This Is My Last Breath

by FlyByNightGirl

Summary

☆
War stories, laughter, dances, disasters, stars. Family, fall out boy, falling, nightmares and two broken hearts.

(There's a double love story about two boys with 70 missing years in between - somehow Sergeant James Barnes became The Winter Soldier, and this is how.)
There's a saying... something about people who live on the edge of death. But Bucky doesn't think it applies to them. They don't live on the edge of anything. They can't afford it.

No, instead they live deep in the throes. They live in the very core of it all. They live in the constant ever-wakeful presence of the feared shadowy darkness.

They live in death.

~*~

Brooklyn in the 20s was a rough place for a kid. Brooklyn in the 30s was a rough place for a
teenager. The two of them had grown up in the thrumming, beating heart of it and all that roughness made both *them* a little rough around the edges.

In some ways, they still had it better than the other kids. Because at least through all the roughness and hell of living in the dirty underside of New York, they had each other. Hell, that was better than most humans had, New York or age regardless.

Sometimes Bucky's eyes would catch on Steve - sprawled out across the floor on his stomach, pencil in one hand and a single foot kicked up in the air as he shaded lightly on the sketchpad in front of him - and wonder how the hell he'd earned this as his better half.

Bucky was always stealing glances of Steve drawing. Calm and almost mindless as he swept pencil over the page, white turning gray with the guidance of careful hands. Bucky liked watching Steve draw almost more than he liked the drawings themselves. It was just the only time he got to see Steve peaceful.

He was always picking a fight, or maybe the universe was always picking a fight with him.

Either way, it was storm season in Brooklyn and the sky was picking a fight with everybody. Storm season also meant one of the million flu seasons that'd knock Steve off his feet for a week. The worst of the sickesses were during storm season, all that constant wetness letting the bacteria grow and travel faster.

If they could afford it, Bucky'd stay home to make sure Steve didn't fall too ill. If he got it bad during storm season, the danger was that much worse. But this year they were running too low on money for Bucky to even think about staying home. Steve had broken his wrist a month back and the cost of that had swamped up everything they'd saved.

So, as much as he should be home right now, instead Bucky was hurrying through the streets to get there. He had his collar turned up against the wind, the only threadbare jacket with a collar he owned. He didn't like it much, but it helped to block out the icy gusts of wind notorious to November in New York.

The pavement was already slick, tinted green by the industrial lights flickering from the back of the buildings Bucky was dodging. This way was a shortcut home from the docks, but it was considerably more dangerous too - back alleys in Brooklyn weren't safe no matter who you were. A particularly cold burst of wind whipped at his face and Bucky ducked his head down, cursing at the weather and the world in general.

The edge of their apartment building was just around the next corner and he picked up his pace, cursing again as he slipped slightly on the slick pavement. A low rumble sounded in the distance, storm closing in, and Bucky would probably *just* beat it home. He could already see it, slamming the door behind him, outta breath as the rain and ice showered down in the streets where he'd just been hauling ass.

He looked down at his feet as he rounded the corner, doing his best not to slip on the ground with worn shoes. Falling would mean getting soaked and *damp* in this kind of cold storm might be fatal, even to him. At twenty-one he was fit and more muscled than some boys his age, all that manual labor at the docks and stores he could scrounge pennies from. But wet and cold was deadly to anybody this time of year.

Bucky sent up an abortive prayer of thanks to no one in particular that Steve wasn't with him. (If Steve were here he'd yell at Bucky for praying to no one and being disrespectful to religions and Bucky would fight the urge to roll his eyes because then Steve would get on to him even more.)
Despite the Steve-shaped voice of his conscience, he was still grateful Steve was safely indoors and (hopefully) fairly warm. Steve was stubborn but not stupid enough to be outside in weather like this.

The sky thundered again, everything already dark from the black clouds overhead. As the crashing grumble faded, distant voices took over the silence. Instinctive worry and curiosity had Bucky straining to hear the voices on the wind.

"--ad the right to come and interrupt?" A muffled thump. "Little scrap like you, barging in like some superhero?" A crash. "You just don't stay down, do you?"

That was the point Bucky stopped listening. He didn't need to hear anymore, although he doubted he'd be able to over the pounding of his heart in his ears. Steve.

He didn't have time to register the flash of lightning in the sky or the anger that should be consuming him because Steve was such a fucking idiot for being outside in this. The only thing running through Bucky was fear, pure unadulterated fear for Steve and why in the world would he be outside in this icy wind and god, oh god, he couldn't take another beating when his wrist was still fucked up and he wouldn't be able to pick up something to block himself and fuck, Steve.

His feet were pounding the pavement so hard he didn't have time to slip. Cautiousness and protection from the wind be damned, Bucky was just sprinting as fast as he could in the direction of the sounds: the alley beneath the window of their apartment.

Why was it always that alley when it was bad? Maybe he should be grateful that Steve's most notorious spot for getting mauled on was so close to their apartment where he could be properly patched up, but it didn't make him any less terrified every time he came home to that.

See, the reason why Steve kept getting in fights in that place, that particular alley? When he was supposed to be resting or at home he'd go sit by the window for better light to draw: the window with a perfect view to the alley and street below. And of course, because it was an alley in Brooklyn, there was constantly somebody doing something terrible. Thieves mobbing people, stupid schoolboys throwing sticks at the neighborhood stray. (Bucky hated that stray. On the pure principle of how many fights Steve had gotten into over the damn thing.)

And the damn apartment window revealed all of it. So Steve would see some disaster and he couldn't not do something - so he'd go running down the stairs and out into that damned alley and stick his nose in things that only got his nose broken.

Bucky had spent many a restless night debating boarding up the window, but he never did, never even got close. It was the only way Steve could draw, the only lighting they could afford. Besides, even without the tantalizing view, Steve would get himself into trouble elsewhere. At the movies, at the store. It was just especially more common in that alley.

The alley that was just another few feet away. Bucky slowed down a fraction so he could round the corner without skidding and falling over because he couldn't help Steve if he wasn't upright. He held his breath as he turned the corner, a feeble attempt at bracing himself for the sight of Steve on the receiving end of brutal treatment again.

The shadows of the alley opened up as the sickening familiar sound of colliding fists echoed into his ears, sending an involuntary shiver down his spine as he closed the distance. The guy - about Bucky's size, probably a year or two younger - was snarling something, his back to Bucky, blocking Steve outta Bucky's sight. He couldn't even see how bad it was.

In the flash of too-familiar panicked anger, his hands coiled into tight, warped fists, grabbing the
attacker's shoulder and ripping him backward so fast he skid on the slick ground too. Then the practiced, heavy punch landed on the guy's cheekbone. He didn't spare the energy to yell, tell the guy to pick on someone his own size; he was too damn mad. Scared. They were kinda the same thing lately, weren't they?

"Get the fuck outta here," Bucky snapped, shoving him towards the open end of the alley. The attacker was more surprised than scared and for a second, it looked like Bucky was gonna have to lay out a real fight. Fine, he'd take the guy right fucking here, beat him to a pulp so he could see what it felt like to lay crumpled on the ground.

Then the guy's eyes went wide and he took off running. Good. Surprising he'd suddenly freaked but -

Bucky's head cleared enough to catch the tail-end of thunder. Then the flash. Shit, the storm was already fucking here. The guy hadn't hauled ass because of Bucky - he'd heard the storm and didn't wanna get pelted in the middle of flu season. The dark clouds overhead may as well be raining straight poison, the way they got people sick. Shit. Steve.

Steve was already struggling to stand as Bucky crowded him, hauling up the frail body with hands that were shaking too.

"Steve, Steve, god, fuck, what were you doing out here, you knew it was gonna storm you fucking dimwit, are you okay? Steve? Stevie, look at me. Are you okay?"

Big blue eyes blinked up at Bucky, the corner of one swollen up already. Otherwise his face didn't look too bad, but his arms were clutched over his torso. Fuck, the guy must've been a kicker.

"God, Steve. C'mon, we gotta get inside before the storm hits." Bucky tossed one of Steve's arms over his shoulders, eliciting a full groan of pain as Steve's bruised chest opened up. A wave of nausea hit hard at the sound, but he ignored it somehow. As much as he didn't wanna hurt Steve, they had to go. It'd be a hell of a lot worse if they didn't get inside before the storm.

Steve leaned his weight on Bucky's side; which he never did. Bucky'd always try to help and Steve'd insist he was fine, it wasn't that bad.

This time, Steve wasn't protesting a bit. That scared him more than the frightened curl of Steve's fingers in the back of Bucky's hair.

He didn't have a particularly good sense of weather, but there was a sudden weight in the air around them that was sounding a thousand alarm bells. He could practically hear it, the impending storm in the air. The quivering tension around them, the wind whipping at their bodies as Bucky hobbled them towards the front of the alley. They still had too far, there was too much space between them and the entrance, let alone the door to their building around the corner.

The storm was coming for them. It was coming to take them both. Bucky sucked in a breath, drawing Steve in closer to his side and making the small body yelp quietly.

"Sorry, sorry," Bucky muttered helplessly, pushing their progress faster.

"'S fine, Buck," came back the pained voice that did not sound fine in any definition of the word.

Steve was blinking against the wind like his eyes were about to water and Bucky wanted to tell him to stop, to cover his eyes or something because there was that one year the wind had gotten so bitter that Steve's eyes had watered over and it'd been so cold the tears froze and Bucky'd been terrified Steve was gonna get frostbite and permanently lose his eyes like the kid three blocks over. Bucky
had breathed warm air over the pretty blue eyes, lighting up one of their precious rare matches and holding it close to Steve's face, apologizing profusely and holding Steve's head still so he didn't get burnt while Bucky warmed up his skin.

The exact temperature was iffy, but he'd bet it was somewhere in the high twenties or low thirties. Not as cold as it got in the heart of winter, but cold enough to turn rain into ice. Cold enough to freeze pieces of the ground under their sliding feet. But it was still too bitter of a cold to be snow. No snow meant ice and hail and god, they had to move faster.

If they could just get inside fast enough --

The rain came down right as they stepped out onto the sidewalk. One moment it was all crescendo, leading up to the big explosion and then the electricity in the air lit off and buckets opened above their heads. Buckets and buckets, colder than anything Bucky could remember feeling.

Steve whimpered, dry to soaked inside'a three seconds. Bucky cursed and tugged them forward roughly, shaking the rain outta his eyes to see the damn steps. He considered scooping Stevie up and running inside with the tiny body, but there was no way he could tackle the slipperiness with his balance thrown off like that. He'd end up slipping and falling and then they'd both be broken, soaked, and good as dead.

He pushed Steve up the stairs instead, one hand cupping Steve's elbow and the other driving a heavy push between sharp shoulderblades. Steve kept making all these terribly pitiful sounds, making Bucky more and more lightheaded to hear. Fuck, that had to hurt so much. Both of them were shivering all over, water running in rivets down every crevice it could find, plastering their clothes to their bodies and showering their eyelashes with heavy stinging drops. Tiny, light pieces of hail were falling here and there too, nothing enough to so much as bruise, but goddamn it was cold.

This was everything Bucky'd been trying to avoid and of course, it was exactly what got dealt.

The time in between finally getting inside and getting up to their apartment was a blur of helping Steve, slipping and shivering and shaking with teeth clacking and sounds of pain coming from Steve and sounds of scared encouragement coming from Bucky.

The storm was battering the apartment's roof as Bucky kicked the door shut behind them, hands gripping both Steve's shoulders tightly. Steve didn't protest an ounce as Bucky sat him down on the couch, quickly scrounging up all the blankets he could find. Which came to a depressing number of three too-thin ones.

Neither of them'd had the energy to say something earlier, but now that Steve was wrapped up in two blankets and Bucky was scrubbing his hair dry with the third, the silence fell on them the same time the suspended possibilities did.

Bucky froze where he was rubbing the space behind one of Steve's ears, eyes flicking from the damp hair to Steve's cutting gaze. Steve'd been watching him the way he always did when Bucky cleaned him up, blue observing with that bright hesitant light. But now that Bucky was looking back, now that their eyes met and the reality of it sat heavy between them, the situation felt about eighty times more real. Steve was cold, soaked, and beaten up in the middle of the most dangerous season in the year.

"Fuck," Bucky cursed quietly, starting to move the blanket over Steve's hair again. His hands were slower this time, more calculated and less panic-frantic. He had to get Steve dry, as dry as their shitty apartment would let them be.
"I'm sorry, Bu-" Steve started, the name cut off with a wet cough. Bucky's eyes went wider as Steve's hand flew up automatically, cupping over his mouth as another cough wracked his body, shaking his shoulders. Again. And again. Bucky's hand went up too, gripping Steve's shoulder in the only bit of comfort he could give him. His body was shaking with each cough like a ragdoll, force gripping his torso and rattling around like a barrel of monkeys.

Eventually the coughing stopped and Steve curled into himself tighter. That sound, that dyer sound of Steve's coughing. That was the scariest thing Bucky knew.

"You alright?"

Steve nodded slightly, looking extremely miserable. The cold hadn't even set in twenty minutes yet. Which meant it was gonna get a hell of a lot worse.

"Let's get you to bed, yeah?" Bucky scooted closer on the couch, one arm slinging back around Steve's shoulders and the other settling around his waist. That look of stubbornness came over Steve's face like he was actually gonna protest for a second, but instead he deflated against Bucky's side, letting him lift up to their feet. Now that the couch was soaked through and Steve was at least relatively dry, the warmth of the bed might help stop this before it got worse.

The apartment wasn't big enough for the couch to be far from the bedroom, but Steve's knees were shaking by the time they got to the edge of it. Bucky had him plastered close, would be getting him wetter if it weren't for the cocooning blankets. Bucky's teeth were chattering slightly, but he could warm himself up after he made sure Steve was okay.

"Bucky?"

The quiet voice snapped him outta his daze, blinking down worriedly. Steve'd pulled away enough to stand on his own, knees still trembling. He was looking right at Bucky, eyes caught with that focused gaze he normally only reserved for drawing paper.

His eyes were tender, almost sweet as he blinked up at Bucky, looking way younger than his twenty years all wrapped up in blankets and still damp enough to make his hair stick to his forehead.

"Yeah, Steve?" Bucky forced his voice to be as playful as he could, rubbing his hand across Steve's shoulder in some muted effort to warm and comfort him at the same time.

"You, uh. I'm sorry I got you all wet." It was the closest thing to a thank you for saving my ass that Bucky ever got and it normally made him light up like a fool. Today, though, everything was still too wet and cold and precarious for Bucky to smile. They were barely even into this thing, he wasn't going to smile until it was over. Because it would be. It would be over and the cold would pass and they'd make it out fine on the other side.

He wasn't losing Steve like this.

"M'used to your stubbornness by now, punk. I'll be fine," Bucky pushed Steve carefully back onto the mattress, pretending not to think about what he didn't say. Bucky's body may be fine, hopefully would be fine. But Steve might not. And Bucky would definitely not be fine with that at all.

As much as Steve still needed the bruises on his stomach looked at, as much as Bucky was dying to wash the blood carefully away from where Steve's hand had landed on the concrete, being warm right now was a hell of a lot more important than that.

Steve was out like a light before his head hit the pillow. Bucky tucked up the sheets and blankets as tightly as he could, brushing damp hair away from Steve's forehead and sending out another silent
prayer to no one at all, not feeling the least bit guilty for it this time.

He could've lost Steve today. He might still lose Steve, if this didn't pass.

It didn't.

Steve woke Bucky up coughing in the middle of the night for the fourth night in a row and Bucky held back tears and scooted outta the bed where he'd had his back pressed to Steve's. He knelt down beside the bedframe, fingers lacing up with cold ones.

"Hey, hey. You're gonna be okay. It's gonna pass." Steve smiled weakly at him for a second before another cough took him and his fingers squeezed tight, trying their damned near best to crush Bucky's through their fragileness. He was more scared of Steve crushing his own bones.

Two days later, Steve wasn't getting any better. Maybe he was getting worse. His temperature was a rollercoaster of highs and lows. His skin was too pale, nearly translucent over his wrists. The coughing fit last night had flecks of blood in it and Bucky had nearly had a heart attack until Steve managed to whisper he'd bit his tongue. Bucky wasn't sure if he believed him. The rattle in Steve's lungs was back. The bruises across Steve's fragile chest weren't healing the way they should've by now.

Bucky was a wreck with worry and Steve was too out of it to even try to reassure Bucky he was fine. The last few pennies Bucky had went to medicine, but Steve still wasn't breathing right. That shallow rasping sound still filled the apartment so loud that Bucky wanted to scream to drown it out before he lost his damn mind.

He had to give up his job at the docks because there was no way in hell he was leaving Steve alone like this.

Steve had shoved lightly at him once, on a good morning that'd had Bucky hoping he was getting better. He'd weakly told him to get outta the house and go work, dammit, and Bucky had rolled onto his back and - very carefully - wrestled Steve into an exaggerated hug while proclaiming in a too-loud voice that the docks weren't nearly so salty as what he had at home.

Steve had squirmed and gasped out a soft laugh, scaring Bucky enough to let go. He'd gotten a soft smile in reaction to his worried face, and floated on a cloud rest'a the day, even singing quietly to himself as he got medicine ready for Steve.

Then of course, that night Steve thrashed and coughed and nearly had an asthma attack, it got so bad. Bucky had to squeeze his hand and place a palm over his heart, eyes locked and quiet, shaky words trying to calm Steve down enough so that he didn't end up on his fucking deathbed.

The hope Bucky had for Steve getting better squashed like a bug. He was still getting worse.

It was the eighth night since the storm and Bucky'd had enough. He whispered a promise to be back soon, then he was jogging down the streets to the too-familiar building down the block. The nurse that worked the front desk looked up as she saw him, her face instantly coating into a very unimpressed but vaguely sympathetic look. She hadn't liked him since he was a kid, but he was an adult now and she was cordial. She liked Steve though, and that was what mattered.
"Mr. Barnes," she said as politely as a thirty-something woman who dealt with sickness and death and poverty everyday of her life could.

"Ms. Jones," Bucky greeted, leaning on the counter with a focus that already had her sitting up straighter. He went right into it, no preamble about the 'weather sucking lately' or otherwise. "Look, I know that I still owe you a bit from the last time, but I didn't come for any more medicine today. Well, maybe, but I have a real important question first. If you could just give your advice, ma'am --"

"Mr. Barnes, calm down. I'm assuming this is about Steve? I can go get the doctor if you need him to come see him."

"No, ma'am, that's fine, I just. He's not getting any better and I don't think it's just a cold anymore and I don't know what to do. I don't know what I can do, because I don't even know what's wrong with him."

"Can you give me a list of symptoms?"

Bucky rattled off the list about the trouble breathing, the coughing, the muscle weakness, the temperature fluctuations. At one point Ms. Jones froze, stopped writing down the list and just looked up at Bucky. Bucky cut off mid sentence, looking back at her.

"What is it?"

"You said that he wasn't coughing up much, correct?" Bucky nodded. "And when he does, it has a greenish tint?"

He nodded again automatically before he froze too. Her voice was shaking a bit and Bucky's entire nervous system narrowed down to this suspended moment. No, no, no. It couldn't be something that terribly wrong, could it? Steve couldn't be-- no, not Steve--

"I'm afraid that sounds like Steve has pneumonia." The world stopped spinning and Bucky almost fell over with it. "I'm so sorry Bucky. I know he's always had troubles with his health and you've always been so kind to look out for him." She had that patented mothering look on her face, like she was about to reach out and pet his arm.

Bucky wasn't listening anymore. He backed away from the desk slowly, not seeing anything in front of him. Pneumonia. That was deadly.

Exhaustion tugged at him, grief and pain and worry all surmounting to take over his senses. His eyes were already shut against tears, so it wasn't long before consciousness slipped from him too.
A soft rubbing over the back of his hand eventually drew him out of the dreamless sleep. He blinked against the rough cotton in his eyes, taking a second to figure out where he was. Bucky's left leg was asleep from being cramped underneath him and it was dark now, dark enough to be night. He'd been asleep for so long and if he didn't have the still-warm presence of Steve's fingers brushing over his hand he'd've probably had an asthma attack of his own. Although he was pretty sure those were called panic attacks if you don't have asthma.

He skirted his fingers back across Steve's, forehead still pressed to the mattress as he took a moment just to feel the soft tight skin stretched over the bones of Steve's hand. Steve was dying. Steve had pneumonia and he might not make it through the night.

"You with me?" Steve's voice asked quietly into the darkness. It was a simple question, just a way to check if Bucky was awake or not. But it made Bucky wanna cry and scream and run and take Steve somewhere where this wasn't their life, where he didn't get triple whammied with bruises, lingering weakness, and freezing cold wetness at the same time. Because fuck, Steve may not be with him at all much longer.

Bucky lifted his head, a rush of cold air hitting his cheeks, streaks down it colder than others. So he'd been crying, then. He had no idea for how long. Maybe since the nurse had told him. Maybe since right now.

Steve looked right at him, his brow furrowing as he recognized the tears on Bucky's face. He already had to have known something was up, Bucky didn't exactly fall asleep kneeling by the bed on a daily basis.

Steve looked right at him with those big blue eyes that looked like the ocean in the summer and Bucky couldn't stop the words from coming out of his mouth.

"You have pneumonia," he breathed, his voice hitching on the last word. Steve's expression flashed, crumpling, eyes shutting as he steeled himself. Bucky stared hopelessly at Steve's face, at the closed eyelids, at the flicker at the hollow of his throat. This was gonna be taken away from him.

Steve was dying.

When his eyes opened back up, they weren't watery like Bucky's were. He looked so strong that Bucky wanted to throw something, wanted to scream at Steve that he wasn't allowed to be okay with someone trying to take him away from Bucky like this.

"Buck," Steve said, sounding like he was in pain. Bucky blinked as Steve nudged his hand. He had Steve's fingers crushed in a death grip, shit. He quickly let go of Steve's hand, making to apologize, but Steve quickly snatched Bucky's hand back before he could say anything.

The movement made Bucky go quiet, staring at their joined fingers. His best friend, his best friend in the whole world was dying and it was Bucky's fault. It had to be, he hadn't gotten there fast enough, he should've stayed home from work when he knew it was storm and flu season and--

"Bucky," Steve said again, stern this time. Bucky blinked back into reality, automatically looking down at their hands to see if he was crushing Steve again. He wasn't. "Bucky, you know this isn't your fault. We knew this was gonna happen eventually. It's just..."

"Just what?" Bucky interrupted. Steve could go out there and be righteous any other day on the planet, but not about this. There was no right and wrong with this, no justice served. Steve Rogers was the best human being on this earth and no amount of misplaced faith would make his death okay. "There's nothing right about this, Steve. You know that. It's not fucking fair."
Steve cringed at Bucky's crude words and Bucky couldn't help the hollow pang of guilt. Here he was kneeling by Steve's deathbed, and Bucky was still managing to annoy him.

Silence fell on them and Bucky bit his lip, blinking back tears as he stared at the wall above Steve's head. He was such a fucking mess. But he couldn't do this. He couldn't do this. It'd been bad before, of course, living the life they did. But Bucky had never actually believed Steve might not make it through the night. But now, the chances of him surviving this...

They were still for a long time, only interrupted by Steve's occasional wracking cough. Bucky cringed every time the terrifying sound echoed in the room, ripping at his heart.

It was probably an hour later before Steve's eyes lit on Bucky's again in the semi-dark. The room was lit up by a soft golden glow from the streetlight outside, illuminating mottled orange.

Steve's eyes were soft, like maybe he understood how Bucky felt and wanted this to be easier for him. There was nothing that would make this easier for him. Bucky was watching a candle get snuffed out, but instead of one breath it was a week in coming, a lifetime in coming as each punch landed on that keen, caring face knocked them that much closer to this moment.

There'd been so many moments since the beginning, so many things they'd done and never had the chance to. How much of that meant to Steve what it did to Bucky? How much of their past would Steve change if he had known it was only leading to this? Here, in a dimly lit tiny room with clouds overhead outside and the only familiar sound the awful cry of Steve's cough.

"Steve?" Blue eyes lit up gold from the outside streetlight as they flashed to Bucky.

"Yeah?" The word still sounded like it hurt to say. This could be it. It could all be over in the next couple of minutes and Bucky had to know. He shifted his weight, leg sparking up with needles from being pinned too long. For the rest of his life, that feeling of coming back from numbness would probably remind him of this moment.

"If we could go back..." Bucky trailed off, blinking back the tears that were still trying to escape down his cheeks.

Go back, back to golden memories of Coney Island and happy mornings with Steve tossing a sketchbook his way. Back to when Sarah had still been alive, sharing a single mug of tea with Steve as Sarah ruffled Bucky's hair, kissed both their cheeks on the way to her night shift. Back to scraped knees instead of scraped hearts (and knees). Back to the way Steve used to laugh at Bucky's wild smile. Back to all the times that weren't riddled with disease and coughing and death, of losing everything they had.

"If we had time for that, would you... would you change anything?" It was a selfish question and Bucky didn't look up as he asked it, staring at Steve's thin fingers. The controlled hands of an artist. The things Steve could create...whole entire worlds. What was Bucky? What was Bucky without the sunshine at his side? He'd never thought about what he would be without Steve. He couldn't imagine being anything without Steve.

Those fingers curled up tighter, lifting Bucky's hand so his eyes were forced up, flicking them to Steve's. Steve looked so damn exhausted, but somehow he had a ghost of a smile on his drawn face.

"Buck," he said, chiding like he was scolding a particularly ridiculous child. Bucky's eyes widened a tad, but he had no idea why Steve was looking at him like he was the biggest idiot of the century.

"If this is it...if this is my last breath," Steve wrestled back a cough, fingers curling harder. "I'm
leaving with no regrets."

He smiled that sad, hopeful, sweet look and there was no stopping the tears now as they gathered at the edges of Bucky's eyes, a single one slipping free and sliding down his cheek.

It seemed impossible, but so trademark Steve to somehow be okay with the terrible life he'd had to live. All the fights, all the loss he'd had to suffer.

Bucky couldn't possibly imagine what might make all that worth it. What in the world could be worth all that? Steve squeezed his hand tighter.

"This life might be over, but." He paused, lights catching on the water in his eyes too. "I had you. 'Til death."

The dam broke.

One moment he was frozen on his knees beside the bed and then he was tangled in the sheets, holding onto Steve as his body shook harder than Steve's did when he coughed. He cried into Steve's blond mess of hair and Steve clung back to him weakly.

_I had you, til death._ They had nothing. Bucky'd always thought both of them had nothing. But Steve's bright eyes always saw the world with so much more than his could. Bucky'd thought they had nothing and Steve turned to him with that precious face and told him he had everything, he didn't regret a single thing, because he had Bucky.

There was nothing Bucky had done in his life to deserve this. He didn't deserve Steve. The unquestionable morals, the optimistic heart that smiled at the sun, the battle-fists that threw him into fights he knew he couldn't get out'a, just 'cause it was right.

He didn't deserve to live while this brilliant star faded and blinked out in the dark blanket of Bucky's sky. It wasn't fair. For some reason, Steve'd chosen him when they were kids. For some reason, Steve looked at him and saw what Bucky couldn't in the mirror.

It would break his heart if it didn't make him the happiest person in the world. And he'd always been too damned selfish to change Steve's mind. He'd tried saying he wasn't worth the trouble, but Steve would have none of it. He always told Bucky he never needed anything more, he was lucky with what he had.

Staring at the tragedy and pain of Steve's life, Bucky'd just thrown up his hands. What the hell did Steve feel lucky for?

He felt lucky he had Bucky. Bucky couldn't give him much, but that was something that'd always been Steve's for the taking. He was never leaving. He'd never turn his back on this stupidly perfect little dying punk.

He'd never be so eloquent to say something like that to Steve. He couldn't even say it back. He could only lay here and hold Steve and cry into his hair and make the pillow wet and wish and pray and curse that this was their life.

Time folded and slipped around them like the warm blankets they couldn't afford, holding them to each other as Bucky sobbed and Steve silently waited for his body to shut down.

But somehow, it didn't that night. The waiting and the crying and the promise of death hung over their heads in the dark, but nothing bit. The two of them fell asleep tangled and tired and broken, the sheets and pillows wet, holding each other tighter than they'd ever dared to before. It wasn't like it
mattered anyways, because Steve might not wake up in the morning.

A week later, somehow, Steve was sitting up and feeding himself cold soup in bed.

A month later he was pelting Bucky in the back with a snowball.

A year and a half later he got his first rejection slip from the army.

Bucky got a very different kind of letter.

Chapter End Notes

Just so everyone knows: the next chapter jumps directly to *Captain America: The First Avenger*, in the scene that Steve rescues Bucky from the torture camp in Azzano.

On the note of music; an amazing person made an entire This is My Last Breath playlist on youtube that consists of basically all the songs the fic includes. If you'd like a link to that so you don't have to search for songs, you can find it [here!](http://example.com)

(Huge shoutout of thanks to every one of you who've made something for, commented on, or simply encouraged this fic - I never could've done it without you.) xx
"Steve." The word sounded like a prayer, like a dying breath and the first gasp of air in a century. His name slipping from that mouth rushed a crushing wave of relief; Bucky was alive and he knew Steve and...something was wrong. His eyes were glossed over, lips curved up in a way he'd never seen before.

The tone finally settled into Steve's head and the wide smile that'd taken over his mouth faded at the edges. The word sounded like a prayer, like a dying breath and the first gasp of air in a century. It ripped something wide open in Steve's heart.

He'd always been the one hauled outta alleys by Buck. Now he was in an all-new-body, hauling Bucky outta POW camps. War, war they'd never seen before, war changed everything. The reversal was twisting something in Steve's stomach because this didn't feel like atonement for all those times he'd been pulled from a fight. It felt like hell.
Worse, though, than the call of Steve's name, disgusting smell around them, word torture thrumming on Steve's tongue: the look on Bucky's face. Unabashed hopefulness, raw relief. Muddled too-much-give, like pushing against a rotted wall that was supposed to be sturdy and solid but instead melted and bowed like a flimsy mattress. Bucky was the strong one, the solid one, and he was looking up at Steve with this loopy smile that should've been comforting but made Steve wanna be sick.

The Bucky he knew would never let himself show that much hope, pure emotion. Always careful, guarded. Wary, smart, strong. Not this, strapped to a table and swaying sickly-green.

He couldn't handle the overload. Mantra of name and serial-number, loose limbs-- Bucky'd be fine. Steve found him, alive, but something was so so wrong. If time wasn't of essence, if he wasn't in uniform and pumped with adrenaline, he might've just curled Bucky in his arms and shattered into a thousand pieces.

"C'mon." Steve helped him off the table, the warmth of Bucky under his hands shaking him outta his head. Bucky looked queasy enough to fall over if Steve wasn't holding onto him, but Steve wasn't planning to let go. Ever.

He'd been told Bucky was dead. Steve absolutely couldn't believe-- no matter what condolences, proof. If Buck was dead, Steve was 100% sure he'd feel it. Distance between them damned, he'd know. But he hadn't felt anything, the world hadn't collapsed and changed colors, so he'd convinced himself Bucky was alive.

And he'd been right. Bucky was here, breathing smiling looking up at Steve like Steve was the goddamned sun. Even though he hadn't gotten here fast enough. His stomach clenched at the leather cuffs that'd been holding Bucky down, the strewn equipment hastily left on tables. Bucky. He'd been tortured and Steve'd barely managed to save him.

"I thought you were dead," he managed, cupping a rough hand on Bucky's jaw. The bone felt same as always - Steve'd memorized the sharp angle by now, drawn it a hundred times. Scanning over the beautiful haunted face, comparing it to the one he'd memorized...Buck's eyes were different. That bright, take-on-the-world fire was gone. His mouth was different, no curving smirk or resting-bitchface to be seen.

Darting gaze, fumbling-joy shifting to confusion. Buck was holding himself with careless fluidity, almost like he didn't think he was awake. They could deal with that later. Right now, Bucky was upright and they had to be walking. Running, if Buck could.

"I thought you were smaller," Bucky slurred in response, maybe attempting for banter and falling flat. Missing that spark. The normally immovable, impenetrable hero of his childhood was shaking on his feet. So much about this was not okay.

A loud noise went off in the corridor, danger sparking with reality and they had to get outta here. Steve took a quick scan of the torture room for anything to take to headquarters. One wall had a map, markers in cities. So this'd been the planning room, too. They'd kept Bucky in here while they planned their war, kept him ready and available in the center of plotting...he probably hadn't had a moment of peace or privacy.

Steve looked away, sucking in a breath. Strange it didn't rattle in his chest, healthy enough to take as much oxygen as he needed. Now he was holding up Buck - who wasn't taking oxygen half as well. Leaning all his weight on Steve, verge of collapsing. Or maybe they'd done something to his feet... as soon as they were out, he was giving Bucky a thorough checkup.

"C'mon," Steve said again, one arm wrapped over Bucky's shoulders and the other holding up his
torso as they edged away from the table. Bucky gripped back just as tight, breath catching in little
pained noises every time they moved. Steve shut out the sounds, pretending not to hear. It'd destroy
him to listen to that; had to focus, get Buck somewhere safe first.

They weren't even out the door before Bucky's shaky voice tried speaking again.

"What happened to you?" he managed, like it hurt every bone to say. It wasn't loopy as before
though. Even if he was in pain, at least Bucky was with him mentally. Maybe.

"I joined the army," Steve replied, the joke falling lightly between them. If Bucky was even slightly
there, he'd appreciate the light-heartedness. That's how they coped. Steve tugged him faster, shifting
as he scoped out the hallway.

The moment Bucky started carrying his own weight, Steve let go to scope ahead, eliminate threats.
Everything was strange, like he'd woken and the world was shifted three inches to the left in a place
he'd thought he'd memorized. Bucky was here - Bucky was here - but something wasn't. Not to
mention the road inside'd been hectic as hell, but they hadn't run into anyone since.

Nothing was adding up and it was making Steve uneasy, focused on guarding. He almost missed it
when Buck spoke up again behind him.

"Is it permanent?" There was a note of concern, maybe pissiness too. Why the hell would Buck be
pissed? Steve glanced back for just a moment. Bucky was hobbling, but he was upright, which is
what they needed.

"So far," Steve replied distractedly, scanning the walls and floors for a clue to what the hell was
going on. Why were all the guards gone?

Then of course, it turned out the place was blowing up. That'd definitely do it for evacuation.

And apparently there was more than one side-effect to a failed serum. Looking at the red skull
beneath peeled skin? He didn't have one'a those - didn't even think about it until Buck commented -
but that didn't stop him from feeling like there was something trying to crawl under his skin.

Until he turned around and saw Bucky's expression. Straight outta the horror books he loved, staring
petrified. Steve followed Bucky's gaze, the retreating bespeckled man beside Schmidt. That was the
same guy Steve'd seen running outta the room they'd kept Bucky in. Was that...was that the guy
that'd been torturing Bucky?

That man'd been right there and Steve'd ignored him. And now Buck was a damn wreck. Weakened
body shaking like a leaf in Central Park. What else'd Steve missed in his hurry to get them out?
Clearly, Bucky wasn't as okay as his hobbling body implied. There had to be other signs he'd
ignored - Steve went back over Bucky's questions as he ushered him hurriedly up the stairs.

He'd sounded pretty damn concerned about the serum. Maybe not a quip to lighten the mood. Well,
obviously there'd be some curiosity there, Steve came back double his old weight and a foot taller.
The last time Bucky'd seen him, Steve'd been in an entirely different body. But not just curiosity,
Bucky seemed genuinely disoriented by it.

Torture wasn't something Steve knew much about, but hallucinations might be a side effect? There
was a possibility Bucky didn't think he was real. He'd been stumbling around, almost
dreamwalking...

But that didn't make any sense, because why would he've followed Steve outta that room? Steve
hadn't given him much of a choice, but still. Bucky wouldn't just let someone take him wherever,
would he? That wasn't the Bucky he knew.

Then again, the slumped shoulders and drawn face of the haunted man in front of him didn't look all that much like the Bucky he knew either.

Steve pushed aside the thoughts, bigger worries sliding up to the top. They had to find a way across, now, or they were gonna be stuck.

The only way to cross the pit of fire and explosions was a thin metal support beam. Bucky saw it the same time Steve did, looking at it grimly. It was their only option.

"Let's go. One at a time." Steve reached for Bucky again as he stepped up to the rail, steadying his weight as he hoisted a leg over. Even through layers of tattered uniform, Bucky was warm. Alive.

Steve gripped a little tighter as he looked over the rail. It was so thin, the metal looked like it could barely hold any weight at all.

He was reluctant to let go of the solid hold, but getting Bucky across was the most important thing. Worry etched between Steve's eyebrows as he watched Bucky inch forward, brave and determined balancing carefully on thin metal with floppy shoes.

It was hard to breathe just watching. Then the bar shifted, jolting Bucky's center of gravity. Steve startled, worry lines creasing deeper. He should've just picked Buck up bridal style, carried him across in Steve's arms. If Bucky didn't make it, if he fell...

Steve had no idea what he'd do.

The metal bar shifted again, snapping out a few screws and tilting downward. Oxygen stuck in Steve's throat, unable to breathe as he stared at Bucky's back. Then the supports gave and Bucky broke into a half-run, down the thin line falling falling-- dipping downdowndown...

The support finally snapped. Bucky jumped. Steve's heart stopped. Then Bucky's body slammed into the railing on the other side, adrenaline-filled arms hauling his body over the metal rail.

Worn feet hit solid ground and he swayed. Then he was looking steadily at Steve. Bucky made it. He was okay. Steve's head cleared, exhaling as the world righted itself.

"There's gotta be a rope or something!" Bucky shouted, hands white-knuckling the rail he'd clambered over. Steve'd been paying a hellofalot of attention; there wasn't a rope. There wasn't another way over. But Buck was on the safe side, that was what mattered. Steve'd gotten him (most'a the way) out and that'd been the mission. He'd known going in he probably wouldn't survive this - the idea that Bucky still could was the only consolation he needed to blow up with the factory.

"Just go!" He waved an arm, encouraging on. Buck had to get out, he was what mattered. They were friends, but he could leave Steve behind. Steve wouldn't be able to, but this was Bucky. He'd always been the less needy one. Steeled his voice into the stern order-giving one, just in case, so Bucky'd have to listen, "Get outta here!"

The last word barely left his mouth before Bucky had the rail in a death grip, dark eyes wide and wild as he shouted back,

"No, not without you!"

The words were half-crazed and hands-down the most passionate thing that'd ever left Bucky's mouth. That dirt-smeared, struggling body shaking with the vehemence of his words, pieces of his
hair falling over his forehead as his mouth snapped shut around the barking shout.

There was absolutely zero room to argue. Steve'd never seen him more serious. Something deep inside his chest coiled tight, suddenly hard to breathe.

Didn't even have time to think what a fool Buck was - a dedicated fool - before he started scoping a way out too.

Steve'd thought for a moment Bucky could go without him. Apparently he'd been wrong.

That thought fueled him, gaze caught on the broken rail. With explosions destroying the world under their feet; had to move now and had to move fast. Using strength he wasn't the least accustomed to, Steve bent back metal rail, opening a gap to jump through.

It was crazy, but Bucky's panicked eyes ricocheted a new wave of adrenaline and hope through veins. Buck wouldn't leave without him, Steve had to do this. The handsome features were distorted with confusion and fear, but Steve could do this. He could do this.

Backed up far as he could, which wasn't anywhere near far enough for this gap. He could make the jump. He had to make the jump. Bucky wasn't gonna leave without him. And Steve wasn't gonna let him down.

He took off running, giving it his all in few, short feet. Push off and jump, warmth from the fire crackling beneath-- burning the soles of his feet as he flew, everything slowed-down as the railing got closer and closer.

The only thing he could see was fire and Bucky, both exponentially closer every millisecond. He might not make it. Extending arms, angled body and prepared to grab the metal bar like Bucky had.

He underestimated the serum again. His boots just cleared the rail, sending him sprawling forwards with momentum. There was a split second of I made it, I'm alive before he was crashing into Bucky.

They both went tumbling backwards, Steve skidding his feet to try'n stop before knocking Buck to the ground. He caught his footing just as Bucky lost his, then Steve's arms wrapped tight around Bucky's waist and hauled him upright. Their bodies were pressed so hard together that Steve could barely breathe, but Bucky clung back just as tightly.

A sweaty, smelly mop of hair brushed his chin as Bucky buried his face in Steve's neck. Buck was shaking head-to-toe, momentary strength from the jump melting to scared relief. They were so close and real and alive. Both'a them were alive, they were okay, and they needed to get outta here right now.

Because his nose was still pressed to Steve's skin, he could feel Bucky's lips part to say something. As much as Steve would cherish that sentiment or scolding, abandoning the exploding building was still priority #1. Feelings and discussions could come later.

"We gotta go," Steve interrupted before Bucky could start, prying his friend reluctantly outta his arms. Bucky blinked at him and they were off again, down more hallways. This time, Steve kept a steady hand between Bucky's shoulders as they moved. A reminder of Steve's presence (he'd been stupid to think, even for a moment, that Bucky'd leave without him), a support system and a push to move faster.

They turned a corner and there was a door, escape and promise of freedom, safety. An explosion sounded just outside, blue light flashing through the door's window. Steve pushed faster. This time Bucky pushed back against his hand, forcing them a step backwards.
"Steve," Bucky called hopelessly, echoing scared confused lost. Another explosion went off and Bucky flinched, twisting to stare with miserable eyes. Steve's breath caught in his throat and he wanted so bad to do this properly, sit Buck down and help him through whatever was making him tense up like this. But they didn't have time. They simply didn't have time.

"C'mon, Buck, we gotta go. Okay? We're almost out." The look on Bucky's face was absolutely awful, darkened agony. Something equally dark twisted inside his chest - someone'd done this to Bucky and Steve would shatter them into a billion pieces it'd change that.

"Steve?" Bucky asked, curious, like he'd never seen him before. No, no, no. Now was not the time for more confusion. Steve had to get Bucky to cooperate, to come outside without freaking at every blue-fire explosion.

"It's me, Buck. I'm gonna protect you, alright? Just come with me." Pleading, and inadequate. He was so far outta his depth here, no clue what to say. Steve ran his hand comfortingly down Bucky's arm; maybe if words couldn't go through, touch might. And thankfully, he turned complacent under Steve's touch, slipping from scared to the unseeing look from before. Okay, not exactly thankfully then.

Steve's stomach lurched - that was exactly what Bucky'd looked like when Steve first found him strapped to that table, muttering his serial number and rank. But he didn't have time to worry, they might be dead in a few minutes anyways.

He wrapped around Buck's shoulders and chest again, pulling him for the door. Another blue light went off and Bucky cringed, but didn't stop. Okay, so blue-lights were a problem. Steve took mental note and kicked the door open, hauling Buck outside with uncalculated strength. Automatically spun their bodies so the shield on Steve's arm would protect them both.

Bucky was shaking again, cringing and pulling deeper in on himself every time a blue-light went off. The fire wasn't headed their way though, so they might be winning. Actually, they might've just won.

A few stragglers from the base were attempting to fire or run, but one'a the tanks was taking them out. A soldier Steve recognized from the cages was sitting on top, and shouted down into the tank when he saw them. The head of the tank swiveled and took out the last few visible Germans, then another prisoner stuck his head out the top.

"Sarge is okay!" started a shout, which was quickly repeated further down the clearing. Another prisoner in hand-to-hand struggle with a German delivered a final blow then took up the shout too, traveling the word down to the men outta earshot.

It was only a moment before cheers went up, battle-cry-like from the roughened voices and inability to really celebrate in a moment like this. There wasn't happiness on the battlefield, just wins and losses.

Another head stuck outta the tank and Steve took back his comment about the happiness. The guy had a mustache that arched his entire face, a bowler hat atop his head and a wide, ridiculous grin on his face.

"Men! Sarge is alive!" The man shouted, a bit'a Brooklyn twang in the joyed words. Bucky stopped shivering once the tank stopped firing blue missiles, but he was still leaning entirely on Steve, clinging to his clothes like he'd fall off the earth if he let go.

The prisoners from the base - the soldiers Steve'd saved- started to gather around them, everyone
conglomerating in the clearing. Which would be great, if the building wasn't still exploding. It might not ever explode externally, but the risk wasn't worth it.

"The building's gonna blow!!" Steve shouted, letting go of Bucky with one arm to wave at the men to move towards the woods. The coverage of the trees was a ways off, but if they could get there they'd be safe.

The man with the bowler hat echoed Steve's words, catching the attention of more soldiers. The whole mass of them - so many, even more than Steve remembered rescuing - surged towards the woods. All except a few, just five men, who came running towards Steve and Bucky instead.

The man in the bowler hat went straight for Bucky's other arm, lifting it up over his shoulder. He pointed at another of the four who'd ran over with him. "We got Bucky -- Gabe and Morita, you go secure that tank. It's gonna be a hell of a lot easier to travel if we've got something with firepower and wheels."

The dark man and the Asian man nodded, taking another brief glance at Bucky, then Steve, giving an appreciative nod before they were headed for the tank.

"Voulez-vous de l'aide?" One man asked him. Steve blinked, pulling Bucky forward with him.

"Dernier, we can't tell much'a what you're sayin' when Gabe ain't around. Go see if you can grab another tank." The Frenchman hurried off, snapping into soldier-mode. Then the fifth spoke up, mustache that made him look like an Italian painter.

"Need me to take over..." The British-accent turned to him, trailing off in implication of asking for Steve's name.

"Captain," Steve provided, just a tad guiltily. He wasn't actually a Captain, but. It was the only thing he really had to hold onto. And these men needed direction right now more than anything - it was as much for them as it was for him. Then he shook his head at the offer, arm tightening on Bucky's shoulder. "And I'm fine. Thanks, though."

The man nodded, falling into step beside them and lifting his gun at the ready, scanning the grounds for any danger. "I'm Falsworth by the way, Captain."

"I'm Dugan," the man in the bowler hat heaved, voice strained from carrying Bucky's weight. "From the 107th."

"So that's how you know Bucky," Steve's voice was a little pained too. More from mental exhaustion than physical exertion, although he had just stormed an enemy base alone. But now, walking alongside these men who'd instantly come to help...it looked like Steve wasn't alone anymore.

"Everyone knows Sergeant Barnes, Captain. If you don't mind me askin', how exactly do you?" Dugan looked at him curiously over Bucky's head.

"Grew up together," Steve replied, the three words kinda...extremely inadequate. They did grow up together, but so much more than that; they protected each other, fought for each other. Bucky understood him like no one else, was there for him like no one else. When his ma died, Bucky had clapped him on the shoulder and practically forced Steve to move in with him. He'd never had to spend a night alone. Buck was always there, through thick and thin, good and the worse. Buck'd been there when Steve caught ill, had taken on extra jobs to pay for medicine. He'd been there when Steve'd almost died of pneumonia, had cried when Steve told him it was alright because at least he'd
had the best pal in the whole damn world at his side since the beginning, more than Steve ever could've asked for. More than Steve deserved.

The three words felt more than a little inadequate.

Dugan still let out a low whistle. "That's mighty impressive, coming all the way out here to save your boy. He's a lucky fellow, if he's got someone like you lookin' out for him."

Steve couldn't help the short laugh that escaped his throat. Him, looking out for Bucky. Their entire lives it'd been the other way around and despite all this, he wasn't sure that was about to change any time soon.

Both Falsworth and Dugan looked at him curiously, confused by the laugh. Steve was about to give an aborted explanation when a soft voice spoke up between them.

"More like lookin' out for his ass, 'cos he decides to storm enemy bases in his free time." Bucky huffed out, slurred but a little less haunted. Dugan laughed, big and full-heartedly, but Steve just cut to Bucky's face, which was lifted now.

"You alright?" he pressed quietly. Bucky's eyes shot to the side, glancing at Steve before taking in a shaky breath.

"Been worse," he replied with a strained bit of the chipper smartass Steve used to know. If the words were supposed comfort, they definitely did the opposite. Bucky'd been worse than this at one point. For about the hundredth time today, Steve felt like keeling over and puking up his breakfast.

Just as soon as they hit the safety trees - the last ones - Bucky doubled over and that's exactly what he did. Upright one moment, then wrenched over and hurling the next. Steve quickly wrapped his arms 'round Bucky's bent form, fingers digging into ribs to keep him upright, support his weight. The sound was awful, Bucky's shaking body was worse, but somehow Steve managed to look up at Dugan and Falsworth, tilting his head in indication.

"Go and round up the men to that clearing. It's about three-hundred feet further, but we'll regroup there."

Dugan and Falsworth nodded, then they were off in the direction Steve'd sent them. The other three men from Dugan's party - Gabe, Morita, and Dernier? - were rumbling on the path next to the forest, two in a tank and one in a truck of sorts.

The Asian man waved at Steve and Bucky as he passed by in the truck, concerned as he looked at Bucky's slouching, puking form. Steve waved back, tried to portray some form of we're all okay here. Which hopefully, Bucky was.

The hurling didn't last long, Steve doubted he had much to puke up anyways. Bucky was at least twenty pounds lighter than the last time Steve'd seen him, and he hadn't spare to lose in the first place. Not to mention Steve couldn't see anything beneath his tattered uniform.

Eventually, hands landed on knees and he tried to catch his breath, a few tumbling pained noises.

"Buck? You okay?" Steve asked softly, one hand holding him up and the other rubbing over his back the way Bucky used to for him. Bucky nodded slightly, a hand grabbing Steve's arm as he pulled upright. He wiped the back of a hand over his mouth, eyes on Steve's face again.

"Are you okay?" Bucky asked, deadserious, eyebrows knitted together in that familiar look of concern. Steve almost laughed, just barely managing to keep the incredulous look to a minimum.
"Me? 'Course I'm alright," Steve scoffed, placing both hands on Bucky's biceps and guiding him carefully around the spit-up, started walking them towards the clearing ahead.

"Not 'course," Bucky corrected, and Steve supposed he had a point. Before the serum, it was never "of course." Wasn't like the whole world changed, just Steve's body. Pale-blues glanced back at Steve, expression wavering.

"Are you...what happened?" Bucky whispered again, voice going small and scared as he repeated the question from earlier. Only now Steve could see it clear; positively, absolutely lost.

He'd been so stupid - busy, yeah, but still, if he'd looked -- all right there. In the cellophane attempt at old humor. In the way he couldn't hold eye contact for longer than a few seconds. In the way he was looking at everything with wide doe-eyes. Buck didn't think this was real.

He could explain the serum later, but right now Steve needed Bucky to know where he was - *with your Stevie* - needed him to understand he was safe now. Steve stopped, holding carefully onto Bucky's arms as he looked over those icy eyes.

"Bucky, it's real. It's me, Steve. Your name is James Buchanan Barnes and we've been best friends since we were too small to go on rides at Coney Island." Steve studied the pretty face, waiting for the quip about how Steve'd still been too small the last time Bucky'd seen him (which was an exaggeration but absolutely something Buck'd say). He waited, pause stretching out as he realized it wasn't a pause at all.

Bucky was staring blankly ahead, lips barely moving, tiny murmurs tumbling out his mouth. Steve had to lean closer to hear the cut words--

"32557038. SergeantJamesBuchananBarnes. 32557038. SergeantJamesBuchananBarnes. 32557--"

Panic gripped hard - couldn't let Bucky fall back to that. The mantra shifted rapid, terrified as Steve tried to physically jog the sense back into him. The murmuring finally stopped somewhere in the middle of the fourth rough shake to shoulders. "Bucky," Steve begged for the tenth time in the past twenty seconds.

Blink, eyes going wide and curious--

"Steve?" He asked cautiously. Steve bit back a sob, reality sinking deep into his bones as Bucky looked up at him with too-hopeful eyes.

Bucky wasn't alright. Not at all.

He gathered Buck into his chest, arms gripping around him tight and squeezing carefully, afraid of his own strength and Bucky's new fragility. Bucky held on back, forehead ducked against Steve's collarbone.

"Yeah, it's me. I got you. You're safe now, Buck. I got you." Steve swallowed thickly around oncoming tears as Bucky relaxed into his arms. There was no immediate threat, not right now. They were 'always' from base and they'd definitely have to start walking soon, but giving the men a moment to catch their breath and gather their weapons and friends was a good idea anyways. They'd have to figure out who among them were too injured to walk, who was comfortable carrying what weapons and driving which vehicles.

Steve had no doubt the men could figure that out themselves. He'd definitely go set his chain of command and make sure everything was in order (and explain who the hell he was) in a bit, but that could wait until Bucky actually knew who *he* was.
This whole time, he'd been flashing in and out. Scared one moment, determined to stay at Steve's side the next. Disoriented for a few steps, then complacent and letting Steve drag him wherever.

They'd messed up Buck so bad.

Maybe he just needed a warm meal, a few days to let the idea of the serum sink in, a comfortable bed to sleep off the worst of what they'd done to him. And god, if he needed to talk, Steve'd be right there. He wasn't letting Bucky leave his side for a moment, now they were together again.

Well, honestly, it was more like he wasn't leaving Bucky's side.

The grimy face pulled away after a bit, peering up at Steve with guarded eyes.

"You're not like I remember," Bucky accused lightly. Steve clapped a hand on Bucky's bicep, unfamiliar muscle curving underneath his hand.

"You've changed a bit yourself." Steve gave Bucky a weak smile and he tensed for a moment, freezing up before forcing himself to relax, curving a ghost of the smile Steve used to draw all the time.

"I joined the army," Bucky joked, copying Steve's words back to him with the miniature version of his patented smirk.

Steve's mouth curled in an affectionate smile, biting back his retort. It wasn't the answer Steve wanted, but that could wait til they got back to base. Bucky was alive and slowly starting to sound more like himself. The rest? They could figure out.

~*~*~

The cot in Steve's tent didn't look anything like the table he'd been strapped to, but Bucky still winced as he laid down. Steve was at his side less than a second later, clumsy and too big and fretting much as he always did.

"-cky?" Steve asked worriedly and Bucky blinked. Seemed to catch the tail-end of his name lately.

"Steve," he replied stubbornly, looking over the lines of Steve's new face. It might be permanent. So far, Steve'd said. Or maybe that'd been in one'a the nightmares. Bucky wasn't so sure.

"Buck, you should really see a medic. You were...I found you on..." Steve looked like was about to cry, the word torture hanging at the edge of his lips. Bucky looked away.

"Lots of guys got it worse. I can hold my own." Steve looked reluctant to agree to that, so Bucky attempted a smile and tacked on to the end, "'Sides, I need somethin', m'sure that new rank a'yours can get you in all sorts a'things."

Like the gorgeous brunette agent that couldn't keep her eyes off. No one could keep their eyes off Steve, but Agent Carter looked different. Because, for whatever reason, Steve couldn't keep his eyes off her either.

It was a moment Bucky was pretty sure he'd never forget. Marching up to the base, hardass colonel narrowing his eyes at Steve as an entire wave of men marched in behind them.

The walk back hadn't been easy. He got back feeling in his toes sitting too close to the fire, then Steve was eventually pulling him away from the warmth with a murmur that Bucky was gonna "get a damned sunburn" if he sat that close.
He'd complied. Knew better than to fight. There wasn't any point in thrashing when he was moved - the bonds would hold. Or worse, they'd stick a needle and he'd numb up. Trapped inside like a shark at the aquarium, pounding on glass, peering out, see and feel everything, unable to do the slightest thing. Screams drowned out by the water in his brain.

So he knew better than to fight it as Steve tugged Bucky to his side. He didn't want to be buckled down again or trapped inside his own damned head.

Or, if it was a nightmare, he was never gonna get warm anyways. What was the point?

Steve held Bucky close and whispered stories to him about times when they were kids. He couldn't for the life of him figure out why, except maybe to prove he was actually Steve? It wasn't really another-person-with-Steve's-face that worried him though. It was whether or not Bucky was real. Either his hallucinations had gotten very creative or he was somehow in real life and missed out on somethin' very important. Because this body was not Steve's.

The curves of his chest fit like a puzzle against the slope of Bucky's back during the one night they bedded down on their trek to base.

Bucky hadn't slept, because he was still being restrained. Arms instead of leather buckles. If it was really Steve, maybe he was trying to help. If it was a hallucination, Bucky'd lost his marbles - picturing the table straps as Steve's arms?

It wouldn't be the first time. Although the muscled thing was new - hadn't thought'a that before.

But anyways, he was still half outta his mind the morning of their last day trekking. Time and scraps of food had been good to him though. Strength to shove everything down, numb himself off. If it was a hallucination, so be it.

If he was missing out on a really crucial part of Steve's life - which felt increasingly more likely - so be that too. Bucky'd march next to his best friend. They'd march and Bucky'd throw all his feelings out and be strong. The walk was long, but they marched in step. Synced, same as always.

Steve kept tabs on him the whole time, occasionally reaching over to pat him for comfort. When they reached base though - the final destination - the pat on his lower back from Steve didn't feel as much like comfort as it did like pride. Bucky'd made Steve proud.

The feeling that blossomed in his chest couldn't've been hallucinated. That caring, affectionate smile Steve gave him couldn't be hallucinated. This was real. It was all real.

Bucky steeled himself, looking back away from Steve with determination crossing his features. He could be strong.

He'd been a prisoner of war. He'd been tortured and humiliated. But he'd been saved. He, and thousands of other men, had been liberated.

By none other than Bucky's Steve.

He'd never been more proud. He could burst with it. Everyone knew Steve now - wait, no, everyone knew Captain America; but Steve was still his.

Steve Rogers was Bucky's years before he was anyone else's, and Bucky wasn't gonna let him forget that.

Even as the gorgeous brunette sauntered up to him, drawing a real smile outta his boy. Bucky
watched them both, back and forth between their faces.

She stood too close. Spoke too softly, so Steve'd lean closer. She was tough, teasing. Unrelentless.

Beautiful.

Respected.

Bucky'd just lost Steve.

He turned away from the scene, eyes stinging. He was fine. Always figured it'd happen one day. They'd both settle down, live next door with their respective wives and spend evenings together as one big family.

Except that wasn't the life waiting for Bucky anymore. Bucky couldn't go...settle down with some dame now. It wouldn't be enough. He'd been without Steve for so long...and Bucky'd broken so easily without him...he couldn't fathom being apart again.

But it looked like while Bucky was being tortured and holding on to Steve's memory even tighter, Steve'd been falling in love and letting go of Bucky even more.

Bucky had to turn away.

The men were all looking at Steve, looking at the whole scene and waiting. Expectations, orders.

He could hear Steve and the beautiful agent still talking, happy smirk as he said something about calling a ride.

Bucky got a strange, burning urge in his gut. She was standing too close to Steve, her eyes flicking all over his new face. Glancing at his lips. The burning inside Bucky kicked up another notch. Then a brilliant idea flashed - it was probably childish as hell, but the scheme hit him and just the thought sounded so satisfying he couldn't help it.

Before the brunette could respond and fawn over his best friend even more, Bucky interrupted her.

"Hey!" Bucky aimed at the men. Then his attention went back to Steve. Always back to Steve.

"Let's hear it for Captain America!!" He shouted, and the girl took a single step back as Steve's attention broke away from her.

The annoyed set of his jaw cloaked into something warm and tingling as Steve looked over at him. Bucky raised an eyebrow, grinning with a look that Steve couldn't misinterpret.

Yeah, "Captain America". You're an idiot but I still love you.

Okay, maybe not exactly what Bucky was saying with his eyes. But in the back of his mind, he knew that's what he was thinking.

He'd been sure to put the emphasis on the "Captain America," though, so Steve knew exactly how Bucky felt about it.

He could be this redwhite'n'blue hero and Bucky'd stand at his side. Bucky'd support him through all of that, he'd cover his six and he'd step back to give Captain America the spotlight.

But the quirk of his eyebrow, the screw it, what the hell smile held a promise in it.

You may be Captain America to them, but you won't fool me. You're still Steve Rogers and I - even
if I'm the only person on the planet who knows - won't let you forget that.

Still you and me, Rogers.

Steve smiled back at him.

As soon as he turned back around, as soon as blue eyes were off Bucky, the mask fell. He'd kept it up all day for Steve and he was just so damn tired.

And now that smile was gone, replaced with the look of worry as Steve hovered over where Bucky was laying on his cot, still trying to convince him to see a medic. Apparently the joking comments weren't deflecting.

Bucky'd always been more patient than people gave him credit for. But there was something pounding his temples, this itching feeling he couldn't shake. Making him restless. If Steve wasn't here, Bucky'd probably be curled in a ball, rocking back and forth. Because even the dim light of Steve's tent was too bright. His body was too exposed, stretched out like this. The room was stagnant around him and he was moving too much. He was so used to being held down by leather, the ability to move left his limbs feeling loose; could fly off any moment.

Steve was here, so he was wearing a brave face. That's how it always was. Just another way to protect Stevie. The day Bucky'd gotten his orders, he'd been chipper as ever. Put on the mask and smiled wide, not giving either an inch of room to think about tomorrow, when they'd be separated. Apart.

So much'd changed since then, and masks weren't so easy to slip into anymore. Sometimes he'd wished for a real one, something to hide behind and not be studied. If Steve couldn't see Bucky's emotions, he couldn't be disappointed. And Bucky's mask was slipping now, it was getting harder every moment to brave through this for him.

The pressure was wearing patience thin. Then Steve pushed one more time - "you really need to see a doctor, Buck" - and the thin string he was hanging from split.

"I'm not gonna lay out on another table for another doctor, Steve. Okay?" Bucky finally snapped. His anger was all directed inwards he'd broken so easily under their hands, Steve should be ashamed of him and he had a feeling Steve knew that. But he didn't have it in him anymore to keep up the façade. He was too goddamned tired.

Steve's hopeful expression crumpled, one hand running down his face as he looked miserably at Bucky. Bucky almost apologized, from the look on Steve's face alone. Defeated, and that was Bucky's fault too.

"God, Buck, I'm sorry. I should've known, I just-- Are...are you okay?" Like this was somehow all Steve's fault. Bucky really wished he had a mask to hide behind right now. Everything was too open. Exposed. Raw. He brought his hands up to cover his face, only realizing they were trembling once they were covering his eyes nose mouth. Steve didn't need to see this.

He sucked in a breath behind his hands, air tasting like dirt and blood on his tongue. Maybe the only thing left of Bucky anymore was skin, dirt, blood.

"Buck?" Steve asked again, a tentative hand coming up to rest over one of Bucky's. The added weight and warmth to his mask was so nice...Steve's hands were big and hard and much much cleaner than Bucky's. They still had blood and dirt on them, sure. But it wasn't polluted and
poisonous like Bucky's blood was. Everything about Steve was cleaner than Bucky.

He wondered if Steve'd understand if he asked him to cover Bucky's face with his hands. Probably not. Probably just get more worried. He was just so sick of being unable to turn away. Of being peered down at and poked at and unable to hide, unable to stop looking. He just wanted to stop looking.

One of Bucky's hands lifted a touch, reversing to grab the one Steve'd covered him with. Their fingers interlocked, dirty dark callused ones with sweet white artist's hands. He probably hadn't even killed anybody yet. Bucky never wanted him to have to.

If he asked Steve to come home with him, would he? If Bucky begged him, he'd gotten so good at begging, hadn't he? begging stop, begging for relief. begging for Steve if he got down on his knees, what would Steve say? He might have a chance at getting outta this hellhole. Maybe released on psychological torture. As his single caretaker (the only one who ever cared in the first place), Steve might be able to come with him too. Actually, hell, Steve wasn't even technically in the army, based on the few bits he'd told Bucky on the walk.

But Steve'd never come home with him. He'd feel awful about denying Bucky that, but he wasn't selfish enough. Steve was a godforsaken angel. He'd never leave men to die out here. And now that he had the physical ability to help? Bucky couldn't drag him away if he tried.

And he would, Bucky'd be selfish enough to do that. He'd try. If he thought there was any chance of Steve choosing him over this war, he'd ask. But honestly, Bucky already knew the answer. And he'd deny himself the heartbreak. He was gonna pretend he didn't know the crumpling no.

He might've laid there forever - one hand over half his face, his and Steve's entwined hands awkwardly covering the other half - if he hadn't heard the tiny snuffling sound. If he wasn't a sniper, trained marksmen, the sound would've been too soft. But picking up on shit like that saved people's lives, it was Bucky's job. He heard the sound.

Pulling away the hands from his face and sitting up all at the same time was probably not the brightest idea, but he knew that sound. The oil lamp in the corner of the tent was dimming and the only light around, but it still made Bucky half-blind as he blinked stupidly and tried to focus on Steve's face.

The stark-blue looked up from where they'd been cast down in - what, sadness? shame? sorrow? - water brimming thick black bottom-lashes.

"Steve," Bucky said softly, worriedly, scooting forward on Steve's cot so his knees inter-lapped every other with the no-longer-bony ones. Steve looked away, sucking in a breath and blinking rapidly in attempt to dry the unshed tears. Well, they were having none of that.

He reached up a dirty hand, landing solidly on Steve's jaw and tilting his head to look at Bucky. Steve's bottom lip was trembling (one thing that hadn't changed), so he bit down on it and stared at their entwined hands. It was comforting, Bucky couldn't deny that. It always had been, that physical link to Steve of their touching fingers.

It was nothin' like holding hands with girls, that flirting, fluttering. This was another way to connect to Steve, have him here and solid and real and alive. Mutual promise and a physical representation of how tightly woven, how close their bond was. Nothin' like holding hands with girls.

If someone were to walk in right now, they'd probably get the wrong idea. With Bucky's knees pressed tight to trap Steve's, hand on his jaw and the other interlocked tight. To somebody who didn't
know, it might've looked odd. Hell, even Bucky could admit it wasn't exactly normal behavior. Little on the touchy-feely side, even for them. But everything was still raw and painful and Steve was trying not to cry and it wasn't like he could let him start tearing up on Bucky's behalf. Bucky was gonna be okay.

He'd been saved. He'd been rescued. Steve'd come for him. It shouldn't've been possible, but somehow they were together again and they should be damn-near celebrating, not crying like dames.

"I'm sorry, Steve. I'm so sorry." Bucky dug his thumb into the hard angle of Steve's jaw, grounding him. This whole angled-jaw thing was new. Not quite as pretty as LittleSteve's sweet face, but it was nice. More ruggedly-handsome than sweet, Bucky supposed.

"Hell are you apologizing for, Buck? I'm the one who's sorry. I can't...what can I do? There's gotta be something I can do to help you." Steve begged, desperate. That was not what he'd expected. Steve's sympathy, sure. Good-natured teasing, definitely. But this desperation that had Steve wrapping one solid hand around Bucky's elbow...it was new. Really new.

But Bucky did a damn good job tampering down the strange tightening in his chest. His body did that sometimes around Steve, he was used to it. Well; he had been anyways. Hadn't seen Steve in a long time, it'd been months since that tightening feeling. Just had to get used to it again, was all.

"You already did help me, you nut. You got me outta there, remember? I'll be okay." Bucky pulled his hand back from Steve's jaw, maybe a little reluctantly. It was just...solid proof of Steve's existence under his hands. He couldn't hold on forever, though. They were in the middle of a war.

Steve just kept looking at him with that lost-hopeless-puppy-dog look that Bucky was pretty sure he'd learned from that damn stray down the street.

"What?" Bucky accused, crinkling up his nose. His tone'd lightened up - whole body'd lightened up. Steve could do that. It was all the damn sunshine and pure-angel-goodness. Just rubbed off sometimes. Well...got suckedup by Bucky's energy. He didn't actually get any sunnier himself, just stole some of Steve's and warmed himself with it.

What in the world would he be without Steve? In the few months they'd been apart, Bucky hadn't had much time to find out. He'd been much too busy ruthlessly killing people. Besides, he hadn't been without Steve, exactly. Steve sent him a total of four letters, each with a drawing on the back. He hadn't lost Steve. Bucky couldn't imagine what'd happen to him if he did.

"Please, Buck. You know how I hate feelin' useless. Can I help with anything?" Steve squeezed their fingers together tighter and Bucky squawked indignantly, trying to pull his hand back. Steve was goddamn strong now and there was no way Bucky would win that fight.

Then, of course, Steve thought he was hurting Bucky (he was not made outta fucking feathers) and snapped his hand back like he'd burned him, instantly spurting off apologies. Bucky just barely shut him up by lifting a hand in the universal stop motion. He considered slapping it over Steve's mouth for added affect, but the surrender sign sufficed.

"You didn't hurt me, goodness. I'm not that much smaller than you now." Bucky raised an eyebrow, giving Steve a pointed look. Blue eyes shifted to the side with a relieved sigh. Steve had this look on his face no one else in the world could achieve - that relieved-guilty thing he did when Bucky saved him from fights, brought home long-needed medicine. Clasped a hand on Steve's shoulder and told him to move in, dammit, or else Bucky would move all his stuff in the middle of the night and leave Steve with no choice.
That body may be bigger and more...muscular? than the LittleSteve's, but the insides were the exact-same-worrying-punk Bucky'd known his whole life. For some reason, that felt like the best news all day.

"Tell you what. If you really wanna help..." Bucky trailed off and Steve perked up. He literally was a damned golden retriever. "...how bout you take me for drinks tomorrow night? After we give our reports tomorrow and everything? Lord knows we could both use a night out."

Steve smiled, clapping a hand (too hard) on Bucky's shoulder. "I can do that."

"Good," Bucky said, a little weakly. He'd been planning to ridicule Steve a little more, joke about Steve's new acquired fame or maybe his inability to go drinking when he was so tiny, but this whole ordeal'd been kinda draining.

He'd put on enough of a mask to yank them past the conversation where Steve broke down crying about Bucky being tortured and Bucky clammed up, not wanting to relive it over again. Although, if Steve really asked him, Bucky might say what happened. It'd hurt like hell, but lying to Steve might hurt more.

Well, he wouldn't tell him everything. That wouldn't just hurt Steve, that might break him. It'd broken Bucky. But maybe they could talk about it. After drinks, when everything wasn't so just-happened and the world was pleasantly numbed with some alcohol in his system.

They could face anything after a couple of drinks.

~*_~*~*_~*_~*

Sleep sounded terrifying in the prospect of everything that'd happened, but he was more tired than he could ever remember being in his existence. Including back when he was working three jobs and staying up all night to help Steve through his illnesses.

He fell asleep with Steve's back pressed to his, both of them laid out on the ground with a blanket underneath and one draped over the top too. It was a hellosalot nicer sleeping arrangements than Bucky'd had in the war before.

The muscles of Steve's back were defined and safe and warm against Bucky's tattered shoulderblades, unfamiliar and strange in a way, but still comforting. If Bucky could draw like Steve could and Steve had asked Bucky to draw him the way he should have been born based entirely on his personality and his insides, this is what Bucky would have drawn. Strong, tall, wholesome and healthy, but not too flashy or proud.

Bucky slipped into unconsciousness while he was still contemplating over Steve's new body. It didn't last long - when he woke up the oil lamp was just about out but still going. He'd been out for maybe half an hour. Steve was a dead log beside him, entirely shut off from the world in his slumber. It wasn't fair.

His eyelids were sandbags, just begging him to sleep. But every time he drifted outta reality and tried to get some legitimate rest, his body kept waking him back up. Up, awake. Down, knocked out for a moment. Then startling awake again. His eyes shot open every time he came back to the world of the living, his breath picking up a notch as temporary panic set in. Then he'd register Steve's back pressed to his and settle back down. He was safe. He was safe. Drift into unconsciousness for another moment. Startle awake. Rinse, repeat.
He probably wouldn't be getting any sleep at all if it weren't for the physical exhaustion in his bones. He couldn't name the last time he slept. They didn't let him sleep on the table. He hadn't gotten anything quality in the trenches. It was too damned cold. Too dangerous. He just volunteered to keep watch all the time. As a Sergeant, it made his men trust him. And with his amazing eye, it was safer for everybody. Nobody ever protested.

Except Bucky's body, which couldn't take all the sleep deprivation. So it kept trying to take him under. And his stupid mind kept waking him back up in states of varying panic.

One shock back awake - probably around three in the morning - hit a bit harder than the others. Bucky's eyes shot open and his breath caught as usual, but his whole body flinched this time, recoiling from some invisible force that'd reached out and touched him in the darkness. The flinch was fairly exaggerated, but Bucky carefully tried to slow his beating heart, get his breathing back to normal before Steve woke up.

"You okay?" came a quiet voice in the darkness. So much for that.

Bucky stared at the canvas of the tent and nodded in the dark. A few seconds slipped by. Maybe Steve would go back to sleep. Then Bucky could try to too, all over again.

The pressure against his back shifted and then one of the big warm hands was curling around Bucky's bicep. Bucky tried to make some of the tension leave his body, but everything was still too high strung. The walls were getting closer, slowly, but Steve didn't seem to be worried about that. Maybe Bucky shouldn't care either.

It was a hell of a lot easier when he just stopped caring. Complacency was a treasure on the torture table.

"Can you look at me?" Steve's voice came again, just as quiet and soft. Like they were in a little bubble. Because outside this bubble, there was no such thing as quiet and soft. Bucky knew that first hand. Why would Steve pretend it was, then? That was cruel. Very cruel.

He flickered his gaze up to Steve's face anyways. He was half leaning over Bucky, one of his legs brushing the back of Bucky's. Even in the dark, his eyes were somehow still piercingly bright.

Steve's breath caught in his throat and Bucky looked at him curiously. What the hell could be wrong now?

The soft fingers unclenched from Bucky's arm, reaching down slowly to brush under one of Bucky's eyes. He followed the finger with his gaze as Steve pulled his hand away, something wet and glistening on it now. Huh. Why was there water on Bucky's face? It seemed like a cruel riddle and his brain hurt too much to try to figure out riddles right now.

Bucky waited, bracing himself for the inevitable scolding. *How long have you been up?* at the nicest. He didn't want to think about the worse. Steve hated when Bucky stayed out late, stumbling home drunk. Or when he just didn't sleep. That bothered Steve too. Bucky never really understood why. But there was no reason that Steve wouldn't yell at him for it now.

Except that he didn't.

"Buck? I'm here. You're here, with me. You're safe. Both of us are safe. Okay?" Bucky just blinked at Steve. What the hell was that? Maybe he was being condescending? Or maybe he was just trying to remind Bucky of something. It was too late - well, too early in the morning - to handle that much thinking right now.
Bucky just wanted to sleep forever and his stupid head wasn't letting him. It might be easier though, with Steve so warm and close. Bucky could at least try. "Okay," he whispered.

Steve looked at him for another moment, then he laid back down. His hand on Bucky's bicep didn't move. Bucky slipped back into unconsciousness. He woke up about an hour later. It was the longest stretch of sleep he got all night.

But in the light of day, Bucky could be okay.

In the morning, they had debriefings and calculations and all sorts of fun technological stuff. Nothing emotional and nothing physical so Bucky would be fine. When he woke up, he already was.

Neither of them mentioned the night before.

If Bucky had his way, they'd never mention any of it ever again. Forward and forward only. No looking into the past because the only things there were heavy and dark and still just wedged under Bucky's skin. He'd smile and cock his head and everything would be okay.

His best friend was here, stronger than ever, and Bucky'd never had it so good.

~*~*~

He was a little honored Steve'd come to him for advice about who to have on his team. Obviously, Bucky'd been in the field with these people, so it made sense. It didn't make him any less proud that Steve trusted his judgement that much, just took it in blind faith on Bucky's word alone. Just an added bonus that the group Bucky had pointed out was composed of basically the only men in the army Steve'd befriended so far.

They were a good crowd. Steve mentioned something about them stepping up to help out while they were trying to get outta the lab. Bucky didn't remember that very well, which was probably not a good sign, but he'd nodded along like he knew what Steve was talking about and sent him on his way to ask them to join up. Bucky already knew they'd say yes. He told Steve so, too.

And as Steve came sauntering back in (yes, his walk had subconsciously turned into a saunter), the grin on his face proved Bucky right.

"See? Told you," Bucky teased, trying not to look like he'd been staring at Steve's back, waiting, suspended-- just didn't wanna let Steve outta his sight quite yet. Steve circled behind him to take a seat and Bucky lifted his glass to his lips, trying not to think about how Steve could sit with any person in this room and he still gravitated back to Bucky. He quickly amended his statement more, drawing any bit of attention off himself that he could. "They're all idiots."

Steve smiled a little before turning those eyes - still big and blue and beautiful - on Bucky. Bucky forced himself not to stare back.

"How bout you? You ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death?" Bucky snorted at the Captain America thing. So Steve had definitely noticed Bucky's smirk earlier when he said it.

But it was easier not to look at Steve now than he thought it'd be. Because as much as they were joking as always, the weight in Steve's voice wasn't messing around. This was the moment Bucky'd been waiting for. Cringing, preparing for. Steve was asking him to fight, asking Bucky to stay with him and try to win this bloody hell of a war.

He stared at his glass for a moment. He could tell Steve no. He could. If he was an entirely different person, maybe. If he'd been born with immunity to pretty blue eyes and soft blonde hair and quick
shy smiles instead of a propensity to melt at a flash of any of those things. Let alone all of them at once, aimed in Bucky's direction. He couldn't actually tell Steve no.

Captain America, though...

"Hell no," Bucky said with a ghost of a smile. He had to lay this whole Steve vs Captain America shit to rest right now. If Bucky was doing this, if he was falling back into the fight, Stevie had to know where Bucky stood. Aka he wasn't blinded by the sequins of Steve's new tights. Probably the only person left on earth who didn't see Captain America when they looked at the tall handsome man with the shield. He never would. Bucky'd always see behind the shield. The only one.

Steve's eyes were on him, maybe concerned. Maybe waiting for Bucky to tell him that he couldn't do this, that he had to go back home to Brooklyn because they'd poisoned the blood in his veins and destroyed the core of him. Bucky wasn't gonna say any of that out loud, but he did appreciate the patient silence. That was something Steve was always better at than him.

Was there anything Steve wasn't better at than him? Killing people, so far. If only Bucky could keep it that way.

"That little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb not to run away from a fight..." Bucky turned his head, gaze catching on Steve's waiting one. It was probably obvious as hell, but for just a second Bucky decided he didn't care how it looked. Some heart-eyed fool, sitting here fawning over Steve. Well, he wasn't really fawning. Just...affectionately gazing.

"I'm following him."

Steve smiled, the abashed-holdingback one. Head ducked, emotions tumultuous at the edges of his mouth. Relief, knowing somebody saw more than the brave soldier, this dramatic symbol. Which Steve was, but he was a hellofalot more too. And they both knew it.

Steve didn't need him like he used to, but for some reason he was sticking around.

That was more of a comfort to Bucky than any sort'a medical treatment could've been.

A few months ago he was sitting at bars and wondering what it'd be like if Steve were here. What Dugan'd think of him. What trees, buildings, people Steve'd wanna draw. Sometimes Bucky used to pretend Steve was just waiting up for him back at base, waiting for Bucky to come home with stories of night while Steve laughed and sketched Bucky's crazy drunken sprawl across the ground.

Now Steve was actually here. They hadn't gone out to battle yet. Hadn't had to face anything but the inside of a debriefing tent and this bar, so the worst was yet to come.

But with the piano and singing in the background and Steve at his side, Bucky was gonna get drunk enough to forget everything but those three words. Steve was here.

"But you're keeping the outfit, right?" Bucky teased, setting down his drink and leaning in a little too close. He swayed backwards, quick, because the tightness-in-his-chest thing was going again and he wasn't sure he could handle it with the number of drinks he was planning to consume.

Steve turned to him again, curving smile on his mouth. Bucky forced himself to look away from Steve's mouth smile, up at his eyes again. Blues were smiling too and that made Bucky smile wider.

"You know what?" Steve studied the poster over Bucky's shoulder - didn't hafta turn to know, he'd seen it plenty while he was waiting for Steve to come back. (They picked the wrong color of blue for his helmet to make his eyes stand out. Bucky would've picked a better blue.) Those eyes were
currently looking a little nostalgic, scanning the poster like it stood for all those months he'd spent touring. "It's kinda growin' on me."

"Well, good. I need somethin' to tease you about if you're not thin as a lamppost anymore." Bucky raised an eyebrow, mouth quirking sideways. Steve's smile widened and this glow settled over Bucky's skin, because he'd done that, he'd made Steve smile. It'd been such a regular part of Bucky's life before the war - always trying to get that smile outta the ever-stubborn Rogers - and the fact that he could still do it was amazing.

Of all things to stay, Bucky was relieved, glad, praisingly-thankful this was one'a them.

Behind them, the sudden hush of the bar made smiles die, cautious instinct kicking in. They leaned back in tandem - perfectly synced as always - trying to source the instant atmosphere shift. Bucky saw her first. And pretended his heart didn't sink to the ground.

Because Sarah Rogers was a saint and taught both her boys (Bucky never got over how she called him that) proper manners, they both stood the moment Agent Carter stepped into the room. Bucky may've been a low-life kid working the backstreets of busy Brooklyn, but he knew how to properly treat a dame. Even one he kinda hated.

"Captain," she greeted, stepping forward with long legs slinkier than ever in that tight red dress. She was gorgeous, absolutely stunning in every sense of the word. Voice melted chocolate and normally Steve'd be a mess - Bucky's hardening gaze and clenched fists had nothing to do with the way he responded so smoothly.

"Agent Carter." She stepped closer and Bucky took the opportunity to make her as uncomfortable as possible with a very obvious check-out. He wouldn't do anything rude or vulgar obviously, even if Steve wasn't here. But he wasn't gonna let this dame come waltzing in here like she owned the place. Worse, like she owned Steve. Bucky had the upperhand here and he was gonna damn well prove it.

"Ma'am," Bucky shot as sarcastically as possible without getting a correction from Steve. He nodded and gave her a smile so distasteful she'd have to be blind not to feel offended. She let it glaze off her shoulders though, just turning all her attention and that long, beautiful body back to Steve.

"Howard has some equipment for you to try tomorrow morning." She had this sly way about her that was teetering him on-edge. Fighting the fucking urge to just stand in front of Steve, bar his arms and hiss mine at her until she ran away.

Wow. That was a ridiculous fucking thought.

Steve was his best friend. Bucky just didn't wanna split attention with someone else, right?

They'd always said that they'd get married to dames some day, live next door. If Steve was gonna marry anyone, this Agent Carter looked like she might be the candidate.

Suddenly Bucky wasn't so sure he liked that idea anymore.

"Sounds good," Steve smiled easily. Bucky's eyes couldn't leave his glowing face, traveling all over the new body and trying to pick up familiar signs that might've transferred. He needed to know how Steve was feeling but it was harder to read when there was all this muscle and such in the way. Not that Bucky minded the muscle...or liked it? It was comforting to know Steve was safe. That's all it was. Right? Of cour--

Agent Carter suddenly turned to him, sharp eyes snapping up like she knew the exact words he was thinking. Bucky almost blushed, almost ducked his head and turned tail because it was so not what it
looked like. He kept telling himself that it wasn't what it looked like, but then why would it look like that in the first place? So he'd been looking at Steve a little intensely, fine. So he hated this girl that was throwing herself at him, fine. Didn't mean anything.

She'd be so good for Steve. She could give Steve so many things that Bucky couldn't. But it wasn't fair, why couldn't Bucky just give Steve everything--

His eyes cut from Carter to Steve, and cast down in jealousy. Shame. She couldn't take Steve from him, Steve was the sole star in Bucky's sky.

He couldn't be alone again.

How could Steve smile shyly back at her, go galavanting with crushes right now? Why now, when Bucky needed him?

He needed his best friend.

He needed him and he needed to not be alone and he'd been destroyed and cut up and hurt and he couldn't go it alone, how could Steve chose right now to chase some girl?

But it wasn't Steve's fault, he didn't know anything about torture, didn't know how quickly Bucky'd blinked out without sunshine and he just needed a chance at light again--

It was her fault. She was gonna take Steve away from him, Steve was his.

Jealous. God, fuck, something was wrong with him.

Bucky turned his head away from the tension that'd risen in the air. He didn't know if Steve could feel it, if Steve had any idea what was going on. He couldn't do this, couldn't lose Steve again, couldn't watch him marry somebody else.

Fuck, did Bucky just think the words somebody else?

If he wasn't high-versed in panic moments and masking conversations, Bucky probably would've started a panic attack by now. Or ran outside and screamed. His emotions were already shut down, thank god. It was too much to have to function after that table, after everything they'd done to him...everything they promised they'd still do.

Already hiding that, what was one more thing to pile on top? He couldn't watch Steve leave him for someone else, his heart was breaking right on his face--

He needed a hell of a good strategy if he didn't want Agent Carter seeing through him like cellophane. Over here just radiating jealousy and he had to twist that, shape it so that she didn't know what was going on. So Steve didn't-- so Bucky didn't drive himself half-mad.

Calling up every ounce of the Brooklyn Boy he had left, Bucky turned back to them with a shallow version (best he could muster) of that patented smirk on his face. He could do this.

"I can see your top squad is prepping for duty," she was sing-songing, amused mouth towards Steve. Pure laser-focus.

But Bucky was going to win this, he had to have the fucking upperhand here. He didn't give Steve a chance to reply to her quip before he butted in, perfectly chosen words with brutal execution.

"You don't like music?" Accusatory and sugary, egging her to say the wrong thing and already
condemning her before she did. There was a reason Bucky Barnes got promoted to Sergeant, and not all that was marksmanship. He was damn clever. He could play the game, always knew what to say. Except around Steve, who called Bucky's bullshit without even glancing his way.

"I do, actually," she said (still managing to keep eye-contact with Steve), voice dropping to add velvet to already melty-chocolate. Bucky fought back the urge to groan and roll his eyes. She was laying it on so fucking thick, any other man would be disgusted. Or have that dress half-off. But Steve stood there with his little grin, looking slightly scandalized but mostly interested.

If she wasn't a dame, Bucky would've punched her by now.

"I might, even, when this is all over --" made-up eyes flashed, sparking red-hot fire. Bucky used to burn bright too, he remembered. He used to shine like that - but he wasn't stupid. He knew Steve didn't like Agent Carter because of the fierce-brunette resemblance. That'd be the most ridiculous thing that flashed across his mind tonight. Steve wasn't like that.

He just wished she wasn't on fire. It wasn't fair, she had so much spark when Bucky'd just lost his. A candle blown out with a rough, smacking breath, right when it finally might've counted.

"--go dancing." She was looking at Steve like she was gonna eat him alive and she'd deflected so smoothly it wasn't fair. At all. But he was Bucky Barnes. And she was just another dame who'd fallen in love with the muscle of Steve's chest, his perpetual smile, bright angelic goodness. She didn't even know the real Steve.

Bucky wasn't gonna lose Steve to that.

"Then what're we waiting for?" Bucky prodded, the idea of dragging her away from Steve roughly the best thought he'd had all night. He wasn't on top of his game and he knew that. His brilliant charming smile was flat with outspoken disgust, but the words were all that mattered right now because it wasn't like she could stop looking at Steve anytime soon.


Bucky asked her a direct question and she answered him without once budging her gaze. "The right partner."

Okay. Okay then fine, fuck her. This chick seriously thought that she could come barging into Steve's life because he was some glittering hero and win his affections because she was gorgeous, smart, the first girl to pay him any mind since the beginning of time? His teeth clenched at the thought of Steve changing himself for this girl, this girl that wanted Captain America, not the precious bold, perfect Steven Grant Rogers that used to flick eraser pieces at Bucky when he got annoying.

She thought that she was the right one for Steve. Her, this girl. Honestly believed that she could--

Bucky was surprised steam wasn't coming outta his ears. Disgust rolled off him in palpable waves as she finally took a step backwards, eyes never leaving Steve's face. "O'eight hundred, Captain."

Agent Carter stepped off with a swirl of red and gorgeous and so so much better than everyone else ever and Bucky wanted to throw things. He wanted to shred things, he wanted to rip doors off their damn hinges and scream. She had no right. She was trying to steal Steve from Bucky and she had no fucking right.

"Yes ma'am. I'll be there," Steve said, hint of blush in his voice. Bucky glared unregrettably at her retreating back. Maybe he could burn a hole right through her if he glared hard enough.
He was too mad to care about the rejection. Too mad to think about anything but how un-fucking-fair this whole thing was.

He'd just gotten Steve back, and it turned out Steve wasn't his to take back at all.

"I'm invisible," Bucky managed, spinning towards running sunshine. It was the first thing he'd said since he'd been rescued that felt honest. (He'd meant what he said about following that little guy from Brooklyn, but even that'd been hesitant because Bucky didn't wanna follow Steve anywhere but back home to Brooklyn.)

Bucky was invisible. Steve's world used to revolve around him, they revolved around each other, and now there was a whole'nother solarsystem tugging Steve's gravity away. Centering his world somewhere else.

And Bucky was invisible.

He couldn't care less that Agent Carter wasn't interested in him. She was interested in Steve and that was way way way more infuriating.

Steve just got him back. Shouldn't he be unable to look away from Bucky? Shouldn't he be giving Bucky those eyes? Red hot, fire in his veins and it wasn't fair, it should be him. The best-friend-lost-and-returned. Not some girl. How could it be some girl?

Hit him all at once; like a fucking train.

He was jealous, really fucking jealous. Plain as day now, to anyone. Hell, the bartender probably could see it from across the room. Bucky was fuming with jealousy and anger and it wasn't right.

Steve'd see through him in a heartbeat if this were a normal day. If Bucky'd never been...captured and they hadn't been apart so long. If Steve wasn't swooning over someone else. If things were like they used to be, Steve'd take one look at his face and hear those two words I'm invisible, and he'd know instantly what was wrong with Bucky.

Jealous. Fucking--

There was always the chance Steve wouldn't react well to that. Steve might hate him for it. Steve might leave him for it.

Things'd changed, but there hadn't been enough time to tell how much. If Steve could still read him, Bucky'd be in deep shit. He wasn't ready for anything near this conversation, let alone right now when he was pissed and volatile and hurting and burning--

So he ran his mouth, couldn't look Steve in the eye through the bullshit - façade weak, weaker than the bones in Bucky's dead limbs.

"I'm - I'm turning into you." The stutter would give him away, god the stutter would give him away. He let out a panicked rush of air, eyes forcibly away. "Th-This is some horrible dream."

Nightmare. Shit, he'd meant to say nightmare. Bucky stared at his feet and held his breath and waited for Steve to call him out. A year ago, Steve'd know instantly. But Bucky wasn't Bucky anymore and Steve wasn't Steve anymore and he just smiled lightly, turning back towards the bar.

"Don't take it so hard," Steve teased, big hand clapping down on Bucky's shoulder. It was supposed to be playful, sure, but none of the other guys touched each other this damn often and for once? Bucky wished maybe it could be what it looked like.
Steve's hand lingered too long and Bucky was a ragdoll. He stared forward, lips parted, the touch warming him all over, calming away the anger in his belly. Edge filed off because dammit, Steve hadn't touched her, hadn't even reached to. But here he was with his hand lingering on Bucky's shoulder like it was the most familiar, okay thing in the world.

"Maybe she's got a friend." Steve smiled. Like the old days. God, if they could go back to the old days. Then his hand was gone and Bucky's body automatically turned to follow the path of Steve's. Barstools, glances, and he quickly snatched Steve's glass. He needed alcohol now. A soft punch landed on his shoulder and Steve gave an indignant hey! that was entirely pointless because they both knew Steve wouldn't drink a drop anyways. It was the stipulation to going out - Steve said he'd only go if he didn't have to drink. The excuse: he didn't want to get sloppy as the new poster child, but Bucky had a feeling it was deeper than that.

If Steve was drunk, he couldn't look out for Bucky. He'd have to be an idiot if he couldn't recognize at least that look on Steve's face.

Another slip of warmth shot through his chest, tightening again, way it did around Steve. What did that mean? Been there forever, he'd never let himself think--

But he wouldn't worry right now, not when another glass scooted his way. Steve's proximity was summer, heat on the Coney Island Pier. The spot on Bucky's arm where Steve'd just punched - left arm, direct center of his bicep - was tingling pleasantly. Like Steve was still there, even though he'd barely lingered. If just his arm was tingling, how amazing would Steve's hands feel between his shaking fingers right now?

Would it be like always? Safe warm precious and the only thing Bucky had to hold on to? Or would it be different, now that Bucky was steaming with jealousy. Possessiveness. Maybe he'd always been jealous, possessive. Hadn't had to face it til now.

If it wasn't so damn scary - don't leave me - he might actually thank Carter for getting his dumbass outta the cloud of denial. But it was too much, too new to do anything but try to inhale.

He just wanted to wrap himself up in Steve like he was a blanket. He wanted to breathe, feel, own nothing but Steve because Steve was the only one that could-- could make him feel safe and comforted and- and loved dammit. Even if it was like a brother. Even if that's all Steve ever saw him as, that was fine. Because - frankly - the idea of anything more was making him shake. Couldn't push this, not when his head was so messy. Maybe his love for Steve wasn't so brotherly after all.

Maybe it never had been. He paled at that, thinking back to all the times his chest tightened, all those times he'd looked at Steve and thought something that might not've been normal. He'd always thought Steve's eyes were so pretty. That his delicate frame was somehow both cute and endearingly tough. He could take a lot, and Bucky admired him for that.

Admiring wasn't exactly lusting after. Oh god, lust. Wow okay he did not need to go there right now.

Bucky tipped back his drink, whole throat lighting up with unpleasant fire as it went down, every drop. God, Steve. Little, tiny, beautiful Steve. And now the big, warm, gorgeous one...

It wasn't fair. Double-whammied - memories of the past dredging up in his gut, forcing him to look at all those times with eyes that weren't so prejudiced while sitting right next to the source of his irrational instability. Steve was here, glancing at Bucky, huffing a breath of laughter as Bucky sat the empty glass back down on the bar. The bartender gave him a sympathetic look and pushed across another.
Bucky had walked in this bar with his eyes steady on Steve, reaching for the one bit of familiarity in a war that'd ripped everything outta his body and stuffed it back in in the wrong order.

He was gonna walk outta here with that last bit of familiarity ripped away from him too. Damn Agent Carter and her stupid thing for Captain America. Damn her. Damn her.

But how long'd this been coming? How long'd this new thing not been new at all? How fucking long had he been hiding from himself?

That was scarier. What if it was true? What if Bucky Barnes was actually a guy who...who felt too much for the little blonde kid he'd grown up sharing beds with?

Steve would hate him.

He'd never say it, too damn polite. But if he found out he'd plaster that awful smile and tell Bucky it was fine, they'd work past it. Temporary reach for comfort in a cold and unfamiliar war. It'd all go away soon, he'd promise Bucky. Maybe even clap a hand on Bucky's shoulder in a weak attempt at how things were before Bucky realized that his world started and stopped with Steve Rogers and that meant more than just friendship, too.

But as nice as Steve'd be about it, he'd be disgusted. He'd be disgusted and disoriented and he'd hate Bucky for taking away the one thing he'd always counted on: Bucky's friendship.

Bucky couldn't do that to Steve. He'd already taken more than his share, he didn't deserve to thwart all the sunshine outta Steve's life.

Worse, he could leave, and Bucky'd be alone. He couldn't be alone again, he couldn't do it, who'd be there to save him, who'd be there to pull him outta the fire, who'd drag him away from that horrible, retched, poisonous, burning place—

Whatever this was.

Steve could never know.

"Buck?" Steve called, his hand landing softly on Bucky's forearm. Bucky stared at the hand for a moment. He didn't flinch on the outside, he knew that, but the sight of someone else's hand on his skin - he froze. Someone was touching him and there was nothing he could do about it, no way he could fight back.

Alone again.

He was gonna be alone--

There was something in his system - must've drugged him, lord, that was heavy stuff. His mouth tasted like whiskey and the world was blurring but maybe the whiskey taste was just how he was coping with the drugs shot into his system.

Abandoned.

They'd drugged him and fuck if he hadn't just had the most vivid dream. He could have sworn he'd felt Steve coming to rescue him.

How the fuck would Steve come to rescue him? Steve was back home in Brooklyn, scrawny ass
probably fighting with walls in his spare time because all the bullies were gone off to war. Like Bucky. Stupid fucking war, had him ended up on this table. He'd never see Steve again and that was fine, he was okay with that because eventually he'd be dead anyways, right?

The drugs must've been something new this time. It wasn't the hardest he'd been out. That hallucination was a helloafalot more vivid than the rest of them, but Bucky was an experiment, right? He was an experiment and they'd found something new and damned if it wasn't creative because Bucky'd just had a dream about Steve being taller than him. What the fuck was that?

Maybe they'd let him sleep soon. That one guy - Zoma or something? - said he wouldn't need sleep, not after they were done with him. Bucky just hoped they were done soon.

"BUCKY!!" He was hearing their shouts in Steve's voice now. That was weird. But not that surprising. Maybe they were done, maybe this was the end after all. Maybe he was finally dying, like the rest of them that'd come to the table.

Someone was shaking his shoulders. How could they shake his shoulders when they were strapped down? Maybe they were shaking the table. Disorientation, he knew that one. They did a lot with disorientation. He was supposed to be doing something, he was pretty sure. There was his serial number, he was supposed to say that. But his mouth didn't feel much like working. That happened sometimes. They didn't always get mad, sometimes they made curious faces and said *interesting* in German.

He didn't want them to hurt him for it this time. He didn't want to hurt anymore. It didn't hurt much, actually. Dizzy, aching. Well, now that he thought about it he wasn't sure it hurt at all. Okay, definitely dying then. He tried prying open his eyes, golden too-bright lights swimming.

There were thick leather straps around his biceps, holding him up. They were thicker than he remembered, and warm - heated over a fire then. It was kinda nice though. If he was gonna die, this wasn't a bad way to go. He tried blinking against gold again, something fuzzy starting to wave into focus.

Was that an angel? An angel'd come to take him to heaven. That wasn't quite right, though. Bucky was pretty sure he wouldn't go to Heaven. He'd killed alotta people. He'd killed too many for an angel to be looking at him like that. That angel looked so familiar. All that sunny hair, eyes direct outlets to summer skies. Glowing, even.

It looked like Steve. The angel looked like Steve. God, Bucky was finally going home from this miserable war.

"Steve," Bucky murmured happily, leaning closer to the angel. Those straps on his biceps were still holding him tight, although he was closer to the Steve-angel now. He wanted to close his eyes again, let the angel take him. He just wanted to see his Steve again. Even if it was only looking down from the floor of heaven. He knew Steve'd be praying upwards every night anyways.

For the first time, a heavy rushing wave of gratitude that Steve was so faithful. If he was praying upwards than Bucky'd see his shining face as he looked up to the heavens and Bucky looked down. They'd be apart, but he'd be able to see Steve so it'd be okay. He'd be okay.

Suspended, waiting for that final blow, the blow to declare him dead. He peeked open an eye again. The angel was still there, mouth moving like it was speaking. Bucky couldn't hear, but he managed to slur out a few words instead.

"You gonna take me to heaven or what?" The angel stopped talking, was looking at Bucky now
with its face all twisted up. Bucky wanted to reach a hand and smooth out the sudden worry in the angel's face, but his arms were still pinned. It wasn't quite Steve's face, the jaw was all wrong, but it was close enough Bucky didn't want it to ever look as pained as it did right now. The angel looked like it was hurting more than Bucky was.

"I ain't afraid to die," Bucky clarified for the angel. It looked so worried, Bucky didn't wanna see it worry. He was gonna die and then he could look down on his praying Steve and that was a lot to tell an angel when his throat was all hot and tight, but he still wanted the angel to understand. It was okay. It was okay. Bucky didn't mind dying, "Jus'wanna go home, where they can't hurt me nomore. Just take me, take me and letit all be over. Please?"

Bucky asked nice as he knew how. The angel started to tear up. No, no, Bucky wasn't trying to make it cry. It was such a pretty angel. He felt awful that it was crying because of him.

"No, no. My life don't matter. It's okay, it's okay," Bucky tried to comfort it, moving his arms against the bonds. Huh, they moved with him. He lifted up a hand, thumbing at the angel's cheek where a tear had slipped away.

The angel was talking again, saying something and Bucky could at least hear sound this time. Only sound though, concerned and broken tone, shapes of words floating. The angel looked so upset. He had to try to listen. He focused hard as he could, watching the angel's mouth as he tried to place what order the sounds were in.


Unless the angel really was Steve? That didn't make any sense at all.

"Steve?" Bucky asked again, dubiously. There was no way this could be Steve. It didn't even look like Steve. It sounded like Steve, sure, and it had those same blue eyes. It smelled like Steve.

The angel - Steve? - pulled away quickly, eyes bright and hopeful as they scanned over Bucky's face. Bucky didn't know what the hell they were looking for, but he was pretty sure the angel wasn't gonna find it. He didn't have anything left in him for the angel - Steve - to find.

Okay, something wasn't adding up here. The more Bucky looked at the angel, the more he looked like Steve. Bucky blinked a few times, scanning the surroundings. Holy shit, this was not the torture chamber. He wasn't on a table. He was sitting on a stool...where the hell was he?

"Where am I?" Bucky echoed aloud, not missing the jump of hope in Steve's eyes. It really did look like Steve, in a strange sorta way.

"You're with me, Buck. We're in a bar, okay? We were out celebrating because I got you out. Bucky, it's me. It's Steve. I found you on Zola's table and I saved your lame ass for once, yeah? We got you out, blew up the building. Do you remember?"

Steve was staring at him intently, entire body thrumming with hope. Bucky blinked a few times, trying to figure what the hell Steve was talking about. There was something - puking and limping? Something about an evil lady in a red dress and before that, fire? Lots of fire, a metal beam. A disproportionate Steve across a gap, determined look on his face as he ran towards the pit.

Bucky squinted at Steve, trying to match up the one in his head to the one in fronta him. They
"Something...about you bein'a dumbass and trying to jump a fuckin' twenty-foot gap?" Bucky wasn't sure, and it sounded really crazy (especially if Steve was still here, because if he'd jumped wouldn't he be dead?), but a light suddenly shot up all Steve's features, relieved elation covering his face.

"Yeah, yeah, Buck. I made it to the other side. I'll explain everything, I promise. But you're safe, okay? Bucky? Do you understand me?" The straps on his arms shook him and Bucky looked down. Those weren't straps at all. Those were Steve's hands. "Do you understand you're safe now?"

Bucky looked up again. He had no idea what was going on, but Steve looked so sure. Even if it wasn't quite Steve, Bucky could never say no to that determined face. "Yeah, okay," he agreed softly.

Steve breathed out a sigh of relief, glancing over Bucky's left shoulder. Bucky sat obedient as Steve addressed somebody behind him.

"I'm gonna take him upstairs, see if I can't bring him all the way 'round. Thanks, guys, for being there."

There was shuffling behind him and Bucky suddenly didn't feel so safe. Steve was close, warm, so he tipped, pressed his forehead to Steve's shoulder. Darker, safer like this. A hand automatically came up to run fingers gently over the back of his neck. Safe enough to listen in now.

"-ure thing, Captain. He's had it rough, tougher than most the rest of us. But y'know Barnes, he'd break his leg and never tell a soul 'til his body stopped lettin' him walk."

Steve breathed out shakily and Bucky could feel it's path from where they were touching. Steve's shoulder was really comfortable against his spinning head.

"I know, that's what worries me. But you've all been so supportive, I don't know what I'd...thank you. I'll see you all tomorrow?"

"'Course, Captain. You take care." That was a different voice than th'other one. All the voices were real familiar. One sounded like Dugan. Maybe it was. Alotta strange things were happening and Bucky wasn't so sure. Maybe it was the whole squad he'd befriended.

Footsteps started to fade into the background, but they paused a ways off. Probably at a door.

"He's real lucky to have you lookin' out for him, Cap. He's a good guy."


"I know," Steve said softly, still shaky. His hands were steady though, pulling Bucky off the barstool. A heavy arm slung over his shoulders, guiding him forwards. "C'mon, let's get you some sleep, yeah?"

Bucky nodded. Sleep sounded amazing. Vaguely impossible, and not allowed, but amazing regardless.

The room above the pub was small, just a mattress on the ground. War did that. Steve guided him to sit, big hands tugging at his boots. Bucky looked up at Steve and tried to recalibrate the fuzzy images in his head with everything now.

"Who's the lady in the red?" Bucky asked as Steve pushed him gently down onto the mattress. He
sat beside Bucky, tugging off his boots too. Bucky laid perfectly still. He'd been placed here. He knew how to stay. "I don't like her very much," he added, crinkling his nose.

Steve looked over his shoulder sharply. "Why not? She's been great to me, Buck. She's the reason I was able to get you out when I did."

"I dunno," Bucky defended quickly, making sure to keep still, stare at the ceiling. Silently debate the nagging feeling he'd had about her. Lots of nagging feelings, he couldn't place-- "She doesn't know you," he finally settled with.

Steve kicked the last boot aside, swiveled to sit cross-legged in his direction. It was a strange look, Steve sitting there in white socks and full uniform, criss-cross applesauce to look at Bucky. He looked cute though.

Bucky looked away sharply at that thought. What the hell?

"Sure she knows me, Buck. Not like you do, but nobody knows me like you do."

"I know," Bucky grumped. That was kinda the whole point. She thought she knew Steve and she thought she could have him but she had no idea, not really.

"I did meet her before the serum, though," Steve added. "I think maybe she even liked me before the serum. It's hard to tell with Agent Carter, honestly. She may not even like me now."

Bucky was still hung up on this serum thing, which he had lots'a questions about. But arms and eyes were getting more and more tired. He'd ask in the morning.

"She sure seemed t'like y'fine," Bucky pouted, a little slurred even to his ears. Steve laughed quietly, mouth quirking sideways into a smile. Took a second to place the unease in his gut, but when he finally did he nearly choked on his tongue. Fuck, he'd messed up. He'd read that book, knew exactly what'd happen - Steve'd jokingly say what, you jealous Buck? and then Bucky would freeze and go red and try to laugh it off but Steve would know.

Bucky wasn't sure what exactly Steve'd know and why it was such a bad thing - couldn't quite remember - but he knew he couldn't let it happen. He'd messed up and it might just ruin everythi--

"Maybe," Steve offered instead, picking at a loose string on the hem of his pants. Bucky let out a breath of relief. Who was he kidding, this was Steve. He was the most oblivious guy on the planet when it came to crushes.

Wait, crushes? What the hell--

He was missing a lot. Could figure it out in the morning though, everything was confusing and too bright and he really wanted to pass out right now.

"You okay, Bucky?" Steve asked softly, glancing back up.

"I dunno," Bucky answered truthfully, forcibly looking at the ceiling. "Don't really remember...just patches, and. I know enough to know you're you, which is why I followed you up here but."

He held his breath, wishing he had permission to turn his head but he'd already done it once, couldn't push-- "Maybe it'll all be back in the morning. I...I don't wanna be wrong. I don't wanna wake up on that table and I don't wanna lose you again and I can't--"

He didn't realize he was shaking - hard - 'til Steve was there, laying on the mattress beside Bucky
and scooping him into his chest.

Straps—warm—p-please—safe?—don't—

"I'm not letting go, okay? You can sleep. I promise I'll look over you. I'll die before I let them take you again." Steve's voice had steeled into this solid, serious thing and it was so confusing, the strong arms around his shoulders. But Steve wouldn't let anything hurt Bucky. He promised. So long as Steve was alive, he'd save Bucky.

Even from his own mind betraying him. Blank was terrifying, and Bucky couldn't imagine what he'd do if Steve wasn't—

At least his body was cooperating. Muscles all relaxed, his eyes drooping shut. Like Steve asked. He wanted to sleep, and it looked maybe it was allowed. Then hopefully, morning sunrise would bring him back. And everything'd be okay.

~*_~*_~

When the harsh sunlight hit the back of his eyelids, Bucky groaned. And wow, fuck, he definitely remembered everything. He had a hangover the size of Antartica, but he remembered. Disoriented to hell when he'd fallen asleep, but safe must've finally sunken in. Body and mind worked in the night to stitch him up, weave out whatever'd sent him spiraling into the fuckin' looney bin.

He wasn't on Zola's table, although the psychological damage...must've been worse than he was counting on if everything turned to torture again.

Steve probably thought he was crazy.

Although, in fairness, Steve had a new body. Didn't help with the whole familiar/safe thing. Well, spending a night wrapped safe in the new arms kinda changed that.

Waking up cradled in Steve's arms also did wonders towards highlighting the epiphany from the night before. Raging jealousy, possessiveness. The possibility of more-than-brotherly feelings for Steve. Those were all still there, hovering in Bucky's head and. Great. He'd give anything not to have remembered that.

"Mornin', you alright?" Steve's chest rumbled under Bucky's ear, voice all deep and echoing. Bucky squeezed his eyes shut. Fuck.

"Jeez, Rogers, give me plenty a'time to adjust, huh? Yeah, m'fine. If you count waking up with Adonis arms squishing me half to death as fine."

Steve let go of him instantly, scooting back a foot to properly see his face. Bucky sighed, deflated. He shouldn't've said anything. It was much nicer on Steve's chest.

"Think my arms are as built as a Greek god? Aw, Buck, you always did know how to sweet talk that purty mouth a'yours," Steve teased. Bucky punched Steve in said arm and tried not to think about Steve calling Bucky's mouth pretty. He hadn't meant it like that. Steve lit up like watery sunrise, rolling away playfully.

When he hit the ground - less than a foot from the mattress they'd been laying on - reality sunk back in. Steve's eyes landed on his, laughing smile fading at the edges. "You really okay?" he asked quietly.

Bucky sighed and sat up, running a hand through his hair. It'd taken to falling like a mess over his
forehead lately and he hadn't exactly had the chance or incentive to slick it back yet. He should do that today.

"Yeah, Steve. I remember everything. The walk back, 'the right partner,' the whole nine yards." Bucky smirked as he did air quotes around Carter's flirtation last night. Steve made a face, but it didn't last long. He kept looking at Bucky, nervous, awaiting real reassurance. Bucky sighed melodramatically and stood up from the mattress, walking around it to offer a hand to Steve, who maybe really didn't need his help anymore.

"Sorry I wigged out on you, man. It's just...haven't been gettin' much sleep, hit me all at once. And gettin' drunk probably wasn't the best idea. Kinda felt drugged up all over again." Steve's face crumpled concerned again and Bucky waved it off with a hand. "But I'm fine now, really. Got my head back on straight thanks to you, so that's another tick on the list a' stuff I owe ya."

"You don't owe me anything, Buck. You'd do the same thing for me. You did, for years. It's my turn to take care of you now."

"Steve--" Bucky started to interrupt. If Steve seriously thought that, he'd been missing the whole point. But Steve held up a hand, halting the complaint and fixing him with a look.

"Yeah, I know. S'not why you did it, I don't owe you anything. You've told me a million times, and fine, I've got that by now." Bucky huffed. About damn time that sunk into his stupid head. He was always trying to compensate, find work, make it up to Bucky. There was nothing to make up.

Only thing was, that was kinda Bucky's main argument here. So when Steve kept going he didn't have much in the ways of protesting.

"But it's not fair to shut me out, I didn't do that to you. Swap our places and you know you'd be givin me this same speech. Just, please. Buck. Let me do this for you." Steve got that look on his face, that desperate-puppydog-look he'd learned from the goddamned stray. Bucky scowled.

"Let me in that...messy head of yours. Lemme help. You don't have to tell me everything that happened if you don't wanna, but tell me when it starts to come back. As soon as it gets to be too much. Tug my arm and I'm yours, okay?"

Steve could be the king of impeccable wording. He meant his attention would be Bucky's, of course, but that didn't stop it from bouncing around in Bucky's head.

He reached out and tugged Steve's arm, one side of his mouth up in a half-smile. Steve was Not Impressed, raising an eyebrow and staring Bucky down, waiting for an answer. Fine. Apparently turning it into a joke wasn't gonna fly. Sighing, he took a step backwards. That'd been 100% the only reason why he'd tugged Steve's arm. Entirely about making this into a joke, not about making Steve his or anything.

"Okay," he finally relented, making a face and throwing up his hands. It was a tough bargain, tougher than he'd ever know, but this was Steve asking. Bucky was the opposite of immune.

He wasn't gonna spill his guts, though. He wasn't gonna talk about this, or last night, or anything else. He was gonna bury it in the deepest corner of his head and block it away with a siphon of Steve. He'd use the awkward blonde Brooklyn boy to cover up and fill in all the cracks in his head. He was already so saturated with Steve, what could a few more extra Steve-shaped barriers do?

If Steve was on the lookout and Bucky kept him as much in the know as possible, then nights like last night wouldn't happen again. That's what Bucky was agreeing to, really. All he was agreeing to.
"Okay," Steve echoed, a soft smile on his lips. Bucky was not gonna think about his lips. Watched him straighten out his suit, carefully fixing his tie, jacket, pins. He looked good in uniform. Sharp, intelligent. Brave. Just like Bucky knew he was. "So, you ready to tackle this war with me, Sergeant?"

Bucky snorted, picking up his boots from the floor. "Ready as you are, punk."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, the action will be picking up from here. I know this was like 98% mental stuff, but I wanted to set a very clear base before we start exploring.

Thank you again for reading!!

xx
As awful and terrible as war was, it was good for one thing: a distraction. When you're out in the field and getting shot at, it's pretty easy to forget newly realized feelings for your lifelong best friend that you maybe had all along. Focus was imperative, the missions too serious to be compromised by a petty crush. Crush? Was that even the right word? It didn't feel like the right word.

But there was a downside in the daytime distraction, too. Since Bucky could shut out the crazy way his heart beat faster around Steve during daylight hours, it hit even harder when darkness fell. He'd go all day forcing it outta his mind but then they'd bunk up and clean their guns by the fire and Steve would be right at his side, touching Bucky too much and sharing a tent and bigger than life and more beautiful than any dame Bucky'd ever seen. And every night it would hit him hard as it did that first time in the pub - okay, maybe not quite so hard, but the tightness in his chest still came and knocked him off his feet.

He spent his days protecting his best friend and his nights falling for him all over again. It was dizzying, to say the least.

The only thing keeping him from going crazy - as ironic as it was - was Steve. No matter how much
Bucky shut out the feelings or let them swallow him, Steve didn't change one bit. He was the same solid, happy, perfect guy Bucky had grown up with. He was so entirely sure of who he was, what he did, what he stood for. Steve looked in the mirror to a flawlessly reflected image of what he saw inside. Pure Steve, 100% himself all the time, and there was nothing better for Bucky to come home to.

Bucky lost his grip on reality, on who the hell he was, divided himself into pieces and floated into nothing and darkness and clawed blindly at the confusing mess of people he'd become. There were all these different Bucky's living inside one body -
the punk kid that pranked his teachers;
the overprotective big brother that beat up Steve's attackers;
the ladies-man with a girl on each arm and ten more lined up around the block;
the confused teenager that came home stumbling drunk, pissing Steve off all the time;
the best friend that looped his arm around Steve's neck and pulled him along to rides on Coney Island;
the quiet and respectful young adult who could spend hours watching Steve draw;
the scared kid at basic training with a gun in his hands for the first time and a smoking, perfectly shot target across the field;
the cocky young Sergeant who'd never seen a day of battle;
the caring commander who gave sharp orders in the field that saved lives and earned him the respect of everyone he fought with;
the expert sharpshooter that could kill a man so swiftly, end a life so brutally, no one knew he was coming;
the detached soldier that stopped trying to care about all the people he'd shot;
the courageous friend that'd comforted the rest of the captured 107th, making each night in cages pass faster;
the rebellious, spitting man who'd been strapped to a table kicking and biting;
the scared, screaming mess he'd been halfway through the torture process;
the broken, complacent thing he'd been at the end of it;
the confused, stumbling ghost that was only alive by some miracle;
the painted face over the broken one that pretended to still win over a room, when honestly all he wanted to do was curl up in Steve's lap and never leave.

He was all and none of them, probably the most jumbled mess of a person to walk the earth. But every single version of himself, every personality trait and burning flaw...they all clung to Steve. Steve was the common ground, the glue that held the pieces together so Bucky was still a real person. The stuff of miracles - his smile, constant faith, unbreakable loyalty kept the stitches from snapping.

It was dangerously codependent, but Bucky couldn't remember a time when that hadn't been the case. Long before he'd felt his chest tightening at Steve's smiles, long before he knew what that might mean, long before he realized he was jealous'a Steve's dreamboat gal. Long before any of that, Bucky'd needed Steve like people needed oxygen.

He was the only good part about Bucky. So he held on to Steve with both hands and spent his spare time sewing himself up so that one day, he could let Steve go.

One day he'd have to. The way Steve looked at Agent Carter? One day he'd leave and Bucky wouldn't stop him - Steve deserved his own life. In the meantime, he'd figure how to keep himself from unraveling without Steve holding him together like thread through a vital wound. So far nothing was working.

Steve would disappear in the middle of a mission for five minutes and Bucky would nearly have a
panic attack. One time he came back limping with a bloody slash on his forearm and Bucky had nearly killed Steve himself.

Thankfully it was towards the end of a mission, so by the time Steve limped in the enemy hostiles were dead. Which was a really good thing because as soon as Bucky saw Steve dripping blood, he abandoned his post and barreled down the hill cursing every expletive he could think of, mixed in with a lot of you can't do that to me Rogers's.

Steve had been amused, actually. He'd apologized, then shot this look at Gabe and they were both snorting at Bucky, who was red in the face from yelling. All Bucky could think about was Steve coming back with a bulletwound, or not coming back at all, and then what would Bucky be and he'd fall apart and Hydra would find him and drag him back to that table and no one would come for him and he'd scream and scream and no one would hear him, just like the last time he'd been strapped down with heavy leather, the scent of blood surrounding him and --

He'd promised Steve he'd let him know when everything was too much - with the world spinning and Bucky's suddenly lack of ability to breathe, he'd say this was probably that "too much." He'd been bracing his hands on his knees, staring at the ground, while Steve and the Commandos laughed softly above him, jostling each other and making cracks about Barnes's big brother syndrome. Dugan joked about getting Bucky's eyes checked, maybe he was still seeing the little version of Steve and that's why he worried so damn much...

But none of it was sinking in. Bucky couldn't anchor himself, all he could see were dim lights and the glint on the edge of a scalpel and he couldn't move, he was pinned down all over again and his screams were making his voice sore, ripping up his throat until he coughed blood--

Bucky reached out a single, panicked hand for Steve. The other Commandos kept joking amongst each other, their voices fading as they started strolling to their mini camp in the woods. Steve didn't go with them, hallelujah, because Bucky's lungs weren't working and he was gasping now, his fingers brushing the material of Steve's sleeve.

His cheeks heated up as he felt Steve's eyes land on him, but he'd rather parade through France naked than relapse into another torture-nightmare; he could handle the embarrassment of losing his grip on reality if Steve could prevent another night like that one in the pub.

"Buck?" Steve finally asked, sounding concerned. He took a step closer and Bucky's brushing fingertips turned into a full grab, his hand squeezing Steve's arm so hard it might bruise. Steve took half a step backwards, startled at the sudden brutality. Bucky squeezed tighter and hauled himself upright. Everything was still spinning and he was pretty sure he might fall over any second now.

Then, finally, Steve realized something was wrong and a strong arm wrapped around Bucky's waist, catching him as everything started to topple sideways. The world was half leafy-green and half cold-metal and all fire, fire everywhere. Steve's arm was flickering in and out between safe comfort and the bite of a leather strap. He kept chanting this mantra in his head - he'd gotten out, he'd gotten out, he wasn't hallucinating this whole time - and did the best he could to make himself believe it. His brain kept swirling, stuck between deciding whether the table or Steve were the hallucination. If he could convince himself that this -- the forest, Steve -- was real, he'd be okay.

It was so much easier to pretend it was all a dream.

"Bucky. Bucky Barnes. We're in Poland and you were just yelling me for being a stupid ass - and a lot of other words I won't repeat - for running into a building by myself. You were a prisoner of war and I saved you, I got you outta there. Okay? No more tables and no more Zola - all of this has been real. I promise. If you can't hold onto anything else, you have my word it's real. Have I ever lied to
Bucky blinked groggily, Steve's eyes coming into focus wayyy too close to his face. They were at kissing distance and it would only take a single movement forward and they would be kissing but -- Steve had asked him a question. What'd Steve said? Oh yeah. Bucky steeled himself, running his tongue over his teeth to shake the feeling that his mouth was made of sandpaper. Words. If he spoke slow enough then they might come out in the right order.

"Yeah...you lied to me about the reason you got beat up in April '39 you punk." Bucky managed, trying to narrow his eyes at Steve. The dark feeling of none of this is real was retreating further into his head. He couldn't make up the way his heart was pounding right now, could he? Steve holding him close, trying to say all the right things without sending him spiraling deeper. Steve was trying so goddamned hard to hold onto Bucky and Bucky felt like a firecracker on Steve's birthday in between his lungs. He couldn't fabricate something that warm and sparkling, could he?

"But I told you the real reason that same night, so it doesn't count. I managed what, an hour of having lied to you before I confessed?" Steve's voice was lighter and more cautious than fit the words, but the topic change was good. Something he could focus on without having to think too hard about the past.

"Mmm. What was it again?" Bucky asked, swaying on his feet a little now. He started taking mental note of his limbs, his fingers, his torso, his neck, his head. He had control of all those things, he could move all those things.

Steve didn't answer him. Instead he took a step backwards, keeping his hand square over Bucky's chest so they were still touching but giving Bucky enough room to move around on his own. He wiggled his fingers and shook his foot and rolled his shoulders. All here, all under Bucky's control. Steve had picked up a hell of a lot on how to help Bucky outta his head since that night he'd freaked in the pub. It was the first time he'd felt himself really starting to slip since then, but Steve was handling it way better than Bucky thought he would.

Well, most of what Steve was doing to help he'd based on what Bucky'd told him about losing touch with reality.

It'd been a painfully awkward conversation and Bucky'd refused to talk for a long time. Until midnight one night, his eyes closed as he carefully detached his memories from the things he was saying so he didn't freak out. Speaking in a numbed monotone, relaying to Steve that touch was grounding and helped - especially when it was Steve. Because I know you, Bucky had amended quickly. And that being trapped and unable to move was gonna make it worse. He needed a reminder of where he was, that he wasn't hallucinating on drugs, that the world with Steve was the real one.

It was dark and Bucky hadn't looked at Steve once during the conversation - but he didn't miss the sharp breaths during and silent tears when it was over. He hated being the one to make Steve cry but he couldn't make the truth disappear. Which was why he never confessed the really bad parts. Or the way he'd eventually caved to their demands, stopped trying to thrash, gone quiet and compliant because it hurt a hell of a lot less. Nothing he could do anyways, right?

But now he shoved it aside with distractions. The war, this emotional whirlpool of feelings for Steve - that he'd yet to label or face in the light of day. The torture was in the past and Bucky had a responsibility to move on. If he was psychologically damaged, he was useless to Steve. Mental injuries were just as dangerous as broken legs on the battlefield.

He was a Howling Commando and he owed it to his team to be okay. They counted on him - he'd
saved all their lives more times than anyone bothered counting and they'd returned the favor. They were a unit and there was no room for a weak link. So Bucky buried it all down and didn't let himself be weak.

Until now, apparently, trying to breathe through what had started as rage, turned into a mild panic attack, then completed the circuit with a mental relapse to Zola's torture room in a lab that'd blown up three and a half weeks ago.

The Commandos were probably back to camp by now and Steve's arm was bleeding and he was favoring his right ankle and Bucky was so selfish to freak out when clearly, Steve needed medical attention but was instead worriedly holding onto Bucky.

"Lemme see your arm," Bucky demanded, outta breath. Steve broke into a grin, catching on. Bucky's head had stopped spinning, thanks to Steve, so he could go back to being pissed at Steve for running into buildings alone like a damn idiot. And pissed at himself, this shit was gonna happen all the time the more they got out in the field and Bucky had to learn to handle it without buckling.

Steve stuck out his arm, pulling up his sleeve and grimacing as the hem passed the wound. Bucky stepped closer, lifting Steve's arm to inspect the cut. It wasn't too deep and the edges were already stitching themselves back up. Steve waited patiently as Bucky analyzed it, deciding on the likelihood of infection. Probably not very high. He didn't have to much to worry over with this serum, did he?

"Thank you," he finally said quietly, eyes still on Steve's arm so he didn't have to see the sympathy in those skyblue eyes. Steve knew exactly what Bucky was talking about and it wasn't his arm.

"'Course," Steve answered, a newly-enlarged hand clapping Bucky's shoulder. "Now, let's get back to camp, yeah?"

~*~*~*~*~

For the first time in his life, Steve felt like he was actually making a difference. He was taking down Hydra bases and helping military officials plan attacks and he was eliminating bullies and he was helping his best friend past the most traumatic experience they'd ever dealt with.

It was hard to take sometimes, but he'd never back down from helping Bucky. Actually, he was flattered every time Bucky reached for him in the dark. They'd been best friends for as long as Steve could remember, but it was humbling how much trust Bucky placed in his hands now. Not just trust to keep him alive (as always), but trust to let Steve see him so haunted; so sure that Steve could bring him back from that edge. It was a lot of pressure (even though it'd only happened twice now) and Steve was fairly sure he'd muck it up. Do the wrong thing, say the wrong thing, then Buck'd trapped in his head again.

Most of the time, it was like he'd never been tortured at all. Bucky'd gone through hell and how did he handle it? He was the best damn Sergeant the army'd ever seen. He smiled and joked and saved lives every day. He was a fantastic person, so sensible and intelligent that sometimes Steve would stare at him and wonder how in hell Bucky thought he was made for anything less than this.

As strong as he was now, there were these...changes in Bucky that had Steve worrying the nights away. Sometimes he'd look at Steve and quickly look away in pain. Steve had a pretty good idea of why, too. He knew that Bucky had always considered Steve as someone he had to protect - they were family - and Steve had taken that away from Bucky. He didn't think Bucky hated him or anything, but sometimes it felt like Bucky just wanted the old Steve back. That had to be why he kept looking at Steve with a funny expression, one Steve had never seen before. The idea of Bucky doubting him was worse than Steve could handle, but he kept it to himself. Bucky had every right to
feel that way. Steve just wished he didn't.

Another thing that'd changed was their physical relationship. Bucky didn't throw his arm over Steve's shoulders anymore, didn't haul Steve's body into his side affectionately. At first Steve had thought it was just taking some time to adjust to the new size difference. But then sometimes when Steve was the one to reach out (Steve was always the one to reach out lately) Bucky flinched away. But it wasn't the discomfort or numbness that glazed over his eyes when he was having torture flashbacks. It was just...awkward. Uncomfortable. Like Bucky couldn't decide whether or not he wanted Steve to touch him anymore.

The whole thing was weird and Steve was honestly perplexed. Something had changed between them, between their dynamic. They were closer than ever, but at the same time Steve had never felt further away from Bucky. There was so much Bucky wasn't telling him, and while it was true that Steve wasn't asking, he really wished he knew what *that* look was.

There was no point in fretting over it though. Buck was still his best friend, that part hadn't changed a bit. And it was more of a relief than he could ever express how *good* it was to know that someone saw behind the stripes and spangles.

Steve was honored to wear the flag, honored to be a symbol for a country he'd die for in a heartbeat. But sometimes he wished people would look at him and see that he hadn't changed from the scrawny guy who got picked on in back alleys. And now that he was back at Bucky's side, Steve did have someone who saw all of him. Every single inch.

It was so much easier not to get caught up in the parade of it all when the familiar face and pouty lips were in sight as often as possible. Sometimes Steve could sit by Bucky at the camp's fire and pretend they weren't at war at all - just him and Buck again, breathing in smokey air and sharing relative body heat from their pressed shoulders.

A couple of days after Bucky's second panic attack (Steve couldn't think of another way to refer to them, even though they weren't technically panic attacks) the Commandos made it back to base. They didn't always trek back to base after their missions, but it had been radioed in that they were needed.

Ever since the slip after their last mission - which Steve entirely blamed himself for - Bucky'd been even more lighthearted, prone to joking jabs and laughter. The rest of the men didn't seem to notice anything was off, but he couldn't help but wonder if it was some sort of overcompensation from freaking out. It had to be exhausting, keeping a smile on his face if he didn't mean it. Steve just wanted Bucky to be alright.

Colonel Phillips was waiting for them as they marched their squad in, getting the briefest report of all time before dragging Jim and Gabe to the officer tent. Apparently their previous officers wanted them back in their "own kind." Steve hated how the army was segregated so much, but Phillips was dead set and determined not to give up their spots on the Howling Commandos. As tough as he was, Phillips really was a wonderful Colonel. Steve had faith that he'd have Jim and Gabe back at his side tomorrow.

But with a third of their troops missing, they couldn't head back out on missions until at least noon tomorrow, maybe longer if the fight for his comrades was tough. The rest of the Commandos were given the night and following morning off, told to go "take a damn break from saving the world and get drunk or something."

Dugan and Falsworth and Dernier cheered and split off for the nearest town, even though it was only four in the afternoon. Steve got rushed off to the medical tent to get his wounds checked - per
Bucky's instance - although they were already entirely healed. The medic shoed him out and then Steve was standing in the middle of a fairly empty base camp with nothing to do.

He couldn't remember the last time there was no agenda, let alone an entire afternoon, night, and morning of free time. He blinked and looked around the camp, trying to figure out what the hell he was gonna do for the next eighteen hours.

He used to have free time every day back in Brooklyn. What in the world did he do with it all?

*Oh.* Of course. There were some supplies he needed to borrow from the correspondents' tent.

Ten minutes later with a sharpened pencil, a clipboard, and the white empty back of some generic briefing forms tucked under his arm, Steve just needed one more thing.

"Hey," Steve greeted as he pushed back the flap of a tent and stepped inside. Bucky looked up from where he was cleaning his rifle, looking vaguely surprised to see Steve.

"Hey." A few strands of brown hair had broken free from where Bucky had slicked his hair to the side, brushing against his forehead as he looked back down to snap the scope back on his gun. Steve cleared his throat and tightened his grip on the clipboard under his arm.

"So since we don't have to report back until tomorrow afternoon, I was gonna go out and draw. Did you wanna come with?"

Bucky broke out in a smile - the one that started with the left side of his mouth first - as he looked back at Steve, already setting his rifle down. "Yeah, 'course."

The two of them hadn't had a chance to hang out and be since before Bucky got shipped off to basic. It was almost strange falling into step alongside Bucky with nowhere in particular they needed to go. By silent mutual agreement, they ended up walking north of the base, to the heart of the woods. The trees were the sparser kind that left plenty of room to walk, but enough coverage to block out the rest of the world.

Once they were about a mile away from base, the world around them was only filled with a soft serenity of golden browns and greens. The ground and trees dotted with springy moss, the leaves whispering a soft flutter from the wind. The foliage overhead was thick enough to block out most of the sun, letting the golden rays through in patches of glowing spotlights. The dirt underfoot was plush with enough moisture to make walking entirely silent, although it held a shallow imprint of each step they took, marking the way here and therefore giving them a path back.

In Brooklyn, there was a severe lack of foliage, let alone entire gorgeous wild forests to walk through. Europe was defined with beautiful places and they'd already traveled through enough to see some. But in the course of war, you can't actually see the beauty. A soldier looks at the gorgeous architecture of an enemy building and all they see are escape routes, sniping vantage points, structural weaknesses. It's the only thing they can afford to see. You can't exactly stop and admire something pretty in the middle of a battle of life and death.

But they weren't battling right now, they weren't at war. Their break was too brief to stop being soldiers - it was engrained too deeply - but maybe they could be soldiers *and* the Brooklyn Boys in awe of Central Park. Of course, manicured trees and sloping grassy plains didn't exactly compare to the raw, visceral beauty of the woods surrounding them now.

The combination of the landscape and the peaceful air - and of course the company - was already putting Steve at ease. At the beginning of their walk everything was quiet enough to almost put him
on edge instead, but each footstep brought him closer to the peacefulness of the trees he was walking between. Bucky treaded right on Steve's left, a bit of a gap between their shoulders. They used to walk so close that their shoulders would bump every other step, if Bucky's arm wasn't slung over Steve's shoulders or around his neck.

They hadn't had the chance for that kind of playfulness in their relationship lately and Steve got the sudden strange urge to tackle Bucky to the ground. They could wrestle now, since Steve wouldn't get smushed by the lightest of touches. It'd be a good way to make Bucky unwind, at the very least.

Bucky's sharp-eyed gaze was shifting around from time to time, one hand hovering near the pistol he'd brought with him. There was nothing out here, they were nowhere near enemy lines, but the protective instinct didn't switch off very easily. A cracked twig made Bucky jump and draw his gun on a squirrel, but Steve just laughed at him and Bucky loosened up a bit. The only thing out here with them was nature: that was why they'd picked this direction. To get to these woods at all, you had to pass the base camp.

And between the training soldiers, ColonelPhillips, and Agent Carter, Steve was pretty sure their safety was covered. He'd say it aloud, but he was sure Bucky already knew that. He was being cautious, but he'd settle in to the peacefulness of it all in a little while.

"It's been a while since we've done this," Steve said softly, narrowing the gap between their strides to bump his shoulder against Bucky's. Bucky snorted, letting Steve bounce off him without complaint.

"I don't think we've ever hiked in the woods in France. Unless there's some memory I'm missing and you're not telling?" Bucky shot him a sly smile and it was Steve's turn to huff a breath of a laugh. Bucky always found a way to joke about the most serious of things; it was how he survived. Although in the month since he'd found Buck on that table, he hadn't made a point to mention it himself until now. Maybe the serenity and war-free woods were really making him relax.

"Nah, this is our first time." Steve smiled and Bucky gave him a quick grin before looking away, a bit of red coloring his cheeks. Steve looked at his profile for a moment, trying to figure what that was all about. He had to look away fairly quickly though; running face first into a tree because he was staring at Bucky would be pretty humiliating.

They walked another half-mile in companionable silence, the sunlight shifting shadows around them. There were only a few hours of good lighting left until the sunset. So if he wanted to draw, they should find a campout spot soon. Well, not a campout spot - this wasn't a mission. A...resting place then?

The fairytale moment of finding the perfect clearing and twisting plants shaped like chairs wasn't the kind'a resting spot they needed. Just a couple of trees with patches of sunlight at the bases, enough to illuminate Steve's paper and the subjects around him. It was actually Bucky who spotted a place first, pointing and raising an eyebrow.

There were two patchy sunlight-bathed trees about five feet apart with diameters big enough he'd barely get his enhanced arms around one. More trees in various shapes and sizes surrounded the two thicker ones at random increments, all with twisting roots above-ground, wide enough apart to sit between. Bright enough to see and shady enough to be relaxing and cozy.

Steve plopped down against the tree on the left, leaning his back against the thick trunk as Bucky took the one opposite. The trees were close enough that if they stretched out their legs, Steve's shoes would end up somewhere around Bucky's knees. For now both their knees were drawn up, flat feet on the ground -- with the exception of Bucky's left leg, extended out into the space between them in that lazy sprawl he'd perfected years ago.
Steve kicked off his boots first thing - in case he wanted to mess with Bucky and prop his feet on him later - but Buck just looked at him oddly and kept his boots on. He did take off the navy blue peacoat though, tossing it at Steve to bundle atop of his boots.

"It's a lot louder out here than you'd think, with all the quiet and all." Bucky looked around, taking in the pattern of the landscape. "Wait, that sounded totally confusing --"

"No, no, I get what you mean." Steve looked up from where he'd been clipping the papers more securely to his borrowed clipboard, taking a moment to listen to the sounds around them. The woods gave this initial impression of perfect silence, but if you listened close enough there was an entire orchestra of noises. Wind jingling leaves, the occasional soft call of a bird. Grasshoppers buzzing, tiny squirrel feet pattering along branches. There was a constant array of sound, all natural and quietly soothing.

"It's nice out here." He tapped the back of his pencil to the center of his paper, debating on what little scene to draw. Bucky hummed noncommittally, looking up to the tops of the trees as he checked out all their surroundings. He was more curious than perfunctory now, which Steve was really glad for.

"Yeah, well, while you draw I'm gonna take a powernap. Keeping up with those supersoldier legs wears a guy out." Bucky fake yawned and stretched his arms out, leaning his head back against the tree.

There was thankfully a plethora of acorns on the ground; couldn't help but snatch one to throw at Bucky. It hit square on his sternum, bouncing off his dogtags with a clang.

"Hey!"

"You had that coming." Steve was smiling - again - and this time Bucky returned it without the sassy eyeroll. Then he settled back against the tree again and closed his eyes.

Steve knew exactly what he was going to draw.

The lines of Bucky's face transferred onto paper were familiar in a way not a lot of things felt anymore. The hair was entirely different - the normally slick gelled top had taken to coming more and more disheveled throughout the day. It always looked pristine and artfully sculpted at the beginning of missions, dark hair swirled to the side with an arch at the top that made him look like one of the movie stars back home.

But as the days and nights grew longer, at least a few strands would escape the stiff slopes. The loose pieces would curl slightly on one side of Buck's forehead, making him look debauched enough to be a very...different kind of movie star. It'd be damp with sweat occasionally too, adding to that artfully wrecked image. Buck'd always managed to pull off any look he tried, although Steve couldn't imagine him wearing his hair this tousled in Brooklyn. It wasn't exactly a safe way to dress yourself in a city that big and judgmental.

Right now it wasn't all crazy -- there had been absolutely no order to it at all when Steve'd first found him in Zola's grasp -- but there were quite a few pieces of fallen hair over his forehead. He drew those first. They were new to Bucky's daily look and it fit the new version of him in a way that almost made him uneasy to think about.

War changes people, he'd have to be an idiot not to see that. But it didn't make it any easier to see the once-bright spark of fire in Bucky's lightning blues dull into the sharp eyes of a soldier. He didn't
wish for the old Bucky back, not at all, he just worried sometimes that this one wasn't as happy. Well, obviously, they were in a war, but...but Steve wanted Bucky to be happy, was all.

His pencil hovered over the blank face on his paper. The jaw was a little long, the hair maybe a tad too loose. But for some reason, Steve was hesitating to draw the closed eyes and curved down mouth. Bucky had the poutiest lips ever and he'd spent way too many drawings perfecting that unique shape. He'd gotten it down pretty well at one point, but...he wasn't feeling it today.

There was a tension in the corners of his mouth that hadn't been there before. Darker circles under his eyes, tired lines across his forehead. A sharpness to his cheekbones, subtle enough that no one would notice if they weren't so familiar with drawing those lines. It was all too new and a little depressing, how much more stressed and tired Buck looked now.

He'd come back to the face later. Maybe.

Steve started sketching the tree behind Bucky's head, quick aborted strokes because he was thinking too much to be calculative and careful. Sometimes he sketched like this - wild, overlapping lines that eventually resembled some rough form of an object. Other times each curve was purposeful and pretty, sloping and shadowing little pieces of trains or monkeys or buildings or plants.

It was liberating, drawing with such abandon. Realistic drawings were more his forté, but it kinda fit the rough edge of the man across from him.

Steve glanced up every few moments, barely looking at the trees as he studied Bucky's features. The curve of his collarbone across where his shirt was opened up, the rough patches that he hadn't had time to sew. The bright glint of his dogtags against the filtered sun.

He was too occupied with trying to get the angle of Bucky's damn extended leg to notice that his eyes had opened.

"You drawin' me Rogers?" The comment made Steve's eyes snap up in surprise. He had no idea how long Bucky had been awake, although knowing him he probably never took the nap at all. Steve made a face before his eyes traveled back down to Bucky's knee.

"Maybe," he said, pretending it wasn't ridiculously obvious that he was.

"So long as I can see it when it's done." Bucky's eyes were on him in a way that forced Steve to look back up at his face again. He hadn't let Bucky see a lot of the better drawings Steve had done of him for obvious reasons. It always drove Bucky crazy - just let me see, Stevie.

Steve looked down at the drawing in his lap and back up at Bucky. Then did it again. Bucky's eyebrow was arched, still waiting. Finally Steve sighed, sketching in another line in a tree. "Fine. You can see it."

Lips curled up and he made a very-serious come-hither motion with his finger. Steve sighed but got up from the ground, sitting back down beside Bucky and leaning against his tree, knocking their shoulders together as he handed over the clipboard.

Steve rubbed at the graphite on the side of his hand, trying to smear out the gray shadow as Bucky studied his picture. He didn't get nervous showing his drawings anymore; Buck seemed to genuinely like most of them, and even if he didn't, it was his job as Steve's best friend to be trusted with things like that.

Well, not all his drawings.
"I don't have a face," Bucky said, sounding more curious than offended. Steve shrugged, picking an acorn off the ground and spinning it in his fingers. As much as he trusted Bucky with his drawings, sometimes he gave Steve this uninterpretable look that always made him want to run away from Bucky's gaze. So Steve wasn't looking at him, staring down the acorn in his hand instead.

"I didn't get the chance to finish before you were whining to see it," Steve nudged Buck's shoulder as his response. Nothing good would come outta explaining how he was pretty sure Bucky'd changed almost as much as he had. And Steve wasn't sure he'd be able to capture that with a pencil. Or, more accurately, he was more afraid that he would capture it. Then they'd both be stuck with a picture of a broken soldier.

Everything was so much more real once it was down on paper. He could pretend Bucky was as okay as he pretended to be - so long as Steve didn't draw it, didn't prove the haunted soldier his best friend had become.

"Hmm." Bucky turned the clipboard upside down, squinting at the reversed image and Steve couldn't help but laugh. Bucky smiled at the sound and carefully took the sketch outta the clipboard, folding it up and putting it in his pocket before he handed Steve back his clipboard. "I like that one of me sticking my tongue out at you better."

"I drew that when I was ten!"

"And I was eleven. And I looked damn good even back then." Bucky's mouth curved up in a smirk, which Steve's eyes couldn't help but draw to. Then Steve was smiling wider, and Bucky's smirk turned into a full-on, real smile and Steve hadn't seen that smile in such a long time that now he was beaming.

And they were both total idiots, sitting here and smiling at each other and smiling even more because of the other's smile.

It was absolutely ridiculous and soon they were busting up, laughing as Bucky chucked an acorn at Steve for recompensation and Steve ducked, even though he was inches away and had no way to dodge. It hit him on the cheek and he shoved Bucky's shoulder lightly - still extremely cautious with his new strength - which barely made him move at all.

Bucky called him a dame and shoved him back - hard - toppling Steve onto his side. He actually fell all the way to the ground, making a sound of surprise. Apparently there was some serious muscle gain in sniping, cause Bucky'd never been anywhere near that strong before the war. Hell, Steve was pretty sure even Dugan wouldn't've been able to push him down like that. Weird.

But Steve came back up laughing, taking note of the slight lines by Bucky's eyes as he did too - those hadn't changed. Neither had the clef in his chin or the ever-changing eyes. Sometimes - if the lighting was good enough - Buck's eyes were lighter blue than Steve's. But in their old apartment and back-alley Brooklyn, they were brown under the lack of illumination.

The laughter died down after a little bit, both of them settling back against Bucky's tree as the wind rustled around them. It was absolutely gorgeous out here. Steve needed something else to draw.

He peeked around the corner of the tree, looking for a scene that would fit the emotion. The shadows were too dark; he wanted to draw something full of golden streaks of light. He leaned forward to look around Bucky, maybe something over there? Still nothing.

Steve huffed, leaning his head back against the tree in temporary defeat. He'd find something, he just--
His eyes cut upwards, taking in the blowing, shimmering leaves at the top of the tree they were leaning against. The sunlight was cutting through softly, lighting up certain parts golden and other parts dark green. The leaves were small enough to look like coins - he could almost hear their jingle as they fluttered in the wind. It was absolutely perfect.

Drawing the sky framed with the leaves of trees and sunlight wasn't gonna be easy leaning back against the tree like this. Ideally he'd lay on the ground, except all those acorns would not be comfortable at all--

Oh. Duh.

Without preamble or warning, Steve shifted from where he was sitting and plopped his head down on Bucky's thigh. Bucky jumped, cursing, but Steve didn't pay him any mind, lifting the clipboard up with one hand and the pencil up with the other.

"Can you hold the other side?" Steve asked, already starting to sketch out soft lines across the paper. It took a few seconds to process, then a calloused hand took the side of the clipboard, holding it steady for Steve to draw.

"You could have given me some warning or something," Bucky complained, shifting a little so that Steve's head rested more comfortably on his thigh. Bucky was sitting cross-legged, and now Steve was the one with one knee in the air and one leg extended. It was a comfortable position though, definitely comfortable enough to draw.

"Hey Buck, can I lay in your lap? Great, thanks." Steve didn't give a moment's pause between the question and his own answer, smiling a little in that way Bucky always said was 'terrifyingly mischievous.' Surprisingly, Buck didn't come back with some smartass retort at Steve's sassiness. He just got real quiet and let Steve draw in silence.

The sunlight was perfect right now, angled not to blind and bright enough to light everything up like the heavens. It'd be tough to capture that glow without a good eraser, but if he shaded enough around the streaks of light it may end up having the same effect. A rough sketch turned into a rough draft, which started getting filled in with details of glittering leaves, reflected bits of sunshine, dark shadows. The pencil wasn't quite sharp enough to get all the veins in the leaves he'd like to, but the thick still looked nice if he kept it light enough.

Bucky's thumb was pinning Steve's paper to the clipboard, which was actually really helpful to keep it from falling into his face. Except there was a white, thumb-shaped space covering the right side of Steve's drawing. A very obvious, Bucky-shaped space in the middle of Steve's sky. At least the symbolism was fitting. He pondered whether he should ask Buck to move his finger or not.

He liked the idea of having Bucky's imprint in the drawing, but there was a chance that without his thumb covering the white space it might look incomplete. Which didn't fit Bucky at all.

Eventually Steve decided to shade the leaves surrounding Bucky's thumb darker, turning light gray graphite into dark black shadows. A shaded arch around Bucky's finger, branching out and getting lighter further away. Now, once Bucky moved his finger, there'd still be the line of where he'd been. And he could fill in the blank white space with light, swirling leaves with soft edges and lots of sunshine.

It'd be even better than the picture he'd set out to draw, as always.

After a moment of looking over what he'd done so far, Steve lifted his pencil from the paper and jabbed it at Bucky's thumb.
"Ow! Okay, okay jeez. You could have just asked."

"Again with the asking," Steve sighed, starting in on the white space Bucky's thumb had left. Now his thumb was busy smudging the bottom half of Steve's drawing. Steve didn't really mind.

He hadn't been drawing for too long, but thankfully his arm hadn't started to hurt yet. Holding up one half of a clipboard and drawing with the other put a lot of strain on arm muscles. Actually, drawing like this before the serum would've been impossible. He'd have gotten a single leaf in before his arms collapsed at his sides in pain.

It was a little surprising that Bucky wasn't complaining yet either. His arm was holding up the other half of the clipboard, but he didn't seem to mind. Or if he did, he wasn't saying anything. That sounded more like Bucky. He never spoke up when he was in pain - which was why Steve was so damn surprised when Bucky'd actually kept his word and reached out for help when his brain was betraying him.

The incident had been two days ago now, but it was still fresh on Steve's mind. The look on Bucky's face had been awful; he'd stared at him like he couldn't tell if Steve was real or not. And the worse part was that it wasn't even that crazy of an idea. Sometimes Steve felt like he was hallucinating these past months and he hadn't been tortured and drugged.

"What're you thinkin' about?" Bucky asked, brushing a piece of stray hair back into Steve's careful blonde swoop. He blinked up at Bucky, eyes leaving his drawing for the first time since he'd laid his head here.

It was comforting, in a way, to have Bucky be the one towering over him again. Not to mention that Bucky's leg was warm and comfortable under Steve's head. He'd lay like this all the time if it was just the two of them.

"What?" Steve asked, totally zoning out from looking Bucky over.

"You had this awful look on your face. What were you thinking about?" Bucky asked again, bouncing his leg a little. Steve sighed, bringing his clipboard down to his chest to give Bucky's arm a break. There was no way holding it up that high wasn't killing him.

"You," he responded simply as his fingers worried the edges of the clipboard. Bucky made a face, clearly disgruntled that the 'awful look' on Steve's face was because of him.

"Wow, thanks, so sweet." Bucky's voice was dry and sarcastic, the slightest edge of actually offended.

"Well, what happened to you." Steve amended, his voice going a little quiet as he looked back up at Bucky. Bucky looked away, clearing his throat. There was a light stubble under his chin, which Steve'd never noticed until this angle. This would be the weirdest angle to draw at though, so it wasn't like he could say anything about it.

"Oh," Buck finally said, his voice hoarse. Normally he shrugged off the comments about Zola easily, plastered on a but you saved me, Stevie and a too-wide grin that didn't reach his eyes. Hell, Bucky had even reported everything useful from what happened to him to Colonel Phillips, just so they could have an upperhand over Zola's techniques. He hadn't shared all the details with anyone though, no matter how much Steve wanted to know. Bucky always shrugged it off, said Steve was better off not knowing.

Like that wouldn't make Steve want to know about a hundred times more.
But right now, Bucky wasn't shrugging anything off, wasn't joking or smiling it away. He looked caught, and Steve supposed he kind of was. They were in the middle of this really peaceful, raw moment filled with nature's beauty and soft serenity and Steve had barreled through it with the mention of that. He'd caught Bucky off guard and they were too close right now for Bucky to pretend.

"Why won't you talk about it?" Steve asked, quiet enough to be respectful and not demanding.

Bucky turned his head back to look down at Steve, one hand carding roughly through Steve's gelled blonde hair and probably ruining it beyond repair. Well, until he got back to base and could style it again. He was gonna look like Bucky, random strands of hair falling haphazardly over his forehead. Steve couldn't pull off the look like Buck could, but at least they matched now.

Besides, Steve wasn't seriously gonna snap at Bucky about the state of his hair right now when they were talking -- or, rather, not-talking -- about this. Bucky's hand was warm where it was threaded through the stiff gel in Steve's hair, blunt fingernails scratched slightly against Steve's scalp. It felt really damn good.

He slipped his eyes closed, halfway to revel in the feeling of Bucky's hand roughly pushing into Steve's hair, but mostly so that Bucky could have the comfort of knowing he wasn't being watched as he responded. If he responded. Bucky got that way sometimes, never when they were kids but definitely over the past month, where he grew uncomfortable and shifty if people's eyes were on him for too long or during intense moments.

At first, Steve had thought it was something akin to stage fright with the new Captain America's Best Friend fame that was tugging at him. But now, Steve wasn't so sure. He had a nagging feeling that it might have something to do with Zola - Steve was going to destroy that man when they finally got to him - because almost everything different about Bucky now seemed to have changed with that. Well, the war too, but that wouldn't explain the discomfit Bucky felt when people were watching him too intensely. No, Steve could think of plenty of disgusting, terrible things that might make Bucky feel that way and they all made his blood curdle.

"There's nothing to talk about," Bucky finally said, the tense line of muscle in his thigh relaxing the same time his hand softened in Steve's hair, trying in vain to fix the style back to the stiff gelled one Steve'd had before Bucky mauled it. He gave up after a little bit, absentmindedly stroking strands to follow their path.

A few moments into the silence, Steve tentatively opened his eyes to look back up at Bucky. He wasn't wearing one of his fake-smiling-masks for a change, but he didn't look too keen to open up and share either. He just looked back down at Steve with a stubborn expression, eyes guarded from pain.

"Bucky-" Steve tried. Bucky shook his head, repeating Steve's name back to him with a tone that said we aren't talking about this.

With an exaggerated sigh, Steve rolled over onto his side, tucking his nose against Bucky's hipbone. He could feel Bucky's breathing against his forehead, his closed eyes making the scent of Bucky that much stronger. Like was being swallowed up in everything Bucky was as a human being. A glimpse into Bucky's world, a part of feeling him breathe and move and zoned into every ounce of this entire person - the most important person, actually.

He didn't have enough time to be with Bucky without the constant rush, always something wrong. Either Steve was sick or Bucky was on his way to work or off to war or they were both fighting on the battlefield and collapsing from exhaustion at night. There were some distinct memories from
when they lived in Brooklyn that Bucky'd been between jobs and Steve was healthy for once and
they'd go out and do something wonderful and perfect that Steve would remember forever.

But they hadn't had this kind of peace and quiet in what felt like years. Steve hadn't had the chance
to just breathe in everything Bucky and be greedy for once, taking this and wrapping himself up in it
like Bucky was the whole universe.

"You don't tell me anything anymore," Steve mumbled into Bucky's shirt, the words only half
joking. Okay, maybe not joking much at all, but he said them light enough that Bucky wouldn't feel
awful. None of this was Bucky's fault, not in the slightest. Steve was pretty sure Bucky knew that
too, or they'd have a lot bigger problems on their hands.

Bucky huffed a muted laugh at Steve's petulant mumbling, still stroking a hand through his hair.
Steve wished Bucky would rub his back too, the way he did when Steve got sick and achy. But
Steve wasn't little and weak anymore, he had no reason to need Bucky like that. Except that,
obviously, he did. He always had.

"I tell you how great you look in your star spangled uniform," Bucky offered.

"That was one time," Steve complained into Bucky's shirt again, the words coming out more like
thawaone'ime. Okay, he'd probably overstayed his welcome in drooling on Bucky's clothes. Steve
rolled back over onto his back, blinking up at Bucky as his eyes adjusted to the light. Which was
significantly less than he remembered it being. How long had he been daydreaming with his face
against Bucky's side?

"Besides, you just asked if I was keeping it. You never once said I looked great in it. Hell, you never
even said I looked good in it." Steve made a pouty face and Bucky laughed, his leg jostling Steve's
head. Well, it was true. And Bucky knew it too. His laughter curved its way into a pretty smile as he
looked back down, mouth opening to speak before he even had time to think.

"Of course you look great in it, it's you," Bucky argued, like that was actually an argument. If Steve
hadn't spent years of his life practicing for moments like this, he might have frozen and blushed and
blinked up at Bucky with those same doe eyes dames gave him when he kissed them goodnight.
Instead, years and years of practice had a snide retort on Steve's lips before he really let the words
sink in.

"Aw, Buck, you sure know all the right things to say. Just how is it that half the army isn't lining up
to swoon over you?" Steve teased, resisting the urge to jab his finger into Bucky's stomach in favor
of batting his eyelashes girlishly up at Bucky.

He was waiting for the inevitable shove off of Bucky's lap, or the indignant laughter, or maybe an
even sharper comment back. Instead Bucky went bright red, his cheeks lighting up with color as his
eyes cut away, wide with what, surprise? embarrassment? Maybe Steve had pushed it a step too far.

"Nah, it's just you swoonin' over me, Rogers." Bucky finally said, shooting a sly look in Steve's
direction. Okay, so something was off about that whole thing, but Steve could go along with it. At
least the teasing he knew how to respond to. (Even if he had no idea what was going through
Bucky's head anymore. He used to be able to read Bucky like a book but now it was as much Steve's
guess as anybody's.)

"Me and anybody who's ever seen you with a sniper rifle. If they ever let dames on the battlefield,
you know you'd have slept with them all by now just based on those 'gorgeous sharpshooter skills.'"
Steve said the last three words in the highest, girliest voice he could, making actual air quotations
with his fingers for extra emphasis.
Bucky snorted disbelievingly, his whole face lit up now. The talk about Zola was long gone now, which was a little frustrating. But if not talking about it actually made Bucky feel better, Steve could handle that. For now. He'd give it another month before he started really pushing. But in the meantime, seeing Bucky laugh and smile was about the best thing Steve could ever ask for.

"Whoever said that?" Bucky asked, poking at Steve's shoulder like Steve was the crazy one. Right now, Steve felt like he was.

"I did, thank you very much."

"You don't count," Bucky said exasperatedly.

"I'm the only one that counts," Steve corrected. Bucky made a face at Steve that said vain much? but then he leaned back against the tree again, seeming to think that one over in his head. Steve took the opportunity to study Bucky's profile, committing the lines to memory again for the thousandth time.

"Maybe," Bucky finally relented. Which wasn't much of an answer, but Steve didn't mind all that much.

He looked back up at the sky, the piece that he'd been drawing looking entirely different now. The sunshine wasn't filtering through the cracks anymore, it was pulling off to the side as it sunk down, making everything slowly darker. It wouldn't be the first time they'd slept in the dark of the woods this week, but Steve figured since they didn't technically have to he'd at least ask Bucky if he wanted to go back or not.

"Did you wanna go back to the base?" Steve asked, tilting his head up as he stretched out his arms, body already complaining a little from staying in one place for so long.

"Not unless you do." Bucky checked his side for his pistol, making sure it was still secured and loaded. "I'm fine to stay out here. Or we could catch up with the rest of the Commandos, go join their bar parade at an actual reasonable hour for drinking."

Steve mulled it over, trying to decide what Bucky wanted and wasn't saying, as always. "We'll have plenty of time with the Commandos in the next couple of months. I vote we rough it out here."

"Yeah, it's so rough bunking down in safe territory on soft ground with sufficient weaponry, a warm coat, and a supersoldier at your side." As soon as his sarcastic mouth closed, Bucky pointed across to Steve's tree where Steve's boots and Bucky's jacket had been abandoned. "Speaking of which, can you grab that?"

The navy blue peacoat looked so far away. "Why can't you?"

"Because you're laying on my leg."

Steve huffed, but pushed himself up off Bucky's leg. He rolled onto his stomach, stretching out a hand and just barely grazing the edge of the coat. He strained a little harder and his fingers caught on the hem. He tugged it, snatching it up and sitting up before the coat could get snagged full of dirt and crushed acorns.

After tossing Bucky's coat at him, Steve tugged the laces of his boots so he could put those on too. It had started to get chillier at nights and the more clothes, the safer against the cold. Body warmth was always a good thing too, although the cold didn't get to Steve half as much as it did to Bucky.

They scooted up next to each other again, both of them leaning against the oak. Sundown wouldn't be complete for another twenty minutes at least. Watching the sun sink behind the trees was
absolutely beautiful, though. Neither of them said anything for a bit, watching the light fading in what pieces they could see of the sky.

Eventually dusk settled, the trees starting to slip into darkness around them. Steve reached out a hand and patted the ground. The acorns would not be comfortable to lay on at all. As nice as it was under this tree, they needed to find a mossy one if Bucky wasn't gonna complain all night.

"C'mon, let's find somewhere better to sleep than the tree of acorns before the light's all gone." Steve offered a hand out to Bucky, pulling him up off the ground. They double checked they weren't leaving anything behind, then they were off in search of a new tree. It was considerably easier to find a singular mossy tree than two well-lit and reasonably-spaced trees, so they were sitting back down on the mossy ground a few minutes later.

"As much as you're an idiot to throw yourself into this supersoldier thing without even writing me about it, I gotta say it's nice not to worry about you freezing your ass off and dying anymore," Bucky commented, laying down on the ground with his hands behind his head. Steve followed suit, leaving his hands to rest over his stomach instead.

"Yeah, it's good to be able to, you know. Breathe." Bucky snorted. "Although now I have to worry about your sorry ass freezing in the night."

"Okay, just because you're bigger than me now does not mean I'm suddenly as puny as you used to be." Bucky turned his head and fake-glared at Steve. Steve smiled, looking back up at the sky.

"'Spose you have a point. Doesn't mean I don't worry, though."

"Not half as much as I used to, punk. I've been worryin' about you my whole damn life. Little, tiny, stupidly stubborn Steve."

"I'm still just as stubborn when I'm big."

"Yeah, I noticed." They both fell silent for a moment, looking up at the sky. The tree they were under had less foliage at the top, and there was actually a really good view of the night sky. It wasn't quite dark enough yet to see stars, but the navy blue color matched Bucky's coat perfectly. Steve blinked up at the sky, thinking that maybe that was symbolic too. Bucky kinda was Steve's sky, the dark blanket that'd held him and covered him up as Steve tried to shine like a little, blinking star.

"You know, I would pay good money to see Dugan meeting the little version of you." Bucky grinned and Steve shook his head fondly.

"He'd probably freak. And treat me like I was a four year old. All 'I don't want to step on you' and such."

Bucky laughed at that, again. Steve hadn't heard either of them laugh this much, hadn't even smiled this much, since before Buck shipped out. Even if they weren't talking about anything important - weren't even really doing anything important, it was nice just to talk and laugh and smile at the darkening sky with Bucky's warm arm pressed to his.

"What do you think Gabe would say? Or Morita?" And then they were having a full on discussion about the Commandos' reactions to meeting the littler version of Steve.

Then the aimless talking turned to some of their neighbors back in Brooklyn, what they'd be doing right now. Or if Steve and Bucky weren't in the war, what they might be doing right now.

"Well, you'd probably be drawing and I'd probably be laying on the floor, pretending to patch up my
work pants while I watched you draw," Bucky mused. Steve looked over at him curiously.

"You used to watch me draw?" It was rather dark now, but Steve could still see the sudden tightness around Bucky's mouth as he pursed his lips, looking away. Embarrassed, again. That wasn't an emotion he was used to seeing on Bucky, but he'd been turning red and looking away quite a lot recently.

"Well, yeah. Not like there's much else to do in that tiny apartment." That wasn't exactly true, but he'd let it slide.

"You could always shine shoes with me," Steve offered. Bucky turned back to look at him, eyes crinkling as the corners of his lips turned up. The comment thankfully broke the tension that'd settled on them.

"And take away your sole purpose in life? Nah, I don't think so." At this angle, the freed strands of Bucky's hair were falling to arch over his eyebrow, threatening to cover one of his icy blue eyes.

Without thinking, Steve reached over and smoothed back the pieces, his fingertips brushing against the pressed line of Bucky's forehead. They were close, too close, their faces less than a foot away. And now they were looking at each other, Steve's fingers pinning back the short fallen strands as his eyes flicked over Bucky's face.

Bucky was searching his features right back, both of them trying to figure out what the other was thinking. It probably only lasted a few seconds, but it felt like a lifetime.

Then Steve took his hand back, pulling away with a sigh as he looked back up at the sky. He could feel Bucky's eyes on him for a few seconds longer, then he rolled to look back up at the sky too.

The silence fell again but this time felt a little different. There had been an electrical current there, some sort of energy pulsing in waves between them. The stars were starting to light up the sky, but they weren't blinking an answer about what was happening.

"Wish we could just live out here," Bucky said softly, slicing through the energy in the air. It fell shattered to pieces around them and Steve sighed. They weren't ever gonna talk anymore, apparently. Not about what was really happening.

"I'd miss being able to do my part." His voice sounded a little like he was giving a speech, but it always kinda had whenever he was talking about anything important.

"You always were too good for your own sake, Rogers."

"No such thing as too good, Buck. Just men and women doin' their job for their country."

Steve was entirely somber, but Bucky huffed a laugh into the night air. Steve glanced at him before looking back at the stars. "What?"

"Nothin', it's just. Preachin' to the choir there, Captain." Bucky had a serene look on his face as Steve shot a look at him again.

He really might be the luckiest man in the world. He had spirit, a wonderful country to fight for, healthy blood pumping through his veins, a position and permission to make a difference in a war of the world, and a loyal man at his side who still just wanted to do good, deep down.

Bucky may hide it sometimes, but he was just as patriotic as the rest of them. He dove into battles head first, fell into stride with the very best of them. He didn't give himself much credit, but Steve
could see the passion that Bucky fought with and it amazed him. You could practically see the focus and motivation behind each perfectly executed shot.

Steve just didn't know that Bucky's hadn't jumped into this war guns blazing for America. He fought for something, of course, but it wasn't for the Stars and Stripes. It was all for the man that wore them.

A few hours of stargazing later and they were both too tired to stay up any longer. They curled up on their sides, backs pressed together for warmth.

The cold had settled by now, each breath leaving Steve's mouth in a little puff of fogged air. It wasn't the coldest night yet and Steve really didn't mind the chilliness too much. The strong muscles of Bucky's back pressed up to his were all the warmth he'd need.

Apparently, though, Bucky wasn't quite so warm. It wasn't until he was drifting into sleep that he even noticed the movement. Bucky was shivering, his body trembling slightly everywhere it touched Steve's.

His eyes shot back open as he registered the vibrations. "Are you cold?" Steve asked into the dark. It took a moment or two for Bucky to answer. "No," he said, almost sounding convincing. Well, maybe it'd be more convincing if his body wasn't shaking like an earthquake.

"You sure?" Steve pressed. "Yes," Bucky responded defiantly. If Bucky insisted, maybe Steve was just overreacting. Maybe he really wasn't that cold.

He let it go for a little while, listening for any sort of change. Bucky didn't stop shivering, although it felt like he was trying to hold himself more still.

Ten minutes later and Bucky's teeth started to chatter. "Okay, that's it." Steve flipped over, scooting so that he was facing Bucky now. "Stop trying to be all tough and just get over here."

Steve held out his arms but Bucky didn't scoot backwards, just looked over his shoulder at Steve like he'd sprouted three heads. "I'm not some dame to cuddle, Rogers."

"And I'm not gonna let my best friend freeze to death because he's too damn stubborn, Barnes."

Bucky narrowed his eyes, not seeming convinced in the least. It was maybe just a little inappropriate to sleep like that, Steve could admit. But it wasn't like they'd never done it before.

"C'mon, you used to do this for me all the time when I was sick and cold."

"I'm not sick."

"But you are cold. Now come over here, dammit, before I drag you in myself."

Bucky muttered something about stupid sparkly punks thinking they can get their way because some
people dressed them up in tights and put them on a stage, but he finally relented and scooted an inch backwards.

Steve closed the final gap between them, fitting his knees up snugly in the bend of Bucky's, their bodies lining up from head to toe. He wrapped his arms under Bucky's, clasping over his stomach and one of the peacoat buttons.

Bucky seemed hesitant for a moment, ridiculously stiff in Steve's arms. Then he brought his hands down, overlapping Steve's. The tension didn't leave his shoulders, but at least Steve was helping him warm back up because he wasn't shivering anymore.

"This is weird," Bucky finally mumbled, his thumb running over the back of Steve's hand. "I'm supposed to be the one holding you."

"Grow a foot and then we'll talk." Steve's voice was muffled against the back of Bucky's neck.

Bucky poked his hand, a little hard. Steve still wasn't over how crazily strong Bucky was. "Or you could just stop growing."

"I thought I did," Steve mumbled nonsensically, already drifting into the pulls of sleep.

Bucky said something back that Steve didn't catch. Everything was too soft and comfortable for him to stay awake like this. He didn't wanna miss anything important that Bucky might say, but they also needed to rest up for tomorrow.

"G'night, Buck." Steve said softly, the warm world around him sinking down into blissful darkness.

Just before he slipped unconscious, Steve could feel Bucky finally relax in his arms. He sighed and all the tension and fight was gone, both of them mush wrapped around each other.

"G'night, Stevie."

His eyes slipped shut and he dreamt about icy blue stars and warm, navy blue blankets.
There was a surprising amount of cheer when Peggy walked Morita and Jones back to their troop. The other men had to have splitting headaches from how bloody early they went drinking yesterday, but they all seemed quite chipper regardless, bright faces and clapping hands on shoulders, thrilled to have their squad back together.

They were generally more merry than most, although Peggy supposed anyone would be if they got to serve under Captain Rogers. And that wasn't a "crush" talking either, she knew how patriotic and noble Steve made this war. His men were always in the highest of spirits.

Well, not quite all his men.

Peggy eyed Sergeant Barnes, who was steadily refusing to look at her. As always.

"I trust you all didn't drink too much last night to go back out in the field today?" Peggy raised an eyebrow, pursing her lips as the men shrank down half a size under her gaze. She'd be lying to say it wasn't a thrill watching men do that, although she'd come to appreciate the genuine respect of these particular soldiers in a world pitted against women.

"Rogers and Barnes have got their sober eyes on us, if not," Dugan joked. Before straightening a
little taller and tacking on a "ma'am."

Peggy cocked an eyebrow, but smiled slightly as her eyes cut to Steve. His mouth curved up a little, ever shy. Or maybe just anxious to be fighting instead of trading small-talk with an agent.

"Very well. Colonel Phillips has your assignment ready." She smiled wider as Steve passed - in a swarm of his troops - and didn't miss the sour expression on Sergeant Barnes' face. She'd have to be completely daft not to see how much he disliked her.

"Dernier!" Peggy called after the troops. Dernier quickly came trotting back. She could have called one of the other men, but Dernier wouldn't be able to tell Steve directly and she doubted he'd bother translating such a conversation through Jones.

"Oui, Madame?"

"Rogers et Barnes étaient avec vous au bar hier, non?"

"Non, Madame. Ils sont allé à la forêt."

"Seuls?" Peggy asked, trying not to sound too curious. She didn't need Dernier reading anything more into this than he already was.

"Oui, Madame."

Peggy nodded curtly, dismissing the confused soldier. "Merci, Dernier."

He hurried off to join the rest and Peggy blinked after their retreating backs. So Steve and Sergeant Barnes hadn't gone out to the pub with the others yesterday.

They'd gone to the woods, apparently.

Alone.

~*~*~*~

Snipers can't shoot in the pitch black of night. The whole key to sniping is a good eye, being able to see something far off and kill it before it ever knows you're there. In the dark, you can't see that far away. Period. Night fighting is all about your other senses - being able to pick up the energy of another moving body, listening for telltale sounds of approaching enemies. Smelling the blood and the fire as the fight breaks out, only just managing to avoid tripping over dead bodies by their putrid scent.

You can't shoot at shapes in the dark, in case they're your own men. At night it's all about knives and short-range pistols. Fists, if you're particularly unlucky. Even when the fires started, the light was flickering and red and about 800 times more disorienting, not helpful. The orange flickered a distant, confusing glow and made everything look like blood and then the fire spread and you'd have to dodge that too. Bucky hated night missions.

Not to mention that it was freezing, January, and they were in Belgium. Three more things that Bucky hated.

"À l'arrière!" Dernier shouted. Jones had taught them all five phrases in French: to your right, to your left, behind you, duck, and fuck you. It seemed like a pretty decent vocabulary to have, and Bucky had a split second's moment of gratitude before he whipped around, quickly pulling the trigger at the figure behind him.
The Hydra soldier stumbled backwards and dropped to his knees, clutching at the bleeding hole in his ribcage. Ammunition was important not to waste and Bucky cursed for not executing a fatal shot. In fairness, the guy would probably bleed out and die anyways, but he couldn't take that risk. He flipped his gun around in his hand, leaping the gap between them and using the momentum to swing the pistol's handle down on the soldier's head.

His skull cracked from the force of it, instantly splitting and spurting hot red everywhere. Bucky forced himself not to think about how much strength was needed to crack a human skull from just a single swing. It wasn't a normal amount of strength, but he shoved that thought as far back as he could, kicking the guy's sternum to topple him backwards so the dead, bloody body didn't collapse on Bucky's boots.

An explosion went off to the side and Bucky jumped and rolled, breaking into a run as soon as he had his feet under him. There were at least 10 shapes left from what he could see in the flickering firelight and the Commandos only made up five of those since Morita was on watch outside. Bucky kept his center of gravity low as he neared the next one, trying to determine who was who. A few steps closer and the fire reflected off the signature golden Nazi pin. Yahtzee.

Bucky pulled his gun, firing a single shot. More red exploded in the room as the man crumpled, bullet clean through his temple. That left four enemy hostiles and there was no way that the other Commandos weren't killing anyone, was there? Although at second glance, Bucky counted 8 figures running and dodging through the fire. The others had gotten one, at least.

Another shot went off, followed by Falsworth's signature war cry. One dead. Two more to go. Bucky crouched low, because if he was counting that meant others had to be too. There was a cluster of silhouettes just beyond the next set of stairs, so Bucky kept his lowered stance and crept up on the shadows, dodging the spreading walls of fire.

The element of surprise was always an advantage, sniper or not. Even in the field, Bucky had learned to place his feet carefully and silently, rolling from heel to toe as he moved quickly across the floor. He'd gotten so good at quiet that most times he forgot he didn't need to be. He'd accidentally snuck up on Steve and the other Commandos a dozen times each. He'd even managed to surprise Colonel Phillips too, which was something Bucky deeply regretted. He always made a point to be talking loudly whenever he was on his way to see Phillips, just so he'd know Bucky was coming.

It'd probably be easier to just walk louder, but Bucky honestly could not remember how anymore. Unless he stomped around like a maniac, which would probably make Phillips even more sore. So he kept to his silent walking, gliding across the floor with his gun aimed at chest height in front of him.

He ducked behind a rolled wire fence just before he rounded the corner on the silhouettes. The building they were in had been experimenting with new kinds of fences, electrical ones that would zap anyone who came within twenty feet stock full of 2000 jules of electrical energy. None of it was fully functional yet, but the rumor of a partially-functional prototype was floating around.

These Hydra guys were a little terrifying sometimes. The good thing about fighting in the fence factory though was the extreme openness of the place. Nothing was taller than five feet and everything was made of wire, leaving space to see through and count silhouettes. That, and wire wasn't combustible. Otherwise they'd all be blown to bits right now.

Bucky inched closer quietly, listening for whether the three figures were Hydra or Howlers. He readjusted the grip on his gun, droning out the crackling of fire to tune into the conversation.

"Ain't so super now, huh?" The cock of a gun. "Let's see if that supersoldier serum can save you
from a bullet in the brain."

Turning the corner and closing the gap between him and the Hydra assailants wasn't something Bucky realized he'd done until he was pulling the trigger, another perfect headshot spraying blood over blonde hair as the Nazi fell over backwards, dead before he hit the ground. Bucky swiveled and pulled the trigger again, the dry click barely registering before he flipped the gun again and brought it down on the other Hydra soldier's head - before the Nazi'd even realized his comrade had been shot.

Both of them, both of the two Hydra soldiers that were left. They'd both had Steve. Bucky didn't even have a chance to see if Steve was okay yet. This fucker had to be dead first. He crumpled with Bucky's first swing and Bucky followed him to the ground, fist driving into the guy's nose. Blood splashed up on Bucky's coat as he hit the guy's face, again. And again. Both fists swinging, one still with the gun in it.

Pistolwhip, punch. Pistolwhip, punch. Bucky didn't even register the point that the Hydra soldier died under his hands. He just kept swinging, mashing in and crumbling bone structure. He could feel the cheekbones crack under his bloody knuckles, felt the bones in the nose snap over and over. It didn't look human anymore. It was never fucking human in the first place.

This thing had put a gun to Steve's head and almost blown his brains all over the room. And Bucky wouldn't even have had the fucking chance to say goodbye there was absolutely nothing fucking alright with that. This thing had almost taken Steve away from him, he'd almost just lost Steve.

"Bucky you can stop," Steve's voice sobbed from somewhere in Bucky's head. Wait, no, that was behind him. Bucky slammed his fist down one more time before he threw himself off the crumpled body, shaking all over as he backed away from it on all fours. His arms could barely hold himself up. God, he was gonna puke.

"Steve," he managed, crawling towards where Steve was still lying in the darkness. The fire was getting closer, they had to get outta here. "Steve?"

"Here, here. Bucky I'm here. J-just help me outta this f-fence." Steve was rolled over on his side when Bucky reached him, hands instantly going to Steve's face. Sparks shot through his fingertips and he cried out in pain, drawing his hands back. Okay, if that's what 'sparks when they touched' was supposed to feel like, Bucky never wanted to do that again, he felt like he just got electrocuted.

Wait, fuck, no. "Fence?" Bucky asked breathlessly, everything still red and confusing and too hot around him. His hands were tingling and shaking.

"F-feet," Steve managed, his face twisting up in pain under the flicker of the firelight. Bucky looked around, eyes darting down to Steve's feet. His boots were wrapped up in a tangle of fence weave, sparks and little pieces of lightning running along it.

"O-oh god, oh god." Bucky rushed down to Steve's boots, tugging at the first wire wrapped over his calf. Electricity shot through his spine and sucked the air outta his lungs. "Fuck," he cursed, steeling himself before grabbing it again and yanking. His hands let go of their own accord, trying to free him from the shock, but he'd gotten that piece outta the way. Okay, if he moved fast enough he could get them all without frying up his insides. Maybe.

Shocks ran through him as he grabbed another, a muffled scream wrenching from his throat as he tugged it off of Steve's ankles and quickly let go. No fucking wonder Steve was on the damn ground. It hadn't made any sense at first, how Steve of all people had managed to get a gun to his head. If you're being electrocuted by a wire bird's nest of electric fence, it was probably a little difficult to get away from that situation.
If anybody else but Steve had been wrapped up in all this electricity for that long, they'd've been fried to a crisp by now. This electricity was amped up high enough to char a human inside of a minute. With each wire he grabbed he fought the urge to scream as the electricity burned into his skin. Bucky's hands and fingers burnt in overlapping black lines, flesh just short of being fried away. It wasn't burning off though, and Bucky wasn't dead yet by some miracle. Or something was wrong with him, as always.

He finally tugged off the last coil of wire, freeing Steve's boots from the lightning shocks. Steve automatically curled up his legs, shaking wildly on the ground. Bucky tried to crawl back over, but the second concrete touched his palms his throat let out a high pitched noise and his hands drew back. Fuck fuck fuck that burned something terrible. He wasn't gonna be picking up anything until he got those treated.

Except Steve, of course, because damn Bucky's hands if they couldn't at least get Steve off the ground and outta this burning building. Although they did have a team of six other people, that would go a hell of a lot faster.

"Dugan!" Bucky shouted into the darkness. "Jones! Somebody help!"

Shouts echoed back from across the room but Bucky couldn't hear them anymore. He scooted up to Steve's face, nudging his jaw with the back of his hand so Steve would turn his head to look back up at Bucky. He looked a little dazed and he was shaking, but he wasn't dead. Steve was okay. Bucky leaned his forehead on Steve's shoulder, shaking with relief and the aftershocks of all the electricity.

Heavy footsteps got closer and there were more shouts. Bucky forced himself to listen, in case they were about helping Steve.

"Oh my god," Jones said, sounding like he was horrified. He'd stopped off just to the left where....where that Nazi that Bucky had pummeled was. Yeah, that was a pretty gruesome sight. Bucky would feel bad for it, should feel bad for it, but he really couldn't give a damn. Jones wasn't gonna get that, although Jones also didn't deserve to have more mangled and bloody, twisted, rearranged faces haunting his nightmares. Bucky felt a little bad about that part. If he could stop the Commandos from having to see the bloody mess he'd made, he would.

"Keep going," Dugan said gruffly, pushing the horrified Commandos past the dead body. Bucky couldn't even lift his head. He needed to know that Steve was alive and okay here, his shoulder trembling under Bucky's forehead.

"Sarge? Sarge what happened?" Jones was crouching down beside Bucky, tugging him gently away from Steve. Bucky rolled backwards, let Jones take him around the shoulders and lift him to his feet. He wasn't close enough to Steve anymore, but if there was anyone else that Bucky trusted Steve's life with, it was the Commandos. He couldn't help Steve much right now with his burnt up hands anyways.

"Electrical fence," Bucky mumbled, lifting his hands up to show Jones why he couldn't lift Steve up himself. Gabe sucked in a breath, turning away from Bucky's hands with a sickened look on his face. Bucky closed his eyes, a wave of exhaustion trying to shove him down.

"Dugan, Barnes's hands are fried. That electrical fence --" Jones let go of Bucky's shoulders with one hand to point at the fence still tangled up a few feet away from Steve, "must've gotten Cap's feet. Look, his boots are all burnt up."

Dugan, Dernier, and Falsworth were attempting to pull Steve to his feet, all three of them groaning as they tried to split the weight. Dugan looked from the fence to Bucky, then back at Jones. "Jesus,
Sarge, tryin' to get yourself killed too? That ain't gonna help anybody."

"Le feu est annoncé," Dernier barked, pulling Steve forward a little faster. Jones looked around, translating for the rest of them.

"The fire's approaching. We gotta get outta here." Jones threw one of Bucky's arms over his shoulders and started dragging them both towards the door. Bucky tried to blink against the fire, tried to catch his footing. His body was still shaking and he'd promised himself he wouldn't be the weak link. But here Jones was, helping him out the door when his feet were perfectly fine. It was just his head that wasn't. And his hands. And he was shaking from electricity, but he could walk at least. Maybe.

Bucky tried to tug away, still blinking away pieces of imaginary lightning from his vision. Now it was blood and fire and lightning taking over his eyes. "'M fine, Jones, fine. Go help 'em with S-Steve."

Jones eyed him reluctantly. Bucky finally got his feet under him, taking a few shaky steps to demonstrate that yes, he could fucking walk. God, how could he be so weak when Steve needed him? When they were all depending on him? Finally Jones shook his head and sighed, ducking out from under Bucky's arm so he could go help the others with Steve.

Bucky forced his feet forward, one in front of the other, until they reached the door. He reached out automatically, but stopped last second. He couldn't fucking turn the knob, god he was useless. He couldn't do anything and they were all gonna get trapped in here and die because of him. He always knew he'd end up hurting good people eventually, Bucky had just always hoped he wouldn't even have to. Soldiers made mistakes, shot their own team, but getting everyone stuck because Bucky was so damn weak? At least Morita wouldn't die, right? Wait...

"Morita!!" Bucky shouted, leaning one shoulder on the door. The crew carrying Steve was making it up the last flight of stairs.

Morita opened the door, making Bucky stumble heavily outta it. Clumsy hands caught him just before he hit the ground, saving him seconds away from faceplanting. As much as Bucky pretended to treasure his face, the idea of landing on his hands right now was a hell of a lot worse than a broken nose.

"Jesus, Sarge, what happened?" Morita pulled Bucky upright and Bucky took a few seconds to gain his balance before he took a shaky step back, holding up his hands to motion that he was fine. Which was a bad idea, because Steve was limped outta the door right then, leaving everyone with a perfect view of the (still smoking) black gashes across his palms and fingertips.

"Fucking hell, Barnes," Dugan cursed. Dernier reciprocated in French and everybody paled, going still. Steve could barely lift his head, but he was staring with wide eyes at Bucky's hands. Bucky quickly brought them down to his sides, one of his palms brushing his pants. He winced, jumping as pain shot up his arm from the touch.

Steve was silent, still shaking slightly, just staring at Bucky. Bucky looked away. He didn't regret it, not for one moment. He'd do it again. He wouldn't stop until his hands were fried and he was pulling away fence with just bone. Steve wasn't gonna get that. Steve cared about him, sure, Bucky would be stupid to ignore that. But it wasn't the kind of way Bucky cared about Steve. The way he kind of always cared about Steve, just never had to admit to himself until there was actually someone else in the equation.

Yeah, Bucky had set Steve up with countless dates and dances when they were in Brooklyn. But he
spent every time hoping Steve wouldn't like any of them at all. He'd just thought he was selfish and
didn't want Steve to start spending time with other people. He just thought he'd miss his best friend
too much.

He'd told himself that his entire life and he'd somehow let himself believe it. Until this sudden fiery
love between Agent Carter and Steve. It wasn't fucking fair. Bucky didn't even realize it until it was
too late. There was nothing he could do about it now.

Well, nothing but try to save Steve's life. No matter the cost.

"Bucky," Steve said, so soft and broken that Bucky tensed up all over. He could take Steve being
pissed, but that broken sound of his name? Bucky couldn't handle that.

"Don't." He cut Steve off. "We'll talk about it once you've seen a damn medic, alright?" Bucky didn't
turn his head, didn't look back at Steve. He didn't wanna know what Steve looked like right now.

Maybe he'd caught on. Maybe this was where Steve realized that maybe Bucky loved Steve more
than Steve loved Bucky. Because Bucky did that for Steve, and that wasn't something Steve would
do. Well, he'd try the best he could because he was so damn noble, but. But he wouldn't blindly ruin
his best weapon in an attempt to save Bucky's life. Steve wasn't as selfish as Bucky was.

And Bucky had no idea how much his face gave away, but he couldn't risk it. He couldn't risk Steve
finding him out, not right now when everything was so raw. Steve had almost died, *jesus*, he'd
almost died. Bullet to the brain. He wouldn't survive that, Bucky was sure. And if that wasn't
enough, he'd been electrocuted for god knows how long with that insane voltage and...and it was all
way too much.

Bucky turned back around. Steve was looking at the ground, Dugan and Morita each with one of his
arms slung over their shoulders. He was getting his strength back enough that he could hobble along
with them now, no longer needing to be dragged/carried up flights of stairs. It wasn't that far back to
base - thankfully Phillips and Carter had decided to move with them because there was a lot of
activity in the area.

It would still be an hour walk though; without the slow paced hobbling and two shaking officers. But
they'd make the whole thing in one shot, because that's how they were. Stubborn, tough, and
wickedly loyal to Steve. And to Bucky a little, too.

Steve was okay now, Bucky knew that. He was still shaking and his eyes were glazed over in pain
and Bucky could definitely relate to that. But he'd almost lost that man right there and Bucky could
cry with the overwhelming power of it all.

He fell into step beside Morita, brushing the back of his shaking hand up against the one Steve had
thrown over Morita's shoulders. Just a soft touch to let Steve know Bucky was here and he wasn't
going to leave. Steve's fingers curled in like he could physically hold on to the feeling of Bucky's
touch.

Once they hit woods, the shaking made his feet more unsteady over rocky ground. Jones and
Falsworth each forced Bucky into letting them half carry him, one arm slung over each of their
shoulders. He hated feeling needy, but Falsworth had insisted they would travel faster this way,
which also meant getting medical help faster. So eventually Bucky had relented and their caravan
trooped on.

Two officers, trembling from a lethal dose of electric exposure, held up by two Commandos each. A
flank of six across, with Dernier in front to scout out any danger. They made the whole trip like that,
ended up walking (limping, hobbling?) into base camp in that same formation.

As soon as they crossed into camp a shout went up, alerting the whole place. A few soldiers ran over and hovered, wanting to help but unable to do much. Their team already had everything covered.

"Somebody alert the medic's tent, we've got third degree burns and electrocution damage here," Dugan ordered one of the hovering soldiers. He dashed off to tell the doctors and the Howling Commandos followed, a step at a time.

Bucky had considered insisting walking on his own again, but it'd still slow them down and the sooner Steve saw the doctor, the sooner Bucky would be able to breathe again.

The medics were waiting and ready by the time they reached the tent. Dugan and Morita carried Steve in first, laying him down on one of the cots. Bucky was next, laid down right next to Steve.

They were both going to be okay, Bucky promised himself. They were both going to be okay.

Just outside the tent, the rest of their team were talking in hushed voices amongst themselves when Agent Carter finally marched up.

"Dugan, Falsworth, come with me. The rest of you go start filling in Colonel Phillips on your report." None of them moved immediately, glancing worriedly back at the tent, so she straightened up a bit and curtly added, "Now, soldiers."

The group broke off, three of them headed towards the officers tent while she led the other two to an empty briefing tent. As soon as they were all inside, she gestured for Dugan and Falsworth to sit. Peggy remained standing, arms crossed as she looked down at them.

"What happened? And before you start, I'm not talking about a mission report. I think we'd like to know how you came back with two squad leaders in critical physical condition while the rest of you barely have a damned scratch."

She raised her eyebrows, tapping her fingernails on her arm. Dugan had always seemed a little intimidated by her accent alone, but he looked more than a little intimidated now. The two of them glanced at each other, neither quite sure how to start.

"It was Sergeant Barnes, ma'am," Dugan finally said. "Captain Rogers was in trouble. Barnes jumped in and saved his life. None of the rest of us got there until the damage was already done."

Dugan's eyes cut to the side, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. There was something he wasn't telling her. Peggy turned her eyes on Falsworth, implying he should elaborate.

"The Captain got his legs tangled up in a prototype electric fence and it took him down. Two Hydra soldiers found him and were gonna put a bullet in his brain. Then Sergeant found them and..." Falsworth paused, blinking away the mangled image of the soldier Bucky had destroyed. "...and took them out. Then, uh--"

"Took them out how?" She interrupted. "Two Hydra soldiers with guns to Ste-- Captain's head, and Barnes just took them out?" Peggy pressed sharply and both of the men refused to look at her or each other. They had planned to leave that part out, then. Why? This was war, people died. It wasn't exactly Sergeant Barnes's first kill. She tapped her nails on her arm again, waiting for them to speak up.

"One with a headshot, and the other, he. He beat to death." Falsworth whispered the last part, looking horrified as he stared at his hands.
"With his fists." Peggy confirmed, an eyebrow cocked. They both muttered yes ma'ams. "And this is concerning because..."

"Because he didn't stop, ma'am. He just kept swinging until the guy didn't..." Falsworth trailed off again, eyes glazing slightly as he looked into the distance.

"Didn't what?" Peggy said crossly. This was getting ridiculous, having to prompt every damn word outta their mouths.

"Didn't look human," Dugan finished darkly. Peggy blinked a few times. Well, that was new. They'd all seen plenty of dead bodies by now, it would take a lot to shake men like these. "Most messed up damn corpse I've ever seen. Odds are we're all havin nightmares about it now."

Peggy nodded, almost sympathetic, finally taking a seat across the table from them. There was no need to tower now that they'd decided to start really talking. "And then?"

"Then Barnes saw Cap all tangled up in the electric fence and decided to remove the wires himself. Burnt up his hands something awful, whole place smelt like burnin flesh, but he got Rogers out."

"Then he shouted to us and we came runnin over and pulled them both outta the factory. Barnes resisted anybody's help at first, but he finally let us carry his weight by bribing that it would get Captain Rogers to a medic sooner."

"And Sergeant Barnes told us what we just told you on the walk back. Well, what he could anyways. He was pretty outta it, ma'am."

Peggy leaned back in her chair, analyzing the information in her head. Barnes had turned out more violent than anyone thought he would. He was brave and a good soldier, an excellent marksman. But he was being eaten away by something and it was affecting everything he touched. Peggy could see it, and Steve probably had an idea as well, just not the right idea.

When Peggy first met Steve, she'd never have imagined a man like James Barnes to be his best friend. She'd been more than a little shocked at first, hearing stories about the young, fiery Sergeant. She'd tried to picture the two of them growing up together - the little, stubborn version of pre-serum Steve from somehow befriending the haunted, rough-around-the-edges smirking bastard with a reputation.

Maybe that was half the problem though. Peggy didn't know anything about what Barnes was like before the war. Still, if he'd changed that much, he and Steve wouldn't be friends anymore. And they were definitely friends.

Either way, Peggy was instantly skeptical of Sergeant Barnes, the moment she heard Steve relay his name to Phillips. Curious, though, because what kind of man would be so important to Steve Rogers he'd go on a suicide mission to save him?

She'd actually done some research while Steve was attacking the Azzano Hydra base. She'd pulled half the 107th into interrogation, asking as much about Barnes as she could without arising too many questions from her superiors.

The man they described was a good leader, courageous as hell, but that was the only thing that made him someone Steve would befriend. All the other descriptions?

Cocky, sarcastic, a real ladies man. Some of the men joked that the Sergeant could walk into a bar empty-handed and leave with a woman on each limb. He told wild stories of fights back home in Brooklyn, but always got quiet and closed off when he got letters. He earned the respect of everyone
he fought with, but had a bit of a problem with authority.

So, of course, Peggy was reluctant to believe that was who Steve'd endanger his life for. She hadn't believed it at' all, really.

Until she saw them together.

That first day when Steve'd marched back, she'd been so overwhelmed seeing him again that she hadn't bothered to search for Barnes. When a blue-eyed man shouted up a cry - *Let's hear it for Captain America* - she'd finally turned and seen him.

He was looking at Steve at the time, somber one second then lifting an eyebrow and giving Steve an expression that was so detailed, complex, and brief it would only be understood by someone who knew the language. Peggy could absolutely admit that Sergeant Barnes was attractive, but the way he looked at Steve was much more fascinating to her.

She'd looked back at Steve's face to see his reaction to Barnes's expression and Steve had been beaming. Lit up like Christmas morning, looking at Barnes like he was the moon in Steve's sky.

That's when she'd started to understand. This really was Steve's best friend. Somehow the naive, tiny Steve she'd known was impossibly close to the crazy, wild Sergeant. No one could ever deny that.

It was just a matter of how close.

Peggy sat up a little straighter in her seat and turned her eyes back on the two tired soldiers. She had an interrogation to get back to.

"In your professional opinions, do you believe Sergeant Barnes makes dangerous, irrational decisions in the field?" Peggy asked, keeping her voice neutral. Falsworth looked startled by the question but Dugan shrugged and answered back casually.

"Only regarding Captain Rogers, ma'am. He looks out for all of us - saved my life more times than I can count - but he's got a soft spot for Cap. Can't stand to see him hurt. I don't know if I'd say dangerous, but probably irrational."

Soft spot was an understatement. When they'd first met, Peggy'd had 'a soft spot' for Steve. Everyone had a soft spot for Steve after the serum. Sergeant Barnes didn't just have a soft spot.

Peggy tilted her head towards Falsworth, indicating he should answer the question too.

"He's only really dangerous to people who try to hurt the Captain. Then he's brutal." Falsworth seemed careful in his word choice, hesitating before he chose 'brutal.' That was a better word for mashing a man's face to an unrecognizable mess, she supposed.

"This brutality, it's never been turned on any of you?"

"No ma'am."

"Has it ever been for any of you?"

"...no ma'am, just the Captain."

Again, not that surprising. If Steve looked at Bucky like he held the moon, Bucky look at Steve like he was the entire universe. She had a few other theories though, ones that were at least important enough to test.
"Do you think the cause for this brutality could be in relation to Sergeant Barnes's time spent as a prisoner of war?"

That one got some surprised blinks as the two men looked at each other, then back to her. No one ever talked about that, about how Sergeant Barnes had been laid out and tortured. He acted like he was fine all the time, so everyone was happy to forget. It was important though, people don't bounce back from torture, as much as they pretend to.

"Well, ma'am, that's hard to say. None of us ever saw Rogers and Barnes together before the war, so there's no way to tell if that's just their relationship or something Sarge got from Zola. He's been more violent on the field in general, but. I don't know if I could say that with certainty."

Yes, Peggy was aware how little they knew about Rogers and Barnes's relationship before the war. Phillips hadn't cared, said that good soldiers fought better and died less when they cared about their team. He'd had no problem putting them together on this, and Peggy didn't exactly have qualms with the efficiency either. That didn't stop her curiosity, though.

"Do you think Sergeant Barnes is overly concerned with Captain Rogers' safety?"

"Yes, ma'am."

They both answered in tandem, so immediately that she'd barely finished the question before they agreed. So that was something that'd come up before. She'd dive into that more if she could get away with it, but her questions were already getting suspicious. She could interrogate, but the moment she asked too much this whole thing would shut down or blow up.

She had to ask one more though, even if it was a risk. There was no telling what the men might think she was implying and she definitely didn't want that. She just needed to know where the Howling Commandos stood on the whole situation.

"Have the men ever speculated as to why that is? Why is Barnes so overprotective? She could still be talking about their dynamic as a team, couldn't she?"

Falsworth shrugged. "Barnes has got big brother syndrome. Feels the Captain's his personal responsibility."

"But he doesn't feel that way about the rest of you?"

"He protects us, ma'am. He cares about all of us. Just not the same way he cares about the Captain."

There it was. That last sentence, that's what she'd been looking for. That's what she'd been expecting to hear. She was surprised it took that long to get it.

By the unalarmed, casual looks on both of their faces, they had no idea what'd just been said. No one but Peggy ever seemed to notice, that was the amazing part.

"Thank you, gentlemen." Peggy said as she stood, uncrossing her arms and nodding her head. "You are dismissed."

Dugan and Falsworth both tipped their hats, then walked towards the entrance of the tent together. Dugan leaned over, keeping his voice low, but Peggy was listening closely enough to hear.

"Wow, you'd think she's scouting Barnes out for competition. Like she's afraid he's gonna steal Cap away from her or somethin."
Falsworth laughed quietly, both stepping outta the tent. It was a joke to them, something quickly said for a laugh and then forgotten.

Peggy looked around at the once-again empty tent and thought *you have no idea how close that is to the truth.*

~*~*~*~*~

They looked a little like boxing gloves. Or maybe a mummy, right when they're first wound up tight, too trapped to move. Waiting on the decay of fabric so the stiff boards they're strapped to eventually gave way. Just time, waiting on time. As always.

Bucky stared down at his wrapped hands, wiggling the tips of his fingers experimentally. A sharp burn across two combined with chafing across his broken knuckles had him instantly stopping that. He'd rather be a stiff mummy board with gauze gloves on his hands.

By the time the medics fussed over his hands, the burns weren't smoking or sparking anymore. They still hurt like a bitch, though. They'd carefully turned his hands over, wrapping his cracked, bleeding knuckles. Bucky hadn't even noticed his knuckles splitting from hitting that damn Nazi so many times.

So his whole hands were covered in wraps and ointment. He looked like an invalid, big white bandages over his hands. At least they'd weaved the gauze between his fingers so they looked more like gloves than mittens.

Steve came into their tent a few minutes after Bucky did, finishing up his own report to Phillips. He was walking and talking like normal, for the most part. He was still a little shaky on his feet, still shivered like imaginary shocks were going through him sometimes. But by tomorrow morning he'd be good as new.

Bucky would be more healed than he should be tomorrow, but he was gonna ignore that. Like everything else.

The cot dipped as Steve sat down beside him, the changed angle of the thin cushion tilting Bucky sideways on Steve's shoulder. He'd usually complain, or at least scuff him on the arm and scoot an inch away. Tonight though, after all that mess at the factory, Bucky didn't want Steve to be anything short of pressed up right against him.

He was holding the silence, waiting for Steve to speak first. It was the first they'd been alone since it happened, the first chance they'd had to talk. So Bucky sat, soaking up the warmth of Steve's proximity as he waited for the inevitable scolding.

Steve didn't say anything. Not with his words, anyways. After a minute or two of silence - full of admonition that they were both still alive - he finally shifted his weight, angling his torso to face Bucky as he reached, taking one of the boxer-mummy-gauze-gloves in his hands.

Bucky watched with soft eyes as Steve ran his fingers over the gauze, tracing light fingertips on the layers protecting Bucky's scorch marks. He drew the burn pattern on each of them, having memorized it in the brief moment he'd seen outside the factory. Bucky watched as artist fingers sketched lines onto the bandages, an invisible pencil drawing.

He kept his eyes downcast, on the mess of Bucky's hands. Like with every line he drew over Bucky's hand, he was blaming himself. Apologizing. Not a single ounce of it was Steve's fault. Bucky cleared his throat, eyes flicking up to watch Steve's face.
"Holdin my hand now, Rogers?" Bucky joked lightly, trying to ease some of the guilty tension outta the moment. A soft, barely there smile curled up on the edges of Steve's lips.

"Not like it's the first time," Steve replied, glancing up. Their eyes met in a beat of heavy emotion, both of them caught off guard by how close they were. How caring and sweetly Steve was holding Bucky's bandaged hand in his own.

They'd both tried to joke away the intensity, and it had backfired immensely. The truth in Steve's words hovered in the air around them as they looked at each other, chests on fire. They'd held hands plenty of times, during moments of distress. It was a comfort to both of them, that tangible proof the other was there. Like how siblings did, twining fingers to cross the road when they're little.

Only they'd grown up now, and sometimes they still needed help crossing the metaphorical road. Times got tough, weaving fingers with your best friend for comfort in the face of darkness didn't have to mean anything.

Except that to Bucky, it really really did.

His eyes searched Steve's, looking for some clue to the tension that was high and screeching between them. Steve was searching too, both of them clueless and helpless and standing on the edge of a cliff.

If he leaned forward, tilted his body eight inches forward, he could be kissing Steve. Bucky blinked helplessly at that thought, feeling much too small in his own head.

He still hadn't let himself label the way he felt about Rogers. He couldn't dwell on it, call it anything, because then it would be real and impossible to dodge. But he was thinking about kissing Steve. Had thought about it plenty over the last month. Had wondered what Steve's lips would taste like. Had stared at Steve's mouth from across the room, memorizing the shape of it with his eyes because he couldn't with his mouth.

He still couldn't call it anything though, still couldn't look inside himself like that. His head referred to it as a crush a couple of times, but that was nothing like what it felt like. Steve wasn't some smart, sweet beautiful dame that Bucky was fawning over and cursing himself for weakness. Steve was the liquid that ran through Bucky's veins and Bucky just wanted to have as much of Steve inside him as possible, wanted to consume every bit.

Oh, God, he hadn't even been thinking like that. Like as in Steve's body actually... inside...

Bucky's face heated up in a colorless blush as he stared at Steve. Holy fuck, Bucky was such a lost cause. He was in so, so, deep.

The little piece of sky that was staring at him cut away, carefully placing Bucky's hand on the rough sheets of the cot. Then he was standing and Bucky's body tilted back to normal, his shoulder oddly cold without Steve.

He watched cautiously as Steve walked to the front, pulling the tent flap all the way closed. Then he picked up the flickering lantern on the stool and set it atop a crate, unscrewing the glass lid to change the oil.

Bucky's eyes followed Steve's movements as he rummaged through one of the supplies duffles in search of lighting fluid. As soon as he found the metal container of it, Steve straightened up, sighing like he was running his hand exasperatingly through his hair. Except of course Steve didn't run his fingers through his hair anymore, the slick swoosh to the side was much too important to mess up.

He turned the sigh in Bucky's direction, meeting his eyes again as his fingers etched worriedly over
"Jesus, Buck, I can't believe you did that." Steve voiced, sounding exhausted. And a little torn up too. He glanced back down, looking at the metal container as he spoke again. "I'm actually really pissed at you, underneath this whole stupidly-relieved act I have going on."

The last few words had a hint of humor in them and Bucky couldn't help but laugh. Steve said the most wonderfully adorable things sometimes and Bucky's entire insides light up like a firefly. A bit of a smile tugged at Steve's mouth too, maybe because of Bucky's laugh. Bucky liked the idea of Steve smiling because of Bucky's laugh.

The smile turned away, Steve's back to Bucky as he carefully refilled the lantern. He reverted to watching Steve's shoulderblades again. The bones expanded across his back, obvious even through the layers that he was taking a deep breath. Steeling himself for something.

"But seriously, Bucky." Steve turned back to face him, leaning on the lantern crate. His eyes looked positively miserable. "Why'd you have to go and do that? Your hands, they just...you could have died, Buck, you do get that. Right?"

Steve was glaring at him now, arms crossed. Bucky lifted his chin, meeting back the challenge of Steve's eyes.

"What would you have done?" Bucky shot back. It was worded like a comeback, like an answer. It was a question though, underneath all that. One of those questions Bucky probably wasn't ever gonna get answered. Saying it out loud at least felt like he was trying.

Steve narrowed his eyes a little then gave up, sighing as he turned back to the lantern to screw the lid on.

"You know what," Steve muttered under his breath. It was another one of those supposed-to-give answers, but the entirety of it was skewed because Bucky actually had no idea what might've happened if he was caught in that fence.

Would Steve have hurt himself to save Bucky? He definitely wouldn't have wasted precious time beating a guy to death (and beyond), that's for sure.

"Do I?" Bucky responded wistfully, quiet enough that Steve could ignore it and they could move on.

He stood from the cot, aimed for the outside to get some air before they went to sleep. He wasn't about to panic or anything, he just wanted to relieve some of the pressure on Steve. He didn't want his best friend to feel obligated to act guilty for what happened to Bucky when it wasn't Steve's fault.

Steve registered Bucky's words just before Bucky passed behind him, eyes going a fraction wider before he spun around and reached out to catch Bucky's arm. Gently. Buck stopped, nearly stumbling into Steve's chest, looking up at him in surprise. This wasn't part of the plan.

He forced himself not to stare at where Steve's fingers were curled around Bucky's bicep. It actually wasn't that hard to overpass because there were a thousand other things spreading through him like wildfire right now. Their chests were almost touching and Steve's grip on him was light enough not to hold him down but firm enough to let Bucky know he needed to stay. Then there was the whole fact that Steve'd grabbed him in the first place. He wanted to talk about this. He wanted to answer Bucky's question.

That all would've been overwhelming enough to send Bucky off the deep end even without the look Steve was giving him. But god, the look on Steve's face. Bucky was going to melt into a puddle on
"Look, Buck, as mad as I am about you hurting your hands, I--" Steve stopped, sucking in an unstable shot of oxygen. When Steve breathed in, his chest expanded with air and brushed against Bucky's. They were that close. Close enough to touch when they breathed deeply. Bucky had to tilt his chin up to look at Steve. His heartbeat was so loud and crazy in his chest that he was pretty sure Steve could hear it. Actually, no, their chests were touching. Steve could probably feel it.

The idea of Steve feeling Bucky's heartbeat over his own, their bodies syncing to each other, made his head a little woozy. He had to blink a few times to get Steve's gorgeous blue eyes back in focus. They were just so much closer than he was used to. And they were usually pretty damn close.

Steve exhaled lightly, his breath warm as it ghosted over Bucky's nose. There was electricity between them again but this time it wasn't trying to kill them. Well, maybe, Bucky kinda felt like he was dying. This time the sparks in the air were warm and gravitational and Bucky could hardly breathe as Steve's lips parted again.

His voice was soft, like he was gently coaxing as much as he was reminding Bucky of something he should've known his whole life.

"You know if it'd been you in that fence, I'd've done the same thing."

The words floated down to Bucky's head like they'd been placed there directly in Steve's gently sloping handwriting. There wasn't room to doubt Steve's words, not so much as an inkling of space for Bucky to not believe him. Those words, that face, those eyes were so damn sincere that Bucky's heart hurt. His entire chest hurt.

What he was supposed to say to that? There wasn't anything he could say to that. He didn't need to anyways, Steve could see it all written plain and sharp on his face as he looked up, eyes searching.

Steve was all soft edges, tall slopes, angelic blue eyes and the softest blonde hair he'd ever touched. Bucky was hard and angled, sharp cheekbones, cleffed chin, thick dark hair and eyes the color of ice - silver blue where Steve's were the warm blue of the sky, the ocean. They were perfect physical opposites and he'd never felt more at home than he did right now, his chest brushing against Steve's as they breathed.

He'd also never felt more overwhelmed, because Steve was so damn close. His response to Steve's declaration of dedication wasn't the only thing written on his face right now. Open amazement, anticipation. Attraction. He did the damn best could to keep a lid on it. If he ruined this proximity by declaring I lo--

Whatever he was feeling. By declaring that with his expression, he might ruin everything. So he was quiet. Bucky swallowed thickly, trying to get rid of the tingling urge in his mouth. He couldn't. That wasn't even a fucking option. Wasn't anything like an option.

But since when were Bucky's body and his brain in agreement? He didn't want to spoil this, didn't want to destroy everything. But they were just so close and Bucky's alarm system was dismantled the moment he'd felt Steve's air on him and he just had to know, had to see how much danger they were in. He had to see how close Steve's mouth was. Or maybe he had to see what the pretty curve of Steve's lips looked like this close, maybe that's what he meant.

His eyes darted down of their own free will, flicking away from Steve's rich blue and glancing down at the light pink color of Steve's lips. His lungs quit, freezing in his chest like ice. He'd have to move less than four inches. Less than four inches and he'd be tasting Steve, tasting him for the first time.
Bucky's eyes shot back up to Steve's, wide with fear in an abortive, panicked movement because oh god Steve had to have seen him do that. He wasn't sure what he was expecting to see in response; maybe disgust, repulsion. Shock. Surprise, at least. Steve did look a little surprised, but most of his expression was just careful. There was a wall up in his eyes, a barricade to keep Bucky from looking into his soul.

Which meant Bucky had absolutely no idea what Steve was thinking. Except...it didn't look like it was a bad thing. When their eyes met, Steve's lips parted ever so slightly, drawing in a soft breath of air. Bucky was hyper-alert to every movement, to Steve's now parted lips and lord, it would be so damn easy to lean forward.

He had to be reading this all wrong, right? Steve wasn't freaking out, he was actually breathing a little heavy. Anticipation. Maybe his body was betraying him too. Maybe he wanted this too, maybe even if just in his subconscious but oh god oh god this couldn't actually be happening right now. Steve was looking at him like that and Bucky could cry with amazement. Shock. Everything.

So much tension, anticipation, he could cut it with the knife in his boot. He had to do something. He couldn't let this slip by, he'd never forgive himself. But he couldn't lean up and kiss Steve. Not if he wasn't 100% sure how Steve felt. And right now he was kind of at a wishful, disbelieving 23%. Still, twenty three percent chance that Steve wanted to kiss him back. He had to do something. He had to.

Bucky's eyes never left Steve's, his voice dipping low as his lips parted too (so close) and he breathed the words out his mouth.

"You gonna kiss me anytime, Rogers?"

The blue eyes crinkled slightly at the edges, something akin to a smile as they darted back and forth across Bucky's. Everything was frozen but he wasn't cold for once. He wasn't cold at all.

Steve slid his hand up from Bucky's bicep, hot pressure smoothing over his shoulder and settling against the side of Bucky's neck.

"Yeah, just as soon as you put on those high heels a' yours, Barnes. I'll crane my neck if I stoop that low." Steve teased, fingers lightly massaging the back of Bucky's neck. He could die from this touch alone.

"Oh, think you're so funny now that you're tall, huh?" Bucky managed, and his knees were so weak he'd be sinking to the ground right now if Steve's hand wasn't warm and steady on his skin, fingertips beating a pulse into the highest knob of Bucky's spine.

"You love it." Steve's voice was still teasing, still light. His eyes were dark though, pupils blown. Bucky was getting swallowed whole.

"Maybe I do," Bucky challenged. Steve's lips split into a wide, honest smile.

"I knew it. Got you all figured out, Barnes." He could feel Steve's breath on his face and it was all so much he just wanted to close his eyes, breathe in Steve until he never took anything else into his lungs again.

"Prove it." Bucky's voice was nearly a whisper, slightly hoarse from the swirl of emotions pulling through his existence. He blinked up under his eyelashes, feeling like some faint hearted dame with his chin tilted up. Steve didn't look nearly so overwhelmed, glowing and happy and his mouth probably tasted like spun sugar, the look on his face was so sweet.

Steve leaned closer and Bucky stopped breathing again. Their noses brushed and tingles went down
Bucky's spine as his eyes slid closed. It felt like they were dancing, they were *flirting* in sweet slow steps, like the icy moon revolving around the brilliant gravitation of the glowing sun.

Bucky had said *prove it* and now he was praying to a god he didn't have faith in that Steve was going to prove it by leaning down, connecting their lips. There was a pause, a single moment of suspension.

And then the side of Steve's nose wasn't touching Bucky's anymore, his warm breath drawing further away. Bucky's eyes opened back up, still taking a second to focus because Steve was still so close. His heart wasn't calming down in his chest any.

"That's what pencil sketches are for." Steve smiled, one side a little deeper than the other, and leaned away. The insertion of space between them, but easy and gentle like Steve had gotten everything he needed outta the moment. His eyes were wickedly bright, happier than Bucky'd seen him in a long time.

And Bucky couldn't be more confused. Steve's hand pat his neck once then disappeared and left Bucky's entire spine cold. Steve wasn't freaking out, but he wasn't kissing Bucky either.

He blinked a few times, processing everything they'd said while his head had been full of fog. Steve said he had Bucky all figured out. Bucky said prove it. Steve responded *that's what pencil sketches are for.* So is that what it meant when Steve drew him? Was he somehow communicating to Bucky how well he knew him?

Fuck, now he was even more confused. He just knew he'd really like for Steve to be kissing him right now and he wasn't. So he'd circle the topic back around, then. And hopefully get more of an answer than a quip about their new height difference.

"That's cheating. I can't draw," Bucky pointed out, maybe pouting a little. Steve snorted and raised an eyebrow in clear disagreement (he always said Bucky was great but Bucky wasn't an idiot. he may be okay with a pencil, but Steve was fucking perfect, Bucky didn't compare), taking a full step backwards. Bucky watched him back away, standing there in confusion. He probably looked like a lost puppy, no idea where to go now that Steve wasn't touching him.

"Can't figure me out either, can you?" Steve teased, turning back to the lantern to finish screwing the top. He was way too messed up right to try to figure out what that was supposed to mean. Bucky backed away and sat back down on the cot, eyeing Steve and waiting, wanting, *praying* that Steve would follow.

"If I could, you know I wouldda been the one to plant a kiss on you by now," Bucky said, which was probably the truest thing he'd ever admitted out loud.

It was all in light of the teasing, the joking, and Steve huffed a laugh at Bucky's comment, walking the lantern back to its stool and setting it down carefully. The light lit the up tent with that soft, golden, distant glow that made Bucky want to hold Steve and kiss him so slow and sweet and lazy that neither of them moved for days.

"That's cheating," Steve echoed Bucky's words from earlier, making Bucky shiver. He made his way back over to Bucky's cot, a one sided smirk on the mouth Bucky couldn't stop thinking about, talking as he walked. "What if I can't kiss?"

"I'm a pretty good teacher," Bucky offered. Steve plopped down on the cot beside him, toeing off his boots and snorting at Bucky's comment.
"You don't have the patience to be a teacher, Buck." Steve gave him an exaggerated skeptical look and Bucky smiled, ducking his head. He couldn't tell if they were flirting anymore or just teasing. Had they ever been flirting? Had they always been flirting, their whole lives?

Bucky leaned back on his elbows, looking up at the ceiling of the tent with an exaggerated huff of air.

"I have more patience than you'll ever know, Stevie. I've put up with your stupid stunts for this long, haven't I?" Steve looked over his shoulder at Bucky with that stern look on his face again.

"And if you don't try to die saving me, maybe you'll stick around a little longer." He pointed out seriously. Bucky sighed and rolled his eyes. Somehow the whole hand ordeal had been brought up again. He still didn't regret it. And he hadn't died either, had he?

Buckt sat back up, knocking his shoulder against Steve's to catch his attention. The broken worry was back in those beautiful blue eyes and he wasn't going to let Steve do this to himself. He was a great person, but he blamed himself for everything. So Bucky had to nudge him, smile soft at him and get his head back on straight.

"You ain't getting rid a' me that easy, Rogers." Steve just looked at him, hopeful and sad all at once. Bucky's smile faded a little at the edges, praying his eyes weren't giving away everything. Then he sucked in a breath, rewording something he'd told Steve a hundred times, hundred different ways. "I'm sticking around 'til the stars fall from the sky."

There was a brief dangerous moment as they sat in silence and looked at each other. This could go one of three ways, really. They could finally close that gap between their mouths, lean forward and seal the final nail of Bucky's coffin because once he kissed Steve he was never going back, not ever.

Or Steve could start crying. He'd done that before, and it always tore Bucky up. He used to pull Steve into his chest and squeeze him tight, but that might be harder with Steve big now. He may have to figure it out though, because Steve's eyes were wet enough to maybe start watering over.

Or there was option number three.

Silence and a promise laying between them, raw emotions and wounds opened up and exposed. Steve blinked a few times, looking at Bucky as he opened his mouth, his words sweet as honey.

"I didn't know you were a poet, Buck."

Bucky grabbed his pillow before he could think, smacking it down over Steve's head. Steve laughed in surprise and fell backwards, flailing to try to catch the pillow before Bucky could hit him with it again. He got a grip on it and flung it across the room, leaving Bucky ammo-less.

The silence fell again for just a moment, then Steve was looking at him with big doe eyes and Bucky glared, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Shut up," Bucky pouted.

Steve laughed again, tossing his head back as the sound echoed in the tent. Bucky managed to sit and pout for at least ten seconds, then his mouth was cracking a smile at the corner too. How could he not, when Steve was so loud and perfect and beautiful, arms clutched over his stomach as he gasped from laughing too hard, giggles still slipping past the gasps.

"I hate you," Bucky tacked on, the smile on his mouth counteracting his declaration so strongly that Steve knew he meant the opposite.
"I know," Steve said breathlessly, finally sitting up straight again and meeting Bucky's gaze. The smile on Steve's face kept wavering at the corners like he wanted to smile even wider.

If Bucky could have any picture of Steve in the world, it'd be of this moment. Of the look on Steve's face right now because it was more beautiful and shiny and happy than Bucky'd ever seen him. And Bucky had been the cause of it. Somehow, Bucky'd been the one to make that smile.

He didn't need a photograph, then. He'd just spend the rest of his life trying to get that same smile outta Steve. That was all he'd ever need.

Right? He shifted a little, looking away as his mind recapped the past twenty minutes. They'd almost kissed. They'd been about to kiss, hadn't they? There had been something there. There had to have been something there. There was no way that'd been just-best-friend material. Right?

Bucky plopped down on his side. He needed sleep. And an entire bar to drown himself in. Well, what else were the Howling Commandos for? He'd go out with them to some pub tomorrow, get a bit of space. Let Steve stop worrying about Bucky and his hands for three seconds.

And maybe, just maybe, when he was drunk, he could figure this all out. Maybe he'd finally have the courage to tell himself what was really happening in his head. How he felt about Steve.

Bucky swallowed in the dark, already feeling his skin crawl with nervousness at the thought. He didn't want to know. But he had to figure this all out, especially after tonight. God, especially after tonight. What in hell had that all been?

You know what, maybe he'd go to the pub tomorrow and get stupid wasted and just forget. That sounded a hell of a lot easier than summoning the courage for something more.

Bucky could never have something more. Could he?
February was another one of those months that had made Steve uneasy for as long as he could remember. There was something about it that always went wrong. The weather was terrible, he was constantly sick with that last bit of cold before the relieving melting slush. The only thing anyone liked about February was St. Valentine's day. And for obvious reasons, Steve didn't like that holiday at all.

Then there was the whole twenty-eight days thing. That bothered him from the moment he'd found out about it. Why only twenty-eight days? It's not like time just stopped, like the world refused to continue on for whatever reason. And why /that/ month? Why not any other month?
At the time Bucky had just snorted at Steve, dramatically declaring that *maybe the world did stop turning that day, Stevie*. Steve had always doubted that. And continued to hate February.

They were currently spending this February in Czechoslovakia, planning an attack on a well equipped Hydra base. And based on their Bucky's smooth sailing rate so far, they could definitely use the time to plan. And instead, the Howling Commandos had decided to hit the local pub. Steve had protested at first - mostly on Bucky's behalf - but everyone wanted to go. Especially Bucky.

He'd been a little more interested in his flask lately than Steve was comfortable with. Ever since their last Hydra mission had turned south with the electric fences, Bucky had been leaning heavily on the little metal container of amber liquid. Hell, he'd been acting different the entire month that had passed since that day.

It'd been a wickedly awful experience; lightning pumping through his veins, rendered useless and incapable for the first time since he'd formed the Commandos. That hadn't been the worst though, the worst part of that day was almost losing Bucky. Twice.

Those sniper hands were nearly healed now and Steve was *so* glad the burns weren't as bad as they'd looked. For Bucky to have healed this quickly, the burned flesh couldn't be *nearly* as detrimental as Steve had seen them in his head. Now there were bright white lines across his palms and fingers, instead of the flayed, smoking, missing flesh that Steve could've sworn he'd seen.

Then again, he'd been electrocuted at the time, probably hadn't been all there. And he didn't have a chance to see the marks again because the next time he'd seen Bucky, the hands had been wrapped up like boxing gloves. That night. The night that everything had changed. That night had felt like so much progress, Steve had been sure that things would start to slide back into place. Their entire lives, Buck had had a deep-seated reluctancy to share any of what he was feeling or, even more importantly, reach out for help. In fact, Steve was pretty sure Bucky had no idea what asking for help meant.

That night though, Bucky had been *honest*. Steve had blown off the whole saving ordeal with an "of course Bucky knows I'd do anything for him," to which Bucky had softly responded *do I?* Steve had never imagined that Bucky wouldn't know that.

This was James Buchanan Barnes. Any man with the honored privilege to serve three minutes by his side would be forever indebted to him by his saving of their life in some way. Anyone so blessed as to befriend him would never find a more loyal and incredible companion. Anyone who's so much as heard of Sergeant Barnes spoke the name with quiet reverence, the utmost respect.

Bucky was everything Steve wasn't. He was a true leader from behind the scenes while Steve waved something shiny in the spotlight. He was such a damn good person that he'd stuck by Steve's side, ignoring all the greener pastures and promises. Back in Brooklyn, he used to walk into a room and light it up so brightly that everyone turned to stare at him like he was some showstopping, stunning dame. Now, when Sergeant James Barnes walked into rooms, rooms reshaped silently to accommodate his quiet, gravitational presence.

He was such a good man that Steve would feel inadequate if it weren't for their shared beliefs. They fought this war for the good of the world and Bucky had so much passion for it that none of his respected reputation amongst the men was deniable.

So yes, of course Steve had been a little surprised when he realized Bucky didn't know that. Even more surprised that he didn't know that Steve would die in a second if it gave the world one minute of longer exposure to the great Bucky Barnes.
He'd been quick to set the record straight too, the best that he could. Grabbing Bucky's arm, giving him no physical room to pull away or protest as Steve gave him the truth, promised Bucky that he felt exactly the same. And he did. He'd die for Bucky a thousand times over. And by the blinking shock and unadulterated relief that crossed Bucky's features, he'd believed Steve and everything.

And then the most incredible thing had happened. Bucky had this irrational fear of ever reaching out for help, regardless of his trust in people. If he was lonely or scared or didn't know how to depend on Steve or let him in, he never had the right words to say it. Which is why it was a hell of a good thing that Steve knew Bucky well enough to figure out what his jilted words really meant.

When Bucky blinked up at him with slightly fearful eyes and asked Steve if he was going to kiss him, Steve had heard it loud and clear. Joking away the physical proximity they had, but showing Steve the trust he was embedded in. Showing Steve that this was okay; that it helped, even. That Bucky needed him here, close and physical, to ground him.

So of course, Steve had joked back, unable to hold in his joy as he realized what Bucky was trusting him with. This was his call for help, the only way he knew how to tell Steve that he needed him. At one point Steve had leaned down, brushing his nose against Bucky's. A silent promise that yes, of course he could be there for Bucky. For always.

So maybe Bucky's methods of asking for mental help and physical proximity were a little strange...Steve could imagine that most people might not quite pull that conclusion away from jokes about kissing when their faces were so close. But that's how Bucky was: he was an extremely sexual being, which Steve had been used to for his entire life. Of course when Bucky joked that was sexual too. He couldn't not, his entire body and mind were this elegant tool carved out for...those things. Bucky had always taken advantage of that and Steve was so so used to it.

And of course, Bucky's joking made the whole thing easier to take. It was a serious conversation laid over with sexual, funny tones and that's basically the epitome of Bucky Barnes. It had been so natural, joking like that, and Steve had honestly thought they'd solved like half of their problems in that single conversation. It'd ended in a pillow fight for Christ's sake, how had that not been the most healing thing they'd done in years?

He'd woken up the next morning absolutely elated that Bucky had asked him for help in his quirky strange little way, Steve's mouth already breaking out into an overjoyed smile the moment he saw his best friend. Bucky had looked briefly confused, then blinked a few times and looked away.

It'd only gotten worse from there.

Steve was heartbroken about it. They'd talked (in so many words) about how Steve could help Bucky now, how Bucky was going to lean on him more and take comfort in their physical friendship and what the hell had gone wrong between that conversation and the next morning? Because Bucky was doing the exact opposite. He was avoiding Steve and that cut him down deep.

Bucky had trusted him, briefly, and somehow Steve had mucked it all up. His most important job was to take care of Bucky and he'd failed and he had no idea why. Just when Steve was so sure they'd found the solution, it felt like they'd ignited a hundred more problems instead.

Then the canteen full of whiskey started to make nightly appearances. Then daily appearances. And Steve had spent the past month since that night worried sick, trying to figure out how to reel Bucky back into trusting him and what the hell he'd done wrong that night to ruin the whole thing in the first place.

They were supposed to be better and okay by now, but they weren't. It was eating Steve up.
The Commandos had been busy all month, so that had at least helped a little. There were a few smaller towns that they'd been asked to hit, then at least a week of planning and prep for the next big base. That's the part the films left out: the days on end spent searching for blueprints to the building, intel on the weaponry made there so they could go in prepared. Time schedules, attack plans, escape routes. The best places to set up camp, the amount of ammunition they would need.

So yeah, they were busy, but it had been an entire month of Bucky avoiding him more and more and Steve was 100% done with that. He had to do something. He wasn't going to lose Bucky to whatever the hell was going on his head.

He'd spent the past few days trying to figure out what to say without pissing Buck off, when to say it. Turns out the opportunity to take action came a lot sooner than Steve was planning.

You don't have to come, Captain, they'd all told him. Even Bucky's voice was mingled in with the other men making sure Steve didn't feel obligated to go. But Steve had insisted on coming to the pub with them because there was no way in hell he'd be gone when Bucky was at risk.

Buck had had a panic attack at the last pub they went to and Steve fully intended to be the support system if it happened again. Besides, they'd needed at least one sober man amongst them so the drunken Commandos didn't make bad decisions or unfixable mistakes.

Which was how Steve ended up with his chin propped boredly on his hand, elbow on the sticky surface of a bar table as his men laughed widely and loudly around him.

They were currently all singing an off key rendition of Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition, Bucky's familiar sound blending in with Dugan's rich tones, Morita's accent. Falsworth swayed a little in his chair, bumping his shoulder against Steve's. Steve smiled a little tightly and scooted his chair a little closer to Jones's.

He'd never sat between two of his men before and frankly Steve felt a little awkward, a little too big and muscular and strange to be amongst these people. It was just that all this time, Steve was used to the comfort of being at Bucky's side. Bucky was the bridge that connected Steve to the rest of the Commandos, the stitches that held them together, the only thing they all had in common. But tonight Bucky wasn't at his side and Steve felt detached from the rest of them. Not unwelcome, of course. Just an outsider.

Around campfires, Bucky's shoulder used to be pressed to his for warmth. Walking as a unit, Bucky was always at Steve's side, their footsteps falling in step with each other automatically. But over the course of the past awful month, Bucky was further and further from Steve's side.

The last time they'd been in a pub, he and Buck had decided to sit together in the back room. Just the two of them, as always. They never got enough time with just the two of them. When Peggy had come to tell Steve about a meeting he had the next morning, she'd had to walk through the entire bar of men to find them. Steve and Bucky just...used to sneak off together like that.

He wasn't sure what he was expecting when they came into the pub today, but it wasn't for Bucky to sit down in the empty chair between Dugan and Morita that was supposed to be Falsworth's. Bucky played it off as some casual, normal thing like he hadn't just disrupted the entire flow of the Commandos. When Falsworth got to the table he furrowed his eyebrows in confusion, then shrugged and plopped down next to Steve. In Bucky's spot. So now they were sitting forever away from each other and Steve wasn't exactly pouting, he was just. Annoyed.

Of course it was for personal reasons of comfort, but there was the whole safety thing about having Bucky so far away. If Bucky started to slip back into feeling like he was being drugged, Steve was
too far away for him to reach out to. And Steve seriously doubted that Bucky would reach out to Dum Dum Dugan for help.

So that's where they were. Steve was pouting and worried and Bucky was singing too loudly and too far away and drinking about eight times more than he should be. He was going to be wasted and Steve could not figure out what was eating Bucky enough to make him turn to the risk of losing himself like that.

Praise the Lord and swing into position
Bucky's face was lit up bright, his eyes twinkling as he tilted his head comically and sang the words with exaggerated conviction,
Get aboard to be a politician
lifting his whiskey to the rest of them in a sloppy toast before he tipped his head back and downed the rest of his glass in one go,
Praise the lord we're all between Perdition
squeezing his eyes shut tight from the burn before breathing out a heavy breath
And the deep blue sea

Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition
and slamming his glass back down on the table. Dugan clapped him on the back,
Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition
laughing and saying something about "Sarge sure can take his whiskey!"
Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition
Steve refrained from burying his head in his hands.
And we'll all stay free!

Bucky's eyes were bright and his mouth was loose and shiny, tongue constantly wetting his lips as he looked around the table of men, his face happier and more relaxed than Steve had seen since January. His movements were sloppy, he blinked too much, and his limbs started to get in the way of his own body. Wow, he was incredibly, seriously, drunk. The other men were laughing their asses off at the sight of seeing their serious Sergeant fumbling and smiling too wide.

Steve started to sketch the image out in his head, the dull lights of the pub reflecting off their faces as everybody turned their eager eyes on Bucky, mesmerized by the glowing aura and wide smile. It could be something of a painting, the same look of respect and amazement on all of the Howling Commando's faces as they soaked in every word the too-excited Bucky said. He couldn't not draw this when he got back to base.

For a brief moment, Steve wondered if this was what Bucky had been like before Zola's table. Or had the war squashed this out before the torture could? When had that light started to fade to the solemn Bucky that sniped enemy soldiers from a mile away?

Was it in basic training? When he'd proved to be one of the best shots anyone had ever seen, promoted to an officer before he even shipped out? Was it the first time he'd taken another man's life away with a bullet between the eyes? Was it down in the trenches, waking up at night at the slightest sound, nerves and adrenaline dangerously high for weeks on end? Or had he somehow maintained his bright joy through all of that, been the beacon of light for the other soldiers? Had Zola been the one to take this?

Steve didn't know, and he didn't know how to ask either. He just stared, eyes drifting over Bucky's face as he explained something enthusiastically to Gabe, his hand gestures big enough to almost hit Jim every few words.

If someone were to take a photograph of this moment, would the look on Steve's face match the rest
of his teammates? Or would his reveal something more? He had a feeling he knew the answer to that already.

Normally he'd be looking down at the table, maybe at a sketchbook if he'd thought to bring one. But tonight Bucky was talking and vibrant and everyone was looking at him, so Steve had the excuse to too. Hell, it'd probably look weird if he didn't. So he kept his eyes floating over Bucky's face, over curves and lines and shadows he'd drawn more than anything else in his life. He was million miles away and Steve had been cut off from that light.

Even his stories somehow managed to leave out Steve's name. Or his presence at all, actually. He hadn't even known that was possible. Every single one of Steve's stories from Brooklyn that was worth telling started with the words "Bucky and I."

But Bucky had an entire night full of stories that had nothing to do with Steve. Crazy happenings at the docks, run ins at all his other jobs. Stories of girls, of red lipstick and curls and dirty kisses in alleys. Bar fights and drinking competitions with his buddies from the docks. Stories from basic training, stories from the first few months at war before the 107th was captured. An entire lifetime of stories. And in all of them, Steve had been home. Drawing, or sleeping, or helping out the neighbors with their laundry for a tiny bit of cash.

Bucky had chapters and chapters in the book of his life sans Steve, but Steve didn't have a single page in his own that didn't have Bucky's name on it, at least in thought.

He'd never realized...Bucky had access to any piece of Steve he could ever want and on the contrary, Steve was missing so much of Bucky. He hadn't been there, didn't know, didn't own all of those little pieces of Bucky. He was missing so much.

And now he'd lost another month with Bucky too. Bucky had been right there and Steve hadn't reached out, hadn't dragged Bucky back to him, hadn't nuzzled down behind Bucky as they slept on the cold ground. And all for what? Because Steve had thought Bucky would come to him? Buck gives him one night - just one - of trust and asking for help and suddenly Steve assumes that Bucky is going to come waltz his way to Steve's side the way he always had?

Times had changed and of course it wasn't like that anymore. Bucky had been hurt; he wasn't going to just show up and throw his arm around Steve's neck the way he used to. It was Steve's turn to do that for him.

He'd been so caught up on making sure that nothing changed between them due to the serum that he'd missed the entire point. Bucky had changed too, maybe more than Steve did, because Bucky had changed on the inside. It's like a gift on Christmas morning. You can change the size of the box and the wrapping paper but it doesn't change what you'll find inside. But if you keep the same box as before and swap the gift inside for something else entirely...it's not even the same present anymore.

Bucky had been needing Steve this whole time and wow, Steve had been a moron not to see that. And it wasn't like Bucky Barnes was going to try to explain to Captain America that he'd been changed more than the serum ever could have done. Especially since Bucky probably felt guilty for it or something ridiculous like that, knowing him.

When Bucky stood up to go grab the next round, he stumbled slightly and all the boys laughed, Bucky included. Then Steve stood up too, crossing around the table with a smile on his face (for once, thank god) and threw his arm around Bucky's shoulders.

Those icy turquoise blues landed on Steve, blinking and looking more sober than they were just due to the surprise.
"You always were a clumsy drunk," Steve smiled, his eyes trying to tell Bucky everything he'd realized, a new kind of promise in his eyes.

"A' least I don' hurl ova everythin' like you do," Bucky slurred back, sounding deeply Brooklyn. It was the best thing Steve heard all night. He threw back his head and laughed, tugging Bucky along with him towards the counter. The entire walk over, Bucky leaned warm and tight against Steve's side, his head all but resting on Steve's shoulder.

"Two pitchers of rum and two pitchers of whiskey, please." The bartender smiled and shook his head like they were crazy, but moved to the other wall to get new bottles out anyways.

"Hey, you alright?" Steve asked, leaning against the counter. Bucky braced himself against it too, staring at the wood between the hands he curled around the edge.

"Yeah, m'fine. I'll b'in tip-top shape t'morrow t'get back b'hind th' sniper rifle, no need ta worry." Bucky was looking anywhere but Steve, obviously uncomfortable. Which wasn't at all the intention, so Steve wrapped a gentle hand over an alcohol-loosened arm, forcing those icy blue eyes on him.

"That's not what I meant. I wasn't asking if a soldier was ready for battle, I wanna know if my best friend is okay." Steve's words made Bucky blink in surprise, eyes wide on Steve's before they cut down - flummoxed and flushed - to the bar. Steve watched the sudden redness and confusion filter into Bucky's skin and with a jolt, another idea lit up in his head. "Wait, is that why you've been avoiding me?"

"I h'vn't been avoidin' you."

"Don't even start with that."

"Then fine. No. S'not..." Bucky trailed off, expression pinched. "T'was stupid, really...don't matt'r much in th' first place. Just...all catchin' up to me, guess."

Steve scanned Bucky's features, deciding whether or not to push. Based on the stubbornness, probably not. "You know you can tell me anything, right Buck?"

"Act'ully I can't," Bucky said flatly as he straightened back upright, the statement made even more final as the bartender smacked all four pitchers down on the bar.

Steve was too taken aback to respond instantly, picking up two pitchers in one hand and swinging his arm back casually over Bucky's shoulders as Buck picked up the other two. He stiffened a little at the contact, so Steve kept his voice as light as possible when he finally responded to Bucky's comment.

"Well I can listen to anything, then. Alright?" Chilled silver eyes turned to look at him again, rich and more like caramel in the lighting, unguarded surprise in those eyes. Bucky hadn't been expecting that, and now he looked a little overwhelmed. Well, it wasn't the most eloquent thing Steve had ever said, but it still made the point loud and clear.

Bucky didn't have to talk if he didn't want to, but if he did? Steve would listen to anything and everything.

Steve shot the bartender a thanks over his shoulder before he walked Bucky back to the table, setting the next round down.

"Alright, Falsworth, get up. You're in Bucky's spot and he's nearing the point of fallin' over anytime soon. Unless one of you want to put the life of our Sergeant in your drunken hands, I recommend"
opening up the seat next to me."

Bucky shoved at his collarbone, apparently offended by the implication that he couldn't handle himself when he was drunk. But there was a ghost of a smile, maybe even appreciation in Bucky’s eyes. He was totally a mess when he was drunk and he knew it. All wide eyes and big mouth and wet lips and excited noises and funny faces and lots of tripping over himself. Steve was more than willing to be the one to catch him.

They all sat back down and before anyone could say so much as another word, Bucky was starting in on his next story, words and arms as extravagant and exaggerated as ever.

This time, his story was about Steve.

~*~*~*~

A few hours later, there was a staggering, happy, very tactile Bucky draped over Steve's side as they made their way back to the little inn they were shacked up in. Czechoslovakia was fairly pretty, with its white stone wall buildings and red orange stucco roofs. Everything was close together and little and condensed on the sides of hills. Tiny inns and closed corridors and softly lit everything.

"Stevie, I swear," Bucky slurred as Steve manhandled him through the doorway of his room. He was ridiculous pliant when he was moved around, enough that something about the way he was acting kept nagging in the back of Steve's head. Something was off, but he couldn't place what it was.
"You're jus' about th' most confusion guy I know."

"How's that, Buck?" Steve asked, pushing Bucky down onto his bed and wishing for a moment that he wouldn't comply so easily. It was a little scary, how Bucky didn't seem to mind being pushed around anymore. It was nothing like how he'd been in Brooklyn. Back then, he didn't even let Steve help him around when he was drunk, always slurring that he could do it himself.

The only really comforting thing was that as pliant as he was, Bucky was needy. That was an awful thing to think and Steve kind of hated himself for it, but at least he could help this way. At least Bucky had two handfuls of Steve's jacket like he couldn't dream of ever letting him go.

"One momen' you back 'way, then you're here an' tryin' ta save me all sweet and pretty." Bucky blinked at him with big beautiful eyes and Steve looked up from where he'd been trying to disentangle Bucky's hands from his jacket.

"Aww, Buck, you think I'm pretty? I'm so honored, thanks. It's always been my dream, to finally get this tall strong body and be called pretty. Instead of, you know. Handsome. Awesome. Strong. Bigger than you."

"Well you prolly are bigger 'an me, now," Bucky pondered, looking off over Steve's shoulder with a contemplative line between his eyebrows. It took Steve a second to catch on to what Bucky was talking about.

"Bucky!" Steve scolded, shoving Bucky's chest so he fell back onto the bed. "Do you ever stop thinking about...that sort of thing? Ever?"

Bucky rolled over on his side, curling his legs up as he looked up at Steve from under the pieces of disheveled hair that had drifted onto his forehead. His lips were parted, open cupid's bows with the most unique slope Steve had ever seen.

"No," he answered simply, reaching up a hand to make grabby motions at Steve. Steve snorted and shook his head.
"You need to sleep this off, Buck. I'll bring water for you in the morning alright? I'll be in my room if you need me." The inn they were in was entirely empty due to the war. The manager was actually the bartender down at the pub, said that they could take however many rooms they wanted. So they'd each gotten their own to spread out in for once, and Steve's was down the hall, the first door by the stairs. Bucky's was at the other end, both of them placed in corner rooms so they could be the closest to the exits, should the need to protect the men arise.

"C'mon, Stevie. Don' leeeave me here." Bucky made a pouty face, the indent in his chin deepening as he frowned. Steve did the very best he could to maintain his poker face and keep from laughing at the sight.

"You need to sleep, okay? You know where to find me if you need me." Steve leaned down and brushed the mess of hair off of Bucky's forehead. Bucky mumbled something that Steve couldn't make out, then his eyes slipped closed. Good.

He checked one more time at the door to make sure Bucky was asleep, then Steve shut it softly behind him and headed down the hall to his own room. The rest of the men weren't in their rooms yet, they'd stayed for a few more rounds at the pub. Bucky had been about to drop from sleepiness though, so Steve had taken him back to the inn two buildings down.

Steve sighed as he closed the door to his own room, taking in the identical setup of the room to Bucky's. He plopped down on the bed, sure to kick his boots off first so he didn't get even more dirt everywhere than he already had. The bed was hard - probably wood covered in a few blankets. All the mattresses had been sent off in the war effort or cut to pieces to use for blankets. Warmth was a hell of a lot more important than cushion or comfort lately.

He'd literally barely laid down when there was a knock on his door. Steve sighed, swinging his legs back over the side and walking on tiptoe over to the door, in his socks and unsure of the sanitariness of the floor. It was probably Dugan or Jones, checking in with Steve to tell him they were all back to the inn now.

Steve swung open the door and was instantly pushed aside by Bucky shouldering his way into the room. Steve threw up his hands and sighed, closing the door behind him so the draft didn't get in.

"Bucky, I told you--"

"Couldn' sleep." Bucky interrupted, sitting down on Steve's bed and placing his boots next to Steve's. Steve ran a tired hand down his face, looking at the man who was now curled up on his bed. Sometimes Bucky Barnes was the most incredible and terrifying Sergeant in the US Army and other times he was a four year old.

"Well now I can't sleep, because you're in my bed. Besides, it's been three minutes. Nobody falls asleep inside of three minutes." Steve raised his eyebrows at Bucky but Bucky didn't budge.

"You do," he responded, shivering slightly. Okay, he had to be faking that. He was trying to get Steve to be sympathetic or something so he would relent and let Bucky sleep in here. Which didn't make sense in the first place, because why would Bucky want to share a bed when they finally had one for each of them?

Unless...unless this was about the flashbacks thing. If Bucky was scared to fall asleep alone when he was this drunk, in case the nightmares came. Maybe this annoying shit was Bucky's way of reaching out for Steve's help. He'd done weirder things. And Steve had promised himself that he'd be here for Bucky now...
"Okay. Fine. You can stay." He absolutely did not feel a rush of joy (Bucky was turning to him for help) as he walked over to the other side of the bed, lying down with his back pressed to Bucky's. As ridiculous as it was how often they did this, it was admittably nice and familiar to have Bucky's warmth and presence safe behind Steve. And besides, it had been weeks since he'd slept pressed this closely to his best friend.

Because apparently tonight was the night of Bucky's immaculate timing, just as Steve's eyes were slipping shut into comfortable sleep, Bucky flipped over. Steve's eyes shot back open as Bucky pressed up against his back and snaked his arms around Steve's waist, knees pressed up against the back of Steve's, something warm and wet brushing the bare skin on the back of Steve's neck.

Steve froze, completely still at the touch. It was one thing to let Bucky sleep in his bed when their backs were pressed together for warmth and solace. It was an entirely different ballgame to let his - very drunk - best friend cradle them together like lovers, pressed too tightly and too intimately.

The last time they'd slept like this, it had been for a reason. Just the two of them, in the woods and in no risk of people walking in and thinking the wrong thing, and Bucky had been freezing his ass off. And sober. Steve had pulled Bucky into his arms that night so that Bucky didn't freeze to death in December in France. It had been a tactical move, not a personal one.

But now, with the hot puff of Bucky's breath on the back of his neck, surrounded by the soft, wet touch of his lips resting on Steve's skin...this wasn't tactical anymore. They'd wake up in the morning and Bucky would be hungover and pissed because he'd been out of his mind the night before and tried to hold Steve in his arms like a dame and Steve hadn't stopped him. Steve couldn't do that to Bucky, not when he wasn't even in his right mind. If it was just the two of them, maybe. Maybe Steve would let it slide. Okay, fine, he'd let Bucky hold him because they were best friends, they were closer than most people could understand without confusing...things. But they weren't alone, it wasn't just the two of them, and Steve had to do something about it.

"Buck," Steve whispered into the darkness. A low hum vibrated against the back of his neck in response and Steve squeezed his eyes shut, fighting the chills that ran down his spine at the feeling, shoving that down as deep as it could go. "C'mon man, you can't koala me. It's not that cold, it's gonna be March in two days."

Warm lips made another sound into Steve's skin. Steve growled in frustration. Bucky clearly wasn't going to just move by getting talked out of it. Making a split second decision, Steve rolled in the circle of Bucky's arms, swift enough that he didn't catch on until they were laying face to face, Bucky's hands still clasped around Steve's middle, over his lower back now.

Okay, this would be crossing about three hundreds lines of their friendship vs Captain America thing (Bucky was only Sergeant Barnes on the battle field and in front of other soldiers, never alone. Steve would never boss Bucky around when it was just the two of them), but Bucky was drunk and half crazy and obviously cold and he wasn't going to listen to anything but Steve's order-giving voice right now. Steve hated to do this, but he didn't have a lot of other options.

"We have a mission to plan tomorrow and I need you at your best which means you need to get some legitimate rest. So let go and roll over, soldier." Steve ordered, the tingling feeling in his gut waiting for a response with something along the lines of yes sir, Captain Rogers. They'd laugh at this tomorrow, right? Or sometime next week? Eventually?

Bucky blinked at him a few times, their faces so close that he could physically taste the whiskey on Bucky's breath. Then the arms let go and Bucky rolled over, his back to Steve as he went quiet.
Steve let out a breath of relief, moving to roll back over himself. Then another thought echoed through his mind at the stillness of Bucky’s body. The terror on Bucky’s face when Steve had first found him. Scared, disoriented. Alone. Ordered.

Okay, so that may have been a shitty thing to do when Bucky was disoriented by all the alcohol. But it was still better than waking up in the position they'd been in; Steve could atone to that. He couldn't just abandon Bucky though, not if he might have been reaching out to Steve in his weird, tactile way. Steve groaned, looking up at the ceiling. Things would be a hell of a lot easier if they didn't have to keep up appearances so people wouldn't talk.

Steve didn't even want to know what people might think. What they might say. What Colonel Phillips and Peggy and the Commandos might think.

But it was still Bucky.

Steve rolled over to face the curled up body, sure to keep at least six inches between Bucky's back and his own chest. Okay, so they couldn't exactly cradle, but they could still touch. Especially if it wasn't obvious.

The hand that was closest to the blankets slid forward, pushing gently under Bucky's ribs. The touch was met with a quick jump of surprise, then the tense muscles in the shoulders relaxed as Steve bent his elbow up, hand sliding over the top of Bucky's clothes to rest between his heart and his left arm, where his left shoulder met the rest of his body. Once Steve's hand was pressed to the place - out of sight to anyone who walked in, due to the way Bucky's body was angled - he made sure to scoot back as far as his bent elbow would allow. He had the entire length of his upper arm to put space between them and Steve felt a little bit like a robot saying hello, his arm making an extended L from his body.

It'd be a lot nicer to hold Bucky's body to his properly, but again. It wasn't safe. Even this could mean that Steve would wake up to Bucky's not-so-thankful punch. But it was some sort of middle ground, cradling Bucky's torso with one arm, wrapping it there for support and presence. Even if the rest of them wasn't touching, it was nice.

Bucky must have thought so too, because he was relaxed again within seconds. With a small, almost hesitant gesture, his right hand curled up over Steve's, fingers overlapping. Their forearms over lapped too, Bucky's right arm over Steve's curved up left. It wasn't much, but it was enough. And warmer, somehow, even though it was just Steve's arm. The peacefulness of it all was incredible, but not near as great as the sense of security was.

They both were asleep within minutes. As soundly as two soldiers in the middle of a war could be. The Commandos raised their eyebrows at Sarge's open bedroom door and Cap's closed one, but nobody said anything. They were close, and Bucky had been pretty drunk. Which meant that if they mentioned anything about it tomorrow, Bucky would be pretty hungover. And pissed. So they kept their mouths shut.

In a war like this one, everyone was safer if they just kept quiet.

~*_~*_~*_~*_~*

The next few days were a blur of planning and prepping and fighting, taking down the Hydra base in Czechoslovakia and then they were hauling ass across the border into Austria. They reached the Danube River by March 8th and caught a ship there so they could cut up through the country, riding the German border all the way to Belgium. From that point they'd get as far north as possible, look into London or the Danish Straits as the next attack.
But in the meantime, the Howling Commandos were stuck on a boat - thankfully, a fairly large boat - for several days. One of which happened to be a pretty damn important day.

They'd spent more than twenty four hours on the ship by the time the sun rose on March 10th, so they were all pretty familiar with the way things went. Morita kept threatening to get sea sick, Dernier loved the thing, Jones and Falsworth and Dugan were all pretty content just to play cards on the deck. But there was literally nothing they could do until they got off the boat tomorrow evening, so technically it was supposed to be a day to catch up on their rest.

Instead, Steve had a plan. Or two. After all, March 10th was a very important day.

Bucky was the type to rise pretty early, so Steve actually had to set up the plans the night before. Then sneak out of the room they were sharing at like four am just to make sure that they'd get to Bucky before he woke up on his own.

When Steve came knocking on everyone's doors and rounded everyone up on deck, Jacques was grumbling something in French that Gabe muttered an agreement to. Steve didn't have to know French to tell they were complaining about how the sun was still half an hour away from rising, but he wasn't taking any risks on spoiling this because they wanted their beauty sleep. They'd woken up earlier in a hell of a lot worse conditions for a hell of a lot less. They were only complaining because technically, this wasn't a mission. Technically, they were all supposed to be sleeping in.

They could sleep later.

The only person who didn't seem grumpy about being up this early was Morita, who Steve nodded gratefully to. It was probably just because he was too serious and quiet to complain, but still. Dugan rolled his eyes, whispering a complaint about how they might as well damn do this already if they woke up so goddamn early. So Steve had waved them all down to the little cabin room (well, the "cabins" were actually just bunk beds built into a wall with doors over them, basically) that Bucky was still sleeping in, everybody slowly losing their grumpiness as they looked at the door in anticipation.

Steve put his finger to his lips and they all stopped, looking at least slightly excited that they got to make someone even more miserable than they were. It wasn't that early, they just liked complaining. It'd be totally worth the look on Bucky's face anyways.

With a silent turn of the knob, Steve swung the door open wide, letting the cold wind rush into the little bunk the same time their united shouts did.

"HAPPY BIRRTHHDAAYY TO YOOOUUU!! HAPPY BIRR--" Bucky shouted in surprise, jumping half a foot off the bed before quickly drawing his gun out from under his pillow and aiming it at them, eyes wide and hair sticking in eighteen different directions.

Dugan threw his head back and bellowed, Dernier crumpled to the ground with tears in his eyes, Jones had his hands on his knees and his shoulders shaking, Morita was snorting ungracefully into his hand and Falsworth was attempting to keep singing the rest of the birthday song with the rest of the Commandos laughing too hard to join in.

Except for Steve, who had inched forward cautiously and removed the pistol from Bucky's hand. Bucky blinked a few times, like he'd forgotten he'd drawn it. Then he turned his eyes to the rest of the boys, who were still laughing. And at the look on Bucky's face, laughing harder.

"You're all going to hell." Bucky said flatly. Dugan managed a breathy already there in between laughs and Bucky made a half-assed touché face in response. Steve looked on, smiling, as the other
boys at least managed to settle down into giggles instead of barking laughs. He hadn't busted up the way everyone else did because he'd seen Bucky that way a hundred times; besides, he never could be too careful with what his face gave away. It wasn't that Bucky's surprise ever stopped being wonderful, it was just that Steve didn't find it so much amusing as he did adorable.

Bucky rubbed a hand down his face, attempting to wake up as he blinked around at everyone. He caught Dernier's point at his hair and resounding snicker, then he was trying to smooth it down with flat, frantic palms. Everyone kept laughing. Bucky finally threw up his hands in frustration.

“Ugh. Who the hell told you it was my birthday?” Bucky accused, glaring at everyone in general. All eyes went to Steve.

Steve quickly emptied the bullets from Bucky's gun he was still holding. Bucky glared double what he had been before, pointing at Steve and dropping his voice lower. Probably for intimidation, although that's not exactly what came across.

“I'm getting you back for this. Watch your back Rogers.” Steve opened his mouth to protest but didn't get the chance before Falsworth interrupted, looking around and grinning at everyone, finally having finished his quiet rendition of the rest of the song.

“You're right Cap, that was entirely worth it.”

“Brilliant plan.” Morita agreed. Bucky finally got off his bed, tackling his combat boots onto his feet.

“Yeah, super brilliant. You guys are such amazing singers I'm shocked you haven't formed a barbershop quartet yet.” Bucky's voice was loaded with dry sarcasm and then everybody was peeling into laughter again. Steve tossed Bucky his gun back - sans bullets - and Bucky made a face but tucked it in his belt.

"Okay, so birthday plans-" Steve started.

"You made plans??"

"You're turning 26! Of course I made plans!"

"Two years older than you, Stevie," Bucky retorted. Steve rolled his eyes and the Commandos all got that funny wide-eyed look they had every time Bucky called their Brave Strict Captain America something as silly and childish as Stevie. None of the rest of them would ever dare to call him that.

"How many times, Bucky? You're not two years older than me, just a year, three months, and twenty five days. I'll catch up again in July, goodness. Do we have to have this conversation every year?"

"Yes," Bucky grinned, making faces at everybody as he passed to walk up the stairs to the deck. "So, what are the plans for my birthday? If it doesn't include cake or drinks you're officially off party-planning crew, Rogers."

~*~

There wasn't cake, but there were plenty of drinks. And cards. Actually, quite a few hours worth of poker games. Then Dernier taught everybody a new card game through Jones's translations and they played that until the sun was high in the sky, beating down on them from overhead.

They all stretched out the best they could on the deck, soaking up the feeble promise of warmth from the sun. If ten degrees above zero could be considered warm in any sense of the word. The boat wasn't exactly big enough to hold seven sprawled out men on deck, so they were all close together
enough to share bits of body heat where arms and feet touched.

Everyone was pretty content just to lie there in the quiet for a while. After a bit though, Steve blinked up at the blue sky drifting by overhead and spoke up.

"How bout you tell us a story, Tim? One of the good ones." He shielded his eyes from the sun as he looked over to where Dugan was laying. He looked contemplative for a moment, one arm under his head and his hat on his chest.

"How bout you tell us one, Cap? You never tell stories." Dugan nudged Morita who nudged Steve with his foot.

"Yeah, you should tell us a story, Captain. You don't gotta drink with us, but you can't get outta story telling." Falsworth added.

"Les histoires?" Dernier asked Jones. Gabe nodded, reaching up his hand to smack the side of Steve's boot. Then he reached over and poked Bucky's shoe too.

"Cmon Sarge. Make him tell a story. It's your birthday, he'll do whatever you ask."

"I doubt that," Bucky responded, still looking up at the sky. Steve glanced over at him, resisting the urge to reach out his hand and bump it against the back of Buck's. It would only be another few inches, but Steve refrained anyways.

"Oo, tell us one about Barnes, Cap! It's his birthday after all." Gabe nudged Steve again. Steve sighed, scooting a bit closer to Bucky so he would stop getting nudged and poked.

"Okay, fine." Lazy cheers erupted and died down just as quickly. "I've got lots of stories about Buck."

"All your good stories are about me," Bucky pointed out. And, damn him, Steve couldn't refute that. Of course they were. Steve made a face up at the blue sky in response.

"Definitely an embarrassing one, then. So for Bucky's birthday a while back, I think it was in '39? Bucky comes stumbling home that day at noon, drunk as an ox, staggering all over the place. His face was busted up, lip broken, bleedin all over everything. You know the first thing he says to me?"

"Oh lord almighty not this story," Bucky groaned in complaint.

"Hey! It's a good story!"

"No it's not. And I'm a better story teller anyways. See, how it actually went is that early that day, Steve had gone out to the docks I was working at to bring me something for my birthday. The thing is, this guy named Carter was workin that day and he didn't take to well to tiny Stevie and - man you shoulda seen the look on his face..."

~*~

Like all vacation days, hours slipped by faster and faster. Cards and stories and drinks and laughter and too soon, the sun was getting ready to sink in the sky. The bright had faded to a sunset glow, reflecting off the water like something of a fairytale. They were all sitting on the benches by the hull, jackets wrapped tight against the freezing spray of the water. It was worth it though, even as their hair was wiping in the wind, skin burning from the bitter cold. The whole scene was too beautiful to miss, too beautiful to turn away from.
Dernier was humming something under his breath, just a quiet backtrack to the scene. Everyone had been quiet for some time now, watching the sun sink lower and lower in the sky. For lack of anything better to do, Steve hummed along a few harmonies to Dernier's soft sounds.

"You know, Buck, you mentioned somethin' earlier about a barbershop quartet. I think we'd make a pretty fine one." Steve elbowed Bucky, tipping him sideways slightly. Bucky ducked his head and curved his lips up a little, contemplating the idea as the rubbed the fingers of his gloves together.

"Yeah, brilliant plan, Stevie. After the war, all of us stickin around to sing." He laughed, the sound visualized like dragon smoke in the air against the cold.

"We could still go by the Howling Commandos. It might lower expectations if we keep 'howling' in the name," Dugan offered. That made a few of the boys crack up, leaning back against the sides of the boat as they all pictured it.

"Actually, keeping the name might encourage high expectations," Morita pointed out.

"I can see the papers now...The Howling Commandos: Captain America's famous war regiment and Professional Barbershop Quartet," Jones announced in his radio commentator voice. A few more laughs went around the boat, eyes flicking between the beautiful sunset and each other.

"It's not actually a quartet if there's more than four people," Bucky commented, cocking his head with one of his signature side smirks.

"Alright, Barnes, it's a septet." Falsworth crossed his arms, raising his eyebrows at Bucky. "I think birthday boy doesn't think we have it in us."

Steve tipped his head back and laughed. It had been a joking side comment, but the boys seemed to at least like the idea. Dernier turned to Jones, leaning over Morita.

"J'ai un harmonica? Je le peux récupérer." Dernier offered. Jones snorted but waved him on with his hand. The Commandos watched curiously as Dernier opened up his backpack. He rummaged around for a moment before pulling out a silver harmonica. He looked to Jones, grinning. "Joue un air?"

"Oui! Nous chanterons," Jones responded. Dernier grinned and pulled the harmonica up to his mouth. Jones turned to the rest of them. "Dernier's gonna play a tune and we're all going to sing for Sargeant Barnes."

Bucky groaned and Falsworth pushed his shoulder, tipping Bucky into Steve. Steve caught his shoulder and put Bucky back upright.

"Alrighty, what are we singing?"

"You know Hot Time in Berlin, Dernier?" Dugan asked, looking around at the rest of the eager faces. Everyone but Bucky nodded in agreement and Dernier blew a warm up scale.

"D'accord." The first few notes of the melody started up on the steely harmonica sound, cutting in the cold March air and floating on the wind. Dugan started tapping his foot along, bobbing his head as Jones tapped his fingers on the bench.

Steve leaned over to Bucky's ear, whispering encouragement.

"C'mon, you used to love to sing while I drew. Don't be shy now, Buck." He leaned back away with a grin and Bucky muttered something in Steve's direction, but he was fighting a smile.
Dugan clapped a hand on Jones' back as they leaned together and both began singing. "There'll be a hot time in the town of Berlin." Morita and Falsworth joined in, voices comically high as they sang the backup vocals, "When the Yanks go marching innnn."

The Commandos all pointed to Jones to take the solo, a grin breaking out on his face as his deeper voice echoed out with as much brightness as his smile. "I want to be there boy, spread some joy, when they take old Berlin!"

Steve was still making faces at Bucky, trying to get him to sing, when Dugan got up out of his seat, fighting the wind to come up behind the two of them. Bucky was starting to cave, shaking his head and smiling now. The rest of them all came in with the next verse, untrained voices meshing together into something resembling singing.

"There'll be a hot time in the town of Berlin!" Dugan leaned in close with his head between Steve and Bucky's, one arm over both of their shoulders as he squeezed them together, singing the next part in his loud, overbearing baritone. "When the Brooklyn boys beginnnnn!

Steve tilted his head towards Bucky's, singing exaggeratedly loud, "To take the joint apart, and tear it down, when they take old Berlin!"

Bucky rolled his eyes but finally joined in with the rest of them, his voice and smile blending to match everyone else's.

"We're going to start a row, show 'em how. We paint the town back in Kokomo!" Dugan made his way back to his seat, throwing his arms over Jones's and Falsworth's shoulders. Jones followed suit, pulling Morita and Dugan closer. Dernier kept up the harmonica while the rest of them banded together, singing loudly into the cold wind with everyone's arms over linked over each other's shoulders.

"We're gonna take a hike through Hitler's Reich, change the heil to whatcha-know-Joe...There'll be a hot time in the town of Berlin. When the yanks go marching iinnn." Morita took the next solo, everyone else fading to humming in the background. "How you gonna keep 'em happy down on the farm, after they take Berlin?"

Bucky suddenly shot out of his seat, both hands gripping the edge of the boat, his hair whipping around like crazy as he shouted face first into the wind, "POOR ADOLF!"

Dugan doubled over with laughter and Dernier choked on the breath he was about to put into the harmonica, making Morita start laughing harder as he fell off the seat, which made Falsworth start gasping for air and tear up as Jones tried to fumble to catch Morita and fell himself.

Steve tossed his head back again and laughed, loud and happy and never higher in a war like this one. Bucky's eyes were on Steve when he wiped tears from them and looked back over his comrades, the wide mouth cocked in a Brooklyn-worthy grin. Steve may be the one with all of the ideas, but Bucky was what gave them life.

He lit up all of Steve's plans, was that vital second piece. The person with the idea was important, sure, but it was the second person, the one who initiated the plan and agreed, the backup and support...that was the most important thing Steve could ever have. It was an odd time to think about it, sure, when they were just messing around and singing, but.

But there wasn't a part Steve's life that he didn't need Bucky in. He couldn't imagine what his life would be like now if he hadn't been able to save Bucky. If Bucky wasn't here...Steve had no idea what he'd be without him.
When the laughter eventually died down, their song cut short due to Bucky's outburst, everyone settled back into their seats. A few giggles still drifted in the wind - although if anyone had accused any of the soldiers of the sounds they were making being called 'giggles,' they might not take that so well - as they fell back into a merry silence. Dernier kept his harmonica out, sitting on his lap.

They were all quiet for a minute or two, still grinning as they sat in the glow of the evening. The sun was further down in the sky now, a fourth of it disappearing into the water. The world was more orange and red than bright now, shadows falling over the boat but not on anyone's faces.

"You know, Cap, I didn't know you could sing." Dugan raised his eyebrows, readjusting his hat on his head as he gave Steve a look that said don't even try to deny it. Steve tried anyways.

"I really can't. Barnes can, though."

"Cannot."

"Yes, you can."

"No, that's not fair, that was ages ago--"

"It was like a year and a half ago!"

"Okay, okay," Falsworth interrupted. "Sarge, Captain, how about this. You can both sing for us, and we'll decide who can sing or not."

"No way-" Bucky started, the same time Steve nodded and agreed with "Yeah, alright."

They turned and looked at each other. "What, you scared Buck? Think you can't beat me in a little friendly competition?"

"Fine. You go first." Bucky sat back and crossed his arms, petulant and pouty as he glared at everybody. Steve considered this for a moment before he nodded.

"Yeah, okay. Falsworth is singing with me, though." Falsworth looked mildly taken aback, the surprise on his face making Morita snort. Steve was fairly sure this was the most lighthearted he'd ever seen the man.

"That wasn't in the rules!"

"Neither was me going first!" Steve crossed his arms right back, getting on his feet so he had the upper hand over Bucky. "So this is the stipulation. Unless you wanna back out?"

"I hate you." Bucky shot back.

"I know. Okay, Montie. It's your time to prove you're good for something other than blowing stuff up."

Falsworth rolled his eyes but stood up, slightly wobbly from the rock of the boat before he got his bearings and made his way over to Steve's side. They conversed quietly for a moment, deciding on a song. Well, more like Steve had a song he wanted to sing and was trying to convince Falsworth to sing it with him.

"That song is extremely cheesy," Falsworth whispered. Fairly loudly.

"I like it," Steve argued, not exactly quiet either. Bucky rolled his eyes again. Falsworth finally sighed and relented, waving a hand in Dernier's direction. "Do you know How Deep is the Ocean?"
Dernier didn't respond, just lifted the harmonica to his mouth and began playing again. The melody drifted out in the metallic sound, a few grace notes and embellishments here and there as he started out the slow, sweet song.

Bucky rolled his eyes again, throwing up his hands and talking over the top of Dernier's intro. "This song, Stevie?"

"It's your favorite to sing in the shower," Steve retorted innocently. Dugan nearly lost a rib laughing. Again. At first, all of the Commandos had been extremely surprised every time that Steve made a comment that wasn't pure goody two shoes angelic. The first few times they'd seen him joke around and prank Bucky, they'd blinked in surprise like that was some side to Steve they had no idea could exist. By now though, they still thought it was hilarious but no one was actually surprised by it.

Bucky's cheeks had a bit of a pink tint to them, but that was more likely the bite of the freezing wind than it was embarrassment. He just rolled his eyes at Steve and leaned back, waiting for them to come in with the first verse.

Steve grinned, kept his eyes locked on Bucky's as he opened his mouth to begin singing.

"How much do I love you? I'll tell you no lie. How deep is the ocean? How high is the sky?" The fading light could be deceiving, but it looked like Bucky did go a deeper shade of pink then.

He looked away, flushed, and Steve's eyebrows furrowed a little. That was a little out of character for Bucky; it took a lot to get him uncomfortable. Or embarrassed. Steve couldn't tell which this was, but he just pursed his lips and nudged Falsworth to take the next few lines.

"How many times a day do I think of you? How many roses are sprinkled with dew?" While Falsworth sang, Bucky glanced back over at Steve. Steve cocked his head in a question are you okay? and Bucky nodded slightly, fingers worrying the edges of his right sleeve.

He kept his eyes on Steve though, all throughout the next verse too. Steve didn't stare back because that was a recipe for trouble, but his lips curved up a little at the weight of that gaze on him.

"How far would I travel to be where you are?" Steve sang, his head full of parachuting from planes and planning to walk to Austria if he hadn't been able to catch a ride. "How far is the journey from here to a star?"

Falsworth threw his arm up over Steve's shoulders, tugging Steve down sideways with his smallness. Steve threw one back as they sang the last verse together, over exaggerated this time as they totally hammed it up, vibrato and all.

"And if I ever lost you, how much would I cry? How deep is the ocean? How. high. is the skyyyyy?" Steve squinched his nose to hit the high note at the end and the laughter erupted over the boat again, even Falsworth falling into giggles as Dernier blew a final flourish on the harmonica.

They kept their arms over each other's shoulders for a deep, exaggerated bow. Jones wolf-whistled and even Bucky and Morita were clapping and laughing.

It wasn't like this all the time - it wasn't like this ever, really - but Steve had a feeling if they all made it through the war, they might have a chance for it to be like this. Not the barbershop quartet part - although, maybe just for kicks when they went out to bars - but the fun. The laughing and the joking. They had a good time in their off time, sure, but nothing so crazy as today. Today Steve wasn't Captain Rogers of the Howling Commandos. Today he got to take off the suit and for once, be Steve Rogers from Brooklyn.
"If we all make it out of this war, first thing we're doing is going to some dive bar and singing at the top of our lungs," Steve declared, taking his arm off Falsworth shoulders to clap him on the back. "And then, maybe I'll drink with you all."

Cheers erupted and Steve bowed lightly again, exaggerated arm roll and everything. Then he plopped back down next to Bucky, nudging him with his shoulder. "Your turn, Buck."

With a melodramatic sigh, he got up and crossed the boat with slightly wobbly legs, leaning down to whisper his request into Dernier's ear. Dernier nodded, looking slightly surprised, but put the harmonica up to his lips and looked to Bucky for the cue.

Instead of standing at the opening of their semi circle, Bucky just sat down on the empty bench next to Dernier, looking down at his hands as he nodded at the Frenchman and began to sing.

"The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping...I dreamed I held you in my arms. When I awoke, dear, I was mistaken...And I hung my head and cried." Steve blinked a few times, not sure he'd heard right. Or was seeing right. Bucky's voice was as beautiful as always, but the broken sincerity on his features and the familiarity of the scene that the words were painting made Steve listen a little harder.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are grey." Bucky finally lifted his head, staring off over the water and not looking at anyone as his voice softened a little for the next few words. "You'll never know, dear, how much I love you."

Then, finally, Bucky's eyes were on his, both of them barely breathing as Bucky sang directly to him. "Please don't take my sunshine away."

Steve's head was spinning, the whole world was spinning. It wasn't what it looked like, right? Steve was reading to much into it. It was just a song. Bucky was only looking at him for a confidence boost, right? Steve had always been his biggest fan.

But Bucky's voice was beautiful, he didn't need any bit of confidence. Just as perfect and enchanting as it had always been. When he was like this, Bucky's singing was as soft and sweet as his normal jokes were crude and loud.

Everyone got to open up a new side of them today, everyone got to see a little deeper into each other. They'd all been wonderful friends before this, but Steve would say that day was the turning point between a well-oiled team and inseparable friends. That was the first day they had a chance to be more than soldiers. That day they got to be just men. Friends.

"I'll always love you, and make you happy. If you will only say the same..." Bucky's voice was back to louder now, and Steve had spent the beginning of that verse watching the Commandos' faces, gaging their reactions to Bucky. Of course, everyone was just quiet and watching and enthralled, as always. Well, not the quiet part. That was fairly new.

"But if you leave me to love another..." Steve's eyes snapped back to Bucky, who was actively avoiding looking at Steve at all. "You'll regret it all some day."

Then the chorus came again, the usual bright cheeriness of the song taken with a melancholy edge. Slower than the original he and Buck had heard on the radio in art class, a few different notes thrown in to almost make it into a minor key. Not quite, but just enough to bring an edge of sadness to a song that should be about sunshine.

Steve's heart was pounding ridiculously and he hated himself for it, the way his mind was wandering. It wasn't what it look like, it wasn't what it sounded like. It was never what it looked like
between them. Steve just had to calm down, get a grip on his racing heart and damp palms.

"You told me once, dear...you really loved me. And no one else could come between." A dark apartment, the word pneumonia in the air as watering eyes and clenched fingers looked up from their kneeling spot beside the bed and asked if Steve regretted anything. This life may be over, but I had you til death. He'd meant it too, when Steve had told Bucky that. They'd cried themselves to sleep that night.

"But now you've left me. And love another..." A red dress, bright red lips. Distaste in Bucky's voice. The first time Bucky had seen Steve's compass, the way his face had twisted up in some dark emotion. Pain, maybe. Not jealousy. Never jealousy, of course. "You have shattered all my dreams..."

Steve couldn't breathe. It was like he was having an asthma attack all over again, except that his lungs were perfectly healthy. It was just his mind. His heart. They were going to collapse in on him.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine," drifting beautifully over the wind, Bucky's eyes glancing nervously between the very last sliver of the setting sun and Steve. "You make me happy when skies are grey."

Just a song. It was just a song. "You'll never know, dear..." overreacting, he was overreacting. "How much I love you." Just. A. Song.

Their eyes met. Bucky's cupid's bow mouth wide open, paused before the last line. Time was frozen over, everything was frozen over. Dernier's harmonica stopped, leaving the last line to be acapella. Steve was fairly sure everyone on this boat could hear his heartbeat it was so loud.

Then, finally, slow and soft and sweet and barely above a whisper, came the line all the men were silent and waiting for.

"Please don't take...my sunshine...away."

Cheers and hollers and incredulous looks from every direction and Bucky smiled, thanking Dernier before heading back over to plop down beside Steve.

He leaned in close and Steve's heart stopped. Then his mouth was ghosting over Steve's ear, the whisper curling its smoke into Steve's skin. "I think I won."

"Mmm, really?" Steve managed so eloquently, the rocking of the boat threatening to make him seasick for the first time since he stepped onboard.

"Yep," Bucky said smugly, leaning back to his side of the bench. Steve blinked.

God, what was wrong with him? He hadn't been this ridiculous for years. This was Bucky, of course it was about the competition. Nothing else. How could Steve worry for a single moment...?

He let out a shaky breath of relief. Maybe all this salt water was getting to his head. He'd always had trouble with the salt water in his lungs, so maybe since the serum fixed his lungs, his head didn't recognize that salt water was no longer dangerous and was still letting it get to Steve's head?

Or...something like that.

Anything but what Steve had been thinking because this was Bucky. Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes. A sudden wave of guilt and shame washed over him. How could he think those things about his best friend for one second? How dare he insult Bucky like that, even in his mind? Especially in his mind.
The last of the worry drained from him, just a slightly empty feeling lined with guilt to replace it. He'd been irrational and ridiculous. And had apparently zoned out of the conversation the rest of the boys were having. Steve focused back in.

"-ote we sing one more for the whole team and call it a night." Dugan was declaring. The men all murmured content and tired agreement. The sun was down by now, just a slightly streaked sky fading darker. It was early, but they hadn't spent all day sleeping like they'd been planning too. So the extra hours would be appreciated by everyone.

"J'ai un chanson," Dernier assured and they all nodded, even though only Jones knew what he was saying. But if it was good enough for Jones to nod, the rest of them trusted him enough to agree.

The harmonica was set to lips again and the brief metallic melody started out over the wind again, grinding slow and sweet and final.

They all looked to each other, everyone's smile haunted by the melancholy of reality catching back up to them, their lives and the war falling back into their minds as the notes drifted over the wind. Dugan's eyes were watering a little already, although that could have been the wind. Steve doubted that though.

When the words started, Dugan and Morita and Jones and Bucky all came in together, Falsworth and Steve taking backup vocals to add on.

"Till then, till then, my darling, please wait for me. Till then, till then, no matter when it will be. One day, I know I'll be back again. Please wait, till then."

He knew Jones had a girl back home, as did Falsworth and Dugan. Morita had mentioned one at first, but a couple of letters later and that was a bust. Dernier had never bothered to get that part of his life translated, although he probably did have a girl.

It was on all of their faces. The loves broken by war and distance and time. Holding on across oceans and battlefields. Painted across their faces like a vivid, broken story.

"Our dreams will live though we are apart. Our love, I know it'll keep in our hearts. Till then, when all the world will be free...Please wait for me."

Steve glanced at Bucky, wondering who he was thinking of to have the same painting across his features. There hadn't been anybody special for years, that Steve could remember. Just lots of girls that didn't work out. But Bucky sure looked like he had somebody in his mind.

"Although there are oceans we must cross, and mountains that we must climb...I know every gain must have a loss. So pray that our loss is nothing but time."

"Till then, let's dream of what there will be." The back of Bucky's hand brushed up against Steve's. Steve pressed back in automatic response. "Till then, we'll call on each memory."

For a couple of soldiers from all over the world stuck in a war together, they didn't sound half bad. In fact, Steve was fairly sure it was the best barbershop quartet he'd ever heard. He was a little partial, though.

"Till then, when I will hold you again," The muscle flicker pulsed against the back of Steve's hand as Bucky's fingers curled. If they were to overlap their hands, they'd be weaving callused fingers together. Neither of them moved. "Please wait, till then."

"Although there are oceans we must cross," They all looked out over the black river, waves crashing
the side of the boat from the wind. It might as well have been an ocean. "And mountains that we must climb..."

"I know every gain must have a loss." Steve's eyes cut to Bucky, the peaceful expression on his face as the wind battered at the loose strands on his forehead. He'd never considered himself all that lucky, but he'd gained so much. Always had so much, when he had Bucky. But Steve couldn't lose him, he couldn't live with that. "So pray that our loss... is nothing but time."

Time. Years spent killing instead of drawing and singing and sitting on the steps of their Brooklyn apartment. They were losing time, months of time, and that was the only thing Steve was willing to sacrifice in regards to Bucky. He couldn't stand to lose anything else.

"Till then, let's dream of what there will be," Two houses, next door. Their children calling each other brother and sister, Bucky's baby boy in Steve's lap by the fire. Their wives as best friends, Steve and Bucky sneaking away every Saturday night to do something with just the two of them.

"Till then, we'll call on each memory," Cold nights, the warm comfort of hands entwined, a million blankets. Bucky's brilliant laugh as he throws his arm around Steve's shoulder. The white blank pages of the new sketchbook Bucky bought him shining bright and begging to be filled with sweeping pencil lines.

"Till then, when I will hold you again," Bucky's back to Steve's chest in the woods, pressed warm and safe enough to feel Bucky's heartbeat and every breath. Nights in Brooklyn with the position reversed, his back curled up against the warmth of Bucky's front, a familiar arm looped over his waist. It was in those moments that Steve never felt safer. More real. More alive.

"Please wait," The backs of their hands pressing closer, Steve's thumb running over the side of Bucky's.

The harsh, cold wind whipping around them as their heads turned, eyes met. The last streak of pink in the sky slipping to black. The stars starting to twinkle out of hiding overhead. A beautiful, icy blue silver moon the color of Bucky's eyes washing light all over them. Something deep in those eyes that Steve had never had permission to see before, didn't have the slightest clue to what it was.

"Till then." Their last notes garbled and slipped away in the wind, a whisper in a lover's ear. Steve leaned over, soft smile on his face as he knocked his shoulder into Buck's.

"Happy Birthday, Bucky."

Chapter End Notes

So that was ridiculously fluffy - an apology in advance for the next chapter of definitely not-so-fluffiness
Late March they ended up in London, much to Monty's joy. They didn't stay long, although they did have the chance to go to a pub Falsworth used to regular.

In April, they invaded a Hydra castle in the Danish Straits and almost died. They pulled through thanks to Steve, as always. In May they hit another part of Scandinavia, knocked out a couple'a minor bases there. Then took down a bigass submarine. June was fairly nice because they weren't in risk of hypothermia anymore; they spent most of June outside in the woods.

Months fly by and mesh together when nothing changes. Killing and shooting and smoke and nights under open skies around a flickering fire. The same six faces, the same six expressions. All that spark they'd had at the beginning would still burn on the battlefield during a fight, but the nights of singing around the fire and cheering after each exploited base grew fewer with time and weariness. They were still running too fast for the Nazis but not fast enough to outrun the things they'd done.

Quiet nights, Steve would draw by the fireside. He never finished those sketches and he never let
Bucky see them, but Bucky didn't push. If they were of him - of the quiet, worn and solemn face that stared back in a rippled reflection - Bucky wasn't sure he wanted to see anyways. He didn't know if he'd recognize the man behind the smoke and blood.

They had it better than a lot of soldiers, Bucky knew that. That was because of Steve. He was so confident and sure and promising that somehow, every single one of them managed to roll out of bed in the morning. Somehow they all found something to keep fighting for.

July and August could barely be called summer, stifling sticky months with the same chilly nights. A fever of the earth, pulsing and dragging them down by their ankles. Bucky could barely breathe some days, everything was so stagnant and stuffy. Not breathing was at least better than freezing to death.

It was one of the thankfully less-stifling August nights that Bucky was on watch, gun propped comfortably at his side as he kept an eye on his sleeping comrades.

Well, almost all. It was probably sometime around eleven when the stick cracked and the ground compressed with heavy boots, alerting red alarms in one swift motion down to the trained pulse in his veins.

As soon as Dugan came marching up over the rise into sight, Bucky relaxed the hand on his gun. Well, half-relaxed. Wasn't due to be off his shift for another hour - and Steve was taking the next one, not Tim. Coupled with the serious look on that face, the 'doe was swaggering up that hill for something else entirely. Great.

"Hey, Sarge. How you holdin' up?" Dugan made his way over, plopping down next to him on the fallen log. Bucky glanced over, vaguely curious as he repositioned the rifle across his lap.

"Fine, thanks. Got plenty'a shuteye earlier, no need to worry 'bout your nightwatch fallin' asleep." It wasn't entirely true because Bucky hadn't gotten sleep earlier, but he definitely wasn't gonna fall asleep on watch either.

But Dugan apparently didn't come up to discuss the integrity of his wakefulness. He leaned over on the log, tapping his finger against the side of Bucky's head. "I meant how you holdin' up there."

Oh. It was a legitimate how are you, not a generic one to pass the time. Dugan was checking up on his mental state. Great. Fuckin' great.

"Y'know how it is." Bucky shrugged. The Commandos were soldiers, they all had nightmares and bad days. And they needed to stop poking Bucky about his. "Nothin' worse than the rest'a you. Why?"

"We're worried about you." Dugan said, that whole gruffly light, not-taking-bullshit tone he'd basically copyrighted.

Bucky scoffed, toeing at the soft dirt with his boot. Everyone worried too much. Steve and Dugan the most, but all them worried way more than he deserved. Just cause he'd been tortured for a couple months didn't mean he was about to goddamned snap.

"Y'been acting off for awhile now." A lifted eyebrow shot his way and Bucky attempted not to tense up all over and failed. "Can't say I remember the last time you made a joke, Sergeant."

"This some sort'a intervention?" Bucky asked, blowing out a stream of air just to watch it not fog up from the lack of cold.
"Nah, Sarge. We're just worried. You're pretty damn important to all of us and nobody wants t'see you hurtin'." Dugan wasn't being gentle - wasn't ever gentle - but those words were a bit too invested to be his own.

"...you keep saying we. This a team effort or something?" That wasn't the best of thoughts; the Commandos conspiring how to talk The Sergeant down from his crazy cloud.

"Everyone's noticed, if that's what you're askin'. And well, y'know Rogers'd never say anything. Wouldn't wanna hurt your pride or such, but he's been getting rough around the edges with his frettin' again."

That was probably true. Steve wasn't the type to ask until it was a risk or a problem. Which it wasn't. He wasn't a goddamned risk. Or a problem.

Hadn't been avoiding anyone. Hadn't violently destroyed any Nazis with his fists lately. Just hadn't been laughing and joking. So he fell into silence more often than not, so what? Didn't have anything to say. Didn't wanna say if he did. None of it'd make sense to anybody anyways, it wasn't like they understood a lick'a what was happening behind the crystal crosshairs.

"So. You wanna tell me what's goin' on in that big noggin of yours?" Dugan pressed, resonating loud in the peace and quiet. The peace and quiet he'd really like to get back to now. Alone wasn't so bad, alone meant he didn't have a damn thing to be scared of but the crystal mirror, and the glass reflection wasn't gonna be pryin' secrets from him anytime soon.

"There's nothin' to tell." Bucky finally looked over, steely eyes challenging him to say one more goddamned thing.

Dugan sighed heavily and cut his gaze to camp, avoiding the hard metal behind icy blue. Didn't wanna be confrontational, but he also couldn't have the boys digging into his head right now.

Apparently he didn't glare hard enough because Dugan was still here, leaning forward to rest his forearms on his knees, hands clasped loosely between, comfortable and patient and he had to fight the childish urge to just reach over and shove the man off the damn bench.

"Barnes, you know you don't gotta hold up a'front for the rest'a us. We all know you've got some stuff goin' on that ain't so pretty. It's not like there's somethin' you can say that'll make us suddenly turn tail and squeal."

Bucky snorted a sadistic laugh because actually, there was plenty Bucky could say to get a hellofalot worse reaction than that. Dugan had no idea. This ran deeper than Zola's torture, now. "Rogers put you up to this?"

He hadn't meant to sound entirely cold, but the words came across pretty bitter. More bitter than he was feeling, because Bucky wasn't feeling much of anything, couldn't feel much of anything. One emotion meant one too many, and what happened when those emotions turned back to the sunshine again--

Dugan wasn't fazed though. Maybe that's why he'd been elected the mouse to navigate the maze of Sarge's psycho thoughts. He didn't exactly cave easy. Instead silver-blue leveled on Bucky's gaze again, mustache scrunching in all that seriousness and sincerity.

"Look, I ain't forgettin' you're a superior rank. And I'd follow you into hell, I would, Barnes. You're a damn good soldier and a hell of a loyal friend. But I ain't gonna sit and watch you deteriorate in front'a my eyes if there's somethin' I can do about it."
"There's nothing any'a you can do about it." This time he finally managed numbed and neutral. Maybe saying it at all was a little brutal, but he was bein' honest, which he owed Tim.

This round'a extended silence came from Dugan's half'a the rotting log. He stared off in the distance, bowler hat a shouting obvious landmark in crosshair's peripherals. Always kinda had been.

Finally Dugan tipped his big head to one side, looked at Bucky from the corner of his eye with the only cautious bone in his body, clearing his throat carefully and starting one more time. Stubborn bastard.

"I know you and Rogers were damn close as kids, grew up together and everything. Gotta be a lot stupider than even I am to downplay that. Anybody who's seen you with him-- the way you two are around each other..."

He trailed off, expression going foggy and distant and Bucky raised an expectant eyebrow, making a point to very obviously adjust the gun in his lap. Dugan snapped outta it, glancing over at him quick before rubbing a hand over his mustache.

"Point is, I know y'both and I get it. Lived in each other's pockets your whole life, had to be weird as hell for him to suddenly be some hotshot, leave you in the dust with us normal folks. Y'veen taking it real well, but some part of you's gotta be against it... 'cause you're fighting this like hell. You talk to him less now than you talked about him durin' that first stint on the frontlines. Things have changed. And I get he's your CO now, but if y'need your best friend, a man like Rogers ain't gonna deny you that. Really just...talk t'him. Maybe he can fight off those nightmares a'yours."

Bucky shot him a sharp look at the last line and Dugan raised his hands in surrender.

"Just tryin' to help. And if you can't talk to him, you know you've got five other guys who've got your back. Any one of us'd be honored to take on some'a the load y'veen carryin. Hell, Dernier'd sit and listen...even if th'only advice he'd ramble back y'wouldn't understand."

The light-hearted jab was just so Dugan, the teasing easy-going guy he didn't wanna shove off logs that the tension dissipated for a second, flit of a curve tugging at one corner of his mouth. They both sat in the quiet for a bit, watching over the camp and the surrounding woods. Eventually the silence started running cold and Dugan shattered it easy, clapped a hand on his knee, softly breaking up all that settling ice. Everything was soft compared to gunshots now.

"Alrighty, I'll leave ya to it then. Just...think about what I said, Sarge. Could do you some good."

The air shifted as Dugan stood to leave, a hesitant pause and the bowler hat was nodding once in his direction before broad shoulders started back for the slope down to camp. Before he could take off, Bucky cleared his throat and the man paused, glancing back at the shadows cutting jagged lines across Barnes' face.

"Thanks. For, y'know, caring and all." The unfamiliar words felt jilted on his tongue, but Dugan smiled wide anyways, full teeth and wide open mouth, the way he laughed. No black cutting lines across his jaw.

"Now all that caring and stuff did come from Rogers." Dugan winked grandly before he started back down the hill, leaving the shadows and cold to settle around Bucky's boots alone.

He didn't like alone. Even when Zola'd been torturing him, there'd always been at least some intern there, studying from the corner. And before that, every minute of his life before that and after that there'd been Steve. He'd never really been alone. Even when he had nothing--
He didn't wanna think about details again - not ever - but maybe. Maybe he should talk to Steve.

Or it could be pointless and make everyone worry a hellofalot more.

Rogers was taking his shift in a halfhour anyway. Might as well...bring it up, right? That's what Dugan was expecting, and if they'd all plotted together. Had to say something, now, or they'd stage another intervention or something and he just. Fuck, okay, he should say something to Steve. Wasn't that hard. They wanted stable? He'd fuckin' show'em stable.

"Sergeant," Steve greeted as he made his way up the hill. Bucky glanced up, palms clenched nervous and damp around the barrel of his rifle.

"Captain," Bucky replied, gaze sweeping over the fading bags under Steve's eyes. One more thing Bucky hated about the serum; could never tell how much sleep Steve'd gotten 'cause it fixed up those tired eyes with tightened skin before he could tell. "You mind if I stick around for a bit?"

"Sure, 'course." Steve sank down to the same spot Dugan had, rippling muscle easing into something comfortable nothing like the way he used to sit, eyes patiently on Bucky as he waited, beautiful features schooled into that angelic look that just glowed all sweet and soft. Bucky looked away.

"Dugan thinks I should tell somebody about my time in Italy," he said, offhandedly as possible.

Steve was quiet for a few moments, the weight of his gaze heating up the side of Bucky's face. "What do you think?"

"I think that'll do jack shit, honestly. S'not like saying it makes it any better." For once, Steve didn't scold him on his vulgar word choice, keeping his voice almost infuriatingly patient.

"It might help to feel like you're less alone," he offered, about ten thousand times more hopeful than he had any right to be.

"I'm a hell of a lot more alone than you think," Bucky muttered. His shoulders and neck were tight, ready to snap, palms still all clammy. With an exasperated sigh, Bucky ran a hand down his face, cursing his stupid head stupid body. "God, I can't even talk about this without freaking out and tensing up like it's happening all over again. I can't--I can't--"

Struggled to find the right words, to somehow talk out loud without falling into a dark pit full of sliced feet and strangely colored needles and leather straps. Finally he just clenched his fists tighter, digging blunt fingernails into skin for clarity.

"I'm a fucking mess, Steve. I'm a mess and I don't know what the fuck I'm supposed to do with it because we're all fucking messes out here. I don't even know what-- what's wrong with me anymore."

"Hey, c'mon." Steve leaned forward a little, trying to catch Bucky's eye. When he finally did, Bucky couldn't bring himself to look away. "Whatever the mess you are, you're mine, okay? Buck, you're never alone. I'll take whatever pieces you wanna give me, mess or not."

Steve had that sincere, naïve Brooklyn boy innocence on his face and Bucky only just managed to roll his eyes instead of tackling the asshole into a hug.

"You're a fuckin' sap, Rogers."

"You love it." Steve declared instantly.
"You love it," Bucky corrected, twice as petulant and young as he felt.

Steve smiled. The hovering storm cloud wasn't lifting on the horizons, but with the sun smiling like that he couldn't keep living in the dim.

"Thanks. I mean I know I didn't say much but. Thanks." Bucky cleared his throat, staring at the closest tree like it was the center of his universe.

It was too dark to see Steve's eyes, but it was a safe bet they were twinkling and sparkling and beautiful right now. Had the color memorized anyways.

"Course," Steve said gently, smile softening from the distance, so far away, nothing between them but years and years and years past--

Young, huh. Didn't feel much like the 26 he just turned. Closer to 30 than 20. God, could be ninety, the way the storms kept making his bones ache. But if he didn't start moving his bones now, he'd rot right here on the log beside Steve, two skeletons turning to dust with years between their bare shoulders and hollow eyes still peering for each other's from the dark.

A quick shift of movement, blonde following him as he stood and Bucky'd disappear into the shadows if he could, but gold kept aiming his way and it was keeping him here, on the edges of the light, and Steve watched him take three steps away, knew he was lingering, would wait forever for the goodbye if he had to.

Finally gold caved, flashing bright under white blue as Rogers smiled him off.

"See you at sunrise, Barnes."

If sunrise ever came, Bucky'd be waiting.

If sunrise ever came.

~*~*~

The end of September was soaking. Rain fell in heavy, unforgiving sheets, drowning the empty streets. They'd fought their way into this ghost town, half-burnt shell of a city that may've once been beautiful, before the war took away its light and burned down its inhabitants, slaughtered them in the streets and left the bodies to rot in the ditches.

The rain was everywhere but it wasn't enough to wash the stain of destruction from the empty streets. They weren't originally planning to spend the night in crumbling ghost structures, but the rain seeping through skin and infiltrating weapon packs shifted plans pretty damn quickly.

They'd been traveling through the outskirts of the village when the thunder broke overhead, single warning before the bucket flood. Steve shouted and beckoned with an arm - they all took off running for the broken down, abandoned buildings.

Every one of the Commandos was soaked before they reached the road. Bucky couldn't see through the fringe of wet hair plastered to his forehead and dripping in his eyes, couldn't run properly from the puddles sloshing in the soles of his boots.

It felt like years of swimming through the air and battling the violent rainfall before they finally reached some sort of shelter. Steve yanked open the door, gesturing all the men inside hurriedly. Bucky was the last through, Steve following behind with a hand on Bucky's back.
Which he wasn't thinking about at all.

The door slammed shut behind them, pushed harder by the wind, and Bucky had to blink a few times before his eyes started to adjust to the musty darkness of the building. He couldn't see much, but from the black space on the wall and the army of desks it was pretty clear they'd chanced upon an old, one-room school.

Great, school. He'd always just loved these places, gettin' written off as some dumb dandy, separated from Steve like he was the bad influence, unable to run across the room and dote on all those playground scratches--

"Dernier, Jones, start us up a fire. Morita and Falsworth check the perimeter, and Dugan search for any supplies that we can use. Barnes, help me move these desks against the doors. Nobody go outside if you can help it, catching pneumonia is the last thing we need right now."

Everyone split off automatically, falling into the regular step of listening to Steve's easy commands. The confidence and respect Stevie'd gained? Still made'im way too proud sometimes. Right now though, he was too soaking and shivering to be much of anything but miserable.

It wasn't five minutes later when Falsworth and Morita came back with the all clear, Jones and Dernier had a fire going in the fire place, and Dugan brought back a bucket full of chalk, a few battered textbooks, and a couple of children's coats. The doors were barricaded with desks, the large teacher's desk propped sideways to cover the singular window, securing them all inside.

Dugan laid out the children's coats on the dusty floor in front of the fireplace and Bucky had to cover his mouth with his hand to keep from gagging at the beautifully woven bright colors. The children that used to wear those coats were probably dead now anyways, no point in getting all misty.

They'd dragged a few extra desks over to the fire, giving them all a place to sit while they dried off. If they got the coats - only source of a blanket - wet, they all really might catch pneumonia. Bucky'd been down that road once before with Steve and he'd really like to avoid reliving that hell ever again.

"At least the world isn't frozen over yet," Morita mused, dismantling the parts of his gun so they could dry.

"Snow's better than rain, because you can drink it and you don't get damn soaked," Falsworth said, wringing his cap out onto the dusty floor and sending spirals of rich colored wood to cut through the dust. "Besides, it's insulating."

Dugan piped up with something, emptying rainwater outta one'a those big clunky boots. Bucky stopped listening somewhere in the middle of the bantering, settling quietly to perch on one of the desks by the fire, shivering while he waited for the flames to seep warmth and dryness back into his bones.

Steve made his way over to the fire too, shield propped up by the door, dripping rainwater down colorful metal to pool on warped wood. Treacherously beautiful weather...and sauntering boy. Steve's normal perfect wave of blond hair was soaked, matted down to his forehead and giving him the general look of a drowned rat. Bucky almost smiled at the sight.

Then Steve stepped even closer to the flames, both hands ruffling up his hair in an attempt to dry it. The soft blond pieces went from plastered wetness to crazy, fluffy spikes in no time and Bucky's mouth was suddenly mysteriously dry. The tousled hair, flushed chest...it wasn't fair, he didn't mean for his heart to start pounding in his shivering ribcage.
Couldn't help it, his eyes were dragged down of their own accord, scanning over the newly familiar body, hard lines, soft curves. Soaking wet suit clinging even tighter to Steve's frame than usual. Only his gaze drifted further than he was prepared for, cheeks flushing deep red and eyes cutting quickly away from that harshly dipped lower back, rounding into the protruding curve--

Good god, what was wrong with him? Middle of a war, stuck in peril, and he was checking out his best friend. True, he was flawless and soaking and any man would be crazy not to--

No, wait. Any woman would be crazy not to. Not man. Men didn't check each other out. And they definitely didn't flush red from the tight, pretty curve of their best friends ass.

Bucky put a hand over his eyes, shoulders curling down as latent shame pounded in his veins. It was one thing to feel jealous and over protective. He'd been dealing with that. It was one thing to get butterflies in his stomach when Steve shot him that smile. Bucky was trying to deal with that.

He'd even managed to deal with the almost-but-not-kiss. But this? This was something else entirely. Getting all red and flushed by looking over Steve's new muscles, new tight and sculpted body...that wasn't something Bucky was anywhere near equipped to deal with.

Mental things he could get past but physical attraction? No. No no no no.

"Stupid Stark," Steve muttered, making Bucky look up from his hand. Which he instantly, thoroughly, deeply regretted.

Steve was stuck in the middle of peeling his shirt off over his head, the material around his neck too wet and snug to pull over his head. As funny as that sight normally should have been, it also meant that Steve's chest was bare. Naked, golden, glowing muscle.

Bucky couldn't breathe.

"A little help here?" Steve asked, muffled through the blue material. He wiggled his elbows and pulled one more time for good measure and the shirt popped off over his head, making him blink and ruffling his hair even more. He peeled the rest of it off his arms, the material soaked through with rain water. "Never mind, I got it."

Bucky still couldn't move, his eyes glued to Steve's chest. He was overwhelmingly beautiful. More than beautiful, he was...all sorts of other words that Bucky should never be thinking about Steve, never in a million years. It was too late though, Bucky's skin was flushed and his pupils were dilated and his heartbeat was going a million miles a minute.

Steve bent over to lay his uniform out by the fire and Bucky choked on some sound his throat tried to make, his pants suddenly a little tighter. Oh god. Oh god no no no.

This time he buried his face behind both palms, cursing the rain and his body and willing the tightness in his pants back down. He'd just crossed a line he'd never even considered crossing. He hadn't prepared himself for shit like this. Sure, he wanted to kiss Steve sometimes, but he'd never let himself think about...about that. Not while he was sober enough to remember it, anyways.

"You alright, Buck?" A much-too close voice interrupted Bucky's self-deprecating thoughts, his head lifting back up on instinct. And staring directly at Steve. Shirtless, gorgeous, caring glowing sunshine Steve.

"Mm," he responded noncommittally, trying to look anywhere but the defined, chiseled lines of Steve's golden, glowy chest. Why was that making his heart pound? Why couldn't he breathe? Fingers twitching to touch, stomach twisting itself in knots, tangling black knots of rope he could
choke out to wrap around his throat, make himself stop breathing forever.

"You're all flushed," Steve said concernedly, eyes flickering over Bucky's face. Yeah, yeah, he'd kinda noticed that. The heat that had crept into his cheeks and chest. He was too busy thinking about that and avoiding Steve's eyes to quite register Steve's next words before it was too late.

"And you'll freeze to death in those soaking clothes." Steve leaned forward and started unbuttoning the big navy blue buttons on Bucky's peacoat. His brain was so overwhelmed with thoughts and Steve's proximity and everything that it didn't catch up to the moment until Steve's fingers had undone more then half of his coat.

Then it sunk in. And Bucky freaked.

He shoved Steve off him, quick and brutal enough to make Steve stumble and almost fall on his ass. His ass that Bucky had been checking out earlier, god. Fuck.

Steve had been half naked and undressing Bucky. Those artist hands had been taking the clothes off Bucky's body. Steve had been stripping him, comfortably and worriedly, planning to get Bucky warm.

His brain was short circuiting. Too much, all of it was too much all at once. Physical, undeniable attraction to Steve and a half-hard erection because of it and Bucky was so f-fucked up and Steve didn't even know it, was trying to help Bucky out when he should have been sprinting in the other direction.

"Bucky?" Steve asked, taking a cautious step closer. Bucky buried his head in his hands again, curling in on himself. Fuck, what was he doing? What was he doing? He couldn't even sit still and let Steve be a friend to him. He was fucking everything up. It had to happen eventually. They couldn't go on forever with Bucky torn apart by feelings he couldn't face and couldn't name.

He'd ruined everything and Steve still wasn't getting that, still was worrying and putting his hand on Bucky's shoulder. Bucky was shivering, even harder now than before. He'd f-fucked up and they were going to hurt him for that. He'd fought back and that always meant more drugs, more pain.

It was all his fault, that test going wrong. He hadn't held still the way they'd wanted him to and now look at him, look at what he's ruined. Who are you? What are you? Tell me what you are.

Sergeant James Barnes 32557038 a total fuck up who ruins everything Sergeant James Barnes 32557038 who can't even let his best friend touch him Sergeant James Barnes 32557038 who doesn't deserve to be touched. Sergeant James Barnes 32557038 Sergeant James Barnes 32557038 Sergeant Ja--

"It's me, it's Steve. I need you to focus on my voice. I'm here with you and I need you to listen to me, okay?" Firm and gentle fingers tugged the hands away from Bucky's face. Cold air hit his skin and there was more wetness on his cheeks than just rain water.

He blinked haphazardly, trying to focus and that wasn't dirty operation lights, golden skin stretched over unfamiliar muscle. Why was-- Steve...oh fuck, Steve.

Bucky scrambled away, sliding backwards on the desk and basically falling off the other side, catching his feet on the ground just before he fell over, bracing his hands on the wood to stay upright.

Oh god oh god oh god, Steve. He backpedaled further, crashing into another desk. He whipped behind that one too, eyes wide as the Commandos all stared at him. Bucky slid down the wall behind
the desk, back pressed hard against the rough surface as he tried to catch his breath. Oh god oh god oh god.

"Bucky?" Steve rounded the first desk cautiously, hands up in the air like he was trying to placate a wild animal.

"Don't touch me." Bucky begged, pressing back further into the wall and drawing his knees up to his chest.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Steve promised, a flicker of pain over his features lingering from Bucky's begging.

"Please," Bucky begged again, curling his arms around the top of his knees and dropping his forehead with a thud. It wasn't dark enough, wasn't warm enough, he was soaking the wall through and he was sitting in a settling cloud of dust that erupted by his frantic scramble over here and Bucky just wanted to curl into the darkness and never have to be blinded by the bright again.

Flashes of memories tugged at his head, drugs that made him feel woozy. Drugs that made him lose control of his own body. Drugs that never stopped coming.

He didn't have control over his body now, either. He couldn't stop himself from reacting so strongly to Steve and he was so sick, so messed up, and Steve wasn't getting that, wasn't ever going to get that because he was too perfect and too bright.

Steve was the North Star and Bucky couldn't break the gravitational orbit he'd been stuck in and it was eating him alive because he didn't even have control over it anymore.

If he couldn't control it he was going to lose Steve. He could not physically live with that. Bucky was just pieces without golden blue stitches on all the jagged edges.

Steve was still inching closer, nearly at the next desk now, hands still up in caution.

"We got you out. You're not in that lab anymore, you're safe here with us--"

"I know," Bucky snapped, squeezing his arms tighter around his knees. The soft footsteps edging closer froze in spot.

"What?" Steve asked, sharp, soothing tone breaking in confusion. Bucky lifted his head slightly, barely enough to meet that skyblue but he couldn't.

"I know I'm not in Zola's lab, I know that. I can't escape because it's not the fucking outside world that's trying to get me, it's my own fucking head!" Steve recoiled as Bucky shouted at him, the destroyed look on his face instantly making guilt rise up in his throat like bile and Bucky hadn't eaten enough over the past week to afford puking, swallowing down the urge and tightening the corners of his mouth.

The memories of the torture were sharp as day, clear and vivid and unavoidable now that he'd let himself think of them. He knew they were memories, but that didn't make them any better. Mental replays of torture combined with internal hatred for his own body and mind? Not the best mixture for sanity.

Finally Steve swallowed back whatever lingering freakout was hovering in those calloused hands, lookin' close to hurlin' as Bucky was, lowering into a careful crouch beside the desk he'd cowered behind. "What can I do?"
"Leave me alone," Bucky answered instantly. Steve's face fell but Bucky couldn't bend, he'd never snap back straight. "Let me sleep it off. I'll be okay if I can sleep."

Steve rubbed a hand down his face, expression torn up all terrible and helpless. Bucky held his breath as Steve leaned closer, almost close enough to make him shake, dropping his voice to a whisper. The other Commandos were still frozen and watching, but Bucky could be embarrassed about that later.

"If you have a nightmare, do I have your permission to come wake you up?" Steve asked lowly, words meant only for Bucky's ears. God, he was not a child, he didn't need to be coddled. But waking up from a nightmare usually meant Steve's hands, on his skin, touching him.

Which Bucky didn't want. No, actually, that was the problem, there was a want--

No, no, bad. But. Steve was still his best friend, still trying to do the right thing. Trying to help. That shine-your-shoes make-you-soup soft expression he'd never been able to turn down in his entire goddamned existence. He stared owlishly at that broken please written all over blue eyes and who the fuck was he kidding. Steve could ask him to jump off a building and if he was doing it with that face, Bucky'd take a running start.

Fuck. He finally managed a single nod, sharp, eyes averted, and buried his face in his arms again.

Listened hard as he did on the frontlines, tracking the silent movements as Steve stood back up, reluctant pause to leave him there like that finally outweighed by the shaking request. Then the footsteps were disappearing further and further, taking years with them as thud thud boots crossed too far away and barely the other side of the classroom.

It was cold over here and Bucky was soaking enough to risk pneumonia but he'd been colder all winter and survived it. He'd make a night without the warmth of a fire. Or Steve's back pressed to his.

Couldn't have anything to do with Steve's body right now. He was already going mad, no point in sparking stars into a harsh-burning fire. It was all a big bundle of too much stress and weariness and he had fuckin told himself he couldn't deal with this.

He'd been right.

~*~

"Morita, can I talk to you a moment?" Steve asked quietly, all of their voices hushed so Bucky could sleep in his makeshift barricade against the wall. Morita nodded, getting off the desk he'd been propped against Monty's back on, following Steve to the far wall of the schoolroom.

They were thankfully all dry now, except Bucky. His heavy pea coat was still half draped over him and dripping rainwater into a little puddle every few minutes. As terrible as it was to witness and as much as he wanted to warm his best friend up, Steve wasn't going to risk touching Bucky again.

"What's on your mind, Captain?" Morita asked, voice hushed as he sat down on another desk. There was a plethora of seating in here, although there wasn't anything else useful.

"Sergeant Barnes," Steve answered truthfully. Morita's face molded into a sympathetic, slightly pained one. "It's just...it's never been like this before. He's never shut me out and I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"I think you're doing the best you can, Cap. He doesn't want anyone near him and you've given him
that." Morita glanced sadly over at Bucky's fitfully sleeping form.

"I know, but that's what scares me. It's never been like that before. It got triggered when I was helping him out of his jacket, and that could mean--" Steve paused, forcing himself to take a breath. Morita waited patiently, one eyebrow up and how wasn't he freaking out? "Do you think they ever did anything like that to him? He was fully clothed when I found him, but--"

"Rogers. If anything like that'd happened, he'd be hell of a lot more messed up than he is. Touch used to help, right? Wouldn't make sense if he's been through...that kind'a trauma."

"Yeah, I guess you have a point." Steve paused, glancing up to peer at the huddling, shivering shadow in the corner. Hell. Buck didn't deserve any'a this. "Thing is though, I think he is a hell of a lot more messed up than he's letting on. Maybe not for that reason, but there's something. There's something that's been eating him and he won't tell anyone what it is."

He won't tell me what it is, was basically what that translated too, because if Bucky wasn't talkin' to him odds were he wasn't opening up to Dugan in his spare time either. But why wouldn't he tell Steve? He told Steve everything. Didn't he?

"No offense, Captain, but you worry too much. Sarge is a lot stronger than you give him credit for."

Steve blinked. That wasn't it at all. He knew Bucky was strong as the rest of them. Hell, he'd been through more than all them combined and he was pro'ly the most sane one here.

But Morita had this look on his face and he knew better than to interrupt, not when his team looked at him like that. "You two are just...really close, which isn't a problem, don't get me wrong, but. It skews your judgement sometimes. He's fine. You're fine. We're in the middle of a war and sometimes you look more at each other in battle than you do the enemy."

Steve just stared. Morita took a second to catch onto the wide blues and sudden frozen bones, eyes going wide himself as he realized what he'd just said, backpedaled faster than those girls on doubledates ever had.

"Not that you aren't both incredible soldiers, 'cause you are. Y'just worry too much. Both of you do."

Silence fell back on stiff shoulders as Steve looked down at his hands, turned them over and tried not to think too hard about Morita's accusation. He had a bit of a point. Probably a really good point.

But this was Bucky, Steve couldn't stop worrying if he tried. He cared about all his men, but he'd stormed an entire enemy base alone for the sole purpose of saving Bucky Barnes. Kind'a obvious how much Bucky meant to him. That wasn't something that could be turned off.

"Thanks, Jim," Steve managed anyways, squeezing a tight smile onto his face. Morita nodded, returning the tight smile before weaving his way back across the room to the warmth of the fire.

Steve stayed where he was, sitting on a desk in the cold as he leaned his head against the wall to watch Bucky's sleeping form from all the distance and dust between them. He wasn't ever going to stop caring too much, was he?

~*~*~*~

It ate his insides every moment his hands twitched to reach out, help only he couldn't, forced himself quiet and passive when all he wanted to do was scream, kick his feet and beg Bucky to just tell him what to do. Instead he watched carefully as he could, ready to jump at the first sign that he was needed. But Bucky didn't so much as pleadingly look his way.
He'd been avoiding all of their eyes since his last panic attack in the schoolhouse. It had been a long eight days. Everyone was more tense than usual because of it, and Steve was stuck with trying to boost the morale of the team while simultaneously planning their next siege.

The stress would probably crumple anyone else - he had a lot of lives in his hands - but Steve didn't have the luxury to let it get to him. He had to be solid for his men and for his best friend. Who was shutting himself out from the world.

Nobody had mentioned Bucky's outburst since it happened, and no one was going to. Steve was dying to see if Buck was okay, but he couldn't push. He'd never forgive himself if he made Bucky bend so far he snapped.

Since he couldn't figure things out with Bucky, he settled for figuring out the perfect plan of action for their next attack. It wasn't on a Hydra base; Colonel Phillips had radioed in a request for them to eliminate a German town the rest of the army wouldn't be able to get to. The Nazi army was using the cathedral as one of their major storage facilities for weaponry and the Commandos had to get close enough to destroy it.

The cathedral was in the very center of a city on the eastern border of Germany, surrounded by stores and houses and roads of twisting alleys. Just getting to the cathedral would be risky as hell, let alone taking the place out. And then making it out of the city and back into Allied territory before they all died. It felt like every mission kept getting riskier and riskier.

Currently, Steve was shacked up in his dimly lit tent, pouring over a map of the city and trying to place where windows might be in houses based on aesthetic, architectural, and functional design. It felt a little futile but he needed to protect their entrance and exit routes from any vulnerabilities, like a civilian with a gun in the window. That, and he needed to find a place to put his expert sniper.

A warmth settled over him and Steve looked up from his map, Bucky's silhouette outlined by the entrance of the tent. Bucky was too quiet on his feet to hear, but Steve's body was in tune enough to recognize the familiar presence before his ears did.

"Barnes," Steve greeted, trying not to show how surprised he was that Bucky'd voluntarily approached. Or how much his chest ached as the surprise settled in. "Anything go wrong on the perimeter check?"

"No, sir. The camp is secure." All but saluting, standing there stiff as a board with those wide shoulders rolled back all professional the way they'd been for...days now, at least. A soldier, 24/7, and all Steve wanted was to go back to the woods in December when they were drawing and laughing and Bucky wasn't slowly wasting away day by day. Or the May before that, squeezing between crowds at a ballgame and watching Bucky shout and cheer and turn that wickedly wide smile on Steve, more alive than he'd been in months.

Forget the war.

"Great. Would you mind taking a look at this?" Steve looked up from the map, tapping it once in indication. Bucky made his way over silently to stand beside Steve, bending just a fraction to see the details of the map.

Steve traced the entrance route he was considering with his fingertip, pointing out different advantages to it as he explained it. Bucky leaned in a little closer, squinting at the map from the dim light of the lantern.

"Yeah, that should work. So long as we keep low and attack at night, the shadows of that alley and
that alley should give us time to regroup and take the rest out with more man power."

"Would you mind using your significant man power from a window? Or do you think a rooftop would be safer?" Steve kept his tone light and teasing on the words significant man power and Bucky almost smiled at that.

"Whichever keeps you safer, Rogers," Bucky said, turning his head to meet Steve's smiling eyes.

The moment icy blues landed on his, Bucky froze in his tracks and stiffened like a puppet. Like he was about to freak out again, beg Steve not to touch him. With Bucky's head turned towards him, their faces were close and the rest of their bodies were inches away from actually touching.

Bucky hadn't touched a soul since the Don't Touch Me outbreak. Which ripped Steve's heart in two. If he ever found Zola--

He just wanted to toss an arm around Bucky's shoulders, nudge him by the campfire, excitedly tap dirty wrists when he found something important. He'd had no idea how much they touched until they didn't.

But now they were standing as close as they had been that one night in January, and there was no way in hell he was gonna be the one to pull away this time.

Bucky was staring at him, unblinking, lips parted and shiny. Steve really wished that mouth would just tell him what was wrong. But it wasn't going to any time soon, and what had Steve learned? He had to take the first step. As much as being rejected would destroy him, he couldn't stand it any longer. He just had to.

"Can I...?" Steve asked quietly, voice steady enough to surprise even him. Bucky's eyes widened and he nodded, slightly, almost fearfully.

With very careful hands, Steve wrapped an arm around Bucky's back, spinning him closer, chest to beating chest. Bucky's breath caught in his throat - maybe panicked? Steve held his tongue and paused, cautiously keeping one arm around Bucky's waist to hold him still and steady.

Bucky's eyes were searching everywhere on Steve's face, pupils dilated and breathing heightened. Steve searched right back, looking for any sign of a panic attack. Their faces were closer than they'd been in a long long time - they slept back to back in the field, which was nothing like facing each other like this. The tension in the air was palpable, sparks and energy waves bouncing and ricocheting off goddamn everything.

Steve lifted his other hand, slowly so Bucky could see it coming, and placed it directly over Bucky's heart. The parted lips drew in a soft breath as Steve pressed down a little, fingers curling into the fabric of Bucky's uniform as his palm resonated with a rapid heartbeat. It wasn't dangerously fast, didn't feel panicked as much as...almost excited. Anticipatory.

With that confirmation out of the way, Steve tugged his arm in, pulling Bucky closer. Their chests brushed and Buck had to tilt his chin up to keeping looking at Steve. The hand over Bucky's heart - pounding even faster now - slid behind Bucky's shoulders as Steve leaned forward the rest of the way.

Bucky's head turned slightly to Steve's as Steve pulled him in, so he tilted his head back against Bucky's as he tugged him into the hug. Steve was so used to being the smaller person when they hugged, it was a little strange not to tuck his chin over Bucky's shoulder.

It was a little more strange that Bucky wasn't hugging him back. He was stiff and frozen again,
hands down at his sides, not so much as one muscle twitching. Steve squeezed Bucky a little tighter, reveling in the feeling of having his best friend entirely safe in his arms.

Steve closed his eyes, humming softly as he rested his head against the side of Bucky's. Sometimes it felt like the only way he'd ever keep Buck safe was like this, wrapping his body around the slightly smaller one, shielding him from the gray world and red bombs and the haunted screams behind pretty crystal.

"You know, hugs are a two way thing," Steve reminded Bucky lowly, his mouth right by Bucky's ear anyways. Two hands instantly came up, resting lightly at identical heights on Steve's mid back. Well, it wasn't the hug Steve was used to, but Bucky was allowing himself to be touched again and honestly, Steve had missed that comfort. It was colder without Bucky's shoulder constantly pressed to his side.

He really could stay here forever, with the knowledge that Bucky was safe for once because Steve had physical proof of it. He could stay here and run his fingers through Bucky's hair and rub his back and he'd never have to go anywhere else again.

They both let go after a few more seconds, Steve's hands holding Bucky's biceps a moment longer as he drew back, searching Bucky's face. His expression was locked down in an unreadable mask, but he didn't look like he was going to panic any time soon. That was good, right?

"You alright?" Steve asked softly, going for words since Buck's expression wasn't telling him anything.

"Yeah. You gotta stop askin' me that," Bucky gave a weak smile, almost sad at the edges, but Steve's heart fluttered. They were going to be okay.

"I'll stop askin' when you start hugging me back like a normal person." Steve quipped and Bucky rolled his eyes.

"Normal person? You hug all the Commandos during battle plans?" Bucky raised his eyebrows, the words turning into a challenge at the expression.

The cute look was such a change from the solemn, avoiding Bucky that had walked in here Steve could almost hug him again.

"You know you're my one and only, Buck," Steve promised overly sincerely, batting his eyelashes at the young Sergeant.

Bucky smacked Steve's arm with the back of his hand, rolling his eyes again. But then his voice got a little quiet as he leaned back over the map, the few last words hovering in the air between them.

"I better be."

Steve smiled and leaned over Bucky's side, shoulder behind Bucky's again and cherishing the warmth of their proximity as he pointed with his other hand to a spot on the city wall.

"What if we climb over here on our way out? It looks like there might be a blind spot because of that building."

"No, no, it's too far from the cathedral. How about we climb over here, so we can just follow that path around to there and hitch a left..."

~*~
It ended up not mattering where they climbed over the wall, because they didn't climb it at all. They blew a hole through it so that Steve could carry Bucky through the rubble.

The mission started out perfectly: execution was planned, the boys were all ready, the tension from the past week resolved now that Bucky was back to smiling with the rest of them again. They'd gotten enough sleep for once and it wasn't absolutely freezing, just fairly cold. They had the weapons they were going to need, they had the layout of all the paths and roads and alleys memorized.

As soon as dusk began to settle on the city, the Commandos lined up in a crouch just outside the city wall, an old, crumbling one that was more likely to fall down than hold their weight. They had to go over the top to get in though, because the mission had to be entirely stealth until they blew up the cathedral. At that point, it was basically just get the hell out of the city and over the river to the east. But if they got caught before they blew up the cathedral, the whole mission would be screwed. And they'd be POWs again, which Steve was entirely not okay with.

So stealth climbing over the top of a rickety wall it was.

"Careful," Steve whispered as he boosted Gabe up the wall. Gabe nodded, dragging himself up to the top with his arm strength. It was thankfully a fairly thick wall, so he folded himself in half over it and helped pull Dernier up over the top as Steve boosted him up. Dernier dropped on the other side and Steve folded his hands to take Dugan's boot next.

By the time they all dropped on the other side, dusk had turned into dark. Soldiers crouched in the shadows against the protection of their entry wall, scanning around for hostiles while Steve whispered a last-second reminder of the plan. Everyone nodded, then the team split up in two - Bucky, Jones, Dernier, and Dugan taking the left path to the cathedral and setting up in a safe spot to provide whatever backup was necessary while Steve, Falsworth, and Morita took the path to the right and snuck in behind the cathedral, dropping down into the basement to set up explosives.

Morita would cover any hostiles they came across with his fancy Hydra tech and Steve would protect Falsworth with the shield while he set up the bombs in the basement.

Dugan tipped his hat and Bucky gave a two finger salute to Steve before they set off, following Jones and Dernier as they disappeared into the night, creeping along the shadows beneath windows.

"C'mon," Steve beckoned to his half of the team, taking the other fork. Stealth was a lot harder when you carry a large, reflective, brightly colored shield, so Steve had it strapped to his back for now, covered by the men who followed closely behind him.

They stopped at the corners of the cobblestone streets, peeking around corners before running across to the shadows of another row of old stone architectural buildings. The maze of the streets seemed to be quite accurate to the map they'd memorized, so it was only about fifteen minutes before the cathedral was in sight. Bucky's team would be around the front and side of the cathedral, covering as much ground as possible between the four of them in case anything went awry.

The cathedral was lit up with candles in most of the windows, flickerings of light through stained glass windows. It was beautiful in an eerie sort of way, and if this wasn't war than Steve might feel sorry for blowing it up. But this was war, and he hadn't come to Europe for the sight-seeing.

"Eleven o'clock," Steve whispered, crouching in the overhanging doorway of the building across the street from the cathedral. Morita and Falsworth both looked around Steve's shoulder, scanning for whatever Steve had seen. They both nodded as they spotted the cathedral guard, taking his slow, methodical steps back and forth in front of one of the doors. Their entrance to the basement was still another corner away, so if they moved fast enough they could get in without alerting the guard.
It'd be easier to kill him now, but odds were that the sudden death of a guard would raise attention of the rest of the fleet of Nazis.

"Hold off for now," Steve mouthed to Morita. Morita nodded, and they all crept forward out of the shadows. The guard was facing the other direction as they quickly crossed the street to take cover pressed up against the next building's wall. This alley was quite dark, which was exactly what they needed.

The soft sound of a footstep suddenly hit Steve's ears and he spun around to look behind them in dark alley. But Morita beat him to it, bringing his gun down over the stray guard's head. The guard crumpled silently to the ground and Steve let out a breath, turning back towards the cathedral. Just off to the right were the cellar doors, bolted shut with a padlock. It'd break in a single snap of Steve's shield, if they could follow the shadows and avoid the guards' eyes on the way there.

"Ready?" Steve whispered over his shoulder. Falsworth's eyes were wide but he nodded, Morita following suit. Steve signaled with his hand and they all cut out across the grassy plaza, timed to leave the shadows just as the guard turned and begin to walk the other way. The ground was slightly slippery, but if they ran fast enough they'd just make it. Steve rolled into the shadow against the cathedral's lower outside walls, almost flattened by Falsworth who had done the same. All three of them held their breath as they waited to see if the guard had seen him.

The footsteps got closer, closer, than turned away again. They'd made it. Steve breathed out slowly, carefully unstrapping his shield off his back and gripping it in his hand. They'd have to time this too, the sound of the breaking lock. Steve waited and counted until the guard was the furthest away he'd get, than he struck out metal against metal, snapping the lock off the cellar doors.

A clang echoed through the night air and Steve didn't wait to see if the guard had heard, he just ripped open the wooden doors and gestured Morita and Falsworth to drop through. Steve followed last, closing the door behind them with the broken lock still attached.

It took a few seconds of blinking for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, and by then Falsworth was already setting up demolitions around the cellar. There were actually a few weapons down here as well, although most of them were in the ground floor storage room. Which was conveniently located directly above the cellar. By blowing up the cellar roof, the fire should ruin all gunpowder, ignite grenades, and melt down enough metal on the guns or blow up enough pieces to ruin almost all of the supplies they were keeping here.

Personally, Steve thought it was kind of terrible that they would keep weapons of war in a place of God, but then again. This was the Nazis. They didn't have respect for most things that Steve did, and nearly everything they did was more than kind of terrible. So they'd blow up the cathedral and not think twice about it.

The creak of a door made them all freeze, then Steve quickly hurried to the stairs entrance of the cellar, shield out in front of him as he peered around the corner. No one was in sight. He looked back over to Falsworth and Morita, gesturing a question of how much longer. Falsworth held up a single finger, mounting his last explosive to the low cellar ceiling.

The exit strategy was back out the way they came, but once they got back topside they were going to cut off to the side of the cathedral that Bucky's team was on, exit by climbing the wall on that side. Steve lifted the cellar doors just a crack, listening for any guards around. There wasn't a sound.

He pushed the doors up all the way and pulled himself up onto the ground, shield held up in the direction of the pacing guard automatically. The guard wasn't at his post. Steve furrowed his eyebrows, but beckoned to Falsworth and Morita to come out of the cellar anyways.
He glanced around the corner of the cathedral. Still no guards--

A sharp *zing* echoed through the air as a single bullet bounced off of the metal of Steve's shield. They'd been found. Three more bullets ricocheted off the metal as Steve searched frantically for the direction of the gunmen. There, off by the alley they'd first come through. Directly behind where they were trying to go.

"Go go go!" Steve shouted, holding up the shield and trying to protect all three of them as they sprinted across the courtyard, headed for the plan's rendezvous point. More bullets soared their way but they were moving fast and jagged enough that the only ones that got close were either dodged or bounced off of Steve's shield.

They skid into the darkness of the alley just as fire opened up from another direction. "Go find the others, I'll be right behind you!" Steve shouted over the gunfire. Falsworth hesitated and Steve waved them on with a hand. "Go!"

He didn't wait for an answer before he rolled back out into the plaza, crouched behind his shield as he fired his pistol around it, aiming for chest shots as he took out the guards he could see. Four men went down and the hostile gunfire pattered out to a stop. That couldn't be all of them, they just had to be regrouping now, restrategizing. Which hopefully gave the Commandos time to get the hell out of here.

Steve took off back into the alley, skidding around the first left turn and almost smacking into the wall. It probably would have entirely crumbled under his weight if he had smacked it, so he was pretty thankful he managed to catch his footing and keep running.

The rendezvous point was just up ahead, at the convergence of this alley and the back open lot behind a factory. Steve skidded into the open lot, which was right up against the wall to get out of the city. In particular, the climbing over spot that Bucky had picked.

The lot was empty.

It was purely adrenaline that kept Steve from freaking out and shouting everyone's name. Instead he just kept going, sprinting across the lot, almost starting to sweat from how fast he was running. He'd helped Bucky pick out that spot too, where he'd be protecting above through the eye of his sniper scope. Plans to hell meant get to the last known location of Bucky Barnes.

Steve reached the medical building in another minute and forty five seconds, even though it felt like hours by the time he was racing up the stairs. The corridors were dim and there were a few uniformed bodies dead on the ground here and there, leaving a trail of bloody breadcrumbs on the way to Bucky's stakeout spot.

As Steve neared the top floor, panicked voices washed down over him. One of them sounded like Dugan. Steve ran faster, taking the steps four at a time. When he finally reached the top floor, he nearly busted the door off of its hinges as he blew through it. Instantly, there were six guns pointed in his direction, one of them from a slumped body on the floor that was holding his gun just as steadily.

The guns all instantly went back down the moment they realized it was Steve. He didn't even bother to say anything about it, he just instantly rushed forward and skid on the ground next to the man crumpled on the ground. Everything happened so fast that Steve didn't even register who was down until he cupped Bucky's jaw in his hands.

Bucky's eyes squeezed shut in pain and he yelped as Steve frantically searched down Bucky's body, looking for the wound. No, dammit, they didn't even have time for that. They had to get the hell out
"We only just got him off the fire escape. We were going to carry him out braced on Jones's and my shoulders--"

"We don't have time for that," Steve interrupted, shooting a glance at Dugan that hopefully stood as an apology for interrupting him and not having time to go through this right now. "Everybody, rendezvous point right now, I'll carry him."

"Cap--"

"We don't have time for anything else. Go, soldiers, that's an order!" Bucky made a weak sound of protest as Steve picked him up, followed by a groan of pain. Bucky was a hell of a lot heavier than Steve had been counting on, but he shifted Bucky a little closer to his chest anyways and took off.

The hand that was wrapped under Bucky's knees got slippery and warm within a couple of seconds and Steve cursed. Leg wounds were the fucking worst. It made sense though, since they had been trying to help him walk. Why couldn't it ever be a shoulder wound or something?

Steve had to turn sideways to make it back down the stairs, because he wasn't jumping out of any buildings while he was holding one of his team in his arms. On a particularly rough jolt, Bucky groaned again and tried to make himself a little smaller in Steve's arms, easier to carry.

"'M not some dame, you know," Bucky said through gritted teeth. Steve smiled fleetingly down at him before kicking open a door.

"Really? Then how come I have to keep savin' you like one?" Steve was teasing, but Bucky's face still managed to look pissed off through the pain. Before he could retort though, they were back out in the alley and suddenly surrounded by a band of Commandos.

"What part of get out of here don't you understand?" Steve asked in between breaths as they all took off running for the empty back lot by the wall. Bucky wrapped both of his arms tight around Steve's neck, holding on tight enough that Steve could focus on something besides worrying about dropping him.

Dugan just shrugged, ducking to avoid a low hanging shop sign. "We weren't leaving the Sergeant and you behind, Captain."

As stupid as it was to all go down because one of'em was down, had to admit the Commandos' disobedient loyalty tipped a corner of his mouth up. It was reckless and dangerous - they should've gotten outta here by now, but if they chose to stay of their own free will, Steve wasn't gonna stop 'em now. Team was a team.

"Alright, Falsworth, you wanna help? You and Dernier go blow up that wall, we're not getting Sergeant Barnes over the top of it." They both nodded and sprinted off to get ahead of the group that couldn't move as quickly. Bucky looked over his shoulder at how much faster they could be going and groaned.

"This is ridiculous, Steve, y'all are gonna get yourselves killed 'cause'a me."

"Don't care," Steve replied, his voice in the most stubborn tone he had. "Speaking of which, Dugan, what the hell happened back there? Why the hell is our sniper of all people the one that got shot?"

"Because he was being a dumbass, that's why," Dugan said with a glare in Bucky's direction. Bucky grimaced and stared up at the sky. Steve's arms were killing him - Bucky was only a few inches
shorter, only about eighty pounds lighter. Wasn't exactly easy cargo to carry across a city while getting shot at.

"Care to expand upon that? Tell me something I don't know." Steve grimaced and repositioned Bucky again, his hand starting to slip from the blood that was coating it.

"I hate you," Bucky said weakly. Steve and Dugan both ignored him.

But before Dugan could continue his explanation, gunfire started up again, bullets ricocheting off the wall next to them. Dugan cursed and ducked, spinning around to fire back some shots at the hidden enemies. Morita opened fire too, but they weren't moving fast enough to get out without some damage, especially if Steve's shield was outta commission by carrying Bucky.

"Jones! The shield!" Gabe weaved over and wrestled the metal off its holster, holding it up just in time to stop the next wave of bullets that were getting closer and closer in accuracy.

"God, this thing is heavy," Jones complain-shouted, trying to prop it haphazardly behind them as they dodged between small alleys and stretches of abandoned street. Morita's bullets found one'a the shooters, a body falling loudly to the cobblestone behind them. But it wasn't enough, couldn't take long before one of the other shooters hit somebody. Again, apparently.

An explosion went off ahead - Falsworth and Dernier's exit plan - and Steve tried to push his legs a little harder, get them there a little faster without leaving the rest of the boys in the dust. They had an exit strategy now, just needed another dozen shooters to keep the enemies off their tail before they got there.

"Where's your gun?" Bucky shouted over the gunfire, apparently reading Steve's mind. Again. "Left holster," Steve shot back, breathy and panting as it started to catch up to him, undertrained arms carrying a soldier this damn heavy this damn far under rigorous gunfire.

Bucky let go of Steve's neck, hanging on one-armed as he pulled the gun outta Steve's holster and aimed, muzzle propped up over his shoulder. A quick murmured apology and cold fingers started firing off shots, kickback punching hot bruises into his skin despite the thick uniform, blast of each discharge ridiculously loud right against his ear. Bucky was muttering a litany of hushed curses tangled with sorry sorry's but Steve just grimaced and kept running. Trigger pull and trigger pull, focus on the rippling shift of the muscles in Bucky's hand, pressing knuckles instead of bullets firing inches from his jaw.

It felt like an eternity before he'd counted to six, simultaneously relieved and worried because that was all in that clip and that meant Bucky wasn't firing anymore but what about the rest of the shooters-- Oh. There...wasn't anymore gunfire battering behind them, a loud thump of the final body dropping echoing in the alleyway behind them, just in time to round the corner into the backlot clearing. There was smoke tendrilling up from a huge hole in the wall, rock and dust crumbled into a rocky path under the space Falsworth and Dernier had cleared.

Bucky dropped his head to Steve's collarbone with a grimace, eyes squeezed shut tight again and wrist going limp, hand dangling Steve's gun over the back of his shoulder, burst of energy draining outta his body almost as fast as the blood soaking Steve's fingers was.

"Sarge and the Cap through first," Dugan ordered, waving Steve through the rubble and out to the dead grass on the other side. The others followed behind, Jones passing Steve's shield to Dugan, complaining that his arms were getting tired. Steve could definitely relate to that because, right now, he felt like his arms were about to fall off his body from Bucky's weight.
"We gotta cross that river and cut into the woods if we don't want to be followed. We can't get far so we'll have to be silent, but it's our best shot for now."

"Here, let us carry him, Cap." Jones made a move to take Bucky's weight off of Steve's arms but Steve didn't slow down to let him. Safety came before comfort.

"Soon as we get in the woods. We can't slow down now." Steve gritted his teeth against the strain and tried to keep up with the men wading through the shallow river. The icy water sloshed Steve's boots and splashed droplets up the blue pants, sticking even tighter to tired skin. He kept Bucky above the spray though, they didn't need to add freezing and wet to the list of maladies right now.

Risking a glance downwards, Steve's breath caught at the drooping eyelids, pretty features sunken gray as ash with that fiery disposition smoked out. The slippery hand coated in Bucky's blood was dripping into the river, bright red getting swept up in the white and blue swirls. Sure was losing a hell of a lot of blood.

Too much blood.

Just. Don't look down, don't look down and keep going, so long as he didn't let go Buck'd be fine.

The cover of the trees was too scarce to be really helpful, but it was better than nothing. They trekked - quickly - over tree roots and let gravity hurry them even quicker down large slopes covered with moss and rock and overgrowth. A soft, pained sound was pressed into Steve's uniform at every bump for the first half mile of woods before Bucky's noises just eventually stopped, his body rolling with every jolt and shift of his wound. Either that or he'd passed out from blood loss.

The pale face was pressed into Steve's uniform so he couldn't exactly tell if the ice blue eyes were open or not. There wasn't anything they could do to help the pain until they were safe anyways.

About two miles into the trees, a patch of particularly jagged and deep rocks gave way to a sort of small cave, hidden in the side of a hill and covered on most sides by overbrush. Jones pointed it out and they all followed quickly, skidding down the steepness of the hill before Morita cleared a few rocks and they all hustled under the makeshift cover. There wasn't much space and the walls were littered with roots from the tree above them, but the rock overhang cast a deep shadow that was big enough to hide them all, so long as they kept quiet.

Steve laid Bucky down the moment he could, carefully placing his head against a rock. His lips parted to make a sound as Steve slid his arm out from under Bucky's knees, but they couldn't fucking risk getting caught over involuntary noises of pain.

He clamped down a hand over Bucky's mouth, whisper silent apologies with the "s's" taken out. (That was something Bucky had taught him long before the war - it was impossible to whisper the s sound, so you just leave out all s's when you whisper. They finally managed to get one over on Sarah, staying up all night to practice whispering in the "s" free way.)

Icy blues squeezed shut in response, his entire body trembling from blood loss and pain. Now that he finally had the chance, Steve let go of his grip on Bucky's mouth, eyes scanning wildly down his body for the point of entry. His entire right pant leg was stiff with dried blood.

On the inside of his right thigh, just an inch or two above his knee, the material was shredded and ripped open. The glint of bloody metal was embedded in Bucky's skin, red still leaking from the wound.

There was a steady chant of oh god oh god please no, there's too much blood, lord save him, do not
As soon as he swallowed back the urge to cry or throw up, Steve looked up at his men and gestured wildly at them and Bucky. They all looked to each other, hesitating slightly, before Falsworth scooted closer, popping the blade of his knife out. Bucky had the steadiest hands as a sniper, but Falsworth was probably second best. His mouth was tight in a worried, insecure frown as he examined the wound, sucking in a sharp breath at how much blood was still pooling.

Falsworth pointed at Bucky's mouth, indicating he had to stay quiet and that this was gonna hurt like hell. Something to bite down on...Steve pushed up the hem of Bucky's uniform, scrambling to undo his belt. He'd give Buck his own, except the belt with the suit didn't exactly slide free with all the pouches and loops. So quick and shaking fingers - there was a reason Steve wasn't the one digging out the bullet, his artist hands couldn't be steady when he was under stress and this could count as a little more than goddamn stress - Steve unclasped the buckle, lifting Bucky's hips a centimeter to unthread the belt through its loops with a violent tug upwards.

As soon as he had it free, Steve came back up to Bucky's face, coaxing his mouth open with a thumb to the jaw. Bucky took the belt between his teeth without complaint, biting down into the material and breathing through his nose. Falsworth didn't wait a second longer, sinking his knife into ripped skin along the edge of the bullet and tilting it sideways.

Bucky's back arched, crystal eyes squeezing tight as his teeth sunk into the leather belt - hard - but somehow, he didn't make a sound. Steve had to bite his own lip to keep the distressed noises inside his destroyed chest because it was entirely irrational to feel pain shooting up his leg too, his body wasn't Bucky's and their pain wasn't one in the same but try telling that to his brain.

Falsworth changed angles and Bucky's eyes screamed for him, his hands tightening up into near bloody fists. For lack of any other way to help, Steve grabbed ahold of Bucky's clenched fists, wrapping their hands together and squeezing. Steve was here, Bucky was going to be okay. His fingers twisted with Steve's, crushing bruises into both of their hands.

Bucky looked up at him with pleading, pain-glazed eyes and a face as white as paper and he was not going to die. It was just blood loss. A lot of blood loss, but he could pull through. They always did.

The adrenaline rush and trauma shock from earlier when Bucky had managed to grab Steve's gun and dismantle enemies was long gone. He'd crashed from the artificial high, body weak and hurting and Steve would give anything for the bullet to have hit him instead.

Little drops of moisture hovered at the corners of Bucky's shut eyes, unfallen tears from the pain. Steve thumbed them away and Bucky's face squinched up more.

*I'm not going to let you leave me,* Steve thought in Bucky's direction, words as loud in his head as he dared.

He leaned down over Bucky, pressing their foreheads together and closing his eyes. Bucky's breathing hitched but he squeezed Steve's hands a little tighter in his own.

Steve kept his forehead to Bucky's, awed by his silence and torn apart by his pain. He could only think one thing now, one thing as Bucky's grip got weaker and weaker on Steve's fingers.

*Don't leave me, don't leave me. Don't you dare leave me.*
(The serious injury possible-trigger is that someone gets shot.)

Okay so I haven't left cliffhangers before and I'm sorry I did but I have LOT planned for the next chapter.

Thank you so much for reading! xx
Шесть (Six)

Chapter Notes

The Big Conversation of Pertinence aka the last scene in this chapter I have been waiting to write since forever.

Dialogue and some ideas from: "Til Death" by Barcelona (again)

Also, this beautiful girl I know recommended this song: Hero by Family of the Year for this fic, everybody should go check it out. xx

It was a little surprising when Steve sat down beside Dugan at dinner, wearily folded his hands together and stared at the flames with flickering eyes. The rest of the men fell silent at Rogers' appearance, watching him with careful, concerned eyes.

Dugan set the spoon in his tin of beans and scooted it to Dernier before half-turning, quiet as he waited to see if the emotional Captain was gonna say anything. Apparently not.

"How you doin', Cap?" Dugan finally ventured. At least they didn't have to whisper anymore. Rogers’ hands were shaking and he clasped them tighter together as he noticed.

"Sergeant Barnes is sleeping," Steve said, like that was an acceptable answer. There'd be no point correcting him though, he'd wave 'em off and say he was fine, they should all be worrying about Barnes. Which, yeah, the guy'd been shot. But that didn't mean Cap wasn't kinda freaking out.

"He's a fighter. He'll pull through. Don't you think so, Jacques?" Gabe nudged Dernier, who was looking solemnly at his next spoonful of Dugan's beans.
"Je ne sais pas ce que je pense," Dernier muttered under his breath. Jones made a face and decided he wasn't gonna translate that. The Captain wouldn't take so well to negativity, even if it was "I dunno what I think." Aka he wasn't so sure Barnes was making it through the night.

"So long as it doesn't drop too low below freezing." Steve tossed a stick into the fire. Nobody said anything, there wasn't much you could say to that.

They'd managed to stabilize Barnes in the woods. Well, stabilize was a loose term. Falsworth'd gotten the bullet outta his leg, wrapped up the wound with cloth torn from Morita's shirt. The blood stopped draining like a damned faucet, but he'd already lost a scary amount. The leather belt had permanent teeth marks in it and his limbs were too weak to move on his own, breathing too slow and shallow, eyes glazed over in shock - but he was alive. Technically. Didn't even blink at the tear that splattered on his pale cheek as Rogers held their foreheads together.

It was heartbreaking, Cap losing it like that. The way he looked at Barnes...like someone'd ripped Rogers in half down the middle and told him he'd hafta live like that. Glassy eyes turned pretty quickly into shut ones. Which made Rogers (silently) panic at first, until Dugan managed to calm him down by whispering there was no chance of a concussion, he probably should sleep.

The bloodloss was dangerous - there was no way to tell, but odds were that he'd lost too much. A couple of pints, at least, and that bandage wasn't gonna stop much. It'd already soaked through by the time Steve picked the unconscious Sergeant back up in his arms.

Rogers' arms were trembling though, so Dugan and Jones had forcefully pulled Barnes back, whispering they could take him, that Cap would hate himself if he dropped Sarge outta stubbornness. That'd finally made Rogers sensible enough to let them brace one of Barnes's arms over each of their shoulders, dragging him outta their hiding spot an hour after they'd found it.

The footmen militia from the city had passed overhead while Falsworth was digging the bullet outta Barnes's leg with a knife. They'd all frozen, listening to the voices with guns at the ready. Rogers had clamped his hand of Barnes's mouth and nose to quiet his breathing, melting in apologetic looks. But the Nazis passed right over them without stopping.

Half hour later, they were on their way outta the woods and over the German border. They'd reached safe territory after another hour's walk, slowed down by whichever two soldiers were bracing Barnes's weight. They all took turns, even Rogers, despite his shaking hands and trembling bottom lip.

Now they'd set up a camp and a fire and their tents, just as the coldest part of the night set in. Barnes was inside a tent, sleeping in a pile of all their sleeping bags, cushioning him the best they could. Rogers had insisted on staying with Barnes instead of eating dinner, which was why everyone was surprised he'd emerged from the tent at all.

But here he was, sitting glumly next to Dugan and throwing little pieces of wood into the fire and talking about how Barnes wasn't gonna make it if the temperature dropped too much. Which was true; Sarge lost a shit ton of blood, which didn't go well with cold. Temperatures below freezing made it difficult for blood to circulate and since Barnes didn't have alotta blood left in his body to spare, it was pretty likely his heart would fail or his brain wouldn't oxygenate or his organs would shrivel or about a'hundred other terrible things following that fate.

So yeah, if it got that cold, Barnes might not make it through the night.

They all stared solemnly at the fire now, eyes flicking occasionally to Rogers then back to the flames. Dugan had always known Rogers and Barnes were close - he'd heard countless stories about the tiny
version of Rogers before he'd ever shown up to save them in Azzano - but it was heartbreaking to see how much Barnes's injury was affecting him.

He wasn't just deflated, he was...disheartened. In the worst of ways. Not entirely hopeless, obviously, but nowhere near the bright, confident commander they'd all come to know. Barnes once said something under his breath about Rogers being "a goddamned ball of sunshine," and as crazy as that sounded, it fit. Rogers was resplendent and warm in a way not much else was in the war of cold western Europe.

And with that sun behind a cloud, everything felt a little darker, little colder. Rogers lit up rooms, lit up battlefields, and now they all dripped melancholy with his sadness. Not that everyone wasn't worried about Barnes too, because Dugan was 98% sure he'd seen Falsworth with shiny, unfallen tears lining his eyes earlier. They were all worried to hell. There wasn't one of them that didn't respect the shit outta Bucky Barnes.

"He'll pull through," Dugan promised, grabbin' Rogers's shoulder, rocking him with the movement. Rogers breathed slowly, nodded slower. Guarded blue eyes flickered red and orange fire reflections as Rogers looked over, sucking in a breath.

"You mind taking watch tonight? I wanna be there when Buck wakes up." Rogers still looked positively miserable, but of course Dugan nodded. He knew everyone'a them'd take that bullet for Barnes, but Rogers looked like he was seriously wishing it'd been him, twenty times over.

"We're out here if you need us. If either of you need us," Jones reminded as Rogers stood. He nodded again, giving them all the most grateful expression he could manage, then he was off for Barnes's tent again.

Dugan sighed, snagging his beans back from Dernier. Those two. They were gonna be the death of him.

~*~

The lantern flickered, a brief interruption of the golden glow reflecting inside tent walls. The light made Bucky's pale skin absorb gold, face radiating like an angel's. And five years younger, back when he did glow like that from dock work in the sun all day.

The rest of his body was covered in blankets and sleeping bags, every warm item in the Commandos' inventory. They'd insisted on giving anything they could to keep Bucky warm. Keeping him warm meant keeping him alive. Steve'd do anything in the world right now to keep Bucky alive.

And he'd proven that before. He'd jumped out of a plane and stormed an enemy base alone because he'd been deadset on keeping Bucky alive. Because regardless of the letter addressed in his name, declaring Sergeant James Barnes dead, Steve was entirely sure he couldn't be. He'd know if Bucky was dead. He'd feel it inside him. There'd be some sorta physical indication. Something inside his body would break. The world couldn't keep spinning, Steve would know. The entire planet would change if Bucky Barnes left it. He'd never been more sure of anything in his life.

And he'd been right - Bucky wasn't dead then. And he wasn't going to die now.

He sucked in a shaky breath, eyes drifting up to the lantern. Tilted head, chin propped on a curled fist as he sat by Bucky's makeshift bedside. War. He'd never thought it'd take so much from his hands.

A soft sound caught his attention and Steve looked back down, eyes catching on the exotic lips parting to draw a breath. Iceblue blinked up at him, slightly dazed and confused, still dizzy, wide
with pain or exhaustion or fear. The clarity sharpened as crystal settled on him, familiar worried face at a cold, hard bedside. Pale, so quiet and pale, pain still fogging the back of shining icyblue. He'd give goddamn anything to take his place.

"Ev'ryone get out safe?" Bucky whispered, voice grating smoke over gravel. A soft and sad curve tugged Steve's lips. 'Course Buck thought'a everyone else first. Steve nodded and ran his hand over the length of Bucky's cheekbone, tracing proof of living, breathing, still alive.

"Dugan told me what happened out there." Steve let his hand stop in Bucky's hair, weaving fingers through the short strands above his ear. Bucky was looking up at him with this quiet, watchful cautiousness and that cracked Steve down a little, eyes threatening to water as he smiled and choked out a shaky, affectionate, "You idiot."

"Had to protect your sorry ass, Stevie," Bucky whispered again, ghost of a smile on his pastel mouth. Steve wanted to press his fingers into Bucky's lips, rub them until they revived their normal wild pink, until they had enough blood in them to make it look like Bucky wasn't dying.

"Your job description doesn't have anything to do with my ass, sorry," Steve tried for the same ghost of a smile and they were both so foolishly gone, sitting here and pretending to ignore that Bucky might not be around for sunrise.

"But my life description does." The words were soft, like Steve was the one who needed the gentle touch. Like Steve was the one bleeding and broken.

Not bleeding; definitely broken when Bucky was looking at him like that.

"You can't keep doin' this to me, Buck." Steve sucked in a breath, pulling his hand out of Bucky's hair and clasping both in his lap. "I thought we agreed you weren't gonna almost-die on me anymore, after you almost fried your insides from that electric fence. And what's this thing with November? Last November, captured. This November, bullet in the leg. You keep near dyin' on me and I'm not sure I can take much more. What's the plan for next year's November, so I can plan ahead emotionally?"

An amused huff through the pale pink cupid's bow lips and Bucky had to be going through hell if he didn't have the energy to joke back.

"How bout next November we have a Commandos Thanksgiving at our place in Brooklyn?" Bucky winced as he shifted, still managing a shadow of that old smile. Steve had to bite his lip to keep the tears from welling up this time.

"Yeah," he forced out, sharp grimace twisted inwards. Thanksgiving in Brooklyn. That boy was gonna break his damn heart. Bucky, who never looked down. Who thought that they were gonna win this war. By this time next year. Who dreamed of the two of'em crossing the familiar dark brick Brooklyn bridge one more time.

It was all Steve's fault. The bulletwound, the continuous trauma flashbacks, everything. Bucky'd had the chance to go home and he hadn't taken it. He'd followed Steve right back into the belly of the beast and it was all his fault.

Wasn't supposed to know about it. Actually, Bucky'd gone to lengths to make sure he didn't. It wasn't that he just didn't tell Steve; he told the doctors not to tell him either.

After Azzano they'd put Buck through a psych eval. Came back clear, but stamped with a major recommendation. Severe encouragement. The doctors, staff, commanders all wanted to send Bucky
home as a POW. Psychological injury, honorable discharge. They told him to go home, back to Brooklyn.

But Bucky turned down his one shot, his one chance to be home and safe and mentally stable because Steve had asked him to stay.

Hadn't even found out until after their first mission. He'd overheard Peggy and Phillips whispering about it, and confronted Peggy later. She'd been hesitant to tell him anything, but eventually relented, relayed that Sergeant Barnes was supposed to be sent home as a POW and had turned down the offer.

At the time, Steve was struck silent. Bucky was supposed to be home, not out here killing people. But he'd stayed for Steve, turned into a murderer for Steve. Something about that made Steve feel really warm inside, but mostly really nauseous.

But now Bucky had been shot and that was Steve's fault - in more ways than one - and if Bucky died...

"You takin' back that answer about following me into a suicide mission yet?" Steve asked, trying not to choke on the tears crawling up his throat. Bucky huffed, looking through him at the ceiling of the tent, movements slow like he was thawing from frozen ice.

"Just one suicide mission? Whose squad have you been in?"

It was a joke. Which should be good, Bucky joking meant Bucky might be okay, but the words hit him like a freight train ramming into his chest. Hard. How many times had Steve put Bucky's life on the line? Of course it eventually came to this.

The soldiers used to whisper this tune, this phrase whenever some greenie was still too bright and excited and didn't understand what the hell they were doing out in the first place. Steve had actually never said it to anyone, nor been around any greenies like that (or really any greenies at all), but Bucky had told him about it while he was telling one of his stories from the first few months in the 107th.

*We've heard it all before, how we've come to die. Just before it ends, people start to fly.* It was always sung in soft, low tones, under breath until the greenies had it implanted in their heads. Honestly, Steve thought it was a little sick, but so was war. Part of it was true though: as much as the films overseas glorified war, made it look honorable and beautiful, there were nights that Steve couldn't sleep so well because of the things they had to do. They'd come over here to die, or to kill. No other options. And yeah, it put you outta your mind sometimes. Yeah, it messed you up. That'd never once deterred him from fighting.

But watching Bucky get messed up...Steve wasn't sure he could do that. Buck lying here under the flickering glow of the lantern, pale and wasting away in the night, shivering to keep the blood pumping through his veins. And after everything Bucky'd ever done from him, the number of times Bucky'd saved his life, this was how Steve repaid him?

"I'm so sorry," he whispered, trying not to cry. Barnes took a bullet to the leg and hadn't shed a tear, Steve had to be stronger than this. He sucked in a shaky breath, gaze cutting away in the dim lantern glow. It was still flickering, light weak but unfailing. Holding on, through the night.

Bucky hadn't answered Steve's question. Hadn't said whether or not he'd change his answer now, about following Steve into the jaws of death.
He had to know.

The ice blue eyes were on him when Steve looked back down, even paler blue than they usually were. Without thinking Steve reached over, wrapped all ten of his shaking fingers around one a Buck's weak, gentle hands. Squeezed the curled fist between his palms, thumb running over the back of cold, rough skin. The pale lips curved up a little, colorless, too close to blue under the golden glow of the tent.

"If we could go back," Steve whispered, harsh in the cold gold, came out even rougher than he felt, fingers curling a little tighter around Bucky's cold hand. "...would you change anything?"

Would he have gone home? Would he have asked Steve to come with him? Would he have never enlisted in the first place? He couldn't take his eyes off of the crystal below him, losing oceans in the pitch black sky, bottom lip trembling as he fought welling tears.

Bucky took one look at him and snorted, raising both eyebrows in high arches.

"C'mon, man, I ain't dyin' on you that easy."

"Humor me." He managed to turn the corners of his mouth up a little, because Bucky was being stubborn as always. But if this was really the last night, Steve couldn't. He couldn't let Buck leave him without knowing, knowing if he forgave him, if Buck hated him for this stupid war, if--

Bucky sighed, wiggling his fingers free from the fist so he could intertwine them with Steve's.

"If this was my last breath, if my life was over..." Bucky squeezed Steve's hand a little tighter, terrifyingly weak and sending chills down his spine, so so cold. "I'm not leavin' with any regrets, Stevie. 'Cause I had you."

The smile that broke out on Steve's face made him duck his head, overwhelmed, bringing Bucky's hands up to his face. Steve rested his forehead on their entwined hands, breathing in and out as slowly as he could to keep from crying and laughing at the same time. It took him a minute to stop the tears from spilling down his cheeks, to get a grip back on his lungs, on his hands, on his stupid heart that was trying to jump outta his chest.

Fuck. Bucky Barnes.

He pressed his lips gently to the place where their thumbs overlapped, soft solid kiss to the joint of mismatched, puzzle-piece hands. Bucky's breath hitched and Steve's gaze cut upwards faster than the slip of a sniper trigger, staring wide-eyed at the beautiful features. Pale lips were parted, ice blue wide as his as they stared at each other in flickering gold.

"You stole my line," Steve accused, a relieved smiling huff falling from parted lips, ghosting over Bucky's fingers as they curled even tighter around his, pressing marks between his knuckles he wanted to keep for the rest of forever.

What else could he say, to follow a confession like that?

* I leave with no regrets because I had you.*

He'd almost forgotten, about the last time they'd had this conversation. Bucky sure hadn't though, reading right back to him that promise, almost word for word. It'd been years ago - he'd had pneumonia, neither of them thought he'd make it through the night and Bucky'd asked him teary-eyed, you regret anything?
Did he regret anything. Jesus, no.

Steve'd answered, no, 'course not. Couldn't, he'd had Bucky 'til death. Which better always be goddamn true, by the way. The memory was kind'a hazy, he'd been so damn sick at the time, but he'd never forget the look on Bucky's face when he'd said that.

He'd do...anything to have Bucky look at him like that again.

"Mm, 'cept the 'til death' part 'cause m'not dying," Bucky mumbled tiredly and Steve's heart lit off fireworks in his chest, beating like the drummer boy's call.

"Better not be. Who else'd abandon their posts and get themselves shot 'cause'a me?" Steve teased carefully, lowering their entwined hands to rest by Bucky's side, fingers still locked secure. Bucky huffed a laugh and tilted his head, eyelids fluttering. He didn't shrug - even though the head tilt was part of that gesture - because moving might pull the dental floss stitches Monty'd sewed up a few hours ago.

"An'body who knows how quick you get yourself int'a trouble..." The words came out a little delayed, slow and further further away. Crystal eyes blinked rapidly, trying to stay open.

He couldn't take back ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death and he couldn't take back the command that had Bucky covering his six when the bullet lodged in his thigh, but he could soothe his best friend to sleep. Bout the only thing he could do, but for now, it'd have to be enough.

"Get some rest, Buck. I'll be here when you wake up." Steve brushed the fingers of his free hand back through through the disheveled brown hair, smoothing it down the way Buck did before missions.

"Mmm," Bucky said as way of response, then his eyes shut and his hand went lax in Steve's, body slipping back into unconsciousness. Steve watched the sharp features soften out, moment strangely intimate, so close to the pretty face soft in slumber. For Bucky to go through all this pain for Steve and then trust him so much as to fall asleep holding his hand...

It was. It was a lot, was all.

Steve leaned down and pressed a soft, lingering kiss to Bucky's forehead, closing his eyes at the warmth of Bucky's skin under his lips. Proof he was still alive, proof his body was breathing and beating and here and Steve hadn't lost him yet. He sent up a quick prayer of thanks before he sat back again, not missing the hint of a smile on Bucky's mouth that wasn't there a moment ago.

Don't you dare ever leave me. Steve reached over to blow out the lantern, arm stretching uncomfortably to keep ahold of Bucky's hand. Like hell he was ever letting go.

The tent plunged into darkness and he settled onto the cold ground next to the bundled up sleeping body, body facing Bucky's as he curled up close to the pile of blankets that he could.

Sleep wasn't gonna come anytime tonight, and Steve was more than alright with that. He wasn't gonna sleep until Bucky wasn't in danger of dying in the middle of the night. So he'd lay here and watch the rise and fall of that warm chest beneath the blankets, the way Buck used to when he was sick.

Kept his thumb rubbing an insignificant amount of warmth into the back of Bucky's hand, other fingers resting over the quiet thudding pulse. For once, hypersensitive touch was gonna do more than just overwhelm, he was gonna know the moment anything went wrong. And maybe, he'd be able to save Bucky from this.
He'd do anything it took to keep from waking up to ice cold fingers, glazed over crystal. Maybe, when the morning sun broke out its warmth over the top of the tent, Bucky'd still be breathing and his precious heart would still be beating. Steve's would beat in time as he waited for the most beautiful sunrise he'd ever see.

~*~*~*~

"You think we should tell Agent Carter?" Dugan raised bushy eyebrows, knocking his shoulder into Monty's to catch his attention. The brit snapped outta his daze, gaze cutting away from where he'd been watching Rogers hobble Barnes into the medical tent.

"'Bout what happened?" He clarified, grimace tugging down one side'a his mouth as what happened got brought up again. Not like any of them'd had anything else on their minds for the past day and a half.

"Yeah." Heavy shoulders shrugged, forcing himself to look away from Rogers' hand curled tight in Sarge's collar. "I mean, she seemed pretty concerned about Barnes acting differently 'cause'a the torture thing."

"You think that's what this was? Some sort of...temporary insanity from the torture?"

"No, I don't." Dugan looked grimly ahead, lips pursed beneath his mustache. "I do think Carter wants to know the details, though. And if it's gonna help Sarge, I'll tell her whatever the hell she wants to know."

"She'll probably seek us out anyways...shall we go while the others are indisposed?" They both looked over to the increasingly busy debriefing tent, bustling soldiers mulling and hushed, word about the bullet startin' to spread.

"Might as well. 'Fore Barnes is awake long enough to buck his feet."

Falsworth snorted, mumbling some amused heh, Buck, under his breath as he fell in step with Dugan's boot strides, matching treads cutting through the crowds and stragglers as they aimed for canvas.

"Agent Carter?" Dugan called, peeking his head inside a flap of the closest debriefing tent. A pretty brunette head snapped up and he waved Monty over, ducking to step inside. Carter waved off the other reporting soldier, starting their way with her eyebrows knit in concern, sharp heels somehow still making a bit of sound on the tightly compacted dirt.

"Gentlemen. I assume you've come to relay information?" She asked them, deep brown eyes lit up with that vaguely-terrifying fire. As always. Rogers sure had his sights on one hell of a dame.

"Yes, ma'am," Falsworth answered. "It's about Sergeant Barnes."

A flash of worry, fury, something at the mention of Barnes' name and she was spinning on one'a those heels, waving a hand at the closest table and barely waiting for them to sit.

"Well?" She demanded, crossing her arms as dark eyebrows arched high and impatient. Dugan tried not to shrink in his chair as he removed his hat and offered a matching grimace.

"Well, ma'am, it's a bit of a long story...."

The night was dark enough to give them plenty of shadows as they crept into the center of the city. Barnes led the way, low, impossibly silent as always. Jones and Dernier shared a spirited look as
Barnes crouched, signaling to stop. The boys all fell easily into the command of their Sergeant - he'd earned everyone's eternal respect in the Hydra factory, before any of this even started. Taking work from men that couldn't do it, stepping in to keep as many necks off the wire and the wrath of the bitter guards. Stuck 'em together and made 'em get along and never treated anyone different, whether they were Asian or black or couldn't speak english. He'd been the one to make the Howling Commandos into the Howling Commandos in the first place.

And it was those same loyal boys that followed him through the shadows of the city, splitting off into groups of two at one point so they could cover more ground with their backup cover. The locale of Barnes' sniping post was across from the cathedral and from a high enough window, had a fairly decent view. Dugan waited in the alley beside the building, wishing Barnes luck with a silent clap on the shoulder as he mounted the stairs.

With that he waited below Barnes's window, eyes skyward until the familiar tip of a sniping rifle stuck into view. With Barnes secure in his position, only thing left to do was wait. From his assigned position he could see the three figures as Rogers, Falsworth, and Morita darted across the cathedral plaza, disappearing into the shadows against the wall.

There was one problem with Barnes's window that they hadn't been counting on. There was a tree next to the cathedral that made the angle kind of impossible to see beyond the basement doors. The tree obviously wasn't on a map of city streets and buildings, nobody draws in that sort'a thing. It shouldn't've been a problem at all, really, if the mission went according to plan.

But as soon as the three Commandos dropped into the basement of the cathedral, something went wrong. All of a sudden, the guards on the outside of the cathedral all turned their heads, then took off for the other side of the building, blocking them from sight.

Dugan glanced up, but Barnes's rifle was still aimed through the window, still patiently waiting. Then the basement doors shot upwards and Rogers rolled out, curling into a ball behind his shield. A moment of pure silence and the blue helmet peered out, checking in both directions. If it wouldn't give away his position, Dugan would've called out the guards disappeared, that they should take off right now.

And that's when the gunfire hit. It came out of nowhere, bullets started bouncing off of Rogers' shield, source too far away to pinpoint. And 'cause of that damned tree, Barnes couldn't do a damned thing; guards were all on the wrong side'a the cathedral to snipe from the window.

Which, of course, didn't settle for Barnes. One moment Dugan was cursing the enemy gunfire and the next he was startling, gaping upwards at the flash of movement. Barnes wasn't firing. No, instead, he'd rolled outta the window and was currently scaling the fucking fire escape.

To be fair, it did stick out quite a bit further and he'd be able to shoot around the tree.

Only thing was, the fucking fire escape didn't have a lick of protection. From a window, only the gun was really visible. This was Barnes's entire body suddenly exposed, in the open. And it was always everyone's first move to take out the sniper because obviously, they could rack up a shit ton of kills. Which was why snipers don't go out in the damn open.

"What the fuck Barnes," Dugan hissed under his breath. There was no way Barnes was going to hear him from up there and Dugan may as well not get them both killed.

It was Sniper 101 stuff, never ever leave your post to go out in the open. Actually, that was just War 101 stuff. But of course, the moment that Rogers was in danger, Barnes threw all the rules out the window. He'd never risked anybody's life but his own to save Rogers, but still. It was fucking
reckless and ridiculous and frankly extremely worrying.

Then the shot fired. And Barnes crumpled above him. Mid-step on one'a the top metal stairs, bullet puncturing the muscle of his inner thigh and just like that he was down, toppling with a sharp cry, nearly falling off the fire escape. Dugan cursed out loud this time and turned tail, barreling straight into the building.

Jones and Dernier were right behind him, tearing into the building seconds after Dugan had. They'd seen Barnes fall - everyone and his brother could see Barnes fall he was out on a fucking fire escape. There was still gunfire on the other half of their team and Dugan could hear Rogers shouting something, but they had a man down and Cap had a damn invincible shield and a supersoldier serum pumping through his veins. They could hold their own for a bit.

As soon as they got inside, a flood of disorganized soldiers started pouring from the doorways. Barnes must've snuck up to the top, cut the time it'd take to kill through. But they had to get to Barnes as soon as possible, so all four of them went kinda nuts slaughtering everythin' in the way of them and their beloved sniper.

They were on the fourth floor when Falsworth and Morita's shouts joined in, extra man-power the perfect boost to tear through the rest a the building. It wasn't a minute later before Dugan and Jones were climbing onto the fire escape, crouching down beside Barnes's body. He was still breathing, thank the lord.

"The hell were you thinking?" Dugan hissed, lifting Barnes's head and shoulders. Jones picked up his legs and Bucky shouted, unrepentant face screwing up in pain. Jones called into the other boys for help, all groaning as they lifted Barnes off the fire escape and tried to maneuver into safety.

"Had...to cover...Stevie..." Barnes gasped between pained pants. Dugan would've smacked him over the head if he already wasn't in a shit ton of pain. "'S m-my job."

"Well it's not gonna be your job if y'bleed out you bastard."

Four pairs of arms finally lowered the trembling body to the floor, Jones crouching down worriedly as Barnes threw his head back and groaned. So much for that recklessness speech now, huh?

Then the door was busted open and they all drew on the intruder, including the goddamn bleeding invalid. And, 'course, soon as they recognized Rogers, weapons dropped and their Captain fucking dashed across the room, freaked out, and they somehow all managed to get outta the city while Rogers carried Barnes's body.

"The whole thing was insane, ma'am." Dugan finished, leaning back in his chair. Agent Carter'd been quiet, listening intently to the story with deceptively pretty hands clasped on the table.

"Lieutenant Falsworth, do you verify this story?" Carter asked, tipping her head at Monty's shallow nod, apologetic grimace.

"You told us to tell you if Barnes ever became a danger to himself or anyone else. I guess getting shot because he was being a dumba-- a, uh...fool, technically counts as that." Dugan pointed out, glancing over at Falsworth for backup.

"I mean, we know he feels he needs to protect Rogers, but. We're concerned about him," Falsworth added.

Carter nodded, looking pensive. She'd been uncharacteristically quiet, none of her normal rapidfire pestering questions.
"Is there anything else?" She finally asked, cocking her head.

Dugan thought about the way Rogers had worn himself thin trying to care for Barnes, the way he'd stayed up all night at his side. After his shift on watch, Dugan had peeked his head in Barnes's tent. Rogers had been lying curled up on his side, squeezing Barnes's hand and staring at him as he slept. It was damn heartbreaking.

Rogers had lifted his head when Dugan had come in, but he'd waved away the curiosity, nodding his sympathy before he backed the hell out of there. Oddly felt like intruding, in a strange way he couldn't place and really didn't wanna either.

"No ma'am," he finally answered. No point try'n to explain it. Just the way Cap and Sarge were.

"Well then, thank you for the information, boys." She pursed her lips, giving them a sharp, semisweet smile. "I believe you have a Sergeant that probably could use your good morale right now. You're both dismissed."

Tipped both their hats to Carter and they bolt outta there quick as they'd come in.

"You think he's gonna be alright?" Falsworth asked under his breath as they cleared the tent, stepped into the chill of the open air. Dugan glanced over at the worried Lt, who was knawin' his lip like Barnes was already half dead.

He'd survived the first night of cold, it wasn't gonna get any worse from here.

"He'll be fine. Only person I know that fights harder than he does is Cap, who might as well be fighting for 'em both anyways, way he's acting." Dugan cocked his head knowingly, fitting the bowler back snugly on his head. Falsworth smiled, a little distant on the horizon as they started for the medical tent.

"If it wasn't so stressful, those two might almost be endearing," Falsworth smiled lightly and Dugan laughed, clapping Falsworth on the shoulder.

"Almost," he agreed absently, running the list through his head, the important one of where he was gonna bed down tonight and if there was any chance of a decent C-ration for dinner.

~*~

Seven days. That's how long Bucky's sentence was. He was supposed to stay in a medical cot to heal for seven days and there was no way in hell he was going to keep still that long.

He ended up lasting about seven hours before he got up. The doctors had put him in a regular sleeping tent, thankfully. Nobody wanted a repeat'a the whole affair that went down in the medical tent.

Bucky really hated doctors. And he really didn't want Steve in there in case he freaked out. But of course, he got both.

He'd refused to see the medics when he'd first been rescued. Wouldn't be able to stand the shock and horror on their faces, seeing his body. Didn't let anyone see underneath ratty clothes for weeks; by then, all the worst of the scars and burns and bruises faded. And now it'd been a year since, so all the marks Zola left on him were gone. Well. The physical marks, anyways.

Still, he hated doctors. And he hated the idea of being weak, broken at all in front of the kid he'd done nothing but try to be strong for. But Steve limped him into the medic tent anyways, instantly
spurting off to the doctor the story behind Bucky's gunshot wound and the dental floss stitches and everything.

Honestly, the bullet hadn't gone very deep at all. The worst of it was the blood loss and he was already recovering from that. He was a little dizzy, sure, but Steve was acting like Bucky was dying. Which he wasn't. Well, not anymore.

And then they'd pushed him down onto the cot for the medics to operate. And a switch somewhere inside Bucky flipped.

One moment Steve was holding him to the cot and the next Bucky's hand was around the medic's throat. The soldier made a shocked choking noise and suddenly big hands locked around his wrists, ripping him off and tipping them backwards and de didn't have much balance standing on only one leg, but the sharp tug whipped him around and fast and hard enough to land the punch anyways.

Fist exploding with fire, loud thud and a broken, hurt sound flew out of Steve's mouth and that sound shot the tent right back to reality and all he could see was snap of Steve's head to the side, his knuckles against that high fragile cheekbone and. Steve was hurt. Oh god oh god Steve was hurt.

"Oh god," Bucky whispered, horror lacing his tone and fingertips but he had to reach anyways, hesitating a moment before carefully wrapping his fingers over Steve's wrist, pulling him close as he fell back to the edge of the cot, reached up gentle and terrified to inspect the already forming bruise on the soft golden cheek. "Steve, are you okay?"

"Yeah, I - wow, Buck, you pack a mean punch." Steve flexed his jaw, tracing over the same place Bucky just had, big blue eyes looking at him wide and kinda scared.

For him, not of him, he could tell that much from Steve's expression but he still couldn't take that, the shock settling in over dusty purple--

"Sorry, I...You okay, doc?" He shot his attention to the medic too fast, too obvious, but he really did wanna make sure he hadn't hurt anymore, jesus christ. The doctor nodded, inspecting his own trachea carefully. Bucky swallowed, looking down at his hands. Fuck. He'd just sucker-punched his best friend.

Who had just saved his life.

He was a terrible terrible human being.

"-ou okay, Bucky?" He caught the last half of Steve's question and sucked in a sharp breath, blinking up to look at the looming worry. Why were they asking him if he was okay? He hadn't torn any stitches or anything.

"Fine. You just...surprised me, is all." He attempted a smile that probably paraded as a grimace to the scouring gaze but the longer they spent talking about this the longer he had to be in here and Bucky held the oxygen stale in his lungs, practically shoving himself back onto the length of the cot. He could do this. He had to do this. "Can we get this overwith any time soon?"

The medic looked hesitant, but Bucky curled his hands around the side bars, forced himself still and as nonthreatening as possible. The doctor eyed him cautiously but finally pulled out the little box of tools, leaning into his space with a pair of scissors to cut open the torn pant leg, properly sew up the messy bullet wound.

See, he was fine, he could do this. It wasn't bad at all, he was--
The sewing needle pierced his skin and it was all he could do to reign in the scream. He was okay, he was okay, he was safe. Right? He was...fuck, that hurt. There was so much pain. He couldn't move, he was bleeding, warm and sticky down his leg and he couldn't move, couldn't-- Sharp tang of metal, musty canvas, another harsh bite at the burning slide of a bitter hook slipping into his skin...

Someone was speaking German behind him and Bucky squeezed his eyes shut, wishing for some dust particle of English so he'd at least know the hell were doin' to him. Another flicker of pain shot up his leg and Bucky's mouth couldn't keep shut any longer, head throwing back as lips parted in a silent scream. One of the torture minions had a filthy German hand wrapped tight around his bicep, holding him down and exerting all that power and he just wanted the leather straps to let him go, he just wanted to pain to stop.

The German voices were still floating over him, gritting the edge of his brain, one sharp one getting louder. And closer. Bucky's eyes were still closed but he could feel the warm breath on his ear, how fucking close the voice was as it dripped more words over him and for some reason, it was in a language he understood.

"Tell me where you are right now."

Bucky struggled to find his tongue, he had to speak, better to give the fuckers what they wanted 'cause he'd proven too many times, lashing out never worked and he couldn't take anymore pain right now, he wasn't strong enough.


"No," the voice interrupted, harsh and pissed. Bucky instantly fell silent. Something was wrong, the voice was wrong and he couldn't place it, except that it was too soft to fit the harsh German and he hated them, every single one of the bastards who stuck him with needles and knives but if he focused on the voice hard enough maybe the pain would just stop and. "No, open your eyes Bucky. You're with me, your Steve. I got you out and I'm not ever gonna let them take you again."

Bucky blinked watery eyes open, ignoring how his lashes stuck together with drops of moisture. The beautiful worried face of an angel swam into focus above him. His angel.

"Steve," Bucky breathed in relief. A rush of air passed Steve's mouth as he looked down at Bucky, lips curved up like he was relieved too.

"It's me. Still me. How many times I gotta tell you? I got you out, Buck." Steve ran a tired hand over Bucky's hair, ruffling it up. Another sharp spike of pain went up Bucky's leg and he squeezed his eyes shut, sucking in a breath. He'd gotten shot. He'd been safe from Zola for a year. Steve was here, dropping a soft whisper in his sweaty hair, warm against the crown of his head, so exhausted but still so honest, real, 'I'm always gonna get you out, Bucky."

"Promise?" He whispered, blinking shattered to stare up at that pretty face again. Steve leaned back, softening all sweet around those the angled features, precious and gentle but still locked down so serious, that stubborn expression that got him into more fights than the smart mouth did.

"James Buchanan Barnes. As long as I am alive...I will always save you from that table."

The color of Steve's intense, serious eyes was probably the color of Bucky's soul.

"So just don't go dyin' on me, huh?" Bucky joked weakly, (knowing it wasn't a joke at all - he had no idea what he'd be without Steve but it wouldn't be very pretty) trying to ignore the cold droplets
running rivets into his skin from the corners of his eyes to his temples.

One of the soft, strong artist hands smoothed the tears away with thumbs and fingers, brushing away all evidence Bucky was crying. The gesture made Bucky wanna cry a hell of a lot harder, break right into all that tender caring.

"You're the one who's always almost dyin' on me, remember?" Steve asked, kind'a sniffly too. Shit, they were goddamn soldiers, they had to get their shit together.

"Haven't left you yet, Stevie. Ain't plannin' to anytime soon."

"Y'keep saying that. M'not sure I believe you, jerk." Steve sucked in a breath and smiled shakily at him.

"Punk." He smiled at the familiar quip - they hadn't called each other that in this fuckin' lifetime. "We're a couple'a dames, aren't we? Cryin' all the time."

"Nope, just you," Steve piped back. Bucky rolled his eyes. He wasn't gonna argue that.

'Cause honestly, the few tears and mental breakdowns and shouts of pain were...all Bucky's.

Maybe it was 'cause he was forcing himself to work towards a higher level than his body was capable. He had to keep up with Steve in order to protect him but he physically could not step up to that game. Steve had superhuman capabilities and Bucky kept throwing himself at the same electric fences and dangerous situations that Steve did and he was actually...extremely lucky he wasn't dead yet.

He took on the impossible because he had to. Because Steve did. But Bucky's body couldn't take as much as the supersoldier serum could. He was weaker and slower and not stupid enough to test if he could jump outta burning buildings like Rogers did.

The rest of the Commandos were content to do their very regular fighting, that y'know, regular people were capable of. But Bucky couldn't protect Steve with regular. He had to climb out onto the fire-escapes of the world to make sure he could cover his best friend. And it backfired. Maybe that's why Bucky was always the one getting hurt.

Or maybe it was 'cause he couldn't stand to see the potential hovering pain headed in Steve's direction and he'd do anything to put himself in the way of that impending firestrike. As a distraction, a sacrifice. Whatever.

Or maybe his intentions may not be pure as he liked to think they were.

Maybe all of it was 'cause of the butterflies he got in his stomach when Steve smiled.

Maybe it was 'cause Bucky was shooting remarks in Steve's direction all the time that could maybe be flirting.

Maybe it was 'cause there'd been twice in his life when he'd been so sure Steve was gonna kiss him and that was all he'd ever wanted. And he'd been heartbroken the first time when they'd just brushed noses. Defeated the second time when Steve'd pulled him in for a hug instead.

Maybe it was 'cause Steve looked at Agent Carter with the only look he'd never given Bucky; like he could marry her. And she wasn't the one jumping in front of things to save his pretty ass, was she?

Or maybe, worst of all...maybe Bucky didn't mind getting hurt because Steve held his hand with
every knife wound and bullethole. Steve gave him all that precious sought-after attention and focus and said the most wonderful things about how he needed Bucky whenever he was about to die.

Maybe his subconscious craved that attention and put him in terrible situations because he was way more selfish and terrible and disgusting than he'd ever want to admit to himself.

"Guess it is just me," Bucky echoed, staring up at the ceiling and wish he could sink through the blood-splattered cot and sink right into the blood-splattered earth.

He was sick, in the head. So so sick and Steve had no idea.

~*~

Seven days was wayyy too long of'a time to stay put. He nearly busted his stitches at the seven hour mark 'cause he'd decided to walk on his healing leg.

Honestly, it hurt like a bitch. Just sitting up had nearly knocked him over because the whole tent was spinning and his head hurt from how dizzy the goddamn canvas and dirt was. Hadn't regenerated all the blood he lost yet, so any tip of his equilibrium and he was down for the count with vertigo.

He managed to get a grip on it though, stumble outta bed on his bad leg and wince and hiss at the pain, barely keeping in the grit sounds. But he was more stubborn than anything else so he hobbled literally all the way across the tent, stooping to pick up the fallen blanket.

Bending over to pick up the blanket was a bad idea because one moment he was grabbing it and the next he was on the ground, shouting out a barked fuck! as he fell.

Steve almost stepped on him as he jumped outta bed.

"What the hell??" Steve swooped down, actual eagle-grabbing-a-sparrow style, big hands all over to try and help him up as Bucky swatted back petulantly because dammit, he was fine. He'd just miscalculated.

But the one trait Steve always beat him on was that damn stubborn head and his leg was throbbing, wasn't like he could fight back as those crazy-muscled arms hoisted under his and dragged him up like a goddamned doll.

"What in the world are you doing out of bed? What part of seven days don't you understand??"

"Your blanket fell off. I didn't want you to freeze to death, Rogers. Sorry for trying to help you," he bit about as sarcastic as he could get and Steve pushed Bucky onto his cot with way more force than necessary.

He wasn't sleeping on Steve's cot, he'd drag himself to his fuckin' own--

"You can't help me when you have a bullet in your leg, dammit!" Heavy palms shoved him back hard enough to bounce against the flimsy mattress and Bucky was about to shove him right the fuck back.

"It's not in my leg anymore, Steve!"

The sound of the tent flap pulling back snagged both their attentions, twin heads turning in tandem as Jones' head poked inside.

"You ladies wanna stop arguin' anytime soon, the rest of us are trying to sleep," Jones raised
unimpressed eyebrows and Steve instantly deflated, all that fight draining into puppy-dog apology.

"Sorry, Gabe. Sergeant Barnes was being dangerously irresponsible." Steve shot a glare down at Bucky, crossing his arms over his built chest muscles which Bucky was absolutely not looking at. It took a lot of inner strength for him to look away long enough to roll his eyes but fuckin' roll his eyes he did.

"Well, Cap. Dernier said he'd really appreciate the quiet, so if you two could whisper-shout your constant arguments, we'd all appreciate it."

"Course. Yeah, sorry, we're going right back to sleep anyways." Steve stood there looking super fuckin' guilty and Gabe only smiled a little, gave a two finger salute, and put the tent flap back in place.

The moment that Jones was gone, Steve turned back on Bucky and hissed, "Don't you dare get outta bed again, Sergeant."

"Yes sir," Bucky shot back sarcastically, rolling to face away from his fuckin' motherhen of a best friend with an aggrieved, dramatic sigh. No way in hell was he going to make it lying here for seven days.

The next morning he hollered to Morita from the tent, hoping he was in earshot enough to hear. Steve had gone out to debrief with Colonel Phillips, so technically Bucky could get outta bed, but he didn't want to risk Steve coming back and freaking out.

Morita showed up a few minutes later, after Dernier had fetched him.

"You called, Sarge?"

"Yeah, I hate to do this, but Rogers has me on lockdown. Can you go find Stark and ask him for a crutch or cane I can use to get around for the next six days? I'm going to melt if I have to stay here."

Morita made a sympathetic face, glancing at the meager space of the tent and cringing secondhand at the torture Bucky knew all too well it was gonna be.

"I'll see what I can do."

Then he was left to stare at sloping canvas walls for another hour, slowly counting down the ways he was going to slaughter the next Nazi he saw for making him go through all this boredom.

Finally, Stark pulled back the flap of his therm, ducking his spikey-headed self inside.

"Sergeant Barnes. What can I do for you?"

"How good of an engineer are you?"

"The best," Stark shot back, without a second's hesitation. Bucky didn't need a good engineer as much as he needed someone with supplies and authority, but buttering Stark up was how you got stuff from him.

"Could you make a crutch I could use to walk around without putting weight on my leg? It's just for six days, so it doesn't have to elaborate or anythi..."

Bucky trailed off as Stark brought his hands out from behind his back, already holding out a metal pole with an upside down triangle at the top.
"The flat part here can go under your arm, should be the perfect height to get you around based on the dimensions in your file. It's fairly crude, I'd say, but it only took me a few minutes and I do have other projects I'm working on--"

"Stark. It's great, thanks."

Howard stepped up to hand it over, helping Bucky (unnecessarily) to his feet so he could tuck it under his arm. Then Stark stepped back away, surveying his work and nodding to himself.

It was so strange to think that a year and a half ago, Bucky had taken Steve and some dames out to the Stark expo, seen this same man on a stage with a car that wanted to float through the skies. It felt like a different lifetime.

"Thanks." Bucky moved the pole forward, leaning his weight on it as he hobbled a few feet, trying to get the hang of it.

Honestly, he was guessing he could ditch the stick by tomorrow, but he'd keep up the act for Steve. Besides, it wouldn't do any good to let on how fast Bucky was already healing. He didn't want people to ask questions, try to speculate why. Hell, even he didn't wanna think about why he was in way better shape than a man who got shot three days ago had any right to be.

So he'd keep the crutch around for longer than he needed it. Just to stop the questions and prodding doctors.

And when people asked him why he was already feeling and looking better, he'd chalk it all up high pain tolerance threshold. He was a soldier after all, who'd been tortured. It wasn't an entirely irrational thing to say.

The crutch was weird to use and it made Bucky feel like a total dame - the rest of the broken toy soldiers didn't use crutches. Then again, other soldiers didn't have Steve Rogers breathing his motherfucking concern down their necks.

It also kinda made Bucky like Stark. Even more. The guy wasn't so bad - maybe they could even be friends after the war. Stark liked good whiskey and was always moving a hundred miles an hour. He was confident like Bucky, but he also kinda wanted to help in his weird, egotistical way.

Bucky actually ended up spending three of his seven days of lockdown in Stark's lab. Maybe partially to avoid Steve, but also 'cause the guy worked on some really cool stuff.

He let Bucky test shoot his new rifles and pistols, even let Bucky keep the M1911 he liked so much. Some of the other soldiers had commented on how cool Bucky's crutch was - honestly it hurt more to use the crutch than to walk because walking didn't sting and the crutch was a big, cold metal bar underneath his arm - and how beneficial it could be to other soldiers too. Bucky agreed that it could help out some of the other men who were recovering from injuries and may or may not have mentioned the idea of making more.

They were easier and less likely to break than the pieces of wood the soldiers normally hacked for crutches, at least.

The next morning when Bucky hobbled his way into Howard's lab, the table he'd been sitting at had a sodering gun, big pieces of metal poles, and a dozen of the already formed metal pole triangles.

"I made the triangle pieces last night, but I figured you wouldn't mind sodering the rest of the pieces
together while I work on that submarine project." Stark had made it off to be all nonchalant but the
guy was an extremely wealthy genius engineer who should be sipping hot chocolate and putting his
feet up at home in New York. Instead he was out here, volunteering his work and risking his life to
help his country.

Stark may be a bit of a pompous asshole, but deep inside he was a pretty good guy. He hadn't been
drafted to come out here. He'd come over on his own, to help the war effort as much as he could.
And as terrible as war was, Bucky couldn't help but respect the guy for that.

So he'd helped make more makeshift crutches for the injured, even filled out the mailing labels to
ship them off to other camps.

Never really pictured this when he thought about war. The dim lit dingy desks, scratching away
mailing labels while pieces of his pomade kept escaping to curl over his forehead.

But somewhere between befriending Stark, helping out in the lab, drinking the nights away with the
Commandos, and being fretted over by Steve, the seven days of bed-rest-hell that was bed rest at
all didn't turn out to be so bad.

He'd been basically healed by day 3, but he'd waited until day 8 before he jumped outta bed without
the crutch, laughing at Steve and running outside to go exercise because dammit it'd felt like years
since he'd last gotten to run and sweat.

He stopped by Stark's lab first, dropping off the crutch with a clap on Stark's scrawny shoulder and a
promise of taking him out for drinks at the best place in Brooklyn when this whole war mess was
over. Stark had laughed and said he'd love to, then Bucky was off again to run laps around the base.

Steve joined him on the second lap, falling into step on Bucky's right.

"I don't think you're supposed to be running yet," Steve commented between breaths. Bucky
shrugged and pushed to run a little faster. He wasn't gonna run all-out 'cause he already ran faster
than everyone (excluding Steve) without really trying and he didn't particularly wanna see how fast
he could go. He never gave his all in anything but a fight, and only then when the others couldn't see
him.

He was stronger and faster and healed quicker than he remembered and he had a feeling he knew
why and he really did everything fuckin' possible to never think about it, had to be just dumb fuckin'
luck he was up on his feet again, not even breaking a sweat from going this quickly, less than two
weeks after taking a bullet to the leg.

"I don't care if I'm suppose to be running yet or not, I was dying with that stupid crutch."

Steve made a non-committal sound and pushed faster, breaking ahead easily. Bucky let him, but
pretended to struggle a little harder. It kinda sucked keeping this from Steve when he'd love to see if
he could still beat his best friend in a race, but. Steve had an excuse, to be all hyped up and beautiful
and Bucky didn't and he. Didn't wanna be the freak.

So he let Steve beat him at the race, then he let Steve beat him to the showers too. Well, what
counted for showers in an overseas war.

They were both grinning wide as Steve skid across the wet ground, throwing up his hands like the
finishing-race dames with the flags. He shouted a declaration of joyous victory, hands on his knees
all winded as he rambled some breathy blame of Bucky's defeat on the idiocy of getting pointlessly
shot. Bucky was stuck between breathing hard and trying not to laugh while simultaneously acting
more fatigued than he was without going overboard and worrying Steve about overexertion.

It was too much to focus on all at once and Bucky ended up caving, throwing his head back in a laugh at the competitive-serious look on Steve's face. His eyes were lit up like he'd won a year long battle instead of barely beating Bucky at some dumb race to the showers. Steve was damn adorable, that's what.

They both tossed off their shirts and Bucky mentally steeled himself for the...the goddamn violation of Steve's beauty. Wasn't fuckin' fair. But he couldn't think about that, couldn't destroy the glow in Steve's eyes right now, not when they were laughing for the first time in what felt like decades.

Steve's pretty blue eyes glanced over at him, not a shy bone left in that too-big body as he peeled off his pants, exposing all that skin without thinkin' twice about how skinny or bruised he might be. Bucky wondered distantly if he'd stop being shy around girls now too, or was he still the exception? Didn't much like the idea of not bein' Stevie's exception.

Now it was just him left to struggle the rough-cloth army pants over the ridiculously wrapped up gauze concealing the mostly-healed bullet wound. The movement to his right paused as Steve looked over at him, face all motherly and concerned again.

"Do you need help?" Steve asked, taking a step closer. Oh god, yeah, like Bucky needed Steve to help him undress right now. That would be a recipe for fucking disaster if he ever saw one. Not to mention that no one really knew exactly how healed the wound was and he'd like to keep it that way.

"Steve. I'm 26." Bucky deadpanned, looking up from where he was hopping on one foot, trying to wrestle his pants off.

Steve cracked up but left Bucky in peace, stripping and turning into the weak spray of water as Bucky looked the other way. They couldn't afford to wash their hair because there wasn't enough water and frankly it was way too freezing to walk around with wet hair in the middle of the day.

So they both ran a quick bar of soap and a splash of freezing water in the aborted shower-style they'd gotten used to over the past year. It was less than a minute later that they were both dried off with towels and clad back in boxers, silence falling now that the water from the showers was cut off.

They both reached for their discarded shirts at the same time, fingers brushing from how close, sending tingles up his arm that the suddenly clenched fist wasn't helping a bit. Steve looked up, sky-blue eyes landing on Bucky's wide ones. Fuck.

He was entirely naked under those thin boxers and it was about damn time that his outsides matched up to how beautiful his insides had always been.

Then something piercing and emotional clouded over the bright blue as Steve broke eye contact, flicking down the minuscule space between them. Bucky followed the trace further further, all the way to the wet gauze just visible under the hem of his boxers. Oh. His leg, again. Steve was taking a long time gettin' over a simple bulletwound. Hell of a lot longer than Bucky was.

"I'm feeling better, you know," Bucky said quietly. That seemed to break Steve outta his daze, body snapping back up straight as his gaze locked on Bucky's again. He looked so...soft. Just, soft and touchable and warm in all that sunshine and smooth and perfect.

Goddamn angel from heaven, and Bucky could live in the clouds forever but Jesus Christ, everytime he looked in those babyblues he was falling, falling so hard and fast he'd lose an arm if he ever hit the goddamn ground.
And then suddenly those babyblues were a hell of a lot closer.

The world stopped spinning and Bucky was frozen, final image of a soldier in a sniper scope before the life snuffs out for good because suddenly Steve was stepping up to him, fire in his eyes as precious hands came up to Bucky's jaw. It was something between holding him like he was a beautiful precious valuable treasure and holding him like Steve was going to slam him into a wall and give him punishing passionate bruising kisses.

His boxers were not going to be much use of hiding anything if he let those thoughts into his head - Jesus, would Steve push him against a wall?? - so he had to get a handle on himself right the fuck now.

Only Steve was looking at him so intensely, almost pissed, and one of his hands was sliding down to cup the back of Bucky's neck, a little violently. Of fucking course Bucky couldn't breathe.

Desperate, shaking hands came up to grab helplessly onto Steve's biceps, longing for some anchoring point in the goddamn spinning snowglobe off some fucking twisted black and white war movie love scene. This couldn't be real. Only Bucky could never in a million years fabricate the look in Steve's eyes right now.

"I thought you were going to die," Steve said fiercely, his breath washing over Bucky's face. Why did they have to be only in boxers? It was so damn vulnerable like this.

Although, hey, if Steve needed almost-dying as a justification to kiss Bucky senseless, then...

"I always think you're gonna die," Bucky breathed, looking up with searching eyes. Steve's fingers curled tighter on the back of his neck and fuck, fuck, Bucky wanted Steve to leave more than just bruises, wanted permanent proof of Steve's presence on his skin, something dark and blue he could carry with him for the rest of his cursed life.

And gall, they'd always been affectionate, but this? This was killing him. It ate him up inside because every time, every single time he managed to be so sure that maybe for a moment, for a brief moment, there might be more than just the best friend-ness. And he was always wrong because look where they were, impossibly close and still not...whateverthethellhewantedfromSteve. Which he still didn't know exactly what that was. Or have any idea.

He really didn't want to think about it at all, actually. He wanted the last few inches between their mouths to be abolished, for the tension and the blood pumping in his veins to finally explode into something beautiful and eternally warm instead of always on the edge.

For fuck's sake Steve was holding his face in a death grip, inches apart as they stared into each other's eyes, rough thumbs digging into his jawbone and he was so close to just tipping his face up, parted lips falling open wider and pressing up against that slick, pretty mouth, just one more inch--

The sound of boots approaching had them breaking apart faster than lightning, Steve's hands dropping and Bucky's heart pounding as it sunk incrementally lower, again, one more chance missed but he couldn't think about that right now, following Steve's suit and snatching up their respective shirts, tugging back over their heads in tandem right as some Private walked round the corner.

The Private stopped a few feet away, giving them a salute before delivering his message.

"Sergeant Barnes, your presence is requested in the officers' tent."

Bucky raised an eyebrow but nodded curtly at the Private, trying not to think about how obviously red his cheeks must be. He wasn't sure why he felt guilty - they hadn't even been doing anything,
only some intense-staring and face-holding. Didn't keep him from blushing like a virgin in a
whorehouse, though.

"Officers' tent?" Steve asked, buckling his belt. Bucky shrugged, slipping into his shoes.

"Guess now that I'm not an invalid they wanna chew me out for saving their best soldier. Again."
Steve rolled his eyes and Bucky shot him a wink.

How was it that they could go from the potential of that near-kiss moment to simple-familiar-teasing
without a single hitch? It was almost like the near-kiss moments had become regular. Except how
could that...?

Or maybe there were no almost-kiss moments and Bucky was either losing his mind or reading a
hellofalot more into it. Which was the most rational explanation.

Or he could just. Not explain it. Not think about it. Not worry about it until it happened again, go
back to normal in between. That'd worked for him so far, right?

~*~*~

It was already nearing December - only another week - so the air was crisp and cool as Bucky made
his way across the camp. He'd stopped by the tents to grab his blue peacoat and style his hair. The
Private hadn't said it was urgent, which meant he thankfully didn't have to dash and actually had the
chance to presentable.

Although he was still flushed from the shower, a little outta his head and up in the clouds - but also
confused and a little down because Steve might've almost kissed him? Which also meant Steve had
managed to not-kiss Bucky again.

He was still sifting details through his head as he rounded a canvas corner to walk into the long
rectangular tent. It was more a canvas pavilion than a tent, but whatever. Either way, he was a bit
distracted and therefore totally unprepared for the scene that greeted him as he stepped inside the
enclosure.

The tent was empty, save one person. Who was sitting on the edge of a desk, arms crossed over her
chest as she waited. Bucky startled, eyes widening, before he managed to recover and stand
straighter at attention.

"Agent Carter," Bucky said, a touch less hateful and disgusted than he felt inside. Obviously he must
not've portrayed the negative well, because Agent Carter didn't so much as a flinch.

"Sergeant Barnes," she greeted, voice calculatingly neutral. Bucky was instantly suspicious.

"Where is--"

"It's just you and I, Sergeant." Peggy interrupted, looking him over with this conscious aura of self-
aware power and two shots of deadly, overwhelming grace. Wow, Bucky suddenly found 3 new
reasons to hate her.

She stalked behind the table, gesturing for Bucky to join her on the other side. Crossed the tent
slowly, wracking his brain for what in the world this could be about.

One deep, silent calming breath as he stepped up to the other side of the desk, debating whether to
take the chair or not, when Agent Carter spoke again.
"Sergeant Barnes. Do you know where you are standing?" Manicured hands on the surface, leaning forward to study him, pursed perfectly-red lips.

He didn't get the chance to answer before her expression shut him up, taking the floor again with that wickedly intriguing British accent.

"A year ago, that's where Captain Rogers stood, asking for your name. I was standing beside him when he stormed the place, rain-soaked without an ounce of authority, and demanded Colonel Phillips the fate of a particular man in the 107th. He was quite stubborn too, managed to royally piss off Colonel Phillips at least twice in the conversation.

"Phillips told him you were captured, presumed dead. So, of course, Steve jumped in the nearest jeep and planned to - I quote - 'walk to Austria if it were the only way.'"

Carter had an infuriatingly unreadable expression Bucky grit his teeth against, standing perfectly still, sniper-poised and soldier-stalwart, as though she were simply giving him the coordinates of his next mission.

Underneath that though, Bucky had no idea what the hell was going on. No one'd told him that before - Jesus, Steve, walk to fucking Austria? - and he was torn between yelling at Steve and kissing him for it.

Which seemed to be the two most prominent emotions for Steve lately. Maybe always?

Agent Carter studied him again and he didn't bother looking at her, staring straight ahead in the most strict of respectful positions. She considered this for a moment, then went on.

"I must admit I was quite surprised there was someone in Steve's life so important he'd risk Dr. Erskine's research on a practically suicidal mission to find them. It wasn't until I saw the two of you together that I realized why."

Peggy paused, letting silence fall so she could openly look Bucky over, eyes piercing and stupidly brown and beautiful. After a moment or two, she crossed her arms back over her chest and stalked around the side of the table to stand directly next to Bucky, tilting her chin up and looking at him like he was the one who had to look up.

"Sergeant Barnes, what is the nature of your relationship with Steve Rogers?"

Bucky's stomach dropped, bottoming out at his feet, just like that ride on Coney Island. Only Steve wasn't clutching his arm, looking green and making him throw back his head in a clustered laugh. He'd been so beautiful that night, so delicate and bitchy and happy. Steve, his relationship with Steve, Christ.

He'd taken way too long to answer. He'd been standing in shocked silence and Agent Carter was still looking at him expectantly, eyebrows raised and perfect red lips pursed.

"I-I don't follow your question, ma'am." Bucky finally got out. He at least managed to keep his face blank, thank god, but if she reached out to take his pulse she'd know exactly how damn fast his heart was racing.

"Peggy's eyebrows arched higher, tense silence falling again. She played silence like some interrogators played punches to the jaw - she held all the power, every ounce of control in those moments of pure, anticipatory quiet. She filled it with the stalking step of heeled shoes as she started walking again, circling behind Bucky like a lion stalking prey, stepping up to look at him from the other side.

"I-I don't follow your question, ma'am." Bucky finally got out. He at least managed to keep his face blank, thank god, but if she reached out to take his pulse she'd know exactly how damn fast his heart was racing.

Peggy's eyebrows arched higher, tense silence falling again. She played silence like some interrogators played punches to the jaw - she held all the power, every ounce of control in those moments of pure, anticipatory quiet. She filled it with the stalking step of heeled shoes as she started walking again, circling behind Bucky like a lion stalking prey, stepping up to look at him from the other side.
"The question was in regards to the nature of your relationship with Steve Rogers," she repeated, literally explaining what she meant approximately zero. Bucky had a feeling that was on purpose.

He took a moment of his own silence, still not looking at her as he stared ahead and answered carefully.

"He is the commanding officer of my squad, ma'am. I respect his decisions and have no complaints regarding his leadership style. Have there been concerns from my other team members I should be aware of?"

"Not exactly." Peggy looked at him curiously, her accent crisp as she spoke again. "What is the nature of your relationship off the battlefield, Sergeant?"

She wasn't letting this go. She couldn't seriously be prying at...at that. Even Bucky didn't know exactly what that was. He'd been avoiding that mental conversation with himself for a year, he wasn't exactly planning to have it now. Much less with somebody-fucking-else.

Oh, wait, and that somebody-fucking-else was none other than Steve's future goddamn fiancé, right, yeah, Bucky totally was gonna have that conversation. What the fucking hell, Carter.

"Captain Rogers and I are good friends ma'am. Has this proved to be a problem?"

"Sometimes," she answered vaguely and Bucky's eyes widened. He'd been totally sarcastic with the question but that answer, that was serious as hell. There'd been speculation on their friendship being an issue on the battlefield?

With her gaze never leaving Bucky's face - her interest peaked even more once his eyes'd widened in alarm - Peggy stepped backward and perched on the desk again. Bucky stayed standing. "And was your friendship the same before the war?"

"He was a lot smaller," Bucky replied sarcastically, desperately holding onto the last grip of control he had. His collected and calm facade was slipping and that wasn't gonna have a good ending.

Peggy looked at him, eyebrows raised and unimpressed with the answer. "Would you care to elaborate?"

"Steve's my best friend, ma'am. Would you care to elaborate on the purpose of this questioning?" Bucky snapped back, nerves starting to wane. He wouldn't ever talk back to her in front of other soldiers - as much as he despised her, he still respected the name she'd made for herself as a tough dame in a misogynistic army - but there weren't other soldiers around and Bucky was fed up with being dangled like a mouse on a string.

Peggy didn't look the slightest bit fazed by his outburst. In fact, she looked like she'd been expecting it. Maybe even pushing towards it.

"I'm not completely daft, Sergeant Barnes. I'm well aware of your dislike for me," she started and Bucky honestly didn't intend to react but he automatically snorted at her comment because that was such a serious understatement. Peggy's eyes narrowed dangerously at the sound and Bucky instantly regretted it, face twisting in vague apology.

"--however," she continued pointedly, "that does not give you the authority to lie to me, nor does it give you the authority to be a complete bastard."

Bucky blinked in surprise, finally glancing at her. That curse was strangest thing he'd heard, a soft, feminine, British voice speaking words like that. If he didn't hate her, he might've been in love with
her, and that made Bucky hate her about 800x more because of-fucking-course she was perfect for Steve but not the shiny kind'a perfect, the rough-edged sharp, scary kind'a perfect and none of it was fucking fair.

She stared back at him, their eyes meeting for the first time since this whole thing'd started. Bucky didn't turn his body to face her, but he didn't look away either.

"So Sergeant Barnes, I will ask you again. What is your relationship with Steven Grant Rogers?"

This time the question hit him in a different way. The last three words threw sparks on kindling and an angry fire lit up in his chest, because goddamn her she did *not* have the right to use his name like that, like the whole thing gave her some superior position in Steve's life just because she *knew* that and *she had no right.*

That was fucking it. He'd been patient and he'd played along with her stupid game but this was ending now, she had no right to pry and no right to anything about Bucky and Steve.

He spun to face her, taking a single, charged step forwards. She held her ground, but Bucky was fairly sure there was a spark of fear in her eyes, if only for a millisecond.

"You have no right," Bucky started, hands clenching into fists at his sides. "If this is some...*twisted* way for you to get closer to him, prying information outta his best friend? I'm tellin' you, Steve would *never* indulge this kinda behavior and he'd probably be *disgusted* with you for asking."

Peggy stood up from the desk, a sudden wave of anger as she took a step forward too, eyes flashing with a mirrored fire to Bucky's.

Two comets colliding, more alike than either would ever admit, head to head and exploding fire all over the place. A hurricane and a tornado staring each other down with matching sparks of anger and possessiveness and look what a picture they painted - look what a scene they'd created. The two of them versus, unforgiving and stubborn and burning too hot for this to end in any way but a massive explosion of destruction.

"And just what would he think of you if he found out your feelings aren't nearly as innocent as you let on?" Peggy hissed.

Bucky's heart stopped, but he managed to lean forward and bite back a mark a hellofalot more bitter.

"You have no idea what you're talking about." She didn't, the pretty, feisty brunette was throwing out accusations with no clue as to how deep this ran, to how much more this was than some inappropriate feelings. If that's what she was even talking about.

"Don't I?" She shot back, eyes narrowed as she straightened, tone going cold and calculating. "A blind man could see the way you look at him."

No. No, she had no idea where she was going with this. How was this even something you threw around? This was a lot bigger deal than some speculation or curiosity a dame had about some fella she liked. This was the annihilation of somebody's future, the end of Bucky Barnes and the only good thing he had left on this planet. So his respectful manners went out the window - he was pretty sure he had a right, when it came to this. They were in a competition of who could have harsher, more cutting words. And goddamn him to hell if he wasn't winning that fucking competition. "What *exactly* are you accusing me of?"

"You know perfectly well what I'm saying." Peggy took a single step backwards, careful cautious, distancing herself from a grenade. "Steve Rogers is not just a best friend to you, is he?"
Bucky's hands clenched into tighter fists, blunt nails digging into his skin but not nearly hard enough to keep him sharp. Maybe he was a fucking grenade, because he felt about three seconds away from exploding. How dare she?

He set his jaw, eyes deadly as he glared down at Carter. "I'm not gonna give you anything. You think I don't see what you're doing? You want him for yourself and you're gonna do whatever it takes to get that. You'd get his best friend blue carded just so he'd put you first, huh? Is that it? Making up things so I'm outta the picture?"

"You and I both very well know that's not what this is about. I know you have issues with my feelings for Steve--"

"Issues??" Bucky barked a laugh, because seriously, issues? He hated her and she knew that, the whole damn planet knew that. Except maybe Steve, because he was way too sunshiny to notice the battle between the dark moon and the deceptive stars going on right in his same sky. "I sure think he'd have issues if he knew what you were trying to do to my military career."

"This is a lot bigger than a blue card, Sergeant Barnes. I wouldn't do that to this army, I'm not selfish enough to take away one of the greatest assets we have over a crush. And I wouldn't do that to Steve, you know very well how I feel about him."

"You use him because it makes you look good! You're the damn photograph in his compass and it puts your face on the silver screen!" Bucky threw up his hands, not really intending to mention the compass thing but it'd destroyed him the first time he'd seen it and yeah, he hadn't exactly let that go.

"You really think this is about fame?" Peggy stepped up close to him again, boiling now underneath her cool brown reserve. "I'm a woman in the army for godssakes, this is not about fame."

She set her level gaze on Bucky, eyes knowing and so confident that Bucky could be the size of the Eiffel Tower and still feel the urge to cower. "You know what this is about. You keep denying it and denying it, even to yourself. But you know." Peggy paused, her eyes flashing with something akin to anger but about four times hotter red - "This is about Steve. Feelings. This is about love--"

The four-letter L word shot directly into his chest, piercing harder and faster and deeper than the bullet in his leg and the entire world flashed red and Bucky didn't stand a chance against it. Never had.

"I LOVED HIM FIRST!!"

The chorus drop of the song, the momentum piling to the big finale, the drumroll before the firework, the explosion, the grenade, and he wasn't ever gonna dig the shrapnel outta his skin.

Utter glass silence, shattering splinters as his lungs finally caught with a wet, ragged gasp of air.

He stumbled backwards, the back of his legs hitting something solid, autopilot limbs as he fell heavily into the closest chair, staring at nothing. It didn't even sink in then, sitting there, what he'd just said. His eyes cut down to his hands, turning them over to look at them both and they were shaking and his whole body was shaking and he had just..."Oh god," he whispered.

Then common sense kicked in and Bucky looked around frantically, listening for approaching footsteps outside the tent because he'd just shouted that and--

"I cleared off this quarter of camp, nobody can hear us," Peggy said quietly. He didn't have the energy to feel grateful, he just slumped back down in his chair, bringing a hand up to his face. Behind the darkness of his dirty palm, his eyes didn't feel any less on fire. Suspended in shock, world
still burning bright and fiery around him but he frozen, stuck. Stuck in disbelief - unreal - that that'd just happened.

How could he have let that happen? How could he have said...that. God, that. His lungs apparently didn't agree with his mouth's outburst because he couldn't breathe, he was going to fucking collapse over any moment. He couldn't open his mouth though, couldn't speak another word. God\textit{fuck} knows what'd come outta his mouth this time.

He tried struggling though breathing for another few moments, then a soft, slightly concerned voice spoke again. "Sergeant Barnes?"

The spell broke at his name and suddenly Bucky rocked forward, both hands covering his face now as he tried to curl into nothing in this stupid metal chair.

"Oh my god. Oh my god." Rock, one-two, a broken sound. His head lifted disbelievingly from his hands, wide, terrified eyes on the evil ground. "I love him. I mean, I've always loved him, but. I \textit{love} him. I'm in love with him." The words kept cutting knives into his insides and Bucky moaned, wild hands running rough fingers through his hair. "Oh \textit{god}, no. I'm in love with him."

He was still shaking and Peggy took a step closer, hesitant as she crouched down beside him. "Sergeant Barnes?" Bucky sucked in a shaky breath, choking on the oxygen as he covered his face with his hands again. "Sergeant Barnes...Look at me. Look at me."

When Bucky didn't respond, Peggy switched to her commander voice, barking out the next word loud enough to make Bucky instantly snap up, even if only outta surprise. "James!"

It was the first time she'd called him by name, even if it wasn't really quite his name. It hadn't been since a little blond kid decided to call him Bucky. But he looked up anyways, eyes red rimmed and bordering on tears as he stared at the woman crouching down beside his chair. "It's alright," she reassured. "It's alright."

"No, no, you don't get it, it's \textit{not}." Bucky straightened up in his chair - every piece of his body was trying to shoot away in a different direction. Peggy straightened too, scooting the other chair over and sitting down too, pretty knees almost bumping into Bucky’s. He didn't pay attention to her, didn't even want to think about her right now, it was too much-- he'd messed up so much. "How could I do this? How could I let this happen?"

"Sometimes things are bigger than our control, James." Peggy's voice was back to her commanding, confident tone and Bucky really had no idea why she hadn't kicked him to the curb yet. "This \textit{is} Steve we're talking about. You'd be mad not to love him."

"If I was a dame," Eyes closing, defeated. "But I'm not. I'm supposed to be his best friend, the guy that pulls him outta trouble and convinces him to ask out dames. Not...not wish he'd be dancing with \textit{me}. I've been playin' this game my whole life, can't remember a time I \textit{wasn't} tryin' to explain away the way I felt about Steve..."
"You've known about this for that long?" A bit of sympathy and amazement snuck into the harsh British tones and this was all too confusing to figure out.

"No, no. I mean, I always felt...more for him than I should, since always. But it wasn't until somebody - you, actually - threatened to take him away that I realized all this time it was...the whole..." Bucky waved his hand impatiently, hating himself a little more every time he said it out loud. "...I love thing."

"That's quite a long time of denial," Peggy leaned forward in her chair, looking so soft and pretty and somehow so much stronger than Bucky as she reached out a lean, firm hand and clasped her fingers over Bucky's closed fist. "Why didn't you ever tell him? You know Steve would never hate you for that."

Bucky stared at her pretty, delicate hand over his and wondered when exactly he'd stopped craving a woman's touch. When it stopped being enough of a sweet distraction that he could be okay and pretend a little longer. When he'd gotten so far deep that is was only ever Steve anymore. He sucked in a breath, still looking at Peggy's hand over his.

"I know he'd never hate me. Well, he'd never say it, he's way too...good for that. But he'd look at me differently...he'd tell me it was fine and it wouldn't be at all because you don't come back from that. Even if I was a dame and it wasn't wrong, you don't come back from telling your best friend you love 'em. He'd act like it wasn't a big deal and I couldn't take that. Because it is a big deal."

He forced himself to swallow, to try and take normal breaths. "I guess, best case scenario, he'd clap me on the shoulder and tell me nothing could change our friendship...."

"Worst case scenario he's appalled and leaves," Peggy finished. Bucky shook his head once, side to side, a sharp no, and closed his eyes, trying to find some kind'a relief from the real world behind closed eyelids.

"No. Worst case scenario he thinks I'm sick. Thinks something's wrong with me, like it's a disease I've been infected with," Bucky paused, his voice dropping to a whisper as his eyes welled up again. "Worst case scenario he tries to fix me."

Peggy went quiet at that. She may be a woman in the army, may've been told she was too weak or delicate or dumb to make it amongst men. But she could prove them all wrong with her sharp wit, brilliant shooting, knockout punch.

Bucky wouldn't get the chance to prove anyone wrong. They could tell him his feelings for Steve were sick and wrong and weak, but how could he ever prove otherwise? How could he ever show anyone that it was about dedication and protection and pure sunshine in the darkest nights?

The soft, slightly gun-calloused fingertips drew back from Bucky's hand as Agent Carter straightened up in her chair, neutral, unreadable expression.

"Is that why you despise me, then? Because I'm allowed to love him when you can't?"

He almost would've laughed, if there was oxygen left in his lungs.

"No. I mean, I don't like you for that, but. That's not why I hate you." Peggy blinked at him and this conversation couldn't get more crazy, he might as well spill it all. His guts were lying on the floor by now anyways. So he stared off into the distance, words drifting under his breath. "He looks at you with the only look he's never given me...Like he wants to marry you."

Agent Carter blinked wide in surprise before she clamped down the emotion. Yeah, Bucky couldn't
hate her for that reaction because he'd be excited too if someone told him Steve wanted to marry him.

"You never struck me as the marrying type of man," she smiled at the edges, lighting the tent a little less dim. The clouds weren't parting that easy, but Bucky shrugged.

"Probably didn't strike you as the type'a guy to like fellas, either, huh?"

"Do you? Like other men?" The question was pure curiosity, no judgement; why? Why didn't she think...shouldn't she be disgusted, if he did? If he did.

"Dunno. It's always been Steve." Although it'd been Steve back when Bucky'd dated all those dames, too. Back when Steve was small and condensed and feisty and so beautifully fragile he made dames look bulky. Back when Steve was entirely, purely his.

"And it's not fair, it's not, because he'll never see it. And I'm the only one who's ever gonna be able to love him properly. It's not that I deserve him - because I don't. He deserves a million times better than me.

"And it breaks my heart because I know I'm still the best he could ever have. No one's ever gonna love him right but me and it's not fair because someone as perfect as him shouldn't be stuck with nothing more than a dark shadow at his feet."

Bucky glanced over at Peggy, who was fairly taken aback. Surprised, at very least. So he amended, clarifying - if she really loved Steve, she'd get it.

"I know you say you love him too, but. But he deserves someone who loved him all along. He deserves someone who loved him before he was shiny and huge, someone who knew the tiny firecracker with delicate collar bones and this earth-rattling cough and the brightest fight you've ever seen...

"I know you say you love him, but if you really do, than you know he deserves better than someone who fell for his body and stayed for his heart of gold."

Bucky's gaze cut away, couldn't see the look across those sharp pretty features as it sank in; as much as he hated Peggy (walking in here, anyways), he still felt kind'a awful telling her Steve deserved better.

"James, are you not aware of when I met Steve?" She didn't sound pissed, at least, more of that surprise? "...I knew him quite a bit before the serum. I liked him before the serum."

He stared blankly. He'd thought-- Well. Fuck. That changed everything.

"That night at the bar, where I first realized your feelings, I told Steve I was waiting for the right partner. That was something he'd told me when he was about five-foot-three and frail as my pinky. I liked him plenty before he took the serum - actually, I tried to stop the operation halfway through because I...I couldn't listen to him scream."

She'd known him all along. Bucky wasn't the only one who loved that tiny guy from Brooklyn more than Captain America - Peggy did too. Bucky wasn't the only one anymore.

Bucky wasn't the only one.

It'd been the very center of his reasoning to hate Peggy. She hadn't deserved Steve because she hadn't loved him before this. But now that...she had--
What else did Bucky have to hold on too? He'd been Steve's anchor from the past but Steve could 
find that in Peggy. She had anything Steve could ever need. Everything he could ever need.
Bucky couldn't compete with that.

(And he couldn't hate her for loving Steve either.)

"You should've stopped the operation while you had the chance," he said quietly. "At least then he 
wouldn't be over here fighting in Hell."

Peggy sighed, straightening the cuff of her uniform. "This war's the best place for him. We need 
people like Steve, or it's just battles and bloodshed. He makes this fight something worth fighting 
for."

"You think I don't know that?" Bucky tipped his head, blue on brown, ever a challenge as he held 
her gaze and dumped ice water on their feet. "That doesn't make it hurt any less to watch him run 
into burning buildings and wonder if he's ever gonna come running back out. Could you stomach 
that, Agent Carter?"

Brown eyes stared unwaveringly into his. If she was a blue-eyed dame, she'd be...scarily like Bucky.
Why?

"He saved your life. Isn't that worth it?"

Bucky looked away. He hadn't deserved to be saved by Steve then and he sure as hell didn't deserve 
it now. Peggy softened and Bucky wanted to harden against her melting eyes but he couldn't, his 
heart was aching--

"Steve cares about you, you know. He stormed an enemy base alone just for you. You can't let 
yourself forget that."

The tears started to well up again - for what, the third or fourth time in this conversation? This 
ridiculous, impossible, torturous conversation that didn't even feel real. Sitting in a chair next to 
Agent Carter and confessing up feelings for Steve?

She was being so soft and this was illegal, he couldn't--

"Why're you doing this?" He suddenly accused, scooting his chair a fraction away and staring wide 
(and watery) eyed at Agent Carter. "What's your angle? Get as much information outta me as 
possible so you can-- ca-can go tell Steve? Make him hate me? Make hi-him choose between us?"

"I would never make him choose between us," Peggy articulated, quiet and serious, "...because I'm 
not sure I want to know the answer to that question." Bucky scoffed. Like Steve'd chose him. "And 
it's quite likely he'd hate me for telling him, too. This is Steve we're talking about."

"Then why? Why quarantine off a tent and drag a confession outta me?" He leaned forward in his 
chair and the flash in her eyes this time was more pity than fear. What a life he'd come to. "Why?"

A pause and she looked down at her hands, turned them over. Bucky waited. A steady breath - at 
least her lungs were working, maybe Bucky finally knew how Steve'd felt all those years - and she 
was being so gentle...

"No one should have to be alone. You were bound to explode sometime or another, and." Dark, rich 
brown met his and Bucky's breath caught. "--at least I understand the way you feel."
Protecting. Better he scream all this at Peggy than Steve, right? He could respect her for that. He could respect her for all of it. She hadn't been disgusted with him - not externally anyways - when he'd admitted it. She'd even comforted him through her sharp, careful manner. She'd explained to him and let him tear up and freak out and ramble on with all his illegal, disturbing feelings for his best friend. Let him tell her she didn't deserve Steve, even when she did.

It was the highest compliment he could think of. But if anyone did?

She deserved Steve.

"So how do we go forward, now?" Agent Carter waited patiently after the question, hands folded in her lap. It was an interrogation, only she was being a hellofalot nicer than he'd seen her with anyone else.

Funny, how it'd been the opposite walking in.

So much'd been the opposite walking in.

But next? Next he had to find a way to walk out of this tent.

...it might be the hardest thing Bucky'd ever say. About a million times worse than realizing he was in love with Steve. And he'd been avoiding that truth consciously for a year, subconsciously for most his life. This was gonna be so much worse than that.

But he had to say it. He didn't believe in the 'if you love them let them go' nonsense, because that wasn't love. Love was scouring the earth, love was never giving up.

But this love didn't have a choice. He'd never give up on Steve, not ever, but he was giving up on himself. He couldn't give Steve anything more than undying devotion and Steve deserved so much more than that.

Steve deserved the stars and all Bucky could give him was a pitch-black sky.

"If you really did like him before-- if you could see the pure insides before his outsides matched?" Bucky bit his lip, wishing it'd draw blood. Copper'd be a better taste than the bitter in his throat now. He had to say it.

He'd bleed out anyways.

"...I've gotta give him up. It's the only thing I can do."

"James--"

"No. You know it is. He's my entire world. But he deserves so much more than me. He deserves a real life, one with a wife and a family and a home. He deserves the universe, and I can't give him that." The last time he'd smiled was at Steve, in the showers, and now another curled on his lips, the exact opposite kind. Nothing but sadness, sadness and pure, raw truth.

"But I'd be honored to give him you."

Peggy blinked rapidly, eyes cutting away as she ran a careful finger underneath them, trying not to cry.

"He'd marry you tomorrow if it weren't for the war. I know he would. And when he comes to me and asks me if I think he should...I'll tell him the truth. I'll tell him you're the best thing he could ever
hope for. The best thing he could've ever gotten outta this stupid war."

"But James," Peggy reached out her hand again, eyes still watery as she wrapped her fingers over
Bucky's wrist. "What about you?"

Bucky put his free one atop hers, looking her directly in the eye and holding that gaze.

Two comets that collided, exploded, helped each other pick up the residue. They really were so
much alike - the same fire, the same stubborn feelings and cruel words and brilliant smiles. Maybe it
should've been a comfort the woman Steve'd marry was so much like Bucky, but it wasn't. He had a
feeling it wasn't exactly a comfort to Peggy either.

Two comets collided and there was only space left for one in this sky.

"Promise me," Bucky squeezed her hand, both their eyes wet now. "Promise me you'll never tell
him. He can't ever know.

"Please - this is the only thing I'll ever ask of you. You can't tell him. You can't tell Steve. Just
please, please Peggy. Promise me you'll love him with every ounce of your heart. But more than
that," a ragged breath and he tipped his head like the twist of his mouth didn't mean he was about to
cry. "Promise me you'll never tell him that I do too."

A tear slipped down Peggy's cheek, a whisper so quiet he could barely hear. "Of course. I promise. I
promise."

One comet to burn brighter and one to melt to water in the ozone.

The tears he'd been holding back for decades came now - silent and flooding and painful - nothing
and everything like release.

He curled into himself and Peggy squeezed his hand, let him cry, still and solid beside him. One
palm over his ducked face as his shoulder shook. And shook and shook.

Of all things to wish, Bucky wished Sarah were here. He wished it'd been Sarah who'd finally gotten
this outta him. He wished she'd sat him down on her rickety kitchen counter when they were young
teens and forced it outta him the way she forced manners into him.

When he broke down and cried like this, Sarah would've held him. She'd've held him close and
stroked his hair and whispered that it was okay, it was always okay. They'd always understood each
other so much, sacrificing everything for Steve. Sarah Rogers would've found a way to make Bucky
live with himself, found a way to tell him what he felt for Steve was more than okay - it was a love
that meant the world, beautiful and pure. Like the way it felt inside him.

But Sarah Rogers was in her grave, too far to catch the falling tears, and it was the only other woman
in Steve's life listening to him cry now. A tight grip on his wrist, a solid, unmovable presence beside
him.

Peggy wasn't one for comfort, but she did love Steve and she didn't hate Bucky for loving him too
and that was so much more than Bucky could've asked for.

He finally managed to get ahold of himself long enough to suck in a breath, choke out mangled
words wet and hoarse with tears.

"T-This has to be it. When I walk out of this tent," he sucked in another breath, halting the rush of
blood to his head, "I have to leave this here with you. I won't ever stop loving him and I'm so sorry
for that. I wish I could. I wish I could let you two be, but…"

"I understand. It's alright." She squeezed her hand on Bucky's wrist a final time before she drew away, offering him a sad smile, one cheek holding two tear tracks, two promises that she really did understand.

One side of her smile quirked up a bit, something like the half-smile a Brooklyn Bucky used to give.

"If we ever do get married, you can still come over for Sunday dinner." The other side curled up, a pained but real smile now. "Although I'm afraid you simply can't have any dessert."

Bucky couldn't help it, he laughed. That was something he would've done, if positions were reversed. The lighthearted joke, the ridiculous picture she was painting. The relief in his chest at knowing Peggy wasn't gonna kick Bucky outta Steve's life. That apparently he might be invited to Sunday dinners.

"I hate you," Bucky said shakily, the thankful smile on his face screaming the opposite. Peggy pursed her lips and heard him, loud and clear.

This was the woman Steve'd have for the rest of his life. This was the woman to replace him. She was perfect for the job.

And it hurt more than anything he'd ever known.

This was letting himself go, giving Steve everything he could before he gathered up his love and hid it so close in his chest that Steve'd never ever know.

It might as well be Steve's wedding day now, and it was Bucky walking Steve down the aisle to give him away. Peggy looked beautiful, standing there waiting for him.

"You alright?" Peggy asked, standing on steady feet. A few stray tears were still making their way down his face, but Bucky wiped them away quickly and shot up too. He had to go back out into the world and crying wasn't the way he needed to do it. Somehow his knees weren't giving out on him, so maybe he really could do this. He took a breath, steeling himself.

And then he stuck out his hand.

"Thanks, Peggy. He'd...he deserves somebody like you." Peggy's eyes crinkled and she reached out her hand too, grabbing Bucky's in a firm shake. Like a business deal - here, on this line, sign away the other half of your soul.

Before she could draw her hand back, Bucky covered it with his other, both holding onto Peggy's as he looked down at her big brown eyes and swore away his life. "And that's the best compliment I know how to give, ma'am."

"You have my gratitude, Sergeant Barnes," Peggy smiled softly and Bucky let go. With a final nod, she walked back around the desk and picked up a folder, flipping it open. He looked at her another moment - Take care of my darling. This was it. He sucked in a breath and spun on his heel--

"Oh, one last thing, Sergeant." Bucky paused, turned back around as Peggy gave him a pretty, professional nod. "The army appreciates your contributions to our research on Doctor Zola's interrogation methods."

He blinked a few times before he realized what she was saying. The cover, for why Bucky was in here for an hour, tent private. It was a good cover, although honestly Bucky'd rather have an in-depth
conversation of every torture method used on him than confessing being in love with his best friend and losing that same best friend all in the same conversation.

He gave Peggy a tight-lipped smile anyways. "Anytime, ma'am."

The sunshine of the outside world was blinding and Bucky instantly lifted a hand to cover his eyes. He was constantly comparing Steve to the sunshine, and that'd be pretty ironically fitting in the situation right now considering he was getting blinded.

He'd barely walked fifty steps before he heard a shout and someone running towards him, so he lowered his hand from his eyes, blinking into the brightness as his vision slowly adjusted.

"Bucky!" And then outta nowhere Steve came rushing to his side, like one'a those golden retriever puppies after a frisbee. "You've been gone for more than an hour! Are you okay? What happened? Have you been crying?"

"Steve, Steve. Calm down." Bucky carefully pried Steve's death grip off his arm. Those warm hands, the ones he used to hold. He almost choked again, just thinking about how that last time they'd been so close - in the showers just earlier today - it'd been the very last time they'd be that close.

No.

Fuck, no, that'd been it, it was over now and--

Oh god.

Had to cut this off now, sooner than later. Cover more than just that conversation, cover a lifetime of hidden looks and sparked touches and--

"I'm. F-fine. We...I just. It was about Zola. And things got kinda intense. But I'm okay, alright? I mean, I might have bruises on my arm now from your death grip, but otherwise I'm good."

Steve breathed out a sigh of relief, mumbling an offhand apology about Bucky's arm. "You know, I, uh. I would've gone with you if you needed somebody there."

Bucky couldn't help but huff a laugh, falling into step next to Steve as they made their way back to their tent.

"Believe me, that was not a conversation you wanted to be at. You know I look awful when I'm crying."

Steve bumped his shoulder. "Nah, Buck. You don't ever look awful."

The familiar warm tingles threatened to expand in his chest and Bucky shut it down, numbing himself because even if Steve had meant that, it didn't matter now.

They could never ever be anything more than best friends.

"Thanks," he said offhandedly, like he was distracted and not really paying attention. The faster they got off the track of teasing each other about things that could be flirting, the better. "Hey, did you see Stark today? I thought of a way he could improve those crutches he's been workin' on."

"No, I haven't." Steve looked at him curiously, all underlying concern. "You sure you alright? You seem-"
"Tired? I kinda am. Think I'll take a nap, actually." They'd reached the slopping canvas of that shared tent, two peeled flaps as they both ducked inside. In sync, again. In sync, always. Bucky blinked into the darkness as his eyes adjusted, praying the few seconds would cover the red around his eyes. Just, focus. Simple. His personal-affects bag was thankfully already packed, he kept it that way.

"You mind if I draw in here while you sleep?" Steve asked, already getting out his sketchbook.

Here it was. Just another one'a those things, but it was too soon. This was all too fresh and Steve was looking at him with those beautiful blue eyes and Bucky was so desperately terribly in love with him.

They needed space.

"Actually, uh," Bucky picked up his bag, looking a little guiltily at Steve. "I was gonna sleep in Falsworth's tent. He uh, said he didn't like bunking alone at base camp. Said it felt weird to be isolated or whatever. I told him I'm sure you wouldn't mind."

Steve's face fell. Bucky's heart broke. But he didn't budge.

"Oh. Okay, yeah. I'll uh. See you at dinner then." Steve looked down dejectedly and Bucky turned around before he changed his mind and ruined everything.

"Yeah. See you at dinner."

He walked back out into the sunshine, only the rays felt pretty damn cold now. Falsworth'd mentioned the lonely thing once, probably seven months ago, and he'd actually been talking about not seeing enough girls when they were at war, but. Bucky needed an out.

"Hey, Montie. You mind if I take a nap in your tent?"

"Uh. Yeah, course, Sarge. Anything wrong?"

"Nah, just wanted some shut eye and figured yours was the emptiest."

Falsworth nodded and Bucky wondered how many lies he was gonna have to tell for the rest of his life.

Falsworth's tent wasn't the emptiest.

Bucky's heart was.
Warning: graphic scenes of violence and death and war in addition to a very heartbreaking almost death yes sorry

Here have this song for our dear troubled Bucky Barnes: Boats and Birds

Also the Howling Commandos theme song: Bullets

And because I am 100% sap here have a video on how to jazz waltz from the 1930s (with the actual dancing footage at the beginning and 6:25)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You're a fucking idiot, you know that?" Steve flinched at the harsh language, ducking to narrowly avoid the next thwap to his head. "It's been a month and a half since I got shot; I can run circles around your lame ass and I'm pretty sure climbing a tree to get a better view for protecting our team isn't gonna kill me."

"Fine, fine, okay. Sorry I mentioned anything." He held his hands up in surrender, making Bucky glare at him a little harder.

"Fine, fine, okay. Sorry I mentioned anything." He held his hands up in surrender, making Bucky glare at him a little harder.

"You better be. Now, before Rogers interrupted, what were you saying about the back exit, Jones?" Bucky turned back to Gabe, arms crossed in fein annoyance as Steve looked down and smoothed the corners of the map, thinking. True, it'd been a month and a half since the bullet, but anybody else'd be walking with a crutch for at least that long. Maybe for the rest of their life. But Bucky absolutely
refused to stay injured. He could probably stop a freight train in its tracks by being pissed at it.

The corners of Steve's mouth threatened to tug up in a smile, but they were going over the mission right now so it was really not the time to be grinning about his stupidly stubborn best friend. He managed to keep the affectionate thoughts on lockdown as Jones explained the best way outta the building - which was where the tree thing from earlier came in.

Trees were dangerous, alright? To snipe from a tree you had to find a branch sturdy enough to hold your entire body weight and not swing in the wind. Then you had to shoot through the leaves and foliage, which was nearly impossible. Not to mention that getting out of a tree was super difficult in the midst of a hurried escape plan. Especially with a sniper rifle strapped to your back.

But apparently mentioning any of this just managed to piss off Bucky, who lately found any precautions to be basically an insult. Ever since he got shot, Bucky'd dived back into fighting twice as hard as before the bullet. It wasn't necessary; they hadn't taken too much time off and he hadn't been slacking at all in the first place. But Bucky was damn dedicated to the cause now.

Lately Bucky had so much vigor in every shot he fired, every mountain he climbed...he had to be fighting for something. Hard.

And the team was better than ever, smiles all around and victories lining up flawlessly in the past month they'd been back in the field. Bucky'd been on the up and up too, ever since he got shot. Ever since his talk about Zola, he'd been...lighter, almost.

Like he'd really gotten the torture off his chest. Almost everything was for the better; he was joking again, bringing up memories from the past now and then. He still put on a serious face as they started a mission, but once most the danger was outta the way he was even making dry comments in the field. It was almost like having the Bucky from Brooklyn back - just older, calmer, more wise.

There was only one negative change since the bullet: he didn't let anybody touch him. Hadn't been able to place it at first, fallen back into the habit of not noticing when they touched. Bucky stitched his wounds, bumped shoulders, threw an arm around Steve for decades. It was so normal, and then it was entirely gone.

But it wasn't the don't touch me breakdown in the schoolhouse. Buck wasn't quiet, wasn't avoiding anyone. Never said anything about it. He just didn't run his fingers through Steve's hair to mess it up, didn't gently touch Steve's hand when he spoke. And when Steve clapped a palm on Bucky's neck, placed a hand on his back or shoulder, Bucky edged away. He always made it casual and cool, simple, easy. Simply didn't wanna be touched.

The only exception was the occasional time he'd smack Steve: backhand to his shoulder, kick to his boot, or - like just now - a thump to his head. It was confusing as hell because Steve had no idea what any of it meant. Why were certain types of touching fine and others weren't? It was strange.

"Steve? You on this planet, Rogers?" Morita nudged him, making Steve blink and look up from the map he'd been staring at.

"Oh, uh. Sorry. Exit plan?" Steve looked around at the other soldiers who were all looking back with amused faces.

"We were talking about the exit plan like, twenty minutes ago." Falsworth deadpanned. Steve paled, blue eyes widening - had he zoned out that long? - and everybody cracked up at the look on his face, Dernier pointing at Falsworth as he threw his head back in laughter.
"C’était huit minutes, peut-être." Dernier giggled and Steve furrowed his eyebrows, looking to Jones. Jones threw up his hands like he had no idea what Dernier said, even though Steve knew for a fact he did. {It was like eight minutes, maybe.} Steve just sighed, folding the map back up as his men laughed around him.

"You musta been thinkin' about someone real special, huh Cap?" Dugan clapped him on the shoulder and Steve's eyes cut to Bucky without thinking, because yeah, he was special. An idiot, but still special.

"Yeah," Steve said softly, still looking at Bucky. Who knew him too well to miss the intention behind that word, lips parting in surprise as he realized Steve had been thinking about him. He was frozen for a millisecond before he reached out and snagged the radio from the jeep's hood, quickly spinning away from Steve and headed in the other direction.

"I call back left!" Bucky shouted, pulling open a jeep door to disappear inside. Steve's gaze followed after him, tracking the sudden disappearance. That was the other weird thing about Bucky, lately. Over the past year, they'd practically melted to each other all these confessions, all this comfort and solace in their friendship finally spilled out and spelled out to hold even closer. But ever since the bullet, Steve so much as looked affectionately Bucky's way and Buck was spinning around, changing the topic entirely.

For as many don't leave me's as they'd shared in that first week after the bullet alone, it was weird to suddenly act like they were...normal. Like Steve might as well be Falsworth - a good friend you'd die for but not one you ever told that to. Everybody assumed everybody knew how everybody felt. But it was weird to be like that with Bucky because he'd always had so much to say.

"Je reclame le siège près de Barnes!" Dernier called out, reaching for the other back door of the jeep Bucky was in. Steve didn't need to understand French to get that phrase either, especially since it consisted of Bucky's name.

"No you don't," Steve interjected, sliding past Dernier and the door he'd opened. Dernier made a face and said something in French that made Jones laugh - a lot - but Steve crossed his arms and didn't budge. There were two jeeps, Dernier would find another spot.

So Steve cocked his head and smiled at him, the classic Captain America poster boy smile that always made everyone laugh. Dernier cursed again and stomped off dramatically to the other vehicle, which was literally three feet away.

"Sometimes I forget you're all children," Dugan grumbled as he swung into the driver's seat of Dernier's jeep.

"You're like six years older than us!" Bucky protested.

"Two years older than me," Falsworth pointed out.

"Yeah, and Dernier's a year older than you," Gabe added.

Dugan just shrugged, starting up the engine. "Children, all of you."

~*~

Morita was driving their jeep - just the three of them - but he'd barely started the engine before Steve leaned over into Bucky's space, his voice low as he raised his eyebrows and spoke. "Can we talk?"

"I'm pretty sure my mouth works, yeah," Bucky sassed back dryly, instantly wishing he picked better
wording because he should not be talking about *mouths*, dammit. But Steve didn't notice, rolling his
eyes and scooting a little closer. Bucky scooted a little further away.

"You been alright?" Steve asked, voice low enough that only Bucky could hear over the grumble.
Bucky threw his head back against the seat and groaned dramatically, because good god Steve never
stopped asking him that.

"Holy shit, Steve. Yes, I'm fine. My leg is fine. My head is fine. Are you okay? Because I think you
need your damn hearing checked. I literally answered this question like, last week."

"That was an entire week ago, I have the right to ask again. Things can change," Steve said
defensively.

"But they didn't. I'm good. Now, can we talk about something important, like this mission? Or did
you have other useless questions for me?" Bucky raised an annoyed eyebrow and pinned
unimpressed eyes on that infuriating boy. He'd gotten to the point that he was cornering Bucky in the
back of moving vehicles now, apparently.

Steve hesitated, like he actually had another question for Bucky - what the hell could *that*
be - but
decided to shut his trap and leave him alone, leaning forward to ask Morita if they were leading the
caravan or Dugan was.

Bucky turned back to look out the side of the jeep, wishing there was another foot between his
pounding heart and Steve.

~*~

"Hey, tree-boy, how are you enjoying the bird view?" Steve tapped on the mouthpiece of his walkie-
talkie, a resounding echo in static over the distance. There was nothing stealth about this mission, so
they got to talk throughout it, which was always fun.

"Better than your view, punk. There's a guy waiting at your 3 o'clock but your big head is in the way
so I can't get him. Frenchie, step to your left!" A shot rang out as Steve ducked - he wasn't
particularly keen to catch one of Bucky's bullets in the head (even though he knew Bucky was the
best shot in the army and would never hit Steve unintentionally) it was always good to be safe - but
the bullet soared in another direction entirely, taking out an enemy soldier that Dernier had been
crouched near.

Steve peeked around the side of the building, taking down the soldier at his 3 o'clock with a single
bullet to the forehead. "Thanks for the heads up, tree-boy."

Bucky muttered something over the wire that Steve couldn't pick up, then more shots rang out and
his attention averted, rolling across the open space behind his shield to help Jones out with the group
of soldiers that just ran outta the building. Most of the Nazis went down with a single blast from
Jones's gun, although a few dodged the explosion and tackled up close, the glint of knives flashing
through the air to replace heavy metal bullets.

A slit to the ankle made Jones shout, then he kicked the Nazi in the face and brought his gun down
on the guy's head, knocking him to the ground but not quite unconscious. "You good, Jones?" Steve
asked as he ducked under a bladed swing from another soldier. Knife cuts were never fun, but they
all got nicked with blades or stray bullets at least three times over the past year, minor injuries were
something they were all pretty used to.

"Fine," Jones gritted out, slamming up against the wall again and adjusting the helmet that'd fallen
"Rogers, eight o'clock," crackled over the line, Bucky's voice concerned even through the metallic filter. Steve covered himself with his shield and crouched behind the pile of debris, waiting for a beat before he jumped out to the side and landed another kill shot in the chest of the next Nazi soldier.

The worryvoice piped up over the line again. "You guys gotta get outta that debris mess, I can't cover you from up here."

"It's you who picked the tree," Steve pointed out, rolling back behind the debris cover.

"Before you decided to lure all the bad guys into places they can hide!" Bucky hissed back.

"You...lure bad guys," Steve responded lamely.

"What is that even supposed to mean?" The exasperated voice complained again.

"It means you're alluring, Barnes," Falsworth said snidely, piping up into the middle of Steve and Bucky's conversation over the wire. Muffled laughter rang out from the little speaker as well as more exasperated sounds - probably Bucky - and Steve had to fight the smile on his face when he spun to pull the trigger on the next soldier lowering a gun his way.

"Ask any girl in Brooklyn, they'll tell you all about how alluring Bucky Barnes is," Steve inputed, the words back in his serious mission-voice - he was pretty sure there were five semi-automatics around the next corner - which apparently made them a hell of a lot funnier because the laughter started up again.

"Yeah, alluring Bucky Barnes and his scrawny blonde friend. It's a package deal," Jones joked, wire covered with loud static for a few moments from a bout of gunfire. As soon as it faded back out, Steve piped up again.

"You don't know how true that was, Jones. Scrawny is an understatement." He jumped around the corner, taking out all five Nazi's with perfect shots to their foreheads. He was breathing heavy now as he ducked into the next shadow, turning his head to talk into the wire. "But I could still kick your ass then, too."

Laughter broke out again, crackling through the wire and around the outside of the building, a double echo.

"Correction: he'd try," Bucky amended. "And then you'd probably break his face and I'd have to come break yours."

"Jones versus Barnes; now that's a fight I'd like to see," Dugan finally joined in. And another exasperated sigh came over the wire, surprisingly not Bucky's this time.

"I'm trying to storm an enemy weapons storage facility, would any of you mind helping? Or is killing German bastards not entertaining enough for you?" Morita whispered seriously through the walkie talkie.

Silence crackled over the line for a few moments, static filled with the soft breaths of seven men.

"Nah, Barnes and Rogers arguing is better," Falsworth finally said.

This time even Steve had to stop and lean against a wall to laugh. Looking back, it was probably the most fun and light-hearted mission they ever went on. It was child's play compared to some of the
Hydra bases they'd had to take down; an old weapons facility that a fleet of German soldiers had come across and decided to bunk down in. The building itself wasn't even armed or functional anymore; they were here to eliminate as many soldiers as possible, then take any information available. And considering the time of day they weren't running into a lotta resistance.

He almost felt bad for how easy it was, taking out soldiers with their guards down. But it had been the mission orders and these were bad people - they were murdering thousands, throwing people in concentration camps and treating them worse than animals. Steve had to remind himself of that sometimes, and he never hesitated to pull the trigger.

But despite the internal controversy on how fair the odds were, the mission was ridiculously easy and they spent basically the entire time joking and bitching at each other.

That night, they all sang songs around the campfire and toasted each other's health and futures, tipping back tin cans of watery soup like it was the whiskey they hadn't seen in weeks. It was January again and therefore freezing, tents already setup as the sky bled into darkness. If it was warmer, they might lay out on the ground by the fire, stare up at the stars and talk about nothing at all until everyone was asleep.

Unfortunately, it wasn't warm enough to sleep outside. The cold was harsh, the bitter kind'a winter that normally dashed everybody's spirits and made 'em retreat to sleeping bags before the cold could settle in brittle bones. And just as Steve was about to duck into his tent to do just that, Montie caught everyone's attention, accent echoing as he pointed up at the sky.

"Look! Snow!" He blew at a snowflake that drifted down towards his nose, eyes crossing as he failed and the snowflake landed on the the tip of it. Dugan shook his head, rolling affectionate eyes as he snuffed out the fire with a dirty boot.

"You're British, Falsworth. How is snow even remotely exciting to you?" Falsworth shot him a glare, sticking out his tongue to catch the next flake drifting down slowly.

"I've said it before; it's better than rain because at least it's insulating."

Steve looked up at the sky, watching the white flakes drift down from the heavens. The billows of snow clouds only covered part of the sky, leaving a blank blanket to see sharp pinpricks of the stars. Reflecting off the dying light of their hand-lanterns, the snow itself almost looked like hundreds of stars, falling down from above.

A year ago, he and Bucky had laid out on the cold French ground and stared up at those same stars, bodies curled together and warm in the darkness. Steve's hand had been smudged with graphite from drawing and Bucky had smelt like gunpowder and the whole night had been so peaceful...

How could that much change in a year? And so much stay the same?

He turned his head, gaze snapping to Buck's calm, motionless form. He never had to search for him, he could always feel which direction Bucky was in. It had to be some subconscious thing; his head was well aware of Bucky's walking and breathing patterns -signaled softly, constantly, the angle to wherever Bucky was. In fights that gave them such an advantage, moving instinctually to adjust their lines of sight, keep each other outta harm's way.

But they weren't fighting tonight. Tonight it was just soft sweet gravity.

Those silvery blue eyes were looking up at the sky too, maybe at the snow, maybe at the stars. Maybe at both, and maybe he was thinking about last December too. What Steve would give to
"C'mon, Buck, gotta get inside before the snow gets that pretty hair all messed up," Steve reached out to ruffle the dark pomade - kinda liked it better disheveled anyways - because if Bucky wasn't gonna mess Steve's hair up anymore then at least Steve would mess up Bucky's. Buck smacked his hand away before he could touch, but there was the faintest of smiles on his pouty pink lips. His heart was only pounding a little as he pulled back the flap of the closest tent, waving Buck inside before he could see the flush high on cheeks. Barnes made another cross face as he ducked, the sweet joking kind, and Steve had to take a deep breath before he followed into the the tiny sanctuary.

They had slept in different tents for a week after Bucky had walked out of the officer's tent with red-rimmed eyes and a haunted look on his face. But eventually Bucky had come back to his tent, rambled something about Falsworth kicking him out 'cause he liked sleeping alone better after all.

They'd gotten bigger tents anyways, so Falsworth shared with Jones and Dernier now and Bucky was back in Steve's. They'd shared rooms - shared beds, actually - for most of their growing up lives, it was so much easier to fall asleep to the sound of Bucky's breathing.

In a war full of foreign countries and high-tech weapons in too-big hands, a body that had finally started to feel like his own and a mind with a hell of a lot of pressure and troubles, having something as simple and familiar as the presence of your best friend by your side was invaluable.

"Hey Bucky," Steve started, rolling out his sleeping bag. Bucky looked up from where he was straightening out his own, eyebrows raised in silent encouragement to continue. "Would you really take on Jones if he fought the old me?"

"You mean the younger you?" Bucky joked, untying his boots. Steve made a face because yes, that's what he'd meant and Bucky knew that. He sighed when Steve didn't laugh at his joke, mumbling something about being underappreciated for his sense of wit. Steve just sat and waited for a real answer. Finally Bucky kicked off his boot, starting on the next one and not looking over at Steve as he spoke.

"Yes, Steve, 'course I would. I'd take on anybody who fights you, idiot. Why do you think I'm out here?" Bucky kicked off the other boot, slipping socked feet into his sleeping bag and shivering at the cold slide of the material.

Steve didn't move, staring at Bucky as he slowly kicked off his own boots. Bucky still didn't look at him, reaching for the lantern between their sleeping bags to blow it out. Steve reached out to stop him, grab the lantern before the room went dark and he wouldn't be able to see Bucky's face anymore. He wanted to see Bucky's face when he asked this.

Because there was no way in the world he'd heard Bucky right.

But his hand grab was too late and the tent flickered out around them, darkness falling into the little space. Steve let out the breath he'd been holding, slowly releasing the oxygen from his lungs in an attempt to calm the race in his chest. Silence settled in with the darkness, the quiet kind loud enough to drown in.

Steve sat muddy boots aside, unwrapping his toolbelt to prop beside them before sliding into his sleeping bag with the tight Captain America uniform still on. It was cold, better to sleep in as many clothes on as possible. And it definitely wasn't the first time he'd slept in uniform.
The puffy material settled around him and he stared up at the seam of the tent where Bucky's half met his until his eyes were as adjusted to the darkness as they were gonna get.

"Buck?" Steve asked again. Bucky sighed, still awake. Good, Steve knew he wouldn't be asleep yet. Deep breath and he rolled over, studying the sloping profile in the darkness of the night. So clear, even in all this dark, so pitch black the world dipped an octave lower, no light to bounce off of as he spoke, quietly. "You're not just out here for me, right?"

There was only silence from the other half of the tent. No response. He stared a little longer before Steve rolled his head to look back up at the canvas ceiling. "As cheesy as it sounds, you're fighting for America, right? For our country?"

"Goodnight, Steve." Bucky rolled over in his sleeping bag, facing the opposite wall and giving Steve the outline of his broad shoulders, curving down to the tapered waist beneath the sleeping bag.

Steve stared at Bucky's back for a minute or two, watching him breathe and debating opening his mouth again. Clearly, Bucky wasn't in the mood to talk. If Bucky didn't want to talk you couldn't yank it outta him with pliers. He was second in stubbornness only to Steve.

It felt like forever before Steve's eyes finally drifted shut, but the question even infiltrated his dreams, playing on echo repeat as his head drilled the idea over and over.

What was Bucky fighting for?

~*~*~

For as long as he could remember, nothing made Bucky more pleased than seeing Steve happy. But the idea of seeing him happier with somebody else was the furthest thing Bucky had ever felt from pleased. He was trying - so goddamn hard - to ignore everything that he'd been feeling for years, but the torture wasn't leaving him alone. He had promised to give Steve up, he just didn't know how.

If Steve was the stitches holding him together, it was no wonder Bucky was falling to pieces as he tried to cut those stitches free.

He covered it up with sarcasm and snark and honestly, he felt pretty okay most of the time. He started to feel like himself again, if only because he'd spent years in Brooklyn living in the same hardcore denial he was trying to shove himself back into now. Just like the old days: don't stare too long at Steve and set him up with as many dames as possible and shut down every single thought about how you prayed Steve wouldn't find some dame he actually liked.

He was in full blown Brooklyn-level denial and with it came all the features of the kid he used to be, just older. He was surprised to see that he still had it in him: he was that same joking, smiling guy underneath all the mess he was feeling for Steve and the Zola memories tugging at his head. The more comfortable he got with acting like the younger version of himself, the easier it was to picture them as the same person.

The war had changed him, like it had everyone and everything, but he wasn't an entirely lost cause. He didn't live with reckless abandon anymore because he couldn't afford to, although otherwise he almost felt like Bucky again. Just with a lot more issues, a lot bigger problems, a crazier messed up head.

The biggest problem was that he missed Steve all the time. And between missing him like crazy and hating himself for it, Bucky was trying to distance himself without actually distancing himself. He was balancing on a tightrope wire and constantly in risk of falling, arms out to balance and the huge,
imminent fall underneath. Just waiting, waiting, for the ground to come rushing up to meet him. It had to, eventually.

"Bonjour, Barnes," Dernier greeted chipperly as Bucky stepped out of his tent and straightened out his uniform, buttoning the last button on his coat as he sat down next to Dernier at the fire.

"Morning. You know the plan for today?" Bucky dug around in an equipment pack for an C-ration and snagged the can of water heating up over the fire. Dernier shrugged, either not knowing or seeing no point in saying when Bucky wouldn't understand him anyways.

Bucky hummed softly as he poured the hot water into the outside pouch of his breakfast, reading the description on the back and making a face. Military food was all the same, not one bit of it as pleasant as the scraps he and Steve had gotten by on in Brooklyn. That's one thing they don't tell you when you join. Or, well, get drafted. Not that anyone exactly knew that about Bucky, though. Especially not Steve.

Steve. Bucky sighed, placing the green package back by the small fire and looking around the camp. The sun was just skirting the horizon, rising over the world and coloring the snowy ground a blinding white. It'd been a week since Falsworth had pointed upwards at the first snow they'd seen yet this year. Now everything as far as the eye could see was covered in white, the ground at least six inches thick.

It still wasn't a lot of snow, which was kind of surprising. This winter had been cold as hell so far, but there had been a major lack of precipitation. Not that Bucky was complaining.

"Morning, Jones! You know the plan for today?" Bucky asked again as Gabe ducked out of his tent and shivered a bit, pulling a ratty jacket further around his shoulders.

"C'est févier déjà?" Jones asked Dernier, sitting down between Bucky and the frenchman. Bucky sighed. He really shouldda taken French back in school. If he'd known he'd be missing this much conversation, he'd've picked it up before he came to Europe. Not like he'd been planning spending who-knows-how-many years in cold, foreign places where he'd need to know French, but whatever.


"You don't even bother translating anymore, Jones," Bucky complained, rubbing his hands together for warmth. Jones just shrugged.

"I'll translate the next one for you, Sarge," he said distractedly, taking apart the barrel of his gun. Yeah, like he would actually keep up that promise. Bucky checked again - still not done. Damn C-rations's.

A breaking stick made all three of their heads pop up, looking across the fire to see Steve coming out of their tent. He'd tried not sharing and as much as he wanted to stay away, he couldn't do it. He'd crawled back barely a week after leaving.

"Oi, regarde qui c'est, le petit ami de sergent," Dernier piped with a grin. Jones lost it, slapping his knee and bending in half with laughter, eyes almost watering as his laugh echoed around the clearing. Bucky looked between Jones and Dernier and Steve - at least Steve looked as confused as Bucky did - but Dernier was laughing now too, and it just wasn't fair.

"Jones! What the hell did he say?" Bucky demanded, poking Gabe in the side. Gabe skirted further away, still laughing as he dodged Bucky's demand. "Hey! You told me you'd translate the next one!"
"I'm not ever translating that," Jones finally managed between sucking breaths and remaining giggles. Bucky made a face - figured, he'd totally called it - but let it go. It wasn't the first time Dernier said something that sounded like that and Bucky was done trying to figure out what it meant. It wasn't helpful that he could pull the word "Sergeant" out of there, even though that one took him forever too because it sounded more like "sar-john" without the "n" on john.

His attention was suddenly diverted as something warm and heavy pressed up against the side of his calf, making Bucky startle and look down. Steve didn't budge an inch when Bucky jumped, propping an elbow on top of his knee and leaning the length of that heavy body harder against his leg.

There was a plethora of perfectly reasonable places to sit and Steve choose the ground, leaning on Bucky. It wasn't fair. Bucky had half the mind to just offer Steve the stump he was sitting on and go find another one, except that Steve would be super offended. And suspicious. And as much as he'd love to avoid this situation, making Steve ask questions would be a hell of a lot worse situation.

He sucked in a breath and cursed the skies for giving him this life and his stupid heart and head and a best friend that simply would not leave him alone.

"Are you really so cold that you can't find your own space to sit and have to take half of mine?" Bucky finally ventured, because it was sarcastic enough that Steve wouldn't be offended, but would hopefully take the hint.

Then again, this was Steve and he understood subtly even less than he understood women. Although he had certainly lucked out lately in that department, Bucky thought sourly.

"I always have half of your stuff," Steve said, like the whole thing was axiomatic and Bucky was somewhere on planet crazy for even mentioning it. Bucky groaned, but Steve just reached out for Bucky's breakfast and settled back against his leg, tearing open the package.

"How do you know that wasn't Dernier's?" He said, crossing his arms and fighting the urge to kick Steve off of his leg. Steve propped his elbow back up on Bucky's knee, placing the hot plastic on the ground in front of him.

"Because you're the only one who eats this kind." Steve answered, not looking up as he started in on Bucky's breakfast.

"Am not," Bucky said, even though it was likely Steve was right, as always.

"Yeah, you are, because it's disgusting. And no one else would ever eat it but you've got a heart of gold and you always chose it so no one else has to," Steve said, putting another spoonful in his mouth. If it was so disgusting, then why'd Steve taken it? He'd save Bucky half, he always did, but it was still infuriating.

"I don't have a heart of gold. I just hang out with you too much," Bucky grumbled, thumping Steve lightly over the head. Steve made a face but kept on eating Bucky's breakfast.

They couldn't be this close when Steve asked Peggy to marry him. Bucky was already buying time and space with the deal they had set up now. Peggy knew how Bucky felt and she was letting him stay in Steve's life. He wasn't going to push his luck and be all close and physical and comfortable
with Steve. He'd asked for more than his share already, he couldn't take this too.

But Steve wasn't taking no as an answer. And it was getting harder and harder to shove space between them. He was giving up faster and faster each time it happened and soon he was gonna snap.

The tightwire rope beneath his feet would just *pop* and Bucky would go tumbling, tumbling, falling. He could feel it. He just had no idea how to stop it.

~*~

"Hey Steve, you know that summer we got so sunburnt we couldn't sleep for three days?" Bucky asked, checking the rifle strapped to his back before picking up the semi-automatic from Jones's bag and loading a magazine into the chamber.

"You mean the summer you insisted we go down to the beach almost every day so you could meet up with Mary-Lou?" Steve shot him an amused look and picked his shield up out of the snow. Bucky pondered a moment, pulling on the strap for the machine gun.

"Was that her name? But yeah, I'd give just about anything to be that warm right now. I'd take that sunburn over this stupid snow any day." He kicked at the ground to prove his point, snow shooting up and drifting around, fancy white swirls in the wind.

"I dunno, *your* nose didn't peel off your face." Steve made a disgusted pouty face and Bucky laughed, because yeah, he remembered that. Steve never could take much sun when he was smaller, all pale and thin-skinned. After their fourth day on the beach, his nose had gone from pink to red to that thin skin peeling off. Bucky had laughed a lot and called him Pinocchio for at least a month.

"My shoulders peeled, though," Bucky pointed out, falling into step next to Dugan and behind Steve, everyone falling into triangle formation automatically, even though they had half a mile before they reached the tanks. Soldiers were never off the battlefield.

"Yeah, but they peeled in the shape of angel wings, so it didn't count because it looked cool," Steve argued back, holding up a hand for them to halt. Everybody stopped, falling quiet as they looked around. Steve stayed perfectly still for a moment, listening into the wind. After a few seconds he gave the all clear and they started forward again.

"Still burned, though. And they didn't look *that* cool." Bucky glanced behind them, a clear track in the snow of their footprints. That was the other sucky thing about snow, besides the terrible cold.

"Cool enough to draw," Steve commented, crouching behind a mound of snow at the edge of an outcropping. The rest of them crouched down next to him and Bucky fell quiet, deciding to use the mission as an excuse not to respond to that one.

He remembered that part of that summer too, maybe even with a fonder smile than Steve's sunburnt nose. He'd come moodily shuffling into the kitchen of their shared apartment, complaining that his shoulders were peeling and he was going through terrible hell in general. Steve had laughed and said he was pretty sure Bucky was making it up for sympathy.

So he'd whipped his shirt off over his head, turning around to show Steve and demand an apology to his honor as a non-liar. Steve had apologized sincerely (even though Bucky had been kidding of course) and stepped forward to trace the angry red skin with careful, gentle fingers. His fingers had been freezing (as always) and it felt kind of amazing so Bucky had just hummed and not bothered to stop him.
They look like angel wings, Steve had commented, showing him by tracing the outline with an obvious finger. Bucky pondered a moment - Steve was exaggerating, as always, it was more like two blobby triangles arching his shoulder blades, but Steve had always been more creative than he was - and shrugged in semi agreement. Can I draw it? the little blond had asked. Bucky had smiled and affectionately rolled his eyes. But of course he'd agreed, under the condition that he didn't have to sit or stand still for too long.

He'd ended up laying shirtless on his stomach, that way Steve could sit on the couch to draw and didn't have to worry about Bucky's fidgeting. So he'd laid there for hours, talking about everything and nothing at all, rambling a million different things in an attempt to get Steve to laugh. Even back then, Bucky's favorite thing in the world was Steve's laugh. Besides, it was nice to lay there with the cold floor on his bare stomach while Steve created whole worlds from simple gray lines in the sketchbook Bucky had bought him.

It was a really good memory - they'd both been happy, and healthy other than the sunburns - and he'd entirely forgotten it until right now. And they were currently on another mission, not exactly the best time to be reminiscing on the past, full of warm smiles and carefree summers. Especially all of his memories about Steve. Who he was trying to stop thinking about 24/7.

Bucky puffed out a breath, watching the air turn to fog in front of his mouth and wondering distantly if his whole body could dissipate into fog and fade away, slip from the pain of sitting right up against Steve's side and knowing he shouldn't be, knowing it was so wrong and he already had so much, how could he possibly be wishing for more?

"Coast is clear," Steve whispered, the words barely out of his mouth before he was vaulting over the snow pile and skidding down the side of the slope. The rest of them were a tad slower getting to their feet, but one by one they all slid down to the road in the deep tracks of the snow.

The ground was frozen underfoot, a thick sheet of ice underneath the inches of snow. Falsworth slipped, reaching out a hand for Dernier but only succeeding in making him skid too. Jones grabbed them both and they all straightened out, inching forward more carefully along the road. Bucky gestured everybody to the side of the road where the snow was deeper; at least it would be less likely to slip on ice over there.

"Are we stealing the tanks or just blowing them up? I'd like a tank of my own right now," Dugan whispered, stepping gingerly over a blank patch of ice. Steve signaled them to be quiet again and they all silenced and inched forward, resisting the urge to peer around Steve's shoulder to see what was going on.

"Four guards, gated entrance. Attack dogs on the left and a ten foot fence with electrical wire across the top." Steve relayed back to them before turning around, giving everyone his encouraging battle face. "Everyone ready?"

"You make it sound so easy, Rogers," Morita sighed, but he hoisted his gun a little higher and nodded. They all looked back to Steve and he nodded at them each in turn, meeting everyone's eyes and making sure they really were all ready. It was such a signature caring Steve move that it almost always made Bucky smile - not today, though. He could smile after this mission was over.

"Keep an eye on each other. On my mark...go!" The seven of them rounded the corner, a perfect triangle with Bucky on Steve's right - right hand man for a reason - and the shield as the emblem out in front of all of them.

It scared Bucky sometimes how easy carrying a machine gun felt. There was something about the instantaneous, nearly guaranteed death that the weapon haphazardly delivered that just made it feel
too powerful for any one man. With a sniper rifle, at least it depended on skill and accuracy and patience. You had to work for the kill. But you could give a monkey a machine gun and watch it slaughter thousands. Not exactly Bucky's favorite weapon.

But Nazis were Nazis and Bucky was always going to fight alongside Steve. He'd always be fighting for Steve. That's why he was out here and Steve never needed to know that. It was honorable to fight for your country, but what kind of man fought for his best friend instead? War was hell and war messed you up and this was just the best way he could weather it, justify the lives he'd taken.

The machine gun rattled and jumped in his hands, smoking and absolutely deafening even outside like this. Every human he killed was one less person trying to kill Steve, right? He could tell himself that and maybe he'd sleep fine tonight.

The moment the smoke cleared from their guns, Steve was running forward again and the rest of them hurried to keep up, weapons at the ready as Steve busted the lock on the gate with his shield, kicking open the tall metal fence and waving them all through. The guards, German Shepard attack dogs, and a few stray soldiers were all dead: littering the ground, bleeding out ugly red onto the snowy ground, polluting the white with the screaming sins of the lives they'd taken. Bucky looked away.

Snow made it worse, somehow. It was a winter's war and Bucky was entirely sure that hell made of ice, not fire.

Steve stopped them again, turning amidst the carnage and pointing off orders from beneath his blue emblazoned helmet. Bucky looked at the too-blue eyes instead of the bloody ground because if he was going to hell for something today, he'd rather it be for staring too affectionately at Steve than the sleek, dead dog about a foot and a half from Steve's feet.

"There should be three tanks on the right side of that building - Dugan, Jones, see if you can snag one for our side. If it gets messy, blow 'em all up. Dernier and Falsworth, cover the entrance and make sure we don't have any unwelcome visitors or runners. You last two are with me - we've got the fleet out back to deal with. Rendez-vous in the woods, three miles to the west."

Another hand motion and they were all off, each on missions that should require ten men, at least. They made due with two. It wasn't often Steve and Bucky were in the same group though. Bucky was sniping more often than not, and if they were on the ground, he usually lead the other half of the team.

If they were both needed in the same spot, with the addition of Morita and his havoc-reeking gun, the fleet in the back must be pretty intense.

Peeking around the corner of the last building, Bucky paled and decided to change the word from intense to impossible. He spun back to Steve, hissing in his ear just because they couldn't afford a noise any louder.

"There's like 9 tanks out there! How the hell are we supposed to survive this? We used to have an entire team to take down one, remember?" Bucky wasn't doubting Steve as much as deciding he was nuts and about eight times too dangerously optimistic.

Steve just handed Bucky a grenade. "Do your best, soldier."

He didn't even have time to suck in a calming breath before Steve was charging around the corner, shield in front and pistol firing left and right.
They'd come at the perfect time, the tanks getting ready to deploy and roll out. That meant they were crawling with activity and enemy soldiers - at least five for every one of the machines. There was no way to tell if the tanks had been Hydra weaponized or were simply military grade cannon shooters, but either way they could do a hell of a lot of damage.

That's without counting the two soldiers perched on top of each, ugly machine guns in their filthy hands. By the time Bucky started firing off rounds too, most of the soldiers on top of the tanks were already dead or had jumped to the ground, weaving closer between the huge metal beasts.

Bucky cut off to the left, hand curled around Steve's grenade as he kept his head down and sprinted across the snow, sliding up against the nearest tank, flattening his back to it to use for cover. This mission was fucking nuts.

He held his breath, counted to three, then turned and mounted the side of the tank. He barely made it past the chain wheel system before someone from inside the tank popped out and shouted and Bucky's pistol had to buy the silence back. Of course, a dead soldier falling back through the top of a tank was enough to alert the others because there was more shouting and Bucky had almost reached the top...

Another helmet appeared from the entry hatch and Bucky was close enough to use his fist this time, reeling back to land his fist hard - really hard - on the guy's face, shattering his cheekbone into splinters.

None of the Commandos were paying attention, so Bucky could use all the strength or agility he wanted - although with their odds, he'd probably use them anyways and risk getting caught because better poked and prodded and questioned by his friends regarding why he could shatter cheekbones with a punch than have everybody dead.

The guy screamed in agony and Bucky shoved him back down into the tank, tossing the grenade in after him and slamming the hatch shut. He could still hear a muffled version of the scream as he jumped off the tank, hitting the ground and rolling to absorb some of the shock. His ankles still stung and his calves were screaming at him but Bucky took off in a run anyways, whistling as high pitched as he could to alert Jim and Steve to the grenade warning.

The explosion came only seconds after, lighting up the place with fire and smoke and a lot of shouting. Two sharp, fast, and distinctly different whistles pierced the noise and answered back to him, just a confirmation that both Jim and Steve were still okay. Bucky breathed out a sigh of relief and loaded another magazine in his pistol.

The machine gun had too many stray bullets, which meant a risk of hitting his teammates. So Bucky switched to the familiar handgun, lining up his sights on the figures in hats that he could see moving through the smoke. The soldiers had all piled out of tank number two and that meant Bucky could take them out with just a gun, no explosions required.

The fire of the first tank filled the air with smoke, gray powder covering the air to contrast the white powder covering the ground. All mixed in with leaking red blood and orange, dancing flames. Bucky gave the fire the smallest berth he could stand (it wasn't the warm kind of fire, just the burning bodies kind) and rounded the melting metal to come up behind the next set of soldiers.

His instincts screamed at him but Bucky pulled the trigger until his magazine was empty - ten shots into five soldier's backs, two a piece and probably all lethal on the first one anyways. In their backs.

Sometimes he wished he'd been stuck in the American Revolution instead. At least then there was a code of honor in war, a simplicity that made the whole thing way less nasty. Two perfect lines
marching towards each other, waiting and patient and don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes and that damn strict honor code and following all the rules until they fired upon each other in tandem.

None of this shooting men between their shoulderblades shit. None of this packing thousands away in concentration camps shit. Just honest fighting, was that too much to ask for?

Apparently so, because suddenly the metallic sound of bullets started to bounce off of the twisted burning tank next to Bucky, gunshots aimed for his spine. Karma's a bitch. He spun around and fired - the gun clicked, out of ammo. He cursed, ducked, and spun to the side, narrowly avoiding the next round of offending bullets. It took him less than seven seconds before he had a new mag in, stepping back out into the open to fire off the new rounds at the armed soldiers.

The speed of his gun recovery must have surprised them, neither soldier had the chance to shout before there was a smattering of bullets destroying their shocked faces. An eye split in one, nose completely burned through in another. Faces that stared at him for one more moment, mangled with bullets, before the bodies dropped.

Maybe Bucky liked shooting people in their backs better after all.

Another explosion went off further down the line of tanks and Bucky whistled his pitch in response, alerting his still-alive-ness to everyone, including the residents of the next tank over.

"This never stops, does it?" Bucky asked his pistol with a sigh as he lifted it back up to shooting height, taking out what soldiers he could from this distance. Okay, that was more than just the five from the next tank. It was hard to count with the smoke in the air and the zigzag conglomerate they had goin' on, but the best guess was maybe twelve Nazi soldiers? This wasn't even fair.

Dead bodies were disgusting, but he didn't exactly have an impenetrable shield like his best friend over there with the tights, so everybody else had to make due. Bucky grabbed the nearest slumped body, hoisting it up in front of him to at least block some of the bullets as he inched his way towards the cover of the next tank and some sort of advantage. Or help from that best friend with the shield, if possible.

He backed towards the machine, groaning from the weight of the dead guy in front of his chest. He only had eight bullets left in this mag so it'd be a risky move, but...it might save his life. Bucky kept backing away, lifting his pistol and aiming. Eight shots left - eight out of twelve was a hell of a lot better odds. He couldn't risk killing a soldier only to have the guy next to him grab his gun, double the ammo...he couldn't risk any kill shots at all right now.

He aimed and pulled the trigger, blocking out the screams and trying not to stare at the spraying red onto the snow as he fired off eight shots, each into the trigger hands of the approaching enemies. Guns dropped like hot potatoes as screams commenced - if getting your hand cut hurt, Bucky couldn't imagine getting shot through the thin flesh.

But it meant eight less people who could shoot him and four others who were very rattled. He could kill them all in a moment, once he had the time to stop and reload.

In the mayhem caused by bleeding hands and dropping guns (bonus to that whole dropping guns thing was that if they were loaded, odds are they probably went off and unloaded bullets everywhere, which means soldiers with no workable hands or feet; didn't get much easier to kill than that), he managed to ditch the dead guy shield and finally duck behind another tank to reload.

The good thing about how tall tanks were was that no one really saw you when you were standing
next to one. So in the too early relapse of safety, he loaded up both his pistol and the machine gun, glancing back around the edge of the tank as he tucked his pistol back into its holster, checking to see how much damage he'd caused by the hand wounds and incidental gunshots to the ankles.

Only three Nazis were unscathed and heading his way. Perfect.

He angled away from the safety on the side of the tank, plifferating the approaching Nazis with machine gun holes. They dropped like flies and Bucky didn't think a damn thing as he stepped over their bodies to finish off the handless eight he'd snagged earlier. The machine gun bit into them too, destroying what was left at the attempted grasp on life.

A third explosion went off and Bucky barely registered it, whistling the safe-signal without thinking as he counted the number he'd just taken down. Something was off, he was missing one--

There was only that brief moment to think before Bucky was tackled from behind, blade slashing for his throat as a heavy weight landed on his back. Bucky grabbed the wrist holding the knife, snapping it clean in two with a squeeze. A high pitched scream pierced his earlobe and Bucky cringed but followed through with the movement, yanking the wrist down in front of him and flipping the soldier over his shoulder to land hard on the frozen solid ground.

The screaming man hit with a painful-sounding thud, hand shaking and held up in agony. It was too close range to use the machine gun so Bucky reached for his pistol again, cocking it and leveling it on the man's head.

In another scream, that head tipped backwards, the Nazi hat falling off of tight blonde curls. The man rolled onto his back, clutching his wrist still, and Bucky saw it wasn't a man at all. It was a kid, couldn't be older than seventeen. Good-lookin', with those blonde curls and dark blue eyes and a strong jawline, now clenched in pain.

Fuck, it was just a kid. Just a kid stuck in a fight that wasn't his. Stuck on the side that was dying today.

Bucky's hand wavered, thinking back to what Dugan'd said a little while back, another teasing jest they'd all laughed at at the time and didn't stop to think about. Children, all of you.

Children. God, Steve was so young. They put a shiny suit on him and the world of responsibilities on his shoulders, taught him to murder and to lie. He was just a kid, only 25, the biggest care he should have was findin' some dame he could stick with for life. Not saving the goddamned world.

Just two years ago, the two of them were still meetin' up at the movies, for godssakes. The night before Bucky shipped out, they were supposed to go see some film together. Of course by the time Bucky got there Steve was already getting smacked around in the alley out back. He'd actually started to check there first. But seriously, the goddamned movies. They weren't adults. They weren't fucking grown up yet. Children. Just children.

God, they all were, weren't they? Just kids, fresh out of school, home, college. Not even married yet, not even old enough to want kids, let alone have 'em.

How many people had Bucky killed - today alone - that now would never get the chance to even try having kids? They were all dying so young. How could they all be dying so young?

What the fuck was this war for anyways?

Bucky pulled the trigger. Blond curls soaked bloody and he stepped over the body; he'd wasted enough time already. He didn't have the luxury to fret over a 17 year old when there was a 25 year
old on this battlefield he had to get to. There was somebody who had to survive this because he'd be
the best goddamned Dad on the planet and Bucky had taken so much from the world's future today,
the least he could do was pay the world back with another day of living, breathing Steve Rogers.

He would be drowning in debt from all the lives he'd killed if he didn't have the chance to give back
the one that mattered the most. Steve was his way out, Steve was Bucky's only chance at salvation.

So long as Bucky kept saving Steve, maybe Bucky could be saved one day.

Too bad he's not yours to save anymore. Too bad he's not yours at all. He never could have been.
What would I be without him. Let him go let him go let him go.

~*~*~

Snow, covered in red. A trail of blood, following him, winding around his legs, dragging him under,
into the dark red inky wet frozen cold snow. Blonde curls, matted and soaked in blood, a grabbing
hand and the flickering light of children that would never be. So much red in the snow, so much pain
all around him, just red creeping up his legs and torso and neck; trying to slip into his throat, break
him, drown him--

Bucky woke up shouting. Gentle hands coaxed him back to lying down, already warm against his
skin like they'd been there for a lifetime.

He blinked against the darkness, trying to make out anything about where the hell he was. Freezing
cold, dark. Familiar enough to set a warning edge in his bones. Something was bounding his arms...

"C'mon Bucky, don't leave me now. It was just a nightmare, alright? Your awesome best friend
pulled you out of it and I'm here now, okay?"

Everything was swimming and kind of strange, but at least Steve's solid, warm hands were on him.
Wait. Steve's hands were on him--

Bucky shoved Steve's arm, rolling out of his grip and nearly knocking over the lantern. Steve made a
distressed noise and reached out for Bucky again. Oh, he thought--

"No, Steve, M'fine. I'm good...it's fucking freezing, but I'm good." Bucky sat up and Steve let out a
breath of relief, falling back to sit down beside Bucky's sleeping bag again.

"How uh, long was I...?" He asked, a little hesitant 'cause he still had no idea what was going on or
what that whole thing had been about...

Had he just freaked out about three different things in a row? He was pretty sure he just freaked out
about three different things in a row.

Steve ran a hand through ruffled blonde hair, smoothing it back down into the signature wave. "Not
long. You were having a nightmare, so I woke up and tried snappin' you out of it. It took a couple
minutes I guess, then you finally started to come back to me. Which I think confused you even more,
then you freaked out and jumped away."

So it had been three things in a row then. Nightmare about bloody snow, waking up thinking he was
back in Zola's lab again, and then freaking out because Steve was touching him. Great. He was just a
poster child for functional and balanced nowadays, wasn't he?

Bucky fought the urge to bury his face in his hands. Steve would just think more was wrong with
him, try to help more, but that was the whole point. He couldn't be depending on Steve for stuff like
nightmares anymore.

And his stupid body had to stop betraying him. He responded more to Steve's touch than he did his own brain and it wasn't fucking fair. He just really really wished he'd never told Steve that the whole Steve-touching-him thing worked because now Bucky was stuck wishing that truth had been a lie so Steve would let it go and never touch Bucky again.

Well, not never, that was a scary thought...but it was supposed to be never. Bucky had to be okay with it being never. Steve didn't belong to him anymore. Now that was something worthy to have nightmares over.

They sat in silence for a bit longer, Bucky's legs still warm tucked all secure and useless in his sleeping bag. Steve must be freezing. But he didn't move, just looking Bucky over worried until he eventually spoke.

"So, nightmares...I thought those were over when you had that catharsis about Zola." Steve looked at him expectantly and Bucky furrowed his eyebrows. Zola?

"My what?" he asked, running a hand through his hair. Steve raised an eyebrows like Bucky was the crazy one now or something.

"You know...about a week after you got shot, when you had that talk about Azzano?" Steve prompted, head tilting in that uh, hello expression. Which made no sense. He hadn't talked to anybody about Zola...wasn't ever gonna, either. So what in the world was Steve talking about?

Bucky just stared blankly at Steve. Those pretty blue eyes, trying not to think about how pretty they were while simultaneously wracking his brain for whatever the hell was going on about. About a week after he got shot...

Oh! Oh - oh. Yeah, that. That'd been the cover up for his talk with Peggy. Obviously, didn't do a damn thing to catharsize him from fucked up torture memories. Unless you counted a hyperactive attempt not to lose his mind, cause now Steve couldn't be the one there holding him when he got his head back.

"Uh, yeah. Well, apparently that talk didn't stop as much as I'd hoped if you're still here dragging me face first outta nightmares." Key words you're still here, because Steve wasn't supposed to be, that was the entire point of that whole talk, wasn't it?

"I'm always gonna be here to save you from that, no matter how bad it gets." Steve promised, big hand darting out to take Bucky's before he could protest and flinch away. Ugh, why was Steve so stubborn?

"That's the problem," Bucky huffed under his breath, wiggling his hand a little to try'n free it subtly from the warmth of Steve's addictive touch. He wasn't allowed to touch anymore, why wouldn't Steve just get that?

"What?" The fingers clamped down tighter, making a point and forcing Bucky to lift his gaze, look guiltily at Steve's even-more-concerned face. Shit, course he heard that. It wasn't fair, none of this was fair, he wasn't even really all the way awake and Steve totally had the upper hand and--

"What?" Bucky responded in a bout of beautifully smooth eloquence. Steve just raised his eyebrows, hand an unbreakable clasp on Bucky's now. He sighed and gave up fighting it because physically, Steve would always win. Especially since Bucky couldn't use full strength without raising questions.

He threw up his free hand, trying to portray his confusion and tiredness and annoyance all in one
motion. "I don't know. I just...I wanna go back to sleep now, if you don't mind letting go of my hand."

Blue eyes searched his in the darkness, looking for whatever it was Bucky wasn't saying. Steve wasn't going to find it. Ever.

With an annoyed huff of his own, Steve practically threw Bucky's hand back to him. Once he was back in his own sleeping bag, the tight air around them softened a little and Bucky could physically feel Steve thaw from over here, sinking back into his soppy, soft self that couldn't stay annoyed with Bucky long enough for Bucky to get away. "I'll be here if you need me, okay?"

Bucky just closed his eyes and tried to breathe. It was only early February but it felt like years since that conversation with Peggy. He was hurting, so much. It wasn't often that Bucky felt he couldn't take it anymore, but...

How could he do this for the rest of his life? How could he spend whoever knows how many years with Steve, watching him happy with someone else? Knowing Steve was so close and not Bucky's anymore.

What happened when Bucky had these same nightmares three years down the road? Steve would still be there. Steve had promised he would save Bucky from Zola's table as long as he was alive and Steve had never broken a promise to Bucky.

Steve would spend the rest of his life saving Bucky and Bucky would spend the rest of his life wishing he could stop needing the only thing he could never call his own.

There wasn't anything Bucky could do but keep fighting; he had to push harder, fight smarter. They had to be as normal as possible. Best friends, just best friends, never an inch more. Bucky had to learn, had to fight for this. Keep Steve at his side without giving him his heart.

But Bucky had no idea how to do that. Steve had always had his heart. It was too late to take it back.

~*~*~*~

It was February again and Steve didn't like this one any better than last year's.

"Didn't we go out drinking last February too?" He complained, trudging along behind Dugan as the pub's door swung open to the loud, excited group of Howling Commandos.

"We actually go drinking all the time, you just never come with us," Falsworth pointed out. "And February is cold, whiskey helps out with that. How often are we in a town with a functioning pub?"

"Besides, we don't have a mission to prep for this time, Cap. Which means you can kick back and drink with us." Jones nudged him and plopped down in the corner booth, sliding around the wide U to sit in the middle.

"I'm fine, thanks," Steve said dryly because they were always getting after him to get drunk and Steve knew, from experience on his twenty-first birthday, that getting drunk never ever ended well. He'd been a hell of a lot smaller then, but he had a feeling his drunken attitude wasn't going to change any from the last time he'd gotten drunk and sworn to never again.

The only person who never pressured Steve to get drunk was Bucky, who'd been there to witness the fabulous spectacle last time and was probably not too keen to relive the night of Steve curling up in his lap and clinging to his shoulders like a koala bear. Except now if he tried to climb into Bucky's lap, it would be a lot less of the tiny-adorable-best-friend kind of embarrassing and lot more like
what-the-hell-is-Steve doing kind of embarrassing. Not exactly Steve's shining moment, or really Bucky's either.

Bucky was in high spirits tonight though, sliding into the extended booth across from Steve with a genuine smile on his face. He rubbed his hands together in excitement, leaning over Morita to ask Falsworth something as Steve tried not to stare. Everything had just gotten progressively more confusing and it was tearing up his insides in this conflicted battle of wanting to be elated and wanting to just be really cautious and afraid all the time.

Not counting the nightmare a few weeks ago, Bucky had been in great shape since they all got back out on the field. The nightmare hadn't even messed him up that much. He'd been fine in the morning, right back to the joking, smiling Bucky that they'd all gotten used to over the past two months. The rest of the Commandos just rolled with every one of Bucky's mood shifts, joking with him or being careful around him back in the days that he freaked out at everything.

Those days of freaking out would be entirely of the past if it weren't for the damn touching thing Bucky still hadn't gotten over. The rest of them were pressed shoulder to shoulder in the curving booth in the corner, but Bucky had an inch between his shoulder and Morita's and Dugan's. It was of his own doing and nobody questioned it, except for Steve.

He just wanted Bucky to be 100% okay, as perfect and okay inside as he deserved to be. So he'd kind of been pestering Bucky - just a little - over the past couple of months, trying to edge his way into Bucky's trust and space so that he'd eventually either get pissed and shout at Steve the reason why he was physically distant or cave and let Steve clap him on the shoulder again.

So far, neither had occurred, but Steve was patient. Their friendship was almost back to normal, just that final little bubble of space around Bucky that needed to be popped. He'd figure out how to pop it eventually.

"Aight, sober-boy, since you ain't drinkin' you can go and get the next round," Dugan tipped his head towards the counter, grinning wide at Steve. Steve sighed dramatically, but rounded up the empty glasses from the table.

"Tree-boy and sober-boy, I like it," Jones pushed his glass closer to Steve with a devious smile. "It's cute."

Steve snorted and looked over to Bucky, who went bright red. "That was forever ago!" Bucky complained, looking down at the table and making a pouty face. It was cute.

He snagged the last empty glass from the table, heading over to the counter and whistling softly to the jazz over the jukebox. He hadn't heard live music in such a long time. That's something else they should all do, once the war was over. Go out and hear some real jazz. Maybe, just maybe, Steve would get drunk then.

"Here we go ladies, next round's on me," Steve passed the new drinks back out to everyone, earning a few thank you's and a few laughs.

"They're all on you, you're the only one with an ounce of money," Morita tipped his head in appreciation and brought the glass back to his lips. Steve threw up his hands with a you got me expression and more laughter echoed out around the table, even joined by a bright, content smile from Bucky.

Dernier scooted out of the booth so Steve could slide back in behind him, his ankle brushing against Bucky's boot as Steve settled into place across from him. The boot moved away, but Bucky shot him
a one-sided smile before turning his attention back to his glass.

"You know, I was thinking," Steve leaned forward, elbows resting on the table as six pairs of bright eyes turned on him. "After we win this thing, we should go out and see a really good band live. It's been a long year of jukeboxes and harmonicas."

"J'aime mon harmonica!" Dernier protested, a hand over his heart in faked heartbreak. Steve clapped his shoulder and smiled, lifting his own glass of water in a toast to Dernier's wonderful harmonica playing. The others joined with their lifted glasses, all pitching in with a few words of agreement to go see some real jazz after the war.

With the signature dim lights setting that familiar golden atmosphere, Steve settled back into the seat as more conversation started up from different places of the table. Most of their drinking conversations included stories of other times people had gotten drunk and it was just pure luck that no one had thought yet to ask whether or not Steve had ever been drunk before.

"You still good with your kiddie juice, Cap'n?" Dugan leaned across the table, poking Steve's glass to get his attention. Steve rolled his eyes at the goodnatured teasing, still half listening to Morita's and Bucky's conversation about Stark's engineering ideas.

"He's actually a really cool guy," Bucky was saying, sliding his finger around the rim of his glass. "Underneath the rich pompous asshole thing everybody's got him pegged as. After the war we'll see if I can't convince him to come drinkin' with us."

"Speakin' of pegged," Dugan interrupted, his attention on Steve again. "How's Agent Carter doin', Rogers?"

"Oh, you think you're so clever with that name pun, huh Dum Dum?" A side of Steve's mouth quirked up as Dugan laughed, slapping a hand on Jones's shoulder and spreading the laughter further.

"Actually, I was referin' to how you're whipped," Dugan replied in that same laughing tone. Steve opened his mouth in mock offense, playing along with the game.

"I am not whipped!"

"Oh you so are," Falsworth agreed. Steve made a more exaggerated expression of offense, turning to Bucky.

"I am not! Back me up, Sarge," his mouth broke out in a smile as his eyes met Bucky's, then quickly wilted at the look on Bucky's face. His icy blue eyes were frozen, staring ahead with a blank look tinged with misery. Steve reached across the table, carefully taking Bucky's wrist into his hand.

"Buck?"

Bucky snapped out of it, blinking at Steve once before coming to reality and snatching his hand back, stuffing it in the pocket of his blue peacoat.

"Sorry, spaced out. What were we talking about?" Bucky looked around the group, cheeks faintly tinged with a pink blush. Jones leaned over Dugan to answer.

"Captain and his lovely lady Agen--"

"I love this song!" Steve interrupted, smacking a hand down on the table. Everybody paused, straightening up a little to listen to the trumpets of the intro and forgetting their torment of Steve about Peggy. Somebody commented something about the singer but Steve wasn't paying attention, just
looking back at Bucky. "Sergeant Barnes, come dance with me?"

Bucky snorted and looked away, swirling around his drink before tipping it back. When he sat the glass back down, and glanced over at Steve again, Steve was still looking at him, eyebrows raised. Bucky's eyes went huge and he nearly dropped his glass as he realized Steve was still waiting for an answer. "You actually...yeah, no. No way. Nice try."

"C'mon, you love to dance," Steve teased, smiling brightly as Bucky's eyes managed to go even wider.

"No," he said again, shaking his head in disbelief and leaning back against the cushion of the booth. Bucky looked pretty adamant against it, but the more Steve thought about it the more he decided it was a really good idea. If he could get Bucky to dance with him, he'd catch Bucky in a happy environment so they could talk. That, and it would mean that Bucky couldn't keep flinching away every time Steve so much as brushed him. Dancing was physical, and the two of them hadn't been dancing in forever.

Well, they'd never actually danced in public, but a couple of army guys and tired locals wasn't exactly the public. It didn't even count, really. They were in the middle of war and there wasn't a dame in sight. Besides, Bucky had taught Steve plenty about how to dance back in their apartment in Brooklyn. It'd be just like old times.

"In the name of waltzes in the Brooklyn apartment?" Steve pulled out the puppy eyes, nudging Bucky's empty glass with his finger just because he couldn't actually reach Bucky himself.

"So you can dance, Rogers!" Falsworth nudged him with an excited look and Steve shook his head no, eyes never leaving Bucky's.

"Not really, but Bucky can and he used to try to teach me." With impatient hands Steve shooed Dernier out of the end seat so he could slide out and stand up. Dernier obliged, everyone looking up at Steve as he stood up next to the table and tilted his head towards the empty dance floor with a dare in his eyes. "Come show everyone how much fun you used to be."

"I'm still fun!" Bucky protested, waving his arm in protest and nearly knocking over Dugan's drink. Dugan scooted it out of Bucky's reach. He looked apologetically at the glass then back up to Steve, making a face and smoothing his hair back down. "I just don't like dancing when there's no one else on the dance floor."

"And I don't like Valentine's day, but here I am, celebrating with everybody." Steve spread his arms out wide, making another impatient gesture with his hand for Bucky to join him. Bucky didn't budge.

"Valentine's day was technically three days ago," Morita pointed out. Steve shot him a look and he shut back up.

"Fine, then I don't like this entire month," Steve glared a little at Morita again before looking back at Bucky "and look who hasn't complained once yet this year. I need this to make this wretched month tolerable. Do it in the name of how much February sucks."

"You're not over hating February yet?" Bucky asked, drumming his fingers on the table. Steve shifted his weight, still standing and waiting for Bucky.

"Hating February?" Jones asked, looking over to Bucky. Bucky jumped on the opportunity, leaning forward onto the table to explain and avoid responding to Steve's pushing requests to come dance.

"He has this thing - just hates February for some reason. The whole month, but doesn't have a single
reason why. Just says he has this 'bad feeling' about it." Bucky used actual air quotes, crooking his fingers before bringing one of them up to his temple and twirling it in a circle, tilting his head in Steve's direction. Right, like *Steve* was the crazy one.

"I'm standing right here. And you're dodging the request." Steve made a *don't think I don't see what you're doing* face and Bucky scowled. He was just all full of pouting today, wasn't he? Steve held out his hand in invitation, properly asking like a gentlemen should. Like the way Bucky had taught him. "C'mon. Dance with me."

"No. No, I'm not going to." Bucky crossed his arms, looking terribly stubborn with his familiar gelled hair and blue coat and cleft chin.

Thankfully, Steve's backup finally decided to join in and help. The Commandos all started poking at Bucky too, cajoling him and trying to push him out of the booth. Morita was sitting on the end cap so he switched over to sit on the side of the table Steve had just left from, so they could push Bucky out of the booth if need be.

Steve watched with a smile on his face, hand still outstretched towards Bucky.

"We live in a dangerous business. This may be the last date you ever have the chance to go on," Falsworth pointed out, tilting his head towards Steve. Bucky was more than a little taken aback at his wording choice, his jaw dropping as his eyes widened.

"It's not like there's any dames around to chose from," Dugan pointed out, sweeping a big hand at the near empty bar to prove his point. Steve jumped on the opportunity, quirking his mouth up in a one sided grin and leaning closer.

"Besides, even if there were dames around I bet none of 'em would be as pretty as you, Buck." Steve said it as sincerely as possible and the rest of the Commandos fell into various surprised laughter. The strangest look crossed Bucky's face as he blinked up at Steve.

"Okay, now I'm definitely not going with you."

"Nope, you're going," Jones said definitively, pushing Dugan so he'd push Bucky. Bucky slid about six inches closer to the edge of the booth, grabbing onto the table and the back cushion to keep from falling out of the seat.

"Both of you need to lighten up. You just worry about each other all the time, always afraid the other's gonna die," Jones finished with a pointed look in both of their directions.

"And neither of you are dead yet, so go enjoy the lives of the people you fret over so much." Morita added, with the same half-annoyed scolding look. (Did they really fret over each other that much?)

"Allez, s'amuser!" Dernier added, throwing his hand up in the air as his input of agreement.

And with the final encouraging holler, Dugan pushed Bucky the rest of the way across the slick cushion seat of the booth. He fell directly out of it, stumbling to catch himself on the back of the seat before Steve scooped him up and pulled him upright.

Bucky fumbled but Steve threw a tight arm around Bucky's waist, tugging Bucky to his side and not intending to let go.

The Commandos broke out in cheers, all raising their glasses to Steve and Bucky. Steve laughed and Bucky scowled but didn't try to break free, just ran a hand over his hair again to smooth out the mess it hadn't become and made a face at his teammates.
"I hate you all," Bucky informed them with that deadpanned tone of his, pushing halfheartedly at Steve's chest but giving up after a single shove.

"What's new?" Morita grinned.

"Have fun, kids." Dugan added with a wink.

"Yeah, get him to lighten up," Jones pointed, the direction of his finger kind of vague from the alcohol in his system.

"Which one of us?" Steve asked, already starting to pull Bucky towards the dance floor.

"Both!" Falsworth shouted. Steve laughed and turned around, his arm loosening around Bucky's waist as he walked him to the counter where the bartender was already waiting with a few records spread out on the surface.

Bucky groaned as he realized there was yet another person in on the scheme of trying to get him to dance and Steve just smiled wider.

"Do you have any waltzes? From the '30s, if you can." Steve requested and the bartender snatched up one of the records with a wide smile, taking it over to the turntable and setting the needle.

"You dip me and I'm ending you," Bucky warned, letting Steve lead him to the middle of the empty dance floor. "I am not some dame."

"Good thing, too," Steve commented, taking Bucky's hand in his own and lifting it to chest height, sure to extend their arms away from their bodies like Bucky had told him so many years ago.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Bucky asked, putting his other hand on Steve's shoulder reluctantly. Steve would normally take the girl position, except that Bucky was shorter now and it really was based on height.

"That I'm glad you're not a dame," Steve replied. "Now let's dance."

The first step forward threatened to topple them both over already because they both stepped forwards, successfully stepping on each other's feet.

"Dammit, Bucky, you are shorter and you have to step backwards," Steve complained, pulling Bucky closer and toeing his foot back to take the proper step of the girl's dancing technique. It took a few seconds for Bucky to catch on, then Steve motioned to smooth it out, swinging Bucky into the first three step spin.

"I only know how to be the guy," Bucky muttered back, looking a little stiff as Steve lead them into another three step sequence.

"But you still used to dance with me." Steve pointed out and Bucky sighed, unrelenting from his stiffness. In fact, Steve was a little insulted Bucky was so resilient.

"And what, I have to depend on Dugan to get you to waltz with me now?" Steve asked with raised eyebrows. Bucky's feet stuttered but he caught himself before Steve tripped over him and they fell back into the triplet pattern of their feet.

They circled around a few more times, floating to the beat and steadily in sync now as they danced across the floor. Then Bucky finally spoke up, taking the opportunity to look over Steve's shoulder instead of at him.
"Shit, Steve. It's just been hard for me," Bucky said softly under his breath, a quiet admission that felt too detached to be as personal as the words were. Steve looked sharply towards him, not expecting an answer and definitely not expecting that one.

"What has?" Steve asked, his response paused to integrate the question best into the three step. That way the talking and the dancing coincided, so hopefully more of one would lead to more of the other. They must have been quite a scene, two tall and fairly built men in uniform, speaking in hushed tones as they waltzed across an empty dancefloor in an old pub hardened by war.

Bucky sighed, the warmth of his breath battering against Steve's collarbone as the tension left his shoulders. "Nothing. Let's just dance."

Steve hesitated a moment, considering pressing the topic. But then Bucky leaned a little closer, the tension in his shoulders deflating. That was good enough for him.

Now that Bucky wasn't so stiff, Steve moved the hand on Bucky's waist to wrap around his lower back, pulling their chests closer and heartbeats flush against each other.

At the possessive move Bucky turned his eyes up to the ceiling, mumbling something under his breath that Steve didn't quite catch, although it sounded kind of similar to why me?

They hadn't touched like this in a long time, hadn't danced together in longer. If he honestly thought Bucky was that against it, Steve would never make him do something he wouldn't want to do. But this was for the greater good of their friendship. Touching and being close again. Besides, it was just a dance.

And it was nice, it really was. Bucky's familiar hand back in Steve's, the calluses real and grounding in the most wonderfully human of ways. The hand on his shoulder was grounding too, gripped just tight enough to hold Steve close but not tight enough to claim Steve for his own.

Dancing like this should feel ridiculous, but if anything, it felt sweet, Like they were young and innocent all over again, laughing like maniacs as they stumbled their way around the tiny apartment, Bucky crooning out some tune he'd heard pouring out of the diner across the street.

Not to mention that this was the first time Bucky had let Steve really touch him since the bullet. It was just comforting, having Bucky a physical, tactile presence under his hands. If the proof of Bucky was there and something he could feel, reach out and touch, it meant he was safe. It was the only time Steve completely stopped worrying - he had nothing to worry about when Bucky's shoulder was pressed to his, when Bucky's arm was around his neck. When they were dancing across an empty floor, holding each other tight as they swung from one two three.

He'd been missing something, and this was it. The two of them, close and tight again, the piece that settled into place in his chest. Steve was fairly sure he could spend the rest of forever just waltzing in Bucky's arms. There were a hell of a lot worse futures to picture than having Bucky this close for forever. Even if he couldn't stay quiet for half that long.

In the middle of a sweeping change of directions, Steve squeezed Bucky's hand a little tighter and spun them a little faster, catching Bucky off guard so Steve could see an honest reaction when he asked the question.

"Are you out here for me?"

It was out of nowhere, no preamble or explanation. It wasn't even worded specific enough to describe what he was asking, but Steve had a feeling Bucky already knew.
Bucky turned his head, looking at Steve with just inches between them. He wasn't freaking out anymore, wasn't pushing Steve away or breaking down. He just looked at Steve with clear eyes that Steve barely had to look down to see, they were so close in height.

"You already know the answer to that question," Bucky answered quietly, wrapping his forearm tighter behind Steve's shoulder and pulling Steve into the next step of the waltz a little harder.

Steve let Bucky guide them for a moment, just so he could think. Bucky wasn't fighting this war for America, for his country, for freedom and honor.

He was fighting it for Steve.

But why?

Their entire lives, Bucky had been sticking up for Steve. But James Buchanan Barnes was not a natural born soldier. He was a lover.

He loved life and he loved women and he loved to dance - he couldn't even hide that now, Steve could feel him starting to enjoy the slow triplet spin - and he loved the sunshine something fierce.

They were here in the cold and Steve had never felt more at home jumping behind enemy lines and Bucky was probably just as homesick as Steve was happy. Steve was a soldier. Bucky wasn't.

But he was fighting for Steve and Steve had no idea why.

Steve looked over at Bucky again. Bucky glanced back, his expression still neutral. Not blank, just...calm. There was a resignation there that Steve had never been a part of, some internal agreement Bucky had with himself that Steve was nowhere near understanding.

But Bucky just looked so peaceful, Steve couldn't bring himself to dig deeper. Not now, not tonight. Maybe later, when they were just getting off the lines, blood pumping hot and hearts pounding with adrenaline, when the right words would just slip out because they always tended to do that when death was on your heels.

For now, Steve would just dance and let Bucky keep that reason for himself. One day, Bucky would tell him why. Until then, Steve could wait.

"Okay," Steve agreed, because Bucky was right. Steve did know the answer to that question, even if he hadn't been able to let himself admit it until now. Then he cleared his throat, taking control back over the dancing and pulling Bucky in a new direction entirely. "Next question."

"Are we dancing or playing confessional?" Bucky asked, a bit of a smile on his face as he followed Steve's feet with his own. The song had switched sometime while Steve was lost thinking, but it was still a waltz so they kept going on as if nothing had changed at all. It almost felt like nothing had, like they really could be back in the Brooklyn apartment again.

"Both," Steve declared determinedly and Bucky huffed a soft laugh but kept dancing without protest. "Now, next question."

Bucky waited, watching Steve out of the corner of his eye as Steve decided on his wording, choosing it carefully so Bucky got what he was asking without being offended.

"You've been more...physically distant lately, but it's been consciously, so I know you have a reason why." One, two, three, step, two, three. "What's the reason?"
Bucky huffed a laugh, picking up the pace of their dancing a little as the faster chorus of the song echoed over the tavern.

"Is there anything you don't notice?" Bucky asked, a hint of amusement in his tone.

"No answering questions with questions," Steve reminded, poking Bucky in the side with the hand on his back. Bucky jumped just a tad, flicking Steve on the shoulder in retaliation.

"Okay. Well." Bucky pondered a moment, settling his hand back on the back of Steve's shoulderblade, each step of his dancing feeling a little lighter as they spun around each other's boots. This really was good for them. Talking, breathing together, close and safe and dancing. What more could he ask for?

Bucky finally settled on an answer, eyes looking out over Steve's shoulder, the sides of their faces close. "I'm going through a phase. Still trying to figure things out."

The words floated between them for a moment, the weight of saying even this not going missed. Steve cocked his head, leaning it against the side of Bucky's for a moment, just touching their temples together. It was just a simple affectionate gesture, a movement to show he understood and he was here for Bucky.

From the position Steve couldn't see Bucky's eyes flutter closed, lips parting in overwhelmed emotion as he fought the urge to cry. It was such a simple gesture and Bucky could only think what if we could be this way forever. But forever with Steve wasn't his.

One two three, spinning over each other's feet. So tightly close and promisingly safe, like they were kids again and real adults for once, forever and never because this wouldn't ever be something Bucky could keep.

"If you ever need help figuring things out--" Steve started, his voice soft and quiet against Bucky's ear. Steve was almost sure he felt Bucky shiver in his arms, then that beautiful lilting voice interrupted him, too loud for the moment as he took back control from Steve, pulling them back to the center of the dance floor as he spoke.

"Actually, I think I can eventually figure things out, but you..." It was a good thing Bucky was holding on to him tight because Steve was entirely unprepared for the dip. One moment he was upright, listening to Bucky talk and the next he was looking up at Bucky's wide grin, his back parallel to the floor and leg held up by a firm hand.

Steve's eyes went the size of saucers, his balance entirely thrown off and his head even more so. The overwhelming surprise more prominent than anything as he blinked up, registering that he was in fact being dipped like a dame. The triumphant look on Bucky's face was priceless and he couldn't help it, Steve threw back his head, the tavern turning upside down entirely as he opened his mouth and laughed.

More cheers and laughter broke out, upside down shapes from a table in the corner making a lot of noise. Oh yeah, they were being watched by the Commandos. Steve entirely forgot they were there.

Bucky pulled Steve back upright (he was so much stronger than Steve remembered) and settled him onto his feet, both hands on Steve's upper arms as he swayed a little, trying to regain his balance.

"...keep harassing me," Bucky finished with a grin and the delay by the unexpected dip made Steve blink confusedly, trying to remember what Bucky had said.

"I don't harass you," Steve said, blinking down at Bucky. Bucky laughed, rubbing his palms up and
down Steve's arms once before entirely letting go, taking a step back. Everything instantly sunk a few degrees colder.

Steve's eyes followed Bucky's shoulderblades as he turned, still smiling, and started the return walk to their table. At the edge of the dance floor Bucky stopped and turned around, eyes locking instantly on Steve's and either not noticing that Steve's gaze had been following him or just not caring.

"Oh, and Steve? Apparently height doesn't actually matter all that much. Because you still managed to be the dame in the end." Bucky winked, then spun around on his heel and walked back to the corner both, arms spread wide as the Commandos cheered, clapping him on the back and laughing, congratulating him on getting one up on Steve.

Maybe Steve was still a little dizzy from the dip or maybe he was going through withdrawls from being so close to Bucky after so long apart and then having to be apart again, but either way his head was flashing, his brain in knots and confusion as he tried to process everything that just happened.

After standing alone in the middle of the dance floor for a few moments, Steve decided he wasn't going to figure anything out any time soon, and now wasn't exactly the time to try to process it all.

Bucky was fighting this war for him and Steve didn't know why. Bucky didn't want to be touched - said it was a phase, he was working through something (that Steve also didn't know what was) - but the moment that Steve was touching him his entire body relaxed and he loosened up like it was exactly the kind of comfort that he needed.

And apparently, Bucky was an even better dancer than Steve thought because he switched between the two roles like a pro, letting Steve guide him then pulling Steve along to his own pace and dipping him like a dame.

Which shouldn't have really been possible, because all of Steve's new muscles weighed a ton and Bucky had been supporting them all without so much as straining. Could that all be from army training?

It was just too much to process at once and Steve gave up fairly quickly, deciding all those questions could be answered later.

He nodded his thanks to the bartender / disk jockey who'd provided the music. The man just waved Steve on with a smile.

He was still kind of floating in that pondering headspace as he sat back down, on the edge seat of the booth this time. The Howling Commandos cheered him on, too.

"Not half bad," Morita grinned, patting Steve's shoulder.

"I'm surprised you didn't drop him on the dip, Barnes." Dugan tipped his glass at both of them before clinking it to Bucky's empty inanimate one.

"Nah, I wouldn't let Steve fall," Bucky shot a one sided smile his way before reaching across the table to take Steve's glass of water and down the whole thing in a single tip.

"Steve gave the rest of the Commandos a small smile, trying to figure out how his ploy to get both of them dancing and loosened up had done wonders for Bucky but left Steve feeling more confused and out of the loop than ever.

At least Bucky was clanking glasses, telling stories and laughing. The whole point was to make Bucky smile, which he had. That much still made him feel warm inside, but everything else?
Steve just really wished they were dancing again. It had ended too soon and all he wanted to do was lean up against Bucky's side again.

He kicked his feet out under the table, ankle of his boot brushing against Bucky's, holding his breath to see if Buck would tangle their feet together or not.

With a soft, almost apologetic smile, Bucky moved his boots away.

Steve sighed. Baby steps, right? He'd moved a mountain today and he wasn't going to stop climbing slippery slopes until he got to the peak of what Bucky was "figuring out." Then they'd be fully back to normal, two impossibly close Brooklyn kids again.

In the meantime, Steve had better prep for the climb.

~*~*~

"I hate mountains," Bucky bitched, trudging up through the snowy ground, wishing he could wrap his coat tighter than the buttons already were. "They're obtrusive and pointless and they take days to climb."

"It's more like an hour," Dugan supplied, climbing up the slope a few feet behind Bucky. Bucky just made a face and kept stomping his way up through the snow.

As always, Steve seemed entirely unfazed by either the weather or the mountain, trekking ahead of the pack and cutting a trail through the thick snow for the rest of them to march on shallowly.

"Is it snowing even more?" Jones complained, looking up at the sky and clouds above them. Bucky looked up at Steve, about five feet ahead, whose styled blond hair was dusted with white, sparkling flakes.

He looked kind of like an angel.

"Yep," Bucky bit out a little bitterly, pretending it was the snow he was pissed at and not his own stupid self.

"But at least it's--" Falsworth started.

"S'il vous plaît, ne parle pas," Dernier groaned.

"--insulating," Falsworth finished.

Less than two steps later, a distinctive smacking sound and a shout made everybody turn around. Falsworth was glaring at Morita, who'd pegged him in the back with a snowball.

Bucky snorted and turned from the antics, back to trudging drearily along the never-ending hike up the mountain. Having a snowball fight sounded like wicked fun right now, but it was a time sensitive mission and they couldn't delay.

After, Bucky mused. He'd even instigate it, make everybody join in with proper teams and snowball forts, call it a celebration. Because of all the missions they'd been on so far, this was the one Bucky cared about this most: the one that needed celebrating at its completion.

They were finally going to get Zola.

"Hey Steve, we almost there yet?" Bucky asked, taking a few big steps to walk up next to Steve instead of behind him. Their shoulders didn't touch, but Bucky stayed as close as he could without
touching.

It meant he had to trek through the deep, freshly fallen snow now, but with double the number of paths being made, maybe they could move up the mountain twice as fast.

Steve glanced over at him, the blonde hair ruffling beautifully in the wind. "You haven't gotten an ounce more patient with time, have you?"

"And you haven't gotten an ounce less stubborn. So here we are, stubborn and impatient climbing a mountain in the snow on the last day of the month you hate."

"It's a leap year," Steve said absently and Bucky made a face. Okay, so tomorrow was the last day of February, then. Of course Steve had to be right.

In the eleven days since they went dancing, everything had been...great, actually. Now that Steve was at least a little more understanding, the two of them had settled into a careful, easy homeostasis. Standing and sitting next to each other, close and constantly rotating around each other without actual being pressed together.

It was the best kind of compromise because it meant Bucky could stay at Steve's side without his head going in all kinds of crazy directions. Steve's skin against his - even through layers of uniform - kind of cut off rational brain functioning. Bucky couldn't think or make decisions because his brain just insisted on reverting back to the days in Brooklyn, the two of them lazing on the couch, his legs in Steve's lap as Steve drew or they talked. Or worse, it'd cut back to the past year, his heart racing every time Steve so much as smiled his way.

But if they kept close and didn't touch, Bucky could keep his head on his shoulders and still be with Steve. It may not be a permanent solution, but it was working for now.

"What time's the train coming?" Dugan asked Jones behind them, voices caught and whipped away by the wind, just like everything else on this damn mountain. "Should pass by in about half an hour." It wasn't snowing too badly, just a light drift that seemed to be getting less and less the further up they climbed.

"Think we'll make it to the top by then?" Dugan's voice dropped quieter this time, almost like he didn't want Bucky and Steve to hear him. Bucky heard anyways.

"We'll make it," Steve promised, a little more serious today than he'd been in the past few. As soon as they'd gotten the word that their next mission was Zola, Steve had shut down into full soldier mode. Bucky hadn't seen him this focused and sure of a mission since before he got shot.

It was personal to Bucky, yeah, but it was kind of personal to all of them. As much as they were a bunch of misfits from around the world, they were also a team and they all cared about each other enough to all hate Zola with the same passion Bucky did.

"Especially if you all pick up your feet instead of throwing snowballs," Bucky pointed out, his legs starting to strain a little from keeping pace with Steve.

Something cold and heavy thudded between his shoulderblades, an explosion of snow against his back making Bucky jump. There was an instantaneous splattering of laughter as Bucky spun around to glare indignantly at whichever Commando had thrown the snowball. Thing was, they were all laughing - even Steve - so he had no way of telling who had thrown it. Not like it mattered, anyone of them would have.

"I'm getting you all back after this train thing," Bucky swore, spinning back around to follow Steve.
up over a rock cropping. The snowball battle he'd been planning earlier looked like it may be more of snowball war. They'd have to make teams, set up rules...

"Yes sir, Sergeant," Dugan replied, still laughing. Bucky shook his head and smiled. He'd get his revenge once they got Zola, especially if he had Steve on his team. In the meantime, there was still a mission they had to get to.

The top of the mountain was nearing, the cold snow in the air just on the ground now, crunching and shifting underneath boots. Thankfully the wind wasn't whipping around like earlier, when it'd been hard to breathe from the air alone. Now it'd calmed down enough to make the last stretch up the steep slope as tolerable as a freezing slope in whipping wind could be.

The boys had fallen quiet for the rest of the trip, everyone inside their own heads and just focusing on the willpower to get up the mountain without expending too much energy. They still had a mission once they got to the top. The climbing was actually the easy part.

When they'd first gotten the assignment, there had been talk on whether or not it was a good idea to send Bucky in. Emotionally compromised, someone had said. He's already got a dangerous streak and we need Zola for information, not dead. The talk had all pissed Bucky off (which was probably the point) but he'd kept quiet, just sitting in his seat and looking to Steve for direction.

Of course, Steve had blown up. Civilly, that is.

"Excuse me sir, but Sergeant Barnes happens to be one of the most reliable men in this army. He not only keeps a cool head in the field, but also has saved hundreds of lives of fellow soldiers fighting for this country. He stayed to continue that record, despite psychological and physical torture, which is more than anyone else here could say. And I am entirely confident in his abilities to successfully complete this mission without the slightest hitch."

Bucky had kind of just sat there and blinked because that was 110% not how he saw it. Like, at all. Of course he wasn't going to make the mission personal - Steve probably hated Zola more than Bucky did, knowing him. And okay, technically everything Steve had said wasn't exactly lying, it was just. Really stretched.

Unless that was actually how Steve saw him?

Which wasn't right, because Bucky had shot some kid in the forehead just the other day in the field, he didn't deserve any of the respect that Steve was pinning to his name. He was a murderer and a scary good one at that. Not to mention that he wasn't quite fighting for his country.

But Steve had been met with the same agreeing, apologetic nods he always was and all mentions of Bucky being too emotionally charged to take the mission had dropped. And two days later here they were, climbing up a mountain to snag a ride on a train that Zola may or may not be in. The benefits of intersecting travel plans was always, of course, that they could be entirely flawed and the trek up the mountain could be for nothing. Bucky really hoped it wasn't.

"Okay, here we are. Radio can probably set up there, that spot looks fairly flat. What's our ETA, Morita?" Steve called and Bucky pulled himself up the last set of rocks, climbing onto the flattened outcropping that had more than enough room for them all to stand. The tension line that Stark had promised would be here was just overhead, exactly like they'd planned.

"Seven minutes, Cap." Morita followed Bucky up, heaving down the gigantic backpack that carried their hijacking radio and all the rest of the technological equipment. The rest of the Commandos shuffled up onto the flat part of the mountain, a few gazes catching curiously over the edge, peering
and shivering at how far down the ground was.

"We're depending on Stark technology to race you guys down this wire onto a moving train?" Falsworth asked, looking worriedly at the tension line. Bucky looked up too, debating the sturdiness. It was thicker than he'd thought it be.

"Hey, Stark technology hasn't failed us yet, has it?" Bucky adjusted the rifle strapped to his back, checking his belt for ammunition and his pistol. The snow had stopped entirely, the ground just barely dusted this high up the mountain. That whole saying about being too cold to snow or whatever. Wasn't that a lovely thought, too cold for even the winterish hell of snow.

"I'm less worried about the wire than I am about how much it's going to suck ziplining down it," Bucky added, joining the boys looking out over the edge of the cliff. Falsworth made a noncommittal sound, pulling out his pair of binoculars worriedly. Jones and Morita were behind them, setting up the radio and checking into the Hydra frequency they'd hacked. Dugan was scouting, rifle out as always. There wasn't much to do but wait.

He stepped up next to Steve, the wind blowing slightly as he gazed out over the length of the wire, the corner of his mouth curling up in a smile as he glanced over at Steve.

"Remember when I made you ride the Cyclone on Coney Island?" Bucky asked, a soft smile on his face as he surveyed the cliff, attempting to judge the distance to the ground from here based on the size of the tracks. It was really damn far.

"Yeah, and I threw up?" Steve replied, his tone making Bucky smile and the memory apparently still pretty clear with the face he was making. It probably hadn't been the shining moment of their friendship, but Coney Island was Coney Island, that meant just as much disaster as joy.

Steve had been reluctant as hell to get on the ride, making up a whole range of excuses to get out of it, but Bucky had cajoled and begged and given Steve the best puppy eyes he had. He just didn't want to go alone, was all. Or maybe he just really wanted to see the look on Steve's face as the ride dropped them into the twist.

Finally Steve had relented because he always caved at Bucky's pleading, didn't have a single bad bone in his body. Bucky had practically bounced up and down in the line waiting, spurting off all sorts of random facts about how it had been built in '28, did Steve remember what they'd been doing in '28? (They'd spent a lot of that year in Sarah Rogers's kitchen, playing around her feet with the sticks they used to pretend were cars.)

Once they strapped in, Steve's eyes were as wide as saucers, looking at Bucky like he was falling off a cliff instead of going into a rollercoaster. "I-Is it possible for your heart to beat out of your chest?" Steve had asked, his seventeen year old logic adorable even if he knew it wasn't true. Bucky had laughed and reached across the seat, placing his hand on Steve's chest so his heart was beating rapidly under Bucky's palm. "Needs to be going about 3 beats faster," Bucky mused, tapping his fingers over Steve's chest. Steve had swatted his hand, shoving Bucky back into his half of the seat as Bucky threw back his head and laughed cheerily.

Then the ride had lurched, making them both squeal with surprise and grip the bar across their laps. Steve lasted about six seconds before his hand went from the bar to Bucky's hand, squeezing it so tight that Bucky had actually had a Steve-shaped bruise from having his fingers all crushed together. Not that he'd minded.

They both screamed at the drop. Loud. Louder than Bucky had ever screamed, probably. At the end their hair was sticking in a thousand directions and Bucky was making incredulous gasping sounds,
trying to find himself in his body again as he turned to Steve. Who promptly ran for the trashcan by the grass, a hand over his mouth.

Bucky followed just a step behind him, still gasping with amazed sounds as Steve hurled into the trashcan, his entire dinner (which admittedly hadn't been much) coming back up in choking wretched sounds. Bucky had rubbed one hand over Steve's back and used the other to hold his floppy bangs off his forehead, even though it was kind of unnecessary, it still felt good to have Steve's warm forehead under his palm and he'd imagine Steve felt the same. "I'm s-sorry," Bucky finally gasped, pressing his own forehead to Steve's shoulder as he tried to catch his breath back, still gasping through the half-laughing.

Steve's thin artist hands had gripped the sides of the trashcan tight enough to make his knuckles white, his head hanging as he mumbled a half-hearted "I hate you." Bucky's body tried to laugh more and he ended up just gasping for the breath he'd had knocked out of him, the desperate trying-to-breathe-sounds eventually even making Steve crack a smile through the pain and humiliation of chucking up his entire stomach after a rollercoaster ride. Steve hadn't let that one go for years.

"This isn't pay back, is it?" Bucky looked up at the wire, thinking about the glow of that night and the bruises on his hand from Steve's grip, the pouty face he'd given Bucky when he'd tried to buy Steve cotton candy to make up for the Cyclone. Now though, the comment made Steve smile, turning to Bucky with that happy grin of his that still made Bucky's heart flutter.

"Now why would I do that?" Steve asked, and Bucky huffed a laugh and shook his head at the all-innocent and All-American facade fronting the mischief underneath. They both knew perfectly well how much Steve liked good ol' fashioned revenge.

Speaking of revenge, they both turned in unison as Jones looked up from the radio he and Morita were tuning into, relaying back what he was hearing about Zola.

"You were right, Doctor Zola is on the train." Bucky's face steeled down from the reminiscing smile he'd had on earlier, fighting the urge to cringe at the name. Steve had told everyone he could be professional about this and he could. (He just really hated that people called Zola a doctor - there was no science in the things he'd done to Bucky's body.) Both Bucky and Steve stepped away from the cliff and back to Jones, who was still listening to the single headphone he had pressed to his ear. "Hydra dispatcher gave him permission to open up the throttle. Wherever he's going, they must need him bad."

This was it, then. The big moment. Bucky turned his head, looking over at Steve. Steve turned to meet his eyes at the same time, their gazes locking on each other. There was something in Steve's eyes, some form of silent communication that Bucky knew he should be able to understand.

But maybe the past year had screwed over his judgement, because what it looked like Steve's eyes were saying...they couldn't really be saying that. It looked like those blue eyes were staring into his with some sort of promise. We can do this. I'm here for you, we're all here for you. And of course, the twisted part of Bucky's mind had to add in the three words he'd never heard out loud. I love you. He wondered what they'd sound like coming from Steve's lips. If that was what they looked like coming from Steve's eyes.

Maybe. Maybe it was the best friend kind of I love you. Was there a best friend kind of I love you?

It felt like time had frozen over because Bucky was perfectly still, just looking at Steve as the soft blonde hair tousled in the wind. Steve's body swayed with the movement, one with the world, the fluidity to Bucky's rigid. Bucky got to be a standby of this beautiful element, the closest thing to perfect that God had ever created. The God that Bucky couldn't believe in but that Steve still prayed
to on Sundays.

The moment lasted a hell of a lot shorter than Bucky wanted it to, but he was still grateful for it. Just a few seconds pause from the outside reality, the two of them against the world again. Then Steve was pulling his helmet on, stepping back away from Bucky.

Bucky nodded to himself, because they couldn't spare any more time right now. Besides, he had a lifetime of staring at Steve ahead of him if his brain kept tormenting him so. Might as well not rush it all now. Not when they had other things to do.

Dernier came over with their metal hooks, handing one to Steve first before handing one to Bucky. They looked fairly sturdy, good enough to ride the wire down on. So long as none of them let go. He had a pretty solid grip though, so did Steve and Jones. He wasn't that worried. Just a little.

It definitely wasn't the most dangerous thing they'd done.

"Let's get going, because they're moving like the devil." Falsworth warned, lowering his binoculars and sounding more than a little worried. Moving like the devil didn't exactly sound like all that much fun.

"We only got about a ten second window," Steve called over his shoulder, looking between Bucky and Jones. Then he turned back to the cliff, adjusting his grip on the metal zipliner as he raised his voice a little to be heard over the wind."You miss that window, we're bugs on a windshield."

"Mind the gap," Falsworth reminded them, a bit of his regular teasing smile back on. Bucky caught Falsworth's eye and nodded at him - once and confident - a reassurance that they were all gonna make it through this fine. Falsworth always got worried before the big ones. He smiled a tiny bit at Bucky's nod, grateful for the reassurance.

A shift from Steve turned Bucky's attention back to him, only standing a few inches behind the shield. It was weird, the huge metal circle had felt a little strange at first. But after the past year, Bucky was as used to seeing Steve with his shield now as he had been used to seeing Steve with his sketchpad in Brooklyn.

"Gotta get moving, bugs," Dugan joked, his voice still sounding big and warm despite the harsh wind was trying to eat them alive. Steve readied himself, leaning forward a bit and tightening his grip on the metal handle. Dernier's hand was in the air, ready to signal. Bucky screwed up his face against the wind, wishing it weren't so damn cold.

"Maintenant!" Dernier shouted, lowering his hand down. Steve jumped off the cliff and Bucky's heart stopped for a single moment before the metal caught on the wire and Steve was sliding down to safety. He let out the breath he was holding and swung his own zipliner up over the wire, waiting just a second and a half before Dernier shouted at him too.

Then he jumped, following Steve down the line.

The metal made a strange wooshing sound against the tension wire as they slid down across the gap, what felt like miles under the bottom of his boots. It was a good thing his boots had straps, because otherwise he'd be in his hole-covered socks right now.

The wind whipped something bitter, biting at his face and hands, but he managed to keep himself upright and relaxed as he slid closer to the barreling black snake slithering on the mountain tracks. He took a quick inventory of everything he had, the weight of his semi-automatic strapped to his side and the pistol in its holster, the blood pumping with adrenaline rushing through his veins. Mission
mode.

What felt like only seconds after jumping, Bucky was dropping down onto the train's roof, landing in a crouch to keep his balance against the brutal wind. His palms traded out the cold metal of the ziplining bar for the cold metal of the train roof, real and smooth under his hands. They’d made the first step. Now here comes the hard part.

The train felt unnaturally thin as he rose carefully to his feet and pattered forward, following after Steve. Trains really shouldn't have roofs this thin, should they? All three of them walked quickly along the narrow slope, stepping up over windows and staying crouched to maintain balance as they moved. At least they weren't bugs on a windshield yet.

Bucky glanced behind him quickly, making sure Jones was there. All three of 'em were still in the green so far. When he looked back forward, Steve was already mounting a ladder on the side of the train, quickly scaling down it as Bucky crouched at the top. He squinted into the wind; the cold was making it hard to breathe again. Steve pulled open the car door, swinging inside, and Bucky looked up one last time, nodding at Jones who stayed kneeling on the roof for backup. Jones nodded back, a reverent look on his face that Bucky didn't deserve as he swung into the open train door behind Steve.

As soon as they were both on solid ground, Bucky rolled the door shut behind them to block out the cold and the whistling sound of the wind. Solid ground, that was nice for a change.

He looked around the train car, glancing at Steve before taking survey of everything else. Everything looked empty, strangely empty. They both moved forward, Bucky's gun held out in front of him as they split on either side of the middle barrier. There were some sort of crates or cases in here, holding all sorts of things Bucky didn't want to think about. He could still see Steve in his peripherals as they scouted through the car, looking for a sign of movement. Still nothing.

He glanced over to check on Steve, who was stalking low just ahead of him, alert and ready. That was another thing Bucky hadn't gotten used to, and probably never would. Steve being entirely self-sufficient. He didn't need Bucky anymore technically, but Bucky didn't care. Just because Steve could fend for himself physically didn't mean he wasn't a dumbass enough to go picking fights and jumping out of burning buildings. Somebody had to yell at him for that.

So Bucky was still defending Steve from bullies; just countries of bullies now, treating them with a sniper bullet through the brains instead of a punch on the nose in a back alley.

He swung back forward, repositioning the gun on his shoulder and keeping his head low and his footsteps silent. Steve reached the door of the car first, stepping up and looking around in confusion at the emptiness. Something wasn't right. Bucky hung back - he didn't exactly have a gigantic starry shield - and covered Steve's six as Steve stepped through the doorway and into the next car. After a few steps that didn't reveal any sudden gunfire, Bucky started to follow, checking back behind him to make sure they didn't have company. Still clear. It was nerve-wracking.

Just as he stepped up to the threshold to follow Steve, a metal door slammed shut in his face, nearly taking off his fingers. More concernedly, the door just behind Steve slammed shut at the same time, locking them away from each other. He stared with wide eyes through the trapezoid window as Steve rushed to his own window, eyes big and beautiful and scared as his fists came up to either side of the glass, instantly trying to slam the door down. It didn't budge a bit but Bucky didn't have another second left to watch.

A sound behind him made him spin around automatically, heart pumping in his ears and entire body buzzing as he aimed his gun, trying to locate the source of the sound.
Of fucking course Zola tried to separate them. They were better as a team, but Bucky wasn't that same weak beggar Zola had made of him on that table anymore. He could hold his own. So machine gunning the enemy it is. He pulled the trigger, sending a burst of bullets in the other direction. He was almost a little offended that they thought quarantining him from Steve would mean his demise.

Shots fired back from the other side of the train car: two big, blue vaporizing laser beams. Okay, he took it back, he'd really like the advantage of that shield right now. Bucky ducked out of the way and behind a crate of something or another. Holy shit, these guys were trying to vaporize him. He did not sign up for this. Well, actually, he didn't sign up for any of this. The joys of getting drafted. (Okay, he signed up for the second half but who could blame him when it was Steve asking.)

He jumped back out into the open part of the car, machine gun firing at the other side of the car. A few of the bullets finally hit a target, taking down the blue suited guy with some sizable holes in his chest. But the shots kept coming - shit, there was a lot more than one guy in this car - and Bucky scrambled quickly to the crates on the other side of the train, taking cover again to avoid getting zapped into nothing. That had to be the worst death. No body to bury or anything, just dust and a final scream.

More gunfire battered in his direction as he tucked his shoulder behind one of the crates and reloaded his gun with steady hands. Now there were machine gun bullets bouncing in sparks off the corner he was hiding in. Machine guns and blue vaporizing blasts: today was just his lucky day. Determined, he drew in a steady breath and swiveled up over the top of his cover, shooting off a round of bullets. Shit, new angle, they weren't even over there anymore. He ducked back down, spinning on his knees to shoot out from around the side of the crate instead. How many were in here, god? He'd just keep shooting, they all had to die at one point, right? Another Hydra soldier went down, body flopping backwards from the intrusion of metal into his chest.

There better not be this many guys after Steve. Steve had better be kicking ass. With the part of his brain that wasn't trying to stay alive, he zoned in on the sounds coming from the next car over. There were a lot of metallic and crashing noises, but that meant Steve was still alive.

Crouching there against the wall trespassing on a train car zipping through the snowy mountains, Bucky decided that his absolute favorite thing about Howard Stark was that shield he made for Steve.

He kept his breathing as quiet as possible, ducking back low in his corner and listening to his own train car now. There was a soft patter of footsteps headed his way. Just one pair though, it sounded like. The steps weren't falling as heavy as the guy with the blue suits. So machine gun Hydra soldier. Bucky could definitely take him out, so long as he got the shot in first. Only thing was, he was out of machine gun bullets himself. That meant switching to his pistol, which wouldn't be that big of a problem except that the other guy knew Bucky's location, had more ammo, and was hiding behind a lot bigger crates than Bucky was.

Somehow he kept his hands steady, jumping back out from behind the crate as soon as he pinpointed the source of the footsteps, firing off five bullets in quick succession. All of them slid past their target as the guy ducked back between two crates in the center of this train. Bucky slammed back into the other side of the train, ducking behind the crates again as machine gun fire followed just inches behind him, revealing the guy's location again.

Two more shots, fired in the direction of the Hydra guy. No screams or thuds, Bucky was still missing and that soldier was still getting closer. If they could be called soldiers; they looked more like wasps in the uniforms they wore.

Okay, he only had a few more shots left. Should be three, actually. He could do this in three. He was
a sniper for god's sakes, he should be able to pull off close range shooting too, right?

With a final burst of energy, he swiveled around one more time, pulling the trigger once, twice, *click*. Empty. Bucky cursed silently and pressed back into the safety behind the barrier again, sucking in a breath. Shit. That was the last of his ammo. He slid back further against the train wall, sinking down as he realized, as it slowly seeped into his bones the way the cold always had, that creeping sensation that finally just hit all at once. This was it. He was going down today, wasn't he? He couldn't decide if he was glad or extremely regretful that he never told Steve he was in love with him.

A panicked breath escaped his mouth as Bucky pressed his spine to the wall, throwing his head back against the metal gratings of the wall. He should have been more careful with his bullets. Taken a few seconds longer to aim, at least. Packed more ammo, maybe. Found a way to carry another gun. Something. He just didn't want to die. He didn't want today to be his last day with the Commandos. What about that stupid snow fight they were supposed to have after this? Dammit, he should have told Steve.

The locked door by his feet slid open and Bucky startled, jumping at the movement and raising the empty gun like that would help anything at all. Wait, *Steve*. All of the panic drained out of him and Bucky could have cheered if it didn't give away his position and he wasn't still in the middle of a gun fight in a very serious mission he'd been anticipating for more than a year.

But Steve was here now, holding up his gun in offering before he tossed it in Bucky's direction. Now Steve wouldn't have a gun at all, so Bucky would have protested, except that the firearm was already flying through the air and after all, he wasn't much help to Steve when he was dead. His own gun scattered to the ground as he caught the loaded pistol Steve threw at him, rising to his feet in the same motion as he aimed the muzzle down the train car. Steve barreled forward, shield slamming into a canister that slid straight through the center of the car and into the hiding spot of the gunman, forcing the Hydra soldier to either get beheaded or step out to the side. He chose to step out to the side and Bucky fired, sending a bullet into his neck the moment that he did.

The black wasp head jerked backwards and he crumpled to the ground, the train car falling deadly silent. It was over. Bucky wasn't dead and it was over. By some natural born instinct, he gravitated back to Steve's side instantly.

"I had him on the ropes," Bucky told him, the same phrase the Little Steve used to say every time Bucky came and kicked ass for him. (Literally, most times.)

"I know you did," Steve replied, his tone kind of endearing as he shot Bucky the faintest of grins, their eyes meeting with an electric charge. Pumped through with adrenaline as they stepped back close to each other again, *two of us against the world* mixed in with a bit of the relieved *I am really glad you're alive*.

A sudden high pitched whir shattered the moment, Steve recognizing the power-up sound even faster than Bucky did, snapping into soldier mode and spinning around just in time to see one of the blue-suited guys aiming the vaporizer directly at them.

"Get down!" Steve shouted, one of the talented artist hands grabbing onto Bucky's arm and shoving him safely behind Steve. Bucky didn't even have time to think - plus Steve was holding onto him, how was he supposed to *think* when Steve was in the heartbreaking saving-your-life mode of putting himself between Bucky and danger - before the gun went off, the explosion smacking directly into the shield and exploding even *bigger*, a bright flash of fire and smoke that disappeared almost instantly as the side of the train blew off, peeling back like one of those sweet summer oranges.
The explosion had blown them both further back into the car and Bucky was the first to blink into the cold air swirling around them now as he picked himself up off the steel ground, instantly looking around for Steve. His breath caught as he registered that Steve was down, fuck, no, Steve was down - but moving, breathing, okay. Bucky's heart restarted because Steve was alive. He was okay.

And mission number one was to keep it that way. If the Hydra agent tried to take down Captain America right now - the way they'd been trying for the past year - there'd be nothing protecting Steve from that. So Bucky had to distract the bastard-with-the-exploding-vapor-gun from Steve's defenseless body.

Okay, so based on the helmets the guys were wearing, odds are they couldn't see all that clearly. The Hydra agent was going to aim for the guy standing and holding the shield, not look around on the ground to determine who's dead or not. So without a second consideration, Bucky reached out and picked up the shield, distracting the guy from Steve as he fired Steve's pistol around the heavy thing.

He got off three shots before the blue gun powered up again, the whirring sound the only warning before a bright burst smacked the shield front and center, two tons of pressure ripping the shield from his hands and throwing Bucky into the air. Standing one second and flying the next, scrambling for some purchase in the blast of air, his hands reaching out to grab the closest unbreakable thing he could touch. Somehow his fingers closed solidly around a steel rail, nearly yanking his shoulders out of their sockets in the processes. His brain took a few seconds longer to catch up with his body before he realized he was hanging off the side of the train, off the orange peel piece that ripped back in the first explosion.

Fuck, it was cold as hell out here. The metal burned worse than anything else cold he'd touched today, the wind was being an absolute bitch, but he was not leaving Steve in there to take on Zola alone. There was only really one solution then, so Bucky held on.

And just like the bright sunny angel he was, Steve appeared only moments later, his helmet ripped off and blond hair flying everywhere in the wind.

"Bucky!" Steve shouted, already edging out onto the ridges of the flayed train wall. The idiot was going to come save him manually, his heeled brown boots just barely finding purchase on the side of the train as he inched out closer to Bucky's rail. Not that Bucky could complain. He wasn't sure what the hell he'd done in his previous life to deserve Steve in this one, but he couldn't think of a single thing that might be worthy of his stupid, optimistic, precious best friend.

With the last bit of strength he had bottled left, Bucky repositioned his hands on the rail, scooting himself ever closer to Steve.

"Hang on," his blonde angel begged, shimmying further away from the safety of the inside of the train and inches closer to dragging them both out of hell. Bucky was helpless to do anything but listen, trying to get as close as he could without his hands slipping. He didn't even want to think about falling right now, that was way too terrifying to grasp.

Bucky flailed out a single hand, no where near close enough to Steve. You know what? The second that they landed on the floor of that train, he was hauling Steve in close and kissing him until they couldn't breathe. Renewed with the thought, Bucky pushed his luck and inched closer. It was a battle, fighting the wind trying to rip him off, the cold trying to freeze him to death. His left hand was bleeding from the impact with the side of the train, which wasn't exactly making this any easier.

"Grab my hand," Steve called out, holding out one red gloved hand in his direction. Okay, maybe when they landed on the floor of that train again he'd haul Steve in close and tell him he loved him instead. And then he'd kiss him breathless. Bucky inched closer and the rail he'd been hanging from
started to snap away from the wall. He froze, not wanting to make it pull back anymore. With a
desperate prayer Bucky reached out his hand from here, fingers aching to hold Steve's again. They
were still too far apart.

They'd always been too far apart. All this time, what was Bucky so afraid of? Hanging off the side of
a train, death inches away and reaching for Steve's hand, those desperate blue angel eyes on
his...Bucky couldn't remember a single reason not to tell Steve he was in love with him. The pining
and the worrying all seemed so silly now, in the stark face of reality. All this time, they should have
been together. He should have told Steve such a long time ago. I love you.

He steeled himself, sucking in a breath of the sharp, burning cold wind. Just another shift closer...and
something creaked and snapped. Bucky heard the "No!!" of Steve's shout before he even knew he
was falling.

The air rushed up to grab him, dragging him down down down. And he screamed, reaching out for
Steve. His hand in permanent outstretch, reaching and reaching and there was... nothing there to
catch him. Steve's hand wasn't there, he couldn't reach Steve in time, he was never going to grab
Steve's hand again and he kept falling. and falling and falling and falling.

The mountain rushed by beside him, faster than the train had been going and he was falling, he was
never going to stop falling. His throat was wrecked already, hoarse scream just shredded by the wind
the moment it left his mouth.

He stopped screaming halfway down because he couldn't see Steve anymore. He closed his eyes
because he couldn't see Steve anymore and he needed Steve Rogers to be the last thing he ever saw.
He couldn't see Steve anymore and he never got to say I love you.

He never got to say I love you. He didn't even scream it going down.

Didn't even scream it going down.

Bucky! No!

He hit the water with a freezing cold smack and everything went black.

~*~*~*~

The faded green screen was staticky, but he was fairly sure he could see what'd just happened. Could
"Doctor, if Captain America gets back aboard, we only have time to send out one more message before they seize the train," the German fretted, fingers poised over the keys like a dancing monkey. Zola stared at the camera-screen trained on the blank place Sergeant Barnes had just been. And fallen.

"Send headquarters our coordinates," Zola ordered. He tapped the blank space on the screen, staring in awe at their luck. This couldn't have panned out more perfectly. Finally, something that they'd won. And this one thing, this one little piece...it might be worth everything they'd lost. Maybe even more.

He turned to the German monkey of a soldier, awaiting the direction of a message to relay. Zola couldn't keep the triumph out of his voice as he gave his next order. This was the answer to all their prayers.

"Tell them that I left behind one of my...belongings in the ravine."

Chapter End Notes

Wow I'm sorry, this is quite a lot of pain. Just awful, really.

On the plus side, have some translations for the French Dernier and Jones are always laughing over:

"Oi, regarde qui c'est, le petit ami de sergent," Dernier piped with a grin. Jones lost it, slapping his knee and bending in half with laughter, eyes almost watering as his laugh echoed around the clearing.

Translated: "Oi, look who it is. The Sergeant's boyfriend..."

On another note, the lovely commenter Erika sent me this song The General by Dispatch because it reminded her of this story. If you feel like getting even more emotional, feel free to go check it out.

Thank you to every one of you beautiful souls who read this, I am just honored to share my story with you all. xx
A song for Steve: xx.

I seriously recommend listening to it. Headphones and closed eyes and just listen. From this incredible Stucky playlist.

Warning: graphic depictions of sorrow and brief graphic missing arms.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

On the 28th of February 1945, Armin Zola was captured by the allied forces. He was held in custody for a month and a half before being released and deemed harmless - although still tracked by the U.S. Government - with the destruction of Hydra.

A lot can happen in a month and a half.

~*~*~

February 28, 1945

"Doctor Zola, tell your engineer to stop the train. Or I'll stop it for you with this trigger. And I gotta say, I wouldn't weep if you were collateral damage." Jones aimed his sights directly on Zola's head, taking comfort in the shocked sound he'd made as Gabe'd crashed through the roof. He kept his finger out of the trigger guard though, because as much as he was dying to take the shot and wipe the scum of this bastard off the earth...they had specific orders not to kill him. Although more convincing than Colonel Phillips was knowing that as much as he wanted it, this wasn't his kill. If anybody
deserved to ice Zola, destroy him for real and for permanent, it was Barnes.

A few rapid words of frenzied German later and the engineer was fumbling with switches, finally pulling a lever to stop their rapid race through the mountains. The movement jerked the train into a lurch, nearly throwing Gabe off his feet as everything jolted and the train finally started to slow: race to gradual crawl to a stop.

Barnes and Rogers better be holding onto something or else they'd be toppling into walls with that sudden jerk. Not that that wasn't a sight Gabe would pay to see, but still.

As soon as the train settled, engine creaking to a halt on the mountainside, Gabe didn't bother wasting a bullet on the Hydra engineer; swung his gun up and busted it down on the black hooded head, letting the guy crumple to the ground. With a shocked sound, Zola quickly backpedaled away, hands in the air and eyes wide behind his owl glasses, making pointless protests for his life.

Gabe just shot him a venomous look and ignored him for the time being, leaving him to flail around the cockpit in some combination of worry and fear. Gabe hoped Zola was terrified for his life. Like the way Barnes had to have been in Zola's clutches a year ago.

Shutting out the ministrations of the doctor, Gabe leaned over the slumped engineer to find the little numbers on the dash of the train. Right...there. Turning the knob on his walkie talkie to switch it into radio mode, he dialed up headquarters. Stark picked up on the other end almost instantly, wickedly professional as he listened to Gabe relay their coordinates, repeating them back over the static to confirm the numbers' accuracy. He'd have an extraction team on the way right now, Stark promised. He'd be there with their biggest Sikorsky H-5 in twenty minutes.

There was a chance Barnes might be right about Stark, he didn't seem half as pompous as everyone made him out to be. He even congratulated Jones on the mission before he cut off the line, over and out. It was a little surprising, but kinda nice. Maybe Barnes had gotten him to soften around the edges. Barnes kinda had that affect on people.

"You're real lucky I'm not allowed to kill you," Jones finally said, switching off the radio and turning around to level his gaze back on the cowering scientist. Zola still had his hands up in surrender, now backed up against the wall in fear.

"Pleez, d-don't--" Zola pleaded as Jones stepped closer, gun in hand. The begging was disgusting and Jones cut him off with a - much gentler than he'd have liked - pistol whip to the head, instantly making the pudgy body crumple to the ground unconscious.

"Bastard," Jones muttered, pulling out his length of rope and crouching down to weave it through a steel bar on the wall. He'd tie up Zola in a knot the doctor couldn't break in a million years, even if he did wake up with all his brain cells. Personally, Gabe wouldn't be all that hung up if he didn't.

Once Zola was bound and dealt with, far too kindly (but to orders - kind of), Gabe straightened and pulled the little box outta his pocket, turning the knob to switch the setting from radio mode back to the Howling Commandos' walkie talkie frequency.

He swung the barrel of his gun around to settle on his back, surveying the room with a final sweep to make sure no one was getting up anytime soon before he turned up the dial and spoke into the quiet static.

"Doe's, you all frozen yet?" Jones asked into the speaker, kicking Zola's slack foot on his way to the door. A few seconds of crackling static before the quality cleared and put through voices.
"How many times I gotta tell you Jones, you can't shorten Commandos to Doe's. We're an army squad, not a pack of female deer." Dugan's smiling voice came crackling over the line, the same teasing jilt in his voice that never seemed to leave. Gabe broke out in a grin, sliding open the cockpit door.

"Well, female deer stuck waiting on a mountain...we've got a tressed and tied Arnin Zola here, complete with Stark's extraction team heading our way in twenty." Gabe reported victoriously, humming a triumphant trumpet call under his breath, walking across the first train car. Where the hell were Sarge and the Captain at?

Cheers erupted over the static, everyone hollering - even Morita - at the warming idea of Zola finally locked up for good. Done and over, the things that'd been haunting Barnes in the night to be no longer. The various shouts all blended together, with the exception of a loud victory! that Dernier shouted at the top of his lungs, probably spreading his arms out wide and screaming the word over the echoing valley below the mountain. Jones laughed, clipping the walkie talkie box to the collar of his jacket as he walked, just able to pick up the excited voices in the background as he made his way through another doorway, the next car showing empty too. What the hell? They should all be celebrating right now.

"Barnes and Rogers are still in the back of the train, but I don't hear gunfire anymore," Jones mused into the speaker, the words met by a few curious mumbles. Jones waited a few beats before switching to French, just to egg on Dernier and annoy the other men at their lack of understanding. "Any bets to what they're up to?"

Dernier laughed loud enough to make the speaker crackle and fizz and everyone else muttered lots of nonsense about French lessons they were never going to take but kept threatening to.

"I wish I could see the look on Sergeant's face when he sees Zola's the one bound up now," Falsworth declared over the wire, the wind from the mountain distorting some of the sound. Jones could definitely agree - just because Rogers was the go-to for Barnes whenever he woke up screaming didn't mean the rest of them didn't hear it too. Every one of them had awaited this day with heightened anticipation.

"Speaking of which, still haven't run into them yet," Jones replied, starting to get concerned. On higher alert now, he entered the next train car and nearly tripped over a body on the ground. He stepped over the bulky suit of the vaporizing-gun soldiers, kinda surprised there had been this kind of gunpower to contend with. Hell, they'd had to have had it bad back here.

And then he heard the sound. Like a kettle boiling over, or a car going too fast with the windows down. Wind, whipping around like crazy, the whole train getting colder with every step Jones inched forward. Okay, now that was weird.

Dugan and Falsworth were discussing something over the walkie talkie but Jones wasn't listening, their voices blurring into background noise as he stepped through the final doorway, the source of the sound and cold finally coming into sight.

The train was fucking blown open. There was a huge gaping hole in the side of it, metal peeled back to the mountain below and no sign of Barnes or Rogers--

Until he saw a body slumped on the floor a foot from the gaping edge. The frame was smaller than either of those two men but still in bright blue, somehow one of theirs. Jones didn't have time to think, just rushed forward; entirely forgetting the other Commandos were still on the line as he skid to his knees next to the body, hands reaching out to check breathing. The pattering in his chest released a little as Jones felt the muscled back moving up and down heavily beneath his palms.
Wait. No, not breathing.

Sobbing.

Every panic and alarm bell was going off in his head as his brain tried to catch up, figure out what the hell was going on. And where the fuck was the other one? With a serious heave to the shoulder, Jones managed to roll the shaking man up on his side.

The body refused to cooperate, a flash of a star on his chest to make Jones's brain finally register Rogers before he curled back in on himself, still sobbing as he turned his face into the ground again. Steve was wound into a little ball so tight and tiny that Jones couldn't help but wonder if this was what he looked like before the serum - tiny, fragile. Helpless, broken.

With another violent shove, Gabe managed to get Steve to curl up on his side, face still tucked down to the floor. Jones cursed under his breath, grabbing Steve's chin to turn his face up, forcing Cap to look at him. The normally stoic, confident face was streaked, flooded over with tears that were still falling. His entire body was shaking, couldn't stop shaking and Jones just stared. This was some twisted nightmare. Maybe, if he weren't human, he might be able to process what the fuck was going on, but Rogers was...

Rogers was crying and shaking and crying and shaking and the wind was rushing around them in a swirl of confusing cold and Jones didn't have a single answer which wasn't going to cut it.

"Where's Barnes?" Jones demanded, one hand shaking Steve's shoulder to snap him out of it, and Steve just broke down bawling, the crying from earlier practically misty-eyes in comparison to the ugly sounds tumbling out of his mouth now. Steve wrenched away from Gabe's grip, his knees curled into his chest, arms tightly wrapped around himself as he shifted so the cold air blowing from the open side of the train threatened to freeze the tears to his face.

Gabe couldn't move, as Steve broke away from him, another painful sob gasping out of trembling, freezing lips as Gabe watched numbly. Just as frozen as the whipping air, couldn't do anything but watch numbly. And then Steve uncurled slightly, uncurled just enough and the next sound he made, the next ten seconds, the sheer desperation and pain and horror, it engraved itself right into Jones's memory and it was never going to leave, not until the day he died.

He reached a hand towards the gaping hole in the train, fingers outstretched like he was grabbing for something precious, the snowy mountain outside inches away, his voice cracking as a single word left his lips, the most pain Jones would ever hear condensed into five letters.

"B-bucky."

Dernier was laughing at one of Dugan's comments and Falsworth rolled his eyes, fiddling with the volume on his walkie talkie while he waited for Jones to get back to them. He'd been really worried about this mission - a bad feeling, he got those before a lotta their bigger trips.

But Barnes had given him this confident look, a simple reassuring nod that they were all getting through this. And if Sarge could be calm and collected about the mission of the man who'd tortured him, Montgomery Falsworth could absolutely collect himself as well and wait patiently on the mountain.

Well, pacing patiently on the mountain, it seemed. But Jones patched through the victory and they
were all in great spirits now, waiting for Stark's helicopter to come get them (and for the word on
Barnes and Rogers) as they chit-chatted about nothing in particular. He was kinda serious about
taking those French lessons though, it'd be bloody helpful when 2/7ths of the team spoke it
constantly.

Falsworth kept fiddling with the volume knob on his walkie-talkie as he waited, windy sounds
coming over the static, maybe soft voices. He couldn't really be sure, but he wasn't paying much
attention either.

It just so happened that he had the volume turned all the way on high when Jones shouted something
over the line, the words jumbled and unrecognizable over the rush of loud static. Falsworth quickly
turned it back down to a regular volume, opening his mouth to ask Jones to repeat that but never
getting the chance before the panicked man shouted back into the speaker again.

"MAN DOWN! MAN DOWN! MAN DOWN, God, dammit, I need backup I don't even know
what I'm supposed to - man down, I-I--"

They were staring at the walkie talkie in Falsworth's hand, all four of them dead silent and
unmoving. The words echoed on replay in his head, in all of their heads. It might as well have been
Russian that Jones had shouted through to them because Falsworth was fairly sure he didn't
understand - couldn't, understand what those words meant in English.

Muffled sounds started coming back over the speaker, bits and pieces of a conversation that
Falsworth wasn't the slightest bit privy too. His hand was over his mouth but he didn't know how it
got there because he was fairly sure every bone in his body was ice. Frozen.

"St-- look at me, hey - an, you gotta push through thi-- no, c'mon, hey-- ust hold on, help's comi...no,
no, I can't let you near that ledge -- ok at me, dammit," Falsworth listened dumbly as the sound of
snapping fingers echoed across the walkie talkie. Distantly watching a movie of someone else's life,
but about a hundred times worse.

A loud crash and some inarticulate shouts sounded over the crackling static, more broken muffled
sounds in Jones's voice. "Fuck, c'm- don't fuckin do this--ook at me S-- ck, you know it's...S-s--god,
don-... not your fault -"

A scream shattered over the walkie talkie speaker and they all jumped, Falsworth curling in his
shoulders and pinching his arm because he had to be in a fucking nightmare. He couldn't even feel
the pinch but the world was too sharp and vivid for this to be dreaming. It had to be. It had to be, this
couldn't actually be happening. That scream...

Dugan was the first to finally speak, snatching the walkie talkie out of Falsworth's hand violently
enough to crush it. Falsworth looked on with wide eyes, still not feeling real. Dugan lifted the box
up, speaking directly into the mesh with the most serious expression he'd ever seen on Dugan's face.

"Jones, what the hell is happening? Who's--"

"Barnes. Barnes is dead. Sergeant Barnes fell off the train and he's fucking gone and I can't get Steve
under control. I'm not fucking strong enough to hold him back and if he starts to put up a real
fight he's going to overpower me and fucking jump out of this goddamned train looking for Barnes
and he's out of his fucking mind and I am so fucking far out of my league right now I don't know
what the fuck to do." Jones's frantic, panicked words ended in a choked sob. The sob was followed
by another, the quiet echoing pained sounds of continuous crying over the static.

Dugan stared at the device clutched in his fingers, not really seeing it. When he'd yanked it out of
Falsworth's hand, he'd had only one question on his mind. He was going to ask who was screaming. Because it didn't sound human. That's what he was going to ask. He'd never even considered--

Sergeant Barnes. Dugan had met him day 1 of the 107th regiment. The most alive, bright kid Dugan had ever seen. Settling down into the most mature, reliable man in the entire damned army. And through every moment of it, his entire being had been focused on one thing, his entire purpose had been so clear and apparent from the start. The thing that he lived for, what lit the spark in his eyes. What grounded him to that dependability.

And he'd come back from his grave to kick Dugan's ass if they let any harm happen to his boy.

"You gotta calm down Steve," Dugan commanded urgently into the speaker, trying to get across how damn important that was in just five words. He broke out of the frozen spell and started moving, a damn hurricane, picking up speed and unable to stop moving now that he'd started, pacing the length of the flat rock terrace so he'd feel a fraction of control.

He'd never called Rogers "Steve" before, maybe once in mocking joke or something. It felt weird as hell in his mouth, like it was almost too personal or something. That's what Barnes called Rogers, not the rest of them. And somewhere in his head, he'd always kind of considered Rogers and Barnes more heroes and less humans.

But listening to shattering screams and cries from the other end of the walkie talkie static...Dugan hadn't heard anything more humanizing in his life.

Steve Rogers was so very very human and apparently so was Bucky Barnes. Well, he'd been human enough to die at least. It seemed impossible, really. But standing in the whipping cold wind at the top of a mountain Dugan was burned into clarity, finally seeing his two best friends for how human they really were. And it was entirely too late for one of them.

"I don't know how," Jones gasped into the speaker, his words wet with his tears and panic.

"Think of what Sarge would have done to calm him down," Dugan tried, pacing a little faster as he realized he was already putting Barnes in the past tense.

*Man down.*

"I don't fucking know! I can't even say his name without Rogers melting into a fucking potentially-suicidal puddle!"

"Captain wouldn't do that," Falsworth muttered quietly. Dugan looked down at the words, taking a step back as Falsworth repeated himself. "Captain wouldn't do that." Falsworth's arms were wrapped around drawn up knees as he rocked back and forth on the flat piece of rock he was perched on, eyes staring at nothing. "Captain wouldn't do that."

Jeez, they were all going out of their fucking minds. Dugan quickly scanned over the rest of the Howling Commandos, checking on the rest of his team as he realized he was in temporary charge of seven of the most-- six. Six of the most...

He sucked in a breath, forcing his brain to focus on the boys. Morita was sitting silent and numb, unmoving and unspeaking, face blank. Cut-off denial. Okay, that wasn't too dangerous. Falsworth was rocking and muttering, trying not to cry, telling himself all sorts of things to make himself feel better. Active denial. Also not dangerous so long as he didn't snap before they could get help. Dernier was slumped, tears rolling nonstop down his face, staring out into the distance of the mountaints.
And Dugan was total shit because he hadn't been there to help. He still wasn't there to help, he was fucking useless and he had never thought the day had come that he'd have to watch one of his brothers die in the field.

Or worse, not watch it. Hear about it from afar and know there was absolutely nothing you could do while you're stuck on a fucking mountain miles away.

He kicked a rock angrily off the cliff, watching it tumble head over tail before falling and falling and falling. Fuck, like Barnes must have. And knowing Barnes and Rogers' tendency to never leave each other's side if they could help it...Rogers must'a seen the whole thing. No wonder the poor kid was freaking out.

And Jones was freaking out too, panicking and trying to help out Rogers and generally feeling as useless as Dugan was, probably.

It wasn't the first time they'd lost a soldier in this war. It wasn't the first time Dugan had lost a friend to the war either. He'd been on the front line when one of his war buddies got shot in the neck in front of him, watched him bleed out.

But this was Sergeant Barnes. He and Captain Rogers were...the fucking moon and the sun in the goddamned sky. The best two men Dugan had ever known.

And now half that pair was gone and they might lose the other half too, if they couldn't get a handle on this.

"What's happening? Is he calming down?" Dugan demanded into the walkie talkie, entirely uncomfortable with how quiet the other line had fallen.

Jones snorted humorlessly, his voice sounding dead and raspy - cried hoarse - as he answered back into the speaker.

"I don't think he's ever gonna calm down from this, Tim. He's too weak to pull himself off the edge though...I don't think he ever really wanted to die exactly. Maybe. Honestly I think he was more intent on saving Barnes than offing himself."

Dugan closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Jesus Christ. What the fuck are we supposed to do? Is Stark bringing a whole damn team to extract you guys? Because I don't think Stark can exactly lift a panicking supersoldier into a helicopter by himself."

"Radio him to get you guys first," Jones responded tiredly, leaning his head back against the train wall, staring at the gaping hole across from him. He was so fucking exhausted.

It had hit him all at once, an emotional storm of realizing Barnes was dead at the same time Steve rolled over to the edge of the train. He'd radioed in Barnes's death to the other Commandos. (Just six of them, now.) Then there was the panic that had set in as Jones shouted man down, because wherever the hell Steve was in his head at that moment he'd definitely recognized those two words.

And flipped the fuck out.

Jones turned his head and blinked slowly, looking a few feet further down the train car at Steve. He'd overexerted his muscles and probably his brain from all the crying and panicking and thrashing about. Now he was lying in a curled up ball on his side again, staring blankly ahead like a lifeless China doll.

The only thing that made him look more alive than his counterpart were the tears still dripping off his
face.

The calm was terrifying, but it was better than when Steve had been rolling around and punching and screaming Bucky over and over - before just plain flat screaming in agony - trying to get over to the edge. Well, the calm wasn't exactly better. Easier to handle.

Gabe closed his eyes again, feeling along his jaw carefully. Steve had lashed out wildly, no finesse or plan in his punches and kicks, just raw pain and open hurt. The lack of intent was probably the only reason Jones was still alive. He was going to have a massive bruise on his jaw and his ribs were pretty battered but he'd escaped nearly unscathed giving the circumstances. Raging, crying supersoldier wasn't exactly the easiest person to wrestle.

Gabe opened his eyes back up at the sound of an engine, some not-numb part of his brain perking up at the sight of another human being. Help was here. It was a damned good thing too, because he was not cut out for handling Steve on his own.

Dugan jumped out of the helicopter - using the giant hole in the side of train as an entrance - not even bothering with a greeting before he rushed to Steve's side, trying to roll him out of the tight ball he'd wrapped himself in again.

Morita hopped out of the helicopter next, heading straight for Jones. He didn't say anything - asked if he was okay with a look. "Yeah, I'm fine," Jones replied tiredly, letting Morita throw an arm around his shoulders and help him up into the helicopter. Falsworth was sitting in one of the chairs, staring at the ground, and Dernier was sitting in another, staring out the window.

Jones plopped down next to them and stared at nothing at all.

A few minutes later, Dugan, Morita, and a soldier Jones didn't recognize all man-handled Steve into the helicopter. Steve stared blankly ahead, face still shining with tears and hair skewed in a thousand different directions. Dugan had at least thought to grab his helmet and shield, tossing them down onto the helicopter floor as they slowly took off. Apparently the extraction team had grabbed Doctor Zola from the front of the train while the Commandos were distracted with getting Steve into the helicopter.

Which was a really good idea because if Morita saw Zola's face right now, he'd bash it in. Any one of them would.

Morita stared out the window watching as the black train slowly grew smaller and smaller, a black speck of death in the stark white snow of the mountains.

They were only in the air for a few minutes before Howard Stark emerged from the cockpit, yanking his pilot helmet off his head and freezing in spot at the sight of all the beaten, broken Commandos.

"So he's really--" Stark started, face distorted with pain and horror.

"Yes," Morita answered, eyes cutting down to the gun in his hands. They were all still armed to the teeth. It was a wonder nothing had happened yet because of it. He looked back up, watching as Stark's face paled, like he was about to pass out. That might be a nice relief from reality, actually.

"Oh god," Stark whispered, a hand coming up to cover his mouth in shock. His eyes darted over each of them, finally landing on Steve.

His hand lowered back down to his side as he took a hesitant step forward, cautiously approaching Steve, who didn't even appear to see him.
"Steve?" Howard asked, crouching down beside him. There weren't enough seats for all of them and Rogers was too difficult to maneuver so they'd put him on the floor, propping him up against a wall.

Steve blinked a few times, eyes finally connecting with the real world as he looked at Stark up close. When he spoke, his voice came out as wrecked as if he'd been crying for days straight. "Howard?"

Stark leaned forward, clapping a hand on Steve's shoulder. "Yeah buddy, it's me. How're you holdin' up?"

Steve just stared at him blankly. Morita was pretty sure he'd only recognized Stark due to how rarely they saw each other. In whatever place Steve was in his head, the Commandos were a regular part of it and he couldn't see them, couldn't turn to them. Or maybe they reminded him too much of Bucky to process. Or maybe Stark was just the first person to approach Steve gently. The rest of them were too shaken to handle Steve right now.

At the look on Steve's face, Stark withdrew his hand, looking nervously at Steve while trying to hold back tears of his own. Morita wondered dimly if Stark had liked Barnes as much as Barnes seemed to like him.

"He's gone," Steve whispered, voice hoarse as a smoker's. Stark made a sympathetic face, biting his lip to keep the overwhelming emotions at bay. "He's gone," Steve said again, the first intelligible words besides Bucky and my fault they'd managed to get out of him.

And apparently they were the only words left in Steve's brain, because a dam broke somewhere and the stunned whispers evolved into miserable shouts and ramblings. "He's gone he's gone HE'S GONE and it's a-a-all my fault he's gone he's gone Bucky's gone he's g-gone, g-gone, gone gone g--"

Stark tried calming Steve down but Steve buried his head in his hands, the words still on repeat but at least muffled now. It ached just to watch him. The movie that had to be playing behind those blue eyes right now...

They'd been best friends forever. Inseparable was literally an understatement. They were more deeply integrated into each other's lives than most married couples Morita knew. Quite unfortunately, they really were the moon and the sun, unable for one to exist without the other.

He couldn't even imagine the kind of pain Steve was going through right now.

No one could have ever prepared for this, for losing Bucky. And losing Steve. Stark backed away from the broken-record that was Steve Rogers now, eyes wider than ever as he stared helplessly around at them. Yeah, join the club.

"Hey, you got a tranq gun? Or monkey gas?" Morita asked, looking up at Stark. Howard blinked a few times, stumbling as he straightened, a single tear slipping down his cheek that he quickly wiped away.

"A-a...what?" Stark asked, trying to suck in a steady breath. "I couldn't--"

"I think he'd probably appreciate being sedated right now," Dugan interrupted, his voice dead and his eyes turning up to look at Stark too. Howard paled a little more, twisting his hands and sniffing as he looked back over at Steve. Steve was rocking now, palms and long fingers still covering his face as he muttered to himself.

And as much as Steve needed the break from his own head before he went fucking nuts...Jones was sporting some pretty heavy bruises. That wasn't something they all needed to share. The sedation
was as much for them as it was for Steve.

"Yeah, I'll. I'll be right back." Stark practically ran into the cockpit, more energy in him than any of the rest of them combined. Morita wasn't sure he could run for anything right now.

At least if they drugged Steve up for the ride home, maybe they could all find a way to piece themselves back together. Morita stared out the window and wondered how the hell any of them could be whole again.

~*~*~

"State your full name for the record, please."

"S-Steven Grant Rogers."

"Age?"

One year three months and twenty five days younger than James Buchanan Barnes.

Intake of air that patchily makes its way through swollen tubes to destroyed lungs. "Twen'y-five."

"Can you tell me how many fingers I'm holding up?"

The fingers were blurry with the waterfalls in Steve's eyes. With rainy days on the window ledge, watery hot cocoa in hand, holey socks in his lap, soft crooning of the sweetest voice - Steve's favorite sound - singing from the other end of the window ledge, golden waterdrops reflecting over icy blue eyes and a sketchbook in his hands.

How many fingers? More than he had left.

"Sev-v-ven?"

"Good. Can you breathe in for me, nice and slow."

He couldn't.

The doctor asked again.

He still couldn't.

"Alright. We'll come back to that. I'm going to listen to your heart now."

There's no point, he wanted to say. It's broken. It doesn't beat anymore. You won't hear a thing.

"Captain Rogers, your heartbeat is reaching dangerously high levels. I'm going to need you to calm down."

Steve blinked at the doctor. Jesus, Stevie, got a temper like a bull. You're gonna drive me mad one of these days, you hear me? Can't stop worryin' about you. You ever gonna spend a day in some semblance of calm?

He couldn't just calm down. He couldn't just calm down.

_Down down down down down._

_Falling._
"No no no no no," Steve moaned, burying his face in his hands. He couldn't breathe, his lungs weren't working, and he didn't care he didn't care at all, let them close up, let his whole body shut down. Pneumonia might as well be taking him again and he wouldn't care, not one bit, because then Steve would see him again.

*Til Death.

"-tain Rogers?" Unfamiliar fingers tried to pry his hands off his face. Steve jerked away, curling his body in half and tucking his forehead against his knees. It was too bright. Everything was too bright. The world didn't deserve to be so bright.

"I thought you said he was sedated," the doctor hissed to his nurse. Steve wasn't listening.

"He is, sir."

"You're telling me his heartbeat was faster at one point? Jeezum Crow. Is his team still waiting outside the tent? Bring 'em in here."

He'd promised. He'd promised Steve that he'd never leave him. He promised Steve he wouldn't die.

"YOU LYING BASTARD!!" Steve screamed, uncurling just in time for Dugan and Jones to grab his shoulders, shove him down onto a medical cot. He only struggled for a few moments, but the five men managed to hold him in some vague direction of down.

*Down down down down down*

Steve gave up. He deflated, nose squinching up as more tears streamed from the corners of his eyes. His chest was heaving again, up and down with little shakes. The rattle was back in his breathing, but it wasn't the one from his childhood, the dire sound Bucky used to worry about. It was just more sobbing, more pain, more protests from his body. Bucky wasn't here to worry about him anymore.

A callused hand brushed back his hair from his forehead, palm resting over his heated skin to catch a temperature reading. Bucky used to do that, used to check on him and make his little disapproving sounds. Steve whimpered, eyes squeezed shut tight.

"Allez chercher Stark," Dernier let go of Steve's ankle to motion at the nurse. She looked a little confused, so Jones clarified.

"Tell Stark to bring a sedative strong enough to knock Rogers out for the night."

"Good god," Falsworth whispered, squeezing Steve's wrist a little tighter. Steve's bottom lip was trembling.

"B-buackyy," he moaned, tossing his head to the side.

"I can't fucking do this," Morita mumbled, taking a step back from Steve. The rest of them didn't stop him as he backed out of the tent. They understood.

Steve didn't notice, he was in Brooklyn in 1934.

*No, it doesn't look nothin' like it. I can't draw like you do, Stevie.*

*Hey! Give it back! You can't take my sketchbook you bastard!*
Bucky! Language!

Come back here!

Steve laughs and runs faster, ducking behind the kitchen counter. Sarah isn't home, so they aren't going to get in trouble for running in the house. Bucky chases after him, cursing as his holy socks slide on the rough wood.

It's not fair, you're so tiny you can run around like a little annoying kitten!

I'm not a kitten you weirdo, you're just slo-oof!

Give it...back...Rogers!

Steve screams and laughs harder, trying to escape from where Bucky's grabbed him around the waist. But it's all too easy for Bucky to pick him up off the ground - just a few inches - and Steve squeals, kicking his feet.

Let me...see your...drawing dammit!

Bucky drops Steve in sheer surprise of the curse word and Steve woops a victory and runs again, scuttling around the couch to sit on the floor and open up sketchbook, flipping to the last filled page.

The picture is of him.

He blinks up at Bucky, who'd come around to stand in front of Steve, hands shoved nervously in his pockets.

Can I keep this? Steve asks, blinking back tears. Bucky looks at him confusedly.

It's no good, Bucky replies.

Steve looks back down at the drawing. He's never seen a picture of him that he liked. Bucky’s drawing makes him look...whole. Bright, almost like the sunshine in a way.

Okay, great. I'm glad you think so, because I'm keeping it. Steve carefully tears the page out of the thin sketchbook, folding it and tucking it inside his jacket, against his heart.

Bucky rolls his eyes. You are such a sap. It's no good, I'm telling you.

Steve just smiles, eyes still a little watery.

Bucky leans over and wipes underneath Steve's eye with his thumb, collecting the unfallen tears with an affectionate shake of his head.

Bucky wasn't here to do that anymore.

No one wiped away his tears now.

~*~*~*~
February 29, 1945

"What can we do?" Falsworth asked softly, plopping down on the ground next to Steve. He looked up from his sketchbook, blinking as the rest of the Commandos held back the flap of his tent, all standing and waiting, in uniform like Steve was. He'd only come into his tent to change, actually. The sketchbook had been sitting there, black and unobtrusive and waiting to be picked up.

He didn't have a photo album to flip through and he didn't really want one either, not when he had this. Steve had sat down on the ground Indian style, crossing his legs and picking up the sketchbook, running his hands over the cover.

It had been Bucky's parting gift to him. The day he'd gotten back from basic training he'd given it to Steve, despite all of Steve's protests. *They're gonna ship me out one day, Stevie. And you better keep me up to date with everything that happens to you, alright? Just draw, and when I come home you can show me your sketchbook and it'll be like I didn't miss a thing at all.*

His voice was still so clear in Steve's head, every single version of it. Memories of the young whiny sound as he swung his legs off the counter, telling Steve's mom all about the pretty girl he'd seen at school that day. When he'd gone through puberty, his voice cracking right in the middle of yelling at Steve one time, making them both start laughing and forget whatever fight over Steve's safety they'd been in. The slight Brooklyn tang in some of his vowels as they were teens, the way that edge softened after basic. The older, worried tone of voice he'd spoken with just last year.

The scream as he fell from the train, Steve lunging for him and not being fast enough, not reaching far enough.

Steve's head dropped, a tear falling onto the front of the black sketchbook in his lap. He couldn't even bring himself to turn the first page. All the stories he'd been planning to tell Bucky, his drawings of different city skylines from his USA tour, the sketches that eventually turned into dancing monkeys as he got more and more frustrated with being stuck spinning his wheels.

And of course all the sketches he'd drawn of Bucky in the past year...they were all here, inside this little book that Steve couldn't open. The last year of the life of Bucky Barnes, as documented by Steve Rogers, but he couldn't look at it. Not when he could still hear that scream, echoing in his head over and over and over.

He'd been right about February all along. All of the bad feelings, the distaste and confusion for it. The world really did end on the last day, the 28th. It cut off there because that's the day that the planet stopped turning, that's the day that Steve's entire world came to a close as the greatest thing to ever be his slipped through his fingers on the side of a train.

Bucky wasn't the only one to fall. Steve was already dead, living in some half-real afterlife. Today didn't feel real, nothing but this sketchbook in his hands felt real. Which was fine, because exactly a year from today, this day wouldn't exist. The 29th of February, what an ironic time to mourn.

He blinked, taking a few seconds to focus back in on the sketchbook in his hands. There were more tears streaking the cover now, that Steve couldn't remember crying. His cheeks were cold though, glistening wet again. He hadn't gone an hour without crying yet, since it happened. Since the fall.
Steve sucked in a shaky breath, oxygen catching in his throat against more tears as he rubbed the salty water from the black cover, not wanting it to stain with waterspots. Tearstains would at least be fitting, and it was probably too late to undo the water entirely, so he gave up after a few swipes, letting it fall back into his lap.

He almost didn't believe it. Not just in the shocked sort of way; like it didn't feel real. That scream was real. Steve had been there. That scream had been very very real.

That wasn't why he almost didn't believe it. It was bigger than that.

When Steve had stood in front of Colonel Phillips -this same sketchbook tucked inside his leather jacket- and asked for one name, Sergeant James Barnes of the 107th...he'd been given Phillips's condolences.

He'd been told Bucky was dead.

But that couldn't be right. Steve had known it wasn't right. He'd have known if Bucky had died. He'd have felt it in his core. The world would shift, everything would change. He had been entirely, 100% sure that he would physically feel pain when Bucky Barnes died.

Not just the kind of pain from watching someone you love fall to their deaths and the shock of their absence. The kind of pain like a hole, like something was missing inside Steve's chest. Not just sorrow, but something physical and tangible.

He hadn't felt it when Bucky had been a prisoner of war. The world was still in the same vibrant colors, so Bucky had to be alive. And on that gut instinct, on that one feeling Steve absolutely knew to be true, he'd stormed a Hydra base by himself. And he'd been right. His body had been right, Bucky had been alive, and Steve saved him. He'd saved Bucky because he knew in his soul that Bucky was alive.

And now that he'd seen Bucky die with his own two eyes...

It was killing Steve. It was eating him up because he still didn't have that hole in his soul. The world hadn't shifted. The colors hadn't dimmed. His heart was broken in sorrow but he wasn't in the kind of pain he'd spent his entire life so sure he'd be in when Bucky died.

The piece that he should be missing wasn't gone.

He hated himself for it. He hated himself for it so much because Bucky was dead and the world hadn't ended.

If he hadn't been there to see the fall, Steve would be storming the mountain ravine right now, looking for Bucky. If someone had only told Steve that Bucky was dead, he wouldn't believe them because somehow, his soul was still intact.

He'd been so sure. So sure he'd know, he'd feel it. He didn't. He didn't feel anything but raw, empty pain.

The hole wasn't there and Steve wanted it to be true, wanted Bucky to be alive, but it was impossible for him to have survived that fall.

It wasn't fair, because the world didn't deserve to keep spinning with those same bright colors. It wasn't fair that nothing changed. It wasn't fair that Steve's body was telling him Bucky was still alive.

How was he supposed to live with that?
How was he supposed to live with his body screaming at him that Bucky was still alive, waiting to be found?

Steve had to go find him. He was out there and Steve had to find him and he knew Bucky was alive but he'd seen him fall, he couldn't be.

His body and his soul and his mind was telling him otherwise and Steve couldn't live with that.

He couldn't physically survive this feeling, could he?

If Bucky were here, he'd call Steve a drama queen and he'd laugh, that beautiful sound that filled places and lit them up with the most beautiful glow in the world.

He was never going to hear Bucky's laugh again. Oh god.

A hand came up to cover his mouth from the broken sound ripping up his throat as Steve curled down, squeezing his eyes shut against the new flood of tears spilling over and tried to get a damn grip on himself. Bucky wasn't coming back, there was no one to save him from himself now.

"C'mon, Stevie. Pick your head up. It ain't that bad. It ain't that bad, okay? A warm, familiar voice sounded in his head. He knew the exact expression Bucky would have on if he saw Steve now...the way he'd crouch down next to him, wiping away the tears on Steve's cheeks with his rough palms, chiding Steve to stop crying unless he wanted Bucky to start crying too.

"Buck," Steve choked, lifting a hand to his cheek, placing it over the imaginary one Bucky had cupped to Steve's jaw. His fingers fell through air, landing on his own skin instead of Bucky's. Bucky, who he'd never touch again.

Steve. I need you to be strong now more than ever, man. I swear, I'll come back and haunt your ass if you don't stop cryin' over me like some dame. The Bucky in his head scolded and Steve huffed a laugh because good god, even in his head Bucky was bitchy with his affection.

He blinked the tears away, running his fingers over the edges of the sketchbook. There was so much he'd never told Bucky. All those nights in Brooklyn, looking out over the bridge with Bucky at his side. For the first time since the war started, Steve understood what all the soldiers felt when they wrote about how homesick they were.

"I just wanna go home," Steve whispered, dissipating to nothing with no-one to listen anymore. They should've jumped the tracks together. They should've fallen together. They did everything together in life, that's the way it should've been in death too.

His hands they shook and head it spun. Bucky had found so much in life, he had been the most alive person Steve had ever known. Even after he'd been a prisoner of war, he'd come back alive in a different sort of way - a darker, more serious kind that meant he'd met death and come back even more determined to live.

And now he wasn't alive at all.

He just wanted to go back home. He wanted to stand in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge, Bucky at his side. Looking over the water, eyes following the tension lines, the sweeping architecture of the dark brick. The familiar embrace of the cobblestone streets. The dim streetlights that flickered, the dark alleys with their hidden secrets, the smell of salt and sweat at the docks Bucky used to work.

If he could somehow go back now, to their old apartment, looking out over the view he'd drawn more than anything (besides Bucky)...would Bucky's ghost find him there? Would Brooklyn take
Steve back in, give him back the warmth he'd lost from his core?

Or when Steve was asking to go back home...maybe he meant the home of Bucky's hand in his.

He stared down at the sketchbook, trying to focus on anything but the memories trying to haunt him. The ghost of Bucky's fingers, wrapping tight around Steve's hands. Ever since they were kids, always grabbing on to each other tight. Never letting go.

And Steve had let go.

Fuck, he had let go.

Thankfully, that was the moment that Falsworth stepped into Steve's tent, sitting down in front of him with that question hanging in the air between them. *What can we do?*

Steve sat the sketchbook back down, sliding it across Bucky's sleeping bag, sniffing and rubbing at his eyes. He was such a fucking mess.

All of the Commandos - only six of them, now - waited patiently as Steve sucked in some ounce of courage through his mouth, pursing his lips to keep his eyes from spilling over again. They were back to watering, and might permanently be.

He looked up at the silent men, at Falsworth sitting beside him, the solemn faces at the entrance to his tent. They'd all lost one of their best friends too. And here they were, trying to help Steve through this because they knew, they knew better than anyone how damn much Bucky meant, how big a piece of Steve's heart was dedicated to him. They had been there for the fights and the laughter and...

Steve blinked back more tears, attempting some form of a smile as he looked up gratefully at his band of brothers. His family.

"You can get me drunk," Steve offered brokenly, the words so full of emotion that he had to bite his lip to keep from losing it and bawling all over again.

No one so much as huffed a laugh at the irony of it. For a year they'd been trying to convince him to join them and now finally Steve wanted to get so drunk he forgot his own name but there wasn't a single thing to celebrate. Falsworth reached over to clap Steve on the shoulder, tugging him to his feet. Steve's body shook and he hated that he couldn't control this, couldn't honor Bucky's death with a respectful quiet sigil. That he was in such shambles. Bucky deserved better, he always deserved better.

He deserved better than this war. He'd enlisted because he knew how much it meant to Steve. He'd come over here and been tortured and isolated and driven nearly mad. The psychological damage had been heartbreaking and intense and Steve had never even been *allowed* to see the physical damage to its full extent. Whatever it had been, Bucky deserved so much better.

He'd stayed in this war for Steve and he deserved better than that too. If Steve hadn't asked him to stay, Bucky would be alive right now. He could be in Brooklyn, maybe even taking art classes again. Writing Steve letters and drawing him pictures on the back because Bucky never drew enough, always felt intimidated by Steve.

Steve had killed him because he was so damn selfish he'd wanted Bucky at his side. He'd always wanted Bucky at his side and now his best friend was dead because of it. Bucky deserved so so so
If Steve had known Bucky would leave him, Steve would have sent him home. He would have insisted, pulled every string he had to get Bucky on the next flight back to New York. If he had known he'd lose Bucky to his fight, Steve may never have joined the fight at all.

"Where to, Cap?" Dugan asked softly, fingering the keys of a jeep. They could go anywhere they wanted in just one car now, because there was only six of them left. Steve gave Dugan a weak smile that turned down at the edges, everything feeling like it was made of water and ice.

"That bar..." Steve started, thinking back over his memories. He wouldn't be able to go to the last one they'd been at, less than a month ago. Where he and Bucky had danced, where they'd waltzed across the floor together, spinning forever and forever under the golden glow of the dim lights--

He covered his mouth with his hand again to stop the choked sound trying to escape his throat. Two more hands landed on his shoulders, Jones on one side and Morita's on his upper back. This was so fucking hard. How was he ever going to learn to function like this?

"The first one," he finally managed, speaking as quickly as he could to still get the words out in the right order, anticipating the next time that memories of Bucky decided to rip his heart wide open again. "Where I asked you to come fight with me."

"Ending where it started," Falsworth said under his breath, nodding to himself as he opened the jeep door for Steve. The ending. Finished, over, done, no longer. God, the end. The end of the li--

He shut down that thought so fast he was left blinking in reality like someone had hit him with a cold splash of water to the face. Everyone was looking at him worriedly because he was still just standing here and dammit he had to stop spacing out. With shaking legs he stepped up into the jeep - the last time he'd been in the backseat of a jeep, Bucky had been next to him, rolling his eyes like a drama queen as he spouted off more BS about how he was totally fine - and sank into the seat defeated.

Steve's hand clapped over his eyes now, squeezing the sides of his temples and trying to convince himself to calm down, to chill out because this was the end. He had to accept that. Bucky was gone.

"I-I," Steve started, his vocal chords grating and wrecked and hating him almost as much as he hated himself. He'd never get the chance to say this to the person who deserved to hear it the most...but he could say it to the Commandos, to the family that was holding him together right now.

"I'm sorry," Steve whispered again, his bottom lip trembling as he looked to each of their faces. It wasn't enough, he could never say enough. Could never apologize enough. They had put up with his crying and screaming and his punches, had held strong and steady beside him. The best men he'd ever known, standing stronger by his side now than ever. And all while he was a goddamned mess -- Steve, I'm a fucking mess. I don't even know what kind of mess I am anymore. Hey, Bucky, listen to me. Whatever the mess you are, you're my mess okay? You're not alone.

You're not alone.

"I'm so sorry," Steve whispered again, his voice breaking this time as the rain started back down his cheeks.

Five strong pairs of arms came around him, cradling him in the safest hold he'd ever been in and Steve cried, cried and cried, maybe he was never going to stop crying. And his Commandos were never going to let go.

Not like he did.
Howard had patched through the news to her the moment he got off the radio with Dugan. Peggy's hand had covered her mouth in shock, a sharp gasp escaping anyways. She'd been in the strategy room at the time, everyone quietly discussing amongst themselves. All heads turned to her at the sound she made, expressions of surprise and confusion. Her eyes were already watering, so she'd managed an *excuse me* and hurried out of the room as quickly as three inch heels can allow.

They hadn't let her see Steve the night he got back. She hadn't asked to; she had no place to intrude on...this. On losing Barnes.

Once a group of soldiers had carried a - apparently sedated? - Steve to the medical tent, Howard had come to find her. She'd wiped away the fallen tears by then, had put on a fresh coat of lipstick and done her hair up in tighter rolls. The best defensive mechanism to despair was dressing up, despite how foolish and girly the idea felt.

Stark's eyes had been puffy and red by the time he found her sitting alone in the empty officer's tent. He'd sat down across from her, blinking up at the sky to rid his bottom lashes of the threat of more tears.

"How's Steve?" Peggy had finally asked. Howard had just looked at her for a bit, his hands clasped tightly in his lap.

"Not so hot," he'd replied. "Hell of a lot more messed up than anyone's seen him."

*Anyone but Bucky, probably*, Peggy thought. She doubted there was a side of Steve that Bucky didn't know. There wasn't a single thing about Steve that Bucky didn't know. And perhaps at one point that had gone both ways...

But now there was something about Bucky that Steve didn't know. That no one in the entire world knew, except for her. She was the soul survivor of the deepest secret Bucky Barnes ever held and the weight of that was unimaginably crushing. Sergeant Barnes had given his life for Steve Rogers. Sergeant Barnes had been so totally, completely, helplessly in love with Steve Rogers. And now Steve would never know.

Unless Peggy told him.

"I think he could really use some comfort, once he calms down." Howard sighed, giving her a side glance. She almost would have laughed, except for there wasn't a single part of her left with capability to do that.

"From me?" Peggy gave Howard a look, because she wasn't the person that Steve would turn to right now if he had the choice. It'd be Bucky, it had always been Bucky. He'd been the guiding North Star for Steve their entire life.

How could she compare to that? How could she possibly hold a candle to what Bucky Barnes had done for Steve? There was a part of her that wanted to believe Steve Rogers loved her, because it felt as though he truly might. But even if he did, even if he wanted to marry her like Barnes had said...it was nothing compared to the rivers that ran between Rogers and Barnes.

No one knew Steve like Bucky did. No one had him all the way. She may have been acquaintances with him before the serum, but she was a lifetime behind Bucky.

Years of dedication, years of something so much deeper than affection. Now that she knew them both, she couldn't imagine Steve without Bucky. She'd counted on never having to. Sergeant Barnes
had been so grateful when Peggy told him she still wanted Bucky in Steve's life, regardless of his feelings. But it had been a purely selfish move - she needed Bucky to be what she couldn't be in Steve's life. Bucky gave Steve the understanding and history and reliability and easy companionship that she simply couldn't...

She couldn't compare to that. She was no replacement for Bucky Barnes. How could anyone ask her to be?

But Steve had to have someone to turn to. He couldn't weather this alone and Peggy couldn't think of a single thing more important than helping Steve through this.

"He leans on you, you know." Stark had said, leaning forward to clasp his hands on the table between them. "You're his support team. You've always had faith in him, always stood by his side and given him something to fight for. As much as I don't want to flatter you Peg, you inspire all kinds of courage in a man like that."

She'd just looked away because as much as she'd like to believe that, she couldn't. She'd always had faith in him, yes. Maybe even given him something to fight for, although it would just be adding to the list because Steve was already fighting for so much. And she'd stood by his side in meetings, in mind.

But she hadn't covered his six. She hadn't nearly fried her hands off ripping electrical fence away from his body. She hadn't killed specifically for him, hadn't offered her entire life to him. She hadn't died for him.

Bucky Barnes's shoes were too big for her to fill, but who else would be there to even try?

"I'll see him tomorrow," Peggy had told Howard, her mind already racing with the conversation. If she was taking on Bucky's responsibilities now...

Did she have the responsibility to tell Steve too? Didn't Steve deserve to know that the man who gave his life for him loved Steve in every sense of the word? Didn't Bucky's memory deserve to be honored with that?

*

By the time Peggy found the tavern (for the second time - the last time she'd been in her red dress, watching with a twinkle in her eye as the entire bar fell silent at her presence), she'd spent hours lying awake and thinking about what Barnes had told her. The confession he'd screamed, falling into pieces the moment the words left his mouth.

I loved him first.

He had. Bucky Barnes had loved him first. And Steve had lost Bucky first. Now here she was, a watery wine to replace the rich whiskey of that love. But she'd do the best she could at saving Steve. She owed that much to them both.

The tavern was a burnt out shell of a building, a husk destroyed by fire and war. The rubble shifted treacherously under her heels as Peggy peered inside, stepping over a chunk of wood that may have been a door at some point. The walls still smelled like smoke, the tables overturned and riddled with bullets. It was a poignant place to mourn, in the least.

She walked carefully over brittle boards, surrounded by degradation and death as she looked for Steve. The last time she'd come looking for Steve here, he'd been in the very back room, sitting with only Barnes. An entire bar full of people dying to talk to him and befriend him and thank him and he
had secluded himself to the back, just the two of them.

That was the first day she'd realized Bucky was in love with Steve.

It was in the same back room that Peggy finally found Steve again. This time he didn't turn around perfectly in sync with the rough man beside him. He didn't even hear her at first; if she'd been an enemy with a gun he'd be dead. It was the first sign of how far gone he had to be...the best soldier in the world got snuck up on by a woman in heels walking through rubble and not bothering to be the slightest bit quiet.

But Steve did eventually hear her, turning around in his seat. Her breath caught at the look on his face - those confident beautiful blue eyes were swollen and teary, his bottom lip trembling slightly. He looked so positively miserable her heart ached in her chest. He only looked at her for a brief moment before turning his head back down, staring at the table.

Peggy stepped forward, walking carefully as she neared the place of Steve's vigil. He sniffed, leaning forward to grab a bottle of alcohol from the center of the table. It was mostly empty.

"Doctor Erskine said that...the serum wouldn't just affect my muscles. It would affect my cells." Steve's voice sounded like he'd been crying for days. The past two at least. He poured himself a drink as he spoke, filling up the bottom of a glass she had a feeling had already been filled quite a few times. "Create a...protective system, of regeneration and healing. Which means, um..."

He paused and Peggy called upon every ounce of strength she had. Bucky wouldn't break down crying right now, would he? Somebody had to be strong for Steve. The task had fallen to her - quite literally - and she couldn't fail that ghost now.

She managed to keep her tears at bay as Steve finally spoke again, his voice sounding wretchedly, terribly broken.

"I can't get drunk." Steve stared at the glass, eyes watering and so positively heartbreaking. Then he turned his head a little, not quite looking at her as the sorrow in his voice tinged with a deadened version of interest that didn't sound like interest at all. "Did you know that?"

Pity wasn't something in Peggy's usual repertoire of emotions, but she felt so extremely sorry for Steve right now she couldn't even begin to express her sympathies. Of all the times to get drunk, now would be that, and he didn't even have that option of escape.

Somehow, she kept her voice professional as she picked up a fallen chair, perching it by Steve and sitting down to face him.

"Your metabolism burns four times faster than the average person. He thought it could be one of the side effects." Now that she could properly see his face, Peggy took a moment to look at him. His eyes cut away, a watery intake of breath as he stared through the table. She'd never imagined seeing Steve this...broken. Hurting. Guilty.

She gave him a few moments of silence before she decided there was no point talking around it anymore. Barnes was dead and Steve was in so much pain he'd lost every ounce of sunshine he used to tote around and throw at people. Peggy leaned forward, attempting to catch those teary blue eyes so he could see the sincerity she tried to portray through her voice.

"It wasn't your fault," Peggy promised, her mouth tight with sympathy. Steve deflated, brightness downcast.

"Did you read the report?" He said tiredly, like it was an answer instead of a question.
"Yes." Howard had been the one to get her the file. Apparently Steve had to write it all down because every time he tried to debrief they had to stop because he kept breaking down in tears. That he had been there, clinging to the train, watching Bucky fall...she couldn't imagine a worse way to watch someone die.

Steve gave a little of course nod at her admission, huffing a breath and still not looking at her.

"Well, then you know that's not true," Steve managed, the self-deprecating tone about a thousand times worse than the tears in his eyes.

"You did everything you could," Peggy told him, not letting his words echo for a single second before she cut them off. It wasn't Steve's fault. Not an ounce of it was.

Even if Bucky had chosen to jump - which he hadn't, but he would have if it meant saving Steve's life. Even then, it wouldn't be Steve's fault. Because it wasn't Steve's choice, it was Bucky's.

And Bucky was in love with him.

Peggy watched Steve with careful eyes, calculating. There was so much pain there. So much history, years and years of an undying friendship and an unbreakable bond.

This was the moment she had to decide.

A man with a secret big enough to shake the world, keeping it hidden dark and safely away until the moment came that he gave it all up to save that life he loved more than he ever should have. It was a heartbreaking love story, one she'd admittedly spent some time crying over. On Steve's behalf for losing the incredible man that was his best friend and on Bucky's behalf for never getting the chance to tell Steve he loved him.

And on her behalf, because the whole thing was too heavy for her shoulders. This may be the biggest choice she'd ever made. And if she married Steve, it could stand to be the biggest choice of her lifetime. If she was going to tell Steve, she had to tell him now. And if she kept that from him, sealed her lips in silence...that silence would have to be permanent. Every time Steve mentioned Bucky in years ahead, she'd have to keep quiet and take this pit in her stomach all over again.

She'd be haunted by this secret for the rest of her life. Of knowing she had the responsibility to share with Steve the most crucial part of his best friend, to help Steve understand why Bucky had to give Steve his life, his everything. If she didn't, she'd be lying to Steve forever.

But she'd made a promise.

She'd made a promise to a man that had trusted her with everything, his entire life and future and happiness. She'd made a promise to a man who had died for that promise. She couldn't break it now.

She'd keep quiet for Bucky. It was the last thing she could do for him - besides take care of Steve - and of course she'd do it. Keeping this promise was the only thing she could give left to his memory and it was her duty - her honor - to let Bucky's secret die with her.

"Did you believe in your friend?" Peggy leaned forward, her words full of intent and focus. Steve looked to her, looked directly at her for the first time tonight. His eyes were redder than she'd thought. He just looked at her, the words echoing in between them. Did you believe in your friend? It didn't need an answer. They both knew it in their cores.

"Did you respect him?" Peggy pressed, her sincerity unmistakable. Steve looked away again, but she was fairly sure he might be listening to her. Or at least thinking of how much he believed in Bucky,
how much he respected him. The proud way he said Sergeant Barnes, knowing that was something Bucky had earned all for himself, long before Steve was anything more than a little artist from Brooklyn.

"Then stop blaming yourself." It wasn't Steve's fault. Steve hadn't done a single thing wrong. His best friend had fallen for him and that wasn't Steve's fault. She may not be able to start her next sentence with because he was in love with you Steve, but she could at least still do honor to the memory of that love. "...and allow Barnes the dignity of his choice."

I LOVED HIM FIRST! I loved him first. You don't understand...he's my entire world.

She could still see the look on his face, hear the passion in his voice...

"He damn well must have thought you were worth it," Peggy finished. She hoped that if there was an after life, Bucky would be looking down on this moment and understand. That he would know she was doing the best she could.

She'd keep his secret forever, but Steve still needed to feel how much Bucky had loved him right now. Bucky had absolutely thought Steve was worth it. She would know. The only one who really knew, and Steve had no idea. For all he knew, she'd never spoken to Bucky at all.

It might as well be that way now, because Barnes was dead and Steve was practically dead too. The sun in his eyes was gone, the hope in his chest that made this war something to believe in.

"I'm going after Schmidt," Steve finally said. There was a movie playing in his eyes that Peggy wished she could see, only it didn't belong to her. And there was a bitter revenge in his voice that didn't - shouldn't - belong to Steve.

"I'm not going to stop 'til all of Hydra is dead, or captured." He tacked on the captured a bit like an after thought. It was a promise of the darkest kind, a promise of death and revenge and blood spilt in Bucky's name. This wasn't about America anymore. This was about avenging Bucky.

But it didn't matter, because this was still Steve. Even the broken Bucky-less version of Steve was the best man she'd ever known. When the end came down to it, he'd still do the right thing. Even if he only chose the right thing for Bucky, too.

And Peggy made - another - promise of her own. Two boys written across the stars and two promises she'd never break.

And she meant it in as many ways as she could, finally accepting what she had to do now. This was the closest she'd ever come to stepping into Bucky Barnes's shoes and accepting his responsibilities as her own.

"You won't be alone."

~*~*~*~

February 28, 1945

Snow, and red.

The same nightmare, the same red-stained snow.
A nightmare he'd had before.

Except this time it wasn't some curly blonde-headed kid who was bleeding out. It wasn't a conglomeration of black wasps heaped over each other, riddled with machine gun bullets. It wasn't even the minefield of deaths he was responsible for.

It was him.

Everything was so clear it didn't feel real. Watching through a very cold, very detached microscope of his own life. Holy shit, he was fucking cold.

There was a lot of red.

He could still see the blue of his coat, but he couldn't quite figure out where the red was coming from.

Or why the fuck Heaven looked a hell of a lot like the bottom of a snowy ravine.

...oh. Duh. He'd landed himself in Hell. Of course he hadn't made it to Heaven.

Funny, the only ping of sadness he could feel was that now he wasn't going to see Steve again. God, Steve. He better have crawled the fuck back into that train and shot Armin Zola in the face.

Well, no. Steve wouldn't do that. Bucky would, but that was why he was here in Hell, wasn't it?

He was really fucking cold, and he couldn't figure out where all the red was coming from. The sky and the snowflakes were really clear, but whenever he tried to lift his head to focus on the blood in his peripherals, his head filled with sand and pounding and basically he wasn't going to be lifting his head anytime soon.

Steve had told him once that glitter was tiny pieces of glass. The snow looked like glitter but maybe since this was Hell it really was little pieces of glass raining down on him.

Why was he so much colder than the snow? Oh. He was wet. Being wet in the freezing cold was not a good idea at all.

That was weird...he could remember a splash, maybe he'd landed in the river at the bottom of the ravine. Maybe Hell started off wherever you died. And then you laid there in your own personal doom, dead and looking up at snowflakes that had stopped looking pretty the first time Steve had almost gotten frostbite.

They still looked gorgeous in Steve's blond hair, though.

Steve.

It was really cold.

~*~*~*~

February 29, 1945
It was dark when his eyes blinked back open again. He kept drifting in and out of consciousness, but it didn't feel anything like sleep. Which he supposed made sense, because you weren't supposed to be able to get any rest in Hell. He'd read that somewhere. Or maybe Steve had told him.

Steve had better be okay.

It was a shame he couldn't be a ghost because if he could chose any way to spend eternity, it'd be haunting Steve.

Because he was a selfish bastard that simply could not let Steve go and would rather Steve live with a ghost chasing him down than have Steve be in peace.

There was no way to tell how much time had passed. Or if there even was time in Hell. Bucky wondered if he was going to lay here in the cold for eternity, surrounded with blood.

Was Steve okay?

He'd be pretty upset. Bucky wasn't stupid enough to pretend he wouldn't be. But the Howling Commandos would take care of his boy. And Peggy would take care of him. She better fucking take care of him.

The world kind of spun and then everything shut down black again.

When his eyes blinked open for the sixth time since the first time, he heard a noise. A weird, groaning and crunching noise. Like wheels on snow. Maybe Hell wasn't just lying here forever after all.

Then there were footsteps. God, people walked so loudly, even in Hell. Didn't that drive them insane? To hear themselves everywhere they walked? How did the loud, auditory reminder of their existence not make them want to scream?

A fluffy hat swam into focus, then a face underneath a fluffy hat. An entire torso, looking down at him. Bucky tried to lift his head. It still didn't want to lift. He just blinked. The guy looked kind of startled when he blinked. Maybe he'd expected Bucky to lie silent in his death.

Maybe none of the other guys that ended up in Hell blinked. Bucky didn't know. It was his first time. Well, kind of. His first time officially. There'd been lots of times he'd felt in Hell before. And he was entirely 110% not surprised it was made of ice instead of fire. He'd always figured it would be.

The fluffy hat-guy turned to look at something else, firing off a command in a language that Bucky didn't understand. Then there were hands on his shoulders, lifting him up an inch or two.

Panic shot through his veins and Bucky tried to scream but his body still wasn't connecting with his brain. His mouth didn't open, vocal chords didn't budge. Strange people's hands were on him when he couldn't move and couldn't scream there was no version of this that ended well.

A rough hand cuffed the back of his jacket at the base of his neck, the back of gloved fingers pressed up against the top knob of his spine. If those fingers turned around and pressed they could break his spinal cord connection to his brain. It was terrifyingly vulnerable and more than anything Bucky wanted to scream, wanted to scratch and claw and fight his way out of here. Break bones with his knuckles and just run and run but he couldn't move.

A rough hand cuffed the back of his jacket at the base of his neck, the back of gloved fingers pressed up against the top knob of his spine. If those fingers turned around and pressed they could break his spinal cord connection to his brain. It was terrifyingly vulnerable and more than anything Bucky wanted to scream, wanted to scratch and claw and fight his way out of here. Break bones with his knuckles and just run and run but he couldn't move.

The hand on his jacket lifted him a bit higher, dragging him backwards with a rough tug. The pull on his jacket lifted it an inch above his waistline, his undershirt coming with it. Bitter ice and terrible
burning cold flayed his skin, an inch of his skin at the bottom of his back. Like it was getting peeled off from the cold and dragging.

The arm pulling him - fuck, where were they taking him and why the fuck couldn't he move - suddenly tugged him faster with a jerk and Bucky's head tipped forward and that's when he finally sourced the blood.

He was missing an arm.

His left arm, and actually just the bottom half of it, specifically. It was leaving behind a spotted red trail of blood as they dragged him and if he had control of his body he'd be thrashing and screaming and freaking the fuck out right now.

But he couldn't, so he just stared.

Why the fuck would they sever his limbs when he was dead? It was cut off just above the elbow. God, that was scary to look at.

For the first time since he'd fallen off the train, Bucky was a little glad he was dead. He wasn't sure he could handle losing an arm when he was alive.

That was his last thought before everything went black again.

* 

When he woke up, he was on a metal table. Now this part, Bucky was very familiar with.

*This* was Hell.

* 

He realized he wasn't actually dead about twelve hours later.

Bucky had been disoriented as hell when he woke up strapped down to a metal table. He remembered getting dragged through the snow, the bloody trail of his arm. Passing out, probably from shock or pain or both. Something about the back of a moving vehicle, lots of shouting with words he couldn't understand. Then waking up in here, under harsh industrial lights.

Blaring bright up above him, whiter than the nice gold lights he was used to. After a few dozen blinks they calmed down from the glare and kind of drifted into the background and he realized it actually wasn't bright in here at all. Here was a room with no windows, longer than it was wide, bigger than the last lab he'd been in. That was all he could tell from looking because his head still wasn't quite cooperating with him.

He could twitch the fingers of his right hand and it felt like he could twitch the fingers of his left too, but he knew that wasn't possible because he didn't have a left hand anymore.

So much for ever being able to snipe again. Although, really, was that the worst thing he'd lose without a left hand? He must lead a very miserable lonely life if that's the biggest change being one-handed was going to do for him.

He'd only just managed to settle the lights from their harsh glare when suddenly the ceiling was
moving, everything was moving. The table he was on apparently had wheels and he was getting
rolled and this was not fun at all. Especially since he still couldn't tell where they were taking him.
And he still couldn't do anything about it.

The smell hit him first. Fire and smoke and death are three scents that have a very unique property
when they're combined, and you don't ever forget that smell. It hit him just before he felt the warmth
at his toes.

He'd heard some rumors about some pretty awful things the Nazis were doing to Jews in their creepy
camps. He had no idea how much of it was true, but if they cremated him right now and blew his
ashes in the air as a black dust to settle over the snow...he'd come back from whatever next ring of
Hell they'd sent him to and kick all of their asses.

It looked a little like a casket, or maybe a really large pizza oven like the one in that place on the
corner two blocks down from his and Steve's apartment.

He wondered if Steve was missing him. Bucky sure could use a knight with shining shield to come
to his rescue right now. But no matter what Steve did for the rest of his life, he'd already totaled up so
much good and wonderful that he'd be sent to Heaven, hands down.

Bucky wasn't ever going to see him again and that thought hurt enough that he decided he didn't care
he was being put into an oven.

Turns out it wasn't an oven, it was a defroster. He'd been frozen stiff, which kind of made sense
since he'd died falling into a frozen river. The cold tingled and dripped away from his fingers and
legs and torso, drying out his icy stiff clothes and making his hair all damp against his forehead.

His hair had looked really nice before he fell off the train. What a shame.

They pulled him back out of the oven/defroster before he'd even began to feel warm. But he told his
brain to lift his foot experimentally and it rose an inch off the table.

That's when the shouting had started and the leather straps had made their appearance. Bounding
down his ankles, legs, torso, wrist, arm.

They'd kept him strapped to the metal table for a while, lots of people in coats and lots of people in
fatigues coming in and out of sight. There seemed to be some confusion as to what to do with him,
although they couldn't have been
confused because he was hooked up to unknown fluids and
currently tied to a table, so.

He was also tied down with the exact same leather strap pattern he'd been tied down with in Zola's
lab.

Which would make sense, if he was dead and this was Hell. The worst Hell was what you already
knew, right?

But then an English guy came in, speaking in hushed tones to another soldier. Up until that point
there had been a splattering of languages he hadn't recognized. Now that there were comprehensible
words being spoken, of course he listened in.

"How is he even alive?" came the English voice. Bucky would have cocked his head in confusion if
he could move. He could open his mouth a few inches and wiggle his fingers now, but the defrosting
machine they'd put him in hadn't done as much as he'd hoped.

Of course it wasn't as simple as just being frozen. There was a possibility he was in shock, but again,
that wouldn't make all that much sense in Hell.

Except that people in Hell weren't alive, and that guy had just said Bucky was. Alive, that is.

"The river at the bottom of the ravine took some of the fall, the serum took the rest."

River. Ravine. Fall. Serum. The river part made sense, because he could remember hitting water and waking up soaking and freezing on a river bank in the snow. The ravine and the fall part were still quite clear and fresh in his memory. You tended to remember your death.

But the serum thing had him tripping up. The only time he'd heard that word was in context to Steve's supersoldier experiment. So how could a serum "take part of the fall?"

"When the hell did this guy get Zola's serum?"

"That's Bucky Barnes. Hydra got him about a year ago, then lost him after the operations. Until now."

"Fuck, brilliant move on the doctor's part. Shooting up Captain America's sidekick."

Okay, Bucky was not Steve's sidekick, good god.

But shooting up? Operations? Zola's serum? Arnin Zola had a fucking serum?

And suddenly, just like that, it dawned on him.

That thought that he'd been avoiding since Steve had rescued him the first time...how he was stronger, faster, healed better than he should. Could crush bones with his fist, split skulls with a pistol whip. How he could nearly keep up with Steve when they ran. How his burnt up hands had healed entirely inside of weeks.

He'd known something was wrong since day one. He'd known in the deepest part of his head that they'd done something to him. He'd just been way too afraid to even consider what.

A serum. They'd shot him up with some bastardized version of the same stuff that was running through Steve's veins.

He remembered needles - lots of needles - from his time on Zola's table last November. They'd been putting more in him than drugs, they'd been fucking with his cells. Trying to turn him into another Steve.

He suddenly had the overwhelming urge to puke.

Bucky blinked up at the ceiling, not even hearing the next part of the conversation because he was a fucking experiment. He had some terrifying amped up drug pumping through his veins. Into his muscles, into his brain. It wasn't something he could ever scrub out, even if he peeled off his own skin.

But somehow, that wasn't the worst part.

He was an experiment and he had poison in his veins, but he was alive.

He'd survived the fall.

He'd survived the fall.
Bucky did puke then.

* 

His body was kind of working now.

The parts of it he had left, anyways.

They'd hosed him down and shoved him - sopping wet - onto another table, strapping down his arm and legs and chest again. He was too weak to try to escape during the transfer, and he was still in enough shock from everything to keep him docile. Or, well, basically a rag doll.

He'd be ashamed of it later, the one chance he had to break free of the bastards and he blew it because he couldn't handle his damn brain enough to pull himself out of shock.

He was entirely detached and numb. There were facts floating in front of him in black and white, words and ideas that he should be embracing and accepting and running with. He stared at the facts in front of his eyes, unmoving and unable to think. There were leather straps holding him down again but he had too much to worry about to even freak out about it yet.

There was too much going on and he might as well be dead for how he was handling it. Shock, unable to process or accept any of the things that were supposed to be true.

He only had one arm.

One arm and one stub, cut off above the elbow. He was alive. He was an experiment, he had poison in his body that was keeping him alive.

So they strapped him back down and they sewed up the bottom part of his stub, not giving him the slightest bit of anesthetic as the needle cut jaggedly through hypersensitive nerve endings. He was grateful though, because the stitched up stump was a hell of a lot better than a ripped-off bloody one with jagged edges and torn red flesh hanging out.

With the same detached, numbed brain he finally figured out where all the confusion amongst his captors was coming from, too.

"He's Zola's project, why are we keeping him here?" another English guy had asked, in the middle of a lab-coated-guy stitching his arm up.

See Zola had his ass captured, and he was kind of the lead torturer and coordinator for these things. Now that Zola wasn't here anymore, nobody could really figure out what they were supposed to do with Bucky. They just had to keep him alive until Zola got back, apparently.

Bucky was hoping more and more every hour that Steve had shot Zola in the face on that train.

He had no idea how much time passed before he overheard the next conversation, two more guys passing by the metal table like Bucky may as well have been a wall ornament.

"I heard they're bringing Reinhardt in to supervise until Zola gets here."

"That bastard's crazy. I thought he only does torture and unique artifact retrieval, though. Not babysitting gigs for Zola's leftover time bombs."

"Well, maybe they're handling this like a unique artifact retrieval. Although my bet's on the torture."

Bucky stared up at the ceiling and blinked and internally cursed everything he could think of in every
language he could think to curse in. Which was not nearly as much as he'd like.

They were going to torture him.

He was alive and he was missing an arm and he had a serum like Steve and his body still wasn't responding to his brain all the way and he was fucking freezing cold and he was lying here on a table in the middle of god knows where and he was going to be tortured again soon.

Everything was kind of floating over him right now, like those snowflakes when he'd first woken up. Drifting down, never seeming to hit his face. He was just suspended, disbelieving. None of it could be real.

The idea of dying and being sent to Hell was much more enticing now.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is intense apologies ahead of time.
and a warm thank you to everyone who is reading this xx
Chapter Notes

Warnings: for graphic depictions of torture, drowning, suicide, and brief mentions of possible rape (wow yeah sorry)

Songs: Skinny Love by Birdy
9 Crimes by Damien Rice

AND I also made an 8tracks for the songs for the first part of the fic here, hope you guys enjoy.

Disclaimer: so I've been studying the MCU timeline and wow there is a lot of confusion and vagueness. Because while Bucky's death date is in 1944, Steve's is in 1945? In the movie they capture Zola and interrogate him, then leave immediately to attack Schmidt with the information. Not really sure how an entire year could pass during that interrogation. So I'm changing Bucky's death date to 1945 and I know that's a year off but I seriously just have issues with Marvel's continuity errors because they make negative amounts of sense. xx

Important: if you start to read the first paragraph under the ~*~*~ and are suddenly extremely confused, I promise I will make a whole thing explaining how I've been writing that way all along and I've been dropping hints since the beginning of this fic so just hang in there with me.

ANYWAYS I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
On March 1st, the allied forces carried out a meeting (in which everyone was very concerned about the very silent and serious Captain Rogers) to determine the next attack on Hydra forces. Johann Schmidt was declared to be in the last Hydra base in the Alps. At Captain Rogers' unnerving and reckless suggestion, an idea was formulated to "knock on the front door" of the Hydra facility. A plan commenced, most of which took the rest of that day to plan.

On March 2nd, the allied troops led a caravan across Europe to the Alps. It would take them until March 4th to reach the facility. In those two days on the road, Captain Rogers was again, unnervingly, concerningly quiet.

In those same two days, a soldier finally started to grasp his presence on a cold metal table.

~*~*~*~

March 2, 1945

Of one thing, Steve had always been sure. Just one thing that had never once in his mind been questioned, never once been revoked or altered: It is impossible to be best friends with Bucky Barnes and not be in love with him.

There'd been no huge epiphany, no moment where Steve ran the words I'm in love with my best friend through his head. It'd just...always been there. Since the moment Steve knew what love was, he knew that was how he felt about Bucky. Just never told him, never said the words out loud.

But this was Bucky Barnes - gorgeous and slick with icy blue eyes over a black suit, pouty exotic mouth and a quirked eyebrow under a crooked hat, beautiful jaw and kissable chin and a smile that lit up nations and worlds alike.

Steve wasn't blind.

Obviously though, he didn't love Bucky for his looks. The quirky advice and the happy teasing, the gentle hands on Steve's broken and bruised skin. The warm heart and beautiful principles, the way he was afraid of nothing. He was devoted and kind and rough around the edges in the best way.

Bucky Barnes was oozing life, the down to earth, soot-covered kind of raw, real, human life. All surrounded by a bright, beautiful light that Steve'd always been drawn to like a moth.

Their whole lives. From the trouble-magnet kid to the Brooklyn-rough teen to the respected Sergeant at his side. At first it was childhood affection: Bucky was the brother, best friend, hero, and single happiest memory of Steve's younger years. But the moment that Steve found out the world was filled with different kinds of love, he'd instantly known that what he'd felt for Bucky was the deepest of those kinds.

He'd actually asked his mother if he was allowed to marry Bucky, after she'd told him that marriage meant "choosing to spend the rest of your life with someone because you love them more than everything." When he'd declared that's how he felt about Bucky, Sarah had laughed goodnaturedly, ruffling Steve's hair and telling him that's a different kind of love, sweetheart.

Somehow, Steve didn't think it was.

When he hit puberty, Bucky talked enough that Steve already figured the ideas that were gonna start forming in his head. About all sorts of pretty dames, Bucky told him with a wink. And yes, there were plenty of girls Steve found pretty. But none of them smiled like Bucky did, none of them had
eyes as light and crystalized. None of them threw their arm around Steve's skinny shoulders and made him feel like he was more than a stubborn sickly teen.

Bucky was the ultimate. He always had been and honestly, Steve wasn't the slightest bit surprised the first time he looked over at Bucky and realized he wanted to kiss that smiling mouth until they were so out of breath they couldn't kiss anymore.

In the same moment he realized that, Steve realized what it'd mean. Boys weren't supposed to love other fellas like that. And it wasn't that Steve didn't like dames - he did, he really did - they just didn't make his heart pound, his lips tingle and his hands itch to reach out and touch. Bucky did, and that wasn't right.

So the first time he got the urge to kiss Bucky, he decided it had to be the last time too. He was entirely positive he'd never ever fall outta love with Buck; he'd shove it to the side so it was never a problem.

There was nothing he could do about it. Just like his asthma. Two brain defects, no cure. Avoid running too fast for the asthma, don't let his brain bend that direction for Bucky. It was simple, really.

And Steve didn't need anything "more than friends." He was entirely, completely happy with Bucky at his side. So maybe he'd have to be careful about staring too long, about letting Bucky see the sketches of him. Just in case you could see how much Steve loved him (too much) in the fine pencil lines.

By the time they moved in together, he was so used to it he didn't worry anymore. He didn't pine after Bucky because Steve had him. So they didn't kiss or hold each other, fine. Steve wasn't exactly out kissing and holding many people now, was he?

(It was actually one reason Steve ended up being so terrible with dames. He'd spent his entire life shutting down urges to kiss, flirt. They weren't an option; he decided so early on not to let himself think about them. Things like that were off the table for him, not a consideration.)

Because as much as he loved Bucky, Steve knew Bucky wouldn't ever feel that way about a fella and that was fine, Bucky liked girls. So did Steve, so it could work out eventually one day. If he ever found a girl that could hold a candle to his resplendent best friend.

He'd never even thought to tell Bucky he loved him because, well, why would he?

Being in love with Bucky Barnes was just part of his being, made him who he was. Steve'd never hated himself for it either; something was wrong with him, yes, but he didn't hate himself for his asthma, why would he hate himself for this? He actually had to remind himself not to list likes both fellas and dames on his medical history record.

That is, until he'd realized it wasn't a disease. He'd been shoved in a machine, pumped full of a serum that would fix him. And when the serum hadn't cured the way he felt about Bucky, Steve figured maybe it wasn't a disease after all. It was still part of him, but it wasn't a defect. If it was, it would have either disappeared or turned Steve evil. Neither happened.

And nothing changed. Why would it? Steve spent his entire life in love with Bucky Barnes, so what? He loved Bucky and the sky was blue and snow was cold as hell. There was nothing to think about, nothing to confess.

Until now that Bucky was dead. And Steve couldn't help but wonder if maybe he should've confessed.
It was too late now, though. Steve could whisper I love you to Bucky's grave when they won this war. (The empty grave. They'd hand Steve the folded flag, wouldn't they?)

He knew he'd visit that grave (every day), if he survived this. If he made it out alive on the other side. Part of him didn't think he would. Part of him didn't think he'd last past this next battle.

Part of him didn't want to.

That was the worst part of him and Steve stared with dead eyes in a foggy mirror and wondered when he'd turned into the coward that couldn't keep breathing without Bucky at his side.

Steve grabbed his bag and his leather jacket and headed out for the jeep. They told him he wasn't allowed to ride his motorcycle all the way there. It was cold, they said. You're reckless and volatile when you're alone, they didn't say. He heard it anyways.

The back of the jeep was cramped but at least they'd put him with the Commandos. Probably because they figured the HC were the only ones who could sedate him again if he freaked.

He didn't hate them for sedating him. He hated that they felt they had to. He hated that they didn't trust him with himself. Or worse, they didn't trust him with their lives anymore. Steve couldn't tell if they were afraid of him now but if they were, they were doing a damn swell job of hiding it. Of all of it though, he hated himself the most for pushing them to that, for losing control, for needing them to stop him with more drugs in his system.

The blood in his veins was just a Petri dish now. Pump him full of serum here, pump him full of sedative there. The only pure, real Steve Rogers blood left in this world was probably staining some backalley in Brooklyn.

It should've been him. Steve should've been the one that fell. If he could make a deal with the devil and trade their places, he would. It should be Bucky sitting with his boys, laughing and cheering everyone up for the final takedown of Johann Schmidt.

Steve was probably never going to laugh again.

"You alright Cap?" Falsworth asked, pulling his hat over smoothed back hair.

"Ready to fight," Steve responded, pretending it was a sufficient answer and not bothering to attempt a smile. He didn't have to lie to them. They knew how torn up he was. They knew most everything.

The battle plan was solid. It was risky and dangerous and Steve wouldn't have it any other way. They were avenging Bucky, this couldn't be a simple shoot-em-up go round. It had to be near impossible, like Bucky was.

Steve stared out the window of the bumping, moving jeep and decided he knew why Bucky had never told him his reason for being over here - his reason for fighting - was Steve.

There was something undeniably dark about fighting a war and killing people and destroying human lives for a single person instead of your country.

And now, Steve would know.

He doubted Bucky would be proud of him.

~*~*~
He was still cold all the time because wherever the hell they were apparently didn't know about fire or anything resembling warmth.

Not to mention that metal holds cold temperatures and laying for hours and hours and hours on a freezing slab of it didn't exactly do anything to warm you up.

"If you let me out I'll teach you how to make a fire," Bucky offered to the random foreigner clearing the air from needles. The white lab coat and creepy face mask didn't so much as look his way. Only like three people understood English here, and even they ignored him as though he were just a dog barking away in some corner.

Another lab coat walked over to the first one. He waved his hand in Bucky's general direction, not looking his way as he fired off rapid speak in more words Bucky couldn't understand.

"Does anybody have a translator?" He asked as he flopped his head to the left in exasperation. He quickly looked back though, because he was being very careful to avoid even thinking about the left side of his body.

It was slow going and hard work but he was making his way through all the things he was supposed to be processing. Arm was a no go, didn't even think about it. The impending torture was also in the don't think about box. So was the serum thing.

Actually, everything was in the don't-think-about box besides the realization that he was alive. He was working on that one, accepting it and trying to decide how much it was going to affect his future.

Hopefully, not a lot. When he got out of here, he'd apologize profusely to Steve for scaring him and all the Howling Commandos would go singing in some bar to celebrate because Bucky was actually alive. He was in the same dimension, on the same planet as Steve Rogers. Nothing could make him more hopeful.

He was alive, he was alive and he could deal with everything else in stages. He wasn't back to full strength yet - his body had still dropped deadly distances into a river and washed up on shore to be found a day later - but he could talk and he could wiggle the parts of him that weren't strapped down with leather.

The next step was just to wait until his opportunity; there had to be a point when he'd get through or around the leather straps. He knew how to break the bones in his hand to fold it through those restraints - he'd need his feet to walk though, so he couldn't break those.

As for the rest of the straps, they had to undo them eventually, right? Of course right. Something always had to change. Bucky hummed to himself and waited and formulated a plan.

The change came a lot sooner than he'd been anticipating. It couldn't have been more than a day since his abduction before three soldiers came to his table, looking anywhere but his face.

One of the soldiers began to undo the leather strap across his chest and Bucky's heart started to pound. This was it. If he hurried he might even make Steve's next mission.

Phwip phwip phwip the leather pulled through the loops holding it down. One down. Two to go. Then he'd be that much closer to his freedom. Bucky stared up at the ceiling with eyes hopefully convincingly dead and waited.

The next strap across his lower chest fell to the ground. The hands undoing his straps moved to the top button of his coat, tilting it sideways to--
Bucky's brain caught up and his eyes went wide with panic.

"Leave me alone!" Bucky squirmed, rocking his body back and forth. He still had his arm and hips and feet strapped down, but he could move around enough to make undressing him impossible.

One black suited soldier wrestled his shoulder down, rough hand jarring his left arm into the table. Bucky screamed as the stub of his arm slammed into the table, a hot and heavy rush of pain flooding into his senses and making him nearly go blind with pain.

The hands started up again on his buttons. How dare they strip him. Disgust caved, gave way to a dark pit of rage bubbling in his stomach. Bucky grit his teeth, closing his eyes for a millisecond to shove all the hurt away. He'd had worse.

"Get the fuck away from me," he spit, trying to knock his left shoulder up out of the soldier's grasp. The arm slammed back down again and Bucky growled instead of screaming. He couldn't have them undressing him. He was already freezing, he needed his jacket, and he would really like to not be naked for his torturers. This was not how the last time had gone.

And there was something very important inside his left jacket pocket, he couldn't risk losing that to these bastards.

The gloved fingers started up on his coat again and Bucky lost it. He bucked and squirmed and shouted and screamed and hissed and the hands kept undoing the buttons of his coat.

The last person to undo those buttons for him was Steve, in that classroom right before one of Bucky's panic attacks. Fuck, if Steve could see him now. Steve would come rushing in here like a fucking hurricane, a bullet for every person in between him and Bucky. He'd kill every single one of them and then he'd be hovering over Bucky's body, worry all over his face as steady hands helped Bucky off the table again.

The last button popped out of place and a rush of cold air pushed into the gap between the folds. The soldier ripped his coat open, tearing it at the seam of the shoulder. Bucky snapped his teeth at the hands holding down his shoulder but the distance was too far. Fucking bastards.

He'd kill them. He'd kill every one of them, shove their own filthy hands down their throats. The gloves pushed his jacket over his freed shoulder, the material sliding over the sensitive skin at the messy sutures of his arm. He threw his head back and hollered in rage and pain, throwing himself upwards with a terrible yank to the arm that was still strapped down.

The move knocked one of the soldiers back and he brought his forehead down on another's temple, hearing something crack with the slamming force. The soldier screamed this terrible sound, lunging for Bucky's throat with his hands. The other two soldiers held him back, pulling him away from table and Bucky made quick work of breaking the bones in his hand, wincing and sliding it through the leather material and sitting up in one swift motion.

Everything was bright and swimming but pumping with hope and victory and the adrenaline rush of potential freedom. He didn't have the time to do his coat back up and he reached forward with both hands to undo the straps over his hips and legs, pausing in confusion as only one hand started on the leather strap.

Fuck. He didn't have another hand. That was going to make this a hell of a lot harder. He grit his teeth, pulling the leather away from the buckle with shivering fingers. Only one arm, Jesus that was
going to make getting out of here freakin’ nuts. He wasn't ready to grasp that whole arm concept yet.

Although right now, Bucky could get on board with the serum running through his veins. That sounded like something he could really appreciate right now.

He whipped the leather cuff off his hips, sliding down the table to make quick work of the ones over his ankles. He got his right foot free and was fumbling with his left foot when hostile hands suddenly grabbed his shoulders again.

"Fuck, no, you bastards!" Bucky swung out his right arm and hands caught his elbow before it could connect to anything solid, pulling it inverted and forcing his body in half with the movement. He shrieked as his elbow hyperextended, thrashing wildly now against the tears in his eyes.

There were too many hands, more than before, and they yanked Bucky's blue coat off his shoulders. One of the soldiers stepped back with it, pilfering through the pockets as the other six wrestled Bucky back down to the table. Someone's nose snapped at his swinging arm, shattered someone else's wrist, and delivered a hell of a lot of bruises.

They got him strapped back down within minutes. He was screaming out of spite now, out of anger and pain and disgusting rage that filled his vision with red and black shapes.

The soldier found Steve's drawing inside his left pocket and his homing device in the other. They smashed the homing device under their big clunky boots and they made him watch as they burn Steve's drawing. It was the one he kept against his heart, the one of him that Steve had drawn last December in the woods in France.

His head in Bucky's lap, infectious smile and focused hands as he drew and laughed and held Bucky tight against the cold of the darkness.

Bucky watched the paper curl with flames, hot red ashes dropping to the ground as the fire licked over the image of the man he used to be. They were going to burn that right out of him, weren't they?

He didn't cry because he couldn't bring himself to feel the loss. Sorrow wasn't something he had a grasp on right now. No, he was pissed. He was pissed and he was going to tear down this entire fucking place eventually.

No one tried removing the straps again to get off his undershirt. They just cut it open with scissors, sliced it to pieces until he was lying there bare chested in the cold. He spit on the guy holding the scissors and in turn he wasn't so careful as he cut the fabric from Bucky's torso.

Bleeding and bruised and pounding from pain all over, the cold wasn't even kind enough to numb him.

~*~*~

"Hey, Rogers. Gotta a question for ya," Dugan jogged over to where Steve was leaning against the jeep door, arms crossed. They’d hit something sharp and metal in the road, perforating a tire and forcing the whole caravan to stop.

That was the thing about war; regular dumb stuff would happen, like blowing a tire, and this big epic battle of taking down enemy forces was delayed ten minutes while they hooked up a spare.

It was stuff like this that made the war seen more real, and more ridiculous. Out there in the civilized world, people blew a tire and that was the biggest event of their month, the biggest worry. But in here with the lot of killers and fighters, a blown out tire is nothin', not when you're about to go blow
some people's heads off.

"Actually, I've got a question for you too." Steve responded, a bit of a delay. Dugan was looking at him guardedly and Steve pretended not to care.

"Well, I asked first, so...you heard anything about the team Carter's settin' up? It's all just rumors for now, but word is there may be some sort of recruitment eventually." Dugan leaned the underside of his forearm against the jeep and Steve looked off in the distance and wondered if Bucky was finally warm right now.

"Haven't heard anything." Steve kept his voice as interested as he could but he couldn't tell what he sounded like to people anymore.

Grief comes in stages and denial had to come round at one point. Just a seed of doubt and everything is forever altered.

"...But if I do, I'll let you know." Steve amended because he didn't want to offend Dugan. He still wasn't so sure he'd make it out of this alive. There was one thing though, that was keeping him from snipping that thread. "My question, now. After this thing's over, will you come on a mission with me?"

Steve glanced sideways to gage a reaction and Dugan just looked vaguely surprised by the question.

"What kind of mission, Captain?"

"To find Bucky." Steve answered simply. Dugan's face fell. There it was, the instantaneous he's gone out of his mind look that people kept giving him. He half considered just ending it there, but he might actually need Dugan's help for this.

"Before you think I'm crazy, I know he fell. I was there. But I think we at least owe it to him to find a body." Steve uncrossed his arms and Dugan's forehead smoothed out in relief and Steve was sick of lying but it was the only thing he could do left.

Sure, if Bucky was dead his body deserved a proper burial. But that's not what Steve had meant when he said find Bucky.

His soul was still telling him Bucky was alive and he had to do something about it. He'd search the ends of the earth until he found Bucky, dead or alive. He just felt pretty confident that if he searched now, it'd be alive.

"Sure, Cap'n." Dugan clapped him on the shoulder. Steve was going to hell for lying. "Soon as this mission's over, we'll go search that ravine."

"Soon as it's over," Steve repeated. They'd find him. Steve always found him.

~*~*~*~

No one told him when Reinhardt arrived but Bucky kind of figured it out based on the guys flooding his table with needles and knives and burning iron rods.

~*~*~*~

March 3, 1945

"What are you gonna do when you get back to London, Montie? Trading in all this fresh, open air
for that condensed city smog." Dugan shot Falsworth a grin from the driver's seat, not as easy as it used to be but some semblance of a bright side.

"Oh yeah, I really am gonna miss all the green hills and enemies," Falsworth responded with an eye roll. After a moment of pondering he shifted in his seat, turning to face the center of the jeep so all of the Commandos could see him. "Tell you what. When I get back to London I'm going to stay inside for weeks. Just lay in front of a fireplace, not budge an inch, and eat soup to my heart's content."

"Soup? That's the best you could come up with?" Jones snorted, shaking his head. Falsworth made a face that said he liked soup fine, thank you. The jeep fell silent for a couple hundred feet, then Dernier nudged Jones and fired something off in rapid French. Jones laughed, then translated for the rest of them.

"Jacques says when he gets back to France he's going to marry the baker's daughter, just so he'll have a lifetime supply of fresh bread and pastries to eat to his heart's content."

Everyone smiled; except Steve, who just kept looking out the window. A few glances went his way and the bright looks dimmed down a bit.

"I think I'm going to sign up for that new team Agent Carter's been forming," Morita offered, glancing between the rest of the boys and Steve. Their Captain still didn't respond.

"I've been thinkin' about that too, Jim," Dugan said, the words feeling a little inadequate to fill the silence. The beat lasted a moment too long to be comfortable, then he tilted his head and looked over again. "After that, you headed back to Fresno?"

Morita nodded and Jones snickered. Then he sobered up a bit, looking around the rest of them. "I'm going home too, after the war. And I'll find the best whiskey they make and drink until I don't remember a day of the past two years."

The words sunk in with a wave of uncomfortable silence that settled like a smothering blanket over the jeep. No one ever really talked about how much the war haunted them all. It was the inevitable, but they spent a lot of time pretending they were all untouchable. It wasn't so easy to pretend in the face of Jones's words though, so they all shut down and straightened back out in their seats.

After another few bumps down the dirt road, Falsworth sighed and stared out the window sadly. "I don't think any amount of whiskey will make you forget Dugan's ugly mug."

It took a few seconds for it to sink in for everyone, then surprised laughter bubbled up over the car.

"No matter where home is, we're all still meetin' up after the war, yeah?" Dugan reminded and they all nodded, Dernier and Morita glancing at the still silent Steve.

"And Rogers, you know I'm headed back to New York too if y--"

"I'm not going back to Brooklyn," Steve interrupted. The car passengers all turned and looked at him, most eyebrows arched in surprise. They'd heard enough stories about Brooklyn over the past year and a half to know how much Sarge and Cap loved it. Steve sighed and looked back out the window. "You're talking about going home and Brooklyn ain't home if Buck ain't there."

"Désolée, Cap," Dernier said softly, reaching over a hand to pat Steve's knee. Steve looked down at Dernier's hand, sighed again, and offered everyone a weak smile. Falsworth inputted too, turning around in his seat to see Rogers' face as he softened his expression, speaking as respectfully as he could.
"We know it's been hard since-

"Let's just focus on the mission," Steve interrupted again, too sharp on the corners. Falsworth's mouth snapped shut, his eyebrows knitting together as he turned back around in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. There wasn't anything they could do, apparently, Steve was just going to sulk.

A cold hand came up to pinch the bridge of his nose as Steve breathed out slow, trying to get his head on straight. This was his family he was barking at, they didn't deserve this.

"Sorry, sorry," Steve murmured sheepishly, feeling fairly awful for the sudden solemn quiet in the car. "It's just that-

"We know, Cap." Dugan said, shooting Steve a small forgiving smile. "It ain't been easy for any of us, and we didn't grow up with him."

"That's not an excuse." Steve huffed a breath, frustrated with himself now. He was overriding all their pain with his. Bucky would be disappointed. Hell, Bucky would probably check Steve's temperature, a big hand smacking to Steve's forehead exaggeratedly, pulling Steve close as he mimed a mother hen, clucking over Steve with not-quite-feigned worry for something so out of character. Steve wasn't the kind of person to be selfish in the face of other's pain. It was just...everything hurt now.

Steve needed to hurt people in return. Just not his comrades, not his team. People like Johann Schmidt, people like Arnim Zola. People who had taken Bucky from him. Those were the people that needed to feel pain, those were the people that Steve was going to slaughter.

In the meantime, someone had to have some semblance of pep for the team. With a tight breath that'd survived him through too many stages, too many times, Steve threw all of his emotions behind a barrier and shoved aside the urge to *scream* as he tipped his head and looked over his still-patiently-waiting teammates.

"...you know what? I can't wait to kick some Nazi ass."

"That's the Steve Rogers we know." Jones cheered, reaching over Dernier to clap Steve on the back. He gave them a smile that probably shone exactly as much as the one in all the propaganda posters, all but the pointing finger over the dancing monkey tights and everyone seemed just this side of satisfied enough Steve turned, looked back out the window. The expression fell the moment he did.

Apparently even his team needed him to be someone else for now. Steve was fine with pretending for their sake.

~*~*~*~

They dashed open the soles of his feet first.

Bucky had been expecting it; they did it last time. It was a strategic move as much as it was a torture method. Take out the bottoms of the feet and the ability to run away was significantly less. Because he'd been anticipating it, he closed his eyes just before the blade went in, steeling himself and grinding his teeth in advance against the pain.

He didn't scream. They didn't like that much, made more slashes to cross over the ones they'd just made. The sharp blade slid into his skin, splitting it and peeling it back just enough to expose cold air directly to the inner muscles. It was kind of like getting ice pumped directly into an open cut.
A low sound strained in the deepest part of his throat but it was too quiet for anyone to hear, just for Bucky to feel. He could do this. He wasn't going to break under them this time.

"Where is Captain Rogers?" The vaguely-English-speaking bastard spat at Bucky, holding up the knife dripping with Bucky's blood. Figures, they bring in somebody to talk to him now, after all this time that he'd been looking for some good conversation.

"With your mother," Bucky grit out, edges of his mouth curling up in a bitchy smile.

This time he only had a few seconds to prep, eyes catching the sharp glint of something large and metal being swung directly towards his leg. The hammer collided into his tibia and snapped it clean in half. Well, not clean. The hammer was wide enough that the point of collision shattered that segment of his bone into little shards, sticking into the reverse side of his skin.

The shout that came from his mouth was more pissed off than hurt. It was a low fucking blow to take a hammer to somebody's leg at the first question, like damn.

"Fuck," Bucky gasped, looking up at the dirty, cobwebbing ceiling. "I take it back. No way he'd sleep with somebody who raised their kid to have manners like that."

(Although, really, Steve wasn't the type to sleep with anybody's mother. Who would Steve sleep with? Agent Carter, obviously. But if he hadn't met her, what would his type be? Bucky knew Steve was still a virgin, knew he hadn't actually given anybody the time yet. He'd told Bucky about every single moment in his life that could have even led up to a first kiss, let alone been one. So of course Bucky knew Steve hadn't slept with anybody. The question was just who it'd be if he did.)

It actually wasn't his head that prepared himself for the next blow, it was instinct mixed with the lovely combination of a bastardized serum. The englishman's fist came swinging for his nose and his hypersensitive nerve endings picked up the movement just before his brain did, whipping his head to the side so his cheek and jaw would take the impact of the hardened knuckles.

Fire shot up the side of his face and before he could think to recover the fist landed on his cheekbone again. Bucky blinked back involuntary tears at the double punch. This guy was a total dick. He got a grip on himself and rolled his head across the metal table to look back up at the fuming englishguy.

"Where is Captain Rogers?" The guy fumed again, spit flying over Bucky's face on the "s's." Bucky blinked and squinched up his nose because that was the worst part about having his hands - shit, hand - tied down, he couldn't wipe DisgustoGermanEnglishGuy's spit sputtle from his cheek and nose.

"Currently planning your death, motherfucker." Bucky spit right back. The guy was still fuming, rage practically boiling out of his ears like those cartoons he used to take Steve to sometimes, back in the old days. He didn't strike out at Bucky again though; instead he just held up a hand, gesturing at one of the other standby's.

Somebody got him gloves and a knife, one that was considerably thinner and longer and looked a hell of a lot sharper, too.

Bucky couldn't hold back the pained sounds and muffled screams beneath clenched teeth as the knife dug in between the lines of each of his ribs, tracing over his bare skin with half an inch of blade carving outlines of every piece of Bucky's ribcage. It was almost like how Steve used to draw him, only Bucky had never been this skinny back then and Steve had never carved his body with a fucking butcher knife.
"Where is Captain Rogers?"

"Fuck off," Bucky responded, his vocal chords wrecked from all the sounds he'd been making in his throat. The knife cut its way deeper inside one of his rib lines, wiggling around and tilting to the side with a little sawing motion to cut out a triangle of his flesh. Bucky threw back his head and shouted, shaking all over from the pain.

"Where." The knife was turned around, blunt end of the handle shoving up hard against Bucky's ribcage, attempting to crack it. Bucky groaned and blinked back tears and tried to find some safe place to go in his head.

"Is." The English guy reeled back his hand and slammed it into the same spot again.

"Captain." A fourth slam, harder this time, and Bucky couldn't decide which he hated more, this guy or the way that he said Steve's name.

"Rogers." Fifth time was the charm and Bucky's rib snapped, breaking upwards and scraping against another rib as the world tipped sideways and his head wiped to the side, pain shooting up to electrocute his brain, wet slick red spilling out over his chest from the impact.

Vision was swimming black at the corners and it nearly took him with it but Bucky managed to suck in a panicked breath, grounding himself with the blue sky he knew had to be somewhere up there above the swimming red and gray and black and he just had to hold onto blue enough to speak again.

"C-crawl back to whatever hell you came from, scum," Bucky finally managed. The guy just glared and wiped the knife across Bucky's hipbone, using his body like a towel to clean his own blood off a torture weapon.

"I don't think you understand," the English guy started again in a terribly annoyingly calm voice as he ran his finger along the side of the blade. Bucky rolled his eyes, even just that small movement making him wince from the sparking hell.

"I understand j-just fine. You're not taking no for an answer or whatever th'hell excuse you have. And not to compare myself to a...a dame or nothin', but you're not the first guy I've seen with th-that problem. 'll tell you what, there's this scrap of a thing I knew that's torn apart bigg'r men for less. 'thing is, now his fists are faster than his tongue and he ain't so scrappy."

Not that Bucky spent any significant amount of time thinking about Steve's fists or his tongue. Christ. Maybe he should be.

He sent up an abortive prayer to no one in particular (Steve would scold him) to thank whatever power gave Bucky the most wonderful mental distraction from torture. Nothin' like Steve Rogers to get you through the rough patches. Even when he ain't there, apparently.

"Sergeant Barnes, I'm afraid you still don't understand. This time we're not just playing. This isn't for fun, this isn't even for science. This time it's going to really hurt because this time, we need something from you. You will talk. No more fun. If you don't give us what we want, you're not going to survive another day."

"I'll never tell you anything," Bucky promised breathily, light headed from blood loss. His ribs were still pooling blood everywhere and he could feel his heartbeat in every bruise the guy was making.

"You are an experiment, Sergeant Barnes. We can inflict a lot more pain to you than to normal people." The guy twirled his knife, pressing the tip lightly to the skin above Bucky's navel. "So
where are the allied forces hitting next?"

The tip of the knife broke the outer layer of skin. Bucky hissed but managed to keep his glare. With a smirk, the guy twirled the knife again, gouging and twisting a hole through Bucky's flesh. He closed his eyes and ground his teeth against each other.

"I'm. Never. Talking." Bucky grit out, bridges flashing like fire under his marrow.

"Where is Captain Rogers?" The knife flicked up to his sternum, drawing a deep line of red blood with it. A strangled sound made it out past Bucky's lips.

"Do what you want," Bucky spat. "You can't ever get me to talk. You can cut me and beat me and shatter my bones but I'm never giving him up."

Bucky would die a thousand deaths before he let anyone lay a finger on Steve. He had a feeling it was going to come to that, too. Who knows what the serum could regenerate his body from. It looked like these guys were pretty interested to find out.

"Bring the hose," the guy said, stepping a foot away from Bucky. A soft breath of relief escaped Bucky's lips and sharp eyes turned down on him.

With a quick lunge, the knife lodged into the top of Bucky's thigh, all the way in to the hilt. Bucky screamed loud enough to make his own ears ring and the guy laughed as he walked away.

Then the top half of the table dropped out from underneath him, tipping him backwards so suddenly that the wave of nausea did make him puke. He hadn't eaten in a long time so it was just clear stomach fluid now that he had to bat his eyelashes against as it splashed on his face.

By the time the upside down room kind of fuzzed into semi-focus again, all the blood was rushing to his head building up a shit ton of pressure behind splotchy eyes. They were going to waterboard him. Bucky thrashed against the leather straps, hoping for some weakness now that the table was at a new angle. No such luck, everything held tight.

A rag was shoved over his face and Bucky coughed, trying to spit out the foul smell of the rag covering his nose and eyes and mouth. A creak of a turning faucet was the only warning he got before freezing cold water doused over his face.

And just like that he was drowning. He couldn't breathe and there was water in his eyes and his nose and his mouth and the soaked cloth sticking to his skin suffocated him even more as he tried to suck in around the material. He tried to scream and the sound was muffled and bubbly. There was water in his lungs and his limbs stiffened with the sudden realization that this was it, it was over, he was dying now.

*I'm sorry I never told you I love you, Stevie,* Bucky thought vehemently towards the sky, hoping that one day Steve would forgive him for that.

The rag was ripped off his face. Air and cold hit him all at once and he gasped, lungs burning with the switch from H20 to oxygen. He was probably crying but he kind of felt wet and drippy everywhere, there was no way to tell.

"You ready to start talkin?" The English guy was back, leaning down close by Bucky's face, his spit mixing in with the fluids and water already dotting Bucky's cheeks like disturbing freckles.

"I d-don't know anything," Bucky said truthfully, gasping between the words. "But if I did I wouldn't tell you a word, you bastard."
The English asshole just looked at him for a moment. "Hose him again."

The second time Bucky passed out from lack of oxygen and a panic attack that his body slammed into without warning. The serum in his veins had him conscious again in only fifteen seconds, sputtering and choking and bleeding out of his nose from the pressure breaking his sinus cavity.

"Where is Captain Rogers?" The knife was pulled out of his leg, taking a considerable chunk of Bucky's flesh with it. His speed-healing had already started to stitch up his skin around the metal of the knife, so it was like ripping a vine out of a tree that the vine was embedded in. Bucky screamed again.

"Where is Captain Rogers?"

Bucky gasped and shook, taking a few moments before he could try to stutter out an answer. "Don't you think you've exhausted all the big...torture methods by now, you d-dick?"

"Sergeant Barnes, have you ever heard of a pressure chamber?"

Bucky hadn't. That was alright, he found out anyways.

~*~*~*~

March 4, 1945

The moment the caravan rolled to a stop, Steve jumped out of the jeep and beelined straight for the truck toting his bike. They'd wasted enough time riding over here and Steve was aching with pent-up emotions and adrenaline. He wanted justice and he wanted it now.

He pulled his helmet on as he jumped into the back of the truck, taking his bike by the handlebars and walking it out of the bed, the back tire slamming the ground as he tipped the bike against the dirt road. As soon as the teams were set up, he was going to go blazing in there, cold wind whipping past him and guns firing at him. Steve could already see it, already feel the buzz in his veins.

"Rogers!" a voice called out from behind him, the same time someone called out "Captain!" to the left. Steve spun around, propping his bike on its kickstand as he turned to the Captain caller first, because Phillips came before the Commandos when it came to orders.

"We're ready for you to roll out," Colonel Phillips told him, tipping his head. Steve nodded and patted the seat of his bike in confirmation that he was ready.

"Just one moment, Colonel." Phillips rolled his eyes but nodded as Steve gestured at the Howling Commandos, who were all standing in formation waiting for Steve's attention. Phillips marched off and Steve turned to his friends, adjusting his helmet a little as he looked up.

The Commandos were all standing on the side of the road, keeping their guns from clogging with road dust, solemn looks on their normally cheery faces.

"Rogers," Dugan started again, glancing at the rest of the men before looking at Steve with a sort of reverence. Something knotted up in Steve's chest as he looked at his boys, all so brave and solid and caring. The best men Steve had ever known.

"Just in case things go sideways...it's been good fightin' with you, Cap." Dugan nodded once at him, a reassurance and a promise, tipping his hat in respect.

Just in case things go sideways. Maybe they knew him well enough to know all of the flaws in his
plan. Maybe they knew him well enough to know if it came down to it, he'd fight for their lives but not for his own. Not anymore.

Maybe they knew this might be the end, and Steve's throat clogged up at that thought.

"You've done a hell of a lot more an' save our lives," Jones added quietly, looking between Steve and the conglomeration of soldiers in the distance. There were so many of them out here, but war was bloody and lonely, it ruined strong men and tore apart souls.

They'd made a family of their own amongst something as terrible and destructive as this place. Jones and Morita shouldn't even have been allowed to fight, let alone be given the opportunity to make a difference and save thousands of lives. They'd fought together and they'd saved together and they'd cried and laughed together, all of them.

"Merci," Dernier added. Steve scanned his eyes over them, his heart seizing in his chest.

At one point, Steve had told himself the only thing holding them together was Bucky. It was the one thing they all had in common and Bucky Barnes was the foundation that they built the Commandos on. Now that Bucky was gone, the bond he'd left behind held strong. They had each other in common now, each other to depend on.

"Best man I've ever had the honor of serving," Morita looked solidly at Steve, hoisting his gun a little higher. Falsworth shifted his weight, eyes watery as he tipped his hat to Steve too.

"Sergeant Barnes woulda been proud a' you." Falsworth smiled tearily. Dugan clapped Falsworth firmly on the shoulder, giving him a little comforting shake. Falsworth's mouth tugged down at the corners in a pained smile as he pat his hand on top of Dugan's.

If Bucky was here, he'd roll his eyes and call everybody saps or dames or something. Then he'd tear up himself and wave them all over into a group hug, complaining the whole time and making them all laugh through their tears.

They'd all had the luck to split the pain up seven ways, for a year. They'd leaned on each other and they'd fought together and there wasn't a word that could do that justice.

Maybe Montie was right, maybe Buck would be proud of him. Bucky sure was proud of them.

There wasn't anything Steve could say. He'd never been more touched, he'd never been prouder. He'd never been more honored to serve his people and his country. His Howling Commandos.

In a slow and deliberate movement, Steve lifted his arm from his side, fingers straight and tipped slightly as he brought the tip of his hand to his temple. Everyone had tears in their eyes now as Steve stood and saluted the five best men he'd ever known, the ghost of one more standing beside them.

He held the position for a moment, standing there in the dirt road beside his bike, bright white star on his chest and red white and blue shield strapped to his back, facing the Howling Commandos and hailing the men who had followed him into death. Who were following him there just one more time.

Steve snapped his hand back away from his temple, closing the salute and turning with a final look over his shoulder as he mounted his bike.

He paused with his hand on the handlebars, foot ready to kick start. The sky was lit up behind them, beautiful and glowing, turning the men on the side of the road into near silhouettes as Steve looked at them.
Five men saluted him back.

Steve started the engine and his bike took off, soaring down the road. He leaned in close against the metal frame to fight the wind. The tears in his eyes were either from the bitter cold or the moment, the forever memory etched into his brain of those five salutes. Steve didn't care which it was.

~*~*~

"Arrogance may not be a uniquely American trait. But I must say you do it better than anyone." Steve glared at Johann Schmidt as the fire-red skin sauntered closer. The only reason Steve wasn't ripping him to shreds right now was for the necessity of the plan. The two wasp soldiers holding his arms certainly weren't what was stopping him.

"But, there are limits to what even you can do, Captain. Or did Erskine tell you otherwise?" Schmidt stopped directly in front of Steve, just a few feet apart. With a well aimed kick Steve could at least send him flying backwards right now. There was sweat beading in Steve's eyes from the angle of his helmet, but he didn't move. He just stood and glared.

This was the bastard that had employed the perpetrator and encouraged the torture and death of Steve's best friend.

"He told me you were insane," Steve responded simply. He wasn't one much for small talk when he was this amped up, this ready to punch and fight and kick and kill.

"Ah." Schmidt responded, almost sadly. The skull of his face morphed into something that looked almost regretful, misunderstood. "He resented my genius, and tried to deny me what was rightfully mine. But he gave you everything."

Steve looked down, just barely holding off on his anger. What was rightfully Schmidts? The lives and countries he'd destroyed were not rightfully his. That sorrowful, lost look wasn't earning an ounce of Steve's sympathy. He didn't care that the reminiscing made Schmidt look tiny and sad - Steve couldn't wait to kill him.

"So. What made you so special?" Schmidt finally bit, his words spit out like they had a terrible taste in his mouth.

Steve huffed a breath, shaking his head once in a small no. Special. Even Bucky knew better than to call him that.

"Nothin'," Steve replied. Schmidt cocked his head, not understanding. He genuinely thought there was something different about Steve, didn't he? Some chemical makeup or brain superiority.

Steve was a fighter, that was all. He had a spark in him of the fighting kind and the tongue to get him into trouble. Just a kid, fighting for his country. For what was right. And now fighting for the home and the best friend he used to call his.

Steve summed up his entire life in the next six words. "I'm just a kid from Brooklyn."

That was exactly the wrong thing to say.

If he hadn't already been the color of tomatoes, Steve would imagine that Schmidt would have turned red with rage as his fist reeled back to punch Steve across the face. The hit instantly throbbed but Steve didn't have the chance to quite register the pain before it was followed by a backhand snapping his head in the other direction. A punch in the stomach completed the deal and the force of it sent Steve down heavily to his knees.
I'm just a kid from Brooklyn.

To Steve, Brooklyn meant Bucky and Bucky was Brooklyn. Steve was just a kid lost without his Brooklyn, the sniper at his side. How many times had Steve been here, on his knees with his arms held in place and a bully pummeling him down to the ground? But Brooklyn always found a way to save him.

Steve coughed, his breathing heavy from the throbbing. He fought it though, fought his body the way he used to have to every day, and managed to look up at Schmidt with a glare even more serious than it used to be. "I can do this all day."

He wasn't Captain America right now. He was Steve Rogers on his knees in front of a bully. Bucky was wrong - war was a backalley. Nothing had changed between today and the last time Bucky had pulled him out of the movie theater's back alley the night before Buck shipped out - suave and gorgeous and terrifying with his cocked hat and raised eyebrow and arm tugging around Steve's shoulders, pressing their sides together impossibly tight with his sweet smile lighting the world.

The Red Skull was still a bully and Steve still hated bullies. And he still needed help taking the big ones down.

He could almost pretend he was waiting for Bucky. He could almost pretend that it was his best friend who was going to come sauntering around the corner, pulling Steve off his knees and punching the face of anyone who dared lay a hand on him.

"Oh of course you can, of course," Schmidt sneered, not understanding the levity behind Steve's words. But it didn't seem to matter anyways, because suddenly Schmidt was pulling a pistol out of his belt, the air filled with the whir of it charging up to kill as he aimed the muzzle directly at Steve's forehead. "But unfortunately I am on a tight schedule."

Steve glared up from his knees, waiting for the Brooklyn sniper to come round the corner. And look it now, here he comes -

"So am I," Steve gritted between his teeth, charm all dropped for pure anger. It wasn't Bucky coming shattering through that glass but it should have been. It should have been Bucky and it wasn't - because of this bastard, because of Zola, and the Red Skull would be fucking destroyed because of this.

Glass shattered and the fight erupted full swing, bullets soaring everywhere. Bucky hadn't come for him, but his boys still had. Steve could hear the distinct comforting sounds of Falsworth's machine gun and Jones's missile launcher, Dugan's shotgun. Schmidt had disappeared and Steve was already starting after the bastard.

"Rogers!" Falsworth shouted from across the room.

"You might need this." Steve turned around as Montie launched the shield at him, spinning through the air from his hand with the practice of a skilled Commando.

They'd all had contests, once. Throwing Steve's shield...

"C'mon, I'm placin' a bet on Jones as the farthest."

"No way in hell! I'm votin' Barnes."

"What? I'm not gonna throw the silly thing. That's Steve's job. What, we're all gonna start wearing
"tights now too?" Bucky joked, nudging Steve from where they were sitting together on the sole rock in the middle of the field they were all camped down in.

"It's good practice," Falsworth insisted, weighing the shield in his hand.

"For what?" Bucky asked incredulously, throwing his head back and laughing at them all. Falsworth made a face.

"Aw, you afraid you can't lift it, Buck?" Steve teased, nudging him back. Bucky crossed his eyes at Steve, then lifted a hand to his hair to smooth back the pieces that had fallen out over his forehead. The strands flopped back down seconds later.

"Okay, fine. I'll do it. But if we're placing bets, I'm placing on Dugan."

Food rations and ammunition were placed in a circle as currency and they all lined up, Bucky shaking his head and muttering something about fool kids who get excited at shiny things, but Morita shoved his shoulder and he picked up the shield.

"Here goes," Bucky slung the shield out across the open field they'd found, watching as it spun through the air. It eventually landed in the tall grasses with nothing to bounce back from. Bucky turned around and took a few steps backwards, throwing his arms out with a smug smile spread wide across his face.

Steve leaned back and laughed into the sky, amazed at the beautiful July weather and the even more beautiful boy. Dugan rolled his eyes and shooed Barnes out to go and stand by the spot it had landed. Bucky broke into a run, a blue dart rushing through the swaying yellow grasses.

When he reached the shield, he tossed it back at them, staying in the place he landed so they could measure everyone's toss. He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted back at them, the wind catching the words and carrying them like music to Steve's ears. "Just don't hit me!"

Of course, Steve won. No one counted that though. So Bucky lost two boxes of ammo to Dernier and Falsworth, both who'd bet on Jones.

It was a heavy shield, admittedly. It did take some practice to toss, and Steve was glad now that they'd had the competition. Otherwise, Falsworth wouldn't be able to send the shield flying perfectly into Steve's hands from across Red Skull's evil lair.

"Thanks!" Steve shouted as he caught it, giving his boys one last nod before he ran out into the hallway. He had a crazy man to catch. Or maybe to run from.

Dernier blew up the door and Morita came in behind him, gun protective and wielded over Dernier's shoulder. "We're in, assault team go!" Morita shouted into the coms.

"Move out!" Phillips shouted to his men.

Dugan, Falsworth, and Jones snagged themselves some vaporizing guns, started charging the hallways with them and giving the Hydra wasps a taste of their own medicine.

It was really such a shame the Commandos couldn't be bantering playfully over the comms like their old missions. This mission was too crazy for that, and the silence from their comrades was a little saddening.

Steve was too busy to notice, chasing Schmidt down the hallway as fast as his legs could take him. Schmidt was running too, reaching behind him to shoot blue missiles that bounced harmlessly off of
Steve's shield. Steve was getting closer though. Just as Schmidt began to round the corner, Steve pulled back his arm and hurled his shield. It whirled through the air, spinning in front of him the way it had that day they'd all done the same, they’d all flung the shield across that field in July.

The metal shield lodged in between the sliding doors, holding them open. Steve started forward the same moment that a suited Hydra agent appeared in the hallway, flames pouring out of his guns. For lack of a better spot in the situation, Steve ducked behind an outcropping in the wall, holding his breath against the heat of the fire.

The flames kept coming and Steve cursed all the time he was losing without the ability to get around this guy. Then the splattering of machine gun bullets sounded in the distance and the flames suddenly disappeared. Steve peered around the corner as the flamethrower's body crumpled to the ground.

He came jogging back out in the corridor the same time the rest of his troops did. He hurried forward, intersecting Peggy at the cross of the next corridor. She was holding the machine gun, looking beautiful as always in her leather jacket.

"You're late." Steve told her. She looked up at him with parted lips and Steve stepped closer. They hadn't talked alone since that night at the bar, their conversation about Bucky. She was looking at him with eyes Bucky had always warned him about - *she gives you those eyes Stevie, you better kiss her. It's just not right to not to.*

He might have, because he just lost the love of his life less than a week ago and some comfort sounded like it'd be a great distraction and Peggy Carter sure as hell deserved better than distraction but he didn't have anything left to give her. All he had left was a heart in two. Or maybe just the adrenaline pumping through his veins.

But now, standing here in front of Peggy...he didn't lean forward. She was looking at him with those eyes but Steve furrowed his eyebrows, thinking. He'd seen those eyes before, on someone else.

Bucky had looked at him like that. He could *swear* Bucky had looked at him like that. If this was the look you were supposed to kiss someone for...Steve had to be going out of his goddamned mind.

"Weren't you about to..." Peggy thankfully interrupted. Yes, he was about to actually, Steve was about to go avenge his dead best friend. Or, not dead, jury was still out on that one.

"Right," Steve agreed, taking a step backwards and taking off running down the corridor. Head back in the game.

Okay, but had Bucky really ever looked at him like that? Seriously? Had Bucky ever thought about Steve in that way?

No, it was impossible. Steve was...honestly losing his touch with reality. He was overcome with the strange combination of terrible grief and pumping adrenaline and his head was confused, it was that simple.

Deciding to let it go for now, Steve reached up and unlodged his shield from the doors, running through just before they closed again. He came sprinting out into the airplane hanger just in time to see the Red Skull's plane rolling down the runway, preparing for takeoff.

His lungs were starting to catch up to him again, the way they did in Brooklyn when he so much as walked quickly. He ignored his heavy breathing, eyes scanning out over the tarmac. There was a war going on before him, fighting and killing between wasps and soldiers. Steve ran directly through it, taking out as many wasps as possible in the process. A punch here, a slam of the shield there. Taking
down whoever he could while getting on to bigger things. As much as he'd love to help, to stay and fight the ground battles, there was a plane trying to get away.

Steve ran straight for a pile of crates, jumping up a few and grabbing onto an industrial chain with gloved hands. He jumped, swinging over machine guns and blue vaporizers, dodging all the shots as the air blew past him. He let go of the chain and dropped on the other side, not losing a second before breaking into a run again.

He was directly behind the plane now, jet engines overwhelming his nose and the heat of running so much and so fast burning up the soles of his boots.

That plane was going too fast, dammit. Pushed harder, harder, but he'd gotten sucked back into the body of Little Steve all over again, never fast enough, always falling a step behind, ten steps behind, beaten and broken and pushing up to his feet one more time but his bones were failing him, his legs were failing him, he couldn't make it, he wasn't gonna make it.

There was nothing left but to stumble, slow to a stop, cursing the serum for making him good but not good enough, until there was suddenly a bright light beside him and a car pulled up on his left, Phillips and Peggy inside.

"Get in," Phillips commanded. And just like that he was off again, launching over the side - internally apologizing to whoever the owner was for getting his dirty feet all over the seat - then Phillips stepped on the pedal and the vehicle roared. They were gaining speed on the plane seconds later, already soaring closer. Phillips pressed a button and then they took off like a rocket, fire shooting out the back and everything. The side of the plane got substantially closer and Steve started to get back up.

"Keep it steady," Steve shouted over the sound of the engine as he stood up in the car, ready to jump out and board the plane from here.

"Wait!" Peggy shouted. Steve turned around and Peggy grabbed a strap of his uniform, pulling him down as she reached up to kiss him. Their lips met, wind rushing around them like a hurricane, and Steve almost didn't think it was real. The moment had caught him entirely by surprise, but after a mental restart he caught on and leaned in, kissing her back. Her mouth was soft on his, didn't taste like cherries or roses or any of the girly things Bucky had always talked about. When she pulled away, Steve's lips were still tingling and he was frozen, looking at her with wide eyes.

"Go get him." Peggy told him, a smile on her face, the one that said the only thing he needed to hear - I believe in you. Apparently Bucky was right; she did like him a lot after all. Steve was aware he probably looked like an idiot, half standing and half sitting and staring at Peggy Carter with his mouth still open. Bucky would be proud. In his disbelief and blinking shock, Steve looked over at Colonel Phillips, just kind of confirming that that had actually just happened. Phillips glanced at him with an amused look.

"I'm not kissing you," Phillips told him snarkily. So it had happened then. Right. Wow. Yeah, okay, back on mission. Saving lives and all that. Avenging his best friend. He shot Peggy a glance, something like a smile in the sorrow of his heart. She smiled back like she knew why he couldn't smile for real right now. That was half the reason he might come to really love her some day. She'd just kissed him and it was a shame Steve had to run off now, but...she was great enough to be more than understanding.

His first proper kiss with someone he wanted to kiss and he couldn't even tell Bucky. He wondered what Bucky would say.
Steve ducked under the blade of the airplane, shield on his back. He had a plane to catch. And this was it, this was the moment that would determine if Steve could save the world or if he'd fall to the ground. There was no one to pick him up if he fell this time, though. There was no more Bucky and that instilled something dark inside him, fueled an anger Steve didn't know he had, and he sprung at the plane.

He landed on the back, hands holding steadfast. Carefully, Steve crawled up through the belly of it, using the rise of the landing gear wheels to take him up. He hauled himself over the rail onto a platform and looked around. And was met the three scariest things he's ever seen.


They were going to try to take Brooklyn away from him again.

A gaggle of henchman came down to intercede and Steve took half them out with easy punches and kicks. He had bigger fish to fry. With quick fingers that used to just be for drawing Bucky Barnes, Steve dismantled the Chicago bomb, sending it out of the plane to go crash somewhere in the ocean and fry actual fish, which was still unfortunate but better than human beings.

Once he handled the bomb-plane situation (Steve wondered if Bucky would have liked planes. They were better than trains. Everything was better than trains.), Steve snagged his shield and mounted the stairs to go face the bastard who'd taken Bucky Barnes from him.

He snuck into the main chamber of the plane, peering around for moment. Everything was eerily quiet and Schmidt was no where to be found. Steve creeped forward, keeping low as he peered at the pilot seat. Schmidt wasn't there, either. Where the hell was he?

The giveaway was the soft whine of a power-up behind him - that was the fatal flaw to those guns, the sound before the blue missile always gave you time to prepare for the shot. Unless, of course, you prepare just fine and it still sends you flying out the back of a moving train.

Steve blocked the shot with his shield easily, glaring at Schmidt with daggers in his eyes. "You don't give up, do you?" Schmidt asked him, that same condescending tone from earlier. It was the signature bully line. Steve had probably heard those words more in his life than any others.

"Nope," Steve said, because this time there was no one there to interject and shout Hey! Pick on someone your own size. Although Steve supposed he and Schmidt were the same size now. That didn't make it any easier to miss the Brooklyn savior swooping down with his invisible wings.

He barreled directly for Schmidt, slamming into him and connecting his fists to any place he could reach. This. Punch. Bastard. Kick. Took. Shield at the throat. Bucky. Everything was red and it wasn't just the flashes of the skull Steve was seeing. He'd never felt this kind of rage before, never wanted to kill like this. Schmidt had killed so many, was planning to kill so many more.

At one point Steve ended up temporarily on the ground, getting kicked in the ribs and it was just like the old days. But he bounced back up to his feet, swinging harder and more pissed because Bucky wasn't here to pick him up off the ground anymore and it was this guy's fault.

They wrestled and hit each other and Steve eventually got Schmidt in a headlock, slamming them down against the plane floor. Schmidt managed to wrestle back away, pushing Steve into the console in the center of the plane and smacking him across the face with his own shield.

The serum had them unfortunately close to equally matched and Steve could not remember ever being in a fight this long. It was sloppy and angry on both their parts - there was no finesse, nothing
beautiful in the way they threw fists and kicks. Sometimes fighting was dancing, but only really on Steve's half. As souped up as this guy was, he didn't carry that grace, couldn't dance with his fists. Steve wondered if he'd ever meet someone who could.

In a particularly pissed swing, Steve threw Schmidt into the pilot seat of the plane and suddenly everything shifted as the plane started to nose dive into the ground.

Gravity sent them reeling all over the place but it didn't matter, he didn't care if they were sideways or upside down or falling to their deaths. He just kept hitting and hitting. It was like every bully he'd ever had to face, every look of worried fear on Buck's face when he found Steve bruised and bleeding, Steve was paying them all back now. He might as well be blind in his anger, seeing Schmidt with a thousand faces, a thousand people who had knocked him down. It was his turn.

By the time Schmidt righted the plane they were on opposite sides of it again, but Steve could still hear Schmidt shouting at him from the distance.

"You could have the power of the gods!" Schmidt shot a blue laser right at Steve and Steve ducked quickly to avoid it. "Yet you wear a flag on your chest and think you fight a battle of nations."

His nation. His country. This was about freedom and doing the right thing and avenging incredible people who didn't deserve to die at the hands of psycho bastards. Schmidt fired again, dangerously close and Steve just barely managed to dodge again. His heart was pounding out of his chest because, holy crap, he almost just got obliterated into nothing. Is that how Bucky had felt, clinging to the side of that train? Scared and trapped and barely hanging on?

The shots were getting closer and Steve didn't have a weapon. He wasn't really seeing a way out of this yet and this guy was a psychopath, how in the world was Steve supposed to make it out of this fight alive?

"I have seen the future, Captain!" Schmidt shouted again, firing off another shot. Steve ducked for a third time, trying to evaluate a new strategy that didn't just include getting shot at. "There are no flags!"

"Not my future!" Steve shouted in response. Time to execute that new strategy thing. He jumped, soaring across the cabin of the plane and landing in a roll, shield in front of him to block another blast of obliterating blue. For Brooklyn, Steve thought and he threw his shield with all of his strength directly at Schmidt's chest.

It bounced off and Schmidt went flying straight into the center counsel of the plane. Blue lightning erupted and rippled like a volcano, a stream of bright light escaping into the plane. Schmidt struggled back to his feet, limping over to the blue lightning source.

"What have you done?" Schmidt stared at the blue cube in desperation, reaching for it. Steve watched cautiously - that thing leveled people in pieces, he didn't want to see what the source could do - as Schmidt picked up the blue cube. Lightning sparked and heavens of stars opened up on the ceiling. An entire galaxy, a world above that looked like something out of fairytales. It was gold and blue and kind of beautiful and Steve wondered if that's where Bucky was. Light shot out in a burst from the cube, directly upwards in a stream of brilliant white. Schmidt held up his hand, watching in horror as he began to be sucked upwards with the stream of light, screaming in protest.

Well, if Schmidt was being dragged off there, it definitely couldn't be Heaven. And that meant Bucky wasn't there. Schmidt's body engulfed with white light and Steve dimly wondered when his mind had started to accept Bucky's death as the truth again.
Steve watched as the skies plucked Johann Schmidt from the earth, destroying him, and he only felt a pang of loss that he didn't get to do it himself.

"Sir, he's not scared of us." Reinhardt turned around from his desk, adjusting his round spectacles to look at the private a little closer. The soldier shifted, looking nervous as he elaborated. "He won't talk."

Reinhardt didn't say anything for a moment. He reached out and closed a file on his desk, the words Case 17 written in German across the front. The 17th person they'd tried Zola's serum on, the first one to survive it. The only one to survive it, actually.

The private shifted again and Reinhardt finally spoke, his tone as condescending as he could make it.

"What could you possibly mean? He's been a prisoner of war before, he should snap at the first table he sees." Reinhardt raised his eyebrows over his glasses, very aware of Sergeant Barnes's history. The things they'd done to him should have given him nightmares for the rest of his life.

"He's too strong willed, sir."

"Strong? Last time he broke into a begging, withering mess that could do nothing more than repeat his name and serial number. Are you suggesting that thing in there is stronger than your renowned torture methods?"

The private looked uncomfortable. Good, because he was speaking nonsense. He glanced down at his hands, which Reinhardt just noticed were streaked with blood, presumably Barnes's.

"He's...uncompromisable, sir. We've tried nearly everything and he just won't give up the American's location. He's unfortunately resilient."

That shouldn't be possible. It was a previous torture victim, it should be like slicing through butter that happily spills every secret before the first cut.

"Let me get this straight." Reinhardt took a step forward and the private flinched. Reinhardt's lips curled up a bit in a smile. "You're telling me I give you an already broken prisoner of war and torture victim that has an arm and a half and you can't manage to even scare him?"

"Yes...sir."

"I've got to fucking see this." Reinhardt brushed past the private, ignoring the astonished look on his face as he stormed into the section of the warehouse he hadn't even visited yet.

Barnes was strapped to a metal table, dripping wet and bleeding in enough places to make any other man die within seconds. The moment that he heard their footsteps, his big eyes turned on them, looking a little wild.

"You can't touch me," he told them seriously, looking ridiculously pathetic with just half an arm, the sutures at the bottom of the stub ripped and bleeding. His hair was sticking to his forehead and his bottom lip was split but he didn't look the slightest bit shaken other than the crazed look in his eye.

"You can't touch me," he repeated.

Reinhardt stopped a foot away from the table, looking down through his glasses and speaking simply with that small smile still on his face.
"What in the world makes you think you're going to be able to stop us?"

The prisoner blinked a few times, registering a new face and not seeming the least bit phased. Instead he just spoke again, voice strangely strong beneath the tattered sound of shredded vocal cords. "He's going to come save me, you know. You can't break me because I know he's coming."

"Who?" Reinhardt asked, looking over at the private who'd been in charge of the first round of torture. The private leaned over, speaking under his breath as he filled Reinhardt in on the missing information.

"Captain Rogers rescued him last time he was in captivity, sir."

Reinhardt turned back to Barnes, voice flat and honest. "Captain Rogers thinks you are dead."

"No," Barnes insisted, shaking his head. If the story had been correct from the dispatch they'd gotten, the allied troops all assumed Barnes was dead. They'd seen him fall off a train. That was the genius to the plan, no one was ever going to look for Barnes and therefore the operation couldn't be compromised. Except that Barnes seemed fairly convinced otherwise.

"No, Steve'll know the difference. He'll know I'm not dead, he can tell." Barnes was almost rambling as he spoke, looking even slightly crazier now that his words were off in left field too. "They told him I was dead last time and he came for me anyways. Because he knows."

"He watched you die with his own eyes," Reinhardt reminded him coldly.

"No!" Barnes shouted back, straining against the leather bounds. "No, he's coming! He knows, he knows." Barnes took in a breath, eyes narrowing as he looked at Reinhardt like he was simply a wall in the way of what Barnes really wanted to look at. "He'll feel it in his soul. And he's going to come and slaughter every last one of you bastards for laying a hand on me."

Reinhardt huffed a laugh at the threat. He'd heard plenty about Rogers and his slaughtering skills, but all for this one soldier?

"You have a lot of faith in Captain Rogers. What in hell makes you think you're that important? He has a world to save. A war to fight."

"It doesn't matter. He'll drop it all. He's gonna come and save me. You'll. See. I'm important to him." The words at the end faltered slightly and Barnes's bottom lip quivered a bit. Reinhardt mistook the painful honesty for a sensitive weakness and jumped.

"No, he loves me. And he's coming. He's saved me before and he'll do it again."

Reinhardt scowled and straightened back up. At first he just thought the private had just been torturing Barnes with the wrong instruments. But he seemed ridiculously, irrationally sure in his own words. He honestly believed everything that was spewing out of his mouth and it was all vaguely disgusting how confident he was.

"All of this because some guy saved you once?" Reinhardt gestured angrily at Barnes and Barnes blew up.
One moment he was blinking back tears and the next he was straining against every single one of his leather straps, snapping at Reinhardt with a ferocity and anger that Reinhardt had never seen before in anything, let alone anything human.

"Once??" Barnes shouted, spit flying as he kicked at his bounds. "Do you have any idea how many times in the past year I've woken up on this table you bastard?? Do you have any idea how many times I've thought Hydra has captured me again? And he's. always. there. He's saved me from this same fucking table dozens of times you insignificant fucking Nazi!!"

Reinhardt blinked and stared at the seething prisoner for a moment.

This was a major kink they had never considered. Barnes had had nightmares after all, then. He'd had nightmares a ton, and he'd been...saved? He'd been constantly saved from his nightmares? And now he had this sense of security that he was going to be saved again.

They hadn't counted on that. They hadn't even considered that Barnes might be unbreakable now. All because he was holding on to a string of hope that his - apparently friend - Captain America was going to come for him?

This was going to be a problem.

"...And you think he'll come for you now, after he watched you die with his own eyes," Reinhardt clarified, keeping his voice as disbelieving as possible.

"He will. As long as he's alive." Barnes swore, his eyes unfocused now as he drifted somewhere else in his head. "He promised me that as long as he's alive he's coming for me. He's always going to save me. And YOU CAN'T TOUCH ME BECAUSE HE'S ALWAYS GOING TO SAVE ME."

Barnes started kicking and thrashing after the shout and Reinhardt gestured at the private and the ten soldiers standing by on watch. They all started forward, a soldier grabbing onto each thrashing limb as a few others started to undo the leather straps holding Barnes down.

Reinhardt watched from a distance as Barnes struggled and shouted and refused to give in. This was going to be a problem, a big problem. Crushing someone's body and spirit were easy, but if they had hope? Hope was the first thing you had to take away before you could torture someone.

There was one thing interesting Barnes had said though: He'd given a condition to his saving. As long as Captain America was alive, Barnes would have hope. So if Schmidt found a way to kill Captain America, they'd have a way to break Barnes.

Then again, the only reason Reinhardt was even babysitting the prisoner was for information to kill Captain America. It was an egg or the chicken first situation and that was going to be a problem.

He stepped back a few feet as the soldiers finally wrested Barnes off the table. All ten were trying to help in some way and Barnes was putting up one hell of a fight, even swinging out his stumped arm to hit as he kicked and bit and shouted. The soldiers' gloves were bloody and the whole ordeal looked painful and slippery.

They finally grabbed onto his shoulders and started to drag him away, to the cells Reinhardt had already prepped. He never stopped struggling against them, screaming one final thing at Reinhardt before they dragged him into the hallway.

"YOU'LL NEVER BREAK ME AS LONG AS STEVE IS ALIVE. NEVER."

~*~*~
Steve stepped up into the pilot's chair, eyes landing on the screen blinking a little triangle to show their flight path. It was headed straight for New York. There were still two bombs on this plane, two explosives that could destroy a city each. They really were going to level Brooklyn for good.

Steve stared ahead at the clouds and wondered what falling felt like.

He flicked a switch to the radio, dialing into the base frequency. "Come in, this is Captain Rogers. Do you read me?"

"Captain Rogers, what is your..." Morita's voice started over the line.

"Steve is that you, are you all right?" Peggy interrupted. Steve almost wanted to smile. That was something Bucky would have done.

They were a bit alike, Bucky and Peggy. He wondered why he'd never noticed before.

"Great, Schmidt's dead." Steve flipped another switch that did nothing, looked for any sort of *diffuse* button, trying to figure out the plane and the bombs on board but his lack of experience was just leaving him confused.

"What about the plane?" Peggy asked. Steve kept looking around him, because there had to be *something* that was labeled clearly. Apparently not.

"That's a little bit tougher to explain." Which was a bit of an understatement, because he had two huge bombs on board and no idea how to diffuse or stop them.

"Give me your coordinates I'll find you a safe landing site." Peggy said over the line, her voice in that stern no nonsense tone that was somehow still pretty. Steve looked over at another one of the screens. Oh, god. There were a lot more than two bombs on this plane.

"There's not going to be a safe landing. But I can try and force it down."

Colonel Phillips motioned Morita away from the sound of Steve's voice. The loyal Howling Commando paused a moment, confused. Why would--

Then it hit him. Oh.

He followed the Colonel silently towards the door. Walking, no, floating through water. Through the icy water.

It was his turn now, instead of Jones. His turn to radio in another death, wasn't it?

"I'll get Howard on the line, he'll know what to do," Peggy responded, desperation in her voice now. Steve wished he could make her worry go away but there was nothing left that he could do now.

"There's not enough time. This thing's moving too fast and it's heading for New York." Steve could never let it hit New York. He stared out at the clouds and saw snow, snow drifting down from a mountain peak and cold metal under his hands as he scooted further out, reaching for a bare hand with his gloved one.

He realized it as the words were coming out of his mouth. "I gotta put her in the water."

The words felt alien, like they weren't even his, like someone else was telling them to him. He knew what that meant. He knew what he had to do now and Steve could do nothing but stare at the fluffs of snow wisping by around him and wonder how cold it was going to be.
"Please, don't do this. W-we have time, we can work it out." Peggy begged. Steve looked over at the map again, at the little destructive triangle headed straight for his Brooklyn.

They'd already taken one home away from him, Steve would never let them destroy both.

"Right now I'm in the middle of nowhere. If I wait any longer a lot of people are going to die." How many had already died on his watch? How many people had he reached for and not been able to stop from falling? The most important person, that's the one he couldn't save. Steve couldn't that again.

The only choice left was to join him.

"Peggy," Steve pleaded, trying to make her understand with just the word. She would never really know, not really, why he had to this. But if anyone were ever to understand, it'd be her.

"This is my choice."

She'd told him once: allow Barnes the dignity of his choice. Now he repeated the words back to her, hoped that she'd see that and understand it was the same situation. It was his turn to fall for Bucky. For the country. For the stars and stripes, his red white and blue America.

He pulled the compass out of his pocket, setting it on the dash. He'd always loved that compass. It was a like a locket, in a way. Like a fifteen year old girl with a gold heart around her neck, two pictures inside - one for each half. Except for Steve it wasn't heart shaped, it was an old metal circle to help him find his way.

In one side, Peggy's beautiful picture to inspire him. She'd gone against all odds and she was so strong, she deserved every ounce of respect she ever earned. She deserved to be there. One last time, he looked at her soft smile for the courage he needed.

In the other side of the compass was a needle, always pointing true North. That side was Bucky's half. It didn't have his picture but it didn't need to: Bucky was always Steve's arrow pointing North.

He pushed the controls forward and snow whipped at the glass, whole clouds of it as Steve began his descent downwards. Bucky had fallen reaching up and now Steve was plummeting reaching down. Reaching for each other, always.

"Peggy," Steve asked, his heart beating in his chest. Wind was whipping through his hair and everything was so cold. Just like Bucky. Always following in Barnes's footsteps, even now. Steve had been wrong when he thought they'd be different in death. Nothing ever kept them apart that long.

And just like Steve quoted the night she'd told him to allow Barnes the dignity of his choice, Peggy quoted back her promise she'd made him at the end of that night. *You're not alone.*

Steve didn't want to die alone.

"I'm here," Peggy promised through the line. The snow clouds were whipping faster and Steve stared at them wide eyed. This wasn't something he'd ever really felt before. Steve was scared.

"I'm going to need a rain check on that dance," Steve managed, the snow breaking away to reveal the bottom of a ravine. Water, coated with ice. He wondered if Bucky had landed in the water when he died.

"All right." Peggy's voice had tears in it and so did Steve's eyes.
She looked down at her hands, trying to breathe through this. He was just like Bucky, wasn't he? They were two pieces of the same puzzle and she had no idea how she'd been lucky enough to be the person they both turned to at the end.

She may be the only person alive who ever knew the love story of two boys from Brooklyn, but she'd die with both of their loyalties held tightly to her chest. She'd been a part of the most beautiful love story she'd ever seen and she'd been loved by Steve and there was nothing better she could ask for.

"A week next Saturday at the Stork Club," Peggy's voice came over the line again. Steve stared at the water, trying to remember all the most important parts of his life. Bucky was in almost all of them.

"You got it," Steve promised. It might be the only promise he'd ever break.

A tear slipped down his cheek. The ice was getting closer. It was going to be so cold.

He wasn't ready to die.

"Eight o'clock, on the dot, don't you dare be late. Understood?" Peggy asked him and Steve was so grateful he wasn't alone right now. He wasn't sure he could do this alone.

But he was coming home. He was scared but he was coming home.

"You know, I still don't know how to dance," Steve told her, a war-oldened bar in his head and Bucky in his arms, their boots stepping *one two three one two three*; a song he'd never hear again. How many times had Steve told Bucky he didn't know how to dance? How many times had Bucky dragged him out on the floor anyways?

If Steve could pick any way to greet the afterlife, it'd be with Bucky, prim and gorgeous in a slick black suit, holding his hand out to Steve, waiting to pull him onto an empty dance floor.

Peggy smiled to herself, her lips tight as she tried not to cry. She could hear his voice wasn't for her anymore. He was talking to a dead man's ghost and she'd do the best she could to honor them both now as she responded with the words Bucky Barnes would have said.

"I'll show you how," she breathed, wishing she really had had the chance to dance with Steve, just once. She stared into the distance, begging of him one last thing. "Just be there."

"We'll have the band play something slow," Steve offered, watching the ice come up to greet him. It was here. He was here.

This was the end. Of what? Steve just thought the word. Funny how they both started with l and ended with e. Four letters and it all ended here.

"I'd hate to step on your--"

The line turned to static.

"Steve?" Peggy asked. Static came back. She swallowed, trying again, her voice breaking and weak. "Steve?"

"Steve," Peggy tried a final time. Static. He was gone. Just static. She shut her eyes and wished
everything could just go black for her too.

Except it didn't go black for Steve.

The nose of the plane hit the ice.

Glass imploded inwards and he managed to lift his arms in time to block the majority of it from cutting his face open. He wasn't sure why he bothered to try, a couple of gouges weren't going to change anything in the long run.

The electronics of the plane sparked and caught into fires that instantly smoked out around him, sending electrical waves through the water and ice and vibrating shocks into his bones.

He'd been electrocuted by a fence once and this was that, only Bucky's hands weren't here to free him from the sparks trying to destroy his brain.

The water rushed through like a tsunami, knocking the breath out of Steve as it hit him square in the chest. He sucked in a final breath and then everything was water and freezing and the oxygen was gone. He blinked his eyes open as soon as he could, everything filmy and blurry under the water.

It was colder than snow, colder than ice, colder than Steve had ever been in his entire life. It was one of those moments that he could physically feel the serum in his cells straining, crying out for warmth.

If he were an ordinary man, he probably would have died on impact.

As it was, he had a piece of glass lodged in his abdomen and a plethora of cuts on his arms that were smarting against the water. If he were ordinary and somehow hadn't died on impact, he'd be dead from the shock of the cold water. But his body was giving him time before it froze, giving him who-knows-how-long before his blood turned to ice in his veins and his heart stopped beating.

In the blurry view Steve whipped his head around, breath screaming and stale in crystallizing lungs as he took in the flickering surroundings. The plane was nose-first, only the bottom half submerged under the sheet of cracked ice. The wet around him was tinged red, blood from his cuts spilling out sluggishly and freezing with the chunks of floating ice. It was getting harder to move.

He could crawl up to the top half, the part of the plane still sticking out over the surface of the ice coat. He could swim around the pilot's chair, up to the surface of where the water met the rest of the plane's internal beams. He could crawl up, slippery and shivering, and pull himself out of the plane and onto the surface of the ice. They'd come and find him eventually, and the serum could keep him alive in the freezing temperatures until then.

Steve hadn't counted on this. He hadn't counted on the plane not sinking, lodging in the ice and giving him the chance to escape.

He'd been so ready to come home to Bucky.

It was freezing.

What would he crawl out for? He'd taken down Hydra, he'd served his country. Peggy was beautiful and brilliant, she'd find somebody else and live life the way she should. Steve would have loved her one day, he was sure of it. He would have loved her but he'd never stop being sad inside. He'd never stop missing Bucky and Peg deserved so much better than that.

What would he crawl out for? The war was almost over. They were winning and the Germans were
being taken down and the Commandos would be okay without him. They'd saluted him goodbye.

What would he die for?

James Buchanan Barnes.

Steve closed his eyes and opened his mouth.

Water and chunks of ice flooded into his throat and Steve choked on reflex, lungs seizing heart pounding throat convulsing. It burned worse than fire, worse than the cold numbing tingling of his fingers and hands and feet. His lungs filled with water and his eyes spilled over with tears of pain that the cold water took away, sucked for their own. No one could see you cry in the ocean.

His lungs protested and his cells fought and Steve didn't want to be a coward, didn't want to make this his way out, but he couldn't keep trying to survive when everyone he loved had been ripped away. There was nothing left to live for, not when Bucky was dead. What was life without Bucky? He wasn't Steve Rogers without Bucky and he didn't want to see the man he would turn into in that absence.

Maybe it was selfish. Maybe it was the most selfish thing Steve had ever done but he couldn't find the willpower to pull himself up out of the plane.

He couldn't breathe, his lungs were trying to suck in more oxygen and he couldn't breathe, water was rushing in everywhere. If he wanted to go peacefully, this wasn't anything like serenity. His mind was racing and his body was fighting him, the way it always had, except this time it was fighting to live.

He just wanted to let go but it burned and his brain wouldn't leave him be, just begging and begging for Steve to swim up to the surface. The water pushed at his skin and his muscles but somehow Steve managed to curl up, pulling his legs into his chest and wrapping his arms around them. It was so cold.

Just take me Steve begged, squeezing his eyes shut tighter. The hurt pulled at his heart now and he could feel enhanced cell walls filling with water like those freaky bloated gummy bears in science class and he could just burst, should burst, but the cold creeping in was freezing the water before it could ruin him, the serum was keeping walls just tight enough, liquid at bay and it wasn't fair, it wasn't fair, he still wasn't dying, nothing was going black, and all Steve could do was cry, salt running from his eyes steadily now as he curled in uselessly tighter.

Nothing would save him now, but God wasn't taking him either. He was stuck in Purgatory and he should have died by now but the serum wouldn't let him. It wasn't letting him die and it was so cold.

Bucky, he mouthed into the water, vocal cords lost in the flood.

And suddenly, everything was instantly sharp, lighting every cell in his body, every blood vein and muscle, could feel the oxygen slipping from every single one of them. The clarity demanded that Steve find the surface, break the surface now, and he couldn't do it, he couldn't force himself up. There was still time, too much time, and Steve hated the serum for that. He hated himself for that.

He just wanted to die. He wondered if Bucky had been this cold when he died. He wondered if Bucky would yell at him for taking his own life. He wanted to hear the sound of Bucky yelling at him more than anything.

Take me home, Steve begged to God. He knew that committing suicide landed you in Hell, but he didn't care wherever he went so long as Bucky was there. If Bucky was in Heaven like he should be,
Steve hoped that the lives he saved were enough compensation for taking his own.

If Bucky loved him, why'd he leave? Why did he have to die? Why wasn't Steve allowed to join him?

The water pulled and tugged at him and the plane creaked around him as it settled a few feet deeper in the ice and Steve couldn't stop crying because he'd never been so cold and so alone.

He was so alone.

He just wanted Bucky to come and take him away from this place, away from the sick thing he was doing to himself.

Steve had no idea how long he cried curled up in a ball. It was entire minutes, he was sure of that, but his cells just weren't freezing and his lungs were somehow surviving and his brain hadn't failed him yet and it wasn't fair.

This would be his grave, this plane. This was his coffin, just like Bucky's was in the bottom of a ravine. Steve wondered if the snow had covered his body yet, a white blanket as pure and beautiful as Bucky was.

What was he doing? Steve was the symbol of America. If they ever found his body, it didn't need to be in the weak ball he was curled in. Bucky had died still in uniform and Steve would too, as proudly as one could when instigating their own death. Steve straightened out of his curled form, pulling the shield up to his side, and stuck his shoulder just behind the pilot's seat so his body wouldn't float to the top.

I'm sorry I never told you I love you, Bucky. Steve thought, and everything finally went black.

~*~*~*~*~

So he was alive, he was fighting, and he had a serum running through his veins. Bucky had embraced all of those things, managed to start checking things off the list of "shit to process so you can break out of this hellhole."

The serum was as terrible as it was great. It kept him alive, but unfortunately it also didn't let him die. There was a hell of a lot more pain involved with the torture, but he'd made it through the torture too. He'd count what he could for wins. Besides, being faster and stronger was definitely going to help out in his plan to escape.

So the next thing to check off the list was the whole missing-an-arm thing. He didn't have an arm and as much as that sucked, he could live with it. Still felt like he had an arm, which was the weird part. He'd reach for things and no hand would go to grab it. He could still feel tingling in his fingers and he'd heard enough from other soldiers who'd lost limbs that the ghost feelings were totally normal. Ghost pains too, which he got.

But at least he still had the top half of his arm, so there was that to count for. He could probably learn how to shoot a sniper rifle one handed. He'd do it for Steve.

Besides, it was his left arm. He was right handed so it totally could have been a lot worse. His left arm had never been good for much of anything, anyhow.

He wondered what Steve would think. Steve probably wouldn't make a big deal out of it, except he'd ask Bucky if he was okay basically all the time.
Bucky leaned his temple against the filthy wall of the cell and wondered when the hell Steve was going to get a move on and come find him.

On the first day, they lifted a flap on the bottom of the door to the cell and scooted a small metal pan across the ground through it. The pan hit Bucky's foot because the cell was only five foot by five foot, not big enough to lie down in, but tall enough that he could stand without being able to touch the ceiling. It was weird, the layout of it, and entirely windowless. Pitch black metal, the whole thing. He wasn't entirely unfamiliar to isolation, though.

Besides, there was actually a lightbulb in here. They never turned it on and it was too high up for him to reach - that was probably why the ceiling was so high, so he couldn't get the light bulb - but it was still there. He was sure they'd find some use for it eventually.

But anyways, they gave him a pan on the first day. It was a sorry excuse for water and it smelled like piss. Thinking about it, Bucky decided it probably was piss. He didn't drink it.

The next day they gave him a bone, with just a bit of flesh still on it. Raw, like a dog. Bucky didn't even touch it. They weren't going to scare him like this.

He wasn't going to tell Steve about the bone though, he didn't need Steve to suddenly go all crazy revengeful on their asses. He knew how Steve could be sometimes, when he got his head into it. People treating Bucky like he was a dog was definitely going to be one of those things that made Steve go nuts.

Bucky hummed in the dark, waiting for Steve to come and storm the damn place already. He was going to, Bucky could feel it in his bones. Not the one he'd kicked to the corner of his cell, the freezing bones inside his body. His leg was almost healed from the hammer a few days ago, but it still smarted like hell every time he moved it.

Everything did.

Bucky hummed *Til Then* and smiled to himself because the Commandos were going to throw him a damn party when he got back. It'd be great.

Maybe he'd even convince Steve to get drunk. Last time he had, he'd spent the night in Bucky's lap, clinging to him like a koala bear and it had probably been the cutest thing Bucky had ever seen. He could just picture the serum version of Steve doing the same thing, tripping over Bucky as he tried to stand up to get more beer and landing his huge body drunkenly in Bucky's lap.

The Commandos would howl with laughter and Bucky would snicker and pinch Steve's cheek and Steve would curl down and wrap himself around Bucky's shoulders. The Commandos would break into aww's and Bucky would roll his eyes but rub his hands down Steve's back, call him a dame and tell him he still can't hold his liquor, his Irish roots would be ashamed of him.

Bucky was never ashamed of Steve, though. Steve was a goddamned angel. He was Bucky's goddamned angel.

When Steve finally came for him, when he pulled open that door and gathered Bucky into his arms, Bucky was going to tell him he loved him.

It would be the first thing he'd say.

Peggy was a darling to understand and keep it a secret but Bucky hadn't been ready then. He was ready for Steve to know now. It didn't matter what Steve said, didn't matter how Steve reacted. Bucky would tell him and they could deal with everything else after.
Just as soon as Steve came for him. He was coming, soon. Bucky could feel Steve reaching to him across the distance between them.

Bucky was waiting and Steve was going to save him. Bucky's own sweet guardian angel.

~*~*~*~

The next day all they gave him was a newspaper.
Chapter End Notes

Just an explanation anybody who was confused: I've been writing from the very beginning of this story as though Steve had been in love with Bucky his entire life. I've been giving hints to the "more than friends" thing since the beginning, which I'll add here:

Throughout, Steve constantly refers to Bucky as "handsome" and "pretty," which were not exactly things that were considered acceptable thoughts in the time period.

Chapter 1:

They were friends, but he could leave Steve behind. Steve wouldn't be able to, but this was Bucky. He'd always been the less needy one.

Chapter 2:

He hadn't let Bucky see a lot of the better drawings Steve had done of him for obvious reasons. It always drove Bucky crazy - just let me see, Stevie.

(Referring to how some of his drawings might show his deeper feelings for Bucky)

Bucky's mouth curved up in a smirk, which Steve's eyes couldn't help but draw to.
"What?" Steve asked, totally zoning out from looking Bucky over.

If Steve hadn't spent years of his life practicing for moments like this, he might have frozen and blushed and blinked up at Bucky with those same doe eyes dames gave him when he kissed them goodnight. Instead, years and years of practice had a snide retort on Steve's lips before he really let the words sink in.

Chapter 4:

If someone were to take a photograph...would the look on Steve's face match the rest of his teammates? Or would his reveal something more? He had a feeling he knew the answer to that already.

Bucky was talking and vibrant and everyone was looking at him, so Steve had the excuse to too.

He absolutely did not feel a rush of joy as he walked over to the other side of the bed, lying down with his back pressed to Bucky's.

He never could be too careful with what his face gave away...it was just that Steve didn't find it so much amusing as he did adorable.

Steve glanced over at him, resisting the urge to reach out his hand and bump it against the back of Buck's. It would only be another few inches, but Steve refrained anyways.

Then of course Steve sings Bucky “How Deep is the Ocean”

Steve's heart was pounding...he hated himself for it, the way his mind was wandering. It wasn't what it look like, it wasn't what it sounded like. It was never what it looked like between them...had to calm down, get a grip on his racing heart and damp palms.

He leaned in close and Steve's heart stopped..."I think I won." "Mmm, really?" Steve managed so eloquently...God, what was wrong with him? He hadn't been this ridiculous for years. This was Bucky, of course it was about the competition. Nothing else. How could Steve worry for a single moment...?

Chapter 5:

The cute look was such a change from the solemn, avoiding Bucky that had walked in here Steve could almost hug him again.

Chapter 7:

...but they were going over the mission right now so it was really not the best time to be grinning about his stupidly stubborn best friend. He managed to keep his affectionate thoughts on lockdown...

“You musta been thinkin' about someone real special, huh Cap?” Dugan clapped him
on the soldier and Steve's eyes cut to Bucky without thinking.

Steve reached out to ruffle Bucky's hair - he kind of liked it better disheveled anyways.

"Tree-boy and sober-boy, I like it...It's cute." Steve snorted and looked over to Bucky, who went bright red. "That was forever ago!" Bucky complained, looking down at the table and making a pouty face. It was cute.

"Besides, even if there were dames around I bet none of 'em would be as pretty as you, Buck." Steve said it as sincerely as possible and the rest of the commandos laughed in amused surprise.

"You dip me and I'm ending you," Bucky warned, letting Steve lead him to the middle of the empty dance floor. "I am not some dame." "Good thing, too," Steve commented..."What's that supposed to mean?" Bucky asked..."That I'm glad you're not a dame," Steve replied. "Now let's dance."

He'd been missing something, and this was it. Steve could waltz for forever. Could have Bucky this close for forever.

Chapter 8:

With rainy days on the window ledge, watery hot cocoa in hand, holey socks in his lap, soft crooning of the sweetest voice - Steve's favorite sound.

There was so much he'd never told Bucky. All those nights in Brooklyn, looking out over the bridge with Bucky at his side.

Or when Steve was asking to go back home...maybe he meant the home of Bucky's hand in his.

__________

Again, a huge thank you to everyone who is reading.

xx
Warnings for suicide attempts, graphic depictions of violence, torture, loss of humanity, and the general painful horror that comes with the creation of the Winter Soldier.

***If you don't want to read the graphic torture scenes of the transformation and would like to skip straight to Steve waking up from the ice, that starts at this chapter and you can just click that link, you won't miss anything that isn't missed in the movies.

Bucky's green vial dream song: Swans by Unkle
The closest thing to the white room sounds: xx
(if you listen on loud with eyes closed and headphones on, you can kind of get the effect of insanity isolation - be forewarned)
And here have this song again but now listen to the chorus and cry because they really are taking Bucky's body my darling :( All I Want by Kodaline

Also I made another 8tracks (for a friend) and while it's not technically for this fic it still fits with the storyline pretty well xx

Disclaimer: so this chapter is written very uniquely - it's split into these little pieces that switch back and forth between conversations of Hydra agents and Bucky's point of view - the psychology information should all be accurate though.

As for the torture scenes: any really graphic pieces will be forewarned with a single " * " and will also close with a " * " so you can skip it if you need to. Any relevant plot points missed by skipping the graphic scenes will be in the end note.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
"How long are we leaving him in isolation?" One of the soldiers asked, tapping the grainy screen with a gloved finger.

"I thought we were supposed to be torturing him," the other soldier agreed, frowning as he peered down at the tiny room flickering on the monitor.

"We are," Reinhardt's voice echoed from the doorway. Both soldiers snapped to attention, spinning to face the officer as he walked slowly up to the screen on the wall, hands clasped behind his back.

"Physical pain would just give him release, now. A distraction from the true pain. He'd welcome it."

Reinhardt smiled, watching the figure on the screen. "There's no need to slice him up. We already broke him. Now we sit back and watch him rip himself to pieces."

~*~

To be a ghost:
Only those who are haunted
Can ever learn to haunt

~*~

The first thing he noticed was how warm it was. Wonderfully warm, which was a rare occasion for him no matter where he was. His eyelids were too heavy to lift and his arms and back were bare, his feet and lower legs too. Whatever he was laying on was rough, scratching at his bare skin, hot and uncomfortable but tender enough that he wouldn't mind lying here for a little longer. Something was trying to wake him though, something important, so he forced himself to tap into his surroundings.

"Buck! Buckyyy, c'mon man." Something small and cold shoved at his shoulder and Bucky groaned but opened his eyes a little, squinting at the bright light.

"Leave me alone, Stevie," Bucky grumbled, shutting his eyes again and trying to ignore the little bouncing sunshine peering down at him. A cold hand pressed to Bucky's cheek and he blinked his eyes open again, vision kind of blurry but the image still unmistakable. Steve was hovering over him, blond hair flopping down around his face like a halo.

Bucky frowned exaggeratedly so that he didn't end up grinning affectionately like an idiot. "Go away."

"No, Buck. C'mon. Get up! You've been layin' there all afternoon."

"Maybe I wanna sleep.""Well maybe I don't want you to sleep." That petulant adorable tone crept into Steve's voice and this time Bucky couldn't help the involuntary grin that snuck onto his face.

"What do you want from me, Steve?" Bucky mumbled, draping a hand dramatically over his face, blocking out the bright light. Steve tugged at his hand and brought it back down to the sand, lazily entwining loose fingers together.

"For you to wake up, jerk. It's your day off, you promised me we could go swimming. And you've been sleeping in the sand for hours. I've already drawn you twice, and the dock too. So c'mon, get up and let's go swimming." Steve used his grip on Bucky's hand to tug at him, pulling Bucky's arm
and using the whole of his tiny body's weight to drag Bucky up out of the sand, laughing cheerily at the look on Bucky's face as he snapped up--

His eyes shot open with a sharp gasp, clawing at the ground one-handedly as he scrambled along one of the rank walls, the concrete bitter beneath his fingers. The darkness and freezing cold settled back into his bones, Steve's sweet laughter still echoing in his head.

*Steve*. Bucky whipped his head to the side, eyes searching in the darkness to find it. The newspaper. It was still there. He stared at it with wide unblinking eyes; at the crumbled edges from where it'd been read over and over, the creases and folds from when he crumpled and threw it, then picked it up again a day later and smoothed it back out with his only careful, shaking hand.

Only moments ago he'd been on the beach in New York and now Bucky didn't know where he was, didn't even know what country. It didn't matter, though. Only one thing mattered now.

"How could you do this to me?" Bucky whispered to the faded photo on the front cover, drawing his knees into his chest and digging his dimpled chin into his (only) forearm. Steve from the propaganda poster stared back at him, fingers in a sideways salute. The picture didn't show the beautiful blue eyes and the soft blonde hair but Bucky saw them anyways.

He closed his eyes and didn't bother to wipe away the tears rolling down his cheeks again. It was amazing that he had enough water in his body to keep crying, but that was the sole thing that hadn't failed him yet.

"You promised," Bucky choked out. The tears made his words muddy.

A year ago Bucky could have counted the times he'd cried on one hand. He'd lost count over the past few days, but he'd cried enough to break that record ten times over. Well, he was guessing it was a few days. There was no way to tell how long he'd been in this room, how long it'd been since they gave him the newspaper.

He couldn't even judge based on his body's patterns because after finding out about the serum, Bucky realized he actually didn't know anything about his body anymore. His own skin and bones had betrayed him. Just another enemy, another force against him.

He was surrounded by enemies and tears and memories and dreams and nightmares and screams that didn't sound human (that he didn't realize were coming out of his mouth until his throat clogged up and stopped working.)

He cried and screamed and lost track of time.

He stared numbly at the walls.

He cradled the photo of Steve.

He talked to himself sometimes.

He only slept so he could dream of Steve's beautiful face.

Most often, the dreams turned to nightmares and memories from Brooklyn twisted and ended bloody. Steve had died behind Bucky's eyes more times than he could count and each felt worse than a knife to the chest.

Sometimes he stared at the door and imagined Steve coming for him, barreling to his rescue. Imagined what would've happened if that plane hadn't gone down.
Imagined what would've happened if he'd told Steve about the serum the moment he'd suspected. If he hadn't held back and kept it a secret even from himself, Steve could've guessed that Bucky would survive the fall.

He might've jumped in after him.

Bucky imagined what would've happened if he'd shouted *I LOVED YOU FIRST!* to Steve's face instead. He thought about that one a lot, gaged all of Steve's possible reactions. Made a few up of his own that would probably never happen.

Like the words flying loud and fast and pissed out of his mouth - the exact same tone as *NO. NOT WITHOUT YOU.* - and Steve, blinking staring looking at him, frozen while Bucky tried to catch his breath.

Then Steve would take three big steps across the tent and his big artist hands would come up to cup Bucky's jaw with that same possessive ferocity Steve looked at him with sometimes and then he'd lean down and -

Bucky couldn't let himself imagine past that point. A hundred different scenarios but he couldn't bring himself to do that to Steve's memory. Especially knowing it could never, ever happen.

Not now that Steve was...Not ever.

Steve was gone.

They were all gone. Not all dead - hopefully - but the rest of the Commandos had given up on him too. They weren't going to really look for him, not like Steve would've.

His men had abadonned him here. He needed them. He needed Dugan's clap on the soldier and Falsworth's annoying speech about how insulating snow was and Morita's eye rolls and long-suffering sighs and Dernier and Jones's amused glances between him and Steve.

He needed them to tell him to be strong and he needed someone - anyone - to understand that he wasn't going to ever *fucking be okay* without Steve. Ever. They knew that, they understood that.

God, Bucky was so damn grateful they'd been there for Steve though. When Steve thought Bucky was dead he had to have been a wreck - Bucky wouldn't fool himself about that. But it wasn't fair, because now Bucky lost Steve and there was nobody to look after *him*. He was utterly, entirely alone.

When Bucky woke up screaming that Steve was a *goddamn liar* for leaving him alone out here, there were no Howling Commandos to hold him down.

When he curled around the newspaper bawling and mumbling all the things he'd never told Steve, there were no friends to drag him off to get drunk at a bar.

When Bucky started shaking and whimpering, remembering Steve holding him in those beautiful arms and twirling him round a dance floor, there was no support team to tug him into a hug and tell him he was going to be okay.

He wasn't going to be okay.

~*~*~

"You can't torture a man who's already broken."
"We are not here to torture him. Zola's orders, apparently he's supposed to be left alone. He's going through 'maximum pain' right now."

"Did he seriously care about that Captain America guy that much?"

"Guess so."

~*_~*_~

He hated that newspaper more than anything. The leer of Steve's propaganda picture, like that photo was supposed to represent the number of lives he'd fucking saved. The red white and blue shit they shoved down everyone's throats to make the war about honor instead of what it was really about.

Which was nothing. Nothing at all. Death, that's all war was. Death and blood and fire.

Other times that newspaper was the only thing that kept him hanging on. He woke up from a nightmare about 20 hours after Steve's death with the worst idea imaginable planted in his head:

For the past year and a half, none of it was real. He'd never gotten out, he'd been tortured and hallucinating this entire time. It made more sense, so much more sense, than what he wanted to believe.

His best friend - a tiny little scrap from Brooklyn - underwent scientific experiments to become some sort of sci-fi superhuman? Just to rescue Bucky? Storm an entire base by himself. It didn't get more crazy or "wishful thinking" than that.

Then of course, a group of men in an army who would never be allowed to fight together forming a band of brothers? A team that was famous and in movies for crying out loud. A Jap and a Frenchman and a Brit and a black man? All fighting in an elite (happy??) group, taking down entire bases with just the seven of them.

And then, the bright red angel that was Peggy Carter? A kickass, beautiful, perfect dame in love with Steve that let Bucky cry on her shoulder about how in love he was with his best friend. That told Bucky it was okay, that once she married Steve he still better come over on Sundays for dinner.

And of course all those moments with Steve - the super Steve in his head - that they'd almost kissed, that Steve had carried him out of a city with a bullet wound in his leg, all of Bucky's advanced healing and Steve's crazy ideas.

Jumping out of buildings. Singing songs on a boat for Bucky's birthday. Holding Bucky in his strong arms. Dancing a waltz on a beautiful old wooden dance floor...

Being tortured by Hydra for a year-plus was more plausible than that.

Hell of a lot easier to believe it was all a dream. A hallucination. His instinct wanted to accept the "just a dream" theory because logic was pointing in that direction. Simple: Bucky was a POW and he'd been on one hell of an acid trip. It made sense (seriously - Steve saving him? since when?) and he would have entirely lost himself in that idea, he would have.

If it weren't for that newspaper. If it had all been a dream, why give him the newspaper? How would they know what he was dreaming of in the first place? If it had all been in his head, they couldn't have printed something as crazy as Steve being a famous supersoldier in tights in the real world.

Bucky was positive he was awake now; he was in enough pain to know that for sure. So that meant the newspaper was real: tangible in his hands.
Proof it had happened. Proof that Steve had been the stupid idiot who signed up for that stupid project and had rescued Bucky's ass at some point. He had gotten out and that stupid propaganda picture was proof of it. Bucky could hold it in his hand and stare and feel and it was proof the whole year was all real.

Which meant Steve's death was real too.

Steve wasn't safe back home in Brooklyn, only fighting the war in Bucky's dreams. Steve was dead.

Bucky hated the newspaper again.

~*~*~

There was a man drifting in and out of consciousness, mind aching to slip into a coma and body fighting to live. Everything was ice and cold and Steve's cells weren't freezing. He was suspended, but his brain hadn't cut off yet. It was all ice and memories of eyes that matched the ice, brilliant flashing blue.

At least he was coming home to Bucky. At least they were both safe and sound now.

~*~*~

It started in the corner of a dark room. It was the first moment in his life that Bucky Barnes wanted to be dead more than he wanted anything else.

It wasn't something he'd ever thought he'd stoop to, not even on Zola's torture table. There'd been plenty of times that Bucky'd been sure that dying would be better than the hell he was living in, but he'd never actively wished to end his own existence.

It was sickening, and it was probably highest on the “most ashamed of” list, which was fairly long, including all sorts of things; like losing the one opportunity to escape because he was in shock. Like the shame of being a permanent cripple, a useless discarded ex-soldier with only one arm. Like not being able to face the idea of being a serum-recipient back when it would have ended up saving lives: including his own and Steve's. Like not telling Steve I love you when he had the chance.

But wanting to die beat them all out because - as always - Bucky stepped back and tried to look at it with Steve's eyes. Steve would forgive everything Bucky was ashamed of. He'd forgive it all with that golden heart of his; except wanting to die. Steve would never understand that and he'd certainly never forgive it.

But Steve was gone. Steve was dead, he was dead and he didn't have a say anymore because he left Bucky here all alone and he'd promised, he'd promised.

Damn him, of course, he'd promised he'd come as long as he was alive but now he wasn't and that singular condition had been broken. Bucky didn't want to face a world that didn't have Steve Rogers in it. A world without sunshine was cold and dark and there wasn't much he hated more than those two things.

But even more than he didn't want to live in a world without Steve Rogers, Bucky didn't want a life without Steve Rogers.

He didn't want to know what he'd become without Steve.
All he knew was that when Steve was gone, all of the good was scooped out of Bucky and he was left with nothing but his raw terrible core and something Steve would never be able to forgive.

How could he? There was something dark inside Bucky. He could feel it, he'd always been able to feel it. That black rage that bubbled up in his gut when he came running into an alley to see it wasn't just some bully on Steve, it was an entire gang of them kicking and punching and laughing and little Stevie wasn't breathing.

That rage. It scared Bucky, a lot. The way he'd mauled on those guys had scared him. He was glad Steve was unconscious for it. Real fucking glad. He'd never told Steve about the details - Steve had woken back up on the couch Bucky had carried him to, whimpering and eyes swollen shut. Bucky had just shifted the frozen bag pressed to the swollen places, whispering to Steve that he was okay now. Bucky wasn't going to let anything hurt Steve.

He'd been careful about swooping to the rescue after that - he never chased down the guys that hurt Steve, just gave the minimum number of punches and kicks possible and yelled at them to get the hell out. And it worked for a while, and Bucky eventually stopped being scared of what he'd do to protect Steve.

And then the war came. Basic training was terrifying all over again because he might not have been pissed, but he was deadly with a gun in his hands. So deadly they made him a Sergeant before he even shipped out. That scared him almost as much as the boiling black rage did.

And for the past year and a half, he'd been trying to keep a fucking handle on it. But when it came to Steve, Bucky just couldn't do it. There was something in his core that was so primal and protective that he didn't have the slightest bit of control over it.

He'd bashed a Nazi's face into an unrecognizable, bloody mess for threatening to shoot Steve. A perfectly executed killshot for every enemy that so much as looked Steve's way.

He didn't always have control over himself and now that Steve was gone, that rage was tearing at him and trying to consume him - and the one thing that had kept him in check was gone.

If he waited, if he gave himself time, the murderer in his veins would consume him. He couldn't let that happen, Steve would never let that happen. Bucky had to prevent it, for Steve's sake.

So he scraped. They hadn't given him anything since the newspaper and he didn't need anything else. He'd been creative with his kills since he first started to murder. Bucky Barnes, always thinking outside the box. Shooting enemy's hands, side-stepping avalanches, scraping the edge of his fingernail against the gritty wall, over and over. Again, to the other side.

His nails were short but the sharpened point still formed eventually. Sharp enough to break skin. He knew they were watching him, so he'd have to be quick about it, else they'd interrupt.

One sharp smack to the wall and the bones in his hand broke, violent hiss as he crumpled the shattered pieces against each other, shoved his fingers against the wall hard enough to curl the broken bones in, slide the sharpened point of that fingernail up against his only wrist.

The skin over blue veins broke and the door busted down before the blood even started to drip. An army flooded the tiny room and Bucky screamed and kicked but they dragged him out anyways.

That was the last of his time in free isolation. They kept him chained up after that, three cells down.

~*~*~
"He's volatile and dangerous. Don't underestimate the American."

"We don't know the full effects of the serum yet. Keep him locked down and drugged up."

"Do you have anything that will make him hallucinate? The boss said we need to keep the brain as active as possible. Well, the nightmares as active as possible."

"Try the light green vials. But you might want to find a bite guard if you want him to keep his tongue."

~*~*~

It wasn't the warmth that hit him first this time. It wasn't the glow of sunlight on closed eyelids. It wasn't the soft breaths unsettling and resettling the loose strands of hair across his forehead.

The first thing that Bucky really absorbed was the feeling inside his chest. He was more than warm, more than comfortable, more than happy. He was safe. He was loved. It was filling him from every ounce of his soul - he could feel it in his toes, his shins, hips, torso, building up through tired bones and tingling out the tips of his fingers, behind closed eyelids. It was everywhere.

A soft smile curled on his lips and he pressed his fingers in harder, serenity washing over him so sweet he could drown in it. The press of fingers pulled a reciprocating draw, the strong arms over his back wrapped him ever closer, fingers spread wide and possessive to burn over his shoulderblade and lower back.

"Mmm," Bucky hummed, mouth muffled by thin fabric draped over tight muscle. The hand on his shoulder blade dragged up over the top of Bucky's back, callused artist fingers rubbing over the bare skin on the back of his neck before slipping up into his hair, nails scratching slightly against his scalp. His lips parted and a blissful escape of air slipped past, his fingers digging in to find the outlines of those newly-padded ribs, that didn't stick out (thankfully) like they used to.

He traced his fingertips along the ribs like he was painting them himself, memorializing the one thing that had always been so familiar to him. It wasn't often that Bucky felt like an artist but he did now, only a thin layer of unobtrusive fabric between his palms and the masterpiece he was holding. A masterpiece that was his.

"Buck," Steve whispered into the top of Bucky's head. Bucky's soft, contented smile broke out into an immeasurably happy one and he hummed again, burying closer to Steve's chest. The hand playing in his hair swept back down to his neck, fingertips dipping below the hem of his shirt. It was warmer than fire and a thousand times gentler.

With his eyes closed, the rest of his senses were heightened and Steve's touch, Steve's arms around him, Steve's body underneath him, were all so tuned into his head that he could be Steve. They were pressed so close together Bucky didn't care where Steve's body started and his ended. He was entirely surrounded in all things beautiful, his senses filled with something like summer and clouds and sunshine and dirt and everything else beautiful and natural and real.

"Stevie," Bucky mumbled back, running his hands down from Steve's ribs, cataloging muscle and beauty all the way down to Steve's hips and back up again, rubbing care and love into him the way he used to rub warmth into tiny, frozen limbs. Now, the limbs were strong and safe and wrapped all up in Bucky's, legs tangled beneath slivers of sheets that felt like swan feathers.

"Lemme see you," Steve whispered again, his deep gold voice made gentle and silver in the peaceful quiet of the early morning. Bucky nosed against Steve's collarbone one more time, breathing in a full
breath of pure Steve, and rolled a little off of Steve's chest. Steve kept one arm braced over Bucky's lower back and Bucky settled in against it, hand sweeping around to press his palm over Steve's heart as he turned his face up.

When he slowly blinked his eyes open, Steve was already looking at him, eyes dazed they looked so mesmerized. The image grew sharper and Bucky's soft smile returned, the edges of his mouth curling as he lost himself in an abyss of beautiful beautiful blue like the sky over Brooklyn.

Steve's hand slid from Bucky's neck to his cheek, cupping his jaw as he searched Bucky's face, only a few inches of white pillow between them. Everything was so perfect and beautiful that Bucky's heart couldn't help but ache. He couldn't lose this, he just couldn't.

"Let me wake up next to you every day, Steve," Bucky breathed, his fingertips curling a bit frightenedly over Steve's heart. The peaceful look on Steve's face sharpened with worry, creases forming between his eyes as he registered the tremors down Bucky's spine.

The hand on his jaw drew back and those artist fingers clamped down solid over Bucky's, holding their entwined hands over Steve's heart as blue eyes stared straight into Bucky's soul. Bucky bit his bottom lip, blinking a little timidly in the face of that intensity. Steve's hand squeezed tighter on his and the arm still half under Bucky pulled him a few inches closer. It was impossibly warmer and safer now and the fear was already slipping away when Steve was looking at him like that.

"I'm never letting go, James Buchanan Barnes," Steve promised him and Bucky locked their fingers tight enough to bruise, dipped his head forward to touch his forehead to Steve's. His eyes shut and ghosted warm air washed over his nose, his lips. "Never."

A shaky breath rolled past Bucky's lips. Steve tugged up their entwined hands, freeing his thumb to brush slowly over the corner of Bucky's mouth.

"I want to go home." Bucky kept the words as airy as he could, the golden sunlight streaming around them still creating a bubble too sweet to break. It was beautiful, everything was just so beautiful. But it wasn't Brooklyn.

Steve didn't answer for a moment, just leaned back away and tilted Bucky's chin up so Steve could look him in the eyes. Bucky stared up, enchanted, because Steve could truly be a painting, his beauty was something of the gods, something of art. And then he spoke.

"I am home. I'm with you." Steve's face was in the most honest, pure expression he owned and Bucky could cry, except that every ounce of him was filled with warmth and there was nothing to pull tears from, not even the happy ones he wanted. He was just made of clouds and love and the beautiful blue that was Steve Rogers.

Steve's callused thumb stroked over Bucky's cheek and Bucky closed his eyes against the feel of it, the words behind it. The promises and the sweetness and everything that was golden and perfect. He let out a shaky breath and the air around them shifted, the warmth in his bones tightening.

It wasn't his idea, it wasn't even something he'd thought to happen next, but suddenly Steve was rolling, up over Bucky to hover, looking down with that gorgeous halo of blonde over his head and his legs still all tangled up in Bucky's. His elbows were pinned on either side of Bucky's head and Bucky's breath cut off in his lungs in the most wonderful way.

Steve was looking at him with this burning expression, his eyes flicking down to Bucky's lips and how was he ever supposed to take in oxygen when Steve was on top of him, looking down like that?
"Steve." A prayer. A dying breath and the first gasp of air in a century. Steve's lips curled up a bit too, his voice as soft and sweet as always, words tumbling out to wash over Bucky.

"I never want to see you again," Steve whispered, his voice so soft Bucky didn't register the words at first. Steve kept looking down at him with that sweet face and Bucky's eyebrows furrowed, confused.

"Steve?"

"I never want to see you again," Steve repeated, like a promise this time. Hot, heavy hands ran down Bucky's sides, roaming over to Bucky's hips, but the sentence wasn't matching the movements of Steve's hand, the softness of his face. Bucky blinked up at the halo'd Steve in confusion, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

Then without warning, Steve's hands suddenly drew away from Bucky's body. He didn't see what Steve had taken from him until the glint flashed through the air.

Then the blade of his favorite knife was sinking into his chest.

Bucky screamed. Steve kept hovering over him, up on one arm now as he carved the knife down Bucky's sternum. Bucky tried to shut his eyes before the image burned into his brain but he couldn't, for some reason he couldn't shut his eyes, he didn't have a single ounce of control over his body. It was all he could see, Steve's face so peaceful and sweet as he ground the knife through flesh and bone.

Steve carved a bloody star into Bucky's chest.

He carved an x over it.

Bucky couldn't stop screaming. The guards threw a bucket of icy snow in his face and he startled awake, the image disappearing, and he still couldn't stop screaming.

The guards left with their bucket and Bucky was alone again, chained to the wall and chained to the ground and shaking and hurting all over and dripping with melting snow and bleeding from his nose and from his throat.

His vocal chords gave out on him and his screams fell silent and hoarse. He couldn't even curl up in a ball and lose himself, the chains were too tight.

The screams eventually faded into weeping and Bucky hung his head and cried until his body gave up on him too and he dropped into unconsciousness again.

~*~*~

"Shipment from Zola."

"I thought he was still in captivity."

"They're hung up on Captain America's death and he still has contacts. He left a message and sent a box with very specific instructions. He suspects to be joining us in a few days; however the instructions in the box must be completed before his arrival. He also sent seven men - specialists - that are waiting to see you, sir."

~*~*~
Bucky didn't budge when they undid the chains around his wrist and ankles. He didn't lift his head when a guard kicked his thigh, told him to get up. He wasn't sure he could voluntarily move if he tried.

"Steve," was all he could manage around swollen lips. The guards kicked him again, harder, and a single tear rolled down his cheek. He'd believed it for a moment. Believed he was loved.

Steve didn't love him. Bucky always thought Steve at least loved Bucky like a brother, but it turns out Steve didn't love him at all because Steve left him here alone to die.

If Steve loved him, why did he leave? Why did he leave?

Eight gloved hands invaded his space and hauled him up off the ground. Bucky was a rag doll, head hanging and limbs dead, disheveled strands of hair flopping over his forehead, too numb for even his bottom lip to tremble.

They dragged his body out of the cell and his bloody heels left trails across the floor. Curses and kicks followed every painful foot they tugged him - it was difficult to get a grip on what was left of his limbs - but he still didn't lift his head as they dragged him down the hallway. The piece of his brain that held his sniper self catalogued the route automatically, something deep inside him still looking for some kind of exit.

It was only a piece of him though, not a big enough piece to matter anymore. Other pieces of his brain took precedence over something as refined as the strategic thinking of a sniper.

He had - at one point - realized that Steve Rogers was the stitches holding him together. He'd been a dozen different versions of Bucky Barnes in his life and Steve had meshed them into one person, somehow he had let Bucky be all of them at once. The mischievous kid and the troubled teen and the Brooklyn beauty and the smartass greenie at basic and the respected sergeant of the 107th and the haunted torture victim and the silent sniper and the protective best friend.

Steve held the pieces of him together, Steve was the thing they all had in common, and now Steve was gone and Bucky was in shambles.

He had shattered and he was all of those people and none of those people and they weren't connected anymore and his entire brain was split into pieces. Sometimes he was the stubborn best friend who refused to believe that Stevie had died on him. The Nazis knew how to print a damn faux paper after all.

Other times he was that broken man on Zola's table and he was just so so scared.

The thing about being broken into pieces, though, was you couldn't possibly hold onto all of them at once.

Especially when people were trying to cut them out. If they wanted to carve away a chunk of Bucky Barnes there was nothing in him to stop them - the soldier part of him wasn't the strongest anymore, now that what he fought for was gone.

Bucky couldn't stop them at all.

They shoved him up onto another metal table, a leather strap fastened over his only wrist, over his elbow. He stared up at the ceiling, miserable and cold; they still hadn't given him a shirt. He was back on the table and he was scared, more scared than he'd been in a long time, but he was kind of relieved too.
They were going to give him something to think about besides Steve. The numbness would keep him safe.

And then gloved fingers started on his belt buckle. The dead eyes flashed and he wasn't a rag doll anymore, the piece of him that had given up slipped away and instantly, he was pissed again. Suddenly and so thoroughly pissed his vision tinted red at the corners.

He was going mad, switching from version to version, piece to piece, emotion to emotion like that. He didn't care.

"Get the fuck off me you sicko," Bucky bit, kicking his bloody bare foot at the closest soldier. Three gloved hands slammed his heel back down on the table, three more gloved hands grabbed his other ankle before he could lift it.

He'd freaked out when they took his jacket from him but now they were stripping him naked and there was still nothing he could do about it. They'd gotten smarter with holding him down, had at least seven soldiers on him at any time.

Serum or no serum, he couldn't take down seven guys with one arm. They figured that much out.

Exposed, vulnerable, freezing, and nothing he could do about any of it. They had 100% full access to any part of his body that they wanted and Bucky was red with rage, humiliation. Pain. Fear.

There were too many emotions to handle.

They wheeled the table into a room he hadn't been in yet. There were lab coats in here, men with face masks like doctors. The same bright industrial lights, same table of tools.

As much as he hated to let them win, Bucky was crying again, silent tears rolling down his cheeks as he stared at the dirty ceiling and wondered what they were going to do to him. At one point one of the doctors covered his lower half with a sheet, but it just managed to fuck with his brain because why would they strip him to cover him back up? Or maybe the doctors didn't want to have to see the nasty gash on his thigh that hadn't healed yet. Everything else had healed, by now. Except his arm, that was still a stump.

The world was spinning now, slightly foggy. Bucky wondered when the last time he'd eaten was.

The labcoats marched to his table. One had an electric saw in his hand. Bucky wondered what the hell that could possibly be for. Not exactly a common torture method.

* *

He found out what the saw was for. He thought he'd screamed and cried himself hoarse by now, but he'd underestimated his vocal chords. He thought the pain would be a distraction from his heartbreak, but he hadn't realized the price of that distraction.

They didn't even sedate him as they sawed off what was left of his arm.

The electric blade started up with a whirring sound that would haunt him for years and Bucky was screaming and begging for them to stop before the spinning even reached his arm. They all had earplugs in to muffle him.
The labcoats still flinched at the blood-curdling shriek when the saw slid through his flesh, ripping back layers of cell and skin and muscle with the first swift slice down.

Blood splashed against the side of his face, against his mouth. His own blood, splattering up against him like a bad graffiti painting. He could barely comprehend the pain through his screams.

Then the saw hit bone. Marrow went flying, little white slivers and shards of periosteum following. The side of his neck took a hit and then he was bleeding even more: sliced open by a jagged piece broken off of his own skeleton. His brain was short-circuiting, trying to simultaneously ignore the grinding blade and get it to stop at the same time.

He passed out from the sheer, delirious pain before he got a single glance at the glint of metal to replace him.

*

~*~*~

There were twenty-four men in full uniform standing at attention before the metal double doors of the abandoned factory's headquarters. When the doors opened, a bespectacled tiny man limped out and shook the hand of a tall lean bespectacled man. Reinhardt nodded once at Zola, taking his team of seven and leaving the facility. Zola turned to the remaining soldiers, Swiss accent thick as he addressed them from the metal balcony.

"My name is Doctor Arnim Zola and I am one of ze last functioning, remaining heads of Hydra. You have been assigned here because you are ze best your countries have to offer. Zis project is ze most heavily-guarded and important project to ever be executed in Europe. Ze circumstances are more zan dangerous, and I'm sure you have all been filled in on ze details. Before we begin, I must remind you of ze most important key."

"We are not breaking a man anymore. We are creating a weapon. We are creating a masterpiece. Zis will not be torture, zis will be art. Training. Any attempt on Case Seventeen's life will respond in ze termination of yours. Sergeant Barnes is more valuable than the lives of all of ze soldiers in all of your armies. No one will come into direct contact without explicit orders and no one will interfere with ze molding processes. Only ze top of zeir division even know zis project exists, and we have no qualms with ze destruction of zeir lives as well, should it be necessary. Is zis understood?"

Seventeen double arms reached to the sky.

"Heil. Hydra!"

~*~*~

For the first time since he'd been captured - scratch that, for the first time since he could really remember - the immediate thought when he regained consciousness was not of Steve.

He blinked his eyes open under harsh industrial lights and he didn't turn to look for Steve's sleeping body, didn't sob as the realization of Steve's death hit him all over again.

Something was off. There were lab coats around him with their face masks, one of them close and hovering with a clipboard. His shoulder was burning like a nest of fire ants were attacking him, his body was aching and there was a weird taste in his mouth and he could swear there was pressure on his left arm.

Bucky looked down and lifted two hands into the air. One of them wasn't his, but it lifted when he
told it to. Shining shifting plates, an unfamiliar whirring sound as metal shifted. Bucky stared, curling his fingers into a fist and watching the metal curl in a mirror form of his real hand.

They'd ruined him.

The black rage slipped over him like a dark transparent blanket and he reached for the nearest lab coat, watching the metal hand with fascination as wrapped the metal fingers around the scientist's trachea.

He'd kill every single one of them for polluting him like this. And he'd use their own fucking tool to do it with.

The skin of the scientist's neck didn't have a texture, but he could sense touching it. Like wearing gloves, in a way. Touching through something but not actually feeling all the details.

Bucky focused and squeezed, lifting the scientist off his feet as he choked and scrambled wildly against the metal hand. The man couldn't do anything. He couldn't do a single thing about it because the metal was uncompromisable. It was metal, for crying out loud.

And he had control of it.

The rest of the lab coats rushed his way and one of them stabbed a needle in his chest, instantly filling him with some sort of dizzying drug. They must not have had enough time to figure out the dosage yet because Bucky’s eyes didn't flutter shut. Instead he snapped the metal fingers together, crushing the esophagus of the scientist he'd been choking. With a movement that felt too easy, he tossed the dead scientist's body at the next closest one and they both went tumbling down.

Only his hips and ankles were strapped down.

Bucky sat up and yanked back the sheet, ignoring how the shock of sudden cold made his naked body want to curl up and shiver. Everything was spinning from the drug, but he didn't care. The metal hand was clumsy in a way that it was confusing to watch - he felt like he had to mentally tell it what to do, which was clearly not how it worked.

You don't tell your hand to grab a doorknob, you just grab the doorknob. So he tried to focus on the metal hand a little less, just so he could get out of here fast enough.

He ripped back the strap across his hips, breaking the leather and sliding down the rest of the table before ripping back the leather straps on his ankles too. He was out.

Bucky jumped off the table and there was instantly a swarm of lab coats on him, all bearing needles and trying to stick him with one. He had a lot of exposed skin, but they'd given him a weapon now and he wasn't going down without a fight.

He spun in a circle, letting the metal thing swing out and knock over the lab coats like bowling pins. A few dodged it, a few hit the concrete with terrible thuds. Bucky paused, trying to regroup his thoughts, and nearly fell over sideways. Now that he wasn't using his momentum or laying down, his entire left side was way too heavy for his body. Readjusting his center of gravity lower and tipping his body to the right, Bucky eyed the approaching dripping needles. They had no idea who they were messing with.

He shot out a kick at the nearest lab coat's knee and almost fell over from the change in balance. Okay, fighting with the extra weight was almost as bad as fighting without an arm. The scientist he kicked went down, but in the proceeding stumble another scientist lunged at his back, needle raised high and ready to pierce skin.
Bucky swung out the metal thing again and slammed the scientist down to the ground, his skull splitting on the concrete.

Another thud made him spin sharply around, but it was just another lab coat crumpling to the ground. By himself. Odd. Thud. And another. Thud. Another. Each of them with eyes rolling back in their heads before dropping to the ground.

Bucky looked around with wide eyes as the lab coats all collapsed. What in the world? He tipped his head back to look for vents, maybe it was some sort of gas? A few strands of hair had strayed to his forehead and he smoothed them back haphazardly as he looked around.

A soft white memory of ghost artist fingertips, shifting the strands of hair off his forehead.

Bucky crumpled to his knees. He couldn't tell if it was from the sudden hit of Steve again - and the realization of the three minutes he'd gone without Steve on his mind - or the gas that was finally starting to get into his system.

A glint of metal in his peripherals was the last thing he saw before the gas took him completely.

~*~*~

"Sergeant Barnes," Zola greeted. Bucky blinked against the foggy film over his eyes. He couldn't quite see, everything was fuzzy and spinning, but he could still make out that face. He'd never forgotten it.

If he could move, Bucky would kill him. He'd been dreaming of killing him for more than a year. They all had, every one of the Commandos. Ironic, that they thought Bucky had died the day they had captured Zola.

Bucky had really been hoping that Steve had smashed Zola's face in.

But Zola was here. Steve hadn't killed him, none of the Commandos had. Even the US Military must have let him go. That thought alone was sickening enough to ruin him. None of Bucky's pain had been worth it: his death hadn't even been important enough, reason enough for them to kill this bastard.

And then Zola opened his mouth and everything got about a hundred times worse. That kept happening a lot lately.

"You are to be the new fist of Hydra."

Of course.

Of course they hadn't captured him just for information.

Of course they wanted him to fight. They wanted him to fight for them. The bastards who had killed Steve.

Zola smiled down at him.

Bucky just closed his eyes. This had to be another nightmare.

~*~*~
They go for his head first. At one point, a month ago, he might have beaten them at their own game. When they'd had him a year ago he broke easier than he'd have liked to admit.

Now, there was no contest. Not really. He didn't have anything to lose anymore.

"Who are you?" The metallic voice asked. (Everything was metallic.)

Bucky was in a perfectly square (metal) room, strapped to a (metal) table and staring up at a perfectly square (metal) ceiling. There were windows on all four walls, windows that showed Bucky his reflection, even though he knew the people on the other side of those windows could see him.

His shoulder hurt enough to have most of his brain occupied with refraining from screaming. Screams meant iron brands with fire now (there were two burns already healing on his side and thigh) and he didn't want to bend over backwards (Steve would be ashamed), but the smart thing to do would be to avoid getting burned again.

"Who are you?" The voice asked again. Someone behind one of the windows, he was sure. Speaking through some sort of device.

The first time they'd asked him that - more than a year ago - he'd sassily replied with just a kid from Brooklyn. They'd pressed and prodded and poked him until he changed his answer. Sergeant James Barnes. 32557038. Over and over and over. Who are you.

He knew this question too well already.

They never hurt him enough to kill him and Bucky hated them for that. The only thing he hated them for more was the newspaper. Which was alright, because he hated himself for the newspaper the most.

It was his fault Steve was dead and he's not stupid, he couldn't deny that.

"Who are you?" The voice sounded pissed now and the question didn't come alone. An electric shock spiraled up from the metal bars impaling his feet, a warning that he needed to answer.

The pieces of him laughed at himself because he knew that a month ago, he'd be fighting back so hard. For Steve. Bucky had always fought for Steve (since day 1) and he'd simply lost that. There was nothing left to fight for, only things to fight against.

"Fuck off," Bucky slurred tiredly because it's what he was supposed to say even if he didn't have a reason to anymore.

The shock bit the insides of his feet again. Bucky tossed his head back lethargically against the table and wondered distantly if he had the strength to bust his own skull.

"Who are you?" The voice asked again. The metal robot.

"Sergeant James Barnes," Bucky rasped. Like he was supposed to.

"Why are you here?"

The first time they'd asked him that he'd shot back because you took me and brought me here, you ridiculous Nazi bastards.

Eventually he'd given them a different answer for that one too. Eventually they'd stopped asking that one, always reverting back to who are you. Bucky couldn't figure out why.
He wondered if the here they were asking him about meant here as in the facility or here as in the war.

"Information," Bucky responded eventually. His left side was heavy. Too heavy, he felt like he was going to fall off the table.

"Who do you serve?"

Your mother. the first time they'd asked, a year ago.
Not you batty Germans. the second time.
The 107th. the third time.
My fuckin' country. the fourth time.

"The United States of America," Bucky said dully to the ceiling.

"Who do you serve?"

They were trying to make him think. Trying to break down to the answer in his soul. Every time he didn't give them what they felt was the full truth, it was an electric shock up through his legs.

"The Howling Commandos," Bucky revised. He hated himself for cooperating but he'd hate himself more if he got killed right after he was given his first weapon.

Well, it could be a weapon. After Bucky got over the urge to hurl every time he so much as looked to his left. It was metal, like everything else cold.

Bucky was metal like everything else cold.

"Who do you serve?" The voice echoed again, words relentless and feet burning hot from the lightning by now. At least he wasn't screaming. Just gasping, tears in his eyes. He didn't really take the time to notice his body's reactions right now though, he was too caught up in his head.

"The Howling Commandos," Bucky repeated, because it was true. He did serve them. They were the only family he had left.

The unseen faces on the other side of the windows must not have been impressed. They asked again.

"Who do you serve?"

Bucky clawed at his brain with invisible hands. He still couldn't budge from being strapped down but if he could he'd sink his sharp nails right into the flesh of his temple, tear out the worms they were trying to stick into his brain.

Who did he serve? Why did he fight? It wasn't America it wasn't his country it wasn't even his team and he hated himself for that.

Who did he serve.

"Steve Rogers," Bucky whimpered, tears blurring his vision again. He sunk his teeth into his bottom lip to make it stop trembling but the shivers wouldn't seize.

It wasn't giving Steve up, he told himself. They couldn't hurt Steve now. Steve was gone. Steve was safe, at least. Bucky had gotten Steve killed but at least he wasn't here. At least they couldn't hurt him.

Something still crumpled painfully in his stomach at the admission. He'd given them Steve's name
and his head was swirling with it.

He didn't want to know what they were going to do with that name.

"Who are you?" The voice repeated. Again. The voice wasn't over that one.

"Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038."

"Who are you?"

"Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038."

"Who are you?"

But he'd answered it. He'd answered it and they weren't going to leave him alone. This was how he'd ended up mumbling it to himself on repeat last time.

The more times you say something the less meaning it holds.

Repeating his name rank and serial number didn't just give the enemy his information.

It took the information away from him, made it meaningless. Made him meaningless. Nothing.

"Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038."

"Who are you?"

"Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038."

"Who are you?"

"Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038." It came out like a plea this time.

"Who are you?" Unrelenting.

"Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038." A sob.

"Who are you without him?"

The question froze him. A shock rattled the bones in his ankles but Bucky couldn't care.

Who was he without Steve?

Who was James Buchanan Barnes without Steven Grant Rogers?

Who was he?

He wouldn't have been a Sergeant if it weren't for Steve. Probably wouldn't have been in the army if it weren't for Steve. Wouldn't have been an artist. Wouldn't have cared so damn much about everything. Wouldn't have saved lives, wouldn't have fought for anything important. Never would have been Bucky if it weren't for Steve.

When you stripped the Steve from Bucky Barnes, what was left over?"

"Nothing good," Bucky whispered. Mortified. Staring at the ceiling with wide eyes and a shaking
body.

"Who are you without him?"

Bucky closed his eyes.

Darkness. There was nothing beautiful inside him that hadn't come from Steve.

"Who are you without him?"

"Who are you without him?"

"Who are you without him?"

"Who are you without him?"

"Nothing," Bucky whispered.

The voice fell silent.

~*~*~

A knock on the door startled her and Peggy spun around at the sound, glad she wasn't the type of mourner who had to wipe at her eyes.

"Agent Carter?" Dugan asked a little sheepishly from the doorway. Morita had an even more sheepish look on.

"Yes?" Peggy crossed her arms tightly over her chest and raised her eyebrows in a way that hopefully wasn't too sharp.

"We, uh. Wanted to come check on you, ma'am." Dugan flinched as he said it and Peggy had half the mind to snap at them for being presumptuous enough to think she needed 'checking on.'

"That's very kind, Dugan, but I don't need your moral support. Was there anything else you came to discuss?"

Morita shifted on his feet, eyes lowered in some form of respect, or maybe fear. When he looked up though, he seemed fairly confident in his words.

"It just seemed only right somebody come ask. We know how close you were to Captain Rogers, ma'am."

Peggy sighed, letting her arms fall back down to her side. There was something about the Howling Commandos that just made them somewhat endearing in their deadliness.

"Not as close as Bu- you boys, were. How are the men holding up?"

Dugan shrugged. "Morale's pretty low but no one's lost their heads."

"See to it that they don't," Peggy crossed her arms back over her chest again. "Will that be all, gentleman?"

"Actually ma'am...we heard something about a team you might be forming?"
"Are you both interested?" Dugan and Morita both nodded. She waved them at the chairs in front of the desk. They both removed their hats as they sat down, listening intently. Peggy wondered if they had been this respectful before they'd met Steve or if they'd learned it from him. Either Steve Rogers had a brilliant choice in his team or he shaped men more than she thought.

Although she had heard something about the team actually being formed by Barnes...

No thinking about Bucky, or Steve. There was a mission at hand, not a love story to cry over.

"There is a Nazi unique items retrieval and torture specialist by the name of Werner Reinhardt that needs to be hunted down. He had a powerful position in Hydra and is very likely to be involved in top level projects the US Military may be interested in. He's dropped off the grid since Zola was captured, but I need a skilled team to track him down."

Dugan and Morita both looked at each other then looked back at her and nodded.

"What kind of top level projects?"

"Secretive ones, unfortunately. There's a rumor about the manufacturing of a new weapon that is quite concerning. Other than that, I'm afraid we don't know much. Are any other members of your team interested?"

"Falsworth and Dernier are both headed to rejoin their own armies. Jones is goin' back to the front lines, I believe. Just Morita and I are stickin' around."

Peggy pursed her lips, looking down at her shoes for a moment. The best fighters - possibly best men - this war effort had and they were disbanded. Nothing had been the same since Bucky had died, but Steve's to follow...

"That's fairly understandable." She smoothed out her skirt, turning a tight smile on the last two members of the Howling Commandos. "Well, the US Military appreciates your help. I'll contact you with further information."

"Yes ma'am," they said in unison, standing again and nodding in respect. Peggy watched them as they walked back out of the tent, heads high but tired. They all were. There wasn't a single one of their fleet that hadn't been affected by the plane crash.

She wondered if Steve would be disappointed in them all.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

March 18, 1945

The seven steps to breaking a man creating a human weapon.

The meeting room was as unremarkable on the outside as the two men who walked into it, shaking hands over a metal table before they sat down, surrounded by unobtrusive grey walls and an unassuming metal door. But inside that meeting room - and those two appearingly unremarkable men - a plan to shape the century was born.

"Doctor Lagunov," Zola greeted, adjusting his glasses as Lagunov carefully sat his pile of manilla
folders on the table between them.

"Doctor Zola. I understand you went to great lengths - as far as Russia - insuring you find the top consultant of my division. I can assure you will not be disappointed in your choice. How can I assist you in your current project?"

"Well, Doctor. I make ze weapons of ze warfront, and zis is my greatest weapon yet. A project a year in ze making zat should last for decades. Ze plan is nearly perfect, but I need some...psychological advice. I cannot begin the physical creation of zis weapon until it is mentally prepared. Specifically, zere need to be certain features retained and others erased; in order to have ze slate I need to work my magic."

Lagunov nodded slightly, sliding the second manilla folder out from his pile and opening it gently, spreading a few papers across the table between them.

"The psychological creation of a man into a machine. It's a fascinating topic, one I have had the fortune of studying extensively. I must say though, there hasn't been a single scientist who has come close to such a creation. The biggest factor isn't the methods used, it's whom they are used on. How confident are you of your subject's ability to morph into something inhuman?"

"Quite confident, Doctare. Zere's something special about zis one." Zola straightened his glasses on his nose and Lagunov slid one of the papers across the table.

"Wonderful. So we shall begin, then. Now the groundwork for the transformation is based on an old philosophical idea introduced by Rene Descartes. He once said that the body and mind are separate entities, composed of different substances, which interact within a living person; sometimes in harmony and other times competitively. The idea is to break apart the body from the mind, while keeping them linked enough that the control of one will give you the immeasurable control of the other.

"So, that brings in the work of Ivan Pavlov - he was able to condition a dog to salivate to the sound of a bell instead of the smell of food. Animals are extremely complex, but they respond to situations according to their nerve pathways conditioned through experience. The conditioning is key. Now, for the convenience of execution, the first stage has been split into seven separate sections. These - steps, if you will - are the best way to achieve the man to machine transformation."

Lagunov pointed at the piece of paper, following Zola's gaze to the words.

"The seven steps go as this:
Один (1): information collection
Два (2): strip to the core of humanity
Три (3): rerouting of emotional connections
Четыре (4): physical and mental awareness
Пять (5): disconnection of mental physical barrier
Шесть (6): destruction of personal identity
Семь (7): assertion of true control

"Now, let me explain just what I mean by these further, Doctor Zola..."

~*~

"Step one: Collect as much incriminating data against the subject as is possible. Find the weaknesses, find out what the nightmares are about, their most secret desire, most terrible memory. Anything that will break them."
"Who are you without him?" The voice asked again.


"What are you to him?"

His eyes squeezed shut and Bucky tried to breathe, tried to find some semblance of calm amidst the cold and the prodding and the electric shocks in his feet and the terrible questions they kept asking him.

They'd let him be, let him sit and rot in his own words and thoughts for what felt like days. Nothing, repeating in his head over and over again on loop. He was nothing without Steve. They'd ripped that out of him.

Then the voice came back out of nowhere, suddenly starting up the questions again. Bucky was just so tired. He wanted it to be over, he didn't want to have to think. He didn't want his brain and his mouth betraying him and betraying Steve but the voice wouldn't stop asking and the rods in his feet wouldn't stop shocking him and his shoulder wouldn't stop burning.

"I don't know," Bucky said, which seemed to be his preferred answer to most of the questions they asked about Steve. They asked a lot of questions about Steve. It wasn't fair. It was like they knew that Steve was his core, Steve was his everything. They were using the beautiful sunshine against him, like dangling a carrot over a donkey’s nose to make it run and it wasn't right because Steve's memory deserved so much better than that.

"What are you to him?" The voice asked again. The wording only ever changed slightly and it still sounded like a robot, but each question was enough to tear a hole into Bucky’s sternum.

He could spend hours thinking about the depth of each question, he could lie here and wallow in his sorrow and the incredible question of what is Bucky to Steve?

His best friend? His childhood playmate? His left hand man? Sure, but that wasn't quite what the question was asking. Bucky knew, because he'd tried all of those answers and apparently it wasn't the one they were looking for. No, they wanted to know how Steve felt about him.

If Bucky was something more. But Bucky wasn't. He wasn't anything to Steve.

"What are you to him?"

"Nothing," Bucky whispered again, the word swallowed up by the sob he'd been choking back. The voice fell silent as he cried, slamming his head back against the table and cursing everything and just pouring tears all over the metal table beneath him.

He was nothing. He was nothing to Steve. His body was nothing and his head was nothing because Steve was gone and what was his purpose supposed to be? What was he living for? Why did he exist if he wasn't here for Steven Grant Rogers?

The soft strands on his forehead that Steve used to fix for him, sweep back with a soft smile on his face, were sticking to him with sweat and probably blood, he couldn't tell where he was bleeding or not anymore.

It didn't matter, though. None of it mattered because Steve was dead.
"How long have you known Captain Rogers?"

"Don't talk about him," Bucky replied tiredly, getting a little sick of all of the questions and metallic voices. He had no idea how long he'd been in here but they'd been asking more and prodding more for what felt like forever.

They kept up that same torture method of shocking him any time they didn't like his answers and Bucky decided it was basically fucking pointless to tell them anything but the truth. They were monitoring his vitals or something, had some sort of lie detector going or at least a few experts on lying standing on the other side of one of the glass windows, watching and waiting for the truth in his answers.

Although he had to admit that most of the time it was pretty obvious when he gave in and told them the truth like they wanted because he basically started crying every time he did; or he just got pissed. Either way, it wasn't too tough to figure out when he was giving in to their stupid questions.

They'd asked him about his family and his life in Brooklyn, but just briefly enough to tell that they didn't want to know, they were just looking for weak spots. So focus turned to the war, prodding him about Steve and all the people he'd killed.

The voice asked him about Steve a lot. Probably because he reacted so strongly to those questions; but he couldn't help it. He couldn't be silent in the face of Steve's death, he couldn't. Which meant they would not leave him alone about it.

"How long have you known Captain Rogers?"

"'M whole life," Bucky muttered, closing his eyes and trying to drift away. A bolt of electricity shot up his ankles (he wasn't allowed to sleep) and he opened his eyes back up.

"Did you join his squad because of your previous relationship?"

"Yes."

"Were you promoted to sergeant because of your previous relationship?"

"N-no, we- I. Before I shipped out."

"Why were you promoted to the sergeant position?"

"Because I was s'posd to be good at killin' you bastards."

"What was the nature of your relationship with Captain Rogers?"

"Will you stop fucking talking about him if I tell you?"

"Were you sexually involved with Captain Rogers?"

Bucky groaned, wishing he could bury his face in his hands. Well, hand. Hand and weird metal thing that was attached to his body.

"Were you sexually involved with Captain Rogers?"

Honestly, Bucky couldn't see why it would matter. Except, right, they were looking for a weak spot. Of course. As always. Being in a relationship with someone who just recently died was kind of a
weak spot.

Except, of course, his relationship with Steve had been...complicated at the best, irrelevant at the worst.

Maybe Steve didn't even care that Bucky had fallen. He hadn't come looking. He'd gone and left and he wasn't coming back now, so clearly Bucky had been reading too much into how Steve felt about him. He'd thought Steve at least cared about him, but how could he leave him here if he did?

"Were you sexually involved with Captain Rogers?"

"You're askin' the wrong questions," Bucky mumbled, eyes slipping shut again. Lightning shocked them open again.

"Were you sexually involved with Captain Rogers?" The voice paused and Bucky still didn't answer, just stared up at the ceiling with a blank expression.

"Were you in love with Captain Rogers?"

"If I tell you yes will you call me a homosexual and finally let me die?" Bucky offered hopefully.

"Were you in love with Captain Rogers?" The voice asked, not changing the slightest. Fine.

It was a shame, really.

"Were you in love with Captain Rogers?"

"Who wasn't?" Bucky asked bitterly, staring up at the ceiling and thinking that at least I loved him first didn't hold the slightest bit of weight anymore when nothing mattered. It wouldn't have made a difference anyways, not in the face of pretty red lipstick, perfectly silky hair, a tight red dress and eyes full of fire Bucky used to have.

Fire he was never getting back.

~*~

"Step two," Lagunov slid his finger down, translating the next paragraph of Cyrillic letters. "Strip the subject down to core. Boil away the masks they hide behind, unravel all of the deflection techniques and denial. Turn everything into pure honesty, cut down to the very central part of the beginning and end of each emotion, each thought, each instinct.

"Peel back until everything is open and raw and simple. The very simplest version of a man there can be - a one word core out of a million page novel."

*

The next room they dragged him to was white. The whole thing, ceiling, floor, walls. Whiter than a hospital, whiter than anything he'd ever seen before. It was like one of those asylum rooms, except without the padding they had in the stories.

He thought he'd known isolation. He had no idea.
They left him in there with just his head and this array of sound. Different pitches, different noises. The frequencies were all wrong. Just hearing them the first time made him shiver and clutch at his head.

But they didn't stop. For days.

It was a radio recording, he could tell that much. There were all of these different levels to it, different layers added over each other and it was drivin' him fucking insane.

Some of the sounds were out of hospital machines, it sounded like. Others sounded like war sounds, others he could swear were birds. Beeps and blank static and he couldn't even think with all of that going on.

His brain was short-circuiting and he couldn't form a single coherent thought. He stumbled around harmlessly, broken and confused. The metal thing attached to his shoulder was strapped flat against his body, a tight leather harness that made him one armed again. Something about not giving him weapons. The harness was the only thing on his body when they threw him in the room and locked the door behind them.

He wasn't tied down and when he ran into another white wall for about the fifteenth time in the past minute he decided that was probably the point. He couldn't tell where the walls began and the floor ended and he couldn't tell where his head began and the noises ended and it kind of felt like falling off the train all over again.

Except there was no water to hit at the bottom.

He was just falling and falling and falling and

and his hand clutched his head as he curled into a ball on the ground but the noises didn't stop and he got swallowed up anyways.

It could have been minutes or months before the noises finally faded into nothing. His brain didn't pick up on the silence though, he kept on hearing those sounds, agony, rushing through his veins.

They dragged him out by the leather harness across his chest, but he didn't notice. He wasn't seeing the white room door close and he wasn't seeing the hallway they pulled him down. He didn't see anything, he didn't hear or feel anything.

There was just white and everything else was too much, too irrelevant. None of that mattered, not an ounce of it mattered. Even words and screaming were all just...frivolous. Sounds. Everything was noise, just noise.

His eyes shot open when he hit the water. The blast was freezing and suddenly he was gasping, a flood of ice cold rushing down his throat and making him choke. He couldn't breathe and he'd inhaled water and everything suddenly got sharp

bright and clear like putting on glasses for the first time after spending an entirely life surrounded by fuzzy shapes.

His brain ached but his lungs ached more and his shoulder was still burning and he struggled, choking and coughing in the water as he tried to swim upwards with one arm, the metal attached to his body trying to sink him in the tank.
Gloved black hands grabbed the leather straps around his chest and dumped him onto the metal catwalk above the tank, water already trying to freeze to his skin from the temperature. The cold of the metal burned his body all over and he sputtered water past his lips, trying to breathe when he just wanted to scream from the pain.

Bucky was fairly sure he was freezing to the metal catwalk, physically attaching to it from the ice and water on his skin. Boots kicked his stomach, making him curl deeper in on himself as he shivered violently, teeth clacking hard enough to fear snapping his own tongue off.

Then it was back to the white noise room.

*

He didn't know how many times he woke back up gasping in a lungful of water but by the time they took him back to the room with the table and the four glass windows, he didn't have any trouble answering the first question they asked him.

Well, he had trouble speaking, but he had no trouble with the answer.

"Who are you?"

"N-noth. Ing."

~*~

"Step three: Reroute all of the dangerous emotions. Turn rage for you instead of against you. Repaint targets in the subject's head. Burn mental safe houses, break down paths of intentions and shift them just enough to work for your benefit."

"What do you know about Hydra?"

Bucky tried to swallow around the blood in his throat. His entire mouth was made of copper and his eyes had little fires lit behind them and the skin on his shoulder still felt like it was peeled open, raw.

"Nassisciencedivizon," Bucky slurred in response, blinking at the ceiling and wondering how many times they'd force him to speak before his vocal chords finally snapped their final shred.

"What do you know about Hydra's goals?"

"Whirl' dom'nation?" he responded, sounding kind of doubtful because it had to have been such a long time ago that he'd been talking about Hydra's goals. Maybe a different lifetime. Probably a different lifetime.

"Hear the truth, Sergeant Barnes. Hear the truth. Hydra is here to save the world from chaos."

"Hydra'sss," Bucky said confusedly, rolling his head a little on the metal and trying to stop the ceiling from dipping down and smushing him.

"Don't bother when he's like that. Just hang it up for the day - he'll still be there tomorrow. Somebody go find the nutrients needle." The voice got distant and Bucky didn't really hear what they were saying, he just stared up at the ceiling and wondered if he'd ever see the sunshine again.

"What do you know about Hydra's goals?"
His body had healed significantly overnight and Bucky was just tired now, back to wishing they’d just end him already.

"Wanna kill a lotta people," Bucky offered, rolling his wrist in the cuffs and trying to count back in his memory to how many times it had been broken now.

"You do, or Hydra does?"

Bucky almost smiled at that one. "Both."

"You don't want to kill us, Sergeant Barnes. You want to kill, but it is not us." He snorted at the metallic words. He had a pretty good idea who he wanted to kill.

He was pissed.

"There is still a world that needs saving. That's what Hydra are here to do: save the world. You want a part of that, don't you?"

Didn't he? Bucky wished he could pretend this was about saving people anymore. Although, really, maybe it was. Maybe all this time Bucky was just trying to save as many people as he could and he got caught in the crossfires and now he was here.

"You don't save anybody," Bucky told them. Is that what they called their torture now? Was that their excuse for the scars on his body? For the tattered, fraying edges of his mind? For the way they were ripping him apart?

"They didn't tell you the truth about us. Hear the truth, Sergeant. We are saving the world from chaos."

Bucky didn't answer. These bastards didn't deserve an answer. He was just too goddamned tired to deal with their mess right now. The only thing he could really feel was how pissed he was, how much his body ached, how much he didn't feel like talking.

"Your army drafts soldiers, pulls boys out of their homes, all for what? To fight against those who are trying to bring balance back to the world? They told you whatever you needed to hear to raise your guns against Hydra. How could you blindly trust the people that pull you out of your home and force you to go fight a war in the cold, away from life and surrounded by fire and death?"

He knew what they were trying to do. It was just that there was a piece of his head, some piece of his brain that wanted to believe it because it actually made a little sense. Everyone's army said they were the good guys, said that the team on the other side of the battlefield were evil and wrong. Of course they'd told Bucky that.

There was a little kid, just a teen with curly blonde hair, holding onto his broken wrist and looking up at Bucky with pleading blue eyes. Bucky pointed his gun at the head of some kid, just some kid, and wondered when the hell he'd started killing people without even asking what the hell they'd done.

That individual kid, what had he done? So his government sucked. Didn't all of their governments suck? What the fuck made the U.S. of fucking A. any more justified to kill than the bastards over here? What made it okay for Bucky to take lives and not some other kid defending his homeland?

"Hydra isn't looking for world domination. Hydra wants world peace."

Peace. Bucky wondered what the hell peace was supposed to look like. It wasn't something he'd ever
known before. Imagining a whole world of it...an entire world all just. Okay with each other.

Nobody killing anybody.

Is that what these people wanted? And the US were what, jealous they hadn't thought of it first? Not wanting peace because then they wouldn't be so damn powerful? What?

Or...

or maybe Hydra was trying to turn him against the only thing he had left. Maybe Hydra was trying to make him turn on his home, on his beautiful America, on the ideals of freedom and justice.

"I'm going to rip the heads off of every one of you," Bucky grit out from between his teeth. His head was swirling with the doubt that maybe he'd been on the evil side all along...but Steve had been fighting for America and nothing Steve ever did could possibly be bad--

"You're angry, Sergeant Barnes. If you are angry, be angry at Steve for leaving you."

Leaving you.

He'd promised Bucky. Bucky had been so afraid to trust, so afraid to depend on someone but he'd always depended on Steve and Steve had let him down. Steve had left him.

Bucky was so, so alone.

He was going to be alone forever.

"We aren't the enemy, Sergeant Barnes," the voice told him again. Bucky stared up at the ceiling and decided that maybe they were all the fucking enemy.

Which meant no one was.

No one, nothing. All over again. White and noise, that was all it was, wasn't it? None of it fucking mattered. It was all politics and glitter and noise.

Humans were born into a world of what? Of what? What was the fucking point? What was the fucking point? To kill each other? To give birth more useless people to kill more people?

It was just all. Noise.

~*~

"Step four: Awareness. The brain must be entirely completely aware of the body's presence at all times. This will take months of training, at least. You can begin today, Doctor, but true awareness comes with practice and time.

"You said he has a prosthetic that needs to become second nature, correct? Make him learn to accept the arm as his. Entirely, completely part of his body. Then when we take his body away from his mental possession later, you will own the arm as well. But he has to believe it is his own, first.

"And remember, power and deadliness comes through awareness. This may be one of the most important steps of the process and it certainly must be repeated."
"Sergeant Barnes," the lab coat (Bucky still couldn't call them doctors) greeted him cheerily, snapping a blue face mask over his smiling mouth. Bucky raised an unimpressed eyebrow (because it's what he would have done a few months ago) and pretended to be disinterested in whatever the newcomer was planning to do to him.

"Did you know there are 206 bones in the human body?" The same cheery voice prompted.

"I don't care," Bucky responded, pretending for his own sake that he wasn't desperately lonely of human interaction.

Pretending that he wasn't so broken he couldn't close his eyes without having nightmares about Steve. Pretending that he still could breathe fine, that his chest didn't constrict with pain from broken ribs shielding a broken heart and a broken soul and a lost little kid crying out for the sunshine to save him.

"Well, how about I teach you? Let's learn about every--" the hammer struck the bottom of Bucky's foot, snapping something in half at the impact "--little bone in your body."

Bucky didn't have the luxury to scream; his vocal chords weren't healed fully from the last time he'd shredded them. He'd be spitting copper for days if he screamed now.

"That was your Navicular bone. Sharp, isn't it? Now this is your Cuboid..."

*  
He did learn all 206 bones eventually, because it turns out the supersoldiers have the ability to get every bone in their body broken and live through it. It took him a few tries before he got all of their names, but there came a time that he could locate any bone inside his body. Lifting his hand, he could feel the bones beneath his skin, could picture them shifting or snapping behind the layers of muscle. He knew which ones hurt the most to snap, which ones could just be broken with a carefully placed chop of a hand and which needed a sledgehammer.

The exception of course, being his left arm. There were no bones to be broken there, only metal now. It was a long time after the surgery, but they eventually took the leather harness off of his chest that kept the metal thing strapped down. The first thing he did was close the strange metal fingers around his own throat and squeeze. They had him sedated again before he even broke oxygen flow.

When he woke back up the harness was still off, but there was a metal collar protecting his neck from the hand. Sighing in defeat, Bucky turned over the metal hand curiously, clenching and unclenching the fingers, watching the way the metal responded to his brain. It moved like it was his own, like it knew him already.

It was kind of beautiful, in the way that machines are. Bucky rolled the fingers and watched in fascination as the plates shifted and broke apart and realigned themselves. He wondered if that's what his heart looked like now too, little plates of armour shifting and breaking apart as a memory from Steve stabbed him here, a nightmare tortured him there. Maybe the arm was kind of fitting in a way; broken but somehow functional, like Bucky.

The most experience he had with anything mechanical like this was hanging out with Howard and watching him tinker. But now there was a chunk of metal attached to him. It was the first thing they'd given him, next to the newspaper. The only two things to call his own, a battered slip of paper to remind him of what he'd lost and a shiny foreign thing to replace what he'd lost.

It was better than not having an arm, at least. Wasn't it? Bucky turned it over in the light and watched
it glint dangerously. It really did fit him. It fit the way he felt all the time - cold, shifting. Broken pieces and waves of emotions and little shutters running through him. Responding to his thoughts but unable to figure out *how*. An imposter.

But it was his, and he didn't get to say that about a lot. Bucky ran the metal fingers through his hair, shivered at the cold feel of them, and decided to make the arm his own.

~*~

"Step five: Disconnect the body from the brain. This is not an easy process, and he is certainly going to fight against it. Hard. But once you have this, you'll nearly have him.

"The first key to this is disorientation. Make them distrust their own senses.

"A quick recommendation for the tip of the iceberg on this step: have you had the opportunity to study the brain of a ballet dancer? There is a fluid in the brain that tips when we lose our balance, but ballerinas can control it. That is how they spin around in circles so swiftly without getting dizzy. You can train the weapon similarly - dizzying spinning will not only create disorientation and the first part of body and mind disconnect, but will also begin his body's training to peak performance. Imagine a soldier who can control his brain from ever getting dizzy, keep his body from ever becoming disoriented again."

*  

They set up the new table in what Bucky had come to mentally refer to as the room 2, or the interrogation room. There was room 1 - that was the cell they'd given him the newspaper in, room 2 - with the four big one way interrogation windows on each wall, room 3 - the white room, and room 4 - the operation room.

His life basically consisted of those four places over the past god-knows-how-long. Sometimes strapped to a metal table, sometimes thrown in by himself so he could wander around and mutter to himself and lose his mind. Or curl up in a corner and cry. Or just lay down in the middle of the floor like he was on the table anyways because he might as well fucking be because this never ended, they never stopped the stupid cycle.

That's why new things almost got *exciting*. Like the new table, which wasn't really a table. It was more like a little box, with a window so he can see out of it. What he didn't know was that the model was based off of the machine they used to transform Steve during Project Rebirth. Instead he just decided that the vertical coffin thing was strange but again, exciting in the depressing way of how much he hated opening his eyes every day.

The same black gloved hands shoved him inside and closed the top and Bucky blinked, looking around what little he could see of the room and glad his feet were standing on something solid and wondering what the hell they could possibly do to him now.

Then the vertical coffin started to spin. It was slow at first and Bucky watched as one interrogation window gave way to another, then another. Speeding up and speeding up until it was a single line, just a blur of windows, a blur of unseen faces on the other side, watching his coffin spin and spin and spin in the middle of the room.

Just when he thought they couldn't do anything else to him, his brain was seizing and his eyes hurt
and it didn't matter if he closed them or not, he was dizzier than he'd been in his entire life. The world was knocking him in a thousand directions and if he wasn't being held in a tight position right now he'd probably be on the walls or the ceiling or something because he couldn't even tell which way was up.

The windows kept rushing by and Bucky - as usual - didn't have anything to throw up. They'd kept him alive by sticking him with needles that had some sort of fluid similar to an IV drip. But the last time he'd actually eaten food had been with the Howling Commandos. He had no idea how long that had been. So he didn't have the choice to hurl, his head just pounded as he moaned, the disorientation making his brain want to explode.

Bucky couldn't stand up when they finally pulled him out of the machine. They left him slumped on the floor and he didn't even try to move. His entire life he'd had an incredible sense of direction, but now he couldn't even begin to guess where the door was, let alone where North or East or South or West might be.

When he finally lifted his head, the perfectly square room didn't give the slightest hint as to which direction he was facing. Everything was the same in every direction he turned and he was in a box in a warehouse somewhere and he might as where be nowhere, because there was no out. He decided he really did not like new things.

He didn't like new things at all.

"You try so hard, Sergeant Barnes. You fight the pain so much. But I have a question for you that I want you to think about."

"You'd think I was b-back in school 'stead of a POW camp, how much you guys are t-t. T-tryin' to teach me," Bucky responded shakily, wishing he meant an ounce of the bite back anymore. He didn't have any spare energy to fight this anymore.

Between trying to block out the physical pain and trying to keep the pain of Steve at bay - which took both arms and full effort at all times, just waiting for the tidal wave to collapse the flimsy wall of denial he was hiding behind - he didn't have any spare mental process left to fight back. He was just trying to stay alive. Or maybe he was trying to die, he couldn't tell anymore.

"This is not a POW camp, Sergeant Barnes. But think about this: why do you fight the pain so much? What pain is there to fight?"

Bucky did laugh, then. If you could call the haunting burst of noise laughing. The sound actually frightened him a little, especially coming out of his own mouth. He shut his lips again pretty quickly.

"No, think about it. There are physical wounds to your body but who ever said your mind had to register that? Who ever said that a touch like this - " prod in the ribcage " - should be tolerable but a touch like this - " shallow knife to the side " - has to be more painful? Pain is a mental process of the brain, Sergeant Barnes."

Bucky blinked numbly a few times at the lab coat. The lab coat waved his hands in the air, a few drops of Bucky's blood on his knife flying as he spoke.

"It's all in your head! You can detach yourself from it. You don't have to feel the pain. It's a brain nerve connection. Just science. You can overrule that. You have control over the processes of your body. Are you saying that this little blade is stronger than every cell in your body, every connection
in your mind?"

Bucky stared at the man in the lab coat. "Think about it," the lab coat advised, sticking the knife back into Bucky's side. Bucky opened his mouth to shout, then froze the sound in his throat.

His side was throbbing, the point of intrusion burning as the lab coat started to walk away. Bucky zoned in all of his energy on the bleeding hole in his side, closing his eyes so he could just focus on the sensations running through his body. It felt sharp, like the pain was almost shaped the same way the knife was.

Bucky held an invisible knife up behind his closed eyes, turning it around and inspecting it, projecting his pain onto the sharpness of the imaginary blade.

Then he whittled it down. He whittled away and whittled away at the blade until it was just a stick in his thoughts. The knife was causing the body pain but he didn't have to own that, did he?

He tossed the metaphorical stick aside and opened his eyes back up. His side didn't hurt. The same spiking, sharp sensation was running through his body...but it didn't have to be Bucky's. He wasn't forced to claim this body as his own, was he?

* ~*~

"Step six: Identity destruction. He must unlearn himself. Something that once held importance - such as a name - must become as meaningless as quantum physics is to a child. The connection to a past life must be severed. He must learn to distrust his own thoughts, hate his own memories.

"Give him a name that means nothing. Then give him another. Then give him another. Until he is no one. Until his real name falls into the category of nothing all over again. Then you can call him whatever you please and he won't have an attachment. It will mean nothing.

"A warning though: identity destruction is not permanent. The idea of his initial identity can be triggered back. But if you take his identity away for say - five years, ten? The number of things that could trigger him back get smaller and smaller. Eventually, they should diminish completely. By the twenty year mark, it should be next to impossible to trigger any sort of recognition in him.

"Give him nothing to recognize."

"Come, Собака," one of the soldiers said as they opened the door to his cell. Bucky blinked up at the soldier, already pushing himself off the ground obediently.

"Soh-bah-ka?" Bucky asked in confusion, but he followed. They didn't need to tell him that the name meant dog. The way they said it made it clear enough.

He actually responded to it after a little while. He just got used to it, is all. If they asked him Who are you and he responded with Собака a few times, it was just force of habit. He'd been called worse things.

The name was almost nice, in a way. When they screamed and cursed at him, shouting his new name over and over, the punishment almost drifted over him. So they were yelling at Собака, Собака had done something wrong. And in a way Bucky knew he was Собака, but...at the same time it wasn't
It was just a name and whoever that Собака was tended to piss a lot of people off and he went through a lot of pain and honestly without them shouting Sergeant Barnes in his face, it got a little easier to distance himself from it all. He could just...let go of himself. His body was getting beaten but his mind was getting sharper and eventually Bucky could start to erase himself.

The thing was though, he couldn't decide which one he wanted to be.

Собака may go through a lot of physical pain, but Собака's name had never been shouted by Steve Rogers. He didn't even know what the word would sound like coming off of Steve's lips.

With Sergeant Barnes, it was like Bucky was living in constant fear of someone shouting Barnes! with the inflection that Steve used to. Whenever he was Sergeant Barnes, he had to take all of the pain that came with the people who had said that name. The people who weren't ever going to say it again.

Sometimes, Bucky didn't want to be Sergeant Barnes, he just wanted to drown in Собака. It was easier. Less painful. Собака didn't love Steve any less, so that still threatened to rip him apart from the inside out, but it was still safer.

Eventually he gave up trying to balance the two names during the who are you questions. It was just Собака now. Except, of course, when they asked him who he was without Steve.

Then the answer was still nothing.

~*~

"Step seven: Control. It is not enough to make him fear you. It is not enough to make him respect you. He must rely on you. Give him a leash, but make him beg for it first. He'll be yours, then.

"Once he comes crawling to you for help, then you can begin your weapon creation. If you spend years enforcing these seven steps, his brain will be more than ready to take on any physical training you have in mind.

"For control, you must remember to be the outlet. The savior. The master. Offer to take the pain away. He'll never run away from you again."

It was only so long, he supposed. He should have guessed the weeks or months of running wasn't going to do anything for the long term. He'd been hiding from it, denying it. Focusing on the torture, on the stupid fucking lessons they were trying to teach him for god-knows-why.

He'd been drowning himself in the torture because that was better. He found strength in the number of times they cut him open and he survived. He found distraction in the ways they fucked with his brain.

But it was only so long before it all eventually caught up with him. It was the simplest of things too, the thing that broke the final barrier he'd been trying so hard to keep up. One moment he was gritting his teeth, being dragged down yet another hallway, and the next everything went white.

The gloved hands had pulled him past a door that was ajar today, today of all days when it had always been shut before. Beyond the door was a smoke room, just a little officers room with a radio in the corner. The radio was actually for news of the war and the outside world, but at that moment
there wasn't a voice coming over the other end.

Just a three step jazz waltz.

Bucky crumpled with the sheer force of memories, his knees giving as his head suddenly whisked him off somewhere far far away. Steve's arms around him, big boots guiding Bucky across the dance floor. The soft brush of Steve's blonde hair against Bucky's temple as Steve tilted their heads together.

His chest, solid and warm and so so alive against Bucky's. Bucky had never been more at peace because in that moment, it hadn't mattered if he was in love with Steve or not, Steve was safe and thriving, just buzzing with life and beauty. In Bucky's arms, where he belonged.

His world split in two. Someone had blown out the only candle in Bucky's life. His soul light, the one thing that led him home. Brooklyn Brooklyn.

Happy blue eyes, a forgiving smile, the warmest heart. Callused, talented fingers weaving between his. Home. Home. Home.

Steve didn't exist anymore.

Bucky wasn't just alone forever. Bucky could never go home.

Bucky could never go home.

They were confused what to do with him at first. He'd been silent or screaming or cursing or depressed or leaking tears for the entire time they'd had him so far, but it had never been like this.

The tsunami came crashing down and it swept Bucky away. He couldn't uncurl from the ball he'd wrapped himself in, he couldn't stop sobbing. He was reliving Steve's death all over again but time had made it real. It wasn't just a newspaper anymore, it wasn't just words that broke his heart. The weight of Steve's absence had settled in heavy and crushing and Bucky knew now, he knew it in his soul that Steve wasn't coming for him.

The guards eventually just had to pick up the shaking ball Bucky refused to budge from, toss him in the closest cell they could find. Bucky bawled and the superiors held a meeting about what the hell to do with him now.

He's broken, really broken. One of the soldiers told Zola.

I can't imagine what we could possibly do to hurt him now, another imputed.

Zola slid out his file, looking over the seven steps, and smiled to himself. They'd reached the completion of the first cycle. There'd be many more to come, but the first round of breaking down man into machine would be over after this final thing.

It's step seven, now. We will not hurt him any longer. Instead, we will save him.

"Собака?" Zola asked, stepping into the cell. Bucky didn't lift his head.

He didn't need to tell Zola there was nothing they could do to hurt him now. Zola could see it in the shape of his shoulders, in the metal hand that was clenched so tightly in his hair, he was probably pulling some of it out.
"We aren't here to torture you any longer, Собака. Let us help you."

Bucky still didn't lift his head. The curled metal and curled real hands in his hair didn't relax an inch.

"Let us help you," Zola offered again, gently reaching out to place his hand on Bucky's bare shoulderblade.

Bucky lifted his head slowly, looking at Zola with bright red bloodshot eyes surrounded by dark grays and blues from lack of sleep, exhaustion, pain, bruises.

He didn't look human but Zola managed not to flinch away.

"What could you possibly--" Bucky began, voice like shattered glass grinding against gravel.

"We can take it all away. We can make you forget."

Bucky just stared at him with his wild animal eyes.

"We can wipe it out of your memory. If you want. We can take it away. We can help you, Собака. You don't have to feel it anymore."

The metal hand uncurled from his hair, whirring softly as Bucky brought it down in front of him, clenching it tightly and staring at the glinting plates. He brought his other hand up, held them both and looked at his palms.

At the spaces between his fingers where Steve's hands would never be again.

"Just make me forget," Bucky whispered, closing his eyes in defeat.

Zola lifted him gently to his feet and Собака followed the doctor, staring ahead and seeing everything, wishing he could see nothing.

He'd see nothing soon.

~*~

"And when the first stage is over, find a way to suspend him. Still the transformation; leave him stagnant to stew in the progress, let it all sink in. When you bring him back out into the world and start at step one again, he'll already be halfway to ready.

"One last thing to remember, though, Doctor Zola. Never, never forget how deadly your weapon will be when the process is over. More deadly than anything humanity has dealt with before.

"You may make yourself a demon trying to create an attack dog. If he loses his muzzle for a moment, there is no telling what he will kill. What he will become. Keep the collar tight, Arnim Zola.

"And whatever you do, don't lose your grip on the leash."

Four words became more important than who are you. Four words became more important than any other words he was supposed to know in his life.
Four words became the ending and the beginning.

"Put him on ice."

Chapter End Notes

In case you were uber confused, timeline probably took place over a few months. And Bucky's an emotional rollercoaster, but that's kinda how it goes when you lose your mind.

And if you haven't caught onto the Reinhardt reference yet, he's a guy in Agents of Shield that was a pretty integral part of Hydra during World War 2. He was involved in all sorts of top secret projects, I figured being a temporary supervisor of the Winter Soldier project wasn't too far of a stretch.

As for Lapunov, I made him up, no reference to catch there sorry. Just a crazy psychologist philosophical guy.

Hang in there with the tough chapters (or skip them that's okay too) I promise things will be worth it.

(I just really needed to have some understanding of the transformation from Bucky Barnes to Winter Soldier because everyone writes them as two different people and I just really want to show how it's still Bucky - even if he doesn't know it is. It's the same human being and that's easy to forget so that's why I am putting us all through the pain of Bucky's transformation. )

ANYWAYS thank you so much for reading, you are all angels

xx
Одиннадцать (Eleven)

Chapter Notes

Warnings for: psychological torture, brief mention of possible rape, major identity loss, and some physical torture as well (the little * warnings are still in play)

Also, the writing style is kinda crazy, but it's to reinforce the organized analytical "mission" way of thinking.

The playlist for our darling Bucky:
This gorgeous Russian song we all know so well
Who Are You Really - Mikky Ekko
The Road - Hurts
Almost Lover - A Fine Frenzy
A Place Only You Can Go - Needtobreathe

Okay, there are certain times in the fic that if you want to listen along while you read, I've put a little xx that you can open in a new tab at the time when the song would come in. (or listen to the song just before you read that part). If you want.

If you haven't seen Agents of Shield (it's a good show - I vote you watch it) this clip: xx is part of a scene in this chapter. (There are more pieces I use from the episode too but it's not on youtube) If you want to watch the whole episode it's Season 2 Episode 8, Things We Bury.

DISCLAIMER: The majority of this chapter is written from Bucky's POV. He is absolutely unstable; out of his mind to the point that he isn't seeing things the way they are. He literally refers to blatant torture as "pain training." So, if at any point Hydra looks like the good guys, it's b/c that's what he sees. (Hydra are dicks irl fyi)

This also means that the worst parts of the torture - especially the physical parts - his mind is going to exclude. The whole "forget for your own sake" thing. I think a lot of what they did to him would be too much to handle, so his mind simply cuts them out of his consciousness. That said, do enjoy!

xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"Psychology as a behaviorist views it is a purely objective experimental branch of natural science. Its theoretical goal is … prediction and control." - Watson (1913)

~*~*~

July 1945

Werner Reinhardt had heard of Agent Peggy Carter. Most Hydra had - there was an advantage to knowing your enemy. He even knew the two men flanking her as they stormed his base in Austria - it wasn't difficult to recognize members of the Howling Commandos when you'd spent the last month babysitting their sniper.

The two Howling Commandos - James Morita and Timothy Dugan, he was fairly sure - shoved him none too kindly into an interrogation room, a bitterness in their faces that didn't match the joking tones in their voices. It was fascinating, to see the broken pieces of what used to be America's biggest band of heros. And the satisfaction, looking at their faces and watching their grief and knowing they were grieving two dead soldiers, one of which was quite alive.

Probably not quite human anymore, but alive and less than twenty miles away, losing his soul in isolation while these men paraded with their big guns and had no idea they weren't saving one of their own (the only one that would really matter in the end).

So if he had a smug look on his face when Peggy Carter came whipping through the door for his interrogation, there was plenty of reason for it.

"Werner Reinhardt," she greeted. Every movement the woman made was a game, a play to her femininity and power.

She was testing him, he knew, but he had motives of his own. Which, when hinted at, Peggy Carter had no troubles determining.
"You want a deal," she smiled with bright red lips, delicate hands folded on the table and English accent sharp. "How terribly shocking."

"The US Government has recruited many German scientists," Reinhardt pointed out. Recruitment was key - having an insider to the allied forces would do wonders for their projects. Even just his most recent involvement with Sergeant Barnes was dependent on Stark technology, American resources. Who knows who they'd have to sell him to if they didn't have the technology to upkeep the metal arm and cryochambers.

The U.S. was recruiting, and he was one of the best.

"They'll send rockets into space," Peggy mused before her voice turned icy. "Maybe they can strap you to one of them."

The quip was meaningless and Reinhardt ignored it, leaning forward in his chair. "They'll show you parlor tricks. Giving me a second chance could save all of humanity."

To save all of humanity... he would give her the Case 17 project if it meant him walking free. He'd spoil Zola's new weapon in a heartbeat. And yes, maybe stopping it would save humanity. Because once Sergeant Barnes's project was done...it'd be a weapon like no other.

"I've seen all of your home movies," She pursed her lips in thinly veiled disgust. Not all, he corrected in his head. "The bodies left in your wake. The girl you caged up."

If only she'd seen the video of the removal of Sergeant Barnes's arm. Zola had plans for him worse than a cage. But her opportunity to stop that seemed to be slipping.

She leaned forward a final time, eyes as red and hot as her lipstick.

"There'll be no second chances for you."

And of course, she closed her ears, closed her mind, swung out of the room in graceful power. She was admirable for a woman, but Reinhardt knew she'd be back. She was the kind of person that could tell when someone was offering real, solid, life-altering information.

To be fair, it was several hours before the door opened up again.

"So. Curiosity brings her back. Have you come to make a deal?"

"With the devil? I considered it." The room echoed with the sound of sharp footsteps on cement as she walked back to his table. "As you said, the skies might open up one day. Your work would be valuable. But if that day comes, I know who I'd want by my side."

Agent Carter leaned down, placing both of her hands on the table. "It isn't you."

Too stubborn, then. The people that would die now? Blood on her hands for being unable to discover the truths he knew.

"We could learn so much together," Reinhardt told her wistfully, a final teaser to just how much he knew. Peggy Carter let the opportunities of the future slide by her, stubbornness unwavering.

"Instead, we'll forget. Forget you. Forget your work. When I leave, no one else will come. No one to hear your stories, study your deadly artifacts. You'll be buried."

Irrelevancy. The worst fear of a successful man. "I seriously doubt that. Nothing stays buried
forever," he bit, which was the first of her clues, ignored.

"For as long as I have a say, you will. Farewell, Doctor Reinhardt."

Sharp clicks echoed again as Agent Carter spun and stalked for the doorway. One last chance now, he had to give her something she couldn't refuse.

The high heels just passed the doorframe when Reinhardt called out, making her pause.

"You will regret this, Agent Carter." Peggy turned back around, giving him a blank expression. Reinhardt curled his lip up, knowing what could catch her attention now. "There's a project I have access to that you would be very interested in."

"A project?" she said dubiously, smile still quirked up and triumphant. "I'm afraid you'd have to do better than that."

"It's quite personal to you, actually. Even moreso to the men you brought with you. A special team called the Howling Commandos?"

That caught her attention. The smile was suddenly gone, replaced with crossed arms and an attempt at disinterest.

"What could you possibly have anything to do with an American squad?"

"Well, not the entire squad," Reinhardt amended, eyeing her from across the room. Peggy shifted uncomfortably and it was Reinhardt's turn to smile victoriously. "Just a certain...lost member."

The arms uncrossed with a sharp look, but tumultuous emotions wavered behind the hardened eyes. "I hate to break it to you, Doctor Reinhardt, but your information is outdated. There are no lost members of the Howling Commandos, only deceased and disbanded."

She feigned disinterest, but she couldn't hide the cringe at the mention of the Howling Commandos. Well, she was the face in the locket of the only dead one.

Then the smile returned, bitter and the corners of bright red. "It was a decent try, though."

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Reinhardt glared. Her smile widened and he hoped the first target on Sergeant Barnes's list was this woman.

"I won't be saying much of all about you, Doctor. Enjoy the view from underground."

~*~*~

January 1946

They'd thawed him yesterday morning, so he had plenty time to adjust to walking and speaking again. Not that he had anything to say; he kept quiet. It was one of the first things he realized: how little people actually say. The same conversations over and over again, words and condolences that mean nothing, really. A world full of people asking how are you, expecting the same answer and entirely unsure what to do with themselves when given a different one. No one actually...spoke.

How many times had the guards had the same conversations over and over? How many times had they repeated themselves? It was disgusting, really. So many useless meaningless words, so much extra noise.

He wouldn't speak unless it counted. He never wanted to say the same word out loud twice, never
wanted to repeat himself ever again. The moment a word is uttered aloud more than once, what did it mean? Nothing, it meant nothing. Repetition of words destroys worth. But repetition of actions creates mastery.

"Собака!" a guard shouted and Bucky looked up, blinking at the light pouring in from the hallway. A few doctors followed guards into the room and he quickly started to get to his feet. One of the doctors snapped his hand in a stop motion, making a tsking noise in Bucky's direction.

Obviously he listened, freezing mid crouch, metal hand propping him off the ground. There was a major gap of information in his head - he didn't know where he was or where he'd been before this - but he knew they called him Собака (which didn't feel like it was quite right) and that if he didn't listen, there would be a hell of a lot of pain. So of course, he froze.

"More efficiently," one of the doctors ordered, waving an annoyed hand at him. He furrowed his eyebrows, confused. The doctor made an impatient sound and pushed Bucky back to the ground with his boot. He landed hard on the threadbare pants he was wearing, blinking a few times to settle the sudden wave of anger that bubbled up in his chest. He didn't have any reason to be mad, but his heart was pumping and his vision was tinted. No point in getting riled up though - complying was easier.

"Get up, but do it more efficiently. Use every muscle in your body to its maximum potential, make it a smooth glide. And for god's sake, balance out your weight." The doctor made another waving motion and Bucky looked down at his metal hand, curling the fingers a little just to hear their quiet sound. It threw him off balance sometimes, but that was the only clue he hadn't owned it very long. Because it sure felt like part of his body.

There were a few other clues like that - pieces of hair kept falling on his forehead and he pushed those back automatically, like his hands were used to it. But he also startled occasionally when the tips of his hair brushed lightly against his ears - so it was probably a little longer than he was used to. And his body still shivered at the cold, so he must not be used to that either. Those were the only clues he had. Everything else was just...blank.

He was a stranger here. Why was he here?

Bucky pulled a careful breath into his lungs, his bare chest expanding against cold air. Efficiency: speed combined with practicality and accuracy. The most efficient way would be using the least amount of muscles possible, but focusing his weight on the stronger muscles so he didn't lose balance. His calf and quad muscles were strong, so were some of the muscles in his lower abdomen. His arms were the strongest obviously, but he wouldn't need to use those. He'd waste more energy pushing off with his hands than he'd gain out of the push.

In a swift motion, Bucky shifted his weight onto his calves and the balls of his feet, engaging his abdominal muscles to straighten out his back as he leaned slightly to the right to accommodate the weight of metal and tightened the muscles in his thighs, pushing upwards. And he was on his feet, standing and solid.

"Better," the doctor said, narrowing his eyes. "But it could be smoother, faster. More powerful." He spun on one uselessly thick shoe and strode out the room, not giving Bucky a moment to respond. "Come, Собака."

Step four: Awareness.
"Breathe. Listen. That is the sound of your existence. That sound belongs to you, you control it. Now erase it. Getting sufficient oxygen is important - but your body does not need the sound. Breathe in through your mouth and destroy the noise. Noise will only hinder you."

There was so much noise in everything. Getting rid of it was like ripping at fascia tissue - endless spiderwebs between every single layer that caved the moment you prodded them away. People made so many sounds, did so many things they didn't bother to notice. Involuntary actions - but that didn't mean they couldn't be controlled. Don't let your body do anything involuntarily, they told him. (Blinking, breathing, moving, so much that he did automatically. Automatically meant noise.) Of course, that didn't count what they did to his body involuntarily.

They may force him into things, but they taught him power too. They gave him more control of his body. In the two days that he'd been out of the ice he was already looking differently at everything. Starting to clear away noise.

Precision, efficiency. Awareness, control. He understood those.

"Freeze, Собака. What are you touching? Just stop and take account of every place your body is touching. Your feet on the ground, the space between the concrete and the arch of your foot. Your elbow touching your hip. Your fingers are curled, the last three of each are pressed together. Pay attention. Feel everything you are touching, individually."

"If you aren't aware of everything you are touching, there will be unwanted noise. Loss of focus. Loss of control. Focus on your hands. Focus on where your fingers are touching. Now don't let them touch. Feel the space between your skin. Feel the energy between your fingers. There is power there. Spread fingers means power, because you aren't crippling yourself by finding comfort in the touch of your own skin. Don't let them touch."

Bucky lifted his hands, palms facing away as he slowly touched the sides of all of his fingers together and spread them apart again. A rush of power flooded his veins as he spread them, told himself he owned and controlled every ounce of the empty space between his fingers.

It was like a domino effect. Every time they opened his eyes to another crutch, he was emancipated. And he just kept seeing more and more things, on his own. Learning himself, learning the way he moved and thought and breathed. (He was pleasantly surprised to find he already walked perfectly silent.)

He didn't have anything else to do, and he didn't know a single thing about who he was supposed to be. So it just kind of made sense to do what they told him. It wasn't all just words though, they really liked to reinforce the cognitive ideas with physical reminders. Stimulus and response, conditioning.

He wished they would just let him look at the sun.

Another doctor came in, this time with a rack of tools to open up Bucky's metal arm. Apparently there was a setting inside that made his left hand fingers metallic, drawing them into each other with a resounding click. It was fairly infuriating, especially when he'd just learned that spreading his fingers gave him sovereignty again.

But if he focused really hard, he could still keep them spread apart. It didn't take long to figure out that was kind of the point of the magnetism - he was forced to focus all of his energy on his fingers and keep them from weakening and curling in to touch each other, scared and insecure.
He couldn't keep depending on his subconscious to find safety nets, making himself smaller or finding comfort in the feel of his own skin and metal. The creatures on the top of the food chain didn't need safety nets. The creatures on the top of the food chain were efficient - he couldn't have any noise, any involuntary movements, any moments of being less than entirely aware of himself and his body and his surroundings.

That was the optimal way to survive. There was no reason to survive at any less than that.

~*~

He didn't sleep much. Some part of him was telling him that he should be sleeping for at least a few hours every day, but he was awake for 62 hours after his removal from ice before they finally sent him to a cell to get some rest.

_No rest for the wicked._

The guard called him Терять when he closed the door and Bucky blinked, wondering what the hell had happened to Собака. He guessed it didn't matter much, because Собака had never quite felt right; although Terri-att didn't sound like it was his name either.

Bucky laid his head on his metal arm and stared at the wall, wondering if there was a more efficient way to sleep. He decided he didn't care all that much - he was tired and honestly the desire to be efficient was fading a bit at the edges.

Slipping into sleep was easier than he'd thought it be. Being forced into sleep through the freezing cold was extremely unpleasant, but lying on the ground wasn't nearly as bad. He was unconscious in moments.

"Buck!" a voice shouted and he turned around, the world spinning and blurry at the edges. He was standing in an empty room with vaulted ceilings, but it looked broken somehow. There were paintings that he vaguely recognized, but most were torn or ripped to the ground. The windows were riddled with bullet holes, light streaming through in filtered rays. Everything was kind of floating but he didn't care, because something inside him settled calm and warm at just the sound of that voice.

A figure floated into view, but Bucky couldn't see any details. It was a silhouette, coming closer, and his hand reached out on instinct. The silhouette got closer and Bucky's heartbeat could pound out of his chest. He didn't know why the voice had shouted Buck, but it felt more like his than Собака or Терять did.

The silhouette reached out his hand as he neared and Bucky strained to reach further, unable to move anything but his hand. There was the sound of wind, whipping fast, but the figure kept getting closer and Bucky was torn between being scared and elated. It wasn't the silhouette or the voice he was scared of, but there was something at the corners of his vision, just out of sight...

Black shadow fingers reached out to touch his and Bucky's breath stopped in his throat. So, so close-

- The shadow turned to smoke. Everything suddenly dropped to freezing - as cold as the ice chamber - and Bucky spun around, trying to find the shadow again. It'd been strangely beautiful, even if he hadn't been able to tell a single feature beyond the shape. Wide shoulders, boots, disheveled hair. And then, gone.

Something moved in the corner of his eye. Bucky spun again, but there was nothing there. Then
another movement, closer this time. He automatically lowered his weight in a crouching stance, wobbling from the wavy floor. Everything was waving, slowly losing shape and dexterity and then the floor just dropped and Bucky was falling, falling falling-

His eyes shot open and his body jerked as the dream world suddenly became reality, just before he hit the ground in the dream. But Bucky pushed aside his racing pulse and the jolting panic of the fall, trying to recall the more important part of the dream. There had been a silhouette, a silhouette of something warm and human. It could be wishful thinking, but Bucky had a feeling that figure was part of who he was. It’d called him Buck...

"Buck," he tried out aloud, the word feeling heavy in his mouth. His brain recognized it, but his mouth didn’t. By process of logic then, it was his name. No one spoke their own name much, but they heard it all the time. Still...Buck wasn't quite right. It was his name, but not his whole name...

"Bucky," he said suddenly, sitting up and whipping his head to look at the door. His name was Bucky. There was someone who was supposed to be looking for him. The silhouette in his dream needed him, Bucky needed to get to him. He just didn't know how-

He ran his fingers through his hair in frustration, pushing the escaped strands away from his face. Soft, artist hands ghosted through his hair and Bucky quickly shut his eyes, chasing after the lingering memory. Artist hands, brushing back his hair. Something very blue. Safety.

It was just on the tip of his tongue, he knew he knew those hands. That silhouette...

"Who are you?" Bucky asked the darkness, wishing that the silhouette man would just step out of the shadows now.

Who are you. Who are you. Who are you. Who are you without him. Nothing.

A sudden pain clenched Bucky's chest and he cried out in shock, doubling in half with a hand clutched over his heart. The door slammed open and then there were black gloved hands, dragging him out into the hallway. Bucky looked around in confusion; he didn't know why he was hurting or where they were taking him, but worst of all he didn't know who the shadow man was and he needed to.

All he had were flashing memories - dragging down another hallway, watching the trails left behind by bloody feet. Tears and pain and something else, he was missing pieces. So many pieces.

Straps closed over his ankles and arms and torso and Bucky blinked up at the ceiling, waiting for the punishment to begin. He wasn't sure what he'd done, but they'd tell him. Hopefully they could tell him about the shadow man, too. He had to know.

~*~*~

"We've got another few solid weeks before the memories will start to really come back. Tell me we've got someone working on the wiping machine. How did someone overlook wiping the part of the brain associated with dreams? This isn't child's play anymore, we can't afford to have slips like that again."

The soldiers nodded, taking the order and exiting the office to go relay the instructions to the lab scientists. Once they were in the hallway, one leaned over, keeping his voice low under his breath.

"How could this much trouble possibly be worth it? That guy's a fuckin’ wreck, I don't know what they see in him."
The other soldier shrugged. "Must be something special about him. The rest of the people they've injected with Zola's serum like, combusted or something. Besides, I can't complain about watching Captain America's big bad sidekick lose his mind. Justice served, right?"

~*~*~

They kept him on a leash. For most of the time he was in the cells, sometimes even leading him to the pain-training tables with it. Just a chain most of the time, a dirty chain looped around his neck instead of his wrists.

*Attack dog*, the guards had called him once.

They held the fire, they trained him of his existence, they gave him so much; he would bare his teeth for them if they asked.

*Open your mind.*

"There is noise in your thoughts. Extra words, unimportant things. If you can clear out the miscellaneous data, you can shine light on the shadows."

Bucky perked up at that. He'd like to shine light in the shadows if it meant being able to see the face of the silhouette man in his dreams. A few more random things had come back to him - something about a baseball game and something about apples. More flashes of the hands from his dream, except pressed over Bucky's heart, or twisted up between Bucky's fingers. Each little touch into that world made him desperately hungry for more.

So he threw every ounce he had into the next round of mental training. Besides, it'd be a relief after the way he'd spent the morning. They'd put him in this machine that looked like a coffin and spun and spun around in circles for what felt like hours before they let him out. Opening his mind sounded much less painful.

"Do you know what we are doing for you?" The doctor asked him. Bucky didn't bother wasting energy to answer or shake his head. He didn't have a lot of energy to spare (he couldn't remember the last time he ate, there were only nutrients needles) and the doctors didn't seem to mind his silence much. If they did, they'd say something. Or slap him.

"We have given you the opportunity to be born again. At birth we are all gifted with 'tabula rasa' - a blank mind. The world mucks up this white slate, pollutes it with error. You are lucky enough to be given a second chance, and we are here to help you, keep you from polluting your tabula rasa."

Bucky blinked at the doctor, not sure if he was expecting a thank you or something. As much as he wouldn't mind being error-free, he kind of wanted to know who he was before he got reborn.

"Терять, you have been studying awareness, Да?" Bucky quickly spread his fingers, cursing himself for getting lazy enough to let the last two touch. The moment that he had focus on his hands again, something settled inside him and he relaxed a bit. Da - they said that sometimes. It was fairly clear it meant yes, but he wasn't sure in what language.

*Oi, regarde qui c'est, le petit ami de Barnes ... français, oui?*

"You are clearing the extraneous from your body - now we must make your thoughts efficient as well. Some things do not matter to think about and you will be wasting your time and energy even allowing them in your mind. Organize your thoughts so you can destroy the useless ones. For the next hour there will be doctors recording your every thought to help you with this. Just speak exactly what crosses your mind the moment it crosses. It will be a...catharsis."
Catharsis. Bucky wasn't even sure he knew what that meant. But giving his mind ultimate efficiency sounded maddeningly powerful. And helpful, especially if he could control his head. Which meant controlling his dreams.

Besides, he should be grateful, they gave him life. So what if it was a life he never chose.

"Begin, Терять."

~*~*~

"That has got to be the fastest learning curve I have ever seen. He's fucking...silent man. You can't even hear him when he walks and he's been awake for what, three days now?"

"I don't think we even taught him that. He was already way messed up when we got him. Did you see the lash out from yesterday? It was brutal. Serious rage. I'm pretty sure he killed two of the guards."

One of the soldiers let out a low whistle. "Captain America's boy toy is a hell of a lot more impressive when he's not a slobbering mess."

"Yeah, well, once the memories come back he'll break down again."

"And we're training him until then?"

"Yep. Squeezing in all of the physical training and obedience programming before he can remember again. And then it's wiping him and starting the whole process over, hoping that the training sticks."

~*~*~

"быстрый! быстрый! Как можно быстрее!" Bucky dropped the clip out of the gun, jamming the next one in and firing off 7 shots in quick succession, each one knocking perfectly into the center of the metal targets.

Faster, faster. As fast as you can.

The moment they'd finished organizing his thoughts it was a bastardized lesson in Russian. He couldn't say a single thing yet because his tongue pretty much refused to cooperate with the strange harsh sounds. But he understood a few commands now - yes, no, get up, faster, speak.

And then it'd been training, more questions, lead around on the leash. Pain training too, which he didn't have as much trouble with as he'd been expecting. They told him not to scream as they slid a knife through his skin and he didn't. It made him wonder if he'd done this before. But there were no scars on his body (with the exception of the raw skin around his shoulder of course).

He hadn't been allowed to sleep since his dream about the silhouetted man and it felt like it'd been a lot longer than 62 hours this time. But he wasn't supposed to think of his dreams - lingering pieces of poison to tug at his mind, they told him. They'd given him a second chance to find true efficiency - he didn't want to ruin that. The shadow man of his dreams was just...the only warm thing since he'd woken.

At least the gun was familiar in his hands, but he found himself wanting something longer, more accurate. Another clue about whoever he was before they'd put him on ice. And there was a memory associated with it too, just a flicker of a headshot through a scope, a salute sent his way from something familiarly blue.
He was a good shot, but it wasn't good enough. They kept pushing him harder, faster. His right arm ached, but there was something comforting in the blank ease as he fired off more ammunition. It wasn't until he’d emptied four clips before he found a stray thought edging at his mind. The accuracy of his shots...had he ever killed anyone before?

Suddenly he felt a little queasy. Blank mind or not, he knew he didn't want to kill anybody. He didn't know anybody who deserved to die.

He considered asking, but they didn't always take too well to his questions. Especially his questions about before he'd been given a new mind. "It is a waste, Терять. How could you have a clean slate if you insist on trying to muddy up your brain with the past?"

He almost let it go. If it weren't for the man, he would've. But he couldn't, not with a ghost hopeless dream like that in his head. So he drowned it out instead, focused hard on everything they asked of him. There were still a few guards who called him Собака, others who called him Терять - he responded to both, did the very best he could to remain efficient. Clear the noise.

Martial arts helped - there was a quiet power behind every guiding palm of Tai Qi, a natural control through every spinning kick of Muay Thai. He had a propensity for it, or maybe it was just the acute awareness of his muscles and his mind that was making him beat his instructors in their own matches.

He was good with knives too - not as good as the guns though, so they spent more time training him with the blades. The first knife they handed him, his mind flashed an image of pulling a similar one out of a blue coat. A blue coat with big navy buttons and something special tucked inside the pocket. He collected them like stones, the little flashes of memories he got back. He put them all in a box in his head and shoved the box in a corner so it couldn't interfere with the efficiency of his thoughts. Simple, his thoughts should be simple. Cut down to the core.

Bucky curled his fingers over the hilt of the knife, reveling in the texture and the gentle spread of his fingers. No, texture didn't matter. It was extra information, something that wouldn't help him. A knife was a knife was a knife was a knife.


Wait, no. Texture shouldn't be included in the mental report at all. Bucky cursed in his head, then cursed himself for cursing because that wasn't going to do anything to help efficiency either.

Okay: mission. He was supposed to throw this knife into the target. He'd taken too long already - быстрый, faster. Да - Da, yes.

It was always faster, better. Every time he failed, the knife got thrown at him instead. It was simple: get better, or get hurt. So he got better.

~*~*~

"[The purpose of psychology is]...to predict, given the stimulus, what reaction will take place; or, given the reaction, state what the situation or stimulus is that has caused the reaction." - Watson (1930)

~*~*~

*
He cried out the first time that they electrocuted him. He hadn't been expecting it - he didn't even know what he had done wrong. (Again.)

The wires were wrapped around every part of his body. He hadn't stopped them as they wrapped the coils over his arms and legs and torso, always trusting there was a purpose. There was always something to learn, something to improve his blank slate.

But no one had told him what he was supposed to do, they'd just walked out of the room. Then he'd turned his head to look for instruction and he'd been shocked--

Oh. Maybe...maybe he wasn't supposed to move. Bucky twitched his finger in curiosity. Lightning shot into his veins and he screamed again. His eyes squeezed shut automatically and he took a few moments to reconcile, breathing in pained huffs as he forced himself to stay as still as possible.

He'd felt the lightning before...he was sure of it. There was another memory, black lines of burned flesh across his palms, black rage tugging over his mind. The same rage was threatening to bubble to the surface now, but there was a lesson to be learned.

Be still. So still. Don't so much as expand your chest when you breathed. Bucky could do that.

*

The first time, he managed to avoid electrocution and lie still for an hour. The next time, two and a half. The third time he stood on his feet, straight and tall and still for forty minutes. The fourth time he extended it to an hour. Eventually he could stand perfectly unmoving for three hours. Then he learned to do the same while crouching.

The lightning never stopped burning. His body never stopped screaming every time the electrocution shot through his veins.

Once he'd mastered that, it was on to the next thing to make him perfect. There was a voice in his head (that he didn't have a face to match but he knew he recognized) that told him that it was human to be imperfect. That perfection meant a loss of humanity.

Part of him didn't want to be perfect. Or efficient. He just wanted to remember.

It was like being a butterfly, stuck under a pin. Held up for inspection, preservation. Maybe there had been a time that he could fly, but they were taking that from him now.

It was like losing faith in something he'd never known he'd had. Tugging the soul right out of him, destroying whatever pieces he had left. But as much as he wanted to fight this, as much as Bucky wanted to run away on the breeze and pray to a god the color of blue eyes he didn't know, he still knew this was easier. The pain in his body was easier than the pain of something else - the more they hurt him, the more he knew that.

He left you here to die.

Whatever it was that his mind and body was so afraid of, the electrocution and the dizzying table and the knives and the straps and the drowning tanks and the white rooms and the fires and burns to his skin and the isolation and the pressure room and the degrading terms were all better than what was on the other side of that fence.

He couldn't remember what it was he was running from, but he was running hard. There was something more painful than all of this that would blind him if he let it. So he gave in and he held still and he learned, he learned and absorbed and breathed in every ounce of the new air they forced into
his lungs. Self-preservation meant giving in to this, so he didn't have to face the ghost in his dreams. The ghost promised a safety Bucky couldn't remember knowing and he promised a pain worse than anything Hydra could ever do to him. He had to shove the ghost to the darkest places of his mind. *Can't you just let me be?*

But you can't choose who haunts you when there's no light to scare the ghosts away.

One of the memories he kept secretly tucked away in his mind came a few days ago, after the pain training. He'd been too loud with his voice -- he knew better than to scream, sometimes he just couldn't help it and the doctors hadn't liked that very much. They'd strapped a muzzle over his mouth - *attack dog.*

The moment the crude muzzle was fitted over his face, Bucky fell silent. It was a natural reaction, but the surprising part was the wave of relief washing over him the moment it was fitted over him.

That's when the memory flashed:

"I'm not going to go lay out on another table for another doctor, okay?" Bucky snapped. His anger was all directed inwards; he had broken so easily under their hands...he just didn't have it in him anymore to keep up the façade. He was so goddamned tired.

A flash of a face, turning away from him as it always was in the memories. Bucky almost apologized, just from the slumped over look of the man. (The only person who was in every one of his memories.) He looked so defeated, and that was Bucky's fault too.

Then the ghost spoke, that same voice all over again:

"God, Buck, I'm sorry. I should have known, I just-- Are...are you okay?" Like this was somehow all his fault. (And that moment, that was where the thought was, the thought that the muzzle suddenly had rushing through him) --

_Bucky really just wished he could have a mask to hide behind right now. Everything was too open. Exposed. Raw. He brought his hands up to cover his face, only realizing they were trembling once they were covering his eyes and nose and mouth. The ghost didn't need to see this._

_He sucked in a breath behind his hands, the air tasting like dirt and blood on his tongue. Maybe the only thing left of Bucky anymore was skin, dirt, and blood._

"Buck?" the silhouette asked again, a tentative hand coming up to rest over one of Bucky's. The added weight and warmth to his mask was so nice...the ghost's hands were big and warm and much much cleaner than Bucky's. They still had blood and dirt on them, sure. But it wasn't polluted and poisonous like Bucky's blood was. Everything about the ghost was cleaner than Bucky.

_He wondered if the ghost would understand if Bucky asked him to cover Bucky's face with his hands. Probably not. The ghost would probably just get more worried. Bucky was just so so sick of being unable to turn his face away. Of being peered down at and poked at and unable to hide, unable to stop looking. He just wanted to stop looking._

One of Bucky's hands lifted a bit off of his face, reversing to grab the one the ghost had
covered him with. Their fingers interlocked, dirty dark callused ones with sweet white artist's hands. He probably hadn't even killed anybody yet. Bucky never wanted him to have to.

The memory wasn't half as vivid as Bucky wished it could be - but it still shook him to the core. Every time he saw a flash of the silhouetted ghost it shook him, but that one had been particularly painful.

Because in the memory, Bucky had wanted the mask then, too. Had wanted to hide. The muzzle was comforting because it meant he wasn't exposed anymore; and it was even more comforting because it wasn't the first time he'd felt that way. In the past, he'd been dirty and broken and those soft hands had still wanted him. The silhouetted man still wanted him.

Bucky had been broken and he'd been wanted and that memory haunted him.

"Who are you?"

"Nothing."

"Who do you work for?"

"Hydra."

"Who do you belong to?"

"Hydra."

"What are you?"

"An asset."

"What is your purpose?"

"A weapon."

"Who are you?"

"Nothing."

"Who is he?"

"Who is who?"

Russian came easier than it probably should have. German was even easier than that. Just like with his names, he responded to whatever they spoke to him in. If it was English, he automatically responded in English. The same was for German, Russian.

They taught him the basics in Italian, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, a few Nigerian dialects. They were pleased to find out he already knew the basics of French.

It wasn't the only thing they taught him how to do with his tongue.

Disappearing didn't take as long to learn as they were expecting, either. He was fast and he was smart - everything they taught him only made him smarter. Bucky didn't have the memory of the good marks he'd gotten during school, but his mind hadn't forgotten his eagerness to learn.
He used to drag Steve to science expositions after all. He was creative, intelligent. The only bad marks he ever got were on attitude, of course. He was respectful to his teachers, and happily pranked his classmates. Then, of course, there were all the fights he'd gotten into. Well, more accurately: Steve had (purposefully) gotten into and Bucky'd had to drag him out of.

It actually surprised him the first time they taught him about his arm. He'd never really thought about it - he had two arms, one of them had more armor than the other and should therefore take the worst of the blows. But his arm was special, they told him. It was more than just an arm, it was a weapon.

There were features, training to be done. He had to know the limits of the metal, troubleshoot any issues that may happen in the field before he could get back to Hydra. (They hadn't let him leave yet but he knew once they did, he'd come back. They were the only ones who understood him. He didn't have a single reason to leave for good.)

"Humans have a propensity towards left-handed and right-handedness. This is an error in programming; it makes them weaker on an entire half of their body. You must have perfect control of both."

They strapped his right arm behind his back for a month. He could throw knives just as perfectly with his left arm as he could with his right. He could shoot with both, strangle with both.

When they gave him his right arm back, he didn't rely on it anymore. Favoring his left arm meant stronger power - he had long since balanced out the weight of the metal. It was part of him, the same way a smile that used to quirk up on the right side first used to be part of him.

The metal was one more thing that set him apart from the race - not human; not human.

They'd put him into a drug-induced sleep a few times now, at least twice a week. It wasn't true rest, but it gave his body enough time to regenerate wounds and psychological tiredness. There'd be a point in a few years that being tired wouldn't even be a consideration because processing his own physical ailments would be pointless 'noise,' a lack of efficiency. But for now, he still got weary after days on end spent awake, fighting or training or hurting.

It only took one time, just a simple slip on the dosage. Or maybe he was becoming immune. He didn't know, and it didn't matter because either way, his body found a way to dream.

xx

Golden, that was the first thing he opened his eyes to. The room he was in was glowing, dim lights overhead that cast a dark gold and made everything look soft and warm. Something like sunshine, but gentler and sweeter. Old wood under his hands, a sticky glass a few inches from his hand.

There were blurred faces around him, loud laughter that didn't make him cringe, for some reason. He looked down and his hands felt like embers, glowing hot in anticipation and surrounded by dead ashes. Bucky curled his left hand, curiously cocking his head at the missing sound of the whirr. His fingers weren't made of metal.

A movement through the fuzzy images caught his eye and Bucky looked up. There was another blurred man at the end of the table, standing tall and beautiful, holding out a hand. They were the same hands as the ones he could remember stroking his hair, weaving through the fingers of his own.
"Sergeant Barnes, come dance with me?"

Bucky stared at the silhouetted man of his last dream, but he was in color now. The details of his face weren't quite clear, like he kept turning away every time Bucky tried to focus on his features. But he could see the hands; those were crystal and beautiful. Sergeant Barnes. That was him. He was in the army, his name was Barnes. If his other dream had been right...Bucky Barnes.

Time lapsed around him in a hurricane as the figures of the table shouted and joked, the scene starting to play without him. A shake of his own head, a draw back and pounding heart as he looked at the outstretched hand. Panic, a flush of his neck. The version of him in the dream wasn't taking the hand and Bucky was suddenly entirely not alright with that.

He slid out of his seat and stood, reaching hesitantly for the fingers. There were more sounds behind him - Have fun, kids. Allez, s'amuser! - and Bucky started forward, only to freeze just before their fingers touched.

The last time that he'd reached out to the ghost in his dreams, the ghost had disappeared. Bucky would rather never once touch than have it disappear again. His heart yearned to remember exactly what the ghost's face looked like, why he knew the blonde hair was so soft, where those hands were now.

But then the crystal fingers pressed forward on their own and fire spread through Bucky's body, consuming him and making him glow from the inside out. The room around them shifted, floating by in a world of color and more laughter, the sweet sound of that same familiar voice speaking to him, words muddled by time and distance.

And then they were dancing.

It was a feeling he'd never imagined - the spinning waltz, the empty floor, circling round and round, dizzying in every way that the coffin machine wasn't. Everything was moving too fast to see clearly but it didn't matter, because there was one point of clarity through the one two three one two three of his head and his feet. Someone was holding him safe and warm, arm wrapped over his waist and callused hand in his own. A temple pressed to his, both sets of eyes closed as they spun and danced and danced and everything swirled golden and blue.

The dim glittering lights spun by with streaks of aureate behind them, streaks that grew and feathered out like a careful hand brushing strokes of paint until they were simply lines of soft gold circling around them, a beautiful wake made by the waltz's spin.

Four boots creasing at the toes as they stepped lightly over old floors, the smell of gunpowder and whiskey still thick in the air.

The hand in his tightened slightly and Bucky curled his fingers more in response. Something cold and wet landed on his cheek and Bucky wondered if he'd cried in the past, too.

Another wet, cold dot landed on his hand, then on his nose, and Bucky opened his eyes. The world around them had shifted, gold lights just barely visible in the distance through the whirls of silver snow. The snowflakes were blowing all around them, more vicious than just falling. The man in his arms kept moving them through the snow, the waltz turning slippery but immovable under their feet.

Snow started to accumulate around them, puffing up in powdery swirls as they slid through it without abandon. The top of his spine was wickedly cold, exposed to the wind, but his chest and his hand and every place the dancing figure was touching him was so warm that the cold didn't matter.
The snow got thicker, whipping around them so quickly now that the golden lights were entirely invisible. Everything was white and swirling and spinning and it was all going so fast and Bucky was suddenly saturated with fear that the wind might rip him apart from the graceful silhouette he needed to hold on to.

The soft tones of the song kept drifting over the pull of the wind and Bucky tucked his head in closer against the ghost in his arms, mouth fighting to suck in air against the bitter cold. The ghost didn't seem to even notice the wind, he just kept holding tight and spinning them. Spinning and spinning and the snow was turned red around them, dripping down in icy, bloody flakes and they were still just spinning and spinning and falling, falling--

Bucky woke with a shout (Steve, although he didn't have time to process the word) as a hand smacked across his face, snapping his head to the side from the force of it. He cried out into the darkness and then there was another gruff voice superimposing the gold one drifting through his head.

"Wipe him."

~*~

~*~*~

~*~

September 5, 1945

The war was over. They had won.

It'd only been six months since their last mission together, since the Howling Commandos had stood in silent shock as Morita relayed the Captain's death. A plane crash. Less than a week after they lost their Sergeant.

They'd gone their separate ways, then. There was still a war to close up, each of their armies could use the final touch of reinforcement.

But there was a rule they'd made - what felt like a lifetime ago, but was only two years - that they'd all meet up when it was over. No matter where, no matter how long it took for them all to get there.

xx

The sun had sunk from the sky by the time the little bell over the door chimed a fifth time, announcing Jones's arrival. He stopped just inside the door, looking around the golden bar for a moment. The bar they'd all met in had been burnt to ashes - so they'd picked the next most important one.

From his spot at the door, Jones could see the corner booth, but instead of the rowdy Commandos, it housed a cheery group of uniformed men and red-lipsticked dames laughing and singing along to the music crooning from the record player.

The record player...Gabe floated his eyes past all the shining faces, turning to the reason they'd chosen this bar. The dancefloor. It wasn't empty now, instead packed full with happy couples and jiving dames. A long time ago, the Commandos had all sat in the corner booth and had the privilege to watch the scene on that dancefloor, empty but for two people.

Two boys, best friends since childhood, dancing and gliding together with an ease that the rest of
them would forever envy. It was like two magnets, two halves of the same whole. A dark puzzle piece to juxtapose the light one, army boots more graceful over the old dancefloor than they had any right to be.

It'd been only eleven days before Barnes had fallen from the train. Seventeen days before Rogers had joined him. It'd been the last Barnes and Rogers moment. Jones was just glad they'd gotten to have that before it'd all ended. Sad and bloody.

He found the rest of the Commandos in the back of the bar, all waiting for him in silence. Falsworth was in full uniform, decked out with medals - that was right, it was Lieutenant Falsworth. Morita was in a slouchy suit and tie, Dugan was sans-hat. Other than that, they all looked basically the same as the last time he'd seen them.

Funny, how people from so far apart with so many differences could feel more like family than anybody else he'd ever known.

"Gabe," Dernier greeted, a sad smile on his face. They were the only ones in the entire bar with solemn looks on, the only people mourning instead of celebrating. Jones stuck out his hand, shaking Dernier's and giving him a nod.

Dugan pulled Jones into a one armed hug, Morita and Monty both nodded at him. Their little band of misfits. Missing two, their brightest two.

"We got you a whiskey," Dugan offered, handing Jones a glass of his own. The rest of them already had theirs, held untouched in war-steady hands. Jones tipped his hat in thanks, taking the glass from Tim.

Oh how much had changed since the last time they'd been here.

It was by habit that they formed a half circle, everyone leaving an empty space for the two missing members at the head of their group. After all this time, the two that should have been here today more than any of the rest of them were the only two gone.

Dernier sniffed as they all lifted their glasses and it was only due to the dim lighting that none of them could see the tears in the others' eyes.

With the same practiced synchronization they'd always had, everyone clinked their glasses together, a five-way toast to the realest heros they'd ever know.

"To the Captain," Falsworth said, his voice more solemn than it'd ever been during the war. Captain Rogers - the man who deserved to see the end of this war more than anyone else alive. They all tipped back their glasses and Jones was immensely grateful for the burn of the whiskey down his throat.

Dugan was on one side of him, Dernier on the other, Morita and Falsworth forming the other end caps. It was like finally coming home -

*Til then, Jones thought.

The party spun on around them, joy and laughter and music in full swing. What felt like hundreds of happy, celebrating people. The Howling Commandos stood silent, memories of the past dancing around them.
"Hey, tree-boy, how are you enjoy your bird view?"
"Better than your view, punk. Frenchie, to your left!"

"Jones versus Barnes; now that's a fight I'd like to see."
"I'm trying to storm an enemy weapons storage facility, would any of you mind helping? Or is killing German bastards not entertaining enough for you?"
"...nah. Barnes and Rogers arguing is better."

"Tree-boy and sober-boy, I like it. It's cute."
"Here we go ladies, next round's on me.

"Is it snowing even more?"
"Yep."
"But at least it's--"
"Please, don't say it-"
"--insulating."

"Mind the gap."
"Gotta get moving, bugs."

"MAN DOWN! MAN DOWN! MAN DOWN, God, dammit, I need backup I don't even know what I'm supposed to - man down, I-I--"

"Rogers didn't make it."

"I can see the papers now...The Howling Commandos: Captain America's famous war regiment and Professional Barbershop Quartet..."

"It's been an honor, Cap. Sergeant Barnes woulda been proud a' you."

They all looked at each other, the weight of the world settling heavy at their feet.

"And to the Sergeant," Dugan added quietly, lifting his glass again. The rest of them followed suit, clinking their drinks together a second time. It would be impossible to leave out Sergeant Barnes.

"Réunis dans vie, réunis dans mort," Dernier offered softly, his words swirling into their circle.

"Together in life, together in death," Jones agreed, touching his glass to Dernier's. The silence fell heavy after that.

The Howling Commandos stayed for a few hours. It was their last few hours together and no one wanted it to be over. With some light coercion of the happy partiers, they got their old corner booth back.

Monty offered a few stories from his time back in London, Dugan and Morita shared a few bits about working with Agent Carter. Dernier had Jones translate a story about how strange it was to speak to his army and actually be responded to in French.

A few of them almost smiled at that.

Eventually, it had to be over. None of them wanted to be the first to leave, but dawn was breaking and the bartender had long since gone.
"Well," Dugan finally said, standing up from the booth. "It's been an honor, boys."

He shook each of their hands. Dernier handed him his bowler hat from the seat and Dugan nodded, fitting it firmly over his head. And then he was gone.

They all left, then. One by one. Handshakes to go around.

And then the sun broke over the sky, lighting up the world in bright color again, and it was over.

~*_~*_~

May 1948

"Выше! Higher, выше!" He pushed his legs to run faster to the end of the catwalk, pushing off at the last moment to force himself as high as he could in the air, curling in a ball to flip in the air and land back on his bare feet in a crouch, thirty feet below the catwalk.

The rush of exhilaration in his veins was temporarily tampered by the shot of pain up his ankles, but the stinging settled down after a few seconds. At least he hadn't broken them this time, that had happened a few days ago and it'd put a damper on his training for long enough to make him restless.

Of course, he'd worked on other things then. Mental exercises, faster reflexes, swimming. The water was always way too cold, dirty and grimy too. He could hold his breath for two minutes and that was nowhere near what they wanted.

They spent a lot of time holding him underwater.

Then there was all of the environment and route training - it was automatic now, the way he checked every place he entered. Find cameras first; guard positions; local weapons; escape routes. There was a constant awareness: everything was a battlefield.

That part almost felt familiar; he used to do this to protect someone important to him. Bucky wondered who he was protecting now....the mission, he was protecting the mission. It wasn't his place to protect himself, just his assets and his identity and Hydra's favorite weapon.

Hydra's favorite weapon went through all kinds of training. Pain training the most. It was important, that they pain-trained his body. He knew that and he tried not to hate it.

But he liked the traceur training. One of the rooms was set up like an obstacle course of sorts - crates and wire fences stacked, chains hanging from exposed beams. It was invigorating to work out the anger and adrenaline on his body.

He'd been angry since he woke up in the machine but he couldn't figure out why. He didn't remember what would have made him angry. He didn't remember much actually, but he didn't really care either.

Who are you? Who are you without him? Nothing. Who are you? Nothing.

His mind was purified, but they'd used the term мягкий переводить. It made him wonder what a hard reset must have been. Until he decided that didn't matter much either. His hands hadn't forgotten their way around guns and knives, he could stay still for an eerily long amount of time, he could remember what they'd taught him in Russian, how important it was to clear his mind and organize his thoughts.

There was an unidentified box tucked in the corner of his mind, but the doctors told him to avoid it.
So he did, ignoring the tug he felt to the tucked away thoughts. It was just curiosity - it had to be. If he ignored it, maybe it'd go away.

He was angry, he ignored the box, and he tried harder and harder to jump higher, spin tighter, land more gracefully.

"Вновь!" the man on the catwalk shouted. Again. Bucky sucked in a breath and took off, running as fast as he could to scale the wall back up to the catwalk. They made him run a lot, stripping the error from residing habits and shaping the way he moved his body. He walked wrong too - they spent a lot of time changing that.

Feet that used to swagger into a room now strode with dangerous purpose, still deadly silent. It was faster, used less energy. He was getting better all the time, getting better and better. Bucky just wanted to be fixed. He wanted to stop feeling all of these emotions in his veins. He wanted to be numb.

Because then maybe he wouldn't keep wanting to dream.

~*~

"The behaviorist, in his efforts to get a unitary scheme of animal response, recognizes no dividing line between man and brute." - Watson (1913)

~*~

They sent him on a trial mission. It was simple and brutal: kill the guard named Fyedka. Mission briefing: subject armed and on duty; pacing the highest catwalks; skittish enough to shoot at creaking water pipes. Silence and deadly force required.

It would have executed flawlessly, only Bucky got his knife pressed to Fyedka's throat and couldn't find a reason to kill him. They'd hurt Bucky if he didn't, but his insides were screaming that this was wrong. He didn't want to kill at all, but there was a sunshine voice in his head telling him he would never kill for no reason.

So he'd lowered the knife. They hadn't liked that very much. He'd paid for it in screams.

The voices asked him why he hadn't done it; and when he'd told them, they'd responded that his reason was the mission. Missions mattered more than anything.

No mercy.

Why did he care? What was the benefit of caring? Where was the logic in caring? Where was the advantage?

Emotions were a weakness. Sentiment was a defect. He had to thread those things out of himself if he was to be indestructible.

Obedience was necessary. Compliance was rewarded. Disobeying meant more and more pain.

The entire world was simple if he didn't let himself be weak. Did he want to be defective?

They told him Hydra was here to save the world from chaos. Who was he to stand in the way of saving the world? That voice in his head - the one that told him not to kill without reason - also said that saving the world was the whole point. Saving the world from bullies was his job. Chaos was a bully, in a way.
So the next time they assigned him to kill another guard, Bucky didn't question it. And walking away with blood on his hands, he decided it probably wasn't the first time he'd killed. The thought made him sad for about four seconds - then he shut that down, locked it away. What the hell was the point of letting weakness into his heart? Where was the logic behind getting emotional? There was no logic. There was no point.

There were two different occasions he recognized the guards they assigned him to kill - the ones that'd come into the cell at night to test obedience training on his knees. He didn't mind shooting them at all. Didn't know if it was a trade off or punishment for the guards or just another way to fuck with his head but. When they doused him in gasoline and asked for the mission report, there wasn't any part of him celebrating their deaths either.

He just didn't care.

~*~

"There's an old saying in the world of assassins: there is always someone better. Your job is to be that someone better."

Russia, Poccus: the perfect place to practice optimum performance in harsh environments. He'd been put on ice and woke back up in the Soviet Union with the world around him a year older and an unfamiliar red star painted onto his arm. The red star was the only change; he observed it, categorized it, and moved on. The thawing process was as painful as usual - Longing, Daybreak, Freight Car - then they shoved him into his first outside mission, barefoot in the snow and ice.

Outside meant looking at the sun for the first time in years; he wasn't sure why it reminded him of someone's laugh, made him want to just stare into the bright light. *Let me look at the sun.*

Being outside meant an entire new set of challenges: it was a lot harder to disappear, the environment had a lot more to throw at him. He had to pick surfaces to hide footprints, had to be aware of every creak of the wind without losing the keen focus on the movement of every muscle in his body.

The only weapon he had this time was piano wire: hand to hand combat possibly required; takedowns from behind (за) more efficient; silence not optional; exit mission: disappear.

His hair was long enough now that it didn't want to sweep back the way he was used to. The few strands that used to hang over his forehead had turned into entire pieces, hiding his eyes and giving him another change to go with all the missing memories. But the voice in his head was still there, the moment he crouched behind a wall.

*Be careful out there, okay?* the unidentified voice sung out in his head. Bucky frowned, shutting down the unwelcome comment. Of course he would be careful, cautiousness meant an accomplished mission, a true efficiency.

There was black paint coating his eyes and streaked down his cheekbones - *“We can't have anyone identifying you, Мусор.”* He'd only blinked in agreement. The new name didn't even feel new anymore. There had been other things he'd been called -Терять, Собака, ...B-Barnes? - he knew that, but he didn't really care. They could call him whatever they wanted, he just made sure to pay attention whenever they were talking. It wasn't the name that mattered, it was the information.

The mission parameters made the entire thing too easy; he was sure he'd been on missions much more dangerous and difficult than this. He didn't know when, couldn't remember a detail, but the bitter cold was familiar and the adrenaline seeping into his bones wasn't making his heart race like it should have (on terms of biological responses), implying he was used to more dangerous situations
than the current.

The danger didn't matter though - Bucky returned to the base with the bloody head of the man they'd sent him after. There was reward for his obedience, in this case the opportunity for an ice shower. At first he'd thought the arctic water was another form of pain training, but the ritual - Misogi, it was called - was actually invigorating. His body convulsed at first, shivers and pain sparking along every piece of his skin, but the burn eventually developed into strengthening shocks.

Falling into a frozen river, reaching up a hand to a fleeting train.

When the body attempts to warm itself, the immune system releases more white blood cells and increases testosterone levels - testosterone is one of the main components for building strength. There was also a noticeable increase in energy level: it was easier to take the pain training that came after when his skin was numb and his bones were tingling with renewed energy.

Mission report.

But eventually even the arctic showers weren't considered rewards - there were no more rewards after long enough. He didn't need rewards. What was the point? They hurt him less when a mission went accurately. His only purpose was to make sure a mission went accurately. If he couldn't fight, what was he?

Useless. Human instinct fought irrelevancy and lack of purpose more than anything else.

Hydra held the control and gave him purpose. His system was isolated from the rest of the soldiers, his assets were valued. More than valued, indispensable.

He'd always been good at this, he knew that. But now he would be the best, he'd be the one that shaped the century.

Only one catch: there were ghost fingers tracing over his every time he pulled the trigger. He didn't know who or when or why but he was being haunted - had been haunted for as long as he could remember. (Which, admittedly, wasn't very long.)

The deadliness, the accuracy, the efficiency: they were unsustainable, so long as the voice in his head and the ghost hands and all of the синий kept dragging at his tabula rasa. Poison.

It didn't matter, he told himself. He'd grit his teeth against the wavering gravity at the corners of his mind, shoving out the little flashes that tried to drag him down. He'd go without having to feel anything at all for weeks and then something would trigger and a flood would pour into his head, a thousand things to feel at once.

Sorrow, rage, loneliness, loss. He'd only just fight the urge to scream, resorting to the easiest shut down technique. Find a clock and stare at the seconds hand as it clicks clicks clicks, emotions bubbling up and drowning and click click click the moment the hand hits the 12 it's a power switch. Just - off. Switch off and then it was gone, just like that. Nothing to worry about - no ability to worry with the emotions gone now.


"Mission report?"

Obedience - training. He had nothing to lose, there was nothing to take from him anymore.

Yeah, cause you got nothin' to prove.
It took a lot of practice to get good with bombs; he nearly lost his other arm once. It was only all the reflex training (reflex training was in one of the top five most painful) that had him spinning around to make his left arm take the impact. The doctors were still picking shrapnel out of the panels weeks later.

Electronics and alarms, breaking into places; that came easy. Too easy, like he'd spent most of his life climbing in through windows. A certain window in a ratty apartment in Brooklyn when Sarah Rogers was sleeping from a long shift and would wake if he took the door.

His body was strong, his muscle mass the perfect balance to his weight. Perfection - a goal. Inhuman - didn't matter. He would be perfect. That was the point, wasn't it? Wasn't that what everyone wanted? Hadn't he always wanted it? Blue eyes and a flashing, cocky smile. Little fists, raised to fight. A heart of gold and hair of sunshine and a world at his fingertips: he'd always thought that was what perfect meant. This was nothing like that kind of perfect.

When they fit him for an outfit in black he'd never considered another color. Not just because it wasn't his place to consider and it wasn't in his mind to care anymore; there was a dark purity in black that fit exactly what the insides looked like.

The rage of the past wasn't blind any longer - everything he ever saw and felt was shaped into power, put into maximum use. What once had hindered him now became the ultimate weapon - every piece of him was that way. Fine tuned to optimum performance.

He was Hydra's asset. No, more importantly, he was the asset. The world fell at his feet. His body held more power and was more deadly than any other to walk the earth in the year of 1952.

But it wasn't good enough.

"There's something holding you back, Пустяки." Another name. Another mission, almost perfect. He was brutal and he wasn't merciful. He was brilliant, he saw the world around him and he shaped it into the perfect setting to execute his kill. He'd long since gotten over the longing of freedom as the ice closed up around his metal hand and shut his eyes in his coffin of cold. He should be perfect.

But there was something holding him back, and he knew that. Hydra knew that. Zola, when he could spare the time to come check on him, knew that.

He growled in frustration, slamming his fists harder into the metal punching bag. His knuckles were bleeding again, there were red streaks all around him, but it didn't matter. Pain was an entity of the body and the body he was in was strong, efficient, and entirely under control of his mind. Simple - he chose not to feel the pain. (It worked up to a point - the process that came after the words wipe him was too much pain for even him to control.)

"What's holding you back, Пустяки?" The doctor on the side asked him. He turned instantly, instincts making him obey and answer the question at all costs, no options, no ability to not to.

"Призрак, в моей голове." The ghost in my head. It wouldn't leave him alone. Everywhere he went it was lingering, just beyond his touch. Always reminding him of things, always reaching out to him when he least needed it.

It'd almost compromised a few of his minor missions. He'd only really been on minor missions so far; nobody big enough for the government to notice their death. High level assassinations would come later - no one even knew he existed yet.

He liked it that way. If the world pretended he didn't exist, he got to pretend he didn't exist too.
But the ghost was always there, holding him down to the earth, making him question things that should be second nature by now. Just a flash of blue and suddenly his body was hot all over, hot enough to be on fire, and he wanted to peel the skin off his bones just to escape.

"You cannot let something like that be stronger than you are. This is your weakness, Пустяки. Your achilles heel. It makes you flawed. Human." The doctor spat the word human like it was the most despicable thing on the planet. It was. He would never stoop so low as to be a member of a flawed race.

Bucky curled his hands, looking down at his fingers and spreading them apart. He didn't need to remind himself anymore - he calculated and planned every twitch of his muscles before they began. Even when to blink, when to breathe. It'd taken so much focus and time at first, slowed everything down. But years had given him speed and control, so much more control than a human would have.

"You are living in a war but you fight battles with yourself. How are you ever to win if you don't have complete control of your own mind? You don't feel anything else - why must you feel this?"

It was his last tether; he would have to cut it out of himself. Surgically remove his own heart, because that's where the ghost came from. At first he had thought it was from his mind - but no, it arose from his chest, ghosted to brush back too-long hair and run over broken knuckles with worried sounds.

"You need to let go of that ghost. It is your turn to become the ghost."

It's just a ghost story, no need to be afraid.

"I can cut it out, under suspended sleep." Eyes that used to be wide in wonder, surprise, hurt, were now narrowed and icy, waiting for the command or the needle to send him on to the next stage.

The devil latched to his spine must go. Or maybe it was something beautiful, that was why it couldn't stay.

"Bring the hallucinogens."

~*~

Sleep:

The night was crystal; a sky as perfectly black as Bucky, draped like a blanket over the dim lights reflecting off the harbor. Brilliant pinpricks of white cut through the darkness, glittering stars to shine through the broken spaces of sky.

The wind whipped cold against the back of his neck as he stood on the dock's edge, overlooking the water. There were two bridges in the distance, familiar in the very core of him, even though he couldn't recall seeing them before.

Everything was blue and black and gray, smelled like salt and sweat and the city. He'd been here before, he knew that. But more importantly, he knew the sound of those approaching footsteps.

Bucky turned away from the water, hair blowing disgracefully around his face. The length of it suddenly felt out of place and a metal hand reached up to smooth it back.

The ghost beat him to it. He stared, wide eyed and unabashed at the man in front of him, one big hand holding back Bucky's hair from his face. For the first time in years, the ghost's features were as
sharp as his hands. And he was beautiful.

Eyes locked on his, irises blue - *that's* where that haunting color came from. A military uniform, dark brown and dusted with medals that reflected gently in the starshine. A defined jaw, blonde hair that just invited Bucky to reach up and touch.

The ghost didn't look like a ghost at all. He looked like an angel.

"I'm so sorry," the angel whispered to him. Bucky blinked, the proximity washing him into a state of confusion. (He'd been this close before, he could feel it in his bones.)

"I wanted to save you." The angel's voice spoke again, the same as the one in his head. Telling him not to kill, to be safe. To get enough sleep. That praised his impossible shots, scolded his foolish decisions.

"Save me from what?" Bucky asked, his voice feeling rounder than he was used to, syllables lacking the sharp precision he spoke with now.

The hand pinning back his hair ran a thumb over Bucky's temple, smoothing a warm feeling from his skull down to his spine.

He wanted to ask again, what the angel was apologizing for. What Bucky needed saving from. The only thing he had was Hydra, and they'd saved him from a life of human error. Error - *error*. He had a purpose here, Bucky had to complete his mission. Not just stare at the soft, glowing angel.

"You must leave," Bucky told it, ignoring the flash of surprise across the angel's features. "You're just...a hopeless dream. I can't have you stay."

"Bu--"

"No. You've haunted me for too long. You have to go." Bucky glared at the angel but it didn't budge, the eyes just softened with the sweetest kind of sadness.

"But I _am_ gone. Why do you think you see me everywhere?"

That didn't make any sense. Unless he meant something else by 'gone'...maybe dead? Maybe this was someone from his past, someone very important, that had died. Left him in the flesh, but not in the mind. It was a possibility, but it still didn't explain everything.

It still didn't explain why he'd held on this long. Why he still wasn't disappearing like Bucky wanted him to.

"Why _do_ I see you everywhere? Who are you?" Bucky accused, taking a step back, closer to the edge of the water. The angel's hand fell to its side, mouth turning down in disappointment.

"I was everything to you." The angel answered quietly. Bucky stared for a few moments before whipping around on his heel, staring out over the water and turning his back on the sunshine glow. He could see his reflection in the water, watched the angel's reflection step closer before he felt the warm hands circling around his waist.

Those arms had been around his waist before, his body knew them like a puzzle piece. A clue towards the mission: a vital piece of information that may change the parameters entirely. He needed a final data point, if he were to rid himself of the angel completely.

Bucky turned his head to the side, looking stiffly over his shoulder at the angel who was resting his
chin hooked over Bucky's clavicle. Blue eyes glanced up to his and Bucky held their gaze.

"Were we lovers?" he asked, the words less curious and more accusing. Blue eyes blinked slowly, then the arms around Bucky's stomach squeezed a little tighter as the angel looked out over the harbor.

"Almost," he said softly.

Bucky traced the pattern of the closest bridge with his eyes, surprised he knew the lines of the brick so intimately. He must have studied that bridge before. He couldn't remember the way he used to draw the sloping wires, jutting brick architecture, glittering water underneath.

"I spent a lot of time trying not to think about you," Bucky told him.

"I know," the angel replied. The wind whistled around them like a hurricane, a storm to separate them once more. "Do I have to go?"

"Yes." Every part of him was screaming to say no - he wanted the angel to stay more than anything. But he simply couldn't have him anymore. He had to sacrifice this if he wanted uncompromisable power.

"I'm never going to forget you," the angel whispered, warm breath ghosting over Bucky's neck. Bucky closed his eyes, tightening his hands over the arms around his waist and wishing for the first time that his left could feel more than it did.

"I have to forget you," Bucky whispered back.

The angel circled around to stand in front of him again, tipping Bucky's chin up with a finger as Bucky opened his eyes again. It was such a beautiful image, the golden glow looking down at him with the glittering sky reflected in the water behind him, bridge sloping in the distance.

The air around them froze, cold like his ice chamber and suspended like the years spent inside. The angel leaned forward, hand cupping Bucky's jaw now as gentle lips pursed and pressed tightly to Bucky's forehead.

The gesture might have once swirled something deep from within him, but Bucky was already drifting away from the steady hold of artist hands. Those hands weren't there to hold him anymore.

The opacity of the scene turned down and Bucky watched with distant eyes as the angel faded, dust gathering from his feet, vanishing bit by bit as Bucky watched, silent.

"Goodbye," the voice whispered into the wind, blue eyes disappearing into smoke before him. The feeling in his chest evaporated with the sudden cold on his jaw, waist, forehead. Gone.

Bucky didn't say anything in response. The air was bitter now that he stood alone on the dock. He looked at the bridge one last time before the arching brick faded to smoke too.

And finally, he was saved.

~*_*_~

"They weren't kidding about the assassin. He's freaking...deadly, man."
"He's an assassin," the other guard answered dryly.

"Well, yeah, but. Hey, do you think they're going to have him train other assassins and shit? To be all crazy like him?"

"Does that look stable enough to speak to a human being?? Let alone teach one???"

"...okay, yeah. Fair point. So much for that."

"It wasn't created to make more. It was created to last forever. Besides, I heard this project's been going on for years. It's not every day you get an opportunity like that. They aren't going to waste its training on something like that."

"Also fair point. But if it weren't so damn... dead in the eyes, I bet it could teach the world."

"Pretty sure the only thing it can teach you is how to scream."

~*~*~

He had a man at gunpoint, waiting for him to enter the code on his safe, where his mission: collect MSRM files was waiting.

The sharp-jawed man looked at him in disgust, finger hovering over the last button to open the steel door. Bucky didn't even flinch as the man opened his mouth, gesturing accusatorily at the four dead Russian bodies on the floor.

"How could you kill your own kind?" The man asked.

"I'm not even your species," Bucky told him, pulling the trigger.

The man crumpled with a bullet in between the eyes and for once, Bucky didn't have the layover memory of a similar shot made in a war a decade ago, no flashing shield at the corners of his vision, no hands reaching out to hold his.

Just.

blank.

He was finally perfect.

~*~*~

"Howard!" Peggy stalked into the lab, heels clicking sharply over polished floors and making Stark jump, even after all of this time working together.

"Jeez, Peg. I'm working on somethin', you mind? I couldn'ta blow-torched my hand." Howard lifted the goggles off of his face, carefully setting down the twisting metal project on a lab table. Peggy ignored his complaints and held up the file she was holding, snapping it once in the air for effect.

"This is more important," she insisted, sliding the dark folder across the table to him. Howard barely glanced at it, rolling his eyes the way all men did at the idea of paperwork.

"A file, Peggy? What piece of paper could possibly be more impor--"
"It's about Sergeant James Barnes."

Howard's eyebrows went up, the joking smile suddenly disappearing. The two of them had been friends once, Bucky and Howard. She wondered if Stark had ever really cared for Bucky, the way the rest of the world did. Based on his expression, probably. Who didn't?

"I'm listening." Stark picked up the file, opening the covering and glancing a bit sorrowfully at the photo - it'd hit Peggy hard too, that cocky half smile, the crooked hat. It was a version of Barnes she'd never had the opportunity to know. *Steve did,* her mind provided quite unhelpfully.

"Look at the stamp across the first page." Peggy leaned over the top of the file, pointing a red fingernail at the large boxed mark.


"Missing?" Peggy prompted. Howard still just looked at her, twitching his moustache as he quirked his mouth to the side. She sighed, waving her hand as she continued. "I'm quite sure we have it on good authority - *the best authority, if she had anything to say about it* - that Sergeant Barnes was killed in action. He died, quite honorably, for his country and protecting his best friend. But we stamp 'MIA' on his file?"

Stark looked back down at the file, nodding slightly to himself. "No, you're right, Pegs. Barnes deserves to have his sacrifice recognized. But I don't think I have the authority to change something like an SSR file..."

As much as she agreed they should get it changed, that actually wasn't what was bothering her the most. The word *missing* had triggered a memory, a conversation she'd had a long time ago with someone she'd long since forgotten about.

Werner Reinhardt, right after he'd been captured...he'd said something about a "lost" member of the Howling Commandos. Lost, missing - they fit together like puzzle pieces and it made her uneasy. Before she'd joined Shield with Howard, the SSR had stuck her as a code cracker and her mind saw patterns in crystal clear highlights now. And in her line of work, coincidences weren't quite considered.

So it wasn't as exactly a change in the file that she was looking for (although that would be appreciated); it was the *reason.* Someone had stamped this file as Missing in Action. It was quite possible that wasn't an accident.

"Actually, Howard, I was hoping you could do a little more than that. Could you look into why it was stamped that way in the first place? Or at least who stamped it." Peggy lifted her eyebrows and smiled winningly over the papers between them.

"Why, you planning on crackin' down on some poor intern who's probably moved on to some other job all these years later?" Stark asked amusedly, setting the file back down on the table.

"Something like that," Peggy conceded, briefly debating telling Stark everything. He was the only one who never looked at her like she was crazy - but based on the fact that this was still Howard Stark, she just settled with, "I've got a hunch, is all."

"Well you know how my every goal is to endow your hunches." Stark rolled his eyes and Peggy refrained from kicking him in the shin.

"I'm busy, you know. Trying to save the world, inventing things. Handling a newborn child."
"He's hardly newborn! What is he, three now? Besides. You owe me from that time I cleared your name of being a traitor selling your 'bad babies' to the United States's enemies."

"Fine, fine, I'll look into it." Howard waved his hand and Peggy nodded her thanks, turning to step back out of the lab again. "And Peggy?" Howard called, making her stop in the doorway. "He's four and a half by the way."

She smiled; Howard couldn't fool her, she knew how much he cared underneath his consistent submersal in his work.

"I know. And I knew you did too."

~*~*~

The year is 1963 and the place is Dallas, Texas.

He'd never been to Texas before but he didn't see the big skies now, didn't feel the hospitable warmth of the November evening. He just waited, perfectly still as he watched through the sniper scope.

Three shots.

A lot of screams. It wasn't his first time back on U.S. soil and it wouldn't be his last. The three shots weren't necessary for a kill; instead, they were necessary for suspicion of another player. Bucky didn't need more than a single shot.

Maybe, if he had let himself, there would be a memory to flash back to: looking through a sniper scope like always, a salute in his direction. But those memories weren't available anymore. They didn't matter anymore. They didn't exist; just like he didn't exist.

He packed up his rifle and he was gone before the screams even stopped.

~*~*~

"Hello?"

"Hey, Peggy, it's Howard."

"Howard! It's been some time! How are Tony and Maria?"

"Fine fine, they're fine. So listen, you remember when you gave me Barnes's file a few years back and I couldn't get anywhere with it?"

"Yes, of course."

"So I was visiting one of the old SSR bases the other day and they had an entire database set up in the basement. They've been cataloging in all the old forgotten documents from the forties. So of course, I ran Barnes's file through it."
"And?" Peggy prompted, tapping her nails impatiently on the phone.

"And I hit high level security clearance: an official level 8 SHIELD access required. Thing is though, the train incident was back in '45. That's before--"

"Before SHIELD was even formed," Peggy finished for him.

"Exactly," Howard agreed. "So it shouldn't be possible for Barnes's file to have been secluded in the first place."

"Which means a dozen more questions, and another brick wall."

"Basically. But look, I'll see where I can get with the level 8 clearance. They may not even have anything, honestly. But based on all the roadblocks we've hit so far with this thing?"

Howard had that tone in his voice, the one that hinted at his inner thoughts: like maybe they really were on to something.

"You think there's a reason for it," Peggy finished. She could practically hear the nod on the other end of the phone line.

"There's a chance. Either way, it's Barnes. We've gotta look into it."

"We do. Keep me updated?"

"'Course. No promises though, dead ends have been the song for this one."

"Well hopefully that's changing soon."

"Hopefully."

~*~*~

May 1978, an ex-president this time. Mission: complete. His sixth high-level assassination.

There were whispers now, of a metal-armed ghost. There had been for about five years; just whispers.

Bucky had nothing but power running through his veins. He was deadly. He was perfect.

He hid behind his mask and no one had to know it was a muzzle too.

~*~*~

"Peggy, it's Stark. Howard. I know we haven't talked in a few years but you should really gimme a call back."

~*~*~
It was October 1983.

Mission Parameters:
Target: Алиев family
Place of entrance: sunroof, waiting room
Weapons: piano wire, various explosives, fourteen knives, three guns
Requirements: collateral damage may be necessary

Mission Report:
Seven family members terminated; eighteen guards executed; no survivors.

There weren't just whispers of a metal-armed ghost now.

There were whispers of a name.

~*~*~

"Hi, Peggy. It's Howard Stark again. I know we've got our differences now, but this is bigger than that. This might be bigger than everything. It's about...look, I can't say what it's about over the phone. Just, trust me on this one. I need your help, Peg. The whole world may need your help."

~*~*~


Haruo Remeliik, the first President of Palau, was shot in the driveway of his home by an unidentified gunman.

To this day, the gunman has remained unidentified.

Bucky didn't even know his target's name that time.

But the target had heard rumors of Bucky's name.

It's a ghost story to tell the little assassin children at night.

~*~*~

"Carter."

"Stark."

"Thanks for meeting me. Jarvis, don't let anybody past the tenth floor, okay? Seal off the top half of the building and go guard the elevator yourself or something."
Peggy watched with narrowed eyes as Howard deadbolted the metal door behind them, the blinds for the room already pulled. The only light came from a single lamp, illuminating a file on the lavish desk.

"How's Tony?" she asked perfunctorily, sitting down in the chair across from Howard's desk.

"You know how twenty year olds are." Howard dismissed, taking his seat as well. She nodded - she had children of her own, she did know. Not that any of her children were anything like Howard's, but.

"Well, you've got me here, and the tower's locked down. I assume you have something to show me?"

"You're gonna be glad you're sitting down," Howard slid the file across the desk and Peggy picked it up at the corner, tilting it into the light to read the cover. She recognized it in seconds; it was one of only two folders she'd made a point to memorize.

"Sergeant Barnes...you found a way past all of the clearance and false leads, then?" She didn't bother keeping the admonishment out of her voice; both of them had spent plenty of time over the past decades trying to dig up anything on the file to know how absolutely impossible it'd been. Literally every person they asked, every box deeper they tried to unveil, all dead ends and classified's.

"Not quite. I did finally manage to crack a code, pin down one of the reroutes. It took a hell of a lot of lying and possibly some thievery, but I eventually managed to conjure up a document - just a one page report. Go ahead and open it up, it's on top."

Howard waved his hand impatiently and Peggy lifted back the cover flap, pulling out the first paper and reading aloud.

"Request for transfer, temporary project manager. Austria, 1945." Peggy looked up from the file. "Austria? That's where the last Hydra base was, wasn't it? We picked up this...self-righteous German scientist, bastard named Reinhardt."

"The same Reinhardt who told you about a 'lost' Howling Commando, right?" Howard replied grimly, that signature look on his face (and not the cocky one) as he leaned back in his chair.

Peggy looked back down at the file in her hands. Reinhardt. She scanned the paragraphs, freezing as she reached the bottom. Two sets of initials, swung haphazardly over thin lines. "W.R. and A.Z....Oh, my god."

Her hand flew to cover her mouth and Howard rubbed a weary palm down his face. "I know, Pegs, I know."

She just stared a moment, filtering what in the world this possibly meant. The W.R. was clearly Werner Reinhardt, and the A.Z.? She knew of another German scientist - who'd been released from custody about that same time - with those initials.

"Could you find anything on the project? Anything else in correspondence?" She flipped through the folder, making a frustrated sound at how little information they had. Stark reached out like he was going to take her hands, calm her down the way he always used to, but froze and withdrew before he could finish reaching over the desk.

"It was a weapons manufacturing project," he said instead, pointing at the top edge of the paper. "That is, according to the numeric code on that stamp in the corner."
"A weapon?"

"I know, it doesn't make sense to me either. There was one other thing though: a shipment, made in '45, to the same warehouse mentioned on that report."

A shipment. That could tell them everything. Or, it could simply be food rations for guards.

"What was it?" she pressed, flipping through the file again. The rest was the same as every other time she'd read it.

"Still working on that, Peggy. I've been playin' this thing close to the chest, which makes it a hell of a lot harder. If what the file implies is true..."

"...then we may have neglected the rescue of one of the nation's most admirable heroes." Peggy finished for him.

"Exactly. I'll keep you updated as I can Peg, alright? I know you're outta the game now, got your family to worry about."

"Yes, well. Sergeant Barnes was a bit like family to us both, wasn't he?" Peggy pursed her lips, handing Howard back the file.

"I think he was to everybody who gotta meet him." Howard looked down, faraway expression on his face. A familiar pang sharpened in Peggy's heart at the sight. "Kid sure was made outta somethin' good."

"That he was," she agreed softly. Maybe is, if they were lucky. But it'd been so many years...he'd be as old as they were now, if he was still alive. Maybe he'd gotten out, maybe he was living some fulfilled life in France and just decided to never come back to America. If he knew about Steve's death, he wouldn't have had a reason to come back. Loved him first.

"Do you think he's still alive?" Peggy asked quietly, both lost in their heads. Howard sighed, straightening the files on his desk.

"I dunno, Pegs. He fell from a mountain, after all. We can't even be sure that paper means anything. It could be another dead end."

She nodded, looking down at her hands and tangling them together in her lap. How was it that it'd taken them so long to even get this far?

"One last thing, Peg. Just in case I find something on that shipment, I got you a pre-paid cell phone. It's untraceable, and you should be able to crush it under your heels if you have to. If this really is something, we've gotta be careful."

Careful. That day Peggy had nodded, thanked Stark, and they'd briefly hugged before she left the tower and drove her way back home; untraceable, destructible phone in her pocket.

Apparently they weren't careful enough.

~*~*~

December 16, 1991
She'd known something was wrong the moment she saw the blinking red light on the little pre-paid phone. Peggy held her breath as she pressed a still-manicured finger to the speaker button.


"Peggy, hey. Look, I don't have much time. But I found out what that shipment was and Peg, you're not gonna fucking believe this. The shipment was for a fucking metal arm."

Howard's voice went hollow and airy, words echoing into the air. Peggy's breath caught in her throat. That wasn't...possible. It simply wasn't possible.

"Peggy, listen to me: I know you're freaked right now, I'm freaked right now, but we've seriously gotta backpedal the fuck out of this. Because Peg, I think they might know we're looking. The second someone fucking finds out that we know, Peg, you understand what they are going to do to us-- Just one second, Maria! Did you gas up the car? Look, Maria and I are skipping town for a bit. I've just got this feeling...anyways. Be safe, Peg. And don't fucking dig into that file."

The voicemail clicked silent, echoing ominously. Peggy just stood there, cell phone in her palm.

A metal arm.

It couldn't be.

The timing was fucking perfect.

A metal arm.

The most deadly assassin in the world: a ghost story. She'd heard of him, everybody who was anybody'd heard of him. The three words whispered under tones, talk of metal arms and disappearing figures. The ultimate killer.

Sergeant James Barnes.

The sound that left her lips scared even her, a hand clapping over her mouth as the cell phone dropped from limp fingers, flipping in slow motion to the floor. The moment the clatter echoed across the ground, her eyes snapped down to stare at the fallen device, eyes wide and watering.

Bucky.

The man who'd come crying to her in an army tent decades ago, hopelessly in love with his beautiful best friend.

The man whose cocky smile stared up from that file, hat on crooked and the entire world at his feet.

Steve Rogers' best friend. The man Steve Rogers had thrown himself into battle headfirst for.

Bucky Barnes.

The Winter Soldier.

She brought her heel down on the phone, hard. Crushing it to pieces, stomping and stomping until the heel snapped off her shoe and the phone was long since destroyed. Sergeant Bucky Barnes.

They hadn't even looked for him.
Reinhardt had told her, so many years ago. Warned her... *Giving me a second chance could save all of humanity.* He'd known, he'd known the plan for Bucky and if she hadn't been so stubborn she would've been able to stop it, to save him --

Somehow, Bucky Barnes was still alive and he was the deadliest assassin in the world. He should be crippled and old but instead he was alive and wielding an advanced technological arm.

Peggy crumpled to the floor, her hands covering her face as the tears started to escape her eyes. It couldn’t be. It shouldn’t be possible. But SHIELD had a tentative file on possible Winter Soldier sightings, possible killings. The first was in the 1950s.

They'd assumed copycat killer, something. But all along, it was somehow Bucky. He'd *survived* that fall from the train.

She hadn’t even *looked*.

The moment she'd seen the Missing in Action on his file she should have dug deeper, harder, faster. The file read missing because *someone* in SHIELD knew. All of this time someone had known, had been inside their ranks and working for the enemy. But what enemy?

Who exactly was the Winter Soldier working for? Who had captured and destroyed Bucky Barnes?

Once, a long time ago, she'd kept a promise for Bucky Barnes. A promise that she swore she'd take to the grave.

And what, she was suppose to take this one too? She and Howard *had* to do something about this. It was their responsibility. Their duty. This was *Bucky*. They couldn't just leave him.

She could never just leave him.

Peggy picked herself up off the ground, nudging aside broken phone pieces with her foot and straightening out her skirt. Falling apart now wasn't going to help anyone; let alone the deadly assassin that was one of Stark's oldest friends, one of her oldest comrades. Her biggest responsibility.

Out of habit, Peggy snagged the remote off the couch and flipped on the TV as she sat her bag down, already pulling out a pile of files. She’d need maps, connections, a personal meeting with Fury--

"--rry to report the death of America's favorite billionaire and genius-inventor Howard Stark."

Peggy's eyes snapped up to the television instantly. Papers fell from her hands unnoticed.

A newscover shot, rolling over a scene from the top of a cliff: a smoking pile of wreckage. Stark's favorite car. She couldn't hear anything for a few moments, couldn't see anything but the twisting, smoking metal. Then the anchorman spoke again, words floating over her daze.

"Both Howard Stark and his wife Maria have been announced as fatally injured in the collision. Based on the lack of skid marks on the road, it can be assumed that the brakes on Stark's family car gave out, sending the power-couple off the side of the cliff and into the rock face below..."

One of the things Howard'd said in the voicemail, before he hung up. *Maria and I are skipping town for a while. I've got this feeling...*

He'd come for them.
The Winter Soldier - Sergeant Bucky Barnes - had killed Howard.

It was too much to take in, so Peggy didn't. She stared at the TV and at the files strewn over her floor and let her mind go blank.

*Don't fucking dig into that file.* The last words Howard had ever told her.

Once upon a time, a long long time ago, Peggy Carter had made a promise to Sergeant James Barnes. A promise that she planned to take to the grave.

And unless she wanted that grave to be a hell of a lot sooner than she'd been planning, it looked like she had another promise to keep.

No one could ever know.

No one could ever know that James Barnes was the Winter Soldier.

☆

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer for the psychological and physical training in this chapter: I wrote a longass explanation of the scientific research and ideas behind the past two chapters due to a request on tumblr and you can find the link to that here.

xx

(P.S. GUESS WHO'S BACK SOON? 
Our blonde little sunshine.)
Chapter Notes

This is basically the Steve-is-adjusting chapter combined with the Steve-meets-everyone chapter, just so you know.

Disclaimer: I do not hate Tony Stark. Quite the contrary, I think he has a lot deeper plotline that most Marvel fans see. Yes, he can be a dick, but wow he is a lot more than that too. So if it seems like Steve hates him at first, he totally did in Avengers. So. Not my opinions, but Rogers’.

Actually, while I'm saying, I don't hate any of the Avengers. Steve is seeing them through the tainted eyes of someone who lost his best friend less than a month ago and is still traumatized by the war - so he's going to be bitter.

Also: in case you haven’t seen the deleted scene from Avengers I put it in the fic with my little xx link when it comes in. Just so you know.

Warnings for depression, canon typical violence.

Songs for our sorrowful Steve:
Set the Fire to the Third Bar - Snow Patrol
A Sadness Runs Through Him - The Hoosiers
xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
White. A sense of encompassing, piercingly-bright white. Steve blinked, stared up at the ceiling, and could only process the too-clean color above him.

There were sounds too, soft sounds drifting through the room. Recognizable sounds, like voices over a speaker; he was clean, warm, surrounded by too much white, a strange chemical smell, and a radio.

The room was... reality-adjacent. (It turned out later, that the whole world was reality-adjacent.)

Steve looked around, soaking in everything through the confusion. He was lying on a bed in a room that was otherwise empty. There was a radiator by the window, a green panel wrapping the bottom half of the walls. A recovery room, it looked like. Which would mean...he was alive, then.

Besides, there was no way he'd be wearing a shirt this tight in heaven; he had to be in the land of the living.

A quick shot of fear had Steve stretching out his arms a little, checking to feel the muscles rippling underneath his skin. His body was still strong from the serum. A bit of relief edged over his features as he sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He didn't recognize anything in the room. Where was he now? Glanced over his shoulder, scanned outside the window. Empty gray buildings, no clue to his location, although it maybe looked like New York?

He kept searching for more clues, still overwhelmed with how clean everything was. There was a radio on the dresser by the window and Steve tuned into it now, voices crackling but audible over the wire. It was a depiction of a baseball game. Wait...he knew this game. He knew this game.

It'd been May, 1943 and Bucky Barnes had come barreling home with two tickets in hand and a wild smile, a pep in his step that had him practically bouncing as he tackled Steve on the couch, where he'd been drawing quite peacefully before the soot-smudged boy had jumped on him.

"We're going to a game Stevie!" Bucky'd sing-songed, nudging Steve's shoulder from where his legs were draped over Steve's lap. Steve'd been halfway through shoving Bucky off him when the words sunk in and his eyes lit up, jaw dropping as he looked up at Bucky's shining face.

"A real ball game, you and me. It's gonna be amazing." Bucky shoved the tickets at Steve, exchanging them for the sketchpad in Steve's hands. (Which he closed up carefully and sat down on the coffee table.) Steve had lit up in a smile, tackling Bucky right back. They ended up on the floor laughing, both of them elated in boyish excitement.

And the game itself had been even better. Bucky had thrown his arm around Steve's neck and pulled him along happily as they found their seats, leaning close as they cheered on the game, both of them shouting as loud as Steve's little lungs could allow. Their team'd won and neither of them could keep the smiles off their faces for a week after.

Bucky.

It hit him outta nowhere and suddenly Steve was very much not alright. The room was suddenly crushing him and his overwhelmed lungs starting pumping a hundred times faster. Only one question rushing through his mind now: Where was Bucky?

Thankfully the door had opened at that exact moment, snapping Steve into the present before that trail of thought could escape and drag him under. A nurse walked in, smile plastered over tight lips.

"Good morning," she greeted, her tone of voice putting Steve even more on edge. Her hair was all wrong, her lipstick color was wrong. With a quick glance that almost had him blushing, Steve realized that her bra was wrong too.
It was like everything was *shifted*. The entire room was off.

She was speaking but everything she was saying was a lie, everything he was hearing and seeing was a lie. He told her so and the nurse stumbled over his accusation and suddenly there were people in black uniforms and then he was busting out of a wall and oh, turned out he was actually in a warehouse because that was *not sketchy* at all and then he was swinging through doors and he was running and he was running and he was going as fast as he could possibly go but then he just stopped because

Because he had absolutely no idea where the hell he was. There was a crowd pushing around him, mulling and moving and there were so many people he should've been suffocating and there were so many lights and moving pictures and huge screens he should've been drowning but Steve'd been drowning approximately an hour ago in his memory and this was nothing like that, nothing like suffocating either, because he was surrounded and enclosed and overstimulated and there was so so much and he was so so alone.

~*~*~

Before he'd crashed the plane into the ocean, Steve'd been waiting. Waiting to either find Bucky, or join him. Then the fall had taken them both, but the ice had been crueler to Steve. The ice hadn't let him die, it'd brought him to a new world.

"Where are we going?"

"The future."

But Bucky wasn't here with him, in this new world of the future. *What was the point of a future without his best friend?* And the worst part about the 70 year gap meant that there was no chance now, of ever having Bucky again. It'd been 70 years and no body'd ever been found: Steve would never be whole again.

Stuck waiting again; waiting for the dust to settle, waiting to get used to jumping images and the twisted, too-colorful future, waiting for a time that he was okay without the beautiful sniper at his side.

They woke him in New York by some twisted fate of irony. It wasn't New York, not really. They even got him an apartment here, in the "quieter" part of town that wasn't full of bustling zombies and flashing billboards on every corner.

The SHIELD agent that showed him to the apartment wore the proudest look. "It's vintage," she told him. "To make you feel more at home."

He was a half, the lighter side of a two headed coin. No amount of vintage furniture and wall decor was gonna make him feel at home when he was a stranger in his own skin all over again.

Honestly, he tried to be polite about the apartment. Made it through the big blank square that took up too much room (a television, the agent said) and the fridge that was too big and took up too much room, the ridiculous size of the apartment in general. He even made it through the too-soft couch and the bed he didn't even want to touch.

He hit his limit at the wall decor.

"What's this?" Steve gestured vaguely at the strange black and yellow thing on the wall. The
SHIELD agent perked up, pushing back short black hair from her forehead as she beamed, repeating the same two words he'd heard plenty over the past twenty minutes.

"It's vintage!" She gestured at the shape of it with a small hand. "It's a movie reel."

"It looks like traintracks."

The agent raised her eyebrows axiomatically. Based on the amount of paperwork he'd done earlier, he was gonna guess she'd read his file. So, clearly, she should know. Didn't seem to catch the drift though. Not the only one of them who couldn't catch.

Steve sighed, waving a hand at the wall without looking at the iron lines.

"Unless you want me to wake up every morning crying, I recommend not decorating my apartment with trains." Steve did his best to add humor and a smile to it - lighthearted or keel over from the weight - but the agent's expression only grew even more confused.

"You..." she started, and Steve could practically see the ...don't like trains? forming on her lips as the lightbulb suddenly went off. Her eyes went big as she instantly backpedaled. "Oh. Oh. That bad?"

The words dripped all sympathetic at the end and Steve sighed, shifting his weight and shooting an I'm-trying-I-promise half-smile.

"That bad," he confirmed. She nodded once, gaze cutting awkwardly away as she jotted something down on the clipboard. Steve doubted it was notes about the decor.

"Okay. We can take those down right now." The tight smile returned and Steve did his best to mimic it. To appear more stable than he looked. Felt.

She helped him take the metal thing off the wall and the relief that rushed through him at the loss of a physical reminder was a little ridiculous.

Thankfully, they didn't run into any more horrifying moments. The agent wrote down a few things on her clipboard, sometimes when she thought Steve wasn't looking and others blatantly obvious after something he said.

He had no idea what she was looking for. Or what she'd found. Just paste on a smile until she left him alone again, so he could have a moment to breathe without paperwork and questions and the SHIELD crash course to the 21st century. He needed some time without the swarm. Which took a few hours, but finally the agent let Steve see her to the door.

"If you need assistance at any time, feel free to call. These--" she handed Steve a thick folder from the pile she was holding, "--are for you. Don't spend too long looking over them...it's in the past now. The sooner you come to terms with that, the happier you'll be. Okay?"

She gave him a cheery smile and Steve made a mental note not to recommend SHIELD therapists for anyone ever.

"Yeah, thanks. Have a good evening, ma'am." Steve gave her a little wave and closed the door solidly, leaning against it with a relieved rush of air escaping.

And he was finally alone. With a folder full of files on the one thing he actually cared about in the 21st century: the Howling Commandos.
There was a slight sense of nausea that followed everywhere he went. Like everything was moving too fast, rushing along without him, and Steve was staggering off the ride with no one to rub his back as he hurled in the grass.

It wasn't the changes themselves that bothered him. Of course the world changed, he'd been expecting that to happen eventually. He could embrace change; he'd been dumped into an entirely new body once, for crying out loud. Steve Rogers didn't have a problem with change.

The electronics were overwhelming, that was true. Lights used to be golden flattering soft curvy honey - replaced with fluorescent whites that lit the world harsh mean unforgiving. Streetlamps and store lights were too bright, everything split into atoms with sharp white beams called xenons that destroyed the pigment of everyone's skin and polluted the air with a strangely industrial feel. No longer were bars memorable and golden, no longer did the rainwater on the sidewalks glisten and glitter in dim streetlights.

The absolute worst part though, was the color. There were so many colors. Everything was ridiculously vibrant in a disgustingly fake sorta way. The 40's hadn't been in sepia, or black'n'white like all the movies showed; every one'a Steve's memories were in full colour. No, that wasn't the problem. It was just that the dark green forests of Italy and the brilliant red dresses of dames were different, somehow. The color of green that shouted from his phone was violent; the reds in dresses were synthesized, chemically brighter than any natural dye would make them.

And the buildings. Skyscrapers were blue, storefronts an array of cheap fake shades, street signs so bright it hurt to look if you stared long enough. It almost made Steve wish he did live in black and white. Everything was so focused on clean and bright and if SHIELD wrote down more worried notes about how Steve kept most the lights off in his new apartment, so be it.

At least the darkness hadn't changed. When the lights were out the world could almost be the same. The sounds were different; the temperature was different. It wasn't cold, for one. It wasn't ice - but Steve didn't let himself think about ice much. The timeline in his brain had him drowning in freezing water less than three days ago, so any topic steered in that direction was avoided.

There were quite a few things he was avoiding, actually.

The foremost being all emotions. Especially any that might be associated with curling up and crying.

He didn't have his boys to save him anymore. He didn't have anybody to save him. He couldn't afford to lose himself.

So he didn't. He stared at everything with half-interested eyes, did the best he could to avoid the damn past. It might've worked, barely, if night had never fallen. Everything's lonelier in the dreary of the dark.

Steve laid down on the new marshmallow bed, pulled heavy blankets to his chest, and closed his eyes. He managed to lie still and quiet for about three minutes.

The silence started to really hit after that.

In the war, there'd been moments of quiet. Just the boys all sleeping in their tents, one propped dutifully against a tree keeping watch as the crickets and the dying crackle of fire were the only noises to float through the air.
This was nothing like that kind'a quiet. This kind'a silence was *deafening*.

He made it another minute staring at the dark ceiling, then he rolled up on his side, pulling the blankets over his shoulders.

He was still falling straight through the mattress. He couldn't handle falling.

*Falling and falling and falling away from Steve's outstretched hand.*

The first night he was only in bed seven minutes before he sat up and padded across the new apartment - only managing not to run into walls thanks to heightened senses - and threw a blanket down on the floor by the back window.

Steve curled up on the cold ground, blinking into the dark and shivering in the tight tshirt they'd given him. Squeezed his eyes shut and tried to breathe.

It felt like he hadn't prayed in years (actually decades, really), but tonight Steve prayed to God for a comfort he'd only ever gotten from the resplendent man who'd never believed in something higher looking over them.

Steve almost didn't wanna believe, either. If God took Bucky away from him, how was Steve supposed to-- to...

But tonight it didn't matter. Tonight Steve prayed that someone'd find his freezing bones, that his Commandos would come and scoop him up, carry his shivering body to Bucky's waiting, open arms. Tonight Steve prayed Bucky'd cross the distance and decades between them and just come and *save him*.

And then he only lasted another twenty seconds before the tears started to roll.

Deceased.

Deceased.

Deceased.

And *Steve* had survived? What the hell for? What was he supposed to do now? America didn't need him. Bucky didn't need him. No one needed him.

He reached under the pillow he'd brought (still too soft), but his hand came up empty. His sketchbook was gone. Everything he had, it was all gone. *Build a new life*, they told him.

He didn't even have a drawing of Bucky to tuck in his pocket.

Steve sat up again, running tired hands through his hair. Looked like he was gonna have to make a new one.

That night he never ended up sleeping. He turned on the little gold lamp, searched the apartment until he found a pen. Then he apologized to Dugan, flipped over his report, and started to draw. He figured Dugan'd care the least about having the back of his paperwork defiled.

His eyes started to burn around 3am, but Steve didn't stop drawing. Let his hand drift slowly, trying to keep his heart from racing and his fingers from shaking. If he let the weight hit him, he'd either get crushed or lose his mind.

Familiar sloping pretty lips, sharp icy eyes. Hair swept to the side in that pomade he'd had the day he'd fallen from the train. The collar of a navy blue peacoat, graceful shoulders.
After all this time (that didn't feel like any time at all), Bucky's face still came so easily to him. The single most important, most frequent subject he'd ever drawn. It didn't do anything to ease the ache in his soul, but Steve tucked the drawing in his wallet anyways.

It was a week and a day before Fury found him again, told him to report for duty. A week and a day of quiet, of mourning, of adjusting to a world he didn't want to be in. He couldn't find it in himself to smile, not like this.

He showered and he ate and he kept sketching and outside, he was functioning perfectly normally. With the exception of a probably unhealthy amount of time at the gym. It was the only way he could handle the feelings bubbling in his chest...all the stupid things he'd done, all the things he'd never said, a lifetime's worth of regret.

For as long as he could remember, Steve'd been irrationally quick to get pissed. But the anger he felt now? It was all internal and that was worse because there were no bullies he could punch, no Nazis he could kill, no planes to crash into the arctic. It was just him, stuck with everything he hated about himself and everything he'd ruined.

He'd. punch. Let. punch. Bucky. punch. Fall. punch.

The loneliness wasn't even about losing the love of his life. Of course that hurt like hell, but it still wasn't the worst part. Steve'd lost his best friend. His partner in crime. Not counting the five months without Bucky during the USO tour, he'd never had to live without Buck. Without Bucky to look out for him. Without Bucky to come home to. Bucky had always. been. there.

So after a week and a half of not sleeping, not smiling, walking in circles around the same settling sadness (waiting for a storm that was never gonna cease), Steve was actually...relieved to be assigned again.

He'd even have a team. The thought made him choke up a little, thinking of the Commandos, but he'd always been good at teams. There'd be some familiar names, too. Howard's son, for one.

Hell, even Howard was dead. Howard was supposed to be invincible - Steve'd always figured he'd just invent a way to stay alive, even when his time was up. But he was dead - in the most regular of ways, a car crash - and another friend was gone.

Peggy wasn't dead, but Steve couldn't visit her yet. Not when he was like this. She deserved better than that. Deserved better than a mess on her doorstep. She'd lived a life, she didn't need Steve to barge in and ruin what was left of it.

So he stayed isolated. Unbalanced and probably depressed, if the pamphlet SHIELD gave him meant anything.

When Fury interrupted Steve's nightly workout (aka beating-the-shit-outta-the-only-legal-thing-to-beat-the-shit-outta session) with news of an assignment, the first thing he asked Steve was trouble sleeping?

Steve slammed his fists into the punching bag again and thought you have no idea. Instead, though, he answered,

"I've slept for seventy years sir, I think I've had my fill." His fists didn't stop snapping into the punching bag, but thankfully the bottled up memories that flashed between every hit ceased.

Fury strolled closer, voice less consoling and more challenge. "Then you should be out. Celebrating. Seeing the world."
Celebrating. Steve wasn't in celebration, he was in mourning. If he had black in his closet he'd probably dress in it head to toe. He was mourning death, not the newfound life he'd been given. That he hadn't wanted. (Not that he'd ever tell anyone he intentionally chose to sink that plane.)

The swinging fists suddenly felt entirely useless and Steve froze, placing a palm on the synthetic plastic to stop the swing. What was the point? His feet took a few steps backwards without him, then Steve decided he might as well call it quits and started unwrapping his knuckles. Bucky'd kill him if he practiced without wrapping his hands first.

Fury was still waiting on an answer so Steve stared down at his slowly-revealed knuckles, making his way back to the bench, maudlin slipping between the cracks of his façade. "When I went under, the world was at war. I wake up, they say we won."

He turned on Fury, what once would've been challenge shredded to sorrow. "They didn't say what we'd lost."

Steve wasn't just mourning Bucky. He was mourning his country; mourning the ideals of freedom and equality; mourning that people thought they'd actually fixed everything. The 1940s had some terrible segregations and opinions, but at least everyone knew they were there; now people pretended everything was perfect and it was the furthest Steve'd seen from it.

He was mourning a lifetime he'd missed. Never seeing the end of the war, the deaths of his Commandos. Mourning the brilliant colour of a world lit by the beautiful silvery light of the moon.

He was mourning having to face tomorrow.

"We've made some mistakes along the way. Some very recently," Fury said and Steve could pretend he didn't know what this was leading to, but what was the point of that? He was sick of the way everyone in this generation danced around straight answers.

"You here with a mission, sir?" Steve asked bluntly, undoing the wrappings on his other hand.

"I am."

"Tryin' to get me back in the world?" If the words came out bitter - Steve didn't wanna be back in the world - Fury didn't seem fazed. Instead he held out a file in Steve's direction, serious tone and impeachable look on his face.

"Trying to save it."

Steve paused, looking at the outstretched folder. He was being requested on a mission to save the world. He'd been wallowing in loneliness and purposelessness for a week, but now he was being offered a distraction. A possibly quite satisfactory distraction.

Besides, he was still that backalley Steve Rogers. Who would he be to refuse a chance to save the world?

He took the file.

~*~*~*~

It should be simple; Steve'd worked on teams before.

It wasn't simple.
First person he met: Agent Coulson. Who wasn't actually an Avenger, more the Avenger's...mascot, in a way. Then Steve met Romanoff and Banner. Eventually Stark, Thor, Barton.

The official team was the six of them. (And the lack of a seventh member hit Steve hard all over again, the same way it had the first time he'd fought without the beautiful seventh member, that brilliant pouty sniper.) Every one of the Avengers had a catchy superhero name; but all the Commandos had a nickname too, so at least that part was familiar.

And that was literally the only thing the two teams had in common.

Befriending the Commandos had come easy as breathing. They were Bucky's friends, so Steve wanted them to like him. Steve'd saved their lives, saved Bucky, so they liked him. Simple. Everybody fit into the puzzle with happy, brandished pieces.

There was nothing easy about the Avengers.

Agent Coulson was kind, seemed to really like his job. Even if he was a bit of a fangirl. It was almost USO days again, except instead of a hundred people crowding him, it was one person with the enthusiasm of a hundred. Steve was used to it though, he'd spent five months signing enough autographs to take the blushing comments in stride.

Besides, there was something comforting in someone with such immeasurable approval. Even if Steve didn't feel he'd earned it, Coulson's blind faith was something he found himself repeating in his head, words to hold onto.

"Aren't the stars and stripes a little... old fashioned?" Steve had asked and Coulson'd looked at him, soft smile on his face, all confidence for Steve. Well, for Captain America.

"With everything that's come to light? I think people might need a little old fashioned."

He wasn't just useful, or helpful. Maybe he was needed. Steve hadn't felt needed since the train fall. Especially not since waking up.

And in the face of the Avengers crew, that concept was even harder. Technology fit for aliens, actual aliens themselves, robots and assassins and incredible monsters that could rip apart buildings. Missiles and combat skills and negotiation tactics and flying and lightning and bows and arrows and where was Steve? Steve was taking the stairs.

So in the light of that, the echoing words of I think people might need a little old fashioned were something Steve could latch onto. He'd be needed. There'd be a point he'd be crucial and he'd be there for that. He hadn't found his place in this team yet, but he would.

Meeting Romanoff and Banner was more complicated than Agent Coulson. Steve'd stepped outta the plane onto the airplane carrier, blinking at the bright sunlight as a woman walked into view.

"Agent Romanoff, this is Captain Rogers," Coulson introduced, making a gesture between the two of them.

"Ma'am," greeted Steve. Her hair was almost as red as her shirt, short and practical above her shoulders like Steve was used too, but waves instead of victory rolls.

"Hi," she said back, a bit dismissive as she turned to Phil. Busy, then. Didn't waste time with small talk. "They need you on the bridge, they're starting the face trace."

And then Coulson was gone and Steve was left to walk with Agent Romanoff - Natasha. She was
wearing leather like Peggy used to, only black instead of brown, more edgy and modern too. Bright, keen eyes gave him this look and Steve got the instant impression she was waiting for him to make a mistake.

"It was quite the buzz around here, finding you in the ice." She glanced over, every word meticulously picked and prepared.

Steve barely refrained from asking is this a test, 'cause it felt a hell of a lot like one.

"Thought Coulson was gonna swoon," she continued. "Did he ask you to sign his Captain America trading cards yet?"

Amusement, perhaps - she had a funny side somewhere. That, and she was the only one with constant informational awareness. Fury ran everything, but it seemed like Romanoff knew everything.

It was easy to see it. Steve may be a clutz in the presence of beautiful women, but he was still a soldier - he could recognize the face of another fighter. There was nothing ordinary about Natasha Romanoff.

"Trading cards?" he asked.

"They're vintage. He's very proud." She didn't say it condescendingly though; she liked him, maybe even trusted him. It was a testament to both Coulson's character and Natasha's, because it didn't look like she was extending that trust to Steve anytime soon.

Let's just say she wasn't exactly Dum Dum Dugan, who jumped on board and became your best friend under the only condition of opening a tab at the local bar.

There was another man on the tarmac - one Steve recognized from the files - who was currently looking around, hair disheveled, confused, outta place.

"Dr. Banner!" Steve called out. The man turned, looking their way, so Steve was right about that. He held out a hand and Banner instantly took it, shaking a little vigorously while scanning Steve up and down.

"Oh, yeah, hi. They told me you'd be coming." Banner was on edge, waiting, taking in everything but afraid to look too long.

"Word is you can find the cube," Steve offered, knowing doctors were happiest when talking about their work. Doctor Banner nodded slightly, eyes darting back and forth. He was uncomfortable here.

"Is that the...only word on me?" Banner asked, cautiousness mixed with unlying defense. He was testing the waters too, testing Steve. This all counted, these first impressions.

Yet another stark change from the Commandos; it was a good thing they hadn't judged him based on first impressions, because Gabe'd shouted up who are you supposed to be from those metal cages and he'd awkwardly shouted back Captain America? while wearing tights and a helmet stolen from a showgirl.

Yeah, not exactly his shining moment of first impressions. That's why these had to count: if he was getting a new team, whether it was temporary or not, Steve wanted to do it right. And the people of the twenty-first century were, so far, much more sensitive than the crowd Steve was used to.

"Only word I care about," Steve reassured him with a slight nod. The tension didn't ease outta
Banner's shoulders, but he looked slightly grateful, nodding and instantly turning the subject to Steve.

So the Hulk thing was a bad topic, something not to approach. Steve could do that, he was familiar with triggers. His best friend had been a torture victim, after all.

Then the next person Steve gotta meet was Loki. The bad guy, the same power-hungry bully Steve'd been fighting since he learned how to speak. He wasn't exactly grateful, but he couldn't deny the thrilling rush as Fury'd turned to him and said, "Captain, you're up."

See, the last time he fought, he'd been avenging Bucky's death. Now, he was back to trying to save the world again. Wearing the stars and stripes. (Which Steve was also more grateful for than he wanted to let on.)

_You're keeping the outfit, right?_

_Yes, Bucky, I am_, Steve thought, snapping a strap across his chest. He hoped if Buck was looking down from heaven, he'd finally start having reasons to be proud'a Steve again. The shield was waiting for him, as heavy and comfortable as always.

If Steve could afford to be sentimental, he might run his fingers over the familiar nicks and scrapes, the bright white star in the center. But if he let one thing get to him, everything might get to him and right now was his time to finally be strong again. To have a purpose again. To be something besides waiting.

He dropped down on Stuttengard just in time to block Loki's first alien blast with the very center of the beloved shield. The blast bounced back and knocked Loki off his feet, giving Steve the advantage of surprise, not to mention the perfect entrance.

"You know, the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everybody else...we ended up disagreeing."

And the rush of power was back. Steve was where he belonged, in full suit, facing down the bullies that hadn't changed a bit over the past seventy years. He still had it in him. He hadn't been sure he could, but hell yes he was made for this.


"I'm not the one who's outta time," Steve smirked, in perfect timing for Natasha's plane to level the bigass guns on Loki's head, giving Steve's punchline all the punch it needed.

"Loki, drop the weapon and stand down," Romanoff's voice warned from the plane. And hallelujah Loki chose not to listen, predictable-evil-villain he was, firing another dangerous blast of energy upwards.

Hell yeah, Steve finally had the excuse to beat up something that'd fight him back.

He dove at Loki with the kinda ferocity he hadn't felt in the new decade. They fought and punched and kicked and spun and Steve's blood was pumping and everything was absolutely amazing.

_Sometimes I think you like getting punched_, a voice scolded in his head. Steve scoffed, slamming his foot into the center of Loki's chest with another breathy comeback _not today_, and thought that Bucky'd been close, but not quite right. Steve didn't like getting punched, Steve liked _punching_.
Then his hand to hand battle was interrupted, loud crazy sounds blaring outta the sky and making them both look up. *Cause I shoot to thrill, I'm ready to kill...* A star streaked across the sky, fast bright closer closer - an explosion he threw up the shield to block.

And that's how he met Tony Stark. One moment he was kicking ass and then there was a flashy red and gold robot in the square, missiles and guns and god knows what else aimed at the common enemy.

"Mr. Stark," Steve greeted him, a little outta breath.

"Captain," he responded. The military title was a good sign and for a moment, Steve figured he might actually like Stark as much as his father.

Tony even looked a bit like Howard. But then he opened his mouth. Where Howard was all quirked eyebrows and funny faces, Tony was flashy smiles, rude side-comments, and disapproving glares.

There wasn't a reason to dismiss him yet though, so Steve stood beside him in the plane and leaned over slightly to talk under his breath, strategizing with a fellow soldier. They were a team, after all.

"I don't like it." Steve muttered.

Tony responded without looking at him. "What, Rock of Ages giving up so easy?"

"I don't remember it being that easy. This guy packs a wallop." Steve glanced over his shoulder at Loki, who was sitting eerily calm.

"Still, you are pretty spry, for an older fellow." Tony huffed at his own joke, looking Steve over. Steve returned the gaze, calculating. "What's your thing, pilates?"

"What?" Steve asked, not following at all.

"It's like calisthenics. You might have missed a couple things." Tony looked back away, voice flat like he found himself extremely amusing and couldn't give a damn if anyone else did. "You know, serving time as a Capsicle."

The eyes were back on him with an unmistakably condescending look and instantly, Steve was in the back of an alley again.

Holding up a trashcan lid to defend himself against some bully who leered at how tiny Steve was, how he needed that mothering, protective friend of his to tie his shoes for him.

But this was Howard's child, and Steve had to be patient. God, he hated bullies though.

"Fury didn't tell me he was calling you in," Steve replied, a little coldly. He'd been perfectly civil to Tony not 30 seconds ago and this was how Howard's son was gonna respond?

"Yeah, there's a lot of things Fury doesn't tell you." Now his eyes were of steel, directly on Steve's, challenging. Testing. So Tony was against authority, belittled people to inflate himself, a control freak, and relied on flashy entrances to give him a false sense of power.

Natasha said something in the background but Steve was busy staring down Tony, trying to decipher what the hell his problem was. Then the thunder hit, lightning whipping flashes, and that's how Steve met Thor.

The plane shook, a loud thump on the roof rocking them all. Steve instinctively grabbed his helmet,
pulling it onto his head the same time Tony folded down his and started walking towards the opening plane belly.

"What are you doing?" Steve shouted over the sound of wind and thunder.

It was at that moment a man swooped in, knocked Tony in the chest with - what was that, a hammer? - and sent him flying backwards, knocking into Steve and flattening them both to the floor with the weight of the metal suit.

The stranger then proceeded to grab their prisoner by the throat and jump back out the belly of the plane, a whip of red cape snapping behind him.

"Now there's that guy," Tony complained, miffed as he hauled to his feet. Steve struggled up right after him, as Natasha shouted,

"Another Asgardian?"

"That guy's a friendly?" Steve shouted over the wind. He really hoped so, because going up against him and that hammer didn't look like fun.

"Doesn't matter. If he frees Loki or kills him, the Tesseract's lost." Tony started back towards the platform and Steve shouted quick before he could jump.

"Stark! We need a plan of attack." Strategy won wars, soldiers that worked together won together. Fighting wasn't about the individual man, it was about the efficiency of a perfectly executed team.

"I have a plan," Tony responded, pausing at the edge of the plane. "Attack."

A jump, flurry of fire and swirling red metal and Steve would sigh in exasperation if he wasn't in the middle of a battle. So this was how Tony was gonna be.

He really wasn't seeing how this could work out, the whole of them as a team. But he'd be damned if he didn't try.

Seconds after Stark disappeared Steve snatched the closest parachute, pulling the harness over his shoulders and strapping it across his chest.

"I'd sit this one out, Cap!" Natasha shouted from the front, her voice strangely kind but still firm. Regardless, Steve'd never run away from a fight.

"I don't see how I can," he responded, tightening a buckle around his waist.

"These guys come from legend, they're basically gods." She looked over her shoulder as she said it, words holding a lotta weight in that tone. But this was still a fight, and he was still Steve Rogers.

"There's only one God, ma'am. And I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that."

And with that, Steve jumped out of the plane, foregoing safety and rational, well-thought out decisions.

Bucky was probably yelling at Steve from beyond the grave.

~*~*~

A few hours later, and the imaginary Bucky wasn't the only one yelling at Steve. Everyone was yelling at Steve, at each other, voices raised and tempers raised and goodness, he'd thought the
fighting couldn't get any worse than the Thor-Iron Man-Captain America battle they'd had in the woods earlier.

That'd come to a stalemate pretty quickly, realizing that hammer meets missile meets shield wasn't gonna ever put somebody out on top. And because Steve was used to being the Captain who got the last word, he'd ended that with a snarky "Are we done here?" that both Tony and Thor had deserved.

But no, apparently they hadn't been done, because about a hundred more problems had arisen since then. The more they got to know each other, the bigger the problems.

After the initial introduction to Thor, Steve made a point to observe him a little closer, trying to figure out what his deal was. Thor's voice was strangely soft for a man of his stature, calm in a way that the rest of them (not even Steve) really were.

Steve was used to battles, used to roughing it in the woods with nothing for warmth but Bucky's back pressed to his. But the kind'a battle they were fighting now - one of technology, of aliens - wasn't exactly his forté. Consequently he wasn't as calm as he'd like everyone to think he was.

Or the small fact that the weapon he'd died to protect the Earth from was the exact weapon they were fighting again.

Really, how many sacrifices had been entirely useless?

Then there was the thing between Banner and Stark, which put Steve into yelling-mode. The scientists got along better than the rest of them, but that didn't mean Steve trusted Tony to be understanding of what the hell a trigger was. Tony was pushing the Doctor's buttons and Steve wasn't willing to let that slide.

The good thing about being pissed (which was basically the summary since the whole team got together) was that he did stupid things when he was mad. Or, in this case, stupid and beneficial to the team. Because Tony was a dick, but he had a point about blindly trusting Fury - there was always a chance more was going on under the surface.

If the big Hydra guns he'd found (while snooping - Buck would be proud) were any indication, turned out that Stark was right.

If he thought the team was fighting before, that was children's squabbles in comparison to the storm as Steve dropped a quite familiar Hydra assault rifle on the lab table.

Tony'd just asked Fury What is Phase 2? and Steve was happy to input his findings. "Phase 2 is SHIELD uses the cube to make weapons."

To say he was mad now was an understatement. This was what he'd died for, what Bucky'd died for. And it was happening all over again? Tony was kinda blinking at him so Steve clarified, definitely not gloating that he'd gotten to the bottom of this before Stark and his fancy technology. "Sorry, the computer was moving a little slow."

Fury instantly backpedaled, trying to cover his own ass with some fabricated explanation. "Rogers, we gathered everything related to the Tesseract. This does not mean that we're--"

"I'm sorry, Nick," Tony interrupted, sliding a computer screen towards Fury with a lit up plan of weapon technology etched across it. "What were you lying?"

"I was wrong, Director. The world hasn't changed a bit." The words didn't do the slightest justice to
the bubbling anger Steve was holding back.

With perfect timing, Thor and Natasha walked into the lab, instantly sensing the animosity. Well, animosity was an understatement. Fury'd recruited Steve to save the world and instead he was turning it to the state it was in before Steve'd saved it the first time.

"Did you know about this?" Banner shot at Natasha, looking betrayed. Another connection between their team severed, and the blank look on Romanoff's face wasn't doing anything to help.

"You wanna think about removing yourself from this environment, Doctor?" Natasha asked, more an order than a question.

Steve watched cautiously as they argued, judging the anger on Banner's face versus the strange dance Natasha's words were fabricating. He understood why Banner was pissed, he was too, but Steve's anger wouldn't end with half the ship slaughtered.

Finally, the argument turned to the important question, "I'd like to know why SHIELD is using the Tesseract to build weapons of mass destruction."

"Because of him," Fury finally interrupted, pointing an accusing finger at Thor. Thor looked simply stunned, asking a shocked "Me?"

And that lead to another argument about aliens, wars, leveling towns, peaceful proclamations, controlling people - which Steve couldn't stand for.

"You forced our hand," Fury argued, glaring at them all. "We had to come up with somethi--."

"Nuclear deterrent," Tony interrupted, finally inputting with his snark, adding sparks to a fire that was already burning wild. "'Cause that always calms everything right down."

"Remind me again how you made your fortune, Stark?" Fury shot back and Steve couldn't pass up on that opportunity--

"I'm sure if he still made weapons, Stark would be neck deep-" Steve started, before Tony was suddenly interjecting loudly.

"Wait! Wait! Hold on! How is this now about me?" He sounded more shocked than outraged but that didn't stop Steve from turning a glare on him.

"I'm sorry, isn't everything?" He shot back, because he was a twenty-five year old soldier who'd grown up too fast with nothing but a sassy mouth as his weapon for years.

Thor scoffed, giving them all reprimanding looks and the quite rude side comment of "I thought humans were more evolved than this."

_God, Steve, what are you, five?_

"Excuse me, did WE come to YOUR planet and blow stuff up?" Fury glared intensely, Thor only managed to look more indignant.

"Do you always treat your champions with such mistrust?"

"Are you boys really that naïve? SHIELD monitors potential threats," Natasha reasoned in her everyone-is-stupid voice, the word _boys_ so condescending it could've been a curse word.

"Captain America is on threat watch?" Banner raised his eyebrows in disbelief and if that was
supposed to be a compliment, Steve didn't take it as one.

He may not transform into something big or shiny or annoying, but he was a war hero who shot people in the face just because his best friend died, he wasn't the innocent fucking angel they all made him out to be.

"We all are," Natasha shot back, but apparently Banner wasn't the only one who thought that Steve was harmless (useless). Tony scoffed, nearly laughing outright as he looked at Steve incredulously.

"You're on that list? Are you above or below 'angry bees'?" Tony raised an eyebrow with that same cocky expression and Steve fought back the urge to growl.

The little ball of bundled up, pissed off fire that'd taken on bullies three times his size in Brooklyn was being sneered at again, the same joke, you just don't know when to give up, do you?

"Stark, so help me god, you make one more wise crack--" Steve placed one menacing step and the nonchalant façade slipped for a single moment as Tony leaned back, eyes widening.

"Threat! I feel threatened!" Tony shouted, back to cocky and eternally-joking to cover back up whatever fear he was actually feeling.

"You speak of control, yet you court chaos!" Thor inputted again from behind them. Steve didn't take his glare off Tony's stupid face.

"It's his M.O., isn't it? I mean, what are we, a team? No, no, no. We're a chemical mixture that makes chaos. We're..." Banner paused, searching for the right word, and the one he chose Steve could not agree with more. "We're a time-bomb."

"You need to step away," Fury pointed at Bruce and he seethed even more, then Tony fucking Stark put his grimy little hand on Steve's shoulder, cajoling again and Steve could seriously punch him.

"Why shouldn't the guy let off a little steam?" Tony prodded, and that was it. Steve shoved Tony off, literally calling on every ounce of strength he had not to start a fight with this bully the way he had with a hundred others.

"You know damn well why! Back off!" It was the last warning Tony was gonna get before Steve was done with words. He'd made a point not to pick fights since the serum - not petty ones with innocent allies he could hurt. But on his team or not, Steve was about ready to make an exception for Tony Stark.

Of course, that was the moment Tony decided to step in close, face just inches away as he glared up at Steve.

"Oh, I'm starting to want you to make me."

If Tony was trying to throw him with physical proximity he was failing - Steve had no problem getting up in Tony's face either, especially if it meant he could be punching it soon.

A smile curved up Steve's mouth and this was about more than getting punched, this was getting to lay out justice on a bully. If he was looking forward more than he should be, so be it.

"Okay, that's how this is going to be." About damn time. Tony thought he was some pristine icon, but this wasn't Captain America that Tony had pissed off, it was Steve Rogers, a kid from Brooklyn with a big mouth and angry fists. What the hell was Tony? "Yeah. Big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?"
"Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist," Tony replied easily, like he'd practiced in mirrors, mirrors probably lined with diamonds or pictures of his own cocky face. A flaunting media starlet, the kind who didn't fight for anything but his own pocketbook.

Steve leaned even closer, his words biting harshly between them.

"I know guys with none of that worth ten of you."

Men who'd stood in the face of danger every day, who'd saved lives with nothing more in their backpacks than ammo and a harmonica. Men who'd changed the world, changed Steve. The best men to ever live. Steve knew an entire squad without a dime to their name that outshone Tony Stark in the dimmest of lights.

Tony looked a little miffed and Steve just kept going.

"Yeah, I've seen the footage. The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you." Or strip electrocuting wires from your best friend's feet and flaying the flesh on your palms to save another life. That wasn't something Tony would ever do.

"I think I would just cut the wire," Tony responded, but he was slipping on losing ground. Another smile curved on Steve's mouth, sharper with understanding this time.

"Always a way out..." Steve mused, looking down at Tony and making sure he was well aware of it. Tony didn't know anything about sacrifice, about fighting. He'd never been in a war, never had to reach out a hand for the love of his life and watch them fall to their death, knowing there was nothing he could do, that he was too late, that it was over, this time there wasn't a way out.

"You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero."

Bucky Barnes was a hero. The Commandos were heroes. Incredible people who gave their lives for this country and for what? So people like this spoiled rich kid could make fancy weapons and get away with whatever he wanted because he was bored?

Was this what Bucky died for?

And then the guy has the audacity to put his name right up next to Sergeant James Barnes of the 107th. To consider himself a hero amongst the footsteps of men he'd never compare to. Never.

"A hero?" Tony snapped, final string snapping on the facade, bottlecap popping off in an explosion of smoke and heat. "Like you? You're a laboratory experiment, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle!!"

You must promise me one thing: that you will stay who you are. Not a perfect soldier, but a good man.

Everything special about him.

A red skull glaring down at him, the same bitterness and jealousy in his voice that Stark had now. What made you so special?

Nothing, I'm just a kid from Brooklyn.

Brooklyn: (noun) backalley fights, sloping bridges; drawings, home; Bucky Barnes.
No, see Stark was wrong. Everything special about Steve didn't come out of a bottle. Everything special about Steve fell off a train and left him here in this future alone. Everything special about Steve came in the form of Brooklyn and eyes of ice, hands warm and gentle wrapped up in his own.

Stark could insult Steve all he liked, but he didn't get to insult the memory of Steve's best friend.

"Put on the suit, let's go a few rounds." Steve replied easily, voice too calm. If Bucky were here this'd be the moment he'd intercede, on the tension in Steve's voice alone. He'd hear that familiar tone and he'd get those beautiful hands on Steve's shoulder and rip him backwards, pressing a hand over Steve's heart as he talked him down, words quiet but insistent. Ever the savior.

Instead, Thor just laughed at them both.

"You people are so petty... and tiny."

Steve bristled - it was a bit of a soft spot for him - and Tony thankfully backed away. Banner didn't miss out on Steve's reaction though, muttering something under his breath Steve didn't hear. He was too busy fuming.

Apparently it was concerning though, because Fury suddenly turned to Natasha, gesturing at her and Bruce. "Agent Romanoff, would you escort Dr. Banner back to his--"

"Where?" Banner interrupted, fuming. "You rented my room."

"The cell was just in case--" Fury started again and Banner wasn't going for that either.

"In case you needed to kill me, but you can't! I know! I tried!"

And just like that, all of the muttering and glares shot silent. Seven gazes turning on Bruce, Steve's breath stopped in his throat. Apparently he had more in common with Dr. Banner than he thought.

"I got low. I didn't see an end, so I put a bullet in my mouth and the other guy spit it out. So I moved on. I focused on helping other people. I was good, until you dragged me back into this freak show and put everyone here at risk!"

Banner was getting more and more upset and the rest of them were getting wider and wider eyed. Steve was already scanning the room, calculating the best way for damage control if Bruce hulked out right now. And actively avoiding thinking about a very avoidable plane crash.

"You wanna know my secret, Agent Romanoff? You wanna know how I stay calm?"

Okay, apparently no one was gonna say anything. But Steve'd really like to prevent mass destruction if possible.

"Doctor Banner," Steve instructed calmly, the same commanding tone he used for broken soldiers and terrifying missions. "Put down the scepter."

It was a direct order and Banner looked down at the words, responding instinctively. The rage in his eyes flitted over to surprise, finally realizing he was holding the weapon.

The computer took that moment to beep a warning and then the crisis of World War Three was averted, Banner put down the scepter and snapped outta his anger without death on anyone's hands.

They were a time bomb. There was supposed to be strength in numbers. Armies weren't won with weapons or technology, they were won by men: a unit, not a bunch of guys with guns.
How could this group of dysfunctional, crazed people ever work together? How could this compare to the team of boys he knew? How could he find a place in a team like this?

The answer was simple really: a common enemy, and somebody had to die. But blowing up one of the engines of the helicarrier was definitely a good start.

Differences could be forgotten when things were exploding.

Steve helped Tony off the ground, "Put on the suit!" an order instead of a challenge. Lifting Tony by his arm and it was purely instinct that had him leading Tony outta the lab with supporting hands. The moment he caught himself with a palm over Tony's lower back, it quickly shot off. Not Bucky.

It was just that he'd helped Bucky off the ground so many times that Steve was used to being close and physical and...he and Tony may be in agreement now, but they weren't ever gonna be comfortable in the way that he and Buck were. Steve was probably never gonna be that comfortable with anyone again.

He shook off the thought, turning back to the mission at hand. As much as he'd love to wallow in misery about Barnes, he had a helicarrier to save and maybe after that, a world to save too.

~*~*~

The arguing didn't miraculously cease after that, but it lessened. Steve managed to help, make himself useful. There wasn't exactly trust between them yet, but there was mutual agreement.

And there was depth too: Steve realized that maybe Tony had a lot more going on than he'd initially realized. Natasha, too. Even Thor turned out more complex than initial appearances.

It took another semi-fight with Stark before Steve saw the depth, but once he did it was so obvious he scolded himself for not seeing it sooner.

"Sometimes there isn't a way out, Tony." Steve knew first hand that there wasn't always a way out. Even transformed into a superhero with the world placed in your palm, there still wasn't always a way out. People still died. People still fell.

"Right," Tony'd scoffed, turning to walk away from the conversation and the reality of Coulson's death. "How did that work for him?"

"Is this the first time you've lost a soldier?" Steve asked. The puppet-string snapped and Stark spun around, eyes on fire as the mask shattered, only a hell of a lot louder than last time.

"We are not soldiers! I am not marching to Fury's fife!"

Wow. There was a lot of story behind that. A lot. More than a soft spot - a crippling weakness. Tony had a major issue with the soldier ideal. Which was really strange, considering that his father had been best friends with soldiers--

Unless maybe that...? It could be something about Howard. Clearly Howard hadn't been the best father, based on Tony's attitude alone. Steve made a mental note to ask Natasha about Howard and Tony's relationship later.
It would open wonders into the locked doors of why Tony was such an asshole.

With Natasha, there was no pissed outburst to reveal her softer side. In fact, it was the opposite. Shocked quiet, emotional eyes, scared calm--

Just after his conversation with Stark, Steve went to the infirmary to ask Natasha on the mission. She'd been sitting in near reverie, unprepared and strangely unguarded at his entrance.

"Time to go," Steve'd told her. She didn't sneer at the command, but she didn't listen to him unbidingly either.

"Go where?" She inquired, still...off. Steve furrowed his eyebrows, trying to source the change.

"I'll tell you on the way. Can you fly one of those jets?"

And Steve finally met Clint. He walked outta the bathroom, looking at Steve with calm eyes while Natasha looked at Clint with torn ones.

"I can," Barton interjected, assured. Steve looked back to Natasha and she nodded, attesting Barton's loyalty rested with them now.

There was Natasha's weakness: Steve'd seen the way she'd been earlier when someone'd mentioned Agent Barton, but he hadn't known why. Well, he still didn't know why exactly, but clearly Barton made Romanoff emotional and that was a hell of a lot more than anyone else could say.

So he met Clint and got to understand Natasha in the same moment. Plus they had a pilot now.

(Yes, obviously Steve could fly jets, he'd flown a plane. But considering he'd also crashed that plane on purpose, he wasn't exactly looking forward to getting in a cockpit anytime soon.)

"You got a suit?" He asked bluntly, because there were some things about the new century he could get on board with but the sidestepping and circle-dancing delicate words everyone used was not one of them.

"Yeah."

"Then suit up." And they'd both listened to that command. Maybe they'd all come a long way; funny how Steve didn't consider questioning Natasha's judgement now. Maybe it was the circumstances, or maybe that's how it was gonna be.

His faith in their ability as a team wasn't fully restored, but. Maybe they really could do this. They all had something uniting them now, in Phil Coulson.

They had something to avenge. Steve knew all about avenging somebody's death - how much strength that could give you.

So when they all were standing in the middle of the street in New York and Natasha asked the question, "How do we do this?" He finally had the answer.

"As a team," Steve told them.

Maybe it wasn't a backalley in Brooklyn or the freezing cold European countryside and maybe Steve didn't have his Howling Commandos behind him or Bucky Barnes on his six, but he was still Steve Rogers. And he was a leader.

And now it was Steve's turn to prove himself again. Right, cause you got nothing to prove: the
veneer Bucky’d always seen through. And best of all, the one he’d pegged as the most reluctant to let him lead was the one who gave him the privilege.

"Call it, Cap," Tony drifted over the coms. Captain America was back, and Steve Rogers got to save the world again, unofficial CO to a team that needed him.

"Alright, listen up. Until we can close that portal up there, we're gonna use containment. Barton, I want you on that roof, eyes on everything. Call out patterns and strays. Stark, you got the perimeter. Anything gets more than three blocks out, you turn it back or you turn it to ash."

Steve paused as Stark picked Barton up, soaring through the air to deposit him on a rooftop. Barton would be their sniper, one'a the best shots alive. He wondered what Bucky would think, no longer having to complain about climbing all those sets of stairs (or trees) to get to his post. And for the first time since he'd woken, Steve found himself smiling at the memory of Bucky instead of wanting to cry.

He'd probably think all Steve's new friends were crazy, but that would be alright. They'd love Bucky, if they knew him. Everybody did. The pang of sadness struck, but it didn't knock Steve over this time. Bucky was gone, but Steve was commanding again, fighting again, saving lives again.

*Sergeant Barnes woulda been proud 'a you, Cap. And his new team was gonna be, too.*

"Thor, you've gotta try and bottleneck that portal. Slow 'em down. You've got the lightning. Light the bastards up." Thor nodded once and took off as Steve turned to Natasha. "You and me, we stay here on the ground, keep the fighting here. And Hulk?" Banner turned, awaiting his command. They trusted him, every one of them. With this, at least. It was all Steve would ask for.

And so, feeling like himself for the first time since he'd woken defrosted, Steve Rogers felt exactly like himself, and he gave the goddamn command.

"*Smash.*"

~*~*~

The Avengers: a team. A team who won.

They were all surprised to find out how much they cared for Tony, in the moment they'd thought they lost him. Watching the empty portal bubbled anticipation and regret in his stomach, but Steve'd eventually made the hard call, told Natasha to close it anyways.

That was the fun part of commanding. All the hard calls and deaths were on you, all the blood on your hands.

But then Tony'd come crashing down and Bruce had jumped to save him and Thor had ripped off his faceplate in a hurry to help him and even Steve had been hovering, hand over the glowing light on Steve's chest as he held his breath waiting for some sign of life.

Then Banner had yelled, so loud it startled Tony awake and Steve deflated with relief, a genuine smile on his face for the first time in a month. (With 70 years somewhere in between.)

"What the hell? What just happened? Please tell me nobody kissed me," Tony groaned, startled but undoubtedly also relieved to find out he wasn't dead.

What just happened? They were a team, they'd saved the world. From aliens, which was strange, but Steve was learning new things all the time.
He was a soldier, used to the roughened roads of war. The dirt on his face was the most familiar thing he'd felt in this century. The bleeding wounds and various aches were the first physical comfort since the 1940s. He was soldier, and he was where he belonged, only this time? This time the outcome was a little different.

"We won," Steve breathed, two words he'd never gotten to say in 1945. It tasted as sweet on his tongue as he'd always thought it would.

But Bucky wasn't here to say them with him. Steve went quiet, letting that thought sink in. It was the end, victory, and the only thing he wanted was to share it with that sharp laugh, that little head shake, that warm hand clapping Steve's shoulder.

"Alright. Hey. Alright. Good job, guys. Let's just not come in tomorrow. Let's just take a day. Have you ever tried shawarma? There's a shawarma joint about two blocks from here. I don't know what it is, but I wanna try it."

Shawarma turned out to be better than it sounded, but they were all too exhausted to say as much as a single word the whole time. Which was fine; sitting there at a table in a restaurant was something Steve knew, something else from the past that gotta be part of the future too.

The silence was comforting, the company even more so. They sure as hell weren't the Howling Commandos, but they weren't any less than them either. Just...different. Steve was gonna be getting used to a lot of different.

He was almost looking forward to it.

~*~*~

The post-victory high lasted for longer than he thought it would. They sent the weapon that'd killed Bucky and the man who'd killed Agent Coulson back to Asgard. Steve had a new set of allies, maybe even friends.

And when the whole thing was over he rode away on his Harley with a smile on his face.

Four days later and he was in the gym again, fists back to pounding plastic punching bags, memories tugging his mind again. What else was he supposed to do?

Natasha showed up at his door a week later.

"Hey. I know you're not okay, so you can either invite me in and we can talk about it or you can pack your things and get in the car." One red-brown eyebrow arched in the dim lighting of the hallway outside his apartment, an expression as blunt as the words. Finally.

Steve blinked at her.

"Well?" she crossed her arms and Steve was still standing in his doorway, hand on the painted wood frame.

"Maybe both?"

The slightest smile perked up on the side of Natasha's face, then she was pushing past him into the lonely, empty apartment, taking stock of everything with curious eyes as she spoke.

"Yeah, okay. So pack, then we talk on the road. Actually, you talk, I listen and tell you when you're being an idiot which is probably a lot of the time." She rifled through the magazines on Steve's
"You like this with all the people you've just met?" Steve called over his shoulder, stuffing his meager belongings in the bag as Natasha wandered around the soon-to-be-ditched apartment.

"We saved the world together. Besides, you're not as stuck up as I thought you'd be."

"Thanks," Steve responded dryly, although he was actually a little proud Natasha approved of him in her sharp, raised eyebrow sorta way.

She offered him a smile as he came back out, grabbing the pile of folders off his table and the clipboard of drawings to complete his packing. Then they were both headed down the outside stairs without ceremony, apartment already forgotten behind as they hit the curb. Natasha opened the back door to a bubble-looking car and Steve tossed in his duffle, climbing into shotgun as she started the engine. And then they were off, whipping fast as Steve watched the blurring lights of New York streak past the window.

"Where are we going?"

"I figured that you've got more goin' on that you're letting on, and I can't imagine how staying in New York would help any of that." Natasha glanced slyly at him, words bold as she watched his face for a reaction. "They might as well have forced you to live in Azzano."

Well if she'd wanted a reaction she got one; Steve flinched like the devil and averted his eyes. She'd read his file then, at least. Good, he wouldn't hafta explain stories he didn't wanna think about.

"Okay, but where are we going?" Steve shifted in his seat, eyes catching automatically on Liberty Island in the distance. He was kinda surprised at himself that he wasn't protesting leaving New York. Maybe he'd been considering it anyways. He'd told the Commandos so, once:

*I'm not going back to Brooklyn. You're talking about going home and Brooklyn isn't home if Bucky isn't there.*

"What better place for America's Sweetheart than the capital?" Natasha offered, tipped head waiting for a legitimate agreement or veto. Steve raised his eyebrows but nodded, turning to look over the night sky of New York City as it passed by a final time.

"District of Columbia works for me."

"People just call it D.C, so you know."

"Right. Any other things I should know?"

"Hell of a lot more than I can teach you," she snorted. Steve huffed in agreement and Natasha drummed fingers on the steering wheel, soft sound echoing throughout the car. "So how about you start by telling me what's got you acting like the world's saddest national icon?"

"You mean besides the culture shock everyone seems so worried about?" He quirked a smile and she made a little triumphant sound.

"Yes, exactly. I knew it wasn't the whole future thing that was messing you up."

"It's not. I mean, it's a factor, and it's definitely not easy. But um. It's not the. Y'know, *changes* that suck as much as that...it's that I don't get to share them with. The people I..."
Left behind.

Natasha arched an eyebrow, waiting for him to finish but Steve just trailed off and she nodded slightly, silence settling in the empty space for a moment, two, before Natasha finally leaned over and filled it. "Special lady back in the war?"

Steve sighed, staring out the window. "I don't really wanna talk about it."

Now wasn't the time to spurt off stories and explain how he'd never gotten to tell the love of his life he loved him because he'd been the one to kill him before he'd realized that maybe Bucky had a right to know. Not an easy story to just. Tell, let alone relive. Natasha was kind enough to drag him outta New York and give him an excuse to stop actively avoiding Brooklyn or any of the bridges going there, she didn't deserve getting bled all over with his stories and sorrow.

Steve would rather bleed to death inside.

"Alright, fair. So you're lonely. And now that we saved the world from aliens, I'll bet you're bored, too. You know, I was in a place like that once, and somebody offered me an out." That sounded suspicious coming from an assassin, but Steve nodded to show he was listening.

"Look, not saying you have to, but SHIELD has actually done a lot for me. A lot for most of us. I know you didn't get off to the best start, but the organization's saved a lot of lives. I've got paperwork if you want details, but basically you go on missions, save the world from terrorism, stop wars before they start. It might be a good place for you. And it's always helpful to have something to do."

"I'll think about it," Steve told her.

Which is how, two weeks later, he and Natasha were on their way to his first mission as an unofficial SHIELD agent. He went through training but refused the badge; he wasn't a spy, he was an army captain. Besides, Agent Rogers didn't fit him. Like, at all.

So he kept the Captain but got the job, starting to ease his way back into the world.

June went by in a flurry of paperwork, hiding from the past, and a scattering of SHIELD missions. July 4th snuck around the corner and hit him square in the chest like the star was a three ringed target instead.

He'd had only one rememberable birthday without Bucky at his side - the month after Bucky'd shipped out. It'd been wickedly lonely, just him and a hotel room with nothing but a new unfamiliar body and a yearning for the life Bucky was living without him overseas and he may or may not've teared up as the first fireworks went off.

The next year the Commandos had all made a night of it, staying up to tell stories around the campfire. Bucky'd leaned over at one point, regretful smile on his face as he whispered in Steve's ear. "All these explosions sure don't make you miss the fireworks, huh?" Steve'd thrown his arm over those blue shoulders, tucking his best friend into his side the way Bucky used to do for him. Bucky just said things like that sometimes, things that made the whole war seem extremely terrible in a way that was so real Steve couldn't bear it.

Bucky'd laughed and tried to wiggle free, the way he always did when Steve copied something predominantly Bucky's signature. Most times though, the dynamic between them didn't change and Bucky was still the one tugging Steve down with an arm around his neck.

There was no Bucky to make comments about the bombs ruining the magic of fireworks this year, but it didn't matter. They were ruined anyways.
Steve was all for celebrating America's birthday, but he couldn't bring himself to go to the July Fourth event Tony'd invited him to. He wanted to be alone, in his apartment, without having to placate the pretense of being fine.

He was okay, really. Doing better than before. Just, some nights he couldn't pretend and he wasn't okay, not at all. His birthday happened to be one of those nights.

Natasha called, invited him to go get wasted with her - not an option, even if he wanted to - but he politely declined. As much as he'd love the enlightenment of whatever Romanoff wisdom she wanted to share, his apartment in DC made a lot better proposition of loneliness and staring out the window drawing and imagining Bucky was just on his way home from the docks.

As much as he liked the new apartment SHIELD got him in DC, it wasn't home. Steve hadn't stopped searching for a home, but he didn't think he'd find one anytime soon. So he drew them instead, New York skylines and the bridges of Brooklyn and Buck's pretty face and the army tents they'd share and the cold winter nights of the 1940s.

The fireworks went off outside, loud crashes and whistles and sparkling sounds and flashing colors of light. Steve tried not to think of bombs, of explosions and fires and bullet wounds and bloody days fearing for the lives of his men and the people he'd yet to save and fearing the fate of his country, of every country he set foot in.

Night folded around him like a box instead of a blanket, trapping him under the starry sky, smoke drifting over bright lights and smothering bright blue with distant flashes of red. He sat on a chair by the window until he couldn't stand the sight of smoke anymore and closed the blinds.

It was times like this he couldn't handle it, times like this he wished he'd never been dragged off ice. He didn't belong here.

With a sigh Steve snagged his iPod from the kitchen counter, untangling his headphones as he strode to the armchair in his living room. He'd been working backwards through the decades he'd missed, listening to a bit of everything. You could learn a lot about a time period by its music.

But tonight he didn't care about the world he lived in now, only the one from then. He didn't have the willpower to listen to the songs Bucky used to sing, the songs the Commandos used to sing, but there were a few from the forties that didn't knock him flat.

So he put up his feet on one couch armrest, head on the other, tucked in headphones and closed his eyes, letting the music wash over him and the memories tug him back.

Like all memories from Brooklyn nights, the scene started out golden. The lights were that way, the world was that way, the happy smile turning to him was that way.

"The whole world's celebratin' you today, Stevie," Bucky beamed and threw his arm around the back of Steve's shoulder, pulling him tight to Bucky's side as they strolled down the sidewalk. Steve rolled his eyes, self-consciously brushing bangs from his forehead.

"We're celebrating America, Buck." Those icy eyes looked like caramel in the streetlights as Bucky rolled them, nodding cheekily at a gaggle of girls that giggled as they passed.

"Nope, just you. What do you say we stop for ice cream?"

Steve smiled and poked Bucky in the ribs. "No teasing. You know we can't afford that."

Bucky just shrugged, golden smile spread impossibly wider. "I've been savin' up."
"You--how...no, Bucky, we couldn't--"

"Oh we so can. And we're going to. Right. Now." And Bucky was dragging him into that diner on the water, beaming like the moon while Steve stared at him with unfiltered 15 year old awe. Bucky ordered the smallest vanilla with sprinkles on top and they sat in a booth overlooking the East River, splitting the treat between them.

"This is perfect, Buck. Best birthday gift ever." Steve lit up, grateful, and Bucky ducked his head, almost bashful.

"I actually. Uh. Got you something else." He reached into his inner jacket pocket before pausing, looking up with an exaggeratedly serious expression. "And you're not allowed to not take it."

Steve tapped his feet against Bucky's shin, telling him to hurry up. With another nervous huff, Bucky pulled out a little brown book and slid it quickly across the table. Steve picked it up and flipped open to the title page, expecting a science-fiction novel or something. It was blank.

"Buck, is this..."

"It's for the greater good," Bucky interjected hurriedly. "Because there'll be no more goddamn napkins left in the world at the rate you're using them up."

He only blinked, rifling slowly through the blank pages. "I draw on stray papers and the backs of posters too," Steve said softly, his voice kinda floating because his head couldn't quite process that Bucky'd gotten him an official artist's tool.

"But now you can keep 'em all in one place." Bucky shrugged again, fingers worrying at the edge of a napkin.

"I- thank you so much, Bucky." Steve looked up, eyes just shy of damp with sincerity, and Bucky met his gaze this time, nervousness slipping away.

His pretty mouth curved up and he nodded, the harbor reflecting exploding red'n'blue beside them. "You're welcome, Steve."

The night'd been simple, but purely magic, Steve's first real sketchbook curled in his hands, watching beautiful paint explosions over and under them, not wanting to be anywhere else in the world.

Now the only explosions Steve saw behind his eyes were blue ones, knocking a shield out of precious hands, flying a body out of devilish trains. Always the same, always that train.

The best thing about D.C. was the lack of looping subways and automatic-train-rails. When Steve'd been in New York, he forcefully took them, couldn't be haunted. (Couldn't so much as look at a real train without shaking, but the sleek silent imitations only made him tear up.)

If he kept doing things that hurt, maybe eventually it'd stop hurting. Pretending he was okay enough that he convinced himself it was the truth. Fake it til you make it.

On his birthday, he couldn't fake anything, not when the day was so integrated into the memory Bucky. Eventually, golden memories faded, music drifting hollow.

It wasn't until midnight that he rolled off the couch, pressed his back against the bottom of it and cried himself into restless sleep.

So there were bad days.
Random ones too, days with no meaning on a calendar but regardless shook him to the core. Waking up miserable, unable to leave for his morning run, let alone face the world. Walking wounded.

Exercise was the only way he kept his head. Patterns were easy, fall into the drone and forget about the world. Running+punching+practicing gymnastics = forget how he woke up screaming Bucky's name at least twice this week.

The nightmares were always changing, but there was one that kept repeating randomly for months. It started out like a memory: the Commandos in the woods in Germany, running away from a city with a blown-up cathedral, and Steve was carrying Bucky in his arms. They crossed over rocky ground, soft pained noises escaping Buck's pale lips until they finally found a place to set him down and tend to the bullet in his leg.

Except in the nightmare, Falsworth couldn't stitch it up. In the nightmare, it was too late. When Steve cupped Bucky's face in his hands, whispered to him not to scream, Bucky's eyes would start to fog over.

He's lost too much blood, Jones whispered behind him. The crushing weight of those words hit like an avalanche and Steve ran fingertips over Bucky's cheeks, trying to push color back into his white face.

No no no. You aren't leaving me now. And Bucky would look up at Steve and he'd just fade. His eyes would turn to glass and his chest would stop rising and then he'd simply be dead. No big explosion or final words. Just there one moment, dead in Steve's arms the next. Nothing he could do.

And the worst part was how damn realistic it was. Bucky'd almost died on them that night; just barely survived. So when the dream took him, it felt real. It felt so terribly, horribly real that waking up was the reality-trip. The living room of his apartment was the dream, the war was reality.

Sometimes he wished that were true. Most days he'd rather be back in the war, if he was honest with himself. People were dying then, but at least Bucky'd been by his side.

Once, when she'd picked him up from a morning run, Natasha asked him what he was running from. He told her it didn't matter; it was something he'd never outrun.

So what if he dreamed Bucky was alive. So what if he never told Bucky he loved him. So what if no one could ever know what was eating him up from the inside out. So what if the world'd shifted around him and it still hadn't changed enough. Because even after all these years, all these decades, the world hadn't altered enough and hadn't dimmed enough and Steve's heart was still telling him that Bucky was alive.

It was sickening, really, that he couldn't let it go. He was more sure now than ever of Bucky's death and yet his body kept telling him its other half was out there somewhere. And he hated himself for that.

That was the darkest the thoughts really went, though. He wouldn't let himself stray darker, and he did the damned best he could to limit the thoughts about Bucky and the Commandos.

He couldn't live in the past when he had the future to embrace.

Natasha was constantly dragging him outta the rut too, always sending him stumbling in the direction of pretty, available girls. Like that would actually be a solution to his problem. To be fair, he'd admitted he was lonely. Natasha drew the rational conclusion.

So he went on a few (four) of the coffee dates, although really only so Natasha would shut up for a
week. Most of them ended with Steve apologizing, giving awkward smiles, and waving goodbye. One of them ended in a kiss on the cheek but Steve'd just blinked in surprise, apologized for not being 'ready' interested for a relationship, and awkwardly walked away.

Making friends wasn't as terrible, but the only people Steve talked to were the SHIELD teams. He was "Captain America" to everyone else (actually, even to them) and he wasn't interested in a friendship with someone who only cared about the side of him that shot aliens in New York.

Then a couple of months after working for SHIELD, Steve was out on his morning run when he passed another runner. And then he passed him again. And again.

"On your left," Steve huffed out as sprinted past the guy.

"Aw c'mon!" The guy finally shouted, pushing harder to see if he could catch up. Obviously, he couldn't. But Steve rounded back to the tree to meet him after the lap anyways. It never hurt to try and make a friend.

At first it'd been simple, two guys shaking hands. Then it turned out Sam knew he was Captain America, which he admittedly handled way better than most, but he still asked that one question that everyone was always asking.

"Must have freaked you out, coming home after the whole defrostin' thing." Sam was totally nonchalant about it, but Steve still sighed internally. Of course. The only thing anyone ever wanted to talk to him about: the seventy year time gap.

"Takes some gettin' used to. It's good to meet you, Sam." Steve didn't really intend to be dismissive, but he also didn't want to spoil his morning with another hundred explanations. It was just that the "defrosting thing" all anyone asked him about. Steve wished someone would ask him what he thought of the weather, the current state of the union, the healthcare reform bill, anything. Anything but that.

So Steve was walking away from another potential-friend-gone-sideways when Sam's voice called out again behind him.

"It's your bed, right?"

"What's that?" Steve asked, turning around and raising his eyebrows. He wasn't quite sure what Sam had said, but he'd heard the word bed and that was a bit forward, no matter what century you're in. Right? He was fairly sure right.

"Your bed. It's too soft," Sam clarified. "When I was over there I'd sleep on the ground, use rock for pillows like a caveman. Now I'm home lyin in my bed and it's like..."

"Lyin' on a marshmallow, feel like I'm gonna sink right to the floor," Steve finished for him. Man, did he understand that. Even in the few months since the Battle of New York, Steve still hadn't quite conquered sleeping on the thing. On bad nights it was the floor, other times he could brave the couch. But he really couldn't do the bed yet.

Clearly, he and Sam had a little more in common than he thought. And, maybe, Sam was interested in more than Captain America. Sam wanted to know about the soldier; only the hero. Sam really must know something about war if he was asking questions like that.

"How long?" Steve asked him, his attention officially caught.
"Two tours. You must miss the good old days, huh?" This time it didn't sound like a Captain America thing, it sounded like a soldier to soldier talking about two different wars they fought in. For probably the first time since he'd gotten back, Steve didn't really mind the question.

"Well. Things aren't so bad. Food's a lot better, we used to boil everything. No polio's good... Internet. So helpful. Been reading that a lot, tryin' to catch up." He still remembered the days back when he'd get their only pot out and heat up water, ready to boil whatever Bucky brought home. Which, somehow, was always something.

Then there were the meals they'd split during the war, Steve stealing half of Bucky's the way he always did. And then making Bucky eat half of his own so that Bucky didn't starve himself, because he would. Not because he wanted to (Steve was fairly sure), but because he wanted Steve to eat more than he wanted to feed himself. Selfless bastard.

"--vin Gaye, 1972 Troubleman soundtrack - everything you missed, jammed into one album." Sam was telling him. Steve smiled gratefully, digging his notebook out of his pocket.

"I'll put it on the list." Steve hadn't caught the first part (he hadn't spaced out for long though, thankfully), so he wrote down Troubleman on the tiny lines before tucking it back in his pocket. His cell chose that moment to beep an incoming text and Steve unlocked the screen, opening up Natasha's message, smiley face and all.

"Alright Sam. Duty calls. Thanks for the run." Steve stuck out his hand, shook as Sam smiled widely at him. And okay, they'd just met, but if there was a chance of being friends, Steve did it to all his friends and he couldn't just not..."If that's what you wanna call running."

"Aw, that's how it is?" Sam shook his head and Steve smiled, glad to see someone who could joke back.

"Oh that's how it is," he confirmed. Sam nodded, a wide smile that took up his entire face. Steve liked people who could smile like that, no holding back. He returned the smile, even though he didn't smile that wide anymore.

"Anytime you wanna stop by the VA, make me look awesome in front of the girl at the front desk, just lemme know."

"I'll keep it in mind," Steve told him. He might, because maybe he could use a new person to talk to. Natasha was great, but Steve had to be alright around her. She knew he was hurting, but she was too detached to ask why.

It didn't matter, Steve wouldn't tell if she did. This was Steve's burden to carry, not hers. Not anyone's. He had a team and a job and a purpose and a position, a few friends and an apartment that did everything it needed to.

But he couldn't shake the feeling that every night was lonely and cold.

The hurricane I'll never outrun.

~*~*~

"You do anything fun Saturday night?" Natasha asked, strapping on her parachute. Steve adjusted the comm in his ear, smiling to himself at her constant pestering. If he didn't joke about it, the damage would be too heavy to take.

"Well. All the guys from my barbershop quartet are dead, so no. Not really." Steve turned the smile
on Natasha and she looked away with a little grin of her own.

She had no idea how true that statement was. The Howling Commandos - professional barbershop quartet.

*Technically, it's not a quartet if there's more than four people,* Bucky complained.

Fine, a septet then. *I think Barnes thinks we don't have it in us. What do you say boys? Should we prove him wrong?*

Steve could drown in those memories, in the promises of *you are my sunshine* and *'Til Then.* No matter when it will be...

"You know, if you ask Kristin out from Statistics she'd probably say yes," Natasha shouted to him over the sound of the rushing (freezing) wind. Steve tuned back in, shaking off the ice tugging his peripherals. Reality was colder than all of those memories.

"That's why I don't ask," Steve shouted back.

"Too shy or too scared?" Natasha's knowing smirk was louder than the wind, louder than the plane engine, and Steve wanted to respond something he never would. Instead he shouted

"Too busy--!" And jumped from the plane, filling in *--pining over my dead best friend* as he soared down to greet the equally freezing water.

~*~*~

Steve Rogers was built on beliefs, upheld by the statements he held true in his heart. The foremost: he only wanted to do what was right. A second truth: half his soul was nestled in the body of a Brooklyn sniper and he was hollow without it.

As if hollow wasn't enough, the thing that shaped him was falling apart too - he wasn't honoring a death anymore, wasn't honoring a memory, wasn't honoring anything because Steve wasn't so sure about the first truth anymore. Was he still doing the right thing?

Peggy told him they'd rather mucked up the world. He told her out loud he didn't agree, but she knew what he meant.

She knew most everything, honestly. The first time she'd seen him (the actual first time, not all of the Alzheimer's-induced ones since), this look had crossed her face that he'd never be able to describe. Relief, amazement, shock, guilt, disbelief, a thousand others.

After the initial reaction had settled down, she'd asked him how he was doing. He said fine, of course, but this was still Peggy. She scolded him and weaseled a much more sincere answer out of him.

"I miss Bucky. I miss them all, really." Her eyes had softened and Steve looked down at the clasped hands in his lap. "I can't help but wish Buck were here with me."

Her breath caught in her throat and Steve looked up seconds after the flicker of terrified recognition disappeared from her features. ((She could never tell him. Either one of the two secrets. She wished more than anything that she could. She’d been forgetting plenty lately, but she’d never forget the look on Sergeant Barnes' face when he shouted those four words. *I loved him first.* The haunted chill in
Howard's voice as he whispered *a metal arm*. Steve had more than the right to know. And it killed her, because Peggy couldn't be the one to tell him. But she'd been given another chance to keep him safe; she couldn't fuck that up.))

But, as always, she knew exactly the right thing to say. Keeping Steve believing in himself and his own judgement, but making him question the world around him too.

*Is that all you could be? A lab rat or a dancing monkey?*

He went to Sam, too, at the VA’s office. Maybe something that might be good for him, a friendship with someone who wasn't expecting a hero; who understood that all along - since the very first fight - Steve had always just been a soldier.

And of course, the added benefit that Sam was a vet therapist. Which meant he didn't only understand Steve, he knew what to say to make the world seem a little better. During his visit Steve caught the tail end of a therapy session, listening in quiet reverie to the stories.

"That's pretty intense stuff," Steve told him, finding Sam after. Sam'd nodded, still in that rational tone that made you wanna listen.

"Yeah, brother. We've all got the same problems. Guilt. Regret." Well Steve certainly knew all about those two.

"You lose someone?" He asked, because that's what Steve felt guilty about. It wasn't a generic question because obviously, fellow soldiers died. It was war. The "someone" was a little more specific than that, and Sam knew exactly what Steve meant by it. Someone special, someone important. Someone whose life was so integrated into your own that you changed when they weren't there anymore.

"My wingman," Sam told him. *Me too*, Steve thought. The story was terrible, just as bad as the one that played on repeat behind Steve's eyelids. *Nothin' I could do. It's like I was up there just to watch [him die].*

Die and die and.

"I'm sorry," Steve said. It wasn't enough. *I feel that every day*, he didn't say. He couldn't say.

"After that I had a really hard time finding a reason to be over there. You know?"

Did he know? It was all he knew. But how was he supposed to tell this man - a new friend, a fellow soldier - that the famous Captain America lost his mind after he lost his best friend? How could he possibly tell Sam that in the end, Steve had chosen to die too? How could he ever admit that?

After Bucky's death, it wasn't just that Steve had a really hard time finding a reason to be over there. He had a really hard time finding a reason to be *alive*.

He deflected the question, looking away as a flicker of hurt crossed his features, uncomfortably shifting his weight and changing the topic. Kinda.

"Are you happy now? Back in the world?"

Sam was. And then he asked Steve a much harder question than *Are you happy?* No. Instead, Sam said,

"What *makes* you happy?"
Steve used to have a hundred responses to that. Now? He just told Sam the truth.

"I don't know."

He didn't have the answer to that question anymore. He'd lost it back in 1945, the same time he'd lost everything. It wasn't an exaggeration when Steve said his world ended that day. It had.

But, once upon a time, someone used to make him happy. Someone used to have the answers, too. Someone used to make Steve sure of himself, sure that despite the teasing and the saving and the bitching and the cleaning of Steve's wounds, someone was proud that Steve always tried to do what was right.

He needed that someone now.

Which was how he ended up (finally) standing in front of a glass panel in the Smithsonian - A Fallen Comrade - baseball cap pulled tight over his head and hands shoved in pockets to keep himself from reaching out to touch. His fingertips didn't want the reminder of the cold, dead smoothness of the glass. The same cold dead way Steve'd left Bucky down in that ravine.

"Best friends since childhood, Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield..."

It was nothing like the drawings Steve had tucked in his wallet. It was nothing like the flashes of memories and dreams always playing in his head. The exhibit and the videos were real, a physical embodiment, a moving picture in front of him. This was more than remembered lines on paper, this was...

This was Bucky Barnes, memorialized and beautiful and laughing, eyes crinkling and shoulders shaking as he glanced at Steve, the screen in clear black and white, starkly contrasted to the color-version in his memory.

He knew exactly what Bucky was laughing at right there. He could remember that conversation as clearly as if it were yesterday. And they'd captured it, that beautiful light had somehow survived all these years apart.

"...Barnes is the only Howling Commando to give his life in service of his country."

Steve stayed longer at the exhibit than he should have.

Tears ate at his eyes as he numbly walked out the building, zipped his Harley down unfamiliar streets.

He rode until the wind took his tears away.

He asked out his neighbor in the hallway when he got home.

The relief that rushed through him when she said no made him feel absolutely terrible.

He snuck in through the window of his apartment, wondering if that laughing beautiful face from the museum today felt this way every time he crawled in through Steve's window when they were kids.

Fury was sitting in the armchair that doubled as Steve's bed sometimes.

Three perfect sniper shots came through the wall and Steve's entire world was shifted in that moment, and he had no idea yet.
Steve looked out the window, calculated the distance, and told his neighbor those words that would change everything.

"Tell them I'm in pursuit."

He'd been in plenty of fights since he'd woken, plenty of fights since the serum, plenty of fights through the course of his life. Steve trained and trained and worked out all his hate and anger and sorrow on punching bags and gymnastic courses and running and for the first time, he honestly might not be running fast enough.

His legs were pumping strong as they could, pounding the ground over and over as he slid around corners and jumped through windows and dented walls and busted through doors and hurdled over gaps and somehow the sniper was still ahead of him, somehow Steve hadn't caught him yet.

The figure finally came into sight, a rooftop and Steve swung back his arm without a single thought and hurled his shield at the escaping assassin. It whistled through the air, dead set on its target, moving fast enough that it actually might behead the guy.

Just before the shield could slice, a dancing spin and a loud metallic clank echoed over the rooftops, stopping Steve's heart. He stared, blood pounding in his ears as his brain absorbed the picture like a camera flash, instantly snapping every detail into perfect clarity in his memory.

Black soot smudged around eyes, a black mask covering the lower half of the man's face, wild strands of long hair obscuring details, a black combat suit and at least two guns from what Steve could see. And then: the metal arm. A shining, silver, unmistakable thing, metal fingers wrapped deftly around the edge of his shield.

The shield looked like merely an extension of the metal arm - and by the way the sniper swung his body and flung the shield right back in Steve's direction, it acted like it too. The surprise at the amount of control the sniper had over the shield was enough to make Steve nearly miss catching it back. His torso took most of the impact and his body skid back at least a few feet from the strength of the throw.

What the hell.

Not only had Steve's toss not even made the sniper budge an inch, he'd thrown it back harder. Steve slid when he caught it, nothing like the clanking epic stop from the metal arm.

It wasn't possible. Steve probably could've thrown a little harder if he hadn't been so hurried, but still. The sniper was...inhumanly strong. And inhumanly fast.

And now, inhumanly gone.

Steve stood on the edge of the rooftop, peering into the night. Entirely vanished, not a single sound or trace of a direction. All in the few seconds Steve'd looked down from catching his shield. Disappeared into thin air.

They had a problem on their hands.

~*~*~

"I know who killed Fury." Well that made Steve shut up. He raised his eyebrows at Natasha, waiting for her to go on. She looked extremely reluctant, almost... scared, in a way. Smaller, younger than he could ever remember seeing her. Which could be because he was crowding her against a wall, but he'd bet on the horror story.
"Most of the intelligence community doesn't believe he exists." Natasha's eyes darted around, wary like the words alone would bring wrath. "Those that do call him the Winter Soldier. He's credited with over two dozen assassinations in the last fifty years."

"So he's a ghost story." It did sound a little terrifying, but that didn't explain Natasha's reaction, she wasn't the type to beware the boogeyman. Steve's face must've said so, because Natasha gave him a serious look and elaborated.

"Five years ago I was escorting a nuclear engineer out of Iran, somebody shot out my tires near Odessa. We lost control, went straight over a cliff. I pulled us out. But the Winter Soldier was there. I was covering my engineer so he shot him-" Natasha lifted the corner of her shirt. "-straight through me. Soviet slug, no rifling. Bye bye bikinis."

"Yeah, I bet you look terrible in 'em now." Steve gave her an unimpressed look and Natasha only blinked. There was a gravity in her words, making Steve think back to the metal arm, the power that had rippled through the sniper's body as he flung Steve's shield back at him.

Apparently she could read his thoughts too, because she made an unimpressed sound, catching Steve's attention again.

"Going after him's a dead end. I know, I've tried." This was going to be a hell of a lot harder than he thought it'd be. He'd never imagined Natasha saying the words dead end. "Like you said, he's a ghost story."

A ghost. Like Steve wasn't haunted enough already. But at least this ghost was real, at least this ghost wasn't Bucky Barnes lingering in every one of Steve's dreams, the subject of every one of his nightmares. At least this ghost, Steve could take down.

"Well, let's find out what the ghost wants."

~*~*~

"Where did Captain America learn how to steal a car?"

"Nazi, Germany. And we're borrowing, take your feet off the dash."

A small smile curved up on Natasha's face as she brought her feet down where they belonged. Steve looked back to the road, watching the landscape slide by and trying to make his brain shut up.

Bucky'd thought it was hilarious the first time Steve had to steal a car, had given him shit the whole time he'd been hot-wiring it. Of course, the teasing was whispered and Bucky had been holding a sniper rifle over Steve's shoulder while he worked, but it had still been a moment with Bucky smiling and any moment like that kept haunting Steve's memory, over and over.

He was grateful when Natasha spoke again, although after hearing what she had to say, decided to take back that gratitude.

"Alright, I have a question for you. Which you do not have to answer. I feel like if you don't answer it though, you're kind of answering it--"

"What?" Steve interrupted, turning to look at her.

"Was that your first kiss since 1945?" Natasha had a wicked grin on her face and Steve thought back to the blonde girl he'd taken on that date, the kiss that'd landed on his cheek. Well, it was kinda more like the corner of his mouth, actually. Mostly.
"That bad, huh?" He turned back to look out over the road, his voice lighthearted in the way that a smiling Natasha could always make it.

"I didn't say that!"

"Well it kinda sounds like that's what you're saying."

"No, I didn't- I just wondered how much practice you've had."

"You don't need practice-"

"Everybody needs practice."

"It was not my first kiss since 1945," Steve finally relented, because technically it wasn't a lie. He'd been kissed. Almost on the lips. It counted. "I'm ninety five, I'm not dead."

"Nobody special though?" Natasha pressed, looking over at him again. Steve huffed a laugh. She had no idea.

"Believe it or not, it's kinda hard to find someone with shared life experience." Maybe that said something about him, how he had to share life experience with someone for them to be special. It was just that anyone he'd ever loved or had come close to loving had that.

Especially Bucky, whose entire life had basically been the same life experience as Steve's, except he was beautiful and strong where Steve was sick and small. They'd been through everything together, shared everything. Brooklyn, the war. Only now Steve was stuck in the future and who the hell else had been frozen in time - literally and figuratively - just to wake back up 70 years later?

"Oh, that's alright, you just make something up." Natasha shrugged and Steve glanced over. That was the whole thing. He didn't want to. Sometimes his life felt made up enough when it was the truth, he couldn't add more lies to that.

"What, like you?"

"I dunno, the truth is a matter of circumstances. It's not all things to all people all the time. And neither am I." She had a smile on her face but Steve knew enough about pretending to recognize a mask. There was a tear between just the two identities of Steve Rogers and Captain America, he couldn't imagine handling all the different ones Natasha had.

"That's a tough way to live," he told her, an ounce of sympathy, careful not to overstep. She did it for a reason, obviously, but that didn't make Steve hurt for her any less.

"It's a good way not to die, though."

There were a lot of good ways not to die. Better ways than that. But it wasn't like Steve knew half as much about not-dying as he did about almost-dying, or on one memorably freezing occasion, actually-dying.

His death was the only other thing besides Bucky that he had nightmares about. The freezing water pushing into his lungs, ice surrounding him on all sides, the water around him tinged with blood from the imploding glass of the crash.

But it'd all been worth it, because he'd saved the world. He'd stopped Hydra.

Until it turned out he hadn't.
Seeing Zola's face, hearing his voice again? The man that'd tortured his best friend, the man that'd given Bucky nightmares for a year, that'd taken Bucky's body from him and his own name from him and made him scream out for Steve in the middle of the night, that man was here.

"Your death amounts to ze same as your life."

"A zero sum."

He'd spent years controlling his temper, especially since the serum. He couldn't afford to think violently, couldn't afford to be pissed the way he did when thrown punches didn't hurt anyone. If he hadn't put a lid on his temper, Steve could've done serious damage by now. The strength of the serum mixed with the quick violence of his youth would've never worked.

He'd spent years making sure he didn't hurt anyone accidentally. Even people who deserved it, he was still careful. Tony Stark had insulted him, his company, his life, his best friend, and Steve had managed to keep it bottled in.

He'd spent years keeping it that way.

But that all went to hell the moment the words left Zola's mouth.

A zero sum.

Steve hurled back a fist and slammed it into the glass of the computer screen without thinking, spiderwebs instantly spitting out pieces of shattered green glass. All that time, all the emotions he'd kept locked down, they all flew out the door and for a split second Steve wasn't just dangerous, he was out of control.

The green face of Zola just reappeared on another screen and Steve tried to catch his breath, chest heaving from the adrenaline and anger coursing through his veins. He'd promised he wouldn't ever be violent without thinking. He'd promised and he was losing his grip on that and it was Arnim Zola's fault, the way everything shitty in Steve's life tended to be Arnim Zola's fault.

Zola'd tortured Steve's best friend, killed Steve's best friend, then proceeded to make sure that death was for nothing.

Bucky'd died for nothing. Steve'd died for nothing.

And Steve didn't even know half of what Zola'd done. Right now, he couldn't imagine hating him more. This time tomorrow, he'd have quite a different viewpoint.

The face mocked him, sneering, and it turned out Zola planned to kill Steve a second time. Because inadvertently giving Steve reason to kill himself the first time apparently wasn't enough.

"Admit it. It is better zis way," Zola cajoled and Steve bristled. He might've submitted to dying once but it wasn't happening again, not now. Not when Steve still had to avenge Bucky, not when he still had to make both their deaths meaningful again.

But, maybe, it was too late for even that.

"We are both of us, out of time."

~*~*~
Mission: Level 6
Target 1: Officer Jaspar Sitwell
Target 2: Agent Natalia Anianovna Romanoff

Time for Mission Completion:
Ten Hours
Parameters:
Targets Terminated
At All Costs
Disregard Collateral Damage

---

"Let me hold the laser pointer pen."

"No, I get to hold it."

"I outrank you. Besides, I have more experience."

"Have you ever even *sniped* somebody Steve?"

"Actually, I always had someone to do that for me. Which is why it's my-" Steve grabbed the laser
pointer pen from Natasha, "-turn."

Natasha rolled her eyes but managed not to push Steve's shoulder as he turned it on, pointing the red
dot directly at Jaspar Sitwell's tie.

It was harder to hold steady than he thought it'd be. A newfound wave of respect for Bucky rippled
through him and Steve had to shake it off, because they had a mission and thinking about Bucky on
missions never ended well for him.

Although he was about to find out Bucky + missions wasn't going to end well for *anyone.*

---

"What? Are you crazy? That is a terrible, terrible idea," Jaspar Sitwell spit, leaning forward in his
seat to glare at Steve in shotgun. Steve was busy ignoring him when the roof suddenly made a soft
*thump.*

He looked up on instinct and Jaspar leaned back in his seat. Then glass was shattering and Steve
spun around just in time to see Sitwell dragged out of the window and hauled into oncoming traffic.

It happened so quickly he could barely register - people don't get plucked outta cars and tossed at
sems - before Natasha was leaping over the back seat and into his lap. She got Steve in a headlock,
pulling him forward just as the headrest behind him exploded in fluff and smoke, where his head'd
been only seconds before.

Another shot went off but Sam managed to dodge the bullet for *him,* all of which were coming
through the freaking *roof.* Finally setting his brain back to functioning mode, Steve quickly yanked
the car into park, stopping the tires with a screech and jolting them all forward with the motion. But
more importantly, flying their intruder off the roof.
A body soared through the air, upside down but righting itself last second in a half roll, and then there was the metal arm, fingers digging into asphalt and sending up sparks as the assassin slid backwards, long hair flying as his body froze into the perfect hunting crouch, screeching to a stop in front of them.

Steve could only stare as the metal arm unlatched from the road, plates reflecting against the sunlight as they shifted. The assassin slowly straightened up from the ground, each step perfectly planned and executed, lifting every vertebræ of his spine as he stood, brown hair reflecting with golden undertones and falling in soft frames around his face.

Not that Steve was noticing. Or staring. It was just that...

He was beautiful; in that way that deadly things always are.

Even with the black mask (muzzle) covering his face, something about the way he held himself, the fluidity to his movements, the grace that spoke mountains of the deaths to his name, the way he looked at them through blackened goggles as though they were simply bugs in a trap...all of it sent a sharp shiver down Steve's spine.

He was still staring like a loon, entirely enamoured when the Hummer hit them from behind. Seriously, they should've heard it barreling towards them at high speeds, loud engine grumbling and pressing intentionally faster. At the very least, Steve's enhanced hearing should've given him an advantage.

But of course, he was too busy staring. They got slammed from behind, gun falling to the floor and taillights crushed as the Hummer's grill shoved their car forward into rapid motion again.

The Winter Soldier stood in the middle of the road, directly in front of them, waiting. Just, waiting. The car was going to hit him, was going to crush this beautiful deadly thing, but he just waited, silent and terrifying, kept waiting, waiting for the crash, waiting for Steve, 70 whole years of it. And just before the grill crushed his knees, he leapt into the air, swinging up and backwards and then there was another crash, more glass splattering, and it was all happening too quickly for Steve to catch every movement but somehow the assassin was on top of their car again.

Sam stomped the brake and sparks flew but the car didn't slow, nothing was happening, and then the metal hand came through the windshield and they now had zero control over the car. Natasha finally grabbed the gun, started shooting, and the Winter Soldier jumped off their roof and onto the waiting Hummer, heavy combat boots graceful as ballerina slippers.

Steve was still gawking as the assassin rode the hood of the Hummer like it was a surfboard, entirely unfazed by the wind whipping at him or the fact that they were all barreling at high speeds down a busy interstate on top of cars, one of which currently didn't have a steering wheel anymore.

"Shit!" Sam shouted, looking up through the glass hole as he realized the wheel had literally been taken from his hands and they now had zero control over the car. Natasha finally grabbed the gun, started shooting, and the Winter Soldier jumped off their roof and onto the waiting Hummer, heavy combat boots graceful as ballerina slippers.

They were all going to die. He seriously had to do something, had to get his head on straight and fight the damn battle. Who the hell was he to forget the mission, even for a moment? The beautiful assassin was trying to kill them and he'd been sitting here waiting for it to happen, not engaging in the slightest. He was Captain America, he was not going down without a fight. No matter how pretty the killer.

God, when was the last time he'd been so entranced with someone he'd frozen like that? And it had
to be a fucking ghost _assassin_ to stun him into silent shock. Of course. Typical Steve Rogers, right, go for the most dangerous thing in the room. Couldn't he be normal _once_?

But god, the assassin was beautiful and _anyways_, he should be focusing on _survival_ right now, his friends needed him, right now. Steve lifted his shield from where it was tucked against the door, tucking Nat against his chest and pulling Sam in too.

"Hang on!" he shouted, ramming his shoulder into the car door and jumping out sideways, just as the car flipped up into the air. It rolled, pieces of metal and tires flying, but the door and shield they'd landed on were thankfully too slow to be flattened by the wreckage, sparking as they deposited onto the highway.

Sam rolled off somewhere along the way and Steve and Natasha only just got off the ground in time to see the Hummer stop ahead, the Winter Soldier jumping off the hood. Steve picked his shield back up and thanked the Lord that he had friends that weren't totally breakable.

He was checking to make sure Nat was okay when a movement drew his eyes to the Winter Soldier again, only this time he was holding a grenade launcher pointed in their direction. And no preamble, no big bad guy speech, just a simple aim and fire and then Steve was shoving Natasha out of the way, curling up in a ball behind his shield because he wouldn't be able to run fast enough.

The explosion hit the star and Steve flew. Air, cold wind, and Steve had the brief moment to recall when Bucky'd done that same thing once, held Steve's shield up to an explosion that'd bounced off the shield fine, but still left him flying out into the cold; except there was no trainrail for Steve to grab, only more glass shattering and everything went dark.

~*~*~

They couldn't take _all_ emotions out of him. Most, of course, but the basic instinctive ones stayed.

Unless, of course, he was in the chair or on the table. Then he was emotionless and numb and entirely obedient.

But when the red-haired woman _surprised_ him, when she shot her pistol from under the bridge and actually _hit_ his eye goggles, there was definitely emotion.

He ducked behind the barrier of the bridge, raw power pumping through his veins. With a sharp snapping movement, he pulled off the cracked eye goggles, tossing them to the ground.

He was _angry_.

When he whipped back upright he sent a splattering of enraged bullets where the redhead'd been. She was further away now, but for a brief moment he'd fired the machine gun angrily for _vengeance_, because she actually dared catch a bullet on him.

Anger was an emotion that went hand in hand with power. He could feel rage because it gave him an advantage. Because it fit in nicely with the only label for the stuff pumping through his veins: lethal.

No one shot him and lived.

~*~*~

Steve ducked low, jumped through the bus window, grabbed his shield, and used the ricochet to bounce bullets back at the men with machine guns because somehow, after all these years, people
still thought that aiming for the shield would eventually hurt Steve.

They should seriously give a medal to first person that tries to shoot around the damn thing.

He came running onto the scene just as the Winter Soldier landed on a nearby car, gun raised with perfect, unmoving aim where Natasha was hiding. Steve came sprinting for him, shield raised to attack, but the metal arm got there first.

The assassin whirled and then the unbreakable fist was slamming dead center into Steve's shield, an unstoppable force meeting an immovable object; only for the first time Steve was the steady, immovable one being plowed over by the wild, crazy power of the unstoppable.

The echo of the clang was still ringing in his ears as that same hand shoved Steve's shield to the side and a heavy boot connected with the center of his chest, knocking him violently to the pavement.

He fell on his back and instinctively curled up in a ball behind the shield, just in time for a quick splattering of machine gun bullets to patter the star. After a few shots, the assassin apparently figured out he wasn't getting anywhere with that and the firing stopped, giving Steve just enough time to roll across the ground, keeping his body safe behind the metal.

The car was his next shield and Steve ducked behind it to dodge another quick burst from a different kind'a gun. The moment the firing stopped again, Steve vaulted over the hood to kick it out of the assassin's hands, then yet another - pistol this time - was spitting bullets at crazy angles that Steve barely managed to block.

Guns determined useless, the Winter Soldier advanced on him bare-handed and Steve closed the distance between them with the first swing; but the assassin simply dodged, grabbing Steve's shield to throw a punch of his own and that one hit, hard against Steve's cheekbone and followed closely by a second. He barely managed a single retaliation of his own before the shield attached to his arm was spinning, flipping Steve and disorienting him only for a millisecond but long enough that the Winter Soldier somehow--

--had his shield now. Steve couldn't process the transfer but it didn't matter because there was another hit to his chest, and another, and he was stumbling backwards, falling on his ass and carrying his momentum through a backwards roll to land in a crouch.

Time froze, then, as the space between them gave the fight a temporary pause. And there was the Winter Soldier, holding Steve's shield like it was his own, like he'd held it a million times, the exact same way Bucky'd held it before he'd died on the train. Except that the Winter Soldier was looking over the top of his facemask with eyes scary enough for Steve's heart to pound in fear for his own life this time.

Which meant only fighting harder. Steve launched off the ground, running straight for the Winter Soldier just as that incredible arm sent the shield flying back in his direction, fast enough to behead Steve if he hadn't ducked so it could lodge into a van instead.

Something silver glinted through the air as Steve threw the first punch, a countermove with a heavy knife inches from Steve's arm. Every movement was punctuated with the whirring metallic of the arm moving, ever-adjusting to optimum performance. They blocked each other's punches and swings, forearms smacking and bruising and this man was so strong, there was no way he didn't have some kind of enhancement.
Arms both metal and human came flying at Steve, attacks from both sides with a knife swapped and glinting in between and he was barely holding his own, throwing up enough blocks that he wasn't dead yet but he also wasn't getting anywhere.

When he'd fought Schmidt, Steve'd been hoping for an equal match, a fight that would get his blood hot instead of just spilled. Schmidt had the serum too, so they should've been equals, but all Steve could remember was the overwhelming sense of disappointment. Schmidt'd been all kick hits and brutal, wild, misplaced punches relying solely on strength.

Fighting was a dance, if you did it right. If you had the right partner. And fighting the Winter Soldier? It was the first time Steve was at his max, that he was part of something beautiful, a raw, humanistic dance.

It was as close-hand combat as was possible, the deadly ghost assassin of legend against the shining hero icon of America. There was something about the way the Winter Soldier fought that struck Steve as more intelligent and powerful than anything else. There was no misplaced anything, only perfect swing after perfect stab that Steve could barely use his enhanced abilities to keep from intersecting any fatal parts of him.

A particularly brutal hit had the metal arm swinging into his stomach, but the movement gave Steve's body the momentum to land a solid punch of his own (finally) across the face mask, followed by a spinning jump kick that sent the assassin soaring backwards - even graceful as he was flew through the air - and slamming directly into the side of a car, metal crumpling around him.

Steve wasn't going to lose the upperhand now and went sprinting at the car, jumping last second to slam his knee into the Winter Soldier's stomach as he swung his fist towards what he could see of that pretty face again. The metal arm was up and blocking Steve effortlessly, a punch to Steve's chest and then they were moving backwards again, assassin on offense, but Steve took the opportunity of a heavy swing from the metal arm - he moved like the arm was part of him, but the weight distribution still had to be off somewhere - to flip the armored body sideways, rolling the assassin in his arms to slam on the ground.

The Winter Soldier got his feet under him and grabbed Steve's wrist as he swung back upright, balancing just in time to latch a metal hand around Steve's neck. And here they were, face to face and those raging eyes stared at him and Steve went cold as ice, staring, not enough time to notice that the color of those eyes were ice, too.

He couldn't breathe and it wasn't as much the lack of airflow he was concerned about, it was the actual crushing of his esophagus into a useless crumbled thing in his throat. Steve had both hands around the metal, using the grip of black sniper gloves to try to rip his throat free. Metal whirred again and the fingers around his neck tightened as he drew them face to face, noses inches apart as those lethal eyes stared him down with promised brutal death.

The movement was intimate and personal and probably the most terrified and awed Steve'd ever been, all branded into the same rushing heartbeat.

The metal fingers could crush his throat at any moment and if this is what it felt like courting death, no wonder Steve was jumping outta buildings all the damn time.

Then that same hand threw him, shoving Steve backwards and tumbling head over heels over the hood of yet another car. Everything was spinning and he still couldn't breathe. Lungs couldn't decide if it was the squeezed windpipe or.... just something about being held that intimately close to the masked face of the killer that'd set off a hundred sparks in Steve's body.
He barely rolled away in time to avoid the metal fist crushing his head into pavement, splattering asphalt pieces in his eyes as the ground split like an earthquake under the unstoppable hand.

With a quick spin Steve stood, catching his bearings to charge forward again; he couldn't give up now, he couldn't give up ever, and Steve threw up his forearms as blockades to violent, painful metal punches and he was bruised all over and he couldn't really breathe and he was aching but he hadn't felt this alive since 1945.

The side of a van smacked his shoulder and he couldn't remember being shoved but the moment he tried to step forward, a kick to his lower stomach sent his head smacking back into the van and then the glint of a blade reflected in his eyes as yet another knife drilled down towards Steve's head, both metal and human hands driving it and Steve had both his up too, holding onto the wrists of the Winter Soldier and trying to use his strength to keep the knife from indenting his forehead.

Finally he just ducked, body pinned against the van with every inch of the assassin's and Steve's breathing was cut off again as he got both hands on the human arm, tried to shove his way free as the knife slid closer to his head, cutting through the metal side of the van like butter as Steve's feet stumbled between the assassin's black combat boots.

The van wall eventually ended and the movement bent the Winter Soldier just long enough for Steve to wrap both arms around his waist from behind, hauling the assassin over his shoulder, grimacing under the frankly ridiculous weight as the momentum slammed them both into the ground.

Steve was the first to jump up, on his feet and grabbing the shield only seconds faster and then there was another quick punch to the star, the slash of a knife inches from his face. Steve lifted the shield to block a stab from one arm, but the Winter Soldier simply dropped the knife over the side of the shield, grabbing it with the other hand, and landed a solid punch on Steve's cheekbone. He went stumbling backwards, mind reeling at the pain and beauty, the moves the assassin was coming up with, all that deadly creativity.

How fucked up did he have to be to be entranced, enchanted by the only thing in this life so far that actually had a very real shot of killing him?

He blocked the next kick and managed a solid swing with his shield, lodging the edge into the metal arm, denting a panel with the force of it. A terrible short-circuiting sound filled the air and the Winter Soldier was stuck, just long enough to pull the shield out and whip it around under the arm, smacking it directly into his face before Steve jumped up behind him, one hand closing heavy over the facemask and heaving the assassin into the air.

The Winter Soldier flipped and landed on his shoulder, rolling and straightening back up, spine to Steve and one foot almost scuffing the ground in his disorientation.

The facemask was lying on the ground.

Steve paused, breathing heavy, looking at the shoulders of the beautiful powerful assassin and waiting for him to spin around, waiting to see the face of the deadliest ghost in the world.

Then the Winter Soldier cocked his body to the side, head whipping over his shoulder to look at Steve through the frame of wild dark hair around his face.

Icy eyes glared at him and the world went perfectly still. Steve straightened up and he didn't notice this time when his lungs didn't take in oxygen.

He just stared. Because the deadliest ghost in the world was somehow the ghost of Steve's dreams
"Bucky?" he breathed, heartbeat pounding and sky closing in and the name as familiar on his lips as it ever was, spinning everything around him into a blur.

The icy eyes narrowed at him and familiar lips parted, five words to end Steve's life all over again.

"Who the hell is Bucky?"

Chapter End Notes

AND NOW WE FINALLY GET TO THE POST-CATWS DRAMA WOOO!!!!

Also: the lovely quote of "Because there'll be no more goddamn napkins left in the world at the rate you're using them up" came from my dear friend who I went running to for flashback inspiration. Just that one line and I was like YES I HAVE THE SCENE NOW. But anyways, thank you so much for that doll :) 

Thank you all so much for reading <3 <3

xx
Chapter Notes

Warnings: references to torture, brief religious debates, mentions of possible homophobia (not really though), and possible trigger warnings for food disorders.

If you haven't read the post on the CPR scene in CATWS, that's here and quite relevant xx

So quick editorial note: I'm using the *'s again, but not for torture scenes. Now, a * represents a change in POV because that kind of happens a lot in this chapter.

Also, if you haven't watched Agents of Shield, there is a machine in the MCU universe that is super relevant and I will explain further in the chapter, but if you have watched the show you probably already know what machine I'm talking about. But it is actually canonically part of the Marvel Universe, so I figured I would explain that I'm not totally making things up.

Running Up That Hill - Placebo
This Night - Black Lab

The song Tony plays: Back From the Dead - Skylar Grey

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Drop the shield, Captain! Get down! Get on your knees! Don't move!" People shouted, pointing guns. Steve didn't hear them. The words floated over and he couldn't get down; didn't know they
wanted him to.

Eventually some part of his brain must’ve registered, dropping his body to the pavement with a kick to his leg. Just as well, his knees were about to give out. Or maybe they did, maybe that was why he collapsed. He didn’t say anything, couldn’t say anything, lips parted and eyes open but he wasn’t seeing anything either.

Just Bucky's face, whipping around to look at Steve. The unbalanced surprise at his own name, that expression when he’d turned all the way: five words to rip the heart outta Steve's chest, mind outta his skull. Who the hell is Bucky. Who the hell is Bucky.

Bucky was alive. He had no idea who Steve was. Steve was a goddamned stranger to him, Buck would've killed him. Steve was nothing to Bucky but how was Bucky even here?

He couldn't breathe. Bucky was the Winter Soldier. Steve had to repeat it a few times in his head, five new words to make his own. Buck was the Winter Soldier. Buck was a deadly assassin. Bucky was the deadliest assassin, the beautiful thing of legend Steve couldn't stop staring at, the one thing that'd made him feel alive for the first time since February 1945.

How?

He sorted through memories, anything that could've lead to this. First: Bucky hadn't died when he'd fallen from the train. How could he survive? Would Steve've survived? Was it possible Bucky'd been enhanced?

How in hell had Steve's best friend in the entire world, second in command, faithful right-hand sniper and love of his life been a fucking serum recipient and Steve had never noticed?

When could he've gotten it? The only time Steve hadn't been with him was when--

Zola. Buck'd been experimented on. Things he refused to talk about, things he shut away from Steve. In Zola's lab, Bucky'd been stuck full of needles, pumped full of drugs - Steve knew there'd been needles involved, Bucky'd accidentally told him once. After a drunken flashback, pestering Bucky about what'd triggered it and Bucky had - in his hungover groaning - said something about how the body-mind disconnect felt like he was 'drugged up again.'

So Steve'd known needles and drugs were part of the torture. Why in hell had he never searched for Zola's files? The moment he found out they were pumping unknown substances into his best friend, it was Steve's responsibility to find out what. But he hadn't, he'd let Bucky down. Bucky said he was okay, most everyone believed him.

Physically, he was better than okay. So obviously better than okay, how had Steve never noticed? He'd picked up on little things - it'd constantly bugged him how strong Bucky was, how he didn't fatigue like the rest of the boys. That one December they'd slept in the woods, Steve kept wondering how Bucky could hold up his drawing clipboard for hours and not feel the slightest bit tired.

He'd pulled an electric fence off Steve's feet for god's sake. His hands'd been flayed and smoking and...Steve hadn't been imagining it, then. Bucky really had destroyed his hands, they'd just healed superfast. Super serum fast. Then when he got shot in the leg and lost an impossible amount of blood? He'd miraculously pulled through that too - back and running around camp a week later.

All the signs had been there and Steve had turned a blind eye because he was so stupid and he'd had the chance to save Bucky from...seventy years under Zola and he hadn't because Steven Grant Rogers failed the only good thing he'd ever had in his life.
It made sense now, too much sense, that Bucky had some version of the serum all along. That he'd been alive all along. And the kicker that really drove home? The day after the fall, the minute after, yesterday, Steve had that feeling in his gut Bucky was alive and HE DID NOTHING ABOUT IT.

He knew, all this time his soul had known and still, he'd crashed that stupid plane in the ocean because the weight of Bucky's death, apparently not-death, was too much for him to cope.

And so, because Steve had failed, Buck'd been taken captive by Hydra and moulded into the deadliest assassin on the planet. They'd been inches from each other's faces, Bucky had stared right at him, shield and all, and hadn't recognized his best friend since childhood.

Once, a few months ago, Steve'd believed he was in the most pain possible for a human being. He'd watched his friend die and he'd been helpless, lost, broken.

That was a papercut now, in comparison to this. Because some things were a hell of a lot worse than death. The look on Bucky's face alone, when Steve had said his name...Steve would take drowning and ice over this. Ingrained in him forever: the look on the face of the love of his life as Steve said his name and Bucky didn't know it anymore.

"It was him," Steve said quietly, the first three words he'd said since "Bucky?" He was staring unblinkingly at his lap and everyone else was quiet, watching him warily. Steve didn't notice. Nothing mattered. Nothing mattered except Bucky was alive and Steve was nothing to him. "He looked right at me...like he didn't even know me."

No one in the truck believed him. Not entirely. He didn't really blame them.

"How's that even possible? It was like 70 years ago." Sam's words were tinged with disbelief. Steve cringed. He knew it was seventy years ago. He knew it wasn't possible. He should've known. He should've fucking known.

"Zola." Saying it out loud made it about a hundred times worse. Steve still couldn't look up. He couldn't look at anyone's eyes. The last person whose eyes had locked on his were Bucky's. Fuck. "Bucky's whole unit was captured in '43. Zola experimented on him."

The experiments. Bucky'd been a lab rat and Steve'd never pushed. He'd given Bucky all this space and for what? So they could both end up seventy years in the future where the world went to hell and Bucky didn't fucking know who Steve was?

"Whatever he did helped Bucky survive the fall." Zola had fucked with Steve's boy. And Steve'd never even fucking asked. He'd had his chance for more than a year and he never asked, not once, for Bucky to tell him. "They must have found him and..."

...and destroyed him.

"None of that's your fault, Steve," Natasha interrupted, tone indissimissable. The words floated by now, empty sentiments. They didn't know. Natasha wasn't there. Natasha hadn't watched the love of her life fall from a train because she couldn't reach far enough. Natasha hadn't failed over and over and over and Steve didn't even deserve to have Bucky back in his life, assassin or not.

He looked away, unable to meet the eyes of his friends, friends who knew nothing about him, not really. Because throughout this all, for as long as he could remember, it wasn't their voices he heard in his head, it wasn't their advice urging him to do the right thing, it wasn't their hands he dreamed about holding at night.

"Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky."
He didn't care how it sounded. He didn't care how much of his heart it revealed. His heart was in the hands of a Brooklyn sniper who'd run away from Steve in a flash of black smoke and the most overwhelmed look on his face he'd ever seen.

*I had Bucky.* Bucky was *his.* He'd always been there, always let Steve love him too much, and never knew. But even when Bucky was dead, even when Bucky was gone, even when Steve's entire *world* was gone....Buck'd still been there.

Steve had woken with nothing, not even a familiar face. He'd woken with absolutely nothing left in his life except for the beautiful boy in his head, saving him every step of the way. Even when he had nothing, he had Bucky.

And he wasn't giving him up now without one hell of a fight.

~*~*~

"He's gonna be there, you know." Sam offered quietly, taking a cautious step close. Steve kept looking over the bridge, water below. Quiet and still, soft ripples instead of the tumultuous, churning waves of his mind.

"I know," Steve replied. He was counting on it. Bucky was alive, they'd met again by some twist of fate, and Steve wasn't gonna mess it up this time.

It was Steve's turn to show his best friend how much their promise meant. The words etched into the gravestone of his heart; it'd been the day of Sarah's funeral. Steve dodged Bucky and his folks all day, needing time alone. Mostly because he didn't want Buck to see him cry.

But, of course, he caught up to Steve eventually, followed him up to his door. Tried to coerce Steve to moving in; to leaning on Bucky when the skies were the dimmest. And he hadn't taken no for an answer. He'd pledged and promised to Steve, right there on his ratty porch, that he didn't have to go it alone, Buck would always be there.

The warm, familiar hand tight on Steve's shoulder, shaking him slightly with the weight of it. He couldn't help the small smile that formed on his face, his heart aching with how much he love he carried for that boy. The softness should've passed the moment Bucky pulled back, the energy around them should've fallen back to joking, but it didn't. Not yet.

Bucky had followed Steve inside his apartment, shooting glances at him every three seconds with that beautiful smile still soft and rounded at the corners, like he knew how much Steve was hurting. Well, he did, Buck loved Sarah too. Steve was pretty sure he didn't have to fake an ounce of the sorrow or sympathy.

He'd insisted on helping Steve pack. Steve insisted no, Bucky insisted harder.

They'd moved in together and that first night they'd done just what Bucky promised. Put the couch cushions on the floor like when they were kids, lying nose to nose in the darkness. It wasn't cold enough to pretend he needed Bucky's arms wrapped around him, but their hands were tangled up between their chests anyways, a gentle reminder and a promise of comfort.

"I miss her already, Buck," Steve whispered into the darkness, running his small thumb over the back of Bucky's work-roughened fingers. Bucky repositioned his head on the cushion, scooting closer to tip their foreheads together. Steve closed his eyes into the warmth, breathing in the feeling of Bucky so close.

Knowing he still had *this,* the night after he'd lost everything else; it was immeasurable what that'd
done for him. Steve's life was empty, he had absolutely nothing left...and there was Bucky, still, always.

"I miss her too, Stevie. I miss her too," Bucky whispered back.

The quiet stillness of the night settled around them, a hovering weight of peace hanging over the impending sorrow. They laid together like that for another little while, letting the silence speak for them as Steve drifted on the edge of teary-eyed sleep, just dozing off when Bucky whispered one last thing into the night.

"I'm never leavin' you, Stevie. Promise."

"Look," Sam interjected kindly, "whoever he used to be...the guy he is now? I don't think he's the kind you save. He's the kind you stop."

The Winter Soldier was the deadliest assassin, a ghost story, a legend. Something to tell little assassin children at night, the silent monster on every horizon. The most beautiful fighter Steve had ever seen. And of course, of course he was Bucky. The Winter Soldier may be the kind you stop, but the person under the mask?

"I don't know if I can do that." Honestly, Steve couldn't imagine. Not in a million years. As torn as he'd been lately about right and wrong, as much as he'd been doubting himself? He'd never been entirely lost really, not until right now.

When it came down to it, Steve knew what the right thing to do was. Bucky had killed so many people. He was a murderer in the cold blood and he wasn't gonna stop. But Steve could probably watch Bucky slaughter a dozen men and he'd still reach out to him with open arms, begging Bucky to come home.

This was so far past Captain America's "right and wrong." Cap'd be able to stop the most dangerous killer of the century. Steve Rogers from Brooklyn may've always been about right-and-wrong too, but this was where the line breached. This was where Steve crossed his own morals, his own beliefs, because as much as he believed in the right thing? As much as he wanted to - and needed to - save the world?

He loved Bucky more.

"Well, he might not give you a choice," Sam warned, a little harsh at the edges, splash of water to wake up to the cruel world of reality. But the gentle words he added on stung a hell of a lot more than the idea of Bucky killing him. "He doesn't know you."

Best friends since childhood, Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield...

...Steve?
It's me, it's Steve.
Steve.
I thought you were dead.
I thought you were smaller.

He'd even known Steve then. Bucky'd been half outta his mind with hallucinations, nightmares, drugs, pain. Steve'd been in an entirely different body. He'd grown feet, his jaw had filled out, he actually had muscle mass, they hadn't seen each other in months, the lighting was absolute shit, he had dirt smudged on his face and a helmet pulled over his distinctive blond hair and he was wearing
clothes Bucky'd never seen before, was basically an entire person Bucky'd never seen before, and through the drugged haze and the pain and the hallucinations Bucky had still known Steve then.

And seventy years later, against all odds, they'd found each other again. Bucky didn't know him, but-

He turned his head, looked over to Sam for the first time. And decided, in that moment, he knew exactly what he was going to do. With the most conviction he'd ever spoken, Steve made a single promise to the swirling air of dusk.

"He will."

If it took hours, months, years, another lifetime. Bucky would know him. Steve was part of Bucky's soul; there was no way he could lose that part of him forever, it wasn't possible. For the first time in a long time, the confidence rushing through his veins wasn't faked, wasn't adrenaline, wasn't blind faith from strangers and friends.

Right now, in this moment, Steve had absolute faith in himself: his best friend would know him again.

They had a mission to accomplish.

"Gear up. It's time." He started for the van, a spark in his step that made him wanna sprint, run, shoot things, punch and be punched and find Bucky and save Bucky.

"You gonna wear that?" Sam called from behind him. Steve turned over his shoulder and gave Sam a look that'd have Buck laughing if he were here.

"No. If you're gonna fight a war, you've gotta wear a uniform."

(Steve knew where his blue uniform was. It was more padded, more protective, moved with better range. When he'd first been declared a hostage from SHIELD, he and Natasha had ditched the suits for strange hoodies and terrible shoes, and Steve had put his uniform in a duffel bag in a high school gym. He knew exactly where it was and honestly, it was a hell of a lot safer. Especially considering he'd be fighting the most lethal man on the planet.

But this was a fight about Bucky. You're keeping the uniform, right? Steve couldn't let him down. Bucky liked the damn thing.

Besides, something that might trigger Buck's memory back? He'd take an old, itchy and definitely less protective suit any day. And it was only fitting; that was the version Bucky fought beside. They may be fighting each other this time, but at least they were still fighting together. )

~*~*~

"People are gonna die, Buck."

Cold eyes of familiar ice didn't so much as flicker, half hidden beneath the frame of hair. Something had changed between the wild shock of who the hell is Bucky and the man before him now. Steve wished he had the time to find out what, wished he could sit Bucky down right now in the middle of this damn catwalk and run his fingers through Bucky's new hair and talk to him.

But people were going to die, and Steve had a responsibility.
"I can't let that happen." This had to be his compromise. He had to save the world - Bucky would understand, once he got his memory back. If only he'd just. Trust Steve. Remember. They could take Hydra down together, the way they had in '45. But from the looks of it, Bucky wasn't budging and Steve still had to do this.

If everything went perfectly, without hurting either of them. Saving Bucky's life was as important as saving all the millions of others. It'd just be a lot easier if he didn't have to worry about getting killed in the meantime.

"Please don't make me do this," Steve begged, a final shot in the dark. Bucky narrowed his eyes, lowered a steel gaze. Fine. Steve could take the goddamned challenge. They were both walking outta this, and they were taking Hydra down too.

Steve drew back, paused, apologized to the heavens and whoever else wasn't listening, and hauled his beloved shield at the chest of his best friend.

Of course, the metal arm blocked it, star rebounding, soaring through the air and Steve caught it one-handed, just in time to block two aggressive bullets to the chest.

What awful irony it was; Bucky used to take bullets for Steve - now he was behind the trigger.

On the sixth shot Buck scooped low and a bullet grazed Steve's rib, cutting through his uniform and making him cry out at the sharp burn and instant wet-hot soak of blood. He'd never been shot around his shield before.

He'd never been so perfectly matched before. He'd always known Buck had the strength in him to be this powerful, but everything it must've taken to get here made him wanna be sick.

But god, he was beautiful when he fought. Watching those same brilliant fighting moves and knowing now, that the deadly gorgeous thing was Bucky? Enthralled wasn't exactly the word.

This fight was either going to save them, or kill them both.

~*~

Having to choke Bucky unconscious was simultaneously one of the most difficult and satisfying things Steve'd ever done. On one hand, having Bucky grasp at his arm, making little choked sounds (more pissed than scared), was breaking Steve's heart. On the other hand, having Bucky safely unconscious and outta the fight was the best thing that'd happened to him all day.

Well, that and it was a little satisfying to finally pin that metal arm underneath his leg, overpower the man that'd shot him. And stabbed him. And punched and kicked and just wasn't remembering him.

And then he got shot in the ass.

It surprised him more than anything, but it also hurt like a bitch. He was still gasping at the pain when the next bullet fired for his hand, barely letting go in time to dodge it.

Bucky was back up - shit - and if Steve could get to the center counsel fast enough, all he had to do was insert the chip back in the empty slot and "Charlie--"

Charlie not locked because suddenly Steve couldn't breathe. Fire ripped through his stomach and all his thoughts went sideways as his body went down, sinking ungracefully to the floor and choking on his own tongue, unable to get a single gasp of proper oxygen into his lungs.
Everything was searing and red and there was a hole through his stomach, the white stripes of the flag across his abdomen bloodied red.

If he had to die, Steve would choose to die by Bucky's hand. But not like this, seconds away from saving the world. The insert was a foot above his hand, twelve inches and the mission would be over and then he would be alright to die, so long as Bucky got his ass off the floor and came and held Steve.

But Bucky wasn't going to, he'd have to figure this the fuck out himself.

*C'mon, Rogers. Hang in there, okay? I know it hurts buddy, I know. You just gotta hold on for me, alright? What would I do without your punk ass to save all the time? Hey-hey, careful. You're bleeding a lot. Hey - look at me, okay? Look at me. You're gonna be alright. Hold on for me, Stevie. Hold on for me.*

Steve reached up, dragged his body as high as he could, hand trembling. Just a few more inches and it'd all be alright. A few more inches and Zola wouldn't be able to touch them anymore. A few more inches and Bucky could be Steve's again.

The chip fell into place. "Charlie lock," he breathed into his mike, and the ground took him in with open arms.

"Okay, Cap, get outta there," Hill warned over the comm, but Steve was still trying to breathe. He lifted his wrist to his mouth, knocking his head back against the wall. Every ounce of his body felt like it was falling apart.

"Fire now," he ordered. Maria instantly started protesting but Steve wouldn't have it. He hadn't just hauled his ass - which also had a bullet in it, by the way - to the chip thing to have his efforts wasted because Agent Hill was getting sentimental. "Just do it! Do it now!"

The first explosion went off with a loud, terrible sound, and Steve's entire body rocked as the helicarrier hit, blowing up the world in a flash of red and orange and black and twisting silver metal.

*Bucky.*

Through some semblance of the same stubborn stupidity that normally landed him in situations like this, Steve staggered to his feet and grabbed the rail of the walkway, holding up all his body weight to keep from collapsing.

He could finally see Bucky from the vantage point - and the huge metal beam pinning him to the sloped underbelly of the carrier. Well. That wasn't even a question. Steve could never leave Buck down there alone. His body was burning and fighting him - always fighting him - but Steve fought back harder, somehow made it back down to ground level, limping weakly to Bucky's struggling body and fearful, dirty face.

Every last ounce of strength he had went into lifting that metal bar. Bucky hauled himself out and they were both broken and panting, strings of hair sticking to Bucky's face with sweat and heat from the fire exploding around them. Finally.

Steve pinned Bucky with his eyes and held the gaze, words as sure as they'd ever been. "You know me."

The explosions were getting closer but neither noticed. For once, there were more important things than the fire threatening to steal their feet from under them. Bucky tried straighten and Steve moved closer to help, then there was a very angry metal fist colliding with Steve's ribs and Bucky was
shouting, livid and laced with confusion.

"No I don't." Now Steve couldn't breathe again. He just barely struggled back to his feet, mouth gaping to take in oxygen and head pounding with the weight of it all.

"Bucky. You've known me your whole life." That time Bucky swung out blindly with his fist and yelled, knocking them both for the ground, shooting more pain through bruises and gaping wounds. But Steve just struggled back up again, because he wasn't giving up.

"Your name is James. Buchanan. Barnes."

"Shut up!" Bucky shouted, metal crashing into fragile bone. This was nothing like their dance on the bridge, this was all wild swings and emotions and flying hair and Bucky was so beautiful and he was bleeding and Steve just wanted to wrap him up in blankets and stitch up the gash on his cheek and hold his hands between Steve's trembling own.

He pulled off his helmet for the same reason he'd worn the red white and blue suit. He needed Bucky to see him, to know him. If Captain America wasn't cutting through to any of Bucky's memories, maybe that blonde kid from Brooklyn would. God knows he had enough cuts and bruises on his face to be recognizable now. Maybe that was all it would take, seeing Steve beat up; the way Buck had for the entirety of his growing life.

A love to span decades, continents apart, and they were finally together again. He wasn't gonna lose Bucky a second time.

Steve would die by that metal hand before he lost Bucky again. He'd do whatever it fucking took.

And as much as it was ripping him apart, he didn't need Buck to know who he was. He could temporarily live with that. What he needed, really needed, was for Bucky to understand how much he meant. Because that could save them. It was the only thing that ever had.

He'd spend his last breath making sure Bucky knew how goddamned much Steve loved him.

"I'm not going to fight you."

Somethin' to prove. The shield that had saved both of their lives so many times, the shield that felt like an extension of his body, it was nothing compared to what Bucky meant. Red-leather fingers pried open and he let go. The starry protection tumbled through a sucking hole in the ground, flipping into the Potomac below. Steve could care less. The shield was his lifesaver, Bucky was his life.

"You're my friend," he promised, from the deepest place in his broken body that could still speak.

Bucky glared, staring him down with intense, unreadable eyes. A split second and he charged forward, tackling Steve to the ground hard enough to knock the air outta his lungs. That wasn't what crushed him.

"You're my mission," Bucky shot back, breathless and breathtakingly beautiful, then that metal fist was connecting with Steve's cheekbone. Something cracked. Metal slammed again and the bruise shot rivets of pain through his skull, unbearable and overwhelming and burning so much Steve couldn't see anything but blur outta his right eye.

But he took the hits, felt the skin on his cheek split, his ears barely registering the rough voice as Bucky punched again and again, each punctuated with a single word. "You're. My. Mission."
Neither of them could breathe and this was where it ended, wasn't it? This beautiful war machine hovering over him, knees pinned to either side of Steve's hips - for however many times Steve'd blocked this fantasy from his mind, none of them went quite like this. But the proximity was more than fitting; it was the only thing he'd longed for earlier, slumped and bleeding out from the bullet in his stomach.

Now, being pummeled to death by the love of his life, so long as Bucky was there and close, Steve would go with him wherever Bucky wanted him to follow.

The metal arm paused, hovering in mid air, and the look on Bucky's face was about as torn apart as Steve's heart felt right now. But he'd go. He'd go with Bucky anywhere.

"Then finish it," Steve choked, his words barely intelligible over the pounding of his heart, the blood in his mouth. Bucky was still paused over him, breathing too heavy, metal fist raised, snarl on his lips and wild fire in his eyes as he looked down at Steve, looked down and that was okay, it was okay, Steve was always going to be there for him. You and me forever.

"Cause I'm with y-you. To the end of the line."

A gravestone for two. Those crystal eyes were wide and watering, precious breathing ragged, everything about him shaken to the core, and he looked so damn beautiful, even now, even with fire exploding behind him, with Steve's mouth filled with blood.

And the metal fist lowered.

It lowered and Bucky'd heard him, Steve could see it in the shining crystal, could feel it in the hand curled over his pounding broken heart. Bucky heard him, Bucky was damn near crying, crying, and the fist lowered. Dropped. Fell.

And it was at that exact moment the helicarrier creaked, crash, and then the fist wasn't the one falling, Steve was.

Falling, falling, falling, reaching up for Bucky, and wasn't it a lovely twist of fate that now it was his turn, it was his turn to die and Steve didn't regret a single thing.

He'd told Bucky he'd loved him with those final words. To the end of the line. That was all that mattered - the look on Bucky's face said it all. James Buchanan Barnes had - in that very moment - truly realized and believed that Steven Grant Rogers loved him and

Steve was falling

falling

falling

but that was alright, it was his turn now.

He hit the water and everything went black.

~*~*~
The man wasn't breathing when he pulled him out of the water. It didn't take long to swim from where they'd fallen - well, the man had fallen, he'd jumped - then he was dragging the man up to shore.

He tossed the body down without bothering to be gentle, he was already bleeding and not-breathing and bruised, sand on the shore of a river wouldn't cause further harm.

But he stared down at the body and knew he couldn't let the man die from the water in his lungs and throat. There was something deep inside his chest he couldn't place, but this man was more important than anything else in the world; that was all he knew.

In a moment of vulnerability he knelt beside the body, tipping up the clean-shaven chin to clear airways. With a calculated press of metal he pushed down on the man's chest, just below the dimensional white star. CPR wasn't something he remembered being taught, but the motions of the chest-compressions were instinctual.

More, and the man still wasn't breathing. Carefully cradling the back of the man's head, metal fingers tipped the chin higher. He leaned down, ready to push air from functioning lungs to revive failing ones, when the new hold suddenly had the man choking up water.

Lean back, rolling the man's head to the side so he could choke up water into the dirt instead of drown. The shockingly blue eyes were still closed, but the choking eventually evened out, the worst of the water cleared from his lungs.

With careful footing he straightened back up, slow enough to keep the physical damage from worsening. The man's head rolled upright and he studied the busted face, the mouth that'd spoken to ruin something inside him.

The man had given him a full name. He could do wonders with a full name. The man had said they were friends; he had no idea what to do with that.

The man had laid down his shield and given up his life in honor of that friendship.

He couldn't quite process that.

But he'd find a way to. He'd find a way.

He called the ambulance and gave them the man's location at the first phone he found. He'd been given a mission to take a life, a single life; and instead he'd saved it.

He couldn't remember saving a life before. He couldn't remember failing a mission with no internal repercussions. All he knew was that everything had changed, and that man had changed it with ten words that felt like they were engraved into his organs, carved somewhere deep inside that he couldn't see but he could feel, could feel with every ounce of his blood and bones.

Those blood and bones had a new mission now.

~*~

He found his first answer in a museum.

Walking through crowded New York streets, he observed carefully until he determined all research was done on mobile devices, on screens not unlike the ones he hacked for security bases. He
snatched one easily from a back pocket, pressing the unlock button and holding the phone up in the sunlight to determine the placement of fingerprints.

Locating the pattern of the passcode was too easy, then it only took him a few minutes to find a search engine, to type in *James Buchanan Barnes*. There might be nothing, but public options might give a starting place.

He had the opposite problem. Too much information, none of it necessarily reliable, so he scrolled down the search page until a reliable source caught his eye: a museum.

He'd already placed his uniform and the majority of his equipment in a secure location, dressing as one of the crowd to float under surveillance.

Then he was standing in front of an exhibit, gloved hands shoved in pockets and a baseball cap pulled snug over his head, coat collar turned up as he stared at a piece of glass with the words *A Fallen Comrade* etched across the top and a dot image of his own face looking back at him.

A screen, a looping video, black and white of the man from the helicarrier - Captain America; Steve Rogers - looking at him, smiling, and then another man, looking back, his eyes crinkled at the corners and mouth turned up and the most unabashed expression of joy across his features, then he was dipping his head, his shoulders shaking as he laughed and laughed and he just stared.

Bucky Barnes.

He was a hero, Bucky Barnes had saved lives, he had fought alongside a man that he'd known his entire life - *Best friends since childhood, You're my friend, You're my mission. Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield I'm not going to fight you. You know me.* - and somehow, that was him.

Somehow, he had been a hero and he had been taken; he had been believed dead, so Hydra had turned him into their weapon.

They had taken that laughing man and twisted him and squeezed him and looking at that shining, joyful face - and the response of similar joy on Captain Rogers' face - the most familiar of emotions washed through his veins.

Anger overtook his blood as he watched that laugh, again and again, a protective urge bubbling through veins. He had been that happy once. Happiness - something of irrelevance and fairytales - had been his. He'd been Bucky Barnes and someone had decided to destroy Bucky Barnes and they were going to pay.

There was only a single thought running through his head as his lips parted slightly, his eyes glued to the words of the glass exhibit.


"He's not gonna come easy, you know," Sam said quietly. Steve didn't look up from the folder Natasha had just handed him.

"He never has," Steve replied, carefully tugging the tiny black and white photo outta its paperclip, holding it up in the sunlight. He was going to bring sunlight to this face again. "I'm just lucky I got
this chance at all."

For once, Steve was doing okay. Bucky was alive. Not only was he alive, he’d recognized Steve - or maybe his words - and he'd chosen not to kill him. Better yet. He'd chosen to save him.

A warm hand patted him on the shoulder. "Alright, well if we're making a mission of it, we're gonna need some supplies."

Steve sighed, tucking the little photo of Bucky with his crooked army hat and crooked smile in his wallet. "I know a guy."

~*~*~

"Well if it isn't the great Captain himself," Tony greeted without bothering to say hello. Steve sighed into the phone, tucking it against his shoulder as he carefully wrestled Bucky's file into his backpack. He'd read the whole thing later, but he needed supplies to go after Buck first.

He supposed Tony did have a right to be surprised that Steve was calling (he'd only seen Tony once and talked to him over the phone twice since the Battle of New York), but he was too busy for Tony's antics right now. "Look, Stark, I need help. Do you have some equipment I could borrow?"

"I have more toys and gadgets than you could imagine, Cap. What, standard SHIELD issue not doin' it for you anymore? Gettin' bored already?"

"There's nothing boring about helping people," Steve grumbled, swinging his backpack over a shoulder and heading down the stairs of his apartment two at a time. "I've just got something bigger going on."

"Oh, so you finally found a girl. I'm surprised at you Rogers. How'd you find time for that when you were busy blowing up helicarriers over the Potomac?" Stark's voice got all sassy and Steve groaned. This was why he didn't call Tony.

"You heard about that?"

"The whole free world heard about that, Stars-and-Stripes. Just gotta ask, couldn't you have managed to blow up something that wasn't a project I'd contributed to?"

"Maybe you could stop contributing to projects that try to destroy that free world. Okay, look, anyways, can I drop by to pick up some things? I'm on my way to the bus station now..."

"Yeah, yeah, JARVIS will let you in, old man. You bringing your girl? Cause I'm just warning, she may not stay after she meets me--"

"I'll see you soon Tony, goodbye." Steve hung up the phone and cursed Fury for ever introducing him to Tony Stark and then cursed Howard for not still being around so Steve could yell at him or at least complain about his damn son without feeling terrible.

The bus ride from DC to New York was about four hours, giving Steve time to gather what the hell to say to Tony. He was going alone because tickets weren't exactly cheap, and Sam had to pack for the trip anyways. Steve'd swing back by with Stark's personal plane and pick him up later.
He needed more than a plane though, he needed tracking equipment and tranquilizers and communication devices and whatever else he could use to find Bucky as soon as physically possible. With SHIELD in the wind, the only place to go for that was Tony.

The moment Steve stepped into the living quarters of the Stark Tower (being remodeled to the Avengers Tower), the speakers in the walls or the ceiling or wherever suddenly started up a blast of music. It wasn't the first time Tony'd played some stupid song as Steve entered - last time it had been the USO recording of "Star Spangled Man." Today though, Steve didn't recognize it.

He paused, cocking his head to listen to the lyrics. It sounded like a piano piece at first, but then an airy female voice drifted out over the room.

_I never thought that you and I would ever meet again..._

Okay, he hadn't been gone that long.

_I mourn the loss of you sometimes and pray for peace within..._ except Tony wasn't the peace or the praying type. Okay, so not about Tony then, it was still about Steve.

_The word "distraught" cannot describe how my heart has been, But where do we begin now that you're back from the dead?_

Steve cursed loudly and Tony came around the corner, arm over his stomach as he doubled over from laughing so hard.

"You're an asshole," Steve told him, pointing with a very serious finger. Tony laughed harder. The beat had dropped and now those words were repeating over and over again. _Where do we begin now that you're back from the dead? _"Who the hell told you?"

"Natasha," Tony managed, his laughter quieting down. "She said you might come for tracking equipment and I asked why, so that's how I got the whole story on the epic Bromance of the Ages."

Steve wasn't even going to ask what that word meant. He just crossed his arms over his chest, pointing upwards to indicate the stupid song with a very unimpressed face. Another too-fitting lyric drifted over them..._I'm so confused I don't know what to feel, should I throw my arms around you or kill you for real?_

The words must've hit Tony too (how much exactly had Natasha told him?) because he suddenly sobered up, looking almost human for a moment as his voice humbled a little. "So it's really Sergeant Barnes?"

That's right, Steve'd forgot that Buck and Howard were friends. Howard was bound to tell almost as many stories about James Buchanan Barnes as he did about Captain America.

"It is, which is why I'd really appreciate being able to get on the road so I can find him."

"Well, you came to the right place." Tony clapped his hands together, turning to stride into the adjacent room. Steve followed, for once not distracted by all of the robots and strange metals and glowing screens. "I already set out what I think you'll need. Do you happen to know what metal his arm is made out of? If you've got a sample, even a picture maybe, I might be able to run a trace."

"No, nothing. It was probably made in the 1940s though, if that helps. And it's silver, strong...hurts like a bitch." Tony snorted and tapped something on one of the blue screens, swiping it to another one.
Alright, well I'll see what I can find. In the meantime, here's your new backpack. It's got an electric-field-transmitter, a top of the line tracking device that's magnetic so you should be able to just throw it if you get close enough...

The best part about having a team, Steve decided, wasn't the battlefield advantage. That was definitely a benefit, but it didn't compare to the help and support you got off the battlefield. The Commandos had worked so well together because they split up the pain of war, made it more laughing less painful.

And now, the Avengers were using their respective talents to do whatever they could to help Steve, push him on his feet towards Bucky. Nat had gotten him the file, Stark got him equipment. Sam was coming with him, and the phone call from Bruce was exactly what Steve needed on the private jet ride back to New York. (Tony gave him shit for requesting the plane but Steve couldn't depend on public transportation, too slow.)

"Hey Steve, how are you doing?" Bruce asked as Steve shifted in the plush seat, staring uncomfortably out the window.

"I'm doing okay. Thanks for the call, Bruce. I'm guessing you heard too?"

"Yeah, Natasha called everyone, said to be gentle." Steve fell quiet, because that was all he had left to do. "Which I assumed meant it was bad. You wanna talk about it?"

He hummed, watching the blurry green of the world below pass by for a few moments. "I just have a few questions, ones you might be able to help with," he finally relented. Bruce instantly jumped on that, "of course, anything."

"They had him on cryofreeze most of the time, I think. He was awake for some of it, obviously, but he didn't look that much older. Do you know how long it takes hair to grow?"

It sounded like an odd question, but that was really the biggest difference over seven decades and it looked like Hydra hadn't bothered to cut it. Bruce asked for specifics, Steve explained the difference between Bucky's short pomade and the shoulder length he had now.

"Four years, tops, without cutting it. Probably less. If they used the ice to sustain him, its likely he was only out for missions about a week at a time, maybe a month at the most. Which could give you an idea how much time he actually spent awake and not in cryofreeze..."

"...therefore determining how many people he might've killed, how many years he was being tortured," Steve finished flatly. Some distant part of his brain was throwing all kinds of warning signals and red lights at the detached, scary apathy of his own voice but Steve ignored them.

So what if he was speaking in a monotone, isolated from facing reality. So what if he was numb from the inside out. So what if the idea of his best friend getting tortured for years was too much for him to take. So what if Steve wasn't strong enough to handle this, so what if he was losing his fucking mind and pretending he was alright and throwing jokes around and saying the words tortured and Bucky like they were nothing. So. What.

"Thanks, Bruce. I'll keep in touch." Steve waited patiently for Bruce to finish his goodbye, say his condolences, make Steve promise to keep him updated, then he hung up his phone and tossed it aside. He was fine.

But he was gonna get Bucky soon. He was gonna find Bucky and save him and then, maybe then, Steve would be able to breathe.
"You know, you are awful optimistic for a guy that was in the hospital a week ago," Sam commented, sliding Steve's credit card across the counter. The diner checkout lady made bug-eyes at the Stark logo but Steve ignored her and Sam both, leaning on the counter as they waited for their food.

"What are you going to do when we find him?" Sam kept pestering, propping himself up next to Steve. Steve crossed his arms over his chest, watching a quiet squabble between a few locals so he didn't have to look at Sam.

"I'll take him back to my place," Steve said absentmindedly like it was the most axiomatic thing in the world. Really, it was. The squabble was in rapid German - no surprise when you're in Germany - but was quickly dying out, destroying Steve's ruse of a distraction.

"Are you prepared for that, man?" Sam's voice was back to gentle now, like Steve was the one who needed coddling. The only person who needed help right now was Bucky, especially if the state of the first three Hydra bases they found were any indication. "Look, Steve, even if we get him back to okay, he's still gonna have nightmares, flashbacks. At the very least."

"Yeah, and I'll handle it." His sharpest commanding voice. Thankfully the checkout lady took that moment to slid two paper bags across the counter and Steve picked up both their lunches, sliding into one of the tall barstools that overlooked the street. Just in case.

Sam slid into the seat next to him, toes a few inches off the floor. He had that patented worried-friend look and Steve tried not to get annoyed.

"Steve, that kind'a trauma isn't something you can talk your way through." Sam emptied the contents of his lunch onto the table but didn't take his eyes off Steve, eyebrows raised.

He gave Sam a funny look because he may be a little unstable and overly enthusiastic right now, but he wasn't a complete idiot. "Yeah, I know," Steve said slowly.

Sam pulled a skeptical face and Steve pursed his lips, wrestling the drink outta his bag.

"I'm not going in blind, Sam. This is Bucky. I know how he works."

"You know how he responds to being brainwashed for seventy years?" Sam said dubiously. Sometimes he forgot not everyone had read every SSR file on the two of them. Steve took a sip of his drink before setting it aside and swiveling his chair to face Sam directly, because they were gonna clear this up right the hell now.

"I know that he gets more nightmares when it's cold out, that stressful situations like seeing me in danger can get him worked up into a frenzy that slowly slips his resolve. I know he's triggered into flashbacks by doctors, leather, and laying on tables. Certain words too, like his serial number, can make him lose touch with reality. I know that getting drunk leaves him scared due to memories of the drugs."

Steve took a breath and held up a hand before Sam could interrupt, then continued with the same matter-of-fact voice.

"And most importantly, I know how to get him out of a flashback or a nightmare, or a moment where he's terrified and doesn't trust his own senses. He responds to touch, so long as it's not suffocating. His mind recognizes a healing hand as grounding, and it gives him something to latch on to."
Steve finished with another sip of his drink. Sam stared at him for a moment, that incredulous look he
gave Steve when he first found out Captain America had a funny side. Ah, that's how it is? Yes,
Sam, that's how it is. After a few blinks, Sam apparently caught up, voice finally working again.

"How the hell could you know all that?" He had that kinda awed and disbelieving tone back in his
voice and Steve looked down, numbing his head from the memories trying to erupt.

"It's not the first time Bucky's been tortured."

The look on Bucky's face when Steve found him on that table in Azzano, the nights Steve'd jolt
awake from Bucky's scream and roll over to the other side of the tent, cupping his face and
whispering for him to come back to Steve. The fear of doctors, the way he used to slink across an inn
to come sleep in Steve's bed for comfort.

The confusion left Sam's expression and now he just looked a little overwhelmed. He propped his
arm on the table and shook his head, both their lunches ignored for the time being. He probably
couldn't eat anyways.

"So, human contact brings him back. Alright man, what, just somebody grab his arm and he's okay?"
Sam talked with his hands and Steve wondered absentmindedly if a drunk Bucky still would.

"No, it doesn't work like that. It's just me."

"Meaning?" Sam had the confused look back and it took alotta effort not to sigh.

"As in its only my touch that grounds him, not just anyone." Steve clarified. Just last year he'd been
explaining this same thing to the Commandos. They'd all taken it in stride, always been the backup
for Steve while Steve held up Bucky. This part, he was good at.

"It...what??" Sam's voice raised a tad in volume but Steve didn't notice. He was looking out the floor
to ceiling windows now, scanning the crowd for the figure in black he'd just seen a moment ago. It
was probably nothing, but.

His eyes caught onto the man again, a black business suit weaving through the crowds. Unless
Bucky turned into a sharp-dressed Filipino overnight, it wasn't him. Steve sighed, gaze scanning
lazily over the crowds now.

"Steve, you said this was your best friend, right?" Sam asked slowly, tone nine levels of cautious.
Steve glanced over at him, furrowing his eyebrows.

"Yeah, since as long as I can remember. Why?"

"And it was nothin' else," Sam clarified. He had this look on his face but Steve must've not read this
part of the 21st century manual because he had no idea what was going on.

"Sorry, I'm not following where you're going with this."

Sam sucked in a breath, looking hesitant enough to make Steve tense warily.

"You guys weren't...you know. More than friends?" He had a look of very cautious sympathy on his
face and it took Steve a moment for the words to register.

When they did he barely kept a lid on it, narrowing his eyes instead of raising his fists. The last time
they'd been called that both he and Bucky had come home with more bruises than they could count.
"Are you implying that Sergeant Barnes is a--a- ... after everything he's been through you accuse him of that? " Steve was aware he was seething, raising his voice, but this wasn't something he could keep calm about. His hands were curled in fists in his lap, mostly so he wouldn't break the table with his grip.

"Woah, woah, hold on. You mean you guys really weren't--"

"No! You really could say that about him? He's my best friend." Steve might as well be lecturing Tony, at the rate he was losing his cool. This was just not a topic he could talk about, ever.

"Okay man, but uh. Riley and I were thick as thieves and his touch wasn't...'healing' or whatever." Sam had both hands out in a placating gesture and Steve managed to at least stop yelling, but he was still glaring.

"Look, that's. That's different. Bucky's all I've ever had." The admission made him deflate, sighing and looking down at his hands again, squeezing them tighter as his voice dropped a few notches. "It's not what it looks like."

There was a pause, a moment of silence in air filled by quiet background chatter and floating German voices.

"But you do know what it looks like, right?" The words were still gentle, in that kind make-you-wanna-listen therapist voice and for some reason that made Steve feel about a hundred times worse.

Now it wasn't just scolding or arguing with Tony, Steve's brain reached that point where he was yelling at Nick Fury for compartmentalizing everything and not knowing Steve's best friend was the fucking Winter Soldier.

"What? What exactly? As if he hasn't been tortured enough over the last seventy years, you're adding this on too? Calling him a--a--"

"Wait. Oh my god. This isn't about some..." Sam waved a hand in the air, vague gesture Steve also couldn't interpret, "...homophobic 1940s thing, is it?"

Steve just looked at Sam, waiting for him to go on. Sam's face basically lit up, all the tension and confusion replaced with the patented eager I-get-to-help expression.

"Dude, you know being gay is totally cool now, right? Well, basically. How the hell did you not pick up on that? You've been off ice for like, half a year, man."

Steve had definitely noticed a few things, but he'd been too busy pining over his dead friend who turned out to be not-dead to really pay attention. So he deflected, picking at the label on his drink until the edges peeled.

"But it wasn't okay back then." Which was true, and avoiding the question. But Sam wouldn't stop pestering until he gave some sorta answer, so Steve tacked on, "And Bucky would never."

They both went quiet after that, slowly straightening out in their seats to watch pedestrians again. Steve was still looking for black, or a baseball cap, or anything that might indicate Bucky. The next Hydra base was a few miles from here, but odds were Buck'd attack at sunset or the middle of the night, so they had time.

Sam cleared his throat and Steve listened back in but didn't turn his head, still watching out the window.
"And Bucky would never," Sam repeated quietly. There was a pretty strong emphasis on the name and Steve's breath caught in his throat as Sam paused, both of them anticipating his next words. "What about you?"

What about Steve. All of the years, an entire lifetime of loving Bucky more than everything. What about him.

"I'll be in the car," Steve told him, standing up with a barstool screech, snatching his untouched lunch bag. Sam watched him quietly as Steve strode across the little diner, shouldering open the door and not looking back once.

The outside air hit his face with a blast of cold but it wasn't enough to wake him up from the dream he was living in. His entire life didn't feel real - suspended in some fairytale. Bucky was alive, they were 70 years into the future, the whole universe had flipped upside down; and Steve's deepest insides were getting exposed to the world in the process.

Maybe it wasn't a dream at all. It felt kinda like a nightmare.

~*~*~

"Alright Wilson, basement clear. I've got six bodies, no survivors, glass punched out on all the computer screens. Over."

"Rogers that," Sam smirked back over the comm and Steve rolled his eyes because he'd never ever heard that joke before. "Level three clear, two bodies, clean headshots through the window."

Steve sighed, going down on one knee next to a mangled scientist. This was their fourth Hydra base so far and for some reason, the scientists in the basement always had the worst deaths. Steve could guess why.

"Where are you, Bucky?" Steve mumbled softly, pressing two fingers to the snapped neck. It was just a precautionary measure, but the moment he touched the skin he froze. The man was still warm.

"He's still here," Steve hissed over the comm. "These bodies are still warm; he's not far. God, Sam, we've gotta find him."

"Shit. Okay Cap, meet me on the ground floor, we've gotta go at him as a unit."

He'd never gone up a flight of stairs faster. The stretch made his abdomen sparkle with pain - his stitches weren't quite as healed as he'd led everyone to believe - but he still made it to the groundfloor of the German factory in a matter of seconds.

The place looked empty, no sign of so much as a shadow. Sam had more flights of stairs than Steve did, but odds were he was sliding down them instead of walking.

The familiar wave of nausea built up in Steve's stomach as he spun around the empty space, looking and searching and trying to keep his knees from giving out. They were so goddamned close Steve's bones were aching with it.

He almost missed the flash of black. The world beyond the window was stuck in that lingering moment before nightfall, roads outside wet and glittering with streetlamps flickering on. The abandoned factory was in one of the endless rows of buildings with gorgeous architecture facades, windows facing over a cobblestone street, alleys signature to Europe cutting around the sides of the building. The black figure emerged from one of the alleys, crossed the street, visible for just one moment before he disappeared again. Steve was running before he could tell his feet to move.
The cold late-October air hit him like a brick but Steve sucked in a heavy breath through freezing wind and ran into the street. It wasn't crowded, but it wasn't empty either, just enough people around that Steve almost lost the figure in black and Sam almost lost sight of Steve.

He shoved past a gaggle of businessmen, apologizing swiftly in German but refusing to stop, cobblestones slick under his feet as he rounded the street corner. The shadow ducked into an alley and Steve's run turned into a sprint. He skidded to a stop in the mouth of the dark alley and had both hands up in placency before the figure-in-black even whipped around to look at him.

"Buck," Steve breathed, heart stopping in his chest. Icy eyes glared at his from over the top of a face mask, an exact duplicate of the one Steve had yanked off him on the bridge two weeks ago. It was startling to cognize Bucky's eyes over the Winter Soldier mask, but no moreso than the gun Bucky had pointed at Steve's chest.

A 1911, Bucky's favorite. The same gun he'd carried back in 1944. It was aimed at Steve and his heart was pounding for an entirely different reason. Did Buck remember?

Sam finally caught up, sliding on glittering cobblestone as he positioned himself behind Steve, tranquilizer gun held steady at the Winter Soldier. There wasn't a lot of skin showing, Sam'd have to shoot Buck's forehead if he wanted a solid hit. It wouldn't be easy; but that was fine, Steve had never wanted to drug him anyways.

"Bucky," Steve tried again, taking a step forward. The hardened eyes over the face mask didn't soften and the gun didn't lower, but it didn't fire either. The dim streetlights of the little German town were casting shadows over everything, but Steve could still make out the expression staring back at him in the dark: blank.

All the vulnerability from the helicarrier was gone, hidden behind the same terrifying, unmoving Winter Soldier persona, the same apathetic mask and wind-blown hair. He still hadn't said a word, just looked at Steve, gun raised.

Steve took a step closer. The gun moved with him, perfecting aim to stay on Steve's chest.

"Rogers, what--" Sam started from the behind him. Steve cut him off with a quick hand-motion and ignored the warning.

"Bucky, do you know who you are?" Steve asked carefully, inching closer. Buck still hadn't fired, perfectly still and aim steady. The last time he'd seen Bucky, there'd been this look in his eyes, this moment where his metal fist stilled in the air and maybe maybe he'd recognized Steve. He'd recognized that promise, that was for sure. Steve wasn't gonna let him forget it. "I'm not here to hurt you. Please, Bucky, let me help you."

Silence. But he hadn't shot Steve either, and Steve was only five feet away now. The closer he got, the more he squashed Sam's opportunity to tranq Bucky, but they had to take the chance that Bucky'd come peacefully. Steve needed Bucky's trust more than anything.

Right now he was looking at Steve with furrowed eyebrows, most recognizable tells covered with black over his nose and mouth. The metal arm was quiet too, for once. Every inch of him was deadly quiet and so still he could be a statue and Steve just needed Bucky to come home.

"Buck, you know me. Us against the world, remember?" Nothing. The expression didn't change in those hardened eyes. Steve inched closer, careful, approaching a caged animal. Except Bucky wasn't an animal, he was just hurting. Alone. "Just come back with me. I promise I won't let them hurt you."
He still hadn't pulled the trigger. On a leap of faith that had Sam hissing behind him, Steve reached forward, hands gentle as they closed around the gun, carefully sliding it from Bucky's grip.

On Bucky's birthday in 1944, the Howling Commandos had scream-sang Bucky awake and he'd pulled his gun on them in surprise. Steve had inched forward, eased the gun from Bucky's grip, and emptied the clip into his palm while the Commandos laughed and cheered at the bewildered look on Bucky's face, the disheveled state of his hair.

It was the same move now that had Bucky's gun in Steve's palms. He'd disarmed the Winter Soldier, Bucky'd let him get close and take the weapon away and maybe they were really gonna be okay--

He only looked down for about four seconds to make sure bullets were dropping outta the clip, but it was long enough. His head shot back up at the metallic sound; just as Bucky's metal arm grabbed onto the fire escape, swung his body upwards, then there was a crash and an explosion of glass as Buck kicked through another window, showering shards over Steve's head.

And then he was gone.

Sam cursed loudly and colorfully while Steve dropped the empty gun and launched himself onto the fire escape, peering through the hole in the window. There wasn't a trace of movement, empty darkness and an open window on the other end, white curtain fluttering in the breeze. Bucky was nowhere to be found.

~*~

"He looked good though, right?" Steve glanced over at Sam from shotgun. His driving privileges had been revoked when he apparently 'drove too slow' because 'looking at every damn citizen you pass' was determined an annoying idea by Sam and every other car on the road. But what if they just drove past Bucky, Steve had to make sure he was paying attention to the pedestrians. Whatever. Sam drove.

"I mean, he was a little thin, but it looked like he was taking care of himself alright. Good enough to knock out Hydra bases before we get there, anyways. It'd be easier to tell if he wasn't in uniform and wearing that stupid mask..."

Steve trailed off, staring out at the crowds because he might not be allowed to drive, but he could still look. Just in case. Sam tapped his thumbs on the car wheel, glancing back and forth between Steve and the road as he contemplated.

* 

He was pretty sure Steve was half outta his mind, but that's why Sam was here, right? He could be giving physical backup if Steve wasn't an idiot and ruined their sole chance to take Barnes down. But yeah, Barnes looked way better than Sam'd been expecting.

Wait. Waitwaitwait hold on. Did that--how...

"Yeah, actually...he did look good," Sam said slowly, testing the waters. Blue eyes flicked over and Sam studied them for a moment before turning his attention back to the slow crawl of traffic. "Maybe a little too good. You, uh."

* 

Sam gave him this look and Steve tapped his foot, mentally encouraging Sam to hurry up whatever he wanted to say so he could go back to checking the crowd for a black suited assassin. The look on
Sam's face changed a little, his patience slipping a bit at something he saw in Steve's eyes. Or maybe around his eyes.

"You wanna explain how your cheekbone is still bruised and your torso is riddled with holes while the Winter Soldier doesn't have a single scratch?" The little inhale between Steve's lips was not intentional, but probably gave Sam the exact answer he was looking for. This was also on the list of conversations he did not wanna have.

Sam just kept going, his tone as close to condescending as his sweet demeanour ever got. "Not even a limp, a bruise, a single mark on him. So. What's up with that?"

"He's an assassin," Steve muttered, not meeting Sam's eyes.

"Yeah, man, he is," Sam agreed. For a very brief moment Steve perked a little with hope that his bullshit excuse just worked. But then, of course, Sam had to open his mouth again. "And you're a super soldier. What the hell happened in that helicarrier fight?"

"I assumed that if you walked away like that - or well, didn't walk away - then the Winter Soldier had to be half dead. At least."

Silence settled in the car and Steve fidgeted. He felt like he was getting lectured by Sarah all over again, or maybe Peggy, or Pepper. People who were very sweet but then suddenly you crossed them and you felt like total shit because you couldn't lie, but you also really didn't wanna have to fess up to the truth.

But, clearly, Sam had already figured out enough of the truth to harp on Steve, so.

"I didn't fight him," Steve said under his breath. Sam heard him anyways.

"You didn't. You didn't what?"

"I couldn't!" Steve deflated in his chair, looking out the window with his arms crossed over his chest and saying defiantly (and a little petulantly), "He's my friend."

"Holy shit. Holy shit." Sam's palm hit the steering wheel and Steve flinched. "You didn't-- have you lost your goddamned mind? Don't answer that. I know the answer to that."

"Look, Sam. I'm not expecting you to get it."

"What, that you risked eminent death because the deadliest assassin in the world is some guy you used to know seventy years ago? What's not to get about that?"

Steve made a hmph sound. Sam pinched the bridge of his nose like Steve gave him the biggest headache ever and he probably did. They rode in silence for a few more minutes, Steve scanning the crowd and Sam at least no longer seething, settling back into the disappointed-and-worried role.

A tight black leather jacket had Steve perking up, following the movement of another figure, before he registered the red hair and green eyes, slumping back in his seat with even more disappointment running through his veins.

"And I'm seriously supposed to believe he's not your ex-boyfriend," Sam finally said, glancing over at Steve again. Steve crossed his arms over his chest again, apologetic look morphing into an instant glare.

"Yes, you are, because that's not something you fucking joke about," Steve hissed, the curse word
making Sam jump a little in surprise, but apparently he wasn't letting it go that quickly.

"Ex fiancé? Ex husband? Ex booty call?" At least the words were lighthearted now, which was better than nothing. But this was still something Steve was 300% not talking about.

"Would you stop that?" Steve snapped, palming his forehead and closing his eyes against a lifetime of memories that were trying to resurface now, of all times. Moments in the dark quiet of a Brooklyn apartment and an army tent, shared smiles and soft promises, fleeting hands holding hands and shoulders and his fingertips on Bucky's jaw, Bucky's big beautiful eyes blinking up at Steve. He couldn't afford to think about that right now, or ever, because he'd always read too much into those moments, hadn't he?

"Bucky would never. And don't-" Steve pointed very seriously at Sam "-try to spin this around on me. This conversation topic is off limits."

Sam just gave him a look, one of those skeptical one-eyebrow-raised looks that had Steve sighing and almost apologizing for blowing up, but this was still about Bucky, dammit, Steve couldn't bend on this. He couldn't let this go anywhere it hadn't been seventy years ago. Not when he was still trying to find Bucky, let alone deal with the aftermath of getting him back.

~*~*~

He watched through his sniper scope from the shadows of a building a block away as Steve Rogers got practically dragged into the gaudy plane with the huge word Stark written down the side.

Mission: Level 6
Target: Howard Stark
Parameters: Appearance of an accident

The details weren't crystal, but he retained the memory of cutting the brake lines on a target named Stark. He didn't know or care if it was any relation to the plane Steve was getting in. Steve was going to back to the United States of America now, likely convinced by the other man that their search was in vain.

He functioned only to take down Hydra. His mission was to avenge the smiling man in the museum exhibit, to rip the hearts outta every Hydra operative he could find and shove it down their throats.

That smiling man used to be him. And fuck if he wasn't going to make those bastards pay for destroying that.

But he'd already ripped apart seven bases, had locations and adequate bombs to send to four others. He wasn't following Steve Rogers to the United States; his next mission was simply in New York. He'd been researching data points from the encrypted SHIELD files that had been released and there was a project he needed to further expand. Access to that file came through an ex-SHIELD agent in New York, so that was why he was on the next flight across the Atlantic Ocean.

They were both in the air back to the USA at the same time and he didn't think about that once because it didn't matter. There was a new mission to plan.

There'd always be more Hydra to shred. He wasn't gonna let them take anything else away from him, even if it was just time. They weren't fucking worth that.

The airport, the street, a baseball cap pulled low over his head and his coat collar up, metal arm concealed in his jacket, walking down crowded sidewalks and blending in underneath the noise the
way only he could. The empty subway line underneath 9th avenue, a backpack with the weapons and materials he'd gathered from the bank vault in Washington.

He wasn't as efficient changing into his armour as he should be. Performance error; unidentified source. The mask fit on last, covering his identity and providing the safety of anonymity. If Steve Rogers had recognized him, others might as well. The persona of the legend he had become must be maintained.

The identity of who he used to be may have been discovered, but the lethal assassin he was now wouldn't disappear in the presence of a past. There were still missions: primary being avenging Bucky Barnes. He'd fucking fight every person in the world that had destroyed that smile, he was pissed.

The moment of vulnerability he'd shown during the helicarrier fight was gone; shoved outta his system with time and an emotional washdown. A single decision remained in result; he wasn't going to kill Captain Rogers. He was too pissed to go slinking back to the broken state those words cause I'm with you 'til... had put him in, but killing the man that said them was a fixed limit he knew he was never going to cross.

It wasn't mercy. It was a decision based on instinct. A tactical choice. He did not show mercy.

Traveling through the shadows and subway lines and back alleys and rooftops from 9th avenue to Stark tower was easy, regardless of the daylight hour. Steve Rogers had likely gone home to the District of Columbia and he was the only person that stood a physical threat. So with Rogers three hours away and outta the picture, the emotions (and lack of) floating through him were perfectly balanced, efficient, and as powerful as ever.

Without handlers to control his every move, he didn't deteriorate to weakness. He'd only ever been weak under Hydra's hand; when free of the leash, he was powerful and lethal and dangerous. Now they were permanently gone, and he had no reason to be anything but the machine they set free on missions.

They'd held him back before, with their controlling grip and brainwashed promises. There was nothing to hold him back now. You may make yourself a demon trying to create an attack dog. If he loses his muzzle for a moment, there is no telling what he will kill. What he will become.

It was his turn to destroy now.

Stark Tower security was impeccable, but he was a professional. Regardless, the personal upper floors ran a tighter system and the mission didn't require anything above the third floor. There was one office he needed to visit and the ventilation shafts in the industrial section of the tower were wide enough to fit his shoulders.

Agent Maria Hill was more than a little surprised when he dropped down into her office, black mask no longer muzzle secure over his mouth and nose, gun aimed straight at her forehead. She lowered one hand slowly in the pretense of putting down her pen, and then she had a gun aimed at Bucky too.

He'd have shot her for that - she'd be dead already - if he didn't actually need information from her. The presence of a gun in her hand wasn't going to change anything.

"Sergeant Barnes," Hill said carefully, gun not waverin an inch as she looked at him, still sitting in her chair but in perfect stance otherwise. The name wasn't one he'd heard directed his way -
Bucky, Buck, the Asset. 'The Winter Soldier' by the man with Steve, which was something he'd heard spoken a few times but had never connected to himself. He knew Hydra told him he'd shaped the century, and from the pieces that were sporadically coming back he knew that much was true. But they'd given him a name and never told him about it. Why would he've cared?

He didn't care now, although something inside tightened slightly at the directed military title. Another possible performance error; error unidentified. Source: 'Sergeant Barnes.'

"Tell me about Project T.A.H.I.T.I." Filtered through the mask but Agent Hill didn't so much as flinch, like she hadn't heard him at all, knew nothing of those words.

Bucky knew for a fact that wasn't true.

"Your project isn't relevant, I need access to a machine used on Agent Coulson," he amended, moving a micromillimeter closer, and Hill did flinch this time. She had a good poker face, but she was scared of him. That should lead to more expedient results.

"Agent Coulson died during the Battle of New York," Hill said cooly, arms still unwavering from the grip on her gun. If they ended up holding guns to each other all day, he was going to outplay her. She didn't have the strength or the training to maintain the position like he did.

"Where is the machine," Bucky commanded in response, not wording it like a question because it wasn't one, it was a direct order. He couldn't care less if Agent Coulson was dead or not, only the location of the machine mattered. The intel on finding its existence alone had been more difficult than any research he could remember doing.

"I don't know what you're talki--" Hill started, interrupted halfway through her protest by the sudden opening slam of the office door.

He spun and had another pistol drawn - the first still pointed at Hill - to aim at the door as well. Two guns, his arms at a 120 degree angle between them, but head turned towards the intruder now. He'd shoot the whole place down right now if he had to, before he let them take him.

But, of course, the person who slammed open the door wasn't even a SHIELD agent.

"Fuck. You again," Bucky cursed, metal fingers whirring as he relaxed his trigger finger just a fraction on the gun pointed at the door.

"Bucky," Steve Rogers gasped - that was clearly the decided way to greet the lethal Winter Soldier nowadays - in the same heartbreaking, breathy tone that had started this entire mess in the first place.

"You interrupt everything," Bucky told him, using the surprise on both of their faces to inch surreptitiously towards the window.

Steve Rogers wasn't supposed to be in New York, let alone in the Stark Tower on the same fucking day Bucky decided to hold one of its top agents at gunpoint. Rogers looked so damn shocked that Bucky was here - or maybe because he'd finally spoken - that he hadn't moved a single inch from where he'd busted through the door.

Hill must have hit some sort of alert button, or maybe Rogers just went barging into places. Based on the stupid reckless way he'd dropped his shield off of a burning helicarrier, he had the feeling Steve Rogers did stupid reckless things as a habit.

"Buck, I can't let you hurt Maria --" Steve started, that same pleading but righteous voice he'd used when he'd said People are gonna die, Buck. Please don't make me do this.
"Agent Maria Hill has vital information regarding the restoration of my memories," he interrupted flatly, waiting a few seconds for the absorption of information. He could pinpoint the moment Rogers identified with that statement because he suddenly turned to Maria Hill, who looked back at him in return.

Perfect execution and timing and now Bucky was three feet further from them both, only five from the window, two from the ventilation grate he'd dropped from. By the time they both looked at him again he was only one more move away from executing the escape route.

"Bucky, look, just put down the guns and we can talk, okay? Agent Hill will help, I won't let anyone hurt you." Rogers had gotten no less heartbroken in his tone, no less frivolous in his promises.

He was not worried about them hurting him. He'd kill them all before they touched a hair on his head. Elimination of masses was a familiarity. He'd blow up the whole damn tower - himself included - before he let them shove him in another box with a window.

Hydra had created an attack dog and now that the leash was gone he wasn't squeezing back into someone else's collar.

"Don't look for me," Bucky warned through the grates on his mask, then he tossed one of his guns in Agent Hill's direction - instinct would kick in, make her catch it to prevent uncontrolled discharge from a loaded gun instead of shooting him - then he was crashing through the glass window and flipping through the air, metal arm first.

~*~*~

"C'mon, man, talk to me," Clint said, blunt enough Steve couldn't ignore him. He sighed into the phone, glad Barton couldn't see the state he was in. As much as Tony had researched, the drinks he'd dropped off in Steve's apartment weren't doing much of anything but giving him a headache.

That didn't stop him from drinking them all.

Stressed fingers ran through blonde hair, tipping back his chair to stare at the ceiling. "I guess I just...I wish I could do more, you know? He's not even in his own head and I'm kinda doubting that cognitive recalibration works on seventy years of torture."

Barton snorted, a hundred miles away. He'd already asked if he could come over with pizza about three times in the four minutes they'd been on the phone. Steve kept declining. So he hadn't slept, didn't mean everyone should obsess over how he was...Steve didn't wanna talk about himself. He wanted to talk about Bucky, really, that was it.

"Do you believe in God?" Steve blurted out and Clint took a breath in surprise.

"...not counting Thor? I don't really think so. Do you?"

Steve bit his lip and nodded before he forgot Clint couldn't see him.

"Yeah, I. I keep--keep praying but. But Clint, I just wish I could make some sort'a...deal, to. To trade places with him. Make it me instead...he never should've gone through that. Not him."

Clint made a soft sound and Steve squeezed his eyes shut, trying to keep the tears out. "You didn't get'a meet him, but anybody who knew Bucky'd agree - he's the best damn person I-- ...had it so hard when we were kids, always lookin' out for me, even worse when we were teens. He only enlisted cause I begged him to."
"It wasn't that he didn't wanna help out, he really did, but he kept saying his job was to look out for me first...he finally came to his senses, thank god, and it was so damn hard to watch him go but. Did y'know he got promoted to Sergeant before he shipped out? Best sharp-shooter in the army. Bet he'd've given you a run for your money."

Steve snorted darkly, remembering that actually, Bucky was probably a hell of a lot better now than he even was then.

"Course, he still is a sharp-shooter. He used to be humble about it, but I was so damn proud of that, of how hard he worked, how incredible of a fighter he was...and Hydra took that, they took him and twisted all the amazing things into--into- this machine. He was perfect long before they took him, and Zola - goddamn him - must've seen that, must've seen the same thing we all did. Took Buck away from me before I even got to Azzano...

"And then, after he'd gone through hell, you know what he did? This is the part of the story that never made the exhibits, that no one tells in history books because nobody knows. Even I wasn't s'posed t'know. But thing is, after Azzano, they told him to go home. All the paperwork filled out to send him off with an honorable discharge on grounds of psychological trauma. So you know what he did? He told 'em forget it, flung himself back into battle with one of the most prestigious squads in the army cause he didn't want me to be alone.

"The hell kind'a person does that? Sergeant James Barnes, from the 107th. It's just...it's not fair. It shouldn't've been him. He's the best goddamned man to walk the earth, better than me. Way better than me. He f-fell...that day, because he picked up my shield, was protecting me, and it should've been me, it should've. I'd give anything for it to be me, now, instead. Anything."

He fell quiet, the darkness settling back in around him. Barton breathed over the line for a little while, letting all of Steve's words sink in. He really didn't know what to say - what could you say to something like that? Steve was hurting, immeasurably, and whatever it's going to be fine's he was getting from everyone else clearly weren't working.

Clint cleared his throat, tapping his fingers on the side of his phone as he prepared his words. He meant every one.

"Well. Steve, I..." Clint closed his eyes, wishing he could just shoot Rogers' pain away. Real life never had enemies that easy. "I'll pray for him, tonight. For you. Just so you know. I- call me whenever you need to, okay? I'm here."

There was a muffled sound over the line like Steve was snuffling back tears, then a choked voice whispered back, "Thanks, Clint."

Clint wiped under his eyes and smiled, wondering when the hell his life had become teary-eyed support crew for the legends of museums. This wasn't usually part'a the assassin gig. He wouldn't trade it, though.

"Course. You take care, Rogers."

"I'll try," Steve promised, which was really the best he could do. It felt like just about the only thing left to do.

~*~*~

Three-and-a-half weeks since last checking in with handlers. Three times the longest outta cryofreeze since 1969. Three-and-a-half-weeks without arm maintenance, nutrient shots, needle-induced sleep.
Without sleep at all. He'd given time to regenerate between missions; moved efficiently, held still, kept at optimum performance to minimize energy loss and physical damage.

Simply didn't have the luxury of closing eyes. Too dangerous. He was vulnerable the moment he broke awareness. Too many revengeful-individuals to risk a moment without perfect control.

It was catching up to him. Fatigue wasn't a concept he'd dealt with in decades. Neither was the responsibility of upkeep - he had no knowledge of the nutritional requirements needed to survive, no ingredient list for the drugs pumped into him in place of foods and water.

This body was failing. Stomach slightly sunken, knocking balance off from perfect equilibrium he'd carried for years. Eyes burned, soles of feet felt like they'd been sliced off, a feeling he knew first-hand.

Internal organs contracted with awful sounds, vision spotty at the edges. This body was failing him and it'd end him too, if he didn't regain control soon. If sleep wasn't located, it'd come involuntarily in the form of unconsciousness and vulnerability would increase substantially enough to insure death.

Unsustainable. The errors were exacerating. Inconsistencies, flaws, noise he hadn't dealt with in decades. Performance errors; source: lack of body regeneration.

There were no more safe houses, bases. He wouldn't bunk up in a Hydra facility if his existence depended on it, which it did in this case. He had nowhere to go, nowhere that was safe. Everyone was looking to seize or shred him.

Everyone except that idiot with the shield who kept insisting Bucky was safe with him. Those words were empty; but there'd been plenty of opportunities to kill him and Steve Rogers was the only one who didn't seem interested in taking them.

Rogers's been willing to die to prove he wouldn't hurt Bucky. All he needed was an hour beneath a roof that wouldn't kill him. Unfortunately, in isolation - the isolation of an attack dog turned on its master and not interested in its country - Rogers' roof was the only roof that qualified.

~*~

Tony'd offered Steve a floor in the tower, but he'd declined. If Bucky ever stopped running away from him, they didn't need the added pressure of dealing with Tony Stark and the high-security minimum-privacy the Avengers Tower offered. So instead he let Sam hole up on his floor in the tower and picked a New York apartment for himself, the closest to Tony's that wasn't surrounded with constant traffic and the bustle that New York seemed notorious for nowadays.

It was light on security, set up a little like his place in DC, except less modern. The left wall of the main room was exposed brick, across from a couch, coffee table, and an armchair with a reading lamp. The bedroom took up the front half of the apartment: just a desk, built in bookshelves, and a bed pushed up against a few windows overlooking the busy New York street.

The u-shaped kitchen was basically part of the living room, only a stretch of counter with bar stools dividing the two rooms. The dining table sat at an angle a few feet from that counter - on the living room side - and was way bigger than he needed; but the whole place felt like it was bigger than he needed. It worked though, so he didn't complain.

The stairs up to his floor were particularly steep today, or maybe his body was just exhausted from running around Manhattan all day looking for Bucky. There'd been no sign of him in a few days, but Steve'd find him somehow.
He just kept running Bucky's words in his head over and over again, trying to figure out how much of Bucky was actually in the Winter Soldier right now. *Fuck, you again.* The cursing was Buck to a tee - then again, he'd gotten a *who the hell is Bucky* from the very beginning. *You interrupt everything.* The sarcastic comment, that was definitely Bucky. But was it just a speech pattern?

His accent was entirely gone - he'd never had a particularly heavy one, but now his words were crisp and clear to the point that it almost didn't sound like Bucky's voice.

Steve was still contemplating that voice - *Don't look for me* - as he unlocked the apartment door, pocketing his keys after he locked it behind him. He didn't instantly dart for the lights like most people in this century, so it wasn't until he tossed his backpack down on the kitchen counter that he even noticed.

Someone was in his apartment. The realization sparked simply instinct: he grabbed his shield and inched to the edge of the cabinets, back pressed against the dark wood as he peeked around the corner. The pale sliver of light from the far window didn't illuminate much, but the glint off that metal hand was unmistakable.

His heart pounding in his chest for all the wrong reasons, Steve stepped around the corner and set his shield back on the ground. Bucky was sitting at his dining table, face and chest hidden by the shadows and metal arm propped on the surface.

"You're here," Steve said, sounding more like a question than a statement. Bucky didn't move, just looked at him in the darkness with unreadable eyes. Steve felt like he was floating; this couldn't be real. But Bucky was still right there. For some reason, Bucky had finally come to him and Steve just couldn't screw it up this time.

"What can I do?" He'd started forward cautiously, hands in clear sight and moving slowly enough that Buck could stop him if he needed. The metal arm made a soft sound, plates adjusting, and it was just about the sweetest sound Steve had ever heard. "Is there anything you ne-"

"Are you going to kill me?" Bucky interrupted. Steve froze, heart breaking a little more in his chest at the distrustful words. Hadn't Steve proven to him again and again that he could *never* kill Bucky?

"No, Buck, never. You're my friend." The words had just as much conviction now as they had the first time he'd said them. Steve held his breath as Bucky looked at him a little longer, then some of the tension in his shoulders deflated a little and he stood.

With his eyes on Steve the entire time, Bucky walked carefully towards the window in the living room, keeping the brick wall at his back. Now that he wasn't in the shadows, Steve could see a vague outline of details. He was favoring his left leg and his right arm was tucked carefully against his chest. His cheeks were more sunken than Steve remembered, his eyes looked downright tired, and - thank god - since his mask was finally off, the stubble on his jaw made him look older, the draw of his mouth sadder.

He stopped in the corner of the room, sinking gracefully to the floor and curling on his side with his back pressed to the wall, head pillowed on his right arm, metal one bent protectively over his chest. Steve just stood there, stupefied, as Bucky's eyes closed and long pieces of hair draped over his face.

Buck should've looked young and innocent, but there was something about the position that couldn't help but allude danger, power. It still wasn't hard to see the Bucky he'd slept beside in tents, to mentally push the long hair aside and see that pouty, exotic mouth smirking up at him.

The desire to say something was overwhelming, but Steve kept his mouth shut and his feet silent as
he slunk to the couch, watching the intruder's resting body with teary eyes. Bucky'd come to him for a place to sleep, which felt colossal. But the tears were for sorrow too: how damaged did Buck have to be to collapse unguarded in the home of someone he could (possibly) only remember meeting four times?

He didn't have to debate staying awake all night, this was the most important vigil Steve'd ever take. Buck slept the whole night through, perfectly silent and still terrifying in his weak, unconscious state. The only moment he let Bucky outta his sight all night was for the few minutes it took him to find a pencil and paper. He drew by moonlight, selfish and probably half outta his mind, but this may be the last time he ever got to see his best friend and he couldn't imagine not having something tangible to hold on to.

Around seven in the morning, Steve's legs groaned and his eyes burned a little as he rubbed them and got up quietly from the couch, still watching the heap of black from the kitchen counter as he set a kettle on the stove and cracked eggs into a pan. His stove was thankfully quiet, and Bucky must have been more exhausted than Steve had given him credit for because he still hadn't budged since the moment he laid down.

The light of dawn filtered into the apartment, finally bright enough to count what physical injuries might have lead Bucky to his door. His right arm looked entirely off, like the angle at the elbow was wrong. The clothes that had once been tight and solid over his muscular frame were loose around his abdomen and waist. Steve's fists clenched automatically at the idea of Bucky losing weight, failing to take care of himself. But at least he was here now; Steve could take care of him, if Bucky let him.

Which was easier said than done.

It was around nine in the morning when Bucky suddenly shot up, scrambling to his feet with wide eyes and a knife in his hand, chest heaving with confusion. Steve was already there, both hands up, keeping his distance from across the room as he carefully calmed Bucky back down.

"You're safe. We're in my apartment in New York, you've been asleep for about eleven hours, I made you food - you haven't been eating well - there's coffee or tea, and I think you set your broken arm wrong." Steve took a deep breath after his mini speech and the air between them settled into a stalemate; both of them staring at each other from across the living room with arms raised and hair disheveled.

Bucky caved first. The metal arm lowered and the human one slipped the knife back into a pocket. Steve deflated a little and grabbed the plate of eggs and toast off the kitchen counter, sliding it onto the table he'd found Bucky at last night. The icy eyes were still looking at Steve like he was crazy. But when Steve slid a mug of tea across the table too, Buck unfroze completely, walking over to the table like he owned the whole damn apartment.

Confident hands snagged the mug off the table then Bucky's hardened gaze was scanning over Steve's apartment as he lifted the drink to his lips.

*

He probably should say some form of a thank you. His plan to recalibrate his body had worked, Steve Rogers hadn't killed him - no one had killed him - and the rest that he needed was obtained.

Although he had saved Steve's life from drowning in the Potomac River; so they were even, now.

With another quick glance at Rogers (Bucky avoided looking at him as much as possible, something shifted inside him every time he did and he wasn't comfortable with that), he sat the mug back down
on the table and contemplated door versus window. Knowing Captain Rogers' security level in SHIELD, his apartment was surely being watched. Window it was.

"Bucky?" Steve called out behind him but he couldn't afford to listen, he just flicked the window up with his metal arm and launched over the edge into the sharp light of the outside world.

Last night had been the riskiest thing he'd done that he could remember. There had been no way to know for sure that he'd be safe under Steve Rogers's watch...except for that somewhere deep inside him, his body was telling him that with Steve Rogers was the only place he really should be.

~*~*~

The next four days, Steve was going outta his mind. He'd gotten plenty of lectures from Sam and Tony about how damn stupid he was to let a deadly assassin sleep in his apartment, lectures from Pepper and Bruce about how it wasn't safe or fair to either of them to try to go this alone, and a very lengthy talk with Maria Hill about why the hell Bucky was under the impression that she had a way to restore his memories.

Maria was an expert about dancing around answers. She couldn't guarantee that, she said. It was all rumor, Barnes must have misread information somewhere, he must be jumping to conclusions. Steve had strategized with Buck in the war, there was nothing about him that misread anything anywhere. But he got virtually nowhere with her, besides the warning that she wouldn't hesitate to shoot the next time he came barging into her office.

He went everywhere he could think Bucky'd go. There wasn't a single peep of him, not even a Hydra base explosion on the radio or anything.

Steve could barely sleep, just constantly pacing, jumping at shadows, always searching and watching and waiting and praying that Bucky'd come find him again. There were two nights he woke up around three a.m. and called out Bucky's name in the darkness, so sure that the shadow in the corner had to be him. It never was.

The ghost was haunting him again, except now he was real and he kept disappearing and disappearing. He was always just outta reach and Steve was always dreaming that those perfectly clear hands were still here, holding him.

On the fifth day, a local news channel reported that a bank in upper New York had been blown to smithereens and the 'destruction of this historical landmark' would 'forever be mourned by its citizens.' Steve was not mourning anything, instead he grabbed his cell and dialed up Tony, gave him the report to calculate into the pattern they were trying to track of Bucky's hits.

The next night, Steve opened the door of his apartment to a bloody mess in his kitchen. He dropped his keys in surprise and Bucky spun around, sewing needle between his teeth and shirt torn across his left side.

Steve's heart stopped beating for a moment and his entire world narrowed down to the ghost in the flesh. Bucky was here. He had to get a grip on himself.

"Are you okay?" He glanced around the kitchen, the blood-smeared counter and red drops on the tiles. He tried to keep the horror from his expression as eyes widened, taking in the half-sewn gash across Bucky's hip. Buck's human hand pushed the hair outta his face - the same move he used to do to smooth out his pomade - as he looked down at his side.

"Losing efficiency," Bucky muttered, bunching his shirt up a little higher to slide the needle into torn
skin and sew together the next stitch. Steve blinked a few times - he didn't really know what to say to
that - before he decided fuck it and stepped into the kitchen, walking in a mimic of the powerful
confidence Bucky held now.

Bucky's head whipped up to look at him and Steve held out his hand for the needle. "Let me help.
It'll go faster." The world was spinning and Bucky had come to him for help again, but Steve had to
get it right this time, he had to find a way to make Bucky stay.

After another moment or two of calculating glares, Buck relented and handed over the needle and
string. Steve dropped to his knees, one hand pushing up Bucky's shirt higher so he could properly
see the cut. The deepness of it was shocking enough that Steve leaned back, looking up to catch
Bucky's eyes. "What did you do?"

"Blew up a Hydra site. They were expecting me," he answered simply, like that somehow explained
the gouge in his side. Steve shook his head and started threading the needle, holding his breath to
keep his hands from shaking. Bucky was here. Bucky was here.

"Well, it's pretty bad." He kept his eyes directly on the wound, forcing himself not to look up or
change the inflection of his voice on the next words. "You should get some sleep while it heals."

Silence responded, heavy enough that Steve eventually forced himself to look back up. Bucky was
looking down at him with an expression Steve used to know so well - the fire in his gaze hadn't
faded, even if the light behind his eyes was gone now. It was almost like they were back in the war
again, fretting over Bucky's injuries while Bucky gave him glares he only half meant, hating to be
babied but regretfully appreciative of Steve's presence.

He wanted to make some lame comment about how this was not how Bucky had promised they'd be
spending their next November, but the joke would fall flat without the memory to accompany it.

"...what's this thing with November? Last November, captured. This November, bullet in the leg.
You keep near dyin' on me and I'm not sure I can take much more. What's the plan for next year's
November, just so I can plan ahead emotionally?"

"How bout next November we have a Commandos Thanksgiving at our place in Brooklyn?" Bucky
winced as he shifted a little, but still managed a shadow of his old smile up at Steve. Steve had to bite
his lip to keep the tears from welling up in his eyes...

Well they certainly weren't having a Commandos Thanksgiving after all. It was only a year ago for
Steve, but how far away was it for Bucky? Did Bucky even have that conversation anymore? Did he
have any of their conversations? Did he even know who Steve was?

"Do you...do you remember anything?" Steve whispered, hating how scared his voice sounded in
the dark echo of the kitchen. Bucky's gaze quickly cut away, the same uncomfortable movement he
always made under scrutiny.

"I went to the Smithsonian," Bucky answered instead, left hand curling up a bit with a soft whirr. "I
know who you are."

Steve nodded, unconsciously running a thumb over the skin underneath the gash on Bucky's hip.
Bucky either didn't notice or didn't care. He just kept looking away. It wasn't exactly the answer
Steve was looking for, but if Bucky needed space then Steve wasn't going to push. Not about that,
not yet.

"Can I get you anything to eat? Have you been eating?" He started back up on the last few stitches,
trying to memorize every single breath expanding the body under his hands.

"I don't have a positive reaction to most foods." Bucky's voice sounded like it was reporting something to a commanding officer, leaving Steve to guess what the hell that might mean. Hydra had kept him on fluids, according to the ridiculously brief file Natasha had given him. Which meant he'd probably hurled up anything he tried to eat - Steve did the very best he could to block out the mental image of Bucky puking in some bathroom somewhere, all alone and feeling betrayed by his own body.

"I could cut up some apples, if you want?" Steve bit the string and tied off the final knot on Bucky's stitches, regretfully checking their dexterity with a slight tug on the skin below it. Bucky didn't even flinch at the pain, which was worse than if he'd punched Steve for it.

When he straightened back up, Bucky still hadn't answered, just kept his posture guarded and in constant attack-mode as he leveled Steve with his gaze. "Apples it is, then," Steve said, stepping back to grab a plate from the cabinet.

Bucky watched him from his post in the kitchen with unblinking eyes, arms crossed over his chest and hair falling over his forehead in disarray.

He took four of the apple slices when Steve slid the plate over to him and Steve counted that as a win. He slept sitting up this time, in the same corner with his head tipped back against the brick wall. Steve stayed up all night again, just watching Bucky sleep and running a thousand things through his head of what the hell to say when the sun broke into dawn.

It ended up not mattering what he planned; Bucky left out the window before Steve could open his mouth.

~*~*~

"How're you holdin' up man?" Sam asked, pushing a cup of coffee into Steve's free hand. Steve lifted his head from where it'd been propped on his other hand, the fingers unthreading from his hair leaving it disheveled. Losing efficiency, he considered saying. Instead he stared at his blond reflection in the dark coffeecup and pictured the shadow behind him taking shape into a certain Brooklyn sniper.

"I'm doin' fine," he managed, lifting the bitter drink to his lips. Sam perched on the edge of the dinner table, crossing his arms over his chest and raising his eyebrows in that yeah, sure, okay expression that said Steve had convinced him zero.

"You know, I can stay, sleep on the marshmallow bed. Just so you have somebody here the next time he comes." Sam had that same kind tone in his voice but Steve just sighed, scooting his chair back from the table. Bucky showing up wasn't killing Steve, it was the morning after when he left that was destroying him.

"Thanks, but I think he'd just stay out until you left." The coffee tasted about nine times too sweet to be coffee and honestly, he missed the disgusting dirt-flecked joe the Commandos used to gamble over.

Steve stood and slide his coffee across the counter so he could lean against the edge and stare off at the window, waiting and wishing for Bucky to appear, even though he'd never come in daytime and certainly never when Sam was visiting.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" Sam offered quietly. There was so much worry in his face that Steve
wanted to pick himself outta the rut if that'd make Sam feel better. No one else deserved to carry the weight of Steve's sorrow. But he hurt too much to not say something.

"Talk about what?" he sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. "About how my best friend spent seventy years getting tortured and now only shows up at my door when he's bleeding or about to pass out from exhaustion?"

Felt like he was in his old body again, waiting anxiously in the apartment for Buck to get home from his night out drinking, worried he'd pissed off someone's boyfriend again, maybe ran into one of the bullies Steve had taken on last week again, except with alcohol dulling his sharp fighting skills this time.

Only now he had a lot worse to worry about than bullies. Bucky was in the wind without his own mind, hunted by the government and Hydra and too terrified or stubborn to turn to Steve for help.

"Steve, man, you know none of that's your fault, right?" Sam interrupted his thoughts and Steve looked down, scuffing the toe of his boot on the wood floor.

"Yeah, I know," he said absentmindedly. The edge of his boot left a black smudge on the wood panel and Steve glared at it.

"None of it's your fault," Sam said again and Steve sighed, leaving the floor alone and lifting his head back up.

"I know." He'd been telling himself that over and over since the train fall, since Peggy had forced those words into his brain. It's wasn't your fault. Did you read the report? Yes. Then you know that's not true. But she hadn't let him wallow in his guilt, she'd held his gaze in that decayed bar and told him he had to respect Bucky.

Allow him the dignity of his choice. Steve had always wondered what the power behind that statement was. She'd said it with so much depth, like she'd known something about Bucky's choice that Steve didn't.

But this time, it hadn't been Bucky's choice. It hadn't been his choice at all to be turned into the Winter Soldier.

"It wasn't your fault." Steve looked over at Sam that time, a little curious because Sam'd said that already, three times now, and Steve had already agreed with him twice.

"I know," he replied for the third time, letting his mouth turn up a little tightly at both corners, letting Sam see that he was okay, he knew it wasn't his fault. Maybe the soft smile had been a bad idea, because suddenly Sam got up from the table, taking a few steps closer to Steve.

"It wasn't. Your fault," Sam articulated slowly, and this time Steve couldn't keep the confusion out of his features. The look on Sam's face was so serious, the most serious Steve had ever seen him, like the words he was saying were the most important words in the world.

"I know," Steve shrugged, feigning indifference. Sam could be all intense and everything right now but Steve didn't wanna get dragged down that road. He didn't have the ability to deal with this right now. He had promised he'd always save Bucky from that table and the one time it counted, he hadn't.

Sam stepped up directly in front of him, boxing Steve into the counter and Steve straightened a little, arms still crossed over his chest. "It wasn't your fault."
"I know." The words came out a little clipped this time; he was getting impatient. Steve didn't wanna play whatever stupid game Sam was getting at. Sam was supposed to be a support team, not rile everything up and make it worse.

"It wasn't your fault," Sam repeated, he hadn't even looked for Bucky, stepping closer and that was it, Steve couldn't keep dealing with that patient, serious look on Sam's face.

"Would you stop it? I know." He was brinking on the edge of his temper and Steve didn't wanna lose it, not on Sam who had done nothing but been helpful. Except right now, when he was doing...this.

But he did know. He knew. Goddammit, he knew. Because it was him that didn't try harder to save Bucky, it was him that didn't notice all the signs, it was him who condemned Bucky to this.

It was him- Steve Rogers. (It was actually kinda funny, because he was Captain America, who was meant to be this incredible, brave person who fought for freedom and justice. And Steve- well, he was just a coward who had more blood on his hands than he'd ever be able to deal with.)

"No, you don't get it Steve. It's not your fault." Bucky had been tortured for seventy years because Steve had never fucking asked what happened in that torture chamber. Because he'd never noticed Bucky had been enhanced. Because he'd been too damn wrapped up in himself and the stupid fucking mission to jump in after Bucky when he fell from the train.

"Stop fucking with me, man," Steve warned, his arms uncrossing so he could curl his hands around the edge of the counter, ground himself, try not to be swallowed up by the tone of Sam's voice, the promise he was making, the way he was swearing to Steve -

"It's not your fault," Sam repeated again, bold as brass.

Okay, Steve was getting legitimately angry now. Angry at Sam for whatever the fuck he was doing, angry at his own stupid body that was betraying him like always, letting tears well up in the corner of his eyes. He looked Sam straight in the eye, words as low and commanding as he could make them.

"Not you, Sam," his voice broke slightly over the you and another wave of rage boiled up in his veins. Sam was supposed to be the caring one, the one who made everything easier. Not the one who fucked up Steve's insides. "Don't you do this to me."

Sam took that final step closer, his hand landing heavy on Steve's shoulder, holding his gaze with those overwhelmingly serious eyes. Steve was hanging on the edge of a cliff, waiting for the wind to tip him either way, when Sam's voice dropped to a whisper and the words echoed straight into Steve's soul.

"It's not your fault."

And the dam broke. All of the internal anger and guilt and sorrow and loss, everything that he'd bottled up since the bridge, since they woke him from ice, since the goddamned train just boiled up and over and the resolve Steve had been scrambling with just crushed and he had only meant to push him but his temper forgot he wasn't little anymore and Steve shoved Sam, hard, making him stumble over his feet and crash into the table.

"Don't you dare say it's not my fault," Steve snarled, towering over the table, high-strung and trembling. "Don't fucking dare. You don't fucking know. What, am I just supposed to get away with it because I'm- I'm Captain America and it was for the greater good or whatever the hell excuse I'm supposed to have? Because Bucky was my best friend. He was my responsibility and I let him die."

Steve spun around, hands landing back on the counter again as he tried to catch his breath - calm
down, Stevie, it's okay, just breathe with me - except he wasn't having a fucking asthma attack because he was supposed to be fucking fine and Bucky wasn't here to help him because STEVE HAD LET HIM DIE.

The counter crushed underneath his hands, crumbling into dust and sharp shards that instantly sliced open his palms and shot pain signals into Steve's brain, making the whole room tip and leer around him because it was all too much, it was all too fucking much.

He spun back around to Sam, bloody hands clenched in fists at his sides as his brain short-circuited and his body wasn't just betraying him, it wasn't even his anymore, he was just watching from some distant part of his brain as he exploded.

"No, I didn't even let him die, I gave him worse than that, I got him tortured for seventy years and turned into a fucking war machine all because I was so fucking blind and weak and I failed him, I failed him. I loved him and I didn't even ask about the torture and made him go on a fucking suicide mission and I let him slip through my fingers and I couldn't catch his hand in time and you wanna stand here and tell me it wasn't my fault?!!"

He couldn't remember spinning back around again, but then his fist was lodged through the drywall and pieces of paint and dust were swirling through the air and he was coughing and his knuckles were broken, bleeding skin but he couldn't feel it, he couldn't feel any of it, couldn't feel anything but the broken heart in his chest that was making it so hard to breathe he was seeing black spots at the edges of his vision.

Steve shook his hand out, little drops of red flying, but he couldn't feel it, couldn't feel anything, he was just shaking and shaking and he felt like clutching his head and screaming but instead he just quivered like an arrow on a bow, drawn and waiting but exploding and flying at the same time and the room still wasn't standing up straight.

"I killed him. I killed him. I killed him. I killed him and I destroyed him and IT'S MY FAULT. I KILLED THE MAN I LOVED AND I BROUGHT BACK A GHOST!! I RUINED THE ONLY GOOD THING I HAVE EVER HAD IN MY LIFE AND HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO LIVE WITH THAT?!?!!"

His voice was raw, copper on his tongue, his ears were ringing, his chest was heaving with rushed, heavy breaths, and he could feel every pulse of his veins and every beat of his broken, shattered, crumbling heart singing with the adrenaline.

In the disconnect, he didn't hear Sam get up until he was standing in front of Steve again, both hands gently taking Steve's clenched fists, holding all four together in front of them as Steve looked up at him with wild eyes, still shaking, still bleeding, about to explode and punch the wall - or worse - all over again.

Then dark brown eyes caught on his and Sam whispered, softly,

"It's not your fault."

Steve collapsed then, sinking down to the ground with a broken cry. Sam's arms wrapped over Steve's shoulders and Steve curled up as little as he could, tears overflowing and sobs wracking his body as Sam rocked him back and forth over the dusty, bloody tile, murmuring the same occasional It's not your fault.

He hid his face in his arms, cried and shook and cried and cried and this was like watching Bucky fall all over again, except the technicolor memory came in black and white now, another
Bucky, on the bridge, looking at him with wide eyes, lifting a gun to Steve in fear as Steve just stared and stared and Bucky was *alive*, he was alive now,


His Bucky, the same Bucky, had been transported here to the twenty-first century with him. Maybe there really was nothing he could have done. Maybe the only thing left to do was fix it. Steve couldn't carry this guilt, not if he wanted to bring Bucky home.

"I can't-" Steve choked out, fingers closing tightly over one of the arms wrapped around his shoulders. He couldn't lift his head yet, not when there were still tears rushing down his cheeks, but he'd just pushed Sam into a table and he'd yelled and punched things and he was *so so messed up* and so not okay and, "I'm so sorry," he whispered shakily. "I'm so sorry. Sam, I'm so-"

"It's okay," Sam promised, still rocking them over the floor. "It's okay. We'll get him back, Steve. I promise. You'll get him back."

You'll get him back. It was Steve's turn now: his turn to come around the corner with his fists raised, his turn to shout *pick on someone your own size*.

Going back all the way to the beginning, coming around full circle - it was Steve's turn to save James Buchanan Barnes.

Chapter End Notes

The "it's not your fault" scene was inspired by both my lovely Irish friend and the movie *Good Will Hunting*, which is probably one of the best cinematic / therapeutic scenes ever and can be found here xx WARNING: it is a very intense scene featuring depictions of graphic violence and adult language

Anyways, we have just dabbled into the beginning of our journey and I have some huge things planned, I hope you enjoy! Thank you all so much for reading.
The night air was freezing, as always, but he wasn't bloody, broken, or excessively exhausted. Tired, but not critically. He couldn't place why he was standing underneath Rogers' window, just that he'd been weaving through crowds until he suddenly appeared here, like his boots had chosen the path instead of his mind.

Careless. Inefficient. *Performance error*. If his cognitive processes were dysfunctional enough to drive him here subconsciously, how many potential threats had he avoided by luck? If his body was falling into automatic patterns, how long before he was dead or captured?
He didn't go inside, that night. Or the next. Or next. It was dangerous that he'd gone at all. Wouldn't allow Steve Rogers to direct his footsteps.

Instead he drifted to the Potomac, found himself kneeling in sand beside the river, eyes shut, other senses heightened. It was foolish to tell himself for any reason but the memory of saving Steve's life here. He told himself anyways.

Jogging memories, digging deeper into a locked mind, and locating Agent Hill's machine were the only priorities; each obviously behind staying alive. And taking out more Hydra when convenient.

But something was burning in his chest. And it wouldn't leave him be. For a week, everytime he found himself outside Steve Rogers' window, he kept running back to the Potomac. He'd been fine, better than fine. He'd been perfect. Then this pain settled inside and no matter what he did, it wasn't going away.

It was useless to keep going to the river. But there was something about slipping under the surface of cold waves, slipping to sweet silence. In the water, he could scrub clean. In the water, he could purge and look up at the sky through golden ripples and ask questions he knew the sky couldn't answer.

Eight days since the last time he'd seen Steve Rogers; the burning in his chest hadn't lessened any. Something could be medically wrong with him, but he couldn't access accurate medication. He couldn't go anywhere; nowhere was safe.

Maybe he needed sleep. He probably needed sleep.

It'd be a confounding error to not enter the window this time. If he avoided Rogers any longer, clearly, it was about more. Which it wasn't. This was about sleep and safety. This was the last time, he told himself.

Bucky went through the window.

Admittedly, it was late. He shouldn't've been surprised Steve Rogers was asleep, although the location of where he slept was more surprising. He'd expected Rogers to be in the bed, as everyone else in the century slept. But upon slipping into the bedroom, he nearly tripped over Steve. On the floor.

It was only his acute sense of awareness that saved him from tumbling to the ground. Instead he froze, carefully stepped over Steve Rogers' sleeping body, and gravitated into the corner of the room where shadows would hide him, incase Steve woke.

The bed was tightly made with hospital corners, as though Rogers'd never bothered to sleep in it. Bucky curled deeper into the corner and wondered why.

The light from the window illuminated the features on Steve's face from this angle, cutting white strips of moonlight and New York streetlights across his jaw and cheekbones. The bruising around Steve's cheek was gone, near-translucent pearly skin. His blue eyes were closed, casting shadows from long eyelashes Bucky'd never noticed before.

He wondered what Steve'd been like, when he was tiny, like the exhibit showed. If his eyelashes'd been that long. If the laughing Bucky Barnes from the museum noticed Steve Rogers' eyelashes, when he was big or small.

As always, after being outta cryofreeze too long, some basic memories were coming back. The most recent missions, the very beginning. A newspaper with a blurry face he couldn't remember anymore. He remembered the bridge now, the first time Steve Rogers'd seen his face and asked Bucky?
He remembered after. He remembered remembering, seeing Steve reach out as he fell, waking with a metal hand and being pissed instead of confused. He remembered telling Pierce but I knew him.

The only other pieces he had were from training; learning, developing, but something holding him back from perfect - Призрак, a ghost. Haunted, but what by?

Other than that, not much'd come back. Only information on Steve Rogers: fight on the bridge, a flash of Steve shouting his name as he fell high and fast and cold.

Memories and ghosts.

He'd come here to sleep, really, he had. But it made him uneasy to fall asleep without Steve aware of his presence. He should wake Rogers, then.

For some reason, he didn't move from his corner. He kept his arms crossed over his chest, fit snugly in full uniform, mask and all.

It was instinct telling him Steve Rogers didn't get much sleep. Something deep inside him that shouted let Steve sleep at all costs - not so deep as those engraved words Steve said on the helicarrier, but deep enough to be from a long time ago. So he'd wait until Steve woke on his own before crashing. It was only fair, that he look over Steve's resting form, Rogers'd already done that for him twice.

His eyes were wandering over titles on wall-bookshelves - categorizing Steve's literature choices - when the silence of the room suddenly shattered.

"Bucky," Steve gasped, shooting upright like a firework, chest heaving, sucking in air. Instantly frozen in the shadows of the corner, knife already in hand by the time he realized Steve wasn't looking in his direction.

Steve hadn't seen him. But he'd just said--

Bucky watched curiously from the corner of the room as Steve's heavy breathing settled down, both hands sliding exasperatedly into sleep-messy blonde hair. He was hunched over now, curled in a ball as he mumbled too quiet to catch.

Why had Steve Rogers awoken with a shout of his name? Didn't know Bucky was here, what was the purpose of calling out...it might not've been intentional?

He had memories of nightmares, from long ago, from before he'd adjusted to drug-induced sleep. He didn't know the nightmares themselves, just that images used to play behind his eyes when he closed them. He didn't have that anymore, but what if Steve did? Did he dream of Bucky?

He could say nothing. Steve would never know he'd been here. He could come back tomorrow night. Or never. He could attempt creating a safe place of his own to sleep, although that sounded frankly impossible. Or...he could alert Steve to his presence.

He didn't have words of his own for this situation, mimicked Steve's once-previous instead.

"Are you okay?" Bucky asked from the shadows, taking a single step forward. Steve startled, scrambling backwards a foot. His hair was wild, eyes wide, but the moment he recognized Bucky the expression of shock didn't widen in fear like he'd expected. Fear: common response.

Instead Steve...deflated, letting out a puff of air and turning up a soft corner of his mouth. Voice rough with disuse, soft words to accompany the soft smile. "Hey, Buck. You startled me."
Bucky had no idea how to respond to that reaction. Steve beckoned at him with a hand, drawing him
another foot outta the corner. His question'd never been answered, but he wasn't going to repeat
himself. Instead he just looked at Steve, decidedly appreciative of the decision to keep the mask on.

"Have you been in here long?" Steve asked, but more conversational than accusatory. He watched as
Steve picked up a blanket from where it'd been thrown off in shock, as he stood and placed the
blanket and a strangely-shaped pillow on the tidy bed.

"Approximately thirty minutes," he replied eventually, following Steve outta the bedroom to keep
visuals.

"Can I make you tea?" This time Steve's question was almost hopeful and Bucky gave him a funny
look that might not've translated over the facemask. But he sat down at the wooden dinner table,
noticing Steve's habit to keep lights off and finding himself appreciative of that too.

His silence was taken for yes and Steve set up a kettle in the kitchen, humming softly under his
breath. For lack of anything better to do, Bucky listened. Surprised to find he recognized the song.
The words didn't magically appear in his head, but he could hear that same melody in harmonica
pitches, unintelligible voices he didn't recognize.

"What is that?" finally asked; purely for informational purposes. Music wasn't important for the past
seventy years; useless noise. But for some reason the humming was unobtrusive enough to drift
almost-pleasantly.

Steve spun on him with an unreadable expression and an edge of hope in his voice. "Do you
recognize it?"

He'd shrug, if it weren't waste of energy. Instead he kept looking at Steve's eyes, deciphering the
code beneath them as he responded carefully, words articulated slowly. "It's familiar."

"Hmm," Steve turned to cabinets and pulled out two mugs, setting them on the counter and speaking
with his back to Bucky, maybe to give him time to react without Steve's judgement. "I sang it to you,
one, back in the war. We were all on a boat...it was for your birthday, actually."

He didn't know he had a birthday. Obviously there was a date he'd been born, but he never
considered that celebrations of society were once something that applied to him. To the same
laughing, black'n'white him.

The part of his brain that collected data was requesting to ask the date of said birthday, but what was
the prevalence? Numbers wouldn't change scattered pieces of memories, but further explanation
might.

"We?" Bucky asked, reaching his right hand for the mug Steve slid to him, warmth radiating through
his palm, threatening to scald skin if he held long enough. The skin would repair, and the warmth
was welcoming, so a burn would be allowed.

"Well, that song was Monty and I, but it was all the Howling Commandos on the boat. Do you--"

"No," Bucky interrupted, because he'd seen in the museum but their faces were no more familiar
than his own, short hair and cocky smile. Steve's light expression dampened but he nodded,
distractedly reaching for his mug as he sat. The moment his hand slid underneath the handle, Steve
hissed, flinching away. Bucky raised his eyebrows over the top of his mask (realizing he wouldn't be
able to drink until removed; debating not drinking).

"How are you not burning your hand?" The words were incredulous, possibly rhetoric, but Bucky
didn't respond because obviously, if the tea was hot enough to burn Steve, then it was burning him too.

Either his eyes gave away more than he thought or Steve was more attentive than he appeared, because he suddenly reached out and touched Bucky's mug, drawing back with the same swift movement.

"Jesus, Buck, you're gonna burn yourself." Steve reached over and pried Bucky's right hand away from the mug, flipping his palm over in the dim light; enhanced vision wasn't necessary to see the obvious red marks. Then he was glaring at Bucky, holding onto his wrist and lifting Bucky's arm in the air - as though Bucky hadn't tried to kill him with it at least four times since they'd met. "What were you thinking?"

Actually, he'd been thinking that Steve wasn't reckless enough to invite lethal assassins for tea and then grab them and scold them without second thought to possible consequences. If it were anyone else, he'd've killed them on principle alone. Steve would already be dead - again - if it weren't for... whatever reason Steve was an exception.

Instead he yanked his arm back, glaring at Steve's offended expression and deciding that, screw his tea, he wasn't taking the damn mask off. "My skin has a rapid rate of healing," he hissed, wrapping his palm right back around the warmth of the mug.

And - because he must have an actual death wish - Steve Rogers yanked his hand back out.

"I'm not letting you burn your hands up for me again," Steve countered. First of all, this had nothing to do with Steve, second of all, he didn't have to ask Steve permission, and third of all -

"Again?" A demand instead of a question and finally, finally, Steve paled a little. It wasn't fear, but at least now he might be thinking straight enough to realize Bucky was dangerous enough to kill him. Even if he wasn't going to.

"Again," Steve confirmed quietly, a puff of air, looking away, placing Bucky's hand on the table. Just so they didn't have to fight, Bucky didn't bother curling his hand around the mug a third time.

Neither of them said anything again in the time it took Steve to finish his tea and Bucky to run a visual trace for potential bugs in the living room and kitchen. The apartment looked clean from here, but it wouldn't change anything if it wasn't. He needed a place to stay; it wasn't as though the people Steve worked for were gonna cross Steve just to get to him.

Well, they might, but Bucky was still better. He was better than all of them. When he was at optimum performance, anyways. Which he was not currently, considering the edges of exhaustion in his bones.

"You can use the couch, if you want," Steve offered as Bucky stood. He couldn't recall the last time he'd slept on something cushioned, but it might be worth the experiment to determine maximum resting ideals. Since drug-induced sleep was no longer feasible, it was logical to test all available options.

So he sat - sunk - down on the couch cushions, like falling, straight to the floor. The feeling might fade; but falling wasn't an unfamiliar feeling, anyways.

"Do you sleep here?" Bucky asked, running his left hand over the material to determine the likelihood of snagging his arm. Steve shrugged, walking slowly around the couch to sit in the armchair perpendicular, tucking his feet up off the floor as he watched Bucky.
"Sometimes. You're welcome to it whenever you want." There was something hidden underneath that statement but his brain didn't spare the energy to decipher it. Instead he laid down; left arm under his head so he could keep facing the armchair. He was aware Steve watched him while he slept, the last two times he was here. Considering that he'd almost taken Steve's life on multiple occasions, he delved it was fair to be treated with caution.

Because that could be the only reason Steve watched him all the time.

Bucky closed his eyes before Steve could say anything further, easing his muscle tension to relax into a sleepable form. Staying in the mask made breathing difficult, but he didn't like the idea of Steve being able to read whatever he wanted on Bucky's face while he was unconscious.

In the spark of clarity before unconsciousness it occurred; for all the questions he was asking, Steve Rogers probably had the answers. Not just his birthday, but other pieces he was missing; maybe almost all the pieces he was missing. The museum said they knew each other for most their lives.

He'd been searching his own mind, the internet, the world, but he could just...ask. Or stay for longer, because Rogers seemed to bring up the past unprompted.

Obtaining answers was as easy as choosing to stay.

When Bucky woke the next morning, he left before Steve could blink open his eyes from where he'd fallen asleep in the armchair. He didn't need Steve. Steve Rogers knew more about him than he did, and he wasn't alright with that.

~*~*~

"Wow, well would you look at that. Mr. Captain America has time for one of his old runnin' buddies." Sam's grin was wide enough to span his entire face as he crossed the room and pulled Steve into a one armed hug, clapping a hand on his back.

"Ha ha, very funny. It hasn't been that long since I saw you." Steve shook his head with a smile and leaned against the wall, scanning his eyes over a few veterans in passing.

"Maybe not. But still, you seem to have a habit of showin' up right at the end of these meetings. You do know you could show up at the beginning some time." Sam raised his eyebrows and Steve nodded shallowly, cocking his head to the side.

"Thanks Sam, for the offer. I just don't think it's my thing."

"Don't knock it til you try it. Anyways, what's up with the visit? I'm pretty sure it's not to compare and contrast the VA chapters in New York and D.C. Unless you're coming to ask what it's like living in the Stark Tower, then let me tell you, I am so glad you passed me up on all those morning runs, cause it is entirely worth living in that place. Just the showers alone..."

Steve smiled, shoving his hands in his pockets. "So Tony hasn't been too much of a bother, then?"

Sam waved a hand in dismissal. "Nah, he's pretty cool. He still doesn't remember my name and I don't think he knows I exist half the time, but he leaves my orange juice in the fridge alone. How'bout you? How's the crasher at your apartment doing?"

"Alright, I guess." The sigh deflated and Steve looked around the room at empty chairs, wondering what it'd be like, coming here to officially talk about his problems with Sam. Maybe he could convince Bucky to come...if he could convince Bucky to do anything.
"He showed up two nights ago, but nothing's changed. Well, he recognized a song I was humming, but when I tried to tell him about it he cut me off. Other than that, things seemed pretty, I dunno. Decent." Steve shrugged, gesturing loosely at nothing. "Up until I woke up yesterday morning and he was gone. Just vanished, no sign it'd been anything but some wacked-out dream."

Steve stared at the ground and pretended not to hear Sam's pity sigh. He didn't want pity, he just wanted Bucky to show up for more than sleep, stay for longer than the five hours he spent unconscious.

"I'm sorry, man. But there's gotta be a reason for it, y'know? Maybe he just...doesn't know you." Sam kept his voice all gentle and kind but Steve shook his head, because it wasn't that simple.

"He told me he went to the Smithsonian. So he at least knows who I am, who he used to be. He responds to Bucky, never said anything contrary about calling him that."

"Well, then, maybe that's the problem. He knows who he used to be, who you guys used to be to each other, and he doesn't think he can live up to that expectation. I mean, you guys were...really close, and he's been through hell since that. Maybe he thinks you expect him to be this perfect guy from your memories."

Steve tapped his foot, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning heavier against the wall. It was a good point, if Bucky was afraid Steve didn't want him around the way he was, no wonder he wasn't staying. But it still didn't feel like that was all of it. There was something else, because Buck'd never been one to need approval. He always just. Did whatever he wanted.

"I'll talk to him about it, just to be sure. But I really think it's something else. If he didn't think I wanted him around, he wouldn't show up at all, right? But he still comes over, he just always end up leaving." Steve tried not to sound miserable (or overly obvious) but Sam's eyes were wary, concerned.

"Okay, then. There's something else it could be. I see it all the time in PTSD patients, especially in...uh. Married couples? Not that I'm--" Sam held up in hands in a please-don't-freak-out motion and Steve forced tensed muscles to relax. Anything Sam had to offer, he could at least consider.

Once he determined Steve wasn't gonna blow up at being called a couple, Sam lowered his hands and continued carefully.

"Maybe he's scared of hurting you. You know, like a relapse in the middle of the night, wakes up outta his head and slits your throat sorta thing? Lots of vets deal with that fear, because losing their loved ones by their own hand is the worst thing imaginable. Not to mention the guy's almost killed you a few times already."

Steve made a noncommittal noise, running the idea over. Sam took the silence as an encouragement to elaborate, apparently.

"I mean, I know you trust Bucky Barnes with your life. But what happens if he loses the wheel for a moment, and then the Winter Soldier takes over and kills you? There's a chance, if he feels the same way you do, he wouldn't be able to live with himself after that." Sam shrugged and Steve pursed his lips, blinking distantly.

"You know, I really don't think that's it. The guy that spent the night on my couch was the deadly assassin." Sam kinda made a face at that and Steve made a face back because no, he wasn't changing his mind about letting Bucky stay. "There's not really a wheel to lose; the whole idea of the Winter Soldier is based on control. He has complete restraint over his violence, so far as I'm aware. He isn't
afraid of his own power because every move he makes is about controlling it. He's all hyped up on efficiency and danger and whatnot."

Steve'd been thinking that over lately, and the best conclusion he'd come to was that Bucky wasn't afraid of himself, or of hurting Steve. He had too much control over himself, if anything. Sam crossed his arms, stumped expression on his face.

"Well, okay, what's your theory on why he won't stick around?" Why didn't Bucky stay? Why was he giving Steve strange looks and avoiding talking about the past? Why hadn't he killed Steve yet, the only person he was seeming to make a serious exception for? What'd gone through his mind on the helicarrier to make him lower his fist and pull Steve from the Potomac?

"That's just the thing," Steve shrugged. "I don't know."

~*~*~

Six days passed and he'd told himself last time'd been the final visit, final slink to Steve's apartment. But he had one question, one Steve could answer for him. This would be the last time. It really would.

It was earlier in the day than he'd gone before but waiting until dark was pointless when he knew Steve was home. Scaling the building to Steve's window - the livingroom's that overlooked the alley, not the bedroom's that faced the street - was ridiculously easy, even in the fading light of dusk.

He slipped inside silently, picking out Steve's location and padding through shadows as he kept his ear tuned for Steve's conversation. He was on the phone, spine to Bucky as he sifted through papers on the counter, talking to someone named Bruce.

Bucky was only inside the apartment for about ten seconds before Steve suddenly cut off the speaker, interrupting as he tossed another paper aside.

"Hey, Bruce, I gotta go. Thanks for the call, I'll talk to you later." Steve hung up and sat his phone down on the counter, still not turning around as he reached in the cabinet above his head for a plate.

"Can I cut you up some apples?" Steve asked, and it was only then that Bucky realized Steve was talking to him. How the hell did Steve know he was here? He'd been perfectly silent, Steve hadn't seen him, there weren't any cameras around...

He was still blinking in confusion when Steve turned around, giving Bucky a quick smile before he reached for a knife and started chopping up fruit.

"Do you have cameras?" Bucky finally prodded, because either he had entirely lost his abilities as a trained professional or Steve was psychic. Or, cameras.

"Nope," Steve said, still chopping. The knife rhythmically clink clink clinked against the plate as the apple pieces fell apart. He hadn't moved since Steve'd noticed him, stock-still and reevaluating the situation from the middle of Steve's living room. Steve glanced up at him with an expression that was partially smiling, partially annoyed.

"Your assassin skills haven't been compromised or whatever you're worrying about. You've walked silently since Azzano. Just got used to picking up other signals to know when you're around." He popped one of the apple slices in his mouth and picked up the plate, bringing it into the living room and setting it on the coffee table in front of the couch. After plopping down on the last place Bucky'd slept, Steve gestured at the cushion beside him. "Sit down."
Bucky didn't move, narrowing his eyes and crossing his arms, wishing he'd left the damn mask on. "Azzano. That's the first time I fell under Zola's guidance."

"Torture," Steve corrected, taking another apple piece. The word was blunt and cutting and it made Bucky tighten his arms across his chest. Pain training, he'd told himself. For decades.

"Hey, look, Buck. We need to talk." That long-suffering look cast over Steve's features and Bucky found himself inching back towards the window because he wasn't exhausted enough to go through this. Steve noticed, because suddenly there was a towering supersoldier standing between his feet and freedom.

He could go through Steve if he wanted to. It'd be painful for both of them, but he'd do it, he would. Instead he glared harder and Steve crossed his arms over his chest too, puffing up with righteousness and gesturing at the couch with a tilt of his head.

"Sit down. It's just a talk." The quite-serious words were coated over with a comforting curl of a smile, like Steve knew exactly what was happening in Bucky's head and wasn't judging him for it, was just waiting for Bucky to sit.

With a scowl he absolutely meant, Bucky lowered himself onto the couch cushions. It was still falling through puffy water, but he wasn't gonna cave because of that. He could sit and listen to Steve's "just a talk" if it meant the weird tension would go away and his safehouse wasn't compromised.

Steve perched on the arm of the couch and it was only Bucky's weight on the opposite side keeping it from tipping over.

"I know you're going through a lot right now," Steve started and Bucky evened out his expression into blankness. Facemask or not, he could hide what he was going through from Steve. "...but my apartment doesn't have to be a crashpad for when you're about to pass out from exhaustion."

If he wasn't already sitting perfectly straight, he would've straightened at that, possibly stood, but as it was he just stared. He'd overstayed the welcome of this safehouse; finding another would be imperative and immediate.

"This is the last time you'll see me." The words were clipped and perfunctory because of course, in his consistently exhausted state, he'd been misreading the signals of his safety here. Steve Rogers shouldn't be forced to handle his presence.

The shock that crossed over Steve's face was not the intended reaction. Steve always reacted differently than everyone else and frankly, it was pissing Bucky off how damn unpredictable he was.

"Jeez, Buck, that's not what I'm saying. Of course you're welcome here, whenever. I meant you don't have to only show up when you're hurting." The words were gentle but sure and that wasn't a way to talk to someone who'd tried to kill you multiple times.

"It's a performance error," Bucky snapped. "There is no pain, or dependency. I needed a damn safe place to sleep and you're the only person who isn't trying to kill me."

Steve just looked at him, forearms resting on his knees. Bucky glared back. He wasn't going to let Steve Rogers corral him into a box like he depended on him in any way. He absolutely did not. Beings of lethal perfection did not require assistance of others.

"Look. Just..." Steve took a breath, looking down at the couch between his feet. "Bucky, I'm asking you to stay."
Stay.

Steve Rogers wanted him to stay. Here.

"Why?" Bucky narrowed his eyes again. The question was cutting and immediate and full of disbelief but apparently Steve Rogers had an answer for everything because he looked almost relieved that Bucky was demanding a reason.

"Because. I know you. I know how you are." Right. Of course. Bucky snorted and moved to stand from the couch - Steve reached forward and grabbed his wrist, pulling him back down to the cushion and scooting closer, an electrifying and terrifying six-inches away.

"All I'm asking is for you to hear me out, okay? You can still walk outta here when it's over if you want."

"You couldn't stop me regardless," Bucky shot back. A pained look tightened the corner of blue eyes, then Steve took a breath and let go of Bucky's wrist.

He could leave, right now. He should leave right now. His chest was too tight and that terrible burn inside him that only appeared in relation to Steve still hurt...but maybe he'd never find out what either of those things were if he didn't stay to listen. It wouldn't be a disadvantage to listen. Gaining access to information wasn't problematic.

He didn't say anything, but he did cross his arms over his chest and settle a little deeper into the cushions. Steve let out a breath of relief and settled in too.

"Okay. First off, Buck, I know the past seventy years don't compare to a couple of months, but this-" Steve waved a hand in Bucky's general direction, as though that were articulate enough to indicate his meaning, "-isn't all new. After Azzano, you were..."

He made a face, looking off to the side as he tried to pick the right word. Bucky waited.

"..haunted."

Well if that didn't describe the burning feeling in his chest and the ghosts in his head and his memories and the way he couldn't shake coming back to Steve's apartment, nothing else would.

Haunted by what?

"But, really, even before that. You never had it easy, Bucky. Neither of us did. You've been beating up kids and making tough moral calls and looking after my sorry ass since you were three feet tall. The war made it worse, I think. Zola brought out something you'd been trying to hide." Steve laced his own fingers together in his lap, glancing up from underneath fanning eyelashes every couple of sentences.

"You were silent, walking places. Didn't feel like talking most times. You were always shying away, needing space, like you didn't want people to watch your face or know your emotions. I was always pretty sure it was because you never got any privacy under Zola...but I dunno, you never told me why.

"That was new after Azzano, too. You told me everything - probably too much - when we were younger, but in the war I spent most my time studying you, reading what I could from what little I knew. You always said you knew me too well, but that...it used to go both ways. Not that I'm-- I mean--" Steve let out a frustrated breath and he looked young, perched on the couch with his hands in his lap and his blonde hair in careful spikes instead of crazy disarray.
"Anyways. It was always about doing the safest thing, for you. You've spent half my life yelling at me for doing 'stupid, reckless' things." Bucky almost snorted at that because well, good, because Steve made alotta stupid decisions.

"But the point is...I'm not expecting anything from you, okay? You don't have to hide around me, Bucky, you never have. Whatever's wrong, however you feel, I'll help however I can. That used to mean giving you a lot of space, which I can do now too. I'm not asking you to pour out your soul or anything, I know you need time and there's a lot we have to figure out, I just. I want you to stay. You're my friend."

Bucky blinked. Best friends since childhood...

With a bashful smile Steve ducked his head, slight pink blushing his cheekbones. "You, uh. You told me this once and I don't know if you remember it...you don't have to," he amended quickly, looking up. Bucky just kept watching him.

"I know you're going through a lot. And I know that you're totally capable, I fought you twice, you don't have to depend on anyone, I get that...I know you can get by on your own just fine, but. That's the thing. You don't have to."

*Cause I'm with you to the end of the line, pal,* an unfamiliar voice in his head filled in. It wasn't Steve's voice, it was heavier on the Brooklyn accent, but it was vaguely familiar.

Being alone was efficient. Until he needed sleep or medical attention. Staying was...

Not permanent, necessarily. He could always leave. Whenever he wanted, pack up and never show up again. Steve wouldn't be able to do anything about it. But he was being given an open invitation to stay, without being pestered. Without having to hold up another end of a bargain.

*All you gotta do is shine my shoes, maybe take out the trash...* the unfamiliar voice echoed again.

Bucky had no idea who it was, or what that had to do with sharing an apartment with Steve Rogers, but it didn't matter.

It was a strategic choice. He'd have access to more body-regeneration-time if he needed it, he wouldn't have to find a place to hide between missions.

"You only have one bed," Bucky finally said, although it sounded like an admission, a sigh of agreement. A slow smile spread over Steve's features, like he heard the exact same admission Bucky had.

"Good thing I don't use it." One side of Steve's mouth quirked up in a sideways smile, another flash of something familiar. "But if you ever want a bigger place, I've got a friend in the city that kinda has a whole floor for me in his tower, so. No pressure though, we'll go wherever you're comfortable."

Comfort wasn't a consideration; a luxury of noise that'd do nothing to benefit him. But he didn't protest Steve's words, just reached out and snagged an apple slice from the plate on the coffee table.

When Steve jumped off the couch a few seconds later with a ridiculously wide smile on his face Bucky took another apple and wondered what the hell for.

~*~*~

"Hey, Rogers, before you say no - I have pizza, I haven't seen you in months, and I'm officially done with you avoiding me. Well, avoiding everyone. I'm already on my way over and I swear the aliens could attack New York again right now and I don't even care, I am coming to your apartment and
"Clint! Clint. Listen, thanks, that sounds awesome, but I seriously can't right now."

"Nope, no way. Steve, you are not backing out on me now I will crawl through your vents if I have to dammit--"

"Seriously, Barton, listen to me. Honestly, I appreciate the offer. Just. Not tonight, okay? Or, um. Anytime soon I guess...how about we meet up at the Avengers tower in a few days? During the day? Maybe?"

"Are you seriously gonna blow me off like this? I'm literally in a taxi with six boxes of pizza next to me right now. You can't deny this."

"Shit, Clint, I'm so sorry. Honestly, man. I mean, Sam's always up for pizza..."

Clint tapped his fingers on the phone for a moment, staring out the taxi cab window at the New York traffic.

"Okay, man, this isn't like you. Even Tony wouldn't've shelled me out like that. It's not...are you okay? I'm not talking about the general depression of 'your best friend tried to kill you twice already' either, like do you need help? I can call Bruce. Or ditch the pizzas, we can just talk--"

"Clint. I'm fine. Seriously, I'm fine, I'm just busy. Okay? I'm really sorry about thi--" Steve's hand went over the receiver - but the phone was pressed to the ear he could actually hear out of, so Clint picked up the muffled voice over the line.

"What? No, it's fine. We seriously need to find a food you like besides apples. Just because it's the Big Apple doesn't mean there's an endless supply. Hold on one second..."

"Hey, sorry. I'm back. But look, I gotta go, I'm real sorry about the pizza, and raincheck, okay? Seriously, raincheck. It was super nice of you to- but anyways. Um, thanks and have a great night and bye!"

The phone clicked silent and Clint blinked at the screen. Steve Rogers hung up on him. Denied pizza, even. But that wasn't the part that was making him gape at the phone in his hand.

Steve Rogers had someone in his apartment. Someone spending the night. And he'd either been too embarrassed to say or it was one of those things you couldn't say over the phone when there was some smoking-hot girl in your bedroom listening in...

"Driver! Take me to Stark Tower instead, please." Clint leaned back in his seat and fist-pumped the air.

Steve Rogers was finally getting laid. This was 100% worth getting stood up. Besides, Sam Wilson did like pizza and so did basically everyone in the Stark Tower. What better reason to throw a sans-Steve Avengers party than to celebrate the fact that they were finally sans-Steve for a reason.

He whooped and the taxi driver shot him an annoyed look and Clint didn't care, this was the best turnout of being stood up ever.

~*~*~

"So now that you're here, what all are you missing out on in the world you've been conquering on your own?" Steve leaned against the counter across from the one Bucky was sitting crosslegged on.
He made a cross face at the question, tucking a strand of long hair behind his ear. Steve tried not to smile and was failing miserably at hiding it behind his mug. The tea was too hot to drink - he wasn't a goddamned dragon like some people who apparently didn't care if they got burnt - but he could pretend for the sake of his uncontrollable face.

He'd been smiling a ridiculous amount over the past three days and Bucky kept giving him this calculating look like he was trying to pry apart Steve's brain and seriously, Steve used to be a lot better at hiding the extensive joy he felt around Bucky but the months apart had him way outta practice. Besides, Bucky wasn't exactly helping, shooting Steve unimpressed looks for the light-hearted remarks he made.

But he did joke back sometimes, even if the jokes were more sharp and sarcastic than actual teasing, but Steve'd take anything he could get.

"Well?" He prompted, because Bucky tended to get over his aversion to talking if Steve kept asking. The piece of hair he'd tucked behind his ear had fallen back out and it took everything in Steve not to cross the kitchen and fix it for him.

He used to smooth out Bucky's pomade for him all the time - too often, probably - but in the nine months since he'd last done it (on his timeline, not Bucky's) a lot had changed and it probably wasn't the best idea to cross the tiles just to tidy up the hair of a deadly assassin who was sitting on his kitchen counter drinking tea.

"If I wasn't here, I'd be executing a mission. Either terminating Hydra agents or researching." Bucky's voice without any trace of an accent was a little heartbreaking, but the disconnected tone was worse. It was Steve's job though, not to let it get to him. He had bigger worries, like getting through to Bucky at all.

"Researching what?"

Bucky looked at him with those cold eyes that could be half the reason he'd been codenamed Winter Soldier (although if it was really based on the Payne poem, it was kind of terrifyingly beautifully fitting) and said the next statement like it was the most axiomatic thing in the world. "Sergeant James Barnes."

"Oh. Well..." Steve let his mouth curve up in a small smile this time, "...I happen to be an expert."

Bucky raised a single eyebrow at him and took another sip of his tea. The artificial coffees and over-caffeinated drinks of the 21st century weren't appealing to either of them, hot chocolate wasn't exactly a daily drink, and they both could use some warm liquids in their bodies after years on ice. So tea it was. And it was deemed healthy and pure enough for Bucky's standards, which were actually pretty difficult to meet.

His stomach couldn't handle anything heavier than fruit and he didn't want anything heavier either. Thankfully Buck seemed to love oranges as much as he had in the thirties, and raspberries were also added to the list of foods to keep around. Steve was afraid to push much else on him right now because he wasn't sure he'd be able to listen to Bucky puke it up without running in the bathroom to rub a hand over his back and he still didn't know where they stood with that.

Or with anything, really. But Bucky was here and that was step one, the biggest step. (Or so he thought.)

"Seriously, anytime between 1917 and 1945, I've got your answers." Steve set his mug down, glancing over the small space of his apartment. It felt like the only place he'd been for the past week
was this kitchen and the adjacent living room. They could use some air. "Hey, you wanna go up to
the roof? The view's better. Unless you'd rather stay here, of course."

The single raised eyebrow arched higher and Steve'd dare say Bucky almost looked amused. He
unfolded his legs and like...glided, to the ground, somehow. There was this puppet-like grace to his
movements, an artist's marionette of a dancer tugged by perfect invisible strings.

But could strings of control be cut without losing the tiptoe fall?

Steve brushed the thought aside as Bucky floated past him and snagged a few oranges from the crate.

"Just because I specialize in long-distance sharp-shooting doesn't mean I have a propensity for
roofs," Bucky commented, tone dry but there was something akin to brightness in his eyes and Steve
found himself dashing ahead to open the door to hide another stupidly-wide smile.

The sun wasn't quite up yet, and while New York never slept, thankfully their neighbors did. Not
that Steve should've been worried though, because the moment they slipped into the hallway Bucky
kinda vanished in the shadows along the wall. But when Steve reached the stairs, he was still right
beside him.

The other residents of Steve's building were all fairly old, or reclusive, and no one else came on the
roof ever. Which meant that Steve may or may not have dragged a couch from a garagesale up here.
Inspiring place to draw.

Bucky raised another eyebrow as he saw it, but he walked over, sinking down to the ground in front
of the faux red velvet and leaning his back against the cushions. Steve ambled down next to him,
drawing his knees up to his chest and distantly missing the way Bucky used to sit with one leg
stretched out lazily into Steve's space.

"You can see the Empire State building from here, so sometimes I--"

"When's my birthday?" Bucky asked suddenly, gaze locked on the horizon. Steve only just managed
to clamp down on a surprised breath because gosh, he'd never imagined Buck wouldn't remember
that.

"March 10th, 1917. Mine's July 4th, 1918 and you always used to crow about how you were 'two
years older than me' for the entire three months and twenty five days before I caught up."

Bucky was quiet for a moment, his posture perfect even as he pressed his back to the couch legs.
"You said you could tell me anything that happened between 1917 and 1945, how would you know
about when I was born if you weren't yet?"

"Your ma," Steve shrugged. "The couple'a years I missed before we met I got the full run-down
from her. She liked to talk about you, and she liked me. Thought I was a good influence on you. She
never realized that I was the one starting fights and you were the one stopping them."

He glanced at Bucky from the corner of his eye. Buck's expression was schooled into blankness, but
god, he was still so beautiful. The wind was ruffling the hair around his face, sending strands
sideways into his eyes every few moments. His hair'd never been this long, but back in the days
when he'd slicked it back it'd been pretty lengthy, curving down around his cheekbones after he
showered.

"Did you...do you want me to tell you about her?" Steve asked cautiously. Bucky finally looked at
him then, icy blue gorgeous as it'd ever been. A few seconds ticked by, air between them charged
with energy before the silence broke.
"Tell me about you. Why were you always fighting?"

Steve laughed, tipping his shoulder into Bucky's automatically. He stiffened a little and didn't sway to the side, so Steve ended up bouncing off awkwardly. Buck didn't look miffed though, maybe just surprised, so Steve scooted a few inches closer and started in on his story.

"Well, it wasn't like I fought for no reason. I hate bullies, and in Brooklyn's dirty thirties, there were alotta those. People who were rude to girls, who kicked that dog that lived in the alley next to our apartment, who were disrespectful or just plain mean. I'd always end up in way over my head and then you'd come 'round the corner, crooked smile, sarcastic comments. We'd fight together if I was still standing, other times you'd chase the guys off, or on a few memorable occasions you'd be picking me off the ground, half-carrying me back to the apartment and yelling the whole time about how I was gonna get myself killed one day and then where would you be..."

*I'd be here,* Bucky thought to himself. *Like this.* He remembered flashes, little second-long clips here and there, bloody hands fixing up a bloodier cheekbone that was so frail he kept wondering how it wasn't shattered into a million pieces.

He could remember throwing an arm around tiny shoulders. Watching a man in redwhite'n'blue from behind a sniper scope. Clutching a battered newspaper to his chest and crying.

Steve talked, all morning, words that made Bucky Barnes sound like the best kind'a hero. The man Steve was painting...noble, funny, loyal; the man of Steve's memories could barely be real. Like he was almost as good as Captain America was.

But now, he wasn't all light and sunshine. He killed people and he felt more comfortable with a mask over his face and he got pissed too easily. And he still couldn't shake the terrible burn in his chest whenever Steve was around. That didn't sound like the man Rogers was describing.

(He never occurred to him that maybe, Steve didn't see the same man that Bucky had, in the past. Maybe Steve's memories were accurate to him, but the man in them had been in a mask so long that even Steve never saw how much he was hurting.)

Sometime around noon, Steve's excited storytelling tapered off into random, short bursts of scenes as they came to him, words slowing with sleepy blinking. Their shoulders had been pressed together since the sun rose on the left, but staying awake all day and night must've been more tiring than Steve was used to.

Because by one in the afternoon, his head slipped down to Bucky's shoulder and the blue eyes were shut before Bucky could shrug him off.

"Rogers," Bucky whispered, craning his head to try'n see past the tuffs of blonde hair brushing his jaw. Steve didn't open his eyes, dead to the world, so Bucky studied the lax curve of his mouth for a moment before he straightened back up, eyes shifting to the skyline on the horizon.

It was more efficient to let Steve sleep on his shoulder than to wake him and move back downstairs. Besides, he'd had extensive training to stay perfectly still for hours on end. He hadn't exercised that skill this week, now was a good'a'time as any.

And with Steve sleeping on his shoulder like this, Bucky was warmer than any memory he knew.

~*~*~

He knew the man at the door wasn't Steve the moment the first boot landed in the apartment. Steve
walked heavy enough to carry the world on his shoulders but quickly enough to save that world. It was nothing like the bootfall that followed the rattling key-in-the-door late Monday afternoon.

Bucky'd been staying at the safehouse often over the past week. He only left during the day, and then to go track down another base in Jersey. But he was still back by 1am the next morning. Steve'd been waiting up, pensively looking out the window by the time Bucky slipped through it. Then Steve'd gifted him a smile and left him the couch.

Now, Bucky was sitting on the floor, knives laid carefully across the coffee table as he sharpened them one by one. Then the frontdoor opened and unfamiliar boots echoed and it wasn't five seconds later that Bucky was on his feet, 1911 aimed at the intruder in the doorway.

A man was standing a foot inside the apartment, both hands up in a ridiculously unconvincing surrender. He had strangely shaped facial hair, shiny silver (robotic?) cuffs on both wrists and a look on his face like he was the owner of the free-world.

"Oh. Hi...Steve's friend, right? Star-Spangled didn't say he had company." Bucky didn't lower his gun, scanning the stranger's body language. He was tense, wary, but...not scared. More cautious than Steve (everyone on the planet was more cautious than Steve) but not terrified either. Maybe Bucky needed to start intensive training again.

"The only reason you're not dead is because you have a key to Rogers' apartment," and therefore he trusts you, Bucky didn't say, but the man heard anyways. Good, it was easier to refrain from killing Steve's friends if they weren't obviously inadequate. But he didn't lower his gun as he took a single step closer, "Why are you here?"

"To see you," the man answered simply, then his half-assed surrender hands dropped lazily to his sides and he strode into Steve's kitchen. He started opening cabinets and Bucky shifted his weight, crossing to the kitchen and replacing the gun with a knife he twirled swiftly between fingers.

"Do you happen to know where Rogers keeps his alcohol? I gave him an entire liquor cabinet, not even last week..."

"How did you know I was here?" Bucky interrupted, glaring at the rifling intruder from the edge of the counter. The man didn't seem all that phased, turning around to look at Bucky with raised eyebrows.

"I'm Tony Stark," he replied, as though that portrayed a deity of classified information. Bucky gave him an unimpressed look, because names weren't answers. The man - Stark - sighed and crossed his arms over his chest as he leaned against the counter. "And it's kinda obvious when Steve has left his apartment twice in the last week. Since SHIELD went down he's been in his apartment twice. Always out looking for you." Stark shrugged. "So, I figured he found you. Or, well, you found him."

Stark spoke with his hands and seemed to be duly unsurprised by everything he encountered, like each word he had to waste explaining something exacerbated him into a bored, overly cogent asshole.

That, Bucky could relate to.

"You want a drink? I'm having one." Tony turned back to the cabinets, finally opening the correct one and triumphantly grabbing glasses and a tall glass bottle. He uncapped the top, pouring amber liquid and talking again, his back to Bucky. There were so many openings to kill Stark it was embarrassing on his behalf. "Can you get drunk? Cap can't, unfortunately. I'd kill to see him without
a stick in his ass."

Stark glanced over at Bucky, holding out one of the glasses. "Well, not actually kill," he amended, the corner of his mouth tilting up in amusement.

The joke wasn't funny and Bucky glared for it, but he took the extended glass anyways. Tony quirked an eyebrow as he took a sip of his own, watching Bucky with a challenge in his eyes. He hadn't had alcohol in decades - it was inhibiting, useless, and caused massive performance errors - but the accelerated cell reproduction in his body would likely keep his body from getting drunk anyways.

Using his right hand so he didn't have to concern with pressure on the fragile glass, Bucky lifted it to his lips and tipped the drink over his tongue. It carried an eruption of burn into his throat, the instantaneous water-loss expanding the blood vessels in his body to falsify a feeling of warmth through his veins.

Either his cells weren't nearly as equipped to deal with this as Steve's were, or the alcohol in that glass was a hell of a lot stronger than vodka. The dizziness came instantly, coursing through him like all the needles and shots he'd been given in the past seventy years were swallowing him again.

His hand darted to catch himself on the counter, not noticing the countertop denting beneath his fingers as his head spun seventy years into the past, dragging his consciousness through a hazy blur to deposit him into a crystal-clear golden scene from another lifetime.

"One more round, how bout it?" a loud man in a bowler hat clapped his shoulder and the world tipped fuzzily for a moment then the most beautiful laugh he'd ever heard washed over him from his left and Bucky turned his head towards the sound.

Steve Rogers was sitting right next to him, suddenly throwing an arm around Bucky's shoulders and drawing him up tight to Steve's side, heat radiating from the tight muscles in a wave of - what was that, comfort? Joy? The beautiful laugh was still trickling past Steve's lips, fading into a soft, affectionate smile as he looked down at Bucky.

"You are so drunk," Steve chided and Bucky blinked, running his tongue around his mouth to identify that yes, that was the taste of alcohol, he'd just been sipping it from a glass in Steve's New York apartment, hadn't he...

"M'not!" protested a strange voice, heavily accented and fairly slurred, but still recognizable: the same person Bucky'd heard in his head saying those things to Steve, the cause I'm with you to the end of the line, pal, the all you gotta do is shine my shoes, maybe take out the trash... voice.

It was coming from his mouth.

"Hey, Sarge, how bout we have a contest then?" Another voice interrupted from the right and Bucky groggily turned his head that way, where a man with a beret and a mustache was giving him a grin. Sarge. Was that him too? Sergeant James Barnes.

"Wha'kinda contes'?" The accented voice stumbled from his lips again and Bucky realized he wasn't the one making the choice to speak; he was watching a memory as the whole version of himself - the happy version? - conversed with the Howling Commandos.

"Fléchettes!" another voice inputted and Bucky's 2014 mind helpfully translated that to darts. Then commotion erupted and people were talking over each other and Bucky couldn't absorb any of the information because everything shut down into tunnel vision - entire being, entire body, was
suddenly centered and focused on the man pulling him outta the booth, one hand tight on his bicep and the other pressed protectively against his lower back.

"I can walk o'm'own, Stevie," Bucky's accented voice slurred and Steve laughed again, a brilliant, stunning sound, face radiating more sunshine than Bucky could remember seeing in a person before.

"I gotcha, Buck. Can't have the army's best sniper breaking a wrist from falling over in a bar." Steve winked at him and Bucky's knees melted at the sight and then Steve was laughing more, gathering Bucky up in his arms with a possessive arm slung around his waist. He stumbled straight into Steve's chest, locking his arms around Steve's shoulders, and the part of him inside the memory decided he really didn't wanna leave the warmth of Steve's arms ever.

"Aw, Sarge sure gets cuddly when he's wasted, huh?" Another Howling Commando clapped Bucky on the back, so he tucked his face deeper into Steve's neck, lifting a very heavy arm to flip off whoever'd said the comment.

More laughter and joking burst out behind him and Bucky very reluctantly pulled away from Steve's chest. Steve Rogers was looking down at him like Bucky hung the moon in the sky, eyes pouring over with something so deep that he gasped - in reality - from the expression alone.

Steve's big hands brushed stray strands of hair off of Bucky's forehead and his gaze lightened, then he was pulling Bucky over to the dartboard, one hand still around his waist and Bucky stumbled again but Steve straightened him with another blinding smile and everything was warm and spinning and perfect and --

Someone was holding him, strapping him down at the shoulders, compressing his body into a pressure chamber, warm air brushing over his face and no, Bucky was never letting Hydra fucking brainwash him again, not when he'd finally gotten free, he was never letting anyone grab and take him again.

He swung out his left arm, hard and fast, the world flashing between Steve's apartment kitchen and a bank vault and a golden bar full of laughing men and then there was a startled sound and something breaking and his lungs were convulsing in his chest, his body heaving as he tried to breathe, tried to center himself back to wherever the fuck he was.

He'd lashed out this way before, bank vault after meeting Steve for the first time on the bridge, he'd thrown scientists across the room in an explosion of fury and confusion and then he'd been left with his arms curled threateningly and his body heaving with breath and now--

--only now he wasn't in a bank vault, he was in New York. In Steve Rogers' apartment. Bucky forcibly focused, blinking as memories faded into the back of his mind and he was left with the broken countertop raining sharp pieces to the floor, lodging dust and shards in between the plates of his metal arm.

And then there was Steve's friend, Tony Stark, on the other side of the kitchen, holding himself up with his elbows hooked over the edge of the counter, eyes wide and gasping for air and already bruised along one side.

Bucky blinked. He'd hurt Stark. Stark must've approached to calm him from the memory and the attempting-to-comfort hands triggered the memory of being held down and of course he'd lashed out but how was Tony Stark supposed to know that, how was anyone supposed to know that?
He was a high-level assassin, who the fuck was he kidding? Of course he'd hurt the wrong people, Tony was lucky he was still alive.

Bucky took a step back, ready to take his things and go, what if that'd been Steve, what if he lashed out at the one man he didn't want to kill? He was lethal, he was dangerous. He was compromised.

**Performance error:**

"Wait," Tony gasped, struggling back to his feet again. Bucky paused and Stark held out a single finger, bending in half to try to get air in his lungs. "Wait, wait. Alright, well, ow. You-" another gasp "-knocked the air out of me, but. Uh, wow, would you let me look at your arm? I'm-

Tony waved an arm around, straightening up the rest of the way. "-kinda an engineer and I've been geeking out about that-" another pointing finger "-but obviously, I get you don't like getting operated on or anything. I mean, I've been in some tough spots in my life, I know-" more explanatory waving hands "-how it can get. But that did kinda just...spark? at the elbow when you flung me across the room, and I can't imagine that'd be good, so."

Tony crossed an arm over his chest and propped his elbow on the arm, resting his chin in his hand. It was an odd pose but it weirdly fit him. He was still breathing a little heavy, but he also looked a hell'ofalot more humble now. And...oddly, more interested. Almost forgiving.

Bucky stared for a moment. Who the hell was this guy?

"Steve doesn't have the tools for that," he finally said, slowly. Tony lit up, clapping his hands together and wincing slightly at the motion.

"Great. Well, I don't live far and I've got a lab with all kinds of toys. There's a car downstairs, if you're interested. No pressure." His hands were up now, both palms out. Then he shrugged, giving Bucky a sly look that couldn't be a good thing. "I mean, unless you want to throw sparks around Cap's apartment until one of his ancient relics catch fire and the whole place goes up in flames and this nice cozy little corner of the world would be ruined and it'd all be because you were just too stubborn to come in and get your tech arm fixed at the house of a very trustworthy friend of Steve's--"

"If I come with you will you stop talking?" Bucky interrupted.

"No promise," Tony gave him a raised-eyebrows look and pointed another finger in his direction. "But you won't catch Steve's place on fire," he offered.

Bucky rolled his eyes. And followed Tony Stark outta Steve's apartment. Stark trotted down the stairs and chatted about how he'd send one of his buddies to replace Steve's counter again-

"-again?" Bucky asked. Then Tony launched into a story about Sam Wilson having called in for it a few weeks ago, apparently Steve'd crushed it during an argument, and Bucky listened distantly as he swung himself into the passenger seat of Tony's flashy red car.

"Jarvis, take us back to the tower."

"Of course, sir," a robotic voice responded. The access panel for the voice wasn't visible and Bucky glanced around, looking for the placement of the speakers. The voice'd said tower...

"The Stark Tower?" Bucky asked, glancing at Tony. He'd slipped sunglasses on and was looking irrevocably smug as his car started zipping through the streets on automotive control. Tony Stark, of course. The plane Steve had borrowed was Stark equipment - that must've come from Tony.
"Well, it's the Avengers Tower now. But yeah, you should be familiar with it. I mean, you broke in a month ago. And shattered one of my windows."

Bucky shrugged, looking back out the window of the car. "Agent Hill has intel regarding the restoration of my memories."

"Maria?" Tony asked incredulously, one hand resting casually on the car's wheel. "Well how about that. She's not really an agent anymore though, you know."

"Sir, would you like me to alert tower security of your incoming visitor?" the robotic voice spoke again. It sounded more personal than the other automotive car systems he was used to, like the words were programmed to be more polite than the standard SHIELD SUV.

"Actually, take us around back. We don't need the paparazzi following us up. Protocol override superhero mode."

"Working on a secret project, are we, sir?"

"Something like that." Tony turned back to Bucky again, fiddling with one of the knobs on his steering wheel. "That's Jarvis, my AI. He's integrated throughout the tower as well, so if you ever need anything - strippers, vodka, red octopus - he can get it for you."

Bucky was going to roll his eyes outta his head. The car took that moment to jerk to the right, then they were disappearing through an alley into an abandoned-looking garage. The ground swiveled beneath the wheels and the car lowered underground; then they were taking off again, sharp lights illuminating the corridor until Jarvis found a parking spot, a few feet away from two sliding glass doors that opened into some kinda testing lab.

Tony stepped out and Bucky followed suit, walking silently behind as doors swung open and Jarvis' voice greeted them again. Tony gave instructions to the AI while Bucky followed him up a rounding set of stairs, one hand over the sheathed knife on his hip.

There was a certain instinctual uneasiness at the way Stark was treating him. Respectfully, like he understood the danger, but recklessly like he didn't care about it. By the time they ascended into another lab - full of screens and much better lighting - the suspicions deemed more relevant than the repair of his arm.

"Why are you placing trust in someone who is a threat to your life?" he finally asked, walking slowly between the shiny metal and discarded robotic parts. Tony glanced his way, picking up tools from one of the tables.

"My life is threatened on a pretty frequent basis. On some more memorable occasions, by your Red-White-and-Blue buddy too. Not that you aren't all intimidating and whatnot, but I figured if you wanted to kill me you'd've done it already." Tony shrugged again, reaching over a table to tap a blue screen, pulling up a file that expanded a cacophony of documents, blurry photographs, and datagraphs.

"This is all I've got on your arm, which isn't a lot, but I should be able to get something done once I find the access panel. You wouldn't happen to know--"

Bucky reached over with his right hand and popped back the plates that revealed the main circuit. Tony clapped his hands together again.

"Great. So, I'm guessing you don't want to do this in a chair...how's the floor?"
Which was how, two hours later, Steve came barging through the doors to Tony's lab to find his best friend sitting crosslegged on the floor in the middle of Tony's lab while Tony sat next to him holding something sparking inside Bucky's arm, humming along to the Classic Rock playing over the speakers.

"What the hell?" Steve skid to a stop, breathing heavy from running all the way from the top floor, where he'd been in a meeting with Pepper all morning. He'd only found out Bucky was here because Jarvis had slipped, asking if Steve knew what Bucky would prefer to drink, because Tony was getting snacks brought down to the lab and Sergeant Barnes hadn't stated his preferences.

"Nice to see you too, old man," Tony replied absently, not moving from his spot on the ground. Bucky looked fairly surprised to see him, eyebrows raising as he flipped hair outta his eyes with a jerk of his head. He didn't look hurt though, or scared, or overwhelmed. A bit of anxiety eased out of his bones because at least Buck was okay, god.

From closer inspection though, it looked like Tony might not've fared as well. His arm was pretty bruised up and his back was stiff, hurt. Considering he'd been perfectly fine the last time Steve'd seen him - which was this morning - he could guess who'd caused the injuries.

"What the hell happened?" Steve reiterated, still kinda puffed up and glowering. He gestured at the two of them - sitting on the floor - and Tony's obvious state of disarray. He hadn't even introduced them. No one knew Bucky was in New York, let alone Steve's apartment, but apparently someone'd figured it out because clearly, Bucky wasn't in Steve's apartment anymore. But seriously, Tony? And something had to have gone down, for Stark to be that beat up.

His tone was not messing around at all, but Stark just snorted at him and kept on poking around in Bucky's arm. The metal fingers twitched and Bucky and Tony both looked down at the hand curiously.

"Hmm, odd," Tony did something else with the sparking tool and Bucky's metal fingers curled up tight into a fist. "You doin' that?"

"No," Bucky responded, sounding just as curious. Another few pokes the fingers uncurled and started twitching again.

Steve threw up his hands. He was gone for four hours and Tony was already trying to steal his best friend.

"You can keep standing there fretting or you can pull up a chair and join us, if you want. Jarvis is heading for snacks, so tell him what you want before they get here." Tony turned away and stood for a moment, typing something onto one of his blue screens. A larger-than-scale three-dimensional projection of Bucky's arm was rotating over one of the tables and Tony set to peeling back the holographic panels of the arm, tracing something with his finger and inputting a blue wire into the projection.

Steve turned back to Bucky, a little lost with all the technology. Bucky's head was tipped back, looking up at him from the ground, so Steve walked all the way over and plopped down beside him, on the right side so Tony could work. Bucky's eyes followed, looking at him curiously like he was trying to measure Steve up against something else in his head.

"What?" Steve asked, nudging Bucky's thigh with his foot. He watched the movement, a little confused, then looked back up at Steve.
"You're here," he said. Steve had to fight the smile that threatened to take over, because yes, of course he was. He'd go anywhere Bucky was, even if it was Stark's annoyingly-technological-lab. There was no avoiding the future when it was spanned out around you in 3D and blue charts and robots.

"So are you. Why is that?" Steve folded his legs out Indian style, propped elbow on knee and chin on hand, gaze on Bucky. Buck looked down under the scrutiny, fringe of dark hair blocking his eyes from view as he tightened a random strap across his calf.

"Stark came by the apartment, offered to operate on my arm. It was failing efficiency, so the logistics were to let him look at it."

Buck lifted his head again, pieces of hair falling in his eyes, so Steve reached forward without thinking, tucking the strands behind Bucky's ear in the same familiar motion - fixing unruly hair a thousand times.

It wasn't until he caught the expression in icyblue Steve realized what he was doing. He'd spent his entire life straightening Bucky's hair; it was basically instinctive now. Except how was Buck supposed to remember that?

He was frozen, staring at Steve, and Steve brought his hand back so fast it might as well've caught fire. He opened his mouth to apologize, then Tony was spinning back around and that idea was quickly discarded in favor of snapping his jaw shut.

Bucky was still openly staring at him, searching his face for something. Steve looked down at his lap, running a distressed hand through his hair. He didn't want to ruin everything they'd been building with one stupid slip-up from the past, fuck, he had to be more careful.

"Sir? Your refreshments await," Jarvis thankfully interrupted and Steve couldn't help the breath of relief. Bucky stood to walk - glide, he could be a dancer with the way he moved - over to the tray. When he came back he had two oranges in his right hand, tossing them both at Steve.

"Can you peel them? I've only got one functional hand." He shook the limp bionic arm to prove his point and Steve nodded, trying not to stare from how strange it was to see the normally-powerful-weapon a dead robot hanging at his side.

The rest of him looked strangely normal, despite the tactical gear he was in, as always. Steve'd offered him clothes on multiple occasions but the only thing he'd gotten were weird looks in response. He had a feeling it had something to do with keeping all the weapons and armor close by, protected and safe. Maybe soon, Bucky wouldn't feel like he needed to be on guard anymore.

And Steve may need to check if Tony had mind-reading equipment, because he took that moment to grab a green smoothie from the refreshments tray and wave a hand in Bucky's direction as he spoke.

"Hey, you mind losing the knife-vest? It'll be easier to get at the shoulder joint."

* 

It didn't cross Bucky's mind to protest or disobey, so he started in on the straps across the right side of his body, except he still only had one hand in commission and they weren't coming undone easily.

"Rogers, would you mind?" Bucky asked, glancing down at Steve, who was busy focusing on peeling oranges. He looked up at his name though, blinking a few times in surprise before sitting the orange aside and standing.
"Yeah, no problem Buck." Steve reached over to finish unwinding the first clasp, moving down to the next like he'd done it a thousand times before. Bucky narrowed his eyes, thinking back, and the next memory hit him outta nowhere.

They were in an empty schoolhouse, a fire roaring off to the right, bright children's coats piled up in front of it, and it was freezing.

"You're all flushed," Steve Rogers said concernedly, eyes flickering over Bucky's face. This time, since he knew what to expect, Bucky froze and watched the scene play out, tapping into his own thoughts and emotions as much as he could. Despite the cold, a heat - the flush Steve was talking about - had crept into his cheeks and chest. He was too busy thinking about that (and avoiding Steve's eyes?) to quite register the next words before it was too late.

"And you'll freeze to death in those soaking clothes." Steve leaned forward and started unbuttoning the big navy-blue buttons on Bucky's peacoat. (It was the peacoat from the Smithsonian exhibit - this must be during the war.) His brain was so overwhelmed with thoughts (too many to sort through) and Steve's proximity that he didn't cognize the words until Steve's fingers had undone more than half his coat.

Then it sunk in. And Bucky freaked.

He shoved Steve off him, quick and brutal enough to make Steve stumble and almost fall on his ass. Steve was half-naked (his shirt was dripping by the fire, they must've been caught in rain) and undressing Bucky. For some reason, this was a problem.

His brain was short circuiting. (There were too many emotions too pick out any particular one, but the general feeling of 'fucked up' was pretty clear. That and singular thought that there was something Steve didn't know, but should, that he was trying to help Bucky out when he should've been sprinting in the other direction.)

"Bucky?" Steve asked, taking a cautious step closer. Bucky buried his head in his hands again, curling in on himself. Fuck, what was he doing? What was he doing? He couldn't even sit still and let Steve be a friend to him. He was fucking everything up. It had to happen eventually. They couldn't go on forever with Bucky torn apart by feelings he couldn't face and couldn't name.

He'd ruined everything and Steve still wasn't getting that, worrying and putting his hand on Bucky's shoulder. Bucky was shivering, even harder now than before. He'd fucked up and they were going to hurt him for that. He'd fought back and that always meant more drugs, more pain.

(Because the same thing had happened earlier today, Bucky recognized what was happening the moment that the younger version of himself's brain started to wander - relapse with reality.)

It was all his fault, that test going wrong. He hadn't held still the way they'd wanted him to and now look at him, look at what he's ruined. Who are you? What are you? Tell me what you are.

Sergeant James Barnes 32557038 a total fuck up who ruins everything SergeantJamesBarnes 32557038 who can't even let his best friend touch him SergeantJamesBarnes 32557038 who doesn't deserve to be touched. SergeantJamesBarnes 32557038 SergeantJamesBarnes 32557038 SergeantJa--

(Holy shit, this guy was fucked up.)

"It's me, Steve. I need you to focus on my voice. I'm here with you and I need you to listen to me, okay?" Firm and gentle fingers tugged the hands away from Bucky's face. Cold air hit his skin and
there was more wetness on his cheeks than rainwater.

He blinked open his eyes, vision taken up by more golden muscle. Bucky swayed, trying to get his bearings. It didn't look like a metal labroom, but Steve...oh fuck, Steve. (Steve Rogers pulled him outta the flashback - was that usual?)

Bucky scrambled away, sliding backwards on the desk and basically falling off the other side, catching his feet on the ground and bracing his hands on the wood to stay upright.

Ohgod ohgodohgod, Steve. He backpedaled further, crashing into another desk. He whipped behind that one too, eyes wide as the Commandos all stared at him. Bucky crouched down behind the desk, back against the wall as he tried to catch his breath. Ohgodohgodohgod.

He'd rather be on Zola's table than living this hell because then at least he could hate the Germans, instead of himself. Right now Bucky had both tormenting his head though, so it didn't matter exactly which person he was hating. All of them.

(And somehow, this man was the laughing one from the exhibit? That black'n'white, happy, smiling person? He was missing something terribly crucial, wasn't he? How was it possible to be this...crazy and that happy too?)

"Bucky?" Steve rounded the first desk cautiously, hands up in the air like he was trying to placate a wild animal.

"Don't touch me," Bucky begged, pressing back further into the wall and drawing his knees up to his chest.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Steve promised, a flicker of pain over his features lingering from Bucky's begging.

"Please," Bucky pleaded again, curling arms around the top of knees and dropping his forehead to them. It wasn't dark enough, wasn't warm enough, he was soaking the wall through and he was sitting in a settling cloud of dust that erupted by his frantic scramble over here and Bucky just wanted to curl into the darkness and never have to be blinded by the bright again.

(He knew that feeling.)

When he blinked back into reality, Steve's hand was resting heavy over his heart, blue eyes searching his worriedly. The heat of Steve's palm on his bare skin blossomed down through his muscles, bleeding that familiar burn through every inch of him.

"You okay?" Steve asked softly, quiet, words just for the two of them. Bucky looked up at that gentle, caring expression and tried to cognize what it meant, what Steve meant, what the hell that memory'd meant.

The emotions ricocheting through him in the flashbacks? In the first flashback earlier, Steve had brushed his short hair out of his face and then - minutes ago - he'd reached out and done the exact same thing. What the hell did that mean? What the hell did any of it mean?

And fuck, the more he was seeing of Bucky Barnes the less he looked like the smiling, laughing man from the museum and the more he looked like what he saw in the mirror now.

He'd been messed up, in the past. More than just performance errors; he'd been truly dysfunctional.
Was that what Steve was expecting of him now? To be dysfunctional? Bucky wasn't like that anymore. He was perfect. No more mental flaws or handicaps.

"Yes," he answered, simply, because there was absolutely no evidence of the contrary. The moment he answered Steve let out a breath and took a step backwards, hand falling to his side.

While Bucky's memory was consuming his head, he must've been silent this time, complacent as Steve rid him of the vest and shirt. Now the slight chill was making his bare torso shiver as he sat back down, taking a moment to realize how differently he'd come outta that memory than last time.

The first flashback from today, he'd come out swinging at Tony. And seconds ago, he'd been still and calm as he blinked back to the present, just looking at Steve. Why had there been a change? What factors caused it?

He sat there in slight frustration on the floor as Stark started working on his arm again and Steve started handing him orange pieces. His body was acting without him. When his mind was preoccupied it was making instinctual decisions and Bucky didn't appreciate that. There were no involuntary movements of his body; he had complete control. His instincts, even, were supposed to be controlled.

More and more performance errors;

But it didn't feel like he was broken.

*

He was trying not to stare. Thankfully, Buck seemed pretty distracted, taking the oranges Steve was handing him without question, staring at the floor while Tony played with his bionic arm.

The same arm that was attached to his body with scarred, ripped up skin. It looked like the damn thing was poisoning him, tendrils of scars and raised pink flesh spanning out from where the metal was fused with his otherwise beautiful golden skin and honestly Steve wanted to be sick at the sight.

With his armor on, Bucky was pretty damn intimidating. Hair whipping in the wind, eyes hard as ice, knives and guns slotted all over his body, grace and deadliness in every calculated step of his heavy and silent boots.

And now, sitting shirtless on the floor of Tony's lab, he just looked...hurt. Ripped up, compromised by his own greatest weapon. Confused. Smaller, pained, lost somehow.

Steve just wanted to reach out and take Bucky's hands in his, hold him so tight that Bucky knew he never had to be alone again. Steve was never going to let anyone hurt him again.

But he didn't. He handed another piece of orange to Bucky and listened half-heartedly to Tony's chatter about the nature of a certain mechanism in Bucky's arm and tried not to stare at the destroyed flesh of his best friend's shoulder and tried to keep his damn hands to himself.

~*~*~

"Stark. What can I do you for?"

"You do realize that is not proper English, right Barton?"

"Maybe if anyone actually invited me to shit instead of just calling all the time, I would learn to communicate to your standards. But seriously, what're you calling for? You call me, let's see.
"Never."

"Well excuse me for being a very busy super genius running a multimillion dollar company while simultaneously inventing the newest generation of technological advancements and y'know, saving the world."

"Pepper runs the company."

"Anyways. I just thought I'd give you the opportunity to know, that the most accurate shot in the world is spending all day tomorrow under my roof."

"...I mean, there are way better ways to ask me to come over than that, but I'm flattered, so yeah, I'll hop on a plane tonight--"

"Oh, wait, sorry, did you think I meant you? No, you see, I was talking about the fucking Winter Soldier."

Clint didn't really even have the chance to be pissed about the insult to his sharp-shooting skills. That could be an argument for another time. Although that conversation was not over.

"James Barnes is in New York? And he's just...chill now??"

"Not exactly chill, persay. But I did him the honors of fixing up his arm and he's coming back tomorrow for a checkup recalibration. I got a plethora of specs on the thing though, you should seriously see the intricacy--"

"Tony, frankly my dear, I don't give a damn." He could basically hear the eyeroll over the phone and smirked in response. "But what I do care about - how is Rogers holding up?"

Stark actually went a little quiet at that. Jarvis said something in the background and Tony was much better at muffling phones than Steve was because Clint picked up exactly zero of his response. When he came back Clint was already jiggling his leg impatiently, waiting for a response.

"Cap's acting...weird." Tony finally relented, coming back over the line. "He won't stop staring at Barnes, which is totally understandable when the guy shouldn't even be alive, but they're living together, you'd think he'd get his fill of staring when I'm not trying to give a technological diagnosis. I never even thought that could be a thing, a technological diagnosis...I should really coin that term, it sounds way cooler than medical diagnosis, although technically the arm is part of Barnes..."

"They're living together?" Clint finally managed to squeeze in between Tony's long-winded explanation.

"Yeah, I know, not exactly the smartest idea Cap's had. But what can you expect, the guy is ninety something. Maybe he's getting amnesia...oh, no, wait that would be the lethal assassin living with him. I have a feeling it's like that whole, you know, babynake thing? Where it's more dangerous to get bit by a babynake because they can't control their venom output? That's basically how that whole assassin-without-memories thing has got to be because he doesn't even remember half the brutal murders of his pa-- oh, shit, hi Barnes, I didn't know you were still here."

The phone got cupped into silence again and Clint wasn't just jostling his leg while he waited this time, he was pacing and cursing Tony Stark and that Murphy dick who made that one law about shit going wrong.

"Hey Barton, gotta go, have a splendid night shooting things or whatever you do in the dark hours."
The device beeped off and Clint stared at his phone, showing him the newly-familiar screen of being hung up on.

He really was reconsidering giving the Avengers his cell number.

~*~*~

"Memories are a funny thing, Sergeant. There's a scientist - here, let me get his name..." Bruce shuffled through the pile of papers in front of him, only half of which Bucky could see on the little blue screen with Dr. Banner's face.

It was something called a Skype call, although Tony went on to explain it was actually a lot better technology than a simple Skype call and Bucky really didn't care, it was simply a benefit to acquaintance himself with more allies from Steve Rogers' life. And finding that both Dr. Banner and Tony Stark had done a lot of research regarding amnesia and brainwashing, it was much more educational than Bucky'd anticipated.

Finally Bruce Banner emerged back into the webcam with a file in his hand and his curly hair in a wild swoop across his forehead. Bucky straightened and watched the screen patiently.

"...Dr. Yadin Dudai. See, he's got this theory on the memory paradox and it's based on the idea that memory is an act of creation and imagination - every time you remember something you're physically recreating a scene in your head from pieces. It's not actually something that's stored, it has to be created new every time. So, there's no such thing as a true memory, only the most recent recreation. And you can't know that any memory is verifiably accurate. So that's where the paradox comes in."

Bruce Banner talked with his hands in rolling motions, kinda like Tony did. Maybe it was a genius-scientist thing.

"The more you remember something, the more times you have to recreate it, the less accurate it becomes. The most honest and clear memories are actually those of amnesia patients. If the memories haven't been accessed over and over and therefore meddled, then the recreation of that scene for you is gonna be alot more accurate than whatever Steve's remembering."

Well.

That explained a lot.

"So all of the flashbacks I've been having, those are real scenes, then? They felt unrealistically clear."

"Yes, that's exactly how it's going to be. Whatever your mind is bringing back - unless, of course, it's an implanted memory - will be the realest version of the truth. The catch to this, though, it's true for all memories. I don't know if you're familiar with the term PTSD, but those memories are going to be alot clearer for you than any other veteran--"

"I'm not a veteran, I'm a soldier," Bucky interrupted. He wasn't done serving. Just because he'd spent a few days at the Stark Tower did not mean his missions were complete or forgotten in any way.

Bruce Banner gave him a look like he was calculating way more from Bucky's words than the conclusion that he was still fighting, but Bucky wasn't gonna take back his statement.

"Okay. Yeah, alright. But you know, flashbacks might turn to nightmares. Or, if it gets really bad, night terrors." Bucky waved a dismissive hand, because he slept as efficiently as he did everything else. He didn't dream. Bruce shrugged, looking down at the folders in his hands. "But if they do, you know you can go to any one of us for help."
For a team of dysfunctional, half-crazy superheroes, they sure were keen to 'help.'

"Stark has been...abrupt." Bucky shifted his weight, crossing his arms over his chest in the stance that he seemed to be taking more and more lately. "He's not as reckless as Steve, but he's not careful with his words either."

Bruce smiled and ducked his head bashfully, a faraway look in his eyes like he was remembering something.

"That's the nice thing about Tony. The rest of them? They only see the tragedy. He thinks...he thinks we're human." Bruce's eyes met Bucky's through the time and space between them, across the Skype call to wherever Dr. Banner was, and for just a moment Bucky wondered if maybe, maybe these people were more alike him than he'd thought.

*He thinks we're human.*

A real human being.

"I appreciate the research," Bucky started, not really sure what to say next because he had seen plenty of people thank each other but it felt so trivial, surely Dr. Banner was aware of the impact he was making and did he really have to be *reminded* of it by Bucky?

Noise, more useless words, people repeating the same things over and over for each other's benefit. What was the point?

"You're welcome," Bruce interjected, before Bucky could stumble anymore. He gave Bucky a smile and Bucky ran a hand through his hair, offering Dr. Banner a nod before disconnecting the call.

When he turned back around, Steve was standing in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe.

"I think you're human," he said quietly, the words drifting long and sloping in all the space between them. Bucky hadn't moved, frozen watching Steve, the void of ten feet suddenly twenty, then thirty, and he decided to take a step closer, because he was much too far away and it was an irrational thought and he almost took two steps backwards because of it but no, he wouldn't be weak enough to change his mind.

Steve's eyes were soft, nothing like careful, but nothing like the stupid-reckless either.

"I think you're human," Steve repeated, still leaning in the doorway, watching Bucky.

The way he was looking at Bucky felt familiar, and a wave of unexpected warmth bubbled through him. The same warmth he'd felt when Steve's palm had rested on his chest, but that'd been physical, that'd been a transfer of energy and body heat, why would the same feeling come when they were nowhere near touching?

The situation was teetering on the edge of something dangerous and Bucky almost considered pushing past Steve to avoid it because he didn't know where this was going but his senses were screwing with his head and he couldn't move.

"And I think you're a hero, Buck," Steve finished, words cascading down like waterfalls, treacherous and glinting with sunlight and promise and crashing on rocks below to send up rainbow and silver droplets to spin in the sun and cool off the world and Steve Rogers thought he was a hero.
"I'll be gone for a few days," Bucky told him, then he was brushing past Steve and out into the hallway and into the elevator and he didn't stop to answer Jarvis's questions, just stepped out of the building and slipped away into the dark of the night and let the shadows cover him and the world hide him from the sunlight so he could hide from those words and Steve's warmth and himself, too.

~*~*~

A few days was apparently six, which was basically a week, so really Steve felt cheated. It was his fault, though. He'd pushed Bucky too far and yes, he knew he was supposed to be giving Buck space. He'd promised he'd give him space and what, two days after he accidentally got introduced to Steve's friends he was pushing titles and heavy words around?

Meeting the rest of the team was surprisingly easier than Steve had thought. Not that he'd expected Bucky to slaughter them all, but he'd anticipated it to at least be difficult. Bucky didn't seemed phased though, not by crowds, not by strangers, not by Tony's robots or the lab or the ridiculous security protocols or the wide blue screens and holographic projections.

It was like Bucky just...didn't care about any of it. Nothing phased him. He took it all in stride, so long as he didn't find it annoying or - what was that word he always used - inefficient.

It would be infuriating if it wasn't breaking Steve's heart.

That didn't stop his broken heart from pounding out of his chest ridiculously when Bucky slipped through the window on the sixth night, somewhere around 7pm.

"You have a good trip?" Steve asked as he got off the couch, maybe a little sarcastic, maybe a little pissed off, but Bucky'd been gone for a week and Steve didn't have a single good day in his absence.

Bucky narrowed his eyes but sat his sniper rifle down on the brick fireplace. Hell, Steve was surprised he'd come back at all.

"Let me guess," Steve continued, kinda slamming his way around the kitchen. Back in Brooklyn 1940 all over again, getting riled up and pissed everytime Bucky didn't come home because he'd been with some girl - or multiple - and gotten stupid drunk and hadn't bothered to show up to the damn apartment until he was broke off his ass three days later. "You're either bleeding or exhausted, and you need a place to sleep."

"Basically, yeah," Bucky responded, just as sarcastically, starting to unload his guns onto the floor. Steve groaned in exasperation because obviously, he wasn't going to tell Bucky to leave. He was stubborn, but he was only pissed because Bucky was gone, he'd never send him off intentionally.

"Bucky, I thought we were over this stage." Steve crossed the room and slipped the firearm between Bucky's shoulderblades out of its holster, setting it down on the floor beside his others. Bucky didn't swat him away from helping, but he didn't thank Steve either.

"What stage?" he asked, like Steve was the craziest person on the planet.

"The stage that you leave all the time and only come back here to lick your wounds. I don't know what you're afraid of-"

"Afraid? I'm not goddamned afraid of anything, Rogers." Bucky spun on him with fire in his eyes and no, that was Steve's line. Buck may be some hotshot legend now, but Steve'd already gone down that road once and it hadn't changed anything between them then, it wasn't changing anything now that the roles were reversed.
He got right up in Bucky's face, six inches between their chests as Steve leaned forward, making his words as damned clear as they got.

"Buck, you were a prisoner of war for seventy years, you'd have to be off your fucking rocker if you think you're just fine."

Icyblue eyes that used to look at him with adoration and affection turned as bitter and cold as the ice that'd trapped them both for so long, then Bucky was hissing back in that tone that'd scare anyone else, anyone but Steve because Tony may just rollover people's pasts but Steve knew. Bucky. Like no one else in the entire goddamned world ever would.

"You're the one who gets nightmares, not me," Bucky pointed accusingly, too pissed to brush the crazy disheveled hair out of his face. Nightmares? Really? Bucky wouldn't even know about those if he hadn't been watching Steve sleep because he never bothered to get rest of his own.

"You don't sleep!" Steve accused back, throwing his hands up. "You crash here what, once a week?"

"I get the exact amount of regeneration time that my body needs, it's not my fault you never trained yours." The words cut deep and cold because that was it, that was the core of the problem.

Bucky didn't see how hurt he was. He didn't see how messed up he was, how far off the reservation from okay. He thought he was functional. And he was, on a surface level, he was still deadly and he had perfect posture and he moved like a goddamned dream but what was the point if underneath that all was a robotic machine?

"That's the whole point, Bucky. Life isn't supposed to be about training." He'd gone from semi-yelling to pissed-exasperated and Bucky'd simmered down a notch in response, looking haughtily up at Steve like he was outta his mind.

"It's not about training, once you know what you're doing. Then it's just efficiency, something you also don't have." Bucky crossed his arms and Steve threw up his hands again because goddammit, Bucky was missing the entire point here.

This wasn't about whether or not Steve was efficient, this wasn't about whether or not Bucky had 'performance errors' or whatever the fuck he'd called them that one time that'd made Steve want to throw things and resurrect Zola just to destroy him all over again.

"Life's not supposed to be about efficiency either, Buck." God, he was so tired of this fight. It may be the first time they vocalized it, but this was the underlying argument behind every glare and unimpressed eyebrow-raise Bucky'd ever shot his way.

Steve sighed, running a hand through his hair and taking a few steps backwards. How were you ever supposed to save someone if they didn't know they were drowning? Bucky'd lost the entire point of what being alive was supposed to be about and it was killing Steve because, really, it was simple.

Their gazes caught again and the corners of his mouth turned up a little, sadly, but Bucky was just so defiant and that wasn't the point of this at all.

"I just want you to be happy," Steve told him. It was the wrong thing to say. Icy eyes widened a fraction, then a bomb went off somewhere and Bucky exploded.

"Happy?? Ты счастлив? Are you happy, Steve? Tell me all about what it's supposed to feel like to be so goddamned happy!" The words were the sharpest he'd ever heard from that mouth and Steve'd heard some bitter things from those lips. Most of them directed at bullies in back alleys, but now the
bitterness was turned on him, so pissed off he'd actually reverted to cursing in Russian.

Steve really wished he'd killed Zola when he'd had the chance.

But he couldn't change anything about that now, so he just crossed his arms over his chest and glared back; because this wasn't their first fight. Bucky might not remember how these normally turn out, but Steve was well aware which of the two of them were more stubborn.

"I'll be happy once you're better." It was the truth; Steve may not be in a great place right now, but once Bucky was okay, then there would be nothing to keep Steve from being okay too.

"Better? Better? There's nothing wrong with me!" Bucky shouted, metal arm whirring as his hands tightened into curled fists at his sides. That wasn't a good sign. Steve knew about triggers that made Bucky scared, but he didn't know anything about what'd happen if he pissed him off.

Last week he'd helped Buck out'a flashback (although of what, Bucky hadn't told him) - when Tony'd tried to do the same, he'd ended up flung across the room (which Steve'd weaseled outta Stark by dragging him off by the arm and demanding how he got the bruises). Buck hadn't changed in that aspect - Steve's touch was still what grounded him, what calmed him from his memories and the haunted ghosts swimming through his head.

So, as much as Bucky was pissed and screaming there was nothing wrong with him, Steve wasn't gonna just ignore Buck's flashbacks and avoidances and trying to shut the world out. Not when it was his job to be here. His job to save his best friend now.

"Bucky, I'm just trying to help." Steve took a single step forward and Bucky tensed like a guitar string, mirroring Steve's movement with a step backwards, forcing distance between them. His words were as cold and heartbreaking as the sudden step away.

"I don't need you to fix me." Bucky sneered, gesturing at Steve with a disgusted wave of his hand. "You're a hell of a lot more messed up than I am. You can't even go a fucking day. without losing it. You're the one who's broken, Steve, not me."

Steve was left blinking in his living room while Bucky stormed past him, silent as ever, then the bedroom door slammed and the apartment fell into crushing silence and Steve just sunk to the floor where he was, staring at his closed bedroom door and wondering where the hell he'd gone wrong.

Not catching Bucky from the train, that's where he'd gone wrong. And it seemed like he was doing nothing but making mistakes since.

Chapter End Notes

The doctor that Bruce talks about is a for-real guy, and there is a super interesting podcast here about memories if you wanna listen to that.

Thank you so much for reading as always!! All comments and kudos are super duper appreciated :)
The bed in Steve's room wasn't as offensive as he'd thought it be. Locking himself in Steve's bedroom meant there wasn't much to do besides read the library stacked on the shelves; and he stretched out on Steve's bed to do so. He didn't sleep on it because getting off it took an act of congress and if he needed a quick escape it wouldn't be efficient. So at night he slept on the window seat, head tipped back against the wall and the sounds of New York washing over him, constant drone of noise he turned down like a knob in his head.

During the day he read Steve's books until there were no more to read, then he rifled through the closet until he found something interesting: a little black sketchbook. The drawings were all dated between May and September of this year, so throughout the first few months of Steve's assimilation to the 21st century.

There were buildings, skylines he recognized out the window juxtaposed to ones that were achingly
familiar, probably from the 1940s. Scenes of Central Park, Grand Central Station. Pencil sketches of people in battle - the girl from the bridge, Tony Stark, others he didn't recognize. Confused drawings of new gadgets, an adjusting world around him. A few sketches for Captain America suits, one in red, one in blue, one in white with blue accents and red straps. That one had a note next to it in Steve's handwriting, something about never being able to keep it clean.

But Bucky's favorite drawing actually wasn't in the book; he saw it later, two days later, when he finally decided to venture out of Steve's room after their fight.

It wasn't a terrible fight, but he didn't feel like dealing with the aftermath of Steve's pity or nurse syndrome or hurt from Bucky's words. He'd meant what he said; he wasn't broken. Steve was more messed up than he was. He wasn't interested in being 'fixed.'

He needn't have worried though, because as soon as he emerged from Steve's bedroom it became clear the apartment was empty. He re-armed himself in the living room, checking for signs of where Steve had gone. The answer ended up sitting on the kitchen counter, in the form of a handwritten note.

_I'm at Tony's, researching what he puts in his strange green smoothies. I figured we could eat something besides apples for a change. Not that's anything wrong with - I took my bike, but the walk isn't bad, I left a map. Or you can call this number for a car, if you want to join me._

- S.G.R.

The map had a route highlighted in black marker - avoiding all the major roadways and cutting through backalleys to get there. He almost smiled at that, because maybe Steve was getting to know him after all. Or maybe Bucky Barnes had always been the kind to travel through back alleys.

But the best part of the note was the pencil drawing arching down the side, next to Steve's carefully sloping words. It was of Bucky's metal arm, bent slightly at the elbow, plates carefully shaded and detailed. Except instead of the red Soviet star on his bicep, there was a pencil sketch of an apple.

The Apple Soldier. He almost laughed.

He was supposed to be mad at Steve, but instead he found his lips curling up automatically, his body turning a smile on a mouth that hadn't had a use for one in decades.

Carefully folding the note, Bucky unstrapped part of his vest and tucked the paper inside. The moment his fingers slid it into an inner pocket, his mind turned the vest blue, a peacoat, another one of Steve Rogers' drawings in his hands, a lifetime ago.

_The world smelled like forest and graphite, Steve was pressed up warm against his side as though there wasn't plenty of room for both of them. There were acorns, filtering light of dusk, Steve's soft blonde hair, the crisp feel of the paper in his hands. Since the paper was folded, he couldn't see what the drawing was of - but he really, really wanted to know._

The memory faded before he could take any other details from it, then Bucky was strapping his vest back up and grabbing the map from the counter, swinging out of Steve's window to follow the black line before he could lose the train of inquiry or the nerve to ask Steve about it.

He wanted to know what the other drawing he'd kept was. It was vital information; somehow. He didn't know why yet, but not all mission parameters were clear from the beginning. Right?
"Good afternoon, Sergeant Barnes. Can I assist you with anything today, sir?" Jarvis greeted as the elevator doors closed. Normally he'd take the stairs, but Stark's enhanced elevator went fast enough that he didn't feel like punching walls.

"Do you have a visual on Steve Rogers?" Bucky asked, finger hovering over the elevator buttons. The doors slid closed and the seventeenth floor lit up all on its own, already sliding upwards before Jarvis spoke again.

"Captain Rogers is currently on the seventeenth floor, waiting for the arrival of the remaining Avengers members so the Avengers meeting may commence."

"Avengers?" He repeated, folding his arms over his chest and leaning against the wall. Which is how he got the run-down over the length of the ride, images displayed helpfully on the wall to depict the Battle of New York in full detail.

The 'Avengers' team consisted of all the people in Steve's notebook, so their faces were familiar. Hawkeye and Black Widow and Thor and Bruce and Tony. He'd already met three of them, although his encounter with Natasha had been trying to kill her, so that may prove to be a problem.

Turned out the first problem definitely wasn't Natasha. Although really, he didn't think it was as big of a problem as Steve did...

"Rogers?" Bucky called out, stepping out of the elevator and now armed with names and information to store alongside his knives and three pistols.

The seventeenth floor was lavish but modern, a stocked bar to the right and metal stairs and platforms arching above the door, half-open blinds covering floor to ceiling windows, and a giant raised platform in the middle of the room lined with white couches and a silver banister.

Steve was sitting on one of those couches, but the moment he heard his name he shot up with a surprised "Bucky!" Tony was there too, looking at him with raised eyebrows over the projection hovering on the table.

He stepped out from under the alcove, cutting to the left to scale the stairs up to the platform. Halfway up the metal stairs and a faint thwip went off behind him, followed by a soft whistling sound, then Bucky was leaning backwards and snapping his metal arm up, just in time to catch the arrow aimed at his skull.

The tip of it was inches away from his temple but the quick catch with the strength of the metal hand splintered the arrow into a thousand pieces, a few splinters scratching his cheekbone in the millisecond it took for him to spin on his feet and aim one of his pistols at the shooter on the metal beam.

He'd have shot already, if Steve wasn't right behind him, if he wasn't inside one of the most secure buildings in the world. Odds are, if someone was here, Steve knew about it, and if he killed any of Steve's friends that might put a serious damper on the day.

"What the hell was that?!!?" Steve shouted from behind him, before he could open his mouth and ask the same thing. Except probably a lot less nice.

The man on the metal beam swung down, jumping to a platform across the room and starting their way casually. Bucky didn't lower his pistol, watching the shooter and debating non-lethal shots as his brain filtered through information on the man's face, finally supplying a name to the attacker:
Codename Hawkeye; Clinton Francis Barton; high-level assassin, propensity for arrows.

"I wanted to see if he was as good as everyone claims he is," Barton shouted back as explanation, starting down the stairs towards the platform where Steve was glowering.

He was expecting a "Bucky, put the gun down," from Rogers, but actually...it looked like Bucky may be the one to step in with damage control. Steve Rogers was thrumming on the verge of exploding.

"Is this a joke to you??" Steve seethed, fists curled at his sides, then Tony was rolling his eyes and muttering an exasperated "here we go." Either Rogers didn't hear or didn't care about Tony's comment because he was still glaring at Barton, shoulders strung up high with tension. "What the hell made you think that was a good idea? Do you have a death wish? Just because he's not Bruce doesn't mean he won't get pissed off enough to kill you! If you hadn't killed him first!!"

"He's also right here," Bucky supplied, tucking the gun back into its holster and jogging up the rest of the stairs. "And offended, because an arrow isn't going to take down the Winter fucking Soldier, Steve."

"Thank you," Clint rolled his eyes and put the bow down, keeping a healthy distance between himself and the blonde ball of rage as he stuck a hand out to Bucky. "The man I keep getting blown off for. I'm Clint, by the wa-"

"I know," Bucky interrupted, brushing past Barton with a calculating glance before turning all of his attention to the still-pissed Steve. The Sergeant voice from the 40's had long since only spoken Russian when giving commands, but the sharpness of it hadn't failed him yet. "Rogers, pipe the fuck down."

Steve was still glaring at Clint, hardcore, and Tony had started to edge away from him, probably in fear of the wrath of a 240lb supersoldier. Bucky sighed, the situation feeling oddly familiar, like he'd done this a hundred times. He kept himself braced for the hit in case Rogers lost his temper, but for some reason he felt confident Steve wouldn't swing out at him, specifically.

So he sauntered up to Steve's side, grabbing one of his balled up fists and uncurling the fingers manually, prying with cold metal against dangerous strength. It took a few seconds for Steve to catch on to what he was doing and by that time he'd already started forcing the other hand to relax.

Steve's eyes went wide and Bucky moved to drop Steve's hand back to his side when suddenly the fingers tightened again, trapping Bucky's between his this time.

"Are you okay?" Steve asked, voice low and private, words for just the two of them. Bucky looked up at blue eyes, the familiar warmth spreading through him at their proximity, at Steve's fingers tangled up with his own. There was another feeling too, akin to one of the performance-enhancing drugs he used to take...like a prickling heightened sense of awareness beyond even what he usually knew, like every inch of his body that was touching Steve's wasn't just present but burning, on fire.

Before he could pull back his hands his brain tipped sideways in his head and a flood flashed before him, a hundred little clips and moments rapidly evolving and dissolving before his eyes – their hands entwined between their bodies, reaching over at a carnival ride, squeezing tight as they laughed, holding loosely while inspecting damage, clasped elegantly while the world spun around them in the swirls of a dance – then he was deposited back into the present, hands still locked with Steve's.

The worried eyes had become even moreso – ironic, considering the source of Steve's worry versus the actual cause. He'd feared Barton's arrow would upset Bucky when in fact the only thing shaking him was this, their hands clasped together between their chests.
“Aren't I supposed to be asking you that?” Bucky finally responded, drawing his hands back from Steve's and cocking his eyebrow like he hadn't just been bombarded with a hundred memories of holding hands with the supersoldier before him.

“I'm not the one that got shot at,” Steve huffed exasperatedly, shooting another glare at Clint from over Bucky's shoulder. It was considerably less dangerous though, so he let it slide. At least he'd calmed Rogers down before he slaughtered a fellow team member. Although why he'd gotten *that* pissed on Bucky's behalf was a mystery.

Not near as fucking much as the mystery that Steve had never told him that they apparently spent their entire lives holding hands on a frequent enough basis his fingers still fucking curled at the memory.

Wait. No. Couple *hundred* memories.

“Jeez, it didn't even have a sharp point!” Barton complained from behind them and Bucky took a step back, then another, shoving distance between him and Steve. They must have created quite the scene, all pissed rage melting into quiet hand-holding. He didn't know what the fuck to think of that.

“Now that crisis has been averted, Barton had his question answered and Cap has stopped whistling like a boiling tea kettle, can we get on with this meeting anytime soon?” Tony gestured at the table, where the blue telescreen flashed an image of Dr. Banner, apparently also waiting.

Deflating, Steve made his way back to one of the couches and sat down, glancing between the three of them – four, if the holographic Bruce counted – and twisted his mouth in confusion. “We're still missing--”

“No anymore,” another voice interrupted. Bucky spun around to witness the swinging-hips smug-smiled approach of the red-haired woman who'd tried to choke him to death with piano wire – Codename Black Widow; Natalia Alianovna "Natasha" Romanoff; Russian assassin, propensity for interrogation.

She was greeted with a chorus of various forms of the name “Natasha,” one of which was simple Tash from Barton. With a wide, pretty smile she greeted them all back, a little wave at Tony, a quick hug from Steve (that he was planning to analyze later), and a suddenly sobered look and deep nod for Clint (also curious enough to further analyze).

Then curly red hair swung and she was facing him, expressions schooled into a careful mask. “James Barnes,” she greeted cautiously.

“Bucky,” he corrected without thinking. Steve's eyebrows shot up about 800 feet and Bucky was pretty sure he looked just as surprised as Steve did. He hadn't ever given himself a name or a title, but everyone else (Steve) called him Bucky instead of James, so it only seemed appropriate to correct her misinformation...

“Alright. Bucky.” She nodded, still on guard. Understandable, he'd shot her through the shoulder. To be fair, she'd zapped his metal arm and cracked his eye goggles. Which may not elicit a bulletwound in other circumstances, but he *was* a deadly assassin.

“Are you joining us for the meeting, Barnes?” Tony asked, interrupting the calm staring contest between them. He turned from Natasha, looking at Stark with raised eyebrows.

“Meeting about...”

“You,” Clint piped up, sitting cross-legged on the floor beside one couch, rolling a drumstick...
between his fingers. The Avengers were holding a meeting in discussion of him. The information would be beneficial. So he found Steve's gaze, which wasn't hard since the blue eyes were basically glued to him every time he was in the room.

“Do you have qualms with my staying?” He didn't need to ask Steve, really, but it was the courteous thing to do when he'd been invited to the tower by Steve and didn't want to impose on any discussions just because he'd come to talk about a drawing. Right, he still had to see about that drawing--

“Course not, Buck.” Steve scooted a few feet on the couch and Bucky took the invitation, sitting down carefully next to him.

“Alright. Now that that's settled, we can start this thing. Romanoff, you said you wanted to-” Natasha interrupted Tony, leaning against a couch and looking directly at Bucky.

"Why did you quit Hydra? Assuming you did."

"Natasha. Would it kill you to have some common courtesy--" Steve interrupted, before Nat raised her eyebrows at him and gave him that face, talking over him in turn.

"No, but he still might kill us-"

"We're literally less than a minute into this meeting and already-" Clint started to say, then Banner contributed from his telescreen, "We won't ever get through this if we argue," and Tony started to point fingers and give his input too, then Steve whistled, high-pitched and loud, and everyone shut up.

"Okay, let's make this simple. Clint, you have no room to talk because you tried to shoot Buck the moment he got here," Natasha raised an eyebrow at that and looked over at Barton, who shrugged. Steve ignored them and continued. "Tony, talking over everyone helps nothing, Bruce - we all appreciate the peacemaking, but let's keep this conversation to a maximum of two people at once. And Natasha, don't be rude."

Bucky snorted and everyone turned to him in surprise. His expression snapped back down into nonchalance and Steve sighed, turning back to Nat and waving for her to continue her line of questioning.

"Barnes. Please tell us why you quit Hydra." She had that smug little smile on her face, but that was the best Steve was going to get out of her so he let it go.

Bucky studied all of their faces for a moment and Steve made sure to keep his supportive but not pressing, all open and sincere and everyone here was so fucking uptight, so stuck in their opinions and righteousness and Bucky shook his head, the urge settling on his tongue like it'd come from under his skin, somewhere he didn't even know yet.

One glance at Steve's face, all the tight lines that weren't there in the museum footage, and Bucky didn't hesitate a moment longer.

"Hydra didn't have apples," he told them. And Steve couldn't help it; he just started laughing. The look on Buck's face had been dead serious - except the dull twinkle of mischief in his eyes that Steve was pretty sure only he could see.
Now everyone was staring at Steve and he clamped down on his laughter, shaking his head with an affectionate smile before waving a hand of apology for interrupting.

He didn't miss though, the quiet whisper from Tony to Bruce, almost too soft for his ears to pick up, but he did anyways. "I think that's the first time I've heard him laugh."

Steve's smile faded a bit at the comment. Not because Tony had said it, but because it was probably true.

"Are you going to make me ask the question a third time?" Natasha asked, eyebrows raised a little. Bucky leaned forward, forearms resting on his knees as he answered.

"I left Hydra because I had a reason to. For sixty years I had no purpose but to execute the mission. I didn't know who I was before Hydra and I didn't care. They handled my upkeep, there was no reason to leave."

"But you were tortured." Natasha cocked her head. Bucky just looked at her.

"Pain training." Steve couldn't help his wince at the words. Bucky ignored him. "I never considered escaping; there wasn't anything to escape from. Then I was given a name and a past and told that there was more to myself than I knew. So I researched, I discovered Bucky Barnes, and I realized the truth about Hydra."

He leaned back, threading his right hand through his hair to push it out of his face. "It pissed me off, so I took a new mission." Bucky's pretty mouth curved up a little on one side, eyes twinkling again. "To...ave
g Bucky Barnes."

Steve groaned and Tony made some indignant sound. Barton and Banner just looked amused.

"And just like that, you're one of the good guys? Assassins don't randomly switch sides." Natasha pointed out, twirling a piece of her curly hair.

"You did," Bucky replied. She made a face and Clint gave Bucky a triumphant grin. "Not saying I'm an Avenging Angel like Rogers. And I'm not going to work for SHIELD. Or anyone. But even with Hydra, I only killed the bad guys. Well, who Hydra said the bad guys were."

"What do you mean?" Clint asked curiously, twirling his drumstick again.

"They told me I was saving the world. The same thing anyone gets told when they fight. You think the bad guys have a different speech about spreading evil or something? Everyone says they're the good guys. Even back in the war."

Steve had really been trying to keep his emotions out of this, but he couldn't stop from looking at Bucky helplessly at that. It was something Buck had always struggled with...Steve could still remember them talking about it sometimes, in dark army tents under the flickering light of a lantern.

Who do you fight for?

Their dance, barely more than a week before Bucky had fallen, Steve had asked him what Bucky was fighting for, why he was over there in the first place.

You know the answer to that.

Bucky had fought for him. He'd been told - they'd all been told - that they were saving the war by killing the Nazis. And Bucky had flat out said once that the American Army was full of shit because
they'd say anything it took to get them to kill who they were supposed to.

So Bucky hadn't fought for them. He'd fought for Steve.

And then, when he didn't have Steve anymore... what had he fought for then? Hydra had been forced to tell Bucky he was saving the world in order for him to comply.

Bucky couldn't fight for Steve anymore, so he'd fought for what Steve used to fight for.

He was fine. He was totally absolutely fine he wasn't gonna cry or anything fuck tearing up right, fuck tear ducts and fuck this whole meeting.

Thank god Natasha got back to grilling before anyone could call Steve on the near waterworks. Pretty sure this was the first time in his life he'd been grateful for Natasha's relentless interrogations.

"So we're supposed to magically trust you now?" she said dubiously and the sound that came out of Bucky's mouth at that was terribly distressing.

"No. I don't trust any of you. I don't have reasons to kill you, either. But if you give me one, I will."

"That is super comforting," Clint said dryly. "Ghost assassin legend that'll off us the second we steal his cheerios."

"I don't like cheerios," Bucky offered. Tony looked a little pale. Natasha's eyes were narrowed and Bruce had busied himself in something on the other side of the telescreen in his nervousness. It was definitely time for Steve to intervene.

He clapped Bucky on the shoulder - the one that wasn't scarred - and forced a tight smile at everyone.

"Any of us could kill each other anyways, right? And as for trust, we can work up to that. Not everything has to be done today." Steve let his hand drop off of Buck's shoulder and his stiffness faded slightly.

"But you have been through a debrief?" Nat asked and Bucky raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

"Not interested."

"Not optional," she shot back.

"Woah, woah, let's not get all Russian-assassin on each other." Tony held up his hands to placate them. "Like Rogers said, we'll work everything out. It's not like there's eminent danger to handle right now."

"Besides Barnes," Bruce pointed out helpfully. Steve narrowed his eyes but Bucky didn't seem offended in the least, mask of nonchalance back over his features.

"Still, I'm sure we can work everything out before the next crisis--"

*

The tower chose that exact moment to sound a loud alarm over the room. Everyone pulled weapons except for Steve - who just looked alert - and Tony, who was used to loud-ass clanking interrupting his life.
But the three assassins in the room all had weapons of choice aimed in various directions until Tony swiped something on a screen and the sound died, replaced by Jarvis' vocal rundown of the situation.

"Escaped convicts holding up a jewelry store, sir." Bucky snorted, because that had to be the most dramatic police scanner in the world.

Everyone looked between Bucky and the holographic report that had appeared on the table.

"Now's a good a time as any to test the trustworthy theory, right?" Tony suggested. No one disagreed, and Bucky didn't care either way. He'd kill who he wanted to kill when he wanted to kill them and if they were requesting his services, he'd take the opportunity to brush up on his skills.

Tony shrugged and swiped the holograph away. "Suit up."

Good thing he was already in full armor.

Natasha and Clint opted out because it wasn't exactly a life or death situation and they had no obligation to save the great jewelry stores of New York and plant their face on a headline like Stark always did.

The problem, though, was that Steve wanted Bucky to opt out too. And on the ride over, he found out Steve didn't just want Bucky out of this mission. Steve didn't want him fighting at all.

"This is not negotiable, Rogers."

"You're right, it's not. You just spent the past 70 years under Hydra's thumb and now you want to go out and keep fighting? God, Bucky, out of everyone on the planet, you deserve to hang up the uniform more than anyone else!"

"Is that what this is about? What I deserve? Maybe you should stop making decisions for me and let me do what I want. It's been a while since I've been able to do that."

"Look, Buck, you know I didn't mean--"

"To what, tell me when I can and can't fight, exactly like Hydra did?"

"That's not fair. You know I would never do that to you."

"Then let me do this!" Bucky gestured wildly at the New York streets, indicating the world in general. "This is what I'm made for, Steve. Have you stopped fighting? Why the hell should I? If you can't handle that, I'll find someplace else to stay. But I'm not going to sit on the sidelines because you're squeamish about having me in battle with you."

"It's not that! I trust you, Bucky."

"Then fucking prove it," Bucky snapped back, pushing his hair pissily out of his face with his left hand.

"Fine. We're already on a damn mission together. I just wish you'd think about this--"

"And I wish you'd shut up so I can go over the fucking mission parameters with Stark." Bucky's tone was harsh and Steve looked genuinely offended for a moment, then his eyes just narrowed and he turned away. Good.

"What's the rule on target elimination?" He asked into the comm.
It had been a while since he killed anyone that wasn't Hydra, and it looked like today wasn't that day either. Non-fatal damage, if at all possible. *People like to watch the bad guys get cuffed.*

He didn't give a damn about what the people liked but when he dropped through the window behind the convicts, he refrained from shooting them all. Instead he threw knives to pin the hands of the further ones and knocked out the closer ones with embarrassing ease. Steve was checking the back room and Tony was on the street to catch any runners, but the whole thing was quite easy.

That is, until Bucky kicked one of the unconscious bodies and the man rolled over to flash a familiar pin featuring a red skull octopus.

It was a setup.

Training, instinct, every synaptic response of his brain set to evacuate mode and he absolutely would have made it out in time. Hydra hadn't gotten him yet, and there was a reason for that. He was uncompromisable.

Except that Steve Rogers hadn't reported over their radio connection yet.

Standing in the middle of a jewelry shop (although the whole thing might just be stage props to draw him in - surely Hydra had noticed his presence at Stark's; most likely by tracking Tony's movements, not his - and planned the distress call that way) - Bucky was frozen for a millisecond, running new mission plans through his head and calculating his options.

There was no way to know if they had the equipment to take him. No way to know how big this operation was. If the whole block was in on it, or maybe the fake-convicts were just looking for confirmation he was in New York so they could set up a bigger plan.

With the math blinking behind his eyes and training tugging his body towards the door, Bucky decided it didn't matter what Hydra had planned. He had to warn Steve Rogers.

*What do you fight for, toy soldier?* He used to know. Hydra told him he was saving the world; they told him he was shaping against chaos. Before that, in the war, had he fought to save the world then too? Had he fought for the red white blue, like Steve?

What was he fighting for now?

It didn't matter. He wasn't going to leave Steve Rogers here alone.

The next few minutes passed by in a black and white blur. He stormed into the back room, just in time to see Steve putting down his gun, hands up in surrender as another Hydra agent held a knife to a young man's throat - probably the shop owner, or some random citizen. Or, knowing Hydra, one of their own pretending to be a victim.

He didn't hesitate, just shot the Hydra agent between the eyes, making him cripple to the ground and the newly freed young man to close his hands over his ears at the sound. Steve was looking at him with wide eyes but Bucky just stooped to the ground, snatching Steve's pistol up and tossing it back to him.

"The hell were you thinking--" Bucky started, then the cock of another gun interrupted and he spun around, just in time to see one of the bastards on the floor getting up, sights aimed at Steve.

He shoved Steve behind him without thinking, lifting his metal arm to block the bullets. And it did, the first four, then one hit him in his ribcage and a sharp burn exploded through his body but he ignored it, blocking the last bullet with the palm of his metal hand before firing off three rapid shots
into the gunman; then shooting quick headshots around the room to any more bodies, just in case.

"As I was saying," Bucky started again, spinning back to Steve, but Rogers was staring at his chest - at the soft spot in his armor, where the bullet had penetrated - with wide eyes, speaking quickly into his comm with panicked words-

"Barnes has been shot, Stark, tell me you've got a 'copter in the area and a fully staffed hospital in the tower, because we can't take him to NY General."

Bucky snatched Steve's wrist, yanking the comm away from his mouth. "I'm fine," he hissed, glaring. Steve's eyes widened more and Bucky could already hear the stupid comeback on Steve's tongue but he didn't care, he didn't want to listen to Steve's worried concerns, especially not when they were in the middle of a setup. "But those douchebags are Hydra, so unless you want more damage than a bullet, we should get out of here right the fuck now."

Then Stark came bursting through the back door, red and gold suit blasting fire out of his feet and hands. "I'll fly him back to the tower, Cap, can you take the car?"

"Go," Steve pushed him in Tony's direction and Bucky rolled his eyes because good god, he got shot all the fucking time this was not a big deal. As soon as he got back to base they'd just give him the metabolism inducer and he'd be--

Except Stark didn't have those drugs, did he? Or any of the usual medical care he was used to. Not like it mattered, because he'd stitch the damn thing up himself before he let a doctor operate on him.

He complained half-heartedly about being treated like a dame while Tony blasted them off to the tower (even though he wasn't sure why he'd chosen the word dame, that word was ancient) then he was being bustled down a tower hallway and really, he wasn't going to let them shove him in a hospital room, even if it was Stark's people.

Steve showed up halfway through Bucky losing his temper. He'd just complained at first, then he'd raised his voice a little, turning serious. Then he started shouting, because he wasn't going to do this, Rogers had fucking promised he wasn't going to force Bucky to see a doctor. But he hadn't swung out yet, he wasn't going to get violent with them if they'd just listen, but they weren't, pushing him onto an operating table, then he shoved one of the white-coated people - not hard - and then, finally, Steve had come bursting into the room.

"Wait, wait, get off him!" Rogers was shouting and Bucky had never been more dizzingly grateful for the stupid overprotective streak and the way that people listened to Steve Rogers. "Bucky? Bucky, I need you to look at me. Where are you at right now?"

He'd been fine. He'd been perfect. Why were they trying to put him under? He didn't want to be wiped again. God, he'd thought he'd fucking escaped this whole scenario. He was strong, powerful, deadly --

Except when they put him in the chair; then it all drained out of him. That was his training, to submit and comply; and really, he should be pissed off and deadly, but he just felt blank and scared.

"Bucky? Bucky, it's Steve. I'm here. Can you look at me?"

He blinked up dejectedly and there was a golden-halo man staring at him. His body shivered, chills running down his spine violently, and then gentle hands were on his shoulders. Holding him down? Pushing him back into the chair? He couldn't tell.

"Steve?" he asked dubiously, eyes glassy and unfocused. Steve bit back the tears and the rage and
everything else he was feeling, running his hands gently up and down Bucky's biceps.

"Yeah, Buck, it's me. Can you tell me where you are right now?" God, this was a familiar game. One he'd hoped he'd never had to participate in again, but of fucking course Hydra hadn't weeded this out when they ripped Bucky apart.

Actually, the glassy look in Bucky's eyes was worse than it'd been this time last year, the last time he'd gotten shot and shoved onto a table. He'd lashed out then, bruising both Steve and the medic in the tent and that was decades ago for Bucky but for Steve it was a year ago, just a year ago that they were in this same spot.

Only back then, Bucky had melted into his words, blinked to the present and held Steve's hand tight, eyes watery and teasing, bitchy words trying to cover up his fear. Now he just looked blank, a tinge of fear in his eyes, lax compliance in his limbs.

The pouty lips parted, their usual smirk long gone, filled with confusion and pain now. "Stark Tower hospital ward," Bucky told him, his voice dead like a robot. Steve bit his lip and looked up at the ceiling blinking back the water in his eyes because fuck, how was he supposed to save Bucky from this?

When he looked back down, Buck was as white as a ghost. His eyes were somehow even more fogged, body trembling slightly and dark, damp strands of hair hanging in his face. The pale colour of his skin was terrifying enough in itself, then his head dipped forward, body slumping over.

"Bucky?" Steve called, panicked, catching that precious face between his hands before Bucky could topple over. The firm jaw was scratchy with rough stubble, but otherwise it was the same face he'd always known, the same cheeks his palms used to rest on. *I thought you were dead.* Only now, he looked like he might as well be.

Steve tipped Bucky's face up, palms frantically running over his cheeks, his forehead (which was too hot), one hand threading back into his hair, pushing the long strands out of his face. The icy blue eyes were half-lidded and his lips were pale and no, no.

"Talk to me. C'mon. Come on, Bucky, hey, hey!" None of Steve's words were making a difference, Buck just slumped into the hand holding back his hair.

The doors burst open and people in white coats swooped into the room and it was instinct that had him stepping closer to Bucky, only letting go with one hand so he could angrily shoo at the doctors.

"OUT!! All of you!" He couldn't even maintain his strong, steady Captain America voice right now, he was too panicked, he was losing Bucky, and the very thing that had set him off in the first place wasn't leaving.

"Captain Rogers, but he needs medical assis-"...

"Out!!" Steve shouted again, gesturing one more time and someone muttered something about Stark then they were all off and the door was closing again and Steve lifted Bucky's chin, pressing his fingertips against a pulse point to read the too-slow heartbeat. "Jarvis, run his vitals, what the hell is happening?"

Thank god for Tony Stark and the fully equipped robot butler - at least Steve didn't have to be alone in helping Bucky.

"It appears, Captain Rogers, that the parasympathetic autonomic nervous system activated expeditiously and the decrease in heartrate is preventing the proper coagulation necessary--"
"English." He felt like an idiot for yelling at a robot but goddammit Stark why make the damn robot too smart?

"Sergeant Barnes is losing blood rapidly because his body is not clotting the wound, due to a dangerously abrupt psychological switch from the adrenaline-filled 'fight or flight' response to the resting, 'calm and sleeplike' response."

Five words into Jarvis' speech Steve was already unbuckling Bucky's vest, yanking off armor and cursing under his breath between apologies because he knew forcefully removing Bucky's clothes couldn't be helping anything but he had to get at that bulletwound now.

He shoved the black suit away from Bucky's upper body and cursed Hydra for fucking with his boy, cursed every single fucking one that'd forced Bucky's body to respond like this. He knew exactly what caused that 'dangerous psychological switch,' it was this fucking chair, it was the doctors, it was the mindset that he had to be obedient and silent when they got him like this.

"Hold on for me, Buck, you gotta hold on." The scars veining from the metal shoulder were no less harsh but Steve barely glanced at them because Jarvis was right, Bucky was still bleeding, when the serum and the time that'd passed should've made the open wound clot over by now. He pressed his hand over the bloody mark - hard - to make it stop fucking gushing, then he was mumbling a thousand more apologies as he pushed Bucky to lay down on the medical table.

"You can kick my ass when this is over, okay? But I just need you to stay with me until then. Listen to my voice, Buck. You can't check out on me now. It's a damn shame Monty isn't here to stitch you up with dental floss like last year in the woods. Guess you'll just have to settle for my shitty sewing skills. But the doct- the medical people left us their supplies when I scared 'em outta here, so we've got real thread this time. You still with me?"

Tony watched through the observation window, arms crossed tightly over his chest and refusing to look at either Clint, Natasha, or any of the hovering, swarming doctors.

"Does Rogers have any medical experience?" He asked Jarvis curtly, staring at the scene in the hospital room. Barnes half-dead and Rogers half outta his mind. He was still running a constant dialogue, something about trees and fire-escapes, but the glassy look hadn't left Barnes's face.

"Disregarding the time spent in medical attention for himself, no sir, Captain Rogers does not."

"Based on the previous pattern of reaction and the current spike of Captain Rogers' emotional state, it is recommended to not attempt interference. The effects of Sergeant Barnes' serum should begin to stabilize his body functionality soon, sir."

"Is Steve's friend in the tower? Send for Steve's friend. He's a doctor of some kind, isn't he?"

"Sam Wilson works at the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs as a Post-Traumatic-Stress group psychologist, sir."

Tony grimaced as Rogers slipped the needle into bloody skin. Barnes didn't even flinch. "Send him down here anyways, I'm pretty sure some part of this counts as both veteran and PTSD. And there's the whole 'friend' part. Maybe he can get through Cap's thick skull."

"Sam Wilson left the tower at 7:30am this morning, but if he maintains his pattern he should return
within the hour. Shall I send him down then?"

"Yeah." He blinked away from the look on Steve's face, from the raw pain in that room that had nothing to do with blood or bullets. "And send down something from the liquor cabinet, too."

~*~*~

He hadn't been crashing at Stark's pad long enough to get used to the talking robot in the walls, so he may have jumped and cursed when Jarvis told him his presence was requested in the medical ward.

Then he cursed a hell of a lot more when Jarvis told him why.

Sam came running full blast into the outer observation room, skidding to a stop as he almost pummeled into a gaggle of fretting people in lab coats.

"Sam," Natasha greeted, and he'd never been more grateful to see a familiar face.

"Nat, what happened?" He wove around the doctors to plant himself in front of the large window, glancing at the other two men flanking Natasha's sides. Tony Stark, who nodded at him, and a ripped blonde guy he'd never seen before who was standing obviously-close to Natasha.

"Barnes got shot, then went into some kind of overdrive. His body shut down, lost a shit ton of blood," Tony crossed his arms over his chest, gesturing at the window. "Then Cap freaked out and wouldn't let anyone in the room, which was a dumb fucking move, then proceeded to stitch Barnes up himself with his entire lack of medical knowledge."

Sam stared through the observation window, where Steve was collapsed in a chair at Bucky's bedside, head tilted back against the wall and hands bloody, eyes closed to match Bucky's lax, sleeping body.

"How in hell did the Winter Soldier get shot? I've fought the guy, and he can evade machine guns."

"He jumped in front of Steve." The blond guy inputted, sounding a little awed. Sam turned back to the window, getting a good look at the resting assassin, trying to quantify him with the loyal man in Steve's exhibit. The last time Sam had seen him, he'd been aiming a gun in Germany, weary but holding his fire, refusing to hurt Steve. This was a whole other ballgame.

"There is a big difference between not killing someone and dying for them." Sam shook his head incredulously and Natasha cocked her head, red hair bouncing.

"I know. What I can't figure out is why. His training should have had him evacuate the building. Logically, he shouldn't care about Steve at all." Natasha pursed her lips and the blond guy shot her a loaded look that was way too deep for Sam to interpret.

"He's my best friend. I don't think he's forgotten that."

All heads turned to Steve, who was carefully shutting the operation door behind him. They'd been too busy speculating amongst themselves to notice Steve silently crossing the room to come join them.

"Hey, Steve, how're you holdin' up?" Sam stepped over to clap a hand on Steve's shoulder, not missing the way Steve sagged tiredly at the touch.

"I'm okay," he responded softly, and Sam had the sudden impression of the tiny person Steve was before the serum quantified against the one standing before them now.
"Could someone find a glass of orange juice? Buck's gonna need it when he wakes up."

Tony waved a hand at a lingering nurse, who rushed out of the room to fill Cap's request.

"How bout we get you washed up?" Sam put an arm around Steve's shoulders, guiding him towards the door. He looked ready to collapse.

"Bucky shouldn't wake up alone," Steve started to protest, then the blond guy stepped up and gestured at the door.

"I'll sit with him," he offered and Steve nodded mutely. The post-adrenaline crash coupled with exhaustion (the last they'd talked, Steve'd been too worried about Barnes to get proper sleep) was really hitting Steve hard and it was strange, to see how human and...small he looked.

This wasn't Captain America saving the world, it wasn't even Captain Rogers saving his teammate. This was tiny, pre-serum Steve exhausted from the weight of his best friend's trauma.

"I'll run a medical report while you're gone," Tony called, then Natasha mentioned something about researching Hydra's involvement in the jewelry heist and Steve let Sam drag him off to the bathrooms to see if he couldn't at least fix something today.

~*~*~

"Ебать," he cursed, groaning before blinking open his eyes. Someone huffed amusedly to the right and he rolled his excessively heavy head to determine who.

The moment he moved his brain lit up in protest, spewing everything around him in tinted, swaying colors of the rainbow. "Где--мой друг? Ебать, я усталый..."

"Well, from what pieces of that I could pick out, Steve's washing up from his miracle House moment. And yeah, I know how you're feeling." Barton made a sound of sympathy and Bucky lifted one of his hands, turning over the pallid color in his head.

"How much blood did I lose?"

"A lot," Clint shrugged. "But the whole superhuman thing saved your ass."

"It tends to do that." Bucky moved his hand to his rib cage, feeling over the stitches. So they'd wrapped him up instead of giving him a blood coagulating drug like Hydra always did. He'd known medical treatment would be tough when everyone that knew how his body worked was either dead or evil, so.

"How's your head?" Barton asked and Bucky stared up at the ceiling, noticing his transfer from a medical table to a generic bed, which was considerably less likely to trigger the submissive part of his training.

"It's been worse," he settled for, which was true. Zoning out hadn't been half as bad as it used to be, especially considering that he hadn't been wiped after. How thoughtful.

"I know what you mean," Barton offered offhandedly, not looking at Bucky when he found the strength to turn his head again.

"Loki Odinson, the Battle of New York," Bucky cited anyways. Clint looked a little surprised, then nodded, rearranging himself in the chair.
"I got dragged outta my own head, had to watch as they shoved something else in. My body wasn't my own anymore, the number of people I--"

He stopped abruptly but Bucky knew what he was going to say. Killed. Slaughtered. Ended. It didn't matter. He'd had plenty of dragging himself, although it'd been decades. Sometime around the late 1950s, he stopped fighting it. He wasn't split anymore, he'd absorbed into what they wanted him to be. There was no more 'unmade'; just remade.

"At least you remember all yours," Bucky offered dryly and Clint snorted.

"Yeah, Nat's working on that. She's been following a lead on that machine Hill knows about." Romanoff was helping him? That was surprising, considering the wary looks she gave him.

"Wow. She must really like Steve a lot," he said slowly, eyes on Barton's face to gage a reaction. He had a feeling there was something between the two assassins, although what, he had no idea.

"Most people do," Clint replied wryly, seemingly unphased by the idea. "But I think she's doing it for selfish reasons, so she can bitch you out for shooting her."

"I remember shooting her," Bucky said simply, rolling his shoulders as he looked up at the ceiling again. Everything seemed to be working fine. "To be fair, she zapped my arm and tried to choke me to death with piano wire, I wasn't just going to let her walk away from that."

"Actually, that wasn't the first time you shot her," Clint replied just as casually, and for a moment Bucky wondered if there was a time conversations like this weren't normal.

"Really? How is she still alive?" He was genuinely curious, not boasting.

"She wasn't your target."

Fair enough. He'd thought there was some sort of grudge there, in the passion she'd fought with on the bridge. It was subtle, ridiculously subtle, but she seemed way too familiar with his reputation - it was in her eyes, the way she looked at him, like she knew first hand how dangerous he was.

He actually kind of appreciated it, because with Steve's and Tony's blatant disregard for his lethal assassin training, the entire seventy-year-legend story felt kind of irrelevant. He could still kill them all, even Steve, and the only person who didn't seem to forget that was Natasha.

"Speaking of targets," Barton continued, after a few moments of silence. "I've heard your aim is pretty good. Once you're all healed up, what do you say to a friendly competition?"

"Is Steve still gone?"

"Yeah, I think Natasha stole him to talk--"

"Then let's go now, before he gets back." Bucky sat up from the bed, ignoring the way his head instantly rushed with blood, pounding heavily behind his eyes. Homeostasis would be obtained momentarily.

"Wait, what? You just got shot and nearly died from blood loss..." Clint started to protest. Bucky toed on his boots, foregoing the bloody vest because getting back into it might rip his stitches. It wouldn't kill him to go shirtless.

He paused at the door, looking over his shoulder at Clint while the metal plates of his arm recalibrated, rippling down from his shoulder to fingertips.
"You can either whine or prove you're a better shot than the Winter Soldier, your choice."

Ten minutes later the gun range was littered with bullets, Bucky had found out Clint was deaf in one ear, and had successfully managed not to rip his stitches as he and Barton fired shot after perfect shot. They decided the range in Stark Towers was too easy to have a proper competition and made plans to hold a real one soon.

In the meantime, Bucky was trying to shoot Clint's bow, lodging an arrow and cursing as he tried to pull back the string, only managing a few inches. "This thing is fucking heavy, what's the pull?"

"250 pounds," Clint replied, taking the bow back to demonstrate a perfect snapping succession of whistling arrows across the range. Bucky raised his eyebrows and took the bow again, switching to his left hand, the metal hand drawing the line easy this time.

His arrow hit the line between the center and the second ring of the target and Clint smirked as he cursed. Hydra obviously hadn't supplied him a bow and arrow, and for a first shot, that wasn't exactly bad.

"The metal arm makes one hell of a difference. It must be nice to have indestructible armor attached to you." Clint poked one of the shiny plates and Bucky narrowed his eyes a little, pulling back the draw to send another arrow whistling half an inch closer to the perfect center of the target.

"It's not indestructible," Bucky huffed, docking another arrow. "And I've never thought about it. It's just my arm."

Clint gave him an indecipherable look and picked up the rifle Bucky had sat down, stepping into the next cube to fire off a clip. They fell into silence after that, switching weapons occasionally, the compatible quiet of two people who had more in common than either of them needed to say out loud.

~*~*~

Natasha and Sam had been force-feeding Steve peanut butter and Ritz because "Tony did not have apt food fit for anyone over fourteen" according to Natasha and the green smoothies "don't count as real food" according to Sam. Tony glared at them briefly before waving a hand and telling Jarvis to stock the pantry according to everyone's files on food preferences.

Personally, Steve was doing fine. Better, anyways. He could actually breathe now. It'd just been so long since he'd lost Bucky like that...and he'd panicked. Thankfully the doctors had all graciously accepted his apologies with apologies of their own - they didn't know about the PTSD, they were just told about the bulletwound, they would be sure to update the files, inform all of the staff.

Steve had thanked them again, apologized again for losing his temper, and sagged down into one of Stark's barstools. Which was when Natasha had slid the peanut butter to him and Sam had slid the crackers. They were watching him with wary eyes but he wasn't going to yell again, or freak out, or have a breakdown or anything.

He was just...so scared. He couldn't imagine losing his best friend again. Hadn't made it through the first time he'd lost Buck and he wouldn't make it through now either. But the world kept shifting under his feet, Bucky kept disappearing, and Steve felt so damn helpless. Like everyday was inching closer to the day that Bucky left him for good and there was nothing he could do about it.

When two energized, slightly-sweaty sharpshooters joined them in the penthouse, the first thing that hit Steve wasn't the stitches or the scared shoulder, it was the heavy, unmistakable smell. He furrowed his eyebrows, swallowing the Ritz in his mouth and talking around the taste.
"Why do you smell like gunpowder?" The whole enhanced-senses thing was kinda a dead
giveaway, not to mention that Clint looked suddenly terribly guilty. Bucky cocked one unimpressed
eyebrow and grabbed Sam's orange juice outta the fridge.

Sam reached out to stop him, making a distressed sound, but thought better of it and took his hand
back to slouch in his chair while Bucky poured himself a glass.

"You worry a lot," Bucky said offhandedly, taking a sip of juice and pushing the hair outta his eyes.
Steve's jaw dropped. Really, they'd gone shooting when Buck'd been in critical condition less than
an hour ago??

"I worry a lot??" Steve could feel his temper beginning to boil under his skin because goddammit, he
couldn't take this. Acting like he was totally fine, like Steve was the crazy one when Bucky'd been
bleeding out--

"When did our roles switch, Rogers?" Bucky sat the glass down and met his gaze with eyes the
colour of ice, but for once weren't cold and hard. "I thought I was supposed to be the one yelling at
you, for defending that stray dog all the time and getting your ass beat nine ways to Sunday."

"Dog?" Clint asked, and they both ignored him.

"When you started being stupider than me!" Steve sputtered.

"That doesn't have to be mutually exclusive." Natasha pointed out, and they ignored her too.

"Yeah, it's not like what you said is the way it works, I can't just take all the stupid with me," Bucky
shot back and Steve's brain short-circuited.

A beautiful boy, hand tipped in a salute, dressed-to-the-nines in an army uniform that fit him
perfectly, hat crooked on his head, sincere expression, the sound of Steve's heart breaking as he
watched Bucky leave without him.

"You remember that?" Steve's voice had gone all quiet but his head was still spinning.

Because that moment had meant so much, the way Bucky'd wrapped him up in a hug, not caring the
slightest bit that they had dates to entertain, that they were in public and hugging was the exact
opposite of his reputation but he didn't give a damn, not in that moment. It'd been 1943 and he'd
hugged Steve tight to him right in the middle of the damn Queens science exhibit and Steve had
wondered if it would be the last time he'd ever see Bucky Barnes and in a way, it had. He'd never
been the same after Azzano, after Zola.

"Yes I remember that, your dumb ass decided to sign up a fifth time and then, because apparently
five tries wasn't enough to prove a damn point, you signed on to be a damn lab experiment. Of
course I remember that."

Bucky crossed his arms over his chest, his hair parted to one side and curving away from his face,
making him look like a goddamned angel. Even with the vaguely-cross look on his face.

For once, he was at a loss of words. Bucky seemed to catch on that Steve was just gonna gape at him
because he snatched his glass up again, sliding it across the counter behind him before jumping up on
the counter himself, sitting down and crossing his legs indian style.

"Actually, the whole reason I came to the tower today was to ask you something." Steve at least
managed to close his mouth and stop gaping but god, Bucky was remembering, actually
remembering. Bruce had told him the likelihood of Bucky getting his memories back was pretty low,
but the ones that did come back would be the most recent ones. Of his years as the Winter Soldier, _maybe_ his years in the war. But the idea that he remembered all the way back to when Steve was small?

Bucky was studying him with sharp eyes, reading his body language and watching Steve stare. Steve didn't even wanna know what conclusions he was drawing. Probably a lot more than he needed to know. Then the pretty curve of his mouth opened again and he fiddled with his glass as he spoke. "You drew me something, back in the war. I kept it, I remember that. Something about acorns...I think we were in the woods?"

If he could change anything about today, it'd be the way he went bright red at those words. And everyone was here to witness; three assassins and a scientific genius all watching as Steve Rogers flushed the color of apples at a few words from Bucky's mouth.

"You remember _that_?" His voice sounded small, high, even to his own ears. Bucky either didn't notice or didn't care, just kept right on talking and running his finger over the top of his glass.

"Partially, that's why I wanted to ask you--"

"How about we talk about it later? Back at my apartment?" _when we're alone_, the silence filled in very loudly for him and Steve cringed at his own words.

Well if he was trying to be subtle, he pulled off the exact opposite; everyone was staring at him now. If Tony so much as _mentioned_ something along the lines of 'draw me like one of your french girls' Steve would probably throttle him. Because it wasn't like _that_.

It was his head in Bucky's lap, nose tucked against that firm stomach, Bucky's fingers threading through his hair, teasing Buck about his gorgeous sniping skills. It was the sweetest starry-sky night fall, Bucky's back pressed to his chest as they slept nestled together, their hands clasped tight even as the sun broke over the horizon.

Not exactly something the whole Avengers team needed to hear.

Bucky was looking at him oddly (he didn't want to know the looks he was getting from everyone else) but he nodded slowly, seeming to understand at least. The metal hand gestured at the elevator as he hopped off the counter, downing the rest of his orange juice in one swing. "Back to the apartment, then."

Carefully avoiding everyone's eyes, he got off his stool and started towards the elevator, hands shoved in his pockets and hoping that everyone would excuse his behavior on the high stress situation of the day.

"Wait, you guys can't go out there like that," Tony called from behind them and Steve spun back around with a barely-repressed sigh. Stark gestured at the window. "It's snowing."

"So?" Bucky asked, his voice in that petulant axiomatic tone again.

"So you're planning to walk around New York in the snow without a shirt on? They say _I'm_ the crazy one. And don't even think about putting the bloody vest back on - probably ever, because it looks like a freaking straight jacket." Tony punctuated his words with an accusing finger and Bucky crossed his arms over his chest, metal whirring softly.

"No, it doesn't."

"Yes it does. You need a new suit, pronto. I could design one, unless you want Star-Spangled over
there to... sketch you something else." Tony raised his eyebrows, smirking at his own drawing comment. Steve glared violently.

"Well I'm not particularly interested in tights." Bucky glanced over at Steve, the soft pink mouth curving up in the closest thing he'd seen in a smile since the 1940s. "No offense, but not everybody's got the ass to pull that off the way you do."

Steve's lungs stopped.

Last time, Bucky had said 'you're keeping the outfit, right' because he would never have been that damn outright and now he had literally just said that out loud. The ass to pull that off the way you do. What the hell was that? He'd assume he was dreaming, except that Sam's eyes were huge and Natasha's eyebrows were raised and Tony looked about .3 seconds away from laughing and even Clint was blinking at them both.

He was staring at Bucky in shock but either Buck hadn't noticed he'd - what, hit on Steve? Flirted? or he simply didn't care because he kept rambling on, talking to Tony, arms still crossed over his chest. "And since I'm also not interested to have any more metal on my body than I already have, I think I'll pass on your designs too, Stark. I'll just make my own. I think."

Bucky shot him another glance, this time a confirmation to the wavering I did go to art school I think. (Thursdays at 6pm downtown, bright lighting and graphite smears down Bucky's hand, flicking eraser from his desk to Buck's, Bucky's arms slung over Steve's shoulders on the walk back) Steve just nodded in response, positively mute.

"Your loss," Tony shrugged. "But in the meantime, your closet has clothes that won't make you look like a deadly Russian assassin who can kill people in 107 different ways."

"That's a small number," Bucky replied casually, the same time Steve managed to finally find words and interrupted with "His closet?"

Everyone decided to ignore Bucky's comment and Tony opened the fridge, pulling out Sam's orange juice again. Sam threw up his hands as Tony poured himself a glass.

"Actually yes, Rogers. I turned one of the guest rooms on your floor into Barnes' room, the closet has clothes in his correct size. And color palette, but that was all Pepper."

Steve and Bucky both looked at each other, eyes wide in shared shock and for just a moment, nothing had changed, they were two peas in a pod in some middle school in Brooklyn in the early thirties and everyone called them SteveandBucky because where there was one, there was always the other, in sync against the rest of the world.

Then reality hit, the moment passed, and the world came crashing back eighty years later with continents between them and a lifetime apart for one, still grieving yesterday for the other.

Sam interrupted before Steve could tear up, which he wasn't going to do anyways, but god, when had this become their lives?

"How 'bout I take you? I'm living in the other guest bedroom on that floor, so I can show you around." Sam shrugged and Bucky cocked his head, evaluating, then stepped to Sam's side with a nod. Which left Steve to yell at Clint for letting Bucky shoot weapons, because he had not forgotten about that.

"We'll be back," Sam called over his shoulder, then Bucky was following him down the stairs, not questioning why they weren't taking the elevator.
Halfway down to the floor, Bucky broke the silence between them, even though it wasn't necessarily uncomfortable (which spoke wonders for the guy considering Bucky had almost killed him quite a few times). "What's the plan, pass the puppy like show and tell? I get alone time with everyone so you can all evaluate me privately?"

Sam snorted, pausing to push open a door on an unmarked floor. "Something like that."

The door opened to a short hallway with another few doors that Sam breezed past. He could explore later. A few more feet and the floor opened up, a huge living room with a flat screen TV, a U-shaped couch that could probably fit ten people, and a polished wood coffee table.

On one side was a wall of pure windows, overlooking New York skyscrapers and city streets. On the wall behind the couch was a mirror, a row of dark-wood shelves, and a huge but classy vintage clock. The dining room curved around past the wall, just a glimpse of an old rectangle table and chairs before it slipped out sight as they kept walking. The kitchen was around the next corner, at least twice the size of the one in Steve's apartment. Then the space narrowed back down a little, a bathroom to the left and a wide hallway with spaced-apart doors to the right.

"These are the bedrooms," Sam gestured at the doors, the furthest at the end of the hallway. "And behind the dining room's the other half of the floor. There's two offices, a small workout room, and an empty room that I'm guessing is for Steve to set up his studio."

"Stark got Steve an art studio?" Bucky asked curiously, peeking his head around the corner of Sam's room.

"Yeah. I mean, the guy grew up hearing stories about Cap. He knew stuff like that. Hell, he probably knows more about Steve than I do." Sam laughed lightly and Bucky frowned, because he was about to comment with and I've got you both beat, but he didn't. Not anymore. He had what, ten memories - he had known Steve his entire life - but what's the point if he couldn't remember it?

"Anyways, the bedroom at the end is Steve's, and yours is probably the one right next to his..." Sam walked past a few more doorways leading to mystery places, then swung open an unremarkable white door.

There was a bed pushed up against one wall, a slant-top desk in the corner, and dark black curtains over the windows. Because it was Tony, there was one of the old Captain America propaganda posters hanging on the wall that Bucky rolled his eyes at. And another frame on the wall by the door, which he stepped up close to inspect. It was a collage of newspaper clippings, headlines and grainy photos and little articles, all arranged artfully around a large sepia photo in the center.

It was of the Howling Commandos, glasses lifted and heads tipped back in laughter. Bucky was in the center, one of his hands raised, eyes bright as he told some story, his hair short and disheveled, pieces falling over his forehead. The men around him had their heads thrown back or dipped forward, eyes closed with laughter. Except for Steve. Steve had one arm on the table, looking directly at Bucky, a soft smile on his face that seemed extremely out of place in the rowdy atmosphere of the rest of the photo.

He didn't remember that moment. He didn't remember the story he was telling. And he didn't remember ever catching Steve looking at him like that.

"You okay?" Sam asked quietly, off to the side. Bucky leaned away from the frame, pushing the strands of hair out of his eyes, metal fingers catching on a few knots. That photo was just as painful as the black and white reel at the museum, Steve's affectionate eyes and involuntary smile as the
Bucky of the 1940s dipped his head and laughed, shoulders shaking.

"Fine," he said shortly, tearing his eyes away from the thing. Sam was looking at him warily but Bucky ignored him, glancing around the rest of the room to find the closet. He didn't really feel like walking down memory lane any more right now.

There were two french doors on the wall perpendicular to the window and Bucky swung them open, flicking on a light and draining himself into disinterest as he glanced over the clothes.

"You need something warm, right? There's a coat right there." Sam pointed from over his shoulder and Bucky reached out, unlodging the hanger from its rack. The coat was blue with big navy buttons down the front, a little more modern but still clearly recognizable. Navy blue peacoat, like the one he used to wear back in the war.

They both stared at it, then Bucky carefully placed it back on the rack. "I don't think I'm ready for that."

"No rush," Sam agreed quietly, stepping around Bucky's side to grab something else warm. He held up a black hoodie with Steve's shield in the middle and they both rolled their eyes. "Well, it's either this or the gray hoodie with Stark's logo on it."

"Which one will rile Tony up more?" Bucky mused, thumbing through the rest of the closet, blue coat and sepia picture shoved to the back of his mind. Sam outright laughed at that, shaking his head as handed the shield hoodie over.

"You really are as much trouble as Steve said you were," Sam said thoughtfully and Bucky pulled a black (and thankfully blank) tshirt out of the closet too.

"What else did Steve say about me?" Bucky raised his eyebrows as Sam held up his hands, taking a step backwards.

"No way man, I am not starting that conversation."

"But there was a conversation?"

"You're his best friend back from the dead, you think that just slipped by unnoticed?"

Bucky hummed, holding up a red tshirt for about three seconds before deciding it was the least conspicuous thing he'd ever seen and putting it back. "Speaking of back from the dead...I thought I kicked you off a helicarrier with only one wing."

He raised an eyebrow at Sam, glancing up under his eyelashes, and he was pretty sure Sam would have paled if it were possible.

"Not to piss you off and make you wanna do it again, but uh. I guess I'm harder to kill than that?" Sam was cringing at his own words and something odd bubbled up in his stomach, lips curling and when was the last time he'd wanted to laugh at something? His sense of humor was a little twisted now, obviously, if he was amused at poking Steve's friends with the threat of imminent death, only to see the expressions on their faces.

He wasn't going to kill any of Steve's friends. Steve was his safe house. Wait, no, Steve's apartment was his safe house, Bucky corrected mentally.

"I'm not going to push you off anything again. So long as you don't shoot at me with machine guns." It was no big deal, just a confirmation of words, but Sam was looking at him with this expression
again and Bucky found himself shifting his weight, uncomfortable. The room suddenly felt way too big.

"Why is that? Not that I'm complaining that you're not killing any of us, but. What changed? One minute you were all 'Heil Hydra' and now we're picking outfits from a Stark-stocked closet?" The words were simple enough and Natasha had asked something similar earlier, but this wasn't a tactile question. He was asking about emotions and that kind of hit like a brick because yeah, Sam was right. A lot had changed. He wasn't any less deadly, or less likely to kill other people, but. He hadn't exactly kept his distance from Steve either.

And, by consequence, Steve's friends.

"I don't have Hydra around to control me anymore. None of you are targets, so therefore you aren't dead." Bucky shut the closet doors, maybe a little too loudly, and threw on the black t-shirt and hoodie, grabbing the other three shirts he'd decided to keep and folding them over his forearm. "It's not complicated."

Sam's eyes had softened and Bucky didn't want pity, goddammit. He was a lethal machine, he was--so far from perfect.

He was still being as cautious as always, still checked escape routes and camera locations, still had three knives and a pistol strapped to his thigh, but when was the last time he'd chosen to blink or regulated his breathing? His body was falling into automatic patterns, involuntary actions, and that meant danger.

He'd been shot today, lost too much blood because his new 'handlers' didn't understand his medical requirements. Except they weren't his handlers, not really. What were they? Steve's team. His friends. Steve wanted Bucky to be his friend too.

What the hell was happening? It was like Steve Rogers was blinding him. Why? What could possibly have been between them in the past to make his body respond to Steve's this way? It ran deeper than his training - look at where he was now. The way he was acting? It was because of Steve, it was overriding the perfect way he'd been before...

Suddenly he really needed to know what happened in that memory in the woods. What that drawing was. What had happened to it. What had made Steve blush red at the thought of it. What had happened in all of his memories, he wanted to remember everything right now.

"Steve's been waiting," he said, an excuse for why he was suddenly rushing out the door, leaving Sam to follow in his footsteps, nearly running to keep up. He didn't want to stand and make choices anymore, he wanted Steve to tell him everything that had happened between them. Everything.

~*~*~

The snowfall was swirling and gentle, depositing shimmering flakes of white throughout soft, long brown hair. He forced himself not to reach out and touch.

The apartment was warm and the snow melted from Bucky's pretty hair too quickly, before Steve could run his fingers through it. Not like he'd have the nerve to do something like that.

"How are you feeling?" he asked as nonchalantly as possible, shedding his coat and hanging it by the door. Bucky was still in the hoodie with his shield on it, but he kept pulling it snugger around his torso like the bagginess was driving him insane.
"Functionality's immaculate," Bucky replied, starting for Steve's bedroom without a glance his way. "You telling me about that memory now?"

Following the broad shoulders into the room, Steve glanced around the space to calculate the changes since Bucky's time in here. Everything looked exactly the same, like Bucky was never here at all. Sometimes it felt that way too.

Bucky sat down on Steve's bed, heavier than the careful grace he carried in this century. He looked weary, a little pale, and Steve had to bite his tongue to keep from asking if he was alright again.

Instead he sat carefully down beside him, sinking into the dipping mattress and clasping his hands, staring at the floor between his feet as he waited as patiently as he knew how.

"What did you draw?" The words were almost bordering on curious and Steve could just picture the excuses Buck was making in his head - all 'benefit of information' and no 'hey I really just wanna know.'

"It wasn't anything bad. It was of you - we'd gotten the day off, decided to spend the night in the woods because we weren't sick of the outdoors yet. You pretended to take a nap and I drew you, dogtags and messy hair, sleeping against the tree."

His words must have struck something (he hadn't even gotten to the important part yet) because a sudden stillness settled over the room. Bucky might as well be wearing his mask, staring blankly at nothing, expression dead and tone detached as he opened his mouth again. "Did I have a face?"

He shifted his weight towards Bucky then, scooting an inch closer as he really looked him over and replied slowly. "No. I wasn't ready to draw you like that - it was right after Azzano, neither of us wanted proof down on paper of how much you'd changed."

Bucky's eyes were blank, lifeless and silent. Steve wished desperately he still had the drawing, so he could give it to Buck...maybe finish it now, after all this time.

"I don't know what happened to it," Steve admitted. "The Smithsonian might have it, or maybe some antique collector somewhe--"

"No," Bucky interrupted quietly. Steve instantly shut up, opening the silence to the detached man who looked like he would float away if Steve didn't wrap him up in his arms.

He cleared his throat, eyes cutting to the ground, words so quiet Steve almost missed them. "Hydra burned it. I had it from the beginning, kept in my inner coat pocket...over my heart. When they took my clothes they found it, held it in front of me and lit a match."

Steve couldn't respond to that, he turned as China-doll-mute as Bucky had been. His silence left the door wide open and Bucky slipped through one more time, adding an offhand comment that sounded more to himself than Steve.

"I remember they...they made me watch as they burned it, flames curling at the corners and destroying the image of the man I used to be, and the only thing I could think - the only thing I could think was...they were going to burn that right out of me, weren't they? And they did. They did."

The world folded around them even when I had nothing I had Bucky and nothing mattered but the look on Bucky's face, the pained, dejected expression Steve had never seen before, didn't know belonged to another moment of but I knew him.

He wasn't sure he had the words for this situation but that had never mattered before, they'd always
been able to say so much more with their eyes and hands and energy than words could ever say. Steve reached forward and prayed that Bucky would remember their private language after all this time.

The moment his hand closed around Bucky's wrist, icy blue eyes shot up from the floor and stared, wide, at Steve. He held the gaze, sliding closer slowly until their knees touched, silence radiating between them as Steve ran his thumb back and forth over the inside of Buck's wrist, the same wrist he'd done this to a hundred times, the arm that Bucky hadn't lost in the fall, the hand that still knew Steve's.

"You got out," he whispered, words he'd told Buck about Azzano a dozen times, words he needed to hear now more than ever. "You broke free from them, Buck. You got out."

Steve had failed him. And so Bucky had saved himself, his own hero, his own avenging angel. He'd broken away from Hydra, overcome decades of conditioning.

But did it count if it was for Steve?

Bucky wrenched himself out of Steve's grip so fast that his fingers snapped together from the sudden emptiness between them. His superserum wasn't quick enough to trace Bucky's movements, then the bed tipped him sideways from the disappearance of weight beside him.

When he spun around Bucky was at the window, one hand braced heavily on the frame, head ducked and veil of hair blocking his face. At least he hadn't left the room, just flew away from Steve's touch, from his words. He wasn't sure what had set Bucky off, but it'd been his fault regardless.

"I'm sorry-" he started, but Bucky's right hand shot out in a stopping motion.

"It's fine," came the curt reply, not meeting Steve's eyes.

The hand was trembling slightly, skin pasty and whiter than it should be. Now that Steve looked closer, Bucky was shaky all over, holding himself up unsteadily against the window. The reaction was a little violent for comforting words, unless the stress had triggered his body to go back into that parasympathetic system or whatever...

"Are you feeling okay? Physically?" Steve added for clarification. The metal fingers curled a little against the window, glass creaking and arm whirring softly.

"Performance error..." he muttered quietly, lifting his head and shaking his hair out of his eyes, flipping his trembling hand over in front of his eyes. When was the last time Bucky had eaten? He'd lost a ton of blood today and it was getting late, even supersoldiers needed their energy refilled.

"You're probably crashing again," Steve offered carefully. Bucky leaned a little more on the metal arm against the window. "Have you had anything to eat? You got shot today, in case you forgot."

So maybe his words went a little bitter at the end, that didn't mean Bucky could just scoff at him, propping his shoulder on the wall to glance at Steve.

"You're not letting me forget. Do you have any idea how many times I've been shot? It's not a big deal."

"I was there one of the times you got shot, in the thigh, and it is a big deal, okay?" Steve crossed his arms over his chest, shifting around on the bed to face Bucky entirely.

"Why are you so freaked out about this?" Bucky shot back, the energy between them escalating up
to a fight again like it kept doing, just stuck in this pattern. Steve wasn't going to play into it anymore.
He wasn't going to yell back, he was done fighting Bucky on this.

So instead he got off the bed, making his way over to the window too, where Bucky was watching
him with wary eyes. Steve stopped right in front of him, looking down an inch and a half,
remembering the days that he'd had to tilt his whole head up to look Bucky in the eyes.

Those days were over. It was Steve's turn now, coming around the corner with Brooklyn wings on
his shoulders, the way Bucky had for so many years.

"I want to protect you." Bucky tilted his chin up, glaring softly, and Steve didn't care, he needed
Bucky to understand this. If he'd forgotten the things Steve told him on the helicarrier; the vulnerable,
overwhelmed look on his face as he realized how far Steve would go to stay with him - Steve was
reminding him now. Except without the punching and nearly-dying.

He reached up, placing his palm on Bucky's jaw, the way he had a hundred times before, cupping
Bucky's face in his hand like he was something precious because he was the most precious thing
Steve had ever had.

"I need to protect you," he amended, voice barely above a whisper. It wasn't everything, it wasn't the
whole truth of it, it wasn't I can't imagine losing you or any of the other things he needed to tell
Bucky, but it was a start.

Bucky's metal hand came up to cover Steve's, then the metal fingers were prying Steve's away from
his face. "You can't, Steve." The words were softer than they should have been, almost emotional.
Almost. "Let it go."

Let it go? How was he supposed to just let it go? Bucky said Steve couldn't protect him, but. God, he
had to. If he didn't - If he lost Buck again -

"You almost died..." Steve choked out, hating himself for the tears in his throat. He didn't want to
know who he would become if Bucky left him again. What he would do. He was still haunted by
what he'd done the last time...

"Don't exaggerate," Bucky sighed, exasperated, cutting the emotions right in half. "I would have
been fine if I hadn't been shoved on that table. You know that."

He was right. Steve did know that. Bucky's body would have been able to handle the wound if he
hadn't freaked out about it, insisted on getting him medical attention. He hadn't been thinking, he'd
assumed they wouldn't be stupid enough to shove a PTSD patient onto a medical table, he'd assumed
everyone would respect Bucky's wishes enough to not trigger a physical shutdown response.

It was his fault Bucky had almost died, because he hadn't been there from the beginning, because he
hadn't handled it calmly, because he'd seen his best friend get shot and lost his shit. And Bucky had
been protecting him, he'd stepped in front of Steve to catch those bullets and that made it even more
Steve's fault.

"I am so sorry for that, Buck. Honestly, I didn't think- I should have handled it better, I know that.
I'm so sorry." Bucky cocked an eyebrow at him and nodded, accepting the apology, moving on,
taking a step back from the window and Steve, but it couldn't just close up that easy, there were too
many loose ends.

He kept hearing Natasha's words...he'd told her it was because Bucky was his best friend, but they
both knew that Buck didn't remember enough to hold that belief. Which meant what?
"But Bucky... why did you jump in front of the bullet?"

He'd only stepped a foot away, had been scanning the street below with half-interested eyes, but he froze at Steve's question.

A month ago, Bucky had been behind the trigger; now he was taking bullets for Steve.

"You were compromising the mission," Bucky said uncomfortably, more like a question than a statement. "If Hydra shot you they could take you in and torture you for a location on me..."

Even Bucky didn't sound convinced with that line of reasoning, shifty-eyed and awkward with his own words. It was a blatantly obvious lie, but why? He was uncomfortable sharing his real reason, then. Steve could handle that. If Bucky didn't want to tell him why, Steve had sworn he'd give Bucky that space. He'd promised to back away if Buck needed him to.

So he just nodded, following Bucky's gaze to look out over the glittering streets below. It was so starkly different from the view of their Brooklyn apartment, but Steve was kind of glad it was.

"You know I'd do the same for you," Steve whispered quietly, a final admission before they put the whole incident behind them. It was an axiomatic thing to say and Bucky didn't need to hear something he already knew, but admitting it out loud made him feel a little better.

"Do I?" Bucky huffed softly, turning away from the window, then his entire body stiffened, eyes slipping shut. Steve reached out to catch Bucky's arm but Buck didn't respond, didn't even notice Steve's presence, just let himself drop into whatever memory was flashing back into his head now.

It was only the second time Steve had seen Bucky like this, the way he'd suddenly just check out - it wasn't for long, and he was a little disoriented after the last one, but he'd slipped back into consciousness calmly with Steve's hand on his chest. Steve held him now, running their conversation back over in his head.

Do I? Oh. Steve had a pretty good idea he knew exactly what memory Bucky was reliving right now.

*

The lines of Steve's bedroom flickered and morphed out, sloping into the golden, gentle lines of the inside of an army tent. As always, Rogers was there, on the other side of the tent.

"But seriously, Bucky." Steve turned to face him, leaning on a crate holding up an old fashioned lantern. He looked as miserable as the Steve in the 21st century had three seconds ago. "Why'd you have to go and do that? Your hands, they just...you could have died, Buck, you do get that. Right?"

Steve was glaring at him now, arms crossed. Bucky lifted his chin, meeting back the challenge of Steve's eyes. (That hadn't changed, at least.)

"What would you have done?" Bucky shot back. He couldn't remember what the conversation was about, but it was pretty clear they were fighting about something Bucky did that had been determined stupid. (So today hadn't been the first time, then.) Steve narrowed his eyes a little bit then gave up, sighing as he turned to an old-fashioned lantern and screwed a part back on.

"You know what," Steve muttered under his breath.

"Do I?" Bucky responded wistfully, quietly enough that Steve could ignore it and they could talk about something else. (That's where the connection was, between this fight and the last one.)
Then he stood, crossing the tent with the intention of slipping outside, getting fresh air and leaving Steve in peace. But just before Bucky passed him, Steve spun around and gently caught Bucky's arm. He stopped, nearly stumbling into Steve, looking up in surprise. This wasn't part of the plan.

Their chests were almost touching and Steve's grip on him was just light enough not to feel like it was holding him down but firm enough to tell him he needed to stay.

Then there was the look on Steve's face. Bucky was going to melt into a puddle on the floor. (That was an unusual reaction, although the blue eyes were lit up with a unique intensity he'd never seen in the 21st century Steve.)

"Look, Buck, as mad as I am about you hurting your hands, I--" Steve stopped, sucking in an unstable shot of oxygen. They were so close that their chests brushed when they breathed and he had to tilt his chin up to look at Steve - but more curiously, his heartbeat was pounding erratically loud and his knees were weak, head woozy like he was physically ill. (Source: unidentified.)

Steve exhaled lightly, his breath warm as it ghosted over Bucky's nose. The thoughts running through his head were of electricity and sparks, the air warm and gravitational and oxygen-depleted because he was having trouble breathing. (Source: still unidentified.)

Steve's voice was soft, gently coaxing as much as he was reminding Bucky of something he should have known his whole life.

"You know if it'd been you in that fence, I'd've done the same thing." (Fence?)

(Is that what Steve had meant? Would Steve jump in front of a bullet for him like Bucky had today? Why?)

His chest was aching, overwhelmed, and the nature of the memory was still too sporadic to extract full thoughts and information from his own brain. He could pick up fear though, anticipation for something, then a single phrase: *since when were his body and his brain in agreement?* (That dysfunctionality he'd seen in the other memories, the broken pieces that were making the Bucky from the past look more and more like the man he was now.)

Then the memory-Bucky's thoughts shifted and he quickly focused back into the scene, just in time to feel his own eyes dart down until they were locked on the light pink color of Steve's lips. He'd stopped breathing. *He'd have to move less than four inches. Less than four inches and he'd be tasting Steve, tasting him for the first time.*

The thought hit him like a cold splash of water to the face - dunked, freezing, into a tank, sneering Hydra soldiers peering down at him - and Bucky gasped, reeling as he plummeted from the memory back into the present.

Sometime during the war, he had looked at Steve Rogers and wanted to kiss him.

He had no idea what to do with that new piece of information about himself.

The bedroom of Steve's apartment tipped around him and he was falling forwards, then there was something solid and warm against his chest and sounds washing over him that he couldn't pick out and heavy hands stroking down his back, over his arms.

"-afe, I've got you. I've got you." Bucky's ears finally started translating the sounds into words, warmth cascading over him. He could not remember being trained for this situation. What was this situation?
His brain and his sight and his legs started working again and Bucky straightened a little, hoisting himself up to full height by pushing down on his hands - which were on firm muscle, Steve's chest, both hands trapped between them and he might have just left bruises by collapsing on Steve and had he seriously just fallen?

He blinked upwards and there was the brilliant blue looking down at him, filled with worry (as they always were, it seemed). "You okay, Buck? You back with me?"

With you. God. Their faces were so close. He was still all pressed up against Steve's chest, Steve's arms were around his back, he had to tilt his chin up and they were almost as close as they'd been in the memory and Bucky suddenly found himself unable to breathe.

Source: identified. Steve Fucking Rogers.

He really didn't mean too, it was curiosity, it was his state of overwhelmed confusion, it was the simple urge of comparison. His gaze flicked down to Steve's lips.

They were as soft-looking and gently pink and slightly parted in worry and good god, that's exactly what they looked like in the memory and his heart was pounding because this time it wasn't just the past, this time it was real, this time was happening right now and that blue was relentless and Bucky just stared because he couldn't stop thinking about whether Steve was going to kiss him or not.

System; override. Steve Fucking Rogers.

When Bucky had collapsed forward, he'd been standing close enough to catch Buck's weight, hold him tight and talk him through his shaking as his mind yanked him out of the memory. Steve had thought it was the memory of that night in January, but Buck seemed pretty shaken...

Then he'd blinked up at Steve with his precious icy eyes and just looked so shocked and beautiful that the air escaped Steve's lungs.

And then those eyes cut down to Steve's mouth.

His instinctual reaction was to shove the familiar words through his mind of it wasn't what it looked like. It never was, for them. People didn't understand; they were just close. They'd known each other forever, grew up in each other's pockets--

Only, Bucky didn't remember that anymore. He didn't remember being Steve's best friend. And now he had the expression on his face that Steve had convinced himself he'd only ever seen in his dreams. It wasn't just interest and curiosity, there was a gravitational pull: like every inch of air between them wanted to disappear forever.

So really, who was Steve to say what Bucky wanted? Who was he to say this wasn't what it looked like - he may have known how Bucky felt in the past, but he had no idea how Buck felt when he didn't have a lifetime of memories of Steve as just friends.

Bucky himself had told Steve once - if she gives you those eyes, you better kiss her.

If it was Bucky's own words...

Who was he kidding? Steve had wanted this since he knew how to want and now it looked like it might actually be possible. Fuck excuses. Fuck reasons. What was stopping them now?
Drawing in a careful breath, he lifted a hand to that gorgeous face, palm cupping Bucky's cheek. God. How many times had he wished for this, how many times had he forced himself not to dream of--

He had to.

Steve leaned forward, watching mesmerized as Bucky's eyes slipped closed, lips parted, chin tilted up. His eyes shut too, of their own accord, then the soft puff of Bucky's breath was on his lips and it was less than an inch and Steve could feel it in every single ounce of his body, the world suspended around them, time frozen and carved into history.

He was going to kiss his best friend.

He was going to kiss his best friend.

He was going to kiss his best friend.

Holy fucking shit.

His best friend who couldn't remember being best friends. That one.

Steve drew back so fast, his eyes popping open, that if it weren't for the look on Bucky's face the almost-moment could have been something he imagined. It all happened so fast - one moment their lips were an inch from touching and now Steve was standing a foot away, eyes wide and vocal cords not working, backpedaling further and further away because holy fuck, he'd almost just ruined everything.

Here they were, staring at each other, stuck in the future together where Bucky didn't even know him, not really, and Steve was the worst best friend in the world because he was going to take advantage of that?

This was it; he'd become no better than Hydra: using Bucky and his amnesia for his own benefit. For his own childish feelings that he hadn't been able to shove away and Steve was fairly sure if he was small he'd be halfway through an asthma attack right now.

That pretty head cocked to the side, curious and analytical like the sniper he was, but not cold like he'd been so often lately.

"А...ты мой друг?" It didn't sound harsh, just confused, and that made Steve want to cry because goddamnit, if only Bucky knew. He was supposed to be all good-decisions and role-model but when it came to Buck he just lost his head and Steve was going to lose everything all over again if he didn't get a grip on it and he could Not. Lose. Bucky.

He'd backpedaled almost all the way to the door of his bedroom but he suddenly stopped, shoving his hands in his pockets and somehow making his voice work again. "I'm going to go uh. I should probably...I'm exhausted, I'm gonna go to bed."

It was the worst excuse in the world and the dubious look on Bucky's voice said so, but he didn't do anything to stop Steve. So he spun on a heel, reaching for the doorknob. He couldn't be in this room anymore, but he couldn't just...leave Buck all alone. He paused in the doorway, looking over his shoulder with words devastatingly sincere.

"Wake me up if you need anything."

Bucky didn't reply and Steve shut the bedroom door behind him, walking numbly to the kitchen.
What had he almost done.

He slumped against the kitchen counter, wind knocked out of him like he'd just fought an army of Chitauri. He couldn't handle this. He needed reinforcement. Backup. Ground control.

Steve dug his phone out of his pocket, rubbing a palm over his forehead as he typed out a message.

*Hey, you up to teaching remedial Russian anytime soon?*

Really, he just wanted to text Nat about how he'd almost kissed his best friend but that was a can of worms he was *not* planning on opening.

Because Natasha was either lost in silence for months or pestering Steve daily, it was only about thirty seconds before the phone lit up in his hand, her response blinking up on the screen. *There's apps for that. :) Spell out the sounds I'll translate.*

He'd been way too over his head to remember the quick phrase exactly, but he had the last part he was pretty sure. *Moidroog?*

Ten seconds later Natasha's reply popped up. *My friend.*

Steve stared at that text for a moment. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but that wasn't it. Obviously he had no idea what else Bucky had said...but if 'my friend' had been part of it?

That was his *job.* Bucky needed a friend right now more than anything. He didn't need the complications of Steve's feelings on top of what he was going through.

Steve had repressed those feelings for years. He wouldn't let them destroy him now, not when Bucky was depending on him, not when Bucky needed him more than ever.

But damn, it wasn't fair. Bucky was stunning and incredible and the best thing he'd ever had...and they finally had the incremental chance to be together, in a century that was basically okay with it, without a war to tear them apart, without death constantly on the horizon for them both. He wanted Buck more than ever, but he could never take him like this. It wasn't fair to his best friend.

*Thanks,* Steve shot back, tossing his phone on the counter. He was already walking out of the kitchen when it lit up again. With a sigh, Steve grabbed it back and read Natasha's text on his way to the couch.

*No problem. Now spill.*

*Spill what?* Steve asked, plopping down on the couch and sinking most of the way to the floor.

*I'll come over and drag it out of you. Don't test me.*

He groaned and tipped his head back against the couch. Of course Natasha would be able to figure out something was up from a few words in a text.

*Just B. He's as stubborn as I remember.*

*Like you?*

*I'd say he's worse, but he'd kick my ass.*

*I thought that was my job :)*
Except you let yourself get medical treatment when you get shot.

Shot by him. Twice.

Steve made a noise of half-amusement and half-distress because Nat was still hung up on not trusting Bucky. He understood though; she knew a bit about what he'd been through - all of them did, really, in a way. Which was kind of sad, because how much would Bucky had to have been through to share something in common with every one of the Avengers?

I know, he finally texted back. I'm sure he'll apologize eventually.

Doubt it. But I've got good news.

You're sticking around? It might be more complicated if Nat stayed, considering she was still giving Bucky the cold shoulder, but Steve wanted her here anyways. They could work something out. He could really use her friendship right now.

Yes. Not the news. I have a lead on the machine Barnes is after.

The memory machine Bucky had broke into Maria's office for. Natasha must have heard, decided to use her resources to look for it...

Bucky would get all of his memories back.

For one fleeting, sickening moment, Steve's heart dropped in disappointment. Because if Buck got his memories back, they couldn't have....whatever Steve had just stopped in the bedroom.

He was going to hell.

But the moment was gone as quickly as it had appeared. He'd loved Buck his whole life, but what made him think he'd actually ever get a chance with him? The first time he'd seemed remotely interested was when he had amnesia and didn't know Steve from a stranger on the streets.

No. No, he needed his best friend back. Once the idea fully sunk in, of Bucky actually knowing him again? The disappointment all pulverized out of his veins and he was left breathless. His best friend back. He'd rather have Bucky with all his memories and nothing between them all over again than have to live with someone who didn't remember how much they truly meant to each other.

You're a better person than you pretend to be, Steve finally texted back.

Shut up Rogers.

Seriously Nat. Thank you.

Don't thank me til the lead pans out.

Nope. Thank you. A lot. :)

You're a sap. Go to bed.

Yes ma'am. You too.

:)

He stretched over to sit his phone on the coffee table before settling back onto the couch arm, closing his eyes and trying to get comfortable.
It still felt like he was falling.

At least it was an impressive nine minutes this time before he rolled off the side with a sigh, snatching a couch cushion and shoving it onto the floor. He settled on his side, back to the couch, and crashed. Sleep took him fast and hard, exhaustion dragging him down into unconsciousness before he could lay awake all night fretting about what he might have ruined.

As always, the night was never that simple. But for once, it wasn't the bad kind of complicated.

He hadn't been asleep for more than an hour when Steve was drifting back awake, some unknown drawing him into consciousness.

He opened his eyes into icy blue ones. Bucky was lying a foot away, looking at him carefully. The other couch cushion was under his head, metal arm tucked out of sight under his body and hair brushed away from his face. From the angle of Steve's couch cushion, there was virtually no difference between this Bucky and the one of his memories.

There was no way tell how long Buck had been lying there, but Steve didn't really care. He was here. After Steve had freaked out on him. He'd stayed, dragged the couch cushion down beside Steve's, laid on the floor beside him for no other reason than to be here.

"Just like when we kids, huh?" Steve asked quietly, his voice a little low and rough from sleep.

"We used to do this?" Bucky's eyebrows furrowed and instead of making him look terrifying the way it did over his mask, he looked kind of adorable.

"Yeah, we did. The first time, I was five and you were six. You don't remember?" Steve shifted a little, inching a tiny bit closer.

"No. I just thought I'd join you." It wasn't the blazon darling of Brooklyn, but those weren't the words of a stone cold killer either. Well, they were, but it looked like there were more facets to this particular diamond than even Steve knew.

Maybe there should be sorrow at the gap of Bucky's memory, that Bucky didn't remember all the times they'd lain here like this, but Steve decided he didn't care. This might even be better than having that image from the past - this was the Bucky of now, choosing the same things he always had, proof of how much of him was really left in there.

Even if Bucky's brain didn't remember Steve, Bucky's body did. I just thought I'd join you. Steve's lips curled softly, eyes softening.

"I'm glad you did." Bucky crinkled his nose at Steve's sappy words and the expression was absolutely darling. Steve smiled wider, eyes drooping a little in the comfort and safety of the bubble Bucky had created for them. He blinked a few times, voice dropping to a whisper. "Night, Buck."

"Goodnight Steve," Bucky whispered back.

His eyes shut again, and this time Steve fell asleep with a soft smile on his face.

Sometime during the night, their hands entwined in the space between them and neither of them could say who'd started it. Maybe both. Bucky's right and Steve's left, curled up together the way they had so many times. It should have felt new after so much had changed between them. It didn't. It felt the same as it always had.

But for once, Steve didn't have nightmares about Bucky falling, and Bucky didn't think about his exit
strategy in the morning.

And they both slept through the night, neither noticing that sometime around midnight, three feet away on Steve's coffee table, the screen of his phone lit up with a single text message.

*Found the machine. Looks like your boy's got an appointment to make. Call me.*

Chapter End Notes

In case you didn't click the link - hooray I drew something again!

Thank you all a ton - I adore all of the comments and kudos :)

So I know a lot of Stucky fics are about Bucky regaining his memories, or not, and dealing with that. But in the comics he got them back pretty fast and I thought that was awesome, so yes, memories aren't going to be much of an issue anymore.

The storyline is going to focus more on how the boys handle their feelings about each other, like the first part of this fic. And of course, B's identity crisis and such. Getting memories back doesn't actually fix those memories...

And as for the machine I'm talking about, you can read about it [here](#) if you haven't seen Agents of Shield.

Anyways, thank you so much for reading, you guys make my whole week xx
Chapter Notes

Sleep Disorder Warning: See the end notes if you have a sleep disorder of any kind. Otherwise, I don't want to spoil.

Other warnings: eating disorders, political discussions (you never know), insanity? identity confusion, doing reckless shit to get hurt, also panic / asthma attack warning? (god this chapter gets kind of nuts), lots of talk about death

Also! Agent Carter references just fyi

Here's your chapterly reminder that Bucky Barnes is not a reliable source of information and he bullshits everything. Just a little something to keep in mind.

And here's where I geeked out on a certain 40's Brooklyn food

Soundtrack:
This Love - Taylor Swift
Sleep - My Chemical Romance
Strong Hand - Chvrches

I also quoted this twitter account: xx (which everyone should go check out it's amazing and hilarious)

AND there's a youtube video that is SUPER GREAT that I didn't make but I really love and I put a link in the chapter where you can go watch it (when it fits in) but if you wanna watch it now or after it's right here: xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
"You sure about this?" Steve asked for the sixth time since this morning. The amused glances had shifted to raised eyebrows then rolled eyes and now Bucky just glared at him for the question.

"I'm just tryin' to look out for you Buck. You know you don't have to--" 

"I want to, Rogers. Okay? I want to." Bucky's long hair was hanging in his face as he leaned against the wall, waiting for the go-ahead from Maria.

Natasha had picked them up from the apartment this morning, but the whole crew was here now. It wasn't really necessary and Bucky kept eyeing everyone suspiciously, but nobody was in their right mind today.

He wanted this for Bucky, more than anything, but at what cost? Were twenty something years with Steve worth seventy years of torture? The machine unlodged all memories from the subconscious, restoring each to the true version.

If he filtered 'torture' to 'pain training,' Steve couldn't imagine what kinda horrors were awaiting them after this.

"Sergeant Barnes?" Agent Hill finally called and Bucky pushed off the wall hastily, slipping through the inner doors with Steve on his heels. Everyone else was waiting outside, with the exception of Agent Hill, who knew how to work the theta brainwaves inducer.

There was a chair next to the bed-looking machine that Steve took while Bucky swung himself up onto the machine's platform. It looked like an operating table (Buck's shoulders were stiff in his black tshirt but he was handling himself impressively well), except the headrest had a big encircling part that looked like those X-ray scanners at the dentist. Steve was eyeing it more warily than Bucky was, although the icy eyes were betraying a bit of hesitancy too.

"Alright boys. I don't need to remind you that this machine is level eight classified. If you breathe a word of it outside this room you will be killed, no exceptions. As for the dangers of this procedure..." Maria flipped a page on her clipboard, pulling up the scientific numbers in front of her even though she probably had them memorized.

"...the machine uses theta waves pulsing through the brain to dislodge memories from the subconscious. Any memories that have been altered by either your own mind or outside influence will be reverted to their true form. This is for all memories, including tragic ones. You will get back the crystal clarity of your childhood, but you will also have seventy years in full detail regarding the actual nature of your torture and treatment."

She paused then, looking at Bucky with a little sympathy and a lot of you should seriously consider this. He met her gaze calmly, lifting his chin up.

"I know. I'm prepared for the consequences." He looked so beautifully strong and sure about this; the nobility he'd had since they were old enough to know the word.

"There is a possibility that the complete compilation of these memories will permanently damage your psyche - you may never wake up from the operation, you may lose your mind and require mental institutionalization for the rest of your life. You may lose touch with reality, or your brain may decide it's too much and close off from the rest of the world. You will likely have nightmares, hallucinations, and identity confusion."

Steve was as white as his shirt. He'd known it'd be bad, but the idea of cracking Bucky with his own
"You don't have to do this," he said softly, turning to place his palm over Bucky's hand. "You know you don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do," Bucky replied, not bitter but definitely firm. He gently eased his hand out from under Steve's and Steve took the hint, sighing and turning back to Hill.

She cocked an eyebrow for a moment, then looked back down at her notes.

"Previous patrons who have used this machine went temporarily out of control afterwards. You have been signed into Captain Rogers' custody for the next twenty-four hours to prevent harm to either yourself or the city." Maria flipped another page on her clipboard. "Any questions?"

"Is there any physical damage to his brain?" Steve asked, at the same time Bucky said, "What is the permanence of the memories?"

Maria took the bombardment in stride, turning to Steve first with a "No, the waves are physically harmless," then addressing Buck's. "The machine is not implanting memories into your head, only unlodging those already there. Your memories will be restored permanently and will fade at the rate Captain Rogers' or anyone else's do."

"One last note - the operation itself is emotionally painful and open to subconscious self-harm caused by thrashing and such. Do we have permission to strap you down?"

"No," Bucky shook his head. "That's the fastest way to ensure I'll lose my mind. I've had my head messed with enough to hold still, but I want everyone out of the room anyways, just in case."

"Absolutely not," Steve shot back, grabbing Bucky's hand again. "I'm not letting you do this by yourself."

"I'll be fine," Bucky chided, but he didn't shove Steve's hand off this time. "You can stay until it starts, then I want you out. I'm not playing, Rogers. I'll have you detained if I have to."

It was a low blow, but there wasn't anything he could do about it; detainment was not the kind of atmosphere they needed surrounding this. He'd promised Bucky any space he'd ask for.

"But I'll be right outside that window. Okay?" Steve squeezed Bucky's fingers and Bucky rolled his eyes and nodded. Hill gestured for him to lie down and Steve stood, supporting Bucky's shoulder with his free hand as he laid down.

With his fingers over Bucky's wrist, it was easy to pick up how devastatingly quickly his heartbeat was racing. Those eyes closed as soon as he stretched out on the table and Steve brushed back the hair from his face gently, fingers locked tight in Bucky's.

"You're gonna be fine. I'm right here...Always. Are you doing okay?" A weak nod in return. It was a very different situation from the last time, mainly because Bucky was doing this all on his own, no pushy doctors or frantic energy. "It's gonna be fine, Buck. You ready?"

Another weak nod and Steve closed both his hands around Buck's, squeezing tight and sure. Bucky was so so strong. He'd endured far worse things, was going to be hit with those things again today, but they'd be fine.

"Starting theta memory transfer. In three. Two. One--" the headgear circle lit up and Maria turned a knob on the controller station - which was in a supersoldier proof cubicle a few feet from the
and it was barely five seconds later that Bucky's mouth opened with a pained shout.

Steve froze, panicked, and considered ripping the machine in half for a moment. Then there were hands around his biceps, dragging him backwards and away from Bucky, who was shouting and moaning like a mad man. He was too numb to fight the men hauling him out of the room, just staring as Bucky's beautiful lips wrenched open in another shout.

By the time they shoved the door to the room shut and had Steve safely on the other side, he was pretty sure he'd lost the ability to breathe. He bent in half, hands on his knees as his head spun and he tried to get his lungs back in working order.

There were a few pairs of hands rubbing his back and the rough-edged comfort reminded Steve exactly of the Howling Commandos, the way they'd all crowded him with comfort after Bucky's death. Not-death. That painful traumatic incident involving trains and shields.

"He's a fighter, Steve. He'll pull through." Natasha's voice was even more reassuring than her words, which were true, right? Bucky was the strongest man Steve'd ever known. He'd pull through. He'd pull through.

"You need some water, Cap? Barton, would you find water somewhere?"

"I think this is the first time I've missed Jarvis," Clint complained halfheartedly, his voice fading as he walked further away. "Then at least I don't have to take orders from Tony..."

"Hey man, can you straighten up? It'll help your breathing." Sam crouched down next to him and Steve reached out a shaky hand to steady himself on Sam's shoulder.

It'll help your breathing. Back when he used to have asthma attacks, his lungs would fight him then too, and guess who always stepped in and saved him? Bucky would rush over with Steve's inhaler - or if they didn't have the money to refill it, just rush over and wrap an arm around Steve's shoulders, straighten him up from his gasping, choking state. Then he'd carefully tip Steve's chin up, clear the airways, murmur encouragement and it'll help your breathing.

Bucky was getting that memory back right now. That memory and every other one too. More memories than Steve could imagine.

His best friend was coming back to him. He would be hurting, he would need Steve to be strong. He was getting his Bucky back.

With Tony and Sam's help he straightened back up, blinking away watery eyes and focusing his energy back into battle mode, calling on all his strength. He could do this. If Bucky was going through hell - literally - than Steve could take a few miserable moans and shouts.

Clint brought him water and Natasha scrutinized him worriedly while he downed it. They all scrutinized him worriedly. He hadn't had much alone time with his team lately, but he was immensely glad they were here. Even if it wasn't for Bucky's sake, Steve needed the support.

"Be glad you don't have best friends with amnesia," Steve finally managed, attempting and probably failing a smile. Natasha and Clint looked at each other amusedly and Tony clapped a hand on his shoulder.

Out here the sounds were muffled, but every once in a while one would break through the sound barrier and shatter Steve's heart. He kept pacing, which probably wasn't much better than the panicking he'd done earlier, and he was pretty sure his boots were wearing away the integrity of the floor he kept tracking.
Natasha was folded in some impossible pose in one of the chairs and Clint was on his phone, probably watching dog videos on youtube or something equally ridiculous. Tony had excused himself to go get food (more likely he needed out of the stressful environment and Steve would never blame him for that) and Sam was sitting in the chair next to Nat, staring at nothing and probably hearing every one of Bucky's distressed shouts as someone else's.

But Steve couldn't stop pacing. There were five minutes of utter silence from the room that Steve didn't move an inch, listening at the door and ready to barge in any moment. Then the shouting started again and Steve shut his eyes, leaning his forehead on the door and cursing every decision he'd made that had lead them here.

Ten minutes later Sam had pulled him off the door, brought Steve across the room and chatted with him softly about nothing in particular, which didn't help much because Steve was still cringing at the shouts; although they were getting consistently more spaced out now.

He was in the middle of replying half-heartedly to Sam's question about the view from his apartment when Natasha and Clint's quiet murmur in the background vanished and Sam froze, looking over Steve's shoulder. Oh god. His heart was pounding out of his chest.

Steve spun around just in time to get crushed.

From the sound of it, Natasha and Clint both had weapons drawn and Sam shot halfway across the room but Steve didn't care, he didn't care at all because Bucky was in his arms, squeezing him tight. He was frozen for only a few seconds, trying to comprehend the arms wrapped tightly around his back, the cheek pressed warm against his. Metal and human fingertips curled hard against his shoulder blades, leaving bruises. Bucky. God. Bucky was hugging him.

The world crashed down and Steve encircled his arms tight around the broad back, metal chilly against his bicep, clutching Bucky so tightly that neither of them could breathe. He didn't need oxygen. He needed this. Steve ducked his face into the long unruly hair, one hand coming up to grip the back of Bucky's head, to hold him closer as Steve tried not to cry.

His eyes were watering and his voice was probably shaky, but he didn't have anything to say, didn't want to move an inch from where he was right here. Probably ever. They were clinging to each other like the world had ended; which it had, too many times.

Seventy years apart.

An entire lifetime.

Memories of summer sunshine and crystal blue eyes; flickering lanterns in army tents; laughing promises and crinkling eyes; snowy mountains and pelting snowballs; corner cafés and cheap picture shows; talking up all night and falling asleep slumped together; trains and whistling snow and Steve's entire world breaking in half: one to be haunted with memories and one to die with that outstretched hand; ice and cold and silent screams; bridges and knives and who the hell is Bucky and falling to his knees; sketchbook smiles and broken dreams and apples and couches and tears and hell--

--and this love had come back to him.

Bucky had fallen and Steve had crashed and they'd both made it back to each other and everything hit him in that moment, in Bucky's shuddering breaths against his ear and his watering eyes getting Bucky's hair wet and they couldn't hold on to each other tight enough.

"God, you bastard," Bucky finally breathed against his ear, hands splayed across his shoulderblades.
Steve lifted his head a little out of Bucky's hair, eyes still closed and nose tucked against his temple. He could feel Bucky's body expand as he sucked in a breath, trying to get the shakiness out of his voice. "I'm gonna kill you for letting me almost kill you."

Steve barked a shaky laugh, because of course. He'd known it. The first time Buck really remembered him - all of him - and he was scolding. *Fuck*, he had missed this. He bundled Bucky up a little tighter in his arms, until he couldn't breathe at all, but he was never going to not want this, Bucky here with him.

It was probably another minute before Bucky finally sighed, warmth washing over Steve's neck, then his arms relaxed and he started to pull back. Steve wasn't quite ready to let go yet, but he never would be. So he relented and let Bucky put a few inches between their chests, his palms still secure on Steve's ribcage, Steve's on Bucky's biceps as their eyes met, both teary and smiling.

A single brief pause, and Steve could swear their souls entwined all over again, then Bucky was pulling his hands back all the way, clapping the right one on Steve's bicep congenially as his mouth quirked up in a soft version of his tired smile from the war.

"Sorry I'm being such a dame," Bucky huffed a laugh and wiped under his eyes with his metal thumb. Steve fell in love for the thousandth time.

"No apologizing," Steve scolded, stern through his shaky smile. The crystal gaze was obscured by the long strands of hair in Bucky's face and Steve ran his fingers through the length of it, tucking pieces behind Bucky's ear and probably staring way too much, but he didn't care, he was so damn gorgeous with a smile on his face, even if it was a sad at the edges.

Now that he could fully see him, it was pretty clear who'd exactly walked back out of that machine. This was still the Winter Soldier, but it was somehow the haunted man after Azzano too. Now that he wasn't busy scowling and not-remembering, the similarities to the Bucky of now and the Bucky of then were...scarily similar, really.

"I know it's late afternoon and Barnes only eats apples, but bakeries make the best comfort food arou--" Tony froze at the entryway to the waiting room, big white box in his hands as he stared at Bucky and Steve.

Because Steve's brain still wasn't really functioning, he didn't think to take his hand off of Bucky's cheek until metal fingers pried it off, a bright and totally fake smile on Buck's face as he turned to Stark, giving him a little wave.

"Tony," he greeted. Steve took a moment to look around at the rest of the Avengers, who were in varying forms of shock and wariness. They were all on their feet but it looked like weapons had at least been put out of sight, which was better than nothing.

It was a little annoying that everyone had pulled weapons on Buck the moment he strode out; but they'd thought Bucky had been attacking him. (And to be fair Steve had as well, for about 3 seconds.)

"Sergeant Barnes," Tony responded trepidatiously, holding out the white box in front of him. "I wasn't sure if you'd want an apple pastry..."

"Sure," Bucky replied easily, shooting a smile at Steve and clapping him on the arm one more time before stepping stiffly up to Stark, opening the lid of his box and making a face. "You don't happen to have any Charlotte Russe, do you? It's Steve's favorite."
Steve may or may not have clapped a hand over his mouth to stop the surprised sound from escaping his lips. Sam looked at him funny and Steve lowered his hand, gesturing silently at Bucky and making an *oh my god is this real* face that included a clenched fist and staring up at the ceiling.

Natasha rolled her eyes, Sam shook his head, and Clint laughed, then Bucky was back at his side, holding out a glazed donut.

"Sorry, Stark has terrible tastes." Bucky deposited the donut in his hand then proceeded to stare at his own apple pastry, picking a piece off the corner and making a face at it.

He looked...uncomfortable, almost. Like there was some pretty intense internal pressure. He'd been given all of his memories back, he'd hugged Steve, so he might think the expectation bar was set at the high level of "Bucky Barnes normal," when that was not the case at all.

Sam had talked it over with him earlier today, pulling Steve aside for a moment to explain that even if this all worked and everything went well, Bucky wasn't the same person he'd been before. No matter how many memories he had, he was still the Winter Soldier, he was still an emotionless assassin who couldn't bring himself to eat anything but fruit and hated talking for too long and got restless if he hadn't killed anything in a few days. *Whoever he used to be, versus the guy he is now.*

Not counting the fact that every terrible moment from the past seventy years had been shoved back into his head at once, and really, he shouldn't even be upright, let alone expected to eat high-sugar foreign foods.

"Buck?" Steve asked softly and Bucky looked up from where he was picking apart the apple pastry, flicking his hair out of his eyes annoyedly. It was hard to tell how much it was a façade and how much was the truth, but better safe than sorry. "How about we go back to my apartment and talk? It's quiet, I think the couch cushions are still on the floor--"

"Nuh uh. No way, Rogers." Bucky interrupted with a shake of his head and another too-bright smile. Steve crossed his arms over his chest and Bucky straightened up a little taller, playfully knocking his shoulder against Steve's. "We've got a destination booked already, have had for years."

Steve raised his eyebrows and Bucky popped one of the pieces of cooked apple in his mouth, sucking the sticky sugar off of them with an impressive poker face.

"We're gonna back home to Brooklyn, baby," Bucky sing-songed, crossing the room to grab their coats from one of the waiting chairs and shooting a wink at Natasha while he was in the vicinity.

No one had stopped looking at Bucky like he'd grown three heads.

Then he was shoving Steve's coat at him, tapping his foot impatiently as he shouldered his own on. Tony plopped the box of bakery goods down on an empty chair and Clint inhaled three eclairs before Sam could swat his hand and grab one for himself. Under the pretense of squabbling over baked goods, Natasha lowered her voice and leaned closer.

"He just got seventy years of gruesome torture memories shoved back in his head, and we're going to let him be alone with Rogers right now?" Natasha pursed her lips, glancing over her shoulder at Steve, who was taking an uncharacteristically long time to button up his coat.

"Especially when we won't have tabs on where they're going?" Clint added (with his mouth full), reaching for another donut and getting swatted by Tony.

"Do we have a choice?" Sam asked grimly. They all straightened then, looking over at the two supersoldiers. Bucky looked way too calm, listening patiently as Steve murmured something quietly
to him, standing close together like they couldn't imagine being further than three feet apart ever again.

"Hey," Steve called out, and they all pretended that they weren't just staring. "I've got my phone on me, but we're headed out. Thank you guys though, for being here. It means a lot."

Natasha stood and quickly crossed the room, pulling Steve down into a brief hug. "Be careful," she whispered in his ear and Steve nodded as he pulled away, giving her a small smile.

"Alright, well, since Rogers is leaving, do I get the extra muffins or..." Clint suggested, already reaching for the box again. Sam snatched it away from him.

~*~*~

"Okay, so there's this place on Staten Island called Holtermann's that still sells Charlotte Russe, but I'm pretty sure that's the only place in New York that still has 'em. A damned shame, Brooklyn used to obsess over those. Remember in '41, they used to cost a nickel and sometimes I'd stop by that bakery a few blocks down from the apartment after work to bring you one?"

Bucky chattered consistently in the car, sentences strung together sloppily like he used to, but—almost too perfectly. Like he'd carefully chosen every word, controlling every movement and pretending he wasn't. Steve watched him and tried to figure out how to say just one of the things running through his head. Coming up blank, he figured he might as well participate in the simple conversation.

"Yeah. Didn't we get some for my birthday one year? We sat in that café overlooking the East River—"

"Nope, that was ice cream."

"You sure?" Steve asked, furrowing his eyebrows. Bucky snorted, glancing at Steve with a light in his eyes. It looked like a light that belonged in the twenty-first century: too bright, out of place, entirely lacking glow or beauty that light was supposed to have. Something was so wrong.

"Yeah, I'm sure. And Bruce said my memories are clearer than yours, the whole amnesia-phenomenon or whatever. We went out for ice cream on your birthday, Charlotte Russe for mine."

He sounded proud to remember that and Steve hummed because yeah, it was nice to have Bucky recalling which desserts they used to eat when they were kids, but what about the whole, you know, seventy years of torture thing?

The way Buck wouldn't shut up or sit still for more than three minutes (he'd never been this enthusiastic, even when they were kids) was...disconcerting.

Kinda like watching someone skip haphazardly on the edge of a cliff. Or kiss a grenade. Suspended right on the edge of toppling into disaster.

The hovering worry stilted a moment as Steve glanced out the window and suddenly caught sight of the Brooklyn Bridge. His breath froze in his throat, giant brown brick arches and sloping wire lines the exact same as they'd been back then.

Home. Except really, home was sitting right next to him in the back of one of Stark's chauffeured SUVs.

"Hmm." Bucky tapped on the window, looking distantly at the bridge with a foggy, unreadable look on his face. "Almost..."
"Almost what?" Steve asked. The fog instantly cleared and Bucky shot his gaze back at Steve, mouth curving a smile that still didn't feel right.

"Nothing. Whaddu you wanna see first?"

They wandered around Brooklyn for the better part of the day, pointing out buildings and landmarks to each other and making faces at how much everything had changed. Streets that used to be cobblestone lit up dull gold were now arching blacktops with shiny white blinking lights.

Sharp angled buildings and too-bright blocky signs, nothing handwritten, nothing really human. The rowdy, edgy feeling of Brooklyn from the depression had shifted to something smoother, more bohemian. It was trendy in an intentionally off-trendy way - no kids playing in the street, no vendors on corners. Even the alleys looked different.

They walked in sync most of the time, but with a hell of a lot more space between them than they used to. Although, to be fair, still closer than any New Yorker had a reason to.

Bucky had an opinion on everything, or he was at least making up opinions on everything, and Steve barely got a word in likewise. Which was also unusual for their relationship, it'd always been equal banter between them.

It took a little while to figure out the pattern, but by the time the sun was starting to set in the sky, Steve realized that - disregarding the initial bitching out for the helicarrier fight - Bucky hadn't mentioned a single event past July 1943, when he shipped out. If he didn't know better, he'd assume only the pre-serum memories came back.

He wanted to say something about it, wanted to ask Buck how he was coping with his time as the Winter Soldier, but he'd promised space.

After a disappointing visit to all their old apartments (everything had changed too much, only one was still an apartment complex at all), they drifted the streets and ended up on the harbor by the bridge. The old shipping box they used to sit on was long gone, so they sat on the ground and dangled their feet over the edge of the concrete.

"The river even looks different. Muddier, you know?" Bucky mused, stiffly tapping his right hand fingers along his leg.

That was the other weird thing. Before today, Buck had used both hands equally, with an emphasis on the metal one for strength. But he was pretty sure Bucky hadn't used it for a single thing since he'd hugged Steve - like he was pretending it wasn't there, forgotten at his side.

"And by the looks of it, the dock workers are different. No more fifteen-year-olds out there hauling things around."

Steve glanced over at Bucky, wind blowing and disheveling the hair around his face. The lights from the city across the harbor were starting to reflect in the river, a few shining their brilliance in Bucky's eyes.

"I wonder if the dock workers all go drinkin' on Friday nights, keepin' up the tradition like alwa--"

"Bucky?" The glittering reflection of New York across the bay turned to Steve, eyebrows raised and smile all wrong. Initially he wasn't planning to say anything, but he wasn't sure how much longer he could take this.

"You know you don't have to do...this." He gestured vaguely, figuring Buck would know what he
was talking about. From the furrowed eyebrows, apparently not. Steve cleared his throat and clarified. "I'm not expecting you to-- you don't have to put up a front."

Bucky just blinked. Steve sucked in a breath and steeled himself, the next words firm.

"This is me, Buck, you know you don't have to fake anything. I'm not asking for you to forget the last seventy years. You don't have to pretend to be...him."

"Him," Bucky repeated flatly.

"Not that I-- It's just. I know you're a different person now, Buck." He was being as patient as he could, using the words Sam had told him, placing the Winter Soldier and Bucky Barnes as two separate people because way too much had happened to--

"A different... It's still me!!" The wind whipped Bucky's hair in his face and the metal hand came up to frustratedly push it away. "It always has been, since the bridge, since before that. I didn't just stop being who I was just because I forgot who you were. Which took a hell of a long time, by the way."

Okay, that was not what he had been expecting. Wasn't this supposed to be the other way around? Wasn't Buck supposed to be all 'I'm not him' and Steve supposed to say 'I know, but I love you anyways?'

Bucky huffed exasperatedly, although at least the fake smile was gone. He looked more like the soldier from the war now, or like the Winter Soldier on his nicer days. (Except they weren't separate people?)

"I just remember everything now, that's the only change. I'm more than my memories; and I'm not a different person. There is no him, Steve. This is me, Bucky Barnes - hi - your best friend." He gave a sarcastic little wave on the hi and normally that'd make Steve smile but instead he blinked confusedly.

"But you've changed so much..." The words were quiet, unsure; this was not how this was supposed to go.

A terrible self-deprecating laugh escaped Bucky's lips, metal fingers running through his hair again. "A hell of a lot less than you know, Rogers."

Whatever that meant.

"...okay, but what's with all the nonstop chatter and fake smiling and enthusiasm? Didn't you spend seventy years--"

"Could I possibly have a day without dwelling on Hydra? I don't know if it's going to last, if I can shove all that to the back of my mind permanently, but I'm sure as hell gonna try." Bucky sighed and pushed himself up off the ground, holding his right hand out to Steve to haul him to his feet too.

They dusted themselves off and Bucky looked out over the water one more time, eyes distant now but expression a hell of a lot more real. "I'm disregarding all performance errors right now, don't stomp on that."

Swallowing everything Bucky said was going to take some time, but he got choked up on that last part.

"Performance errors?" Steve asked hollowly, because of all things for Bucky to hold on to from his time at Hydra, it was going to be the obsession with efficiency?
He just got an odd look as they started walking back to the city. "I'm not going to forego my training now that I remember a time that I wasn't trained. That'd be like you going back to pre-serum on purpose."

Actually, that was a shitty comparison, because there was a difference between chronic health issues and deadly assassin skills.

"Life is a hell of a lot easier when you're efficient, Steve. Hydra made me perfect, then they used me. But I'm not gonna go back to being flawed."

"You were always perfect, Buck."

Not the brightest thing to say aloud when hiding how you feel about a person, but it slipped out of his mouth before he could consider taking it back. But Bucky didn't read too much into it, didn't think about it at all, just tipped his head back and laughed at the fading light of the sky.

"Holy shit, Steve. No. I was not. You have no idea what a mess I was in here." Bucky tapped a finger to his temple. "Since we were kids, man. But it doesn't have to be like that anymore. As much as Hydra are douchebags, they made me strong."

You were always strong, Steve wanted to say, but apparently his opinion didn't count. What happened to the days when Steve's opinion was the only one that counted?

"But enough of that. What do you say we hit the town, find some pub that still serves Irish liquor?" Bucky clapped him on the back and turned as they hit the sidewalk, already strolling down to the bars on seventh.

"Wait wait wait. Don't you think we should maybe hold off on getting wasted for a little while? Last time you tried that, you had a relapse and thought I was a goddamned angel taking you to the afterlife."

Right after Azzano, two years ago now, but the dazed expression and begging words were clear as ever.

Bucky snorted and slowed a little, keeping pace with Steve now. "Not my finest hour. But you've done some pretty questionable things when you get drunk..."

Steve groaned. "Of course you'd remember that. Thank god I can't get drunk anymore."

Bucky turned to him curiously at that. "Wait, really? And you actually tried?"

Okay this was not a conversation he wanted to have. There were quite a few, actually, especially those spanning the gap between the train and the whole crashing-into-the-ocean thing.

"Yeah. After...after you fell."

The quiet admission made them both silent for a few blocks.

Bucky had been so wrapped up in distracting himself from pieces of his own timeline, he'd entirely forgotten about Steve's.

Steve had thought he'd died.

Bucky knew first hand how bad that could be - he remembered that newspaper clear as day. He
remembered every second of that but no, no, he wasn't going to let his brain go there. Not today. Not ever, hopefully.

He'd knocked his shoulder against Steve's, giving him a smile that was hopefully less fake than the others he'd been attempting today.

"How bout we go back to your place, instead? Watch a movie or something. We'll go out drinkin' some other time." Steve lit up at his suggestion, already pulling out his phone to shoot off a text for their car.

While they waited, Bucky teased Steve about his pretentious taste and affinity against taxis, which apparently had to do with safety precautions and constantly being stopped as Captain America.

Really, Bucky preferred the armored SUV, couldn't imagine driving in a car that didn't have reinforced windows, especially when he wasn't the one in control of the vehicle. But he needed to talk about something, needed to keep commenting, needed to keep distracting himself with constant noise.

Because he was absolutely terrified that the moment the noise left and silence settled in, seventy years of silence would come crashing down on him at once.

He'd thrown a barrier up in his head for protection, but he had no idea how long it'd last. It crumbled a little every time they fell into silence though - he'd talk himself hoarse about nothing at all before he let that wall come down.

That's why he'd suggested a movie, too. Constant noise and distraction.

Really, the idea of watching frivolous irrelevant fictional characters parade around on screen for two hours of technicolor scene changes and overly dramatic dialogue sounded useless, terrible, and repulsive.

But what else was he supposed to do? He couldn't let this crash down on him. He'd heard Maria's warnings. He might not survive.

As soon as he'd stepped out of that machine, only one thing had been on his mind. He hadn't worried yet about the torture. Hadn't worried yet about a certain revelation in a certain bar right after Azzano. Hadn't worried about anything besides one single word that mattered more than everything in the whole world. Steve.

He finally remembered why Steve was the most important person in the world.

And that person, his best friend, his other half, was waiting for him, chatting quietly to Sam Wilson, his back to the operation room door. And Bucky could not think of a single thing except--

This stupid punk that he'd grown up with, this incredible man he'd winded his life around like a vine squeezing the solid trunk of a tree, he was here and now and

_Don't win the war til I get there._

_You got your orders?_

_Thanks, Buck. But I can get by on my own._

You don't have to.
God, he didn't have to.

Bucky was here now and he wasn't ever leaving again and he strode across the room the way he walked down the smushed hoods of cars, crushed Steve into his arms and held on for dear life because he was drowning in the soft golden glow and he never wanted to let go.

Eventually they'd had to step back, face reality, but first he'd bitched Steve out for the helicarrier - and that was not the end of that conversation, he had a lot to say about Steve's reckless abandon, especially in regard to how deadly Bucky was now.

He had a feeling that getting his memories back wasn't going to help that recklessness any, either. Steve probably thought Bucky was as harmless as a butterfly now, but really? He was more dangerous and lethal than ever.

He had complete control over his life. He knew who he was. He could pinpoint the very first time he'd realized the darkness inside of his soul. And it was long before he got drafted.

Hydra had no control over him. Everything they'd taken from him had been given back, and everything they'd gifted him with he'd chosen to keep. If they thought he was lethal before...that was nothing compared to the complete control he had now.

But Steve only smiled wide at him and held open the door of his apartment. Like Bucky was perfectly harmless. He'd never been harmless. But he'd never intentionally hurt Steve (when he knew who he was), so he wouldn't hurt him now, either.

That didn't stop him from sighing exasperatedly at how unaware Steve was of the gravity of that I'm-not-going-to-kill-you pass. The pass that had also somehow extended to Steve's weird colorful friends.

Oh, and he remembered shooting Natasha now. Both times.

Still wasn't repentant about it, though.

Once they were back at Steve's place, popcorn came up, but he still felt kind of queasy after eating a piece of that sticky, baked, soggy sugar mess that Stark had called an apple. The appeal in real apples was the raw purity of their form. Crisp and clean and not polluted. No noise or useless nutrients. All beneficial to his body's functions without being overwhelming enough to make him hurl.

He told Steve no thank you on the popcorn and, of course, that worrying face flitted across his features again.

See, the problem was, he knew now how much he used to love popcorn. Which was great, go him of eighty years ago, but it didn't work with his body now. He felt kind of guilty, like apologizing to himself for not wanting all the things he used to. But people's favorites change all the time; he'd rather hold the memory of how much he used to like certain things than try to force himself to like them again.

Steve kept asking him lots of things, questions for everything. Maybe he'd taken Bucky's comment a few days ago seriously, when he'd snapped to stop acting like Hydra by trying to dictate his life. Which, obviously, this was Steve, he'd shoot himself in the foot before he stepped on Bucky.

Still, the overwhelming push of decisions and choices being shoved at him was a little annoying. He didn't care what movie they watched, seriously. He didn't care where Steve sat on the goddamn couch, he was entirely okay with letting Steve chose what he wanted.
It wasn't that he didn't want anything, because he still had a few preferences (mostly for whatever was the most efficient) and even if he didn't, he could remember the ones he used to have and could just reference those if he needed to.

Eventually Steve stopped pestering him and decided to randomly choose a movie from the list. It didn't matter what it was, neither of them were paying attention anyways. It was still a distraction from silence though, so he wasn't going to complain. Out loud. He was going to internally bitch about it the whole time.

By the time the movie clicked off, it was dark outside, late enough to start getting cold, and exhaustion was wearing down his bones. He'd slept last night, way more than he usually did, but running around Brooklyn all afternoon after the biggest operation of his life had really pushed the whole don't-sleep-for-days thing.

"Buck? There anything I can get you?" Steve's voice was quiet, gentle, but Bucky didn't really feel like opening his eyes. He'd slumped down on his half of the couch, head tilted back against the cushions and legs curled half underneath him. He really didn't feel like moving, he just wanted to sleep.

"A bed that doesn't feel like a marshmallow?" he replied gruffly, sinking down a little more on the couch and probably making his hair stick up in a thousand directions. Steve made a sound of agreement, then there was a hesitant hand on his ankle.

"Did you wanna sleep here?"

"Mmm." Bucky replied, curling his human arm closer to his body. There was another strange sound, then the hand on his ankle suddenly pulled his legs out from underneath him, tipping him sideways to lay down on the couch and stretching his legs out so he was more comfortable. He made an undignified sound at the manhandling but it was too cold and he was too tired to really snap at Steve.

If it were anyone but Steve here, he couldn't imagine going to sleep right now, letting his guard down like this, but he'd been doing this around Steve for a month and the likelihood of Steve killing him was even less than Bucky doing the same, so there wasn't anything to worry about.

Until Steve started to get up.

Bucky's eyes shot open, propping up on his elbows as Steve froze, already half off the couch.

"Where the fuck are you going?"

"You need to sleep and you can't stretch out if I'm on the couch--"

"Yes I can. Put my feet in your lap, it won't be the first time you've slept sitting up." Maybe he should be considerate and offer Steve a more comfortable way to sleep than sitting, but Bucky was not going to fucking fall asleep if Steve wasn't here and he sure as hell wasn't sleeping in that bed of his. Besides, they'd slept in worse ways for lesser causes.

Steve sat back down without protest, swinging Bucky's legs into his lap and turning his torso sideways to prop an arm up over the top of the couch, looking down at Bucky worriedly. "Are you sure? If you just want warmth, I can go find a blanket--"

"Rogers, I'm asking you to stay. Please. Thank you. Goodnight." Bucky closed his eyes again, but not before seeing the flash of a bashful smile across Steve's features. God, how was Steve so fucking beauti-

Not going there. Nope. Sleeping, he was going to get sleep, then he could face everything in the
morning. He'd face his memories and he'd start compartmentalizing shit and he'd stay in all day eating apples if that's what it took to figure everything out. After sleep, though.

For Steve's sake, he decided to ignore the thumbs absent-mindedly running over his calves, the fingers curled around Bucky's legs like he was afraid they'd disappear if he let go. And the gentle stroking absolutely did not make him fall asleep within thirty seconds of closing his eyes again.

If only it had been enough to make him stay asleep.

Twenty minutes after midnight and Steve had long since been asleep too, arms resting on Bucky's calves and head tipped back against the couch cushion. The apartment had settled into an eerie stillness, black shadows shifting at the corners of the room, a pale blue-white stripe of moonlight sucking color out of everything it touched.

Perfectly silent, not so much as the tick of a clock as two supersoldiers slept in the darkness, horror waiting to grip through the quiet and rip apart the soft colors of dreams. Suspended glass hanging by a silver string, swinging back and forth as light glinted off the knives in the distance, silence to suffocate in, waiting, waiting.

Then the scream pierced the thick layers of the mute world, dream glass shattering into a thousand pieces.

The terrifying shrill sound yanked Steve out of his dreams, had him scrambling through the darkness and calling out Bucky's name, which was when the first heavy foot violently kicked his thigh, probably already bruising by the time he shot to his feet, wincing from the pain.

The moment Steve got off the couch Bucky sat up, metal arm swinging out into (thankfully) empty air. His eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness yet and he couldn't see Bucky's face, couldn't see where he was kicking or thrashing. Just in case, Steve took a step back, trying to calm himself down so he could help Bucky.

"Bucky? Buck? Hey, hey, I'm here, it's okay, it was just a nightmare--"

Another shrill scream pierced the air and the metal arm swung out again, hitting his own hip as he thrashed and collapsed onto his back again. It was all happening way too fast and Steve had no idea what was going on. But whatever was happening, he couldn't let Bucky hurt himself.

Calculating the wild swings the best he could, Steve dodged another kick and reached out for Bucky's left arm, hard cold metal colliding with his hand and definitely bruising his palm. It took all of his strength to keep it from hitting either of them, but Bucky's head was still thrashing back and forth and his right arm punched Steve in the chest and okay, he was going to have to seriously restrain him.

In lack of ingenuity or better ideas, Steve dragged Bucky off the couch, wrestling him to the floor and forcing the metal arm under his leg, pinning Bucky against his own chest with an arm wrapped around his throat - not hard enough to choke him, the way he'd had to last time when they'd fought on the helicarrier. It was the same position, just less aggressive, more about keeping Bucky still than actually making him pass out.

Clearly, unconsciousness was something they were going to have a problem with.

"Bucky, Bucky, you gotta snap out of it. Look, it's Steve, it's me. You're in New Yo-" Bucky lurched to the side and Steve struggled, wrestling Bucky back against his chest again, both of them breathing heavy now. The panicking body was soaked through with sweat, sticking to Steve's tight
white t-shirt and probably ruining it, but he didn't think to care.

There weren't anymore ear-shattering screams, but Bucky was making these terrified (and terrifying) noises, whimpers and little cries. With his arm around Buck's throat, he could feel his heartbeat pulsing erratically against his forearm, way too fast, jumping all over the place.

"Calm down, c'mon Buck, s'just me, I'm here, I'm gonna protect you, I'm never going to let anyone hurt you again. Please, please, come back to me. Buck. C'mon, you're scaring me. Bucky. Bucky?"

Steve pulled Bucky up a little higher on his chest and clamped his leg down tighter on the metal arm so he could lean to the side and try to catch a glimpse of Bucky's face. His eyes were wide open but staring at nothing, entirely glassy like he wasn't here at all.

The struggling weakened slightly, so Steve slowly released the pressure from around Bucky's throat. He watched carefully, focusing on every movement, trying to grasp his head around whatever the hell was happening. But he missed whatever he was looking for entirely, because suddenly there was a metal elbow in his gut and then Bucky was gone, darting out of his arms and to his feet so fast that Steve couldn't even reach out to grab his ankle.

"Bucky!!" Shouting when all the air was knocked out of him wasn't easy, but it didn't matter because Bucky might as well have been deaf. He scrambled back up to his feet, stumbled over a pillow Bucky had flung when he'd bolted upright the first time, then he was running off in the only direction Bucky could have gone.

Cursing the stupid ability to walk silently - and apparently, run silently - Steve checked the kitchen first, sliding over the tiles in his socks and catching himself on the counter before he fell over. No Bucky. He really shouldn't be running in socks, but he managed not to fall as he ran into the bedroom next, slamming open the door and calling out Bucky's name again. Nothing.

Steve whipped his head around, because his apartment was seriously not that big, and on second thought darted to the front door next, checking the deadbolt and pulling the security chain, just in case. And he'd have known if Bucky went out the window...

That only left the bathroom, and Steve went barging in with the same vehemence as the bedroom, ducking just in time to narrowly avoid getting impaled with a knife. It stuck in the wall where his head had just been, handle reverberating up and down from the force of the throw. Steve instantly put his hands up, finally locating Bucky in the bathtub and inching carefully forward, on full-alert so he could avoid the next knife, which was held tight between Bucky's fingers.

He looked positively wrecked, crouched in the bathtub with his hair sticking to his face in sweaty strands, blinking rapidly, still glassed over and not seeing Steve.

"Hey, hey, it's just me. I'm not gonna hurt you, no one's gonna hurt you. I'm here. Okay? I'm here."

As soon as he was close enough, Steve snatched the knife out of Bucky's fingers, ignoring the shallow cut across his palm in the process. He'd heal. What mattered was his best friend, staring over Steve's shoulder like all the demons of hell were in the hall.

With a quick glance behind him (it couldn't hurt to check), Steve realized that the knife that had almost hit him wasn't the only one in the wall. The door had two lodged in the wood and the wall had three for a total of five, not counting the sixth that Steve had tossed to the ground. What the hell had Bucky been throwing knives at when no one was in here?

A frightened cry had his attention snapping back to Bucky, who was still staring wide eyed behind him, bottom lip trembling and still glassed over. Steve's heart was pounding outta his chest and he'd
be having an asthma attack if he were smaller, although scratch that, he couldn't breathe right now anyways.

He had to get Bucky to snap out of this before he killed them both.

In another quick-thinking moment of genius ideas, Steve flipped on the bathspout, cupping his hands full of freezing water and tossing it in Bucky's face. A gasp, shaking shoulders as Buck scrambled away, then his head dropped and body tipped, falling. Just as Steve dove to catch him he shot upright, blinking through the water on his eyelashes.

"You with me? Are you okay? You're safe, Buck, I swear, you're safe." Open palms raised, forcing himself not to cradle Bucky to his chest - he had no idea if that would help or make his best friend run around the apartment chased by ghosts again.

"Where'm. R-reporting mish. No, ple- wha-" Bucky murmured nonsensically, swaying slightly as his pupils dilated and contracted, trying to focus and adjust to the dark bathroom.

"We're in my apartment. You're in the bathtub. You're okay....God, you're okay." Steve slumped against the side of the tub, one hand running through his hair as he breathed too quickly, holding off the pending panic attack. They were both fine. They were both alive. Bucky was extremely disoriented, but his eyes weren't glassed over, he was looking at Steve, even if his gaze was utterly confused.

"That had to have been one hell of a nightmare," Steve breathed, cupping a hand over his eyes to focus his head and get his heartbeat back to rational.

"Night--Nightmare?" Bucky asked, cocking his head and blinking rapidly, like a machine trying to recalibrate.

Steve lifted his head from his hands, staring at Bucky. There was no way Buck didn't remember that. He'd ran around the apartment throwing knives. Clearly, he'd been having a nightmare about something. Maybe the past seventy years they'd just dragged to the surface??

"Where'm. Ca...can I. Bed?"

And he wanted to go back to sleep now?

He'd kept his head up to this point, he really had, but Steve could not do this twice in one night, the idea of it wasn't comprehensible. His stomach probably had permanent metal indentions in it, his thigh was throbbing from being kicked, one hand was already purpling over in a bruise and the other was bleeding from grabbing the knife and his chest was aching from where he'd been punched and his head was the worst of it because the sound that Bucky had made when he screamed.

Dr. Erskine would probably be fascinated to document that Steve could, in fact, have non-asthma asthma attacks after all.

His body forgot he had the ability to breathe and entirely convinced his brain that he was tiny and weak and his lungs weren't working and he was gasping and choking on oxygen. Steve shut his eyes and gulped in useless breaths, reaching out in the darkness but it didn't matter, there was no one here that could help him (especially not the disoriented assassin in his bathtub). He couldn't breathe, he couldn't breathe and god knows he didn't have the comfort of an inhaler because obviously, he was the epitome of physical health, he should be able to get a grip on himself, it was all in his head but it didn't matter, because his lungs were failing him anyways.

Somehow, he ended up with his cellphone in his hand and some distant part of his brain was grateful
he'd fallen asleep in pants with pockets. There was a difference between not being able to breathe and not being able to work his thumbs, so Steve got his phone pressed to his ear and ringing between gasping, useless breaths.

Good thing he could go a long time without oxygen, right? As he'd found out when he was drowning. Being crushed in on all sides by freezing cold, water rushing through his body, brain screaming at him to swim to the surface--

"Rogers? What the hell do you wa-"

"Tony, I c-can't breathe," Steve gasped into the phone, slamming his head back against the bathroom wall to try to clear his airways.

"Wait, fuck, what? Like are you being choked to death? Steve?" The sleepy voice on the other end of the line suddenly sounded very much awake.

"A-asthma at-tack I, ah-" he tried gulping in air, his head starting to pound from lack of oxygen. "N-no inhaler, f-fuck, I..."

"Barnes can help you, okay, he's done this before, remember? You guys grew up together, I know he's helped you through these before. Just go get him, okay? He's a good guy, he won't mind, assassin or not. Steve?"

"C-can't, he's. He's hurt, th-that's what-" a whimper he'd be embarrassed about any other time slipped through his lips, eyes squeezing shut as a tear slipped down his cheek, "-what s-set it off."

"Okay. Okay, just listen to my voice, Rogers. You're taking the orders from me now. For a second, anyways. You're okay. He's okay, he's not dead - right? - well, if he was, you probably wouldn't be calling me. Okay. I kind of suck at the whole not-panicking thing so really, stellar choice on friend to call here. But I need to you do exactly what I say, alright? Clear your airways first, tip your head back. You've got to give your lungs all the opportunity they have to start working right again."

He'd already gotten to that point, but Steve was glad Tony was pretending this was actual a physical problem, like he wasn't just fucked up in the head and responding the way he had years ago. Nothing was actually wrong with him, which somehow made it worse, but Tony was thankfully ignoring the fact that it was physically impossible for Steve to have an asthma attack with the serum.

"You clear? Now we're going to breathe, okay? Just in, now...out. Slow and steady, match the way I'm breathing. In...out. Again. You can do this, okay? In...and out."

It took a few more rounds, but gradually his lungs started functioning properly, or at least his head finally agreed that they'd never stopped working in the first place. Three minutes later and he was running his fingers through his hair, breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth, glancing over at Bucky to make sure he was still alright.

Bucky was curled up in the bottom of the tub, eyes closed, ribs rising and falling with each deep breath. He was sleeping again. On one hand, rest was great, and on the other hand if they had a repeat performance of the past half hour before dawn, Steve was actually going to invest in a damn inhaler.

"You good, Rogers?" Tony finally asked quietly over the line, his voice the most serious and caring Steve had ever heard it.

"Yeah." He pinched the corners of his eyes, steeling the headache that threatened to pound his head back into mush. "Thanks, Tony. Seriously, I don't know what I'd've--"
"You'd've been fine. You'd find a way to push through it with that stubborn head of yours. Now, do you wanna tell me why you called at ass-o'clock in the morning with the profound words of Bucky's hurt?"

Actually, Steve was a little surprised Tony hadn't pushed about that more earlier. He'd been patient, for once, and while half the reason he'd called Tony was because he knew he'd pick up regardless of the time, he was glad he'd made the choice.

"It's...god, I don't even know how to describe it."

"Start from the beginning, that tends to be a pretty good spot."

Steve hooked his arm over the side of the bathtub, looking down at Bucky's sleeping form as he relayed the story of the scream, the wild thrashing, the way he'd seemed to calm for a moment in the chokehold before breaking free and tracking around the apartment like he was being chased. The knives in the door and the wall, then finally getting Bucky to wake up with a splash of cold water to the face.

How Bucky hadn't even known what the hell had happened, had been disoriented as hell, and was currently passed out in the bottom of the bathtub.

"I mean, I knew this operation would be risky, Tony. I knew it'd bring up all sorts of memories and I knew it'd be tough. I was ready for nightmares - he's had those for years, I couldn't tell you how many flashbacks and memories I've pulled him out of. But god. The things these people did to him? Hydra had to have destroyed him beyond what any of us could imagine... It's never been like this. Honestly, I'm not sure how I can handle another nightmare like that."

"Nightmare?" Tony finally interrupted. He'd sat in silence for the entire explanation, and from the tone of his voice he sounded pretty shaken up about it too.

"Steve, Barnes isn't just having bad dreams. That wasn't a nightmare. That was a night terror."

The words echoed, bouncing around in his head like beads in a microwave, heating up every inch of him as he turned his eyes back on the collapsed sleeping figure. "Night terror?" He repeated in a whisper, the world tipping sideways enough that he had to grab onto the tub edge again.

"It's caused by over-stimulation by the central nervous system. They're more common in little kids, but adults can have them too. Especially if they've been under high stress, aren't getting enough sleep, have a shitty diet, and are going through traumatic experiences."

Steve made an annoyed humming sound because really, if that was an option, someone should have at least mentioned the idea to him. Actually, no, Steve should have researched everything he could, but how the hell would he have known what to look for? The internet was overwhelmingly vast.

"I don't know much about them, just that it starts with screaming and the bad ones lead to the whole 'being chased' thing. You're only supposed to grab them if they're a threat to themselves - which obviously in this case, he was - and whatever you do, you aren't supposed to wake them up. It just freaks them out and doesn't accomplish anything."

Tony never ceased to amaze him with the amount of information he had stored in that egotistical brain.

"What am I supposed to do, then?" Steve asked, reaching over the side of the tub to peel the sweaty strands of hair off Bucky's face, flipping them back into the rest of his hair. He looked so beautiful and peaceful while he was sleeping, the stark opposite of the terrified screaming and thrashing from
earlier.

"Just wait it out, unfortunately. Apparently they go back to sleep after about ten minutes, maybe longer. Just keep the windows and doors locked so he can't get out. People with night terrors can get pretty violent when they're not the deadliest assassin in the world." Tony's flat-lined humor was back, which he found himself actually appreciative of now. Anything that made it easier to swallow the scary words of night terror. "Good news though, he probably won't remember anything in the morning. It depends. Some people do, but most don't."

"Well, I guess that's good. I doubt I could patch up everything by then, though. And the bruises probably won't be gone either, so I'm guessing I'll be getting some questions."

"I'd bet on it. You good now, Cap? Got everything in control on your end? I can send someone over if you want--""

"No, no, I'm fine. I'll be fine. I just want to get some sleep. Thank you though, again, really, it means a lot."

"I was counting on you of all people not to get sappy."

"Yeah, take it up with Bucky, he thinks I'm the biggest sap in the world. Anyways. I hope I didn't disturb your night too much...thanks again."

"You're welcome, Rogers. Now go to bed and call in the morning. Or come over or something. There's a rumor of a movie night, see if Raccoon-Eyes is up to it. Seriously, get some sleep. I hear it's good for old people."

The phone clicked off before Steve could complain about the geriatric joke. He shoved it in his pocket, taking one more shaky breath and wobbling to his feet. He didn't know how long the don't-wake-them rule applied, but he wasn't particularly interested in finding out tonight. So he just scooped Bucky out of the tub, carrying him bridal style out of the bathroom.

His long hair tickled against Steve's arm, head lolled back and body feeling way too small. Odds are there was nothing triggering about the couch, but just in case Steve kicked the pillows that had fallen on the floor out of the way of the coffee table, laying Bucky down carefully and trying not to groan at his bruised and bloody hands.

"Steve?" a low voice mumbled and he froze, carefully sliding his hands out from under Bucky's shoulders. "Why're you carryin' me?"

One icy eye squinted open and Steve couldn't help the soft smile that slid onto his face at the scrunched up nose and furrowed eyebrows. "We'll talk about it in the morning, okay?"

"'Kay." Bucky slid his right hand under the pillow, burrowing a little deeper into it. "Stay?"

The various bruises on his body all protested as he laid down, grabbing another thrown pillow and scooting in close, fingers curling comfortingness around Bucky's metal wrist. "Always."

~*~*~

Sunlight broke soft and golden through the window, reflecting dust particles in the air and casting a glow over half the living room.

Bucky blinked awake and decided Steve's hair was exact color of winter sunlight. He was sleeping a few inches away, shoulders rising and falling slowly with each breath. His eyelashes were still long
as fuck - looking at the shadow they cast down his cheeks, Bucky smiled to himself because even when he hadn't remembered Steve, he'd noticed those damn eyelashes.

His pink lips were lax, barely parted, looking sinfully soft, like they'd just fold plushly around anything that touched them. Sleeping, he looked so gentle and young, like he really was in his twenties, like he hadn't seen war and sickness and death his whole life. For as long as he could remember, the only thing he'd wanted to do was protect this boy from all of the terrible darkness of the world.

This glowing angel, with his stupid too-tight tshirts and his rare striking smile and the ideals settled in his heart. Someone who had sacrificed too much and just kept on giving and giving.

God, Steve was beautiful.

And here he goes again.

Bucky shot up - albeit, perfectly silently - and stared down at his best friend, eyes wide as he forced himself to keep his breathing quiet, even though his chest was heaving up and down. *Shit*. Shit shit shit.

The summary movie reel in his head helpfully provided a flashing stream of moments, too many moments, since the beginning of time, falling deeper and deeper in love with Steve, realizing he was in love with Steve when he was already two and a half decades into his life, spending a year and a half trying to cope with that, all of the almost-kisses and the not-sures and the declarations in his head and the looks Steve would give him and the moments that couldn't *not* be flirting--

Two days ago, looking up at Steve with wide eyes after just getting back that flashback about almost-kiss #1 and then being *so sure* Steve was going to kiss him for real and he hadn't had enough memories to know what a *bad fucking idea that was* and he'd almost gone along with it and--

Wow, okay, this wasn't going to work out. He wasn't sure he could do this, like at all, and that was going to be a big freaking problem and he had to get out of here, he had to go sort through this where the goddamn source of his pounding heart wasn't four inches away, unfairly gorgeous.

Out. He'd have to be silent, if Steve woke then he'd try to stop Bucky and he wasn't strong enough to fight. He was vulnerable as fuck and if Steve woke up right now Bucky would kiss him, he would, and he really needed to go get his head on straight before he ruined their entire lives.

He had no idea how he thought yesterday that if he didn't face it, it wouldn't be true.

He made it to the window in perfect silence, lifting it and wincing as he looked down at the snow below. *Shit*, he was still in his tshirt. This was not his day. He glided back across the floor, quietly rolling his feet until he got to the door, grabbed the first jacket he could find - Steve's, the brown leather one, he wouldn't mind - and then he was passing the sleeping body again, holding his breath and praying Steve wouldn't wake up, he was almost there, almost there--

Then he was out the window, closing it back up so the cold didn't get to Steve, and slipping down the wall. Home free baby.

~*~*~

Gluten-free waffles were not half as bad as they sounded. Natasha still opted for toast, Clint didn't appreciate any of the trail-mix bird food jokes (and actually refused to stay for breakfast because of it), and Wilson was cool for whatever there was to eat.
He'd sat his cell on the table next to his plate, just in case, but the second that he lifted a bite, it rang, and he cursed his own stupid idea before setting down his waffle and scooping up the phone, ignoring Wilson and Romanoff's looks as he took a few steps away from the table, looking out over New York and thumbed the answer button.

He didn't even get the chance to say hello before Steve's (loud) desperate voice came over the line.

"Tell me he's with you." It sounded like a command, although basically everything Rogers said did, and Tony took a second to register that, figure out who 'he' was and do a mental rundown of the breakfast company.

"Sarge? No--" A broken-sounding noise came over the line and Tony instantly pulled it away from his mouth, cupping his hand over the speaker as he fished his keys out of his pocket and threw them at the table.

"Wilson. Rogers' apartment, now."

Sam's chair creaked in complaint as he practically vaulted out of it, snatching up Tony's car keys and taking off in the direction of the stairs. Tony should really fix up those Falcon wings in his lab, Sam shouldn't have to drive for god's sake.

Before he could pull Barnes&Rogers recon mission number two, Natasha snatched the phone out of his hand and shooed him with a hand, barking a sharp order. "Go find Barton, tell him Barnes is missing - Istanbul conditions."

He had no idea what that meant, but he started for the elevator, already getting Jarvis to locate Clint. Natasha lifted Stark's fancy cell phone to her ear, pushing open a stairwell to scale up to the one of the computer rooms. "Steve? What's going on?"

"Nat, Bucky's gone. Just vanished into thin air. He was fine when I put him to bed, but when I woke up this morning he was gone. I should've stayed up, I should've taken him to the tower, I should've..."

"This isn't your fault, Steve."

"No, he had a night terror last night, he woke up screaming and--"

"I know. Stark told us over breakfast. It's still not your fault." Natasha tucked the phone against her shoulder, using both hands to hack into Stark's wifi to locate his secure server. "But you need to stay calm, otherwise we can't find him. Look around your apartment, is anything missing?"

There were a few seconds of silence and the computer opened up all of Stark's internal location software. She started programming in any Red Room requirements and procedures she could think of, any place that she would go. Which, in New York, were unfortunately a lot. She started narrowing down options, still listening as Steve came back over the line.

"No, everything's exactly as I left it. The door's bolted from the inside, the window's closed."

That didn't matter, he'd go through the vents if he needed to. But the word window lit up an idea.

"Okay, what was he wearing?"

"Wearing? I don't think a missing persons report would do any--"
"Rogers. What was he wearing?"

"Uh. Um, he had his knives on him, so he was wearing his uniform pants, and...a black short-sleeved shirt."

"Go check your jackets. I know you've only got like, three."

The slightly-panicked sound of Steve's breathing disappeared from her ear and Natasha crossed a few more options off the list, saving the remaining twenty and initiating a hack into their security cameras.

"My brown leather jacket's gone," Steve finally breathed into the phone. Natasha typed a few more keys and pulled up a wall of security cameras, thumbing through a few.

"Good. Now we know he's likely to be mentally stable. If he grabbed a jacket before going out in the snow, he probably left with a sound mind."

"...the snow! Nat, I can track his footprints! I gotta go."

"Steve wait, you-" the phone clicked off and Natasha glared at the End Call screen for a moment. "...live in New York," she finished dryly to the empty room.

Then she was dialing Wilson's number, not bothering to search Stark's contacts for it because God knows what name he had him under.

"Where are you?" She asked, pulling up security footage of a man in a black hoodie. His left hand was human. Dammit.

"I'm getting out of the car at Steve's now," Sam replied, and for a man who kept insisting he was a soldier and not a spy, he was keeping up remarkably well.

"Have you got a visual on Rogers yet? He's running out into the street to check for prints in the snow."

"It's New York, there's a dozen footprints out of his building alone!"

"I know." She shook her head tiredly. "He's unstable."

"Wait, I see him, hold on." The sounds over the phone became distinctly muffled, the familiar filter from shoving a phone in your pocket when it's on speaker. She waited, listening for the blurry sound of their voices.

"Steve, hey man. Hey, calm down. There's a lot of footprints out here, how about we go back inside and get you some warm clothes? I'm sure he's fine."

"Sam, he's out there somewhere-"

"And he's an invincible super assassin, remember? He's fine. We've got Nat and Clint already looking for him, I'm sure Tony's calling all the people he knows right now. We'll find him. You've just gotta sit tight, okay? Inside. In the warmth, man."

A few more seconds passed then the muffled filter dropped and Sam whispered into the phone again.

"I've got Rogers inside. I think I can contain him, but we gotta find Barnes. Really, he can't be far."
He was.

Bucky was staring out a window, on a bus to Washington DC. He'd picked up a pair of gloves in New York and snatched a hat, so at least he was a little less recognizable. He doubted anyone would bother him though; people had a pretty good sense of emanating danger.

He spent the entire ride over running a hundred different things to say in his head; running over memories, picking apart pieces with the apathy of distance and the clarity of newly-acquainted scenes.

He didn't feel any better by the time he made it to his destination.

The woman at the front desk responded easily to his charming smile, the sob story about his grandmother, then he was through the doors, walking down hallways, and ducking into a room he'd known about for years. He'd had this location programmed in since it had been utilized - just in case Plan A didn't pan out, the Asset was Plan B.

As soon as he closed the door behind him, the old woman turned his way.

"Sergeant Barnes?" Agent Carter's voice was raspy, expression confused. He took a step closer and her sharp eyes cut to his left arm. He knew she knew - it was why she was in here in the first place. There's more than one way to eliminate a threat to Hydra. A pattern of deaths was suspicious...but medically-induced Alzheimer's was well with Hydra's capabilities.

She'd known too much, so she'd been snuffed out of the picture. Who would believe the retired, traumatized ex-agent with dementia?

He could pinpoint the moment that she recognized him - not just as Sergeant James Barnes, but as that file she and Stark had tracked down. The Winter Soldier. Her own personal ticket to losing her mind - a much slower death than Howard's, for a much stronger threat. Seeing her through the eyes of a potential target, Bucky could feel nothing. But pulping that face with the bright, powerful one of his memories...it was nothing but sorrow, sorrow that she had to end up here, sorrow she'd had to chase after him until she found out the truth, until his identity landed her here.

"Peggy," he greeted, taking a step closer. She sighed, deflating in her bed and looking at him with the same steely, unafraid expression.

"So I suppose it's my turn, then?" She asked, the British as strong as ever through the ruin of her vocal cords. Bucky shook his head, taking the chair by her bedside and scooting it closer. He'd bet this was where Steve sat - he'd be able to grab her glass of water on this side. It would be the Steve thing to do.

"I'm not here to kill you, Agent Carter. I don't work for a Hydra anymore." He sat in the chair, scooting a little closer, and she just raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him. Which he deserved, because being a super assassin for seventy years and then just randomly stopping wouldn't make sense in any other situation. "Steve got me out," he clarified.

With that, her face lit up.

"Steve? He found you? Oh my g-damn. I'm so- I'm so glad, James." She reached out one frail, breakable hand, grabbing his left one over the glove. She was so thin, so breakable - one twitch of his metal fingers and he could snap her entire hand in half. He gently placed his hand within her own, the most careful he'd ever been at holding something with the harsh metal.

"You never told him..." Bucky whispered, and by the watery tears in her eyes, he knew she knew.
exactly what he was talking about. (And it wasn't her discovery of the Winter Soldier.)

"I made you a promise." She whispered back.

Striking comets, young hearts and foolish minds and red lipstick and bloody fields and they had been so young, both of them so on fire. Both of them so in love with the sun, a life of glittering explosions and aching power, two fighters burning bright and hot and fast and strong and so incredibly beautiful. The collision of two masses of stars.

*I loved him first.*

"Thank you," he managed, two pairs of broken sad eyes meeting. Once the highest have fallen the darkness comes too; and in that darkness a light is born to shine again true. Everything had changed from the time he'd first told her that. The whole world had changed.

Two burnt out comets wasting away in the shadows, praying for sunlight to take them away. But he never would have had Steve as long as he did if Peggy hadn't given him that. She'd saved him. She'd kept his secret for a lifetime...there'd never be enough words for that.

And now he was coming to her one last time, part two of his tragedy and nowhere else to go.

"I don't know what to do." His voice cracked, throat tightening, "It's too hard." Peggy's eyes searched his, still so stunningly dark brown against the white pillow.

"You'll never stop loving him, James. I tell Steve he's terribly dramatic, the angel, but you? A love like...the way you feel? You'll never rid...yourself of it. But good god, why would you want to?"

Bucky took a deep breath, shutting his eyes against her words. Every pause, every cough and stumble of her words, it was all his fault. If he'd never gone to her for solace with Steve, they never would have connected, she'd never have looked into the Winter Soldier, she wouldn't know too much, she'd still be healthy and remembering--

"I can't. I can't, Miss Carter, if I did this to you, the woman he loves, what will I do to him?" He opened his eyes back at her, waiting for the shock, for the anger, for the confusion about why he was responsible. Instead she just looked at him with terrible pity in her eyes, understanding like he'd never imagined.

"Sergeant Barnes, I always knew too much. Even if I'd never met you, they'd have put me away." She paused, looking so soft, and he had to blink away water in his eyes, pushing away the crushing emotions. "I wasn't sure if it was SHIELD who'd taken my head from me, but I'd guessed. It's not your fault, dear."

"Jeez, Peg, you really are old. You just called me dear."

She laughed, raspy sound and bright smile the best thing he'd heard since he got back. A smile curved over his mouth too, sad and unfamiliar, and then her laughing turned into coughing and Bucky reached over for her glass of water, handing it to shaking hands and helping her guide it to her lips.

He'd never imagined this, in the 1940s. Peggy had been as immortal as he and Steve had been. There had been foreseeable no end, then. War hovered ominously, but they were untouchable. Like they would never die, not the three of them.

Bucky was just glad as hell that he'd gone first. He wouldn't have been able to watch Steve's sorrow over losing Peggy, wouldn't have lived through watching Steve die.
And now Steve never smiled and Bucky killed people and Peggy was coughing and losing her memories to dementia in a retirement home. Funny how much a single tumble from a train could change everything.

Now that the coughing had subsided, Peggy patted his hand, encouraging him to go on. She made it seem so easy.

"What am I supposed to do? Everything hurts when I love him, it's consuming and terrible and--"

"James. James. That's only when you thought you couldn't have him. You can...h-have him now."

She coughed lightly and he ran his thumb back and forth over her wrinkled skin.

"But what about you?" They'd made an agreement. A lot had changed, but he was a man of his word. He would never take Steve away from Peggy.

"I said my goodbyes," she croaked out. "I let him go, for good, on the Brooklyn Bridge."

*Goodbye, my darling.*

"It's your turn to hold on tight and say your hellos," she scolded. Bucky looked down at their hands, at the black glove encasing metal and the achingly human fragility, juxtaposed in their stark contrast.

If he held on tight to Steve he'd crush them both.

Bucky sucked in a breath, blinking back tears again. "How the hell'd you ever learn to say goodbye?"

Peggy's mouth curved down disapprovingly, looking immeasurably sad. "Is that what you really want to do?"

Yes, and no, he didn't know. That's why he was here. He finally settled for, "It'd be nice to know how, if it's an option."

"Well...He was dead at the time. And it took me th-thirty years." The piercing brown eyes closed, relieving the memory all over again. "I had a vial of his blood that I poured over the side of the Brooklyn bridge...there's actually. Ahem. Quite a fascinating story that goes with that," her eyes opened again, finding his with a gentle smile. "Maybe I'll tell you some time, if you keep coming back."

"You sayin' you want to see more of me?" Bucky teased, running her words over in his head. Apparently he wasn't going to be able to move on until thirty years after Steve died. But that was the difference between Peggy's strength and his. If Steve died, he'd just follow after.

"Of course I want to see you again, James. I need someone to tell me about your advancements with Steve." Her tone was light and teasing but her face was crinkled with worry, scrutinizing his own.

"I don't...I can't." Bucky stared down at his hand, the same hand that had choked endless people to death, that had almost pummeled Steve to death. "After what I've become...how could I ever...? How could he...?"

With an expression that belonged to a twenty five year old agent and not a tired old woman, Peggy pinned him down with her eyes.

"When you told me you loved him, you *meant* it. It had been a long time coming...you h-had a lifetime together. Look back at that, at those memories...tell me what you see."
Since the very beginning, they'd been chased by death - Steve's parents, then Bucky's. Steve's health issues, then Steve's fighting. Bucky's defending, the danger of the jobs he took.

But nothing killed them, and like the saying goes, it made them stronger. Stronger together, stronger inside...

Until they owned the Brooklyn streets they walked.

The war came, disaster struck, Bucky had been tortured and Steve pulled him out of death. Then there was a year and a half of being chased by death again, a few times it'd latched onto their boots and they'd always managed to kick it off.

Stronger.

They'd owned the European forests. The battlegrounds were their kingdom.

"The two of us? We ruled the world... we were invincible." He took a deep breath, remembering just how invincible he'd felt holding Steve's shield, seconds before their crowns had been torched forever. "Death was always just around the corner and it never took us - it was almost like we were immortal. Just Stevie and I, my arm around his shoulders..." his eyes slipped closed and the last words sunk into a whisper. "Us against the world."

Silence filled with soft beeping sounds and ragged breaths. He wasn't going to cry. He wasn't.

"You can't give up on something like that. The way you love him...it spanned centuries. It held on through seventy years as a prisoner of war. It's a love of legends. It's the thing of storybooks, of kings."

Kings. Legends. That was all Steve. Bucky had never been noble enough to fit beneath Steve's crown of gold; his was made of thorns. Bucky may have worshipped Steve's life..."But he never loved me like the way I loved him."

"Are you sure?" She asked dubiously, something in her expression suggesting otherwise. Bucky hadn't seen Steve's reaction to his death, hadn't known the world had ended that day. It wasn't Peggy's place to tell him.

"Yes, I'm sure. But even if he did, how could we be together? I'm a murderer, he's...Steve." He made a vague hand motion that he knew Peggy would understand, because she spoke his name with the same reverence it deserved.

"And he loves you, Sergeant Barnes."

"As his best friend."

"As his everything. You could rule the world again, James. The two of you are more powerful than ever...all you have to do is be at his side."

It sounded so simple, but considering the way his heart clenched and his soul melted anytime Steve so much as smiled his way?

"I don't know if I can. There's my programming-"

"And your heart."
"And my heart. God, Peg, I wish this were easy. Can't I just have an easy love? Couldn't I just fall into his arms?"

Even in her scolding optimism, Peggy knew it wouldn't be that easy. Knew that neither one of them would dare risk what was between them when they'd finally just gotten each other back--

Not unless they were entirely sure it was what the other wanted. (But how to discover that if both were so desperate to hide?)

"You know...whenever Steve visits, he always tells me I'm his best girl. Always says it that way. That still leaves room for you. If you can take it."

If he could take it. Bucky would have laughed, if it were anyone but Peg. Instead he scowled, his voice gruff in half-seriousness.

"It's goddamned terrifying."

Peggy huffed a breathy sound of amusement, because no one had dared curse around her in a long time. James Buchanan Barnes was a treasure.

"Love is," she reminded him. "I couldn't be happier it was you though, James. No one in this world deserves to be with him as much as you do."

Him? He didn't deserve anyone, let alone Steve Rogers. He hadn't since the first time he'd lost his temper, lost his mind, filled with black rage and slipped into something less than human, nearly killing a gaggle of bullies who'd beat Steve unconscious.

But maybe that was the point. He'd do anything to protect Steve, which was terrifying, but he'd always had a reason.

And he was left in that spot again - now, he wasn't just the only person on the front to remember that Steve Rogers was more than Captain America. He was the only person in the century who'd known Steve his whole life. The only living piece Steve had from the past.

It was all up to him now.

He had no idea how he was supposed to do this.

His stupid eyes were welling up with tears again and Peggy squeezed the metal fingers, unafraid, powerfully serious as brown eyes locked on his.

"You told me once that you loved him first." Bucky's breath caught in his throat, threatening a sob. Steve had been his. He'd had Steve, he'd loved Steve with every ounce of his body. The passion that had coursed through his veins with that shout, the breakdown of crying, his world beginning and ending all in the same moment.

Peggy closed her eyes tiredly, hand giving Bucky's one last squeeze, voice caught in a raspy whisper.

"And now you get to love him last."

~*~*~

Clint and Sam had pulled him into a movie marathon of something about space and robots, which
was nowhere near distracting enough to keep him from frowning and glancing at the window every few minutes. He hadn't broken down all day, despite everyone treating him like he was made of glass. He was a goddamned soldier, he'd seen Bucky get shot twice. He wasn't about to cry.

He was just really upset. Pissed, at himself, wickedly guilty. Because he'd been stupid enough to let himself fall asleep when Bucky had needed him. He deserved to wake up alone, really. The only concern now was whether or not Bucky was safe, or warm, or scared, or permanently gone...

The window was still empty. Steve sighed, looking at it a little longer as though that would make it suddenly open, Bucky suddenly slip through. Then someone knocked on the door.

All three of them jumped in surprise, staring at the door like it was a portal to outer space. Then the knock came again. Steve vaulted off the couch, crossing the room too quickly and yanking open the handle. And there, in Steve's brown leather jacket and a NY cap, was Bucky, hands shoved in his pockets.

Steve had no idea what his face looked like, but based on the expression on Bucky's, it was concerning. He stepped forward worriedly, gloved hand pressing over Steve's heart. "Hey, hey, what's wrong? Steve? What happened? Are you okay?"

"Am I okay," Steve said slowly, staring disbelievingly. Bucky made a distressed noise and pushed Steve inside the apartment, kicking the door behind them and cupping Steve's cheek with the other glove, forcing him to look Bucky in the eyes.

"What's going on? What did you--" Bucky froze, looking over Steve's shoulder and finally seeing Clint and Sam. His hand shot off Steve's cheek like it was on fire, worried expression sculpting into a more relaxed and slightly confused one. "Hey, why are you guys here?"

"You were gone. You just left..." Steve trailed off, watching Bucky's face as it all suddenly clicked. But instead of softening into understanding he stiffened, taking a step back and raising his chin in challenge.

"I didn't know there was a rule against leaving," he replied sharply, arms crossing over his chest. Steve threw up his hands because really, they were going to have this argument now?

"I thought, after last night--"

"Last night? What the hell happened last night?" Bucky kept glancing between Steve and the guests on the couch who were just watching silently. Everyone stiffened at the mention of last night, though. "Are you telling me I'm missing more pieces of my life?"

"It's called a night terror, most people don't remember them. Stark said he's working on a solution, but we need to get you scanned at the tower...it's a sleep disorder where your body and mind disconnect. You woke up screaming and I tried to calm you down, even held you down, but you got away and ran into the bathroom and started--"

"Throwing knives," Bucky interrupted. As soon as Steve started explaining, flashes started coming back, the screaming, the arm around his throat, the shadows chasing him around Steve's apartment, a splash of cold water in his face, the bathroom tipping sideways and spinning and noises washing over him and darkness and confusion. Waking up in Steve's arms, being laid down on the floor, asking Steve to stay. "Wow. Yeah, that sucked."

"You're telling me," Steve smiled, but it was all kinds of painful at the edges. Bucky dug back through the memory - kicking Steve, the punches, the knife aimed at his head, the hiss as Steve
grabbed another knife away from him. It hadn't been his fault, he knew that, and the bruises by now were probably gone by now...but that would explain the bruise on his own hip.

"And when I was gone this morning you thought..."

"That you'd lost your mind and gone running through New York alone? Yeah, that'd be why I freaked out." He breathed a sigh of relief, immeasurably grateful that Bucky remembered, that he wouldn't be alone in that.

"Aw, Steve. I'm sorry." Bucky gave him a wincing smile and glanced over his shoulder, aiming a nod at Clint and Sam. "Thanks for keeping him company, guys."

They both nodded, although Clint was looking at him suspiciously. If they were as good as they were supposed to be, they'd have been looking for him. And not being able to find him probably threw everyone for a loop. Looked like he just kept proving how good he was.

"Yeah man, where were you at?" Sam asked casually, leaning back against the couch as Bucky walked into the living room and Steve followed. It would be impossible to miss the way Bucky froze at that statement, carefully avoiding everyone's eyes as he plopped down on the couch too hard.

"Nowhere," he replied shortly, gesturing at the TV. "What were you guys watching?"

~*~*~

He hadn't been sick in a long time but he felt like throwing up, looking through the paneled glad outside one of Stark's emptier labs. Tony was being perfectly careful, treating Bucky with the respect of someone who knew first hand how bad PTSD can get. It didn't matter. Bucky checked out anyways, everything falling blank and submissive and scarily compliant. It was eating him up to watch, to see his darling Buck ripped apart to be left only with this as his defense mechanism.

Sam had read up on the four responses (fight, flight, freeze, and fawn), told him all about them, and Steve knew it was how he survived seventy years of torture, he knew it was Bucky's safety mechanism, but watching him so eager to please, so dead to anything but doing what's wanted of him....he still wanted to hurl.

When Tony finally gave him the okay to come in, Bucky was still out of it, staring ahead blankly. Tony had clapped a hand on Steve's shoulder with a quiet, "Careful, Cap. He's fine, reacting might make it worse."

He'd nodded weakly, put his arm around Bucky and shot a short thank you at Tony, who just waved a hand for them to go on their way. As soon as Bucky was in the hallway he started to harden a little, straightening up and looking around.

"Did you want to go back to the apartment?" Steve asked carefully, rubbing his thumb over Bucky's shoulder. Bucky squinted at him and he could practically see the word recalibrating crossing Bucky's features.

Finally he pushed Steve's hand off him, starting for the elevator of his own accord. "Do you know where the gym is in this place?"

He hadn't been explicitly invited to join, so Steve sat on one of the benches with a book propped in his hand and pretended not to watch Bucky train.

It was incredible to witness, really. He'd known the Winter Soldier was good - a legend, the best - but seeing the behind the scenes work that went into it...it was nothing like the kind of training Steve
The closest thing their routines had in common were punching bags - only Bucky did his upside down, long hair flipping upside down adorably as he balanced the inside of his knees on a rafter and pummeled a bag that way. It looked ridiculous, but probably did wonders for balance and stability while working on his arms. It was smart - no, efficient. As always.

By the time Buck came and plopped down across from him on the bench, he was soaked with sweat, metal arm humming and whirring as he stretched out his fingers, curling them and rolling the plates down individually like a shiver.

"Good book?" he asked, still kind of out of breath, right hand slicking his hair back from his forehead to pin it back against his head as he raised his eyebrows at Steve.

"Mmhmm," Steve said noncommittally, pretending to check his page number (it hadn't changed) before closing the book and setting it to the side.

"Funny how it's good without needing to ever turn pages," Bucky responded casually, leaning back against the wall and giving Steve that one-sided smirk that broke hearts and dropped undergarments of all sorts.

Of fucking course Bucky had noticed Steve watching him. He had enhanced hearing, was even more attentive to the environment than Steve was, was a super assassin... it was entirely Steve's fault he got caught.

But before he could respond - how the hell do you respond to that - Bucky cocked his head, sweat rolling deliciously down his temple as the playfulness of his grin slid to pondering. "You know what I haven't had in decades?"

"Hm?" Steve replied, because really, who wasn't reduced to a humming, one-syllable mess when there was a gorgeous, sweaty - so much more built than he remembered - man sitting on your bench.

"A hot shower," Bucky said dreamily, and Steve absolutely did not picture what his own name might sound like in that time of voice from those lips.

Then the clouds faded and sharp eyes snapped to his. "Race you?"

He'd known from chasing the Winter Soldier across rooftops after Fury got shot through the wall that Bucky was fast. It made him no less pissed when he slid through the shower doors a millisecond behind.

"No fair, you're warmed up," Steve gasped, sagging against the wall just inside the immense multi-shower bathroom. Bucky propped himself up with his metal arm, sweaty hair disheveled and sticking up adorably as he tried to catch his breath, "More like worn down."

"At least I beat you last time," Steve conceded, lungs starting to pump oxygen properly again.

"Cause I let you." Bucky rolled his eyes but Steve paused at the comment. So he'd known, then. Back then, Bucky had known he'd been a serum recipient. And he hadn't told Steve.

It hit him like a freight train to the heart.

And he knew what that felt like.

"You remember last time?" Steve asked casually, turning his head to look at Bucky, holding the
facade that he didn't feel like dying right now. But he needed to know if that even what those words meant.

Buck rolled his eyes, pushing off the wall and running his hand through his hair, as always. "Of course I do, it was the last time I saw you before..."


There was no point in pushing. If Bucky needed space, he'd promised.

He grabbed the back neckline of his black top, pulled it over his head and shoulders in a swoop and folded it with a flick of his wrist, draping it over one of the benches. The scars on his shoulder were no less jarring and the urge to touch them, to kiss every mark of twisted tissue hadn't faded any but Steve kept his hands to himself.

"Can you get that wet?" he asked instead, gesturing at Bucky's left arm. It was metal after all, and from the sound of it Bucky hadn't been showering himself over the past seventy years, so it was a good precaution to have.

Bucky looked down at the hand solemnly, flexing it and watching the panels break apart and shift together. He sighed, voice emotionless. "No. They only ever deployed me on missions in Texas, where it didn't rain or snow."

Steve furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. Bucky had totally deadpanned that, but the rumors were that he spent a lot of time in Russia? Steve shifted his weight, going for cautious. "...really?"

The laugh in response to that was nowhere near the grandeur of Bucky's usual ones, but the worried tension finally dissipated between them, Steve rolling his eyes at the joke that really wasn't funny and Bucky huffing something about gullible blondes.

Then he started unlacing his shoes, not-quite-smiling and voice back to casual. "No, not really, but they did deploy me in Texas once, in '63."

Steve hummed, trying to remember why that date and state stuck out in his mind. He'd been doing a lot of research lately. Then it clicked and he snapped his fingers, "Wasn't that the year Kennedy..."

"Yep," Bucky replied and Steve ran the story back over in his head. It had been a sniper, and the guy they'd pinned it on was mostly a conspiracy theory. "Oh.

"And that was you?" He tried to keep his cool but Bucky may have killed one of the Presidents of the United States and they were just casually discussing it in the shower room.

"Yep," he said again, absolutely no change between the inflection of the first one. Steve's eyebrows raised but he kept his mouth clamped down, quiet for once.

Bucky stood, barefoot now, and unbuttoned the top of his pants. "Nothin' to say to that, Rogers?"

Mostly, Steve was busy forcing himself not to look below Bucky's shoulders, so it really wasn't his fault when he couldn't come up with anything and offered, "I think he was a bad man?"

The eyeroll he got for his troubles was almost bordering on affectionate. He'd count it as a win. Then the sound of Bucky's pants hitting the floor jarred him out of his light smile and his eyes cut down entirely unintentionally and Buck was still in his boxers, but that didn't stop Steve from finally getting a good look at his physique.
"Thanks, you are so helpful," Bucky murmured, scooping his pants of the ground and folding them, not looking at Steve. Which was fine, because Steve was doing enough staring for the both of them.

"And you are too skinny," Steve shot back, suddenly extremely serious. Bucky froze at the words, looking wide eyed at Steve before looking down at himself.

The air shifted around them and suddenly they were fighting again, Bucky on hard defense and Steve's heart breaking for the thousandth time because Bucky's ribs were too prominent and his stomach was sunken and Steve had seen him that way before, that one winter where Steve had been so sick Bucky kept giving Steve his half of dinner and not telling him about it until Steve caught him changing one day and yelled with his hoarse, scratchy throat about what an idiot Bucky was, then he'd just ended up coughing halfway through and losing effect but he refused to eat for two days after that, shoving all the food back at the too-skinny Bucky until he finally relented and said they could split it evenly again.

He'd do it again, if he had to. It was the cheapest, probably most terrible way out but Bucky cared about Steve's health more than his own and he'd do whatever the fuck it took to get Bucky healthy again.

"Let's not get into this." It sounded like a warning more than a request, but Steve wasn't going to back down that easy.

"Bucky--" he started, already scolding, but he just got cut off with a scowl and sharp words.

"No. I'm fine."

Steve made a frustrated noise and stared up at the ceiling, mostly so he wouldn't see Bucky's sunken form again and start hitting things. Silence settled on them for a few moments, Bucky tense and Steve fuming and trying to figure out how the hell to handle this. "Can I at least convince you to drink Tony's shakes?"

Another few beats of silence, then a sigh and a gruff, "Maybe."

He'd take what he could get. And then pester Tony about how they were going to get maximum nutrient value back in Bucky's body without making him hurl, since he hadn't eaten anything solid except for fruit over the past month.

Probably, the past seventy years. That thought made Steve's stomach churn for the second time today.

"Can you turn on the water for me?" Bucky asked, and Steve was too busy fretting about everything else to think about how strange the request was. He was already running ideas through his head, things that Buck could eat without feeling sick as he walked over and flipped one of the showerheads on, turning the handle to hot and steering clear of the spray.

He didn't want to make Bucky uncomfortable and there was no reason for him to be in here, so as soon as he heard the sound of the rest of Bucky's clothes hitting the ground, Steve headed for the shower room doors, already shouldering it open as he shouted over the sound of the water. "I'll be outside if you--"

"Wait!" Steve froze, closing the door again and turning around, wary not to look below Bucky's eyes because this was not the time. And Bucky already looked uncomfortable, shifting nervously. "Would you...would you mind staying? I just- I don't know, it seems..."

Bucky trailed off making a vague hand motion and Steve nodded, stepping up to the bench where
Bucky's clothes were folded. "You don't have to explain. I'll stay."

With a relieved breath, Bucky shot Steve a little smile and stepped into the water. His back was to Steve from this angle and not that that was any better, but if Steve kept his eyes from following the drops of water that trailed down between his muscular shoulder blades, weaving over his ribs and arcing through the slope of lower back and oh god, no.

It took every ounce of his self restraint to look away, to stare down at his hands instead of the beautiful arches of Bucky's golden back, the ripples in his shoulders, the wet hair slicked down and long over the back of his neck. This was why he didn't want to stay. But Buck had asked, that was way more important.

"How are you doing?" Steve finally asked, leaning his head back against the wall and allowing himself a quick glance over. The metal hand was pushing water back through his hair, face tilted up into the spray, steam splattering off his left arm and fogging up the room quicker than usual.

"Okay." Bucky made a noise to substitute for a shrug. He used to shrug a lot, but Steve hadn't seen him do it since he'd become the Winter Soldier. "It's kinda suffocating."

That was not the answer he'd been hoping for. Steve was already half off the bench, ready to jump in the second he was needed. "Shit, Buck, how can I help? What do you need?"

Bucky hummed, kept calmly running his hands through his hair. "If I stop breathing or responding, come resuscitate me."

The words were light enough to ease the worry in Steve's chest and he sat back down, sighing. "I can do that. Is it the water or the steam?"

Bucky's hands were by his sides now, head dipped and water running down his back. He didn't say anything in response, unmoving and scarly silent. "Bucky? Are you okay?"

More silence. Steve cursed and jumped off the bench, skidding over wet ground, his eyes behaving only because Bucky was in trouble, it was below even him to glance down now. The second he reached the spray he pulled Bucky back, spinning him and tipping his chin up, both hands on Bucky's face.

Which had the most amused smile in the world.

"Wow, you really would save me after all," Bucky mused, blinking water out of his eyelashes and looking up at Steve with those mischievous, stupidly beautiful icy eyes.

"Of course I would, you dick." Except holy shit, he shouldn't be talking about dicks right now, in his current position, which was holding Bucky's stupid face while hot water ran over his fingertips and Bucky was naked, vulnerable in front of him.

"Captain America," Bucky announced in his best radio voice, "Come to save the damsel in distress!"

Steve glared at him but it didn't have any heat, because Bucky was pranking him, he didn't have it in him to be pissed. It was how Buck had always dealt with things, since the beginning. This, he was used to. This, he could do.

So maybe he ended up raising his eyebrows sassily, sliding his hands up from Bucky's cheeks to the long hair slicked back from his face. "You are in distress. You haven't even started shampooing your hair yet."
"What? Oh, yeah." He made a pleased humming sound as Steve's fingers pushed over his scalp, the way he always used to when he convinced Steve to give him head rubs. Which was probably only four times, ever, because those humming sounds did not do good things for Steve's psyche. His eyes had slipped closed as he tilted his head a little more against Steve's fingers. "Guess I'm not used to it."

"Clearly."

"Hey!" Bucky made an indignant sound and pulled Steve's hands away, holding his wrists in between them. "Hydra washed my brain, not my hair."

Steve stared at Bucky with wide eyes for about three seconds, then they both broke and started laughing. It was one of those side-grabbing, irrational kinds of laughter that were so much funnier because you shouldn't be laughing and then you laughed harder because why the fuck couldn't you stop and it was basically an endless cycle of painful gasps in between choked laughs. Bucky stumbled to the side just as Steve doubled over, exactly the right time to get mauled by hot shower water, then he was soaking and Bucky was laughing harder, sliding down to the ground.

Eventually, they both got a grip on themselves, although Bucky was still wiping away water from his face in between remaining giggles that had not come from the shower. Steve washed Bucky's hair for him, getting him to tilt his head back so Steve could be behind him, running his sudsy fingers through the wet pieces he'd been dying to touch since he'd seen them.

At one point he spiked Bucky's hair up into the tallest mohawk ever and they were both giggling again, then the shower room fell into silence again as Steve cupped his hand against Bucky's forehead and tipped his head back, washing foam away down the rivets of his back.

By the time he shut the shower back off, Steve was soaked and his clothes were clinging to him uncomfortably, but there was a resting smile on Bucky's face and he didn't mind one bit.

Jarvis offered to request for Sam to bring down two pairs of clothes from their respective closets and they wrapped up in towels in the meantime, one around Bucky's waist and one to ruffle-dry his hair. It fluffed up around his head in pretty curves, light waves of volume that feathered around his face as he parted it to the side, nothing like the sad strands blocking his eyes.

Steve stood behind him with one towel wrapped around his hips and one around his shoulders as Bucky primped in the mirror, messing with his hair and flipping it this way and that. He hadn't come to make suggestions, until Bucky met his eyes in the mirror and asked him what he thought.

"Is it harder to fight when it's long? I feel like it gets in your eyes a lot." Not that he didn't like the long hair...it was just different that what he was used to. Bucky had always been so careful with his hair, had been constantly fixing it since they were just kids.

"Hmm," Bucky pondered, running his hands loosely over the sides and pulling it back into a ponytail that he held with his fingers. "What about that?"

He only just managed not to say it's cute, catching onto his brain last second and settling for, "Whatever you think, Buck."

"Well, I think it's kinda sexy long..." Steve made a choked noise that Bucky smiled at, then he twisted the end of the ponytail into a messy bun and turned his head to the side to see it better in the mirror. "...just so long as I don't part it in the middle. God, I need volume."

"You're a drama queen." Steve told him flatly and Bucky finally turned around, letting his hair fall
back to his shoulders. They were close, in just towels, the room still lingering with steam and warmth and this was not a good idea, emotions were too high and they had to joke this away, it was the only option. "Like a dame, really," he added, trying not to notice how Bucky had to tilt his chin up to look Steve in the eyes.

So close, like they might kiss, like they would almost kiss, and that couldn't be an option, it really couldn't.

He took a step back and Bucky followed the movement with guarded curiosity, then he shrugged and ran his fingers back through his hair, glancing at the mirror one more time. "Speaking of which, are there any dames around here I could snag a hair tie from?"

"You could just ask, instead of stealing?" Steve suggested and Bucky gave him that look.

Then a knock on the shower room door startled them both and they jumped away from each other, even though they had been at least a foot apart. It was only Sam with their change of clothes, although he gave Steve a weighted look as he handed them over, eyes darting between Bucky's state of undress and the high flush on Steve's cheeks.

"Shut up," he muttered, taking the clothes and closing the door back in Sam's face. Just in time for Bucky to yank it back open - somehow already dressed - and shoot Steve a smile and a thanks over his shoulder before the door closed again and Bucky's voice fading in the distance, asking Sam something about dames and ponytails.

Steve stared at the closed door and wondered how the hell he was going to do force himself back into pretending not to be in love with Bucky.

~*~*~

Pepper Potts had been happy to lend (you're welcome, Steve) him a hair tie, even gave him a few hair suggestions that made him quirk his eyebrows. She was cute, super kind, and way out of Tony's league. Stuck out her hand to shake, unafraid and professional and smiling, regardless of the fact that he was lethal and probably unstable. He liked her.

And she called him James Buchanan.

Just like Sarah Rogers used to.

It touched something in his heart, something he'd forgotten, to hear his name like that. Emotions welled up in his chest like a tsunami and he could drown in them, in memories of the past. And it made him suddenly acutely aware of his skin itching, his feet restless and his head pounding to get out again (like always, god, he always had to get out). He'd lose his fucking mind if he let those emotions take him. He had to carve them out. He couldn't handle it.

Steve was off somewhere preparing lunch and really, Bucky should stay, he'd only gotten back last night from his last excursion.

But.

He was losing it. He was losing the perfect control he had, he was losing the grip on his life. Performance error after performance fucking error and he'd been ignoring them all, for what?

Dependency. He'd asked Steve to stay in the goddamned shower room with him. What, like he needed Steve now?
He was perfectly functional on his own. Better than functional.

Steve was making him soft, making him cozy and putting him in danger; even if he didn't intend to.

This was how he survived; he'd been perfect. He'd been strong. And then Steve had put his artist fingers in Bucky's hair and worked wonders and it was like all of that just slipped away from him, leaning into the touch and letting all his training slip and how stupid and how vulnerable.

If he was allowing himself to be weak in Steve's presence, what would stop him from being weak when Steve wasn't there? When it counted? He was still being hunted, by Hydra, by the US government, by Russia, by god knows who else, and he was letting himself giggle in hot showers with the man he was in love with.

Hydra had made him strong. Strong enough not to go through the searing, wrenching pain of loving Steve. Strong enough to fight his own feelings, to barricade his own emotions. It was so much easier to be numb, to shut down his heart into metal so it couldn't flutter.

He had to get out. Had to prove to himself he was still strong.

If he didn't get space from Steve, he'd never be able to clear his thoughts. He had to keep moving, couldn't let himself get too comfortable, because then his guard would break down and then he'd be dead and then there'd be no seeing Steve again, at all, ever.

The thing was, none of the Avengers really knew how wanted he was. They had only a glimpse at the people he'd worked for, at the people and societies and entire countries that wanted him dead.

He didn't need to worry them more by revealing just how bad it was, couldn't risk them putting him under harsh security measures. It'd be easier to instead keep his skills up, not let himself get soft, run and clear his head every few days, the way he'd been doing before he got his memories back.

It was safest for everyone. Especially for Steve.

~*~

"Captain Rogers, I'm afraid I have some bad news, sir. Sergeant Barnes has left the premises."

"He what? Where did he go?"

"I have no way of tracking him, sir. However, it does appear that he took your motorcycle from storage."

"My bike? Well at least that means he's planning on coming back, right?"

"I would hope so, sir. You have a tendency to be emotionally unbalanced when he is gone."

"Yeah, Jarvis, thanks. I noticed."

~*~*~

When he finally made it up the stairs knocking felt like it'd be frivolous, so he just picked the ridiculous lock and let himself in.

Steve was sitting at the kitchen table, drawing. Bucky closed the door behind him and Steve looked up - he'd be dead by now, if Bucky wanted to kill him. He didn't.

The blue eyes probably would have been pissed, that pretty mouth probably would have yelled or
cursed at him if it were any other situation, except instead Steve's pencil fell to the table and Bucky let himself sag against the counter.

Let Steve gather him into his arms. At least they were both bloody now, right?

He blinked in and out of the next few hours, half paying attention to Steve running washcloths over his skin and stitching him up, half running the mission back through his head, locating performance errors and determining future solutions. So many performance errors. He'd still been incredible, but not good enough. Something had been missing.

They were both quiet. The kitchen was red with his blood, Steve's hands were stained. It didn't feel like the old days. It didn't feel like the days when Bucky would come home and scold Steve for getting beat up, worried for his safety and fretting over every cut to his pretty skin. This didn't feel safe like that; more like their whole world was hanging in the balance as Steve patched another bandage of white gauze over Bucky's right arm.

In the two hours between when he arrived and when Steve tucked him into the marshmallow bed, he'd only asked Bucky one thing.

"Why do you keep running away?" It was quiet. Almost...defeated. He couldn't imagine the idea of Steve being defeated.

"What happened to the privacy you promised me?" Bucky asked in return. Steve fell silent.

He didn't protest when Steve guided him into the bedroom, lifted back the sheets on the bed neither of them had slept in, carefully helped him to get on the bed and lie down. Pulling blankets up to tuck around him, slick and cool against his skin.

Bucky stared up at the ceiling, waiting for Steve to leave. Then the bed beside him compressed and the room fell into dark stillness. He hadn't expected Steve to lie down with him, not after the way he'd treated him. The mission had taken four days. That wasn't fair to Steve. But here he was.

It wasn't easy; Steve jerked in and out of sleep for an hour, the painful jumping kind of shallow sleep that had him startling awake and his heart pounding loud enough for Bucky to hear in the quiet. But eventually he slept. They both did.

When morning broke and the streaming sunlight from the window bathed him into wakefulness, he blinked his eyes open slowly to see Steve still lying beside him, on top of the covers despite the freezing December air. He was on his stomach, head turned towards Bucky and pillow bunched underneath him with both arms wrapped under it, hair tousled and worry lines etched into his sleeping form.

Bucky looked at him and wondered if this was the first time in the twenty-first century Steve had slept on a bed the whole night through. Probably.

What was he doing?

He left a note this time when he left. For Steve's sake. It was brief and nowhere near what Steve deserved, but he wrote it anyways. He debated between writing in perfect cursive or perfunctory caps. Maybe it didn't matter, but he had enough handwriting styles to efficiently adapt anyone's identity and he wondered who that should be for Steve.

Eventually he closed his eyes and wrote it, not thinking too hard, because really it didn't matter. What mattered was that he kept messing up. He kept messing up.
Steve was still asleep by the time Bucky made it down to the curb. He decided to walk because he didn't trust taxi cabs and it wasn't far enough to have to steal a car.

It took him longer than he expected. He wasn't entirely healed from yesterday, it was cold and snowing lightly. But it hadn't been a bad winter, the snow was only a few inches deep at best. Even in the graveyard, when he finally got there, all the tombstones were readable, just a dusting of white over the top.

Like the touch of angels atop all of the dead. It didn't take him long to find the particular angel he was looking for. He'd been enough times. Never on his own.

He knelt on the ground in front of the tombstone, the snow cold against his knees, and pressed his metal hand to her name, careful, tracing the letters half-heartedly before letting his hand fall to the ground.

"I always come to you, you know. You've been gone for a long time now and I can't help but drag my problems to you. I wonder what Steve would say if he knew. Did you ever tell him about our talks? I didn't. How do you tell your best friend that the only person who seems to understand you - besides him - is his mom? He'd have given me that look probably...you know the one.

"Maybe it was because you were a nurse. Maybe I was used to watching you work so hard to save people's lives, I always thought you could save mine. I wish I'd known earlier, I wish you could've been the first to hear it instead of Peggy. I know she's a better friend than I could ever ask for...but you knew how LittleSteve got under my skin better than anyone. You should've dragged the confession out of me when I was still young enough to break away from it. How young would that be? When did I start loving him more than the world?"

He sucked in a breath, rocking forward and placing his forehead on the stone, closing his eyes as he breathed in the cool air, the still eerie quiet of the graveyard.

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do," he whispered. "I didn't prove anything. I didn't learn anything. I killed so many people on the last mission...I don't think Steve realized how much of the blood he was washing off me wasn't mine. I was just trying to be strong...how is that strong? Leaving Steve alone? Isolating myself? I'm only strong at his side and I hate that, you know I hate how much I need him."

His knees were soaked through now and starting to get stiff, which would be dangerous to run on in case anyone found him. He lifted his head, blinking away the tears that were freezing to his bottom lashes, and shifted to sit down on the ground, palm on the earth over where the coffin lay, six feet deeper into the ground. His voice was breaking.

"You're not here to call me James Buchanan and tell me to stop being ridiculous. You're not here to tell. To tell me to look out for your boy. I tried, Sarah, I promise, I tried. But I wasn't good enough. Why aren't I good enough?"

The world went foggy as he breathed out, his lungs coated in ice when he breathed in. But at least he was still breathing.

"What am I supposed to do? I don't know what I'm supposed to do." He laughed bitterly into the cold, metal hand making shapes in the snow around him. He used to be an artist, a long time ago. He wondered what that would be like, to create again, instead of destroy.

"Peggy told me all I have to do is stand at his side. I didn't...it seems so much harder than that. But you...you told me something like that once, too. James Buchanan, don't forget the sunshine needs
the rain to make it bright. Don't forget the rain needs the sun to set it right. Did you make up the rhymes you always told me? Steve said he thought they were from Ireland, but I don't know. I think you made them up. But I think you meant them.

"Can I do this? Do you think it's really that easy? All I have to do is be by his side? We used to fight together in the war. Do I join him in battle again, is that how I fix this? I'll do anything to have him again. I think you knew that. I think that's why you let me stick around. You couldn't look out for him all the time, but you knew I would. I'm...I'm so sorry I let him down. I'm so sorry I let him die. I don't know how to resuscitate him now, not anymore. This is too big for me to stitch up. Because it's not him, it's me, I'm the problem and I'm the open gash in his heart and I'm so sorry.

"I lost our boy. I don't...I'm not going to do that again. I promise, Sarah, I promise I'm going to try. I'll give it what I can. I'm just...I'm so scared." His hands ran over his face, wiping away tears before his skin started to freeze. "I can't fight this on my own. We were always better fighting together. You think he'll join my side if I ask? I think he wants me to join his. Maybe we can meet somewhere in the middle...you'd know what to say if you were here, you'd give me some story or some proverb or maybe you'd just scold me and give me half your afternoon tea and ruffle my hair and tell me to stop being ridiculous. You know he needs you James Buchanan. You just have to be as stubborn as he is."

He could do that. He could be as stubborn as Steve was.

Just like the old days.

~*~*~

Finding them was easy. When Staten Island was being held ransom by crazy people who'd stolen Chitauri weapons (and proceeded to drive themselves insane and half-alien mutant with the things) and Earth's Mightiest Superheros were called in with all of their flashing armor and fancy colors, it wasn't hard to miss.

Besides, Bucky had a track record of not missing. Which is why when he finally level the aims on his sniper scope and shot three alien-people with a single bullet, everyone had a pretty good idea who'd joined the fight.

"Bucky?" Steve asked, although he wouldn't have known that Bucky had hacked into their secure communications line and had wired himself into their conversation.

"I lost our boy. I don't...I'm not going to do that again. I promise, Sarah, I promise I'm going to try. I'll give it what I can. I'm just...I'm so scared." His hands ran over his face, wiping away tears before his skin started to freeze. "I can't fight this on my own. We were always better fighting together. You think he'll join my side if I ask? I think he wants me to join his. Maybe we can meet somewhere in the middle...you'd know what to say if you were here, you'd give me some story or some proverb or maybe you'd just scold me and give me half your afternoon tea and ruffle my hair and tell me to stop being ridiculous. You know he needs you James Buchanan. You just have to be as stubborn as he is."

"What the hell? How did you get in my comm? Jarvis, how is he on the comm? What are you wearing?" Tony's red and gold face managed to look as confused-pissy as his voice sounded, even though the hovering robot was technically expressionless.

"We here to talk about fashion choices, Stark?" he replied dryly, snapping a knife from his thigh and whipping it across the street into the forehead of an alien-person who'd been aiming a Chitauri gun at
Tony. The alien-person crumpled and Iron Man looked from Bucky to the dead guy, then back to Bucky, then his robot-filtered voice decided,

"He can stay."

Bucky rolled his eyes because it really wasn't up to Stark, then he grabbed the gun from between his shoulder blades and ducked behind a parked car to fire into the next crowd of lunatics with blue weapons.

A plethora of arrows rained down at the same time his bullets did and Bucky automatically looked up, locating Clint in a third story window. Clint gave a little wave, notched another arrow and sent it flying perfectly without looking, then he was pointing at Bucky and talking into the comm. "What's with the face mask?"

A noise behind him made him spin around, taking out another few with guns aimed his way before turning back to Clint's window.

"If you guys recognized me, the rest of the world might too." Another power-up sound from a gun off to his left, another knife in between the eyes of another alien-person. "And it's badass," he added.

Clint laughed and Tony made a disagreeing humming sound and there was a scoffing noise that sounded like Natasha too. Quickly scanning his surroundings, Bucky hauled himself up on top of a van with his metal arm, pulling his 1911 to start popping off headshots at the crowd that had started to swarm in the street.

What he didn't say was that the mask was his protection. That he'd found comfort in hiding behind masks his entire life. That having something over his face, blocking the world from seeing him, letting him stay anonymous, muzzled, was calming. He needed it. But he'd never say that, not even to Steve.

Instead he'd make up whatever bullshit excuse he needed so he could wear the only thing that had a chance at keeping him safe and in control.

"Besides, Barton, Rules of Battle 101. If you're gonna fight a war, you've gotta wear a uniform."

Giant boots that Bucky knew first hand were not fun to get dropkicked with chose that moment to break into his crowd, metal wings expanded as Sam Wilson landed on top of a whole swarm of bastards, knocking the bunched together ones over like dominos.

"I think I've heard that somewhere," Sam commented, swinging his wings out to knock over another group of domino alien-people.

"Yeah, from me," a breathy voice shot over the radio, then the window of the building behind Bucky was shattering, glass raining down on the street and he had his guns aimed at the hurtling object through the sky before he realized it was red white and blue. And stupid enough to still be jumping out of buildings.

Steve landed with a roll on his shield, using the momentum to swing it powerfully into the crowd in frisbee mode, which always made Bucky want to laugh because they'd played frisbee a few times as kids and Steve had sucked then and now that was basically his weapon of choice. Glorified frisbee-thrower.

"Well hi, Steve," Bucky replied, jumping down off the van. He was expecting some witty banter back, maybe an eyeroll, maybe even the cold shoulder because Bucky had been a dick lately and Steve didn't deserve that.
What he was not expecting was for Steve to grab his shield back and come marching over to him, grabbing him by the arm and dragging him off the street.

"What the--" Bucky started, then Steve cut him off, lifting his wrist to talk over Bucky in the comms.

"You guys got it for a minute?"

"Yeah, Cap. No problem."

Steve lowered his wrist from his mouth and Bucky flicked off his comm, yanking his arm free from Steve's grip now that they were entirely out of the battle, standing in some abandoned street square with a fountain trickling happily behind them.

"What the fuck was that?"

"I was just about to ask you the same question!" Steve shot back. "Why the hell are you here?"

"What does it look like? I'm saving your ass." Bucky crossed his arms over his chest and glared over the top of his mask, which he knew was terrifying for most people, but Steve didn't even flinch. To be fair, Bucky had nearly killed Steve while wearing this mask and he hadn't seem scared then, either.

"You can't just show up here! And in case you forgot, last I saw you you were dripping blood and had gashes covering your entire right side? What in the world makes you think you can fight? I'm not going to let you."

Steve crossed his arms over his chest in response and there they both were, in some random empty marketsquare on Staten Island, a few papers fluttering across the ground, the trickling spray of an unremarkable fountain in the background, arms crossed and eyes narrowed at each other, matching glares in opposite uniforms.

"Let's get something straight, Steve," Bucky spat, leaning forward just enough to be intimidating because Steve did have a few inches on him which was not helping his argument.

"By all means," Steve replied sassily, leaning forward too.

"If we're doing this--" he gestured at the empty street around them but he meant their whole lives, everything, the fighting and the domestic scenes and the sharing an apartment and the trying to fit back into each other's lives and he knew Steve knew that's what he was talking about because this was Steve, they'd lost a lot over the past seventy years but their language of understanding each other was not one of them.

"--it's going to be together. We're equals." They'd proven that over and over again. Bucky was faster, Steve was stronger. They were both hot-headed and stubborn you just have to be as stubborn as he is and fought too hard and leaned on each other too much but so long as Steve actually let him be himself, this might work.

"I don't need a guardian angel and I don't need a caretaker. But I'll take a partner in crime. Or, well, since it's you...Not-crime. Crime fighting."

Steve was just staring at him, perfectly quiet. That helmet was still the wrong color blue to accent his eyes. At least some things never changed.

And here it was, the moment that determined whether they were going to grow up and move past this or if Steve was going to try to keep being his mother, which he did not need, thank you very
much. He was the Winter fucking Soldier (he decided he really liked that name, even if he hadn't heard it until a few months ago) and he didn't need a babysitter. Best friend, yeah. Fighting partner, yes. Life partner, he wished.

Finally, finally, Steve's steely gaze melted and he threw up his hands.

"Fine."

"God, it's about time." Bucky threw his head back with an exasperated groan and Steve smacked him in the arm. Steve couldn't see the wide smile behind his mask, but Bucky had a feeling he knew it was there.

"Alright. How about we go kick some ass then, Sergeant?" Steve's mouth curved up in one corner and it was Bucky's turn to smack him.

"Yeah, yeah, you just like to rub it in that you outrank me, don't you?"

"You know it."

They jogged to the scene together, but not without pausing around the corner of the building just out of sight of the rest of the team, giving each other a look they both knew and a reassuring nod. Then Steve was rolling out into the street, shield flying out of his hand again, and Bucky spun around and under the toss, firing perfect shots at the remaining enemies.

Steve vaulted onto the nearest car, catching a smarter alien-person with an uppercut while Bucky rolled under a blue blast and snatched Steve's shield out of the air with his metal hand, spinning around in a circle to behead a few bastards before tossing it back up to Steve who caught it mid air, rolling back down in front of Bucky just in time to save him from another blue blast.

With his body still protected by Steve's, he ducked to the side and fired off three shots into the shooter, then they were both rolling in opposite directions, taking out the guys on either side of them before slamming back together, his back protect by red white and blue, Steve's by Bucky's metal arm and perfect aim.

A sharp appreciative whistle came over the comm as Bucky flipped it back on, using one hand to take down three more idiots in windows. He cringed at the sound and Steve cringed behind him so he must have turned his back on too.

"Power couple of the fucking century." Stark's voice was tinged in awe and Bucky couldn't stop his grin at that because yeah, if Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers had been a good team back in the day, that was nothing compared to the skills they had now - combined with the their synced fighting style - as the Winter Soldier and Captain America.

He decided he liked it. Even if they weren't a couple, exactly. So maybe it wasn't the Howling Commandos' affectionate tree-boy and sober-boy, but he figured he could deal. After, of course, pretending to be annoyed and use the excuse to show up Stark's apparently superior fighting skills.

Bucky turned to Steve, cocking an eyebrow over his mask. "C'mon, Stevie. Let's show 'em."

By the time they took out the rest of the crazed alien-people with their beautiful, perfect, synced fighting skills, Steve hadn't stopped smiling and Clint was still laughing somewhere up on the rooftops. Bucky decided to count it as a win.
He woke up with a gasp and sweaty hair sticking to his forehead. A warm hand pushed his hair off his skin, pressing his head down into the pillow. Bucky squeezed his eyes closed and tried to make his heart stop pounding, tried to breathe calmly.

Five minutes later and he at least felt alive again, enough to croak out an apology to Steve. "I'm sorry for wakin' you."

"It's fine. I was already up." Steve was propped up against the headboard, hand tiredly carding through Bucky's hair. He allowed it because he had a feeling Steve needed it more than he did, but he wouldn't let himself lay his head in Steve's lap, wouldn't let himself curl up in Steve's arms because god, that would not fix anything.

Steve shouldn't have been up at one in the morning, but Bucky's brain hurt too much to realize that. He was exhausted, his third nightmare in three days since the battle on Staten Island. Steve thought the nightmares had something to do with getting back in the field. Bucky was just grateful as hell he hadn't had another night terror. He'd take bad dreams over hurting Steve and not remembering it.

"What was it about?" Steve asked, like always. Bucky didn't answer, like always.

Tonight though, apparently Steve didn't feel like putting up with his silence.

"Buck, you know you have to talk about it sometime." His words were just as tired as Bucky felt, but that didn't make him want to listen any more. He shoved Steve's hand out of his hair, rolling on his side to face away from Steve.

Really, he wanted to tuck his nose against Steve's thigh and hold onto his leg and let Steve pet his hair until he fell asleep again, safe with Steve's warmth around him. Everything else was so cold.

"Are you seriously going to do this? I thought we weren't going to shut each other out anymore."

That made him roll back over so he could glare at Steve in the darkness. “I said we were equals, that we fight together. That means you can't coddle me.”

"I'm not trying to coddle you! I just want you to talk to me."

"You said you'd give me space if I needed it. So give me space." He glared harder, but with Steve still looking down at him from the other side of the bed, it felt pretty pointless. So he sat up and swung his legs off the side of the bed. "Actually, you know what, I'm going to go sleep on the couch. Maybe the walls won't pester me with things they promised not to."

Then Bucky stormed out of the room and Steve knocked his head back against the wall and cursed himself.

That was probably the worst thing he had ever agreed to.

He'd always given that space, he'd always let Bucky do his thing. He never wanted to overstep, to be clingy, to need Bucky more than Bucky needed him. But this had gotten ridiculous.

There had been a day in the war, back during one of the months that Bucky had been avoiding him for some strange unknown reason. They'd been in some bar with the Howling Commandos and Steve had been pouting because Bucky hadn't sat by him, and he'd finally finally realized that maybe, he'd been wrong.

Maybe he'd been giving Buck all this space when really, it was the opposite of what he needed. He didn't want to be the one to set off the grenade that blew his best friend into pieces, but he couldn't
stand by idle as he ate away at himself anymore, either.

What if Steve just kept making the same mistakes? Backing off and giving space over and over when really, Bucky needed to be held and listened to and chased until he finally got it through his thick skull that Steve wasn't leaving him, ever.

What if all this time, Steve had been wrong?

He spent the rest of the night thinking it over, and the next morning making breakfast too. They ate in stagnant silence, but it wasn't the frustrated tension from the night before. Both of them were sorry and both of them knew without having to say it. But there was something Steve did have to say.

He was done making mistakes.

"Bucky? Can we talk?" Steve asked, rounding the corner of the kitchen counter. Bucky was sitting at the dining room table in the same spot he had that first night, except now with one of Steve's sketchbooks sitting in front of him, open to a blank page, pencil in hand.

There wasn't a mark on the page yet, and by the familiar look of frustration on Bucky's face, there probably wouldn't be for some time. At least he was trying. It was Steve's turn to do the same.

"Yeah, Steve. What's up?" He sat down the pencil, looking a little relieved, and Steve slid into the seat across from him, scooting a mug of tea across the table. Bucky took it with his left hand so he wouldn't burn his right, making an appreciative noise.

"I need you to talk to me. I can't do anything when I don't know anything." Bucky sat the mug back down with that lethal glare in his eyes and Steve held up a hand before he could interrupt and ruin everything. "I know I promised you space. But it's not working. You need to let me in."

"We've talked about this," Bucky said slowly, too calmly, like Steve was the fool here.

"No, we haven't talked, that's the whole problem. I don't care if you think you're protecting me from the horrors of what you've done or whatever. This isn't about me and you know it. This is about you, being scared out of your wits to feel any emotion whatsoever."

The mug slammed this time, matched with a glare that he had to fight very hard not to glare back at.

"Why in the world would I possibly want to feel, Steve?" Bucky waved his hand, looking up at the sky for a few moments before getting a grip on himself and numbing his voice, numbing his whole body like it was some sort of dial he could turn down. "I spent so many years feeling pain in my body, and now you want me to accept pain in my mind too? Do you see why I'm not getting the logic in that?"

Well that explained a lot. See, this was why they talked about things. So Steve could understand things instead of feeling like he was always falling and reaching for Bucky's hand and missing over and over again.

"I know you're hurting, Bucky. I know you have more in your head than anyone could ever deal with." Bucky snorted because they both knew what an understatement that was, but it was the perfect opening for Steve's next line. "Which is why you shouldn't have to carry it alone. I'm here. Can't you let me in?"

Bucky stood up abruptly, chair almost knocking over as he stalked across the room, landing somewhere in the living room, just staring out the window. Steve followed, waiting. Bucky was always passing him by. He was always flying away.
He kept leaving, and it hurt so badly every time. It ripped apart Steve's heart every single time because the moment Bucky came back, Steve let himself hope again. Let himself hope that Bucky would stay, that Steve would be good enough for him, that he could do enough things right that Bucky wouldn't pack up and leave him again.

They used to be each other's home. It used to be that Bucky would come to him, not leave him. It used to be that Bucky would put his hands in Steve's and the world would be right.

He'd been blinded by Bucky's beautiful smile, blinded by the icy eyes, had let himself melt past the point of no return such a long time ago he couldn't remember a time he wasn't hopelessly, deeply in love with James Buchanan Barnes.

But who was he kidding? The good guys don't get the girl. Or the love of their ex-brainwashed assassin best friends. Or anything they want. Which had only ever really been Bucky.

He'd thought he could fix the world, he'd thought he could be strong enough and noble enough to save everyone and maybe save Bucky, but he was just a bright star burning out without the darkness of his sky to protect him, to wrap around him at night.

So he wasn't good enough, he wasn't enough reason for Bucky to stay, but he at least deserved to know why, didn't he?

"I've fought for you my whole life, Bucky. Does that really mean so little that you can't even give me this?"

"Steve," he warned, voice low and unbudging.

But no, Steve was not being ridiculous. This was not a crazy request. He was doing this for them, how could he not see that? Everything that had happened to him was Steve's fault and he was trying to make up for that but Buck wasn't letting him.

He said he needed space. But that was what had gotten them into this whole mess in the first place. It had been too easy just to let Bucky stay quiet, give him what he wanted. But that's why it was Steve's fault.

If he had refused that, if he had forced Bucky to open up to him after Azzano? If he hadn't been so scared of what they'd done to his best friend that he was willing to forget it...if he hadn't let Bucky run away from him, they could have prevented all of it.

If he hadn't given him space, Bucky would have felt safe enough to open up to Steve about the drugs, about his suspicions about Zola's serum. He'd known - Steve knew that now, Bucky had slipped when he told Steve he'd been holding back during races. How much had he held back then? There was no way he hadn't known.

But Steve hadn't pushed and so Bucky had never told him and because of that, Steve didn't know to jump in after him when he fell. He didn't know to look for Bucky's body. He didn't know that Bucky would have survived that. He didn't know that Bucky was struggling so much, that he was trying so hard to hide himself from Steve.

If only Steve hadn't given him so much damn space, they could be somewhere in the 1950s, with Peggy on Steve's arm and maybe some pretty waitress on Bucky's and they could all have real lives and Bucky wouldn't have had to face seventy years of torture, of erasing himself, of nightmares and night terrors and always flying away.

"I'm done making the mistake of letting you run away from me," Steve said quietly. Bucky finally
spun around, meeting his gaze with fiery eyes.

"You know nothing about it," Bucky accused. *He knew nothing about it.*

Right, because he hadn't been the one by Bucky's side for as long as he could goddamn remember.

"I know exactly what you do, Buck. I've studied your every move, my whole life. I know you better than you could ever imagine. And I keep letting you shut me out, I've made that same mistake over and over, but I won't this time."

They were staring at each other now, an unstoppable force meets an immovable object, and Steve was strangely reminded of their first fight, the unexpected fire between them, the grace of that dance. This wasn't dancing, this was brawling, but all he wanted to do was dance again, to hold Bucky in his arms where he belonged.

"I guess I thought, that just maybe, you'd chose me. That you'd chose to stay, that I'd be worth the fight, but I'm *not* and I get that now, I get that you don't think I'm good enough to help you. And hell, I probably deserve that. But I won't let you destroy yourself in the process of leaving me."

"I'm not--"

"I really believed you wanted it, how crazy is that? I believed that you wanted the life I wanted to give you, I believed that you wanted to be equals, to fight together. But you won't even *talk* to me."

"I can't!"

"I'm not going to let you do this." Steve shook his head, taking a step closer. "I'm not going to let you down again, Bucky. I'm *not* going to let you down."

"Let me *down?*" Bucky shouted, suddenly exploding. He glowered, close enough now that Steve could see the tremble in his hands, clenched tight in fists at his sides, the faintest traces of water at the edges of his eyes. And then came the words that crushed every bone in his body.

"Steve, you didn't let me down. You let me *fall.*"

The room span in slow motion as Bucky brushed past him, a single tear escaping down his cheek, and then his retreating back, then the door slammed shut behind him and Bucky was running down the hallway, trying to run faster than his tears, then he was running down the stairs, every jarred step dislodging another piece of his heart.

It was the only thing he could say to shut Steve up.

It was the only thing he could say that Steve would have no words for.

It was the only thing he could say to keep himself from shouting *I love you* and that one, that would have been unrepairable.

But what he'd just said might have been unrepairable too.

*You let me fall.*

Bucky wasn't talking about the train. Steve would never know that.
Chapter End Notes

The sleep disorder warning is for night terrors. If this is a trigger please please be careful.

And a song for our ending: Butterfly by Christina Perri

Also, I know this chapter was super Bucky-centric, but the next one we're really going to open up into the PTSD and downhill depression of Steve Rogers my darling.

Thank you everyone, so much, for reading. Ily all.

AND GUESS WHAT this beautiful human being made an edit of that quote which you can find here and I never stop crying aight

xx
Внимания: панические атаки, пищевые расстройства, краткосрочные суицидальные мысли, утопление, религиозная дискуссия

Если в какой-то момент в этой главе кажется, что *Steve* и *anyone* в порядке, ясно, что это не так.

Тони делает смешную виниловую запись для парней (не волнуйтесь, все равно все объяснено) и вы можете найти ее [здесь](#). Также есть ссылка на нее (и конкретные песни) в главе. Если вы увидите подчеркнутые слова, это песни.

Также не забывайте, что Глава 4 была просто главой музыкальной излишка с Howling Commandos Barbershop Septet и даже в этой главе музыки больше. Рассчитывайте. У меня нет жалоб или раскаяний.

Также Нью-Йоркцы забывают, что они Нью-Йоркцы, пока не переедут в другие места.

Смотрите конец главы за более подробной информацией на [ссылку](#).

"Если вы не откроете эту дверь за следующие одиннадцать секунд я разрушу ее и вы заплатите за новую," Натша предупредила, и Стив решил, что он подарит каждому ключ от своей квартиры так он никогда не должен будет покидать диван.

Он даже хотел крикнуть *kick it down*, но старушка через три двери, вероятно, спит и это было бы неуважительным к ее сну. Он знал, какова ценность сна. Если бы он мог быть неосознанно вечно, он бы это сделал.

"Если вы не откроете эту дверь в следующие одиннадцать секунд я разрушу ее и вы заплатите за новую," Натша предупредила, и Стив решил, что он подарит каждому ключ от своей квартиры так он никогда не должен будет покидать диван.

Он даже хотел крикнуть *kick it down*, но старушка через три двери, вероятно, спит и это было бы неуважительным к ее сну. Он знал, какова ценность сна. Если бы он мог быть неосознанно вечно, он бы это сделал.
He wasn't sure, really, how he made it to the door, just that there was suddenly a red fireball blazing past him and an empty hallway gaping at him like a mirror of his insides and then a slam and the hallway was gone again and he was staring at a blank door.

"Rogers. Snap out of it." When he swiveled back around Natasha was standing right there, arms crossed over her chest and hair a new color of red, darker. More like the colour of blood. She looked kinda pissed, eyes narrowing to glare him down scarily. "Don't make me use cognitive recalibration on you too."

Being hit in the head didn't sound all that bad.

"He hates me," Steve told her, then it was back to dying slowly on his couch. Except Nat got there first and stood crossly in the way.

"I doubt he hates you."

"He hates me," Steve confirmed, plopping down on the floor. If she wasn't gonna move, fine. Whatever. He didn't care. The floor was just as apt to waste away on. "Do you know what he said?"

He looked mournfully up at her, waiting for the excuse to repeat the words out loud, drive the knife a little deeper in his heart. He deserved it.

"It doesn't matter." Natasha shrugged, giving him a look as she sat down cross-legged in front of him. "He makes you happy when he's around and you're impossible when he's not, so we're gonna fix this."

Impossible. It was kind of her to say; he was a faker. He pretended to keep breathing.

"I don't even know where he is." - in his best, most ludicrous Captain America voice.

An announcement: buy your war bonds, folks! A bullet in your best man's gun.

A bullet in Steve's best man's gun - three, to the gut, but they weren't enough.

"He's with Sam. See, that's got to count for something. He crashed at your best friend's place when you guys got in a fight. Not all hope is lost, Steve."

He didn't have much to say to that, so he looked down at his hands, pressing his palms together and wondering distantly if he was strong enough to break his own wrists like this.

"So the opening-up talk didn't go like you planned?"

He'd messed up plans before. Almost got the Commandos killed for it a few times.

This wasn't that.

"He left, I think it's pretty clear how it went."

For a long time he'd thought Natasha knew everything. But sitting across from him with that easy expression and no worry in her eyes he realized she'd been right when she'd said - I only act like I know everything, Rogers. for a trained assassin, she didn't see inside him very well.

Or maybe this wound had been so deep for so long that no one in the world could see it but him.

"Well, wasn't the whole point of that conversation for you to change things? To chase him? How does he know you meant what you said when you're decaying here in your apartment?"
"I'm not decaying."

Natasha quirked her eyebrow and Steve sighed, his shoulders slumping. Maybe his masks were more transparent than he thought. With every breath he deflated further, until he'd deflate all the way eventually, wring out into the tiny version of himself he used to be.

Bucky hadn't hated that version.

"Why didn't you chase after him?"

"He doesn't want me to!" He spread his arms wide, because Nat was acting like this was just so easy but it wasn't, she hadn't seen the look on Bucky's face.

He'd meant it, when he said Steve let him fall. He'd meant it, Steve was sure, he'd studied Buck his whole life, he knew when he was serious about something and he was serious about that.

"Rogers, you're letting him blind you." This was Bucky. Of course he couldn't see. "If you want to change your ways, you have to show him that. Unless you don't want to be close to him again?"

What makes you happy? Sam had asked him.

I don't know, Steve had replied, his smile the perfectly sculpted combination of contemplative and okay.

He'd wanted to scream instead. How many times had he wanted to scream instead?

"It's not that." It's not anything, it can't be anything. "It's just...he's not done running away, Natasha. I don't know if he physically can stop running. Ever."

"Then chase him. Run with him. God knows you're fast enough."

Nat leaned over to shove his shoulder and Steve let his body rock with the movement, her words sinking in.

Run with him.

God knows. What did God know?

But he was fast enough, wasn't he? After all these years, he finally had the means to keep up. More than keep up. Wasn't he supposed to be the one saving Bucky now? He'd let him down - no, let him fall - before, and he finally had a chance to make it right. He hadn't given up on Bucky in the past. Not after all those hard times during the war, not when they were kids, not when a half-dead amnesia assassin showed up at his door. Was he gonna give up now?

They'd had harder times, hadn't they? It didn't matter. Steve may be impossible but Bucky wasn't. Bucky was everything.

You didn't let me down, Steve. You let me fall.

He knew that. He knew that already and he'd deal with it, eventually, he'd apologize, he'd earn forgiveness, he'd find a way to redemption. Or maybe it'd be the thing to finally take him out. But he couldn't do any of that if he didn't hold to his words, stop making mistakes. Run with Bucky.

I'm done losing you, Steve promised in his head, words echoing around because he couldn't, not again. It'd kill him.

Again.
But this time, he couldn't let that happen. Bucky was here, Bucky needed him. He needed to be with Bucky. He let him fall once - but goddammit, he was catching him this time. He was catching him this time.

God knows.

What makes you happy?

Who the hell is Bucky?

It's still me!

Sergeant James Barnes of the 107th, sir. B-A-R--

He hopped to his feet, kissed Natasha's forehead, and ran skidding to the door. He yanked it open with a shout of thanks over his shoulder then Nat was calling after him and he paused in the doorway, turning around and bouncing on the toes of his feet. He could sprint all the way there right now, he was pretty sure.

"If you're gonna be running, you might wanna pack a bag."

She was standing again, sly smile on her face and Steve groaned, stared up at the ceiling, and came running back into the apartment to pack a bag for both him and Buck. Natasha hopped up on the counter - must be a Russian assassin thing - and amusedly watched him pack.

Then he was running out the door again after a proper goodbye hug and he did end up sprinting all the way there.

He couldn't decide if Sam or Bucky looked more surprised to see him. He came barging through the doors to the floor, panting and hairline damp with sweat. Buck swiveled around on his stool, staring at Steve with wide eyes, and Sam almost spit out his water.

"Steve--" Sam started, and Steve didn't even glance at the immense commodities of his Avengers' tower floor, only strode forward to the counter they were sitting at, walking with the kind of confidence The Winter Soldier did. The world was spinning around him, threatening to tip from lightheadedness, but everything had been floating since Bucky left so it wasn't that surprising. He hadn't eaten since Bucky left and the serum didn't work well with that. It was his own fault. Maybe he was half out of his mind.

"You can't run forever," Steve warned, gaze locked on Bucky's as he sauntered closer. The passive surprise quickly darkened at Steve's words, expression narrowing into that lethal, terrifying glare of the Winter Soldier.

"Watch me," Bucky spat, stiff, like he was itching to grab something sharp. Steve kept his head up, the same stubbornness he'd had as a kid - striding across Buck's folks' place to give him a piece of his mind.

"Fine." He stopped a foot away from Bucky's stool, dumping his overnight bag heavily on the counter in front of him. "I'm coming with you."

Icy eyes shot to the bag, shock rippling down his spine. He could feel Bucky's reactions from all the way over here. And Buck honestly thought Steve didn't know him? Fuck no. He wasn't backing down now.
“What?” Bucky finally managed.

“If you're running, you're taking me with you.” He repeated, crossing his arms over his chest and puffing up a bit to loom over the stubborn expression glaring at him defiantly.

"That's not how this works," he hissed, metal fingers tightening agitatedly at his side. Steve took note of it and straightened himself a little taller, settling his stance into the most solid Captain America mode he had.

Buck should know by now. Steve just didn't know how to stay down.

“Yeah, well, that's how it works this time.” He narrowed his eyes, daring Bucky to protest again. He looked positively stunned, gaze flicking between Steve's bag and his face.

Eventually he sagged in his chair, running exhausted fingers through his hair and muttering something under his breath about punk kids these days thinking they can get what they want because they're national icons or whatever.

Steve fought back a grin. The lightheadedness hadn't settled, but he just won round one. Now they were onto the real battle- and he could do this. They were finally getting somewhere. Finally.

"So? Are we going or not?"

~*~

Grab your bag and grab your coat, tell the ones that need to know. We, are headed--

"Yes, I have a car you can borrow. But you can't go road tripping in the winter, it breaks the first rule of road tripping. You know, windows down, wind in your hair?" Tony made a face at them and Steve glanced at Bucky, who cocked an eyebrow in return.

Stark waved his hand around, giving them the how incompetent are you that defaulted as his usual expression most days. "It's December, and it's freezing."

"We've both had colder," Steve deadpanned casually, plastering on a stage smile and waiting for the horror to sink into Tony's eyes.

His expression did not disappoint.

"You two are twisted," he muttered, pulling open a drawer to grab keys. "And terrifying," he added under his breath.

They both heard him and Bucky shot Steve a sly grin that he couldn't help but return.

"Here, Rogers, go pick out one of the Classics. Jarvis will show you where they are. You can't go roadtripping in a plastic car." Steve caught the four pairs of keys Stark tossed his way, scooping up both their duffels and giving Bucky another cautious smile before starting for the elevator.

"Okay Barnes, the other rule to roadtripping? Music," Tony's fading voice explained behind him. "I've got a box of Classic Rock cassette tapes that'll work in the car, or you can take an iPod and an aux cord. None of my vintage cars have an AI system..."

Load the car and write the note.

Ten minutes later and Steve was waiting in Stark's enormous garage, leaning against a cherry red '69 Chevelle with white stripes running down the hood.
Bucky let out a low whistle that was more for the man than the car, but Steve would never have to know. He just had to shove his feelings into the darkest corner of his brain and force himself to be by Steve's side as always.

Maybe the trip was a bad idea. Or maybe it was the perfect opportunity to prove to himself that he could be alone with Steve for however long without jumping his bones or dying in agonizing pain.

That pain in his chest that he'd thought was a performance error when he couldn't remember why he was feeling it. The pain in his chest that as a teen, he'd summed up to hormones and residual possessiveness and worry. The pain in his chest that he hadn't realized the gravity of until Peggy Carter showed up at that bar in that curvy red dress and kicked Bucky's ass nine ways to invisible Sunday.

But that was years past. Even for Steve, it was two years ago. And for him? Two years plus seventy. He could get over it. He could go on a road trip with his best friend and behave himself and sort out (aka squash down) those feelings once and for all.

"You ready?" Steve straightened up and ran a hand over his wild, spiky blonde hair, looking like the epitome of America's boy with his tight white t-shirt and faded jeans and blue blue eyes and wide bright smile and shiny red car propping up his perfect ass.

Bucky did not sign up for this.

"As I'll ever be," he sighed. Then he held out the box in his hand, exchanging it for the keys in Steve's. "And I'm driving."

Steve - surprisingly, for once - didn't protest, just nodded slightly and reached behind him to pry open the red shotgun door, somehow fit those broad shoulders inside the tiny space.

"Did you grab a coat?" Bucky pinned those pretty eyes through the windshield with a look as he started around the front of the car, ducking inside his open door too. Wow, there was a surprisingly large amount of space in here, a lot more than modern cars. That was nice for a change.

"You're worse than Sarah," Steve complained, door slamming behind him as red lips turned down in a pout. "Yes, I grabbed two coats. You're welcome."

"One of us has gotta be responsible," he pointed out, sliding the key in the old-fashioned slot.

"And you think that's you?" Box plopped down at his feet and Steve gave him the most incredulous look Bucky quirked one corner of his mouth to.

"Always has been." Quick flick of his wrist and the engine was rumbling before Steve could shoot back whatever half-assed retort he had and so maybe he was smiling a little in victory as Steve rolled his eyes and settled in his seat, leaning against the door as the shiny vintage peeled outta its lot, wheels spinning as they started for the sunlight.

Maybe this wasn't too bad of an idea after all.

~*~*~

They took the first highway west out of New York.

It all went to hell from there.

"Steve Rogers, I think you've finally managed to surprise me." Steve looked up from where he'd
curled into the seat, counting down the numbers to their exit. Bucky cocked an eyebrow and tilted his head to indicate Steve's legs. "Putting your feet on the dash. What would Tony think?"

"Why do you think I'm doing it?" Steve asked, popping a goldfish in his mouth and sinking further in the seat, crossing his ankles and kicking his feet up higher.

Bucky laughed - kind of - and shook his head like Steve was out of his mind, turning back to the road. He wasn't sitting nearly as comfortably as Steve was, perfectly straight with the seat not even touching his back. Maybe he'd loosen up from the efficiency after a bit. They were still in a pretty congested area, but it took a while before the real roads; before the skyscrapers and the K-Marts and the Subways disappeared into the rearview and the two-lane blacktop turned into the stairway to heaven.

"There anything in that box of Stark's?"

Steve finished chewing his goldfish and stretched out an arm to grab the box from under the seat. The nice thing about the vintage cars was all the room. It fit two supersoldiers easily, even left space for Steve to put his feet up.

He pried off the lid of the shoebox, tossing it into the backseat and picking up the piece of paper on top of the box contents. "A letter from Tony. Great, I'm sure this is all kinds of sarcastic asshole."

"He's not that bad," Bucky argued lightly, glancing over his shoulder to check his blindspot before changing lanes. Steve gave a noncommittal hum in response and started reading the note to himself. "Summary?" Bucky asked when Steve sighed and folded the paper back up.

"Basically there are rules to roadtripping? It all seems kind of pretentious but here-" Steve fished through the box and found the two pairs of aviator sunglasses Tony had left them, handing a pair to Bucky. "Sunglasses, road food, loud music. He made a few mixtapes, and then he left this-" Steve held up a white envelope, "-mysterious package with my initials spelled wrong. Said you'd know what to do with it."

"Howard's kid got your initials wrong?"

"Yeah. It says SGT, and I can't even figure out what stupid reference that's supposed to be."

"Actually, that stands for Sergeant, so I'm gonna guess the envelope's for me."

Steve stared at the letters for a moment, feeling about nine kinds of stupid. Bucky glanced over at his face, then at the envelope, then back at Steve. And promptly started laughing - the real kind, this time.

It took every ounce of strength not to smile like a fool at the sound of Bucky's laugh so Steve pouted instead, mumbling something about having an excuse, he was blonde and ninety five, this wasn't his fault.

Finally the laughter died back down and Bucky tilted his head, looking at the envelope again. "What's in it?"

He slit it open, dumping out the contents into his lap. Which was a single plastic card with a post-it note on it. "J.B.B," Steve read aloud. "I left you a credit card because Rogers is old and doesn't - okay, rude - know how to do anything in the twenty-first century. And don't be honorable with it either, you grew up in the dirty thirties and deserve to spoil yourselves sometimes. Stay in the nicest hotel you can find, do whatever you want - it's on me."
"I told you he's not that bad," Bucky said smugly, snatching the card from Steve. Steve rolled his eyes because he did know how to use a credit card, he just didn't. Often, anyways. He didn't need material items, the twenty-first century was overwhelming and material-obsessed, there was nothing wrong with him.

"Stop pouting," Bucky chided. "And hold the steering wheel so I can put my hair up."

Steve reached over, almost falling in Bucky's lap from the off-balance of his feet still on the dash. He managed not to crash as Bucky wrapped a ponytail into his hair, totally missing two or three single strands around his face, then he shoved Steve back to his side of the car and took the wheel again.

"Anything else in our mystery box?" Bucky's eyes were on the road again, which meant that Steve was staring at him, taking in the sight of his best friend with a messy ponytail, pieces of hair falling out like some kind of sex god. It should make him look like a dame because he'd never seen a guy with a ponytail in the 1940s, but it didn't make Bucky look anything short of exotically beautiful. He could just imagine yanking Bucky's head back by that ponytail, icy blue eyes looking up at him with Steve's hand tight in his hair--


"What? Oh, uh. Sorry. Right, the box..." He was bright red as he cut his eyes away from Bucky, thankful as hell for the aviators he'd slipped on because they'd at least hide the humiliation in his eyes. And the wandering gaze. God. "Um. There are a lot of cassette tapes."

Thumbing through them and glancing over unfamiliar band titles and album names, it was pretty clear they were all made between 1970 and 1989. Nothing really jumped out until he got to the bottom of the box, where one of the cassette tapes had a neon yellow post-it note on the side. He peeled it off, holding it closer to his face so he could read it through the dim light of his sunglasses.

Cap - if you're looking for "shared experiences," the answer's closer than you think.

He read it a few times, trying to figure out what the hell it was supposed to mean and drawing up blank. Until he read the sharpie letters sketched in caps on the side of the mixtape. Popsicle Boyfriends Roadtrip Mixtape.

He was gonna kill Tony Stark.

Really, he should have thrown the thing back in the box. Maybe out the window. Instead he stuck his tongue in his cheek and studied it, turning it over a few times and thinking it over. Tony thought he knew everything about them, had heard stories since he was a kid. But if he thought they were - or could be - dating? It would at least prove his suspicions about Stark were right: all hot air and no real observation. The tape was probably a ton of ridiculous cheesy love songs that didn't fit them at all. Right? This was Tony.

"So...Tony made us a mixtape. Wanna see how well he doesn't know us?" Steve offered, already pushing the tape in the the player. Bucky cocked an eyebrow and made a why not sound, switching the wheel to his left hand so he could turn up the volume dial.

When the first simple piano notes came over the car stereo, Steve should have guessed. When the annoying rock he'd been expecting had violins and sounds of thunder echoing softly in the background, he should have known. When the first drums hit and put the touching 'power' behind the word power ballad, he should have realized.

And when the first lyrics came over the speaker, he should have ejected the damn thing right then.
When I look into your eyes, I see a love restrained. But darlin' when I hold you, don't you know I feel the same?

Instead, he kept on looking at the center console expectantly, popping another goldfish in his mouth and listening to the lyrics with the most dispassionate expression he could muster. Simply listening with vague curiosity and absolutely not thinking about how this tape was made for his non-relationship with Bucky.

And how devastatingly well the first song was seeming to fit so far. 'Cause nothin' lasts forever and we both know hearts can change...We've been through this such a long long time, just tryin' to kill the pain.

Neither of them said anything, listening to the vaguely whiny rockband voice drift over the speakers, loud guitar hits and beautiful ooh'ing harmonies in the background. Then the lead singer crooned If we could take the time to lay it on the line, I could rest my head just knowin' that you were mine, and Steve shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

It had to be a coincidence that this was even remotely similar to them, right? Obviously. Steve was associating his feelings with some generic love song because that's how love songs were.

Everybody needs some time on their own. Don't you know you need some time all alone? The radio sang and Steve glared at it because yeah, Bucky had been thinking that for the past month and no, they didn't need anymore time alone. I know it's hard to keep an open heart, when even friends seem out to harm you...

"Stark picked this?" Bucky finally asked, the first thing he'd said since the song started. Steve made a face at the stereo and shifted in his seat again so he could tilt his head and look out the window.

"Yeah. He did."

So never mind the darkness, we still can find a way. 'Cause nothin' lasts forever, even cold November rain.

And then the song dropped and got all alternative-sounding (yes, he could name different genres of music, he'd been awake for three-quarters of a year) and Bucky seemed to perk up, listening intently with his head cocked to the side.

Then the music faded out into soft sounds of rain and a fading high note and that had been really weird. Like, creepy, in a way. Or maybe he was reading too much into it. It was a generic love song, after all. Tony had made a whole tape, there was no way the next one would be spot on like that.

It was.

But, thankfully, it wasn't heartbreaking. Actually, it was kind of hilarious, and the sad rain-song had disappeared to the back of Steve's mind with loud, repetitive guitar licks. And because it was super catchy and they both had enhanced memories, they were singing along loudly by the time they hit the second chorus of hit me with your best shot's.

When the girl on the speaker sung something about you don't fight fair, Steve reached over and nudged Bucky's shoulder, then they were both cracking up. The giggling hadn't subsided by the next fire away, which Steve may or may not have shouted way too loudly and left Bucky torn with trying to breathe between gasps of laughter and apologizing profusely for shooting Steve on the helicarrier.

Which had apparently slipped his mind until now, too busy burying a hundred memories surrounding the moment. But between the laughter and hilarious, gasping oh my god I'm so sorry's, all of the...
tension that Steve hadn't realized was residing between them slipped away, left in the rearview somewhere halfway across Pennsylvania.

He was gonna leave it all in the rearview. They were going on a trip across the US; for once he didn't have to be anybody but Steve Rogers. And maybe, if they turned the music up loud enough and drove down roads empty enough, he could forget all about the look on Bucky's face when he shouted you made me fall.

Bucky was burying things, surviving. He could do it too. Steve had become far too talented at silent weeping.

~*~*~

First stop was a rest stop a few miles from the Ohio border. Bucky parked the car and shut the engine while Steve unfolded himself from the seat, stepping onto solid ground and stretching his arms over his head. The air was crisp and smelled like impending winter, breath fogging slightly in front of his lips.

He shut his car door with his knee and stretched his arms a little higher, closing his eyes against the sun and feeling his body wake back up as he distractedly finished humming along to the last few bars of Heaven isn't too far away...

Oh, yeah. Turned out he was wrong. Tony Stark knew them way too well.

Or, Steve at least, anyways. It was disconcerting.

Bucky had laughed his ass off to I Remember You, but Steve had not been amused. Especially considering that the lyric right before that was Remember yesterday, walking hand in hand. Love letters in the sands - I remember you. And through the sleepless nights, through every endless day, I wanna hear you say, "I remember you."

So they held hands sometimes. So sleepless nights were a thing. He could blow that off to lyrical luck, if it weren't for the rest of the song consisting of Paint a picture of the days gone by...I'd stare a lifetime into your eyes, time after time you were there for me.

Maybe Tony was simply reading more into it than there was, romanticizing things like Steve's art and the way he used to draw Bucky, the way they'd grown up together.

Then Skid Row sang we've had our share of hard times, but that's the price we paid. And through it all we kept the promise that we made: I swear you'll never be lonely.

And Steve decided, at that point, that Tony Stark either had mind-reading powers, or he'd scientifically found a way to look into Steve's heart and found it was the color of Bucky Barnes's soul.

Basically, the whole mixtape turned out to be a waving flag of Hey! I know Steve Rogers' deepest secret! He's in love with his best friend!

He was gonna strangle Tony. Like, the second they got back. And he felt zero guilt for putting his feet on the dash. Absolutely zero. Asshole deserved a lot worse than bootprints on his car.

But it wasn't like he could freak out and insist they don't listen to the tape. Because then it would give away exactly how close to home the lyrics were hitting. Although by the way Bucky was occasionally shooting surprised looks at the cassette player, maybe some of the lyrics were sticking with him too.
"You comin'?" A choked voice asked from the sidewalk and Steve turned his head, catching Bucky's quickly averted eyes and clearly uncomfortable shifting. He'd ask what was wrong, but he had a feeling nothing good would come of it. Instead he just brought his arms back down to his sides, pulling his shirt back down from where it'd ridden up to make his stomach cold.

He fell into step alongside Bucky on the way to the angular brown building, taking a moment to breathe in the fresh air. It was absolutely beautiful out here, wind whistling softly and ruffling his hair.

"You look like a hardcore biker," Steve commented, nudging Bucky with his shoulder. Between the aviators, Steve's brown leather jacket, and the long hair shoved messily into a ponytail, he could definitely see Buck on a low-riding Harley, something a hell of a lot less pristine than his bike.

"You look like America's boytoy," Bucky shot back dryly, shoving Steve back except way harder, making him stumble to the side indignantly.

"I'm nobody's boytoy!"

"Whatever you tell yourself to sleep at night," Bucky said with a lifted eyebrow, holding open the door for Steve. He walked through without meeting Bucky's eyes because actually, he didn't sleep at night.

Hadn't once, not since Bucky had told him--

"I'm gonna find a map," Steve declared, interrupting his own thoughts and putting some space between him and the devastating man at his side. Buck nodded quizzically and took off for the bathrooms.

There were a hell of a lot of pamphlets and maps and tourists guides and Steve glanced over them all before deciding on the simplest fold-out map he could find. He was standing in the lobby by the doorway and holding the map out wide in front of him, swiveling his outstretched arms to find North, when suddenly there was a hand on his lower back, making him jump.

Steve whipped his head around, startled, and nearly smacked Bucky's nose. "Wha-" he started, then the hand on his lower back was shoving him forward none too gently, basically pushing him through the doorway.

"What weapons do you have on you?" Bucky asked, low and close to his ear and Steve's brain was short-circuiting from the hand pressed on his lower back, let alone the gravely words pressed to his ear, how was he supposed to be thinking about weapons.

Wait, weapons, that was never a good sign with this Bucky. Well, the only Bucky, but the one who'd spent the past seventy years killing people.

"Buck? What's going on?" Steve tried to twist around to face him but Bucky kept guiding him forward, basically pressed up against Steve's back. The touch was almost...possessive.

"Have you not noticed all the jumpsuits?" Bucky hissed and Steve looked around at the other people mingling at the stop. He'd noticed when the wave of orange arrived, but he hadn't really thought about it.

"Yeah, so?"
"So that bus belongs to the county jail and there are a swarm of convicts here, two of which were discussing their recent sighting of Captain America over the bathroom sinks."

"Bucky." Steve stopped in the middle of the parking lot, which was not easy because Bucky was strong, pushing him hard towards the car. He made a frustrated noise as Steve dug his heels in, but Steve just glared harder over his shoulder. "Look, I can take care of myself, okay? I don't need you going all Winter Soldier on some harmless inmates."

He crossed his arms and lowered his gaze, because this was serious. He couldn't have Bucky turning into a killer at the first sight of possible danger.

The hand on his lower back instantly disappeared and the clear icy eyes clouded over with a sharp intensity. "I was protecting you long before Zola, Steve. He didn't instill this -" a sharp gesture of glinting metal "-in me. It was always there."

"That's different, you didn't get violent-"

"Spring 1938."

"...what?"

"I found you in an alley with four boys trying to kick you to death. You weren't breathing. I nearly killed them Steve, and that's not an exaggeration. Was probably one punch away for two of them and the other two I know were hospitalized. You never saw, I made sure you never saw, just carried you home and told you they'd left by the time I got there."

"Buck," Steve whispered, because he'd never known, he'd had no idea Bucky had felt that strongly. He had no idea he'd ever pushed Buck to that...

"And it scared me, the rage I had, the things I'd do for you? Are you telling me you don't remember me destroying that Nazi who'd almost shot you on that electric-fence mission? And that was just the one you saw, Steve. He wasn't the first, he sure as hell wasn't the last."

He couldn't speak. How was he supposed to respond to that?

"If you don't start being more cautious with your own damn life, I'm gonna keep dragging you out of danger. No matter the cost. That's not a threat, it's a promise." Bucky stalked to the driver's side of the car, yanking open the metal door and slamming it behind him heavily.

The only reason he managed to move, to pick up his feet and duck back into the car, was because he was pretty sure Bucky would pull away and leave him here if he didn't.

Neither of them said anything for the rest of Ohio. Steve didn't put his feet up on the dash or turn Tony's tape back on. He leaned his head on the window and stared at the landscape whipping past and ran Bucky's words over in his mind over and over.

He had no idea what was going on in that pretty head, did he?

~*~*~

One foot in and one foot back.

The silence broke when they stopped to get food, with a hesitant "Do you want anything?" from Steve and a terse "No," from Bucky. Steve didn't open his door, just sat and stared at the dash for a few moments. Bucky hadn't moved either, both of them frozen in fighting mode.
But Steve was more stubborn.

Finally Bucky sighed, tipping his head back against the seat. "I'll take something that's not cooked. And no crackers or bread--"

He had to lean over to shout the end because Steve was already climbing out of the car with a victorious fist pump. The ice between them broken again, Bucky ran his fingers through his hair - forgetting he was wearing a ponytail and dislodging most of it - and muttered another grievance about Steve and his stubborn star-spangled ways.

When he got back with food, Bucky took his mango sorbet with minimal complaint and only eyed everything else Steve had brought him, so he settled back into shotgun happily with his own meal.

With the air between them lighter now, they could forget about the conversation earlier. But if they were fixing things, moving forward and running together like this trip was all about?

"I'm sorry," Steve said abruptly, putting his sandwich down. He got a confused look in return so he shifted in his seat, torso facing Buck. "I think sometimes I keep expecting you to be like you were when we were kids - or how I thought you were - and not like the way you were during the war. After Azzano, when we were fighting and hurting all the time... Cause that was basically this."

He gestured up and down with wide hands and the tiniest of smiles quirked up the side of Bucky's mouth.

"You remember me being this bitchy in the forties?"

"Absolutely," Steve confirmed. It wasn't a lie, the silence and the weird outbursts and the shaking moments and the over-protectiveness, that had been Bucky for the past two years. On his timeline, anyway.

Shaking his head with a real smile on his face, Buck reached over and turned the stereo back on.

It don't pay to live like that.

~*~*~

Despite Steve's occasional protests, Bucky drove the whole night through. Steve dozed fitfully against the passenger window, texted Natasha that he was still alive, and tried not to think about how freezing he was and how dark the night was outside.

He was in one of his half-dazed but mostly-awake periods when the bottom edges of the sky begin to lighten, a warning streak of pink against dark black stars above. They were somewhere in Illinois or Indiana, couldn't remember passing which sign; but both sides of the road were covered in fields, so it didn't matter much anyways.

It was the middle of nowhere, flat and nothingness for as far as the eye can see, and Steve blinked tiredly, deciding he'd never seen anything like it. Not in Europe in the war, not on the USO tour, definitely not in New York.

The tires of the car hit dirt and all residual tiredness flew out of him as Steve snapped up, reaching for the wheel automatically, assuming Bucky either fell asleep or lost his mind or wasn't paying attention or something, only then the car was parked and Bucky was climbing out and it was way too early for this, he was sleep-deprived and befuddled and groggy.

"Stevie, you comin'?" Bucky hollered from outside the car and Steve pried open his door, composing
himself before he fell onto the soft dirt. It was squishy under his boots, like the whole world wanted him to sink, swallow him up so he could sleep forever and forget about the ache in his bones.

But the wind was crisp enough to whip him awake and he held onto the side of the car for a moment, rubbing a hand down his face and dragging his mind into reality, turning his gaze on their surroundings and letting the usual keen observations take over.

It was empty, flat, but somehow kind of beautiful. Like the world stretched on forever, like they could be the only two in it and it wouldn't matter. The whole earth might as well be theirs. The air was cooler than he'd like, peetering sounds of morning crickets sharpening the picture into one of those movie scenes, where the young couple dances in the fields to the morning light and falls asleep laughing at the clouds.

It almost didn't feel real, like places like this didn't quite exist, only Bucky was looking at him expectantly from his spot propped on the hood of the car, waiting for Steve to stop his mini meltdown and come sit down on the hard, cold metal. He did, floated over and thanked the durability of old metal cars, and scooted up on the hood beside Bucky.

Those icy blue eyes were staring at him, concerned, so Steve leaned back on the windshield and stared at the sky. The stars were fading, blinking out of sight as the beautiful dark blanket of the sky shifted into lighter, vibrant colours that felt too impossible to be real. Sunrise, he should be watching the horizon, but all he wanted to do was keep those fading stars from blinking out entirely. It was hard, he knew, to stay lit up bright in a sky that didn't want you anymore.

Five minutes later he was passed out in the first real sleep he'd had since Bucky had severed his heart.

Bucky'd be stupid not to see that Steve wasn't okay, that the chipper smile was trying but fake, that he kept glancing at Bucky like he'd disappear. That he was tired, but wouldn't let himself fall asleep for whatever fear that Bucky might not be around when he woke up. It wasn't until he'd pulled over to watch the sunrise which wasn't necessarily romantic, friends could watch the sunrise together, right? that the pretty blue eyes finally gave up and slipped asleep.

It was his fault, he knew that. He knew Steve would take it hard, what he'd said.

And he hadn't exactly been making it easier since. Bucky sighed, glancing at the precious sleeping boy with his head tilted towards the sky. Yeah, Bucky needed to run, but Steve needed to rest, he needed to find some way to heal. It had always been his job to take care of Stevie, but he'd done nothing except make his life harder since he came back.

It was still him. It was still them. This was still the little kid he'd grown up elbowing and holding innocent hands with. If he disregarded efficiency for a few days - he'd still be cautious - they might not get killed. They'd covered enough ground that any Hydra cells following them were probably at least 24 hours behind. If they'd even been followed. So, he'd drive some more, and then when Steve woke up they'd take 24 hours to not care about running or safety or efficiency. They were coming up on Chicago, he was pretty sure there was an art museum?

Bucky snagged a blanket from the back, silently wrapped Steve's sleeping, shivering body up, and transferred him to the backseat, laying him down carefully with Bucky's hoodie tucked under his head. There was a soft smile on his lips now, tiny and honest and he was so far gone he didn't feel the soft kiss pressed to his forehead, the shaky breath before Bucky closed the back door and started the engine, racing the morning sun to Chicago.

~*~*~
He was sold the moment he saw the huge stone lion up front. Actually, he was sold the moment Bucky casually mentioned the idea of seeing an art museum. Steve'd had no idea he'd meant the Art Institute of Chicago.

So yeah, maybe he was a little overeager. Bucky's words were "basically jumping up and down" but Steve was pretty sure that was an exaggeration. He was just...bouncing on his toes a little.

"Are you sure? You don't think you'll be bored?" Steve asked for the hundredth time as they started up the beautiful white steps in front of the building. The car was parked in a garage around the block and the whole walk over here he'd been worried Bucky didn't really want to do this - museums had tight security, there would be tons of cameras, it was super public - but Bucky kept insisting he wanted to go, eyes flicking to Steve every few seconds.

"C'mon, Steve. I went to art school, too. Just because I'm in the twenty-first century doesn't mean I've lost all my culture." Steve made a humming noise, distracted by the swirling architecture gracing the top of the huge white arches. It was stunningly beautiful, like some of the European architecture they'd seen in the war, except now they had the time to appreciate it. "Besides, I dragged you off to science exhibits, I'm not complaining about you finally getting your turn."

In a fit of irrational excitement Steve reached over and squeezed Bucky's wrist, his entire face lit up and glowing, eyes crinkling with happiness. Bucky's expression softened as he looked Steve over. "Thanks, Buck. Really, I haven't gotten the chance to do anything like this since I woke up."

Bucky rolled his eyes but Steve didn't miss the curve at the corner of his mouth. "Rogers, it's just a museum. You can gush after we see the art."

If he could, he'd kiss Bucky on the cheek right now, just an appreciative, cute, chaste thing. But he couldn't, so he bounced a little and dragged Bucky up the rest of the steps, fingers still closed over his wrist. He hadn't been shaken off yet, and if it got weird he could excuse it to his childish excitement.

"Wait, wait." Steve paused again as they reached the doors, tugging Bucky over to the side. He hadn't even thought about it until a few seconds ago, seeing the guards at the door and the big gray arch on the inside. "What about your arm? The metal detector--"

"I got into the Smithsonian, I think I can figure out an art museum. Just...you go first, I'll meet you in the French Renaissance section, okay?"

"I'm not gonna leave you here. Why in the world would you want me gone when you get in?" He was legitimately concerned about this, but the expression on Bucky's face was only increasingly more amused.

"Trade secret. No point in being a super epic assassin if people know how you do shit."

"I'm not people," Steve pointed out.

"You're not," Bucky agreed. But he didn't let up, twisting his wrist out of Steve's grasp and pushing him towards the huge glass doors. "Meet me inside, okay? I'll be fine. Promise."

Because he was being absolutely forced into this and it had nothing to do with Bucky having a smile on his face or them finally going to an art museum, Steve relented and absolutely did not bound inside like a puppy, no matter what stories Bucky told about it later.

The art was beautiful. It was everything Steve had ever dreamed of, better, more surreal than he could've imagined.
He was standing in front of *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jette* when Bucky appeared next to him, looking considerably tourist-y with his sunglasses on his head holding back his long hair and Steve's bomber jacket folded over his arm.

"It's about prostitutes, you know," Bucky said. Steve snorted and glanced back at the dotwork.

"How d'you know?"

"I paid attention more than you think," he replied haughtily and Steve smiled, taking a step closer to the painting. He had a feeling it was more because Bucky wouldn't forget something like a famous piece of art being about prostitutes, but he wasn't gonna say anything.

"It's amazing, that these are all little dots. When you get close enough they don't even mean anything, just a blur, but the big picture? It's beautiful." His voice sounded cheesily awed even to his own ears, but they'd studied this piece when they were kids and now it was here, big and real and beautiful, the original version a foot away from him.

Bucky was probably rolling his eyes at Steve's awe, but that didn't stop him from prodding Steve and pointing at the painting too.

"The lady has a pet monkey. Can I have a pet monkey?"

"No," Steve declared, taking Bucky by the elbow and leading him down the hallway he'd just come from; he had a lot to say about this painting he'd seen, something about a gothic farmer with a pitchfork? He was pretty sure Buck would have some opinions on it.

"You're no fun," Bucky complained.

"I'm the funnest," Steve corrected. A gaggle of teenagers passing them started giggling and whispering to themselves and Bucky was pretty sure that *Captain America said 'funnest' was gonna be trending on some social media site within the next half-hour."

As if the museum wasn't wonderful on its own, there was a special exhibit called *The City Lost and Found: Capturing New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, 1960–1980*. They wandered with wide eyes through the photographic and cinematic pieces detailing streets, pedestrian life, neighborhoods, and seminal urban events. Both of them were left staring at the timeline, the creation of a complex, realistic image of New York; filling in the of gaps of how much had changed since the 1940s.

"It's a shame cameras were so damn expensive back then, or I'd taken about a thousand pictures of Brooklyn. And you, for proof of how damn tiny and stubborn you were." Bucky nudged him with his shoulder and Steve shook his head in fake exasperation.

"The only photo the world has of tiny you is from that military base," Bucky pouted, making a face at the memory. "And you weren't even looking at the camera. Although I wasn't looking at the camera in my military photo either..."

"Yeah, but I have about a thousand drawings of you from the time you were like, six, so pretty sure you've been documented just fine," Steve replied without thinking, too distracted by a unique shot of Harlem to realize what he'd just said.

Until Bucky's eyebrows arched in curiosity and Steve caught the look, replaying his words over in his head. Shit.

"I didn't know you drew me that much." He sounded too surprised to be cocky about it and Steve was glad because yeah, he'd drawn Bucky an embarrassing number of times. Most of the time?
There wasn't a year that hadn't been documented on some scrap piece of paper somewhere.

"I..." Steve started, before realizing he didn't have an excuse that made an inkling of sense. "I didn't have much else to draw?"

Not true, and they both knew it. But Bucky only cocked his head, chewing his lip for a moment. "You want to go check out the sculptures? Apparently they're pretty famous for them."

And just like that the slip was forgotten, Bucky's metal fingers closed over his wrist to drag him past another teenage-sized crowd and the brightness of their twin smiles lit up again as Bucky pointed at one of the small bowls and declared it looked exactly like that one they'd had in their first apartment (before Steve had tripped and broken it).

Then they were laughing and everything was perfect again.

It was beautiful, the whole museum was beautiful, and Bucky even insisted that they eat at the museum's little family bar, scooped wooden stools and crowded chatter around them. And between the ice cream they split with too-long red spoons and the incredible atmosphere, Steve could almost pretend he didn't see the way Bucky kept stiffly scanning the crowds for threats. He was being considerably more rational about it than Steve thought he'd be though. They were in one of the biggest tourist attractions in the country and Buck was managing to keep a running dialogue over ice cream and keep his hands from straying to weapons as he looked over the room.

The whole day was amazing.

They walked the brightly-lit evening streets of Chicago after the museum, shoulders bumping and lingering smiles as they watched people interact, the city come to life once the sun set. Music tumbled out of bars onto the sidewalks, families rushed by, college kids in clumps. They both blushed and avoided each other's eyes as they passed a blonde and a brunette boy holding hands and kissing.

Before they left Chicago, Steve insisted on stopping for pizza. Bucky rolled his eyes a lot and called Steve lots of immature things but Steve shoved his metal shoulder and ordered the deepest Chicago style crust available.

"You know New York crust is the best in the world, why do you bother?" Bucky propped his chin in his hand, looking positively adorable as he raised his eyes at Steve from the other side of the booth.

"Because we've never even had Chicago style! How can you know if you don't try?" Steve used his tongue to capture the straw poking out of the top of his glass, sucking up cold water before straightening back up, tilting his head at Bucky's amused expression. "You are gonna try it, right? Just a few bites?"

Bucky sighed with that look on his face that meant he would shrug if he did that anymore, but when the waitress brought them the thick, steaming pizza he let Steve cut him a slice and slide a plate across the sticky table.

"How are you supposed to eat it? It's too thick to fold in half." He complained, lifting the slice with an overwhelmed look. The waitress glanced between them and pursed her lips.

"New Yorkers?" She guessed. Steve nudged Bucky with his foot and gave the dame an apologetic shrug and hopefully charming smile.

She shook her head with a smile of her own and turned away with a promise to return with more
"Do people not fold their pizza in half outside New York?" He wondered aloud, picking up his own piece. Bucky was still glaring distrustfully at his, but his gaze cut to Steve when he spoke.

"I don't know, but I'm sure the waitress would be happy to tell you, giving her the Captain America smile and everything." The words were bitter and Steve had to fight back a laugh, taking a bite of his thick pizza instead.

Neither of them hated it, but Bucky insisted vehemently that New York style was way better. Which could hardly be determined from four bites, but Steve wasn't gonna push. Instead he ate the rest of the slices and paid up at the counter while Bucky excused himself to the restroom.

The girl at the counter was very sweet and talkative, asking him all sorts of questions and laughing delightedly as he stumbled over answers. She seemed harmless, which is why Steve was extremely surprised when the conversation was cut short by a heavy hand pressing into his lower back again.

Bucky looked slightly pale, fingers curling possessively against Steve's jacket. It was his metal one this time, cold through the layers of his clothes, but the weight of it made Steve's entire body light up warm anyways.

At the expression Bucky's face and the repeated motion from earlier, warmth got pushed to the back of his mind and he looked over Bucky worriedly. "You okay? Taylor, this is my friend Bucky, we're--"

"Just leaving," Bucky interrupted, giving the girl a tight smile and guiding Steve away from the counter. Okay, something was wrong, but the tightness in Bucky's shoulders was all off, his free hand wasn't resting over a knife or a gun.

The second they were back on the sidewalk and headed towards the car, Steve swiveled, making the hand drop away from his lower back. "Buck, is everything okay?"

He was scowling, but not glancing behind them. All the mixed signals were terribly confusing. "Yeah, fine."

"Then what was that? I wasn't in any danger." Steve crossed his arms over his chest, still keeping pace with Bucky's fast legs but giving him a pointed look to show he was not impressed with being hurriedly escorted out of places for no reason.

"No, but. She sure seemed to like you," Bucky finally huffed, eyes carefully not meeting Steve's as he pushed open the door to the parking garage and started up the stairs.

"The Captain America thing tends to do that," he replied, unable to keep the amusement out of his tone. Bucky made a funny sound and kept scaling the stairs, looking like a graceful dancer compared to Steve's exaggerated steps.

Why the hell would Bucky care if a girl liked Steve? He'd done his whole protecting thing...was he trying to protect Steve from her? Or was the hand actually more possessive? He was looking too much into this, wasn't he? There was no way Bucky was jealous. This was Bucky. He didn't get jealous. And really, Steve shouldn't ask, but he'd keep on wondering if he didn't. Besides, what was the harm in a little teasing?

Buck held the door open for him once they reached their floor and they fell in step beside each other as they crossed the dark parking garage. That sour expression was still on his face so Steve nudged him, mouth tilted up in a smile. Now was his chance.
"Why, you jealous?"

Bucky glared at him - hard - but didn't say a word. Steve tilted his head back and laughed, the sound echoing around the parking garage and bouncing off dark concrete walls. Bucky glared harder and Steve threw an arm around Bucky's shoulder, pulling him in tight against his side, knocking them together like Bucky always had in the golden days.

"You don't have to worry about me running away with a Chicago girl, Buck. The pizza wasn't *that* good." Steve's arm hooked around the side of Bucky's neck and Bucky sighed exaggeratedly, like Steve was the most impossible person on the planet and his life was just *so* hard.

He was smiling for the next twenty minutes.

Then it was back on the road, city lights fading into the rearview behind them as Bucky pulled off the highway and onto a road Steve had read about, something called Route 66. It was too dark to see much, but it looked positively empty, which made it perfect.

Not empty like sheared cornfields, empty like they were on an adventure to the end of the world. Which was kind of fitting, really.

Steve reached over and turned up the stereo as Bucky rolled down the windows, night air whipping cold but their jackets kept them warm enough, the only world existing inside the glow of yellow headlights.

*The song* was live, started with a cheering crowd and a piano-led melody in the background. A voice - the lead singer presumably, was talking over the sound, thanking the crowd and making comments about the show before the song started. It sounded like it might be a nice song, right up until the lead singer said-

"-not too long ago, back in a place called New Jersey, where we lived."

And then came the riot.

"Turn it off!" Steve shouted, reaching for the dial. Bucky swatted his hand before he could touch it. "We are *not* listening to a Jersey song."

"The song isn't Jersey, just the band. And it sounds like it might be good," Bucky argued back. Steve lunged for it again and he got swatted harder this time, then Bucky cupped his hand over the stereo knob so he couldn't get to it.

"Nothing from Jersey is good." He absolutely was not whining. "Don't betray Brooklyn now, Buck."

"You're just hating on Stark's music."

"I am not!"

"Prove it, listen to the damn song."

Steve crossed his arms over his chest and made a face, sinking down into the seat petulantly. A chorus of harmonized *ooo's* had started up and he supposed they sounded *fine*. For Jersey music.

By the time they hit the second chorus Bucky had already memorized the words, turning it up louder and singing over the top, hands drumming on the steering wheel. "Give me the beat boys and free my soul, I wanna get lost in your rock and rooolll, and drift awaayyy."
Normally, he'd hold his palms over his ears and sing loud obnoxious noises to prove his point and annoy Bucky, only it was the first time he'd sung since 1945 and there was no way in hell Steve was gonna stop listening - or god forbid, stop Buck - anytime soon.

So he slipped out of his tennis shoes and kicked his feet up again, sticking them at the corner of the window so the open wind would wrap around his socked toes. It was cold as hell, but entirely worth the fresh air, the loud music and Bucky singing obnoxiously beside him.

When the final notes drifted through the air, the acapella harmony close that actually sounded pretty great, Steve made a mental note to actually ask Tony for the name of that band. They weren't terrible. For Jersey.

"So does rock and roll free your soul?" Steve asked - only half rhetorically - rolling his head on the seat to give Bucky a pointed look. He got the shrug-noise in return and the usual tick of Bucky's fingers weaving through his hair.

"It's not bad. I like dubstep better."

"Dubstep?" Steve made a disgusted sound, thinking of the records in his apartment, the only music that felt real anymore. Everything else was electronic, filtered, changed in some way, no longer that raw kind of beautiful sound that a certain beautiful boy used to dance to. "Why the hell do you like dubstep? It doesn't even sound human."

"I know." The knowing grin that came with that was a little terrifying, kind of like the look Bucky had given him that first day at the bridge, all scary-Russian-killing-machine and none of the pretty dancing boy from Brooklyn.

But some part of the pretty dancing boy still had to be in there, because it was only another hour before the wheel suddenly cut to the left and they pulled into the parking lot of a decent-looking motel. Which meant real sleep in a real bed, one that was probably not quite as marshmallow-y as the SHIELD provided one in his apartment. Really though, after the past two days, he'd take any opportunity for sleep right now.

Not to mention that Bucky hadn't closed his eyes once for the past 48 hours, and they could definitely use the break.

Steve grabbed the bags from the back of the car while Bucky checked them in at the lobby. He came back holding up a key with a grin.

Really, he shouldn't have been slightest surprised when the door to their room opened and two double beds stared back at him. Why would they share a bed in the first place? This wasn't the war and it wasn't Brooklyn and it wasn't Steve's apartment, laying on the couch cushions on the floor or collapsing in the only bed in the apartment.

They could afford to sleep in separate beds, he never should have assumed they wouldn't.

Dumping their things on the table first, Steve took the bed furthest from the door (although there were only about three feet of space between them anyways), plopping down and kicking his boots to the floor before stretching out, only remembering the aviators on top of his head when they stabbed his ear laying down.

Neither of them had bothered to turn on the lights because the slanted blinds over the window were casting orange stripes across one of the walls and it was enough light to see by, especially with their eyesight. It also meant though, that Steve could watch Bucky's silhouette as he stripped out of the
brown leather bomber jacket, pulled his hair out of its ponytail and shook his head to settle it back down in pretty waves and goddamn him.

Then he curled up on his bed, facing Steve in the dark, and they could be back in 1945, laying in their tent with only the dim firelight and soft sounds of the Commandos conversing outside, just Bucky's silhouette in the dark, the most familiar and comforting thing he could cling to in a foreign land and a foreign body.

His body felt like his own now and he was in his country again, but somehow he was more alone than ever.

He dreamed about Bucky falling that night.

The sound of his final scream had been permanently engrained in Steve's head and his dreams didn't let him forget that. Except this time there was another shout inlaid over the scream, Bucky's words to go with the wrenching sound, you didn't let me down, you let me fall.

Watching his body get smaller and smaller as Steve clung to the edge of the train and the ice whipped at him and he couldn't breathe and he never wanted to breathe again.

From his bed three feet away, Bucky had already woken up, startled into consciousness by the first whimper from Steve's lips. He was pretty sure Steve was having a nightmare, but the only other one he'd seen was before he'd gotten his memories back, when he'd been watching Steve sleep and suddenly awake with a gasped Bucky.

This wasn't anything like that. He kept rolling over, making the most pitiful whimpers, like he used to do back when he got really sick. Bucky hadn't heard the fever sounds in years, even on Steve's timeline. But it was unmistakably the same pained, unconscious whimpers of pain.

He hadn't been able to take them then, and he sure as hell couldn't handle the sound from his Stevie's lips now, regardless of his size or muscle content. He stretched his arm across the space between their beds, reaching for the tossing and turning body.

It took a few seconds before Steve rolled close enough, but then his arm was extended and Bucky grabbed onto Steve's hand (with no idea that that was exactly what he'd been dreaming about), hoping the warmth of his skin might be enough to jar him out of the nightmare.

Oh boy, was it.

Steve shot awake, fingers clamping down on Bucky's as he startled up, nearly dragging Bucky off the bed and/or yanking his arm out of its socket. It took all his strength not to faceplant on the ground. "Jesus, Steve, you okay?"

Wide eyes turned on him and the orange light from the window reflected off Steve's wet bottom lashes and fuck, Steve had been crying, Bucky got out of his bed so fast he almost ended up on the ground again. The moment Bucky took a step forward, that blonde head shot down, staring at their twisted up fingers for about three milliseconds before he snatched his hand back, basically throwing Bucky's at him and scrambling backwards over the bed.

Bucky lunged to catch him before he fell off the mattress but Steve caught himself first, getting his feet under him and then the bathroom door was slamming shut and Bucky was left standing in the
middle of an empty room with two rumpled beds and a dumbfounded expression on his face.

What the hell just happened?

Since when did Steve shut him out? Since when did Steve have nightmares? Since when did Steve shove Bucky away and go hide in the bathroom to avoid him?

He sunk down on Steve's bed and stared at the bathroom door. He could hear the sink running water, but otherwise the world was quiet and still, just the soft hum of the ancient radiator by the window.

Twenty minutes and no sign of Steve coming back out so Bucky - entirely unintentionally - ended up curling around Steve's pillow and falling back asleep in the middle of Steve's bed, surrounded by the smell of him, the one that had stayed since before the serum.

A turn of the doorknob had him shooting back awake, knife in hand as his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room. Steve was at the doorway to the outside, in a pair of sweats and a tight fitted shirt, his hair wet. He paused when he saw Bucky, face perfectly unreadable.

"I'm going for a run," he said quietly, then the door closed behind him and he was gone. They didn't talk about it when Steve came back and they didn't talk about it when they checked out of the motel and hit the road again.

But when he cautiously tapped Steve's ankle with his foot under the diner table at breakfast, a smile finally lit up that beautiful face and Steve kicked him back. Which turned into a full-on war of kicking each other and trapping feet between ankles. Then they got scolded by their elderly waiter for acting like children and the moment he was gone they started cracking up and everything was right in the world again.

~*~*~

Bucky drove and Steve pretended to sketch the road or the dash or the car or anything but what he was really doing, which was trying to capture the perfect swoop of Bucky's hair back into its ponytail. Bucky hummed under his breath and Steve watched the wide open road of America stretch out in front of him like the epitome of the American Dream and the Western Frontier and wondered if anyone in that war knew this was what they'd been fighting for.

There was something immeasurably peaceful about having nowhere to be, about sitting next to Bucky with only two-lane blacktop under them and an open sky above them.

Every state sign they passed Steve snapped a picture on his phone, sent it to Natasha under the pretense of bragging about getting to travel. But really, so she wouldn't send the search squad on them. And so that in case anything happened, she'd have at least a general area to start searching.

But he wasn't worried. It was more for her than for him.

They stopped at an empty park and laid out on the tops of picnic tables and stared up at the sky and soaked in the distant warmth of the sun. Bucky was the only person in the world he could spend time with without pressure of saying a single thing.

The wood of the picnic table got uncomfortable after a little while and he sat up, stretching his arms and reaching over to tap Bucky, wake him up so they could find a water fountain somewhere. He didn't think to be cautious on Bucky's left side because he'd gotten used enough to the metal to mostly forget about it. So, he didn't think about how they'd been laying in the sun and metal heats up like hell in the sun.
Bucky's arm was scalding. Steve hissed and drew his fingers back, opening his mouth in silent pain and shaking his hand out, which wasn't helping the burning fingers at all. "Ow?" He finally managed, refraining from putting them in his mouth because he was ninety five, he should not put his fingers in his mouth when he burnt them.

All he got for his troubles was an amused huff. Like Buck knew perfectly well how much his arm heated up. Well, of course he did, it was his arm.

"That doesn't ever bother you?" Steve asked, poking Bucky again - with the other hand, in his ribcage so he didn't have to touch the arm. Buck didn't bother opening his eyes, flexing his fingers and rolling the plates down his arm in a whirring ripple.

"My arm? Sometimes." It looked like Bucky wasn't moving anytime soon so Steve laid back down, adjusting so the panels of wood would hit his back in different places. He'd just closed his eyes when Buck spoke up again, all nonchalant and lazy-sounding. "It's better than when I had just one."

And he sat right back up. "One?"

Bucky peeked open an eye, saw Steve was serious, and furrowed his eyebrows together like Steve was the crazy one. He probably was.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Why did you think I have a metal arm now?"

"I thought-- I guess I'd only thought about the change. You used to have a skin arm and now you have a metal one...and I figured it hadn't been easy, based on your shoulder..." Steve trailed off, realizing that they hadn't talked about this once yet, that it was probably rude as hell for him to bring it up, that Bucky used to only have one arm. He couldn't even picture it.

"It wasn't easy," Buck agreed quietly, closing his eyes again. He had that story-telling edge in his voice so Steve laid back down, giving Bucky the privacy to speak without the pressure of being watched. Another few moments passed, filled with the rustle of wind through grass and a few ornate bird calls in the distance. Then the air shifted and Steve's world shifted with it.

"I lost from the elbow down in the fall from the train. I hit the water at the bottom of the ravine, blacked out, and woke up with snow falling in my face and a pool of blood coming from my arm. Hydra stitched it up, right above my elbow, but it was kind of a hack job. Didn't matter much though, they sawed it off later."

The words were so detached that Steve wanted to crawl over to Bucky and pull him into his arms and stroke warmth and love and promises into his skin and tell him he never had to be alone again. But he'd said that once, back in the war, and he'd broken that promise, hadn't he?

"Sawed?" Steve choked. Bucky hummed in confirmation, still laying peacefully dead atop his table.

"I had just the one arm for about a month though, I'd guess. Maybe longer. But when they got the shipment for my metal arm, they had the whole arm, wanted to attach it at my shoulder. They didn't tell me what they were doing at the time, but I'd probably have agreed to it anyways if they did. Fuckin' hated being a cripple."

"A cripple? Buck, you served your country, you're a veteran--"

"No, I'm not, because I'm not done fighting. And yes, I was a cripple, I walked funny and I couldn't pick up anything and I kept reaching for shit with a left hand that wasn't there. The surgery sucked and I passed out from pain at the time and it was all around terrible, but at least I had a goddamned arm again."
Steve stared up at the sky because it was the only thing he could do to keep from crying. He wasn't gonna cry, it wouldn't help anything. He could cry on the inside. It was his specialty now.

But...no. He wasn't gonna let Bucky down anymore.

"You're not a cripple." Not a fight, a declaration.

"Steve--" Bucky started, sounding tired like they'd had this argument a hundred times, even though Steve had never mentioned the arm before.

"Bucky, does my asthma make me a cripple?" Steve interrupted, realizing a second too late that he'd used present tense and holding his breath that Bucky didn't notice. He hadn't exactly told Buck about the panic/asthma attack he'd had after Bucky's first night terror. He wasn't planning to, either. Less things for Bucky to worry about.

"Of course your asthma didn't make you a cripple," Bucky scoffed up at the sky. "You just got born with shoddy lungs."

"And you lost your arm in battle. So you weren't a cripple, you got forced into a robotic implantation--"

"Rogers, look." The cold tone had softened into something apologetic and light. "It's not-- I like the thing, okay? I'm not expecting you to understand that; I know it makes me a freak, but it's as much a part of me as my right arm is. As your asthma was. Besides, it's like something straight out of those sci-fi books I used to read."

There was a smile there, a transformation to the past, two kids on park benches again. He wanted to say that if Bucky liked it, of course Steve did too. That he'd find a way to stop wanting to be sick at the sight of Bucky's shoulder. That he'd stop feeling the cold plates of the metal and hating what happened to his best friend. That it was as beautiful as the rest of him, as shiny-pretty on the outside and deadly in reality. That he wanted to find a way to incorporate the red star on Bucky's shoulder into his uniform, or maybe incorporate his shield onto Bucky's arm.

But the words stuck in his throat, well-bred caution keeping his lips sealed on the important things, his mouth parting with the simplest of versions instead.

"So long as I can draw it," he conceded. Bucky's mouth curved up in a soft, sad smile, but he nodded. Then the quiet and the wind and the rustling grass encompassed the air again and the warmth of the sun didn't feel so distant.

~*_~*_~

It wasn't all driving, all the time. The pattern they struck up wasn't much of a pattern of all, but it tended to consist of staying at a few places for a few days with stretches of road in between. Sometimes roads that crossed state borders and sometimes roads that only went five hours further. There was a lot of parking and staying, which had its upsides and downsides.

He got to run, to stretch out his legs in the morning and take the world under his feet before the morning sun broke the horizon. He invited Bucky to run with him, but he never wanted to. Steve wouldn't make him do anything he didn't want to.

Some mornings he ran so fast that he ended up puking on the side of the road, then he'd have to run some more to get colour back in his cheeks before he made it back to whatever random motel or cabin they were staying at for the day. Bucky would study him when he got back on those mornings, but he thankfully didn't say anything. Steve didn't know if he knew, but he didn't let himself think
about it (or what it might mean) enough to find out.

They played cards, they took pictures with a digital camera Stark had put in the box. Not of each other (not when the other was looking) but of cities and sunsets and long stretches of road. Steve drew and had nightmares and Bucky drove and had nightmares and Steve ran every morning that he could and Bucky drove as far as he could and they were running but they weren't going anywhere.

Steve told stories about the USO tour and Bucky told stories about memories from Brooklyn that made Steve smile.

Bucky pulled a gun on someone in all black when they were in a grocery store and it took Steve half an hour to calm him down in the parking lot.

Steve found a golden retriever tied to a fire hydrant, waiting for its owner, and Bucky laughed until he couldn't breathe because apparently Steve's hair was the exact same colour as the dog's golden fur and "even their goddamned facial expressions matched."

The further they drove and the more they saw, the more people they ran into, the more Steve realized that yeah, there were some amazing things out there, some amazing people, but there was nothing or no one that came anywhere close to comparing to Bucky.

It was like there was an entire world full of people to see and only one that mattered. And he was at his side, methodically driving with a shadow on his jaw and his hair up in a ponytail.

There was something about Bucky that he needed. And a lot of things about Bucky that worried the hell out of him.

He would've let Bucky be, because it was really just a shower, but the moment fog started rolling underneath the closed door, he had to do something.

Steve knocked first, calling Bucky's name cautiously. When he didn't get an answer he tried the handle, relieved to find it unlocked. He pushed open the door and it was like walking into a sauna, slammed with a face-full of steamy, hot wet air.

"Buck? Jesus, how do you breathe in this - Bucky?" Steve stepped up to the other side of the shower curtain, close enough to hear over the pounding of the shower water.

"Mm?" Finally came a reply, a detached hum of what do you want?

"How hot is that water? You're gonna burn yourself." Steve tapped on the shower curtain to get Bucky's attention without putting either of them in an awkward situation. "Bucky? Is anything going on? Can I help?"

A few moments of silence passed, the pattering of the shower, the silhouette of Bucky's hands moving through his hair, the metallic plinking and soft hiss of his left arm. Steve was just about to ask again, maybe switch into concerned-scolding mode, when Bucky finally sighed, arms lowering back down to his sides.

"Can't get warm..." he said softly, like it was the worst admission he'd ever made. "I keep turning it hotter but I'm still cold, my bones aren't thawing, I just can't. Get warm."

"Turn off the water," Steve ordered, grabbing a towel from the rack and unfolding it. The water hadn't shut off yet so Steve repeated himself, voice stern. Bucky finally turned the handle, the steam-coated shower room falling into silence. Steve pulled back an inch of the curtain and held out the towel for him to take.
"Steve-" Bucky started shakily, but Steve cut him off.

"I know, Buck. I know. I'll get you warm, I promise. Just dry off, I'll grab you a pair of sweats, and come join me in the bedroom, okay?"

He got a noise in return that was probably the closest to a yes he'd get, so Steve draped a pair of gray sweats over the towel rack and left the suffocating fog with his head feeling crystal clear in comparison.

By the time Bucky came out of the bathroom with his hair damp and his skin tinged pink from the shower, Steve'd already turned up the room's heater and piled all the room's blankets onto his bed. He'd taken the pillows too, making his bed twice as warm.

Before he could talk himself out, he motioned for Bucky to come sit on the bed. The mattress sunk under his weight, icy eyes confused behind the pieces of hair catching on his wet eyelashes. Taking a deep breath, Steve pushed Bucky back onto the bed, turning him to lay with his head on a pillow as Steve crawled in next to him and pulled the mountain of blankets over their shoulders.

"C'mere," Steve offered quietly, holding out his arms for Bucky to settle between. The icy eyes were still confused, maybe sad around the edges.

"Rogers, I don't need you to-"

"It's not an emotional thing, okay? I'm cold too. It's just sharing body heat, like we used to. Back in the war, back when I was always cold as a kid. Okay? It doesn't have to be anything else. I'm not coddling you, just. Please."

Bucky looked like he didn't quite believe Steve, searching with that calculating stare from the war from when he was scanning the area for the best escape route. Steve held his breath and waited, hoping that he didn't decide to escape now.

Then Bucky rolled over, muscular back to Steve, and for a moment he thought he'd just get up, walk to his bed, maybe walk out of the room, maybe never come back. And then he scooted back, shoulders bumping into Steve's chest cautiously.

The half-second it took for Steve to get his arms wrapped around Bucky's torso was embarrassingly short but he didn't care, not at all, he just tucked his forehead against the back of Bucky's neck and tried to breathe, tried not to cry.

He had his best guy in his arms again and from the moment he let Bucky fall from that train, he'd thought this would never happen again.

His fingers might be leaving bruises in Bucky's ribs but he didn't care, he could feel Bucky's lungs expanding as he breathed, the tips of his damp hair seeping wet; he could feel the skin real and warm and alive underneath his fingertips and that was all that mattered. Bucky probably thought he was crazy, squeezing them so tight together like this, but he was indulging Steve and he didn't plan to let go until he was forced to.

Exhaustion took him after about twenty minutes of quiet breathing and a few stifled gasps from tears in his throat. He hadn't intended to fall asleep or hold Bucky hostage in his arms the whole night through, but one moment he was reveling in the warmth of Bucky's back and the next he was blinking into daylight, his vision obscured by a veil of Bucky's soft hair.

Bucky had rolled over onto his back in the night, right arm pinned under Steve's body. Actually, more like entire right half pinned under Steve's body. He still had one possessive arm wrapped over
Bucky's bare stomach, his face tucked in the crook of Bucky's neck.

And for some reason, Bucky hadn't shoved him off. That was even more surprising than the position itself. Why the hell had he let Steve koala him? Even when they were kids they never slept that intimately.

For lack of a better solution Steve drifted back to sleep and when he woke back up, Bucky was across the room, lacing up his boots, complaining for Steve to hurry up. Neither of them talked about the night before, falling into old habits of pretending silence.

And the next time Bucky got a room, there was only one bed in it.

Steve had choked on his tongue for a few moments before deciding that if Bucky wasn't gonna say anything, neither was he, and he definitely wasn't gonna let the single king sized bed be the death of him.

They slept on opposite sides of it anyways, occasionally back to back when it got colder, but it was basically the same as the bed at Steve's apartment. Maybe the motel clerks thought they were giving each other the time, but what did it matter? He wasn't gonna look a gift horse in the mouth, because feelings or not, it was nice to have the familiarity of Bucky's warmth beside him while he slept again.

Just like the war, just like when they were kids. It didn't mean anything.

And the next morning, there was always another morning-run or another checkout then they were back behind the wheel and pulling off and the motel room was forgotten behind them and it really wasn't a big deal anyways.

The road was congested again as soon as they crossed the next state border, weaving through bits of traffic while they chatted, Steve pointing out every piece of pretty architecture they passed. There were a lot of churches, from glass paneled sleek ones to ancient German rock facades to towering renaissance-styled steeples. He kept pointing them out, making Bucky turn and twist around in his seat to see them all.

"Jeez, Rogers, you start bible thumpin' while I was gone?" Bucky asked after Steve pointed out the second Celtic church in ten minutes.

"It's good architecture!" he said in his defense, following the buildings with his eyes. They passed a few boring strip malls and congested buildings before he sighed and glanced at the driver's seat. "I've been praying again, though."

"Really? Sarah'd be glad." Bucky sounded carefully disinterested and Steve wondered if either of them would ever call each other out on each other's bullshit. Probably not. So he studied Bucky's jaw and answered as vaguely as possible.

"I don't think so. It doesn't count if you pray for the wrong reasons." He could still remember confessing to Clint; he kept praying to switch places with Buck. (Please, lord, why couldn't you have taken me instead?) Bucky didn't need to know that, although he already knew what kind of praying Steve used to do.

"So it's the 'just in case it's real I don't want my ass kicked' kind of praying? Or the 'I aught to be respectful' kind?"

"Neither," Steve said quietly, looking out the window. "I mean, after everything that's happened? Aliens being real, the Norse gods Mom used to tell us about real too? I never mentioned to Thor that I had an Irish upbringing and used to hear stories about him. They were supposed to be myths"
though, not actually gods. Mom was always saying there was just the one--"

"But since when have you listened to anyone? You've got your own opinions on everything."

"I don't know. I don't know how I feel about it anymore, what I'm supposed to believe. I don't like the idea of praying to no one, and there are things I guess I do pray about but it's not even the right way--"

"What do you pray about?" Bucky interrupted curiously.

Steve looked out the window, watching the reflection of their car roll by in shiny storefronts. So much for not opening this jar of beans. "You."

"You-- wha- why would you pray about me?"

He turned an unimpressed look on Bucky who threw up a hand, looking genuinely confused. Seriously? Like he didn't know. Like he didn't fucking have a reason to be prayed for. Even taking God out of the equation - because really, how was he supposed to be sure about those things when his best friend had been tortured for seventy years?

"Buck, what happened to you--"

"Wasn't your fault." Bucky interrupted, smooth as molasses, which was probably the craziest thing Steve had heard all week.

"Bullshit!" Steve said incredulously, turning all the way in his seat to face the driver's side. "You said it yourself, I let you fall."

What he hadn't been expecting was the instantaneous drain from Bucky's face, the suddenly pale, sickly pallor as his eyes went wide and his cheeks inebriated: the color of a empty sketchbook pages. His metal hand was whirring, unintentionally molding permanent indents in the hard steering wheel.

Which made no sense, because Bucky had said that. He'd shouted it. In Steve's face. And stormed out of the room. Why the hell did he look like he was gonna puke?

A trembling hand pushed hair off his forehead, fingers caught in the strands for a moment, the unconscious tick suddenly revealing exactly how nervous it'd always been.

"Jesus, Steve. I had to. It was the only way to get you to shut up. You know I didn't--"

He couldn't listen to that.

"No, Bucky," Steve interrupted. "Don't insult me like that. I know you. And I know you meant it."

Bucky opened his mouth and closed it again, expression wrecked, looking positively devastated. Fine. He could act as upset as he wanted. Steve crossed his arms over his chest and refused to meet Bucky's eye, looking passively at the city instead.

Buildings rushed past, faster now as the traffic began to clear, and it was only a few seconds later that he muttered something, so quiet that Steve almost didn't pick it up; Bucky probably wouldn't have if their positions were switched.

"Not in the way you think."

He didn't mean it in the way Steve thought? What in hell other way was there to mean the very clear words of blaming someone for your death? Or, actually, worse-than-death condemnation to seventy
years as a prisoner of war?

Then Bucky cleared his throat, sounding desperate as his words nearly broke over his tone. "Steve...It wasn't your fault."

He couldn't do that, he couldn't blame Steve and ruin his life and then go on and sound so damn sincere saying the opposite. It wasn't fair, and Steve was entirely justified when he turned to Bucky and snapped, "Then whose was it? Yours? God's?"

"I don't know! But it's not yours, goddamit. Did you blame yourself for the first time I got tortured?" Bucky's voice got all sarcastic at the end but funny enough, he had no idea how deep the guilt ran, how much of his life had been Steve's fault, how long Steve had been living with this.

"Yes, I did, I pressured you to enlist! And then I asked you to stay when you could have gone home!" Steve snapped back and Bucky fell silent, squeezing the steering wheel in both hands now, taking very obvious, deliberate breaths that were still infuriatingly, perfectly silent.

He was so goddammed quiet all the time and so damn stiff like the entire world was a battleground and maybe Steve had always seen the world that way but this was Bucky, he wasn't supposed to. That was probably Steve's fault too.

If all those years ago, he hadn't ever become friends with Buck, none of the terrible things would have ever happened to him--

"Look," Bucky started, voice soft and serious, hands rolling frettingly over the steering wheel, probably leaving more indentations in it. "I chose to go on every mission I ever went on with you." That little kid from Brooklyn, I'm following him. Why? Why? "Including the last one, Steve. I could no more have left you than you could have left me."

He would've scoffed, if those weren't words he'd been craving to hear, if those weren't words that threatened to breathe life back into him.

I could no more have left you than you could have left me. There was a part of him that wanted to protest, to tell Bucky that no, he was wrong. That Steve loved him as more than a best friend, that Steve loved him with every inch of his soul, that he'd meant it on the helicarrier when he'd looked up at Bucky's broken eyes and said he'd rather die by his hand than live without him.

But Bucky had broken through Hydra's clutches for him.

Romantic, aching, heartbroken, consuming love aside - Bucky felt the same way about Steve. It shouldn't be possible, because Bucky didn't love him like that...only somehow, Steve knew in his soul that no matter how much he protested, Bucky was right when he said that.

I could no more have left you than you could have left me.

He'd made the mistake once, of thinking that Bucky would be fine without him. That because it was only best-friend-love Bucky felt for him, it was somehow lesser than the way Steve felt. Then the same haunted, tortured man had gripped onto a metal bar and screamed No, not without you!

Bucky'd do anything for him.

He'd been a fool to ever think otherwise. He'd known that then, but how much had he let himself change since then?

"Okay, well." Steve leaned his head on the window, the outside world passing by in a dizzying blur.
Everything felt dizzy and blurry, lightheaded, the way he kept getting lately. "I could use some sleep, wake me up if you want me to drive."

Bucky wouldn't wake him up and hadn't let him drive once, but that part didn't matter. The point was that they weren't talking about this anymore because this wasn't something they could solve and Steve was honestly way too tired to try. Not tired from lack of sleep (though he hadn't gotten enough) but from the exhaustion of this conversation, of all of the conversations they were always on the verge of having.

The conversation they'd been on the verge of having for decades.

It wasn't the answer Bucky wanted and neither of them were saying what they wanted to so really, it was only fair. Steve leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes, listening to the occasional whir of Bucky's hand as it repositioned on the wheel until he drifted off.

He slept fitfully and woke too many times but when the really bad nightmares started to tug he woke up again - this time forcefully, the loud unmistakable sound of a semi-truck horn blaring through his dream and yanking him into the present.

The car swerved and Bucky was cursing, then the semi's bright headlights were fading into the rearview and they straightened back out on the road, both of them breathing heavy with wide eyes. Steve opened his mouth to ask if Bucky was okay, then suddenly the car was signaling to pull over to the side of the road, tires rolling to a stop in the grass before the ignition cut and everything fell perfectly silent as Bucky tipped his head back against the seat and tried to breathe.

His pretty eyes were squeezed shut, and in the dark with nothing to reflect it the metal arm was undetectable, the seat obscuring his long hair, and Bucky looked exactly the way he had during the war, after one of the missions that Steve had done something particularly stupid and Bucky'd tipped his head back against the seat and forced himself to breathe the exact same way he was doing now.

"Want me to drive?" was the only thing Steve eventually said. Bucky nodded, handing Steve the keys before crawling out of the car, folding himself up small in the passenger seat while Steve started the engine, locating the emergency brake and a few key features before pulling out into the empty road again.

They were both quiet and Bucky's eyes kept threatening to slip shut but he didn't let himself fall asleep, forcing himself back awake and staring out the window like the world outside could swallow him up and take him somewhere far far away.

Steve focused on controlling his own lungs, keeping the impending panic down, driving safely and securely with Bucky in shotgun. It was more than stressful, he felt like screaming or parking the car and running or curling up in the backseat and wrapping himself around Bucky until both of their bodies decided to stop freaking out; but he kept his foot resting on the pedal and his hands planted firmly on the steering wheel.

Everything got a little easier by mid-day, sun high overhead by the time the rusty voice croaked from the passenger side. "About the car--" Bucky started.

"It's okay," Steve replied with a small smile, before Bucky could beat himself up anymore. They'd both been arguing and ridiculous and they'd both pushed themselves too hard. Bucky didn't know about Steve's morning runs that ended in him lightheaded or puking but he knew a lot about pushing too hard.

He got a silent nod in return, then they were half-heartedly listening to the local classic rock radio
station for the rest of the day. Driving was...healing, almost. Easy, to keep his eyes on the road, to have Bucky as a solid presence behind him, to have the purpose of going somewhere without the pressure of needing to get anywhere. He didn't have to fight to keep his eyes off Bucky with the excuse of looking at the road. He didn't have to worry about anything, really. Keeping Bucky safe and driving, that was all that mattered.

Sometime around three in the afternoon while they were driving through a midwestern smalltown, Bucky turned away from the window and casually asked, "Where we at?"

Steve shrugged. "I dunno."

He did not expect Bucky's eyes to go wide.

"You don't know where we are?"

Confused, he glanced back over, exchanging his attention between Bucky's confounded expression and the road. "No? Why would I? Aren't we just driving?"

"Well yeah, but I still knew where we were the whole time!"

It was Steve's turn for his eyes to go wide, then Bucky leaned his head against the window and groaned - loud and exaggerated like something out of a terrible porn flick.

"C'mooooon, Rogers. I give you the wheel for fifteen hours and you get us lost. This is why no one gives you maps."

"Hey! How was I supposed to know?"

"That's exactly what you said when you landed us thirty miles into the middle of nowhere-backass-Europe."

"Okay, no, that was Falsworth's fault."

"It was not, the Commandos were fucking saints for putting up with your shit."

Steve glared but he couldn't keep the corners of his mouth from wavering, and Bucky made another hopelessly gorgeous sound and threw up his hands.

The rest of the afternoon drive was filled with stories about the Commandos, carefully skirting around ones battles or fights that might trigger memories of other ones. They didn't talk about the war much, if ever, so the mention of their team already had Steve's heart pounding.

He didn't want to be the one who set off the grenade in Bucky's head. So he skirted to only non-violence stories, stories of campfires and bad food and coffee and ridiculous bets. And, like he'd guessed, Bucky didn't bring up a single battle scene.

Better to just avoid those all for now. It was still perfect, somehow, finally getting to talk about their boys. He'd walk on eggshells for the rest of his life, he already knew that, but having a few more topics open up as at least semi-okay? It was exciting. Progress, but he'd never say that out loud.

They stopped for the sunset.

Steve turned the wheel - they'd finally figured out where they were a few hours ago - into one of the prettiest places he'd ever seen. A dirt road that broke off from the stretch of Route 66 they were on, one surrounded by nothing but golden cliffs on the horizon glinting with rainbow reflections, dust
kicking up behind them as the sky got darker overhead and the dirt road rumbled to a stop at a lookout point. It was exactly what Steve had been hoping the dirt road would be.

The loud rumbling of the engine cut as he parked the car in front of an old wooden post, a few propped pieces of wood making a makeshift semicircle fence. The sign read simply **Sandia Mtn. Range**.

Bucky raised an eyebrow at him and Steve shot him his wide winning smile and pulled himself out of the car, closing the drivers side door with a satisfying metallic click. He pocketed the keys and cocked his head to the footpath behind the sign.

With curious eyes absorbing the colors of gold and red splashing around them, Bucky followed him down the path. It was getting rapidly darker with every step around the rock facing, and then suddenly the footpath curved around the outcropping and they were standing at the top of a cliff, a valley opening up below them.

"Wow," Bucky commented, like it was involuntary, stepping up next to Steve.

He couldn't tear his eyes away. The world was **huge**. Gigantic red rocks in squares and rectangles and crumbling columns layered with sparkling orange clay and patches of green mosses and bushes. At the bottom of the valley was a thin, glittering ribbon of water, cutting through the desert landscape with the glinting promise of the dying sunlight.

An entire world in the dip of a valley, exotic and stunning. Dusty and lush at the same time, vibrant like someone had turned the saturation up on the world. And then there were the clouds; purple and pink and orange streaks across the sky, layering like whisps of paint to cover the highest parts of the most incredible canvas he'd ever seen.

There was nothing like this in real life, he didn't think. He'd seen pictures of course, he'd seen movies with landscapes like this, heard songs about the open frontier of the west. That was nothing compared to seeing it laid out in front of you, an entire universe beneath your feet as you stand atop a plateau, a tiny speck in the arching circle of mountains in the distance, surreal valley below.

The last time he'd felt this small, he'd been laying on a table making a joke about a serum that would change his entire life.

And now he was tiny all over again, but somehow, through all of the time that had passed since then?

Bucky was still standing here beside him.

"I'm sorry." Steve finally turned his head, looking Bucky square in the eye. The fading sun was right behind him, casting a halo behind his silhouette, temporarily blinding Steve and wasn't that just fitting.

"I'm sorry too." The words were almost a whisper but they were the sweetest sounding words he'd ever heard out of Bucky's mouth.

They were apologizing for everything and nothing and it didn't matter, because they'd said it and they'd meant it and in this moment, everything could be at peace between them again. Although, really, when had anything ever been at peace between them?

There had always been something, even when things were good, there was always tension or conflict or craziness or laughter, never so simple as contentment. Apologies. Mutual understanding, for once.
They both had a lot to be sorry for. Things they'd said - just yesterday - things they'd done. More from Steve than Bucky, but he wouldn't ruin the moment by taking the release of Bucky's apology away from him.

Then came the brief dangerous moment where they stood in silence and looked at each other. This could go one of three ways, really. Steve could start crying, which really didn't happen that often at all (and never lately) but it was a feasible option from the past.

He could take the option he normally did, which was to joke away the moment. Like one of the more poignant times they'd come to this impasse - Bucky's hands wrapped like boxing gloves, an intimate stare in a cold tent in the middle of a war, the words I ain't leaving til the stars fall from the sky sitting heavy and real between them. Steve had leaned over in the silence full of raw emotions and wounds opened up and exposed and said, "I didn't know you were a poet, Buck."

He'd been smacked for that. They'd both laughed and the moment had passed and the world had righted itself.

But there was always option three.

Steve reached into the space between them, closing a distance that had been too far for far too long. He moved slow enough that Bucky could see him coming, but Bucky would be able to see him if he was moving at the speed of one of Clint's arrows (he'd proven that already) and really, it was more about the fear of Bucky pulling away.

He could pull away.

But how much was on the line here? A lifetime of silence versus for the fear of rejection. So he closed the gap between them and weaved his fingers in between Bucky's.

The icy blue eyes turned down in surprise as the lips parted with a sharp intake of New Mexico air, his right hand flexing around Steve's left. A moment of silence as Bucky looked down at their joined hands, as he categorized or registered (or whatever he did in that efficient brain of his) the feeling of Steve's fingers in between his.

These exact ten fingers had held hands before. Their palms had been pressed together like this before. When they were kids, when the night got too cold and dark as teens, when the threat of a bullet or fire or mission or the eminent death in general that came with the war got to them and made them reach out for each other in the darkness.

But they hadn't held hands in a long long time and no one was dying right now. The world was breathtaking and Bucky was breathtaking and Steve didn't want to waste another breath without Bucky's fingers entwined between his. Actually, he was currently holding his breath, waiting to see if Bucky would pull away or not.

Then his warm right hand fingers tightened around Steve's and the wired tension in Steve's body drained out of him and it was just the two of them standing on the top of a cliff and holding hands and looking out at the sunset as the world faded from gold to red to purple to black.

For the first time since he'd woken in the SHIELD fake hospital room, Steve finally felt like he was home.

He wished he could say they held hands all the way back to the car, but when the stars came out and they both started shivering and the world was shifting into shadows around them Bucky gave his hand one last tight squeeze and let go, gesturing Steve back to the car.
They were quiet but it was the good kind; then Bucky was back behind the wheel and they were off again, the road stretching out before them.

The warmth that had spread through his body from where their hands had been threaded together didn't leave him the whole night through. And from the resting soft curve of Bucky's mouth, he'd guess it was the same for the stunning man beside him.

~*~*~

With the world set right and a new destination in mind Steve decided they might as well play the other half of the 'Popsicle Boyfriends Mixtape' that Tony had made; still extremely careful not to let Bucky see the title as he popped in Side B.

"The first half wasn't so bad," Bucky mused as another soft piano intro broke out over the speakers. Steve grimaced, remembering exactly how fitting the lyrics had been, how much he was gonna strangle Tony for finding out his secret.

Like that one song that'd said something about She's got a smile and it seems to me, reminds me of childhood memories...And if I'd stare too long, I'd probably break down and cry.

He should ask Jarvis if Tony had installed spying software in his apartment.

This song was a lot slower though, sad sounding, which should have been the first clue to skip it, but they both just hummed along to the background music and listened intently to the lyrics. The first verse was something about a priest, but he didn't make the connection until the drums hit.

Twenty-two years of metal tears, cries a suicidal Vietnam vet. Fought a losing war on a foreign shore to find his country didn't want him back...In a time I don't remember, in a war he can't forget.

The only other sound in the car was the creak of leather under Bucky's tightening metal hand - Steve was just frozen, silent.

He cried, "Forgive me for what I've done there, cause I never meant the things I did."

A drum hit, pause, then the music picked up again, strong and crooning sad, hopeful in a way that neither of them were. And give me something to believe in - if there's a Lord above. And give me something to believe in. Oh, Lord arise.

Steve considered turning it off. It might offend Bucky though, the implication of how well the song fit. It was hitting Steve hard, all the emotions put into words they couldn't say out loud. He wasn't sure if he hated Tony Stark for this or if the screaming guitar was exactly what they needed to face this. He didn't want to face it, though. But it wasn't his place to do anything about it. He curled his fists in his lap and stared out the window, not seeing anything, washed over with a Poison song.

My best friend died a lonely man in some Palm Springs hotel room. I got the call last Christmas Eve and they told me the news...I tried all night not to break down and cry, as the tears rolled down my face.

Maybe Steve had the right to cut the song after all.

I felt so cold and empty, like a lost soul out of place. And the mirror, mirror on the wall... see my smile, it fades again.

"Turn it off," Bucky interrupted, sharp, and Steve had never responded faster. He jammed his finger on the next button and the song cut out, a squeaking creak as the tape looped to the next song, then
You're as cold as ice. They both turned to each other, eyes wide, and lasted about three seconds before Steve was cracking up and Bucky was snorting, shaking his head and dislodging pieces of hair from his ponytail. You're willing to sacrifice our love.

"Tony Stark, man." Bucky shook his head in awe and Steve nodded his agreement, looking amusedly out the window. It was exactly like Tony to put the most heartbreaking song on the tape right before one called Cold as Ice.

And yeah, maybe the lyrics still hit a little too close to home with you're closing the door, you leave the world behind...throwing away a fortune in feelings, but someday you'll pay... but it was too hilarious for either of them to really care.

They hummed along through the rest of Cold as Ice then it was another Pink Floyd song. The first one - Comfortably Numb - had been brutal, and Wish You Were Here was no less so.

That didn't stop Steve from singing "Did they get you to trade your heroes for ghosts?" under his breath as he grabbed two iced-tea lemonades from the gas station refrigerator. And since Bucky was outside filling up the car, he sang "Did you exchange a walk on part in the war for a lead role in a cage?" as he grabbed granola bars and uncrystallized ginger.

"We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year," Steve deposited his things on the counter, ignoring the amused look of the checkout girl as he kept singing softly to himself. It was a catchy song, alright? "Running over the same old ground, what have we found? The same old fears. Wish you were here.

"See?" The gas station door chimed as Steve pulled out his wallet and looked up. Bucky was propped in the doorway, straight out of a magazine with his arm on the doorframe, the aviators on, his long hair down and windswept away from his face. Steve only barely managed not to drop his credit card. "I told you we never coulda been a barbershop quartet."

"Septet," Steve corrected automatically, handing the checkout girl his card. She was staring wide-eyed at Bucky too, her mouth open and eyes glassy. Steve could relate.

"C'mon, Captain. Taking long enough, we've still got the rest of that mixtape to finish." Bucky swung the gas station door closed and sauntered back out to the car while Steve awkwardly gathered up the purchases in his arms.

"Is he your boyfriend?" The checkout girl demanded, peering around Steve's shoulder. Steve snorted, glanced at Bucky who was waving to hurry up with his gloved hand. And managed not to trip over his words for once as he looked back at the girl and deadpanned, "I wish."

The next few songs on the tape were good, ones they could hum along to and probably fit as well as the others if Steve paid closer attention. He could sing loudly along with here I go again on my own and pretend that Bucky hadn't jumped ship a thousand times, harmonize to I close my eyes, only for a moment and the moments gone and snort at the irony of having slept for seventy years instead of get all teary-eyed about it.

Dark fell back around them, headlights flicking on to light up the crystal clear night as Steve rested his arm on the open windowpane and watched the line of mountains in the distance. A soft guitar piece came on and by mutual silent agreement neither of them sang, watching the raw beauty of the
wilderness open up around them as someone crooned out *knock knock knocking on heaven's door...*

So maybe he wouldn’t quite *strangle* Tony for the mixtape. He finally could see now, why it’d been called *Popsicle Boyfriends*. When you looked at how the lyrics lined up to their lives, how their lives lined up to some of the nation's most classic love songs...

It looked a little like they were dating. Should be dating. Something. And god, Steve would, he so would, but Bucky would *never*. Hell, knowing Steve's luck, Bucky probably thought of him as brother or something. Never anything more. How could they be something more?

When the *next song* started up Bucky instantly started humming along. There was this high-sounding piano melody arching over a lower one and it was nice. He was pretty sure it was the last song on the tape, if he’d counted correctly, so it'd be interesting to see Tony Stark's grand finale choice. Tony was all about grand finales.

*I can't fight this feeling any longer,* the voice started. Steve dipped his head forward and forced himself not to groan. He was not gonna give an *ounce* of perfectly sculpted years of denial away because of one stupid song.

*And yet I’m still afraid to let it flow.* He risked a glance at Bucky, who was carefully not returning the gaze, all focus on the road in front of them. *What started out as friendship has grown strooonger, I only wish I had the strength to let it show.*

Okay, it was not a matter of *strength*. He was strong enough to say it. If he thought Bucky felt the same way. Which he didn’t. If he did... *I tell myself that I can't hold out forever, I say there is no reason for my fear.*

When he looked at the driver's side again, Bucky's cheeks had flushed pink. Wait...what? *Cause I feel so secure when we're together, you give my life direction, you make everything so clear.*

It was probably just embarrassment that Tony thought this song would be about them. Right? Of course. It had to be. Steve could *prove* that's what it was. It was all a big joke to Bucky and he could prove it. He started listening harder, picking up on the pattern of the melody so he could predict it and jump in for the second verse.

*And even as I wander, I'm keeping you in sight...and I'm getting closer than I ever thought I might...*

Bucky was bright red now, from what he could tell in the dark with just headlights to illuminate. Yeah, Steve had to prove it. As much for Bucky's sake as his. The drumset picked up and the chorus broke out strong and sure. *And I can't fight this feeling anymore. I've forgotten what I started fighting for...*

By the time the first verse was over Bucky was fidgeting and Steve was holding back his mischievous smile. He may or may not have just gogg led and memorized the lyrics on his phone. It'd at least prove that it was all a joke, right? That was the whole point.

So when the song settled back into the chorus, Steve casually leaned against the car door and started to sing along.

"My life has been such a whirlwind since I saw you...I've been runnin' around in circles in my mind. And it always seems that I'm following yooouuu--"

"Seriously?" Bucky interrupted, looking over from the driver's seat. Steve perked up, pretending to have just noticed Buck was in the car at all. But instead of responding, he held eye contact, opening his mouth to sing the next line quietly, barely letting any sound out at all, like he was *timid* or
"...you take me to the places," he lifted his voice just a little louder, ",-that alone I'd never fiiind."

Finally realizing what Steve was doing, Bucky groaned and smacked his head against the headrest. Steve leaned forward in his seat, getting increasingly louder with every phrase.

"And even as I wander, I'm keepin' you in sight." Bucky made another hopeless sound, mouthing please stop at Steve with a desperate gaze.

Steve screwed his eyes shut and clenched his fist in the air, voice properly loud now. "You're a candle in the wiindooww on a cold, dark -" punch to Bucky's shoulder "-winter's night."

"Please, god, save me," Buck muttered to the sky and Steve scooted closer, stretching his seatbelt as he knocked his knees against the center console and leaned as close to Bucky as he could.

"And I'm getting closer than liii ever thought I miiiight." Two hands cupped over Bucky's ears and Steve had to grab the wheel to keep the car straight, singing as loudly and obnoxiously as he could when the chorus hit again. "AND I CAN'T FIGHT THIS FEELIN' ANYMOOORE!! I'VE FORGOTTEN WHAT I'VE STARTED FIGHTING FOOOR!!"

A hard metal hand shoved his chest, effectively pushing Steve back into his seat as Bucky took the wheel back with a scowl that was starting to slip. Steve bunched up both hands in front of him, knotting his eyebrows together as he sang as passionately as he could. "It's time to bring this ship into the shooore and throw away the oars fooreeeeever."

"What did I do to deserve this?" Bucky asked the steering wheel. "I don't think even seventy years of killing people deserves this."

Okay, that was low. Steve sang louder. "CAUSE I CANT FIGHT THIS FEELING ANYMOOOREE. I'VE FORGOTTEN WHAT I'VE STARTED--"

"I WILL GIVE YOU SOMETHING TO FIGHT FOR!" Bucky finally shouted back over the top of Steve's singing.

"That doesn't make any sense!" Steve shouted back, then kept going. "COME CRASHIN' THROUGH YOUR DOOR--"

And then, finally, Bucky gave up and jumped on board.

"BABY I CANT FIGHT THIS FEELING ANYMORE." He shout-sang right along with Steve and Steve hollered, fist-pumping the air and shoving Bucky's shoulder again.

See? It didn't have to mean anything. Just friends. The way it'd always goddamned been. That's what Bucky wanted, wasn't it?

Only now, Bucky was looking at him, and his eyes were soft, affectionate in a way that made Steve want to stay pinned under that gaze forever.

The car had fallen immaculately silent. Steve was still facing Bucky, turned in his seat, and Bucky kept turning back to Steve after glancing at the road, like he was studying him, like he was holding him with his eyes and didn't want to ever let go.

The air in the car got thicker and Steve's whole body was buzzing. It was probably a straight - well, not-straight - minute before Bucky finally shook his head a little, long hair bouncing around his jaw
before he settled back in his seat and really started focusing on the long stretch of road again.

"I like that song," he said softly, and Steve could only swallow and nod his agreement.

Plan; backfired.

Steve wasn't sure whether or not he minded.

~*~*~

"This is the craziest thing we've ever done," Bucky told him, looking up at the terracotta entrance.

"Maybe," Steve agreed. "Are you counting the serum and Howling Commando experience with that?"

"Yes," Bucky replied instantly. Steve laughed and readjusted the duffel bag on his shoulder. "La Posada de Santa Fe... it literally just means The Inn of Saint Faith."

"Well, it's the nicest looking inn I've ever seen." Steve started up the steps to the lobby entrance and Bucky trailed behind him, still looking at everything in awe. "Besides, you're the one who said we should listen to Tony. He said treat ourselves."

"He did. I wasn't exactly picturing this though. The last time I was in a place this nice I was killing the person who owned it." The tone of voice didn't change for that, just as speculative and in awe as if he'd commented that the last time he'd been there he'd gone swimming.

Which, of course, was the first thing Bucky wanted to do. Not the killing-people thing, because Steve had dryly replied, "Well, let's refrain from that this time," and Bucky had snorted his agreement. Probably on the grounds that he figured he wouldn't be allowed to use the pool if he did.

But whatever motivation they could find, right?

Oh, and there was the small factor that La Posada de Santa Fe was home to one of the most respected art galleries in the Southwestern art world. Steve was sold the moment he saw the architecture, and that was before he found out about the art gallery.

"Hurry up, Stevie!" Bucky shouted from the living room of their suite. Although why he was impatient Steve had no idea, because their suite was literally the most lavish thing he'd seen in his entire life and there was no way in the world that Bucky could be bored.

The whole resort felt ridiculously warm, although that could be due to the fact that everything was painted red, gold, or yellow. But somehow still ridiculously classy. And they were in New Mexico which was incrementally warmer than New York anyways.

Their room - suite - had its own fireplace, billiard table, french doors opening to the path that lead to the pool Bucky was obsessing over and Steve was currently changing for. They'd only been here for twenty minutes but Bucky insisted that swimming was the most important part of "fancy-ass hotels" and Steve certainly was not opposed to seeing Bucky shirtless and wet.

It would be innocent enough, swimming together, because they'd only done it since forever, all the way back to when Sarah used to throw them in the same bathtub in order to save water and warmth.
Obviously a lot had changed since then, including the horrifying scars arching out from Bucky's shoulder and the tight abdominal muscles they were both sporting now. And how Steve would probably be staring the whole time, but what's new?

He wasn't even that concerned about keeping his eyes to himself - certainly wasn't concerned about anyone else's eyes either because the hotel clerk had said the pool was technically closed since it was cold outside; although with the mention of Tony's name and the large sum of money that came along with it, hotel management said they'd have the pool heated up for them within fifteen minutes. Privately, even, closed off to all other guests, which had made Bucky get way too excited.

And so by consequence, Steve was excited too. They got to go swimming in one of the most beautiful, architecturally mouthwatering (and romantic) pools he'd ever seen in his life.

He didn't think to think about it until he was standing on the first shallow step of the lit up pool, golden reflections of firelight dancing in the blue water circling his ankles.

And suddenly the only thing he could think about was the icy crush of an ocean in March of 1945. He had drowned. The ice may have saved his life, but not before the water had taken it.

It had only been a few months ago that he'd been surrounded, pummeled, ice filling his cells and burning his body and his brain, his life slipping between his fingers as water pushed into his lungs, crushed him, and killed him.

*Water and chunks of ice flooded into his throat and Steve choked on reflex, his lungs seizing and heart pounding and throat convulsing. It burned worse than fire, worse than the cold numbing tingling of his fingers and hands and feet. His lungs filled with water and his eyes spilled over with tears of pain that the cold water took away, sucked for their own.*

He couldn't do this.

Steve stepped back out of the water, forcing himself to put his feet on soft concrete with slow, careful precision. Forced himself not to jump out of the water screaming and run as far as possible. Forced himself to stay calm. He could stay calm. He couldn't let himself shake.

He closed his hands into fists to stop the trembling and tried to focus on the feeling of solid ground beneath his bare feet. He was safe, he was on land, he couldn't drown so long as he didn't touch the water.

"Rogers! The hell are you doing?" Bucky shouted at him from across the pool, water lapping at the waistband of his shorts, halfway down the steps Steve had freaked out on. Had he walked all the way over here already? When did that happen?

Steve flailed for an answer, pulse thudding, unstable and lightheaded from the memories threatening to overtake him.

"It's cold," he finally managed. It wasn't, it really wasn't, they both knew a lot colder. It was warmer than outside, warmer than roadtripping with the windows down.

Bucky rolled his eyes and waved a hand, taking a few steps further into the pool. He was up to his waist in the shallow end, slowly advancing deeper, gesturing for Steve to join him like it was the easiest thing in the world. It wasn't. But he couldn't tell Bucky that.

"C'mon! I'd say don't be a dame, except that Peggy Carter would laugh her ass off at you right now. That woman is more fearless than anybody I have ever met."
Steve managed a shaky laugh that didn't sound the least bit convincing, but Bucky was busy gliding his hands through the water in fascination, watching ripples curl around him in the glittering gold reflections of the firelight that lit each of the pretty lamps surrounding the pool from their safe distance in the rocks.

And Steve didn't notice that Bucky used present tense, that he knew Peggy was alive, that he'd talked to her. He was too busy forcing himself not to back away from the pool and finally realizing what it was like to be scared of something that wasn't losing the people he loved.

If the twenty year old version of himself was here, he'd go running at the pool full tilt and splash Bucky with a wicked cannonball, getting about three seconds of laughter in before Bucky was scolding him and holding him above the water for fear that his weak lungs would give out on him. But Steve was careful in the water, always had been. Swimming was good for him, the docs had said. Fair playing ground too - he and Bucky could hoarse around without the threat of Steve getting mortally injured for once.

But now, less than ten years older and just the sight of the pool was making him shake.

"Steeevveee," Bucky whined, treading water into the deep end and making doe eyes up at him. "It's cold," Steve protested, at least a little more convincing sounding this time.

Probably because the memories that were trying to drown him again were reminding him just how cold that ocean had been.

He got a splash of water in his direction for his troubles. The metal arm had some serious splashing power and the droplets of water managed to sprinkle as high as Steve's swimshorts, but it was a close enough sensation to shower water that he didn't freak out.

"Don't make me swim alone, that's no fun." Bucky was pouting and Steve raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him, crossing his arms over his chest. He could make this about Bucky. He could pretend this was just some act to annoy him or something, anything that wasn't the memory of drowning. Dying.

"Just jump in. It's really nice once you get used to it, and it's warming up more by the minute." Bucky sing-songed the end, sinking into his shoulders to prove his point. The tips of his hair drifted across the top of the water, a few pieces sticking to his neck, and he looked so beautiful there, flickering firelight lighting up the night with the peaceful water lapping gently around him.

"I don't know, I'm kinda tired. Not really in the mood to swim..." he trailed off lamely, looking away from the gorgeous temptation of a wet Bucky Barnes crooking a finger alluringly at him.

"There's no such thing as not being in the mood to swim." There was a soft plopping sound and when he risked a glance back at the pool, Bucky was gone. Steve's heart stopped for a moment, then Buck burst up from the water with a graceful slide like some sort of sinful, heartbreaking model, having swum underwater all the way to the edge near where Steve was standing.

His breath was still caught in his throat and his heart was pounding in his chest except it was for two reasons now. For the first time, he wished that he could let himself be distracted by Buck, that he could make Steve's heart pound fast enough to forget about the other reason his lungs weren't working.

But the pool was still right there and so were the memories. It wasn't enough.

Bucky folded his arms over the edge of the pool, looking up at Steve with forlorn eyes, hair slicked
back and dark and so so pretty and wet as he batted his eyes and made a pouty face.

"Please? You're gonna love it," Bucky coaxed.

"Seriously, Buck. Swim without me," Steve suggested, sitting down at the edge of the pool, a few feet away from where Bucky was looking at him with that sad puppy expression. At Steve's stubbornness Bucky let out an exaggerated heartbroken sigh, clutching at his chest and falling back into the pool dramatically. Steve rolled his eyes and Bucky stuck his tongue out.

After a few faces made back and forth in response, Bucky started lapping the pool with a perfectly executed freestyle, gliding through the water as gracefully as everything else he did. Steve half focused on watching him while convincing himself to dip his toes back in the water.

By the time Bucky had gone through freestyle, butterfly, backstroke, and breaststroke, Steve had convinced himself to let his ankles dangle in the side of the pool with only minimal dents to the side of the pool from the terrified tight grip of his hands.

Just ankles. He was fine. He watched Bucky's repetitive motions and let the rhythm calm him. Bucky had pulled him from the water before. He was safe, it was just ankles, there was nothing to be afraid of.

The water was warm now, really warm, and that helped. It wasn't icy like the ocean. Like standing in a shower with the plug blocked, almost. He could convince himself it was that. Just ankles.

After a little while, Bucky swam back closer, looking him over for a moment. Steve met the gaze with a lift of his chin, challenging Bucky to say something. Instead he narrowed his eyes a little, thinking, and suddenly swung a leg up over the side of the pool.

The splash narrowly missed soaking him, then the other foot was up and Bucky was leaning back down, his hair floating around him in the water. He was basically sitting on the wall of the pool, shins tucked up on land and legs bent at the knee so he could hang upside down and keep stationary in his backfloat. It was a good position for situps too, or for lowering yourself underwater to practice holding your breath.

Having Bucky close - even though he was underwater now, out of sight but for his wet calves dripping eight inches away from Steve's spot - calmed down a little of the panic and Steve found he could uncurl his hands from the side of the pool. Well, not entirely let go, but relax them enough to see that he at least hadn't cracked the concrete.

With a splash Bucky's torso emerged from the water again, shaking his head and sprinkling Steve with water again from the soaking strands of flying hair. Steve made a face and only didn't splash Bucky back because insinuating a splashing war was not a good idea right now.

Then icy eyes were on his and Bucky pulled himself up in half, looking at Steve with a glimmer in his eyes that almost looked like...heat.

"Steve," Bucky murmured, running a hand through his hair to pin it back. Steve's mouth ran dry, because god, he'd give anything to have his own hands running through Bucky's hair right now.

"Mm?" he managed, forcing his brain to work at least moderately.

"C'mere." It was barely above a whisper, low and almost gravely, and it sent shivers down Steve's spine. He scooted over closer but Bucky crooked a finger, placing a hand up by his mouth like he was gonna whisper something. So Steve pulled his legs outta the water, kneeling between Bucky's feet and leaning over so Bucky could whisper whatever it was he had to say.
Steve's heart was pounding out of his chest, his hands felt clammy and his head was all lightheaded again, but this time the majority of it was the proximity. The way Bucky was looking at him.

He moved in closer and the hand beside Bucky's mouth reached out, cupping around the back of Steve's neck. He was practically leaning over Bucky now, the wet non-metal hand curling damp fingers into the place where flushed skin and soft hair met, carding through the short hairs as he pulled Steve in even closer.

Steve couldn't breathe. Bucky was reaching up for him and Steve was leaning over and god good, right before Bucky had gotten his memories back they'd almost kissed, they'd been so close and maybe Bucky wasn't as disgusted with that memory as Steve thought he'd be, maybe all of those times he'd never let himself quite refer to as "almost" really had been just that.

And it was all leading up to right now, with that intensity in icy eyes and the warmth of Bucky's wet hand on the back of his neck as he pulled Steve in closer and reached up further and both of their lips were parted and Steve's lungs weren't working again but he didn't care, he didn't care because Bucky might be about to kiss him, all he had to do was lean in a little closer--

He leaned and Bucky tugged and then he was in the air, somehow, for about three seconds, just enough time to register that he was flipping - had been thrown - then he hit the surface of the water.

A ploy, a practical joke, something so signature Bucky - he was sexual, he was devious, Steve had always known that, should never have let himself be blinded, he'd always known that, should have seen it coming - and so innocently brilliant, really, the pretense of the whisper then the unmistakable curiosity of the what's-going-to-happen that obviously hadn't meant anything, except for that it worked.

It worked and Steve had fell for it, leaned in close, and gotten flipped right over Bucky's head with that strong hand and splashed straight into the water and normally, he'd come up sputtering and righteous and Bucky would be laughing and it would be a win on Bucky's side except that this time, this time it was different.

Because Steve hadn't told him, Bucky didn't know, but the water wasn't just cold and Steve wasn't just tired. He was terrified.

And he was drowning.

His lungs protested and Steve couldn't breathe, water was rushing in everywhere. He wanted to go peacefully but this wasn't anything like serenity. He just wanted to let go, let the plane be his resting place, but it burned and his brain wouldn't leave him be, just begging and begging for Steve to swim up to the surface. The water pushed at his skin and his muscles and he squeezed his eyes shut tighter. The hurt pulled at his heart now and he could feel himself filling with water and he still wasn't dying, nothing was going black, and Steve was crying steadily, his entire world collapsing...

He gasped in a breath of air, unable to cognize that he was really breathing, that he was choking up water past his lips and that there were hands on his chest, on his cheeks, a very concerned voice calling his name, soft concrete under his back, that he'd been pulled out of the water, carried onto land, was safe now.

"--evie? Steve? Hey, hey, can you hear me?" His brain finally registered and Steve blinked open his eyes, vision feeling muddy and body heavy, waterlogged, world still spinning. He choked another spurt of water up and careful hands tipped his face to the side, insured that he didn't spit into his own
mouth. And drown. Like he'd just been doing.

"B-b--" he managed, coughing before he could get the full name out. One of the hands left his cheek and covered his forehead, pushing back soaking hair.

"Hey, yeah, it's me. You're okay. I've got you." Bucky's face swam into focus above him and the coughing finally died off. He sucked in a shaky breath, closed his eyes for a moment, and opened them again to a world that was spinning a hell of a lot less.

"Thanks," he croaked, gesturing with a hand before tugging Bucky's touch away from his face. The terrified concern in Bucky's expression melted to exhaustion and worry as he plopped down next to Steve, who was stil on his back, staring up at the sky and trying to catch his breath.

Bucky pulled his knees into his chest and looked at Steve with wide eyes, like he'd been betrayed somehow.

"Are you okay?" The worry was disconcerting, even through the pounding in his head. Steve made a vague humming sound in response; but apparently that wasn't gonna fly because Buck scooted closer and studied him harder. "What the hell was that? Last time I had to pull you outta the water you were unconscious."

He'd forgotten that. Buck had pulled him out of the water before. Bucky'd saved him, even when he hadn't known him. Like his love for Steve ran deeper than just his mind. Of course Buck would save him again.

"Nothing." The word came out all crackly and Steve cleared his throat, forcing himself to speak louder. "I just don't like water."

"You don't like water my ass. You used to drag me down to the beach the second the snow cleared. Swimming was the only place you had equal fighting ground." Bucky prodded him, carefully, like Steve was still that tiny little thing that could break from a hard gust of wind.

Really, though? He'd been stronger back then.

"Things change." Steve gritted his teeth, staring up at the desert sky and wishing Bucky would leave him alone. He didn't turn on his serious voice when it was just the two of them, but this was an exception. He needed Bucky to shut up for once, to take a card from his own book and be goddamned quiet instead of bothering Steve. "I don't like water."

About three seconds of peaceful, hopeful silence. Then the arms unwrapped around Bucky's knees and he folded his legs indian style, toes brushing Steve's bare (wet) ribcage.

"Why?" Bucky leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees and looming directly over Steve, looking down at him with his own serious expression on, the one that fit on the face of the killer, of the fighter who'd almost killed him on the bridge. It was even more terrifying with the curious, worried, soft words to accompany it. "I'm not taking 'drop it' for an answer."

Steve stared up at Bucky, at the way he was worrying his bottom lip between the teeth and knotting his eyebrows together but looking at Steve like he was the most precious thing in the world that had to protected at all costs.

It was a pretty damn familiar look.

He sighed, closing his eyes, the weight of Bucky's gaze on his face still heavy in the darkness. There'd be no point in hiding this anymore. This was Bucky. Who the hell was he kidding?
wouldn't let Steve rest if it was the last day on earth.

"I drowned once, okay?"

"You- what?" Steve opened his eyes back up to see icy ones staring down at him, wide and scared and confused. He met them back calmly, silently, and Bucky's eyes only widened more. "When the hell did you- Oh. oh. Oh my god, the plane crash."

The metal hand shot up cover to Bucky's mouth in horror, looking positively devastated as the past ten minutes sank in alongside the words plane crash and drowned once. By the time his hand lifted slowly away from his face again, it was trembling. "I'm so sorry Steve, I didn't know, I didn't think--"

"It's fine. Like you said, you didn't know." Steve shrugged, looking away from the pity party and back up at the sky. This was half the reason why he didn't tell Bucky. He didn't need the concern and the prodding and the arguing. "Since we settled that, can we go back to the room now?"

The firelight in the lamp posts around them flickered with a soft breeze, crackling in the beat of silence.

"No."

It took a few extra seconds to register, then he was slowly turning his head in case he'd heard wrong. "What did you say?"

"No," Bucky repeated. Then he hopped to his feet and held out a hand. "C'mon, We're gonna take care of this."

Steve propped himself up on his elbows, ignoring the pounding in his head and glaring at Bucky, the way he used to when he was getting mother-henned after a fight that wasn't that bad in the back of some alley.

"Bucky, no. I don't make you--"

"That's different," he dismissed with a wave of his hand, grabbing Steve by the shoulders and hauling him up impatiently. "I'm not gonna let you be afraid of swimming pools for the rest of your life, alright?"

"I'm not five." Steve glared harder and Bucky threw an arm around his bare shoulders, guiding him to the stairs of the pool.

"No, you're not. But you are human."

The water was warmer now, as Bucky kept an arm around Steve's shoulders, another looped around his waist, the way Steve had carried him out of the Hydra facility in Azzano so many years ago. It was just the first step, wet around his ankles and not an inch higher. Like standing in a shower. It was even warm.

He forced himself to breathe. He wasn't gonna make this into a big deal, he could suck it up and push through if it meant Bucky worrying about him less.

You are human. Steve had told Bucky that, something like that, and Bucky had run out on him. He'd followed it up with hero too, which is what Bucky was, but he didn't want to see that.

Funny, how Steve was Captain America, the bright shooting star across the sky, the one with the flag
and the exhibit, and he couldn't handle himself in more than three inches of water. Funny how the deadliest assassin of the century was the one keeping him from falling apart, who'd pulled him out of the water and saved his life again.

Steve wasn't the hero. He'd never been the hero. He held the weight of world on his shoulders but he leaned those shoulders on Bucky. Even when he'd had nothing, there'd still been that memory.

"You don't have to do this," Steve breathed, the world spinning a little again as Bucky helped lower him down to the next step. Just halfway up calves. He was fine. The water couldn't kill him from here. Bucky's arms around him could keep the memories at bay. Right?

"Gotta make up for triggering you somehow," Bucky replied with a soft squeeze to Steve's shoulder. He huffed annoyedly in response, because it wasn't a trigger, he didn't have PTSD or anything. Not that there was anything wrong with that but--

But his best friend in the entire world had been tortured for seventy years and was holding it together better than him. He'd been in a coma, basically sleeping for decades. He'd fought in the war, but he'd had a special serum to keep him safe. He'd been nothing but privileged and Bucky had been anything but. Steve didn't have the fucking right to complain once. Who was he to be scared? Who was he to want to cry?

He'd weep on the inside because he didn't deserve to fall apart. Not when Bucky was holding it together.

So he clung a little tighter, both hands gripping metal for fear of bruising Bucky if he touched him anywhere else. He had to do this. He had to do this. If Bucky could do it, if Buck could get through, then he fucking could too.

Steve forced himself down the next step, jarring the unexpected arms around him looser as the water flushed up to his thighs. God, it was gonna take him. It was gonna take him under and take Bucky away from him again and he'd never felt so goddamned helpless--

"Bucky?" he called out, turning in the water, reaching and scared, and warm arms wrapped around his waist from behind, holding him tightly as Steve dug his fingers in the metal plates again and tried to shut down the fear pounding inside his chest.

"I'm right here, Stevie. 'M not goin' anywhere." He closed his eyes, focusing on the strength and smoothness of the metal under his fingertips. Bucky was solid, he wasn't gonna let Steve drown. The arm around his waist was strong as Steve's shield was.

He almost wished he had his shield right now, the comfort of being able to protect himself, the familiar weapon to hold that saved him from every other weapon in the world. But he didn't have it, he had Bucky. He'd protect Steve too.

"Easy, easy. Take it one step at a time." Literally, one step at a time, Bucky eased them down the next one, the warm water badgering up to the waistband of his shorts now. His grip tightened on the metal bar around his waist and Steve wondered briefly if he could dent it. Bucky didn't seem concerned, keeping his arm tight, voice soft and warm against the back of Steve's ear. "Just hold on to me."

He squeezed his eyes shut, gritting teeth and focusing on his lungs. He wasn't gonna have an asthma attack on top of a panic attack on top of a trigger or whatever. He could do this.

There was so much water.
"Don't think we should do this, Buck," Steve managed, voice sounding weak and frail even to his own ears. The warmth of Bucky's chest against his back was about the only thing keeping him from running out of the pool like a madman and curling up on the floor and never opening his eyes again.

"Let's try. Let me try." The gentle murmurs in his ear were so sweet, so caring. It wasn't right, Steve had to find his center, had to get his head on straight, something. Wasn't he supposed to be the strong one now? Wasn't he supposed to be taking care of the man who'd been prisoner of war for seven decades?

He took the last step down and the water crushed his abdomen, swirling around him and he was standing in the shallow end of the pool now but that's not what it felt like, it felt like his brain was screaming at him to swim for the surface, that his body was fighting him to live, that his cells were filling with water and there was blood arching around him from the broken glass of the plane's window and he was so cold.

The metal arm around his waist became a metal hand on his hip and the blurry world shifted into focus for a few seconds to see Bucky standing in front of him, cupping Steve's face in his hands. Something cold and wet ran down his cheek and a warm thumb wiped the tear from Steve's cheek the way it always had.

Except that day. That day Steve had cried more than the rest of his life combined and Bucky hadn't been there to wipe them away.

Bucky had been dead.

Steve had just been trying to join him.

He grabbed the metal arm again, trying to weakly tug back to the stairs, his hands slipping on the smooth surface.

"Don't think I can do this," he gasped, backing towards the entrance. A soft warm arm wrapped around his shoulderblades, stopping him gently. The water around his legs hadn't tugged him down yet, hadn't held him under and taken him away from Bucky for seventy years.

"You can," a gentle voice told him. "I believe in you."

Of course he did. He always had. Steve stared up at the sky and sucked in as many breaths as he could, chest heaving and water tumultuous around him with the movement. He had to be able to do this. He couldn't afford to have things wrong with him. What if Bucky fell in the water one day? He had to try harder. He needed to be able to do this for Bucky, heart racing or not.

Fingertips brushed the top of the water, then his whole wrist, and he could remember the snapping sensation of what he'd thought were bones when he'd been gripping the plane controller too tight, hands coming up last second to block his face from the imploding glass.

"I don't want to do this," Steve finally whimpered, hating himself for how damn broken he sounded. He'd been so good. He'd tried so hard to be everything that he was supposed to be, to not let down anyone, to not bleed on anyone. He'd spent the first twenty-six years of his life as a burden; he didn't want to be a burden anymore.

The hand on his back rubbed in small, grounding circles and that voice was talking again, calming and gentle and sweet. "Alright. If you really don't want to, we won't. I'll take you right back up to the room okay? Is that what you want?"

Throw in the towel. Give up. Give up. Let the damn bully of the water win. When did he ever want
that? Yeah, cause you've got nothing to prove.

He'd always rolled his eyes, ignored Bucky when he'd said that. Except that he'd always known it was right. He'd always had everything to prove.

"I want to stop being scared," Steve whispered.

"Okay," Bucky agreed. "Let's figure that out. Tell me what you're feeling. What's going on in that fluffy dandelion head of yours?"

Steve closed his eyes, forcing himself to breathe in through his nose, out through his mouth, and tried not to let his voice crack as he told Bucky what it felt like to drown. Not all of it, not the really bad parts, but about how the water tried to drag him under, how it surrounded him from all sides and there was no escaping it (that part was a lie - he could have gotten out and he hadn't and that was the worst part) and how it filled every cell and made him choke until his body betrayed him all over again.

Patience, listening, then an arm circling around Steve's waist again. "Does this help?" Bucky asked, holding Steve tight against his side. "Physical contact? So you don't feel like you're alone?"

Steve shivered and gripped Bucky's arm again. "Yeah, yeah. It. I th-think so."

They'd drifted a little deeper in the pool and Steve hadn't even noticed that the water was up to his ribcage now, covering up Bucky's arm. He was being so perfect, so patient, it wasn't fair-

"You don't have to do this. If it makes you uncomfortable..." he trailed off, letting the silence finish for him. They were wet and cold from not moving much, half naked and pressed so close together that not even water could get between them.

"Hey, whatever you need, okay?" The words were soft, the smile quirked up at the side, and how was it that people said Steve was the strong one?

Who's strong and brave, here to save the American way...

Certainly didn't feel like it was Steve who that song should have been about. Thomas Payne had written something once, a poem, and loving a man named the Winter Soldier, he'd had it memorized to the last word-

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country...

But the Winter Soldier?

Who will redeem, head the call for America? Who'll rise or fall, give his all for America? Who'll finish what he began?

Steve was under no illusions who the real hero was.

They got as deep as rushing water around Steve's neck before he started panicking. Then Bucky had him back on dry land in seconds, covering him with towels and wrapping his arms around Steve's neck, pressing close together until Steve stopped shivering, started breathing.

It was over, he'd survived, and he half felt like crying, half like throwing a goddamned party and inviting the whole state to celebrate.
Instead he put his arms around Bucky's warm, wet back and tucked his face in the crook of his neck. Maybe his actions would speak louder than his words and he'd get, he'd really get how damn grateful Steve was for this. For Bucky's strength, his support. His unwavering loyalty. His stupid perfect everything.

So goddamned human.

Bucky squeezed him back, laughter bubbling in his chest, a smile on his lips as he pressed his cheek against Steve's and murmured happily,

"How 'bout next time we die together, yeah?"

Steve laughed shakily but he couldn't fucking agree more.

~*~*~

"Steve?"

The whisper in the dark was the first sound he'd heard in hours, drifting through an abyss of dark room silence. But he could at least be dignified enough to pretend he'd been asleep. He'd been dozing, at least.

"Steve?" Bucky whispered again. Steve made a groaning sound in response. It was like 2am. Probably. It was dark and the world was sleeping and they should be too.

"Steve, seriously. It's important." The whisper got more urgent and Steve sighed, blinking all the way awake and rolling over to face the ceiling. What could possibly be so important in the middle of the night?

"Wha'?" He mumbled crossly, draping a hand over his eyes. Bucky's whispers had sounded serious, enough to force him to pay attention from his half of the bed.

The room fell back into silence. Steve dragged the hand off his face after a few moments, rolling more so he could actually see Bucky, lifting his head off his pillow to meet the icy eyes in the dark.

"Buck, what is it?" he pressed, repositioning his pillow and propping up on his elbow to look down at Bucky concernedly.

Blue eyes blinked up at him then Bucky's lips parted, looking like a sweet, young innocent angel as another whisper slipped past his lips.

"Were oranges named after the color or the other way around?"

The pretty parted lips opened in a squawk as Steve's red and orange striped pillow slammed down in his face. The metal arm lifted to block the attack but Steve was faster and this hotel had an ungodly amount of pillows.

Steve hit Bucky with them all.

"Why-" smack "- the hell -" thump "- would you -" whack "- wake me up -" more pummeling "- to ask a stupid -" tiny pillow aimed at Bucky's face "- fucking question??"
Bucky was rolling and laughing, trying to dodge the blunt Steve's pillow attack, but there were a lot of pillows and the bed was big, but not that big. For once, Steve was faster too, because he was grinning instead of laughing, yelling instead of gasping to breathe.

"No fair, no fair!" Bucky shouted, ducking away from another pillow aimed for his head. Steve didn't plan to stop his pillow assault anytime soon, only they'd reached a whole new level of warfare since when they were kids.

So Bucky slid under the covers, all the way under, somehow slipping to the bottom of the bed without totally rucking up the sheets and comforter. It was January and therefore cold, but New Mexico was warm and he had to be burning up under there. Besides, hitting an immobile lump through blankets was no fun.

Steve kicked most his ammunition off the bed - just in case Bucky came back out with a surprise revenge attack in mind - and shoved himself under the covers too.

Bucky made another indignant squawking sound at his hiding place being violated, then Steve placed a finger on those pretty exotic sloping lips and Bucky fell entirely silent, darkness between their faces keeping both red flushes secret for the time being. It was perfectly black under the covers, the way it was only in the middle of winter with every blanket they owned piled on top of Steve to keep him warm.

He used to hate that, as a kid. Thought it wasn't fair that other kids got to play in the snow while he had to stay wrapped up inside underneath a pile of blankets. So Bucky'd join him. They'd camp out under the covers and Buck would end up sticky and sweaty with his good immune system but he didn't care. They'd tell stories and Bucky would make Steve laugh and he'd forget all about playing outside in the snow.

It was crazy to think that those were the same two people underneath the covers now.

Steve took his finger off Bucky's lips. It'd been there for way too long, but neither of them said anything. Neither of them had been able to breathe either, the giggling suddenly cutting short in a wave of hot, coiled tension. Tension no one did anything about, as they laid there underneath the covers and caught their breath.

It was probably five minutes before Steve finally reached out and poked Bucky's right arm.

"Pretty sure it was the fruit."

They spilled into giggles again, laughing and kicking at the blankets above them until they were curled up next to each other, sheets draped over their heads and comforter tangled around their necks and torsos, knees bumping and fingers pressed to backs of hands, and fell back asleep.

The room was warm and everything was soft and dark and they slept most of the day through.

By the time they'd both woken back up it was getting dark again outside.

"We should go out," Bucky declared, emerging from where he'd been tying his hair up in the bathroom. Steve studied the painting above the fireplace up for a few more seconds before turning around and raising an eyebrow.

"Out?" His voice was way higher than it should have been, but Bucky's hair was in a bun. Practically on top of his head. It was messy and somehow perfect, soft strands framing his face and the rest pinned up all pretty. Steve could die from a heart attack.
"Drinking! We haven't done that since the war." Bucky made an adorable face and Steve forced himself to stop staring, processed Bucky's words - he was right, they hadn't been drinking.

_For good reason_, Steve thought to himself.

But somehow the next thing he knew he was carefully making his way across the Irish pub they'd found, plopping two pints down at a table. He obviously couldn't get drunk, but it was the spirit of the thing.

Which made him wonder a lot about all the times Bucky had been "drunk" during the war.

"Wait, can you...?" Steve asked, gesturing at their glasses.

"I can get tipsy. A little drunk if I try hard enough." Bucky raised his, dark liquid sloshing. "Here's to trying hard enough!"

He knocked back half the glass in one try but Steve was studying his (and the slightly wet puff of Bucky's mouth) and trying to figure something out.

"Are you sure you can get wasted?" he asked again, just to press, just to get a reaction out of Buck that might clue him in on the truth. The skeptical look on his face would make Bucky nervous if it wasn't true, if he'd been faking the whole time - why would he fake being drunk enough to fall asleep in Steve's bed?? - but if he really could get wasted he'd roll his eyes, make fun of Steve for not being able to.

"I totally can!" he said defensively, snatching Steve's glass from him too. Okay, mixed signals. Steve studied him suspiciously, but by the time he'd knocked back quite a few, it looked like what he'd said'd been mostly true.

His knock-off version of the serum could get him a little tipsy. His personality did the rest.

"C'moon, come sing wi' me!" Bucky whined, tugging at Steve's arm. Steve laughed, barely catching his glass before it tipped and spilled all over the bar.

"Okay, last time I had to get the Commandos to _push_ you out of the seat," Steve complained, but it was fruitless because he was letting Bucky drag him towards the karaoke stage.

They'd specifically picked an Irish bar because it was Steve's heritage, but it was also a bonus that everyone would be drunk as hell - it meant no one would think to tape Captain America getting hauled on stage by his assassin best friend and a microphone shoved in his face.

"I don't know any modern songs," Steve hissed, glaring at Bucky who was already humming along to whatever song was just closing up.

"You're mem'ry's like...kickazz," Bucky slurred, shoving Steve in the arm. "F'gure it ou'."

With a heavy sigh, Steve relented and thumbed through the song choices. Bucky hovered over his shoulder, trying to peer around and see what Steve was singing, so he kicked him off the karaoke stage with a firm _no way_ and sat him down in the closest chair.

Thankfully the karaoke-song-choosing device wasn't half as complicated as half of Stark's equipment, so it didn't take long until Steve _found a song_ that he decided would be absolutely perfect. Bonus, it even sounded Irish, so by the time the first rowdy notes started up, half the patrons were shouting cheers.
Bucky tipped back his chair, eyes glassy and movements loose as he blinked up at Steve with amused eyes, nursing another vodka and waiting for the singing to start. People were already clapping along by the time the music dropped to a simple drum beat.

Steve glanced at the screen, memorizing the first few words and deciding he'd just wing the melody. And act it out, because that would make up for the rotten singing. Probably.

"When I'm fat and old, and the kids thing I'm a joke-" he clutched a hand over his (perfectly sculpted) stomach and Bucky was already smiling, which was exactly the whole point. "Cause I move a little slow..."

He spun around in a fairly terrible circle, nearly tripping over himself as he sang the next line. "...when I daaance."

Bucky was nodding way too vigorously at that, making faces at Steve.

Then he froze, pointing at Bucky in the front row with a tilt of his head and the cheesiest Captain America smile he had, "I can count on you, after all that we've been through."

Bucky put a mock hand of surprise over his heart, mouth and smile wide as he looked up at Steve and Steve looked down from the stage. "Cause I know that you'll always understaaand..."

The bass dropped and the music was pounding loud, so Steve took three steps back, lifted the microphone up high, and shouted the first line of the chorus. "I won't act my age! No, I...won't act my age, no I'll stiiill feel the saaame around yooou...hey!!"

He glanced down at Bucky, who was laughing so hard he couldn't breathe, gasping with hand on his chest and water in his eyes. He looked drunk as hell, and Steve felt drunk as hell, just from the smile on Bucky's face, the gasping laugh and shaking head, the way those watery eyes were looking up at Steve like he was the cutest thing in the world.

The rest of the bar was cheering and clapping, even though they probably had no idea how ironic the song really was. Because really, Steve was ninety-five, Bucky was even older, and how could he pass up a song called Act My Age? Even if he'd never heard of the band before. Direction something.

This time when Bucky clambered back up on stage, Steve just handed him the other microphone, clapping along with the rowdy Irish sound while Bucky shook his head, mouthed you're a dork at Steve, and quickly scanned the rest of the lyrics to memorize them. Minds like theirs gave an unfair advantage to karaoke but he didn't care at all.

"When I'm fat and old, and the kids think I'm a joke," Bucky started, his voice incrementally better than Steve's, even if the words were a little slurred. "Cause the stories that I told, I tell agaaain and agaain."

Steve clapped, because yes, Bucky told stories all the goddamned time, the Commandos used to make it into a game, who could get more stories out of Barnes before the night was over. "I can count on you-" Bucky sang, tilted his head comically at Steve, who couldn't keep his foolish smile off his face.

"...after all we got up to." That one came with a quirked eyebrow that Steve knew was exactly for all those times in back alleys, pulling Steve out of fights and getting into them himself, all the prank wars and the trouble they used to get in. It was all there written in the sideways smile and the shining eyes looking at him from the other side of the stage.
"Cause I know that you truly understaaand...I won't act my age," Bucky bent in half, singing straight into the microphone with all of his Brooklyn Beauty energy and the crowd went wild, jumping and cheering and drunkenly singing along while Steve laughed and tried not to look so in love with his best friend. "No I...won't act my age! No, I'll still feeel the saaame around you."

Steve lifted his own microphone, taking a step closer so they were facing each other as he joined in and they sang together. "I won't act my age, no I-" he scrunched up his nose and squeezed his eyes shut to hit the high part "-won't act my age, no I'll stiiill feel the saaame, and you will too...."

They looked at each other for the brief second pause, then Bucky turned out to the crowd and lifted his hands as he shouted "Hey!!"

The whole bar lit up with the excited cheering na na na na na's as Steve and Bucky jumped around stage like morons, clapping their hands and riling everyone up even more. The folk instruments in the background rapidly pattered over a fast part and Bucky did a pretty impressive foot move to match that had more people cheering and Buck tipping his head back to laugh, looking at Steve with those shining eyes.

His hair was a total mess, pieces dislodged from his messy bun and flying around his face as he danced and it was probably the most breathtaking thing Steve had seen on their entire trip.

They danced closer, meeting somewhere in the middle of the stage for the bridge, singing turned to mostly sing-shouting like the way they had in the car, loud and crazy and matching the song's energy perfectly.

"When I can hardly walk and my hair is falling out--" Before he could lose his nerve Steve reached over and tucked a piece of the unruly hair behind Bucky's ear, raising an eyebrow at him that said exactly what a mess Bucky looked like right now. Buck bit his lip to keep from smiling, shoving Steve's shoulder playfully and whistling along to the song as he shook his head, dislodging more pieces from the bun on purpose.

Steve tipped his head back and laughed so Bucky took the next line, singing straight to the audience, "We'll still stay out too long and--"

"--we'll throw the afterparty!" Steve joined in, shoving Bucky back, then they were both singing oh yeah's in each other's faces, standing way too close and leaning closer as the music crescendoed and everything got louder and louder - then fell perfectly silent as they both pointed up at the sky for the acapella break for the loud shout of, "Won't act my age, no I..."

A single piano chord and Steve took the high part again, hand splayed over his stomach to give him the air support, "...won't act my age, no I'll still--" he glanced over at Bucky, who was looking straight at him with this wide affectionate smile and they were both total morons, more high on each other than anything else, but Steve wouldn't change it for the world, "--feel the same about you."

It was a lyric slip, but the bass and drumset hit again before Steve could think about what he'd just said. Besides, Bucky was probably too drunk to realize the difference between "still feel the same around you" and "still feel the same about you." It could mean nothing. Steve was gonna pretend it meant nothing. Not that he'd been in love with his best friend since the beginning of time.

"I won't act my age, no I won't act my age," They shouted the last chorus together, Bucky's arm looped around Steve's shoulders as he pulled him down heavily against Bucky's side, the way he used to when Steve was a hell of a lot smaller, but he wasn't complaining. "--I'll still feel the same, and you will too."
The music froze and Buck turned his head to meet Steve's gaze only they were standing way too close for that, sides pressed together, and their noses almost bumped and Steve could practically taste the alcohol on Bucky's breath and good god, his heart was pounding out of his chest.

"Hey!! Na na na na na na," Bucky interjected happily, arm moving down to wrap around Steve's waist, then he was pulling him along with the metal hand looped through Steve's fingers, jump-waltzing them around the stage for the last round of na na na's. Steve laughed and the bar spun and the music was so loud and Bucky was smiling at him, dancing them so fast and wild that it was amazing they didn't fall, feet circling each other and hands squeezing hard, one of his palms splayed on Bucky's side and one of Bucky's gripping him back, tight so he wouldn't fall as they spun and spun and the lights turned into a blur then the music crescendoed one last time and cut with a final burst of music.

The bar was perfectly silent for about three seconds, then the crowd went insanely loud, cheering and shouting and Bucky was laughing more, patting Steve's shoulder and drawing them out of the crazy dance, bowing low to the crowd and nudging Steve to bow too.

He felt like he was in a daze, stumbling to set their microphones back down, while Bucky waved and blew kisses at the crowd. Steve made it back to his side just as he decided to try jumping off the stage. He lunged and caught Bucky's right arm before he faceplanted, then the crowd was laughing and Bucky blinked up at him with a surprised expression, turning between the edge of the stage and Steve and trying to cognize how the hell he'd almost fell.

The Winter Soldier, deadly assassin, had almost just nose-dived the ground because he couldn't figure out where the end of a damn karaoke stage was.

Steve couldn't breathe he was laughing so hard, then Bucky was pouting and shoving at him with that beautiful smile and Steve dragged them both down the stage stairs, arm slung haphazardly over Bucky's shoulders, tucking him close against Steve's side as they pushed through the crowd, hands clapping shoulders and random cheers still spurting through the group.

Bucky was chattering and laughing and so goddamned beautiful that Steve's lungs weren't working; they'd just danced again. It'd been short and brief and crazy but all he wanted to do was dance with Bucky for the rest of his life and Bucky's arm was around his shoulders again and the bar floor was spinning like he'd been the one to down a bottle of vodka.

Actually, on that thought - Steve reached out the free arm that wasn't curled around Bucky's waist, snagging the closest shot and tipping his head back to down it in one swing. It burned on the way down, but there was another cheer from the crowd. It wouldn't do anything, but it made it a hell of a lot easier to pretend.

Then Bucky was smiling loose and pretty at him and Steve was smiling back, laughing as he got poked in the side, and maybe he didn't need alcohol to get drunk at all. Some of the drinkers got together to shout something at them that was way too slurred to figure out so Steve waved his free hand at the crowd, tugging Bucky towards the door with a shout of thanks over his shoulder.

They stumbled into the night air and Bucky was still laughing, leaning his weight on Steve's side like he'd fall over if he didn't. Buck was wasted, (or acting like it) and Steve was high on life and karaoke and the feeling of Bucky's warmth pressed up against his side.

If Bucky was faking, Steve had every right to fake too. If he wasn't? Well, then he wouldn't remember anything in the morning anyways, right?

Arms slung over shoulders they stumbled to the hotel two doors down, crashing into the rented room
still out of breath from laughter and shouting and dancing like crazy people. Bucky was more out of it than even he was - Steve was basically holding him up, propping Bucky on his side as he shouldered his way through the wood door and locked it tight behind them.

"God, their faces," Bucky slurred, giggling. "They don' ev'n know you're li'...nin'y fiiive."

He didn't remember much about being drunk, only that his Brooklyn accent got ridiculous - so for a moment, Steve decided to forget his sculpted words, the way he forced himself to talk without a trace of the slum he grew up in.

Steve laughed and tugged Bucky away from the door, shoving him unceremoniously on the bed. "You're old'a 'an me!"

"Been thr' way mor' shit too," Bucky mused, blinking lazily up at Steve from where he was sprawled out across the top of the covers. Oh yeah, yeah, that was right. Bucky had been a POW, had had some not so hot experiences with getting drunk.

Steve plopped down on the bed next to him, turning Bucky's face to him with a heavy palm on the scratchy cheek. "You don' gotta worry, Buck. Don't hafta be afraid." He leaned in closer, the icy eyes locked heavy on his. "Cos even if we've got nothin', we've got us."

Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky.

Big wet blue eyes blinked up at him, then Bucky's hand pressed to Steve's cheek too and they were so close, their mouths just inches away. If they were really drunk, they might have an excuse, except Steve still wasn't sure how much of what Bucky was doing was an act. Some of it, he was pretty sure, but what if it was a hell of a lot less than it looked like?

He considered shying away, until Bucky's fingers curled in his hair, possessively keeping Steve's face close as he whispered up at him with his slurred words. "'M so damn gl'd we made it ta this time."

Steve swallowed and Bucky's eyes cut to his mouth as his tongue darted out subconsciously. A temporary crush, then. Alcohol, singing, exhaustion - whatever it was that was making Bucky look at him like that. It had to be.

They were frozen looking at each other for a moment, gazes on mouths and eyes and searching and god, this was everything, the feeling of Bucky's fingers in his hair, Buck's scratchy jaw under his hand, long hair splayed out around him like some gorgeous model.

With a too-innocent look, icy eyes blinked up at him, wide and pretty and oh so sweet as Bucky's perfect wet lips parted. "'M s' cold, Steviee," he groaned, sounding obscene, and Steve was lightheaded again. Only this time it felt like the good kind.

So maybe he kicked off his shoes, laying down fully next to Bucky and snagging two pillows from the top of the bed, hand slipping down to Bucky's neck as the beautiful eyes didn't leave his.

"Hey, well, I'm a furnace now, so..." Steve trailed off, raising an eyebrow at Bucky, and that was all it took before Bucky was climbing half on top of him, dramatically draping himself over Steve's chest and nestling his cold nose against Steve's neck.

Steve closed his eyes and ran his hands up Bucky's back, soaking in the warmth and the weight of him pressed heavy over Steve, the muscles under his hands, and if his shirt rucked up a little in the process it couldn't have been Steve's fault.
He could hold Bucky like this every single day for the rest of his life.

Once, a long time ago, he'd made a joke about how maybe he couldn't kiss, and Bucky had looked at him with bright eyes and offered well, I'm a pretty great teacher?

He'd almost collapsed at the comment, had thankfully been sitting down, but he'd forced it out of his mind until now, with Bucky's mouth lax and wet on the collar of his shirt and god, what would he give to have that mouth on his skin instead?

"Y'know," Steve started, hands stilling from where they'd been mapping Bucky's back. On second thought he traced one down the center of Bucky's spine, all the way down to where his shirt had rucked up, leaving the small of his back bare as Steve spread his palm over it, humming at the warmth. "If you want to really warm up in the winter, skin gives off more warmth than clothes do..."

Bucky sat up so fast Steve almost took it back, almost dropped the out-of-it-act (although he really did feel like he was barely here, like he was drunk on something because good god the world was still spinning), almost darted off the bed and apologized.

Except then Bucky threw his shirt off over his head and the words sucked back into his mouth, lungs seizing in a gasp for air as he stared at Bucky, sitting up over him with his shirt hastily tossed off and thrown to some corner of the room and Steve could die.

He was just gaping, staring, at the barechested Bucky, not realizing how much time was passing or what the hell he was doing, until cool metal tugged at his shirt, a whining sound out of that pretty wet mouth, and Steve realized he was supposed to take off his shirt too.

He lifted up just enough to pull it over his head and he hadn't even tossed it off the bed yet before Bucky collapsed back on top of him, fingers curling into Steve's side as his head pillowed on Steve's bare chest. Lightning shot up Steve's spine and straight to other places, pants tightening, and fuck he was a terrible person, but Bucky was squirming around to get comfortable on his bare chest and Steve couldn't die, he'd already died and gone to heaven.

Removing clothes to get warmer when there was a perfectly functional thermostat and a heavy comforter beneath them? Sure. Why the hell not.

Less than five seconds later and his palms were running over Bucky's back again, eliciting a soft sound out of him, then those wet lips parted and Steve could feel Bucky's open mouth against the tight skin on his collarbone and the world was spinning faster than when they'd been dancing in that bar twenty minutes ago.

It was his responsibility as the most not-drunk one here to keep shenanigans at bay instead of encouraging them, but good god Bucky was shirtless in his arms, there was nothing in the world that could stop Steve from wanting this, let alone his own libido.

So he squeezed tighter and Bucky went lax against him, eyes slipped closed and silky hair brushing Steve's skin and the sheer awe and arousal pulsing through him was the most overwhelming thing Steve had ever felt.

But he was exhausted. And the most comfortable he could remember being. Besides, Bucky needed him here in case he had nightmares from the alcohol, right? This was perfectly rational, as perfectly rational as holding hands to watch the sunset or dancing around bars together or singing each other love songs that fit too well in the car...

And then he was asleep and rational didn't matter the slightest bit anymore.
Bucky woke right after two, consciousness snapping back into his body in silence that had him counting his surroundings - tactical move - before deciding to open his eyes.

All he could see was blonde. The side of Steve's head, his nose pressed to a spot right below Steve's ear. Bucky closed his eyes again, pretty damn quickly; set to evaluate and recalculate.

He'd fallen asleep draped half across Steve. In Steve's arms. They weren't wearing shirts, jesus. There was no way they were ignoring their way out of this one.

In a quick, perfectly executed movement, Bucky slid half a foot backwards, effectively landing on the pillow next to Steve without disturbing him. One of Steve's arms was still pinned under his body but at least they weren't breathing in tandem anymore, at least Bucky could see more than just a faceful of Steve's dandelion puff hair.

What the hell were they supposed to do now?

He stared at Steve for hours, memorizing lines and slopes and angles and bone structure and freckles. Just in case. He had no idea how the morning would go once Steve woke back up.

There was an unmistakable sense of warmth that curled into his consciousness first, then the weight of eyes on him, and Steve blinked his own open. It took a few moments to register the room, the sunlight pouring through the windows, the white sheets and light blue comforter stretched out below him.

And Bucky, sitting shirtless on the edge of his bed. Steve lifted his head, propped up on his elbow, realized he was shirtless too, and the night before came back to him in an instantaneous flash.

They'd fallen asleep that way. Bucky had woken up first, which meant he'd had time to think, which meant--

"We should go back to New York." Bucky's voice drifted softly over the morning sunlight, dead of emotion, like he was reporting the weather. It didn't have a right to still sound so soft when he was refusing to look at Steve.

Just the beautiful, sunlit, arch of Bucky's back, metal shoulder facing away from Steve so he could only see Bucky's profile, the parts of him that were still all human. And bare, beautiful, had been pressed against Steve's naked chest all night.

Fuck. Steve collapsed back down onto the pillows, breath flying out of his lungs as he repeated Bucky's words in his head. Back to New York.

He stared at the ceiling and wondered whether the past month had positively been the best or worst thing they could have done.
Disclaimer: there are some strange scenarios in this, but actually, most of them are based on legit things that have happened to me throughout my various trips across the country.

Like the inmates at the rest stop, that happened to me. All the exhibits and places I used are real life places you can go as well.

And here's a song for Steve: Something I Need - OneRepublic

Sorry for all the classic rock and One Direction I warned you guys it was a lot of cheesy ass music. Honestly I think we just needed a happy chapter (can I count this as a happy chapter?) before the next one of terribleness. Don't hate me.

Thank you all for reading! Your comments give me life xx

(PS IM SORRY THIS GOT SO LONG I DON'T KNOW HOW THAT HAPPENED)
Disclaimer: pay attention to the warnings!!

WARNINGS: suicide attempts, eating disorders, mentions of self harm, lots of discussion about death and worthlessness, graphic depictions of trauma and pain, a shit ton of sleep deprivation, street hecklers that are assholes

Christ everyone is a fucking mess is this chapter

After I've gotten some feedback on this, I'm going to reinforce there are very very realistic suicide thoughts / scenes, which I have placed between *'s so if you need to skip, do it there.

Glittering Clouds - Imogen Heap
Save Me - Globus

(also lots of Fall Out Boy quotes no regrets)

Also Tony is a music guru who knows everything about modern music and chooses to listen to classic rock because its better #confirmed

See the end of the chapter for more notes
"You called?" Steve crossed his arms over his chest, leaning against the closest lab table that wasn't holding explosives. Tony spun around, fingers tapping into another file, pulling up documents as he spoke.

"Yes, actually. I've got some awkward questions for you." Steve raised an unimpressed eyebrow. They'd gotten back to New York an hour ago from their silent car ride home and already Tony was up to his antics. Stark waved a hand around, making his contemplative how-do-I-say-this-in-English face. "Has Barnes been eating?"

That was definitely a weird question, but he shrugged and answered anyways. "Yeah. I mean, it took some convincing."

Tony tapped a blue screen, too fast for Steve to catch. "...and he's been leaving for the restroom after meals?"

And the questions were getting weirder. It took a bit of mental calculation to answer that one because he hadn't been counting. But, looking at it, "Um, yeah, I guess. I dunno, why?"

"I think we've got ourselves a problem."

"What kind of problem?" He kept the words slow, so it wouldn't be so obvious that his heart was pounding out of his chest. The look on Tony's face - like he was already apologetic before he even started speaking - was making his stomach coil in fear.

"Look..." Too gentle, his voice too kind, the way a soldier reported the death of a fallen comrade. "Barnes's sugar levels are record low, his stomach's unnaturally small, his energy level's down...and then there's this."

"The hell is that?" It wasn't supposed to be demanding, but that medical diagram looked terrible, all torn up and complicated, and they were talking about Bucky.

"His knees show signs of repetitive bruising without time to properly heal in between. So unless you two have finally acted on that mixtape I sent with you..." Tony raised his eyebrows as he looked up; somehow cautious, smug, and curious at the same time, and it took Steve a moment before he caught the reference.

"No! No. God, no. We – no."

The teasing that would normally accompany that didn't come. Instead Tony grimaced, flicking
through another table of calculations as he took a sip from one of his infamously strange drinks.

"That's what I was afraid of. So if he hasn't been on his knees for you--" The indignant squeak out of Steve's mouth at that was entirely not his fault, "--that basically confirms the rest of this."

Stark waved a vague hand but all the numbers and charts and pictures weren't the kind of English that Steve spoke.

"Which is..." he prompted, rolling a hand. Finally, Tony looked him dead on, stilling from his fidgeting with that rare seriousness.

"I don't think Barnes's been keeping down anything he's eating."

Steve just stared.

"Excuse me?" It had to be a miscalculation. "No. The two of us just spent an entire month together. There's no way I wouldn't have noticed."

He'd crossed his arms over his chest, defending his best friend, because there was no way Buck had an eating disorder that Steve just happened to overlook. Especially if it was as obvious as bruised knees and puking in the bathroom. Although when had he seen Buck in shorts? Only at the swimming pool...but there had been a lot going on, he hadn't exactly been checking Bucky's well being. There had to have been other signs if it was true. He was supposed to be looking out for Bucky, supposed to be taking care of him now.

"No offense Cap," Tony started slowly, taking a step closer. "But you've got a lot going on too."

"It doesn't matter," he hissed, glaring so he could ignore the water starting to build up in the corners of his eyes. Tearing up wasn't going to make it any better. But everything Tony was implying? "No, if something was this wrong, there's no way I wouldn't have--"

Steve broke off, staring at all of the clear, factual evidence staring right back at him. He'd sat beside that man for a month. Shared a bed with him for half of it.

"God, Tony, how could I not have noticed?" His voice cracked and he had to take a shaky breath to keep himself from crying. But Bucky was hurting, his Bucky was broken and he'd done nothing, he hadn't even known.

Bucky'd told him once, in the beginning, that his body rejected certain foods. The mental image of Buck alone and throwing up had been devastating; Steve'd shut it out of mind. He'd figured - stupidly - that he was taking good enough care of Bucky, that doing that wasn't an issue anymore--

"Hey, he's trained to keep things secret, okay? It's not your fault."

"It is my fault." Steve threw up his hands, frustrated and teary eyed, because it didn't matter that Bucky was trained to keep secrets, it was Steve's job to see past them. "I'm supposed to be looking out for him!"

"Nobody can do that all on their own." The bluntness hadn't left Tony's voice - no one could ever accuse him of being soft - but he did wipe the files out of sight and throw some sympathy in Steve's direction. "Look. I've been meaning to offer for a while, since Barnes is so restless. Your apartment's tiny, but if you both moved in here, you'd have reign of a lot more space. So instead of running off, he could run up three floors and crash at Clint's or something."

Tony shrugged and Steve wiped a finger under his eyes, smoothing away the unfallen tears. It wasn't
confirmed, there was always the chance of assumptions and mistakes. All hope wasn't lost.

"I'll run it by him, see what he thinks." He'd probably say yes, but Steve wouldn't make a decision that big without asking permission, especially since nobody'd allowed Buck to have an opinion for so long.

"And if you move in, we can keep an eye on his health. You don't have to go this alone, Cap. If he's here, we'll be able to help him...It'll at least be harder for him to keep secrets."

He forced a tight nod and tighter smile. Anything that would help Bucky, he'd do. And a little more socialization would probably be good for him. Or both of them.

"How bout I give you a rundown of those reports while we wait? He's gotta come in the lab entrance anyway. And there's another test I can do, to check stomach acid levels and everything. Just to confirm."

Tony started thumbing through the file as Steve pulled up a stool and tapped out a message to Bucky.

*Idea to run by you. In Starks garage lab.*

It was only a few minutes later when his pocket buzzed and Steve got his response.

*D grt CapAm can txt its a modern miracle*

There was something about getting a text from Bucky that made him warm inside. Maybe it was the comfort in knowing that regardless of how far apart they were, for at least a few seconds in time he'd been on Bucky's mind. And actually, he didn't know how far apart they were - Buck had taken off as soon with a few thrown ambiguous words the second they got back. But he'd taken Steve's bike which meant it wasn't permanent.

*And the science geek can communicate long distance*, Steve typed back. Barely a minute this time before the next vibration.

*Not tht long c u soon*

"You texting Barnes?" The voice from the other side of the room asked, way too casual. Steve pocketed his phone and looked back up.

"Yeah, why?"

"You've got that fool smile on your face."

Steve transformed said smile into an annoyed frown and Tony laughed. Which reminded him, wasn't he going to strangle Stark for that mixtape about Bucky?

Speaking of the devil (or the angel), Steve's thoughts got cut short by the loud roaring of an engine as his bike came racing down the tunnel to the lab garage.

The tires skid and the bike cut to the side in a diagonal slide, squealing to a stop inches from crashing into a lab table. The roar of the engine cut and one leg swung gracefully over the side, a creak of leather as two gloved hands reached for a helmet, tugging it up and off in a cascade of sweaty, tumbling dark hair and the sharp click of boots as Bucky walked over, helmet under one arm, hair a gorgeous mess around his face, smelling like leather and the pungent sharpness of the city, jaw chiseled to fuck, exotic lips soft pink, eyes clear enough to be waterfalls, and a swing in his hips like
he ruled the entire world.

He ruled Steve's world, anyways.

"Wow," Stark commented from behind him, voice thankfully covered by the sound of the blow torch. "Your boyfriend is really hot."

"God, I know," Steve sighed dreamily before he froze, registering Tony's words and the smug look. "...wait what?"

By the time the opportunity opened to slug Tony, Bucky was already crossing the floor, well within earshot. Steve glared as evilly as possible. Stark smirked back.

Really, he needed to know how Stark had found out his secret. Maybe his old drawings of Bucky showed the underlying fondness? Was there a history book somewhere that speculated army tent conversations? They'd always been so careful - or at least, Steve had. Bucky didn't have a reason to. He didn't have anything to hide.

If only...

Steve turned away from glaring at Tony, nearly jumping as he realized Buck was right there, standing a foot away with his head tilted up, crystal eyes sparkling coyly at Steve like he knew exactly how beautiful he was. Or he was teasing again because god, he was always teasing and Steve was always fumbling to keep his reactions sane.

"I'm gonna go take a shower," Bucky said casually, like the words weren't sending a thousand images through Steve's head of his nose tucked in Bucky's damp hair, holding their warm bodies together under a pile of blankets, or the exquisite muscles of his naked back under Steve's hands, pressed together hot and needy and-- "Can we talk after?"

Because he didn't trust himself not to open his mouth and either say something permanently condemning or cover Bucky's lips with his own, he nodded vigorously and tried not to look like he was falling deeper in love every day.

The corner of that precious mouth curved up in response, the one-sided start to a smile that always made Steve's heart melt. Unmoving as two chess pieces, a knight and a rook frozen in places on a board they'd been dancing circles around forever, gazes locked on each other in a battle to the ground.

Maybe it was the guarded affection in Steve's eyes or the familiar silent standoff of nothing in particular, but the side grin suddenly expanded, pretty lips curving up wide and honest and stunning, every feature lighting up, a smile that belonged in the back of Brooklyn alleys; and he looked so astonishingly much like the beauty Steve grew up with that his knees went weak.

Some part of his brain was functioning enough to lean back against the lab table, propping himself up on the cold metal with gripping hands, unable to stop watching as that bright face strolled by him, then he was left to stare at the back of Bucky's jacket as he ascended the spiral staircase.

God, it wasn't fair. Buck was so perfect, why did his body have to reject nourishment? Wait, wait, Steve'd planned to check him over the next time he saw him, to look for bagginess in his clothes, sunken ribs or cheekbones or something, and he'd totally blown it off, it'd slipped his mind entirely--

So that was it. This was why he'd never noticed Bucky's eating disorder. He was too busy fawning over him to actually look at his best friend.
What the hell kind of friend was Steve?

"You know, I'm pretty sure my dad would be disappointed as hell to find out the serum actually makes you blind."

"What?" Steve asked, remembering he wasn't alone.

"Did you see the way he was looking at you?" Tony swiped a screen to the side so he could look at Steve directly, deliver his next line with his signature dead-serious genius science-y monotone. "Like he wanted to tangle those metal fingers in your hair and fuck you sideways on a lab table."

Steve raised an unimpressed eyebrow. He was pretty damn sure he'd know if Bucky looked at him like that. He'd been pining after the guy for their entire lives, he'd know the moment a thought like that - even more innocent ones than that - crossed Bucky's mind. Arguing was useless; he gave Tony the bullshit Captain America Disapproves look that the public ate up like sugar. (If only they knew.)

"I was friends with your father, you know. Buck even more so." He crossed his arms over his chest for good measure, puffing up to the righteous Red White and Blue pose that pissed Tony off. Instead of getting annoyed though, Tony looked more amused.

"You even call him Buck."

"What's that supposed to mean? It's not like the stupid boner thing is it?"

Tony laughed. A lot. Steve glared.

~*~*~

Hurting Bucky was the last thing he wanted, but if they could avoid the eating disorder fight, he'd take a few seconds of pain.

Buck was sitting on a stool at one of the hundred bars that graced the Avengers Tower, hair slicked back wet from his shower, wearing leggings that weren't half as tight as the shit Steve owned but gorgeous enough to be outlawed.

He looked up when Steve walked in, setting down the book he'd been reading and raising his eyebrows. Steve made his way over, pretending to be distracted by his phone so he'd have an excuse when he tripped over the stool in front of Bucky's.

A metal hand shot out to steady him, but not before Steve reached to catch himself, the heel of his hand smacking hard on Bucky's knee. Steve was heavy, landing on a "repetitive bruise" would be painful. Unless none of it was true and Bucky was fine, then he'd make some comment about Steve's clumsiness instead of jerking in pain.

"Clutz," Bucky muttered, helping Steve straighten back up without so much as a flicker across his face. Steve might as well have smacked his metal arm.

Bucky was okay. He had high pain tolerance, sure, but he'd at least flinch if Steve smacked one of his bruises, right? It was the involuntary reaction.

So a false alarm, old injuries and Jarvis confusing serum readings, nothing to worry about. He hadn't
let Bucky down again. The relief that flooded him was instantaneous and intense and he plopped down on the stool beside Bucky the happiest he'd been since they'd sung in that Irish Bar a few days ago.

And Bucky was totally cool with moving into the Avengers Tower. So much so that Steve pretended to be a little offended and Bucky shoved his shoulder with a smile and said that Steve's apartment was too small for both their egos anyways.

It was so signature Bucky, still Steve's best friend through and through, the twinkle in his eyes and the way he fucked up Steve's hair with a ruffling hand as he took his book and left to lay claim to his new room.

There was no way he was keeping something as big as an eating disorder from Steve. Just so they could put this whole thing behind them, Steve pulled his phone out again, shooting off a quick text to Tony in the downstairs lab.

_Just talked to B we're moving in! You have final test results?_

It was only a few seconds before he got the text back. A report with the compilation of all of the data, evidence, and a clear resolution at the bottom.

_Undeniably positive._

Steve stared at the photo, zooming in, reading it again, checking again. It didn't make sense. How could--

No, because Bucky had been perfectly normal. Like nothing was wrong, the way he'd been for the past month. Months. Everything'd been fine. He hadn't even flinched.

Hydra...it had to be.

Fucking Hydra had made Bucky so damn used to pain that he didn't feel it anymore, that he didn't flinch when he got hurt. Steve had seen him get shot and Buck hadn't even cared, like his body didn't matter, like he didn't matter, like his entire self was worthless, meaningless, and he'd been throwing up for months and he'd never bothered to say, never reached out for help, he'd covered it with bright smiles and teasing and anything to keep from admitting that he was hurting and he hadn't even flinched, he'd taken the pain like it was something he was supposed to do, he'd hidden it from Steve like it was something to be ashamed of, like there was something wrong with him, like he wasn't allowed to be broken and he wasn't allowed to feel pain and, and--

Something shattered, loud and crashing, but it took blinking at the black mess of pieces on the ground for fifteen seconds before Steve registered it was his phone, that he'd thrown it, and he was still standing, breathing heavy, hands clenched in fists at his sides.

It took a faceful of water and a few dents in the edge of the sink before he managed to cool down enough to slink into the "quiet room" (aka attached office) of one of Tony's labs. He was sitting at a desk, writing a note of some sort, when Jarvis announced Steve's arrival and opened the door.

"I hate to ask --"

"Then don't," Tony offered, still writing with his head down. Steve ignored him and continued.

"-- but can I have a new phone?"

"You get what I sent you on your old one?" Tony glanced up for a millisecond before looking back
down at whatever he was doing, too preoccupied to pay attention.

That is, until Steve dropped shattered pieces onto the table, scattering cracked glass and black plastic.

"That's why I need a new one." Steve crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back, detaching himself from the evidence of his destructive temper.

Tony finally looked up, for real this time, setting down his pen as he studied Steve like he was a malfunctioning lab experiment. He was. A few moments of silence as Tony picked up the pieces, letting them trickle through his fingers. Too-observant eyes cut back to him and Steve tried not to bristle in defense. "Cap, you okay?"

"Fine." Sharp and curt enough that Tony should drop it.

The calculating gaze broke away as Tony rummaged through one of the drawers for a new phone, tone exaggeratedly casual.

"You wouldn't happen to be getting that pre-serum temper back?"

Steve grit his teeth, response clipped and a little brutal. "I've got a handle on it Stark."

"You know me." Tony put his hands up in surrender, the paradigm of innocence when he was anything but. "Just trying to help."

"Oh, is that what you're doing? I could've sworn you were prying into my personal business. And I disabled the cameras in my room, by the way. Hope that's not too much of a problem."

Steve glared and Tony looked chagrined by the sarcasm for three seconds before returning the glare, sliding the new phone across the desk haughtily.

"You're welcome, Rogers."

"Thank you ever so kindly, O' god of technology." Steve shot back, snatching the device and storming out of the office, letting the door slam behind him.

Tony stared at the empty space for a few minutes, making a mental note to reinforce all the doorknobs and frames on Rogers' floor.

"Hey Jarvis," Tony called, waiting for the customary yes sir as he scooped the destroyed pieces of Cap's old phone into the trash. "Put a tag on Steve's emotional spikes. I think the Captain's not doing as well as he'd like everyone to think."

~*~*~

CFB: you're having a moving-in party?

JBB: b thr or b sqr

CFB: god you do realize no one actually texts like that in this century

JBB: idc I hav 1 hnd gfsoi

CFB: I'll be at your moving-in party just so I don't have to text you anymore

JBB: asshole
"Just to be clear," Natasha started, uncapping a beer with her ring and sliding it across the bar to Clint, who made a face. "Are we celebrating Barnes and Rogers moving in here or moving in together?"

Her mouth quirked up on one side, the smile that implied unmistakable mischief.

The other Russian assassin averted his gaze, perfectly masked nonchalance as he cracked open another pistachio and slid it to Steve, standing on the other side of the bar.

The awkwardness was palpable enough that Tony decided he'd be a good person for once and come to the rescue.

"We're celebrating 4.5 fulltime Avengers living in the Avengers Tower." He snagged the orange juice from the fridge and sat it down in front of Steve's friend. "Me, Cap, Sarge. Then Barton and Romanoff both count as a half because they live here when they're in the state. Which is never. And Steve's friend gets the other half."

He shot Wilson a smug smile, handing him a whiskey glass for his orange juice.

"So let me get this straight," Sam leaned forward on his barstool, ignoring the glass and the orange juice both. "The world's deadliest assassin gets a full membership but only .5 goes to the guy that helped take down Hydra and's been watching Steve Rogers' ass for the past six months?"

"Hate to break it to you Wilson," Bucky finally piped up, "But everyone watches Steve's ass, you don't get a medal for that."

Natasha laughed and Clint snickered but Tony was way more interested in Steve's reaction. He had a torn look on his face like he was trying desperately to figure out if that was a you-are-reckless-and-everyone-has-to-babysit-you comment or a you-have-a-smoking-hot-ass comment.

Like he said - serums apparently make Brooklyn boys blind.

But now wasn't the time to have an existential crisis over everyone's feelings; Tony saved the day again before Rogers blew up the tower with his intense blush.

"Sarge, you drink?" He offered, grabbing a few bottles of his best bourbon and wines from behind the counter.

"You invent things?" He sassed back. Apparently serums made people blind and sarcastic. He'd have done Project Rebirth differently, he mused.

Barnes rolled the bottles in his biohand, looking over the labels. "But it takes a lot of kick for me to feel it. Pretty sure I could drink Romanov under the table."

Natasha made a very offended face that was mostly skepticism.

Barnes spread his arms with a cocky grin on his face. "Serum, what can I say?"

"Stark, give him the strongest stuff you got," she ordered, tapping the bar for him to hurry up.

Well that sounded like a brilliant plan. "Finally, some people who know how to party!"

The drinking games commenced and Rogers leaned against the bar, watching with a hint of amusement and a lot of faked scorn.
Until Natasha grabbed him by one scientifically perfected bicep and dragged him off to the side where no one could overhear. Steve had no idea what for, but by the look on her face he was about to get lectured.

Behind them Buck and Tony were engaged in an intense and likely detrimental drinking game while Sam snickered and Clint ate his seventh slice of pizza. Earlier, Steve'd almost joked that Clint ate more than the serum recipients, until he'd remembered test results and bitten his tongue. Literally.

"Rogers, please tell me this crazy innocence act hasn't got you fooled too."

Steve didn't grace that with a response. He'd spent a month on the road with Bucky, had lived inside that fantasy world with him where nothing mattered. They'd come home and reality hit and it was painful and terrible, but Bucky was no less Bucky now than he had been then.

"He showed up at your door half-crazed and bloody. He's almost killed you what, four times now? At least? He shot me. Twice."

"And he's had plenty of opportunities to kill me since, but he hasn't taken one of them. He's healing, Nat. I need to be there for him. He's struggling with the idea of being dependent..."

"He's a professional. It's his job to make you feel exactly what you're feeling right now. I promise, every single thought in your head about him, all you've ever felt - he has put there with expert care and derision."

Steve glanced away, his gaze landing reflexively on the beautiful boy smirking at the bar, pushing long silky hair away from crystal eyes and gorgeous features. Well, clearly not all, he thought.

When he turned back to Natasha she had a look on her face that implied she knew exactly what Steve'd been thinking. "I just want you to be careful."

"Aren't I always?" Steve smiled and gestured Nat back to the bar because Stark was lining up vodka shots and she'd been looking for an excuse to drink Buck under the table all night.

"You have the weirdest drinking style," Tony slurred, twenty minutes and a close competition later, "You've got tastes - and down shit - like you're Irish, but a Russian poker face and strange draw to vodka."

Bucky smiled loose and pretty, the way he used to in golden-lit bars of the past. "Well, spent a lotta time in Russia over th' past couple decades. But Ma..." Bucky paused, contemplating for a moment before he corrected, or clarified. Steve was never sure. "...Steve's Ma - was Irish as hell, Catholic single mom, nurse taking care a' two kids in the dirty thirties.....only person I know tough as Sarah Rogers is Peggy Carter."

"You knew Peggy?" Tony interjected curiously, leaning forward on the bar. It was the perfect time to jump back in the conversation.

" Barely, they only met once," Steve answered, at the exact same time that Bucky started, "Really damn well, she's the one who--"

Buck froze, suddenly snapping his mouth closed as his widened eyes flicked to Steve, looking unmistakably guilty.

Steve crossed his arms over his chest and stuck his tongue in his cheek. Since when did Bucky know Peggy? Let alone "really damn well." Everyone'd always whispered how Sergeant Barnes was so cold towards Agent Carter. The only time Steve'd ever seen them interact was that first night in the
bar, and Bucky had been pouty and shell-shocked. He'd even told Steve in his drunken haze that he didn't like her.

So where the hell did Bucky's answer come from?

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, glancing between Steve and the table for a few moments before clearing his throat and finishing his sentence.

"...the one who was gonna marry my best guy, I had to make sure she wasn't some hack." The fake smile curved over his pretty face and Steve's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Possessive," Natasha commented with a raised eyebrow and her glass pressed to her lips.

"Damn right," Bucky shot back, settling into his cocky smirk.

Yeah, no way in hell Steve was gonna let himself analyze that comment. Buck'd always been protective, that's all he'd been implying. Right?

Apparently he wasn't the only one surprised by the comment. Clint's eyebrows shot to ceiling and Sam was glancing between them curiously. Buck ignored the looks, grabbing the closest glass and tipping it back.

And leaning back, on the precarious stool that suddenly threatened to tip. Then Bucky was flailing backwards and Clint jumped forward, catching a firm grip on Bucky's left wrist before he could topple to the ground.

It all happened in an instant, then Bucky cried out in pain, wrenching himself free. He didn't even have the time for a follow up whimper before Steve was at his side.

In one smooth movement he ducked under Bucky's right arm, wrapped his arm around Bucky's waist and straightened them both carefully, suddenly fit together like perfect puzzle pieces. Bucky melted against his side, tension draining as he let Steve support his weight and remove his mind from the pain.

They'd taken less three steps forward when Bucky's thankful expression suddenly changed, a darkening shift before he was shoving Steve off with a hasty, "I'm fine, I'm fine."

"Bucky," Steve chided, grabbing his elbow before he could pull away and freak out--

With a sharp twist Bucky yanked away from Steve's grip, wincing as he jarred his metal shoulder again. Steve bit back the exasperated huff, gritting his teeth as a soft cough reminded him that they weren't alone.

"I'm really sorry, man," Clint started, carefully keeping his hands to himself as Bucky cradled his metal elbow in his right hand. Buck gave him a tight smile and a quick shake of his head.

"Wasn't you. Performance error, not an often occurrence."

"The hell happened?" Tony inputted, finally speaking up.

"Nothing," Bucky replied defensively, narrowing his eyes. Everyone stared. After a beat or two of staredown with five concerned friends, Bucky sighed and deflated. "Fine. Ever get your shoulder yanked out of socket? Try that when your shoulder and arm aren't attached right in the first place."

Clint made a distressed noise and Tony's eyes went wide. As much as Steve would love to gasp
himself, pull Bucky into his arms and hold him tight until he never hurt again, all this attention was
going to be the exact opposite of what Bucky wanted. Instead he stepped in, replaying their
conversation on the picnic tables about Bucky's arm - he didn't consider it a burden, and Steve wasn't
going to make it one.

"I'll walk you back to our floor," he offered, taking a step closer and interrupting the pity party.

"I don't need your assistance, Rogers." Bucky grit his teeth, looking more annoyed than pissed.

"No, you don't, but I still haven't gotten a tour of the place and there's no reason to pull Sam away
too." Steve lifted his shoulders innocently and Bucky rolled his eyes, grumbling quietly, but he took
a step in Steve's direction, cocking his head towards the door.

Steve waved at everyone without taking his eyes off Bucky, carefully tossed an arm over his
shoulders and guided him out of the room. Buck didn't even shrug out of Steve's hold until they
parted ways on their floor.

But when the bedroom door closed in Steve's face, it was impossible to pretend he didn't hear the
pained whimper from the other side as Buckycollapsed against the wall. Steve lay awake all night
listening for more whimpering sounds. Buck was too good at keeping quiet. He didn't hear a peep.

~*~*~

Everything was fan-fucking-tastic when the sun rose over breakfast, table set in the perfect place to
be lit up gold but not blinding. Which Bucky noticed and rambled on about, like the whole world
was as perfectly bright as the glass breakfast nook of their tower floor.

Which meant that he was pretending last night didn't happen. Or the silent night in the car before
that. Or any night since - and definitely including - the bar.

And it wasn't like Steve could say anything; calling Bucky out on his chipper smile was the last thing
he wanted to do. So he ate his eggs in mostly-silence, pretending he wasn't watching close as Buck
ate. He cut everything up into tiny pieces, but otherwise it seemed perfectly normal. Just like his
smile and his attitude and everything was perfectly normal and Steve was fucking sick of it.

He hated lying. He'd only intentionally lied to Buck twice. But he couldn't stand the tension of the
suspense anymore.

Steve cleared the breakfast dishes and casually told Bucky that he was going running with Sam,
shouldering on his jacket and shoes and waving goodbye from the stairwell door. In some ironic
twist, the anticipation was eating his stomach; but at least it was only a white lie? He did leave. He
just only went as fall as the stairwell.

His training was sharpening up lately, but he wasn't at Bucky's observational level yet. He'd have to
depend on Buck being too distracted to notice Steve stealth-sneaking back onto their floor.

He made it to the bathroom in perfect silence, right on time to hear the first heart-breaking lurch. The
door wasn't closed - would've kicked it down if he needed to, so he slipped inside and forced himself
not to freak at the sight of Buck on his knees, forehead resting heavy on the arms crossed over the
toilet seat, long hair a veil to hide his face.
His back arched suddenly, another choking sound, and Steve bit his tongue and stooped down, smoothing his palms over flushed temples to pull Bucky's hair back as he coughed weakly. His forehead was warm against Steve's skin, holding back silky strands from his face with one hand, long pieces wrapped in a loose finger-ponytail with the other. He wondered distantly if this was why Bucky wore ponytails.

A few pained wretches later and suddenly Bucky rocked back onto his heels, nearly knocking into Steve. He hadn't reacted to the intrusion, like he didn't know or care that Steve was here, and for some reason that felt a hell of a lot worse. Because if he honestly didn't mind, he'd have told Steve about it. So that meant he was purposely ignoring him.

God, Steve just wanted to help. He was so far out of his depth.

Seconds later and Bucky pushed to his feet, breaking free from Steve's touch and washing his mouth out at the sink. Steve straightened up slowly, watching in cautious silence as Bucky toweled his face, threw the cloth down, and strolled out of the bathroom without a glance his way.

Great. This was going just great.

But the swift exit didn't keep him from following, on Bucky's heels all the way to the open living space. And he was still being ignored. Fine. If Bucky wasn't going to say anything, Steve would. There was no point in pretending he didn't know anymore.

"You ever plan on telling me?"

"You were supposed to be out," Bucky pointed out nonchalantly, pausing by the couch to worry the edge of a pillow between his fingers. Steve shifted his weight, one hand on his hip as he waited for Bucky to meet his eyes. He didn't so much as lift his head. Holding back an exasperated sigh, Steve took a single step closer, blocking the path to the doorway in case Buck tried to bolt.

"I'll take that as a no."

The combination of the movement and the words had Bucky's head snapping up, glaring cold Winter Soldier daggers but finally meeting his gaze.

"What did you want me to do? Oh Steve, I can't keep down most the food you shove at me because the only thing I've had in my mouth for the past seventy years is a rubber bite guard or a rubber something else, would you please hold back my hair for me as I keel over after every meal? Yeah. Really wondering myself why I didn't tell you that."

Steve crossed his arms over his chest and raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

"What?" Bucky demanded, throwing up a hand and glaring harder.

He was trying to get a rouse out of Steve, anything to distract from the truth, from what was going on. But Steve wasn't having any of it. He stayed perfectly silent, waiting and calm, eyes locked on Bucky's.

"What?" Bucky demanded again, voice pitching a little higher in hysteria. "It's not like I need your help! I've been handling this for months!"

When the shout died, the only sound in the room was the metallic whir of Bucky's arm as his fingers subconsciously crushed the edge of the pillow in his frustration. Silence was the best way to fight him sometimes.
"You're shaking," Steve finally said, voice quiet and calm.

Bucky looked down at the tremble of his right hand, his legs, like he hadn't noticed. When he looked back up, his jaw wasn't clenched in anger anymore, just stubbornness. "Yeah, it does that. It'll pass. Performance error..."

And that was the last straw.

"Stop." The word broke through the soft bubble of peace, too harsh and rough for the moment. Bucky stared at him. Steve took a step closer, barely refraining from shouting. "Just, stop. It's not a performance error, because you're not a machine."

Avalanches start with a single tremble, then momentum picks up and rolls and rolls and builds and builds and builds.

"No, I'm not anymore." He'd been right, then. Bucky actually used to think of himself as a machine. Steve grit his teeth and dug his heels into the carpet so he wouldn't fly at the closest punchable thing. Bucky just kept talking. "I used to be perfect and you ripped that away from me. And you want me to thank you for it?"

Right, of course. Who was he kidding? Buck had every right to be a total dick when Steve had done nothing but try to help him.

"Is that what this is about? Because I'm trying to make you human?" He'd promised himself he wouldn't yell and he wasn't, not really, it was more of an incredulous half-shout.

"I don't want to be human!" Bucky shot back, crossing his arms defensively over his chest. "Being human is really, really shitty, in case you haven't noticed."

*You let me fall.*

Human meant emotions. Pain. Facing things that'd happened. Steve knew that, because half the time he didn't want to be human either.

But the funny part? As much as they should have this conversation and talk about how they had way more in common mentally than Bucky thought, he'd actually managed to distract Steve. He'd pulled them off the tracks - no pun intended - and entirely washed aside the conversation they were supposed to be having.

So Steve shifted his weight, relaxing his half of the western-gundown-at-high-noon, trading in the revolver for the rope. He wasn't letting this go now, not after Bucky'd admitted he'd been dealing with this for *months.*

"...was it an IV, then? Maybe shots? You don't have the scars from needles, but the only scars your body holds onto are the fusion marks at your shoulder."

Steve crossed his arms over his chest and Bucky's lips parted in surprise, staring at Steve incredulously. Like the topic change back to the eating disorder was the worst in Steve's long and offensive career.

"Yeah," Bucky said slowly, dragging the word long enough to make it axiomatic. "Shots. Nutrient needles. Directly into my bloodstream." He was studying Steve now, a strange expression that could either be disgust or something else entirely. "And they kept my mouth occupied so my teeth didn't weaken."
"Occupied?" He echoed, dread dropping his stomach like the Coney Island Cyclone.

"Bite guards. Belts. Other things." Steve couldn't breathe. It'd been years in captivity, but he'd prayed it'd never been like that.

"We don't have to--" He started, trying to backpedal before he triggered Buck, or maybe he couldn't have this conversation right now, but Bucky just barked a laugh, spinning away from Steve to stalk to one of the glass walls.

"No, really," Bucky glanced over his shoulder at Steve, right hand resting on the glass as his mouth curved up in an innocent, pretty smile. "It's not like I haven't been interrogated before."

Steve cringed, something dark twisting inside him at the look on Buck's face. Fuck, this was not how this conversation was supposed to go. Then the sadistic, terrifying grin turned away from him, a distorted reflection in the window as Bucky stared at the streets below.

"You shoved my belt between my teeth once too, remember that?" Five flesh fingertips pressed against the glass like if he pushed hard enough he could push through, disappear out the window into another world.

"You got shot, we were in enemy territory..." He reasoned, calm and slow as he could be, because they were treading treacherous waters now. Any moment Bucky could break, blow up, and Steve'd been avoiding exactly that, he was only trying to help--

"They broke every bone in my body, Steve." Bucky spun around, the air thick like smoke. "Is that what you wanted to hear? It's the truth."

Soldiers didn't get squeamish. They'd all seen men blown apart, ripped apart, faces torn off and eyeless, legless men dragging themselves across bloodstained ground.

But none of that came close to the punch in the gut at Bucky's words.

Every bone in his body. There was something intimate, violating, disgusting about that and Steve couldn't imagine, his head couldn't fathom something that terrible happening to Buck. If it weren't for the crazed fucking look in his eye.

A madman, stalking closer with the dangerous walk of the world's deadliest ghost story, right up to Steve, eyes on fire and hands clenched in fists and Steve couldn't move, couldn't think, this was Bucky and he was going out of his fucking mind and Steve was already out of his fucking body, floating, trying to process everything.

And reality slammed like an ice bucket to the face, except instead of water there were freezing metal fingers wrapping tight around Steve's wrist, yanking his hand into the air and Steve didn't have time to think or move, his wrist was thudding and Bucky was leaning in close and the last time he'd been anywhere near this panicked was when that same metal hand had been around his throat on a bridge a few months ago.

"I know exactly how much pressure I need to break each--" Metal fingers tightened with a whir, bruises purpling on his skin, heart racing, his eyes unable to leave the crystal cold ones locked to his, so close that the bitter, terrifying words were practically assaulting his skin, "--and every bone in your Pretty. Little. Artist. Wrists."

Steve's brain was short-circuiting. This was Bucky, his protection, his savior, his night sky, with no excuse of amnesia behind the brutality and the pain, and he was positively terrifying. Steve had never
been scared of Bucky before. The moment he'd found out the Winter Soldier was his best friend, the only thing that'd mattered was getting him back. He'd never been afraid of anything but losing Buck.

Until right now. Logic said he'd never hurt Steve. The throbbing in his wrist begged to differ. The look in his eyes begged to differ. The pounding of Steve's heart begged to differ.

Your pretty little artist wrists.

Maybe it was the danger. Maybe it was the words *pretty little artist*. Maybe it was the proximity or that this was Bucky, but for some reason his terror was ridden right up next to anticipation. Fascination, like the way one reaches out to pet the coat of a beautiful wolf before it rips you to shreds. Steve was so f**ked up.

Bucky threw his hand back at him like it was on fire, then the metal fingers grabbed his shoulder instead, thumb digging into his clavicle bone, pulling him forward an inch to counteract the sudden heavy weight of Bucky's knee pressing hard against the top of Steve's femur. He leaned in closer, practically whispering the words in Steve's ear as his knee dug in harder to Steve's thigh. "I can break this one too. This one hurts like hell. It broke through my skin the third time they did it."

Breathing still wasn't an option, but it wasn't the sharp pain that was closing his lungs. If Bucky wanted to, if he firmed the position and actually snapped Steve's femur, there was nothing Steve was going to do to stop him. It was revolting, the whole affair was, but it was also the first time Bucky had opened up about his time as the Winter Soldier and maybe it was fucking freaky, but he'd sacrifice whatever he had to if it meant healing Bucky.

The metal hand uncurled and shoved away, rocking Steve backwards as Bucky stepped away. His eyes were still on fire and so was Steve's shoulder and his thigh and his wrist and his heart.

"You're never gonna get it, Stevie," Bucky sneered, mocking sing-song on the old sweet nickname. Steve's blood curdled, but his vocal chords were still dysfunctional, he could nothing but stare in shock as the one-sided grin curled up, Brooklyn twisted dirty with Russia. "We're not on the schoolyard anymore. And this battlefield is *so much* bigger than you could ever imagine, babydoll."

*Best friends since childhood, Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield...*

Bucky gave him one last look that stung worse than bullets to the gut, then he was brushing past Steve, knocking his bruised shoulder and jolting his body sideways as he passed, stalking all the way to the door of his new room and slamming it shut behind him while Steve stared after him.

Huh. He'd called Steve babydoll.

He'd almost broken Steve's wrist.

Steve drifted to the couch somehow, couldn't remember deciding to move his feet but then he was sinking onto the edge of the cushion, eyes unfocused and too dry, like he hadn't blinked in days. The throb in his wrist had already subsided. The room was colder than he remembered it being earlier.

Every bone in his body.

Somehow, that was an easier conversation for Bucky than his eating disorder. Or maybe it was the worst thing he could think of, shocking Steve into numb terror so they didn't have to talk about anything else. Maybe he was giving away the darkest parts of him so they didn't meant anything. Steve knew all about that.
He tilted his head, lifting his hands up in front of his face and turning them over. His stomach churned and his throat was scratchy with unshed tears and there was a heavy weight crushing his ribs and he was not alright, not at all. And his hands looked perfectly fine. The hands that'd let Buck fall. The hands that'd betrayed them both.

His pretty little artist wrists.

He healed fast anyways.

Steve positioned them, one palm facing away in resistance, other hand wrapped tight around his own wrist. All he'd have to do was snap and pull back at the same time and the bones would break - shatter, if he pressed hard. He could feel them, smooth white skeleton beneath layers of skin and muscle scientifically gifted to him.

It might take a while to heal. He wouldn't be able to draw for a bit, but that was the whole point, right?

He grit his teeth, bracing himself and counting down to the snap. Five, four--

A whooshing swing of a door he'd missed in his concentration, then Bucky came flying into the room, already talking, hands thrown exaggeratedly in the air.

"And one more thing--" he started, then froze like bathwater in winter. Only problem was Steve hadn't been expecting him, had frozen too, in the same position and shit shit shit, Bucky's face was twisted up in an expression he'd never seen before and he'd walked right in on-- "What the hell are you doing."

It wasn't worded like a question. It was a statement and a terrifying one and Steve had to get out of here, not because he was scared of that tone of voice but because his heart was thudding and his lungs were tight, verging on a panic attack because through the flashing disorientation in his mind, he was scared of himself now, of what he'd almost done, shying away from the look on Bucky's face and making to leave.

Escaping was pointless. Bucky got there faster. Then there was an unstable, half-crazy assassin pinning him down to the couch and Steve was spinning with lightheadedness from the sudden knock into the cushions. Both of his wrists were trapped in Bucky's hands, back pressed against the length of the too-soft seat, Bucky looming over him with his knees on either side of Steve's thighs, feet hooked over Steve's calves to keep him pinned down as his eyes searched Steve's, looking more hurt and terrified and pissed than any other part of their conversation today.

"What. The hell. Are you doing." He repeated. Steve struggled, trying to break free from the impossible grip, whipping his head to the side so he didn't have to look at the rage and the betrayal on Bucky's face. But the position was too tight, Bucky was holding him down with all his weight and the leverage wasn't there, not if he didn't want to majorly injure Bucky in the process of escaping.

His wrists were transferred to Bucky's left hand, metal fingers trapping both and shoving them hard against Steve's sternum so his right hand was free to grab Steve's face, digging indentions in his cheeks as their eyes were forced to meet again.

"Have you gone out of your fucking mind?" Bucky demanded, leaning down closer. Steve tried to pry his hands free from the metal fingers, but there was no give. He struggled a little more, trying to wiggle away as he glared and finally opened his mouth, shooting off his own fiery, pissed response.
"No, but you have! You hid an eating disorder from me for months, you bastard!"

Bucky leaned even closer, hissing directly in Steve's face. "It's not an eating disorder."

The extra few inches he'd moved to make his point shifted his balance and Steve may not be a superassassin but he was still a good fucking soldier and he knew an opportunity when it hit.

So he pushed off the armrest of the couch, sliding up and kicking his knee hard into Bucky's (empty) stomach, knocking the breath out of him but Steve wasn't going to stop there, he was getting the fuck out of this situation before something worse happened and yes, there were a hell of a lot worse things that could happen right now.

Using Buck's temporary surprise and lack of oxygen he finally wrenched one of his wrists free - though not without significant bruises and a sudden long, bloody gash from slicing his skin on the edge of a metal plate - smacking the heel of his hand into Bucky's shoulder and knocking him off the couch in an ungraceful tumble.

Only the metal hand still had one wrist and Bucky was still faster than him. One foot hooked around Steve's leg, the metal hand tugging, and then Steve was flipping and dragged right off the couch with him.

Thankfully the coffee table was a few feet away, so there was enough room for them both to land on the floor. (Not that the thing didn't end up breaking anyways.)

They'd wrestled as kids, whenever they were swimming. That way if Steve went down too hard the water would break his fall. And they'd fought a few times in this century - except in the helicarrier it had been about weapons and damage control, during Bucky's night terror it was about holding him down so he didn't hurt anyone.

Now they were both out to hurt each other. Kind of.

Steve slammed his elbow into Bucky's ribcage and thought *it's complicated.*

Metal fingers closed around his bicep and flung him at the coffee table, only they were still both on the ground and Steve's leg was hooked around Bucky's, so when his back slammed into the wood and broke it, Buck was dragged close enough to have to shield his face from the spray of splinters.

Because being thrown at the nice furniture was super rude, Steve bit back the groan and tackled Bucky instead, aiming for the metal arm. Only Buck was expecting it and absorbed Steve's momentum when he rammed into him, using the speed and force to flip them over so Steve was on his back except no, he wasn't going to let Bucky win *that* easy; the metal was heavy, so all he needed was a tug and they were toppling over again, neither able to hold a solid lead.

That's because they were *equals,* or they were supposed to be, only how could they ever reach that if *Bucky never told him anything?*

Then they were rolling across the floor, shoving each other, slamming into the couch and scooting it a foot, then Bucky somehow got Steve's arm behind his back, twisting up painfully, and he had to do a forward roll and smack Buck into the ground to get out of it, then a heavy boot knocked into his hip and the ceiling tipped and then Bucky was in sight again and Steve grabbed him blindly, throwing him into the couch again.

Long hair draped in his face as he tried to catch his breath, stunningly beautiful, his skin glowing with adrenaline and his eyes on fire and his hair sticking to his neck, his temples, muscles straining beneath his black tshirt. But Steve couldn't take it easy on him cause he was pretty. Besides, maybe if
he ached a little he'd understand that Steve was trying to help him and he didn't have to be such a bitch about everything.

And suddenly those immovable metal fingers closed around his ankle and yanked, tugging Steve's shirt up and threatening carpet burn if it weren't for the fucking ridiculous softness of Stark Tower rugs. The rug practically slid with him anyways, and he barely managed to kick Bucky's thigh and break out of the hold before Buck's right hand grabbed Steve's fist out of the air, stopping the punch to Bucky's arm before it connected.

If their first dance on the bridge had been ballet, this fight was those interpretive dancers who broke out in beautiful, unbelievable movements on some abandoned basketball court, the kind of dance that was haunting to watch, none of the class or beauty or efficiency of ballet, all popping and kicking and individuality showing through each punch. Or, well, blocked punch.

He used the brief moment of distraction to swing his other arm up and grab Bucky's shoulder, flipping up and kicking his feet out from under him at the same time to shove his back into the ground, metal wrist pinned under one knee, fist struggling to break from Bucky's hold.

The hips he was trying to balance on suddenly twisted, tumbling Steve to the side and he cursed as his back hit the ground again, air going out of him and everything pinned, forearms under Bucky's calves, feet digging into his hipbones, and two hands wrapped around his throat, metal cool against the warmth of his skin.

He couldn't breathe. His heart had never beat so fast.

Bucky stared down at Steve under him, defenseless and still defiant, spark in his eyes as he looked up from his position of defeat on the ground, blonde hair spiked up around him like a halo of thorns. The brilliant blue color nearly vanquished, his pupils were dilated so much. What was that? Terror? Disgust? Hate?

It'd be so easy to end it all here and now. Except that this was Steve, and Bucky no more wanted him dead than he did in 1930.

But here they were, so much later, and this time it wasn't pneumonia or some bully that had Steve on the ropes, it was Bucky. And from his angle, there wasn't much of a difference between the little punk kid he used to loop under his arm and the one pinned and choking under his hands.

He looked goddamned gorgeous this way, Bucky's hands around his throat; contradictorily, the sight was also threatening to puke up his guts again. The way Steve was looking at him? It was dangerous. A moment of adrenaline and blood pumping and hearts racing and those dark dark eyes did not mean the heat they were staring Bucky down with.

It was a fight. Steve was a fighter. Bucky'd always said he thought Steve liked getting hit.

From the look on his face, the way he was choking out breaths around Bucky's hands, his parted lips and huffing chest, all of the body language he'd been trained to read --

Maybe Steve really did like getting hit.

And how far had they come since the last fight he'd pulled Steve out of? The war didn't count, those were battles with the team, that wasn't the hot-headed temper brat that he'd grown up with, Steve had dropped the temper when he got the serum - it was dangerous as hell to throw fists at every disrespectful person when you could kill them with a punch.

So the last fight had been in an alley outside the movies. Not bad at all, Steve'd brushed himself off
and stood up fine. Bucky'd walked him back to the apartment, straightening out his tie and fussing over his hair until Steve shoved him off with a grumble and kept trying to tilt Bucky's hat straight.

*I like it crooked, dammit,* Bucky laughed, dodging yet another swipe at his head. *C'mon Stevie, it ain't disrespectful to have it tipped a few inches.*

Steve glared, but it held no heat. *If I was goin' with you I'd wear my damn hat on straight,* he huffed and Bucky held up the corners of his mouth with every ounce of strength he had because he couldn't let his smile falter, not tonight, not when Steve wouldn't be around tomorrow. No, he wouldn't be around. Steve would be home, safe.

Safe from everything, the way Bucky had always wanted him.

Funny, how safe was he now, windpipe half crushed beneath an alien hand of metal?

This time the bully was Bucky. But he'd save Steve - even if it meant from himself. The pariah and the messiah. He'd never fail to come around the damn corner, fists flying. Even if it meant he was the one who ended up on the ground.

He unwrapped his fingers from Steve's throat, revealing white and purple marks underneath. They'd heal. Steve would heal. The pretty pink lips parted, gasped in a few breaths, and Bucky curled his hands into fists, landing them heavy on either side of Steve's head.

Darkened eyes blinked up at him, breathing slightly heavy, marks already fading as Bucky loomed over him. He should never have fought, but how could he fucking not.

Steve had lied, manipulated him, asked too many questions, stood there with a broken look on his face when he finally got answers, and then had the audacity to nearly break his fucking wrist and then accuse Bucky of being the one out of his fucking mind and then he'd kneed his stomach and wrestled him and looked up at him with eyes of heated want and it was all such a huge fuckin twisted mess.

"You happy now?" Bucky glared accusingly down at the blue eyes and they lit up with darker, hotter fire at the words.

"I could be," Steve dared back, lips parted and words strong through the breathy tone.

Bucky stared at him. The blatant challenge in those eyes was unmistakable. Steve was daring him, that was his fight-me face. Only, it looked exactly like a fuck-me face too. Which was fucking with Bucky's psyche.

Steve was looking at him like it was an invitation.

"You've never learned when to stay down, have you?" Bucky grit his teeth, narrowing his eyes into the Winter Soldier glare that made lesser men cower in fear. Not Steve. Steve licked his lips and tilted his chin up, the equivalent of raising his fists when his arms were still pinned at his sides.

"You used to love that about me."

The tone was so sure, cocky, the strangest mix between the confidence he had now and the defiance he had then. Bucky could only stare down at him incredulously, the loose hair hanging on the sides of his face framing Steve to be the only thing he saw.

"You worry the fuck out of me," Bucky told him.
"Right back at you," Steve spat.

Blue eyes narrowed and the world zoomed into this moment alone, three seconds of a challenge, another battle in a war they'd been fighting their whole lives, another step along the precipice they'd always been walking.

He could lean down and kiss Steve right now. It'd be all heat and anger and decades of pent up frustration, biting teeth and wet tongues and Steve's pinned body squirming underneath him. From the way Steve was acting, it looked like that was exactly what he wanted.

He could do it.

Bucky pushed himself off the ground, shattering the moment and anything that could've happened, and left Steve there in the middle of the wrecked living room floor, breathing heavy and hot, surrounded by broken wood and a spray of couch pillows and knocked over, rearranged furniture and strolled his ass out the door, walked right out of the Stark Tower.

He didn't come back that night.

Not through the front door, anyways. He snuck into his room, actually, but Steve didn't know that. As much as Bucky would like to make a point, he'd also like to sleep on his bed, so sneaking back into his room it was.

Then maybe he could figure out what the fuck he was going to say to Steve tomorrow. Preferably, nothing at all.

It's not like he got sleep anyways. He laid in his bed and stared up at the ceiling for hours. The whole room felt so goddamned empty. Which was funny, considering how it was way more cluttered than any cell or chamber he'd been in for the past seventy years. But he could remember a time when he'd lived in apartments papered with Steve's drawings, so the blank walls felt hollow.

He'd removed the propaganda poster from the wall for various reasons, but he'd at least kept the framed Howling Commandos one up. Sometime around four in the morning he got off the bed and wiggled the center photo of the boys out of its place, taking it to the window and using the dim light of the outside streets to look it over, committing every detail to memory.

He knew exactly what they'd been talking about, he could remember that night perfectly. The bellow of Dugan's laugh, Morita's eyerolling, Falsworth's pestering about French lessons. It was a few months before the train fall.

Then there was Steve - looking directly at Bucky with that peculiar soft smile on his face. The one he couldn't remember ever seeing in person.

And in the center, hand raised in story-telling, hair a quarter of the length it was now, was Bucky. The photo didn't have color, but memory filled in the cherry wood table, the rich blue of his peacoat. He'd loved that goddamned peacoat. It meant he and Steve were still in arms, still matching in their unique way. Two blue soldiers.

Sergeant James Barnes of the 107th. Howling Commando.

There was a replica of that coat in the closet. It was probably a crazy impulse, but Bucky sat the photo down and swung open the closet doors, rifling hangers until he could pick out the reflection of buttons in the dim moonlight. It wasn't the exact same as the one he'd had during the war, the one
he'd fallen in.

The one he'd opened his eyes to see was missing half an arm. He slipped it free from the hanger, carrying it to the window and holding it up for inspection.

So damn much had changed since the last time he'd worn this, since the smiling face in that photograph on the windowsill. But the scarier part? How much he hadn't changed. He'd told Steve "it's still me" and goddamn, was it. Sergeant James Barnes, torture victim - here in the twenty first century, the longest prisoner of war.

He was an assassin now, yeah, but hadn't he always kind of been? The same pent up rage, the same protective streak. The same waiting, black piece inside of him, filled with gravity to Steve, the only place in his soul he had left.

The biggest difference was the stupid mistakes he used to make in the past; Hydra had weeded those out. They'd given him perfection and this was what he's chosen to do with it?

They'd given him perfection. God, who the fuck was he? Perfection was safe. Perfection wasn't human. Steve took that all away. He wasn't safe around Steve, he was far too human, and it hurt.

He didn't want to hurt anymore.

Metal fingers dug into the material of the blue coat, clutching it tightly against his chest.

Back then, he'd have followed Steve anywhere. Right over the edge of a cliff it that's where it took him. He'd been in so far over his head, he'd been so ignorant, so foolish. Such a child.

Back when he'd still had a chance. It'd been illegal, it'd been risky, but it would've been worth it. He could've had Steve back then - and he knew that now. If Steve had been looking at him the way he had today, the way he had in that photograph? If Bucky'd just asked, Steve would've been his.

Back when he could've had everything, he'd blown it. He'd been scared, terrified, of losing Steve. Putting a lifetime of friendship on the line for the slight chance of real love. But goddammit, he should've taken it. Right before he'd fallen off the train, he'd finally found the courage. He'd finally been ready, brave enough.

Only then it'd been too late. And it was too late now.

It wasn't just friendship on the line anymore. It was their entire lives, the safety of Manhattan, the safety of the world. Because if Bucky was wrong, if he'd been reading it all wrong and Steve didn't want him and he lost Steve again?

He'd go out of his fucking mind.

And they all knew what happened then.

Steve was the brave one. Steve was the unshakable one. Bucky caved like a flimsy mattress under the weight of the sun.

Carefully uncurling metal fingers from the indentions they'd made, Bucky shook the coat out and shrugged it over his shoulders, sleeves hugging his arms like he'd never left. He hadn't. He was still right here. The buttons clacked quietly against his left hand as he fastened them, slipping navy blue through stitched holes, tightening the material across his chest.

He still belonged here, if nowhere else.
They'd taken this from him, ripped it from his body and shredded the contents before his eyes. It was his turn to take it back.

He'd been dozing in the armchair when the handle to his bedroom door turned. He didn't think, just moved, instinct and decades of defense training stepping in before his cognitive processes did.

Then there was a quiet, surprised "Fuck!" and the dull thud of his knife embedding itself in the hallway wall. Steve jerked his body sideways just in time to avoid getting knifed in the chest; although by the hand clutching his bicep with shiny red seeping between the cracks in his fingers, it looked like he hadn't moved fast enough to avoid getting nicked on the flyby.

"Would it kill you to knock?" Bucky sighed, letting his second knife clatter lazily to the floor beside the armchair.

"No, but apparently it'll kill me to not to," Steve offered, visibly shaken a little, but the surprised humor in his words was enough to prove he was okay. After checking the cut on his arm and determining it not dangerous, he brushed off and looked back up, a tiny curve of an apologetic smile on his lips. "Sorry, I didn't know you were in here..."

He trailed off, eyes drifting down to Bucky's chest. Oh, right. Shit, he was still wearing the peacoat. Playing oblivious, he crinkled his eyebrows at Steve's stare then followed his gaze, looking down himself and even popping his mouth in a surprised "o" and jumping a little.

"Oh, wow. That would explain why I was as damn uncomfortable as always." He smoothed his hands over the fabric like he was seeing it for the first time, not meeting Steve's eyes and pretending to be just as distracted. "Got in so late wasn't even lookin', just grabbed the first warm thing in my closet and passed out."

He glanced back up and Steve nodded, looking disturbed, even moreso than having a knife thrown at him as a goodmorning. Bucky looked away and Steve shifted his weight, leaning on the doorframe and biting his lip worriedly.

"About yesterday..."

"I'm meeting Clint for a shoot this morning," Bucky interrupted, before Steve could start talking and digging deeper holes and ruining everything all over again. He stood up for good measure, taking the few steps to the closet and grabbing his gun duffel. Steve was still leaning in the doorway, looking at him expectantly with his arms crossed over the too-tight white shirt. Fine, if he wanted an answer, he could have an answer.

"But don't worry about it." Bucky smiled bright, words chipper as the look on his face. Odds are Steve saw straight through it- so the sooner he got out of Steve's sight the sooner he'd be off the hook. So he tossed the duffel over his shoulder, tilted his head in goodbye and brushed past Steve, careful not to knock into him on his way out.

Then he was gone, again, and Steve stared at the empty bedroom. He took the knife out of the wall behind him and sat it carefully on Bucky’s nightstand and decided not to leave the apartment today. He'd call in with a headache if he had to.

He couldn't go out and pretend everything was okay right now, he didn't have it in him.

The only thing he did do was about two hours later, when he forced himself to get up and find his
cellphone to call Clint.

"Did you and Bucky have fun this morning?" He'd never get his head back on straight if he didn't checkup, make sure Bucky was doing all right. He needed to know, was all.

"You mean at the range? He never showed up."

"He never-- oh. Okay."

"Yeah, sorry Cap. Haven't seen him all day. You want to come down instead?"

"No, I'm good. Thanks. I'll uh. See you later."

Steve hung up and stared at his phone. It was the new one. That was the only thing that kept him from throwing it at another wall. He sat it carefully on the nightstand and retreated back to bed.

And here he was, on the wrong side of the bridge but otherwise back in 1940, waiting at home for Bucky and feeling utterly, entirely useless.

~*~*~

In 1926, the first playground was put up in Central Park. They didn't get the chance to go play on it for nearly a year, but by the time they did Steve had been so excited that he'd nearly bruised Bucky's arm dragging him through the sunny grass while Sarah clapped her hands in amusement behind them.

Now, it was basically a city in itself. Everything from Shakespeare Garden to the Bethesda Terrace in Mid-Park. That was where Bucky ended up, sitting on a bench at Bethesda, overlooking the water and feeling like a dramatic teenage Upper-East sider in a soap opera.

Normally at this time of year the Canada Geese were gone, but today there was a gaggle of five or six down by the water, undeterred by the cold with the depressingly small amount of snow on the ground.

From his spot on the bench, he could have killed them all within seconds. It'd be more than easy. Hell, he could peg a rock and knock out three from this angle.

And it was the same for the group of scarf-and-sweater-bound teens gossiping by the trees. Seconds, and they could all be dead, put out of their misery with a knife to the throat. And they'd never have to be in pain again.

Everything died so easy. He could save these lives by taking them, gift death to the living, put the geese and the kids and the whole world out of the terrible misery of waking every morning. A flick of his wrist and the impossible weight of living gone.

Bucky clasped his hands in his lap, dipping his head down and sucking in the crisp winter air.

"But I can't die that easy," he whispered to the wind, letting the sound whip away into nothing. "You can't kill me. They can't kill me."

He lifted his head, smoothing his hair back from his face with a tired hand and stared out at the water, the dull reflection of the sun against the water.

The wood beneath his right hand was soft, like it might cave and shatter if he pushed hard enough. How long before he pushed hard enough?
Bucky traced the grain with his finger, wind rustling his hair as it swirled around his mouth, stole his words right out of the air in their quiet whisper.

"So that leaves me as the only one to take mercy on myself."

When he got back to the Stark tower that afternoon, Steve paused in the kitchen, glass of water in hand, and looked at Bucky for a moment. Then he kept walking without a word, closing his bedroom door behind him quietly. Bucky stared at the blank door and the empty kitchen for a few minutes before slipping off his peacoat and tossing it on the new coffee table - that was fast - and plopping down in the couch to settle in for a movie without any beautiful blonde boys or people who smiled like the sunshine.

~*~*~

He got one more night of silence.

Then everything was loud and busy and constant and Steve was suddenly around all the time. Thin healthy smoothies placed in front of Bucky at the breakfast table. Knocking on his door in the afternoon, running shoes in hand. Cocked eyebrows and nudges over mission plans. A sketch pad full of drawings slid across Tony's bar, design ideas for Bucky's new outfit.

And Bucky was trying, he really was, anything that wouldn't have them throwing each other around the living room and breaking all the furniture. Circling with pens, silent nods, grabbing his running shoes too, taking the smoothie and drinking more every day without chucking it back up.

But no matter what he did, Steve wouldn't leave him alone. Bucky was busy, trying to re-train his body to fit his current living situation. Or ideally, change his current living situation - only he couldn't strand Steve.

As nice as the tower was, it wasn't enough. It didn't change the fact that Bucky felt utterly, crushingly alone.

Walls of glass and metal, clean cut wood and swirling paintings, a constant availability of company. A gym and a library and a room with Steve's art supplies; a shooting range, multiple kitchens, labs and labs full of technological genius. He had access to the world, anything he could want. He had people invested in his well-being, an enemy to destroy, and freedom he hadn't been allowed in a long time.

But it wasn't enough. He didn't have Steve.

Steve was always there - dragging Bucky to events, rushing to his side the moment nightmares woke him up. But he wasn't his. And so Bucky was constantly shoving Steve off. He didn't want to fucking cuddle when he'd spent twenty minutes reliving Hell. He didn't want Steve to look at him with those big beautiful eyes and give him that soft smile and wrap his strong arms around Bucky because he didn't mean it. It was like forcing a recovering alcoholic to swim in pools filled with whiskey and vodka. It wasn't fair.

And then, of course, there were the questions. Feelings aside, he couldn't do the goddamned questions. Steve would not leave him alone. Every day, questions.

“Hey Buck, how are you?”

“Jimdandy Steve, leave me the fuck alone.”

Except he didn’t say that, even if he was thinking it, he only said, “Great, you?” and gave Steve his
best bright-white smile.

It was getting harder to wear that goddamn smile.

If he had it his way, he’d live behind his mask. Too bad Steve’s face wilted like it broke his heart every time he saw the damned thing. It was Bucky’s salvation. His only protection in a world of prying eyes and stone cold expressions. He’d always been good at putting up walls and masks to hide behind anyways, but it was exhausting. The Winter Soldier facemask let him breathe, through a filter like how he deserved. Air was better with a buffer. He was better with a buffer.

His body was betraying him too. He was either so sick that his insides felt like they were trying to devour each other or he was a cavity, an empty scraped out shell with bones rattling around under his skin. He looked fine, for the most part. The mirror did plenty of lying. But he ached with fatigue inside. It was too bad that the most dangerous place he knew was behind his own closed eyes.

Alcohol didn’t do anything. He even tried a few different drugs, but nothing stuck. What was the fucking point, anyways? If he could only function with the help of some pill or needle, he’d become his own Hydra and everything he’d fought to escape would’ve been for nothing.

It was February. He’d fallen off the train in February. He’d danced with Steve in that bar in February. He never let himself think about that memory, but it happened 69 years ago as of next week and how was he supposed to not think about it? His left hand was acting up, but not because something was wrong with the machine; it was all ghost pains, the terrible kind that made him want to shoot something until either it stopped breathing or he did.

Worst though - worse than the ghost pains or the physical pains or eating food when his stomach didn’t know what to do with it or even Steve’s constant bombardment – was his head. Some days the world was crushing him. Not as much dragging him down by his ankles but making him sink with the weight of his head. He didn’t want to talk to anyone, basically all of the time, but he sucked it up 9 days out of 10 and gave sharp short proficient answers on the tenth day until everyone eventually left him alone.

The only good thing about it was that when he wasn't asking questions, Steve didn’t really feel like talking either. He’d overheard a conversation between Stark and his AI assistant about chronic depression and anhedonia and realized that fuck, he had no idea whether Stark was talking about him or Steve.

That was also when he realized that if it was Steve – and it could be – he knew why. He’d found out on their little roadtrip that Steve was a hell of a lot less okay than he pretended to be. He’d always been a shit when it came to admitting pain or owning up to injury, but Bucky’d had no idea how fucked up Steve was inside until the exhaustion and the nightmares and the running and the panic attack in more than an inch of water.

Steve was fuckin’ mess: it was all Bucky’s fault.

And there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

The only thing that kept him hanging on was that beneath all the crap and the not talking and the pain and the loneliness and the guilt and the general feeling of not wanting to deal with existing anymore, his best friend was still his best friend.

Stark was holographically designing their route through Brooklyn to the abandoned storehouse some alien-enthusiasts were rumored to be meeting and he was royally mucking it up, ignoring side streets and shortcuts that would get them through the city in half the time with a quarter of the traffic.
Another turn down some generic road added and Bucky caught Steve's eye over the holograph table, raising his eyebrows and fighting a grin as he tipped his head at Stark's 3D drawing. Steve caught on instantly, widening his eyes and nodding in agreement.

*Turning left there?* Bucky mouthed, making the most exaggerated skeptical face he had. Steve mirrored his expression, mouthing *I know right!* back at him.

Twisting his mouth sideways and signaling with his eyes, Bucky made his *say something* face and Steve pursed his lips, tipping his head to the side, *no, you.* Bucky rolled his eyes, but leaned forward.

"Stark?" he finally interrupted, swiveling the holograph closer. "Steve and I are both pretty sure it'll cut three minutes off the route if we turn right there."

"When did you decide that?" Clint asked, confused as always.

"We just talked it over," Steve replied, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I didn't hear anything," Clint complained, looking between him and Steve.

"You wouldn't," Bucky muttered, adding another turn to the hologram. When he glanced back up, Steve's eyes were on him, and they both smiled a little deviously.

Vague fighting and eggshell walking aside, there was still an unbreakable camaraderie between them. They were sticking up for each other, finishing each other sentences, United We Stand on the battlefield.

And on the Avengers game nights.

Which he hadn't been to a lot of, but everyone hadn't been super annoying lately so when Steve tugged him off the couch Friday night he relented and let himself be dragged upstairs.

The game of the night was Scrabble and they were playing in teams, which was a good recipe for a quiet night. Team games always went smoother because the one on one shit got people at each other's throats faster than you could imagine.

As usual, he and Steve were axiomatically on a team and kicking *ass.* Maria (who didn't show up often and still threw distrustful glances when she thought Bucky wasn't looking) and Clint were the only real competition though, because Tony and Sam were arguing the whole time and unable to decide on a single word to play.

It was about halfway through the game that the perfect opportunity laid out on the board - a triple word score on the q in quaint with the n turning or into nor and rash into trash at the same time.

Steve hadn't been paying much attention, too busy watching Bucky out of the corner of his eye and avoiding all of the pointed looks and head tilts and obscene gestures Tony was making in his direction. About Bucky. Like usual.

Then Clint whistled low and impressed, the same time Sam groaned in agony, and Steve focused back in on the board. Bucky was placing the Q down, finishing the word that was going to guarantee their win. Again.

His annoyance with Tony and his constant underlying worrying dissipated for a moment, the rush of a victory and the chance of seeing Bucky smile overshadowing everything else in the lighthearted joy of a simple win.
"Hell yes!" Steve spun towards Buck with a huge smile on his face, lit up at their teemed (aka mostly Bucky's) genius, and leaned forward, shooting his hand up for a victorious high five.

And Bucky cowered.

He recoiled from Steve's raised hand like a rattlesnake poked with a stick; so quickly it had to be instinctual.

The second that he registered the flash of fear across Bucky's face, the way he shrunk back in terror, Steve's hand fell to his lap fast enough that it smacked his leg but he didn't, couldn't feel it because Bucky was cowering away from him like Steve had been about to hit him.

"I'm sorry," Bucky rushed out, straightening up and scooting away from Steve, eyes wide and hands shaking. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to--"

"Buck, Buck, it's okay, you don't have to apologi--" Steve tried, reaching for him before he flipped and darted, only Bucky'd already shot to his feet, backing away from the table with his hands up while they all stared.

"I should go, I don't-- I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ruin the game, I'll just. Sorry. I'll go. I'm so sorry."

One of the surrender hands threaded through his hair in a panicked craze, then he spun on his heel and clenched fists at his sides, all but running for the stairwell, door slamming loudly open and louder closed.

And just like that Bucky was gone and Steve was left staring at their knocked over tray of Scrabble letters.

"Is he--" Maria started.

Okay, she might say. No, nothing was okay, not at all.

Crazy, she might finish. Probably. Steve sure fucking felt like he was.

But he couldn't sit here and listen to them talk about Bucky, couldn't sit at all, he needed out out out, Bucky had thought Steve was going to hit him.

He stood before she could finish her sentence, bumping the table and making the pieces scatter loudly to interrupt. It'd been instinctual. Bucky's ingrained response was that he was going to be smacked, his body reacted to violence like it was expected.

Maybe he should've followed Bucky out. But there wasn't anything he could say to change what just happened, and if judging from the look on Bucky's face, he could use a little time alone. To breathe, get his head back on straight. Stop feeling mortified.

Steve might never stop feeling mortified. He could feel it tingling in his bones, the rage, the pure unadulterated hate towards Zola, towards Hydra. And if he looked deep enough, towards himself, for letting Bucky fall, for not being there when Bucky needed him, for leaving his best friend for seventy years.

So he didn't follow Bucky out, there was too much shit going on in his head, too much guilt and horror and rage to be able to handle Buck's needs properly right now. He'd probably end up yelling at some point, hitting walls, and that wasn't going to help anything.

There was one place he could hit things though. He excused himself from the room less than ten seconds after the door had closed behind Bucky, then he was taking the stairs down to the gym, two
at a time with his head down, watching black boards soar behind him faster and faster. The glass gym doors only didn't shatter when he shouldered through them because they'd been reinforced for occasions like this one. An angry supersoldier storming down to the gym to beat the fuck out of some reinforced punching bags in order to keep himself from beating the fuck out of other things.

He almost didn't wrap his hands, wanted to feel his knuckles split, feel the blood soaking through his fingers hot and pounding, but Bucky would only be more distressed if Steve showed up on their floor like that. So he wrapped them - too tight, but still meticulous enough to save his skin - and dragged one of the reinforced punching bags out of their closet. Then he got to work.

A lot of people had things that let their mind drift, mindless activities that let their body focus on something else so their mind could open up deep. Things like playing the piano, painting, riding bikes, running. For Steve, it actually wasn't drawing that gave him release. Drawing was peaceful, blissfully unplagued, everything simplified down to the shading of a monkey's bike or a skyscraper's window.

The thing that really let him think though, was punching things.

Hitting the bag over and over, sweat dripping down his temple, the world was in vivid hypercolor, saturating his mind with emotions and his veins with adrenaline and he was punching and punching over and over and waiting waiting waiting for the pain to stop. Or take him over completely.

The look on Bucky's face. He couldn't decide which was worse. The look on his face as he cowered away from Steve's hand, or the look on his face when he straightened up and realized what he'd done? Terror and horror. Two sides of a coin that Steve wanted to smash under his foot until it split into crumpled pieces and could never hurt his Bucky again.

There was sweat flying now, his hair curled over his forehead and hanging in his eyes. The reinforced bags were a hell of a lot more of a challenge, they met every angry red punch and let Steve pummel away, his thoughts exploding around in his head and his fists flying faster faster faster. Someone was watching him. He'd felt it a little while ago, but he hadn't stop hitting the punching bag because Bucky's stammered apology was on repeat, his hands didn't hurt enough, his brain wasn't shutting up, the bag wasn't enough. A drop of sweat rolled in his eyes and he'd have to pause anyways to wipe the hair out of his face, so he might as well see who'd joined him.

He threw one more brutal punch at the red plastic before stopping and catching the bag, the smack against his palm reverberating loud around the empty gym. (Well, empty except whoever was standing behind him.) His bet was on Sam, maybe Clint. But when Steve turned around, he was wrong for once.

"Bruce," Steve greeted in surprise. "I didn't know you were here." Here as in the country, or the state, let alone the tower. He hadn't seen Bruce in person since they'd put Loki away.

If it were any other situation, he'd go hug the good doctor, except Steve was still red and soaked with sweat and breathing heavy and way too full of rage to do something like hug right now. Instead he kept his hand on the punching bag, making it clear that he wasn't finished and wasn't in the mood to talk.

"Just got in." Bruce gave that half-smile that wasn't as much a smile as it was a I'm not about to turn into a rage monster confirmation. Which was nice and all, except that Steve was still in his own rage-monster mode. And Bruce didn't look like he was planning on leaving anytime soon. "Thought I'd come down and say hi."
He almost replied with well you've said it, you can go now, except that as pissed as Steve was, Bruce didn't deserve the wrath. Instead he huffed and nodded, curling his fists again and tapping the punching bag with one. Then the other. And it felt good, the shock running up his "pretty little artist" wrists, the way it reverberated all the way into his shoulder.

So he hit harder. And harder and harder except then the super hearing picked up a soft sigh and it was rude to stand here and punch away his troubles when someone clearly wanted to talk. Steve had never let his own pain get in the way of others before, he wasn't going to now. Bleed on the inside, right?

The rage wasn't stopping, not anytime soon, so he bottled it up and shoved it deep down and he was hot all over, skin tingling with it, but he reached out and stilled the bag again, hand on the material to prop him up as he deflated a little, head dipped as he tried to catch his breath.

It wasn't fucking fair.

He blinked and watched as sweat dripped from his hair and his nose, landing in splattering drops on the floor. There was a possibility Tony'd turned up the heater for Pepper and Natasha's bikram yoga and never turned it back down, but it was more likely that Steve'd been in here a hell of a lot longer and punching a hell of a lot harder than he should've.

"How are you holding up?" Bruce offered behind him, not particularly soft, more like he was simply curious.

"You want to know how I'm holding up," Steve asked, voice tinged with disbelief as he spun around and pinned Bruce with his gaze.

Bruce contemplated Steve's question for a moment, the way he did to show he was actually thinking instead of giving automatic answers. He came to a conclusion pretty quickly, pushing his glasses up on nose and nodding. "Yeah. Yeah, I think so. How are you holding up, Steve?"

Clearly, Bruce had to have heard. He wouldn't be down here checking on Steve - with wary movements, like he was handling something explosive - if he hadn't. Except he was asking the wrong questions.

Steve stared incredulously for a moment, because that couldn't seriously be the concern right now. Steve and his crazed punching bag meltdown should be the least of anyone's worries. But Bruce wasn't budging, leveling him with that solid gaze and Steve took a single step forward, aware of how threatening it looked and doing nothing to stop it.

"I just tried to high five my best friend for the simplest of things and he cowered like a beaten dog and you want to know how I'm holding up??"

Hands curled in fists at his sides, boxing wraps biting into his skin, nowhere near hard enough to bring any sort of clarity, but at least the shaking was less obvious. Bruce probably noticed anyways, but in the guarded eyes it was impossible to tell.

Banner looked him over for a few beats before crossing an arm over his chest and throwing the other up nonchalantly, "...humor me."

Why the fuck did it matter how Steve felt? But he shook sweaty hair out of his eyes and grit his teeth, answer clipped and nowhere near strong enough. "I'm pissed."

That wasn't even the right word for it. He squeezed his eyes shut and focused on his breathing and trembling and rage, trying to get a grip on himself before he did something stupid. "Really pissed,"
he clarified, opening his eyes to glare at his hands.

The ones that'd let Bucky fall, then scared him into cowering away.

"I know the feeling," Bruce offered quietly. Steve glanced up and Bruce gave him a little sympathetic shrug. How sweet. He looked back down and started unwrapping the gauze from his hands, heading for the closest bench.

"Sorry if I’m not in the most therapeutic of moods, Doc." He tossed the white strip of cloth down violently, unwrapping his other hand fast enough to make his wrist ache. Then that one got thrown down too and Steve landed heavy on the bench, tipping his head back against the wall and rolling his head to look at Banner, who still hadn't left.

"I'll be on my floor if you want to talk," Bruce finally offered, then he was blessedly thankfully leaving Steve alone to sit on the gym bench and stare up at the ceiling and cool the fuck down and figure out how the hell he was supposed to help somebody who wouldn't let him in.

He wasn't the only one who'd needed to cool off steam. Beyond out, Bucky hadn't decided where to go until he was already there, standing outside the track entrance on the second floor of the gym. It was something Steve would do, beat things up to calm down, but it wasn't a bad idea.

He'd always felt the most powerful in control when he was fighting. He just hadn't thought Steve had steam to cool off too.

Bucky came in on the second floor, where the circular track was - complete with a balcony to overlook the main floor, where someone was currently pummeling away at a punching bag. He heard the squeaking material and muffled hits right before he stepped up to the balcony, where he'd be in sight.

The sound made him freeze in the shadows. Steve was here. Shit. He didn't want to talk right now. At all. He wanted to forget.

So Bucky plopped down behind the balcony, hidden by shadows as he looked between slats and listened. He saw Bruce come in before Steve did. The doctor was a lot shorter than Bucky'd pictured. He stayed perfectly silent, watching the scene unfold from his perch in the shadows - Steve's frustrated and shaking hand pushing sweaty hair out of his eyes while Bruce watched calmly.

Their voices carried and echoed in the gym's vastness and Bucky almost smiled at how goddamned stubborn Steve was being. Right up until he blew up.

"I just tried to high five my best friend for the simplest of things and he cowered like a beaten dog and you want to know how I'm holding up??"

Cowered like a beaten dog. Bruce's response, the rest of the conversation, the loud noises as Steve slammed the punching bag again, none of them stuck. Sounds drifted over him, but his head wasn't there to hear them.

A beaten dog. That's what he was, wasn't he?

Собака. They used to call him that. It was his first name. He knew enough Russian now to know exactly what it meant.

Hydra's pretty attack dog. Beaten dog. Just look at him, hunched over in the shadows with glassy
eyes. He'd cowered. Like he was supposed to.

Собака. He remembered perfectly well. He used to like that name. It was an escape of sorts. They could spit dog at him like he was a filthy worthless animal but he didn't mind, liked being called Собака. And he remembered exactly why.

He'd told himself one thing, over and over again. Something to hold onto, a reason to respond to his new name. It was disgusting and it made him feel worthless, less than nothing. But. But he still liked it - because at least he had no idea what it sounded in the voice of the man he loved. Because at least he'd never heard it spat with distaste from Steve's soft pink lips.

Well.

Now he had.

He didn't know how long it took him before he could move his fingers again, before he came back to his head enough to realize he was sitting in an empty, dark gym. Broken, beaten dog.

Bad dog, staying out this late, not letting your master know where you are.

Bucky laughed out loud, the sadistic sound echoing around the gym like it was coming back to slap him across the face.

He stood, dusted off his hands, and debated punching a hole in the wall. That was more Steve's gig than his. Instead he'd keep silent, walk methodically back to his room. Pretend to sleep while he stared at the walls and forced himself not to carve out his own heart with his metal hand.

They used to disable it when he got bad. Bucky was pretty sure he understood why now.

~*~*~

"Hey, it looks like it might storm today." Steve piped up from the kitchen, looking out the window as he swirled his paintbrush around in a fresh cup of water. The words were way too casual, like he was trying to get a rouse out of Bucky. Or maybe warn him.

Like he figured that some thunder might send Bucky spiralling into madness. He'd had a hell of a lot bigger reasons to lose his fuckin' mind and he hadn't yet.

"Well, I've always loved storms," Bucky deflected, pretending to be distracted, keeping up appearances as he thumbed through his book to find some random chapter to fake-read.

Steve hummed in response, nodding to himself as he stepped away from the window. In his peripherals, Bucky could pinpoint the moment that the words registered - Steve paused, eyebrows furrowing, looking at Bucky's profile confusedly.

"You hate storms," Steve said slowly.

"What?" Bucky asked distractedly, pretending not to pay attention.

"You've always hated storms." Steve corrected, the words loud, a challenge, on edge.

Oh shit. The nonchalance had backfired on him. It wasn't often that he slipped up that big - normally
when he was faking being okay, he was smart enough to remember times in the past that used to not be okay. But he'd overdone it because, yeah, he'd always hated storms, and now Steve had caught him red-handed in a lie and there was no way it wasn't written all over Bucky's face.

He shut his expression down as quickly as he could, but it was too late. Steve had already seen the slip.

"Remember?" he goaded, taking a step closer to Bucky's couch and making his shoulder tense. "We were out in a storm once and I got pneumonia and almost died? You've despised them ever since. Always freaked out."

"I remember." Bucky mumbled, words short as he turned pointedly away.

"Then why did you say you liked them?"

"Let's drop it," he replied too brightly, and shot to his feet, slamming his book shut and dropping it on the reinforced coffee table.

He almost wished he didn't have enhanced hearing, because the defeated sigh and collapse onto the sofa was so loud behind him. He was opening the door to the stairwell and he still heard Steve's murmured rhetorical question from the living room.

"How much have you been lying to me, Buck?"

And there was no way in hell he was answering that.

Turned out it did storm.

And, like Bucky predicted, the thunder rolled off his shoulders, no problems. Bombs had never bothered him anyways.

But, like he hadn't thought of, lightning was open electricity, something he was too familiar with. There had been a chair, a machine to be strapped into. Another mask that covered all of his face but a single eye, both wide open as he screamed through a rubber bit and open lightning danced around his face, pulses of shocking electricity to take his memories away.

Wipe him.

He didn't respond so well to the lightning.

Maybe he was going out of his fucking mind, but Steve could swear he felt the scream before he heard it.

It pierced like something from hell, a demon screech, echoing through the vents and shaking the tower and Steve pulled out his headphones and scrambled up so fast he knocked over the red paint, the can hitting the floor with a clank and a sudden spray like blood over the floor and the walls. He skid out of the room with his latest work in progress dripping bloody red behind him.

It took him way longer to find Bucky than he would've liked, but Steve didn't even know there was a floor still under construction, let alone that Bucky'd set up a knife throwing range in the empty space. Jarvis wasn't active on that floor, but he managed to give Steve enough to go from that he was
bursting into the huge, dimly-lit room a few minutes after the scream.

Like most of the other floors, the walls were shiny with windows, the black storm outside making everything that much darker, casting shadows longer. "Bucky?" Steve called, spinning blindly to try to locate a shape in the darkness. Thunder rolled distantly outside, dark and low and threatening, twisting a shiver down Steve's spine.

He shouldn't have let Bucky go off on his own, not when he knew it was going to storm. Especially not after he finally saw through the bullshit front Buck'd been putting up for weeks.

A hitched breath in the darkness tipped him off. On the far side of the immense room, a crouched figure, curled into the shadows of the wall. He flew across the slick concrete floor, nearly wiping out as he fell to Bucky's side, worn leather under his palms as he stroked his hands over Bucky's back.

"I'm here, I'm here. Bucky, c'mon, talk to me," He pressed his forehead against Bucky's shoulders, rubbing soothing circles down the curved spine. Buck was curled in a ball, head tucked out of sight, and didn't look to be budging anytime soon - thank god he wasn't screaming anymore.

"You're okay, you're safe, I've got you," Steve promised, pressing his knuckles against the back of Bucky's neck, wrapping one arm over his ribs to tug him closer, then a loud crack of thunder sounded and Steve jolted, a shot of panic through his veins as a bomb went off behind his eyelids, smoke and bloody red of the war shaking into his core.

He clung tighter to the unmoving body, grounding himself in the solid muscle beneath his arm. Bucky was here, they weren't in the war, he was fine. But Bucky wasn't, and he hadn't jumped at the thunder, so what the hell could have sca--

Lightning flashed, arches of crackling electricity outside the window, turning the room of shadows into a white and blue painting for a pause. The scream was muffled in his curled ball, and what a pair they made, one who couldn't handle thunder and the other who freaked at lightning.

He tried everything he could think of short of kissing him to pull Bucky out of it, but nothing was working, he kept trembling in Steve's arms and he wouldn't lift his head or move an inch and the thunder was making Steve's heart pound faster and it was so dark and the storm was so loud.

Because his life was bad luck followed by more bad luck, Natasha's number was out of service. Tony was the next on his list.

"Rogers? Why are you calling me when there is a perfectly good AI system?"

"I'm on the construction zone floor, Jarvis isn't around. Can you get Natasha on the line?" Keeping his voice calm, not panicking, he was okay, Bucky would be okay, no one was hurt and the thunder wasn't bombs, it was just a goddamned storm.

"Why the hell are you on that floor? And yeah, she changed her number again, let me see if I can find it...okay, I just added her to the call, it's dialing."

"Hello?"

"Nat? It's Steve, Bucky's having some sort of panic attack and I can't get him out of it." Steve sucked in a breath and dug his fingers harder into Bucky's ribs. "I don't know why it's different this time, but he can't hear me. The only thing he's responding to is lightning, which is making him scream. Please tell me you've got some idea what that means."

"They must've used electricity in his conditioning...Okay, Steve, he's not going to be able to respond
to anything that isn't part of his training. You're gonna hate me for this, but you have to be his handler for a moment. Ask him for...ask him for a mission report."

"What?"

"Just do it."

Steve shook his shoulder, forcing his voice steady. "Bucky. Mission report."

"C'mon, Rogers. Do you wanna help him? Not like that. And don't use his name, it's contradictory. You fought in wars. I'm very aware, the thunder has no problem reminding me, Steve added in his head over Natasha's commentary, "I know you have that commander voice in you somewhere."

"Soldier!" He snapped, shoving Bucky sideways. "Mission report."

He really hadn't been expecting it to work. So when Bucky shot up instantly, robotic voice stating "Ready to comply," Steve freaked out, dropped the phone, and scrambled backwards, hands scraping on the concrete.

"Wow, you didn't even need to use Russian. I wonder how many languages he's trained to respond in," Natasha's tinny voice crackled through the line.

"Fourteen," the robot voice responded, dead as hell, eyes glassy and body straight and stiff like a talking doll.

Steve put his head in his hands.

"Steve?" the tinny female voice asked again, about as worried as Nat let herself sound. Steve lifted his head slowly, staring at the blank concrete walls and draped plastic dropcloths.

"Holy shit, Natasha. I'm going to kill them. I'm going to kill every fucking one of them, I'm going to tear apart the rest of Hydra until no one even remembers their name--"

"Rogers, calm the fuck down. Barnes needs you, okay? Just...tell him to report to his resting quarters or something. Get him in a neutral environment so he can be comfortable until he comes around."

Steve stared at the phone on the ground, appreciative for the serum enhanced hearing so he didn't have to pick the damn thing back up. His hands would crush it right now. "How long is that going to take?"

"No idea. He may not break out of it at all."

"That is super comforting, thank you," he replied dryly, snatching the phone and standing up, brushing the dust off his pants and making a gesture at Bucky.

"Asset report to resting quarters."

Bucky blinked at him.

"Bedroom?" Steve tried. Still nothing. He took a breath and stared at the dusty, raw ceiling, gathering his wits before he started breaking things. "Report to cryofreeze," he relented, closing his eyes in pain.

When he opened them again Bucky was already pushing open the door on the stairwell. Fucking hell.
Steve followed him up to their floor, where Bucky stood patiently, waiting to be shoved into some ice chamber. Now that they were in a place that Steve could lock the doors while Jarvis monitored from above, breaking Bucky out of the conditioning was worth a try.

"You know me," he started, keeping his words and movements slow as he approached Bucky. Buck turned his head, blinked twice, his eyes still foggy as he opened his mouth.

"The man from the bridge," Bucky replied, looking down. Steve froze, absorbing the words. The man on the bridge. Their first fight had been on a bridge. Had Bucky asked his handlers about him? But he'd acted like he'd never seen Steve before when they met again.

"What about the man on the bridge?" He asked carefully, taking a step closer.

"I knew him," Bucky whispered, head down as he grimaced. He was referring to Steve in the third person, like he wasn't right here in front of him. Was he stuck in a loop then? Repeating whatever he'd told his handlers that day? If Bucky had known him, why did he fight so hard against him?

The sky choose that moment to explode in thunder again and Steve jolted at the sound, cursing and covering his ears with his palms, forcing the flashbacks and the bubbling rage and fear aside. The sound must have triggered something in Bucky too this time, because when Steve looked up Bucky's eyes were watering, his teeth clenched as he looked at Steve with terrified eyes.

"But I knew him."

Lightning crackled, followed by a sharp burst of thunder and Bucky was covering his face with his hands, pleading as he sank to his knees. "Please please don't wipe me I don't want to forget him again, please please don't wipe me--"

His stomach churned and pulse was racing as he slowly reached for Bucky again, hands low and palms up, as unthreatening as possible as he pressed his fingertips into the tops of Bucky's thighs.

"No one's wiping you, Bucky. It's me. It's Steve. I'm here. I've got you." He gathered Bucky into his arms, threading fingers through his long hair and burying his nose in the top of Bucky's head. Strong arms wrapped around Steve's ribs, clinging to him desperately as the storm rolled around them.

They both winced and cringed at the sounds, the shocks of light, but neither of their grips let up. An anchor in a storm, two lost drifting ships tethered together. Until about three minutes later, when Bucky suddenly shook himself free of Steve's hold, blinking at him confusedly from beneath his fucked up hair. "Steve?"

A choked laugh escaped his throat and Steve folded in half, head landing in his hands. "Thank god," he murmured to the ground, pressing his palms against his eyes to stop the tears that were threatening to spill from relief. Or trauma. Whatever.

"What the fuck happened?" Bucky poked his shoulder and Steve lifted his head again, sniffling a little and wiping off his face as he scanned Buck over again. All of the fear and glassiness was gone, his sarcastic asshole of a best friend looking at him with one eyebrow raised worriedly.

He supposed he'd be concerned too if he woke up sitting in the middle of the foyer floor wrapped up in Bucky's arms. Steve gestured with a wide arm, resting the other elbow on his knee. "Apparently you don't like lightning."

Bucky cocked his head, looking around the dark room and taking in the fading storm outside. "Huh. Who'd've guessed."
"Natasha," Steve answered with a strained smile. Bucky gave him another puzzled look and stood up, brushing himself off and holding out a hand to help Steve up. Steve took it gratefully, keeping Bucky's fingers entwined with his a little longer than necessary. "If it makes you feel any better, I don't like thunder?"

"It doesn't," Bucky replied flatly. The smile he got for his troubles was more of a grimace, then Bucky withdrew his hand, clapped him congenially on the shoulder, and strolled towards the kitchen, shooting a final word over his shoulder. "Thanks, by the way."

Steve stared at his hands and the tear stains on his shirt before running tired fingers through his hair.

"Sure, Buck. Anytime."

~*~*~

"Sergeant Barnes," he was greeted the moment he stepped out of the locker room showers.

Bucky raised his eyebrows, squinching the rest of his hair dry. "Doctor Banner. What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if you'd be up for a chat." The easy smile was simple and the words were simpler, the quick adjustment of his glasses making him look like the least harmless thing in existence.

It took more than Bruce Banner to get one over Bucky's head. He returned the bright smile, tossing his towel in the hamper and opening his arms wide and sarcastic.

"Steve put you up to this?"

Bruce put his hands up in surrender, carefully schooled expression of calm. "I just want to talk, Sergeant."

Bucky nodded slowly, rolling his lips in and popping them back out, and started for the doors.

"I'll tell you the same thing I told Sam last week. I'm not interested in a psychological evaluation." Bucky glanced over his shoulder at the surprised and slightly guilty expression on Bruce's face. He turned all the way around, walking backwards as he pushed open the glass gym doors behind him. "And the next person that mentions it is walking away without an eye. Thanks for asking!"

He gave the scandalized doctor a sarcastic salute and spun on his heel, stalking down the hall with his metal hand curled into a fist so he didn't start breaking things.

Personally, he thought the threat was pretty damn clear. But he'd barely turned the first corner when a hand landed on his shoulder, spinning him around. Seconds later and Bruce's hands were up again, Bucky's favorite pistol aimed at the center of his chest and a feral look in his eyes.

"Stay the fuck away from me," Bucky warned, metal finger twitching on the trigger, forcing himself to back off before he killed Bruce. Or, knowing his reputation, kill them both. Because meeting the Hulk out was not number one on his list of activities to do, Bucky lowered the gun a few seconds later, flipping the safety on and flipping his middle finger up as he walked away.

Barely twenty minutes from their conversation at lunch, Bruce showed back up on the communal floor, concerned creases by his eyes, curly hair rumpled.
"Hey, Steve. I, uh. I don't think Barnes is okay at all."

~*~*~

It was 1944 and the rumbling clouds in front of the moon cast shadows over the soggy trench they were crouched in, the dirt under his back caving every time he shifted. The sound of enemy gunfire was getting closer, but they should be able to contain it. They were helping the escaped 109th back into allied territory, only no one had anticipated the ambush.

They'd dealt with worse and Bucky wasn't all that concerned with anybody's safety. Except Steve, because he was always doing something fucking stupid.

"Hey Sergeant," a warm voice whispered against his ear. Bucky glanced to the side, not risking turning his head in their proximity.

"Whaddu you want punk?" He couldn't help it if he was soaking up how close Steve was, how warm his body was pressed against Bucky's side. But he could shoot his arm out to blockade Steve's chest the moment he saw that familiar glimmer in his eyes. "Don't you fuckin' dare. Leaping out of this trench will do nothing but endanger everyone."

"I didn't even say it," Steve complained under his breath, glaring and trying to wiggle out from under Bucky's arm. Bucky pressed down harder and didn't say your eyes said it, because he was trying not to think too hard about the fluttering in his chest he'd felt ever since that first night in the bar. "C'mon, Buck, you know if we don't start taking out these bastards they're gonna pin us like animals."

Bucky stuck his tongue in his cheek and knocked his head back against the dirt wall. Steve was right, of course, but there was always plan B when plan Sacrifice Steve got shot down by Sergeant Barnes. And plan B tended to consist of Sacrifice Bucky.

He shot a crooked grin at his best friend, nudging him once with his shoulder before flicking the safety off on his sniper rifle. "Well...let's give 'em a taste of this animal then, huh?"

Before Steve could drag him down Bucky shot upright, training the gun over the top of the trench and opening fire on the approaching enemies, aiming for the grenades strapped to their chests and belts, setting off explosions left and right.

There was nothing but him and his scope, the cross-hairs settling steady on grenade pins. Then on helmed heads, shooting between eyes. The background behind the target was shifting, trenchside battle turning to a river, then a little German town, a snow-covered mountain, barren Russian lands. A city, a rooftop, decades suddenly cycling through the crosshairs, Winter Soldier's targets in flashes, shots and shots fired, blood exploding, bodies dropping.

Carefully tracking his Captain through the scope, catching the strays and getting a salute in return. Then they were morphing and Steve kept showing up behind the scope just as Bucky was firing and then all of the head shots and the bodies crumpling were all wearing blue with soft blonde hair and the blood was spreading and there was screaming and screaming--

A sharp sting on his cheek, then Bucky was sitting up and the screams stopped and someone was breathing heavy on the floor beside his bed and there were two knives wobbling in his wall.

"Fucking hell," Bucky groaned, dropping his head in his hands. Long strands of hair swam into his vision and he pushed them away angrily, hating the sudden reminder of how much older, sadder he looked now. On second thought he snatched a hairband from his bedside table and whipped his hair into a high bun. He wanted to shear it all off but that'd be caving, that'd be cheating. Like he could
go back to being okay if he looked okay.

"You with me?" a breathy voice asked from out of sight. Right, Steve had probably come barging in at the screaming. And apparently Bucky'd responded by throwing knives. He wondered if Steve would've agreed to living with him if he'd known that came with knives.

"Thanks for waking me." Bucky sighed and tipped his head against the headboard, remembering when it'd been dirt just a moment ago, in his dream. Well, it had started out with a memory.

The thing was, memories were comforts for normal people; but they are gorgeous and vibrant and unfairly detailed for Bucky – they are the most stunning, real thing he'd ever seen, clear in a way nothing was anymore, and he'd live inside those memories forever if he could.

He remembered so much. Including every second of the lightning trigger. And the nightmares. And everything else he pretended to blank out for. His body might freak, but his mind could remember every excruciating moment afterwards. Steve didn't need to know that.

"Of course, Bucky. Anytime, you know that." Steve pushed off the floor and sank onto the edge of Bucky's bed, looking at him too softly, even with the darkness shadowing his eyes.

The room was coated in fractured moonlight, streaming between his black curtains. If Steve weren't here he'd rip the curtains back to look out the window, make sure the world outside wasn't on fire anymore. But he didn't need Steve thinking he was any crazier than he was, so he turned away from the prying gaze and pulled the third knife from under his pillow, setting it carefully on the nightstand.

"Bu--"

"I said thanks, can I go back to sleep now?" he interrupted, not looking at Steve, his right hand tracing designs into the sheets.

"You can go back to sleep after that?" The words were incredulous, so it must have been a really bad one. Steve'd had to slap him to wake him up, clearly it'd been pretty awful. He shoved at the guilt in his stomach before it ate him alive and slid back under the sheets, rolling his back to Steve.

"I can try. If you leave."

Steve left without a word.

Bucky didn't get a second more of sleep.

~*~*~

In order for people to leave you alone, you have to be okay.

So he forced himself to join in on the Avengers lunch date in the movie room, where there was a very loud and very vigorous, game battle of Guitar Hero commencing. He made it about halfway through a song before the amount of noise started to drive him crazy.

It was only noise, he could block it out. Bucky focused on spreading his fingers, feeling the energy between them. Controlling every inch, focusing on his breathing. He could erase the noise. He could still do it. He could still--

Three songs later he excused himself to the bathroom and he'd been in the closest dark space he could find ever since. Which was some sort of janitor's closet. He wrapped his arms around his knees and buried his head and forced himself to count his breaths.
He hit three hundred seventeen when the handle turned. His gun was in his hand at the sound but he shoved it back in its holster when the door opened to flood light in and he recognized the quiet breathing.

"Shut the door," Bucky growled, not bothering to lift his head. If Steve knew what was good for him, he'd close the door again.

And surprise of all surprises, he actually did shut it. But not surprising at all, he stepped inside first. Which was not the fucking point. Bucky'd said shut the door as in go away, not come squeeze your perfect ass into the closet with me and then shut us both in here together.

He lifted his head, glaring at Steve's innocent perch on the ground across from him, wishing it wasn't pitch black so Steve could actually see the anger in his glare.

"Do you just not care that I'm deadly or are you that stupid?" With all the knives he'd had thrown at him lately, you'd think he'd catch the hint.

"Probably both," Steve replied simply.

Well, how fucking true was that. They sat in silence for while, until Bucky's breathing had settled back out and Steve seemed pretty comfortable himself, leaning against the opposite wall with his legs stretched out in Bucky's space. Bucky was counting breaths again, making bets about when Steve would speak again.

He'd actually undershot, guessing 150, but it wasn't until 419 that the pretty mouth opened again.

"You may be deadly--" a quiet admission that Bucky'd been waiting to hear from that mouth for a long time, even if he could already hear the condition Steve was going to tack on to it, "--but you're still human. You're allowed to feel. Be scared, overwhelmed, whatever. You're allowed to be human. You don't have to be powerful and efficient and in control all the time, Bucky."

He closed his eyes because Steve couldn't see him anyways, hating his stomach for untwisting its knots at Steve's words. He didn't want Steve to be a comfort. He didn't want to soften at those blue eyes. But most the time it wasn't up to him, and that was the very source of the problem.

"Look, Rogers – Hydra put a leash on me." Literally, he added in his head, but he didn't need to clarify the mental image for Steve. "They tortured me and made me believe it was for my own good. I get that. I get that I'm fucked up or whatever."

Steve made a noise of protest and Bucky threw up a hand to stop him, even though they couldn't see details in the dark he should be able to detect the movement and shut up. Which he did.

"But when I wasn't leashed and caged up, when I wasn't strapped down in a chair and tortured? I was powerful. I was invincible. It was the only thing I had for decades. And you're asking me to throw that away. You're asking me to give up the last bit of control and power I have in my life."

Bucky reached up for the door handle, twisting it and shoving the door open without getting off the ground. Light flooded them both, so he got to see every ounce of heartbreak and despair as it crossed Steve's face at his next words.

"I won't do that."

When he gestured out the door with his hand, Steve didn't move. Bucky sighed and got up himself, strolling away before Steve could catch up.
"What am I supposed to do?" He threw up his hands and nearly knocked over the closest robot, who made a funny noise and wheeled away from him. Tony picked up a wrench and started twisting something, making an annoyed sound before glancing back up at Steve.

"I'd wait it out, Rogers. Sometimes before it gets better, the darkness gets bigger." He went back to tightening bolts and Sam reached over the lab table to nudge Steve, furrowing his eyebrows and tilting his head towards Tony.

"Did he just quote Fall Out Boy?" Steve shrugged and Sam turned to Tony this time, leaning over his latest project to get his attention. "Did you just quote Fall Out Boy?"

Tony glared at Sam and chose not to answer, tossing a bolt in his direction instead. Steve sighed and glared at the robot who'd decided to venture over again, thinking it was safe from Steve's wrath. He definitely didn't knock it over on his way out.

~*~*~

SGR: Hey B, easy mission at 13:00, meet me @ the lobby

JBB: so I'm ur собака now too? I go on missions when I want to.

Steve frowned at his phone, copy-pasting the unfamiliar word and shooting it in a text to Natasha. Is this Russian?

NAR: wow, Cyrillic letters and everything, I'm impressed Rogers

SGR: but what does it mean?

...

NAR: dog

Suddenly, Steve didn't feel well enough to go on a mission. He called in with a headache and Tony shot a knowing glance at Clint, who sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off the pending headache.

But Sam didn't know there was even a mission going on, so when Steve popped into his new floor (aka Thor's floor) he didn't bat an eye.

"I'm going out for a run, you want anything?"

Sam looked up from the spread files and books, taking in Steve's appearance - he'd chosen carefully, clean sweats, a tight gray shirt, his running shoes already laced - and settled for approval of sound mind.

"Sure, you planning to pass that coffee shop on Broadway?"

"Kinda hard to miss."

"So Captain America wouldn't mind picking me up a cherry donut?"

Steve put his hands on his hips and shook his head, perfect smile stretched across his poster-boy face.

"No sir, Captain America would not mind."
"Awesome. Thanks, buddy." Sam gave him a little wave that Steve returned cheerily before heading back out into the elevator.

If his smile fell the moment Sam couldn't see, no one was the wiser. Well, maybe Jarvis, but he didn't have a reason to care.

He really did plan to go running. The burning soles of his shoes eating up pavement, the world rushing by him fast enough that he didn't have to focus on anything but keep going.

Only nothing was ever that easy anymore.

The route he had planned was an hour long, but he was only halfway through when it got interrupted. He'd stopped for a moment to grab water because hydration meant he wouldn't end up puking, and that was when he heard them.

A pack - like hyenas - of total assholes, big, buff, and jostling each other around. There were eight of them, huddled in the mouth of an alley, out of sight if it weren't for the leader suddenly wolf-whistling some girl walking down the street.

Steve may not know much about the twenty-first century, but he was entirely sure that was not okay, no matter what time period you were in.

"Hey! You wanna show a little respect?" Steve called, straightening up from tightening his shoe. The pack of jerks ignored him, a few catching on to the one asshole's move and making obscene gestures at the poor passing girl.

"Why don't you come say hi, pretty lady?" One of the asshats shouted and his buddies all laughed, shoving each other's shoulders and pointing at the girl with beckoning fingers. That was enough of that.

"Hey, you wanna shut up?" Steve crossed the street, puffing up his chest because he could do that now, making sure the group wouldn't miss him this time.

A few pointed in his direction, whispering amongst themselves, but they didn't budge. And then one had the audacity to whistle at the next girl passing by, shooting an amused look at Steve seconds after.

"What're you gonna do, big guy?" He jeered and Steve had to clench his fists at his sides, grit his teeth to keep from lashing out.

"I'm gonna ask you one more time to stop whistling at the girls like they're dogs."

The hyena pack laughed, turning their backs to Steve like he was the least threatening thing on the planet. He'd spent a lot of his life getting that exact same cold shoulder from bullies. But he wasn't prepared for an asshole leaning over, snapping his fingers at the next passerby with a smug sneer.

"Hey, a bitch is a bitch."

So maybe it was a soft spot. Steve Rogers would stand up for anyone getting heckled, regardless of gender or situation.

But calling someone a dog?

After the text he'd just gotten?

He used to have a wicked temper. It had been too dangerous to keep - he'd mellowed out with the
serum, putting his pent up energy into helping people, fighting the war. But this was the war he was fighting, the dehumanization, the haunted looks and nightmare screams and sharp accusations of so I'm your собака now too?

Which meant he'd been somebody else's dog before, and it wasn't hard to put two and two together with the Russian and the words Hydra had me on a leash.

So it was a soft spot. The dog thing.

Steve reeled back his fist and punched.

~*~*~

"Spill." Tony swung his leg over the chair, facing backwards and straddling it as he blocked Bucky into the corner of the communal floor he'd escaped to.

"What, blood? I'm pretty good at that." Bucky raised a cocky, triumphant eyebrow and Tony could swear it was like looking straight in a mirror.

He stroked his beard thoughtfully, giving Barnes an unimpressed eyebrow-raise of his own.

"You and Steve. It's a fucking rollercoaster. He wants to help you and you want..." Tony trailed off, waving his hand in the air to indicate Barnes to fill in the rest.

Instead he scowled, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest. "I don't need anyone. Or anything. I'm perfectly fucking functional on my own."

"Did you even listen to the boyfriends playlist I made you? Everybody needs somebody."

"Everybody wants somebody. And even if I did want Steve..." Bucky trailed off, staring down at his metal hand and twitching his fingers, sending a whirring ripple down his arm. Tony knew that look. Again, mirror.

"Let me guess. He's an American beauty and you're an American psycho?"

Bucky's head snapped up, staring at Tony with wide eyes, looking like the young, kid army brat for the first time Tony'd ever seen.

"Yes exactly," Bucky breathed, eyes glittering with relief that someone had finally said it out loud.

Making a mental note to deck out an iPod for Barnes ASAP, Tony poked the metal arm, catching Bucky's attention again from wherever he'd drifted off to.

"Hey, well, that American beauty is fixated on you."

The temporary brightness dulled, then sharpened darker, and that's it, there it was, the American Psycho, the ghost with a kill count high enough to be an Avenger.

"He shouldn't be," the assassin snarled, and Tony's fingers twitched irrationally for the protection of his suit. As terrifying as Steve's boyfriend was, he couldn't back down when Rogers had been dying lately and if somebody didn't intervene it would be on Tony that they lost the greatest soldier of all time.
Again.

And as much as he'd like to pass on his dad's legacy, the trauma of losing Captain America was not a burden he wanted passed down through the generations.

"You know Rogers. There's a reason he's fighting for you, he's got a reason for everything."

Plastic snapped and shards were already flying, Bucky was already standing, by the time Tony's brain registered he'd moved - broken the chair in his metal hand then moved - and the violence was too sudden for him to calculate a single solution before Barnes was shouting, towering over Tony, all angry red deadly rage.

"Guilt! That's why! He fucking adopted me because he feels guilty about what happened. He's always had something to prove and now it's me, I'm his fuckin' project, and he's got fists raised at shadows he's never gonna be able to fucking fight and I don't need to be saved, I don't need the goddamned blessing of his love or whatever the fuck he's trying to give me I don't fucking need any of this just because Steve fucking Rogers has to take on the fucking world!!"

Because apparently Barnes really was adjusting, really was thoughtful, the knife he threw for emphasis wasn't aimed at Tony, just at Tony's wall.

Then he stormed out of the floor and Tony slumped in his chair.

And cursed his father for ever creating Project Rebirth, because as usual, Tony was left to clean up the mess.

~*~*~

The slam of the stairwell door matched perfectly to a folder file in Bucky's memories, the one that held scenes of an extremely pissed, terribly beaten, and fragile, small Steve Rogers.

The sound could've come straight out of 1941. Bucky'd assume he'd time-traveled if it weren't for the heavy weight of tired boots coming down the hallway. Tiny Steve had never walked like that.

"What the hell happened?" The incredulous words shot out of his mouth the moment Steve stumbled into the living room.

Steve just looked at him, one eye slightly puffy, his lip split, blood caked in his hairline, an arm draped protectively over his ribs.

"Did you get in a fight?" How many times had he said that in his life? He'd never imagined he'd say it again. The blue eyes were downcast, shamed and pained.

"There were these assholes goin' after a girl, I got a duty to do mor'n watch." Steve shuffled a few steps towards the kitchen, wincing and tightening the arm over his ribs.

Bucky threw up his hands and crossed the room, each step walking back a decade until the Winter Soldier and Captain America were standing in the same positions as Tiny Steve Rogers and Pretender Bucky Barnes. And as always, he gathered his fucking punk of a best friend in his arms, the familiar game of avoiding Steve's injuries while supporting his weight and keeping from getting shoved off.

They limped to the kitchen together, where Bucky snagged a stool with his foot, pulling it over and plopping Steve down so he could search for washcloths and alcohol.
"It's already healing, Buck," Steve said tiredly, leaning his non-bloody temple on the counter. Bucky ignored him, finally opening a useful cabinet and dumping everything he needed next to the sink.

"You show up bloody, you deal with getting cleaned up. And you get to tell me the goddamn story, because last I checked Captain America doesn't get into back alley fights anymore."

"I wasn't being Captain America," he huffed, eyeing the wet washcloth gingerly. "Clearly," Bucky muttered, tilting Steve's chin up with his left hand so he could use the nerve endings in his right to assess damage properly. The lighting wasn't great in here, but it was better than their shitty apartment in the forties, so he could see all the blood dried to Steve's forehead. He dabbed carefully, wiping away red with the washcloth and keeping a careful eye on the skin underneath.

Blue eyes searched his face, the penetrating gaze of confusion and calculation, like he was trying to figure out why Bucky was doing this. Personally, he thought it was pretty axiomatic. He was Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers had gotten in a fight.

The only person here who thought this part would change was Steve. That's how everything was - Steve really did act like he was two separate people half the time. Bucky wanted to scream from the rooftops that he'd always been the fucking Winter Soldier, always, it'd only been easier to hide in that world. It was still him, he was still here to clean Steve up from his endless fights.

Except they'd been ended once; because punching civilians when you could kill them with a single swing was not a good idea.

The washcloth brushed over the open cut and Steve winced, biting his lip as Bucky held blonde hair back with one hand so he could see better. It was already healing, mostly stitched up, a slightly raised red line where there must've once been a deep gash.

"How many guys? Cause I know first hand you don't go down easy."

Or, well, in Bucky's case, he went down too easy.

He was still really fucking pissed about that helicarrier fight. Honestly Steve, what the fuck.

Steve grimaced, letting Bucky tilt his chin up again to get a look at his split lip. "Eight, I think."

"You kill any of 'em?"

"What?"

"Hate to break it to you, but you're not a scrap anymore. Punches from supersoldiers aren't the same as punk kids from Brooklyn."

Those blue eyes cast guiltily down. Bucky swiped his thumb over Steve's bottom lip, wiping away the wet from the washcloth and refusing to let himself think about how close their faces were.

"I stopped fighting halfway through. I thought I had a handle on my temper... but it's been getting worse lately and I guess. I guess I snapped." Bright blue found his again and Bucky held the gaze, running his right hand fingers over the slight bruising on Steve's cheekbone. It was already fading too.

"Bullies were that bad, huh?" Bucky framed Steve's face in his palms, turning it back and forth in the light to check for any more damage. The pretty face was pliant in his hands, eyes drifting closed,
innately trusting Bucky to take care of him.

Sucking in a breath at the weight of that request and feeling a little dizzy, he dropped his forehead against Steve's and dug his fingers into the back of his neck, taking a moment to get his head back on straight. The warmth of Steve's puffing breath over his mouth was more disorienting than helpful, so Bucky only gave them a moment of proximity before pulling back, sliding his fingers through Steve's blonde hair once as Steve didn't bother to open his eyes, tipping his head in Bucky's hand like a cat.

Okay. Enough of that. Steve'd been clutching his ribs when he came in, so Bucky rucked up his shirt, tugging it off over Steve's head, careful around his wounds. Then he knelt in front of the chair, tracing his fingers over the yellow and greenish healing bruises on Steve's ridiculously built torso.

The last time Steve had been shirtless in front of him, he'd been wrapped up in Steve's arms, tangled together half-naked and fuck, why was this always happening to him?

"They called her a dog," Steve blurted out, and Bucky stilled, his fingers frozen on Steve's skin, not looking up.

So he must have translated Bucky's text. He had no idea what he was supposed to do about that. But it didn't matter anyways, because the silence was suddenly cut again, jolting words falling to the floor like death sentences.

"They whistled at the girls and snapped their fingers and when I told them to stop, one said 'a bitch is a bitch,' and I couldn't take it, I couldn't watch those monsters dehumanize people to dogs, not after...not after..."

Steve had actually gotten into some backalley fight. Bucky had every right to be pissed - only, for the first time, he didn't blame Steve. This was *all* on Bucky.

It was his fault.

It was Bucky's fault Steve had broken the pact of more than two years without a fight.

*So I'm your Собака now too?*

Because he'd dumped his problems in Steve's lap and Steve couldn't handle it - shouldn't have been made to handle it.

He'd known he was hurting Steve, but this wasn't just hurt. This was ruin.

It'd been building up, all the warnings of Steve losing his temper more and more. Breaking his phone and punching walls and the freak out session in the gym and the way he'd been biting and sharp around everyone lately, it was all

Bucky's fault.

The first time he'd realized, overheard Stark talking about depression - he'd told himself there was nothing he could do about it.

At the time, he'd believed it. There were no solutions besides leaving, and if he left then Steve would come looking for him.
There was really only one way to leave for good, to stop being the burden that was eating Steve alive. To save Steve from depression and PTSD and temper swings and all the hell he'd been going through.

To save Steve. For good.

Only one way out to ensure Steve wouldn't follow.

He didn't want to hurt Steve, not ever, and he knew this would. But the bullet was too deep on this one.

It was February again. Perfect timing.

Bucky stood up, eyes on the floor, and dropped the washcloth in the sink.

"Get some rest," he said softly, pausing at the kitchen entrance. And, because it was the last time he'd get to, Bucky let his gaze land on Steve, let himself memorize the beautiful blue color again. He barely managed to keep himself from saying I'll miss you, because that wasn't something Steve needed to hear.

Instead he gave Steve a small smile, wishing he had something better to give Steve to remember him by. They'd never been ones for closure, but if anyone deserved an ounce of it, it was Steve. So Bucky sucked in a breath and gave Steve the last thing he could. "I'm sure you had 'em on the ropes, you punk."

He left before he could hear the whispered jerk in reply.

The next place he went was his room; there were some things he had to take care of first. He wasn't stupid or mean enough to write a note - letters broke hearts, it'd be easier and faster if he didn't bother. But he did grab his blue peacoat out of the closet, carefully slotting the picture of the Howling Commandos in the inside pocket.

His fingers brushed a piece of paper and he tugged it out, unfolding the drawing of his arm with the apple instead of a star. He'd never gotten rid of the damn star. Not that he wanted an apple, but there was a red Soviet star branded onto his bicep and he hadn't bothered to get rid of it. It didn't matter now anyways.

It was the only drawing of Steve's he had anymore, and maybe it was selfish but Bucky transferred it to the pocket of his leather jacket, hanging the peacoat back up in the closet. It was already nearing the end of February, he didn't need anymore parallels.

On the way out of his room something under the bed caught his eye. He tugged it out, unrolling the propaganda poster that'd once been hanging on his wall. He'd taken it down before he'd gotten his memories back, and it was a damn good thing he did--

It was the exact same picture that they'd printed in the newspaper. The newspaper that'd broken him. The newspaper that'd driven him to try to take his life the first time. When he'd realized Steve was dead.

It'd been his ruin. Steve had been his ruin. Steve had always been his ruin.

Steve broke him. With the newspaper. By dying. But he'd broken him long before that. Steve broke his heart every time he pulled away from an almost kiss. Everytime he laughed lightly at something
Bucky said, didn't realize that Bucky was pouring out his soul. Steve broke his heart when he didn't even ask before getting the serum. Steve broke his heart every time he jumped out of a burning building, even when Bucky begged him not to.

Steve broke his heart every time he kicked Bucky out of his bed during the war. It's not cold, he'd say. You shouldn't need me, he didn't say. Bucky heard anyways.

He shouldn't need Steve. He shouldn't, not back then. Especially not now. He was strong and perfect, a killing machine, the scariest ghost story to tell children at night. The only thing that'd ever broken him was Steve.

Through his torture as the Winter Soldier, as a young child, as anything he ever was, Steve was the only thing that'd broken him.

And he needed him. More than anything.

It was disgusting.

Bucky couldn't live with it. Not anymore.

*

He took the elevator up because he didn't feel like climbing stairs all the way to the top floor. Well, not the roof, the floor that had that platform on it - the one that jutted over New York City with all open space and no ledges.

"Sergeant Barnes," Jarvis greeted as Bucky stepped out of the elevator. "I congratulate you on your calm heartrate, sir."

Bucky laughed lightly, scaling the few steps in the middle of the room. "It's been a while since I've been balanced, hasn't it?"

"Yes sir, I'm pleased to hear you're doing better."

"Much," Bucky replied, stepping outside. He had a mission. Of course his body was finally alright.

The sun was setting on the horizon, golden and blinding, the bright shimmer before the burn. How many times had he been burned by the sun? Except that his own sun never burned angel wings into his back, only chains onto his wrists.

Gold was the inside of a bank vault. Gold was the sunshine boy he'd craved for so long. Gold was the memories of dances to haunt. Gold was the crushing weight of a smile that never gave up.

Gold was everything that'd hurt him. And he wasn't as strong as that golden smile.

All that's golden is never real, right?

Bucky stepped to the middle of the platform, stretching his arms in front of him, rolling his fingers, watching metal plates shift and human muscle ripple. He could feel it, the constant rumble beneath his skin, the itching, swallowing, consuming dark rage that blossomed from that deep, black desire and pain.

He'd almost killed bully schoolboys with it when Steve was just a kid. Protecting the piece of gold he'd stolen from the world, like an angry dragon protecting a prize it didn't deserve.

He'd killed curly hair schoolboys with it during the war, when Steve had asked Bucky to come
along. Protecting the bright star that arched across his sky, swallowing up the brilliant light with his blanket of darkness.

He'd killed so much more than schoolboys with it as the Winter Soldier, when he'd lost that bright golden star. Lost only hope he'd had to cling to. The stitches that held him together.

Now Bucky was fraying those stitches and ruining Steve and it wasn't fair, that the consuming dark rage had to drag Steve down too. He'd tried to stop it once back when he'd had one arm. He'd felt the rage coming and he'd sharpened his nails and tried to slit his wrist before the rage consumed him.

He'd failed. But he'd be damned if he let himself fail this time.

It started in a dark room a long time ago, mournful thoughts in his head and blood on his hands and wanting nothing more than to be dead. It would end that way too.

For so long, he'd forced himself to hold on for Steve's sake. The last time he'd died, falling from the train, he'd had a few brief moments of shocking clarity. In the face of death and the end, he'd decided that the moment he got pulled up from the train, he'd knock Steve to the floor and kiss him senseless. Because why the hell had he refrained in the first place? Petty, foolish, childish reasons. So now, knowing all that, he should've kissed Steve already, right?

But he'd fallen that day, moments after thinking it. Maybe it was a sign: he was never supposed to kiss Steve. The universe had yanked them apart to prove to Bucky that Steve didn't feel that way about him, then shoved them back together so Bucky could actually be a good friend to Steve without his stupid feelings getting in the way.

But he couldn't do it. He couldn't be a 'good friend' because after everything that'd happened to him? The takeaway wasn't that he didn't love Steve. It was that his love for Steve had sustained decades - haunted him when he couldn't remember Steve's name, taunted him with nightmares and performance errors, and saved him, from himself, on that helicarrier.

The takeaway was that his love for Steve was everything.

It was too much. He couldn't do it. Because what if he lost Steve again? He hadn't survived that last time and he sure as hell wouldn't survive it now. So he had to leave before it got that bad - because no death could be as painful as losing Steve Rogers.

And the thing was, it was probably the only thing Steve could never forgive. Maybe there had been a chance of them being together, but how could they when Bucky was suicidal? When he'd rather die than face the pain of losing Steve?

He'd just seen Steve bloody and beat up and it'd tugged at something so deep inside of him, the memory of faces under his own fists, the bodies piled around him. He'd end himself before he saw that happen to Steve.

Steve would never forgive him for this. He'd never understand. How could Steve understand that Bucky loved him too much, that death was easier? It was Steve, he'd never get that. He'd never stoop so low.

And so they couldn't be together.

He stepped forward, toes brushing the edge of the platform. New York was wide and busy below him, opening up with wide arms as his final resting place. All it would take was one more step forward. Then he'd be falling again.
Poetic justice, right? He fell from a train the first time, it was only fitting he fall again. He sucked in a
breath and curled his right hand over his heart, taking count of his heartbeat. It was racing now, in
the face of death again. He could see it, stepping over the edge, his body flying down with that
unforgettable feeling of falling and reaching and falling and then he'd hit the pavement and that
would be the end of him.

Tony would probably get all kinds of shit from the media. And if there were pedestrians down there,
they'd probably be scared for life. The cleanup would be awful. And the look on Steve's face...

The last time he'd fallen, Steve's face and outstretched hand had been the last thing he'd seen. In a
sudden selfish whim, Bucky glanced back at the tower, wishing that Steve was behind him. All he
wanted was for Steve to be the last thing he saw again.

Last month, after Steve's pool panic attack, he'd pulled his best friend into a hug and said *how 'bout
next time we die together?* He'd meant every word. And Steve'd laughed lightly in response, never
agreeing, and forgotten about it. If only.

But as selfish as Bucky was, he wasn't selfish enough to wish the horror of his suicide upon Steve's
eyes. He didn't want Steve to see this. It wasn't fair.

Bucky held his breath, looking down at the streets of New York.

He'd finally be coming home.

He lifted a foot, suspending it in the open air, and paused. The last time he'd fallen he'd survived. If
he survived this, they'd put him on suicide watch lockdown for the rest of his life.

He'd survived falling from a *train in the mountains.* There was no way to be sure he wouldn't
survive this too.

Cursing, Bucky stepped away from the ledge. So much for poetic justice.

Trudging back inside, he'd never felt so heavy in his life. The one out he thought he had and it
probably wouldn't work. Bucky looked dejectedly around the floor, from the wall stocked with
Tony's alcohol to the sweeping glass windows, the crushingly empty space.

Grand, beautiful, and unmistakably alone.

He'd told the geese in Central Park that he was the only one who could take mercy on himself. There
were other ways besides jumping.

Bucky pulled his pistol out of its holster and checked the chamber for rounds mechanically, flipping
the safety off and cocking it with the familiar click of a trained hand.

He jogged down the mini steps to the middle of the room and crossed over to the nearest wall,
leaving a few inches behind him. It'd stop the ricochet and cause minimal damage that way. With
scarily steady hands he switched the gun to his left grip, curling his metal hand to aim at himself.

On the day Steve had fallen from the helicarrier, Bucky had saved him twice. Once by pulling him
out of the water and once by walking away. He'd save him for a third time today by leaving for
good.

Bucky shifted his metal hand around the grip, leaning back against the wall and staring at the matte
black metal. The last thing he'd ever see. Not half as pretty as Steve. Beautiful in the way Bucky was instead - dark and terrifying, stunning into shocked silence. Deadly.

And here goes. The most lethal machine to becomes it's own fatality; he got his poetic justice after all. The one who had created a century of death bestows the gift upon himself.

Bucky closed his eyes. What was one more squeeze of a trigger?

The door burst open.

The loud sound almost had his finger squeezing on reflex and wouldn't that be ironic, the sound that was supposed to save him instead sealing his death certificate. Except his reflexes were too perfect for that. Even now, even after all those mistakes and error, he still managed to keep the metal finger from twitching and ending his life.

Because he had a feeling he knew what that sound was. And it was the sole thing he'd been trying to avoid.

Bucky opened his eyes. And swore.

He knocked his head back against the wall behind him, muttering a string of violent curses as he slid all the way down, sinking to the floor and leaning so hard against the wall he was surprised it didn't bow.

"Get the fuck out, Rogers," he rasped, rolling his head to look at the intruder.

Steve's hand was covering his mouth in shock, frozen and staring and absolutely terrified. It wasn't fair. The look on Steve's face was going to fucking haunt him. He'd be fine if Steve just walked back out, so he could pull the trigger and it'd all be over and he wouldn't have to see Steve fucking Rogers look like he'd just gotten his world ripped in half.

He slammed his head back against the wall, under the chance that it could take him out just like that with no mess or worry for either of them, except of course it didn't, it just made his head throb as he glared daggers at Steve.

Steve who chose now to refuse to leave him the fuck alone.

This was the last secret he'd had and it'd been ripped out of his hands. He'd never told Steve about all the times he'd tried to kill himself while they molded him into a killer. But now Steve knew and how was Bucky supposed to live with that? Only yeah, right, the plan had been to not live, before it got trampled all over by nosy star spangled asses.

The shocked hand over Steve's mouth lowered, and it didn't take his enhanced sight to see that Steve was trembling like a leaf. Bucky kept glaring, watching as Steve rebooted, reset himself and shoved the shock aside, taking a few steps, then walking slowly all the way to his wall. Bucky bristled as Steve got closer but he didn't stop, not until he was a foot away, crouching down in front of Bucky.

He forced himself not to growl, feeling extremely patronized at the position, like he was a petulant child. He knew exactly what he was doing. But there was no point when Steve was here, so when soft artist hands reached for the gun in his hands, carefully prying his fingers from the grip, Bucky didn't stop him. He refused to meet Steve's eyes, watching his hands instead as Steve dismantled the entire gun, as many pieces as it would break into, and threw them all haphazardly across the room.

Then the gentle hands were patting him down, slipping the knife from his ankle and the two from his hip, tossing those to the side too. It was a smart idea, but Bucky still had at least 3 knives on him by
the time Steve finished. Not that he was going to off himself when Steve was here.

As soon as he decided Bucky was unarmed, Steve collapsed against the wall beside him, energy drained as he threw his head back and stared at the ceiling, his shoulder pressed warm against Bucky's right side. There was no pretending he was alone now, not when Steve was solid beside him, an unmistakable reminder of everything he'd almost just saved left behind.

"Why?" Steve finally asked the ceiling, and he didn't need to elaborate, it was pretty clear what he was talking about.

"You know why," Bucky replied, glancing at Steve from the corner of his eye. Although really, Steve barely knew the half of it. Now was not the time to lay a lifetime of hidden feelings on the table.

He lifted his hands from his lap, turning over the fake one, watching the metal glint in the dying sunlight. He hated the ghost pains, like his old left hand was there under the metal, trying to break out of the encasing, reverberating in aches and sharp tingling like the blood circulation had been cut, not his entire limb.

"I've been abused too long," he said quietly, letting the metal fall back to his lap. Machine. "I can't do it anymore. I won't do it anymore. I'm done. I'm sick of hurting."

Steve swallowed thickly next to him and Bucky closed his eyes, the familiar ache in his chest nothing to do with almost dying and everything to do with the beautiful man beside him that he simply couldn't have. The American Beauty. "It hasn't stopped hurting--" Bucky paused, clarifying 'it' as loving you in his head, "--not once, and this is it for me."

"If you'd just let me help," Steve tried, voice small and scared.

Half the reason he was doing this was because he needed Steve, couldn't breathe right without him, couldn't handle the idea of being left alone. Which would happen eventually. It was more than want, he physically needed Steve, and Steve didn't feel that way. He couldn't drag Steve down that road of clinging, crippling codependency.

"It's not fair to you. All that I am? This mess?" Bucky waved a vague hand and Steve caught his wrist, fingers closing solid and promising over his pulse.

"I can take it, Bucky."

"The thing is..." he paused, finally turning his head to meet the gaze of those precious blues. "You shouldn't have to."

Maybe it was low, quoting the past like that. Steve was staring at him in horror but Bucky was just so tired, he didn't want to have this fight. He didn't want to do this at all anymore. He'd finally been so close to the end.

It took a few recalibration blinks and licked lips before Steve managed to find his words again. "You promised me it was always the two of us--"

Yeah, until Bucky had become a burden instead of a best friend.

"That doesn't change anything, Steve. I can't depend on you. When they took you away, look what I turned into. The only thing I have left is the art of murder."

"Okay," Steve shot back, like that was a perfectly alright skill to have, like it didn't matter that it was
the only skill Bucky had. "Okay, we'll take that and we'll build on it. Just, don't do this. Okay?"

Metal plates caught on his long hair, tugging as he ran his fingers through his hair in exasperation. Steve wasn't going to get it, Bucky'd predicted this. He'd known this would happen, that's why he'd planned to go out alone.

"I have no reason to stay alive."

"What about me?" Steve pleaded desperately. "Can't I be--"

Your reason?

"No," Bucky snapped, stopping him too harshly, but he was going out of his fucking mind because-- because-- "No no no no, you can't, because what the hell does that make me? If you're the only thing I'm living for? I am no one, Steve, without you. Nothing without you."

Who are you?

James Buchanan Barnes.

Who are you without him?

Nothing.

Who are you?

Nothing.

There was a choked sound next to him and Bucky bit his lip hard enough to draw blood.

"You've been my everything for my entire life and then I lost you, Steve. I lost you once and I can't. do. that. again. I cannot depend my existence on you when you don't even--"

He froze, tongue between his teeth, words love me pressed against the tip of his mouth only he couldn't say that, not out loud and definitely not right now.

"When I don't what?"

Steve's wide eyes were begging and watery but Bucky shook his head, looking away before he had to see Steve cry. He couldn't handle Steve crying.

"Please," he whispered. "It's too hard, Steve. I can't do it anymore."

Silence. A few sniffles and the peripheral movement of Steve rubbing his face. Bucky blinked and wished his body would go numb already. He was so ready to give in.

But because his dumb ass decided to claim Steve Rogers as his best friend, giving in wasn't an option

"You can't do this to me, either." Steve's voice was steadier now, pissed and firey. What an unsurprising turn of events.

The whole empty room cringed as Bucky laughed, sadistic and terrifying even to his own ears, tipping his head against the wall again.

"First time I tried this - once Hydra found me in the snow - I kept thinking how ashamed you'd be of me. I didn't think about my own life, not about what God or my parents or, fucking hell, what I
thought about dying. Just that you'd never understand. You'd never forgive that."

Bucky ground the heels of his hands against his eyes, wishing his insides would stop screeching. "They didn't let me, they stopped me every time I tried to off myself. And then here you are, doing the exact same goddamned thing."

"I'm not Hydra." Steve's voice had turned from pissed to desperate now, a whole range of emotions. A heavy hand shaking his shoulder. "Bucky, you know I'm not Hydra. I'm nothing like them. I care about you."

So sincere, as always, and Bucky snorted, lifting his head to give Steve an unimpressed look. "You care about every goddamned person on this planet, Steve."

The frustration that crossed Steve's face at that was at the maximum level he'd ever seen it, which was saying a lot considering how frustrated Steve used to be with the whole goddamned world.

"Not like I care about you!"

Right. Bucky just looked away, turning his face before Steve could see the tear slipping down his cheek. Weak weak weak.

Then soft hands cupped his jaw, turning him back before he could force himself away, then Steve's fingertips were digging into his hair and he couldn't turn away if he tried, Steve was holding onto him too tightly. Careful thumbs wiped over the wet streaks on his cheeks and Bucky hated himself for how that made his eyes leak even more.

How long had it been since someone had wiped his tears away? And he had no idea that really, Steve was forcing himself not to kiss the tears away, let the salt seep between his lips, take Bucky's pain for his own.

Then a warm palm pressed against his forehead, grounding and sweet and Bucky's eyes slipped closed, he was so goddamn exhausted, as tired as Steve looked. The hand on his forehead slid into his hair and the warmth was replaced with Steve's forehead against his own.

Except this time, there was no quick pull away, just Steve's raggedy gasping breaths and the inescapable heat of his hands holding Bucky in place, close and forever and perfect. If Bucky could die right now without ruining Steve's life, he would.

Steve must have run out of rational arguments, his lips parted in gasping pain and blowing hot air over Bucky's chapped lips, his earlier logic morphed to desperate begging. "Please, please, don't leave me."

Squeezing his eyes shut tighter, Bucky drew in a shaky breath of his own. "It's not up to you anymore."

Why can't you let me do this?

Why did Steve care so goddamned much? He'd get over losing his best friend. He'd gotten over it once. He could fucking do it again. He'd be so much better off.

"B-buck--" Steve choked, and Bucky's hands itched to take Steve's jaw in his hands too, hold Steve so tight and close he could never get away, but instead they clenched into fists in his lap, fingernails of his right hand threatening to draw blood.

"My entire life," Bucky's voice cracked and he had to pause, breathe in and out, force himself calm.
"My entire life, I've been so afraid of the way...the way I've always been so ready die for you." He swallowed, metal hand prying one of Steve's hands away from his jaw, eyes still closed as he squeezed Steve's fingers too tightly, tried show Steve how much this meant. "But it's my turn now, Stevie. Can't you let me die for me?"

See, Stevie, look, finally doing something for me. The way you always said you wanted me too. Shouldn't Steve be proud of him? Finally choosing himself? Even if it was to save Steve.

What he hadn't expected was for Steve to start crying.

Bucky took Steve's hands off his face and leaned away, taken aback with the sudden curl of Steve's shoulders, the fisted hands that Bucky was holding by the wrists, the broken cries and flood of tears.

He let go of Steve's wrists, still kind of staring in shock, and the second Steve's hands were free they clutched onto Bucky, one fisting the front of his shirt and the other curling around his shoulder, thumb pressed hard into his collarbone as the pretty face tucked against Bucky's neck, fat wet tears cold against his skin as Steve clung to him like a child.

He was holding on hard enough to hurt, fingers inflicting real, dark bruises onto Bucky's skin. Wet, terrified noises tumbling out of his lips, no regard for his supersoldier strength or how he might be hurting Bucky.

Suddenly unsure for the first time today, Bucky lifted his left hand to stroke down Steve's back, head, something, to comfort him.

Only the metal glinted in the last light of the sunrise and the thought made him sick, a spiraling twist in his stomach at the idea of comforting Steve with that.

The metal impersonator fell back to his side and Bucky leaned his head against the wall, closing his eyes and centering himself in Steve's touch. In the pain. Focusing on the press of violence into already purpling bruises, settling into the feeling of reality.

That pain. He could feel it. He'd always been able to feel it, but for so long, he'd detached himself.

It doesn't have to be yours, the doctors had told him. Detach yourself from your body and you don't have to own that pain.

It was how he'd survived.

But the more he focused on the sharp sensations, the more his mind was sharpening. Like someone was clearing cobwebs. Shining sparkling clarity into dull metal pieces.

That was his collarbone that Steve was bruising. His. His neck that was wet with Steve's tears, his ears that were picking up the sounds of Steve's crying.

He could own that pain again if he wanted to. He could center himself in it and he could attach his body to his mind.

He could choose himself again. He could sink back into this skin.

He'd have to feel pain again -
was
it
worth
it?

Steve needed comfort right now, but Bucky didn't know how to give it to him. And Bucky needed words, but Steve didn't know what to say.

It was just as well when the elevator opened and the recon squad came rushing in.

*

Bucky stared ahead numbly as they approached, didn't move or blink as Sam's strong hands tugged at Steve's arm to detach him from Bucky.

Steve wasn't having any of it.

His hands dug in deeper and Bucky's lips parted in a sharp inhale - that had hurt. That had hurt.

Sam tugged Steve again. Clint grabbed his other arm to help. Steve was weak with exhaustion, everyone could tell the moment his body began to cave. That's when he started screaming.

"No! No!" He struggled, clinging to Bucky tighter. "No! I won't leave him! You don't understand, you d-don't--"

Steve tried to shrug them off but then his hands slipped, everything wet with tears, and Clint and Sam had him upright, one arm each, as Steve struggled, trying to sink back to the ground.

"You don't understand, I can't--" He turned his attention away from the interferers, eyes wild as they met Bucky's again, as he tried to lunge forward. "I can't lose you. Bucky, I can't lose you."

Struggling, trying to shove Sam and Clint away as they started to drag him backwards. "I CAN'T LOSE YOU!!"

Bucky was still staring ahead blankly, but some distant part of him recognized that his cheeks were wet again, that there were tears streaking down the passive, numb expression on his face.

"I've got him," Natasha promised, cupping a hand on Steve's tear-streaked cheek as he tried to break away from the three of them. "Steve, I've got him. I'm gonna talk him down, okay? I promise. You can trust me."

Wide blue eyes blinked at her, more water welling up in them and Natasha grabbed his hand, squeezing tight, deadly serious. "I need you to trust me, Steve. I won't let you lose him."

He struggled for a few more seconds, then the fight just flew out of him, too physically worn down to do anything but slump over, entirely deflated. Clint and Sam both cursed, readjusting their grips and propping him back up, holding him as upright as possible as they started to pull him away.

Natasha walked with them a few steps, and Bucky could hear the quiet whispers still tumbling out of Steve's mouth. Don't leave me don't leave me don't leave me.

"Are you sure you can handle him?" Clint asked, voice hushed. The distant part of his brain that was still working registered the words but he didn't care, couldn't care about anything except that his shoulder was throbbing and Steve was crying, being dragged away.

"I'll knock him unconscious before I let him kill himself, okay? He's emotional, which means I'm
faster.” Natasha’s voice was sure, steady, and he got to see Natalia Romanovna for the first time.
Today was a lot of firsts.

Bucky closed his eyes and waited for the tranquilizer shot to come.

~*~*~

Once they’d wrestled Steve into the bathroom on Sam/Thor’s floor - it was closest - Clint left with a
salute, saying he’d go help Natasha with Barnes. Which left Sam with the crazed, oversized lunatic
that was barely recognizable.

When he’d been passed up on his morning runs by Captain America, this was not exactly what he’d
had in mind for the future.

The clear, cold water that Sam splashed in his face was the best thing Steve'd felt in days. After
spluttering and blinking, he stood up from the bathtub edge - carefully, because his legs were wobbly
- and splashed more water on his own.

Behind the cupped safety of his hands, he was okay. Then, after enough cold had washed the salty
 tear stains from his cheeks, he felt at least alive enough to breathe.

Sam kept a steadying hand on his shoulder as they made their way to the kitchen counter. Steve
 propped himself on one of the tall bar stools, both elbows on the counter in front of him, focusing on
his breathing as Sam sat down beside him.

His lungs were too small in his chest, maybe all the crying had made them shrink, or maybe the
moment he’d punched that asshole in the alley his body had reverted back to pre-serum on the inside,
making him weak all over again.

Except he’d never felt this useless back then.

Steve buried his face in his hands, hair probably poking in a thousand directions, the epitome of a
walking disaster as Sam ran a hand over his shoulders.

"You gotta pull it together man. You can't help him if you're a mess." Sam's words were gentle,
kind, and Steve slumped over, fingers threading through his hair. He was so goddamned tired.

“Sam, I don't know how to help him through this." His voice sounded distant, exhausted. Shell-
shocked. The hand on his back stilled, holding onto his shoulder with a solid grip.

"I know it's a lot. It's scary, watching someone you love so close to the edge. You're afraid you'll say
the wrong thing, tip them off the cliff, and then it's on your hands. There's not a lot worse than that
fear. But look, man, he trusts you. More than everyone else. He needs you for this one.”

That same calm, dedicated voice had once told him that Bucky was beyond saving. Now Sam was
telling him the exact opposite and Steve should be elated that someone else had hope, only he was
crushed, he couldn't blink without the image of Bucky with a gun aimed at himself engraved in his
eyelids.

"I can't do it, Sam. I wish to God I could, I want to save him more than anything, but I can't. Of all
people, I can't. Where could I even start?” He lifted his head, dropping his arms back on the table
and counting as he breathed in and out, backing out of the panic attack before it could start.

“Okay, well...” Sam's hand left his shoulder, leaning on the counter next to him to catch Steve's gaze. "Look, think back to times when you had it bad. Rumor has it you didn't take Bucky's death too well back in '45, right? Half outta your mind with grief. So focus on that.”

Steve looked at him incredulously, sitting up straighter on his stool. “How the hell would that help??”

“Well, it was the darkest time of your life, but you found a way out.” The color drained from Steve's face but Sam didn't notice, kept barreling on. "You have to show him how; there was something that made you pull through-“

“Dammit, no!” Steve shoved off his barstool, turning to the shocked look on Sam's face and throwing a hand up in the air. "That's the whole point, Sam! I didn't make it out!! Didn't you read about the damn plane crash?“

He stopped to catch his breath, grabbing the counter with one hand while Sam's eyebrows furrowed, looking confusedly between Steve and the curled hand threatening to break his countertop.

"But...that was an accident. You can't blame yourself. The plane going down, there was nothing you could do--“

And that was the final straw. Steve pushed off the counter, fists clenched at his sides, kicking the barstool out of the way and ignoring it as it clattered to the floor.

"Nothing I could do?" He laughed, the sound echoing around the room, waiting until the echoes returned in silence, empty, quiet and peaceful. "Nothing I could do," Steve repeated. Then he took a step closer to Sam, one hand in the air ticking off fingers as he counted.

"You mean like use a fucking parachute? Drop the bombs into the ocean? Let Peggy reroute the aircraft? Get Stark on the radio to dismantle the missiles?" Four fingers up, another step closer as he started shaking, sticking his thumb up for number five. "Or even just jump out of the damn thing?“

His voice broke on the word jump.

When Steve had fallen from the helicarrier, Bucky had jumped in after him. When Bucky had fallen the train, Steve hadn't bothered.

He could've jumped out of the plane. He could've jumped off the goddamned train.

Maybe Bucky wouldn't feel the need to shoot himself if he thought Steve actually cared about him.

The tears started overflowing and Steve would be surprised he had tears left, if he weren't too busy breaking down crying.

“W-when the plane hit, swim to the surface? Or maybe climb out once it settled in the ice and I was st-still awake? When the ice started to wrap--" he gasped a breath, clutching his counting hand over his chest now to keep from collapsing, "--wrap around my bones, do something besides curl up in a ball? When my body tried to float to the surface, don't t-tuck my shoulder under the pilot's chair so I would stay under?"

"Maybe hold my breath while my body still could, instead of inhaling arctic slush into my lungs? Choose to fucking live to honor B-Bucky's memory instead of...“
Steve covered his eyes with a hand, ragged wet breaths gasping between his words now. "Instead of dying with him like some...some unrequited Shakespearean story? Pull myself out of the goddamn plane..."

His hands clenched into fists and he pressed them to his temples, folding in half as he squeezed his eyes shut and the words of his soul got ripped out of his chest. "P-pull myself out of the goddamn plane so I could go find my best friend before he's t-tortured for seventy years??"

The weight of the words dropped from above like an anvil and he crumpled to the ground, unable to stand on two feet any longer.

He'd hated himself for letting Bucky fall. So much.

But that wasn't the worst part.

No, the worst of the guilt was buried deeper.

Because, rationally, he knew that Bucky falling from the train wasn't preventable. Steve had reached. He'd tried.

But you know what he hadn't tried?

To find his best friend.

He'd known.

He'd sat in their tent with his sketchpad in his hands and he'd known in his soul that Bucky was still alive out there somewhere.

And he'd chosen to listen to physics instead of his heart.

He'd chosen rationality over his own soul.

He'd done worse than let Bucky die, he let Bucky get captured by Hydra, he let Bucky get tortured, he let Bucky become the Winter Soldier.

Why?

"I couldn't live without him," Steve whimpered, rocking in his ball, the guilt eating his inside like a parasite.

Because he'd been so goddamned selfish.

"It's not your fault," Bucky'd told him on their road trip. Like it was a blessing. Like it was a goddamned hail mary.

Bucky was the one who fell

but Steve's soul was the one that went down

and Steve was the one who died.

"I COULDN'T DO IT!!"

In a red blur Steve shot out off the ground, stumbling to his feet, wrapping his arms around himself, screams wrenched out of his throat like a monster was caving its way free from between his lips,
shattering his soul and spilling it on the ground like the broken glass of a sinking plane.

"MY OWN SELFISH, STUPID FUCKING FEELINGS GOT IN THE WAY AND I KILLED MYSELF WHEN I SHOULD HAVE BEEN SAVING, HIM."

With a sob, Steve's shoulders shook and he started to fall to his knees, crushed under the weight of it all again, except that strong arms wrapped around his waist from behind and caught him.

Always catching him.

Steve dug his fingers into the metal arm over his stomach and dipped his head forward, crying openly now as another hand pushed through his hair, gentle lips murmuring and whispering against his ear.

"Shhh, shh. I've got you. I'm not ever letting go. I'm never letting go, Stevie. I promise."

Chapped lips pressed a kiss to his ear and Steve let his body go slack in Bucky's arms, collapsing against his weight as Bucky lowered them carefully to the floor. He curled up between Bucky's legs, turning his face into the solid warm chest and clinging to his back and shoulders.

Bucky tucked his chin on top of Steve's head and smoothed his strong hands down Steve's back, tears in his eyes as he mouthed thank you over Steve's crown at Sam.

Sam blinked, wiping tears off his cheeks and nodding weakly. He was still stunned, as exhausted as the shaking body in Bucky's arms felt. At least it wasn't the shocked, betrayed look Sam'd had on his face earlier when Steve had first start spurting off about the plane crash.

Bucky'd been watching from the shadows of the doorway.

He ran his fingers through soft blonde hair, relishing the warm brushes against his right and the gentle tingle against his left. Steve was still crying and Bucky closed his eyes, tightening his grip around Steve's ribs now, cradling him tight against his body.

"I know. I know. I know," he murmured in Steve's ear, heels of his hands rubbing comforting circles over Steve's spine. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry, babydoll. I've got you now."

He ducked his head to press a kiss to Steve's temple, the heavy feeling washing over him making him close his eyes, nestle his nose in Steve's hair and just breathe.

Steve was here.

They were both here.

"It's okay," Bucky promised breathlessly, pressing another kiss to the corner of Steve's forehead. Fuck.

This was his Stevie. His stupid, reckless, Stevie. As shocked and mortified as he was, there was some part of him that took it and rolled. Some part of him that wasn't surprised, that'd always suspected. Even before the plane, he used to joke around, 'I think you like getting punched,' but he was always afraid it was something more.

Something deeper.

So, no, now that he knew, he wasn't that surprised.

He was just so so sorry that he wasn't there to save Steve from that.
"B-buck..." Steve choked, lifting his pretty tear-stained face from Bucky's chest. Bucky cupped Steve's perfect jaw, holding his gaze as a few tears streaked down his own cheeks too.

"Listen to me. I need you to listen, okay, Captain Rogers?" Steve nodded weakly and Bucky breathed out shakily, pressing another quick kiss to Steve's forehead before leaning backwards again and catching his gaze, holding it with every ounce of seriousness in his bones. "I was afraid, but I'd known Zola'd done something. I knew about the serum. It was my fault I never had the guts to tell you. It's not on you."

A pained whimper escaped Steve's mouth and Bucky could swear that might turn into a protest, so he pressed his index finger on Steve's lips, forcing him quiet.

"It's not on you. Okay? Steve? I need you to know that."

A weak nod. Bucky raised an unimpressed eyebrow, tilting his head. Steve huffed a breathy laugh, and nodded again, this time stronger.

It'd have to do for now. Bucky gathered Steve into his arms again, crushing him as tight as he wanted because he knew now that Steve wasn't going to break.

Neither of them were going to.

A few minutes later and Bucky pulled Steve to his feet, clapping a hand to his jaw the way Steve had when he'd rescued Bucky from Azzano all those years ago.

"Don't you forget it," Bucky told him, then he nodded over Steve's shoulder at Sam, immeasurably grateful, and taken a few steps backwards. He backed all the way out of the room, eyes on Steve the whole time, pausing at the doorway to give Steve another concerned look, before pointing at Sam and making his fix it face.

Steve gave him a little wave and choked on a weak laugh before turning away, straightening his barstool on its feet and scooting it back in place guiltily.

Sam was watching him wearily and at least Steve hadn't hit anything, hadn't totally broken Sam's trust. In a shaky move of hopefulness, Steve opened his arms up and looked at Sam sheepishly, because honestly Sam may want to move out now, not hug Steve, but then there were two more strong arms wrapping around his back and Steve ducked his face on Sam's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Sam," he managed, then Sam pulled back, his hand clapping on Steve's bicep and holding tight.

"Don't apologize. Seriously, what else am I here for but to listen to my childhood hero vent?" Steve laughed, wiping the tears on his cheeks. "Although I have to admit I'm pretty glad Barnes showed up, because I was at a loss of words there."

"Yeah, well. I'm pretty glad he showed up too." Good thing he was already flushed red from crying, or else Sam would see the way his cheeks blushed dark at that.

Although, honestly? He'd just seen them crying it out on the floor. Blushing about his feelings for Bucky seemed...frivolous, now.

Bucky'd almost died.

They sat back down on the barstools, considerably calmer now - or more likely, finally crashing after the exhaustion of all of that - and Steve toyed with the edge of the counter, thinking out loud while
Sam listened patiently.

“You know - after all this time, I never really considered how much we have in common. I mean, the two of us, all we've been through? I was so guilty for so long...and of course he understands. It's Bucky. Even when I had nothing..." Steve trailed off and Sam huffed a silent laugh, filling in the words for him.

"...you had Bucky. Yeah." Sam nodded, looking pensively off in the distance. "He's a good friend."

Steve almost laughed. Instead he looked up sharply, Sam's words playing again in his head. A good friend. How freaking inadequate.

Friends. That's what they were supposed to be, right? Best friends?

They'd never dated. Technically, Bucky wasn't an ex-boyfriend.

But he was an ex-something. An ex maybe.

All of those almost-kisses? Almost-confessions? The conversations they were always on the verge of having?

An ex almost.

Who the fuck had Steve been kidding for the past century?

He looked across the kitchen out one of the wall-length windows, where the sun had disappeared under the horizon and New York was beginning to light up in all of its shining glory. Stars, in an endless sky. This star wanted its endless sky.

And there was nothing stopping him now. The very worst thing about himself, the darkest deepest part of him - killing himself. Bucky knew. Bucky knew and Bucky understood and Bucky had held him for it.

They'd been made for each other.

Who the fuck had Steve been kidding?

Steve looked down at his hands, the ones that'd let Bucky fall, made him cower in fear. The ones that wanted to be laced between Bucky's fingers for eternity.

"We always looked each other too long to be just friends," Steve told Sam, lifting his eyes from his hands to meet Sam's wide-eyed gaze.

Silence, the ticking of a clock in the hallway.

Tick

tick

tick

"It's about damn time you admitted that!" Sam shoved Steve's shoulder and Steve laughed, throwing his head back to the sky, exalting sound echoing through the floor.

He'd never felt so free.

Sam laughed too, then they were both gasping breaths and giggling and Steve nearly fell off his
barstool and they were both laughing harder. He'd been such an idiot for such a long time, that had to be a record.

"Sam, Sam, hold on," Steve gasped, holding out his hand, signaling for them to fall into silence. The quiet settled and Steve looked out the window at the New York skyline again, the bridge he knew was in the distance.

“Sam. I have to tell him.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to each and every one of you who have stuck in here for this long what a crazy journey right

I promise things are looking up from here, like way way way up, so. Stick around?

I'm so sorry for all of that ^^^^^ hell but it was in my head and it needed to happen I think especially considering the way their story has been in the past and...

Anyways. Thank you again everyone. So much. Much love xx

(P.S. If anyone wants to talk to me on my tumblr, I finally figured what the hell, can't stay anonymous forever.)
When you finally come to the realization you need to tell your best friend you've been in love with them your entire life, unfortunately the world doesn't just present the perfect opportunity for you to do so.
The ex-SHIELD communications line picked up a fleet of Hydra-controlled fighter jets at an airport in North Carolina. Natasha said it'd be good for everyone if Steve came along while Bucky took a few days at the tower. And surprisingly, Bucky agreed. So Steve was back in full uniform, sneaking around an aircraft hanger with Natasha and Sam while Bucky was doing god knows what alone in the tower.

Sam was still raving about what a badass he was, how that last plane he'd blown up had sent pieces everywhere and Natasha was rolling her eyes and offering side comments about how true badasses didn't have to say it and Steve was laughing at everyone's antics, swinging himself into the belly of their plane home and popping his helmet off, putting it back on its shelf. Natasha ruffled his fucked up hair as she passed and Steve threw his bundled jacket at her, which Sam snatched out of the air and tossed back at his chest.

The post-victory high was suddenly interrupted by the loud thrumming of Steve's phone, the familiar drumroll that started Star-Spangled Man because it was a Stark phone and Steve had no idea how to change his ringtone. He'd left his phone on the center console of the plane so Natasha grabbed it first, reading the screen and tipping her mouth up in that mischievous smile.

"Your boyfriend's calling." She quirked an eyebrow, holding the phone out to Steve. His cheeks flushed red, which made Natasha look even more amused, but he couldn't fight the growing smile at the teasing words. It wasn't true, not yet, but it might be soon and the idea of Bucky being his...

"Isn't it a little late to be calling? It's like...2am in New York." Sam unlaced and wrestled his boot off with a worried crease between his eyebrows while Natasha held the phone playfully out of Steve's reach.

"It's not late if it's a booty call," Natasha suggested with a wink and Steve went bright red at that, lunging forward to snatch the phone before it stopped ringing. Or Natasha could say more to make him blush.

"Alright, that's enough of that. Everybody quiet." Steve slid the green answer button and waved Natasha and Sam off with a hand, pressing the phone to his ear and taking a few steps towards the back of the plane. "Hey, Bucky."

"Steve?"

The word was enough to stop Steve's heart; breathy and destroyed, and he doubted it was due to Natasha's suggestion.

"Buck, hey, what's wrong? Are you okay?" The plane had fallen silent behind him but he still paced all the way to the back, as far from everyone as he could get, cursing himself for coming along when Bucky had been in such a volatile place.

"I-I...I can't stop sh-shaking, Stevie," Bucky choked over the line and Steve screwed his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose and forcing himself to breathe.

"Hey, hey. Just talk to me sweetheart, tell me what's going on." He didn't have time to get mad at himself for the slip of the petname because a quiet sob broke over the phone and clenched his chest in pain.

"It-it's...so. So bad tonight, please. I t-ried to sleep, but. But they came after me and I c-can't breathe and nobody could hear me scream--"

"Fuck. Fuck, I'm so sorry. I'm right here, Bucky. Listen to my voice, I'm right there beside you,
"Alright?"

"St-steve..."

"I came barging in your room like I always do when you have nightmares and you threw a knife at me like always but I'm getting good, I'm getting used to the way you train me so I ducked and came rushing to your side. And I grabbed both your shaking hands and held them in mine, forced you to breathe with me, alright? C'mon, in, two three. And out, two three. One more time. In...out. There we go. Are we doing any better?"

"...I'm still shaking a little. But I can...I can breathe okay." His voice was barely above a whisper but the plane was dead silent now and Steve could hear every word.

"Alright. Then, if you'd let me, I'd wrap you up in blankets, the way you used to when I was all sick and coughy?" He got a tiny huff of a laugh at that, but it was accompanied by the shifting sound of fabric on the other side, so maybe Bucky really was wrapping himself up in blankets for once. "And I'd sit on the edge of your bed and tell you dumb stories until you passed out or kicked me out."

"T-tell me one now?"

"Course, Buck. In fact, I'll tell you all about this mission we just completed. I didn't do anything stupid, you'll be happy to hear. But Sam's promoted himself to badass level now, even if Natasha is reluctant to allow another one of those around..."

~*~*~

"Morning," Steve sat a mug of coffee on the table in front of Bucky, sure to steer clear of the sketchpad in case of a spill. "Whatcha up to?"

All he got was a disgruntled noise in reply and Steve bit back his smile, peering over Bucky's shoulder and definitely not missing how this would be the perfect moment to kiss Buck's cheek, or the top of his head, a simple, chaste goodmorning kiss. What kind of life would that be, greeting Buck each morning with a kiss over coffee...

"How can you see what you're drawing with all this hair hanging in your eyes?" Steve pinned back the dark hair on one side, thumb brushing soft against Bucky's temple. Those sharp crystal eyes never left the paper. But he wasn't giving up that easy, he was gonna prove to Buck how sorry he was for being gone the other night, how he was right here, not planning on leaving anytime soon.

Another few breaths of silence and Steve hummed contemplatively, stepping behind Bucky's chair and tugging a hairband off his wrist. He'd been carrying them with him for a while, ever since that day in the gym Bucky'd had to steal Pepper's. He'd told himself it was for convenience, but now that he was no longer bullshitting himself - he liked running his fingers through brunette, liked the tight band around his wrist reminding him of his best friend everytime he looked down.

With a few fingerbrushed strokes, Steve gathered Bucky's hair into a quick ponytail, catching the extras and pulling them tight enough to wrap the elastic around long silky strands, pinning them outta the way.

"And now you can see," Steve declared with a flourish. Bucky sighed, leaning back in his chair and tapping his pencil agitatedly against the table.

"Not like it makes a difference, can't draw for shit."

As an artist he felt like socking anyone who looked at his sketchpad while he was still drawing, but
Buck'd never allowed himself enough pride to be uptight about his work. So Steve propped his chin on Bucky's head and made clicking sounds, looking over the half-shaded sketch. It was a crude drawing of the Chrysler building, only the lines were all dull and thick.

"What kinda pencil are you usi-- no wonder you're frustrated, this thing has no point left, idiot." Steve snatched Bucky's pencil away from him, holding it up exaggeratedly in the light and clutching a hand over his heart.

But Bucky didn't smile, just sighed and ran four fingers over his forehead, thumb on his temple. "The pencil sharpener's really fuckin' loud."

"Oh." Steve sat the pencil down and Bucky scowled at it.

"Yeah."

Well that killed the mood. Steve shifted his weight, leaning against the breakfast table to study Buck for a moment.

"...I'm surprised you didn't sharpen it with one of your three thousand knives," he tried, voice casual enough to make it a joke.

"Was gonna, but it's your pencil, didn't know how you'd feel." Bucky crossed his arms over his chest, glaring moodily at his drawing, so Steve scooped the pencil up again and sat it on the sketchpad.

"It's your pencil now."

"You don't have to--"

"It's a pencil, Buck. Take it."

"You playin' sweet on me now, Rogers?" The corner of his mouth curled up in a ghost of his old smile and Steve wished that was the only reason his heart stopped. Just one'a Buck's teasing rhetorical questions, only he had no idea how true Steve wanted that to be.

But he could handle it. He'd handled it for years. So he lifted an eyebrow, shooting a sly glance over his shoulder as he headed back into the kitchen. "Don't you wish, Barnes."

It's not what he should've said. The vaguely amused look on Buck's face was eating him up because god, he should've leaned over the table and whispered if you'd let me, Buck, I'd be honored. But it wasn't the right time, his pulse was thudding but. It was just. Well.

A lifetime of pining should be confessed over something more than a pencil, right?

Or.

Or maybe Steve was terrified outta his fucking mind of getting rejected.

That too.

He needed to tell Bucky, yes, but...but he'd like to know if those feelings were anywhere near mutual before he poured out his soul. And staring at Bucky's ducked head as he started carving the tip of the pencil with a knife, his hair swept up by Steve's hands without so much as a thank you, Steve couldn't help but wonder if Bucky took him for granted, or if he was as terrified of this thing as Steve was.
Bright sunlight when you haven't slept in four days is not a fun experience for anyone, but with enhanced sight it's basically torture. And Bucky knew a lot about torture.

But Steve had done that cute eyebrows-furrowed hopeful-puppy look and there was no argument, Bucky was defenseless. So he trudged along beside Steve, fending off interested glances with his favorite "so outta your league" glance he'd been giving girls on Steve's behalf since the operation.

And it felt even more like the old days than usual because Steve had actually done something with the dandelion poof of his hair - not that Bucky minded the disheveled, fucked out look, lord knows he did not mind that at all - slicking it down the way he used to in the war, curving and proper, and with the bright Central Park sky beating down on the golden strands, Bucky was getting burnt from more than one sun.

The ground was gross from melting snow so they found an empty park bench atop a cheerful hill and Bucky had sat down for all of three seconds before Steve's head was in his lap. He threw up his hands in feigned exasperation but Steve ignored him, shoving a sketchpad upwards and Bucky remembered this perfectly. The last time he'd held Steve's sketchbook was in the war, under a canopy of shady forest and fuck, that day had been amazing.

But he dutifully took the sketchbook in hand now, holding it up so Steve could draw whatever the hell he was looking at this time. And the same stabbing pencil told his thumb to move, the same escaped strands of blonde hair rustled against Steve's forehead in the wind.

"Hey Buck," Steve's voice drew him outta his thoughts and his gaze snapped down, raising his eyebrows as he realized the sketchpad was resting on Steve's chest and Steve was holding something out to him with his free hand. His right hand was still trapped under the sketchpad so he reached out with gloved fingers, gingerly taking the green stem.

"What's this?"

"A dandelion."

"Like you?"

"I'm not a dandelion, weirdo. You make a wish and blow the seeds out." Steve pointed at the white puff perching above the black gloves and Bucky faux-glared down at him.

"I know what a dandelion is, I'm ninety-six Steve, I'm not dead."

Steve's mouth gaped open for a moment before he narrowed his eyes, hissing an accusatory "Natasha," then Bucky was laughing and Steve crossed his arms over his chest in an adorable pout. "What did she tell you?"

"That you had to go to Jersey."

"That all?"

"Yeah, she totally failed to mention how you guys madeout in public to escape surveillance."

"Okay, first of all, we did not makeout, and secondly, it was her idea. Besides, you know how it is in the field, Buck. You do what you gotta do." Steve shrugged lightheartedly and Bucky pursed his lips, inspecting the dandelion fluff a little closer.
"We never madeout to escape surveillance," Bucky pondered casually, squinting at the dandelion like it held the answers to the universe. He didn't miss the sudden hitch in Steve's breath though, the way those blue eyes got a fraction wider before he schooled his face into a mask like the ones Bucky wore.

"No, we didn't." Quiet, the same playful tone Bucky'd carried. "It's a shame, really."

"Bleedin' shame," Bucky agreed, holding the dandelion up higher and refusing to look down at Steve. It was all a joke, it was always a joke with them, but he didn't want that confirmation right now. And he knew that's exactly what he'd see if he looked down - he was too good at reading people now, he'd see the easy laughter in Steve's eyes while his own insides were being ripped apart.

"That what you're wishin' for?" Steve pushed, nudging Bucky's stomach with his shoulder. That's right, he had to make a wish.

He'd always loved shit like this when he was a kid, wishing on shooting stars, four-leaf clovers, whatever excuse he had to wish another day of health on that punk kid who made his chest feel too tight.

Now, though, Steve was healthy. They both had anything they could imagine. So what of wishes? Last week, his only wish was to be dead.

"Got bigger things to wish for than making time with a fella like you," Bucky murmured, spinning the thin stem between his fingers, words distant and muddled, underwater.

"I'm the best kind of fella you could get," Steve argued, prodding Bucky's arm. Only Bucky wasn't listening, he was puckering his lips and thinking about death.

The white fluff exploded, a dozen little seeds caught on the wind of Bucky's breath and fluttering through the air, drifting out of sight.

"Maybe," he replied, staring at the empty dandelion stem and wondering which wish his mind had been on when it counted.

The wish to stay alive?

Or the wish for Steve to let him die?

~*~*~

As amazing as Steve in workout attire was, there was nothing like an empty gym to clear your mind. So Steve got kicked out of Bucky's training sessions - although Bucky was 99% sure he stole away to the second floor to watch from the shadows anyways. But if he put headphones in and turned up as loud as possible, he could pretend he didn't notice and focus on his work.

Tony'd gotten him an iPod and it was hands-down the best gift he'd ever received. Because music didn't care what mood you were in or if you didn't reply, music didn't judge or worry or hate. Behind the veil of someone else's words he didn't have to hide anything, he could listen to bands shout all his thoughts for him.

It was therapeutic really, even if it was disconcerting how well some of the songs fit his psyche. But when he was practicing his standing backflips or building-fall routine, it was kinda great to have his internal dialogue played over a loud bass.
He was probably at it for a couple hours before his muscles felt exhausted enough to warrant a hot shower. Bucky dropped from the rafters where he'd been doing pullups, landed in a careful roll, and yanked the headphones outta his ears, tossing the iPod down in the middle of the mat so he could sprint into the shower room without worrying about getting it wet.

Bucky'd been gone for no more than twenty seconds when Steve ventured into the gym, glancing around cautiously before making his way to the center of the room, plopping down cross-legged on the thick blue mat and scooping up Bucky's music thing, untangling the headphones and lighting up the screen. He was curious, is all. Bucky looked pretty damn into the music, working out strenuously to the beat in his ears, losing himself in the sound.

You can tell a lot about a person through their music choices, and honestly Steve could use some workout music that wasn't suggested by Jarvis.

He stretched out on the mat, pressing the headphones into his ears and holding the iPod above him as he thumbed to the playlist labeled *Top 25 Most Played*. See, Stark, he wasn't a total imbecile with technology.

Steve picked the *top song* and closed his eyes to listen.

It started with a heartbeat.

It all went downhill from there.

*This is gospel for the fallen ones, locked away in permanent slumber. Cryochambers and the fallen ones? Assembling their philosophies from pieces of broken memories.*

Well. Buck sure knew how to pick songs that fit him well. It didn't sound too dark, which was promising. He focused hard on the lyrics, wondering if this was 'the beat of my heart' to Bucky, like the song said.

For someone who'd considered themselves a machine for so long, admitting to a beating heart might be really good news. Steve hummed to himself, just on the bright side of hopeful.

*But they haven't seen the best of us yet...*

In his defense, he wasn't familiar with this kind of music, let alone the lyrics. And he'd had certain concerns on his mind lately, so maybe that was why he heard the next line all wrong.

*If you love me, let me die*, the music poured over Steve's ears and his eyes shot right open. *If you love me, let me die... 'cause these words are knives enough to leave scars; the fear of falling apart. And truth be told, I never was yours. The fear, the fear of falling apart.*

He couldn't breathe. This song, *this* song was Bucky's favorite? Fuck. No, no, no.

Already regretting his stupid music-bonding decision, Steve covered his eyes with a hand and turned the volume louder. If he was gonna do this, he might as well brace himself and take it.

*This is gospel for the vagabonds, ne'er-do-wells and insufferable bastards. Confessing their apostasies, led away by imperfect impostors.*

Who the hell wrote songs like this? Apostasies? But that wasn't the line that made his breath hitch, his heart fill with guilt.

*Don’t try to sleep through the end of the world...* seventy years, the end of their world, and Steve had
been weak, chosen a coma over the pain of looking for his best friend.

...and bury me alive - in a tomb of snow at the bottom of a ravine and Steve'd known in his heart, he'd known all along and Bucky knew too, he had to.

Why was this so fitting?

He wasn't taking as much comfort as he could in 'Cause I won't give up without a fight, because how could he when the rhyming line that came next was if you love me let me die?

The fear of falling apart.

But knives? Really? Were Steve's words the knives that left scars? If you love me, let me die. He'd basically said that exact same thing to Steve when Steve'd found him with a gun in his hand. That if Steve cared about him, he'd let him do this.

But for some reason, when the song looped into the repetitive bridge, it wasn't that line that hurt the most. The whole song was making Steve ache inside, the idea of if you love me let me die was enough to make him want to curl up in a ball and cry.

And the fear of falling apart - Bucky was afraid of losing himself, the control he'd built, the way he'd put down the gun? He was afraid of what would happen if he fell apart and lost it, and if Bucky was scared? Steve was terrified.

The stinger, though? The words that were digging under Steve's skin and flaying him from the inside out?

And truth be told, I never was yours.

He wasn't.

He never had been.

Bucky had never been Steve's and he was pretty sure that until this moment, Steve had never realized how much Bucky wasn't his. And clearly, if this was the most played song? Bucky felt that exact same way.

As scary as the rest of Bucky's thoughts were, the idea that through all of this, through everything they'd ever had even when I had nothing I had Bucky, Steve'd been wrong. Buck was his best friend sure, but that didn't mean he was Steve's. He was only Steve's if he thought of himself that way - each other's other half, even if only as best friends. Steve'd always thought-- Everything he'd sacrificed, everything he'd given -

Truth be told?

Bucky had never been his.

The song ended and Steve tugged out the headphones, staring up at the gym ceiling. What the hell was he supposed to do? He'd treaded into territory too deep to fess up to, but he couldn't pretend he'd never heard either.

God, Buck was hurting so bad.

This was nowhere near over, was it? He'd thought because he'd talked Bucky down once they'd be fine now? What had changed between now and when Bucky'd been aiming the muzzle of a gun at
himself?

Just that he knew Steve had done the same thing. Which had changed things - clearly, Bucky was still alive - but it wasn't enough.

He had to do something. What the hell could he do? Bucky was surrounding himself in these dark clouds and it was like he didn't want to see the sun on the other side. Then...what if Steve showed him? Maybe he didn't want to see the sun on his own, but what if Steve carried him into the light?

Rhetorically, because Bucky would probably kill him before he let Steve pick him up like a dame again. After he'd been shot in the war and Steve'd carried him bridestyle, he'd never stopped complaining.

Besides, this could actually be a really good opportunity...he could show Bucky how he felt instead of tell him. Show Bucky how much he loved him so he didn't have to go through the hell of saying it out loud without knowing how Buck felt first.

By extending his hand, he could show Buck he was extending his heart.

It was a brilliant idea, really. So Steve unlocked the iPod one more time, memorizing the name of the artist (why was the exclamation point in the middle of a sentence?) in case it proved useful.

He abandoned the iPod to its original position and got to researching. Three hours later and Bucky'd showered, helped Tony with one of his projects, and cut up a tray of apple slices, sitting down on the counter to his snack when Steve ventured into the kitchen, snagging an apple piece for himself and leaning next to Bucky's knee casually, letting him strike up mundane conversation for a few minutes while he sorted the perfect timing for his plan in his head.

It came, unsurprisingly, at the help of Tony again. Bucky was rambling something about one of Tony's projects and Steve pretended to suddenly remember something, lighting up and reaching over to tap Bucky distractedly.

"Speaking of Stark, he's been trying to accumulate me to modern music and he showed me this band I really like...Panic, uh. Panic at the Disco?"

And, like Steve predicted, Bucky lit up like a firecracker.

"You like Panic? Are you kidding me? That's awesome. Do you know Fall Out Boy too?"

"Um, no. I don't think so. But there's this one Panic song I'd love to show you, if you wanna hear?"

Bucky hopped off the counter, apples forgotten as he clapped his hands together, left whirring quietly as he looked at Steve with little-kid-eyes. God, Steve hadn't seen him that excited about something (that wasn't a lethal weapon) since the goddamned Science Expo in Queens.

Steve corralled him into his room and Buck took a second to look around. He'd been in here a few times after Steve's nightmares, but it'd always been dark and he had a feeling Buck hadn't exactly been paying attention to the decor.

Not that there was a lot of it, but he had started papering some of his drawings on the walls again. It made the place feel a little less immense and lonely.

"I like this one," Bucky commented, tapping his right index finger against the sketch of the Howling Commandos, laughing as they laid on the floor of a boat, staring at the sky and telling stories for Bucky's birthday. "That was a good day."
"It was," Steve agreed, plopping down on his bed and grabbing a pillow to stuff under his head, watching Bucky scan over the drawings for a few more moments before he remembered Steve was there and quickly turned around, shy smile on his face as he perched carefully on the edge of Steve's bed.

"C'mon, I don't bite." He patted the empty space next to him and Bucky rolled his eyes, but he kicked his feet up on the bed and stretched out next to Steve, reaching his arms over his head and arching his back like a cat before settling into the comforter and stealing Steve's other pillow. "You ready?"

"Mmhmm." Bucky closed his eyes and Steve selected the song on his iPod, letting Jarvis play it through the loudspeakers for full effect. It started with the sweet, high pitched slide of a violin and Bucky's mouth quirked up in a half-smile. "This is Panic?"

"Yep." Steve propped up on his elbow, free hand toying absentmindedly with the edge of Bucky's sleeve as he watched the flickers of his expression, memorized the sweeping wave of his dark hair as it fanned onto Steve's white pillow. They were laying so close, all peaceful and easy, and it was times like these that Steve was suddenly hit with how much he'd missed his best friend in the months that Bucky'd been gone.

But he was here now - and maybe, if Steve didn't panic (no pun intended) and stop the song before the lyrics hit, they might have a shot at being more than best friends.

He was really glad Bucky'd closed his eyes, and not just so he could stare and judge reactions to the song that would pour out his soul. This way, he was sure to listen, to really hear the music and what it was saying.

What Steve was saying.

*When the moon fell in love with the sun, all was golden in the sky, all was golden when the day met the night.* The beautiful pink lips parted, like he was about to say something already, then Bucky thought better of it, keeping silent as Steve's heart beat outta his goddamned chest.

He wasn't sure if Bucky remembered, but a long time ago he'd said that Steve was his own personal sun - that he lit up the whole damn world with that annoyingly bright light of his. The comment had made Steve's heart soar, but he had no idea if Buck would catch the reference after all that'd happened since.

*When the moon found the sun, he looked like he was barely hanging on.*

When Bucky'd first found him, pushed down by kids not much bigger than him; but Steve'd been so young and small and sick he'd started coughing the minute they shoved him to the ground.

*But her eyes saved his life, in the middle of summer.*

And Bucky'd swooped in, offered his hand, and Steve'd stared up in wonder.

*All was golden in the sky, all was golden when the day met the night.*

He'd asked Bucky, in his tiny little-kid voice, not even a proper three feet tall, why he'd bothered.

*Summer (summer)*

"I don't like bullies," Bucky'd replied.
All was golden...

Steve'd been toting that line ever since.

...when the day met the night.

Bucky shifted, and maybe it was Steve's imagination but it felt like it was closer. Then his hand was brushing the back of Steve's and that, that couldn't be Steve's imagination.

Hot summers and cold winters and plenty scraped knees, years later. A fire escape in Brooklyn, outside Steve's bedroom at his ma's place.

So he said, "Would it be alright, if we just sat and talked for a little while?"

A beautiful boy who'd been his childhood playmate, asking if maybe they could keep on bein' best friends, now that they were older. Steve couldn't imagine losing Bucky's friendship, but that didn't keep him from shoving Bucky's shoulder, "Yeah, jerk, what's in it for me?"

"If in exchange for your time, I give you this smile?"

The half-shocked giggle as he shoved Steve back - lightly - and his eyes opened up real nervous, for once, and that was the first time Steve realized Bucky Barnes really wasn't all bravado or smarts, he was as human as Steve was. "I can't offer much, but I do make a pretty good drawin' model, I thought."

So she said, "That's okay, as long as you can make a promise not to break my little heart, or leave me all alone -" in the summer.

Steve let himself soften for a moment at the vulnerability of Bucky's expression and scooted closer, pressing his tiny body against Bucky's side, taking his hand for no reason but to hold it, watching Steve's tiny white fingers disappear between Bucky's soft long ones. "You make a pretty good best friend, Bucky. Forever."

Bucky's eyes blinked open, slow like he wasn't seeing Steve's ceiling, like he was looking right through it at the same old memories Steve was.

He held his breath, waiting for the rejection, and then Bucky rolled his head across the pillow and the icy crystal blue locked on Steve's and they weren't angry, or pissed, or confused, just. Looking. Searching. Probably finding.

Well he was just hanging around, then he fell in love. A sharp intake of breath between Bucky's lips - Steve's chest might seize with anticipation, his heart was pounding so hard he was sure Buck could hear it.

And he didn't know how, but he couldn't get out. The crystal blues left Steve's then, squeezing shut tight, like the words had burned him, like they actually meant something, and if it weren't for the cold hand suddenly clutching his, Steve probably would've floated away.

Just hanging around, then he fell in love...

"Steve," Bucky rasped, face turned away, and the world hitched in Steve's chest, his fingers tightening around Bucky's, their whole universe pending on the edge of a golden cliff shaped the color of summer and sunshine.

It took him a few seconds to get his vocal chords functioning again, to squeeze out a quiet, pained,
"Yeah?"

_All was golden when the day met the night_

Bucky didn't reply, fingers curling hard enough to leave bruises in Steve's skin but god, he wanted them there, he wanted bruises anywhere Bucky'd give them to him, he wanted anything to prove to Bucky he was here, forever, his, forever,

_Summer, summer, summer,_

The breathing in the room was harsh and Bucky was still facing the wall, but the grip on his hand hadn't let go and he'd bet anything Buck's eyes were closed, letting the music wash over him.

_When the moon fell in love with the sun,_

And the sun fell in love with the moon, Steve wanted to say, wanted to make sure Bucky knew, but he was being pretty damn clear with this whole thing, wasn't he?

_All was golden in the sky, all was golden when the day met the night._

Bucky's balance of weight shifted and Christ, was he wiping a hand over his face? Had he made Bucky _cry_? He had no idea if he should be elated or mortified.

Either way, the next move was simple, no matter why Buck was sniffling. Wrapping Bucky up in his arms until he understood that Steve never ever wanted him to get away again.

_In the middle of summer, summer, summer, summer._

He closed the gap between them, one arm curling over Bucky's stomach, and he didn't even get the chance to tighten his grip before Bucky turned, sliding out from under Steve's arm and hopping off the bed.

"Bucky," Steve tried, sitting up and stretching for the closest shoulder, but Bucky shook his head and strode out of reach, keeping his back to Steve as he paused in the doorway. It didn't hide the way his left hand was clenched, his right fingers trembling as he ran them through his hair.

"Don't, I'm fine. I've just. I've gotta go."

Then Steve's door was closing softly behind him and Steve flopped back moodily on his bed, staring up at the ceiling and wondering how he'd managed to fuck everything up even _more_.

~*~*~

He hadn't been haunted by anything but the mirror in a long time. Until Steve showed him that song. It wasn't fair. What was he supposed to do with that?

Did Steve know? Was it the universe laughing at him? Some stupid coincidence? A platonic _I'm here for you_ gesture?

Or, the thought that was churning his stomach, was this another signature Rogers fight? Throwing himself down on the line - sacrificing his heart and his body to keep Bucky around. A reason to stay alive, at the cost of the truth.

Like offering himself to Bucky would save him from condemnation.

Bucky wanted to hurl.
But he'd really like to keep Rogers as far away as possible right now and puking in the bathroom was going to do the opposite.

So he ran.

He took Sam with him. For safety reasons. Wilson was surprised, but he gladly agreed. Bucky didn't let himself run ahead like Steve did, he kept it slow and focused on his breathing. It was more of a social exercise than an avoiding Steve exercise than a physical one, forcing himself to communicate and be congenial to others.

Sam Wilson was a great fucking person. He was funny, loyal, honest. Didn't push Bucky (anymore) about getting his head evaluated. Which was good, because Bucky had been taught plenty about evaluations so he could do on-the-job analyses and he knew exactly what was going on his head and it wasn't something Sam needed to see.

Steve didn't either. Sam was a great friend. Sam was the kind of friend Steve needed.

Sam didn't try to jump off buildings. Not without wings, anyways. Sam may not know how to stitch up Steve's broken skin like Bucky did, but he could probably stitch up that broken head. Steve needed help with nightmares and denied PTSD - Sam could help him.

Really, Bucky shouldn't be sticking around.

But if he disappeared, Steve would come looking for him. And there it's gone, full circle. Back to the only thing that felt like a solution. He was a burden and the very last thing Steve needed right now.

Running only worked for a few hours, then it was back to the tower. He worked out, read books, got caught up with the twenty-first century, tried to draw, and everything felt like endless scrolling, waiting for the next thing.

He found himself in Steve's art studio one day, because Steve was out and he had time and he'd always wanted to come in here but he'd never had the nerve.

He couldn't lift any of the drop cloths or walk up to the half-finished paintings on the walls; there was a possibility Steve had been painting him and Bucky wouldn't be able to handle that right now.

Instead he found the closet of empty canvases and set up an easel. Painting was different than sketching, because paint stroked on free and easy, didn't have to look like anything; there weren't any rules. Look at fucking Picasso.

He got about halfway through the covering the canvas when he realized what he was painting.

The skin and blacks and reds stared at him as he wiped a fallen piece of hair away from his forehead. Fuck. His forehead was hot as hell. Bucky put down the paintbrush carefully, placing both palms on his cheeks. His right hand supplied fever and his left hand felt like heaven, all that cold metal against his hot skin.

His shoulders hit the wall and he couldn't remember backing up but now he was sinking to the floor, shutting the haunting painting behind closed eyes and the cool touch of an unmovable solid. It was the only simple part of him anymore, as ironic as that was.

The fake, machine implant was the only thing he understood, the only thing that felt like it wasn't about to break any moment. And the funny thing was that his shoulder'd been killing him lately, acting up more and more, the nerve endings flaring in pain, the muscles cramping with the weight of his arm. Even his body was rejecting the easiest thing he had left.
One of the only things he had left.

God, he used to be so okay. He used to be balanced, powerful. What happened to kicking ass with Steve behind the secure safety of his Winter Soldier mask? What happened to the steady concentration of watching the world behind a silent sniper scope? What happened to laughing with the Howling Commandos around a campfire?

It'd gotten so difficult, so fucking complicated. And he'd, what, tried to give up?

What a fucking coward.

He'd been a lot of things in his life, but two weeks ago? That was the first time he'd been a coward. The biggest kind of performance error - machines don't turn themselves off. He was supposed to be better, supposed to be efficient and right and strong and all of the things normal people couldn't--

and he'd done the worst thing imaginable instead.

The world behind his eyes wasn't as dark as he deserved.

He sat on the floor holding his head in his hands so long that he didn't know what time it was anymore, that he couldn't find a single reason to ever move again.

So he hadn't expected it when the door swung open. Worse, he was way too fucking far out of his head to recognize it, to move before he got questions. Everything felt so distant, then there was a gentle hand on his arm and Bucky lifted his head from his drawn knees, blinking until the image swum into focus.

Steve. Of course, it was his art studio after all. Who else would come in here?

...

Bucky's brain didn't supply any commentary after that. He just looked.

"Hey," Steve said softly, his body crouched in front of Bucky's. He waited dully for the inevitable are you okay, maybe the slightly more thoughtful anything I can do? But it didn't come. Instead Steve's thumb rubbed gently along Bucky's right arm, not even looking too hopeful as he asked, "Can I look at your painting?"

That was odd. He'd never asked permission before, he'd always stolen Bucky's art and looked at it regardless of what Bucky protested. He didn't want to open his mouth, didn't feel like pressuring his vocal cords to engage. And shaking his head side to side would waste way more energy than a simple nod, which was the only reason Steve got a yes.

Blue eyes looked him over for a few moments then Steve stood, turning away from Bucky to look at the easel.

Bucky stared at Steve's shoes and curled his fingers tighter on his elbows, hoping the dull sensation might hurt enough to shake his mind into clarity. That had worked once, when Steve's hands had been bruising his collarbones, pressing hard fingers into wounds - sharpening Bucky's mind and forcing him back into his body.

He'd wanted his body, then. He'd wanted to feel pain, to own that, to become everything that his vessel was. But the sensation had dulled and his own hands, right now, weren't doing anything. For whatever reason, it wasn't enough when the metal fingers left bruises. It wasn't clear like Steve's hands were.
"Can I keep this?" The words sounded very very far away and really, if Bucky kicked out his foot he'd knock Steve over, there was no reason for it to sound like Steve was in New Jersey. He still didn't want to open his mouth though, didn't want the vulnerability of parting his lips.

"No?" Steve prompted. Bucky didn't move. "Yes?" he asked, like it was totally normal for Bucky to refuse speaking. No condescending tone, no confusion, as though Bucky had been mute their entire lives. That was why Bucky nodded.

The painting wasn't done, but if Steve liked it enough to be patient with Bucky in order to get it, he could have it.

Creaking and shuffling as Steve took it off the easel, but he didn't lift his eyes enough to see where it was placed. The sound of boots approaching, then a body pressed against his left side, metal sending a pressure reading, and Bucky let his body list sideways, his head falling on Steve's shoulder and he hadn't intended for this to happen only now his eyes were closed and he really couldn't place why he felt like crying but it didn't matter, his eyes were eternally dry.

When he blinked them opened again, the art studio was coated in streaks of sunshine, light that hadn't been there when he'd fallen asleep. He'd slept all night then. That hadn't happened since the Gun Incident.

There was a weight on top of his head, and it took a few seconds of calculation to register it as Steve. He'd fallen asleep on Steve's shoulder and Steve had fallen asleep right back, head tilted on his.

Why had Steve stayed all night? Why had Steve played that fucking song?

Why had Steve crashed that plane in the ocean on purpose?

They used to sleep tucked close together any chance they could get away with it. Especially when they were kids. That wasn't the way things were supposed to be now. It wasn't fair, the stupid psychological block that he only felt safe enough to drift asleep when Steve was there to protect him. Hold him.

The Winter fucking Soldier did not need to be held.

Rationally, the correct thing to do would be to slip away, use his training to make a perfectly silent exit. There would be no questions, no worry, no fight. But he didn't want to be fucking correct, he didn't want to be a good собака, fuck performance errors. Who was he performing for??

He shoved Steve off him, hard, and Steve went down with a shout that sounded more scared than anything and good, fucking good, Bucky shot to his feet and Steve was scrambling to wake up and process but Bucky stormed outta the room and slammed the door behind him - splintering the doorframe, look at that - before Steve had the chance to push himself off the ground.

The moon may love the sun. It was a reflection of the sun's rays, after all. But the sun didn't love the moon, the sun runs around the other side of the world the moment the moon showed its face. Or at least, the sun fucking should be.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about," Steve breathed, dropping his hands to his knees and avoiding all thoughts of what asthma attacks feel like.
"Dude, you just ran so hard you almost hurled." "Have before," Steve muttered under his breath, but thankfully Sam didn't hear him. "Maybe this is the psych lessons talking, but I'd say something's up."

"I'm fine."

"Is Bucky?"

Steve scowled, straightening up and starting for the tower. Sam caught up annoyingly fast, keeping pace in a light jog beside him as Steve stalked down the sidewalk.

They made it halfway back in silence before Sam finally spoke up, glancing from the corner of his eye. "You still haven't told him?"

Steve stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, making at least three businessmen scowl and walk wide strides around them. "No, Sam, I haven't told my best friend I'm in love with him when he's shoving me away - literally - anytime I get closer than three feet!"

"Okay, okay, man. Calm down." Sam's hands were up and Steve scowled. How many times had people told him to fucking calm down in his life?

But he wasn't going to get in a fight, the last time he'd gotten in a fight Bucky'd almost killed himself and Steve had to keep it under wraps, bleed on the inside, goddamnit. He grit his teeth and placed one foot in front of the other, a facade of calmly walking, even if his hands were clenched in fists at his sides.

"So what are you going to do?" Sam fell in step beside him again and goddamn, why did Steve have to pick such stubborn friends?

"I don't know." He stared straight ahead, not caring how dead his voice sounded. "I have no idea."

But he was sick of telling Sam he didn't know. At least he finally knew what made him happy...too bad he couldn't figure out what to do with that.

The words were simple. But the timing, tone, delivery, mutual agreement - that would all determine whether Bucky said them back, freaked out, or walked away forever. It should be simple, but Steve didn't know how to get the words outta his mouth.

However, he did know that it was no use trying until he and Bucky were on good terms again.

"Can we talk?" Steve propped his shoulder on the wall and the body in the armchair stiffened, then forcibly relaxed.

"Famous last words," he mused darkly, but the book in his hands dumped dramatically in his lap anyways, crystal eyes landing heavy on Steve. "Yeah, what's up?"

"About yesterday--"

"I was exhausted, haven't slept in a long time, and shouldn't have taken it out on you." Bucky stood abruptly after his interruption, tossing the book to the coffee table now. "Sorry I ended up drooling on your shoulder or whatever."

Steve fought the urge to punch something and tightened his mouth, calmed his heartrate.

"That's not what I'm upset about, Bucky." He kept the words slow without erring into piss-off territory. "I have no problem sleeping with-- uh... under-- beside you. Getting shoved first thing in
the morning, though..."

Odds were that Bucky'd bristle at that, so it was pleasantly surprising when he deflated instead, looking depressingly young as he pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes guiltily. "Yeah. I shouldn't've pushed you. Are you okay?"

Swallowing the lump in his throat and the tightness in his chest, Steve pushed off the wall. "Yes, Bucky, I'm fine. Are you?"

He'd taken a few steps closer while Bucky's head was down, and it paid off in the clarity of his expression as he looked at Steve now, the words written clear on his face in a language only they'd ever understood. What's it to you, Bucky replied in the skeptical expression and Steve held his breath at the loaded question.

"I care about you," he finally managed, barely above a whisper. And that pretty mouth curled up sad and lonely at the corners, melting Steve's heart in the worst of ways.

"I know, Steve," Bucky replied softly, and it was a shame Steve couldn't hear the Just not the way I want you to, added in Bucky's head.

The apologetic smile was breaking his heart but he couldn't push it - not if Bucky wasn't ready to hear it. Instead he nodded and sat down on the couch beside Bucky's armchair. In the silence Jarvis put on a movie from their catching up with the world list but Steve couldn't pay attention.

(Through some grace of god he fell asleep halfway through, head propped on the armrest and arms curled under his body. The flickering light of the TV cast rainbows over the peaceful face and Bucky watched the colors playing on that exquisite bone structure until the movie ended and the room fell dark.)

The feelings he'd dealt with for years were eating him away inside. He needed Bucky to know. It'd never felt like lying before, just protection. Now, though, Steve had almost lost Bucky again and everything was finally crystal clear. Bucky had to know. Steve was wasting away every moment he scream it aloud.

Bucky was killing him. It wasn't his fault his subconscious mind took that literally.

As a kid, he'd always wished he could step into paintings; a place he could go that wasn't as painful as his world. Except when the dream washed him under this time, the paint that choked him was only pain.

Skin and blacks and reds swirled thick around him, then his bones lit up with life and he was running, pushing aside rattling tins of rusting metal, the sound of attack dogs barking at his heels. Like all his dreams, gunfire in the distance, explosions and fire in his peripherals, fading to smoke when he turned to look directly.

The shadows of skyscrapers hiding monsters in the darkness and he could turn, spin round and stare at every corner, but there were always eyes and he could never find--

Until this dream, that painting, and when he inspected the shadows he actually saw shapes; and instantly wished he hadn't. Heaps of bodies, bleeding and distorted, piling around him, each with a bullet between the eyes and a number carved into their chest. Kill count. Some of the faces were familiar enough to know it was his - but they'd all been sniped, instead.

Every person Steve'd killed reassigned and the red on his hands was dripping, running free, washing off, because a certain sniper had gotten to them all before Steve had, to save him the guilt --
He screamed.

The black shadows and red blood swirled through his feet and he was swinging out at the darkness, fighting nothing, fists raised at monsters too deep for him to kick away.

Then the body dropped from his sky and suddenly there was a black gloved hand over his mouth. Hydra or himself or anyone, really, and Steve was scrambling at the hand because he couldn't breathe, he was suffocating with water in his lungs, but the hand didn't let him go, and he kicked his legs and squirmed as it dragged him into one of the skyscrapers, one of the masterpieces he used to draw now drawing and quartering him. And up up up the stairs in a never ending spiral and thick red black and skin was dripping from each step, kicking up muddy bloody with his feet as he fought in vain.

The stairs leveled out and the sky opened up, inky black and gray, red stars poking through like glittering death omens. A rooftop, they were on the roof of his old apartment, darkened New York stretching out in its apocalyptic wonder around them and he was getting lightheaded without oxygen in his lungs, could feel his body shrinking smaller and smaller--

He gasped in air, collapsing to the ground as the hand dropped him. Struggling to push himself up on his hands and knees, trembling, spitting blood on the ground the way his lips had learned, too many back alley fights, too many bloody nights.

Then the black glove gripped his hair and forced his head up, blood-red moon backlighting the man who'd taken him.

Half a face, that was all. The other half was twisted with black and silver metal, a muzzle over bloody lips, carved barbs gripping the damn terrifying mask to his face and Steve screamed, barely a shriek before a cold metal hand closed over his throat, destroying the sound and Steve was choking, unable to speak, fingers pressing bruises into his skin.

A glint of a knife, half a face, everything black and red and then the sharp edge of the knife slipped into his throat above the cold metal hand and the world spun and tipped sideways and he was falling, always falling, falling--

"Steve!"

The command hit him the same time the bottom of the fall did and he jolted awake, startling into his body with the impact vibrating in his muscle. The room was filled with a gasping sound, the clearer version of an asthmatic wheeze, and that was him, his throat was still being sliced open by that terrifying knife.

A cold metal hand to his cheek and Steve flinched away from the touch, making it recoil in a blur. Everything was blurry, and dark, but there was one warm, nice thing on his shoulder and he drew all his energy from that, pulling from that comfort to shut the mental haunting out, regulate his breathing.

Bucky was leaning over him, concern etched into his features, metal hand hovering self-consciously, like he wanted to have both hands on Steve but he was terrified to get an adverse reaction to the metal again.

He didn't have a right to look like that when he'd kicked Steve outta his heart so many times. But more than anything, Steve wanted him to look like that, concerned and caring and scared, vulnerable, real, but he had to mean it. Right now, he couldn't believe Bucky meant it.

"Get out," Steve rasped, shutting his eyes stubbornly.
A moment of silence. A single backwards footstep, the right hand hesitant on his shoulder now.

"Go," he reiterated. "I don't need you here."

It wasn't a game. It wasn't some stupid relationship test. Part of him honestly didn't want Bucky here. The bigger part needed to know how much Bucky remembered. How much he'd endure.

"No," came the single, quiet word.

"Go away," Steve hissed, eyes squeezing tighter shut to hide the tears gathering on his lashes.

"No." Stubborn, stronger. Quiet, but sure.

"I don't need you," he insisted, but it was a hell of a lot less convincing when his bottom lip was trembling and his squeezed-shut eyes were threatening to leak at the corner.

Bucky had come for him. Why? When he'd pushed Steve away so much, why come for him?

"I don't believe you." Simple. Quiet.

Buck had a lot of nerve saying that. It ripped something in Steve's chest.

"Fuck off," he choked out, turning his head towards the back of the couch, praying Bucky would catch a hint and listen to him for once.

"Try'n make me."

How many times had they danced this before the war? Steve shoved Bucky off when he tried to patch him up and Bucky held him down until Steve relented and let Bucky fix him.

Steve would push and scream and punch and shout, telling Bucky to leave, get out, go away, never come back.

Hoping he'd prove it by staying.

He always had.

And he could still call Steve's bluff, apparently. Try'n make me. That was when the useless hitting normally started - Steve swinging his fists wildly in frustration at the world and Bucky catching his wrists, backing Steve against the bed or a wall or the floor, any place he could keep Steve pinned while he held his wrists and predicted the abortive swings, holding Steve still until he broke and stopped fighting, deflated against Bucky.

Steve didn't feel like hitting now, especially when he knew Buck wouldn't hit back.

And if he did, Steve'd probably crumple from the weight of the nightmare.

So he turned his head to glare, right on time to see Bucky plop down on the floor beside the couch, legs crossed as he brought their faces level, propped an elbow on the cushion, and ran his right hand through Steve's hair.

It was so affectionate and simple and easy that the drying water in his eyes seeped another drop of moisture onto his bottom lashes.

"Steve?" Bucky checked in quietly, one finger slipping from Steve's hair down his forehead and the line of his nose, coming to rest at the tip.
"Mmm." All the fight had drained outta him, the panic too. Bucky knew it would. No one could keep Steve down but Steve, and for some reason if Bucky fought back hard enough Steve chose this, to quiet down and concede.

He always had. Only ever around Bucky, and that was the part he couldn't figure out. It was like a strange, less dramatic demonstration of dropping his shield, the way he had on the helicarrier.

In a world that always got Steve's I can do this all day, somehow Bucky got I'm not gonna fight you.

He'd bet he was the first and last thing Steve Rogers ever chose not to fight.

So that's why he'd stayed. That's why he was sitting here next to the couch, playing with Steve's hair and tracing memorizing, soothing fingertips across his features.

Now probably wasn't the time to bring it up, but he wasn't sure he'd have Steve passive and listening to him again anytime soon. He opened his mouth, hesitating before the words finally tumbled out.

"I get you took my death real hard..." Although he had no idea why; could it possibly be that Steve loved him as much as he loved Steve? "...and Steve, look. I know you're not doing as okay as you want everybody to think."

Understatement of the year. Steve snuffled and prodded Bucky's hand away from his cheekbone. "I'm fine."

"That's not the point. What I'm trying to say..." One blue eye peeked open, studying him hopefully in the dark. The sudden perky hopefulness carved a hole in Bucky's chest and he had to take a breath, looking away as he muttered the words. "Clearly, I agitate something in you. I'm here for you, Steve, always. But aren't all of my issues the last thing you need? Look, I'm a chip on your shoulder that you shouldn't have to be worrying about. I'm a mess--"

"But you're my mess," Steve interrupted suddenly, sitting up, and Bucky stared up at him from his spot on the floor. Once, a long time ago in the woods of Europe, he'd confessed "I'm a fucking mess, Steve. I'm a mess and I don't know what the fuck I'm supposed to do with it because we're all fucking messes out here. I don't even know what kind of mess I am anymore."

And Steve had leaned over with "Hey, c'mon. Whatever the mess you are, you're mine, okay? You're not alone. And I'll take whatever pieces you want to give me, mess or not."

Except this time, a warm hand reached for him, tentative, then Steve's rough palm was resting on his cheek, thumb smoothing over his skin, and Bucky had to tilt his head up to keep eye contact, a strange tightness settling in his stomach as Steve looked down at him. What a picture this had to make, the deadly assassin sitting on the floor at Steve Rogers' feet, those artist hands cupping his cheek like he was the precious one.

"You're a fuckin' sap, Rogers," he'd said last time. But Steve hadn't been looking at him like that in the woods of Europe.

Darkness sharpened the building coil in his stomach as Bucky shut his eyes, pushing a calming breath through his lips, calculating his heart rate and hating himself for leaning into Steve's hand. "Steve," he warned, sounding more breathless than he wanted to be.

"I mean it, Buck." Steve's other hand threaded fingers through Bucky's thick hair, folding it away from his closed eyes. "I no more want you to leave than you want me gone."

The weight of sandbags on his chest kept it from expanding as he breathed in, a reverberating
shudder drilling down his spine, making him shiver colder than cryo.

He couldn't believe that. He couldn't believe that Steve wanted him as much - it wasn't possible. As caring and compassionate as Steve was, as much as he valued their friendship? That philia was never going to compare to Bucky's agápe.

This time he purposefully chose the metal fingers to wrap around Steve's wrist, because he didn't want to feel the warmth of that skin against his right hand. The last time he'd held Steve's wrists, it was because Steve'd almost broken them. Because of something Bucky had said...

How were they healthy for each other? At all?

He pried the hand from his face, unable to watch Steve's expression as he shook his head in apology and pushed himself up to stand. Only Steve stood with him, and they were way too close for this, chests brushing as Bucky clenched his jaw. His lower back was burning, a heavy hand resting there, wrapped around him loosely but asking him to stay. He kept his eyes on Steve's shoulder, wondering what it would take to shove him off.

How much of their friendship it would break.

"Stay--"

"I can't."

Steve nodded, the hand dropping away from Bucky's lower back. It didn't change anything, he still couldn't breathe. But he didn't move away either.

Checkmate, their circle dance halted with nowhere to go, no place but hell or heaven at this point--

"Do you want breakfast?" Steve asked, interrupting his thoughts and surprising him enough to tilt his chin up and finally meet Steve's gaze.

"It's 3 in the morning."

Steve shrugged. "I can make mango sorbet now."

He chewed his lip, studying Steve's expression for the catch. It didn't look like there was one. Fine. He sighed and Steve lit up, instantly recognizing the agreement and taking Bucky's arm, tugging him towards the kitchen.

"You never cease to amaze me, Rogers," he half-complained, following after the stupid punk who'd somehow switched this whole thing around on him. Steve was the one who'd woken with the nightmare, but Bucky was the one being taken care of.

A blinding smile shot over a wide shoulder and the last of his resistance melted. What was the harm in giving Steve this? Maybe it'd be good for him. For both of them.

~*~*~

"Til then," Steve sung softly under his breath, taking the last flight of stairs two at a time and pushing open the door. "My darling, please wait for me. Til then, no matter when it will be...one dayyyy--Oh. Hi Natasha."
"Someone's in a good mood," she commented and Steve shrugged with a sideways smile. "What's got you fluffed and bright-eyed, Rogers?"

"Nothing," he insisted, snagging one of her cheese-cracker sandwiches off the bar. "Have you seen Bucky?"

A suggestive eyebrow-raise in response. Steve rolled his eyes, both hands on his hips as he shook his head at her. "You ever gonna butt outta my love life?"

"So it is a love life, then. You told him yet?"

"How do you even know about that?"

"I know everything, Rogers," Nat replied smugly, popping a cracker in her mouth. He pointed an accusing finger at her, already starting for the stairwell again.

"You can't fool me Romanoff. I know for a fact you don't, heard it from the best source around."

"He's on the hangar floor!" she shouted over her shoulder and Steve pumped an arm in victory. Although...wait. The last time he'd seen Bucky on the hangar floor--

So maybe he took the stairs a little fast, was a little flustered by the time he rounded the corner, panting. He spun in the open space, actively avoiding that wall, but Bucky was nowhere to be seen, maybe Natasha had been wrong again after all?

A slight movement caught his eye and Steve bounded up the stairs in the middle of the room, peering out the windows. Bucky was outside, sitting in the middle of the hangar overlooking New York, wind whipping the few escaped strands from his bun around his face as he curled over his sketchpad. He paused the moment Steve stepped outside, overtuned to the environment. But he didn't look up, pencil angrily scratching at the paper, dark graphite lines in a distinctive shape, clear even with the distance between them that Steve was closing carefully.

Halfway across the hangar and there was suddenly a loud tear, then Bucky was shoving the drawing aside, paper swooped up by the wind and carried into open air. Steve leaned to the side to watch it drift towards New York sidewalks, surprised to see there were two more sheets floating slowly down too.

"Somebody's pissed," he commented nonchalantly, shoving his hands in his pockets and glancing at Bucky, who was grinding harsh lines into the next victim sheet of paper.

"You would be too if you'd almost wasted decades of courage on a single. stupid. mistake," Bucky bit between grit teeth, ripping the next page out and sending it cascading to its death too. Steve nodded, looking down at his feet, at the drawings beginning to litter the ground so far beneath them.

"I know. I was there." He kept his words as careful and sweet as he could, wondering what the hell had gone wrong between this morning and now.

But did it matter? This was still how Bucky felt, inside, no matter how much he smiled on the outside. As much as Steve's heart seized at Bucky's smile, he'd take the truth any day. If he was going to confess to anything anytime soon, Bucky should probably know that first.

"Buck," he started.

The whole sketchpad went over the side of the tower. Steve cringed, praying that the cardboard
wouldn't hit some poor soul in the head, a dozen blank pages ripped out by the wind and fluttering down the side of the tower like dead butterflies.

He could do nothing but watch as Bucky stormed past him, brushing an angry hand through his hair and dislodging more of his bun, then he was swinging the glass doors open and disappearing inside and Steve sighed, looking back at the cascade of drawings to the sidewalk. Something was always falling with them, wasn't it?

The rest of the day disappeared in meetings with Maria and not-SHIELD operatives, but odds are Buck was avoiding him anyways, there was no point in hanging around the residential floors.

He woke up to the sound of breaking glass.

"Buck?" His socks slid dangerously on the floors, threatening to send him into the wall (that never ended well) as he caught his footing and turned the corner.

The mirror in the living room was destroyed, shards of glass strewn all over the floor. There was a bullet casing on the floor and no other sign of Bucky.

Eventually Steve found him on the kitchen table, sitting cross-legged and cleaning out his gun.

"What the hell happ--"

"Reflection startled me," Bucky replied boredly, shoving the clip into place and flicking on the safety. "You can go back to bed."

"Why were you...are you okay?"

"Perfectly efficient," he sneered, dismantling his next gun with his long, disheveled hair stuck up in a hundred directions. Right. He was totally balanced.

But there was nothing he could do, so Steve left him there and retreated to his art studio, staring at Buck's half-finished painting for a while before going back to bed.

The next incident was considerably more dangerous, mostly because it wasn't isolated supersoldiers involved. Clint and Bucky had taken up training together for things beyond sharp-shooting and were working on long-distance drops when Clint snuck up behind him, startled him, and ended up with a knife in the thigh.

That time Steve met him in Stark's infirmary, pale and drawn as he sat ramrod straight in a waiting chair outside Clint's operating room. Steve sat down beside him and Bucky stood up, crossing to the observation window. He stayed for a few more seconds, then he was walking away and Steve knocked his head back against the wall hard enough to dent it.

Personally, Steve was torn between two theories. Either Bucky was losing his mind, or he was testing boundaries to see how much damage he could do before Steve gave up on him.

Funny enough, those were Bucky's same two theories.

He didn't want to hurt Clint. But his body and his mind were more disconnected than ever. He'd had a glimpse of what it'd be like to own his flesh and bones - the tight grip he had on his conditioning was slippery now, because he couldn't decide whether to abandon his body again or embrace it and that left him in this terrible gray area where his training decided things before his head did and he
was shooting mirrors and punching walls and throwing knives into Steve's friend's thigh.

But no matter what he did, Steve kept showing up, all understanding and soft and sweet and Bucky was choking with the cloying taste of it.

That's where the losing-his-mind part came in.

He'd given his everything for all the wrong things for a long time - a selfish war machine buried under a lifetime of guilt traced back to the first time he met Steve. The dark, terrifying side of him, the black soul and hands that itched to kill.

Moon was a compliment, he never shone that bright. But that didn't stop Steve from shoving that in his face.

It was so confusing, why did Steve bother? Why was he acting like this was more than the friendship bond they'd shared for years? Why was he looking at Bucky like that?

There was one possibility he couldn't get outta his head, another bullet to bury in his head and bring the ghosts in his dreams to life. He was haunted again, like last time.

Last time. He'd gotten that memory back when he'd gotten the others - but it wasn't until now that he started thinking about it. Dreaming about it. Dreaming about a dream, that's how fucked up his head had gotten.

"Why do I see you everywhere? Who are you?" Bucky accused, taking a step back, closer to the edge of the water. The angel's hand fell to its side, mouth turning down in disappointment.

"I was everything to you." The angel answered quietly. Bucky stared for a few moments before whipping around on his heel, looking out over the water and turning his back on the sunshine glow. He could see his reflection in the water, watched the angel's reflection step closer before he felt the warm hands circling around his waist.

Those arms had been around his waist before, his body knew them like a puzzle piece. Bucky turned his head to the side, looking stiffly over his shoulder at the angel who was resting his chin hooked over Bucky's clavicle. Blue eyes glanced to his and Bucky held their gaze.

"Were we lovers?" he asked, the words less curious and more accusing. Blue eyes blinked slowly, then the arms around Bucky's stomach squeezed a little tighter as the angel looked out over the harbor.

"Almost," he said softly.

He remembered dreaming that as the Winter Soldier. The Steve in his head had told him they were almost lovers. It was all a concoction of Bucky's subconscious, but it had to come from somewhere.

And if he held his breath and looked back at every moment between them, every lingering look and touch and clasped hand and near-kiss?

It was the assumption one might make.

If it weren't for Steve Rogers being so definitely, positively not in love with him.
"Alright, team, I think we need to make a few precautionary safety measures--"

"Stark," Bucky interrupted, tucking a piece of hair behind his ear and crossing his arms over his chest. "We all recognize I'm the problem here. You don't have to pretend it's about everyone."

He'd accidentally blown up one of Tony's lesser-used labs yesterday, but he was pretty sure the impromptu Avengers meeting was actually about the arm-shaped hole in the hallway. In his defense Jarvis had come out of nowhere, ripping the AI system out of the wall was the instinctive thing to do.

Or maybe it was all the doors he'd ripped off their hinges over the past week. Who knows.

"Well, in that case, stop fucking up my tower."

"Tony!"

"What? He's got a point. I've been distracted." This was all going to fall on Bucky anyways, might as well let them blame him. It was better than sugarcoating.

"Distracted? You're taking your personal emotions out on Stark's damn inventions, Bucky!"

"Steve, chill."

"What, calm down Stevie, like always? I won't act like this isn't a big deal, Buck."

"Oh, what, like you've got the power to decide everything I do? Or pretend to fucking care?"

"Guys, guys, fighting over this isn't going to fix anything. Cap, it's fine, this is all kinda routine. Barnes is going through a lot--"

"I'm right here."

"--and Sarge, Steve's looking out for your well-being, you know that."

"I don't need a keeper." Bucky rolled his eyes and stuck both his wrists out, shoving them together. "If you guys wanna put chains on me just do it already, I hate all this diplomatic bullshit."

"The first person that goes near him with restraints is breaking their arm," Steve pointed a very serious warning finger and Bucky laughed sharply, tipping his head back.

"I can fucking take care of myself, Steve, you don't need to threaten your team."

"Our team, and apparently you can't take care of yourself or else you wouldn't be taking your vendetta against me out on the towe--"

"Goddammit Rogers, not everything is about you! You know what, I'm fucking done with this bullshit. Count me out of your superhero drama, I'm not interested."

Bucky took the stairs mostly so he could slam the door behind him, every step jarring him on the way down - as far down as he could go, basement level - and echoing the lie in his head over and over. Of course this was about Steve. Damn him, everything was.
Because it was his little Stevie. His precious, darling, Steve.

God, he'd been a dick.

He was so confused.

On one hand, maybe Steve wanted him, maybe after everything they'd been through they deserved this.

On the other hand maybe Bucky was grasping at reasons to stay alive and he'd end up depending on Steve for his existence which was exactly what he didn't want to do. Because then he'd lose Steve and become nothing again.

What was the worst that could happen? This was Steve.

Shit. This was Steve.

A hell of a lot of terrible things could happen.

Did he mean it?

Did Bucky mean it?

Of course he fucking meant it. He remembered the first time he realized he was in love with Steve. Clear as day. It was before all of this shit. This wasn't new. If it was new, he could be worried.

He was worried. Why would Steve want him?

He didn't. He couldn't.

Wishful thinking.

Ghosts.

Memories and false hopes.

He ended up in Steve's room anyways, the internal argument too loud to handle on his own. He can't survive alone again.

Steve walked in and dropped his coat in surprise. Bucky didn't look up from where he was sitting on Steve's bed, staring at his palms. One of these was fake and sometimes he couldn't decide which one.

A warm arm wrapped around his shoulders and Bucky let Steve guide him back onto the comforter.
Let arms curl carefully around his torso, lips pressed to the back of his neck once before he curled close and held Bucky.

This was nothing like the straps they used to hold him down. This was nothing like the punk firey spark he'd fallen in love with as a kid. But this was them, and it was now, and he couldn't imagine being anywhere else in the world.

The rush of anguish settling, hot breaths on his neck healing the hurt behind his eyes. Like spun sugar, waves of sweet fire, finally safe within Steve's arms. The flood came rushing in, but for once it wasn't tears or blood. It was a hand in his hand, the mess in his head drowned with sunshine shadows.

They fell asleep tangled together and when Steve woke he wasn't holding Bucky anymore, just a single handwritten note.

*You deserve better.*
*I'm sorry it's me you got stuck with.*

-B

Bucky wasn't supposed to feel emotions beyond rage and victory, that was the whole point of the Winter Soldier program.

Any other emotions were weakness and fuck, he could agree with that motto now.

He was living in a castle of glass and yes, he was the crack threatening to destroy the entire tower.

Maybe he was going out of his fucking mind.

~*~*~

He left a post-it note on the fridge that he'd be gone for the day, then he caught the first bus to D.C. before anyone could ask him questions.

It'd been way too long since his last visit, but he'd been so busy and overwhelmed with everything from SHIELD going down to Bucky being back that he couldn't spare the daytrip.

The way Peggy's eyes lit up when she saw him, he felt ten times shittier for missing months of visits. But she greeted him joyfully, shushing him the moment he began to apologize.

"I certainly hope you've been too busy to visit. Have you had the...the chance to start that life?" Steve scooted his chair closer, sighing at the familiar question. Because the thing was, he thought he had. The center of his unhappiness had been focused on loneliness. On looking for a home.

But Bucky was alive and so Steve had those things, if Bucky would let Steve have him.

Peggy could read him as well as ever, the teasing lilt in her tone softening as she looked at him worriedly, "What is it?"

As much as he'd love to tell her his troubles, this might be something she didn't need to know. She'd been his girl in the forties - kind of - and dropping his bisexuality in her lap the same day as confessing a lifetime of feelings for his second in command felt an awful lot like undermining what she'd been to him.
People may be more open-minded now, but it wouldn't be easy to hear there'd always been someone else. The thing was though, he'd come here for her help because she always knew what to say. If he kept it vague enough, neutral pronouns and situations, he could confess without hurting her.

Besides, this was Peggy Carter. He could no more lie to her than he could to his mother.

"For as long as I can remember," Steve started, settling into the chair and letting his eyes drift over Peggy's retirement room. "I've always been so sure about my decisions. Until recently...I figured I finally need to do something. Say what I haven't before. Be true to every part of me...I guess it's not that easy anymore.

"I thought I could throw myself in with open arms, maybe have the courage to chase what makes me happy." Steve shook his head slightly, disbelieving he was even saying this aloud. What a place he'd come to, that he was confessing to the one person who deserved his burdens the least.

Besides Bucky. God, Bucky didn't deserve any of Steve's issues. Buck was trying to work through things, but how could he do that when Steve was having just as many nightmares? No fucking wonder he didn't want to stick around.

"They're just not interested," Steve quirked an eyebrow, tilting his head with the saddened curve of a smile.

With the same dependable, wonderful reaction Peggy huffed a weak laugh, shaking her head fondly at him as her British accent scolded. "Still so dramatic...Steve. He died for you, did you ever stop to think. Of what that means?"

He turned his hands over in his lap, the soft sad smile still on his mouth as he ran the words distantly through his mind again.

Then it clicked.

His head snapped up, looking at Peggy with alarm. "Did you...How did you...?"

She'd said he died for you. Was she talking about Bucky? Did she know he was talking about Bucky? When the hell had that happened?

"Oh dear," Peggy frowned, reaching a frail hand for him across the pastel sheets. "He still hasn't told you?"

His brain was spinning too much to accept the offered comfort of Peggy's hand, instead looking between the door and her face, processing the words again and only more confused by it.

"Told me-- what? Who?"

How could she possibly know he was talking about--

"James? The Sergeant who came back from the dead for you?" She raised an unimpressed eyebrow and Steve's mouth opened and closed, eyebrows furrowed as he shook his head, his insides rattling around in their tandem befuddlement.

"You...but how?"

He was running a hundred different scenarios through his head and drawing up blank for all of them.

There was no way Peg could have known about his feelings for Bucky, no way except that
somehow she did.

Actually, she shouldn't even know Bucky was alive. At all.

He was missing so much of this conversation.

"You should know better by now, Steve. There isn't much I don't know." Peggy patted his arm in amused condolence, but her expression softened into something gentle as she took in the overwhelmed shock on his face. "I'm sorry I never told you about him. I promised him I wouldn't--"

"You two did talk then." Steve should feel bad for interrupting, only his mouth was moving faster than his brain. Everything was moving faster than his brain right now. "About what? About me? Bucky talked to you about me?"

"He shouted about you," she corrected. "And cried. My, what a day that was."

He could do nothing but stare at her. The hand on his arm slid down and slipped in his hand, rubbing a weathered thumb over his skin like he was the frail one now. Well, she wasn't wrong.

"I'd known already, of course. But I don't think he ready to admit it, not until I made him. But I knew the moment you brought him back from that Hydra camp...the way he looked at you? That boy was more in love with you than I was."

"Peggy," Steve choked out, closing his fingers around hers to stop her, half because he was terrified of what she'd say next, half because this felt like some lucid dream and there was no way any of this was true. Besides, she couldn't be the one to be saying this, not when she'd been the one who-- "But you..."

"Steve, I know what I meant to you. He kn-knows that too. It doesn't...matter now. What matters is. What you two mean to each-- each other. Now you can live your life."

Was she saying...Bucky'd talked - shouted - about him? Cried? "More in love with you than I was"...it didn't feel possible.

"It's impossible," Steve echoed aloud, staring at their hands, duly surprised he hadn't shrunk back to pre-serum size from shock alone. "Really, how could he?"

"You already know the answer t-to that. That qu-question," she turned away, coughing lightly for a moment before turning back with a small smile. "You know most all of it, if you think hard enough."

Actually, he knew shit, but he wasn't going to say that aloud.

"What did he say to you?"

"Shouted?" she corrected again, eyes twinkling with that mischief that looked so much like someone else's. God, Bucky. "I had him...so scared, talking a-about you and his feelings for you and then he j-just. blew--" a choked cough, "-blew up and..."

Her words rolled into a heavy coughing fit and Steve grabbed water off the bedside table without looking, sloshing some onto the carpet as he brought it over, helping guide it to her lips as always. If she noticed that his hands were trembling, she didn't comment on it. As soon as the water was gone Steve shoved it back on the nightstand, careful not to knock over frames as he turned back to her, feeling nine times too eager and vulnerable right now.

"A-ask him yourself," she muttered, letting her eyes slip closed tiredly. She at least had the guile to
let her mouth curve up again as she patted his hand and pushed it off her bed. "Now leave an old woman be."

He sat for a few seconds, brain still working too slow, then he cracked a smile - couldn't disobey a direct order after all - and stood, bending to place a soft kiss on her wrinkled forehead. The lines next to her eyes and mouth crinkled deeper and Steve squeezed her hand one more time before he started for the door.

On instinct he turned around in the doorframe, looking at Peggy one more time. Her eyes were back open, slightly, and the smile on her face was wide and happy and god, if she had that much hope for them (he still wasn't over that she knew, let alone approved), then maybe this really could work.

"You two youngsters are both so damned blind...you deserve each other, in every sense of the word." He gave her a final smile and she waved her hand for him to hurry along. His trembling hands closed the door softly, careful, and the moment it was shut he leaned his temple on the wood, closing his eyes to still the spinning in his head.

There was something Bucky had said to Peggy, something important, that could change everything.

His best girl had thought Bucky was in love with him the moment she met him.

Maybe.

Maybe he was going as crazy as Bucky or maybe, really, there was a chance.

After all, he'd never heard of Agent Peggy Carter being wrong...

The bus ride home might as well have been a plane for all Steve was floating. He stared out the window for three hours, replaying every individual word of their conversation over and over.

There was a chance.

A legitimate, honest, strategic chance.

Bucky Barnes might love him back.

~*~*~

So maybe he dented a wall or two running in. It wasn't easy to slow down for corners with all that muscle mass.

All heads shot up as he came bursting into the communal kitchen, where basically everyone was bickering over food. Steve put a hand on the wall to try and catch his breath.

"Where's Bucky?"

Clint was the first to get over his surprise, putting his knife down to address Steve. "Apparently, he's been intercepting SHIELD calls for the past week, which Maria finally discovered today. We tried stopping him, but he took the mission parameters anyways, storming out with - and I quote - 'Just because Steve won't let me die for the people I've killed doesn't mean I can't atone for my sins.'"

"Maria was reluctant to let him go but I figured it was like that phone call, the whole 'guilty in the
eyes of God' 1940s thing you two've got goin' on." Clint went back to chopping, barely heard
Steve's confused murmur over the sound.

"Bucky's not religious..."

They all looked up again and this time Sam was the one who spoke. "...well that's a problem."

"I need a printout of the last call interception, now."

~*~*~

He would prove it.

Bucky Barnes would prove to the world he was still alive. No, the Winter Soldier would prove to the
world that ghost stories don't die. Although, really, it was the same thing, wasn't it?

This was the best he'd felt in a long, long time.

Stealth boots on his feet, Gerbers and SOCP in their sheaths, Derringer and Intratec strapped to his
thigh, Skorpion between his shoulderblades, SigSauer P226R in hand.

Winter Soldier mask strapped over his mouth and nose. Hair down and wild, his old leather one-
armed jacket strapped over his chest. It was like stepping into a pair of your favorite, most
comfortable shoes after being forced to wear someone else's for months.

Bucky crouched behind the lip of the roof, looking through the scope of the rifle he'd brought.

The building across the street was a Hydra intelligence base. Well, it'd been taken over by one,
anyways. After the downfall of SHIELD, they were popping up everywhere. It made perfect sense
they'd chosen a well-populated building in Manhattan as a base of operations. Especially if they
thought their greatest threat was gone.

Inhale, and a slow exhale, stilling the crosshairs on the little black box he'd placed in one of the
windows earlier. Tell them all the ghost lives on. Bottom of the breath and he pulled the trigger.

The explosion was instantaneous, anybody in the near vicinity likely eliminated, but he was more
interested in the smoke now spiraling heavily through the building's vents. He'd smoke 'em out like a
forest fire - and the ones that looked up as they hit the sidewalk, searching building rooftops for a
sniper? Those were the agents that got to die first.

To be fair, he was half out of his mind at this point.

Steve Rogers was fucking with him and he couldn't take it. He'd tried the whole emotions thing and
it was painful, it was ripping him up because Steve was so goddamned beautiful and funny and
understanding and perfect and Bucky was trying too hard not to care because it all had to be some
kind of joke, only he couldn't tell the difference anymore.

He'd lost control of his head and his life and he was going out of his fucking mind with the suspense
and confusion, so he'd gone to the one place he had control left.

The battlefield, the mission, was the only place he still recognized the inside of his own brain. He
was powerful here, behind the trigger of a Beretta, taking out black-suited bastards right and left.
On the plus side, the noises and explosion had cleared all the civilians from the street. That meant it was just him and Hydra now. He swung his rifle to the ground and vaulted over the edge of the roof.

Metal fingers skid down brick, snagging on a ledge ten feet off the ground and snapping him to a stop, then Bucky was leaping to the ground, rolling with the impact, and had bullets between the eyes of three suits before someone thought to shout "The Winter Soldier!"

The screams and panicked frenzy that accompanied that were quite flattering. That didn't stop Bucky from slaughtering the closest screamer.

This was what he was made to do. His metal arm felt lighter than it had in months, grabbing Hydra agents by their throats and throwing them into the squirming crowd. When was the last time he'd felt this good? When was the last time he'd done something good?

Taking out evil was better than just killing, it was catharsis. The blood splattered on the road was to make up for the innocent blood he'd spilled for decades.

Besides, nothing distracts you from the sunshine more than dabbling in the darkness.

~*~*~

The motorcycle under him roared and Steve sped down the streets, weaving haphazardly through cars, the shouts and whipping wind falling into background noise as his mind flew a hundred miles per hour. No wonder Bucky'd been so temperamental. No wonder he was losing his mind. If he really did have feelings for Steve, that had to have been hell.

Steve spent so much time making sure Bucky knew their relationship was platonic because he was terrified of being found out. Buck must've gotten a thousand mixed signals - Steve almost kissing him before he got his memories back, shutting down emotional talks, wanting simultaneously to hold him and keep a careful arms-length away.

It must've been terrible for him to fall asleep in Steve's arms and wake up thinking Steve was only doing it out of pity or friendship.

If Bucky thought this was unrequited, no wonder he'd blown up at Steve's begging to stay alive for him.

No fucking wonder.

All of Bucky's weird behavior since he got back suddenly made sense.

Actually...all of Bucky's weird behavior since Azzano was starting to make sense.

This was the missing factor, the piece in the puzzle that connected all the horror and the good times, the shared underscoring that knit everything together and finally gave Bucky the motivation, purpose, reasoning that Steve'd never seen.

This was why.

Bucky Barnes might be in love with him.
Unfortunately, a lot of Hydra was too smart to stay in the street and get slaughtered like sitting ducks by a righteous assassin.

They split off, running into buildings and up fire escapes and hey, who was he to deny a challenge?

Creative, the army used to call his sniping methods. Efficient was the better word; he thought of the simplest ways to kill. No annoying dramatics or unnecessary finesse. He needed a plane? He hopped on the roof, shot the pilot, and swung inside.

Efficient.

Things started getting fun when some of the agents ran back into the building and brought back guns. Big guns.

He backflipped outta the machine-gun fire and pulled the pin on a grenade, tossing it as he rolled to the side and brought down a stray soldier with a heavy kick to her knee, another scream as the bone snapped and then she had a knife in her throat and didn't scream anymore.

There was another agent climbing up a fire escape and it looked like the street was gonna be covered in a lot of machine guns pretty soon, so Bucky figured he might as well follow. He launched himself upwards, swinging on the metal arm and flipping high enough to crush the agent's shoulder in his metal fist, fling him off the side of the building. A sound on the roof made him look up, then a grenade was flashing, blinking towards him and he batted it aside with metal fingers just in time, blast radius close enough to send a dark splatter against the metallic shine of his arm.

Bucky glared at the mark - it needed new paint job anyways, but still - and pulled the Skorpion off his back. Whoever was on that roof was about to be very unhappy in the next twenty seconds.

Or, as it turned out, a lot of people were about to be very unhappy.

The conglomeration below had been a setup - actually, surprisingly smart for a Hydra cell. Because the guns on the street were nothing in comparison to the numbers of muzzles pointing at him when Bucky vaulted the rest of the fire escape and skid onto the roof.

But the difference between him and the twenty-five agents on the roof? He wasn't quivering with fear at the sight of the black-clad assassin with deadly eyes staring over a black mask belonging to a ghost.

Ammo ran out pretty quickly, he caught a bullet in his right thigh, and knives weren't as replenishable as you'd think, so there were still twelve people shooting at him by the time he started fighting with his hands. That number quickly became five though, then he started pushing people off the roof because it was so less time consuming.

With that rooftop cleared, he rode the fire escape back down to the ground and didn't have a chance to grab anymore guns before he started combat fighting with the group of assholes who decided to bring tasers.

His wicked killing streak and the resulting screams were suddenly interrupted by a loud roar behind him, the sound of a high-power engine. Yes, that meant even bigger guns to fight.

Bucky spun around, freshly-retrieved knife between his metal fingers and poised to throw, except that the bigger guns to fight were totally not the kind he was thinking of.

"Steve," he groaned behind the mask, throwing back his head in annoyance. "Again? Really?"
"We need to talk," Steve told him, climbing off his bike and stepping over a bloody body in the middle of the street. Bucky swung his metal arm out wide in explanation, raising his eyebrows because Steve couldn't see the annoyed set of his mouth.

"Can't you see I'm a little--" a sound to the left had him spinning on his heel, throwing the knife meant for bigger-guns into the forehead of one of the taser assholes. "--busy?" he finished, turning back to Steve.

"Bucky, c'mon. I'm serious." Steve stepped closer, and if he got into the middle of this then Bucky wouldn't be able to finish his damn fight. He wasn't about to drop everything for another one of Steve's games.

"So am I, Rogers. Get the fuck out." Bucky turned his back, scooping to snatch his knife from taser-guy's forehead and breaking into a run, picking up speed to swing over a car the stupid bastards were hiding behind. Half of them were fast enough to dodge, but the other half got sliced open or crushed by metal.

"Buck!" Steve called the moment Bucky rolled back into the street, jogging closer and making a total nuisance of himself. "Listen to me, I have to talk to you."

"Not. Now." He punctuated the words with the angry hurl of an empty gun, shattering windows across the street and eliciting more panicked Hydra shouts.

Steve was closer now, ten feet away, and Bucky spun towards him angrily, his hair whipping in his eyes as he hissed at Steve through the grates covering his nose and mouth.

"I don't have time for your shit, Rogers. Get the fuck out of here."

"Just liste--" Steve tried, reaching with pacifying hands. Bucky knocked one of the artist wrists aside, glaring over his mask - the same glare from their first fight on the bridge, his metal fingers wrapped around Steve's throat. They were standing that close too, because Steve wouldn't stop advancing and Bucky wouldn't back down from a challenge; stepping forward, practically on his toes as he glared Steve down, just inches away.

"Why can't you ever catch a hint Steve, good fucking lor--"

The words cut off in surprise as Steve's hands came up to his jaw, fingers hooking around the back of Bucky's mask and tugging it straight off his face. He stared incredulously as Steve tossed it aside like it was some useless piece of plastic instead of the **emblem of his identity**, then he turned back to Bucky, those blue eyes burning as they met his own, clashing like two stars colliding in the sky.

The look in Steve's eyes. Bucky couldn't breathe.

This time when Steve's hands landed Bucky's jaw, there was no mask in the way. Just Bucky's soft skin under his palms and Steve's heart pounding out loud enough that Buck could probably hear it...but he didn't care.

Not anymore.

Steve tightened his hold, long strands of hair brushing the curl of his fingers, his stomach twisting in knots as the wind whipped around them, Bucky's crystal eyes staring at him, staring **into** him, and it was jump now or never, a lifetime of waiting, and with fists raised and blood pumping Steve leaned forward, destroying the space that had been between them for decades too long.
He tilted Bucky's face up and pressed his lips to soft pink ones, eyes slipping closed as their mouths connected and the world stopped turning.

The exotic, plush curve he'd dreamed about a hundred times over (and drawn twice that many) was caving under the pressure of his lips - barely parted, a touch of lingering wetness against Steve's mouth and the jolt of it spiraled through his body, rippling down his spine because god, this was Bucky in his hands, Bucky's face tipped up to meet his, their - their - lips pressing together.

In the middle of this carnage, this wreckage of bloody bodies and dirty New York streets, somewhere in the goddamn twenty-first century; he never thought he'd live to see this day but fuck, wasn't it fitting.

Fit just like Bucky's mouth to his, crushed close and solid and so warm and -

Bucky wasn't kissing him back.

Steve pulled away so fast their lips made a soft popping sound, then Bucky's icy eyes were staring at him, wide and so bright Steve could see his own wild reflection in the blown pupils, those lips he'd just been kissing parted in shock.

Shit.

"Bucky," he started to say, to apologize or backpedal or something, but he only got out the first vowel before the glinting flash off metal caught his eye and Steve's heart stopped for an entirely different reason because that metal arm was reaching out for him and fuck, he was going to die because he'd kissed an assassin who quite clearly didn't want to be kissed--

Then metal fingers tangled up in the front of his shirt, fabric catching and threatening to tear as the arm that'd done nothing but crush things permitted its first mission for something good and hauled him back in, their mouths crashing together this time.

He took it all back.

Bucky arched up against his mouth, kissing back messy, hungry, and Steve couldn't breathe, he needed more than just his hands on Bucky's face, he needed Bucky so close he could never get away again. He crushed their mouths tighter, lifting his hands from the strong jaw and wrapping his arms around Buck's muscular back instead, leather creaking as he pressed their chests flush together, twin hearts skipping.

Metal and real fingers shoved into his hair, dragging Steve down further, closer, and Bucky's head tilted sideways to adjust the angle, lips interlocked and pressing, hard enough to bruise, hard enough that Steve could taste the desperation - the broken, terrified way Bucky was clinging to him like he'd disappear the moment their lips parted.

A stuttering wave of emotion rushed through him, threatening to knock him off his feet. Steve bundled Bucky close and kissed him deep, letting them both drown in the sparkling heat of their chests; all senses on fire and warding off the years of freezing ice cold. Maybe this was how they were supposed to heal, in the warmth of their hearts combined, in the comfort of each other's bodies. Real, alive, here.

Real, alive, here.

In the same shot of adrenaline that made him swing his shield into fights, Steve figured if he was already running towards the window, he may as well jump out of the proverbial burning building. It'd always been all or nothing for them anyways.
He parted his lips, opening his mouth to cautiously trace plush lips with the tip of his tongue, dragging wet heat between them. Bucky's mouth was as soft and pretty under his tongue as it looked on paper and tasted almost exactly how he smelled, that warm familiar presence he'd grown up tucked beside like a puzzle piece. Then Bucky eased open his mouth, breathing straight through Steve's parted lips - an electrical shock tingling all the way to his toes as Bucky pressed his tongue back, wetly brushing against Steve's, and he couldn't help the indecent moan dragged out of his throat as his fingers tightened and toes curled in his boots.

And all the pieces locked together, their life-long dance in circles around each other finally meeting in the middle. Every single word and broken nose and burning building had carried them here, to the passionate crook of their pressing mouths.

The heat coiling in his chest could set fires in Russia. Bucky's fingers were still knotted in his disheveled hair and his fingertips were probably embedding bruises into Bucky's shoulders and there may still be people trying to kill them but Steve couldn't imagine breaking away, not now, not ever. He was focused too intently on the lips against his, the hot, heavy, surging heat in his mouth, the wet pull of his bottom lip between Bucky's.

Jesus Christ, why hadn't they been doing this for years?

A piece of glass broke off to the right and suddenly Bucky's mouth was gone and Steve's chest hitched, trying to take in oxygen and his lips landed sloppily on leather, Bucky's shoulder, eyes still shut, trusting Bucky to take care of whatever the fuck was going on and get back to freaking kissing him as soon as physically possible. The gun tucked against the small of his back suddenly disappeared with a woosh of cold, then a loud shot fired off and something thumped in the distance. Then Bucky's hand was on his cheek and Steve lifted his head off Bucky's shoulder, moving right back in to kiss him.

Bucky laughed against his lips and it was the best thing Steve'd ever tasted, licking Bucky's laugh right out of his mouth and memorizing the feeling of that smile pressed against his lips and then he was getting shoved an inch backwards with unforgiving metal. Steve finally opened his eyes into sparkling icy crystal, Bucky's face tipped up to look at him, that wide, honest, Brooklyn smile on Bucky's pretty, swollen lips and god, why did they have to stop kissing?

He groaned in annoyance and ducked in again but Bucky's hand on his chest was solid and unbreakable so that smile just widened and those eyes danced with laughter and he was so goddamned beautiful, stunning, breathtaking, that it was a miracle Steve had enough brain power to pout, pushing out his bottom lip in petulance that his mouth wasn't on Bucky's anymore and then finally the metal gave, curling him in again one more time as Bucky reached up and kissed the pout off his mouth with sweet, moving lips.

It was total submersion and the opposite of drowning, like being so stocked full of ecstasy and warmth it overflowed, overwhelmed, and then they weren't kissing, again, much too soon and Steve was really upset about the whole stopping thing Bucky kept doing. He pressed his forehead against Bucky's and breathed him in, breathed in the air ghosting over his wet mouth and god, there weren't words in any language he knew to describe this.

"Why can't you ever catch a hint?" Steve asked breathlessly, fingers threading through Bucky's long hair to keep their foreheads dipped together.

He could feel Bucky pause, tracing back to their conversation before the kiss, the BC to their now AD and god, everything had changed, his life wasn't pre-post serum anymore it was pre-post kissing Bucky--
Then a surprised huffed laugh burst over his lips and Steve dipped his mouth down to cover Bucky's again, quick enough that he wouldn't get shoved off, just pressing mouths together and capturing that surprised joy before letting their lips drag apart from each other, slow and wet and fuck fuck fuck, he was never going to get over that.

The metal hand on his shoulder was the only thing holding him steady as Bucky took a step backwards, tilting Steve's chin up straight with a crooked finger on his right hand. Steve looked at him, could feel his insides melting, his knees practically going weak, he was so so goddamned in love with his best friend and Bucky'd kissed him back and the whole world was perfect now--

"This doesn't change anything," Bucky told him, softly. He blinked, repeated it in his head, then the meaning kicked in.

"What the hell?" Steve threw his hands up and spun away with the motion, staring up at the sky because of fucking course that was his luck. They were never going to catch a fucking break, were they?

He had to take a few breaths - probably needed them for going so long without oxygen anyways - to calm himself down before he turned back to Bucky, one hand on his hip and the other waving in the air.

"I just kissed you--"

"I noticed," Bucky interjected with a sideways smile.

"--and doesn't that change everything?" Steve continued, ignoring the sassy comment.

Bucky shrugged.

Of course, he hadn't shrugged once since he got back and he chose right then to revert to his old fucking habit of shrugging at everything Steve said.

"I mean, I'm definitely not going to hit you if you do it again." The twinkle in his eye at that made Steve's chest clench and that wasn't fair, they were trying to have a legitimate debate here, now was not the time to get distracted. Then the shine faded, the edge of his mouth turning down in disappointment. "But it's not some magical band-aid to fix me, Steve."

"I don't want some...magical band-aid." Steve stepped forward, not missing the way Bucky eyed him warily as he took the metal hand with both his own. "I just want you to talk to me. To take comfort in...this."

He squeezed Bucky's hand, knowing that the pressure signals would at least show him what Steve was implying. Them, to take comfort in them, two human beings turning to each other in crisis because they cared about each other, more-than-friends cared about each other, and they'd always be best friends first of course, but they could have this too. They could have each other.

Bucky sighed, eyes filled with that familiar tired sadness. "It's not that simple, Stevie."

"It can be," Steve tried, taking another step closer and cupping Bucky's cheek in his palm. He kept his expression as honest and genuine as he knew how while Bucky's sharp sniper gaze searched him, looking for the catch.

Eventually he tugged Steve's hand gently away from his face, weaving their fingers for a brief moment. That, that was familiar. Holding hands was nowhere near new territory, comfortable where everything else was precarious, and the fact that Buck incorporated it into the moment meant he
"We'll see," he finally permitted, thumb running over Steve's hand in an aborted comforting movement. Then he looked over Steve's shoulder, a single pause to survey the damage around them before he pulled on his hand and tugged towards his bike. "In the meantime, I don't wanna be here when the cops show up for cleanup."

"Yeah, you made a mess," Steve commented, letting Bucky pull him along while he looked around at the scene for the first time since arriving.

"I was emotional," Bucky shot back, the barest hint of a grin as he slid onto the back of Steve's bike.

"And then I came along..." Steve prompted, swinging onto the seat in front of him and leaning back, tilting his head onto Bucky's shoulder to look at him with a teasing, wide smile.

"And fucked me up more," Bucky complained, running steel fingers through Steve's blonde hair one more time before shoving him back upright. "Now drive."

~*~*~

The world was oversaturated. He knew plenty about mind color contrast play, sensory deprivation and cornea confusion but this wasn't anything like that.

This was like all his senses weren't just enhanced, they were...tingling. It was ridiculous, really, and he'd roll his eyes at himself in the mirror the next chance he got. But in the meantime he'd let the energy build in the tips of his fingertips, steady himself in the cool smoothness of the kitchen counter against his calves.

"Why do you sit on the counter?" Steve asked, glancing up from where he was making trail-mix cookie dough. Bucky raised his eyebrows, feeling his jaw click against the heel of his hand, elbow propped on his knee as he looked Steve over curiously. It was a question he'd know the answer to if he stopped and thought hard enough, but that was basically the theme of today so Bucky might as well tell him.

"Better vantage point. And latitude advantage."

Steve pursed his lips, setting the stirring spoon against the side of the bowl and facing Bucky, leaning back against the opposite counter. "So it's basically so you can be taller than me," he clarified and it took all his willpower not to cringe instinctually at the expression on Steve's face, that too-familiar one that spelled trouble.

"Basically," Bucky relented. The too-innocent smile widened and Steve crossed the kitchen, wide hands propping on the counter on either side of Bucky's knees. Brilliant blue eyes looked up - and wasn't that a trip, Steve looking up at him again? A wave of nostalgia for the 30s tugged in Bucky's chest and that's exactly what Steve was doing, wasn't it? Giving Bucky the upper-hand, the taller one again, to get him all riled up. Maybe get his mouth on Steve again.

The punk.

"You really think you can handle me?" Bucky asked, dropping his voice low as he straightened and brushed his metallic thumb over Steve's cheekbone. There'd been a nasty bruise here once, caused by
this hand, but that actually wasn't what Bucky was talking about.

See, the thing about Steve was that he went running into things head on. Jumping out of planes and taking on Hydra bases single-handedly. Okay, they shared that trait, but they went about it so differently.

Steve hauled himself into the line of fire, all instinct and passion and no thought. No planning ahead of time, everything on the goddamn spot, grab the flag and run with it.

Bucky was the one who made sure they covered every angle of the plan. Way ahead of time. Steve was an incredible leader, but he relied on instinct and leaning on people and Bucky wasn't like that, he was a sniper for Godsakes. It was all about preparation and strategy and deadly power and control.

That wasn't just who they were in the battlefield, that was who they were. Steve had ripped off his mask and kissed him in the middle of a live battle scene, all passion and fire.

Sure, Bucky was pretty sure he meant it then. And, knowing Steve, he meant it now too - and that was without the assurance of the hungry way he was looking at Bucky. But it wasn't the same as the way Bucky wanted Steve. Needed Steve.

This wasn't about comfort for him. It wasn't about what they deserved, what he wanted, none of that.

He'd devour Steve from the inside out.

This went a hell of a lot beyond want.

"I don't think I can handle you," Steve murmured, pushing up closer, head tilted back to hold his heated gaze. "I know I can."

He wouldn't throw caution to the wind, not when Steve was on the line. Protecting Steve came above everything else is, especially his own happiness.

But that didn't mean he couldn't let his fingers shift roughly through the hair on the back of Steve's head, forcefully tilting his face higher. A soft gasp escaped his lips and Bucky held him there, head cradled in his metal palm because for some reason, Steve really liked his left hand. Maybe because it wouldn't let him forget this was Bucky, no one else. Bucky liked that idea.

He tipped his head down, long hair flipping over the top of his head as he pulled Steve all the way up, pressing a hard, frozen kiss against his pretty mouth before releasing him entirely. He almost missed the soft whine in back of Steve's throat that he tried to choke down, but enhanced hearing gave him a really pleasant advantage for once.

"It's not going to be that easy," Bucky warned, leaning back against the wooden cabinets and raising one eyebrow at Steve. He had both hands on the counter again, looking vaguely out of breath and fuck, he looked good overwhelmed.

"I don't care," Steve breathed, hand curling around Bucky's bare foot. "I'll do whatever it takes."

Bucky hummed, studying him for a moment.

"Let's start with testing your deadly cooking," he offered, shaking free of Steve's hold and hopping off the counter.

Steve glared, but it was so affectionate Bucky'd normally laugh at him for it. As it was he nudged
Steve with his hip, taking the raw-food bowl from his hands and shooting a playful glance over his shoulder.

It was adorable, watching Steve groan and fumble after him, light pink dusting his cheekbones when he used to be a full-body blusher. Bucky sat the bowl on the table and grabbed a spoon before he broke his resolve and tasted the soft blush on Steve's cheeks instead.

In all the fighting they'd done lately, in all the running he'd done since he got his memories back, all the problems he'd caused lately -- he finally got his solution. The antidote, the snapping ribbon at the end of the finish line.

Everything he'd pushed away was ready to hold him. For real.

All the angst and the pain and the longing should all be over now. According to Steve. Who apparently equilibrated kissing to ambrosia.

Steve wanted to take his hand, give him a reason to start again, but Bucky meant it when he said nothing changed. Well, not nothing...he knew Steve liked him like that now. And sure, crushes could soothe surface pain and aggravation.

But they didn't change his mind about not depending on Steve. If anything it was more risky now, to open his heart and rely his existence and his reasoning and his drive on someone else. Even if -- maybe especially if that person was Steve Rogers.

So when he woke up thrashing and screaming because of some horror, some terrible distorted body beneath his hands, the disgusting things they'd made him do? When he woke up like that and Steve burst into his room, automatically dodging a knife that wasn't there, nothing could change.

If Steve was expecting to swoop in and rescue him, thumb away his tears and kiss his face and pull him into his arms to soothe him back to sleep, then he was going to be sorely disappointed.

Bucky kicked him out on his ass.

He had it coming, really, scooting up to Bucky's side and taking his shaking hands and throwing an arm around his shoulder and whispering for Bucky to talk to him.

Right. Talk about his nightmares. He'd done that...let's see...never. And he was never going to. And so he shoved Steve off his bed and made it very clear he was being dumb as f**k. Even repeated this doesn't change anything, in case he'd forgotten, featuring a wild hand between the two of them on this.

Whatever "this" was.

The next morning was the first morning he'd ever woken up, stared at the golden sunrise outside his window and had the chance to think - "I've kissed the sun."

What a way to start a morning.

He pulled his hair into a high ponytail, liking how bouncy it made him feel as he rummaged through
his closet for something tight and black. The only thing he was missing was his hoodie, but he figured Steve might have it, so he was already loudly voicing the question as he wandered into the kitchen.

"Hey Steve, have you seen my--mmpf!"

His question got cut short by a mouth suddenly covering his, Steve's heavy hand on his lower back pulling forward the same time he pressed hard against Bucky's lips, effectively bending him backwards with the force of the kiss.

Bucky felt like something out of a comic book, dipped backwards like some dame with his arms out in surprise - and a failed attempt at balance - eyes wide as Steve folded him close and kissed him.

He could've shoved Steve off, playfully punched his shoulder, except then Steve opened his hot fire mouth and Bucky was a goner.

His eyes slipped shut and he pushed back into the kiss, shivering as Steve's lips slid over his, carefully wrapping his arms around Steve's neck to hold him closer.

Steve tasted faintly like tea, and maybe mint under that, and as assaulted as he felt, Bucky figured he could definitely get used to this.

When they finally straightened up, Steve's hands sliding to settle on his hips, Bucky detached his arms and fell back flat-footed, although he'd never in a million years admit he'd been on his tiptoes.

The kiss broke with a wet sound that made it really hard not to dive in for more, then Steve was beaming down at him prettier than the morning sunrise outside his window and Bucky bit his lip, head spinning as he ran both his palms over the sides of Steve's neck. Right. He'd been saying something.

"Have you seen my hoodie?" He managed, fingers rubbing circles into the top of Steve's spine. Steve shuddered and smoothed a hand over Bucky's hair, tweaking his ponytail with a grin.

"It's in the living room." Blue eyes looked down at him and the hands on his hips squeezed, thumbs digging into his hip bones and turning his head woozy.

"Mmm. O-kay," Bucky nodded slowly and rolled his lips in, trying not to think about how he tasted like Steve. Jesus. He forced his hands off Steve's warm skin - god, he really was made of fucking sunshine, wasn't he? - and tilted his head towards the living room. "I'm gonna go...um. Get my...yeah."

He ducked out of the kitchen before he could embarrass himself any further, clutching a hand over his chest the second Steve couldn't see him anymore. Holy shit. There was a chance he wasn't going to make it past today, let alone anytime in the future. He was gonna die of a heartattack first.

Fuck. There were worse things to die of.

Considering that he'd blown off his mornings with Clint since he'd stuck a knife in the guy's thigh, now was as good a time as any to mend that burnt bridge. But he couldn't resist popping in the kitchen one more time before he left, catching Steve's attention by drumming his metal fingers on the wall.

"Hey, so I'm headed out to meet up with Clint." Steve's face lit up at the news, although whether it was because of the actual event or because he was being told about it, Bucky couldn't say.
"Have fun. Except maybe don't throw more knives."

Of course, leave it to Steve to joke about Bucky nearly killing one of his friends.

"Haha," Bucky shot back, dryly sarcastic. He pushed off the wall, pausing one more time in the archway to cock his eyebrow at Steve. "Speaking of which, I'd be careful with the surprise kisses, you catch me on a bad day and you might end up with a knife in your thigh."

He only got three steps down the hallway before Steve shouted from the kitchen, "It'd be worth it!"

And maybe Bucky shook his head and smiled all the way down the elevator.

~*~*~

After getting heartily lectured for stealing not-SHIELD intel for his own "revenge missions," Maria reluctantly let him back on the fight squad, effective immediately. The team was called in somewhere around noon, various states of grumpiness as they all shuffled into the tower's official briefing room.

Apparently he left a few survivors in his fiasco yesterday - which made everyone look at him in confusion and Steve look down at the table with a barely-concealed smile. The leftover Hydra asshats were too shaken to cover their tracks though, so it was pretty easy to trace where they ran. Which meant another Hydra base location.

"It was a strategic move, leaving them alive," Bucky confirmed, standing up after Maria dismissed them. Tony gave him a funny look and Steve laughed out loud because he knew exactly why Bucky'd failed total elimination yesterday. Bucky shot him a glare and Steve covered his mouth with a hand to stifle his snickering.

"Suit up, the quinjet's waiting!" Maria ordered over her shoulder, letting the door slam behind her. Tony mimicked her words with a bitchy face and Steve punched him on the shoulder hard enough to make him whine and Bucky rolled his eyes a lot and they all filed out of the room to get changed.

"Buck, have you seen my shield?"

"You lost the single most important Captain America symbol?" Bucky shouted back from his room, wrestling his metal arm through the sleeve hole of his new uniform that 'didn't look like a straight-jacket.'

"Never mind, found it!" Steve passed by his room, strapping the shield onto his arm as he muttered, "Dick."

"Hey," Bucky interjected, sticking his hand in the hallway to flick Steve off. A distant laugh, then Bucky cursed, struggling to get the stupid inner layer of his jacket zipped except that the thing was way too small for his metal fingers to hold and the angle wouldn't let him zip it with his right hand. "Fuck, who the fuck designed this thing?"

"You did," Steve reminded him, suddenly at the doorway again. "Can I help?"

"No." Bucky gave Steve a weird look and wiggled the stupid metal thing, cursing again when it refused to move. Then red gloves were on his hands, prying them off so Steve could do it.

Just because they kissed now did not mean Steve got to coddle him.

Bucky swatted Steve's hand - hard - and turned away, muttering "I got it, I got it," as he curled his right hand around, trying to overcome the impossible angle. The piece finally caught, zipping up all
the way, and Bucky spun back around to glare at Steve. "You done being my mother?"

Steve crossed his arms over his chest, the dimensional white star in the center making him look ridiculously pompous. "Why are you still denying help?"

"I told you, Rogers." Bucky brushed past him, grabbing Steve's shield from where he'd deposited it in the hallway. "This doesn't change anything."

Despite the squabble, the mission went off without a hitch - the Hydra base was less a base and more a safehouse, so they grabbed what intel they could and blew the place up. In and out.

And thankfully, Steve didn't try to wipe the soot smudges off Bucky's cheekbone and forehead because he literally would have punched him.

They got back to their floor sometime around five, cleaned off and changed into comfortable clothes, the remnants of post-battle victory still thrumming beneath Bucky's skin. It didn't matter that it'd been easy...Steve had still gone blazing in, uniform hugging him in all the right places as he flipped to the ground, lips parted with adrenaline and fuck, Bucky was still human and this was still Steve Rogers in a goddamned uniform.

But he wasn't about to kiss him on the battlefield - not when Tony and Clint were there. Not when anyone was there, actually.

The good thing? They weren't on the battlefield anymore. In fact, they were perfectly alone...

Bucky hummed to himself, plugging his iPod into the speakers in the living room. He could get Jarvis to play the music for him, but he liked having the control in his hands. Besides, he was pretty sure Steve had disabled Jarvis in most of their floor by now.

xx

Just as the music started up Steve wandered in, tight blue tshirt and gray sweats that he had to be wearing that low on purpose. Fucker.

"Who's this?" He asked casually, following Bucky into the dining room. Bucky grabbed his water glass off the table, listening to the words float over the apartment. It was loud, loud enough you could feel it but not so loud you couldn't talk.

"Fall Out Boy remix. They're kinda like Panic." He took a sip of water and Steve leaned against the table, head cocked as he listened. This is the road to ruin, and we're starting at the end. Say yeah, let's be alone together. We could stay young forever...

"I like it." Steve traced his fingertips over the edge of the table, sketching something into the wood. Bucky watched him for a moment and sat his glass down on the other end of the table.

"Do you?" He made his way back over to Steve, standing in front of him with his arms crossed over his chest. Steve nodded, looking up at him with a half-smile, still focused on the music, which was catchy enough that Bucky couldn't help but sing softly along. "We'll stay young, young, young..."

Blue eyes lit up, bright and amused, and Bucky raised his eyebrows, couldn't help a sudden smile spreading. Steve was still leaning on the table, eyeing Bucky with this look, so he took the last few steps forward slow enough to make Steve's pupils dilate.
The music was picking up, crescendoing, and the moment Bucky was close enough, heavy hands reached out slowly and landed on his hips, thumbs tracing over his tshirt contemplatively. Bucky stood still, right hand running over Steve's forearm, watching him and waiting, waiting, gazes still locked as Steve's fingers curled in his belt loops and tugged him closer.

The beat dropped and suddenly there were hands under his thighs, scooping him off the ground and swinging him around, dumping Bucky on the table and Steve shoved his thighs apart, pressing in between his legs and pulling his face up to meet a hot, wet mouth that was already open, kissing Bucky so hard and filthy he gasped, both hands clenching in the back of Steve's shirt as he arched closer, unable to breathe or think anything but the mesmerizing, pounding heat and the way Steve's mouth was stealing every ounce of oxygen from his lungs.

Fingers spread low on his back, one rounding over the top of his ass and suddenly dragging him closer to the edge of the table and his legs wrapped around Steve's hips, ankles locking at the back as he pressed closer, one of Steve's hands running up the side of his thigh and god, Bucky couldn't breathe at all.

He ducked his head, breaking apart from the heat of Steve's mouth with a shudder and a gasp, his eyes still closed as he tried to regain a heartbeat somewhere rational. His head rolled to the side and then Steve's sweet mouth was sucking its way down his neck and Bucky's fingers clenched tighter, thighs squeezing Steve closer as his lips parted in an obscene moan. The lips on his neck paused for a moment, pressing a quick splattering of chaste kisses over everywhere he'd just mouthed wet.

"Fuck, fuck, Steve," Bucky breathed, one hand scratching up his back to scramble at the short blonde hair. And just when Bucky thought he couldn't go out of his mind anymore, the muscle between his shoulder and his neck lit up on fire, Steve's teeth sinking into his skin and Bucky jolted, crying out and tensing all over, a shiver running down his spine and his left arm at the same time. Steve's lips closed around his skin, sucking lightly on the mark and shooting a flurry of sparks into his spine.

"I'm outside the door, invite me in, so we can go back and play pretend..."

"Christ, get your mouth up here and kiss me." Bucky grabbed Steve's jaw with both hands, pulling him up and pressing their mouths together desperately, unable to go a moment longer without Steve's lips on his own. Warm hands rubbed over his ribs, circling up to his shoulderblades and back down to his hips, tracing his thighs, like Steve had to touch everywhere and fuck, Bucky was so okay with that. He pushed up against Steve's mouth like he was dying for it, lips moving together as they held each other tight and--

There was someone in their apartment.

He didn't hear it, didn't see anything with his eyes closed, but he knew. Bucky shoved Steve off him so fast Steve stumbled over a dining chair, barely catching himself on the edge of the table before he hit the ground and Bucky swung his legs closed, eyes wide as he registered the intruder standing stock still just outside the elevator.

"Ms. Potts!" Steve greeted, voice more alarmed than welcoming, pushing himself to his feet and swaying a tad before he steadied himself on the back of the dining room table. His face was bright red, but not as red as Bucky's. "We...we weren't expecting you!"

Pepper rolled her lips in, touching her hand to her mouth once, looking away for a moment before composing herself and looking back at them both. "Clearly."

She was trying not to laugh.
"Is there...is there anything we can help you with?" Steve gestured vaguely with a hand, still propping himself up on the chair.

"Ah...ahm. Tony would like to extend an invitation to a sitdown team dinner tonight." She bit her lip, looking away for another moment, clearly having an increasingly difficult time holding her laughter in.

"Great!" Steve said way too enthusiastically, even shooting her a little thumbs up. "We'll be there."

"I'll let him know." She gave them a low nod and pressed the elevator button, stepping back inside. Just before the doors slid shut, she leaned to the side and offered, "Boys, you may want to fix your hair before you come upstairs. Have a good rest of your day!"

The doors chimed closed and they both stared at the gray metal for a few moments.

"Shit. She's so telling Tony."

"Uh. Yeah," Bucky agreed, running his hand through his hair. Wow, she was right, it was totally fucked up.

"Fuck."

On the bright side, they made it halfway through their pasta before Tony put down his fork, taking a sip of water, turned to Bucky and Steve and casually asked,

"So when were you planning on telling everyone you guys are makeout buddies now?"

Sam Wilson spit his drink all over table, an arching spray that soaked both a dangerously-frozen Natasha and shocked Bruce.

Clint fell out of his chair laughing.

Bucky rolled his eyes and stood abruptly, taking his plate with him as he walked away, shoving open the stairwell door and disappearing with a loud crash while Steve stared after him like a lost puppy.

"Rogers?" Natasha asked, and Steve stood up too, apologizing as he threw his napkin down and took off for the stairs.

"That doesn't bother you?" Bucky hissed, waving an arm in a general up-direction as he stormed into his room.

"No! I could care less." Steve followed, closing the door behind them and sitting next to him on the bed, running his palm over Bucky's bicep. "Bucky, I have you now."

He got a glare for that, but at least Bucky didn't shove him off. Instead he ran a hand through his hair, looking about ready to pull it out in exasperation and confusion. "But it's so...dangerous."

Coming from a fuming, deadly assassin, the idea of their teammates knowing they kiss seemed like about the least dangerous thing Steve could think of. But he didn't say that, he just took Bucky's hand and weaved their fingers together.
"We're *indestructible*. I've always gone in fighting, Buck. And you mean *way* more to me than any dame I've stuck up for."

"I'm no dame," Bucky scowled, trying to shake free of Steve's hand. Steve squeezed tighter, leaning forward and forcing Bucky to look at him.

"I know, and I'm glad you aren't."

"C'mon." The scowl was all skepticism now, the face he wore when he was getting Steve to fess up to something stupidly obvious. "You ain't a fairy, Rogers."

He let go of Bucky's hand then, only so he could sock him in the shoulder.

"Oh shut up, what would you know?" Those crystal eyes narrowed, open distaste with that sassy *I'd know plenty, Rogers* look he didn't have to voice aloud. Steve shook his head, because of course Bucky would fight him about this. He tipped Bucky's face towards him, forcing his stupid head to listen. "I've been wanting to kiss you since I knew what kissin' was."

Bucky searched him, contemplated for a moment or two. Started adding up clues, from the look of it. He looked off to the side, eyebrows furrowed. "So that one April those guys beat you up for looking at that dock worker...?"

"Which dock worker do you think it was, Bucky?" Steve sighed boredly.

"I-- what?"

"How did you *never* catch on?"

"Why did you *never* tell me?"

"Because you're Bucky fucking Barnes, that's why!" Steve threw up his hands and a disbelieving huff escaped Bucky's lips as he shook his head, running an exhausted hand over his forehead.

"Fuck. How did this...just come kiss me, Rogers, that's how you can apologize for wasting all those years." Bucky still looked chagrined by Steve's confession, but he was waving a beckoning hand impatiently at Steve, so who was he to protest?

Steve leaned over and captured Bucky's lips under his, not touching anywhere but their mouths as they tilted their lips together and slid apart again. Was there ever a day that kissing Bucky wasn't going to light up every nerve ending in his body? He seriously doubted it.

But this conversation wasn't over, because Steve may have fessed up but he still hadn't gotten a word from Bucky's side. So he (very unfortunately) pulled away, pressing one more quick kiss before straightening back up and placing a hand on Bucky's knee. "What about you?"

Bucky blinked his eyes open, glancing between Steve and the hand on his knee, before finally settling on looking at the wall. "I had a hell of a lot more reasons than you did, let's just say that."

"Like what?" Steve teased, leaning forward again to ghost his lips over Bucky's. Bucky tipped forward to close the space between them but Steve slid back, biting his lip and staying just out of reach as Bucky leaned in again. "C'mon, tell me."

He slid his fingers through Bucky's hair, tangling in the long pieces as caught Bucky's gaze and held it. "Like what?"
"Like maybe I'll tell you one day if you ever stop being a dick," Bucky shot back, suddenly shoving Steve off and jumping up from the bed, gone out the door before he could apologize. Steve collapsed back on Bucky's comforter and groaned up at the ceiling.

Why was his life so fucking hard?

"Why's my life so fucking hard?" Steve complained, plopping down heavily in one of Tony's swivel lab stools. Tony raised an eyebrow at him, minimizing one of his slidey blue screens and waving a hand in the air for Steve to elaborate.

“He's not letting me in,” he pouted, crossing his arms over his chest. Tony snorted and Steve glared crossly at him. “Not like that.”

With a grieved sigh, Stark pushed off from one table and let his rolling chair slide up to the table Steve was sitting by, tipping his chair back as he looked over with that one unreadable expression. Steve raised his eyebrows, waving his hand in a what? motion.

All he got were an axiomatic glance and a shaking head like he was the dumbest person on the planet.

“He's not going to let himself need you, Cap.” Tony reached behind him to grab a bag of something while Steve scowled and fiddled with the adjustment controls on his chair.

“Why can't I be what he needs?”

“Because he doesn't need,” Stark replied, popping a handful of mystery-bag's contents in his mouth. As much as Tony's advice normally sucked ass, he had a pretty fan-fucking-tastic point with that one.

Bucky was a lot of things, but dependent was definitely not one of them.

“Then how the hell do I keep him in my life?” Steve swiped the bag and inspected the contents, deciding that goji berries sounded very strange and smelled even stranger.

Stark paused at the question, pushing his roll-y chair again and swiveling to a stop at one of the holograph tables, flicking something blue into oblivion as he pondered. Steve could hear him muttering to himself, something along the lines of without needing...if you don't need, then...

Suddenly he straightened up, lightbulb going off as he froze, pointing a finger in the air as he finished chewing his strange berries.

“...You gotta be what he wants,” Tony suggested, popping another handful.

Steve pushed off from the floor with his feet, letting his chair glide until he bounced into one of the holographic tables, where he expanded the closest 3D model of the tower, zooming in on his floor and shifting it to look at another angle. “Meaning?”

“Meaning, if you want him to stick around, you've got to give him a...” Stark waved his hand around in the air, probably looking for a word that wouldn't offend Steve's 'delicate sensibilities.' "...different reason to stay. Meaning you have to get out of your comfort zone a little, Cap.”

Right, yeah, he knew exactly where this was going. Steve sighed, smashing the holograph tower into 2D with a flattened palm. “I hate to break it to you Tony, but things don't just get fixed with sex.”
“Yeah no, believe me, I know that.” The tone of Tony's voice didn't leave any room for imagination, but as least that meant he wasn't suggesting stupid things he'd never tried before. "But if you want him to need you, you gotta start small, with him wanting you.”

It was an interesting theory, at least. Steve scooted his wheels back from the table, curling his feet up cross-legged in the chair and pushing off with an arm to see if it spun in circles. It totally did.

When he slowed to a stop he was facing away from Tony, so he had to grab a table and swing back around again to clarify the suggestion.

“So basically I'm covering up the fact that I want to hold him through his nightmares by making out with him on the couch?”

It sounded totally irrational, especially when he said it out loud like that. But Tony shrugged, pouring more berries out of his bag. “Sure. It's worth a shot. Everything's worth a shot, right?”

He held out the bag towards Steve and he crinkled his nose, shaking no.

“I don't know. It seems kinda immature...” he trailed off, looking down at his hands. This was Bucky Barnes, his best friend in the whole world, wasn't it kind of childish to convince him to agree to something by teasing him with his body?

A goji berry hit the side of his nose and Steve popped up, making an indignant sound and covering his nose with his hand. Before he could say anything or yell at Tony another goji berry was being thrown at his face and he barely managed to dodge it in time.

“A goji berry hit the side of his nose and Steve popped up, making an indignant sound and covering his nose with his hand. Before he could say anything or yell at Tony another goji berry was being thrown at his face and he barely managed to dodge it in time.

“C'mon, lighten up, Grandpa Rogers!” Tony chided, throwing another berry. What the fuck? The look on Tony's face was pure glee, that expression he got when his robots did something particularly extraordinary. He threw another berry and Steve batted it aside with a scowl. Tony shook his head, popping the next one in his mouth. "You're acting like you're 96.”

“I am 96,” Steve informed him dryly.

“Then for once, just maybe, you should try being 27.”

Steve stared at Tony.

Stark popped another berry in his mouth and chewed, raising his eyebrows.

He had a really fucking good point.

He was 27.

Tony must have taken his silence and stare as disagreement or offense, because he sighed and shook his head, finally getting up out of his roll-y chair and standing like an adult. He pulled the 3D tower up again, zooming in on the unfinished floor and rotating it, looking for something while Steve just kept staring at him.

“You know...I think you could really get him." Tony clicked his tongue, wiping a wall out of the hologram before turning to Steve and making a wave gesture with his hand. "Just for a few days, try it, okay? Words of an ancient proverb: I can make the bad guys good for a weekend.”

That did not sound like an ancient proverb.

*I think you could really get him.*
Maybe, you should try being 27.

Steve put his legs down, pushing his toes along the concrete floors to slowly scoot his chair to the table with the goji berry bag.

Stark was busy assuming Steve was pouting, or leaving, or something, because he didn't look up as Steve moved across the room. With careful, slow, planned movements he tipped the bag over into his palm, arranging the little dried berries with a fingertip, looking for the biggest one.

And then he chucked it at Tony.

He was going to be 27.

Chapter End Notes

Woohoo!

So if you're looking for the links to embedded songs those are here:
- **This is Gospel** - Panic! at the Disco
- **When the Day Met the Night** - Panic! at the Disco
- **Alone Together** - Fall Out Boy (The Jumpsmokers Remix)

Other songs that coincide with the chapter:
- **Hurt me** - The Jezables
- **Ghouls** - We are Scientists

So to everyone who has commented "Steve get your shit together"

Steve got his shit together

(well, like, the kissing-Bucky part. We still have a lot of problems but hey)

Thank you all so much for reading - comments and sharing are the drive of my writer's heart <3

xx
"What are you doing?"

Steve looked up under his lashes and Bucky kept his hand on the stairwell doorframe, eyebrows raised as he waited for an answer. But he didn't get a reply - instead Steve stuck out his arms,
presenting the flowers to Bucky.

He stared for a few seconds, studying the bouquet without reaching for it, then looked back up at Steve and repeated his question. "What are you doing?"

"Aw, c'mon, Buck. Don't be like that."

"Be like what? You brought me flowers, Rogers, what the hell am I supposed to do with that?"

"Take them?"

Bucky threw up his hands and kicked the stairwell door open, leaving Steve to come inside for himself. It was stupid enough he knocked on the damn thing in the first place. What, so he could stand there like a moron pretending they were in some suburban movie? He fell onto a couch, groaning into his hands, and suddenly a faintly-sweet smelling bouquet was dropped in his lap. Bucky lifted his head, picking the thing up like it was poisonous, and made a disapproving sound.

Steve plopped down next to him, one hand on Bucky's cheek while he nuzzled in and pressed a soft kiss to the other cheek. Bucky grumbled and turned the open petals towards them, scanning the color palette and Steve even picked out flowers like an artist.

"You're lucky you're a good kisser," he muttered, dropping the bouquet back into his lap. And tipping sideways with the force of another supersoldier kiss to his cheek. "Why'd you get me flowers, anyhow?"

Resting his forearms on his thighs he turned his head to look at Steve, who at least had the decency to blush a little at the ridiculousness of it all. Then he shrugged, twisting his hands together and looking down in that weirdly cautious way he did sometimes. "Always wanted to. Figured I finally could."

"You've always wanted to get me flowers?"

"I did, once." Bucky's eyebrows shot up and Steve leaned back against the couch, voice barely audible as he mumbled. "Just didn't give 'em to you."

"Wait...really?"

"If you're gonna be a dick about this just forget it--"

"No, no, wait. You are so telling this story. Sit your ass down, I need to hear this." Steve crossed his arms. Bucky picked up the scented plants and waved them enticingly in front of Steve's nose. "I'll keep the flowers if you tell me?"

Blue eyes narrowed suspiciously and Bucky jumped off the couch, filled a glass with water, and dumped the thing in as is. Steve rolled his eyes and took them back out, clipping the bottoms and undoing the ribbon that held the stems together as he talked.

"Eighth grade - you'd started workin' your first job, so I'd go to that park down the street to wait for you to get off. Except you always looked so exhausted comin' home and I wanted to do somethin' to make you smile." Steve fluffed the flowers in their makeshift vase, thumb stroking a tiny delicate petal. "So I picked half the flowers in the park and bundled em up with a shoelace--"

"You asshat, you said you lost that shoelace by stepping on it!"

"Interrupting. Anyways, I got you flowers and ran to see you as fast as my stupid lungs would let
me. 'Cept then I was standing outside the door with flowers for my best guy and..." He stopped, running a hand through his hair and closing his eyes and Bucky could see it - little Steve standing outside the door, bouquet of freshly picked flowers in his tiny hands, wheezing from the run - pretty face falling as he reached for the doorknob and reality hit.

Steve cleared his throat, "...and I couldn't. So I gave 'em to Ms. Sherry next door."

The tone of his voice, the way he was looking at his hands...there were times Steve's body language overruled the muscles and he was the tiny punk again, sittin' on the couch next to Bucky, stuffed inside some body that took better care of him than Buck ever could.

And it was goddamn depressing, the mirror of the past slumped beside him; that irrational hope, stubborn spark, broken heart - all still tucked inside, no matter what body he had.

And so he brought Bucky flowers.

Because he couldn't before. What a touching parallel.

"You think this is sweet, don't you?" Steve looked up, glancing from Bucky to the vase and Bucky shook his head, swooping a hand as he clarified. "Not the flowers. I'm talking about the whole thing."

That got an even more confused glance so Bucky shifted, turning his torso and sitting up straighter, his body language as accusatory as his tone.

"You think this is some sorta...romantic Shakespearean play." Soft lips parted to protest but Bucky shut him up with a hand because he wasn't done. He wasn't anywhere near done. "Best friends their whole lives, one almost dies and the other can't live without him and tries to die too."

Blue eyes narrowed but Bucky ignored them, waving a hand and continuing in his mock storytime voice. "Then they both get a 'second chance' so they play it right, fall for each other. Get to be together after decades of pining and unrequited feelings..."

Steve's expression was hard, defensive and hurt and that in itself confirmed everything Bucky said. He wasn't being malicious; just realistic. That's how Steve saw this whole thing, some mushy fairytale about flowers and yearning gazes. They'd never survive this if that's the reality Steve was pretending to live in.

With hands as gentle as his words had been harsh, Bucky took Steve's face in his hands, running his thumbs over the chiseled jaw and forcing Steve to look him in the eyes, serious and close.

"Stevie," Bucky chided softly. "This ain't some sonnet."

Blue eyes searched his, wavering between confusion, offense, and fear and this was so much more complex than Steve was pretending.

"Bucky, what're you saying?" He managed, hesitant and small and it wasn't like that.

Steve was painting their picture in pastel colors - but it'd never be them without harsh blacks and reds and grays. Bucky was only trying to change his color palette. Look at this thing without rose-colored glasses.

Don't forget what this thing was really about.

"We're not a love story, Steve." Bucky smoothed his hands down Steve's neck and shoulders,
gripping his arms and holding them both stock still. "We're a war story."

Surprise flitted over sharp features, a single pause as it sank in, then Steve shook Bucky off, grabbing his hands before they could retreat and holding all four in between them, high and centered and Steve looked almost relieved. Excited, even, and it was Bucky's turn to be confused.

"It's the same thing." Steve squeezed their hands together and Bucky furrowed his eyebrows, pretty sure he'd heard wrong.

"What?"

"It's the same thing." Steve repeated, scooting half a foot closer as the eager look settled into determination. He let go with one hand to gesture grandly as he elaborated. "Love, war."

Bucky stared at him. Maybe somebody should give Steve a dictionary because Bucky was pretty sure those were antonyms.

"I'm gonna show you, Buck." He put their hands down, fingers running up Bucky's forearms as he leaned forward, mouth curling into a pretty smile. "It's the same goddamn thing. You watch."

He was still wrapping his head around whatever the hell Steve was saying when warm lips pressed against his, thrumming with energy as excited palms rubbed lines into Bucky's arms and how had that turned around on him?

It wasn't like Steve said it just to say it, either. He'd brightened all over, lighting up the way he always did when he realized something important.

He actually believed it, Steve sincerely thought...

Their mouths broke apart and wet lips puckered on the side of his mouth in a chaste, happy kiss and Bucky's brain was turning gears but he still couldn't figure out how Steve was going to show him two opposites were the same thing.

Then Steve leaned back and great, Bucky knew that face, that was the unmistakable - probably patented - Steve Rogers has a mission face.

Bucky watched with a sigh as Steve vaulted off the couch, snagged a single flower from the vase and took off with a salute.

Great.

In his attempt to make Steve understand the actual theme of their lives, he'd accidentally invoked another war.

Because that's what Steve's mission face meant. He wasn't gonna let this go, he wasn't gonna back down from the fight.

The bouquet laughed at him from its vase and Bucky reached out, running his thumb over one of the delicately soft petals, the pretty colors blinking up almost cloyingly sweet.

If flowers were the first battle?

The next assault was the exact fuckin' opposite.
It came roughly 20 hours later, so Bucky'd pushed it out of his mind and really, he hadn't expected Steve to follow up flowers with something like *that*.

Bucky went to the gym in the mornings, *Steve knew* this. And he hadn't forgotten either, because when Steve left for his run with Sam and kissed goodbye him on the nose (fuckin' sap), he explicitly said "have a wonderful workout!" with a suspiciously cheery tone.

He'd jogged down the ten flights of stairs to the gym in a tanktop and gym shorts, debating what the hell Steve could've been up to with each jolting step.

The explanation came when Bucky swung open the glass doors.

Steve was in the middle of the gym floor doing one-armed push-ups. In tight black boxer-briefs.

His life was so hard.

Literally.

"You're an asshole," Bucky commented nonchalantly, leaning against one of the padded columns to watch. Steve pushed extra hard, torso lifting a few feet off the ground as he quickly switched arms, landing on his left and tucking the right behind his back. The kind'a pushups officers do in basic camp, back in the forties.

"Don't be sore," Steve managed between heavy breaths, "Just 'cause you're...jealous."

Bucky scoffed, pushing off the wall and making his way slowly across the mat. "At that rate, you're gonna be the sore one."

"Prove it," Steve breathed, not missing a beat of the obscene up-down motion, arm straining and muscles ridiculously defined, shiny with the beginnings of a sweat sheen, the perfect gorgeous soldier.

He'd seriously been hanging out with Steve too much, because that sounded like a challenge, and who would he be to deny it? And as much as he'd love to give Steve some extra weight and do sit-ups on that gorgeous back, they could save that for a time when Steve wasn't practically naked.

There were other ways to make him exhausted.

Scooping his foot under Steve's ribs, Bucky flipped him over easily, balance shot with only one arm on the mat. The rippling back smacked the mat with an loud noise then Bucky was straddling him, pinning both arms over his head, locked fingers over strong wrists.

Steve strained up against him, lifting his head and forcing his wrists apart in attempt to break Bucky's hold, only Steve was a goddamned amateur at wrestling compared to him, so he didn't get further than an inch. He flopped his head back down on the mat, sweaty hair sticking up in a thousand directions and an amazing, fucked out grin on his face.

He liked being held down. A lot.

A mischievous smile of his own curled a corner of his mouth, because he was in a great position for revenge when he was hovering over Steve. Squeezing the wrists tighter, Bucky lowered down, mouth ghosting over Steve's, then he was grinding his ass down on Steve's hips and the sudden pressure shot through Steve like a bottle rocket and he arched up hard, spine curving and head tipped back and goddamn, was he beautiful.
The pressure against his ass was making him dizzy, the heat pressed up against him through a thin layer of boxers and fuck, fuck, Steve was keening up against him all needy and flushed and every single one of his nerve endings were on fire, a ripple up his spine and through his left shoulder, plates of his arm shuddering all the way down to his fingers closing harder around those pretty wrists.

Sweat glistened on Steve's neck and Bucky circled his hips once, biting his lip at the heat tightening his chest as Steve lost it, head thrashing to the side with a gasp, shaking and panting under him, lips parted and damp with heavy rushes of air and fuck, that was enough of that.

Bucky covered that gorgeous mouth with his, kissing the trembling lips rough and dirty. He tasted salty with sweat, pressing up against Bucky all desperate and hot with tiny puffs of staccato breaths in and out of Bucky's mouth, stealing his oxygen and god, that was fucking intense, Steve filling his lungs with air directly from his own. The world threatened to tip sideways but he couldn't afford to get lightheaded now, not when he was supposed to be exacting revenge.

He broke off before he lost his mind, feeling the separation tug deep in his chest but he forced himself up, on his knees again so the only part of their bodies touching were the cuffs of his fingers over Steve's wrists. It took a few seconds to open his eyes, get his breathing under control because fuck, he could feel Steve everywhere and he needed more, really fucking badly, and he actually had to resurface mental training techniques to keep himself from dipping back down for more.

"C'mon, Buck. C'mon," Steve panted, squirming and looking so goddamn debauched Bucky almost caved. God, Steve was all sweaty, had come in here and stripped down to just boxer-briefs to put his gorgeous body on display all for him and Bucky was gonna die.

"No," he managed, voice cracking, then he shook his head and forced himself to get a grip. And seventy years of training were apparently still good for something because it took him about five seconds before the tension bled enough to calm his voice down, steady and cocky now as he spoke again. "This is payback for interrupting my morning workout."

Steve glared up at him, biting his lip annoyedly except Bucky knew it was to entice him and that's when he made the mistake of readjusting his grip on Steve's wrists. That was the only opening he needed before Steve kicked up, wrapping one leg around Bucky's hips and then suddenly Bucky was slammed into the mat, pinned down with inescapable weight and Steve's mouth was back on his, kissing the fuck out of him.

Wet, hungry twists and darting licks of his tongue and Bucky's head was spinning, his everything was spinning and fuck fuck, training, he could do this. He could fucking fight the moans Steve was trying to tug out of his chest, he could hold himself back when Steve tugged at his lips, sliding and popping and diving back in and fuck fuck fuck, he could keep his hips from bucking up like a starved whore only god he wanted it, so fucking bad, and it was every ounce he had to keep himself from crying out and shuddering when Steve pressed their mouths so hard together they'd both bruise.

Decades of training and he was barely keeping it together, ripped apart by the fire of Steve's mouth and holding on by a fraying string, so close to giving in that he was trembling with the force of it, barely managing to keep still--

Then suddenly it was all gone and a whimper did escape his throat finally, mouth and chest and everywhere hit with cold as Steve's grounding weight disappeared. Fuck, fuck, he probably looked like a total wreck, laying on this mat and half-near crying with the effort and the twist in his chest.

"Hey, hey, are you okay?" Steve asked from next to him and god, what a fucking question that was, Bucky felt like he was inches from exploding. He glared at the gated lights on the ceiling.
"No." He grit between his teeth, heart pounding out of his chest and why the fuck had Steve stopped touching him, he wanted - needed, to do something about that but if he caved now, if he grabbed that perfect body and pressed it back to his then Steve would win.

And that was the thing about being best friends for a lifetime before they started doing...this. As fucking much as he wanted to kiss Steve? He couldn't lose a competition. Goddammit, he could not let Steve win this. It was like, embedded in him not to.

"God, Bucky, I'm sorry, I didn't think." Steve's voice sounded strangely distressed, although Bucky felt pretty damn distressed too, only what the hell was Steve apologizing for? Bucky glanced over and Steve was curled up, arm curved around his knees and the other fucking up his hair as he looked down and muttered. "Of course you wouldn't want to be held down. Fucking Hydra."

He pushed up to stand and Bucky stared at him, the words finally registering.

"Wait what?" So that's why he'd stopped? Oh, shit, must've thought Bucky's reluctance meant-- He shook his head quickly, quirking an eyebrow as he looked up with an amused twist of his mouth. "No, no, I just didn't want you to win. I'm so okay with being held down." The amusement curled up in a sidesmile but Steve furrowed his eyebrows in disbelief. Okay, he had a bit of a point. Bucky thought it over and tacked on a stipulation. "Just as long as there aren't chairs or leather involved, I'm good."

The hesitant fear was still on those pretty features so Bucky reached out, curling his right hand around Steve's ankle, forcing his attention with a sharp shake of his head. "Seriously, Steve. Don't let Hydra take this too."

That got him. The idea of Hydra still fucking them up, grip tight when it was in the past, it was over? Hydra'd already taken so much from them and Bucky meant it when he said they weren't going to take this.

Whatever this was. So they kissed now, but beyond that, he had no idea what they were supposed to be. What it meant, even, really.

Steve ran a hand through his hair, ducking his head. After a moment or two and he nodded slowly, looking Bucky over carefully. "Yeah, yeah. Okay...if you're sure."

The mood shift had given him enough time to get a grip on himself so he stood easily now, closing the step between them and tipping Steve's chin up with the side of his finger. "I'm sure. I'll let you know if it ever gets to be like...that, okay?" He gave Steve a small smile, hand sliding to cup the side of his neck. "So long as you do the same."

He'd expected it, but that didn't make it sting any less as Steve's face twisted in blatant, honest confusion. A few beats of silence, then Steve's mouth opened and Bucky's heart broke. "You've been hanging out with Sam too much." A little laugh, shake of his head. "I don't have...issues. I'm fine."

Right. He'd never heard Steve say it out loud like that, but he didn't need to. He knew how that brain worked and he'd be offended, really, that Steve thought he was too good for PTSD - but smothered Bucky about his. Except he knew it wasn't about that either. As much as he'd love to shake Steve's shoulders for being a self-deprecating dumbass, he raised an unimpressed eyebrow instead.

"So if I wanted to makeout in a pool you'd be fine with that?"

Steve huffed and looked away, the internal monologue of this is stupid as clear as if he'd said it
aloud. Ever patient, Bucky cupped Steve's jaw and manually turned his face, making their eyes meet again.

"How about thunderstorms?" The blue darkened a little but Steve didn't say anything.

"Nightmares?" Bucky suggested, and that one got a flare of annoyance in response. There was no way to deny the things Bucky was saying and he could tell, that was the most frustrating part for Steve. Not the truth, but that Bucky was presenting it in a way he couldn't deny it like he'd done for months.

"The way you refuse to go into the cockpit of the quinjets?" Steve's eyes widened at that one and Bucky pursed his lips, adding a thoughtful sidenote. "Or any plane, for that matter."

"How did you--" Steve started and Bucky almost laughed. Was he about to say notice? How did Bucky Barnes notice something Steve Rogers did? Gee, it's a national mystery.

He refrained from saying, "It's my fucking job, punk," and instead cut Steve off, continuing with the mile-long list Steve didn't want to hear.

"How when you visit Peggy you can't take the train, so you sit on a public bus for three hours?"

Steve scowled. "You take the train when you visit her?"

There was a lot loaded in that question, the assumed accusation of you visit her; Steve was trying to trip him up, shove Peggy and the train-fall in his lap at once but Bucky just smiled, running his thumb along the edge of Steve's ear.

"No. But I know I'm fucked up."

And there it was. Steve either had to deny being fucked up too, which would be ridiculous considering everything they'd just said, or he'd have to admit to months of denial.

Or he could take bastard-route-number-three.

"Speaking of which, Buck. Last time I saw Peggy she told me you two had a talk? During the war?"

Bucky dropped his hand from Steve's face. The subject change was blatantly obvious, depressingly desperate, but he wouldn't force Steve to talk about this in the middle of the gym floor if he didn't want to. Instead he studied Steve's expression, looking for exactly how much he knew before carefully replying, "We did."

"About me," Steve clarified.

"Yep."

"And you said?"

Bucky snorted, taking a step backwards. "That's between me and her."

"Really?" Steve crossed his arms over his chest, all stubborn and righteous again. "Cause she seemed to think it was pretty important you tell me."

"She would," Bucky conceded, more to himself than Steve. The expectant look was waiting but Bucky ignored it, taking a few backwards steps towards the door. "But I'm not going to. Now, before we ruin a morning that started out perfectly fantastic," he gave Steve a grin and turned, looking over his shoulder for the rest of the line, "...you wanna put on some clothes and join me for
He paused at the door, trying not to laugh at Steve jumping into gym shorts and throwing on a - Bucky's - black hoodie, tugging it over his head as he caught up to Bucky's side.

"Real breakfast as in not juice? We're actually eating food now?" There was a joking tone in that sweet half-smile but it was a low blow, so Bucky shoved him, swinging through the door first with a growl.

"Shut up, I'm trying." He meant it to be snarky but Steve's face suddenly went all soft, bumping up against Bucky's side with a sugar smile.

"I know. And I'm so proud of you, sweetheart."

Oh Christ. Bucky rolled his eyes and threw his arm up, looping Steve's neck in the crook of his elbow and tugging him down the way he used to when they were kids. Except this time he nosed Steve's temple, eyes closed, placing a solid kiss to the side of his head and holding him there a moment too long.

When he finally let go Steve straightened up with that sunshine smile and it wasn't Bucky's fault if he ducked his head with a smile of his own.

~*~*~

Natasha was waiting on their couch. That was the thing about living in the tower, there were always people invading your space because technically, it was all Tony's space.

She stood up when she saw them, and thankfully they weren't doing anything embarrassing like making out in the elevator. They were both outta breath, but that was because they'd raced up ten flights of stairs - while pushing each other down whole sets. Steve had a fading bruise on his shin and Bucky had one on his forearm and he could tell Steve's hair was fucked up, so god knows what his looked like and all in all they probably looked suspicious as hell. But it'd been an innocent game of shoving people down dangerous slopes, nothing to be giving them that look for.

"James, can I borrow your--"

"Steve, yes, you can borrow him, but you have to return him without any cracks or I charge full refund." Bucky clapped his hand on Steve's shoulder and shot them both a wide smile on his way to his room. Either Steve was seeing things way more sexually or Bucky was totally swaying his hips on the way out.

He shook his head fondly and suddenly remembered he was being stared down by Natasha, turning to her with raised eyebrows. He was pretty sure she'd almost called him Bucky's boyfriend, so it was a really good thing Buck had reflexes enough to interrupt before they had to have that conversation. Not that he didn't want to have that conversation, but.

"Nat. It's been a while, how are you doing?" Steve started towards the couch and Natasha waved a hand, cocking her head towards the elevator.

"Not as great as you, it seems. Although with bruises like that, I don't see how anyone could be." Another raised eyebrow and shit, this was totally not what it looked like. Not that it hadn't been like that earlier, down in the gym, when Bucky'd...God. Not the time to think about that. "You had coffee yet? There's a great place downtown."
Steve followed her into the elevator, wondering what the hell could be pertinent enough to discuss over coffee. He didn't have to wait long to find out; the moment they sat down in the corner booth of a shop (that was surprisingly cheery for Natasha's taste), she cut straight to the chase.

"Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

"You're a very gentle person Natasha, has anyone ever told you tha--"

"Rogers, it's a ploy. I told you he's a professional, I warned you he was putting thoughts in your head. You know you're smarter than this." She uncapped her coffee and blew on it and Steve blinked at her with a little shake of his head.

"Don't you think you're being a little paranoid?"

"What do you know about Red Room?" Steve shrugged, making a wishy-wash motion with his hand. Natasha pursed her lips and held up her thumb for number one. "First step for deep cover missions: make yourself appear the victim. Misogynistic minds do that to women all on their own, but it helps to play up confusion and dependency. What's the first thing Barnes did? Show up to your apartment bloody and needy. You know what it takes to get a ghost story to bleed?"

"He was in a messed up place--"

"Do you honestly believe that? A man who's been invincible for decades suddenly leaning on you because you 'shared a moment' on a burning helicraft during one of his kill missions? He saw an opportunity in you, and he took it."

"Natasha, this is Bucky. He's not playing me, he's been my best friend as long as I can remember. He's got his memories back, he killed all his Hydra connections."

"Step two, prove you have a common enemy." She flipped her palm out with an axiomatic expression that read hello in that terribly sassy tone. "And you can say for sure it was total elimination?"

Steve narrowed his eyes and took a sip of his coffee. "I can't imagine he'd leave any alive. You should've seen what the carnage looked like."

"I've seen him fight." Nat leaned back in the booth, arms crossing over her chest. "He's an animal."

"Steve. He's not your innocent Bucky Barnes from Brooklyn anymore." She shook her head exasperatedly and Steve stared into his cup, the taste bitter on his tongue now.

"He was never innocent, Nat. He was always...dark."

"And Hydra took that darkness and twisted it, shaped it into a guard dog. Don't -" she held up a hand to stop him and he froze, forcibly unclenching his fists under the table. "I know what you're going to say. I get it's hard to hear, but they called him Собака for a reason. You don't come back from that."

"Maybe you don't," Steve leaned forward, holding Natasha's gaze seriously. "But he's not a machine anymore. He's a human-fucking-being. Not a ghost story, or a monster. When's the last time you kissed somebody because it made you happy, Nat?"

"C'mon, Steve, that's the point! You seriously think he's seeking happiness here?"
"Right, 'cause god forbid a killer be happy?"

"You're blind to this. You don't get it - you're the in. The tool to pry open the vault. You two conveniently fall in love while one of the biggest evil super-corporations in the world decides they don't care about retrieving their deadliest weapon? Oh wait - it's because he's safe now, right? The only place in the world he could to be safe from Hydra is, of course, the famous Stark Tower. There was just nowhere else to go.

"And now he has full access to one of the most technologically advanced intelligence bases in the world. The inside scoop on SHIELD's biggest pawns, the dinner invite with the Avengers. I wonder how he could've possibly set that up?"

"It's not like that." Steve glared out the window and it was Natasha's turn to lean forward, rapping her fingernails on the table insistently.

"How do you know? Hydra hasn't attempted to come after him. He's refused to do a psych exam. Or a medical exam. Or even a debriefing over why the fuck he's here."

"He's here because of me." His voice had the edge of a challenge in it, the same tone that'd gotten him into a hundred fights before.

Except Natasha had the opposite reaction, dipping her head and softening her voice, something almost like pity. "That's what he wants you to think. That's the whole point of this."

She gestured at him and Steve ran a hand down his face. When Natasha got worried, that's when you should get the fuck out of whatever the hell you're doing. But this was Bucky. There's no way he'd be a double agent.

"There's a Red Room method, a guaranteed-results path. Ensures any victim, no matter how difficult to break." Natasha looked sorry enough that he could anticipate her next words and fuck, he wasn't sure he'd be able to hear them. He didn't have a choice though, because Natasha flicked her hair over her shoulder and opened her mouth to break his heart. "You make them fall in love with you. You get that, you have everything."

Steve tilted his head and curled one side of his mouth in a smile, the way he always did when he wanted to cry.

"Do you believe in love?" he asked softly. Natasha gave him a sad smile and weary eyes holding the reflection of a thousand stories.

"Love is for children."

He nodded, looking out the window again. "We were children together. I loved him then, and I never stopped."

"But did he love you?"

Steve closed his eyes. He'd been asking himself - how long - had mentioned it to Bucky, tried to pieces together clues. But the truth was he didn't know. Bucky refused to tell him.

"When did he start feeling this way about you? As kids? Teens? After you shot up three feet? After he broke your cheekbone with his metal fist? When his agency was tracking him down and he needed a safe place to stay?"

If Bucky didn't insist on hiding everything, Steve could answer that. But he'd been shoved off every
time he brought it up. So he shook his head, giving Natasha the depressed shrug.

"He didn't say."

Another smile and Nat looked him over, studying and evaluating. If she didn't think Bucky was working for Hydra and Bucky wasn't cold to basically everyone, they could be friends. They'd talked a few times (because Bucky'd known about the kiss in the mall and Steve hadn't told him), but now that Nat laid out her opinion it was pretty clear she'd only interrogated him and thrown events to judge reactions.

How do you feel about me kissing your best friend? And by the way, are you still being brainwashed by the assholes who kept you captive for seventy years?

A surprisingly sturdy hand slipped into his, holding it tight until Steve looked up at the concerned green eyes. "Look, Rogers, I don't want you hurt. If he's hiding something, you need to know what."

He didn't want Natasha to be right. But she had a terrifyingly good point.

All the signs, they all pointed to a distrustful double agent who’d found Steve's weakness and exploited it like the professional he was.

Steve could only pray it wasn't true.

~*~*~

He ran into Bucky in the first hallway past the lobby.

His hair was pulled in a low bun, wisps of pieces around his face and he was carrying a small thin box under one arm.

"Hey! You and Nat missed it, Tony's setting up the neatest security net for the Tower residents and he asked if I wanted to help." Bucky stopped as he reached Steve, bouncing on the balls of his feet in excitement.

What had Nat said? Insider access to the most-advanced technological base?

"That's great, Buck," Steve managed, hating how obviously he tensed up. It was a lot to take right now, so Steve meant it when he offered a small smile and stepped aside, ending his half of the conversation.

Only Bucky was too excited to recognize the uncomfortable rejection, following Steve's step with his own and pulling him into a one armed hug, other occupied with holding the box at his side. He pressed a kiss to Steve's shoulder and Steve closed his eyes, wishing he'd had like ten minutes longer to absorb everything before this.

"Remember when Howard used to let me hang out in his lab?" Bucky lifted his head, one arm still around Steve's waist as he looked up with bright eyes. Steve smiled tightly. When Bucky'd hung out with Howard he hadn't been a deadly assassin with possible ulterior motives.

"Yeah, after you got shot? And were supposed to be invalid for a week?" He'd meant it to be a joke, that always was between them, it was their coping method.

Except this time Bucky's expression dimmed, ducking his head to look at Steve's shoes as his excited energy thrummed down into quiet seriousness. "I knew I'd heal faster than that. I should've...I shouldn't'a faked it, I should've told you." A soft breath, the metal hand on his back tightening in his
shirt. "Steve, I'm sorry."

"What, a legitimate apology from a Barnes?" He teased, because that's what they did, Bucky'd would say shut up and they'd go their separate ways and Steve would have time to think.

But he didn't get the shut up back. Instead crystal eyes turned up at him and fuck, were they actually wet? Bucky had his pretty bottom lip between his teeth, all masks down, sincere and honest written into every single detail of his features.

Steve had known this face his entire life. He knew exactly what Bucky's poker face looked like, what every stage of his lying faces were. This wasn't any of them - this was honest.

If Natasha was right...if Bucky was trying to hook him?

He got Steve good.

Fuck paranoia. He was goddamn sick of second-guessing every good thing that came into his life. They'd been brought back together through the centuries and they'd finally gotten something great and Bucky was blinking up at him, teary-eyed and so sorry for not telling Steve about the serum, so sorry he didn't save them from all that pain--

Steve pulled Bucky into his chest, wrapping both arms high around his shoulders and holding him close enough to feel the patter of his heartbeat. He was so far gone. If Bucky was playing him...there was no way he could back out now. He was in this thing way too deep.

When Bucky pulled back, sniffling once and wiping an embarrassed hand down his face, Steve tucked a piece of dislodged hair behind his ear and told him to have fun with Stark; Buck gave him a little wave goodbye and turned back to the labs. Steve watched him go, memorizing the familiar gait for the thousandth time, and decided that the most honest thing Natasha'd ever told him was I only act like I know everything, Rogers.

He'd defend her to the death. She was honestly his friend - and she'd also been the one to tell him not to look for Bucky in the first place. Don't pull on that thread. It was her past experience clouding her judgement and Steve could never think less of her for that. God knows the same was the case with him.

But he didn't have to take her word as gospel either. You can't kill ideas once they're planted - he'd watch closer now, make a point to learn all the things Bucky was hiding. But he wasn't going to accuse his best friend of working with the enemy, and he sure as hell wasn't leaving him anytime soon.

In fact, he was gonna do the opposite. He was going to give Bucky every reason in the world to trust him so he could know all those secrets, so they could put the entire thing behind them.

He'd tuck the paranoia as deep inside him as it'd go, smile bright over the top so no one'd ever know.

Just one more reason to give it their everything, right?

~*~*~

It'd become almost regular, now, waking up screaming. Or silent-crying, or sweating, or gasping and jerking upright. Or not going to sleep at all, that was pretty regular too.

That didn't make it any easier.
Especially since Bucky'd called him out on it, claiming it was PTSD or something. After everything Bucky'd been through, Steve didn't deserve to have nightmares at all, let alone full-blown issues like trauma.

The darkness of his room was the same blackness as the back of his eyelids, the same darkness as that black mask that'd been shoved over his face ten seconds ago, cutting off his air and suffocating him as he scrambled against the hard plastic--

Steve shoved upright, pressing his back against the solid headboard and drawing his knees into his chest, covering his face with both hands and forcing himself to breathe normally. Fill his lungs, empty them, inflation, deflation. Things Bucky'd coached him through a hundred times; and the words in his head were in Bucky's voice, the familiar concerned tone and gentle coaxing.

The door to his room pushed open and then it wasn't the comforting voice in his head anymore, it was the weight compressing the other side of his bed, five warm fingers encircling the top of one of his knees. Bucky refused to touch him with the metal hand post-nightmare after Steve'd flinched that one awful time.

"Hey, you here with me?" A whisper against his ear and his shoulders dropped, slippery sheets sliding him down the headboard into a tighter ball. He didn't mean to let out the whimper, only the sound came from somewhere in him he didn't have control over and then heavy arms were around him, pulling him all the way down to the bed.

Bucky was wearing a hoodie, and a glove, and Steve felt goddamned awful about that but he didn't have full control after waking up like this and fuck, he wanted to tell Bucky he was sorry but he was afraid of the noises that'd escape his mouth if he pried his lips apart.

"Shh, shh. I'm right here, babydoll," Bucky murmured into the darkness, running the leather glove over Steve's sternum soothingly. He figured when we were in bed together...all sweaty and outta breath...it was gonna be for a really different reason.

Puffs of breath tingled at the top of his spine, a steady, slow rhythm that was nothing like the way Steve was breathing and he had to focus on that and he'd be fine, he'd pull himself together.

It wasn't fair doing this to Bucky.

How could Steve take his nights away too?

It took another three minutes, but he got ahold of himself. By the time Bucky was running gloved fingers over his ribs, Steve's back leg trapped under his, the darkness had faded enough that the terror in his veins was safely threaded out. It always drained him, made him boneless and exhausted, never wanting to crawl out of bed again, and once he hit that point, that's when Bucky usually smoothed a hand through his hair and left.

"You know," Bucky pondered into the darkness, running the leather glove over Steve's sternum soothingly. "I figured when we were in bed together...all sweaty and outta breath...it was gonna be for a really different reason."

Steve couldn't help it, a laugh escaped his chest and he could feel the smile in the kiss pressed to his neck that time. It was such a Bucky thing to say, only it'd never meant anything before. Except now, now feelings had been revealed and it wasn't a joke anymore. Not in that way. It was a tease, but it wasn't...impossible. Which made it a hell of a lot less depressing than usual.
He lifted his head from the soft sheets, rolling backwards enough so Bucky could scoot out of the way and let him roll onto his back. He got a grumble of complaint, then the glove was cupping his face and Steve blinked into the darkness, barely catching the outline of Bucky's features.

The leather thumb brushed over his cheek and he couldn't have felt it through the leather and metal, but somehow he still knew... so Bucky leaned forward and kissed the tears from his cheeks.

Steve's eyes slipped closed and the soft presses against his face didn't stop, soaking warmth and safety into his skin, and then the world wasn't palpable anymore, he was drifting to some place where everything was sleep-soft and easy and smelled of Bucky.

He fell asleep while Bucky was still kissing over his forehead.

Thankfully, he woke up first. But god knows why he opened his eyes to a peaceful face smushed against one of his pillows, dark hair fanning against white, lips slightly parted and arms curled under the sturdy chest.

Why was Bucky in his bed? Why hadn't he left?

He always left.

Steve held his breath and rolled off the side of the mattress, landing silently on his feet and padding for the door as quiet as possible. Bucky must not've slept in a while, otherwise he'd have woken already. But his body was more exhausted than his mind was alert, so Steve snuck out of his bedroom without waking the snoozing assassin.

He'd rather have stayed, but that wasn't an option. God knows Bucky would either freak or bolt the moment he realized they'd fallen asleep in the same bed now that they didn't have to (Steve had no idea why - they'd shared fine in the past, what the hell was the problem with it now?) and he was sparing Bucky the trouble. Leaving first so Bucky didn't have to.

And in the process, saved his own heart from breaking the way it always did when Bucky left. Bucky wouldn't care about waking up alone, but it ripped something up in Steve he didn't have a right to keep whole with hope in the first place.

Really, Steve was desperately reaching for him with no idea of what Bucky wanted. But he was determined to find out. To prove Bucky that they could be happy - more than that. They had the right to be happy.

"You seem awful chipper this morning," Sam huffed, pumping his legs and arms while Steve jogged lightly beside him.

"Hmm? Yeah. Guess I am." A smile curled his mouth up and Sam gave him a suspicious side-glance.

"Barnes alright?"

"Yeah. Yeah, he's great. I mean...things aren't perfect. And I still don't know where we stand on. Well. Anything. But he smiles now, and he kisses me sometimes and I definitely can't," Steve sucked in a breath, picking up the pace a little to push Sam further, "-complain about that."

"No you cannot," Sam agreed with a smile and quick shake of his head, wheezing a tad as he forced his body to match Steve's pace. "You - agh - you remember that one conversation we had...in that
restaurant in Germany?"

Steve furrowed his eyebrows and Sam made a cross face, apparently hoping Steve would pick up the
talking at that point to save Sam's breath.

"The one-- where you said Bucky'd never. Like you like that?"

"Oh yeah. That conversation. Is this your I told you so?" Steve grinned and widened his strides,
making Sam curse before switching into a sprint to keep up.

"It's a little...more effective when I can. Fuck. Breathe."

Steve laughed, taking a few jolting strides to slow back down to an easy jog. Sam nearly collapsed
with relief, falling into step beside him and wiping sweat off his forehead, flicking his hand to splatter
the drops on Steve.

"Eww," he complained, shoving Sam's shoulder lightly, except it still almost made him wipe out
and by the time he caught his balance again Steve'd stopped jogging, hand on his stomach as he
laughed at Sam trying to breathe, hands on his knees and gasping.

"You're a lot more of an asshole than that museum makes you look," Sam gasped and Steve shook
his head, glancing up at the sky and smiling. It was nice out today. Maybe he'd take a walk with
Bucky in Central. "Speakin'a which..."

Sam straightened up, hand on his torso as he waved a hand to get Steve's attention. "If Barnes is in a
good mood, I've got somethin' I wanted to talk about with him."

Steve shook his head, both hands on his hips as he raised disapproving, amused eyebrows at Sam.

"I'm pretty sure the I'll kill you if you break my best friend's heart' speech doesn't work on deadly
assassins who can backflip-dodge your machine-gun bullets and kick your ass nine ways to
Sunday."

"Haha, very funny. It's actually not about you, surprise of all surprises. Somebody wants to talk
about something other than Captain America..."

"And you wonder where I get my sarcasm from," Steve shot back, bumping into Sam's side as they
started back towards the tower.

"No way, man. You had that way before I was in the picture."

Steve rolled his eyes, but that much was true. Honestly, though, it kinda made Steve curious. What
would Sam want to talk to Bucky about that wasn't Steve? It was kinda...all they had in common.
God knows Bucky wouldn't do a psych eval, and Steve doubted Sam was dumb enough to ask
again.

Which meant it was something Steve had no idea about.

So it couldn't be good, could it?

~*~*~

"I've actually never been in here," Bucky mused, stepping in behind Sam and glancing around the
room. It was tidy, small enough to feel cozy but sparse enough to seem decently-sized. Brown
crown-moulding and a wooden desk, everything else standard whites and blues.
"Well I don't live in here anymore, so feel free if you want a change of scenery." Sam waved a hand around and Bucky snorted.

"It's twelve feet from my room, the scenery can't change that much."

Sam shrugged and pulled the chair from under the desk, scooting it next to the bed. A sound at the door made them both turn their heads, where Steve was standing in the doorway pointing over his shoulder.

"Hey I'm gonna go find Clint, so follow the smell of pizza and dogs if you need me." He gave a little wave and disappeared, and that was the first clue this was definitely not going to be the good kind of talk.

Well, the first clue was Sam coming back with Steve from his run and asking if he could talk to Bucky privately, but if Steve was leaving their floor altogether? Might as well get it over with.

Bucky plopped down on the edge of Sam's former bed, rubbing his hands together and letting the serrations sliding across the palm of his right hand calm his heartrate.

"So. What did I do?" He glanced up, tucking a piece of hair behind his ear, and Sam swiveled the chair around, sitting down on it and crossing his arms over the back of it.

"Right to it?"

"Sure. Unless you wanna talk about Rogers first, I've got about a million embarrassing stories you could hold over his head."

Sam laughed, eyes lighting up and shifting to get more comfortable. "Man, that sounds great. I'd definitely love to hear those sometime. You should stop by more often - we're both friends with Steve, I'm sure we've got plenty in common."

"Actually I think we're polar opposites," Bucky admitted and Sam smiled with a contemplating sound, "But that could actually be a good thing."

"Yeah. And I'd like to see if Steve's stories are anywhere near the real thing."

"Steve talks about me?"

"Uh. Yeah, all the time. You're kinda his..." Sam waved his hand, waiting for Bucky to fill in the blank. He shrugged, looking away and pretending to study the framed picture on the wall.

"We haven't talked about it," he finally filled in, glancing back at Sam. But his expression didn't crease with worry or flatten with judgement; it was as open as ever, nonchalant but not uncaring.

"Cool. Whatever floats both your boats, you know? It's none 'a my business. That is, unless you hurt him--"

The over-exaggerated tone was obviously a joke and Bucky snorted, shaking his head because they both knew that conversation was useless. How many people had Bucky threatened or killed for hurting Steve? It was a mute point. That is...unless that's what Sam'd come to say?

"Uh. Is that what you wanted to talk about...?" He asked hesitantly, rolling his lips in and glancing up with an apologetic look.

"Oh, no. No worries, man. I know you've got him. You always have."
"Except when I was trying to kill him. Then you had his six. I never, uh. Thanked you for that, so. Seriously, it means a lot to know that if I went off the rails, he's got somebody else."

Because really, Bucky'd spent months being pissed at Steve for making him feel this way. And years with muddled memories wishing he could get rid of the ghost with the blue eyes. And now that the ghost was pressing kisses to his lips, everything was a thousand times more complicated and nothing was answered. So yeah, going off the rails didn't seem that far out. And he couldn't let Steve get hurt if that happened.

"Yeah." Sam nodded, biting the inside of his cheek and looking down. Steve'd told him about Riley - Bucky knew exactly how it was, finding out your best friend died. So it was a hard topic for everybody.

"See? This is why we should be friends." Bucky reached over to nudge Sam's arm and he lifted his head, mouth turning up in a one-sided smile as he nodded slowly.

"Yeah, yeah. We should. Which, actually, brings me to my point. I know your birthday isn't for a week--"

"Ugh how do you know that?"

"Dude, everyone who's taken sixth grade history knows that. Anyways, that's not what I came to talk about either. See, I got you something for your birthday, and this is gonna spoil it but I don't really care, so." Bucky shrugged in agreement and Sam continued, "A lot of soldiers who come back already have 'em for comfort, but I know you don't, so I figured I'd get 'em for you."

Sam leaned sideways and dug a hand into his jeans pocket. Bucky knew what is was the moment the silver chain fell between Sam's fingers, the familiar clink of metal on metal.

He didn't know what to say. Thankfully, Sam to be expecting that, holding his hand out and dropping the two metal plates out of his hand, letting them dangle by the chain in front of Bucky. He lifted his right hand slowly, wanting to feel them against a hand that'd actually held dogtags before.

The cool metal settled against his palm, an extension of the steel fused to his body, the first metal he'd ever been attached to. Sam dropped the chain and it slinked into Bucky's hand, rattling softly as he ran a finger over the raised words, the inscription he used to trace back in the war.

BARNES, JAMES B 32557038 T42 43 A  
P

That's who he was.

Who are you?

Rewind.

Nothing.

A soldier.

James.

Buchanan.
Barnes.

He pressed his thumb into the letters, like maybe if he could engrave the name into his skin he'd never forget it again.

"You-- thank you." Bucky closed his eyes and wrapped his fingers around the tags, reveling in the bite against his palm. He'd never thought about it, hadn't considered the absence of cold weight against his chest. Identifier. "I...I didn't even know I was missing them."

"Most people don't." Sam propped his chin on his forearms, watching Bucky as he ran the chain between his fingers, clutching his fist tight and releasing it open again, looking the necklace over. Hydra'd taken his, the same time they'd taken that drawing and his coat, burned it all to ash.

"And thanks for not...not giving them to me in front of everyone, that. I, uh. It's just really personal." Bucky glanced up and Sam nodded silently. As much as he wanted the chain around his neck again, he didn't want the emotions that'd come with it. He'd do it later, by himself. So instead he held them, turning the tags over in his palm.

"It's actually not...I mean, I wanted you to have the tags, but it's not what I wanted to talk about."

"Oh?" Bucky didn't look up, running his fingernail along the curved edge of metal instead. Nothing Sam said was going to surmount past this anyways.

"Yeah. I went to the Smithsonian exhibit a few weeks ago," Sam cleared his throat, maybe nervous? before continuing, "...and they got something wrong."

Bucky snorted, glancing up with an amused smile. "You mean like how I was simultaneously born in both 1917 and 1916? I'm sure you can imagine how confusing that was, pre-memory-restoration. No wonder I was messed up."

He was expecting a laugh, or at least a smile, but Sam just looked at him. Bucky shifted his weight uncomfortably, tightening his fingers around the individual bubbles of the chain. But he didn't get an answer, only a patient expression as Sam waited for him to cut the bullshit. Finally Bucky sighed, pushing an aggrieved hand through his hair.

"Fine, what is it?"

The brown eyes were looking at him cautiously - gaging a reaction? Why? What could possibly be that--

"Your part of the exhibit?" Sam straightened up, voice softening as he pinned Bucky with his gaze and said the four words Bucky was praying he'd never hear aloud. "It says you enlisted." The colour drained from his face.

"That's not what your serial number says." The words were low, half-asking a question that clearly, he already knew the answer to. Then his fists were curled tight enough to hurt and the metal in his right hand would get crushed, if he didn't let go.

He shoved the dogtags in his pocket, tucking the etched name and number out of sight.
The numbers Zola used to make him mumble on repeat.

The fucking number that gave him away.

Obviously Sam worked with vets, 'course he saw Bucky's serial and recognized the numbers - it wasn't the combination they gave the enlisted, it was the bastard number given to the soldiers who had to be drafted, dragged off their home turf before they agreed to suit up, to all the people like Bucky who'd never wanted it, who'd gotten a letter in the mail with their name and words to end a life.

No one was ever supposed to know.

It was the best thing that exhibit ever did for him, those words etched into the glass. *Enlisted.* It couldn't be any other way, not with who his best friend was.

"Steve doesn't know, does he?" Sam's voice shook the air again and Bucky parted his lips, staring at the ground and wondering if he could sink into the floor if he focused enough.

Of course he hadn't told--

"What don't I know?" Interrupted a voice from the doorway and both their heads snapped up. Steve was leaning in the doorway. He pursed his lips, looking between Sam and Bucky with his arms crossed over his chest. "I came back to get something, caught the tail-end of 'Steve doesn't know.'"

He stepped into the room, moving big and graceful and powerful and Bucky wanted to shrink away, crawl under the carpet and never face the light again. "So what don't I know?"

Steve sat down on the bed beside him, pinning sky-cut eyes and Bucky had to look away, desperately turning to Sam for help.

"He deserves to know," Sam offered quietly and hot tears welled up in Bucky's throat because yeah, he fucking knew that, he should've told Steve the moment he got the letter.

Better now than never, right?

Actually, scratch that, he'd much rather have this conversation never.

He could leave. Storm out, lock the door to his room, they'd let him go. It's what he *wanted* to do...escape the situation and he didn't have to deal with it.

But Steve was doing so much, trying to make this work, whatever the fuck this was and hell if Bucky was going to be the weak one.

Flailing in the dark for a maritime star. Praying it wouldn't blink out.

Blink.

"I never joined the army."

There, said it, done, he could go now--

Steve's hand landed on his arm and Bucky flinched, falling weakly back down to the bed. He didn't want to see the look on Steve's face, the hate and confusion and betrayal.

"What do you mean? Buck? I fought beside you, watched you ship out--"
"I was drafted," he interrupted flatly.

The hand on his arm fell away.

Silence.

Tick tick tick and Bucky could count the seconds from the patter of his pulse, and ten, fifteen, twenty, maybe he'd be the first person to count to infinity, and then

"What?" Quiet. Calm. Too calm. Way way way too calm, but hey, at least he hadn't walked out yet, right? He was saving that for later. Probably after he had the satisfaction of seeing Bucky cry. Wouldn't be long now, not with the way his throat was closed and his eyelashes were cold, clumped together, bottom lip wavering no matter how much he bit down.

Another ten seconds, god knows how long, and then he couldn't.

"I'm sorry," he broke, curling in against the light except the hands on his face had barely covered him, he'd barely pulled his knees into his chest before there was a heavy hand on his shoulder and one on his thigh, prying him back apart before he could become a whimpering ball and Bucky was so surprised he pulled his hands off his face and blinked at Steve, two fat tears rolling down his cheeks.

"No. We need to talk about this." Steve was looking at him with that face they'd given him the title Captain for. He was so goddamned pure, beautiful, good, noble and honorable and fuck, how was Bucky supposed to look him in the eye and admit he'd been a coward all along?

"First of all, why the hell is this the first I'm hearing of this? Are you...are you being serious? I mean, Buck. You've gotta be...this can't. Okay. Um. If you really....when the hell'd you get a letter? 'Cause I sure never saw one. And why'd you tell me you enlisted if you were...

"A sunshine patriot?" Bucky asked with a self-depricating smile, wiping a quick hand over his face.

"C'mon, you know that's not--"

"That's exactly what you were gonna say," he bit back, jumping to his feet so he could sneer right in Steve's face. Letting the red take over his veins because it hurt less to shout than to cry. "These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine--"

"I know how the goddamn quote goes, Bucky." Then Steve was standing too, a few inches taller than him and like he was gonna let Steve use the fucking serum to win this fight.

He shoved Steve back on his ass with his metal fucking arm, two could play that game, and crossed his arms over his chest, leaning forward enough that Steve was forced to look up at him.

"Then you know exactly what people used to call the soldiers who got drafted. Why'd you think I never told you? So I didn't have to see the disgust on your face when you found out I wasn't the 'brave, courageous man' you always thought I was!"

"Seriously? Seriously, you're gonna pin this on me?"

"Oh, like you don't hate me right now?"

"I don't! I'm pissed," Steve bit back and Bucky threw up his hands because wasn't that the whole point, then Steve put a palm up to stop him and continued, "-that you didn't think you could tell me you got drafted into the goddamned army. That you felt like you had to lie to...to keep my respect for
"What, like you respect me right now? No, don't answer that. I don't wanna fuckin' hear it out loud. If I did, I would've told you instead of burning the fucking letter."

"Oh, stop with the dramatics, would you? You seriously thought I'd feel better thinking you joined the army for me? I've lived with the guilt of that for years, Buck. I kept telling myself I pressured you to sign up, that Azzano, Zola, the fucking Winter Soldier never would've happened if I hadn't kept pushing you to fight. That it was my fault everything happened to you and you knew, you knew," and Steve was on his feet again, jabbing a finger in Bucky's chest and forcing him a step backwards, ",how guilty I felt for that because I told you and you just let me live with it? When all along it would've happened anyways? Are you fucking kidding me."

They were both staring, winded and emotional to all hell, and Bucky was so goddamned pissed, he could feel it in his bones and fuck. Fuck, he knew he was pushing that outwards on Steve, who sure as hell didn't deserve to take the brunt of Bucky's shame.

That's what it was, that's why he was pissed, at himself for refusing to sign up, for having to wait until he was dragged overseas when the sweetest, most honorable person he knew would do anything humanly possible - did do anything humanly possible - to get one minute of fighting for his country.

So yeah, he'd never told Steve. Because it was about more than what Steve thought about him.

It was what Bucky thought about himself.

He couldn't look Steve in the eyes, so he stared at the wall over his shoulder instead. "I couldn't...I couldn't tell you because. Because I don't deserve any of the- the honor and credit they all try to give me when I wasn't even." He sucked in a breath, closing his eyes so they didn't well up with tears again. "I wasn't even brave enough to go over there on my own. And. And you were so small and s-sick and you wanted to fight so badly you'd do anything and I couldn't bring myself to enlist, I couldn't bear to--"

A choked sound escaped his mouth and he ducked his head to his chest, taking a step back to sag against the wall. "I couldn't imagine..."

"What, Bucky? You couldn't imagine what?" It wasn't yelling anymore. It wasn't soft, more like...tired. Steve sounded exhausted. Done.

A week ago, he never would've been able to answer that. But. But Steve had kissed him and Steve cared about him, more than his second in command, more than even best friends, and. and.

He may not know what that meant or why Steve was doing any of this, but they'd kissed and somehow, that changed something. He didn't know what it changed or why Steve kept kissing him, but for some reason when he opened his mouth, the words didn't freeze in his throat.

"I couldn't imagine leaving you." He bit his bottom lip, shaking his head as tears prickled the corners of his eyes, trembling hands curled into weak fists. "I couldn't imagine having to live without you, Stevie, I'm. I'm so sorry, I needed you too much..."

Callused hands curled over his, tugging him off the wall.

"C'mere," Steve ordered, voice rough and gravely as he bundled Bucky into his chest, one hand pressed hard against the back of his head, the other arm barred over his shoulder as he held Bucky close and rocked them gently.
He clutched Steve's shirt in his hands, arms parallel with Steve's back and held on as tight as he knew how.

There'd been a time he hadn't felt emotions at all.

He couldn't decide if this was better or much much worse.

"You two okay?" Sam asked quietly from the side of the room and Bucky choked a sudden laugh, turning his face into Steve's shirt.

"Ohmygod, we forgot about Sam," he mumbled apologetically against the warm cotton and Steve finally seemed to catch on, hand on the back of his head leaving to probably cover his mouth in surprise.

Bucky lifted his head, resting his chin on Steve's shoulder to look behind them at Sam, who was still sitting in his chair, had seen that entire argument and Bucky was probably all puffy and red and he could still feel the glittering cold on his cheeks and nobody'd ever seen him like this except Steve, so the club of witnessing trash Bucky Barnes just expanded by one.

"I'm so sorry you had to see that," he winced, jaw clicking weirdly from keeping his chin on Steve's shoulder. Sam put a single hand in the air, mouth curling up a little on one side.

"Hey, man. It's all good. At least now I know how supersoldiers work through their problems. A lot of shoving and a lot of yelling."

Bucky snorted, tucking his face back down against Steve's collarbone and then Steve was turning them, looking over Bucky's back now as he mouthed something at Sam, except Bucky could really care less because Steve was holding him, hadn't left after he found out what a fuck-up Bucky was.

He'd ruined Steve's shining, reflective image of him, had wiped it black with truth from long before he killed people, and Steve was still here.

He had no idea why Steve hadn't left. And he was much too selfish to ask.

~*~*~

It was raining.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd sat and watched it rain.

The window at the far end of the art room, after stepping over the cacophony of paintings and supplies, had a window seat, a long, wide one that fit him easily with room to spare.

Steve sat on the windowsill with a mug of tea and watched it rain. He used to love this before the serum. Sometimes Bucky'd sit on the other end and Steve would watch the reflection of rain in those crystal eyes instead.

One thing that hadn't changed, over all this time, was the way the rain fell on the fading dusk of New York.

The rain hadn't lied to him about one of the most important--
Bucky'd been the one to bring up they were a war story. War stories started with letters. Drafting and enlistment letters. Red and blue. Bucky'd started the most influential chapter of their lives with the biggest lie imaginable.

Was this it? Was this the one thing he'd been hiding all these years? Was this why he refused to talk about how he felt when they were kids? Was this the big secret Natasha wanted him to find out?

All that talk of spies and trust. Steve wanted to be trusting, he did. This was Bucky. And he'd been lying for how long?

But the rain cleared his mind. Let him think. And he was going to prove that even this -- this -- was part of their story. It all was. He only had to figure out how to say it.

The door creaked open slowly, a silent foot touching hesitantly inside. The nervous features asked a single silent question. Steve nodded and turned back to the rain.

It was hard to be graceful when climbing over a mess of canvases and paint but somehow Bucky managed it. He really was an assassin after all. Steve scooted one leg up, bending at the knee so Buck would have room on his half of the bench. His other foot was on the floor beside the windowseat, propping him up and out of the way for Bucky to sit.

Steve just hadn't expected him to choose there.

Hesitantly, propped a few inches away, looking over his shoulder for permission first. Steve sat his mug down and opened his arms, waiting for Bucky to lean back against his chest before he wrapped his arms around Buck's torso, hands sliding into the hoodie pocket over his stomach. Bucky pulled up both his legs, feet flat on the windowseat as he settled back against Steve, covering Steve's hands with his own.

The rain was pattering softly against the window, wind blowing it at a rougher angle than before. But it was still beautiful, always was, from angrily pattering to a gentle drizzle.

The heavy weight on his chest was grounding, warm. Everything he hadn't had the last time he'd done this - sitting alone on a windowsill a few months after waking up, staring at the foreign outside world and wishing he had his best friend beside him.

But those dark days? That was the worst time in Steve's life. Those months after Bucky died, after Steve's existence was cut in two. And maybe Bucky lied to him, maybe he hurt Steve - a lot - but he was here. In Steve's arms, the strong muscles of his back solid against Steve's chest. How could...how could he stay pissed? In the end, it didn't matter. What mattered was they had each other now.

He tightened his arms around Bucky's torso, pulling him in closer and eliciting a soft sound as he pressed his nose to the side of that beautiful face. Crystal eyes slipped closed and Steve opened his mouth, breathing soft over Bucky's ear for a few beats before he brushed his mouth close, placing the words right onto heated skin.

"I forgive you," Steve whispered, and Bucky deflated against him, going soft and pliant with relief as he turned towards the window, reaching his head up to kiss under Steve's chin. He ran his fingers through thick, long hair, carefully untangling knots as Bucky curled closer against his chest, knees knocked over and pressed to the cold glass as he gripped one hand tight in Steve's shirt, head falling to Steve's collarbone.

The rain settled, quiet steady bullets from the sky, splashing on pavement far far below. Two boys
sat on a windowsill, one cradling the other in his arms, holding each other close as water poured down outside.

It was probably twenty minutes later that Bucky fell asleep on him, exhaustion making his eyes droop and slide shut, breathing slow and deep as he let himself drop off in the safety of Steve's arms. He ran his hands carefully over Bucky's hair, the sides of his face, smoothing down his torso and his sides, securing warmth around him while he rested.

A few months ago, Bucky hadn't slept at all, not until he came stumbling into Steve's apartment with wary eyes, jumping up and clutching a knife the moment he awoke. And now Bucky was passed out on his chest, fingers loosely tangled in his clothes and body curled as tight to Steve as he could manage.

It was an hour later that Steve threatened to fall asleep too; shifting carefully, avoiding the mug of tea as he slipped off the windowsill, he lifted Bucky up bridal style, tipping him inwards and turning his face against Steve's chest. Carrying him all the way across the apartment to his bed.

A few years ago, Bucky'd been shot in the thigh and Steve had carried him out of the city exactly like this, climbing over twisting roots in the woods and soaking his Captain's uniform as he waded through a river, looking down at his pale best friend with his heart in his throat.

He didn't let himself fall asleep beside Bucky this time. He wouldn't be able to take the heartbreak of waking in the morning alone.

~*~*~

He woke up alone.

It was his fault; he'd never told Steve he could stay.

He shouldn't care.

But he felt empty. Hollowed out. Missing.

He couldn't hate Steve for not staying. But he could hate himself for making Steve think he couldn't.

And he hated himself the most for wanting Steve to stay so goddamn badly.

When Steve came to check on him at eleven the next morning, Bucky was staring at the ceiling, lips red from how much he'd bitten them in attempt not to call out Steve's name.

"Buck?" The door shut softly behind him and Steve sat down on the edge of his bed, stroking one hand through Bucky's hair. He couldn't help it. He turned into the touch, nosing at Steve's hand with his eyes screwed shut. "You feelin' okay?"

"Fine," he choked out, keeping his eyes shut so he didn't see Steve's stupid face. He wanted to grab that jaw and kiss him until he bled.

"You mind if I sit awhile?"

Yes, conditioned training formed on his lips.

"No," his mouth answered for him. Bad dog. Steve scooted up on his bed, laying beside him and stroking his fingers down the back of Bucky's neck. They were so warm and solid and fuck, Bucky wanted them tangled in his hair.
With his eyes shut, he could keep the vibrations down his spine minimized, he could keep Steve out of his goddamned head--

And then damp lips were on his. Bucky's lips parted in ecstasy and the chaste kiss of comfort was suddenly Steve's tongue sliding into his mouth, violent shivers running through his bones and his body pulled itself closer to Steve's without his permission and then a warm hand was pressing hard against his lower back, holding Bucky up against his hips and every nerve ending in his body was warning him, bright red flashing signs

**off off off**

**don't touch don't touch**

his senses overloaded with every instinct to stop, poison seeping into his mouth from Steve's, toxic every place they touched and he **needed**--

The Winter Soldier did not need.

Only now he needed **too much**.

Consumed, buried so deeply in his veins he could devour Steve from the inside out and this, this was what he'd been worried about, this was so much more than comfort and crushes, this was addiction and pain and he wanted to bar his metal arm against Steve's throat just to hear him choke Bucky's name and--

No one'd told him the serum amplified everything. Including emotions. He'd been repressing them from the moment he'd gotten drugged up in Azzano. And now that Steve was trying to

open

the

floodgates?

"Hey, hey," Bucky mumbled into Steve's mouth, getting a metal hand between them and shoving Steve gently upwards. Their mouths broke apart with a twist to Bucky's gut and he managed a breathy, barely-there smile up at Steve because it was the only way not to scream or pull him back in. "Breakfast?"

Steve groaned, dropping his forehead to Bucky's chest. "Can't you eat later?"

"No. I'm hungry." He ran a controlled hand through Steve's blonde hair, watching with careful eyes to be sure it didn't shake. He was hungry, but not for breakfast. He needed air before he lost the last grip he had on these tumultuous waves inside him.

A heavy sigh shoved hot air against his chest - Bucky closed his eyes and grit his teeth, then Steve's head lifted and he smoothed out every tense muscle in his face, looking down with patient, sculpted softness. He should be on Broadway.

"Do you want grapefruit? Pepper said something about a really good--"

"Sure. Great. Cut it up for me?" So I can have three seconds to breathe without inhaling fumes?

"And he thinks just 'cause I kiss him now I'm his servant," Steve grumbled, inching forward to press another short peck to Bucky's lips, sticky and tugging then he was climbing off and Bucky was
sucking freezing air into his lungs and his room was empty, door wide open.

Fuck.

"Get up. We're going out."

"What?" Bucky looked up as Steve smacked his foot, raising his eyebrows and gesturing hurriedly at Bucky.

"C'mon. Get dressed. We're going out."

"Where?" Bucky looked back down, uninterested. Steve grabbed his foot and pulled.

The squawk that came out of his mouth was not his, he'd claim that to this day. But dumped on his ass on the living room floor with Captain America standing over him with his hands on his hips and that patriotic-ass look on his face?

Bucky got off the floor and put on nicer clothes.

"Do people even do that anymore?"

"Course they do. A lot might've changed, but going out for drinks isn't one of them."

He glared out the tinted window. It wasn't that it didn't sound like fun, it was just that...everything lately? Bucky sucked in a breath and glanced back at Steve.

"Why are you doing this? Like...all of it. Flowers, the gym, taking me out drinking..."

Steve shrugged, eyes on the road. "Things have been hardcore lately. I figured we could use some fun."

That wasn't what he meant. But he wouldn't ask again.

"...it's not that easy, Steve. All the crap doesn't go away if you ignore it."

"No, it doesn't." Blue eyes glanced over from the other side of the car, all sweet and serious at the same time. "But the bad times don't have to be over for the good times to begin."

"Steve," Bucky whispered into his ear. "Steve, is this dancing? I don't think this is dancing."

"You're the dance expert, not me."

"Steve," Bucky tugged his sleeve. "Steve, I really don't think this is our scene."

Steve raised his eyebrows and knocked back the shotglass the bartender slid him. He didn't feel the burn, but he needed to do something with his hands.

The bodies on the dancefloor were basically...having sex with their clothes on.

The music was so fucking loud, he didn't care how old he sounded saying that.
"You can get a little tipsy, right?" He shouted over the bass, leaning closer to Bucky's stool. Bucky looked between him and ridiculous supply of alcoholic beverages behind the bar.

"A little." Bucky made a face and Steve lifted his hand, calling the bartender over.

"Give me ten of the strongest stuff you've got."

He got a really concerned look, then he slid Stark's card across the bar and there were no more problems after that.

Steve laughed as Bucky made a horrified face at the greenish liquid the bartender plopped down on the slick black surface. He made a worse face after tipping it back, but then he was reaching for the next one and Steve leaned on the bar, propping his head in his hand as he watched Bucky grimace his way through the drinks.

They'd had some bad experiences with drinking since Azzano, but Steve was sober and on red alert; the slight chance of an episode was worth getting Bucky to loosen up for the first time since their roadtrip. It was killing him, watching how much Bucky beat himself up over everything.

You know what he needed? Bucky Barnes needed to dance.

Ten apparently terrible drinks later and a vodka to wash it down - Russia, god - and Bucky's eyes were a little brighter, looking over the squirming bodies on the dancefloor with genuine curiosity instead of disgust. Steve slid off his barstool and scooted up to Bucky's side, leaning close to his ear so Bucky could hear him over the blaring music.

"You wanna dance?"

"C'mon, Stevie, you know we ca..." Bucky trailed off, turning in his seat slowly to look at Steve with wide eyes. "There's guys on that dancefloor. Together."

Steve stuck his tongue in his cheek, biting back his laughter at the look on Bucky's face. "Yes, Buck. There are."

"So we could...you and me..."

"Yep." Steve popped the 'p,' leaning in close enough to make Bucky go cross-eyed looking at him. "We can."

Another glance at the dancefloor, then the DJ and the rest of the room, and Bucky turned to him again. "It's dark enough in here, flashy lights and everything, no one's recognized you yet."

" Entirely anonymous," he confirmed. Bucky blinked, staring at Steve like he was something out a gold mine. Then there was a gloved hand squeezing his and Steve jolted as Bucky jumped off the stool and started towards the dancefloor.

They weaved between sweaty, scantily-clad bodies until a spot in the middle of the floor opened up, the beat of a new song started up. It didn't sound like a real instrument, but then Bucky's arms were wrapping around his neck and he was swaying his hips tentatively back and forth so Steve was definitely not complaining.

"C'mon, put your hands on my waist," Bucky breathed into his ear and that was it, there went any bit of resolve Steve had.

His hands settled on the light curve of Bucky's waist for about three seconds before he decided that
one of them had to adapt to this century sometime. Might as well be here.

With a quick shove to Bucky's right side and equal tug to his left, Steve spun Bucky around and pulled their bodies flush with his fingers digging low into the jut of Bucky's hipbones. He felt the air leave Bucky's body in a shocked gasp, then his head was leaning back on Steve's shoulder with his eyes closed and lips parted in arousal and Steve sunk his teeth into the side of Bucky's neck and ground their bodies together.

"F-fuck," Bucky cursed, low and rough, bass too loud to hear it, the word slipping silent into the smoky air around them. He kissed the faded bite mark, pressing his lips too long because Bucky was irrationally, wonderfully warm.

The music was loud enough to sink into his bones, crashing beats against his insides, steady and downright dirty. The bass made the floor beneath their feet tremble and every place their bodies were touching - pressing - was throbbing, making Steve's head spin, dizzy with the heat between them.

The curve of Bucky's body against him, the solid, undeniable weight of his arousal pressed against Bucky's ass, Buck's hands pressed over his, forcing Steve to grip him tighter and fuck, Steve could get onboard with the twenty-first century. Thumping in his chest, the energy thrumming in his fingertips as he hiked up Bucky's thin black shirt, eliciting another broken sound as he painted his touch against the heated skin stretched over sharp hipbones.

He could feel the leashed moan in Bucky's chest, a dark low sound, vibrating under his skin, and he had to dig his fingers in harder to anchor himself. The room blurred around them, sweat and alcohol and artificial smoke.

And then Bucky's hands reached backwards, sliding over Steve's hips until his fingertips were brushing over the edges of Steve's ass and then they were curling hard against his jean pockets and there were only a few layers of clothes between that metal hand and his ass and Steve's knees nearly gave out with the heavy rush reverberating into his spine.

"Ahh, Buck," he groaned, voice low and rocky. Then Bucky was grinding back against him hard and Steve wasn't in his mind anymore, he was lit up like the fireworks on his birthday except this was way better than any birthday he'd had.

A hand shoved up in his hair, fucking it up royally and god, he wanted Bucky to wreck him, wanted to walk out of here stumbling with bruises and fucked up hair and a swollen mouth for a reason that was finally not a fist fight.

He couldn't resist, Bucky was devastatingly gravitational and Steve was so so gone, the secure hands on Bucky's hips started to wander, skimming up under his shirt over the tight planes of his stomach, hard muscle tensing under his chest and then Bucky rolled his hips back slow, so slow Steve's stomach coiled tight enough to shake another moan past his lips.

The music shifted, picking up faster in the background but he didn't notice, not when Bucky's pretty mouth was turning to him and whispering firmly against his neck, "Yeah, babydoll, c'mon."

Would it be entirely too forward to drag Bucky off the dance floor and bend him over the sinks in the bathroom and ruin him in every way imaginable?

Except they hadn't talked about that, hadn't gotten anywhere near that, and honestly he'd be just as fine with pushing Bucky into a wall, makeout and grind against each other. Those lips were wet and parted and the most familiar shape he knew, the most addicting thing he'd ever had against his and god, Steve wanted to kiss Bucky until the world stopped spinning around them.
"Steve," Bucky said again, voice strangely clear, and it wasn't until the hand slipped out of his hair that Steve opened his eyes, blinking and looking back down at Bucky.

"Hmm?" he hummed, an octave too high with the way his brain wasn't exactly functioning right now.

"Did you hear that?" Bucky'd stopped moving, looking up at Steve with his eyebrows furrowed. Steve blinked at him, hands still swaying Bucky's hips back and forth except they were barely touching now, and maybe that was helping clear his head a little. "Pretty sure the song just said...wait. Okay, hold on, we have to call Natasha."

"We have to-- what?" His confusion disappeared under the blaring song and the sudden jarring of being dragged across the dancefloor. "Buckyyy," he whined, tightening his fingers around the hand dragging his. He didn't want to call Nat he wanted to dance with Bucky. Or makeout with Bucky. Although it did look like they were headed towards the bathrooms.

"Wait, wait, listen." Bucky stopped, putting a hand on the center of Steve's chest and thank god that was there, he was about to fall over, only how was it that he felt like the drunk one? Although, looking closer, Bucky was totally swaying off tempo, his lips shiny and wet and why wasn't Steve kissing him?

He leaned forward, landing his mouth sloppily against Bucky's, the intoxicating wet drag that had nothing to do with the alcohol, the cling of Bucky's plush lips to his and god, that was great-- And then he heard it.

He actually laughed into Bucky's mouth before thinking to lift his head, cocking it to the side as he listened harder to the lyrics. "Black, black widow baby."

"Oh my god," Steve gaped for a moment, then the next line came in I'm gonna l-l-l-love you until it hurts. Just to get you I'm doing whatever works, and if that wasn't Natasha he didn't know what was. "You have to--" he turned back to Bucky, but he already had his phone pressed to his ear, dragging Steve towards the bathrooms.

"Natasha!" Bucky shouted into the phone, slamming the bathroom door behind them. The music was still really loud in here, but you could hear yourself think too, which was nice.

"Barnes? Is Steve alr--"

"NAT!! There's a song about you! And it's like waaaay worse than Star-Spangled Man." Steve giggled and Bucky shoved him, then he was half falling, grabbing Bucky's hip with one hand and the wall with another, and suddenly Bucky was pinned against the wall, blinking wide pretty eyes up at him and then that mouth opened....

To shout into the phone again. "Hold on, hold on, it's comin' up. Wait, listen."

Bucky held the phone up and Steve finally noticed the speaker button was on, which would probably explain why he'd heard her so well.

This is the web, web that you weave, the song sang and Bucky covered Steve's mouth with a hand, trying to keep his laughter quiet so Natasha could hear but while they were waiting they might as well be kissing. Steve pressed his mouth to Bucky's, only wait, his hand was still there. Well. They were kissing through his hand at least.

"Are you guys in a club?"
"Why are you not freaking out about this song?" Steve demanded, breaking off to stare at the phone in Bucky's hand.

"I've heard it before."

Bucky groaned, banging his head back against the wall and mouthing *goddamnit* and wait, his mouth was free again, only then he was being pushed back by a metal hand and how did Bucky have more resolve than him *all the time*?

"But you didn't answer my question. You guys went clubbing? And you haven't freaked out and left yet?"

"We're not that lame," he whined and then Bucky gave him a look and he could picture the Natasha-version of that same look probably on the other side of the phone right now.

"You know, twenty-first century dancing can be *very* fun if you give it a shot--"

"Oh, believe me, we know," Steve told the phone and then Bucky's hand was clapping over Steve's mouth - again - and he squeaked in annoyance.

"You guys are at a club and *grinding*?"

"No, Steve's drunk," Bucky tried to cover, only Natasha snorted at him and said, "Steve can't get drunk."

"You should see 'im right now, you'd be surprised. Although he's not drunk on alcohol, just m-*fuck*."

Steve had gotten tired of Bucky's hand over his mouth and decided to lick his way up one of Bucky's fingers before pulling it into his mouth. Now Bucky was staring at him with wide eyes and a bead of sweat rolling down his temple, his finger salty and heavy on Steve's tongue and *wow*, they should do this way more often.

"Are you okay?" Nat asked over the phone and Steve couldn't answer with his mouth preoccupied so that left Bucky to breathe, "Yeah, fine. We gotta go, bye."

The phone clattered to the ground and Bucky's finger popped out of Steve's mouth, replaced with his tongue and then Steve was being shoved back against the sinks and he moaned, threading thick hair through his fingers and pressing back against Bucky hungrily.

Unwielding hands shoved against his ribs, yanking his shirt up and then there was cold metal running up his bare sternum and solid teeth sunk into his bottom lip and Steve cried out, clutching Bucky's hair and pushing their mouths together harder, tasting a hint of cooper as Bucky ground his hips forward against Steve's and *fuck* his mind went white.

The heavy heat against his crotch was making him see stars and he let go of the long thick hair to grab Bucky's ass and drag him closer, kicking his feet out to the side to press against that hard pulse and then Bucky's hands were on his shoulders and Steve had about three milliseconds to register that before he was being shoved to his knees, denim smacking the dirty bathroom floor hard enough to throb except that really wasn't the throbbing part of him he was concerned with.

Or the part of Bucky he was concerned with. His knees were still smarting, sending a tingle up his spine that traveled right back down to tighten his pants and he tipped his head back, meeting those crystal eyes looking down at him as that metal hand shoved into his hair, gripping the short strands tight and it was *predatorial*, the way Bucky was staring down at him. *Animal*, someone'd called him.
Fuck.

He leaned his forehead on Bucky's hip, so dizzy with want the room was threatening to tip, and Bucky's hand smoothed down the back of his head, still rough, still possessive, but comforting too and god, fuck, if that didn't make Steve want to do this even more.

Running his hands up the sides of Bucky's thighs Steve lifted his head again, peeking up at Bucky one more time before breathing out heavily and inching his fingers closer to that zipper.

He didn't even get the chance to touch metal before there was a loud banging on the door and that's right, Bucky'd locked it and this was a public restroom after all, if he had to pee he'd be super annoyed about people making out or doing...other things in here and leaving a public commodity unavailable to the rest of the population, especially one that'd been drinking a lot.

With a very reluctant and still spinning head he pushed to his feet, eliciting a groan and an arm wrapping around his stomach as he tried to walk away and okay, if Bucky pulled him tight enough to press up against his ass Steve was gonna be gone, so he shoved forward and quickly yanked open the door, Bucky's arm still around his waist as he peered angrily over Steve's shoulder.

"Sorry," he winced, then the interrupter stormed past them and nearly stepped on Bucky's phone so thank god Steve thought to bend over and pick it up only Bucky was still behind him and the sound he made--

They really had to get out of here.

And sleep in different rooms.

Before somebody did something really stupid.

He hauled Bucky out of the club with an arm around his waist and Bucky kept kissing his neck when they passed through the shadowed areas and hell, maybe nights on the town weren't his brightest idea. Especially when he was drunk on Bucky and Bucky was at least tipsy for real and seriously, weren't they supposed to talk about these things before doing stupid stuff in club bathrooms?

Except once he called a cab, Bucky passed out on his lap with a soft smile on his pretty face, so maybe tonight wasn't exactly his worst idea either.

~*~*~

They'd just come back from a mission when Steve first did it. Bucky was exhausted and gross and stripped off his shirt before the elevator doors slid shut behind them. Steve whistled low and Bucky flicked him off, then they were both getting water glasses from the kitchen, leaning against the counter with twin groans.

"I'm gonna go take a shower," Steve whispered against his cheek, pressing a quick kiss to Bucky's sweat-sticky skin. "Mmm, have fun," he hummed back, tilting his head to the side as Steve pressed another kiss to his neck, then his shoulder. Then the red star on his arm.

Bucky pulled away, shoving Steve back lightly and holding his arm out of Steve's reach. "Don't," he warned quietly, turning to put his glass in the sink. Except Steve caught his shoulder, turned him
"Why not? You don't like the star?" The worry in that statement held even more than than the weight did. He didn't answer, then a pressure slid over the plates, Steve's thumb tracing over the mark. "I think it's patriotic."

He yanked his arm away again, starting for his room as he muttered to himself. "Yeah, for Russia."

"What?"

"Steve, it's the Soviet symbol? Hello?" He cupped his hand over the red metal, wishing he'd thought to paint over it by now. Although honestly, he wasn't sure he could.

It wasn't hard to hear Steve following him to his room, so Bucky didn't bother kicking the door shut behind him, sitting down on the edge of his bed with enough room for Steve to sit quietly beside him. On the right side.

"It shows I belong-- belonged, to them. Like a brand." He turned the metal hand over, watching the way the plates shifted and glinted in the light.

"We could get rid of it, if you wanted." Steve scooted further on the bed, coming up behind him lay his palm gently over the metal. So much for putting him on the right. Steve's fingers were running so gently over his arm he could barely detect them, tingles more than pressure. He didn't know the sensors could do that. "Or..." the trace of the star, an outline Bucky could swear he felt sometimes, "...instead of altering you why don't we alter what it means?"

Bucky turned over his shoulder to give Steve his what the hell does that mean face, then Steve was climbing off the bed, spinning around as he scanned Bucky's room and found what he was looking for by the window. Grabbing a clipboard, paper and colored pencils, he sat back down, shoulders tipping together as the mattress shifted.

He started drawing, careful thin strokes of color across the paper, outlining a shape that'd become achingly familiar. As touching as it was, he really wasn't all that interested.

"I'm not gonna wear a flag suit like you," Bucky rolled his eyes and nudged Steve with his elbow, because he was still drawing that signature Captain America suit that looked great on Steve and Bucky had absolutely no reason to wear.

"It's not for you," Steve replied, focused hard on his drawing and missing the confusion knotting Bucky's expression.

So he sat and watched for a while, the outfit sketching more dimensional, padded and smart like his blue one, closer in color to his old one with red and white stripes across the stomach. By the time he finished it looked really good, clean and sharp with heavy outlines and stark colors. Steve straightened up and held the clipboard out, showing the suit to Bucky.

He nodded, because it did look good, but he still didn't get whatever point Steve was trying to prove. Then he put the clipboard in his lap again, grabbing the red pencil and pressing hard, dark lines on the chest, outlining the silver-white star in bright red.

"There." Steve scribbled the lines darker, "Now your red star is over my heart."

He stared wide-eyed at the drawing. Steve wanted to have Bucky's star...and then he was swooping the red lines out at two of the tips, arching them across his chest and wrapping them over the top of his arms, tying it in perfectly with the rest of the uniform. "And this way, it wraps all around me..."
"You're a fuckin' sap," Bucky said incredulously, taking the clipboard from Steve. He took the blue pencil and eraser, smudging out the red on the top point of the star and the two bottom points, leaving the red outlines on the other two points that wrapped across the rest of his chest. "That looks better. And this way, it almost looks like something red is holding the star."

Steve laughed, nudging him back. "You're an even bigger sap than I am." Bucky shrugged exaggeratedly and handed Steve the clipboard as he popped off the bed with the energy of that tiny kid from Brooklyn. "I'm gonna show the sketch to Tony, get him to make it for me."

He started for the door and Bucky gave him a little wave, except then Steve stopped in the doorframe, one hand on the wood as he turned around and gave Bucky that look.

"So now your star means something...it means we match." Bucky groaned and Steve stepped closer, wide-ass smile on his face. "We're a pair, a duo, it's so ROMEO AND JULIET."

And it was worth getting off the bed if it meant shoving that smug, laughing face out of his room with some very rude expletives and a smile on his face to cancel them all out.

The next time he saw the star in the mirror, that sinking feeling in his gut of branded didn't feel so bad. It didn't stand for Russia anymore.

It stood for Steve.

Bucky let him kiss the red star when he got back from Tony's lab. He let Steve kiss all the way up his left arm.

~*~*~

It took some searching, but he finally found Steve on one of the communal floors, elbows propped on the counter with a pile of papers spread in front of him, talking to a holographic screen and practically bent in half at the angle. He stopped and leaned against the wall a little ways away, admiring the view until Steve finally noticed him, straightening up and saying goodbye to Bruce before shutting off the screen and scooping up the papers into a pile.

"You're back." The smile on Steve's face was tucked in at the corners, lips rolled in so he didn't end up grinning wide like an idiot. Except his eyes were dancing and bright and it wasn't like Bucky wasn't gonna notice how happy Steve was to see him.

"I'm back," he confirmed, twitch of a half-smile as he hopped up the inset three steps leading to the kitchen, then Steve's arms were sliding around his waist, under his jacket, both of them checking over each other's shoulders for company before Bucky leaned up on his tiptoes and pressed a kiss to Steve's mouth. Fingers pushed up through his hair, smoothing it away from his face and combing out the few light tangles as Bucky slipped his hands up under Steve's shirt, heat-warm metal still making Steve shiver against him.

When they pulled away Steve pressed a kiss to his forehead, hands cupping Bucky's jaw and tilting his face up to look him over. He let Steve look his fill, tracing lazy patterns across his back with fingertips while he waited.

"I missed you," he whispered, hands dropping to Bucky's shoulders. And this time it was his turn to lift a hand to Steve's face, holding the pretty jaw as his eyes crinkled in a smile.

"I always miss you, Stevie." The precious blonde head ducked, bright smile and faint blush on his cheeks. Bucky pressed his thumb against Steve's shoulder, holding him solid and steady as he leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "Even if it was only a day-mission with Clint."
"You better," Steve mumbled back, shoving Bucky's collarbone in his flushed grievance. It was adorable, so much like the way he acted when he was younger, that Bucky had to tip his head up and kiss him again.

His lips were soft and pliant, moving under Bucky's so easy, breaking apart to soon, always too soon. Then a light went off behind Steve's eyes and he straightened up, mouth curving in excitement. He didn't bother moving out of Bucky's loose embrace, reaching around his arm to dig something out of his pocket.

"We," he announced, pulling two slips of hard paper into the air. "-are going on a date."

"A date? Jeez, Rogers. You gone outta your mind?"

"Why couldn't we?"

Steve's eyes widened all innocently and Bucky narrowed his, analyzing Steve and the two suspicious pieces of paper between his fingers. They weren't...they weren't dating. Yeah, they'd kissed. A couple times. But they were still best friends, and going on a date? That wasn't something they did. Like...why would they?

“What's your game?” He asked warily, hands frozen on Steve's sides as he tilted his head up to look directly at those pieces of sky. Steve softened at the tone in Bucky's voice, fingertips running along his right arm and sending tingles up his spine.

“Don't you wanna go back?” That c'mon, Buck plea was in the curve of those pretty lips and Bucky squinted, analyzing Steve harder as fingers closed tight around his bicep. "You and me, the old days. Let's be the way we never got to be then."

There were a lot of ways they never got to be then. But. But if Steve wanted to court him, take him on dates to make up for all the times they'd gone with girls instead of each other...

"My hair's too long for that," Bucky conceded, pushing a handful backwards for emphasis. Steve's eyes lit up in a smile because he heard the yes, then Bucky's hand was covered with another, warm fingers threading through his hair with an affectionate grin.

"I like your hair." Dry lips pressed a kiss to Bucky's forehead and he closed his eyes, pushing aside the thought at least one of us does before it ate him up. Then Steve was leaning back, sunshine smile as he presented the tickets to Bucky with a flourish.

"So, we're going." Steve's fingers brushed his, waiting with his tongue in his cheek while Bucky read them over.

"These are train tickets." Bucky turned them over, not seeing what they'd have to do in that destination. Then he flipped them again, staring at the front for a moment before it clicked in and he looked back up at Steve. "These are train tickets."

Steve shrugged, one hand playing with the long hair at the base of Bucky's neck. "I figured we've gotta conquer it eventually, right? Why not together?"

The platform was noisy, full of people crowding each other and for once, when Steve reached for his hand, Bucky let him take it. It wasn't about the whole new kissing thing though - it was about the two of them finding comfort in each other's touch the way they always had.
They waited in silence, standing with shoulders pressed together as people milled around them on the tracks.

Then the train came roaring around the corner. Impossibly loud, chunking engine and piercing whistle as the wheelbars whipped in spinning circles.

Steve cringed at the sound, forcing warm air into his lungs. Bucky was here beside him, his hand in Steve's. They were fine. It was just another form of transportation.

If Bucky was doing fine and he's the one who fell, then seriously, Steve shouldn't be shaking. What gave him the right? Only then he glanced over at Bucky and maybe he wasn't doing so fine after all. If the gloved metal bruising his hand was any indication, anyways.

They both stood in silent checkmate, staring at the train and the cacophony of sounds washing over the platform. Steve was frozen again, stuck in a coma of ice and couldn't move at all--

"We tried," Bucky suddenly announced, tugging Steve's hand and pulling him off the platform. Good lord could Steve agree with that. He laughed incredulously as Bucky shoved through the crowd, pulling them back out into the lobby and holding the tickets up in front of them, letting go of Steve's hand to dramatically shred them into the closest trash can.

Steve smiled all the way to the bus.

The seats were admittedly cramped and it smelled like the underside of an extremely dirty city, but they crammed their shoulders together and sunk low in the seats, one earbud for both as they listened to Bucky's iPod and whispered made-up stories about the other patrons.

"Why can't you tell me where we're going?" Bucky whined, tipping his head against Steve's shoulder.

"The whole point of a date--"

"Oh what do you know about dates?"

"Plenty! Watched you go on 'em all the time."

"Shut up," he grumbled, poking a finger into Steve's pretty waist. "S'not like we couldda done this in the thirties."

"Would you have wanted to?"

"Are we really gonna get into this now?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's the past, there's nothing we can do about it. Plus you're interrupting, this is a great song. Now we're gonna have to start it over."

Steve had to admit, it was a good song.

They got off the bus in DC. Truth was, the whole time Steve'd lived here, he'd never once gone. He'd ran past it almost every morning, but nothing could make him turn down the path to cut between the Lincoln memorial and the Washington Monument. He couldn't do it.

But now that Bucky was here? He deserved to go.
"You taking me on a date to see a dead guy pillar?"

"C'mon, Buck. It's George Washington, it's a monument."

"He owned 123 slaves and used to be a spy, don't tell me Captain America doesn't know his American history."

"Yes, I do, why do you?"

"Because I am not as dumb as you think."

"I don't think you're dumb," Steve shoved Bucky's shoulder lightly and then a metal arm was shoving him off the sidewalk.

Bucky laughed at him way longer than necessary, finally settling down as they neared Washington Monument. "Wait, are we seriously going to the tower thing?"

"No, we aren't."

"I thought dates were supposed to be fun. Like dancing and drinking."

"We tried that. It didn't end well."

"It didn't end badly. And it wasn't a date."

"True. But still."

"...but seriously, monuments? D.C.? Can't we go to the movies like normal people?"

"We go to the Avengers movie nights all the time. Besides," Steve looped his arm through Bucky's, turning them down the split in the sidewalk he'd never taken before. "This is more important."

"What could possibly be...oh."

They stopped and Bucky stared.

*Here we mark the price of freedom.*

More than 4,000 gold stars reflecting the sunlight. Huge white pillars with wreaths, a fountain pool in the center. The two gazebos, *Atlantic* and *Pacific* at the ends. The National World War II Monument.

The war. The beginning of the end, the end of the beginning, the catalyst to everything and the suppression of the air in their lungs. Lies, bullets, prayers, a sniper scope and a shield, seven men in uniform in the back corner of a rundown bar.

The memorial was a circle. They stepped onto the path quietly, pausing at the Victory Medal embedded into the ground. A medal they'd never gotten to see. *Victory.*

No part of it had ever felt like victory.

In silence they moved along a curving wall, bas relief depictions in an arching story. Engraved: soon-to-be servicemen getting physical exams, taking the oath, being issued military gear. Bucky's eyes cut away and his arm unhooked from Steve's. Steve didn't stop him.

It was an entire study, scenes following through the war, soldiers in uniforms nicer than any the Howlies' had ever worn. Sun shadows over deep engravings, men in combat.
And Steve's turn to stop, step closer, press his fingers against the wall. Broken-hearted brothers burying their dead. Something he'd never gotten the chance to do with Bucky. Something the Commandos had never gotten to do with him.

Eventually Bucky took Steve's hand off the wall, both of them moving in perfect silence as they stepped further on, arms falling to their sides, shoulders brushing as twin gazes followed the carvings. The elation of the homecoming scene. The brilliant smiles and the cheering. A couple dancing in the street, another kissing over a mailbox, people waving flags and leaning out of windows. Neither of them had that either.

The last scene was of a handshake between the American and Russian armies when the western and eastern fronts met in Germany.

Steve put his arm around Bucky to still the shaking. "They didn't know," he whispered against his ear. Bucky covered his mouth and nodded, staring at the joined hands. The Americans, Bucky's home; the Russians, his captors; shaking hands at the end of the war he'd given his life for.

By the time they'd gravitated back to the Atlantic gazebo no one'd cried, but they'd come pretty close. As soon as Steve propped on the white stone wall, scooting over to leave room for Bucky, those crystal eyes turned to him, too shiny and dangerously pretty.

"You tryin' to make me cry on a first date? What kinda fella are you? Mixin' this with..."

"Us? I told you, Bucky. This war? Our war story? It's the same thing as our love story."

Bucky turned away, shielding his eyes from the sun as he squinted at the immense marble columns surrounding them, the glitter off the fountain pool. "How, Steve? How? I look at this...at us?" Crystal turned to him, surreally beautiful, brown hair fluttering in the wind. "And I don't see anything but those engravings, but our lives laid out bloody and sad. The only flowers we get are the ones on graves."

His chest rose and fell, a slow steady breath, eyes closed against the sun and those words. Bucky waited, watching Steve ground himself, watching his hands flatten against the white stone beneath them, blonde hair batting against his forehead and how much had changed since the last time they'd sat somewhere and talked.

How many memories were full of smoke and fire? How did Steve not see that? Did he not remember the clarity, the stark whip of death, of living on the brink of that...

"Bucky? When...when you first heard about the war, what's the first thing you did?" Steve's eyes were still closed, or maybe downcast, and Bucky squinted across the memorial, the circling pillars shining so white and clean and opposite of war's reality.

"We were in art class. I turned to you and--"

"You turned to me. And what did you do when I told you I wanted to train?"

Bucky furrowed his eyebrows, glancing over curiously again. "I took you to that gym and taught you what I could."

Steve nodded, head lifting to look out over the water, sun blinding a halo behind him, so beautifully regal against all that white stone, like the angel who'd come to visit his own grave. Their own graves.

"When I stopped in front of the first I Want You poster?"
"I put my arm around your shoulders and dragged you off. Told you they didn't need fellas like us. Why?"

"And when I asked you to enlist?"

"Said I had enough fightin' keepin' you outta trouble. Steve, what's this got to do with anything?"

Steve paused, blue eyes reflecting water and stone and everything was so bright and open and so different from those dirty gold streets, from the shadowed green woods, from the bitter years of ice. They were sitting close enough that he could see oxygen filling Steve's lungs, his chest expanding without the familiar wheeze, the strength and power, so surreal. Ethereal.

"And when you got...your drafting letter? What's the first thing you thought?"

The wind almost stole the words before he could hear them and it certainly stole Bucky's breath away with it. He hadn't thought they'd talk about this again. Especially not on a date. If this was a date.

"I. I thought about how I couldn't leave you. How I didn't want to...to die over there, because who'd take care of you? I thought about how I didn't want to fight, not when the only thing--" he stopped, clearing his throat and kicking his heel against the stone beneath them. "--when the only thing worth fighting for needed me here."

Brooklyn, dirty Brooklyn that felt like heaven after the months in trenches with the 107th, the explosions he'd see everytime he'd close his eyes, and he couldn't have Stevie in those ditches with him.

"After Azzano, they told you to go home. But I needed you there, so..."

"I followed orders. I went home, to your side, and I fought beside you because I'd rather die than have to leave you--"

"Do you see it, Bucky? Do you see the common denominator between you and the war?" They turned to face each other and Bucky had to pin his hair back with a hand to keep it from flying into his face.

"...you. It was all about you." Bucky sighed, pressing his palms against the tops of his thighs. They were so much warmer than the cold stone. "Steve, if you're tryin' to prove my life revolves around you, believe me, I already know that--"

"No, Buck. Listen. The war. For you, what was the war about?"

With his memories so vivid in his head, it could've been yesterday he burnt that letter in the alley. He remembered exactly what the war had been about for him. What the fight had always been about. "So...I did it all. Because of you."

"No," Steve said again, then there was a hand covering Bucky's, fingertips landing between his spread ones, interrupting the energy, the space he had control over, now that space was shared. The hand on his. The one that'd taken off his mask, cast it aside. Pulled Bucky into his arms. A thousand times.

Then that rich low voice was in the air between them, heavy words spilling onto white pristine and black relief. "You did it because of love."

*I'm gonna prove it to you, Buck.*
They're the same thing. War stories are love stories.

"It's not...it's not clean enough to be love," he whispered and the memorial ghosts shredded his words the moment they hit air. The fingers between his curled, tucking tips under in a rush of seething warmth.

"Love isn't beautiful." A melody on the air, singing voices of soldiers past as Steve leaned closer, too far for intimacy but proximal enough to float soft sounds instead of stab. "Love's human."

Human. Собака. War?

"Do you remember when we danced...it was February, 1945?"

A laugh spilled out of Bucky's lips, quiet under the roar of distant invisible gunfire. "Did you forget that dance? Everyone who saw that remembers that dance."

A little girl grabbed her mother's hand, pointing at the pond with a loud exclamation and Bucky watched, thinking of swirling snow and spinning gold. "The damn bartender, who didn't even know our names, probably thinks about it nightly," his mouth said for him and Steve's hand loosened on his.

"Do you remember what you said?"

1 2 3, ratty boots over war-worn floors.

Tears in his eyes then, dry disfracture upon him now.

"When I asked what you were fighting for?" Steve's dandelion voice prompted again. Bucky remembered. He remembered every detail.

Solid stone where there had once been caving dirt, earthy tree branches, the sharp smell of smoke from behind a sniper scope.

"I said...you already know the answer to that question."

The hand over his - the same two that'd once been clasped in a waltz.

"And I did," the angel beside him replied softly, white as his halo, white as the sloping gazebo behind them. Atlantic.

"Love," Bucky echoed, detached as he cocked his head at a scar on the side of Steve's hand. He didn't think Steve got scars anymore.

"Me," Steve corrected, and something warm flooded him from his toes and arched out through his fingertips, buzzing them warmer against Steve's, buzzing his whole body bright.

War story?

Even the wind took the caesura, everything freezing around them in the only way that wasn't cold, in the only way that didn't lock him out of his mind. He could go back.

That body, that Steve was touching, was his.

Maybe it wasn't on fire enough to feel all over. Maybe it wasn't bruised enough to feel alive. But it could still be his.
That story. That could be his.

"Bucky. That's what soldiers fight for. They all do it for love. Love for their country. Love for the people they leave behind. To protect the people who haven't gotten the chance to love. Because the horror hit and they love the world to much to see whatever they're fighting for die. The soldiers who got drafted? They didn't enlist because they were already fighting for something they loved back home. Like you. And when you left overseas, that was about love too. War stories, Bucky. They're love stories, every one of them. Every soldier."

"All those people that died..."

"I don't commend countries for initiating mass murder with a patriotic stamp on top, but it's not about the countries who do this, or the politics. It's about the soldier who fights anyways. Every uniform has a cause, Bucky."

"But Steve, war--"

"You say 'war' like it's a condemnation. Like being soldiers was the worst that ever happened to us." Fingers, palms covering his and Bucky clutched on too tight, digging metal bruises into angelic flesh. "But we're still here. We came home."

Some day, I know I'll be back again. Please wait, 'Til then.


"And I took so many. Stevie, I can't come back from that--"

"You think you're already dead from the inside out." The fingers squeezed tighter and maybe they'd bruise each other this way. "You think all that matters is the lives you've taken, but that's not it. You're not a machine, Sergeant. Your skills might not be applicable in the civilian world, but you're still part of it - you went on a journey, you left with your brothers, and you came back dead, but there's always a second chance."

Shining waterdroplets and anyone who said angels couldn't cry could write that out of their poems now. The memories under their feet and the wind and the sun so cold and warm against their skin and holding on too tight as tears slipped out of blue eyes while crystal watched on.

"You think no one will ever see you again. I see you, Bucky. Let me be your second chance."

The blinding light off white stone and glittering clear fountains disappeared, fading, and Bucky tilted his head back to look up at the sky. A swarm of mottled gray and white clouds, covering the brilliant sun. Shadows cast over the memorial and the speckled crowd began to murmur and exit.

Impending storm.

Bucky looked up at the clouds and wondered how long he'd been covering the sun.

He used to be the nightsky holding a remarkable star.

The sun was reaching for him and the one in the sky wasn't the one that mattered, not when there was another at his side. A glowing halo waiting to pull him out -

but it was more complicated than that.
That halo was stained red. Just like his.

The angel didn't want to lift him from condemnation, it wanted to take his hand and army crawl into the light with him once more.

A second chance.

Bucky tore his eyes away from the sky, sweeping over to the wall now duly reflecting what bits of light the clouds had left to offer. 4048 gold stars. Each for 100 soldiers who'd died in this war. *The Freedom Wall.*

And before it, engraved and huge enough to see from the sky. *Here we mark the price of freedom.*

**The price of freedom is high. It always has been.**

He was the price of freedom.

He was one of those gold stars. So was Steve. So were so many soldiers. And this was only one war. War.

**Love?**

Bucky turned back to Steve. The wind settled enough to gently ruffle their hair now and Bucky lifted his hands away from Steve's, scooting on the white stone wall to angle his chest towards his best friend.

His comrade. His brother-in-arms.

He lifted his metal hand - the phantom's limb, the mark of his time as a soldier *he would always be a soldier* - and placed the cold palm against that angled, pretty jaw. Steve's eyes slipped closed and he tipped his head into Bucky's touch and Bucky held him that way for a moment, a moment of concession to the words upon this world they'd written.

"Steve?" He lifted his other hand, half dead and half alive, half human and half machine, all here. All soldier. All...

All hero.

"Will you be my war story?"

~*~*~

"Am I the only one who thinks surprising a scary ghost-assassin and his legendary boyfriend is a *bad* idea?"

"Shhh, they have super-hearing." Natasha elbowed Sam and he hissed in pain, scooting away and bumping into Clint. "Besides," Nat whipped her head towards the stairwell door, pressing closer to the wall they were all hiding against. "They're not officially dating."

"Well they're *something*, otherwise it wouldn't take them eight years to walk up the stai--"
"Tony! Super-hearing!" Nat hissed. Clint and Sam snickered.

"Yeah, Tony, superhea--" Sam started to mock in a high voice, only then Pepper elbowed him in the other side of his ribs and he hissed again, grabbing his side in offense as Nat reached over him to high-five Pepper while Clint and Maria snickered.

Then the stairwell door was pushing open and everyone shut up, a final quick battle glance before they jumped into sight, a cacophony of clashing voices,

"HAPPY BIRTHDAYYYY TO YOOOUUUUU!!"

It was only his immaculate training *assess targets before shooting* that left everyone alive, although there were two guns aimed at both Tony and Nat, who had been the loudest shouters of the group and therefore deserved bullets to the chest first.

Except then Steve was knocking both out of his hands, pushing through from behind him and taking his guns almost as fast as Bucky had drawn them, then the room fell silent as Steve stared wide-eyed at the Avengers: frozen with their arms wide and their voices echoing around the huge room. Two metallic thuds as the ejected clips hit the ground, and Bucky stared over Steve's shoulder at his crazy, colorful friends.

One of which was holding a cake, another a big blue box with a bow, another a bottle of wine, another a microphone?, another with a bunch of balloons and a sixth with a deck of cards.

The last time he'd been told happy birthday, it had been by the Howling Commandos. They'd been on a boat, there'd been singing to Dernier's harmonica, whiskey, cards. They'd woken him up by screaming the happy birthday song in his face.

He'd pulled a gun on them, too. Steve'd taken the clip out then, too. Everyone'd been dying of laughter, brimming with joy. No one'd been afraid of him. He'd been a killer then, and they'd woken him with shouts because they trusted him.

But now, he was more than a killer. He was an assassin, deadly, volatile.

A war story.

And...these people. This team. They trusted him too?

They trusted him enough to shout-surprise Happy Birthday at him and not fear for their lives. Tony wasn't even in his armor. They were all just standing, looking, presents and a *cake* in hand. Waiting to see what he'd do.

The last time he'd been told Happy Birthday in 71 years had been by his boys. His team.

And this time, it was his team too.

"You're all going to hell," Bucky told them flatly. And his mouth curved up in a tentative smile. A real one.

Steve glanced over his shoulder, blue eyes soft and...watery? Fucking sap. Those pretty lips rolled in and Steve shook his head once, then he handed the guns back to Bucky and turned back to his team.

Their team.

"Already there," Tony offered cautiously, shrugging his shoulder like he wasn't sure if he'd be shot
or toasted with amusement.

Then Steve was laughing and Natasha stepped forward to give him a kiss on the cheek. Sam crossed the room to throw an arm around Bucky’s shoulders, Tony shook the big blue box in his face tantalizingly and Pepper held up the wine for him to see as Clint crowded the herd towards the dining table, narrating the scene into the random microphone as Bucky laughed at everyone and tried to peer over Maria's shoulder to see what Natasha's cake had in icing on the top.

Happy B-day Bucky Barnes.

The 98 was crossed out with a big purple x of icing, the 28 traced next to it all lopsided and most-likely in Clint's handwriting. Steve had this beautiful smile on his face, one arm around Nat and the other around Sam, backs of his fingers brushing Bucky's shoulder as the cake slid across the table to land in front of him.

A fancy-looking lighter that probably had 8000 extra features wielded in Tony's hand while Pepper produced candles, setting one on each point of the red star in the center of the cake, everyone cowering cautiously as Tony flicked a switch and a golden flame leapt out of the end of the lighter, then Clint was starting the Happy Birthday song way too loudly and quite off-pitch into his still-mysterious microphone and everyone else's voices joined in, loud and merry.

Steve caught his eye over the people between them, gazes meeting in the middle of the chaos and the look on Steve's face, that easy, unadulterated joy - he deserved that every day of his life. After everything they'd been through? Steve deserved that more than anything. That brilliant glow in those angel-blue eyes, surrounded by his friends while they serenaded terribly, and this was exactly where Steve belonged.

He broke his eyes away, looking down at the round cake, the flickering fire atop each of those five points. Five months ago, he'd been in a box of ice. He'd been nothing but a killer. And now here was this team, this family, pulling him into their arms and their antics and baking him a birthday cake.

How could this be where he belonged? He was that odd piece out still, wasn't he? Steve fit in here, Steve'd found a home amongst all the crazy soldiers and scientists, but that piece of sunshine was the only thing Bucky had in common with these people.

How could they want him to be part of this scene?

How could Sam be squeezing his shoulder and Clint be nudging his side and Tony be trying to poke him with the strange lighter as they all waited for him to lean down and blow out the flames.

Five candles, five months ago he'd been a burnt-out empty shell full of nothing but fire and now, he was blowing fire out.

But war stories didn't have happy endings, did they?

Except love stories did. And if they were the same thing...

Bucky closed his eyes, leaned over, and blew out his birthday candles with a single wish silent on his tongue. Cheering erupted and rough hands clapped him on the back, more loud shouts and insisting of unwrapping presents and getting knives to cut cake.

He pulled one of his nine blades out and Pepper scolded him for using weaponry on things they were going to eat and Tony thanked him exuberantly for not being the only one to understand
functionality of personal armory and Sam and Steve were in some sort of argument over ice cream and Nat was trying to get Maria to lick off the icing on candles so as to not waste it while Clint pried the cork off the wine with what looked like a modified arrowhead and

Bucky stood and watched; a soft, awed smile on his face.

Pepper coerced him into letting her pull his hair back into a french braid while he opened gifts and Sam set up cards. Nat smeared cake in Tony's and Maria's faces and nobody dared get her back. The loud and the crazy and the laughing didn't stop for what felt like hours. At one point Tony shouted "children, behave!" at them and Steve giggled like a schoolgirl and threw a plastic fork at Bucky's head, only it hit Clint instead and that induced a very quick wrestling match that ended with Clint cradling his elbow and whining.

Eventually, in the midst of an intense game of B.S, the chance popped up and Bucky pulled Steve to the side, halfway across the room so they could talk without being overheard, think without Sam's bellowing laughter floating between them.

"So this," Bucky waved a hand to indicate the surprise party, glancing up at Steve with an amused look as he ran his fingers through his hair to undo the french braid. "Our war story? This part of it may play out familiar, but they sure are nothin' like the Howling Commandos."

"No, they aren't." Steve shook his head, glancing over his shoulder affectionately before turning back to Bucky, running his palm down the metal arm and freeing a few pieces of remaining braid with his other hand. "But it's just part two of our war story, Buck."

He huffed a soft sound, catching Steve's fingers as they stroked down his wrist and stilling them, holding his focus tight.

"I fought a World War for you, Rogers." The liberation of saying that out loud - he never thought he'd have that. He never thought he'd have any of this. "You think we'd be done with this whole battle business by now."

That pretty blond head shook, then their clasped hands were joined by another warm one, wrapping Bucky's fingers up and squeezing tight.

"Never." A step closer and Bucky had to tilt his chin up to meet those eyes and wasn't that strange, this body he used to be able to scoop off the ground like a sack of potatoes now forcing his chin up. His little Stevie. Nothin' little about either a' them anymore.

Fingers squeezed tighter and maybe Steve was making up for lost time or somethin', how much he'd been holding Bucky's hands, only he really really wasn't gonna complain. Those pink lips parted again, whisper floating between them. "I'm on the frontlines all over again. I'm fighting the war for you this time."

Their war. Only the war hadn't ended so well last time and that was written all over his face, familiar pained sorrow that'd found them so young and taken both their lives.

"And I'm not crashing anything this time," Steve added with a little smile. Bucky blinked and Steve's whisper was louder now, desperately sincere as he leaned down, inches from Bucky's nose, and slipped a promise over his shoulders. "This time, I'm falling with you. For you. Every day."

He wasn't gonna cry, really, only he'd spent months wishing and wondering why Steve hadn't jumped after him because God knows Bucky would've. Except now Steve was. Falling right alongside Bucky, both of them jumping off the proverbial cliff into this mess of a war story, into
whatever this was, into kissing each other and testing icy waters with toes that were scared to be frozen or broken again, only they'd already jumped; it was too late to do anything but hold each other tight and close their eyes until they hit the bottom.

"Aw, Stevie," he managed, eyes watery and voice choked. "Sure know how to sweet talk a fella."

Another little sad smile, only that wasn't enough, holding his little punk Stevie's hands weren't enough for this moment.

"C'mere," Bucky murmured, wiggling his hands free to spread his arms. And like always, his Stevie folded against his chest, icy nose to the side of his neck, one hand clutching his shirt and the other shoved up in the back of Bucky's hair and he closed his eyes, clutched his arms around Steve's broad back and held him tight.

Falling for you. With you. Every day.

He wasn't gonna cry.

When he pulled away he covered his eyes with his right hand, knowing the wet would shine against the metal and wanting that water gone before the day was spoiled. Bucky wiped the stupid unfallen tears and knocked his damp fist into Steve's shoulder, making that sweet mouth giggle softly and fuck, that look on Steve's face wasn't fair.

"What do you say we get outta here?" He whispered, leaning to the side to dodge the kiss aimed for his cheek. Steve made a pouting sound at the rejection, but it came with a nod and a quick squeeze of Buck's hand, then they were saying goodbye to everybody, tingling with the anticipation to be alone again.

"You guys have been wonderful," Bucky begrudgingly admitted, placing chaste kisses on the cheeks of all the women - even Maria - because that's what he would've done back in the day. "But we're gonna go try out my new present."

"If I'd known we were couple-gifting, I'd've been much more raunchily creative." Tony raised his eyebrows with that look that said way more than his words did and maybe he went red as the star on his arm but god that is not what he meant by that.

"Haha, we're not a--" he cut off, glancing at Steve for help, except he looked just as confused, so Bucky threw up a hand and gave Tony a pointed look. "We're gonna go. But thank you guys, seriously. It's great to be older than everyone and still the best looking."

Nat flicked him off and Maria snorted and Sam laughed at Clint's raised unimpressed eyebrows and Tony rolled his eyes as Pepper shooed them off. Steve wrapped a big arm over his shoulders, Bucky's gift from Stark in the other hand as they stepped into the elevator.

Bucky pressed the button for the roof instead of their floor and Steve gave him an amused look but didn't say a word of protest.

The soft beeps followed them up and Bucky repositioned his grip on the speaker handle. Jarvis told Tony how he liked having control of his own music and didn't have a decent speaker, so the big blue present had been a high-tech but simple boombox, small enough to carry around and big enough for a great sound.

It was actually the perfect gift. And they were going to test it out properly.

"Alright, c'mere." Bucky sat the radio on the ledge of the roof, waving Steve over to the center of the
empty space. Steve screwed up his eyebrows, looking between the boombox and his best friend, the urgent gesturing hand, bottom lip caught between his teeth.

"What are we doing?" he asked cautiously, taking a step closer. Bucky waved faster. Giving up on interpreting anything, Steve crossed the space between them, hands on his hips and head cocked as he waited for whatever Bucky was planning.

He pressed a button on the tiny remote, shoving the thing back in his pocket, and then the music started.

It was loud, an instrument Steve'd never heard before, and strangely poppy sounding. He turned to look at the stereo in confusion, but Bucky grabbed his wrist, whipped Steve back to face him, all attention on the crystal eyes and ruffled brown hair.

"Oh don't you dare look back, just keep your eyes on me," the words started behind them, except Bucky was singing along, eyes sincere, expression serious, fingers locked tight around his wrist.

"What ar--"

"I said you're holdin' back, she said shut up and dance with me."

It was such a signature Bucky thing to say that a surprised laugh tumbled out of Steve's mouth, shaking his head in amusement, except that only made Bucky more insistent, taking Steve's other hand and squeezing them tight.

"Oh ooh oh, shut up and dance with me!" And then Bucky was tugging him in, lifting clasped hands up and wrapping metal fingers over Steve's hip, cool through the cotton of his shirt.

"Are we-" he started, then Bucky took a step backwards, pulling Steve with him, making him stumble to keep up.

"We're actually-"

Bucky stepped again and spun them around, hands secure,

"--dancing on the roof." Steve finished, raising his eyebrows because this was Bucky of Brooklyn, not the Winter Soldier, and this one didn't belong to Steve, not the debonair flirt from the past.

"We were victims of the night," Bucky's hands curled around his waist, their bodies pressing close as he guided Steve's hips, moving them together. "-the chemical, physical, kryptonite." The suggestive, classy way he used to dance with all those dames.

"Helpless to the bass and the fading light." The New York skyline reflected like stars and he was leaning up with a coy, precious smile on his face, singing straight to Steve with this incredible, twinkling mischief.

"Oh, we were bound to get together, bound to get together."

Together, Bucky'd just called them together and bound, bound to happen, if Steve was ever the sun, it was only because Bucky lit him on fire.

"She took my arm, I don't know how it happened." Bucky's expression shifted into sheer, exaggerated innocence, wide-eyed and pure trouble because he knew exactly how this happened and then he took Steve's hands again and the chorus hit, music loud and fast as Bucky tugged him into a swing-out Lindy.
"Oh, don't you dare look back. Just keep your eyes on me." The sincerity in Bucky's words made it impossible to tear his gaze away, although Steve couldn't imagine looking at anything else, locked on each other with Bucky's grace and fire to guide the way.

"I said, 'You're holding back,' she said, 'Shut up and dance with me!'"

It wasn't You're My Sunshine but Bucky was as stunningly beautiful as the last time he'd sang for Steve on his birthday, that night on the boat with the Commandos. After all this time, everything that happened to him, he still had that spark. That gravitation, the light behind his eyes and that dashing smile and the undeniable charm, that perfect way he moved his body like he owned everyone who dared look his way.

The heavy beat fell back to something lighter and Bucky pulled him in close again, hand on Steve's waist, rockstep triplestep. He'd never been a dancer like Bucky, despite the lessons in the kitchen. But now, like this? This was perfect, like old times. Better than old times, because this time it meant something.

He knew he was already beaming down at that pretty smile like a lovesick fool, but it wasn't until Bucky's eyes darted down, a hint of shyness as he sang the next line a little softer, "I felt it in my chest as she looked at me." That's when Steve melted entirely.

"I knew we were bound to be together," Bucky whispered quietly, something like awe. And Steve'd caught on enough to take the next line easily, tipping his hand under Bucky's chin to make their eyes meet.

"Bound to be together," Steve echoed with a smile and the world lit up as Bucky brightened again, the music stopping for the briefest of pauses, tension flying as it kicked up again, voice loud and beautiful again as Bucky swung them through the crisp night air.

"She took my arm, I don't know how it happened. We took the floor and she saaaaaid..." They spun and Steve was past focusing on not falling, only thinking of those crystal eyes and warm hands on him. "Oh, don't you dare look back, just keep your eyes on me--"

"I said you're holding back," Steve sang back at him and the air was the lightest in his lungs it'd ever been with the way Bucky was beaming at him.

"She said shut up and dance with me. This woman is my destiny," and Steve had to join in for the next part too, enthusiasm to match Bucky's, energy and tension between them high enough to float to the clouds and, "Oh, oh, oh, shut up and dance with mee.

The song split into an instrumental bridge and Bucky broke off, dancing backwards, gesturing at Steve, all mischief and beauty and temptation and Steve was a helpless, poor lost soul. "Oh, come on girl!" Bucky shouted with the song and Steve laughed up at the sky, hand over his chest as he tried to catch his breath.

"I ain't your dame," he finally managed, eyes on the man jazzing in happy circles around the rooftop.

"Prove it," Bucky dared back, raising an eyebrow.

He was close enough that Steve only had to bound once before he had Bucky in his arms and he may not be the kind of dancer Bucky was, but there had been a bounty of kitchen-lessons and he hadn't learned nothing.

With one hand tight on Bucky's he flicked him out, lifting his arm high and whipping in a circle to spin Bucky under it, tugging him right back into Steve's chest, finishing the swoop and dipping him
low, long brunette hair falling back as Steve leaned over the backbend of that pretty body. Bucky tipped his head back even further, laughing joyously, and the sound echoed over the rooftops and engrained itself into Steve's heart.

Only a few seconds of victory before he was outmaneuvered and Bucky straightened, falling onto his chest and the world froze around them, bright eyes looking up, reflecting stars and city lights, both palms flat on Steve's collarbones, blinking up intimately like Steve was somehow everything.

"Deep in her eyes, I think I see the future," Bucky sang, captivated, and how could this emotion be for him, edging into desperation tinged in sadness and the next words tore his heart out of his chest, the heavy, final way they fell off Bucky's tongue.

"I realize...this is my last chance."

As much as Steve wanted to hold him and tell him they had all the chances in the world, all the last breaths in the world; Bucky kept singing, pushing past and the wind whipped everything else away.

"She took my arm, I don't know how it happened. We took the floor and she saaid..."

The music paused and really, he wasn't going to get sentimental, but he was going to goddamn kiss his best friend because he wanted to more than anything and for once, he finally could.

Steve tilted Bucky's face up and pressed their lips together, eyes slipping shut as Bucky's hands weaved into his hair and kissed him back, easy and sweet, his soft bottom lip sliding between Steve's, a gentle tug as their mouths moved together, stars shooting down his spine, making his toes curl in his shoes.

Their lips parted, barely, and Bucky's forehead pressed to his, his words ghosting right over Steve's mouth and this time, they meant a lot more than dancing. "Oh, don't you dare look back...."

He could never look back, not now,

"...just keep your eyes on me."

They'd never been anywhere else.

Steve's eyes were still closed as he ran his thumb over Bucky's jawline, and his whisper wasn't about dancing either. "I said you're holding back."

"She said shut up and dance with me," he replied softly, and it was an answer and a promise and maybe Steve was high on moonlight and dancing but he could swear this was important, the way Bucky was holding him so tight and close. "Oh, oh, oh..."

The moment snapped, hair flipping in the wind as he grabbed Steve's hand and opened his pretty mouth to shout at the top of his lungs,

"Shut up and dance!"

Bucky lifted him off his feet with strong hands and twirled them around, sending them both spinning across the rooftop like crazy people and no wonder all those dames fell in love, the celestial beings looking down from heaven were probably in love with Bucky Barnes right now.

But in all the times he'd seen his best friend dance, he'd never seen this pure freedom. Which he would never say aloud because there would be jokes about eagles and bleeding red-white-and-blue for the rest of his days and that was not the kind of freedom he meant.
"Ooh, oh oh, shut up and dance with me!" The roof and New York were spinning around them, the only clear thing pure crystal, if it was possible to burst, he might do it in this moment.

Bucky's hand whipped him around and Steve's feet twirled so quickly it felt like a battle reaction, then he was spinning right into Bucky's arms and they were dancing around the roof, Bucky's hair was all over the goddamned place and his smile was impossibly wide.

"Oh oh oh, shut up and dance with me!!" Bucky shouted at him and Steve shouted it back and then they both stumbled to the edge of the roof, hands overlapping as they clutched the edge and shouted over the floating rooftops of the city.

"Shut up and dance with me!"

Bucky spun under his arm and Steve spun under Bucky's and then they were laughing over the final refrain of the music, falling against each other and propping each other up because god, when was the last time they screamed something over the rooftops of New York?

The drums hit in a final warning for the end of the song and Bucky grabbed him around the waist, dipping him upside down and kissing his mouth hard enough to press the laughter right over Bucky's tongue and it felt like falling, in a million ways, only propped up with a single hand on his back, balanced over Bucky's touch and entirely trusting as that mouth moved over his, and then the music crescendoed into silence, echoing the finish into the night.

And then Bucky dropped him.

Steve hit the ground with a groan and a swinging kick for Bucky's shin. He cursed and dropped to Steve's side, then those contrasting hands were on his face again and Steve rolled them over on the concrete ground and kissed Bucky back until his lips were numb.

The moonlight spilled over them and every time they'd almost kissed, almost spoken, and passed each other by all melted away because this, this was the end game. Simple and perfect, no complications, just them under the big bright sky, holding onto each other for no other reason than that the other was here.

By the time they shoved each other off, collapsed in heavy-breathing piles next to each other, staring up at the sky, Steve's heart was pounding out of his chest and he was happier than he could remember being, ever.

"Wow," Steve told the stars and Bucky laughed, an airy, disbelieving kind that was exactly how the inside of Steve's chest felt.

"I wanted to dance." Bucky shrugged next to him and Steve made an approving noise at the sky.

"That crap at the club doesn't count."

"It doesn't," Steve agreed, smacking his hand on the concrete next to him repeatedly until he located Bucky's arm by whacking it and scooted over, still looking up at the sky as he flopped his head down on Bucky's stomach and made him huff in annoyance.

But then a metal hand was carding through his hair and Steve closed his eyes with a smile because he knew Bucky didn't really mind. How long had he been using Bucky for a pillow on rooftops and fire-escapes?

This, this was what it was all for. This was that reward, the point of living that made not-dying worth
it. Moments that could belong to any goddamned year in their life and that was the most beautiful part, how many times they'd done this and how this time was unlike anything they'd ever done.

"I want to paint something," Bucky declared to the stars and Steve raised his eyebrows curiously, even though Bucky couldn't see him. He could probably picture it anyways. The fingers in his hair didn't stop playing with the blonde strands, voice kinda distant and dreamy. "Like, for real. Not some moody expressionistic creepy crap."

"Yeah your last painting was creepy," Steve pondered and the fingers in his hair flicked his temple. He supposed he had that coming, so he refrained from punching Bucky back for it.

"One rule though," he continued, like Steve'd never interrupted at all. "Nobody touches it but me. Until I give you permission, then you can, but I want it...I want it to be mine. And maybe, if you're nice, I'll let you see it one day."

"You planning something big then," he asked, although it was worded like a statement because he knew Bucky well enough to at least know that.

"Oh you know it." Steve'd bet anything Bucky quirked his eyebrows all cute and he laughed at the metal image, opening his eyes up and rolling his head on Bucky's sternum to catch a glimpse of his peaceful expression. The angle was all wacked, but then Bucky lifted his head and looked down at Steve, twisting up funnily. "Get your ass up here so I can kiss you."

Steve rolled onto his stomach and army crawled the rest of the distance, pressing a chaste kiss on Bucky's lips. "You're shivering. Inside?"

"I'm not shivering. You're shivering." Bucky shoved him off and Steve rolled his eyes, picking himself up off the ground and humming over to the quiet boombox. He tugged the iPod off the top, checking the name of the song and the artist. "Walk the Moon...no way."

"What?" Bucky paused from brushing himself off, looking up in concern. Steve waved the iPod, pointing at the artist and kinda disbelieving of the uncanny luck.

"Stark sent me a song to show you, it's by them. We're..." he slid his thumb over the screen, pulling up YouTube because he was a Proper Twenty-First Century Citizen and typing in the name of the song. "...gonna listen to it on the way down."

He shifted the boombox in his hand, throwing an arm over Bucky's shoulders as the elevator doors slid shut and they began the descent to their floor.

The elevator doors slid open with a ding and Steve tugged Bucky into the hall, thumb pressing the play button, arm hooking around Bucky's neck just in time for the song to start.

"We walk out the cinema, about to go our separate ways," Steve tipped his head up and gestured with his free hand at the sky like somebody out of the films.

"And I, I almost wave goodbye, when you let your hair fall in your face," he tucked a piece of stray hair behind Bucky's ear and the crystal eyes rolled in fond exasperation.

"And I often wonder why the things that I want are so hard to find," Steve sang, tugging Bucky towards the kitchen and setting the boombox on the table. "But I often fail to see the things that I need are right here by my side."

He pressed a kiss to Bucky's cheek and a metal arm shoved him for his efforts and Steve grabbed the steel fingers, tugging Bucky back in with a twirl, one hand pressing tight to his lower back as he
lifted his eyebrows and sang with overexaggerated sincerity.

"Something in the air is giving me bad ideas,"

"Always," Bucky grumbled in agreement and Steve swayed them side to side, still on top of the world and full of energy from that smile, no matter how much Bucky was pretending to complain now.

"Something in the air is giving me dangerous thoughts, like..." Steve took the pause, gathering courage before he let the words slip out of his mouth.

"...Why don’t you stay at mine tonight?" The song echoed the question in the background and Steve rolled his lips in, refusing to get nervous and let his heart rate raise the way Bucky's eyebrows suddenly did. So he'd never explicitly asked before, but.

"Why don’t you stay with me...and be my sidekick, sidekick?" Steve twirled him out with a shove and it was a good thing he did, because as soon as Buck spun back to facing him, his mouth was open in shocked, exaggerated offense. Steve offered a don't kill me smile.

"Do you, do you, do you wanna be my sidekick, sidekick?"

"I will sidekick your ass," Bucky declared, then there was a heavy boot colliding with Steve's hip and Steve barely caught Bucky's ankle before it knocked him over, laughing and tugging Bucky down sideways with him as he did lose his footing after all.

They landed in a pile on the tile floor and Bucky wasn't trying to kick him anymore, just tickle him, which was a hell of a lot worse, so Steve grabbed his hands and rolled them over, pressing kisses to Bucky's face so he'd stop trying to attack Steve for the sidekick comment.

"We’re kissing on that kitchen floor, our friendship up against the ropes," the song sang from the boombox on the table and Steve suddenly broke off, pushing up to look down at the crazy waves of brown hair and parted lips because that opportunity was too good to pass up.

"I've got you on the ropes," he exclaimed, then he was being shoved onto the tile floor none too kindly and even if the air hadn't been knocked out of him Steve wouldn't be able to breathe anyways, he was laughing too hard at the scandalized look on Bucky's face.

They wrestled around on the ground, tumbling over the tile and shoving into cabinets and walls before somebody finally pinned somebody and they were kissing.

The best idea to shut Bucky up was definitely by kissing him. And, strangely, for once they agreed on something because Bucky was kissing him back enthusiastically, giving up his attempts to tickle Steve to run his hands in swirly lines down Steve's spine instead.

"Well it just occurred to me the one that I need could be right here by my side." The words floated over them and Bucky was smiling into his mouth and Steve adjusted the angle to kiss that smile right off his lips, taste happiness like if he could memorize the flavor they could feel this way forever.

"Something in the air is giving me bad ideas, something in the air is giving me wicked thoughts..."

"Wicked thoughts, huh?" Bucky murmured, words squished by Steve's mouth, so he reluctantly pulled back a little, blinking his eyes open while the song reverberated that question through the room, settling the meaning heavy in their gazes.

"Why don’t you stay at mine tonight?"
It could mean sleeping next to each other the way they used to. Or maybe. Maybe it could mean something more.

"Why don’t you stay with me and be my sidekick, sidekick?"

To be fair, Bucky'd been offended as hell at being portrayed as a 16-year-old in a mask and tights, and after everything that'd happened since, he'd imagine being called a mere sidekick was even more offensive.

Which was exactly why he ran his fingers through Bucky's hair, eyes wide and innocent as he cooed, "C'mon, you'd be a great sidekick, baby."

And also why Bucky kicked his shin, flipped him onto his back and shoved him sliding halfway across the kitchen tiles in a single maneuver with a very loud shout of "The Winter Soldier is not a sidekick."

Steve was out of breath again, wheezing laughs as he grabbed onto the counter and hauled himself back to his feet, leaning on the granite for support.

"Do you, do you want to be my...?"

Buck pushed up to his feet too, fluid and easy, moving like a different kind'a dancer now, a ballerina or a trapeze artist, all grace and waterfall movements as he slid back up to Steve's side just in time for Steve to mouth the words do you want to be mine? against his cheek.

He got a contemplative noise in return, a stiff hand rubbing over the top of his shoulders, and Steve closed his eyes again, tipping his head against the side of Bucky's and breathing in the heat of his skin.

"Something in the air is giving me bad ideas," Steve whispered along to the song and the ripple down Bucky's spine was unmistakable, the shiver making his metal fingers pulse and tighten, plates shifting with a whir. He slid his lips over to Bucky's ear, pressing the words tight against his skin. "Something in the air is telling me you could be my..."

Settling his grip on Bucky's hips, Steve pulled them away from the counter, gazes locked as he backed towards the archway into the hall. "...sidekick, sidekick."

There was too much loaded on this to let it happen this easy, so as soon as he backed into the hallway Steve let them settle against the wall, unmoving as he ran his thumbs over the defined bones of Bucky's hips, ignoring the fading music in the background as he leaned his mouth beside Bucky's ear again.

"C'mon, Buck, answer the question." He kissed the soft skin of his neck and Bucky shivered against him, taking a moment to get ahold of his voice again before he answered in that familiar, masked nonchalance.

"Be your sidekick? Aren't I kinda--"

"Will you stay at mine tonight?" Steve interrupted, pulling back so he could see the emotions flickering through Bucky's eyes in the dim light.

He was frozen, studying Steve with the skilled, observant debate of a sniper. Steve waited, patiently, his hands stilled on Bucky's hips because if they were going to do this, they were going to talk about it like adults instead of dancing and flirting like the crazy teenagers they'd been all night.
"Maybe," he finally relented, not sounding adverse as much as cautious. "Let me take a shower and think on it, then...then we'll see."

Steve nodded, ducking his head with a sincere smile that invoked another fond shove, then Bucky backed up a foot, eyes still on Steve as he tugged tantalizingly at the hem of his tshirt and added, "And no, you can't join me."

"I wasn't gonna offer!" He clutched a hand over his heart in offense and Bucky's eyes went wide with dancing amusement.

"Oh you totally were." Steve looked scandalized at the suggestion, a slip in the usual teasing for whatever concern Steve had about Stepping Over Lines and Bucky wanted to kiss him for that, too. Instead he kept up the innocent act, taking another step backwards as he teased. "It was in your eyes, Rogers. I can read you like a book."

And finally Steve seemed to catch on he was still playing, the worry draining entirely as he shuffled awkward on his feet, arms crossing over his chest as he pouted.

"You're a... book," he responded lamely and Bucky threw back his head and laughed, because sometimes Steve was the same ninety-pound punk he'd grown up with and that was probably the very best thing about all of this. Bucky got to have them both.

The pout was too precious, he had to bound forward and kiss that pretty mouth one more time, lips sticking and popping apart with a wet sound as they both ached to hold on too long, but Bucky really had to go off for a shower, spend a few minutes alone to get his head on straight without the poison of Steve's taste on his tongue.

So he smacked Steve's hip and darted for the bathroom door, only Steve caught him first and shoved him and Bucky had to shove him back and he barely got his hand on the doorknob, turning it quick and tumbling out of Steve's reach before it could turn into another battle that ended in kissing against walls and floors and maybe beds.

He stumbled into the bathroom, laughter echoing with the closing door, tile cold and smooth under his bare feet. A hand landing on the counter Bucky looked up, flashing crystal eyes meeting his own in the mirror, a beaming, brilliant reflection. That smile on his face, that joy in his eyes, that light and laughter tingling in the layer beneath his skin.

It almost didn't look real.

Like a doll.

Like a pretty painting.

A perfect machine.

He lifted a hand - the right one, both literally and figuratively - tentative fingers curling towards that expression in the mirror. Reaching forward, watching as the flesh grew closer and closer, until his fingertips were pressed against the shocking cold, hard, unfeeling glass. The surface of that smile. Glass.

Crystal eyes locked on his as the edges of the mouth fell, hundreds of feet down a mountain. The fire in eyes extinguished, burning flame flickering to ashes of paper drawings. The bright joy sinking through a frozen river to settle against the billowing dusty bottom of reality. He watched as the man in the mirror faded.

If he pressed hard enough, maybe his fingers could go right through the glass, delve into that shiny, gooey material to reach that face in the mirror, touch real skin, feel what a smile meant against his fingertips. Skin pushed harder, glass creaked in warning and his hand flew back like fire.

Those eyes were dead now, looking back at him. If he opened his mouth to scream, no sound would come out on this side of the mirror, not when the dead man staring at him was locked inside that shiny, silver box, behind the glass wall.

Bucky cut his gaze away, staring at shaking hands. One grabbed the faucet handle, turned the sink water on full blast to fill the bathroom with noise. He couldn't hear his own breathing. He wouldn't know he was breathing at all if it weren't for the stinging blood pumping through the veins beneath the translucent skin on his wrists.

Shoving his hands under the clear spray, waiting for water to wash the shaking away, only the water wasn't touching him at all. Full, wet, circle droplets sliding off his skin, over his hands and gone, nothing was sinking in. Nothing was staying. Like duck's feathers, waxed cars, waterproof dogs, the water slid off his skin and none of it sank in. It wasn't permeant. He was impermeable.

He'd been letting himself slip. He'd been letting himself forget. He'd been breathing, blinking, thinking automatically. A month and a half ago he'd shouted at Steve that they'd broken every bone in his body. Tackled Steve to the ground when he tried to snap his own wrist.

They'd done -- Hydra'd done so much to him. He had all those years of training and torture and hell shoved inside his head and he'd been ignoring them. Kissing Steve's mouth to forget the taste of blood on his tongue.

It still happened.

Bucky stared at his hands under the spray of the water. The water slid right off his hands and drained down into the sink. That part wasn't a war story. Seventy years that didn't fit in - that was a horror movie, no plot but pain and terror.

He could rub a towel over his hands and all of the water would be gone. Just like that. Nothing stuck. Nothing absorbed. Nothing lasted. Nothing stayed-

The water was cold, flooding his eyes as he shoved his head under the faucet. It drained down the long strands, soaking his head, but at least it proved he was real. His hair was wet, dripping into the sink, running down his forehead, but at least it would stay that way. At least it proved he could be touched. At least it didn't slide off like his skin.

The towel was rough on his head, turning dripping to damp, then he was staring at the reflection again and finally, fuck, something changed. He smoothed his hands over his head, pushing strands flat to his head, slicking it all back until the length disappeared, until the man in the mirror looked like someone he knew. He used to wear his hair like this, all slicked back. Especially for special occasions. And funerals.

The person in the silver box could almost be him. If it weren't for the hunk of ugly metal hanging off
his body. Metal.

Bucky dug his fingers in his pocket, pulling out the chain with a soft clink. He hadn't had the courage to wear them. Sitting the tags on the counter, he pulled his shirt over his head, smoothing his hair down again before unbuttoning his pants, dropping them to the floor and toeing them aside, sliding down his briefs too, pushing the pile of clothes out of the way, peeled out of this century and left with nothing but his body.

He turned to the man in the mirror again. If he looked at the right half of his body, he could be back in 1944. What he'd give to be back in 1944.

They'd danced tonight, under the stars. Laughed and kissed. Steve was waiting for him in his bedroom in this lavish palace of glass. He had a team. They made him a cake, got him gifts, trusted him.

What he'd give to be back in 1944.

He lifted the dogtags off the counter, holding them up in the air and watching the bright bathroom lights reflect off the glint. If he had to choose -

- go through the hell of Hydra and be with Steve, or
- go back to the simplicity of the war and watch Steve marry Peggy

At least he was invited over for dinner on Sundays. Steve was so much...brighter, then. He was still beautiful now, but that easy, sunny joy? Nothing was easy anymore. Bucky'd give up kissing those precious lips for the rest of his life if it meant Steve could have a home.

The dogtag chain was big enough that he could slip it over his head, slicked-back hair setting the strangest illusion of youth. He almost looked 28.

Steve knew he'd been drafted. The way he'd acted, his response, the easy way he was around Bucky now. He thought that was it. He thought that being drafted was the scary, dark secret Bucky'd been hiding away since '43, he thought everything was in the open and fixed now.

He had no idea. That was nothing, not in comparison.

The metal settled on his chest. Familiar clanking, cold, his name etched and unforgettable.

James.

Buchanan.

Barnes.

"Bucky?"

A naked soldier staring at his reflection, wishing he had the courage or incentive to cut his hair off, wishing the body in that glass box could belong to him.

Crystal scanned over his reflection, looking at the expanse of bare skin, wondering if he could carve his way inside, force his mind back into that body manually. He was nothing but metal and bone
now - more metal against his chest now. He'd always been metal.

Clanking.

There were fingerprints on the mirror. Fingerprints on the counter and the doorknob. Sloppy. Worse than sloppy - a death sentence. Shaking hands grabbed the towel and started to scrub. Smear. The man in the mirror looked distressed and Bucky ignored him, wiping away the evidence. He'd been here.

This body had been here.

There were fingerprints all over the apartment. Sloppy sloppy sloppy. If Hydra came, there'd be so much proof, so easy to track, he'd have to burn the place down--

His fingerprints were all over Steve. He'd touched his face and his arms and his back and his hips and his mouth and if they got their hands on Steve they'd have proof of that, they'd have proof that Steve was involved and they'd kill him, they'd torture him and he wouldn't break

*not like Bucky did*

so they'd kill him and it'd be his fault because he'd left proof, his hands, this skin, had betrayed him and he'd have to flay Steve's skin off to save him--

Metal fingers slammed on the hot water in the shower. More than hands were shaking now and he didn't wait for the temperature, ducking into the waterfall, under the spray and let the water rush over him - untouched. It burned his lips and his eyelids and the skin of his wrists and his lower back and his chest, it was burning a hole in his chest.

The dogtags heated up and they were searing hot into his skin, imprinting his name so he could *never forget again* only nothing stayed, nothing lasted, all the scars and burns were gone.

Except his arm.

The metal burned. It was still burning when he slammed the water back off, leaning his forehead on the cool tiles to clear the swimming vision. It didn't clear.

He dried off automatically. Wrapped in a towel. He didn't look at the man in the mirror.

He went straight to his room. Steve heard him. Came and hesitantly knocked on the door once Bucky was dressed. Bucky didn't answer.

He'd said maybe. It was never. He couldn't -- it was too deep. Everything with Steve ran too deep.

They'd used Steve to break him. Of course he was still broken. He couldn't turn to the cracks in his heart for comfort, not when Steve'd been the one that'd caused them.

*Why don't you stay with me tonight?*

He pulled the sheets over his head. Eventually footprints walked away from his door. Steve got the message.

Except really, he didn't. He had no idea.

The nightmare was inevitable. Waking up silent was the only blessing. He used to be perfectly silent.
Efficient. Now he was a fucking mess. A fucking mess.

*Whatever the mess you are, you're mine, okay?*

Shut the fuck up, Bucky told the Steve in his head, the first cognitive thing he'd processed in the past five minutes of rocking, clutching his head as he shook. Most times, Steve came barging in. It was like he had a sense of when Bucky woke up with a nightmare.

It'd been a terrible one. There'd been a hole in his chest, a smoking burning hole where his dogtags now burned against his skin. He'd pulled a knife from that hole, carved the skin off Steve's pretty face, carved him down to a skeleton while Steve looked up at him lovingly and even his skeleton was golden, made from the sun and the moment Bucky's fingers had touched it it'd burnt black, spreading like a disease, crumbling to ashes--

He shoved metal knuckles in his mouth to stifle the whimper.

His eyes were squeezed shut and the darkness did nothing to ground him. He had to stay silent. Steve couldn't come in here right now.

The taste of metal on his tongue. Bitter like blood. Only maybe there was blood in his mouth too.

Copper and steel swirled over the backs of his teeth, drowning his throat. A metal swirling poison. Topped off with salt from the tears streaming down his face.

Curling up into a ball, as tiny as he could get, holding his arms around himself as more tears and salt dripped against metal and a cotton pillow that felt like falling.

Always falling.

*Every day, for you. WITH YOU.*

But Steve hadn't. Bucky'd fallen alone.

His shoulders shook. He shook until he cried himself back to sleep.

But at least he'd accomplished the mission. He'd kept quiet. So quiet Steve never knew. Steve never came. Just like he'd told himself.

It was better this way, he was made - designed - to fall alone.

---

Chapter End Notes

I'd like to give a reference to [Amanda H](https://www.fanfiction.net/u/1879501) and her VA group - one of the quotes is taken directly from a comment of their group leader, an Army psychologist. Innumerous thanks to this VA group for reading TIMLB, all of your comments give me a kind of purpose I haven't had in a long time. So shout out to each and every one of you for being amazing, incredible soldiers who fought with the kind of inspiration these boys do.

And here are the songs:

Poison - Groove Coverage (this song is 300% Bucky in this chapter it's great)
Shut up and Dance - Walk the Moon
Sidekick - Walk the Moon

Thank you all so much for hanging in there with me this long. God it's been crazy.

P.S. your lovely comments are my life force and you are all positive darlings
xx
Двадцать Один (Twenty-one)

Chapter Notes

Warnings: verbal discussion of nonconsenting sexual encounters, brief thoughts of self-harm and low-key suicidal ideation (really low-key), someone gets shot, discussion of war as always. Dissociative minds, vertigo, a lot of yelling.

Also there is a lot of falling over in here, people's bodies are betraying their insides and just fyi that happens a lot.

There are a couple of stabs at AOU (couldn't resist), but nothing that spoils the movie. And there is no intention of hating on Laura Barton, but the AOU storyline really doesn't fit with this one. Clint's farm is therefore empty.

The song "Til Death" by Barcelona is making yet another appearance. (It is the theme song of this fic after all.)

The Words - Christina Perri
World Without You - Hudson Taylor
Guilty Filthy Soul - Awolnation

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

This is My Last Breath

...:

A love story.

He'd seen Steve his whole life. Wanted to kiss him since the war, last night, last week, always. They were on that verge again. The cliff to something more: only they didn't cannonball off holding hands,
Bucky tripped and fell, sinking through the whipping wind and snow until he splattered on the riverbottom below and wrenched off a limb.

That's what it felt like. Again. He hadn't wanted anything in so long; and the logistics behind wanting, the rationality, the lack of efficiency behind personal frivolous desires? Synopsis: useless.

Only Steve kept kissing him and Bucky didn't have the power to tell him no. Because he wanted to kiss Steve, more than anything. He just couldn't figure out why Steve was pretending to want it to.

Was it a tactical move? Forcing Bucky's emotions to form a deeper connection and gain control over the asset? But this was Steve, not Hydra. So was it outta the goodness of his heart? Finally giving Bucky something he'd wanted for the sake of making him happy?

On Steve's dime, of course. Or, well. His body.

So he'd wanted to bring Bucky flowers as a kid. Maybe even told the truth about always wanting to kiss him. But they were best friends, impossibly close. Bucky was what Steve knew, what he trusted. Mere Exposure. It was all imprinting, that fuzzy line where he wanted comfort and Bucky's attention and maybe at one point mistook it for something else.

Sailors who spent too long at sea, isolated, surrounded by water for years, underwent a phenomenon: started to see manatees as mermaids, long and lust after them, because it was what they knew, all they had. Then, of course, the moment any deep connection was made, the effect shattered and reality hit like a tidal wave.

Bucky was waiting for the tidal wave. For the day Steve woke up and realized - shit, I don't actually like him like that, I just needed to have him close.

Only for Bucky, he'd never wake up and think that. He wished to god he could. Steve had other people - Nat, Sam, Peggy, Tony, that one god-friend he talked about. All Bucky had was Steve and he'd sworn to himself he wouldn't let Steve be his only tether to the Earth and he--

He couldn't.

They may be a love story, but there wasn't a happy ending.

The sheets were technically soft, but they felt like sandpaper on his skin. Like he'd been laying here for days. He hadn't - it'd been a week since his birthday. They'd been busy with missions and the drone of everyday life and really, the past seven days were blurrrier than anything else in his memory. He'd drifted through them all. Perfectly, he was fairly sure.

His mask was incredible.

But when night fell - the darkness let paint run from his face and shadows cut his features. If only they'd leave permanent marks.

He was on his stomach, arms wrapped underneath a pillow, trying to get out of his head when it hit him like a bus. He couldn't remember if he'd been eating regularly or not, couldn't remember much at all except Steve's hands brushing his arm, his collarbone, his neck; except it didn't matter if it was lack of food or whatever, the world suddenly tipped sideways and Bucky's brain short-circuited.

One moment laying quiet and the next everything was wobbling, distant and dizzy like spinning in that coffin-machine Hydra'd shoved in the 50s, unstable and suddenly washed over with the unmistakable urge to hurl.
He couldn't hurl, couldn't bring that mess up again.

Forcing his feet into the kitchen to get water, he could do that. The world was still tipping, he felt like hell, everything was too far away; echoing. Coming in, he'd kept his hand on the wall. Those fingers now curled around the counter to keep him upright, gripping tight enough to ensure he wouldn't fall over.

Everything was pounding, shit. Head dipped, stupid fucking hair hanging in his face, breathing slow, itching fingers longing to grab a knife and saw off Hydra's destruction of his once beautiful pomade only he couldn't. Steve would freak, they all would, and he'd do anything to keep them from asking questions.

Speaking of which. Truthfully, Steve's real superpower wasn't the serum, it was goddamn perfect timing.

A single creak, then a sleepy soldier stumbling into the kitchen. Bucky didn't move, the shadows of the moonlight were keeping him in the dark and there was always a chance Steve'd go back to bed without noticing him. Neither of them used lightswitches, so with the dark on his side...

Beneath the veil of snakes in his face, he could see the black boxer shorts and loose gray army tshirt, flailing clumsy arms patting along the cabinets until he pulled open the right one, yanking a glass out and filling it with water and just a few more moments and he'd be gone, no dealing with questions -

Except then Steve turned around, glass tipped to his lips, and finally caught sight of Bucky. He nearly spit out his water in surprise and Bucky sighed. So much for that.

"Hey, Buck, you okay?" A few seconds and a big hand ran down his spine, the simple comforting kind that could've placed them back in Brooklyn. Then that sleep-warm mouth dropped a kiss to the top of his shoulder. Definitely not LittleSteve.

Why.

"Yeah. Just thirsty." His voice was even - a filter, separating him. Detached.

Tracing Steve's warmth behind him; then thick arms wrapped around his torso, spread fingers sliding over his chest, rippling sparks into his body. His eyes slipped shut, his chin dropped and the fog thinned. His chest expanded under Steve's hands. Only it really didn't, not the way it should. Steve's hands were compressing, couldn't breathe deeply.

"Mmm," Steve hummed against the cotton of his tshirt, low and rumbling as hands pressed tighter against flimsy ribs.

If he kept breathing shallow, he might pass out, slump right here on the counter while Steve caught him, slowly lowered him to the ground, worriedly calling his name and realizing how fucked up Bucky really was.

Except...he had training to breathe shallow. The Winter Soldier had to be able to stay perfectly still, learn how to breathe without expanding his chest or stomach or anything, look perfectly dead.

Because he'd been dead.

And now Steve's kisses were CPR, dragging him to reality, bringing him back to life. Except everything was easier when you were dead.

Warm lips brushed damp against the nape of his neck and Bucky pushed off the counter, head lifting
and chest breaking free, spinning out of Steve's reach and molding his face into a sleepy smile. Steve was a little confused but that was okay, so long as he wasn't suspicious. Bucky rubbed his eyes for good measure, running a hand down Steve's arm before he could stop himself. It was instinctual, as real as he didn't feel. But it eased the tension a little and then he was heading back to his room and thankfully, Steve wasn't worried enough to follow.

Can ghosts have souls?

...  

"Hey Barnes, you see the screwdriver around here anywhere?" Tony didn't bother glancing up from whatever he was attacking with a hammer.

"Don't you have bots designed specifically to retrieve you things?" Bucky sighed, not lifting his head from where his cheek was pillowed on his forearm, tracing useless designs into one of Stark's transparent tables.

"You're part robot," Tony shot back in his This Is Rational tone and Bucky glared at his shoulderblades, thinking how easy it'd be to kill him from here.

"But he's not yours," Steve interrupted, strolling through the sliding glass doors with a box in his hands and interrupting Bucky's six hours of peace. Again.

He held his breath, praying Steve wouldn't complete that thought with he's mine.

Thankfully, he didn't.

Tony did.

"I wouldn't mess with Property of Steve Rogers if it was the last option on our little blue marble," he announced, grabbing the screwdriver from literally two feet away and giving Steve a pointed look as he sat the boxes down.

"Don't belong to anyone," Bucky muttered under his breath, turning his face down towards the table. The surface was cold on the tip of his nose, strange in comparison to the warm arm still under his forehead.

"What's that, Buck?" Steve asked congenially, rough fingers rubbing into the back of Bucky's neck. Fuck, that felt good. But he wasn't gonna repeat himself, Steve didn't need to hear that - he'd freeze, lift Bucky's face from the table, kneel down in front of him with that hurt puppy look and press his fingertips into Bucky's thighs and promise that Steve never owned him.

**Property of Steve Rogers.**

He hummed uselessly instead and Steve dropped it, still rubbing the back of Bucky's neck as he chatted with Stark about something or another. Bucky stopped listening. Thankfully, he'd thought to tuck the chain of the dogtags under the lip of his shirt. He didn't need Steve to know. He'd worry.

He shouldn't worry.

...  

"Cap, hold these."

Bucky flipped a page in his book, tucking his feet deeper under him and pretending he wasn't
listening in to Bruce's and Steve's conversation. Doctor Banner wasn't in town for long, but he'd requested Steve for something and apparently that was adequate to do right here in the communal living room.

* A *Farewell to Arms* was intense, but nothing could distract him from the sudden weight of Steve's pretty blue eyes on him. With a repressed sigh he stuck a finger in his page, lifting his head to see whatever it was Banner'd given Steve and was apparently worth showing Bucky.

Thick black-rimmed glasses, eyebrows raised and waggling as he made a face. He was gorgeous, as always, looked like a proper hipster in Banner's glasses, but the smile Bucky gave him must not've been bright enough. The expression fell and before he could mend the crack in his mask, Steve was sinking down on the couch next to him, eyebrows crinkled now as he looked Bucky over with his worried CO face.

He didn't have the energy to sculpt a good reflection, but it didn't end up mattering. Steve glanced over his shoulder, ensuring Banner's back was to them, then big callused hands were cupping Bucky's face, tilting his mouth up to reach Steve's, glasses and all.

The kiss was so tender it sunk exhaustion heavy into his veins, made him want to collapse on Steve and fall asleep with their lips still overlapping, breathing into each other's mouths. Steve pulled back, tugging Bucky's lips lightly before sliding together again at a deeper angle, wetter now but still all sugar and sweet, palms framing Bucky's cheeks like he was something precious, mouths squeezing together all pretty and soft and really,

Bucky didn't deserve to be kissed like that.

He slipped out of Steve's hands, lips suddenly cold, blinking hard a few times to make the room stop wavering. Steve'll be suspicious, he was stumbling over masks that used to be airtight. Too much breathing room.

"Nat's a smart woman. Don't know who could resist kissin' you in glasses," his mouth supplied and good, that was sufficient enough, the smirk even felt familiar, had to be close to accurate. Convincing, at least?

The worry bled out of Steve's smile and one eyebrow cocked in amusement, and he looked so comfortable, one arm propped on the back of the couch and his body angled towards Bucky's. He was really settling into this. Increasingly happier.

A foot away but shrinking into the distance. Bucky couldn't keep up.

He lifted his tired legs off the couch, tensing his quads so he wouldn't fall, engaging decades of steel training. Something soft tugged inside his chest and Bucky leaned down, pressing his lips quickly to the corner of Steve's eye, beneath the black rims. If only it could stop the years of dried tears. Another smile and Hemingway in his arms as he retreated from the room.

The hallway was empty. The mask slipped so fast from his face it hurt, falling like a crash instead of the easy slide he'd perfected as a teen. The wall held him up when his body listed sideways, betraying him again but he had to be quiet, it'd all be shot to hell if Steve followed him out here.

A few moments to catch his breath, eyes closed, fucking hair in his face, lungs reset. Mask recalibrate. Pushing off the wall, taking strides down the hallway, forcing each step to get lighter. Roll shoulders back. Think murder.

But don't, not killing, he wasn't that monster anymore. A faded ghost, rusting machine; but not a
"You sure like that book," Steve's voice was even lighter today. Sunshine on green grass, sparkling lakes. Summer.

Bucky lifted his head. Послушный Собака.

"It's World War One. Before even your time," Bucky teased, tipping his head back against the armchair as Steve walked behind him. No glasses now, running shirt tight on his shoulders.

He paused as he passed, one-sided mischief tucking into the corner of his lips. "You callin' me vintage?" Two hands curled around the back of Bucky's armchair, fingers inches from his shoulders. "I'll have you know I'm 27."

"Two years younger than me," Bucky provided perfectly, and Steve tipped his head back to laugh, one hand flying to his ribs.

"How many times? One year, three months, twenty-five days..."

His head was still tipped back against the edge of the armchair and Steve bent in half to press his top lip against Bucky's lower. A Spiderman-kiss, the media called it. Bucky opened his mouth to kiss back and he could swear he felt the toxicity rolling from his tongue to Steve's the moment they touched.

And he was dirty all over, covered in layers of grime and filth. During the war he'd pressed bloody, muddy hands to his face, wondered how Steve's hands could be so clean when they had the same filth coating them. But the dirt on Steve was precious earth, the blood spilt in justice. Bucky was steel, copper, swirling choking dust.

A pollutant. A parasite burrowing into Steve's veins each time his mouth sunk low enough to kiss Bucky's.

If he slid down the couch and curled up in a ball, started shaking, Steve would know. He'd come running around the edge of the couch, bundling Bucky into his arms and brushing long fingers through his hair, whispering soothing worried.

He forced himself to stay. Thankfully, Steve pulled back away with a happy, barely contained, bottom-lip-caught-in-teeth smile before he was contaminated beyond repair.

Bucky stared at the ceiling until Steve was gone on his run. He couldn't remember what he stared at after that.

"Yeah, uh, I'm actually real surprised Tony hasn't told you. He's gotta big mouth."

A laugh. "No, I guess not. I don't know what the policy on Asgard is-- oh. That's awesome, yeah, we're not quite that advanced over here. It's getting there, but honestly? I could care less if it was still illegal."
Another laugh and Bucky held his breath as there was a pause, silence as Steve paced the distance of the bar.

He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but he'd come upstairs and Steve was on the phone, it was Hydra's instinct that had him pressed against the shadows around the corner, listening silently in curiosity. So far all he'd picked up was that Steve was talking to his teammate Thor, and whatever news he was relaying was irrationally exciting.

"Yeah, I. I can't wait for you to meet him, Thor. You'd love him."

Shit. This better not be about--

"Well, he's a warrior, like you. They call him the Winter Soldier- there's this quote that was published back in the day..."

Bucky cursed internally and forced himself not to bang his head against the wall in exasperation.

"...fought beside me everyday in the war, been keepin' me outta trouble since I was a kid. Yeah, yeah, just like that. War-brothers. He means the world to me." Laugh. "I know Earth's valuable, I'd still trade it for him in a heartbeat."

Another pause, then Steve's next words were wrapped up in a smile. "Yes, it does, but I'll bet yours beats faster around Jane...well I'm not a god...actually, he's got a version of the serum too, it's not as strong as mine but--Thor!! We haven't-- I mean. Hell."

Steve was blushing now, Bucky'd bet his best rifle on that. But he didn't dare peek around the corner to confirm it.

"Hmm? He...yeah. I couldn't imagine being with anyone else...I mean, I've been through alot, but nothing like what he's endured. Does Asgard take prisoners of war? Oh? Wow. And uh, Buck was one for seventy years...they kept him frozen a lot of the time. Yeah, I know. It's- it's not easy, but he's so strong. Tell you what, next time you hop down here, bring your hammer -- I'll bet he'd pick it up without thinking about it, probably shove it off the coffee table to put his feet up. Yes, I really do-- oh c'mon, it's more rational than an elevator..."

He didn't need to hear anymore. Bucky slid along the shadows of the wall until he reached the stairs again, taking them down one at a time because he wasn't sure his feet could go faster.

How long before Steve built him up so high he fell apart? How long before Steve took off the rose-colored glasses and the world shattered into reality?

He didn't want to be human if this is what it felt like. He'd do anything if it was what Steve needed, but he couldn't tell if this was all reversed and backwards instead.

His metal hand whirred as he turned the doorknob to their floor and Bucky barely repressed the urge to rip it from his body. He'd tried before - it wouldn't work anyways.

The door closed softly behind him and Bucky tightened his fists instead of sinking against it. Steve thought he was strong? Maybe he'd go shoot things until he felt that way too.

... He'd warned it might be a knife in the thigh. At least it wasn't a knife in the thigh.

Bucky shoved open the gym door, damp locker-room smoke rolling out behind him, and then an arm
was around his waist, whipping him around fast and hard and suddenly his air-supply was cut off; he'd been tense; he hadn't been sleeping;

every muscle in his body blared threat, then his metal hand was knocking into something hard and there was a sound of pain and Bucky fell backwards on his ass, scrambling back to his feet with his stupid fucking hair in his face and fuck, why was he wearing yoga pants, there was no traction or tactical advantage--

"Steve?" He froze, gun dropping from metal fingers, hitting the ground with a loud clatter.

"Ow?" Steve replied, one hand on his purpling jaw and the other touching his lips tentatively, not looking all that shocked when his fingers pulled away warm and red.

Bucky just stared. He'd punched Steve: hard enough to make him bleed. Time passed uselessly as Steve felt his jaw tentatively and Bucky was frozen, he'd hurt little Stevie and he'd done that once, hadn't meant to, it'd been the worst memory of Brooklyn--

"Hey Stevie!" He stumbled into Steve's room, nearly tripping on the windowsill, but managed to plop down onto the thin, hard bed. Steve groaned and rolled away from him, shoving a pillow over his head.

"'ow'd you even get in here? It's like 11, Buck."

"M pretty sure 'ts 12," he slurred and Steve lifted his head, moonlight soft on his floppy hair.

"You drunk?"

"I hafta, hafta," he waved a hand around, looking for the right word before he suddenly remembered it, reaching clumsy hands to squeeze Steve's hip - missing the hiss of pain as the room tipped. ".-gotta teach y'ta fight, kid."

"Buck, not right now. I know you're still worked up over Tuesday, but I'm fine. Had it worse. Tomorrow, okay?"

"No, no, now. Can't see ya'like that 'gin Stevie, 'm not livin' through that again."

"I'm fine," Steve insisted, which was counteracted quite nicely as he sat up, wincing when stitches pulled, moonlight lighting up his broken face, swollen eye and mouth, gashed nose.

"See? Gotta a'least teach ya t'block."

"Buck, you know I ain't--"

Blocking? Yeah, he knew that. But he wouldn't be able to sleep tonight - hadn't been able to sleep, that's why he was here and wasted - if he didn't get this outta his mind. He'd never been so sure Steve was dead. Every time he closed his eyes--

"Gotta, Stevie, c'mon. Lemme." He tugged pathetically at one of Steve's impossibly thin arms, fingers wrapping all the way around and touching on the other side. Something in his expression must've made Steve realize he wasn't kidding, cause next thing he knew the little body'd clambered outta bed and was tugging him to his feet.

"Kay, you punch and I'll show you I can duck and we'll go back to bed, yeah?"
Bucky didn't answer, he just pulled back a fist and swung. Steve dodged as promised, little towhead ducking beneath him and circling behind except it was never one swing with bullies and they both knew that. He spun back around, aiming a gut punch and Steve barely skittered to the side.

Then the asshole was swinging back and Bucky'd known he would, and that was the exact-fucking-reason why Bucky couldn't sleep, because he knew one day Steve'd pick the wrong fight and he'd be finished, bleeding-out and glassy-eyed on the sidewalk by the time Bucky got there and he couldn't live through that.

He caught Steve's tiny fist, twisting it back and popping something and Steve yelped like a wounded puppy - only he didn't give up, he never gave up, he was never gonna get it, he'd give Bucky a legitimate heartattack eventually - and his pale barefoot kicked Bucky's shin hard, making him drop his grip.

The movement opened up Bucky's side and Steve used his other arm to punch directly under his ribs; only it felt like a chewed-tennisball dropped on your foot - soft and useless. He shoved tiny shoulders and Steve just bounded back, barreling forward with his fists raised and that fucker was so goddamn infuriating, how could he do this to Bucky?

He swung again and Steve dodged, faster than him when the room was spinning in drunken haze. So he shot out a foot and Steve tripped right into him, little fists flying and fuck, there was so much anger in those tiny hands as he hit Bucky over and over and the moon cast shadows over Steve's eyes like they weren't there at all, swollen and black, and Bucky swung again, connecting with Steve's jaw, hard enough to knock him down.

Up again, hair flying, spitting to the side like he was enjoying this and that was it. Bucky was too drunk to know his strength and Steve was too pissed to be properly cautious and he was already well banged up in the first place.

They collided again and it all happened so fast, then there was a loud crack and Steve was sliding down the wall and by the time Bucky rushed over Stevie was bleeding from the back of his head and cradling his elbow and blinking wetly and the stitches over his eye had split, blood dripping down the side of his face and--

--and the helicarrier was exploding around them, Steve's right eye orange and red, swollen to hell, lip busted, blonde hair sticking up in spikes, lungs stuttering, head snapping back over and over, each one hard enough to crack a normal human skull and Bucky was going out of his goddamned mind; because he didn't know who this man was and he knew him with every inch of his being, beating the fuck out of the only human that he'd ever seen in clarity - humans were nothing. Targets, blank, featureless; only this man was as clear as weapons, real as the guns in his holsters, as sharp as knives felt in skin.

Fist raised and the cold wind attacking his skin only he hadn't be able to feel it then, the only thing he could feel in that memory was the calculated rate of Steve's heart under his curled right hand.

His metal too, drawn back, hair whipping (back when he couldn't give a damn how long it was) as he stared down at the man who was willing to die to prove his loyalty to someone he thought Bucky was supposed to be.

Blind rage and fear to curiosity and wonder to recognition and horror.

One single punch away from murder. He'd hurt Steve.
"Bucky? Buck? C'mon, hey. It's okay. It's me. I'm okay." Something warm ran down his face and Bucky jolted, unfreezing as his eyes snapped up and met blue ones. Worried blue ones.

_Fuck._

He grit his teeth and turned his face away from Steve's touch, backing up a step to get un-tainted oxygen and shoving a pissed hand through the long hair, pushing it away instead of pulling it out.

"You okay?" A tentative hand on his shoulder he couldn't bear to shake off, then Steve's palm was running down his chest, words whispering soothingly. "God, you scared me. You okay? Fuck, you're tense. Buck, c'mon. It wasn't your fault, you were just in a headspace, but it's fine now. We're fine now."

Two hands running up and down his biceps and Bucky wouldn't break away, he knew better. He stared at Steve's barefeet and wondered when he'd gotten time to tan them to match the rest of the golden muscle. Maybe the serum fixed his white toes too.

His shoulders were too high, muscles tensed, metal clenched, and Steve only petted him softer, words gentler. "Just let go. Let me take care of you."

"And what, destroy the mermaid effect?" he mumbled to himself, thinking of crashing boats and sinking planes.

"The what?"

"Nothing," he muttered and Steve sighed, taking a step closer and stilling his hands atop Bucky's shoulders, thumbs pressed into his collarbones.

"Why won't you let me in, Buck?" His voice got quiet, low, so much lower than it'd been back then. "What more do I have to prove before you trust me?"

He wasn't talking about the punch, because that was to be expected some time or another. No, he was talking about the way Bucky was closing up. Funny thing was, he was looking at it all wrong. It had nothing to do with trust. Not that kind, anyways.

"That's not what this is about," his mouth said, and Bucky could punch himself for that, it'd all go away if he just kept _quiet_

"Then what is it about?"

Raised fists, all that radiating little anger in the moonlight :: Bloody and broken by Bucky's hand.

Neither of those things had gone away, but at least one was out in the open. The other...the other was tucked deep inside that body, the new one, the one that couldn't allow for rage. Didn't mean it was gone.

He had to look out for Steve. That was his _job_. And unless there was some alternative motive for the new twist in their relationship - like why the fuck had Steve kissed him in the first place, he'd understand.

Deep breath; oxygen. Optimal functionality.

He lifted his head, eyes locking on Steve's. Same colour blue. Still the same colour blue underneath all that black bruising, bright red blood;
"I can't let this happen, Steve." Just frozen, staring at him, and Bucky kept the gaze because he could do this, this was the one thing he'd never stopped being good at. Save Steve. "I've followed you around for years."

He took the thick wrists (his fingers couldn't wrap all the way around now) brought them down between their chests as his thumbs ran subconsciously over Steve's artist fingers, eyes cataloging how much had changed from the little fists he used to know. "...and I'll never stop chasing you, I don't think."

Never wasn't a long enough word because he'd always go where Steve led, "But what makes you think you can stop running?"

He lifted his chin again, meeting those eyes with the glimmer of defiance they used to share, the one Steve pretended he didn't have anymore. The one Steve pretended he could drop. Just like he could apparently drop PTSD, depression, and his addiction to the battlefield.

"What do you mean?" Eyebrows furrowed, genuinely confused, because this ran so deep he was lying to himself and Bucky couldn't do it anymore, he couldn't get deeper entangled with Steve when there was this sitting between them.

The fight. The war. Their story - Steve wanted him to let go.

Let go.

When the fuck had Steve ever let go? And he suddenly wanted to now?

He wanted, what, a steady boyfriend? Kisses over morning coffee and snuggling on the couch to movies? This war hero wanted to let go of all their protective walls and safety nets and break down the barriers around two of the most dangerous people on the planet and shove them into the same box with no secrets left?

Two catalysts, two broken shells cracking against each other and letting go, letting all of both their pain bleed into each other, he really thought that was a good idea?

Steve was notorious for bad ideas, but them giving this their all...that was the most dangerous idea he'd had in decades.

And why why why, what was the fucking point, why would he push this that far if it was just a game? Or maybe that was the whole purpose of the game? Break Bucky's walls down, get him to let go, then they could ease out of the kissing stuff and get back to being best friends only Bucky's heart would be shattered and Steve'd be happier than ever, thinking he had the dedication of his just best-friend at his side forever...

"I'm done, I'm ready, I just want to be with you now--"

"And I can't trust that," Bucky interrupted, and that pretty, earnest smile wilted like autumn leaves and Bucky hated himself for saying this, but he had to, had to drop their hands apart. "I can't let go, Steve. I can't fall into this. I've hurt too much in the past."

The dropped hands lifted to his neck and that really wasn't the point but he was glad as hell he'd put a shirt on, that Steve couldn't feel his dogtags.

"I'm so sorry, Buck. But that's all over now. It's just you and me--"
"Until it's not, until I lose you again and I lose everything."

It wasn't supposed to come out that blatant and honest. But it did and Steve's eyebrows furrowed in confusion, because he still didn't get it.

"Wha--"

"Nothing. God." He lifted his arms and shot them out, breaking Steve's grip an ounce too violently, the purpling bruise on Steve's jaw screaming at him now as Bucky glared. "Leave me the fuck alone, Steve."

Not the most subtle. But efficient.

He got about 24 hours of reprieve, anyways.

...

"Hey," a tentative voice as Steve knocked on his open bedroom door, hands shoving in his pockets nervously. "Can I come in?"

Mechanically lifted his shoulders up and let them fall, thought about how goddamned inefficient shrugging was. Waste of energy.

"Are you--"

"I'm sorry I yelled at you. I shouldn't've freaked." He scooted over in his reading chair and Steve sat down carefully on the armrest, looking down at Bucky with a soft, forgiving gaze, reaching out to tuck a strand of snakehair behind his ear.

"It's okay, Buck. We've all got bad days."

He kept his mouth shut when he smiled lightly because opening it might mean saying or bad months. But he'd been doing so good, besides the one break. Everything else, he'd been perfectly convincing. He could go back to that now.

At least until he completed his mission of finding out Steve's mission. Why why why.

A gentle kiss pressed to his forehead and Bucky closed his eyes, sucking in a breath at the warmth on his skin. Sometimes it felt like he'd never been touched before, the way his body starved for Steve's. The starvation didn't make him any less queasy, didn't make him pray any less for Steve to get away before he was ruined from Bucky's sheer proximity.

"Lunch?" Steve asked, standing and offering a hand. Bucky took it, using the ruse of sitting his book down to make sure his legs were stable - enough - before following Steve numbly into the kitchen, letting the world fade into the distant part of his brain again.

...

He couldn't place it exactly. But it was there.

See, he knew it had to be something. Steve just wasn't like...this.

The more he saw of twenty-first century Steve, the further the Steve Rogers he knew felt. This...this was Captain America, not Steve Rogers.

Like seeing that exhibit made him forget everything he stood for in Brooklyn. Or hell, even in the
This Steve - the one that wanted to kiss him? He was still sunshine, but where was the spark? The thing that made that scientist pick him up for Rebirth in the first place.

Steven Grant Rogers was a troublemaker.

This Captain America fella was all rainbows and sweet befuddlement over the new century.

Steve was hiding a lot. The Steve that kissed him wasn't Steve and that was it, he couldn't take that. It was proof that this - whatever this was - wasn't real. Because this wasn't his little troublemaker.

Hell, the most in-character thing Steve did lately was the surprise-attack kiss Bucky punched him for.

Fuck, now? The way he'd been acting lately...this was the kinda guy to shout language! in the middle of a mission, instead of slicing the throat of a Hydra agent with his shield and kicking the guy in the chest with a take that, fucker.

Which yes, Bucky had witnessed with his own two eyes. (In fairness, the Hydra agent had Monty in a headlock only moments before), but still.

The Steve that joked with the Avengers felt...fake.

His Steve in Brooklyn had always been righteous, always been inherently good. But he wasn't some naïve golden puppy. He wasn't the kinda guy to settle back and be content - always looking for something more, always trying to prove himself.

Even in the war, the constant stream of battles: they fought people back then, men with wives and families, innocent kids who got drafted only to take one of Steve's bullets to the chest. Now it was aliens and creatures and robots they fought. No moral confliction there.

People treated Steve like he was made of gold and hell yes his core was, but what happened to the hardened shell? When did he get all soft? Why was he acting? Why was he hiding? Why did he always use his commanding voice around his team?

Why did he kiss Bucky all soft and sweet?

It was all wrong. The only time it felt like Steve at all was when the shield was in his hand.

He still did stupid shit in the battlefield, which was actually a solace. His fighting style changed, but at least that felt true. On the helicarrier, he'd been tough - skilled. Smart. That was Steve. He'd seen clips of the stupid fucking elevator fight. That was definitely Steve.

All that brutality, the simmering-under-the-surface-hate. Bottled up, barely contained. It was still coming out in his fists. Thing was, those fists dropped the second the shield did. That wasn't like Steve. It was like he was...afraid to be himself off the battlefield.

Like the battlefield was the only place he was comfortable in his own skin. Maybe that was because the whole world used to be a battlefield for him - he was fighting for his size, for his country. He'd never had to live in a world without constant fighting. And he didn't know what to do with himself.

Steve hadn't had to be anyone but Captain America for nearly a year. He didn't have to be Steve Rogers, because no one even knew who that was. His closest friends saw exactly what Steve wanted them to: dude, Captain America needs my help, there's no better reason to get back in. He'd submerged himself in the role. Which was easy when it's all his friends knew. It wasn't lying,
because Captain America was still a part of him, but it wasn't all the truth either.


How much?

WHY?

This wasn't Steve. What was this game?

The asset couldn't figure out the fucking mission.

...

He could pretend he was in control if he ignored Steve.

Really, Bucky couldn't breathe right when he wasn't in the room.

...

Left alone, staring up at the dark ceiling; he couldn't decide.

There was a monster deep inside him and he'd been feeding it. It was either that or starve.

Stave for Steve's touch, for his smile, for the security of his kisses.

Or let himself burn up in flames.

The hunger left pangs of hurt in his chest, in his heart.

Yards away, Steve was sleeping alone in his own bed. The darkness was sweeping Bucky out again.

He couldn't remember moving, but somehow he was standing outside Steve's door, knuckles rapping once before he wrapped hoodie arms around himself and shivered in the cold.

Losing his grip, losing his mind, then Steve's door was opening, just in time before Bucky took it all back. It'd brought him here tonight, but the horizon was still wavering, he couldn't see straight.

He stumbled inside and warm hands guided him to Steve's bed. He curled up the moment he hit the mattress and Steve climbed around him, pulling the blankets over them both and flipping over, scooting so his shoulders lined up against Bucky's.

Back to back, the way they had in the war. Brothers in a dim-glowing tent.

The world slid black and for once, he didn't scream.

...

Eyes shooting open into darkness. Calculate: body behind him, stiffling blankets, wrong room.

His muscles ached to run.

He held his breath and counted, staring at the blackened windows and convincing himself not to crash through them.

The soft earth wasn't beneath them. There was a mattress and a floor, then another floor and another and another and so much open space, they were floating in the sky so goddamned high, and--
Rolling off the bed, dropping to the carpet, catching himself on his hands to keep it silent. Holding breath; no movement.

The floor wasn't low enough.

At least he hadn't learned from Hydra how to sneak out of a room without waking Stevie.

Elevator button blinked, coming down from the top. Watching the dot move closer. He didn't have the energy for the stairs, he'd probably launch himself over the side and hope he didn't break too many bones when he hit the bottom. He couldn't keep floating up here.

The elevator was safe. Ding, slide. And occupied.

He froze, arms curling tighter around his chest, eyes wide as he stared. He wasn't gonna get in, it was so late, why was anyone else even up--

Sam's hand blocked the elevator door from closing. He'd have to get in now, or Sam'd worry. More than the brown eyes already were.

He stepped inside.

The doors slid shut. Floor dropping. Fuck, he hated that.

"Bed? Too soft?" a solid, quiet, sympathetic voice beside him. Bucky stared up at the blinking dots, watching them descend.

He wondered what Sam would say if Bucky replied, I wasn't in my bed. Not like they'd been doing anything but sleeping, but.

"Too many floors up," he replied, eyes still on the descending lights. Like him.

Sam raised an eyebrow. He hadn't heard that one before. But Barnes was kinda a unique creature.

He reached over Sarge, unlighting the button for his floor. There were other places that needed him more right now.

Bucky turned his head, studying with searching eyes. Sam shrugged, settling his stance and staring forward. Another few blinking dings passed before he cleared his throat, hands shoved in his pockets as he offered,

"Tony's lab in the basement?"

...

There was a camping pack in the lab's back cabinets that Sam pulled out with a quiet triumphant sound, unzipping it to unroll a two-man prop-up tent. There were sleeping bags in the cabinet too.

He had a feeling Jarvis and the robots might've had something to do with that.

Sam must've expected him to stand idly by while he wrestled with the tent, silent and useless. Bucky didn't understand Steve and he didn't know Steve's mission but he sure as hell knew tents. WWII gave him quite a bit of experience.

He knelt down beside Sam on the concrete floor, taking one of the long poles and snapping the ends together.
"You guys use tents in your war?" Bucky asked, wrestling one of the extended poles through the tent-loops. Sam sat back on his heels, still surprised Bucky was helping and talking, but he was on the ground (underground - even better) now and didn't have to think about Steve for a little while.

Or, not the Steve that kissed him anyways. The Steve he'd shared tents with didn't make his soul ache. He could smile fondly at the memory of that Steve.

"Yeah. I mean, not like this. There were team tents - 10 to 20 men per tent. If you're on the move, you usually dig and sleep in a grave. Rocks for pillows. That's a lot of desert." He started feeding the other pole to cross-section Bucky's and there weren't exactly dirt places to drive in the stakes -- how mad would Stark be if they hammered tent stakes into his concrete floors?

"Desert. I wonder if snow-forests or hell-deserts are worse to fight in."

"It's still all war, still all fightin' man." Sam shook his head and Bucky made a noise of agreement, picking up a stake and seriously debating whether Stark would kill him or not.

"We could duct-tape the edges down?"

He looked up, between the silver tape in Sam's hand and the wooden stake in Bucky's silver hand. That was much better than cracking the concrete.

They got to duct-taping and it was nice. All quiet, like how it used to be with Steve. Easy. How it could still be with Steve if he knew why Steve'd made them more than best friends. It wasn't the kissing he had the biggest problem with, it was that he still didn't know why why wh--

"Sarge?"

"Mm? Oh. Sorry. Uh, what were you saying?"

"Green or black snivel gear? If, you know. You sleep in that kinda thing."

"Green."

"Really?" Sam handed the green one over, folding back the tent flap to roll the black one out inside.

"I thought you liked black. Wear it all the time."

"It hides the blood of my enemies."

Sam barked a laugh and Bucky cocked an eyebrow, pinning him with a serious look. The laugh faded as Sam caught the expression, his eyebrows raising in return.

"You weren't kidding."

"No."

Another laugh, lighter this time and shorter, the kind that sounded more amazed than anything. He held back the tent flap for Bucky and he crawled inside, flattening out the sleeping bag beneath him.

"Besides," Bucky started, unzipping the side of the bag and taking note of how much smaller the world was from the inside of a tent. "Green was better camo for Egyptian PT's. Forest, remember?"

"War, man."

"War," Bucky agreed, flipping over to shove into the sleeping bag, slick material whistling around him as his feet slid to the bottom.
Sam settled in, rolling on his side to face Bucky. A few seconds convincing himself and Bucky turned his head too, hair flopping haphazardly. The concrete was super uncomfortable and the most comforting thing he'd slept on in months.

There was a lantern between them, flickering gold, and at least that hadn't changed. There were white and blue lights now, but this one was gold, the way it used to be.

He'd never shared a tent with Gabe, but the gold looked just the same over Sam's dark skin as it did over anyone else's, shining and flickering like the promise of an ending. The hope of an ending. A victory, a finale, the grand explosion in the streets that sent hats flying instead of heads.

They'd never seen that.

"You win your war?"

"Not over yet." Sam shifted his head, tucking an arm under his temple. "You win yours?"

"You read the textbooks," Bucky shrugged and the sleeping bag whispered around him again.

"Not the one I was talking about."

The tent fell silent.

Those brown eyes were steady on his, flickering with lantern light, and Bucky wondered what his own silver looked like in the flicker.

Minutes ticked by; he could hear them on Sam's watch. It was half a millisecond slow, but he'd had a lot of training on perfect timing. Sam probably wouldn't notice until it got to be a whole minute off. That was fine.

He rolled his head again, kicking his feet out further and folding both arms under his head, staring up at the ceiling. Ten minutes ago, this space had been immense, towering lights and technological toys and concrete floors and now it was just a little golden bubble, a piece out of time he was carved into. And once they took it down, it'd be like it never existed.

"I don't get him."

"Does anyone?" Sam asked, but it wasn't as rhetoric as it was meant to be.

"I used to." He shifted, thinking of fire escapes and sketchbooks and playgrounds and kitchen tables and battlefields.

"He's changed."

"Not as much as he wishes." Rage eyes.

"What do you wish?"

He wished he knew why Steve's latest dangerous idea was one that'd ruin them both.

Steve'd had a lot of ideas.

This was the worst.

"I wish I knew how to live without him."
He got silence in return.

"Not that I want to, but. I've never been able to. I wasn't alive as the Winter Soldier and I can't..."

"You can't what?"

"I don't know. Breathe."

The ceiling flickered. Sam reached over for the lantern, hand cupping behind the flame.

"Why don't we just shoot for sleep for now?"

Bucky laughed. It was the best advice he'd gotten in a long time.

Sam smiled and blew out the lantern.

...

Waking up felt raw.

More real than he'd been.

Shoved back into a body again - his body? - but not trapped, just. Bursting.

Tingly, oversensitized all over. He could feel the lights of Tony's lab burning his skin as they rolled the tent up.

He hadn't spoken this morning. Sam didn't ask questions.

Floating to the elevator would've been a blessing. Instead he felt the jarr of every step, stretching his arms out and rotating them, curling and uncurling his fingers.

This was a body he was in. Way too present in this moment.

Soft dings were now loud warning beeps - it wasn't a hangover, more like the opposite.

He stepped toe-first out of the elevator, blinking at the living room and taking in the spiderweb in the top corner, the rumple of the couch cushions. He was seeing everything, but not evaluating threats.

The sunlight was streaming in the kitchen and it reflected rainbows off the glass and Bucky blinked, spinning around in the space. There was a lot of white in this apartment.

Kitchen tiles cold cold under his feet, his toes, and he lifted the metal hand slowly, spanning his fingers out. The rainbow landed in his palm and shot a hundred new directions, casting prisms off the metal and--

"Buck."

Clenching the fist, trapping the rainbows inside, and turning to Steve. "Goodmorning."

"I've got something for you."

"Oh?" Seven steps and he was leaning on the counter beside Steve. It was smoother than he remembered, fingers jumping across the surface as he slid his right hand. Steve fumbled around with his sketchbook, flipping pages while balancing, and he wasn't looking Bucky in the eyes.

Why?
"I know your birthday was a while ago, but it wasn't done..."

"It's been," Bucky started, and the vowel felt strange on his tongue. He paused, mouthing the *been* again - what kinda vowel was that anyways? Steve glanced up. Right. He'd been speaking. "...a while since I got a drawing for a gift."

A curl on one edge of Steve's mouth, eyes on Bucky, then he was flipping through the book again. Bucky mouthed *been* again.

"Here." Steve sat the sketchpad down, bracing it with one hand as he carefully tore out the drawing. Bucky waited, tapping his barefoot and deciding that was a very strange sound on tile.

Then a paper was being held out to him and Bucky glanced up at Steve before taking it. Charcoals, it'd been a while since Steve'd--

A man standing at a window. Shirtless, hair in a low ponytail. Watching, silent, pensive.

He knew it was supposed to be him. He remembered standing there. The lines were all right for it to be him. Shape of his lips was perfect. Hairline, eye shape, it was all perfect.

It wasn't him.

It was the first time in his entire life Steve had drawn him and it hadn't been him.

"Bucky?"

"This isn't. You didn't--" he stopped, biting his lip, glancing up. Steve was looking at him expectantly, waiting. "Are you okay?"

"Am I...what?"

"You...forget it. Never mind. Um. Thanks for the drawing, I'mma go hang it up." He walked an arch around Steve, cold tiles morphing to cool wood, then fuzzy sinking carpet and he pinned the thing to his wall, studying the man's face for a few more seconds.

He didn't even know who that was. It wasn't him in the past, and it sure as hell wasn't him now. Unless that's what his mask looked like to Steve? No way to tell.

When he turned back around, Steve was in the doorway of his room. Just...standing there.

Bucky shoved his hands in his pockets.

"You wanna..." he started awkwardly.

"Sure," Steve agreed, before he knew what it was. Wouldn't matter anyways, right?

He moved a shoulder and Bucky started for the living room, plopping down on a couch and realizing he hadn't brought his book.

Steve sat down next to him. Fuck.

"Are you--"

"I'm fine. Sorry."

"It's fine."
They both shifted, staring at the blank wall that projected into a tv screen.

In 1944, he'd shouted at Peggy Carter *I loved him first*. He'd broken down and cried. Then he told Peggy she had to take Steve.

*He didn't believe in 'if you love them let them go,' because that wasn't love. Love was scouring the earth, love was never giving up. But this love didn't have a choice. He'd never give up on Steve, not ever, but he was giving up on himself. He couldn't give Steve anything more than undying devotion and Steve deserved so much more than that.*

He couldn't give Steve anything more than undying devotion.

What the hell could he give Steve now? He'd follow the kid for the rest of his life, but he couldn't give himself over. He couldn't let go. He couldn't devote himself because there'd be *nothing left of him*...

"Do you wanna--" Steve started, turning to Bucky the exact same moment Bucky turned to him and said,

"Why are you doing this?"

They both froze.

"What?"

"...why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"I'm a killer, Steve." *Poison poison.*

It'd been his job to protect his darling boy.

He'd protected by ripping heads off innocent men.

But Hydra never went searching for his sunshine's body. Not when they had a soldier to train.

"I know you are, Bucky," Steve said slowly. Confused. "Why am I doing what?"

"All of this! The past few weeks." He waved an arm across the living room and Steve straightened, turning his torso as his shoulders softened in seriousness.

"I care about you. You know that." Reaching hands. Bucky withdrew his from the touch.

"That doesn't explain this. You cared about me before. You never kissed me before."

Steve leaned back, startled. Caught out? Was that genuine shock or faked annoyance from his mission being discovered? Bucky straightened too, scooting back an inch as he gave Steve a serious look, tipping his head and studying the blue eyes

"All missions have purposes."

And there startled goes to shocked. Steve's eyebrows shot up and he leaned forward, looking Bucky straight in the eye and pinning him there. The abundance of emotion in his expression was insufferably overwhelming, his voice laced with it - feelings, caring, acting? *why?* - laced like arsenic floating atop a shiny gold-rimmed glass.
"You're not my mission."

Fuck. He couldn't do this. He shouldn't have started it. Left it alone.

The room span and Bucky shot to his feet, wobbling a little as he stepped backwards away from the couch, into the middle of the room. Rug sharp under his toes, hand in his hair as he spun, tried to keep his balance, only everything was faded dark grey - except Steve, who was shining, wavering like a mirage as he untucked the leg from under him, standing and approaching and Bucky stilled himself, taking a solid step backwards.

You're not my mission. That road.

"You're my friend," Bucky sneered, mocking as he quoted back because that was the whole point. He remembered every bit of the past ninety years, that wasn't the problem. But there were problems, there were so. many. problems. "--yeah, okay, I got that part. Loud and clear. We're friends, Stevie, so why the fuck are you kissing me?"

Friends for their whole lives, and Steve'd never kissed him until a few weeks ago. Friends wasn't the part he was confused on - it was the part that was fucking up the friendship he'd relied on for so long.

"I thought you. I thought you wanted to--"

Of course he thought that because god did Bucky want to. That wasn't the fucking point. That was the opposite of the fucking point.

"We're not talking about me, I wanna know why you kiss me."

"Buck--" Steve tried and Bucky took a step forward, plates on his metal arm rippling as the sensors picked up the heightened pulse, shifting into battle mode.

"Give me a goddamn reason, Rogers. What's your play?"

"I'm not playing," he pleaded, standing in the middle of the room now with his palms open, forward and exposed, begging as Bucky approached. He paused a few inches from Steve's face, narrowing his eyes as he studied the blue.

Honesty. But that didn't mean he was telling the truth. Steve was brilliant at keeping things in the dark.

Look how he'd kept Bucky on a leash for so long.

He snapped his eyes away from the blue, studying Steve's posture. Bucky kept his eyes narrowed, a few inches away as he advanced to Steve's side, circling him like a predator stalking prey.

Interrogation. He was good at this part.

Steve followed him what he could, flipping his head to the side to watch Bucky evaluating him. He circled once, then again, slower this time - voice low and curious. He'd made victims scream their secrets. Steve would be no different.

"What's the advantage?" He pondered, noting the way Steve's pulse picked up when Bucky was behind him. He was scared, then. Or at least cautious. Smart boy. "Proximity?"

A shiver went down Steve's spine and Bucky smiled, running his metal fingers over the back of Steve's neck, watching his body shiver again, violent, harder this time. "Dedication?"
Another half circle and every muscle in that scientifically perfected body was tense now, on high alert. His arm whirred, fingers curling and ready to tighten. Battlemode. Behind Steve again, careful not to touch as he leaned close, air ghosting over the spot underneath Steve's ear. "To make sure I don't put a gun in my mouth again?"

"C'mon, you know this isn't about that." His voice was weak. Not breathy, but weak.

"Oh really?" Bucky sing-songed, continuing his stride circling Steve's pretty shoulders. "Because you never kissed me before I tried to kill myself."

Steve flinched.

Bingo.

Bucky stopped circling, directly in front of him as he narrowed his eyes once more, cocked his head and an eyebrow at Steve.

"So that's it?" Lay down Steve's happiness to make sure Bucky didn't pull the trigger anytime soon? Dance with him on the roof so he wouldn't jump off it?

"No. No, Bucky, it's not like that." A soldier's response, words separated and serious, heart pounding steady now. It wasn't a lie.

"Then what's it like, Steve?" he asked sweetly, taking a step closer and tilting his chin up to look right in those aching eyes. "Huh? What's it like?" A curious, overly-happy question. He knew he was scarier like this, when he was smiling instead of glaring.

"You're trying to twist this," Steve started, low and commanding, but Bucky wasn't gonna let him make this into a Captain-Sergeant moment.

He shot a step backwards, façade falling, because he couldn't let Steve get the upperhand here and all that stupid army training made him withstand interrogation and it wasn't fair.

So forget it, if the Winter Soldier wasn't getting answers outta Steve Rogers, Bucky Barnes sure as hell would.

He threw his hands up, ripping away the painted sincerity because fine, if it was gonna be about emotions, he could do that. He'd do whatever the fuck it took to get answers.

A frustrated noise, clenching fists in the air, and whipping back around on Steve.

"I'm not twisting anything! I'm just trying to find out why the fuck my childhood best friend decided kissing me was suddenly so goddamn important. What are you trying to do?" A plea, at the end, shoving his hair away from his face and for one moment, this could be in their apartment back in Brooklyn, Bucky begging Steve to stop getting in fights and Steve was suddenly shrinking his shoulders in, making himself smaller and yes, exactly, he felt it too.

Time jump and those same shifting eyes, the same way he'd always gotten when Bucky opened up for real.

"Nothing, I--" small now, hands shoved in pockets and eyes too wide, looking so little. Was that it? Bucky paused, looking Steve over from across the room, swallowing and reign in the emotions as he forced himself to ask.

"Are you trying to shape me?" A step closer again, the disbelief as the idea suddenly dawned on him
making his voice cut too high. Conditioning, he knew all about conditioning, classical and operant and shaping, conditioning into the exact result you want through a simple reward, association, something. "Mold me into that pretty young thing I used to be?"

Steve's eyes went wide in shock. A lot of shock. So it wasn't conditioning, maybe it was therapy? Before Steve could jump in with buttery protests, Bucky's voice arched higher again and he leaned forward, gestured at his own chest, the alien metal.

"Are you trying to fix me??" Steve Rogers' latest adopted puppy. He'd thought he'd made it very clear Steve couldn't fix him, but how many poor girls in alleys had Steve tried to save? He wasn't some helpless dame, he was a broken man in a gutter somewhere in Russia.

"What, the serum give you magical healing make-out powers?" He shoved both hands in his hair, smoothing it roughly away from his face and not looking Steve in the eyes. "You think bombarding me with affection is gonna wipe away seventy years of blood and ice?"

"Bucky--"

"Why? What the hell do you want from me?" He was too far away to hear Steve's heart anymore as he paced across the living room, but a glance at his face said it all. Stunned into silence. Bucky jolted to a stop, shaking his head as he finally looked at blue again.

"My undying loyalty?" He spread his arms wide. "You already had that you asshole, you didn't have to uproot our entire friendship to make me jump in front of bullets for you."

He didn't have the scar in his leg anymore, they'd carved too many over it.

"Buck--"

"Was being friends just not good enough for you?" Back then, Steve used to say he was the best friend a fella could have. Made life exciting. What about now? "I'm too broken and I'm no fun anymore unless you can shove your tongue down my throat?"

"Bucky stop," Steve pleaded, tears welling up and no, that wasn't fucking fair.

He strode the distance between them, shaking his head wildly.

"Why why why why?" He closed his fingers too tight around Steve's biceps, shaking him like that could make him fucking answer. "Why??" Steve rattled, didn't fight the movement an ounce, eyes squeezed shut like he didn't want the tears staining his cheeks either.

"What do you want??" Bucky shouted, shoving him away on the last word. Steve stumbled backwards and Bucky spun away from him before he fucked everything up even more. Then there was a solid hand on his shoulder, pulling him back and no, not now, not after everything.

He whirled back on Steve, slapping his hand away hard enough to make a sound, rage in his eyes as he stared down the man who'd dared touched him, dared tried to pull him back. Into what, a hug? A kiss? A thousand promises of sunshine and summer?

He knew nothing of summer.

He was frozen, staring, then his lips parted, posture shifted, quiet and serious, voice calm and controlled as he let the words drop into the space between them.

"Do you wanna fuck me? Huh?" The words didn't sink in at first. Good. Bucky closed the space
between them, slithering close and sexual to spit the next words in Steve's ear, "You wanna fuck me, use me up and toss me aside like a fu--"

Steve shoved him off so hard Bucky almost fell on his ass, barely catching his balance in time to straighten up, to stare defiantly at the shocked, horrified face. Steve was breathing heavy, shoulders up and down, lips parted as the implication settled in.

"If I let you fuck me, will you leave me the fuck alone? 'Cause I'll do it." Bucky's voice was still steady, his fingers not quite so as he fumbled with his belt, metal scraping over the clasp with this terrible sound, wrenching the leather out of its fastenings, and it was only because he was staring down at his hands that he saw Steve's fingers cover his, ripping them away.

He wasn't going to let himself shake, as much as he felt like collapsing. Didn't want to look up.

"God, Bucky, no. No." Steve squeezed their clasped hands and his voice was all watery and broken; Bucky didn't wanna see, staring at his half-undone belt and stilling the trembles in his bones.

"Bucky. Bucky, no, no I'd never--" Steve gathered Bucky into his arms, drawing him closer like he just needed to hold Bucky, to stroke his hair and feed him tea and wrap him in blankets and this would be so much easier if Steve just answered yes to that question instead of looking horrified.

Or like he might puke.

Bucky wrenched his wrists away, wriggling violently out of Steve's grasp and Steve pulled back his arms so damn fast that Bucky almost fell again, hands raising in air to signify safety, no harm. Totally unwilling to touch Bucky if he didn't want to be and why couldn't he stop being so goddamn full of justice for one moment, just bend Bucky over the back of the couch, take him and leave him there dirty because it'd be so much easier and faster. It'd at least be mercy, but from the look on Steve's face, mercy was the last thing he was getting.

Steve was crying now. Bucky curled his arms against his chest, staring at Steve from the three foot distance between them. He couldn't stand it when Steve cried. Used to thumb the tears away. If he put his thumbs on Steve's face now, he'd probably bruise him permanently.

"Bucky. Bucky, please. You know I could n-never..." Choking on his own words, tears gathering and then slipping, racing down his cheeks one at a time, building then slip, gone. Shiny, pretty, making Steve's eyes all red. He understood the tears, at least. "Bucky, you're my world, I couldn't -- I couldn't lose you."

A sob and Bucky rolled his shoulders back, dropping his arms to his sides. Actually -- he looked down again, reclasping his belt with careful, slow, steady hands. Steve was still crying softly, shoulders shaking in his peripherals as Bucky's insides scooped out; a pretty, numb void.

"You did once," he said thoughtfully, tucking the edge of the leather into its loop and looking up with a shrug. "You survived." He paused, voice going flat as the image of a plane flashed. "Well. Relatively."

Steve stepped forward again. Dancing, they were always dancing, except this kind wasn't the fun kind, this was the kind that ended with one of them over the edge of the roof instead of collapsing on each other in the middle of it.

Their eyes locked and Steve was still sniffling through tears, fists raised for once - clenched pleadingly instead of a fight.
"Bucky. James. Please, just listen to me," he reached timidly, with a shaking hand, and Bucky stared at the extended plea. He couldn't take that. He couldn't take all that concentrated heartbreak on Steve's face, in his trembling fingers.

"You don't get to do that," his voice said, hollow and echoing around in his empty mind. He wasn't talking about touching. He was talking about reaching. "You don't...you don't get to be all angelic and then..."

Lifting his head. Don't look directly at the sun, you'll burn your eyes. He'd never been too good at following directions when it came to the sun.

And he was burning on that cross.

"Y-you never--" he paused and Steve was frozen, a foot away, waiting, begging, tear-streaked and too goddamned bright.

"I can't." Bucky looked down at his hands in surprise, the quiet whirr of confirmation from his arm; the next words were to himself, not Steve, more surprised than he'd been at anything in a long life of shock. "I can't do this."

He turned on a heel and started for the door. Steve lunged for his arm, fingertips brushing, but Bucky wasn't going to let Steve grab him, wrestle him to the floor and pin his struggling arms until he gave up and cried, until they clutched each other tight and cried and cried--

Running, he'd always been good at. Bucky took off for the stairwell, sprinting and sliding, wrenching the door open and hauling down the stairs.

A bang from above as the door slammed open again and a sharp shout of his name. "Bucky!"

The railing shook as Steve pounded down the stairs after him, shouting his name, and Bucky was taking three at a time down, god knows how many Steve was taking.

The last time Bucky screamed something at Steve and went running down the stairs, he hadn't been chased.

You didn't let me down Steve. You let me fall.

He hadn't been talking about the train.

He'd been talking about this.

Steve'd let him fall into the darkest pit of devotion, of needing Steve to breathe, and Bucky could hate him for that if all his hate wasn't used up on himself for letting it happen.

But he'd been fine, he'd pushed past it, shoved it down and he'd tried to function fine and then Steve'd kissed him and--

You know what, fuck Steve. Fuck him for making Bucky so goddamn broken and dependent and--

It was amazing the glass didn't shatter as Bucky burst through the garage-lab doors. Tony did a lot of testing in here, but more importantly, all his cars were in here, this was where the tunnel to the streets were.

He skid around a table and all the robots were making concerned noises but Bucky ignored them, cursing as the doors burst open behind him again and fuck Steve was still behind him, when was he
gonna get the message?

Steve'd chased him all the way down here. They used to chase each other as kids. That was cute. There was nothing cute about this. No grabbing Steve and picking him up at the end, tickling his sides as he shouted laughter and kicked, flailing to be put down.

Steve'd chased him once, after Bucky'd shot Nick Fury. He hadn't caught Bucky then and he wouldn't now.

But how fucking much had changed since he swung out his left arm, resounding \textit{pang} as it caught Steve's shield for the first time since it'd blown him out the side of a train?

He already knew which cars had keys in them, came sliding to a halt at the blue one and he knew he had a fifteen foot lead at least, so he wrenched the door open, ducking to shove himself inside--

--only then Steve's hand closed around his arm and yanked him backwards. Bucky stumbled a step before catching himself on the open car door, breathing heavy (for once - he'd raced Steve in the war, right before shouting \textit{I loved him first}, had to hold back so Steve wouldn't suspect - there was no holding back now).

"What part of \textit{I can't do this} did your thick stubborn head not understand?"

"Bucky, you can't leave, please don't leave--" Blubbering, begging, needy. If this was Steve's new version of raised fists, it wasn't a good look on him.

"You gonna stop me? Why, Steve?" It couldn't matter this damn much, it really couldn't. He'd sent Bucky off to \textit{war} with a hug and a smile. Like he couldn't do the same now?

Although, he'd been planning on following behind. Funny enough, Bucky'd been so sure he'd never see Steve again. How many times in his life had he been so sure he'd never see Steve again?

He raised his eyebrows, making a get-on-with-it gesture, because if Steve really wanted him to stay, he'd share the goddamned reason. The blue eyes were still puffy as he stepped forward, hands wrapping over the tops of Bucky's from the other side of the open car door.

"I need you." Steve's fingers tightened around him and Bucky could've laughed, if he had enough air left in his lungs. Instead he shoved Steve's hands off, throwing them back at him like the lying things they were.

"No you do \textit{not}," he snapped. "You stopped needing me the moment you stepped science's fake manufactured foot out of that stupid Vita Ray machine."

The pretty pink mouth fell open as Steve gaped at him. There. Bucky'd never said it. Ever since that first night, the trek from Azzano to base, Steve's hand on his lower back, the big bright smile looking \textit{down} at him for the first time. An entire base one-handedly destroyed. He'd thought it then - \textit{you don't need me} - he'd meant it then, and that hadn't changed.

"You know that's not true," the mouth finally managed to whisper, and the funny thing is Steve kept assuming he \textit{knew} all these axiomatic things but he was wrong, this was all wrong.

"Yes, it is," Bucky insisted, but that wasn't the conversation they needed to have right now. He waved a hand dismissively, forcing Steve back on the goddamn point. "But it doesn't matter. I need to know why the fuck you kiss me."
"Can we please talk about this in the apartment?"

"Why, Steve? Just give me the fucking reason, I can't fucking take it anym--" he started for the car again and both Steve's hands went up, reaching instinctively before snapping upwards in surrender.

"Wait. Wait. It was too much, that's okay, I'm sorry, just come back upstairs -" Steve's voice nearly broke again and Bucky had to harden his shell in order not to reach out. It was instinctual, ingrained in him deep enough to break Hydra's coding and years of brainwashing - protect Stevie. Who was currently about to start crying again. But he couldn't protect Steve from this. Not if he didn't know what was going on.

He grit his teeth, tightening his fists and maybe denting the door a little. "No. You're always asking me for answers and now it's my turn. Why? Why are you pretending to care so much?"

"I'm not pretending!!"

An exasperated sound and Bucky threw his hands up again, staring up at the sky in frustration. "Why do you even bother?"

"You're my--"

"What? Long lost best friend that's just a broken twisted piece of metal now?" He glared at Steve, because really, what was he going to say there? What the hell was Bucky to Steve? What the hell was Bucky without Steve?

Nothing nothing nothing.

The garage was swimming treacherously and his grip on the car suddenly became a lot more about being upright than leaving.

Steve's face was still clear as ever though, so much pain etched into his features that Bucky could cry too from that look alone, if he weren't the reason for it. Instead he leaned into Steve's space, tightening his fists on purpose this time to stop the shaking.

"Buck--"

"I've tried every fucking thing I can think of, WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS??"

"Bucky--"

"FUCKING WHY??"

"Please--"

"Whywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhywhy???"

"Bucky, I--"

"WHY STEVE FUCKING WHY??"

"BECAUSE I LOVE YOU!!" Steve screamed, and the garage fell so instantly silent that the words echoed.

CAUSE I LOVE YOU
I LOVE YOU
"LOVE YOU"

love you

Two bodies breathing heavy, shoulders rising and falling like they'd ran a marathon.

Once, in 1944, they'd raced each other, laughing and shoving, breathing hard as their eyes locked, magic dancing between them. The last moment before he'd been called into Peggy's tent and screamed his confession. I loved him first. Because I love you.

He had no idea how long passed before the metal hand resting on the open car door twitched and whirred. Decades, maybe. All of the space between the first time he'd shouted it to the first time Steve had.

Waiting, heart racing, world laid at Bucky's feet.

I love you.

"Well that's too bad," that hollow voice seeped through his lips, then he was swinging into the drivers seat with a slam and the tires screeched, wheels spinning, engine roar. And Steve was staring blankly at a cloud of black smoke.

He'd left Steve in a cloud of black smoke before too. Who the hell is Bucky? Because I love you.

He lowered his boot on the gas pedal, car rumbling as he burst into a world rushing by to fast too see and Bucky had no idea that he'd left Steve to sink to his knees both times.

~*~*~

"I think Barnes' pistanthrophobia may have just ruined everything."

"Goodmorning to you too, Stark." Nat didn't lift her head, strolling past Tony while tapping rapidly away on her phone.

"No, Natasha, I'm not kidding. Jarvis just recorded in the garage-- there's something you've gotta see."

"Now?" she sighed and Tony made a face, gesturing her to follow. "Now."

...

Natasha stared at the screen. "Rewind that."

"I've watched it like six times, yes, Steve does say that--"

"I'm not interested in Steve's shout-confession, rewind it."

Tony gave her a weird look and rolled back the tape, playing again from the part where Barnes yanked open the car door and Steve yanked him back. The angle wasn't great from the camera in the corner of the ceiling, but you could see Steve's face and hear them both really well.

"Why do you even bother?" "You're my--" "What? Long lost best friend that's just a broken twisted
"piece of metal now?"

Nat made a contemplative noise and Tony looked at her funny. The rest of the video played out and Tony cringed, the way he had every time now, as Steve shouted a seventy-years-late confession and Barnes looked him dead in the eye and told him too bad.

"It's pretty cold, right? I mean I get they call him the winter soldier, but damn," Tony whistled and shook his head because, really, Steve had to be aching right now. "You gonna go check on Steve, or--"

"Stark, as upset as Steve's gotta be right now? I'm a lot more concerned about Barnes," Natasha leaned back and crossed her thin arms over her chest and Tony blinked up at her.

"...Barnes? Why the hell--"

"Do you read Vannugaut?" Natasha interrupted.

"Obviously, why have you?"

"Bluebird, there's a quote. 'Never trust a survivor,' my father used to warn me, 'until you find out what he did to stay alive.'"

Tony blinked again, looking back at the screen. The image of Steve sinking to his knees, the car speeding off for the entrance of the garage.

"You think that Barnes...you think that asshole move's a deflection method he learned from Hydra?"

"Worse. I think that's something he learned from himself."

The warning click of approaching heels was the only preparation he got before Natasha's blunt shout across the room.

"I saw the tape from the garage."

He didn't answer. He hit the punching bag again instead.

She was too smart to try stopping him, instead standing right in his line of sight and crossing her arms, talking loud enough to hear over the slamming of fists into plastic.

"What are you gonna do about it?" She shouted and Steve laid his fists a lot harder, voice as punched and torn as the crumbling bag.

"He made it...pretty damn clear," he grit his teeth, letting his fists fly faster, "...there's nothing. I can do."

"Oh c'mon, you don't believe that."

"Thought you'd be happy, Nat," he shot back, pausing for a millisecond to shoot her a glare before shifting his weight on the balls of his feet and landing a few more solid punches. "You were right. He doesn't want me."

"I'm not happy, asshole. I didn't want him to leave, I wanted you to get answers."

"Yeah, well." His hair was dripping sweat into his eyes and the burn was too grounding to wipe
away. "He wanted answers too and the ones he got weren't what he wanted to hear."

"He was afraid to hear. You think it's really as simple as he doesn't want you?"

Punch punch combo, kick for good measure. "Yes."

"This doesn't add up, you know that. Why did he run? What's he so afraid of? You broke him out of decades of training by just existing and you seriously think the feelings aren't mutual? Something else's at play. You need to find out what, and you can't do that by beating the shit of out punching bags."

He didn't bother responding. If he punched hard and loud enough, maybe he'd forget the sound of well that's too bad.

"You have a love to span the decades. Don't you think that's something worth fighting for?" She almost sounded pissed, which was funny because nobody was as pissed at Steve Rogers right now as himself.

"Not if he doesn't love me back," he growled, the punching bag groaning in complaint as it threatened to snap.

"You've fought for him your entire life. And after all of this, after everything. You're giving up on him now?"


Bucky'd given up on him.

Then punching bag flew, breaking against the opposite wall and exploding sand everywhere.

Nat had to sidestep to dodge it, glaring at Steve as his chest heaved, hair still dripping in his eyes.

"Clean yourself up. Your knuckles are bleeding." Nat stalked past him in her clicking heels, red hair flipping over her shoulder. "Be upstairs in ten. Don't you dare make me come down here again."

He stared at his hands, sweat rolling down his nose as blood dripped from his ripped open hands. He hadn't wrapped them. He should've.

He should've done a lot of things. Not letting Bucky leave being the primary of those things. Right next to not shouting a lifetime of feelings in the middle of an argument.

He should've --

He should get upstairs. God knows what Nat would do if he didn't.

~*~*~

Two kids thrown into the flames.

Bucky'd always had this kid he had to look out for. The only real family he had - for the longest time, the only thing he'd wanted was to retain that image of himself that Steve had. But he'd ruined it, through and through. Hydra'd turned him inside out and flayed his darkest parts into the open, letting the sunshine peer at the swirling secrets of the night.

It was instinct to look out for Steve, but when was the last time he'd actually dragged him out of a fight? He'd been the one causing problems and Steve was the one patching up and Bucky couldn't
do that anymore.

Bucky Barnes would go to the ends of the earth to protect Steve Rogers. And if that means saving Steve from him, too, he'd drop himself back in a pit before he let his pain ruin that sunshine.

He couldn't drive forever.

He was a Soldier, he should've stayed to fight. But he wasn't made for the art of war like Steve was.

So he ran. Eventually, he'd have to stop somewhere - and besides the Stark credit cards in the glovebox and his own weapons, he didn't have anything on him. Using the credit cards would be a giant red flag to where he was. He needed a safehouse.

All the safehouses he knew were Hydra. It wasn't like the Avengers ever had to lay low, wasn't like Stark had--

Wait. Stark didn't. Barton did.

~*~

"But where would he go? You think he'd run back to Hydra?"

Steve shrugged and kicked his feet against the floor. "Don't think I know 'im as well as I thought."

"Cap, it's not--"

"Stark, don't bother. He's gonna blame himself, fine. But we need to find Barnes before..."

"He hurts someone. Or himself," Sam added solemnly and Steve swallowed rocks down his sandpaper throat.

"Guys..." Clint finally sighed, getting up from the couch and looking vaguely guilty. "I'm pretty sure I know where he is."

"What? How?"

"It's kinda the only place he could go. He's at my safehouse."

"You have a safehouse? No, wait, it doesn't matter. Take us." Tony started shoving maps aside and Clint held up his hands to freeze.

"If everyone knows about it, how's it gonna be a safehouse?" He complained, making a gesture for them to stay put. "I'll go myself."

"Cut the crap, Barton. We're your family. There's no one safer." Stark slammed the quinjet controller against Clint's chest and raised his eyebrows, waiting for the protest.

Sam, Natasha, and Bruce all crossed their arms, flanking Tony in a V. Steve was still standing dejectedly to the side, staring out the window silently. Clint looked between all of them, hesitating a second before finally throwing up his arms.

"Fine. But you're throwing me a pizza party or something."

"I'll get you a goddamned puppy," Tony promised, clapping Clint's shoulder and starting for the elevator.
"Don't say that, he'll actually hold you to it," Nat warned, shrugging into her leather jacket and cocking her head for the boys to follow.

~*~*~

"Sergeant Barnes?"

He figured someone'd come eventually. Bucky sighed, starting down the stairs and pulling his ponytail out, letting his hair swing against the sides of his face.

Clint was standing tentatively in the foyer, fingers twitching like he was dying to pull out his bow. Bucky paused on the stairway landing, looking down at him with an unimpressed look, kicking a foot out to the side and crossing his arms over his chest.

"I thought I told you to call me Bucky."

The worried expression dropped and Clint shrugged, exaggerated frown as he gestured with a hand. "I think Sarge fits you. Hell of a lot more authoritative than Bucky."

Bucky sighed heavily and tapped down the rest of the stairs, swinging past Barton and strolling through the corner of the living room to the kitchen. There was a pitcher of water in the fridge, so he got to pouring them both glasses as Clint wandered into the kitchen behind him.

"I spent my life growin' up with the most authoritative person imaginable, I've got no illusions about how much authority I've got." He turned and held out the glass of water for Clint. "Which is none."

"I dunno, I think the homicidal look alone gives you plenty of authority." Clint sipped his water and made a general gesture motion in Bucky's direction, which he had every right to roll his eyes at. It wasn't like there was anything he could do about the fucking hair anyways.

They both sat down at the empty wood table, Clint's feet kicking up on the chair next to him as he leaned back and studied Bucky lightly.

"Speaking of growin' up with...how are you feeling on the whole Cap subject right now?" It was a casual enough question, all easy and curious instead of worried; he couldn't help but tense up anyways.

"Don't wanna talk about it," he muttered, dipping his pinky finger in his water glass to hear it whirr in protest. He had an understanding with Clint - they went shooting together pretty often, and most sessions were silent except for initial greetings. Sometimes not even those. Clint'd been messed up recently enough to understand a little of Bucky's headspace, and the sniper/soldier in him certainly didn't hurt.

So he expected Clint to nod, drop it and go quiet like always. Maybe they'd play cards in a while, then Clint would clap him on the shoulder, give him crap about his arm, and head off with a I'm around if you need to talk, real glad you're okay.

Except none of that happened. Instead, he shifted in his chair, lowering his feet down seriously to the ground as he leaned on the table, tracing a design into the wood grain table.

"Tasha told me this story, cause I wasn't there when it went down, but." His finger traced a little heart into the table and Bucky narrowed his eyes. "Apparently, right before SHIELD went down, there was this battle on the bridge...everybody got detained by Hydra, shoved into a truck in handcuffs. And the Commander told his team that this deadly assassin they were fighting was his best friend from the 1940s. At first, his squad was a little reluctant, cause you know, that's like
impossible, but. One word from the CO and the team just accepts the Winter Soldier was this guy's pal. Cause what the hell, if Rogers was frozen for 70 years, obviously his buddy was too."

"Clint--" he started to warn, but Barton just barreled on.

"Look, Sarge, the point is, you two are \textit{like that}. That's how you are, how you've always been. Together." A simple shrug, finally looking up with that easy relaxed expression. "So maybe it's a little more complex now, doesn't mean you can't handle it."

"Actually, I can't," Bucky shot back, bitter as he pushed the glass away and stood. "You here to lecture me? I'm not interested. I made a choice, and that choice doesn't include your opinion."

Steve was a soldier. He'd make it through fine without Bucky. He always had.

"Look, I know what happened--"

"Okay? And? I'm not gonna talk about it. If you want me back in the tower you're gonna have to sedate me."

Clint stood then too, hands out in the \textit{placating a wild animal} gesture everyone always used around him.

"C'mon, Sarge. I just wanna talk. Why'd you run? I thought you would've wanted--"

"Wanted what? \textit{That}? I can't, Clint. I can't."

"Bucky,"

"I \textit{can't}. I can't I can't I can't." He'd backed into the living room now, his back to the windows and if there was anyone out there they'd have a perfect shot of his back right now and wouldn't that be mercy.

"Bucky, I get it. Emotions are scary. This, this is really scary. But Steve shouldered the blow, he still wants you--"

"He doesn't! He can't. I can't. I can't do this Clint, I can't, you can't make me."

Two hands up, getting closer, and Bucky kept backing towards the windows. It was a cute farmhouse, but he'd dive through the fucking window if it came to that.

"No one's making you do anything, Bucky. We just wanna help."

He was panicking, looking around for exits, head whipping back and forth and Clint couldn't have him fall into an episode now, not when it was just the two of them. There was no way that'd end well. But, thank god, he missed the slip of \textit{we}.

Instead he curled in on himself, hands in his hair, metal fingers curled tight enough that the entire arm was clenched and vibrating and fuck, that couldn't be good.

"Bucky? C'mon, man, you can push through this. I get it, I really do, it's okay to be scared. There's nothing in this world that's scarier than love--"

The explosion happened so fast that he only registered Barnes's shouted words on their echo in the empty house.

\textit{He can't love me, crack crack love me, crack love me.}
The two shots echoed pretty well too.

It took a few seconds before he managed to look down, pull his hand away from his side. Red, wet, and he managed to lift his head, blinking at the image of the gun's muzzle smoking in Barnes's hands.

The farmhouse tipped and Clint reached out for something to grab onto, praying that some of his rushed words were making sense.

"Bucky, it's okay, it's fine. I've had worse, just. Ah, tell me you know how'ta stitch up-p," he paused, grabbing his side again with the bloody hand and waving the other one in the direction of Barnes's horrified expression. Shell-shocked. He hadn't meant to, Clint got that, he shouldn't have pushed so hard, it was his own fault for coming in here without backup, cornering an assassin and trying to crack open his feelings.

Well. He sure had cracked something somewhere.

And that was the last thing he thought before the farmhouse swam black.

~*~*~

They'd have heard the shots if they didn't have equipment trained on the house. Steve's eyes went wide, Sam cursed. Bruce's hands covered his mouth and Natasha went white as a sheet. Tony blinked, whispering something to Jarvis.

Then Nat was leaping out of her seat and sprinting down the quinjet, jumping from the ramp and taking off across the grass. They were a couple hundred feet away from the house, but she ran fast enough to bust down the door in seconds.

Sam cursed again and took off after her while Tony and Bruce shared a terrified glance.

"Jarvis, fly us to the front porch, we're gonna need to carry Barton in here. Bruce, get the med kit, we'll have to stop the bleeding on the way to the hospital. Cap, you're probably gonna have to sedate Bucky...Cap? Rogers? Fuck, snap out of it, Steve, one of your teammates is down. Steve? Good, thank god. I know you're upset, but--"

"I'll handle Barnes," he muttered, pushing himself out of his seat. Except there was no assassin to handle. Nat and Sam came stumbling out with Clint lifted between them.

"He was gone by the time I got there," Nat grimaced and lifted Clint a little higher. Steve sunk back down in his seat and stared out the window.

~*~*~

He stayed upright the entire walk through the lobby, hallways. Stark's carkey was burning a hole in his pocket, illegally parked in front of the building but he could give a fuck, he had to be here.

He also had to disarm himself before he released himself around everyone. So he couldn't climb in the quinjet, he'd gotten the fuck out of there before he shoted anymore of his friends.

Clint was his friend. *His*.

He made it to the fourth floor hallway, the one that ran perpendicular to where they were holding him. Not holding, healing.
He hated hospitals.

One of the doors was open, a nurse wheeled past him with a tray of tools. Some of them were the exact same tools they'd used on him.

He stayed upright until that point.

The nurse disappeared around the corner and then Bucky was stumbling, pulse pounding too hard, vision swimming. He collided softly with the clean white wall and collapsed against it.

One of his feet slipped out from under him and he let his legs go out, tumbling to the ground, spine sliding down the supporting plaster. Everything was rushing, flashing too loud, so much white and it smelled like antiseptic but Clint was hurt, he'd been bleeding, the smell of gunpowder was still on his hands.

Bucky weaved his fingers together tightly, pressing them down on the tops of the knees he curled into his chest. Rising too fast, breathing heavy, trying to clear his head, only the world kept betraying him, spinning like that box--

He whipped his head to the side, glancing up just as Steve crouched down beside him.

The rush of air out of his lungs felt something like relief, then he was staring at the wall across from them again, gasping air into his chest again before he passed out. It was laboring, the breathing thing, the way Stevie must've felt like a kid. Steve didn't comment, silent and unmoving in his crouch.

“How's Clint?” Bucky managed, squeezing his fingers tighter to his knees.

“He's gonna be okay,” Steve promised quietly and that time the breath was real, unmistakable relief, oxygen collapsing and refilling against his lungs.

“Nat's here, Sam's here?”

“Everyone's here.”

Bucky tipped his head back against the wall, still breathing heavy, closing his eyes for a moment. Clint was okay. He was okay. Everyone had come. Clint was okay.

“How's Clint?” Steve's voice washed over him, concerned enough to preamble a talking-to, but he already knew the speech. That wasn't...so long as Clint was okay, he could work through everything else. Clint was easy.

"I know he'll forgive me. You don't have to tell me," Clint Barton was too good for all of them.

He opened his eyes again and Steve moved in his peripherals, settling down on the ground next to him, sitting properly now with his torso turned all the way to Bucky.

Those wide shoulders pressed to the wall, followed by Steve's temple as he tipped his head, blue eyes heavy on the side of Bucky's face as he stared straight ahead at the washed out white across from them.

He couldn't do hospitals. Never'd been able to, even before he got strapped down and drugged up. Never could handle seeing Stevie's thin skin under those harsh lights - he hadn't been admitted as often as he should've, only when Sarah was alive, when she could afford proper care. Bucky couldn't ever stand it, sitting at Steve's bedside as doctors shoved tubes down his throat and needles in his tiny arms.
Clint was easy. This wasn't easy.

"Hydra always told me I was defective," Bucky started, pausing as the wave of memories threatened to dizzy him. The goddamn smell, the glint of those silver tools--

A shuddering breath. Steve kept silent. He wasn't sure he'd be able to do this if he wasn't.

"And when they took me... in the moment that mattered most, I was." His metal fingers were bruising his right hand but he couldn't stop, he couldn't stop pressing and he couldn't stop talking. Steve's knee was pressed against his hip and Bucky had to bite his lip to reign in the emotions. "I couldn't take it, I couldn't handle it when they told me--"

Gray, defiant, red, screaming. Refusal.

He's. always. there. He's saved me from this same fucking table dozens of times you insignificant fucking Nazi. He promised me that as long as he's alive he's coming for me. He's always going to save me. And YOU CAN'T TOUCH ME BECAUSE HE'S ALWAYS GOING TO SAVE ME.

"That you uh. In the plane." He had to pause again, words too shaky. The water gathering on his bottom lashes was making it hard to see. He rubbed his eyes hard, but he wasn't sure anything could postpone the break. His throat was closing up with bottled tears, years of bottled tears and secrets, but he had to say this before he started sobbing.

He couldn't say this.

He had to.

Running two hands of fingers through his hair, knocking his head back against the wall once - not hard enough for Steve to worry. Two palms pressing hard on the tops of his thighs, pushing against just for the pressure, and his mouth opened again.

"I...I gave in. I a-asked them to wipe my memories. I thought it'd be easier than facing...I c-coul--." A quick shaking gasp and he rushed the next words so fast they almost blended together. "I just keep pushing myself to prove them wrong and. I'm. I'm pushing you away."

A whoosh of air out of his lungs and it felt like deflating, only he filled himself right back up with air because this was too heavy, too much.

How do you tell your best friend the entire reason you'd had temporary amnesia and tried to kill him - and everyone - was because you'd asked for it? Begged. Begged for it.

He'd planned to carry that to his goddamned grave. Hydra'd hurt him, but Bucky Barnes was the one who'd ruined himself. The Winter Soldier had stood in front of Sergeant James Barnes's exhibit in the Smithsonian and sworn to destroy who'd ever taken that laughing man away from him.

He didn't need to scour the earth to find that man. All he'd needed was a mirror.

The clock down the hallway ticked the minutehand again and Bucky finally turned his head, glancing at Steve over his shoulder. He wasn't leaning on the wall anymore, he was just sitting and looking at Bucky. There were tears in his eyes.

He'd thought Steve was dead. He'd thought Stevie was dead.

He'd held that newspaper in his only hand and cried and screamed until his throat bled.
He'd caved like an animal at Zola’s feet, begging them to take away every bit of humanity he had left.

Tears in those pretty blue eyes he'd never thought he'd see again. They were here now, Steve was alive and okay and here. Bucky took a deep breath, one single in and out, and the bright lights overhead maybe dimmed a little, the horizon centering, and Steve's lips parted softly with words to match.

“I don't think you asked them to take your mind away because you couldn't handle death. I think it was because you couldn't handle feeling.”

Feeling. The way his heart had wrenched outta his chest. He'd say his world split in two, but it didn't. Steve was more than half of him, Steve had a bigger portion than that, especially back then when Bucky'd let himself go. When he'd said the words I love him, when those could still come off his tongue.

That was total submersion. And look what it'd done?

He searched Steve's expression for detest, disgust, mortification. Anything.

A war hero's eyes looked back at him. Love.

“But you're not like that anymore. You're strong.”

The words were so sure, so Steve, that Bucky's lungs stopped working again and he had to suck in a shocked breath through his teeth, grinding his hands down to get a grip on himself.

Steve's fingers brushed his skin, then there was a warm, heavy hand on his arm, solid in the way only Steve was. The hands that punched and saved and raised and held his since they were kids. The hands that let him fall and lifted him to the earth again.

“You carry people, Buck.” Steve told him, hand tight on his arm and words cracking with emotion. "You carry me.”

Bucky's head dropped to his chest, breath hitching and lungs shot again, silent sob catching in his throat. Blinking through water and staring at the polished hospital tiles between his feet, then Steve was leaning in close, warm at Bucky's side, forehead pressing against Bucky's temple and a single drop of cold landing on his shoulder.

The space between his ear and Steve's lips disappeared and the warmth came with more than tears this time, the quietest whisper, the most precious secret. “There's a fire in you that Hydra could never take away.”

One of his hands shot upwards haphazardly, fingers threading roughly into Steve's hair and it was seconds before one of Steve's was covering it, fingers interlocking as they both held on tight.

They sat together on the hospital hall floor, clutching each other tight, Steve's head pressed to Bucky's, and let the air in their lungs catch until oxygen began working again.

How many times had he sat in a hospital with Steve, praying for those lungs not to fail him? And now they were here. The world was a real fucking terrible place, but this? Steve, here. This was all worth it.

By the time they both could breathe, tears on cheeks had dried up too. Bucky lifted his head and cocked it enough to the side to see Stevie, sliding his hand down Steve's head to run a thumb over
his jaw. This part, this was beautiful. So goddamn beautiful.

“C’mon. I think it's time we finally go home,” the beautiful angel whispered. The words were the sweetest thing he'd ever heard.

Steve pushed to his feet, offering a hand. Bucky took it.

The hallway floor was a little slick with moisture, but Steve steadied them both easily before taking a step backwards, leaving open space. Bucky ran a hand down his face, settling himself. The hospital still smelled terrible, but. He was okay.

When he turned back to Steve, a gentle hand pressed to his lower spine, the way Steve'd supported him on the walk after Azzano. One more shaky breath, Steve steady as a rock beside him. Glowing like an angel in harsh hospital lights.

He threw an arm around Steve's neck, like the old days, pulling him down into Bucky's side.

“Thank you,” he whispered, closing the words with a tight kiss to the side of Steve's head. He wondered if Steve would ever know how much he meant inside those two words.

An arm wrapped around his waist and it didn't matter, not now.

...

With quiet assurance and insistence from the team, Steve and Bucky took the illegally-parked Stark car back to the tower. Nat was okay, and they were transferring Clint to the Stark tower too, as soon as he woke up. *We'll be there by morning,* Tony promised, clapping Steve on the shoulder. *Go take care of your boy.*

It was a few hours drive back to the tower, and Bucky made it about ten minutes in before he curled up, falling asleep with his head on Steve’s lap.

Steve stroked the long brown hair with one hand, the other on the steering wheel as countryroads gave way to highways.

Bucky slept and Steve stared out the windshield and cried.

*Highway sets the traveler's stage
all exits look the same.*

~*~*~

He didn't mean for this to become his life. He didn't mean to make war the only thing he understood anymore. Because he sure as hell didn't get his best friend.

Or the man staring back at him in the mirror.

Steve splashed crystal in his face, looking down at the water pouring out of his hands and wondering how he’d let it get this far. He was so extremely out of his depth here.

What Bucky did---

There was so much he didn't understand, and it was like Steve was just *finally* getting that. Seriously, if it'd crossed Bucky's mind even once that the only reason Steve wanted him around was to fuck him?
A ripple went down his spine and Steve shuddered, turning the water off with his wrist. This was such a goddamned mess.

His hands were still dripping, scrabbling as he gripped the counter, ducked his head, steadied himself. Fumbling to grab Bucky from falling again with hands too slippery, coated in blood--

*Why was it always goddamn falling?*

They were dominos, setting each other off, every time they touched: falling deeper and harder and faster, flashing closer to utter blackness. Only when were they going to land so hurt they couldn't heal?

The counter cracked. Steve forced his grip to loosen. He hadn't always been like this. It was something he'd become.

There used to be clear lines: good, bad. Evil could be destroyed, bananas were sweet, never stop fighting. But where the hell was the right thing here? Where the hell was he?

He couldn't remember the last time he'd doubted...he'd doubted *everything*.

Part of him wanted to pack up with Bucky and leave this place, never come back in their lives. Forget the bloody fists, forget everything but some beautiful green hillside in Ireland and waking up next to Bucky's sweet face.

Part of him couldn't *imagine* hanging up the suit, ever. What the fuck would he do? What good were these hands if they weren't killing to save a life, what good were these legs if they weren't standing between his country and chaos? What use were two out of time soldiers if they weren't being the machines they were made to be?

But what was good for *Bucky*? He had no idea.

Steve was a killer and a soldier and he'd never wash all the blood off his hands and maybe Bucky was right. Maybe they were too messy to mesh. Would you kill to prove you're right?

*Plane crashes and smoke and the red spray as the edge of his shield sliced through skin--*

*He was drowning again, but his lungs were dry, choking with no hands around his throat. The counter spiderwebbed further and he flared his fingers, letting go, stumbling backwards and hitting the wall.*

*The heartbeat in his chest was too fast, skin on fire with the flames of icy tears.*

*It'd all abandoned him, everything he knew. Where was his God now? He used to pray let me switch places him, lord please - the idea of sinking to his knees felt hollow now. A desperate cry from a despairing man who didn't want anything but for his heart to stop hurting, for the world to stop being foggy at the edges.*

*You always were so dramatic, Peggy teases in his head, but even that isn't enough, even her words aren't grounding like usual because this time, it's worse than just am I fighting the good fight.*

*Was he fighting at all?*

*He'd walked an entire exhibit in the Smithsonian, watched his past laid out in the world's hands like it was just another story and that's exactly what he'd become - just another story. Isolated, alone. Unrecognized as he walked beneath his own goddamned mural. The suit's what they saw, so the suit's*
what he became. He didn't have anything else but the star on his chest to match the shield on his back.

*What you carry, so heavy on your back, soldier.*

Steve Rogers fell off a train with Bucky Barnes. Bucky'd come back. Where was he? Who was he?

Faith slipping steady from his hands. If his blood ever ran red white and blue like they teased, the navy was rusting, burning out filthy, guilty black and he could see the uniform in his head, the blue paint dripping from the shield, searing black left behind--

The sky wouldn't save him, he lowered his chin and forced the man in the mirror to look him in the eye. His entire life, saving people. And the one person that mattered most, it'd been too late once, twice, almost a third--

The *one person* that shared the bones in his spine distinguishing the lanterns in his eyes. How many wars was he going to drag Bucky into before he gave up breathing through the sludge of Steve's poisonous love?

~*~*~

Paint was easy. Facing everything else was not.

Clint laughed at the pizza Bucky dumped on his sidetable with a loud "I have it on good authority hospital food sucks." He'd also taken Bucky's apology with grace - said it happened to the best of them. After all, he'd shot Bucky with an arrow the first time they met.

"But it didn't hit me," he argued. Clint shrugged. "And if I was good enough, neither would've your bullets."

A startled laugh, then they both sobered up and *Clint* apologized, saying he had no right to corner Bucky like that, but Bucky couldn't take that apology.

It wasn't Clint's fault, none of this was anyone's fault but his. He was the one who ran, pulled the trigger, fucked everything up.

Paint was easier.

His canvas was quite big, but he could still see the door opening over the top of his easel. He'd expected Steve would come in here, which is why he was painting with the canvas facing the window and therefore outta sight. No one got to see it yet - Steve knew that though, he wouldn't ask.

In fact, he barely gave Bucky a glance, but the few seconds their eyes met it wasn't cold. Then he was propping up on the windowseat across the room, dragging the closest sketchbook to him and grabbing a pencil stub.

They were both quiet for a long time. It'd never really been like this in Brooklyn - Steve would fit perfectly dumped back eighty years, but they'd never had the money for paints back then. And if they had, you could be sure as hell Bucky wouldn't be the one using his mediocre talents to waste them.

In fact, he'd always been reluctant to do anything that might mean taking away from materials for Steve. Or food for Steve. Anything for Steve.

He picked up a thinner brush and blew out a level breath between pursed lips, leaning closer to the
canvas and carefully touching the blue tip over brown.

"You okay?" Steve asked, twenty minutes later. Bucky tucked a stray hair back into his bun and swirled his paintbrush in a cup of water.

"Uh huh," he replied, taking a dab of orange and locking the metal fingers in position around the brush to keep his grip solid as he pressed careful, small, watery dots.

Another five seconds and the sketchbook closed, sound of the discarded pencil rolling edgily across the floor.

Then Steve plopped down a few feet in front of the easel, shoving a bucket aside with his toe and looking up with his arms around his knees.

"What's goin' on?"

When he'd asked Natasha, she'd looked at him incredulously for a moment before cautiously replying, "When I first joined SHIELD, I thought I was going straight. But I guess I just traded in the KGB for Hydra."

If only Bucky trusted him so much.

"Nothin'," he hummed, not looking away from his painting.

Apparently they were going to ignore that Steve'd shouted a lifetime of feelings yesterday and Bucky'd broken down in a hospital hallway.

"You want lunch?" He offered, and Bucky paused, looking around the side of his painting.

"Let me clean up here, and I'll get something cooking--".

"I'll do it," Steve interjected, and Bucky gave him an odd look and scooped up his brushes, starting for the sink to wash them. Steve stood and walked back out, fighting the urge to slam the door behind him. It wasn't Bucky that made his fists curl. It was Bucky that forced them free.

~*~

Once, months ago, a comment about Hydra that Bucky shoved aside, straightened up, and Steve kicked into Captain Mode. Before they'd ever kissed, before any of it.

"You can't just pretend the past 70 years didn't happen," Steve'd argued, and Bucky'd kept his voice level in response.

"It's either that or have a mental breakdown, which would you prefer?" It was sarcasm obviously, but Steve just threw up his hands.

"If it'll help you move past it! You ignore this and it's going to boil over one day and that's gonna be a hell of a lot worse."

"No."

"What?"

"No, I'm not going to talk - I'm not going to think about how I got tortured for 70 years. It's not happening."
And now, months later, Bucky looked back and decided Steve'd been right. It'd built up.

He supposed this was that breakdown.

~*~

Bucky sat uncomfortably at the table, watching Steve busy himself around the kitchen. They weren't like this.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Steve was the snarky one, full of sass and bullshit, the one getting in fights in alleys. He wasn't supposed to be the one cooking and taking care of and squeezing himself into that "settling down" box. What happened to the restlessness?

A plate slid in front of him and Bucky silently picked up his fork.

"Can we talk about it?"

He looked up as Steve sat down, hands in his lap and eyes down cautiously.

"Meaning?" Bucky said, because there were multiple things that could be about. Hallways and Garages.

"What I said..."

"Now?"

"No, it's fine," Steve mumbled, picking up his fork too, eyes still cast down. Bucky studied the top of his blonde head for a moment. A month ago all he'd wanted was for Steve to not get in fights, but that was before - this. Why was it changing everything?

Or maybe Bucky was the one changing everything.

They ate in silence.

...

He was curled up around Hemingway when Steve knocked on his door.

"Sleep in mine tonight?"

Well that was blunt. He was gonna ask why, but the nervous voice and shoved hands in pockets beat him too it.

"Didn't get an hour last night, don't wanna deal with the nightmares alone."

That was even more blunt. But he was still Bucky Barnes, he wasn't gonna be able to deny Steve that. He stood, followed into the other bedroom, refusing to let his heart beat faster as he plopped down heavily on Steve's bed and kicked his feet up, crossing them at the ankles.

Steve sat down beside him and it felt strangely like all the sleepovers they'd had as kids, falling asleep mid-ramble. Well, Steve would. Then Sarah'd come home and Bucky'd pretend to be asleep too as she draped them both with a blanket, placing kisses on their foreheads.

"Bucky, I--"

"Steve."
"No, Buck. Let me say this. I don't care if you want to hear it, let me say it for me if nothin' else."

He crossed his arms over his chest and slid down Steve's headboard, feet kicking up the comforters as he stared at the ceiling.

"Fine."

Steve still beside him like he hadn't been expecting that answer. Bucky may've kept his head as goddamned blank as possible don't think don't since...

But he wasn't gonna go kicking and screaming in protest either.

"I've known you my whole life," he started slowly and Bucky snorted because yes, that was the whole point. Mere exposure. Mermaid effect. Nothing more.

A pause and Steve slid down beside him, matching his stance as he stared at the ceiling too.

"...and so I know what you're thinking."

"You really don't," Bucky pointed out, and Steve reached over to smack his arm. Bucky made a hurt noise and covered the bruising spot with his metal hand.

"Yes, I do. And I looked up the mermaid effect. You idiot."

"Hey! How'd you even--"

"You said it once. And despite what you think, I pay attention when you talk, Buck."

He sunk further down on the bed and kicked his legs deeper under the covers. Steve never paid attention when he - I dunno, told him not to fucking jump out of buildings.

"Buck. Bucky, are you listening to me?"

"Yes," he growled, counting in Russian in his head.

Then Steve's hand was on his face, turning it sideways, thumb and fingers pressing into his cheeks and forcing him in place.

"You really think my feelings for you are only cause we've been friends for so long?"

"...it makes sense."

"Is that why you have feelings for me?"

"Whoever said I have feelings for you?"

Steve let go of his face but Bucky didn't bother turning away now. Curled towards each other.

"Do you?"

Fuck. This?


"And that's it."

"I was going in alphabetical order," Bucky clarified. "There's still 25 more letters."
"D comes before G."

"But I had to put aggravation before adoration because it's a very primary emotion."

"I told you you could feel emotions."

"I tell you to be careful all the goddamn time and what do you do? You crash planes and dive out of places without a parachute--"

"Forcing myself to know what you felt like falling."

Bucky stared. Steve blinked at him, tucking his hands further underneath his cheek.

"What the fuck you motherfucking asshole--"

Steve closed the space between their mouths and pressed his lips carefully, softly, to Bucky's.

It was short and the softest thing he'd ever felt, just a brush of their mouths, a little pressure, and then Steve was pulling back, plopping his head back down on the comforter with a little curling smile and his eyes all lit up, hair ruffled to the side and his nose just inches from Bucky's.

Huh. That light in his eyes was the same one he got in fights.

Bucky'd always thought that was rage. What the hell was it, then? Cause he sure as hell didn't look pissed now.

"What was next on the list after amazement?" Steve whispered and Bucky couldn't fight the smile because what a fucking idiot.

"Anchored. Anxious. Awestruck."

"Do you really have a whole list?"

"26 letters, Stevie."

"Buck...what about the eight I told you earlier?" He rolled his lips in, suddenly nervous again, and Bucky's heart was pounding fast enough Steve had to hear it.

He swallowed and searched between the two blue eyes. He wasn't sure he was ready for this. How was he supposed to face--

It couldn't be, Steve couldn't really...

He'd been waiting round for Steve forever. He'd always been there, waiting for Steve, he'd just never thought Steve'd ever actually...?

"I've spent my whole life afraid to let go and tell you. You've always had so much, Buck, but me, I had nothing but you--"

"No, it's not."

"Listen. Before the suit, before everything. You were the one. Do you remember what I told you the first time I almost died? I've got no regrets cause I have you. The hell did you think that meant?"

"You were always restless, wild, what happened to that--"
"Nothing! But I'm older, now, Buck. I don't have to prove anything anymore, not if I have you. This can be it, don't you get that? I know it's scary - believe me, I'm terrified - but just because you can't control it doesn't mean it's gonna be a disaster."

But he'd always had control, that was how you survive--

"Emotions are weaknesses to you, I get that. I don't know if that was Hydra or just you, but I promise you the truth can't hurt us now, Bucky. I went through hell to find you, I always have and I always will. But I wouldn't trade a minute of it, not if it got us here."

Snap and he almost sat up, shooting back so fast Steve could barely finish the declaration.

"I'd trade it. I'd trade it all, send you back home to Peggy like we planned. Come over on Sundays for dinner-but-not-dessert, I'd fucking do it Steve, you deserve that."

Steve's big hands grabbed his and Bucky was looking at him with wide eyes, caught on that helicarrier all over again, terrified of wherever the next minute would land them.

"You and Peggy planned...?"

"Shit."

Bucky rolled away and Steve bounced up, landing on top of him with his arms barring either side of Bucky's shoulders, looking down with his eyebrows raised.

"She knew? She knew before I did?"

"She knew before I did," Bucky corrected. The incredulous look on Steve's face narrowed as he searched back through his memories. Bucky waited, shifting a little to get more comfortable under Steve's weight - honestly, who the fuck had conversations like this - and finally it clicked, blue eyes going wide.

"That day you came out of the officer's tent crying. You avoided me like the plague after that. What the hell happened?"

"A lot," Bucky sighed and Steve furrowed his eyebrows in offense.

"Tell me."

"I will, eventually, just not right now, okay? I've fessed up my share of secrets over the past twenty-four hours to last me a month." Bucky gave him a look and Steve tipped his head in reluctant agreement, rolling back off Bucky to collapse on the bed beside him.

"Speaking of fessed secrets..."

"You really don't know how to drop anything, do you Rogers?"

"At least that hasn't changed?" He offered and Bucky elbowed him. An offended laugh and Steve's pretty face turned to his again. Bucky met the gaze, raised eyebrows as wavering honesty draped like a blanket over the raw wound. "I've been waiting to say that for years. And, since its me, of course I mucked it up, did it during the middle of a stupid fight, but."

"You kissed me in the middle of a fight too," Bucky pointed out, because really, could Steve even function off a battlefield? Although that thought was a lot more depressing than amusing.

"Bucky, shut your mouth for three seconds and let me say this."
"Shut it for me," he shot back and Steve smiled.

"I'm gonna say this first. Not gonna let you distract me with your pretty lips."

"You think my lips're pretty?" Bucky batted his eyelashes and pitched his best USO dancer voice, which got him an exasperated sound from Steve as he rolled his eyes up to the ceiling again.

"My god shut up, would you?"

"CO thinks he can order me around," Bucky mumbled under his breath and Steve shot him a glare, propping up on one elbow so he was fully in Bucky's line of sight, hovering over him.

"Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes--"

"Oh my god I'm too young to get married--"

"--I love you."

Bucky's mouth snapped shut. Steve looked down at him, eyes all soft and affectionate, fingers sketching tiny letters into Bucky's chest.

I love you.

"Stevie," Bucky breathed, name hovering on his lips like raindrops dripping from a flower. A lifetime of I need you's and switching a couple letters suddenly confirmed every wish he'd ever made.

"You don't have to say anything, you don't have to do anything about it if you don't want. But it's the truth. And if you want...I'm yours to choose."

Tears shouldn't've welled up at something so simple, something he knew in his soul, but they did anyways. How was this what he deserved?

When he'd asked why, this wasn't an answer he'd ever considered.

The pain ripping in his chest, the open vulnerability on Steve's face, that same simple, unrepenting promise he'd had on his face on that helicarrier, then finish it.

His chest was tight and his eyes were prickling because after all that time, the explosions of war and dirt-covered simplicity of Brooklyn and promising, hopeful smile from the passenger side of a red car as the USA rumbled beneath their tires and how far had they had to go before they made it here and it wasn't fair, he'd never planned on making it here at all.

Spending his whole life chasing rainbows and he'd ran smack dab into the gold at the bottom and it hit like a faceful of bricks.

If this was love, he didn't want it. If this pain was their hearts, then Bucky'd give anything to cut his out and restart. Take it from me please.

An angel's thumb slid over the corner of his eye, wiping an unfallen tear and Bucky closed his eyes, bottom lip trembling. How could Steve be so sure when Bucky was so terrified?

"Stevie, I can't give this my all," he whispered, and the thumb curved down, tracing his cheekbone. It wasn't just that he didn't have control, he was a ghost, they were both dead already, how were they supposed to make it--
But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was what if they did. What if they tried and it worked, then something happened and he lost Steve?

"N-now that you know what happened last time? Don't you see why I can't let that happen again?" He blinked his eyes open and Steve was still propped on one elbow, gazing down at him with that serious, caring expression, hand shifting into Bucky's hair as he listened quietly. Now Bucky was the one pleading, running his hand up Steve's arm and back down, trying to get him to understand. "I turned into a deadly assassin because I lost you. Can you imagine if I actually had you - like that, completely - and I lost you? I can't picture anything worse than the monster I became as the Winter Soldier, but I promise, somehow, it would be."

"You won't lose me," Steve replied, easy and light like that could somehow be true.

"You don't know that." How could he be so goddamned calm?

"I do." A little mischievous smile and the fingers in his hair tugged a piece. "It's the only thing I know."

Bucky narrowed his gaze, studied Steve's tells, except the idiot wasn't lying. Steve's lies were so goddamn transparent, but he'd convinced himself completely.

He actually thought this was going to work, he was more confident they'd have each other forever than anything else and if that wasn't the most infuriating thing he'd ever heard--

"You're a fucking sap," Bucky accused, knocking Steve upside the head with his metal hand. A resounding noise of offense, then Steve was shoving him hard enough to slide half the blankets off the bed and that's right, it was like the middle of the night, he'd totally forgotten with the bedside lamps on.

Why'd Steve turned on the lights before he invited Bucky over? He'd been totally planning this conversation, hadn't he, the nightmare thing had been a total ploy.

Bucky dove back across the bed and landed a punch on one of Steve's arms, then that beautiful laugh was lighting up the room and they were rolling over, sheets tangling up in their legs.

"Only thing you know," Bucky huffed, throwing an elbow before wrapping his knee over Steve's leg to pin him. "I could've sworn you at least passed Ms. Jones's third grade class."

"Why do you still have to bring that up?" Steve flipped over and knocked Bucky back to the mattress, glaring down at him with his hair sticking up in spikes. "I passed the goddamn class."

"Barely! They almost held you back because you were always missing lessons, getting sent home with bloody noses--"

"It wasn't like they were gonna send me across the hall to Ms. Holtz so you could patch me up!"

"They should've," Bucky shot back, letting go of his grip on Steve's arms and flattening his palms on soft cheeks instead, holding Steve's face as he tipped his head curiously and looked him over.

Another little smile and Steve dropped down to his elbows, chest compressing heavy over Bucky's heart, both hands sinking into his hair. He wondered what Steve would say if Bucky asked him to cut dark length away from him forever.

"So do I get to have an answer? Am I yours?" It was such a silly question, felt like it didn't come anywhere near what they were, what they'd been since they met.
"You've always been mine." Bucky sighed, shoving a hair through the blonde and snorting at the sudden joy that lit up Steve's face. It was misplaced, though, because that wasn't a concession to the future. He wasn't retracting his belief anytime soon. He couldn't imagine willingly falling again. "But that doesn't mean we can do this, Steve. I don't know if it's even possible for me to open my heart--"

"Is that a challenge?"

"Shit, Steve, no--"

"Steve yes." He bounded up like a goddamn puppy and placed a loud peck to his cheek while Bucky groaned at the sky. "I'm gonna show you Bucky, I'll show you it's real and I'm here forever. I'll prove it to you every day if I have to."

"Why?" Bucky asked the ceiling fan, throwing up the hand that wasn't pinned by Steve for good measure. "Why is this the idiot who weaseled into my life?"

"Shut up. You love me." Another blinding smile and Bucky squinted, too bright to stare right at the sun. "I'll show you. Can I kiss you?"

"Really. You never asked before." Bucky raised an eyebrow and some of the light diminished as Steve's face clouded over, sinking down into the memories of everything'd Bucky shouted yesterday. No, no, none of that. "But...since I know you're not being a manipulative ass and you actually lo--have feelings for me, then. Yes punk, you can kiss me."

"You sure?" Steve asked slowly and Bucky rolled his eyes, grabbing the front of his tshirt.

"Shut up and kiss me, Rogers."

~*~*~

"Uh oh, Rogers is smiling, barr the doors!" Sam shouted and Steve flicked him off on his way to the fridge. "No, seriously man, what's going on? He say it back?"

"No," Steve opened the door and grabbed Sam's orange juice. Sam opened his mouth to protest, but the dreamy look on Cap's face made him shut it again. It wouldn't kill him to let Steve have the goddamned orange juice for once. "But we're working on it. We're working on a lot, and it's good, Sam, it's really good."

A glass sat down on the counter because he was a civilized human being unlike Natasha and Sam watched as Steve poured his precious orange juice with hands steadier than he'd seen in a few weeks.

They'd all gotten to that point where paranoia set in - no one was gonna tell Rogers about Jarvis's footage or the tabs they were keeping on both him and Barnes, but it'd been a necessary precautionary to take. Barnes was pretty fucked up still, and Steve was oblivious to the whole thing - even the way his own hands trembled, it seemed - but now that Clint had a couple holes, it seemed shit was starting to straighten out.

Which was good, because everyone in the tower'd agreed they were damn near intervention-time.

"I'm glad for you, man," Sam said cautiously, shifting on his barstool. Steve hummed and put the orange juice back in the fridge. "I'm always here if you need to talk, you know that, right?"

"I know." Steve shot him a quick smile and grabbed the glass, starting back across the room without as much as a goodbye.
"Jarvis? Are Stark's warnings still on alert?"

"Yes, Mr. Wilson," the walls (or whatever) replied.

"Good." Sam studied the empty elevator Steve'd disappeared into. "Let's keep it that way for awhile."

~*~*~

He shouldn't have told Steve he could use his boombox whenever he wanted.

Because stumbling into the bathroom at 6am and getting assaulted by a sudden blast of music was not his idea of fun.

Bastard set it to auto-motion-play (it was from Stark after all), so at least the only receivers of his knives were the walls. Which was probably the point, but still.

Teelllll me you believe in love, it's not an illusion illusion illusion

"STEVE!!!"

"Hmm?" was all he got in response, stalking into the kitchen and dumping the still-playing boombox onto the kitchen table. Steve was flipping pancakes on the stove and he was wearing a goddamned apron and it was way too early for this.

"What the fuck is this?"

"It's a cute song," he defended, tilting onto one tiptoe to grab cinnamon from the cabinet. "They're that band who sing 'Act My Age.' Remember, that Irish song we danced to?"

Bucky cocked his head, listening to the lyrics. But believe me, I'm not trying to deceive you. I promise falling for me won't be a mistake.

"Má tá tú t-ádh go leor chun a bheith Éireannach, tá tú t-ádh go leor," Bucky muttered, drumming his fingers along the counter.

Steve whipped his head to the side, disbelieving grin creeping onto his features.

"You remember that?"

"Your ma literally said that weekly, Steve. Pretty sure even the Winter Soldier would've recognized that one. Why didn't you shoot for that instead of the awed 'Bucky'?"

"Wait. You remember that?"

"The bridge fight? Yeah, sure. I remembered it after too. Kept saying but I knew him when Hydra was telling me to kill you. They had to wipe me again."

Steve lowered back flat-footed, setting down the cinnamon and wiping his hands off on his apron. Were his eyes watery? His eyes were definitely watery.

He stuck his thumb over his shoulder, indicating the peppy song still drifting from the stereo. "The song isn't actually that bad. I mean, it's cheesy as hell..."

"Bucky," Steve's voice broke over his name and Bucky sighed, hurrying across the kitchen to undo Steve's apron and turn down the heat on the pancakes, whirling Steve around and wiping both hands
over his cheeks.

"C'mon babydoll, don't cry. Of course I knew you, you idiot." He reached up on his tiptoes and pressed a solid kiss on Steve's nose, ruffling his hair for effect as he pulled him away from the stovetop. "C'mon, don't get all soft on me now."

"Sorry," Steve wobbled and Bucky rolled his eyes, cupping his hands on both sides of Steve's neck, catching that shiny gaze on his.

"It's okay. Now talk to me about the song, yeah?"

A soft laugh and Steve's hands covered Bucky's, squishing his cheeks a little. "It's pretty self-explanatory."

Can't you see it? I'm not trying to mislead you. If Steve was good at anything, it was finding goddamn fitting songs. No baby, this is not an illusion. I've really got my heart out on my sleeve.

"I ever tell you your a--"

"Sap? Yes." The smile was hurting, Stevie was hurting, and Bucky couldn't take that, gripping warm skin tighter.

"Kiss me," he murmured, and warm hands squeezed his hips, his ass hitting the counter as Steve caged him in with his body, tilting Bucky's chin up and capturing his mouth with catching lips. It was salty with tears, dizzying with everything else. Fingers slipped beneath his tshirt, branching over skin and it almost burned, summer sun pulling nerve endings to the surface, trapping him here in this body in the most incredible of ways. Hot air cascading over his tingling mouth as they broke apart for a millisecond, then Steve's lips were slipping between his again, tugging plush and slanting together again.

You're the truth I can't explain, you're the only one I see. It's not an illusion to me.

Steve's head tipped to the side, pressing harder against Bucky's mouth, prying his lips open with his tongue, suddenly nine kinds of filthy and wet and Bucky couldn't help the surprised sound escaping his mouth because he was the one with all the kissing practice, what did Steve think he was doing?

Except then those long fingers were digging into his skull and a heavy knee eased between Bucky's legs, forcing a gasp out of parted lips and Steve's tongue curled in his mouth, an electric shock shuddering down his spine and yet, wow, Bucky was really not complaining. The thumbs hooked under his tshirt guided his hips down to grind on Steve's thigh and that's when his veins took fire, devastatingly hard as he choked on another sound and Steve hummed soothingly into his mouth. The leg shoved between his was solid, warm, and... comforting. Strangely. To have Steve this close, this comfortable with Bucky's body, wanting him--

Had he just called this body his without thinking about it?

So tell me you believe in love...

Their mouths pulled apart on twin gasps, not enough oxygen in the inch between them for both their lungs, then Steve was leaning back and running his hands down the sides of Bucky's face, overwhelming adoration in that gaze as he stroked Bucky's cheeks and Bucky just tried to catch his breath, still shaking from the power of the way they were touching and those pretty lips came closer, mouthed the last words over Bucky's mouth, lips catching and moving with Steve's, sticky with wet kisses instead of tears, so tell me you believe in love, cause its not an illusion to me.
And Bucky was shivering, wanting Steve to take him here and now but it was raw, he was raw all over and he wasn't sure he could take anything more than this.

If he looked in a mirror right now, closed Steve on the other side of the door, would it feel real?

He almost wanted to go try.

"You okay?" A gentle voice as Steve kissed his cheek, pressing hard like he could sink right back into Bucky's mouth that way.

He tried responding and the whimper that escaped his throat first was ridiculously embarrassing. Fuck, he was drunk on the feeling of Steve hot and firm against him, could bleed himself dry and fill his organs with this instead--

Except he wasn't supposed to think like that, wasn't supposed to wind tendrils so tightly 'round the rose it shattered in fragility.

"Stevie, hell. The things you do to me, the things you make me want..."

"Like what, Bucky?" Closed eyes and Steve's repetitively-broken nose nuzzled his temple, words barely reaching the air. "Tell me what you want, sweetheart."

The world was split, tingling heat swooping in his stomach and that, Steve's pressure on his crotch, he wanted that. But everything else was so sweet right now, wouldn't it shatter the bubble of comfort and warmth they'd made, how was he supposed to decide between swooning or moaning--

"Do you smell that?" Bucky's eyes shot open but Steve was still lazily draped over him, placing sticky, lingering kisses on his cheekbone. He shut down the brain functions screaming to respond, rerouting his attentions to stave off impending mental crisis. And apparently kitchen crises as well. "Shit, the pancakes are burning--"

He shoved off the counter, ducking free from Steve's arms and darting across the kitchen. Only he'd grabbed Steve's hand on impulse, dragged him over to keep him near.

Addict.

"You're never touching pancakes again my god this is a disaster, the hell'd you use for butter? Hand me that bowl." Bucky gestured impatiently with his free hand and Steve reached, fingers locked together between them, tether and reminder and when Steve squeezed his hand, Bucky squeezed back.

But he still bitched when Bucky told him to back the fuck up and let him cook, so he gave Steve the silver bowl and a spoon and told him to stir, even let him sit on the counter and swing his legs and sing to the *boombox* while Bucky artfully made shield-and-heart pancakes with *minimal* glances in Steve's direction.

Steve started blowing kisses when their eyes met and Bucky blushed, tingled all the way to his toes.

"Kiss me where I lay down, my hands pressed to your cheeks," Steve sang loudly, leaning sideways into Bucky's space for the next line, "a looong way from the playgrooound."

"Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield," Bucky mock-recited and Steve's smile reached his eyes.

"You understood the reference!"
The last time he'd referenced that, Steve's hand had been poised to break his own wrist.

A long way from the playground.

A long way from the battlefield too.

The song kept playing in the background and Bucky hummed along a few counts. It was his favorite - he was sold on the first four lines alone.

"They called you Steven," Bucky giggled and Steve whacked his red star with a wooden spoon.

The morning sun was finally in the sky, lighting up the kitchen in streaks, shooting highlights into fluffy blonde spikes, catching a glow on his left arm in some angles, serene and beautiful.

"I have loved you since we were eighteen," Steve sang, legs swinging to the sides, his hands curled round the counter as he tipped sideways to the beat. "Long before we both thought the same thing."

He still couldn't believe that Steve was singing I have loved you like it was the easiest thing in the world. Like they hadn't spent decades dying for each other with their lips zipped shut.

"Were you really eighteen?" Bucky asked, scooping another round of perfect pancakes onto the serving plate and picturing every moment he could remember of eighteen-year-old-Steve.

"...these arms were made for holding you," Steve finished singing, hopping down off the counter and yanking open the silverware drawer. "More like eight."

"Really?"

"Yep," Steve popped the p, grabbing a handful of silver and sliding the drawer shut with his hip. "Told my mom I wanted to marry you."

Bucky almost dropped a pancake in surprise, thankfully scooping it into a flip before it hit the ground. "Holy shit, what'd she say?"

Steve shrugged, grabbing extra plates and starting on the table setup, hands and eyes focused on the mundane task.

"That I was confused. Not that kinda love." He straightened the forks and made a contemplative face at them. "I knew she was wrong."

Bucky watched him, careful with his words as he toed around the wicked temper and defensive walls. "Your ma wasn't wrong about much from what I remember."

Which was true, she'd raised them both with all the answers and an inescapable kiss to the forehead.

"She was wrong about this," Steve said firmly, taking the plate of finished pancakes and setting it on the table. All the stubbornness Sarah had, Steve had double.

So was he certain Sarah was wrong about what kinda love Steve felt. Unless...he'd been talking about the marrying thing? Was that something Steve wanted? To get married?

To him?

Whatever it was Steve was talking about, he'd known all the way back then.
And well, Sarah was wrong about one thing for sure. Steve wasn't gonna die in the back of some alley. He was gonna right here in the middle of some fucking Houston street throwing himself into a throng of electrically-enhanced-experiment-zombies.

"What the fuck are you doing," Bucky complained, shoving his next clip in and taking out the creature lopping towards Steve's deaf side.

Wait Steve didn't have deaf side--

Whatever. He'd take out all the bastards around Steve. Especially since Steve thought it was a good idea to abandon his relatively safe post in order to fight amidst the deepest of these peoplecreaturethings.

At least he had a great post from the overhanging highway, perched with a perfect view of the city. And the perfect spot to gun down every creaturething before it got a chance to come within five feet of his idiot Steve.

It was about three minutes of swinging around in circles at already-falling zombies before Steve threw up his hands in exasperation, shouting upwards in Bucky's general direction-ish.

"Let me hit someone, Buck!!"

He peered through his sniper scope, picked out the smallest, sickliest looking zombie and shot down everyone else except that one. There. Steve couldn't say Bucky never gave him anything.

"Asshole," Steve muttered into the comms, uppercutting the tiny zombie with his shield.

"Woah, woah, let's not share explicit relationship details over the intercoms--"

"Do you ever shut up Stark?" Bucky complained, re-aiming to send a bullet into the foot of the red and gold metal blasting past. Stark made an indignant sound and Bucky lowered his sights again with a smile.

By the time they took out the threat to downtown, storm clouds were gathering overhead and growling in recompensation. Someone made a joke about Steve's friend being annoyed he couldn't join in the fight and Bucky just had to shake his head, because they were fighting creature-experiments and joking about Gods of Thunder and how was this the future they'd both made it to?

Everyone was heading back to the quinjet after helping with a cleanup when said rainclouds opened up. Stark and Sam flew back the rest of the way for fear of their equipment, taking Bruce and Nat with them. Clint was actually on coms in the Stark Tower, making a lot of jokes from his hospital bed. He'd be back in commission tomorrow, and Bucky was pretty sure he'd only stayed behind because everyone'd lined his recovery room with pizza boxes.

But for now Bucky and Steve were stuck in the rain and walking on foot for the last block. The second the water started pinging off his metal arm, there was suddenly a dry spot. Or a metal disk floating overtop of his head. Bucky looked up, into the underside of Steve's shield.

"Well now you don't have an umbrella," Bucky pointed out, squinting through the increasing wall of rain at the water running in rivets down Steve's uniform. He shrugged, a little smile at one corner of his mouth.

"I don't rust," he commented, reaching over to flick Bucky's arm.

"Neither do I! You know I take showers all the time."
"Well I don't know that, first-hand." The blue eyes widened innocently and Bucky laughed, reaching from under his shield-umbrella to shove Steve sideways, even if it meant the cover tilting and pouring a rivet of rain between them.

"You two are still on comms," Clint offered and Steve cursed, leaving Bucky to laugh harder.

~*~

"I'm just glad Bruce didn't break the Houston aquarium - no one wants to deal with albino alligators running around the city too," Tony raised his eyebrows at Bruce, who narrowed his a little and turned his music up louder. Sam leaned an elbow on the cockpit with a curious look out the quinjet's windshield at the city disappearing below.

"They have albino alligators?"

Natasha rolled her eyes at the boys, steadying her balance as she peeled off her leather jacket, hanging it carefully in its place before spinning back around, aimed towards Steve's chair and mouth half-opened with a question before she realized it was empty.

He was in the middle of scooping Bucky's hair into a ponytail when Natasha shouted from the cockpit. He finished the tie, kissed the exposed back of Bucky's neck, and jumped up to see what Nat needed.

Rounding the corner from the shadowed tail-end benches revealed a very worried, arms-crossed redhead. Everyone else were in their regular seats, joking quietly and relaying plays of the fight, discussing something or another.

"Nat, what's u--"

"What's going on?" She interrupted, grabbing his arm and leading him off to the side, no room for answering before she waved a hand behind them and furrowed her eyebrows, shaking her head in confusion. "You always sit with the team."

"What?" Steve cocked his head in surprise, amused smile on his face as he reminded her. "I've been hiding in the back of the bar with Buck for long as I can--"

Remember, the Howling Commandos and a dozen other soldiers in a swirling, golden room, clunking piano keys and drunken singing, shouted laughter as Steve wove through the crowds, tension draining from his shoulders the moment he crossed the threshold into the back room, Buck waiting for him on a barstool. Just the two of them, the way it always was, sneaking off to the comfort of each other.

Nat blinked at him, waiting for him to finish the pause. The Avengers, piling into the quinjet after a mission. Tony plopping down in cockpit, Sam beside him and Bruce too, if he were there. Nat leaning against the wall with a snarky comment, Clint beside her. Steve on the opposite wall, arms crossed and plastered smile as he ran over battle suggestions with the team until Tony complained for a lighter mood and they all shared stories instead, one of the echoing laughs his.

He'd sat with the Commandos, sometimes, when they went out for drinks. But the moment missions were over it was instinct to close the flap behind him on the tent he shared with Bucky. Fall behind in the squad marching back, the two of them keeping up tail and talking about nothing at all as they marched over thick treeroots in forests. Even right after Azzano, when everything had been off, it'd been his instinct to separate himself from the team, to go running to the man waiting in the back.
instead of keeping his Captain Stance on, his Captain Voice, never stepping back from the star on his chest, never taking off the red white and blue--

Bucky'd asked him if he'd keep the suit. Not become it.

"...remember," he finally finished, trailing off in echoing wonder.

Natasha gave him a strange look and crossed her arms over her chest again, leaning closer with red hair bouncing.

"This is your team, Rogers. Is one member more important than--"

"Than sitting with the Avengers?" He interrupted, and suddenly the suit compressing his chest felt betrayingly tight, irrationally bright. It wasn't the brown, medallioned Captain's uniform he'd worn off the battlefield in the forties, he hadn't stepped in a real soldier's clothes since.... Steve swallowed, shaking his head once and curling his fists. "It's a plane ride, Natasha. I'm sitting with Barnes."

He brushed past her, aware of how the cockpit had fallen silent, ignoring the questioning gazes as their Precious Good Captain America marched to the back of the plane.

She was right - he always sat with them. Hanging on the edges, quiet. Gazing off, detached, isolated at his own celebration parties. Looking out over a crowd like an outsider.

He didn't used to be an observer of his own life. He used to have two feet on the ground. Natasha wasn't to blame for not understanding - she'd never seen him human, none of them had, he'd never let himself take off the suit because it was his only protection, the only way he even had friends.

None of them wanted to befriend Steve Rogers. No one ever had but Buck. Nat knew Captain America and that was fine, that's who he'd become, that superhuman with the morals and the golden-boy blood.

Did he have any human left?

It hit him harder than a swing to the face, saturating the world and dumping him on his proverbial ass. His hand darted to grab an outlay of the jet's wall, head dipped as the floor tipped and threatened to deposit him on the ground. Upright, all he had to stay was upright and he'd be fine--

"Stevie?"

That name shouldn't belong to him anymore.

A flash of dark hair, then a soft sound as Bucky hit the wall, tipping the plane sideways with the weight of supersoldier+metal and Sam shouted for them to settle down the post-mission celebration because Tony was threatening to come back there and film, words drifting uselessly over the air as Steve stared at his hands.

Bucky's fingers were curled, eyes wide, muscles tensed from the harsh shove.

"I'm so sorry," Steve rushed, reaching before he realized these were the hands that'd hurt, they couldn't heal too and then he didn't know where to put them, spinning around in a circle and forcibly unclenching the fists they kept making without his permission.

"Hey, hey, it's okay. Is it the plane?" Bucky hovered nervously at his elbow, and at least he looked
okay, he wasn't bleeding, just surprised, asking Steve if he was what - freaking out because of PTSD? He wasn't fucking stressed or whatever the fuck Bucky thought was wrong with him, he was fine, he could handle fucking planes. Crystal eyes worried over his features and Steve's chest was pumping air too fast, raising up and down, making metal fingers twitch as Bucky worried his bottom lip between his teeth. "Can I touch you?"

"I'm sorry," Steve tried again, letting Bucky lead him carefully back to the benches in the shadows. Suddenly the wings were tipping and they were sliding over slick floors and fuck, fuck, maybe the plane was crashing, how was he supposed to deal with that right now too?

"I'm here, angel, you're okay," Bucky soothed. Steve blinked against leather, jolting in shock as the sudden sharp smell pressed to his nose; and tried to remember falling onto Bucky's chest, how the metal hand stroking his hair had gotten there. How long he'd been clinging to Bucky like the lifeboat he'd never had.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled against Bucky's collarbone and the hands in his hair stilled, hooking under his jaw to tip his face up.

"You have nothing to apologize for." Crystal searched his for a moment, then Bucky pushed his shoulders down, sitting him on the bench before swooping down beside him, hand cradling the back of Steve's head like he couldn't hold it up on his own.

The glass had been so loud when it shattered. He hadn't expected it to happen all at once, the moment the nose hit water, but it'd been an instantaneous explosion, the sinking-stomach feeling from the altitude drop turned to irrational, spiking fear.

"It sucks, huh?" Bucky whispered, pressing a kiss to his jaw. The strands of hair that'd escaped his ponytail were brushing Steve's neck, the sides of his face, too soft for the way he'd just shoved Bucky and practically barreled into him afterwards. And Buck was acting like this was all okay, like the whole world wasn't all wrong.

"Why can't I take back what it took?" He whispered back and he could be talking about flying, planes, instead of a man who died in the ice seventy years ago and never unfroze.

"Take me," Bucky whispered, then hot air was ghosting Steve's mouth and parted lips to follow, the sudden weight of two hands on his thighs as Bucky leaned over to kiss him, soft and pliant. A distraction. With his eyes closed he could feel every press of Bucky's lips, how easy they caved, like he was waiting for Steve to push forward and grab him, pull Bucky over into his lap--

_Do you wanna fuck me? Huh? If I let you fuck me, will you leave me the fuck alone? 'Cause I'll do it._

At least he had the sense to throw Bucky off him before the bile threatened to resurface, shoving him blindly aside as a hand jumped up to cover his mouth, eyes squeezed shut to keep from hurling, replaying the look on Bucky's face as his fingers fumbled with his belt and he couldn't handle this, how was he supposed to ever...

"Steve?"

"God, I'm gonna be sick," his hand muffled most of the whisper, didn't stop the sudden palm pressed to his forehead, checking his temperature like _that_ could be a problem. Bucky's skin was warm, grounding, worriedly holding his head in place and it wasn't right, he'd been trying to help and Steve even managed to fuck _that_ up. The fingers over his mouth curled roughly, digging into his own jaw to bring back any sensation that wouldn't leave him shoving Bucky again. "I'm sorry," he grit between teeth still holding back the urge to vomit.
How many things had he fucked up? The one thing he'd always taken for granted thought Steve just wanted to take him. That he only kept Bucky around for...

"Hey, no, it's fine, you're dizzy, it happens." Sweet fingers curving down his face, over his hunched spine. If only it was vertigo, if only he could be sick from just the goddamn plane instead of that and the suit squeezing his chest and the goddamned boy stroking his back, the one who'd laid down his body like an offering Steve could crush.

Bucky'd thought--

He shoved both hands into his hair, clutching to stop spinning that had nothing to do with altitude.

"Fuck, I'm losing my..."

"--center of balance?" Bucky finished for him with a little smile of comfort in his words. Like it was all okay.

Steve pried his head upright. Mirrored the pained smile with a similar nod and turned towards the window, shoving down the slow-dripping word mind he'd planned to finish that sentence with. He had to be okay.

Especially now, when everything was so fresh and new. He should be focusing on Bucky right now, on the confession of I love you resting between them. On building something. That was what mattered.

Bucky was what mattered. He had to get a grip and figure out how to breathe in the tight clothes SHIELD and the Avengers and the World wanted him to wear. It didn't matter that he missed the ragged suits that hung off his frame.

He had Bucky now, nothing else mattered.

A soft kiss to his cheek, hand slipping in his, and Steve had to close his eyes before Buck saw the way they were shining.

And for once, it wasn't to hide his love. It was to hide something else entirely.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I know, more 1D but those songs had to make an appearance somewhere because seriously, stucky.

So the rain idea was inspired by this adorable art:
and here is the source!

I know people are looking for solace between these two and really, it had to get worse before it got better but hey, it got pretty bad so there's definitely some good to look forward to.

As always, thank you all so much for reading, you're wonderful people and your comments make my entire existence. If you wanna come yell with (or at) me, I'm here!

xx


"Bucky. Wake uppp."

A soft groan and Bucky rolled onto his stomach, metal fingers untucking from under him to raise the middle one at Steve.

"So classy, Barnes. Get the fuck outta bed."

Long hair disheveled distractedly as Buck lifted his head and glared through the messy veil at Steve. "You're no better than me, asshole."
"Never said I was. Now get up."

A swinging kick that Steve barely managed to dodge, then Bucky was grumbling, sitting up and shoving hands into his hair. He was so precious in the mornings, especially the mornings where he wasn't throwing knives. A moment's hesitation, then Steve decided *fuck it* and bent over to press a rough kiss to Bucky's forehead, holding his head in place with a possessive hand.

Bucky made another noise and waved Steve off, grumbling something about little or not so little blonde punks ruining his sleep and Steve smiled the whole time he was searching for his running shoes.

"Hey Cap!" Sam called, waving him closer. "You see that sign? Memorial Day concert in Central Park. You goin'?"

"If Bucky wants to," Steve shrugged, glancing over the sidewalk to where Barnes was keeping pace with them easily, hair dislodging from his ponytail the faster they ran, framing his face all soft and disheveled. Long hair was a goddamn blessing.

"You gotta," Sam insisted, less outta breath than usual with the slower place they were (hallelujah) taking. "Probably playing your theme song."

"Theme song?" That signature befuddled-with-newfangled-twenty-first-century look and Sam grinned, tipping his head with the most axiomatic look he could muster.

"My Country 'Tis of Thee? America the Beautiful? Y'know, all the songs about you."

"About America," Barnes corrected, falling in closer stride and Sam gave him a funny look.

"Yeah, man...Captain America, remember?"

"He remembers just fine," Steve suddenly snapped and Sam's feet jolted in surprise. Not like it would've mattered, because Steve's smile shut down and he just...took off.

Left them both in the dust, a quick glance at his shoes then eating pavement fast enough to rewrite records.

"Wow. Uh. What was that about?" He started jogging again, pushing faster in case there was any chance of catching up.

He glanced over at Barnes, but the long-sleeved-shoulders only shrugged.

By the time they reached the edge of Central Park, Steve's body had to be *aching* with how fast he'd ran on an empty stomach. The sidewalks were crowded, but the towhead wasn't hard to keep a (very distant) eye on as Steve pushed through the crowds.

Then suddenly he stopped, one hand on the wall and head dipped, chest heaving and a dark inverted triangle of sweat soaking his back. They were too far away to see his face so Sam pushed through the crowds faster, Bucky keeping obediently by his side.

Steve's body suddenly jolted, visibly shaking even from the distance, and he was gonna fall, his legs looked about ready to give out on him--

A pedestrian knocked Sam's shoulder and he cursed, glancing back up in time to see Steve darting into the closest coffeeshop, disappearing with a hand over his mouth.
That couldn't be good. He quickened the pace, arm out to push through the coffeeshop door, when Bucky grabbed his bicep and pulled him gently aside.

"Let him go." The look on Barnes' face was passive, too passive.

"Shouldn't we follow him?" Sam glanced between the door and Bucky, but all he got was a nonchalant glance.

"His hair's too short to hold back. He'll be fine. You have mint gum?" Barnes checked pockets and Sam furrowed his eyebrows with a "no," trying to peer through the windows to catch a glimpse of blonde. He was probably in the bathroom then, if Sarge was right about him overexerting himself to the point of hurling.

"He do this often?"

"Running himself ragged? Yeah." Bucky crossed his arms over his chest, leaning on the brick and for just a moment the mask of indifference cracked, worry slipping temporarily before he cut it down, staring at the ground. "I can't decide if coming home weak-limbed or broken-limbed's worse."

Sam'd vowed to support the two outta-timers, they had enough on their plates without being nagged, but this was one'a those times someone had to step in before either got seriously damaged. He crossed his arms over his chest too, pursing his lips to the side before shifting his weight, glancing at Barnes carefully.

"You know that's really not healthy-"

"Yes, I know that," Bucky snapped, crystal eyes flashing as he narrowed them at Sam and then the door. The metal arm whirred and anger faded a smidgen, resigned sorrow filling the frown. "He won't listen to me."

It was a long shot at the least, but there wasn't much else he could offer, so Sam tilted his head and kept his voice as levelly helpful as possible. "You think he'd listen to me?"

Finding their target was easy when Steve was the only huge blonde with slightly shaking hands and a pale, pained face. He was at the front of the coffee queue, ordering some drink or another, too focused to notice them entering. Bucky sighed beside him, pausing at the edge of the counter to pull the disheveled ponytail out, both hands reaching up to redo it in a bun.

It all happened in slow motion, black glove twirling his long hair atop his head, and the long sleeves on his arms slipped, succumbing to gravity, sliding down to flash jarring metal in overhead lights. Bucky didn't notice, too preoccupied with studying Steve to realize he'd exposed a futuristic robot arm on a man who already held himself like a killer, a spark in his eyes and shit, knives lining his belt, glinting right along with the arm.

The scream was so loud Steve nearly spat out his coffee, spinning with wide eyes to the scene. The little boy wailing, tiny finger pointing as tears bubbled at his eyes, words blubbering high-pitched and terrified. "Monster! Mommy, monstermonster! Killer robot's gonna get me, killer robotkillerrobotkillerrobot!"

Bucky was frozen, staring at the kid like he was Hydra, fingers still tangled wrapping a tie around his bun. The kid screamed louder and the mom grabbed his hand and took off for the door, looking near
as terrified as her son, muttering something about not invoking dangerous people and Bucky was still frozen, staring at the same spot, metal arm flashing and whirring in warning.

A cop two tables over fidgeting, setting down his coffee to stand, looking nervously between the door and Bucky, hand going to his belt, and Steve's brain finally kicked into gear.

He abandoned the drink and crossed the room fast enough that his head was pounding again but he couldn't give a damn, reaching for Bucky's left arm to slide the sleeve back down. Only the moment he touched metal Bucky flinched away from him, turning his entire left side out of Steve's reach. He threw an arm over Bucky's shoulders and Bucky elbows him off, refusing to let Steve anywhere near his left side and fine, they weren't gonna mess with it right now, they could talk once they got the hell outta here and back to the tower.

With the compromise of an arm around Bucky's waist he led the silent, stunned man over sidewalks, all the way back to the tower with Sam faithfully trailing beside.

"You take him up, I'll make him something to eat?" Sam offered as they stepped into the elevator and Steve nodded gratefully, letting go of Bucky's waist to press the button for their floor. Bucky backed into the corner, tucking his left shoulder out of sight and a wave of dizziness had Steve reaching for his hand, needing to know they were both alright, only Bucky's right hand wasn't there, fingers squeezed tight over his left bicep.

He looked about ready to rip off his arm.

Not safe; he'd blown his cover. Order: relocate. Civilian witnesses and coffeeshop cameras, a confirmed sighting. Running, they should already be running--

The look on his face was horrifying and Steve could picture it, Bucky curled in a bathtub, right arm clawing bloody at his arm like he could scrape away all the pain it'd caused and that image was too much, he couldn't handle this.

Then the elevator dinged open and Bucky darted past him, leaving Steve to follow weakly behind. His shield was propped on the wall, the silver marks from Peggy's hotfire gun flashing in the morning sun and he had to be strong, for Bucky, had to be that man again.

Captain Rogers, he forced himself to pretend that's what they meant when they called him Cap. That's what the Howling Commandos had meant, they'd called him Captain in reference to the man in the brown medaled uniform who'd held up that shield to Peggy Carter and asked what do you think?

And then cowered in awe as she stalked away on heels, beautiful hair swishing with the sound of her gunfire echoing around the base. Captain Rogers: a real soldier.

If he focused hard enough, he could pretend the Avengers saw him that way too. But what of that was left to see? He was Captain America to them. It was his own fault. He didn't know how to strip the red white and blue from their image of him, didn't know how to push aside the icon and show the face behind the mask.

Was the face even there anymore?

A quiet crash and Steve jumped, startling back into the present. Bucky.

He was sitting on the floor in his room, one arm wrapped around his knees and the other limp at his side, framed Howling Commandos montage scattered in pieces at his feet. The past, their old faces, their old smiles and laughter from that film in the museum--
Were those the ghosts? Or was it them now that weren't real anymore?

"They couldn't have known--" Steve started, crouching down beside Bucky on the floor. He got a glare through a veil of messy hair, but at least he wasn't frozen anymore. Crashing glass and pictures tended to bring you back to reality pretty damn fast.

"That I kill people with a terrifying hunk of metal?" He shot back and Steve plopped down beside him, grabbed the right hand from around his knees and kissed the skin on his fingers.

"It's done good too, Buck," he reminded softly, stroking a thumb over the only hand Bucky was letting him touch. "You pulled me in and kissed me with that arm the first time--"

It was the wrong thing to say. The hand disappeared and Bucky skid away, thankfully backing towards his bed instead of the spewed glass, a mean sneer twisting his mouth.

"What, you gonna be my redemption?"

Steve pushed to his feet, walking right up to Bucky and sitting down on the edge of his bed, only then the confidence flickered, hands trembling again. He squeezed them together, gaze flicking over the pictures on the ground. One of them was flipped up, a simple one from a film reel of battle, Bucky at his side and Steve's finger pointing at something in the distance.

"Is that what you want? Am I what you want?"

Bucky eased down next to him, tense all over. "Don't be ridiculous," he said crossly, like Steve's question was legitimately offensive. "You know the answer to that."

"Do I?" Steve muttered, shutting his eyes and running a hand through his hair, only the pictures weren't disappearing in the darkness.

"Steve, I want you." Less axiomatic this time, more the way you reminded a child not to play with fire. They were too late for that. He opened his eyes again, staring at his upturned palms instead of looking at the man beside him.

At least he'd said that much, Steve shouldn't push him, except in all those photographs he'd been drowning in love for his best friend, deep enough that he'd dragged Bucky with him through a war, selfish enough he'd let him die, let seventy years of hell take him away.

He had to know.

"How long?" Steve asked the sepia smile on Bucky's face in 1944.

"Too long," he replied easily and Steve couldn't take it anymore, he had to know, to be sure he'd fucked up their entire lives with an unrequited love story of one-sided dedication.

"Give me a date."

A shift and silence, then the sassy smirk in his words that Steve didn't need to look up to see. "What, you didn't like our trip to the World War 2 monument?"

There was a lot in that question, too much to take right now and Steve shoved it down, deeper where it couldn't hurt Bucky, where he was the only one being eaten by parasites.

"Bucky," he pushed, because this wasn't something he could dance around anymore.

And apparently neither could Bucky.
"Why does it matter?" He stood, snatching up a photograph and crumpling it in the metal hand. "Does it make it easier to believe if you think I loved you before I was a monster?"

The ground was slipping under his feet, impending avalanche and god, how could he be so selfish when Bucky was still hurting? Forget what Steve needed, "C'mon. You know that's not what I meant."

"Do I?" Bucky mocked back. "Because I hate to break it to you, I've always been a monster, Steve."

The little kid had shouted monster and Bucky'd frozen, broken, the words he'd had aimed his way for seventy years still trailing at his feet like a demon's shadow.

*Always been.* On their roadtrip, Bucky'd mentioned something about being deadly and broken long before Hydra. But that didn't make him a monster. Not Bucky.

"A killer, maybe." Steve lifted his head, stood all the way. Raising fists to take Bucky's hand in his, snatching the left too before Bucky could pull back, even though he tried, even though metal fought and whirred against him. Steve squeezed his fingers tighter. "But that doesn't make your left arm any less beautiful."

He said it like a challenge and Bucky twisted in confusion. "It's not--"

"It is, Bucky," Steve interrupted, letting go of his tight grip to brush his fingers up the cold plates. "You are."

The anger twisted, fingers curling too tight; a pause, precipce; and releasing, draining away as Bucky melted against him, emotions leaving him soft and pliable against Steve's chest, mellowing out of the Winter Soldier and into his best friend, both their knees a little weak.

He tugged them to the bed, sitting on the edge so no one's legs gave out, tracing his fingers higher over Bucky's shoulder, ducking underneath his sleeve and stroking back down.

"Beautiful, you hear me?" Steve whispered, tucking his hand under the metal one, lifting them both into the air, holding his palm out towards Bucky.

Crystal eyes were wet on the edges but his face was smoothed and calm now, curiosity and hesitance as metal fingers spread, his palm extending forward slowly. Sitting on the bed and facing each other, fingers lined up between them, the heels of their palms, cold hard metal against the cave of Steve's callused hand. Like reaching to touch your reflection, hand against thin glass, mirroring each other as two humans with two real hands.

"One day," Steve started, voice crackling enough to clear his throat and try again, wrapping his thumb over the back of Buck's left hand. "I'm gonna prove to you this is beautiful too."

Soft eyes flicked to his and Steve leaned across the space between them, tipping his mouth against Bucky's ear as he dropped to a whisper. The words hesitated on the edge of his tongue, barely convincing himself to say them when just the thought alone was so goddamned overwhelming, but.

He sucked in a breath and blew it back out slowly, ghosting hot air as the words pressed against Bucky's skin. "One day... I want this inside of me."

The whisper sent shivers down both their spines. It sunk more sensual than sexual but Bucky's body tightened all over anyways, collapsing forward weakly. Forehead pressed to Steve's shoulder, a soft groan as he closed his eyes, metal hand tightening around Steve's.
"I love you," Steve whispered and he could feel Bucky's heartbeat in his neck, the way it skipped and pounded. Entwining their fingers and squeezing tight enough for sensor pressures to shift plates. "Every part of you."

Running fingertips delicately over metal knuckles, Steve could still remember rolling out of the way as this same brutal fist shattered the concrete where his head'd just been, the way his heart had pounded in terror, realizing he may have finally met the man to end him.

How right had he been? And now his heart was pounding with the same thoughts and a very different kind of ending.

Rogers: the building that stands after a hurricane destroys every living thing.

Barnes: unraveling bricks and shattered glass, melting silver dripping weak to a black pit below.

He stroked Steve's cheek with his open metal palm, staring straight into the sun, and wrapped an arm over his shoulders, tipping forward and pulling his best friend into a hug.

Steve clung to him tight and somehow, no one cried.

~*~*~

"Oh, did I just take over your entire country? Is that right? With this modern game I supposedly won't understand?"

"Jeez, Barnes," Stark muttered, repositioning what Risk pieces he had left. "What'd you do with Cap and who is this sassy asshole?"

Bucky glanced over his shoulder, studying the innocent look on Steve's expression versus the chagrined one on Tony's. It almost could've been the Stevie he knew. With a shrug Bucky turned back to the chessboard, making a face at Pepper's destruction of his bishop.

Clint was playing solitaire on the coffee table next to the chessboard and it was raining outside, there wasn't much else to do.

"Hey! That's not a legal move, Stark."

"This is literally the first time you've played this game, you have no idea what's legal or not, Rogers." The sound of a card slapping onto the board. "Just because you're all righteousness about the country doesn't mean you know anything about Eurasia."

Bucky knocked out one of Pepper's pawns and waited for the pending explosion behind them.

"And what would you know about anything other than your luscious glass tower, Tony? Some of us fought over there, some of us saw the world and got our hands dirty, laid down on the wire--"

Not the wire.

"Cool down Papa, don't you blow your top," Bucky sing-songed, scooting his rook outta the way.
A spray sounded, pieces rattling and an offended noise, and everybody's heads lifted to look at Tony and Steve. Stark was wiping his mouth, setting his water aside and wiping the splattered table down distractedly with his sleeve while his widened eyes turned on Bucky in offense.

"My god, Barnes. TMI."

"Tee-em....what?" Bucky sat up, turning around on the couch and furrowing his eyebrows, because how was Stark spitting out his drink his fault? Tony made a really? face and took another sip of his water before tipping his head with an axiomatic,

"No one needed to know you have a daddy kink."

It was Steve's turn to almost spit out his drink and Tony snickered, fixing a plastic piece on their gameboard. Bucky ran back over everything he'd just said, because where the hell had that come from...oh.

"No, no, it's from that song. Straighten Up and Fly Right?" He made a nondescript handgesture and the awkward silence broke as Pepper moved another piece and Clint shuffled his discard pile, dealt himself another round.

"That makes way more sense," Clint glanced up at the rest of them before turning back to solitaire with a tutting sound. "Steve is not the daddy type."

My god. Bucky shook his head and turned back to chess, only the door was open and it was Steve, he had to, it was in his blood. He moved his knight and said just loud enough to be heard but quiet enough to be offhand, "Well, you've never seen the beard."

"Cap had a beard?" Tony whipped his head to Steve and the pained look on that pretty face was exactly what Bucky'd been aiming for.

"Oh god, Bucky, no," Steve pleaded and Bucky smiled, because there wasn't anything better than embarrassing stories about Steve.

"Oh, do tell," Pepper encouraged, ponytail flipping as she gave Steve a look. Bucky leaned back on the couch, winking at Stevie's frown before he started dramatically.

"It started when Dugan found out he'd never been able to grow one as a kid, that young pretty skin and all." Pepper made an awe sound and Steve put a hand over his face. Bucky smiled wider and continued. "So there was a month in '44... we were gonna be isolated from the cameras - and Peggy - and the Commandos dared Steve to grow it out. And let me tell you."

Bucky didn't get another word in before a plastic Risk piece smacked him dead-center forehead. Steve had a triumphant grin and Clint was laughing at him, then Pepper knocked his king over in checkmate.

He sighed heavily and pushed off the couch, nodding a good game at Potts before he plopped down on the stool between Stark and Steve, directly in front of the Risk board, and put Steve's little arrow back in his country, except probably in a better place because if they were good at anything, it was war strategy.

Tony's water was still on the counter and at least half-full, so Bucky snagged that too, watching as Tony fumbled his way through adding more troops.

They only got three minutes of content silence before Tony had to open his mouth again.
"...seriously though, if you guys sang that song in the forties, who was the top then?"

And it was Bucky's turn to spit out his drink.

Clint perked up from his spot on the floor, leaning around Pepper's novel to add an intrusive comment of his own.

"Actually, who's the top now?"

"My question first," Stark shot back, then all three heads turned to Steve and Bucky.

They turned to each other with wide eyes.

Tony watched the supersoldiers watch each other, everyone in the room frozen as two of the deadliest people on the planet stared wide-eyed like six inches away from him, matching unreadable expressions and weird stillness.

To be fair, they'd just been asked who topped in their relatively-new relationship and it was 99.99% likely they hadn't slept together yet and it was Captain fucking America after all, he was the paradigm of purity and goodness.

They still didn't move and maybe Tony'd broke the poor virgin vintage boys who probably never even talked about sex, let alone had it, and he may have just ruined Captain America?

Or not.

What he didn't expect, what he was pretty sure no one expected, was the perfect mirror, two twins jumping forward at the exact same time.

"It'd've been me!" They both shouted, and Tony's stool slid half a foot as they shoved each other off their stools and my god, he was way to close to this, and he was pretty sure Rogers just growled something that sounded like "oh yeah?"

And then they were wrestling on the floor and jesus, not holding back the slightest, it looked more like dancing except actually really violent, and kinda sexual, and he just threw his hands in the air, jumping off his own stool before they knocked it over with their rolling around and fuck, he was pretty sure Barnes just made that sound--

"Oh god, Pepper, I don't get paid enough," he complained, covering his face exaggeratedly as he fell down on the couch beside her. She put her book down and he could hear the amusement in her voice as she looked over his shoulder at the two idiots wrestling and probably wrecking his goddamn stools.

"We don't get paid at all, taking care of those two kids." Yes, kids, that was the perfect word. He'd told Rogers to lighten up, but he was pretty sure the only person who actually made him young was Barnes. And as much as he complained, a Cap that was smiling was...kinda nice, actually.

Although it was still weird, Cap was acting weird, and why were neither of them shocked and horrified at the idea of who topped in the forties, he'd really thought he'd had something there. Maybe if you've been best friends with someone forever, shit like that doesn't phase anymore. Still, though, it was a serious topic and they were wrestling over it--

"Pretty sure they take care of each other," Clint offered, laying down his last card and making a victorious noise at winning solitaire. Against himself. Again.
"Barnes! Eight o'clock!"

Bucky ducked and swung out his arm, knife flying from his fingertips and dropping the assailant with a stunned look and bleeding forehead.

"Rogers, head up!"

Steve swung around, efficiently bouncing his shield off the attacker who'd dropped unnoticed behind him.

"C'mere, you're better behind me," Bucky commanded, waving Steve over in between backflip-kicking the next victim's face.

"You two planning date night or fighting?" Tony commented sarcastically from above and everyone ignored him.

Steve did fight better behind him, when Bucky could have his six. And it didn't hurt to keep an eye on the gorgeous ass in that suit too.

The suit that Steve'd picked at uncomfortably on the ride over, finally fessing up after a lot of poking and pestering that it "felt tight, is all." Right.

Bucky didn't know what that was all about.

Steve loved the suit. Walked like he was always wearing it, puffed twice as big when he actually was.

Even if he wanted to be more than the flag, the attachment ran too deep. He needed that, the shield in his hand, the star on his chest.

The place he was most comfortable: the way Bucky used to only feel safe behind his mask. He actually wasn't wearing it today. Figured he'd give tying his hair up and looking relatively-normal a shot.

And from the heated glances Steve was giving him between punches to bad guys, Bucky was pretty sure the messy bun was worth it.

He was sniping from a rooftop when the access door blasted open - actually, blasted off its hinges, falling to the ground as Steve came rolling into view and Bucky straightened worriedly, turning to ask Steve what could possibly be bad enough to warrant him following Bucky up here--

then Steve reached out and turned off the comm on Bucky's uniform, still breathing hard as he leaned in against Bucky's ear and whispered, "I'd've topped you in the forties."

That, that's what--

Alright, he was high enough on adrenaline to play that game.

He ran his gaze obviously down Steve's body, taking in the pleasant curves of the uniform before raising a curious eyebrow and leaning in closer. Blinked innocently up at Steve's blue eyes, thumb
brushing over an arm of the raised white star on his chest and casually challenged, "Stick me with that little prick a' yours? You think so?"

"I think I've had you begging for it," Steve replied, low and husky, and Bucky groaned low in his throat, dragging his bottom lip through his teeth and slowly popping it out, wet and puffy.

Steve yanked him close with one arm, mouths nearly brushing and tingling everywhere--

A sound behind them and Steve slid his palm over leather, grabbing the gun from Bucky's thigh and aiming it high to shoot cleanly over Bucky's shoulder.

"You used to shove me behind you, now you don't even bother," Bucky teased, running a hand down red and white stripes over abs, remembering the dozen times he'd been shoved behind Steve's back - the last of which ended with Steve down and the shield in Bucky's hand, then the train's walls'd peeled back and that'd been the end of that.

Except then a red glove was shoving him again, pushing Bucky roughly, slamming his back hard against the brick wall; Steve's body following and pressing tight, the bright blue shoulders pinning Bucky behind him.

"Like that?"

"Fuck, Steve," Bucky moaned, rolling his hips forward against Steve's perfect ass, making him grind back against his crotch roughly.

A red glove reached behind and gripped Bucky's hair tight for a single moment, fucking up his bun but a perfect picture stretched out over Bucky's chest; before Steve was suddenly rolling away, using the momentum as he straightened to vault over the edge of the roof, flipping out of sight and Bucky ran to the precipice, leaning over with fallen strands from his bun dangling in his face as he watched Steve plummet for the ground, reaching up to blow a kiss on the way down, cheeky smile on his face before he smoothly landed in a roll and dipped into it, throwing the shield on the impact, already back in the fight.

Bucky was left with his chest heaving, staring after the idiot who'd come up here just to say that and do that with huge, dark eyes.

He didn't turn on his comm in time to hear the comment as Stark blasted past him, took one look at Bucky's widened eyes following Steve's path through the black-suited enemy and murmured a soft, "Ah, those two. Fighting, they're lethal. Around each other, they melt."

Steve heard it, but he was too busy thinking about the look on Bucky's face, the way he'd hardened so quickly against Steve's ass--

The whole quinjet ride home had them on opposite sides of the same bench, forcing Sam to sit between them with no explanation as to why, shooting fuck me eyes over the barrier between them anyways.

They made it as far as Bucky's bedroom (it was closer) before he slammed Bucky into a wall. The gasp he made sent shivers down Steve's spine, sun-hot leather under his gloves as he palmed Bucky's thighs, sliding under to hoist him higher on the wall with two handfuls of his ass and Bucky was moaning wantonly, heavy boots crossed behind Steve's back, probably getting mud all over his uniform but he really couldn't give a damn.
Metal fingers were clutched tightly in the straps on the front of Steve's uniform, holding onto him like he'd fall the minute he loosened his grip but he wouldn't, Steve'd never let him fall again.

He scraped his teeth over the only part of Bucky's neck he could reach in uniform, tightening his grip and eliciting a soft cry from those gorgeous lips.

"Fuck, I'm glad Nat was wrong," Steve murmured, kissing over the fading bite mark, tasting like sweat and salt and mission grime and he was so okay with that. He pressed another kiss and another, trailing up to the soft skin behind Bucky's ear. "She warned me about you."

"She say I'm trouble?" Bucky managed, words breathy and voice shot to hell. And really, when he sounded like that, how was Steve supposed to do anything but pick him up all the way, mouths crashing together as he held Bucky's spread legs to his stomach and stumbled across the room to tumble haphazardly on the bed. They were tangled to hell now but Bucky didn't seem to mind, kissing Steve's mouth and jaw and clawing hands down his shoulders, swooping fingers down the curve of his spine.

"Cause you of all people know I'm trouble," he whispered, then hard metallic fingers were pinching his ass and Steve jumped, making a shocked sound and untangling his arms enough to pin Bucky's hair out of his eyes.

"Hey!" Steve kissed the smile on his face and wrapped a leg over his hip, rolling them closer together. Another sticky kiss and Steve murmured the rest against Bucky's mouth. "No, she thought you were a double agent for Hydra."

"What?" The pretty lips disappeared and Steve lethargically blinked his eyes open, meeting Bucky's wide ones and trying not to think about how hard he was, pressed up against the sharp bone of Bucky's hip. Instead he spread his fingers and thread them through long hair, careful not to catch on his gloves, twisting a piece away from Bucky's face and smoothing it down as patiently as possible.

"She thought you were playing me." Maybe it wasn't the best idea to tell him, on the off chance she'd been right, but with everything lately, how could she be? So what the hell, he may as well say it. "-- pretending to be in love so you could have access to Stark security."

"That bitch!" Bucky exclaimed and while that wasn't exactly the word he'd use, he understood Bucky's grievance as much as he understood Natasha's caution. Although, right now, really, tossing it all aside and kissing Bucky sounded like the best plan of all.

He ducked back in, catching ahold of Bucky's mouth and tugging his lips apart, then they were rolling, a haphazard tangle of uniforms and straps (and weapons, not the best idea) that somehow made sense to one of them, because then Bucky took control again, used his hands to grab Steve's gloves, pull back from kissing, cradling his face and forcing his gaze.

"You know that's not true." The sincerity in his voice made Steve's heart skip.

"I'm real glad it isn't," he breathed, glancing down involuntarily to Bucky's lips. He could feel his heartbeat in his throat, in between his legs, in his chest. And the hands on his face pulled him back in, lips already parted and wet as they pressed to Steve's and hell, he wasn't gonna live through the intensity of kissing Bucky Barnes.

Then metal fingers were undoing the buckle between Steve's shoulders and he lifted up, panting as their eyes met. Dark and sparkling, nine kinds of heat as they pressed closer, as Bucky unthreaded loops with a daring side-smile.
And really, it was only fair, because if he'd be wearing fewer clothes Bucky really aughta too. He hovered higher, starting down the dozen straps across Bucky's chest. It was a hundred times more heart-pounding than buttons, slowly undoing pieces of battle-armor.

The zipper slid down his spine, warmth trickling down his sides as the suit split open, Bucky's solid palms sliding down the curve and further, over his lower back and all the way down. He bit his lip to keep in the sound, then fingers were sinking into his ass and squeezed, rough and hard enough to make Steve cry out, rolling his hips forward instinctively to escape the grip - only that made him grind up against Bucky's pants and fuck, the predatory look on his face, Steve was gonna pass out. A shiver wracked down his spine and Bucky hummed, tightening his hands and pushing Steve's hips forward again.

"Fuck, Buckybuckybucky," he groaned, tipping his head back and curling his fingers over Buck's chest.

The grip suddenly released, wide palms spreading to the sides and tracing down the outsides of his hips. "So goddamned beautiful, Stevie."

Steve grabbed the collar of Bucky's undershirt, dragging him upright and pushing his tongue into Bucky's stupid mouth before he could say anything else to make Steve swoon. Uniforms shoved over shoulders, discarding haphazardly. His gloves were sweaty and he really needed Bucky's skin under his touch so those got tugged off with his teeth, tossed aside to hike up the black undershirt, get his hands on Bucky's hips.

Their mouths had to break in order to yank shirts over their heads, then Bucky was squeezing him tight around the middle, head tipped up as Steve grinded down on his lap. He wrapped his arms around Bucky's neck, panting into his mouth as their bodies rubbed together. They were still wearing way too many clothes, but if they took off more that'd be a line they hadn't crossed yet and he didn't want--

"You sure about this?" Steve asked, mouthing Bucky's jawline, chests expanding against each other with all the heavy breathing. Buck tipped his head, pretty hair swooshing outta the way so Steve could suck down the taut line of his neck.

"Yes, Steve," Bucky groaned and tightened his arms, pushing his hips up hard and making Steve's lips part in a gasp. "So sure."

"Ah, ah, but." He sucked in air, eyes squeezed shut as he leaned his temple on Bucky's, hands smoothing down the muscular back as his heart pounded in his veins. "B-but what about...?"

It was a good thing Buck knew him well enough to know what he was talking about, because his mouth couldn't form another word, not when it was too busy reigning in the wrecked sounds he wanted to scream. The hands around his waist loosened, trailing over his back in misplaced awe as crystal eyes leaned back into sight, irises contracted dark.

"I'm messed up, I know. You're messed up too. It's okay. I want this." Cold metal against his cheek and another shiver down Steve's spine, the rest of his skin burning hotter. Bucky looked so sincere, so sinfully gorgeous, stroking fingers over his cheekbones. "And I promise we'll talk about it all you want afterwards. If you want this too..."

It trailed off into a question and fucking hell, did Steve know the answer.

"God, Bucky. Yes." Leaning back further, he ran his palms down Bucky's bare chest, picturing it sweat-sheened and shuddering and hell, he wanted this as much as he'd ever wanted anything.
That pretty face was quirked in amusement now, watching Steve absorb hungrily, metal and short nails brushing gently along the back of his neck. Sweet voice innocent, laced with a dare beneath. "Then shut up and kiss me, Rogers."

The mattress compressed and they both bounced as Steve shoved Bucky onto his back, pinning him hard and taking his mouth. Bucky kept gasping against his lips and he'd never get enough of that, Steve could listen to him make those sounds all day long.

Except right now, Bucky wanted more and fuck, Steve could definitely give him more. The heels of his hands raked down Bucky's sides, fingers slipping beneath the hem of his pants to dig bruises into bone. Bucky scraped his teeth over Steve's bottom lip before pulling it into his mouth and sucking hard and Steve had to press their hips harder, throbbing enough to make him dizzy.

Metal scraped along the clasps of his pants, then everything got a fraction colder as Bucky shoved them down his hips, making a frustrated noise when he couldn't reach all the way. Steve licked the sound out of his mouth and sat up, wiggling the material past his knees and over his feet, turning to flip Bucky's button free next. The black pants were even tighter than Steve's blue, but he managed to get them all the way down, forcing himself to only think about this and this alone, removing Bucky from his clothes, because if he let himself actually think of what comes next--

Buck kicked his pants to the ground after Steve wrestled both their boots off and now it was just boxers, Bucky laying out on the bed and looking up at Steve beneath his pretty eyelashes and jesus, Steve'd never thought this could be his.

He swooped down to kiss Bucky's knee and a hand shoved his shoulder in retaliation but Steve didn't care, someday he was gonna kiss every inch of Bucky's body, memorize every bit of skin to call his.

From the drawings over the years, he had Bucky's face memorized. His shoulders, his hands and arm. His feet, ankles, but there was one part of him Steve'd never drawn, he'd never known like everything else.

His fingers skirted lines up strong thighs and hell, Bucky'd probably killed people with these and now Steve was feeling them up with yearning hands.

The breath in Bucky's throat caught and Steve bit his lip, gazes locked as he pressed the heel of his hand against the tented fabric of black boxers.

Bucky's hips rocked up and a moan choked past his lips, then Steve wrapped his fingers experimentally around the fabric, pressing his palm firm against the hardened heat through the layer of cotton.

With the same wild impulse that normally had Bucky yelling at him, Steve ducked down and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the bulge under his hand. The sound Bucky made was nothing like yelling, all breathy and broken and beautiful and Steve wanted to make those sounds spill from Bucky's lips for the rest of his life.

He parted his lips wider, mouthed along the outline of Bucky's erection, eyes flicking up in fascination as strong hips stuttered. A soft hand gripped the back of his head and Steve tongued over cotton, wetting the material to stick to Bucky's skin.

"Baby, baby," Bucky murmured, fingers threading through Steve's short hair, scratching at his scalp. "You're gonna kill me."
"Wouldn't be the first time," Steve smiled, pressing a hard kiss to the wet mark he'd left. Bucky groaned something like I don't even care just keep your mouth on me.

As much as he could probably do this for the rest of his life, there were all these other unexplored parts of Bucky too and Steve wanted them all, everything.

The curve of Bucky's lower back allowed just enough room to slide fingers beneath the elastic hem, tracing over and down, dipping shallowly between round cheeks and his skin was so much smoother than Steve'd imagined, so soft and easy to touch, begging his hands lower.

"How're we doing this?" Steve glanced up at the fluttering eyelashes, mouthing over Bucky again and slipping his fingers further down, elastic band pinning his wrists.

"I'm - ah - still teaching you the ropes, huh kid?" Bucky managed, hand covering the thudding pulse in Steve's neck and really, he had the audacity to call Steve kid when he was on his back arching against Steve's tongue?

He lifted off and glared, except the crystal eyes were squeezed shut; so he closed his teeth over the skin on Bucky's hip in retaliation, biting hard enough to make a mark. Dark hair fanned on the pillow as Bucky whipped his head and moaned low in his throat, hips stuttering and toes curling.

"W-want you in me, Stevie," he gasped and Steve had never been faster to agree in his life. He chastely kissed the bitemark and pressed a bruising thumb against the red, pushing himself back up Bucky's body, another quick kiss on Buck's open mouth.

"Yes, yes," he mumbled, kissing again, tilting into it as Bucky's squeezed his shoulders, arching up to brush his damp boxers over Steve's equally disastrous state and at this rate it'd be amazing if they even got that far, the way Bucky's tongue was sliding into his mouth, tightening every muscle in his stomach, the cotton catching between them making his head spin.

Because he wasn't sure he'd have the mental capacity to remember later, Steve reached out his free arm, patting the edge of the bed until he hit the nightstand, mouth popping free as he turned his head, biting his bottom lip as he rummaged through the drawer because Bucky had to keep--

There, thank god. He grabbed one and slid the drawer closed, fingers curling around the crinkling packet and head dropping as Bucky's pretty mouth suddenly slid over his neck, teeth worrying his skin, sucking a mark into him that Steve only wished would stay.

"Overeager, huh?" Bucky pulled back and smiled, tipping his head towards the wrapper in Steve's hand and the teasing was so far from putting him off because honestly yes, he was really goddamn eager to touch Bucky like that.

"You have no idea," Steve huffed a disbelieving laugh and Bucky curled him closer again, a delicate kiss to his ear to follow the whisper.

"I have an idea, I think."

Wasn't it kinda crazy, how it felt normal to hold Bucky this close while they bantered? That their friendship fit in just as well right here with nothing between their mouths, hearts beating against each other wildly. A hand on Bucky's waist, legs tangled together and everything burning all over, warmer than summer on the beach, brighter than the sun off the east river.

He bit the edge of the foil and tore, shoving aside the wrapper to flutter off the bed and hell, they were really doing this, Bucky was waiting and warm beneath him, crystal eyes dark and watching--
Except. Except they weren't looking at him anymore, hardened and glazing over. Steve froze, hovering as he blinked down at the eyes that'd been so bright just seconds ago.

"Buck?"

A quiet metal ripple, then Bucky's shoulders drew up and Steve furrowed his eyebrows. The chest beneath his was rising and falling too quickly, lips parted, and Bucky wasn't even blinking.

"Hey, Bucky? You with me?" He discarded the condom and placed both hands on Bucky's cheeks, looking right into his eyes.

Nothing.

Then his entire body started shaking. Steve placed both hands on Bucky's chest, stilling and comforting as he tried to get Bucky to look at him.

"Bucky? Are you okay? Talk to me, what's going on? Buck?"

He waved a hand in front of Bucky's eyes. Nothing, again. His bottom lip was trembling now, hands clenched fearfully at his sides. Steve's heart was pounding for a hell of a lot worse reason.

"We don't have to do this," he reminded carefully, thumb over Bucky's jaw. He clenched his teeth in response; Steve bit his lip and hovered higher. Maybe his weight was too much, maybe they really weren't ready for this, maybe a lot of things.

"Bucky," Steve tried again, hand curving over scars from metal, and he hit the ground so quickly and so hard he'd have no idea what happened if the quiet whirr wasn't still adjusting plates. His chest was pounding, sternum already bruising from the swing.

"Please, please," Bucky whimpered from the bed and Steve got up so fast his head was spinning, one hand over Bucky's pulse and the other on his cheek, turning his head and searching for answers in the deadened eyes.

"Can you hear me? You're safe, Buck, I've got you and no one's gonna hurt you--"

"NO! Nonononononono," Bucky thrashed and Steve cursed, looking around the room for whatever must've triggered the panic, because he'd been fine just seconds ago, the only thing Steve'd done was open...

Maybe the sound? Or the smell?

He had to let go of Bucky to run around the other side of the bed, clear away the wrapper, dumping the whole thing in the trash. He'd barely turned back around when Bucky was blinking owlishly, rubbing his eyes with a tentative, "St-Steve?"

The panic in his veins dropped and the weight of fear lifted so quickly he felt a little light-headed. He leaned a hand on the wall, the other over his forehead as he watched Bucky cautiously from across the room and forced himself to breathe again. "Thank god, are you okay?"

"Fuck," Bucky groaned, struggling upright and waving Steve over distractedly, resituating himself on the sheets. "That wasn't fun."

"What happened?" Steve sat down on the bed beside him, clasping his hands together in his lap to keep from reaching. He had no idea what Bucky needed and he'd already fucked everything up once today.
Metal fingers ran through fuckedup hair, an aggrieved sigh as Bucky looked at his hands, voice falling quiet in explanation. "I used to have a rubber mouthguard...for when they wiped me. So the smell of rubber just--"

He made a crashing sound and spread his fingers in an explosion motion, staring at the sheets instead of Steve, but at least he was breathing regular, at least he could talk about it. Which was better than Steve could say, air trapped in his lungs and head flashing with seventy years he'd missed, slept through while his best friend was getting his head wiped.

And then Steve went and triggered him right back to living that.

"I'm so sorry, Buck," he started, but before he could beg for forgiveness or promise something unkeepable, soft fingers landed on his thigh, crystal eyes waiting when he finally found the courage to turn his head.

"It wasn't your fault." Bucky shook his head solidly once, and Steve had no choice but to concede, attempt to believe him. The sheets whispered as Bucky scooted closer, leaning on Steve's shoulder and settling in against his side. The fingers on his leg traced lazy circles, easy comfort to melt into, forget everything else.

He closed his eyes, didn't count how long they sat there before quiet words slipped into the room again.

"But Stevie, how're we supposed to...if I can't...?"

"We'll get tested." Steve dragged his eyes open, watching window curtains flutter and threading fingers through long brown hair. "Then we won't have to use one."

"Jeez, Steve. You honestly think that's a good idea?" The hand on his thigh stilled and Steve swallowed the ice coating his throat.

"Look, Bucky. If you don't want to, we don't have to. We don't ever have to do any of it." He tugged on a strand of hair and Bucky made a sound, his palm flattening on Steve's skin, fingers curling against sensitive inner thighs. Tingles straight to his brain, the kind that made him wanna wrap himself around Bucky's body and never let go.

He blew air steadily between pursed lips, slowing his pounding heart that'd be impossible for Bucky not to feel. "If we never kissed again, I wouldn't love you any less."

The head on his shoulder adjusted, chin resting on his collarbone as big eyes gazed up at him. Steve turned to meet the searching look, the wonder that made Bucky ten years younger.

"But you...love me enough to risk that?" To get a simple test and never use something triggering? Steve leaned back on the headboard, smoothing over soft strands and fluffing them away from Bucky's face.

"We've got the serum on our side too," he reminded, because the risks for them weren't the same as everyone else, and it wasn't like Steve was planning to ever have this with anyone but Bucky. How could he even question-- Steve cupped the pretty jawline in his hand, tone dead-serious as he laid the stars at Bucky's feet. "And I love you enough to risk anything."

"That's not a good thing, Steve," Bucky whispered, fingers tightening bruises into his skin, a warning instead of a comfort and Steve turned his head away, letting the blank wall empty him from his mind.
The hand released its painful grip, throbbing a pulse heavy in its place, and Bucky's head slipped from his shoulder, tips of hair tickling bare skin at the bottom edge of his boxers as he curled up in Steve's lap, resting heavy on his thighs like a solid weight to drag him down from the sky.

He didn't know how to get Bucky to accept the light he stole and offered, didn't know how to hang the stars to make Bucky smile instead of sink with quiet worry. What was there to worry?

"Later," Steve said, lifting Bucky off his lap so he could lay down proper, toss sheets over lethargic hearts.

Buck curled up on him like he was a sleeping bag, collarbone for a pillow, stomach pillowing his side, an arm tucked under Bucky's like a blanket, all bare skin and smooth sheets. The dark night ran away from them. Sleeping shallow. Then the sun rose, casting a golden glow over a scene Bucky'd seen once before.

A green vial, weeks after a plane crash in '45. A dream.

It wasn't the warmth that hit him first this time. It wasn't the glow of sunlight on his closed eyelids. It wasn't the soft breaths unsettling and resettling the loose strands of hair across his forehead.

The first thing he absorbed was the feeling in his chest. More than warm, more than comfortable, more than happy. Safe. Loved. Filling him, every ounce of his soul - in his toes, shins, hips, torso, tingling out the tips of his fingers, behind closed eyelids. Everywhere.

*Flashes of lightning pulsing through his veins, screams gurgling bloody--*

A soft smile and fingers pressing his spine harder, serenity washing over him so sweet he could drown in it.

*The splash, icy water, choking up on black-booted feet that dragged him by his hair over metal catwalks--*

In response strong arms wrapped him closer, spread wide and possessive over his shoulderblade, lower back.

*Bloody dripping onto white brilliant snow.*

"Mmm," Bucky hummed, mouth muffled. A hand dragged upwards, callused artist fingers rubbing over the bare skin on the back of his neck before slipping into his hair, nails scratching against his scalp. His lips parted in a blissful breath, fingers digging in to find outlines of newly-padded ribs that didn't stick out (thankfully) like they used to.

A green vial, needle sticking into his arm, slumping to filthy floors as his eyelids betrayed him, mind slipping into the golden sunshine of Steve's arms.

When he slowly blinked his eyes open, Steve was already looking at him, eyes so dazed they looked mesmerized. The image grew sharper and Bucky's soft smile returned, the edges of his mouth curling as he lost himself in an abyss of beautiful beautiful blue like the sky over Brooklyn.

Bloody stump, sutures torn, tipping sideways, wracking screams - cold, lying sunshine.

Steve's hand slid from Bucky's neck to his cheek, cupping his jaw as he searched Bucky's face, only a few inches of white pillow between them. Everything was so perfect and beautiful that Bucky's heart couldn't help but ache. He couldn't lose this, he couldn't.
Concrete floors, dogbones and crinkled newspaper in the corner.

"Let me wake up next to you every day, Steve," Bucky breathed, his fingertips curling a bit frightenedly over Steve's heart. The peaceful look on Steve's face sharpened with worry, creases forming between his eyes as he registered the tremors down Bucky's spine.

He knew this dream.

Rolling up to hover over Bucky, Steve's gorgeous halo of blonde over his head and their legs all tangled up. Elbows pinned on either side of Bucky's head and Bucky's breath cut off from his lungs.

How many times had they forced him to dream this?

Steve was looking at him with this burning expression, his eyes flicking down to Bucky's lips and the oxygen would cut off now, he knew that. He knew the next words--

He couldn't hear them again.

He *couldn't hear them again.*

Solid gold and he was drowning in it, choking on artificial sunshine and molten aureate in his veins--

"Nononono," Bucky pleaded, still as a board, afraid to lift his arms in case the left was gone; "Not this time."

A violent shake of his head and his hair was too long, whose body was he in--

"What?" The angel-imposter asked, and at least he hadn't said it yet.

"I know this dream. I know how this *goes,*" he whimpered, heels digging into the bed because he couldn't move his arms, didn't wanna know.

"*I never wanna see you again,*" Steve whispered, so soft, a promise. Hot, heavy hands ran down Bucky's sides, roaming over his hips, but the sentence wasn't matching the touch, the sweet sugar expression.

"*Please,*" Bucky begged, thrashing his torso, shoulders pinned in place.

"--cky! Bucky, baby, listen, it's just me. You're here, in my arms, safe--"

*Steve had a knife. The knife would carve a star into his chest. And a deeper, bloody red x over it.*

"Don't!" He knew this and he couldn't take it, not again, too painful to survive. The film of water in his eyes blinded, cold slipping down cheeks as he pleaded the way he'd learned so well. "Don't cut me up this time," a choked gasp.

*Cold, spitting metal voices. Were you in love with Captain Rogers?*

"--real, this is real, I'm so sorry Buck. I need you to talk to me--"

"You already have my heart," Bucky tossed his head, dislodging the path of tears on his cheeks, voice a hoarse whisper, "-don't carve it out."

*The blade of his favorite knife sinking into his chest.*

Bucky screamed.
Hands stroking his face, chest, but he wasn't dripping blood, where was the pain, the angel of murder carving stars into skin?

"--aby, it's me, I'd never hurt you--"

"You killed me," he gasped through tears and the hands on his chest fluttered worriedly.

"Buck, it's Steve." Then warm hands were reaching for his and Bucky blubered protest, he didn't want Steve to see the missing arm--

And then four hands were between their chests. Except one of them was metal.

They'd--

"Get it off!" Bucky shrieked, clawing at the elbow, only it didn't end there, it went all the way up his shoulder--

"Shhh, shh, Buck this is your arm, it's okay--"

"NO! I have one!"

"...y--you think you're in-- before. Before you forgot me?"

"Forget you? Are you fucking kidding me?" A hysterical choked laugh. "Nothing Hydra's gonna do can make me forget you, you bastard." He struggled against the hands holding his, trying to punch upwards with the metal one, to wiggle free, salt dripping over his lips as he voice caught. "I-If only. It'd be better than waking up next to you...a-and. and then waking up again, faceful of snow. That stupid fucking newspaper..."

His shoulders caved, wracking his chest painfully, "I don' wanna wake up, Stevie. Why aren't you cutting me up? You always carve me up--"

"Bucky, this isn't a dream."

"I've had this dream before!"

"I'm real now--"

"Including the part where you carve a star into my chest and rip out my heart??"

Steve's soul shattered in his chest.

What had Hydra done?

Bucky struggled against him but Steve held him down, barring his chest solid as he reached for the nightstand. He didn't know how to deal with this.

His chest was soaked with terrified tears, the wrecked look of confusion on Bucky's face, the shaking and disgust, begging Steve not to--

"Goodmorning," the other end of the phone answered cheerfully and Bucky whined into Steve's collarbone, thrashing beneath him, pinned.

"Nat, Buck's having an episode and I can't break him out," Steve rushed, eyes shutting against another pained sound beneath him. "I need you in his room as soon as you possibl--"
"On my way, don't let him break anything."

The phone clicked silent and Steve tossed it aside, gathering Bucky properly in his arms and holding him unforgivingly tight to his chest.

"Please," Buck gasped and Steve shh'ed him, comforting hand stroking his hair, tears gathering on his own lashes as another shout of pain ripped through the shaking body.

The door burst open and Bucky screamed, roughly fighting Steve's arms. A kick to the thigh that was definitely gonna bruise, elbow catching under his chin and hell, it was a good thing Bucky's body was exhausted from crying, otherwise he'd never be able to pin him back down.

By the time Steve managed to settle him in an armlock and look up, Nat was putting her phone away again and Clint stepped through the open door too.

"Explain," Nat demanded, stooping down beside the bed and reaching for one of Bucky's hands. He curled closer to Steve and shook his head madly but she grabbed it anyways, started to wrap rope around his wrist.

"H-he triggered last night but it wasn't bad, he snapped out the moment the rubber smell disappeared--"

Clint made a sound and Steve flushed red, but there were things more important than embarrassment right now, than his friends seeing him and Buck tangled together in bed, wearing just boxers. They hadn't even--

He took a deep breath, stilling the shake in his voice, and stroked a worried hand over Bucky's fucked-up hair. "But this morning he woke up blabbering about vials and dreams and...and knives, me carving him up, and--"

"We've gotta debrief him. All the way." Natasha gave Steve an unarguable look and it wasn't fair, Bucky'd never consented to being debriefed but he was outta his goddamned mind and Steve couldn't lose him for good. She stood, gesturing for Steve to lift Bucky up, grabbing his other wrist and winding more rope, locking his arms together as Steve murmured promises against Buck's throbbing temple.

The three of them somehow lifted him into the hallway and Clint was thoughtful enough to throw a robe over Steve's shoulders as they started for the elevator.

But the moment Steve and Clint tried dragging him across the floor, Bucky's shaking flipped instantly and he was kicking and screaming, fighting back hard even with his arms tied and pinned to his chest with rope.

"Nonono," Bucky twisted away and Natasha yanked on the rope, tugging him towards the elevator and Steve's stomach seized, threatened last night's dinner to resurface because he couldn't watch this, he couldn't see Bucky struggling and fighting against them but--

It was impossible any other way. He'd tried everything to pull Buck out of it but nothing. If they didn't tie up his arms Bucky'd probably kill them all, if they didn't drag him for one of the labs he could end up offing himself.

This was dangerous, Bucky was dangerous and they didn't have options that didn't include dragging him bodily down the hallway.

Clint caught a kick to the shin and cursed. Steve tried to wave him off, he was still healing from
gunshot wounds after all. But he just grabbed both of Bucky's ankles, scooping him all the way off the ground so he couldn't kick anymore. Steve braced Bucky's shoulders and head but he didn't stop thrashing.

"He's gonna come for me," Bucky insisted, eyes glazed and vocal chords destroyed. "Stevie's saved me from this table a dozen times y-you insignificant Nazi!"

Steve almost dropped him. Nat wrapped the rope around her elbow and took Bucky's shoulders on the other side, apparently not trusting Steve either.

Bucky's face was streaked with tears, more bubbling over as he choked defiant protests. "He won't leave me here. He'll know I'm alive, he'll feel it in his soul."

The weight tipped sideways and there was cursing, but Steve didn't hear it, palm covering his mouth. He'd known. He'd sat in the jeep next to the Commandos and stared out the window and he'd felt it in his soul that Bucky was alive.

Even convinced Dugan to go searching after the last mission.

Bucky'd been waiting for him, counting on Steve coming--

"Rogers!"

"Rogers, the hell were you thinking? Schmidt's supposed to be the crazy one, remember? I swear to god, the next tank you backflip off--"

A smack to his cheek and Steve startled, hand still covering his mouth.

"We need your strength, get your head together," Nat snapped and Bucky twisted sharply, one leg breaking free of Clint's hold.

"He's gonna kill you all," Bucky promised madly, eyes flashing through the tears, blood dripping onto the floor beneath him and Steve lifted his side again, fingers sliding over wet, biting ropes on a flesh arm. "He's gonna save me. He wouldn't leave me. He wouldn't, he loves me." A broken sob, curling at the hips. "He loves me."

Steve froze, staring down at the crystal eyes that were in 1945, screaming at Hydra captors that Steve'd come for him because Steve loved him--

Wind whipping open the side of the train, staring down at the empty snow, watching the world drain of color, watching his life fall down to the ground. On the metal floor, Gabe or someone trying to calm him,

"Where's Barnes?"

Screaming for Steve as he fell and Steve should've jumped.

"MAN DOWN! MAN DOWN! MAN DOWN, God, dammit, I need backup I don't even know what I'm supposed to - man down, I-I--"

"He's not coming for you," Natasha's voice replied and Steve's eyes flashed open so fast the room span. Bucky was crumpled on the ground and Steve's hands were empty and Clint was wincing, holding himself on the wall, and Natasha was standing over Bucky with the lead of the rope in her hands, looking down at him with cold eyes.
"What the fuck are you doing?" Steve lunged for the rope and she held it easily out of his reach, a hand up to stop him, and when her green eyes met his they weren't cold, not at all, they were heartbroken and full of more emotion than he'd ever seen in her.

"You want answers? You wanna help him? This is how." She dropped her gaze to Bucky again, all waver cleared from her voice as he curled away from her, dripping tears onto the hard floors. "Who are you?"

"Sergeant James Barnes," he choked and that was it, that was good enough, right? He knew who--

"That's not the answer they'd've wanted," she told Steve quietly and he covered his mouth with his hand again, backing up until his spine hit the wall.

"Who are you?" she demanded again and Bucky shook, answering her without the slightest hesitance, like he knew exactly what would happen if he didn't.

"A soldier."

"Who are you?"

"Fuck you." Bucky's eyes squeezed shut and his lip was bleeding, bitten bloody. "Waitin' to ask the bad one?"

"You say it," Natasha ordered, yanking the rope to roll him on his back, like she was in control, like she wasn't fishing for information and it was good, she was too good at this and what was left of Steve's heart sunk even lower.

Bucky blinked at the ceiling, deflated entirely, ropes going loose where they'd sliced into him moments before. The crystal eyes weren't crystal at all. Flat gray, no light to be spoken of, nothing to shine.

He looked dead.

"Who are you without him?" Bucky mumbled. Steve's throat closed. "Nothing," he supplied softly to himself, then his pretty face was twisting and Bucky shot up faster than anyone could've anticipated, scrambling away on solid heels, voice cracked and broken but getting louder with every word until he was shouting, until his lips were spotted red with blood.

"Nothing nothing NOTHING NOTHINGNOTHINGNOTHINGNOTHING--"

"Sputnik!" Natasha shouted sharply and Bucky didn't deflate, he shut off. Eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed to the ground, and if the feeling in his soul wasn't still there--

Bucky's alive

--Steve would've thought he'd got shot, died on the spot.

And he was, dead, lying broken and small, tied up and bloody, and Steve couldn't move right now if a freight train came rushing through the living room and if a train couldn't move him now--

"They used you to break him," Natasha said softly, her tone filling in the rest, that explains alot. She watched him passively and Clint put an arm around her soldiers and Steve lifted a foot forward, stumbling from the single step, and somehow lopped his way across the room, legs giving out the
moment he was close enough to reach out and touch the unmoving back.

His bare feet were sticky with blood and Bucky was still off, frozen, and Steve couldn't feel him breathing when he pressed his forehead to Bucky's ribcage.

Phones dialed in the background. He weaved his fingers in warm, lifeless ones and held Bucky's hand and the obligatory *you holdin' my hand, Rogers?* didn't part from those pretty lips and the noose around their necks might never let them both breathe.

They'd--

Bucky'd told him in the hospital about asking to be wiped.

And if they'd used *that*, Steve's not entirely sure he'd've made a different choice.

But the choice now--

Bucky said he couldn't let go, give everything to Steve.

He couldn't give anyone that power over him again.

*This* power.

The right thing to do would be to let him go. That was the just thing. But who was gonna wipe Steve's tears after his nightmares? Who was gonna hold him in rushing water? Who was gonna see past the suit who was gonna remember he still existed?

A touching glimpse at *himself* again, at being alive, real, instead of a 3D RedWhiteandBlue drawing, icon, and giving up Bucky meant giving up that again, giving up his *life*.

His *love*.

Selfish. Selfish.

A hand rested on his spine and Steve's mouth spoke. *just. like. it. should.*

No, Cap's mouth opened and spoke, Steve still couldn't breathe.

"I'm too goddamned selfish," the speech-voice said for him and the hand on him waited, silent for Steve *Cap* to say something more.

"I can't do this without him."

A nod he couldn't see. Natasha's voice, steady now, understanding.

"You're different around him, Rogers. Rougher around the edges. But softer in the middle." The end sounded confused, like Nat couldn't quite figure out how or why Steve was different but he wasn't different, he just wasn't Captain America.

Rougher around the edges and softer in the middle because he wasn't flattened with an iron, because he wasn't broken down and destroyed, because he wasn't pretending. A real human being.

"Is he coming back?" His mouth was dry cotton and his voice was nearly unrecognizable now.

"He'll wake up. Although he's gonna be pretty pissed. I'd be."
At least the walls weren't steel. Off-white, sculpted crown-molding bordering the ceiling. Not white enough to think he was dead.

Except he'd died already, with a newspaper. He'd forgotten and he'd been dead for seventy years.

Shot back to life with just one look. Thirteen words.

*Then finish it.*

He might as well've finished it, the pain etched into Steve's features when Bucky turned his head.

Steve was sleeping, chin on his chest, bags under his eyes and tight hurt around his mouth. If Bucky closed his eyes again, forced himself back unconscious, would someone eventually drag Steve away? Or would they let him rot at Bucky's side forever?

They were stones that stopped rolling, gathering moss and mold as their wheels spun and they went nowhere.

*Because I love you.*

*You carry people, you carry me.*

Codependency. If nothing else, the past twenty hours - that he remembered perfectly fantastically - served as an eloquent reminder: how much this would hurt if it went wrong. And that, what he'd reverted to, the screaming and the crying and the pain?

That was before Steve'd said I love you. What would happen *now*?

And if Bucky said he *loved him back*?

It wasn't just dangerous.

This was potentially *deadly*. For how many thousands next time?

In the war, Steve'd vowed to always save him. He didn't save him that time. Or on the helicarrier, or now. Bucky'd saved himself. And he had to keep doing that. *Steve'd understand.*

The hospital bed under his back was hard, unforgiving. That made two of them.

Bucky lifted his hands, turned them over, spread his fingers. Efficiency, that's how episodes were avoided. It was catching up to them, it was all catching up to them.

He felt Steve's eyes open before he rolled to see.

"You okay?" Rubbing eyes, then a hand reached for his and Bucky burned in the heat off Steve's skin inches before they touched.

Fingers weaving between his and cutting off the energy between and Bucky closed his hand in a fist, nearly crushing Steve's bones.

"I need out."

Steve paled.
"Not like that," Bucky clarified, "Out of the tower."

"What're you thinking?" Steve's thumb managed to fight Bucky's deathgrip enough to rub soothingly, contrasting soft over metal.

What was he thinking. Alottathings. Things he couldn't say.

This, he'd been thinking for a long time and hadn't said. His skin'd been itching to run for weeks. It wasn't enough, the openness of the tower. It was better than any other place, the security was comforting. But it'd been a cage since the last near-breakdown episode and the sudden adaptations in their relationship hadn't erased that.

"Road trip?" he offered, because it was easier to imagine handling this shit in some sketchy motel room halfway across the globe where Hydra and robots weren't tracking his every move.

"You think that's a good idea?" Steve worried his thumb over metal and Bucky wondered if he'd wear it down, rubbing hard for long enough.

If they were halfway across the country, the next time Bucky slipped into an episode and started clawing the walls, who'd be there to help Steve hold him down?

The ropeburns on his arms and wrists weren't bleeding anymore, just bruised. How many bruises would Steve have if Bucky got violent and there was no one there to help?

But he couldn't stay here either, he needed out.

"I just need...if I hadn't seen my roadtrip to Clint's farm through a wall of tears that might've counted, but." He shrugged, lifting his head off the hospital pillow and swinging his legs to the side, fingers still squeezed unforgivingly tight.

"You cried?" Steve was staring disbelievingly and Bucky looked down at their entwined hands.

"Yeah," he muttered awkwardly. He didn't wanna worry Steve, not with that and not with his need to run, but it was either have this conversation or leave out the window in the middle of the night. Steve'd given so much for them lately, this was the least Bucky owed. "But I need to do this."

When he looked up again it was Steve's turn to look away, discomfort and hesitancy written all over his features.

"If crisis arises, we'll be a phone call away," Bucky tried.

"I wasn't worried about that." Blue darted to his before looking away again. "They've got other soldiers."

Bucky knew the worry wasn't a fight without Steve. Just Steve without a fight.

"You don't have to come," he reminded quietly, touching down off the bed and padding for the door. Steve's hand tightened again so they wouldn't break too late, dragged behind for a moment before he caught up properly.

It didn't feel romantic, holding hands like this, not when both of them were holding tight enough to bruise. Sinking ships in a rocky sea, maybe.

"Of course I'll come." Steve held open the door with his free hand and Bucky brushed his hair back as he stepped through. "How bout we try a day thing. See how that goes."
It wasn't worded like a question so Bucky didn't question it.

"Beach?" he offered instead and Steve nodded, held onto his hand the whole time they bustled around the apartment, gathered supplies. Everyone came individually to check on them and Bucky let Steve do the talking, wandering off to stare out the window.

Steve'd told him they did tests while he was out. So, if that came back clear, they'd be in the green, no condoms necessary. Somehow, Bucky'd even managed to fuck that up. Disaster.

The moment the elevator slid shut behind Sam, Bucky turned back to look at Steve, busily folding a beach towel into a bag.

"I haven't had a conditioned trigger in ages and then I had two within ten hours?" He kept his hand on the window, glass cold on skin, and Steve looked up, meeting his gaze steady and level.

"We're digging into deep emotions Bucky, everything's gonna get a lot more intense before it gets easier."

"There's nothing easy about this," he whispered to the curtains. Steve pursed his lips and kept packing their bag.

Maybe if Steve held him down, pinned him with those beautiful arms. Crippled Bucky, broke his legs, he wouldn't keep running. Maybe if he held on too tight, the way Bucky wanted to hold onto him, the pain of that would be the only pain in his heart.

"I'm not leaving you."

It came out of nowhere and Bucky couldn't gasp, forced a breath through circle lips.

The tiles were cold under his moving feet, each rib expanding as he breathed, blood running through his veins that wasn't drugged, not with green vials anyways.

The kitchen crossed behind him and he took Steve's face in his hands, turning sorrowful eyes on him. Leaning in and hovering over lips, Bucky shut his eyes and exhaled an easy whisper,

"When you kiss me, do you taste the blood I've taken?"

Steve crushed their mouths together and Bucky opened instantly, letting Steve lick into his mouth, catching the wet tongue between his teeth, jolting a gasp in the back of Steve's unbruised throat. Heat burned in his pallet, the top of his throat. Then the hands on his jaw dug in sharp enough to hurt and Steve pulled Bucky off him hard enough to make his head spin.

"Can you taste mine?" Steve ordered and a chill drizzled down Bucky's spine, the intensity of the question and the look and that tone - his Captain. The Captain that'd killed, blew up, beheaded, shot, destroyed so many - from the clean-handed shadows. Bucky'd always been the one to do the dirty work, to take the rap: that troublemaker Bucky Barnes and his sweet friend Steve Rogers.

Oh, how the world was fooled. The reputation Bucky'd take on so Steve didn't have to, so everyone thought his beautiful angel was just that.

*The blood Steve's taken,* he wanted to know. Thrown the question right back at Bucky. But there wasn't copper in his kisses. Not steel or gold, just wet and human.

Love, not blood.
Love,
not blood.

"I don't know how to do this," Bucky choked and Steve pulled him in tight, arms crossing over his shoulderblades and cheeks smushing together. They rocked back and forth and the summer shining smile used to be so bright it burned Bucky alive only now the harsh depths of winter reflected that smile brighter, brilliant sunshine off snow.

"I've got you. I've got you," Steve promised quietly and Bucky let him rock them back and forth in the middle of the kitchen floor.

~*~*~

"Normal people go to the beach for sand," Steve complained, climbing over the brush Bucky just stepped around.

He hoisted their bag higher on his shoulder, hopping around another grassy patch. "We've never been normal people."

Steve followed with a sigh, probably glancing back to the pretty sand they'd left a hundred feet behind. "I dunno, you were pretty normal as a kid."

"I was best friends with you, that's bout as far from normal as you can get."

Lifting a hand to shield his eyes from the sun, Bucky peered over the shoreline ahead of them and determined it entirely empty, which was perfect. To be fair, Fort Tilden wasn't the most popular beach in New York, and definitely not this far from the tourist trails at this time of year. It was an old military base, and according to the signs swimming was not recommended - which made it perfect for them.

No people, just the two of them, and if they went swimming they'd be breaking rules, which would make Steve happy.

Speaking of Steve, he'd fallen quiet after Bucky's last comment, so he paused and turned around, letting his hand fall back down. Steve was squinting at him, skin and hair lit up golden.

"Why were you?"

"What?"

"Best friends with me?"

Oh.

Bucky extended his hand and Steve climbed over the tall grass, reaching to lace their fingers together and finally landing on open, sparkling sand beside Bucky. The wooden trails were arching atop the hill on the left, but the cliff face separating them made the whole area perfectly secluded, which was exactly what Bucky'd been hoping for.

"James Buchanan, don't forget that sunshine needs the rain to make it bright. Don't forget the rain needs the sun to set it right," Bucky recited, shielding from the sun again to look at Steve outta the
corner of his eye.

A tug and Steve started them off across the sand, gritty grains slipping between toes.

"That's real beautiful," he said softly and Bucky turned to look at him proper, wind blowing salty in his hair as the sunshine held his hand and walked him down the shoreline.

"Sarah used to tell me that all the time."

"Really?" Another pause, looking out over the sparkling water, maybe thinking how beautiful it was, while Bucky could only look at Steve and think how beautiful he was. Sap. "She might've known more than she was letting on," Steve mused, easing the bag off Bucky's shoulder.

"About you and me? Hmm." He took the other corners of the blanket, straightening it out and guiding it to the sand, tossing Steve a book and a waterbottle to hold the edges. "Kinda funny how it's the women who figure it out before we do."

"I can't believe Peggy never said." Steve plopped down moodily in the middle of their blanket and Bucky held out his hand again, gesturing him back up.

"When the hell would she've said?" Buck tugged the callused fingers, pulling Steve towards the water with him. He came easy, like he'd actually forgotten. And constantly denying his PTSD, he probably did.

"I dunno, maybe when I was crying my eyes out over your death and she told me - I quote - 'he believed in you?' She couldda worded that a little better, maybe told me what you said that day."

Bucky ignored the prodding because he wasn't gonna tell Steve about that conversation, not now, not yet. Instead he turned around, still tugging Steve as he faced him, backing towards the water.

"You cried in front'a Peg? I figured the Commandos had to deal, but--"

"Deal? I was a mess, Buck." Steve stopped at the water's edge, but Bucky had a feeling it wasn't intentional, he was just pausing to make a point. Really, Steve'd probably let Bucky drag him under before he admitted to himself he had a problem.

"My mess," Bucky quoted smiling and Steve shook his head, taking two steps forward.

The water grabbed his ankles and the color drained from his face and by the time Bucky herded him back onto sand Steve was shaking, hands in fists, one pressed to his mouth, trying to stop the trembling. Like there was any way Bucky wouldn't've noticed.

"S-sorr--"

"What did I just say? My mess?" He ran a hand through Steve's hair and the pretty blue eyes closed.

"But--"

"You can do this. I get the current makes it harder, but you can do this."

"B-bucky, just yesterday y-you. I need to take care of you."

"No, you don't, let me watch out for my punk the way I always have, yeah?"

"I don't wanna..."
"Try? For me? I mean, if you think it's impossible--"

"Is that a challenge?" Steve interrupted, eyes popping open. He got him. Bucky's mouth spread into a smile, gesturing towards the water.

This was how Steve faced things. Everyone had different ways of handling trauma, and Bucky'd bet anything Steve's was tackling it with fists raised. But Steve knew his body and his issues better than anyone - including Bucky - so if he was wrong about this, they'd figure it out some other way. And Bucky'd have to live with the guilt of hurting Steve again.

It was worth it though. He could handle that responsibility if it let Steve overcome this fear, the fear of drowning. If he could get a smile on that face, get them splashing in the waves the way they had as kids.

Steve eyed him, and maybe he'd caught on to Bucky's brilliant idea of making it a challenge, forcing him in there through his own stubbornness, but whatever.

"I'm not getting my shirt wet," he said slowly, hesitantly, and Bucky smiled wider.

"Even better." He grabbed his own collar, whipping his shirt off and tossing it aside, gesturing Steve to do the same.

Except Steve was staring at the center of his chest. Bucky looked down in confusion, and the sun glinted off the dogtags hanging over his heart. Oh.

He'd taken them off before the last mission, didn't like wearing them under his uniform yet. Two things that didn't quite go together. So when they'd stripped down, it hadn't been a problem, but Bucky'd entirely forgotten about slipping them back on later.

It'd be easier to explain before he got a bundle of confused, overwhelmed questions.

"Sam got them for me," he said quietly, running his real fingers over the edge and looking back up at Steve. There was a whole whirlpool of emotions on his face and the wind whistled by them, the splashing rumble of the ocean filling silence.

It meant alot, he knew that. More than was probably good to share in this moment, but.

It was his name. Identity. He'd been wearing ones just like these when Steve'd rescued him in Azzano, all the way 'til when he'd fallen from the train, and now that reminder what he'd forgotten was sitting between them in plain light, glinting reflections and undeniable.

For a moment, Bucky was fairly sure someone was gonna break down crying, and he wasn't really sure who.

Except Steve didn't, he didn't say a single thing. He just held out his hand.

Bucky weaved his fingers between Steve's, and they both stepped into the water.

An hour later they were standing chest to chest, arms around each other and waves lapping at their waists. Steve pinned Bucky's hair back with two palms, saving him from the salty wind, hands not shaking anymore. They couldn't go deeper than this, and Bucky's arms couldn't leave from being wrapped all the way around Steve's waist, but it was a start.
"You alright?" Bucky puckered his lips to kiss Steve's cheek gently. The ocean reflected, then eyelids closed and another deep, controlled breath.

"Thanks to you," Steve murmured, lifting his arms to rest on Bucky's shoulders, caging their faces in close and personal. A soft press of lips, a breathy sound, and they were both pressing in deeper, tilting heads and suddenly making out right there in the water, twenty feet from the coast. It was a pretty goddamn decent distraction in Bucky's opinion.

Rough hands slid over his collarbones, down his chest, circling around to dip under the waistband of his swimshorts and slide wet fingers between Bucky's cheeks and _fuck_, as much as he'd love to climb Steve right now, there were more important things at hand. Like making sure Steve's hands didn't start shaking again - although from the way they were kneading into his flesh, he'd say Steve was doing very well, but.

"A-ah, c'mon, Stevie, not now," Bucky managed between biting kisses.

The hands instantly slid back out, mouths breaking away as Steve leaned back to look at him, concern etched into his features, like something was wrong with _Bucky_ instead. Only the movement caused a ripple in the water and the sand beneath their toes shifted and balance shot to hell. Bucky didn't have enough solid ground to stop them before they both tipped, but he shot a metal hand to catch Steve's head before it could break the surface.

His eyes were wide, breathing too fast, and Bucky slid across the sand, digging his heels in to pull them upright. "You're okay, I'm here, you've got this Rogers."

Fluttering eyelashes, arms tight around Bucky's back now as they finally balanced again, waves rocking around their ribs now.

"See? Not thanks to me at all, thanks to you. You're the one who's pushing through this Steve, who's kicking this thing's ass." He ran his hands up and down strong, heaving back muscles, Steve's forehead on his shoulder, sounding half-exhausted as he clung.

"Bout time I kicked _something_ 's ass," he muttered and Bucky smiled, kissing his collarbone and starting to walk them slowly back to shore.

"You kicked plenty of Nazi ass as I remember." Arms looped over shoulders and Steve leaned on him, still clutching tight as the waterlevel lowered down their bodies.

"Mmm. They kicked ours too." Waves crashed over their ankles, then they were on dry sand and he could feel the relief seeping through Steve's bones. "You got shot," he pointed out, voice already less shaky.

"I did," Bucky agreed distractedly, watching Steve's face for any signs of lingering stress, anything to show the whole thing'd been a mistake. But he just got a brief, pretty smile and an arm snug around his bare waist. Steve better not be bottling shit up, burying it down, because they'd just made progress and going backwards on that wasn't something Bucky was looking forward to.

The beach towel caught them easily, sand soft as a pillow compared to the ground they'd slept on for a mock-eternity. A moment to catch their breath, then Steve was shivering a little and Bucky gathered him close. The last time they'd been tangled together like this, they'd been on Bucky's bed, about to--

"Penny for your thoughts," Steve breathed, head flopping down on the sand beside Bucky's, still curled against his side.
"You'n'me, that night," he replied simply and Steve's smile vanished, long fingers tracing the scarred flesh near Bucky's heart.

"We're taking this too fast." It was more of a statement than a question, slow and pensive.

"Since when do you abide to caution?" Bucky snorted, rolling his head to stare at the clouds, which were thankfully covering the brightness now.

"I'm not kidding."

It was his Captain's voice and Bucky sighed, because honestly what would Steve even know about it?

"It's just sex," he argued lightly and the hand over his heart froze, thankfully not pressing into sensitive scar tissue.

"But sex is powerful, Bucky. This is a big deal."

The clouds shifted in the sky, sunlight pouring over them in a wave and Bucky just looked at him because people don't treat him like this. After the number of times Bucky'd almost killed him, how could Steve treat him like he was fragile? Without making him feel like glass?

"Bigger deal than getting shot?" The joke was flimsy, shallow, and Steve saw it for exactly what it was. That didn't stop him from running a hand down Bucky's body, dragging down the outside of his thigh, branding him with seeping summer.

A shock snaked up Bucky's spine as the palm traced to the inside, tucking in the crevice between his thighs and sliding up, nice and slow, creeping higher, until a final pause, a few inches before the crotch of his shorts.

Then Steve's thumb was pressing hard to swimshort material and it took a moment, but he caught. Hard pressure over an invisible mark, a scar that hadn't been a scar in years - the first real one that healed too fast, the first confirmation of the half-serum pumping through his veins.

Falsworth'd gotten the bullet out of his leg while Steve'd cupped a hand over his mouth and now that hand was holding onto his leg, pressing a reminder in a place he'd never had the chance to be...touched like that before.

"I thought you were gonna die," lips whispered into his mouth and Bucky parted them further, let Steve kiss him gentle, eyes closed and sun beating on bare skin. Red white and blue, an American summer beating into their skin.

Weren't they always gonna die?

"I don't remember what it's like," Bucky's eyes were still closed, words forming the moment Steve's mouth released him. "--to not feel afraid. To not feel broken."

Fluttering open, eyelids heavy as he sunk deeper into the warmth of sun and sand, voice shifting to a whisper. "Was there a time you weren't angry? Or numb?"

Their foreheads pressed together, senses heightened without sight; the beach blanket fluttering around them, Bucky's hair whipping against both their temples.

"When I first met Sam...he asked what made me happy." Hands found his, a thin pinky wrapping around Bucky's. "I said I didn't know."
"Do you know now?"

"I know you make me happy."

Bucky's breath caught and Steve shifted, free hand tracing up his sternum, two fingers resting on the hollow of his throat.

"What else?" he whispered. "We have to have something else. And I think you know what yours is."

Steve shrugged and somewhere a seagull called, clouds drifting in front of the sun again.

"You don't have to bury it." He peeked a glance at his best friend, thought about how much had changed since they'd laid on a beach together like this. "I know I've given you shit your whole life, but. You're a fighter. A soldier. You don't have to be sorry for that and you don't have to have some...happy ending that doesn't include that. If you're home fighting, then fight."

"That's not a life."

Before he could reach to stop him, Steve rolled away, staring moodily at the clouds.

"Said who?"

"C'mon, Buck," Steve huffed and it was an awful sound, then his soft hair fluffed up messier with an annoyed hand and he sat up, further than ever as he stared over the crashing waves. "Don't be ridiculous. It can't go on forever."

"But we can?" He asked incredulously, sitting up to give the same seriously look at the idiot on the blanket next to him.

"Yes," Steve replied instantly, picking up a handful of sand and watching it trickle through his fingers.

He wasn't sure he'd ever be able to believe in the possibility of forever, of them never being apart again, but he wasn't gonna be the one who gave up on Steve either. He'd never been able to and--

And fuck how much he hurt, he wasn't gonna let Steve feel that same pain.

"Then so can your fight." Bucky scooted over, ghosting his touch down Steve's arm, running it heavy back up over gathered muscle, wishing he could keep the tremor out of his heart the way he kept it out of his voice. "I'd rather have the real you than some watered-down version. I'll fight at your side. We'd be amazing."

The point was, neither of them knew how Steve was gonna live without a war, and if fighting was the only piece of him left that connected this Steve to the little one he'd fallen in love with the first time, Bucky'd do anything he could to keep him on the battlefield, however long it took to remind Steve who he used to be off it.

"We?" Bucky rested his hand on the back of Steve's neck and he turned, catching Bucky's gaze and pinning him, ocean glinting off blue. "Does that mean you're...you're accepting this? You and me?"

If they didn't have to fight for each other, if they just had each other...how long before Steve didn't want that either?

Was there an end goal? An ending at all?

Was you'n'me all Steve wanted? What did that mean to him anyways? It'd always been
"What exactly are you asking?" He narrowed his eyes in comic-suspicion, waiting for an answer while his stupid hair flipped sideways on his head from the wind.

A brightened spark, then Steve was leaning over with that mischievous look Bucky knew *all too well*, that sweet cherishable trouble he'd missed like water.

Then the mouth that'd gotten punched a dozen times more than kissed (which said a lot about how much they'd kissed and even more about how much Steve'd been punched in his life) opened and a phrase Bucky hadn't heard in decades flowed off the cheeky tongue.

"Hey sugar, you rationed?"

Bucky couldn't help it, couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled up in his chest, had him shaking his head and closing his eyes against it, chest shaking a little and this was it.

Somehow, he'd become the man in that video in the Smithsonian and he had no idea how they'd gotten this far without him noticing but they were here, Steve was giving him that same laughing smile, crinkling eyes, and Bucky was looking down with an unbreakable, unmeltable smile that no mirror could take from him right now.

He had an idiot for a best friend, and funny enough that's exactly what he'd been thinking when the photographers had caught that video in the 40s too.

"You wanna go steady with me?" He finally managed, half-incredulous, still smiling like an idiot.

Steve softened a little, lips closing and smile turning more sweet than amused, gazing at Bucky like he was thinking the exact same thing, living that exact same movie reel, except this time Steve's next words were quite different.

"I want you to be my boyfriend."

Something in Bucky's chest twisted and he breathed in hard, forcing oxygen to his brain in hopes it might spin a little faster.

"Yeah?" It came out breathier than he meant and Bucky tipped his head again, giving Steve the side-eye as he studied him. "Not words I thought I'd ever hear, Rogers."

A fond smile and Steve leaned even closer, words dropping lower as he teased, "That's not an answer, Barnes."

He tipped his head and kissed Steve's pretty mouth for his answer. Which was that he didn't have one, because part of him felt like they'd already been so much more than *dating* their whole lives and at the same time, how was he supposed to commit to a relationship for Steve when neither of them could go five minutes without someone panicking over *something*?

Then Steve adjusted the angle, pressing closer and deepening the kiss and Bucky let the ocean waves be the only thing crashing for a moment, let himself drag the smile from Steve's mouth and save the taste in his own. There was something immeasurably fitting about sitting here in the sunshine, hot all over from the heat while he kissed his own little sun and streamed a whole different kind of heat.
down the back of his throat, down his spine, wildfire spreading through his veins.

This way, he didn't wanna get this way, only how Stevie clutched his arms on the shiny side of desperate, maybe he was getting this way too and wouldn't that be a disaster, both of them diving so deep there was nowhere to go but down, nowhere to go but death.

Their mouths dragged apart with tugging bottom lips and twin low sounds, then another chaste kiss to Bucky's mouth like Steve was starving without it, satiated heavy gaze.

"Lay down with me." Steve dragged him down before Bucky could disagree, only he really didn't wanna do anything but let Steve hold him here in the perpetual warmth, where night could never touch them.

The beach towel was crumpled on the edges, sand kicking up around their feet, scraping grainy skin as ankles hooked over each other. Bucky's back on the towel, metal shoulder opposite from Steve so he wouldn't burn; and Stevie on his side, broad body tucked smaller against him, one hand splayed possessive over Bucky's bare stomach.

A bicep for Steve's pillow, fingers playing with blonde hair, a soft kiss to the top of his head as Bucky let the sun bake his chest, let Steve's warmth bake his soul.

And it was so nice like this, his boy propped on him like the old days, back when Bucky'd crush him with his weight. Steve didn't need Bucky anymore, not like this, but the idea that he still wanted to rest his head on Bucky's arm - or sometimes his stomach, shoulder - that felt important. At the least, he got to support the pretty head that'd been worried over waves and sinking planes moments before, give him some comfort after that bracing display.

But as sweet and lovely as Stevie was being, as comfortable as the sand was, the soothing heat of sunny skin, heavy eyelids begging to flutter shut - he fought it hard, because it wasn't safe here, not for that.

"You're makin' me drowsy," Bucky grumbled, carding fingers through blonde slower and slower.

"You can sleep." The jaw on his arm moved as he spoke and Bucky could feel it layered in his muscles. "I've got you."

Except he really couldn't. They were in public; he didn't sleep in front of all the Avengers, let alone out in the open. Anyone could. Could come along...

A yawn threatened his chest and Bucky blinked hard, focusing on the floating clouds above, designing shapes to keep himself occupied.

He hadn't slept proper since the breakdown, the drug-induced coma. (Or shutdown word, he hadn't asked and he didn't wanna know because really, he didn't even know what the word was and he sure as hell hoped Steve didn't. Not that Bucky didn't trust him with that, he trusted him with his life, but that was one horror Steve didn't ever need to see.)

So he'd convinced himself someone'd shot him up, drugged him and dragged him free from whatever horror he was inflicting on his Stevie. Either way, drugs or...that, there was nothing restful about those, nothing but sluggish hell, invoking more exhaustion.

Still wrung out from the night with Steve, the breakdown, the drugs, the nightmares, the aftermath. Helping Steve through this thing, watching shining golden hair without reaching, forcing himself to be what Steve needs, fumbling to find a balance, give him the love he deserved without ruining their souls in the process.
His body wanted to sleep and his mind refused; he slipped into darkness within minutes.

Steve watched the battle, watched Bucky's body jolt as he forced himself back awake, watched his mind drag him back under. Then, finally, he was gone for good. And Steve didn't move a centimeter, laid still and quiet on Bucky's arm, palm flat over soft abs, watching the chest rise and fall of the man he loved, the man he'd thought was lost to him forever.

Nothing on the beach moved for a long time, nothing but Bucky's beautiful hair in the wind as Steve laid sentry and Bucky slept soundly beside him, safe. Forever safe.

Crystal cracked open and Steve didn't move until Bucky did, until he lifted up - abs clenching wonderfully under Steve's hand - and peered over squintingly, slightly peeved but definitely rested.

Steve lifted on an elbow, little knowing smile, and he couldn't resist running his eyes down Bucky's stretched out body one more time.

He froze as his eyes lit on Bucky's stomach.

"What?" Bucky croaked, looking down before the question was even finished, then his mouth popped open in indignance. "You ass."

"I didn't even think--"

"Your handprint is tanned into my stomach--"

"I didn't know you tanned so damn fast!"

"There is a white handprint on my abs."

"...it's cute?"

"I'm way too metal for this shit," Bucky whined, then he was shoving Steve onto his back.

And they both found out very quickly that wrestling in the sand wasn't fun for anyone, especially tracking the grains all the way through the taxi, Stark tower, and into their shared bathroom.

They didn't share a shower, but Bucky winked and teased him before shoving the curtain closed and tossing his swimsuit over the top while Steve shaved in the mirror so really, it wasn't all that bad either.

~*~*~

Bucky was humming when Steve cracked open the door, shoving the folded paper in his back pocket. Although, lately, it wasn't safe there either--

He smiled to himself at that thought, but changed pockets anyways, stuffing it in the front (Bucky really couldn't see yet) as he picked his way over paint buckets.

There was a blue streak across Bucky's forehead, angled like he'd rubbed a hand over his temple to catch sweat, and combined with the peek of his tongue as he concentrated, holding the paintbrush
close and steady - painting something very tiny and detailed, and the only colors Steve'd picked up so far were orange, brown, and blue - he looked as adorable as he'd ever been.

"Hi honey, I'm home," Steve teased, crossing his arms over the top of Bucky's easel, sure not to get within sight of peeking over.

"Hey sugar," Bucky flirted back, pinning his hair behind his ear and giving Steve a charming smile.

Because he just had to, Steve licked his thumb and reached over the painting between them, rubbing at the mark on Bucky's forehead the way Sarah always used to. An offended noise, then Bucky was dipping bristles into his pallet and there was a paintbrush dotting red to the tip of Steve's nose.

"Oh you rascal," Steve exclaimed, trying to wipe it off with the back of his hand, then Bucky came swinging around his easel, no more barrier between them as his eyes widened innocently, licking his thumb and reaching for Steve's face too.

He dodged the hand in time, grabbing Buck's wrist and pulling him in close, then they were stumbling over each other and a lot of paint cans that were not as empty as Steve thought.

So really, it wasn't his fault the art floor was now splashed in red, green, and blue, but it probably was his fault there was a multi-colored handprint on Bucky's ass and another smear across his cheek. And it was definitely Bucky's fault Steve ended up laughing so hard he clutched his chest and fell over in the mess, splattering it over everything.

Actually, the whole thing was basically Bucky's fault for being so damn cute while he was painting and if there was anything that Steve loved about this century, it was that they had enough money for Bucky to paint too, for him to be proud of something, for his eyes to light up the way they did every time Steve so much as mentioned the mystery painting.

And it was also Bucky's fault for all the paint in Steve's hair, because it was Bucky's stupid idea to kiss him silly in the middle of the mess, until Steve felt dizzy with it and could do nothing but lie in paint and giggle and really, who cared whose fault it was?

~*~*~

"Are we betting money on this?"

"Hell yes."

"Easy for you to say, Stark," Sam pointed out and Tony waved him off, taking a sip of his bourbon.

"Fine, you can bet your fancy wings?" Stark offered and Sam scoffed in offense, just as Clint jumped onto a stool and slammed an arrow down on the counter.

"I am so in."

"Barton, how many times--"

"I don't get why we can't match, birds of a feather and all that?"
"Boys, boys, are we making bets or not?" Pepper placed a fancy key in the middle of the betting-counter and everyone looked at it suspiciously, including Tony.

"Alright, Wilson, if you don't wanna bet wings, how about you remove your blanket claim to all orange juice??"

"Buy your own goddamned orange juice! It's one thing, literally one thing that I own in this tower and every morning--"

"Is this arrow even worth anything?" Tony asked skeptically, picking it up and studying the tip.

"You're all idiots," Natasha offered, and everyone shot her a glare, except Pepper gave her a nice smile and turned back to the betting table.

"Alright, I'm calling Miss Missing You," Clint declared, pointing an accusing finger at everyone that clearly stated there were to be no takebacks. Everyone gave respectful nods and Natasha pulled the lyrics up on her phone, snorting at the chorus and reaching over Sam to give Clint a high-five.

"Fair choice, Barton, but I've gotta go Jet Pack Blues," Sam inputted, scratching out a reluctant freed orange juice on a napkin and tossing it in.

"Really?"

"Man, you didn't see how blue Steve was before we found him, trust me on this one. It's pretty goddamned fitting."

"Are you all betting on Fall Out Boy songs? For what?" Maria grabbed a glass as she passed Tony, one eyebrow cocked curiously.

"For Steve and Bucky's theme song," Tony clarified, getting a snort in response. "Everyone quotes FOB to them all the time anyway, may as well make an official thing of it."

"And no one's brought up Alone Together?" Maria offered, tipping her head to where the two were curled up on the couch all the way across the room, murmuring quietly to each other some romantic poetry shit from the 40s, probably.

Pepper made a choked sound at Maria's suggestion and everyone looked at her funny, so she quickly nudged the key and placed her bet. "I'm on Young Volcanoes."

Nat fist-bumped her across the table too and Tony narrowed his eyes, looking around everyone in the group.

"Good, fair choices, all of you. But I'm still taking the cake on this."

"Oh really, you gonna go American Beauty American Psycho? Cause it's good, but the title's the best part--"

"Nope," Tony interrupted, popping the P and dropping a thousand dollar watch into the pile. "The Kids Aren't Alright."

Nat and Sam groaned in tandem while Pepper and Maria made agreeing sounds and Barton's fingers hovered, debating whether or not it was worth snatching his arrow back.

"I dunno, I'm still for Miss Missing You though..." he mused, and everyone decided they'd keep their bets in regardless of how surprisingly well-fit Stark's song choice was.
"ROGERS! Get over here." Tony beckoned with a hand and Steve got up, hand carding through Bucky's hair before he started for the table, leaving Bucky on the couch. Stark muttered something under his breath and clarified loudly, "Both Rogers's."

Bucky lifted his head, turning over the back of the couch in confusion, but at the insistent wave sighed and got off the couch too.

"So, we made a bet--"

"No, no, you can't do it like that," Natasha interrupted, waving a hand to shut him up and facing the boys with a one-sided smirk and tapping nails. "We made a playlist for you two, so listen to the whole thing and tell us your favorite song, okay?"

"Okay...?" Bucky agreed confusedly, then they were being lead to opposite sides of the room, both facing the same direction so they could give each other weirded-out sideglances.

"There's a lot of money on the table, choose wisely," Tony advised, and Sam flicked him on the arm.

Bucky recognized the first song as Fall Out Boy instantly, caught onto the bet by the second song, and spent the rest of the playlist crossing his arms over his chest and trying not to cry.

Steve was stunned, to say the least, and neither of them really had much to say after, but their friends prodded them for a decision and saying no to an Avenger wasn't exactly easy--

So Steve weaved their hands together, too many fresh memories to not touch Bucky right now, and decided he'd pick the one that was the most present, the one that didn't rip out his heart (although really, what were friends if they weren't a little painful), even if it meant Tony cheering and crowing the rest of the evening.

Bucky stayed quiet, pulled Steve aside for just a moment, because he'd been told who'd chosen what song and if Sam had chosen Jet Pack Blues, "Was that really how it was in the beginning, looking for me?"

He had to ask, and by the water in Steve's eyes, he already had his answer.

"I'm so sorry--" he started, fumbling with how to make an apology for the Winter Soldier's stupidity, only Steve grabbed his hands, interrupted him with tears stuck to bottom lashes.

"But you came home." Steve smiled wobbly and Bucky pulled him down to press a solid kiss to his forehead, closing his eyes and holding too tight for just a moment, then he waved Steve back off to his friends.

In the absence he chatted with Pepper, congratulating her on song choice and asking under his breath who the fuck had this kinda idea and she laughed for a good minute straight, waving one hand in the air as she grabbed a martini for him and whispered who do you think?

He kept humming Americana, exotica to himself until Tony came to prod him with his newly-won arrow. Although, really, if it came from Barton god knows what kinda tip it had and Bucky would really prefer not to be unexpectedly electrocuted or something.

"So, Barnes, you agree with my song too? I know I won the technicalities, but I like the confirmation of full agreement--"

"Your song was the closest to making me cry," Bucky interrupted and Tony stopped talking. For a moment.
"Steve said the exact opposite, said it was the only one that didn't, that's why he chose--"

"It wasn't from his point of view. He wouldn't know." He crossed his arms over his chest, looking past Tony to the wall of windows, the midnight lights of New York opened up beneath them.

"I didn't-- I told Steve, after...after he told me he loved me, he. He said he wouldn't change a single thing if we ended up here and." Bucky stopped, sucking in a breath and glancing at Stark. He was standing silently, listening quietly, no rude remarks in sight, and for some reason that made it a little easier to keep talking.

He didn't have to, he didn't have to explain a single thing to Tony, but. But if that was Tony's song, he already knew it all anyways. Besides, it was Howard's kid, and god knows Howard got an earful of Bucky's complaints about Steve back in the war.

"And I told him I wouldn't, that I'd go back and make him marry Peggy and have some normal life but--"

And in the end, I'd do it all again. I think you're my best friend. Don't you know that the kids aren't alright?

"But Tony, I don't. I don't think I'd do that anymore. Not after...I just want the best for him." He scrubbed a hand down his face, checking the other side of the room just in case, but everyone was busy laughing and chatting about something or another.

"Do you think...you think there's a chance that I'm the best thing for him?"

"You heard the song," Tony replied quietly, swirling his glass around in his drink and right, Bucky wasn't the only emotionally destroyed person around here, he forgot that sometimes.

"Well," he said, a touch brighter, clapping a hand on Tony's shoulder. "Every word of it, Stark. You outdid yourself. Things you couldn't've known, even, and. Just...yeah. Congrats on the win, it's deserved."

Even if it was a some stupid game, but. But maybe Bucky meant more than that and thankfully, Tony was smart enough to get everything Bucky wasn't saying.

Y'know, if they ever got the chance, Bucky was pretty sure he'd be really good friends with Stark. They were both science geeks, Bucky just wasn't as smart. Or maybe hadn't had the opportunity to be as smart, who knows what he could learn now, especially if he was hanging out on Tony's lab tables the way he had with Howard's.

A clap to Bucky's shoulder this time and Tony gave him a half-sorrowful smile, the other half genuine victory and Bucky huffed, waving him off and feeling a little bad for suddenly dampening the parade, but if anyone could handle it, it'd be Stark.

He slid back into the crowd laughing and joking with the rest of them, easy and light, and Bucky watched from afar, small smile as he propped on the armrest of the couch and let his eyes drift over the skyline.

Even the whistles at the beginning were perfect, the swinging hands of little Stevie as he skipped up the driveway to Bucky's, perfect image from whatever time in the 20s that'd been.

Fall to your knees, bring on the rapture. Blessed be the boys time can't capture.

You gonna be my redemption? Falling to his knees at Steve's feet, that's how it'd always been, letting
time slide right past them both.

*On film or between the sheets. I always fall from your window to the pitch-black streets.*

How many times had he gone through Steve's window, how far had he fallen to dark bloody streets since?

*Former heroes who quit too late. Who just wanna fill up the trophy case again.*

If the trophy case was Steve's heart, that is. He was never gonna quit, and Bucky knew that in his soul and it *ached* that Steve'd never be *free*, he'd never get the dream and promised freedom he'd won for everyone else.

Then the next line came and Bucky couldn't stop repeating it in his head.

*And in the end*
*I'd do it all again.*

Would he?

Would he go through seventy years of torture to know what *I love you* sounded like falling from Steve's lips?

Forgetting it all to remember again?

Bucky's gaze cut to the other side of the room, searching and finding heartbreakingly quickly. And he looked at Steve Rogers, just watched him across the distance between them that really, really wasn't that far at all. Time frozen in this moment, sound shifting to hollow echoes, light from the overhead bulbs reflecting highlights off blonde, illuminating brown roots darker.

*I think you're my best friend.*

One look, dark room. His moving-mountains mouth opened in a happy laugh, blues flicking between Sam and Maria and Bucky couldn't turn his eyes away if the world lit on fire around them.

Steve looked up, lifting his head and meeting Bucky's eyes. A smile grew, genuine and slow until he was shyly beaming and Bucky's heart tore slowly in his chest.

*And I'll be yours.*

Just when he thought he'd burst with it, with too much of everything, that bright blue of Bucky's sky and ocean and stars - they flashed once and Steve crossed his eyes at Bucky, making a face like this was just another day in their apartment in Brooklyn and a choked huff escaped Bucky's mouth, tearing out half his soul with it.

Then just as quick Steve's head turned again, raising his eyebrows curiously at a question from Pepper, then he was waving his hand around as he answered and Bucky looked away, tears gathering on his lashes.

He was so. so. in love with that boy.

~*~*~
"Should I be worried, or...?"

"Why would you be worried?" Steve teased, pressing the button on the elevator and making sure his hand covered Bucky's eyes entirely.

It was amazing, that months ago Bucky was throwing knives at everything and now he was letting Steve lead him around blind.

"I dunno, maybe because I was told to dress nice and I haven't even seen you since you got home? It was hand over the eyes since before I could even kiss you hello."

"There'll be plenty of time for that. Besides, what I'm wearing is half the surprise."

"...you do realize the places that makes my mind go," Bucky started and Steve pinched him.

"Shut up, we're almost there."

The elevator dinged open and Steve guided him into the room, floors suddenly echoing at the sound of his boots, emptier sounding than any of the floors Bucky could remember.

"Where are--"

Then Steve's hands were lifting away from his eyes and Bucky just stared.

"I thought..." he started, and Steve wrapped arms around his waist from behind, resting his chin on Bucky's shoulder.

"It was under construction? It was. But Tony said I could take over, do what I wanted with it. Said it was only fair, since we're the only two who've really been here anyways."

The floor Bucky'd made into a knife range back in the first few weeks, the floor he'd been on when that terrible thunderstorm hit and Steve'd had to drag him out using Soviet commands. Then, it'd just been an empty floor of concrete and windows, white plastic sheets over some walls.

Now? It was transformed. The floors were still concrete, but everything else'd been shaped into something beautiful -

Dark brown walls, a swooping wooden bar on the far wall that looked straight outta the war, wood seats and everything. Every light in the place was golden, the old kind, only most of them weren't on - instead, the angle where the walls met the ceiling was strung in tiny, white-gold lights like something out of Great Gatsby, the modern twist that tied in the wall decor and the floor-length windows on the sides with the old-timey look, leaving everything beautiful and vaguely nostalgic instead of a cloying imitation ignoring the progress and life they had now.

"Steve..."

Just when Bucky couldn't imagine it getting any better, Steve stepped out from behind him, holding his arms out a little shyly as he turned to show off the whole thing.

He was wearing clothes straight out of the 1940s, right down to the suspenders and the slightly-big white shirt and the pants settled around his waist. His hair wasn't slicked down, but it wasn't spiked up either, kind of just. Swooping to the side in that same incredible mix between past and present, the Stevie of then and the Captain of now.

"Dance with me?" Steve offered a hand, stooping low, and Bucky placed his fingers gingerly in
Steve's grip, still hardly believing this was all real, then Steve straightened and pulled him close in one motion, touch settling easily on Bucky's waist, other hands clasped loosely in the waltz they hadn't done since that night in the bar, a week before Bucky'd fallen from the train and everything’d changed.

Music started from the boombox on the bar, motion sensor picking them up the moment Steve pulled them into the first one two three.

Only it sounded like it came straight outta a record player, fuzzy with that muted quality and that, that's what they used to dance too.

The song sounded familiar as hell, could swear he knew it, only nothing really mattered right now but the way Steve was looking at him, not as much soft as melting, like the confident step towards him wasn't about dancing at all.

One two three, one two three, and the last time they'd done this it'd taken a bit to get into but now Steve just took his hand and...jumped. Finally, jumped.

"Took you long enough," Bucky whispered and Steve cocked his head a bit, tightening the fingers on Bucky's waist and pulling him into the sidestep. One step closer.

Smooth gliding, solid touch, beat not too fast, and Steve had a much better handle on this than Bucky remembered, swinging them into the three step spin.

The triplet pattern of their feet was natural as breathing, always had been for Bucky, and he had half a mind to ask Steve if he'd been taking lessons, only who the hell taught jazz-waltzing anymore? The piano in the background was naggingly familiar, the overlaying trumpets shaking the sound a little too high the way it always did on records, just enough edge to set your toes a little faster.

A sax hummed in the background and Steve moved the hand on Bucky's waist to wrap around his lower back, pulling their chests closer and heartbeats flush against each other; a perfect reflection, looking through a mirror to the past, two other boys on the floor with them, young things with easy smiles and bashful glances, dancing hand in hand the way they always had.

Who were the ghosts now?

Young. For Steve, it'd been fifteen months ago. Fifteen. He was still a kid, they both were, only why did Bucky's soul feel so worn?

They circled around again, then again, floating to the beat like immortals and really, Bucky thought, tightening his grip on Steve's shoulder, it wasn't that far of a stretch.

The way you wear your hat, a muffled voice came in and Bucky suddenly snapped his fingers, finally placing where he'd heard the damn song.

"Shall We Dance, 1937, that's what this is from." He made a victorious noise and Steve crinkled his nose in a smile, hand a little looser on Bucky's back as he squinted and cocked his head. "It missed the intro."

"Our romance won't end on a sorrowful note?" Steve offered and Bucky closed his eyes with a quiet "Yes, that's it. It was killing me."

"Noo, they can't take that away from me," he sung softly, then Steve was sweeping him into another spin and Bucky nearly missed the timing of the footing, landing a touch too close to Steve's chest, only that was perfectly fine.
The hand on his back spread angel wings over his shoulderblade and Bucky held on tighter, eyelids slipping closed as their feet straightened into a perfect triplet again.

Are you out here for me? Steve'd asked him.

Of course, Bucky'd thought, squeezing Steve's unbloodied hand. You know the answer to that question.

Though they take you from me, I'll still possess...the memory of all that, no, no, they can't take that away from me.

Bucky turned his head, just inches between their noses.

"Fifteen months isn't long at all," he said quietly, wrapping a forearm tighter behind Steve's shoulder and pulling him into the next step of the waltz a little harder.

"Bucky?"

"Yes, Steve."

"Can you...how well do you remember last time?"

He pressed his lips against Steve's solid jawline, closing his eyes into the warmth. "Perfectly."

"That...when you told me you were fighting for me, you had this look on your face. A...resignation I'd never been a part of, some internal agreement you had with yourself that I wasn't anywhere near understanding, and. I remember thinking Not now, not tonight. That you'd tell me one day and I'd wait until then. And I. I think I've waited some time now..."

Bucky huffed a laugh, slowing the pace of their dancing a little as the next song echoed into the room. He pondered a moment, each step of feet a little lighter as they spun around each other's boots. This was a thing for them, apparently. Talking and dancing.

"It was about that talk with Peggy," he said slowly, hopefully level enough to translate to Steve that his wait wasn't over, that this wasn't something Bucky could talk about.

Violins arched over them and Steve cocked his head, leaning it against the side of Bucky's for a moment, touching their temples together. For once it wasn't curiosity, muted frustration. Just simple affection, showing he understood, he was still here.

Last time, Bucky's eyes fluttered closed, lips parting in overwhelmed emotion as he fought the urge to cry. Such a simple gesture and Bucky could only think what if we could be this way forever.

He'd told himself forever with Steve wasn't his.

One two three, spinning over each other's feet. So tightly close and promisingly safe, they were kids again and real adults for once, forever and never because was this something Bucky could actually keep?

Any change in time, we are young again.

"If you can ever tell me one day--" Steve started, his voice soft and quiet against Bucky's ear. Steve was almost sure he felt Bucky shiver in his arms, then Bucky's voice interrupted him, slipping languidly over Steve's as a trailing palm ran down his spine.

"This song, is it Panic?"
"Yes."

A modern song for their lives now and it wasn't fair, forced to live two realities at once, the pain of a double love story to break hearts twice.

Lay us down, we're in love.

"Steve," Bucky's voice cracked over the word and Steve broke the dance, letting go of extended waltzing hands, wrapping both arms solid around Bucky's back, held close as the room spun around them.

"Is this the end of all things?" he asked into Steve's collarbone, hands curling comfortably around the familiar suspenders splitting across sheathed muscles.

"Is this what you want at the end?" The soft, low words bled into his skin and Bucky wasn't going to cry.

He clung a little tighter and this wasn't a war-worn floor, their boys weren't waiting at the table, the war outside wasn't the promise they'd never spoken aloud because that was all gone, it was gone forever.

Were they gone forever?

In these coming years, many things will change. But the way I feel will remain the same.

The end. Dancing with Steve, holding each other close - it was this that'd haunted him before, it was this that'd haunt him now.

It didn't matter what he wanted at the end, this was what would be there waiting for him. The first step inside the pearly gates would be into Steve's waiting arms.

If he ever got so far as heaven.

He couldn't fool himself.

So this was it, then. If they both died tonight, this would be the last time he'd hold Steve close--

Lay us down, we're in love.

"I can't lose you," Bucky breathed, and Steve's fingers dug into skin, bruising like that would be enough to ensure Bucky he'd never be alone again.

"I need an answer, Buck. I can't...keep wondering." Heartbeat loud enough for Bucky to feel against his throat. "Will you be mine?"

Mine.

Property of Steve Rogers.

He lifted his head, took ahold of Steve's hand, and swept them to the side. Fast, rough movements and then they were spinning across the floor in a dizzying waltz, Steve tripping over himself for the first time that night as he switched into the way Bucky'd taught him, standing on his toes as they waltzed over easy, uncomplicated kitchen floors and then--

If Steve'd asked then, he'd've said yes. He'd've fallen to Steve's feet in prayer, begged Steve to take his heart.
Mine. Owned.

Wide blue eyes, off-guard from the sudden mood shift, from the sudden burn in Bucky's eyes but he'd always been like this, he'd dipped Steve that night in '45 and he'd spun him every dance before that and there's a fire in you that Hydra could never burn out. Only why was Steve surprised he still had it?

"I used to be a legend. A ghost story. I had power, control, a name for myself. And now you're asking me to become Captain America's boy toy?" He spoke the words private and serious against Steve's ear, but the moment he said boytoy the waltz stopped abruptly as Steve planted his feet, forced the dancing halt, fast enough to make Bucky stumble, only he wasn't done, Steve didn't get it.

He considering wrenching his wrists from Steve's hands but he didn't want that, he wanted to hold Steve, wanted Steve to hold him, but he wasn't sure how to say this with so much intimacy still hovering between them. So instead he clamped his fingers down on Steve's arms, holding him solid and still, making sure he was listening.

"I don't want the world to remember me as Captain America's scandal," Bucky emphasized seriously and Steve gripped him back, hard, fightin' words on the tip of his tongue but he thankfully, somehow, kept his mouth shut long enough for Bucky to finish. "I don't want to be the plus one for Mr. Steve Rogers. I'm the Winter fucking Soldier, and I don't wanna lose that."

Can't lose that, because it's all that kept me alive when you couldn't.

Hands framing his face, room spinning again, only they weren't moving, Steve's gaze was just that dizzying, Bucky was hopeless in his arms.

"I don't want you to. I want you exactly as you are." The palms slid down Bucky's arms, holding him tight and serious and sweet as Steve crinkled his brow, lifting his eyebrows in the center and shooting a wave of shocking honesty through veins. "I want you strong and terrifying and I want you to remind everyone that I do have a dark side. You're my dark side." I am the mask you wear. Metal plates shifting under the intensity of Steve's grip as Bucky blinked dizzily and Steve tipped their foreheads together, strong hand rough on the back of Bucky's head, voice dropping low. "I won't let us forget each other again."

"Fuck you, Rogers," Bucky shot back weakly, searching the two blue eyes a little wildly, shifting his feet to scoot closer, then he tipped his chin up and Steve leaned down to meet him halfway.

The kiss was something out of movies, the kind where the camera spins all the way around and the watcher is dizzy as fuck - which was only fair, because Bucky's brain was pounding, his heart was thudding, his body was thrumming with every tipped angle of Steve's mouth, lips professing together and away, tongue dipping emphatic and this was how people fall apart.

Was this the apostatized promise? Downward spiral to the end? Their mouths broke apart, Steve's biceps on his shoulders and forearms tucked up behind Bucky's head, hands gripping hair tight as he boxed Bucky closer, breathing fast and heavy as Bucky held onto Steve's back just as terrified.

"I love you," Stevie breathed, ducking his head and swaying Bucky close against him. "I love you, I love you."

The words were a confession, a cry, and Bucky swallowed the lump in his throat, praying to a god he'd never quite believed in that he didn't lose this.

Singing baby come home.
There was one more fight left for them, one more battle that they hadn't been ready for, not when Bucky was still ready to give this all up for the past, when he still regretted all those years--

But he couldn't, he could not physically imagine losing this. Losing Steve after this.

The way Steve looked at him, the way Steve held him, the rushing relief and lingering fear in his voice every time *I love you* escaped his lungs, there wasn't anything Bucky'd trade for that.

Maybe this was the victory swoop at the end of their war.

Bucky withdrew from Steve's arms, leaning all the way back to arm's length, both hands on Steve's collarbones as he held him in place and watched the devotion flit over beautiful features. A tone of voice to match Steve's *I love you* perfectly, low and quiet, their final words to condemnation.

"Make me never forget you again."

Two hearts pounding through the drowning flood and Steve snatched Bucky's hand, pressing a kiss to metal knuckles, and lead him across the open dancefloor.

Bucky was just about to make a joke about how romantic concrete was, until they turned the corner around the edge of the bar and there was suddenly a door embedded in a lone wall.

It looked old, almost old enough to be the one to their apartment in Brooklyn, and Bucky squeezed Steve's hand helplessly. The final steps forward and Steve reached out, turning the doorknob and stepping behind Bucky as it swung the reveal.

The door creaked open and Bucky paused at the threshold, staring inside. He didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't this.

A single bed, a nightstand, a single curtained window.

There was nothing else in the room.

"You..." he trailed off, mind racing with thoughts of *he planned this, he wanted this, Steve went to all the trouble to make this beautiful.*

"We don't have to," quick and quiet, "We can go back upstairs if you want, I just. I thought maybe we..."

*deserved something like this?*

Steve's voice was quivering, nervous as hell and Bucky looked over his shoulder, eyebrows raised and lips rolling in.

"It's perfect," he promised quietly and a rush of air escaped Steve's lips, untensing in relief as he beckoned Bucky inside, followed him in. Closed the door carefully.

This was happening.

Bucky's heart was in his throat and this was *happening.*

In all his memories, he'd never had anything like this.

In all his years, his heart'd never been so full and close to seizing.
The bedroom was dark, black and sharp at the edges. Shadows like the altar of his sins, then Steve drew back the curtains, spilling white moonlight through glass and he'd always pictured this moment in gold, but the black and white felt about a thousand times more real.

Steve was still in color. Everything else was gone, but the moon reflected palladium on his hair, soft angel-wing glow on his skin. Blue eyes bright like the sky, the only heaven Bucky'd ever reach.

They were so far apart, Steve standing at the window, looking at Bucky with those beautiful eyes and how was this real? He'd never been more sure something was, but after everything that'd happened, every twist and plummet of their universe, they'd ended up here and there was nothing in the world that could take this away from him. Nothing.

And it's peaceful, in the deep. Cathedral where you cannot breathe.

He stood silent and still, watching each beautiful stride Steve took to his side, the easy way he moved, all grace and power underneath those rippling muscles and he'd shouted about fake manufactured science a month ago, but here, like this? If this was the perfect body, the optimum potential and efficiency, it belonged to Steve before it ever did to science. Because this was the only one that could match his insides, the man behind the wind-whipped flag.

A callused palm ran over his cheek, cupping his face into the moonlight and Bucky shut his eyes, leaning into Steve's hand the way he always had inside.

"Are you sure about this?" Steve's voice was low and soft, gentle the way no one else'd ever been with him, wrecking Bucky's future with anyone else in a single moment because that, you don't come back from that.

Bucky just managed not to say let me give you my life - he'd done that once, he'd died for Steve a hundred times over, and this was about more than that, about more than living for him too. This was about coexistence, about tying their lives together in every way they could be tied, stepping over the final threshold hand in hand.

"If we could go back," Bucky whispered instead, opening his eyes again to make sure Steve was listening, absorbing every word outta his mouth. "If we had time for that, would you change anything?"

The sweetest smile, crinkling next to his eyes as the familiar dance resurfaced. And for once, neither of them were dying. Or maybe they both were.

"If it meant getting to have this, with you? No, I wouldn't change a single thing."

The raw honesty in Steve's voice hurt, deep inside where the memories of every beating he'd endured were stored, every memory wiped away from him and shoved back inside.

The threatening rainstorm that started everything could knock down their window tonight and Bucky'd let it take them both this time, so long as they were together.

"If this was my last breath," Bucky vowed quietly, taking Steve's hands in both of his, holding them between their chests with the quiet whirr of metal and the tight press of skin. "If the last words I ever said were against your lips... I'll leave with no regrets."

I'd do it all again.

There were tears in his eyes. He meant it.
Steve leaned down and kissed him.

The bed hit the back of his knees and Steve's strong arms lifted him onto it, one cradling his back and the other his legs, placing Bucky down like he was made of something beautiful. If he could pick any moment to know inside Steve's head it'd be now. How did he look at Bucky and see this?

A tender mouth pressed to his again and Bucky parted his lips, inhaling the oxygen from Steve's lungs and taking it for his own, sunburnt on the insides as Steve closed his mouth around Bucky's bottom lip, pulling off with a slide and the shivers down his spine were subdued by the reaching fingers rubbing down his ribs, his waist, his hips.

Fingertips grazed the bottom of his shirt and Bucky lifted his arms, breaking away to breathe cold air as Steve tugged his buttonup over his head, tossed it aside, sitting up to pull off his own too, white and black landing in a pile to the side, suspenders hanging off Steve's hips, and Bucky forced himself to push air through his body, rolling his head on the pillow to look up at his best friend.

Lover, he was going to be Bucky's lover.

No war could've prepared him for this.

Steve's fingers branched over his bare chest, tracing lines and patterns like Bucky was his blank canvas, the same contained joy that lit up his face the first time Bucky'd handed him a sketchbook. A huff of laughter escaped Bucky's throat and he shook his head, reaching up to palm the curve of Steve's shoulder.

"What?" Steve asked, settling down closer, his knees pressed to Bucky's hips as he bent, mushing a kiss over the scarred skin over his heart.

"You're looking at me like I'm something to paint on," Bucky replied, a little disbelief mixed in the awe, hand swooping over the curve of Steve's spine. He lifted up at that, eyebrows furrowed in confusion and hesitance.

"It's a good thing," Bucky assured him, because he'd always thought there wasn't a better look on Steve's face than when he had a pencil in his hand. _Bucky liked watching Steve draw almost more than he liked the drawings themselves. It was just the only time he got to see Steve peaceful. _At home.

A tiny smile and Steve pressed closer still, chest hard and heavy over Bucky's, lips teasing at his softly.

Something clanked a quiet metallic sound and Bucky turned his head, breaking off and closing his eyes as Steve kissed a trail down his neck, tilting outta the way as his lips caught on the metal chain, followed it past Bucky's collarbone, another quiet rattle as he pressed a kiss to the name etched over Bucky's chest.

_and it's breaking over me, a thousand miles down to the sea._

The earth held still for a heartbeat, then Bucky lifted his head, tugging the chain carefully off of his neck, over his hair. Steve propped on his elbows, worried again, but he hadn't done anything wrong. Not when it came to this, he never had.

Bucky looped the chain over dark blonde, holding his breath as the heated metal settled over Steve's skin, plates dangling down in the space between them.

"You ever get your tags back?" Bucky asked softly, running his thumb over his name around Steve's
neck. It may as well be his anyways; it wasn't like it'd matter, if one of their bodies were found, whoever's tag was around whom's neck. If one was gone, the other would be too. He was starting to get that now, maybe finally. He didn't just follow Steve, Steve'd been chasing him around their whole lives too.

"No." He ran his fingers over the chain, the strange way the individual metal beads threaded together, lifting them in front of him, reading the engraved letters, numbers. Barnes, James B.

Blue staring at the name, the serial Bucky'd been tortured into mumbling on repeat. He closed metal fingers over Steve's, easing the tags out of his hand and into the metal palm, tugging gently, pulling Steve down by his own necklace, then their mouths were pressed together once more and the emotions were bitter on Steve's tongue.

Broad hands spanned down his ribs again, past his hips, fingertips dipping beneath his waistband. Bucky lifted up, encouraging Steve silently, kissing his pretty mouth over and over while careful fingers unbuttoned his jeans, lifting and tugging down the zipper. Steve's hands were steady, sure as he pulled back, tucked his hands in the pockets and slid Bucky's pants down his thighs. The air hit cold enough to make him shiver, tugging off the rest of the way and wrestling them over his feet, Steve pressed a quick kiss to his ankle as he tossed them aside.

Steve'd helped him outta coats a hundred times, carefully removing Bucky's boots from his drunken feet, helping unstrap the guns and knives from his back. So as foreign as this should've felt, it didn't. It was different, but it was Stevie and everything about that was comfortable.

His right hand was trembling as he popped the button on Steve's slacks, left hand whirring softly as metal fingers slipped on the zipper. It eventually caught, then he was pushing the material over Steve's ass, palms following with a gentle stroke that had Steve's eyes closing, a deep breath through his nose. The slacks and suspenders were tossed aside too and Bucky's palms kept running up Steve's sides, pressing fingertips into his skin, leaving white rivets in his wake as he traced the body he'd spent so much of his life protecting.

"You know what you're doing?" He asked quietly, tilting his head at the sound of a container dropped on the bed beside them.

"Don't I always?" Steve replied, making a face and sitting up to unscrew the top.

"Never," Bucky sighed, staring up at the ceiling in feigned disaster.

Steve smacked his lower thigh and Bucky made a chagrined sound because that was bare skin, it stung like hell.

Then his boxer-briefs were sliding down over the stinging mark and suddenly there were a lot of other things to focus on. Tugged over his feet, dropping to the floor, and Bucky was laying here naked, with Steve, moonlight casting black shadows, white highlights, except how naked could he be when he wasn't all skin, when there was metal attached to his shoulder?

He wanted to get rid of it, give himself, nothing but his skin and bones and beating heart. But then Steve's boxers were dropping to the floor too and the pretty face was leaning over him again, dogtags swinging from his neck. And Stevie had metal too.

Reflections still look the same to me, as before I went under.

"Bucky," Steve whispered, and without the low gravel in his voice he could've been eighteen, tiny and reaching and maybe it was crazy but he didn't care, this was still his best friend. He reached up
and pulled Steve into his arms, wrapping tight over broad shoulders and a tiny waist and fuck, lord
their hips were pressed together like this too but just for a second he needed to hold the punk who'd
made it through the century with him.

Nose against his neck, lips parted on his collarbone, elbows slid under his spine, warm and solid in
his arms, alive and real, the pounding heart against his chest and heavy breaths, for once: nothing in
the world standing between him and Stevie.

No need to pray, no need to speak. Now I am under.

Then, because he'd chosen an asshole of a best friend, Steve mumbled something into his skin and
rolled his hips down on Bucky's. The air punched out of his lungs, hard abdominal muscles catching
on his skin, consuming spike of arousal as their erections rubbed against each other.

Hands tipped his face up and Bucky breathed into Steve's mouth, metal plates shifting as he ran two
fingers down Steve's lower back to flatten over his ass, drag him down to brush together again.

Words were gone, but that didn't stop the shaky sound escaping his mouth as their hard lengths
pressed together, as Steve rocked his hips and Bucky's hands curled to fists against golden muscle.
He'd always been attuned to the world, moreso as an assassin, but it'd never been like this, so
electrifyingly aware of each touch, brush of skin. Tingling instead of shocking, building instead of
breaking.

"C'mon angel," Bucky coaxed, but it was more of a breathy plea, meeting the circle of Steve's hips
with a reminding squeeze to plush flesh.

A bit lip, nervous trembling hands as Steve held his breath and nodded, scooted backwards, lifted
one of Bucky's legs at the knee and let blue eyes cut down to unfamiliar skin. A bottle screwing
open, hesitant heartbeats as eyes shot to his again.

"I can--" he started to offer, but Steve crinkled his brow in offense and lifted Bucky's other knee,
tipping the bottle slowly to coat two fingers in slick.

A hiss as sensitive skin lit up cold and Steve murmured something low, Bucky's lips parting at
pressure tentative and warm over tight muscle, then the tip of a finger was folding inside his body
and he didn't know how to breathe.

"A-ah," Bucky's throat caught and Steve stroked a worried hand over his stomach, hand stilled inside
him.

"You okay?"

It burned a little, stretching more than he'd pictured, but that was nothing compared to the feeling of
something inside him. Intrusive, a different angle than he'd thought, feeling bigger than Steve's
fingers were.

He bit his lip and nodded, not trusting his voice or words right now, staring at the shadows dancing
on the ceiling while Steve planted the hand on his stomach and slowly withdrew, pushing in again
while the burn dulled.

"God, you're beautiful." Steve's eyes grazed over his body in something like awe and Bucky glanced
down at him with an amused little smile.

"Mmm. Think so?" The finger inside him was slipping in and out more easily now and Bucky's
chest was rising and falling deeply with it, rerouting the highs under his control, letting his body trust
Steve's immeasurably.

"Know so," he murmured, placing a kiss to Bucky's inner knee and guiding his finger all the way in to the knuckle, shooting a stutter into Bucky's breathing because god, that was deep.

"Th-thank you, Captain Rogers," Bucky managed and a little laugh escaped Steve's throat, suddenly lifting up to drop over Bucky's body and kiss him on the mouth, a gentle tug on his bottom lip as he kept working his finger in Bucky's ass. It was a little overwhelming, having two fires lit up in his veins at once, but Steve was keeping everything easy and slow and captured every gasp with a soothing flick of his tongue.

Steve's hand sped up inside him and Bucky had to break off to keep breathing, a touch too fast as he squirmed on the penetration.

"You're welcome, Sergeant Barnes," he finally replied with that knowing smile and Bucky snorted because god, Steve was a little shit even in bed, he wasn't the slightest surprised. "You ready for another, sweetheart?"

"Fuck, Steve, don't say shit like that," Buck cursed and couldn't help but reach down and run his hand up his cock, moaning softly as he stroked down, way too fucking hard to not have some kind of friction before he exploded.

Steve's eyes were glued to Bucky's hand, breathing shallow and cheeks pink, his finger buried deep and unmoving in Bucky's ass.

"C'mon, Stevie, yes, put another damn finger in me." Bucky tipped his head back as Steve drew out, pressed two fingertips against the rim of his hole. It took a hell of an effort not to beg Steve for it, to grit his teeth as wider warmth barely squeezed inside. It burned again, but Bucky was getting to really be alright with that, kinda goin' mad at the thought of Steve inside him at all.

More slow, slick easing in and out until Steve had two fingers half-buried in him and started kissing the inside of his knee with each shove deeper.

By the time Steve was spreading his fingers apart in his ass Bucky was shaking, hard tremble rucking down his neck, spine, ribs, hips, legs. One of Steve's big arms wrapped around his thigh, kisses a bit rougher as he sped up the flick of his wrist into Bucky's body.

His mouth was dropped open in an overwhelmed O and the looser he felt around Steve's fingers the less he remembered how breathing and talking worked, then a third finger was pressing into him and Steve licked Bucky's weak cries out of his mouth, muscles in his arms rippling as he made a space for himself in Bucky's body.

It was like being drugged with sugar instead of bitter, lips fumbling wet over Steve's without the slightest finesse, feeling ruined and wrecked and never more solid in his life.

Eventually Bucky couldn't take it anymore, panting helplessly into Steve's mouth and forcing his brain to focus enough to mumble something coherent.

"Please, please," he whimpered into Steve's mouth and the pretty face leaned back, blue sparkling as he hovered and looked down adoringly.

"Okay," Steve whispered, and Bucky let his eyes close, sensations washing over him like ocean waves. The fingers dragged out of his body and it was terribly cold and empty without Steve completing him--
No.

No, he'd promised himself he wouldn't let Steve complete him.

Crystal eyes shot open, finding Steve instantly, wiping his fingers on the sheets and grabbing the bottle of lube again, eyes down and the lightest pink flush blushing down his chest, neck, cheeks. His hands were shaking.

Bucky reached out, placed a palm over the unsteady hands, stopping Steve and forcing blue eyes to look up at him.

"Hey," he soothed, running a thumb over callused skin. "It's me, Stevie. It's your Bucky. I won't let anything happen to you."

"I'm not...I don't wanna hurt you." Steve looked so innocent and sweet, sitting there on the white sheets with the moonlight striking white lightning strands in his hair, lighting up the rare nervous expression.

"You won't," Bucky promised, wishing they both could believe every swear unconditionally, that the world hadn't made them break promises to each other so many times.

Like the promise that he wouldn't let himself wind the tendrils so tight around the rose that it choked them both. But what could he do now?

A quick nod and Steve popped the cap, tiny sound escaping parted lips as he slicked himself up, rubbing a hand tightly down his erection. Bucky kinda longed to reach over, take Steve's cock in hand for himself, twist his wrist and see what kind of sounds he could pull outta those sweet lips, but there'd be time for that later, there'd be time for all of it.

He held his breath as Steve settled between his legs again, hand smoothing under Bucky's lower back to tip his hips forward and up, making the angle easier. It wasn't a question, the position the first time, he needed to look Steve in the eye as they fell through rushing wind and snow together.

What would that've been like, if Steve'd reached far enough for Bucky's hand that he had to let go of the train instead? Their hands clasped tightly as Bucky screamed, realizing in that moment that Steve was going to die, never assuming they'd both survive the fall. And Steve would hold his hand tighter, pull them closer through the falling wind, arms around each other as hair whipped, two blue uniforms tumbling for the ground as they clutched each other and Bucky'd probably cry, squeeze his Steve tight and shout I love you over the wind before they both hit the bottom.

Their eyes locked and Bucky cupped Steve's cheek in his hand, poised and ready to fall all the way this time. Except he'd never drag Steve down with him, not if Steve wasn't positive, not if they weren't both ready.

"You want this?" Bucky questioned quietly, curling fingers in blonde hair and scratching Steve's scalp, letting all of the masks slip from his face for one of the few times in his natural life. Steve looked ready to cry, hands clutching the sheets on either side of Bucky's head desperately.

Bucky met that gaze and asked the most honest question he could think of. "You want to damn yourself to me?"

A flit of confusion and Steve's eyebrows furrowed, taking a few seconds before the words managed past his lips. "You think this is wrong?"

He shook his head with a soft smile, stroking his hand down to Steve's neck, running fingers
delicately over the thudding pulse.

"That's not what I mean. But there's no going back after this," He stilled, made sure Steve was paying attention, because every word counted, this was all dark truth. "You let me in your halo...you're coming out the other end bloody or black."

A shaking breath and Steve dropped his head, staring at Bucky's chest, the metal dogtags swinging between them for a moment. Bucky ran his hand up through brunnête roots, waiting patiently as Steve gathered his thoughts, whatever fighting words he was raising fists to this time.

"I walked through hell for you," he started, metal clinking together on the chain around his neck, then Steve looked back up at him, a hundred stories in his eyes of army fields and bloody battles. Peggy'd told him, on that day, something Steve's said when he found out Bucky was a prisoner of war. I'll walk there if I have to. Steve'd walked through hell for him and maybe Peggy was right, maybe that was all that really counted in the end.

Artist fingers found his, taking both Bucky's hands and entwining them onto the sheets. How many times had they entwined fingers? How many times?

"...It'd be an honor to burn hand in hand."

Bucky blinked up at him and Steve lowered his arms in a pushup to kiss him one more time. Bucky closed his eyes and his lips slid against Steve's, then oxygen filtered through parted wet lips and the air without Steve was cold as it'd been that day, wind and snow.

Fingers laced together, letting go of Bucky's metal hand to reach down between them, lining up the wet head of his cock against Bucky's entrance. Gazes meeting one more time, a look across a dark room, the silent words they'd never had to say aloud for them both to know in their souls.

A careful tilt of hips and then Steve was pushing inside him, slick and stretching and Bucky's throat seized like he was choking, fumbling metal plates until he was gripping Steve's bicep hard enough to leave a star-shaped imprint on him too.

"Mo dhia," Steve cursed, pressing further until the head slipped past the outer rim of muscle, shooting spikes of burning fire up Bucky's tailbone, into his lower spine and straight up to his brain. He still couldn't make a sound, head tipped back with his lungs entirely void of oxygen, body void of anything that wasn't Steve.

The burning wasn't fading, not like it had with his fingers, and as Steve's hand clutched tight enough to tear the sheets, tipping his hips to drive deeper into Bucky's body, he wasn't sure he'd ever breathe again.

"Bu-ucky," the heavy voice broke above him and Bucky's eyes were frozen open, felt like real crystals, sparkling and faceted with a thousand indescribable feelings.

Then Steve's hips were flush against his, buried deep in Bucky as he could go, as connected as they could ever possibly be. The built pressure in his body was so much higher than he'd imagined, could feel Steve all the way in his stomach, the warmth spreading up over his heart and into a gasping breath, lungs finally expanding over oxygen and Bucky's lips parted with the only worded that mattered slipping off his tongue.

Loose lips touched down to his, brushing mouths as they both fought to breathe, fought with lungs caught like little Steve's asthmatic ones, then Steve was drawing out of his body and the burn forced a whimper out of him, shot to pain but not stopping, he didn't ever wanna stop, he knew Steve'd take care of him.

"You alright?" Steve breathed against his cheek, eyes squeezed shut and dogtags brushing Bucky's neck. He sounded as wrecked as Bucky felt, hips tipping forward again to sink back deep.

_I love you_, Bucky thought vehemently, easing up his grip on Steve's bicep a little, not missing the wince as Steve realized the bruise.

"Ah-- I. Mmm...yes," he managed, his pulse pounding so loud it felt like plenty of an answer anyways.

It was all still slow and careful as Steve pulled back, pushed into Bucky's bloodstream again, smoother that time, like gaining his footing in a waltz.

"Does it hurt?" He asked, still panting breaths over Bucky's skin, rocking his hips up a bit faster.

"A little." A gasp flooded his chest, making metal ring softly in the background, his abs trembling and clenching against the sliding flesh under his skin. He wasn't lying about the slight pain because it'd eased, it wasn't nearly so bad, sharp hurt faded into a dull stretch of light sparks.

"Ah-h, Bucky, I'm sorry." Steve slowed his hips a little, like he couldn't stand any slower and Bucky felt that in his bones, couldn't imagine Steve ever _stopping_ now. Not when every slide was adjusting him more, fluttering muscle accepting Steve into his body the way his heart had years ago.

"Don't be," Bucky breathed, back arching as Steve drove his cock in again and the burn finally settled. He could think again, almost, enough to feel nothing but the maddening dance of their bodies together.

Having Steve inside him, filled to the brim, threatening to overflow; a sparkling river, clear enough to see the shining rocks at the bottom, pattering raindrops marking ripples and circles, rising the waterlevel, dancing and flowing closer up the shores, dragging the tips of leaves and roots down before engulfing them entirely - and the river overflows the banks, hugs the shore the way his body held Steve's, snug inside him.

The way his body'd held Steve's when he'd pulled him out of the river then, saved his life. Set him on shore and believed to save his life a third time that day, by walking away.

He understood, now. Saving Steve's life could never include walking away.

What had they gotten themselves into?

"Stevie," Bucky moaned in reverence, eyes shutting as he lifted his hips, shifted against Steve's thrust, driving back against his beautiful hips. There wasn't enough leverage and he wasn't sure he could control his legs or move his lower body without shaking all over.

He wet his lips, a soft groan punching out of him as Steve pressed deep into his body again. It took a few tries to find words, to make a sound out of his mouth that wasn't a shaky, hurt, pleasure sound. "Feet...waist," Bucky managed, pressing his knees against Steve's hips to hopefully portray the request, eyes still shut as his body rocked an inch higher on the bed.

Steve fumbled for a moment, unstable rhythm derailing entirely as he straightened up, lifted Bucky's legs at the knees and wrapped them around his waist, crossing them at the ankles behind his back.
before sinking back into him again, leaning over Bucky's chest with his own heaving, bottom lip puffy and wet from worrying teeth.

"That okay?" he asked and Bucky nodded, rolling his lips in and lifting his hands to the sides of Steve's neck, holding onto him as Steve ducked his head again, dogtags swinging between their bodies as he planted his hands and started picking up his pace, evened out the push with the pull, sweat starting to bead along the edges of his pretty blonde hair.

When Steve was all tumultuous and fucked up inside he'd end up in the gym for hours, beating the fuck outta punching bags until his hair curled of its own accord, arching pretty in little slopes over his forehead, dripping wet into his eyes.

And the arms of the ocean are carrying me, all this devotion was rushing over me.

Stuttering hips a hard crash together and a little cry escaped Bucky's mouth, the flinging pieces of blonde threatening to sting blue eyes and Bucky bit his lip, body rocking faster and harder under Steve's as he tried to find some sort of balance, lifting fingers to Steve's forehead to brush sweaty hair out of his eyes, sweep it to the side like a pomade and blue flicked up to his for it, gazes locking with Bucky's hand still pinned to the side of Steve's face.

And they looked at each other, world spinning, swirling around them like the flashing golden snow of dances and Steve pulled his hips back fast, drove into Bucky hard and deep, settling flushed and rolling his hips in a tantalizing circle, grinding up against Bucky like he could get at every angle and pore of him from just this.

The sound he made wasn't describable and Bucky lifted his head the same time Steve ducked his, mouths slotting together somewhere in the middle, then Steve's mouth was pressing Bucky into the pillow and his hips rolled, deeper and encompassing again, everything starlight and gold.

When the hips started pumping into him again Bucky's jaw dropped open and Steve's tongue followed the movement, fucking into Bucky's mouth like they could have this forever, like there wasn't a part of Bucky that wasn't worth filling and loving and it was dizzying, crushing his mind with the weight of it.

The sky held stars, jet-black made to show off bright light, galaxies trailing behind stardust and the two of them were everything, oceans and heavens and fires and sunshine and rain, his beating pulse against Steve's skin, the tight skin of Steve's abs rippling over his leaking cock.

Shifting his mouth softer, lighter, Steve withdrew his tongue and peppered affection over Bucky's jaw, matching innumerable kisses with each thrust rocking them together. Steve Rogers was in his body, Steve Rogers was as close to him as it was possible for two humans to be. He'd always known Steve better than the back of his hand and now he knew this too. There was nothing he didn't have and nothing else mattered.

All the questions I have, for a sinner like me.

A wet tongue slide down his neck, licking the salt off his skin, and Bucky's hands clawed mismatched patterns of white down Steve's spine, heels digging deeper into the dimpled hollows of his back.

The steadiest hands on Bucky's hips, holding him in place so Steve could bring them closer to each other, closer to oblivion, closer to the whiteout that'd leave them waking into snow or finally letting go of ghosts. Sharp white teeth sunk into the hollow of his neck and Bucky'd fought a world war for Steve, for love, and Steve was sucking marks into his neck that sang mine in the only way Bucky
could hear it.

*But the arms of the ocean deliver me.*

The never-ending fight; everything was a battle or a dance, there was no in between. This was the latter, this was round and round in a bubble of crystallized glass with stars hanging from red string above the shrine of a sinner, above the beating hearts of soldiers; immortals doomed for death.

An uncontrollable whimper as teeth scraped over bruised skin, dark marks he couldn't see but felt in his bone marrow, then Steve lifted a centimeter from the bite, lips brushing over raw sensitivity as he shaped his gasps into a whisper.

"*Forever,*" he breathed and they were too close anymore to tell where Bucky's body ended and hadn't he always had such perfect control, known exactly where he was, could find the energy waiting in his fingertips, only now he was more than he knew with no idea to how much belonged to him, where he ended and Steve began.

Forever.

He didn't have control, where did that go? Where did he go? His body was empty every time Steve drew back, even emptier than he'd always known he'd be without Steve, and he'd promised himself he wouldn't let Steve complete him.

Nothing left, if there was nothing left for him but this boy, they really were both damned.

Artist hands tightened on his hips and Steve rocked into him harder, faster, and Bucky's feet were slipping out from under him. His fingers were frozen to metal, slipping for a moment before he held on tighter, fought the wind, couldn't fall now, not when red gloves were reaching for him to take a hand.

*Take my hand.*

The shadows on the ceiling behind Steve's blonde halo shifted, moon slipping behind clouds, and the wind clutched him even tighter than Steve was, held down with leather but lifted so high, like Steve could push him right over the edge into the sky where they belonged and it was too much, it was all too much.

"Steve, Steve," Bucky begged, whipping his head to the side, the world sinking under the surface, submerged in panic instead of purge. The same way he'd whimpered that name, laying on a table while Steve hovered over him, turtleshell hat on his head and breathing fast huffs of relief, the amazed Bucky as he tried to lift him from leather bonds that'd started everything.

"It's me," Steve breathed, hovering right over him the way he had that day. Except *everything* had changed. That'd been eternal darkness dragged into bright green; this was darkness holding hands with light and stepping into the unknown. Blue eyes held his, held him tight enough to etch it into the deepest, most untouchable of memories, voice washing over him like holy water over sinned scars. "I'm here. I'm here, I'm never gonna leave."

He shook and Steve took his right hand, the two existing parts of them that'd never changed, the two hands that'd held each other through decades, curling fingers as his body never stopped rocking, never stopped lifting, melting them higher, closer.

"I love you, Bucky, I love you." Steve's forehead rested on his, solid and present, touching him hard enough to shoot the reminder that'd drawn him off the cliff a *spike of pain* - *that was his body, his, this was his body, the one Steve was inside, his, him* and kept thrusting, tangling them eternally.
He lifted off long enough to kiss Bucky's eyelids, then foreheads were touching again, rough grips and pressing close, going outta their damn minds.

Bucky ran his palms over Steve's shoulders, eased the weight off them, if only for a moment, only for these next few minutes, where Steve didn't belong to the world, where Steve's heart only belonged to him. Steve's mouth covered his, just covered open and beautiful and he squeezed Bucky's hand tighter, let him breathe smoke into Steve's precious lungs.

*Found the place to rest my head.*

He couldn't tell who was healing who anymore and he wasn't sure it mattered. Maybe both. Hand in hand, together, the way it should've gone every other time, they were finally getting it right.

And it was better than anything he'd ever dared to dream.

The trembles were violent now, throat wrecked with little sounds that wouldn't stop, a litany of low *ah ah ah ah's* that bled into Steve's lips and matched each pant punch for punch. The hunger burned so hot inside him he wasn't sure he didn't turn to flames under Steve's skin, stomach coiled into the tightest of knots, shaking all over as Steve held him close and rocked again and again and Bucky only had the chance to open his eyes into Steve's, grasp his hand in a lock nothing could break again before he slipped under, before he crashed so high the heavens were looking up to find him--

His muscles clenched, seizing, waves breaking over him, drifting him out to sea and the arms holding him tight and close were crushing him into a thousand pieces, broken glass shattering and raining into streets as the ice thawed completely from his bones for the first time since Russia. Body jerking and heated ivory painting between their sticky bodies together, sheets sliding whispers under his scarred back.

Steve's hips pistoned and shook them both, then the space between his heart and Steve flushed warm as he stilled inside Bucky, shaking the way he had as a child, as a kid, as the small coughing thing with pneumonia laying numb in Bucky's arms. He was anything but numb now, larger than life, larger than Bucky's life.

A mouth slipped over his and Bucky clung to the only thing that'd made it through ice and fire with him to reach the other side, a brighter reflection than they'd ever know. Honest devotion of the sweetest heaven, spilling a river of promises into his body and maybe, when they hit the bottom, the jump'll have taken them someplace untouchable, where they never had to give up, where they only gave in to each other.

*I love you,* Bucky thought to the blonde hair under the soothing stroke of his palm. Steve's face tucked against his neck, nose cold the way it'd always been.

The world could crumple around them and Bucky wasn't sure he'd have the strength to save Steve from it, wasn't sure he'd do anything but let them both get crushed here together.

Every nerve ending open, flayed, shattered. Drained of all of it, lost to all of it, wiped clean - wiped clean of everything but Steve.

Insides raw on oceans and sunlight; Steve'd loved him into ruins.

He blinked at the moonlight splitting over the ceiling, the silver reflection over their entwined bodies.
A flutter of his eyelashes and Steve was up again, pulling their bodies apart with a hiss, and Bucky wasn't sure this was the time to beg Steve to never leave his body again.

Careful hands unbent Bucky's knees, laying him flat out across the wrecked sheets. He didn't try breathing until Steve was hovering over him again, on his elbows, dogtags clanking between their chests, maybe spotted white.

A moment's pause, a moment and twenty, eyes studying each other the way they'd spent so long perfecting.

The smile broke Steve's face first and Bucky followed in his footsteps as always, one-sided corner of his mouth curving up with every bit of honesty.

"Is it cheesy to say I saw stars?" Bucky asked innocently, throat scratchy and voice wrecked, then Steve was rolling off him and plopping down at his side, making the shared pillow bounce as their shoulders squished together.

"Yes," Steve laughed, airy and light, smiling up at the ceiling, black and white still dancing with the clouds drifting by outside. It was cold, wet inside him, like a bottle of tears buried so deep inside they'd never be shed. Bucky stared at black shadows chased away by brilliant silver moonlight and the smile melted off his lips, he melted down like weak caving steel, his breath catching just once.

Steve rolled his head, looked over at him, and Bucky was shaking. A hand landed on his arm, the way Steve'd soothed him during the war, then tears were gathering in the corners of his eyes and he didn't want to cry, didn't want to ruin this, but water was streaking down his cheekbones before he could do a single thing about it.

The first instinct was to lift a hand, wipe them hurriedly away, only Steve got there first, propped up on an arm, other hand gripping Bucky's shoulder tight as he pressed puckered lips over the salty streaks on Bucky's skin, kissing each dripping tearstain away.

No one'd ever kissed his tears away before.

Steve was rocking him before Bucky realized he was sobbing, before Bucky realized he'd broken right in half, curled into Steve's chest and let his heart shatter over his lit soul. Steve clutched him tight, both arms around his back, silent but for the occasional murmured promise, rocking them both back and forth and it was everything and nothing like the way they'd rocked together minutes before.

*How could you love a sinner like me?* Bucky mouthed into Steve's collarbone, wet with tears and the heat of trembling lips, eyes squeezing shut against the pain as his chest tore, half a heart pounding, and could only think one thing, over and over, pressing the words silently into wet skin and muscle like they could somehow save him, like if he mouthed them enough they could somehow, ever come true. One thing.

*Never let me go.*

Exhaustion took him before anything else could and Bucky slipped under for the second time tonight, into the dark wide ocean of sleep instead of the crashing white river of ecstasy, but the arms wrapped around him didn't change, would never change.

It'd been awhile since Steve'd been deaf in one ear.

He wondered if Bucky remembered he used to be able to read lips.

He cupped a hand over the back of Bucky's head and held him over his heart and prayed that he'd
feel how strongly it beat, only for him, even in his dreams. That he'd hear how it was pounding and he'd know, he'd know. Steve'd never let him go.

"Say you'll remember me," he whispered begged pleaded vowed into silky brown hair, tangling his legs around Bucky's, tracing the scars on his back with the softest touch he could.

Steve pulled the sheets from the bottom of the bed, lifting them with his toes first and pulling them up to settle gently, drifting down light over their bare torsos.

If Bucky forgot him now--

He closed his eyes against the thought, swallowing hard.

Only the darkness behind his eyes was terrifying, because Bucky wasn't there and what if he left, what if he disappeared? Heavy eyelids were easier to lift again when you feared what you'd lose the moment you closed them.

Steve blinked hard, forced himself to settle in and trace his touch down the vulnerable curve of Bucky's spine, moonlight reflecting off closed eyelashes, making them shine with the weight of tears. Sleep might take him before Steve could stop it, before he could fight the fear of losing this, of losing everything. At least if death took them now, he was ready. This was it.

He'd never let Bucky go. He promised.

✩

If only they could keep that promise.

Chapter End Notes

✩

As always, feel free to come talk to me here!

Songs:

- Kids Aren't Alright - Fall Out Boy
- You Are In Love - Taylor Swift (listen to it while Bucky's looking across the room at Steve and rip your heart out)
- They Can't Take That Away From Me - Fred Astaire
- End of All Things - Panic at the Disco

Thank you to everyone who leaves me these beautiful comments and kudos - you've kept this story alive, I'll never thank you enough.

xx
It'd be nice to say he had a beautiful, peaceful awakening full of filtering sunshine and Bucky snuggling warm against him, their first morning together something out'a fairytale; only the chirping birds didn't wake Steve up, a very rude metal finger stabbing his side did.

He drowsily blinked awake, curling hands tighter under the pillow as he adjusted to the brightness of
the room and Bucky's face swam into focus.

"You're alive," he declared and Steve groaned, because really, he'd be a lot more alive if Bucky let him sleep.

"Were you expecting otherwise?" It was half-serious through the sarcasm because Bucky'd cried himself to sleep after all, who knows what kind'a dreams he'd fought all night?

A little shrug and Steve squinted, studying the pretty face. His eyes weren't red-rimmed anymore, hair splayed crazy in his eyes but he didn't move to fix it, so Steve reached out to do it for him.

With a chagrined sound the disheveled head ducked away, slipping beneath the covers and stilling suddenly. Steve prodded the draping sheet, poking his revenge right back, only Bucky squirmed away and went still again, white sheet conforming to the outline of his forehead, nose, like a ghost - beauty in a veil. One that didn't appear to be moving anytime soon.

He still didn't understand the complexities of Bucky's responses, the way he sometimes looked at the world with eyes so different than Steve'd ever seen it; but he knew him well enough to know fluffing the sheets over his head was about more than protest, he was hiding under the covers and it was obligatory best friend protocol to lift the corner of the sheet and slide underneath too.

"I can't believe we had sex last night." Bucky's lips slid over fabric, voice slightly muffled from staring up at their thin ceiling in floating awe.

"Can't believe good or can't believe bad?" Steve prompted, rolling closer and careful not to dislodge the safety of their miniature fort. Bucky glanced over at him, twinkle in those eyes as they met Steve's and goodness, they'd had sex last night. That suddenly sounded like the best thing he'd ever heard outta Buck's mouth.

"Just that it feels like a dream." He shrugged, unsettling the sheet over their heads and Steve slid right up next to him, miles of bare skin inches from his fingertips. And he couldn't not touch, not when Bucky was right here and talking about how unreal it was. Steve's fingertips ran down the center of Bucky's chest all on their own, eyes tracing the movement and wrapping around to his hip - there was a faint bruise here, still, and the sight made Steve suddenly feel a little light-headed.

The back of Bucky's hip was such soft skin, caving so pretty he helplessly slipped a palm between Bucky's ass and the sheets, quickly scooping low before Buck could stop him. Rough grip and he yanked Bucky up on his side, pulling him close as he skirted fingertips over the sensitive skin around his entrance.

Buck let out a little yelp, cringing and wrapping a deathgrip around Steve's arm, pupils blown as their eyes locked, heartbeats pounding palpably between them.

"That feel like a dream?" Steve murmured, squeezing the plump flesh and Bucky hissed, the sound breaking into a shattered ah-ahh that shot straight to his stomach. A sweet whimper between parted lips and Steve surged forward, prying Bucky's mouth open with his tongue.

The kiss tasted stronger than usual, still like Bucky, still hot and wet against his lips and it was overwhelmingly tempting to roll his hips forward, sinking new bruises into Buck's perfect ass as he grinded them closer, the groan from his own throat nearly covering a second pained hiss from Bucky's.

It was only through long-ingrained stubborn willpower that Steve managed to pull away, blinking himself back into reality as he studied the panting chest, the squeezed-shut eyes. He didn't want to
hurt, not actually, but Bucky wasn't made of glass and he could take some pain. Steve would be happy to remind him just how strong he was.

But maybe not this morning.

"You want a massage?" Steve offered instead, already rolling Bucky onto his stomach and pressing slow, soft kisses down each notch of his spine. "It might loosen you up."

"I thought you liked me tight," Bucky mumbled and Steve barked a laugh of surprise, shaking his head affectionately and dipping to kiss further, digging his thumbs into shoulders and ribs as he rippled down. Bucky's scarred shoulderblade didn't release as quickly as the other did - another thing to add to the list of things to work on.

They were lovers now, Steve could do things like massage his shoulders. And other places.

He sat up, flinging the sheet back and exposing bare bodies to the cold air of the room, eliciting a shiver down Bucky's spine that Steve's gaze followed, all the way down to the incredible curve upwards and he just had touch where he'd been inside last night--

The muscles of Bucky's ass were tight, bruised, and gorgeous. As much as Steve wanted to take it easy this morning, kneading both hands over round cheeks was making his pulse race, heart pound outta his chest. Steve bit his lip to rein in the arousal tightening his stomach, calling stubborn willpower to shove thoughts into the corner of his mind.

It wasn't much easier when he worked down to Bucky's thighs; legs strong enough to kill, all golden lines of muscles rippling beneath smooth skin--

"I need to wake up like this every day," Bucky groaned contentedly, eyes shut and temple resting on folded arms.

Steve's breath caught and he stilled the grinding heels of his palms, touching delicately now as he smoothed fingers hesitantly up Bucky's lower back.

"You can," he trailed quietly, gaze flicking to the crystal one peering over Bucky's shoulder. "I mean. I'll understand if you want your own space, but. We don't have to sleep apart anymore..."

A soft huff concaved beautiful, sloping shoulders, an amused eyebrow cocked up. "Jeez, Rogers. Screw a guy once and you're asking him to move in?"

"You asked me to move in when my mom died, that's a hell of a lot less romantic," Steve pointed out, sliding spread fingers up Bucky's ribs. He made another precious deflated sound and Steve bit his grin, running thumbs over each individual bone. Buck was stunningly peaceful like this, easily trusting and stretched out for Steve, eyes drifted shut and lips parted around weak banter.

"You know what's romantic?" Bucky grumbled, back expanding and contracting under Steve's hands like he was the most comfortable he'd ever been. "Food."

Hmm. Steve dropped a kiss to Bucky's thigh and rolled off the bed, because he'd kinda made the floor with certain things in mind and breakfast was definitely one of them. "I'll be right back," he promised at the little groan of displeasure. Buck grumbled annoyedly and Steve hurried out the door before he lost the resolve to leave at all.

When he came back ten minutes later, Buck was sitting up with his back against the headboard, sheets draped over his lap and fingers combing the knots outta his hair.
"Hey Rogers, you--" Bucky's question cut short, a wide grin spreading on his face as he took in the glass bowl Steve was carrying, rolling his lips in to hide the beaming smile, but his eyes were sparkling with it anyways. "You're kidding me."

"Yep, this is all for me," Steve teased, plopping on the bed beside him and leaning over to coax that pretty smile open with his lips. Bucky angled their mouths, metal hand curling around the dogtags on Steve's chest, tugging closer. It was an effort not to tip raspberry sorbet over the sheets with Buck kissing him like that, but when their lips slowly eased apart the bowl was somehow still upright.

He handed it over and Bucky gave him this look, leaning back against the headboard as he popped the spoon in his mouth. Lots of happy moaning sounds followed and Steve twitched at the teasing because he'd been trying to behave, but Bucky and his disheveled hair and his stupid sounds were agitating every nerve under his skin.

Halfway through the bowl Buck offered him a bite, holding the spoon in front of Steve's mouth and swatting his hand when he reached to take it. Obediently Steve parted his lips and Bucky fed him the soft pink sorbet, bright eyes and crooked smile.

"This part's stranger than the screwing was," Bucky crinkled his nose and Steve smiled, spoon slipping from his mouth as he nudged Bucky's shoulder and nearly spilled the sorbet again.

"Doesn't have to be like this all the time."

"Good. I'd probably suffocate." He scooped another bite of sorbet towards his mouth, giving Steve that secretly-affectionate smile that'd be the death of him one day. "But I can take it for a morning."

Pink lips closed over the spoon and Steve drifted his hand over Bucky's thigh, rustling sheets as he looked up under lashes, tone pure innocence.

"Anything else you can take?" He wrapped his fingertips around the inside of Bucky's thigh and crystal eyes widened, a quiet slipping sound as Bucky curved the spoon out of his mouth, lips tugging it clean.

"God, you're insatiable." Bucky tapped the spoon on his mouth and cocked his head knowingly.

"That's the third time in ten minutes you've tried to get into my pants."

"You're not wearing pants," Steve pointed out and Bucky raised an eyebrow with that mischievous half-smile. The spoon clanked back in the bowl with a chime, then Bucky was leaning over him to sit it down on the nightstand. Only that left him draped over Steve's lap, and the next thing he knew the sheets were whispering around them and Bucky'd slid over to straddle his thighs, metal tipping Steve's chin up.

He groaned and Bucky licked it from his mouth, cold, sweet like raspberries. As much as he teased, the filthy sounds he made when Steve sucked on his tongue gave him away; not to mention grinding his perfect ass down on Steve's lap, pained whimpers only making him that much harder against Steve's stomach.

Smoothing one hand over Bucky's lower back, Steve kept his lips pliant against that sweet tongue, bringing his other hand between them to circle around Bucky's erection and tug upwards. That sweet mouth broke off with a gasp, nose tucking against Steve's neck as he slid his palm over the slick head and pulled down. Buck's hips stuttered, a dozen little sounds as Steve ground up against his ass and jacked hard flesh easy between them.

A twist of his wrist and Bucky's teeth sank into his collarbone, making Steve tip back his head and
moan faintly, unable to focus on much but the sweet plush of Bucky's ass pushing down against his dick, spinngly beautiful pressure building between them under the gentle gold of morning sun filtering through the window.

Steve could definitely wake up like this every day. All of Bucky's bare, precious skin his to touch, kissing away bruises from the night before, pulling a sleep-warm body into his arms and just looking at those sweet eyes - that's all he'd ever need.

"Ah-ah I'm. I'm gonna--" Bucky started shakily and Steve pumped his cock faster, pulling Bucky closer to the edge as he tipped his mouth to Buck's ear, voice lowering husky and deep.

"C'mon, come for me, Buck," he murmured, pressing a kiss to the silky hair behind Bucky's ear. The body in his arms jolted and Steve tipped Bucky's face into sight, free hand on his jaw and stroking over rough skin, unable to tear his gaze away from the shut eyes and parted lips. His stomach and hand painted filthy again and Bucky let him have this, his body at its most vulnerable and Christ was he beautiful.

He slotted his mouth against Bucky's open lips, tipping his hips up and grinding in tight circles until he was seeing stars too, half-conscious of the hands stroking over his body, everywhere they could reach. It felt like an oath, the way Bucky was touching him, like maybe this really could be promise they finally kept, hauling over the final threshold with arms around each other.

The drift down from the high left him breathless, Bucky's metal hand shoved in his hair and wrecking blonde spikes disastrously, sheets spoiled again and both their bodies sticky and fervid, collapsed against each other. Buck was lazily mouthing along his neck, up to his ear where he paused to mumble something about never having morning sex before.

Steve closed his eyes, liking the idea of being Bucky's first something, although last night had been all new experiences too, having someone inside him like that, Steve had no idea how that had to feel...

"You okay?" he checked, Bucky's neck feeling small and delicate under his big hands. A quiet hum and Steve wrapped his arms all the way 'round the broad back, swinging Bucky off his lap to lay him out carefully on the bed. He got a fake warning growl for his troubles, jumping off the bed to grab a clean shirt to clean off, wiping down both their stomachs and leaving a kiss over Bucky's bellybutton.

"Speaking of pants," Bucky murmured, rolling his head over the sheets to furrow his eyebrows at Steve, "-did you bring down extra clothes?"

Steve stared at the shirt he'd just dropped to the floor beside the ones they'd cleaned with last night, before blinking back at Bucky. They stared for a moment wide-eyed, picturing the number of people they could run into between this floor and their own--

"Jarvis!" They shouted in tandem, twin voices loud enough to hopefully be heard in the elevator (he hadn't had the speakers installed yet on the rest of the floor) and the word barely had time to echo before they were both laughing, falling to the mattress beside Bucky with one hand clutching his chest, giggles amped from the post-coital haze-

-and god, they were still talking in sync, calling on robots to bring them extra clothes after having sex in a floor all to themselves in one of the biggest, most beautiful towers in New York and there was nothing about this that wasn't ridiculous - except for the fact that through it all, no matter what, Bucky was the one still here with him.
Bucky Barnes could handle a lot of things: the idea of carrying on like normal, sitting around the tower with thin clothes covering a body that'd just been exposed and turned inside out like the entire world wasn't fucking upside down...was not one of them.

Steve was surprised when Bucky suggested it. But he'd always caught on quick, and the argument caved with a few well-placed kisses, then Bucky was packing a bag, pausing to shake his wrists and listen to the silence, the absent rattle from chains because he wasn't held down anymore, there were no unturned cards or worries to hold back, this was it and this was his all--

He'd warned himself about this, but if he didn't focus too hard and didn't think about everything he'd given to Steve last night, the strange glowing feeling inside him could be a good thing, instead of an unanchored, fumbling loss of control. Yes, he'd lost control, but who better to give it to than his best friend who'd left him to rot once who wanted to take care of him, Bucky could let them have this--

But just in case - cage either closing for good or finally opening into sunlight - he couldn't spend that wavering line, walking cliff here, not in the tower going about as usual he needed out and maybe Steve got that part because next thing he knew there was an overnight bag dropping on the floor next to Bucky's.

Grab your bag and grab your coat. We are headed north.

Bucky tipped his head up and Steve's arms circled his waist and he rocked them side to side as they kissed and it was adorable, childish like he just couldn't believe Bucky was in his arms and Bucky smiled into the kiss and really, he could prove to himself, his past.

He could prove it, climb to the highest mountain and spread his arms to the sky and shout that he was free, that he could be free and still love Steve Rogers.

He wanted this.

"Woah, woah, the hell are you--"  
"Is this suitcase big enough for overnight? Do you have anything besides band tshirts?" Bucky tossed a Zeppelin one into the case and Steve dumped one'a the drawers onto the ground, toeing through the mess for anything bright colored.

"Does Tony Stark even own a swimsuit?"

"There," Bucky pointed and Steve made a triumphant sound, tossing it over his shoulder into the bag too. Bucky reached over him to grab another tshirt and Tony just stared.

"What--"

"Grab whatever else you need, meet in the basement lab in ten, don't be late." Steve pointed a serious finger, looking remarkably like the 1940s propaganda posters except Tony couldn't believe what the fuck he was wearing, then Barnes tapped the glowing center of his chest with a metal finger, echoing with a clank and they both swept outta the room, tornado in their wake as Tony stared blinking at the door and finally registered Pepper's laughter from the wallscreen.
"Are you wearing shorts? I've never seen you in shorts." Natasha glanced up from her phone, still sitting cross-legged in her fancy armchair and seemingly unfazed that they were (carefully) packing a suitcase for her. Actually, more like uninterested, so Bucky pinned her with a look and snapped one of the clasps shut.

"You're coming with us," he informed her, tossing a bandana in her direction and she snorted, scooping it outta the air easily.

"With your hairy legs? No thank you."

"Oh, like yours are any better," Bucky shot back and she narrowed her eyes to study him distrustfully, but she was rolling up the bandana to wind around her head so he was pretty sure he won this one.

"You adapted to the times scarily fast." She tied the rolled bandana around her red hair and Bucky smiled, tossing Steve the suitcase and grabbing a pair of flipflops off the top shelf to hold out.

"Lots'a things are scary about me. Now, you coming?"

Barton and Wilson were already waiting in the lab, legs swinging off a glass table with Bruce propped beside them, cleaning his glasses a little worriedly.

They all looked up as Steve and Bucky bounded down the stairs, and Clint snorted at the sunglasses propped on Bucky's head, holding back long swoops of hair, matched perfectly to the bright tshirts and boardshorts they were both donning. So much for homicidal looks.

Then everyone was turning around as Natasha burst through glass doors on the other side of the lab, extra black bag thrown over her shoulder that Bucky definitely didn't remember packing. Everyone gave each other quizzical looks as she dropped the bag on a table and it clanked. Loudly.

"I know how to have a bit of fun," she defended, one side of her mouth curled in devilish mischief and Steve threw up his hands when Bucky looked at him accusingly, then Tony was grumbling his way down the stairs too and everyone was looking to Steve, who gave them all his signature troublemaker smile and held up a dangling key.

"Don't tell me," Tony started, low and threatening, and Jarvis chose that moment to light up the garage behind them and reveal the hippie van they'd rented, straight out of the 1960s, round headlights and pealing white paint, backseats that folded into side couches.

"I can't be seen in that," Tony pointed accusingly and Bucky very solemnly handed him a pair of aviators.

"Example C of Rogers&Barnes exemplary disguises." Natasha clapped Stark on the shoulder and gave him a sweet smile. "I'll bet you don't even get shotgun."

"I call--" Clint started and Bucky clamped a metal hand over his mouth.

"It's already sorted," he assured, patting Barton's hair once before lightly shoving him in the direction of the van. Clint grabbed Nat's arm and they both ducked inside, calling cool kids sit in the back.

Bruce actually looked quite excited, coaxing Tony inside with something about a personal test of suspension rates while Sam laughed at everyone and loaded the overnight bags.
Then they were pulling into New York traffic and Natasha clambered over the boys in the middle to insist that she was only coming along if Bucky let her do his hair.

"You're already in the car," he debated, but she gave him a look and he turned sideways in shotgun, grabbed Steve's arm for support and made him tighten his grip on the steering wheel with a bit-back smile.

"Where are we going?" Bruce asked, leaning over Sam, the same time Clint tapped on the window and asked in an annoyingly high voice-

"Are we there yet?"

"I think that's paparazzi," Tony peered over Clint's head and Natasha hip-checked his shoulder outta her way so she could have enough room to braid the underside of Bucky's hair. To which Tony immediately prodded Steve's shoulder and whined, "Teacher, she's being mean."

"Ponytail," Nat demanded and Steve slid one off his wrist, holding it up while Sam and Bruce started taking bets on who was cracking first.

"Can we make it outta downtown before everyone kills each other?" Steve suggested, and Clint leaned around the other side of Bucky's seat to ask if he'd packed food.

"Yeah, don't forget the rage monster," Stark helpfully added and Bruce put both hands up, looking increasingly amused.

"You think the metal arm could do any damage against the Hulk?" Nat pondered and Sam instantly argued no way, which Tony backed up but then Clint was asking which metal would hold up stronger between Iron Man and the Winter Soldier and everyone got in a very loud, heated debate about the densities of certain metals and their epicness properties, which Tony claimed was definitely a considerable factor.

"Whose idea was this?" Bucky grumbled and the corner of Steve's mouth curled because they both knew exactly whose idea it was.

Natasha finished Bucky's hair by the time they got outta the city, two-lane blacktop headed north, industrial fading to residential to rural to the breathtaking open road - with three little braids swooping up into a high, messy bun atop his head, pieces hanging around his clean-shaven face, aviators shading crystal and quite frequent glances from the driver's seat because Bucky was absolutely gorgeous and it was only because he was driving that Steve managed to keep turning back to the road.

"Do we get to know where we're going?" Sam asked, forearm on the side of Bucky's chair with the first polite time anybody'd asked that question.

"Sure," Bucky shrugged, unzipping the backpack at his feet as a chorus of complaints piped from the back with I asked that half an hour ago and that's not fair, playing favorites but the whines hushed pretty quickly when Bucky leaned over the center console with a handful of brochures.

"We're going camping."

"In tents??"

"In a log cabin," Bucky corrected, and the mortified faces morphed into cheers. "There's five to
chose from, so pass these around."

Sam took the brochures and handed one to everyone, the van falling into temporary silence interrupted only by the quiet scuffle of switching brochures.

"I want--"

"No deciding yet, we decide after we swim."

"We're going swimming?"

"The hell did y'all think we were taking you?"

"Hydra base," Nat supplied, to which Clint modified, "Taking out a Hydra base," and Tony inputted, "Some nostalgic-ass 1940s dump," and Sam half-agreed with, "A place from your past," and Bruce just said he'd had no idea and didn't really mind all that much.

"These assholes you call friends," Bucky shook his head and Steve threw an affectionate, amused glance over his shoulder before everyone fussed at him to keep his eyes on the road.

Natasha tightened her bandana and asked Sam why he didn't have one, then Bruce mentioned maybe they should all get matching bandanas or t-shirts which got Clint and Natasha in an argument over clashing color-palettes of everyone's skin tones and Tony shooed them to the back so he could unfold the side bench and maneuver an actual seat in place behind Steve's, so he could lean over and flick Bucky on the shoulder.

"You know Barnes, you're actually pretty cool now that you're not homicidal."

"I might be soon if y'all don't calm the fuck down," he pointed out, but Tony rolled his eyes at the threat, fixing his sunglasses and tapping on the window view of roadside speeding past.

"It's a roadtrip Sarge, it's supposed to be loud."

"As a Howling Commando, I'd have thought you'd be used to loud," Sam piped up and Steve snorted, adjusting his grip on the wheel. Bucky turned around in his seat again, elbow on the console and cocked eyebrow antithesised to the graceful messy bun and softening swoops.

"Oh those boys were loud, but they were also respectable soldiers." He fixed them all with a look everyone could decipher through the aviators. "Y'all are children in colorful suits running around the clouds."

"I take the stairs," Steve interjected innocently and Bucky whipped around to point a very serious accusing-finger at him.

"No, you jump outta fucking buildings."

Steve shrunk away and scooted against the door, eyes cast down guiltily in the face of Bucky's wrath and Tony turned to Nat with a shake of his head.

"See, this is why I can't decide who tops."

Clint snorted, waiting for the explosion, and Bruce lifted his head to peer around Sam's shoulder at the two boys in front, who'd both straightened up and were side-eyeing each other with this knowing look and half-smiles and everybody else in the van fell silent. There was no arguing or surprise or bashfulness this time, just glowy drifting--
"Wait, did you two..." Bruce trailed off and Bucky blinked spellbound at Steve, eyes glazed and smile soft and trusting and sweet and Sam was pretty sure Bucky'd never had that look on his face before and it took at least ten seconds before he'd registered the question enough to tear his eyes away and glance at the matching stares from the back of the van.

"Hmm?" Bucky hummed, still in some trance and Natasha studied Steve in the rearview, cataloging the blissful far-off look and wondering when the hell she'd missed one of her best friends falling irrevocably in love - not just the kind he'd told her about, or the kind he'd shouted in the garage, but the simple, soft, easy kind of love that had blue eyes burning brighter than she'd known Steve's could--

Like a corpse come to life, almost.

"They totally did," Tony suggested, leaning back against the window and Bucky's eyebrows furrowed as he scanned over various expressions.

"Did what?"

"You guys had sex!" Clint declared, loudly, making Bruce and Sam almost spit out the drinks they'd just found and Natasha bark a laugh while Tony reached forward for a high-five--

--and landed in Clint's lap with a scream, both of them toppling sideways and getting squashed by Natasha and then Sam while Bucky laughed his ass off in the front and Steve straightened the steering wheel back into their lane from the heavy, intentional swerve into oncoming traffic.

"See, told you I could shut them up, Buck," Steve said innocently and Tony cursed while Bruce held onto the ceiling handle by the door, bench seatbelt snug across his chest and a shrug about not turning green.

The bruises were minimal and Clint spent ten minutes complaining about being the smallest and how it wasn't right he got stuck on the bottom and Natasha complained how his arms were way too ripped for him to be the smallest, that was definitely Tony, and Bruce piped up if they were talking human or hero forms and Bucky glanced over at Steve with a smile before looking out the passenger-side window at the landscape swooshing past and thinking there was no place he'd rather be.

~*~*~

Thirty minutes down the road the Avengers were chatting light-heartedly in the back when Bucky decided they were rural enough to roll down the windows. An instant chant for roadtrip tunes followed that was more coordinated than some of their fight scenes, so Bucky plugged in his phone with rolling eyes.

There was a lot of screaming Rock'n'Roll out windows before Bucky suddenly gasped, diving over the seat to snatch Tony's phone outta his hands and waving at everyone to get theirs out.

"Wait wait, there's this song we're all gonna sing, I'mma bluetooth connect everyone's screens for the lyrics..." he started rapidly tapping with his right hand and everyone shared shrugs and got out their phones.

"You can do that?" Sam asked, right as his screen lit up with a page of lyrics.

"Yeah sure, it's not complicated, you just..." everyone but Banner and Stark droned out as Bucky explained, shifting metal flashing sunlight.
"Hmm," Tony apprehensively agreed, taking his phone back from Bucky. "That's really simple. I like the way you think, Barnes. You should come hang out in the lab for real sometime."

"Speaking of which, Tony," Bucky spun around in his seat again, pinning his sunglasses on top of his head so he could give Stark the proper Winter-Soldier-Death-Glare. "Where the fuck are the flying cars?"

"What?"

"I saw, first hand, your dad working on a prototype that was really damn close to flying and that was seventy years ago, so where the hell are they?" He crossed his arms over his chest and Tony sat up, looking confusedly between Rogers's expectant sass-face in the rearview and Barnes's glare.

"I don't....know?"

"Hopeless," Bucky sighed, unfolding his arms to gesture at them and reach for the radio. "Okay. Everyone, here we go."

If Sam knew anything about the stories he'd been told of the great Bucky Barnes, it was that if he was singing, it should be recorded. And he'd brought a camcorder, because superheroes didn't understand how important these things were to put on YouTube for the rest of the population.

The chords came in and before the first words could even start, Stark was already scoffing, crossing his arms over his chest.

"This song is way too peppy for you to like, Barnes."

"Hey, the most metal thing is liking non-metal music too," he defended and Natasha snorted. Bucky rolled his eyes and canted his head towards the stereo. "Besides, it's a song we could all listen to."

"Not all of us," Clint argued and Bucky pointed a metal finger at him, glinting threateningly with sunlight.

"Yes, all of us. Just wait for the chorus, you'll get into it."

Sam trained the camera on Bucky, the charming smile, the man behind the mask & metal arm that even the Avengers hadn't seen yet, not really. Capture the impact, see how true the stories were - Bucky cranked it up louder, tilting his head as he came in halfway through the first verse,

"And I've trained myself to give up on the past, 'cause I've frozen time between hearses and caskets," Bucky sang and Steve shook his head in the driver's seat while Tony made a contemplative sound of amusement.

Bucky rallied them up, crystal eyes lit up and voice gliding along easy with the song, beckoning with his right hand, '"my friends were gettin' high and chasin' girls down parkway lines," silky strands of hair framing his excitement and whipping around in the wind.

He swung his head back and forth, singing up at the sky, "the love the love that I gave, wasted on a nice face," reaching over to gently knock Steve's jaw, smile and mischievous fire that made him look so much younger-

Stepping back into the past, a man straight outta Brooklyn, the snarky war sniper with two human arms and a tendency to follow around boys in blue.

"--and got carried awaaay--" Bucky leaned an arm on the windowsill, wind stealing the shout
roadside, a van mesmerized frozen until Bucky suddenly spun to gesture at them all, "Hey! I wanna get better!"

Steve lit up, shot back seventy years younger too - one hand on the wheel as he tipped towards Bucky and sang, "I didn't know I was lonely 'til I saw your face."

*I wanna get better* the song paraded in the background, and Clint started drumming along on the side of the van, making Tony arch unimpressed eyebrows and Natasha tip her head in contemplation. *Better, better, better, I wanna get--.*

"I didn't know I was broken, 'til I wanted to change," Bucky sang back, sincerity in his voice and knitted eyebrows matching the wide smile on his lips.

*I wanna get better, better..."

"C'mon!" Bucky insisted, waving for them to join and Tony finally sighed, scanning the lyrics and shaking his head, but Bucky cranked the song up another notch, singing even louder, and Stark lifted his voice,

"...chased that feeling, of an eighteen year old who didn't know what loss was," Tony broke into a reluctant smile, rolling his eyes as he took the next line and Barnes whooped. "--now I'm a stranger."

"And I miss the days of a life still permanent," Bucky carried again and Sam steadied the camcorder, scanning to Clint who leaned over to shout the next line with him,

"Mourn the years before I got carried away!"

Metal and human arms out the window, leaning back to shout at the wind, "So now I'm staring at the interstate screaming at myself--"

"Hey! I wanna get better!" Nat and Clint jumped in and Steve took the next line again, pinning Sam in the rearview with a pointing finger, "I didn't know I was lonely 'til I saw your face."

Bucky laughed and clapped, Natasha called out *meet-cute* and Sam took a humble bow that almost had him toppling into Bruce as the van sped around a curve in the road, saving the camera in time to train it back on wild, bright eyes.

Natasha jumped in all the way, tugging the bandana off her head to ball up and throw at Clint while she came in too, "I didn't know I was broken 'til I wanted to change."

The song blasted around them and Bruce picking up the drumming as Clint crossed his eyes at Nat and leaned into the middle of the van,

"Beeetter! 'Cause I'm sleeping in the back of a taxi," Barton's falsetto was surprisingly accurate and everyone laughed as he screwed up his nose to hit the high notes, eyes closed and head tipped sideways, "I'm screaming from my bedroom window--"

"Even if it's gonna kill me!" Bucky and Sam sang along and Bruce clapped his hands, then Tony was breaking out the air guitar and Clint's drumming started up again, building faster and louder and Bucky leaned out the window again, right hand in the air as he shook his hair in the wind and hollered and Natasha rolled on the floor, clutching her side in laughter, running smack into Sam's foot, who shook his head at her and angled the camera on messy red hair before panning up to Tony's air guitar and the brilliance of Steve's beaming smile in the rearview.
The song dropped down into quiet chords and everybody froze, Nat tipping her head up from the carpet as they all looked to Bucky, propped on the dashboard and facing the back, smile shifting down into something a little shy as he flicked his eyes between each of the Avengers in the back and came in with the bridge, voice floating and pretty now.

"Woke up this morning, early before my family..."

"We love you too, man!" Sam shouted from behind his camera and Clint made kissy sounds and Tony covered his eyes with his hands, but Bucky just shook his head affectionately and turned his soft gaze on Steve.

"...from this dream where she was trying to show me," he sang and Steve bit his lip, waiting, then Bucky's voice drifted again, "-how a life can move from the darkness. She said to get better."

Steve made a tiny noise in his throat and Bucky leaned closer, eyes widening comically as he shook his head, lifted a mock-gun to his temple,

"So I put a bullet where I shoulda put a helmet--"

A very **audible** shocked sound and Bucky tittered, "-and I crashed my car--"

Metal hand grabbed the wheel, rocking the van and shaking the back passengers to topple over, shattering the emotional moment as Bucky screwed his eyes shut and yelled at the roof, "-cause I wanna get carried awaaaay!"

Steve righted the car and grabbed Bucky's hand off the wheel, tangling their fingers together as Bucky paid him no mind, waving over his shoulder for the laughing Avengers to join him, "That's why I'm standing on the overpass screaming at myself--"

"Hey! I wanna get better!" Everyone shouted and Steve whooped, then Bruce was shoving Tony's shoulder, jumping on board with his own heartfelt, "I didn't knooow I was lonely 'til I saw your faaace."

Tony smiled, squinching his nose up, then everyone was singing **better better better** out the windows and the road whipped past them while Bucky clamored the loudest, "I didn't know I was broken 'til I wanted to change!"

Sam panned the camera over everyone's smiling cheers, lyrics Tasha kept caroling towards the sky as Clint drummed, the way Tony and Bruce were leaning on each other's shoulders and singing with their eyes shut, panning over to the two in the front seat,

"I wanna get better, better, better, better, better, better, better, I wanna get better!"

The red button kept blinking and Sam studied the screen, Steve and Bucky holding hands as the song crashed its final chords behind them; the way they were looking at each other, fingers laced and heads turned, twin gazes stuck together, shining bright, melting smiles and so in **love** and beautiful and - Sam panned down the camera slowly, the final note echoing as the video ended on two entwined hands - metal and human.

He pressed the record button again, **video saved**, and swallowed the lump in his throat.

He just never thought he'd see Rogers like that.

He didn't **know** there was a Rogers like that.
Or any of them, for that matter.

My family, Bucky'd sang.

Sam sat his camcorder down and wondered if maybe that's exactly what they were.

~*~*~

"So, I've got a surprise for everyone," Bucky broke the silence, drumming his fingers on the windowsill and Steve glanced at him curiously.

"Really? What?"

"I tell you and it's not a fucking surprise." Bucky gave him a crazy look and Natasha started laughing in the back. "Just turn at the next exit."

"Buck we've still got another fifteen til the beach--"

"Yes, I know, we've got something to pick up first." He pointed out the window at the exit and Steve started turning the wheel, sliding everyone to one side of the van.

There was a lot of apprehension and grumbling as the backseat passengers attempted to peer out windows to see what the Winter Soldier was surprising them with, especially if it was something the responsible Captain didn't know about. Personally, Bucky couldn't believe how backwards they all had it. Steve was the troublemaker, he just had everyone convinced he was an angel. (Well, he was, but he was a troublemaking angel.)

Who, based on the look on his face, was half-in-love with a god.

The van screeched to a halt so fast that everybody in the back fell over before they could see what Steve was gaping over, the driver's side door slamming shut before even Natasha picked herself up off the floor.

Bucky pried open his door too, hopping down to the ground just in time to see the Adonis-man scoop Steve up in a bone-crushing hug. He kept his hand on the frame, wind whipping hair around his face as he tentatively watched, rolling his lips in to hide the smile as the god squeezed Steve and proclaimed loudly,

"My brother!"

Steve kicked his feet the way he used to when Bucky picked him up like that, then he was sat back down and Steve clapped the huge arm, beaming back. "Thor! I didn't know you were visiting!"

A quick glance over his shoulder and Bucky shrugged, then Steve was waving him over for introductions, right as the rest of the Avengers found the latch on the back of the van and came tumbling out.

"My man," Sam greeted, going in for the same arm pat, and Thor reached over to squeeze Clint's shoulder and nod respectfully at Tony, beaming at Natasha and frowning exaggeratedly as he looked over everyone's heads and counted.

"Where is Miss Potts?" Thor nodded at Banner too, peering around Tony like he might be hiding
her. It was kinda cute, in a way, the exaggerated movements and way he furrowed his eyebrows at
them.

"Having the weekend of her life running a multinational corporation without 12 year olds hanging
around," Tony crossed his arms over his chest and Thor's frown turned into an amused smile, tipping
his head in agreement. Then the bright grin was turning to Bucky, a huge hand stuck out to shake.

He took it and Thor's grip was warm and more gentle than he'd've imagined, shaking Bucky's hand
once and respectfully not holding on too long, voice not so boom-y now that they were all close.

"It's a pleasure to meet you in person, Snow Warrior." The words were solemn and it took
everything in him not to snort, but the guy was from another planet after all.

"Something like that," Bucky agreed, running Thor's name through his head before suddenly
ɡlancing at Steve. "Wait, Thor as in Sarah's Thor?"

Sarah? Thor mouthed confusedly at Tony and he shrugged back just as befuddled. Then Steve
jumped in, still smiling like he'd won the lottery, one hand on Bucky's shoulder as he talked with the
other and explained.

"My ma's Irish, knew a lot about Norse mythology. And she was a storyteller too, full of anecdotes
from her home country, legends and myths for bedtime stories. So, Tony grew up with stories of me,
while Buck and I grew up with stories of Thor."

"All the more reason to get along," Thor declared, while Tony narrowed his eyes suspiciously and
Clint pattered something about growing up with normal stories while Natasha nudged him and
whispered the stories she got told at bedtime would make Thor lock himself in a closet in fear. Bruce
frowned and she smiled congenially, patting his arm with an assurance she wouldn't whisper them in
anyone's ear while they slept.

Glancing between the rest of the faces, Thor's gaze settled back on him again, smile softening a bit as
he leaned over Steve and lowered his voice a tad.

"Although I already welcome anyone who can have such a hold on Captain Rogers' heart."

Bucky raised an eyebrow, popping his lips and looking over at Steve, who'd retracted his hand and
was blushing like a fool, mumbling abashedly for everyone to get back in the van already, they had
places to be.

Piling back in the van proved a little more difficult with an extra two hundred plus pounds to fit in
and they'd barely pulled back onto the road before the complaining really started.

"Okay, this is ridiculous, let's make Cap and Sarge sit in the back," Clint complained, scooting closer
to the window while Thor tried to make his shoulders smaller.

"But they're both huge," Tony and Natasha said in tandem, glaring at the plethora of muscle
surrounding them.

"Stevie can sit in my lap," Bucky offered innocently and half the van made surprised noises while
the other half broke into laughter, although Bucky wasn't sure which half Steve's expression fit into.

"Man, am I the only one who still can't get on board with the Stevie thing?" Sam asked, leaning over
the center council to raise his eyebrows at the two of them. "You are way too big to fit a name like
that."
"Well, he wasn't always. Actually fit in my lap back then."

"Okay, that was one time," Steve complained.

"That sounds like a fantastic story," Clint encouraged from the back and Sam prodded Bucky's metal arm, making it whirr and adjust in offense, but he sighed and turned halfway in his seat anyways.

"Alright, so, back in the day when Steve could still get drunk--"

"You know, there's an Asgardian drink, aged for a thousand years, in barrels built from the wreck of Glunhill's fleet. It's not meant for mortal men. But I do think it'd get the great Captain drunk again."

Thor tipped his head and patted his pocket knowingly, making Steve's eyes widen in the rearview until Bucky grabbed his chin and moved his gaze back to the road.

"It sounds fantastic, bring that stuff out when it gets dark, maybe we'll get a repeat performance." A groan from the driver's side and Bucky covered Steve's mouth with his hand, leaning further in the back, eyes sparkling as he continued his story. "Anyways, little Stevie was a goddamned lightweight, knocked out with stuff that barely made me tipsy. So one year, for his birthday I took him to this bar..."

~*~*~

"We're all just gonna...jump off this cliff into the water." Sam crossed his arms over his chest and Bucky shoved his bare shoulder with a smile.

"It's only twenty feet up, I've pushed you off higher." He got a mild glare for that and Bucky patted his back, turning around to see what all the commotion was about behind them.

Natasha'd climbed outta the van in her bikini and was fussing about scars or something? She pointed accusingly at Bucky before indicating a distorted mark on her hip with a loud, "Look, see, ruined!"

"Yeah, Natasha, you look terrible now," Steve drawled boredly, pushing past her in his american-flag-striped swimshorts. Bucky raised an eyebrow and pointed at the shorts, then Steve was pointing at Tony in explanation and Bruce interrupted that it was rude to point.

"Battle wounds make a woman more beautiful," Thor declared, while Natasha only glared harder, both hands on her hips. Steve rolled his eyes at her and Bucky lifted a hand helpfully, tone just flat of teasing.

"Matches the fresher one on your shoulder just fine," he offered, gesturing at the other bulletwound he'd left on smooth white skin. Natasha's mouth popped open like she couldn't believe he just said that and Bucky cackled, hand over his stomach.

Then there was a little spider trying to push him off the cliff and Bucky grabbed the fragile wrist, whipping her around so Nat would fall instead, except she used that momentum to vault onto his shoulders and-- hadn't they been here before? She undid his bun with one hand, disheveled hair ruining his vision, tugging him towards the edge of the cliff to tip him off balance and Bucky supposed it'd be rude to flip her onto the hard ground with his arm, so he was stuck trying to lift her off carefully. Only Natasha was showing no mercy at all.

His foot slipped at the edge of the cliff and Bucky shouted, then Natasha's heel whipped into his chest and shoved him backwards over the edge, using the pushoff to flip off his shoulders, and she was gonna land right back on safe ground. Bucky swung out his metal arm and closed immovable
fingers around her ankle, then they were both tumbling downwards and landing in the water with a splash.

It was colder than he'd pictured, but compared to the ice tanks Hydra used to dunk him in the temperature was lovely. And the depth was perfect too, letting him spring off the soft ground to break the surface dramatically, shaking water outta his eyes and flinging long hair as he caught his footing and flexed his arms to test the shifting metal plates.

It was working beautifully. And apparently so were Steve's eyes.

He stood gawking at the ledge, gold hair and barechest stunning like everyone's most angelic fantasy - only he was looking at Bucky like he was something outta dreams.

Bucky slid both hands back through his hair and Steve blinked cutely, sliding outta his trance - only it was too late, Thor'd snuck up behind him, hair braided and feet ungodly quiet for someone of that size. The only size that easily scooped Steve Rogers off his feet, bridestyle.

The sudden shout of protest was generic enough to be anyone's reaction, no way indicative of *I can't handle water without triggering*, then it was too late anyways and Thor was tossing Steve high into the air, already laughing good-naturedly at the arms and legs flailing in panic as Steve dropped for the surface.

Bucky didn't need to see the flash of fear in Steve's eyes as he hit the waves to close the distance between them in a rapid freestyle, already pulling Steve towards him before he broke the surface sputtering.

Steve shot outta the water with a harsh, choking gasp that could've belonged to younger asthmatic days - except for the tensed, trembling muscles veining arms and shoulders, squeezed shut eyes, all-but-flailing panic. Bucky was gathering Steve into his arms before his lips could part in another terrified wheeze, dragging close and shoving their bare chests together, pounding heart over Bucky's steady one as he forcefully wrapped Steve's legs around his waist and tucked the watering eyelashes against his neck, metal hand solid on the back of Steve's head. Holding him immovable, safe.

The others were all watching cliffside, Steve's tensed spine to them as Bucky scanned options over Steve's shoulder, calculating Thor and Tony's laughs, Nat's curiosity - it probably looked like Bucky'd swum over and possessively hauled Steve into his arms, under the ruse of staking his claim after Thor's manhandling of his Stevie.

So that's exactly where Bucky took it, keeping his tight grip on Steve and rocking them slightly in the waves while he fake-glared over the trembling shoulder.

"Hey, hey, paws off," he warned playfully, petting Steve's hair once for effect as the Avengers laughed or shook their heads, then all his attention was back on the terrified boy in his arms.

"You're okay, I got you," Bucky soothed, whispering into wet blonde hair. "I've got you."

His right hand ran up and down Steve's spine, stroking warmth over tight muscle like he could coax the strain right outta Steve's body. If only. It was hard to tell in the water, but maybe splashes of salty tears were blinking down his collarbone, matching a muffled, broken little sound and Bucky shushed his shaking boy, holding him tight in the waves.

"Geronimo!" Someone shouted, twin splashes and Bucky didn't look up to see who.

The water thankfully wasn't too rocky, wasn't too deep, and by the time they'd all jumped from cliffside, Steve'd simmered down to clinging hands and soft whimpers, the strained shifting muscles
of his torso deflated against Bucky now.

"You alright?" Bucky murmured, metal fingers shifting through wet-blonde, right arm propped under Steve's ass to keep him upright. A weak sound against his skin and metal slid around to tip Steve's chin up, let him look at the shiny blue eyes and see for himself. Woozy, a little shaken, but otherwise Steve just looked cold, like the water was icy instead - for the plane crash, it had been. He stroked over Steve's cheekbone, adjusting his other arm and jostling Steve closer to his chest. "Can you breathe sweetheart?"

"...I think so," Steve mumbled, eyes cutting down, loosening his grip on Bucky's shoulders.

"Alrighty, you want down?" He palmed Steve's outer thighs, moving to lift him off, only Steve's eyes went wide and he squeezed his legs tighter.

"Uhuhplease -" Arms wrapping around his neck and Bucky glanced over Steve's shoulder again. The others were shooting them occasional amused glances, but nobody looked all that concerned. Good.

"Piggyback?" Bucky offered, going near crosseyed how close their faces were. Before he could think of another option Steve was already swinging around to his back, abs pressed to Bucky's lower spine and chin tucked over his shoulder. "Okay then," Bucky glanced back, amused at Steve's spidermonkey grip that hadn't showed since he was ten and begging Bucky to carry him over hot beach-sand this way.

Now, carrying him through waist-deep water to their team, Bucky hummed to himself about another thing that hadn't changed, another trait buried deep enough in Steve to stick around after everything else'd been shoved in the redwhiteandblue box.

They got a few raised eyebrows, but then Nat suggested a game of Chicken and Steve and Bucky opted to be lifeguards, chatting softly from chest-deep sidelines as Clint climbed on Nat's shoulders, attempted to shove Tony off Sam's while Bruce and Thor actually made an impressive team and knocked everyone into the water scarily fast.

The indignant losers of the game started splashing around, finding creative ways to slice into the water to send legitimately threatening sprays at each other, and no one was spared in that fight.

There was a hold-your-breath-underwater contest that Steve might've won if he were brave enough to play; not that Bucky'd ever say that out loud, because Steve would shove himself underwater - trigger or not - to prove the challenge.

The thing about triggers though, was that unless all parties present were aware, hovering on the edge of an episode eventually meant a crash. What Bucky hadn't realized was the tenseness of his own shoulders, the ever-shifting metal plates actually in fight mode, every hitch in Steve's breath sinking deep-embedded worry down Bucky's spine (where he was still pressed).

Steve hurting meant Bucky at-arms; so when Tony swam up behind them and jumped outta the water with a splash and a shout intended to scare--

--startled wasn't quite the right word. The water and sky tinged red and his vision narrowed - black eating his peripherals and the swinging metal arm wasn't controlled, not like it would've been if he'd been practicing efficiency the Winter Soldier relied on, it was a mix between that brutality and the younger-panicked-version of backalley fights--

His fist would've shattered Stark's skull, if it'd connected.
Steve's callused hands nearly ripped open grabbing the metal elbow mid-swing, yanking backwards and tearing the snarl on Bucky's lips in half, water-surface tipping as they knocked off balance and Bucky's feet slipped, Steve's head went under and the commotion drew Avengers like moths to flame.

The only thing that mattered was pulling Steve above water, wiping hands over his dripping face and tipping Steve's chin up to clear his airways only he wasn't breathing and Bucky moved on instinct, whipping him around to get his hands under Steve's sternum, press the coughing, wracking spine to his chest and shove his right hand over Steve's forehead, pinning up soaked blonde bangs outta closed blue eyes.

"Nonono, please, no c'mon, you're okay," Bucky begged, then Steve choked up a stream of water and gasped in oxygen and Bucky could've passed out with relief, cradling Steve close and finally looking up at the concerned faces.

"I'm sososorry," he scrambled at Stark, because he'd almost just killed him but Tony waved him off quickly, cockiness shattered to leave him looking raw, but not scared, more...worried.

"Can Cap swim?" Bruce whispered cautiously. To someone who didn't know what happened, it probably looked like Steve fell, swallowed water, and Bucky overreacted like hell.

"He can," Bucky answered before anyone else could, stroking the heated forehead as Steve melted in his arms, boneless and shuddering breaths. "He's fine."

"Look, Barnes, I never meant to--" Stark started and Bucky waved him off in return, running a hand through Steve's hair as blue eyes blinked lethargically open.

"No, we're the messed up ones," he assured Tony, because there was no way he could've known. Except then Steve was shoving hands over his face and struggling outta Bucky's arms, stubbornly wading water as he sucked in shakily, kept his eyes averted and fussed, "Speak for yourself."

Sam was probably the only one who got Bucky's noise of frustration, but if Steve didn't wanna talk about it, Bucky'd drop it. In front'a his teammates wasn't the best place to argue over PTSD.

"You looked like you swallowed the whole goddamn lake," Clint commented, and if Steve was still breathing heavy no one was gonna say anything. Nat was eyeing Bucky distrustfully and Thor's eyebrows were knitted in concern, but Steve was being stubborn as hell and--

"Wouldn't be the first time," Bucky joked, and that at least got a huff outta Steve's pretty mouth, then a metal finger prodded his side and the blue eyes rolled; but he let Bucky gather him up in his arms again without swinging fists, a loose circle around Steve's waist as both their heartbeats slowed, the tension in the air snapping as frozen statues of Avengers began moving again, a backhand splash from Thor sending a stream of water over Tony's head.

Worry shifted to laughter and Steve laid hands over the ones on his stomach, hummed softly as they watched the scene. Nat scampered ashore to take a volleyball from her mystery bag - which made it even more mysterious, because what-the-hell-else was in there - and Steve got his footing enough to join in as a setter on the back corner of their makeshift court, so long as Bucky was always within five feet. Which he didn't say aloud and didn't need to, Bucky read his face just fine.

Thor spiked the ball and Bucky dove through the water, metal fingertips shifting plates, tapping it just in time to save the point. Bringing his arm back down caught a ray of sun, shining reflective light
in Sam's eyes and making Clint snicker.

"The metal arm's an unfair advantage," Tony insisted and Steve scoffed, flicking water his way, making a face that implied he quite liked Bucky's metal arm. "You would protest that," Tony grumbled, bumping the ball outta bounds and spinning moodily towards Clint, the brunt listener of his complaints.

Probably because he was half-deaf and didn't hear most of them, but.

"You know, how is it that the pinnacle of purity, the paradigm of the American Dream, America's Original Sweetheart, golden boy Stevie Rogers is – out of all of us, the crazy assassins and mad scientists and alien gods – the one that gets metal fingers shoved up his ass on a regular basis?"

The barked laugh outta Clint's mouth almost rivaled Nat's sudden cackling and Bruce's hand over his mouth, Thor's shocked cough and Sam's snort, even Bucky's mouth popped open in surprise.

Steve raised an eyebrow without comment, not quite CaptainAmericaDisapproves; it was only the enhanced hearing that let him hear Steve's mutter under his breath as he lined up to serve.

"Golden boy paradigm of nothing," Ball tossed into the air, words just as vehement as he tacked on a quiet, "-motherfucker." and smacked the hell outta the volleyball, deflating it the second it slapped the surface of the water and Bucky chewed the inside of his cheek but didn't say a word.

It almost sounded like Steve was bucking the stars'n'stripes suffocating him for so long.

~*~*~

"You're drooling," Natasha commented, crinkling a towel around her hair to squeeze it dry. It took alotta effort to tear his eyes away from Steve's method of hair-drying, which was scrubbing a towel over his head until it stuck up in a million directions like the disheveled spikes of early-morning, a mix between adorable and just-been-fucked and Jesus Christ that was a fantastic mental image.

Natasha was still giving him that look and Bucky raised a single eyebrow at her.

"Messy-haired Steve Rogers is the most beautiful thing in the universe, fight me."

The corner of her mouth twitched up in an amused smile, tilting her head in Steve's direction again. "Prove it."

"Don't gotta, I know."

"Aw, c'mon man," Sam inputted, clapping a hand on Bucky's scarred shoulder. "You say you like him, but so far there's nothing to show for it."

"They were only in each other's laps for the past hour," Clint pointed out as he passed by and Bucky stuck a finger at him, both eyebrows up in a hello expression at Sam and Nat.

"Yeah, sure, and you held hands. All platonic-best-friend stuff if you ask me," Nat nonchalantly studied her nails, undeniable challenge in her stance.

"Platonic?" Bucky sputtered, throwing down his towel and leaning forward to sass them both, "-how's this for platonic?"
He stalked across the rocky ground, not even bothering to tune into Thor and Steve's conversation before whipping him around by the shoulder, blue eyes wide with surprise, but they were about to get alot wider.

In swift fighter's coordination, Bucky lifted with firm hands on a tiny waist, releasing to quickly scoop up Steve's legs, pull muscular thighs around his hips and plant possessive palms on Steve's spine as he dipped Steve upside down in one fluid motion, bending in half to smother the open mouth with his.

The little sound muffled by Bucky's lips sounded straight outta the punk kid he used to throw over his shoulder, and thank god for the weight-training he'd done for the past seventy years because Steve was a hell of a lot heavier now.

Not that he'd ever had the chance to scoop Stevie into an upside down kiss with skinny legs sticking up in the air as a kid, but he'd probably been wanting to since sixteen, looking back deep enough under the bullshit he'd told himself for decades.

Steve tasted sweet and a bit like saltwater, hands shoved in Bucky's hair and entirely complacent otherwise, lips moving plush and pretty under Bucky's, then he was straightening back up, Stevie still snug against his hips, held steady with the metal arm tucked under his ass.

Their lips dragged apart slowly enough to tug at his gut, then pretty blue eyes were blinking owlishly at him, dead silence around them. Steve was flushed all over, from his cheekbones down his barechest; it was just about the cutest thing Bucky'd ever seen and he couldn't keep the helpless smile off his face.

Bright eyes and slightly swollen lips dipped forward to brush against Bucky's one more time, little smiles on both their faces as Steve dug his heels into Bucky's spine and eyes sparkled, locked.

"I dunno, I could still go with platonic--" Natasha finally broke the silence, amusement coloring her tone pretty and Bucky laughed, adjusting Steve on his hips and nudging their noses together.

"Oh fuck you, Romanoff," he shot back, but there was too much smile and no bite in it. Steve's pearly teeth expanded under his lips, sweet as spun sugar, fingers tightening on Bucky's arms and eyebrow lifting invitingly.

"You'll be too busy fucking me," Steve teased, and a loud cheer shot up to the left, juxtaposed to a defeated groan.

"I told you Barnes tops," Tony crowed and Steve lit up in a precious, shockingly amused laugh, tipping his head back before swatting Bucky's hands, hopping down to stand and threading his fingers happily through Bucky's hair.

"Not necessarily," Clint argued back, swinging open the side of the van and helping Bruce in with a hand. "If Tasha were to say she's too busy fucking somebody, doesn't imply pegging."

Tony threw up his hands and grumbled something about getting to the bottom of this eventually, pun intended.

There were a lot of underhand comments about how cute they were that Steve kept blushing at, ducking his head and looking up under long lashes at Bucky. It was a good thing they'd gotten kicked outta the front seat, otherwise it'd be too distracting to drive, shoulders brushing every time Sam curved the van around a corner.
Thor was in shotgun because he was the biggest, so the back actually had a bit of room, enough for Tony to sit in the middle of the floor and announce they were picking a cabin now, he'd be reading off choices and tallying votes himself.

It was actually quite easy to agree on one - for once - and then it was sleeping assignments, which Tony pulled out a pen to jot down on the brochure so no one could argue over it later.

"Alright, we've got three couches, two bedrooms, at least two oversized chairs, and probably plenty of rugs--"

"I'll take the floor," Steve offered instantly, good samaritan he was, but Bucky soccer-mommed his chest with a glare, holding him back from pointing at Tony's list and quickly corrected him.

"No, we will be taking a bedroom."

Steve's mouth popped open in delighted surprise and Bucky's eyes crinkled joyfully, bumping the side of his hand against Steve's, their pinky fingers wrapping together as Steve ducked his head and blushed, biting his lip to keep the smile from bursting.

Tony blinked, tipping sideways to mutter to Bruce, "I think I just threw up in my mouth."

"Not sure I've seen two people wanting to screw each other more," Clint agreed under his breath, tying Nat's bandana around his head and making his hair stick up in spikes.

"Dunno. I'd say that runs a lot deeper than screwing," Sam offered and everyone made sounds of captious agreement.

As if the blushing pinky-holding wasn't enough, the moment the van rolled to a stop in the rock driveway, Steve and Bucky were practically tumbling out the back, racing each other up to the cabin without even grabbing bags, twinkling laughter and shoves to shoulders, fingers tangling as they darted up wooden stairs.

They probably would've disappeared for the rest of the night if Natasha hadn't suddenly leaned out the window, calling after them.

"Rascals, wait! Before you go rendez-vous, there's a hottub." She raised her eyebrows invitingly and they both stopped on the porch, glancing between each other and the van.

"We just got dry," Steve whined, and Nat clicked her tongue disapprovingly.

"Not entirely. We have to go hottubbing."

Bucky heaved a devastated sigh, but there was a smile on his face as he took Steve's hand and led him back down the stairs.

The hottub was around back, a stone path circling down the side of the mountain the cabin was built into, Colorado-style pointed windows, glass and wood and rock, a porch that wrapped all the way around, on stilts in the back with zig-zagged stairs leading up to dark-green doors.

The air was crisp, making the bubbling warmth of the hottub jets a hundred times better. It was a giant circle, big enough for everyone to spread out their arms and slip into the safety of family and the joy of friends that let them relax for the first time since aliens came pouring outta the sky in Manhattan.

Eyes all closed against the twilight sky, sun already set, hovering light enough to decipher faces and
Bucky tipped his temple against Steve's chin, leaning back against the sculpted chest from his spot in Steve's lap - which they both claimed was to open up more room for everyone else, but really neither wanted to stop touching quite yet.

Ten minutes in and Steve's fingers started tracing lines over his skin - specifically a watery circle around his wrist, repetitive motion with a perpendicular dash on top before sloping into a circle again.

"What are you drawing?" Bucky whispered, not bothering to open his eyes from his cozy drift.

"A never-ending line," Steve replied softly, voice sounding deeper and echo-y with Bucky's head on his chest. It took a second, but Bucky caught the reference, breath of laughter escaping his mouth as he nosed the underside of Steve's chin.

"You cheesy sap," he chided, the ripple of the jets keeping their hushed tones just murmurs to everyone else. Bucky slid his fingers around Steve's wrist, making the same motion on him and pausing at the dash, tapping it once. "What's that part for?"

"Well, that's where the line begins, and see how it connects on both sides? That's where the line ends too." The rumble was soft, patient, flooded with emotions, enough to make Bucky's lips tug into a smile, turning to humor the way they always did when things got serious.

"Let's see, we met while I was pulling you outta some fight," he pondered, pressing a kiss to Steve's neck as he began tracing Bucky's wrists again. "You think that's where we'll have the eternal breakup too?"

"No," Steve corrected patiently, "The line began when I felt alive for the first time and it ends when we die together."

"Jesus Christ you have the most twisted version of romance in the world," Bucky huffed faintly, shaking his head at Stevie's maudlin tone that belonged in a tinier body. Steve hummed in response, circling line and dash again, and again, before tipping his head against Bucky's and dropping his voice into a whisper.

"Kiss me."

"Here?"

"Here."

He shifted in Steve's lap, tipping his head up and curling on his side so their mouths could press together, colder than the water lapping at their chests. Lips dragged together and apart, heads tilting as Steve tightened his arm over Bucky's chest and licked along his tongue.

"Okay," Natasha announced loudly, water rippling as she sat up, "To cover up the sound of Rogers&Barnes tongue war, we're gonna gossip now. Tony, is Maria dating Kristin from Statistics or not?"

A giggle that Bucky kissed off Steve's lips, hot tub silence breaking into easy chatter. They didn't kiss for much longer, then Bucky was straightening to sit properly in Steve's lap while they listened into the conversation, inputted opinions here and there.

It was innocent, easy for at least another five minutes, then Steve's hands started to trail over his body
and Bucky was a little more focused on that than whoever was dating who in SHIELD.

Underneath the surface of the bubbling, tumultuous water, a finger slid over the curve of Bucky's hip, caressing from the tie of his swimshorts upwards, wrapping around and sliding down again, skirting the hem in the back. Bucky forced himself not to tense, he'd agreed to sit in Steve's lap and he could handle keeping light touches on the downlow.

The tip of Steve's finger curved a v-shape along the top of his ass, dipping a bit into the crease and sending tingles down after it, so, okay, maybe caresses were gonna be closer to teasingly petting. He could handle that too.

Which was apparently what Steve was thinking, because the arm across his chest suddenly dragged him backwards, interrupting the water with a wave as Steve pressed his mouth to Bucky's ear and whispered low and rough,

"How good's your mission face?"

It was quiet enough that only Bucky could hear, but Steve didn't bother giving him time to answer before the teasing finger dipped down, all the way down, running a line of heat from Bucky's tailbone to his entrance.

Despite whatever the hell warning of *keep a straight face* that'd been, Steve's fingertip was rubbing tiny circles over his hole and Bucky's eyes went wide, quickly snapping his head to the side to hiss back, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Seeing how much you can take," Steve replied innocently, voice floating airily over his ear and sinking deep into his stomach. Bucky only just managed to lockdown the shiver of his spine, stilling himself entirely in Steve's lap while one hand stayed barred against his chest and the other massaged unrelentlessly against tight muscle.

Yeah there was nothing *innocent* about this. Nothing innocent about smiling easily at the other chatting Avengers while he pressed heavy circles into Bucky's rim. No, that was all Steve Rogers is a *little shit*.

And it wasn't like Bucky could back down from the challenge, not when Steve was betting against his *battleskills*. Not to mention that caving and letting Steve win was about the last thing he wanted to do right now.

Then the tip of Steve's finger was pushing inside him and Bucky had to clamp his thighs around Steve's knee to keep from jerking at the penetration.

It burned, but the water made the intrusion easier than he imagined. Then Steve's finger slid in to the knuckle, curving upwards with the angle and Bucky's mouth popped open of its own accord.

"Were you gonna say something, Sarge?" Sam asked from across the hottub and Bucky blinked, snapping his mouth back shut.

"Lost it on the tip'a your tongue?" Steve offered sympathetically and Bucky would turn around to glare at him if it weren't for the *finger in his ass*.

Instead he was stuck picturing all the things he was gonna do with said tongue to get back at Steve for this, only maybe not the best time to be picturing bedroom scenes, considering.

A second finger pressed against him and Bucky sucked in a breath. If Steve was gonna finger him right here - first of all, *holy fucking shit* - and secondly, he really did have to keep this under wraps.
Decades of torture training and control had to be used for something eventually, right?

His whole body was being stretched, remolded, as two callused fingers pushed inside him, just the tips; if they were alone he'd be gasping, crying out. Instead he grit his teeth, cocked his head under the guise of listening to whatever Bruce was ranting about.

Steve carefully eased his fingers deeper, placing a chaste kiss under Bucky's ear where he'd pushed damp strands aside. Concentration and control, he had to slip the fuck outta his head before he whimpered or moaned or something equally incriminating. Thankfully the angle wouldn't let Steve get very deep--

The fingers in his ass lifted to the side, tugging Bucky diagonal across Steve's lap like a puppet moved by the hand inside and fuck, Bucky's vision whited out for a second at that thought, Steve moving him anyway he wanted by the fingers dragging against walls of muscle. And this way, his ass hung off Steve's thighs enough to shift his wrist into a better angle and Bucky's muscles all clenched at once, biting down on his tongue hard enough to swirl copper in his mouth as Steve's fingers sunk all the way in.

It wasn't just deep, it was consuming and the burn was light enough to be a sweet bite of pain and Bucky registered mist smoking off the heated water into cool air before he slipped under entirely.

Silhouetted shapes, safely tucked into his own mind where nothing mattered but the drag of Steve's cautiously scissoring fingers inside him. Two minutes and thirty-seven seconds, then Steve was leaning forward to study Bucky's face; glassy eyes, but bright, like a lightbulb behind a mottled window.

"You okay? Still with me?" Steve murmured against his ear, fingers twisting and drizzling sparks to Bucky's toes. Bucky leaned back slowly, the changing angle making lips part in blissed silence, pausing his mouth beside Steve's ear and taking a moment to gather himself enough to whisper without breaking in half.

"...I'm gonna murder you in your sleep," he exhaled and a little laugh bubbled affectionately in Steve's chest, too quiet to hear but enough to feel.

"Well I'm glad you're okay," Steve informed him, all serious and cute, dipping his head to kiss Bucky's neck.

Bucky's eyes slipped closed in ecstasy, tipping his head and risking the slightest roll of his hips down on Steve's hand. Both fingers slipped out instantly, abandoning him gaping wetly in the current of the hottub and fuck fuck, the jets were close enough he could feel their ripple against the space Steve'd left and nonzero, he needed Steve back inside him right the fuck now.

Just as he was about to spin around and demand Steve stop tormenting him, there were suddenly three fingers shoving inside his ass and Bucky choked like they'd shoved down his throat instead, the sound making a few people glance at him in concern, so he covered his mouth with a hand and feigned coughing, which made his muscles tighten around Steve's hand and then Steve was groaning quietly, pressing his mouth into Bucky's shoulder to shut himself up.

"Fu-uck," he managed under his breath, squeezing Steve's thigh in his left hand as some sort'a anchor. God, Bucky was gonna die, squirming on Steve's fingers and wishing it was his cock, filling Bucky up and stuffing him full, making his head spin, drop to his chest--

Steve crooked his fingers, dragging out and brushing...Bucky's mind went with his body this time, sparking up to a high, floating plateau that felt like being dragged through the stars. Everything shot
away, sounds going distant and faces and sky and pine trees blurring, Steve's fingers pressed against his prostate and entirely owning Bucky's body, dangling him over a kindling fire.

The last rational thought to cross his mind was that his face was probably fucked to hell. He turned away on the guise of whispering something in Steve's ear, leaning back against him and shuddering a ripple up his spine, down his left arm, plates on his fingers whirring. He couldn't actually whisper, he'd choke again, or cry, or scream, so instead he squeezed his eyes shut, mouthed and tugged desperately at Steve's earlobe to keep himself silent.

He shouldn't be surprised Steve Rogers had the audacity to prop Bucky in his lap and put three fingers inside him while the rest of the Avengers were there - but taking it this far?

Calluses fingerpads rubbed against sparking nerve-endings and Bucky broke off, words tumbling outta his mouth through the detached training-headspace.

"Fuck, fuck, Steve," he moaned brokenly in warning, voice low and metal bruising fingerprints into Steve's thigh, "You gotta stop, I'm gonna come."

"Don't," Steve ordered instantly, low and commanding and Jesus fuck, that wasn't helping. "Don't, Bucky, our friends are here. Stark and Nat would kill us for real. C'mon, sugar, you can do it."

"N-no, no, Steve, I can't, baby please," Bucky begged, rocking his hips shallowly back on Steve's hand, mouth tipped up and breathing shattered over damp skin.

"The hell are you two gossiping about?" A loud voice - Clint's - interrupted and Bucky could cry, he could cry with how much he needed Steve right now.

Big blue eyes looked up over Bucky's shoulders, wide and innocent as he draped his free arm higher over Bucky's chest.

"Nothing," Steve insisted like a goody-twos school-boy, shoving three fingers to the hilt, and Bucky growled into his neck.

"It's strange, Rogers being with someone," Tony uttered under his breath, too quiet for the whispering supersoldiers to hear. "He's always been so...isolated. Solo. I never pictured him, you know, dating."

"It's strange to see him smiling so much, man." Sam glanced over at Steve's closed eyes, lips curled as he pressed his nose to Bucky's temple and whispered something low. "Like a different smile, y'know? Kinda makes the other one look fake."

"Maybe it is," Natasha offered, flicking her toes out of the water and tilting her head at the two across the hottub.

"Maybe."

It was through some grace of god that Steve only got in four more stomach-jerking pumps, crooked fingers making Bucky see stars, before Sam finally stood up, waves rocking the waterlevel.

"I'm wrinkling, we're getting out," he announced and somebody commented on girly sensibilities, a splash in retaliation then water was flying everywhere and Bucky lifted his head drunkenly, dazed
like he'd been yanked outta REM.

The others leapt to dry-land in the ruckus and Steve's fingers eased out with a throaty desperate moan, eyes slipped shut as he fluttered empty. Steve kissed his forehead and set him down on the rockseat to go get towels. The hot tub was still warm and Bucky was so hard his vision was swimming, then Steve was pulling him outta the water, wrapping him up in a towel and Bucky could kill him, he really could.

Natasha was saying something and Steve was answering but Bucky's ass was throbbing and he really didn't care until Steve grabbed his hand and started for the cabin.

Bucky cursed Steve all the way there, but they were both running and he was outta breath already, so he was pretty sure only half the I fucking hate you so fucking much's were audible at all.

"We'll be right back," Nat mocked Steve's sincere tone and Tony snorted, everyone watching the cabin door slam behind the two hurried boys.

"You think they're..." Thor waved his hand in a rolling motion that everyone definitely caught the gist of.

"I doubt it," Clint scoffed, grabbing a pack of matches from Nat's mystery bag. "I don't think they'd have sex with us all so close. They're probably giving each other back massages, maybe having some serious, deep, poetic talk or something."

"Fuck, fuck, baby fuckme--" Bucky's desperate plea cut off as Steve's tongue slid into his mouth, the same time Bucky's back slammed into the wooden door, gripping handfuls of ass as long legs wrapped around Steve's waist.

They'd barely made it to the bedroom, Steve'd already untied Bucky's swimshorts on the way and now it was a simple tug to get them off, setting Bucky on wobbly feet for just as long as it took to strip and slick himself up with pocket-lube then Steve scooped him back up against the door again, everything smelling like rich cedar and warm water as he traced strong hands down Bucky's sides, uninterrupted bare skin under his palms now.

"Steve Steve," Bucky whimpered, throwing his damp head against the door, cacophony of despairing, needy sounds tumbling from gasping lips. He crowded their bodies closer, ankles hooked and heels digging into the top of his ass, nothing but smooth wood and Bucky as he pressed his mouth to Buck's collarbone.

"You were so good for me," Steve murmured into his skin and Bucky honest-to-god whined, tipping his hips forward to grind against Steve's abs. He was hard and leaking on both their stomachs and fuck, Bucky wanted this so bad, didn't he?

"Fuck me, Stevie please, n-need you inside me." That pretty head tossed, trembling already, lit up sensitive and feeling everything so intensely, outta his damn mind like he'd die without it and Steve'd teased him plenty, Bucky deserved anything he wanted--

Steve straightened up and took ahold of Bucky's hips hard, shocking more pitiful noises from him as he lined up, the fooling around in the hot tub'd opened Bucky up quite nicely and the moment the head of his cock breached muscle he slid in easy and slick, hips stuttering as he sucked oxygen into his lungs.

It was still tight and hot as hell, enough he should probably be careful, but the choked sound and the
look on Bucky's face as crystal eyes rolled back in his head - Steve gave them about three seconds before he was pounding Bucky's ass against the door.

"Ah ah ah St-Steve, Stevie, fuck," Bucky shouted and Steve held on tighter, nerve endings on fire as he rocked in and out of Bucky's body fast enough to make his limbs tremble, wood behind Bucky's back smacking repetitively as Bucky staccato-breathed, fingers biting, digging sharp into Steve's skin.

"Babybabybaby," Buck murmured nonsensically, scrambling his heels tighter against Steve's ass like he could pull him closer that way. Steve was just trying to breathe and stay upright, holding Bucky up with one hand and the slam of his hips while the other braced on the cedar door, trying to find some purchase and stability when his body was ripping apart at the seams. Bucky was moaning so desperately and pretty, begging Steve for more between rough breaths and yanked screams and he was so goddamn hot and tight inside, surrounded on all sides by slick muscle until it felt like the very air he breathed belonged to Bucky, everything did.

The door creaked and Steve dropped his forehead to Bucky's shoulder, panting as he kept thrusting hard and fast enough to pull another groan from the wood behind them. He really didn't want to explain to the rest of the Avengers how he broke the door, so through some act of god he managed to gather enough strength to haul Bucky into his arms properly, pulling him down snug on his cock and swinging them around to the closest available surface, then he was fucking Bucky against the perpendicular wall and the litany of moans were only louder this time ah-ah-ahh as he pumped in again and again.

"Fu-fucking hell, Steve," Bucky keened shakily, right hand gripping hard enough in Steve's short hair to hurt, the thighs caging his sides tightening as he found his grip again. If he tilted his chin up and pressed close enough, he could rock in and out of Bucky's body and still press their lips together. It was a tight, closed mouth kiss at first and Bucky held his head close enough to keep it that way until they both gasped for air, right into each other's mouths and he felt the shiver that sent down Bucky's spine, all the way down to vibrate his tailbone and Steve groaned, fucking up into him harder.

At some point there were a few soft thuds to the right, then a crash as a painting fell off the wall but whatthefuckever, Bucky was marking up his jaw and there wasn't much to focus on but Bucky's velvet insides and the sting of his teeth along Steve's skin. It was unreal that Bucky let Steve have him like this, let alone broke off to whimper brokenly for it.

"So sweet for me," Steve murmured against his ear and Bucky's hand slid between them, a rivened cry falling from his lips as the pretty hair tipped back against the wooden wall and the metal hand starting jacking in time with Steve's hips, cold plates grating along Steve's stomach from how close they were pressed.

The air'd shifted to something frantic, heat building and coiling as more filthy sounds spilled from Bucky's mouth with each punched breath and shove deeper. Bucky'd already been close in the pool, right on that edge, so it was harder, brighter, faster when he stiffened up, tightening around Steve and gasping shakily, crumbling and crushed, free hand scrambling over the back of Steve's neck in warning. He just pressed closer, drilled his hips harder, faster, dirtier as he pinned Bucky to the wall with his chest and sunk his teeth into the junction between Bucky's neck and shoulder.

The resounding scream was breathtaking, then Bucky was coming all over Steve's chest and the shiver down his spine clenched every muscle so tightly he could barely move, the prettiest little whimpering cries layering over the pounding in his ears and he was spilling into Bucky's body, clinging tight as they rocked together through the addictive waves.
The world spun electric and they were both squeezing tight enough for bruises that might stick, and if this was the kind of drowning he got to do now, Steve'd jump in headfirst every day for the rest of his existence, hold the shaking body to his and trip over the ledge with him the way he'd dragged Bucky everywhere else in their long lives.

Bucky melted like butter in his arms and Steve was pretty sure the serum was the only thing that enabled him stumbling backwards, holding Bucky's weight to his chest until his legs hit the bed and collapsed backwards, tumbling them both onto the mattress. He slipped out of Bucky with a wet sound and a groan, then a metal hand was dragging him higher on the sheets and Steve stared up at the ceiling, heaving breaths making his chest rise and fall like he'd fought a dozen rounds.

Well, something like that.

"Fuck," Bucky cursed beside him and Steve drew in another breath, glancing over from his side of the blanket.

"You alright?"

"You gonna ask me that after every time we have sex?" Bucky groaned, digging the heels of his palms into his eyes and Steve sighed, running a hand through wrecked blonde hair. At least Bucky was alright enough for sarcasm. In Steve's defense, Bucky'd broken down bawling the first time and he had a right to be concerned.

They'd never talked about that, but Steve knew Buck well enough to know the whole thing'd been overwhelming, something he'd never felt before and the connection, the gravity of that--

He understood why Bucky'd cried. Didn't make it any easier, but at least he knew what was going on in that mind for once.

A metal finger prodded his ribs and Steve rolled his head, blue eyes searching Bucky's face. But there was only a hint of exhaustion underneath the amusement, and even that was fading. The benefits of the serum apparently went further than Steve'd thought.

"I think we broke things." Bucky gestured at the wall and Steve lifted his head, taking in the two paintings on the ground - two? - and knocked over demi-moon table. He hadn't even seen that.

"Hmm. We've had worse damage for less noble causes," he pointed out and Bucky giggled, turning his nose into Steve's shoulder and hiding his face against bare skin.

"Having sex isn't noble you asshat."

"But the room's not even that broken!"

"I am," Bucky groaned, nuzzling against the bruises on Steve's arm and reaching to curl a hand around the side of his ribs. "Feels like you split me right in half."

"At least we don't hafta explain breakin' a door," Steve offered, eliciting a snicker that felt really funny with Bucky's lips against his bare skin and Steve couldn't help the huffed response, then they were both giggling, floating with post-orgasmic haze as the giggling bubbled into full-on laughter and Bucky was dragging him sideways to smooch their mouths together and it was the most fantastic taste in the world, laughter on Bucky's lips.

They probably would've kissed back into another round if a sudden rapping on the door didn't break them apart in surprise.
"We're doing s'mores in five, get your clothes on!" Clint shouted from the hallway and they both turned to each other, breaking into another fit of laughter because apparently they wouldn't have to explain anything if the Avengers knew what they were up to without the broken door to show for it.

"While you two were busy," Natasha started with a knowing twitch of her eyebrow, waving them over to the rock pit. "-we started a fire to warm up."

"Are there marshmallows?" Clint asked, to which Thor chucked a bag across the fire and Tony snorted, stealing Sam's camera away from him to capture the offended look on Clint's face as he caught the bag against his chest.

"Stark, you bring fancy mechanical roasting forks?"

"Hell no." Tony reached behind him for a pile of whittled sticks, balancing the camera in one hand as he tossed them around the fire, short pieces of sharpened pine. "We're goin' old school."

"Does that mean scary ghost stories too?" Natasha asked, plucking the uncooked marshmallow off the end of Sam's stick and popping it decisively in her mouth.

"I've got ghost stories," Bucky offered, lifting the metal hand to catch the stick Stark tossed his direction.

"Not-real ghost stories, preferably," Bruce corrected, holding out his stick for Clint to put a marshmallow on the end.

"Now where's the fun in that?" Steve plopped down on the log beside Thor, making a grabby-hand motion at Tony for a roasting stick of his own. Bucky gingerly, slowly sat down in the space between Tony and Steve, passed the stick along before holding his out for a marshmallow from Clint too. "I've got plenty of good horror stories from Brooklyn, too."

"I'm sure they all end with me pulling you outta some alley and holding my sleeve to your bloody nose," Bucky sighed, lifting his stick over the flames and maybe-on-purpose knocking Tony's marshmallow off into the fire. He got an elbow to the ribs and Bucky shot a glare, which Tony returned just as easily, then Nat was coughing some comment about testosterone and Thor laughed, echoing over the crackle of the fire.

"Was Cap really that bad?" Bruce asked, carefully keeping his roasting marshmallow out of swordfight's reach.

"I was always holdin' him back from some fight. Only time he settled down was when he had a sketchpad in his hands."

"You're an artist?" Thor adjured curiously and Bucky's eyebrows shot up, jaw dropping. Steve shifted and looked down at his hands, pretending to busy himself with breaking bark off the handle of his stick.

"He sketches," Nat shrugged and Bucky swiveled to her, same incredulous look on his face.

"Steve," Bucky said slowly, reaching out to tap his thigh that was still mottled purple from Bucky's death grip in the hottub. "Why do these fine people not have your paintings coloring their walls?"

"Cap's that good?" Clint objected incredulously, tossing the bag of marshmallows at Tony.
"That good? Christ, he could be a professional. Probably wouldda been if the army hadn't scooped him up."

"I dunno, Buck," Steve mumbled shyly and Bruce leaned over Sam to whisper to Natasha, "Is Cap actually blushing about something?"

Bucky stuck his tongue in his cheek, debating reactions before rotating his stick, casually offering over the fire,

"You guys know he can speak Irish?"

"Really?" Thor raised an eyebrow, leaning over. "Rud eile atá agaínn i bpáirt, mo chara."

Steve's mouth twitched up at the corner, eyes cast down. "Táimid a lán I gcoitianta, nach bhfuilimid?"

Bucky studied them both while everyone else just gaped.

"...why would Captain America speak Irish?"

"Because that's his heritage?" Bucky furrowed his eyebrows up in the center, axiomatic calling crazy. "Stevie was always about freedom and righteousness, but the 'redwhite'n'blue' thing came way later. What's that quote you told me, Steve, when Erskine asked if you wanted to kill Nazis?"

Steve sighed, wiggling a marshmallow onto the end of his stick and still not looking at anyone. "That I don't wanna kill anyone. I don't like bullies, no matter where they're from."

A few beats of silence filled with crackling fire and the crinkle of the marshmallow bag as Tony popped another in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully as everyone looked at Steve.

"The Smithsonian doesn't have that part," Stark finally said and Bucky's mouth skewed, pulling his golden-brown marshmallow out of the fire and waving it under Steve's nose.

" Doesn't have a lotta things." Bucky waved it again and Steve finally lifted his head enough to glare, sliding the marshmallow off the end and popping it in his mouth. Bucky made a pleased sound and gestured for another from Stark. "Like how Stevie went against orders for that first mission."

"The greatest soldier of our time broke orders," Sam deadpanned, half-disbelieving. "The hell for?"

"Buck," Steve finally inputted, around a mouthful of marshmallow. "He was in trouble."

Sam and Natasha exchanged a glance and Thor mouthing something at Tony nobody caught, then Bruce finally leaned over to see Steve around the flames, more trepidation than confusion in his voice.

"So you're normally considerate and in-line, but when it comes to Sergeant Barnes, you just..."

"Fuck shit up?" Clint finished for him and Bruce shrugged a shoulder with a waving hand of agreement. Bucky pursed his lips and studied the flames because that's not where he was going with that.

"When you put it that way, it's almost romantic," Natasha teased, and Steve flicked the wrist holding his roasting stick, flinging a marshmallow in her direction. She dodged easily, giving him a you-can-do-better-than-that look and that's how the great marshmallow war of '15 began.

Thankfully it also ended quickly, after Clint flung a flaming one and nearly caught Thor's hair on
fire, although there were already pelted white lumps covering the ground by that point.

Steve was laughing though, after Tony’d smashed one uselessly on his head (it popped right back up), and the odd tension dissipated entirely, teammates falling back into patterns of banter and smiles the trip’d galvanized so far.

Thor went for a broom and Sam and Bucky went for drinks from the van, dark sky lighting the way with the sliver of moon and stars sprinkled overhead.

Bucky lifted the cooler outta the back, scooting it to the edge of the van so he could dive metal into ice and hand Sam individual drinks. He’d barely pulled out three before there was a dark hand on his shoulder, making him pause and straighten, meeting the serious brown eyes with a questioning gaze.

"Why are you doing all this?" Sam asked gently, gesturing to the van and sweeping his arm around to the fire, where the Avengers were laughing at Steve animatedly describing the Howling Commando version of s'mores, waving arm motions and all. Bucky watched for a moment, firelight flickering over Steve's stunning jawline, the shape of his shoulders and chest that housed the most beautiful, bright heart Bucky'd ever known.

"I’m introducing you all to my best friend."

He could feel Sam's eyes studying his profile, the slight hesitance before the next careful remark. "We may not know the details, but I think we all know Steve."

Bucky turned his head, meeting dark eyes and pausing at the genuine care in that expression. That was why Bucky'd chosen to do this, because he and Steve were diving into this all the way and hell if Bucky wasn't dragging their family through the light too. Especially one that wanted to be there, to understand for real.

"No. You don’t. You know Captain America. But not a single one of you know who he is when he’s not being a soldier." Bucky looked back out at Steve, smiling at Natasha as he gestured for a chocolate bar. How many nights in Europe, firelight under the sky, soldiers around a fire? Nights before that, Central-Park stars? How long ago, how much hadn't changed? Bucky let out a breath, handing Sam another drink without tearing his eyes away from the sweet boy in the firelight. "I’m showing you all."

A slow nod, curious flickering eyes, but Sam gathered the drinks into his chest and started to the fire anyways, calling over his shoulder for Bucky to carry the last few. And Bucky watched the scene for another moment, the grateful smiles and teasing jabs as Sam passed out drinks, alone, quiet as he studied Steve with his friends.

It was time, now, do to this. Because for the first time since getting his memories back, he was 100% sure Steve was still in there somewhere, the same beautiful golden sunshine kid he'd always known.

There was no Captain America in the way Steve laid him down. No Captain America holding him in bed, screwing him into walls. They crossed the final threshold and it'd done nothing but open more doors, let him see how much of his best friend was dying to peel off the suit.

Steven Grant Rogers, back from the dead.

Just the stars as witness, Bucky sucked in a breath, whispered tenderly to the stars for no one else to hear but one day, for everyone to see.

"I’m showing him too.”
"Truth or Dare? You mean 'who do you like' or 'sexual act of choice'?

"Whatever, we're playing, get over it."

"Okay, Natasha switches bathing suits with Thor." Nat took in Thor's baggy tshirt and bright red
swimtrunks before looking down at her own.

"Yeah, no way he's fitting into these bottoms."

"Rogers, then," Clint suggested.

"I can confirm Steve won't fit in those," Bucky pointed a reflective finger and Steve smacked him on
the arm, shaking out his hand with an ow while Tony doubled over in laughter.

Thor ended up switching tops with Natasha, who looked like she was wearing a dress in his
swimshirt while everyone else got blackmail photos of Thor in a bikini top.

Clint had to jump off the roof, Bucky held his hand in icewater and Tony got dared to lick it, which
did make his tongue stick and Sam tear up from laughing so hard, but the thaw was disappointingly
quick then Steve had to go streaking (after choosing Truth and refusing to answer what he'd been
whispering to Bucky in the hottub) and Bruce had to drink Asgardian liquor and Natasha had to
jump over the fire without using her feet and there was dog-barking and whipped cream at some
point and by the time the fire'd kindled down to ashes everyone was exhausted from laughter with
resting smiles on their faces and murmured goodnights as they each leant on somebody on the way
back up to the house, collapsing on couches and beds with groans like they'd spend the day taking
down an alien army instead of marshmallows and sleepover games.

~*~*~

It was somewhere around 3am, moonlight cutting through glass to figures on couches and beds,
casting long dark shadows, the silent stillness of sleeping soldiers and scientists. Somewhere around
3am when that glass shattered, snoring exhaustion splitting in the half-second it took for the first
blood-curdling scream.

The scientists shot awake and stumbled to their feet, the soldiers shot to their feet and stumbled
awake, battle glances exchanged as they all started for the stairs in rushing worry, weapons drawn.
Thor shot up the stairs first, two at a time and silent as the widow behind him. Tony kept pace in
between them, curiosity overruling the battle sense for weapons, but when you were peering out
behind the shoulder of a god, you have room to be weaponless.

Sam started at the back of the line with his couch the furthest, but he carefully shouldered past Bruce,
Clint, Nat, Tony - he'd never heard that kind of scream before, but soldiers of that caliber had to be in
serious pain or danger to make a shrill, terrifying sound like that.

Weapons drawn and wary feet - the nature of the danger could be anything from a spider to Bucky
trying to kill Steve to a Hydra unit attacking the loft bedroom - Thor reached the door, eased open
the heavy wood, and flattened to the side so all the Avengers could peer around him into the room.

The curtains were drawn, night sky bright enough to light the scene, but the unobstructed sounds
revealed it all anyways.

Soft, broken crying, gasping breaths and shaky whimpers, a metal hand cupping a blonde head silver-white in the moonlight and tucked against a bare chest, broad shoulders wracking with tears, heavy artist hands gripping Bucky's ribs tight, bones mottled purple. Steve was curled up tiny enough on Bucky to look like the version from museums, slight and helpless and broken and nothing like the impenetrable Cap they all knew.

And the Winter Soldier didn't look anything like himself either, propped on pillows to wrap an arm all the way 'round Steve's back, expression gentle and sweet and caring as the normally-snarky mouth comforted promises of safety and protection.

Bucky's gaze shot up the moment the door opened, pulling Steve tighter to his chest – and relaxing the moment he realized who was standing in the doorway. The metal hand glinted as it slid down Steve's head and rubbed methodically into the back of his neck, small sad smile on Bucky's face as he scanned over their visitors and glanced at the still-distraught soldier in his lap.

Another terrible, broken sobbing sound and Bucky's face just melted, all concern and fierce love in his eyes as he leant to press a kiss to Steve's crown, pulling him up higher and wrapping his arms tighter to start rocking them, Steve's head still tucked against his chest.

"Nightmare," Bucky mouthed in explanation over the top of Steve's head, cradling him solidly as they rocked, back and forth, heart-wrenching sounds starting fade.

The Avengers all stared, solemnly frozen in their hallway lineup, various stages of disbelief and awe as the unshakable Captain America let himself get rocked back to sleep a crying, crumbling mess.

It wasn't a side of Steve Rogers any of them had seen before. Sam knew Steve had trouble sleeping sometimes, but he'd imagined restless pacing and staring moodily at the ceiling, not waking up with terrified screams and clinging to Bucky Barnes like both their lives depended on it.

Early on, Jarvis reported to Tony that there were occasional shouts at night, but he'd figured that was all Barnes and long-since passed.

None of them knew what quite to do with the knowledge that Steve Rogers cried, let alone sobbed and clung and shook, had nightmares that worried Barnes - but from the look on his face - didn't exactly surprise him either.

Thor'd been fully prepared to interfere and help, but from the quiet snuffling and tiny, increasingly rare whimpers, Rogers was mostly calmed, shaking turning to trembling and finally just collapsing in exhaustion over Barnes. Clearly their assistance wasn't needed - which, for once, was a comfort. Disconcerting to see how hurt a teammate was, but relieved there was someone in a position who already knew how to help.

Nat mostly just stared silently.

Eventually Bruce started waving the Avengers away from the door, mouthing things about privacy and Cap's fine now. Everyone blinked owlishly, moving like molasses as they snapped outta their consecutive trances, bustling around each other to glance in the room one more time before starting back down the stairs. Clint caught Natasha's eye and signed "did not see that coming", which she could only nod at, the last to linger in the hallway, reaching to close their door with a final scan over the scene.

Rogers was weightless and pliant, reduced to the occasional sniff, ugly finger-shaped bruises arching
Barnes's ribs he didn't seem to give a damn about. That uncharacteristically caring expression was looking at Steve like he was the most precious angel in the world and she had to close the door at that, leave that private thing between them while she stood in the hallway and wondered when life was going to stop throwing her curveballs.

The morning broke easy and misty over the wooden porch, where Sam and Thor were sitting on the cushioned swing, sipping coffee and silently watching the sunrise on the horizon over the view of glittering water and swaying conifers. Stark came out with his mug half an hour later, then Bucky slid open the screendoor and stepped barefoot onto the cedar porch too.

The log cabin was built into the side of a mountain, the stilted porch overlooking the lake, wind blowing the fallen pieces from Bucky's bun as he propped nimbly on the wooden railing, both hands curled around hot chocolate instead of coffee.

A wind chime in the corner of the porch jangled distantly and Tony sat his mug down on the ledge, bracing both hands on the rail as he looked out over the silent stillness of the dewy morning.

"Rogers have nightmares often?" Stark eventually asked, quiet enough to slip through the wind and be ignored if Bucky hadn't been listening for it. He stirred his pinky in the swirling hot chocolate, taking a moment's pause as he squinted over the peaceful view and considered the hidden concern in Tony's voice.

"Yeah," Bucky finally answered, looking down and tucking a piece of hair behind his ear. "Bout as much as I do."

Tony nodded, still looking out over morning mist, soft creak of the swing behind him as Thor pushed his bare toes against the wooden slats to rock the cushion gently.

The silence settled in again, everyone lost in their own worlds until heads all turned at the slide of the door again and Steve and Natasha stepped onto the porch, soft smiles for everyone and mugs in both their hands too. Banner came out yawning, then Clint followed with macaroons he passed out graciously, spun sugar dipped in chocolate until the morning faded from peacefulness to easy chatter and plans for the rest of the day were made.

The first stipulation of which was that Steve and Bucky weren't allowed to drive again. So they called the bench against the back doors, insisting it was the only space for two sets of wide shoulders.

Which turned quite quickly into more than just sitting.

Bucky'd been explaining enthusiastically to Thor, something or another about science fiction novels and alien hovercraft, when Steve suddenly leaned over and kissed him right on the mouth.

It was mid-word, so his lips were parted, confusion furrowing his eyebrows and eyes still wide open as Steve pulled back and turned to Natasha like nothing'd happened.

Bucky took a few seconds to recalibrate, fingers briefly touching his mouth in questioning wonder, then he shook his head and started in on the conversation again, talking with his hands and eyes lighting back up with excitement.

And less than a minute later Steve was leaning over again, hand cupping Bucky's jaw this time as he
pressed their lips together briefly and pulled away, searching Bucky's face for a second with a little smile before releasing him and turning to Sam this time.

Bucky crossed his arms over his chest, looking confusedly at Steve. Steve paid him no mind and kept right on talking to Sam.

Eventually he sighed, turning back to Thor and lifting his hand, but before he could get a word out this time Steve turned around and kissed him again.

This time Bucky made a noise of frustration when Steve pulled away, turning yet again like it'd been nothing. Sam heard him apologize briefly to Thor with an *if you'll excuse me*, then he was turning sideways in his seat and whipping Steve's shoulder around, taking his face in both hands and kissing him hard.

Steve's eyes opened wide like he hadn't expected that in the least, then he was melting into Bucky's touch, slipping his arms around Bucky's shoulders and pulling him close, eyes shut blissfully now as they kissed and *jesus*, there were other people in this car, like two feet away, and Tony was trying to *drive*.

He glared in the rearview for a moment, but Barnes&Rogers were still kissing and didn't look to be stopping anytime soon, so he cleared his throat loudly and jerked the car wheel to get their attention.

"Please don't act out Partition when we don't have one I can roll up." Tony gave them a pointed look over his shoulder before turning to the road with an aggrieved sigh because seriously, these lovesick kids.

At least the rearview was angled perfectly to see the confused looks they gave each other at the reference, mouths separated now as hands fell to knees instead of shoulders.

"You guys know the song, right?" Clint held up his phone, shaking it in example and they both shrugged. Thor leaned over to ask Bruce what the song was and Bruce simply replied "something no one's surprised Clint has on his phone," as though that explained everything.

Barton'd called shotgun, so that left him access to the aux chord, which was his excuse for educating the lovebirds on Beyoncé.

The moment the bassline started Barnes was giving Rogers the side-eye and Tony was already second-guessing his life choices by the time the lyrics hit because the sexual tension was palpable from all the way up here. He was just about to reach over and turn it off when that tension finally snapped, metal hand darting out to grab something silver around Rogers' neck and haul him in for a filthy kiss even Natasha made a sound at.

Bruce covered his eyes and Thor looked amusedly at Nat, who was signing rude expletives at Clint while Sam turned his head away and threatened under his breath that he was learning sign-language one of these days.

"I didn't know Steve had dogtags," Clint leaned over the back of his seat to nudge Sam, who furrowed his eyebrows, glancing back at Steve and Bucky once before shrugging and turning back to Clint.

"I don't think he does. I gave Bucky a pair?"

"...that's kinda annoyingly romantic."

"They're disastrously cute," Natasha agreed, signing *I'm just glad he's happy* to Clint, softened smiles
on both their faces, juxtaposed oddly to the heavily suggestive song in the background.

Which apparently was getting a little too suggestive, because as soon as the words *handprints and good grips all on my ass* hit Bucky suddenly broke off with a gasp, shoving Steve off and shouting at the front without taking his eyes off blue ones,

"Turn it off, *turn it off*, unless everybody wants to see me ride my boyfriend in the back of this van."

Clint shut the song off fast enough to cut mid-word, stagnant silence filled with the sound of Steve breathing too heavy, staring at Bucky with wide eyes and a pounding heart that Bucky was pretty sure everyone could hear.

He curled his metal hand in the front of Steve's shirt, eyes still locked on each other, mostly to not see the looks on the rest of the Avengers' faces, which were pretty damn likely a shit-ton of teasing. The silence stretched forever until somebody finally broke it with a curious,

"Boyfriend? That's new."

"Yeah..." Steve trailed, a handle on his pulse now and curiosity in his eyes because technically, Bucky'd never exactly answered that question.

Bucky shrugged and leaned forward to press a much softer kiss to Steve's parted lips. At least the Avengers all had a fantastic sense of humor.

What would the Commandos have said, if it'd been like this back then? If the homophobia thing hadn't been a problem, they probably would've just had alotta canteens thrown at them. There'd be bets placed. Jargon and code and acronyms about their relationship, pranks and nicknames too.

At least the Avengers weren't immature enough to throw things--

Thor's flipflop bounced off the red star on his bicep and smacked Sam right on the temple, to which Natasha suddenly broke into a flurry of apologies, then Sam was throwing Nat's flipflop and Steve and Bucky spent the next ten minutes of the trip dodging various shoes and apologizing loudly for "scarring" everyone with their "stupid cuteness," as Clint eloquently put it.

Everyone'd settled down into mild glares they didn't mean when the van finally rolled to its last stop, but after a very serious, heartfelt apology from Steve that had Bruce and Thor both tearing up, Natasha just shoved them out the back of the van and told them to makeout all they damn wanted, so long as Steve didn't make anybody cry with his righteousness speeches about how happy he was and how he'd never want to make anyone uncomfortable and really, nobody cared that much that you makeout with your boyfriend in the back of the van.

The line was drawn at Partition though, and Tony smacked Clint upside the head for playing the song, but then Thor was pointing out how beautiful the cloud formation was and everyone was too busy discussing the best plan hiking up the mountain to notice the look Steve threw Bucky and the kiss on his cheek he got in return.

The only plan everyone agreed on was that everyone wanted to climb the mountain a different way, so Tony finally just waved his hand and said, "Whatever, let the kids decide."

"Young and in charge," Bucky said proudly, arms around Steve from behind as he lifted his chin off Steve's shoulder to peck him affectionately on the cheek.
"Alright, Buck and I'll take lead, use our stamina--"

"Really, Rogers?"

"Okay, first off, not what I meant, and secondly, just because your Captain is giving orders with a smile on his face doesn't mean he means them any less, a'ight?" Steve mock-glared at Clint and he put both hands in the air, then he turned his glare on the rest of them before starting his orders over again.

"Sarge and I'll take point, hike to the top, Thor will take rear to protect everyone from potential bears. Romanoff and Wilson mentally track the route so we can get back down easy, Stark's in charge of scenery photos, Barton's in charge of granola bars, and Banner - just don't scare at a rabbit and Hulk out on the mountain, okay? Great."

Natasha pointed through the treeline at the hawk flying overhead, nudging Clint with a sharp elbow and shooting him a smile.

Clint opened his mouth for whatever sassy reply he had planned when he was suddenly interrupted by a declarative yell up ahead.

"I LOVE BUCKY BARNES!!"

The shout echoed and bounced off the canyon below them and Tony snickered, canting his head towards the path broken through the trees and raising an amused eyebrow.

"Sounds like they found the top of the mountain." He kicked aside a pinecone, lips pursed as he gathered his debate, suddenly turning to Clint with a pondering, "If Barnes said he'd ride Steve in the van earlier, does that mean cowgirl or as in ride his ass, because really it still doesn't prove either way--"

"Give it up, mate," Thor clapped a hand on Tony's shoulder, passing him on the trail while Tony adjusted his backpack and made a face.

"You...give it up."

"It's beautiful, isn't it? Shouldda brought a sketchpad." Steve gave Bucky a little smile and he ducked his head, tucking a fallen piece of hair behind his ear.

"You should start drawing again. For real. There's no reason not to." Crystal eyes pinned him with a gaze and Steve scanned back over the view, taking in mountains and valleys and dotted lines of billowing trees. Bucky's fingertips brushed the back of his hand, voice quiet and almost unsure as he dropped the question between their feet. "Don't you wanna get better too?"

The wind whistled past and Steve shoved his hands in his pockets, kicking the dirt. In order to get better, he had to admit he wasn't okay.

"Is there..." How a life can move from the darkness, she said to get better. But there wasn't...he didn't have anything wrong with him. So he couldn't do planes or water, so his friends didn't see him. But Bucky was looking at him so hopefully, like this was something Bucky really wanted, like being brushed off about this would break his heart this time. Steve's voice dropped, barely mumbling, but he got the words out. "...whaddu you mean by better?"
"You, Steve. Stepping out of Captain America. Easing back into Captain Rogers. Steve Rogers. Anybody that isn't this redwhite'n'blue patriot that doesn't have a home."

"Home?" Steve squinted over the edge of the cliff, tipping a rock off to tumble below. "Buck, our home was 70 years ago."

"You wanna find a place in Brooklyn?" A thin smile, eyes averted from the searching crystal gaze.

"Leave the comforts of the tower?" Steve chided and Bucky didn't even allow him that, brushing the comment aside and to tug Steve's hand outta his pocket and squeeze.

"I'll move out with you. If you want." A few mornings ago Bucky'd scoffed at sleeping in the same bed but now he was holding Steve's hand and offering to move into a place of their own. The tops of mountains tended to put things in perspective. Monumental, but Steve still couldn't look him in the eye. Warm fingers rubbed over his skin. "Let Steve Rogers come back to the living."

He fell silent. Bucky didn't need to put it like that.

Better. What was there to get better?

Was there anything left to get better?

Footsteps were on the path, almost at the top, must've heard the I love you echo Steve threw down the canyon.

"I'll think about it," he inhaled and Bucky's fingers clamped over his wrist, forming a circle he traced, closing with a dash at the top.

Steve eyed him in his peripherals and couldn't help but smile.

"Sergeant," Thor greeted, boots tramping soft ground as he reached the peak, hand extended towards Bucky. "For you."

Bucky's nose twisted, confusion and admonishment, delicate fingertips closing around the stiff stem as he took the flower from Thor's hand.

"I thought it might be nice in your hair," Thor explained and Bucky made a sound, quiet and incredulous as he handed it to Steve with a gesture to weave it in. Steve braided a piece on the side, pulling it back and pinning the flower through, bright pink against dark waves.

"Thank you." He squeezed his hands together abashedly, ripple down metal and Thor nodded sincerely. Even Tony had the guile to keep his mouth shut.

A rumble overhead was the sole warning they got before clouds blocked out the sun and sparse droplets started pattering nearby trees.

I wanna get better, his head mocked and Steve shook it aside, shoving down the urge to scream, to curl away from the thunder and from Bucky's hopeful face.

I didn't know I was broken til I wanted to change.

"The pavilion by the van," Steve shouted and everyone took off, sliding through mountain muddy paths. If Rogers kicked mud at people's shoes on the way down, he was a twenty-something kid, it was to be expected.

Change into what? Could he reach that far back?
The two troublemakers got there first, with Thor and Sam following close behind, other four bringing up the complaining rear and significantly more damp than the first quartet.

Bucky made a face at Nat and she flung her wet bandana at him, then everyone was collapsing on picnic-tables with tired legs, safe under the overhang and watching the rain patter down, plinking off the van's roof twenty feet away.

_Betterbetterbetter_

Rogers was playing with Barnes's hair, careful not to dislodge the flower as he fingerbrushed tangles and squinch-dried the damp tips. Barnes paid him no mind, leaning his metal arm on the table to say something to Sam.

Bright, easy smiles, damp hair curling over Rogers' forehead. Just kids. Both of them were younger than Natasha.

Tony couldn't remember when he'd stopped called Steve grandpa and started calling him kid. Maybe he'd listened to the lighten-up advice after all. Or maybe there really was that deeper side of Rogers that nobody born past 1920 saw.

"You know what I can't figure out?" Tony propped an elbow on his knee, foot on picnic bench, chin in hand as he studied Cap. "How did you turn from _I don't wanna kill anybody_ to the paradigm of goodness and sacrifice?"

_How a life could move from the darkness -_

Steve didn't look up from rebraiding, sighing once. "That part's Bucky's fault too."

"What? No it isn't." Barnes gave him a funny look and Steve dropped his hands, folding tiredly over the table, temple landing on crossed forearms as rainwater dripped off blonde onto wood.

_She said to get better._

"Everyone's got a catalyst, right? Stark, yours was getting kidnapped, Romanoff when Barton made the call not to shoot her, stuff like that. Mine was when Buck fell." Everyone's conversations pattered quiet and muscled shoulders shrugged. "I mean, in the beginning I didn't wanna kill anyone. I'd never been to war. I hadn't...once I became Captain Rogers, the soldier, the military officer? Things changed. I killed who I had to."

A weary smile and long fingers traced something into the wood, head propped on an elbow now. Tony watched Steve's touch and wondered why he'd never noticed how much Rogers did that. That it wasn't boredom, that he was _drawing._

"That's it?" Tony prodded and Steve's shoulders tensed, damp tshirt sticking even tighter. Bucky was silent beside him, pink flower between metal fingers as he twirled it absently and didn't look at anyone. "You just dropped the Batman-no-kill policy and started taking heads?"

"I thought that's what I was meant for." Rogers's voice dropped six levels quieter and Clint shuffled closer to lip-read. "They'd designed me -- the serum. To fight the good fight. I never thought being Captain America would take everythin--"

He stopped abruptly, sucking in a breath.

"You guys don't wanna hear this," Steve huffed dismissively, self-deprecating, and a gentle brown hand landed on his arm, made him lift to look at Sam, eyes searching and guarded, hesitant.
"Steve. We do."

*How could he say out loud...he couldn't talk about himself, not like that.*

...but he could talk about Bucky.

Blue eyes cast away again and Tony hopped over to sit on the bench across from Barnes, still motionless at Steve's side. It took a few moments - rain pattering overhead, debate etched into strong features - then another breath and Steve's started again, hollow.

"...when I lost Bucky, everything changed. There wasn't a "right thing" anymore, it was about good men dying on my watch." Rough hands rubbed blue eyes and Bucky finally unfroze, tipping his shoulder into Steve's.

The touch startled, instantly visibly draining comfort, widening blue eyes, and a goddamned flip switched. Cautiousness to the wind as the breeze carried distant warscreams closer--

"I was s'posed to be makin' a difference, for once, finally, an'I got...caught up. Lost th'only thing that'd stood by my side long before I had strength at'oll.'

Cap stopped, staring straight at Bucky, crystal locked on blue like he couldn't believe Barnes was real and here and--

*Bucky, screaming, falling away from him. Watching as Steve fell too. Then a few nights ago, fingers entwined - it'd be an honor to burn hand in hand - and Buck had given up everything, sacrificed his body to Steve like the holy at an altar and this, Steve could give up this, burn hand in hand. Open the floodgates and* 

*I didn't realize I was broken.*

--the rest of them didn't dare breathe, not when Cap's bottom lip was trembling, hands creaking picnic-table surface. Not when it meant Steve might snap his mouth shut the way he always did. He didn't see them anyways, didn't see much of anything behind blurring eyes.

"I remember, after, s'in this bar tryin' t'get wasted, drinkin' glass after glass that did nothing, cryin' m'eyes out ev'ry ten minutes, bawlin' th'ole night through when Peggy came in...t'interfere, told me Bucky's dea-- Death wasn't m'fault. S'where the catalyst comes in I guess." A forceful half-manic laugh and Barnes cringed, Rogers' voice biting higher and higher. "Y'know what I said? Said, m'not gonna stop 'til all Hydra's killed. And so they didn't lock m'up, tacked on or captured."

A gust of wind-blown rain assaulted the side of the picnic table but the Avengers statues stayed perfectly still, couldn't spook, only movement a metal hand gently covering Steve's shaking one.

*Don't you wanna get better too? PTS--PTSD, that wasn't him. Speak for yourself. But this - identity. Home. Captain fucking America--*

Steve shoved Bucky off with a snap of his wrist, eyes squeezed shut and fingers gripping blonde hair tight, a sudden, shattered gasp through wet, wrecked lungs.

Tony had a brief second to wonder distantly if Steve'd told anyone about the asthma attack he had after Barnes' night terror, then the broken voice came back, riled and wound so tight with emotion it'd snap if one'a them wasn't crushing, aching, heartbreaking defeat.

"The only person who ev'r made me...c-calm was Bucky. Grew up so angry at everything
and...always there to talk me down but then I lost him. I lost'im n'I didn't care 'bout justice, didn' matter anymore 'cause th'arrow...spinnin' line. In my compass was gone. Gone, I crashed the plane into the ocean an'I woke up with nothing and no one."

Bruce took off his glasses to wipe his eyes and even Tony's heart lurched - a little, maybe - as Steve buried his face in his hands. He looked so small and tired, deep breaths expanding out-of-place back muscles, then a metal hand was resting on his spine at a second attempt to soothe.

Stevie, Buck still called him Stevie, but hadn't he died in the crash? Or on the train?

Cap shrugged him off, face turned away as he peeled his hands free and rolled them in the air, voice rocking the precipice of breaking, haunted.

"They showed me pictures, and warbooks, n'files n'films n'fliers n'told me this symbol I'd....the Captain America that went on ice wasn't the one I woke up to; Became so much bigger'n me but there was nothin' I c'do, the shield was the last thread left'a what I knew." Desperate, tumbling, waterfall words, wringing hands - "So I put on their uniform an' fought. Molded into the personality, persona they'd built 'cause I had nothin' else. I have...no other purpose."

Not a perfect soldier, but a good man.

Steve shrugged despairingly, mouth twisted up and face downcast, maybe to hide tears or maybe just to hide.

"My heart didn't matter; that...fell off a train with Bucky Barnes." His voice broke over the last part and Steve bit his trembling lip, wiping haphazardly at his face before shattering an exhale and tipping his head up to stare at the sky, raw, high-pitched tears in barely-audible words, "I didn't think...I'd ever b...b-breathe again."

The edge of falling apart -

Thunder rolled in the distance, three Avengers statutes flinched.

Then Bucky was pulling Steve into his chest, hand cupping his blonde head as Steve gasped wet, blinking rapidly to halt oncoming tears, then Sam's arms were wrapping around both of them.

Barnes squeezed tighter and Thor placed huge hands on Sam and Bucky's backs, head bowed in respect -

Which Clint spoiled instantly, circling Sam and Thor in his arms and closing his eyes as he tipped his head on top of Steve's. Bruce joined carefully, added his comfort beside Thor, and Natasha looked to Tony.

He figured he'd cave first, but then she was pulling a tiny arm around Bucky and wedging the other between bodies to grip Steve's arm tight.

Tony felt like the kid hugging a tree ten times his size, no way arms could reach all the way around, and the internal monologue was running alot about hippie sappy types who shouldn't be relied on to save the world, but he tipped his head against Bruce's and hugged the goddamn pile anyways.

Cap - Steve surrounded on all sides and at least no one was crying, he could do silent reverie and console a teammate.

But here of all places, in a lone pavilion somewhere in the mountains of upstate New York, raining and otherwise unremarkable, why here that he broke?
Tony supposed it didn't matter. This was the easy part anyway. So he told a story at least Barnes probably already knew, one Steve certainly did too.

Didn't change anything.

He'd admitted present tense - I have no other purpose - and it wasn't like hugging it out on a mountainside was gonna fix that.

That was a hellolot to fix. How does one go about reclaiming yourself when you've been the living dead in an entirely different world than your own?

So Cap was lost, and they'd all finally been told, but. How exactly was he gonna get found?

Not to be the devils advocate here, but honestly? Tony wasn't sure it was possible. Wasn't sure there was though left of...whoever Cap used to be, in order to save the man he was now.

Clearly wasn't gonna say that when Rogers was on the verge of crying already, but. The skies weren't exactly shining ahead.

"God, you guys are as bad as the Commandos," Steve muffled, started squirming, made everyone drop their arms and back up a foot. Bucky let go last, placing a chaste kiss to Steve's forehead and no one but Steve heard the vehement, whispered swear, you're not alone. A broken sound and Steve wiped his face haphazardly, squeezing Bucky's shoulder hard and waving his free hand to shoo.

"Everybody in the van. We're going home."

Doors slid open and people piled inside, engine rumbling to a start and Tony looked out the window, caught a flash of crumbled, flattened pink torn on the concrete floor under the picnic table, flower fading to a speck of nothing as the van rolled away.

Steve was curled against Bucky's chest, fist tucked against his squished cheek, eyelashes draped beautifully over his cheeks as he breathed, slow, in and out. The metal arm was hooked around Steve's shoulders and Sam's head was upside-down asleep on Bucky's other bicep, curled away from them with his legs tucked against Thor's. Thor had one arm thrown out like Bucky's, and Nat's ankles were curled over it, her head resting on Clint's stomach.

Clint snored, but Tony had soft Poison drifting over the speakers as he drove, so he didn't mind. Bruce was knocked out against the shotgun window, glasses crooked and curls squished on one side of his face, mouth parted as he breathed slowly, fogging and unfogging a spot on the window.

Tony knew Bucky was awake, staring up at the metal ceiling, but neither of them said a word to each other as the night slipped by the van in a blur of overhead lights and sleepy sounds.

They didn't need to.

~*~*~

They'd barely stepped into the Tower lobby, bags thrown over shoulders and sleepy-eyed and
messy-haired, when a team of smartly-dressed agents lit on them, herding everybody into the elevator with tutting noises.

Commotion and raised voices, bustled into this room with bags on hangers on the walls and mirrors and vanities and Steve was so goddamned confused--

"What's going on?" Bucky finally shouted over the noise, aimed in the direction of Pepper Potts, who'd just swept into the room in a beautiful blue gown. She held up a finger in Bucky's direction, making worried noises as she slid a comb through Tony's hair, threw a tie at his chest and started distributing the bags from the walls.

"I've got two hundred people here and most of them have their checkbooks with them so please do behave all of you." She thanked Thor for coming and Steve blinked a few times, forgetting Thor was even with them before taking the bag shoved at him, unzipping it to reveal a suit.

"This party's gonna be a mess," Natasha commented, slipping a second earring into her ear - somehow already in an evening gown to match Pepper's?

"The hell are you having a party for?" Bucky demanded, hopping on one foot to wrestle off his boots in exchange for dress shoes.

Everyone listened to Pepper, the one standing house-rule.

"It was Tony's birthday yesterday," Pepper supplied quickly, straightening Bruce's bowtie and tsking at Clint's shoe-choice.

"It was--" Bruce started confusedly, and Steve interrupted him, looking up from buttoning his shirt to stare at Tony in the mirror.

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"We were all having a good time." Tony shrugged, meeting Steve's eyes in the reflection and clipping on his cufflinks.

"You're a lot better person than you let on, Stark," Bucky accused, pulling his hair on top of his head in a quick, sleek ponytail.

"And so are you Barnes," Tony shot back, waving a vague-disapproving hand at Thor's hair and making him frown, duck his head to look back in the mirror. Then he was started for the door, straightening his bowtie, immaculate like he hadn't just driven the state of New York after running through pouring rain. "You two coming? I believe this is your debut Stark party, right? Pepper, find some of Thor's Asgardian mead. They're gonna need it."

Nat shot a wicked smile and stalked out after Tony in clicking heels. Clint clapped them both on the shoulder as he passed, then Thor was discussing drinks very seriously with Pepper and Bruce gave them a good-luck nod.

Bucky and Steve stared at each other wide-eyed for a moment, then Pepper was pushing them out the door too and it was all he could do not to take the metal hand in his.

The tie wasn't suffocating, the suit wasn't itchy, it just felt...normal. Almost more comfortable than his uniform, because these were clothes he was used to, didn't fit so tight he could barely breathe sometimes, just sleek line edges and sharp clicking heels--
Not to mention that Bucky looked so gorgeous it'd be entirely worth it if he had to come to this thing naked.

They skirted the edges of the party, mulling and avoiding while hopefully not revealing they were doing just that. At one point Bucky skipped out to get drinks and Sam tugged Steve away for a game of billiards.

When Buck came back, Sam and Steve teemed up and he still wiped the felt with 'em, game unprecedented as it'd been back in the day.

Sam tipped his head back with a groan as Bucky sank the eight-ball for the third time that night, then sticks were being tossed down and everyone started for the stairs. Or more accurately, the bar upstairs.

It was weird, everyone was walking fragile around Steve now, had this whole party. Part of him was relieved, even if the past five hours felt...chimerical.

As the world's leading authority on hiding feelings, he'd known he was lying to himself about Captain America since the day they'd shoved him out on stage in a colorful suit. But saying that to them, his team?

He didn't think he'd have the guts, ever. But Bucky'd just looked at him, beautiful and supportive and alive. He was alive and Steve owed him this, in the least. Steve owed him everything.

"So, Steve," Sam started, climbing the stairs between Steve and Bucky, "Heard something about you considering a place in Brooklyn?"

Steve shot Bucky a look and he just shrugged. A sigh, slowing to a stop at the railing up top, looking out over the party as Sam settled next to him.

"I'm not sure I can afford a place in Brooklyn."

Sam looked about as convinced with his avoidance tactic as Bucky'd been. He didn't call him on it, neither of them had, but he did shrug, looking wistfully out at the party below.

"Well home is home, you know?"

"That's what I said," Bucky interjected, leaning an elbow on the rail and tipping outwards to catch Steve's eye. Steve considered them both before shrugging, watching the people mulling below. The people who all looked up and thought there's Captain America.

Brooklyn. Right.

"If Bucky wants to," Steve finally offered, to which Sam's eyebrows went up and so did Bucky's gloves.

"Woah-ho-ho, hey now, this is a two way street." Bucky lowered his gaze with that reasonable-rational look and Steve forced himself not to glare, because Bucky's logic had never been logic he appreciated at all.

"I'm allowed to let my boyfriend chose some things," Steve gave Bucky a defiant look and Sam took three steps backwards, excusing himself to go get drinks and spinning around with something about fighting supersoldiers.

"Shhh, keep your voice down," Bucky hissed, ignoring Sam's comment and very poignantly not
closing the space between them.

So Steve did, sliding closer with a curious tilt of his head, pushing Brooklyn to the back of his mind in favor of running a hand up Bucky's arm, swatted before he could so much as make it to his elbow.

"What, you ashamed to be my boyfriend? I think we make quite the power couple," he teased and Bucky bit back some remark, hesitating a second before leaning closer, dropping his voice and softening his eyes as he gave Steve a little regretful smile.

"We've got too much to risk right now. People aren't gonna take us seriously if we're boyfriends."

"You're worried about the public?"

"It's part of your image. And it's not because it's me, but name one couple you've ever taken seriously when they're boyfriend status."

Steve chewed his lip, thinking it over before finally relenting, half-smile and a little shrug of agreement. Bucky cocked his head pointedly, placing both forearms on the banister beside Steve, nudging shoulders comfortably when Steve'd kill to touch Bucky for real right now.

Boyfriends. Saying it out loud had a rush the first couple'a times, but. It just didn't carry the weight of their relationship.

He glanced at Bucky in his peripherals, sketching the beautiful profile and thinking the word over. Maybe they should change it, was all.

The party didn't last much longer, everyone was too exhausted from the trip. Tony shooed the public out pretty quick, but at least he kept up the reputation of the annual Stark-birthday-party, even if nothing exploded at this one.

Although cleaning up after, it sure felt like something did.

By the time the tower was presentable and they all retreated to their rooms with a birthday-kiss on each of Tony's cheeks - he'd protested loudly that troublemaker kids shouldn't tag-team kiss people or they'd be dishing heartattacks - Steve was about ready to curl up on the floor.

"Mm, I'm exhausted," Bucky murmured, crashing stomach-first onto Steve's bed dramatically, jacket draped over the chair and loosened tie on the floor. He toed off his shoes and Steve sunk in the mattress beside him, carding a hand down Bucky's spine and pressing a soft kiss to his bicep.

"Too exhausted for a night of it?" Steve teased, pushing Bucky's long hair aside to lift up and feather kisses on the exposed back of his neck. A tiny noise, shiver, and Bucky's toes curled in his socks.

"The way you rock those hips? Hell yes." A fond smile over his shoulder then Steve was rolling him over, palms tracing reverent lines down sides as plush lips eased together. Bucky's eyes slipped closed and he rolled his spine, arching up into the kiss with a sleepy stretch and Steve hummed into his mouth, thumbs rubbing little circles into Bucky's hips.

He could fall asleep like this, Steve half-draped over him and tugging their mouths together contentedly. It was warm and safe and comfy, then Steve slowly undid the buttons on his collared shirt, pushing it off Bucky's shoulders and starting in on the belt next.

Steve kept kissing him softly, sweetly, stripping them all the way down to their boxers, then he was
really quite comfortable and in complete risk of falling asleep making-out. A kiss to his throat and Bucky keened, rolling his hips up against Steve's, stimulating sparks up his stomach and spinning his head.

"I love you," Steve whispered, eyes locked on Bucky's, nothing but Steve's face hovering above them and the ceiling spun out, the flicker of a tent, a cracked one from Brooklyn, Central Park's starlit sky, swinging back around to their room in the tower and Bucky ran his hands up Steve's chest, palms smoothing over tensed muscles.

"I'll never forget you," he promised, gravel in his voice as he tipped his chin up, bottom lip catching in his teeth as he beckoned Steve back down. He kept hovering though, eyebrows furrowed and little frown on his pretty lips.

"That's not the same thing," Steve started and Bucky hummed, lifting his head and pulling Steve's down at the same time, mashing their mouths together and pressing his body harder to Steve's. Shoving hands between them to drag rough thumbs over Steve's nipples, a gasping pant as the gorgeous mouth broke away, outline of his erection rubbing up against Bucky and oh, s-see, that was so much better than talking.

But, as always, Steve found some loophole, sliding their crotches together as he pressed his mouth to Bucky's ear, words less breathy than they'd should've been, considering circumstances.

"Buck, you still haven't said--" he started again and Bucky knew exactly where that was going. So he took the easy way out, slid his hands down the back of Steve's boxers and cupped that beautiful, smooth ass in his hands, breathing against Steve's neck, "Screw exhaustion. I want you." A moment's consideration and Steve hovered again, dropping the iloveyou conversation as he somehow stilled his hips.

"You sure?" he asked, all the right kinds of breathless now, and Bucky squeezed, kneading Steve's pretty ass in his hands and making him whimper in his throat.

"Real sure," he assured, wiggling down the hem of Steve's boxers and pressing his open mouth to the sensitive skin under his ear, "Make love to me, my angel."

"Don't just feel obligated?" Steve pressed one more time, but his hips were rolling again so Bucky was pretty sure he had him convinced.

"Me? Feel obligated to do something for you? Have we met?"

Steve was smiling as he tugged Bucky's boxers down with his teeth, then Bucky was laughing all the way through Steve's fingers and the pattering of kisses on his inner thighs, let Steve lick it out of his mouth as he rocked into his body.

And really, it wasn't so hard, pushing it all to the back of his mind when Steve took him like this. In fact, it was the easiest thing in the world.

~*~*~

Since the time he was a kid, there were moments - everything from quick flashes of smiles to entire nights - that the second they happened, he knew he'd remember them for the rest of his life.

Waking up this morning was one.

Apparently they had longer to go before he woke to a sleepy, cross Bucky on the other side of his
pillow because Buck wasn't even in bed when Steve woke up sometime in late afternoon. To be fair, they'd been up until nine o'clock this morning, because not-exhausted turned into do-me-one-more-time to jesus-christ-you're-beautiful-fucked-out-let-me-ride-you-for-an-hour to kiss-me-again- i'll-fuck-you-into-the-floor to I-bet-you-don't-have-it-in-you-for-another to...Steve kinda lost track after that.

Blinking groggily into the filter of late afternoon sun, the first thing he registered was miles of rucked up sheets, then the work of art propped in the windowsill.

The sun was shining behind his hair, making dark-brown look dark-gold, shadows over a muscled, bare chest. The way Bucky was sitting the metal arm was to the window; it simply looked like his best friend from the war, a sketchbook propped against lifted knees, bare toes flexed against the opposite end of the windowsill.

He was in nothing but Steve's underwear, a black pair with a red-white-and-blue band across the top, hair rucked up and unbrushed from a whole night of it, crystal eyes dark blue in the shadows, lips still puffy from how much Steve'd bitten them. And there were the bitemarks too, dark red crevices on the muscle between his shoulder and neck, a glimpse of the ones on the inside of his thighs, marks from Steve and Steve alone.

His right hand moved swiftly, easily over paper, glancing out the window every so often, pencil held careful like something precious, nothing like the bruising way he'd clung to Steve last night.

If Steve painted every day for the rest of his life, he'd never capture how beautiful Bucky Barnes was, never in another seventy years.

"I love you," Steve whispered, reverent, and Bucky's head lifted, pencil eraser tapping his sketchbook as his hand went lax, head turned an inch.

"Goodmorning to you too." Bucky's mouth curved up in a little one-sided smile and Steve bit his lip to keep from crying or something equally stupid. It was just...a lot of emotions.

"Come back to bed," he whispered instead, reaching a hand across the space between them. Bucky's smile didn't falter, but his eyes flickered, once, and gone.

"I'm good." Bucky picked up his pencil again and Steve's fingers curled into the sheets.

"Aw, Buck, m'cold." Steve scooted a fraction closer, sheets whispering and tugging around his bare skin.

"You've had colder," Bucky offered, off-hand and neutral, glancing out the window and sketching a swoop over his page.

(He used to stare out windows and long to jump. Before that he used to stare out windows and see the endless infatuating outside world to explore. Even staring out the windowpane wishing he were dead made him feel alive. Now staring out the window he didn't feel much of anything at all.

What was he now. Content or docile?)

Some part of Steve had always seen this coming. Bucky was ethereal, something surreally beautiful and perfect and human - moreso than Steve, even after the Winter Soldier, because he'd died by his own choice, brought himself back to life by his own choice, and Steve'd always been shoved into things like the pawn he was.

Bucky Barnes was beautiful, and Steve knew he had pulchritude too, but nothing that ran that deep.
Nothing like that work of art, the complexity and loyalty and darkness he'd thrown himself in and pulled himself out of.

Bucky was never really his to keep, was he?

Some part of him'd always seen this coming. Bucky, giving him nights and not mornings, days and not nights, giving him pieces and allowing him glimpses but never really his, never Steve's for the taking, always something he got to borrow, fall deeper in love with, and have to watch walk away from him.

You can't hold the ocean waves in your hands, they're always going back out to sea.

"You alright?" Steve murmured, soft, careful. He could try. His hands were slippery and he felt like he could never hold onto Bucky tight enough to keep him from disappearing, but he could try.

Expanding chest, pause, a heavy rush of air in something like a sigh.

"What brought this on?" Steve pushed up on an elbow, running a hand through his fucked-up hair and Bucky sat down his pencil, putting both it and his sketchbook on the windowsill, bare skin and strong legs as he crawled back into bed.


"No, Bucky, I need you to talk to me."

No frustrated noise, no searching eyes; just collapsed onto the pillow beside Steve, one hand on his sternum and head turned, hair splayed out around him while Steve hovered on an elbow. Until Bucky dragged him down with a metal hand on familiar bruises.

"What would you think if I got a tattoo?" Bucky kissed into the side of his neck and Steve rubbed his thumbs over Bucky's ribs.

"A tattoo, hm?" Steve lifted up, pressing a kiss to Bucky's dimpled chin, making him cross his eyes, then two graphite-smudged fingers were tapping his chest.

"Your name over my heart."

It meant something, Bucky saying that, but Steve didn't know enough to decipher it. So he dipped down, kissed the spot, lifted back up and entangled their hands together on the pillow, fingers locked.

"Why, you planning on forgetting it again?"

Clearly teasing, it was a joke, but Bucky's eyes darkened, not in the good way.

"No." He shook his head, squeezing Steve's hands and rippling his entire arm in a loud whir, "No, never. Don't joke about that."

Steve searched the gaze, fumbling one step closer to wherever Bucky's headspace was right now, wishing he could talk straight like a normal person, wishing either of them could talk in anything but poems and silence and grasping hands.

He let go of Bucky's grip, having to shake the left to get free, sheets unsettling around them as he sat up, crossed his legs Indian style and gestured at the art supplies on the bookshelf.
"Get me a Sharpie." Bucky looked at him confusedly and Steve shoved his hip, gesturing again. "Go on."

When he sat back down, cross-legged too, Steve took his wrist and braced it on his knee, sunlight filtering veins stark blue against the black ink. He traced a careful, steady line all the way around Bucky's wrist, completing the circle with a dash, an ink bracelet to match the one he'd traced in water a few days ago.

Bucky was staring at the mark - an endless line, the beginning marks the end - and Steve pressed a kiss into his palm, holding warm, human fingers to his lips until Bucky's eyes lifted to his.

"That's the only thing you ever need to remember," Steve swore, quiet, and Bucky's eyes were watering. Steve kissed his fingers, every one of them, waiting for the ink to dry before he pressed his lips to the line around Buck's wrist too, mouth against skin as he promised, again, "I love you."

Bucky swallowed, eyes cutting away for a moment before he leaned forward, mouth brushing Steve's, waiting for him to press harder, more, something. Steve didn't, he kissed a tender line to Bucky's scarred shoulder and murmured against metal,

"What were you upset about?" Silence, stiffening that almost snagged Steve's lips between shifting plates. He lifted, kissing Bucky's cheekbone, the corner of his eye, gathering the metal hand too and squeezing them both between their bare chests. "C'mon."

Bucky's face turned away and Steve caught his jaw, brought him back and forced the crystal eyes on his, steady breaths through his nose to block the sound of his heart breaking.

"Talk to me," Steve pleaded, pretending it wasn't destroying him every moment Bucky stayed quiet.

Один-два-три-четыре-пять-шесть-семь--

"I sleep with you, I take care of you." Broken ice-gems, soft dove mouth twisted down in confusion and hurt as Bucky pleaded right back, "What more do you want from me?"

The question took him by surprise. It wasn't something Steve'd ever considered, that he was looking for more from Bucky. But the retracted shoulders, burdened gaze, the way he kept turning away. He did want more.

Steve furrowed his eyebrows, looking down at their hands, body shrunk half its size, background flickering. Sketchpad in shaking, small fingers, looking across a dirty apartment at the beautiful boy draped sleeping on their ratty couch. Hiding a cough in the corner of his elbow and wishing that were the reason his eyes were watering.

The one thing he'd always wanted. Wanted too much, that he'd never imagined asking for, the susurrate on repeat in his head, deepest tug from his soul - voice dropping quiet now, words he'd held inside him when there was nothing else, when he had nothing else.

Words he'd never imagined saying aloud.

"I want you to love me." His shoulders shrugged up by his ears, watching Bucky's stomach expand and contract as he breathed. Was that really so bad to want?

There were other things to drown in, besides water and ice. He'd drowned in this boy, he'd drowned in the weight of the past and the weight of a uniform.

And now he was drowning in silence, waiting.
"You know, Steve..." started so quiet, cautious, careful. “In the movies...books, stories. They always forget. Forgive, overcome, succeed. Someone doesn't believe in love until they find it and boom unexplainable magic.” Buck’s fingers slipped free, stroked up the tops of Steve's thighs, rucking the sheet covering his lap, warm and cold against his skin, the way Bucky was inside too. "Is that real? Do any of those stories feel real to you?"

"It can be real," Steve whispered, watching Bucky's hands stroke down to his knees, back up to his hips again. "It's about trust. Letting go."

"It's too dangerous." Gently, the way you remind a child, no, that's tomorrow. Or Never, maybe it was Never.

He caught Bucky's hands on an upstroke, finally lifting his eyes to meet the crystal ones trying to search his face. A veil of beautiful hair curving over his forehead, framing his jaw, the fallen angel sitting on his bed who kept shying from Steve's reaching touch but dragging him down with warm arms of his own.

"We can't get much deeper into this, Buck. Remember?" Steve pleaded, the only thing he'd ever wanted, remember, don't forget me, not again, “...burning hand in hand? I'm right. here. with you."

"I can't-- I don't see it, Steve, how all those stories switch from caution and logic to suddenly letting go in this overwhelming emotion-- it's not safe. It makes no sense. That sudden spark that turns the coin...it doesn't exist."

Steve just looked at him. Bucky looked away and muttered to himself again, "It doesn't exist."

There was one thing about Bucky that'd taken Steve a very long time to figure out, but it changed the whole game when he did. If he was cornered, Bucky said all sorts of things he didn't believe. He'd convince himself of something, ignore his own head, and outright lie to himself, lie to Steve--

He'd prove Bucky wrong. This was real, and it was something they could have. Deep down, Steve'd bet anything Bucky wanted to believe in love desperately with every ounce of his being. But Bucky wouldn't say he wanted to spend eternity with Steve. Scared.

Steve could protect him from the dangers. It was his turn; and Steve had his six.

A sigh, deflating. Steve looked up under his lashes at the silent, still, skeleton boy, offering Bucky a little smile and a quiet, "Can I make you breakfast?"

"You can make love to me," Bucky whispered, then two hands were pressing him back down into the mattress and Steve went easy, let the weight crush them both, and saved Bucky the only way Bucky'd allow.

Held on tight enough to keep him from disappearing, fading ghost.

Clung and dug fingers into flesh, holding tighter tighter, taking back every time hands'd slipped, forcing those memories away with a castle of new ones.

Drowning in the boy in his arms, gasping for air to keep afloat--

And Steve couldn't tell anymore, who was holding who.
It was pitch-black outside when he woke. There was a strand of hair in his face he highly considered sheering off with the knife on the nightstand, but he was supposed to be getting better.

Bucky rolled over, wincing, stared up at the ceiling and distantly noticing the bed was empty. He *was* getting better, he supposed. He honestly didn't feel like jumping out the window. He didn't even feel like running. Or fighting, or killing, or doing anything but kissing Steve.

That was progress, in some way, twisted or not.

Rogers was a drug, a very beautiful addictive drug that made him so present in his head. Spun time into some abstract concept, let him look up from the sheets at that beautiful face and picture himself in 1944 and everything was okay, they were both okay.

Not that they weren't okay here. Steve was okay, asking for impossible things but Steve was getting better too.

So then why the hell was he outta bed?

Bucky rolled off the side, planting careful, silent feet on the ground and padding for the door. Immediate hallway, empty. He didn't have to try to be quiet, it came like breathing, hugging the shadows and easing around their floor of the Stark tower, searching.

He finally found in the study, which neither of them spent much time in at all, a computer lit up devastatingly bright, Steve's mouth twisted contemplatively as he looked at the screen.

It was like 3am, what the hell did Wikipedia have to say that was so important?

"Hey," Bucky ventured, biting down the smug smile as Steve jumped a foot in the air. He recovered impressively quick, waving Bucky closer to look at the screen over his worn-tshirt shoulder.

"What do you think of this one? I know we don't need three bedrooms, but I figured we could turn one into a guest, the other an art studio. The windows look over the harbor...but, I mean, if you didn't want a studio, that's fine."

"A studio's great," Bucky peered a little closer, one hand on the back of Steve's chair and the other on the desk. "But you're sure you wanna--"

"We need to do this," Steve interrupted, glancing up to meet Bucky's eyes in the foreign blue light of the computer screen.

They studied each other for a moment, Brooklyn apartment pulled up on the screen beside lit faces. If this was what Steve wanted. Or needed. In Bucky's opinion, it was exactly the step forward at this point, the catalyst to healing, to *better*.

"Alright," he finally agreed, looking back at the screen. "Let's make an offer on it."

Steve leaned over, pecking Bucky's cheek. He swatted him off, making a motion to scoot because honestly, Steve was shit with finances and Bucky'd gotten all their apartments before, it only seemed rational he do the transaction for this one too.

"Jesus Christ, Steve, you weren't kidding about not being able to afford this."
Steve laughed brightly, wrapping his arms around Bucky's torso and running affectionate fingers over the lines of his bare stomach.

"Sure we can. Seventy years is a lot of pension."

"You're...a lot of pension," Bucky muttered lamely, pressing a hard kiss to Steve's bicep and turning back to the computer, humming something under his breath as he navigated the page.

Steve smiled into his sleep-warm skin because he knew exactly what Bucky was humming and yes, finally. *Til Then.*

When I will hold you again...

But he got to hold Buck *now.* That was the present, he had that life, and he couldn't imagine it being any better.

Bucky was all he'd ever need.

It kinda hit him like a lightbulb going off, 3am with Bucky squeezed into his chair and elbow bumping Steve's arm as he slid over the keypad and--

Bucky was all he'd ever need.

Of course.

~*~*~

"Fancy seeing you here Cap-- Steve."

Tony lifted the red soldering goggles from his face and Steve mumbled hello on his way to the closest holographic lab table, tapping the center with his palm and lifting up.

The schematics for some fancy metallic gear system popped up and Tony stood from his rolling chair, making his way to the other side of the table and swiping the holograph aside, pulling up the main frame database with a curious look at Steve.

"What're you looking for?"

"I need the dimensions of Bucky's arm."

Both eyebrows raised and Tony stroked a hand over his beard-goatee. "There a particular reason why..."

It wasn't hard to see the gutter-thoughts Tony was implying and Steve shot him a mild glare to hide the way his hands were clasped, cold and clammy.

Stark pulled up the holograph, plates separating automatically to reveal the complex interior wiring and Steve signaled his hands to slide the pieces back, compress the arm into the visual he was used to.

He'd like to be able to do this on his own, get the numbers he needed without Tony's help, but the holographic metal hand was being difficult.

A noise of frustration and Steve finally caved, spinning the arm towards Tony and crossing his over
his chest.
"I need the diameter," he sighed and Stark gave him this unreadable look.
"Of which part?"
"Fingers."
"You knitting gloves?" Mostly sarcasm as Tony twisted something, pulled up an array of floating white numbers. "All of 'em?"
"Just the fourth," Steve replied, voice carefully cautiously neutral. Tony nodded distractedly, swiping aside all the numbers but one, expanding bigger.
"Measurement for left hand ring finger," Tony announced, and the air of the lab actually went stale as Tony froze, staring at nothing for a few seconds before his eyes lifted slowly to Steve's.
"Are you..." he trailed off, throat dry, and Steve spun the hologram back towards him, tracing a circle around the fourth metal extension.

Stark was smart, it'd be useless to pretend Steve didn't know that he knew. So he met Tony's eyes instead, tapping the white dimensions to the side, little hopeful smile on his face that he almost didn't dare, but. This was Tony. Steve knew by now he could be trusted.

Besides, there wasn't much else he could be doing with that dimension, and the more personal he could make this, the better chance Bucky'd say yes.

So he sucked in a breath, steeled himself, and asked the question he'd never imagined he'd have the chance.

"What do you know about making rings?"

Chapter End Notes

✩

I Wanna Get Better - The Bleachers (the car-singing song) (sing it in your car, do it, you'll be on top of the world promise)

This kinda just fits the whole first half, Geronimo by Sheppard

And Tony's Poison songs for the car-ride home, in case you feel like being melancholy.

Thank you so much to everyone who's left me beautiful comments and kudos - this chapter was purely self-indulgent in the name of oncoming onslaught (jeez so few chapters left) and it's an odd stand-alone but you'll thank me for it one day, maybe.

Also I'm so sorry this took almost a month; I got ridiculously sick and was bedridden in the not-fun way (then ao3 ate 16k of this last night) but hopefully the next won't take as long? But there is a shit-ton of stuff going down in the next chapter like lord almighty

Love to each and every one of you xx
He woke to a scream.
For the first time since war 1945, it wasn't his own.

Steve half-expected Bucky to shove him outta bed. The other half expected an impenetrable curled ball, barking words to leave Bucky the fuck alone.

Knives to the heart if they weren't to the head.

But no matter, no matter how many weapons Bucky'd thrown, no matter how many times he'd snapped to leave--

That part of Steve was hoping, begging, waiting - the day Bucky decided fuck it and burrowed into Steve's chest. Let Steve hold him.

One day, someday. Steve was waiting.

That day wasn't today.

Bucky screamed and shot up, puppet yanked so hard a string frayed, wood splintered. Steve snapped up, already reaching pleading hands for his sweet boy to calm--

Then there was cold metal pressed dead-center to Steve's forehead. Metal, registering human-equivalent. Metal, he usually knew.

It wasn't Bucky's hand. It was the muzzle of a gun.

A hitch of oxygen--

"Hey, hey, baby, it's me," Steve soothed instantly, holding his breath against the exploding heart in his chest, armystrength to keep his hands complacent and raised at his sides instead of yanking the cocked and loaded firearm away from his brains. Every instinct in his body was screaming, muscles trembling, pulse thudding, eyelashes watering, danger.

Bucky's eyes were wild. Flashing in the darkness of Steve's room, where they'd both been tangled up in boxers seconds ago.

The gun wasn't moving. Bucky wasn't moving. But he wasn't pulling the trigger either.

"Buck? It's Stevie," he tried, quiet, stripping gravel from his voice and throat-shredding against a thousand rocks. The little kid you used to know.


Recognition.

Horror.

“Bu--” he started again, but it was too late, the gun was shattering in a metal fist, pieces snapping and crumbling and hurled, denting the wall. Steve reached, still too late, Bucky slid backwards off the bed with a hand over his mouth, then scrambling feet were skidding over carpet, rounding the corner of the bed, nearly pulling the door off its hinges and Steve was barely three feet behind him, socks slipping on wooden hallways, shouting something stopwaititisokay, another yanked-open door.

He made it into the bathroom as Bucky's knees hit tile, dropping behind him to smooth hands over beautiful long hair and fold it into a ponytail, force his hands not to shake. Bucky's spine went rigid, eyes squeezed shut, coughing up last night's dinner and Steve kept his hair pinned back, from crouch to sitting as Bucky hurled again.
Pressed his forehead against the heated skin on Bucky's back, stroking his free hand up and down trembling, taut muscle.

"It's okay," Steve promised, and maybe this was why Buck hesitated to share beds. Steve didn't wake from nightmares with a gun in his hands. He wasn't sure he could handle that. "You're alright, Buck."

"Nightmares happen. You didn't hurt me." He circled a hand to Bucky's forehead, checked for a fever and he was warm, but no more so than everywhere else. Stroked down, temple to the corner of Bucky's shut eyes, pulling away with salty tears on his fingertips. Steve closed his eyes too, willed himself to make sure only one of them cried. Kept lamenting they were fine, they were completely fine and they always would be. "You're alright. Everything’s alright."

"D-don't."

"Hey, no, we knew--"

"What, we knew what?" Bucky spun on a heel, tripped over Steve's ankle, and promptly landed on his ass, wiping the back of his hand over his mouth with a bitter groan.

"Are you--"

"If you ask me if I'm okay, I'm gonna shove you outta that door and you will be sleeping alone for a week."

It was weak. A hollow threat and it shouldn't mean anything, but...nightmares. Maybe those were getting worse or maybe he was so wrapped up in post-screaming comfort Bucky offered him and he couldn't return that the idea of crying himself to sleep alone was more horrifying than it should've been.

"You don't have to be a dick, Bucky, I'm not going anywhere--"

"Why? And don't say it's because you love me," he spat, like an offense, and Steve's lungs closed stubbornly inside his chest. "--because this goes beyond that, this is just dangerous. Why the fuck didn't you tackle me? Break my fucking arm? Something! Anything, Steve, I can't have you sitting there when you've got a fucking muzzle to your forehead! Do you have any idea what that's like to gain consciousness to??"

Steve crossed his arms over his chest, wishing that'd inflate his asthmatic respiratory system but he refused to freak over the lack of oxygen now, couldn't let Bucky turn this on him by sinking into an asthma attack, glaring from his own spot on the floor and what a pair they made--

The angry-born kid who let the light in and pumped himself into a hero;
The angel-born devil who shattered his halo and swallowed the darkness to protect his boy.

But Steve didn't need protection. Not from himself and not from Bucky. He trusted Bucky not to hurt him, he trusted Bucky to remember, to always snap out of it. He was giving this his all and that's the part Bucky didn't get. Steve wasn't bailing, ever.

"I'm not letting you run from me," Steve shot back, lifting his chin stubbornly. "You've got my everythi--"

"You can't throw yourself into this," Bucky rasped, struggling to his feet, flushing with one hand and turning on the sink with the other. A violent splash that sent as much water onto the counter as it did onto Bucky's face and his legs were shaking.
Beautiful killer thighs broken down, muscles convulsing--

Steve stood slowly, picked his way over to the trembling, angry, scared, precious--

"You'll lose everything." Bucky spat, slamming off the water, head hanging between his shoulders, fists tight, muscles tensing under Steve's wide palms.

"I'll lose it to you." Smoothing his touch around to Bucky's chest, over pounding wild beating, soft as fallen snow, "I want you to have my heart."

There were ghosts inside the crystal eyes that shot to his in the mirror. Locked gazes and Steve swallowed, a flicker of fear at the haunted figures.

"Don't put that in my hands." Seething. Blood dripping between fingers, souls staring into twin abyss.

"I'll shatter it one morning at 3am and what'll be left of you then, huh?" Angry-beautiful spun around and like this, flat-footed against the counter, Bucky was his height, same wide shoulders and same packed muscle, two fighters head to head at a match. Like this, darkness around them and lingering adrenaline and haunted, cutting gazes - like this, early morning, they were a mess, everything was darker and scarier and it was war all over again, back in the trenches and fires and explosions, inside demon's minds and they'd never come back from that--

"You're going into this with fists raised but this isn't a fight you can win, Rogers."

The only thing missing was red candlelight, the flicker of fire in Bucky's eyes, but if he looked deep enough there were flames anyways.

For most his life, it'd been fights he couldn't win. Wake up. Never stopped him before. Pull me out. Swallow.

"Then you'll pick me up when I fall down." Steve painted Bucky's cheekbone with his fingertips and the burning crystal cut away, face turning, jaw clicking, eyes falling shut like it hurt to look, always falling.

"Not this time." Drained. Not sleepless, but void. "Not this fight. I can't come in swinging to save you anymore. Not when I'm blinded, not when it may be you I'm. H-hitting instead." A hitch, betrayal of emotion and a hand shot over his mouth again, like he wanted to hurl again at the thought and the remnant pieces of Steve's heart shattered deeper.

"Baby. I'm okay."

"Please, just." A single headshake, fists tight at sides and Steve shifted, sliding his hands over Bucky's bare skin, wishing he could force him to understand from touch. If it took bruises, blood, bones, to make him see, Steve'd carve the star out his chest and lace it to Bucky's feet.

"Just what?"

"Promise me--"

"Not that." Steve flatlined and Bucky's sneer sharpened dangerously.

"You don't even know--"

"I do, and I won't promise you that. Come back to bed."
Bucky's eyes were still closed when Steve lead him away from the counter, swallowing tightly as he guided warm shoulders carefully through the doorway. Bucky didn't open his eyes once, not when Steve laid him back down, kissed his eyelids. Rolled him over and kissed his spine.

Neither of them slept again, but Bucky pushed Steve off halfway through kissing every-inch of scarred shoulderblades, metal arm tucked behind his back and right palm flat on Steve's skin in the darkness - arm's length, humanfingers curled over his pumping heart - and Steve pretended not to taste cold salt dripping down the pillow.

~*~*~

"You talk to Steve about it?"

Bucky snorted, flicking the robot buzzing around his elbow and wondering who the hell Stark thought they were talking about. Because Steve, talk? The robot tapped his star with its claw-thing and Bucky sighed, relenting the attention and turning back to Tony. "No."

"Have you guys even stopped and talked about everything? I mean. From what I've gathered, you refused to talk forever and Steve rolled with it. Until that fight where you ran to Sam's--" Bucky remembered that fight, remembered shouting you let me fall because it was the only thing to shut Steve up. And it'd been true in a way. Funny Tony remembered it though.

"--then you went roadtripping to cover up everything, then it piled up too much and you almost offed yourself."

Yeah, he remembered that too.

Bucky shrugged, poking the robot back so he didn't have to look at Tony's expectant gaze over the safety glasses.

"We talked a little after that. Well, Steve shouted and I listened." That, that'd been alotta information. That'd changed the whole game. Finding out Steve'd crashed the plane on purpose--

"Okay." Tony tightened a wrench and something shot sparks that didn't seem to bother him. "And then you guys kissed and the lack-of-talking meant you didn't even know why for like a month, then Steve blew up and said he loved you."

Either Stark had a really good memory or Jarvis was recording things, Bucky wasn't sure which was more unsettling.

"We talked a little after that too."

"And then you slept together, so. All conflicts resolved?" Stark looked up just in time to see the amused, incredulous look over Bucky's face.

"Yeah, no."

"Are there things you guys haven't talked about?"

"...yeah."

"Then maybe you should sit down and have a catharsis." Tony tapped his temple with a wrench, eyebrows lifted in that you-know-i'm-right look he got way too often and Bucky impatiently shoved the robot off his arm again.
"You make it sound easy, Stark." Bucky hopped down off his designated lab table (well, it wasn't his, just his perching spot) and made his way over to Tony's. "But anyways, enough relationship drama--" of all people, why would Tony be an expert on Steve's motives as of late? "--what did you actually call me in here for?"

"Jarvis, pull up the specs - I'll go drag that prototype outta the closet. Although, really, maybe we should make the one with the metal arm do all the heavy lifting?"

"Steve! Stevie, look what Stark got me! Do you recognize it?"

Steve rolled his lips in, hiding the grin as Bucky practically dragged him over, gesturing with the same expression he'd worn the first time they'd been standing in front'a that same invention.

"Do I recognize it? Course I do. From the last time I--" Steve snapped shut on the words saw you. The beginning of the end. Never bring up. "--the day you shipped out," he corrected.

"Mnhmm," Bucky agreed distractedly, metal fingers tapping shiny-red. "Apparently Tony took my ridicule to heart, because he dug up Howard's old blueprints and found a half-functioning prototype. It's about as well off as the one we saw that night, but I'm gonna fix it." Bucky's eyes were sparkling near as bright as the hover-car, glancing back up in disbelief. "I'm gonna fix it. Can you believe it?"

Something in his chest tightened - that night, standing at Bucky's side at the Queen's ScienceExpo, the joy smile the moment Stark walked on stage, bouncing on his toes in excitement. And this was where they'd come, this was where they stood so many years later, Bucky's hands fixing the broken pieces of their past, finally becoming that something-more.

"Course I can." Steve scuffed his boot on the lab floor, despairing smile taking a corner of his mouth. "You always had it in you."

Bucky averted his eyes, arm rippling unsettlingly. "See, look, I've already figured out how to reroute the electrical overload that caused the explosion hindrance in '43. Tony said I can use whatever tools I need, he's been in here working next to me on some project of his own and it's been--" his voice faltered and Steve shoved his hands in his pockets, forcing himself to look at the hover-car instead of twitching metal fingers. "It's just been nice, y'know? Besides my painting, I've never really had anything like this."

He'd never had the chance. They'd never had this life. But it was theirs, now. The world could be theirs if Bucky just--

"Mine," he shrugged and Steve's smile was hollow that time. If only Bucky didn't fight so hard, he could have more than a painting and a science-experiment to call his. He could have a whole damned person.

A beat of silence and Steve'd spill blood to know what Bucky was thinking, the flickering truths behind that expression.

A step in his direction and Steve rolled his shoulders, forcing himself upright. Reminding himself to stand tall, because it didn't hurt anymore, he didn't have scoliosis; even if his spine thought otherwise sometimes, the way Bucky shifted the bones under his skin.

"...thank you," Bucky offered quietly and Steve extended an arm, taking Bucky's hand in his to pull him closer. Always closer.
He couldn't have any of this without Steve. Not just because it was his friends and influence, but. He'd never have wanted this if Steve hadn't been there when he pulled himself outta the fire. If he hadn't had something to latch onto. To bring himself back to this. This.

What Bucky could be thanking him for, Steve couldn't imagine. So he pulled him in and kissed him instead.

He wondered if Bucky could taste it on him.

Bucky breathed in Steve's hurt, lingering like bullets on his tongue and he'd so long since slipped past Bucky's defences, what was the point anymore? When they pulled away he was wrapped too tight in strong arms and Bucky knew he had a grease mark on his temple but Steve didn't rub it off like he'd expected, Steve just stared at him, squeezing close and desperate as Bucky blinked up at lost blues.

Furrowed eyebrows over the strong nose, the impenetrable concern masked with hope - goddamn Steve Rogers, that's what.

It took everything not to wiggle outta the grip. It wasn't leather clamps on his arms but it might as well've been, what Steve was asking--

Bucky tipped up and took his mouth again, parting Steve's lips with his tongue, tugging him down without protest. Kissing him sideways and harder and softer, anything it took until the tight grip around him started to loosen and Bucky smiled against Stevie's soft mouth until he was smiling back.

When they broke apart that time Steve's forehead touched his and Bucky ran his right hand over the back of Steve's neck, dragging him kicking outta his shadows and there, all that tension and worry drained and it was daylight for godssakes, no crying or scraping hearts allowed.

"I came down with news for you too," Steve finally said, breaking the silence and pulling back with a tiny - real - curve on his lips. Bucky slipped outta the embrace, keeping his fingers tangled in Steve's while he tugged a folded paper from his back pocket. Bucky recognized the paperwork before he unfolded it, bit his lip and watched as Steve shook it open, turning to him with a flash of that smile that made it all worth it.

"You ready to kiss community luxury away?"

"Ready to go anywhere with you," Bucky squeezed their hands, tilting his head teasingly, "...so long as it means kissing."

Steve's nose squinched and their lips met and then there were boxes--

So many boxes, more than they'd need, especially since they weren't taking it all yet, but Stark "wanted this done right."

They decided to move the studio last, leave the paint and supplies here for now. It was only a twenty-minute taxi-ride from the Avengers Tower to the new Brooklyn apartment, half that on Steve's bike.

It should've been scary, maybe, but carefully lowering the recently-repaired montage of his Howling Commandos into a box with bright yellow caution-tape (Stark's idea of a joke, but Steve'd smiled so he wasn't complaining) Bucky didn't feel anything but a distant sense of Finally.
The first time they'd moved in together, Bucky'd done all the heavy lifting while Steve fretted and attempted lifting boxes he really shouldn't. There'd only been four anyways: carefully-packed sketches and art supplies, clothes, dishes, Sarah's things.

Now, Tony was shouting at Sam to make sure to get the wallclock in the box with the over-couch mirror and Steve was protesting that really, they shouldn't be taking Tony's things then Stark was arguing that he'd designed the place for them, they could take whatever they wanted, it'd leave more room for updating the floor.

"C'mon, it'll give me something to do. I'll still keep it vintage, because you two will always have a home here, but I've--I mean, Pepper, has been dying for another floor project and these could use a fresh coat of paint anyways..."

Steve finally conceded and Thor helped Barton carry the couch down the hallway while Maria directed traffic and Bucky stood in the middle of their empty living room, single box in his hands while Avengers circled and shouted and carried around him, and asked himself when he was going to stop being so surprised. He had a family.

Natasha socked his shoulder on her way past with kitchen utensils and he shook his head, breaking from the trance and following her down to the quinjet - yeah, Tony didn't know when to stop - they were packing their boxes into.

Pepper kissed them both on the temple and waved them off with a hand, then Steve was waving out the jet window and Natasha was leaning over Thor to ask Bruce if he'd remembered the lamps from the den, up front Tony was asking Sam his opinion on letting the Rogers's take some of the gym equipment for their new place, and all Clint wanted to know was if Bucky was throwing a housewarming party and if there'd be pizza?

"This is way more windows than I thought you would've wanted," Clint commented offhandedly, plopping a box down in the living room and dusting off his hands.

"What can I say, we got used to the Tower's view." Bucky shrugged and Tony fist-pumped on his way past, saying something to Jarvis about a perimeter scan and getting blueprints of dimensions just in case--

"Except now you've got the Brooklyn Bridge instead of Manhattan," Bruce pointed out, straightening the mirror Thor'd just hung and Bucky glanced over at Steve, talking (with his hands) over kitchen-organization with Natasha.

"Well. Brooklyn's always been where we belonged. Ain't that right, Stevie?"

"Hmm? Buck, did you see the different bedrooms? Which one do you think for the studio? Since we've got two resident artists now--"

"Oh shh, I don't count. Put it wherever you want, I'd be fine painting in a closet."

"Closets! Nat, do you know where..."

Three hours, too many boxes, and an arm-wrestling competition over who got claims on the guest-bedroom later, everyone was surveying the open living room one last time before gathering at the front door, starting noisily down the hallway together.

"Avengers Movie Night is still Friday and if you two aren't there, I know where you sleep. Actually,
I setup where you sleep, I'd be careful if I were you--"

"We'll be there, Tony," Steve assured, knocking his shoulder against Stark's. Bruce shook his head while Thor laughed and Sam threw an arm over Bucky's shoulders, tugging him in with a beaming smile as Clint reached over to tweak the loose bun atop Bucky's head.

They were all at the curb too soon and the bustling cheer settled into soft smiles and a few teary eyes and really, they weren't far--

But it was an end of an era, and none of them'd gotten alotta happy endings before, so Bucky wasn't gonna say anything as Clint sniffled and curled his fingers too tight in the back of Bucky's shirt.

Steve shooed everyone back towards the jet parked at the water and five waving hands disappeared around the corner. There'd been five Commandos too, five of those boys like the five boys leaving now--

And Natasha, still standing on the curb beside them. She'd moved Steve into his DC apartment, Bucky'd found out an hour ago. She'd been there when he couldn't--

"I'll be upstairs," Bucky started, because Steve and Nat probably wanted a moment alone but she reached for his wrist before he could go, turning him back towards the sidewalk and beautiful green eyes.

Steve seemed just as confused as Nat tugged him a foot further from Steve's side, leaning in close with that signature curved mouth, dead-serious and somehow disastrously-soft as she looked up at him, held him still and swore vehemently under her breath, "You take care of him."

Bucky blinked down at the little spider who'd been through so much, whose life'd been a reverse of his. She'd started in torture and come to life so much later - he'd had a life and lost it to torture. But no matter what they were, they both loved Steve and--

"I will," he promised, quiet, and by the look in those searching green eyes? She believed him.

Natasha popped up on tiptoes, placing her lips to his cheek and Steve let out the same sound of surprise Bucky did, then she was releasing Bucky and shoving Steve playfully. He pulled her into a tight hug and she kissed his cheek too, then she was turning without the words goodbye - Bucky understood - and Steve called after her, lifting his voice with hands shoved in pockets--

"Aren't you glad I pulled on that thread?"

She stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, turned around with a flash of a slow, real smile on her face.

"I think maybe I am, Rogers."

"Hey Nat?"

"Yes, Barnes?"

"...maybe I'm a little sorry for shooting you."

"Which time?"

"Okay, now you're pushin' your luck."

Her lips pursed and her eyes rolled but she was fooling no one.
For once, everyone heard the *I love you too's.*

The view out the living-room windows was an upclose underneath the Manhattan bridge and an angled, more distant Brooklyn bridge. Bucky had no doubt there'd be plenty of study-sketches on both soon.

It was quiet, white and fancy now that the Avengers weren't bustling around and shouting over the newness of it all. There were tall white columns separating the window-view every ten feet and Steve stood beside one now, hand on the column as he watched the world outside and Bucky watched him.

Brooklyn'd never been this fancy for them. But nothing in Brooklyn was the same now as it'd been in the 40's - nothing but the bridge. So even with the tall glass and granite counters, the view from this apartment made it the closest available to the backalley-dirty-dripping apartments they used to share.

It was an atmosphere anyways, the mindset of *across-the-bridge* that still carried on the sidewalks, the smell from the docks that still lingered beneath the rush of newcenturytraffic if you got close enough to the water. And John Street was about as close to the water as one could be.

"Y'know," Steve started, staring quiet and pensive at the outside world. "The morning of that last mission in '45, the Commandos asked if I was going home to Brooklyn after the war."

Bucky peaked his hands together, palms flat against each other as metal fingers rippled quietly. He'd never gotten to thank them for being there for Steve after the fall. He'd never gotten to speak to any of them again, actually.

That mountaintop'd been the end of his brotherhood.

"I told them I wasn't."

Bucky looked up. He'd been surprised to hell that he hadn't found Steve in Brooklyn either of the times he'd ran into him, but he'd assumed that was the new-century thing. Of course Steve would've come back here if he'd survived the war. Why the fuck wouldn't he?

Steve's left hand - unmarred, human - reached up, tapping the glass like he could take them right back to the first time they'd stood on that bridge, before everything got so damned messy, when Bucky'd had two gentle hands too.

"Why?" He finally pressed, looking away from the flesh covering Steve's left arm.

It didn't matter anyways, Steve spun around and broke the spell, small smile on his face as he made his way to where Bucky was propped, leaning against the wall between the living-room and kitchen.

"Brooklyn was never about Bed-Stuy, brick buildings, dirt and the bridge." A shrug and Steve finally stopped in front of him, a foot away as their eyes met and Bucky forced his expression neutral, schooling into the mask that'd saved him in a hundred conversations like this, too deep to dig out.

Steve's hand extended and Bucky shifted so he could place the human, right one in Steve's. "For me, Brooklyn was a cocky smile...bright accent. Crystal eyes and warm hands pulling outta dark alleys."

Bucky tilted his head, running his thumb over Steve's pistol-calluses and wondering why Steve
thought his eyes were crystal. Bucky'd always thought they were blue, gray. Ice.

"Now, I getta have both." Steve tugged him closer and Bucky let him, tipping his head up as their chests brushed, Steve's smile inches away.

What was Steve saying?

Brooklyn was a burrough. A home, right? So why wouldn't he go? Because he associated it with Bucky too much?

He blinked confusedly but like everything else, it stopped mattering a moment later because their lips touched and that, that's what mattered.

It was dizzying, still, kissing Steve. A possessive hand on his lower back pinning him close, the hard angles and curves of Steve's chest to contrast the smooth glide of their mouths slipping together, apart, angled and again.

The tension slipped from his shoulders somewhere between his tongue and Steve's and Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve's neck, the same time Steve reached his other arm down to gather Bucky closer. Except then they needed closer, and closer, never close enough.

Warm hands slid up the back of his shirt and Bucky circled his hips forward slowly, smile quirking at the sound in Steve's throat. Fingertips traced up and down his back, sliding over slender ribs and rubbing heat into his skin like they were still frozen in winter. Bucky melted, an icicle dripping into a puddle and Steve's strong arms were probably the only thing holding him up, weak-kneed and clinging to Steve's neck, almost unafraid to fall.

Their mouths broke apart and Bucky's eyes stayed closed, tipping his head against Steve's as the wet mouth ghosted hot air over his ear.

"Whaddu you say we christian these new rooms?" A damp kissed dropped right under his ear and Bucky squinched his nose, lifting his shoulders against Steve's ticklish nosing down. Steve squeezed his arms tighter around Bucky's back, strong and demanding and yes, Bucky'd love to christian something, to collapse to his knees and worship Steve right here and now, pray at his feet and take him into his mouth like the holy thing he was. Only Steve was holding him too tight to fall to his knees, mouthing back up to Bucky's ear to drop his voice low and dirty, "All of them."

"There's seven," Bucky managed - more breathless than scolding - and that was if they counted the living and dining rooms separately.

"Eleven, counting bathrooms and the laundry room," Steve pointed out helpfully, hand sliding down spine to squeeze his ass and Bucky laughed, threading his fingers through Steve's hair as he leaned back and bit his lip, affectionately scanning the pretty face.

Steve's eyes were bright like Bucky was the cutest thing he'd ever seen and yes, Bucky wanted to giggle his way through riding Steve on the couch, let Steve bend him over the bathtub, fuck him on the washer and yes yes, that sounded fantastic.

"Where do we start?" Bucky teased, and he was entirely unprepared for hard muscle suddenly sweeping him off his feet, tackling him to the ground with a careful hand catching his head before it hit white-maple floors.

If it'd been a few months ago, the move would've been anticipated, reacted, revenged. But he'd been outta training for so long, been way too tangled in Steve's bed to worry about optimum-functionality or proper efficiency or any of the things that used to keep him lethal -
when was the last time he'd controlled his breathing, blinking?

- but the effort of focusing on expanding-decompressing-lungs when he could be focusing on the heavy weight pressing his hips into the floor or the look in Steve's eyes as he hovered playfully over Bucky's body, arms splayed to the side and wrists pinned under Steve's long wrapping fingers. That machine had been long disconnected and Bucky couldn't place when the hell that'd happened.

So he got tackled to the ground with nothing to show for protest and Bucky's heart was so so full.

"We start right here."

Eager hands yanked his shirt upwards, tugged off quick over his head and probably wrecking his bun but Bucky didn't care, not when Steve was kissing down his throat, his chest, making him roll his head lazily on the hardwood.

The soft lips kept kissing down and Bucky was all set to cup the back of Steve's head, let him wrap those pretty lips around Bucky's cock--

Only he stopped at Bucky's bellybutton, nosing against his abs and peppering little kisses over his stomach, lighter and lighter til it just tickled to hell and Bucky swatted at him, crinkling his nose against the laughter as his toes curled, thighs tightening.

Steve fluttered his eyelashes and kissed again, again-- Bucky caved, giddy giggle as he pushed at Steve's shoulder, tried to gruff at him to knock it off.

Peckpeckpeck and Steve paused, lifting his head only a touch so their eyes could meet, mouth still hovering over Bucky's stomach. The blue was so beautiful, looking up at Bucky like that with his shiny blond hair a halo over his unfairly handsome features and Bucky was so far gone, could look down his body to see Steve there for the rest of his life.

Their eyes held contact as the lips pressed again, promise, just above his bellybutton. "I love you," Steve declared quietly, just as soft and playful as the kisses were. Bucky sucked in a breath, stomach expanding under Steve's touch and Steve pressed another kiss, breaking off to say it again, "I love you."

Kiss. "I love you," kiss, "I love you," kiss, "I love you," kiss Iloveyou, kissiloveyoukissiloveyou--

The words froze on another pause and Steve hovered, eyes meeting Bucky's again with a flurry of warmth spreading through Bucky's stomach chest head fingertips. All the energy he used to trap there spinning under the surface of every place Steve declared his love and sealed it with his mouth and really, Bucky's lungs weren't working right.

Pink lips were parted, mouth open to say it again but he was waiting, waiting on something. Maybe waiting for Bucky to say it back. Bucky wet his lips, ran his hand over the curve of Steve's head, rucking up his hair while he waited, patiently, more patience than Steve'd ever had for anything else.

"Say it again," Bucky whispered, and the corner of Steve's mouth turned up just barely, so small it was hardly a smile, reflexive and stunning and then he was breathing the damnation over Bucky's skin again.

"I love you," serious, a kiss to his stomach. "I love you," reverent, a kiss to his sternum. "I love you," whispered, awed, a kiss to his mouth and Bucky kissed him back.

He kissed him back for a long long time.
"It's alarming how charming you can be--"

"Why thank you."

"--while still being a complete ass."

"I thought you liked my ass," Bucky teased and Steve leaned over the stair railing to swat said-ass, only Bucky dashed up a step further before he could and the rail barred Steve's bare chest from reaching.

"C'mere." Steve made grabby hands and Bucky's reddened lips were curled up at one corner, leaning over the side of the stair-balcony, a strand of stray hair escaping his workout bun.

"You come up here."

"I've been on the bar for an hour, I'm not doing that weird flip-workout with you."

"Aww. Callin' it early?"

"Shut up, you're hard to workout with."

"What was that about hard?" Bucky teased again, sliding down a step to hover over Steve's upturned face. Popping up on his tiptoes let their lips barely brush and Steve just wanted to lick the sweat off Bucky's neck, he should really come down here.

It was unfair as hell, straining up to have his lips just dance across Bucky's, faint taste of salt and plush give much too far away. "Closer, do me deeper," Steve murmured and Bucky groaned, at least three-quarters annoyance.

A metal hand thwacked him upside the head for the comment, but he did lean over the balcony further and Steve sucked that pretty bottom lip into his mouth, stomach tightening with sparks as Bucky shuddered, pressing closer. He reached up to pull the sweaty body down further and suddenly Bucky popped upright, entirely outta reach as Steve landed flat-footed with an offended sound.

"Uhuh, I've fallen for you enough times," Bucky shook his head and Steve strained up on his tiptoes again, trying to snag Buck's arm or something except he was halfway up the goddamned stairs and the serum didn't make him Elastigirl.

"I only remember one train," he huffed, fingertips grazing metal before Bucky took a step backwards, impossible to reach now as his pretty mouth twitched up in that beautiful smile again.

"Who said I was talking about trains?"

The words were hardly outta his mouth before Bucky was dashing up the second-half of the stairs and Steve rushed to swing around the railing and race after him, panting from the workout they'd just finished.

"Did Bucky Barnes just admit he's fallen in love with me?" The pounding in his chest nearly matched the thudding in his head, both outnumbered by the stupid smile stretched across his face.

"I didn't say that," Bucky pointed out, starting into a jog around the upper-floor track and Steve broke into a quick run, grabbing Bucky's shoulders and yanking him backwards into his chest, wrapping his pulsing arms around Bucky's stomach, eyes drifting shut to avoid the sweat running
down his temple as he tipped his breathing-heavy mouth against Bucky's ear.

"Yeah, okay, you fell in like with me." The sarcasm invoked rolled-eyes Steve didn't need to spin Bucky around to see. He nosed along the scruffed jaw, nipping the side of Bucky's chin, smiling too much to sell the teasing. "It's just my irresistible body isn't it?"

"Irresistible?" Bucky scoffed, tipping his head back against Steve's shoulder, hips rolling backwards against Steve's gym shorts as his voice dropped an octave, "Prove it."

See, this was why coming to workout at Stark's gym was a good idea. Tony'd been elated to see them, offering for Jarvis to send down Gatorade or something and they'd both waved him off, insisted they'd barely moved out a day ago.

"It's been three, two of which I'm sure no one wore clothes for--"

"Tony!"

"What? It's like an early honeym-- Nevermind. Go enjoy your workout."

At least Stark's mouth had snapped shut at Steve's warning glare because Bucky was right there and not exactly the time to be talking about honeymoons when the ring was getting its final touches engraved in Tony's most-private lab.

Steve still couldn't believe it.

But he was gonna prove to Bucky, one way or another, he was permanent, forever. This, they could have for eternity.

And speaking of proving things...

"How would you like me to do that?" Steve whispered in response, making Bucky's eyelashes flutter as he tightened the curl of his fingers in hard muscle.

"Hmm." Bucky tipped his ass back against tented gym shorts and Steve's vision swam with want. "Ooo, I have an idea. I dare you...to bench me."

Not exactly what he'd been thinking, but. It was a dare. Steve ran his hand up Bucky's side, peering down his body as he made a contemplative noise. "You weigh what, 190?"

"Think you can't?"

He was 90% sure Bucky said that just for the face Steve gave him in return. But either way, he was on the ground with Bucky balancing on his palms ten seconds later.

"Jesus fucking Christ you're heavy." He groaned, folding his arms in half and pushing a very smug looking Bucky a foot upwards.

"I had a big breakfast."

"Nrgh."

There was a lot of huffing and puffing, but he got in twenty reps before the teasing started, about the same time the sweating started and this was nowhere-fucking-near 190lbs.

To be fair he was already exhausted, he had every right to unceremoniously dump Bucky on the ground after fifty and whine. "How much does that goddamn arm weigh?"
"A lot." Bucky shook his head, freed strands of hair sticking to the side of his face as he looked up at Steve from the ground, eyebrows raised. "You wouldn't believe how long it took me to handle the weight."

He didn't mean to shut down.

Bucky saw the moment his expression turned from light-hearted to maudlin, bright eyes fading as the gravity sunk down, heavier than the arm for either of them.

"I'm sorry, Bucky," Steve whispered and Bucky was tired, so tired of tossing aside Steve's thousand apologies and pretending nothing mattered - being blue is better than being over it.

"Y'know." He stuck up his right hand and Steve pulled him to his feet, sweat making the grip precarious as fingers clung too tight and blue eyes searched his. Bucky nodded, looked off into the distance, the empty side of Stark's gym. "I'm sorry about it too."

"You miss it?"

"My arm? Sometimes. Do you?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes I think about how it use to be, both your arms around me. I never appreciated enough, I don't think. Not that the metal isn't beautiful..."

"I know."

His right palm on Steve's cheek and pretty blue eyes closed, head tipping into Bucky's hand, sorrow etched into his mouth and heart laying at his feet. Bucky'd trip over it if Steve didn't get it together. If they both didn't get it together.

"Showers?"

"Race you," Steve whispered, eyes opening, and they were gone.

Bucky won. Not because he was faster, but because Steve wasn't even trying. Steve was too busy staring at him with big broken doe eyes and Bucky dashed over the threshold to sag against the wall, wiping sweat off his forehead and regretting it a moment later because salt in his eyes would be an excuse for the tears welling up in his chest.

Steve stood in the threshold, eyes flickering between centuries. They'd raced here once before, but he had a feeling Steve was thinking a race to different showers. The last conversation they'd had before Bucky ripped his heart of his chest and buried it in European soil.

Steve knew that now. Knew the conversation with Peggy wasn't about Zola, it'd been Peg discovering his feelings and just so long as he kept his mouth shut--

"What did you tell her?" Steve whispered and the first time, Bucky'd been exhausted and happy and laughing and wanting Steve to kiss him more than anything else in the world only right now Bucky knew pushing his lips against Steve's wouldn't be the kind he'd meant in '45.

"Will you wash my hair?" Bucky said instead and Steve nodded like Bucky hadn't blown off his question, like he'd been expecting that answer all along, closing the door and bolting the lock because this was still official Avengers property.

The water was scalding, the kind he liked and Steve scolded him for but Steve didn't say anything
today, tipping Bucky's head back in the spray a little forcefully and Bucky closed his eyes against the urge to scream because he couldn't handle manhandling his head into a sharp spray of water but he wasn't gonna flip and trigger right here right now, the last time he'd drowned in years of torture he'd woken with a gun pressed to Steve's forehead.

And if he freaked, Steve'd know he'd only asked as a distraction, so Steve wouldn't press about that. Thudding heart was better than that confession.

Hands scrubbed him down, sliding suds over Bucky's bare body shamelessly, like Steve already had every inch of him memorized.

There was a hiss as Steve accidentally brushed the left arm Bucky was keeping tucked aside because it heat up like a motherfucker, but by the time Bucky blinked open to apologize Steve already masked the pain and moved on. A kiss dropped to the top of his head as he tipped it back again and Bucky forced his fists to unclench.

Then Steve's wet, naked body was sliding up behind his and Bucky's breath caught in humid lungs.

Rough fingers squeezed the back of his neck, rubbing thumbs deep into muscle and yeah, okay.

The world around them heated steam, a poor excuse for fire. Making bodies sticky and puffs of breath wet as Steve slid hard flesh through Bucky's crease and Jesus Christ it felt surreal, water pounding from above and eyes closed, head tipped and both their lips parted in damaged ecstasy.

Steve propped Bucky's naked body on the bench, spread his legs with demanding hands, exposure sending shivers down his spine and Steve opened him up with quick fingers coated in conditioner, water dripping down the blonde hair hanging over his forehead like the bangs he used to wear and Bucky tipped his head back against the wall and inhaled thick smoke.

The last time he'd been in this shower room with Steve, his world had been upside-down and they'd laughed their way through washing Bucky's hair and everything had been safe and beautiful and Bucky wanted to laugh again, wanted to suck the smile off Steve's lips instead of stare into cloudy, teary eyes.

"C'mere," Bucky croaked, hoarse from disuse and the fingers twisting in his ass - Steve bent over to kiss Bucky's mouth, but that's not what he meant.

He pulled Steve down with their mouths still attached, right arm wrapping over Steve's shoulders and dragging him to the bench. Steve plopped down with a wet sound and Bucky swung a leg over his lap, grabbing the conditioner and wrapping his palm around Steve's cock to slick him up.

Steve's hips stuttered and his mouth opened wider and Bucky licked inside, running his tongue over Steve's teeth like he'd bite Bucky properly hard if he just begged enough.

Heat pulsed in his hand and Bucky broke off, placing the metal hand on the shower wall beside Steve's head, watching steam curl off it as he registered shower water hitting his calves, Steve's knees.

"In French," Bucky started, clearing his throat as he lifted up, hovering over Steve's lap with his hand steadying for the drive down to come. "--the word for orgasm is la petite mort. It means little death."

"Little death," Steve echoed, then Bucky was sinking down on him and the blonde head tipped back against the wet shower wall, eyes closed and lips parted in bliss, voice echoing and hollow over the pounding water, "Alors...on va voir."
On va voir it was.

Bucky lifted himself up and lowered again, filling up so quick with Steve his head was spinning and the pretty throat groaned, Steve's head still back like he couldn't lift it himself, bruises squeezing into Bucky's hips as he let Bucky ride him slow, closed blues allowed Bucky's stares over every flickering change on Steve's face.

God he was beautiful. Bucky could sink his teeth into Steve's neck and swallow him whole.

Not--

He shouldn't be thinking like that he shouldn't want to devour--

"C'mon, baby, show me what you got," Bucky whispered because he couldn't be in control of this right now and Steve sucked in a breath, fingers pulsating on Bucky's skin, then blue eyes were opening and Bucky handed over reigns that weren't a leash, weren't.

An arm tightened around Bucky's back, a slow roll grind up into his body and his abs clenched against the burn in his stomach. He squirmed on Steve's lap and the gaze flashed heated, both arms wrapping around as Steve rocked harder inside and Bucky's vision swam.

He arched against Steve's chest, oxygen spilling through his head and saturating the world bright and pink lips made a hungry sound that ate the heart right outta him. A scalding mouth enveloped the skin beneath his ear, mouthing wide and sucking a touch as lips slid off, eyes fluttering closed as Steve kissed his neck open-mouthed, down and down like the shivers in his spine, teeth scraping over his collarbone possessively.

"Always a goddamned challenge," Steve growled against Bucky's skin and he couldn't help it, it was just so petulant and young and seriously, Jesus Christ, Steve was the one who didn't know how to back down from a single thing, so what if Bucky used it to his advantage sometimes?

It couldn't be helped. He laughed.

He was having lap-shower-room-sex with his best friend and Steve had to be so Steve, he couldn't stop the burst of sound and his torso wracked with it, muscles tensing from the force of the unexpected joy in his chest and the arms around his back curled closer. Steve was smiling against his collarbone now, Bucky could feel it, and holy hell that felt incredible, Steve's cock filling him to the brim and tracing little circles inside him as hips rolled lazy while Bucky laughed in his lap and Steve hid his smile against his skin and he was lightheaded with it all, shower room zooming outta focus and it was only Steve's embrace holding him upright.

And solid enough for Steve to draw out, slide back in deep, rubbing muscles shifting to part for Steve inside him and Bucky crumbled, deflating against Steve's chest with a fervid groan and he could have a fever from how riled up Steve's touch got him and jeez if that wasn't ironic and his mouth was laughing again, high and light and so turned on, curled against Steve's chest with their bodies connected like this and--

"I love your laugh," Steve murmured and Bucky's smile cut on a glass edge, fading a touch as the sound of laughter stilted on his lips but it wasn't sinking, it was just silence. Steve pulled back anyways, two big palms lifting Bucky's head from his chest.

Hips tipped up against him again, again, and Bucky trembled, sinking up and down but Steve didn't let go of his face, staring right in Bucky's eyes through every shuddering breath and trembling muscle.
"I love your soul," he whispered and Bucky started to shake his head, break free but Steve held on
closer, their foreheads nearly touching and Bucky couldn't get away--

"I love your everything." Steve's words were the challenge now, fingers reinforcing as he refused to
let Bucky turn away, hide his face and how much was Steve seeing in his eyes that Bucky'd spent so
long hiding?

There weren't a lot of defenses at this point - fuck, they were fighting even while they screwed - but
to tighten his body up and take back enough control to get Steve choking on his tongue instead of
digging his own grave.

He shouldn't be saying that shit, Bucky'd kick his ass for it if his hair were shorter and his eyes were
brighter but he'd hurt Steve too much by now, the only thing he could do was try to drag Steve away
from the six-foot-pit he was rushing towards. Like this, if he kept this up - pushing into Bucky's body
over and over, holding him by his face in worship and spilling those condemnations--

They weren't going to survive that. If Steve planted his roots inside Bucky's chest, when Bucky
shattered Steve would wilt and die and the scars they had from each other were already too deep, he
couldn't be fool enough to let Steve close artist hands around his heart and squeeze squeeze

The years he had on Steve meant nothing. Steve would die and leave him behind because the sun
exploded if it kept chasing the night. His long legs could only keep running forever and Steve wasn't
made to run, Bucky was, he couldn't let Steve trip and fall following him.

No more falling allowed.

Prying the hands off his face, Steve opened his mouth to protest but Bucky didn't give him the
chance, pressing his mouth over Steve's open one and shoving their entwined hands against the wall.
Didn't think of how scalding his left hand had to be, pinning Steve there and bracing his knees,
riding him hard and proper now and Steve whimpered and gasped beneath him and Bucky's head
was pounding more than his heart and he had to close his eyes, duck his head, focus on anything that
wasn't impending cemetery.

Over and over, so full of Steve he couldn't breathe and the drag out didn't register, only deep thrusts
again and again, sliding so fast into Bucky's ass there was no room for anything in between but a
broken cry of Steve's name.

With the slick rapture of bodies, sounds spilling from his throat, encircled in steam and heat, he could
shove it all aside. For as long as it took for their bodies to heat each other up, turbulence rocking
them in crescendo and the mouth on his was so wet, wet as the shower-pearls tapping his ankles,
feet. It was hardly kissing, mouths slotting together sloppily as Steve's cock slotted firm and precise.
Muscle made of marble and Bucky latched tight enough onto the statue to fear his own grip, fear
shattering walltiles or bones; shoving them into the abyss together and it did feel like going up in
flames, burning hand in hand, then the edge rushed and they tipped over and

Hollow chest gasping, stuffed sunshine moaning over his tongue and hands broke from the wall to
wrap around him again and if Bucky wasn't spinning like the Cyclone he'd have the sense to shove
Steve off him instead of collapsing against his chest but here he was, breathing open-mouthed against
wet skin and one hand was in Bucky's hair and the other was rubbing his lower back, massaging the
outside shell where Steve was sheathed inside and Bucky couldn't do anything but cling and wish his
mouth could open in more than begging, broken sounds but that was all he had left anymore, wasn't
it?

Strong arms lifted him off the bench and Bucky's legs were rubber. Weak. Staggering weight held
him steady as the shower water washed over their heads. Careful, loving fingers slid over his ass, dipped inside enough to clean him out and Bucky coughed into Steve's chest and tried not to collapse on the wet floor.

Footing caught in time for him to grab the shampoo from Steve's grip, turn broad shoulders and reach up on his tiptoes with a hand cupping the edge of Steve's forehead. Bucky'd allowed him twice, the least he could do was let Bucky wash the blonde hair the way he used to when the fights were bad, when Steve was bleeding too much, too many bruises. They were both dotted in bruises now, but the blood was all internal--

Bucky'd asked Steve if he could taste the blood on his lips of the people he'd slaughtered and Steve'd demanded, *can you taste mine?*

He still didn't know how to do this.

"Do you remember..." Bucky started, fluffy towel around his waist, dropping the hair-drying one to the floor as he ran fingers through dreadful long strands, watching the movement in the mirror. The same mirror he'd stood in front of when Steve looked at him with that *look* and Bucky'd lied about his hair because he saw the question and he couldn't face himself - not then, not that day when everything was so fresh - and admit boiling hatred.

The shower was dripping in the background and that wasn't like Stark, to have some non-perfect piece of equipment but Bucky wasn't sure anyone but he and Steve used these showers anyways.

The beautiful familiar face slid up behind him, peering over Bucky's shoulder into the mirror, arms wrapping over Bucky's stomach as blue searched in foggy-edged glass. Bucky dropped his gaze, stared at the sink,

"...after our first kiss, what we talked about?"

He should just keep his mouth shut, really, but his body was aching and his soul was aching and Steve was looking over his shoulder and the words were already out anyways.

"What, you catching a hint?" Steve teased and Bucky was always the one shutting that down, wasn't he?

"No," he exhaled and Steve's heartbeat flashed before the words dropped between them and this'd be easier if they didn't know each other's worlds better than their own. His fingertips worried over Steve's wrist and his hand was goddamned warm, had he burned Steve's fingers-- "That it wasn't gonna change anything."

It wasn't as bad as the sinking deflation he got the first time he said it. Steve swallowed, quiet enough for the echo not to snatch his words and run away.

"It kinda changed everything."

Bucky lifted his head and eyes locked through clearing fog, if only their minds could clear that fast too, if only his lungs could clear from the ice he'd drowned in.

"Did it? Or are we using the excuse of this--" a gesture between their naked bodies, as if Steve didn't know exactly what he was talking about, "--to pretend we've improved?" Steve's head cocked and Bucky's mouth wouldn't seal closed. "I mean. We talk even less now that we can kiss to shut the other up."
"Or do we have less to fight about? We've shared a connection Bucky. A deep, deep connection. I've been inside you, inside your body, that's..." Steve whistled low without the sound, overwhelmed rush of air. His hands on Bucky's hips, sliding up and down bone, "--combining the emotional and physical together like that? Maybe we're closer than ever. Maybe we're just living behind the same mask now, we don't need to ramble our emotions when I can see them, feel them on you."

Fingertips traced up his sternum and Bucky watched so he didn't have to meet ice - crystal - in the mirror.

"Maybe," he relented. Or maybe Bucky was pretending all along. How could he know? Real? Unreal. Real?

Ice finally caught up to him and he stared at their reflections in the mirror and had no idea what was staring back at them.

~*~*~

The new apartment meant an array of new sounds, but the shuffle of someone in another room was unmistakable. Not to mention that sharing a bed meant Steve couldn't sneak off so easy now, not when Bucky woke up freezing in the middle of the night.

Unless he was looking to buy more apartments, Bucky couldn't imagine a reason Steve might wanna be up at 2am, so he stuck to the shadows and slipped outta their bedroom, moved carefully over newly-familiarizing terrain.

He found Steve at the kitchen table, sitting in the darkness and barely illuminated gold and white, lights off the Brooklyn bridge playing diffused golden dots around the room, over his skin. There was a glass in his hands, some unidentified liquid swirling slightly as Steve stared at the lights dancing off the glass's facets, perfectly silent.

It wasn't a nightmare, because Bucky always woke to those, even when they were in different rooms. But it was something.

He watched from the shadows, hair framing the edges of his eyes, arms crossed over his chest.

Steve took a sip from his glass, setting it down quiet enough he had to be aware of it, he was purposefully trying not to wake Bucky. Too late.

Shifting in his seat at the table, profile glowing as blue eyes looked out distant windows, bridges glittering in the distance, fading sounds to match. At first glance, it could be peaceful.

Only Steve's hands were shaking.

Bucky's chest tightened protectively but he couldn't step outta the shadows now, Steve didn't need generic comfort. Bucky needed to know what was wrong.

Long fingers raked through blonde hair, rucking it spiked the way it's been when they'd first met again. Bucky couldn't decide which was brighter. Before Bucky or After Everything, which was better? Whichever was true, right now it didn't matter whether Bucky was here or not, Steve was falling apart.

He could feel the itch from here, the restless tapping of Steve's foot and the twitching fingertips and the tense shoulders--
Thirty seconds, that's how long Steve lasted with his fingers buried in his hair before he was up, outta the chair with hands falling to his sides, attempting to shove in pockets that weren't there. He was only in boxer shorts and one of Bucky's t-shirts, no pockets to be had and Steve shifted uncomfortably on his bare feet, lifting his hands in the diffused light and staring at his palms like they'd betrayed him for not disappearing into pockets the way he wanted.

Did he see they were trembling or was he blind to that too?

The unease was palpable but the hands fell back to his sides, then barefeet were worrying shine into the wooden floors. Restless pacing, back and forth back and forth, edge of the couch to the table and back again and Bucky watched unmoving in the shadows, eyes dancing horizontally as he traced Steve's movements, back forth back forth.

It ended as abruptly as it started. One moment Steve was pacing and the next he was stalking into the living room. Grabbed a sketchpad off the coffeetable, searched the kitchen for a pencil, and plopped back down in his first seat, scooting the half-empty glass aside as graphite touched clean paper.

Bucky almost snuck back to the bedroom. Maybe Steve simply needed to draw, maybe he'd been pacing because he was looking for inspiration. Bucky'd told him he should get back into it, maybe it was as simple as that.

For selfish reasons, he decided to stay a moment or two longer. Bucky liked watching Steve draw almost more than he liked the drawings themselves. It was just the only time he got to see Steve peaceful.

Except there was no peace to be found this time.

He was too far to see the subject - not too far to see the stressed grip on the pencil - but Steve couldn't've gotten more than a basic outline done before he suddenly snapped, ripping the page outta the notebook fast and hard. It was louder than everything else he'd done and if he was regular-frustrated, he would've looked up as he realized, checked to see if he woke Bucky.

If it was about drawing, that's what he'd do, but apparently drawing was a symptom and not a cause because he didn't even hear the sound. He just ripped the paper in half again. Then crumpled, fists curling it into a ball and tossing it aside like the paper burned and Bucky had to roll in his lips to keep the pitying, hurt sound inside his mouth.

Steve needed him, but he still didn't know enough--

Drawing destroyed, Steve shoved up from the table again, chair screeching and eyes wild as his hair in the flickering light. He paced to the wall Bucky'd leaned on, listening to Steve talk about the Commandos and Brooklyn. Only he didn't collapse against it, he turned and stared at it like it'd personally flattened him and then strong arms were extending, fingers splayed like the volleyball game they'd played.

Setting-position and fingertips pressed against the white paint, the hard surface holding Steve up as he leaned forward, pushing against the wall like he could break right through. He could, if he tried hard enough. Or maybe he wasn't trying to get through, maybe he was trying to move the wall.

Bucky watched him, metal fingers digging into his own flesh, unable to tear his eyes away from Steve's distress.

The wall didn't cave. It wasn't like Old Brooklyn - muddled by too much give, pushing against rotted apartment walls that were supposed to be sturdy and solid but bowed under touch like a flimsy
mattress. New Brooklyn was frozen, like them.

Steve broke off, taking a single step backwards, then another. Spinning around and at least Bucky could see his face now, but for once maybe that wasn't a good thing.

It hurt. It hurt something inside Bucky's chest and he didn't know how to patch up this one, didn't know what stitches Stevie needed now.

A tired hand wiped down Steve's face and his expression wilted, pained but...defeated, almost.

Blue eyes were caught on his hands now, staring at them again but maybe really seeing them this time. No, definitely. Steve stared down at his hands and Bucky could see the moment he realized they were shaking.

He couldn't decide if that realization hurt Steve or him more.

A shocked, ragged suck of oxygen and Steve clenched his shaking hands into curled fists and that was it - that was it.

Those fists.

Bucky slipped back through the shadows, treading silently to their bedroom as Steve collapsed tiredly back into his chair, glass spilling atop rainbow facets cutting the room as his hands uncurled from fists to hold crystal and never stopped shaking.

~*~*~

"Bye babe," Steve leaned over the back of the couch and kissed his cheek, barely pausing his momentum for the door. "Gonna go see Thor and Clint."

"Again? What could you three possibly get up to?" Bucky teased, standing with a stretch that had Steve pausing, eyes lewdly grazing up and down Bucky's body while Bucky rolled his eyes.

"Avenger stuff," Steve shrugged, mischief-smile tucked in the corner of his mouth as he leaned a shoulder against the wall he'd been trying to break three nights ago. Bucky didn't think about that, Bucky raised his eyebrows and bit his lip to hide his smile too.

"Steven Grant Rogers, you think me - me - of all people is gonna fall for your bullshit after all this time--"

His mini-rant was interrupted by Steve tipping his face upward and pushing their mouths together, lips tugging on Bucky's with the drawback and Bucky shook his head affectionately, tapping his palm against Steve's chest and prying his eyes open to see the smile on Steve's face from inches away.

"Go," Bucky allowed, pushing Steve backwards a step. Their lips locked again and he managed enough motor control to keep them moving for the door, butterflies tickling his stomach on the slide apart, taking a second longer to blink his eyes open this time. "Get on, then."

The next kiss was a touch shorter and Bucky was about to drag Steve back to the couch if he didn't leave soon. "Tell Thunderbird...." Another soft collide of their mouths and this would be the last one, really, they were basically up against the door now all he had to do was shove Steve through it, "...I said hi."

He really would've let go and put Steve out the door at that point, but warm hands were sliding under
the hem of Bucky's sweats and Steve tugged him impossibly close, a whole different kind'a rush this time as he squeezed Bucky's ass and kissed him ardent. Hard-pressed from all sides and Steve's mouth was intoxicating, heat shivering up Bucky's spine at the touch kneading bare flesh, deep enough to make him dizzy as he crowded as close to Steve's chest as he could, let Steve's lips play over his.

"Hi? You say hi?" Steve murmured against his mouth, rocking them from side to side while his hands smoothed affectionately over skin, petting Bucky's ass like it was his favorite thing. "No witty remark?"

A peck to his mouth and Bucky leaned up for more, only Steve ducked his head back, just outta reach, teasing shine over blue. "No bitchy comment this time?"

Steve may be cute but Bucky was strung-up and determined, pressing up on his tiptoes to tug Steve's bottom lip into his mouth and hook him back into kissing proper again, which Steve seemed more than willing to do, stave the few interruptions. "You honestly give your greetings?" He teased again, which definitely invoked a nip or two before their lips broke apart again.

"You're so annoying," Bucky complained, pressing the side of his nose to Steve's. "Why do I put up with you?"

Mouths tipped forward to meet again and there was that smile on Steve's face, that disastrous one that always spelled trouble; quite rarely in a good way. Bucky could taste it, right before they broke again and Steve said it, smug against Bucky's lips.

"You looveee me," he sing-songed and Bucky pulled back enough to properly roll his eyes, then Steve was only pressing forward more determined, kissing solid hard serious before they broke and, "You love me," he declared again.

Bucky leaned up and pressed his mouth to Steve's again so he'd shut up - see - and Steve was having none of it, kissing Bucky back for a moment before his hands slipped outta Bucky's pants and wrapped around his back instead, holding him tight and close as he lifted off long enough to say it again, "You love me."

Their mouths met again and Steve kissed him like he meant it, like he was painting the words onto Bucky's lips so he could parrot them back, "You love me, you love me."

Youlovemeyouloveme

He was getting squirmy, trying to wiggle free from Steve's grip surreptitiously, afraid to stop kissing Steve lest he say something really stupid and it was kinda impossible to get-away-but-keep-kissing and Steve just kept saying it with that teasing tone from when they were kids and Bucky just couldn't take it anymore.

"Okay okay, enough, enough," Bucky broke off, reaching behind Steve to grab the doorhandle and yank it open, stumbling them awkwardly into the open space and Steve's grip loosened enough for Bucky to plant a hand on his chest, a quick peck on his lips, and shove him into the hallway. "Get outta here, punk."

He smacked a playful hand over Steve's pretty ass and stepped out to peck his cheek as fast as humanly possible, closing the door between them with a wilting rush of relief, totally oblivious to Steve standing in the hallway on the other side, staring at the closed door while the smile on his face faded away.
The explosion was bigger than he'd predicted, so Steve was cursing and revving his bike to safety before he got either fried or lectured, popping a wheelie to slam over a stray robot and crush it under tires. Tony was complaining a litany over the mics about people trying to copy his tech and Sam'd probably begged him to shutup twenty times already, but half the robot-things were smashed at this point and it didn't look like any of the dead ones were getting up, so it'd all be over soon enough anyways.

"Shit, where the fu--" Static cut out over the line and Steve slammed his bike to a halt, searching over his shoulder frantically because that was Bucky's voice that'd just disappeared.

"Buck!" Steve called out, twisting the ignition again and whipping in a circle to start back for the exploded patch of trees. "Barnes, do you copy?"

The mic in his helmet went quiet as Tony finally shut his mouth long enough to see if Buck replied. Only he didn't. Sam cursed softly, the sound of whooshing wings soaring by overhead.

"I'll see if I can spot him, Cap-- Steve."

"You guys got search-and-rescue, right, because I'm still holding off the other half of these asshat-sorry-excuses-for-a-robots."

"S'fine, Stark, he can't be far-- BUCKY!"

"Jesus Christ you can't shout into a microphone, take off the goddamned helmet if you're gonna blast out everyone's hearing."

Steve ignored Tony and whipped around the closest tree, back tire skidding out before it caught with a jolt and whistling wind soared past, smoke curling in the distance and fire dancing at the edges of leaves and fuck if that wasn't a familiar sight.

European soil flashed behind his eyes and Steve blinked, shaking his head to dislodge the memory. The smell of burning sap and twisting metal --

Blink

A blast exploded two feet to his left and Steve cursed, sliding the bike on its side to avoid the fire and rolled off in a flash of shield and blue, ducking to avoid another soaring grenade, diving around the closest tree and dropping to the ground with another curse.

Laughter echoed behind him and Steve zapped his shield to the metallic grips on his arm, spinning around with his mouth already open to scold, "Watch where the fuck you're throwing those things, Jacques."

Except

Except Dernier wasn't there, the air was too warm and the trees were wrong and a little metal head poked up from behind a log, eyes blinking purple. Fuck fuck, 2015, he was fighting with the Avengers, not the Commandos and where the hell was Bucky?

Jumping the log to smash a stray robot with his shield, Steve held his breath and listened, if Bucky wasn't on comms he might be shouting at least?

Except the Winter Soldier apparently only screamed at him, because the world was dead-silent.
except the occasional explosion and curse from Stark or update from Sam and nonono, he wasn't gonna lose Bucky in some silly-ass low-grade fight--

A smashing metallic whirr sounded to the right and Steve took off, slamming his shield into a tree to ricochet off and soar down into a wooded valley, where a small herd of robots were pouring in one side and a very pissed off soldier was punching and throwing and ripping apart metal pieces which should've been a terrifying sight but Steve could've collapsed with relief.

"Bucky, you're okay," he breathed, running forward to smash a row of metal-toothed things and Bucky glanced over his shoulder at Steve, mouth curling into a little amused smile that Steve could actually see because Buck wasn't in the mask - he was in a uniform he'd drawn and designed himself, mostly black and blue but as stunning and efficient as he was.

"Yeah, one fucked up my comms but they're so goddamned small it's annoying as fuck-- ow!" Two robots jumped on Bucky's back, claws sinking into the exposed skin on his neck and Steve threw his shield into the remaining herd, dominoing nearly all of them as he ripped the two clawing off, throwing them at the nearest tree with a tiny explosion, pieces of metal raining down on them like confetti as he wrapped an arm around Bucky's waist and pulled him in.

Bucky's mouth crashed into his and Steve curled his hand in the blue straps across Bucky's back, kissing him with every ounce of the fear from the moment he'd been gone and everything that could've happened, teeth scraping a plush bottom lip and it was a little violent and rough but his heart was pounding and there'd been so many times in this war, in the last one, he'd been so sure Bucky might die and he'd never gotten to kiss him after so he had a lot to make up for.

A metal hand between their chests finally shoved him off, just in time to backhand a robot Steve'd missed, then soft blue eyes were looking up at him like both their mouths weren't bruised to hell.

"I'm okay, Stevie," Bucky promised, metal thumb dragging over Steve's bottom lip with a sweet smile, "I had 'em on the ropes." His pounding heart stopped entirely.

The last time Bucky'd said that, he'd put a gun to his temple. The time before that, he'd fallen off a train.

"Steve? Why are you looking at me like that? Are you alright? Oh my god, please don't cry, I swear, I'm right here--"

"Buck," he managed, and warm fingers were wiping under his eye, Bucky's calluses rough against thin skin but Steve didn't care, he'd lost Bucky so many times--

"Not goin' anywhere. Promise, Stevie, you and me," Bucky swore under his breath, lifting Steve's wrist to trace a line around his wrist, the perpendicular ending dash and Steve breathed out through his nose, forcing himself to calm because Buck was strong now, so strong and he promised he wasn't leaving and so what if they'd broken promises, they were fucking keeping that one.

Metal fingers curled over his heart and Steve threaded his fingers through Bucky's hair, tickling soft on the back of his hand, his wrist, bright eyes looking up at him expectantly, waiting. The air between them was still filled with shuddering sounds, breaking metal robots underfoot but it might as well've been lightning, the electricity swooping through his stomach.

Their lips met soft and slow this time, gentle as the summer air around them and it didn't feel like Europe anymore, this didn't feel much like Europe at all.
Stark didn't complain half as much as Steve'd expected when they got back to the battle, a few exchanged kisses later. And maybe when he kickflipped a stack of leering purple-eyes and landed next to Bucky, he swept him in for another quick one but to be fair, it wasn't like they were in public. Or really grave danger, this was definitely in the mild-danger category.

Stark complained a lot more then. Sam told him to shut up and that solved that (for once) and so what if he stole one more peck before breaking off to catch Tony's six again?

"Hey Buck," Steve parroted over the comms (after Stark'd turned Buck's back on), slicing the head off a robot and sending sparks and wires in every direction. "Does it bother you that in all the documentaries about us there's no mention of us?"

"What?" Sam whispered.

"Hell if I know," Tony muttered.

"Not once," Steve continued, ignoring his asshole friends. "Maybe no one will ever know I loved you way back then..."

"We know," Tony offered and Bucky flipped him off with a shiny finger. Tony flipped him off with a shiny finger in return and Steve kept ignoring them, not a break in his speech.

"--that you died for me and I died for you. That we finally won when we found each other."

"A sap. I'm dating a total sap." Bucky sighed and tossed a robot at Tony, who shot it outta the air with a little more zealous than necessary.

*About to be engaged to* Steve muttered under his breath and by the lack of shocked responses from any parties present, it was quiet enough. So he lifted his voice, a little, directed straight at Bucky this time. "What if we were...y'know. More than that."

It wasn't like he was popping the question, he was running an idea by his best friend because that's what he did. If he planned on furthering a relationship to any point, Bucky'd kinda be the person he'd consult, so.

"More than the mess we're at now? Like you're ready for that?" Buck snorted and crushed a robot-skull in his bare hand. "I don't think so."

Steve frowned, running a finger over the outline in his pocket. He wasn't planning on it right now or anything, but Stark'd just given it to him on the jetride over - surprisingly secretively - and he couldn't help but think that really, Bucky was wrong. Steve was more than ready for that. Steve was ready for fucking anything.

The jet stopped downtown for the four of them to grab dinner. It was an older place, one of the golden-lighted bars that were dark enough inside you couldn't pick apart clothing colors or certain dishes or centuries.

It wasn't the 40s. He wasn't with the Commandos. Steve knew that, and looking around at all that golden glow was making him more and more pissed he'd lost his grip in the woods. How long had he been in this fucking century? It wasn't like the battles he was fighting now were anything like the ones he'd fought back then. The people weren't the same. Hell, even Buck had a *metal arm* and a whole different fighting style.
"-eve?"

"Sorry, what?" He blinked and turned to Sam, who was looking at him concernedly. Actually, on second thought, all three were looking at him concernedly. "Spaced out," he dismissed, reaching for his fork to take a bite of whatever Bucky'd ordered for him. So everyone else was halfway through theirs, he was a fast eater anyways.

He was fast at a lot of things now, jumping from one thing to the next to the next and his body did more than keep up. Hell, it was encouraging him faster. See, he could do so much now, he had a responsibility--

"Steve, you alright with that?"

"Hmm? Yeah, sure," he agreed, making Bucky look at him funny, tucking long brown hair behind his ear and tipping his feet forward to catch Steve's under the table. He was fine, he was just thinking was all.

Why would Bucky think he wasn't ready for a more committed relationship? This was their lives, and if today was anything like a reminder, they weren't guaranteed long ones and he'd really like to make the most of it while they were still some semblance of young.

A hand pulling him outta his seat made his head snap up in surprise, then Bucky was weaving their arms together and waving goodbye for the both of them, door ringing shut behind them as the faux-lit sidewalk opened up under their feet.

"Wa- where are we going?"

"Home," Bucky furrowed his eyebrows in that funny look again and Steve paused, looking behind them at the door where they'd left Sam and Tony.

"We don't have a car."

"You said you were fine with taking the subway?" Bucky was looking at him even more oddly and Steve blinked, forcing himself to start walking again, bustling shoulders with a man in a black coat before he caught up to Bucky's side again. Steve pursed his lips and nodded like he'd just forgotten or something, staring straight ahead at the dusk skyline.

"Hey, you alright?"

"What, me? Yeah, fine. Why?"

"You had like. Three bites to eat."

Had he? "Not that hungry," he shrugged and Bucky peered at him suspiciously in his peripherals.

"And you're all...distant, I'dunno."

"Just tired. Ready to sleep." He gave Bucky his best tired-smile and there was a 50% chance he bought it based on the return expression.

The subway was crowded. It was New York, it was to be expected. It was just a lot of people which really, normally didn't bother him at all.

Only with this many people condensed in one space, how easy would an enemy attack destroy them all right now? Steve reached up and grabbed onto the overhead bar, swaying as flashing blue tunnel
lights passed and the subway rocked on its tracks.

It wasn't a train. He kept that on repeat in his head. It wasn't.

The next bustle had a woman stumbling into his back and Steve didn't mean to bristle, only he'd spent so many years being pushed down, the crowds hiding the scuffing of boots to his ribs--

Bucky's hand found his and Steve squeezed it once. But he was fine. He didn't need to be taken care of.

He dropped Bucky's touch, feigning the excuse'a diggin' the iPod outta his pocket. It was a long ride and the man down the way kept clearing his throat and it was just that he needed to slow his heartbeat for a second. Nothing outta the ordinary.

The headphones were all tangled up and he bit his lip to hide the frustration as he straightened them out and Bucky just would not stop looking at him. Why did he have to do that? Steve was trying.

He finally got the earbuds in, thumbing through playlists and artists and there was nothing he wanted to listen to--

Fall Out Boy. That was a safe bet. That one song, his favorite by them, the one he hadn't shown Bucky but it was a good song and it was personal and maybe it'd take his head outta this space and put him in that one.

*Last year's wishes are this year's apologies, every last time I come home...*

Bucky tapped his wrist and Steve glanced over, raising an eyebrow and silently communicating a more patient *what* than he felt. He didn't take out his headphones.

"*Are you okay,*" Bucky mouthed and Steve furrowed his eyebrows like Bucky'd asked the weirdest question in the world, giving him an axiomatic nod.

*We're the new face of failure, prettier and younger but not any better off.*

Why wouldn't he be okay?

*Bulletproof loneliness, at best.*

They were going home. Home, the Brooklyn apartment, that was his home, right? Right? Bucky'd called it home.

He'd *just* called it home.

Steve could be a good boyfriend, he could play house. It was home, *right*, if he said it enough it was bound to come true and this should be what they were doing right now anyways.

Marriage and settling down and the endgoal, weren't they supposed to be at the endgoal?

*If I woke up next to you.*

That didn't include the blood on his knuckles.

Didn't include any blood at all.

How much blood--
"You see that guy over there?" One girl whispered to her friend, subtly pointing in Steve's direction. Except he could read lips. "I think that's Captain America."

"No way. You think so?"

A tree I used to lay beneath, kissed teeth stained red.

He lifted a hand in a sarcastic wave and both girls quickly averted their eyes. Right. Captain America dare be an ass to people staring at him. No, he'd sign autographs with that plastic smile and some quip about the healthcare reform, pass out voter-registration forms and carry the American flag up to Washington's steps to roll it in a knot and fucking hang himself from the Capital building's pillars--

Bucky's hand squeezed the back of his neck and Steve jolted, shoulders stiffening as he ducked his head and shy-ed away and shit, if Bucky was looking at him like he was broken before?

Metal fingers plucked out his earbuds and Steve was greeted with the sound of harsh, ragged breathing except fuck fuck he couldn't have an attack right now, not with all these people around, the moment he landed on the ground he'd be vulnerable to steel-toed-boots and he was supposed to protect civilians, not place them in danger of his fucking hyped-up body because he couldn't get a goddamned grip.

"Steve, Steve, I need you to talk to me, you can't-- are you okay, c'mon, Stevie, talk to me--"

"Fine. I'm fine. I'm fine."

He forced his spine straight. People were staring. They'd always stared. Stared when he was too small, sickly. Stared when he was too big, perfect. Stared when he sold bonds, when he was a war hero, when he was the freak science-experiment that survived 70 years. Stared at the man out of time and it made no difference now as they stared at the loser choking on his own oxygen in the subway.

Soldier. A-ten-tion!

Who was he supposed to be? The angry kid who got in fights? The eager showgirl who was dying to join Bucky on the front lines? The stumbling sarcastic army captain? Were any of them good enough?

Was he good enough to do anything right?

"Ste--"

"I'm fine," he insisted and Bucky scrubbed a hand over his forehead, distressed to hell.

"Look, whatever's going on--"

"Nothing," he insisted, sharper, and Bucky reached for him. Steve let the hands come, let Bucky wrap an arm over his shoulders and tug him close. Sideways. Weren't they all.

"Just hold on til we get home, okay?"

Steve flinched at the word.

It took Bucky a second. Then his eyes went wide and Steve stared at his feet and didn't see anything else for the rest of the trip back.

Back home.
The door shut loud and he flinched again. He left his shield in the jet. He'd like it back, solid metal in his hands to ground him except he couldn't and his hands worried long stripes down his thighs, wiping sweat off palms as he kept his eyes down and followed Bucky into the living room. Stupid shield.

His crackled knuckles from the fight were already healing. There wasn't even blood under his nails.

The couch greeted him with hard cushions and annoyingly comfortable pillows and it just wasn't--

Steve forced himself to calm. Forearms on the tops of his knees, feet flat on floors and hands clasped loosely together as he looked at the ground, other couch, Bucky's shoulder, one eyebrow lifted and lips parted in apology. Except the silence filled before he could.

"I don't know what made me think this would be good for you."

His mouth closed.

Bucky was leaning on a window, watching the Bridge, and it took a second for the icy words to sink in. Sometimes Steve hated that intuition. How many times had Buck weasled into his head and found out more than he should've, how long'd Buck had him figured out--

After Bucky'd fallen. Right after, the day he spent bawling his eyes out at every thought that crossed his mind-- he was never gonna hear Bucky's laugh again. Oh god. --heard Buck's voice in his head, telling him to pick himself together, felt Bucky's comforting touch that hadn't been there, his favorite voice telling him to be strong. But sitting there on the floor in his tent, clutching the black sketchbook Bucky'd given him before he shipped out, there'd been one thing he couldn't shake. One thing he couldn't stop thinking about.

All those nights in Brooklyn, looking out over the bridge with Bucky at his side. For the first time since the war started, Steve understood what all the soldiers felt when they wrote about how homesick they were.

"I just wanna go home," Steve whispered, dissipating to nothing with no-one to listen anymore. They should've jumped the tracks together. They should've fallen together. They did everything together in life, that's the way it should've been in death too.

His hands were shaking; head was spinning. Bucky'd found so much in life, he was the most alive person Steve'd ever known. Even after he'd been a prisoner of war, he'd come back alive in a different sort of way - a darker, more serious kind. He'd met death and came back even more determined to live.

And now he wasn't alive at all.

He wanted to go home. He wanted to stand in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge, Bucky at his side. Looking over the water, eyes following the tension lines, the sweeping architecture of the dark brick. The familiar embrace of the cobblestone streets. The dim streetlights that flickered, the dark alleys with their hidden secrets, the smell of salt and sweat at the docks Bucky used to work.

If he could somehow go back now, to their old apartment, looking out over the view he'd drawn more than anything (besides Bucky)...would Bucky's ghost find him there? Would Brooklyn take Steve back in, give him back the warmth he'd lost from his core?
The only thing that'd mattered was coming back to Brooklyn with Bucky. He'd ached for this city, for the burrough's warm arms.

But this wasn't Brooklyn. Not really.

And as much as Bucky hadn't changed...Steve almost wished he had. Almost wished he'd changed enough to love Steve the way Steve loved him. Then maybe this strange city would take him in.

"Brooklyn isn't home to you at all anymore, is it?" Bucky lifted his head off the window, meeting Steve's eyes across the distance between them and he used to feel everything so strong, saturated and painful enough to make him gasp and cry except now he just fell into a complacent curl of his mouth and stared at nothing and Bucky was right, Brooklyn wasn't home. Bucky was.

Steve wanted to hold Bucky's hand, one more time, take the rough skin in his palm and lace their fingers together the way he used to as a kid, comfort he'd been addicted to and lost so quickly and he hadn't had something that simple since the war.

"You're too far gone," Bucky muttered and Steve squeezed his hands together, staring at nothing with his mouth pursed tight and sideways like he wasn't dying inside.

"I like it here, Buck." It wasn't a lie. He did like the apartment.

"But it doesn't feel like home," Bucky filled in and Steve made a point not to flinch this time. "This isn't the life you're cut out for."

His hands were shaking, a little, and Steve clenched them to each other harder. His head was spinning. Nothing he could do about that.

"Bucky, we've talked about this." The words were careful, void of emotion juxtaposed to drowning-emotion the day after Bucky fell. Clutching that sketchpad. God, he'd thought he'd never stop crying. Maybe he hadn't.

"You're better on a battlefield than at a kitchen table." Crystal flashed and Steve broke away, head hanging as he stared at the rug covering wood floors. One of the Commandos said they'd curl up on a rug in front of a fire for weeks after they got home. Had they? What'd Steve done? Had Steve ever come home?

Scuffed kitchen table, swinging little legs while he drew. He'd tried. He couldn't do it anymore, not like he used to. What was wrong with him?

Metal flashed reflections across the room and Steve didn't have to look up to know Bucky was spreading his arms, gesturing at the apartment and Brooklyn and domesticity. "This isn't you, Steve. Not anymore."

This was supposed to be their fresh start. How had he fucked it up already? He fucked up everyth--

"It has to be," Steve said, firmly, clenching his fists together to keep himself from striding over and taking Bucky's hand. He'd take it wrong anyways. "I can't live in a state of perpetual war, Buck."

"You want to settle down, for what? Chasing the American dream?"
The mocking tone cut deep. Steve sucked in a breath and pretended Buck hadn't just driven a knife into his stomach. Voice: level.

"I can't keep fighting. Before...I wanted a life like this, easy, with you. Aren't I supposed to be going back to that?"

So he wasn't adjusting so well. He was trying goddamnit. It wasn't like they had any other options. They couldn't fight forever. Fighting was never the life Bucky wanted. He was a lover, not a fighter. Back then. God knows what Buck was now. But he'd fought a war for Steve and Steve still didn't understand why--

"Not like this. There's not enough Brooklyn left in you to live this way." Metal tapped glass like the bridge outside was personally inputting to the conversation and tough shit, Steve couldn't hear whatever melody it sang anymore. "You'll never be happy."

Happy?

Happy?

"I just want you to be happy," Steve told him. It was the wrong thing to say. Icy eyes widened a fraction, then a bomb went off somewhere and Bucky exploded.

"Happy?? Ты счастлив? Are you happy, Steve? Tell me all about what it's supposed to feel like to be so goddamned happy!"

Steve'd crossed his arms over his chest, glared back. "I'll be happy once you're better." It was the truth; Steve may not be in a great place right now, but once Bucky was okay, then there'd be nothing to keep Steve from being okay too.

Right. Nothing to keep Steve from being okay, nothing at all.

"Better? Better? There's nothing wrong with me!" Bucky shouted, metal arm whirring as his hands tightened into curled fists...

Happy.

You'll never be happy.

The hell did Bucky know about happy?

"I can't--" Steve scrubbed a hand over his mouth, forcing the fight off his tongue. When was Buck gonna get it? For all that he knew about Steve, how hard was this to grasp? He steeled; hardened instead of crumbled like he wanted to. Lifted his head, straightened up. Stared right at Bucky's expectant expression and opened the door on his soul. "I cannot keep fighting, Buck. Can't you see? That's how I lost you. I got you killed by fighting, Bucky, that was my fault and I can't lose you again because I'm the idiot who likes getting punched."

He spat the words bitter at the end and the transformation over Bucky's expression was remarkable. Frustration morphed to shock, then a dark, dry laugh tumbled past Bucky's beautiful lips and Steve had to grit his teeth to keep from turning away.

Thankfully Buck flicked his gaze through glass again and Steve could inhale properly without sucking in the poisonous danger of Bucky's eyes.

"What a place that leaves us. You keep fighting and you're always scared of losing me. You don't
fight and you're already lost." The metal shoulder shrugged and Steve couldn't see the scars rippling beneath Bucky's clothes but he could swear, in that moment, he could feel them. He could feel the flint in Bucky's throat, the shards cutting slivers against his voice.

Patience faded for sharpness and it hurt, enough to make Steve swallow dryly and hold his breath against choking. "You can't make decisions based only on my well-being, Steve. You can't... codepend on me like that."

Codepend. He'd proven, he wasn't alive without Bucky, he was more of a cyborg than the Winter Soldier and the ship to be whole without his best friend had sailed a long time ago.

Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky.

He had Bucky by his side and that - that connection, that tie to his past, that's what made him breathe real oxygen for the first time. Smile. Laugh. Realize he was just a step away from home, from taking Bucky's hand and meaning that, meaning what it'd meant back when Bucky'd let him cling however tight he needed.

Without that, before that? He'd drifted. He'd been nothing. He'd gone to Peggy and told her he didn't know right from wrong but the truth was that he didn't know himself from that exhibit and it hurt, it ached. He'd even been a stranger there. He'd stood in front of murals of his own face and people brushed by him like he was no-one because he was, Steve Rogers had died seventy years ago and someone else'd come outta the ice.

But Bucky'd brought him back. Barely keeping it together in a rainy pavilion as he spilled his soul to his friends and they hugged him and made a point to call him Steve instead of just Cap. He liked Cap fine, so long as it meant Captain Rogers, but the effort was too touching to correct.

Without Buck...

"You're all I have that ties me to who I am, Bucky." Steve stared at the other end of the room and exhaled heavy, sinking. Bucky Barnes, that's what tugged him back from the edge and breathed vitality into lungs that went from broken to perfect to useless to full and alive.

It was silent. The apartment was silent and Steve couldn't turn his head, could picture the broken look of pity on Bucky's face just fine--

"For how long?" Bucky interrupted. Except that softness wasn't there. It was hard and cold and Steve snapped over to look at the passive expression.

"What?"

"For how long have you made me the only way to be you?" Bucky took a single step forward and Steve sat dumbly. Bucky's voice was too careful, words articulate and bordering on efficient and Steve could only blink. "You can't do that to yourself, Steve."

(During the war, Bucky'd come back from torture and stitched himself up with sunshine thread, tying himself to Steve so tightly-- every inch of his fucked-up brain clung to Steve. Steve was the glue that held pieces together so Bucky was a real person. And long before any of that shit, Bucky'd needed Steve like people needed oxygen. Held on with both hands and spent his spare time sewing himself up so one day, he could let Steve go.

Except he'd never figured how to keep himself from unraveling without Steve holding him together like thread through a vital wound. And look what that'd done. Look what happened. The Winter Soldier, that was Bucky unraveled at the seams and it'd been his own fault because the stitches had
been Steve's love and when he didn't have that anymore he fucking lost everything.

Now Steve was doing the same goddamned thing.

Steve was laying that responsibility on Bucky. He couldn't do that to himself.

"--and you definitely can't do that to me." Bucky pointed an accusing finger and Steve looked shocked, appalled. Like he somehow didn't know. "I'm not stable enough to carry us both."

"You're doing better. The nightmares are still bad but--"

"It seeps through in the night, but it's always there. Those horrors. The risk of falling apart? That's always there. I'm too broken for you to need me like that." He couldn't be sunshine stitches when he woke with a gun to Steve's forehead, when Steve was dragging himself through mud to make something work that shouldn't, Bucky wasn't strong enough to support when he was a goddamned hurricane. The only way they were surviving this time around was if they did it different. If they had themselves first, if they could be real people without each other. "You have to make it on your own, Steve."

They were both standing now, a foot away and if they couldn't even control this gravity, how were they ever supposed to be safe--

Steve's puffed-up chest caved.

Blue eyes were watering.

Bucky cocked his head, running back through the lines in his head as Steve looked up at the ceiling, tried to collect himself, looked back at Bucky like he was the one who'd kicked him in the stomach all those years.

"You promised me I'd never have to."

Oh shit. When Sarah'd died.

If only she were here now. Which one would she scold for being foolish? Which one would she pull into her arms and cradle and let cry? It didn't matter. She wasn't here.

She hadn't been since that first night. Standing outside Steve's apartment, his housekey cool in Bucky's hand.

I can make it by on my own, Buck.

He'd known that. He still knew that, only problem was that Steve didn't anymore and Bucky needed him to keep thinking that, needed Steve to be strong enough on his own. Because Steve'd always been so strong, even back then, and Bucky'd always known and that's why he'd shaken his head, glancing up at Steve under dark lashes and offering,

The thing is...you don't have to.

That used to be their relationship.

That used to work.

This?

This didn't work.
Bucky breathed out slow through a circle-o, steadying himself. Steve was leaning too hard. There was no confidence and alright-with-loneliness now. Steve clung to him and Bucky was choking.

Where had he gone wrong?

"We weren't lovers then. We weren't each other's everything then." Bucky tried to keep his voice steady but it was hard when the words sounded like lies. They may not've been lovers, but Steve'd always been his world. In the war he'd realized just how much of that world. But this wasn't then. Too much'd changed and Steve used to be fine without him, hadn't needed anything but company and care and the occasional stitch-job.

Now? What Steve was asking of him now?

"You didn't say you loved me then and you didn't expect me to say it back! We took this too far, we're in this too deep, and if one thing happens that's it, don't you get that?" How many times had he told Steve, we can't give this everything. What happens next time? He was already a killer, monster, nothing without Steve. It couldn't be that way for both of them. "Don't you get how burning hand-in-hand only works when we're two people? When we're equals?" He tapped a metal finger to the center of Steve's chest and it didn't clunk hollowly like Tony's, there was nothing hollow about Steve's heart and if Bucky ever broke that beautiful thing...

He sucked in a breath, thinking of bullets and battle-scars and the danger pumping through his veins that everyone so easily tossed aside now. He'd almost killed Tony the other day, nearly cracked his skull with a punch that Steve'd just barely managed to stop. He almost killed Steve the other day, waking from a nightmare. He was unraveling. He'd never had proper stitches this time around anyways.

It was simple. "The only way I can protect you is to make sure you'll be okay on your own when I finally break down."

"Protect me? When are you gonna stop protecting me? This is why we're not equals, because you've never seen me that way. I'm always your responsibility. Even now, you don't want more with me because you think I'm not ready. When do I get to make my own damn decisions in this relationship?"

"When you start being honest with yourself," Bucky snapped, then he was striding past Steve and the apartment settled into silence and Bucky slammed the bedroom door loud enough he was surprised it didn't come off the hinges.

More with me.

What the hell did that mean.

Bucky saying I love you back? Getting matching shirts? Going steady? He kinda thought they already were.

They'd moved in together. They slept together, they were dating, what the hell did Steve need that was more. Again.

I want you to love me back, he'd said. Was that what he was talking about? Or maybe...no.

No, it couldn't be that.
He didn't have to deal with this shit.

It was two hours later when he opened the bedroom door again. Night had already fallen and Steve was stretched out on the couch, arm folded behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling, apparently thinking he was supposed to sleep there. Right, sleep. That'd become a regular thing for them, a nightly thing. Bucky used to sleep four hours once a week and now he slept for seven most nights and was that a good thing or a bad one? Was he losing time or healing?

It didn't matter. He wasn't sleeping tonight.

Bucky cleared his throat and Steve's head snapped up, sitting up slowly as he looked at Bucky over the back of the couch. He was already standing by the door and he could see Steve register that, the confusion and hurt on his beautiful face and Bucky was getting outta here, couldn't handle this right now.

"I'm going to Tony's." They'd all have so many questions, showing up alone in the middle of the night, but he didn't care. Bucky grabbed his shoes, hand on the doorknob, and leveled his gaze seriously on the blue eyes. "Don't do anything stupid until I get back."

Steve froze. Eyes blown wide, lips tight and trembling at the corners, then he looked away, nodding silently. No quip back. It'd've been trying too hard if he had. That wasn't Steve anymore.

Bucky shut the door behind him and didn't hear the broken sound as Steve put a hand over his mouth and stared at the betraying door.

To their credit, the Avengers did try talking to him. He stepped off the elevator onto their old floor to a hoard of heroes on the couch.

"Sarge," Clint greeted and Bucky's jaw clicked.

"You wanna come and ta--" Natasha started and the look on her face suggested maybe no one'd ever snap-interrupted her before.

"Not interested." Bucky started across the room, having to pass everyone to get to the other half of the apartment and the offended silence Natasha was sitting in may've just destroyed everything they'd so tentatively built as friends in the past few weeks.

"James Buchanan," Pepper called after him and fuck he did not need this right now.

"Don't," he snapped, spinning on a heel to glare at them all. "You may be Steve's friends, but you need to back the fuck out."

There were at least two slack jaws and Sam looked so wounded Bucky was probably gonna be haunted by that expression for months. So he'd disowned them all by calling them Steve's friends, not his.

It wasn't like they weren't all thinking it anyways.

Like any of them genuinely liked him? Right. No, if he wasn't Steve's "significant other" then he wouldn't've had a single fucking hand extended. He remembered how much they all hated him at first. He remembered.

No one said another word and Bucky turned back around, leaving them all in the dust as he slammed
the artroom door behind him. The frame splintered again and Bucky didn't give a fuck.

The paintbrush in his hand was stiff, an old one spun tight with glue to make the tip even smaller. Etching the tiniest of details, smallest color changes and sharpest pointed tips on white stars - if he focused enough on the tiny tiny pieces of his painting then he wouldn't have to look at the big picture and maybe he wouldn't start crying.

Focus on just one star, tiny golden light in the window. Nothing else, don't look at the watery outlined rainbow hues...

Painting let him think, at least. About Steve, of course.

The thing is...you don't have to. Yeah, Steve was right, he'd always been protective. But he'd never seen Steve as some fragile flower. He knew damn well Steve could do things on his own. Never made decisions for him. The only decision Bucky ever made for Steve was when he picked up his shield to protect him from the blue blast that shot Bucky off the train.

He knew Steve was a fighter. Better than Steve did, sometimes. Knew that he'd been through so much and he knew that Steve could pull through anything. He didn't need Bucky, he didn't.

When he'd told Steve he'd stand by his side no matter what happened, offered his company in the worst moment of Steve’s life, it'd been because he didn’t plan on ever leaving Steve. But he knew now, it didn't work like that. Some things were bigger than they were. They couldn't hold tight and be blind to the fact that Bucky'd turned into a monster without Steve and Steve'd turned plastic without Bucky.

If Steve couldn't see that...couldn't see the difference between protection-love-safety and underestimation-no-respect...how was this supposed to work?

Let alone something more. What the hell did that even mean?

More.

He was still thinking about it when the door creaked open. His head snapped up, ready to bark at whoever the fuck it was, whichever "friend" thought they were so damn superior they could just march in and get an exception, only it wasn't one of Steve's friends at all.

It was Steve.

He closed the door softly behind him and Bucky sat down his paintbrush.

"I wanna be honest, Bucky." Steve shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at the paintbuckets on the floor that they'd laughingly splashed each other with and Bucky stepped around his painting, waiting.

"It's ripping me apart -" Dropped into a whisper, Steve's voice so quiet and broken it belonged in that moment Bucky'd witnessed a week ago, pacing around the apartment and ripping up drawings in the watery lights of the bridge. "--this dual life."

Bucky shrugged, crossing his arms over his chest and laying it out, translating the inside of that messy head. "You're a soldier the minute we walk out that door and you're trying to shed the shield when you cross the threshold again. The back and forth is shredding you at the seams."
The seams that weren't allowed to be made of moonlight and starshine.

"You do it," Steve whispered, shoulders up by his ears. Small, almost like Little Stevie again. "How do you do it?"

"I don't," Bucky replied, tucking a piece of hair behind his ear and stepping forward. Steve's eyes lifted and Bucky held them because he wasn't sure it was a good idea to hold any other part of Steve right now. "I'm never a soldier. I fight, but it's for you. The monster I am out there -" A point and Steve started to shake his head, protesting that Bucky wasn't but he didn't wanna hear it, " - is the same monster I am in here. You're the one who can't pick an identity. I've always had the same one."

Maybe...maybe he'd always known he'd become something like this. Maybe that was why he'd always been so afraid to love Steve. Because becoming the legendary ghost-story was a hellofalot less surprising than it should've been.

"Always been the Winter Soldier," he echoed quietly, *always been too far in love with you*, he didn't say, even though he should've. Even though that's what counted.

Even though that's what Steve needed to hear.

Blue studied him like Bucky was something sweet. Good. The sweetest outsides had the rotten cores, didn't they?

No one said anything else because there was nothing to say.

Their shoulders brushed as they got back into the elevator and Bucky saw the depleted cushions, the empty space Steve's friends had left and turned his eyes away.

~*~*~

Black.

Foxholes in black forests; the screams of terrified soldiers, the smell of blood and tears.

He'd told Bucky that much about his nightmares before.

But the Commandos were never the screaming ones. They were never the terrified ones. It was hard, it wasn't like their side had it easy. But they were the ones doing the shredding - cats eating the canaries. That was the part they didn't let themselves think about.

It was the good fight;

Steve'd cut the heads off people who'd been dragged into the same war they'd been shoved into.

Doors bust open and it was too dark to see anything but Steve was firing anyways, bursts of red and white that soared into shadowed corners. Screams lit up the night and there was machine gun fire beside him, except this time it wasn't comforting. The warehouse started to drip blood and Steve's vision swam, checking over his shoulder.

There was Falsworth, beret riddled with bullet holes, Dugan's mustache flecked red. So were Sam's eyes, Natasha's hair catching fire and everything was black and white that wasn't red and Steve opened his mouth to scream.

Except he couldn't, there was something choking his lips, holding his chin in place. He released his
grip on the gun in his hands...except it wasn't letting go, it was stuck to his bloody-red gloves and Steve shook his hands, trying to free himself only the gun melted, molded to his fingers with curling black snakes and Steve still couldn't scream.

Black-red fingers tentatively touched his lips and his mouth wasn't there. Hard plastic instead and the dripping blood had pooled on the floor, raced to his feet and looking down he could see his reflection, flickering in shiny red and there was a mask over his mouth, nose, cheeks. A very familiar mask.

Steve clawed at the choking thing and it wouldn't budge, squeezing tighter and tighter as he screamed wordlessly and fumbled gun-coated fingers on the edges he'd once taken from Bucky's face. The reflection stared back at him with hollow eyes and Steve kicked the pool of blood, spiking red shards across the black-edged room and there was a voice, echoing quietly in the distance, young and innocent and Steve stumbled through black-red into a wall of tar, words steadily louder and louder at the edges of metal.

Not all of us can storm a beach. Or drive a tank. But there's still a way all of us can fight.

You've heard a lot about me over the past few days. Some of you were even ordered to hunt me down.

Series E defense bonds. Each one you buy is a bullet in the barrel--

I think it's time you know the truth.

I know it's a war, you don't have to tell me it's a war.

Each one you buy is a bullet--

I don't know how many more. But I know they're in the building. They could be standing right next to you.

"Bucky!" Steve's throat choked but it didn't matter, the mask was muffling his words and his voice hadn't even changed--

-in the barrel of your best guy's gun.

They almost have what they want. Absolute control.

The wall caved and finally finally, only Steve wasn't breaking free he was falling, falling. Bucky was watching from above and falling below him faster and the screams, everything steadying for a single second long enough for Steve to break the neck of a Hydra scientist. Warm blood spilling over his hands with his last shout still echoing in the factory--

Where is he?

They hadn't told him. He'd found Bucky in Germany, how many facilities had they ripped apart before that--

Good becomes great. Bad becomes worse.


If you launch those helicarriers today, Hydra will be able to kill anyone in their way.

I'm not stopping until all of Hydra's dead or captured.
I know I'm asking a lot. But the price of freedom is high. It always has been.

Bucky, Bucky, c'mon, there are men laying down their lives. I got no right to do any less than them.

Laying down their lives, ribs cracked and lungs punctured with the force of a shield to their chest.

No right to do any less.

He hit the ground with a jolt and the quickest flash of black and white, a man laying crumpled on the ground beside him with red oozing out of his shoulder and eyes and

Steve woke.

His hands went to his mouth first, holding his breath, afraid he'd find the mask fitted over his skull again. Except those were his lips, he was fine, and he pulled air into his lungs as slow and quiet as possible.

He was

fine.

Bucky shifted on the pillow beside Steve's, rolling on the arm Steve had tucked under his neck.

Bucky.

His palm found Bucky's heartbeat and it was steady but it wasn't enough, Steve had to know he was real, this was real.

Wild hands ran over bare skin and Bucky made a sleepy sound but Steve couldn't stop devouring every inch in reach; hard muscle that refused to cave, flesh of Bucky's stomach that condescended under pressed fingertips, gasp punched outta him and Steve was pressing too hard, leaving bruises but he couldn't make himself stop, he needed to crawl inside Bucky's skin where it was safe and he wasn't covered in Hydra's spilt blood--

Strong arms wrapped around his head and Steve choked against Bucky's chest, squeezing his ribs tight enough to break, clinging to him desperately and burrowing closer, breathing straight off soft skin and ridged scars because oxygen'd never liked his lungs.

The mattress compressed as Bucky rolled Steve onto his back, covering him in darkness and heavy weight, living blanket to pull him down from red-stained skies and Steve hid inside Bucky's body and slid his trigger-hand over Bucky's neck. Cold, ice shuddering minutes around them.

"I need you," Steve rasped and his throat sounded as blood-filled as it felt and Bucky just held him tighter. "M'suffocating without you please please, drowning, promise we'll outlive the blind this time just let me--"

"Steve."

"Bucky p-please--"

"Shhh. Shhh, angel, it's okay. I've got you."

"P-p--"

"Shhh. Stevie, shh."
Catatonic melted in his arms and Bucky hid his tears in Steve's blonde crown.

For so many nights beside Steve in bed, how many times had the pretty mouth exhaled nonsense in his ear, late night promises of bleeding himself dry to keep Bucky alive and it hurt, so much, every time. He'd spent a lifetime scared of broken promises, he didn't need to be scared of Steve keeping his.

But he was. This life wasn't made for Steve, this life of latenights in bed and morning kisses over coffee and how...why did Steve want this anyways? Why was he convincing himself he wanted this-

Bucky didn't have the right to hold him back from his shield. He already knew fire and scars and at least that was better. They'd both known death for so long but the real kind, the one that ripped your body to shreds, was kinder than the death that just ripped out your heart.

This was all Bucky'd wanted for so long. Steve was all he wanted and all he'd have to give up--

How much longer could he fake the fragments, how much longer could they both keep playing alive? He was losing his grip in the wake of holding on too tight and two comets weren't colliding with one left in the sky anymore, the stars were battling the sky they lived in and the sky was fighting back even harder and if they couldn't--

They'd lose everything they'd built, Steve's friends. Demons were nipping heels, water poisoned between them, a bridge to fall off one more time--

"Do I deserve to call myself Steve Rogers anymore?" Steve whispered into the darkness and Bucky closed his eyes.

He'd never wanted to have this conversation. They just had to hold each other down and no one was allowed to run or else everyone would explode--

"I never wouldda killed like this back then."

I know, Bucky said silently, hands running down the trembling muscles of Steve's shoulders, arms, hands. Rolling to the side so Steve could breathe but maybe that's not what either of them wanted anymore. Blue eyes were red with tears and exhaustion and stress and Bucky kissed Steve's eyelids and Steve's mouth crumbled down, words rushing like deflating lungs.

"If I'd seen then, what I'd become now..." Bucky kissed his mouth to beg him to stop talking and the moment they broke back off Steve kept right on digging graves. "I'd've been disgusted with myself."

"War," Bucky started, ready to preach back that same speech Steve'd given him. The price of freedom was high. So maybe he wasn't as good as Stevie Rogers from Brooklyn but that didn't mean--

"I've. I've become the bullies that I've fought my entire life." Steve's face twisted and Bucky found his hands, squeezed them and kissed his knuckles and Steve closed his eyes in defeat, voice breaking over a soundless sob, "I-I'm the monster."

And that was it.

Bucky couldn't fight the thing he'd always been and Steve became the thing he always fought.

There was nothing left to go back to and Bucky couldn't fix this one.
He pressed metal to Steve's cheek and Steve pressed flesh over the top, squeezing Bucky tighter to his skin and there'd be an imprint on his jaw, the edge of his mouth, lines like the mask Bucky used to wear on his face and who were they kidding?

"We're both too far gone," Bucky told him and Steve turned his mouth into Bucky's palm and cried himself to sleep.

~*~*~

The light of dawn faded out the stomp of the drum and Steve was already at the kitchen table when Bucky started breakfast. They were both quiet and the white walls of their apartment, big glass windows, made the shadows of night irrationally far away.

Steve's uniform was laying by the door. Bucky still had paint on his wrists, the backs of his hands. He hadn't properly cleaned off between Steve's visit to the tower and crashing beside him in their new bed.

"This is what I used to want," Steve finally offered, both hands warming his mug of tea. Bucky raised an eyebrow and sat a plate of apples in front of him. Steve took a slice with a tiny smile, popping it in his mouth before shrugging, looking down at his mug. Over at the living room. Back at Bucky. "This home, a family with you. The guy who wanted this, that's who I'm supposed to be."

Bucky pursed his lips and nodded. That's what he'd figured this was about.

Steve was trying to come back from a battle he'd never left and all he had to cling to was distant dreams he remembered from a life they never could've had, not then and not now.

He picked up the knife he'd used to cut the apples, swiped it clean with a cloth, slid it back in its engraved wooden block. When was the last time he'd killed someone with a knife?

"Being happy isn't becoming who you used to be, Steve." Bucky turned around, leaning against the counter as he picked up his own tea, metal creaking from the heat. "It's becoming who you want to be."

It took him a long time to figure that out.

Longer to brush it aside.

Steve gave him a look that Bucky read easily, *pot calling the kettle black* and Bucky ignored it, taking a sip and scalding his tongue. Steve took another apple slice, popping it in his mouth and glancing between the plate and Bucky again.

"I want to be with you."

"Mm." Bucky raised both eyebrows and pursed his lips, sitting his mug on the counter because he'd figured Steve'd say that, really hoped he'd be wrong.

Only he wasn't and Steve was pinning him with another look, defensive like his fists were raised instead of wrapped innocently around tea.

"Do you want to be with me too?"

"You know I do," Bucky reminded him lightly, crossing the kitchen to Steve's table and the blue was
still looking at him with that defiant challenge.

"Do I?"

Bucky knew what he was talking about. There was no use anymore pretending that he didn't, so he sighed and braced a hand on the back of Steve's chair, leaning over to speak low and close.

"You don't need those words to know." He tipped forward into a kiss and Steve kissed him back, didn't say aloud what he was thinking and Bucky could go the rest of eternity without the damnation of the confirmation he knew was resting on the tongue he sucked into his mouth,

Yeah, yeah, maybe I do.

Steve blew out a breath and adjusted the height of his stool.

He was gonna get better.

"Is Sarge alright?" Clint asked.

Steve furrowed his eyebrows. "We're fine."

"He seemed...distressed, the other night," Thor offered and Steve shrugged.

"We're working on it. Speaking of which..."

They both huffed, got to work, didn't mention it again.

Steve thought about it though, all the way through when he waved them goodbye again.

There was that book: Wuthering Heights. Bucky'd liked it more than he had, but there was a quote he couldn't stop thinking about. Catherine and Heathcliff, best friends since childhood, mortally in love and fatally obsessed. Anguished, haunted by each other's ghosts, and Catherine had said, He's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, whatever's in our blood. His and mine are the same.

That, he understood.

Bucky, he didn't.

Why--

See, the thing was, as angry as he could get with Bucky about shutting him out, pinning him down, accusing him of lying to himself, refusing to say he loved Steve and breaking more promises thing is, you don't have to - as angry as he was about that?

It was still all Steve's fault.

He let Bucky fall.

He let Bucky fall and didn’t go looking for him afterwards, let Hydra find him and torture him and turn him into the Winter Soldier.
He'd said it before but he'd say it again because as many times as it'd been shoved in the dirt, it wasn't something that went away. Ever.

He never saw the darkness Bucky'd hid in all along.

When he was the one falling, Bucky jumped. Bucky saved him when Steve was nothing to him and Steve failed him when Bucky was everything.

*He'd carry that with him forever.*

He was selfish enough to be grateful he never saved Bucky back then, because Bucky was here now and he wouldn't trade that for anything.

Steve was sick and twisted, and it was all his own fault.

He'd threatened to destroy thousands of people to get Bucky back, to avenge his fall, to get him back once more.

Steve couldn't sleep at night and Bucky couldn't sleep at night and they were poisoning each other and drowning in too many emotions and everything was all off and wrong and if they were ever really gonna move forward, get better? Save each other and heal and start breathing the air of the living again?

They couldn't go on like this. Something had to change.

And Steve was gonna change it.

~*~

War. He'd never come home from the war.

~*~

*Right, cause you've got nothing to prove.*

Steve could prove to Bucky they could do this. It wasn't enough to say he and his boyfriend were working on it. If they were ever gonna get there, he had to know.

Bucky had to be his. Tied to him in some way more than "dating," bestfriends. Just in case things went to shit like always, he needed to know Buck was never gonna leave him.

If "home" couldn't feel permanent, their relationship had to.

It was time.

"...Natasha? Would you...I need some advice."

"And you're sure this'll work?"
"Yes, Steve. I made it to fit, just twist it this direction and it locks in place. I am the best mechanical engineer you know. You doin' it soon? I can break out the heavy champagne."

"Uh. Yeah, actually. I'm doing it tomorrow."

"Wow. Anything special about the 22nd of June?"

"Yeah...that's the day I got the serum. Changed my life around. Figured next big change I'm doing could be that day too."

A few decades ago, Peggy Carter stood on the Brooklyn bridge, skirt blowing in the wind and traffic rushing behind her. Younger than she was now, old enough to have the start of crinkles by her eyes.

She stood on the place that, for her, always stood for Steve. Brooklyn was New York's heart, her heart, the core of the people and the truth behind the struggle.

It'd been Steve's home, and standing on a bridge she knew first-hand meant the world to him - it was about as close as she could get to Steve these days. The museum exhibit they'd opened was as cold as the ice he and Bucky'd crashed into. Glass and walls and distant flickering movie screens.

Black-and-white photographs that didn't capture the skin. The light in his eyes.

The bridge was closer to him. That, and the vial she held in her hands.

There's only one person in the world who knows what to do with this.

She'd kept it for so many years, entrusted with this one last piece of Steve. There's only one person in the world who knows what to do with this.

She'd wondered, for most her life, what that was. Research for the future? Saving more lives?

But he'd already saved so many. It was time he rest.

But time they both rest.

Peggy Carter stepped up to the edge of the bridge and tipped over the vial in her hand.

"Goodbye, my darling," she whispered into the wind and the last piece of Steve fell, fell, splashed into the water below, not a drop to stain the bridge beneath her feet.

Where she'd stood, it was the same place Steve stood now. He didn't know that, but Bucky did. Peggy'd told him.

Steve asked Bucky to come on a walk, Bucky was surprised they'd gravitated here.

But the bridge was the start of it all. For Peggy, the end of it all too. Whatever Steve wanted to talk about had to be important, then, and Bucky leaned on the railing overlooking the water, thinking to himself that maybe the two of them should go up and visit Peggy soon. She hadn't gotten to see the both of them at once before. And Bucky hadn't seen her since...since this.

He glanced over at Steve, wind rustling blonde hair and river below reflecting into peaceful blue eyes and he was so goddamned beautiful, a work of art. If Bucky had to say goodbye to him here too, lost him off the bridge, at least he knew Steve loved him this time. At least he knew Steve was the world.

"Buck," Steve started and Bucky straightened up, tucking a piece of stray hair behind his ear. "I...I
wanted to ask you something."

Bucky raised an eyebrow and waved for Steve to continue. He hesitated, opening his mouth and closing it again, looking out over the water, up at the railings of the bridge. Back at Bucky, more decisive this time.

"Lemme see your hand."

Steve started digging for something in his pocket before Bucky even extended it, offering his flesh palm to Steve confusedly. The hell did this have to do with anything?

Then Steve found whatever he was looking for, pulling it outta his pocket with a triumphant noise while Bucky's eyebrows furrowed deeper in confusion.

"What is that for?"

"Just, gimme a second, jeez," Steve muttered goodnaturedly, taking Bucky's extended hand and separating his fingers. Then he put the Sharpie in his mouth, popped the cap off with his teeth and held it there while he hovered the tip of the marker over Bucky's skin.

"You drawing something?" Bucky asked curiously, trying to peer around Steve's fingers to see what the Sharpie was marking onto his hand this time.

"No, m'writin'theconstitution n'yourhand," Steve sassed, Sharpie in his mouth slurring all the words and kinda losing the teasing effectiveness.

Bucky rolled his eyes with a crooked smile. Steve drawin' on him always tweaked this string in his chest.

Right up until Steve gave his hand back, popping the cap on the Sharpie and shoving it back in his pocket. Because then Bucky gotta see what he drew.

And his lungs closed.

"Steve," he breathed, lifting his hand to sunlight to see it better, making sure he wasn't losing his mind, that Steve'd actually drawn that on him. He had.

His gaze cut to Steve's face next, eyebrows still knit in confusion and eyes broken over hope and mouth twisted because that couldn't mean what he thought it did.

Except Steve's eyes were twinkling, challenge mixed with mischief as he looked at Bucky with that same fire in his eyes, Nothin. I'm just a kid from Brooklyn.

Bucky looked back at his hand. At the mark Steve'd drawn on him.

Of all things Steve'd drawn, this was the one rendering him speechless.

Which was ridiculous, really, considering it was just a line, wrapping around his fourth finger. A line with a perpendicular dash to mark the end. He knew what that meant. And it was on his fourth finger this time. It couldn't help but look like a ring.

Bucky opened his mouth to ask Steve if he'd just goddamned proposed by drawing on Bucky with a Sharpie, except when he looked back up Steve wasn't standing there.

He was kneeling at Bucky's feet.
"Oh my god." Bucky's metal hand shot up to cover his mouth and Steve's expression crinkled in a smile, one knee up at a ninety and the other on the ground and Jesus Christ, this couldn't be happening to him right now.

There was a box in Steve's hand.

There was a box in Steve's hand.

It was open. There was a silver-white ring inside.

"Oh my god," Bucky said again, muffled by his hand, and Steve's smile lit up bigger. The little shit, he was enjoying this. Bucky honestly picked the worst best friend on the planet. His mouth wasn't working now, nothing but his sight as he stared down at Steve. Blue eyes waited patiently as Bucky tried to get a grip and failed miserably.

"Steve," Bucky broke over his name, almost a distant call, and Steve reached up and took his right hand again. The smile faded a little, or the mischief in it did anyways, expression sinking pure and genuine and Bucky was gonna fucking cry. "Y-you want to--"

"Yes. Bucky. I want this. I want you."

It was his most sincere scolding voice - Bucky Bucky, c'mon, there are men laying down their lives...

Only they weren't arguing about joining a war anymore.

Steve was offering to end one.

He couldn't believe-- after all the hell they'd both been through, this was where they'd ended up? It wasn't even surreal, it wasn't. It felt really goddamned real and that was the worst part, because looking back at everything, back from that first backalley, Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers were always meant for each other. They were bound to get together.

Bound to get together.

"Stevie, are you..." Bucky started, lingering over the word sure because that rush in his veins couldn't help but fear if maybe he second-guessed it then Steve would too and after all the shit between them lately and all the issues they'd just exposed raw to the open, how was this some kind of solution and Bucky couldn't survive another heartbreak.

Only Steve squeezed his hand, wrapping their fingers together the way they used to.

A flickering army-tent. Bucky's hands in bandages like a mummy and Steve'd even held his hands then, Steve'd even held him tight then and Bucky'd joked - you holdin' my hand, Rogers? and Steve'd shot back wouldn't be the first time and god, god it'd been nowhere near the last time either and Bucky was seriously gonna cry.

Steve's chest expanded beneath his tshirt as he sucked in a breath, then the words, barely more than a whisper, were sinking straight into Bucky's heart.

"I finally figured out how to come home." A little shrug and Steve's thumb ran over the back of his hand, over knuckles that'd broken, and swore his life down on the wire. "You're my Brooklyn, Bucky. I wanna come home from that godforsaken war. Let me come home – to you."

Come home. To you.
When Steve said all that about telling the Commandos he wasn't going back to Brooklyn, that's what he meant. When he said Brooklyn was a cocky smile, bright accent, crystal eyes, warm hands pulling outta dark alleys? He wasn't saying Brooklyn wasn't enough he was saying Bucky was his home.

Oh.

And now he wanted to prove it. To make it solid. Bucky was his home.

No wonder Steve'd been lost. His home wasn't a time - *it's not 1945 anymore, Cap* - or a place - *I can't afford a place in Brooklyn.* It was a person. His home was Bucky.

Oh.

Funny, of everything he knew about Steve Rogers, how had Bucky never known that?

"Bucky," Steve italicized and his sight unblurred long enough to see the desperate promise on Steve's lifted face as he looked up at Bucky--

what a trip, Steve looking up at him again, maybe he'd planned it that way to rip out Bucky's heartstrings because that was his boy, that punk kid who looked up at him with that bright face and messy bangs and little bloody fists. This was his boy too, the strong and healthy Captain he'd followed into battle and yeah, there wasn't any question about the answer he was giving Rogers.

--and laid their hearts on that wire again, 1941 outside Steve's apartment and 2014 in a helicarrier and they looked at each other with that promise in their eyes and hot fire cradled in hands.

"This can be our last breath. This is it," Steve swore, quiet, and Bucky was hanging on the thread of losing it, suspended above the crash, hand stilled over his mouth and chest frozen colder than cryo, then those words came outta Steve's mouth and there came the slip into the familiar fall, down down down. Bucky welcomed the rushing wind this time, hand in hand, heart to heart, crystal on sky as blue eyes looked up at him and promised;

"I'm with you to the end of the line."

*Although there are oceans we must cross, and mountains that we must climb. I know every gain must have a loss, so pray that our loss is nothing but time.*

Til then.

The tears came with the same crash the rain had, that first thunderstorm that'd given Steve pneumonia and drew them to each other in the first promise, *I had you.*

Bucky's biggest regret was that he couldn't see right now, the tears slipping over his eyelashes and down the line of his nose and pooling wetly against the hand over his mouth, they blurred his vision and he couldn't see the look on Steve's face, but he was shaking too hard anyways.

"Are you crying?" Steve asked and Bucky's hand whirred as he brought it away from his mouth, tried uselessly to glare down at his asshole of a best friend.

"My b-best guy just asked me to marry him, of course I'm c...crying."

A bright laugh and that was nice, at least Steve was enjoying himself, then there was a tug on his hand as Steve hoisted himself to his feet and wrapped his arms around Bucky.
All the cold fought off and the wind off the water whistled around them and the lights over the bridge were just blinking on, glittering over them like stars and they hugged each other on the Brooklyn bridge tight enough to promise to never let go.

Bucky buried his face in Steve's neck and Steve held him closer, warm hands flattening Bucky's spine, strong muscle holding them both up, one sharp edge of the box in Steve's right hand digging into his ribs but he could give a damn, he could stay right here for the rest of his life.

The relief that'd rushed through him after Azzano, when Steve'd dragged him off that table and through a burning building and waved a hand at Bucky *Just go* and Bucky'd lost his fucking mind, grabbed onto the rail and shouted back *No. Not without you*, then Steve'd jumped over that goddamned gap and landed in Bucky's arms, stumbling into each other and breathing too hard and smelling like smoke and squeezing each other tight because they'd almost lost each other so many times--

It wasn't all that different from the relief he felt now, crushing his bones inside Steve's embrace and holding on tight for every jump they'd almost not made across and funny, how much Bucky still meant that, every word.

No, not without you.

Bucky had fallen and Steve had crashed and they'd both made it back to each other and everything hit him in that moment, in Steve's shuddering breaths against his ear and his watering eyes getting Steve's hair wet and they couldn't hold onto each other tight enough.

"God, you bastard," Bucky finally breathed against his ear, hands splayed across his shoulderblades. Steve lifted his head a little outta Bucky's hair, eyes still closed and nose tucked against his temple. Bucky's body expanded *dirty sadness fill me up just like a balloon* as he sucked in a breath, attempting to level his voice and failing. "Of course I'll marry you."

Steve barked a shaky laugh, because of course. Of course. Fuck, he'd missed this. Steve bundled him up tighter in his arms, until he couldn't breathe at all, but Bucky was never gonna want anything less.

It was probably another minute before he sighed into Steve's neck, arms releasing tension as he started to pull back. Steve wasn't letting go yet, but there was a box digging into Bucky's back they still had to attend to. He prodded ribs with a metal finger and Steve relented, put a few inches between their chests, palms secure on Bucky's ribcage, his on Steve's biceps as their eyes met, both teary and smiling.

A single brief pause, and Bucky could swear their souls were entwined, always had been, then Steve was letting go all the way and lifting the box between them again. Bucky held out his right hand, heartbeat in his throat because Steve was about to put a goddamned ring on him, then Steve's fingers were wrapping around metal and the excitement sunk a beat.

"Steve, you know I can't," Bucky murmured sorrowfully, moving to drawback his left only Steve suddenly closed his grip tight, glancing up at Bucky under ridiculously long eyelashes with this nervous look, then the pretty mouth was moving, rushed like he was actually unsure for once.

"It's magnetic. I made it for the specs of the metal, it twists and compresses so it should even stay on in battle but. But, um. I mean, you don't have to. If you want it on your right, you can, I--"

Bucky kissed him. Steve made a surprised sound, then they were melting together again and Bucky smiled, salty tears on tongues as their lips pressed together, still and real and human but more, more, *them*. 
"I can't believe you'd do that for me," Bucky finally mumbled as their lips broke apart, Steve's forehead brushing his as they both looked down at entwined hands, the little black box in Steve's.

He got a snort for his sentiment, blue flicking cross-eyed to his for a second before the blonde head was shaking in amusement.

"I stormed an enemy base solo, dropped my shield off a burning aircraft, and you can't believe I'd get you a ring that fits?"

"Shut up," Bucky smiled, then Steve was slipping the ring over his finger and Bucky fell silent, staring at the shifting plates of his fingers as the lighter, beautiful metal settled over the metal he'd used to kill, then Steve twisted the circle and it snapped into place, magnetizing to his hand and Bucky sucked in a breath. That was some fancy tech, he'd bet anything it came from Tony.

What a fucking sap.

He kissed Steve again as their fingers entwined, then Steve was scooping him off the goddamned ground and Bucky brok off with an offended shout. The last time he'd been carried like this he had a goddamned bullet in his leg, Rogers couldn't just pick him up bridestyle whenever he goddamned wanted--

Except Steve was kissing him again and okay, fine, he'd let it go this once. He should've known anyways, Steve was always a hopeless romantic, course he'd scoop Bucky up in a bridal carry in the middle of the Brooklyn bridge after fucking proposing to him.

The only thing cold left in him were his cheeks, drying tear stains and that was alright, Steve kissed those away too.

It had to be another fifteen minutes before they managed to let go of each other long enough to walk back, shoulders bumping as always, but hands entwined this time as the bridge crossed under marching boots, the place where one love concluded and another began.

Bucky smiled to himself, glancing over the water, and thanked the lord above for Peggy fucking Carter.

The wind whistled back.

"We've been dating for a month," he pondered aloud, glancing over at Steve with a shake of his head. "A month, and you propose."

"Did the word 'boyfriend' not feel extremely inadequate?" Steve defended and Bucky rolled his eyes, rubbing his thumb over Steve's hand.

"Well, sure, didn't mean I was gonna propose."

"Not all of us can have great ideas," Steve teased and Bucky stopped in his tracks, right at the edge of the bridge as their hands yanked and forced Steve to stop too.

"Great ideas? Great ideas?"

"Oh here we go," Steve sighed, and Bucky tugged him in, wrapping an arm around his neck and rucking up his little blond halo with a playful hand. Steve squirmed and pushed at him and tried not to laugh, same way he always had as a kid, still failing miserably.

"Disastrous ideas," Bucky corrected, rubbing Steve's hair one more time before shoving him back to
his feet. "You have the worst ideas."

Steve rolled his eyes, taking Bucky's hand again and pulling him along to keep walking. Bucky stumbled a foot before he caught up, making Steve drag him as he squinched up his face and mocked his voice an octave higher, "Oh, let's just storm this really-well-stocked-base from the front, that way they see us coming but at least the explosions will be bigger and cooler looking!"

"I literally never said that," Steve pointed out and Bucky scowled.

"Maybe not, but that's what I heard. S'what the rest of the Commandos heard too, pretty sure, but they liked you too much to say anything."

Steve ducked his head with a soft smile and Bucky let go of the teasing for a moment, falling into step properly alongside Rogers, bumping his shoulder with a shy smile of his own.

"I liked you the most though."

"You think so?" Steve teased and Bucky lifted an eyebrow.

"Unless you wanted to marry Morita?"

"Shut up," Steve groaned, giving Bucky a very serious face. "I know he kicks in his sleep."

Bucky had to stop again, bending in half with laughter in the middle of the sidewalk and Steve looked around, taking in the city for the quickest of moments, let himself breathe in the air of home, and lifted Bucky back up by the shoulder to kiss him again.

And again.

And again.

~*~*~

Nothing was fixed. They were still messes. But Bucky supposed that if they were fucked up already, having a ring on his finger wasn't something he'd turn down.

And okay, maybe it changed a few things. The home thing - that was helpful. There was a dedication now, that rushing thrill that went through him when he looked down and saw the proof of Steve - Steve loved him and Steve wanted him, eternally, forever, and the comfort he got from that? It was changing a few things.

But what about all the things it didn't change?

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I know, man. When I first heard Steve was getting married, I was like. To America or to Bucky?"

"Haha," Steve said dryly, rounding the corner into the kitchen where Clint and Sam were gossiping. They both shot up like rockets, wide eyes at the intruder on their breakfast.

"How is it my luck he overhead that?" Sam complained to his orange juice and Clint made an equally chagrined face.
"You don't even live here anymore man, what are you doing here at 7 in the goddamned morning?"

"Getting breakfast," Steve answered from the pantry, rooting through kinds of cereal.

"...I'd've thought you guys would be like, honeymooning, that we wouldn't see either of you for weeks."

"The honeymoon usually comes after the wedding." Steve commented loudly outta sight and Clint rolled his eyes, nudging Sam and mouthing seriously, why is he here though, just in time for Steve to come outta the pantry with HoneyNut Cheerios, popping one in his mouth and chewing contemplatively. "Besides, the gym equipment here is way better to have sex on."

Sam spit out his orange juice and Clint choked on his cornflakes and Steve threw back his head and cackled all the way back to the elevator.

"Where do you wanna get married?" Steve tapped a pencil to his mouth and Bucky made a contemplative sound, dipping his paintbrush in water and changing to a lighter blue, bending back close to his painting as he thought over an answer.

"We could always do it at the World War 2 memorial, that might make the papers."

Steve snorted and shook his head, going back to sketching the shadows on Bucky's face from his signature spot on the windowsill. He was glad they hadn't moved the studio yet, it was nice to be back in the Tower on the occasion. Their studio back home - no flinch! - had a couple of easels in it and Bucky hung out in there sometimes when Steve went on his morning runs with Sam, but he'd refused to move his painting over; no one can see it and I'm not risking it getting damaged until it's done, okay? so they were back here in their old studio, windowsill and sketchpad for Steve, painting for Bucky.

"We could do Hawaii. It's like the only place I didn't go on the USO tour."

"That sounds more like a honeymoon destination than a spot for a wedding. Plus isn't Hawaii hot as hell? I'm not gonna sweat through my tux, no thank you."

"Oooo, I getta see you in a tux. How exciting."

"Shh, you've seen me in a tux everytime I've worn one, dunno why you're excited."

"Because you're hot as fuck?"

"Steven Rogers, watch your language," Bucky teased and Steve threw an eraser across the room at him.

A knock at the door had them both lifting their heads before it escalated into an art-supplies-war.

"Come in?" Steve raised an eyebrow and gave Bucky a trepidatious look, getting a shrug and the same look in return.

"Please say everybody has their clothes on," Tony winced as he opened the door, eyes squeezed shut before he cracked one, then opened them both in surprise. "Oh. You're not even in each other's laps or anything. Like...on opposite sides of the room."

He waved his hands around in explanation and Steve shot Bucky a look, pencil-tip on his mouth
"How can we help you?" Bucky sat his paintbrush down and Tony made another nondescript hand-gesture.

"Just figured I'd come ask if you were sticking around for movie night. What're you guys doing?"

"Right now? Art," Steve replied, tapping his pencil knowingly against his temple. Tony made a face and Bucky picked his paintbrush back up again.

"Sure, we'll stay for movie night. And we were talking about wedding destinations." He glanced at Steve in his peripherals and there was that mischief twinkle, the same look they'd give each other during gradeschool pranks. Bucky cleared his throat, dabbing a touch of lightblue on his canvas and speaking as off-hand nonchalant as possible. "We're considering Canada."

Canada?? Steve mouthed with a smile and Bucky gave him that look that said better than Jersey and rolled his lips in to hide a smile too as Tony looked at him wide-eyed.

"You know it's legal in New York, right? You don't want to go to Canada. Goddamned Captain America wants to get married in Canada?"

"Why not?" Steve challenged and Tony turned the wide-eyes on him.

"There is a consistent layer of snow at all times."

"I like snow," Steve shrugged.

"Yeah," Bucky defended, cocking his head with a grin playing at one side of his mouth. "It's insulating."

Steve's eyes shot to him across the room and neither of them could hold it in any longer, bursting out in laughter. Bucky dropped his brush on the floor and bent in half and Steve threw his head back, one arm over his stomach as twin sounds echoed around the room and Tony backed out very slowly, shaking his head as he stared at the white paint and wondered if he ever would've known what Steve Rogers' laugh sounded like if Bucky hadn't come around.

He smiled one-sided, background full of echoing giggles as he took a step away from the door, and another. Those were two different people than the ones who'd sat barefooted on his lab floor months ago, dancing around each other with wary looks and careful words. Now?

Now, they were dancing together.

"Fiancé," Steve whispered into his skin and Bucky tipped his head back, holding his legs higher as Steve slid deeper inside him and peppered his neck with kisses, bedroom dark but for the light of the moon come round again.

"Punk," Bucky retorted and Steve threaded fingers through Bucky's hair with a smile, ducking his head as he rocked their bodies together and Bucky's throat wrapped around a groan that Steve clutched him tighter for, hips meeting again and again.

Bucky kissed the matching ring on Steve's hand when he finally stiffened and came inside him, and didn't comment on the tears in Steve's eyes.
It made sense that Steve saw Bucky as his home. It made sense and Bucky understood better now, why he’d paced the rooms of the apartment and cringed at the word and looked at the bridge with all that sorrow.

But it was a problem.

Bucky'd literally just told Steve he needed to make it on his own. And now they were engaged. They were engaged, and Bucky could whisper that word to himself with the giddiest, most terrified smile he owned but it didn't change a thing. Steve had to be okay when Bucky finally snapped and Bucky had to ensure that. He had to make sure Steve would be okay without him.

And he had to be okay without Steve.

The timing was terrible, was all.

How could they work on being individuals, independent, when Steve'd just tied them together closer than ever? Could they ever be independent?

It was just that Steve didn't understand how important it was to keep that distance. The moment Bucky gave it his all, the moment they both did?

There was no coming back from that. Hell, there was probably no coming back from this.

But Bucky was still holding out and Steve knew that but so long as they could keep distance between them they might make it out the otherside un-charred.

Steve still looked at him like his heart was broken whenever he thought Bucky couldn't see but he hadn't tried to make Bucky say I love you since the proposal so he was gonna hold his breath and count that as a win.

He just...couldn't give up this time.

"Do you want something to eat?"

"It's three-am."

"I know. I'm hungry."

"Okay, midnight snack it is." Steve swung his legs off the side of the bed, stretching to reveal that piece of beautiful skin between the hem of his boxers and the white tshirt he slept in.

"It's three am," Bucky pointed out, because that would be an after-midnight snack, and Steve socked him on the shoulder but cut him up apples anyways.

"Are either of you wearing a white tux for the wedding?" Natasha asked and Bucky cocked an eyebrow.

"I wasn't planning on it."
"Rogers?"

"Hmm? Whatever Bucky wants."

"Hey, don't put this on me. It's your wedding too."

"But you're the one marrying me, shouldn't you pick what I look like?"

"No? You don't get to pick how I'm styling my hair," Bucky replied incredulously and Steve sighed, turning back to his book.

"Can we do white flowers in braids?" Nat pressed and Bucky narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Zoned out as Natasha rattled off ideas, side-eyeing Steve from across the room with his jaw clicking. *Whatever Bucky wants.*

He hated that.

"How about the top of the Tower?"

Bucky blinked, glancing at Steve a moment before looking back out the window. "That's fine."

"I figured Tony'd be pretty stoked, plus it's the first place we danced after 1945."

"Mmm," Bucky agreed, watching the sailor down the harbor climb back aboard his boat. How many times did he drag Steve off running before Steve was too tired to chase him anymore?

"Bucky?"

"Yeah?"

"...nothing."

He didn't want Steve to save him.

*That was all he wanted.*

fading.

What was he now. Content or docile?

~*~*~

"Okay, this explains so much, and I've got more questions than ever." Bucky crossed his arms over his chest and Steve crossed his eyes at him in return.
"Just sit down, everybody, we can't do this with you standing."

"That's not what I heard," Sam muttered and Natasha snorted and Bucky gave them both a mild glare.

"Please tell me you guys call yourself Blondie 2.0," Stark interrupted and Steve raised an eyebrow, glancing between Thor and Clint.

"We don't have a name?"

"Although we should," Clint agreed, tapping the hollow of his guitar. Thor tipped his head in agreement, repositioning the Cajon boxdrum between his legs. Steve rolled his eyes from his stool between them, adjusting the microphone stand a little higher.

"I still like Stevie Thunderbird," Bucky pointed out and Pepper and Maria both laughed. It wasn't the Howling Commandos Septet, but apparently this was the mysterious Avengers stuff Steve Thor and Clint had been working on for the past few weeks. They'd formed a band and honestly Bucky wasn't sure that wasn't exactly the kind'a mischief he'd expected outta them.

As for Blondie 2.0, it was a pretty fair name too, especially considering they were made up of all the blonde Avengers, but Bucky had better name suggestions, that was that.

"Shh, shh. You can criticize after we play." Steve waved a hand at them to settle down, adjusting in his chair and pulling the mic closer. A glance to his left - encouraging nod from Thor, big hands hovering over his drum - to the right, Clint's thumbs up and poised fingers. "Alright. Here goes."

The speakers crackled, adjusting as Clint strummed the first chord, then an easy melody drifted over the room and an involuntary smile curled on Bucky's face.

Barton hummed a few pitches, half ooo's and Thor's hands were drumming steadily, a nice rhythm between them.

Then Steve started singing.

"Yellow boxes in my car," Caution-tape popped into mind and Bucky lifted an eyebrow.

"Pack 'em high til' I can't see far," Steve tipped his head, mouth curving up in a bit of a smile as his tentative voice drifted over the next line, "Yeah, I'm moving on to better."

I wanna get better.

Bucky bit his lip, shifting in his chair as Clint nodded along with the beat, fingers shifting to another chord.

"Try not to care what others think," Steve sang, the boy with raised fists fighting hard to keep his nose outta trouble, harder once he found it. "If I fail again, try to swim and...sink."

Blue flashed to his, hours of swim-and-sink between them, "They'll say I could do 'Better'."

One side of Steve's mouth curled, leaning in close to his microphone and the music peaked.

"So I blame it on...my optimistic heart," The world's just not that good of a place, Stevie. You expect too much. "At least I'll ha-ave stories for my scars."

Artist fingers wrapping around the mic, eyes squeezing shut and lifting for the high note and everyone's breath stilled in their throats, "American dream my life away, when all of my dreams cry
A plastic shield painted red-white-and-blue.

"I may lose my heart," A hand lifted, palm placed over the center of his chest and Bucky's heart stopped too, "...but one day I'll be a star."

Steve looked up, hand still over his chest, the place where the Captain America uniform's star shone; the symbol, his symbol. You be my star, I'll be your sky and Bucky's hand covered his mouth.

"They promised me a bigger house. I'll make the money playing out loud, don't you hear," Steve cocked his head, that sad smile that hid beneath the plastic point, I want you and The Avengers Initiative, "That sounds much 'better'."

A beautiful pawn dragged into someone else's game because of his golden - optimistic - heart and Steve'd thought he was living better. Doing more. Making up for the hell he'd gone through for the first twenty years of his life.

"And if I make this dreaming last, is it worth the painful past? I hope... I hope this will get 'Better'."

The guitar and drum crashed strong and Steve's eyebrows knit as the passion hit again, "So I'll blaame it on my optimistic heart," a little shake of his head, "--at least I'll have...stories for my scars."

Scars and bruises and broken-noses and stories, causes, battles-worth-fighting,

"American dream my life away--" all twisted and stuffed into vivid uniform and Steve'd zipped it up anyways, "--when all of my dreams cry mayday, mayday."

Chasing frontlines in the distance, compromising and unclenching his fists and lifting his chin, "I may lose my heart, but one day I'll be a star."

Peggy told him he could do better, but Steve jumped out a plane for more than that. Catalyst--

The war took more from Steve than his spirit, it took his heart and strapped it to a torture table and Steve'd been drifting when he heard and If I read the posters right, you've got somewhere to be in half an hour.

Yessir, he did. And Steve dropped it all.

"I'll tell you all about the things I left for," Steve's eyes were on his and Bucky's were watering. "Hanging onto dreams thought I was meant for, never did I think it'd take the heart from me,"

A new century and a tighter suit "--it'd take the heart from me--" and Steve'd dropped it all--

Dropped his shield I'm not gonna fight you - for the same reason he'd dropped the fame and picked it up, I'm gonna fight for him.

"I'll tell you all about the things I left for, hanging onto dreams thought I was meant for--"

Dreams of change and the power to make a difference and it never should've gone so sideways, it never should've scooped Steve outta his own suit and shield and

"Never did I think it'd take the heart from me, it'd take the heart from me."

Clint's strums paused, a single beat from Thor's palms and Steve's gaze floated over the audience, microphone in both hands now as he lifted his voice, sang from so deep inside him Bucky could see
every version of his boy right there before him;

"Blame it on my optimistic heart." Tiny, indignant, too caring, _so much to prove_

"At least I'll have...stories for my scars." Fumbling showgirl and reckless best friend, _just go, get outta here!

"American dream my life away," Beautiful soldier, _red white and blue._

"When all my dreams cry _mayday mayday,_" and the empty Man out of Time.

A hand over his chest again and it couldn't be more fitting, that they'd sewn the star right over his chest, bright white beautiful to hide the hole they'd carved in the center of him.

"I may lose my hea-art...oh the day I'll be a star."

Bucky wiped a thumb under his eyelashes and Steve's lifted to lock on his again.

It was so loud, the _I love you_ in his eyes. In his words.

How had Bucky never known? How had he never seen?

Everything he was to Steve...

"I'll tell you all about the things I left for," the voice of an angel sang and Bucky'd never dreamed it come to this.

"Hanging onto dreams thought I was meant for." They'd put the serum in his veins and Steve'd taken it as a responsibility and he was _meant_ to save people and so he held on and he crashed, he crashed and they stole his home from him and there'd been nothing left to thaw to.

"But never did I think it'd take the heart from me," His hands uncurled from the microphone, words drifting over them all again as Clint hummed in the background, layers spilling out so beautifully, "-- it'd take the heart...from me."

The guitar strummed and Steve scooted the microphone back a foot, nodding lightly along to the beat and the smile on his face was so distant it was surreal;

watching Steve on his stool, singing to his friends about how he lost his optimistic heart, so goddamned beautiful Bucky could've cried from that alone, _I'll tell you all about the things I left for._

He'd looked right at Bucky, and this time Bucky hadn't turned away.

Steve's reason. Catalyst.

You're all I have that ties me to who _I am_, Bucky.

Say I could do _better._

Clint's fingers floated the final chord over the air and Bucky couldn't remember standing, or walking, but then he was pulling Steve into his arms and not much mattered anyways.

Steve's arms hooked over his back, nose buried in Bucky's neck and they were holding each other so tight he could feel the imprint of Steve's ring under his shoulder and that, that's how far they'd come from stolen hearts replaced with stars?
He didn't know how long they held each other, only that Clint eventually started playing some finger-picked melody on his guitar that made the Avengers laugh and Bucky reset, pulling back to force a smile on his mouth and Steve's hands framed his face, thumbs wiping over Bucky's cheeks and Bucky closed his eyes against the burn behind them.

Gentle fingers tipped him forward and Steve's mouth touched his, so soft and light, and Bucky was gonna cry a lot more if Steve didn't cut it out. He pressed closer and Steve let him, kissed Bucky back just as hard, just as many promises on his lips and Bucky ached, *all my dreams cry mayday* because it hurt, his chest hurt like they'd carved him up instead.

They had. Just not the way they'd carved Steve. They'd dug a star over his heart too and maybe, maybe that's why it ached because Bucky couldn't sing this song and have anyone understand, not when he wasn't the angel Steve was. For Steve, it was about losing himself and for Bucky he'd *dream'd his life away* to escape the knives sinking into his skin and that wasn't romantic, that wasn't beautiful like this was.

**He wasn't beautiful like Steve was.**

Stevie Thunderbird got a standing ovation that Bucky'd missed, but everyone was still standing and clapping when he and Steve pulled away from each other. The right thing to do was laugh, to shake his head at them or maybe flip the bird but Bucky saw all those people celebrating and cheering over the song and their kiss and he turned back around, tucking his face in Steve's neck and clutching him too tight and Steve laughed for him, sweet and light, one hand playing with the hair on the back of Bucky's head like it was made of silk instead of snakes, making a joke over Bucky's shoulder and reaching around him to clap Clint and Thor on their arms, blushing at the oo'ing compliments and it'd been beautiful, the whole thing just hit too hard and Bucky wasn't ready.

His left arm whirred as Steve barred happily over his back, rocked them to the side to lower his microphone, appeasing Bucky's clinging to him and just functioning around him and it was domestic and sweet, probably, to someone, likely him if he wasn't half outta his mind. But with the melody still drifting through Bucky's head it just felt stupidly symbolic, rain and blue curtains when you didn't need them.

Steve was functioning just fine with Bucky latched onto him, and how long had that been the case? How long had he held so tight Steve just learned to live around him? To mold his life around Bucky's needs and it didn't feel good, it didn't feel good at all.

He let go and Steve tipped his chin up, thumb pressed in the dimple in it as he kissed Bucky's mouth again and Steve's eyes were open books, what were Bucky's?

Hopefully? Lying.

~*~*~

"Do you remember, in 44, we stayed at that place in France?"

"Mmm, yeah. Why?" Steve glanced up and Bucky glanced down.

"No reason. Just curious if you remembered it."

Steve eyed him, running Bucky's posture over in his head for any anomalies before slowly turning back to strapping on his uniform.
"What song are you dancing to at your wedding?"

"Whatever Bucky wants."

Bucky didn't want.

The pan hissed, oil jumping to scald his hand and Bucky stopped himself milliseconds before shouting, mouth poised open as he froze.

Did that hurt?

Really?

A spot of hot oil and he was going to complain. He used to get knives shoved all the way through his legs and not scream.

What was pain anyways?

Had he fallen so far into convincing himself to be normal that he was lying automatically now? Or was this just a consequence of calling this body his?

Bucky sat his spatula down and took a step back from the counter.

"That smells good," Steve commented offhandedly, reading something in the paper.

Buck turned and stared at him.

What the fuck had he become. What had they become.

What had he allowed--

"I'm not just the most convenient apple-pie picket-fence candidate am I?"

He hadn't meant to say it out loud. But Steve's head shot up, deep line creasing between his eyebrows as he studied Bucky's face, whirring fingers trapped between real ones, trying to keep still and realized how much he meant that.

"Bucky, c'mon," Steve chided and Bucky turned around, back to the pan, staring down at the sizzling bubbles popping in oil.

"Why do you of all people wanna get married." He said it too quiet but Steve heard him anyways, scrape of a chair and feet on tile.

Arms wrapping around his stomach and Bucky wished his insides didn't feel so goddamned hollow.

"I wanna spend the rest of my life with you," Steve whispered in his ear and Bucky closed his eyes.

"That was always the plan, since the beginning. Marriage or sleeping-together aside." It was a plan they'd made as kids and Bucky'd spent half his life believing they'd never be able to keep. But they had a shot now, was it really a good idea to risk it on something like marriage? What if he lost Steve?
"What if-- "So why this?"

"I know what you're thinking." Steve's hands took his shoulder, spinning Bucky to face him and that wasn't what he wanted either. It was just he needed, he needed too much--

Warm hands lifted his face, tipping his chin up to force Bucky's eyes on pieces of stolen sky and Steve held him firm and promised firmer, "It's not just another American Dream."

"Not screaming mayday?" Bucky inhaled, not sure if he was being endearing or morbid.

"No. My heart's right here," Steve placed Bucky's palm on his chest, steady thumpthump under his fingers and Steve's heartbeat, that was Steve's heart and he was alive, as alive as Bucky was and he promised he wasn't leaving again. Steve's heart, sans stars. "It's all yours."

"I hope you don't mean that," Bucky splintered over sorrow and Steve didn't give him time to weep, lips interlocking fierce and Bucky clung to him like a dying man in the desert, no companion left but the burning sun, the very thing that would kill him.

If he tried, maybe they could make it out alive.

Just try.

Too much to give up, he couldn't, he could not.

It wasn't working.

~*~*~

The door slammed shut like a gunshot and Steve flinched, shoving it back open, cracking as it slammed into the wall.

Why did Bucky have to be like this?

Why did it always turn out this way?

What was Steve doing wrong?

"Is this a test?" Steve demanded, storming into their old kitchen after Bucky. The mission hadn't gone well and Bucky'd been so out of it he'd almost gotten killed and then Steve'd been a hair too close to an explosion and Bucky'd blown up and freaked out on him and then given him the silent treatment for the rest of the time and that wasn't fucking fair.

He'd shot off the quinjet the moment it landed, taking down nine-fucking-hundred flights of stairs to get away from Steve, go to their old floor so he didn't have to face Brooklyn only Steve wasn't
gonna let him run, not without chasing.

Bucky was running from \textit{everything}.

Since the goddamned day on the bridge, since the moment his mask flipped off and Steve stared at him incredulously and asked, \textit{Bucky}?

Steve was still chasing.

"Bucky, c'mon," Steve snapped, halting a step before he ran into Bucky's back, which was turned to him. Like always.

Steve reached for his shoulder to whip him around only then Bucky was halfway across the kitchen and Steve had to blink a few times, recalibrate. Bucky hadn't moved like that in months. Not since he got over the obsession with efficiency.

"You don't get it," Bucky hissed and Steve threw up both his hands, leaning forward in the distance between them that suddenly felt way more poignant than it should've.

"Because you keep hiding from me!! What don't I get? You've been distant since I proposed - before, probably, but you won't even tell me why!"

Bucky turned his back to Steve again. Opened a cabinet, grabbed a glass with his metal hand and all-but-shattered it on the counter, slamming the cabinet back shut and yanking the faucet on, edge of the glass clanking against metal and that wasn't even \textit{like} Bucky, slamming things around and ducking away from Steve's touch and giving him the fucking silent treatment and weren't things supposed to be getting \textit{better}?

"What's \textit{WRONG} with you?"

The glass dropped in slowmotion, top inch already shattering in a robotic hand as the rest slipped free, crashing to the floor and splashing water up the cabinets, shards skidding across tile and Steve's mouth opened wordless, only Bucky was facing him now and there was nothing in his eyes but hurt. Nothing in his mouth but snapping, sharp words deeper than knife wounds.

"I'm a killer living on borrowed time that's held together at the seams with sunshine that burns so hot it blinds itself."

Water was trickling on the floor. Steve stared at Bucky. \textit{When it rains it pours, stay thirsty like before.}

Bucky stared back.

"Do you love me?"

"...what? Why do you keep asking that!" Bucky growled high-pitched in frustration, leaping over the sharpest of the shattered glass, a step away from Steve and a piece slipped into his foot, instant red joining the water, glass, crystal, and Bucky made an even more pent-up frustrated noise.

Steve stepped towards him, carefully to avoid shards and Bucky cursed under his breath, sidestepping to a safe spot and lifting his foot to pry the piece of glass out, wiggling with metal
fingers and not looking at Steve. "How many times do I have to say – you know the answer."

He tossed the glass aside, stained red and Steve couldn't believe he'd never noticed how far Bucky'd go to avoid talking about this.

"How are we ever supposed to share the kind of commitment - like a marriage - if you can’t even commit to saying you love me?"

"You wanna hear that so bad, but you don’t even know what you’re talking about. You honestly think that's what the problem is? Some stupid, cliché three-little-words?"

"Yes! Because if you can’t even say it, how could you mean it?"

"Don’t give me that," Bucky snapped, arms crossed over his chest, plates on one shifting tighter. "Like you mean it."

Steve's mouth popped open. They were standing in the same building Steve'd declared his love in, reinforced it a thousand times over and was that actually still a problem? Bucky didn't believe him? How could Bucky be so fucking stubborn? Still? After all this goddamned time, you'd think he'd've outgrown that.

He had to take a few breaths to keep himself from shouting, calming himself enough to take a step closer with a semi-patient, "I've been chasing you—"

All over the goddamned planet

"Saving me," Bucky interrupted, sneer on his pouty mouth as he leaned forward and threw invisible knives into Steve's chest. "It's always been about proving yourself, about showing the world how fucking capable you are and I'm just the next project you can fucking use to distract yourself from how much you're hurting, the poor adopted-fucking-puppy that lets you live in your goddamned hero bubble."

"Me? Me? What about you!? You still see me as some little kid that needs to be protected from everything that jumps! You think I don't know horror? You think I should fucking be afraid of you? How many times do I have to say it, you already have me, you always fucking have. And I keep proving it over and over, I dropped my shield on that helicarrier and laid myself out to die to prove to you—"

"This isn’t love," Bucky severed, hands in fists shoved in the corners of his elbows and he looked tight as strung wire, as close to splitting in half as the Winter Soldier had staring at him on that bridge months ago. Steve's mouth was parted in the same shock anyways, words not-quite-registering. "It’s some kind of skewed, delusional devotion."

Devotion. noun; commitment, loyalty.

Allegiance; worship, passion.

There was nothing delusional about it. It was devotion, and it was love, the highest kind. Unconditional. Eternal.

Bucky could say what he wanted to throw Steve off, but it wasn't working this time. Steve'd chased him too long. They had to stop. Face the reflection for once in their goddamned lives. He was so done with the lies.

"I don’t think you believe that," Steve retorted flatly. Bucky's eyebrows shot up and Steve crossed
his arms over his chest too. "I think you just won't say you love me. You've never said it once, not when we were kids on the brink of death, in the war surrounded by death, not now when we're all we have left and you know what I'm starting to get? You've never said it once and...maybe you never will."

The counters were dripping splashed water onto the floor, plinking off glass shards and red was still swirled in with melted ice and they should've known it'd happen that way.

His best friend since childhood, the same man who stood before him and begged him not to sign up again. *Worse, they'll actually take you.*

The same look was on his face now, exasperation sans fondness, cold disbelief of the recklessness that'd just come out of Steve's mouth, deep-seated fear that he'd never voice aloud and Steve stood his ground, the same stubbornness he'd faced Bucky with that day and the only thing he could pray was that Bucky didn't walk away from him this time.

"For once, Steve," Bucky said, slow and bitter metal reaching into his chest and closing a fist around his heart, shattering it like the melted ice coating broken crystal. "You might be right."

Bucky turned.

He turned and he didn't salute this time.

He turned and he started to walk away and the feeling in Steve's chest the first time he'd done that, Steve'd thought he'd never feel anything that painful. This time?

This time crippled him.

The hallway between the elevator and their bedrooms, the hallway Nat and Clint had dragged Bucky down, rope cutting into his wrist as he screamed that Steve was coming for him before he collapsed, *Sputnik*, they were in that hallway when Steve caught up, grabbed Bucky's arm hard enough to bruise, maybe break, a thread short of shouting that word again, anything to get Bucky to *stop*.

"No. No, you don't get to walk away from me like that," Steve's voice sounded like he was crying but he wasn't letting go of Bucky's arm to wipe his eyes and find out. Bucky was staring at him incredulously, and maybe in some other circumstance Steve might be delighted he still managed to surprise Buck but not now, not when his chest was *aching*. Not when his bottom lip was trembling and his words were shot through with bullets. "You don't get to break my heart and make me come ask for forgiveness. You fucking *asshole.*"

"You don't understand!" Bucky yanked free, arm purpling and Steve's hand smarting, and there were tears in Bucky's eyes now too, empty walls staring down at them, empty rooms that used to be theirs. Empty bodies that used to have souls. It wasn't defensive, this was begging. "How can you expect me to *say* that? After e-everything that's happened to me--"

"Is this about the torture?" Steve furrowed his eyebrows, hand freezing moments from circling Bucky's wrist, just a foot apart so he saw every flicker on Bucky's face perfectly.

"Is this about the torture," Bucky scoffed incredulously, turning away and rubbing a hand over his forehead. He was taking that then. He was making that his out.

Steve couldn't do it anymore.

"You can't blame everything on Zola."
Bucky froze. Even his left arm fell silent, perfectly still without the slightest buzz. Nothing moved but his eyes, suddenly on Steve through the disheveled strands across his forehead.

"What did you just say."

He wasn't undermining Bucky's trauma. He wasn't.

"You knew," Steve accused, pointing a finger at Bucky's chest. "Back then, didn't you? Before any of that shit went down. You didn't tell me then, and you didn't have the reasons I did. It's always been about something else."

Bucky just stared at him. Steve crumpled his hands in frustration, making a noise at the ceiling before leveling his heaviest challenge gaze on Bucky, leaning forward just enough make Bucky look like the small one and pinning his slippery heart with bitten words,

"This has nothing to do with the torture, admit it."

It was a corner Bucky couldn't squeeze out of and the last time someone'd backed him into a corner they'd been shot twice in the stomach.

Steve leaned back just in time to see the flash of white and silver, knife handle wobbling on the wall and a gash in the sheetrock, but that knife wasn't half as concerning as the one still in Bucky's hand, metal fingers flexing around it as he breathed too heavy and the throw hadn't even been aimed at Steve, Bucky'd just hurled it in rage and even then, he'd been careful about it.

Even in his wild rage he was protecting Steve from himself.

Blood boiling, red-tinted vision and the sudden rush of anger that whipped up through his sternum came straight out his mouth, spitting pissed at the lying, heartbreaking asshole who'd fucking ruined Steve's life then claimed he didn't belong it.

Bucky threw knives when he lost control and Steve was the one who belonged on a battlefield?

Steve shoved the invisible star branded on Bucky's chest too, fucking pushed him hard because Bucky couldn't do that to him, couldn't pretend like Steve was fucked up just to hide how messed up he was.

"Oh, what, right, like you're not a fighter too?" Maybe if Steve pushed him far enough Bucky'd break, maybe he'd fucking break down and tell the truth for once in his goddamned life--

"YOU RUINED ME!"

Steve's flinch had nothing to do with the second knife burying itself in the wall.

His heart was pounding and their old apartment was on fire, smoke curling up between them and Steve couldn't move. The sun was going down and the darkness would destroy them in the wake of mourning light.

Fingernails dug into palms. If it were anyone but Bucky, Steve'd throw a punch, anything to get Bucky to take it back. But there was no taking that back.

So he reached for him instead.

Bucky yanked away stumbling, knocking into the closest wall and near collapsing against it, creaking steel as Bucky's metal hand crumpled the last knife, bent and staggered dropping to the
hardwood with a hollow clank.

"Holy fuck, you're driving me fucking crazy," Bucky breathed, curling in on himself with his hands gripped together against his forehead, knuckles fucking up his hair as he closed his eyes and trembled and with his face hidden, it was like Steve could see him clear all over again.

Masks, overlayed on walls covering more masks and he'd thought he'd torn them all off but he hadn't, because Bucky was shivering against the wall and losing his goddamned mind.

Steve could see his hands clench tighter like he could hold onto reality that way, like he'd stop slipping off whatever cliff he was dangling on in his head and if Steve could pry open their skulls to get to Bucky's and free him from wherever he'd caged himself inside, he'd do it in a heartbeat. He'd do it in a heartbeat if it were the last heartbeat he had.

Bucky's hands didn't stop squeezing. Steve started forward, worry sinking a pit in his stomach - dropping through the floors below them as he shifted in front of Bucky and saw the other side of his hand, metal holding so tight blood was seeping through his fingers and Steve was prying Bucky off himself so fast he smeared red all over his fingers too but he couldn't see it, couldn't see anything but the tears in Bucky's eyes as his head shot up with a gasp, right hand shaking and imprinted with the outline of metal, blood dripping from the plates' cuts and Steve pulled Bucky's hand to his mouth to kiss the marks, make him see--

Only Bucky was trying to spin away again, eyes flashing and mouth twisting like he'd rather bleed out than have Steve's lips coated in his blood and that was the fucking problem if only he'd hold still--

He should've remembered November 1943, grabbing onto Bucky's upper arms and holding him so tight and solid Bucky thought he was strapped in leather again, but he didn't remember that and he grabbed onto Bucky's arms anyways.

Red smeared on skin and Bucky struggled to get away, uselessly since he wasn't letting Steve anywhere near his metal hand. Like just touching it would kill him but Steve wasn't letting him ruin months of progress in one fight, Steve was keeping him right here until they figured this the fuck out and Bucky stopped hurting himself.

Mentally, more than physically. Seeing Bucky bleed like that was terrifying, but it was nothing compared to the way he had to be ripping himself apart on the inside and that, that was worse because Steve couldn't kiss those wounds, couldn't stitch up those scars.

"Stop," Bucky rasped, shaking his shoulders to make Steve let go and Steve crowded closer, backing Bucky into the wall and holding him firmer, chasing Bucky's gaze to force crystal to fucking look at him and Bucky kept turning his head, fighting, weak sounds in the back of his throat as his feet kicked and Steve shoved him harder against the wall. "Leave me the fuck alone," he spat and Steve leaned in close, gripping tight enough to wreck already purple-red skin.

"No," he bit back through grit teeth and some distant part of his mind recognized that he'd held Natasha like this once, slammed her into a wall and demanded, do better. She'd looked at him with her unshakable eyes and averted too-quick, averted in fear. Of which legend?

*Those that do call him the Winter Soldier.*

He'd called him a ghost. Had no idea how much it'd mean. How much he'd been right, how faded the boy in his tight grip was now.
And like this, head turned away and disheveled hair falling in his face, shoulders drawn and toes barely touching the ground, he did look like a boy. He looked like Steve's boy, his best guy, the one who socked him on the shoulder and stayed up for nightwatch with him so they could watch the sunset.

The sun wasn't going down that fucking easy.

"No," Steve repeated, because he wasn't ever leaving Bucky alone, there was no day without night. "Never. I lo--"

"STOP, let go," Bucky squirmed, starting to tremble as he yanked his shoulder to the side but Steve just shoved him harder against the wall again. "Let me go!" Hysteric that time, head still turned away, bloody hand knocking at Steve's arm. Steve tightened his grip and Bucky made a pained sound, tipping off into rambling, shaking his head.

"I'll hurt you," A plea, terrified, not a threat and Steve stepped closer, feet between Bucky's and chests almost brushing I dare you. "I'll hurt you, I won't be able to live with myself, I'll hurt you!!"

Bucky thrashed in his grip and he had nowhere to go but up, a flash of his eyes and Steve could see that same fear, the horror as he crashed into reality with a gun to Steve's forehead but he hadn't hurt Steve then, he wouldn't now. Bucky wouldn't hurt him. Sometimes it felt like Bucky wouldn't come near him and Steve was so goddamned sick of it.

"No, you won't," Steve grit through his teeth, struggling to keep Bucky's arms pinned and only making him fight back harder.

"Let me go. Let me go!!" His voice shot shrill, heart pounding so fast Steve could feel it in the rotting air between them and crystal was rimmed red and wet, like the kitchen floor, hovering tears on eyelashes as Bucky twisted, voice cracking over a sob, "Why can't you ever let me go??"

Steve stopped.

There was too much loaded in that sentence, too much and he wasn't talking about Steve gripping him against the wall. He wasn't talking about that at all.

The surprise rived a crack in red anger and Steve's hands loosened a millimeter, just enough for Bucky to tear free, duck under Steve's arm with stumbling legs and backpedal dangerously down the hallway, practically falling over himself as he darted for the nearest door and fuck - fuck,

His feet slipped over hardwood, peripherals blackened with ancient blinders and Steve was no more steady chasing Bucky than he was running and when did it ever s t o p--

Bucky crossed the threshold and Steve practically dove to reach him before solid wood slammed between them - he'd break it down anyways, he'd fucking go through the wall if he had too.

He had, chasing Bucky before. Broken down doors and dented walls and jumped out glass windows to throw his shield, the unforgettable echoing clank as a metal hand reached out and snapped it from the air.

Bucky's eyes over the mask painted, dripping black and Steve'd been so entranced he hadn't followed up the throw with a run, punch, anything, he'd just stood in awe as Bucky threw the shield back to him and if he had to Steve'd do it all over again, he'd chase Bucky across the rooftops and break crystal glass and dive over darkness just to get Bucky to hold his shield one more time--

But the door didn't slam in his face.
Bucky didn't move to close the door at all.

Bucky wasn't moving.

Steve slid into the studio behind him and an empty paintcan rolled and Bucky was glued to the easel on the other end of the room. The painting was still facing the window, so Steve couldn't see it but Bucky, Bucky was standing there like he could, knowing exactly what was on the other side and whatever it was he'd made so important, dedicated all that time and beauty too?

Whatever it was, it destroyed him.

The last, invisible knife dropped, clattering silently to the ground and Steve stepped forward, just as Bucky collapsed. Falling to his knees, crumpling broken skeleton with a whirling metal arm and Steve followed him down seconds after, as always.

His face was in his hands and the agony in his fingers, neck, shoulders, the damaged sound in that beautiful mouth, it'd all risen like a tsunami wave, crashing ashore with the painting's push and black fishes in the sea were beached, unbreathing, gasping in the air that didn't belong to them anymore.

Steve fell beside him. Took Bucky in his arms, pulled him sideways into his lap and they were both too big for this but Steve didn't care, wrapping his arms around lethal muscle, rocking back and forth as the waves white-capped, crashed, settled. Drew back, repeat, and Bucky wasn't crying, just fading. Steve wished he'd cry; there'd be something he could kiss away.

He pressed his forehead over scars, breathing in the life he'd spent so long loving, touched his nose to the fabric of Bucky's shirt like it was his skin instead.

They could heal.

*We're too far gone.*

Whirring metal shoved long hair back, buried in brunette as Steve played his fingertips over Bucky's bicep, swaying back and forth, the way Sarah used to when it hurt too bad to sleep, the way Bucky did when Steve was the one disappearing into bloody screams.

Bucky scrubbed the back of a bloody hand over his face to wipe invisible tears. Mortal fingers closed over Steve's knee, five-pointed brand in his skin that Steve'd never shake.

"Touch me," Bucky whispered, hushed and rough in prayer. He'd wanted nothing but to escape Steve minutes ago and now he was begging for him and it ached deep in his stomach because Steve knew why. Could feel it, the nights that Bucky climbed into his lap for more than his love. He laid himself in Steve's arms to forget.

Neither of them were breathing right but Steve depressed his thumb against the back of Bucky's neck, digging into years-built tension too deep to massage out and dropped his palm between spade shoulderblades, smoothing ripples down the bow of spine - a shudder, not the good kind and Bucky was curling in tighter on himself reflexively, shying from the touch like it hurt, like Steve might as well be Hydra.

He lifted off and Bucky made a distressed sound, squeezing Steve's knee tighter and forcing a controlled breath through his lips. He couldn't tell which was worse - touching Bucky or separated from him.

The only thing clear was that Bucky was hurt and Bucky needed him but it was all too raw, torture and pain and the painting and the bruises and the knives in their walls and the empty paintcans he'd
kicked on the way in - Bucky was asking him to touch and Steve knew what that meant but Bucky was too messed up right now for Steve to penetrate his body like that. Bucky was too weak for that.

They needed to be close, they had to drag back together or they'd keep falling further apart but Bucky couldn't take it, not right now, Steve knew that much. So how--

Oh.

"No," Steve withdrew quietly and that time the distress was quiet and high-pitched, a child's cry and Buck looked ready to crack in half but it was better than the way he'd cringed at Steve's hand. So they had to make it Bucky's hand. He pressed the five-pointed brand deeper against his skin, fingers lacing between Bucky's as he leaned forward and whispered mollified against his ear, "You touch me."

* 

A single pause as the implication sunk in and Bucky lifted his head, staring at the back of the painting across the room. Then for the first time in what felt like an eternity, Bucky turned and looked him straight in the eye, searching. Realizing exactly how serious Steve was. They needed each other and Bucky'd split open for real if he was under Steve. It was simple.

"I c-can't be gentle with you right now." Bucky's mouth twisted, eyebrows lifted disbelieving like Steve was a maniac to suggest it.

"I can take it," Steve promised, because he hadn't been expecting Buck to make sweet, slow love to him. Whatever damage Bucky thought he'd do - Steve'd heal.

Wary eyes studied his face and Steve waited, let Bucky look him over with that serious contemplation he'd perfected in European woods. They might as well be there now, the way Buck was looking at him, protective-streak mixed with that "mystery look" Steve'd finally recognized as desperation, seventy years late.

His right-hand sniper sat here with him on the floor, blue shirt and all, hair windblown from the battle they'd been at an hour ago, curved back away from his face like how he used to wear it and Bucky looked a century younger, blinking his icy-blues at Steve. His best friend, that's who was staring at him now, the exact same man that'd sat beside him at the flickering fire, that'd leaned against him while the whipping wind of the boat echoed the final notes of their songs around their heads and it was Buck, it was always Buck, and Steve'd never felt this close to the truth of then as he did right now.

Soldiers, two young soldiers dragged through the bumpiest road of all and Bucky's dogtags were still sitting cool against Steve's chest, under his clothes and --

the spell finally broke, bright eyes turning away as Bucky took back his hands and for the first time in months Steve had to blink and remind himself that one of them was metal.

"No, Steve." His voice was almost the same. He'd never stopped saying Steve's name the same, heavy New York accent or not and when he spoke again either Steve was fucking losing it or he hadn't noticed Buck's accent starting to creep back into his words. "I can't be what you need."

"I need you." Steve whispered and Bucky closed his eyes, curling up shaking hands into little balls that didn't feel like fists at all. Carefully, gently so it couldn't feel anything like leather or lightning, Steve placed his palm on Bucky's neck, the same place he'd held moments after pulling Bucky off a table the first time, I thought you were dead. "Real, raw, I want you to give it to me like you'd break
me if I were younger."

"But you've never...we haven't." Bucky sucked in a breath, almost a hint of a smile (despairing one, but still) as his gaze flicked back up to Steve's. "It's harder than it looks."

"That's the best you got?" Steve murmured and Bucky's face fell, turning to hide again but Steve caught his dimpled chin before he could go, run away again. "C'mon, Buck. I...I need to know how it feels. I. Bucky, I need you inside me."

"Stop," he croaked weakly, fists curling in the front of Steve's shirt, eyes downcast and bottom lip trembling. "You don't want that. I could-- I could seriously hurt you."

"Make me feel," Steve overrode, rubbing his thumbs over Bucky's wrists. "Show me. Show me, Bucky, give me everything. Everything you've felt since the first day you realized..."

Bucky was shivering, eyes wide as he stared at the ground, overwhelmed and broken at the edges and Steve just needed him. In everything. But like this, right now.

He tipped forward, reaching for Bucky's body and his lifeline and Buck scrambled, shot to his feet, pushing Steve off but Steve grabbed for his wrist before he could go, latching onto metal and steadying himself on his knees, pressing his lips to the back of Buck's hand and the sound outta Bucky's throat was absolutely horrible.

Steve glanced up under his lashes and Bucky was staring down at him, lost and tearstained and Steve reached up to grab his other hand, pressing both of them to his mouth, kisses to fingers, wrists, the fading mark on Bucky's right, line with its ending dash. The feet in front his knees tried to take a step back and Steve only just managed not to drop and kiss those too.

Worship, Steve was kneeling at an altar and Bucky was crumbling marble, withstanding the most treacherous of storms but melting in soft sunlight.

"You forgot about me," Steve accused, blinking away blurred vision and sinking his teeth into the metal plate above Bucky's wedding band, pulling back to kiss the ring, voice dropping in a whisper. "You forgot me and I was so empty without you. Was it easier to be nothing?"

Mechanics whirred and Steve's head snapped up forcefully, Bucky's hand immovable under his chin.

"You can't imagine," Bucky began and Steve tipped back further, muscles trembling and he just wanted to grab Buck by the hips, drag him down to the floor and fuck him senseless among the paint cans but that wouldn't--he had to give this to Bucky.

Prove his trust. Let himself go.

He closed his eyes and his back muscles wouldn't relax, hands jittery and legs twitching from kneeling this long but Bucky needed him. He needed Bucky, every bit. No holding back.

Bucky had to stop...stop holding back or it was gonna break Steve's heart outta his chest.

"Why are you doing this?" Bucky whispered and Steve bit his tongue to keep his eyes from watering over. His windpipe was half-crushed from just Bucky's pinky pressed up against it and it was simple, really.

"Til death," Steve rasped and Bucky shoved his chest, tipped him backwards onto the floor and his head hit hard enough to make him groan, then warm fingers were pressing skin against his stomach.
Bucky's hands rucked up his shirt, the tight white one he wore under his uniform and it was spandex anyways, it wasn't like the material was that strong. But he still gasped as a runner ripped up the side, fabric tearing at the seams and Bucky didn't even bother to lift it over his head, just ripped it up to the neck and tore it from Steve's body and that, Steve hadn't been expecting that--

His workout pants didn't have a button or it'd've clattered to the ground, but Steve did slide a foot as Bucky yanked those off his hips, down over his thighs, calves, feet, tossed them aside too. Boxers next and Steve was laying out naked on the artroom floor. He'd been naked in front of Bucky more times than he could count but there was something about this time that was sending shivers up his spine, making him breathe heavy as he watched Bucky strip himself down too. Efficiently.

Before he could think over the perfect way he folded his clothes Bucky was back over him and Steve inhaled weighted air, forcing himself to ease and let Bucky take, whatever he needed. It was just that he'd hated being taken care of as a kid, made him feel even smaller and sicker than he was, but he'd made the exception for Buck then, he could make a hundred exceptions for him now.

Heated lips pressed to his neck and Steve closed his eyes, tipping his head but Bucky was already one step ahead of him, sucking down his collarbone and over shining dogtags, wet trail down his chest and curving to the side, a sudden gasp as Bucky's tongue pressed flat over his nipple. Teeth scraped sensitive perked skin and there was no buildup, no pause, just shooting fire straight from Bucky's mouth to his stomach, building further down between his legs--

It was exactly how Bucky fought, Steve realized distantly as his chest was abandoned for sucking marks down his abdomen, the lack of preamble. No preemptive speech, just aim and fire and Steve'd almost been killed, he'd been almost destroyed by that then and he'd be destroyed by it now.

Buck was in that sniper mindset, looked so much like his younger self that Steve'd forgotten about the arm again. He'd kissed it so many times he'd forgotten how strong it was, then somehow Steve's lower back lifted and the room spun, then he was flipped over and propped up on his knees and Steve's head was reeling, the move had been so easy and now he was on his hands and knees in front of Bucky and he'd never felt so goddamned exposed in his life.

Not up on the stage, not practically falling outta the vita ray machine, not stripping in front of all those generals and Peggy to fit his tiny body inside that machine.

His lungs were tightening up on him and Steve inhaled as much air as he could take--

Right up until Bucky's hands spread open his cheeks and all that air punched outta him faster than the bully in seventh grade. Thumbs lightning on sensitive skin and Steve's lips were parted in overwhelmed shock, then Bucky's mouth closed over him and the sound ripped outta his throat couldn't belong to him. He'd never-- Steve hadn't even considered--

Thoughts weren't forming all the way but Steve's spine was arching, frozen and wound so tight he'd either explode or collapse but there was a flood of sparks riveting up his body and everything was narrowed down to the wet, ragged shock of Bucky's mouth on his ass.

Slick wet rubbed over clenched muscle and Steve whimpered, arms shaking to hold himself upright and he was in way over his head. Bucky's tongue prodded his entrance, licked rough stripes that made him want to cry, dragging sparks over the fluttering, loosening ring of muscle and Steve fingernails scraped the floor then Buck was prying inside and Steve's arms gave out on him.

Sucking tight round muscle hard, tongue shoved in his opening and it wasn't a describable feeling, the shockwaves riding up Steve's lower back, the room fading around them and every amped-cell in his body narrowing down to the twitching muscle clinging to Bucky's tongue. He was dwaling in his
own head and Bucky didn't stop, stroking inside him with the mouth Steve could hardly believe he was allowed to kiss now, let alone--

Some part of his brain registered the slight burn on the edges, the light scratch of Bucky's not-quite-smooth-shaven jaw around sensitive skin and Steve couldn't stop gasping. His chest was heaving and his forehead was sticking to his forearms with sweat and Bucky was sucking on his hole like Steve was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen and it was disarming, the desperation in the way Bucky kept twisting for more like Steve could never give him enough.

Steve'd give him everything. He already had.

Short fingernails scratched red lines down Steve's back, over the sides of his ass and down his thighs and everything was burning high and bright and the whimpers on his lips didn't feel like they belonged to him.

A particularly hard suck as wet-hard swirled a circle inside him and Steve arched again, words finally shocked back into him as he broke over a despairing, "Bu-ucky--"

Just like that, his face was gone and Steve's ass was instantly, terribly cold and wet and gaping and god, fuck. Then a heavy hand was pressing down between his shoulderblades and Steve rolled his head to the side, fluttering eyelids as he gasped for breath and Bucky pinned him harder to the ground.

"Did you mean it?" Bucky asked, low, and Steve sucked in enough oxygen to manage a destroyed, hoarse, "Yes."

"You don't know what I'm asking about." Bucky's fingers curled, scratching his shoulderblades and Steve's vision blurred. "D-doesn't matter. Mean...everything I've." A soft moan behind closed lips and Steve was gonna finish with ever said to you but he couldn't open his mouth again and Bucky seemed to get the message clear enough anyways.

The only warning he got that time was a strange metallic sound, which he'd find out later was the plates on Bucky's fingers compressing and locking, smoothing out water-and-air-proof, tighter and thinner but unsnagable. There'd been lube in one of their pockets but Steve was too far gone to think about things like that.

Cold metal pressed wet against his opening and Steve had a flash to remember--

One day, I want this inside me. I'll prove to you it's beautiful too.

--then Bucky's fingers were sinking inside him and Steve didn't have flashes of anything but lightning anymore.

Eyes rolling back in his head and he wasn't aware of the whimpers, the tears on his eyelashes, writhing on the floor beneath Bucky's hand. Chanting Bucky's name like a mantra, begging again and again. The only thing he was aware of was the slide inside his body - inside - that was peeling him open like a grenade destroying its shell.

Bucky was right.

There was nothing gentle about this.

Teeth sunk into the flesh of his ass and Steve jerked, but the two fingers in his ass didn't stop their relentless dance in out in out in twist out in out and Steve kept curling away and towards and couldn't decide but he wasn't the one deciding anyways, Bucky's right hand held his hips in place
He had to hold hard, tight, to keep the serum strength at bay and Steve was paying for it, he couldn't count the fingershaped bruises if he had the coherency to think.

He didn't know Buck lifted up until the angle in his ass changed and there were teeth sinking into the back of his neck. Steve cried out and Bucky nipped the top of his spine, fingers withdrawing in a rush of cold, then just one was sinking in, the fourth, lighter-metal ring jammed up against his rim. Everything was too bright and the ring felt so different than Bucky's fingers and Steve couldn't breathe.

Buck's hand swirled agonizingly slow inside him and the teeth on the back of his neck scraped further down, sinking around the next ridge of his spine and Steve's bones were shifting under Bucky's touch, rearranging in Steve's body with the brand remember and the way Bucky was touching him?

A bite to the next knob of Steve's spine, the next. Each and every bone, thoracic to lumbar and down down - like he could thread Steve's spine outta his body with his teeth, rip his skeleton apart through his skin.

Closing over his tailbone last, sucking hard enough to shine stars on the back of Steve's eyelids, then the world spun into a vortex and he was spinning, flipping, three fingers inside him now but they were warm and flesh and Steve shook, he shook and Bucky's metal hand closed around his throat.

Pulled him upright and close and Steve's eyelashes unstuck enough for him to blink salty open, recognize Bucky's face in front of his, inches away in the same grip when they'd met but a thousand times less tight, a thousand times closer to letting go and running away and Steve'd rather Bucky choke him to death than hold him close and intimate in that same stare, desperate and heated for all opposite reasons, and not mean it.

Steve's lips parted and he would've spoken but Bucky's right hand was still fucking him on three fingers and he couldn't, so he opened his mouth and waited for Bucky to close the distance, take him. The metal released even looser, slid around to the back of his throat as their mouths collided and Steve inhaled Brooklyn smoke from a hollow chest and the way Buck kissed him now was exactly how Steve'd pictured he'd kiss back then, back when they were ducking from wartime explosions and sharing a tent and yelling at each other in battle.

If Bucky'd shoved him up against a tree, let Steve thread his fingers through short, sweaty hair and kissed him with every ounce of the passion he had when he screamed at Steve for whatever stupid reckless thing--

It'd be like this, this was that kiss and it was the dawn of time and the end of days and the taste of copper slid over Steve's tongue as Bucky's teeth drew blood from his bottom lip, tongue darting over the split seconds later and Steve didn't know anymore if Bucky was patching him up or drinking his blood but it didn't matter, the war was raging on behind them and the boys were waiting back at the camp, he'd stay here in Bucky's arms and drown in his veins for every second he had the chance to.

His unthreaded aching bitten spine arched and their lips broke and Bucky pushed him by the shoulder, further into the arch on the edge of snapping bones and Steve's head tipped back, midnight racing around them and a second away from winning.

Shaking, he started begging again, barely-whispers over the sound of gunfire and the blood in his mouth. "P-please--"

He'd begged Bucky after his nightmare, days ago, begged him for something, anything, and he hadn't known this was what he'd been asking for.
"Buck, please, need--" The hand on his shoulder slid to his chest, pushing backwards further; fingers in his ass withdrew, wet hand grabbing bruised, bitten cheeks instead, grinding his cock against Bucky's thigh and he hadn't even realized how much it throbbed, too much ache everywhere at once. His throat closed, breathing cut out again.

But. It wasn't coming back.

Steve's eyes shot open, gasping for air desperately in a way that had nothing to do with Bucky's hands ripping him apart.

Sliding touch and Bucky was everywhere, a hand on the back of his head pulling Steve in reverse, curling him in with his forehead against Bucky's chest. The fingers in his hair were holding tight, protective and terrifying and in the safe weight of Bucky's embrace Steve shook air into his body and he'd been fooled, it wasn't an asthma attack, but Buck was holding him and Steve selfishly didn't wanna move, didn't want anything but to stay collapsed here in Bucky's arms.

But Buck was smart, caught on. Lifted Steve's chin with metal and Steve's mouth wobbled, looking up at his entire universe as Bucky stared down at him like he was starved.

Their lips met. Bucky kissed him and there were no scraping teeth, no sucking desire. Bucky kissed him and it was soft and more-than-gentle and so dark dark deep-down into despair Steve's chest shattered, heartbeat pounding fast in the million broken pieces scattered through his body and he was melting, he was melting instead of thawing and all he'd wished for the first time he'd drowned was to see Bucky again and now that he was, eyes closed and mouths pressed tight together, seeing Bucky for the first time...

Steve'd rather drown.

The tears bubbled up in his throat, fire and water ready to boil over the edge. Bucky's tongue darted over a single streak down Steve's cheek but before the dam could burst into sobbing his back slammed into the ground again and the hand behind his head didn't do much to stave the impact. Steve groaned and Bucky placed a fierce, open-mouthed kiss to his adams apple, sternum, stomach hips thighs, spreading Steve's legs wide and sending a dizzying rush to his brain. The next hard press of Bucky's mouth was to his perineum, making leg muscles tighten and twitch, toes curl as the wet suction lifted higher, mouthing his balls, the base of his cock up to the head dripping onto Steve's abdomen.

Rough kiss to the center of Steve's stomach and lift, glancing up at him--

Bucky froze.

Steve palmed the back of his head and searched haunted eyes, sticky lips parting as he finally caught on. When he'd littered kisses all over Bucky's stomach, peppered between reverent I love you's...they were in that same position now - reversed but no less reverent and Bucky's mouth was open but he wasn't gonna say it, they both knew that.

They were sliding over precarious ice threatening to crack and it'd either sprawl them over the frozen waterfall or they'd sink right here and freeze to death in struggling water. His vision blurred and Steve blinked rapidly, sending another river down the sides of his face and Bucky still didn't move, hovering and watching Steve cry, still and silent and Steve was so relieved and so terrified that it might be over.

A pause, a lapse in time.
What you were then, I am today.

Temptation snapped before heads did and Bucky flipped Steve over on his stomach with one arm again, fast enough to make his knees bang on the floor, smarting up his thighs in sparks that Bucky traced from the outside with possessive, shaking hands. Deep-chested moans were tingling Steve's lips, wet spread over his loosened hole again and his hips tipped backwards, just as the head of Bucky's cock bumped up against him.

Slick and smooth and bigger than Steve could take but he hung his head between his arms, closed his eyes and arched his back purposefully this time, offering Bucky to take him, always, to fucking keep him for once. How could he not, how could he toss Steve aside when Steve could feel the aching need in Bucky's soul, desire and codependency and damnation bruised into his skin, solid proof of how much Bucky was dying to consume him so why wouldn't he just let go--

Metal-human steadied his hips and Bucky pushed inside, head breaching the rim and shoving further, deeper and it wasn't gentle, it was exactly like Bucky'd warned and it burned, stretched him so wide Steve was sure his body'd just break, scorching all the way into his stomach, his throat and Steve was choking, on Bucky and oxygen and too much too much.

The choking gag slipped into coughing, the way everything had when he was a kid, body wracking roughly and shifting the heat at the base of his spine. Steve coughed weakly, head spinning and Bucky rolled deeper inside, the hands on his hips running up his sides to stroke his ribcage and Steve closed his eyes, the burn of their joined bodies sharper with his other senses gone, but with Bucky's warm hands on his ribs his lungs began to cooperate again and Steve's chest eased into shaky, overwhelmed gasps.

There was no reprieve, only clinging drag backwards before Bucky drove into him hard and Steve's eyes shot open to see the ground rock, or their bodies were the ones rocking, forceful thrust into his body again and Bucky's dogtags whipped underneath his chin, colliding metal to bruise.

Then fingers were weaving between his gripping the floor, both hands covered by Bucky’s as his forehead dropped to the back of Steve's neck and their bodies fit together again. Steve was dizzy, hands and knees already aching and Bucky just squeezed him tight and fucked him harder. Steve's vision went spotty, red dancing in front of his eyes as he stared at Bucky's bloody right hand over his, and how many places on his body had been smeared red before the serum had stitched wounds closed?

It wasn't burning anymore, not in the way it had at first. Now it was just fire, fire pounding into his spine and blistering his skin and slicing him raw like all those nightmares of knives and Steve stared at their overlapped hands and bit his bloody lip and had to focus all the brainpower he had left to tuck his thumb up over Bucky's, hold him a little closer, the tiniest gesture he could give back.

A terrible noise broke between Steve's shoulders and Steve wanted to kiss him, wanted to kiss Bucky for the rest of his life, offer himself in a million pieces until Bucky didn't feel so goddamned lost, so fucking desperate for Steve--

The pain channeled into squeezing hands and normally that was fine but everything was too amped and neither of them were paying enough attention to how strong-- The snap echoed off studio walls and empty paintcans but Steve's stifled scream echoed louder.

Once, after Bucky'd told him Hydra broke every bone in his body, Steve'd sat in perfect silence on the couch, hand bent backwards and seconds away from snapping, gritting his teeth against oncoming pain but then, he'd had no idea how much hands hurt to break.
Now he did.

The room spun and Steve wasn't tipping over, Bucky was flipping him again, panting like crazy as he sank back inside Steve's body, hips dirty and sweaty hair sticking to his face but a fraction slower, burning Steve up from the inside as he gratefully pulled his fractured left hand into his chest, lifted his legs higher and bit back the tears prickling at him again.

His back hurt, bitten knobs of his spine rucking against the ground, but it was better than supporting his weight on a broken hand and Steve forced himself to breathe, quick and shaky between circle-lips, then one of the hands carrying him let go, metal wrapping over Steve's clenched. He hesitated, drawing his hand a bit further from the thing that'd broken it, then Bucky's hips circled and he was stuffed full of the closest thing Bucky'd allow to love and he let Bucky take his broken hand. It wasn't like he could protest much impaled and held in place like this. As much as instincts were screaming at him (in Bucky's voice, as always) this was still Buck and Steve trusted him more than he trusted himself.

Bucky didn't snap bones again, Bucky lifted Steve's hand to his mouth and kissed it, kissed it all over, peppering to the rhythm of his hips driving into Steve's body and there were tears on Bucky's cheeks that Steve couldn't do anything about, but he let him kiss his hand over and over like that'd make it heal faster.

Part of Steve didn't want it to heal at all. He'd keep broken bones for the rest of his life if it meant Bucky'd give him this, if it meant Bucky needed him enough to slip outta control, if only for a moment.

He rolled his head against the floor, forcing himself quiet but for the rough litany of sounds in his throat straight from the heart aching in his chest, the body pushing inside his over and over.

Bucky curled Steve's fingers with the press of his mouth, making him gasp at the pain, but then his hand was in a fist and the tension wasn't so bad, it'd be easier to keep that way. It always had been.

Steve dropped it to the side and Bucky leaned over him, nearly folding Steve in half as he turned worship from hand to lips. Steve closed his eyes and tipped up against Bucky's mouth, sliding together and it wasn't fair, Bucky was tugging his heart out right through his throat, another deep drive inside that had him stilling in Steve's body a moment, pressing circle of hips together and the draw out was so slow Steve couldn't handle it, too much on an entirely different scale but he didn't have a choice.

He didn't have a choice in anything about Bucky. None of that beauty, none of that rage belonged to him.

Bucky sucked on his tongue as the rhythm picked back up again, fast rocking, in and out of Steve's ass and Bucky sucked on his tongue until he couldn't feel it anymore, numb like ice when everything else burned like fire.

There was no hiding now. Every inch of violence revealed how much fear was mixed in with that need and if the bleeding and broken and bruised was any indication?

He'd never seen someone this scared of anything in his life.

Maybe he could've drawn over that thought, maybe he could've whispered it against Bucky's swollen lips, but that was the exact moment Bucky drew back, shoved a hand under Steve's lower back and forced him to tip up, changing the angle so Bucky could fuck him harder deeper and Steve's thoughts shortcircuited on twisting traintracks.
Mechanical strobing skies outside windows and midnight wasn't racing them anymore, the sky'd draped down on them like a blanket meant to suffocate instead of sleep.

But Steve'd surrendered long ago, so far gone for this boy he'd do anything. Like laying under Buck on that helicarrier, waiting to see if Bucky'd kill him or save him and in a twisted way Steve was waiting for that now, hovering on the edge with the full knowledge that Bucky'd never want to cause permanent damage, that'd Bucky sooner die than kill him for real and that meant all this, all the hurt and pain and bleeding--

That was underneath, that was the part Bucky couldn't control, the physical representation of everything he'd been feeling for so long and if this was letting go, no wonder it hadn't happened 'til now. No wonder Bucky was so unsteady.

Nothing, Hydra'd made him believe he was nothing, and Steve'd slaughter them all, he'd slaughter every person who touched a hair on Bucky's head, he'd slaughter the innocent ones too if it meant he could go back in time and change it.

If he could make it him instead.

Bucky pried open his jaw with human fingers, peeled back Steve's bottom lip to cut his thumb on bottom teeth, fucking him straight into the floor and jerking with every movement, Steve’s blood-splattered right hand clenching in a fist around the closest crumpled paintcan to keep from shoving Bucky off him like instinct was begging him too.

The way Bucky was touching him, the passion behind that, it wasn't different than the passion behind the delicate way Steve kissed Bucky. It just resonated different and on that very first day after their first kiss, Bucky'd asked if Steve thought he could handle him and now, Steve knew the answer to that.

Tipped hips to just a slightly different angle and outta nowhere Bucky grazed something inside him and a full bolt of lightning raced up Steve's spine, neck snapping back as his lips opened around a scream and his arm shot out to brace himself only there was nothing but metal around him and another paintcan tipped over, splashing black acrylic onto the floor. A sky for the stars blinking in his eyes, the drag of Bucky's cock over bundled nerves again and again and his head wasn't just spinning now;

Everything was so saturated and so contrasted, shadows blacker and white so bright Steve was blinded-

...held together at the seams by sunshine so hot it burns itself

- and it was crazy, because he hadn't pictured having someone inside his body to be so consuming but this was the point of delirium, this was the point of nothing-in-the-sky but the moon and it seemed irrational now, that there was ever anything for him but Bucky.

There was only so high he could build before Steve gave in from winding tighter tighter and collapsed boneless, so hard he was crying again but the thrum settling into jerking and twitching with eyes squeezed shut and Bucky rocking into him.

Pure surrender and Bucky leaned down and gathered Steve as close as possible, knees nearly touching the ground by his shoulders as Bucky fucked him so fast and hard Steve couldn't see or hear anything, shaking through black until Bucky's voice sunk into his skull and his senses shot back on like switches,
"Steve, Steve, please please." Frantic and so scared and Bucky was touching him over and over, pressing bruises and untouched skin until there wasn't a place on Steve's body that wasn't Bucky's and Steve just cried and clutched Bucky's back, head tucked in his shoulder through ragged breaths, broken hand fisted and half-clutched to Bucky's neck anyways, hanging off him and suspended from the fall.

"Yours," Steve breathed salt&copper and Bucky choked. That's what it was all about, wasn't it? He closed his eyes, nose pressing bone and swore into the carnal space between them. "Yours yours yours yours forever--"

Bucky grinded up into him and cold droplets splashed his chest and Steve held onto him and he may be the one wrecked but Bucky was destroyed.

"T-til our last breath," Steve choked and Bucky's hips stuttered, dragging Steve through Heaven and dropping him back to earth, splintered sob of his name as Bucky came inside him and painted Steve's body his. Metal wrapped around his cock and muscles convulsed, tossing him so high in the sky the stars were below them now, pearled poison coating their slick skin like he'd been detoxed, giving up a part of him to make room for Bucky inside his body, oxygen long gone and thighs pressed tight to his chest.

Bucky'd called orgasm little death; Steve died here in Bucky's embrace tonight. But it wasn't the kind'a death that came through disconnect and bliss, not the blackout pleasure and pain and overwhelming emotions kind'a death. But the kind they'd always lived in - never on the edge. They'd lived and loved in death since they were children on the streets and now they were of the gods, in a glass sky, and death still tread beneath their feet, under their backs, in Bucky's eyes and Steve's hands and the fusion of their souls.

A quiet whirr over patterned breathing as Bucky's hands laid him back out on the ground, soft, and Steve blinked open his eyes, stillness settling as he peered open his eyes to look at that beautiful face.

Only Bucky wouldn't meet his eyes.

Steve pressed his hand to Bucky's cheek, thumb tracing teartracks and staring at Bucky like he was holy, only Bucky's face was turned away like he was damned alone.

He parted his lips to tell Bucky he wasn't, only a hand got between them in time, metal covering Bucky's face like a mask and Steve'd seen him do that before, seen him do that right after Azzano.

He'd have to be a fool not to recognize the shame in Bucky's shoulders as he hid his face, terrified. Undeserving of being looked at like that and Steve was exhausted but there wasn't anything but relief in the way he reached for Bucky's wrist, pulled his hand free.

Crystal shot away again and Steve opened his mouth to plead, no, stop that, I love you--

I forgive you, for every life you've taken, especially mine.

But Bucky felt it coming, lifted up and pulled Steve's shoulder, leg tucked up high so Bucky could flip Steve onto his side without pulling out and the rotation of his body on Bucky's softening cock--

It shut him up.

Steve needed to keep Buck inside him as much as Bucky did, but without the teartracks on Bucky's face to focus on, his felt ahellaofalot colder.

A strong, sweaty arm slid around his waist and Steve deflated against the floor, blinking heavy and
watching black paint drip drip drip from the edge of the can he'd knocked over.

*

There was blood and crystal shattered on the kitchen floor, black and tears dripping on the studio floor.

Funny how well that fit his insides.

Bucky held his battered body tight like leaving was impossible, worse than everything they'd just done and Steve's mouth was bleeding and his hips ached and his ass ached and his spine was crusted in bloody bites and his voice was hoarse and his eyes were spilling over again. Bucky's mouth pressed to his neck, the chain of his dogtags, kissed him and kissed him and it felt shallow because Steve saw him. Steve knew. He knew now. He knew.

And that was why he was crying, not because he was hurt. But because he finally knew Bucky was, deeper than Steve could ever touch.

Deeper than Steve could ever save.

~*~*~

Sam looked up in surprise at the visitor knocking on his door. But the expression on his face wasn't half as surprising as the words outta Bucky's mouth.

"I need help."

Sam scooted back a chair. Bucky sat down, stiff, staring straight ahead for a second or two before he snapped out of it, looked over at Sam's chair.

"What can I do? Is it nightmares? Commitment?" He offered quietly and Bucky's eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"What? No. Uh. Not about me. I'm fine," he lied and Sam kept his face neutral, decided not to point out that Bucky looked stiffer than he'd been the first time they'd met on that bridge. "I need to talk about Steve."

He was here for all of it, and honestly still shocked Bucky'd come to him, so Sam settled into his chair and waved a hand to continue.

Bucky cocked his head. *Maybe his lying was better than he thought, or maybe no one believed a word outta his mouth anymore.*

"You ever saved somebody's life?" Bucky asked and Sam raised an eyebrow. Bucky lifted the metal hand like he was about to wave it around, the way he talked with his hands sometimes, but it fell back to his lap with a dull thud almost instantly. "I'm not talking about shooting someone as a preemptive strike, I mean like really saved 'em, made a difference. Stood in front to take a bullet to the chest, said the right thing to make 'em step away from the edge of a cliff."

Sam pursed his lips to the side, thinking over the question. He didn't know. Maybe. There was that one time with Riley, a couple months before That Mission. So probably. He nodded, and Bucky
nodded too, teeth tugging his bottom lip as he looked off in the distance, voice drifting hollow.

"It's the best feeling in the world, knowing you're that one who made a difference. You've had purpose because you gave another human being a chance at life. It's a beautiful feeling." Bucky cleared his throat, glancing at Sam outta the corner of his eye before looking down at his hands, metal rippling quietly. "And Steve's addicted to it like a cocaine whore."

Sam opened his mouth to offer that might be a bit of an exaggeration, but Bucky just kept talking.

"It's not enough for him anymore to save a person's life, step in front of one civilian. He has to save groups, cities, worlds. He's personally halted grand-schemes-of-chaos at least three times now, but nothing satisfies the bite. It's never enough. He needs it like people need water. That's not something that's ever gonna change. He wasn't just a spitfire as a kid. He's a revolutionary. He's a soldier. It's who he is. And he clings to that so hard he can't see anything else."

A despairing shrug and Sam didn't have anything to say to that. Bucky shrunk a little in his chair, quiet edging with sadness.

"He says he sees me, but he never will. He can't. He's not ever gonna be done with this life." Bucky ran his right thumb along a ridge in his left, watching the movement and a million miles away.

"He said his home was me. Which I don't think is a lie. But as much as it's me - maybe even more - his home's the battlefield too. And like this, he can't have both. He's always gonna be missing something. He won't admit it, but he's trying to squeeze himself into this new life, into this marriage thing, and he thinks that's what we need but it's not. Even if...even if I wanted it, it's not right for him. God's righteous man, pretending he can live without a war. But he thinks it's me who doesn't want this because he can't...see inside himself."

Wobbling, his voice was shaky now and Barnes wiped a hand over his eyes, drying desert skin that probably hadn't seen rain in years.

"He thinks he owes me this," Bucky breathed and it sounded so heartbroken Sam's chest tightened with sympathy. "He doesn't get it. He owes me nothing."

"But you two are in love," Sam offered quietly, because maybe that's what it was about.

Bucky shrugged.

"It wouldn't matter either way. I'm not gonna let him sacrifice everything, because that's not love."

Sam nodded, accepting that much but gently leaning forward to press,

"What is love, then?"

Bucky stared out the window, overcast clouds covering the sunlight and told him, "I don't know."

And that was the problem.

"That he doesn't know what love is?" Natasha asked. Steve looked up from his hands, left still bandaged up but at least Nat hadn't asked about it. Or any of the other various marks he'd be stupid to think she didn't see.

"Well that sucks, yeah. But no, that's not--"
Steve had to stop, suck in a breath. She was patient, letting him barge in here and tear up over his best friend.

He was losing him.

He'd seen so much--

Steve squeezed his hands together, stared back down at them because that, the proof of Bucky's pain, was easier than looking her in the eyes as he said it.

He didn't wanna see her face, because he knew how it'd register. He knew how true it'd sound coming from his lips and Steve didn't want--

"You know what the most painful thing is?" Steve asked, barely above a whisper, watching the world slip through his fingers as his mouth opened around words he'd never wanted to say. "I've been through a lot. A hell of a lot."

"But there is nothing worse than loving someone you can't save."

☆

Chapter End Notes

I've got a whole compendium of things to say so

1) Stevie Thunderbird (Blondie 2.0) - I don't know why I latched onto this idea but I dig the idea of their band SO MUCH. I put together a whole playlist of songs they sing and two hands in the air for our blonde boyband of heros

2) Actually on that note, the song Better - this is an original by Tyler Ward, one of my fav people on the planet. The song itself is incredible, but the music video is super cute too. If you wanna go check it out, there's a link for that here. (He could totally headcannon modern-singer!Steve go check out this video too if you don't believe me)

3) The Fall Out Boy song Steve listens to on the subway is I'm like a lawyer with the way i'm always trying to get you off (thanks to the lovely E who suggested it for Steve of this story)

4) Sourcing a fantastic quote from this post

5) If you want more songs to jam too, Gun by Chvrches for this chapter.

6) Okay, so, happy things over. We're in rocky waters I know, but I promise it's all headed in a direction - you'll see. And it's taking me like a month to update each chapter but to be fair there is a lot happening in said chapters (also 42k holy shit) and my life is super busy jeez but hey. I promise, no matter how long it's been, I will be seeing this story through to the very end. I've actually got the rest of it all sketched out, I just have to actually write it. Which takes a lot of time and inspiration and a lot of attention to
detail. There's like so many things all compiling here at the end and it's crazy!

6) So long story short sorry this is taking forever but I promise, I'm trying.

Thank you so much to each and every person who has commented on this fic - your words have been the inspiration to keep writing, but more importantly, to keep getting better. (haha wow ouch referenced my own chapter there)

Seriously though, I feel like my style has improved so much even just throughout recent chapters. It's been a long journey, but we're all headed to the grand finale soon, so.

Thank you.

Immeasurably.

xx
Двадцать Пять (Twenty-five)

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry

For this entire chapter

**Warnings:** graphic violence, mentions of rape and previous rape encounters, dubious consent by means of disassociation, eating disorders, vomiting, intentional infliction of pain on self and others, general uselessness and loss, depression, mentions of past suicide attempts, panic attacks, PTSD, adult content.

** The scene discussing rape - which is also the dubious consent scene - is bracketed between double stars, feel free to skip. **

I swear it sounds like a total shit show and I mean it is but it's not like. Just. I mean, be careful okay. There's still plot though I swear.

There are a lot of songs quoted in the chapter, but they've all been sourced previously or directly in the chapter. *Definitely recommend clicking the song links as usual.*

One song I must direct your attention to: I've been listening to it on repeat for the past month. It was actually inspired in part by TIMLB and written by my dear friend and it's beautiful, go give her some love [here](#).

Other song super relevant once you finish the chapter: [No Place Like Home - Mariana’s Trench](#)

(it's so fitting I literally sat there in shock when I found it. Also, in the middle there's this huge shift in tempo and style - leading us right into the next chapter of TIMLB hint hint)

Additional reference to [this text post](#).

- one more note, the painting is in this chapter and if the image doesn't load i put a link underneath it with a little "xx" so you should be able to click on that -

Painting cred goes to me. It took me fucking six months to paint that shit. It's huge. And beautiful and actually hanging in my house. I made it for this story, and if you want it that's super cool but hey please don't sell it I promise I'm more broke than you.

Anyways.

I wish you all luck. Much love.

xx

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#).
There’s a lightning in your eyes I can’t deny. Then there’s me inside a sinking boat, running outta time. Without you, I’ll never make it out ali-i-ive.

“But I know, yes I know we’ll be alright,” Steve sang softly under his breath and Bucky glanced over at him from the driver’s seat, one eyebrow raised.

There’s a devil in your smile that’s chasing me, and everytime I turn around it’s only gaining speed.

He couldn’t help it. It was just too fitting. Steve reached over, nudging Bucky’s shoulder and beautiful crystal eyes rolled, that one-sided smile tugging at his mouth now.

“How is it you always find these songs, Rogers?”

“Oh just wait,” Steve smiled, resting one elbow on the open window, wind whipping his hair as the American landscape flew by, legs stretched out on top the dash, cherry red hood stretched out beyond the windshield and an endless black top road stretched out ahead of that, yellow lines disappearing beneath them as the complicated world in the rearview faded to nothing at all.

The chords of the chorus hit and Steve tipped his head across the seat, eyes on Bucky as he open his mouth just in time,

“This time I’m ready to run,” he sang and Bucky’s half-smile broke out into a real one, affectionate shake of his head as he glanced back over, eyes glittering under the highway sun and the crashing stereo.

“Cause I wanna be yours, don’t you wanna be mine?”

“We’re getting married, doesn’t that count as yours?” Bucky sassed and Steve smiled and ignored him, rolling his head on the headrest to sing up at the sky,

“Wherever you are is the place I be-long! Cause I wanna be free, and I wanna be yours, I’ll never
look back now, I’m reeeeeddy to run,” Soft hum along to the background music, the echoing *I’m ready to run* and a funny sound from Bucky’s side of the car.

Steve looked over, smile widening as he caught Bucky’s thumbs drumming along on the steering wheel.

“Isn’t that kinda impossible? Being free and someone’s at the same time?”

“No,” Steve told him, reaching over to turn it up a bit louder. “—a future in my life I can’t foresee. Unless of course I stay on course and keep you next to meee. C’mon, Buck, sing with me!”

“I don’t know the words!”

“You will at the chorus. C’mon. Don’t tell me the great Bucky Barnes is too afraid to sing—”

“God, that trick, will you ever stop being twelve?”

“If it’s not broke—”

“This time I’m reeeeady to run,” Bucky interrupted loudly, smiling at all the edges as his singing voice filled the car and Steve was smiling so wide he might break. “Escape from the city and fol-low the sun.”

Buck’s right hand reached over and shoved him on the word sun and Steve laughed, tipping sideways with it, lit up with the entire world bright and beautiful and Bucky right here beside him there wasn’t a single thing else he could ever need—

“Can you turn that off?”

Steve’s head snapped up, pencil falling out of his fingers in surprise as the daydream flashed to nothing in front of his eyes.

Bucky shot him an irritable look, gliding past the kitchen table with a bundle of files in his arms.

Steve blinked, glancing between the tenseness of Bucky’s shoulder blades, and the lines he’d been drawing in his sketchbook, how far from reality the drawing of Bucky’s whipping wind and mouth tilted open in song was.

Right.

He forced himself to reach over and turn off the knob on the speaker. He liked the song. Combined with a pencil in his hand it made it easy to pretend--

Bucky stalked back out of the bedroom and Steve curled his hand tentatively around his pencil again. It was better to draw now if he had music going. What was the point in drawing them happy though, when he lifted his head to that scowl on Bucky’s face?

Bucky’d heard the song too, clearly. Steve’d been hoping--

But he’d asked to turn it off.

Steve's heart sunk.

“I’m headed to the tower today,” Bucky said, grabbing a pistol from one of the kitchen drawers. Steve looked down at his paper.
“Okay.”

“I’ll probably do some shopping, too.” Buck tightened his ponytail and Steve bit the inside of his cheek.

“Okay.”

A step in his direction and Steve’s heart fluttered ridiculously, hopeful when he knew better. Bucky stooped to press a nonchalant kiss to his cheek, straightened back up to go. It was stupid, Steve knew, but he couldn’t---

Bucky started for the door and Steve’s hand darted out, grabbing Bucky’s. Warm, skin, it felt like they hadn’t touched in years and Steve wanted to cry from the familiar rough of Bucky’s pistol calluses. Only he couldn’t even look up to meet Bucky’s eyes.

A pause, waiting to see if Steve said anything, only what could he say?

“Don’t wait up,” Bucky finally managed, then he was tugging his hand free, boot-falls across the tile, door opened. Closed.

Steve stared down at gray lines on paper. Beautiful twinkle in eyes that cut away from his in real life. It wasn’t Steve who started looking away first. He just didn’t bother meeting Bucky’s eyes this morning because he didn’t feel like getting his heart ripped out through his throat when Bucky turned away like it hurt to look at him.

If it were anyone else Steve’d make a point to lock gazes, defiantly lift his chin but this was Bucky and Steve was weak, always was for James Barnes.

The drawing was crumpling before he realized he’d torn it out. High arc into the trash and Steve was headed for the door too. Fuck this apartment. Fuck it all.

His running shoes were by the door. The next thing he knew, Brooklyn sidewalks were disappearing under his feet.

Files.

Only one had ever really mattered to him.

The Hydra file had been so thin. Certainly wasn’t seventy years worth.

There was always something else, one more thing Steve didn’t know. One more horror Bucky was running from. It was a wonder he was functioning, let alone that they were living together.

How could Steve ask for more?

Only he’d seen--

He sucked in a breath, jolting his legs to pump faster. Rounded a corner, less populated streets. Graffiti littering back alleys and in another life, this had been a place he’d known.

Why had they moved to Brooklyn?

How much about Bucky did Steve still not know? It should’ve been enough, seeing him freak once, to know that Bucky was better off without him. It was just that...Hydra’d used Steve. They’d used him to make Bucky think he was nothing. Maybe Bucky still thought that.
Steve pushed harder.

He still remembered pulling Bucky from that facility in Azzano. It’d only been a few years ago. The bile churning in his gut, the overwhelming urge to puke or cry, just seeing Buck strapped down like that.

That’d been Bucky’s life for years.

He still remembered how Buck broke down in that schoolhouse, 1944. Scrambling into a corner, dripping wet, begging Steve not to touch him. Snapping that he knew where he was, but he couldn’t deal.

Buck didn’t show shit like that anymore. It was all internal.

Bucky’d been so hurt, Steve’d been used as a weapon against him. And still, Bucky touched and grabbed and fucked him like Steve was the only thing left in this earth, like Bucky’d die without him--

...he had, because Steve’d failed him.

Who the fuck was Steve to stay around, when he was the very thing that’d tortured Bucky for that long? It was clear, in the way Buck clung to him too tight, nothing about the way they needed each other was...good, anymore. It was fucked up. They’d made Bucky believe he was nothing without Steve and now he was afraid of making it true again but Steve could feel it, in the bruises he still had on his spine, in the sharp shifting of the broken bones in his hand as they healed.

Bucky’d tried to devour him. There was so much desperation in the way he’d consumed Steve--

God, the things they must’ve done to him.

Steve crashed to his knees, but at least he’d been smart enough to dart inside some cafe bathroom first.

The bile he hadn’t gotten to hurl after Azzano - and every time he’d thought about what happened to Bucky since - had to resurface eventually. Or maybe he’d over-ran again. Maybe both. Steve didn’t know anymore.

Sweat dripped into his eyes and Steve ran a hand through blonde hair, spiking it crazy again, and he wasn’t exactly feeling that rebellious, puking his guts out in some nasty public toilet, but it wasn’t like he had a lot of other options.

He’d been surprised to hell the serum let him puke at all. But perfect cell structure didn’t mean his head wasn’t fucked. Didn’t mean he couldn’t overwork his body. Besides, try hard enough at anything...not that he was intentionally running too hard. Or, well. It wasn’t all intentional. Only partly. On good days.

The reflection staring back at him was shaking and pale but Steve ignored that, splashing his face with cold water. It didn’t clear shit.

The walk back to the apartment started with trembling leg muscles and clenched abs, a searing stitch in his side from the heaving. So he ran back instead, fought tears as the pain spiked to consuming but at least that was better than crumpling in the middle of the sidewalk.
There were too many floors up to the apartment. Steve took them anyways, heaving as he hauled himself up by the stair-railing.

Fuck.

The door was the only thing supporting him as he shoved a key in the lock, then Steve was basically falling inside, kicking off his shoes violently enough to dent the wall.

A tiny sound, far enough off that it was only the enhanced hearing that picked it up, and it was such a *terrible* sound, Steve could only stop and stare and pray it wasn’t in his apartment.

The bathroom door was open. Steve always kept it closed.

Shaky legs brought him to the edge of the doorframe, one hand on the wall as he carefully approached.

“Bucky?” he finally called.

Quiet tightening whirr. Steve peered around the corner, both hands on the wall to hold himself up. Upright was important.

And better off than Bucky was right now.

Curling in a ball in the tub and Steve couldn’t handle this. He wanted to collapse, needed to curl up himself and how was he supposed to be strong?

“Buck,” he said anyways, pulling himself into the bathroom and carefully, quietly closing the door behind him. Box.

Box.

“You’re okay,” Steve started and Bucky made a weak sound that could’ve stood for *yeah, easy for you to say*, or a not-at-all-teasing *fuck you*. Maybe both.

“Can I --” Steve started, reaching closer but paused before he said the word touch you because that wasn’t always a good idea.

Only Bucky spoke before he could.

“You smell like puke,” Bucky muffled, head tucked in his hands and Steve pinched the bridge of his nose, taking a step backwards.

“Were you running?” Bucky asked again, voice shaky and gravelly, shot to hell like he’d spent the night screaming. He hadn’t, Steve knew because he’d been there. At least Buck hadn’t kicked him out of bed. Just curled up as far away from Steve as possible instead. He’d almost rather have been banished to the couch.

“I was running,” Steve managed. “Just pushed a little hard, empty stomach--”

“Please don’t lie to me,” Bucky mumbled and Steve shut his mouth, blinking and turning away.

“Anything I can do?”

“Get it outta my fucking head?” Bucky offered sarcastically, curling in a little tighter and Steve
knocked his head back against the wall.

“You know I wish I could.”

A weak, dire sound and Bucky's knees were shaking; almost glad he couldn't see his face.

“Temporary?” He muffled quietly and Steve looked over the hunched shoulders for a moment.

“...yeah, maybe I've got something.” Pushing off from the wall made the room spin but Bucky couldn't see him stumble so they could pretend. Steve caught his breath, managed, "Wait here.”

“Not like I'm fucking going anywhere.”

It was that scary Winter Soldier voice but Steve wasn't gonna think about that. Only focus was staying upright long enough to find a pen.

The sketchbook smacked the bottom of the tub loud enough to make Bucky jump, curl tighter in on himself. Frightened groan like he was pissed at himself for freaking at the noise and Steve needed to puke again.

He sat the pen down quietly, one hand over his mouth because Buck still hadn't lifted his head and he couldn't call Steve on it.

Managed to make it back to the wall beside the bathtub, flickering thoughts over why a bathtub of all places. Safe? Cold? Easier to clean up if he offed himself?

Morbid, both their heads morbid.

"Blank page,” Steve explained, hoping Buck couldn't tell how weak his voice was. "Best you can get. Draw about it.”

“How do you draw trenches?”

“...it's the war?”

“The fuck did you think I was curled in the bathtub for?”

“I dunno, seventy years of torture?”

“Fuck you.” Bucky squeezed tighter in on himself and Steve forced himself to breathe. He didn't know what he was doing. He wasn't any good at this. How was he supposed to help--

Bucky didn't need him. How many times had he said that? Steve steeled himself. Tried to cut the emotion outta short words.

“Great.” Push off the wall again, "I'll leave you to it then.”

He wasn't trying to be an ass. But his mouth tasted awful and he couldn't shower and his legs were still shaky and Bucky wasn't even supposed to be here, let alone broken down in the tub and biting everything Steve tried to help.

Two steps towards the door before the panicked scramble against porcelain.

“Wait! Don’t.” Steve turned around and Bucky's eyes were up, just barely. Red-rimmed and puffier than Steve'd pictured. How long had he been in here? How long had Steve been running? "Pleas--Ca. Can you stay?”
Eyes icy as the water Steve froze in. Eyes the very ice he froze in.

His spine, bruised and aching, softened like rotted mattresses and Steve's feet took him back to the tub before his head could say not to.

“Yeah. 'Course,” he whispered, sliding down the wall to sit beside the edge of the white white basin. The dark figure inside watched him, studied him, body ridged, hair shining black, bottom lip trembling. Steve curled his legs up, wrapped his arms around them in hopes Bucky wouldn't notice the way the muscles kept convulsing. Distraction. The tiny sane part left of his head inserted best-friend-hurting and Steve's mouth opened around words more light-hearted, lips more curled and soft than they meant. "Thought the smell was bothering you.”

He didn't get a smile back, but Bucky's shoulders rippled and dropped from his ears, harshness dropping from his throat too. “Better than you gone. I'd offer you a shower, but.”

“Not leaving the tub,” Steve filled in, tipping his head back against the wall tiredly. “It's fine.”

The day passed in a series of dozes against the bathroom wall, flashing in and out to consciousness where Bucky was scratching away at pages only to tear them out. He wondered if he ever figured out how to draw trenches.

Steve fell hard-asleep slumped against the bathtub somewhere around four in the afternoon. The world tipped and he woke again to strong hands carefully picking him up. His throat grumbled, but Buck was outta the bathtub now so he couldn't actually complain.

(Even if it was only because he was taking care of Steve. He could let himself be needy if it made Buck feel needed.)

“I'mma wash you down,” Bucky whispered and Steve nodded weakly, bathroom hazy behind sleep-stuck eyes. Propped on his feet and he didn't sag against Bucky but he wasn't all that stable. Didn't matter. Metal was holding him secure.

Cold hands stripped him carefully, running-shirt peeled from skin stiff with sweat, carefully tugged over his head. Easing down sweats while Steve braced himself on the counter and he couldn't help but think about the last time Bucky'd taken his clothes off. Ripping apart his shirt at the seams, shredding them from his body and placing bruises instead of careful support.

Bucky was being gentle, so gentle, like Steve was 20 and fragile again.

It was cold and he hadn't been naked in fronta Buck since he'd been bleeding and broken two nights ago. The handprints bruised into his skin were almost healed - it wasn't just internal bleeding, metal had ruptured blood vessels under his skin from squeezing so hard and it wasn't normal for him to take this long to heal but Bucky was strong.

So strong.

His hands barely touched Steve now, fluttering over skin like he couldn't decide where to touch, finally settling for lightly over Steve's ribs because those weren't purple and blue like his hips were.

Careful lifting into the shower and stepping over the edge of the basin was harder than it should've been. As soon as he had two feet on slippery ground, Steve closed his eyes and tipped his head and shoulder against the wall, propping upright so Bucky could turn on the water.

The spray splashed onto not-quite-healed skin and it stung, enough to make him hiss and tense,
fingers curling automatically and *fuck*, bad idea. Steve cradled his left hand to his chest, breathing fast and already exhausted, lips parting to tell Bucky it was fine, he didn't have to--

(He just wanted it to stop)

But Buck was already smoothing a soapy washcloth over his skin, hands a little shaky and face all twisted up, teeth sinking into his bottom lip every time he slid over a bruise. Pausing at the raw scrapes and bite marks, all that proof still there - Bucky's lip was bitten bloody before he finished Steve's torso.

The water hurt. He didn't want--

Breathe.

He let Bucky wash him down.

He hadn't, after. Steve'd woken up the morning after still curled on his side in the middle of the art room floor. Only Bucky hadn't been behind him. Bucky'd been gone.

Steve'd cried again, but he should've seen it coming. The surprise hurt more than the loneliness.

He thought they were *better* than this this. Better.


Bucky's touch looped around the back of his neck and Steve sucked in a breath, holding as much air in his lungs as he could as the careful cloth started down his spine. There were still crescent-moon-bruiises, heart pounding beneath each, riddled white-hot pulses down his spine and Bucky wasn't breathing, hands so soft Steve could barely feel the cloth.

These hands had cleaned, fixed him so many times. Never from bruises that *came* from the same hands--

The sound of knees hitting tile behind him met Bucky's touch smoothed over his ass, the backs of his thighs. Steve's balance threatened precariously as he tried to spread his legs, hand shooting out to grab the opposite wall but Buck was one step ahead of him, catching him with hard hands on his hips and that was where he was bruised the most but of course Bucky didn't think about that when he was reaching to keep Steve from falling and if he could he would've kept the shout inside his chest but it felt like his skin was nothing but muddled pain-sensors and broken bone and the sound that ripped from his throat was just as horrible as it felt.

"Oh Steve, *Steve* m' sosorry--"

"S'fine," he managed lightly, shower tipping, blurring, light-headed to fuck and half that was probably from puking his guts out earlier when he hadn't had enough food in the past two days to puke at all, let alone knelt for twenty minutes over a public toilet.

"M' sosorry," Bucky rushed under his breath again and Steve palmed his forehead, forcing his lungs to expand with oxygen. He kinda wanted to hurl again.

"S'fine," Steve repeated, closing his eyes against the spin. "M'okay."

"Your body begs to differ," Bucky muttered, running soap over Steve's inner thighs. It was a nice
"Always has." Weak whisper, chin dropped to his chest and fingers curling on the wet wall. Metal whirred as Bucky paused at his words, fingertips skirting the edges of bruised knees.

"Not like this," Bucky whispered back and Steve would've laughed, if he had the extra air. So he had bruised knees from being fucked into the floor instead of falling on it, so his spine ached from bites instead of scoliosis. Didn't mean he forgot what it was like to be broken on the outside too.

"Like this."

Hell, maybe it was comforting, in a way. Familiar, at least.

Maybe it was the most this body had felt like his. Maybe he really fucking shouldn't say that out loud.

Bucky’s cloth started again. Steve’s knees stopped shaking somewhere around Buck’s hands on the back of his neck, guiding him into warm water to wash off soap and this, this was easy. Close his eyes and let Buck carry him through every step, smoothing suds from his skin, rinsing cuts and bruises clean before wrapping him in a towel and Steve didn’t open his eyes, not once.

Arm slung over his shoulders, other curved to hold up his torso and Buck led him all the way back to the bedroom and this, he could do. He could give Bucky purpose, let him take care. Not like he'd been craving since before his hand snapped in half.

Nowhere left to go.

Careful hands laid him out on the mattress then Bucky was straightening and leaving and Steve couldn't do that again. He couldn't.

"Bucky," broken, needy, and he turned on a dime, worried crystal searching and Steve fist the front of his shirt, dragged him closer and Bucky's worry shut down into blank nothingness but Steve cupped the back of his head anyways.

"Don't run," he begged and Bucky tried to duck outta his grip.

Steve pushed up on a shaking elbow and touched parted lips with his.

Bucky's mouth was rough, lips dry and scraping across Steve's still-healing ones but the physicality was so far from the harsh feel, the world spun dizzy--

A soft destroyed noise and Bucky pressed closer, lips tugging Steve's desperately but so so gentle like he was terrified of what more he'd break but he needed to kiss Steve so badly a starving man in the desert looked fulfilled.

His chest seized and everything was fire, like the burning buildings they'd ran coughing out of. Only Steve was running straight into the smoke now.

Mangled bones bit sharp in complaint but Steve ignored them, closing both hands around Bucky's waist and dragging him gracelessly onto the bed. He'd forgotten he was naked from the shower until Bucky's thigh jammed between his legs, denim scraping sensitive skin and Steve hissed, rolling them in a tangle of wet, messy desperate kisses.

Cool metal hitched along his stomach, Bucky's mouth opening wider to the sound of jeans snapping open, lifting his hips to slide them off and Steve took over, vision spinning as he leaned back to strip
Bucky hurriedly out of his clothes, both of them wiggling, tossing, then Steve was surging over him again, mouths slotting together faster and sloppy, rest of their bodies lining up and a groan rumbled in Steve's throat, resounding whimper from Bucky's mouth as he rolled bruised hips down against Bucky's, cocks rucking against each other.

Steve broke off panting, blinking a few times before the bed stopped spinning enough to see Bucky's face, gorgeous hair splayed out crazy and tangled on the pillow below him and it felt like they hadn't touched in forever, like it'd been years instead of days and Steve was still sore and broken and bruised but he'd never wanted that crystal mouth on him more.

"You sure?" Steve managed, biting back the woozy lightheadedness to press his forehead to Bucky's, eyes slipping closed, hands gripping tighter.

"Shouldn't I be asking that?" Bucky shot, weak, barely breathing. Steve pushed his hips forward, skin catching and tugging and the twin sounds past swollen lips matched everything else they'd ever done in sync.

"Please," Bucky whispered, floating his fingers over Steve's sides, still afraid to grab, ruin more, but he needed and Steve knew that now, heard the plea for all it was and there was nothing left but to believe him.

Dropped head, delicate kiss to shoulder scars and Bucky fidgeted under him, breathing picking up as he palmed the back of Steve's head, rocked their hips together again.

He could feel it, the energy trapped under Bucky's skin, the buzzing desire for more, faster, harder. As if Steve wasn't getting it, Bucky knocked their cocks together again, lifting up his knees to tip them open, spread his legs wide beneath Steve and moan prettily for him.

Softer, lighter, sweeter touches, barely grazing his fingertips over Bucky's skin, carefully curving the shape of his hip, caressing down to the inside of his thighs, kissing his neck through gentle, tender touches and Bucky just whined, tipping his head to expose his throat, arching his back to force Steve to touch him harder but Steve just--

Soft and sweet, the way you were supposed to touch. The opposite of how Bucky'd touched him.

"C'mon," Bucky choked and Steve paused in a kiss, lips pressed unmoving and sugary to Bucky's jawline.

Soothing hum in his throat, hands stroking up and down tense muscle and Buck was only stringing up tighter beneath him.

Please. He wanted this. Then why was he shaking?

Steve pressed another kiss to concave skin of heated cheeks, eyes closed, tender and soft as he knew how - Bucky was porcelain and Steve could handle fragile crystal in his hands without shattering either of them.

Even softer, more careful, lips dragging and catching to press by Bucky's eye and--

The tense body was frozen, always ice, except something somewhere was melting inside because Bucky was leaking out his eyes and there was salt on Steve's tongue.

Tears. The moment the taste registered Steve shot up, hovering over Bucky with his eyes wide and mouth open to ask because crying wasn't supposed to be part--
"I'm..." Bucky inhaled, eyes squeezed shut and oxygen caught in Steve's throat as he thumbed a tear away but Buck turned his head, slid and maneuvered and carefully rolled out from under him and Steve was reaching after like a child but Bucky didn't turn to see, padding barefeet to the bathroom.

The door closed quietly behind him, steady stream of sink water flipping on and it'd been fine one moment and fell apart through Steve's cold hands the next.

Steve touched him soft and Bucky cried. How was that any better than Bucky's rough touches that made Steve cry?

Weak. Useless. The mattress swallowed as he fell on his side, curled tiny ball with tears pricking and hands shaking again. Hadn't been this naked and small and sick since he'd had pneumonia.

Empty, rotted from the inside out and he hadn't even fallen to face the bathroom door, couldn't face everything he'd done now.

It opened so quiet he didn't hear. But he felt. The gravitational hurricane sweeping into their room on silent feet. Waiting, deciding, and Steve couldn't keep his wet, trembling mouth shut.

"I-If you got drafted...y'never chose this fight. At'all. Why'd'u keep following me into battle?"

Mismatched shoulders lifted. Fell. Steve wasn’t there to see but he felt the shrug anyways.

The mattress compressed and Bucky’s weight was so heavy. Used to carry, now they were both drowning.

Spines to each other, curled on opposite sides of the bed but they might as well’ve been face-to-face. Spent enough colorblind days and awed wartime nights to memorize every bit of that face.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky whispered into the dark and Steve was naked and cold and small and it was his fault, he couldn’t listen to that apology.

“God, Bucky. Don’t be,” Steve breathed and a tiny sound broke between them, sucked-in sob cracking over Bucky’s throat, bottom-lip trembling but he was nodding, curling tighter, further and further away.

Part of him wanted to beg. Another part never wanted to speak again.

Seven minutes. He lasted seven minutes before he couldn't do it anymore.

The bed was a marshmallow all over again and he'd gotten over that, when Bucky dragged him between the sheets because it was something to cling to through too soft but Bucky wasn't wrapped around him and he couldn't ignore it, falling through rough clouds without anyone to catch his hand.

The mattress unsettled as he slid off the edge, feet catching floor and knees giving out but his arms had the strength to lower himself weakly to the ground, spine propped up against the side of the bed and he was exhausted and he hated sleeping upright but at least he wasn't falling anymore.

Cold morning light and Steve blinked groggily, unable to remember passing out but it was light and he was so goddamned stiff every muscle he had ached--

Bucky.

Steve rubbed his eyes in case he was seeing things but no, the tiny light form was curled, fetal, on the
floor beside him.

He'd pulled on a white tshirt - rucked up in the night to reveal the patch of skin at his lower back, over the hem of white boxer-briefs. Long dark hair splayed on the floor, near-tickling Steve's foot and contrasting sharply to the white clothing and expanse of smooth skin, arms tucked into his chest and metal underneath so it looked like Bucky back then and that hurt.

It ached, scooting along the floor quietly, holding himself up with his elbows as he ducked down and kissed Bucky in his sleep.

Dry lips dragged slightly with his and the curled shoulders shifted a little, knees curling up tighter and Steve was dizzy again, drawing back to watch silent flickers of closed eyes, parted mouth as perfect as ever and he had to dip in, just once more.

Lips pressed to the smart, slack mouth and Steve wished he could pull Buck's curled body into his arms, carry him like a child over the threshold of the flames and heal the scars and love this beautiful soul and press a thousand promises into ruined skin that he could finally mean, promises he could stop breaking, cobwebs he could clear away and pull cold metal from fading--

Shock rippled up bruises as he fell backwards on his ass, gasping stale air with his mouth broken free in surprise. Startled awake, wide ice staring at him as thick chest muscles heaved beneath soft white cotton.

"Fuck, what were you thinking?" Bucky croaked, hoarse from sleep and Steve wanted to kiss him again but his mouth flapped uselessly instead.

"You...slept on the floor for me. You looked so beautiful I had--"

"Beautiful doesn't mean not deadly, Steve," Bucky snapped, smoothing his long hair angrily out of his face and Steve knew that.

When he'd first met Buck again, fighting the Winter Soldier under that bridge, before he knew it was Buck, cold metal wrapped around his throat and faces close, burning fire in his veins Steve could remember thinking that rush, dance, the fight; ghost, the paradigm and enforcer of the dead--

Could remember thinking "if this is courting death, no wonder he jumped outta buildings."

He’d thought fighting Buck was courting death, but really...in a twisted sort of way. Being with Bucky at all was courting death.

And Steve was still jumping outta buildings.

“I know that,” he said quietly and Bucky made this frustrated sound, pushing himself to his feet and pacing towards the dresser, yanking open a drawer hard enough to dislodge the things atop.

Shoulders tense with anger and annoyance and Steve pushed to his feet too, ignoring how shaky he felt because it was better than yesterday and there was too much else to worry about for his bruises and empty stomach to take precedence now.

Bucky’s hands gripped the edge of the dresser tight, a thousand things running through his head that Steve’d never been let in on and would never be told. A choppy inhale, fingers running pissily through his hair again.
“I can’t protect yo—”

“It’s always about protecting me,” Steve interrupted, stepping up behind the heaving cotton shoulders. Metal tightened, creaking, and how many bruises had Bucky hid by barging in alleys to fight off Steve’s? Torn-out throat and he sucked in a breath, staring at redstarcorner peeking out under white. “How far does it go?”

How far would Bucky go to protect--

*That* far. He almost had. He’d tried. *That*--

There were tears in his eyes and Steve blinked them away because he’d gotten there in time and this was not the time he had to be *strong*. Strong. Couldn’t let Bucky see how hurt because that’s what this was about, he was trying to keep Steve from hurting but lately all that did was hurt him more.

“You tried to kill yourself,” the slowest, quietest whisper, “—to protect me.”

That’s how far it went.

Steve couldn’t watch--

Dark hair flashed, spun around and crystal caught on his, defiant, angry. Boiling up over all the hurt shame guilt just under the surface but Steve knew now, Steve’d seen him, Steve could see right through it now because he’d been there breaking under Bucky’s hands as he fell apart, desperate and ruined and

“I said that was about me, not you.” An accusatory tip up of his chin and he looked scary, almost, all pissed red-hot like this but it was even scarier, the watery truth underneath, the part Steve was finally starting to see with open eyes that the tiniest part of him really wished he never knew. Too much now, he was starting to realize too much.

“Did you mean it?” The words were steady, sure, because Steve was. He remembered every word Bucky’d said to him crumpled against that wall, all the *let me do it for me’s*, but he knew better.

Even knew better then.

Bucky just glared.

And glared.

Steve melted.

Fire made ice drip into weak water and he couldn’t do it, couldn’t watch Bucky so tight-strung and hurt and guilty, that pretty face twisted up with hate?

“I’m okay,” Steve swore, same seriousness as all their childhood cross-your-hearts, and every instinct wanted to cradle Bucky’s face but that wasn’t what this was about.

He took Bucky’s hand, uncurled hard calluses of clenched fists and lifted the palm to his own jaw over bruises he knew they’d both been thinking about. Tipped his head against the brutal weapon with a softness to contrast the sense memory of pain and barely managed not to cry.

“You didn’t hurt me.” Another promise. “I’m okay.”

“I broke your bones,” Bucky whispered, horrified, staring at Steve’s cheek against his fingers like one of the two would burst into flames if he flinched.
“Not the first time,” he tried to smile and Bucky shook his head, tearing touch and eyes away but Steve saw the shine on his eyelashes anyways. The same shine that’d been there the first time, the first real time, on that helicarrier above him with metal glinting and eyes watering and he’d fucked Steve’s face up, shot him multiple times, stabbed him with a knife - did he really think a broken hand and some bruises were something Steve couldn’t get past?

“You really think that’s helping?” Failed dry-sarcasm just sounded desperate and sad and Steve’s chest ached with more than bruises. It was so cold and empty from this side of the room and the room wasn’t tipping dizzy but his world was when Bucky was so far away, inches turned miles and Steve couldn’t stop himself from reaching, pulling.

Bucky couldn’t stop himself from hiding against Steve’s chest.

He had to lift to put his chin on Bucky’s head but it was worth the solid weight against his throat and Steve’s eyes slipped closed as fingers curled tight and frightened against his bruised spine.

Desperate.

He’d been so--

The way he clung, like Steve was fading from his fingertips, like they were going to lose each other all over again and god, Bucky clung like Steve was the only thing anchoring him to Earth and that had to be Hydra, had to be the way they’d told him he wasn’t worth anything without Steve and and

“Do you really think you’re nothing without me?” Quiet words came out jolted with his chin on Bucky’s head, vibrations sliding down just like them. “Bucky, you’ve always been so alive, so much better than, than--”

Frozen pause. Swallow.

“Fading stars,” he managed and Bucky’s fingers released from bruises just as Steve’s throat betrayed him again. “You don’t need me.”

“Stop.” A heavy hand landed on his heart and it was the only place he wasn’t bruised at all and Steve hated that because the insides felt the exact-fucking-opposite. Beautiful shining hair was hanging in Bucky’s eyes at he stared at their shoes and if only he’d just fucking look at Steve.

Fingers curled, digging in for just a moment then Bucky pushed off his chest and the room shrunk in size as he left but then he was gone and Steve stared at their rumpled bed with desolate eyes and a distant everything else.

~*~*~

When he was younger, Bucky’d told himself Steve was the liquid that ran through his veins - just wanted to have as much of Steve inside him as possible, wanted to consume every bit.

If only he’d known.

~*~*~

*The fallen ones locked away in permanent slumber.*

He found him staring out the window, hands shoved in sweats pockets, radio crooning heartbeats in the moonlit background.
Truth be told, I never was yours.

“Come back to bed,” Bucky whispered, reaching over to turn off the words himself this time.

The fear, the fear of falling apart....

Steve crawled in beside him and the radio clicked off with an echo, cutting a word in half but better than the knife under Bucky’s pillow.

Ten minutes of ticking silence, bedside clock splitting skin with every shifting second, counting slower slower decades backwards and infinity further under ice and

“What do you remember that rhyme,” Bucky asked the shadows behind Steve’s shoulder blades, “Just before it ends, people start to fly?”

Steve’s form shifted in the sheets, whispering around him and Bucky blinked against the hell-bound silhouettes, voice dropping quiet, echoing hollow off an numbed-empty room. “I thought that’d never hit us. We all had wings back then. On your helmet. On my arm. Right here. They took away my wings.”

Steve sucked in a breath and Bucky closed his eyes. “But that’s alright. Everyone I know’s got wings now. Tony in his hands. On Sam’s back. Your helmet.”

Silence in the dark and Bucky curled real fingers over the metal star, one that used to have something else and it didn’t matter now, it was three am and it’d all be bright enough in the morning not to remember anyways.

“I miss my wings,” he whispered and Steve’s pillow was wet when dawn hit.

~*~*~

When he was younger, Bucky’d told himself alotta things.

From the very first moment it dawned on him, Bucky’d told himself--

As nice as Steve’d be about it, he’d be disgusted, disoriented and he’d hate Bucky for taking away the one thing he’d always counted on: Bucky’s friendship. He couldn’t do that to Steve.

He’d already taken more than his share, didn’t deserve to thwart all the sunshine outta Steve’s life. He could never know.

Well. It was late for that.

The world outside the window was edging early-dusk and the day should’ve passed brighter than it did but the cheery smiles he used to get were weary-wary glances now. Bucky spent the morning making Steve’s favorite breakfast, the one Sarah used to.

Steve ate seven bites and gave Bucky a weak smile, collapsing on the couch with a sketchpad pinned to propped knees, flinching visibly across the apartment as the cabinet in the kitchen snapped shut too loud.

The last time it’d been this day, it hadn’t been easy either. But it hadn’t been anything like this. There’d only been once - before they’d met again on the bridge - Steve’d had this day to himself and Bucky had no idea if it’d been miserable or celebratory.

He couldn’t imagine it being more miserable than this though.
Last time, it’d been expected. And he knew, today, what was coming only he hadn’t in so long and he didn’t know if it’d ruin him disastrously or mean nothing and he couldn’t decide which was worse.

Steve was on the couch in the next room carving five points into paper and Bucky was curled against the edge of their bed, distant light fading from the walls and the quiet sounds of New York outside and in a few hours there’d be nothing quiet, everything shouting at once just like Bucky’s bones had that night--

There’d been so many times. So many times he’d almost said it.

When they were kids, it would’ve meant something different probably. Or he would’ve thought so. But the first time he almost said it, for real, pure honesty without any filter or barriers, it’d’ve...it’d’ve changed everything. How many things could’ve that one moment prevented--

The first time.

Steve, huge and new but Steve and Bucky was burning and the world was spinning and he wasn’t sure it wasn’t all a hallucination but there he was, gripping a metal rail so tight his hands hurt more than his cut-up feet and he couldn’t feel it, was numb to everything but Steve on the other side of that metal gap, freshly bent-back-rail and that stupid stubborn look on his face and Bucky was terrified and his throat hurt from shouting back at Steve so loudly but the bastard had told him to leave without him and Bucky’d barely been off the table ten minutes, he wasn’t about to leave Steve Rogers.

Then Steve jumped.

Bucky’s heart dropped to his feet and Steve’s feet were flailing in the air, soaring over the exploding fiery gap and clearing the landing and he was going so fast he pummeled straight into Bucky but Bucky didn’t care, just absorbed the impact - always - and clung so tight to Steve his eyes were watering with it.

Relief, disbelief, real alive and Steve’s warm skin under his cold nose and Bucky’s lips parted against that beautiful skin and right then, in that moment.

He was gonna say it.

He’d opened his mouth and the first hoarse start of an I-- was in his throat and the love you was coming right after but Steve’d stopped him, Steve’d interrupted him and said we gotta go and Bucky’d let Steve drag him through hallways then there’d been a flash of blue and the temporary sanity he’d had, the clarity of truth had dissipated and Hydra’d taken his head and it wasn’t until that evening when Peggy swept into the bar that the words from earlier sunk in, subconsciously, and funny Bucky hadn’t remembered he’d almost said it until he’d gotten them all restored and even then, he’d never let himself think about it until now.

Now, staring out the window with a heavy blanket wrapped around his shoulders, toes freezing, ears attuned to Steve’s movements and heart pounding in anticipation for when the first colored bomb dropped from the sky and wondering how they were passing yet another of Steve’s birthdays without Bucky ever having said I love you out loud.

“Sweetheart?”

Bucky wrapped the blanket tighter, not turning around to the voice because he couldn’t stop rocking and he had no idea when he’d started hiding behind the heels of his hands, pressed hard enough to
his eyes to make them throb and and

“Bu-cky? Are you...”

Steve crouched beside the rocking bundle and carefully pried violent hands from pretty features, chest seizing at the look on Bucky’s face because that was beyond drunk, the parted lips pulling a memory and he was too surprised that the next murmur wasn’t a serial number to register what the mumbling was.

“No--stars. We'renotstars. Notstarsnotstarsnotstarsn--”

“Shhh, shh. Bucky, baby. It’s okay. Can you look at me?”

“We’re. We’re not stars, Stevie, we’re notstars.”

“I know,” Steve promised, wrapping ticking fingers around thick blanket and Bucky tipped sideways into him like gravity meant nothing. “I know.”

"Too many," the broken voice gasped and Steve pressed the unbandaged hand to his forehead but of course Buck didn’t have a fever, he was burning on the inside, to the end of days.

“I've k-killed too many.”

Sinking stones and Steve squeezed him tighter, tugging a hurt sound and Bucky struggled against him, bumping fading bruises and shaking *shaking* and the weak protest was too much for Steve to take, not today.

Water welled up and he buried his nose in Bucky's hair, praying he wouldn't feel the cold tears edging between them.

Taut and braced, wavering on the moment when Buck shoved him off and away because he did, he always did.

“I got you,” Steve whispered anyways, harsh floating and muscles tensing cringe for the metal hand to his chest, the cold reminder that no, he didn’t deserve to comfort Bucky like this, not anymore.

The heavy body would never crumple against him, puppet with the strings cut, because the branded wooden x’s hadn’t stopped tugging above.

He used to touch Bucky to ground him and save him and Bucky hadn’t let him do that, didn’t let that work this time around. Maybe it could’ve, from the first days back as the Winter Soldier. How many episodes would’ve been avoided if Bucky’d reached for Steve instead of ran from him?

During the war it’d been different. He’d done it because he had to be okay. The torture was in the past and Bucky had a responsibility to move on. If he was psychologically damaged, he was useless to Steve. Mental injuries were just as dangerous as broken legs on the battlefield. They were a unit and there was no room for a weak link. So Bucky buried it all down and didn't let himself be weak.

There was no room to be weak. And now, a lot more than a team was a stake.

The doorbell rang.

They both jumped and Steve cursed loudly and Bucky was rolling outta his grip within seconds, shedding the blanket and straightening scarily fast, a single stumbling step before the spine snapped
tight and tall and Bucky was stalking the murder walk past a stunned Steve on the floor and seconds ago he'd been a mess but now he was striding confidently and scarily for the door and Steve couldn't breathe because he hadn't seen the Winter Soldier like that in months.

But then the door was opening and there was nothing left but to pull himself to his feet too, and wonder how the hell they were getting outta this one.

“HAPPY BIR--”

“Wait, wait, false alarm, s’not Steve.”

“You letting us in Barnes, or you gonna block the doorw--”

“Look, there he is! Haappy Biirr--”

Bucky finally stepped aside and a swarm crowded into their apartment, kitchen filling with miscellaneous shouts, bright packages, clapping hands, and flickering candles.

It wasn’t until Steve saw his reflection in a window he realized he still had tears gathering at the edges of widened eyes. Wiping his face haphazardly wouldn’t do much now because everyone was already here and there was no use hiding and Bucky was standing across the room, arms crossed over his chest and ice studying Steve critically and he was fine, it was Bucky’d he’d been tearing up over in the first place.

All that pain that’d just snapped off like a switch, it was terrifying and honestly Steve felt like crying a lot more instead of plastering on a smile but they had to do better.

He let the Avengers crowd him into the dining room, shoving into the chair at the head of the table and he’d sat at the head of tables in the war, that was where they strategized, Sergeant Barnes on his left and Dugan and Stark on the right, Peg right alongside the boys. Except once, the last time, Bucky's chair hadn't been at the table because Bucky wasn't there and really, really, Steve wasn't sure he was here now.

Crystal was still watching him from so far away but Steve's arms were too-long now so it didn't take much before he curled his fingers over a sharp wrist and pulled. Everything was still loud as Bucky stumbled to Steve's side and it was just so much.

Blonde spikes crushed as he leaned his temple against Bucky's ribs, holding where he hadn't been allowed to for centuries but Bucky wouldn't push him away in front of their family and Steve knew it was sick but he needed the weight of Bucky's body against his, bruised bloody or not.

"You wanna cut the cake, Barnes?"

"Hmm?" Bucky looked up, blinking confusedly with one hand tentatively resting atop Steve's head.

"Buck gets first piece," Steve insisted and the dark head shook, fingers sinking into Steve's scalp.

"S'your birthday."

"Want you to have it."

"Not hungry."

"You haven't eaten."

"Steve."
"Buck," he replied stubbornly and they were arguing about way more than cake and everyone else had gone pretty damn quiet by now.

"I can cut?" Tony offered and Clint smacked him but Pepper started slicing the cake anyway as Natasha got plates and Steve stubbornly stared up at Bucky until the rough hand in his hair tightened sans metallic whir.

"We did not come at a good time," Sam muttered to Barton under his breath but Steve and Bucky both heard anyways.

Apparently Buck had no problem shoving him off in front of family after all.

Steve's head was spinning with it as Nat slid a slice of cake in front of him, mini fire lit up over cloying blood-red frosting.

Bucky stalked all the way to the other end of the table and he was staring at the candle just like Steve was and neither of them were seeing days-past birthday-cakes.

Leaping flames, crying out in the darkness and blood staining snow and electric sparks licking up Steve's boots as Bucky fried his hands prying them free, knuckles split pulpy from the mangled corpse beside them and *le fonce est approche*.

After, boxer gloves and Bucky'd asked Steve when he was going to kiss him and Steve was so relieved because he knew it was a rhetorical cry for help and he'd forgotten about it since but what if What if it'd been exactly what they were now, what if it went *all the way back then*—

It did, didn't it?
It *did*, didn't it.

Steve looked up from the candle.

Bucky was staring at him.

*You gonna kiss me anytime, Rogers?*

The chair screeched loudly enough to make Nat's hand dart to her gun and Tony to jump but Steve didn't hear it, just strode around the edge of the table until he reached crystal and took Bucky's cheeks in his palms, tilted that beautiful face up and moved too quick for Buck to stop him but just slow enough to see the flash in his eyes before their lips pressed together and Steve kissed him like the taste was the only way he could breathe anymore.

A tiny distant crackle outside, kids on streets starting firecrackers as dusk set in and they never got to be kids with firecrackers, they were destined holding timebombs.

Polished bone sunken into plush lips, scraped drag tugging a choked tear and Steve pulled away with a gasp, soldier calluses swiping over brother-in-arms cheeks and sliding wet.

He stared at melting ice and Bucky ducked his head, wiping both palms over his cheeks, rubbing his eyes and Steve just held on as tight as he could to Bucky's biceps and sucked in greedy gasps of proximity.

"I'm putting on a movie," Pepper clapped her hands together and started for the living room, shuttling awkwardly downcast Clint and Bruce in tow. Steve pressed his forehead to the top of Bucky's scalp,
too hard and aching but his lungs still weren't working right and with his eyes closed he could at least pretend they weren't insideoutexposed to the very people who never needed to see either of them like this.

"M'sorry," Steve breathed because he didn't know what he did or why Bucky was crying or why he'd been freaking earlier but whatever it was had to be Steve's fault anyhow.

Bucky opened his mouth to answer and Steve was hanging onto the silence like gospel; perfect time for Sam to lean over to Tony and mutter just quiet and worried and bitter enough,

"They care about each other so much it's gonna swallow them whole." Brown arms crossed over his chest and Tony pursed his lips, stabbing a bite of cake and studying the distraught pair around the fork in his mouth.

"I thought you said Bucky came to you for help," Tony pointed out and Sam shifted his weight, leaning closer to drop his voice lower but neither willing to follow Nat outta the room without the soldiers.

"The more I think about it, it's like he only reached out to say he did. To talk aloud about his problems but what's the point if he's not interested in healing, y'know? I have no idea what happened between them, but I know it was something."

"Or. Maybe everything." Tony shrugged and Sam lifted an eyebrow, tipping his head in the direction of the watery-eyed pair, who were finally on their way for the living room too.

"You think this is built up? Over days, weeks?"

"Hell, it could be years. Decades, centuries, *lifetimes*. Built up, one brick atop another and now the wall’s so high they can’t see over it."

Sam studied Tony out the corner of his eye, watching him tighten his mouth, staring straight ahead at the retreating backs, the bruises on the back of Steve’s neck.

“Well,” the silence finally broke as Sam gestured them to follow into the next room. “At least we came over, can’t imagine what’d’ve been like if they were alone when the fireworks started.”

“Hell, we still may have an explosion. Turn the movie up loud enough, might drown some of it out.”

“For how long?”

Tony scoffed, watching as Steve sat down next to Bucky on the floor and Barnes scooted half a foot away. “Not long enough.”

Because the speakers came courtesy of Stark Industries, they were loud enough to at least muffle the fireworks. Nearly everyone flinched at least once, but with the curtains pulled and the aliens of *Independence Day* crashing over the screen, no one had a panic attack and it could almost be summed up to a success.

Except Bucky kept glancing at Steve every twenty seconds. And wiping at watery-eyes every forty.

Rogers kept dozing off and shooting back awake and every time he startled into consciousness he looked *terrified* and Bucky looked so miserable that Natasha took to “accidentally” kicking Steve’s side to keep him awake.
They were a little over an hour into the movie - an entirely calm scene, so clearly he hadn’t been watching - when Barnes finally broke. Angrily wiping a tear that’d slipped past his metallic defenses, he pushed off the edge of the couch and stood, excused himself with a weak voice.

“M’sorry guys, but I’m off to bed. Thanks for coming over.” His mouth twisted up into a smile that looked nothing like the Sergeant Barnes of textbooks and everything like a man who’d been tortured for a lifetime.

Everyone gave various soft replies of course and Bucky nodded, bottom lip drawn into his mouth and a hand raking shakily through his hair. Steve was looking up at him like a kicked puppy and Bucky exhaled heavily, dropping to one knee and cupping one side of Steve’s face to press his lips gently to the other cheek, lingering just a moment with his eyes closed painfully tight, then he was letting go, straightening again and gone with fallen footsteps across the apartment, a carefully quietly closed bedroom door.

The movie was still playing and no one looked. Six pairs of eyes watched Steve instead as he deflated further against the side of the couch, drawing his knees into his chest and resting his chin on top, eyes straight forward at the screen and prickling water at the edges.

He didn’t speak, so eventually they all turned back to the movie too, one by one with worried glances back at soft blonde hair and dull-blue eyes.

Twenty minutes and a lot of explosions and sniffles later, he finally broke.

Sucked in breath and they were all perking up, then it was finally spilling from the tightened mouth in a rushed, weak version of the Captain’s voice they all knew.

“It’s grinding me into the ground, the way-- the way he won’t let me hold him.”

Steve’s arms tightened around his knees and Nat reached down, massaging the tense shoulder muscles with small hands. Clint plopped down on the floor beside him, tipping into Steve’s shoulder and even Bruce reached over, tucking his ankle comfortingly over Steve’s foot. Tony sighed and scooted over too, taking the shaking wrist and make a small sound of surprise as Steve suddenly grabbed his fingers and gripped tight.

Pepper raked her fingers through his hair and Sam got off the couch to sit directly in front of Steve, expression sympathetic as Steve rubbed wet eyes with his free hand.

They all sat in silence again, giving what little physical support they had, just making sure Steve knew he wasn’t alone but he wasn’t looking any less distraught, and Tony’s hand was turning white and really, they’d all be able to help a lot more if they knew what was going on.

Steve was staring at nothing, but he still didn’t notice as the circle exchanged glances, mouthing to each other who should ask and eventually all heads tipped towards Sam so he scooted a touch closer, keeping his voice as soft as he could.

“...what happened, Steve?”

The pouty mouth trembled and he turned his face away, found there wasn’t anywhere he could look that someone wasn’t looking back and finally just stared at his knees.

“Steve?” Natasha pressed quietly and he shook his head once, like it somehow didn’t matter. No amount of pain was irrelevant, regardless of how small, and this was nothing like small. Sam reached over, curled a hand atop Steve’s knee and forced him to look up, meet his eyes, spoke as slow and clear as he could.
“It had to be something. You two were...giddy fiancés a week ago.”

Steve’s shoulders lifted to his ears and Nat made a little noise of frustration. Rogers just looked so...small. Struck silent as yet again, the LegendBiggerThanLife was nothing but a tiny kid who spent his childhood with black eyes and split lips.

“Steve…” Sam tried again and Tony let out a breath of relief as Steve let go of his hand, shook Bruce and Clint off too.

“Nothing,” Steve said flatly, wiping his face again before shoving upright and standing, knocking off Pepper and Nat too. Natasha popped to her feet but Steve was already halfway’round the couch before she could grab his arm, not like she had much chance stopping him anyways.

“Thanks for coming, guys.” Steve’s voice was all off, kinda scary in a way and he didn’t even stop to look at anyone, headed straight for the bedroom with those bruises on his arms and his broken fingers still wrapped up. “We’re good from here.”

“Happy Birthday!” Natasha raised her voice suddenly and Steve paused, hand on the counter as he froze, broad shoulders hunched and barefeet midstep. It was nearly impossible to hear the tiny self-deprecating huff followed by a much louder, dry and frankly terrible,

“Thanks.”

Then the door was opened, closed, and he was gone.

After some quiet debate, it was decided that Tony should spend the night.

Just in case.

(Sam wanted to - he had work in the morning. Clint wanted to, everyone wanted to, but Tony didn't have anything to do but fix things and that's kinda what this was anyways. Pepper kissed him on the cheek and he tucked in for a hopefully uneventful night on a couch that looked just as sad and quiet as the rest of the Brooklyn apartment. Hell, probably the rest of Brooklyn too.)

They were on the tenth floor. Odds are, both of them’d survive the jump.

Didn’t stop Steve’s heart from seizing when he opened the door to see Bucky standing there.

It took him a second to find air again, then the words were tumbling out his mouth as dark and quiet as the room was.

“Don’t worry precious, I’m here,” Steve swore lowly, shutting the door carefully behind him, no loud noises to spook the animal. Except he didn’t move, didn’t budge and Steve took another careful step inwards, kept his voice slow. “Bucky, step away from the window.”

He didn’t listen. Didn’t jump either, white curtains whipping into their room, distant sprinkle of colored explosions and they both flinched and Steve’s heart stopped because he’d just have to tip forward--

Two more seconds and he got there in time, wrapped a solid arm over Bucky’s chest from behind, dragged him backwards with too-heavy breaths and Buck just slumped against him, staring dejectedly out the window.
“Wasn’t gonna do anything,” he mumbled, disoriented and Steve closed his eyes, tipping his temple against Bucky’s and tried to just breathe.

“I know, baby,” he soothed, rubbing warmth into Bucky’s stomach, over his heart. “Let’s just get you to bed okay?”

They were young and crazy and drunk in one of those years and Steve didn’t feel anything but the fireworks exploding outside the window ricocheting up his spine when Bucky slammed him into the wall.

Snapping, back and forth mood to mood like a toy soldier and Steve’s eyes were blown and he could finally see right through it.

“I need you,” Bucky whispered against his mouth and Steve would give him everything, had to give him everyth--

He dropped to his knees before he could stop himself; here in worship, to pray to the young god and fill his mouth until his throat pounded and Bucky’s hand was in his hair and the fading bruises on Steve’s knees were smarting and he wanted to close his eyes and tip his head back and let Bucky fuck him until his lungs gave up on him but

But Bucky’s hand was shaking in his hair.

Steve leaned forward enough to press his forehead to Bucky’s belt buckle, his nose to heat and place a kiss on the tented bulge but Bucky’s legs weren’t steady and Steve’d seen him, he knew better now.

Bucky made a weak sound when Steve took his hand, weaker still when he rose and shoved finger pads to Bucky’s neck, over his pulse point and it was fucking crazy, they were fucking crazy.

It didn’t take any strength at all to drag him to the bathroom, but it took all the strength Steve had to pin back the long hair as Bucky threw up in the sink and no, he didn’t know how they were ever gonna make this work.

~*~*~

Broken.

~*~*~

They used to not be so different.

Golden Steve, navy-blue Buck.

Now they weren’t gold, navy-blue.

How far apart had they grown--

The contrast between them now?

Pure white.

Jet black.
There was no blue or gold left anymore. The spectrum pushed them far apart and it didn’t get, it didn’t get any more fucked than this.

~*~*~

“He’s gonna leave me. He’s gonna leave and I don’t know what I’m gonna do--”

A slamming door made them both jump, but it wasn’t until the shadow stalked around the corner that Tony’s bed-rustled (couch-rustled) head lifted with concern. On guard, because that wasn’t Bucky Barnes, that was the fucking Winter Soldier murder-walking into the living room.

Steve’s mouth’d snapped shut but clearly, someone’d heard him anyways.

A metal finger pointed accusingly at wide blue eyes and if Tony didn’t know better he’d say Rogers was scared. Should be scared, at least, but he wasn’t, he was sitting there in awe like Bucky was something ascended from the heavens instead of clawed up from hell.

“Nothing,” Barnes snapped, rounding the corner to stand right in front of them and Steve blinked owlishly. “If I wanted to go, I’d’ve gone by now. But I need you.”

Blue cut away, staring at Tony’s shoes and no less wide. Pouty lips tightened to hold in a sob but Barnes’ voice wavered on the next words anyways. “M’not going anywhere Stevie.”

Steve wouldn’t look at him.

Tony was frozen, because he had no idea what the fuck was going on, let alone what he was supposed to do.

Bucky stalked over and Tony tensed but he wasn’t here for him, he dropped to his knees between Steve’s thighs, reached flashing hands to carefully gently lift his face. Force Rogers to look at him and they used to not kiss in front of anyone else, now they were losing their goddamned minds and didn’t care who fucking saw.

“You’re the only thing in this world--” Bucky exhaled, quiet and close and private and Tony would move but every instinct was screaming predator and frozen seemed much safer. Even with Barnes three feet away and gripping Steve’s face with searching eyes and the most desperate tone in his voice Tony’d heard on anyone.

“--I would destroy without.”

Steve’s hands shot up to lock over Bucky’s, and that had to hurt his jaw or something but they were just staring at each other and Tony honestly wasn’t quite registering what Bucky’d said.

Destroy. He’d said destroy and once, Barnes had asked him if he could be the best thing for Steve and Tony’d told him he was, but looking at it now he’d like to retract that fucking statement.

You broke our spirit, says the note we pass.

This wasn’t unhealthy, this was so beyond unhealthy and shocked wasn’t the word for his dropped jaw. Appalled, maybe.

Destroy. To be destroyed or to destroy others? Either way, it wasn’t the kind’a love note anyone wanted to hear.
Except, apparently, Steve.

Those big legendary hands were holding onto Barnes so tight it was pretty shocking nothing’d snapped yet.

They...those two were not okay At All.

*Don’t you know the kids aren’t al-- kids aren’t al--*

(Right?)

~*~

Bruce didn’t think it was a good idea, but Bruce didn’t quite believe how bad it’d gotten and if Tony hadn’t seen it for himself he wouldn’t either. But he knew love - he loved Pepper, he cherished her and he felt lost without her but there wasn’t a dangerous _destruction_ there and they weren’t talking about master assassins and supersoldiers with the ability to level a city so really, if he wanted to take some precautions when everything was so fragile, he was pretty sure he had the right.

Jarvis helped make the pills, Nat slipped them into the building’s water source. Everyone else was delivered a note about not drinking local water for awhile, and Stark Industries provided Brita filters for the rest of the residents and Steve and Bucky were none the wiser.

~*~

Bucky knew the first time he took a sip from Steve’s water bottle. He’d been drugged for a long time, he was pretty sure he knew how to recognize anything slipped his way now.

Initially, he thought it was Steve. But he’d been drinking the water too so that couldn’t be right. Stark, then.

Bucky didn’t care. He’d fucking drink whatever they wanted to put into his body. Not like it fucking mattered anymore.

Funny, he’d come all this way and he recognized this body as his without second thought, but. But now he’d finally come full circle and yeah, it was his, but who fucking cared.

Y’know, he used to be perfect. Once, forever ago. Really, though, it’d just been months.

Months of flaws. Of wrong. Of hurt and pain and ache--

It could’ve all been prevented, really.

He’d lost so much, and for what? He used to have complexity, understanding of the world, power. And then they’d gone stumbling along the path for happiness and he’d dulled all his edges to fit into the box of a tower, the small box of an apartment and he’d calmed his hands so they could touch Steve’s skin without bruising anyways and he’d stopped killing so Steve would smile at him and he was so simple and pliable and easy now, just an extension of Steve Rogers, the docile best friend, boyfriend, fiancé and all that freewill he’d fought so fucking hard for he gave up in the face of what Steve needed and the individual fire that used to rule in his eyes was diminished for the soft lovey-way he looked at blue ones and he used to be Invincible but now he was edging on Invisible and this, wasn’t this exactly what he’d warned Steve would happen?

Worse, though, than everything he’d lost was everything he’d taken from Steve ruined and _torn down_ and it was all him, his fault, because he couldn’t handle himself and he leaned too heavy on Steve
and Steve crumbled and crushed and tried to tell Bucky he didn’t mind and the part of Bucky that thought he was lying hated him for it and the part of him that believed it wished he’d gone through with shooting himself in the mouth that one day because Steve, he couldn’t do that to Steve he couldn’t.

But here he was.

“I’d still trade places with you if I could,” Steve whispered into the dark one morning at three am and Bucky rolled over in his sleep and stared at the wall and thought about the chains that used to latch him to Hydra’s walls and tried to picture them around Steve’s wrists and decided it wasn’t all that far from how he looked now.

Running, Steve spent the morning running and puking and Bucky’d always been running and he wasn’t letting himself eat enough to puke because just One More Thing Steve didn’t need to worry about.

One door swinging open and one door swinging closed.

~*~*~

He’d told Peggy, once, the reason why he was so jealous of her. Not because she could be with Steve when he wasn’t. She’d asked him why, then and he’d told her.

“Because he looks at you the only way he’s never looked at me. Like he wants to marry you.”

If the way Steve was looking at him now was anywhere near that simple, maybe they really could get married one day.

Hell, Steve’d even told Sarah he wanted Buck to be the one he married.

Bucky stared up at the ring on his hand and wondered if Sarah’d known that day would never come. If she’d known that it’d look like it did, it’d stand there and taunt them and the closer they got to the day Steve and Nat picked the further away it felt and really, Bucky couldn’t quite believe he’d live that long.

The day he’d realized he felt more for Steve, he’d realized for the first time that he was jealous and maybe he didn’t like the idea of Steve marrying somebody else and funny, because that thought had freaked him out but maybe this was what Bucky’d always wanted and would never ever get.

Metal plates adjusted, breaking underneath the ring and his entire hand could detach but the ring would still stay, stuck to him with the very technology that’d failed him in the first place.

The Stark technology that’d taken his bitty Steve away from him, the technology that hadn’t been good enough to distract Steve from signing up that last-fatal-time, technology that altered perfect cells into efficient ones and built the shield he hid behind and wrapped him up redwhite’n’blue and made the zipline that took them to the train that separated them for a lifetime and perfected the engines of the machine that’d held that Saratoga fight and built the band that tied Bucky’s finger to Steve’s with a red string he couldn’t snip without bleeding out.

Steve was listening to Fall Out Boy in the kitchen. Bucky stared at the ceiling and stopped ignoring distant melodies.

He could feel Stark’s drug weighing down his limbs, but Bucky hadn’t slept in three days and it’d take a little more than the snuck pills to get him down. He had to be awake.
There were trumpets in Steve’s song and those always reminded him of war anyways.

Passive-aggressive song-wars were kinda Rogers’ thing lately.

...ought to keep me concealed just like I was a weapon drifted in from the kitchen and Bucky lifted his head.

Didn’t come for a fight but I will fight till the end. And this one might be a battle, might not turn out okay.

He sat up all the way. He knew Steve was drawing, just like with the stupid Ready to Run thing but what the fuck was he listening to?

Then the chorus hit.

Bucky’s jaw dropped.

He couldn’t believe Steve Rogers had the audacity to play that song.

Actually, worse, he could entirely believe it.

They’d talked about this. Briefly, Bucky’s cried out and Steve’d soothed and he’d finally scrubbed down all the cuts and bruises he’d made and Steve’s body was healed now, no more fading bruises or marks and even his hand wasn’t wrapped, just hurt sometimes. At random times he’d cringe and pull it into his chest, the same way he had when Bucky’d first broken it, kept fucking him--

--get you to burst just like you were a bubble, frame me up on your wall just to keep me outta trouble.

Trapped in the light by fixation, dying by flying too close to the sun and Bucky was worse than a moth, Icarus, Bucky was the fading moon who chased the sun everyday and night of existence and would never get close enough.

Too many war wounds and not enough wars, too few rounds in the ring and not enough settled scores.

How much had they never solved.

It wasn’t just a four-letter-name they were in anymore, not just blood in the snow but boiled blood under skin and a thousand words they couldn’t speak.

He was on his feet at the second chorus, so fucking pissed he had to take a moment to grab the edge of the easel, keep himself from knocking over all the just-started paintings.

His wasn’t in here and it was a good thing too because he might just go break months of work over Steve Rogers’ fucking head.

He didn’t--

He didn’t get to blare the lyrics of that chorus like they weren’t a fucking lie like they weren’t the opposite of how everything should be like Bucky’d done something good instead of repulsive and unforgivable and everything Steve should hate him for what the fuck was fucking wrong with him to make him blast the fucking lyrics

I love the way you hurt me?
Bucky was fucking done with Steve Rogers thinking his own life was a joke.

Bucky could've killed him. Bucky'd come so close to killing him so many times and he could feel that tick, the darkness settling in his veins right alongside with the way he was walking taller speaking less more efficient energy movements not eating drinking pills breaking bones and they were Steve's, just like Bucky'd always known they'd be--

*You're secondhand smoke, I breathe you in but honey I don't know - what you're doing to me, mon chérie.*

My darling.

Bucky could still kill him.

French, like all those days back in the war, back before Steve would've ever let Bucky fuck him up, let alone fuck him broken--

*Truth catches up with us eventually.*

The door to the studio whined in protest as Bucky threw it open and if it weren't for Stark's tinkering it would've come off the hinges. What the fuck did Steve think he was doing.

Always somethin' to prove, huh? Even now, even still? This, he’d never fucking convince Bucky of this and honestly what the fuck was wrong with him to even *try*.

*I'm coming for you and I'm making war*, the song sang and Bucky stalked through the hallway so fast he almost lost the power in his step.

Steve looked up the moment Bucky swung into sight, flash of something across his face - what, triumph for making Bucky listen to his fucking blasted song?

The timing was perfect, words slamming into his gut the second their eyes met, *I still love the way you huuurt me-e-e* and it was literally visible the moment it sunk into Steve’s stupid fucking head how pissed Bucky was, that twist of apologetic underneath the burning defiance, like if Bucky said a single word about the song Steve’d repeat the goddamned words right to his face and fine, that was fine Steve could be a stubbornfuckingass, Bucky wouldn’t say a single thing.

He knew the speaker was a gift from Stark, it was for Bucky’s own goddamned birthday and they’d danced on the roof to it and that was all wonderful and nonsense but Bucky had a fucking point to make and that was more important than some sentimental--

*tear apart what’s beautiful to prove that nothing lasts*

"It's irresisti--" *crash.*

The screech as metal crumbled electronic pieces was horrifying, but the satisfaction of smashing Steve’s fucking radio and shattering pieces over his lap came second only to uncurling the metal fist to throw the remaining mangled mess into the closest wall.

Crash, clatter, and pure echoing silence.

Bucky was breathing heavy and his metal arm was twitching but Fall Out Boy wasn’t singing anymore.

Steve wasn’t drawing anymore either. He was staring.
And staring.

Then exploding just like the fucking stereo.

“What the fuck is wrong with you??”

That was about a lot more than a stereo.

“With me?? You’re the one who’s fucking everything up!” Bucky shouted back, bent forward eagle arms - wasn’t that ironic - like it might get through Steve’s fucking head if he screamed loud enough.

Nothing got through Steve’s head.

... and Bucky’s head was so fucked, everything was so fucked the room was already spinning because Steve was yelling at him and there’d been a few skipped meals and he really shouldn’t’ve stormed in here using all that saved energy in the first place-- “I don’t even have my fucking efficiency--”

“Efficiency? That fucking-- Hydra, again, you’re resorting to Hydra ‘cause you can’t handle--”

“It has nothing to do with handling shit, it has to do with what you keep, keep---” A frustrated noise and that was nowhere near describing everything Steve kept doing because it was everything;

“What, ask you to love me?” Steve scoffed, big artist hand scuffing up carefully-tamed-blondie into rebel-spikes, head tipping with that awful, terrifying smile he got sometimes - always a way out; you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero. Except Bucky was a threat, and Steve had no clue how deep the pretending went. Just that curved pretty mouth, the distaste as he narrowed his eyes at Bucky and sneered in the fucking worse sarcastic tone he owned,

“Can you even love anymore? Or did Hydra burn that right outta you?”

Whirring as fingers curled, filling the silence as he stared blankly at Steve.

Honestly, he couldn’t quite believe his best friend had just said that.

Except Steve was nowhere near done.

“Am I wasting everything I’ve done for you? Tell me it’s all meant something.” Those big hands once entwined, held back hair and traced lovingly over sharp features-- up and accusing now, pleading but not asking, burnt and curled at the edges.

Cages, and bars, and he’d shook his free wrists once and now everything inside him was nothing but screaming.

He was honestly surprised how quiet and soft his voice came out, how scarily calm.

“You’re giving up now? After an entire life of not knowing how to stay down and this is it, this is terminal?” The end of a rail-line, ironically, and the angry flash in blue eyes proved he got the reference. Oh did he. But Bucky kept going, quiet and slowly slipping down that hill-- “You can stand thousands of hits but you’re done fighting for me?”

“I have fought for you for as long as I can remember,” Steve snapped and Bucky flinched. A single step forward and he didn’t mean to cower but maybe he did just a little and Steve didn’t even notice he was so mad. Little, and bigger than he’d ever been, righteous and indignant and everything Bucky couldn’t face. “You always asked if I had something to prove? You’re right. I did. I fucking did. But
it was never about my size, Bucky, it was about being good enough for you!”

"Don’t make this about me, Bucky begged in his head, wringing his hands together and forcing himself not to shrink. Why? Why? Don’t say things you don’t mean because it’ll dig deeper, Stevie, please."

Didn’t say that.

Rolled back his shoulders and leveled his gaze on fiery blues, “I must not’ve been good enough for you, if you’re lowering your fists after a century.”

“Don’t you get it? They never should’ve been raised! Maybe once, a long time ago, but I shouldn't have to fight for you anymore. Aren't we past that? Don't I deserve more than a fucking struggle every step of the way??”

Deserve more.

Didn’t they deserve more.

Bucky lifted his chin, glaring at Steve like he was the smaller one again and opening his mouth with the kind of bitter he never could’ve shoved on that tiny body. The real one.

“I’m sorry I’m not the perfect doll you want me to be, Steve. Not all of us came out of a goddamn bottle.”

Big blues stared at him and Bucky glared back because yeah, he fucking said it.

Yeah, he fucking said it.

Blonde dislodged as the pretty head shook, once, disgusted smile curving one side of his mouth again and Bucky’d never hated himself more.

“Huh. So much for following that tiny kid from Brooklyn, huh?” He just sounded tired now. Tired and….and defeated. Broken-hearted, disappointed.

Destroyed.

Cleared his throat, blue flitting away from Bucky as his fingers twitched and this was nothing like the bar, nothing like that promise Bucky’d made to him. Jaws of death.

“You ever even mean that?” Steve asked quietly and Bucky ran his fingers through his hair and stared at the ceiling so he’d at least know the moment it collapsed in on them.

“Would it matter?” He asked pure-white and pure-white didn’t need the stain, why were they fighting this so hard? Follow Stevie, that tiny kid from Brooklyn? Not this war. Bucky couldn’t do this war anymore.

Closed eyelids didn’t help anything but the darkness was at least a comfort, something that understood for once, even if it made his ears too acutely aware of how raspy his voice sounded, how shattered. “What's the point in following you if you insist to go places I can't follow?”

“You can follow.” Preached, exasperated, I want you and the pointing finger was only pressing bruises now. “You can come with me! It doesn't have to be so fucking complicated.”

“Well, it is fucking complicated,” Bucky pointed out and that bottle rocket was a millisecond away from going off.
“Love isn’t supposed to be,” Steve fired and the flames were so close to just rolling off shoulders now. “Love is supposed to be--”

Honestly, Bucky couldn’t listen to that right now, not if he wasn’t gonna break more than Steve’s radio.

The flash of the metal coming up into a stop position might’ve been the only thing that made Steve pause. And flinch, he flinched, because Bucky’s eyes opened just in time to see that shitty reaction and he was so beyond horrified now with himself and his hands and Steve that he could do nothing but blink. And open his mouth. And lie.

“I don’t care what you think.”

It didn’t even ripple the slightest waters.

Steve scoffed at him and not even a second of triumph, instantly shoved aside irrelevant with that familiar scorn,


And, damn him, once that’d been true. When he still had Steve Rogers.

But Steve wasn’t Steve anymore and he didn't have the goddamn right to use that name as leverage when he barely fight the fucking bill and he was so SICK and TIRED of fighting about everything when Steve was never gonna understand him because it wasn’t even his Stevie anymore! Had it ever been, or did the beautiful boy he thought he loved die in the plane crash, freeze in the ice that day the same way he had?

And he had the audacity--

“Steve Rogers? Steve Rogers? Really? There's none of you left in there, Steve! Or, wait. Should I call you Cap.” That flinch was worse than when Bucky’d lifted his hand and funny, which strikes still hurt Steve more.

This was his best friend.

His best friend since childhood and they were doing nothing but swinging words instead of fists and it wasn’t like that was any better and Bucky didn’t want to hurt anymore, didn’t want to pretend they were something that they weren’t, just wanted to go back to that day that Steve’d looked at him with love in his eyes and a glowing smile and Bucky’d been saved and nothing’d been complicated because he had Steve and he was Healthy and Safe and Bucky was Saved and there were no feelings, no complications, he’d only had hours, just hours before the red-dress marched in and ruined his entire life and somehow lifted him saved higher than the Azzano fires but before that, those brief moments, Bucky’d honestly, truly believed that for once they might be okay and it was the first and last time he’d ever believed it and he couldn’t fucking believe how far they’d come from that, how far Steve Rogers was from the man that’d stood before him with that shy smile on that day, given Bucky that look while he shouted over the crowd and pulled the first audience for the hero that’d turn into the same villain he did.

He’d said it himself, Steve’d said it himself not a month ago, do I deserve to call myself that anymore? after a nightmare and Bucky’d just shushed him then but he was done, he was done with keeping his mouth shut.

“You know, when I said let’s hear it for Captain America?” The ground was unsteady, softer than war-mud and more dangerous because now, if Bucky tipped over, no one was there to catch him.
Especially not dead-blues that used to shine like the skies.

“...I didn't think he'd be the one to kill my best friend.”

Steve stared at him, blank look on his features that Bucky used to see every time he looked in the mirror. He didn’t look in mirrors much anymore.

But there was an accusation, a disbelief and horror in the way he was looking, like Bucky was the twisted one and it wasn’t fair, Steve was the one who fucked them both to hell. Although, really, who was the one with bruises and who’d done the fucking last—

“You're not him,” Bucky’s voice broke and it wasn’t fair, he’d never asked for this. Wiping freezing metal underneath cold damp eyes and biting his lip didn’t make it tremble any less. “You're n-not.”

“Bucky,” watery-depressed and Bucky wiped metal on his pants to smear away the evidence but Steve was closer now, barely a few feet away and Bucky couldn’t remember when he’d started reaching. The softness didn’t feel gentle, just looked weak. “I can’t fight anymore. Is this a test? I can’t take anymore tests. Just. Please.”

Warm hands closed around his wrists and Bucky stared at golden chains.

“Please, Buck-- I can’t. I can’t take it anymore. Can’t watch you leave me again, I. Please, just. Buck, I can’t...get by on my own.”

Young-rotted-lungs and Bucky couldn’t just grab a little shoulder anymore and make everything alright. Couldn’t tell Steve what he needed to here. The thing is, you don’t have to.

“I can’t get by on my own,” Steve repeated stronger, and weaker than he ever was then.

“Bucky. Don’t make me-- please. Just.” Beautiful lips parted, hopeless inhale sucking air far from Bucky’s lungs, then Artist Hands wrapped around Winter-trained biceps, thunder rolling proximity as desperation of years exhaled,

“--say you love me.”

Bucky stared at Steve’s shoes. He used to keep newspapers in the end, when they couldn’t find pairs small enough.

“I can say it,” Bucky echoed and it was his voice from way back then, accent and all, but the words were anything but his. “If that's what you want. It's three words and I can say them the way you want me too but what then? There's no magic switch, Steve. The world won’t burn brighter. The world didn't burn brighter when you said it. It took me a long time to realize, Steve. Love isn't magic.”

“I'm not expecting it to fix everything,” stubborn persisted and Bucky’s stare snapped, blinking as his eyes flicked up to Steve’s stomach, forced himself to match the expansion, forcing himself to breathe in, let the words tumble as his lungs deflated once more.

“...but you want it to fix this. You want the final emotional, psychological, physiological bond of mutual love to tie us eternally, deeper than two other people have ever felt.”

“We can have that,” Steve whispered.

Bucky stared flately at Steve’s thick arms. “It's not possible.”
“I love you, Bucky. And I think you love me, I don't get why it’s not--”

“Love doesn't exist,” he interrupted, tugging his wrists free from bright-white. “Love doesn't exist, Stevie.”

“I know you're wrong.” Fighting voice. “I feel it.”

Bucky took a single step backwards.

“You feel affection, attraction, devotion, pain, a thousand different things and you jam them all into one pretty three-word phrase to make it simpler, bigger. More magical than the world has. Humans have been doing it forever, Steve, but there's no such thing as love. Everyone wants to – needs to believe it. You need that Steve, the idea of something bigger, bigger than you and everyone, this amazing, beautiful, powerful force that brings people together. Takes two lives – two eggs afraid to crack, and breaks them against each other, makes one big mess and combines everything until two people who used to be people on their own are just one mutated form of a thing until both end up miserable--”

“We won't end up miserable Buck--”

“I know we won't, because at least one of us is smart enough to realize that love isn’t real, it’s some delusion that society’s desperate to fall under and how many songs, stories, entities are created about this concept of human beings relying on each other when we all could be perfectly efficient and happy on our own?”

Steve cringed at the word efficient and Bucky took one more step backwards.

It was quiet, too quiet with the solid windows and all that space between them and the flattening ground outside, no rush of New York traffic, no creak of Brooklyn pipes because all that slipped away, perfected and fixed, just like them.

Silent.

“You feel just as complete without me?” Steve asked and Bucky dared flick his gaze upwards for one moment, long enough to see water and hurt before he huffed, looked away again because that was Easier.

“That's not the point.”

“That is the point.”

“No. No, I'm not gonna let you drag emotions into this--”

“That's what it's about.”

“No, I'm talking about logic, and love doesn't exist--”

“Yes, it fucking does.”

“Steve, no.”

“Steve yes,” he shot back and it actually wasn’t funny this time, neither was the self-deprecating huff that came after because this was how it always was, even in the beginning. Always been nothing but fights for the two of them.

“Fine, you wanna be blind, you wanna be the idiot who never stops jumping outta buildings, you
wanna fall into the same traps as everyone else in this world, I'm sure as hell not gonna stop you.”

Not like he’d ever stopped Steve from doing anything anyways.

“Would you ever have?” The sunshine asked the rain and Bucky took a final step backwards then Steve was just fading in the distance to the murmur of Bucky’s last cognate words,

“I don’t know.” I don’t know.

~*~*~

If there was one thing he knew, it was pain.

Back then, in Brooklyn, that wasn’t supposed to be who he was. Just some pretty kid who felt too much for his best friend and now he was a demon, leashed and snarling at the edge of a chain, a dog who knew too much about what happened when guns misfired, a bullet in the gut and a saw in the brain.

~*~*~

His memory wasn’t as good as Bucky’s, but with his shield in his hand and the dull drill of training practice thudding his pulse in his ears, he could hear more than drowning thoughts for once.

Bugs still ate at his insides, tormenting him that the only time he could think was here, fists curled and rubber pounding, shield ricocheting off practice dome walls, but if he could only think clear when he was fighting, then he’d fight until the glass shattered between them both.

During the war, there’d been changes in Buck. Ones that’d made Steve uneasy, watch him closer from the corner of his eyes, worrying the nights away.

Sometimes he’d look at Steve and quickly look away, pained. He’d told himself Bucky’d always considered Steve as someone he had to protect - they were family - and the hurt came from what Steve’d done. He’d taken that away from Bucky.

He didn’t think let himself think about it much, the fear that Bucky might hate him was-- But he could admit to himself that sometimes, it felt like Bucky just wanted the old Steve back. That had to be why he kept looking at Steve with a funny expression, one Steve’d never seen before. The idea was worse than Steve could handle, but he kept it to himself. Bucky had every right to feel that way. Steve just wished he didn’t.

See, looking back on it, Steve knew that much was partially true. Just the other day, ten floors below his sweaty feet now, Bucky’d shouted in his face that Steve didn’t need him anymore, not since he stepped science’s perfectly manufactured foot outta that fucking machine.

The dull thud of his shield off the wall didn’t feel half as good as the ache in his arm from throwing too hard for too long but this was the only place left for him anymore.

The last time they’d talked, Bucky’d said it again. He wouldn’t’ve said it twice if it wasn’t important; efficient-Bucky didn’t repeat things.

Not all of us came out of a goddamned bottle.

So maybe that’s what the dreaded-painful look during the war was all about.

Or maybe.
Maybe Bucky was bullshitting his way through everything like he always fucking did. Maybe Bucky was in pain, about Steve, and had been all the way back then.

The shield ricocheted and he caught it on a jump, swinging around it launch it at the closest wall again and

Maybe Bucky was slipping from his fingers or maybe Steve was so close to the edge of his core that he could finally taste the possibility on his lips.

Maybe Bucky’d just always been in love with him.

The shield didn’t bounce off a wall that time and if he wasn’t too busy staring wide-eyed at nothing he’d’ve seen it coming, but the bruise to the back of his head from not paying attention was worth the moment’s pause, the pounding made it easier to think anyways.

Maybe Bucky’d just always been in love with him.

~*~

When the pressure’s building, do you give up the things you love?

The sunset was on fire, edges of clouds lined in brilliant reds, reflective orange fading in the background and Bucky sat cross-legged on wood before floor-length windows, Brooklyn bridge stretched out over glittering-fire waters; watching the sky burn, watching the river sink.

It was all going to crumble around him.

The weight from above was shoving him down and he was choking, scrambling for the surface but on the outside, he sat quiet and still and passive, hair tucked behind his ear and blue-gray trained dully out crystal glass, always towards the sun sinking into the city.

Used to be he’d never go back on his word.

Numbed by time and age, were there any words to count on anymore?

The tiniest shift and the metal on his hand caught, flashing red against the plating and his gaze flicked down, watching the ring on his finger. Might as well be round his neck.

“Hey, I’m off to bed,” Steve called from behind him and Bucky lifted his head, stray strands of hair falling in his eyes, fire filtering between the dark spots blocking vision.

“I’ll be right in,” he echoed back, arm whirring as he pushed himself to his feet. The world spun black, rushing dizzy but Bucky only stumbled once, caught on the window and straightened again. He’d be fine.

Lack of sleep, most likely.

It’d been....six days now?

He used to be quite good at this. Used to go weeks. It was just--

Laying next to Steve in bed? How was he supposed to shut his eyes? How was he supposed to turn away from the beautiful sleeping boy who kept slipping from his arms in daylight?

Only when Steve was sleeping did he feel….okay, anymore. Because his boy was there, safe and stunning and at Bucky’s side where he belonged - but dark eyes closed instead of beckoning Buck
closer, where he’d do nothing but damage. Steve didn’t fight for more when he slept. Steve didn’t fight at all.

All exits look the same.

Hazy-edged vision as silent feet took careful steps past the threshold, closed the door softly beside him. Steve was already curled up under the sheets, pillow shoved aside and shoulders taut. A marshmallow night, then. There were a lot more of those lately.

Lifted the corner of the sheets with flesh, soft slide as he slipped beneath, opposite side of the mattress from bare golden skin. The bedside lamp lit up Steve’s chest, shoulders, all the naked beautiful that Bucky used to kiss, touch - left pining once more.

What he’d give to reach over the space between them and pull Steve’s sweet body into his arms, to be close and warm and together again.

But even in the soft glow, even after the weeks that’d passed -

all he saw were the bruises. They’d healed, entirely. The surface of Steve’s skin was deceptively clear and beautiful, like it’d never happened but Bucky looked at him and all he saw was broken bleeding skin and his hands halted before they reached so much as a centimeter for the boy who used to be unpullable from his arms. The one who’d rocked their bodies together in overwhelmed bliss, the irresistible offering just a few feet away. The one Bucky’d broken. The light he’d nearly extinguished with harsh metal desperation, soft sunshine Stevie.

His precious Stevie.

Bucky reached behind him, clicked off the lamp. Darkness fell, and so did they.

Steve to sleep and Bucky deeper deeper in love and it only burned darker every step of the way.

~*~*~

“...hostages in the center guard room, but the prisoners are basically stuck there, since there’s nothing but water surrounding the site for a hundred miles. Not the most well-thought out escape plan, guess they thought they’d take the ships of whoever came to rescue the prison guards. But obviously, if we go in, that’s not exactly an option for them.”

“Buck and I’ll go.” Steve swept aside the island prison plans, collapsing the diagram at the edge of the wallscreen while Tony frowned.

“We can all go.”

“Barnes and I can handle it.” Bucky flicked a piece of hair out of his eyes, glancing boredly over at Steve, contrasted weirdly with his spine still board-stiff. Although, to be fair, he’d stood perfectly still the entire briefing, kinda scarily so.

Natasha looked between them both and raised an eyebrow at Tony.

“We can all go.”

“Barnes and I can handle it.” Bucky flicked a piece of hair out of his eyes, glancing boredly over at Steve, contrasted weirdly with his spine still board-stiff. Although, to be fair, he’d stood perfectly still the entire briefing, kinda scarily so.

Natasha looked between them both and raised an eyebrow at Tony.

“We’ll hover over with an extraction tea--”

“I said we could handle it,” Steve interrupted, already fitting his earpiece for the mic.

“And we’re saying there's no reason you can't have backup.” Natasha crossed her arms over her
chest, one hip popping out to the side but Steve just glanced up, grabbed his helmet off the bench with an eyebrow cocked and his voice eerily steady.

“Who’s the captain of this team? I give the orders, and you listen to them.” The dark blue gloves pointed a finger that swept from Nat’s stony expression to Tony’s offended-passive one and Bucky didn’t even look up, disinterestedly adjusting the straps across his thighs.

Firm, crystal clear and just this side of too calm, “Barnes and I’ll execute the mission, and you’ll wait until I call the quinjet for a ride home. Understood?”

“Steve--” Tony started.

“Be ready for the drop in five, Barnes.” The helmet slipped over blonde halo and Steve was off, leaving Nat to blink rapidly, look away with a swish of shining red hair. Tony to suck in an exasperated breath and type something onto the wall.

Bucky sighed, smoothing two hands over his hair. “Sorry guys. All the fight he’s got left in him..” A loud snap as metal fingers closed the button on his collar, “—bleeds out in this stuff.”

Natasha tapped her foot, lips pursed and Tony didn’t turn from messing with the screen.

Bucky grabbed another pistol off the table, checking the clip and raising his voice a touch to talk over the snap of metal, “Hover the backup team at ready, Stark.”

Two pairs of eyes flashed to him in various degrees of curiosity and confusion.

“But Rogers said--”

“I know what Rogers said.” Bucky slipped the pistol in a strap against his ribs, straightening his jacket back out with a darker version of the familiar forties commanding voice. “Have the backup team ready.”

“You ready?” The shout over the blasting cold air made Steve glance over, take quick note of what he could see of Bucky’s arsenal. Definitely enough. Although Buck could go in with a stick and probably still take down the whole site one-handed.

He was already poised to jump, graceful fluidity to perfectly toned muscles, muscles that’d seen more time in the gym than their bed lately. Muscles carved back towards that efficiency they’d had months ago and every ounce of hard training Steve’d thought he’d been doing lately? Buck spent double.

But they were doing this mission together, because Steve’d show Bucky that they were still better as a team, starting with this goddamned quinjet hatch.

Only a couple more seconds until the drop, and Steve wasn’t opposed to the idea of holding hands for it. Especially considering that Bucky’d died once from a fall like this. And he had the audacity to ask if Steve was ready?

“Shouldn’t I be the one asking that?” Steve shot back, tightening the strap under his chin. Bucky tipped his head with an amused snort, then he was disappearing in a flash of black and Steve cursed, launching over the edge of the jet after him.

“Do I bother asking?” Tony sighed and Natasha pressed the button to close the hatch, shaking her head once.
“Y’know, I did see Steve use a parachute once, back on that mission we met Thor?”

“What the hell happened? And when did he get Barnes to join the stupid suicidal plane jumps?”

“Isn’t that the question,” Natasha replied dryly.

Jumping outta tall glass structures was admittedly a bad idea and even Steve knew that, but that didn’t stop him from crashing out the window of the tallest guard tower with three bulky inmates in tow.

Slamming into the ground made him groan, and it took a second and a half to get up and the first thing he did was look around for Buck.

Only Bucky was already landed, gracefully artfully beside him in a crouch for a half-second then he was off, firing two shots into the shadows only to have...four? bodies fall off the outer wall and. That didn’t even make sense.

Steve was watching Bucky with the curious tilt of his head a second too long, like always, and the pistol whip to the back of the head didn’t feel fucking good at all. He whipped around to retaliate, just in time to see a pile of glinting knives and ammoleless pistols jump him at once.

Fucking great.

Bucky took out another twenty Steve hadn’t even seen by the time it took him to roll out from under the mob, then Bucky was taking out his crowd with a couple of really well placed shots and Steve was forcing himself not to growl in frustration.

Not exactly what he’d pictured when he’d said work together.

Fine. He’d go find another mob, take that one out on his own.

It it was gonna be like that.

Steve rolled underneath the swinging arm of the closest jumpsuit, whipping around to drive his shield between orange shoulder blades and there was another fallen one and Bucky didn’t make a sound, slipping past with disinterested eyes and Steve huffed beneath his helmet, gritting his teeth as he started for the next one.

Never good enough, he was never good enough. Everything he did.

He was small, then he was sick, then he was both and Buck never looked at him as an equal, just someone to pull outta alleys, to help. On the better days, a good person to look up to, somehow, and even that was never level with Steve’s eyes.

He wanted Steve outta the fight, always had. Asked him to stay behind, collect scrap metal, anything to keep Buck from worrying but Steve never wanted Buck to keep him safe, he wanted to prove himself stronger, strong like Buck was.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Pink mouth snapped, frustrated growl following as Bucky
shoved long hair aside, stalking over to snatch his knife back from the fallen body, glare in Steve’s
direction and he was off again, hurling over broken concrete to land atop another snarling prisoner
and Steve sucked in a breath, uniform cutting into his neck.

Another snarl to the left and Steve flung his shield, ricocheting off in the opposite direction as the
man fell and he lifted an arm to retrieve it,

a hollow clank as metal snatched it from the air and it wasn’t fair, Bucky was training so fucking
much these days Steve could barely keep up.

An exasperated sound as Buck tossed the shield back, mouth twisting into a sneer as he called out,
like Steve didn’t fucking see it coming,

“Heads up, Captain!”

The shield slammed his wrists as he practically dove to catch it and Steve just managed not to throw
it back pissily.

“Thanks, Sarge,” he bit back instead and Bucky snorted, turning to sprint away again and it wasn’t
fucking fair.

Four fallen prisoners later and Steve was just more pissed, snapping heads right and left only there
were a lot and he’d already been knifed twice. A huffed, how are there more of you into the mic and
of course, who came to aid, fucking Barnes.

He hopped down into the pit beside Steve, taking out three in one swing, discontented scorn
replacing long-past worry,

“You even fucking trying?”

“Sorry we’re not all trained-fucking-assassins,” Steve shot back and Bucky threw his head back to
laugh at that one, smile still on his lips as he shook his head, ripped the arm off a baddie to swing at
another’s head.

“Sure tried though, huh?” Buck huffed, sparing a look to sweep his gaze up and down Steve’s body
and after everything they’d fought over for the past fucking month this was the one thing Steve
couldn’t fucking let go.

Knocking out everything in proximity with a circle-toss and a series of angered punches he finally
fought his way to Buck’s side again, shoved the closest jumpsuit with a boot to the sternum and just
managed not to shove Bucky’s next.

Didn’t grab his arm, just stalked up close enough to bump their chests, glare down at defiant eyes,
because this was fucking uncalled for, let alone on the battlefield.

“I jumped into that fucking science experiment, volunteered my body to science because it was the
only way to get in the fight,” Steve hissed and Bucky’s eyes rolled. Steve bumped into him again,
whipping off his helmet so Bucky could see him properly glare. Crystal eyes were paying attention
now.

“--to prove that I was good enough. And maybe if I could do something good with it, save the world,
I’d see myself differently in the mirror. Come to terms that I didn't need to shoot up with a serum to
prove myself to anyone. Or maybe, hell, even somethin’ as simple as you wouldn't look at me that
way.”
“Steve, this really the time?” Bucky sighed, cocky-asshole-ness barely dropped. Steve reached up, yanking Bucky’s comm outta his ear, and plowed right on.

“But it didn’t, even that was a mistake, apparently the most perfect body on earth wasn’t good enough for you. And when I realized that I finally saw it wasn’t my bony elbows or ragged lungs, it was me you’d never want. I’d thought you never would, never let myself get past hoping.”

“Steve.”

He remembered. Remembered the dull hope that maybe, just maybe, Bucky might...might see him as worthy. Might see him as more than some sickly kid. Might respect him enough to see his insides, see how much he loved Bucky. How he’d sacrifice the damn world for him.

The look on Bucky’s face now was nothing like the way he’d looked, that day Steve’d pulled him outta the fire, saved him from Zola’s torture table -

Steve was the sun and Bucky’d lived in nothing but Night for centuries

- and maybe he hadn’t saved him later but he had that time and it’d still meant nothing.

It meant nothing because Bucky’d fallen, Bucky’d left him anyways.

“Steve?” A hand pressed to his chest, bitter edging into fear and Steve’s vision was swimming but he didn’t know if that was tears or dizziness. He’d started only eating when Bucky did. It wasn’t faring so well for either of them. Turned out Buck was eating a lot less than even Steve’d thought.

“And then I lost you,” he breathed and the fingers against his heart curled. “...and I couldn't help but wonder if I owed it to you to tell you I’d been in love with you my entire life.”

His throat choked on cotton and Steve shut his eyes before they spilled over, voice scratchy and haunted now. “Do you think I owed it to you?”

Something was removed from his hands and Steve leaned forward, let Buck hold him up as he fought for his breath back.

“Stark? Look, Steve’s not okay, send the quinje--”

Bucky made a startled sound as Steve ripped the comm back, tossed it at the ground but fuck that, he needed to talk to Bucky right now.

He had to battle his tongue a few times before he managed to choke out the next words, to Bucky’s wide eyes and hurt, twisted mouth.

“The next time I see you, seventy years later? You didn't even know who I was. Nothing could've hurt worse than that. I didn't matter enough to look at twice and I sunk so fucking hard that day, that's when it all hit me. Not just you, but my entire life, how fucking bad that day, I'm still not enough.”

“Steve, hey, we can talk about it at the apartm--”

“But I didn't have to face it, any of it, because all I had to do was find you and for months, a year, you were the only thing that mattered and I gave you everything I could and it still wasn't enough. I'm still not enough.”

“St--”
Bucky’s protest cut off as his eyes suddenly flicked over Steve’s shoulder, then the world tipped sideways as he was shoved aside, hard enough to land in the dust and come up coughing, just in time to see Bucky behead another enemy with one of those bloody knives.

And spin back to him with that stunning grace, eyebrows knit in pissiness and worry again and Steve spit out the dust in his mouth, huffing because of-fucking-course Bucky was still trying to save him.

He started slower this time, a single step forward because he didn’t trust himself to walk all the way to Bucky without falling to his knees; words haunted, dark as the circles under both their eyes.

“I train too rough, I run too hard, I mess myself up trying to be good enough for this legend, this thing I could never measure up to,” Steve started and Bucky’s gaze flickered, leveling with a tilt of his head like he couldn’t figure out if Steve meant himself or the Winter Soldier as the legend and honestly, the hell if he knew the answer anymore.

The mouth that’d spit and curse words in and against Steve’s name for his whole life, the mouth that’d kissed his heart and bit his words in half and snarled when Steve tried reaching once more.

Just pursed now, studying Steve from the distance between them and Steve lifted his hands, gesturing shallowly at his chest and trying not to let his voice choke up.

“Well, I realized that superhero, that suit, wasn’t someone you wanted me to be.” Didn’t think Captain America would be the one to kill my best friend. But they were supposed to be Better. Fixed. Working past it. All the past progress? And what’d it done?

“So I changed, I tried, I fucking quit for you and it still wasn’t enough.” Bucky flinched as Steve pointed a finger at him and once, months ago when Steve’d reached for a high-five Bucky’d flinched then too because he’d thought Steve was gonna hit him and even that, they hadn’t even come past that and it was so far down on the radar now Steve didn’t stop to correct, let alone beat the shit outta punching bags in anger. There was too much and Bucky wouldn’t meet his eyes.

“I’m still not enough,” Steve whispered and the clamor in the background was loud but Bucky’s shoulders curled in and Steve knew he heard him anyways. “You still can’t tell me you love me, let alone since when. Or why. Anything about it, you can’t speak a single word when I’ve given you everything.”

“Stevie,” Bucky whispered softly and Steve shook his head. Not anymore.

“This is a long and fucking lonely one-way street, Buck.”

The quinjet landed loudly behind them. Bucky’s hair blew back with the wind of it, crystal eyes studying Steve now and Steve’d seen so much in them. Seen how much Bucky needed him. Felt it, in hands so desperate and terrified they broke his bones.

Bucky offered a hand to pull him aboard. Steve walked past him and only had to catch himself against the wall a few times.

Natasha and Stark rounded up the hostages, they were all but saved anyways. Romanoff rounded up a dozen knives from foreheads too, brought em back in a little pile that Bucky waved aside for the armory.

The jet started up its engines.

Bucky stood with his arms crossed, crystal trained unapologetically on Steve.
Steve leaned back against the wall and tipped his head down, eyes shutting in pain. He couldn’t even manage a simple mission.

There was nothing left to do.

~*~*~

They were supposed to be planning a wedding. No one’d bothered asking, mentioning it at all in the past few weeks. What was the point, when they did nothing but fight?

They were supposed to be married. Steve wanted to marry him. And all they did was break each other deeper.

It just hurt so bad. He couldn’t turn and look over at Steve without this terrible, sinking pain and. And he couldn’t take that anymore.

He’d been in pain this bad before. And if he’d learned nothing else from those godawful demons, Hydra’d taught him one useful thing.

Bucky knew how to make the pain go away.

There were only two ways, really. Either he could turn heel and grovel, please his captors enough to make it stop--

Or he could detach himself entirely. Remove his mind from his body and leave Steve and--

He couldn’t leave Steve. He’d go through hell and back and flames and fire and ashes but nothing in this godforsaken world could make him leave Steve Rogers of his own will.

Even when he should.

So that left option A, and it’d been so long between them anyways, maybe he could just fix it for a night--

The look of surprise Steve gave him as Bucky sat down on the couch beside him hurt, but it’d all go away soon. A hand to that pretty cheek and Steve clicked off the TV, scooted to look at Bucky properly.

Just in time for Bucky to sink to his knees in front of the couch.

Kneeling, between Steve’s legs but it wasn’t even about that yet, just once more kneeling at his only altar.

**

“I’m so sorry,” Bucky whispered and Steve melted, warm touch to the edges of Bucky’s face, smoothing fingers sorrowfully back through his hair and Bucky didn’t want to think about that, about any of it. He just wanted to stop hurting.

“Let me make it up to you.” A little less soft, running both hands up Steve’s thighs, surprised muscles twitching beneath his palms. Steve’s breath caught and Bucky scooted forward on his knees, tugging closer with hard hands on hips.

He let go of Steve’s hips the moment they were closer - skin was too soft, too much give, Bucky’d sink right through and it was irrational to think but he could feel the black’n’blue he’d left there--
“Buck,” Steve breathed, and Bucky shook his head, clearing his stupid fucking brain because he had to do this, had to make the pain go away because if he just made Steve happy for a moment--

“Baby,” sweet murmur as Bucky leaned up, pressed his mouth to Steve’s sternum, cotton against his lips that didn’t feel anything like a kiss, fingers swiftly untying sweats to pull down muscular thighs.

“Bucky, you sure?” Steve pressed, but his voice was already breathy and Bucky was Being Good, stroking up thighs again to dip fingertips under the edge of blue boxers. Steve’s breathing picked up but so did his hands, fingers wrapping around Bucky’s wrists to halt his movements, burning gaze telling him to look up.

Bucky didn’t look up. Steve had his hands, sure, but Bucky could still move, dropping to mouth the bulge under fabric and the sound Steve made was like being choked.

He knew exactly what Steve being choked sounded like.

Bucky closed his eyes, nosing up to Steve’s waistband because he’d strip Steve with his goddamned teeth if he had to.

“B-b…” One of Steve’s wrists let go to grab a handful of Bucky’s hair and yes, good, that meant he was doing it right. “Buck, gotta...g-gotta tell me you want this,” sweet words gasped and Bucky sucked in a breath, deflating to press his forehead into Steve’s stomach.

“Пожалуйста,” he mumbled, twisting his other wrist free and finally getting a grip on boxers, tugging those down carefully but too quick for Steve to make him stop again. A soft gasp at the cold air and Bucky pressed his mouth to the inside of Steve’s knee, sinking careful, gentle fingers into white inner thighs.

“Buck, still haven’t said…” the shaky voice insisted and Bucky had to take his hands off Steve to keep from grabbing him harder, kissing up his bare leg instead.

"Пожалуйста любимая.” More desperate that time, and his head was spinning a little but Steve’s hand held him steady and he knew better, knew this was Better, he’d asked nicely and they should just let him--

“Wh-what are you saying?” Confused and demanding, the hand in Bucky’s hair tangling and tugging upwards to force Bucky’s eyes up and that, that part he knew fucking well.

The snap of his head made him blink, thoughts clear and....his instructions weren’t matching his tongue. Respond in that spoken to. No, no, he’d messed up. He could fix it, maybe, the rough hand in his hair didn’t feel very mean.

“Please,” he corrected, Steve’s face coming into focus before wavering out again. “Please.”

The hands in his hair smoothed to the back of his neck and Bucky’s eyes sunk again, prickling at the edges as he opened his mouth and he was just goddamned grateful Steve was letting him fix this.

The sound Steve made as Bucky took him into his mouth was too much like the ones he’d made That Night but Bucky hollowed out his cheeks and sucked anyways.

He couldn’t breathe and his eyes were watering by the time Steve was gasping, stroking through snakehair like he’d never get Bucky close enough. Last time Bucky’d been weak enough to start something Steve’d seen through him but it’d just been so long.

Steve was weak too. Can we fast forward to when you go down on me?
Bucky was just so sorry.

“B-buck, ooh, Jesus I missed you. God, fuck, missed you baby,” the soft voice murmured and Bucky just curled his fingers and tried not to choke. “You’re so good at this, fuck.”

He could laugh, if he could breathe, but Steve’s hand was tight in his hair and Bucky’s head was swimming and he shouldn’t’ve pulled off for a brief moment, because the senseless words wouldn’t’ve mumbled rough and sarcastic past his lips, “Y’not’xactly m’first.”

Banter, that was regular even in heated times like this and usually he could lick back down Steve and that pretty mouth would pop open and the subjects would fade but he wasn’t fast enough this time, wasn’t pushing Steve high enough yet for the words to slip and suddenly the hand in his hair was stilling.

It took a second for Steve to catch his breath and even then, he sounded nothing but shaky and confused. “What? You’ve...you’ve done this before?”

Bucky had to slide off again to speak, jaw aching and eyes still prickling but if he kept them closed and didn’t look at Steve it’d be fine. Darted out his tongue, swirled another keening noise before answer muffled, mouthing back down, “A’ready talked bout this.”

Another broken sound and Steve’s voice was all distracted, his hands on the back of Bucky’s neck even more so. “Uhm. Mm, no, haven’t.” Pretty blonde tipped against the back of the couch, eyes closed as his hips stuttered and Bucky did his best to shut Steve up but that stupid mouth never knew when to close.

“W-when? In Brooklyn?” Fingers curling against cervical spine and Bucky slid his mouth back up, popping off with a wet sound he forced himself not to cringe at.

“What? No. Them,” he replied distractedly, focusing back on fitting Steve between his lips only rough hands jolted him back, tipping his chin up and forcing him to look at blue eyes that were suddenly a lot less concerned with Bucky’s mouth.

“Them?....Hydra?”

Bucky would roll his eyes but this was supposed to be about getting Better, why was Steve interrupting everything?

Why was Steve looking at him like that?

“...what?” Low and dark now and Bucky didn’t like that tone, didn’t like the way Steve kept forcing his chin up, didn’t want to fucking talk about this. Especially not Right Now, couldn’t they just forget about it, let Bucky’s wet mouth make it all go away--

“Did they….oh my god, Bucky did they--”

Steve was freaking out. Bucky could see it, hear it, feel it. Choking on his own words, eyes watering, cock going soft and no, there were things that had to be done, why did Steve always have to be like this, care too much?

Bucky snapped his head back, free from Steve’s shaking hands, waved one of his own in nonchalance, had to end that conversation right fucking now before it became a Discussion, “Just a couple guards who took advantage of the obedience training. No big deal.”

He dropped back towards Steve’s lap, blinking away the thoughts because he had to finish this,
make them both forget for a little while, just needed the pain to stop--

“Stop that.” Steve all but shoved him off, heavy hands on his shoulders hauling him upwards but Bucky made his limbs dead weight, crumbled back to his knees between Steve’s thighs but if he didn’t want Bucky like that then he’d stop, he should’ve known Steve wouldn’t want anyways--

“Why didn’t you tell me?” That rough voice demanded and Bucky kept his eyes down, averted. He didn’t wanna talk about it.

“I did,” Bucky sighed, because he at least had to pretend to be bored. And it wasn’t a lie.

*Not the only thing they taught him to do with his mouth.*

“I told you they found ways to keep my mouth preoccupied.” The words came out all bitter, but did Steve not remember that conversation? The one where he’d almost broken his own hand after? Wait, that’s right, Bucky’d eventually broken it for him.

Steve was just staring, burning gaze into the top of his head as Bucky traced the pattern of the skin on the inside of Steve’s knee. “I couldn’t handle the goddamned condom, what did you think that meant?”

“Your rubber mouth guard…” confused, hurt trailed and Bucky snorted. That too.

“Yeah. That was part of it.”

“What else? Did they, Did they--” Steve’s voice was all choked, hands frozen and curled fists and Bucky sighed again, he knew what Steve was asking, but no. Thankfully, no.

“Too valuable to risk permanent damage,” he quoted, the first time it’d been brought up and it’d been after he stopped feeling emotions so there’d been no rush of gratitude or relief but now, looking back, it was maybe the one lucky thing about the Winter Soldier.

Only Steve was still staring at him, all hurt and such and Bucky just wanted it to stop hurting.

“You were still my first like that,” Bucky swore, and it was the truth and good news, so maybe Steve’d let him take away the pain now? Shifting forward again, eyes flicking up for a brief second as his fingers slid up white thighs, “Now c’mon, lemme--”

“Stop, Bucky stop.” Serious, scared, shaking head and that wasn’t fair, Steve couldn’t drag him around like that, couldn’t force him to talk but not let him fix anything--

“It’s not that hard to wrap your head around,” Bucky bit because it wasn’t fair, Steve wasn’t-- “You really thought I was in captivity--” sharp cringe at the word, which Bucky would laugh at if it weren’t so goddamned true “--for seventy years without somebody putting their hands on me at some point?”

“Stop, just. Stop.” Steve was shaking his head and he looked like he was gonna be sick and Bucky could do nothing but sneer.

“You don’t want me now?”

“What?”

Bucky scoffed. Just like Steve to play all innocent, huh? That was fine. Bucky could say it nice and plain and clear. No fucking denying it then, right Steve?
“Too damaged, even for you. Shouldda known. I’m contaminated, right?” Tarnished, and Steve was made of gold, who would he be to want-- Bucky shook his head, curled smile on one side of his mouth that had nothing to do with joy. “Not good enough anymore now that you--”

He hadn’t expected the hands on his arms, leather straps grabbing him and hauling him up with a rough shake that had Bucky’s brain rattling and his arm whirring in warning but Steve didn’t pay the slightest mind to Danger, like always, shoving Bucky in place with forceful hands and an even sharper tongue.

“Don’t you dare. I don’t love you any less.” Steve’s grip loosened an inch and Bucky’s shoulders knocked sideways, then scrambling hands were straightening metal again. “I’m pissed you didn’t tell me--”

“Because then it’d’ve been easy right?” A jerk away but Steve wasn’t letting go, tugging closer and he couldn’t take that, turning leering eyes up at Steve from under the veil of snakes that’d fallen in his face, like some rat under interrogation. “Excuse not to start anything. Cause I’m too damaged, used. At least I’ve got stories for my scars, huh?”

“Fucking stop, Bucky, you’re perfect you know that--”

“How do you know that’s not what they said when they put their filthy cocks in my mouth? Huh?” Curled in a snarl instead of broken tears and he spit the words angry, like Steve wasn’t staring at him mortified, like the hands on his body weren’t shocked still, just biting and biting deeper and harder and, “You’re never gonna be able to stop thinking about it. Every time I go down on you you’re picturing me scared and dirty on my knees with no light in my eyes and a burning taste in my throat. It’s ruined it for you. I’m ruined for you. I’m a broken toy, how could anybody ever want--”

The words caught up to him before the anger could.

Frozen, for a millisecond, choking on the next string in his throat and neither of them were moving but Bucky couldn’t breathe, couldn’t see, paused before the edge of the drop and Steve didn’t want him anymore and that was all he had left, that was it, there was absolutely nothing left in his life but Steve’s want for him and that was gone and Bucky was nothing because Steve didn’t want him, no one wanted him and and

Struggling, flash of terror behind crystal and the room was spinning light-headed from closed lungs and his body won, overtook the wild mind and forced his lips to part, gasp in air and then it was all tumbling out like gushing blood from a knife wound,

“Steve. Steve. Stevie Stevie don’t leave me, please don’t leave me don’t leave--”

Blubbering through salty tears and he barely got half a sob out before strong hands were hauling him into Steve’s lap, wrapping around his back safe and protective and Bucky couldn’t survive if Steve left, he couldn’t, not again.

Steve’s neck was slick and warm against his nose, twisting to press a hard, possessive kiss to his temple and Bucky couldn’t do anything but cling, beg, let Steve push long hair out of his face, another warm kiss on the soft spot behind his ear, rough hand clutching the back of his head and just rocking, rocking them back and forth and it was a long time before the broken sounds quieted enough to hear the murmurs Steve kept whispering into the salty air,

_I love you, I love you, I still love you._
Weakness, that’s what ruined him the first time.
That’s what’d ruin him this time.
Bucky was giving away pieces of himself, chopping up to serve on a sunshine platter and he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t keep performing open heart surgery on himself and hope to survive.
Steve was the one who was messed up. Not him.
Steve.
He was exhausted. All the time, this constant wave of nausea. Couldn’t stand up without the world tipping, had to be careful from how dizzy he was getting.
Hadn’t slept yet. Couldn’t afford it.
Couldn’t afford a lot of things, not with the way Steve was looking at him.

But he wasn’t gone, and that was all that mattered, and Bucky could stare out as many windows as he wanted but so long as Steve’s reflection was in the room behind him he wasn’t ever giving up, he couldn’t, this was Steve, this was his everything.

There was so much Steve didn’t know about.
There was always gonna be something else. Bucky could tell him every day he remembered, every moment of the past seventy years and there’d still always be another, something else that’d broken Bucky that Steve didn’t know about.

How was he ever supposed to help Bucky heal when he didn’t have the slightest clue where he’d been hit?

“How was he ever supposed to help Bucky heal when he didn’t have the slightest clue where he’d been hit?

“Can’t you just...comfort him? A good hug can do wonders towards--”

“Look,” Steve interrupted and the other end of the phone line fell silent. “It’s not like he’ll let me wrap him up in blankets, make him a cup of hot chocolate and kiss his forehead. He doesn’t let me anywhere near him when he’s hurting. Honestly, knowing Buck, he never has. He never would.
He’s not the kind of guy you can soothe with a good movie and chocolate. Hell, that’d probably make it worse. He’s the kind that’ll go take a walk barefoot in the snow, chill himself to the bone to make himself numb, he’s not...he’d never let me take care of him like that and I know that, I know it’s not what he wants but goddamn why won’t he let me make footprints next to his in the bitter
cold? Let me walk in front and shield the wind? I’m not asking too much, how does he think I’m asking too much?”

“Steve,” Sam started and it took everything in him not to snap back at the tone. “I know you’re trying. But you don’t have to do this alone. You’ve got an entire team--”

“I know. But we’re okay. We are, really, sorry I just. Needed to rant. Nothing to worry about Wilson.”

“You’re both hurting--”

Steve sighed, loudly, watching the shadows shift as the ever-silent ghost slipped into the living room behind him. It didn’t matter that he was on the fire escape, a wall of glass and a door between them, Buck could hear him now and that meant Steve had a whole different road to rant about.

“It’s okay,” he insisted, keeping his back to the windows and pretending not to notice Buck’s presence. “I’m okay. I mean, he can’t say he loves me, but.”

He could feel Buck freeze from here. Steve tapped in, quiet and inattentive as Sam started monologuing again, too busy waiting for the door to slide open.

And then there was a crude paper airplane hitting the back of his neck.

Steve bit his lip to hide the smile because that was just such a Bucky thing to do, scooping the fallen plane from the fire escape floor and unfolding it carefully.

You can’t admit you have PTSD! Scrawled in angry handwriting, perfect to match the furrowed expression as he finally lifted his head to see Bucky standing in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest and so beautiful Steve could choke.

Instead he lifted an eyebrow, holding the phone a centimeter away to mouth very clearly, “I don’t.”

“Why, because you're too scared to say you do?” Bucky hissed, watching Steve’s eyes narrow stubbornly, then the phone was being tossed aside and so much for whatever Sam was saying, apparently bristling at Bucky was too important.

“Really? We’re gonna fight again?” Exasperated, like Bucky was the one acting like a child when Steve was--

Y’know what, he didn’t have to deal with this. Turned on a heel and he’d just walk the fuck away. Got three steps inside the apartment with the security door to the fire escape still wide open and

“...fine.” Steve grit behind him and Bucky stopped, chest expanding on an inhale, deflating exhale and he wasn’t walking but he wasn’t gonna turn around either.

“Fine,” he repeated, voice dulled and heart lying at his feet again. “I’ve got PTSD.”

That….was not what he’d expected.

“I’ve got PTSD,” Steve repeated, louder now, like a fight. Like a challenge. To who?

Bucky counted Russian numbers between erratic heartbeats, then this sound came from behind him and it broke, it all broke.
“I have PTSD.” A crumpled whisper and Bucky spun around, staring at Steve standing there alone in the middle of the fire escape while Steve stared at his hands, dead still, wide-eyed, lips barely parted in another whisper, “I have PTSD.”

If it were Bucky, this would be the point he’d fall to the ground, curl up and shake or something, anything because when he broke he broke hard, just proved that yesterday, curled up in Steve’s lap like a child until he was so exhausted from crying he almost fell asleep and he’d been forced to end it then, because he couldn’t sleep, couldn’t miss, and he’d crawled off Steve’s lap and squeezed his hand and ran away, taken a shower for an hour or so and scrubbed himself down until he was pink and when he broke he broke hard but Steve was just standing there staring at his hands like he couldn’t believe the words outta his own mouth and that was the problem in the first place.

He wasn’t gonna crumple up, break down. Steve didn’t do that. Steve wasn’t weak like that. Internalized every ounce of the pain so he didn’t bleed on anyone when newsflash, Bucky was the one who’d made him bleed in the first place.

Haunted eyes flicked up to his and Bucky didn’t move, couldn’t spook Steve, had to wait until watery blue said something first. And when he did, that time, it was exactly what Bucky’d expected.

“God, Bucky, I don't deserve to, I don't deserve--”

The powerstride everyone joked about wasn’t joking or deadly this time, neither were the hands suddenly framing Steve’s face, forcing him to keep his eyes on Bucky, his head up because that’s where it’d always belonged, especially with this.

“You deserve the world,” Bucky corrected. For once, scolding his best friend instead of the Winter Soldier arguing with Captain America because for once, they were just two broken soldiers standing under a Brooklyn sky again. “You fought, same as the rest of us. You died. Your brothers died. You had a family and you woke up to a folder of Howling Commandos deceased reports instead of the support you needed.”

A shaky breath and Bucky slid his thumbs over beautiful cheekbones, just this side of too hard but Steve kept hanging from his every word and Bucky gave him the only thing he could, voice strong as he’d had to make it back in Brooklyn too.

“You have PTSD. It's okay.”

Steve’s eyes closed in worship and Bucky couldn’t, he wasn’t the one made to do any saving.

Gripped the back of Steve’s head tight and pressed their foreheads together, eyes squeezing shut in return, pressure hard enough to make his brain pound but by God, Steve was here and he was okay. He had every right to being fucked up. Every right.

He could say he didn’t see it coming, but the energy between them didn’t fade with the added friction, it only grew hotter and the fire on the horizon was never as far as he wished it.

Steve tipped forward and Bucky tipped up and the distance was too small for it not to have happened and he couldn’t fight it at this point, couldn’t fight Steve when his hands were bunched up in Bucky’s shirt like he was tiny again, not when the cliff ended right there.

Their mouths met like it hadn’t been days, weeks, centuries, fit together so easy Bucky’s knees threatened to give and Steve squeezed him tight and kissed him hard, lips interlocked rough enough to hurt, more desperate than his fisted shirt, than Bucky’s grip on the back of Steve’s neck and he couldn’t think, couldn’t make a single good decision right now because the world was slipping out
from under his feet but this wasn’t supposed to shake him, to the core and it was and neither of them
dared deepen it because moving meant the other might pull away and he couldn’t breathe but it
didn’t matter, reality was long since slipping, just like Bucky into Steve’s arms again.

Somewhere in the back of his head, the briefest thought of how many of their kisses had been tear-
stained, salty wet between cracked bloody lips and it wasn’t fair, why was it always them who had to
end up miserable?

We won’t end up miserable, Buck.

Buck.

It was only ever Steve who called him that.

His lips were probably bruised, caught between Steve’s and crushed up against pearly teeth but at
least his hands weren’t in Bucky’s hair. At least for a moment, he could pretend the seizing in his
chest wasn’t from time apart, for a moment he could pretend it was a passionate post-battle kiss,
maybe sometime in 44, fire flashing around them and that spinning camera angle from the movies,
zooming out from around them and their desperate hands and mangled mouths to the carnage of
some European forest, Commandos in the distance and the shell of some building, ashes dancing
over their heads and flickering down to land in Steve’s soft white hair, Bucky’s short army cut
curling at the edges of his forehead.

Except. Except that was steel under his toes, too-clean smell in the background and his head was
heavy, too heavy with Hydra’s reaching red arms. This war was all internalized, shaken
battlegrounds and raging fires housed inside two bodies meeting again for the first time in ages but
they had to break apart sometime.

Teeth caught just as Bucky began to pull back, like Steve could feel it on him and the tug on his
bottom lip as they dragged apart made every nerve ending he had light up but really, oxygen--

They both gasped and Bucky could swear he felt his heart leave his chest through his mouth,
somewhere between Steve’s gulp for air and his deflated lungs.

Soft panting, collecting oxygen and their minds again and Bucky was still holding Steve’s neck and
the balcony was so quiet now and he could hear the harbor beneath them but it was centuries past
and Steve wasn’t saying anything, wasn’t even looking at him, blue eyes on the ground while Bucky
searched his expression and was left with absolutely nothing to go from.

He was pretty sure now was the wrong time to say I love you.

Even if he’d ever been planning to.

Which he hadn’t.

Bucky let go of Steve’s neck. Another tiny gasp between beautiful lips and Steve didn’t have asthma
but Bucky still knew all the signs of an oncoming attack and fuck if he couldn’t at least save Steve
mentally from that since physical didn’t need him anymore and--

He wasn’t gonna think about that. Wasn’t gonna think about any of it because Steve was under his
skin. So far away and still in his bloodstream, the very lifeblood--

“C’mon.” His voice was too gruff and Steve was too big to throw under his arm but Bucky tugged
him in anyways and. Changed his mind.
Dragged Stevie right down to the floor, pushed with careful hands until long legs folded and that legendary ass was sitting somewhere stable that wouldn’t have them both toppling over the railing.

They hadn’t sat out here yet, which was funny considering how much time they’d spent on fire escapes as kids.

Steve was still staring at the floor, dejected and detrimental to all the fences Bucky’d been putting up and this wasn’t fair, wasn’t fair to either of them really but god knows what was running through Steve’s head right now and maybe Bucky shouldn’t’ve forced the PTSD thing on Steve but he was just so sick of all the lying and hiding and pretending and fuck.

“Stevie.” Bucky reached over, hand cupping Steve’s soft cheek and Steve flinched like Bucky’s fingers were fire. It wasn’t even his metal hand.

“C’nere,” he soothed again, hooking around that strong neck once more, but they were sitting too far away to tip foreheads and that wasn’t the intention anyways, Rogers wasn’t breathing right and that’s what Bucky was here for.

Tipped Steve sideways, right into his lap and how many times had he laid Steve down, normally coughing up a lung or bleeding half-to-death, but there were only a handful of times it’d been like this.

Well, not quite like this. Steve went down easy, staring up blankly at the sky, skull pillowed on Bucky’s thigh, body stretched out and mouth twisted up in that awful dead shape.

There was no pretty swoop to mess with, but Bucky carded his fingers through Steve’s hair anyways. A lot’d changed. Propped against the metal rail instead of a tree this time.

He stroked soft blonde hair and watched flashing blue eyes and waited. And waited.

And eventually it came. The slightest teary eyes before blue closed painfully and Steve finally caved.

Bucky lifted his hand, shifting as Steve rolled over on his side, nose tucked against Bucky’s stomach, fingers coming up to clutch his leg and that, that was what he’d been waiting for. He waited a moment longer, sure Steve was comfortable, then his hand came slowly back down, over the blonde head one more time before palming down Steve’s spine, neck to shoulder blades and down.

He stroked Steve’s back and Steve held on tight enough to bruise but it wasn’t the same way he bruised Steve. Wasn’t the same desperation. Couldn’t be.

Last time, the last time in the woods when it’d all been easy and simple, it was just like. Like a dream now, like it could hardly be the same two people from all the way back in the beginning.

A higher place.

Some sort of heaven, now. They’d been safe and together and that, that dream.

"What’re you thinkin’ about?"

"What?"

"You had this awful look on your face. What were you thinking about?" Bucky asked again, bouncing his leg. Steve sighed, putting the clipboard down and giving Bucky this look.

“You,” Steve responded simply. Like he hadn’t just squashed Bucky’s heart.
“Wow, thanks, so sweet.”

“Well, what happened to you,” he amended and. Bucky looked away. Cleared his throat. What happened to him...Steve was thinking about Zola and the torture and finding Bucky like that and how he hadn’t been able to eat for days and

“...oh.” Hoarse. Steve was right there. Too physically close to deny anything.

(It didn’t work like that anymore. They’d already proven that Steve could be inside his body and Bucky’d still deny being in love with him until the day he died.)

“Why won’t you talk about it?” Steve asked him.

Why didn’t they talk about anything?

Bucky wondered, distantly, if Steve was running the same flashback through his head.

He’d taken a long time to answer Steve’s question. Dug his fingers into Steve’s hair, same way he was now, and tried to find the words to tell his best friend that his world was destroyed without making Steve wanna abandon his sorry ass forever.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” he’d finally lied and Steve’d absorbed the blow, better than he did now, better than they both did.

“Why don’t you tell me anything anymore,” Steve’d whined playfully and they’d gotten to flirting, or something, whatever that was back then.

It didn’t go like that anymore.

But funny enough? Turned out Bucky didn’t tell Steve anything anymore in the future either.

”Wish we could just live out here,” Bucky said softly, trees whispering around them and Steve’s warmth radiating at his side.

"I’d miss being able to do my part," Steve told him. And so.

Here they were. Steve still trying to do his part. Bucky wishing. Wishing they could just find some bubble of peace and live in it.

They’d lost so much. Woods like that didn’t even exist anymore, not for them. Maybe not at all.

“Bucky?” Steve whispered.

"This is weird.” Bucky mumbled, running his thumb over the back of Steve’s hand. "I’m supposed to be the one holding you.”

"Grow a foot and then we’ll talk,” Steve muffled back, lips scraping over the back of Bucky’s neck.

“Yeah?” He finally croaked, Brooklyn air feeling dirtier with all the twenty-first century pollution grabbing at his lungs.

"Or you could just stop growing,” Bucky offered and Steve shifted his arms tighter around Bucky’s stomach.

"I thought I did,” he murmured back nonsensically, already drifting off to sleep. Bucky didn’t know the serum all that well yet, but he did know Steve and anything he said in the next ten seconds would
be swept under the rug and tied up in confusion of that tired brain and he’d been taking advantage of those ten seconds for his entire life.

“It’s gotta be this way, you and me forever, yeah? Promise me?” Bucky asked and it sounded way too breathy and desperate and it wasn’t something you could say when you were falling asleep alone in a forest with your best friend-newly-realized-crush’s arms around you but Bucky said it anyways because he meant it, goddamn it, and he always had this theory that some subconscious part of Steve’s brain caught all his ten second confessions and stored them somewhere safe that added up to this general feeling of warmth and that was all that mattered anyways.

“G’night Buck,” Steve mumbled back softly, and yet another day safe, words lingering in the air between them and Bucky finally let go, let himself relax into Steve’s arms. He could pretend they could stay here forever anyways.

“G’night Stevie,” he replied and then it’d been dreams, dreams about Steve’s warmth and the stars and the great open sky above them.

“What happened to us?” Steve muffled into his shirt and Bucky scraped sharp fingers over the back of Steve’s neck.

“I dunno pal,” Bucky whispered back. The wind whipped snakes in Bucky’s face and he just closed his eyes. Easier to pretend his hair wasn’t long that way, his arm wasn’t metal. Steve wasn’t fighting tears that’d never come and the docks didn’t smell all wrong.

Tiny shifts in the plates of his fingers, wrist, adjusting to the expansion of Steve’s back when he breathed and the metal sound was the only thing in the silence but the wind. When was the last time he’d been in perfect silence? His arm was loud, every increment at least a whirr and it’d been so long since pure quiet.

Steve always hated the quiet, felt like he was missing things due to his shoddy hearing. That he didn’t have anymore. Maybe it was better this way.

“Tell me a story.”

The words weren’t as muffled and Bucky looked down, hair whipping across his eyes again but he could still see Steve, half rolled against his stomach and half looking up at Bucky, eyes dry as the ground they bled on.

“A story?” Rubbing his thumb from Steve’s temple to his cheekbone, down the side of his nose. Ghosting over his bottom lip and Steve sucked in a breath, eyes widening as he blinked up at Bucky with those beautiful blues--

“How bout I show you one instead?” He drew his hand back and Steve rolled over proper on his back, fingers releasing Bucky’s leg and the slight bruises they’d made beneath layers.

“That sounds ominous,” Steve offered, and Bucky huffed.

“You...sound ominous.”

He’d been meaning to show it to Steve for awhile now. It’d been done for a month or so, but. It just hadn’t been the right time. Honestly, he wasn’t sure if there’d ever be a right time and this still might not be it but it was the closest to okay they’d been in a long time and it had to be now, or maybe never and he. He wanted to give it to Steve.
It was easier than words, anyways. Words used to be his greatest weapon and now they were his greatest enemy.

Because Steve was just waiting, waiting on those three--

Bucky didn’t have any good stories left to tell but this one.

They took Steve’s motorcycle to the tower, and it’d felt like ages since they’d ridden on it together. His arms around Steve’s waist, rumble beneath them and bodies slotted together as the bike whipped down streets. One corner too sharp that Bucky balanced with metal fingers tracing over concrete, then they were upright again and Steve had a smile on his face and the sharp wind gave an excuse for the tears in Bucky’s eyes.

He just. It was a big step. He didn’t even know what Steve would say.

He just needed Steve to know.

This whole mess was his fault anyways, the least he could do was give Steve some little piece of explanation.

The motorcycle cut to a stop, Stark’s downstairs garage, the one where Steve’d confessed and Bucky’d ran away. That wasn’t...that wasn’t the point of this and Bucky didn’t want to think about that because. Maybe it was the point of this and fuck, fuck it--

Steve propped the kickstand down and Bucky grabbed his shoulders before he could move another inch, spun them both halfway and kissed Steve before his head exploded with the screaming.

No noise of surprise, just slight stiffness before Steve melted into it, lips softening and pressing back against Bucky’s, hands sliding up the back of his leather jacket to tangle in his hair.

He could do this forever. God he could kiss Steve for the rest of his life.

It didn’t last long - couldn’t last long, Bucky’s heart was already pounding out of his chest - and as if he wasn’t nervous enough Steve was just looking at him, all soft and hesitant and sweet and Bucky had to look down, tuck a piece of hair behind his ear and breathe slow, force himself not to reach over Steve and start the damn bike right back up again.

“What was that for?” Playful but too careful, Steve was confused of course because kissing hadn’t exactly been a regular thing lately but.

“Just in case.” Bucky threw his leg over the side of the bike, got solid ground under him again that didn’t feel all that solid after all. Steve didn’t move for a moment, looking at him under the strange garage lights with his hair half swooped to the side and the grips of his motorcycle perfect under his palms. And one eyebrow up, like he’d caught exactly what Bucky’s words meant.

“Is this that life changing? That I wouldn’t kiss you again?”

Except Steve wasn’t the one who’d kissed him in the first place, because the last time he’d tried that Bucky’d bitten his head off about it because--

Life changing, was this that life changing? ....maybe.

“Dunno,” lifted shoulders by his ears and it just felt weird, shrugging, extraneous and a waste of energy but Steve’d vitiated everything and. “Just...c’mon. Before I freak and change my mind.”
Bucky tilted his head for the door and Steve practically leapt off his bike, shrugging off his jacket and jogging a step to hold open the door for them both,

“Yeah, yeah let’s definitely go then.”

There were a lot of memories in the elevator, and in the stairwell, but at least in the elevator he could close his eyes and not think about them. All the times they’d raced each other up the stairs, caught up to the other halfway and wrapped arms around waists to laugh and push and kiss and--

Their old apartment at least looked different. Not much, though. Tony was still renovating, walls half painted and nothing in the living room but the one old couch they’d left behind.

Bucky made Steve wait in the hallway, because there was no way in the world he was handing Steve the goddamned painting in the same room where he’d fucked their relationship to hell. Literally.

Breathe in, out. Careful metal compressing around the edge of the canvas, recalibrating to hold it gently and he couldn’t believe it was done, let alone that Steve was about to see months of work, but. Controlled breaths. He could do this.

Steve was practically bouncing on his toes by the time Bucky made it into the hallway, impatient as always.

Kinda froze when he saw what Bucky was holding. Which was funny, because what the hell else was Bucky gonna get from the studio? The note he’d left Steve wasn’t on the floor, which meant Steve had it, or threw it away or something. Hopefully he lit it on fire, the way Hydra’d lit that drawing of Bucky under the tree into flames. It was better that way.

“Okay, you don’t have to like it and I. I don’t know if it’s any good…” Bucky looked back down at the painting in his arms, up at Steve who could only see the blank back of the canvas. Although from the shock on his face, it might as well’ve been the front. “What?”

“Your painting?” Steve breathed, blue all wide and beautiful and chest heaving a little, “You’re done? It….You....”

“It’s for you,” Bucky offered, extending his arms a little in Steve’s direction. Steve took a single step closer, eyes flicking down to the back of the canvas, back to Bucky’s face.

“It’s for me,” he repeated, like he couldn’t believe it. Honestly, Bucky couldn’t quite either.

“Yes.”

“Bucky--”

“Don’t, just. You don’t even know what it is yet! Just. Look at it and then you can decide what you think but. God…I--”

It was a big step. Maybe it was too much. Not even for just right now but ever, in general, maybe Steve wouldn’t like it or wouldn’t get it or maybe he’d be freaked or or

“You know what, I’m not sure I can give this to you.”
“Bucky!”

“I know, I’m sorry, I just.” He looked up and Steve had this look on his face but seriously, he hadn’t seen the painting yet, he’d understand if he had. “It’s too much.”

“Bucky.”

“Steve,” he replied. “It’s….look, I’ll paint you another, something else just. Let me go put this back-”

And then there were two supersoldier hands holding the edges of the canvas, staring right at Bucky’s eyes with that kicked puppy look, that I’m sorry to do this, we had nowhere else to go look that had know-better-than-civilians opening doors to the golden retriever on their doorstep and it may’ve worked on Sam Wilson but Bucky Barnes had spent his entire life combating that look.

“Bucky. Please.”

“Steve, I…” One more glance down and Bucky made up his mind. It was too vulnerable, too honest, they couldn’t handle that on top of everything right now, Steve’d break under the weight of it and everything would blow up and--

“…no. No, I can’t.” Three step backwards and Bucky spun around to go dart back inside the studio--

Only.

Only the painting wasn’t in his hands anymore.

“What the fu--”

Bucky whipped back around, ready to snatch it back because Steve couldn’t just take it, the way he had with all of Bucky’s sketchbooks way back when. Back when Bucky’d chase him around the kitchen for them back, scooping Steve up and making him this indignant ball of gasping giggling rage and that was a unique combination but that was basically little Steve.

Steve used to take his shit all the time, he should’ve seen it coming. But Steve wasn’t little anymore and that certainly wasn’t a fucking sketch. That was a four foot wide painting.

Steve was staring.

Too late now.

Steve was holding the canvas in outstretched arms, just looking at it and he hadn’t looked at Bucky once, didn’t look like he was gonna look anywhere but that canvas again.

They both stood frozen. He sure as hell wasn’t gonna say anything until Steve did.

It could’ve been years that they stood there, Bucky really didn’t know. He was good at standing in place forever. Toy Soldier didn’t need to count time, just stand still so the straps on his chest head arms feet didn’t electrocute.

Steve moved first. An increment, shift of a shoulder muscle, then he was drifting into the living room and Bucky was following silently, swinging out to the side so he could keep watching Steve’s face but it didn’t change a bit, didn’t leave the painting for a single moment.

Kept holding the canvas, carried it all the way to the couch and sunk down slow and careful, still not saying anything, just looking at it. He might as well sit down too, especially if Steve wasn’t planning
on talking.

Stevie looked a little overwhelmed. Maybe he was shellshocked out of words. Whatever it was, Bucky was gonna sit right here beside him. Clasp his hands and wait.

And okay, maybe straighten up to peer over Steve’s shoulder, make sure it was the right painting and all.

It was.

xx

Part of him wanted to talk about it, wanted to tell Steve how there was the shape of an eagle in the translucent wings, wanted to complain about how long it took to do the tiny individual faded lights on the Brooklyn bridge, wanted to tell Steve that his body type was fucking hard to paint, wanted to point out Peggy and Nat and the Commandos in the drawings in the background, wanted to tell Steve why he’d drawn himself without the muscle mass he had now, wanted to explain every thought and detail that went into the damn thing and the other part of him kinda wanted to light it on fire and blindfold Steve for ever looking at it, so.

He kept his mouth shut.

So did Steve.

His eyes, though.

It was a long time before he did, but time passed and Bucky’s hands squeezed each other tighter and finally, finally, another tiny shift and Steve was setting the painting carefully down on the coffee table.

It was so empty in here.

Steve’s hands were shaking a little when he brought them back to his lap and it was time to finally dare a glance at his face again, see what it said now.

Another moment and half and Steve’s gaze finally left the painting, flicked up to Bucky’s.
There were tears in his eyes.

“Oh no, shhh, don’t cry Stevie—” It was an automatic response because really, it made plenty of sense that there were tears in his eye but the knee-gut reaction for Steve Crying was Bucky reaching to soothe and that was just what he did, even though he was the reason Steve was crying again.

He managed to stop his reaching hands seconds before they cupped Steve’s cheeks but it didn’t matter, Steve was leaning forward before he could touch anyways.

Bucky blinked and Steve wrapped both arms around his torso, burying his nose against Bucky’s shoulder. Oh.

Fucking sap.

For once, Bucky didn’t have to think about it at all. Didn’t have to think about anything. He just closed his eyes, tipped his head, wrapped his arms around his Steve’s shoulders, and hugged his best friend back.

_How can I? You’re taking all the stupid with you._

_You’re a punk._

And Steve in his arms, hugging his best friend tight because he never wanted to let go and he had no idea how long it’d be before he saw Steve again and it could be never and Bucky knew that, knew this could be the end and the dates behind them were the furthest thing from his mind, the only thing that counted was that Steve was being an idiot and Bucky might never get to hug that idiot again, he was damn well gonna hug him now.

_Jerk._

It wasn’t the way they hugged now, not quite. This was closer, deeper. Closed eyes and slight rock.

That and Bucky was pretty sure neither of them’d had teary eyes when they pulled back that night in Queens.

“Bu-cky,” Steve broke and Bucky shook his head, nine kinds of fond and exasperation because Steve was acting like he didn’t know but. Of course. Of course he meant it every time he called Steve angel.

He didn’t wanna talk, not about this, not right now. He just wanted Steve’s arms wrapped around him. Wanted to forget for a moment how broken they were, how anything Steve was thinking would have to be shattered the moment the reality outside that door hit them again and Bucky just wanted to live in this pretend moment of okay a little longer.

It didn’t take much to push Steve down on the couch, lay him out on his back and that blonde head tipped up to look at him so easy, let Bucky do whatever he wanted with this stupid, terrible trust that Bucky’d abused and damaged and hurt in the room just down that hallway but for a moment, they could pretend it’d never happened.

They could pretend Bucky hadn’t shattered Steve’s bones and opened his own chest, carved himself deep enough for Steve to see how desperate and hurting he was.

They could pretend.

Couch cushions against his back instead of under their heads, pulling Steve up on one side so they
could face each other, metal arm curling around Steve’s back to tug him close, warm air ghosting over Bucky’s nose and strong bicep fitting around his back too, over scars that Steve’d never shied from, not once.

So here they were, legs tangled up and eyes searching eyes through shadows, couch cushions the only other thing to see or feel. Clutching tight, both too afraid to ever let go.

“Bucky,” Steve breathed again and now would be another time to say it, wouldn’t it? I love you.

“Just hold me,” Bucky whispered, and Steve, for once in his godforsaken life, listened.

Precious blue eyes watching him, memorizing every inch of his face but stuck on coming back to Bucky’s gaze, their eyes meeting again over and over and lingering, forever lingering. Bucky was counting the dark blue streaks through light blue for the seventieth time in his life when long eyelashes interrupted, fluttering eyelids shut and Steve was out just like that, asleep in his arms.

He couldn’t quite believe that Steve still, after everything, felt safe enough to fall asleep in Bucky’s arms.

But here they were.

Two little kids tangled up on the couch, Stevie already asleep when the rattling lock in the door creaked open.

Bucky quickly squeezed his eyes shut, holding his breath and pretending he hadn’t been staying awake just to watch Steve sleep. He had a feeling Sarah always knew anyways.

Quiet high-heeled tiptoes over to the couch, that one wooden board creaking as always, the soft intake of breath at the sight of them. Bucky understood.

Then came the blanket, the worn one from the closet even when it wasn’t that cold, draped over their tangled bodies with loving, strong hands that did nothing but care for people day and night and Bucky always felt a little guilty when Sarah had her workload doubled like this, two rowdy boys to look after.

He’d left her dinner on the windowsill though, hopefully that’d make up for some of it.

The next part was his favorite, even if he’d never told Steve.

The two soft kisses, one atop Steve’s head, a slight pause and the huff of amusement - she definitely knew he was awake - then there was the kiss on his head too.

Bucky snuggled Steve closer, flush against his chest and the tiny fist bunched by Steve’s cheek made him look so soft and cute and.

He opened his eyes again. Steve’s hands weren’t up by his face, they were on Bucky’s back. There was no blanket from Sarah, but. That spot on Bucky’s head was warm and he could pretend for a moment - might as well, this was all pretending anyways - that she was here, left them both with a kiss upon the head like always.

A creak at the door and this time, now, Bucky’s reaction wasn’t to shut his eyes in fear of being caught out, it was an entire body of taut muscle as his free hand flew to the edge of his belt, knife handle in grip.

It wasn’t Sarah. It was Tony and Sam.
They all made eye contact and Tony’s mouth was already open to speak when Bucky’s hand slowly, silently slid across his throat in the most clearly, terrifyingly intense gesture to the intruders that if they so much as scuffed a shoe--

They may not be able to read him like Steve, but a blind man could read the glare to match, wake Steve up and they will never find your body.

Both of Sam’s hands went up in surrender, already backing out of the room. Then grabbing the back of Tony’s shirt and tugging him with because Stark was still gaping.

To be fair, the last time anyone’d seen them they’d been fighting like pack dogs and now they were wrapped around each other on their old couch with Bucky’s painting a foot away.

It wasn’t gonna fit on the motorcycle to ride home, he should’ve thought of that.

Steve blinked groggily awake a few hours later and that time, Bucky pretended he’d been sleeping too. He didn’t, of course, not for a single moment.

That familiar annoyed groan as Steve wiggled around in his arms until Bucky loosened his grip, muscles shifting under skin as Steve rolled onto his back and stretched out his arms, blinking back awake and just about knocking the painting off the coffee table.

It would’ve survived the fall, but Steve freaked and basically fell off the couch trying to catch it anyways.

The quiet moment shattered somewhere between all that, slipped from fingers before he could kiss it goodbye and it was just was well.

“We’ll have to leave your bike here, take a cab back if we wanna fit that.”

Steve looked up, following Bucky’s gaze to the painting in his hands and back up to the couch, nine kinds of solemn again.

“Bucky, I--”

“We don’t have to talk about it. It’s okay.” The couch creaked as he stood and Bucky offered Steve a slight smile, enough to get him up on his feet, moving for the door. He didn’t want to be on this godforsaken floor any longer than they had to.

It was kinda shocking Stark didn’t come barreling down to the lobby to insist they take one of his cars and a trusted chauffeur, but Bucky’s slice throat motion from earlier must’ve stuck, and they piled both sets of broad shoulders and the painting in the back of a taxi, then Bucky gave the driver the address and they both fell back into amiable silence, painting propped against the door and Steve’s leg pressed against his own.

Dawn was breaking on the horizon, which meant maybe they’d taken longer than Bucky’d thought but he wouldn’t’ve changed that moment for anything.

Their shoulders bumped at every turn and it kept sending sparks of warmth up Bucky’s scars, down his spine. The world whipped by outside, colors streaks flurry of noise. They didn’t belong here.

The taxicab driver had the radio on, playing low in background. Of all the twenty-first century songs out there, the man was bobbing his head along to one that Bucky actually knew.

A long way from the playground--
I have loved you since we were eighteen, long before we both thought the same thing.

Steve glanced over at him, signaled toward the radio. Bucky rolled his lips in and nodded. He heard it too.

Blue lit up a little, tiny curl of a smile as their shoulders bumped.

And the painting stared at them both, singing right along with the song because that, just like the night in the studio, was proof.

Bucky’d been lying.

And there was a chance Steve saw it now.

Or. Well. More than a chance.

“Does that look centered to you?”

“You’re the one with all the artistic talent.”

“Bucky, we are hanging your painting right now.”

“Okay. Fine. Little to the left.”

Steve’s tongue stuck out the corner of his mouth as he marked the spot on the wall with his drafting pencil and Bucky sighed, crossing his arms loosely over his chest, tapping his foot once.

“You’re so impatient get up here and do it yourself.”

“Uh-uh. I still don’t know why you wanna hang it centered over the bed--”

“Most visibility, which is something you should appreciate.”

“I’d appreciate it hanging in, like, a closet.”

Steve shook his head, tucking the pencil back behind his ear to situate the wire they’d mounted to the back, lining it up against the hook he tapped into the wall with the heel of his hand.

Then it was finally done and they could move on, never have to talk about it again because Steve knew now and that was all that mattered. It’d be hard to forget though, with the proof of everything hanging right there in the middle of the wall. Over his head when he slept.

“It’s not straight,” Bucky pointed out and Steve huffed, tipping one corner higher.

“You’re not straight,” he mumbled back and Bucky rolled his eyes, taking a half-step backwards for the door.

“I’ll go make breakfa--”

“Wait, wait, hold on.” Steve gestured wildly at him to stop, stumbling over the mattress to hop down hurriedly. Bucky crossed his arms over his chest, inching another step or two towards the door - he’d avoided conversation so far, he’d like to keep it that way.

“Buck.”

“Steve,” he replied stubbornly, lifting his chin. Steve just shook his head affectionately, striding up to
stop right in front of him and this, why did they have to do this.

“Bucky,” started again, in That Voice, glancing between the painting and Bucky’s face and it just. Another step backwards. Steve caught on that time, eyes widening in surprise. One last glance at the painting, and a step forward to close the distance Bucky kept making.

“I….you do.” It was more to himself than Bucky, like he was realizing something aloud for the first time.

Shit.

Two steps backwards and Bucky’s back hit the door and Steve followed him right there, two slow menacing steps that probably weren’t supposed to be terrifying but they were.

“You do,” Steve said again and this time there was confidence in it and Bucky was fucked. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but Steve’s hand shot up before he could make a sound and there was suddenly a warm palm over his mouth, the mask he’d always been asking for and never gotten, a shot of warmth down his spine then Steve opened his mouth and the warm shutdown to cold so fast--

“You do. You love me.” And Steve was smiling, the tiniest curve of awe and serenity and excitement all wrapped into one. “You always have.”

Bucky blinked.

Steve shook his head once, sucked in a deep breath, steeling himself, then he was even closer, pinning Bucky to the door with those broad shoulders blocking the world and words raining down like thunderstorm hail, hand still over Bucky’s mouth to keep him from interrupting words that’d been so long in coming and always silenced just before they could be spoken,

“I'm done being insecure about it, not when it's been there my whole life. I asked you why you were fighting, you said I knew. It was that kind of love - you were in love with me - all the way back then.” The fingers over his mouth fluttered and the smile on Steve’s face was only growing, more hopeful and sure and Bucky would sink to the floor if Steve’s hand wasn’t pressing his head into solid wood. “In Brooklyn, in the war….that's what you told Peggy, isn't it?”

His heart was gonna pound right outta his chest, explode in this bloody mess.

“That you're in love with me. That you always have been.”

Steve’s hand was still over his mouth. Lifted cybernetic removed it slowly, peeling Steve’s fingers away to drop back by his side.

His shallow grave unearthed.

Here he stood, strange look on his face. A pause, and the iced jaw unhinged,

”How's something warm for breakfast?” Steady. So much steadier than his hands or his chest. Steady and dead as his eyes.

Steve gaped at him.

you’re my best friend.

Toy soldiers bury their hearts from the Rays of Sunshine that threaten burning alive.
The silence was crushing Steve's shoulders, made them weak and Bucky took advantage of that, slipping silently underneath Steve's arm and he didn't know if he was escaping to the kitchen or if his feet would take him all the way to Russia in their fear of eternal warmth.

He was faster than Steve, always had been. Light on his feet, made himself look big in front of all those bullies when he could slip unnoticed and brutally fast during the war, use slightness to his advantage in a way Steve'd never understood.

But Steve understood him now.

From that night in the studio when Bucky finally let him see how deep this thing went to the look on his face now --

Steve caught him.

Literally, too, rough hand grabbing his shoulder before he could slip into the shadows. Slamming him back into the door, hard this time, realization splashing a second tidal wave that even Bucky swept under,

"Fucking talk to me," Steve demanded and Bucky almost laughed. Cap'n's orders. He'd taken bullets against those orders before and he'd do it again. Anything to keep Stevie safe.

Now all that stubborn and righteousness was furrowed in that angry-orders face, Even if you had, would you have told me? Or would you've compartmentalized that too? Steve's arms were tight, all but trembling as he pinned one on the wall beside Bucky's head, let the other hand curl over Bucky's chest, about to tear the heart out himself if Buck didn't offer it up.

"I know, what's the point in hiding it anymore?"

Because it was the last piece of secret he had. Last piece of him. The last thing to hold onto so he knew he wasn't done and gone. The last thing he'd said that meant the world, the last time he'd been painfully, simply honest. And it'd lose every bit of the bite it held in his heart if Steve knew too. If he said it out loud then it wouldn't wind him in its tendrils anymore. If he threw it away it proved what it meant and how much it wasn’t the way it was now.

What Peggy’d told him. And now you get to love him last.

If he said it aloud, it'd be. That’d be it, that’d be the darkest, deepest part of him exposed.

“Buck.” Steve was looking at him with that deep blue blue, rising light from the window catching flecks and reflecting long lashes across his cheeks in stripes like blinds in a motel room, nickname sparking off his tongue like it was still the easiest thing to say in the world.

If he said it, it’d be powerless, slip to nothing. Thrown away just like he was, just like Steve did, leaving him down there in the cold snow when Bucky was so sure Steve’d come for him, so sure his best friend would never leave him there and he’d been wrong. Steve left him there, staring at the sky with the snow bloody and his arm somewhere in his peripherals and snow floating down on his face while all he thought about was the way ice crystals clung to Steve’s long pretty eyelashes.

One single blink dislodging white flakes, crystal fogged and he looked up at blue, glassy-eyed.

“I loved him first,” Bucky told him, echoing hollow in the drifting snow.

The first time he’d said it it’d been a grenade.
Now the shrapnel carved out. He wouldn’t be able to count the places he was bleeding if he knew all the Russian numbers in the world.

It didn’t take much to shove Steve backwards, just metal on that pounding chest, fast as he could so the vibrations didn’t pick up how fast Steve’s heart was beating but they did anyways and Bucky was gonna be sick.

Steve reached for him, knee-jerk reaction to tug him back in with those hands but Bucky shoved free and then he was gone, hair flying behind him and feet barely touching the ground, disappearing before he could be nailed to the damn door with bloody holes in his hands.

A dull note of surprise that he skidded to a stop before he hit Russia, but he didn’t have shoes or weapons or a functioning mind so the slamming bathroom door was as good as it was gonna get.

It wasn’t just surprise that hit him as he lifted his head, looked up from where he was gripping the porcelain counter, breathing heavy enough to call it panting, hair hanging in his face as his eyes finally met their own in the reflecting glass.

He didn’t recognize himself for a half-second, the instantaneous fear of how did someone get in here -- or more accurately, the heart stopping fear of there’s a terrifying murderer in the bathroom -- before he realized it was just a mirror and wasn’t that ironic, that he managed to terrify himself, heart pounding even faster now as he quickly looked away, hand clutching his chest as he tried to breathe and found that wasn’t a feasible option.

Panic attack, some rational part of his brain warned but the rest of his brain was too busy flashing the image of that terrifying man in the mirror behind his eyes again and again and it’d looked like a demon, a monster, something straight from hell and nothing like the fading ghost he’d been convincing himself he was.

That wasn’t translucent and floating, that was the undead, dark circles and muscle mass thick and black strings of hair and a snarl on a mouth that never could’ve curled in that sweet Brooklyn Boy smile, not that mouth, not that man.

And it was the strangest thing, for just a moment, to feel like himself again, to feel like the man back in the war, detached from this Winter Soldier he’d become but the man in the mirror he’d just seen, that monster wasn’t just the Winter Soldier, it was everything before and after, it was the conglomeration of his past and the future with that creature they’d made of him, the compilation of the truth when you took a weapon and a ghost and a zombie and stuffed it full of memories and laid it out to bake in the burning sunlight for too long.

For the briefest of moments, he could simply be Sergeant Bucky Barnes in a tent in Europe, having woken from a nightmare with that terrifying monster flashing in his head, the image of that awful thing that couldn’t possibly be him, that cyborg killer, part robot and steel and ice and part twisted mutilated human and that’s what was left of him, having given that up.

Having given up the only human piece left that was only his, just his and the only other person in the world who’d known was Peg and now it wasn’t his anymore, he didn’t get to hold that phrase to his heart. The only time he’d ever admitted that he loved Steve out loud. Everything Steve wanted to hear, now he knew that Bucky’d been able to say it once, that he’d shouted it once, that he’d screamed it from his core and now he couldn’t even whisper it, couldn’t even part his lips around the words, that’d been the one time and it wasn’t his anymore.

He was ripped open. Split at the seams. No wonder he’d been able to detach himself, be the simple burdened Sergeant instead of the conglomerative mess. He’d shattered into pieces, cracks in the past
and his armor dragging the Sergeant screaming away from the thing he’d become, Steve’s righthand ripped from the clutches of his fiancé, Winter Soldier torn from the schoolboy who feigned sleep while Sarah kissed his forehead, Avenger broken away from training sniper, all these pieces he’d worked so hard to mesh into one, combine into a real person, laying like broken glass before him and Bucky had no idea who was real, which was left for him, which he had to chose to be to survive now.

He’s painted a dream for an angel and now the devil was claiming back the hold he had on that soul.

Steve knew a piece of him now that he’d worked so hard to keep locked away and none of that pain mattered anymore because it’d all been for nothing, Steve found out anyways.

Nothing.

Bucky’d fought and bled and cried and it’d been for nothing and wasn’t that just fitting. So they’d been right, then.

Hydra’d been right. It’d been for nothing, his pain. His pain was nothing. He was nothing.

It took a moment to convince himself, but he turned to the mirror again. If he got to chose, Bucky knew who he had to be. Only one way to survive.

Crystal flashed, dark circles and a twisted mouth that’d spilled too many words but that was fine, he knew exactly how to silence those treacherous words.

Ironically, he’d shoved it in the medicine cabinet. Mainly because it was the one place in the apartment guaranteed Steve-proof.

A moment’s resistance before the cabinet door slipped open, then tiptoes to reach up, back left of the top shelf, and the edge of the black material tipped into grasp.

Closed cabinet once more, and the ease it slipped back on, the security that set in the moment the black fitted over his nose, lips, cheek, neck--

Air cut off, filtered through foramen. Sound muffled, long hair settling to either side, and throat finally finally silenced,

Shoulders rolling once, neck tipping side to side, straightening back every knob of spine into the perfect position and Bucky stood before the mirror once more, planted his feet, and slowly spread his fingers out, energy dancing up through--

Then he opened his eyes.

Two dark silver moons over the top of a black mask, shadows cast over skin, familiar monster again.

Familiar monster again.

Only one way to survive.

~*~

“Yeah, I miss him. Don’t you?”

Natasha cocked her head, typing in the building code while Sam held open the door.

“I get that Steve never meant to abandon everyone for Barnes. Both of em’ve been through a lot. I
just kept asking myself, who would I be to intrude? I mean, if Riley came back from the dead, I’d wanna spend time with the guy - and that’s without the 70 year gap and twisted childhood devotion thrown in.”

One red eyebrow lifted in agreement, circling round the next set of stairs.

“Feels like we're losing him. When he needs a friend more than ever. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad Barnes's in his life, but those guys…it’s gettin’ scary.”

"Interesting choice of words." Nat gave Sam a quick look and reached out, rapped her knuckles on the door that’d been sealed closed the past month and a half.

“Rogers! Barnes! Open up.”

A moment’s pause of silence, then something crashed within and Sam was kicking open the door, both their weapons drawn.

Steve was standing in the middle of the kitchen, staring at broken pieces of a pan strewn across the floor, eyes glazed over and hands clenched in fists. Sam dropped his gun back to his side, gesturing Natasha further into the apartment.

“Where’s Barnes?”

“Dunno,” Steve said quietly, gaze flicking to the counter. “I’m fine.”

“Romanoff--”

“I got it.”

The bathroom door was the only place in the apartment closed, so that’s where Natasha banged first.

“Barnes!”

“He’s not gonna open that door,” Steve mumbled, kicking a piece of glass aside. Sam looped an arm around Steve’s waist, guiding him away from the wrecked kitchen floor.

“James, it’s Natasha. Открывать.”

It was only because she had her ear pressed to the door that Natasha heard the muttered, barely audible, “...укуси меня.”

Fine. She could play that game.

“You two do anything fun Friday night?” Natasha called dryly over her shoulder, aimed in Steve’s general direction as she staked out windowsill stability, glanced over what pieces of exterior building she could see from inside.

“Considering Bucky hasn't talked to me for seventeen hours no, not really.”

She hadn’t been expecting the same shaking head, cocked eyebrow as the last time she’d asked that - only all the life, amusement that’d voice once had? Gone. Dead. Perfect-puppet-mimic.

Natasha paused, turning to look Steve over properly and he just leaned tiredly against Sam, brilliant unbreakable fire under blue extinguished. Haze. Glazed over.

Sam gave her a crazy look as she slid open the fire escape door, but she’d probably get a crazier look
for scaling the side of the building and kicking in the bathroom window.

Or...not.

No dramatic throwdown, busting in on Barnes decked in Winter Soldier gear and hanging from the ceiling, aiming guns, nothing.

Bucky glanced up casually from the sink, where he was coming wet fingers through his hair, plain black tshirt and jeans, the paradigm of normal if it weren’t for his left arm shining reflections in the mirror.

“*Well* Miss Romanoff, what if I’d been in the nude? You can’t just break into places with closed doors.” Bucky’s voice was light, teasing, mouth curled up at one end like Steve wasn’t having some psychotic break in the kitchen. “Although, I do suppose that’s your job…”

He trailed off, smile widening a bit more and it was seamless, really, every inch of it. Even the touch of a faded Brooklyn accent, bright twinkle in dusty-blue eyes.

Nat raised an unimpressed eyebrow, touching down to the cold tile floor with her arms crossed over her chest. “We need to talk.”

Bucky’s smile grew, tipping his head as he turned his gaze back to the mirror, smoothed down a stray piece of hair and fluffed the top for a little more volume, speaking right to his reflection like Natasha’d just walked in on a primping session.

“Now, if we’re gonna have a heart to heart - I’m surprised at you, немного паук - then let us do it somewhere a bit more...comfy, yes?” Barnes turned off the sink, drying his hands before turning to her with that same brilliant smile, holding out his arm in a crook like they were in the forties, debonair lacing a perfect net over the terrifying cold, “Let me escort you to the living room?”

If she were to follow her training, now would be the point where she’d kill him. Or, since it was the Winter Soldier, this was when she’d run.

The casual mix of Russian – especially the fucking little spider he’d just slipped in - with the perfect Brooklyn, the blinding smile--

It was perfect. He was too good. No touch of soldier - cold killing machine with the best mask he’d ever worn, the face that used to belong to the man he was pretending to be. It was too good, he was better than all of them, maybe even better than her because the identity he was stealing, slipping into? Those shoes fit so well because they *were* his, in memory, and the lie he was fabricating?

Natasha slipped her arm through his. She had a tingling feeling it was either that, or the offered arm would wrap around her throat and the last thing she’d see was this tile floor pattern. Her skin crawled the moment bare touched cold metal and the Winter Soldier didn’t say a thing about the goosebumps, angled that cute cocked head and led her back into the apartment with a flourish.

Sam and Steve were nowhere to be seen and Bucky didn’t so much as glance twice at the mess in the kitchen, swept past like they were gliding to golden box seats at a ballet, posture perfect and each step graceful, a spotlight dancer on the very stage he led them to.

It was strange to sit down in an armchair when Barnes decorated the movement ostentatious, stranger still to watch him slip straight from ballerina-ostenair to lazy dock boy, draped out on the couch and stretched lazily like a fat cat basking in the sun.

Slow, deliberate movements, which was the only reason she caught the slightest most temporary of
The back of his head touched the armrest and the corners of his mouth and eyes tightened, body jerking in the tiniest wince that he quickly schooled into a shift of position but she’d spent a lifetime in training for moments like those, and she had him now.

There was always an in, no matter how complicated the enemy was, there was always some weakness and Natasha always found it.

“What happened to your head?” She leaned back in her chair, arms on both rests and legs crossing at the knee. Blunt, that’s how questions with Barnes had to be, because he’d weave and twist around them regardless, at least she could call him out if everything was dead straightforward. Besides, he’d had more than enough experience with her interrogation techniques, she had to pretend this wasn’t one.

“Nothing,” he shook off, settling his head back further against the couch as if to prove it. Then that mischievous smile came back, lift in his voice to imply exactly the direction he wanted her, “Things got a little heated. Got slammed into a door, but I’m fine.”

She’d have to be more than stupid to believe they were having sex. But the easiest lies were the truth, so he probably did get slammed into a door. Likely, it had nothing to do with the sly smile he was trying to pass off.

Why would Steve slam him into a door?

Well. Actually, she knew the answer to that firsthand.

The sunlight filtering through the window made Bucky’s hair highlight gold, splayed over the edge of the cream-colored couch like a painting of an angel, dimpled chin and sharp cheekbones casting dramatic shadows over his face as eyes blinked lazily up at the ceiling, catching golden at the end of his eyelashes too, lit up in sunlight and shadow so juxtaposed he looked surreal.

The perfect side smile and lazily twirling fingers only reflected the image more ethereal and Natasha’s words froze in her throat for a moment. She’d always thought of the non-human Winter Soldier to be something twisted and horrifying but he was worse than that: like Lucifer, in a way, the morning son and light-bringer and he may burn bitter bitter cold but she knew first hand nothing in the world reflected more blindingly than sun on sharp winter snow.

Clear, pure crystal, winter, sunshine on snow, that’s what Bucky was, blinding and terrifying and deceptively beautiful in the bitter, deadly cold.

“Barnes...look.” Natasha filtered a careful breath through her lungs, steadying herself. It was times like these she wished she hadn’t ever left Russia, because then maybe she wouldn’t be so scared of the man who’d spent seventy years training to beat people exactly like her.

He was a sleeper cell, even if he didn’t know it, he was more deadly than all of them. He’d shot her. Natasha Romanoff, he’d managed to shoot her twice and she’d barely nicked him once, barely escaped death every time they’d fought. He could’ve killed her, that day on the bridge, if Steve hadn’t shown up. He would’ve. She’d just been sitting there, terrified, wide-eyed and staring at the terrifying ghost who only needed to pull a trigger and she’d be dead--

That mask, she saw that mask in her nightmares sometimes and Steve’d come running out of nowhere, tugged away the Winter Soldier’s attention but Steve wasn’t here to distract, to leap in with his shield and save her life again. If Bucky wanted to kill her right now, wanted to leap off that
couch, outta his spot of golden-white sunshine, he could kill her.

There weren’t many people in the world that she could sit across from and think that truthfully and the idea’d already drained the color from her face.

When she’d thought he was getting better, she’d stopped being scared of him for a while, even if she’d never stopped being cautious. But now that things were tumultuous with him and Steve --

Would it always be like that? Every time Bucky wasn’t smiling at Steve’s side, he was a bomb waiting to destroy them all? Did her life hang in the balance of whether or not the Barnes-Rogers were fighting?

“Yes?” Bucky drawled and Natasha shook her head once, wiping out the fear and curling her fingers to stop her hands from shaking, inching them closer to her gun.

Barnes, and his head injury. Slammed into a door, that was important. And she was pretty sure she knew why. This was her interrogation, not his.

She rolled her lips in, softening her gaze in case crystal dared turn her direction. Friend, she was here as a friend - Steve’s friend - and she had to make that clear.

Rogers’d hurt Barnes for some reason, maybe during an argument? Maybe just being stubborn?

Frankly, Barnes wasn’t the only supersoldier in this apartment that’d terrified her before.

“James,” she started again, forcing all thoughts of blinding snow and deadly hands from mind, “I know that Steve can be cold.”

“You know, once, you told me you couldn’t ask me to get back in the game because I got out for a good reason. You’ve got that same good reason, and you can be out, Steve. If that’s what you want.” Sam lifted his shoulders, keeping a careful tally of the blank flickers across Steve’s face. “Man, it’s what you wanted then.”

“I never said that.” Steve scrubbed his hands through his hair, nearly tripping over the crack in the sidewalk.

They weren’t walking fast enough to keep heart rates up, but he had a feeling Steve’s was too high regardless.

“You said you didn’t know,” he reminded gently. “But you know now.”

“Can we run?” Steve pressed again and Sam sighed, kicking up the walking pace just a notch.

“End of the sidewalk. But Steve, listen man, you gonna let your good reason slip away? You have a second chance. I never got that, I never will. But you do.”

Blue eyes didn’t look at him. Steve stared straight ahead, chin lifted and mouth tight. Stiff, the way he was that first day in the VA, unsure of where to put his hands. Or anything, at this point.

“Look, man, I’m here--”

“End of the sidewalk,” Steve announced, then he was taking off before Sam could suck in another breath, cursing as he leapt to follow, maybe keep up if he fought hard enough, but when were they just gonna stop fighting?
The sun was in his eyes and Natalia was droning and Bucky knew what she was doing, could read nearly every twitch of her facial muscles but he didn’t care.

He wanted her gone, so he stayed quiet, staring up at the ceiling with a filter of bloody cellophane between his ears and the spinning record words.

“--as a temper,” she started slowly and look on her face at his axiomatic snort gave him everything she knew about how he’d “hurt his head.”

Must’a hurt hers the same way once.

“--don’t scare easy...but he doesn’t know his strength, and his anger can get ahead of him--”

Flashing images in green eyes - cracked glass screen, Zola, stepping up behind and popped a bubble gum, smiling cockily because she’d expected some exasperated joke or maybe the no-fair glare he gave--

She certainly hadn’t been expected to be slammed into a wall.

“--first found the file on Zola,” Where is it? Safe. Do better, he’d hissed and she’d recoiled. “...slammed me in a wall, shook me, bruised my arm and bit don’t make me ask you again and--”

The sun was still in his eyes.

“--far he’d go. In that moment I realized he's...too much for himself....”

Bucky wondered if the tremor in her hand was discomfort or fear.

“--old him I knew about you and.....mission...easily now that he had someone to target, to kill, let’s see what the ghost wants and that's. He's messed up. I don't think he realized--”

Natalia paused, cleared her throat. Maybe realized he wasn’t exactly listening. “Point is. I know how he can be.”

She tapped her fingers on the chair’s hard armrest and Bucky lifted an eyebrow, a glance her direction before he turned a placated smile back at the ceiling.

“That’s cute. You guys talked about me?” That blinding, horror-movie smile turned on her and she barely repressed the shiver that threatened down her spine. “I’m honored. Ironic, isn’t it, calling me a ghost?”

Tongue in his cheek, amused twinkling crystal, “Not sure it fits.”

He had her.

He could see it.

She was scared of him.

This was her interrogation, not his. She was better at this, what was she doing? It was just that...she’d
started to trust him. To consider him family. And maybe that was even more terrifying than he was, the idea that she’d let her guard down for a moment--

“What do you think does?” she asked carefully, calculated into a casual, amused question. One of Bucky’s eyebrows shot up, that same passively-amused expression Steve had.

“I think...zombie. Undead.” He cocked his head, neck elongated at this strange angle all shadowed from the sunlight and дерьмо, she could see the sunken cheeks and green rotting flesh from here. “I’m back from the dead, y’know, ghosts hafta die in the first place and I...never really did.”

A pleasant shrug like they weren’t talking about murder and torture and falling off trains and years under the suffocating grip of red octopus feet.

“You don’t consider Hydra’s reshaping of your existence dying?”

It was blunt, but Clint had been fucked up for a couple days and he still had issues and Bucky’s entire existence had been erased, replaced, destroyed. She’d never had one, but Bucky, he’d had a life and love and happiness and he knew joy and the salt of the ocean on his skin and sun on his face, he’d lost all that to reach the only thing she’d ever really known and at least she didn’t have memories of Before to haunt, it was only After and that was at least improving, she’d broken free and there was no past her to mourn, just a new one to create but he didn’t have Bucky Barnes, she’d thought he’d be more than pissed, she’d’ve thought he’d be righteous and haunted and vengeful and--

“Nope,” Bucky popped the p, smile curving wider than ever as he flicked his hair off his forehead and smiled up at the ceiling. Sun. Sky, casket, snow, whatever he was seeing up there, she had no idea. “Cause I’m still here, aren’t I?”

~*~*~

After years, war, hell, heaven and back--

Still here.

He was still here. Right here, in this same spot. The beams lining the rocks on the water’s edge, the docks just under the bridge. The spot he used to take his lunch breaks in the 1930s when it rained.

It always rained now.

And he could see himself, blurry and edged through the downpour, but unmistakable nonetheless--

There, just there twenty feet to the left, hauling a shipping crate up onto one shoulder, short hair caught and rustling with a burst of salty wind.

The real ghost, himself up on the docks, young and tan and beautiful and strong, wiping his brow with the back of his hand, eyes lighting up as his bare back straightened, perked to a noise he’d caught on the wind.

Bucky sat perfectly still, watching the movie-memory play out like a single twitch would make the image fly off like the gulls.

Young twenties, maybe late teens, quick hand rubbing his hair back like that would flatten it when the wind just tousled it once more but he didn’t mind, didn’t even notice, cursed mouth widening as
he broke into a smile to rival Stevie’s.

And speak of the devil, a flash of blonde up by the road, a shout lost to the wind and eighty years past then the ghost was raising his hand and waving, beaming foolishly wide and overly joyful, the slightest pause, glance around then barefeet jumped a skip and took off, running for the road and his best friend, bright laughter bouncing off rocks, spotlight fading and fading with every step into the wind and Bucky squinted, trying to peer through the downpour but

But he was gone, the ghost boy was gone and there was no way to know if he’d reached the blonde boy waiting for him by the road. No way to know if he ever would.

Bucky tore his gaze away from the empty docks, turning back towards the water, over the bridge and the sky, anything that wasn’t the reflection below him or the reverberation behind him.

There were boats, in the distance. Bucky watched them prepare their sails, drifting background thoughts of what the ship would hold, how far it would go. He used to do that, calculate voyages and how hard it’d be to sneak aboard. Thinking one day when Steve's cough got really bad again they'd just grab a boat and sail south, somewhere warm. Somewhere the cold would never let Steve's lungs give up on him again.

But Steve set sail west without him. That first night in the bar, that last night in the bar, they were more important than Steve'd ever know. Because that was the day Bucky watched Steve's sails disappear over the horizon. Steve abandoned Bucky long before the train and they'd never sorted through that and Bucky'd never really gotten over Steve leaving him for Peggy.

That last night in the bar, the night they'd waltzed across war worn floors with broken hearts - that was the night Bucky realized no matter how far Steve sailed away from him, he'd never be able to stop chasing the horizon where those white sails last disappeared.

How were they to deal with the storm swirling around them now when they'd never gotten over the storm clouds from the past? Gray and red building on black and there was no way to tell anymore where one stopped and the other began.

Bucky stared down at his hands, laced together loosely, skin overlapped with metal and truthfully, he couldn't tell anymore. He'd wound himself so tight to Steve there was no way to know.

Where one stopped and the other began.

All he knew - every time their fingers slipped apart it was like getting shipped off again, no white sails to follow on the horizon and a lying North Star that'd hold him hostage but never let him go home.

There was no place like home and Bucky had no illusions about where his was.

He'd never come home from war.

There were storm clouds hovering on the horizon, exceptionally chilly morning and the wind was blowing colder than it should’ve, whipping snakes in his face and he couldn’t even bring himself to care. Nothing he could do.

It wasn’t hard to find him. He didn’t even really look. It was just...he had this feeling. The same
feeling he got when Buck walked in a room on silent feet.

The wind was rustling his carefully gelled swoop, that last touch of forties he’d been reaching for lately but it didn’t matter whether he wore his damned Captain’s uniform or a snapback, it wasn’t changing anything. Made it easier to pretend though, shoving hands in dark brown pockets as he jogged down the same concrete stairs by the storage crates, smell of wind off the bay crisper than anything he’d been breathing lately.

Each step closer to the water was getting heavier and heavier, trudging through mud and sludge as the pressure on his shoulders threatened to crumple him down. Steve paused to run a hand over his hair, roll his shoulders. A deep breath as his thumb spun the ring on his hand back straight again, that matching metal they’d done nothing about and maybe never would.

It’d felt so much like their answer, the solution to all the fucked up sorrow. Bucky’d cried when Steve asked him to marry him and now they both felt like crying every time they so much as looked at left hands. Bucky still wore his and Steve wouldn’t dream of taking his off but that didn’t mean he didn’t feel like pegging it at Buck’s stupid head half the time.

The way it should be, they shouldn’t still be losing their minds. But Bucky was running, every moment he spent staring off into space he was still running further and further away and it was time Steve let him know.

Let him know he knew why.

More than just what Bucky’d told Peg, more than just the years since Zola, this was about Bucky Barnes’s impossible masks he’d built from the time they were battling on the playgrounds instead.

They were young when sorrow found Buck and they were too young when it won and if this was his last chance to pull Bucky from the fire, he was throwing it all in.

The wind whistled his arrival but Buck didn’t look up til the rocks crunched underfoot, then crystal eyes darted to his once, under the whipping dark hair then they were cutting away again, shoulder muscles shifting under the blue peacoat.

“Hey Buck,” Steve whispered as he lowered, sat down on the jut beside Bucky and settled his feet against the same stones they used to.

“Steve,” the quiet voice replied. His fingers twitched to take Bucky’s hand in his but. They’d never held hands in this spot as many times as they must’ve wanted to back then and for some reason he just couldn’t bring himself to do it now either.

Clasped together between knees instead, middle finger tracing aimless drawings against skin. He’d thought about bringing paper, drawing here beside Buck the way he used to but he didn’t want this to be about anything but what he had to say.

“Bu--”

“Steve, I can’t.” Bucky’s eyes shot over to his again, desperate and terrified, lost beneath all that hair that made him look so much older than he used to be. It fit him though, and Steve’d never mention cutting it. He could always see Buck beneath those masks anyways.

He almost asked -- you can’t what?

But he didn’t want to know the answer. Not with the way Bucky was looking at him, crystal searching like Steve was the sky and all the constellations spelled out the answers of the universe.
Steve didn’t say anything at all. He let Bucky look, let him search and watched as the metal plates in his arms shifted, recalibrating tighter and his real fingers twitched like they were aching to grab Steve’s too, as his lips tightened, pupils flicked back and forth.

He remembered Buck looking at him like that during the war. Behind blurry eyes when he was coughing out a lung. From the other side of Sarah’s sickbed. That look, the one under dark flickering nights when he thought Steve was asleep, that look that stripped away all the masks and shone that core, that single truth beneath it all, the one thing that’d Zola’d never been able to change. Hell, maybe the Winter Soldier was built around that, the way city walls were built around the heart.

The truth behind every unspoken word, behind every twisted lie. In that look, that single vulnerability Steve’d never been able to really understand. Not until now.

“You’re scared,” Steve told him simply.

Bucky’s eyebrows furrowed and his pretty mouth opened and Steve almost put his hand over Bucky’s face, like that mask, covering up from the dimple in his chin to the slope of his nose but he was done letting Bucky hide behind that. Hide behind any of it.

“It’s you who--”

Words could be masks too.

“You blame this all on me, point at the bright white star in the middle of my shield but you know what? It's not me. It's not.” Vaguely, somewhere in the back of his head he could remember Sam backing him into the kitchen and telling him it’s not your fault and the things Steve’d shattered in response to that.

But now, underneath their Brooklyn sky, he could look Bucky straight in the eyes and tell him what’d taken years to understand.

“I finally realized, it’s not me. Not anymore. It wasn't my fault you got drafted and it wasn't my fault you didn't tell me about the serum and it wasn't my fault you fell and it's not my fault you don’t want this.”

Voice escalating to mountaintops he’d never come down fully from and Bucky was looking at him wide-eyed with his lips parted, open around the same scream that echoed in Steve’s dreams, that terrible scream as he fell away from Steve’s outstretched hand, the scream he’d never voice aloud again and Steve got it. He got why.

He did reach over then. Not for Bucky’s hand, because their hands had broken apart too many times. Just to bump his knuckles against Bucky’s hip, to be touching him in some way that wouldn’t break hearts but Bucky might fall again from Steve’s reverent words anyways.

“It's you. You're scared. You're scared shitless and you've been scared your entire life. Scared of losing me and even more scared of losing you. And finding out that those are correlating things.” The silence swirled down on them, blinding snowstorm, and it took him a second to place where the eerie quiet was coming from. Buck’s arm had fallen perfectly still. Steve’d never heard it go silent, didn’t know it even had that shut down mode.

Then again, he’d never seen Bucky so still and silent either. He wasn’t even breathing.

Oxygen, Buck was his home and Steve was Bucky’s oxygen.

“That you need me,” Steve swore low, watching Buck carefully for any sign of air, life, but there
was still absolutely nothing, pure silence. It’d been that way for decades too long. “That you love me. You’re terrified of it. You’re always saying you can’t let go all the way, and that’s why. You’re terrified of the way you feel about me.”

A single, cold gasped inhale and Steve drew his fingers back, let Buck be nothing but himself adrift in that crystal timeline as he said the words to carve on the mountainside above their twin graves.

“You're so scared to say you love me you'd rather rip us apart at the seams.”

The bridge lights fizzed and twinkled on above them, casting stars in the water and Steve pushed off crumbling stones, stood in the cold wind and looked out over the river, chest pulsing with the gravitational weight beside him.

Then he took one last glance down, filled his lungs once more.

And turned back to the road.

One, three, five, seven steps away and Bucky hadn’t hopped up to follow so Steve stopped counting.

~*~*~

Шесть, пять, четыре, три--

This time he didn’t come in panting, holding onto porcelain to keep balanced. Slipped calmly inside, carefully closed the door with a click. A moment’s hesitation at the light switch, then a flick upwards and the bathroom illuminated gold.

Neither of them turned on lights much. Bucky angled his jaw in the mirror, watched the shadow under his cheekbone shift and decided it probably had to do with more than just the difference in the decades.

Carefully tucking the hair behind his ear, Bucky leaned closer to his reflection, studied the shards of gray-blue for a moment.

Leaned back again, rolled his shoulders back. Squared them to that man in the mirror, sucked in a breath. Stared straight at the blue, all that clarity, and opened the mouth he’d sewn shut seventy-one years ago.

“I love you,” he breathed. The mirror blinked back at him, head cocking a touch and he cleared his throat, lifted a hand to his neck, smoothed over skin - not black plastic, the mask stored behind that mirror kept flickering from view but just for a moment just one moment he was clawing it off again, just to look, to watch the words that’d been muzzled too long - and opened his mouth once more.

“I love you,” he tried again, and it sounded just as much like a lie as the first one did.

Bucky shook his head, like he could physically knock that tone free but he’d been trained for years in detecting lies, and he knew his own tones and masks better than anyone and that’s what he sounded like when he was lying.

The tears started up in his throat and he’d choke them down like he’d choked down so much in his life but he didn’t fucking have to go through this, fuck Steve and his stupid fucking expectations--

Sharp turned heel and his hand was already on the doorknob, ready to whip it open and stalk the fuck back outta there when the stupidest, most awful realization knocked into his head like a goddamned .207 and he froze, sucking in another shaky breath as he turned slowly, ever so slowly
on his heel to look at that fucking reflection, wasted lips parting one more time, the quietest of audible whispers falling free,

“I love him.”

The words reverberated in the tiny space, just a ghosted whisper echoing back and Bucky lifted his head, crystal staring at him like a dare now as he parted his lips to say it one more time,

“I love him.”

He didn’t need to analyze the tone. Rip free black plastic. Didn’t need to analyze a single thing.

The droplet of water slipping from the corner of one eyes, sliding down his cheek said more than enough.

Slow, metal thumb wiping away the vulnerable wet betrayal and Bucky turned the knob, stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind him.

~*~

Heart racing.

He wasn’t used to being nervous.

Steady marching beat, straight spine, chin lifted like that might save him but the hand gripping the scissors behind his back was shaking.

Steve was in the kitchen, folding laundry on the counter the way they used to in Brooklyn, propped up on a barstool with his strong hands making careful creases, back in the basket for sorting. Left, left, make it there whole.

Heart racing.

Steve looked up before Bucky crossed the threshold into the kitchen. He actually did a doubletake, straightening up and carefully setting down some folded shirt. (Bucky had no idea which clothes belonged to him anymore. Couldn’t really tell back then either, everything was too big for Stevie anyways.)

He opened his mouth. No sound came out and the toysoldier broke form, ducking his head to tuck a piece of hair behind his ear, gripping the scissors behind his back a little tighter.

Screeching chair, then Steve’s barefeet strode into view, big strong comfortable, bare because the cold floors didn’t make him sick anymore. Just the cold rope dragging him down to earth.

A callused finger under his chin and Bucky let his head be tipped up, hair falling outta sight for hopefully the last time.

The scissors were cutting into his palm enough to make his fingers white but he wasn’t sure how to ask this, just knew he had to, it was finally time and he wanted Steve to do it. Maybe needed Steve to do it. Not that he couldn’t, he just wanted to trust Steve with this, give up this one thing when all he’d done was take.

Steve didn’t even know how much he hated the snakes, how much they reminded him of Hydra’s tentacles everytime he saw his damned reflection.

He had to try.
Their eyes met and Steve’s were so soft, soft as the thumb brushing his cheekbone. Bucky’s jaw unhinged, lips parting to breathe the stale words that’d been lingering behind the veil of undeserving reminders but he didn’t want this scar anymore, he wanted something to be fixed for once, just a simple sound from a closed throat.

Long callused fingers slipped along their path, zygomatic to temporal and slipping straight into his hair, sliding between dark snakes and weaving in against his skull, parting the damn red sea with those beautiful artist hands and

“You are so beautiful,” Steve murmured, awed and reverent with his hands in Bucky’s long long hair and the words of freedom’s wings shriveled in his throat, crumbled to ash. The scratch of knives as he closed his mouth once more, swallowed.

Blinked up at beautiful blue, you are my sweetest downfall, and loosened his grip on the scissors behind his back. Wouldn’t need ’em now.

The edges of Steve’s palms pressed into his jaw, lifting his face just a touch more and Bucky closed his eyes, waited for Steve to decide his fate because with every ounce of the power flowing through his veins he was just so exhausted he couldn’t be the one to decide anymore.

It wouldn’t matter what Stevie tried anyways, Bucky was under no illusions about the black plastic covering his mouth, the muzzle that’d silenced him once more the moment he’d slipped it back in place, he’d been a fool to think he could muffle words like free me from those long red tentacles through the filter when he was damned here to silence for the rest of existence--

The nerve endings of his body were already lit up on hyperdrive ever since that damn day in the mirror and he felt it, felt it moments before and he didn’t do a single thing to stop it because he was still,

still

still

had never stopped

falling.

Steve’s lips pressed into his and Bucky’s mouth fell open in shock they’d burned through the plastic he could’ve sworn was still between them but Steve’d cast it aside once, god knows he was the only one who ever could. Burned up and clawed up and fought his way back from the dead to drag Bucky up from hell and dive back into icy waters with him all over again.

It ached, his chest was physically aching and Steve was kissing him with all this pained vigilance, beautiful blue eyes squeezed shut tight, wet lips locked between his, the slightest tug and the most heartbreaking pressure as his fingers curled in Bucky’s eternallydamned hair and pulled him ever closer.

Bucky kissed him back. Bucky would always kiss him back.

Just the tipped iceberg of desperation, desolation and he gasped against Steve’s teeth, right hand sweating as he carefully placed the knuckles of his curled fist against Steve’s lower back, trying to keep himself from just grabbing because he wasn’t sure he could let go this time.

Black was dripping somewhere from the sunshine that’d burned away smoke and painted angel wings, then Steve’s hands were wrapping around the back of his neck like a guillotine and Bucky’s
right hand pressed Steve’s spine and it wasn’t supposed to go this way but now warm hands were sliding down his back, scooping him closer and Bucky just kept dragging himself closer with every degree of heat between their mouths and

Steve’s fingers found the metal he still had tucked behind his back.

Steve’s fingers found metal behind his back that wasn’t supposed to be there.

It took a millisecond to register and Bucky was faster, snatched his hand away before Steve could close around the scissors but it didn’t matter, their mouths broke and it wasn’t fair because all that heat was still there, Steve’s cheeks were flushed when Bucky’s eyes sprang open to look up at him, lips parted and wet and panting but the blue eyes weren’t soft like they were before and Bucky couldn’t run away and hide with Steve’s fingers digging into the back of his neck.

The other hand was gripping his left wrist tight and the only reason Bucky wasn’t wrestling out of the grip was that the plates on his arm weren’t sealed shut and he’d slice open Steve’s hand if he tried and he couldn’t stomach Steve’s blood spilling out over the metal again.

“Give it to me,” Steve demanded, low and breathy but serious, washing warm and close like they were still kissing instead of back-to-war battling.

“Let go of my wrist,” he answered just as low, void-voice of a soldier who should be following orders but Steve wasn’t his CO anymore, hadn’t been for a long time.

Steve’s fingers loosened and Bucky’s arm whirred shut, shifting as he brought his hand out from behind his back, staring straight at the challenge in those blues.

Until Steve’s eyes dropped down to the scissors in his hand and eyelids fell with this horrific ache.

“What are these for?” Fingers pried back and the scissors were gone, sharp clattering to the left and a violent cringe, shoulders lifting as dark eyes squeezed shut tighter. He’d bet there was a dent in the wall now, and scissors pieces scattered on the floor.

“Nothing.” The hand on the back of his neck tightened and Bucky pinched the corners of his mouth, head dropping to the pounding chest so Steve couldn’t stare at his face. “Nothing.”

“Bucky.”

“I wasn’t going to!” Too loud, and he cringed at that too then the hand on the back of his neck let go and Bucky almost collapsed forward, knees threatening to give--

“Bucky you weren’t going to do what?”

I loved him first.

"I don’t know," the whisper bled and the pressure on his neck doubled, made him sway and he was so exhausted he just. "I don’t know."

Cold gathering at the corners of his eyes and Bucky's lips split over another gasp, choked instead of ached. The briefest of pauses and Steve's mouth was on him again.

Soft, so soft and gentle and sweet, pressed right to the corner of his eye, hand shifting up into longhair to hold his lips there unmoving and permanent.

Permanent. Til then.
A single drop of water slipped past his other eye and he nearly knocked Steve in the jaw because he was gonna wipe it away only soft lips were already kissing down the wet mark on his cheek.

Skin tingling with the memory of being flayed open, exposed. Bucky knew how that felt and the way Steve was peeling him open now - vulnerable and soft and gentle and in control and he wanted to shove Steve off, cover his face with his hands and he wanted to burn back the skin himself to let Steve forever inside--

Did the ice stop his heart?

Steve’s soft lips skirted up to his eye again, kiss in the corner, down the swoop of his eyelashes and Bucky’s hands were clenched in fists at his sides, held up by the hands spanning his ribs. Kiss kiss to the dark around his eyes, where he used to smear black black--

“When’s the last time you slept?” Steve whispered against blue and purple skin. A hand on Steve’s hip to steady himself, room on the edge of tipping.

He opened his mouth to spin webs and Steve’s lips ghosted down the side of his nose, stopped the words with a millimeter between their tongues,

“Don’t lie.”

He was looking out for Steve. He was always just trying to look out for Steve.

One hand raked warm fingers down the back of his head and Bucky’s eyes fluttered open, staring at the pulse under the thin skin on Steve’s neck.

Used to throw his arm around in camaraderie but now it just begged a fist around it. Used to be his best friend.

No, more than that. Before they were “more than that” they used to be more than best friends.

They--

Soldiers in arms. Brothers in arms.

Brotherhood came first, that bond that could never be broken and that love that could never be lost. Family, Steve was more than the love of his life or his best friend. Steve was his family. Steve was his only family left on this planet. Steve was all he had.

Again.

“...I don’t know,” Bucky breathed, running one hand shakily over his hair, trying to smooth it back so he could breathe again, voice echoing from the kid who used to wear it slicked back, that other one buried so deep, “Rogers, I...I don’t know.”

“It’s okay.” Strong arms circled round him properly and Bucky somehow lifted his head, chin falling on Steve’s shoulder as he wrapped them in hug, misery squashing to burn between their chests as his head tipped weakly against Steve’s temple, metal and human running up Steve’s spine. ”You're okay.”

The broken scissors were scattered in pieces on the floor, he could see over Steve’s shoulder.

The wall had another dent.

They were just standing here in the middle of the floor holding each other but Bucky was still
looking over Steve’s shoulder, over his back. Maybe that’s why it never worked. This was where Bucky knew, where his heart told him he had to be. Watching Steve’s back instead of holding his face. Behind instead of side by side.

Safety instead of sidebyside.

“Supposed to go through hell together, remember?” Steve’s voice rumbled deeper with their chests pressed together and Bucky forced himself to inhale, exhale. They weren’t crushing each other this time but breathing was hard anyways.

“I remember.”

He almost smiled at the words because god, did he. He remembered it all, everything, and maybe that’s why it never worked.

“Thank my lucky stars.” There was a smile in the voice against his ear and fingertips curling ever so slightly into his back, rocking side to side. It cost Bucky control but didn’t Steve always. “God, Buck. I can’t have you forgetting me again.”

There it was, the desperation that’d ruined them both bubbling under the surface.

Bucky’d promised Peggy he’d let Steve go during the war. He should’ve. By god, he should’ve.

Steve said Bucky was scared. Bucky was death and darkness, Steve was the one who should be scared and wasn’t.

That edge in Steve’s voice, sharper than all his knives, maybe that’s why it never worked. Steve was never supposed to be that way and Bucky’d dragged him out from his halo to the other side.

Used to be what made Steve calm? Now he was the catalyst.

Couldn’t keep hurting, he couldn’t. He should’ve let Steve go so long ago.

Wasn’t strong enough. Might never be strong enough and maybe that was why it never worked.

But maybe, he could soothe Steve back from that edge of hurt one more time. Soothe him from the stab of when Bucky forgot him, soothe him from the aches and bruises he left last time. He could be in control enough to do that.

No letting go, just carrying Steve through the fire, making the tremble in that voice never forget me steady out once more.

His mouth was curved now, one corner up and it didn’t meet his eyes but it didn’t matter. He had one job, and that was to pull Steve back into the light.

“The first time...” Bucky started, pausing a moment because he wanted to word it perfectly. It felt like a lifetime ago, the gold lights lining that unfinished floor, soft dancing music in the background and the door that lead to That Bedroom on one wall, blue eyes staring down at him with the words I love you floating in the air between them.

“Give me a way to never forget you again,” he whispered. Same way he had then.

A second, two, sliding hands as Steve pulled back, looked down at him with those analytical eyes. Bucky let their eyes meet, shined his own up a bit, much as he could risk.

They hadn’t had sex since he’d broken Steve’s hand but. Bucky’d been training, he’d layered back
in those protective walls and plastic masks and there was no chance on earth it could go that way again. He was in control, enough.

“Are you sure?”

Of course Steve was asking. It was the same answer it’d always been though, underneath the fe--

“Yes. Are you?”

And there it was, the tiniest hint of that watered-down smile Steve had in this century, the one that broke Bucky’s heart but it was the best he could get.

“Oh Buck.” And ostensibly, all he did was take. “I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

Steve took his hand. It didn’t make up for every time the wind had pushed cold between their fingers and forced them apart but he could pretend. Maybe that was why it never worked.

It could’ve been 1938 the way Steve led him into the bedroom, all debonair and distanced and whatnot. Well, if their roles had been switched, Bucky was the only one holding hands with girls to lead them anywhere back then.

More watered-down as Bucky raised an eyebrow, nothing close to the playful scorn that look used to be. But being frozen so long meant a lot of watered-down when they thawed so really, what else had he ever expected?

The sun had just sunk below the horizon, out of sight with just the final touches of light lingering sourceless on the world, gold flecks suspended in the air like dust as the shadows crept down from the corners of the room, decontrasted in this hovering gray nothing like the black and white shadows from that first time; but the scene was no less beautiful, softening Steve’s skin like a Renaissance painting.

Speaking of which.

The corner of Steve’s mouth tipped up, tug on Bucky’s hand that sent him straight into that broad chest but all he could see was the painting over Steve’s shoulder.

Curious eyes caught Bucky’s gaze and Steve twisted, glancing over his shoulder to follow Bucky’s gaze. There.

Unswivel and blue eyes were on him again, intense enough that Bucky dared glance over, meeting with the same sparks that’d burned his hands, the same pulse that’d driven every wild brushstroke, the same crescendo pent up in the barrel of the rifle against his shoulder, all there in the wisps of blonde around Steve’s face, the long shadows cast by eyelashes down his cheeks like morbid circusmakeup tears.

He dropped Steve’s hand, grabbing the bottom hem of black and tugging his shirt over his head in one fluid motion, tossing it behind and already starting in on the snaps of dark cargo pants.

Steve’s hand smoothed over the bare, mottled skin on his shoulder and Bucky glanced up through the stray strands fallen over his eyes, zipper cutting loud through silence as Steve’s fingers traced down, pausing at the red star on his arm, artist fingers wrapping over it and moving with him as he shoved his pants and boxers down his legs, lifted a foot to wrestle them over and off, other foot and kicked aside.

A quick glance to check for Steve’s permission, sure nod and shaky swallow, meeting Bucky’s eyes
for just a moment before they were traveling down, tracing over his body and Bucky could feel the
gaze on his bare skin like a physical touch.

The briefest moment to slip his fingers over the smooth skin on Steve’s hips, then he was tugging a
too-tight shirt over Steve’s head, eliciting that dandelion baby-soft poof as blonde popped free and
the tiny smile on his face was real that time.

Which kinda made it a hellobalot worse.

The smile wilted and Steve smoothed the snakes away from his face, tendrils strangling those sweet
hands but he didn’t notice, just pulled Bucky’s face to his own and this time Bucky managed not to
collapse, pressing every word he didn’t say against that beautiful mouth.

He’d wondered one night, if it was kissing the sun for him than what in the world was it for Steve?

For Steve, it was the kiss of death, wasn’t it?

They’d always lived in it, never on the edge. Deep in the throes, the constant ever-wakeful presence
of the feared shadowy darkness that Steve kept chasing passionate as sin and Bucky was still caught
in freefall through black.

Twin mouths dragged apart, clamped together again with teeth grazing lips and nails digging into
shoulderblades, pulling them stumbling towards the bed, phantom room sliding by in a blur and
before Bucky could sort out the dizziness they were tangled on the bedsheets.

It was instinct that had Bucky rolling to pin Steve to the mattress and likely the same instinct that had
Steve’s leg wrapped around his back in seconds and flipping him into the pillows. He landed with a
thump, blonde halo looking down at him triumphantly, framed by the bottom edge of the canvas on
the wall over their heads.

A split second decision before he had his metal arm barring Steve’s chest, wrestling to flip him once
more and that time when Steve went down he brought Bucky with him, their noses suddenly
brushing from proximity, two pairs of hands poised to push and shove once more, hearts thudding
and --

This was usually the part they both started laughing, eyes and bodies all caught up. The childhood
joy and innocence from their playfights of then to the wrestling of twin soldiers and now, the
grappling of twin skeletons that fought without the play, all tossed in with bright eyes turned hungry,
lust and love twinkling, only.

Only Bucky wasn’t laughing. There was that twinkle in Steve’s eyes when they crashed together like
this, the threat of a curve on his lips but the moment it caught up, this time, neither of them burst into
laughter.

The faded hint of a smile, for the first time in ages and that’s exactly why it trailed off. Died in
seconds, both staring at each other with wide eyes and thudding hearts.

Who knew broken hearts could beat so fast?

The moment broke as Bucky's chest did, surging forward in perfect time with Steve, clash of teeth
and mouths and grabbing hands. The only clothes left between them were Steve’s blue pants and
Bucky slipped those off him easy, thrown behind and forgotten, replaced with his mouth on sharp
hips, hands smoothing up Steve's stomach, soft huffs of heavy breathing as Steve's hands weaved
through snakes, pulled Bucky right back up to press their mouths together again.
Sporadic gasps and flushed cheeks, necks, pink creeping down muscled chests as Bucky swung a leg properly over Steve's lap, sliding into place over the heat between strong legs. Both Steve's hands on his jaw now as Bucky sucked on that pretty lower lip and ground down against Steve's cock, licking up every shocked sound.

Stevie was breathing heavy, way he did when he got in a fight. Chest heaving, sans wheeze and Bucky’s heart seized because what would he give to go back to the simplicity of that. Always fearing Steve’s next breath was his last, taken away from Bucky by some disastrous illness.

It was better than always fearing Steve’s next breath was his last, taken away from Bucky by his own bloody hands.

Steve’s clean, strong ones smoothed down the curves of his ass, lifted Bucky higher in his lap with those long fingers slipping lower, brushing over sensitive where he hadn’t been touched in an eternity. Pop of a cap, cold wet and Steve’s fingers were inside him again, heavy palm on the small of his back to keep him still. Bucky mouthed along the soft pretty skin on Steve’s neck, more heated-breaths than kisses, eyes closed to keep from rolling back.

It’d been so long and it felt like they’d done this just this morning, fitting right back together like puzzle pieces because this, Bucky knew. Steve’s body so close to his it didn’t matter where skin stopped and bone began, what oxygen stole between them or heat pressed them together.

Baby-soft duckling blonde hair, all white at the edges by Steve’s face but darker and thicker at the base of his neck and Bucky nuzzled against the dark, shadows hiding his face as he nosed all that brunette underneath the sunshine.

The fingers inside him twisted, pulling a distorted sound from his burning throat, grip tightening on hard biceps. A warm, dry kiss to the side of his neck, deeper twist and opening spread, too much to focus on and it all started coming in waves, crashing him into the dark.

This was where control started to slip and he just had to make sure Steve was the one in charge because he couldn’t trust much but he could trust that, he could trust the instinct ingrained from that previous century that if he let go, Steve’d catch--

No, actually, wait--

The nerve endings lit up like misfiring chambers, sporadic shocks up his shoulder into his spine as pearly teeth sunk into the scars arching from his arm and Bucky’s eyes did roll back in his head, hips rolling forward to jerkily ride Steve’s abs through the rippling shockwaves.

The fingers inside withdrew in gaping cold, heavy arms wrapping around his back, gathering even closer as Bucky tried to catch his breath, punched right back outta his lungs as Steve rolled them, whipped Bucky down to fall heavy on the mattress, disorientation rushing behind his eyes only making him gasp louder, ankles locking behind Steve’s back.

Blue penetrating his soul, suddenly still, halting all that heat and Bucky groaned, fingers digging, pulse racing, trying to drag Steve back with him.

“C’mon, c’mon baby,” Head tipped back, voice already shot and ankles digging, pulling closer because he couldn’t wait any longer, he needed Steve inside him right now and what the hell was the holdup--

It took some effort to blink open his eyes, room swimming with heat waves he barely managed to wrangle into a mild glare up at the beautiful blue blinking down at him. Steve was just looking at
him, knees pinning his hips and hands cupping his neck, cradling with this sincere affection.

They were too far apart to roll up against those ridiculous abs again, but he still had hands and he wasn’t gonna make it through this if Steve was gonna keep looking at him like that.

Bucky reached up, mismatched hands cupping Steve’s cheeks, half-pulling himself up and half dragging Steve down, lips meeting somewhere in the middle, burn of that stare dissipating the moment wet dragged together again.

But then their lips weren’t interlocked anymore and Steve still wasn’t moving. Waiting, he was just waiting and Bucky didn’t wanna know what the hell for.

“Steve.” The c’mon was perfectly clear in the tone, fingerprint marks. He just couldn’t handle the pause, it had to be gogogo or else he’d start thinking and Steve’d start staring and then the questions and the doubt and the desperation.

“Hasn’t it been long enough?” Bucky breathed, avoiding blue gaze and rubbing his palms down tense shoulders, arched scapula, hollow ribs, lungs expanding wildly like they’d open up and swallow them both if he didn’t just

Tilted hips, guided hand and finally, fuck. He threw his head back, rolled into it before Steve dare stop, stutter in his throat as his body surrendered once more, all pressure and sunlit prayer driving up into his stomach, shocking muscles tensed and his fingertips into roughened skin.

This used to be his favorite part, their bodies sliding back together after the hours apart, or simple minutes, whether it be the easy relock after the fourth round that night or the awakening revival after a day from each other’s sides.

In this moment, it didn’t matter that it’d been weeks, a month, more, they still knew how to do this and they still slid back together like they’d never been apart.

Steve’s hips pressed against his ass, skin on skin and already panting with it, eyes closed so he didn’t have to face but Steve wasn’t letting him go that easily, not this time.

The word was so quiet he almost missed it, if his hands weren’t wrapped around ribs, vibration sensitivity through the roof he wouldn’t’ve felt it.

“Alllllujah,” the stolen whisper, tucked away from sight with Steve’s forehead heavy on Bucky’s scars, hands frozen on his waist, quiet and devout like the soft strumming chord of a favorite acoustic, sending the same chills right down Bucky’s spine, to the base of where they were connected, bound in flesh and spilt blood.

Allelujah.

He. He didn’t know what to say.

Steve wasn’t moving, curled around and inside him with his hands gripping tight and still fearfully distant like Bucky might shove him off any moment, whispering a faith he hadn’t practiced in years. Spilled over a prayer that wasn’t sarcastic or celebratory, just cold and broken and the most lost of cries, ugly duckling in the woods and Bucky didn’t understand, why would he say that when he didn’t mean it?

It took a moment longer than it should’ve, because it wasn’t instinctive. He didn’t have instincts of what the fuck to do around Steve anymore. Just careful thought, cautious as the hand he slowly, hesitantly placed on the back of Steve’s head. Reciprocating hold, cradling him close, human fingers
gliding over the soft blonde to scratch in the short darker hair at the base of his neck, eyes stark open now as he stared wide-eyed over Steve’s bare shoulder.

Up at the ceiling, the bottom corner of his painting. The light from the hallway flickered, something akin to lantern light, the arched roof of a tent during the war. If Steve’d held him this way then…

It was dark green, hair pushed back from his eyes. Steve holding him tight like those crashing hugs every time a tank bit an explosion too close and the Commandos’ backs were turned, hands pulling each other from the earth and crushing together, a fleeting moment before sniper rifle and shield raised once more, a scene of French forests and European mountaintops and wood and fire and snow,

If Steve’d held him like this, moved with him like this back then, what would that've done? What would that’ve changed? There’s no way they could’ve still ended up here, through hell, if they’d held each other this way back then, when it was innocent and sweet and young, untainted unstained.

It felt like floating again, he was floating through clouds that’d never existed and every time Bucky floated he fell. Maybe that was why it never worked.

Steve’s hips drew back, sliding a thousand nerve endings into his spine, lifting up off Bucky’s shoulder to look down at him properly, pushing back in again fluid and sure, not so slow to drive him crazy, just perfect rock and draw back, pull out and push in, slide together again, apart, and Bucky was still floating, he was floating and he was gonna fall.

“Hold me down,” he whispered.

Steve’s eyebrows knit, hips stuttering in a pause of confusion and Bucky squeezed his eyes shut, head rolling to the side, all that blackness filled with sensation but the ground was nowhere near his feet and the higher he got the worse the damage when Steve dropped him again and

“Hold me down,” he begged, rubbing his fingers against skin like that would change the sensors that told him he wasn’t touching anything, nothing at all atoms could never touch, it was all a goddamned illusion.

For a moment he really believed Steve was going to. One of the strong patented arms lifted, barring across his chest, the other gripping his unmarred shoulder tight to keep him from sliding and it was all there, all he had to do was take away the pain and instead, instead.

The hand on his shoulder released, smoothing out to stroke over his collarbone, arm across his chest lifting to tip his chin up, force Bucky’s eyes back on him and he’d known it’d be a losing battle but that didn’t keep his eyes from tearing up as they blinked open on torn blue.

Dance began again, hips slow sweet rocking in and outta his body like a dream and it wasn’t fair, he couldn’t. Bucky arched his neck, swiveled his hips against Steve’s faster, harder and Steve let him, met him in the middle but it was still sweet, insistent, sure, the furthest thing from rough, from the harsh punishment--

It wasn’t like he thought he didn’t deserve

just
just that

he couldn’t and Steve was being stubborn which meant there was no way out of this but to stop and Bucky could do anything but that.
“Steve, God, please.” Bucky rolled deeper on Steve’s cock again, wracking his hands up Steve’s hips, ribs, chest, two fingers tapping his heart in a weak plea, pressing hard against the skin and he could feel the beating, pounding strong and solid like everything else about his blonde angel.

The angel with aching hands that pulled him through clouds until there was no weight left, higher higher through the snowing mountains, higher higher each step up on the fire-escape.

The whole world still around the sweet rocking that was making him groan, less in the pleasure than frustration at it.

“Steve,” he tried one last time, dragging his thumbs across that beautiful throat, tightening himself around all that heat, heels digging into white spine.

The shaking exhale from wet lips wasn’t the one Bucky wanted, that soft precious look he kept dodging still staring down at him like honesty wouldn’t wreck this one moment of escape.

“Fuck, Steve, c’mon. Give m-me. *Something*.”

Deeper, more sure push inside, bodies curling together and the slightest curve on one side of Steve’s pretty mouth, blonde hair flopping down over his forehead all mischief and young.

“Oh Buck,” a patient exhale, stilling muscles and shifting hands, tangling pulses. Who they used to be, slowing down with this toxic, gentle sweetness--

*I’m so sorry* he opened his mouth to exhale. Steve’s lips blocked the way, overlapping his own to close their mouths together, tug apart with a scattering of sparks through his stuffed twisted brain, not making it half far enough to trickle down his spine.

Warm, sticky skin pressed to his forehead, the heat and those layers between their brains, pia mater to that sheen of sweat as Steve lapped at his mouth again, cradled his skull with their foreheads touching so sincere, gentle rocking in and out of his body and.

There used to be days that everyone loved him, now there was just one and it was too much.

He begged.

He begged again, hold me down, speed up, harder, more, something, anything, supposed to listen when he begged

Faithfully, Steve’s hands lightened their touch, hips rolling more and more intimately, treating him sweeter and more and more beautiful and Bucky couldn’t do it like this.

Tears prickled at the corner of his eyes and shutting them wasn’t doing anything to help, Steve’s lips were on his face, breath on his ear, caress down his thighs, rumbling sobs held at the brink of his throat, more than being lifted he was being *shoved* into the clouds and Steve loved him. Love and love and
“Stop,” Bucky gasped and Steve froze so quickly tensed muscles pushed deeper bruises against skin, popping blood vessels beneath the surface that Bucky could feel with every inch of the functioning parts of his brain, hypersensitivity shooting his eyes open against the cold,

Steve’d stopped. Steve was staring at him, lifted up with eyebrows knit and that flop of sweaty blonde the way the pieces unfurled when he took those fists to punching bags instead and if only it were so simple that Bucky could be his punching bag, maybe that was why it never worked.

The sob that broke from his throat wasn’t his fault.

It was Steve’s fault, dammit.

“Bucky? Buck, hey--” The voice from every dream broke through, trickling down between black skies and blinding stars, blinking enough to recognize the room just in time to catch Steve climbing off him.

“Stop,” Bucky managed again, reflexively slamming his ankles into Steve’s spine, keeping him inside. They couldn’t break apart now, this pit in his stomach--

It might be the last time they got to be like this, Bucky would shrivel and fall if Steve left him now.

Powder-white dust, caught by the wind and dragged down down down.

“What’s wrong? What do you need? Bucky?”

There was so much concern, hurt in that distant voice.

“Stop, fuck, Steve. I don’t fucking need anything, I don’t need--”

“Buck. Buck, it’s okay. What do you want? You want me to go?”

“St-steve, fuck. I. Just...stop, I don’t. I don’t deserve--”

His wrists slammed into the mattress, pinned so hard they didn’t even bounce. His eyes shot open, visions of tents and winters swimming, fading, gray light from the window on eyes so shadowed they looked brown, none of the piercing blue nonsense from behind closed ones.

“James Buchanan Barnes--”

“My g-god if you’re gonna propose again I swear,” he managed, half cursing under his breath and he couldn’t breathe right but Steve was holding his wrists down and there was a mattress beneath him, a young god above him and there may still be clouds outside their window but he wasn’t falling yet and it was too late to climb back now.

“There’s my boy,” Steve breathed, rubbing his thumbs into Bucky’s wrists, dipping down to kiss the neck stretched gracefully over white sheets. Bucky squirmed under his attention and Steve kissed him more, thighs trembling with the effort to keep still when Buck was still all heat and pressure around him.

“C’mon,” Buck mumbled again and Steve lifted up one last time, double-checking consent because he’d sobbed to stop after all. There were tear tracks down his temples that Steve wasn’t sure he even knew were there.

“You sure?”

“Rogers.” The attempted scold was despairingly weak, completely defenseless with that dark halo
and his watering eyes, miles of naked beautiful skin, raw scars on his shoulder and warmth squeezing them tight together.

This was for his eyes only. The only person who ever got to see Buck like this, ever, and Steve could barely believe it, the wings Bucky’d painted onto his back. The trust he laid in Steve’s palms every time he let him open Buck up and join their bodies in this dance he never wanted to end.

“I love you,” Steve surrendered again and those crystal blues shut against his words like they were knives.

Was it that Buck still didn’t believe him by now or that he didn’t want it to be true? Or maybe those eyes were closed so Steve wouldn’t expect the promise back.

Buck had to love him back. Of course he did. He’d told Peggy he did then hid it to his heart so close he was just scared to say it now. He didn’t want to hurt Steve with it.

It was still about protecting him, right? Buck was shutting his eyes against Steve’s words to protect him. Too scared of hurting them both to say it aloud and maybe that was all he needed to do - show Buck he was safe, loved, tonight and then come dawn Buck could finally peel back the black and whisper those words under the golden morning sun.

Buck’s pretty lips parted in another call to make him move and Steve didn’t wait for the scolding, driving into slick, tight--

A broken sound from Bucky’s throat, back arching and fingers scrambling at Steve’s spine like he was falling. Steve scooped under tight shoulders, holding Buck secure as their bodies rocked together again.

There were lines next to Bucky’s eyes from how tight he was squeezing his eyes shut and Steve dipped down, pressed his lips to the crinkled skin, sweeping the kiss to both Bucky’s eyelids, saying with his lips what Buck wouldn’t hear aloud.

It was somewhere around the fourth soft kiss that his lips met with wet, a single pause to register the salt on his tongue, tears from whatever battle was ripping Buck apart on the inside leaking war wounds to the surface.

Kissing properly normally took too much focus when they were entwined like this but Steve didn’t care, slipping his nose down the side of Buck’s and tipping their mouths together, sliding his tongue alongside Bucky’s, tangling the taste of tears between them.

And it was like pulling the pin on a grenade, the way Buck started shaking, tightened all over and strung up on the highest of tightropes, swinging higher higher with each push of their bodies together. Hips speeding up, friction dragging aggrandized and pieces of broken souls, glass scattering away from slick skin.

Mouths just mashed together now, quick pistons in in in, deep enough to make Bucky cry out against Steve’s lips.

Rocking faster, harder, indentions in the mattress and sounds torn from them both, balance barely held by a deep blue string, oxygen cutting short.

His lungs strained for air in that distantly too-familiar and similarly strange loss of breath and Steve broke off, chest heaving as he gasped against the hard line of Bucky’s collarbone, forehead tucked against the thudding neck, pulse ricocheting through every long line of two hearts.
I’m yours.

(When it rains it pours.)

Steady hands sliding down to Bucky’s hips, holding him in place, closer to each other, oblivion, whiteout that’d leave them above clouds, watching the snow from afar for once, finally. More salt under his tongue as Steve sunk his teeth into Bucky’s neck, sucked dark into untouched skin, marks of everything Bucky was giving him because when dawn came Steve couldn’t have him forget, never again, both of them needed that proof.

The room was dark and time was moving so fast, swept up in a whirlwind of sweat and sounds and skin and the brush of metal down his spine, the clamp of ankles at the base of his back, Bucky’s head tipped back against the pillow in clinging bliss.

The trembles were violent now, throat wrecked with little sounds that wouldn’t stop, a litany of low ah ah ah ah’s that bled into Steve’s lips and matched each pant punch for punch. It burned so hot inside him he wasn’t sure he didn’t turn to flames over Bucky’s skin, stomach coiled into the tightest of knots, shaking all over as he held his only hope close and dashed together and Steve barely had the strength to lift up, eyes flickering over Bucky’s face as his back arched, right hand fumbling for a grip on Steve’s arm, chest flushed and skin glittering in gray moonlight, muscles seizing as he crashed.

Compressed and spinning on that tightrope, warm white painting their stomachs and mouth tipped open in a silent scream, taut and so stunningly beautiful Steve couldn’t believe this was his, Bucky was his, this moment, couldn’t possibly be real.

Steve’s hips pistoned and shook them both, then the space between his heart and Buck flushed warm as he still, spilling into Bucky’s body, mouths slipping together in delirious heat, swirling waves, clinging to the only thing that’d made it through ice and fire with him to reach the other side, devotion of the sweetest heartbreak, spilling a river of promises into his body and maybe, when they hit the bottom, the jump’d taken them someplace untouchable where they only lost everything to each other.

Bucky’s palm stroked the back of his head, barely, lightly smoothing down down and Steve didn’t bother staving his weight, collapsed in full on Bucky’s bare chest, throbbing heartbeat beneath his ear and hesitant fingers stroking the back of his neck.

“I love you,” Steve whispered, tightening his grip at the catch between Bucky’s ribcage, the sharp intake of breath like they were still blades. What was floating around inside that beautiful mind to make bones cave and cringe from his own? Why? Why?

He couldn’t live without Buck, how could Bucky not get that, how could he still pull away when he knew fair well the pieces of Steve he was shredding every time?

Planting a hand on Buck’s sternum, Steve pushed up, blinking through the gray light buzzing cortex, taking in the deepened dip in his chin, twisted mouth, tightened-shut eyes glittering at the corners again.

“Bucky?”

A single snifflle and Bucky blinked open his eyes, little shake of his head as he lifted up a touch to look back at Steve. “Mm?”

“Are you—”
The sudden rise of Bucky’s chest shut him up before the aggrandized sigh did, snapping his mouth shut as he watched crystal turn back to the ceiling, dull light from the window reflecting off the shining corners.

It was still settling in, everything was too sensitive right now but Bucky wasn’t shoving Steve off or rolling out of bed or bawling his eyes out so maybe they just needed to sleep a moment and everything would be so soft and sweet in the morning that they could just work it all out then, over more raspberry sherbet breakfast in bed.

Everything would be alright once they slept. After all, hadn’t the conversation started with that? How Bucky hadn’t slept in ages? Weeks, if Steve were to guess. The exhaustion straining his face was visible even through the soft endorphins glow.

“Sleep?” Steve offered, running his fingers through the smooth hair by tear-stained temples. Bucky’s gaze flickered to his for a half-millisecond, turning away again before Steve could show him all the promises he held in his soul.

The tiniest of nods and Bucky’s eyes slipped back closed before Steve could say another word, check anything else. But maybe it was for the best for once, so long as Bucky actually slept. Knowing him, he’d pretend until Steve nodded off and then he’d lay awake staring at the ceiling all maudlin and

It was Steve’s turn to see Buck asleep first. He just had to stay awake long enough--

The darkness falling was only making it harder to breathe.

Steve was passed out, carefully rolled onto the mattress with his spine to Bucky, ten minutes of internal battle before he finally placed his fingers alongside the bare ridge.

Eyes wide open.

**Full of tears and wide open.**

His chest ached, the raw open kind from crying too much. Stuttering oxygen, hitched between shut-down sobs.

At one point the edges of his vision started blurring **not tears** and Bucky shook his head, dislodging the long strands he’d forgotten about, tangling down into his eyelashes.

He’d been so sure he’d be rid of it.

All of it.

It was never gonna go away, was it?

He didn’t have the strength to shove the snakes from his face. Bucky simply closed his eyes, willed himself to stay awake this way. Couldn’t miss a single thing.

It was funny, that urge, the one that he couldn’t spend a single moment at Steve’s side not awake and aware because he’d be losing so much - that feeling was stronger tonight than it’d been for weeks past.

That pit in his stomach, the one from when Steve was coughing out a lung with pneumonia on his
deathbed, that pit that kept him awake for days on end--

this time, weeks on end

-- it clenched harder, twisted his stomach even more tonight. He couldn’t miss anything. Not one breath, all this time he’d spent making sure, just had to protect Steve one more night, had to keep him safe and save them both, better, save them both…

He fell asleep fifteen minutes after Steve did. For the first time in weeks, months, however long it’d been, Bucky wasn’t just missing something, he was missing all of it.

And funny enough?

It was the first night he’d broken the vow to watch over Steve in his sleep and it was last night he’d ever get the chance to.

~*~*~

The morning light came filtering in through the windows like a Kinkade, glowing and full instead of pale streaks and the corner of Steve's mouth twitched up as he shoved the pillow under his head a little puffier.

Just his and Buck's bedroom, all that sunrise. Warm bare feet tangled up between his own, skin-warmed metal resting against his spine. Those arms didn't need to be wrapped around him, it was more than enough just to know Buck was here, with him, sleeping and safe and warm and beautiful naked beneath their sheets--

Sleeping. Did Bucky Barnes actually get sleep for once in his goddamned life?

The curiosity overruled the peacefulness and Steve picked up his head, swiveling just enough to peer over his shoulder.

There he was, dark hair fanned out on the pillow, pouty lips slack and fingers curled protectively against Steve's spine, beautiful haunting eyes closed. Bucky was sleeping.

Steve turned back to the window, head plopping down on the pillow and now, there was a real smile on his face.

Steve’d dozed back into drifting gold at some point, because he was sleeping when Bucky woke.

Woke.

His eyes shot open, coronas instantly burning enough to make him flinch and squint.

The sunlight filtering through Steve’s hair, golden reflections bouncing over too-white sheets--

Lights *blinding*, he’d had no idea how bright they’d be. He was supposed to keep his eyes wide open, or else his arms wide open, anything open everything open, up in the clouds not letting go because below him was blackness, everything closed, and the moment his fingers loosened that bar peeled away and back down through the snow and cold he goes--

The muscles in Steve’s shoulders shifted and Bucky startled, hand retracting like fire, crystal shot wide and taut frozen, hovering, he’d forgotten he wasn’t alone because he was always alone and the moment Steve turned around and saw him he’d know, he already knew too much and if Steve rolled
over and whispered I love you one more time then Bucky’d jump out the goddamned window, the fall from that height would be less painful than the one he’d have to face by opening his mouth and he couldn’t couldn’t Steve just had to go back to sleep and Bucky’d carefully slowly roll off the other side of the bed and throw on clothes and sneak out the bedroom and slink down the hallways and slip into the shadows and out the door and down the stairs and onto the streets into the crowd through the morning bustle and out of Steve’s life forever if he’d just shift and fall back asleep, keep those damning blue eyes closed then it could all be over right now, this morning, so long as he didn’t turn around then they could avoid falling of any sort Bucky could just leave and not keep holding his breath waiting waiting waiting

“Mmm, morning,” Steve mumbled, weight shifting and mattress creaking and then he was looking at Bucky and it was

All

Over.

There must’ve been more water in his veins than blood, for his arms and legs to stiffen like this, cryofrozen lingering as he stared wide-eyed and unblinking at the sharp angles of Steve’s face and the soft smile underneath blue blue summer sky and

suddenly wrinkling brow.

“Bucky?” Are you alright?

Steve’s left hand reached for him and Bucky’s left hand coiled, plates shifting loudly and rippling up his hand wrist arm elbow shoulder down his spine and into his brain and waking him right the fuck up.

The carpet weaved peskily between the indentations of his toes, short and thankfully not as slick as the sheets, barely enough traction to get him across the room to his dresser, wood shrieking as a drawer snapped open, clothes found and unraveling, perfect balance as he slipped one foot into boxers, then pants, hands already grabbing a tshirt by the time Steve’s fingers closed around his wrists.

He’d had the sense to throw on sweats on his way over but Bucky wished he’d taken the time to get dressed entirely in uniform, red gloves and all so he couldn’t feel that damned morning-warm skin against his wrists.

“--c-cky,” drifted in hollow, echoing distantly in a faded background. Bucky’d stopped moving when Steve’s fingers closed around his wrists, head cocked as he contemplated the right twist.

The first forty escapes he ran through his head meant broken fingers for Steve and he couldn’t do that again, but forty-one was a simple enough twist and slide that’d save those artist hands from damage and the moment he located it, Bucky was back outta Steve’s grip, ten steps backwards as he threw the tshirt over his head, nearly at the door by the time it popped over the messy brown snakes around his face and the temporary lapse in sight cost him the escape, because Steve was already slamming the door - his out - shut.

Bucky stopped, staring at Steve. Spun on his heel and started for the window.

Steve’s arms caught him around the waist, dragging him backwards from behind and Bucky twisted, spinning with a shove and every other time, that’d freed him from Steve’s arms.

Apparently enough times that he expected it now, because suddenly he was back in Steve’s arms
only they were face to face and Bucky’s heart was beating so fast the corners of the room at the ceiling were starting to become despairingly sharp.

“It’s gonna hurt,” Bucky swore, low and grating and it wasn’t a threat, not at all, because he could never hurt Steve and Steve knew that. He was talking about him.

Steve knew that.

“I’m not gonna let anything hurt you Buck,” he tried, circling his arms tighter as Bucky tried to wiggle free again. The glaze in his eyes was fading though, clarity cutting through in pieces and he could see it, how much the battle was costing them both.

Another struggle and Steve let Bucky gain a bit of distance, secure at arms length so he could see that beautiful, torn face, make Bucky look him in the eye, hear every touch of sincerity and seriousness as he demanded, “Can’t you trust me to protect you?

“Not from this,” Bucky grit, yanking free. Steve didn’t bother grabbing him again, the crazed fog in his eyes was gone, he wasn’t jumping out the window anytime soon. Instead he stumbled three feet backwards and hardened the vulnerability behind crystal, glaring at Steve and lifting his chin to keep it from wobbling with tears that Steve wasn’t fool enough to miss anymore.

Bucky was the only one fool enough to pretend anymore. Not from this, he spat. This.

“And that's the problem. The one thing that you should trust me with you can’t.” Steve squared his shoulders, jaw, aware of how he had to look, the same face he’d given Fury in that cave in the ground *I didn’t know about Barnes.* None of them ever would. Maybe even Steve.

“You've never let me take care of you. You've never seen me as an equal.” Bucky’s arms crossed over his chest, jaw clicking as his eyes flickered away, something akin to guilt or murder or whatever the fuck Bucky even was anymore. It wasn’t fair, why wouldn’t he just say it? Instead, instead he got this.

“It's always ‘look out for Stevie.’” Bucky flinched as Steve threw up an arm and Steve was so beyond freaking out about that right now, not when for all he knew it was intentional, anything to get them off the subject Bucky’d been running away from since 1938.

Or 1943. That night in the bar, when he should’ve told Steve the goddamned truth.

Steve narrowed his eyes, spitting the accusation before he could soften again to hands that’d done nothing but shove him away. “You may have followed that little kid from Brooklyn, but you never let me lead you to safety.”

Defiant lifted chin, split with that dimple Steve used to tease him for before everything went to hell.

“I have no one but myself, you're never gonna get that.”

Bucky’s eyes were on his now, as stubborn and defiant as Steve used to be, as they both used to be before they’d crumbled and it was all facades now, the righteousness. There was nothing left but echoing hollow masks of what they used to be and that anger wasn’t anger.

Fire became ash.

They were dead already, entwined fingers in mortal graves so why was Bucky still hanging from the tips of the stars, burning his hands before he dare drop to the *jaws of death,* like this was still about saving Steve from himself?
“I’m here, Bucky. Never going anywhere. But you’re--” accusing point that just hardened crystal, “--still hung up on protecting me. Seeing me as less. Still. The Captain thing was always a joke to you.”

“I respect your title,” Bucky shot back and Steve could’ve laughed, if there was a bone left in his body that didn’t ache.

The fucking way Bucky looked at him. Sergeant James Barnes and his charge, Captain Rogers.

Right, yeah, respect. Bucky’d given him a lot, but never that. If he did, if he respected Steve a single ounce, he’d fucking say he loved him. Or at least respect him enough to admit he never could say it, that it was too hard or painful or whatever. Anything but hanging him from fraying black thread like this.

“I may’ve been your CO, but you never saw me as one. I was the little kid to protect, not someone you respect. Cap always sounded like a joke from your mouth.”

“Really? Does it matter to you that much?”

“You matter to me! How you feel about me! I’m not some toy soldier for you to tuck away in a drawer, I’m still a fucking person underneath the uniform, Buck.”

“You wanna talk about soldiers? I dragged you out from underneath that uniform! You were entirely lost without me, in case you forgot.”

“I’m not the one who fucking forgot.”

“Fuck you,” Bucky snapped back, bitter and sharp as the expression on Steve's face. "All I’ve done is pull your ass outta the fire.”

“You think I don’t know that? That’s what it’s fucking about! Always protecting, saving, rescuing me and you won’t let me return the favor for a moment. You never fucking have.”

“There’s --” A calculated, frustratingly controlled inhale as Bucky leaned back on his heels, stared up at the ceiling with his dark hair dangling, adams apple bobbing as the sparks in his words squandered for impatient, slow elucidance. “...nothing wrong with me.”

Like Steve was the crazy one. Right. Like Steve was the one asking too much like Steve was the one fucking everything up like it was all just Steve Steve Steve who couldn’t even say a simple thing like I love you like he was asking the fucking stars from Bucky’s sky instead of a single reassurance that it wasn’t all for fucking nothing, like this was somehow Steve’s fault, he’d spent his entire life blaming himself and he was done, he was fucking done hating himself for every time Bucky’d turned away because it wasn’t Steve’s fault.

“Right, yeah.” Steve scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief because Bucky’d always been good at evading, but this was an entirely different level, pinning this all on Steve. Making Steve think he was asking too much so he’d stop asking, anything he had to tell himself to keep Steve safe because in some twisted part of Bucky’s brain that made sense.

“Except that you can't say you love me. If I thought you honestly didn't, or didn't want to, I'd never push this on you, Bucky. But I'm not gonna let you ruin us both because you see me as some sickly kid you have to take care of.”

Buck’s eyes turned down from the ceiling to glare at him again and Steve met the challenge, a single step closer but Buck was stubborn, didn’t move an inch, not even to breathe, just glared at Steve because he couldn’t handle the truth and Steve was done letting them Not Talk About It.
He’d say it over and over and over until Bucky got it.

He finally had the words for it now, the reason why they’d fought the wars and lost each other and never said, never spoken. The reason Bucky’d broken under Hydra’s reign with a single whisper of Steve’s name but couldn’t say to Steve’s face why.

“Because you’re so scared of losing me you’re pushing me away.”

One foot in front of the other, two steps closer and they were as close now as they were that first night in the bar, except the golden sun was so much harsher now than all those soft bar lights.

“Because you’re so scared to let go and hurt me that you’re destroying yourself instead.”

All he wanted, all he wanted was for Buck to keep him and all he got was tossed aside through cobwebs of years and past heartbreak to stave the possibility of distinguishing the only flame that could light the yellow brick road of the future.

“I can’t watch you shred your heart to save mine—”

“I don’t see you as breakable anymore, Steve.” Bucky straightened, took a half-step forward of his own, lips pinched in the corners, the first sign he was getting pissed. Good. Good, better to be fucking pissed than that dead emotionless thing he’d been forcing for the past century.

It was still lies though. Bucky didn’t see him as breakable? Steve’d never forget the look of horror that’d crossed those features every time Bucky’d glanced upon the bandage wrapping his hand, snapped bones that’d proven what could happen if that control dropped for a moment, that’d proven Bucky could destroy Steve inside a single lapsed second and now he held tighter to that control than ever because

“That’s exactly how you see me.”

One cocked, pissed eyebrow, face painted into a clear yeah, you wouldn’t fuckin’ know. Why? Oh, that’s right, Bucky didn’t tell him shit.

Steve huffed, shaking his head once because right, of course Bucky was pulling that expression, that flippant nonchalance, straight-faced lies right to his face, like Steve hadn’t spent his entire life growing up beside.

“I’m not terrified of hurting you.”

It was the least convincing lie Bucky’d ever spoken aloud and that was saying a lot.

“I don’t believe that.”

“So fucking what?”

“So what? Bucky, this is our lives—”

“Second, third, fifth lives, and we haven’t gotten it right before, what makes you think this is what’s missing?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense!”

“None of this makes sense, Steve!”

“Because you won’t let it!”
“I’m not the one shoving us into boxes with labels--”

“Labels, really? Really? All I want is for you to say you love me--”

“Why? Why is that so goddamned important? Oh, wait, don’t tell me, because apparently I’ve been in love with you my entire life and I’m just too fucking scared to say it, right?”

“You’re fucking terrified. Why else would you lie to my face about how you’ve felt for the past century? I was there, the day that you almost said it, everytime you’ve almost said it and it’s always almost with us, years of silence that ended up being more important than every word--”

“According to you.”

“According to me, who’s known you my entire life.”

“Can’t know me that well, or maybe we wouldn’t still be fighting!”

“We’re fighting because you’re terri--”

“I’m not terrified of saying it!”

“Yes you are!”

“No, I’m not!”

“James Buchanan B--”

“Steven Grant Rogers, I’m not terrified of hurting you and I’m not terrified of the idea of loving you!”

The shout echoed around the room and Steve let it, both their chests expanding, heavy breathing as the words fell down down into silence, further and further until the speeding train whipped them out of sight entirely and Steve clung to the side of the train, whipping cold, hands gripping metal so tight he could feel the ice through his leather gloves, face twisted up, eyes squeezed shut in pain and a sob caught in his throat. The only thing caught, because he’d just reached for Bucky’s hand and he’d missed.

He’d missed.

“Prove it.” Voice dropped to The Challenge, I can do this all day.

Bucky’s eyebrow went up and Steve squared his jaw, glaring across the distance at his best friend. “Hit me.”

The other eyebrow went up too.

“What?”

“Prove it. Hit me.”

If Bucky was gonna be all self-assured and stubborn, rubbing that lie in Steve’s face and grinding him to the ground under his heel, Steve was going to call his fucking bluff.

Because Bucky wasn’t gonna do it.
Bucky’d never hit him, because Bucky’d never hurt him, because Bucky loved him. And standing here, sliding down the thick black cable towards a speeding train, Steve knew he wasn’t gonna do it.

They avoided the train wreck the first time, dropping down to land atop Bucky’s shallow grave, the instrument of both their deaths rushing through the ice beneath their feet and the slow motion train wreck of the past months wasn’t derailing now.

Bucky wouldn’t.

The corner of Steve’s mouth turned up, lips parting to say something smartass that he’d gotten his ass kicked for a thousand times in alleys, some smart remark that Bucky’d shake his head at and pull Steve into a hug for with that affectionate punk or some other exasperated declaration of love that was anything but I love you.

He didn’t see it coming.

Bucky didn’t wait to hear Steve’s smartass remark. Didn’t haul him in for a hug.

The metal arm hauled back.

And Bucky swung.

See, Steve knew he wouldn’t. Steve knew Bucky’d never hit him, because that’s what this was all about.

It had to be about protecting Steve. About Bucky being so scared of the strength of their love and how it could crush them both if he finally let go, surrendered.

Had to be that Bucky knew loving Steve could hurt him. That Bucky’d rather go through the hell of not being together than hurt him again.

It had to be about saving Steve. That had to be the reason.

Because then at least Bucky loved him.

But.

But the imprint of metal knuckles were smarting on his jaw. Copper, blooming inside his mouth. That wasn’t.

Bucky’d hit him. Bucky’d hurt him. Bucky’d chosen to hurt him. To prove it.

To prove.

It wasn’t about--

Steve’s jaw was on fire and Bucky was just standing there and it wasn’t about protecting Steve.

It wasn’t about anything. It was simple.

Bucky didn’t.

Bucky didn’t love him.
Bucky didn’t love him.

Bucky. Didn’t love him.

Bucky didn’t love him.

Bucky didn’t--

Steve stared at his hand. It was shaking, like the peeled-back tin of the train’s side, shaking and trembling in the cold.

Steve blinked down at his hand, watched as a single drop of blood dripped onto the back of his knuckles. Blood from his mouth.

Bucky’d just hit him.

Steve stared at the blood on his knuckles and watched his hand curl into a fist.

Always.

Every moment, every backalley bruise, every wartime worrying grasp…

Building.

Pressure, building and building over all those years,

More and more and more and.

Suspended. The edge, the lingering second at the very top of the Coney Island Cyclone. The single pause at the peak of the mountain, shoulder to shoulder and looking down at the gap - *mind the gap* - at the end of the world, the final glance before the jump - *maintenant!* - down the sliding rope to the train Bucky died on. The moment before the drop, the final peak that built for centuries and the cart was tipping, ready to fall down in the abyss and Steve’s stomach would drop and he knew he’d throw up again, like last time. Payback, right?

*Now why would I do that.*

Didn’t matter.

It was finally, breathtakingly clear, up here among the sun and the moon and the stars and the black night sky, hands curled into fists and gold shattered in his chest.

Bucky.

Bucky Barnes.

Bucky Barnes didn’t love him.

The world didn’t flicker sepia for a soldier, or red for *we did what we had to and sometimes we didn’t sleep so well* killer. The world didn’t flicker black because he didn’t get the chance to forget a moment of this, not like Bucky did.

The world went white at the edges.

The tremor shot up his knuckles like the sparks of electric fence all those decades ago, the slightest scratch across thinly skinned bones from the scruff on Bucky’s jaw. The snap, the sound, the flash in
crystal before it all shattered and Steve’s fist followed through fast enough to nearly throw his shoulder and the Winter Soldier was on the ground.

Landed on his hands and knees, cat he always was, blood dripping onto the floor beneath all that beautiful long hair and Steve swayed on his feet for two white-world moments before the metal hand curled against the hard ground and that sound, the whirr--

Snap, shook the earth beneath his feet and Steve was the one on his knees now.

With Bucky’s collar in one fist and the other swinging back again, spinning swirling enough to nearly miss but his hands were big, always had been and if there was one thing he’d always known it was exactly where Barnes was. Didn’t matter if the world was white black red or something in between, his hands always found Buck, always had.

And now it was purple, blue and mottled, blue like Bucky’s eyes flashed sometimes--

What kind of sentence was this?

The Winter Soldier wasn’t hitting him back. The metal arm was whirring, fingers wrapped around his stationary wrist but they weren’t crushing the bones, weren’t even trying to pull him off.

He wasn’t sure if it was the pullback he wasn’t feeling or the follow through, but one of them didn’t exist because it was just collide and collide and collide and he could feel every single reverberation up through his knuckles into his shoulder, neck, brainstem, behind his eyes.

It was blurry, everything was blurry behind his eyes but he could see enough, feel enough to know the hand closed around his wrist wasn’t doing the slightest thing to stop him, let alone hit back, that pretty sweet-talking mouth wasn’t even rambling off some nonsense to talk him outta whatever mess Steve’d landed them in.

So what, Bucky was better than fighting him now?

Made him believe a lie his entire life and turned it all on Steve as the mastermind in the end? Broke Steve’s heart and let him take the sword through the stomach too?

He’d had no problem breaking everything in Steve’s life from his safety to his job to his face to heart to his bones to his soul but now he was above fucking fighting back?

Steve’d been sick, for so long, and Bucky’d taken care of him. Steve didn’t get sick anymore. Bucky’d been trained to take care of him, wipe him off the board. But neither of those bruises were sinking in deep enough to stop a single thing.

Bucky hit him. He proved it, proved everything Steve’d spent a lifetime convincing himself was just. Wrong.

He’d been wrong. And now Bucky was being the saint again, thrown the single punch and withdrawn like a good soldier, turned Steve into the monster with his surrendering hands and snapping head, the blossoming blue and purple around crystal piercing eyes that kept on finding his, after every punch, each lock of their gazes together that ripped a hundred times deeper than every time their eyes had turned away, broken like shattering glass as fists slammed into sharp cheekbone, defined jawbone.

And in the end they did it all again.

So he lost it.
He. He needed this to be the reason why, that Bucky couldn't handle the idea of hurting him so he'd hid his love all those years - but if Buck could hit him, that wasn't it.

There was...nothing stopping Bucky from loving him. Just, simply. Bucky didn't.

Run til the end of his life and he'd finally caught up to Buck's footprints in the snow but they were fake, leading him to the edge of a cliff and shoving him right over to tumble down screaming this time.

Bucky didn't love him.

After all this time and all those years and every tear he'd shed and every scream from Bucky's lips tortured on Steve's behalf, in place of the super soldier Hydra couldn't find so they made their own their own that was sent to kill him and couldn't, hovered there with his metal fist glinting in the air and the wildest most terrified pain in his watering eyes, hair whipping across his face in this beautiful, stark realization of everything the bruised battered face below Bucky's hand was promising, the promise of unconditional eternal love that had Steve following him right into the dark, skipping the trip wire with fake smiles and the fear of falling apart --

Truth finally be told, Bucky never was his.

"You bastard," Steve choked, curled hand on Bucky's chest pushing him harder against the ground, fist reeling back to land in emphasis on the next half-sob,

"You promised." Bucky's jaw snapped to the side, water mixing with the bloody split on his cheekbone. His head just rolled on the carpet, straightened back right in time for the next wail to his skull.

"Promised it'd b-be us, you and me to the end--" another choked sound and salt rolled over his lips, salt instead of copper so he was crying but Steve'd swear it was blood leaking the way his insides scraped.

It was lucky he was right-handed, his wedding ring would wreak serious - more serious, anyways - damage.

Wedding ring. They were...he'd honestly believed he'd get to marry the love of his life.

He'd honestly believed that.

"You never meant it," Steve gasped, head spinning and vision blurring at the edges, hand in Bucky's collar tightening enough to bring him an inch off the ground and Bucky just let him, let him the same way he'd let Steve believed he'd loved him when he never had.

Never. All the way back, no matter how far, none of it meant that. Bucky Barnes had never--

"You never loved me." The words felt like bullets to the chest, knives to his hands, electrical fence around his boots with no one to save him from the storm this time because there they were. Aloud.

Bucky's head snapped back with that punch and Steve just reeled back again, snapping harsh and violent with every single word,

"You." Punch.

"Never." Punch.
"Loved." Punch.

"Me." Punch.

Bucky was on the ground, pinned beneath Steve's weight, beneath the wild blonde halo, disheveled enough to have a few strands strayed over his forehead, fringing on the edge of his watery, spilling pure blue eyes, twisted mouth in horror at everything Bucky'd done.

Fist raised, paused and hovering in the air as his beautiful bare chest heaved, all that strong golden muscle up to his bloody knuckles that were kinda blurry with how swollen Bucky's left eye was.

Steve'd seen this picture once. It wasn't lost on Bucky, the reverse image he'd seen in a hundred nightmares, the flashes of Steve's orange-mottled broken face beneath his hand as the helicarrier exploded around them and Bucky made the single most important decision of his life.

Because Steve'd opened his stupid stubborn mouth and that's exactly what Bucky owed him now.

What he should say:

I do.

I do love you. God, Stevie, I love you more than everything in my entire life.

I always have.

I always will.

To the end of the line.

That's what he should say. That's what his parted lips should croak out in this single moment, the second chance he had at the single most important choice in his life.

If only he had an enemy bigger than himself, he could have won.

Bucky was on the ground for once and Steve'd finally lost it, the way Bucky'd always been so scared of. Scared for Steve, not himself.

He'd die here by Steve's hand without second thought. He'd do anything. All the torture he'd known had never felt like this but Bucky'd.

Bucky'd take this. For Steve. For his boy.

"I'm not gonna stop you," Bucky said, voice shot and raspy, parted lips splitting more bits of copper over his tongue with every movement but Stevie was hovering there over him and Bucky'd kept his mouth shut since he'd learned how to speak, it was his turn to pull out the fighting words now.

"This is who you are," Bucky managed, choking a bit on the blood dripping to his throat, scratching vocal chords around it, no way to silent his soul now. "Since the first time I D-dragged you outta that alley, giving you everything's been...my life, Steve."

Steve'd looked up at him and said then finish it. Bucky'd had no idea in hell what to do with that. But he'd make it clear for Steve, as fucking clear as the ice he'd shattered through at the bottom of his first fall in frozen alabaster.
Bucky swallowed, scuffed throat and fall apart, opening his split lips to make one last reverent rasped promise.

"You've...always been my mission."

Один Два Три I can't let you go. Answer's easy and we finally got it right.

Steve stared at him, wide-eyed and shaking, shaking, small as he'd been back then and larger than life, dark blue angel dripping red, his red, and Bucky could still remember the exact rip inside his chest as Steve looked up at him and croaked, cause I'm with you--

"I'll never finish it," Bucky told him, shredded in broken glass, forties fire behind blinding stars and maybe now, he'd finally get Steve to understand. Broken and more twisted cry than etched declaration but Bucky was goddamned saying it anyways.

"To the en--"

"Get out."

The voice that interrupted him was more hoarse than his was, gravel buried in skinned knees bloody noses black eyes.

Bucky blinked up at him and Steve's grip on his tshirt vanished, dropping him the last inch to the ground, head slamming but he couldn't stop staring at Steve.

Steve, who was choking on tears and muted sobs, bloody knuckles pressed to his mouth, head turned and eyes averted and throat burnt.

"Just go," he rasped again, repeat flooded with so much emotion Bucky couldn't even blink. "Get outta here."

And that was it.

Back to the start, Steve's arm waving across the fiery gap between them, barely together for a moment before the world lifted a barrier of flames and broken metal, determination between knit eyebrows, strong despairing serious shout,

"Just go! Get outta here!"

Prove it.

He had, from the glinting chain around his neck to the death grip on the banister as he shouted back the one thing that mattered most, above all of it, above what he'd shouted to Peggy, above what he'd whispered to the mirror yesterday to make him cry, above the broken promises and the falling because.

Because that was his best friend.

No, not without you.

Bucky choked on a mutilated cough and Steve deflated, falling off to one side still folded on his knees, hand properly covering his mouth now as the tears puddled along his thumb, seeped between his fingers the same way the broken sobbing noises did.

Bucky blinked at the ceiling and noted distantly that he was dizzy enough to make the ground feel like it was tipping, everything was tipping and he'd never held tight enough not to slide right off.
He'd always known one day Steve would leap into the abyss, drag them both to the edge when Bucky was so goddamned terrified of heights--

He'd promised the jump but they'd never landed. Broken ankles and a hundred feet further apart because cold really couldn't break a landing, just ask his bloody detached arm.

Sweetness turned to sorrow and then came the bitterness, blessed sadness tangling, dumped on the floor at newspapers shoes gone bare feet, dirty soles from pitch black streets and fading crooked smiles as he cleaned out each of Steve's petulant wounds, two kids weren't alright and sometime between cleaning the cuts on Steve's white cheekbones and making them,

Bucky'd realized there were battles he did not get to fight for him.

The sunrise had been a ruse. It was nearing storm season in Brooklyn and sometime between the blinding lights when he'd first opened his eyes to the crash of the door as it swung open on its hinges and emptied him onto the sidewalk, the sun had disappeared.

Looming storm clouds in its place and the pavement was already slick, tinted green by the industrial lights flickering by the docks behind their apartment building, reflecting in the puddles stretched across the ground, shadowing purple and black clouds that'd gathered above.

The streets looked like a goddamned ghost town. The Brooklyn Bridge Park and John Street bridge were both eerily empty - sudden storms and dropping temperatures did that to the tourists. They were just fading outta tourist season, august skies dropping for oncoming september chill.

A particularly cold burst of wind whipped at his face and Bucky ducked his head down, cursing the weather and the world in general. He didn't have a collar to hide his face in, or a black plastic mask for that matter.

He’d left the apartment barren, not a single thing to hold.

But his hands weren’t the emptiest.

Bucky’s heart was.

The sky thundered again, world already dark from the black clouds overhead. As the crashing grumble faded, a distant thudding overtook the silence. Instinctive curiosity made him pause at the edge of the apartment building, scanning the alley distractedly and straining to hear the sound under the wind.

A muffled thump, too familiar scuffling boots and the door he’d fallen out of burst open behind him. That was the point Bucky stopped listening. He didn't need to hear anymore, although he doubted he'd be able to over the pounding of his heart in his ears. *Steve.*

He didn't have time to register the flash of lightning in the sky or the anger that should be consuming him because Steve was such a fucking idiot for chasing him down like this. The only thing running through Bucky was fear, pure unadulterated fear for Steve and why in the world would he do this to himself after everything Bucky’d done to try to prevent it and god, oh god, he couldn't take another beating when his chest was still fucked up and he wouldn't be able to shield himself again he was done, destroyed, didn’t have the strength for one more ounce of a lie and *Steve.*
Feet pounding the slick pavement and Bucky couldn’t bring himself to move, to duck into the shadows of the alley because Steve’d always find him anyways.

Cautiousness and protection from the cold be damned. He was bleeding and already dead, it couldn’t get any worse but he should be running, because it could get worse for Steve. He’d wrecked everything to save Stevie and honestly?

He didn’t have it in him to pick himself up and walk away again. That last act, shoving himself up and stumbling around Steve’s lifeless soul to fall down to the streets outside their windows, that was the last reserve of energy he had to call on.

If Steve told him to go again, Bucky couldn’t. He was too weak. Viciously selfish. He’d damn them both and stay before he managed to rip himself from Steve’s arms again.

If only Steve would just turn around, go back inside, save himself from this storm maybe they’d come out the other end without coughing bloody to their deathbeds in a week.

Flash of too-familiar panicked anger, hands coiled into tight, warped fists, grabbing Bucky’s shoulder and spinning him around so fast they both skid on the slick ground. Steve. The long clotted eyelashes and soft fucked-up hair and strong, trembling jaw didn’t spare the energy to yell, he was too pissed. Scared. They were kinda the same thing lately, weren't they?

On the inside Bucky was struggling to stand, wishing Steve would crowd him, haul up the frail body with hands that were shaking too.

“Steve. Steve, god, fuck, what were you doing out here, you knew it was gonna storm you fucking dimwit, are you okay? Steve? Stevie, look at me. Are you okay?”

His eye was swollen and there was blood dripping down his cheek and the bruises on his jaw probably made him look like hell but Steve was staring at him like Bucky was still the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

“Stevie,” Bucky cracked, and he couldn’t think of a single other thing to say but it didn’t matter, his best friend took the final step between them, hands framing Bucky’s face - hard and solid on the right side, soft and so so careful on the left side bruises - and pulled him in.

A sting of pain shot through his face as their lips pressed together, split reopening under Steve’s touch and seeping copper into both their mouths but it didn’t stop Steve from kissing him, tongue darting out to carefully slide over the raw bloody mark, apologetic but not soothing, nothing could soothe the superficial wounds when they’d split his soul a lot deeper than his lip.

And the damage to his soul couldn’t be any worse at this point.

So Bucky kept his eyes shut, wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist, and let Steve kiss him here underneath the storm clouds on a dark Brooklyn street.

Steve’s hands found their way down to his shoulders, gathered Bucky closer. The quiet pained sound at the pressed bruise on Bucky’s chest was lost between their sweeping lips and it was only the familiar smell, taste, sense of Steve that held the wave of nausea at bay.

He should break off. Push Steve away. Stop kissing him back so desperately, stop the chills down his spine every time his bottom lip tugged and they broke to crash together again. They shouldn’t do this. Not if Steve wanted him gone.

As much as he didn’t wanna hurt Steve, they had to go. It’d be a hell of a lot worse if they didn’t get
But Steve held all that was left of Bucky’s dead heart in his hands, letting Bucky kiss him harder, deeper, leaning his weight on Bucky’s supporting hands and. That scared him more than the frightened curl of Steve's fingers in the back of Bucky's hair.

He’d been trained in detecting every environmental change possible. When the air suddenly got heavy around them, a thousand alarm bells sounded in some distant part of his mind he’d never been able to untrain. He could practically hear it, the impending storm in the air. The quivering tension around them, the wind whipping at their bodies as they kissed so desperately like this could fix a single thing.

They still had too far, there was too much space between them and the river home, let alone the white gates Steve deserved to live behind.

The storm was coming for them. It was coming to take them both. Artist hands slid back to Bucky’s jaw, pulling him ever closer and Bucky made a pained sound, breaking off with a gasp.

"Sorry, sorry." Steve muttered helplessly, fingers flitting over the bruises with that awful look in his eyes, too close to look at and not drown.

"'S fine," he managed, eyes dropping from that heavy heavy sorrow. It hurt, but. It was the right thing, putting it all in the rearview. The words outta his mouth weren’t--

Just weren’t.

When he glanced back up, Steve was still looking at him, blinking against the wind with watering eyes and Bucky wanted to tell him to stop, to cover his eyes or something because there was that one year the wind had gotten so bitter that Steve's eyes had watered over and it'd been so cold the tears froze and Bucky'd been terrified Steve was going to get frostbite and permanently lose his eyes like the kid three blocks over. He'd breathed warm air over the pretty blue, lighting up one of their precious rare matches and holding it close to Steve's face, apologizing profusely and holding Steve's head still so he didn't get burnt while Bucky warmed up his skin.

At the time, Steve’s vision was too blurred and fucked up to see the burns Bucky got on his fingers from that match and that was always the way it’d been, Bucky burning his hands from matches and electric fences and holding brilliant blinding stars that couldn’t stay in black skies forever.

The exact temperature was iffy, but he’d bet it was somewhere in the high fifties or low sixties. Cold for the end of August, but the rain’d be colder. Nowhere near cold or bitter enough to be snow or ice but the crossfire would only drag the hardest part out broken worse in the fear.

If they could just get inside fast enough --

The rain poured down right as their eyes met again. One moment it was all crescendo, leading up to the big explosion and then the electricity in the air lit off and buckets opened above their heads. Buckets and buckets, once the coldest thing he’d ever felt a mere joke by comparison.

Once, a long time ago, another mouth of an alley on another Brooklyn street, another thunderstorm and the first time Steve’d said I love you without those words.

I had you. Til death.

So that made this death, then. That made this the end. Is that what this was? The end?
How could it be this? This fight, out of all their fights. Those three words out of everything they’d ever said.

Bucky curled his hand in the back of Steve’s shirt, blinking through the wet droplets battering the top of his head, stinging his cuts, drenching his hair heavy and dripping off Steve’s beautiful long long eyelashes and opened his mouth.

“You know outta everything,” Bucky started quietly, swallowing blood spit salt rain, trying to cut down on tears, shakiness in his voice. Steve’s thumb slid along his jaw and Bucky looked down the hand dangling by Steve’s side, the reflection catching in the dull light. Diamonds were waterproof but they weren’t. The sharpie around his finger wasn’t. “All the...horror, and heartbreak we’ve been though? I never pictured it’d be...this that broke us.”

Steve’s other thumb spun at the ring subconsciously and Bucky tore his eyes away. Glanced back up at blue because he didn’t know how many more times he’d get to see them and that color was the only thing that’d never changed in his long long life.

There was the saddest of smiles on Steve’s face, this soft quiet knowing curve that wasn’t really a smile at all, just curved up lips that Bucky knew too well, it was his smile first. The way he looked at his precious sweet broken Steve as he picked him off the dirty ground in the back of alleys knowing that tomorrow, he’d be on his way for England and he wouldn’t be there to brush off scraped knees.

They’d survived everything. Why this?

“This is the most important part, Bucky. What else was it all for? After all that, out of everything - to imagine it amounted to nothing, it was all for nothing--” Steve sucked in a breath and Bucky tipped his chin up, studied that human, beautiful, broken face. The slope of his mouth, lips parting around the words he’d never never wanted to make Steve say. “That the one person that was always there, even when I had nothing, even when he thought he was nothing without me - that one person doesn’t love me back.”

Steve’s shoulders lifted, head tipping in a teary shrug and Bucky couldn’t stop searching his face, memorizing every single line and curve and tiny imperfection because it just might all be dead and gone and past and of course he loved Steve, more than he could ever imagine, more than Steve could ever ever understand.

But come next morning light, he’d be safe and sound.

The war outside their window was always raging on and this was the only way he had left.

That awful learned smile curved a little higher, callused palm warm on Bucky’s cheek like the summer sun and all he wanted to do was close his eyes and lean into Steve’s hand and out of the freezing rain but the droplets were still pattering their noses, shoulders, weighing down further further

Even when I had nothing I had Bucky and that one person doesn’t love me back.

“That’s the only thing that could’ve broken us.”

Bucky bit his lip, eyes cutting away again as he nodded. He supposed it was. Nothing else could come between them but each other, right? They fought the entire world and won but when it came to each other.

“I understand,” Bucky forced himself to say, knowing the words were supposed to go with a step backwards. But he couldn’t pull off that part. Couldn’t manage being the one to do that.
Steve’s palm fell from his cheek, collarbone to shoulder, sliding down down metal, lighting up an epiphany of sensors from the edge of his star to his elbow to his wrist to his fingers, hands entwining automatically.

One last time.

The rain pattered down, wetting Steve’s hair into his old bangs again, running in rivets down their wrists and trying to seep between their fingers. But nothing could get between their hands. Nothing but them.

Steve was waiting for Bucky to drop his hand. He was waiting, waiting to hear the metal shift and whirr as the plates retracted and Bucky pulled back.

Bucky couldn’t.

As much as Steve wanted him to be the one walking away, to stare numbly at Bucky’s retreating back the same way he had the night Bucky shipped out, hands shoved in pockets as he waiting for Bucky to turn around and salute --

He would, too, he would turn around and salute Steve. If it were physically possible for him to let go Steve’s hand. But he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t.

He couldn’t carry this love anymore, but he’d never had it in him to end it. He’d end himself before he’d walk away from Steve. Everytime he’d ever walked away from Steve it was for Steve, to save him or protect him, or because Steve’d told him to. Just go. Get outta here.

He’d never had the power to end this and that wasn’t changing today. And he could pinpoint the exact moment Steve realized that.

Not all of it, but blue eyes went wide, lips parting a touch in surprise as he realized Bucky wasn’t gonna be the one to walk away. He couldn’t. He didn’t know how. If he did, he’d’ve done it a long time ago and spared them a lifetime of this hell.

But it was fine.

Steve knew how.

So it’d have to be Steve who walked away. And Bucky knew he could.

He was always the stronger one.

His best friend squeezed his hand, looking down at him with this searching, desperate look and Bucky could do nothing but look back. Black banners raised, their hands should just drift apart at the fingertips, the reverse of how it all began as they slipped out of each others lives in the same crash that’d brought them together.

It’d been so long. So long.

Bucky could feel it, could already feel it ripping open his chest, the absence, that gutted hole that made his stomach drop, that vacant pit of what it meant for Steve to be gone, the empty terrifying bleakness of the suddenly very real possibility of never seeing Steve again.

The idea that this could be the very end, the one they’d always promised they’d stick around till, it was suddenly making it very hard to breathe.
That void, the black void of a cold cold future he couldn’t even imagine living on the same world as Steve Rogers and not being right here, in his life, to never hear his laugh again--

Oh god. God, no, he’d already missed Steve’s last laugh and Bucky couldn’t even remember when it was. He didn’t know. Steve couldn’t go he couldn’t go, just one last laugh, lord please--

Steve’s grip on his hand loosened. It all flashed before his eyes, something unfathomable suddenly ripped out of his chest as he felt it, for real, the deep and honest future of Steve Rogers fading away from him.

Steve’s grip on his hand loosened and Bucky suddenly tightened his fingers so fast there was a chance he snapped bone and broke Steve’s hand again but right now he didn’t care, he honestly didn’t care, it seemed so small in the face of what was breaking inside him and Stevie couldn’t leave, he couldn’t leave no no.

“Please don’t make me do this,” Steve breathed.

Bucky bit back a sob.

(And stopped breathing.)

Those clinically-perfect lungs sucked in, stole the oxygen right out of Bucky’s lungs. Never to be returned.

That strong optimistic heart steeled itself, shoulders straightening. A captain’s stance. Hell, now they might as well be shaking hands across a battlefield.

A battle nobody won in the worst war he’d fought in his lifetime.

Steve sucked in a breath, steeled himself, and dropped Bucky’s hand.

Bucky’s hand fell to his side and the distance it took to get there was a whole lifetime too.

They said goodbye in the pouring rain. And I remember.

Everything Bucky’d never said, the most important thing he’d never said.

All he wanted to do was scream for Steve to stay. But Steve turned around, and Steve walked away. Bucky stood there in the pouring rain wondering distantly if some higher power was cruel enough to make him come down with pneumonia for this.

But no, they both had perfect immune systems. Perfect everything.

Steve was fading into the Brooklyn streets and this was his last chance, to lift his voice and shout something other than let’s hear it for Captain America.

His whole life waiting for the right time to tell Steve how he felt and it never came. Here he was, without Steve, lips parted around the scream don’t let me go.

The silent scream. He couldn’t. His throat knew better, it wouldn’t let him. So close to giving it up but instead, Bucky broke down in silence and watched Steve walk away. A sparking catalyst and burning fire, there was no way they wouldn’t get burnt.

Burned to ashes, just like that photograph. Like all their photographs.

The rain pattered on his skin and at some point, Bucky stopped feeling it.
They’d sung ‘till then, whispered ‘till death.

Promised to the end of the line.

Steve was right, the line ended the same way it began, in some alley in Brooklyn.

And once, after that first time they’d almost kissed, Bucky’s sworn he’d stay until the stars fell from the sky.

Well. They were falling now.

The one thing that mattered most he couldn't fight for hard enough.

One last moment, before the black, his heart looked back. Overlayed on rainy streets, dark alleys, an image, the golden flashback of scene from another life.

The last look Steve’d just given him, as his fingers uncurled from the fist they’d knotted with Bucky’s.

The last look Bucky’d given him back.

It was the same way they’d always looked at each other. The same look he’d given Steve that night on the barstools, under all the layers of youth and innocence.

"How bout you? You ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death?" Bucky snorted. The emphasis he put on Captain America, it was the same way Bucky’d shouted it earlier. What he’d meant when their eyes had locked after. Yeah, "Captain America". You're an idiot but I still love you.

But it was easier not to look at Steve now than he thought it'd be. Because as much as they were joking as always, the weight in Steve's voice wasn't messing around. This was the moment Bucky’d been waiting for. Cringing, preparing for. Steve was asking him to fight, asking Bucky to stay with him and try to win this bloody hell of a war.

He stared at his glass for a moment. He could tell Steve no. He could. If he was an entirely different person, maybe. If he'd been born with immunity to pretty blue eyes and soft blonde hair and quick shy smiles instead of a propensity to melt at a flash of any of those things. Let alone all of them at once, aimed in Bucky's direction. He couldn't actually tell Steve no.

Captain America, though...

"Hell no," Bucky said, a ghost of a smile. He had to lay this whole Steve vs Captain America shit to rest right now. If Bucky was doing this, if he was falling back into the fight, Stevie had to know where Bucky stood. Aka he wasn't blinded by the sequins of Steve's new tights. Probably the only person left on earth who didn't see Captain America when they looked at the tall handsome man with the shield. He never would. Bucky'd always see behind the shield. The only one.

Steve's eyes were on him, maybe concerned. Maybe waiting for Bucky to tell him that he couldn't do this, that he had to go back home to Brooklyn because they'd poisoned the blood in his veins and
destroyed the very core of him. Bucky wasn't going to say any of that out loud, but he did kinda appreciate Steve's patient silence. That was something Steve was always better at than him.

Was there anything Steve wasn't better at than him? Killing people, so far. If only Bucky could keep it that way.

"That little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb not to run away from a fight..." Bucky turned his head, gaze catching on Steve's waiting one. It was probably obvious as hell, but for just a second Bucky decided he didn't care how it looked. Some heart-eyed fool, sitting here fawning over Steve. Well, he wasn't really fawning. Just...affectionately gazing.

"I'm following him."

Steve smiled, the abashed-holdingback one. Head ducked, emotions tumultuous at the edges of his mouth. Probably relief, knowing there was somebody out there who saw more than the brave soldier, this dramatic symbol. Which Steve was, but he was a hellofalot more than that too. And they both knew it.

And if they could go back, if they had time for that.

Would it change anything?

If they were placed in that moment, those bodies, those some disbelieving desperate glances and broken shallow smiles--

It hadn't changed one bit. Because there, was Steve. Looking at Bucky like he couldn't believe he was real. That this couldn't possibly be real.

Wasn't that the same way Steve looked at him now?

And running through his head in that moment, as Steve looked down abashedly at the polished bar, was that same thought, the same one from all along. Steve sat there thinking how Bucky didn't - couldn't - possibly love him that much.

How Bucky couldn't love him.

And then Bucky, looking at Steve under those dim golden lights after being strapped down with leather and put through hell and suddenly given everything he'd ever dreamed of. Bucky looked at Steve and waited for him to fade to nothing. *Nothing.*

And running through his head in that moment, eyes flitting over Steve’s features as he looked down with that tiny smile, unbelievable and beautiful, the same man he’d been fighting this war for, was that same thought, the same one from all along. Bucky sat there thinking how goddamn terrified he was to love that boy.

How goddamned terrified he was,

of how much he did.
haha fuck.

that took forever to write and hopefully, you’ll understand why.

This isn’t the ending, we’ve got….quite a few more chapters. And a lot happens in each of them, so. Hang in there with me guys, college makes me more busy than I ever thought possible to be.

But I’ll finish this.

And the ending man - it’s big. This whole thing has gotten so broad and deep and it’s nowhere near done yet.

I mean. I could end it there…no, no, I’m just kidding. I would never do that. I’ve got plans man. Sorry for the mini heart attack. And the general pain of that whole…thing.

I love you all.

Leave me comments come yell and cry at me. Fuck.

xx

(Ready to Run - One Direction)
(Irresistible - Fall Out Boy)
(Eavesdrop - Civil Wars  {for the post-painting scene})
(Unfinished Business - Mumford and Sons  {this fits scarly well I found it after I wrote this and I was like AHHH})
(Samson - Regina Spektor)
(No Place Like Home - Marianas Trench)
Hello again everyone welcome to the Spiral of Pain

Warnings: death (by homicide), near-death, extreme bloody gruesome torture-esque scene, explosions, overexhaustion resulting in delirium, fuckedup dreams, accidental almost-suicide, not-super-intentional self-harm (by punching things mostly), identity crisis, flashback to homicide of adolescents, and nightmares of drowning

It's all rather fucked-up I'm sorry but there's still! Lots of plot!! And the next chapter won't have *anything* bloody or death-related, I promise. Maybe, like, a papercut. At most.

Although this chapter is not a papercut, this is like. bullets, guys. Proceed with caution.

(There's a quote in here, inspiration from this post.)

On the bright side!!! There's a shitton of music in this chapter. Like, a lot, the whole thing is basically one long playlist OH and there's also another mixtape playlist from Tony too. I recommend clicking links, and enjoy!!

Much Love to you all and I am Sorry in advance.

xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“You are so brave and quiet I forget you are suffering.”
— Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms*

The soft creeeak of wood.

Steady wood, softened from use, strong-flat against spinal bones.

Warmed from the burning pulse of the sun.

Drifting, brilliant blue arching from every corner of sight.

Gentle rocking, rustling wind, breaking waves.

Murmur of invisible voices, the distant sting of salt in the air.

The only warm thing he’d felt in months.

Lying there.

Staring up at the treacherous sky

*maybe I am worth the fight*

tears gathering in his throat instead of his eyes.

It was a feeling, more than anything, this overwhelming feeling of being unable to swallow for the wall in his chest, neck.

But if he held his breath and stared at the sky and let the waves rock the boat, it was fine.

*Yet all along, I knew we’d be fine.*

If you’ll be my boat, I’ll be your sea.

*I live to make you free.*

I live,

to make you free.

I live.

Steve stared up at the sky and knew that somehow, that wasn’t quite right.

But there wasn’t right. Not right now, just hadta stop thinking. For one moment, stop thinking. Close his eyes, let the sunlight heat up crackled bones of too many long winters. Especially this last one, all those European snowy forests.

It was the tenth of March, he was allowed to be warm.

It wasn’t the weather though, not the sun on his skin. Instead, the body beside him, the one he could feel without quite touching. So close, all he needed to do was reach out his fingers and they’d be entwining with--
It was his birthday, y’know.

The warm lilt of that familiar voice, the full-shaped words in beautiful Brooklyn twang. Some story, the boys had pushed for some story and Steve’d started out but Bucky’d snatched it right from him with a laugh,

“I’m a better story teller anyways. See, how it actually went is that early that day, Steve had gone out to the docks I was working...”

And of course, he was right. Bucky was the stuff of stories, not Steve. So Steve closed his eyes, let Bucky’s words wash over him like the waves washed against the sides of their boat. The story didn’t matter, syllables consonants sounds. Just Bucky’s voice, the gentle tune of whatever he was saying, it was enough.

Steve closed his eyes against the blue blue sky but he could still see it, somehow, like maybe his eyes were closed all along.

>You can set sail for the west if you want to, over the horizon. Til I can’t even see you.

Til--

He was turning twenty-six. Twenty-six, that felt so…so old. So much longer than the boy laying beside him now, face surely all lit up as he told the blue sky and the lying boys the story of that one birthday, back at the docks.

Bucky was so young, so warm and beautiful. Twenty-six felt false. That part of Steve’d wondered if he’d live to see the day Bucky was closer to thirty than twenty. And here he still was, twenty-four in the middle of a war but they were both still here.

For some reason he couldn’t turn his head, couldn’t see if Bucky was actually there behind him, but that warmth radiating on the back of his hand, it had to be Bucky’s. Earlier, Steve’d glanced over at him, seen that profile staring at the sky and had the most ridiculous urge to reach out,

Bump his hand against the back of Buck’s. It’d only be another few inches, but he’d refrained.

Buck was in the middle of driftin’a story, Steve could get away with it. He really shouldn’t, not when it wasn’t just the two of’em anymore.

Wasn’t it?

He couldn’t hear anyone else’s breathing. They were...he remembered, it was all of them, they were all on this boat, right?

And all of a sudden Bucky’s voice sounded very far away.

No. No no, that wasn’t right.

Steve’s throat closed up, drying out before he could part his lips in a call.

He couldn’t hear Bucky’s voice anymore.

He couldn’t hear Bucky.

Suddenly the only thing that mattered was reaching out, grabbing that hand beside his before it fell away from him forever.
His hand was rock, stone, vibranium and it wouldn’t move, he couldn’t lift--

Steve wrenched his arm away from the deck of the boat, lunging for the hand that was right there, right there, only there was nothing and suddenly it wasn’t just blue sky, there was the peeling-white paint on the planks of the boat and the waves on the sides were splashing up so high, jolting the boat sideways with a gust of wind and a desperate shove.

“Bucky!” Steve shouted, whipping his head around for Buck, Dugan, anyone, but there was no one on the boat but him and

And there were red leather boots on his feet. Why was he in his costume boots? Engaged quad, only his boot wasn’t lifting and it was nailed to the boat, his boots were nailed to the boat and the waves were rocking it harder, rougher, faster now, splashing freezing droplets of ice over the side to patter his back, his arm, and where was Bucky?

The water started leaking through the cracks the same time Steve started thrashing. Or maybe one was because of the other, he never knew how to know.

Waves flooded in, ice cold waves and the boat was going down, he was going under. Trickling cold between fingers breaking into a splash, water rushing his wrists, legs, waist, chest, freezing every muscle and bone on the way and Steve took one last gasp of blue sky, a final choked shout

"Buh--"

Icy cold rushed into his mouth, eyes, muffling the word into nothing beneath the waves and he was getting dragged down, down, more cold cold pressure shoving over his head, sinking through the pieces of wood and ice, freezing soaked clothes stuck blinding-tight to his skin, seeping in through his pores and battering against his choking throat, dragging down down down.

Watery vision, splotchy and tumultuous, white bubbles and salt stronger than tears, so much salt flooding his mouth, nose, choking on the wet trying to force into weak lungs.

A flash, broken glass and flickering plane parts, the crushing rush tsunami vibrating sparks and blood from the cuts on his arms, face, stinging to hell in the freezing cold and the bitter salt and he couldn’t breathe.

Water and chunks of ice flooded into his throat and Steve choked on reflex, his lungs seizing heart pounding throat convulsing. It burned worse than fire, worse than the cold numbing tingling of his fingers and hands and feet. His lungs filled with water and his eyes spilled over with tears of pain that the cold water took away, sucked for their own. No one can see you cry under ocean waves.

His lungs protested and his cells fought and Steve didn't wanna be a coward, didn't wanna make this his way out, but he couldn't keep trying to survive without Bucky. He wasn't Steve Rogers without Bucky and he didn't wanna see the man he would turn into in that absence.

Maybe it was selfish. Maybe it was the most selfish thing Steve had ever done but he couldn't find the willpower to pull himself outta the plane.

Bucky, he mouthed into the water, vocal cords too flooded to sound.

The water pulled and tugged at him and the plane creaked around him as it settled a few feet deeper in the ice and Steve couldn't stop crying because he'd never been so cold and so alone.

If Bucky loved him, why'd he leave? Why did he have to die? Why wasn't Steve allowed to join him?
Last time--

Last time, the last thought he’d had before it all went black,

_I’m sorry I never told you I love you, Bucky._

Steve thrashed in the water, darkness edging at the corners of his eyes, and that wasn’t the last thing in his head this time.

He’d pass out any moment, could feel it, everything from the nails in his boots that weren’t boots anymore, dark red tentacles dragging him deeper and he couldn’t fight it anymore he just wanted it all to be over because drowning was the worst nightmare that’d ever haunted him besides those crystal eyes, glittering like the surface of the water and salvation so far away--

Once more, just enough time for one last thought and it wasn’t the one he had last time.

It’d been a long time since the last time he’d drowned and that long long time had ruined everything.

Steve’s chest was being torn in half with the pressure but it was empty anyways, because Bucky was gone and Bucky was gone and the last thing he had time to think wasn’t the apology he made last time at all.

This time.

_I’m so goddamned sorry I told you I love you, Bucky._

Nothing but water for as far as he could see, empty blue.

The flashing sun distant on the surface of the Potomac as he sank sank sank, falling down down down,

pieces of helicarrier diving into the water beside him, a trail of bubbles behind them, bubbles of oxygen that couldn’t save him now, nothing could save him now--

A glint of metal.

A glint of metal, out of the blue, then fingers were reaching for him, a metal hand uncurling and Bucky. Bucky came back for him.

Steve surged against the waves, reaching desperately for the outstretched hand because if he couldn’t grab it this time there would never be another there would never be another and it was so so far but--

_Bucky! Hold on!_

Their fingers locked.

The metal plates shifted, compressing, squeezing his fingers tight, interlocked the way they were supposed to be, metal cold and the most comforting thing he’d touched in decades, silver pieces shifting under his touch and over his skin--

On his skin. Folding from the hand he was holding to his own, plates locking into place over his skin and that didn’t make any sense at all, why was the metal coating _his_ hands--
Hand, wrist, arm, it was all the way on his arm and Steve’s left shoulder was suddenly aching, burning like someone was rubbing salt in all the cuts from that shattered plane, boat, train...

a strand of black hair drifting in his peripherals, long and dark and too close to be attached to Bucky’s skull, what the fu

Chest damn near exploding with the need to breathe, but it wasn’t water anymore. He wasn’t in water anymore. Gag, choke, oxygen.

He must’ve been shoved above surface somehow, Bucky must’ve dragged him out only it’d skipped that part.

All he knew was that he was looking down at the ocean where he’d just been drowning and he wasn’t reaching up helplessly for the glittering sky, sinking down down down.

Bucky was.

Steve screamed but nothing was getting him any closer to the surface of the water, he could run swim dive but he couldn’t move and Bucky was sinking, drowning, the place he’d just been, replaced Steve’s dying body for his own and Steve was saved but Steve was emptied out, everything gold drained the moment their fingers weren’t locked anymore and.

His hand wasn’t metal anymore, Bucky’d transferred all of that pain and death and taken it right off of Steve’s shoulders and he could scream all he wanted but the world had rolled over and flipped their places and Steve didn’t get to be Atlas when Bucky was drowning for him.

“Rogers!”

“BUCKY!!” Steve screamed again, shooting awake and upright, arms flailing and it was only Sam’s reflexes that had him ducking in time to avoid getting smacked across the room.

Heaving chest, blurry room coming shakily into focus as Steve clutched empty sheets in his fists and blinked at the stark walls.

White. A sense of encompassing, piercingly-bright white. Just like the beginning, all over again. Could only process the too-clean color above, around him.

Purged, only it wasn’t rebirth because this death, he couldn’t come back from. The loneliness, the foreignness of a world he had to learn all over again, the awful unfamiliarness.

There was no baseball game playing from a quiet radio now.

Didn’t stop the flashing memory of Bucky’s smile suddenly on the edge of everything.

Steve swung his legs off the side of the bed, narrowly avoiding running into Sam but Steve wasn’t ready yet, he’d woken screaming and his heart was beating too fast and his face was cold and this wasn’t how it was going to be, he needed a moment to let it all sink in again.

Hands on the sink, closed door between him and the world and nothing was better. Every glance in the mirror flickered with ghosts, with his arms wrapping around Bucky’s stomach from behind, shower-heat fogging the corners of the mirror as Bucky leaned back against his bare chest, beautiful eyes drifting closed as he tipped his pretty face against Steve’s chin--

Splash of warm water, calculated breaths and if he could just flush it all away, the pain, then he would but that’d be cutting out his own chest and the only thing he could really do was shove it
down, down down down until there was nothing but an empty stare looking back at him in the glass
now, water sliding down his temple like blood, white towel scratching layers off skin like peeling
corpses.

“Sorry for the noise.” Steve pulled open the bathroom door, drying his hands a final time on the
towel, stepping into Sam’s apartment with the same careful expression and white tank top he’d worn
the first time he’d been at Sam’s place. Although this was technically Tony’s place, and Sam’s floor,
but.

Steve couldn’t even pretend he could live in the Brooklyn apartment. He’d asked Sam to move in
there, in case Bucky came back in the middle of the night.

“You know what, I think it’s a good idea if I stay here at the tower with you. Could we send Clint?”
A clap to the shoulder. “He and Bucky do get along better.”

Steve had nodded. Clint had dropped everything and moved into the Brooklyn apartment. Steve’d
gone with him, the first day, to show him where everything was and grab a few of his things.

Really, though, he had to see if there was a trace, any trace that Bucky’d come back--

Clint had dropped his bags on the couch, looked around with that approving glint and made the
simplest of comments, glancing at the pillows on the floor and joked if there were any safe places to
sit?

Steve wilted. The pillows weren’t there for that reason, there were pillows knocked off the couch
because Steve spent so much time on the fucking couch when they were fighting he figured he might
as well be comfortable. Especially after Bucky smashed his radio. The kitchen table was a hell of a
lot less enticing than losing himself in couch cushions. Only not actual cushions, because even those
reminded him of Bucky.

So it was pillows. Not like it’d helped.

But Clint moved in. Steve moved into Sam’s floor of the tower and Sam was at his side nearly 24/7
and he knew Tony was monitoring his vitals through Jarvis and he couldn’t bring himself to tell
either of them to stop.

 Couldn’t bring himself to say much at all.

Sam looked up sharply at Steve’s words.

“Sorry for the noise,” towel tossed back onto the counter, easy saunter back into the room. “You
know you don’t have to come in here every morning.”

“It’s either that or you wake the tower,” Sam came back with that touch of a smile, but neither of
them meant it and Steve didn’t bother faking back.

“You making breakfast?” He asked instead, pulling open a drawer to find a shirt appropriate to run
in.

“If you’ll eat that sort’a thing.”

Steve pulled a light-blue size-small shirt outta the drawer and ignored the way his stomach dropped
at the thought of wearing clothes this tight again.

“I’ll eat,” He replied shortly, and Sam was smart enough to know by now that there wasn’t anything
else coming outta that conversation.

He left, pausing in the door as always, but then the bedroom was back to alone and quiet and Steve rather preferred it that way. Dark would be nice too. Sam always turned on the lights when he came in, but he was gone now.

Six steps to the door, carefully quietly closed, and a single loud click as he flicked off the lights.

Better this way.

~*~107th. Sergeant James Barnes, shipping out for England tomorrow.~*~

“Is he just sitting there in the dark?”

“Looks like it.”

“What else am I supposed to do, Natasha?”

A shake of red hair, arms crossed tightly over her chest, pretty face shut down, staring at the closed door she’d just checked behind. Steve hadn’t even graced her with a greeting, hadn’t so much as turned around.

He was quieter, worse than those first few months with Shield. More closed off than when they first met. More distant than when they’d found Bucky with Hydra.

“How are things going on your end?”

Green eyes snapped over to Sam, his patient, hurting face and arms crossed tiredly on the surface of the table.

“I haven’t found him. Does Steve know we’re looking?”

“I’m sure he suspects it.” A dark shrug and Natasha looked back at Steve’s closed door.

“I don’t get why he’s not the one leading the investigation.”

“I don’t get why Bucky’s gone,” Sam replied tiredly and Natasha rolled her lips in. She had a pretty good idea why Bucky was gone.

She’d warned Steve. She’d warned him it would never work and she’d never been more sorry about being right.

The two boys who fell in love in Brooklyn weren’t the same ones who fell outta love in Brooklyn.

~*~I just need one name. Sergeant James Barnes, from the 107th.~*~

“Hey man, listen. Don’t you think we should at least try findi--”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”
“Steve, nobody wants to see you miserable like this.”

“I said,” A simple pause, tipped head and eyebrows lifted, “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Okay. Okay, but when you do--”

Steve shook his head, soft curve on his mouth as he leaned back casually in his chair, smiled up at the ceiling.

Sam didn’t bother finishing his sentence.

~*~The world is changed. And none of us can go back.~*~

“Who’s gonna say it first?”

“Tony.”

“What, everyone’s thinking it!”

Four pairs of glares in return and Tony sunk down in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest and petulantly staring at the monitor in the center of the table.

No one said anything, glares melted for the various stages of stony worry as they all watched the live feed of Steve disassembling and reassembling every gun in his collection.

The magazine shoved into place, hammer clicking back.

Tony shoved his rolling seat back and stood, shutting down the feed with one hand, so everyone had to look at him because he was done with all this refusing to look at each other.

“Frankly, Rogers is a danger to himself and others. If we sit idle on this and something happens to either of them, that blood is on our hands.”

“Tony,” Pepper stood too and Tony shook his head, hand up to stop her.

“Don’t say it’s not our responsibility, because it is. We took those kids in.”

“This is bigger than you and your savior complex, Stark.” Natasha flicked her hair over her shoulder and Tony’s jaw clicked, eyes lit up as he turned, messy hair making him more mad than scientist as he pointed,

“At least I’m trying to help them--”

“I’m the one out there looking for Barnes!”

“Exactly! I don’t believe for one minute that you can’t find him. I don’t think you want him back!” Pepper pressed her fingers to her temples and Tony ignored her, leaning across the table to snap as close as he dare, “I don’t think you’re even trying.”

Natasha’s chair screeched as she stood abruptly, green eyes flashing, stalked around the table and tore open the door. Clint shoved upright, lunging to reach her before the door slammed but the sound echoed with his hands empty.
Tony forced himself to breathe through his nose, heavy and flared and Pepper’s fingers were curled against her mouth now, looking away from the door and the visibly pissed Stark.

“Barton, before you defend her,” Sam started slowly and Clint spun back to the meeting room table, mouth open before Sam could finish.

“Stark’s right. If Nat knows something, she’s not saying. She hasn’t even told me.” He sunk in the closest chair and Sam stared at his weaved hands on the table.

“Fine.” Tony straightened his shirt, signaling something to Jarvis’s camera in the corner of the room. “We’ll find him without her.”

“None of us have Red Room experience like Tash,” Clint pointed out, raking tired fingers through blond spikes. “We need a new expert on Barnes.”

Tony swiped a hand over the table again, pulling the live feed back up, a M1911A1 slowly being pulled apart this time.

“We’ve got the best around.” Everyone watched silently as the holographic Steve emptied bullets onto the table with hollow clanks, face just as empty as the gun he was shredding.

“You say Red Room and I’ll raise you Commanding Officer.”

≈≈Best friends since childhood. Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were inseparable on both schoolyard and≈≈

“What part of he’s gone don’t you understand?”

“Steve, why did he leave? You gotta give me somethin’, man.”

“We broke up! It’s over! What the fuck do you want me to say?!”

“He’s your best friend. Even if you guys aren’t romantically together--”

“He’s gone.”

“And I think we owe it to him to find him!”

Steve swiveled in his chair, leaning back and looking over with cold eyes, studying Sam like he was the crazy one.

“What’s this about?”

“Man, c’mon, don’t be like that. We have to find Bu--”

“Why? If this were anybody else I’d broken up with, you wouldn’t be pushing this right now. So why, what’s the real reason?”

Sam groaned, tipping his head back to stare at the ceiling. Steve didn’t relent on his stare.

“What? Are you afraid he’s gonna end up jumping out another window?”
“Look, I doubt he’d do anything to endanger himself.”

“...so that’s why-- Fuck, Sam, are you honestly gonna play that card?”

“What card? Rogers, what the hell’re yo--”

“You think he’s dangerous. You think that without me as his handler, he’s gonna go on some psycho killing spree. You guys don’t give a fuck about him - Jesus Christ, Bucky was right - you just wanna bring him in. Take another villain off the streets.”

“Steve--”

“Fuck that! Fuck all of you. Bucky Barnes is not a villain. And I’m not gonna help you go on some manhunt and treat him like one!”

“Rogers, just listen--”

“You had the audacity to come in here to try and recruit me, trick me into finding my own best friend--”

“Cap, fuck, would you shut the fuck up for a minute? That’s exactly the point! He’s your best friend and he’s alone in this world and he knows no one besides you and whatever goddamned Hydra agents are still out there and even if you guys broke up, don’t you at least want to make sure he doesn’t fall back in their hands?”

Steve just stared at him.

“Get out.”

“Steve--”

“I said get out.”

“You can’t stay locked up in here forever,” Sam started and Steve stomped him right to the door, all but shoving him through, the closest thing to light in his eyes - even if it was fire - as he spat,

“Watch me.”

Slam.

~*~Hey, you wanna show a little respect? I said shut up.~*~

“He’s not gonna help us find Barnes.”

“He really kicked you out?”

“Yeah, man, it was...this whole thing’s fucked up.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Jarvis, is Steve still in his room?”

“Yes sir.”

“Alright. Looks like I’m trying next.”
“Tony--”

“Somebody has to convince him. There’s no way Rogers doesn’t know where Barnes is.”

~*~C’mom man. Gotta get you cleaned up.~*~

There was no way. He knew Steve would find him here. That’s exactly why he was here.

Even if neither DUMBO nor Brooklyn Heights were the same shabby working class districts they’d been in the thirties, they were both close enough to walk to in the rain with a broken heart bleeding face and slashed soles.

Not that a New York taxi wouldn't take him somewhere further. Just that he couldn't afford leaving the blood trail. And he was broke.

In more ways than his cheekbone and empty chest.

So it was memory lane instead. No yellow brick road to save them from this disaster.

Their last apartment in 1942 was only fifteen minutes from the apartment on John Street he just got thrown out of. (That part wasn’t sinking in yet.) Neither were the streets disappearing under bare feet. This was an entirely different world now, with the wealthy imposters and towering glass but it was the closest thing he had and Bucky was too fucking exhausted to find anywhere else.

The apartment complex across from their old building - all wrong, all wrong of course - had a vacant room on the seventh floor with a view over the same street they used to.

Waking up to that view would either fuck his head more or spare him one brief second of reality and time lapse and truthfully it was worth sleeping slumped against the window if there was the slightest chance he didn't wake up tomorrow feeling like this.

Like he'd be better not waking at all. Ever.

~*Captain? ~*~ You're up~*~

“Rogers.”

“Stark,” Steve replied dully, knife thudding against the wooden cutting board. The scuffle of unsure steps behind him and Steve almost smiled. For once in his goddamned life Tony was being cautious around Steve with a knife and all he was doing was cutting a goddamned apple.

“You still all...raging and whatnot?”

Thud thud thud. Apple pieces falling apart, white and crisp inside that the knife slid right through. He wasn’t gonna fucking make it about Bucky. The tension in the room was sliceable already. Wasn’t the only sliceable thing.

“I’m not pissed enough to stab you, Tony.”
The moment his name was spoken he snapped right outta the caution, striding around to snatch one of his apple pieces. Bastard.

Steve glanced up at him with a mild glare and Tony shrugged one shoulder, popping the piece of apple in his mouth. So he was testing to see if Steve would cut one of his meddling fingers off. He may be mad, but he was still Steve Rogers.

“What do you want,” he clipped, chopping the last piece of apple in half. Tony didn’t say anything. Okay, fine. If he was gonna wait.

Steve stabbed an apple piece with the tip of his knife, popping it in his mouth and looking up again, meeting the always-analyzing eyes that were looking at him with the same ooo experiment his dad used to.

Only there was something else there, some sort of emotion he really didn’t give a fuck about finding out. Tony Stark’s feelings were basically the lowest thing on his list of priorities right now.

“Listen, Cap-- Rogers, whatever. You can’t mope around the tower for the rest of your strange sad-raging existence.”

“Hmm.” Stab of another slice, tipping it into his mouth with the knife and chewing slowly as he looked Stark over, speaking around the apple in his mouth. “You kickin’ me out?”

“You know, you are a lot more dramatic than people give you credit for. No I’m not kicking you out, you dimwit. But you should, y’know, take up a hobby. Racquetball, pilates...I always thought that’d be a good look on you.” One explaining hand waving around in the air the way he always did and Steve just arched an eyebrow, picking up his tray of apples.

“Since when do you care what looks good on me?” He threw over his shoulder, starting for the couch.

“I am the one who designs your suits,” Tony pointed out, tip of his head before he spun around and followed Steve down the steps into the adjacent room. “But that’s not the point, you’ve gotta get out there, do something.”

“Is this another one of those ‘go get Bucky speeches?” The couch sunk ridiculously around him and Steve pretended not to notice, leaning forward to set the board on the coffee table. Pause, eyes flicking up to Stark standing right in front of him, arms crossed over his glowing-triangle chest. “Because I told Sam. Find somebody else.”

“Yeah, because there’s a bounty of experts on the ninety-something year old assassin roaming New York.”

“Get Natasha to do it,”

“Tried that,” Tony huffed under his breath and Steve ignored him because whatever the hell that meant.

“--I’m not interested.”

“Spangled, listen.”

“Tony, I said I’m not interes--”

“Rogers, I said listen.”
Steve looked up sharply from the apple piece he’d been peeling the skin off. Tony was not brave enough to snap at him like that. Tony gave him the lead, only interrupted to bicker, certainly never with that serious tone.

Now that all Steve’s attention was on him, Stark took a shallow breath, headed slowly around the corner of the coffee table. It took everything in him not to drop his jaw when Tony sat carefully on the edge of the couch behind him.

He had never once in his life seen Tony Stark sit on a couch beside somebody if there wasn’t some tech-explanation or movie to watch.

He wasn’t the sit-and-talking about feelings person. He was the furthest person from feelings-sharing in this entire goddamned city. Steve would demand who put him up to this, only no one put Tony up to anything but Pepper and this surprisingly didn’t have her influence written all over it.

There were no begrudging sighs, no grumbling, just quiet soft, careful, perched here beside him and Steve didn’t know what to do with that. But apparently stare in silence. Which was probably the intended effect.

“Steve, you can’t shut everybody out.” Still matter-of-fact the way he always was, but there was something gentle about it, something almost like...Howard. Almost like Howard after Bucky died.

He couldn’t do anything but blink.

“Nobody can live like that, believe me, I know.” Tony’s hand waved out, gesturing at the room around them, this vast space that was just one floor of so many and the last time he’d been sat down and lectured on a couch had probably been by Buck or his mom, a different lifetime a different life.

“But you don’t have to.”

The thing is, Bucky paused, eyebrows knitting, that promise that’d stitched Steve up from his worse beaten-down, you don’t have to.

“You have us. The Avengers.” Stark’s eyebrows were the ones knit together now, all seriousness as he held Steve’s gaze with the most steady tone he had in his body. “You may not remember, but. Before Barnes showed up, you had a team here, Rogers.”

A team.

Before Bucky, he’d had a team.

“I may not be the love of your life, but I had your six.” Brown eyes all shiny and deep, corners of his mouth waverung the way it did when he was all emotional and didn’t know what to do with it. Steve didn’t know what to do with that either. Or the desperation turning up a notch, head tipping as he tried, pulled out every stop, “Can’t you trust--”

“He’s my family,” Steve interrupted, fast and short because he hadn’t had to face this yet and he wasn’t ready to think about the team he’d left behind when he left the tower.

They’d promised they wouldn’t drift but they’d ended up so far away Steve had no idea what to do with any of it, especially not in the face of Tony, who was letting down that impenetrable blue-glass guard and it wasn’t right, it wasn’t fair, he couldn’t talk about this.

Bucky was his only family left and maybe that’d shut Tony up because this was different, Buck was his family--
Tony straightened, slight cock of his head as the brown eyes didn’t have a single screen to reflect and shone too bright anyways.

“So was I.”

Steve blinked.

Birthday cake and road trips and log cabins and overwriting each other’s plans during mission parameters and movie nights and making fun of each other’s suits and games of Risk and teasing and competitions and orange juice and shwarma and flipping his shield up to ricochet Stark’s hand blasters and together--

"Avengers Movie Night is still Friday and if you two aren't there, I know where you sleep. Actually, I setup where you sleep, I'd be careful if I were you--"

"We'll be there, Tony," Steve assured, knocking his shoulder against Stark's. Bruce shook his head while Thor laughed and Sam threw an arm over Bucky's shoulders, tugging him in with a beaming smile as Clint reached over to tweak the loose bun atop Bucky's head.

Steve shooed everyone back towards the jet parked at the water and five waving hands disappeared around the corner. There'd been five Commandos too, five of those boys like the five boys leaving now--

How many teams had he abandoned?

How many families had he lost?

He.

He couldn’t.

“We...were never a team, Tony.” His voice sounded detached even to him, like it was someone else’s mouth speaking but he wasn’t going to do anything to shut up that voice. “Even now, everytime it’s ‘remember that time I sent a nuke through an alien portal?’ That’s how you say it, that’s how you remember it. Just because we moved in doesn’t mean everything stopped being about you, Stark.”

The bitter bite at the end was making him cringe inside and Tony’s jaw was unhinged, looking raw and positively ripped open.

They’d fought like this once, at the beginning, but reverting back to stoop that low?

He wasn’t sure if he hated himself more for lying or for why he had to.

“We’ve fought together, random battle-combinations of everyone's strengths, but there were no sixes covered.” It was all too easy to sneer his mouth up in disgust, stomach churning in disgust ten times worse. “You never stopped finding a way to cut the goddamned wire.”

He’d never seen Tony stand so quickly in his life. Pace half a yard away, fists curled and shoulders trembling. Sharp turn to face him again, eyes watering and finger pointing accusingly, all anger fighting through the crumbling, heartbreaking pain.

“We are still a team. I don’t care if it hurts, we're your family, Rogers.”
Stark may not care if it fucking hurts. Because he had no idea how much it did.

His fucking team. Family.

Stark knew fucking nothing.

Steve couldn’t remember standing, but he was suddenly taller than Tony again, suddenly towering and powerful again, not the boy who’d dropped his shield because he was so goddamned lost in the world, not the boy who’d stared at two sets of blackwhite files in the dark --

Tony’s had been in there. He hadn’t even known, the start of his new family and the end of his old family jam-packed into one manilla folder and stamped ink,

deceased, deceased, deceased,

he’d left them all alone and now he was so goddamned alone, there was no such thing as home without family and he’d been lucky enough to have two, entire full, loving families and he’d abandoned them both.


Deceased,
deceased,
deceased.

"Just in case things go sideways...it's been good fightin' with you, Cap."

“I hate you all," Bucky informed them with that deadpanned tone of his, pushing halfheartedly at Steve's chest but giving up after a single shove.

"What's new?" Morita grinned.

"Have fun, kids." Dugan added with a wink.

"Yeah, get him to lighten up," Jones pointed, the direction of his finger kind of vague from the alcohol in his system.

"Which one of us?" Steve asked, already starting to pull Bucky towards the dance floor.

"Both!" Falsworth shouted.

"Sergeant Barnes woulda been proud a' you."

Proud.

He hadn’t even given Peg his coordinates.

Morita had been in that room. He’d been there, he’d been the first one to answer Steve’s call from the plane.

He’d’ve been the one to tell the rest of the boys that Steve didn’t even try.

Steve didn’t even try.

Tony was standing there, chest heaving, trembling and angry and so hurt and Steve hadn’t even tried.

This wasn’t his family. He didn’t deserve this family.

He hadn’t been able to save any of them. He hadn’t been able to save any of them, every last member of his family died before his eyes, his mom and Bucky and Howard and that file of all the
Commandos and if Steve kept dragging them in all these battles the Avengers would too, slowly, stray bullets and bombs and one more scrap they couldn’t squeeze out of and Steve didn’t have a single fucking use.

He hadn’t even given Peg his coordinates.

God, he’d even lost Peggy. He’d come back too late. Couldn’t save her. She didn’t even remember him.

Just like Buck hadn’t. The two people he loved the most were the only people in this new world that didn’t remember Captain America.

“My team is DEAD. My brothers. Are dead.” Steve was shaking more than Tony was but he couldn’t feel it, couldn’t see the anger melt for pain, the tears threatening to brim over brown eyes because his vision was fogged, everything was fogged and the tapes were all black and white but he’d give anything to paint the war back in color, live in the fucking black and white now.

Anything to save them, only he couldn’t, he couldn’t save any of them. When was the last time he’d saved Tony Stark from anything? Tony’d talked him through an asthma attack a couple months ago and in return he’d pushed them all out of his life. He’d kicked out Sam. He didn’t even know what color red Natasha’s hair was right now.

“My family is dead,” Steve told him, heart pounding in his chest loud enough to remind him how torn it was, how torn he’d made fucking everything.

The room was threatening to spin, everything was spinning and his voice was getting louder and louder and it wasn’t drowning out the pound pound pound because his family was dead.

“--save the one member that I couldn't save. I couldn't save him and I tried so fucking hard I did everything I fucking could and it wasn’t enough, I wasn’t enough I was too late, too late for all of them cause I waited too long, fucking leading authority on waiting too long and it took me realizing he doesn't love me to ever admit it, but fucking there, there!! I’m too late. I can't save Bucky Barnes. I can’t.”

Tony wiped a hand across his eyes. Steve sucked in a breath that was two parts shaky tears and no parts oxygen and it wasn’t fair.

Stark was going to say something. Something about family, and Steve couldn’t listen to his family talk about home and love and saving right now.

He’d failed. He’d failed them all.

“I can’t,” Steve whispered, then he was practically running for the stairwell door and Tony didn’t even try to stop him.

Tony didn’t even try to stop him.

~*~You get your orders?~*~

Once upon a time.
The last time he’d been Bucky Barnes without Steve Rogers, he’d been with the 107th.

See, when he was the Winter Soldier, he wasn’t Bucky Barnes, he wasn’t anybody. Nothing.

But the world wasn’t merciful enough for Zola’s men to sweep in now and knock out all the memories of sunshine and the man he’d grown up beside, grown around like a vine tightening around a tree and carving beautiful arcs into bark, choking the life outta raw nature until neither could survive without the other and the whole thing was some twisted terrifying phenomenon.

So the last time he’d been Bucky Barnes with a gaping hole in his chest not big enough to kill him just big enough to suck the life from him, he’d been with the 107th.

Dirt under his fingernails, soot smeared across his forehead. Nose. Stubble on his jaw, blood in his hair.

The first time he saw blood in Steve’s beautiful blonde hair, Bucky’d puked.

It was him that’d splattered it there in the first place.

It was him that Steve followed into that stupid war. It was him that Steve clapped on the shoulder before taking off through the woods, scouting ahead with that big shiny shield and his life on the line.

Bucky’s too, because if any of those bullets had zipped past the giant white star, taken down their beloved Captain Rogers? He would’ve gone down right there in the woods with him.

During the war he used to love that shield. Practically saved Steve’s life more times than he had. So he was a little jealous of it too. Crazy, that’s how crazy he’d been back then, he was jealous of a hunk of shiny metal painted Red White and Blue.

It wasn’t shiny all the time though, none of them were.

The rougher nights, shield propped carelessly against a log, caked with the same mud dirt streaked blood. Flickering black instead of blue by the light of the fire Falsworth was poking with a stick.

Bucky spun the knife between his fingers, held up the little piece of wood to see better in the dim ass lighting. Details were better to do during the day but he was impatient and Steve hadn’t come outta their tent yet--

“What’s Rogers up to? He’s been in there for a good fifteen now.”

Bucky shrugged, not looking up. “Y’know how long it takes to peel off tights?”

“Very funny,” a dry, flat voice spoke up behind and Bucky had to force his mouth not to twitch up
in a smile.

“Funny but true,” he drawled in response, flicking a piece of freed wood from his carving, angling the knife to cut that soft curve. The air around him shifted as his Stevie plopped down at his side. He could tell without looking up that Steve was side-eyeing him, trying to figure out what this one was gonna be without asking outright or looking like he was snooping.

Bucky didn’t give a damn if Steve looked. The fire excused the heat in his cheeks, so having blue eyes on him didn’t have a single damned consequence on nights like these.

Crackling ambers filled the comfortable silence as they all settled in around the warmth, various hands stuck closer against the cold. His blue coat was warm enough to keep him from shivering, but he’d left it in the tent and this dirty shirt was practically threadbare by now. If Steve only sat a little closer, he radiated heat like a goddamned furnace nowadays.

“Well I’ll be damned.”

Bucky hummed in question, focusing on his knife so he didn’t split open a finger when his entire body wanted to tip sideways into Steve’s like some kind of fucked up gravitational pull, Mars around the Sun.

“...they even breathe in sync.”

Dernier snorted at Jones and Dugan’s slurping paused long enough to make Bucky realize all five pairs of eyes were aimed in his direction.

Bucky finally lifted his head, mess of broken pomade brushing his forehead as he glanced over the Commandos, followed their gazes to the blonde boy next to him.

“Me and Steve?” he asked dumbly and the tiny smile that quirked one half of Steve’s mouth, that tiny tip of his eyebrow - it was just so Steve, just so regular like the other half of his twisted vine-tree he’d never really thought about the odd similarities the Doe’s might’ve noticed.

“Guess so,” Steve echoed, eyes flicking down to Bucky’s neck to watch his pulse, which was suddenly jumping about a thousand times faster than it’d been a second ago. That terrible heat was consuming his chest again, that tightness that made it hard to swallow, especially with Steve’s eyes on his skin and fuck, the fire wouldn’t excuse cheekbones that red.

“Steve, uhh.” His hands were fidgeting around the knife now, flipping it self-consciously as he forced his eyes away, stared down at the glint of metal instead. Carve, he could carve and then he didn’t have to think about his stupid blush or how unfazed Steve seemed, chin propped on his big hands as he kept looking at Buck like he couldn’t fucking feel it in his soul.

“Stevie had asthma, back in the day? Used to get all worked up in a huff over every goddamned thing--”

“Hey,” Steve interjected too soft and Bucky’s heartbeat was somewhat closer to normal and he could almost use his lungs right again, if only Steve would stop goddamned looking at him.

“--got t’where I had to calm him down, make him match his breathin’ to mine cause otherwise he’d end up chokin’ on no oxygen and goin’ damn right blue in the face.” The next curve of the knife was too harsh, split a crack right down the middle of Lady Liberty’s stomach and that was fine, it was probably for the better anyways.

“You’re...blue in the face,” Steve muttered lamely.
“I’m gonna be blue in the face if you don’t get that fire hotter, Monty. What, they don’t teach you boy scouts 101 in London?”

“Oh right, Dum-Dum, because you were a bloody boy scout back in New York.”

“Hey, maybe he was, sure as hell has the look for it.”

“You watch your mouth Jones—”

“It’s still fucking freezing,” Morita interjected and Bucky had to agree, his fingers were starting to tremble against the blade of his knife.

Better cold metal in his hands than Steve’s though. Steve’s hands were much too warm to hold metal so tight like this. He’d give just about anything to have one’a Steve’s warm hands in his own right now.

He’d give just about anything to not be so freezing right now.

He’d give just about anything to breathe in sync with lungs that worked because his own certainly didn’t and Steve wasn’t fucking beside him anymore.

Steve wasn’t anywhere at all and neither was Bucky.

Neither was Bucky.

~*~ Nothin’. I’m just a kid from Brooklyn.~*~

“What... the fuck? Why are there... JARVIS!”

“Yes sir?”

“What the fuck is all this in the hallway?”

“Those are Captain Rogers’ belongings, sir.”

“Is he gone?”

“No, sir. He threw everything out of the room and into the hallway.”

“This is a wall clock! This isn’t even his to throw! None of it is, it’s Sam’s room!”

“There is footage, sir, if you are in need of evidence.”

“I’m not spending my day watching more of Rogers’ temper tantrums. Anything I haven’t heard? And anything not broken?” Clank.

“There was a mild explosion and some choice words along the lines of ‘*beep* you, you ruined everything and it all still reminds me of you, you bastard.’ Presumably referring to Sergeant Barnes.”

“Yeah, presumably.”
“That’s when he began throwing things sir. Although that did not appear to have enough of an impact, so he threw them into the hallway. Out of sight.”

“Jesus Christ, even the pillows. Is that a bedframe? Glass mirror, painting frames...is there anything left in that room?”

“No sir. I believe the quote was ‘see? my tomb can be empty too.’ Shouted at the ceiling, likely in reference to Sergeant Barnes again.”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks, Jarvis.”

“What the fuck Steve.”

~*~ Might not want to pull on that thread.~*~

Steve was supposed to find him here.

Steve was supposed to come storming through that door all in a huff with bloodshot blues and wild hands, supposed to go weak in the knees the moment he saw Bucky here, curled up in the window with one eye swollen orange and his legs tucked against his empty chest.

Why hadn’t he found Bucky yet?

It didn’t make any sense.

He should’ve been here by now. It’d be the first place to go.

Why hadn’t he found--

Steve promised.

He promised he’d always find Bucky, always save him from that table--

Shit. Shit, that table, he couldn’t think about that not when he was alone and Steve really might not be coming this time, again, and how could he have ever let himself be on that table again waiting for the hero that would never save him, he’d left Bucky to die once of course he’d leave him to die again especially now, especially since he was even more fucked up now than the last time Steve left him to die and if it weren’t for that goddamned table--

It wasn’t leather. This was metal wrapped around curled legs. Not leather.

Not leather, there were no leather gloves to weave between his metal fingers and no anything, not anymore, not left and suddenly Bucky needed to see Steve’s face more than he needed oxygen.

He was real. He was real, Steve’d saved him or he’d saved himself or something, something, it wasn’t all some dream and he wasn’t back on that table and Brooklyn hadn’t changed this much or maybe wait, it had, which part was real and he wasn’t still the Winter Soldier, was he? He wasn’t, no, no, it wasn’t all a dream a really fucking vivid dream he just needed proof and where the fuck was that goddamned newspaper?
It was real, that newspaper proved it only Bucky could whip his head back and forth as many times as he wanted, all he got was snakehair in his eyes and no newspaper this entire apartment was empty and the window was so cold and there wasn’t dirt under his fingernails and none of this was right, how the fuck was he supposed to find proof--

The museum. The museum, god, if it was all real then the museum would still be there and Steve would be there and the Welcome Back, Cap would be real and Steve was alive, Bucky was alive, he knew that he just needed to be sure because they’d just played with his mind so many times he knew better than to trust himself but wait, that was so long ago, unless they’d been keeping him under in this dream for years. It could be years.

He needed to see that museum.

Three hour bus ride to DC be damned.

The glass splintered as he scrambled outta his perch but that wasn’t the glass he cared about.

The white pixelated glass of his face, that was --

Penn Station, woosh, flashing colors and lights and so many people he just stayed curled against the glass of the window and waited waited he’d waited for so many years, three hours was nothing then clean streets bustling crowds, tourist season just coming to a close, big pillars, stone steps, sneaking through security, drifting through hallways with a silver hat pulled over his long hair, one two steps freeze:

--real.

It was all real.

Steve’d left him.

They’d both survived the war and Bucky’d gotten away from Zola again and he hadn’t killed anyone in months and they’d really both survived and they’d come home and they’d ended up together and they’d fallen into each other’s beds and Steve had been inside him and they’d kissed and kissed and kissed and he’d actually gotten to hold that beautiful face, the one laughing there in that goddamn black and white video as Bucky shook his head and they’d had that, again, he’d made Steve laugh and they’d danced on the roof and Steve’d taken him to Brooklyn Bridge and proposed and holy Jesus fucking Christ there was the ring on his finger and they’d actually truly honestly built a life together with friends and family and laughter and smiling and paint and blood, still so much blood and he’d broken Steve’s hands and slipped his muzzling mask back onto his face and they’d broken up and the storm had come for them again and the rain had slid down his swollen eye as Steve told him it was the end of the line and

It was over.

It wasn’t all that surprising the next place he found himself was a barstool.

He wasn’t drinking anything. Why wasn’t he drinking anything? He was just sitting here, waiting for something. Both arms on the wooden bar, staring down at his hands, waiting for something.

For Steve to come back, from inviting the Howling Commandos to their team. Except they didn’t have a name yet. And Steve wasn’t coming back.
The empty seat next to his was going to always be empty.

Steve wasn’t coming back.

Steve wasn’t coming back.

~*~ Which means um…I can’t get drunk. Did you know that? ~*~

His fingers were fumbling like they’d never thawed but he dug his phone outta his pocket anyway, soft quick gasps as he tried to breathe and open the damn lock screen over and over until he realized right, metal, he was an actual real life Android not Human and he couldn’t open his phone with that hand and okay, unlocked, where the fuck was contacts, why the fuck didn't he have his number memorized.

There. There. Slide down to S, don't look further down the page just press the first one and lift the goddamned phone to his ear, try to fucking breathe long enough for him to understand when he picked up--

A click.

“Sam? Sam listen I need help, I don't fucking know what I've don--”

“Barnes. Give me a location, I’ll send help.”

“Natasha? Why do you have Sam’s phone? You know what, it doesn’t matter, is Steve--”

“Location, Barnes.”

“I’m….a bar, two blocks from the DC Smithsonian--”

Click.

Slowly lowered the phone and Bucky just stared at it. What the hell was that about? Why did…Why was any of this happening? Why couldn’t Steve just let them be happy? Why did Bucky have to fuck everything up all over again?

Why
Why
Why

The door chimed with a bell like the old days only the lady in red wasn’t gonna steal Steve away from him this time.

At least, that’s what he thought.

“Natasha,” he breathed, because an exhibit was one thing and one of Steve’s best friends in the flesh was an entirely different thing. Stark’s jet’s were fast, but not that fast. How long had he been staring at this wooden countertop? How was Natasha so close? Was she already in DC? Where was everyone else? “Where’s Sam? Is Steve--”

“Is that what you called for?”
She swept into that empty seat behind him and Bucky blinked under his stupid veil of hair because she was really nothing like Peggy. All sharp where Peg was soft, cold instead of warm. Precise where Carter had been all tough shell and beauty with the most sincere of cores -

They were polar opposites and really, he was more like Peg than Nat was. Which could be why he was the one who ended up with Steve. Not that he thought Nat ever wanted too. He was pretty sure Nat didn’t want many things. She just took. Like all the air in this room apparently, and Sam’s phone, because he wasn’t here and really he was a lot better at this sorta thing than she was so why was she here?

He’d’ve called Stark before Natasha.

Hell, he probably would’ve called Stark before Sam if Tony was first in the contact book. Tony, in some odd way, understood him in a way that Wilson didn’t but at least Wilson was in Steve’s corner. God knows where Natasha stood in any of it.

But it didn’t matter because she was here and Steve wasn’t and Bucky really needed to know the state of Steve, not Natasha.

The state of this whole fucking mess he’d made.

Is that all he called for.

“How bad is it?” It was barely more than a whisper and Natasha didn't answer at first, studying sharp green with the little cock of her head.

Fifteen seconds ticked by, fifteen more. Then green finally cut away, lithe little body leaning over the counter to wave down the bartender, ask him for two vodkas with that pretty smile.

Bucky didn't actually like vodka at fucking all.

But it was Romanoff’s turn to speak and he had to wait, black glove curled tight enough against the bar to scuff the leather. Leather.

The bartender brought two glasses, slid one in front of them both but Bucky didn't look down, watching Romanoff as she picked up hers, swished it around like it was wine instead.

Watching the liquid tumble in her glass, finally finally she opened her mouth.

“It's not pretty.” Swish and Bucky’s stomach dropped to his feet. Green eyes cut to him like daggers, chin lifted and so cold he could feel it in his bones. “I always warned Steve, not to trust you.”

Bucky couldn't take that. He looked away sharply enough to strain his neck, teeth sinking into his bottom lip like the pain could stop the tears in his throat.

She'd warned Steve not to trust him. So had Bucky.

And Steve loved him so much he trusted him anyways, with all his heart. All his heart that Bucky bruised and bruised until it wasn't anything but blue blue stained black and then crushed it in his fucking robotic metal fist.

“With your past,” Natasha shook her head, short fingernails clicking on the bar like mini machine gun fire, machine gun fire he hadn't been able to block enough, he always could save Steve from everything but himself--
“all the awful, nightmarish things…” she continued and the metal plates rippled up from his fingertips like they were remembering just how many skulls they’d blasted apart, resequencing all the way up to his shoulder, shoving the shiver into scarred skin that Jesus fucking Christ, Steve had kissed, like they didn’t attach the most dangerous singular weapon any of them had--

All the awful, nightmarish things. The things that’d given Steve nightmares. The horror on his face as he flinched away from Bucky’s touch, the fleeting terror--

“You forget who-- what. You are.”

The tone was more bitter than he’d given her credit for. He knew they’d clash again once things got bad, but the amount of hatred in that voice threatened another shiver down his spine.

“I d-don’t know-- I don't know who I'm. Who I'm supposed to be,” he stumbled, who can protect Steve better, the unfeeling monster or the broken soldier but he didn't get a chance to say it because it wasn't who, it was what and the sudden click of a glass on the table made him look up with the words still on his tongue, just as another bit instead.

“You're a legendary killer.”

Bucky's mouth snapped shut.

Unfeeling monster or broken soldier. Apparently it didn't matter either way.

Both were legendary killers. One with medals and one with metal but it didn't matter, both were. Still a legendary killer.

A killer. A murderer, slitting throats and bashing faces in and sniping bullets between eyes--

But these hands, these hands hadn't broken anything but Steve, hadn't squeezed anything but the back of Steve’s neck as they kissed, soft and chaste and.

There was a ring on his finger, not a trigger.

A ring.

Not a trigger.

“I don't do that anymore,” Bucky broke, so pitiful his eyes were tearing up again.

Natasha flipped her hair over her shoulder, mouth pursed at the corners and Bucky couldn’t take that look, everything she was implying--

I don’t. He didn’t want to kill people anymore he didn’t want to be the Soldier he didn’t want to be a legendary killer or a killer at all he didn’t want to know more ways to kill somebody than he knew how to save somebody he didn’t want to speak eight different languages and case every room he walked into for vantage points and exits and he didn’t want--

He didn’t.

He didn’t do that anymore. Any of that.

It was less than a whisper this time, distant salt on his tongue as Bucky dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, “I don’t do that anymore,”

“It doesn’t matter. You will. It'll get worse, you'll get darker.” Bucky shook his head, pressing his
hands harder til his vision sparked white at the edges but Romanoff kept going. “And you will.”

“It can’t p-possibly—” Gasp, fingers clawing up through his hair, head down and shoulders shaking and it wasn’t right, she wasn’t right he wouldn’t, he didn’t, only Steve was Gone and the last time Steve was gone he’d lost everything and he couldn’t let that happen again, he’d die before--

“B-be worse than this.”

Steve was gone. Steve was gone and he was hanging on the edge of the universe about to fall into the darkness and Nat was just telling him there was no way he could come back. But. But he and Steve weren’t over forever. They-- it wasn’t possible. It couldn’t. There was no way that, just a few days ago in the street, that wasn’t. No, just a fight. They just needed help and everything could go back and they’d be okay, right? Steve wanted him back. Of course Steve did, this was Steve. He was hurt but he’d come back from it, he always did, strongest person Bucky’d ever known and it couldn’t be that bad, it couldn’t be…

“How is -- how is Steve? Is he. Is he alright?”

“He will be, eventually...” Tip of a red fingernail swirling around in vodka and Bucky sniffled, brushing long damp hair back from his face. He had to get himself together, shit. Those green eyes weren’t budging a bit from their cold protectiveness that he got, man he got that more than anybody, if she’d been the one to fuckup Steve this conversation wouldn’t’ve gone half as civil.

At least she was being understan--

“--if you never come back.”

Bucky froze.

“What?” He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been genuinely stunned, so unprepared a dunk of freezing water would’ve been kinder.

Natasha pursed her lips again, shaking her head as she swished around around around that red fingernail inside crystal.

“You hurt him more than you help him, and you know that.” Bucky swallowed only the lump in his throat wasn’t going away and neither were the stabbing bloody wounds. “If you love him, you won't dare go crawling back and dragging him down with you.”

Natasha Romanoff straightened in her chair, looking at him with those intense green eyes under the falling red waves framing her porcelain face and every moment, every emotion towards Steve hovering between them and it was deep, he had no idea it ran that deep but if there was one thing he understood, it was how fucked up Steve Rogers’ redemption could take you, how lifted and terrifying and how dire the urge was to protect something that beautiful but whatever she knew, he had it worse, he had it so much worse and she knew that and she was still asking this of him.

“If you love him the way all the storybooks say Bucky Barnes loves Steven Grant Rogers, if that's really still you - you'll protect him and you'll stay away. For good.”

“I can't,” Bucky shook his head and Natasha’s eyes narrowed and Bucky opened his palms like that could reveal his pain, voice edging on more and more desperate, pain dragging him further further, “I can't, I can’t, I've tried and I can't, the only time I've ever escaped was when I was brainwashed into amnesia--”

“You have to.” White fingers closed around his black black jacket and Bucky stared down at her
hand, the squeezing pressure on real skin, his right side but the wrong side, a girl like her should be held at a distance with metal but she already knew where he was soft and vulnerable and broken, it didn’t matter.

“You have to protect him,” her voice was closer this time and Bucky looked up. She was standing now, closer than anybody but Steve’d been for a long time, asking worse than anybody’d asked of him for a long long time. “No matter the cost.”

Human skin giving under her rough touch, holding him still, holding his gaze impossible and serious and Bucky wasn’t even breathing.

“I can’t save him from you, or I would.” The hand released, blood flushing back through his arm fast enough to make him woozy, woozier than he already was, last flash of focus narrowing in on Natasha’s white features and pinning gaze, the bitter truth spilt past her lips like all the blood they both spilled, red biting fangs seizing his chest. “Only you can.”

A whoosh of red, sweeping dress and click click click of heels bells over doors and Bucky was so lightheaded he’d be begging Steve-shaped Angels to take him to heaven if he didn’t get a fucking grip.

“I’m invisible,” Bucky managed, whisper fading the moment it split from his lips. Steve had made him invisible and that was only the beginning, shot-down and falling into the nothing they’d made him without the sun but then he’d been pulled back into the light of summer and

"I'm - I'm turning into you." Nothing but an extension of Steve Rogers, the boyfriend, sidekick, sucking blonde light from the dark breathing holes in his mask, absorbing what didn’t belong to him and he’d taken too much and pushed Steve too far, trying so hard to turn into the hero when he wasn’t, Steve wanted him to be but Bucky wasn’t Good, couldn’t ever turn into Steve--

The stutter would give him away, god the stutter would give him away. He let out a panicked rush of air, eyes forcibly away. Bucky stared at the and held his breath and waited for Steve to call him out. A year ago, Steve’d know instantly.

But Bucky wasn't Bucky anymore and Steve wasn't Steve anymore and he just smiled lightly, turning back towards the bar.

The bar that wasn’t this one. Steve wasn’t here, Bucky was talking to an empty barstool and twin ghosts and the tear that slipped down his cheek was cold as the ice they’d dunked him in.

Steve was gone. Bucky was here at a bar, finally realizing - again - that he’d lost Steve. He’d lost Steve, Steve was gone and no

"Th-This is some horrible dream,” Bucky broke over the softest, deepest part of his chest and he could see the young, foolish, reckless ghost flickering beside him, the soft gold on his face as he stammered his way through realizing he’d been in love with his best friend his entire life.

The same words - a century apart - echoed over his own, two desperate turns of fate, two Saratogas in the same goddamned battle that Bucky should’ve known, should’ve always known he’d never win.

"Don't take it so hard,” Steve teased, big hand clapping down on Bucky’s shoulder. It was supposed to be playful, sure, but none of the other guys touched each other this damn often and for once? Bucky wished maybe it could be what it looked like.

Steve's hand lingered too long and Bucky was a ragdoll. He stared forward, lips parted, the touch
warming him all over, calming away the anger in his belly. Here he was with a hand on Bucky's shoulder like he was the most familiar thing in the world.

"Maybe she's got a friend." Steve smiled. Like the old days. God, if they could go back to the old days. Then his hand was gone and

gone and

gone.

~*~The living legend - who kinda lives up to the legend.~*~

The wind was blowing, the edge of that New York chill, fucking his hair up, strong enough it'd’ve been hard to walk if he was younger.

He wasn’t.

Steve stood at the edge of the roof on the Stark Tower and couldn’t stop thinking about how far from young he was.

Like Sitwell said, in one of the last conversations of Steve’s free life before Bucky’s Alive consumed his existence, throwing people off roofs wasn’t really his style. Neither was jumping off them.

Then again, he’d also told Natasha in that conversation that he wasn’t ready for that girl with the lip piercing and ten minutes later there was Bucky and his metal arm and everything vanilla got thrown out the window right along with Sitwell.

Although, really, if Bucky hadn’t lied about loving--

Not loving.

He hadn’t--

If Bucky’d loved him back then, odds are Steve woulda been down to get dirty in more than one way in those trenches. But, see, it wasn’t like it mattered. So they eventually did end up screwing. What was the point? Bucky didn’t love him.

Back then, it’d been so much easier. Back then, Steve wasn’t foolish enough to believe they could ever be together. He’d been alright with just being Buck’s friend.

“And now look at us,” Steve bit into the wind, lifting the photograph to the dull light from the cloudy sky. He’d snuck onto their old floor, grit his jaw the entire time it took to run to Buck’s old room, wrestle the photograph out of the frame and run back for the elevator.

Too many memories, way too many memories. He couldn’t breathe in there anyways, and now he was up here because at least there was air up here.

They’d danced in each other’s arms up here. Sang and shouted and laughed and pushed and collided with smiling kisses and--

Fuck. Back then. It was so much easier back then.
Buck in the photograph could be somebody entirely different, only that spark in his eyes, that excited curl of his mouth as he explained something to the Howling Commandos while Steve looked on fondly--

That was the same mouth that’d pressed to Steve’s. The same eyes that held his and promised never to leave. Never to forget him again.

Well. At least he’d kept half the promise. Steve highly fucking doubted Buck was forgetting any of this anytime soon. Hell, maybe he was glowering in victory. He’d fucking destroyed everything.

Look what he’d done, look what he’d made Steve do. He didn’t have the right to blow up at Tony like that. But this family, the one in the photo - they were his real family, right? The ones who knew the real him?

Or was that all just glorified memories? Idealized stories vamped up by Buck like everything else?

But, see, at least the Howling Commandos knew Steve before he died. Before he died when Bucky fell off the train. Before he died and became this raging monster that’d kill anything that looked at his best friend wrong--

Here, spread out below him was all of Manhattan, one of the most populated places in the world. Millions, down there. Millions of individual lives, worlds, with families and friends and coworkers and plans. How many of those worlds would he let burn to save Buck?

*Please don’t make me do this,* only he’d wound up doing it anyways.

Because he loved Bucky. And Bucky stomped on his fucking soul, didn’t give a damn that Steve loved him more than taking his next breath.

Buck never felt that way. He’d never said *I love you.*

“How’re you holdin’ up?” Sam asked quietly.

Steve looked up, blinking quickly to slide the tears back down his throat instead of his cheeks.

Sam looked steadily back at him, sure and quiet and strong. Family. Palms flat on the edge of the roof beside his. Dark and real and human and smaller than Bucky’s, no metal, no leather gloves either.

Steve looked back at the city lights, squinting into the overcast glare so he didn’t have to watch that patient face. Fuck Tony Stark. He didn’t need more fucking guilt.

Sam took a deep breath, stirring up the air with the smallest of hurricanes.

“Look, Steve. I know your entire life, people have dragged you into fights. You’ve been through so much to save so many and I get it, you’re tired man. You’re done. But there’s one last mission, one more person who needs you to save them *one last time.*”

“I told Stark--” In so many words, anyways. Steve wondered distantly if that was the final straw on a fight they’d had their entire friendship. Probably ex-friendship. “I can’t save Bucky.”

Sam kept watching him and Steve kept looking down. He didn’t need this softness. Why couldn’t they all stop caring?

They’d had a conversation exactly not-this once. *He’s gonna be there y’know.* That same steady,
rational, careful. *Family.*

“But after everything he’s been through for you...I think you owe it to him to try.”

Last time, it’d been the goddamned opposite. Last time, he was the kind you stop, right? When did Bucky stop being the kind you stop? When did Steve stop being the kind who saves?

When did Steve start being the freezing cold soldier who fought for blood instead of folks-back-home? When did he throw away all his folks-back-home?

“Steve, this is what it’s all about. Since the beginning, since Stark’s dad fired up that machine. I know it gets muddy, all lost along the way, but *saving people,* that’s what--”

“What I was built for,” Steve finished quietly. Getting Bucky back - he doesn’t know you. *He will,* Steve’d said last time. He’d been so sure. Because it was Buck. Of course he’d remember. They always came back to each other. That’s what they did, they came back to each other.

“The only thing I’m good for.” Except clearly he wasn’t any good at it, because he’d lost the war the last....every single time he’d fought, right? Lost something in all of them. Destroyed his family, every single time. Was there any war out there where he didn’t lose?

Then it wouldn’t be war, would it? And what did Buck say - Steve couldn’t live without a war anyways?

Sam was holding his breath, tentatively waiting beside Steve, all worried and knotted up and whatnot and Steve just wanted to curl in a ball and stop being awake. Stop all this. Couldn’t take seeing that beautiful face and knowing Buck never loved--

He couldn’t keep--

It. Just...Sam was right. Steve knew that, he knew Sam was right and maybe Sam was right all along, because he’d been right about not being able to save Bucky. Steve hadn’t saved Bucky since the war. Only Buck had the privilege to do that anymore, and Steve wasn’t good enough to fit in that picture. Or the one in his hand, the outsider even in his own band of brothers. The off-look, the small smile while the rest were hollering in laughter, dazed as he watched Bucky, so in love he’d never fit in anywhere in his goddamned life because he could never fucking get over the seizing in his chest when that beautiful smile lit up and that soft accent lured him in, the beautiful Bucky Barnes ripped up his entire fucking world and.

The only glint of metal he had left was on his own left hand now. Steve spun the engagement ring slowly, letting the circle slide over the calluses on his thumb, hard and smooth and the only goddamned piece he had left, he couldn’t...that couldn’t be it.

If only to give him his fucking bloody ring back.

End it once and for all.

Cut all the ties, right? Because that part, he was good at. Disappearing, he was good at. Leaving broken hearts in his wake, he was good at.

Or maybe he was just so weak it was still about Saving Bucky. Saving. Captain’s voice, more America than Rogers but it didn’t matter, it’d get the job done. Whatever job this ended up being.

Saving Bucky. Ironic. S’why he took up arms the first time and if this was the death of him the way it felt, it’d be the last reason he took up arms too.
How was that for family?

“What are the mission parameters?”

~*~Then stop blaming yourself. Allow Barnes the dignity of his choice. He damn well must have thought you were worth it.~*~

He stood on the bus platform for an entire hour.

He had a roundtrip ticket. It’d be a waste of money not to go back, and money wasn’t something he had a lot of.

But if he was gonna keep running, it was a waste of miles going back to the city where Steve was.

Who the fuck was he kidding.

The last few seats were taken, so he ended up in a window seat above the G in Greyhound. The first few hours were entirely uneventful. He’d picked up an iPod because listening to music was about the only thing to save his sanity on these rides, curled up against the glass with headphones jammed in his ears.

The bus came rolling to a stop at the edge of New York City, the last pitstop before his station. The hat pulled down over his hair had a low brim, but he could still see the bus platform outside the window pretty clearly.

There were only a few passengers getting aboard, couple of businessmen, a few older couples, and one young blonde girl who couldn’t’ve been older than 18. He wouldn’t’ve noticed her if he hadn’t been watching the homeless man first.

It was pretty clear the homeless man had slept on the bus bench, old and scruffy, threadbare jacket, not a single possession, not even a scrawled-cardboard sign to be seen.

The bus pulled up and the blonde girl jumped off her end of the bus bench, practically running in the other direction and skidding to a stop in front of the homeless man. He looked up under his thin cap, silver whiskers and sad eyes, even from here on the bus.

The girl dug around in her ratty blue bag, pulling out a banana, and an orange. She handed them both to the man, bright smile on her face, leaning close to give some sort of warm sentiment. Bucky couldn’t decide if he or the man were more surprised.

Then she was off in a whirlwind again, sweeping aboard the bus with her torn blue bag hanging off one shoulder. It was easier to see her now, taking in the quick confident, peppy steps as she strode down the aisle. There were lingering purple streaks underneath the blonde, pulled up in a bun over five-dollar aviators. Her gray-knit shoes were falling apart, but the rest of her clothes were in good shape - black running shorts and a white tshirt with the sleeves cut off, printed american flag and eagle design down the front, wings arching into red roses with a big black banner that read FREE SPIRIT across it.

Traveling alone, looking around like the whole place belonged in some romantic book. The vague piss smell didn't even seem to be bothering her all that much and Bucky couldn't help the little smile that curled on his face.
So this would’ve been Steve. If they’d been born into this world instead of shoved into it. If they’d
grown up in the twenty-first century where they could be free spirits without dying on the frontlines
for it. So this is what Steve’d been fighting for without knowing it, all those years ago.

For one irrational, stupid moment Bucky wished this *could’ve* been their century. Their life. Maybe if
they’d grown up without the Great Depression and the second world war, he and Steve would’ve
ended up together.

Maybe Bucky wouldn’t be poison.

His thoughts were interrupted as the young blonde girl swung into the empty seat across from him,
brief smile in his direction before the blue bag was deposited and she curled up against the window,
temple on the glass as bright eyes shut.

The bus rolled to a start. Bucky blinked as the girl...fell asleep. She was sleeping on a public bus,
while a strange dangerous man - a serial killer, assassin actually - was sitting across from her. The
same stupid, foolish trust. Trust not to steal her ratty blue bag, not to slit her throat while she drifted,
unaware.

Trust placed in him that Steve’d given him, until Bucky’d broken it the same way he’d broken every
other part of Steve’s life.

That girl was sitting there sleeping like Bucky wasn’t a lethal assassin --

Only.

Only he was.

He wasn’t deserving of that trust. Not with anyone.

“Stop the bus!”

She woke with a start, as did the rest of the snoozing passengers, but Bucky didn’t give a single fuck,
standing in his seat now with the gloved arm waving down the driver.

“Stop the bus, I have to get off. I have to get off.”

~*~ *You’re worth more than this, you know.*~*~

“The last place he’d hidden out after Hydra was here, three or four miles west of the High Line.”

“Did Rogers make a map? Did you make a map?”

“It’s just a quick look.” Steve straightened, sliding the highlighted map of New York towards the
center of the table.

“Well, nobody’s perfect,” a soft voice chimed in his head, quirked red smile. Steve paused, staring
down at the city, circled regions, red X’s, black lines tracing. She couldn’t help now. She couldn’t
even remember him for longer than a half-hour.

Steve set down Stark’s pens, edges of his fingers smudged red and black. The last time he’d poured
over a map with the Commandos, it’d been the same colors under his fingernails. Dirt and blood
traded for artificial ink and that was just the century, wasn’t it.

“And you think he’ll be in one of these places?”

Steve grabbed his jacket off the back of a chair, swinging one arm through on the way to the door, words echoing off the walls as he kept right on walking,

“I know he will.”

~*~You told me you thought I was meant for more than this. Did you mean that?~*~

Steve was right.

By June, 1937 all the hot water surrounding the new Wallabout Terminal had settled down and Bucky Barnes found one of his new favorite hideaways. That was back before the trains made him cringe, when he and Steve used to come down to the shiny new railroad, sneak through the shrieking, sparking railway cars, ducking through still carriages to climb over the rubble on the far end of the terminal and settle on the edge of the waterline, watch the new steam-powered tugboats come into Palmer’s dock.

It was a park now. East River State Park, ran only from North 7th to 9th, bout half what it used to. Some of the old railroad lines were still embedded in the concrete, although there definitely weren’t tugboats coming in the harbor anymore.

There were informational signs, dedicating the park as a historical site. Even some old grainy photos of the arching entrance, all grays instead of the sharp browns and copper, light light blue as Steve glanced over at him with that smile, flop of blonde and dark sketchpad clutched to his chest.

Bucky tapped the photo with his glove, as if that could somehow pull it big enough to be real life again. Real life didn’t have Steve in it.

He turned away from the sign, taking careful steps along the path that hadn’t been here all those years ago. Hands shoved in his pockets, eyes turned down from the glittering water and a lot of things hadn’t been here years ago.

The bench had the perfect view of Midtown and the Manhattan Bridge. Same way those crates did all those years ago.

Bucky closed his eyes.

It didn’t matter where he did it. He was going to, and it was better sooner than later.

But fingering the ring in his pocket, here, this place, this river wasn’t right.

Nothing was, anymore, he should be able to just ditch the damn thing. Throw the last piece of Stark technology that’d fucked over his life into the water, grind it under his heel in the dirt, flick it into some public trashcan.

But every time he had the chance, his hand shoved deeper in his pocket.

He was starting to look like Steve.
“Rogers.”

“Stark.”

Sam glanced between them both, patient expression straining. “...look, are one of you gonna apologize or...?”

“Or this is gonna be a very awkward quinjet ride,” Clint added on, tightening the strap around his wrist.

“Excuse me, did you say one of us? I’m sorry, did I miss who yelled at and accused who of what? Or did my one attempt at actually caring go so entirely south this is somehow my fault?”

“Tony, I don’t think that’s helping--”

“I will leave - right now, midflight, I don’t give a fuck - if this is going to be a fight, or a fucking intervention or whatever the fuck you’re planning. I’m going with you, but believe me, it will not take fucking much to sway that decision. It’s not me who wanted to find him in the fucking first place, remember?”

“Steve, he’s your friend,” Clint pointed out softly.

“Family,” Tony bit snarkily and Steve threw up his hands, snatching his helmet up and stalking to the cabin. He didn’t have to fucking listen to any of that. Fuck them.

“Fuck you all,” Steve cursed under his breath, both hands braced on an outcropping, head hanging down between his arms. He didn’t have the fucking energy.

There’d always been the fucking world between him and Buck and apparently that wasn’t changing anytime soon.

~*~ How was it? It was okay. She’s next to Dad.~*~

It wasn’t just the 1940s homophobia stopping them back then. Bucky didn't think he deserved Steve. Or real love at all. Steve couldn't understand why Bucky would waste his time on someone so delicate and useless.

The war came between them and the war brought them together and the world yanked them apart and never gave them enough time together but even if it had, it didn't matter. Bucky thought he'd changed too much to be anything but a burden to Steve. Steve thought he'd changed too much for Buck to feel like he needed to stick around anymore.

Then the trains and planes ripped them apart and when they got shoved back together again, there were only more problems to layer on. Bucky didn't need. Steve needed too much.

Bucky couldn't give up the past and Steve wanted to live in it but neither of them could handle the
face of the truth and the present. Both were too hurt and too traumatized and they stumbled fast into each other's arms and didn't understand how much had built up over the years in each other's minds.

It never should've worked out anyways. It was too much, too much past and history, too high of pedestals to put each other on. Feathers weighing like rocks, sunshine and stars and moons and clouds and nothing real, nothing human like it should've been.

They weren't what they should've been. They were a war story and a love story and they broke and it was no one's fault but their own.

Or, well. Personally, Bucky'd say it was a hell of a lot more his fault than Steve's. And he didn't let himself think that Steve was probably saying the exact same thing.

Steve may've been the one kicking Bucky out on the surface but under it all, this was Bucky leaving him. Doing the same thing he always had.

Saving Steve - only now that meant what it had before. Walking away, staying away, that was how he saved Steve Rogers today.

The same way he had the day he shipped out.

The same way he had when he'd picked up that shield to be blown out the side of the train.

The same way he had leaving Steve on the shore of the Potomac.

The shore of the Potomac.

He should throw this goddamned ring into that river.

When Zola had him, that final clinging part of him that wouldn't let go - that part of him that was still so attached to Steve - it held on for years and years before he finally crushed it.

And it was here, that he’d crushed it. In a dream, a dream about a dock by a river and in the dream there hadn’t been trains or benches, not parks of the present of pulls of the past, but the view across the river was the same.

Somehow, it was here and it was nowhere, that dream on the docks where Steve had held him close and Bucky told him to leave forever.

It’d been a river that’d taken his arm from him too. Falling down into that cold blackness, surface of the water rocky and freezing and fast, whipping his body in double directions the moment he hit, severing tendons and depositing him on snowy shore, arm torn off somewhere along the way.

Hanging from a metal beam, explosions and sparks around him as he watched Steve’s broken body falling falling falling for the river below. The tearing sensation in his chest, the awful clutching pain screaming at him to save himself and the deep, searing ache telling him to let go, dive after that body.

Fingers releasing, dropping so fast his head threatened to explode, air rushing around him like a cocoon, like a memory at the edge of his peripherals - streamlining his body, dive position he’d perfected that summer at the pier and when he hit the water he didn’t think about the cold or losing his arm or the sun reflecting off Steve’s bare white shoulders that summer at the lake.

Just saving the body sinking so fast below him.

A river, like this one, all that water between them - the best of times, the worst of times.
He should throw the damned ring in.

*Although there are oceans we must cross*
And mountains that we must climb
I know every gain must have a loss
So pray that our loss is nothing but time

Till then, my darling, please wait for me.

And now that ocean between them, the river that’d shaken them so, there was no bridge over it anymore. Steve’d burnt that bridge right to the grou--

The bridge.

It was fitting, Steve’d given it to him on the bridge.

The bridge.

It wasn’t fair. This wasn’t fair, how could Steve *do* this to him, after everything Bucky’d sacrificed it still wasn’t enough and he’d been following Steve Rogers around his entire life how could they be *apart*--

It hurt. It hurt so much he couldn’t think about it, he couldn’t think about the fact that he’d wake up tomorrow and Steve was still going to be gone. Gone, forever, Bucky had no one he *had no one* but that wasn’t as bad as that he *didn’t have* Steve and he couldn’t breathe.

He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe, he’d lost Stevie he’d *lost Stevie*--

Bucky choked, glove shooting up to cover his mouth, holding his mouth so tight a sound couldn’t possibly escape but he could still feel it in his throat, chest, heart. Soul.

If he didn’t start for the bridge now, he’d collapse in a ball before he ever got rid of the damned ring.

The strength it took to drag himself off that bench, all his weight shoved upright, supported by the curving metal because his chest was so heavy and his legs were jello, strong thighs abandoning him, rendered more useless than when he’d been shot.

Steve’d carried him. Steve’d lifted him in those strong arms and carried Bucky over enemy territory, through exploding walls, across freezing rivers, through twisted gnarls of roots in that forest, carried Bucky even though his arms must’ve ached, carried him with that careful, sincere, desperate protection, soot-smudged face and rushed breaths.

It was Bucky’s fault they came so far from that. It was Bucky’s fault they couldn’t be that anymore. It was Bucky who’d reached too much, asked for more, pushed Steve further, destroyed his best friend by making him his lover and it was too late now.

The bullets riddled in his skin were too deep to dig out, bite his belt sew up with floss. Bucky’d been strong then, bit his way through the pain with tears in his eyes that Steve’d thumbed away with those hushed, whispered apologies.

*Strong.*

“Just hold on, Buck, c’mon.”

Staring at the ground like this, long black snakes framed his vision and he’d never gotten Steve to cut
his hair, he’d never gotten out.

The silver ring in a pocket was going to burn right through his skin if he didn’t get out.

He just had to make it one more time. Come home from the war a final time, land at that bridge once more, that was the only place left and then he could stop being strong, he could stop fighting so damn hard.

Stumble out the park.

Catch himself on a lamppost, force himself to breathe right.

There was a time that he swung on lampposts, singing silly songs at Steve over the glittering gold cobblestone while Steve laughed and shook his head but

No. The bridge, he just had to catch a bus. Subway. Taxi, anything.

The taxi driver asked him if he was feeling well and Bucky waved the man off, stared out the window.

It’d cost more to catch the highway and end up stuck on the Brooklyn Bridge, so the man asked if it was alright to drop Bucky at Jane’s Carousel.

Bucky nodded. But standing on shaky feet at the restored ride from 1922, he found himself regretting that agreement.

Sarah took them once a year. Normally for Bucky’s birthday instead of Steve’s, it was so crowded on the Fourth of July they’d never be able to hop aboard.

Once, near the end, Bucky and Steve’d taken Sarah for her birthday. She’d teared up, managed to fight a smile through helping her on the beautiful golden horse.

And around and around and around

Steve’d jumped on one too, smile matching his mother’s as their eyes caught through the mirrors and glitter. Bucky’d stayed outside, watched on with a wistful smile, the two soft blonde-haired angels he was too blessed to have spinning round and round.

Bucky’d never been a catcher in the rye but he could swear he saw his entire life spinning around on that carousel that day. Immortal, those two, going on forever in their youth, beauty, for a single moment everything was alright and they were both healthy and laughing and.

The moment Bucky took Sarah’s hand to help her back off the ride, she started coughing again.

She didn’t stop.

Bucky stared at the empty carousel, the big glass cage around it now. Big glass cage around all of them now.

The carousel wasn’t moving, no spinning gold lights, no immortality, no life. Just that shining glass cage.

It was only a few feet from the base of the bridge. It took him longer than it should’ve to walk to the pedestrian stairs. These were the same stairs they’d come down the day Steve proposed to him. On this bridge, feet away from that carousel where the last bit of life was spinning around before Steve lost his angel and Bucky got a little closer to his.
“You don’t have to,” Bucky whispered, leg straightening to pull him to the top stair. And there it was, the length of the bridge stretched before him, black wires and rushing cars, huge brick archways they’d all but carved their initials into when they were kids.

Peggy’d dropped her last piece of Steve off this bridge. Today, Bucky’d do the same.

Only….only he’d carry Steve’s heart to the grave.

Sucking in dirty air, wind whipping his hair back, two hands closed around the rail, the same spot Steve’d dropped to one knee.

The cold circle of the ring in his pocket. The circle Steve’d drawn around his finger - the dashed line. The end, where it all ended, where it began only it didn’t feel like forever, it felt like they’d been together days instead of months and really, in the face of the lifetimes they’d lived, it was only a blink.

But it’d started so long before this proposal, so long before, back to the first time they’d walked across this bridge as kids, throwing pebbles off into the water, watching the splash ripple out below, blue blue blue.

Shambles, shattered, how could this possibly be the end of their story?

How could this be all they were meant to be?

Apart, forever?

No. No, they were never even supposed to get this far. It should’ve died then, they both should’ve died long before they ever reached this far but they didn’t, they survived and for the first time, Bucky found himself wondering if maybe they really would’ve been better off if Steve’d croaked the first time he got pneumonia.

Fuck this stupid ring. Fuck all of the stupid promises neither of them could keep, fuck it all he didn’t fucking need this anymore, the pain was going to crush him and he honestly had no idea how he was supposed to survive it, it was too much fuck Steven Grant Rogers.

Metal whirring as his arm surged backwards, one final pause because this was it, the moment he followed through and threw the ring it was all over, that was his last piece of Steve and he’d be absolutely nothing, tethered to nothing with no proof it’d even ever existed and it hadn’t, he hadn’t, it didn’t, he might as well fucking throw--

Bucky stopped.

Arm reeled back and hair whipping in his face and eyes flooded with tears and he stopped, because he couldn’t. He couldn’t throw it, he couldn’t throw Steve’s ring into the river below because he’d never been strong enough to, he was strong enough to do anything but leave Steve, he just couldn’t he always always came crawling back, through trenches and apartment windows he couldn’t, Steve was so much stronger than him he couldn’t, James Bucky Barnes was not physically strong enough to do this--

No. No.

He wasn’t.
But.

But it hurt so bad.

James Buchanan Barnes wasn’t strong enough.

But The Winter Soldier was.

Metal creaking, arm slowly lowering. Ripple from gloved fingers up through his spine, straightening out with a shiver. Tall. Steady. Legs locking into place, weak muscles hardening, whipping hair no longer stinging. Bridge below his feet zeroing in, out. Water splashing below suddenly loud enough to hear, each speeding car behind zipping by popping up numbers on speeds and types and.

He reached over slowly, skin fingers pinching the tip of a black glove, tugging it off slowly, careful not to drop the silver ring from his palm. And then it was metal on metal, glove deposited to the ground, discarded.

This ring.

Fingers closed around the edge of the twisting metal, closed around every promise Steve’d ever made him.

*I had you. Til’ death.*

The metal arm reached out, hovering over the water crashing below. It was more fitting to let it fall, the way they’d both dropped before. Fall slowly slowly to its death.

Except Bucky wasn’t pulling anybody out this time.

Not Steve and not himself.

*Goodbye, my darling.*

Whirr.

Metal fingers open.

A single flash of sunlight off silver and the ring dropped, tumbling down down down.

Black waves to meet it below.

Black to meet them all.

~*~ *Barnes is the only Howling Commando to give his life in service of his country.*~*~

Red, red he hadn’t seen in months.

The last time he squeezed these old gloves over his hands, Bucky’d backed him up against a brick wall on a rooftop and kissed him mid-mission, he could still remember the contrast of dark brunette tumbling over the red leather as Steve ran his fingers through the long hair, mesmerized at the bright twinkle in teasing eyes, heated lips--
Fucking fuck. Fuck Buck for making him do this. Steve rolled his neck, barely able to move with the tight collar against his throat, stealing what breath Bucky hadn’t beaten outta him with that brutal punch, the one that’d destroyed every false promise of the *I love you* he could never say.

Another tightening zipper. He hated Bucky for making him do this. One last time, had to save the world one last time. had to put himself through hell one last time. Had to shove himself into the gaudy redwhiteandblue one last time, compromise everything he’d fought for because he knew, it wasn’t Captain America anymore. Steve’d already come to terms with being the bully - monster - he’d always fought and now he had to go through suiting up into that lie all over again.

One last mission, for the good of it all, because what the fuck else did they keep Steve around for but for this. What the fuck else did Steve ever get back into fighting for? When the fuck was the last time this was about Steve?

He tightened the strap across his thigh, all but cutting into flesh, sliding the gun into one more holster. Fuck Bucky for making it about him again.

Fuck Bucky for making Steve run around the earth for him only to be stabbed in the chest - literally, once, but Steve apparently couldn’t take a fucking hint.

Or any of the fucking hints Bucky’d been dropping since the beginning of their lives together.

He was nothing more than a responsibility.

Bucky felt responsible for the sick kid he'd saved once in an alley and it wasn't love that kept him there.

It was duty.

The same duty that had Steve lacing up these stupid fucking boots in the back of a quinjet.

Funny, how during the war he could've sworn it was the other way around.

Funny, how Steve was supposed to be the loyal one who'd sacrifice anything for his country, his duty. He'd sacrifice anything but Buck, anyways.

And Bucky'd sacrifice anything for him because *he* was Bucky’s responsibility. His duty.

And his fucking loyalty was so precious, so strong - it *made* Steve think he loved him. And Bucky’d let that happen. Let it happen because he wanted what was best for Steve and that was in his arms but not his heart because Steve was SAFE there but Bucky didn't LOVE him.

Steve still needed to be protected apparently. And that only meant one thing.

Steve wasn't good enough.

Still wasn’t fucking good enough.

He nearly broke his nose shoving the helmet on his head and good, wouldn’t that be just ironic, this stupid uniform giving him more bruises than protection. Back in the days of broken noses, he didn’t make himself believe Bucky was in love with him and all that physical pain? He’d take that back a thousand times over this.

Give him the rattle and breaks in his chest over the hole any day.

Snap of the shield on his arm and Steve was fucking ready. One last time.
That’s a tough way to live. It’s a good way not to die, though.

Like he’d told Natasha. Bucky could never rid himself of Steve.

So it was simple. Forget Bucky. Be the Winter Soldier.

*ends where it begins.*

"Let’s see, we met while I was pulling you out of a fight," he pondered, pressing a kiss to Steve’s neck as he began tracing Bucky’s wrists again. "You think that’s where we’ll have the eternal breakup too?"

"No," Steve corrected patiently, "The line began when I felt alive for the first time and it ends when we die together."

"Jesus Christ you have the most twisted version of romance in the world," Bucky huffed faintly, shaking his head at Stevie’s maudlin tone that belonged in a tinier body. Steve hummed in response, circling line and dash again, and again, before tipping his head against Bucky’s and dropping his voice into a whisper.

"Kiss me."

"Here?"

"Here."

He shifted in Steve’s lap, tipping his head up and curling on his side so their mouths could press together, colder than the water lapping at their chests. Lips dragged together and apart, heads tilting as Steve tightened his arm over Bucky’s chest and licked along his tong--

Covering his face with cold metal was about the quickest thing to snap the hottub memory to dust, reality smacking in sharp and freezing like the chill settling on his skin, the bite from the window he curled beside.

It wasn’t really a bed. A mattress, tucked up against a wall. It was better than the floor, at least made him feel somewhat civilized. Not the soldier.

There was a thin blanket too, something he’d snagged downtown when he got the hat, the concealer for the worst of the bruises on his cheekbone.

But lying here on an empty mattress staring out the window at Brooklyn streets, curled up in a ball and just waiting?

He didn’t want to be a runaway.

He didn’t want to be left alone. He didn’t want to be alone anymore. Please, just.

Weight, the *heaviness* of his fingers crushed against each other. He could do this.

Bucky slowly lifted his hand, shadows falling over his face in the darkness. This hand used to grab Steve’s when they were kids, drag him running across Central Park. This hand was real. Fingers sticking to each other like some kind of human security.
It was simple, wasn’t it?

Suck in a careful breath, chest expanding with oxygen, release slow through pursed lips and spread fingers away from each other, room for power to come dancing up between.

It was a little better. The weight in his chest didn’t lift entirely.

Didn’t feel like home like he’d hoped. Or powerful. But there was something freeing about it.

Ebbing, waning away the crushed, sticky weight. Almost enough for him to lift his head off the pillow. But the sinking, the falling down towards the earth, pulled to the ground and away from St--

That wasn’t gone. Wouldn’t ever be gone, would it?

He could swear the fingers in front of his face were see-through. Fading, dissipating in the air like the skin of a ghost--

No.

The hand flopped back carelessly to the sheets only that felt all kinds of ugly again and he couldn’t hold his fingers apart forever but he couldn’t let them touch and…

Folds of thin blanket, tucked between his fingers to keep them from collapsing into each other.

His chest was still caving in.

Head pounding, throat dry.

Physically ill and the room kept shifting gravitational pull, balance all off like he’d never get comfortable in the oxygen bubble again in his life.

He just had to get back in. Get back in, turn it back on.

If he could only slip back into the ease of being that, he wouldn’t have to be this anymore.

He could be clean again. Saved. He could stop hurting, couldn’t he?

No. No, no.

He’d fucking fight that until the day he died.

It would get rid of the pain but so what?

When Steve came for him, he didn’t want to be the Winter Soldier, he wanted to be Bucky Barnes.

He didn’t go down that easy, just because he was hurt, just because he was alone--

forever, the voice in his head reminded him and Bucky moaned, whipping onto his other side, shifting his weight, sinking further but not far enough, never far enough and his neck couldn’t stay like that, turn again, roll and kick and fuck fuck fuck it wasn’t fair, he didn’t want to be alone he just had to wait, it wouldn’t be like this for long, Ste--

Steve. Steve wasn't coming for him.

The end of the line, he’d said it was over and

He had to. So long as he was alive. Steve wouldn’t leave him so long as they were both breathing.
He’d promised.

Only, it felt like Bucky wasn't anymore.

Lungs couldn’t take in oxygen with that crushing--

Sleep. Needed sleep and tomorrow, it’d all reset and be so much brighter tomorrow. Maybe he’d have the strength to crawl out of bed tomorrow.

And he was just going to fall asleep, just like that? Miserable and aching with his head fucking spinning--

What about his goddamned safety? There used to be a time - he remembered when he only felt safe sleeping under Steve’s roof. There’d been something there he’d trusted with every fiber of his being, even with all his training in full activation because it was Steve and he’d saved Bucky so many times-

Except the last time

And he’d come for him again, wouldn’t he?

Why wasn’t he here yet? Why wasn’t he here?

Vision was going outta focus, spotty at the edges. The random objects strewn across the empty apartment were dappling and shifting. Painted black, swallowed shapes threatening to swallow him right back if he stared too long.

Dry throat.

He had to stay away from Steve. He couldn’t let Steve save him, not now, not when it was his turn to save Steve. That’s why he’d walked away, that’s why he was here, and he couldn’t let himself be so weak he forgot that.

He had to be strong. Like Steve. To save Steve.

He didn’t want to fucking stay away.

Romanoff was wrong.

Was she?

He’d never fucking find peace, he’d never fucking move on from Steve fucking Rogers and he sure as hell couldn’t live without him and there was no right answer here.

The empty space on his left hand where a wedding ring had been just this morning didn’t feel any different because his left hand didn’t feel and he hated that more than everything else in the entire goddamned world.

The warmth of the sheets wasn’t the same as the sunshine but summer was fading and Steve’s skin couldn't loll him to sleep anymore.

*If you love me, let me go-o-o-o-o.*

By god, if there was one thing in this world that was true, it was that Bucky Barnes fucking loved Steve Rogers.
“I love you,” Bucky whispered to the dark, jaw clicking and sending a fucking blast of pain up through his skull, behind his eyes and fuck fuck.

Gooooooood

He couldn’t do colors, couldn’t do the bright in the morning, he’d fucking die.

Bucky fumbled for his phone, unlocking it and squinting in the bright light, cursing under his breath as he navigated as quickly as possible to the Accessibility section. Grayscale.

There, black and white, like them, like the only happy footage of Bucky Barnes in fucking existence, he could fucking take that without wanting to hurl.

It was late enough that the world was quiet, everything black and white in the darkness with the surrendered cones in his eyes so this, this was what he needed.

No.

No, the Winter Soldier didn’t need--

He was not the Winter So

He was not the Winter Soldier and he did not need.

He did not need.

Ghosts, did not need.

Welcome to...

...the end of eras.

~*~It’s my last night. Gotta get you cleaned up.~*~

“Why the fuck wasn’t he there either?”

“Rogers, there’s at least twenty other places on this map--”

“He should’ve been in that park. It used to be a train station, we used to go and. And. It doesn’t fucking matter, I don’t get why he wasn’t there.”

Slam, flinch. Shuffle of quiet feet.

“What about your old apartments?”

“No, that’s one of the last places he’d go. It’s too obvious. Bucky doesn’t do fucking obvious.”

“Could you possibly just...call him?”
“...you’re actually being serious right now.”

“C’mon, man, it’s not like--”

“Not like what?? Not like we fucking broke up?!? WE DID. WE FUCKING BROKE UP.”

“Steve--”

“I’m not fucking calling him Sam. Fucking hell, how many times to I have to fucking spell it out? BUCKY AND I BROKE UP. We broke up! It’s over!! We’re over!! Even if I did fucking call him you think he’d pick up?? I LEFT HIM BLEEDING IN THE RAIN, SAM. IT’S OVER.”

“Steve, pl--”

“IT’S OVER. And this search is about to be too, if you keep fucking pushing.”

“....okay. Okay. I’ll see you for breakfast, then?”

“I’m not gonna jump out the fucking window if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Jesus, Rogers. Not what I-- Okay. Whatever, man. I’ll be next door if you need me.”

“I don’t!” Steve shouted after him, right before the door slammed in his face.

He probably deserved that. Worse, even.

Sam didn’t deserve any of this.

Wouldn’t life’ve been so much easier for Sam Wilson if he’d been a dick the first time they’d met? If he hadn’t let Steve show up at his door like a sad puppy? If he hadn’t followed Steve around the earth to get shot at, mocked, and brushed aside at the end of it all?

He couldn’t fucking stand this. He couldn’t stand the hurt on Sam’s face and knowing he put it there, he couldn’t take the flash of fear in Tony’s eyes, the way his fingers twitched like he was about to call on his suit as a barrier between the raging supersoldier and the Innocents.

Fuck. Fucking hell.

_Fuck Bucky Barnes._

The wall exploded more inward than he’d expected, shattering plaster within itself and barely getting any white powder on his boot. Fucking odd, probably some fancy Stark technology or something. Fucking Stark technology.

Fucking Captain America boots.

See, the difference between now and this same temper tantrum in 1937 was that kicking the wall didn’t do a fucking thing back then. Neither did shouting _I don’t need your charity_ at Bucky as he slammed out of the door for the thousandth time after buying Steve fucking _art supplies._

Jesus Christ was it always about fucking Bucky Barnes?

Even in 1937 there’d been some part of his raging tiny self that wondered why the fuck Buck went to such extremes for him. He’d never been sure, but there was some _tiny_ part of him that almost suspected.
Always at least hoped.

Then 80 years later Bucky gave him the painting, that beautiful work of art he spent months on--

And he saw Steve like that?

And he wanted Steve to know that’s how he saw them and it was more than that, even more than that because it was in every stroke, clear as day. Bucky fucking loved him. Steve could see it, in the careful dabs of every color--

Then he’d fallen asleep in Steve’s arms and he’d been sure, for the first time he’d been so sure.

And Bucky told him. Finally, after years of keeping that secret, the secret that’d torn everything apart the first time, the secret that Steve knew was so goddamned important because it was the only thing Bucky held to his chest like those four words could save his life.

Finally, he’d parted those beautiful lips and told Steve the deepest piece of him he’d never shared. 

*I loved him first.*

He told Peggy that. He shouted that at her. He’d told Peg - Steve’s girl that Bucky’d loved him first.

Or did he?

Was even that a fucking lie?

Honestly, Steve couldn’t even picture it.

Even if he did, didn’t mean he meant it. Certainly didn’t mean it now.

It didn’t fucking count, because he’d never told Steve he loved him. Never. Not once.

So it was more lies, possessive lies. He didn’t love Steve, and Bucky’d done everything in his power to prove that. He couldn’t say it out loud. If he meant it, he’d say it.

Fuck him. He didn’t get to rip Steve apart like this.

Splash of cold water, careful not to shatter the porcelain sink. He’d taken everything.

Who the fuck was he without Bucky? Before Bucky?

Was there a single part of him that wasn’t entwined so deeply with that lying, manipulative--

There had to be. He’d been a whole person before he’d met Buck. Bucky. Hadn’t he? Of course he had. He’d been sick and he’d been angry - not as fucking angry as he was right fucking now - and what the fuck had he done with all that spare time if it wasn’t--

That’s. That’s what.

That was *his*. Before Bucky was ever around.

*He used to have free time every day back in Brooklyn. The hell did he do with it all?*

*Oh. Of course. There were some supplies he needed to borrow from the correspondents' tent.*

Or Sam’s desk, really. And he wasn’t skipping down to a goddamned shared tent to invite Barnes along this time. No confessions under trees, this was Steve’s *before* Buck gave him sketchbooks and
made faces while Steve smiled and sketched pouty lips from the couch--

He wore black and I wore white--

The scratch of the pencil was about to drive him mad but the lines weren’t dark enough, gray smearing shiny instead of inking black, harsh shadows laughing at him behind the dark reflective goggles, the etched holes in Bucky’s mask, sharp flicks up from the pavement, the sparks as that metal hand clawed him to a stop, hair whipping in the wind.

A halo of eraser pieces, which wasn’t right. His angel was afraid of the light, his angel only saved, didn’t love, didn’t hold sunlight in his arms without burning them both to hell and fuck those eraser shreds. His pinky was already chalked dark with graphite and the flick to clear away the assassin’s halo just smeared this black shade over the flowing dark hair and fine, what the fuck ever, shadows followed Buck around anyways.

“This is your fault, you bastard,” Steve grit behind his teeth, smudging his hand further across the page because why the fuck not, might as well paint with his blood and tears in there too, right? God knows Bucky sucked the goddamned light outta him anyways.

“This is your goddamned fault.” Scratch scratch, snap of the tip of the pencil lead.

No one to sigh and snatch the pencil from him this time, deft hands quickly whipping out a pocket knife to sharpen it for him again, tossing it back on his drawing with a ruffling hand in Steve’s hair---

“Your goddamned fault, you c-coward.” Bottom lip quivering and Steve bit it to make it stop, he wasn’t gonna let his fucking hands shake.

God, he was so fucking angry. How could Buck do this to him? How could he be that cruel, to spend months - a lifetime, really - letting Steve believed he loved him when he didn’t because he couldn’t face telling Steve he fucking didn’t and it was fucking unbelievable--

A single droplet splat, on the page, another fucking halo amongst the dark smudges, only the paper was thin enough that it started crinkling from the salty water before he could brush off again and how was he still ruining everything??

He wasn’t gonna waste the goddamned energy shredding it.

Blink, blink, one more droplet threatening to fall only he wasn’t gonna fucking cry, wasn’t gonna give Buck that power he didn’t deserve.

Fuck.

Sweep of his arm and it all went clattering to the floor, paper and journals and files and his cup of pens and it didn’t fucking matter Buck deserved the world and he fucking lied.

Steve dug the heels of his palms into his eyesockets, anything to make the pounding behind his eyes go away, to keep the corners from fucking watering because he wasn’t gonna cry, he couldn’t cry, he’d never fucking stop crying if he did and he couldn’t keep living like this, he couldn’t keep fucking living like this.

So what the fuck happened if they found Bucky? Steve threw his fucking ring back at him and Sam embedded a tracker in his fucking arm so they could make sure he didn’t go on murderous rampages?

See, that would require Buck actually caring about him that deeply. A fight wasn’t worth--
A breakup, a breakup wasn’t worth all the trouble.

“Probably too fucking late to find you anyways,” Steve muttered, shoving away from the desk, raking fingers through his already fucked up hair, spinning around to freeze - Sam was leaning in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest.

“I don’t think it’s too late to find him,” Sam offered quietly. Steve just stared. The clatter from the desk probably brought him back over. He’d have to throw his tantrums quietly apparently. That quiet, hopeful, cautious tone, brown eyes soft and all promise and friendship again and. “I think he still wants to be found.”

“I haven’t known what Bucky wants in a long time.” At least he wasn’t fucking crying. At least he hadn’t broken that far. He wasn’t breaking any further.

“None of it’s your fault, Steve.”

Yeah. He wasn’t playing that fucking game.

“Yeah, thanks, I know. Goodnight, Sam.”

Steve turned his back to the door and Sam would either get the memo and go or stand there and watch him longer but he didn’t care either way, he was going to get some fucking sleep.

Because it wasn’t his fault.

Because. That one thing his head kept trying to say, about how it was, he wasn’t going to let himself think it. Not even once.

It wasn’t. It wasn’t.

Or maybe, if you hadn’t ab--

No. No, fuck Bucky Barnes, that’s what. Goddamn him to hell. On his goddamned own.

Let him fucking be alone.

Steve was done chasing.

~*~

Most of the intelligence community doesn’t believe he exists. The ones that do call him the Obsidian, painted fingertips, dragging in streaks over closed eyes.

Couldn’t do it in front of a mirror yet, but the only glass around was the broken shards at his feet.

The alley sharpened into focus with the opening blink, dark shadows long enough to drape over the stars like the cold black sky he was.

The old steel beams had been easy enough to bend down, wedge between window ledges on opposite buildings. It wasn’t like he had access to Stark’s gym anymore.

He kept sweating off the eyemask, but it was easy enough to smear darker, slab another layer over dirty skin. Didn't have Stark's fancy gym showers either.
The black made his fingertips threaten to slip as he threw himself at the bar again, catching the momentum with metal before he slid right off, plummeted the twenty feet to the ground.

He hadn't been down there in the past three hours, wasn't gonna break the streak of windowledge training now.

Fingers spread on the bar, cold metal between each. Energy rippling between each.

He'd found the magnetized feature in his arm panel. It threw him off every now and then, having to focus on keeping his left hand from curling in the way the magnets were begging.

But it kept him in check. Which he needed.

Sweat dripping down his jaw. Heart pounding in his exposed throat, legs curling to whip, swing. Blur of brick, Brooklyn noise, toes catching on a clip in the wall.

Strands of hair plastered across his face, sticking in the heat. It was the second week of September and New York hadn't been this hot in September for as long as he could remember.

And he could remember a fucking lot. Too much.

Way too fucking much.

Like the way Steve's eyes crinkled, leaning into Bucky's space as he laughed--

Fuck. Brick crumbled precariously beneath his fingertips, crushed by metal and raw skin, calluses spotted with blood from getting treated so roughly for hours but really, if he’d kept up his goddamned training, the calluses wouldn’t’ve faded what they did.

Just seventeen more rounds, seventeen more angles to make sure he could land perfectly, seventeen more ledges big enough to jump to from his bending makeshift gymnast pole.

Breath, dust and broken promises lodging in his throat, coating his tongue against the roof of his mouth, energy focused on that focal point, on the controlled, shallow air switching through his nose, seeping his head with oxygen, lighting up neurons as he coiled his muscles, timed the push off perfectly.

Caught bar, swing, pull up to perch the tips of his boots treacherously on the thin bar, crouched and calculating.

God, he was exhausted.

Fingers black and red from the facepaint and flecks of blood, but fuck his heart was pumping in his chest and he was fucking alive--

No. No, that wasn’t right either.

He’d entirely forgotten how to do this, hadn’t he? Been way too goddamned busy fading to nothing between Steve’s sheets to scrape his skin up scaling buildings for parkour practice. But he wasn’t supposed to feel this energized, that wasn’t the point.

It wasn’t a celebration. It was a funeral.

The death of the bad habits he’d allowed back, the death of the pain he’d been penting up, the pain
that was going to consume him if he didn’t find an outlet.

This outlet had worked before. So all he had to do was work, fight, beat himself into the mold of what he used to be and it’d all go away. But the endorphins, the high he was feeling, that exhilaration making his heart race --

the moment he touched the ground it’d slip from him like all those smiles had slipped from behind masks.

Exhilaration didn’t last. Especially when the workout was over and he didn’t have his sparring partner to race to the showers, ruffle his fingers through wet blonde hair--

Exhaustion. That lasted. He had to work himself harder. Harder until he didn’t have the energy for his blood to pump any longer. Harder until he could barely stand, that’s when it’d be enough for him to collapse in bed without the nightmares.

Maybe.

It was the best shot he had.

Harder. Until he didn’t notice the red flecking his fingertips was red smearing his hands.

Until the black was running down his eyes in terrifying lines, sweat or tears, messy and dirty and.

Exhaustion.

Stumbling into the cheap hotel room took more than it should’ve because he hadn’t thought through the conservation, saving energy by not moving when he didn’t have to, eating just enough, drinking just enough--

Shower. Cold, quick, wet hair down on pillows.

They gave him two and he put them in a V, head perfectly centered between. Silence, falling down like the perfectly pulled sheet. Stretched, elongate with fingers splayed against the headboard, feet en pointe towards the opposite wall.

Flat, on his back like this, coffin of pillows from his shoulders like broken wings, eyes closed, focus focus, time to go through and manually relax every muscle in his body.

Down. Down, down, the mattress was shit but he wasn’t falling, fingers were anchored against the shitty headboard and he could focus on that--

Focus on everything, toes to the cut on his ankle to the scrapes on hand and the slight stretch of the scars on his shoulder, under his left armpit, tugging at the skin metal junction with his arms above his head like this.

Proper anatomical position they should be at his sides, palms up, ready for the blades to sink in.

So he wasn’t doing that. Because he wasn’t doing this for Hydra, for the sick bastards who wanted to use him.

This was about being so fucking exhausted his body didn’t give his head the choice to talk about St--

This was about controlling himself again so he could control the pain, make it go away enough to get a fucking grip before he cried himself to sleep again.
Sleep. He just had to sink his body into the blackness, roll back behind the darkness of his eyes where everything was peaceful, just один, дба--

The dizziness hit like a semi, not a wave.

Immense, rushing spin, the disorientation from sitting up too fast in bed, bile coating esophagus cells and pounding so loud his chest could burst.

Only he couldn’t sit up, the world was spinning too much, locked flat on his back in a black velvet coffin to suffocate only it was being shoved sideways off its table, spinning spinning round and round tipping in that awful rolling machine they’d shoved him in--

Had to fight it, just fight and steady himself, he wasn’t moving it was just his head, had to center, центр, fuck.

Couldn’t get an equilibrium.

Bucky gasped, popping his eyes open in surrender, rolling his head to one side and curling his arms into his chest, breaking the perfect but god, fuck, his brain wasn’t trying to end him anymore. He was here, on Earth, face tucked in a pillow and he couldn’t even fucking lie still, lie in that dead sleeping position without wanting to hurl.

That was fucking awful.

A couple breaths, if he just found his center again he could straighten back out. He wasn’t so fucking weak he had to sleep on his side. He could pull off sleeping on his back, he could. He just had to get his head fucking in it.

Or, really, out of it.

Okay. Roll onto his back. Eyes closing, careful this time not to relax too fast into the darkness. Just sink, slowly. Minutes ticking, muscles ticking, and finally his hamstrings released, right on the edge of relaxing and crash.

Limbs convulsed, spiraling through the ceiling to collide with the mattress, jolting hard from the shove off a dream building to shock awake at the icy bottom only he hadn’t even fucking fallen asleep yet and he couldn’t stop breathing so hard, throat pounding and chest heaving over propped elbows.

Motherfucker.

His body was fighting it. Fighting him. Everyone ounce of his subconscious was fighting what he used to be. Maybe it remembered all the torture that came with.

And maybe it was forgetting the torture it’d be to never see Steve again.

He had to fucking do this.

Bucky sucked in a breath, forcing himself to lay back down. Sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems be damned. He’d find a way to control the damn individual synapses in ganglion if he had to.

The only thing more stubborn than his goddamned subconscious was his conscious and if that was going to be his battle over the next few weeks, fine.
Better that than the way it really was.

Him versus Steve.

How did us against the world turn into me against you?

~*~ For as long as I can remember, I only wanted to do what was right. Guess I’m not quite sure what that is anymore.~*~

“I just want you,” Bucky murmured, lips plush against the heated skin on Steve’s neck.

_write our names in the stars_, were the last words on his lips but Bucky didn’t want the red white and blue, didn’t want the freedom fights and the statues.

_I just want you._

“We can be free,” Steve whispered back and Buck curled his fingers into Steve’s bare hip, pressing a little closer beneath the wisping sheets.

“Thought that’s what the world war was for.” The design he was tracing over Steve’s muscle and bone - five points, like them, like both of them even lying here bare in the sheets, their shadows were still painted with stripes and stars.

“Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains,” he told the ceiling in his Captain America voice and Bucky’s head popped up, long hair hanging in crystal eyes as he squinted them curiously. Steve palmed the silken pieces away, fingers brushing down the side of Bucky’s face.

“Rousseau? The only chain we got left is this one.” Metal fingers tugged at the dogtags around Steve’s neck, tweaking the warmed beads to rub against sensitive skin and Steve couldn’t help but smile up at the mischievous glint in those crystal--

Only maybe, in that conversation. Maybe their words had been reversed. Maybe it was Bucky who quoted Rousseau - maybe it was Steve who’d said I just want you.

I just want you.

He didn’t want to know who said it. Any of it. All their conversations were some jumble now, they’d both said so much and the silence had been so loud he remembered those parts better than any of the words.

Why couldn’t he find Bucky?

Why couldn’t he find out how Bucky really felt until Steve was in way too fucking deep?

Really, he’d always been in too deep for it not to hurt, but they’d _slept together_, kissed, dreamed, started to build a future together--

And _that_ was when Bucky finally decided to admit he didn’t love Steve? Or worse, refuse to admit that he loved him. Which meant, obviously, he didn’t.
That was honestly so so much worse. Because if Bucky just flat out said it - I don’t love you, I never have and I never will --

Then maybe Steve’s chest would stop fucking blossoming with that tiny, minute, miniscule hope that maybe there was just the smallest percent of a chance that Bucky still did--

No, no, he didn’t, he’d made that so fucking clear Steve had to get the fuck outta his way-too-optimistic mindset. Just...had to get out of his head. Fuck, he didn’t care if he lost his mind, so long as he didn’t have to fucking take this.

Was he supposed to look for Bucky or not?

What the fuck would he do if he found him? If he didn’t want Bucky back then why was he so fucking pissed everytime another spot on the map showed up empty?

How did us against the world become me against you?

~*I can do this all day.*~

Knuckles split under gloves only he couldn’t stand the red leather anymore, couldn’t stand the Howling Commando wings on his helmet or the raised star on his chest but he couldn’t wear a leather jacket into battle and he certainly couldn’t wear his army greens.

So he punched hard enough that the red seeping through split knuckles didn’t match the red of the leather but that didn’t really matter anymore either.

~*Please. Don’t make me do this.*~

He woke himself to his own screams the third night in a row and that meant skipping to another hotel again because he didn’t do questions. Didn’t do human interaction at all, really.

People didn’t try talking to the man stalking down hallways and slipping through shadows. And it was good they didn’t, he’d had enough chatter from Steve’s goddamned friends in the past few months to last him a lifetime.

The rooftops had all the sounds of the city without the people, so it wasn’t all that surprising he found himself on one again.

Found himself a lot of places, doing a lot of things he couldn’t remember ever deciding to go, or do.

It’d been like that once, when his feet took him on autopilot to Steve’s door.

Feet had always taken him on autopilot to Steve’s door. Knock knock, crash, guess who’s climbing in your window to fucking destroy your life--

*I always fall from your window to the pitch black streets.*

Hadn’t been able to wean himself off music yet. It stopped sounding like noise a long time ago and honestly, Bucky didn’t wanna lose one of the only familiar things he had left. The idea of throwing out all his music too just.

If his playlists were records, he would’ve worn ‘em thin by now.
Besides, up here standing on the edge of a roof with the wind whipping his hair in his face, earbuds might be the only thing keeping his workouts fucking sane.

Only problem was, when he was working on evasions with his hands tied behind his back, he couldn’t change the song. Which meant shuffle kept landing him in some pretty shitty ass situations.

The current though, might take the cake.

He was hanging upside down from the edge of the roof, hands pinned to work on his abdominals under the adrenaline rush and colder wind with the distraction of staying out of sight of civilians when his wonderful iPod chose to shuffle onto Fall Out Boy.

Specifically, the **one that started with fucking whistling**.

Bucky cursed.

Wiggled, trying to pry one hand free to change the goddamned song only he’d tied the goddamned knots, they weren’t coming out in this position. All he managed to do was spill fucking brick powder in his face from the roof ledge.

Great, just gr--

*Stuck in the jetwash, bad trip, I couldn’t get off.*

“I didn’t bite off more than I could chew, you bastard,” Bucky cursed again, wiggling some more.

So what if he’d known he could never tell Steve he loved him? He just hadn’t expected Steve to be so fucking **adamant about it**. It wasn’t his goddamned fault.

Fall to your fucking knees. There was not a single blessed thing about them.

It was useless trying to get out like this. The whole point was that he put himself somewhere he couldn’t shimmy outta easy and he wasn’t fucking ending his workout, not because’a some goddamned song.

*Black banners raised as the crooked smiles fade…*  

It. Wasn’t. His. Fault.

It wasn’t fucking fair, *Steve* was the one who dragged Bucky down a road he couldn’t take, *Steve* who dropped the shield, *Steve* who Bucky’d given his goddamned life for, *Steve* who Bucky’d loved too fucking m--

Inhale.

*And in the end, I’d do. it. all. again.*

Bucky’s lungs shut down.

*I think you’re my best friend. Don’t you know that the kids aren’t all, kids aren’t alright?*

“No,” he breathed aloud, praying his voice would cover the next lyrics only they didn’t, they didn’t at all.

*And I’m yours.*
That was enough of that.

“Can’t fucking do this,” he submitted to the wind, gritting his teeth and snapping his body upright, using the momentum to tumble back onto the safety of the roof, rolling awkwardly to a stop on his side.

The headphones weren’t even *loosened*.

He’d ran them up through his shirt, so he couldn’t even yank them out or anything. Just had to get the fucking tie off his wrists and he could stop being pummeled by the Whistling Song from Hell.

*I’m not passive but aggressive, take note it’s not impressive.*

WASN’T his fucking fault. Not like he’d known picking up the tiny kid with the bloody nose black eye would eventually make him a master assassin, hindsight was fucking twenty-twenty and all he’d tried to do was help the kid who couldn’t stop fucking punching things.

*...we put your curse in reverse*

Those tiny fists, always raised, then that giant shield, red gloves, everything wrong shined up and stamped true--

*And it's our time now if you want it to be, maul the world like a carnival bear--*

Flash of spinning lights, Steve’s high-pitched laughter, spun sugar bright music, towering Cyclone up ahead, Steve’s thin ribs against his elbow as Bucky pointed -- set free

Couldn’t seem to get his damn wrists free, held behind his back, sweaty fingers wrapped around his skin, Steve’s knee in the middle of his back.

“You surrender?” Breathless and exhilarated, voice so much lower now,

*And I still feel that rush in my veins,*

The blue going dark as he backed Bucky into the counter, strong hands possessive on his hips, dipping close enough to breathe heat over Bucky’s neck, head tipped to the side, fingers tightening, eyes shut as his throat ch-choked--

*Dead.*

Bucky shook his head, snapping out of the memories behind the veil of sweaty hair in his face, wrists aching and ears still blasting, words echoing and overlapping each other as his vision spun in and out of focus.

*All those people-- s’aren’t alrigh-- in those old photogra-- best frien-- I've see-- it pours, stay thirsty-- are dead.*

All it took was one moment of pure concentration, zeroing in on the flexing metal plates, ripping as quickly and rough as possible. Snap. His right-hand wrist felt damn near broken from the force, but the tie was gone, hands free but his heart was still seizing, head still shorting out out.

*...sometimes I just wanna sit around and gaze at my shoes...*

Shoes, fucking Christ these weren’t even his shoes, a size too small but he’d grabbed them for the museum and hadn’t fucking done a thing about them since, hadn’t fucking done a thing since he’d stepped off the goddamned bridge where he left behind the thing that beat between his ribs--
The same one that pounded between beaten ribs he’d patched together with careful fingers, careful loving fingers while he bit his lip practically as bloody as Steve’s with worry because it was his, it was his same heart that beat in Steve’s chest and now that they were apart Steve’d left with the most of it and Bucky didn’t have enough left to breathe.

*I think you’re my best friend.*

Don’t you know that the kids aren’t al-, kids aren’t alright?

Crash crash and the metal covering half his face was so cold, but the other half was dirty, scraped up raw, wasn’t any fucking better and for the third distinctly memorable time in his life Bucky gasped into his hands and wished so hard they were Steve’s hands instead he could feel it radiating from his fingertips--

“M’yours,” he crumbled. “M’yours, m’yours, m’yours.”

*When it rains it pours.* The water sliding down Steve’s bloody knuckles as his fingers slipped out of Bucky’s.

*Stay thirsty like before.* He’d wanted, he’d wanted so badly he ached since so so long ago and it was never going to stop aching. He was…..never going to stop being in pain.

How was he supposed to live like that?
How was he supposed to live like that??

*Don’t you know that the kids aren’t al-, kids aren’t alright?*

Whistleeeeee

“Hey sugar, you rationed?” The laugh, high and bright and barely believing, nowhere near matching the fondness in Steve’s eyes, mouth curled up in a smile, skin glowing in the sunshine, sea-wind rustling through blonde hair.

"You wanna go steady with me?" He finally managed, half-incredulous, still smiling like an idiot.

Steve softened a little, smile turning more sweet than amused, gazing at Bucky like he was thinking the exact same thing, living that exact same movie reel, except this time Steve's next words were quite different.

"I want you to be my boyfriend."

Crash.

"You're looking at me like I'm something to paint on," Bucky replied, a little disbelief mixed in the awe, hand swooping over the curve of Steve's bare spine. He lifted up at that, eyebrows furrowed in confusion and hesitance.

"It's a good thing," Bucky assured him.

Crash.

"Are you crying?" Steve asked and Bucky's hand whirred as he brought it away from his mouth, tried uselessly to glare down at his asshole of a best friend.

"My b-best guy just asked me to marry him, of course I'm c...crying."
A bright laugh and that was nice, at least Steve was enjoying himself, then there was a tug on his hand as Steve hoisted himself to his feet and wrapped his arms around Bucky.

Wrapped his arms around, and promised to never let go.

He promised to never let go.

Why?

~*~Did you read the report? Yes. Then you know that's not true.~*~

“He’s hiding. He’s hiding from me, I know it, and I don’t fucking get it. He couldn’t walk away, never had it in him to leave but now that I pushed him out he keeps running? We were supposed to be done running.”

Slam.

“Aren't you the one who keeps insisting it's over cause you broke up?”

Grit teeth, another cabinet violently shut.

“Not helping, Clint.”

“Rogers, it's simple.”

Exasperated huff, sink jammed on to blast water.

“It's a lot of things, but I don’t think fucking simple is one of them.”

Flick, fire jumping to life, snapped pasta in one hand, lid and back to the cabinets for a - violent, again - glass of water.

Clint watched the angry whirlwind slamming around the kitchen and sighed.

“It is simple. Bucky’s your blind spot.”

Steve froze, glass of water still pressed to his lips.

“Not to be dramatic or anything. But he is.”

“He’s a lot of things,” Steve muttered, all muffled by the glass he finally unfroze to tip back. “Look, I made you dinner, so I get the couch, right?”

“You can have the be--”

“The last time I slept in that bed he was beside me Clint, I'm not sleeping in the goddamned bed.”

“Okay man, whatever floats your boat.”

“Actually my boat keeps sinking and drowning us both, but thanks for asking,” Steve said dryly, shouldering past Clint on his way to the living room.

He still had no idea why Steve was even here, of all places. Yeah he’d heard about his fight with
Tony, the tension between the rest of the Avengers. Tash’s frequent absences sure as hell weren’t helping anything.

But Steve was here and it was his apartment after all, wasn’t like Clint could complain. Besides, it’d gotten pretty boring waiting on a ghost that never showed for two weeks.

Personally, Clint wasn’t sure he’d ever show.

Steve was sure.

Steve knew Bucky’d come back here, he knew it the same way he’d known Buck was alive all those years and done nothing about it. Cause I’m you.

Eventually Clint retreated behind a closed door, left the rest of the empty apartment to Steve, the same mocking glittering lights of the Brooklyn Bridge beyond the windows.

He’d spent a lifetime waiting around empty apartments for Buck. Swinging his legs at the dinner table, tapping the most recent scrap of dirty drawing paper, pretending he was doing anything but praying for him to come around.

Then the apartment they shared, waiting at the dinner table with the meal he’d managed to scrounge together, patiently re-stirring watery soup while he stayed waiting for him to come swinging through that door.

Sipping tea, apple slices on the plate in front of him as he stared at the open window in his old Manhattan apartment and waited for the black mask to come slipping through that blank hole in his walls, that place he’d always kept empty, open, waiting.

How many times had they sat at this dinner table--

Steve raked fingers through his hair, ducking his head against the silver reflections of the moonlight bathing his skin. The moon was full of hurt and he couldn’t just. Pray for Buck to come ‘round.

It didn’t go that way, Buck wasn’t gonna come in those windows, he’d sneak in through the fire escape only it wouldn’t be the city slider Steve’d called baby, he’d hurt the moon and it didn’t shine anymore, it sliced.

He could hear it, the dark side he’d shot back into their lives the moment he’d shoved Buck out that door.

He’d had a dream once, that Bucky’d dragged him to a rooftop and slide knives between skin and bone and that was nothing to the dreams Bucky’d had where Steve carved his heart outta his chest in a bloody star and if they could only put down their knives maybe they’d stop bleeding each other dry.

Fuck Bucky Barnes, he’d come with more knives than Steve had stitches for.

A lifetime of dinner tables instead of operating tables and it might as well be now. Might as fucking well be, Steve didn’t have a bone left in his body that Bucky hadn’t broke in some way.

How was this supposed to go then? Did he climb on the table, lay out and wait for Buck to come carve him up, serve him round to all the empty chairs in the empty life of broken promises they’d never even fought to keep?
Buck’d never even fought for it. Never even tried. Fought armies, wars, a lifetime of handlers and brainwashing and he couldn’t fight to love Steve, he couldn’t fight enough to come back, he couldn’t fight enough to do anything but make Steve bleed and bleed and bleed while he waited for the final blow that would never come because the tables were turning and Bucky wouldn’t just abandon him like this, Bucky’d ripped out his fucking heart with those metal fingers and his best friend since childhood, his lover, his protector was leaving him here to bleed out on this table and die--

“C’MON!!” Scream echoing off empty walls, hands shaking to keep from flipping the table, wrecking everything they’d ever fucking touched because he couldn’t keep fucking waiting--

“COME FOR ME YOU BASTARD!!”

Echo echo echo and Steve wasn’t gonna let the sob in his throat free because he was too fucking pissed to cry, too fucking pissed to do anything but scream and he was just so exhausted, he wanted to lay out on this table and never wake up again, sleep for another seventy fucking years until he woke up with Bucky ba--

The fucking bastard had broken his heart and he was still the only thing Steve wanted to see.

Eyes fell shut, throat choking up with all the tears he still hadn’t shed but he couldn’t, he couldn’t.

Steve swayed on his feet, all but collapsing into the chair again, arms folding on the stupid fucking table and he’d stay here, he’d stay here and wait because he knew Buck would come, he always did, he could feel it in his bones…

Clint found him half-asleep, folded over the table, head buried in his arms and spine shuddering every few breaths like it just couldn’t keep him upright anymore.

It took all the strength he had to pull Rogers up, throw one of those big arms over his shoulders and help him stumbling to the couch. Steve barely blinked his eyes open, groggy and heavy but eventually Clint dumped him on the cushions, tugged a blanket over him as Steve curled up on his side, breath hitching and eyes tight and shiny at the corners.

It was fucking heartbreaking. He’d kick Bucky’s ass if he didn’t think they were both hurting this bad.

Clint took a step backwards, pausing and tilting his head as the moonlight caught on something else shiny, around Steve’s neck.

Cap was out anyways, might as well untangle them for him. He was a little surprised they hadn’t been thrown out a window yet, but maybe Steve was holding on a lot more than he wanted to admit.

The dogtags clanked softly as Clint pulled them carefully outta Steve’s shirt collar, untangling the toe tag from the other, thumb running over the name. James B. Barnes. They were way too noisy for Steve to wear subconsciously. That only made the whole thing goddamned sadder.

“We all want him back too, Steve,” Clint whispered. Steve didn’t budge an inch. Not even to the clank of the dogtags settling against his shirt. Freight train couldn’t wake him now.

And apparently, neither could boys who fell from them.

The fire escape was just as fucking creaky as Steve’s’d been in the thirties, but he’d conquered them then and with all the training he’d been doing it certainly wasn’t hard to sneak up now either. At least Steve wouldn’t be here, and Clint’s hearing was good but not that good.
Bucky wouldn’t be here either, except he needed a few things and this apartment still had all his stuff, so. A night mission to sneak inside was really the only option. It wasn’t like he could get a new mask made on the corner shop.

It was dark inside, so he wasn’t all that worried as he jimmyed open the window lock with his knife. Use the fire escape to sneak into the bathroom window the way Natalia had, grab his stuff from the cabinet and sneak right back out.

The tile absorbed his bootfalls easily and the cabinet behind the mirror didn’t even creak as he carefully popped it open. His mask was still on the top shelf, good.

None of his weapons were in here though, and he could probably use some of those. No, the less time he spent in the apartment, the better.

Well. It wouldn’t hurt. It was just Clint, it wasn’t like Bucky’d wake him.

The rest of the apartment was dark too, looked like Clint hadn’t moved anything around. And the bedroom door was closed, good. Just had to get to the kitchen--

He almost tripped on a chair, barely holding in a curse as he glared at the kitchen table. Why the fuck was this chair scooted out so far anyways?

It was weird to think about, that Clint could be sitting there in Steve’s chair, that’d he leave it pushed out. Weird to think that there were other people living here now instead of them. Weird to think that just in the next room, Steve’d destroyed Bucky’s cheekbone with his fists and screamed at him to leave just a few weeks ago.

It could’ve been another lifetime. And it still kinda felt like it’d been this morning.

Didn't matter. He was here to pick up weapons, ammo, money. Shoes if there was a pair around.

Half his knives were in a kitchen drawer and thank god these cabinets didn't creak like the ones in their old apartment. He didn't have all the holsters he should but at least the knives had sheaths, he could line them up in his waistline if he had to.

There, that should be the las--

His fingers brushed the corner of something, paper nearly slicing through callused skin.

He didn't mean to wiggle it free and he certainly didn't mean to pick it up but it was in his hands now and there was really nothing he could do about it.

One of Steve’s sketchbooks.

Course it was.

Too dark in here to see which one but it didn't matter, he should leave it in the damn drawer regardless. The whole point was to get Steve out of his head.

Carrying around his goddamned sketches wasn’t gonna fucking help. He was stronger than this, better than this.

He was the fucking Winter Soldier.

Bucky tucked it under his arm and silently slid the drawer shut. He was a lotta things, but Steve was still, always, forever, Steve.
A quiet sound behind him and Bucky spun around so fast his boots made skid marks on the tile.

No one was there.

Jesus Christ he was paranoid. He’d’ve seen if Clint came out the bedroom, he’d’ve been gone before the doorknob finished turning.

He should get outta here though. Shame on the shoes, but he’d pocketed some bills so he’d figure it out.

All he had to do was slip back onto the fire escape, the living room and one glass door between him and never seeing this place again.

Hair tucked away from his face and Bucky grabbed his mask off the counter, starting for the shine of the window when another glint caught his eye.

On the couch.

Steve was on the couch.

Steve Rogers. Ten feet away from him. Curled up on his side, sleeping based off the way his chest was moving, it was too dark to see much else from here.

So of course rectus femoris contracted and the next thing he knew he was sinking to his knees beside the head of disheveled hair, staring wide-eyed at all the familiar lines. It was one thing to dream, think about, know everything about Steve Rogers but this, kneeling beside his sleeping form, it was all real, Stevie was right here, close enough to reach out and touch.

Those beautiful eyes were closed, just as well for all he’d seen.

Steve was the only one who knew. The only one who knew his soul and all the oxygen in his throat halted to a stop.

The moonlight lit up shining skin translucent - reflective, wet streaks tracing from the corners of shut eyes to dark spots on the couch cushions and he had to bite his lip to keep the pitiful sound from escaping his chest.

It was too tempting. Steve was lying there, still, no idea Bucky was here. Like standing on the edge of a tall building, the psychological wonder to step over the side so deep it was ingrained beyond anything else you know.

He had to, try, once.

“Stevie,” Bucky whispered, crouching down further to see if the long clumped eyelashes fluttered.

Perfectly still.

A rush of breath, collapsing back on his heels with his eyes prickling and heart pounding outta his chest.

God, what was he doing? Steve’d kicked him out. Told him it was over. Broken his heart and walked away in the pouring rain, the fuck was he gonna do if Steve’d woken up?

It was just so surreal, Steve’s sleeping body stretched out on the couch before him. Couch cushions on the floor, like when we were kids--
The last time he's fallen to his knees before this couch it'd been to suck Steve off, only that'd ended with Bucky crying and Steve squeezing him tight in his lap, rocking them with one hand in Bucky’s hair while he whispered, *I love you, I still love you. I'll always love you.*

If only Bucky could whisper the same thing to him now.

Words and fingertips couldn't, so eyes traced along the silhouette under the half-assed blanket, from Steve’s ankles up to his hips, chest--

The moonlight caught a glint, again, and Bucky nearly startled. That was the whole reason he’d seen Steve in the first place, the catch of silver on metal flashing.

Now that Bucky couldn't touch, what other silver could have its fingers around Stevie’s neck?

He leaned a touch closer, human fingers reaching out carefully to tip up the metal against Steve’s chest, darkness shifting to catch shadows on letters stamped clear, chained around Steve’s neck and fully capable of choking him in his sleep.

JAMES B. BARNES
32557038

Quiet clank clank, dogtags jingling against their chain because Bucky’s hand couldn't stop shaking.

It took every ounce of control to carefully settle dogtags back on Steve’s expanding, releasing tight chest, warmth shocking up Bucky’s skin as they brushed cotton, then trembling fingers were clapping over his mouth and Steve’s sleeping form swam sideways in watery vision.

Help.

God, help, he couldn't do this. He had knife hilts digging into his spine and the Winter Soldier’s mask tipped against his boot and he'd give it all up for Stevie to open those shocking blues, call him Buck and ask him to stay.

Steve didn't want him to stay.

Bucky’d thrown his goddamned engagement ring off the Brooklyn bridge, it was supposed to be over.

Fuck. He couldn't tell where the matching band was, Steve's left hand was tucked under his head and what if he was still fucking wearing it--

Still wore the dogtags. But God, fuck, Bucky was losing his mind, he wasn't what Steve needed, he had to protect his boy and he had to leave, he was a killer and.

He. He didn't belong here. Steve didn't want him, Bucky needed too much, asked for too much and it wasn't fair, none of it was goddamned fair because he loved Steve more than everything in the world and he'd told him so many times in so many ways only--

Only it hadn't been enough and it was Over.

Fuck.

It was dark out and it was time for Bucky to go.

His bones physically ached as he pushed to his feet, limbs heavy and feet magnetized to the familiar ground. Lost track of his long time target and if he was going to see the night through a sniper scope,
Steve couldn't be anywhere near his crosshairs.

He was leaving to protect, again, and Bucky’d never made a goddamned selfish decision when it counted but he couldn't, all he wanted was too much, he'd broken Steve’s pretty hands and he couldn't ask those broken bones to catch him when he fell.

Mask clutched in one hand but the other couldn't help but reach over, Gravity. Circling back to the only sun that ever mattered.

The blonde strands were so soft against the tips of his fingers that Bucky could cry.

It wouldn't make a difference, brushing the blonde strands carefully outta Steve’s eyes. How many times had he done the same for floppy blonde bangs only for them to fall right back in Steve’s eyes the moment he folded over his sketchbook?

(Tucked safely against Bucky’s chest.)

If only he could protect Steve with the pound of his pressed heartbeat. But Steve was too bright, wild, lived too fast and loved too hard with his brilliant sunlit smile to be tucked safe anywhere and really, being without Bucky would be the best thing that ever happened to Steve.

He could finally be free.

It was with that promise Bucky swooped down, eyes shut tight and fingers lingering at the tips of blonde as he pressed his lips to warm, sweet skin.

Lingering, a single moment, the softest kiss he'd ever placed to Steve’s forehead.

The last kiss he'd ever place to Steve’s forehead.

The saltwater gathering on his eyelashes was the only thing that managed to pull him back. Wouldn't let his tears stain Steve’s skin any longer.

Straightened up slowly, soaking in, memorizing every angle of Steve’s face one more time.

_I would chose to be with you_, Bucky managed not to whisper, fingers hovering over un-bruised cheekbones, jaw.

As if the choice were his to make.

The choice had never been his to make.

Glass slid open easy, fire escape creaking as it took Bucky’s weight one more time. Jump from your window to the pitch black streets below and Bucky Barnes climbed down Steve Rogers’ fire escape only this time, he didn't stop going down down down.

_THIS is my last breath_,

If only he could leave with no regrets.

~*~This hunger brought me here tonight~*~
Steve was still rubbing his eyes as he stumbled into the kitchen at dawn’s break, feeling wildly around the counter for a mug for tea or something when he saw it.

Mid-reach, fingers extended and hair fucked in a hundred directions, crink in his neck from the couch cushions and his eyes wide as saucers as he froze and stared at the mark on the floor.

A scuff mark, just a black circle sweep across the tile only that wasn't there yesterday.

He didn't have to think about it, didn't wonder for a single moment. Steve knew exactly who made that mark.

He stared at it for another couple seconds before his brain started working.

Then he was yanking open That Drawer and a dozen knives didn't clatter around, empty dark wood staring back at him.

Bucky'd been here. He'd come last night. He'd come last night.

It wasn't just another dream then, was it?

He'd thought nothing of it last night, pushed it aside this morning the way he always did.

Because he'd been having that dream for weeks.

Bucky coming in the middle of the night, finding him wherever he was and combing his fingers through Steve’s hair, kissing his cheek. Nose. Forehead. Tender, whispering some profession of love under the rumble of the runaway train.

Only last night, it wasn't a goddamned dream.

Dear fucking god, Bucky had been here.

He'd taken his knives and left Steve sleeping on the couch.

He hadn't even woken, just felt Bucky in his sleep and. Assumed it was his head fucking with him again and how could he be so fucking stupid--

Steve staggered across scuffed tile floor, nearly cracking the glass on his phone screen as he punched in the memorized number.

“Sam, we have to find him,” Steve rushed, running a hand through his hair and spinning in the empty kitchen. “We have to find him, I can't keep living like this.”

“Steve, hey, slow down. Are you okay? I'm already on my way, gettin’ in Nat’s car right now. What's going on?”

“He was here, Sam, he came in here last night for his knives, God knows what else and how could he come for those and not me?!!”

“Are you okay? Did you talk to him? Is he okay?”

“I fucking slept through it, Sam.”

He was pacing in circles around the kitchen now, wearing down black to shiny white with his barefeet.
“Okay, that's okay. But you're sure he was there?”

“I wouldn't joke about this. Besides, there's a mark on his floor, the entire knife drawer is fucking cleared out. The fuck else did he take? What else did he decide was more important to come back for than the love of his life?” Steve slammed a cabinet shut, pausing in the middle of the kitchen as he thought that over, tipped his head with an exaggerated frown.

“Wait, scratch that, he was the love of my life and he never even loved me back. That's what this is all about anyways, right? Fucking bastard.”

Sam started off on another gentle speech about how Bucky was hurting and said all sorts of things he didn't mean and they'd work it all out and what not and Steve kinda ignored him.

It was never about what Bucky said, it was what he didn't.

But he kept Sam on the line for charity as he started scouting out the rest of the apartment.

After the first scan, it looked like nothing else was taken. But, y'know, his soul and whatnot.

Until the dreaded awful wonder hit his stomach and Steve just had to check, because it wouldn't come to that but he'd never be able to get the idea outta his head unless he checked. Bucky didn't know Steve knew it was there but he wouldn't take it either way, there was no way.

He knew Bucky. He'd never.

Steve opened the bathroom cabinet anyways.

The punch to his gut?

Worse than the one he'd taken from every alien blast folding him in half and depositing him in the dirt.

The mask was gone. The Winter Soldier mask was gone and he'd never hated himself for fighting a war more.

He couldn't take this.

It wasn't possible, Buck just wouldn't.

He didn't do that anymore.

Or.

Or Steve was wrong about everything.

….he didn't know him at all, did he?

“Rogers, you gotta calm down if we’re ever gonna figure this out.” Sam temporarily uncrossed his arms to wave at Steve’s pacing, indicating probably everything from the disheveled to his mildly panicked words. “You're gonna burn a hole in the floor and then we’ll have a lot bigger problems on our hands.”
He was fine. He was totally fine, balanced as fuck. They just needed to find Bucky. The jackass. Had left. Steve. Here in the dark.

“What if it's already a bigger problem than we thought? He came back for the mask, which I never thought he'd fucking do. Maybe I don’t know him that well. Clearly, I don’t know him that well.” His soles were aching from how much he’d been pacing barefoot but he couldn't sit down, couldn't stand there and not get something done--

How could the serum let his feet hurt anyway?

How could Bucky do this anyway?

Steve sure had no fuckin idea.

“We can’t find him,” he pointed out helpfully, again, for probably the nine hundredth time and Sam patiently kept his mouth shut. “He’s not any of the places I knew he’d go. The worst fuckin part is that I never imagined a time where I couldn’t find Buck.”

He'd promised Bucky he'd always come for him so long as he was alive and he meant that promise because he knew he could keep it, was more sure of that at the time than he'd been of anything else in that bloody war only now this was so much worse than the forties.

“I just don't get how we’re still in the dark. We found him when he was a goddamned different person!! A ghost. assassin. How can we not find my best friend?”

“Steve,” Sam said softly, taking a step forward. Steve took a step backwards.

He wasn't done being pissed. He was fucking pissed that Bucky pulled this bullshit on him. So what his voice lost that edge, almost cracked on the words ‘best friend.’ He was still mad, even if he felt like his insides were scooped out with an ice scream scoop. He was still mad, even if the words came out hollow and deflated.

“What happened to ‘I know what you're gonna say, Buck’? My mom died and Buck followed me up to her place, just said the single word Steve and I didn't give him a single moment more, just said I know what you're gonna say, Buck because I did. I always used to. We knew each other so well I could predict an entire conversation before we ever had it. That's who we used to be. That's the man I lo...loved.”

He has to pause, place a hand on his chest to make sure his heart was still beating, lungs still expanding because it kinda felt like they weren't. Kinda felt like they weren't even there.

“But that's not-- not anymore. Not this Bucky, not me. See, I was convinced we never stopped loving each other. Just got twisted up and that love got twisted up and...I can't even remember the last time I knew what Buck was gonna say.”

Sam’s hand landed on his shoulder and Steve stared desert dry eyes at the blank wall.

“All this time,” he echoed quietly, bouncing off all the walls and Sam kept his hand there, silent and strong but Steve could barely see him, replaying a thousand scenes that didn't look the way he'd told himself to remember them, torn apart and shattered like everything else inside him and the worst part about that was that he couldn't hide from it anymore. He couldn’t run from it anymore.

“All this time. It's...it's been my fault.” Head turning slowly, blues last to flick over, landing on sad brown and coming round full circle in one more apartment, one more realization worth smashing counters for only his hands were too numb to curl into fists now. “Sam. It's all my fault.”
And I thought I could throw myself back in, follow orders. Serve. It's just not the same.

Run, бежать, run.

Hadn't worked out this hard in months. Hadn't built muscle like this in months. Maybe ever, really.

The Winter Soldier stayed lean, they put him away in his box once he'd trained just enough to not waste their time.

But see, he had a fuckton of time he needed to waste.

Almost didn’t recognize himself, passing glass windows. Shirts were starting to look the same way on him they did on Steve. No.

Research, train. Sleep, research, train. Eat, sleep, research, train, break something, shower off blood, research, train.

Used to be him who got held up against walls but now, even without the arm he could probably prop up all 200something lbs of beautiful muscle, could just imagine the look on Steve—No.

No, he’d fucking Pavlov condition himself out of it if he had to. Couldn’t fucking research and train if that was all he kept thinking about.

Research. Amygdaloid body, part of the human brain.

See, started with memory because that's how they fucked him up the first time.

Interesting development: the amygdaloid body was one of the processes used for encoding.

Storing and coding short term memories and encoding, shifting, consolidating them into long term memories.

But the amygdaloid body was most commonly known for its associations with fear. Fear, that's what it magnetized to and stuck with like planets around the sun.

So if long term memory was going to be fucked to hell, tying the fear-processing amygdaloid body in was crucial. Which meant that the easiest way to fuck over all his long term memories was to manipulate the fear in his life.

Fear.

Bucky trailed metal fingers over the rough concrete of the ledge, watching pebbles scatter and fall to their deaths below.

What are you without him? Nothing.

The best manipulations took pieces already there - fear, what are you without him, do you love Captain Rogers, he's not coming for you.

And then used those pieces to twist everything else, control that for their own - fear, he doesn't love you, you are nothing without him, your love for him is going to destroy you.
Then all it took was making that permanent. Long-term. Amygdaloid body did most that.

Seventy years sure could do the rest.

Was it Hydra? How much blame was actually theirs?

St--

Once. He'd said, You can't blame everything on Zola.

That was probably true.

Maybe none of it was Hydra.

Just him.

Maybe it was just him.

Maybe it was worse than that.

Maybe his brain was perfectly fine, hippocampus intact and new long term emotional memories and feelings totally create-able.

Maybe he was choosing this.

Maybe he was so scared he was choosing this.

Fear.

The subway jolted and Bucky caught himself on the closest pole, metal clanking metal too loud even through the new glove.

A few people glanced his way and he grit his teeth against the urge to snap at them.

Or snap them.

He didn't know a single thing anymore.

No. He was fine.

The pulse in his neck was keeping him alive and the throb in his shoulder hurt enough to make his vision spin and he could still feel Steve’s hands soothing tight muscle but he could get rid of that. He was going to win this.

He just had to carve open his chest until the empty hole left by Steve was filled with blood and couldn’t hurt him anymore.

Until the screams that left his lips parted by the devil’s tongue instead of Steve’s.

Until the memories flashing behind his eyes weren’t kissing on the paint-splattered art room floor, until it was nothing but deep black paint oozing between the cracks behind his eyes.

Until he was free of golden chains, even if that meant jumping into the darkness.

Even if that meant trading in angels for monsters.

Ready.
Right?

It was the uncharacteristically warm weather that had Jane’s Carousel open for one last weekend. Half price admission, and still quadruple what Sarah used to pay for all of them combined.

He wasn't here to ride though. Just sit, on the bench where all the parents sat.

He'd never be a parent.

But that wasn't why he was here either.

Walking the streets of Brooklyn landed him here -- he was probably headed for the bridge only he really didn't want to get on the bridge. So he'd drawn to the familiar music, flashing spinning lights, children’s laughter, shrieks.

He honestly couldn't even imagine that life. Having a kid, taking them to the Carousel, lifting a little boy on his shoulders to tell him all the stories about how Daddy had to get boosted up onto the very smallest horse, “even when he was twice your age, Montgomery!”

A playful shove from Steve with his free hand, other holding their little girl’s, blonde curls bouncing as she giggled, looked up at Steve with Bucky’s ice-crystal eyes and asked if her other Daddy had a tiny metal arm when he was tiny too.

A smile as Steve swung their hands, leaned down to answer her question in a loud whisper, “Well, Maggie, your Daddy was so strong he sure thought he did.”

Maggie and Montgomery.

Steve’d never even mentioned wanting kids.

Bucky wondered if he ever would. If he'd ended up with Peg, if they would've ever had kids. Steve Rogers would be one hell of a father.

The carousel slowed to a stop, the new wave of riders piling with excitement onto horses, lions, bears, mirrors flashing in the September sun.

A little blonde boy climbed onto the biggest horse, black with a red mane, clutching the glittery gold pole tight with the biggest smile on his face.

What kind of father would he be? The only kid he’d really taken care of was Steve, and he'd only been a kid himself.

When was the last time he'd been around children?

The carousel started up, creaking as the music sped up, lights started spinning faster and faster.

Shot.

A loud crack in the music - smell of gunpowder seeping through his skin, mirror flashing dripping red, the blur of children’s faces riding by, a snapshot of a smiling young face, bullet-hole between the eyes, black and smoldering and dripping red down the side of a tiny upturned nose.

The scream, such a higher pitch than he'd ever heard, echoing through his ears and why didn't his mask cover that high, he really couldn't breathe and that body was so small, tiny fragile arms twisted at awful angles as it crumpled to the ground, the last of the family’s blood spilling the plush carpet.
They’d told him kill them all. They hadn’t told him what order to kill them in and he couldn’t decide if it were more cruel to make the kids watch the parents die first or the other way around but he ended up taking out the toddler last.

He hadn’t debated at the time though, which was more cruel. He hadn’t cared.

That toddler had been blonde too. Right up until the blood of his sister splattered it red. Right up until Bucky splattered it red.

Another crash in the music and Bucky flinched, ducking his head. How many kids had he killed? He’d never taken the time to count.

Certainly didn’t wanna fucking know now.

What about the monster? Wasn’t he supposed to become that again?

Wasn’t that what he was molding himself into? That same devil that shot children between their innocent brown eyes?

Fuck.

Could he kill again?

Natalia said he could. He didn’t do that anymore.

But he fucking could, couldn’t he. If he’d been able to do it once, he could do it again.

So that just left one question.

Would he?

Red blue pumped from the same heart but he’d never wanted to inherit Steve’s war.

~*~Hey, you wanna shut up?~*~

Bad becomes worse.

So he’d been a good man. What happened when he wasn’t anymore?

Bad becomes worse.

“Oh stop acting like you’re all superior,” Bucky scoffed and Steve put both hands over his ears. Not like it’d fucking help, not when Bucky’s voice was coming from inside his stupid head.

Sam looked at him worriedly and Steve smoothed his hair, reaching for his helmet before any of them said anything.

It was surprising enough they’d invited him on the mission, he didn’t need to get kicked out before the action started. Although maybe that’s why they’d invited him. So he could get back in the action and Act Normal again.
It was true, he was the most himself on a battlefield. He’d met, kissed, and confessed his love for Bucky in the middle of a fight, why the fuck not put him back in one? Only time his head really worked.

After everything, everything he’d broken and run from and he couldn’t get rid of that gene. He couldn’t get rid of the fight.

“You ever think you fuckin’ could, Rogers?” The voice in his head chimed again and he glared at nothing, slamming his helmet back on again.

“Shut up, no one fucking asked you,” Steve grit, adjusting the straps.

“You alright there, Steve?” Another voice asked, only that one was coming from his helmet. Shit, the comms.

“Doin’ just fine,” he replied, smooth as possible. Whoever it was seemed satisfied with the sound they made, then the quinjet was landing and it was up to him to take point and give orders again.

This, he was good at. This, they trusted him with. Probably the only thing they trusted him with. But there they all were, standing and looking at him, probably some sorta test. But awaiting his orders. Even if just to see how mad he really was. But they were here, they had to have some sort of faith in him, right?

“If any of them had met the real you, I’d be your only friend all over again,” Bucky’s Brooklyn accent chided and Steve could scream.

“You think I don't know that?” He whispered roughly, then he was clearing his throat and lifting his head. Sometimes, he thought he understood why Buck liked the mask. It wasn’t like it had any protection the way his helmet did, but there was an anonymity to the blue sloping around his eyes that just might be the only thing keeping him calm right now.

“Allright, listen up. Romanoff and Barton, take left flank, draw out the attackers on the ground and make sure the civilians really are cleared. Stark, you take main air support and Wilson, back him up on the right. I’ll run center with Bu-- I’ll run center, Wilson can check in on me from above. Everyone good? Now move out.”

The shield in his hand.

How did he get his shield back after dropping it from the helicarrier? He really couldn’t remember. Blast from the left he barely blocked, and Steve had to get his head back on his fucking shoulders. He wasn’t going down in some useless fight in the streets of The Bronx.

It was barely five minutes into the fight before Nat and Clint attempted to start up a banter. Light-hearted, like that could possibly fix anything.

The Commandos used to banter. The fuck did his Avengers think they were doing?

“You cuttin into my body count?”

“Body count? You don’t have a body count. You’re a goddamned ex-SHIELD agent.”

“Oh whatever, Miss Russian Assassin, you’re just jealous of how much--oof! Better at this I am than you.”
“In your dreams, Barton.”

“Maybe, yes, in my dreams too. I dream about a lotta-- Tash! On your left!”

“Hey, that’s my thing,” Sam interjected and Steve bit back his comment, jogging down the empty flight of stairs and keeping an eye out for movement. Didn’t have a backup sniper with him the way he was so used to by now.

“...up for interpretation,” Clint was saying, rambling the way he always did, which is probably why he didn’t think to filter out the next part. “You weren’t the first to have Steve’s left, y’know.”

The comms fell dead silent.

Which was ironic in itself. Especially, y’know, the dead part, because Bucky wasn’t but he might as fucking well be. Steve sure felt like he was.

Especially with no one on his fucking six, Christ where did that grenade come from?

“Is Steve still there?” Clint whispered, just as Steve’s head cleared from the triple roll off the banister. At least he’d landed on his feet, even if his ankles were smarting.

It was pure silence, no one there to yell at him for being a fucking moron. Of course not. Bucky wasn’t here.

“Steve?” Clint whisper-checked again and he was really sick of the Steve-this Steve-that thing everyone kept doing. More people called him Steve now than the rest of his years alive combined.

“Get back to work,” he finally ordered over the line, annoyance clipping his tone barely half of what he felt.

It was like they all knew him so goddamned well. They didn’t know a thing about him, remember?

Ste-e-eve

A soft sigh of relief, a couple distant explosion sounds. Steve took care of the grenade-thrower, didn’t think about sniper-rifle shots between eyes or black masks or any of it.

The banter started up again, slowly but surely, then everyone was pitching in and he was getting a goddamned headache at this rate.

“C’mon, you can move faster than that, birdboy!”

“Which bird, me or Wilson?”

“You aren’t even a bird, Barton. I mean, I get the whole Eagle Vision Assassin’s Creed nonsense but--”

“Did you just compare me to a video game Stark?”

“It’s just an odd nickname!! Couldn’t they call you Sharp Vision or something? Or maybe Sharp Shooter? Something to do with Arrows, maybe?”

“Oh, like Iron Man is so great? Your suit’s not even Iron!”

“Everyone’s got weird nicknames, you can deal with it. Besides, you call Romanoff Tash.”
“It’s an endearing thing,” Natasha piped up, voice breathless over the comms. “Isn’t that right, Stevie?”

And just like that, bullet straight through the chest. Didn’t matter that he had his shield gripped tightly in his hand or not, nothing was stopping that.

Stevie. The hundred-thousand ways and times Bucky’d called him that, in shouts and coos and teasing jest and soft promises, the familiarity of everything missing from this fight and the silence had never been so fucking loud, the reminder of every single thing he’d lost had never shot faster, harder, and he stopped literally in his tracks, feet skidding to a stop on rough asphalt so suddenly he almost tripped.

Stevie.

He didn’t get to be Stevie. Or pal, buddy, Steve anymore.

His lungs were more than functioning, whole body screaming and he could feel the serum in his veins, each perfected cell he’d done nothing but destroy and abandon - wow, what a pattern, everything good he’d ever been given apparently got wasted and for the first time in a long fucking time, the skyline was clear.

Everything was fucking clear, because the clouds and the sun and the rain and the moon didn’t fucking matter, the ground under his boots could be crushed if he slammed his foot hard enough and Bucky’d come to the apartment to get the mask not him and he didn’t get to be Stevie and the silence on the comms certainly didn’t get to crush him either.

“Would it kill you to address me as your Captain, Agent Romanoff?” Steve snapped, and if he’d thought it was silent before, everyone must’ve stopped breathing at that point. Good, fucking good, hopefully none of the unit’s assets would fall outta the fucking sky.

Natasha was quietest of all and Steve straightened his shoulders, stood tall, full height and full Captain America voice, because he was a goddamned fucking Army Captain and he was sick and tired -

No, not tired, not anymore, just fucking pissed. He was pissed his team didn’t have enough fucking respect to act like he was anything but broken fucking glass.

“If you can’t handle a professional work environment, I suggest you leave the battlefield.” Clear, sure, the voice that belonged to a soldier of such a long time ago, but.

But it was a voice people listened to. A voice that could change something.

And it did.

Because Natasha left.

It was luck that had him walking up on her and Clint’s corner of the street, but he got there just as he finished his last words. Not close enough for her or Clint to see him, but he definitely saw them.

And the barely-calm, vibrantly-pissed assassin picking her radio communication out of her ear.
And throwing it on the ground.

And grinding it under her heel.

And turning, and fucking walking away.

Clint’s jaw was on the ground and Steve’s insides probably were too, but how much easier was it to make her walk away tall and hurt than to watch her trip trying to save him?

There goes one more Russian Assassin walking out of his life and Steve strode into sight, making Clint startle. Calmly bent down, picked up Natasha’s earpiece, and pocketed it.

“Now, where were we?”

~*~This isn’t freedom, this is fear.~*~

If he shook his metal wrists, the clank of steel chains didn’t reverberate. He should be happy. Relieved. Something.

He was free.

So why was he still so terrified?

It was over. He wasn’t going back. It had to go this way. If Bucky wanted to be free, it had to go this way. The price of freedom was high. It always had been.

After that first night together, that night on the floor Steve’d made just for them, dancing and soft lights and that bed they’d fallen into with a dozen promises --

After that first night and the surreal morning after, reality hit the moment clothes were put back on.

And the glowing feeling in his chest, he’d spent an hour convincing himself that it could be a good thing, instead of an unanchored, fumbling loss of control. Yes, he’d lost control, but who better to give it to than his best friend who’d left him to rot once who wanted to take care of him, Bucky could let them have this--

He’d been convinced he could prove it, climb to the highest mountain and spread his arms to the sky and shout that he was free, that he could be free and still love Steve Rogers.

Cause I wanna be free, and I wanna be yours--

Only he’d been wrong.

It was simple as that.

You couldn’t be free and belong to somebody. You couldn’t be free and tether your heart to someone’s soul.

So this was living outta chains, then. Living on his own, that was the only way he’d get his freedom.

Wasn’t that what they fought for anyways? If you stripped away all that convoluted dedicated nonsense of being out there for each other--
It was always about freedom. It was just time for Bucky to take his.

~*~*~

He wasn't eavesdropping, just passing by in the hallway but he heard his name and the next thing he knew he was pressed against a wall, signaling Jarvis to be quiet as he listened in on the conversation drifting from the lab.

“We could make him a mixtape. That’s how they cheer people up in the old days, right?”

“Y’know, man, your patience is even surprisin’ me. Not that I thought you'd quit out on Steve or anything, but the great Tony Stark isn't exactly known for kindness.”

“Just cause I chose not to spend my days slaving away at the VA doesn't mean I don't have a heart. Ask Pepper, she got something framed once. Now, do I put The Captain on this in all caps or do I risk my head by writing Stevie?”

“And there goes my compliment.”

“Anyways, birdboy, I'm thinking mixtape 2.0 and you're helping. Although, considering the existent circumstances, maybe I shouldn’t call this one Popsicle Boyfriends. How does Melting-Ice-Cream Exes sound?”

“Fantastic, Tony. Just so sensitive. You do realize the goal is to get him to not break the rest of the tower and piss off more assassins, right?”

“I think it's a great name. So now we just need music. That pop band he likes came out with a new song a bit ago, right?”

“Which band? One-D? The song’s called Drag Me Down. You really think that’s the sorta thing to cheer him up?”

“It's a great idea. And it fits them pretty well. But fine, we’ll keep it off. For now. How about…”

Steve goggled the song.

It wasn't a good idea.

Like Bucky said, Steve didn't have good ideas. Bucky'd been right. About how much?

He pressed his closed fists to his mouth, staring at the too-bright computer screen.

*If I didn't have you, I'd never see the sun*

He shouldn’t.

*All my life, you stood by me*

What was he doing? He was mad, remember?

That didn’t stop his fingers from typing. He just…
Okay, he wasn’t gonna explain or justify anything. Scroll, find Sam’s channel, click. It couldn’t be any worse than he felt already, right?

Steve full-screened the video and instantly regretted ever owning technology the moment the camera came into focus.

"This song is way too peppy for you to like, Barnes."

"Hey, the most metal thing is liking non-metal music too," Bucky interjected from off-screen and Steve’s breath caught in his throat. He just hadn’t heard Buck’s voice in a long time. It wasn’t the same as watching all that museum footage. This wasn’t clipped up by some curator, wasn’t black and white and silent, distant, all different than he remembered.

Full color, clear sound, and his heart was pounding outta his chest because now the camera was trained on Bucky and that was Buck, his Buck, with that beautiful hairstyle Nat had swept up for him, braids into a loose bun on top of his head, aviators on his head and this beaming smile on his face, reflecting as much light as the metal arm under his tight red shirt.

"And I’ve trained myself to give up on the past, ‘cause I’ve frozen time between hearses and caskets," Bucky sang and in the video Steve shook his head in the driver's seat, affectionate smile tugging his lips but sitting here in his desk chair Steve’s hand was clapped over his mouth.

This was a really, really monumentally awful idea.

“...the love the love that I gave, wasted on a nice face," Happy Bucky reached over to gently knock Happy Steve's jaw, smile and mischievous fire, rolled eyes on his part and that smile still pulling his lips like he just couldn’t contain it.

They’d filmed this the day after they’d slept together for the first time. God, he’d forgotten how goddamned bright Bucky’s eyes could get, he was so fucking beautiful like that, head tipped in song and arm waving for the rest of the team to join.

And then there was him. Singing right back at Bucky, lit up with this soft glow and he couldn’t remember ever seeing himself look like that in the mirror. He….

what the hell’d happened to them?

In the video Bucky convinced a reluctant Tony to join, even making him smile and the stab in his chest knocked the air outta him. Steve’d grinded his teams under his heel and said Bucky was his family and Tony’d said so was I and dear. fucking. god.

He was. He was, they all were, Nat’s flirty smile at Clint and Sam laughing behind the camera, Bruce’s amused glances and Tony’s rolling eyes and Bucky’s hair whipping in the wind as he stuck his head out the window and hollered.

What’d Steve done?

The song dropped down into quiet chords and everybody froze, Nat tipping her head up from the carpet as they all looked to full-color-shining-video Bucky, propped on the dashboard and facing the back, smile shifting down into something a little shy as he flicked his eyes between each of the Avengers in the back and came in with the bridge, voice floating, as pretty as it’d been singing You Are My Sunshine on that boat with the Commandos.

"Woke up this morning, early before my family..."
"We love you too, man!" Sam shouted from behind the camera and someone made kissy sounds and Tony covered his eyes with his hands, but Bucky just shook his head affectionately and turned his soft gaze on Steve.

Steve remembered this. Remembered it from his point of view, hands tightening on the wheel as he looked over and all of that pent up Brooklyn energy was focused on him, Bucky’s lips parting in melody the way they did every time he sang Steve to sleep when they were kids,

"...from this dream where she was trying to show me, how a life can move from the darkness. She said to get better."

How a life can move from the darkness.

In the video Steve looked positively wrecked and funny, because he’d felt that way at the time and it was nothing compared to the way he felt now.

Bucky had honestly believed Steve could show him the light. He’d trusted Steve to show him how to get better and Steve’d run them into the ground, it was his fault, it was all his fucking fault and all of this, Bucky’s smile as he tipped his head, shouted, broke the sweet moment and shook the van’s wheel --

All of that was gone, and Steve was the one who’d erased it and he was drowning in the leftover pink shards, trying to unravel into the sketch they used to be only it was too late, the paper was torn up and he didn’t have anything left to tape together.

It was an honest-to-god shot to his heart as the Steve in the video grabbed Bucky’s hand off the wheel. Their fingers tangled together and Steve’s hands had never been colder, not even on ice. Curled fists wouldn’t warm them now, not when all they’d done was break, break this

"Hey! I wanna get better!" Everyone shouted and Steve whooped in the video, gaze flicking between the road and his best friend caroling beside him.

He couldn’t breathe. His lungs were closing and it’d be an asthma attack if he were younger only he wasn’t young, not anymore, he was a full 97 years and his bones were so heavy, his eyes were so tired, the kid in the video holding Bucky’s hand couldn’t be him.

Only it was, it was, he remembered looking into those crystal eyes as the final chords of the song crashed, remembered drowning in the light there, in the tight hold of Bucky’s fingers in his, in the settling wave over his body that they’d done it, they’d reached everything they’d ever dreamed of, they’d slept together and they were closer than ever, best friends instead of Fall Out and it was all he ever wanted and--

and. And it was all right there in the video.

The two of them, holding hands as the song crashed its final chords behind them; road whipping by in the window behind, lightdark blues locked on each other.

The way they were looking at each other, fingers laced and heads turned, twin gazes stuck together, shining bright, melting smiles and so in love and beautiful and - the camera slowly, the final note echoing as the full screen of his computer settled on the zoom of two hands - metal and human.

Entwined.

Cut to black. Silence.
Steve blinked, didn’t register anything for a few moments.

Then youtube kicked in, a big play button popping up and a mirage of next-video suggestions and there, just like that, ready to move on to the next thing? Ready to put that all in the fucking past like it was just one of millions of videos, press play on whatever entertainment we have to suggest? How about nine other videos you might like?

Like that hadn’t been his entire happiness summed up inside of 3:32 minutes filmed on a camcorder.

Oh my god. He’d been Happy and he didn’t even know it.

"What makes you happy?" Sam asked and Steve looked away for a moment, hands shoved in his pockets and the wood of the VA’s wall hard against his shoulder. What made him happy.

“I don’t know,” Steve said.

I don’t know.

Well.

Now he fucking did.

Flash of red, wasn’t as simple as that. The same snap when Zola’s electronic face had told him he and Bucky’d died for nothing, the snap that had his fist inside a computer screen before he could get a handle on the rage bubbling in his veins.

Except his laptop was too small to punch like that, and even if it were one of those giant old computers he’d probably have slammed it into the wall anyway.

The smash and shattering screen and harddrive pieces, falling keyboard keys, clank of metal against the ground, he didn’t hear any of it because he was breathing too loud, chest heaving and Bucky’s metal hand smashing his radio into the wall Irresititi-- crash flashing behind his eyes and Steve couldn’t breathe because look, they were one in the same again.

Twin skeletons, just like that video, only they didn’t share the sunlight and laced fingers, just hands that smashed crumpled destroyed and bones that only knew how to break and he couldn’t keep doing this by himself, he was losing his mind and he couldn’t feel his skin and the heart in his chest ached so bad he couldn’t take it anymore.

It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t fair, how could Bucky do this to him, how could he do this, was it all his fault was it all his fault Bucky didn’t love him, his fault he made himself believe Bucky did and it wasn’t fair it wasn’t fair he couldn’t keep waking up to this world where the only time he smiled was in videos of the past and the only hands that kept his fists from curling in a fight were raised in battle against him and he just.

Could’t do it anymore.

Couldn’t.

One hand clutched to his chest, heart pounding and ribs shaking like he was tiny and small and too worked up all over again, terrified of arrhythmia only it wasn’t the heartbeat under his palm that terrified him anymore, it was the broken pieces shattered around it. It hurt, he hurt, and he’d never been so lost.

He’d never been so small.
Steve hung his head, shoulders curling in, mouth breaking over a single dry sob only he wasn’t gonna cry, he didn’t cry when he was awake and the wetness around his eyes when he woke didn’t count, he wasn’t gonna cry he was so a-angry--

Small, and beaten. That’s all that was left.

He’d never been so small and beaten.

~*~*~

“The world breaks everyone down. And afterward, many are strong at the broken places.”

That was a quote, in Farewell to Arms. Ernest Hemingway. He’d read that book around the tower, couple months back. Funnily enough, right after he almost jumped out the roof, And almost blew his brains out. And right before Steve’d shout-confessed that he loved him.

And to retaliate Bucky’d shot one of his best friends.

_Bang._

He re-cocked the rifle pressed to his shoulder, one eye shut as he lined up through the sights again. Target practice was tough in New York, but the city was loud enough that his silencer didn’t draw any unwanted attention.

Except maybe the pigeons falling from the sky, but he didn’t give a damn about dead birds.

Didn’t give a damn about much, really.

Aim, ready, then all his finger had to do was squeeze and the world was at his feet again.

The bruise on his shoulder from firing right-handed was fading every day, blood vessels more resilient to the constant pressure. He had a lot more muscle on his upper body than he was used to, that was helping impact the shot too.

Bigger, stronger than he’d ever been. No more lean mean fighting machine, he had the bulk he’d never gotten. The strength he’d never had under Hydra because they’d never allow him to get _that_ powerful.

If only he could get the control.

Bucky grit his teeth, sweeping long strands outta his eyes again and lining up on another stray bird. A crow, or raven, this time, black and sleek, holding something shiny in its beak. It was the reflection off the soda-can tab that’d caught his eye in the first place.

It was fine, the bird would learn that midnight things shouldn’t carry shiny, not if it wanted to keep the bullets outta its heart.

The squawk it made as it went down was a little morbid and Bucky watched passively as the tiny black thing two blocks away fell down ten stories to the ground below, a wave of black feathers dusting up behind it.

They all had to learn sometime.
Bucky’d told him teary-eyed in a hospital hallway that he’d asked Hydra to wipe his memories because it was easier than dealing with all the pain Steve’d caused him.

“It’s not your fault,” Sam’d said.

“None of that’s your fault, Steve.” - Natasha.

“You can’t blame yourself, Star-Spangled.”

Tony was in his lab putting a list of songs together and Steve was sitting in the lab adjacent, staring at a shiny red hover car that Bucky’d spent hours on and would never get to finish.

That day, that was the last day he’d seen Buck before Zola’d gotten him the first time. The last day before he’d gone from hinderance to sinking-anchor.

He had to give Stark credit, at least. If he was making a mixtape, he was nailing this one just as much as the last.

My bones are shifting in my skin, and you my love are gone.

It’d be amusing, if it didn’t feel so goddamned true. Slipping heels on cold cement, knees tucked to his chest and head against the wall, glittering shiny red reflecting him squished, small and shadowed, a dark speck on the smooth wax Bucky’d worked so hard on.

...and promise not to promise anymore. And if you come around again, then I will take, then I will take the chain from off the door.

It wasn’t that he was blaming himself because he wanted Buck to love him. That wasn’t unfair. No, it was his fault for a lot deeper reasons than that.

The concrete wall was too hard against his head but Steve didn’t move, barely breathing, soaking in the cold if it could make him numb.

I'll never say that I'll never love, but I don't say a lot of things, the song echoed from the next room over and Steve closed his eyes.

He had no idea what he was supposed to do now. What was the point of each next breath? Finding Bucky? For what? He’d already broken them. Bucky made it very clear. He’d never say it. Never say he loved Steve.

So he didn’t. It was too late. Too late.

The song next door drifted to a stop and the silence was deafening, filled only with the quiet, sporadic drip...drip.

Knuckles bleeding again. Couldn’t even remember what he’d punched this time.

The next song started, another soft thing, words drifting to fill the spaces between drops of blood.
Cause it was, all you wanted and all I needed
But all I gave up, nooow

He really did hate Tony sometimes.

Could you hold me tighter when worlds collide
Just hold me down right nooow

“Hold me down,” Bucky begged, sweat-sheened and beautiful beneath him, slipping off the edge of control but Steve didn’t give him that, Steve loved him too much. Needed to much.

Fuck, Bucky’d let Steve inside his body when he didn’t even love him back--

I'm losing my friends, in the wave of all these fragments I can't fake

Friends, family. Didn’t matter.

Drip, drip, click click click. That was all the warning he heard before a door slammed open, eyes popping open at the same time. Only it wasn’t this door, must be the one to Tony’s main lab.

Pepper’s heels? Sounded pretty quick and angry to be Pepper, though. Not to mention an entire parade of shoes were following the clicks.

“Woah, what’s this about?”

“How about you explain why the hell you’ve been blaming me for this shitshow?”

“Woah, Romanoff, nobody’s blaming you--”

“Oh, really? That’s not what Bruce said.”

“Bruce says a lotta things!”

“Hey, Tony, don’t pin this on me. We all thought Natasha was withholding information.”

“Withholding information?! I’m the one who’s been out there looking for him!”

“No, actually, we all went without you.”

Steve grit his jaw and squeezed his eyes shut, digging the heels of his hands against his browbone only the voices weren’t getting any less sharp and everyone he loved was fighting and that was all his fault too.

“When the fuck was this? We’re a team, and you went scouting without telling anyone?”

“We told exactly who needed to know, which wasn’t either of you.”

“All that matters is finding him--”

“With what, the fucking expertise of Stark?”

“Steve Rogers, actually.”

Pull me in, drown my fear

“Are you fucking--”
“So nobody cares about Steve’s mental break until it’s about finding some villain, right?”

“Hey, watch who you’re calling villain.”

_Could you wait another day, knowing that I’ll come back_

“Don’t kid yourself Clint, Barnes never fucking cared about any of us, or he wouldn’t’ve split.”

“Oh really? You stick around after you break up with somebody because you like their _family_?”

“Rogers made it very fucking clear we aren’t family.”

“I don’t give a fuck what Rogers says. He’s not in his right mind and we’re the ones who’ve gotta protect him.”

_I’ll come back... no fear_

“Protect him from what? Bucky’s not gonna hurt him.”

“Oh maybe you’re just scared Bucky’s coming for you.”

“It’s not my fucking fault they broke up!!”

“Oh, like you haven’t wanted them to since the beginning.”

“You’ve got a lotta fuckin nerve--”

“Are we seriously fighting about this right now? We’re never gonna find Barnes if we don’t work together.”

“Only Rogers gets to pull the ‘together’ speech apparently.”

“You guys just don’t get it. We’re never gonna find Barnes, period.”

“Because your girlfriend isn’t fucking looking.”

“I am nobody’s girlfriend.”

“You’re also getting nothing done. None of us think you just ‘can’t find him.’”

“He doesn’t wanna be found! _Ever!!_”

Crash, slam, crumble.

The silence that followed was the first time Steve felt relieved in the last month.

Then _his_ door got shoved open and that relief slipped just as fast as it’d came.

There were more people than he’d counted voices although he hadn’t exactly counted and why were they all _crowding_ him and _staring_--

“How long have you been in here?” Tony demanded and Steve wondered distantly if he was pissed about Steve sneaking into his back lab or upset that Steve’d been listening to his stupid mixtape or just wondering if he’d overheard the shout-fest conversation but his mouth was raven’s feathers and answering was pointless anyways.

Sam crouched down beside him and the dark face swam into focus, back out again. Into focus,
brown brown eyes and blur, somebody in the room was wearing red and somebody else was wearing blue and that was about all he had.

“--ou okay?” Sam was asking and Steve blinked at him. How long since he’d eaten something?

“He’s bleeding,” Natasha pointed out and the room was focusing slightly, his hand’d stopped shaking enough that he could roll his eyes without passing out.

“All the boys fall for that wit?” Steve attempted to jab only she wasn’t smiling the way she always did when he teased, no one was smiling and suddenly he definitely wasn’t either. Not even the fake one.

“Steve,” Clint said softly, crouching down beside him. No, he was used to Tony’s ridicule and Sam’s softness and Natasha’s blatant comments but Clint wasn’t the consoling type, he was more Buck’s friend than his and Bucky’d thrown that away because of him too and Steve couldn’t take dragging more team members down Hell Road.

His hand was bleeding more and the concrete next to his head was broken and these hands were supposed to be in Bucky’s, walking through their bloody Hell together, right?

“It is my fault,” Steve told the splits in his knuckles. Deeper, though. Not that Bucky left. It was his fault Bucky couldn’t love him.

“St--”

“I think he did love me, once. He told Peggy he did.” Steve lifted his head, blinking. Looked between all of their faces. They all knew who Peggy was, Tony the most, or maybe Maria, but really he wished it was her young, fighting face here. She always knew what to say. She’d even known what to say to Bucky when he didn’t.

“And I think...really, he did.” He stared back down at his hands, smeared red now, just like those damn gloves that’d dropped Bucky the first time. “Just. Not since the fall.”

It was simple. It was too simple, really, and maybe that’s why it’d taken him so long to see it but after everything Bucky’d cried and confessed to him, after every piece he’d ever sewn together, Steve finally got it.

His voice was all echoy and hollow but it was the only speech he’d ever given he was sure of in his bones.

“He never died in that fall. He just…stopped loving me. When I never came for him. When I left him, for dead. Maybe that tore his heart out and he stopped loving me the moment he stopped believing I’d save him. Because I didn’t. I didn’t save him, and there’s nothing I can do to fix that. Ever.”

There were vague protests as he struggled to his feet but Steve ignored them, one bloody hand holding him up on the wall and the other waving around because really,

“Maybe he just. Hasn’t loved me since. Maybe he only stuck around, gave it a shot because he wanted to see if he could get it back but he can’t because he doesn’t believe in me anymore. He can’t. I left him for dead. I left him for dead, and maybe Bucky used to love me and now he doesn’t because I abandoned him.” Steve pushed off from the wall, bloody hands hanging at his sides. An army of hands reached for him but Steve was done with armies and hands.

“I abandoned him. So, you see, it is my fault. My fault a long time ago, but nothing I can fuckin’ do
about it now so. If you would be so kind,” he shoved past Natasha’s tiny shoulders, and Bruce’s big ones but nobody was big enough to stop him and frankly, nobody was stupid enough to try.

The door took a second to figure out with his hands so goddamned slippery. But eventually it opened, and he let them all stare at his retreating back as he left.

Might as well, it was his fucking fault.

“Well that went fucking well,” Natasha added dryly as the door finally clicked shut.

“No thanks to any of you,” Sam huffed, then he was off in Steve’s direction.

Clint shook his head and took the other exit, followed by nearly everyone. Pepper lingered a moment to pat his shoulder, then even she was going. Slam slam slam and Tony stared at the empty room.

Well, not empty.

The red shiny flying car Bucky was working on before he left was in here. Probably why Steve’d been.

Wait, the hell was that on the wheels?

Tony shoved aside the past ten minutes and crouched down beside the car, peering underneath at the unfamiliar wiring.

Why had he connected those two circuits--

Huh.

It was just. Pure curiosity reasons, for posterity and such. Tony straightened, patting the hood once before waving at hand at Jarvis in the corner.

“Can you remote start the engine? Just...in case it, y’know. Flies now.”

“Certainly, sir. Would you like me to give the report--”

“No, go ahead and start it. Just a hunch.”

The engine grumbled to life and Tony crossed his arms over his chest, chin propped on one hand as he waited, rumble turning into a click and then. The car was shuddering, and. Lifting up.

Okay, basic levitation his dad had gotten at some point, so it should short out any second now--

Only. It didn’t. It...kept hovering.

“By god.” He reached forward carefully, setting a hand on the red paint. The car vibrated warm under his palm, actually floating. Flying. “He figured it out.”

The only thing it’d need now was a rerun to the cooling system it looked like, really just one more part to install to reroute the extra force required and it’d be perfect, a totally functional flying car. See, if he just clipped a secondary pump--

You know what? It was Bucky’s project.
He shook his head, signaling Jarvis to cut the engine. The car lowered slowly, settling back on the ground. Just barely unfinished. But it wasn’t his to fix.

Bit of a shame though. The man’d discovered how to make cars fly efficiently and. It was one part short of being one of the greatest accomplishments of a lifetime.

Well. It’d be here when Barnes came back.

If, he ever came back.

Tony paused in the doorway, turning to look at the shiny red one last time. Then he flipped off the light and the invention faded into black. Just like the rest of them.

When he turned back around he nearly jumped outta his skin. Steve was standing there in the doorway to his lab, hands clean and dark circles under blue eyes, looking something like a ghost as Tony froze, one hand still on the door to close the flying car into secrecy behind him.

Only Steve didn’t have a single damn thing to say about the car. Just pushed off the doorframe from where he’d been watching, and left a single damn sentence echoing in the empty lab.

“If you thought this was gonna have a happy ending, you weren't paying attention.”

~*~*~

He hadn’t been able to make the switch last time.

Last time, he’d been so close, bordering on the verge of perfection and Hydra kept telling him, there’s something holding you back.

So they’d let him dream, so he could fucking rid of it.

It being Steve.

They’d met at the Brooklyn bridge docks, night sky, water lapping reflections of stars. I may lose my heart, but one day I'll be a star.

See, in that dream, he’d just told Steve he had to go. Told his subconscious he had to fucking let it go. Let him go.

"I spent a lot of time trying not to think about you."

"I know," the angel replied, wind whistling like a hurricane, storm to separate them once more. "Do I have to go?"

"Yes."

"I'm never going to forget you," the angel whispered.

"I have to forget you," Bucky whispered back.

Only, it wasn’t that fucking easy this time. Not like it’d been easy last time, it’d been like ripping his other fucking arm off, and he knew what that felt like.
Last time, they’d wiped him after. Last time, they’d erased fucking everything. And that’s how he’d finally done it, how he’d finally stopped hurting.

It was the same fuckin thing keeping him in pain this time.

He remembered everything, all of it, every inch, and he couldn’t be the fucking Winter Soldier when every time he closed his eyes he wanted to curl up and never wake the fuck back up.

Couldn’t just drown himself in efficiency and workouts and sniping and perfection.

It wasn’t enough.

He still woke with his eyes tight at the corners from dried tears. He still felt the hole in his chest that was trying to swallow him fucking whole.

And. Well. He was starting to lose it.

This is a black, black ski mask song
So put all of your anger on

Bucky jumped over the banister, executing a perfect and entirely unnecessary flip, invisible gunfire whizzing by as he slid across empty concrete and spun out the closest invisible gunman.

Metal hand catching on a cooling pipe just in time, creaking under his weight as he hauled himself upwards with the momentum, forearm smacking the next ledge and fingers digging in, swinging his legs to the side and rolling onto the catwalk, knife slicing the invisible second sniper’s thigh and metal hand grasping air to crush invisible esophagus number twelve,

Blood splattering in ninety directions.

In the truly gruesome do we trust

He rolled off the side of the catwalk, catching a metal beam to right himself in the air, go flying into a crouch he sprang outta with finger on a trigger, aimed at the next invisible target.

Only the pretend muscle he was beating up wasn't a challenge in the least.

He was practically bored.

There was only one opponent really, one opponent he'd never quite beaten.

One he happened to have intimately memorized their fighting style.

So Bucky lowered the gun in the face of the invisible target - the target that'd changed everything - because frankly, bullets bounced off that shield faster than he could shoot them.

I will always land on you like a sucker punch
Singing I am your worst,
I am your worst nightmare

The ring echoed, metal colliding with metal and Bucky knew better now than to aim for the shield, but Steve was fast and his sucker punch landed there anyways. Backfired off the side and Bucky used the momentum to throw his shoulder back, spin and swing his other fist down towards Steve’s cheekbone--

That pretty face snapped to the side, blue eyes fiery underneath the helmet as they locked on his,
flashing as a red fist swung for his head. He ducked, shoving Steve’s shield to the side and aiming for a gut punch, only Steve twisted and he hit bone, miscalculation costing him the balance enough to let one of those pretty red boots connect violently with his knee.

Bucky hissed and blocked a swing from vibranium, metal fingers curling around the edge and popping it violently off Steve’s magnetic sensors, one swing dodged and another fired off, punctuated with the whirring metallic ever-adjusting, the grit of Steve’s stubborn mouth.

Blocking each other’s punches and swings, forearms smacking and bruising, blue turning black too easy, threat of red to drip between the glint of his fingers and now, finally, Steve was barely holding his own, throwing up enough blocks that he wasn’t beat and he also wasn’t getting anywhere.

*Because they took our love and they filled it up*  
*Filled it up with Novocaine and now I’m just numb*

Quick punch to the star in Steve’s chest that didn’t have him flying backwards, not when red leather fingers closed around the straps of Bucky’s shoulders, shoved him off balance instead. The slash of a knife, arm lifted to block a vicious stab, but the Winter Soldier dropped the knife over the side of that uniform, catching it with the other hand and blue followed the flash of the knife, letting him land a solid punch on perfect cheekbones.

Steve went stumbling backwards, reeling, still blocked the next kick and managed a solid swing of his own, catching Bucky’s jaw hard. Something snapped and he shot out a sidekick in retaliation, making Steve gasp at the force of it.

*Don’t stop, don’t stop until your heart goes numb*  
*Now I’m just*

“You bastard,” he cursed, heel jabbing into the back of Steve’s knee. A stumble but Rogers caught himself, spun around on a jump and slammed his knee into Bucky’s stomach, folding him in half.

“I don’t feel a thing for you”  

He didn’t. Fuck Steve Rogers, he didn’t.

Straightened up, vision blurring for a moment as he tightened the fist around his knife, lashed sideways and feigned right. Metal screeched as it split uniform, then skin, slitting open red across Steve’s bicep, eliciting an angry hiss and a shoving elbow knocking the back Bucky’s shoulder, shooting a firework of pain up stretched scars.

He should fucking give in, change his damn opponent, something, only Bucky was too dizzy to do anything but finish this and he wasn’t going down that fucking easy.

The tiny knife in his boot wasn’t good for much but throwing, so that’s exact what he did with it, curling in on himself from the sting of his shoulder and springing into a roll, metal slipping under his heel and flicking outta his fingers, glinting in the dim light before it lodged in Steve’s thigh, shocked
pained sound--

_I’m just a problem that doesn’t wanna be solved_

“Why do you fucking bother?” A voice jeered from behind and Bucky spun around, eyes wide. There was Tony, arms crossed over his chest, head tipped towards Steve as he gestured boredly at Bucky.

“We all recognize he’s the problem here,” another pointed out and Bucky spun again, blinking at the redhead stalking the pace of concrete behind him. “I warned you about him, Steve.”

Bucky whipped his head towards Rogers, chest heaving from breathing too heavy, only Steve didn’t say a single thing to Natalia. Or Stark.

“You gonna fight me, Buck? Or you gonna stand there acting like I’m still too small to handle it?”

A flash, the back of Steve’s head sticky red as he accidentally pushed him down too hard when he was just trying to teach and fuck--

Red connected with his jaw again and you’d think after how many times he’d let Steve hit him in their breakup fight he’d be used to the fucking feeling but it still cut him to the core.

“C’mon Barnes, you’re doing an injustice to the Russian name,” Nat called and Bucky ground his teeth.

“M’not fucking Russian.” The metal arm swung, connected with red-white stripes, then Steve’s elbow was coming down on his shoulder again and Bucky cried out, nearly falling to his knees.

A sharp wolf-whistle to the left and Bucky used the sound as distraction to roll away from Steve, wincing as he had to roll wrong on the throbbing scapula.

“Hey Sarge, you’re better’n that!” A cheery voice called and Bucky froze, absolutely terrified to turn around.

He hadn't heard that voice in seventy five years.

“C’mon, ol’boy, bugger up!” Monty added, high British echo settling in along Dugan’s heavy accented tones.

They couldn't see this. Why were they--

Steve’s boot found his ribcage, snapping pain up his side and Bucky latched onto that burn, fingers closing around Steve’s ankle to drag him off balance.

A quick sideflip with his legs and he kicked out Steve’s other ankle, two hundred pounds of super soldier thudding to the ground beside him, a hearty cheer rising up to the left, more jeers from the right, Barton’s dry teasing meddling in with Romanoff and Stark--

_So could you please hold your applause_

Two hands on the ground, attempting to shove upright, except he only staggered a couple inches before twin kicks dragged him down again.

Bucky grit his teeth and threw an elbow, only leather caught it, pulled backwards and flipped it behind his back, that dirty wrestling move Steve used when they were kids--
“Take this sideshow and all its freaks”

“Boys! Not in the kitchen!”

Sarah’s voice cut clear over the litany of jeers and Bucky had to lift his head, blink through the sweat and dangling hair in his eyes, see for himself--

And there, hair wrapped up and donning those scrubs, same stubborn eyebrow raise that Steve did, hands on her hips, tap tap tapping heel to match the click click click of Natasha’s restless pacing,

Bright red hair bright red lips as she sneered at him, spewing her distaste in Russian now while Tony sighed, complaining to Steve with that bright glowing chest cutting through shadows to illuminate a million floating dust particles,

Barton’s lazy sprawl on a windowsill, thumping the tip of some arrow and making offhand comments about how not even Sam could help this one.

Steve shoved Bucky’s bent arm further up his back and he cried out, curling to the side and there were the Commandos, propped on various logs like they were watching a fire crackle, only it was Bucky’s bones and their smiles were so goddamned bright--

And turn it into the silver screen dream dream

The lights flashed on with that same awful, blinding loud pop they did every time the war propagandists filmed something, same spotlights and big square filter lights, shining down from the corners like some kind of arena and Bucky couldn't take that.

One foot planted on the arm behind him and Bucky shoved off, spun, and snapped something hard in the same second, a cry of pain from Steve but he was free, free enough to roll onto his back and throw a spare knife at the closest light.

It shattered, raining down glass and sparks on the heads of the Commandos, damn near lighting them on fire and Bucky’s stomach churned as Falsworth smiled wider, spread his arms and exclaimed to the rest of the boys,

“Snow! We’ll all be insulated tonight!”

“Or incarcerated,” Clint added thoughtfully, throwing a wood chip down from the rafter, throwing shadows as it floated to the ground.

The lighting was totally fucked now, too bright from three sides and casting the craziest shadows from the fourth, cutting every angle on his face deeper as he finally got his bearings, sprung back to his feet.

Steve was already waiting, brushing the dust and glass off his uniform, helmet knocked off to one side and dandelion puff looking more like a halo and horns than anything else.

“A quick feet readjustment as Steve lifted both fists and Bucky snarled, wishing he'd worn his mask - crouched low, stalked the distance between them with perfectly chosen footsteps.

“Hurry up, Cap! Put down the dog already!”

Singing I am your worst, I am your worst nightmare

They wanted собака? He could give them an animal.
Steve raised an eyebrow, then a knife was slicing into his left abdomen and he looked down, mouth opening in pain only he never had the chance to make the sound because Bucky pounced, fist connecting with that pretty jaw and snapping the perfect head to the side.

They made him into a weapon and told him to find peace.

The look on Steve's face as he lifted his head, the blood dripping from the corner of his mouth, that was the only peace he'd ever get.

Leather caught the next punch but Bucky’s brain was working now, he'd prepared a backup plan for that and his other fist landed right over the knife wound in Steve’s uniform.

A shocked sound and Steve twisted Bucky’s wrist, nearly breaking the bones and he had to get the metal fingers up to pry Steve off his damn hand, blue glaring heated and pissed over the top of their grappling hands.

*they took our love and they filled it up, filled it up with Novocaine and now I’m just numb*

Yank free and Steve’s next punch was an uppercut, snapping his head back and sending hair flying, but the momentum only made his kick stronger and then they were both rolling around on the ground, kicking up more dust and drowning in the shouts and jesters of the onwatching crowd.

Steve pinned him to the ground and Bucky slammed his ankle into Steve’s lower back, making him groan and shove a forearm against Bucky’s neck, only that made Steve off balance and it was too easy to flip them, knocking Steve’s skull to the side again with a wild punch, leg hooking up over his side and they were rolling, again, fighting and shoving and pushing til he couldn't tell if the red spotting his vision was stress or delusion or blood dripping into his eyes but nothing was tinting that devilbedamned color of blue, even beating bruises til they were black and matched the insides those leather gloves kept trying to pulverize and he finally got two hands on Steve’s shoulders, on the warm shoulders he used to carry, slammed that precious spine into the ground and screamed.

"YOU SAID I WOULD NEVER BE ALONE AGAIN YOU PROMISED ME FOREVER AND HERE YOU ARE LEAVING ME TO DIE ALONE FOR THE GODDAMNED SECOND TIME!!"

The break was all Steve needed, the rip in Bucky’s soul meant a tear in his heart -- literally.

It all happened so fast, the flash of the knife in his own hand, then Steve was jabbing Bucky’s hand into his chest, slicing through all that black armor, cutting straight into the deepest part of him and lodging there, choking, as his pierced aorta sputtered and Bucky coughed on the blood in his throat.

*don’t stop, don’t stop until your heart goes numb*

One hand grasped at his chest, gasping for oxygen and Steve slid out easy from under him, staggering on his hands and knees and by God, everything was quiet.

Bucky sucked in another haggard breath, risked looking up under the black tangled veil of hair.

They were all gone. The crowds, the Avengers, Sarah, the Commandos, the lights, broken glass.

It was just Steve, standing there, blocking the dim light from a distant window, disapproval and disinterest etched into that beautiful face.

Bucky shredded, here on his knees before Steve again only there was a knife in his heart and Steve really was gonna let him die alone.
He gasped another broken breath, looking down at his chest, lifting his hand free from where he'd been clutching the bleeding--

It wasn't bleeding. There was no knife. There was no wound.

*Now I'm just numb*

Not even a pierce in his shirt. His hands weren't red either, there was no blood splatters arching the floor.

“Stevie?” Bucky breathed, looking up for an explanation.

Only Steve wasn't there.

Just thin air.

Very very thin air; the kind best to choke on.

Steve was gone. Steve’d never been here.

The warehouse was empty.

So was Falsworth’s tent.

*I don't feel a thing for you*

I don't wanna feel a thing for you.

He was shaking, he knew distantly. Bruised in a couple places, which made sense with all the throwing himself around.

Bleeding. The worst on the inside.

I don't feel a thing for you but he could never stop feeling until Steve was *gone*. For good, erased, entirely. Hydra’d proven it. He’d proven it.

He was losing his mind. Losing his goddamned mind and at this rate, he really would lose his goddamned heart too. Almost did today. What if he’d actually had a knife in his hands--

Had to protect himself.

Had to get a fucking grip and protect himself and to do that he had to sever ties. Cut all the strings he was tangling himself up in before they wrapped around his neck and choked him to death in his sleep.

‘Specially that thick gold string he kept tripping on. ‘Specially Steve.

But how?

He'd never been able to drop the kid before. Steve loved him too much.

Shove off the ground, straighten to his feet. Boots felt too heavy on the cold ground now, October chill settling into bones and Bucky’d broken Steve’s but he still stuck around.
Stuck around until Bucky melted into golden nothing and stained both their souls ugly black.

It'd have to be something worse, worse than all the pain of that night. Worse than all the physical and mental torture he'd put them through, because Steve was still sticking around, sticking too hard like sunlight to tanned skin and he couldn't handle gold in the black and white painfree world.

Had to be bad enough to make Steve stop. Leave him be, forever. The only way Steve would stop chasing?

Bucky had to make Steve Rogers hate him.

~*~ Sometimes I think you like getting punched.~*~

Copying the files from the hard drive. It's a good habit to get into.

Natasha taught him once and it was stupid, wanting to put himself in more pain like that, but he'd never been good at avoiding pain anyways.

It was either use Tony's mixtape or trudge through his song library till something made him cry anyways.

Exes. They were exes now. As in past-tense, broken up, and it wasn't even ex-boyfriend it was ex-fiancé and in the span of lifetimes they'd lived they'd only been together for the tiniest fraction, broken-hearted over each other for all the rest.

*Sorrow found me when I was young
Sorrow waited, sorrow won.*

“Captain Rogers? Mr. Stark has requested your presence at dinner this week. There is a general concern for your health and well-being. May I RSVP for you?”

The glass was cold under his palm, city lit up below his feet. Every one of those lights was a person, or a family, and one of them could be Bucky, he could be right there, in that distant golden window, and Steve would never know.

“Sure, Jarvis. I got no plans tomorrow night.”

Or the next night. Or the next.

Or ever.

He dropped his hand from the window, turned a dull gaze over the rest of the floor. Oddly empty, because Stark’d never gotten around to redecorating after he and Bucky’d taken most of the furniture to their Brooklyn apartment.

Still familiar though, same old kitchen table they'd eaten at so many times, same kitchen he'd sat on the counter swinging his legs and singing to Bucky that'd he'd loved him since they were eighteen and Buck almost dropped that pancake at the confession that he'd told Mom he wanted to marry
Bucky.

For awhile there, Steve really thought he would.

*Don't leave my half a heart alone.*  
*On the water, cover me in rag and bone.*

There wasn't a fire escape he could crawl out on, sit in the cold with the wind in his hair and his eyes too frozen to leak.

But the dining room tile was freezing and if he tipped his head back against the wall-length windows it was close as he could get.

*Sympathy - cause I don't wanna get over you.*

Spine against cold rigid, heart beating too slow in his chest, lagging behind his breaths.

Let go.

Dipping Bucky in half for a kiss, over there, the shock and absolute joy on his face as Steve pulled away, crystal eyes crinkling and mouth curling up with that one-sided smile.

*I don't wanna get over you.*

That fight, wrestling on the living room floor after Steve'd almost broken his own wrist. Bucky’d pinned him down, hands around his throat, heated fire in his eyes. And God, Steve’d been hot all over, so young and turned on, eyes begging Buck to kiss him and really, he almost had.

“You worry the fuck outta me.”

“Right back at you.”

Steve knocked his head back against the window, eyes shut and mouth twisted up to keep from crying. He wasn't gonna cry.

“You promised,” Steve whispered, wrenched and quiet and more broken than he'd even wanted to say aloud. “Promised I would n-never be alone again.”

The thing is, you don't have to. Cause I'm with you to the end of the line, pal.

“Last breaths drawn together, but here you are leaving me to d-die alone again--”

Voice broke over the last part and Steve covered his face with his hands, gasping shakily behind softening calluses, knees drawing closer to his chest.

A muffled sound echoing through empty, empty, and that ghost might never fill the vacant spot on their old shared tower floor again.

Bucky’s laugh was done echoing off these walls. Forever. The quiet it was now, that was permanent. About the only thing that was permanent.

“He's gone,” Steve mumbled, peeling damp hands off his face, shuddering breath as he slid up the wall, teetered to his feet. Hand on the window again, five splayed star like he could break through if he pressed hard enough--

“He's gone he's gone he's gone Bucky's Go-o-o-one.”
His head hung with the sob, shoulders shaking with it and he'd never wanted to cry

because he knew he'd never stop.

Cold, wet rolling down his cheek and it was too late now, the wall had a considerably sized dent, shield shaped only he hadn't just bounced off, hadn't kept running for the assassin in black because he was too late. It was too late.

Didn't have it in him to yell anymore.

Didn't have it in him to be angry.

Didn't have a thing left in him at all.

*don't leave my half a heart alone. on the water, cover me in rag and bone. sympathy,*
*cause I don't wanna get over you.*

He was lying on his old bed, staring at nothing in misery when the elevator dinged.

Steve lifted his head, which was how he saw the note on his bedside table. And the sketchbook.

Dragged himself upright enough to grab both, sheets shifting beneath him. How many times had their bodies been entwined in those shee--

He flipped open the sketchbook before his head could finish that thought.

A carnival’s carousel, grays arching beautifully, white clouds saturating the sky. He didn't remember drawing that.

Another page, indiscernible sketches.

Another, another, and the book flipped open to a sketch he definitely remembered making.

Bucky, flopped out on the couch, hair splayed a hundred directions and bright eyes focusing seriously on the book he held up with his metal hand. *Farewell to Arms.*

The shadow of a love bite, lingering kiss, something, dark on his neck and Steve rolled his lips in, wiping a hand down his face before he made all the papers crinkle.

A sound outside the door and he wiped his face one more time, tucking the mystery note into that page and flipping the sketchbook closed. He'd read it later. Wasn't for the eyes of whoever’d found him now.

“Rogers?” Sam called out, carefully tipping the door open.

Steve glanced up a moment, saw he was alone and stared back down at the sketchbook in his hands.

He looked positively awful.

Dark circles under his eyes, loose shirt tugged off balance to one side, legs thin and bare from under a pair of worn shorts, hands trembling a little as they clutched a sketchbook too tight.

Sam closes the door softly behind him, stepping up to the bed and that's when he saw the tear tracks.
He'd never been so relieved to see someone crying in his entire life.

Steve'd been doing anything but crying for the past five weeks and now that he finally was, they were finally getting somewhere.

“Hey,” Steve croaked and see, already, progress. It was always one of them speaking first, but here was Cap taking the initiative. Maybe finally goddamn healing.

“Hey, man.” A very careful hand placed on Steve’s shoulder, one he didn’t shrug away.

But he didn’t look up either, staring down dejectedly at that sketchbook the same way he'd stared down at metal handcuffs that day on the bridge, some other world, some other time period in his hands and he didn't blink once, stared right through the bottom of the van, voice drifting, *He looked right at me. And he didn't even know me.*

Except it wasn't anywhere near as simple as that anymore.

Sam tugged the sketchbook carefully away from those shackled hands. Steve let him take it, head turning to stare at the wall.

“He’s been gone a lot longer than five weeks.” Voice scratchy, precariously torn, but he was speaking and Sam was here to listen. “And I didn't even notice.”

“You went for help. You noticed,” Sam reasoned softly. Steve shook his head once, words clipped like he didn't ever give his mouth permission to say them.

"I pushed him too hard to get better. To be right, for me. And he snapped.”

A simple defeated shrug and it was almost as disturbing to see Cap defeated as it was to see him broken this deep. None of them had ever wanted this, not for these two. Not for anyone.

“Look man. I know it’s hard. You two never had it easy. But you can't blame yourself for everything.”

“He's always looked out for me, even when he was rotting away inside.” A pause, so quiet, eerily calm but at least he wasn’t throwing things and screaming anymore. “And I can't return the favor once?”

“You did everything you could to help him, Steve. I know, first hand, man. But we can't save everyone.” A soft shake to those broad shoulders and Steve sighed.

More like deflated, a noise of pure exhaustion. Rubbed a hand over his mouth, head tipped tiredly to the side.

“How, Sam? It's been building up for so long and I did nothing.”

“It was never your responsibility to know everything, Steve.”

For a legend, an army captain and a best friend with a severe savior complex, that wasn't something he could hear and understand. Frustration knotted between eyebrows, voice lifting just a little.

“I'm the one who's supposed to take care of him.”

“That's not your job.”

“It's my only job! All I've ever done in my long and twisted career is try to save him and when it
comes to the thing that matters most - thinking I'd leave him again - I had no idea how bad--"

“Steve, how could you? He's amazing at hiding this stuff. He's a professional --""

“I am sick and tired of people saying that. What the hell am I supposed to be, then? When is everyone going to get it in their heads that I've killed probably just as many people as he has? In wars, battles. I'm the one who gets in fights, and I'm the professional soldier. We're equals, goddammit. And he doesn't get that. No one gets that!”

“Nobody doubts you, Steve.”

“He does! He always has. Sam, he thinks I'm in it for the justice, red white and blue flags, thinks I don't love him enough not to abandon him again--”

“Steve, this is Bucky Barnes we're talking about. He knows you.”

“Yeah, maybe, but clearly not well enough to trust me! Or- or. Or love me.”

Sam let go of Steve’s shoulder, taking a step back and rubbing a hand over his head. Steve still didn't get it. After all this time, the best vision a human could possibly have and Steve was still blind as a bat without echolocation.

“You seriously think you're the only problem here?”

Blue eyes lifted, muddled confusion over glistening eyelashes. “What?”

“God, Barnes was right. You see the world in shades of martyrs and devils and angels. It's not that black and white, man. His rejection wasn’t just about you. It's him, it's because he doesn't feel safe. Because he's broken and he knows it and he thinks there's no fixing a broken machine.

“Because he's scared. He's terrified you'll jump ship and what he'll become without you, terrified to tether himself to a soul that's always threatened to leave him, either in some ball of fire or finally just walking out. That fear is what kept him from you, all these years.”

“He's always been scared I'll die, that's no fucking excuse,” Steve muttered and Sam would smack him upside the head right now if he thought it'd do any good.

“If that's not a valid reason, the hell is? Man, it's simple. He's got it in his head he's nothin’ without you, then all of a sudden he is without you and he can't handle it.”

“He could handle anything. He's...he pushed through his own brainwashing, saved himself from Hydra both times. He overcame his near-suicide, he pushed through watching people die by his own hands. Overcame seventy years of torture and came out the other side functional, happy, wanting to change, still a goddamned genius with the brain to save the world. He handled all of my shit, easy, slipped right in along the Avengers, sniper rifle in hand. He's courageous, strong--”

The waving arms and increasing pitch weren’t getting them anywhere and Sam had to put up both hands to get Steve to shut up for a second.

“Listen, listen. That's not something he can process, Steve. To him it's just fights, one after another, and he doesn't go down easy. But he's still helpless around you, and he hates that.”

The second lasted exactly that, then Steve was popping off the bed, shoving past Sam and spinning back around, visually pent up with all that frustration, but his top wasn’t blowing, limbs too heavy to be swinging and for once, Sam didn’t have to stand with his guard up, just stand and listen to his
friend pour his heart out without any fists to follow.

Dear god, the affect Barnes had on that boy.

“Helpless? He’s the only reason my dumbass hasn't blown up about ninety times. He's got my six. Still, always has. He lifts me up, Sam, like you wouldn't believe. He's always put me on the tops of mountains and I don't know if I'd’ve ever been able to touch the sun like I did if he didn’t have so much faith in me.”

The tall and proud were held up with metal beams behind the green screen but without his Steve was deflating, crumpling, more and more with every word, quieter and quieter like he could disappear into nothing, become small all over again, let the coffin he was in now reverse the Vita Rays.

“It's always been Bucky, always. I hold him in my arms, Sam, but I know.” Single shake of his head, blue eyes staring out at nothing, mouth tipped sideways. “I know no matter how much he cries on my shoulder...or curls against my chest…”

Two shoulders lifted, dropped, eyes down and fists down, ground too close to do much falling but he was managing it anyways, somehow.

“...he's still the one who's holding me.”

Sam swallowed. If only he could be a miracle worker like Steve, if only he had the power to raise a nation to arms with words alone, maybe he could’ve found Steve’s best friend for him. Because he’d do just about anything to deliver Bucky to that heartbroken golden retriever right now.

“C’mere, man,” was all he had to offer, stepping up into that sad little bubble, wrapping the only two arms he could give around those broad, impossible shoulders.

It took a second, or ten, but slowly, slowly, Steve’s arms lifted too, wrapping around Sam’s back.

Sam squeezed a little tighter and Steve kept his touch light, another few moments of stiffness before he finally gave in, eyes closing and head tipping to the side, blonde resting exhausted against the side of Sam’s neck.

“You’re gonna be okay,” Sam promised, because he couldn’t give Steve a lot but he could give him that. “We’re all gonna be okay, man.”

A tiny, quiet muffled whimper and Sam swayed them side to side, holding Steve close and trying not to think about how long it must’ve been since Rogers let anybody just hug him.

He would’ve stood there as long as it took, as long as Steve let himself be comforted. If the radio on his belt hadn’t chirped, he would’ve stood there for fucking days.

But it did chirp, and he should’ve thought to silence it but he really had not seen that conversation going this direction so the words over the talkie came through loud and clear.

“Wilson? Did you ever find Rogers? It's important, come in.”

“I don’t have to get that,” Sam started and Steve huffed a weak laugh, clapping Sam once on the shoulder and pulling back, hand wiping over his eyes but he wasn’t standing quite so small anymore, which was at least one good thing.

He kept a watchful eye on Rogers as he unclipped his radio from his belt, lifted it to his mouth and pressed the button.
“Tony, hey, what's--”

Static cut through and his voice was cut off, Tony’s radio overriding his, “Code red, and not as in fire or burn victim or whatever. Not to be dramatic or anything, but get your asses up here now.”

“Well shit.” Sam stared at the little black box for a moment before glancing back at Steve, whose temporary peace was shattered with that same confusion and tension back between his eyebrows. They’d have time to fix that later, right now they had places to be.

He tucked his radio back on his belt, gesturing for the door with his head. “C’mon, we gotta go.”

“What's code red?” Steve demanded, closing the bedroom door back behind them. Sam didn’t bother waiting for the elevator, shoving open the stairwell doors and motioning Steve up first.

“As in red star.” A break, blue eyes wide like a child and he almost couldn't say it, couldn't handle the look on Steve's face. "...Bucky’s contacted somebody.”

~*_~I wanna throw my hands in the air and scream~*_~

The message had said to come alone.

Clint supposed as he dropped from the loading deck of the quinjet and left an army of Avengers inside, this was about as alone someone like them got.

Steve was fidgeting like hell inside the cabin, kept readjusting his seat to get a better view staring out the window. He could just steal Natasha’s seat, but he still couldn’t believe they’d let him come in the first place, he wasn’t gonna blow it because he was impatient.

Couldn't believe Bucky'd sent the tower that note either.

And that he wanted to meet Clint instead of Steve. Why Clint? Or better, why not Steve?

Why here, some abandoned top floor of an old factory building in Queens?

Had Bucky really stayed in New York this whole time?

What did he want?

Was he in there, with Clint, right now?

Waiting for them? This was the closest he'd come to Bucky's location since that night he'd snuck into their apartment and left skid marks on the kitchen floor.

Clint would tell them the moment he saw Bucky, right?

They were all on comms so he’d hear the moment any of the rest of them did, headset over his blonde spikes because he really couldn’t wear his helmet right now. He’d thrown on a leather jacket because it was freezing, but the cold wasn’t why he was shivering. Or tapping his foot impatiently.

It was just. He’d never pictured it going this way. Not that he was complaining, he wanted Bucky back in any way he could fucking get him.
Fuck.

Did he actually just think that out loud? Was that how it was, then? He’d come full circle and now he was admitting it, full out, to himself, in the clearest plainest of words.

He wanted Bucky back.

Jesus Christ, he wanted Bucky back.

The comms crackled and Steve nearly jumped outta his seat, adjusting the big earphones and holding as still as possible while he listened--

“This is Barton, checking in. I’ve reached the main hallway for this floor now. Lots of doors, pretty dark in here. Okay, the door at the end is cracked open, so I’m betting that's the one. Approaching now.”

“Do you see him yet?” Steve leaned sideways in his seat, like that could possibly enlighten him to the inside of the building they were hovering beside.

“No, not yet.” Clint answered patiently, silence filling with distant crackling that was making Steve’s heart race even more.

“Alright, pushing open the door now...It's a big room, steel beams up top. There's a window open, so it's a little breezy. Otherwise pretty empty. No sign of Barnes anywh-- Oh, wait. There's something in the middle of the floor.”

The comm went silent for another couple of seconds and Steve was really damn close to about bouncing out of this seat and running down that hallway himself.

“Huh. Looks like a note. Definitely Sarge’s weirdly nice handwriting. Here, it reads, ‘I said...to come alone...’”

The hell did that mean?

“Shit,” Clint cursed over the line and Steve’d never been more on edge in his life.

“Clint, what? What is it?”

Crackle, crackle--

“Fuck, bomb, bomb, there's a--”

The explosion was louder outside the headphones than over the comms, a single crack before the line went dead and Steve’s heart stopped in his chest the same time the quinjet tipped sideways from where it’d been hovering outside, heat wave rolling and the flash of fire, red orange white outside the window, black smoke curling.

And a single black shape, diving from an open window that was now glass shattering in slow motion above--

Steve couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe, just stared out the window but thankfully everyone else wasn’t shell-shocked into ice and Sam Wilson dove out the back of the quinjet, wings snapping out to catch air and dodge between burning flecks of metal.

It could be Barton or Barnes, the black figure falling, they were too far away to see but Steve couldn’t breathe either way, hand pressed to the glass as Falcon swooped further down down only
he wasn’t gonna make it in time, the ground below was too close, the figure in black was moving too fast--

A gloved hand closed around a flailing arm and that should’ve been his first clue to who was falling, but Steve couldn’t process anything but the distant shout of pain, an arm yanked out of socket seconds before the body smashed on the pavement and Sam’d caught him.

Him being a half-exploded, even more deaf Clint, lifted into the quinjet with soot covering half his face, a couple bleeding cuts and an arm cradled to his chest. An extremely worried Natasha, a fretting Tony, silent frozen Steve in his chair, staring at the scene and unable to move, speak, anything.

“Damn your boyfriend ain't messin’ around,” Clint breathed, half a smile on his face as Natasha pressed a worried cloth to his forehead and Sam inspected his arm, but those kind eyes were on Steve and he didn’t even know how, what to say to Clint right now.

But thankfully he didn’t have to, because that never-dying humor turned to Tony next, tired and still light as he offered, “How about everyone listens to Barnes’s requests next time, yeah?”

“There won’t be a next time if you fucking die,” Natasha bit and Steve blinked, trying to figure out how long ago Natasha had stopped being one of his best friends.

“His arm’s gonna be fine but Stark, set a path for the hospital anyways, just in case.”

“How’s the Stark medical team sound?”

“Great, man, whoever can get me doped up on pain meds first-- ow, Nat, chill with the alcohol wipes, would you?”

The white hallways of this ward hadn’t changed the slightest and every time he’d been here it’d been because of Bucky, in one way or another. The last time, Clint had been shot, and now he’d almost been blown to bits and Barton was Bucky’s favorite Avenger.

What was he supposed to do? What was he supposed to do?

A small hand clapped on his shoulder and Steve looked up, half surprised to see Stark still here. It was getting pretty late, just fluorescent lights bathing everything now while Clint slept off the drugs and arm-relocation in the same hospital bed Steve’d stitched Bucky’s bulletwound before he was Bucky again.

“Look, Rogers. Maybe it's a good idea if you stay in the tower for a little while. We’ll set you up in some cozy room, maybe Bruce's floor--”

Bruce’s floor?

“You're gonna quarantine me?” Steve sat up all the way and Tony’s hand froze on shoulder, head shaking too quickly.

“No no, nothing like that. It's for your own safety--”

They were worried about him? Clint Barton was in a hospital bed because Bucky’d almost blown him into a thousand pieces and they were worried about him?

“I'll handle my own safety, thanks.” He knocked Tony’s hand off, glaring with what little residual anger he had left, then he was started for the stairs.
And didn’t quit walking until he found some nondescript hotel that he had enough cash for.

Bought himself a room and trudged up what felt like a thousand more rickety steps. A room in a hotel in New York City and Steve didn’t have it left in him to pity a damn thing.

Just turn out the desk light and lay in the dark until one of the two swallowed him whole.

When he leaned over to flip the killswitch, there was something scrawled on the hotel-issue notepad beside his bed. Numbers, of some kind.

Probably something from the maids, the guy before. How many lives’d passed through this hotel room and how many more after his?

The light clicked off and the pillows collapsed under his head and he could pity them, because he knew just how heavy his head was to carry. Just didn’t wanna carry any of it anymore.

All he wanted to do was stare at the pitch black ceiling, numbers floating through his brain instead of blood and for once, he just wanted sleep.

Wanted it to be tomorrow already. Next year.

Any day but today.

~*~Hey! Pick on someone your own size.~*~

It wasn’t enough, scrawling numbers on notes to slip on bedside tables. This was still his best friend and Bucky wasn’t done falling yet, apparently, because he was still writing more notes. How many of Steve’s friends would have to die before Steve got the goddamned message?

If Steve ever got the goddamned message.

*I don’t want to remember it all
The promises I made if you just hold on--

Stupid, to close his eyes, let himself drift into wishful sleep now. But nothing else could quiet his goddamned head and he couldn’t damn well catch himself, not if he couldn’t see anything straight anymore. Like his thoracic cavity was constantly being shredded, like the world kept changing goddamned lighting on him all the time.

Blinded by the sun and he couldn’t see out of charred coronas, not without stumbling over his own feet and that’s right, almost stabbing himself in the heart in a fake fight with invisible enemies.

Lovers. God, all he needed was just one glance--

And I just need enough of you to dull the pain

And Steve would come, because he’d been hurting too. That’s what he told himself and that’s why Bucky blinked his eyes open in the dimly lit night, hotel room with three walls, a bed, a door.

A door someone was knocking at. Because see, Steve was just like him, crazy and in love and hurting and knowing he was stupid but showing up anyways.

Just to get me through the night ’til we’re twins again
If it was possible to stop breathing in a dream, he did. Or maybe he stopped breathing in his sleep but either way he’d forgotten he was dreaming by now and really, all that mattered was that Steve Was Here.

It was million miles to the door and he was there in milliseconds, heart pounding as the metal hand reached out, turned the knob. Swung open the door.

Bucky’s lips parted but he didn’t, couldn’t make a sound. Just stared.

Steve, Steve was standing there beautiful and glowing, staring at Bucky with the same wide eyes, shock making his chest breathe too heavy and not at all, blonde so light over the dark roots, the same boy he’d left crying in his sleep on a couch, the same boy who’d left him crying in the rain.

“Is that you?” Steve whispered and Bucky couldn’t take it any longer, Steve was too far away and he was freezing, head to toe over here in the icy cold.

“Steve,” he breathed and

Bucky stood there in the doorway, shoulders broader than Steve remembered, unfamiliar muscle bulking his body and his arms that made him want to cry out and beg Buck to tell him what the hell he’d been doing that was so much more important than being found but there was no point, Steve couldn’t control it, it was just a dream.

But god, was he beautiful.

That was the last thing he had the chance to think before Bucky reached across the wooden frame between them, warm fingers curling around Steve’s wrist. He nearly gasped at that touch alone, then Bucky was pulling him forward, stumbling over the threshold and they were kissing, at least one of them was crying--

“God, Bucky, I’m so sorry,” Steve mumbled against his mouth and a rough nip against his lip shut him up, door kicking shut behind them somehow, two hands framing his face, hard curl of fingers against his jaw.

Something was off. Too rough - not that harsh passion from the night he’d broken Steve’s hand, but...darker. Lost.

Couldn’t they at least be goddamned happy in his dreams?

“Bucky--”

“You wanna shut up?” It was practically a growl, teeth scraping as their mouths collided again and he couldn’t remember how he got here, or why he was melting into Bucky’s arms when he should be apologizing more, or screaming at him or something, but--

Suddenly Bucky was scooping him up - fucking literally, metal hand curling under one thigh, strong human on the other and nothing else mattered, not when he swept Steve up off his feet, easy, stronger than Steve ever remembered, so why was he dreaming that way but then those same hands were carrying him across the room, sharp tugging his bottom lip and they were finally the same size, Steve

gasped so hard he sucked all the oxygen outta Buck’s lungs too only Bucky didn’t smile or joke about gettin’ dizzy, just squeezed Steve tighter, hands groping up to knead his ass greedily and the air knocked outta him had no fucking chance of returning, ever.
“Buck, Buck, jesus.” He clutched desperately at the strong arms holding him, fingers slipping along the curves of over-defined muscle, grinding his crotch against the hard stomach, thighs squeezing Bucky’s sides that weren’t the soft skin he knew - but the pouty mouth tasted the same, sliding tongue made the same shivers echo down his spine.

The mattress hit his back hard but nothing could stop the sparks running through his spinal cord, arching up against the mouth that followed him down here, hands pressing hard and sliding up over knotted shoulders, slipping into the familiar silky long hair. Even that was longer than he remembered, still soft as it brushed his temples. The scruff on Bucky’s jaw though, he wasn’t used to that, like he hadn’t shaved in weeks, scratching his face raw but Steve could care less.

Reaching, peeling off layers because god, he wanted to kiss every inch of Bucky he could reach,

_Till we're stripped down to our skeletons again_

the shiver that rippled down Steve’s naked spine echoed up through the plates of his metal hand, fingers to his shoulder, making him shudder as he dragged his mouth down Steve’s shiny lips to that sharp jawline.

Rough hands gripped his hair tight, then Steve was tipping Bucky’s head to the side, wet mouthing his neck, sucking on skin and making his head spin, hotel room blinking dizzy and threatening to land him on the mattress beside that blonde head.

Steve held him still and steady, between the heated panting against his ear, fingers digging into his neck, one hand wrapping around his bare waist like it was all he wanted but somehow unfamiliar, like Steve hadn’t taken this body and ripped it in half dozens of times.

_Till we're saints just swimming in our sins again_

Something like a fever, heat of skin on skin as the room spun, colors shot more contrasted, Steve’s hands on his body swam in and outta focus, disorientation as that wet mouth slid over his collarbone, down his chest, peppered over bruised ribs.

The ceiling rolled into sight and Steve pressed him hard into the mattress, tracing muscle with rough fingers, slick tongue, squeezing Bucky’s arms, hips, thighs.

“I love you, I love you,” Steve was murmuring and Bucky would do about anything to turn off Steve’s stupid mouth but he’d never known how, never once known how.

Soft hands turned into cat claws, digging hard into the flesh of his thighs, a deep anguished sound and Bucky’s human hand found the back of Steve’s head, metal grabbing the hotelbed’s headrest just in time for that wet mouth to close around the erection dampening his stomach.

Another gasp, lifting his head and blue eyes flicked up, hair disheveled and jaw bruised, although Bucky couldn't remember why Steve’s jaw would be bruised.

Just the right bluepurple to match his eyes, too goddamned beautiful to look at Bucky collapsed back down to the mattress, eyes shut tight and lips parted around a moan.

_And there's a jet black crow droning on and on and on_

He raced his fingers up Bucky’s sides, eyes closing to focus on the heated, salty taste on his tongue, the pulse and texture as he lowered further, waves of Bucky’s taste, smell, warmth crashing over him and making him shudder, dig his fingers in hard across the lines of padded ribs.
“C’mon, c’mon,” Bucky moaned again, fingers tightening on his neck, hauling him up and the next thing he knew they were kissing again, Bucky’s tongue in his mouth and a metal hand around his cock.

Everything was warm, sparkling and swirling and it all started coming in flashes, golden skin and dark hair and the press of lips bitten raw, soft calls of his name, slick slide and encompassing heat--

*Up above our heads droning on and on and on*

“Ah, ah, ah,” Bucky chanted, rocking beneath him and Steve kissed the hollow of his throat, making Buck bare his teeth, fingers tightening on Steve’s ribs, matching bruises for them both this time.

Flash and Bucky was in his lap, shuddering and sliding against his chest, clawing Steve’s shoulderblades with sharp metal, head tipped back and blue eyes blown wide and dark, sweat racing down the center of Steve’s chest, skin so slick it could be blood, black at the edges of his eyes instead of red. A hard hand between all that defined muscle, shoving Steve onto his back, blonde tipping back with that sound that sent shivers down Bucky’s spine, thighs tightening around Steve’s hips as he lifted up and rocked back down, strands of wet hair flying in his face and Jesus Christ, that’s why he usually tied his hair up to ride Steve.

Only there was no usual anymore, only dreams and Steve’s hands digging bruises into his flexed thighs were a welcome distraction, slipping back into the rough drag of their bodies together, the quiet deep sounds rumbling outta Steve’s chest, painted gold instead of silver in the glittery moonlight because the moon only knew how to reflect off the sun.

“Fuck, I miss you,” his throat choked and dear god, he did not mean to say that out loud only Steve’s eyes were locked on him now, watering up like rainy skies.

*Keep making trouble 'till you find what you love*

“I can’t keep crr-- crying over you,” Steve swore, low, and it felt a hell of a lot more like it was directed to him instead of Bucky. “Broke both’a hearts.”

“Ahh-ah mmm, yes. Yes you did,” Bucky panted, sliding both hands up Steve’s chest, planting one right in the center, five fingers out in a star. “W-we did.”

*I need a new partner in crime and you shrug*

Bucky’s mouth was bitter on his that time, wetter than it should’ve been and it was no use seeing which one of them broke, the salt was unmistakable and it belonged to them both anyways.

Strong artist hands rolled their bodies together faster and faster and Bucky shuddered, crying out into Steve’s mouth, body locking up and muscles crashing down, twin skeletons shuddering and falling apart at the same time in a tangled pile of breaking bones.

Bones laced in sweaty sticky muscle, pulsing heartbeats and hands in fists, Steve’s ankles around Bucky’s shins, thighs pressed together, foreheads touching, skulls tipped together in eternity.

He could feel the expansion, contraction of Bucky’s throat as he swallowed, chests knocking from twin lungs, filled with fire instead of ice and it didn’t burn any less.

The words painted right on his lips, crystal and red, metal star burning imprints into his own,

“I didn’t win the war til you got there,” Bucky breathed, swallowing again and Steve squeezed black
hair tighter, sweat and silk impossible to grip and Buck was already slipping away from him, mouth dry as deserts they never fought in. “Didn’t win the war at all.”

Steve’s eyes were closed and he could still feel the tracks down Bucky’s face, tear tracks and train tracks and mixtape tracks and it all broke at the same moment, he could physically feel the moment Bucky’s muscles retracted from his own, began to pull away.

“Don't leave me,” Steve gasped, shrunk two sizes in Bucky’s arms, on his deathbed and his boy was just marching for the rickety train-shaped door, army hat on sideways and an entire lifetime left behind in the snow.

He knew it. He fucking knew it had to be a nightmare.

“You're the one who told me to leave,” Bucky reminded him, you shipping out?, scooping his clothes off the floor. Steve was suddenly terribly awful cold, shivering and small as he wrapped himself up in Bucky’s sheet, stumbling as barefeet fell to the ground below.

“I take it back,” he insisted, tripping on white sheets again as he tried to follow Bucky around the room, black tshirt thrown over messy hair, black combat pants zipped. A single half-amused glance thrown over his shoulder, almost looking young again with his hair slicked back, a single short strand curling over his forehead.

“No, you don't. You don't take back anything, Rogers.” Bucky straightened up, turning his way and lifting his metal hand up in a stupid fucking salute.

“Buck,” Steve tried, only he was frozen in place, plane cockpit flashing around him and every choice he’d ever made wrong, he’d never deserved a second chance in the first place.

Bucky just marched to the window, glass shining like the windshield that’d exploded inward on the crash, like the glass shards on their kitchen floor after some fight, like the glass of those crystal eyes glancing at his from the next barstool over.

Window pried open and the muted city crashed inside, car horn blaring and night lights of the Brooklyn skyline twinkling in the distance.

Black boots stepping up on the ledge and Steve stood there in the middle of the room, disarrayed soft blonde over pale-gold skin, wide watery blue eyes and that long white sheet blowing in the wind like angel wings and Bucky paused, one final promise to break on his lips before he slipped away.

“I loved you first,” he whispered into the wind, then he dropped.

He dropped and Bucky was falling,

falling,

jolt

and he woke, woke falling with his eyes snapping open and the cold air hitting him like a faceful of snow, only he wasn’t in his fucking bed, he was falling.

Metal darted out on instinct, caught the window ledge as fast as it took for his mouth to open and scream.

Only he didn’t, he couldn’t scream, not when the only thing terrifying left was him-fucking-self and it was super difficult to scream when you couldn’t breathe.
Jesus christ, he couldn’t breathe. His heart was pounding outta his goddamn chest, so loud he couldn’t hear anything but that, couldn’t see anything but the forty foot drop below him, couldn’t feel anything but the cold wind and the pressure of the window ledge bending slightly under his curled metal fingers.

He’d...dear god, he’d jumped out the window in his fucking sleep.

Was it a night terror? Or did the nightmare just make him--

Bucky choked on his next inhale, but at least he was inhaling now. He could’ve died. He could’ve fucking died, what if he’d woken a single second later--

A door slammed.

Bucky’s head snapped up, staring at the open window he’d just fallen from.

That was the door to his hotel room, that’d just slammed.

Was someone in his fucking room?

He took a moment to compose himself a little more, finally sucking in a functional breath, chest expanding. Fuck, he ached. Everywhere, all over, his entire body felt like it’d been turned inside out. He hadn’t been keeping track of his bruises or injuries and dear god, it was all catching up to him now, hanging from this fucking ledge. He really ought to climb back up into his room, deal with that intruder.

Only. Only when he pulled himself up on the ledge, his room was empty.

The bed was destroyed, pillows and sheets dislodged, thrown haphazardly across the room. Great, he must’ve been lashing in his sleep again.

And he was losing his mind. That couldn’t’ve been the door, no one was in here.

Carefully lowered the window behind him, locked the latch secure. Not like that’d stop him apparently.

Fuck. Fuck, it’d been bad enough he’d jumped out a fucking window--

His heart was still pounding, life flashing before his eyes. The life he’d almost lost. Fuck, Steve was gonna follow him around forever and Bucky was gonna off himself one’a these days and he couldn’t do that to either of them.

A simple message wasn’t gonna do anything, was it?

It’d have to be a lot worse than words if he was gonna make Steve hate him.

And even if he did?

That wasn’t gonna be enough, was it? It was never gonna be enough to have Steve stop looking for him.

Bucky’d have to stop looking too.

He’d have to stop looking for good.
He startled awake to the shrill sound of a phone ringing.

It took him a couple seconds to figure out where he was, shivering cold, soaking wet curled naked in the bottom of a hotel shower but he didn’t have time to think about that, or the reason he was there aka that fucking nightmare--

Just had to dive across slippery tile, grabbed his phone outta his bag just in time to catch Sam’s number.

“Hello?” Breathless and goddamn, he sounded more wrecked than he felt.

Actually, check that. Holy fuck, he was sore. Muscles aching, chest kinda felt like it’d been ripped into ribbons in the night. And there were bruises, on his ribs, what the fuck--

“Hey, man, Barnes got in contact again. You wanna meet us at the tower? It's Tony he wants to talk to this time.”

Bucky?

Again? Tony? What the fuck?

“Yeah, okay, I'm on my way.” He dug around in his bag, looking for something decent to wear that wasn’t tight enough to squeeze all his goddamned bruises. “What time?”

“They’re supposed to meet half an hour from now.”

“Shit. Yeah, I'll be there soon.”

He tossed down the phone, tossed a shirt over his head and cursed his wet hair, hopping into a pair of pants before grabbing his bag and bolting out the door, never stopping to check the note on the bedside table.

Pepper didn’t like it, Natasha didn’t like it, Maria didn’t like it. Clint and Sam were for it and he’d never been great at listening to the right people anyways, so Tony went alone.

Entirely alone.

Drove the same red convertible he’d taken to pick up Barnes the first time, could still remember being thrown across Steve’s tinyass old kitchen and nearly breaking his arm. But what a friendship had formed.

Okay, maybe not friendship, but goddammit they’d gotten along once. Him and Barnes, they’d had a thing, some sort of mutual understanding that ran a lot deeper than genius flying cars.

Still regretted telling Barnes he was the right thing for Steve though. That damn Fall Out Boy song.
In the end I’d do it all again. Just so long as this meeting didn’t end the way Barton’s had, they’d be fine.

Although stepping into the building that looked eerily similar to the one that’d blown up, all metal rafters and graffitied walls, he wouldn’t exactly say confident was the right word for what he was feeling.

Probably not even the right word for the way he was acting, for once.

He’d just prefer not to get blown up, was all.

He’d make some joke about the things he did for Steve Rogers, but this wasn’t for Steve. This wasn’t even for the memories his dad told of Sergeant James Barnes.

This was for Bucky.

“Hello?” Tony called, a bit trepidatiously, taking a cautious step on a leather-shoed heel into the creepy echoing room. Another step, echoing slightly, and this room looked as empty as Clint’s, except there thankfully didn’t appear to be a note with a bomb under it.

Didn’t appear to be anything, though, especially not missing ex-fiancés--

“Put on your warpaint,” a low voice drewled and Tony jumped, spinning around only nothing was there, the room was empty but it’d definitely come from in here. Words kinda muffled but entirely sans accent, the purest version of each syllable locked behind that strange filter sound.

“Barnes?” Tony called again, taking a second glance at the walls. None of them appeared to be secret doors from here, but without Jarvis - he wasn’t taking any chances on the “come alone” scheme - there really was no way to tell.

That voice had to come from somewhere--

“Bring home the boys and scrap scrap metal the tanks...I tried to convince Steve to pick up scrap metal once, instead of joining a goddamned war.” A pitched hum, vibrating in the air with its echo, voice lilting almost…amused. “It didn’t go so well.”

He’d never had a clearer picture from just a tone of voice before, but it was so animated. Like curling smoke, the flickering tongue of a smiling snake. The underground villain’s final speech from the shadows before he burst out in that terrible disney green, shadow elongated and manic laughter ech-ech-echoing.

And for once, he really didn’t have anything to say to that. The great Tony Stark was silenced.

But the paranoid genius, he finally got his head on straight enough to figure out where the voice was coming from.

Bucky Barnes was sprawled in the rafters, propped up on one in the shadows, leaning back against another in the darkness. One knee up, the other leg stretched long, the way it always used to be, in Steve's space. Braced against a metal pipe like it was some luscious tree in the dappled sun of a European forest.

Only he didn’t look rugged and comfortable like that prized sketch Hydra burned.

He looked like the Devil.
“You remember that Fall Out Boy competition? Back in the...good old days.” The dark head rolled, eyes flashing at his only the sharp reflection wasn’t human and those weren’t eyes, they were pitch black goggles.

Over a pitch black mask, long hair ragged and hanging in strands over the void of a face.

Like he said, the devil.

“I gotta say, how come no one brought up The Phhoenix?” A black finger lifted in the air, gloves disappearing underneath tight black sleeves, midnight armor coating every inch of skin but the strip on his forehead, tipping towards Tony at the same time as the finger, lazy sideways point, “Let me guess. No one wanted to admit the Vintage. Misery.”

Tony cleared his throat, reminding himself to breathe in the face of the demon up in the rafters. He was just sprawled, talking, so lazy like they were such good friends, all those sing-song words drifting in the air and setting every inch of his skin on tingling edge.

“It did look better on me, by the way,” he pointed out, black finger aimed at the strapped-up black chest, lunatic with fangs and reign of the shadows.

He didn’t need Jarvis here to blare warning alarms, his head and pounding heart were doing that fine for himself.

“You gotta say it fits,” the devil in the rafters cajoled, head tipping back to look at the ceiling, black glove spreading fingers to up like an artist painting death into graffitied sheet metal. “Jack’o’lanterns in July, setting fire to the sky?”

A nursery rhyme and chills went down his spine at fire, the rough dirt rubbed into it, the first grit of an accent, Russian tainting the word a drop dirtier, a gallon more threatening then it was right back to pure syllables, clear cutting constants.

“Or maybe it was the line I’m gonna change you. Because that’s what you all secretly were dying for, right?” The bright smile was audible, wolf teeth bared and beaming on dying and Tony would give about anything to go back in time and take it back, refuse the fucking meet because he wasn’t making it outta this alive, was he?

“To change me...I'll bet anything,” midnight devil paused, tipping his head knowingly as the black finger lifted again, only it was pointed at him this time and Tony’d been praying to the God he hadn’t prayed to in decades Bucky’d forgotten he was here or something only now that black leather was aimed at him and it was worse than staring into any muzzle he’d had pointed at his face.

“--you thought of that song first, didn't you. Didn't you!” Amused again and it took everything he had to swallow, to recognize that he had anything left in his body that wasn’t the screaming instinct of run.

Just paint on the confidence, the same way Bucky was dripping with black paint, he could put up a mask too. Might not have redgold to protect him but he could pretend, if it kept him alive. Survival, he was good at. Even if the Winter Soldier was better at the anti-survival thing.

He took a single step forward, hands crossed behind his back and a nonchalant tip of his head, voice a bit too scratched up to sell it but there was a chance Barnes wouldn’t pick up on it from up there in the dark.

“It might’ve crossed my mind.”
He couldn’t see under the sharp angled glass but he knew a single eyebrow arched anyway, made it even worse, knowing exactly what he looked like under the mask but being unable to picture anything but that terrifying black void of a stare, hearing every expression in the sharp exaggerations of Bucky’s carefully stabbing words.

“So, really...the whole world will write down The Kids Aren’t Alright as the theme song of this lovely tragedy but all along, it was The Phoenix, wasn’t it? And you, you knew that.” A tut-tutting sound, finger shaking at him once and Tony didn’t mean to flinch but he also didn’t mean to walk into a goddamned death trap.

“Yeah. I did.” Tony lifted his chin, everything he had not to let his voice shake. “But I didn't bring it up because I'm not a dick.”

A short burst of laughter, grating like birds dying, almost perfectly timed enough to’ve been instinctual but he wasn’t stupid, creatures like that didn’t have instincts that didn’t include knives.

Speaking of which.

The laughter died as instantly as it began, all the air in the room chilling and sucking into shadows as Bucky’s focus shifted back from Tony to himself, heavy poisonous silence filling the space the laughter’d cut into the walls, black seeping around his feet and he was shivering again but it was just the cold, he had to tell himself it was just the cold.

Strands of dark brown fell over the black face as it tipped curiously to the side, watching broken shards of shield as they lifted from out of sight, glinting by the thousands as they shifted, metal plates rippling in the dim light like a thousand knives only, well, deadlier.

“I'm disappearing, for good,” Bucky told him, blades of fingers curling and uncurling slowly. “Don't let him look for me.”

Personally, he’d take Barton’s bomb over this. Yeah, he’d definitely take jumping out a window and getting his arm dislocated over this talk, with this demon. He had enough of his goddamned own, he couldn’t handle Steve’s.

And frankly, Steve’s were a hell of a lot scarier and came with alot more knives than his did.

“I can't stop him.” He was already cringing at the idea of telling Bucky no right now, but it was true. He was no closer to stopping Steve than he was to stopping the goddamned devil himself, believe me, he was frozen in fucking place.

“You haven't been doing much have you?” Bucky mused darkly, metal plates compressing with this horrific whirr, curling into a tight fist and Tony couldn’t believe he’d once worked on that thing, tinkering with the very weapon that looked near as ready to kill him as its master. “Where was Steve last night?”

Now that it was questions instead of that freaky-as-fuck monologue, the dry cotton in his mouth was letting him speak, because it kinda felt like it was that or….some really terrible fate he didn’t wanna think about.

“I have no idea. We can't keep track of him, he's... losing his mind chasing you all over.” Bucky didn’t make a sound and that couldn’t be a good sign but none of this was good, none of it. How long’d Barnes been this way, all hyped up and terrifying again? When had he turned dark? The moment they broke up? Was this what Steve would always chase, no matter what Bucky did? “You know him. You know that.”
“He’ll give up. He will. You’re all quite good at making him complacent.” Popped the T, little shake of the dark head, ragged hair cascading around his face like snakes. Metal fingers tracing along a pole overhead, horrifying screech bouncing off decaying walls. “Lit-tle soldier boy…”

Tony’d flinched hard at the sound, shoulders curled. The scraping fingers turned into tapping ones, little bullet sounds in intervals of four, k-k-k-k, k-k-k-k, impatient and drilling right into his skull.

Forced himself to take a deep breath, running through every anxiety-attack saver that stupid psychiatrist pestered him with. It was all intimidation tactics, right? Bucky wouldn’t actually hurt him. He’d left that window open for Clint to dive outta, he was never planning to hurt his team, right?

This was about Steve, they weren’t *targets*. Even. If he’d said *you’re* all quite good at making him complacent.

He swallowed tightly, blinking too fast, one finger loosening his collar. Shit, he was wearing a tshirt, there was no collar to loosen.

“You blame this. On us?” He finally managed, barely resisting the urge to put a hand over the glowing triangle in his chest. Just needed to make some adjustments in the wiring, keep himself from suffocating--

The rafter creaked, loud, and he almost jumped outta his skin, eyes darting upward again, catching on the black movement of shadows absorbing, silent muscle shifting as the temperature of the room dropped another ten degrees.

“Wouldn’t that be nice,” Bucky hissed, all the teasing lightness gone, words dark and dead-serious in every sense of the word, nonchalant lean sliding smoothly into a crouch, one knee still up and the other long. It wasn’t spiderlike, although he’d seen Nat crouch like that before.

On Barnes, the Winter Soldier, it almost reminded him of...Halloween. The last room of the haunted house, lights all going red with a bang, room shut black except the ledge, up high, whatever creepy soul donned themself in face paint and curling red horns, eyes glowing and smoke curling up, forked tail and all.

Now picture it faceless. In all black. And actually deadly enough to drag down half the world to hell.

“I ripped through *twelve innocent men yesterday*--” hissing mixed with violent constants, violent hands and violent hearts and apparently he’d been wrong. Barnes had no trouble killing. Barnes had...no trouble killing. “--before I almost *blew up* your Precious Agent Barton. Easy as *slicing. butter*.”

Glinting fingers grated along the rafter beneath poised feet, carving shiny metal steaks in the old beams, demon claws releasing with a latched pop, wrist twisting, metal plates across fingers compressing, turning over and suddenly something else was glinting in that hand, hellofalot sharper blade flipping through those fingers, knife twirling and twirling, black face cocking to the side, watching the knife in his hand curiously.

Flip glint flip spin flash, lilted voice lifting in that sweet, pretty sing-song voice, more pitched and honey’d than every other echoing word, “I warned hi-im. I warned you aaa-aall.”

He had. He had and they'd all told Bucky it'd be okay, he just had to trust, open his heart.

If this was what the inside of the century old rotting heart looked like, they really should've locked it in a Bruce-securitied box and thrown the key away.
But they didn't. Because they'd all been so sure Barnes’ core was gold as Rogers’.

Or maybe…

Maybe it was all smoke and mirrors. Maybe this was some elaborate plan with good intentions at the end. Maybe Bucky was doing, saying anything to scare him.

After all, if there'd been some sorta slaughter yesterday, wouldn't he’ve heard about it?

What if this was *all* just part of the painted mask?

“Bucky--” Tony started and that was as far as he got before the idea of underlying good got shot to the ground, so quick he could see it still bleeding out.

“You're the last person to ever call me that,” Barnes pondered thoughtfully, metal hand latching onto the rafter tight enough to make it groan, creak and compress. Voice lifting light again, some mix between contemplative and the Cheshire smile draining all the convicted confidence from Tony’s spine. “Congratulations. I aught to cut out your tongue.”

The movement came so fast he almost missed it, metal grip tight as strong black legs lept backwards, rafter shaking and all but collapsing as the black devil swung gracefully, invisible black wings gliding black armor silently to the ground, boots touching down like drifting raven feathers.

Crouched a single moment to absorb the impact then the Winter Soldier unfolded, straightening up tall and he took it all back, the massacre Bucky boasted definitely happened and he never heard about it because when the Winter Soldier wanted something dead, no one found the bodies unless it wanted them to.

He could see that much alone in the eyes that weren't eyes, sharp-angled goggles staring so much worse from down here and Tony'd swear even the shadows were shrinking back in fear.

Then the monster was stalking towards him and there was no way the arc reactor would keep his heart from stopping this time.

He stumbled back a few steps but he'd never move fast enough, could never outrun those legs that could squeeze the life outta him in seconds.

The gloved hand lifted and he’d swear his life flashed before his eyes only Bucky wasn't throwing knives - fingers closing around pointed black plastic and he ripped the goggles off his face in one swift motion, tossed to the ground and crushed instantly under boot soles, plastic snapping, mangled amongst glass shards and Tony stared at the broken goggles a moment too long because the next thing he knew there was a metal hand around his throat, lifting him an inch off the ground.

Garbled sound caught behind the crushing metal and Tony’s eyes bugged outta his head, feet kicking uselessly and both hands squabbling at the unpryable wrist. He took it back, he took it all back, he should’ve never fucking come in here without the suit and a goddamned army.

Just when the choking was starting to turn him from red to blue, metal fingers clicked and dropped him, feet barely catching his weight as he gasped, ragged and broken all over on the inside, vision swimming and chest pounding dangerously--

Only dangerous wasn't done with him yet, black glove grabbing a handful of hair, yanking his head back so suddenly Tony thought for a moment his neck must’ve cracked.

Then there was a knife jammed against his throat and he was very much not dead.
Neither were the eyes he finally blinked up to see.

Sharp furrowed lines between eyebrows and he’d never seen Barnes look so pissed, lines crinkling over the top of that black face mask, long hair blown back from the Power Walk of Death over here, clearing the perfect view to those familiar eyes.

Except there was nothing familiar in the cold crystals, the color of glaciers slicing holes in mountains, intensity cutting right down into his soul.

He was pretty sure he could be Steve Rogers and stare this close at those crazy eyes and not recognize Bucky Barnes right now. Because it wasn’t. Not anymore.

The blade against his throat pressed a little closer, rough hold on his head giving him absolutely no room to move. Bucky moved easy though, adjusting his footing, shoulders rolling and head tipping, something like a winding snake, sliding bloody through ice shards instead of soft grass. To imagine those same eyes once glittered fondly at them all from the shotgun seat of a hippie van--

It was machine guns now, ice drilling deep enough into his soul to make his fingers start to go numb.

“Cut out your tongue…” Bucky repeated distantly, gloved thumb digging into the back of his neck, immobilizing any sound he could possibly make. From this close, the filter over his mouth sounded even creepier, the clicking jaw right here without any of the movement, just the flashing stelliferous eyes.

“Or I could slice your throat,” he offered, eyebrow raising amusedly as he tipped even closer, near enough to whisper, still animated nine ways to hell. “Do the world a real favor.”

Focus narrowing down to the dagger edging his skin and he could feel the exact moment steel split the first layer of stratified epithelium cells, pain lacing up his senses as blood welled up on the silver of the knife, pooling and starting to drip red down his throat.

A fascinated sound behind the grated void, crystal flicking from Tony’s wide, terrified eyes to the slit in his throat and Bucky pressed the blade in deeper.

It was more fear than pain now, fear that Barnes would get bored and just press another inch, be done with it. Or worse, he’d get interested, start trailing that knife over more skin, carving him open one careful vein at a time--

Another splay of blood and Tony started choking, coughing on the blood in his esophagus, painting the backs of his teeth red as his vision spotted out black and stop.

The knife was suddenly gone, hand on the back of his head gone. A silent step backwards, drawing the blade away from his throat with this bored look, voice dropping flat,

“But I still need you to deliver the message.”

A desperate hand grabbed his neck, blood squenching through his fingers and brain rushing light-headed. He was gonna die, he was honestly going to die here, bleed out at the feet of this fucking lunatic--

His free hand fumbled for a wall, holding himself upright as his legs drained weaker, palm barely holding in the red pooling, the choking opening, coated copper over his tongue. His eyes kept jumping in and outta focus but he could at least see midnight demon every few seconds,

Standing a few feet off, twirling his knife between metal fingers. Tony’s blood splattering red drops
between straps on that black vest, over the floor. The walls.

“Chain him up if you have to.” The dark voice sounded so far away, floating over him like rolling poison gas, smoke over burning fires. “Well, you won't have to. He's gone.”

A flick of red landed at his feet, drawing his eyes down a moment and there was a puddle, a puddle he was still dripping blood into--

“But make sure he knows.”

The little puddle splashed, a black boot smushing it to splatter and Tony couldn’t quite breathe but his lungs tried pumping faster anyways, heart racing so fast in his chest he might not be able to hear the next words because Bucky was right there, standing close and in his space again and if he wanted to live he had to look up, stare at those harsh, dead eyes again or Bucky’d let him bleed out before he ever finished talking.

The knife was dangling from the tips of two black fingers, the way people held dead mice like it was some disgusting thing he couldn’t be bothered with anymore, cutting Crystal of Terror close enough to count the shards inside.

A whisper curling out from behind those little black holes like smoke through a vent and he could just picture the sharp smile under the void and he thought nightmares of sending a nuke to space were gonna keep him up for the rest of his life, he was very very wrong.

“I'm nothing--” A pause, crushing silence filled with quiet choking sounds and there was something under the icy blues, black dripping in with red, shambles ripped somewhere deep enough he could barely see anything else.

“...but a ghost story,” Bucky finished and Tony gagged, blood splattering over his lips, Bucky’s collarbone. The Winter Soldier barely noticed, glancing at him once more, words twisting with this dead-final kind of sorrow and he wasn’t talking to Tony anymore, he was talking straight through him, message to the other blue eyed boy who wasn’t here. Would never be here.

Dropped, clipped, whisper. “End of the line.”

Something black slipped from gloved fingers, smacking the ground and instantly spewing smoke.

The clatter of the knife dropping to concrete and Tony flinched away from the sound, from the smoke. Blinked his eyes back open to make sure that was all of it, that Bucky could let him fucking go now.

Only the warehouse was empty. Smoke snaking around his feet, then his knees as he collapsed to the ground, and the warehouse was devastatingly, echoing empty.

~*~*~

He couldn’t be the winter soldier with the hope of Steve coming back and forgiving him, he couldn’t.

Couldn’t just make Steve hate him.

Bucky had to make him hate himself.
The last time he’d been in a real hospital, he’d found Bucky collapsed against a wall, huddled on the
ground like the world was spinning and he’d never find his balance again.

Only now it was Steve holding himself up against the too-white walls, every panicked nurse rushing
by in scrubs some ghost of his mom but no real ghosts to save him.

No one here to crouch beside him, whisper all the right things he needed to hear, the way he’d
whispered them for Bucky.

Buck couldn’t be here to save him from this because one of Steve’s best friends was dying and
Bucky’d been the one who put the knife in his throat.

What he’d give to go back to the simple pain of that day, the day Bucky told him he'd asked Hydra
to wipe him. To spare the pain.

To turn it off. For good.

Only the pain for Steve was getting worse and worse and Buck'd almost killed Tony and seeing
Stark hooked up to all those machines, glowing arc reactor in his chest flickering every few
moments, it was two generations of Stark's he'd failed, two generations of families he'd let get ripped
apart.

Everything was ripping apart.

“How’d the Doc say it’s looking?” Barton whispered, turning to Natasha with a wince. She was
staring blankly at the window into Stark’s room, frozen. Hadn’t heard a word he said. Which was at
least better than Pepper and her tear-streaked face, squeezing Tony’s pale hand so tight he was
wincing from this side of the window.

He tapped Tasha gently with the hand that wasn’t pinned in a sling, red hair swinging as she
whipped her head to look at him, softened just a touch when she realized who it was.

“He should live. Unless anything goes horribly wrong, he’ll live.” The sharp gaze turned back to the
hospital window, blinking machines reflecting off soft white skin. Pale lips parted, shock and guilt
coloring her usually bright voice. “This never should’ve happened.”

“It’s not your fault,” another soft voice interjected and they both turned their heads to see Sam,
straightening up from where he’d been trying to talk to a silent Steve.

“How’s Rogers?” Clint asked quietly, glancing over Natasha’s shoulder at the Captain curled against
the wall, shaking hands wrapped around his knees.

“Not doing so hot.” Sam leaned one shoulder on the wall, mouth sideways in a grimace as he opened
his mouth to elaborate.

Clint’s pocket vibrated and he excused himself, taking a couple steps further down the hallway,
pulling out his phone to see Maria Hill’s caller ID. The hell did Maria need right now?

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen him this bad,” Sam was saying, both him and Nat looking over at the totally oblivious Rogers. Clint walked numbly closer, phone still to his ear.

“What would Steve do if Bucky actually killed someone he cares about?” Natasha’s arms crossed tighter over her chest and Clint blinked, twice, tried to figure out how to speak.

Slowly closed his phone, staring at the little device in his hands, voice finally cracking over a whisper.

“We’re about to find out.” Two heads turned sharply towards him and Clint just kept staring at his phone. As if he could ever ever unhear the news he just got. The worst news he’d probably ever deliver in his entire life. Swallow, fingers curling over the little black device, sounding about as hollow as his insides felt. “Peggy Carter is dead.”

~*~*~

_A birth and a death on the same day--_

He considered doing it the old fashioned way. Checking in at the front desk, letting the nice lady in scrubs lead him up to the right floor. Open up the door, cheery voice announcing him, probably the last person alive to talk about him in that tone.

“Ms. Carter, you have a visitor!”

Only. He couldn’t handle the horror that nurse would go through, knowing she lead him up the stairs, into that room. Besides, civilian clothes would be a hassle. It was easier to stay in the mask, slip through the growing shadows of dusk, sneak up to the window he knew was hers.

The last time he’d visited Peg, she’d told him he should tell Steve everything. That she wanted them to be together.

"I couldn't be happier it was you though, James. No one in this world deserves to be with him as much as you do."

Would she be shocked at how very wrong she was? Because she was. He didn’t deserve to be with Steve. Not this monster he’d become.

They’d been planning a trip up here. Him and Steve, to come visit Peg. The two of them, when they were happy. Announce their engagement, get twin hugs from the only one who’d known all along. Fucking thank her.

What kind of thank you was this?

Bucky straightened his mask, springing off the ground and latching onto the first jutting brick. It was dark enough, on this side of the building and Peg had a corner room, he just had to swing around to her windowsill once he got high enough.

The last time he’d been here.

She’s been so sure in him. But she never knew him that well, did she?
Well enough to call him out on his feelings before he could.

Bucky shook his head, hair flopping in his vision, tossed back outta it. He wasn’t that scared young man anymore. He wasn’t that foolish army boy despairingly in love with his best friend.

He was the ghost story who slit the throats of billionaires to deliver a message.

Deliver a message. This one, this one’d be loud and clear. One more floor up--

“You told me you loved him first,” Peggy’s voice croaked in his head, the only message that’d mattered for the longest time. The words he’d given away, let stab him in the heart. The words that started and ended it all.

Ended, because it was over, there was no going back.

“...and now you get to love him last.”

The metal hand froze on the windowsill.

Dear god, Peggy’d given him everything. She’d given him everything, kept all of his secrets for an entire lifetime, and this was how he repaid her?

He could leave. He didn’t have to do this. It wasn’t too late, he could just drop from here, leave DC, go onto the next stage without--

No. It had to come full circle. It had to be bad enough that he wouldn’t chicken out last second in that chair. He couldn’t change his mind, and this was the only way to make sure he wouldn’t. It had to be this. It had to.

Bucky hauled himself through the window.

The room was taupe, decorated just the same as the last time he’d been, giant curtains framing the windowpane, a collection of photographs, books, letters, reading glasses one wooden bedside table. Pill bottles, decorated lamp, box of tissues, a painting on the other. The white pillows, so many of them, propping the frail frail body up in the sheets, thin old arms over the top of soft light brown sheets.

But this time, there was an IV hooked up to one of those arms, needle and tape stuck in at the elbow, contrasting so sharp and harsh on the weathered, once so beautiful and strong.

Peg still was beautiful, ‘specially for an old gal, gray hair fanned out on the pillow around her, just as many laughter lines as stress ones creasing her face, even with those fiery brown eyes shut.

The water cart, with the pitcher and glasses, was right by his foot, he could tap it and send it crashing into a wall. But he didn’t, he just sat in the window, waited for those Agent instincts to kick in, brown eyes to blink open.

He didn’t have to wait long.

The heart monitor beside her bed, beeping softly, increased just a touch, fingers twitching. Stirring, then those long eyelashes were fluttering and Peggy Carter opened her eyes to the all black figure sitting in her window.

He’d taken off the mask already, sat it on the ground by his foot. Didn’t have the heart to do this in
Didn’t have the heart to do this at all.

Confusion furrowed first, and for a moment it looked like she might not recognize him at all. Dear lord, that would make this easy.

So would killing her in her sleep, but he couldn’t do that. A woman like Peggy Carter didn’t get murdered without knowing exactly who killed her and why.

But then the confusion lifted, eyes widening and bright, happy to see him, then furrowing again as looked around the room, realized he was alone. That something was wrong.

She always was too bright for her own good.

A single shaky hand lifted, moving like it was made of sandbags instead of frail bones and skin, pulled all the way up to her face, thumb and pinky extended, fingers curled against her chin.

Oh. That was sign language. *What’s wrong.*

Fuck. What a question.

Bucky smiled softly, gazing off across her room. It was cozy in here. Not too bad of a place to die.

Better than his, he was sure.

“We had everything,” Bucky told her softly, wishing that was enough to describe the laughter, the light in Steve’s eyes, the warmth of their family in the day and hot kisses pressed down his spine at night, the world conquered and every fight won, for however brief it was, for however tiny and brief it really was.

He lifted one shoulder, wishing he knew how to do this without shrugging but he wasn’t there, wasn’t full under, not yet. Needed this, needed to cut this final tie. The thing that’d make him Not Bucky Barnes anymore.

Because he couldn’t be Bucky Barnes, not when that meant being ripped in half, hole in his chest, a life without sunlight or warmth because the summer’d cast him aside. The shrug wasn’t loud enough to say that either, words could never be loud enough.

“I wasn’t good enough.”

The sound behind those pale lips was the closest thing he’d ever heard to audible heartbreak.

He’d never seen those big brown eyes look so miserably wretched before, watering up all awful and Bucky couldn’t stand that, couldn’t stand to perch there in the window while Peggy cried over the disaster the two’ve them made of each other’s hearts.

Bucky swooped down from the window, falling to his knees beside her bed, taking that shaky hand in his and hating himself more every breath he kept breathing but he had to explain, she had to understand, she’d always known him, known him in the way Steve never understood, the only person in his entire life who’d seen through every mask he’d ever put up she was so fucking clever and how fucked up was it that it was his best guy’s best girl he owed his entire existence to?

“I told you,” Bucky rushed, before she opened her mouth to croak something calming, to ruin him all over again. “I told you he deserved better. He finally figured that out. Steve Rogers finally saw his value, everything he’d ever tried to prove and I just can’t fit in that picture and *god*, P-Peggy, I can’t b-breathe with. without him.”
Mouth snapped shut before he could start blubbering, eyes watering just as much as hers, heart pounding twice as fast if that beep beep beeping monitor was telling the goddamned truth. He had to suck in a few breaths, look up at the sky and blink, world spinning so fast he’d crush the bones in that fragile hand if he weren’t careful.

“B-B--” she started and Bucky sucked in more air, composed himself as much as he could, wiping his stupid fucking eyes against his shoulder, the metal one, nearly scraping his own cheek if his armored shirt weren’t so thick.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I wanted this more than anything. More than anything Peg, you know that.” The little fingers in his shifted, wrinkled bottom lip trembling as she wrapped her frail fingers around his metal thumb.

Like he was the fragile one.

Oh, oh, was he ever.

The first tear broke over his eyelashes and Bucky exhaled, breath wild and shaky now as he scooted a touch closer, tipped his head, looked into the pretty brown eyes and swore one last confession to his saving angel in red.

“We’ll be together again. I know we will. One day, I’ll go home. I'll go home to him in the grave. We'll be together again in death. It was always that way, it was always the grave for us.” Peggy made another broken sound and Bucky shushed her softly, salt dripping into his mouth now, the weakest of smiles as he patted her hand, shook his head in mirrored sorrow. “But see. I can't off myself, I never did under seventy years of Hydra I sure as hell can’t now. I know you understand that, you understand everything better than everybody. But I'll wait. I'll wait for him and I'll be there. And one day, we'll be together again. I'll keep waiting, and one day I’ll go home. I’ll go home and Steve’ll be there the way it was always always supposed to be.”

Peggy was crying now too, weak chest shaking beneath that elegant white nighthrobe. Still Steve’s beautiful angel in red.

The fire, that fire he’d been so jealous of, the one he’d seen in her and wished he still had in him --

He’d still had it then, hadn’t he?

What a foolish young soldier. That’s why he’d been so jealous. He’d looked at Peggy and seen himself, without the darkness, with this light in place of all the black he’d ever tucked inside him and they’d both been red red fire during the war, clashing comets and now they were black and white again, angels and devils but death either way.

Fires so so long extinguished, only the smoke from hers never choked anyone to death.

Sitting around the war campfire, staring into the flames when only ashes remained.

“Never thought I’d make it home from the war Peg. Had no idea how right I’d be.” He rubbed the back of her hand and she squeezed back, tight, so tight for someone so weak and she still was so much stronger than him, wasn’t she.

The woman who’d given him life, it’d be the last life he’d take.

Enough about Steve.

He had to do this or he wouldn't do it at all.
All still for Steve anyways.

Sucked in a breath. Brushed his free hand over beautiful old gray falling curls.

“The war’s over. You can go home now,” Bucky whispered, pushing to his feet so he could be close, bend over her pillow and ask those sad sad eyes the only thing that really mattered, the only thing that’d mattered on those European fronts and the only thing that mattered now. “You have someone waiting on the other side for you?”

It took a second.

But it sunk in.

It sunk in and for the first time, Bucky saw a real reflection in those fearful eyes. The first time he’d ever seen Peggy Carter scared of anything. And he was the one to terrify her.

But then it sunk in further. And this was the part that still made her better than him. This was the part that made her the one who’d lived, who’d fought and survived and *thrived*.

The fear dissipated away. The fear dissipated away and Peggy nodded, just a touch of sadness as her strained neck relaxed, her squeezing hand softened. A simple nod. A tiny smile. Softness in those eyes.

She even understood this. She even understood *this*.

Bucky shook his head, sob catching in his throat but he squashed it down, a splattering of teardrops splashing onto Peggy’s strong, soft hand. She was going to let him kill her. As if she hadn’t done enough for him already, now she was giving him one more promise. One more thing, carrying straight to her grave.

She was ready to die, for him, for Steve. For them. Because she’d lived a life and she wanted Steve to live his, wanted *Bucky* to live his and the only way they could do that was when hers ended. When Bucky crossed the line he’d never come back from.

He didn’t deserve the golden angel in his life and he certainly didn’t deserve the fiery red one but he’d gotten both, been loved by both in such different ways and he could spend the rest of his empty lifetime trying to be half the person Peggy Carter was but he knew, he never could.

Never could.

“I know, for the end, there are a dozen other people you’d rather be with,” Bucky started and that little smile widened, something akin to fondness swimming in watery brown as she slipped her hand free of his, signed him one more thing.

“At least a baker’s dozen.”

Even on her goddamned deathbed. Bucky shook his head, the smile on his face the first real one he’d had in what felt like years now, with how old he felt, taking back the hand of this sweet, beautiful old woman. They were practically the same age, had actually lived all those years. Not like Steve, Steve was still so young.

And here they were, ancient comets colliding one more time, only this explosion, they were both blinking out. Blinking out for good.

“I’m so sorry, Peg.”
She nodded, already forgiving him for his most terrible sin, and Bucky pressed his lips to her cheek, both of them damp from tears, lingered just a moment, imagining them back seventy years, the same patient look on her face under those beautiful brown curls, the quirk of that red lipstick smile.

When his lips broke off Bucky kept his eyes closed, squeezing her hand one more time, feeling the strong, smooth calluses of that beautiful young army gal Steve really should settle down with some day, after this blasted war.

“You'll thank me for this one day,” he breathed, twinged in an accent but they were in a chilly army tent in 1944, scolding eyebrow raised, heels clicking as Bucky looked at her with that same defiant fire and the mirror smiled knowingly back at him. “It's the least I can do to repay you.”

The years flashing by, red lipstick smiles to tired frowns, manicured nails flipping open his file, remote dropping from a small hand as she covered her mouth, staring at the wreckage of Howard Stark’s car on the TV, the quiet promise she made as she closed Bucky’s file. Dropped the last vial Steve’s blood off the Brooklyn bridge, the shock on her face when she’d seen him in this room for the first time, the promise she made just once more. You get to love him last.

Bucky let go of her hand, voice breaking over one last thing.

“Goodbye, my darling.”

Peggy’s eyes slipped shut, soft smile on her face. Ready.

A black glove and a metal hand carefully emptying the IV bag, filling it up with air instead. The room was so quiet, so quiet--

Peggy started coughing and Bucky bit his lip, hands shaking now as he twisted the knob, filled it up with just a bit more air, and squeezed. Squeezed hard, shoving all that oxygen into her veins. God, if he only he could make this faster.

The coughs broke behind him, awful loud and then silent and he wasn’t gonna turn, couldn’t turn around, how was he supposed to look at that face--

“James?” A rough voice croaked. He nearly jumped outta his skin, breathing hard and hands shaking harder, slowly turning around on one heel. Peggy was staring at him like she hadn’t seen him in seventy years. “James, is that you?”

“Peggy,” he breathed, silently begging for the oxygen to pump faster, stop her goddamned stubborn heart.

“Oh, James,” she broke, tears welling up again, voice breaking. “I’m so sorry. Steve’s dead. Darling, Steve’s dead. I tried, I tried everything, I don’t think he wanted to be saved--”

Bucky couldn’t do anything but nod, tears dripping off his chin as he abandoned the IV, took Peggy’s sweet face in his hands. Even now, when she didn’t remember anything, her body wasn’t going down without a fight and he was so so so goddamned sorry.

“Miss Carter, I’m so sorry he’s not the one waiting for you. I’m so sorry I took him from you. I’m so sorry I made him crash that plane and--”

The hand wrapped around his wrist suddenly went soft.

Brown eyes shut, peaceful, and Bucky didn’t have time to break down crying at her bedside but he did anyways.
I'm so sorry I made him crash that plane and kill us both. I'm so goddamned sorry.

The heart monitor flatlined.

One loud beep, like an airraid siren, only there were no uniforms for them to grab and run to save the world this time.

No one left to save the world, because Peggy Carter was dead and the Winter Soldier wasn’t following far after.

~*~I'd hate to step on your---*~

The middle of the gym floor was shiny, wood platform they used to drag wrestling mats to.

The old dance halls, those were shiny wood too.

Walls further apart in this room, no tables on the sides, gold curtains hanging from the walls to soak up the sound.

When he stepped onto the shiny surface, the sole of his shoe echoed. He’d never been to an empty dance hall, but shoes would probably echo there too.

It was quiet in here.

Steve was good at being quiet now.

“How was it?”

“It was okay. She’s next to Dad.”

She’d be buried next to her husband too.

He drew in a careful, steady breath. Once upon a time, he’d been hoping that might be him.

Reached the middle of the wood floor now, holding out his left hand, slowly turning it in the minimal light. The ring on his fourth finger sparkled.

Just like both their eyes used to.

Once upon a time, that really was going to be him, for that beautiful boy.

Steve looked away, fingers curling into the weakest fist he had left. Just didn’t want to look at that right now. Didn’t want to look at much, but if he kept off the overhead lights, the dim gold ones outlining the gym weren’t so bad.

It was quiet in here.

He’d been quiet since he heard.

The two people he loved most--

“I might even, when this is all over, go dancing.”
“Then what are we waitin’ for?”

The first time they’d met. Steve remembered that day like it was yesterday.

For him, it was almost four years ago now.

For them?

He hummed to himself, a simple pitch. Didn’t have much else. Took one step to the side, toe coming up to follow.

Peggy hadn’t even answered Bucky that day. Not directly, anyways. Looked right at Steve, told him the clumsy words he’d stumbled over in that last car ride when he was small.

The right partner.

That was supposed to have been him.

His feet halted to a stop. He’d have to be careful, or he’d scuff the floor. He’d put on his nice shoes, the dancin’ kind Buck was always tellin’ him to lace tighter.

“Can’t be fallin’ outta your shoes, Rogers, you do know you kick in the Charleston, right?”

The Lindy was always safer, that rock-step triple-step. But see, he was sucker for the slow songs.

“We’ll have the band play somethin’ slow.”

Instead of coordinates.

He really should’ve given her coordinates. How different would all three of their lives’d been--

Halt, again.

Couldn’t keep thinking that way. He was here to dance, where was his head? Can’t dance with just your feet, Bucky used to say.

Bucky used to say a lot of things.

Steve closed his eyes. It was easier when he hummed. Hmm hmm hm hmm--

“Our romance won’t end on a sorrowful note,” he sang softly, stepping lightly to the side. “Though by tomorrow you’re--”

Halt.

This was getting frustrating. He’d scuff up his shoes at the least with all that constant stopping.

Steve cleared his throat, forced his closed eyes to relax. Lifted his arms, and tried again.

“The song is ended, but as the songwriter wrote…the melody. Lingers on…”

He’d never gotten to have that dance. Not hers, anyways.

Bucky, he’d danced with. It seemed a million miles away but they’d danced, to this song, a dozen floors above his head. They’d danced back then, waltzing between each other’s feet.

His voice wasn’t working so well on the next part. Didn’t try much of anything but a whisper,
sidestep, one two three.

“They may take you from me--”

Halt.

Maybe he’d just try for the next verse.

“Though they take you from me, I’ll still possess…” Drums, a trumpet somewhere, and a beautiful fiery brunette in his arms.

“...the way you wear your hat.” Sideways, crooked smile to match undernea-- “...the way you sip your teeaa. The memory of all thaat. No, no, they can’t - take that away from me. The way your smile, just beams. The way you sing off key. The way you haunt--”

My dreams.

Sweep to the left, one two three. You alright, Cap?

I had a date.

I’d hate to step on your--

“We may never, never meet agai--”

His throat stopped him that time, welling up on something, eyes stinging at the corners.

He was fine.

“...road to love,” he finished, pulling that laughing smile with him into a beautiful spin, their bodies meeting up again closer, looking down at bright shining eyes--

“Still I’ll al-ways. A-Always keep.”

Pause.

He didn’t mean to stop, rearranging his arms, hands clasped in warm ones--

Only they were fading.

No. No, not yet, he wasn’t ready yet.

“Always, always k-keep the mem. The m-memory of.”

The way you held your knife.

Steve’s hand shot over his mouth. The sound came out anyways.

The way we danced, til three. He’d cover his eyes too but there was no use, not when he could already taste the salt on his tongue. The way you changed my life.

At some point, he’d fallen to his knees. Buckling down, but it didn’t stop his shoulders from shaking. Hands from shaking. Breath from cutting out.

No. No. They can’t take that away from me--
No, they can't take that away. No no, they can't take that away. No they can’t take that away from
me.
(Only, they could.)
Always always keep...the only memories you chose.

And Bucky wasn’t keeping these.

~*~Don't win the war til I get there!~*~

There were a couple purchases he had to pick up first.

A backpack, some clothes. A motel room. Didn’t go with an apartment, because he didn’t wanna be the one to decide.

The motel room wasn’t far from the bank, which was good. Meant he’d be able to walk back.

Not from getting money, he had plenty of that now. Piled neatly in a new wallet, shoved in his pocket. The extra was in an envelope, sitting in his motel room drawer right on top of the paper he’d torn out.

Part of him wanted to keep the whole sketchbook, but it wasn’t a good idea. Couldn’t risk it.

Narrowed it down to one drawing, dumped the rest in a public garbage on the corner of Broadway.

It was the same with his music. The new phone in his room only had a couple songs on it. Neutral things, nothing too drastic. And, of course. No numbers.

The phone he had playing music now, that’d be trashed on the way to the bank.

Everything else was in The Journal, sitting in the middle of the motel room bed. So long as he found that, he’d be okay.

Just one more step before the phone call.

Bucky stripped down to a plain black tshirt, squared his shoulders, and looked that reflection in the bathroom mirror square in the eyes. It was time.

*Sometimes I start to wonder, was it just a lie?  
If what we had was real, how could you be fine?*

Sucked in a breath, brand-new blades lifted to glint in the bathroom light.

'Cause I'm not fine at all

The guitar broke and Bucky sliced. The sharp sound echoed in the tiny space, lock of brown floating slowly to the tile floor. One more raven wing.
I remember the day you told me you were leaving
I remember the raindrops running down your face

Scissors swung open again, shut. One more strand, one more snake with its head chopped off. Violent, chopping shorter and shorter and shorter.

And the dreams you left behind you didn’t need them
Like every single wish we ever made

More dark, sliding off his shoulders, down his back. The beautiful long hair Steve slid his fingers through, that sweet smile as he pulled it into a bun for him, kissed the top of Bucky’s head and snip, the golden kiss was no more.

I wish that I could wake up with amnesia

Black glove of some Hydra agent, yanking his head back by it and snip, that piece was gone now too.

And forget about the stupid little things

Snip.

The giggle on that sweet pink mouth as Bucky hung upside down from that bar in the gym, making a face at Steve from across the punching bags. Snip.

Like the way it felt to fall asleep next to you

Long brown hair fanning out on his pillow, blinking open groggy eyes to callused artist fingers playing with the ends of it, some half-assed complaint about it tickling Steve to death in the night.

“You love it,” Bucky teased, squinching his nose up at sparkling blue eyes.

“I love you,” Steve combatted and Bucky rolled his eyes, then Steve’s hands were in his hair again, tipping his face up, mouths sliding together softly in the morning light.

Snip, snip, snip.

And the memories I never can escape

“C’mon, Buck! Hurry up, you’re gonna miss it!”

“Gonna miss you,” Bucky grumbled and Steve laughed brightly, kissing the side of his head, fingers brushing happily through silken strands.

“No, you won’t, because I am never leaving your side.”

“Never?”

“Never. Promise, on ma’s grave and everything. Now c’mon, really!”

Snip

Snip

Snip
It was supposed to be Steve, with a pair of doll scissors in the morning light.

Only it was his hands this time, again, same pair of hands that’d saved him last time. Only hands he could really count on, and one of them wasn’t even his.

Be his soon enough.

Bucky ran the metal through the short pieces, spiking up in a few places when he ruffled them like that. He could style it in a pomade, just like the old days. Only he didn’t wanna be the one to make that decision either. Jimmy could.

God he looked just like the soldier in that exhibit. Like the laughing bright young thing in his memories, in Steve’s.

Funny, the most he’d looked liked Bucky Barnes in the past seventy years and it was his last day getting to be him.

Bucky sighed, running a hand through the short hair one more time and scooping up his phone. Time to make that phone call.

He dialed the number he’d had memorized for the past year, making a face in the mirror and picking off stray pieces of chopped hair from the dark shirt while he waited.

*Waiting is painful. Forgetting is painful. But not knowing which to do is the worst kind of suffering.* Paulo Coelho said that, some poem or book or something.

Good thing was, he knew exactly which he was doing now.

The slime on the other end of the call finally picked up, a click and that paranoid, newbie voice in his ear.

“Who is this?” The man demanded.

Bucky’s gaze caught on his own again in the mirror, that murder-mischief smile widening on that sweet young innocent face. At least his final act as the Winter Soldier meant he gotta fuck with some Hydra goons.

“The дьявол,” Bucky replied, crystal flashing and metal plates shifting in anticipation. The choked sound across the speakerphone was so fantastic he almost laughed delightedly.

I mean, it was fair. He had said *the devil*.

But the guy knew who he was talking about, so. It worked.

A couple panicked breaths on the other end and Bucky flexed the metal arm in the mirror, glancing between the familiar shine and the short hair atop his head. It was a good combo. A really good combo, shame he’d never tried it before. Cause he looked pretty damn hot.

“I don’t know how you got this number or what you want but please please, don’t kill me, I haven’t done anything, Hydra’s not even looking for you anymore--” the bastard started blubbering and Bucky rolled his eyes, flicking a piece of hair off the sink too. Goddamned mess, and he’d already swept in here and everything.
“I know,” he interrupted, because he hadn’t called to listen to goons begging for their life. “But you have access to something I need. “

You know, it really was so fascinating, the man in the mirror. The short hair made a lot bigger difference than he thought it would.

It was the perfect mix between Bucky Barnes and the Winter Soldier in appearance, one last time. Bright pretty eyes you could see properly, debonair swoosh in the dark brown that, even without any styling, was still pretty much dapper as fuck. All to top off with that terrifying smile Stark would probably have nightmares about for the rest of his life.

Sergeant James Buchanan of the icy cold Russian Assassin league!

The Hydra goon was going off about something again, something about the organization disbanding or whatever but frankly, Bucky didn’t care. He knew all the shit Hydra’d been up to, he’d been keeping tabs.

Since the beginning, actually. Natasha Romanoff was right about that part. The part that he hadn’t told them everything he knew about Hydra, all the people and contacts he had memorized. Because he couldn’t let them take down everyone, never knew if he’d need something.

S’why he kept this number memorized, and look how great it was gonna pay off!

“Look,” he interrupted again, fingers brushing up the front of the short strands, making a contemplative face at the twenty-first century style. “There’s a machine, one I know you’re quite familiar with. You’re going to operate it for me.”

A couple more whining protests and Bucky sighed, flicking the goddamned speaker of the phone and wishing it was the little bastard’s head. But they couldn’t all have what they wanted.

“Listen. You’re doing this, or I will do very bad things to you and everyone you’ve ever loved! Great, glad we agree. I’ll be in the bank vault in half an hour.”

Click, hang up and that asshole was gone for now. He’d throw the phone, but Panic just came out with a new song and he was planning on listening on the walk over. It was his new favorite. Some just fantastic lines - ice has melted back to life, dress me up and watch me die, you just might see a ghost tonight.

Oh, oh, and his personal favorite, heroes always get remembered, but you know legends never die.

He was gonna have a great time walking over, and it had the perfect power-walk tempo too.

Bucky packed up the rest of his bag, throwing the scissors in the trash-to-dispose-of-somewhere-else. Hair was good for now. Let’s see, he had a change of clothes, a jacket, his wallet, his phone, where were his dogtags--

Oh yeah. That’s right. Steve had them.

Good. Okay. Yeah, one less thing for him to toss out, right?

Well, actually. It’d probably make sense if Jimmy had them, but. Whatever, it was fine. Steve could keep the damn things. Or maybe throw them off the bridge, then they could float right along to his engagement ring and they could chill at the bottom of the East River for all of eternity, just like the rest of his heart and soul.
Fantastic, looked like he was set to go.

Bucky took a deep breath, turning to the mirror one last time.

A smiling, beautiful boy with a metal arm, a bullet hole in his leg and a star-shaped hole in his chest where a heart should be.

Should be.

The Winter Soldier smile faded at the edges and Bucky stared at the man in the mirror.

And for just a moment, he was scared.

The Great Bucky Barnes was scared, of himself and his life and his situation, just about everything. Did he have to? He didn’t...he didn’t wanna lose all this. He. He didn’t wanna lose Steve again.

And there, for just a moment, was pure Bucky Barnes, nobody else looking back at him in that shiny glass.

Bucky Barnes trapped inside this war-worn body, sewed onto this arm but for a moment he could feel his real flesh and bone arm, like it was just trapped underneath the metal and all he had to do was peel it back and run, run straight to Steve’s arms--

There. There, in the mirror, was James Buchanan Barnes. The haunted eyes of the man at war, the short shaggy hair half in a pomade and half curling over his forehead, the way it was during the golden years, the day he’d shouted he loved Steve Rogers first, foremost, always.

Now it was finally time to let James Barnes die.

Chapter End Notes

☆

Somebody come cry with me because I got super emotional writing this and would love to cry with anyone willing to do so

Link to Tony's Breakup Mixtape

Okay so I’ve realized that after all the songs I’ve had in this fic, I’ve never had a country song (bc i really just don’t listen to country), but if you do, here everyone, the official TIMLB country song: The Dance by Garth Brooks

Songs featured & inspired in this chapter:
Boats & Birds - Gregory and the Hawks
The Kids Aren't Alright - Fall Out Boy
Hurt Me - Jezabels
Drag Me Down - One Direction
Wanna Get Better - The Bleachers
The Chain - Ingrid Michaelson
All You Wanted - Sounds Under Radio
Novocaine - Fall Out Boy
Sorrow - The National
Twin Skeletons (Hotel in NYC) - Fall Out Boy
The Phoenix - Fall Out Boy
They Can't Take That Away From Me - Fred Astaire
Amnesia - 5SOS
Emperor's New Clothes - Panic! at the Disco

Thank you so much readers. Thank you all so much.

xx
Penultimate chapter !! Wow !!

I'd like to formally apologize to everyone who read the last chapter and thought that was actually going to be the whole Major Character Death thing. It's uh. Not quite that simple unfortunately. Anyways.

Warnings: Major identity crisis, amnesia, adult language. Violent, morbid themes at like, the very end. Also, if you have a problem with cats or Cards Against Humanity? (told you, just papercuts in this one.)

Quoting this terribly painful post.

Jimmy's apartment link is being evil, but if you wanna look up what it looks like, it's 6917 136th St. Flushing NY.

Because I have literally no chill, the theme song for this chapter: Ever After - Mariana's Trench

Enjoy?
xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Black and white. Shadows cast from frames on old walls, twisting iron bedpost, single window with the curtains drawn. Diffused light filtering through in dots and halos, black shifting over white sheets, compressed pillow—

Crystal eyes shot open, sudden splash of color – a single drip of ice from the rainbow-catching icicle, consciousness setting in the same time the panic did.

Whipped to the side, red digital numbers blinking through the black and white, one more splash of color with a halo of its own.

6:47.

“Fuck.” Quiet peacefulness shattered as the sheets ripped back, stumbling barefeet hopping down on cold ground, more inarticulate cursing as hands fumbled through a drawer in the dark, snatching a black shirt. Cotton over short hair, falling down over smooth bare skin, another panicked glance at the clock—

6:49.

“Fuck, no no no. No, that can’t be right, there’s no way that’s right—” Jacket snatched from the floor, a quick hand disheveling dark hair even more, wallet tucked in the pocket of gray sweats and a door flung open.

Half-tied shoes pounding down rickety steps in the dark, shadows flying by with the seconds, minutes—

How could he let this happen again?

Blast of cold air as he shoved outside, pounding feet down concrete, heart racing in his chest.

Fuck. How could he do this to himself?

He wasn’t gonna make it in time. Please, please, fuck, he just had to get there in time—

The bell smashed with a rather violent jangle as the door crashed open and he practically fell inside, oxygen seizing in his chest, words chopped and exhausted.

“Wait, wait, please dear god, say I’m not too late,” he gasped, chest heaving beneath the leather jacket, silver fingers curling around the edge of the door as a metal hand kept it propped open, lips parted and knees weak enough to fall to, begging if he had to.

The entire room of heads turned, eyes wide in various states of shock, distaste, curiosity. He didn’t notice, the only eyes he cared about were the blue ones blinking at him behind the barrier.

The blonde head glanced between him and the band around a pretty wrist, eyebrows raising as the familiar voice chimed,

“Twenty seconds til seven…I think that’s a new record. Impressive.”

The door slammed shut behind him as he fist-pumped the air, practically skipping up to the counter as Charlene rolled her eyes at him.

“Just the regular?”

“The regular? I wouldn’t haul ass outta bed and come bolting over here for anything less.” Crystal eyes flashed with a bright, one-sided smile as he leaned on the counter and took inventory of the little
coffee shop.

Exact same as it was on Friday, except the old man in the corner looked a bit less grumpy today. Well, that was good. Less grumpy people in the world was always good.

“You come bolting down here because you sleep until the last possible minute and still want your early-bird cup’a discount,” Charlene tittered knowingly and he shrugged his metal shoulder.

“S’not my fault you guys close that at seven in the morning. And there’s no way I’m paying regular prices for morning coffee, thank you.”

“Not to like. Burst your bubble or anything, but wouldn’t it be easier to just get a coffee machine? So you don’t come charging in here like a lunatic with your wild, messy hair five days a week?”

“Aw, but where’s the fun in that?” He slipped a bill onto the counter and Charlene handed him the familiar coffee cup. “Besides, then I wouldn’t get to see your beautiful face every morning.”

Those nice blue eyes rolled at him and his smile got a little brighter. Nothing like some good old fashioned teasing to start out Monday morning right.

There was a smile on her face too as she waved him on, dusting off her barista apron. “Have a good one today, Jimmy.”

“I always do,” he assured her, backpedaling in the direction of the door.

“Oh! And Charlene,” a pause as he swung it back open, bell quite a bit cheerier this time and smile tilted in sideways mischief. “Short hair doesn’t get messy. The proper word is tousled.”

She swatted a towel at him and he laughed, waving her goodbye with a flash of metal as the door closed behind him and he was back on the early-morning collegiate streets, then up the five stairs to his apartment, white door with those numbers 6917 down the front, opening right up into the little foyer, the familiar wooden steps.

Well then. Now that the craziest part of his day was over, it was time to settle back into the rest of his life.

Which, he thought to himself as he swung around the banister into his beautiful small studio, was a pretty good life.

“Good morning New York!” The sing-songed words echoed in the empty apartment, bouncing off the cold window he’d just thrown free of heavy white curtains, shining all that morning bright into his apartment.

He spun back around with a smile, taking a moment to do a full scan of the open space. Yoga mat stretched out parallel to the stairs, array of potted plants happily propped on the banister rail, in the windowsill, atop his silver fridge.

To match his silver arm, he noted, glancing down to stretch out his left hand fingers. They rippled with a quiet whirr he was getting pretty used to. If anything, it was almost comforting now. One’a the only things he had from Before.

Which didn’t bother him much. There was the arm, and the journal, and that was about all he needed.
With those, his good looks, and the entire world laid at his feet, he was just about one of the most well-off people he knew. Not that he knew many, but that was alright too.

Besides, it was probably a pretty good idea to get to know himself before he started making a lotta friends, right?

Or at least, that’s what he’d thought. Until about two hours later.

He was just sitting there innocently, laptop on the tiny-ass piece of plastic Queens College called a desk, one of like. Six people in this lecture hall paying any attention to the end of Professor Ghivaad’s closing speech when a sudden voice from the left piped up, made him nearly jump out his chair.

“Barns?”

The metal arm spazzed the same time the rest of his body did, jolting in surprise at how goddamned close the girl had snuck up without him seeing her. Because now his big crystal eyes were looking up, wide, and there was a fuckton of red and black in his vision.

With hair that fucking bright, how had he not noticed her? The all-black outfit was cute, little red belt to match the loose-wavy-red-curls on her head and goddamn, she was pretty.

She’d just said something shit, she’d just said something.

“What?” He chirped in a stroke of rare eloquence.

“What?” the red lips repeated, slowly, and that made about as much sense the second time as it had the first, which was fucking null.

Why...was this random girl standing here, textbooks clutched to her chest and spouting something about farms to him...?

“Uh. Excuse me? I don’t....” he trailed, furrowing his eyebrows in deeper confusion as he watched sharp green eyes scan over his face, and dip lower to take in the rest of him. Obviously. Was she checking him out? Fascinated by his clothing choices? Sizing him up to take out back and rob or something?

This was the weirdest fucking vibe and of course, his first human interaction he hadn’t initiated and he was sitting here gaping like a befuddled fish.

Pretty lips pursed, shifting from accusing to something a lot more open, curious maybe? Satisfied, in a way, so whatever she saw was...good?

And then she finally spoke again.

“Everyone here looks like they’ve been raised in barns,” the girl finally elaborated, waving one hand at the rest of the class packing up their bags. He lifted an eyebrow, glancing around the various states of unkept college classmates.

“It’s the hair, isn’t it?”

“You are the only person in here who looks like they own a mirror,” she agreed solemnly and he couldn’t help but quirk a smile at that.

“Fair enough.” His hair looked pretty fucking great today, he could say that for sure. Swooped up
and classy, like the leather jacket he’d thrown over his white tshirt, dark jeans.

Raised in barns. Huh. Still wasn’t quite sure how he was supposed to get that from the word *Barns* randomly being shoved at him twice, but. Y’know, to each their own.

“Hell of a way to introduce yourself, though.” He shot her a glance as he stood, stretching both arms out and not missing the way green eyes flicked instantly to the metal fingers on his left side. Well. He was gettin’ kinda used to that by now.

Now was either the moment she’d paste a smile and un-introduce herself, make clear for the door or maybe ask some awful awkward question or pretend like she’d never seen it at all, but he wasn’t gonna hold it against her either way, everybody made their own choices.

And apparently hers was to stick out one of those tiny, pretty hands.

“Natalie Roman,” she offered and he couldn’t help the rush of relief. Good, okay, he hadn’t had any awful encounters with his arm yet, but you never really know.

Thankfully it was the left hand though, so reaching out to shake her hand didn’t have to mean a bit of metal.

“Jimmy.”

An eyebrow raised at the name, which was curious because it was a pretty damn regular name, but she had a nice handshake, gave him back his hand before it got uncomfortable and everything.

“Jimmy...so, James?” Natalie crossed her arms over her chest, watching him and waiting as he started to pack up his stuff. Textbook, notebook, pen--

“What? No, just Jimmy,” he replied distractedly, shaking his bag open further and wrestling his laptop inside.

“Your parents named you Jimmy.”

It was worded like a statement and way too dubious to be anything but a question.

He paused halfway through zipping up his bag, physically stopping to think about the extremely simple question she’d just asked.

That he had no idea the answer too.

His face twisted up, contemplative mixed with confusion again, and if that was gonna be a pattern around this girl Natalie...

“I think? I mean. I assumed so. Maybe it is James.” Jeez. You’d think he wouldda put that in the journal though, right? Or maybe he did. He’d read the thing through, yeah, but not recently and there was always a chance it’d been mentioned. Or maybe he’d just assumed because yeah, wasn’t everybody called Jimmy actually named James?

Maybe he just never considered that he wouldn’t know that? Jesus that was a mindfuck, how was he supposed to know what he wouldn’t know anyways--

“How could you not know?” Natalie sounded just about as confused as him and yeah, okay, he was being positively brilliant with this introduction. Maybe he really ought to just, y’know, let it go and find another friend, not fuck it up in the first three seconds of shaking their hand.
“Uh. Long story?” He ran a hand through his hair, throwing a strap of his bag over one shoulder and glancing cautiously back at Natalie. She didn’t seem weirded out, just. Curious, still, which he could relate to.

“We’re leaving Philosophy class,” she deadpanned and he sighed, adjusting the bag on his shoulder and cocking his head with a reluctant touché face.

“Well?” Natalie pushed again and he hadn’t exactly told anybody this yet, but. If he made friends, he’d eventually have to, right? Might as well test it out. See whether or not he becomes some sort of pity party or something.

He shoved both hands in his pockets, lifting his shoulders a bit and steeling himself for whatever oncoming blow. Just like with basically everything, he’d never done this before and after the past couple weeks he’d just decided go with it was the only way he’d end up not being a recluse.

“Retrograde amnesia. Used to be a soldier, ended up in part of medical trial to erase memories and uh. Successful test subject A right here.”

Green eyes wide as saucers, little mouth popped open, and for a second he thought she was gonna call his goddamned bluff or something.

Then the shock kinda settled into this other emotion - she shifted through those a lot, goddamn - and the little o turned into a slowly spreading smile.

“Wow. You're probably the most interesting person in this entire school.” There was a genuine brightness in her eyes and he let out the breath he’d been holding. That hadn’t been so bad, had it?

“Thanks,” he said, because the hell else do you say to that? She wasn’t looking at him like he was a freak or anything either, so. Looked like it was Jimmy 1 World 0.

He opened his mouth to bid her goodbye, or maybe offer to walk her to her next class, when she suddenly blurted an interruption.

“You should take me out for coffee.” Well that wasn’t what he was expecting. It was more excited than demure though, so was she possibly hitting on him again or... “Or lunch. I have a feeling we could be fantastic friends.”

Okay, not hitting on him. Maybe? Well, he wouldn’t ever know unless he went for that coffee, right? Although he was pretty sure most people didn’t end up declaring themselves friends like that, but.

Nothing else in his life was exactly normal, so.

“Sounds good to me. You know a place, or…?”

“On one condition. do I get a full name? Or are you just sticking with Jimmy?”

“There's a great spot three blocks down,” he answered instead, dodging the repeat question just to see the quirk of that red eyebrow in response as he threw a thumb over his shoulder, started backpedaling for the door. “I have to grab something from the administration office, so I’ll meet you at the corner. Or, scratch that, it gets pretty busy, you can grab us a table.”

A bright smile with just a touch of sass thrown over his shoulder, quiet creak of leather as she conceded, started for the door on the other side of the room.

He spun back around at just the last moment, stood up on his tiptoes to call across the room, make just a bit of a scene.
“Hey Natalie!” The red hair whipped around and he smiled, all but cupping his hands around his mouth.

“It’s Jimmy,” he called, mouth curled up bright and real because this part, he knew. This part he knew for sure, because it was in the journal and it felt just about as right in his mouth as anything he’d ever said. “Jimmy Rogers.”

~*~*~

Paradise.

How many people dreamed about a better life?

The only word for the weather was crisp, browns and swirling wind late November, the taste of oncoming snow in the air but none of the bitterness of being so close.

It was the perfect day just to breathe, to walk outside and close your eyes, smile softly up at the sky and pull your jacket a little closer around your shoulders.

In the heart of the city it was walls of windows reflecting the dimple in his chin, sharp cheekbones and a solid jawline but out here, walking the empty sidewalks in the middle of campus, it was just greens fading to brown, nature shuddering in preparation for the long winter and he didn’t have a single echo following him every time he opened his eyes.

There, taking solid steps into his shadow, that distorted and dark thing - it may follow him too, but there were no unfamiliar angles, nothing to refamiliarize himself with. So he didn’t know the different colors in his eyes and the lighter streaks in his hair or what the scars on his shoulder meant, but the shadow didn’t know that and it didn’t matter there, it didn’t.

And today he’d like to keep walking, he’d like to walk forever and ever down endless empty paths with the trees twinkling falling coin leaves above but today wasn’t the day for that, there was a potential friend waiting for him at a cafe and he’d have the rest of his life to discover, to breathe in the sharp fall air and wonder if he’d always loved November so goddamned much.

Or maybe it was because November was all he knew.

Well. If he hurried up and Natalie was still in the cafe by now, he might get to add more to that list. That terribly, terribly short list.

Or maybe it was a wonderfully short list.

After all, with a world this beautiful around him, everything this clear and sharp and crisp - this was just about perfect to start writing new pages in that journal.

“Chemistry. Poetry. Woodshop. Intro to music. Philosophy, obviously.” Natalie set the paper down on the shiny table, giving him an impressed look over her hot chocolate. “This is a pretty eclectic schedule.”

“Well, I don’t know what I like or what I’m good at, so I figured I’d keep trying things until I found
out.” He shrugged one shoulder, tearing a piece of bread off and popping it in his mouth. “It's been pretty fun, only thing is I kinda like all of it.”

She made a contemplative face and scanned down the papers again. For somebody whose newest acquaintance didn’t know whether his first name was Jimmy or James, she was taking this weirdly well.

Could just be curiosity though. Once that faded, she might too. It was probably better not to get too attached.

Although, really, that’d be kinda hard. She was the only one who didn’t look at him like he was either broken for having a metal arm or crazy for not knowing who the fuck he was.

Is that what he used to do? Before? Not get attached? Clearly, it hadn’t worked too well, or he wouldn’t’ve wiped his memories.

Well, maybe. Could’a been a lotta things, though. No point getting wrapped up in it, right?

A red fingernail tapped on the paper and he snapped out of it, glancing back at Natalie and his schedule.

“Bowling club,” she pointed out, somewhat fascinated under the deadpan tone that he was starting to pick up as regular. “Doesn't the arm give you an unfair advantage?”

Well that was definitely not blunt at all.

He hadn’t actually gotten any...direct questions about the arm. Like, at all. People skirted around it like crazy, but here Natalie was looking at him expectantly with the words “the arm” floating between them. Not even your arm, the like it had its own presence in the room.

“What? Unfair advantage? No way girl, I'm not trustin’ this thing to pick up a bowling ball.” The metal fingers flashed as he lifted his hand to curl them, responding just the way his other hand did. Sometimes it still awed him, how much his left arm wasn’t awe-striking.

“To strong?” Natalie offered and he nearly snorted, trying to picture the metal fingers versus a bowling ball.

“Uh, no. You don't know much about prosthetics do you?” The bell over the shop jingled and he looked up automatically, a glance before he was tearing off another piece of bread between them. “Wouldn't matter anyways, thankfully, I'm right-handed.”

“Do you ever use that then?” She gestured vaguely at his left side, sliding a spoon of soup into her mouth like she’d just said the most regular thing at a normal lunch conversation. Hell, maybe this would be normal for him eventually. It was kinda weird though, the way she kept referring to the metal as the arm and that.

“My arm? Do I ever use my arm?” He corrected, shaking his head with a smile tipped into amusement because yeah, the questions made him feel a little odd but it was so much better than all the dodging and staring most people did. “Sure. Opens peanut butter jars pretty damn well. It's just an arm.”

Another shrug and Natalie made another curious sound, another spoon of soup.

“Does it hurt?”
“Your graceful questions are amazing,” he informed her with about as serious of a face as he could pull off. “No, it doesn’t hurt. Now you gonna quit jabbering enough to read the rest of my schedule?”

“It shows you’re free tonight.” A dull tap-tap-tap of fingers on the table and one corner of her red mouth quirked up. ‘Do you cook?’

“Still debating.” The bread muffled it into sill debay-ing and Natalie rolled her eyes at him. He tipped his head, swallowing the bite and squinting as he thought it over. “Sometimes I think maybe, and sometimes I burn everything so. Who the fuck knows?”

“That sounds like an adventure,” Natalie dragged slowly and he could hear it in her voice, the you sound like an adventure. What exactly kind of adventure was that?

Before he could fumble to find some way to tell her he had no idea if hooking up was a good idea right now, Natalie was clapping her hands, brushing bread crumbs onto the table and announcing loudly,

“Alright. I’m sold. I’m in.”

“In?”

“We’re friends, it’s official.”

He couldn’t help the smile growing, some foolish wide grin that stretched to both his ears, probably crinkled up his eyes and everything.

“Friends, just like that.”

“Yep. Kindergarten all over again, just set and declared.”

“Except I don’t...remember kindergarten. Or anything before five weeks ago, actually.” He tipped his head to the side, counting silently - odeen, deva, tre. Well, more like four weeks and four days, but close enough.

“Five weeks? Goddamn.” Natalie shook her head and he snatched another piece of bread with a uh huh I know sound, glancing up at the clock on the wall. Wait, what the hell numbers had he just counted with--

“Did you just what, wake up in an alley and not know a single fucking thing about yourself?”

“Not exactly.” More amusement, which might not be how this conversation was supposed to go, but if he couldn’t laugh at her terribly blunt questions and the whole shitty situation what was the point in the goddamned situation in the first place? “How bout I tell you over dinner instead? I gotta get to bowling…”

He reached for his bag propped on the side of the booth but Natalie got there first, holding it out to him with those perfect red fingernails wrapped around one strap and a smile in offering like she was giving the whole damn thing as a package.

He shook his head at her, dislodging a piece of hair over his forehead he swooped back subconsciously, pulling his bag over one shoulder and throwing down a bill on the table.

“See you tonight,” she chimed, curling a strand of red hair around her finger and he was shaking his head all the way out the door.
Changes fill my time, baby that's alright with me.

“You have one...new voicemail.”

“Hey Jimmy, it's Morgan! Roxy got out, no surprise! I figured she probably climbed through your open window again. If you see her, can you shoo her back to mine? Or y’know, feed her and make her spend the night at your place again...surprised you haven’t bought her a damn collar...sorry, rambling. Anyways, I guess enjoy your night with my cat but I really would like her back at some point! Or you could just. Come over, maybe have dinner sometime? Just. Let me know. Okay, have a great day and sorry again and uh. Bye!”

A soft meow and he stooped over, rubbing the cat’s little black and white head, eliciting a purr probably half as happy as Morgan was every time the cat got out.

They were both sweet though, even if they liked him a little too much, but. Well. Most girls he met did, ended up asking him to dinner one way or another. Natalie was no exception to the dinner part, but. He gave everybody one shot, one night to see how it went and he had a feeling this time was different. Just friends, right? Right.

It wasn’t like he had somebody to worry about getting the wrong idea. That whole significant other thing, he’d never had one of those.

Well. He might’ve, once, back in the Before, but they’d either died or left him because here he was, alone, so either way he didn’t have one Now and it didn’t matter.

You’d think he’d’ve written that in the journal. There were a lot of things he kept noticing weren’t in there, a lot more than there actually were.

To be fair, he’d only read it through once - chance was, it could’ve been in there as some side note he just missed, right? He aught to check. Just in case.

The cat snaked between his legs as he popped off his bed, dodged the easel and mini fridge to go up on one tiptoe, grab the thin black book off the top of his bookshelf.

There was a thin layer of dust on it already, which felt pretty fast in the month he hadn’t picked it up. No point in pouring over the thing, obsessing over a few words in that nice handwriting that didn’t seem to match anybody else’s in this century.

It said, clear as day, he’d chosen this for himself because he deserved a future that didn’t have that past in it. If he’d gone this far to make that happen for himself, he wasn’t gonna fuckin’ put it to waste.

The pages of this were far too new, like he’d decided barely the day before it happened, but no point in fretting about that either. It was done, he was moving on.

Just should check, make sure there wasn’t anything about dating or other people or anything, right?

To the me of tomorrow:

Yeah, yeah, he’d read that part. Scanning time. Blah Blah pain, blah blah it was better this way. Don’t be worried I’ve taken care of everything, yadi ya. Start new.
Nothing about anything that wasn’t him--

Oh wait, no. That part about his arm, there’d been something there, right?

He licked his finger, thumbing through the few pages, flipping past the lines of script. Where had he been when he’d written this? Had he looked the same, hair pushed up off his forehead and bright eyes crystal clear?

No, no point in thinking about all that. Stick to the mission, just find that part about--

There. There it was.

...one of your war buddies painted the star on your arm. You can scratch it off, paint over it, whatever you want to do. It’s up to you.

The first time he’d read that he’d been too busy thinking about what decision to make about that red star to pay attention to the details. But there it was, probably the only mention of a past friend in this whole book.

It’d actually been one of the hardest decisions.

Picking where to live, what to do, how to style his hair, it didn’t matter because there was nothing from the past tied to it. But that, for some reason, hadn’t been scratched off before he wiped everything and honestly.

Made him a little queasy. Looking at it, seeing the sharp red marks in the mirror and knowing they were important enough to keep when there’d been nothing else. Almost scratched it off right fucking then.

But he’d kept it. For now. Scratching it off seemed pretty rude if one of his war buddies painted it there. A war buddy - apparently not buddy enough to not get erased forever. Okay, problem solved. He’d had friends during the war, no surprise, he seemed to make friends pretty easily everywhere. Known somebody artistic enough to put the damn thing there, aught to keep it as tribute or something right?

Wait. Wouldn’t that mean he’d’ve had the arm during the war? In order for it to be painted then? But that didn’t make sense, if he’d gotten his arm blown off they’d’ve shipped him home.

So did that mean this war buddy made it home with him, been there after his coma? Been part of his life after he’d lost everything else and now he didn’t even have whoever the hell that was--

Well. Didn’t matter. If he’d had a buddy, he wasn’t here now. No point fretting about it. Or the star, or whatever secret code he’d thought he’d find in here that he’d missed the first time.

He didn’t want himself to know, fine, he wouldn’t dig. Wouldn’t search, try to fix in the ten minutes before Natalie showed.

Now, his hair? That, that was something he could fix.

.

What makes you think I'm enjoying being left to the flood

“You ever heard of G-Eazy?” A pause in the insistent chopping, slide of a knife over a wooden
cutting board to sprinkle chives over the second layer of cheese and pasta.

“Gee who?” Natalie asked, peering over his shoulder at the increasingly more colorful layers of lasagna.

“Apparently not,” he smiled, breaking open a clove of garlic and setting it in the middle of the cutting board, setting the knife to wood again in that familiar tap-tap-tap that made him wonder if all these utensil skills were related to cooking at all. Brushed aside, cut up until it was finer, lighter, agog tip of his head. “His new album comes out next week, I’m super pumped.”

A swooping energy as Natalie swung around the doorway between the tiny kitchen and his bedroom/livingroom, patrolling his apartment with the same quiet stalking feet as the neighbor’s black and white cat, who was currently eyeing Nat’s roaming quite distrustfully.

He raised an eyebrow at the feline and she rolled on her back, stretching out across the top of the fridge. Y’know, maybe he should’ve tidied up a bit more, Natalie was looking at everything like she was cataloging it all into some mental book with a label that was way too important…

“He’s got this song, *Me, Myself and I,*” he raised his voice to shout over the distance and the boil of the homemade sauce pot on the stove. “Dunno why I like it, it’s pretty depressing actually, but. Young Gerald’s my man...his *I Mean It* video literally made me cry I was laughing so hard.”

“Hmm. I’d’ve pictured you as a Fall Out Boy kinda guy.” Natalie half-shouted back, followed by a soft clatter. He sat down his knife, wiping the metal hand off on a towel and leaning backwards to sneak a glance at whatever she was doing.

Standing there innocently with her hands crossed behind her back, smile on her face. He narrowed his eyes, wiping his other hand on his shirt.

“Who the hell is Fall Out Boy?”

“Apparently not,” she shot back, coy smile as she ran a hand over the edge of his dresser, peering around books and his lamp like there was some secret hiding behind *Carpentry 101.* He watched her for a moment but she didn’t look up, hovering over one of his doodled-on notebooks, voice distant as she ran a finger over one of the margin-sketches. “How do you feel about old stuff, jazz?”

“Jazz...I like jazz. Frank Sinatra, Rat Pack. I mean, there’s something a little off about it, but the saxes, trumpets, they’re good.” He shrugged lightly, reaching back to turn down the heat on the saucepan, raising his voice again as Natalie wandered closer. “There’s an oldie G-Eazy sings - it’s actually how I found him. Called Runaround Sue and I swear, I knew the fuckin’ words before I ever heard it.”

A red head poked in the doorway and the cat meowed in annoyance. He threw a glance over his shoulder and rolled his eyes at their weird feline staredown, sprinkling the next layer of cheese over pasta.

One of them must’ve retracted their claws, because Nat was suddenly beside him again, taste-test fork hovering in her fingertips as she leaned closer, glanced up enough for their eyes to meet.

Her eyes were really green. And there was something about that smile, all tied up in secrets in a way his never could be. Open book, he was, everything he knew about himself was *literally* sketched up in a couple pages in an old journal and for just a moment, he wondered what it’d be like to have secrets, a real mystery, that treacherous danger behind the crystal eyes that looked back so easily at his reflection.
The only thing he didn’t know was what happened to the damn war-buddy that’d painted a red star over his arm, practically tattooed him with beautiful, sharp lines--

“That why you like him?”

It took a second to recalibrate and he blinked rapidly, turning back to the pan on the counter to shift some noodles around. “Who?”

“That artist you were talking about. The one whose lyrics you knew already. Do you think you listened to him, before your head...y’know.” She flashed her hand in a vague wavy motion that he supposed yeah, could indicate severe and irreplaceable amnesia. Before his head. Y’know.

“Nah. It was just the one song, the *Runaround Sue* part. Who knows, right?”

He kicked open the oven with his knee, avoiding more scrutinious looks as he swept the pan into the heat with his right-hand oven mitt - didn’t wanna risk hurting the metal of the prosthetic or anything, he wouldn’t even know where to begin with fixing it.

“Yeah, actually…” Nat trailed, because apparently all his awesome avoidance tactics were actually shit, or she was ridiculously blunt and there was no possibility of not having this conversation sometime, right, might as well straighten up, close the oven with a sigh and set the timer and turn to her with arms crossed over his chest even though he knew exactly what she was gonna say next.

“...how does that work? How much do you know about your past?”

“Technically? Nothing.”

“*Nothing*?”

“Well, I don’t actually *know* anything, but. I did write myself this fi--”

“That’s the mysterious book on top of your bookshelf, isn’t it!”

And that’s how he ended up showing her the Journal.

To the me of tomorrow--

“This is...crazy.”

“Yeah, well. Don’t have anything else to go on, and no point in frettin’, right? I mean, fresh start and all, I get why there’s not a lot of details.”

“How do you even know any of this is true? You grew up in New York, nothing at all about your life before you joined the army, not a single explanation or story there, and then half this is just weird passive-aggressive warnings about not looking for answers.”

“I know.”

“This doesn’t bother you? There’s not...what about all your friends? Everyone from before, do they just not exist anymore?”

He shifted uncomfortably on the bed, left thumb pressing lines into his right. “S’what I must’a wanted. Can’t change it now.”

“Hmm.” She flicked through a couple pages, backtracking a few once she hit the blank ones, and stopped on the final paragraphs, the handwriting still immaculate, sloping prettily into the initials
“J.B.R…" a funny look on her face, milder version of the hidden tumultuous as he’d shouted Jimmy Rogers from across the room. “What’s the “B” stand for?”

He raised one eyebrow slowly, passively studying the book in her lap, the three letters scratched in finality at the bottom of the lines.

“I….have no idea.” The eyebrow quirked, corner of his mouth twitching as they both sat there in silent for the time it took to sink in all the way, then he was shoving the leather shoulder right the fuck off his bed.

“Goddamnit, whyyyy? Why’d you gotta say that? Natalieeeeee I was fine I was living my peaceful content absolutely worry free life and now all I can think about is that I don't know my own goddamned middle name that’s been sitting right there, fucking letter sloping all perfectly and whatnot and what the fucking whhhhhhhyyyyyy?! Great. Great, just great, thank you. Best friend material right here like. Aggggggghhh.”

Burying his face in his hands didn’t make him feel any better and Natalie was still laughing, sounding surprised from her spot on the floor, echoing giggles settling down into a breathless, partially-amused,

“You really don’t know?”

“No! And now it's gonna bother the fuck outta me.” He flicked the journal poutily, making it clatter to the ground at Natalie’s feet.

“It doesn't have to,” she offered simply, snatching the journal back up again to close it properly, set it up on the windowsill. “Let's make one up.”

“You can't just make up names,” he scoffed, giving Nat a look that she returned with the polar opposite expression. Like he was the crazy one for not making up a dozen names for each day of the week. Not like Natalie did that or anything.

Her real name was Natalie, right? Of course it was. Why would she change it, she knew her name. Unlike him.

You couldn’t just make up names. But he didn’t exactly wanna go the rest of his life being Jimmy B. Rogers.

“You know what? Yeah. Yeah let's do this, we’re fucking doin’ this. Why the fuck not, right?” He scooted closer to Natalie, rubbing his hands together and thinking it over. “The fuck starts with “B”? Benjamin?”

“What about Buchanan?” Nat offered and he narrowed crystal eyes at her, blinking up innocently under her perfect red hair.

“Buchanan? What kinda name is that?” Weirdest fuckin’ name he’d ever heard is what it was.

“James Buchanan…” he trailed, squinting absently at the window. “Why does that sound so familiar? I could swear I’ve heard it before…”

The room in the air froze and Natalie was suddenly a perfect statue, not a single muscle twitching. Even the cat in the next room was silent, and he
didn’t even notice, squinting a little harder before it hit him, one hand darting up in the air.

“Oh! The president, there was a president named that!” He smacked the bed beside him in victory and Nat jumped at the muffled sound. Tipping his head to the side he thought it over, chewing the inside of his cheek and repeating *Buchanan* to himself in his head. “I dunno. It's a little uh...unique. I think I like Benjamin.”

A deep breath and the alarmed look smoothed out into a small smile, “Benjamin it is.”

Jimmy Benjamin Rogers. Or James Benjamin, maybe. No knowing on that one either. His attention snapped back to Nat as she pointed at the journal on the windowsill, “This all you have?”

“Yeah. Well, that, and that.” It was his turn to twist around, metal finger extended to indicate the frame on the far wall, his only piece of art in here right now. It’d come with the journal, and hell knows this place needed some brightening up.

A funny sound from the floor and before he could ask Nat what that meant, she’d popped to her feet, crossed the room in three strides and was staring up close at *the picture*. He waited a moment to see if she’d say anything but the redhead stood silently, intent and unmoving. Another moment or two and he pushed off the bed, stepping up to stand beside her.

“This is a nice drawing,” she finally said, something off about her voice. He studied her for a moment before turning to the sketch on the wall.

It was kinda ridiculous, how tight and warm his chest got just by looking at the thing. It wasn’t like it was the most remarkable piece of art he’d ever seen, not exactly a masterpiece, it was just so.

Raw. Beautiful, god, it spoke to his soul. Couldn’t place what it was. It was pretty unique as far as sketches went, all that pencil mixed in with the red sky, blue flag in the water, purple skyline.

[Image of a drawing of the Brooklyn Bridge]

The silver Brooklyn Bridge arching across the center. He didn’t even *live* in Brooklyn. Hadn’t even been to Brooklyn, actually, too busy in Queens. But that bridge, that entrancing sketch of the bridge?
“Yeah...there's something about it that's just so beautiful. I think I'm a little in love with the artist,” he
laughed, high and airy and Natalie blinked silently behind him. Maybe she just didn't get art. The
sound faded, tapering down into a distant smile as he looked over the red star in the sky, harsh metal
lines for clouds, voice dropping into some kind of awed hush. “Can you imagine how they must see
the world when they draw things like that?”

More silence beside him, only it wasn’t the -nothing- kind of quiet, it was the negative-sound kind of
quiet, sound sucked out of the room like there was something that needed to be said so desperately
the words would rather burn than be spoken.

Another second and he would’ve leaned over, nudged her, made a joke, something to cut through
the cold that’d suddenly settled over the two strangers in front of an even stranger art piece, only.

Speaking of burning.

“Shit, the lasagna--”

~*~*~

watch the only way out disappear

“Now carefully pour the solution into the beaker, keeping an eye to make sure it doesn’t combine too
quickly, we’re not looking for any explosio--”

The boom crash couldn’t’ve been more aptly timed and half the class burst into shocked laughter, the
other half blinking tiredly awake, looking around in vague confusion and disinterest.

His lab partner was thankfully the former, covering her mouth with a hand to stifle the giggles as he
stared big blue eyes at the gas rolling slowly out of their beaker, splatter of gray smoke dusting his
apron, the edges of his goggles.

Probably clinging to the cleft in his chin, making his hair stand up on end like some cartoon based on
the way the eyes around him were flicking in their laughter.

Well. That was about the most graceful thing he’d done this week.

The teacher was looking at him with pained exhaustion and he couldn’t do much but lift a shoulder,
wipe the back of his hand over his goggles and offer in his best radio-voice,

“And next time this week folks, I’ll be inventing flying cars!”

The few stifled giggles broke into real laughter and even his teacher cracked a smile. His lab partner
nudged him in the shoulder with her wide-mouthed joy, metal plates shifting in reaction to the touch
and he bit down the cocky grin into a smaller smile.

So he wasn’t normal.

And maybe...he wasn’t quite a scientist either?


He said let's get outta this town, drive out of the city, away from the crowds. I thought heaven can’t
help me now, nothing lasts forever.

But this is gonna take me down.

“Say, you know anyplace you can rent a car for a decent price around here?”

The taxi driver gave him an odd look over his shoulder and he blinked patiently, metal arm propping him up on the back of the passenger seat.

“You lookin’ to go somewhere a bus can’t?” The driver asked dully and he shrugged his scarred shoulder, subconsciously running a hand through his dark hair and mussing it up a bit.

“Dunno, I have a feelin’ I’d like roadtrippin’ or somethin.”

“You ain’t never been on a roadtrip?”

“Uh. No? No. Don’t think so. Can’t imagine when I wouldda. But it’s good right, to get out and just drive, open road and a good stereo, right?”

“Yeah,” the driver agreed, checking his blind spot and weaving into traffic, replying distractedly, “Gotta find somebody to go with though, kinda the whole point.”

“Hmm.” He leaned back in his seat, looking out the glass at upper Manhattan and all the bustling millions shoving by, thousands of people he’d never even see again. And outta all of them, not a single person to go roadtripping with.

There had to be somebody in New York who’d tip back their head, holler at the wind with the windows down with him, racing across America like the whole world could never catch up so long as his foot was on the pedal.

Only problem was?

Brake always came in sometime, it was either that or the crash.

The crash and the fall.

I was just a bad dream.

It came with the dark. It came with the loud switch of the lights turning off and it was New York, he had a window, it was never pitch black anyway, it wasn’t like it should matter.

But the click every night that put him into this place, all alone, in the black? It mattered.

Because he didn’t feel alone.

And yeah, that was creepy as fuck and also the plot of every cheesy horror film ever, but he couldn’t shake the feeling, he really couldn’t. Just that someone was...not watching, but there. Waiting. In the shadows, in the dark hovering at the edges of the cutting moonlight, haunting thing always behind him, no matter how many times he spun around.
So what if he ran straight from the lightswitch to his bed like a seventh grader? He lived alone, it was fair he was a little freaked out sometimes.

It had to be nothing, he knew that. Even if it were someone, here, in his room, odds are he could probably defend himself. He didn’t know how much skill he still had from his military days and he really wasn’t looking to test that, but worse comes to worse it wasn’t like he was in any real danger.

Right? The...the creepy feeling, of not being alone? It wasn’t a super threatening feeling, just. A chilling one.

Sometimes physically, actually, he’d just go cold all over, frozen up like he’d spent years coated in layers of ice. Except even then, even frozen, there was still something, somewhere there, just outside the glass--

No, he was just freaking himself out again, he had to. Let it go, right? Let it the fuck go.

Let it all the fuck go.

~*~*~

He didn’t leave anybody behind, did he?

~*~*~

The sun came over the edge of the hill slower than molasses on a cold winter’s day and his arms lifted with the cool light, head tipped back to the soft wind, palms touching above his head, fingers reaching for the sky.

Early December chill creeping down his bones, settling on his skin like the promise of coming snow, but his long-sleeved under-armor kept it from getting too close. More like a refreshing, clarifying dip of cold air than the torture of winter months to come.

Energy dancing down his torso, waiting and hovering for the moment, the sweet shift as his arms circled out to the sides, bending in a swan dive, toes spreading deeper against the rubber cushion of his yoga mat.

His hair was too short to do much but stick up like those movie star quiffs when he was upside down, but uttanasana was still one of his favorite poses, there was something about the peace and strength of his arms hooked around the backs of his calves, feet planted in the earth--

Yoga in the quad was so so much better than yoga in his apartment, and so he didn’t quite match the scruffy, long-haired guys in ponytails he always ran into carrying yoga mats around campus this early in the morning, but he didn’t need to fit a damn well stereotype to enjoy some amazing physical activity and waking up to sun salutations.

Speaking of physical activity, there was that dance class Nat kept trying to convince him to join. Maybe he really should consider it. But there was something so intimate about dancing, with partners
and whatnot, and he...didn’t think he was ready for that.

He’d stick with yoga for now, there was always time to try out all that fancy nonsense in the future. He had all the time in the world. Nothing but time, really.

And he was gonna make the damn most of it.

~*~*~

“Rox, you gotta moovve,” he groaned, shoving the cat off his pillow. She meowed in offense, but couldn’t’ve been that offended because next thing he knew, she was in his lap.

“Okay, fine, but you get to stay for one episode. And I swear, if you meow over any of Doctor Reid’s lines, I will not hesitate to throw you out the window.”

She snuggled in closer and he sighed, taking that as a submission of agreement. Well, of everything the cat did, insisting on watching Netflix with him wasn’t the worst of them. Besides, it was a pretty damn good setup, blankets over his legs, pillows piled up around, hot chocolate on the bedstand, computer propped against his thighs and a purring cat in his lap. Not a bad way to spend a couple hours on a Saturday afternoon.

Or, y’know, an entire Saturday night and red-eyed Sunday morning but what, bingewatch an entire two seasons? Who, him? No way. He would never!

~*~*~

It was getting late and for some reason he just couldn’t find his way home.

Maybe it was the snow. It was the first real snow yet, and everytime he wrapped his coat closer, squinted up against the windy white pummel of flakes - a vortex, only instead of wrapped up in some swirling space thing it was pulling--

No, it wasn’t pulling him, it was just like he was. Falling. Every time he looked up, all that swirling upside-down snow, it was like he was falling down a rabbit hole, wandering around alone forever and there was just so much white.

Was it following him forever or leaving him to sleep in the snow?

Eventually, through the bitter ice that was starting to make his face sting, eyebrows freeze over, the glow of that familiar line of distant lights. Soft and pale-gold, setting a straight beacon home. All he had to do was follow gold through all the cold and he’d be fine.

Throwing open the door was simultaneously the greatest and worst feeling ever. It was warm as hell in here, he must’ve left the heater on. He started to thaw the second the door shut behind him, ice slipping into water, but that blast of warm air also kinda felt like his insides were being turned inside out and blasted with a dose of poisonous summer heat.

Well. It was better than freezing to death and he’d made his way back to the apartment, so. Win win.
No more standing out there where everything was falling down around him and he could believe in all the possibilities of the world that’d been waiting for him sometime two months ago.

All he had was now, remember?

The quick shower didn't make him feel much warmer, just more dripping and melting, the sound of wet feet on tile echoing between white walls.

Why didn't he have a proper pair of pajamas? A tshirt and sweats would have to do. Thankfully his hair dried fast enough not to soak his pillow as he finally collapsed in bed, pulled the sheets up over his shoulders. Curled on one side, with all that empty space behind him--

And he was out of bed again, pacing with his hands in his hair and he was just so tired, so sick of being dizzy. Had he eaten today?

The white flakes knocking on his window were gone now, quiet and still outside, everything a long sloping blanket of untouched, shining white.

It was so peaceful. All of that blank, fresh snow down like looking at a painting, or a movie. Clean pure white without the slightest touch of human pollution to be seen.

If the cat hadn't wandered home she would've freaked at the loud sudden screech, wrapped herself around his legs but thank god he lived alone, no one to question or scream as he dragged his stubborn bed across the room.

Not as hard to pull as he'd thought it be.

Shoved it flush against the window, yanked his sheets off from where they were tucked nicely. If he was gonna sleep on it upside down, he'd have to reorient the sheets. Too exhausted to tuck them in at the other end, sliding in to drape them over like a thin blanket that didn't do much but tangle up in his legs too easy.

Pillow shoved under his head, close to the foot of the bed as he dared.

And there was all that snow. White and white and the occasional glimmer of reflecting gold. There'd never be the right words to describe that, what the world looked like pure and white and free of people, free of darkness and mud and everything he'd freed himself of too.

Maybe all he'd wanted to be was the snow. Pure, clean. Glittering, stunning under the pale gold streetlights.

So it’d follow him forever. He'd never know, and it'd follow him forever.

Wiped clean, blank slate like fresh snow and he was purified. He should be grateful.

There was a road in the distance, far off distance, occasional car lights tiny blinking orbs sliding by on their thin line.

One hand tucked under the cleft in his chin, watching the faraway lights of those cars, two speeding for each other, collide, kept going. And another two, colliding further left, disappearing in opposite directions like they'd never met.

Every collision, intersection point an illusion.

But for just a moment in time, for one second, the lights were together, burning twice as bright,
covering each other to stand as one and then they were off, gone again, in different lanes all along.

In different lanes all along.

He fell asleep watching the highway, dreams swirling with pure snow glittering under pale gold until it melted away from the warmth of the lights pointing home that slowly slowly faded into nothing at all.

~*~*~

"Okay, next card...blank may pass, but blank will last forever."

"Ughh, I hate double cards," Chase whined and Jimmy leaned over to flick him on the shoulder.

"Well we hate you," Jessica retorted, not looking up from her handful of cards, thumbing through them before smacking two (loudly) facedown on the table.

"Or more accurately, your shitty seventies music taste," he offered and Kyle reached over Matthew to give him a high five, quiet thud against the whirr of his metal palm.

"It’s my dorm, we listen to whatever the fuck I want." Chase put down two of his cards and glared unconvincingly at the everyone else at the coffee table. There was a perfectly good dinner table, but it’d been shoved aside because sitting on the floor for Cards Against Humanity was way better that way.

"Besides,” he pouted, collapsing dramatically on his forearms. “Zeppelin isn’t shitty, y’all are shitty.”

“Fantastic comeback,” he drawled sarcastically and Jessica snorted, elbowing Kyle to put down his cards already.

"Okay,” Matt picked the pairs up, flipping them over and lining them up next to the black card, shoving Chase’s pie plate outta the way. “First pair...Men may pass, but Bees? will last forever.”

“Bees?” Everyone around the table echoed, bursting into various snorts and laughter, Matt shaking his head affectionately as Hannah fell sideways into Jessica’s shoulder with her bright giggling.

“Anyone want more pie?” Claire shouted from the kitchen and Hannah scrambled back up, barely avoiding Jessica’s hand shooting for Matt’s plate.

“Hey! That’s mine!”

“You’re reading cards, get over it.”

“Hey Jess! Get me some too!” He tipped his head back and gave her his brightest smile, crystal eyes all lit up the way he’d absolutely perfect in that one hall mirror.

“Fuck you Rogers, get your own.” She rolled her eyes and Chase snorted, signaling Matt to read the next pair of cards.

“Jessica?” Hannah called, leaning over Matt’s space and making him look up at the ceiling in feigned exasperation. “Can you grab me a piece?”
She batted her pretty blue eyes as Jessica paused in the doorway, almost eliciting a smile from that bitter-sarcastic mouth. “Fine, yeah, I’ll grab you one.”

“What the hell!!” He had to reach over Matt and Chase to shove Hannah with the metal arm and she gave him the sassiest smile, leaning back just in time to avoid getting smacked.

“What?” she blinked, brunette head cocked as he rolled his eyes at her, leaning back just as Kyle whooped triumphantly, attention drawn back to the game as Matt turned back over all the pairs of cards but two.

“Okay, these are all pretty great, but wow this one is fucked up. Dying may pass, but a lifetime of sadness will last forever? Wayyy too real.”

A couple of laughs around the table that shifted into cheers almost instantly as Claire came out of the kitchen with two plates of cookies balanced on her hands. “Wasn’t enough pie left for everyone, so.”

“We love you Claire,” Hannah announced, and Matt held up two cards in the air, looking around at the happy faces.

“I gotta give it to the Bees? one.”

“Boo-yah!” Metal fingers snatched the black card off the table and Chase groaned, making a face as Jessica sat back down and handed Hannah the last slice of pie.

“Jimmy _always_ wins, that’s just not fair.”

“Muahaha,” he shot back and Jessica pulled a fork out of her mouth, raising one eyebrow dully. “That was the least convincing evil laugh I’ve heard in my entire life.”

“How many evil laughs do you hear, jeeez.”

“More than normal,” she sighed, tossing a cookie at Kyle, who’d been trying in vain to reach the plate for the last ten seconds.

“Oh kay, it’s my turn, right? And let’s try to let anybody besides Rogers win this round.” Claire gave him a pointed look and he shrugged, smile split from ear to ear as he leaned back against a couch cushion and thumbed through his cards.

Best way to spend an afternoon, he decided. The very best way.

~*~*~

“Heyyoo, whatcha listenin’ to?” Natalie startled at the sudden noise, the metal fingers plucking one headphone outta her ear as he smiled mischievously and fell in step beside his new best friend.

She didn’t bother answering with anything but a raised eyebrow and the faint traces of a smile because truthfully, he was like this more often than not, just popping the headphone into his own ear. It was something kinda jazz-y sounding, but like. Tinny, and too fast?

“This doesn’t sound like the 50’s,” he pointed out, shifting the strap of his bag to better accommodate walking this close. The corner of Nat’s mouth twitched, moving her armful of textbooks to one side
to fix the pull of the split earphones.

“It’s not. It’s the 40’s.”

“Oh? I didn’t know the 40’s did jazz.” Although it was like. Hardly jazz, but still.

“They did.” Natalie pushed open the door to the outside and he cringed, popping his coat collar against the wind. At least it wasn’t snowing anymore. Definitely different kind’a music than he was listening to last time he was out in this cold.

He let the song go for another verse as they walked in silence, paying a little closer attention this time.

“This is a lot peppy-er jazz.” Absently started humming along, thinking how not-Rat-Pack this sounded. He didn’t even know the forties had their own time period of music. That was like...world war two era, right? Maybe. He hadn’t been paying a lotta attention to history lately. Another couple steps and they hit the chorus again, multiple voices chiming in over the sound of drums, a faint harmonica, maybe. “You sure this is a 40’s song?”

“Yeah, why?” Nat dug in her pocket, producing her phone and lighting up the screen to show him the song, Hot Time in the Town of Berlin, pausing at the edge of the sidewalk to look up at him curiously.

“I know the words,” he said slowly, still looking down at the screen. The name wasn’t ringing any bells, or the band or anything, or even the style of music but. For some dumb reason, he knew all the words. “Weird. Maybe an army buddy liked the forties or somethin’?”

They started walking for their designated lunch spot again, in silence this time as the song played out. Well, in silence until Natalie couldn’t stand it anymore, turning down the volume a tad to look over at him again with that same pester-look she got like. Twenty times a day.

“Do you really remember nothing?”

“Really.” One side of his mouth twitched up in an amused smile. He should start keeping tally of how many times she asked that.

“You think anything would trigger back stuff? Like music, or a face? Maybe even subconsciously, like in your sleep?”

“I doubt it.” He shrugged, careful not to dislodge their headphones as they started up the stairs in front of the campus dining building. “Been pretty quiet so far.”

“And that really doesn’t bother you?” Yet another pause, just outside the door, looking at him with those big green eyes like she was seriously concerned for him and he sighed, taking her arm gently and pulling her to the side, sitting her down on the bench just outside the doors.

Kept his voice as even and serious as he could, which was saying a lot for him because life was way too short to be all serious about shit, but if they could finally lay this to rest then they could go back to joking about shit instead of all these random bouts of worry Nat kept having.

“Listen, Roman. I told you once, and I really meant that. I’ve come to peace with it. I chose this, for myself. It was what I wanted, y’know? If there’s some big piece of me missing now, there’s no point in looking for it. I can’t worry about something I don’t know to worry about. Tree falls in the forest and no one’s there to hear it, right?”
“And you’re sure. It never bothers you?”

“No,” he shook his head, smiling a little because really, it didn’t. When it was light outside and the world was all bright and everything, he didn’t even think about it. There were of course a couple moments of hesitation, wondering, in the middle of the night but that was normal. This was all normal. He was normal. “No, it really doesn’t. Just bothers you, with your terrible, serious, terminal condition of have-to-know-everything—”

“I do know everything!” Natalie interjected, smacking his arm and both of them were smiling now, which was exactly how it should be.

He popped back to his feet, holding out his crooked arm, old-fashioned style and everything. “Well, Miss Roman, I’m sure you do. And if you would be so kind as to let me escort such a beautiful, intelligent, absolute know-it-all—”

Rolling eyes as she stood, all bottled sass,

“Shut up Ba-- Rogers.” There was the oddest look on her face as she quickly looped her arm through his, eyes darting away as she indicated for the doors. “Well? You gonna escort me in or not?”

~*~*~

“What exactly are you looking for sir?”

He pursed his lips, running metal fingers through his hair as he tapped his foot and debated. Didn't quite know the answer to that question, or this whole thing would be over by now.

“Um. I just wanna make sure it's the right decision, for both of us, y'know? S’why I wanted to talk to you before I went and saw...god knows I wouldn't be able to back out then, right?”

The clerk smiled, sliding a clipboard over the counter.

“I understand. It’s good you’re looking at this responsibly, with hesitation. It shows this may be a good idea for you after all.”

“Well. I'm in school, so that's my biggest hesitation.”

“How many hours would you say you spend at school every day?”

“Just a few hours. My schedule’s pretty lenient otherwise. And I’m home basically every evening, don’t leave super early morning either, unless I'm out running.”

“Sir, I'm absolutely sure we can find you a match. Most of the dogs we have here are quite compatible with that lifestyle. Would you want to adopt a dog that could run with you?”

“Oh, yeah, that'd be really cool. But I just wanna make sure they'd be okay hanging out in my apartment for a couple hours. I mean, I'd love to take a dog to class, but. You know the rules.” He gave her a small smile, running down the sheet on the clipboard she gave him. He was pretty sure he could keep up with this.

“I don't mean to pry or offend,” the counter girl started slowly, chipped blue nail reaching over to tap a selection box on the paper. “--but have you considered getting your dog registered as a
psychological pet? You'd have a lot more freedom with where you could take them.”

“I'd love to, but…” he trailed, staring down at the paper and smiling softly to himself at the sudden muffled barking from the next room. “I don't exactly have anything I could convince a psychiatrist with. It's not like I'm--”

“Missing an arm?” The girl offered, voice dropped entirely hushed and hesitant.

It took a couple seconds to sink in and he blinked, looking down at his metal hand and flexing his fingers.

Oh yeah.

“Huh.”

He'd forgotten about that.

But he wasn't exactly...a cripple. Or like, psychologically messed up or anything. He didn't even have nightmares, he was about the most regular non-psychotic person he knew.

“I'll think it over,” he promised her, although he wasn't so sure about that. He didn't exactly deserve to have a psychological pet when psychologically, he was better than most people. “But uh. You think I could see the dogs now? Only ones that'd be okay with being alone for awhile and everything.”

“Of course, sir. Right this way. I think we have a few you'll just fall in love with.”

~*~*~

~*~*~

“You're getting a dog??”

“I'm considering it,” he defended and Morgan’s eyes were wide, blinking up under her blue hair like he was crazy, hand frozen on her mailbox.

They didn't run into each other super often and he did wanna at least give her a heads up he was thinking over the idea.

“What about Roxy?” she demanded, crossing her arms over her chest and he snorted, closing his own mailbox and tucking a couple envelopes under his arm.

“She's not my cat.”

“But she thinks she is! What if she comes through your window one day and your dog attacks her? Oh god what would I--”

“Morgan, chill. I said I'm just considering it. Besides, you never know. They could be friends.”

“Friends? Friends? Is the moon friends with the sun?? They're two different species!”

“I don't see why they couldn't get along--”

“Sure, they may at first but at some point the dog’ll get fed up with all the cat’s evasive techniques
and snap, chase her down, and Roxy could run away!! Never come back!!”

“The dog I found is a golden retriever, they're hardly vicious!”

“It doesn't matter! They're too different. Besides, all dogs are vicious, underneath that sweet puppy face.”

“Oh, what, and cats aren't?”

“Roxy isn't vicious! She's just...liberal with her claws.”

He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Look, I haven't made any decisions yet. I just wanted to give you a heads up. I really do think they could be the best of friends though, Morgan.”

“Jimmy, the only cat-dog relationships that actually work are the ones that’ve been raised together since birth.” Arms still crossed over her chest, chin lifted in defiance, although that was pretty regular with how small she was.

“Well. That's not exactly easy to come across, y’know? We can always see how it goes. I won't make any big choices until I'm sure though, I promise.”

“Thank you,” she breathed, arms tucking a little closer like just the idea seemed positively horrendous. He really didn't see why they wouldn't get along, but.

“I just can't have Roxy bolt on me. She'd be lost out there in the real world, y’know?”

“Yeah,” he smiled faintly, closing both their mailboxes for them, holding out Morgan’s mail in his free hand. “Aren't we all.”

~*~*~


The apartment was pitch black except for the distant green light on the ceiling, the fire detector that interrupted all that darkness. If he covered it with his hand, he couldn’t tell the difference between eyelids open or closed.

Could be anywhere like this. With all that darkness, the black could extend forever or just a few feet in front of him, a box or a warehouse or a snowy prairie with nothing but white for as far as the eye could see. Or not see.

Playing tricks on his tongue and that’s exactly what he needed to write this damn thing.

It’d been plaguing him since the moment he’d picked up the pen and he just couldn’t place--

All that darkness. That was it, wasn’t it?

A quiet victorious whoop and he flipped open the laptop on his thighs, everything lighting up around him at that impossibly bright screen but he didn’t even notice, pulling open a blank word document and tapping down everything before it got lost on the tip of his tongue again.

Who knows how much time slid by, but the next thing he knew there were the fourteen lines, exactly the way they’d been twisting inside his organs.
Fucking finally.

It took a bit of fumbling to find his phone, tucked between some random folds of his sheets, wrestling it free and shoving it between his ear and his shoulder, speed dial ringing out.

The other end clicked as she picked up and he didn’t bother saying hello or waiting for her to.

“Wanna hear this sonnet I wrote?” He typed the date at the bottom of the document, saving it for the hundredth time just in case. “It’s pretty great, honestly. About time too, it’s been stuck in my head since--”

“It’s Friday night...” Nat interrupted, words drawn out and he paused, readjusting and picking his phone up from where it’d been wedged. “…you’re twenty-seven...and you’re home alone writing poetry??”

“Uh. What else would I be doing?” He made a cross face in the dark and Natalie made some sort of disbelieving sound he had to roll his eyes at.

“Okay. Get dressed. I’ll be over in twenty.”

“Nataliiieee--”

“We’re going out.”

“Out? I was having a perfectly great night--”

“We’re going out! I will show up at your door and if you don’t come with me, I will bust it down.”

He...did not doubt that. Another aggrieved sigh and he threw off the covers, groaning at how fucking cold and not-comfy it was out here in the real world. Light, light, needed to flick on a light.

“What am I getting dressed into? Like, where are we going?” Closet door swung open and he glared at all his summer clothes, tidy and shoved in the back because it was so fucking cold out.

“We’re going dancing,” Natalie declared and his eyebrows tried to hit the ceiling.

“Dancing?? I don’t know if I can dance!”

“Well. We’re about to find out.”

“Dear lord.”

“Love you too. Be there soon!”

Click.

He was so fucked.

Or...not.

“I don’t get it!” He shouted over the blast of the music, pulling Natalie closer from the grip he had on her palm, leaning in to mouth the words right next to her ear. “Why are so many people scared of dancing??”

“Not everyone’s as good at it as you!” she shouted back and he shook his head with a smile, carefully spiked hair already fucked up, sweaty strands falling haphazardly over his forehead,
dragging one hand through damp brunette to the sway of his hips.

The leather jacket he’d walked in here with was way too hot to wear, slung over one shoulder, fingers curled around the edge as he danced, low and dirty, black tank sticking to his chest, catching sweat and wandering eyes the same way his bare biceps were.

Even with the lighting fucking shit, he wasn’t missing the way all those guys and gals were looking at him. And then eyeing who he was with and decidedly not approaching, not so long as he and Nat were dancing together. Which was absolutely fine with him, she wasn’t too bad at this herself.

How had they not gone dancing yet? Well, first of all, he’d had no idea he’d be this good at it.

The song’d shifted, something not as heavy, almost pop-sounding as the crowd’s whole demeanor shifted, kids up at the front jumping mosh-pit style as everyone else stuttered to a stop, headed for the bar or the bathrooms, couples breaking right and left - their hands dropped too and Nat turned to him, cocking her head and shouting to be heard,

“You know this song?”

He shook his head no, taking her wrist again and dragging her closer to the blasting speakers, hips finding the rhythm again. “Good dancing music,” he offered, more mouthing it than shouting that time because Nat seemed to be pretty good at reading lips anyways.

“They’re a great band! Fall Out Boy, ring any bells?”

Man, again with the bell ringing thing. There were no bells in his head to ring, and one day that might sink in but for now he just laughed at that pretty, devious smile that always wanted to know if there was just one more thing he might remember.

“Doubt we danced much in the army.” Bury me til I confess. The smile on Natalie’s face looked fake in the flash of the blue lights but they were here to dance and he wasn’t gonna call her out on it, wasn’t gonna think about anything but the bass shaking the floorboards, the reflections spiking across the floor. “But no, it doesn’t.”

And I can’t get you outta my head.

Cheeks flushed, eyes bright, hair destroyed - if he’d been wearing eyeliner it’d be smudged to hell. Not that he wore eyeliner, but there were a couple guys in here with it and he had to admit, if anybody could pull it off it’d probably be him.

Although now, like this, dancing his ass off and rolling his body to the inescapable music, he felt about as immortal as he ever had. Could pull off anything like this. There was just something, about a dancefloor--

You’ll find your way
And may death find you alive

His heart pounding, endorphins rushing through his brain, everything from his feet to his head connected, zoetic, more present and simultaneously free than he’d been in anything he could remember, best friend right here beside him and skin tingling, soul vibrating with the heat and he could just drown in it, all his sense given over to that music.

I’ll keep you like an oath
"May nothing but death do us part..."
He saw him first.

Natalie’s gaze flicked up, saw his caught curiously over her shoulder and followed his gaze, red hair whipping as she flipped her head around, took in the man standing at the door.

And that fluid, dancing body went still so fast it was surprising she didn’t give herself whiplash.

“Shit.”

The song’d changed again, this one even louder but it didn’t matter, he could hear that word just fine over it. Was written all over her face anyways.

Natalie didn’t move, frozen in spot and he paused too, jostled by some dancing bodies around them as he peered over Nat’s head and studied the guy at the door with a whole different set of eyes.

Certainly didn’t look like a ghost the way Nat’s face said he was. In fact, he looked pretty damn real. Solid, broad shoulders and ridiculously ripped arms, the kinda muscle you did a double-take when you saw. Darkish-blonde hair kinda spiked up over light blue eyes, this sharp keen stare as his gaze flicked over the room.

And finally landed on them.

Now that was a double-take.

“You know him?” he leaned closer, pushing Nat’s hair aside to ask the question against her ear since she was still frozen staring at the door.

Still.

His question sunk in eventually, the little body jolting the moment it did, finally shot back to reality from her weird staring contest with the buff guy across the room.

“He’s…” she breathed, blinking rapidly before glancing at him, back at the door, eyes wide and almost scared looking now? She took a single step forward, eyes locked on the blonde like a sniper on a target, nearly forgetting he was standing right there behind her.

The guy didn’t though, those pale eyes kept flicking up to him, pure shock mixed in with some sort of hard-set rage and what the fuck was going on?

“...my boyfriend,” she finally finished, snapping back into full-on Natasha mode and shoving hastily past the grinding couple in front of them. He moved to follow her on instinct, metal arm whirring weirdly like it could sense the increase in his pulse, the sudden urge to protect.

Got half a foot before Nat seemed to remember he was there, glancing over her shoulder quickly and waving him off with a hand, shouting something like keep dancing.

He hesitated, glancing between her and the guy glowering on the other side of the room, making his way through the crowd towards them too.

The look on her face was dead serious though, something pleading in her eyes - confrontation will make it worse, those greens said and he bit back his tongue, forcing himself to still and shake it off. If she didn’t want him there, he had to respect that.

But since when the fuck did Nat have a boyfriend?

Why hadn’t she told him? Why hadn’t he met him? The guy looked fine enough, like he could
maybe even be congenial if he hadn’t caught them like this. They’d just been dancing, it wasn’t like they were *together*, Christ, he hoped he didn’t just create a dozen problems for that girl.

He was still getting stared at by the time Nat reached Mystery Boyfriend, one little hand grabbing the sleeve of that purple shirt and dragging him towards the bar, away from where he was watching carefully.

Okay, clearly, she had this under control. He just had to...chill and trust her. So she had a secret boyfriend. No big deal, he’d probably be jealous at first too if he saw his girl dancing with some guy. Specially a guy as attractive as he was. Not to be vain or anything.

Well, he could stand here and wonder how much he didn’t know about Natalie, or he could go find somebody else to dance with. There were...quite a few from the looks of it.

And this song was hype, so. Dancing it was. Nat would find him before she left, all he had to do was slip back into the music until she came back.

Couldda sworn it was barely ten seconds later that Nat was tugging him away from Young Rich and Handsome, smile more of a grimace now as she dragged him for the door.

Although wow, door swung open onto the weirdly quiet streets it was almost gettin’ light outside, they’d been in there for a goddamned while.

The door shut quietly behind them, lid muffling the bass into this distant thing, all the warmth slipped right with it and he couldn’t pull his leather jacket on fast enough, damp skin and hair about damn freezing up into ice already.

“Fuck it’s cold.” Pulled the jacket tighter, finally got the chance to look over at Nat, inspect her state of well-being without the flashing lights and thudding music surrounding them. He’d glanced around on their blurred way out, but Mystery Boyfriend was nowhere to be seen. Which was to be expected, he supposed, if she was walking him home. “So...how did that go?”

“I convinced him to keep his mouth shut. For now.” Red flashing as she glanced both ways across the snowy street, words distant like they were more to herself than him before she blinked again, looping her arm through his as she guided them both across the street. “That’s gonna be a long talk later today, I’ll tell you that.”

“Mmm.” He supposed it was daytime, probably somewhere around four or five am. Already tomorrow. What time did that switch though, like nobody said *yeah, let’s hang out later today* at like. Midnight. Anyways.

He blew a snowflake outta the air as it tried to land on his nose, shivering at the crystals slowly forming along his hairline. Fuck the winter, that was what. The snow was loud as hell, crunching underneath his boots, but the silence was still there and apparently, that was all Natalie was gonna say which was. Not cool.

So he elbowed her in the ribs. “You never told me you had a boyfriend.”

She made a cross face at the sharp metal poke, but there was a touch of a smile at the edges of her eyes now and it was a bit easier to breathe in all that bitter cold air. So he hadn’t ruined *everything*, then.

“Never came up. You jealous?”

“Mm, no. Maybe of you. Those were pretty fantastic arms,” he teased, last puzzle piece of concern
slipping away as she broke into a real smile, head ducking down against the wind. “How’s somebody even get that ripped?”

“He’s a really fantastic archer.”

“That explains the arrow necklace.” He tipped his head to indicate, too fucking cold to pull his hands outta his pockets. Natalie glanced down, little smile as the silver reflected in a streetlight. He wasn’t sure he’d ever seen her smile that way. Studied a moment longer, smile of his own now as he thought that over. “So he’s got a good heart too?”

“He does,” she replied softly, arm flexing like her fingers were worrying away at something. A beat or two before the softness passed, eyes hardening into that shiny surface again as one corner of her mouth twitched up. “But mm, you should see the rest of him.”

“I’m good,” he laughed, tugging their linked arms around another corner bend.

“I saw you eyeing that guy in the club,” she accused and he arched an eyebrow at the callout, thinking back to who exactly he’d been checking out. That Nat would’ve seen. It’d been a long night.

“Wait...the hot Brazilian one? Hell the fuck yeah I was eyeing him.” He gave her the axiomatic look that was calling her out right back, cause there was no way she had. Except, y’know, Mystery Boyfriend. But. He’d have to get a name, so he could stop referring to him--

“I see you more settling for the Irish type,” Nat declared and he glanced at her suspiciously from the corner of his eye.

“What, redhead and freckles? Little biased I think?”

“I’m Russian,” she shot back, rolling her eyes at him although how the fuck was obvious he had no idea.

“Are you really. I’d’ve never guessed.” She made a weird sound and they fell back into amiable silence, snow drifting kinda pleasantly down now, although his leather jacket sure as hell hated him right now. That whole leather+water thing. But the snow was kinda nice, when it was late and quiet and peaceful like this. Whole world all covered and soft.

“Hmm. I don’t think I have a type,” he pondered, watching the snowflakes dance downwards, counting that Nat wouldn’t run him into a pole or something. They were almost back to his apartment anyways.

“Soft sunshine-blond hair, blue eyes like the sky?”

“Aw, I really come across that stereotypical?” He had to tip his head back down and give her a mild glare for that, green eyes going all big and serious, halting at the edge of his front steps.

“I think it’d be a nice compliment to your look!”

“What, pretty angel to match my devilish charm?” A perfect execution of his most mischievous, trouble-maker grin and Natalie laughed at him, shoving his shoulder playfully. Although from her, that meant almost being shoved down in the snow, and he had to laugh too.

It was nice, even with all the drama tonight, it’d been nice to go out and dance, just spend some time with Natalie. Get to see another side of that multifaceted gem. She was pretty damn great.
“Thanks for tonight, I had a great time. And for walking me home, in all this awful, nightmarish cold~”

“I had a good night too, Mr. Devilish Charm.” She smiled at him and he couldn’t resist the urge, freezing his fingers was worth it to hear that jingling laugh as he lifted two fingers to his forehead like devil horns.

She was still laughing as she walked away and that was it, it was decided.

He let himself inside, warm air washing over his dance-worn bones, unbreakable smile lingering on his face as he trudged up the steps and thought to himself.

This really was the best life. The very very best life.

~*~*~

“Hey, hey, three o’clock!’’

Nat jumped, one hand going for her belt as her head whipped around, followed where he was pointing.

“What?!”

“That girl! Isn’t she just about the prettiest thing you’ve ever seen?”

Natalie relaxed, the hand on her belt drawing off slowly. Weird.

“Wow. She is stunning. You talk to her?”

He sighed, plopping down in the seat beside her, dumping his bag on the floor and digging out his laptop for notes.

“Yeah, once. Said hi all smooth and charming and whatnot and she raised an eyebrow at me so. Yeah.”

“Sounds like that old fashioned charm just does wonders on modern women.” She slid him a handout of the powerpoints and he silently issued a prayer for the gracious, studious Natalie Roman, sliding his laptop back in his bag as she kept talking. “What are you naming your children? I bet they’d have her eyes.”

“Hopefully not, mine are prettier.” He clicked a pen open, scratching his name across the top in that lovely, neat handwriting he was super grateful and had no idea how he’d gotten. “Maggie and Montgomery.”

“For the kids? Why?” Nat reached over him to grab a pack of gum from his bag, popping a piece of his favorite into her mouth as he glanced up, copying down the textbook page numbers scrawled across the board.

“I dunno. Just popped in my head.”

She studied his profile for a moment, could feel it in his peripherals. He let her look - she studied him at the weirdest times, he was pretty used to it by now.
One moment, another, and Nat got back to chewing away his stash of cinnamon flavored attention span, half-muffled as she tossed the rest of the pack into his bag from afar.

“Works for me.”

~*~*~

“You think Rox would like this?” He held up a jingly collar, wrapped red and green with a big gold bell and Matt outright laughed at him. Or maybe he was laughing at how well it matched his sweater and scarf, but hey, only one time of the year you could wear green and red together without judgment. Kyle at least had the audacity to cover his mouth with a hand and snort.

“She’s not even your cat,” Chase pointed out and he sighed, rummaging through his wallet for a five and holding it out to the street vendor.

“You tell her that.”

“Hell no. That cat is vicious.”

“You’re...vicious,” he shot back lamely and even Luke rolled his eyes.

“Christmas is literally the best time of the entire year.” Kyle wrapped his fluffy scarf around his neck one more time, tugging at Matt’s arm to hurry him up.

“You just like the shopping part.”

“Because he’s got somebody to shop for this year, unlike the rest of us.”

“Not my fault you’re all single and sad,” Kyle sniffed and Luke rolled his eyes at Matt’s indignant backhand to Kyle’s shoulder.

“I’m not single!”

“Doesn’t count, you two are practically married.”

“How does that not count?”

“Just doesn’t!”

“You know what I don’t get? How Jimmy’s still single.”

“What?” He looked up from where he’d been checking off his Christmas-shopping list, which was unfortunately not as small as you’d think for a guy who only had friends from the past two months. He was so much more broke than his taste in friends.

“Yeah man! I mean, we all know Natalie’s practically your sister, so why the hell aren’t you dating anybody?” Chase jostled his shoulder and he shrugged, glancing between the waiting faces of the rest of the guys and stopping in the middle of the cobblestone as he recognized that expression.

“C’mon, it’s guys’ night! We’re here to shop, not talk about girls.”

“Rogers, that was literally the gayest thing I’ve ever heard you say.” Matt flicked him and he dodged
it, lining up his metal fingers to retaliate and getting a very girly squeal outta his retreating friend.

“So is there a guy, then? You know we wouldn’t care--”

“Obviously, like half of us are gay in some way. It’s college.” He gave Luke an unimpressed look and the man nodded his agreement, throwing an arm around Kyle’s shoulders and ruffling that purple hair on principle.

“But no, there isn’t a guy. I’m just...I dunno, I’m not lookin’ to date anybody.”

Thankfully the next vendor started calling at them, something about free gourmet hot chocolate samples and everyone’s attention was diverted before he had to look up from his list, meet all their kind, caring eyes and find a way to describe that yeah, he wasn’t looking to date anybody but.

He just couldn’t shake the feeling there was already somebody he was supposed to be with.

Just couldn’t shake the feeling that in some way?

He kinda. Already felt taken.

.

~*~

~*~*~

~*~

.

And Steve?

Steve Rogers, on the other side of New York, staring out the window at the falling snow below, the millions of people bustling around in their red and green sweaters, cheery and celebrating the Christmas season in the streets--

He couldn’t shake a feeling either.

The same feeling he hadn’t been able to shake since that day, years ago, when Bucky’d been on Zola’s table and the Colonel told him, The name does sound familiar. I’m sorry.

Hadn’t been able to shake it even when Sam sat him down, Pepper and recovering Tony and Clint and Bruce and everyone gathered at the door, all quiet and watching distantly, supporting from afar what they could, no one daring get as close as Wilson did, one hand on Steve’s shoulder as he pushed him down onto the couch, everyone watching quietly as Steve stared at him and those words floated right over his head.

“You know he. He may be gone, Steve. For good. In the way you don’t come back from.”

They weren’t talking about psychologically.

“You gotta face...I know it’s hard man, believe me, I know. But. You gotta face the chance that Bucky’s...”

Dead.
They wanted him to believe Bucky’d committed suicide. Wanted him to at least consider it, they said.

You can’t wait forever, they told him.

Steve didn’t ever reply.

Didn’t speak much at all, these days.

But he still knew. He had that feeling, that same feeling he hadn’t been able to shake since the beginning.

Bucky was alive. He knew it, he wouldn’t dare doubt himself now. Bucky was alive and Steve knew that. He could feel him. Could feel their souls, tied across whatever distance was between them. It didn’t matter.

Bucky was alive.

And so was Steve, in the quietest sense of the word, because he had to be here, whole, when Bucky came back to him.

Because he was coming back.

Bucky was coming back.

Steve knew that. Sure as cherry pie on a summer’s day.

Bucky was coming back to him.

One day, Bucky was coming back home.

~*~*~

“Hannah! You’re gonna be like, a doctor, right?”

“Jimmy? The fuck are you calling me at four am for??”

“You’re applying to get into medschool this semester, right? You did say that, didn’t you?”

“Uhm. Yeah? I’m gonna be a nurse, why--”

“Okay, close enough. I just had the weirdest dream, do you think you could decipher it?”

“I’m...not a fucking psychologist. But. Uh. Sure? Let me heat up tea or something jeez. The fuck did you dream about that was important enough to call in the middle of the night?”

“Okay, so. There’s details and everything, but I’ll give you the jest. There were these two like, forces? I dunno, like. They were opposites, and one of them ended up sacrificing itself for the other but it didn’t make any sense, like there was all this darkness that nobody deserved and the sacrifice ended up being for nothing, like there was all this pain that could be avoided so easily, but ended up sacrificing anyways and it was for nothing--”
“You need to stop watching Netflix before you go to bed.”

“I’m being serious!!”

“So am I!”

“You’re the one that gave me the list of shows I had to watch.”

“And it’s a fantastic list! But maybe you shouldn’t be watching all these creepy shows when you live in that apartment all alone? Or else you end up having weirdass creepy dreams--”

“Oh whatever, like watching those shows with somebody makes them any less creepy.”

“...true. Speaking of which, have you gotten to the season three finale--”

“Oh my god, I cannot believe the bastard would do that, it’s supposed to be a fucking team, the hell kind of show just leaves with that explosion--”

.

~*~*~

.

“Is it weird to think I have a guardian angel?”

“Um…” Morgan blinked at him and he closed his mailbox quickly, sound echoing in the awkward silence. “I don’t...know?”

“Is that a thing though? Like, do people have guardian angels?”

“I don’t….think so?”

“Hmm. Okay. Say hi to Roxy for me.” He started for the stairs and Morgan blinked after him curiously.

“Say hi yourself! I think she let herself in your window again…”

.

~*~*~

.

“Merry Christmas!!”

“Merry Christmas! We still throwing that New Year’s party at your place, Jessica?”

“If you guys are fine with kicking in the New Year with roaches and my loudass neighbors, sure.”

“Will there be alcohol?”

“It’s Jessica. Of course there’ll be alcohol.”

“Then I’ll fucking be there. Merry Christmas to you, Jimmy!”

“Who drank all the fucking eggnog?!”
“It’s fucking Christmas! Be merry and make more!!”

~*~*~

Time wasn’t something he thought about much anymore, not unless he was counting the days it’d been since they’d told him, on the hospital hallway floor with one of his team members dying in the next room from his throat being slashed, the days since they’d told him Peg was gone and that meant Buck was too.

But he noticed, when Clint went missing for a week and a half.

Maybe it was the residual Captain’s instincts. Another team member, who he’d actually been talking to at one point, hadn’t shown back up after he’d pulled Steve aside, concerned.

“Rogers? Can we talk?”

“Barton. What can I do for you?” There was no inflection on the question so it didn’t sound like a question at all but Clint seemed surprised Steve was replying in general, didn’t look like he minded all that much.

Sat carefully down on the chair beside Steve’s couch, arms tense and spine rigid, eyes flitting like he was nervous, scared. Something.

His shoulder had been outta a cast for awhile now, no more evidence left on Barton’s body that Bucky’d snapped and left them all.

If only Steve could say the same.

“It’s uh...it’s Natasha.”

Steve managed to make himself lift his eyes, meet Clint’s briefly before looking away again. If Barton was coming to him about love advice, he was asking the wrong person.

Steve didn’t know anything at all about love. Didn’t know a single damned thing. Look at him. Look at him now.

“Something’s just...been bugging me. She’s always been elusive and whatnot, but. We don’t have any cases and I know she’s not working on one. Those signs, that’s easier to spot than Tony Stark in a dark room. So it’s gotta be something else.”

He took a deep breath in through his nose, glancing over at Barton’s hands worrying themselves into knots.

“What does?” Couldn’t even bring himself to lift his voice, a simple inflection to make it a question. Even that was too hard.

“She’s gone. All the time. Most of the day, only comes back at night, even then only five days a week. I’m worried. It’s not like Natasha to be gone all day, the hell could she be doing? It’s not like she’s training somewhere; I can’t tell you the last time she came home with an honest-to-god bruise.”

Clint was worried about Natasha being gone. Well. He could at least relate to that. But maybe worried wasn’t the right word for how he felt about Bucky these days.
“Didn’t know Romanoff still bruised,” he offered, the closest he’d been to a joke, some spark of life in the past seven weeks and Clint didn’t even notice the comment.

Which was fair, he might not’ve said it aloud anyways. Who knew anymore.

“I’m gonna go check it out myself at first, but. If I need backup, can I call you?” The question was so delicate, quiet, not at all about Natasha anymore, all about Steve and he blinked so slow he wasn’t sure if his eyes could ever open again, bottom lip threatening to quiver if he so much as breathed.

All he had to do was breathe, he had to remind himself, couldn’t afford another asthma attack this month.

“Yeah, Clint,” he swallowed, forcing his eyes up again, only the desperation and sorrow in Clint’s was so heavy he wasn’t sure he could turn away this time. “Still got no plans tomorrow night.”

And maybe it was because that conversation had felt so monumental, in some odd way, that he’d actually noticed.

Noticed time passing in more than a number to add onto the calendar days that Bucky’d been gone.

Clint had been missing, for a week and a half. Right after they’d had that conversation.

Steve’d never gotten a backup call.

But he’d promised, one of his team, that he’d be there for them.

And Clint was missing, so. If that wasn’t a call of backup, he didn’t know what was.

It was his duty track Barton down.

After all, he still had an endless supply of plans-free tomorrow nights and he might as well. Really should.

Get outta the tower. It’d been a few weeks since the last time the team had dragged him up here, for his own good. Something about how roaming the streets calling his name wasn’t going to bring Bucky back. He didn’t quite remember those days anyways. Like some story, never happened to him, right?

For the tiniest moment, let it all be not true.

More than anything--

Just remembered running. Running and running and spinning, like that first day he’d been reborn, out of the ice and he’d ran into times square and ran and ran and span and everything had been too bright and loud and all wrong and.

That’s all he remembered.

Only it wasn’t I had a date.

That date was dead.

It was Bucky.
And everyone kept saying he was dead too.

He still hadn’t gotten over puking every time he thought about that.

*Blur.*

But it wasn’t gonna be like that this time. He just had to find Clint, make sure he was okay. Be backup. Maybe do something good for once.

Then he’d be back in the tower and they could lock the doors and he’d eat everything they shoved in front of him and pretend not to hear Jarvis recording his vitals and giving another dismal report--

Just. Had to go find Clint.

Maybe shower, first. Clean up a bit.

Then he’d go find Clint and he could pretend, on the way home, that one day it’d be that easy to find Bucky too.

~*~*~

“Hi. I’m looking for a friend of mine, maybe you’ve seen him?”

“He in trouble?”

“No. Just...chasing around a girl. I’m a little worried about him.”

“Ah. Boy, I hate to tell you. But you’re prolly not gonna see him comin’ back round again. Not if there’s a girl.”

He made a weak sound, eyes averting down. The photograph of Clint stared back at him, the jolting words echoing around his head in that teasing tone, the man there had no idea, *Not if there’s a girl.* Never come back. Right, never come back.

The man cleared his throat and he shifted his weight, lifting his eyes to see the sympathetic look on the stranger’s face, voice carved out into the tsk-tsk, don’t you know, sorry kid sound.

“You ever been in love?”

“Just once,” Steve told him softly.

The man stopped, looked him over properly, made the most pitiful sound and it wasn’t nowhere near the sound inside his chest but that was alright.

“You ever been in love?”

“Just once,” Steve told him softly.

The man stopped, looked him over properly, made the most pitiful sound and it wasn’t nowhere near the sound inside his chest but that was alright.

“Hey, kid, you okay?”

Don’t fall in love, there’s just too much to lose. He wanted to scream it. Wanted to tell everyone in the entire goddamned world. Don’t fall in love. There’s just too much to lose.

He nodded slowly, folding the picture up and tucking it back into his pocket, eyes on the ground as he started for the door again.
“Thanks anyways.”

There were still Valentine's decorations littering a few storefronts, snow raining down like a cataclysm and he hadn’t bothered getting a scarf but he almost wished he had one now.

It was chilly and bitter, but sweet in the saddest way. Reminiscent of Brooklyn, of those winters back when Bucky held his heart but wouldn’t hold his hand, not out here on the sidewalks, not in public like this.

But he wasn’t gonna find Clint in Brooklyn. Wasn’t gonna find anybody in Brooklyn, not anymore. Might as well start on the other boroughs. How many times had he done that taxi ride, the one he was telling the driver now?

Brooklyn to Queens, please.

Why? Where’re we headed?

The future.

He was late, fuck, he was late. His poetry professor was pretty cool, but she wasn’t that cool.

That was the weird thing. Half the teachers in college didn’t even know your name, let alone whether you were in class or not and the other half were offended to hell if you were so much as three seconds late to their class.

To be fair, she was passing back their poems today, and he’d really like to know what she thought. Grades didn’t matter because he was taking way too eclectic of a schedule to get a degree right now anyways, but feedback was fucking great and she always passed poems back at the beginning of class, individually and everything.

But Roxy’d been a fucking pain this morning and if he couldn’t handle corralling a feisty little cat, maybe he really shouldn’t get a dog. It was a nice idea, in hindsight, but could he seriously handle a beautiful, time-consuming, probably life-consuming golden retriever?

Probably not.

It was his priorities, he’d bet. His hair looked fucked great today, swished up seamless and Hollywood, outfit entirely on point, from his lace-ups to the debonair jacket he’d layered with that button up and sweater-vest. Sweater-vests were seriously under-rated.

Although god knows by the time he fucking got to class, he’d probably look like a goddamned wreck at the speed he was taking these sidewalks.

At least it was vaguely warmer today, and the pelting snow from this morning was taking a break which was literally his saving grace, there was no way he’d be able to make it to class if he had to deal with snow in his eyes too.

Mornings like these though, he just could not wait for summer, all that sunshi--

“Fuck!!”

It happened in slow motion, one second he was glancing over his shoulder and the next thing he knew he was colliding into somebody - that felt a lot more like a brick wall than a person, bouncing
off in a comic-book twist, fumble of sprawling limbs, sudden scattering of all his books to the sidewalk.

“I’m so sorry,” he rushed, scrambling to scoop up the closest textbook, on his ass on the coldass sidewalk and his tailbone was smarting from the fall, one of his palms scratched up a bit on a piece of ice or something but he was still late to class and now his stuff was everywhere and he’d ran into some guy--

He noted somewhere in the back of his head that the guy’d swooped down, had half his books cradled in arms that put Natalie’s boyfriends’ to shame, that this guy was faster to drop and help him gather his books than he’d been to drop them, only.

Only that was all in the back of his head because the actual conscious part of his brain was too busy freaking the fuck out to do anything but stare.

The guy’s head was ducked, blonde-- no, gold, the color of fucking sunlight and he wasn’t saying that because he was on his way to poetry class, that was literally the only way to describe how the light reflected off like he was a light source himself.

Track pants and a tight shirt and holy fuck, that shirt was tight, he either gave himself a concussion or he was about to pass out from just all that. Overwhelming. Fuck.

Fuck wow, that was the most beautiful man he’d ever seen in his entire life and he was just sitting here staring at him but he literally couldn’t move. He couldn’t move, he was more frozen than the crunchy white underneath the curled hand propping him up.

And then the man lifted his head.

The sharp inhale was audible, in the way that exhales fogged up in cold, a harsh painting of a breath that should've been like any other only it wasn’t, this moment wasn't, that man wasn't.

Chest seized up and lungs convulsing, like he was physically falling, that awful weightless drag right before you snapped out of a dream with a scream only he wasn't snapping anytime soon, this wasn't a fucking dream.

But Jesus Christ. The color of those eyes sure were.

That blue, that stunning, wide blue, he’d seen it a million times and never before, like the first cool splash of an ocean wave after living on the beach for your entire life and never venturing into the water before now.

Their eyes met and something inside him shifted. Not just because those were the most beautiful eyes he’d ever seen, not because that was the most beautiful human being he’d ever seen, not because he couldn't breathe and the man was staring at him with the same frozen awe? he was, it was because.

Something clicked inside his chest. The same way the world looked different after the credits rolled on a fantastic movie, the click that came with shutting the best book you'd ever read after those last piercing words, the kind of shift that you could tell, in that instant, that your life was changed forever.

He'd never been more terrified and alive in his life.

The entire world was different now, he could feel it in the deepest part of him and he had no idea what he was supposed to do, how he would ever thaw enough to say a single word.

Heavens above. Those were the most captivating eyes he'd ever seen.
That entire man, that was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Nothing else even came close.

He could hear his heart pounding in his chest, could feel the cold air swirl around them as those light pink Cupid's bow lips parted, eyebrows furrowing and blue suddenly shifting like a Ferris wheel, rolling out of shock, surprise, and into an unnamable emotion so deep he could feel it twisting, wrenching into his soul--

“Bucky?”

The word shook him by the shoulders, warm familiar too-big hands in leather gloves breaking leather straps, fractured moonlight breaking through the sea and he was slipping under the surface, dragged into the sky by beating white angel wings, delivered into the cold and--

--shocked back to life after flatlining on a dirty table in the basement of some cold distant factory.

Cold air breathed into his lungs, *never let me go* and the world was being ripped out from beneath his cut-up feet.

“Who the hell is Bucky?”

Devastation.

Gapping shock, pretty pink parted and staring and his chest was seizing and he was.

Late to class.

The man looked like he'd just ripped his heart out his chest with his bare metal hand and suddenly he didn't feel so well. He actually kinda felt like he was gonna be sick.

Staring at him and the panic was setting in, defense raising like an icy guard between them.

“Who the hell are you?”

Hands flailing, reaching, dropping through the cold and he blinked, disorientation seeping into his bones and suddenly the terror that'd been hovering at the edge of his peripherals smashed into his bones.

“No...no,” the blonde said softly, the first words he'd heard from that mouth and they were so quiet and sure and he could feel his bones crumbling.

“No, you wouldn't.” Those blue eyes were sinking him into the ground, voice deep and familiar and distant, like the man was drowning, trying to speak through the crashing surface of the waves, broken glass. “You-- Buck.”

A tug inside his chest like his heart was on a lasso tied directly to that word and he'd never been so scared, pulse loud and thudding, eyes wide and fingers slipping.

It took all the coordination in weak limbs to grab the last book on the ground, tuck it against his pounding chest. Scramble shakily to his feet.

“I don't. I don't know you, I'm sorry--”
The gravity beneath him was twisting, pulling him sideways and down and he struggled to stay up, upright, blinking rapidly as the wing-clipped Angel, solid solid rose to his feet, a touch taller than he was, shoulders wide, blocking out the artificial sun in the sky.

Those Blues were still staring at him, slipping shards of glass beneath his skin.

“You wouldn't.” He swallowed, somehow, and the man’s voice was so calm up to this point only now it was shaking, red and fiery like a volcano about to burst. “You wouldn't fucking dare.”

He still had his books.

Two of them, clutched to that broad chest like if those strong arms weren’t holding onto something they'd be breaking something and really, it was, what--

A book he had to read for English, his Chemistry textbook. He could do without. Had a feeling trying to get them back would...

He had to get out of here. He couldn't breathe and he had to get out of here.

“Look, I'm sorry, I really. I uh. I think you have me confused with somebody.” Backing away, slowly, unable to look away from the highlighted angles of that face, a flash of blonde pushed outta the way with his fingertips, small fragile shoulders and bruised ribs, lips parted in pain but they were the same parted in shock staring at him and that couldn't possibly be right.

He didn't have memories, didn't have anything, and it had to be a mistake. You have me confused with somebody. I promise, I promise, you do.

“I'm. M'late to class, I. I hope you. 'ave a good day, sorry again, I. I gotta go--”

Just go, get outta here.

He turned, hands shaking, head ducked and heart pounding and it was swimming down down falling for black water when there was glimmering sunshine in the other direction and he couldn't breathe couldn't feel his feet, only knew they were running.

Running and running and running. Just go, get outta here.

No not without--

Gravity wrapped him up in cold arms, lips parted around air that wouldn't come and someone was dialing nine-one-one and Steve couldn't think, couldn't think of anything but how chilly the ground was on his knees.

No one had to kick them out from under him this time.

*Get on your knees, Captain! Get down! Get down*!

“Get down! Get down, Jesus Christ! That helmet doesn't protect you from fucking machine guns, Rogers! Monty, you got Steve’s left? Can't get that angle from up here--”

Up there. A tree, a rooftop, up up and gone.

Down down and gone.

Gone.
You wouldn't. You wouldn't fucking dare. You wouldn't do that to me, you wouldn't.

I know what you're gonna say, Buck.

You wouldn't do that to me.

Bucky’s hands lowering him carefully to the pavement, one hand cradling his skull, silverblue crystals looking worriedly down at him under short hair, the hair from the war, the man from the war with that scar on his cheekbone, Brooklyn accent breaking over him distant, echoing--

“Steve? Steve? Stay with me, Stevie, c’mon. We’ll get you home, just gotta get you home--”

Home.

~*~*~

The wooden door was too heavy to burst open dramatically, but about twenty people still turned around when he shoved through it, out of breath and eyes wild.

Professor Jade was glaring at him from where she was passing out papers in the third row, but she wasn’t entirely done with the class and that meant he wasn’t gonna get marked down.

Jesus Christ, he had no idea how that was possible. It felt like his run-in with that man had lasted for an eternity.

Couldn’t’ve been more than a few minutes. Fuck, that was crazy, his entire life had been flipped on a dime inside of a few minutes.

Okay, he should probably sit down now, instead of breathing heavily in the lecture hall doorway.

Wading through fog, drifting thick enough that he could probably use a gas mask, almost felt like he had to wave his arms through the invisible mess to move at all but here he was, somehow, sinking down in his usual seat in the back quarter.

God, fuck, he was confused. What was he supposed to do?

That man had genuinely thought they’d known each other. What if they had?

No, he couldn’t think about that. He didn’t have a past, remember? It was gone, even if that guy’d meant anything in some other world, that world didn’t even exist anymore.

Memories into daydreams into nothing at all and now they were reversing the process, gold and blue drifting behind his eyes, jumping at the edges of his vision like fucking ghosts.

Jesus fuck, he wasn’t gonna be able to shake this thing anytime soon. Or ever.

Only another guy on the street, why couldn’t he wipe that heartbroken look from his head?

He’d never quite understood his own decision to wipe goddamned everything, but right now that sounded like just about the best thing he could think of.

How was he ever supposed to get the broken sound, echoing over and over in his head already,
Bucky?

That man had been so sure he’d known who he was. No, more than known. Whoever Bucky was, he’d been...extremely important to that man.

Fuck, he just wanted to stop thinking about it. Wanted to just. Start over, not run into any blonde angel-ghosts next time.

Was it crazy to want to wipe all his memories again just cause’a some look on somebody’s face--

What am I fighting for, if it ain’t you?

Whoa, whoa.

Wait.

Wait, what if that’d been why--

The first time--

He’d always figured it was like. The memory of his arm being blown off. But he had a good arm now, so that’d turned out okay. What if. What if the reason why he’d wiped his entire head clean--

That feeling, he had all the time, that he wasn’t alone? That he was taken? That there was someone, out there, somewhere, waiting for him. The star on his arm, that an army buddy would’ve had to drawn after they got back to the states.

The look on that man’s face.

The flashes, hand pushing aside blonde bangs, bruised ribs, that color blue that was so familiar he couldn’t breathe.

What if. What if that was why he’d--

That was it. That was it. It wasn’t about the war, was it? It was about a person.

By god. He’d killed the old version of himself because of a person.

It took a minute or two to recognize the taste of metal on his lips, blinking slowly back to reality and wondering how long he’d been sitting there with his hand over his mouth, staring at nothing at all.

A paper smacked down on the tiny excuse for a foldable desk and he jumped, retracting his hand and snapping his head up to look wide-eyed at his professor. She’d come all the way back up here to give him back his paper and he shook his head once, forcing himself to shove it all aside, look down at the red mark at the top of his poem.

It was a B, in a circle.

Bucky?

J.B.R. James Bucky Rogers?

Buck.

Oh my god. Buchanan. Buchanan, Natalie’d suggested Buchanan, it was James Buchanan--
Bucky.

He was Bucky. No no no, he was Bucky, he was Bucky, and Natalie, Natalie’d known? Did Natalie
know? What the fuck was happening? He hadn’t seen her in days, how could--

“I hate to mark you down on this, but. There are some major flaws with it.” Professor Jade’s words
were drifting over him and he couldn’t stop staring at the B circled on the top of his paper. “Lately, it
seems your poems have really shifted. Frankly, it’s concerning, the...darkness I can feel in your
words. This, it’s just. Heartbreaking. If we were studying Poe I wouldn’t be worried, but. This was
supposed to be a love poem. It reads like horror.”

Horror.

“Have you ever been in love?” Words detached, like they weren’t even coming outta his mouth as he
looked up suddenly, fingers curling over that red slashed B. His professor was looking at him with
knit eyebrows, worried, and he held her gaze, voice not even his.

“I have,” he said shortly, clipped, and part of his brain was blinking warning signs and the other was
so fucking confused, because he didn’t even know that, he didn’t know anything--

“I don’t remember it. Don’t remember anything but this brilliant color blue. Sunshine warmer than
summer. Safety, pulling me off tables, laughter. Stars.”

He’d been so devastated.

The journal, he’d left himself, it’d been so careful but now it was so goddamned transparent, like the
entire time it’d been screaming, screaming,

I was in love and it killed me and so I killed you.

Professor J was waiting. He looked back down at the paper, tracing the B once. A red star, on his
arm.

Horror, in a whisper now, so lost harsh frozen, staring--

“And it leaves you...cold as winter.”

Faded to quiet smoke, wisping away in the harsh wind.

A movement in his peripherals and he glanced up, a business card with some gold emblem flashing
dully in the lights.

“There’s a guidance counselor on campus. I think it might be good for you to talk to somebody.”

It took a second to connect. Reality. Right, he was...probably not looking all that stable. Should learn
to keep his mouth shut, huh?

Metal whirred loud enough to be nails screeching down a chalkboard but at least his fingers
cooperated, taking the card numbly from the outstretched hand. He stared at the letters, found he
couldn’t process a single one. Nodded a dim thanks, looking away.

So much for being okay.

Drained. Devastation

He had a past, a real one, and it was waiting for him.

Missing him.
You wouldn’t fucking dare.

What, forget the fucking sun?

You know, he’d been pretty damn bright himself. Jessica called him brighteyes with that sarcastic tone a’hers. Chase used to make jokes about that “debonair smile” lighting up the goddamned room.

How was he ever supposed to light up again, when suddenly all that was zapped away, tangled up in the resonating bright from that man, who’d known him. Who he’d known. He didn’t even know his name, fuck how was he supposed to do this?

How was he supposed to do this?

The lecture seat creaked in complaint as he shifted his weight, gaze restless, hand rubbing over his mouth. Prof was up there starting lecture and he couldn’t fucking focus on a thing.

God, okay. One step at a time. He was way too emotional and confused to make any crazy fucking decisions right now. Just, poetry class first, then he’d figure something the fuck out. Track down Nat, figure out what the fuck she knew.

Okay, poetry. Poetry, he should be taking notes. Backpack, spiral. Pen. Flip through pages, new blank white page--

He’d wiped it fucking all.

Stop. Stop, fuck, write something then. The powerpoint at the front said Literary Devices, just write it goddamned down.

His pen started doodling on his own, he’d fucking swear to his grave.

It took him a while to blink back to reality enough to see he was drawing eyes, those fucking eyes.

A couple of people glanced over at the sound of ripping paper, crumbling up into a ball and tossing it at his feet--

Another flash, paper ripping, smudged graphite on his hand, and suddenly wind, and entire sketchbook launching off the side of something fucking tall, stories and stories below as papers fluttered down, heart pounding and flash flash--

“Fuck.” Both hands in his hair, gripping a little too tight but his fucking head was betraying him and he didn’t know what that was, what the fuck was happening. Was that a memory? Were they fucking coming back?

Or maybe his head was making it up. Fuck, fuck all of this, he couldn’t fucking handle--

Deep breath in. Foot still tapping to hell, but deep breath, force all that aside, he just. Had to get back to reality.

“You okay?” Somebody whispered, off to the side. One of his classmates. He was a college student. Having a fucking crisis about what, the dumbest of things.

So he’d ran into somebody beautiful when he was all riled up and the guy’d been mistaken and now he was concocting this whole fucked-up thing?

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” he muttered back, wiping a hand down his face and forcing himself to look down at the front of the room, read the letters on the powerpoint title individually, process them as an
entire word.

There were no answers. He had to fucking drop this before he lost his mind. He had a vivid imagination, that was all.

Besides, let’s be fucking real. If he’d known somebody that beautiful, who’d cared about him that much, he wouldn’t fucking leave.

What kinda lunatic would just walk out on that, throw it away forever?

_You wouldn’t, you wouldn’t fucking dare._

So much for going through the hell of having no memories to haunt him! Fucking look at him now!!

Fucking sunshine _ghosts_ fuck, just get OUTTA HIS HEAD.

Okay. Chill. Write something down. Just, copy the slide, nice and slow.

His hand was shaking.

Nice. And. Slow.

He was fine.

The structure of sonnets, they’d be studying Petrarchan versus Shakespeare. He’d already written a sonnet, see, one step ahead of the game. Fourteen lines so it’d been Shakespeare style. It was a good sonnet too.

Only what the _fuck_ was it about--

No. No, it couldn’t be about this. That’d be ridiculous. There’d been no way for him to know.

The sun metaphor he’d used, it was _entirely_ unrelated to the sunshine-angel he’d just ran into. It’d been a stranger! There’d been _no_ way for him to know. Psyching himself out for no reason.

Focus. Focus on the lecture.

“One of the elements used to enhance a poem is the poignant choice of punctuation, or lack thereof.”

Punctuation. Okay. All he had to do was focus on that. Literary devices in different sonnets, he could do that. Just, listen, listen and everything would be okay. It’d all work itself out, he just had to make it through his class.

“Caesura is a pause in the middle of a phrase, anywhere actually. And this makes it different from an end-stop. Those include a physical punctuation and they are always _always_ at...does anybody know?”

Twenty-five minutes, all he had to last.

“That’s right! For those of you in the back who couldn’t hear, caesura’s can be anywhere but an end stop _must_ be at the end of the line.”

Snap.

Like when you were sitting innocently in some cafe and somebody said the name of your favorite band, the most powerful of selective hearing and your head just _whipped_ around, snap up fast
enough to get whiplash.

Ice water to the face. It hit him like ice water at 9.8 m/s times all of the distance between the top of that mountain and the black water below. Fast enough, hard enough, to rip his arm off.

The end of the line.

Frozen.

And he was falling.

Wind whistling, cold frigid on his fingers, metal wrapped under two human hands, side of the train car peeled back like a sardine can, red glove reaching for him, diving, and he was falling.

“BUCKY!! NOO!!”

The man, from the street, younger, in a uniform, diving for him and screaming, shouting his name his name, blood in the snow.

Two hands, lifting, one metal, fingers closing around someone's throat suddenly, vicious, heart pounding and terror sinking in, snapshot roll of fingers closing around throats,

“Sergeant Barnes,” German accent, creeping cold, ice and the tiniest window, world disappearing.

Falling, falling.

“Bucky?” Older, confused, colorful shield in hand and a bridge, his name, but I knew him.

“Then finish it. Cause I’m with you--”

The man, falling, the crash and he was hanging by an arm, watching the water below. I knew him.

He let go.

And he was falling, again, only this time he hit something at the bottom.

No, not the bottom, he was falling against something hard. A loud crash, books and a spiral notebook smacking the floor, stumbling, tangled in the strap of his backpack. Metal arm catching dead weight as he crumpled against the row of seats in front of him.

“Rogers? Rogers, are you alright?”

Rogers.


The hell did you do?

The hell did you do?

Hands gripping his head, collapsed between the rows now and it was all swimming back, a lifetime of fights, red and black and blue, bruised ribs and lips and blood between the plates of his metal fingers and in the crescent bite on his hip--

Only he's not a fighter. He’s not a fighter but he’s here, on the frontline, scope settled on that vulnerable broad blue spine, bare spine under his lips, shuddering moan and he’s not a fighter, he's a lover but he's fighting and and
Daydreams into memories and the deeper he goes the less he can breathe, heart too soft to pound this hard in his chest, beating bruised flesh and shocking brighter, faster, harder, electric soul--

Black and blue blue eyes.

When Bucky'd shipped out, for the war, he’d turned on one heel, too young to know everything that really mattered, fool hand lifting to his forehead, saluting the only photo he wanted to take with him, tuck inside his helmet but couldn’t, didn’t, both of their faces begging one last thing.

*Remember me.*

When Bucky’d been saved, standing there at the sun’s side, burning Icarus’s wings right off as he lifted his shredded vocal cords, promise me a place, and shouted over the crowd, *Let’s hear it for Captain America!* the blue eyes turning to catch the look on his face, one raised eyebrow, tipped head, knowing smile, swearing one last thing.

*I won’t ever forget you.*

You know me, the breathy familiarity, blue helmet cast aside and burning eyes ripping up his soul, all the puzzle pieces locking right back into place, terror lining every metal plate, you *know me*, promising one last thing.

*I knew him.*

If you’re a lover, you should know, the lonely moments just get lonelier the longer you're in love than if you were alone.

It’s not fights at all. War stories, they’re all love stories.

*I don’t want to be afraid. The deeper that I go, it takes my breath away.*

And all along, it was never a fight. Red black blue blue bleeding hearts, not breathing, and the fists had rings. Twin rings.

Heart to Heart and Eyes to Eyes.

Soldiers, blue catching across a battlefield, twin bleeding stars carved in chests.

And when your fantasies become your legacy, promise me a place.

In your house of memories.

Broken hands, the bandage wrapped around sweet artist hands, speakers blasting and smashing and rooftops begging jump jump jump--

You wouldn’t fucking dare.

Those past lovers will always haunt me--

Two hands on his jaw, lips pressed so tight he could feel his heartbeat in his throat, long hair fisted in callused hands.

I wish I could believe you never ruled me.

Scissors, silky brown falling, a decade each, younger and younger with each snip, and the man in the mirror who’d taken the lives of those he loved the most, owed the most, and snapped them in half,
the man ready to throw it all away.

The man so.

So scared.

And the look in those crystal eyes, it was nothing. Nothing to the devastation in blue ones, cold ground and worn shoes, books scattered and the only voice that’d ever mattered, breathing his name his name--

Hands, ripped apart and sewn back together, hand in hand walking through hell, tipped back in laughter and a sharp gasp, eyes blown and hands sliding down spines, intertwining and shoving against pillows, falling falling and fingers catching.

Holding on.

Never letting go.

The flash of sunlight in his eyes and golden gravity staring at him in the middle of the street, world shifting under their feet, tipping sideways and falling into the only thing he’d ever known, the thing he’d been falling towards, all along.

All along, at the bottom of the ravine, at the bottom of the Potomac, at the bottom of every nightmare, it wasn’t darkness he’d been falling to underneath open windows, kids aren’t al-- I think you’re my best friend, he’d been falling towards, all along, towards that call, the word that shattered through every block of ice he’d ever built, ever lost, melting away everything cold for the rest of eternity.

“Bucky?”

Golden days.

Somewhere in a lecture hall in Queens College, a gasp of fresh air and a corpse electrocuted back to life with the same scream from that chair, in a bank vault, the chair that’d taken it all away, killed a man who couldn’t take it and let him live again,

Brought back to life, with more than everything he’d ever lost, a soul sparked into existence and gasped, a single word -- a prayer, a dying breath and the first gasp of air in a century.

“Yes.”

.

.

☆

Chapter End Notes

xx

I know, you probably hate me, but it had to happen man Idk. The idea of what their
lives could be like without the hell they've been through. The whole debate of whether that's better, or if the pain of being together is worth the good of being together?

Ignorance is bliss, aight. But ignorance is also now over, and.

We've got places to go now, and one chapter left, so. I do hope you stick around.

I have no chill check out this gif it's absolutely Steve's face in that last scene ha

Much love to you all, thank you so much for reading. (Come yell at me if you like, as always.)

xx

Songs:
- Me Myself and I - G-Eazy
- Runaround Sue - G-Eazy
- Hot Time in the Town of Berlin - Bing Crosby & the Andrews Sisters
- Uma Thurman - Fall Out Boy (they actually played this at a club I went to and I was like !?!)  
- House of Memories - Panic! at the Disco
- Ever After - Mariana's Trench

(And the drawing Bucky kept from Steve's notebook, that Jimmy hung on his wall - art cred to moi)

xx
My dear friends. To all of you who've hung on this long, I wish I had better words than thank you. You've supported this story since the beginning, and you'll never know how truly grateful I am to have had such an amazing team helping me create my first real masterpiece. Because, y'know, 75k chapter here and. Yeah, TIMLB is my masterpiece, and I never could've done it without you.

Anyways. On to the boys.

Warnings: Derealization, panic attacks, physical violence, discussions of eating disorders (specifically, not eating for an extended period of time), suicidal ideation, death, military funerals, identity crises (i know), memory loss

I PROMISE THERES A GOOD ENDING OKAY JUST PLEASE HANG IN THERE

Also, quoting from the first season of Agent Carter TV show, the Civil War trailers, and Captain America: White

References to these poems, novels, and posts:

xx
xx
(and from this incredible poet)
xx
xx
(shoutout to Farewell to Arms - Ernest Hemingway for quotes)

Before you read: the wrist drawing.

Songs:

* Carry On - Fun
* Collar Full - P!atD
* Art of War - We the Kings
* Incomplete - James Bay

If you haven't seen the TIMLB Art Masterpost, you can find all the chapter headings (and songs and everything else) there.

P.S. there may or may not be a link you REALLY WANNA CLICK in the final ☆ star

=cough cough epilogue cough=

And please, I'd love to know what you think. Writing this sure has taken something outta me, if it's done anything for you, I'd be honored to hear.

Thank you. For every comment, kudos, bookmark. Every word you've read and said. Thank you.
Keep dancing, friends.

(And the crooked smiles fade.)

xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"A tragedy need not have blood and death; it's enough that it all be filled with that majestic sadness. That is the pleasure of tragedy."
-- Jean Racine

“Buck. Do you remember me?”

Hope. Broken hope, instead of devastation, the hope of two displaced soldiers finally fighting the same war.

A breakdown in a classroom in Queens and he finally saw all those long bloody battles piled up but it was 1945 and 2016 and that was the year it ended.

Breathe disaster ever after and this time, this time.

They might win.

“Wait for me, wait for me,” Bucky murmured, snatching the journal off its shelf and tossing it across the room to his bag. Journal, notebook of poems, Steve’s drawing off the wall, and he was off, storming down the stairs, door blasting open and sharp breath of cold air filling lungs, prismacolor world lit up and the sun just starting to set in the sky, lighting the way like the stupid-obvious North Star it’d always been.
“I’m comin’ Stevie,” he swore, broken over the months he hadn’t spoken it, the months long as those frozen winters behind glass. “I’m comin’ home.”

The sky tipped sideways and the ice creeping up his knees was settling in his chest, cementing his heart against the inside of his lungs; only thing that’d explain the vacuumed cavern that wasn’t letting him breathe, red shiny pieces crumbling chipped and sharded into his stomach.

“-u okay? Excuse me, sir?” Someone’s hand was on his shoulder, voices washing over a wave of paused business shoes, college sneakers.

Someone could get shot in New York City and no one noticed but this was Queens, college town. Books, backpacks, concerned teenage voices.

Kids his age.

Clutching books instead of broken hearts. He was clutching both. Why was he carrying...

It took awhile to feel his arms, unfolding, pages falling open.

“If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”

Farewell to Arms.

Bucky.

“Woah, bro, slow down there--”

“Sir, do you need help--”

“Move, move, you all need to move,” Steve gasped, shoving upright, tripping over the fallen Chemistry book, broken icy cobblestone.

No, not cobblestone, pavement.

Someone's shoulder, more shouts and his head was spinning but his legs were working now, enough to get him across, enough to get him out.

Enemy fire. From the only gun he'd trusted to watch his six.

The crowd gave up on him at some point because the next thing he knew it was strangers he was knocking shoulders with, blank faces passing in disorienting flashes and he was stumbling, wasn’t breathing right, a couple of seconds with a palm against a brick wall 'cept he couldn’t steady himself when his body was crumbling apart from the insideout.

Cars speeding past, metal screeching and horns blaring, axles shifting with this terrible highpitched whine he could feel behind his eyes, piercing into every sulcus of his brain, radiating in the ridges of his pallet, drilling into the roof of his mouth.

The edges of the world were too sharp, lights flashing fake colors over and no matter how far he stumbled forward there were still lights, noise, people, knives building up in his stomach.
He'd stopped feeling his body a few weeks ago and now shoving back into it was like twisting into something too sharp weak and small for him, broken ribbed and twisting twig arms all over again, shattering splitting spine with every jarring step and he hadn't felt this weak -- hadn't felt at all, for so long and now all he could do was feel and his body kept trying to drag him screaming to the pavement.

The clouds were covering the sky now, dark and gray and blanketing out all that arching brightness that'd flashed for just a brief moment.

Cold electrifying his skin in sparks, white dots colliding through the air and it took him a minute to figure out it was raining.

No, not raining. Snowing?

It looked like rain, pouring rain and it was cold, wet but when he held out his arms, looked at the ground there were tiny white dots, frozen raindrops mixed with snow and he didn't know if he was walking or dreaming anymore.

Staring at his feet meant they kept going, one in front of the other, but his balance was thrown and it took everything he had not to tip, weak bones in limp arms, heavy legs, empty cave torso and his head was pounding so hard he could barely hear how loud his heart was.

But he heard the shout.

He heard the shout and something inside, something deeper than the broken red glass tumbling between ribs and puncturing lungs, deeper than the lightheaded sensitivity crumpling organs --

Something underneath it all snapped, clicked, a sudden rush to his head and it was lifting, shoulders rolling, chin tipping up, the tiniest glimmer of a twenty-something, younger old old version of someone he knew,

Kicking and clawing and fighting deep inside, beneath the hunger, before even Bu--

There was a shout and he was so dizzy he couldn't see straight but he found himself in the alley anyways, breath heaving in too tight chest, dripping lungs, the pulse in his veins thudding as it registered,

gun, mugger, bully.

His knees were smarting from the fall, fingers were shaking with the cold, chest too tight, the most familiar voice in the world echoing in his head and he could swear, the one thing that hadn’t changed in this city were the alleys. The alleys, and the soul buried deep underneath the trumpets, snaredrums, patriotic backmarch,

“Hey!” The mugger startled at the sound of his voice and Steve couldn’t look all that intimidating with one hand on his burning abdomen and his knees all scuffed up but that’d never stopped him before, throat protesting the same as back then but he lifted his voice, called out with the only real sense he had left. “Pick on someone your own size!”

It’d never been that easy for him in the thirties and apparently it wasn’t that easy now either. He wasn’t Bucky, after all.

The gun swung his way and thankfully he had some speed left, or else that would’a been a nasty ending to a pretty fucking surreal afternoon.
His heart was pounding too hard to hear, think, but somehow his elbow collided with something hard and the next thing he knew the mugger’s gun was in his hands instead. The man with the wallet had enough initiative to take off, but the mugger looked pissed as Steve’d ever seen a bully.

One gloved hand over a jacket pocket, either had a knife and was counting on Steve’s beading hairline to get his gun back, or maybe pissed and desperate enough to attack either way.

It took all the focus and strength he had to aim the muzzle at the mugger, tip his head with that silent warning, don’t even try it. Only he was breathing heavy, shirt sticking to his skin beneath his brown leather jacket, tight enough it could be that old old uniform, the first one, from the tour. Tights and flimsy plastic shields.

Or maybe trashcan lid shields.

It wasn’t enough, because the next thing he knew the mugger had a knife, advancing slow on Steve with this unafraid glint in his eye. Did he not see the goddamn gun--

The gun in his hands, that were shaking. Shaking a lot. It took a couple seconds to register, blinking dumbly at the wobbling end of the black muzzle only duh, he couldn’t shoot a bus at 20ft with his hands shaking like that.

His knees were shaking too.

Little and weak and broken and freezing and. Alone. No one to clean him up this time, no one to scold or patch him up.

Shaking.

He dropped the gun, safety flicked on, kicking it aside in one quick motion and pulling his arm back in the other.

Then his fist was cracking over the mugger’s cheekbone and things were shaking a hellofalot less.

Actually, wasn’t shaking at all. There was blood dripping slowly onto the ground and his chest was heaving but his heart was beating.

His broken heart was *beating*.

Who knew it could do that anymore?

“Sometimes I think you like gettin’ punched,” Bucky’s voice echoed somewhere behind him, scolding and affectionate and teasing all rolled into one and he was too caught up to dodge the first lunge properly.

The knife missed his arm by a centimeter, but the kick landed square on his shin, ripping black and blue up his leg like a dozen boots in the past.

See, he’d’ve been prepared if he’d known it was coming. But the mugger shouldn’t’ve gotten up that fast. Or at all.

Spent years now, knocking out enemy soldiers with one punch. When was the last time he’d hit someone? When was the last time his arms weren’t made of rubber? There was nothing solid in the punch because there were no bones left in his body, no mass left in his muscle. Emaciated as a perfect-celled supersoldier could be.
So he hadn’t anticipated the fight back. But he could win this.

Arm lifting, fingers curling, only before he could follow through there was a solid knock to his jaw and the whine in his pallet shot straight through his brain, peripherals blinking stars as he stumbled backwards, legs tangling him off balance,

the way they had when they were young and scrappy. But he’d gotten up then, sure as hell was getting up now.

Staggering up straight, another swinging limb that once held so much power only he didn’t have any of the force, control behind it when his head was still spinning and he was gasping for air and if he hadn’t spent years fighting this way, disoriented and broken, he’d be down for the count already.

’Least he still didn’t know when to stay down.

“I can do this all day.”

Flash of silver and he ducked, aiming a jab for the mugger’s ribs. Funny, how much he could be throbbing and still dealing out blows that couldn’t possibly ache as much as he did.

A fist swung back, fast and dirty, landing right in his concave stomach. The sudden rush of bile to his throat made a hand clap over his mouth involuntarily, only then the mugger was reaching for the gun on the ground and Steve didn’t have time to be sick, snapping his knee into the man’s chest.

The quiet groan of pain wasn’t from behind the bandana-mask, couldn’t be when he could feel the bruise radiating up his thigh, skin and bones so raw they could split.

All he needed was one more well-placed punch and the fight’d be over, just had to time it right--

Arrogance may not be a uniquely American trait, but I must say, you do it better than anyone.

Storming in here like he could make a difference, change a damn thing in this state.

Last time he’d been this unprepared, unacquainted with his own lying body he’d snuck onto that Hydra shipping truck in ‘43, landing with a sloppy roll and one of the showgirl helmets lopsided on his head, two Hydra goons staring him down with guns as his little smile of victory sunk into reality and he managed a familiar,

“Fellas.”

Only he wasn’t vaulting up tanks, ducking behind crates, knocking on doors and knocking out guards, sneaking around an enemy base on his own thirty miles behind enemy lines.

He was in goddamned Queens in some alley and he couldn’t get some waste-a-breath mugger to stay down. Fucked up as it was, this was the most he’d felt like himself in months.

Fuck, he missed his shield.

Comfortable weight across his forearms traded for dragging bones, broken joints. Protection for vulnerability and he was nothing but slashed open from the inside out since Buck sank that first knife into his chest, hilt slamming a bruise over the deep cut that barely missed his heart.

Barely, right.

His fist connected with bone, still strong enough those ribs would be black and blue but they wouldn’t be cracked, not when everything inside was shattered twice over.
A whooshing sound and the stars in his peripherals collided into blues, air knocked free with the
burst of pain from a hip, sliced insides exposed to the freezing air, what little strength he’d been
gripping desperately shooting straight out like a well spout, red and fight spilling over his shirt,
pooling down his side--

“But. There are limits to what even you can do, Captain.”

There’d been a few times in his life, when the bully’d landed the punch and it him right at the same
time, wow, I can’t afford to lose that blood.

This was one’a those times.

Strong bodies didn’t like getting cut open with pocket knives, weak and stumbling bodies that hadn’t
fed on anything but their own cells for weeks really didn’t like to be cut open either.

All those things that you never ever told me, all the smiles that are ever gonna haunt me, and it
wasn’t the scuff of Bucky’s shoes on the pavement to come save him, it was the graveling echo of
Buck’s laugh, grinding dark into the base of his spine, dirt and poison rubbed into the wound
between his frozen fingertips clutching uselessly at the tear in his skin.

If he fell, he might never get up.

The bricks were shifting, grinding and spitting dust, concrete breaking under his soul, soles, and the
world wasn’t gonna hold him up anymore.

Bare cold wrapped impossibly tight managed to kick, black muzzle skirting across icy cobblestone,
over mangled tree roots, the patch of acorns his frozen fingers closed around slowly, picking up the
seed of the earth and holding it up to block out the sun, brown and innocent, flash of metal--

Fingers hurled the acorn across the ocean, mountains, train tracks, plinking off dogtags with an
indignant sound and a smile that ripped faces and split at the seams, bleeding red down bitten lips
between squelching fingers.

His jaw lit up, blossom shooting behind his teeth, through his sinuses and filling the holes in his
brain, draining down spinal fluid as the world spun into Brooklyn and back to Queens, that pointing
finger we want you staring promises into his dutiful soul as the muffled sound behind the bandana
cursed at the skull beneath his peeling skin.

Bucky.

The world didn’t stop spinning, his head wouldn’t stop spinning, and there was no telling what he’d
hit if he kept swinging now but he couldn’t ever stop, not with the glitter of metal chasing every edge
of his vision, metal so cold he reached dying, wrinkling, skeleton hands for the shifting bite of plate-

and the world burst red in front of his eyes. Somewhere in a concave chest his heart stopped because
everything was red and he had the brief moment to think,

a stopped heart couldn’t be that much more painful than a shattered one.

Had stopped fists ever hurt less than shattered ones?

I’m just a kid from Brooklyn.
The winter stole his lungs and he tried not to think about how ironic it was that he couldn’t breathe running through this cold, wind and air somewhere behind him and there was this wall, freezing wall keeping him from going faster and his chest was seizing painfully but he wasn’t gonna slow down, slipping on ice and skidding past intersections but he couldn’t stop now, couldn’t ever ever stop again.

*An open heart is an open wound to you, and in the wind of a heavy choice, a quiet voice.*

Passed a dozen places from the past nearly-four months, college friend apartments and class buildings and that coffee shop and the club Clint had seen him in--

Jesus Christ, this was a fucking mess. A fucking mess.

The spot he and Natalie--

Romanoff.

...*bitch*. No, no, he didn’t have time to think right now, let alone rage about the fucking Russian spy who’d posed as his best friend for three months. Who he’d genuinely come to love and care for.

Who’d convinced him he had to leave. That leaving Steve was the only way to save him.

He’d never had a chance at saving Steve, never from the time they were six and Bucky couldn’t get to alleyways fast enough to stop bloody noses, the hell made him think he had a shot at that now?

After everything, after the fucking century of his life, you’d think he’d’ve figured out the only chance he’d ever had was at Steve’s side.

Steve was his only chance.

*And it's nice to know when I was left for dead -- I was found and now I don't roam these streets. I am not the ghost you are to me.*

Who was the ghost slipping through fingers now?

His only chance.

Steve, Steve, he could keep repeating that over and over and it wasn’t losing any beauty, swell in his chest, could say it a thousand times and it’d be just as precious but he needed to find him, to take those beautiful shoulders in his palms and look those drowning blues right in the eye and tell him over and over and over,

Steve. My darling Steve, I remember you, I remember you forever, I remember every single blessed moment and every single broken bone and I’m so so so sorry--

He didn’t have the words for how sorry he was. How could he ever possibly tell Steve how sor--

*And I know, the scariest part is letting go.*

He’d find a way. He’d spend the next century if he had it, he’d spend every single day proving to Steve that he was never fucking leaving again.

One more block. One more block, running so fast his short hair was catching in the wind and spiking into this crazy tousled mess, skidding around the corner to a stumbling halt as the pieces settled down in soft curling pieces over his forehead, brushing the senses of the last time it was this short and disheveled, staring down past his worn shoes and slit feet to the fire underneath that thin metal beam.
Only now it was ice, of course, instead of flames and fuck, there--

The corner, they’d crashed into each other, fate throwing them back together in the simplest most life-altering experience of his existence, and Bucky wasn’t leaving without Steve this time either, heart pounding as he stared across the distance between them and willed the gods to let Steve jump that gap.

Only the distance between them was a lot bigger this time. Because he skid around the bend and stared at the corner they’d collided like comets, stars and it was empty.

Steve wasn’t there, his books weren’t there, the light rain-snow earlier had dislodged their footprints and there wasn’t the slightest shred of evidence it was real, that it’d happened at all, but this time he didn’t doubt for a single fucking second what was real.

They’d collided, and the stardust had stained the very air itself and he could stand here all day staring at the lack of Steve or he could figure out where the fuck he went.

It was New York, this was his city, their city, and he was goddamn finding Steve Rogers, pulling him outta one more fight.

Red, flash of red and glint of metal and his brain was registering danger the same time it shouted get back up. Took him three more seconds to figure out he wasn't knocked down, that his swinging arm wasn’t gushing blood and the knife wasn't embedded in his skin and the flash of red wasn't blood or stars.

A snap, crack, voice sharp enough to slice through the thickest fog, familiar and so distant, months since he’d heard and never that harsh.

Scuttling feet and he was alone, alone again except the flash of red spun back to him, bouncing over black leather shoulders and he managed a cognizant - Found her, Barton before the world tipped and dragged him down with it.

Red hair flew close and it was a different red than the last time he’d seen her but he couldn't even remember when that was, how many months ago Natasha’d given up on him and stopped coming by.

And there was the ground-- or. Not.

Two small hands on his chest, arm, holding him upright only the gravity in his bones was too heavy, world pulling him too hard in too many directions and he crumbled against the tiny body, concerned voices, worry, drifting over the echoing heartbeat thudding in his ears.

“Rogers! Rogers, are you okay?”

Was he okay.

He’d gotten in a fight. Wasn’t too bad a fight even.

Only his chest was caving in.

Who the hell is--

Black leather over thin thin arms and he grabbed ahold like that could keep him from sinking, fingers
wrapping all the way round the branch and some distant part of his brain screamed that he was going
to snap the tree right in half and the rest was struggling to keep breathing, gasps between a single
word, over and over, mumbling scraping audible for just a moment, mantra,

“B-bucky, Bucky--”

“I know. I know.” And there went the wobbling strength in his knees. Couldn’t feel ’em, couldn’t
feel anything ‘cept these rolling ball weights attached to hips with chains, rattling and tugging to fall--

Brick, guiding hands and his shoulders hit brick and that, wall, wall he could do, he could collapse
against all that red without crushing more bones.

Like his hand, those carpal bones that’d snapped under metal and it'd been a different life but that,
that was closer to yesterday than any drifting day he'd had since.

Metal; metal glinting wrists, fingers, he’d known it was Bucky the moment he'd looked up but that,
that was undeniable proof he wasn't hallucinating, wasn't projecting a broken soul into some
beautiful stranger--

Had been a stranger. Seen Steve as a stranger. Who the hell is--

“Rogers, we need to focus on you right now.” Two stars on his chest, holding him steady and that
wasn't right, one of the stars carved too deep and ripped red right outta him. “Are you oka--”

“Me? No. No, Bucky, you have to find hi--”

A punch to the gut, the kicking steel-toed from beatings past, wind-knocking clench of his stomach
he used to be used to. Hit him outta nowhere, no boots to be found, and he doubled over just the
same, face twisting in open-mouthed raw silent pain.

“Steve? Steve, hey, hey, look at me.” Turbulence on the shaking plane and he was deteriorating,
sharp curl inside his chest twenty-thousand pound bag of sand crushing his ribs, caving his organs
into shriveled wilting--

“C’mon, where are those pretty blues? Steve? Steve! There, there they are. Keep those eyes up,
okay?” Couldn’t decide if the red mouth was pressed in worry or anger, stark clear or swaying,
blurring out with the second crashing wave over his head, torso.

A hand on his neck, pulse thudding against white porcelain.

Had he cleaned the dishes in the sink? Ma always got so frustrated when he left the nice china to dry
on floursack towels.

“Steve, listen, I need you to tell me what's wrong.”

His throat was closing slowly, the way walls in old horror films did, drawing closer and closer to the
screaming bloody victim only he wouldn't be able to scream once the dry tubing in his throat won.

Air wasn't getting through right and his head was spinning, rush of too much oxygen or not enough
and the wind from the peeled back train was whipping too hard to breathe right but he still managed
one word, reaching and crying out over the distance,

“Bu-ucky--”

“Not with your heart, with your body, Steve. You're white as a sheet. I'd say like a ghost, but
considering Barnes…”

The words kept going but his head cut off there, Barnes Barnes Barnes echoing off walls he'd slammed redheads into with a do better and no idea what to do with since, Bucky, back from the dead.

Find’ou what the ghost wants. Had to. The ghost, the ghost was.

Back from the dead.

Buck was back from the dead again, he was here, Steve’d just seen him, it was Bucky.

“Natasha. Natasha, he's still alive.” The alley swung bright enough he managed to flail for her arm, grabbing it wildly and blinking rapidly at green to keep them in focus, enough to make sure she heard, the whole world heard; he was alive. Bucky was alive. Here, he was here, in New York and Steve’s gut was right, again, knew Bucky hadn't left him, couldn't ever leave him like that--

“Natasha you gotta find him. He's here, he's here, in Queens.” Tightening fingers, sucked in breath through swollen throat, rattling painfully between ribs, abdomen contracting with this awful creak.

“I know. Fuck, Rogers, the serum never should've let you get this bad.” There was something off in her voice but he was focusing too hard on inhaling, simple inhaling, fill the shattered cavity only that made it hurt more, even more--

“Your heart’s beating too fast, hands all clammy; are your legs even holding you up? S’not possible for you to get sick, how are you sick?”

Sick. Sick, he just wanted to curl on the ground, blankets of skystars and warm arms wrapping around frail, betraying body, sniper round the corner to pull him out one more time.

It was just too hard, too much to hold upright and focus and think and keep everything rational. Caved. Eyes falling shut, throat bobbing torn, mouth twisted in pain.

Couldn't tell if the harsh canvas on the back of his eyelids was black or white, him or nothing, everywhere and nowhere and tip tip tip…

Sound, then motion, and the sharp burst of pain. Head to the side, handprint smarting on his cheek, fingers grabbing his chin, fixing his head up and he blinked open groggily and that wasn't worry on Romanoff’s pretty face anymore, that was panic.

Panic. He just wanted to sleep. He wanted to curl up and make his damn torso stop feeling so hollow, picture perfect porcelain hollowed out and filling slowly with salty tears to drown one final time.

“Did you take something?” she demanded and Steve distantly noted that no, it was Bucky who took his heart outta his chest and ran away with it, leaving Steve with a battered copy of a chemistry textbook somewhere in the alley and Farewell to Arms--

That was ironic, that book Bucky loved so much, all those WWI quotes and horror and he'd already said farewell to one’a his arms!

Live die they were soldiers and they were never allowed to fall and they were never gonna put down their arms, the only weapons that kept their hearts from bleeding in the alley streets only he was bleeding, sucked dry anyway.
Metabolized. Green eyes went wide and so did the edges of his vision, the joints in his hips, calcium all cataclysm and the wall wasn't gonna hold him up much longer when the waves inside his chest were making him sink down down further down.

The hands propping him up didn't seem to know he was falling in slow motion, running down his chest over the bump of burning dogtags and their seer against his skin until probing fingers reached the first layer of stomach muscle and red gasped quietly, a little sound to take what was left of the feasible oxygen.

Fingers tracing rib bones only it wasn't right, prodding curling against his belly button, flashing green staring at his wincing reactions to the touch, the concave pushed even further towards witherment.

“When's the last time you ate?”

Ate. Food, greasy complicated too warm food or clean easy too sweet food that was Bucky’s anyways, he wasn't the one with the propensity towards apples and he couldn't pop a slice in his mouth anymore, couldn't put much of anything in his mouth anymore that wasn't drizzling water. Poisonous water, maybe, one day and what would he’ve done to stop his sweetest downfall as the stars came fallin’ on their heads?

“When? It doesn't. It doesn't matter.” Apples.

Natasha asked him, at the very beginning, why he'd wound up at Steve’s side and that small, shadowed smirk from a younger boy who used to throw his arm around shoulders, curling up those pretty lips in that sweet promise just for Steve.

Hydra didn't have apples.

He blinked. Steve blinked and he had no idea what he was doing in this goddamned alley.

The echo of shouts, did he think Bucky’s shadow would simply follow him here?

Come and save me. Standing at the edge with his eyes wide open and the echo was the only voice screaming back at him.

It was his job now.

His job to find his best friend at the top of his lungs. Triple-click heels and reach one more red-leather glove hand for that metal glint in the distance.

All I know is the sun won't do enough to prove my love to you. In my heart, you'll always know, there is a place only you can go.

Brick dust scratched at brittle fingertips as he pushed off, single shaky step forward.

“M’best friend. Y’can’t save evryb’dy but y’don’t give up, don’t give up, I gotta go find my b--”

“Steve!” Two solid bars on his arms, leather straps he'd never really known, intensity burning the fire they’d set so long ago. Comets. “Steve. He doesn't wanna be found.”

Careful but sure. Sure’s’if she were Bucky Barnes himself. James Buchanan Barnes. His beautiful James Buchanan Barnes.
He always came back. Always came back.

*Doesn't wanna be found.*

“You don't know that.” He looked down at her curiously, skeptically, still and steady for a single brief moment, the shock of clarity in the eye of the hurricane because he was gonna find the star on his horizon and follow it home, he was gonna pull Buck off that table one more time, didn't care how long it took.

If he had to wait for those memories to grow stronger and stronger every day for the rest of his life, he was saving Buck off that table.

Never, never once did Buck not want to be found. Natasha couldn't possibly know, couldn't possibly understand--

“I do.”

Steady. Steady, and quiet, and it was a confession, the same kind he'd whispered to his mom's grave, I love him I love him and I don't know what to do without him.

It was a confession but he was already retorting, already arguing again before the seriousness, the sorrow in those eyes sunk in.

“You don't kn--”

He cut himself off. Stared, at Natasha, and the panic pity desperation sorrow guilt all finally...clicked into place.

Everything Clint had said. Natasha’d been gone, extended periods of time, on a case that somehow had nothing to do with being a Russian assassin.

Just a spy.

Even before, before Bucky killed--

Before all of that, she'd been elusive, claimed to be looking for Buck when she hadn't been, hadn't been at all.

Because she'd already found him, hadn't she?

There hadn't been an ounce of surprise on her face when he'd ranted that Bucky was here, in Queens. Hadn't been surprised they'd bumped into each other, none of it. She was here, somehow, showed up right on time and she'd.

She’d known.

For how long?

*Look, I didn't want you doing anything you weren't comfortable with. Agent Romanoff is comfortable with everything.*

*Nobody spills the secrets, because nobody knows them all.*

For how long...? Always? Since the very beginning?

“You...you knew.”
He'd been in misery.

She'd watched him deteriorate from afar and done absolutely nothing to intervene.

Worse, worse, she'd watched Bucky deteriorate and done absolutely nothing.

If they'd been anywhere else, kitchen counter, living room, quinjet, he'd've thrown something.

He'd've thrown something to keep himself from throwing Natasha across the room only they were in some backalley in New York and there was nothing to throw.

Nothing to spin and punch in anger but that brick wall. The same brick wall that sounded like the only solid, steady, real, reliable, honest thing in his entire life and he just couldn't bring himself to hit the damn wall.

Instead he stared. He stared at Natasha as she looked up at him in this strange horror of apology and heartbreak.

He still remembered that car ride, after they'd kissed for cover, her smile as she tipped her head and looked at him from shotgun,

Nobody special though?

Kinda hard to find somebody with shared life experience.

How could.

How could she do this to him? To them?

Bucky trusted her.

He'd opened up that steel heart and trusted her against his better instinct and she'd. She'd watched them tear each other apart. Tear themselves apartment.

How could she possibly have let this happen? How could she have been silent? Said absolutely nothing, not a single word of genuine comfort?

He couldn't see how pale and sick he was in the reflection of those eyes, couldn't see the shaking fingers or the shallow breaths or the way everything was swaying at the edges, couldn't see anything but the look on Bucky’s face. So much more open, vulnerable than the first time he'd said who the hell is--

He'd looked so young.

His hair was short.

Jeez, he hadn't registered that ‘til now. Bucky'd cut his hair. Looked just like that beautiful young army sniper all over again, but somehow…dark, with those scars underneath layers, metal glinting to reflect a brilliant smile, soft brown hair swooped up just as debonair as it used to be.

Huh. Bucky’d cut his hair.

Forearms shooting up in defense only it saved him more than her, spinning dizziness hitting like a freight train, again, no cold wind and careful Commandos to drag him back to reality.

At least the collapse was in the general forward direction, at least when his knees gave out Natasha’s
arms went up and his big betraying hands landed hard on her forearms, keeping himself upright and he was in his second apartment’s kitchen, propping himself up on the counter with white knuckles as Sam told him it isn’t your fault and he was gripping so tight his fingers warped for just a moment and then

crack, the counter breaking, shattering pieces to rain down all over the floor and Natasha’s arms were that counter now, bones to snap like twigs, shattering calcium dust into thin blooded Russian veins.

Every other time, he’d shattered counters, doors, walls, and he was gripping with every ounce of the raging inferno of emotions he had then, knuckles white and fingers squeezing into broken fists only.

Only now the counter wasn’t even caving a little.

Probably wasn’t even bruising.

This, him, at his strongest, was barely able to keep upright and all the strength that’d held him upright for the past five months was slipping away its last pieces now.

“You knew,” he breathed, broken somewhere in the middle over a sob that’d never leave his throat.

Never leave his spinning head. The dizziness wasn’t just nauseating, disorienting, it was dragging him down down down and everything was fading and the counter of arms shifted, hands reaching for shoulders only he kept going down down down and.

He didn't know how he was supposed to forgive her for that.

But Bucky was alive. He was here, here, all she had to do was go get him, go call him, lead Buck right back to him, let those strong strong arms lift him off the cold icy ground and carry him outta the storm until they were never cold anymore.

Cold. Cold, and everything went dark.

“Romanoff? You gotta lotta nerve callin’--”

“Tony, shut up for a second. I need your help. It's Steve.”

A moment of silence and Natasha held her breath, eyes closed, fingers over Rogers’ barely-beating pulse. She'd given up trying to wake him back up on her own, on handling this all on her own.

She'd been juggling every member of this broken family for months and she was worn so thin, too thin, she couldn't do it alone anymore.

“Where are you?”

“We’re in an alley in Queens, couple blocks from the college. He's still breathing, but there’s no color in his face and his pulse is erratic as hell.” The corners of her version were watering and she quickly wiped under her eyes, placing a hand on Steve’s chest. Still beating.

“Wilson’s already on his way. What happened? Why are you…”

Why was she the one who found him.

Why did she even care, he probably wanted to know, but Tony didn't know, didn't understand, it had to be that way and. Later, they could do all that later.
“He's. I don't know, I don't understand how the serum let this happen.” A shallow breath, hand propping Steve’s head off the freezing ground tightening. Was this her fault?

“He's. I don't know, I don't understand how the serum let this happen.” A shallow breath, hand propping Steve’s head off the freezing ground tightening. Was this her fault?

“Natasha. Just keep him stable until we get there. We’ll be there.”

Stark hung up before she could explain. And for the first time in a long long while, she let out the breath she’d been holding.

Relieved. She was actually relieved help was on the way. Couldn't do it alone anymore.

Couldn't do it at all. But God, Bucky needed her. Steve needed her. Clint and Tony and Bruce and Pepper all needed her, and she’d done everything she could to at least keep them safe, if she couldn't do anything else, but Bucky’d been off on his own all this time and she couldn't leave him, she had to be there. She’d known something like this was bound to happen sooner or later, everything’d built up too high and the ice was going to crack, better she had a hand in it when it did, better it happened now instead of on a mission overseas, better it happened in the tower when everyone was here and still alive and there was still hope.

She just.

Haden't expected it to be that catastrophic.

When she’d told Bucky the only way save Steve was to leave him, she knew he'd go one of two ways. Either he'd hear her and that fear inside himself he wasn't facing and he'd fucking attack that fear, he'd do everything in his power to prove her wrong and land him back at Steve’s side.

Or he'd listen. And give up.

She hadn't expected the latter. She really hadn't.

She'd expected him to react the way Steve would've, honestly...but he didn't.

He wasn't Steve. He wasn't anything like Steve.

His plan, though, to leave Steve and save him? It was perfect, executed brilliantly. Freed them both, as fucking painful as it was to watch Steve miserable and Jimmy an empty void, it was what Barnes chose and it protected their family.

She'd never respect him enough for that.

Only, there was one flaw she hadn't counted on and the entire thing was shredded now.

Agent Peggy Carter was dead and Tony Stark had almost died and Clint had almost been blown to pieces and now Barton was back to not trusting her, had skipped town entirely because he'd found her, with Bucky, and he couldn't face Steve after that but at least he'd understood that Steve could never know.

Only now Steve did.

He never would've. Never should've.

But apparently the universe had different ideas.

Of the millions of people you could bump into on the street in New York City.

It was them. Barnes and Rogers, because the stars brought them together once and she wasn't
superstitious and she didn't believe in fate but the odds were impossible and yet, here they were.

Here they were.

There was no going back now.

The bell crashed more than rang, and half the customers in the shop snapped up in curiosity at the disheveled, outta-breath man who’d just barreled through the doorway.

“Hi, sorry, my name’s Bucky, and I’m looking for a...a friend’a mine, he might’ve stopped by earlier today, tall, blonde, all buffed up, real blue eyes, sweet as hell, you’d’ve remembered him–”

“Sorry, son. Haven’t seen him.”

They were just closing up after the afternoon crowd when the kid burst through the swinging door, dark hair curling over his forehead and parted pink lips matching the cold-burn on his sharp cheekbones, glinting arm catching everyone’s attention and just-as-flashy crystal eyes setting all the waitresses into some kinda awed frenzy as he put one hand on the counter, leaned over with this desperate tone,

“Hi, did anyone happen to see a collision outside your windows a few hours ago? There was a blonde, tall, I ran into him and--”

The manager rolled out from the back room, taking one look at the wide-eyed waitresses and snapping at the incomer who was clearly not there as a customer. He’d be surprised if the kid had more than twenty-five cents on him.

“You have any idea how many people come by here? I don’t even have time to look out those windows, let alone track down some guy for you, okay?”

“You mean that guy that collapsed? Blonde, good-lookin’, just tumbled down on the pavement?” The clerk paused, glancing between the sudden whirr of the weird prosthetic and the somehow bright-hopeful and dark-devastated look on the beauty’s face at her words. “Yeah, some people tried to help him out and he just took off.”

A panicked rushed huff and she could swear the guy’s heart was gonna burst outta his chest, the way it was straining beneath that tight black shirt, breathy words all but tumbling out,

“You know which direction?”

“I don’t, sorry. Rush came in.”

Distraught, distraught was really the only word for the look on the young’un’s face. Funny, something familiar about that look, about the whole way the youngster carried himself. Reminded him of his past, back in the years when this store was sellin’ things for a penny instead’a two bucks.

Or maybe it was all those old movies. He had that aura, that classic Hollywood look, not Brad Pitt, more Marlon Brando.
“Really wish I could help. But no, didn’t see anybody. I can ask around if you want--”

“That’d be great, yeah, thanks. And if you hear anything, or remember anything, you can call me at this number, okay? I uh. I just. I really need to find him.”

He took the card the kid held out, glancing down at the name. J.B. Rogers. Even sounded like a movie star.

“Wish y’luck, kid.”

“Thanks.” A tight smile that crinkled the cleft in his chin, lines next to his eyes that were deeper than they should’a been on a kid that young. Maybe he wasn’t so young after all.

Really did wish luck to that one. Might be a bit hard’a hearing now, but he heard the muttered, desolate words on his way out,

“God knows I’m gonna need it.”

“Did you happen to see--”

“This is New York, kid. Try the goddamned police station. File a missing person’s report. But if you’re not gonna buy something, there’s a line--”

*What am I fighting for if it ain’t you?*

It was stupid, but the remaining straggling members of the NY Hydra division knew he was here, and so did Natasha Romanoff, and Steve, in a way, so he’d like to have a weapon, that wasn’t totally irrational, was it?

Stealing was not a walk in the park, and he’d been outta training for anything that wasn’t goddamned college yoga since October, but he managed to pull off rounding up two knives and a gun. Everything else he’d have to depend on the arm, which wasn’t a big deal but.

Jesus, his arm. The arm that early this morning, hadn’t even been a weapon.

But now the sun was going down and Steve’d disappeared and no one had any idea where he went, spanned a ten block radius and there was nothing, no sign of anything that could point to Steve and there weren’t alotta options left.

Maybe the stupid part was that he’d really thought he could just bump into Rogers again, find him that easy. Like he’d be out wandering the streets calling Bucky’s name when they’d been right there, face to face and Bucky hadn’t had any idea who he was.

Just the sun. Always the goddamned sun.

Was it awful, how quickly he’d accustomed to having Rogers as a last name? How easy it was to respond to that when his friends called aloud?

How easy it was to have friends?

Bucky sucked in a freezing breath, willing the snow right down to his bones, a price he’d pay if it’d clean him free.
The metal fingers worked on autopilot, slipping the apartment key from his pocket, wiggling open the lock and pushing the door open, standing there at the threshold.

It was surreal, being back here, at Jimmy’s apartment. His, technically.

It’d been so easy. Even with the confusion, the total lack of answers, it was so much easier than any other life he’d lived.

There’d been a day, a day nearly a year ago, Stark tower bedroom, staring into blue eyes as Steve pinned him down to the bed and confessed, for the second time,

James Buchanan Barnes. I...love you.

And Bucky’d teared right up. Only hours after he’d ripped open his soul to tell Steve that he was the one who’d begged Hydra to wipe his memories because he couldn’t handle losing Steve and it was so fresh, big looming cloud right there to take the new sunshine rays I love you head on and he’d. He’d told Steve--

N-now that you know what happened last time? Don't you see why I can't let that happen again?

Blinked watery eyes open and Steve was propped on one elbow, gazing down at him with that serious, caring expression, hand shifting into Bucky's hair as he listened quietly. Now Bucky was the one pleading, running his hand up down Steve's arm, trying to get him to understand.

"I turned into a deadly assassin because I lost you. Can you imagine if I actually had you - like that, completely - and I lost you? I can't picture anything worse than the monster I became as the Winter Soldier, but I promise, somehow, it would be."

I promise, somehow, it would be.

Picture-poster walls and perky handwriting scrawled on the whiteboard and a simple meal in the little fridge he’d made last night while bopping around the kitchen, college textbooks scattered instead of AK’s, knives and.

And empty, empty, all that empty happiness staring him in the face, no reflection in shivering ice as he pressed a metal hand to the cryofreeze window, just swooping blue curtains over the empty view out a sweet little apartment window.

He couldn’t take this, not one bit of it. He wanted Steve. He just wanted Steve.

He was back here, when he should be out there, looking for Steve.

But if he wasn’t on the streets, it was pretty clear there was one place Steve was, and it wasn’t somewhere Bucky could go.

Not the place itself, anyways. But the people with him.

No point in doing anything tonight, Steve was already with Them, had to be, and he had to have a battle plan and that was easier to do with a pen in hand.

Anything you say can and will be held against you, so only say my name.

He didn’t wanna keep doing this. Just wanted back in those arms.

He was so goddamn. tired.
Just wanted this to be over now. Please, take it from him, please. Let the night slip into his soul and drag him back into starshine windows.

Sometimes the day just. Ends.

Ends, like someone’s life at the end of a bloody blade.

It took everything not to cry out as he dug the heels of his hands against his eyes, forcing the flashes to leave him be.

*If you love me, don’t let go.*

Promise, it’d be worse.

How could he--

Couldn’t think about that. He’d torture himself.

But how was he ever supposed to get back to Steve if he couldn’t face the fact that he’d slit the throat of one of their *family members*?

And. Y’know.

Killed the second most important person in both their lives.

No, no, he could maybe *maybe* make himself face what he did to Tony - he’d have to if he ever found the guts to go to the fucking tower and find Steve - but he did not once ever ever for the rest of his life have to think about the look on Peggy Carter’s fac--

Fuck. Fuck, fuck *fuck*, why hadn’t he left New York?!?

Steve never would’a found him and neither would Natasha, pretending to be his friend.

He didn’t have friends.

Just family left, and he’d betrayed them all and he couldn’t keep doing this.

How could Tony ever forgive him? How could he even *ask* Tony to forgive him?

Let alone what Steve thought--

No, he wasn’t gonna psych himself out. There was nothing now that could convince him to pull a stunt like that again.

Not with the memory of Steve’s shattered desperation all over his face when he said *who the hell is Bucky* for the second goddamn devastating time.

He couldn’t do that to Steve again. He’d never seen that twisted beautiful face in that much pain in all their years combined.

And that was a lot of years.

The wood was starting to creak from how much he was pacing but he couldn’t stand still, not when everything was hanging in this awful rock-and-a-hard-place balance. The hell was he supposed to do?
United we stand. Divided we fall.

He’d wiped his memories, gone blank, and still, Steve’d been there.

In every choice he’d made everyday.

Engraved in his soul.

The adoption papers for the golden retriever were still on the kitchen counter.

Leftovers of Steve’s favorite dinner meal still in the fridge.

Red blankets over his blue and white comforter. Yoga mat for sun salutations. Decor carefully placed to accent the frame on the wall, the colored sketch he’d stolen from Steve’s notebook.

The goddammed sonnet he’d spent a week on.

Bucky sucked in stale air, sinking carefully on the edge of the bed he’d slept in for months that felt nothing like his right now.

It was right there, in his notebook, all the proof he’d ever need.

Memory erasing wasn’t enough, not to get rid of Steve. He’d have to erase his entire brain. Everything. Even Hydra hadn’t dared do that.

And look. Look what happened when they didn’t.

He didn’t need memories to remember Steve Rogers.

::: Sonnet 14 :::

O’er glowing sun who whispers to the moon
Racing fast through fogging red mist slips night
The summer shines a light and darkness swoons
Ghosts of warming hands - no one hears him cry

It’s stepping concrete streets turned cobblestone
Years past echo beneath, barely unseen
Once was a promise through all black masks shone
Now the moon lies night, wonder what it’d been

Broken bones this patriot bright and fierce
Who’d give that darkened soul a gold embrace
’Tis only dreams relive those fallen years
And slumber, crystal shards recall the face

But what of false consciousness does portray
If the sun is gone in the light of day?

JBR
January ‘16

Who was he kidding. He could no more leave Steve than he could carve out his own soul. To go back to that tower, to the people he’d betrayed…he’d have to. He’d do anything to go home, but Steve was the only home he had now and if he had to go through the one he’d broken to get there he’d do it.
Nothing could change the hell he’d put his team through, the family he’d sliced up and destroyed, and he’d give anything to be able to fix it but it was simply too late.

He didn’t have a place there anymore, which meant the one thing Bucky’d never wanted Steve to have to do.

He’d have to choose, between them.

The Avengers or Bucky. Because they couldn’t go back to how they were before. He’d never asked Steve to do anything like that before.

Bucky’d never even asked Steve to chose between him and the war. He’d already known the answer.

But this time? This time, there was no I know what you’re gonna say, Buck. This time he was blind, reaching out for Steve behind black plastic and begging whatever stars would listen that it wasn’t too late.

Like fireworks we pull apart the darkness; brilliance turns to ash.

The moment the sun rose, he’d be on the tower’s doorstep.

One more battle to ride, and this time he wasn’t leaving without Steve. No, not without you, never again without you.

Because now, now he knew life without Steve and he knew, it wasn’t living at all.

Worse, Bucky saw the look on his face and he knew for Steve, it was worse than not living. For Steve, it was death.

What am I trying for, what am I crying for, what am I dying for if it ain’t you?

The sun rose over the horizon and it was his best shot of finding Steve.

Sergeant Bucky Barnes still just looking for the best shot and the crosshairs were on the only place he’d never meant to target, the only place that’d given him an unquestionable home, the only place he wanted to be at, safe, more than anything and the only place he’d irreversibly, permanently ruined. The only place he was never welcome again.

And here goes.

“It could be worse.”
"There is nothing worse than war," Passini said respectfully.
“Defeat is worse.”

The tall glass rose in the distance, a peak amongst many only no one missed the enormous A at the top, the jutting quinjet platform.

Bucky squinted up through the glinting sunlight, metal shading his eyes as he rounded one block closer. He’d sat up on that quinjet platform, stood at the edge of it staring down and wondering how bad the fall would be.
Didn’t feel all that much better looking up at the fall now.

*Don’t you wonder when the light begins to fade?*

Only one more stretch of sidewalk, and he’d be at the lobby doors. A burst of cold wind made him pause, turning to catch his breath, tug his coat collar up higher.

It’d been so long.

A deep inhale and Bucky lifted his head, squaring his shoulders at the building that stood for *all* of it. Left, right, left, this soldier was going to march right through those doors.

He hadn’t been this nervous scouting a single Hydra base during the war, a single target with Hydra’s weapons in hand.

Because that wasn’t him anymore, neither of those were. And this life? Wasn’t his anymore either.

If he had time, he’d mourn the loss of every life he’d lost, but the last one might be the only chance he got to finally get it right, and that started here. Back from the dead.

Bucky Barnes ran a hand over his pomade, gathered every ounce of courage he had left, and pushed a metal palm against the doors.

His hands were over his face when his pocket started vibrating and the only thing he could think was Jesus Christ, not now.

He’d never been so kvetched with technology as he was in the flash second of the vibration, fingers twitching to hurl his damn cell across the plaster-white hallway.

They’d spent more time in the past year in these damn places than he’d spent in his entire life. Which said a lot, considering all the trouble he’d gotten into as a kid and oh yeah, their line of work.

But it wasn’t the Avengers that landed ‘em in here. Actually, counting every reason they’d crashed some sterile ward since SHIELD went down? All pointed to the same bloody (literally) reason.

Sanitarium might as well be an asylum at this rate.

Certainly felt like he was going mad, staring at the vibrating phone in his palm. Couldn’t everything just *stop*, for one second? Life just needed to stop happening.

First Natasha disappeared, then Clint, then Sam came to him with a plan for crisis intervention with Rogers only nothing was working and even Bruce didn’t have any brilliant ideas and his nightmares weren’t getting any better and Pepper had started sleeping in a different room on weeknights because she needed the quality sleep to run the company because he couldn’t even bring himself to think about right now because all those inventions, innovations he was always making weren’t getting anywhere because he couldn’t goddamn think when he couldn’t even fucking close his eyes without seeing that fucking mask and there wasn’t a single person left on the team who was remotely okay and then he gets a call in the middle of the fucking day from *Natasha Romanoff* panicking about how Rogers is fucking passed out in some alley and now Clint had appeared outta nowhere too and everyone was here and fretting around like fucking crazy and Tony couldn’t breathe, he really couldn’t breathe and he’d had to leave the goddamned hospital room before he had a panic attack but here he was having a panic attack in the hallway anyways and then his *phone fucking vibrates* and he can’t handle one single more thing on top of this shit right now.
Not one.

It physically hurt inside but he jammed the reject call button.

There was literally nothing Maria had to say right now that could possibly trump his ex-best friend in the hospital after fading off the goddamned planet for the past three months and Tony couldn’t remember the last time he’d even spoke to Rogers, let alone had those blank eyes return the gaze instead of staring out the goddamned glass windows for hours at end.

What was he supposed to do? He’d tried every goddamned thing he could think of and no invention was scraping his way outta this mess and he still! couldn’t breathe.

One step at a time, just one damn thing at a time--

Bzzz The phone went off again and he didn’t give himself time to curse because he was about to smash the damn thing if he didn’t pick the fuck up.

“What can you possibly need,” he snapped, technology whirring against his ear and he’d get Hill flowers or something to apologize next week but he couldn’t handle this right now.

“Sir, we have a situation.”

That serious, professional voice and what kinda fucking situation could be more relevant than Rogers in the hospital?

“Maria, handle it. In case you haven’t heard, I’ve kinda got stuff on my plate right now.” A nurse passing by gave him a mild glare for practically shouting in the receiver but he didn’t give a damn, he didn’t give a single damn. Nothing she said could possibly b--

“It’s Sergeant Barnes.”

His head snapped up, eyes wide in an unbelievable mix of total fear and bitch did you just-- shocked as he’d be if Bucky’d lifted a gun straight to his face and pulled the trigger, no hesitation - never expected Bucky to actually fire.

Or slit his throat with that Hydra pocket knife.

Still had the scar.

“He’s in the lobby of the tower. Security stopped him, but he doesn’t look like he’s leaving anytime soon.”

His home. His worst nightmare was at his home. What if he’d been there? What if he’d been in the lobby per chance?

How the hell was he back? It’d been months. He’d just been starting to think--

What, he’d finally be safe? Who was he?

“Sir? What action to you request?”

What action. Running all the way to the Eastern Hemisphere wasn’t really an option, so.

The funny thing was, he’d liked Barnes. A lot, he’d really felt for the kid. Some…connection between them, at least mutual respect for another scientific genius. Ever since that first day he’d
snuck into Steve’s old apartment and cheap-talk bargained Bucky to come back to the tower with him to work on the arm.

It felt like another lifetime. Another man.

The kid he’d teased about their loud sex life, the friend he’d thrown popcorn at on movie nights, how could that possibly be the monster that’d shown him the first real terror he’d felt in ages?

But it was. And the monster was back. What action did he request?

Yeah, he wasn’t going back to the tower now. And god knows Barnes had no qualms about beating the fuck outta his tower when he was living there, so it wasn’t like barring him from the doors was gonna do a damn thing.

Only thing that probably would? Fuck, he didn’t wanna pin this on her. She’d dealt with his shit too long, she didn’t deserve to confront the fucking Winter Soldier on top of it all.

Barnes wouldn’t hurt her. He had to believe that. Had to have faith that while Bucky could bleed Tony out on some dirty warehouse floor, he wouldn’t lay a hand on Tony’s girl.

A panicked inhale and he couldn’t stay silent for the rest of forever, as tempting as that was. Maybe I ought to cut out your tongue. Do the world a real favor.

“Send down Pepper,” he breathed, eyes squeezed shut and fingers curled, digging into skin that couldn’t drag him outta this nightmare now.

~*~Forever younger growing older just the same. ~*~

Walking into the flames to call out Steve’s name.

Charred wood, metal with scorch marks and bullet ricochets, crumbling down around with that awful burning smell--

Clean glass, reflections and white smooth plastic, echoing scrubbed tiles all too-clean office building.

Pushing through fallen beams, shielding from another popping explosion, hands caked in dirt and blood dripping down his collar, voice hoarse as he called through a scratchy throat, bouncing haunted off dark corners,

“Rogers!”

Bumped shoulder against a glaring business man, a throng of clicking heels and solid briefcases, fake potted plants and speakers drilled into the ceiling, caught whisper on cracking lips echoing through light corridors,

“Rogers?”

Silent, silent war boots came to a quiet skidding stop, panicked rushing feet stammering into stillness as if his heart could ever do the same.

And a soldier stared at the reflecting glass mirage before him as it all came rushing back.
The Winter Soldier stood in front of a glass panel. Bucky Barnes exhibit and everything’d changed.
Now, Bucky Barnes stood in front of one more panel, blank glass, crystal clear reflecting glass and there was nothing in there but him, no rhetoric etched in white, no black and white flashing video of smiling boys in uniform.

This time the museum was the Stark Tower, the endless glass lobby of the Stark Tower, Avengers Tower, the only home in this century he’d ever known happiness in.

Only it wasn’t the man Steve’d danced with on the roof staring back at him, it wasn’t the sharp-mouthed, crooked-smile ghost that Steve ran fingers through long silky hair, it wasn’t the metallic-armed soldier carefully, slowly building a home, building friends, building family.

The 1945 war hero was staring back at him.

Brown leather jacket, short hair pushed into a subconscious sidesweep that’d dislodged those few, curving pieces in the brisk walk over, the exact same man that’d stared back at him from the mirror behind the bar as Steve’d leaned over and asked,

“You ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death?”

Side glance, glass tipped to smiling lips, Steve’s soft, bashful smile in return, blue eyes cutting down as crystal sparkled, so sincere he scared himself.

Only, only piece left that didn’t match was those crystal eyes. Those weren’t Sergeant James Barnes’ sparkling, haunted crystal eyes, those weren’t Jimmy’s laughing innocent ones, the Winter Soldier’s cold terrifying ones.

He wasn’t Bucky Barnes and he wasn’t the Winter Soldier, he was somewhere in between and he’d never be able to shake either, he’d never...

The crowd was still passing by behind him, various employees and guests passing by, swishing suits and clicking heels, and one of them’d just come back from the river. The docks, the crisp smell of the docks washed over his head like a tidal wave and he was standing by the water laughing, tossing a rock at the crystal river to see if he could skip it more than Steve’s, ripple less tears from crystal sockets—

Chest expanding, a deep breath in and his eyes slipped shut, closing against the ocean, settling perfectly still in that quiet quiet absence of a whirr, and there. Just like the rain, he was always falling, two solid feet flying towards too-solid ground.

He was the closest place he had to home and he was terrified.

The hole inside his chest ached, rimmed with metal like everything else and he wanted to stay, he wanted to race up those stairs and go crashing through the door that’d open to that room where it’d happened, glass open over the city, right up top looking down at the broken rollercoaster, Brooklyn Bridge sloping in the distance.

He just wanted to come home, to Nat’s rolling eyes and Sam’s orange juice and Bruce’s brief smiles and Tony’s raised-eyebrow comments—

Tony.

The shut eyes squeezed tight, fists curling up and head ducking, crumbling instinctively against the horror that’d crawled up his spine and latched thick black claws into his shoulders, whispering low freezing ice into his ear.
What he’d done to Tony.

"The only reason you're not dead is because you have a key to Rogers' apartment. Why are you here?"

"To see you," the man answered simply, then his half-assed surrender hands dropped lazily to his sides and he strode into Steve's kitchen.

That's the nice thing about Tony. The rest of them? They only see the tragedy. He thinks...he thinks we're human.

"Spill." Tony swung his leg over the chair, straddling it as he blocked Bucky into the corner of the communal floor he'd escaped to.

"What, blood? I'm pretty good at that." Bucky raised a cocky, triumphant eyebrow and Tony could swear it was like looking straight in a mirror.

He stroked his beard thoughtfully, giving Barnes an unimpressed eyebrow-raise of his own.

"You and Steve. It's a fucking rollercoaster. He wants to help you and you want..." Tony trailed off, waving his hand in the air to indicate Barnes to fill in the rest.

Instead he scowled, leaning back and crossing shiny arms over his chest. "I don't need anyone. Or anything. I'm perfectly fucking functional on my own."

"You even listen to the boyfriends playlist I made you? Everybody needs somebody."

"Everybody wants somebody. And even if I did want Steve..." Bucky trailed off, staring down at his metal hand and twitching his fingers, sending a whirring ripple down his arm. Tony knew that look. Again, mirror.

"Let me guess. He's an American beauty and you're an American psycho?"

Bucky's head snapped up, staring at Tony with wide eyes.

"Yes, exactly," Bucky breathed, eyes glittering with relief that someone had finally said it aloud.

So when were you planning on telling everyone you guys are makeout buddies now?

"Do you think...there's a chance that I'm the best thing for him?"

"You heard the song," Tony replied quietly, swirling his glass around in his drink and right, Bucky wasn't the only emotionally destroyed person around here, he forgot that sometimes.

"...chased that feeling, of an 18yr old who didn't know what loss was," Tony broke into a reluctant smile, rolling his eyes as he took the next line and Barnes whooped. "--now I'm a stranger."

"Avengers Movie Night is still Friday and if you two aren't there, I know where you sleep. Actually, I setup where you sleep, I'd be careful if I were you--"

"We'll be there, Tony," Steve assured, knocking his shoulder against Stark's.

"Bucky--" Tony started and that was as far as he got.

"You're the last person to ever call me that," Barnes said thoughtfully, metal hand latching onto the rafter tight enough to make it groan, creak and compress. "Congratulations. I ought to cut out your
tongue.”

C’mon, Stark, you ever shut that big mouth’a yours? Steve is trying to drive.

“I’m nothing—” A pause, crushing silence filled with quiet choking sounds.

“...but a ghost story,” Bucky finished and Tony gagged, blood splattering, dark eyes rolling back in his head.

This used to be his home.

Jesus fuck, his home. What was he supposed to do? Tony could never take him back in. He could never dream of asking him to. How could they throw popcorn at each other on movie night, work side by side in the lab on that flying car—

He didn’t belong here anymore. He didn’t belong in this tower, he could never come back to this life.

Everything Steve’d built, everything he’d built, gone. He’d ruined his place in Steve’s family, in Steve’s life, the hell made him think he could come beg for forgiveness?

But he couldn’t leave. He couldn’t walk outta here without Steve, he could not keep on surviving without at least trying to explain to Rogers, he couldn’t--

Never giving up on Steve again. Too late for everyone else in this building, but he wasn’t leaving Steve ever again. He’d fucking done that once. He’d thought maybe, without him, Steve might have a shot at happiness. Maybe the same way Steve’d thought when he’d shouted at him across that exploding fire, twisting metal, Just go, get outta here.

The surprise on Steve’s face, when he’d found out Bucky wasn’t leaving without him, it didn’t last long. Shoulda known.

And hell, Bucky shoulda known too. It went both ways, this thing. No not without you -- for him too. For him too.

He wasn’t leaving, not this time. Steve needed him, and he’d do whatever it goddamned took to pull him outta that alley.

Crystal eyes slowly blinked open, glass reflection staring back at him. Comets, and there was that fire. The tiniest spark yet. Hydra hadn’t burned it all outta him with that acorn drawing, even he hadn’t been able to burn it outta himself no matter how hard he tried.

Always kept burning for Steve.

One more bloody inhale and dancing heel spin. Cracked lips couldn’t unspill blood but parted anyways, one more broken confession to the snowy blue sky.

“I need to see Tony Stark.”

“And Tony expects me to be civil to him?”

“He was a member of the team—”

“Maria, he almost killed him. He tried, to kill Tony, he slit his throat and left him to bleed out in some-- some dirty warehouse, with nightmares to haunt him for the rest of his life!”
Maria pursed her lips, looking down and tucking a stray strand of brown hair behind her ear, giving Pepper a moment to fume before offering a sympathetic head tilt to the door.

“I can go talk to him.”

Pepper inhaled sharply and looked up at the ceiling, counting down from ten and reminding herself to be patient. If it were reversed, if it were Tony in that lobby, what would Steve do?

The air deflated her chest with a sigh, looking down and smoothing a hand over the pleats of her skirt. “Thank you, Maria, but I should handle this.”

Glancing back up, Maria still looked hesitant to let her go, worry etched in with familiar caution. Pepper offered a smile, mouth turned up resigned at the corners. “It’s what Tony and Steve would want.”

She nodded gratefully for the support as she started for the door, heels clicking sharply to match the grim expression. Maria reached out as she passed, a gentle comforting hand on her arm and Pepper paused, taking a moment to put her hand over Maria’s, trusting her to take care of them all if anything went wrong.

Then the powerwalk was off for the elevator, red ponytail swishing behind her and Maria turned her comm back on, headed for her desk and wondering distantly if this week could possibly get any more dramatic.

The heels came first. Same sound as the heels Peggy wore, clicking through that bar. Same sound as the heels Natasha wore, clicking to tell him he had to leave Steve. For good.

It’d almost conditioned him now, the sound of clicking heels and a new era of his life coinciding. Behind him, he could see that red hair in the reflection of the glass, standing waiting, and this could be the last breath he took before the end of his world again.

1) You love him. 2) You can’t love him.

3) He doesn’t love you?

“Sergeant Barnes?”

The expectant voice cut through the fog, his name echoing off glass and white corners, the title he wasn’t sure he deserved anymore.

One trained heel spun around, same way he did everytime a uniform addressed him like that, hand stiffening by his side and barely kept from lifting in salute.

And there was the face of the first family member he’d seen since this nightmare.

Ginger hair pulled back in an elegant ponytail, crisp white suit, perfect lipstick, perfect eyeliner, red heels planted on white tile, head cocked just a touch as she looked at him, stood there and simply looked at him, once-caring expression turned the blank expectance of the woman that ran a multinational billionaire cooperation, not the softie-aunt who’d lent him hairties and bright smiles.

“Ms. Potts,” Bucky breathed, broken sounds and a hell of a lot less breathless than he felt. He had to look like a ghost, turning to familiar green eyes with the face of the Sergeant who’d died, the cracked voice of the monster she’d beat at chess in her living room.
Or their old living room, the same name breathed panicked outta Steve’s swollen mouth, the lips that’d just been locked on Bucky’s moments before she’d walked in on them making out on the table and.

A different lifetime.

Something flashed behind green, the quickest of microexpressions before the statue shifted, head tipping to swish the sleek ponytail to the side as two deceptively thin arms crossed over her chest.

“What are you doing here?” Lips pursing as she looked at him, serious across all this white distance between them and he’d never felt so underdressed in his life. Here Pepper was, professional and cold and he was fumbling through memories and thoughts of family lost.

What was he doing here? What was he doing here?

“I need to see Steve.”

He’d been saying it aloud for the past day, battering shopkeepers and pedestrians in search of what intelligence he could gather but somehow this was the first time he’d spoken Steve’s name in months. It was the first time he’d said it to someone who knew exactly who he was talking about.

Who knew the blue eyes and callused hands and quick sarcasm, the man who ran through Brooklyn streets barefoot and told the story with red highlighting his cheeks over the shy, secretly proud twinge of a smile--

Pepper didn’t say a single thing. She just stood there, waiting, looking at him.

Distant. He’d never wanted to be on this side of her, the one that saw him as an intrusion, or worse, a dull threat that forced her into that powerful independent businesswoman stance, something to be intimidated by and intimidate right back.

A standoff in Stark’s lobby was the last thing he wanted today, but. It could be worse, Tony could’ve come swinging in here in full titanium-alloy suit--

Tony.

Metal fingers twisted subconsciously in the weathered seam of brown leather, wishing these army hands could ever get clean.

She couldn’t just keep him out. This was Steve. He was every exception in the world and his soul was crushed but talking to the cold CEO Pepper Potts was the only way to get Steve back.

Are you aware the shape I’m in?

“I need to see Steve,” again, slow, careful, as unthreatening as possible but he couldn’t help the fists his fingers curled, couldn’t help the single step forward in desperation. “Pepper, where is he?”

Red heels took one solid step backwards and Bucky’s chest shattered but he couldn’t focus on that, he had to get Steve back, that was all that mattered.

“Please, I have to see him.” Still thinks I don’t remember him. “I-I. Listen, Pepper, you don’t get what I did--”

“I know full well what you did.” Head tipped and gaze flashing, a sharpness he’d never had directed at him before. “I’m the one that Tony wakes up with his nightmares.”
Green narrowing colder and Bucky’s chest didn’t crack that time, all the air seized inside his chest as his lungs froze twice as icy as that look.

All the color drained from his face, pressing pale lips together as wide eyes cut away from hers, to the ground, his hands, back up again and his fingertips were shaking now, so long as he kept his knees steady that was all that mattered.

Tony’s knees collapsing, dull thud in the splashing puddle of blood and there was so much blood, everywhere, staining the brick and Tony’s choking throat and his crushing hands--

“I’m so sorry. I’m so so sorry.” The whisper ripped from somewhere deep, deep enough that he could be choking on blood now as metal worried through his hair, cold ripple down his spine doing nothing to keep the red from flashing and his knees were shaking now too. “Jesus, Tony, I--”

Lungs cut up, oxygen depletion making him gasp, flush of bright up his spine into his brain and he couldn’t take it, couldn’t think about Tony right now he’d lose his fucking mind.

Blue. Blue, not red, there was sunshine somewhere underneath all that blood and he’d done time, he’d pay for that for the rest of his goddamned life but he couldn’t leave Steve bleeding out on his knees on that street corner in Queens either.

He needed to find him, now.

“But Steve, Steve, he was never supposed to know, he was s’posed to think I was gone but I fucked up, I fucked up and he knows and I dunno why I didn’t just go for g-good, I should’a left New York, fuck, left the goddamned country but I didn’t and Steve, he saw me and it all came back and I can’t. and I can’t--”

Breathe, he couldn’t breathe.

He’d put his hands on his knees, fill his lungs up from the escalating rant into hysteria only if he did, there’d be no blue sleeve to reach out and catch this time, no shut the fuck up Steve I can’t breathe because there was no Steve, there was no Steve and he couldn’t keep letting Steve bleed out from this Stevie still thought Bucky didn’t remember him, again, and that was the only thing Steve’d ever wanted from him and the only thing Bucky’d ever really promised and he’d forgotten, no, worse, he’d lost Steve and then left him on his knees on the sidewalk and he couldn’t keep this diplomatic bullshit up anymore, he’d blow up the fucking tower if he had to.

“I have to see him,” Bucky gasped, shoulders heaving, human hand pinching the corners of his eyes, trying to get his lungs back, lips parted as he looked back up at Potts and forced himself to tone down the intensity in his eyes, didn’t want crystal murder here, but he wasn’t asking questions anymore, it was a demand as he barely managed words through ragged inhaled, “Right n-now. Pepper, where is he.”

“He’s not here.” Sharp gaze studying him, arms crossing tighter over her chest as she shifted her weight, watched him with openly cautious eyes, stark disapproval he’d only seen reserved for the cataclysmic events that ended in some sort’a explosion. It was remarkable, how steady her voice was as she leveled those pursed red lips and green eyes at him, eyebrows raised deadly serious. “And if you’re going to be a threat to anyone in this building, you need to leave.”

“Miss Potts, please--” Another ragged gasp and he shut his eyes, forcing inhaled through his nose so he could maybe get a fucking handle on himself. A few moments to gather himself and he was never gonna get Rogers back like this, he had to communicate, make her understand that she had to Take Him To Steve.
“James Buchanan.”

Stern, the way she scolded him sometimes around the tower and it was the least cold thing she’d said to him or maybe it was the most but either way it was familiar, in so many ways, Sarah used to call him that too and she had to understand.

“I need to…I need to see him.” Slowly blinked both eyes back open, sniffing once and wiping a hand haphazardly across gathering eyelashes. Watering crystal as hands dropped back to his sides, shoulders deflating and chest ready to cave in with just one more swing.

Pepper eyed him, gaze flicking over the single raintrack slipping down his cheek before he had time to wipe it away.

The anger shifted, some complex emotion stuffed with exasperation and betrayal she’d only reserved for Tony’s stupidest stunts, the ones that got people or himself almost killed and Bucky tried not to run forward and melt in familiar arms as Pepper carefully, cautiously took a few steps closer.

“How could you do this?” A shocked hush, arms falling out of their crossed anger, one manicured hand lifting to indicate the elevator behind her, the places that lead, the tower, all the memories he had to leave behind. “He trusted you.”

He didn’t need the betrayed bite in Pepper’s voice to hear what she didn’t say, and he doesn’t trust anyone, didn’t need the watering green eyes to tell him it wasn’t just Tony she was talking about.

There was nothing he could say, forgiveness he could ask for, but he lifted his eyes to try anyways. Sharp click with one more step forward and was close enough to nearly be looking up at him now, almost level on the pointed heels. Level like they were equals, like Bucky somehow even deserved this conversation.

He trusted you.

“Both of them did,” Pepper amended, sharp shake of her head as lips pursed again, tight with pain. “Everyone did. We were your family.”

Family.

“It was the only way.” The broken words didn’t do anything to alleviate the hurt and Bucky just wanted to plead that these weren’t the only green eyes that’d questioned and prodded him and Tony’d trusted him but he’d trusted Natasha and he still had no idea what she’d been trying to do.

Was this a test? If it was, he’d failed miserably. At least she’d still been there for the aftermath--

But she’d said. And he’d believed her.

“It was the only way,” Bucky whispered again, fingers uncurling to reach for her wrist, to show her how much he hadn’t meant to hurt them, to plead, to beg, something, anything--

And she flinched. She flinched like he was gonna strike her and he recoiled so fast he could feel the tears bubbling in his throat, making it hard to breathe again. “I’m so. So s-sorry.”

Wide green eyes stared at him and he could hear how much faster her heart was pounding now but it was nothing compared to the drums in his throat, in his head. Throats, slit, spilling droplets of blood over metal--

Pepper straightened, taking a step backwards and ducking her head to catch, force his gaze on hers
as she held him there, paralyzed, and slowly, quietly, laid down the words to carve the tombstone he couldn’t face.

“Tony Stark was a prisoner of war held in captivity for three months. I know that’s a little less than four-thousandths of the seventy years you spent as a P.O.W, but you were the closest person to understanding him. You were more than family - you were his friend. A fellow scientist, a scholar,” waving hands as the facade crumbled, everything crystal fogging up around them, “--you worked alongside each other in his labs, you respected and valued each other in a way I don’t think many people ever could. He opened up his heart to you.”

Flash, lightning in the rain cold as the crystallizing reflection staring back at him.

“...and you tried to tear it out with your metal fist.”

Iron meets steel and metal screeched to crumple, knife sinking its final blow. He wasn’t gonna cry. He wasn’t. It wouldn’t help a damn thing. He’d spent half his life keeping his tears on the inside, fuck his eyes for watering now.

“In time, you know...there’s a chance he’d forgive you. You destroyed him, but he loves you, and he’d forgive you. But James? I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to. To get that call--” Pepper’s voice broke, a single crack betraying the pure facade. “...that call that he’s in the hospital? That he’s dying? That you were the one who’d--”

A rushed breath, hushed and horrified now and he could see it, could see the memory in her face, and it was the first time he wished he could look up under that veil of snakehair, hide behind anything that wasn’t ruffled pomade curling pieces nowhere long enough to hide the mirror in his eyes.

“And you just come waltzing back in here. Expecting us to hand Steve right over. Do you have any idea what it’s been like, to live with Steve after what you did?”

“He did live here?” Could barely manage the whisper. Pepper shook her head sharply once, burning etches into his soul.

“If you can call it living.”

Fuck. How was he supposed to--

Pepper just looked at him, anger and exasperation just sorrowful disappointment now. Course she was disappointed. Couldn’t forgive him. Like he honestly deserved forgiveness? Hadn’t deserved it the first time around, killing Tony’s parents, but Tony’d brushed it aside, said he understood POW’s, took Bucky into his home, into his heart.

And Bucky’d turned around to pull the trigger in his face.

Steve didn’t deserve this. None of them deserved the burden of Bucky Barnes. But he couldn’t keep hurting Steve either, he at least had to explain.

Steve’d stayed in New York. In the Stark Tower, somehow, stayed and waited for Bucky to come back to him. If you can call it living.

He didn’t know how he was supposed to keep looking Pepper in the eye.

“He’s not here now. He hasn’t been here in days.”
Days. Jesus, days ago Steve had been here, in the home they used to share. And now he was gone. For days, gone. But at least he hadn’t left the city, the state, the world.

There was a part of him that almost didn’t believe her, she’d lie to him as easy as Natasha had, he knew that much. But about this--

He’d know. Wouldn’t he? He’d be able to tell if he was in the same building as the love of his goddamned life. Fuck, what a damned life it was.

He’d tried. He’d keep trying. At least now the Avengers would know he was alive, still out there. Not that they’d ever thought differently. If they’d thought about him at all. He’d done nothing but fuck up every one’a their lives--

He really couldn’t be here any longer.

Bucky sucked in a breath lined with blades, nodding as quickly as he could, looking away from that hurt beautiful face. One more hand wiping over his eyes, clearing away all that water before it froze in the bitter wind outside.

He’d come in here worried Pepper’d tell him Steve didn’t love him anymore. It’d been worse than that though, in a way.

1) You love him. 2) You can’t love him.

3) We can’t love you.

The tiles creaked their goodbye as he turned on one heel, a single hesitant step but Pepper wasn’t stopping him, she wanted him to walk right out that door.

This was it. This could be the very last time he set foot in the Stark tower.

The pang that hit him in his chest at that thought, it wasn’t fair. Didn’t deserve to miss this place. But dear god, would he.

And there goes, one more goodbye.

Heaviest glass door he’d ever pried open. But somehow, couldn’t make himself step over the threshold. Bucky paused at the door, staring at the concrete just past the metal line, the line he might never get to cross back over.

"We looked for you, after." Following slowly, solemnly behind small legs as they trampled up those wooden, rickety steps. Course Steve just wanted to be alone. That’s why he hadn’t pushed it.

Pause at the door.

“Thanks, Buck. But I can get by on my own.” Sorrow found him in those soft blue eyes, those sad blue eyes, and Bucky’s hair was slicked back, crisp suit, the church boy look that made his cheekbones, jawline feel too sharp in comparison to Steve’s soft features.

“Thing is,” Bucky paused, air sharp and drifting wind brushing past them in the quiet sanctuary of Steve’s ma’s porch and this was the moment everything changed, the moment Steve really got it. Finally let go. Leaned on Bucky’s shoulder the way he’d been insisting he could for so many years.

Bucky was so ready for his turn.

So ready to stand in that threshold and look up to see those blue eyes in his place, soft blonde hair
over the quiet smile as Steve looked at him with all that sunshine warmth, key extended in artist
fingers,

“Thing is. You don’t have to.”

The Winter Soldier could get by on his own, that was the whole point, the efficiency, the safety, the
fear, that one day he wouldn’t be able to get by on his own with Steve when all along, it was so
much simpler than that. Thing is, he didn’t have to.

Bucky was so ready to let go.

Come home.

And Steve wasn’t here.

He was waiting here in this doorway, but Steve wasn’t. Just the expectant, waiting, disappointed,
sorry gaze of Pepper Potts, one hand holding the door open and the other practically waving him
through.

Waiting for him to go.

“If he shows up,” Bucky managed, pushing the fallen strands off his forehead the way Steve used to
with those unruly bangs, metal fingers holding out the slip of paper from his pocket, scrawled phone
number from a fading pen.

She took the folded paper, not bothering to look down as she waited for him to go. He could see the
security guard outta the corner of his eye, and he’d bet anything they were gonna lock the doors the
moment he stepped outside. He had it coming. Had so much worse coming.

_I don’t do that anymore._

“I’ll let you know if he’s moved here,” Pepper consoled finally, small pushing hand between his
shoulderblades instead of a Skorpion, then he was on the concrete and the wind and cold enveloped
his bones, wrapped him up in the only blanket he got to keep.

The door shut silently behind him, clicking into place and Bucky lifted his head, squinted out over
the bustling street below. At least she’d said she’d let him know if Steve was mov--

Moved. Wait, what the fuck? Moved? _Moved??_

The heel in his shoe almost gave out as he spun back around again, opaque terrified version of
Bucky Barnes blinking back at him in the reflecting glass, eyes wide as the green behind the
reverberating barrier.

_Moved?

Pepper seemed to be expecting it as he rattled the door handle, expression wild as he stared past the
mirror, begging her to let him back in, tell him what the fuck was happening, give him _something._
Please, just one moment of mercy, what did she mean, _moved._

Green held his. Then red swished, scattering across his vision and leaving him blinking in despair as
clicking heels faded, too quiet to hear over the horns and traffic on the street, pedestrian rumble
outside that sealed tower. Spun on one heel and gone, leaving him there with nothing but the bitter
cold mirror of a man who’d never come home.
She knew where Steve was. And she hadn’t told him.

He wasn’t gonna break any more Stark glass. Not now, not ever again. Howard was probably sighing in relief in his grave and Bucky couldn’t let himself think about how he’d turned from the man who’d invented beside the Stark’s to the man who’d crashed through their technology with peeling metal and bitter cold wind.

Steve was gone. He was back to square one. Steve was gone.

But Pepper knew where he was. Which meant Bucky could damn well find out. Round two, here he came. Round twohundred, but he’d win.

So Steve’d evaded him, again, but Bucky wasn’t gonna let that blonde sunshine run forever.

*I swear I’ll always beat you, golden da-ays*

~*~*~

It took some severe caffeine-induced self reflection and life intervention to get a damn grip on himself, but he finally managed to inhale enough shitty coffee and Manhattan cafe air to think somewhat in a rational direction.

Steve was being held somewhere. Because Pepper said if he’s *moved*, meaning it wasn’t his choice.

So that left three major possibilities - jail, a hospital, or an insane asylum.

Bucky inhaled more gold-flecked chocolate oxygen and tried not to choke on the cloying familiarity of the coffee shop. Coffee shops were about the only thing in this city that hadn’t turned 360 on its ass with the new generation.

Jail, hospital, or an insane asylum. Which of those was the *least* awful at this point?

Jail. He’d start with jail, because the other two...he couldn’t think about the other two. Bail Steve outta jail, he could do. He could definitely do. Punk kid never could keep his nose outta trouble, he’d been bailing Steve outta fights for half his life, one more was fine with him.

God knows what Steve Rogers had to do to land behind *bars*, but Bucky’d seen the look on his face when they last saw each other and at this point, it really wasn’t that much of a stretch. Like. At all.

He’d been pretty upset.

All Bucky had to do now was get his head on straight, march his way to the closest police station, and give the apology of his life through iron bars.

Okay. One more swig of caffeine his cells would metabolize before the bell over the door announced his exit and off he goes.

Of all things in the twenty-first century that hadn’t changed, he was most grateful for the good ol’fashioned debonair smile. Couldn’t dance his way outta things the way he used to, but Bucky Barnes’ Charm still went a long way in the frigid city.

Threw out one hip as he leaned on the edge of the front desk and flashed his best, most beautiful 30’s boy smile at the pretty fella working secretary.
Quickest strategy, and it worked a hellofalot better on people that attractive, used-to-being-hit-on meant less suspicious of ulterior motives, which he totally did not have.

"Excuse me sir, I was wonderin’ if you could help me out? I’m lookin’ for a friend, might’a been picked up some time yesterday?"

The desk officer glanced up sympathetically, slowly morphing into a smile as he picked up on Bucky’s body language. Well, if it were the thirties, he’d be hauled into one’a those cells himself. Hadn’t anticipated the cop stuck at the front desk to be a fella, but lucky for him the twenty-first century not only employed both sexes, but also tolerated flirting his way past both.

"Um...I don’t know if I can...do you have any I.D. on you, sir?"

Shit.

Lean a little deeper, smile a little wider. Take it slow, let the words catch up, bashful averting eyes and patting down pockets--

"Mm...oh no. Aw, man, must’ve left my wallet in the taxi--"

Another sympathetic sound and the officer glanced over his shoulder, back at Bucky’s carefully distraught face, offered a shy smile up at him.

"Tell you what, I’ll just glance in the system, see if there’s anything. It’s a shame about your wallet..."

Victory, phew, resume flirty smile and..the guy told him they didn’t have anything in their precinct. Well fuck.

"...any chance you still have your phone? I could always call you, if something came up?"

Bucky shifted his weight, trying not to look suddenly uncomfortable. It was just, all this flirting, the way that guy was looking at him--

It was the wrong color blue. Same way Steve’s uniform, all those years ago, had been the wrong color blue. Shoulda asked him, he had the damn color etched into the veins of his wrists.

Should be that blue lookin’ up at him like that. Should be Steve’s soft blonde hair, bashful ducking smile, runnin’ his fingers along the edge of that pretty jaw. One eyebrow cocked up, head tilted to the side with that half-smile as he lured his beautiful boy with some line straight outta the forties, tapping teasingly on that big white star in the middle of Steve’s chest, over that too big golden heart--

Fuck, he wanted to flirt with Steve. Wanted to see that hungry light beneath sweeping eyelashes, touch his fingertips lightly to the pounding pulse on Steve’s neck, red flushing down from his cheeks to his chest in that precious fullbody blush.

Tip forward, lean up on his toes as he let his lips ghost over the shell of Steve’s ear, whisper something low and obvious, free hand running metal shivers down Steve’s arm to entwine with graphite-smeared artist fingers--

At some point he must’ve seriously lost his step, because suddenly the officer was standing, looking at him concernedly as his fingertips brushed the edge of Bucky’s hand, taking his outstretched phone.

“You alright, sir?”
“Hmm? Yeah, just. Worried about my fel-- my friend.” He smiled tightly and it really wasn’t any use, he’d dropped the ball already, haunted frown drained all the innocence right outta his flirting act and that meant, fuck, he’d need a new strategy at the next station and.

The officer handed back his phone with one eyebrow up and he really was a good-looking fella but he wasn’t Bucky’s good-lookin’ fella.

One more shattered bright gaze and Bucky brought up his right hand, tapping it once on the man’s chest with the most charming smile he could manage and he was out the door before the officer could realize he’d gotten his badge lifted.

“And you couldn’t submit a formal request?”

“See, the thing is ma’am, I was on my way into station when my partner called and I was close enough to the neighborhood figured it’d be easier if I just dropped in and asked, avoid a couple days worth of unnecessary paperwork and bureaucratic hassle, jurisdiction disputes, all that red tape and whatnot--”

“Yes, yeah, okay kid. What’d you say the perp looked like?”

He cringed at the word perp but hey, if Steve was in jail, the punk had’t’ve done somethin’ or another. And right now finding him mattered more than any of that, so.

“Blonde, 6’2, buff as hell, ridiculous shoulder to waist ratio?”

The female officer typed something in the computer, signaling for him to scoop his stolen badge back off the counter while she searched. Took everything in him not to dive over the desk, type goddamned faster. It was just, Steve could be in this building, sitting dejectedly on some bench while he waited for Tony to come pick him up--

Would he call Tony? To bail him out? Or would he call Sam? Or Natasha?

Would she pick up? Was she even on the team anymore? How the hell had she managed to avoid all Avengerly duties for the three months she’d been going to college with him?

“Alright Officer Jones, it looks like we’ve got one guy who might fit your profile. Irish fella?”

Bucky’s heart stopped in his chest. Sarah’s bedtime stories about the boat over from her motherland, the little Irish phrases they’d picked up as kids, the songs in Gaelic she used to sing, the Stiofan! when they were in big trouble.

“Yes, yeah, that might be him,” he breathed, leaning over the desk a bit, fingers curling tight in his driving gloves. “You gotta picture?”

She straightened up and swiveled the screen his direction, electronic file pulled up. Blonde, buff, even had the blue eyes. Known affiliations: Irish Mafia. It wasn’t Steve.

It wasn’t Steve.

Somehow managed not to crumple. “Damn. Ain’t him...thanks though, for pullin’ that up.”

The smile was weak, knees weaker as he pushed himself off the counter, straightened out his jacket and wished distantly he could take the damn gloves off.

“Sure, kid. Wish you luck findin’ him.”
A quick nod and through another set of glass doors, imprint of leather fingertips for just a moment before they faded in the cold, bustling sidewalk opening up around him again, fingerplates twitching underneath the all-black cover.

He’d spent months not even thinking about the arm, but now he was slipping back into the habit of covering it up in public and fuck, he’d like to be comfortable around himself again but now wasn’t the time to dwell on that, not til he had Steve. Not til he knew if there was anything he was living for anyways.

Four precincts down, two dozen more to go. Great. This was going so wonderfully, just. Great.

“We can’t just give you that information.”

“Look, here’s my badge--”

“I see that, and you can get your superior to call if it’s really that important. Come back tomorrow kid, we’re pretty damn busy in here, ‘case you hadn’t noticed.”

At least he held in the aggrieved groan until he was on the sidewalk again.

That was his third come back tomorrow. It’d already been a day and a half. Almost two, with the way the sun was hugging the horizon.

But he wasn’t gonna quit, couldn’t quit now. He’d check every goddamned station in this city through midnight, if he had to.

Which. Four hours later, looked like he might have to.

It’d be easier, to just hack the police system, right? But that meant time and money and equipment and he still didn’t have a damn thing to his name that wasn’t on college-kid budget and it wasn’t like the computers at the University library were gonna do a damn thing. Besides, odds are he’d run into somebody he knew--

Another two stations and he’d call it a night. Get some food in his system, maybe get his hands to stop shaking, think out a goddamn battle plan.

What you were then, I am today.
Invisible. I’m turning into you. This is some horrible dream.

What would he say when he found Steve in the first place? What could he possibly say?

It didn’t cross his mind until he was walking halfway down the temporary cell block for the 13th precinct, uniform leading him towards another buff blonde that’d been scooped up and didn’t have a photo on file yet, he’d just take Bucky into the back to look--

And it wasn’t, again, but he’d nearly had a heartattack in the hallway, feet faltering and nearly tripping over himself as he stopped, suddenly realized,

he had no idea what he was gonna say. If it’d been Steve, he’d’ve been fucked. It wasn’t, and now he was staring at the East River from one of a million lone park benches, skyline glittering at him from under the reflection of the Williamsburg Bridge.

He hadn’t found Steve today. And he had no idea what to say to him if he found him tomorrow.

What could he possibly say? I’m sorry?
That didn’t exactly cover I left you in the rain, slit the throat of your friend/estranged nephew, then proceeded to commit first degree murder on the only other love interest you’ve ever had in your life who was also your best friend and sole confidant in this century before I came along and fucked up your entire world.

Yeah, no, I’m sorry didn’t cut.

But it was a start. It was a goddamn start, and he had to believe in the smallest chance of a future. Had to believe that somehow, through everything he’d done, he hadn’t broken the final straw and Steve didn’t want him gone for the rest of their lives. Had to believe that yes, they’d fucked up, he’d fucked up, he’d done the worst imaginable and then he’d topped it off with doing the one thing he’d promised Steve over and over again he’d never do again, erased Steve from his memories and ruined them both but it wasn’t over.

Couldn’t go back to that blank empty life he’d wiped for himself. It wasn’t living. He’d thought, with a fresh start, he’d be okay, they’d both be better off but they weren’t. And he had to keep believing this was where he was s’posed to be, chasing after that lil’ guy from Brooklyn. Had to keep believing he and Steve belonged together. That nothing could take him away from his best friend, that they’d always come back to each other. Steve’d forgiven him the Winter Soldier, could only hope for one more, just one more chance at the love of a lifetime, at life, the life they both deserved.

They were still the only thing for each other.

He had to believe that.

Or it was all for nothing.

*Three words that became hard to say—*

He finally wound up in Queens. The dawn had barely broken over the horizon, sunrise lighting up red orange fire in the sky.

Sunrise.

Once, a long time ago, on some night shift in the middle of summer - August, 1944, if he remembered correctly - Steve’d told him,

“See you at sunrise, Barnes.” It was the simplest of goodbyes, nothing that should’ve stuck out, struck his chest like an odd tuning fork, resonating in his fingertips and collarbones, starting back down the hill to camp and just repeating it, the simple words, over and over.

Should’ve been nothing. And he’d spent hours lying awake, wondering if that sunrise would ever come.

Because it was more than a sunrise, it was that sunrise, and somehow he’d always known that this time, when the light flooded the sky, this wasn’t the one that counted. Wasn’t the sunrise Steve was talking about. For some reason, it wasn’t that sunrise, and he just. Kept waiting. Through all these years, always just been…

…waiting for the sunrise he’d promised to meet Steve.

And every morning the sun came over the horizon, even the ones with summer wrapped in his arms, tangled in his bed with warm limbs and hands tucked under his sweet cheeks, blue eyes blinking sleepy content at his own, gold on Bucky’s pillow, even those mornings of soft, barely-there kisses and warm hands sliding content over smooth skin, even those weren’t that sunrise.
But today, the end of February, 2016, Bucky Barnes paused at the edge of Central Park to watch the sun break the horizon, rise over the fading darkness, burning up blue sky with all that warm, soft fire and today, today felt like maybe. It could be.

See you at sunrise, Rogers. I’m coming home.

*Your dreams to catch the world, the cage.*

So he finally ended up in Queens. Wouldn’t started there, but he’d told himself there was no way Steve would’ve got into trouble mere minutes after they’d parted ways on that icy street corner. Besides, he’d been in downtown Manhattan, made no sense to go all the way out to Queens and work backward, might as well start with the closest precinct to the coffee epiphanies.

’Cept there was nothing in Manhattan. And he wasn’t gonna pretend anymore, that he hadn’t effected Steve enough not to get him thrown in jail within minutes of saying, one more time, *Who the hell is Bucky?*

Queens, instead of Brooklyn, fingers carding through his hair and surprising himself with how short it was for the hundredth time since he’d woken back up. See you at sunrise.

“Nope. No descriptions like that.”

“Nothing?”

“Sorry. No blonde guys through here in the past couple days.”

Bucky drew his bottom lip into his mouth, nodding slowly. What had he been expecting? Only he’d just. Been so sure this’d be the place. The morning he gotta see Steve again, it was supposed to be this sunrise.

“Well uh. Thanks anyways.” Funny, how quiet destruction could find a soul. How quick a hopeful smile turned into a plastered one.

How all the spinning heels felt like endings of chapters he never gotta finish reading.

But. But there was something else he could try--

If Steve got in some kinda fight, ended up in a jail-cell, that wasn’t gonna be one-way, right? Maybe he couldn’t find Steve for whatever reason, but he could try’n find whoever Steve’d got in a fight with?

If it was a fight. Probably been a fight, knowing Steve. Everything was a goddamned fight.

What you were then, I am today.

The desk clerk looked surprised that he turned back around, but no less kind as he drummed his fingers on the desk again.

“Hey, could you do me one more favor? Would you mind checking the database, see if anybody was dispatched to that street day before yesterday?”

“Just...any units at all?”

“Yeah, the whole gamut. If you can.”

“Hmm. Maybe, I can try.” The clerk tapped away, staring intently at the screen and Bucky curled his
fingers up, tucking fists in his jacket pockets and rocking forward on his heels.

“Sorry this is...computer’s bein’ bitchy.” A furrowed line of stress and the clerk’s fingers typed faster, clearly getting more annoyed and distressed and that just. He wasn’t gonna drag anybody else into this, he’d had plenty his share of dishing out pain, even something as simple as putting somebody out. There were other precincts, couldn’t all be having computer trouble.

“Hey, listen, thanks for trying, but it’s fine. Kind’a long shot anyway, y’know?” Bucky gave the best grateful smile he could with all that sadness dragging down corners and the clerk glanced up apologetically, giving a little wave as he started to back for the door again.

Definitely a long shot. Steve was gone, from everywhere he was trying to look and. It’d been so long, two days now and he still couldn’t find him and that meant he was gonna have to start doing illegal things to find him, dangerous things and he didn’t wanna be that person, not anymore, that was the whole goddamned point--

He might not have a choice.

But wasn’t that what it was all about? Wasn’t the entire fight about having a choice? Wasn’t that why they went to war - for freedom, for the bloody red, white hands, blue veins that pulsed for each other with the freedom to make that choice?

How else was he supposed to find Steve?

Maybe the universe just didn’t want ‘em to be together. Maybe he was supposed to suffer alone in agony for his crimes, the rest of existence.

“Wait!” He was already pushing open another glass door when the clerk shouted out from behind him, glass slamming right back shut as he took one careful, disbelieving step towards the anticipation lighting up, scrolling screen.

That dashed spark of hope, again, little flame ready to be extinguished the moment the snow set in again.

“There’s a report here...okay, it actually may not be what you’re looking for. But according to the emergency responder logs -- two days ago there was an ambulance call to that area, couple streets down from the one you asked about. I know an ambulance isn’t a police dispatch b--”

Fuck.

An ambulance. An ambulance.

If Steve’s moved here. No wonder Bucky couldn’t find him in any of the jails. He wasn’t behind bars. Just white sheets and heart monitors.

An ambulance.

Steve, picked up in an *ambulance*. That meant hurt. Hurt, bad enough to go to a hospital, that wasn’t fuckin’ easy for a supersoldier--

“Do you have what hospital?” The question betrayed all the cracking pieces of his soul, breathless and terrified and euphorius, wide as his tired eyes and rushing quick as the thudding pulse under thin skin.

“No, sorry. It’s not our division.” Worried gazes and Bucky couldn’t see anything but flashing red,
blue, red, blue. Sirens, flash of white streaking past.

An ambulance. Of course it’d crossed his mind but he couldn’t take that seriously, it was *Steve*, he didn’t do hospitals when he *was* breakable, there was no way he’d end up in one now, even if he was broken enough to need one which he really never was--

“She thanks,” Bucky managed, and he was somehow on the sidewalk again, drifting snow landing on his nose and blurring up his eyelashes.

A hospital.

Here comes the snow, but a *hospital*? Steve wouldn’t still be there, if he’d been taken to one. The serum would’ve healed any injuries by now, right?

He could hack into the medical system database, but it’d take time, equipment -- he didn’t have time. He’d had nothing but for the majority of his life, years upon years upon ice, seventy of it and now he’d wasted seventy hours searching businesses and working up the urge to go to Stark Tower to be turned down by Potts then interrogating police stations and.

And he’d wasted so much time. Same way he’d been wasting time, all along, he could’ve been kissin’ on Steve since they were teens and he’d done nothing but waste, but this time might mean gone *forever*.

Odds were Steve wasn’t in the hospital anymore, he healed so damn fast, even after the helicarrier so he was either out, or about to be out, and.

He was never gonna find him like this.

Fuck. The slippery ice of one more street corner and someone knocked his shoulder, spun him out sideways, and another shoulder, Times Square was spinning and the world was all wrong, but he couldn’t stop staring at his hands and picturing those white walls.

See if it was jail he’d just keep looking but it wasn’t, Steve hadn’t been arrested. He was hurt.

He had to find Steve *now*. No more guesswork, no more slipping under the radar, Steve was hurt, bad enough they’d called in sirens, flashing white over what, dripping blood, pretty blue eyes sealed shut, four EMT’s hauling that precious body up onto a stretcher, laid out like a coffin with no one to ride in the back and hold Steve’s hand--

A hospital, and not even Stark’s, Pepper said she’d let him know if Steve was *moved there* and. And that was yesterday, he could’ve gotten outta the hospital by now, could be off in the wind or could be barely alive, could be *dying and Bucky wasn’t by his side*.

There wasn’t time to search hospitals, to run across the city and ask every front desk clerk in the world. He didn’t have time, because Steve could be dying and he was standing in the middle of some New York sidewalk instead of holding those precious artist hands.

Where could he go? There had to be a way, to find him. Pepper wasn’t gonna break, she would’ve told him then if she ever would. Who else would know? Tony, but Bucky couldn’t--

Clint? Would Clint know? Clint fucking Barton would tell him.

Fumbling through pockets for his phone, jamming in the memorized number and shoving through the morning rush hour crowd, corner of his mind wishing for the curtain of unruly to hide behind - no one looked at him terrified, waters didn’t part when he was a ruffled soldier from Brooklyn.
Managed to squeeze past enough bodies to duck into an alley, actually hear the ringing against his ear just in time for the dial tone to end abruptly.

“We’re sorry; you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you—“

No. No no no.

Sam? Would Sam tell him? Clint was forgiving, Clint understood, but Sam loved Steve almost as much as Bucky did and he might not--

He had to try. Steve was in the goddamned hospital, he had to try.

“You’ve reached Sam Wilson. Leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.”

Bucky hung up before the beep, metal fingers twitching sporadically in leather as he fought the urge to crush the phone. Throwing it against a brick wall wasn’t gonna do anybody good, he had to come up with a plan and Pepper could always still call him--

She wasn’t gonna call him. Steve could be moved to Stark Tower yesterday and she wasn’t gonna call him.

If the Avengers had to choose between protecting Steve and protecting him, Bucky was glad Steve’d picked such good friends.

No way in hell they were giving him anything.

He couldn’t--

He had to. It was the only thing left. Only thing left.

Two leather gloves shoved through his hair and Bucky sucked in a deep breath, storms hovering on the edge of the air, the tip of his tongue. There was only one place left to go.

Welcome to Brooklyn.

~*~*~

*I cut the ties and jumped the tracks, for never to return*

You’d think all those hours he’d spent running around DC getting lapped by Steve Rogers woulda gave him more leg strength than this.

He blamed the wings. Spent so much time training in the new model Stark built he’d been skipping quads day here and there. Okay, maybe a bit more than here’n’there. But the Stark Tower had elevators, and with his running buddy outta commission for the last, what, six months, he hadn’t gotten in all the working out he shoulda.

Not like that mattered right now. He’d give up running for the rest of his life if it meant he got his running buddy back.

Either way, by the time he hit the tenth floor of Rogers and Barnes’ apartment building, his legs were
about to give out on him. To be fair he’d booked it the entire way here from Steve’s hospital room, add on the stairs on top of that?

So yeah, he was huffin’ and puffin’ by the time he wrestled the key into Steve’s apartment door and shoved it open, practically collapsing against the door as it shut behind him.

Every military bone in his body was rolling its eyes. His superiors would be nothin’ but scolding voices of disapproval. And Riley would be laughin’ his head off at Sam right now.

“You need a medic?” that teasing smile he hadn’t heard in so long, back when everything was beautiful and easy and the biggest worry he had was if Stark was gonna steal his orange juice.

Man, what he’d give to see Steve Rogers smile like that again.

Well, s’why he was here, right? He’d been playing Troubleman at Steve’s bedside for the past day and half, Tony’d insisted he got outta the hospital for a bit, go grab some of Rogers things from his apartment. And he was insisting on another iPod too, which yeah, Sam supposed he could bring back but really, Marvin Gaye was the best bedside music Steve was gonna get.

And maybe it had something to do with the fact that the last time Sam’d camped out at Steve’s bedside playing it, he’d actually woken back up.

Just wanted Rogers to wake back up.

Sam shook his head and pushed off the wall, groaning at sore legs as he headed for the kitchen. Water first, then he’d grab some things Steve might need and run back to the hospital - maybe pick up food on the way. God knows that hospital stuff was awful and considering he was the first one to leave the place since they’d all gotten the call, everyone’d probably appreciate some takeout soup from that place around the corner.

He didn’t like not bein’ there, but. If he could bring anything back that might pull Rogers into recovery, it was worth a shot.

Hmm. What would Steve want the most--

And, ironically, that’s the exact moment he heard the sound. And froze.

It had to be an intentional sound though, because even with his water glass on the table and the place graveyard quiet, he wouldn’t’ve have heard it without the explicit permission of those silent feet.

The only silent feet he knew that could sneak up on a vet that way. Only silent sniper who could make the hairs stand up on the back of his neck before he even saw him.

Because you didn’t need to see the Winter Soldier to be terrified of him. Fury stood in front of a solid wall in a dark apartment off the grid and that hadn’t stopped three deadly shots blasting through the sheetrock.

What exactly was the protocol here? What, was he supposed to just turn around, lift his hands and offer a hey Barnes?

It’d been a long long time since he’d seen Bucky.

It hadn’t felt real, for the longest time. Clint’s explosion, Tony’s throat, Agent Carter’s murder. Steve’s entire shutdown. Like he knew it happened, knew it was that last straw, but he still couldn’t quite picture it. The fellow soldier he’d handed engraved dogtags to, that was the guy who’d
terrorized their lives?

Sam spent his days at the VA, he’d seen and heard some awful shit. He’d had to fight Barnes, before he got his memories back, he knew exactly how hardcore and scary the guy could be. He’d ripped off Sam’s wings and kicked him into oblivion, after all.

But he still couldn’t picture it. Bucky wouldn’t do that. Bucky Barnes wouldn’t hurt any of them, he loved Steve too much.

Only he did. He did a hell of a lot more than hurt, and here he was, somewhere behind Sam, probably with a gun aimed at his head and a dozen knives tucked between metal fingers.

Hey Barnes wasn’t gonna cut it.

So he didn’t say anything at all. For all the experience he had with veteran trauma, he had no idea where to begin with Bucky and at this point, the only option he really had was to keep his mouth shut and turn around slowly, hope Barnes didn’t shoot him in the process.

Sam blinked, eyes adjusting to the shadows and going wide the minute they did.

That wasn’t the Winter Soldier pointing guns at him.

Wasn’t the Winter Soldier at all. That was a kid. A young army Sergeant with big scared eyes and a sharp clean jawline with that same dimple Barnes had, hair smoothed into the same vintage wave it had in all the textbooks, clean and tidy. Didn’t look a day over twenty-five. Didn’t look the slightest bit dangerous, not from the tremor in plush lips to the shaking fingers carefully open at his sides.

No weapon in sight.

“Bucky?” Sam said anyways. The whole keeping quiet thing was for the enemy he was expecting to see when he turned around, not. Not this.

“Where is he?”

Once, last year, when Bucky’d finally told Steve he’d been drafted? They’d fought after, the two of ‘em had broken into a screaming match that turned into a shoving match and there’d been so much angry muscle and fiery eyes and sharp snapping as they pushed each other to breaking points and broke and Sam’d witnessed the whole thing, sat frozen on the bed at the edge of the room.

After, Bucky’d broken down, looking ready to curl in a ball and cry and Steve’d looked at him with that stern, serious look and opened up his huge, bodycrushing arms and offered a gruff “c’mere,” pulled his shouting-match equal into his chest, let Bucky just fall apart in his arms as he held one hand tight in Barnes’ long hair, rocking them gently from side to side.

“You two okay?” Sam’d finally asked, and Bucky’d choked on a laugh, lifting his streaked face from Steve’s shoulder and looking positively destroyed as he shot Sam a weak, embarrassed look “oh my god, we forgot about Sam,” and muffled an apology with his chin on Steve’s collarbone.

He’d been so strung out, bent twisted raw, pure emotion carved up like a cadaver, peeled open for Steve’s eyes only but Sam’d been there, even if they’d forgotten, and Sam’d seen, all that pain Bucky was so good at tucking away.

That level of vulnerability, of hurt and weakness--

It was the exact look on his face now, black sharp lines dramatic across the exhausted face in the
shadows.

Where was Steve. God, he had no idea where Barnes’ been in the past three months or what he’d been up to, but he could tell in this exact moment right here, he wasn’t in any less pain than Steve was. It’d ruined them both, one glance at the shattered eyes and it was obvious.

Bucky’s betrayal cut everyone in this family so deep the blood was still running, but nobody was suffering like those two. Barnes and Rogers, never catching a goddamned break.

But what good would it be, to take Bucky to Steve now, when they were both already destroyed? What happened when he just. Left again.

They hadn’t been okay before, no way enough’d changed since then for them to work now, was there?

“Man, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Sam was careful as he could be, non-threatening, simple advice. Barnes used to come to him for advice.

Hell, they’d camped out in Stark’s basement in a pop-up tent once, it wasn’t like Bucky didn’t trust him.

"You win your war?"

"Not over yet." Sam shifted his head, tucking his arm under his temple. "You win yours?"

"You read the textbooks," Bucky shrugged, sleeping bag whispering around him.

"Not the one I was talking about."

The tent fell silent.

Only they weren’t in the safety of a tiny gold bubble, wrapped in green and black snivel gear with a lantern flickering quietly between them. There was nothing golden about this bubble, not since the sun set and forgot how to glow, forgot how to open those blue eyes. All that soft blonde against white hospital sheets...

If it was fucking him up, how was Barnes supposed to see Steve like that? How the hell was he gonna react? What if he went mad, what if Barnes couldn’t take it and he Winter Soldiered out on them--

“Where is he?” Bucky asked again, taking one step closer, outta the shadows. Sam swallowed, scanning over the shaking fingers and mouth pulled down in sorrow, perfect pomade making him look more like a ghost than anything.

Let’s find out what the ghost wants.

When Tony’d suggested bringing back something Steve’d want, Sam was pretty sure this wasn’t what he had in mind. But. Odds are, Bucky was. Or maybe not. There was no way to know.

Either way. It wasn’t up to him. Steve should be the one to decide if he wanted to see Bucky again, and since he was currently indisposed at the moment he couldn’t make that decision and Sam couldn’t even guess what he’d want based off the past few months. There was just as much of a chance that Steve wanted to see Bucky again as there was that he wanted to kill him for real this time.
“Listen, Barnes. I wanna help you man, I do. But tellin’ you where he is...” The shoulder he lifted implied everything Bucky needed to hear, it’s something I can’t do.

Sarge himself had asked him once, if I go off the rails, you’ve got Steve, right? You keep Steve safe.

That’s all he was doin’. Bucky had to understand that.

Well.

Based on the gun suddenly propped in Barnes’ hands, he was gonna say understand wasn’t exactly the word to choose.

“You’re one of my best friends, Sam,” Bucky started slowly, one step closer, wide shoulders rippling, wave echoing down his arm, metal plates shifting on the loose trigger finger.

He should be scared. And yeah, his heart was pounding, he knew exactly how dangerous Barnes could be. But there were no demon horns or wicked eyes, blood dripping between slates of metal. That wasn’t a monster standing in fronta him. All Sam saw was a desperate kid.

A really heartbroken, desperate kid.

“Bucky--”

Sam didn’t know he was the first person to call him that since he’d slit Tony’s throat. He did, however, see the flash behind crystal eyes. The recognition, the shift and suddenly that desperate kid was a hellofalot more desperate, arms lifting to aim the gun half-heartedly, silent steps stalking to the side, predator after prey and Sam held still, kept his hands up, watched Barnes carefully as he cocked his head, lips rolling in and back out before the pretty face lifted an eyebrow and tipped the muzzle at Sam’s pounding heart.

“I love you man, and I owe you the fucking world for taking care of Steve when I couldn’t.” Pistol propped easy in his palm, wavering just a tad as crystal eyes studied him over the top of the sight.

“You’ve been better to me than anyone could’ve ever asked for.” Sam was holding his breath, waiting for the shoe to drop as Bucky studied him, inhaled deep and settled into those broad shoulders, and there, something clicked and the gun was pointed between his eyes and that was a whole other world from a chest shot; if he pulled that trigger there was no chance of surviving, and from the look on Barnes’ face? He knew that.

“I’ll be grateful for that for the rest of my life.” Blink and there goes the shoe, right out the goddamned window, metal whirring and soft crystal settling on his with every ounce of seriousness.

“But I will kill you. Where is he?”

Odds are, it wasn’t a bluff.

But Sam couldn’t help but think, this was Bucky, he wouldn’t pull the trigger, not now, not after everything.

Sam took a single step forward, mouth open to tell him to put the gun down, let them talk this out--

And Bucky cocked the gun. All the hesitation and softness vanished, like it’d never been there in the first place and the man staring him down wasn’t the Bucky that’d never shoot him. Hardened cold and terrifying in a split second, blinking at the whiplash, at how innocent that pretty face still looked as he angled a bullet between Sam’s eyes and dropped the first real-sounding threat to echo in the empty graveyard apartment.
“Don’t make me ask again.”

~*~*~

Two white doors.

Two white doors burst open, highway road to nowhere and a white, blank long corridor. Dashed yellow lines disappearing under black sprinting boots, wind whipping through short dark hair, the ghost of artist hands over strong thighs as the snow tumbled through cold air too slow to catch falling dark skies.

“Maybe...you’ll fall in love with me all over again.”

"Hell," I said, "I love you enough now. What do you want to do? Ruin me?"

"Yes. I want to ruin you."

"Good," I said. "That's what I want too."

It was Steve Rogers, sideways showgirl helmet running down musty green corridors to the open door spilling light at the end of the hallway and Bucky Barnes running down one more hospital corridor past all that white white blank and there was a ticking clock with an explosion somewhere in the distance and a boy locked down in a torture room by leather straps and a boy lying still in a hospital bed with white sheets and all he had to do was burst inside, all he had to do was skid around the corner and inhale a prayer, a dying breath, the first gasp of air in a century and free him. Free him.

I thought you were dead.

I thought you were smaller.

Time was frozen. Time, this time, instead of two boys from Brooklyn. Bucky’s heart, pounding in his wrists, in his fragile chest as warm human fingers closed around the metal handle.

And he opened the door.

In the end, I'd do it all again. I think you're my best friend...don't you know that the kids aren't al-

He didn’t know, until after, long after, why the nurses rushed to the window when he stepped inside. It wasn’t the intruder, they knew he was coming.

They all did - Sam’d called, convinced Natasha to round up everyone, get them outta there. Just outta sight round the corner past Steve’s room; it’d be no use trying to stop Barnes from getting there now.
The team of them could try to take him on, but there was no way there wouldn’t be casualties. So Natasha stood guard down the hall Avengers tucked behind her and Sam took the back staircase up, let Barnes go on his own.

The nurses were warned too but they all came rushing to the window, peering through blinds worriedly. ‘Cause, see, they knew Barnes was coming, but that didn’t explain the sudden jump in their coma patient’s heartbeat when the door opened.

Only, it really did.

“Steve?”

The thing about memory loss, it’s not just images, flashbacks, people that are gone. It’s everything, it’s you. A person’s soul is composed entirely of memories.

What are you, if not a compilation of every moment you’ve ever lived? So, by extension, without memories, can you be anyone but no one?

There is nothing worse than being nothing, except perhaps having nothing, and that’s exactly what he had for so long.

Seventy years, and another three months now.

Except, one thing. One exception.

Even when he’d had nothing, he’d had…

Sunlight. Blue skies and bright smiles and the Brooklyn Bridge and red stars and warm empty spaces between his fingers and 40’s music and dancing and the red white and blue striping his shadow, empty space in his heart and crystals in his eyes.

Only now, he had everything and nothing all over again but still, the only thing that’d ever mattered, the only steady thing in his entire life, catching and falling over and over across the starlit sky, there it came. The sunrise.

“Steve?”

It’s me. It’s Steve. Warm hands, golden blue, wide spreading smile as Bucky jostled and blinked up at the angel leaning over the torture table.

White table, blinking long long lashes, blue eyes opening into the new world, a new century, thawed and defrosted and cold empty alone in that too white room, baseball on the radio and Bucky’s name on the back of his tongue, wake up into the new era one more time.

But.

Blue eyes didn’t open.

The windows could be real or fake or something in between, like him, but there was no sunlight in this room and the gold was too pale to give off anything but this eerie, floating clarity--

Once, a soldier murmured that name on his lips, opened into dingy dirty drag me home.

Except now, standing in the doorway, the soldier couldn’t move, staring at white skin on white
sheets, pale, closed lips, soft blonde hair over shut, hidden blues. Not a single muscle moved. Just a distant heart monitor, beep, beep, beep no sign of life in the entire blank universe, stepping outside into the warmth to find the sky white, drawn on paper and folded in boxes in sketchbooks all along, surprise, nothing but a pencil-sketch falling apart in red flecks of eraser on white.

Why. Why wouldn’t Steve open his eyes?

“Stevie?” whisper.

Bucky was here, Bucky’d come for him, and he’d known Steve would be in the hospital but there wasn’t a single scratch on his face, there wasn’t a single wrapped limb or visible injury he was just lying there, an angel on a casket and it didn’t make any sense, why...why wouldn’t he open his eyes?

Blue skies turned white and the years between them crushed oxygen like crumpling paper and he was curling mismatched hands around the edge of that white bed.

He couldn’t bring himself to touch the fragile white skin, was too terrified to find it frozen, cryodammed, too terrified to feel it fall apart under blue-bruising metal, crumble into snow-powder dust and slip away on the ghost of his last breath.

*Don’t do anything stupid until I get back.*

*How can I?*

Took everything with him. Everything those rough artist hands could give him.

Why wouldn’t Steve open his eyes?

He heard her before he saw her. Again, leaning back in tandem as the bar fell into a silent hush, bodies apart for months and still moving in perfect sync in the swarm of gold.

Only Steve couldn’t spin around with him this time. So Bucky didn’t bother.

“What’d he do?”

Sounded as rough and raw as he felt and he wondered if Nat’s face was twisted in sympathy or cruelty. Or maybe that perfect, careful blank he’d gotten to know so well.

Three and a half months, she’d let him call her his best friend for three and a half months and he couldn’t even bring himself to be mad.

It’d been three and a half months, that they’d been apart during the war too, during their tours.

Steve’s USO tour had been a bit different than Bucky’s European tour. Surprisingly probably had more ammo on Steve’s end, but there were a lot more bombs on Bucky’s.

He still didn’t know why Natasha’d bothered. Why she’d tried to trigger back his memories, all those little hints. Or maybe she’d just checked all those times - Buchanan, 40’s, dancing - to make sure he really was gone.

He hadn’t been. Had she known? How much had she known?

She better know now, what was wrong with Steve. Eerily silent behind him, but clearly, it had to be something. Steve was in a goddamn--

*Sympathy, cause I don’t wanna get over you.*
The hospital bed wasn’t as surprising as he wished it were. Steve Rogers had a pretty reckless habit of doing stupid things that landed him hooked up to a heart monitor, as much as it scared him, he wasn’t blind enough not to see that coming. Just assumed he did something stupid. But what stupid didn’t end up bloody knuckles, red staining blank bandages, blank sheets?

Quiet shuffle, creaking leather as Natasha crossed her arms over her chest, shifted her weight. Watched his spine a moment longer, studying, maybe wondering why he hadn’t taken Steve’s hand yet.

Why hadn’t they ever grabbed each other’s hands when it counted? What was one more time.

Finally she cleared her throat, voice nearly swallowed up in the distant white harsh empty.

“He’s been in and outta Stark’s hospital for months.”

It took a moment to sink in.

“What?”

Bucky spun around like it was the 1943 World Fair and Steve’d disappeared again, only the dread in his stomach sunk a hell of a lot deeper and there was nothing now to hold back the terror on his face.

Steve hated hospitals. Why could he possibly be in and outta one? Fighting? Why? Why the fuck was he in the hospital now?

Natasha studied him openly, arms crossed over her chest, exact same hairstyle as the last time he’d seen her. Which had been in class, hadn’t it? He didn’t much like his head being fucked with. And from the look on her face she was still deciding whether or not she was gonna fuck with him some more.

But if anyone was gonna tell it to him straight, it’d be her. She owed him too much now.

One more comet to face off with and he’d be damned if he was the one pushed outta the sky now.

“He...” a deep breath and Natasha looked away, red hair swinging and if it was bad enough she couldn’t bear looking at him or Steve-- “…hasn’t really eaten since Christmas.”

The bomb dropped out of the sky.

“...what?” He couldn’t feel his hands. Couldn’t see anything but the numbers running through his head, jaw dropping as the words tumbled out before he could process those either, “Eight weeks??”

He hadn’t...eight weeks.

It was his fault. Of course it was his fault. But why, why that, why not eating, of all things?

Why the only thing that could break down those perfect cells? How could he do this to Bucky--

Bucky hadn’t been there. He hadn’t been there to stop him.

He’d always been there to stop him. Since the first day Sarah got sick. Bucky’d been so heartbroken, watching Steve give his portion of the soup to Sarah and insist there was more downstairs for him when they both knew there wasn’t, that tiny frail sick body getting sicker and Bucky’d intervened real quick, started skipping on his meals to make sure Steve was getting something on those tiny bones.
There’d never been enough food for them, and it didn’t help that all those bullies’ kicks against his stomach had Steve hurling in alleys more often than not and maybe it all started all the way back then but where was Bucky to make sure Steve stayed fed now?

It was his fault. It was his fault, not just cause he’d been gone but cause he’d been down this road, it’d been him first, the one barely stomaching apples then pretending he could do more and hurling his way through road trips and after.

Until Steve caught him. Until Steve tricked him, walked in on him on his knees hurling up breakfast he couldn’t take, and the fucking fight that ensued--

Almost broke those pretty little artist wrists. Only it wasn’t him that almost did, Steve almost did and that was so much worse, Bucky’d pinned him to the couch and yelled and there’d been so much fight in those fucking blue eyes.

"Have you gone out of your fucking mind?" Bucky demanded, leaning down closer. Steve tried to pry his hands free from the metal fingers, but there was no give. He struggled a little more, trying to wiggle away as he glared and finally opened his mouth, shooting off his own fiery, pissed response.

"No, but you have! You hid an eating disorder from me for months, you bastard!"

Bucky leaned even closer, hissing directly in Steve's face. "It's not an eating disorder."

Eight weeks.

Steve hadn’t eaten in eight weeks.

This was all his fault.

And all he could do was push back the tears, water down cheeks and breaks in his heart, fight off the cracks for one moment longer as he found himself standing over the frail, sick body of his best friend, one more time and nothing in the world could stop him now from taking Steve’s hand.

His fingers were cold. His fingers were so cold.

Bucky squeezed their weaved hands carefully, choking back another rough tug in his throat, gaze darting over every flicker of Steve’s face, waiting for the moment he caught on, woke up, felt Bucky’s touch returned to him. Only it wasn’t flickering, not at all, not even a twitch--

“They’ve been keeping him on IV’s. It’s not the first time, but it’s never been this bad.”

This bad. Jesus Christ.

“Steve, baby,” Bucky whispered, dragging his thumb over the cool, eerily smooth skin, waiting for the muscles to twitch to life, groggily flicker and blink up at him. But there was nothing. There was still nothing.

He almost couldn’t bring himself to say it. Maybe he was just being impatient, maybe Steve hadn’t gotten sleep in a long time and he was super out of it, maybe he was sleeping off the effects of being under and.

The words slipped outta his mouth anyways, more terrified than horrified and heart clenching tight in his chest with both.

“Why isn’t he waking up?”
Eternity flew right under his feet, raggedy creaking wood as he knelt by Steve’s bedside, fingers wrapped around that fragile hand as he gasped, broken and desperate, tears choking his tongue as that word kept running through his head, *pneumonia, pneumonia, he has pneumonia*, the crippling pain as he pressed his forehead to Steve’s cold skin and it really sunk in, truly sunk in that Steve might die tonight. That Bucky might lose him.

A shuddering breath and Bucky shook his head, shoving the memory aside, forcing his head back into this hospital room, this Steve’s cold hand--

That he was squeezing, fuck, again. He forgot how strong the nonmetallic was too, instantly releasing the bruising grip on unresponsive fingers. Fuck, Steve’d hissed in pain last time, why wasn’t he doing a goddamn thing? When was he gonna wake up, when--

“He’s...” Natasha paused, voice dropping almost fearful, hesitance coloring the stale air until finally, the words leaked, pooling red instead. “...in a medically-induced coma.”

And there went all of the oxygen in his lungs.

“A medically induced coma? He--”

The world tipped sideways, gravity suddenly reclaiming his body and rushing everything to his head all at once, Steve’d been in the hospital for weeks, hadn’t eaten anything this *year*, it’d gotten so bad they put him in a medically induced coma and Bucky hadn’t been there, he *hadn’t been there*. It hadn’t been him, squeezing Steve’s hand on the way to the hospital, him, scolding Steve to eat something, him, moving heaven and earth to keep his boy safe.

The metal arm still had some instinct left, darting out to grab the rail of the hospital bed before he collapsed, catching just as he tipped for the ground, hardened thigh muscle giving out on him and it was *all his fault*.

Fuck. Fuck, even the metal plates were trembling now, he had to stop shaking, had to talk himself through this because Steve sure as hell wasn’t gonna drag him outta a panic attack now, not when Bucky was the one who--

Inhale, fuck, all he had to do was inhale, he couldn’t breathe but he had to pull it together for Steve because he *needed* him and there was no way in hell Bucky’d fail him now. It’s real, you did this to him with your absence but he’s here now, you’re here now, get a fucking grip and breathe. Breathe, he’s not dead, it could be so much worse, he could be dead.

Medically induced coma, c’mon Barnes, what would Steve say? Be smart for once in your life, the way Rogers always goddamn insisted you were. Okay, you can do this. Deep breath, straighten up, focus back in on the sharp lines of that beautiful face--

No, okay, maybe focus on the coma, these people don’t know Steve the way you do, you gotta take care of him, what do you know about this? You know everything about Steve, so just start from the beginning. No food, what were the consequences for no food--

“What are they doing for bone tenacity?” The sudden bark caught her off guard and Natasha furrowed her eyebrows, glancing between the comatose sunshine and the barely-contained fireball starting to leak sparks at his side.

“...bone tenacity?”

And somewhere, a switch flipped.
“Goddamnit, you’ve gotta be kidding me,” Bucky cursed rapidly under his breath, practically flinging himself round the corner of Steve’s bedside, quickly scanning the clear bag hooked up to muscled arms, spinning uselessly as he looked for a medical chart, finally catching sight of a small stack of papers on the bedside table.

“Fuck, if he’s been on IV’s or nothing for that long without chewing anything his teeth will start to break down.” He didn’t even look up at her to speak, rambling off with the same frantic energy as his hands flipping through the stack of papers that were apparently deemed useless, tossed back on the table without a second glance, flying back to Steve’s bedside, checking the tape and needle against his skin, “They’re made of a different kind’a bone, teeth weaken if they don’t have something to bite down on.”

The whirlwind kept going, spinning again and leaning over to jam a metal thumb into the nurse call button, right back at Steve’s side, running a finger up the length of the IV line, checking the pressure all the way up to the bag, “Hydra had me on IV’s for years, so they took care of that with mouth guards but Steve sure as hell ain’t gettin’ one’a those--”

Natasha blinked, quickly swiveling to the side as a triage of nurses burst into the room, door slamming loudly and the worry-terror on their faces even louder.

Bucky didn’t so much as look up, still, thumbs feeling carefully along Steve’s slack jaw, making a pained sound at something and finally, finally, glancing up. Only for a single moment, gesturing wildly at one nurse,

“Do you have him on calcium?” Wide eyes in reply and Bucky waved an arm impatiently, setting right back into whirlwind mode again as he caught sight of a clipboard.

“Somebody go grab calcium, he’s gonna lose bone strength--”

Blur, metal flashing and if his dark hair was still long she could just see the messy bun he’d toss it up in, ponytail in his mouth as he kept ordering everyone around only it wasn’t long anymore and she wasn’t used to seeing this Bucky, this side of Barnes, being the one taking care of Rogers.

Although, she supposed, their whole lives it’d been this way. Short-haired, bright-eyed, young beautiful Bucky Barnes was the one who grew up fussing around his boy this way.

“--shoulders should be elevated, someone get me another pillow--”

She slowly backed for the door, keeping one eye on the crowd that’d gathered outside the glass and the other on Barnes, the perfect storm, stars swept up in a hurricane tide with only sunshine lifted above from drowning.

“--he’s got an allergy to--”

“...it’s not on his medical charts, are you sure that wasn’t before the seru--”

“Listen, I am not willing to take the chance, find a substitute or take him off it but you’re not putting him that in him for another goddamn second…”

Demand after barking order and not a single one of them was harsh, not really, couldn’t be with that much worry and love in the killer’s hands fabricating such chaos so gently, crystal swimming with softness every time they flickered back to the sleeping angel on white sheets.

They watched, Natasha, Sam, and the doctors, standing outside the hospital room window with arms crossed and hearts broken in their chests.
But nobody near so broken as the shaking savior who’d finally, finally, rounded that corner.

Hey, pick on somebody your own size.

One by one the nurses all filed out of the too-white room, leaving behind the water he’d asked for, the pens and paper, the full file of Steve’s medical chart that he was gonna annotate with accurate information goddamnit and Bucky was shaking, his hands were shaking and his knees were shaking and his head was spinning, legs seconds from giving out beneath him.

There was the tired that came with late college nights and early morning coffee classes, then there was the deep-seated overwhelming exhaustion that weighed down fragile bones - it was the second of the two that dragged him down, collapsing in the chair at Steve’s bedside with the last gasped breath whooshing outta his lungs.

My head is on fire but my legs are fine.

After all, they are mine.

Mine. They were, these were his exhausted legs, his thrumming heart, his deep ache. He’d been so afraid of himself, for so long. They hadn’t been his for so long but look at him now, look at them both. Here they were.

One arm reaching out blindly, taking Steve’s hand without thinking about it, fingers weaving together automatically and the other running down his face, fingertips over his forehead, closed eyes and heaving chest slowly settling down into something quiet, distant, one breath in and another out.

Three words that became hard to say.

Hadn’t been this worn in years, hadn’t been this rough in tangled worry. Hope.

Fuck, Steve sure knew how to do a number on him. If there was one thing the kid was good at.

Bucky sighed, blinking back open to the pure surreal white, gaze cutting over to watch that beautiful sleeping body beside him, all peaceful and extinguished; a soft, sad smile tugging one corner of his mouth.

Don’t look down.

Steve’s skin was smooth, absent all the white scars and bumps it should’ve had and Bucky shook his head, rubbed his real, flesh-and-bone thumb affectionately over clean, pretty knuckles that weren’t foolin’ anybody.

“You always were so much trouble,” Bucky told him and the quiet white room beeped a hollow echo over fading, distant promises.

How exactly, had it taken him this long? To come full circle, to sit by Steve’s bedside the way he had that very first promise, that very first night he’d thought they’d be torn apart for good.

And after everything they’d been through since, since that first broken til death, they’d still ended up here. Hands entwined.

Was this a second chance?

Or a hundredth, but.

The last time he’d been here, he hadn’t even been able to say it back. I had you, til death. And
everytime since, every *I love you* Steve had whispered, dropped in his ear, he hadn’t been able to say it back.

And *jesus christ*, here he was, getting to live the moment all over again, and this time, he’d be damned to let it slip by him again.

*It being the love of a lifetime. With Steve.*

The love of his life.

A sharp inhale that practically echoed, stealing all the available oxygen left in this godforsaken crystal white room as fingers detangled from chilled ones, two palms smoothing over short hair, ruffling it up like that boy in the black and white videos of the war, leaning over a map as Steve pointed, straight home. Fuck. *FUCK*--

Bucky forced his head back up, inhale, hold, exhale, look around the room and exhale again, just keep breathing, fuck. *FUCK*, what was he *doing*, he couldn’t, how could they--

Maybe he should’ve gotten flowers. There was an empty vase on the bedside table. Vases were for flowers.

Steve brought him flowers once.

Stood in that stairwell doorway, looking up under long lashes as Bucky swung open the door and stared, colorful bouquet in the extended hand, blonde swooping up over those mischievous sparkling blues--

“Hey Stevie, guess what?” Bucky interrupted, snapping his gaze off the stupid empty vase, over to the comatose features, smooth brow. God, his eyelashes were still long as fuck. Dark sweeps over high cheekbones. How many times had he shattered--

“D’y’know I’m a poet now?” No, course he didn’t know, Bucky fucking split. Into millions of pieces. *Y’know.* “Well, I am a poet, and I was just thinkin’, I could read you the Sonnet. Got it right here, in my jacket pocket. Same pocket I used to carry around that damn pencil sketch from the woods, December ’43? ‘Cept this one didn’t get burned to ashes. Well, not yet.” A raised eyebrow, single pause and he reached inside his jacket, fumbling to unfold the paper. “Can you believe it? I wrote you a bloody *sonnet*, Steve.”

He’d written a sonnet. He’d had his head wiped and he’d written a goddamn sonnet. And it really shouldn’t be funny, at all, but it was because see, the thing was he’d *told* Steve. The very same day Steve brought him those fucking flowers.

He’d *told* Steve.

Nearly a year ago now, wasn’t it? Blondie punk over there brought him a goddamn bouquet and Bucky’d had to sit him down, on that couch, back in Stark Tower. Nearly a year ago.

"You think this is sweet, don't you?"

Steve looked up, glancing from Bucky to the bouquet and Bucky shook his head, swooping a hand as he clarified. "Not the flowers. I’m talking about the whole thing."

That got an even more confused glance so Bucky shifted, turning his torso and sitting up straighter, body language as accusatory as his tone.
"You think this is some sorta...romantic Shakespearean play." Soft lips parted to protest but Bucky shut him up with a hand because he wasn't done. He wasn't anywhere near done. "Best friends their whole lives, one almost dies and the other can't live without him and tries to die too."

Blue eyes narrowed but Bucky ignored them, waving a hand and continuing in his mock storytime voice. "Then they both get a 'second chance' so they play it right, fall for each other. Get to be together after decades of pining and unrequited feelings..."

With hands as gentle as his words had been harsh, Bucky took Steve's face in his palms, running thumbs over the chiseled jaw and forcing Steve to look him in the eyes, serious and close.

"Stevie," Bucky chided softly. "This ain't some sonnet."

Blue eyes searched his, wavering between confusion, offense, and fear and this was so much more complex than Steve was pretending.

"Bucky, what're you saying?" He managed, hesitant and small and it wasn't like that.

Steve was painting their picture in pastel colors - but it'd never be them without harsh blacks and reds and grays. Bucky was only trying to change his color palette. Look at this thing without rose-colored glasses.

Don't forget what this thing was really about.

"We're not a love story, Steve." Bucky smoothed his hands down Steve's neck and shoulders, gripping his arms and holding them both stock still. "We're a war story."

A war story.

Nearly a year ago. They're the same thing, Steve'd told him, love stories and war stories.

Stevie, this ain't some sonnet but here, lemme read you mine. Sonnet 14.

A fucking war story.

Fuck.

He made so many promises. They made so many promises.

And here they were.

That sonnet...that wasn't the poem he needed to read. That poem, Steve already knew. He couldn't be sure of a lot of things, but he knew everything in those jilted fourteen lines, Steve already knew. Ain't some sonnet, right, Bucky'd just proved himself so right with that one. How many things had he said, believed, and been so so wrong about?

Steve already knew. Of course. The ache in his chest had a twin and that twin was golden blue and he could feel it, in the chilled fingers between his again, in the steady heartbeat blinking behind them on the monitors he didn't need, could feel that heartbeat just as sure as he could feel his own.

That poem, Steve already knew.

It was this one that he didn't.

Inhale, slow. Exhale. Manic tears swallowed down in place of that deep ache, deeper than his body had the space for, shredding his words back down quiet, soft. Gentle, careful, the way he spoke on
that sensitive side, one ear couldn’t hear so well n’ the other could be too loud and--

“Got a poem to read you, Stevie. It’s not mine, but...I was actually in poetry class when I remembered that-- when I remembered everything. Thanks to caesuras, right? Anyways. Um. There’s this poem I read, little while back and for some reason I really latched onto it before...before I came back and remembered um. Why…”

That breath wasn’t slow or stable and the hitch in his throat was gonna make him cry, he couldn’t cry cause if he started now he was never gonna stop and he had to be strong for his Steve.

“God, Steve. I’m so. I’m s-so sorry I let go again--”

Raggedy inhale, pause, and his thumb was rubbing the back of Steve’s hand so hard he could feel the tendons shift beneath smooth skin.

Exhale.

By God. He’d spent lifetimes staring at Steve’s face, memorizing every single little angle of it, but it still shocked him, stunned him with a bright flash, old 40’s photographs in blinding white for a single moment and the rest fading into something beautiful, eternal.

Forever younger, growing older just the same.

That was such an incredibly beautiful boy. The crease at the corners of closed eyes, sloping lashes, high cheekbones. The solid, unmistakable curve of his nose, gentle slope of smooth, relaxed forehead into dark roots, fading slowly golden blonde, nearly white at the tips.

*I won’t let it fade away.*

The first time they slept together, moonlight black and white room with Steve in full color, that golden hair had lit up palladium. Pink bow lips parted, peaceful in the deep and disastrously complete, the stark smooth beauty as they reached for each other with bare fingertips on bare skin.

Golden days.

The corners of blue eyes crinkling up, the sharp line of that angled jaw, strong neck sloping up into the soft exposed spot behind round ears--

Where he used to press kiss after kiss until Steve was smiling, giggling, laughing underneath him, strong naked broad shoulders shaking, tightening lines in muscle wrapping around Bucky’s sides, wide smiling mouth against Bucky’s collarbone.

Warm, real fingers squeezed Steve’s hand tighter on impulse, memory racing. Laced together, the way they’d been since they were kids, two tiny kids holding hands as they jumped off the shallow pier in July--

*And this romantic story, you never could control me.*

Holding the hand that’d been through so much - he hadn’t been there to hold Steve’s hand for his last coma. For the ice.

Frozen and thawed and woke up alone in cold white when Bucky should’ve been there, and he never wanted to miss a single goddamned moment of that beautiful life again.

That soft smile, those precious faces as eyebrows shot up and his head tipped, beautiful twinkle as
the morning sun caught its rise in blue blinking awake, big hands curled up against his face, all that harshness only softened edges, polished a pounding golden heart and sunkissed skin and the dark furrow between eyebrows that’d take on the fucking world, beautiful hands curling into fists and uncurling to carefully brace a thin pencil perfectly against white blank pages, beautiful mind lighting up the room the moment the ruffled sweet angel strode inside--

“You are so mesmerizing,” Bucky told him, soft as he could, near mush to slip under white-gold spun sugar, the silence fallen where there was once such sparkling crystal loud pulling him in with thin red thread wrapped round caving wrists and a metal heart -- trying not to choke, “God, Stevie, you’re my fuckin’ everything--”

Inhale.

Bucky blinked, tendons in his hand releasing silently, no whirr as he snapped outta the daze, ran his thumb over soft skin again and slid back into reality. Fuck, how easy he still got lost in that boy.

“Sorry. Got distracted, I uh.” Take one breath and take another. He’d been telling Steve something. Telling his best friend something, what was that again?

Up close at his bedside, crumpled paper in his lap. The poem, right. He’d been telling Steve. Should tell Steve. Because Buck was pretty sure, this part, Stevie didn’t know.

“I’ve...got a poem to read you. Not my sonnet, though. It’s not mine at all, but. I kept it, because when I first read it I couldn’t stop reading it and now…”

Now. Hospital, after all those broken knuckle fights, ‘course they’d ended up here.

“Now, after everything that’s happened…”

Everything that’d happened.

It’d be enough, that Bucky’d fought a World War for Steve, wasted away inside from the love he’d been so afraid of. The love that abandoned him in the bottom of a snowy ravine, the love he depended on too much, the love he let break him. The love that twined so richly with fear he couldn’t tell them apart anymore.

Until a day on a bridge the world flipped upside down and a dead soldier gasped his first breath, promise of a lifetime placed in metallic murderous hands and a soul offered on the line he was so close to crushing, the whirlwind of past trust and broken looks pulling them together, nightmare synonymous to memory, the hands that reached for him when he screamed until screaming meant broken hands instead.

Too much light flooding through the darkness until they both went blind and combusted, until the bomb went off and they didn’t make it out of the building in time, countdown to one and the shared soul, double rings exploded into a thousand pieces and--

...he’d thrown his off the Brooklyn Bridge.

One more promise to break on the shore of icy waves, freezing metal sinking until the drowning buried them alive.

And they’d ruined each other.

...where was Steve’s ring?
It wasn't on his hand. He'd...he'd gotten rid of it too. Bucky didn't know what he'd been expecting, but. It wasn't that.

Did he think Steve would just hold on?

Actually. Yeah, yeah, some part of him had.

You told me once dear, you really loved me
And no one else could come between us
But now you've left me…

A hitch in his breath and Bucky squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, made himself get a fucking grip.

And you have shattered all my dreams.

They’d broken so many things with twin fists but the worst fight, the worst war was this one, he’d take a thousand bloody noses over the cold, limp fingers entwined with his.

A lifetime trying to drag Steve outta the fight and he’d been the most disastrous fight of all.

He’d been so worried, about finding out what to say to Steve. Running the streets of New York racing thoughts instead of panting sass, on your left speeding past Sam and if Bucky couldn’t repent to the family Steve’d made, how could he possibly find the words for Rogers?

How--

How to ask for forgiveness, for the things he’d done. The lives he’d taken. Especially mine.

And now...it didn’t matter.

He could say anything, everything, nothing.

Steve wouldn’t hear a word anyways.

Look what he’d done. Look what Bucky’d done.

The world kept turning and they were so far high in the clouds, stars, sky - he was so scared to look down, ever close drew the ground--

They had to touch down.

Couldn’t keep catching each other, forever. They’d tried, so many times, and they’d slipped through red leather gloves and bare hands and metal fingers and nothing could save them, red skin or silver between.

No more.

No more.

I’ve got a poem to read you. Not my sonnet, though. It’s not mine at all, but I kept it, because when I first read it I couldn’t stop reading it and now.

Now, after everything that’s happened.

“Hell. Now I don’t wanna think about it ever again. Stevie, fuck, I--”
Shaky inhale.

“Okay. Um. tell you what, I’ll read it to you and that’ll be the last time. Which is fitting for the poem and all.” Bucky forced himself to pause, blinking rapidly to clear the fogging water because he wasn’t gonna cry and he wasn’t gonna let go of Steve’s hand and he wasn’t gonna think about how this was it, the last moment he might get to have because the moment he stepped out that door--

Bucky cleared his throat, crystal cutting away from that pale soft face. “‘Cause it's about you and me, Stevie. You and me.”

One hand fumbling to smooth out the crumpled paper in his lap, water pooling in corners of the aching heart inside a chest turned sanctuary to empty cage.

“It's uh...by Elizabeth Hewer. She's pretty new, 2013, but she's amazing. Okay...” Metal thumb wiping a streak under watering lashes, anything to keep the rain from staining frozen skin. “Okay.”

Inhale, black and white, the letters Steve sent in the war and the sketchbook dreams they’d set fire to like Fourth of July. Welcome to the world, beautiful boy, and watch it burn.

Bucky breathed one more time and read Steve the poem always waiting behind the icy smoke.

“‘In one timeline we kiss, but the stars don't come down. In another, you set a world on fire for me. But...I perish in the flames. Another, and we're strangers on a b-busy street, brushing by close enough to- to send each other reeling off-balance but not. S-stopping.’”

Stars and flames and strangers on a busy street brushing shoulders and dropping books and picking up bruises but Bucky’s voice was shaking and there was water staining the crumpled paper and he had three more lines left and somehow that carried war let the storyteller sing one last verse.

“‘One universe has us right.’” Shaking, both hands were shaking and Steve’s bed was rattling quietly like the cough sweet lungs never choked on anymore. Just Bucky’s lungs left to choke now.

“‘One universe has us right, of all the m-millions stacked on. Millions. So it's...not this one. I. I can live with that.’”

I can live with that.

The inhale wasn’t an inhale at all. Last breath caught, wet tears in bruised throats instead of slipping hands and choked on the miserable thawed snow gathering on eyelashes as shaking shaking cut lungs into pieces he’d never pick up now.

*My hands they shake, my head it spins.*

*Brooklyn Brooklyn, take me in.*

Dim lights, too far from the bridge in the wicked cold, damp downfall of the thirties, a tiny frail angel tucked under thin sheets, pneumonia bouncing echoes around the room as a young twenty-something dock boy squeezed the bruised hand of his fragile best friend and shook, shook, hurricane.

"You with me?" Steve's voice asked quietly into the darkness. It was a simple question, just to check if he was awake or not. But it made Bucky wanna cry and scream and run and take Steve somewhere where this wasn't their life, where he didn't get triple whammied with bruises, lingering weakness, and freezing cold wetness at the same time. Because fuck, Steve may not be with him much longer.

*What he’d give, for bruises and weakness and cold rain. For pneumonia. To hold that hand again.*
feel that fear again, over this one.

Bucky lifted his head, a rush of cold air hitting his cheeks, streaking cold. So he'd been crying, then. He had no idea for how long. Maybe since the nurse had told him. Pneumonia. Maybe since right now.

Maybe since the moment he’d met the angel that’d pull him outta the darkness, only to be dragged down in hell by a blood-stained metallic smile.

The tears weren’t gonna stop.

Not this time.

The crumpled poem in his lap was nearly soaked through with salt and melted ice and the metal hand curled, crushed words in the whirring fist, tossed aside--

--white baseball, faded muddy red stitches that spun in the air as small hands lifted over his head, grin bright as the summer sun and that game they’d been to just last week--

Shoulders curled and the sound was awful and sharp as it broke between the silent shakes, empty ribcage rattling and parted lips breaking breaking breaking.

Fingers curled so tight in comatose ones they might break if it were metal instead.

The snap, echoing in the studio, Steve’s hand crushing, the sharp cry as black paint dripped and black masks drained free.

Another hospital bed. Another frozen body, another sick white rebirth and The Phoenix could cry all the vintage misery red and gold had to sing, the ashes burned too bright to ever come back from this one.

Well I never really thought that you'd come tonight, while the crown hangs heavy on either side.

Give me one last kiss while we're far too young to die.

“I was c-counting on growing old with you. Didn't matter how, didn't matter when, I just knew that when I was sixty you better be on the rocking chair beside me. I...I never imagined we'd lose each other th-this young.”

Endless romantic stories, you never could control me.

“B-barely thirty, still don't have a single...crinkled line on your face.” His voice cracked too high, so young, thumb reaching for the closed skies, the shocking soft tenacity to the corner of pretty eyes that one day might crinkle up in crow’s feet and he wouldn’t be there, he’d never know, for all the times this thumb slid over damp corners and wiped away precious tears, for every year he’d-- from those blurry engrained days he was so tiny and young, youthful wide eyes looking up at him with that gap tooth smile behind trembling lips.

Trembling lips.

Give me one last kiss cause I'm far too young to die

“I can't believe...I can't believe I never get to see what you look like as an old man. I know you'll live a long long time, Stevie. I just...I can't bear the thought that outta your whole life. You knew me for less than half of it. For...maybe a third. Maybe you'll live to be ninety, for real, and I'll only have
been there for. For the first third. That scares me so bad, Stevie. My god that scares me. You gonna forget me? You gonna forget me the way I've made myself...oh God, Steve. I can’t...you know I’m never. I’m never gonna forget you again. Never really did, never really could. You’re in more than my head, sweetheart, and nothing could ever burn you outta my veins. I’m so-- I’m so sorry.

“You brought me back. So many times. Over and over, you saved me from tables and my own head and you brought me back and every time I try to forget you the sun’s always around. The next corner Steve I’m so sorry I c-c-can’t-- Wh. What’m I s’pos’d to do? I. We. We were supposed to have forever.”

Far too young to die

“But. Stevie. Only one third...one third of your long beautiful life, I can’t. I can’t be that small, not with you, please, dear god. Please. Steve, not with you. Not with you.”

Shake shake shake and he was never gonna breathe without breaking again.

Not without you.

“Let me s-stay.” Whisper, he couldn’t speak without sobbing, and the whisper wouldn’t do a damn thing but nothing did a damn thing. Who are you? Nothing. “Please, p-lease, let me st-stay.”

Soft blonde halo brushed off too-warm skin, cold lips pressed to the worry crease between dark eyebrows, silent feet careful as they stepped backwards over creaking floorboards their landlord was less likely to fix than America was to join that European war and Steve was so sick he’d only make the fever heat worse--

“Buck?” Quiet small voice croaked hoarse and he froze, baited breath over whirring wheezing lungs. “Stay with me ‘til I fall asleep?”

Stay with me until I fall asleep.

Seventy-seven years later he was still tangled with bruised artist fingers.

Seventy-seven years later,

Bucky Barnes held Steve Rogers’ hand at his snow white bedside and cried. and cried. and cried.

The glass was thick enough to block out individual words. But from this side the sound was practically audible anyway, the shaking hunched shoulders and broken sobs over squeezing hands screamed loud enough.

Loud enough for Clint to have twin tear tracks running down his face.

Loud enough for Sam to excuse himself from the scene, try to regroup in the bathroom, dark hands shaking under the faucet and pararescue wings exploding back at him in the mirror.

Loud enough for Natasha to step away from the glass, watch Clint and Tony instead.

Tony, who wasn’t saying a single word.

It was so loud Clint eventually excused himself too. Natasha watched him go, turn the corner of the hallway, and Stark still hadn’t moved.
She stepped up to the window beside him, both of them looking blankly inside.

She didn’t stand at Tony’s side very often. They were nearly the same height. She’d never noticed. She knew the specs of his file, knew scientifically they were close, but she’d never just. Stood next to him to really notice.

And it was silent, for a long time, silent through all that loud and after everything maybe she should’ve learned to keep her mouth shut, but this was the only family she’d ever had and she couldn’t idly watch it tear itself apart.

They were all already too torn.

“Do you remember…” It was the first thing that’d been spoken in this hallway since Barnes’ rushed into that room and it was ironic, wasn’t it, considering the state Bucky’d been in the last time she’d seen him, how much memory’d haunted all of them.

Tony too, she knew about those nightmares. The panic attacks, when someone so much as said New York.

Tony too. That was the point. All of them.

“...when you promised to catch Pepper’s hand?”

If he hadn’t been paying attention before, he sure as hell was now. Tony’s sharp eyes shot to her like knives, arms crossed tight over his chest and Natasha didn’t look at him, staring straight ahead until he eventually did too, silent and stiff as the memory flashed through that tortured genius mind.

“She trusted you to save her, to catch her hand, and you couldn’t. She fell.”

That time, it wasn’t sharp shock and offense as his gaze snapped over, as the smart mouth dropped open to say something, to bark whatever veiled hurt he’d concocted now only she wasn’t going to give him the chance to shove her aside.

“And she was gone, you honestly thought she was gone, for good. You watched her fall to her death. Do you remember that agony? That despair, that rip inside your soul?”

Shocked into silence now, into trembling silence and it didn’t look like a panic attack coming on but she could feel the edge of that cliff in his memory, that weakness he pretended so ardently not to have. Softening in dark eyes every time they turned to Pepper Potts’ patient smile.

“As you clutched that metal beam, fire burning all around you, and watched the love of your life fall into the flames?” Natasha paused, settling over the shuddering assassin curled over that pretty, vintage soldier they’d all let slip through the cracks.

“Now make it snow and ice. Off the side of a train. And instead of saving your ass a minute and a half later, try a year and a half. That's how it was for Rogers, only worse, because when he woke up in this century there was no chance of getting Bucky back. Seventy years too late to even find a body.

“But...there, there they are, standing right in front of you like every dream you ever wished came true all at once and the love of your life is miraculously alive. Somehow, they froze their way into the twenty-first century with you and it shouldn’t be possible but there they are-- Your best friend. Your lover. Your only hope.”

And I have to protect the one thing I can’t live without. That’s you.
Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky.

Natasha paused, sinking silence. Pure silence, and she turned her head, gaze finally flicking to meet the stricken, too-shiny brown, laying the only kind’a punch no armored suit could block.

“...now make her forget every memory she ever had of you.”

Tony stared at her like she’d just blown up his house - no, worse, she’d actually seen that face - and really, she had no idea how that’d never occurred to him. How similar he was to the supersoldier he’d idolized so much as a kid. To the kid he’d come to befriend.

How well they could understand each other, if they took a single moment to try.

Natasha turned back to the window, scanning the silent white hospital room one more time. Barnes was nearly as still as his counterpart now, slumped and positively drained in that chair, hand gripping Steve’s hand so tightly she could see the white knuckles from here, exhaustion settling in bones that’d never been so broken.

And wasn’t it ironic, that she almost forgot to call him Barnes in her head. She’d just gotten so used to calling him Rogers. Tear-stained, short-haired soldier pretty boy Rogers, only he was brunette instead of blonde and his arm flashed instead of bulged. Tony didn’t see them, not the way she did, but he was still staring blankly in that stricken horror and the thing was, that was barely the half of it.

Shifting heels, a click as she stepped to the side, turned to go. She’d seen enough. And Tony was still looking at her like she was a ghost, only today, for once, it wasn’t her.

“That’s just Steven’s story.” Three steps, three loud clicks brushed past stubborn shoulders and Natasha paused, letting the silence echo for a single moment before red hair flipped, stopping and looking at Stark one last time; wasn’t all they had left just one last time?

”Now try to picture Bucky’s.”

If you’re a lover, you should know. The lonely moments just get lonelier, the longer you’re alone.

Not counting all the ranting from his childhood, he’d known Steve Rogers a few years now. In all that time, Tony’d seen him in alotta different lights. At the beginning, so stiff and high-strung. Chalked it up to an ego-complex, but the months went on and the way Rogers ran the team, gave orders, disappeared--

It took a while to recognize, but it took one to know one and duh, Cap was pretty damn depressed after defrosting. Then DC rolled around. He thought he knew Rogers, exactly how messed up he was, how easy things rolled off broad shoulders. Before Barnes.

But then he’d seen him smile. And laugh. The first time he’d seen Rogers laugh had been in a Smithsonian exhibit (yes he’d seen the goddamn exhibit) and the second time he’d seen Rogers laugh had been because of Bucky Barnes and everything’d kinda hit him then. Everything’d changed.

And it’d been...surreal. They’d. They’d been a family. Then Barnes left, and everything broke. It broke hard, because there’d been so much to lose.

He’d let his heart soften. More than just for Rogers, for Barnes.
He’d thought he’d understood. Then Romanoff dropped that in his lap and now he was staring at another smoking bomb he didn’t know how to engineer his way outta.

Tony thought he was the soft heart, electric soul. But here was Bucky Barnes.

Terror was still thrumming in his chest like another arc reactor, even if the broken American Psycho straight outta WWII and Brooklyn alleyways collapsed in that stiff hospital chair looked more haunted than Aliens in New York and it couldn’t be that kid, that kid that’d been so close to stealing his life, one more person he’d finally trusted so deeply turning their back on him and it was still that shiny arm in all his nightmares, but. Natasha’d painted quite the picture and he saw it now, saw him now. Here was Bucky Barnes.

They had more in common than anyone else he’d ever met.

And that was exactly why Tony’s broken pitying heart couldn’t ever forgive him.

Eventually, the rain stopped. The roof fell in and the wind knocked bones in knots until the storm couldn’t rage anymore, until every ounce of life was drained dry and Bucky crumpled quietly at Steve’s bedside, fingers loose and eyes closed, occasional hitch in slowing slowing breath, empty ribs rattling around under battered skin.

Battered skin too tight over his cheekbones, temples, dried salty tears making everything cold, corners of eyes hard.

Head tipped down against his chest and there should be long hair hanging in blurred-edge vision but there wasn’t, not anymore, not when all those dark snakes were tamed into that sideswoop, few dislodged strands curling over his forehead and he could be sitting beside Steve on a barstool smiling about keeping the outfit, glancing between Peggy Carter in her bright red dress and Steve Rogers with his soft shy smile, eyes cutting to the ground as it sunk in, as it all sunk in.

They traveled so far.

*You carry people, Buck. You carry me.*

Carry on.

The room tipped as he pushed up from the chair, white horizon fading for a moment before it snapped back into a line he knew, feet solid on this too-clean floor too many stories too high up. The world faded at the edges as his fingers slipped free from Steve’s, but they were sharing the same oxygen and that meant he could move, all nearly-ninety-nine years weighing down every stumbling step to the side table, scrape of a sliding clipboard as he fumbled for the Sharpie he’d ordered a nurse to bring earlier.

Cap between his teeth, twist and pull and the smell filled the air sharp and poignant, black ink tip holding all that dark paint.

The last time he’d smelled Sharpie, Steve’d been drawing a ring around his right-hand finger.

A line, with a dash, a never-ending line like the one he’d drawn around Bucky’s wrist in the hot-tub, with a marker in bed, with his fingers and his lips and his heart, over and over, line line line dash.

Where we begin and where we end, but the line never ends.
He’d proposed with a fucking Sharpie, drawing that goddamned never-ending line into his skin and Bucky was shaking too much to do this.

Bottom lip trembling, shaky halting inhale but he had to get it together, there weren’t any tears left in his body to cry and his stomach was already cramped from the shaking and his hands were clammy and the custom ring Steve’d made for him with the promise of being married and together for eternity was lying at the bottom of the river under the Brooklyn Bridge.

The skin on the inside of Steve’s wrist was so smooth, blue veins shifting easily under the gentle stroke of Bucky’s thumb. Pretty little artist wrists.

It was the worst kind of emptiness, the silence where there should’ve been snark, the stillness where fists should’ve been curled, the blank where there should’ve been golden soft sweet smiles. Steve wasn’t fighting him back this time. Might never fight back again.

His hands were shaking.

He couldn’t very well draw when his hands were shaking, he knew that much.

But the good news was, of all the training he’d had in his life, the first he’d learned was stillness, the quiet frozen behind a sniper scope and artist hands couldn’t stitch up his bulletwound in that forest so long ago because he shook too bad but when it came down to it, Bucky knew frozen long before he knew cold.

A deep breath, just breathe, and the trembling fingers curled, uncurled. Shifted, and he was steady.

One more inhale and he lifted Steve’s wrist, black tip setting carefully to clean pure skin, and drew.

The first time Steve’d drawn it with water. Over and over around his wrist, stopping at the same place every time to draw that little dash.

The sharpie slid down in the dash first, black mark over thin pale skin. Then it was the careful line, the line to trace all the way around that beautiful wrist.

Except. Except this time it wasn’t to the end.

So careful, tracing straight with perfect pressure, turning Steve’s hand just a little, moving around to accommodate the angle better, didn’t wanna twist even if Steve couldn’t feel right now.

Bucky could feel him, the pulse in his wrist, soft thudding so slow and peaceful, the heartbeat in a chest he’d spent his life matching black marching boots to.

He didn’t connect the line to the dash on the other side. How could he? They hadn’t made it.

They’d never make it.

The end of the line together, that. It was outta reach now. Out of reach the same way he’d been, gripping the metal bar on the peeled train wall just an inch too far.

No, the line didn’t connect. The black dragging ink wrapped around the edge of a wrist bone and all he had to do was keep going to drag that line to the dash but instead the sharpie lifted. Touch down, touch, touch.

Three words, a dot for every word, three words that stood between two soldiers in love and the end
of the line.

Our last breath.

*You, me, death,* and our last breath.

Bucky capped the sharpie.

Picked up a pen and paper instead. Might as well explain it now.

’Cause he wasn’t gonna be here to explain it when Steve finally woke.

“Alright, pal, here’s how it goes. The dot closest to the line, that’s you. And it’s *breath* too, because you...you were my breath. My air, the thing that kept me alive even when I didn’t want it.”

Another steady sniper inhale, couldn’t start shaking now. Couldn’t start crying again. Steve’d see it, in his handwriting, in the dots his tears would mark all over the page.

No, he had to focus on those three black dots on the inside of Steve’s wrist.

“‘Sides, breathing’s kinda been a hassle for you, ‘specially when you were young. So that dot’s you, and breath. The next one, the middle dot, next to you, that’s me.”

Rolled his lips in and glanced up from the paper he was sketching on, taking in the pretty angles of that face one last time.

See?

“It’s me, and it’s *last* too. Last is for me because I loved you first and guess what pal, even if this is it, I loved you last too. You better go to your damn grave believin’ that.”

Pencil over white, clipboard so oddly hard and foreign in his lap. They should be drawing under trees in the forest, not here, not in this.

One more dot.

“The third dot, that’s death. ‘Cause hey, guess you’re not the only one with a twisted sense of romance, right? And it’s *our* too. Our is for death since that’s the only thing that’s ever stood between us and the end of the line and baby, we could never run from that if we tried. Til death, remember?”

Exhale, pencil scratching one more arrow, make sure Steve understood. Always understood.

“...til our last breath.”

The clipboard was louder than his feet as he sat it back down on the side table. Sharpie too. They’d communicated with enough pencil sketches in their lives he could only hope Steve would forgive him for leaving with something that goddamned *simple*.

The whole thing was pretty simple, really. It was too bad by the time he’d figured it out, he’d been too late.

As the world’s leading authority on waiting too long? Don’t.

*When the moon found the sun, he looked like he was barely hanging on. But her eyes saved his life, in the middle of summer.*
He...was never gonna have a summer again.

It was like watching the stars blink out from the sky as it slowly sunk in, that the world was done spinning, that this was just.

It.

That it was over.

Endless summer somehow became endless winter and now there was...nothing. No seasons with no players left on the board, no soldiers left to push from trench to ocean to plane to train.

Nowhere to fall because there was nowhere to go, no sky to fall from.

There was nothing left for him. For them.

You, me, death, and our last breath.

Goodbye, summer --

*all was golden when the day met the night.*

Until golden days became nothing more than memories.

And memories weren’t something he had a good track record with anyways.

Resignation.


Railroaded.

That’s not alphabetical, Steve’s voice teased and Bucky glared affectionately across the pillow between them.

I had to put that one last. It’s a primary emotion, after all. It needs its own effect, don’t you think?

26 letters, Stevie.

"What was next on the list after amazement?" Steve whispered and Bucky couldn't fight the smile because what a fucking idiot.

"Anchored. Anxious. Awestruck."

"Do you really have a whole list?"

"26 letters, Stevie."

"Buck...what about the eight I told you earlier?" He rolled his lips in, suddenly nervous again, and Bucky's heart was pounding fast enough Steve had to hear it.

He swallowed and searched between the two blues. He wasn't sure he was ready for this. How was he supposed to face--

Bucky sucked in a breath, running a tired hand down his face and forcing the memory aside before he got so swept up he never escaped the black and white movie reel.
It was all he ever wanted, for the longest time, to smile like that black and white movie reel.

What an exhibit they were.

He blinked down at the closed eyes, white hospital gown over the broad chest. Jesus. If you wanna fight a war, you gotta wear a uniform, right?

He’d never learned how to face those eight letters.

Not those.

If only he could lie with Steve. Lie beside him, wrap his arms around under those muscled arms, around that sloped, thin waist, hold his best friend to his chest the way all those heartbroken hospital couples did in the movies.

Only Steve wouldn’t slowly awake, long shadowed eyelashes fluttering. Fingers wouldn’t twitch, suddenly curl around his own. Those callused fingers were frozen. Frozen like the last coma he’d been in.

That ocean must’a been so goddamned cold.

*Believe it or not, it's kinda hard to find someone with shared life experience.*

Weren’t they all so goddamned cold.

But the skin stretched over high cheekbones, the skin Bucky’d bruised and broken orange a lifetime and a half ago, it still ran warm under his fingertips. Still made from fucking sunshine.

He’d never believed in bittersweet, never understood sweet sadness, not until this moment, right here. Fingers brushing down the precious angle of Steve’s jaw, that beautiful face peaceful and quiet beneath him. Could almost be sleeping. How many mornings had he woken early, just to watch Steve sleeping?

Not enough.

Dear lord, he hadn’t had enough. Just one more, one more of everything, *please*.

One more smile. One more laugh. One more happy shouted, “*Buck!*”

One more dance. One more night under the stars. One more song. Please, just one more song.

Thumb in the middle of that strong chin, where Steve kissed him when he was laughing, the crease they didn’t share. If only there were more. Nearly every mark he had matched a parallel - how was he supposed to look at his hands if they only scuffed the same way Steve’s did?

*You’n’me raised in the same part of town, got these scars on the same ground. Remember--*

Remember.

For all the memories he’d won and lost, for all the lives he’d lived, the hills they’d ran up, the skies they’d chased, it was never the shooting stars or the comets that burned red first.

“It took me too long to realize, Stevie.”

The bullet lied deeper than knives could carve. Inhale. Maybe never breathe again.
“Took me too long to see, neither of us were the monster,” Bucky told him, and Steve’d spent a lifetime trying not to bleed on anyone and it wasn’t their fault they’d both been stained so red and blue.

“The only villain in our story was time.”

A sketchpad, only moment Steve was ever peaceful. Bucky pressed his forehead to the smooth, worry-free one beneath the blonde halo, crystal slipping shut slowly and this, this was the only peace he’d ever know.

All the times they’d touched like this. Foreheads pressed together, lips parted, eyes shut, hands clutching necks, jaws, spines.

After Sarah died, that first night down on the floor, couch cushions pulled close. When Falsworth stitched him up in the forest outside the city he’d been shot in the thigh. The first time they’d kissed. The day on the beach, hey sugar you rationed? Dancing on the empty floor, just minutes before Steve led him into that black and white bedroom. Nearly every time Steve rocked slow inside his body, smooth and slick warmth drizzling up his spine. That afternoon Steve’d shouted fine, he had PTSD, crumpled right into Bucky’s arms.

I didn’t win the war til you got there. I didn’t win the war at all.

It took nothing, to tip down. Noses brushing, lips centimeters apart.

He hadn’t kissed Steve since the morning they broke up, in the pouring rain. Goodbye, to the sunshine.

Goodbye, sweet sunshine. My only sunshine.

Bucky pressed his mouth to Steve’s. Soft pink lips carefully compressed under his own, so gentle and breakable like this. The world had done nothing but try to rip Steve Rogers apart and he’d done nothing but grown softer, tried harder to save it.

This job...we try to save as many people as we can.

Sometimes that doesn’t mean everybody.

Break.

That’s what you don’t understand. This isn’t about me.

“I’m so sorry, Stevie,” Bucky whispered, suddenly the tall one again as he straightened, suddenly the one looking down again as he forced himself to blink back open, lips parting around a quiet breath. One hand sliding through silky blonde hair.

Right. ’Cause you got nothing to prove.

The exact same way Bucky had nothing to lose.

The first time, he screamed I loved him first. I love him. I love him, I’m in love with him, dear god. How could I let this happen?

I highly doubt it was under your control, Peggy Carter reasoned. That’s what she’d told him.

And just like with everything else, she’d been right.
Control. And it was in that moment, then, that Bucky first realized he’d lost control.

And that's all the Winter Soldier had ever been about. About keeping control. Efficiency was only ever created to control. And if he loved Steve? He gave that up. He gave up control.

He's my world, and he can't ever know. God save me,

I loved him first.

*Even if it cost us our souls. Even if it cost you control.*

It’d surprised him, how comforting Peggy was, reaching over in the middle of his breakdown to squeeze his hand.

But if Steve were awake, he wouldn’t be surprised at all, the way Bucky squeezed his hand. This was all he’d ever known. This was all they’d ever known.

Even when I had nothing.

Steve shouted it. In the middle of a fight, no less, and that wasn’t surprising either. What was surprising, was how quiet and simple it came out of his mouth now, how small it was, how little it changed anything, but he said it anyways because Steve Rogers deserved to hear it, once, in his life, even if it was like this.

“I loved you first, darling,” Bucky told him.

That day with the painting he’d parroted what he said to Peggy but this time, this time he was saying it right to that beautiful young face and hopefully, somewhere underneath all the ice, his best friend heard it. His best friend heard what Bucky’d been saying to him every day in a thousand ways since they were seven, in the way he’d been wanting to hear it all along.

Let's fade away together, one dream at a time.

His hands were cold. The moment they left Steve’s skin they were cold, but they’d have to be this way. Forever. He’d have to learn.

One step backwards. He couldn’t tear his eyes away.

Soldier lift, pivot. Pivot on a heel because that was the only way he was ever leaving this place. As Sergeant James Barnes, of the 107th. Shipping out for England first thing tomorrow.

He got his orders.

“Hey Steve?” For the life of him he couldn’t make himself turn the doorknob. Couldn’t decide which hand would open the door that made him leave the love of his life for the rest of his life.

But he’d already said it, and if Steve really could hear him he might as well tell him the rest.

“If...this is my last breath?” Staring at the metal handle and Bucky inhaled, tainted oxygen, final drops of sunlight fading over the horizon. “--then I leave with no regrets.”

He had to lift his head. Crystal was watering again, somehow, and who was he kidding, this was still Steve.

Bucky turned back around, the corners of his mouth turning up affectionately as the rest of him melted into nothing at all.
“This life is over but.” Shrug, scarred shoulder lifted to his ears, hair too short to brush against mottled layers now.

Steve was so quiet. Laying there so clean, quiet, surrounded by pure white like the angel Bucky’d painted onto poured canvas. It was one hell of a way to remember him. Remember him, he would.

Exhale.

“I had you. Til death.”

Til then.

Til death.

Bucky Barnes always thought death for him would be some bullet to the head, bomb beneath his feet. But that'd just be mercy now – real death was losing Steve.

So. At least he had Steve til death.

~*~*~

There were only a few things he could do.

What he should do, he should just end this fucking tragedy Romeo & Juliet style, eat that bullet he’d never had the chance to.

But see, he couldn’t off himself. The only time he’d ever been blessed enough to allow himself trying was when he thought Steve didn’t love him. He couldn’t deny that now no matter how hard he fucking tried.

He could get wiped again, he supposed. This time for good. No journal, no fake memories. Blank slate. Tabula rasa. Everything just...gone.

Hydra had always asked him who he was without Steve, and he had answered nothing. It was only fitting, right?

To be nothing?

No. Unfortunately, couldn’t do that either. Too big of a risk.

Not to him, to Steve. He’d broken Steve, last time. And the time before that, right yeah, can’t forget about all those times you fucking wiped your brain so you didn’t have to deal with the pain, leaving the love of your life to suffer all of it double for you both!

He’d been a coward for so long. He’d been scared for so long.

No loose ends this time, he couldn’t risk the repeat of Steve finding him. He couldn’t. There had to be some other way, he had to come up with some other plan.

But see, that plan had one major flaw in it.

Steve was the one who came up with the brilliant plans.
Which Bucky would rather be caught dead than saying out loud, because Steve’s plans were brilliant but they were *dangerous*, almost always had the chance of him ending up splattered on the pavement somewhere--

Wait.

Stupid reckless, that...wouldn’t be his fault. It was a risk they were willing to take anytime they stepped into the field and Steve wouldn’t hate him for that, Steve would *understand*, that was the goddamned rule he lived by in life, right? He’d let Bucky fight at his side in reckless battles a thousand times, it was the only on the battlefield that the threat of death was so imminent they just had to fuckin’ embrace it and jump.

That was it. Fuckin’ embrace it and jump.

He’d lost all his other brothers in the war, Steve had, and he was okay. He missed them, sure, but soldiers died in the field, that’s just what happened. Taps at the funeral and a folded flag and it’d suck, it’d be awful, but with metal tags around your neck you were always prepared for that kind’a end.

Well, Steve had his dogtags currently, but it was the thought that counted.

If he’d’ve thought of it earlier, he’d’ve stolen his toetag back off the chain, left Steve with just the one. Split em, the way they should’ve in the war. Well. It was a little late now.

Bucky took a deep breath, pushed open the hospital’s front doors and stepped into the glaring sun.

~*~*~

White. A sense of encompassing, piercingly-bright white. Steve blinked, stared up at the ceiling, and could only process the too-clean color above him.

There were sounds too, drifting through the room. Recognizable, only this time they weren’t voices over a speaker; monitor sounds, metallic and modern.

He was clean, cold, surrounded by too much white, a strange chemical smell, and an empty hospital room.

Back to reality-adjacent.

Steve looked around, bed in a blank room, twenty-first century blank. No radiator by the window, no half-paneled walls, just fancy beeping machines and a discarded chair and a sidetable with a clipboard on it, a piece of paper he couldn’t read from here.

A recovery room. Which meant...he was alive, then.

And so was Bucky.

It didn’t take a radio and a ballgame this time, didn’t take sitting up and soaking in, it socked him less than ten seconds from fluttering eyelashes parting, smack across the face and punch to the chest, heart *aching*.

It hit him outta nowhere and suddenly Steve was very much not alright. His breathing picked up and
the room was crushing him, one question rushing through: Where was Bucky?

And just like last time, the door opened at that exact moment. Except that ex-SHIELD agent wasn’t bothering to pose as a slightly-out-of-time nurse.

No, he was the only one out of time here.

Running and running lights flashing Times Square spinning snow falling warm leather glove tugging his along through streets and cobblestone echoed empty under dull gold and everyone was there and he hadn’t seen anyone in months, years, an entire lifetime--

The voice broke through like shattering glass, flash of red as Bucky dropped the crystal on the kitchen floor and Steve yelled that he couldn’t blame everything on Zola and Natasha Romanoff was pinned up against the wall with scared wide eyes and bubblegum in her mouth and she was.

Standing at his bedside, looking at him with arms crossed over her chest, same sounds floating over him only this time they sunk in.

“Barnes just left.”

Steve stared down at his hands.

The faintest tremor, that strange steady almost-calm right before he exploded and punched out a glass screen for absolutely no goddamn reason other than pure, bubbling rage. Reignedin rage.

Words didn’t shake him hard as look on that face. Bucky finding him, Steve just missing him, that merry-go-round he knew better than anything else - he wouldn’t’ve come if he didn’t remember Steve again and even that wasn’t surprising, he’d always known Bucky always would, he doesn’t remember you; he will.

Bucky’d been here, came back for him and that meant it was Steve’s turn to go track him down again and here they go, one more time, one more round, he’d do this dance for the rest of his life, long as it took, he’d waltz through endless snow until his feet caved underneath him, it didn’t surprise him anymore, didn’t make his chest seize.

She did.

She used to be his best friend. Sitting on the floor of his old apartment, some girly chick-flick on TV while Natasha chewed her popcorn too loud and threw every fourth piece at his face, falling over on her side from laughing so hard as Steve teared up at the final chase-down-in-the-airport I-love-you-confession.

The undercover missions and training together, a thousand ways to launch her spinning off his shield and a dozen jabs another date she tried setting up over coms. Same way Bucky used to.

The :) SHIELD extractions at the curb, the easy silence when he needed it and the understanding glances when the rest of the team were rolling their eyes. That first long car ride, DC to New Jersey with her feet on the dash in those strange civilian clothes she’d picked out for him, a smile as she looked over at him from the passenger seat and teased him, teased him the way Bucky used to too.

She’d been his best friend. In every way, she’d been his best friend. She’d been there for him when he’d been so alone, and she’d changed his life. She’d pulled him outta the aftermath of New York and dragged him to DC with her and went apartment shopping for him and taught him all the ways of the internet and jumped right into his war when he was an international fugitive, no questions asked, stood there at his side as the world shifted, bleeding out in a van reminded him none of that’s
you fault Steve, and went through god knows what to pull those strings, find Bucky’s file for him and.

What felt like years ago now, she’d sat on Sam’s bed in front of him, shock and gratitude on her face in the quiet gravity as she told Steve he saved her life. And asked him if she’d trust him to do the same.

I would now.

And he had, trusted her to do the same.

I’m always honest.

She’d been through so much, they’d all been through so much, but he did trust her to save his life.

And she hadn’t.

Steve stared down at his hands, slowly turning them over against the white sheets.

There was something on his wrist.

Barnes just left.

“How long?” Steve asked, gaze flicking up to the silent figure barely inside the doorway.

How long what? How long since Bucky’d been gone? How long had he been in a coma?

How long had she known where Bucky was and lied to Steve’s face?

How long was she gonna let him waste away before she finally told him?

Would she ever have told him?

“You’ve been out seventy-nine hours.” She was studying him, calculating, and the first time they’d met he’d known instantly. May be a clutz in the presence of beautiful women, but he was still a soldier - recognized the face of another fighter.

Maybe that’s why he’d been so blindsided when it was her, when she was the one to betray him.

Seventy-nine hours. That was nowhere near seventy years.

When I went under, the world was at war. I wake up, they say we won.

They didn’t say what we lost.

He hadn’t been able to bring the world back then. Couldn’t bring his world back now.

The only thing left to fix was already gone. This time, he didn’t miss a date. Didn’t have a single person left waiting behind for him. But he still had a boy to catch.

And Natasha’d proven already, she wasn’t gonna be the one to help him do that.

The machines started beeping in protest as he yanked out the needle in his arm, threw back the sheets. Swung his legs over the side of the bed, one hand steadying on the sidetable and the other on the bed, pushing shakily to his feet.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Nat started, like she genuinely cared about him or something,
sounded so damn sincere he almost stopped and applauded whatever role she’d flipped on this time.

“Yeah, well, excuse me if I don’t really trust your ideas anymore,” Steve muttered under his breath, trying out standing on his own. Shit, not quite there yet.

Natasha was halfway across the room but she heard him anyways, freezing in place and normally that’d be great but his balance wasn’t super hot and the hospital gown certainly wasn’t either. He plopped back on his ass, glancing around for his clothes.

“Can you grab those?”

He didn’t wait for an answer, already untying the back of the dressing gown, glancing away from the hurt flickering behind green eyes.

While Natasha took her damn sweet time he scooped up the paper on the sidetable, inhaling slow and carefully controlled as he recognized Bucky’s handwriting. Course it was. The hell was Buck up to now?

The clothes fell in a pile beside him and he was pretty sure they’d been folded a moment before. Funny, Romanoff had never struck him as the childish type.

Another closer inspection of the drawn line on his wrist, the explanation on the paper and Steve held his breath for a few seconds, getting a grip on himself before the crackling and crumbling took over.

The floodgates were terrifyingly flimsy but he had to fucking keep it together ‘cause the moment that dam broke they’d never let him outta this goddamn hospital. How was he s’posed to go bitch slap his best friend across his stupid pretty face if they didn’t let him outta here?

“Rogers--”

“Romanoff,” he replied stubbornly, pulling the hospital gown off over his head so he didn’t have to look at whatever disappointed combo of emotions she was giving him now.

She waited by the window while he got dressed and Steve wasn’t sure what she was waiting for, wasn’t like he was gonna apologize for snapping. She sure as hell didn’t sound like she was gonna apologize for putting him through hell either.

But it was fine, the world was spinning a fraction less than the last time he’d been conscious, he’d manage. Had all his nutrient levels back to normal, but the whole coma thing kinda fucked him over regardless. He had to stop doing that, waking up all alone in what felt like another century. Again.

Soon as he found Bucky, the horizons would settle out straight again. The colors would turn back to normal and he’d stop stepping over crumbled, burned out building pieces in the goddamn tile.

He was gonna get his best friend back. He was gonna go fight for him. Again.

But honestly, after all the shit he’d gone through pulling Bucky back into his life over and over, that first time storming an enemy base all by himself - not a lot was really gonna top that. He’d been emotional, untrained, never landed a solid punch a day in his life, didn’t understand his own body, and decided to walk across Europe if he had to, on the slight chance his best friend from back home might’ve survived a firefight that killed almost his entire regiment and captured the rest of the unit to work as slaves in weapons factories.
So yeah, whatever was standing between him and Buck now? He wasn’t all that worried about it.

He’d go through whatever he had to, and he’d get Bucky back to his side. Again.

“Steve, I know how much Bucky means to you.” It was so quiet, honest and low and that was probably the first time he’d ever heard her admit that. She did know. She knew him so well, so how could she— “But running isn’t gonna help anybody. Stay outta this one, please.”

Would Peggy? If the situation were weirdly twisted somehow, and it was Peggy who was supposed to keep Bucky’s fucking existence from Steve, would she do it? Peggy Carter always did the right thing, always knew exactly what right, moral was and if she’d been faced with the same decision as Natasha, would she’ve made the same choice?

Did he hate Natasha for this because in some twisted way he expected it from her, with her past and all the lies she’d told, while if Peggy did the same thing, he’d simply understand she was trying to protect him?

Was that what Natasha was doing? Protecting him? Protecting Bucky? When Peggy’d kept the secret about Bucky being in love with him, it’d been for that reason but it wasn’t like Peg knew about the Winter Soldier and just wouldn’t tell him.

Would she?

His lungs weren’t filling up the way they were supposed to and his heart stuttered for a brief moment, the sudden fear that he was back in his old body again only he’d just wrestled into the Captain America blue plants and those fit him fine, he was fine, he just had to.

Fuck. Breathe.

The shoes felt a little loose as he forced himself to stand, took a moment to inhale, exhale, one hand propped on the back of the bedside chair. Bucky’d been here, and he couldn’t think about that, couldn’t wonder what he’d said, if he’d cried, he couldn’t do a damn thing from in here.

A heavy thumb pressed to the sharpie on the inside of his wrist, proof, this was real and Bucky was waiting for him, in whatever leather bounds Steve had to untangle this time, bombs he had to dodge and shield he had to drop, he was fine. He was ready.

Shove all that other shit down, pull on the invisible blue helmet and step back into whatever shoes were on solid enough ground to handle this and if right now that was Captain America instead of Steve Rogers, so be it.

“Steve.”

“Natasha, I can’t just stay cooped up in here, you know that.” He finally forced his head up, bones clicking painfully as he rolled his shoulders back, fist releasing from the chair to turn to the hurt eyes, crossed arms over black leather.

“I’m the only one that can fix this. It’ll get worse, the longer I’m not out there.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is that simple. This team is short a Captain, and the only one you’ve got around happens to be an expert. We’ve taken on armies of aliens, we can pull one soldier back from the dead.”

She didn’t budge, looking at him with tight worry and that fight she only ever had for them, the team,
nothing like the fire she carried in all those enemy wars.

There was...a chance. That she really had been trying to protect him. Them.

“I can do this,” Steve told her, calm, lying straight through the red white and blue and something in that hard beautiful outer shell cracked, bleeding through and all he could see was the soft torn insides behind the unfolding arms, slightly shaking head.

Natasha was so smart, how could she possibly think keeping Bucky from him would help either of them? It had to be some other reason. Peggy wouldn’t’ve, she’d never hurt him like that.

“I don’t like it.” A sharp sigh and Romanoff pursed her lips, gaze flicking reluctantly for the door. “But if you’re going after him, we might as well come with you.”

Some other day, he might’ve clapped her on the arm, smiled and held the door open for her 1940’s style, but today he just nodded, because the masks could cover a lot but he didn’t even wanna try pretending he wasn’t upset with her right now.

Well, actually.

Upset’s not exactly the word he would use.

_I know I’m bad news, I saved it all for you._

Keep your chin up, Steven. Shoulders back, head on straight. So long as you’re upright, you’re not losing.

It could’ve been a bad alleyfight, way he was coaching. But Natasha was studying him so closely and he didn’t have the helmet or a uniform to hide behind, had to force himself in a straight line, keep on walking no matter how many footprints it felt like he was walking in right now.

Forward, keep going forward and she’d have no idea he couldn’t place a damn thing. He’d been nonexistent for days and now he was back in the world and twisting the doorknob opened the door but wasn’t it already open and hadn’t he just opened it two minutes ago--

Stop. Stop trying, stop thinking about it. It’d only make it worse. So what if cause and effect didn’t exist, so what if he knew objectively it was 2016 and he just couldn’t shake the feeling he’d never left the twentieth century. He could handle it, everything falling down inside him, it was only the outside that mattered. He could fake the outsides. Always had.

Thing was, he knew a lot about comas now. While the last one’d been a lot longer, all the disorientation and disassociating wasn’t just bout waking up in a different century. Then, they’d all expected him to be confused, treading through two lives and stumbling into personal hell.

What he hadn’t known was that happened to all coma patients, no matter how long out - seventy years or seven days.

After, he’d done some research, thanks to the internet. Apparently a coma as short as three days could fuck up your brain’s entire timeline and memories for like. A week.

Like having all the events of your life thrown into a giant messy pile and being asked to sort it without any reference points.
But he couldn’t afford to space right now. Couldn’t afford to let himself focus on the fact that every nurse in scrubs he passed was his next-door neighbor or his mom while he’d simultaneously never seen any of the faces in this dystopian-white building before.

If circumstances were different maybe he could have a second to adjust, but there wasn’t a second left on the melting clock he had left to spare.

Last time, the only life on the wire was his own. But now it was everyone's.

He had to find Bucky.

So here he goes, shoving a world and a half of hospital memories echoing tiles awful smells down the back of his throat to make room for the sounds he was gonna have to make, the words that’d have to be damn near perfect to convince the Avengers he had to assemble when he got outta this place.

Or, y’know, they could all just be. Waiting in the lobby too, that was fine.

Fuck, did he ever catch a goddamned break?

The halting stutter in his step, there was no way everyone in this room didn’t see it and there were too many pairs of eyes staring at him to count and Steve could keep walking straight to the desk but the chance of him walking out those front doors without a fight would be pretty slim if he did.

‘cept who the hell was he s’posed to face right now?

“Uh. Thanks for being here,” Steve started slowly, awkward, shoving both hands in pockets and before he could attempt something better Tony was stepping out from beside Sharon, dark eyes flashing under the harsh fluorescent lights, voice cutting even harsher in its cloying lightness, in the awful casual, offside-comment tone,

“He was here.” Took everything he had not to bristle, not to curl his fists as Tony lifted one arm across his chest, the other elbow propped on his wrist, waving one arm in the air, dripping pure sarcastic scorn, “Your buddy, your pal.”

Signature smart mouth tipping up in a sneer and Steve wasn’t breathing calmly enough to take this.

“Your Bucky.” It bit like an accusation, all Steve’s fault, like Steve’s Bucky was about the worst goddamned thing that’d ever happened to this town. Even Nat was frozen at his side-- no, beside him, not at his side. Right now, nobody in this room was at his side.

“Y’know, it’s remarkable, how many of us he’s landed in here and he still comes gallivanting in like the goddamn hero--”

“Okay. That’s enough.” Steve cut in a little sharp, shooting Tony the same disapproving look from the beginning. Of all the things to come full circle in his life the misunderstanding fight between him and Stark wasn’t one he’d ever wanted back. But stalking pissily past that indignant genius face to politely, quietly ask the desk nurse for his release forms, leave Tony stewing was more than a little satisfying.

Steve got it, Tony was mad. Scared, even. Bucky’d done a lot of damage to them all, and Tony’d had it bad. Really bad. But that didn’t mean he had to be a fucking dick. Literally minutes after Steve got outta a coma. Damn, it never stopped, did it?

This wasn’t what he wanted, fuck this wasn’t what he wanted. But Steve Rogers was too shattered
and shaky right now to take Tony’s ridicule and he’d been Captain America around his team for so long, that’s what they thought was normal anyways, right? Call him Cap and shove him into the streets with a red white and blue target strapped to his back and watch him fight with boots too heavy to dance.

The boombox Tony’d given him, to dance, up on the rooftop of the home he’d opened to two troubled souls that Bucky’d shattered with his metal fist and the pencil in his hand was creaking from being squeezed too tight, on the verge of snapping and he nearly dropped it loosening his fingers so fast.

“How can you just...forgive him. Go after him.”

God, no. Bring back the bitter fighting and the scornful sarcasm. He couldn’t take Tony like that, not all edgy and hurt. That’s not what Steve wanted either.

Go after him. Running through German cobblestone streets, black shadows slipping into an alley and Sam’s voice shouting behind him, wait up, heart pounding and--

*When the city goes silent*
*The ringing in my ears gets violent*

Deep breath, angels choking on halos and he’d never wanted this, he’d signed his name on the dotted line to take out bullies, not all these thudding lives that kept getting cut up darker red and black in collateral damage.

How many paid the price before you did?

Steve sat down the pencil.

“I’m sorry, Tony.” The lobby was so quiet, settling over in freezing waves, shards of glass embedded in forearms and hands and Steve pushed off the counter, spun around to face those heated eyes, furrowed hurt lines as Tony stared accusingly back at him. “But I don’t have a choice. I know bad guys, I’ve fought enough evil in this world to know. Bucky’s not that.”

“What about Peggy?” Natasha interrupted and Steve was so. freaking close to losing it.

Hands curled in fists around the nurses’ counter how many counters had he broken in fights he had to get a fucking grip on something that wasn’t about to shatter the second he snapped.

Wasn’t gonna fucking snap.

What about Peggy.

Well fuck Natasha Romanoff, that’s what.

He’d spent months asking himself the same goddamned question.

Pretty green eyes he’d once trusted, cared about, were looking at him with that wide-eyed open honesty a thousand screams in the silence, *if you can’t forgive me, how could you possibly forgive him that?*

Peggy was the only reason he’d been able to save Bucky’s life.

Not just ‘cause she’d been the one to tell him - *your audience contained what was left of the 107th.*

Because she’d been the one to believe in him. The first person since Bucky Barnes to believe in him.
and Buck didn’t count when they were kids, same way your ma had to love ya, there was an obligation Bucky had to him for being his best friend since all eternity to believe in him but.

Peggy was the first person to see both sides of him, all wrapped up in days of basic and USO tours and still seen past the tights and the too-big helmet crooked on his head and still believed in him. She thought he was made for more than this. Before Buck even knew.

He’d’ve never saved Bucky if it weren’t for her.

That was just the first thing she’d done to save their tangled lives.

She was a war hero as much as he was, only no one made statues for her, no one saw all the power she had, all the asses she kicked and days she made with a beautiful bright smile. She believed in him, in the good of the world, and she deserved so much more than losing all that in twisted, grayed memories.

She’d hated that place. She’d never said it but she’d never had to. He didn’t know her long enough to understand everything in that complex beautiful mind, but he knew her enough to know she hated being stuck in prolonged limbo, kept alive by beeping machines and frail bones, nothing left to live for and nothing left to give the world.

Stuck in sanitarium, walls not so different than the ones boxing him in, that’d boxed Bucky in in whatever basement table Hydra’d kept him strapped to with not enough people at her bedside to make up for the hours she spent wasting away, losing the brilliant, sparkling mind.

Peggy hated not being able to remember.

Same way Bucky had. And he’d saved her from that. Saved himself too, because apparently, according to the feisty brunettes he couldn’t keep away from, there was no fate worse than losing the memory of summer sun shining.

“I can’t hate him for killing Peggy...sometimes I wish I could. But if you're looking for blind anger, I’m sure Buck hates himself enough for that, he doesn’t need it from me too.”

“.....only person I know tough as Sarah Rogers is Peggy Carter.”

"You knew Peggy?" Tony interjected curiously, leaning forward on the bar as Bucky blinked wide and pretty. Perfect time to hop back in the conversation.

"Barely, they only met once," Steve answered, at the exact same time that Bucky started, "Really damn well, she's the one who--"

Buck froze, suddenly snapping his mouth shut as widened eyes flicked to Steve, looking unmistakably guilty.

Steve crossed his arms over his chest and stuck his tongue in his cheek. He’d had no idea.

Well. Considering that he’d trusted her enough to tell her he loved Steve in the middle of a World War when he could’ve lost his position as the Commandos’ sniper - scratch that, as a fighter at all - his army pension, his dignity, and his best friend?

Really damn well made a lotta sense, now.

And as hard as it’d been for Steve, to lose Peggy like that? How much fucking harder had it been for Buck?
To pull the trigger on a life that sacrificed so much for yours?

It hurt like hell, but it was her time. Hell, it was all their time, a long time ago. Steve was still kinda amazed that Bucky hadn’t lured him there and double-homi-suicided them all in one final dramatic scene.

*You were always so dramatic.* Affectionate smile, easy understanding. *You saved the world.*

I have lived a life. My only regret is that you didn’t get to live yours.

“All Peg ever wanted for me was to be happy...and after everything it’s taken to get there...she’d understand.”

She’d probably smile red and pretty, shake her head of bouncing brown curls, knowing she was still the one to drag them back together after all these years, all these decades they should’ve learned and never had. Still the one to take Bucky’s secrets and hold them so tight they both fumbled through the next trial, next battle, quiet steady sure waiting just behind his shoulder with the offer of the best civilian pilot around and a plan to bring the love of his life back from the dead.

*There is not a man or woman, no matter how fit he or she may be, who is capable of carrying the entire world on their shoulders.*

She was Bucky’s way out. And maybe, in some weird twisted way, she’d saved Buck. He’d killed her instead of himself and that was no kind of trade, but that’s exactly the kind of trade she’d make.

“Even after she died, Peggy was still saving my life...” Steve stared down and he wasn’t seeing this hospital, not this room, just hers. The old beige curtains, bedside tables littered with photographs. Bottles of numbing pills. The glass of water, when the cough came--

For as long as I can remember, I just wanted to do what was right.

I guess I'm not quite sure what that is anymore.

One more time, Peg, help him bring back Bucky one more time. All this time and it was still her, who could do this. If Bucky hated himself for killing Peggy, thought that was the worst thing he’d ever done?

Imagine, what it’d prove, to show Bucky that...Steve forgave him.

“I’m forgiving him Peggy. And once Bucky understands that, that I forgive'm his greatest sin? He’ll understand.” He’ll understand. There was nothing, nothing that’d make him anything less than the love of Steve’s life. He’ll finally fucking understand, “...I'm never fucking giving up.” Steve muttered under his breath and the tiles slowly faded back into focus, two feet blocking his vision.

Fuck.

He blinked twice, looked up.

No warm brown eyes, cold green ones.

The first thing he’d thought about Natasha Romanoff was that she reminded him of Peggy, a little, maybe the leather jacket or the short curly hair or the smile to match the guns on her belt or maybe because it was the first beautiful girl he’d been able to talk to since Peg without tripping over himself.

“Steve. You can’t trust him.”
She was nothing like Peggy fucking Carter.

“No, Natasha. I can’t trust you.”

*Kinda hard to trust someone when you don’t know who that someone really is.*

Who do you want me to be?

What the fuck kind of friend let him agonize over Bucky being gone when he wasn’t, when he was right there all along, waiting for him and Peggy would never.

“I know exactly who you are now.” Innocent car rides and undercover kisses turned daggers. “You’re the best friend I depended on, that didn’t tell me the love of my life was alive.”

Natasha’s eyes were red hot as her hair, mouth popping open around a retort he’d never hear, but later, so much later he couldn’t help but look back and wonder if maybe, she’d been about to say, *no, he wasn’t.*

Not without you.

And, ironically, with or without him now.

Natasha opened her mouth and she never got to say whatever it was she was planning, because Bruce was staring and Pepper had a hand over her mouth and Clint was waving a hand at them to cut it out a second, leaning over the counter to ask the chagrined desk nurse to turn up the TV.

And that’s when he heard it.

They all did.

The corner TV in the the lobby was announcing some tragedy and because they were all still superheroes to some twisted level underneath the bullshit convoluted mess this’d become, everyone turned, eyes on the screen.

“--and this is Gav, reporting live with the ABC7 Eyewitness New York. Breaking news, it appears a commuter train crossing from Manhattan to Midtown earlier today nearly hit a pedestrian that’d wandered onto the tracks, reportedly listening to her *music* in headphones, when an unidentified man at the station leapt in front of the train, shoved her out of the way and was unfortunately struck himself; saving her life and tragically ending his.

“The train station footage of the tracks caught the rescuer just at the corner of the screen, see there, as the girl doesn’t look up, taking that first near-fatal step onto the tracks. And here, right as the train cuts into the frame, there comes our figure in black. Running in, bolting so fast for that girl-- Is that something shiny in his hand? And there he goes, he must’ve been an incredible athlete, there is a marathon somewhere missing him right now. Wow, what a shove, she just goes tumbling and there’s the moment, that pause of hesitation while he’s still on the tracks and the train is just so close, there’s nothing either of them could do. ABC7 Eyewitness News and we’re cutting to the survivor now…

“...I j-just wasn’t thinking, it was a platform and the trains always stop, I thought the trains always stopped but it just kept going, pulled through and I didn’t even see it until it was too close, until it was too late and suddenly I was rolling in the dirt on the other side of the tracks and I c-can’t believe…”

“Eyewitness reports are saying the man seemingly leapt out of nowhere, apparently moving so
quickly the conductor didn’t realize he was on the tracks until the man paused in the face of that looming headlight and froze. What a time to hesitate, but one could imagine how overwhelming it’d be. Deafening screech, pulled those brakes hard as he could but the man was just too close, there was nothing that could’ve stopped that train. Oh, and here’s Kris now, coming in with the official report--

“Looks likes there’s no injuries for any passengers on board, only the scrapes of the surviving girl, who’s family is riding with her to the hospital now. While train collisions most certainly aren’t always lucky enough to end with a casualty count of just one, the people of New York can be comforted today, that sometimes even in death, there’s a bright light somewhere. Official reports state that New York’s finest are still trying to identify the fallen hero…”

Identify the fallen hero.

Steve stood in the middle of the lobby and stared at the TV in the corner as the news station ran the footage again, grainy video of a girl on the tracks, incoming train speeding into the frame, fast as the one he’d jumped on top of. Should’ve jumped out of when Bucky did.

The last thing Bucky’d said to him, left on his wrist, was *I had you, til death.*

**Til death.**

And now there was one more train.

Colliding with the man on the tracks.

Bucky.

That was...Bucky.

The floor dropped out from under his feet.

And he was falling, helicarrier exploding debris around him, falling and falling and crashing as the plane hit ice and the train peeled back, reaching up and screaming and there was no one, no one reaching out with red gloves to catch those freezing hands, silence, pure silence instead of the scream, shout,

*Bucky! No!*

There was no one there to shout it. Just the scream as the train collided with that sickening clunk--

Too fast to even see the body crumple, fly. It didn’t matter, he was on those tracks the same time the train was and nobody, not even them could survive that.

Only.

He...had that exact same feeling. The same tug in his gut, slowly still-spinning world.

Nothing...nothing changed.

Bucky couldn’t be dead.

It was that simple. He didn’t feel it, the same way he hadn’t felt it at Azzano, or after the fall. He’d still had that pulse, that sure pulse in his veins that told him Bucky was alive.

And...he still had it now. The world. Hadn’t. Stopped.

So Bucky couldn’t be dead.
Please tell me he's alive, sir.

He was standing in a tent, dripping rain, heart pounding in his throat and hair sticking to his forehead, gravitational shadow standing behind his shoulder, Peggy’s solid presence and rank he didn’t have, showgirl storming an army tent with his heart shredded in fear, hovering despair.

B-A-R...

I can spell. I've signed more of these condolence letters today than I would care to count. But…

He knew it in his soul, same way he’d known it the moment those words sunk in.

The name does sound familiar. I'm sorry.

Steve hadn’t been able to see, anything, for god knows how long. Couldn’t be true. Not Bucky. Not his best friend from back home, the one he’d shipped off for the 107th without him.

Bucky wasn’t gonna die over here. He’d promised he’d come home. They hadn’t--

Steve hadn’t--

Bucky promised he’d come home.

Peggy grabbed his shoulder. “Steve.”

What do you plan to do, walk to Austria? If that’s what it takes.

“You told me you thought I was meant for more than this. Did you mean that?”

It was raining and the soft brown curls were damp enough to flatten, sticking to her skin and she was so beautiful standing here soaking wet and still shining the sharpest diamond, pair of stolen polish dimes, pretty accent so sincere he didn’t doubt, couldn’t doubt, for a single moment as she looked at him and swore,

“Every word.”

Now was the part he threw a backpack in the jeep, turned to her and pleaded, for him, for Bucky, for all those soldiers they weren’t gonna save that Steve couldn’t leave behind, please, couldn’t she understand,

Then you gotta let me go.

The rumbling engine of a civilian plane drowned, drowned out by a scream.

"STOP, let go," Bucky squirmed, tremble as he yanked his shoulder but Steve just shoved him harder against the wall. "Let me go!" Hysteric that time, bloody hand knocking at Steve's arm, tightened grip and Bucky made a pained sound, tipping off into rambling, shaking head.

"Let me go. Let me go!!" His voice shot shrill, heart pounding so fast Steve could feel it in the rotting air between them and crystal was rimmed red and wet, like the kitchen floor, hovering tears on eyelashes as Bucky twisted, voice cracking over a sob, "Why can't you ever let me go??"

Steve froze.

He froze, mouth open around the pleading response, staring at Peggy with the rain pouring down only it wasn’t, the tumbling drops were hardening, gathering up crystals and freezing, on eyelashes
turning away, in mid-air, ice sculpture to box them in and the words were on his tongue, burning fire
on the tip of his tongue,

Then you gotta let me go.

The world was shifting.

No, no, the world wasn’t allowed to shift, wasn’t allowed to flash black and white oversaturated,
hospital lights and fire, spinning so fast he was tipping and ramming to a complete halt, no no no--

Bucky wouldn’t. The ground under his feet was caving mud, ready to swallow him up and the
pavement burned bare feet as he ran, ran, cold metal against his toes as they shoved him in a box
made of jagged ice and he was falling, _fuck_--

One last jolt forward, fingers reaching as he dove across icy rain and muddy boots, red red closing
around the only extended hand he could see and Peggy held on tight, pistol calluses on hands that
looked so soft and fragile, hands he’d never held in war, flashing war around them as she flushed up
at him with _you’re late_, machine gun in those hands as he looked down at her and echoed back.

The echo didn’t stop carrying. Didn’t stop, _you’re late, you’re late, you’re late_, and she was holding
tight to his hand but he--

He couldn’t hold back tight enough. Her hand was shrinking, weaker. Red lips turning down at the
corners, eyes creasing tired, tired and sad and the fingertips laced over his knuckles were shriveling,
chestnut freezing around her face, silver ice to dead gray, pale white snow and he couldn’t move,
couldn’t move in waves of glacial water, glass crystal cutting open his palms, riding up his arms and
he couldn’t stop it, he couldn’t stop it as Peggy shriveled and cracked, fading, fading as his fingers
fumbled to catch hers and she was crumbling, crumbling into ash, rusting Phoenix ash dissipating,
dust the wind swept into a morbid pencil-shaded swirl and she was gone, flew from his fingertips just
like that and Steve still couldn’t scream.

The wind kept blowing, hard enough to threaten knocking him over and Steve was so cold, these
clothes didn’t fit him right, hanging loose and billowing but for the tie around his neck, so tight he
was choking and he was so cold, spinning around on one worn-through heel--

Gravestones.

Black, black dresses and hats and shoes and black notebook clenched in his fist as he stared at
Mom’s coffin, hovering over the ground. Sarah’s funeral. How was it? It was alright. She’s buried
next to Dad.

Paper crumpled, loud, and Steve looked down aghast at the sketchbook in his hand. His hand was
too big. It was too big, too strong, and the birthday gift he’d gotten from Buck last year was crushed.
The leaves under his feet were crushed. Brittle, crinkling under shoes that were too big on feet even
bigger, gleaming fancy with that smell from the shoe-shiners down the street in Midtown.

His whole body was too big. Pumped back full of serum and this wasn’t his suit, he’d never worn
this suit, black and sleek, didn’t fit broad shoulders emaciated stomach right with all its crisp lines,
and maybe it should’ve been familiar to not fit right in a suit because he hadn’t for the first twenty
years of his life but this was a whole different kind’a wrong. Nothing like the ratty suits he used to
bundle in - dark and brooding, sharp jacket, black vest, black tie, buttoned up white shirt -- only that
didn’t belong, it was the white button up he’d worn to dance with Bucky that night they’d made love
the first time and.
Steve looked up.

This wasn’t Sarah’s funeral.

It was Bucky’s.

He’d looked so good, that day, stepping up behind Steve on the porch, just take out the trash, shine my shoes, looked like a damn church boy and if Steve didn’t feel guilty as hell for flushing at that because he knew exactly the kinda things that came outta Buck’s mouth and how could he even be thinking about that at all on a day like this, on a day they put his mom in the ground then Bucky’s hand was on his shoulder and Steve looked up at him with big affectionate eyes and he could melt, he could melt because Buck was gonna be at his side for the rest of forever.

At his side, now.

Only it was a coffin at his side, and Steve was staring down at that young face, the one from that day, and Bucky’d been dead the moment he doomed himself to Steve but he couldn’t be dead, he couldn’t be dead, the world was shifting and dropping under his feet but he couldn’t be dead.

Shaky, numb hands dug split knuckles into the corners of his eyes. Fuck, get it together. Get a grip, Rogers.

He opened his eyes.

Short hair, that was the first thing he registered as he recognized crystal eyes, staring at him blank under pale skin on a street corner in Queens, overwhelmed and confused and not the slightest bit of recognition as Steve reached for him, cried out, Bucky?

It was that face staring back at him from the coffin now.

The cool grass beneath his feet tipped and any second now, his knees were going to give out and at least they’d bury him here, in the open dirt grave they were about to lower his boy into, at least they were together in death and--

“Captain?”

Steve spun around. There were so many faces, voices, so much black he couldn’t tell who was who and who’d spoken and why there were so many people at a funeral for some backalley dock boy from Brooklyn, but someone was wearing a military cap and there were outstretched hands, carrying an American flag.

Not the kind from his uniform. The kind Bucky painted over a casket and handed to him on pure, clean canvas. Red white and blue, America.

“It’s time to fold the flag,” Howard Stark told him softly, quick engineer hands already poised on the other side.

Your best buddies were the ones that folded your flag, everyone knew that. And the Commandos weren’t here, the Commandos had left him a long goddamn time ago or he’d left them, back of a golden bar as he whisked a beautiful boy off to dance but they weren’t here and that hit just as hard now as the files deceased did, deceased deceased deceased but Bucky’d stuck to Howard like over-eager glue, from the minute he’d been asked to test out weapons efficiency and they’d worked together in his shop, had tossed around ideas and made plans for the future, a drink together in Brooklyn after the war.
Howard, who’d Bucky sent flying off a cliff in a car that most definitely couldn’t fly.

Did he know, that shiny red from the beginning, Bucky’d taken that car and finally designed it so it could? Did Howard know?

“Cap,” Howard called softly and Steve’s hands shot to two corners of the flag, fast as soldier’s hands snapped to foreheads to salute only his fingers were curling in the smooth material, the most careful cautious fists he’d ever made but he couldn’t stop, brandishing the only weapon that’d ever saved him only it hadn’t been enough to save--

Breath caught on the sharp inhale and he forced his chin up, snapping his eyes back forward and Howard was.

Tony. Howard was Tony and Tony’s throat was painted with a mottled white scar and he was looking at Steve with raised eyebrows, impatient, waiting for him to lift hands, fold, fold.

To stand here and mechanically fold Bucky’s flag as Howard and Tony flickered and someone was weeping, some girl from some double date that Bucky’d left at the dance hall, dragging Steve off with that angry line in his forehead, dimple in his chin furrowing as he growled something about not being able to stand how disrespectful and.

Fold.

The flag on his chest, it was nothing like the flag in his hands and Bucky turned to him, asked if he was gonna keep the uniform. That sly, tipped eyebrow flirting tone and Steve hadn’t thought about it, then, but now Bucky had a flag and it didn’t matter, if he’d been flirting or not.

How many of his soldiers had died this way? How many came home to waste away, was Dernier’s girl so happy to have him home she finally said yes to that proposal or did she split after the first nightmare he broke something? Had Dugan’s mom made everybody that Thanksgiving dinner he’d promised? Did Monty ever get the homemade soup in front of a fire he’d wished for back when Steve didn’t have anything left to live for?

Fold. Straighten.

One more step.

Barnes was the only Howling Commando to give his life in service of his country. The others just gave their existence, nothing more. Just their hope and their dreams and their normalcy and their queasiness to blood and their pure white innocence, drifting down snow and dark eyelashes as someone pelted one more snowball.

Fold.

It was so heavy.

Why was it so heavy?

It was just a flag, but he could feel every stitch against the raw skin on his palms, like sackcloth weighing down his wrists, almost like it was filled with something and all that pride, that was supposed to be stuffing Steve’s chest right now? Where was that? Shoved in this damn flag instead?

Fold. One step closer to Tony’s waiting hands. Snapping bite, we’re not soldiers and Howard’s wide eyes, staring after Peggy Carter too, whatever you want, pal. Glowing gold, blue arc reactor in his chest and the patience that only the war man knew, younger than he’d ever known Tony, what
father, son was his brother and the flag was. So. Fucking. Heavy.

One more fold. Lift the edge of the triangle and he was in uniform, Class C’s, the uniform he’d only gotten to wear at base, gold and official and Steve wasn’t sure he’d be able to face standing here, holding up the edge as Howard tucked in the final piece, and salute.

How was he supposed to salute.

Bucky’d promised.

The day he’d shipped out, standing there in his Class A’s, saluting Steve goodbye, he’d promised. He’d promised he’d come home.

Gold gloves, gloves rolling the edge of the triangle tighter, tucking it clean and precise the way they’d tucked their beds he didn’t get to share anymore.

Folded. Steve took a step backwards, a single marching step backwards and dear god, fuck, he didn’t wanna do this.

There were tears in his eyes, tears shaking his chest under the shining pins, gold tie, brown uniform, hair slicked perfectly, carefully to the side and the only stars he had left were on the goddamned flag Stark was holding but he’d taken so much from Bucky Barnes, he wasn’t taking this.

Steve lifted his arm slowly, angled the tips of his fingers to his forehead, and saluted Sergeant James Barnes of the 107th and the flag they were to bury him with.

He’d never gotten married.

For all the girls that’d thrown themselves in his lap, all the chances he’d always had, Bucky’d never gotten married.

He didn’t have a spouse, they gave the flag to your spouse, but Bucky never married and they’d put in the ground, bury it beside his cold body--

“Captain Rogers?”

It took him a second, to blink fast enough to see past the watery lashes, gasp in a shaky, hitching breath, and register the man in uniform beside him.

Pararescue NCO Sam Wilson, two white gloves cradling the vibrant red, stark blue. White stars arching across the top, Bucky’s burial flag only it wasn’t laying on his casket. Sam was-- Sam was holding it out to Bucky’s...spouse.

To Bucky’s best friend.

“As a representative of the United States Military, it is my high privilege to present to you…” Oh. “…distinguished service rendered to our country, and to our flag by your loved one.”

To Steve.

His loved one.

On March 2, 1945, Steve Rogers stood in front of a foggy mirror propped haphazardly in the back of an army tent, staring at the shadow of a man about to embark on the last mission of his life.

And he could remember, thinking then, about the future he’d have. If he survived that last mission,
going after Schmidt. Under the arch of a canvas sky he’d stared, the empty void where crystal used to shine over his shoulder in the mirror, and just. Thought about how he much he hadn’t said.

He’d spent most his life so far gone, under and he’d thought maybe he’d break the surface when they pumped his cells perfect. But he’d gotten the serum, and his feelings for Buck didn’t budge an inch.

And nothing changed. Why would it? Steve spent his entire life in love with Bucky Barnes, so what? He loved Bucky and the sky was blue and snow was cold as hell. There was nothing to think about, nothing to confess.

Until now that Bucky was dead. And Steve couldn't help but wonder if maybe he should've confessed.

It was too late now, though. Steve could whisper I love you to Bucky's grave when they won this war.

The empty grave. He’d wondered, all the way back then, in that empty dismal tent in 1945, if they'd hand Steve the folded flag.

Of course they had.

Of course they had.

If he survived this. If he made it out alive on the other side. Part of him didn't think he would. Part of him didn't think he'd last past this next battle. Part of him didn't want to.

That was the worst part of him and Steve stared with dead eyes in a foggy mirror and wondered when he'd turned into the coward that couldn't keep breathing without Bucky at his side.

There was no mirror, now, to tell him he was wasting away in this cemetery with Bucky’s coffin and a burial flag on Steve’s upturned palms, the red gloves that’d failed to catch precious cold hands curling around the edges, terrified of clutching it close, more terrified to drop it.

And he’d been right. All the way back then, he’d been right.

Whisper I love you to Bucky’s grave, only.

They never won the war.

The embroidered stars left imprints on his forehead, cheekbones, but better there than the empty empty hole in his chest.

He couldn’t stop crying.

He couldn’t stop crying, curled in the middle of the floor of their apartment in Brooklyn, the place he’d taken Bucky down and kissed his stomach between murmured I love you’s, watching the beautiful face sink further further down into hopelessness, the fragile, terrified, desperate affection as Bucky wrapped his fingers around the back of Steve’s head and begged so quietly,

Say it again.

Steve’s knees were aching, stomach ripped up from all the shuddering but he couldn’t stop crying, triangle burial flag pressed to his face, curled in the middle of that floor and shaking so hard through the loud sobbing sounds he couldn’t hear the soft murmur as Bucky called to him--
Spattering. Gunshots, seven rifleman, three volley salute and Steve didn’t startle at the overlaying blasts when he’d been hearing nothing but gunfire since he lifted his head off that numb white hospital pillow.

And again, gunshots painted into the sky and he could smell the smoke and powder, the way Bucky smelled at the end of the missions and.

Again, crackling fireworks lighting up the sky as Bucky took his hand, pulled him to his feet, and ran. Color exploding above them, ground shaking beneath their feet and the cold was pulling water from his eyes, the crystal was pulling tears down his cheeks and all he could smell was the burning heat, hellfire flames as Sam slipped the last hot brass into his hand.

It was the last time he’d touch something metal that belonged to Bucky and Steve couldn’t breathe, he wasn’t sure how long before weak legs gave out on him with no one to scoop him up this time.

And for just the smallest, tiniest moment, he couldn’t help but think. It couldn’t be worse than this, there was nothing worse than this.

Then the trumpet started

A single note, again, and five steps higher.

*Day is done.*

Something seized in his chest, some awful mix of panic and terror as he realized, one more time, he didn’t reach far enough. Bucky was lying in the bottom of that ravine and he was about to crash a plane and damn his best friend to hell for eternity and there was nothing he could to do to stop it.

Steady pitch, half-octave, octave.

*Gone the sun.*

Ringing loud and clear over empty fields and it wasn’t panic seizing his chest, it was grief, the kind of grief so heavy it’d drag him down, crumple him on his knees if he weren’t in his Class C’s.

One five eight, one five eight, one five eight.

*From the lakes, from the hills, from the skies.*

Couldn’t they just go back, go back to when it was one two three and the only thing seizing his chest was butterflies and affection and blushing smiles as Bucky swept them across the floor, waltz, one five eight.

Half-octave, octave, and one higher.

*All is well.*

Sheer beautiful, loudest thing he’d ever heard and he’d never wanted this, knew he’d never survive lowering Bucky’s body into the ground, never survive standing stock still, silent at his best pal’s funeral while a soldier played Taps and--

Octave, half, down.

*Safely rest.*

He could...never go home. He could never go home.

A single note, again, and five steps higher.
Falls the night.

Один, Один, Пять.

And the sun can no longer rise.

“That is what death is like. It doesn’t matter what uniforms the soldiers are wearing. It doesn't matter how good the weapons are. I thought if everyone could see what I saw, we would never have war anymore.”
— Jonathan Safran Foer, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

No matter what uniform the soldiers were wearing, be it gold or black or red white blue, there was a part of his subconscious that never stopped being that kid in basic, the kid that tried so hard to become one, to understand how to fight a war in perfect lines with a helmet strap chafing his chin.

And that soldier was still in him, somewhere, because the thread in his spine shot stiff bite to the next knob of Steve’s spine, every bone thoracic to lumbar and down down—like he could thread Steve’s spine outta his body with his teeth, rip his skeleton apart through his skin—chin flicked up before he registered the shout across the white-cross field, “Attention!”

Bucky’d drawn these straps.

On that painting hanging in their apartment, straps wrapped under the casket, the one Steve was currently gripping tighter than he’d ever dared grip the body in that box. One bare hand curled around the wood of the casket and it was the same one, the exact same one from that painting and he’d never noticed that until right now and he’d been so wrong, so wrong because Steve hadn’t saved him, Buck wasn’t curled crying helpless on the casket lid, he was inside, he was g-gone--

The casket was closed. Stood at the head of it, in the fucking place of honor, and eagle eye view had Buck where he always was, covering Steve’s right. The two of them, one more time, lined up together above another gaping hole in the ground.

The casket was closed, wood panel between him and looking at that pretty face one last time and in 1945 he’d told himself it’d be an empty casket and.

It could be. Nothing imprinting the red satin cushion down.

The body, the body could be anyone’s. Everyone’s, he stood here with a strap in his hand to lower a casket into the ground and it could be Peggy trapped behind the mahogany prison.

It was Carter’s funeral, and Dugan’s, Jones, Falsworth, Morita, Dernier’s. It was Riley’s, and Clint’s, Sam’s, Natasha’s.

Steve’s.

The pallbearers were supposed to prompt the family to leave their personal items on the casket they were burying with the body, but he was the only family Buck had.
And there was only one piece he had left to give.

Only piece left of Buck in this world and if he was losing everything, might as well bury that with the rest of his heart in this grave.

They clanked, as he lifted them from around his neck.

He almost expected the signature click of Bucky’s metal fingers against the tags, corner tipped up on one half’a his mouth as he mouthed the name, closed steel around the ballchain and pulled, dragged Steve down into a smiling kiss, dogtags heating up between their bare bodies.

There was no one left to smile absently as Steve cooked shirtless in the kitchen, burning a brand into the center of his chest, no one to teasingly complain about bruising under his chin from getting smacked with the things on repeat, no one to trace the name, numbers into his shoulderblades when he thought Steve was asleep.

JAMES B BARNES.

Never belonged to him anyways.

Of all the punches, split knuckles, scarred from broken crystal, battered, shattered, bruised and used, it’d never been harder in his life to uncurl a fist.

Had to let go some damn time, but he just couldn’t bring himself to open up his fingers, to let the metal just drop to the top of that beautiful wooden casket.

The edges of the tags were rounded, enough so they didn’t slash open skin but they were cutting into his palms anyways.

His hands were shaking. His head was spinning, and the dogtag chain was rattling.

Rattling, like lungs used to. Like bullets used to. In the barrel of your best man’s gun.

One more time.

Just open your eyes, Stevie, c’mon.

The metal was slicing hard enough to hurt, to hurt a lot and he just kept pressing harder. But they weren’t caving, weren’t crushing, not even with the serum strength.

Y’gotta get up, pal, you’re scarin’ me.

Buck? A-ah, Buck, it. It hurts.

I know, I know. I’m gonna take care of you, sunshine. Just open those pretty eyes for me--

Long lashes fluttered, once more, and Steve opened his eyes.

The grave was glowing golden. The inside of a bar, flickering walls of a canvas army tent and harsh white fluorescent and the casket was lowering and the scuffed wood dancefloor was freezing over
and all he could feel was the bite of metal in his hand.

The TV was rattling about upcoming elections, now.

There’d been a story, about a train.

The metal against his skin was starting to cut circulation to his fingertips but the woods were flickering out, fading into background with Arlington, a canvas tent in the rain.

It hurt, freezing metal digging into bruises already formed; he was squeezing harder than the cells in his hand could rapidly heal. Two rectangles and the silver ring he’d slipped on the chain with them when he couldn’t bear to stare at it anymore. Fiancé.

And he stood there, in the middle of a hospital lobby, clutching the dogtags around his neck so tightly he could feel the numbers, letters engrave into his skin.

Sergeant James Barnes, 325570…

Maybe he was mumbling it or maybe that was Bucky, a thousand years ago, but it’d been burned into twin skeleton flesh and the pain was so fucking sharp it kept snapping him back to the white, stinging slash so bad his eyes would water if he had any tears left in this godforsaken body.

I’m turning into you. Th-this is some horrible dream.

As soon as Bucky saw Steve dripping blood, abandoned post and barreled down the hill cursing every expletive he could think of, mixed in with a lot of *you can't do that to me Rogers's.*

Steve had been amused, actually. He'd shot this look at Gabe and they were both snorting at Bucky, red in the face from yelling. All Bucky could think about was Steve coming back with a bulletwound, or not coming back at all, and then what would Bucky be fall apart Hydra find him drag him to that table no one’d come screaming no one’d hear strapped down heavy leather scent of blood--

He'd promised to say when everything was too much - world spinning and suddenly lack of ability to breathe, he'd say this was probably that too much. Braced hands on knees staring at the ground while Steve and the Commandos jostling above him nothing sinking in, couldn't anchor, all he could see were fluorescent lights and the glint on the edge of a scalp, TV screen, and he couldn't move, he was pinned down and in the serumcoffin all over again and his screams were making ripping up his throat until he coughed blood--

Bucky reached out a single, panicked hand for Steve.

Except. He wasn’t there.

Who was Steve supposed to reach for, Bucky wasn’t there.

Bucky wasn’t here and Steve couldn’t separate the white clean from the dirty forest, who was s’posed to put an arm round his waist, let his fingers curl into a strong arm, suck in shaky breaths until the world straightened out again?

Kept chanting this mantra in his head - he'd gotten out, he'd gotten out, he wasn't hallucinating this whole time – couldn’t make himself believe it. Brain kept swirling, stuck between deciding whether the table or the trees were the hallucination. If he could convince himself that this -- the forest, Steve - - was real, he'd be okay.
There was no forest, the only thing the pain kept shaking him back to was the hospital and Steve didn’t want that to be the reality.

That couldn’t be the truth.

He’d never been so elated and devastated to be in a hospital in his life. Because he wasn’t at that fucking funeral. That fucking funeral wasn’t real.

But. The hospital couldn’t be either. No, no.

That hospital lobby couldn’t be what he shook himself back to, let it be something else, let the forest and the raging war fires take him now--

It’d be so much easier to pretend it was all a dream.

But there was the truth, the truth in the zinging metal his hand couldn’t stop clutching so tight. The pain couldn’t lie, couldn’t, only truth he could hold onto.

The only truth he knew. Bucky was alive. Coma or nightmare, hospital or table or funeral, reality or 1944, Bucky was still alive.

That was all he knew.

Maybe he couldn’t hold onto anything but the bite in his palm that kept bringing him back to the hospital lobby and the deep soul ache but no matter where in the timeline they threw him he still knew. Bucky was alive.

_Soldiers fight for their country. They fight for themselves. They fight for each other. And sometimes they die for these things, too. The ones who don’t carry the memory of the ones who did for the rest of their days. Steve Rogers is no different._

The funeral wasn’t real. The embroidered stars in that burial flag pressed to his face as he sobbed, that wasn’t real, right? Right? He wasn’t...he wasn’t flashing back _now_, trying to escape the cold wind, standing with shaking legs as they called three volley, Taps echoing in the background wasn’t real, he wasn’t shaking the hospital to make himself never hear it, never watch that train hit--

Bucky was alive. He was alive. Bu-cky was _alive_.

And he had no idea what was real.

Bucky--

“Steve?” Tony’s hand clapped carefully on his shoulder, flash and he was wearing too much blue as Tony fucking Stark put his grimy little hand on Steve's stiff uniformed shoulder, cajoling again, _why shouldn't the guy let off a little steam?_

You know damn well why! Back off.

The storm rumbled overhead and Steve blinked at the hospital wall, white, metal holding his hand. Crushing bones, was gonna make him bleed, but it was here, he was here on solid ground.

It took a second to tell himself this was his body, he had control of -- late July all over again -- and finally managed to turn his head, blinking wide dry eyes at the man with his hand on Steve’s shoulder.

Howard’s face, a single moment and then it was definitely Tony, older, more pain boiled up behind
those dark eyes and he was looking at Steve like he was about to either crumple or explode and Steve could see now, the nurses gathered in the hallway behind them and none of them were his mom, or his neighbor, and.

They probably all thought he was a fucking psychopath.

The world was the one turning on its fucking side, not him, everything was wrong and he knew all the faces staring at him in their big circle and they were strangers on a cobblestone street, a week older than the last time he’d seen worry lines next to Stark’s eyes and in the wrong century all over again and.

Bucky wasn’t here.

The train.

Steve smacked Tony’s hand off his shoulder hard enough to echo, the same motion he’d used the first time and the walls were shaking with the rain and he had to snap out of it right the fuck now.

Bucky wasn’t here, he needed Steve, he *needed* Steve had to keep it together.

Was that how Barnes made it through all those firefights back in the war?

Steve took a single step backwards, rotating with his back to the wall, and let his fists curl.

That was real.

The tighter they curled the more real he felt, and his epidemic fists were dragging his feet to the ground, hard tile, too white too clean tile with scuffing shoe marks from the running shoes he had laced to his feet, 2016 and his fists kept curling tighter.

"You don't have to bury it."

He peeked a glance at his best friend, wondered how much had changed since they'd laid on a beach together like this. "I know I've given you shit your whole life, but. You're a fighter. A soldier. You don't have to be sorry for that and you don't have to have some...happy ending that doesn't include that. If you're home fighting, then fight."

"That's not a life."

Not a life. *Not* alive.

They were surrounding him. The way storm chasers surrounded a tornado in their tumbling Jeeps, riding after the wild storm -- the whistling storm, down streets, at the beginning of the song.

They were gonna block him in here, weren’t they?

How wild were his eyes, as he darted between their shifting stances, carefully lowering weight stable, bracing to take him down--

Those men on the elevator, sweating, he’d known, floors before the doors shut and they turned around with cuffs, electricity shooting like the fence Bucky’d ripped off his boots so long ago.

He was shaking.

He needed to get outta here. Now, he had to find Bucky. Before it was too late again.
Not a life, the only life worth living was if Buck was there - Bucky who’s life hadn’t ended.

Not on the first train and definitely not on that one.

“Get out of my way.” Steve warned slowly, dark and careful. They were the ones shaking, breaking promises to rain down like papers ripped from sketchpads thrown off that big ugly building in New York. “I don’t wanna have to go through you.”

Sam took three careful steps forward, hands up and Steve couldn’t help but see that same guy from morning laps, shaking smile carved into the VA face, calming down somebody in hysterical tears while Steve stood stiffly in the doorway with a rolled up lunch bag from that street down the place and he wasn’t fucking crying hysterically, Sam.

“Steve, think about this.” Quiet, placating, and Steve was about to break another counter just to get him to stop looking at him like that. “This isn’t what Bucky would’ve wanted.”

Would’ve wanted.

“He’s not dead.” Sharp. Sharp as the blades Bucky threw at walls when he screamed and the scream in his chest was bouncing around inside all that starlit empty but he wouldn’t cave, wouldn’t let ‘em win, he could take this pain, he could do this all day--

“Please.” Even from his peripherals, he could see the melting mask on her face. “You’ll only make it worse.”

Nat was so hurt. Never let ‘em see her like that, everyone else, all pained and vulnerable, only Clint’d ever seen that before the day she’d confessed so quietly, I thought I knew whose lies I was telling. But I guess I can’t tell the difference anymore.

“He stayed on the tracks. Rogers, he could’ve jumped outta the way and he didn’t. Bucky wasn’t coming back from--”

Steve whirled around so fast he left skid marks on tile.

“Fuck you! Fuck you, we were. We could’ve fixed it, this is your fault, you let this happen. You let him--”

Inhale.

The escalating shouts weren’t gonna get him to Buck any faster. Had to be smart, c’mon Rogers think with your head instead of your fists for once.

Fuck though, he was angry.

Fuck, how could she say something like that? After all the shit she’d already put him through? Put Bucky--

Shit. Settle down, you were smart enough to interrupt yourself now gather all that righteous indignation and control it. Control. That’s all that mattered, right? Control? Efficiency?

Exhale. That fucking control.

“He’s not dead.” Steve rolled his broad, threaded shoulders, twitching muscles in arms settling at his sides, the words echoing in every empty space, bullethole Bucky’d left with the cloud of black smoke. “I’m not gonna leave behind him this time.”
Zola must’ve--

Finger point, at all those skeptic faces and he wasn’t on a stage in tights but he damn well could’ve, *I Want You*, except he hadn’t been able to carry the Cap smile in years, not since. “I’m gonna find him.”

The Avengers assembled and it wasn’t on his command, Sam stepping passively closer, Clint shifting in front of the door, Pepper in front of the hallway. Bruce by the nurses’ station, Natasha’s hand sliding to hover over the gun on her hip, and Tony Stark didn’t budge an inch, staring at Steve like he was seeing his dad’s collection room instead of the man that’d lead his team.

He’s my family, Steve told Tony, and those big brilliant brown eyes had watered right up, shock and pure serious as he’d said back, clear as day. So was I.

When it rains, it pours. Shoulders squaring, and his eyes weren’t darting around the room anymore, shifting, *assessing*, running routes and battleplans and this was a hell of a lot harder without a team to back him up.

Without *anyone* on his six. Even when he’d had nothing, there’d been someone on his six.

The boys, Peggy, the Avengers, Natasha, Sam. Buck. His family.

Steve sucked in a breath, lowered his weight, clenched fists vibrating at his sides. Dropped his voice an octave, low scary, black mask, and lit the spark to burn the building down.

“I’m not lookin’ for a fight. But anybody gets in my way…”

Tony Stark yelled that they weren’t soldiers but with that burning flame in sharp eyes, he sure damn looked like he was tryin’ to start a war.

“That’s it, huh? You just...become as bad as him, then?” Tony bit back and the fight music started, deep bass and gradual crescendo somewhere in the distance, genius engineer flashing heat brighter than the suit he’d’ve been smart to wear, watching dark clouds gather in devil rafters for the second time and hell if he was gonna go gentle into that fucking goodnight again.

“You both need to be put in check, whatever that takes.” Rogers bristled and Tony took one menacing step closer.

So he didn’t fight with knives pressed to throats the way Barnes did or shiny star metal the way Rogers did, but his dad never gifted him with shields guns uniforms homemade crutches for detrimental bulletwounds. He’d learned that pretty damn young, the greatest weapon he had wasn’t something from H. Stark. No, this mind was all his, and so were these fucking words.

“Y’know, the Captain America my dad was so proud of? That red white’n’blue soldier, his best fucking creation?” Rogers was vibrating, more ready to leap than he’d ever seen in his life and that was saying a fucking lot. Threatening *them*, Steve was threatening *them*, and for about the thousandth time Tony reminded himself to put Time Machine on the To Build list so he could go back and slap his dad across the fucking face for creating the formula that landed them all in this fucking shitstorm.

“...if that war hero was here, he’d punch you in your perfect teeth.”

Steam’d be rolling outta Rogers ears right now, if this were a comic.

Those perfect teeth were grit hard enough his jaw was aching, throbbing more than the beating in
that parking lot off Duffield. I can do this all day. No point to inhale exhale anymore, not when his blood was boiling so hot it sucked the oxygen from his lungs.

Fists curling, uncurling, every knuckle clicking in morbid claws and clenched back again. Control.

The tempting leap forward, blast of shattering glass as the screen with Zola’s rotten robotized face split into a million fragments.

Natasha had been there. She'd seen him, the first time he'd lost his temper since the serum. That wild swing at Project Insight's televised face, glass suddenly shattering, spiraling out with a crash. The surprise and sudden flash of fear on her face.

She knew exactly what he was capable of. He wondered, if she knew how hard it was for him not to snap a fist at her pretty televised face right now.

See, she'd made sure his death amounted to the same as his life. He was nothing but a zero sum.

His life here, with them, with the Avengers. A zero sum, this wasn't freedom, this was fear.

Last time, he'd stood down, almost a moment too long. But this time? He wasn't shutting up, turning docile away. This time, he had it.

They almost have what they want.

Absolute control.

And fuck, he was powerful. Standing here with his chest heaving, surrounded by Earth’s Mightiest Heroes all ready to drag him kicking and screaming into another hospital bed, in a padded room, leather straps over his wrists.

Yanking them off Bucky’s. Mumbling that damn serial number he’d never studied enough to know it meant drafted, the damn serial number burning black into his chest, reflecting fluorescent and he wasn’t going to lose the only thing he’d spent his life fighting so fucking hard for.

Whatever the cost. The price of freedom is high, it always has been

And it's a price I'm willing to pay.

Steve Rogers lifted his head, met all those defiant, guarded eyes he’d spent so long softening, gathering into the family none of them’d ever had, and gave his team one last order.

“Stand down. This is your final warning.”

The living legend, who kinda lives up to the legend. Sure, he’d been bitter towards the Great Captain at first, anybody’d be. But how quick had he figured out that Steve was exactly what their team needed? That, for the first time in his life, he could be the smartest guy in the room without being the only guy in the room?

Lab's all set up, boss. Actually, he's the boss. I just pay for everything and design everything and make everyone look cooler.

The soldier they’d all followed into battle. Kid they’d appointed as head of the Avengers, friend he’d come to respect, even if Steve totally miraculously called him out everytime he cheated at Risk.
Steven Grant Rogers, who he’d sacrificed everything for. Capsicle Stevie Rogers who he’d had to watch freeze and deteriorate in front of his eyes, barely months after he’d finally seen him alive for the first time, smiling and laughing and happy for the first time only to get it all wrenched mercilessly away.

Captain Steve Rogers, who just barked the last order he’d ever give his team.

Stand down.

He wondered if Steve knew how he’d idolized him as a kid. Tony hoped he did, so Steve could see he was just another person to fucking let him down.

Romanoff broke the silence, new darker red curling away from her face gentle pretty and *normal* he could hardly reconcile her with the badass that destroyed them at pool and shrugged mischievously when Sam demanded to know where his orange juice was hiding.

How new was that hair? When was the last time he’d seen her? When did she start dressing like a civilian?

Had any of them made it out the otherside of this alive?

Natasha stood with those pleading eyes, the face of an ex-best friend who used to pick him up curbside and now crushed him heartside under those deadly sharp heels.

“You know what’s about to happen. Do you really wanna punch your way outta this?”

Steve glared the coldest he could, jaw set and clicking, blue eyes flashing as his body trembled to keep still, chest puffed up with the star-shaped heart carved right outta where he used to be so proud.

Proud of what? Fighting for a country that didn’t stand for any of the things it used to?

Maybe never did. How much of war was propaganda? He’d always assumed it stopped the minute he stripped the blue tights off but.

Didn’t matter now. There were no posters in this war, no speeches left when they all knew what he had to say, and what he was gonna say it with.

Did he really wanna punch his way outta this one. One of those moments that struck a chord somewhere deep, the realization of how much gravity was weighing down Atlas’ shoulders.

He could step into that machine - either die or maybe save mankind.

He could stand staring in this tent - either climb back on that stage or maybe save the love of his life.

He could knock on that door - tell Natasha there was nothing they could do or maybe their little team of three could suitup and the rest of the team would join them just in time to save New York from an army of aliens.

He could get outta here now before the helicarrier exploded - use all the gifts he’d been given to stop evil again or maybe he could climb down through the metallic rubble and breaking glass and save the trapped, forgotten soldier stuck under that metal beam, the exact same kind he’d walked so carefully across *not without you*, metal beam he hadn’t been able to hold onto the side of the train, always snapping, only.
That one wasn’t a maybe. Steve was gonna save him this time.

He could try and convince them, write one more speech and risk them taking him down, letting Bucky get left behind again or. Steve would have to cross a line.

A line he could never come back from.

If he went through with this, if he fought the team to get to Bucky, especially after knives bombs and betrayal, they weren’t gonna forgive him for that. If he crossed this line, there was no coming back to the tower, no coming back to the Avengers.

There was no coming back, period.

And it dawned on Tony Stark the moment Steve took that breath, rolled his neck, and lifted two fists slowly, ready boxer backalley-style, in front of the pounding chest.

That was it.

“You really would.” Almost to himself, realization hit the way it always did and normally only Jarvis overheard but now they all could, Steve’s sharp glare and raised fists so loud Tony sounded like a damn afterthought, sidenote as it hit, started to sink in. “You’d kill us, to get to him, wouldn’t you?”

Steve’s chin lowered, eyes on fire, and he didn’t need the black mask, blank devil-glass covering his eyes to be the most terrifying thing Tony’d ever seen.

And how had he never seen it? All this time, years with Rogers that’d been lurking inside how had he never seen it?

I don’t trust a guy without a dark side. Call me old-fashioned.

Well, let’s just say you haven’t seen it him yet.

Whatever it takes, that didn’t include them. That didn’t include him, Steve would watch Tony burn, would shoot him outta the sky if it meant protecting Bucky. He’d...he’d start a fucking civil war to run with the ghost who had his heart, wouldn’t he?

“I was wrong about you,” Tony told him, torn and roughened, smoke over gravel, ripping guilt doing a damn fine job hiding behind those pretty blue eyes. Or maybe there really was nothing human left in there anymore, at all. The Savior, the Good One, the Moral. The Right. Fire-born phoenix with eager curling hands -- everything he knew was wrong.

There was nothing perfect in those deadly cells.

“The whole world was wrong about you.”

For as long as I can remember, I just wanted to do what was right.

“Shh. Listen to me, sweetheart. It’s okay. You were following orders, just like the rest of us, right?” Shadows shifting, war fog fading into deep clarity, dark settled blanket.

“Buck, they were just kids, like us, how could I--”

“Wasn’t up to you.” Balanced pressure, palms pushing down between shoulderblades, slow. Kind. “Much as you wouldda liked to, you weren’t making the executive decision, okay?”
A warm hand skirted up, ran over his jaw and Steve turned wet cheeks further into the pillow, fists clenching Buck’s sleepwarm tshirt, corner of his mouth trembling as broken cut into a whisper.

“What if they were wrong?” Horror seeping between cracks beneath the door, spiderwebbing window, “If I wasn’t good, if I killed like that ‘cause bad becomes. E-evil--”

“Y’gotta be kiddin’ me, pal. You? Evil? C’mom,” chiding strength settling low around his waist, mouth dropping heated to mumble against skin. “…y’know that’s nightmare talkin’. Or Fury, or anybody else who don’t understand what we had to do.”

“Feels like. Ev’ryone.”

“It’s not. Steve, it’s not.” Deep sigh and a metal arm wrapped over his shoulders, “C’mere.”

Dragging him closer across the whisper of the sheets and Steve pressed his cold nose to Bucky’s neck, fingers drawing letters over his spine.

“You have any idea how many people you’ve inspired, Rogers? What you’ve given this country, this world. More than your life, you gave ‘em a symbol. Somethin good, somethin gold they can strive to be. You fought noble as any soldier you brought home. How many families exist now ‘cause you saved their great grand-dad in 1944? You always did the right thing, Steve. And the world ain’t gonna ever forget that.”

*If you’re lost and alone--*

I wanna come home to you now.

Maybe once, he’d fit here, on the outskirt edges of personal lives, deep in the heart of battlefields, but.

They’d seen him as gone for a long time. And maybe he had been.

The serum’d made him afraid of how easily he could hurt, but then he’d gotten a team so strong, matched every punch. They had his back. He was one of them, in some twisted way.

Built his first family since the Commandos and. It’d be dead if he did this.

I don’t wanna look down.

Steve steadied himself, gaze shifting between each shell-shocked member, redgoldgreenpurpleblack rainbow, colorful friends he’d trained, fought with in Stark’s gym, Beyoncé blasting over loudspeakers and laughter between shield tosses - knew every battlemove, memorized every one of their fighting styles.

Except Tony, he’d never fought Tony without the suit.

Steve calculated his last Avengers battle plan and he was so fucking sorry.

If he could say goodbye aloud, by god he would. If he could say I love you, to every one of them, then maybe his throat wouldn’t be trying to strangle him with latent tears.

Tears bottled for years he’d never gotten to cry, all the forgotten goodbyes.

If he wasn’t pinned, had any other choice, he’d take it in a heartbeat. The choice was between fighting the people he loved, isolating himself for the rest of his life or. Letting Bucky die.
There was no place he could go.

*Pain is alive in a broken heart, the past never does go away
We're born to love and we're born to pay the price for our mistakes*

A half circle, empty space for two missing members. Dernier sniffed as they lifted glasses, only the dim lighting kept them from seeing tears in the others’ eyes.

Same practiced sync clinked glasses together, five-way toast to the realest heros they'd ever known.

"To the Captain," Falsworth said. Rogers - the one who deserved to see the end of this war more than anyone here. They all tipped back their glasses, burn of whiskey down throats.

*Til then.*

This was it then. No going back for Bucky and no going back for him either. Sorrow washed over clenched fists, battling against the anger bubbling in his gut - how could they do this to him, force--

Please don’t make me do this.

There goes his family.

Blood thrumming, heart racing, tears stuck in his throat, crescendo, crescendo and-- pause.

He’d never gotten to apologize to Sam, for showing up at his door that day, dragging him into this world and abandoning him to the horror without ever covering his six.

Fuck. Sam, he was sorry.

And Natasha?

...this was gonna hurt.

Один, два and bare fingers closed round the edge of a clipboard, industrial metal scraping protest as it slid off the counter. Whistled in the air, fast and sharp, burst of papers scattering – smoke bomb built just for the artist jumping into one more battlefield.

Paper bursting; Romanoff was the highest threat, cold and fast enough to shoot, which was why the clipboard was frisbeeing across the room shield-style to crack a bone in *her* wrist.

*Snap.*

All hell broke loose.

Natasha’s gun clattered to the floor and Clint darted to her as fast as he was counting on.

Papers floating slowmotion barrel to the side, surprised yelp as a heavy shoulder whipped Tony’s unprotected ones and knocked Stark tumbling off balance, bought the three seconds he needed before he was spinning behind the coffee table and kicking it up -- no trashcan lid, car door, red white and blue star here -- blocking the possible wave of fire if Nat got ahold of a left-hand gun anyways, or if Sam actually risked shooting at him.

He didn’t, but that didn’t stop him from kicking the table right into Steve’s chest.

Didn't do more than startle him but that's all he needed before there was an elbow against wood and a fist across his face. Sharp, succinct, same surprising skill Sam’d fought with barehanded on the
bridge and it hurt like hell, but fuck if he hadn’t spent a lifetime taking worse.

Sam wanted him down, not hurt, and that meant Steve was gonna win. Because if there was one thing he was good at, it was not staying down.

Jaw smarting, another quick apology sent up and the table was flipping across the room, slamming for Natasha and Clint – odds are they’d see it coming - and he really didn’t wanna punch Sam, shot for kicking out the back of a running knee instead, sharp roll and he was sweeping out Tony’s feet too.

Pepper’d ran to the side, orders into a phone and the nurse at the desk was calling hospital security and there was another punch landing on his cheekbone and Steve kicked to the side, ducking to narrowly avoid the clipboard spiraling back at his head.

All that counted was getting away and he’d do anything it fucking took to not hurt anyone even if it was a little late for that but that wasn't gonna be his downfall.

He hadn't fought solo in a long time. Never, against people trained like this. He'd gotten used to fighting with Buck at his side, offense sniper pointed over his shoulder while Steve held the shield to protect them both.

His right hand wasn’t here, and his left was never as good as Buck’s.

That was the only excuse he had for how they managed to pin him down.

Really couldn't say how it happened, he didn't see it coming and maybe they'd paid more attention in training than he thought, knew his fighting style too but either way the next spin aiming a low punch to Tony’s gut was suddenly hitting air.

And something hard and heavy was tackling his side, something else hooked around his ankle and pulled, one arm yanked behind his back, faceful of tile and suddenly he was in 1945, dimlit tent as he screamed, memories ripping him apart and Bucky’s shout, flailing reaching hand on repeat, Bucky’d promised he’d never leave him--

"YOU LYING BASTARD!!" Steve screamed, uncurling just in time for Dugan and Jones to grab his shoulders, shove him onto the closest medical cot. Commandos held down his screaming body, struggling fighting but five men managed to keep him secure enough he couldn’t get up, couldn’t swing back.

Down down down.

If he'd broken free and ran after Bucky then, found him in the ravine then, they'd’ve never been here. Never would’ve lost everything.

Couldn’t let his team hold him down now.

Hip twist and one heavy boot shot sideways, deflating Clint’s chest with a gasp, tipping Sam’s hold offbalance and freeing his left arm enough to reel back, clock Tony across that sharp mouth that’d teased him and given him a home when the world turned its back.

A fistful of Sam’s shirt, the shirt he’d cried into so many times and he was tossing his closest friend as hard as he could, thud as he collided with Natasha and Steve rolled, popping to his feet to shove through Clint again, breaking free from the throb and nearly tripping over Tony, then he was running, running running.
Footsteps barreling after him. Dear, please god, don’t be Sam.

He couldn’t hit Sam, the only goddamn friend who’d never turned their back, always fought by his side, stood up the moment Steve asked him to, only one question-- what do we do?

We fight. Only this time it didn’t get to be together.

So instead, he ran.

The hallways were slick and pulsing white, too many lights too many straight lines, sliding round the first corner and nearly taking out a wall with him. Couldn’t afford to crash into glasswindow bridalshops now, couldn’t afford to bounce off flimsy walls without the shield to make the dent.

But he couldn’t slow down, either. Bruised shoulders and cracked glass, skidding, slowing for turns and taking off again; this place was a fucking maze, there was no way outta here, was there?

Loud bang and fuck, that smarted without the shield or armor but the metal door crashed open anyways, nearly flying off its hinges as shaking hands grabbed the stair railing, held on for dear life and hauled himself up four steps at a time.

One misplaced step, slipping over a landing fuck he couldn’t trip now soar crash into the wall, two hands on the ground and he was doing fucking everything he could but this century wasn’t meant for him and there was nowhere he could run to--

Get up, Steven. You always gotta get up.

Rough groan and he was pushing up, footsteps getting closer sounded like Sam’s, Nat was shouting something and he had to run, had to keep going. Heaving breath, no air left in his lungs as he sprang off, stumbling into another hallway, faster, faster, dodging two nurses with carts and more shouts, skidding corner and there was nowhere to go--

Elevator ding, three doctors exiting Natasha and Sam catching up, fast apologies as he shoved through, jamming the door button closed, sliding shut just as they came round the corner and fuck, he needed to catch his breath. Slumped against the wall, eyes closed head tipped up clear airways and he didn’t have asthma, he didn’t, it was the stupid fucking coma and he could do this.

Last elevator he’d been in, he’d jumped outta; crashing glass, even he knew it was a bad idea, taser in his ribs electricity running through his veins from that electric fence and Bucky’s smoking, charred hands--

No, Stark had an elevator, he and Bucky’d kissed in that goddamn elevator, fell against each other with smiles on their lips--

Ding.

He shoulda known his team was smart enough to guess the floor he chose, shoulda known Clint and Natasha’d be there when the doors opened, 10ft away running but at least it was the second floor, at least the window he’d have to jump out of would barely be a fall but too high for them to jump after, right?

Steve curled his head under one arm and threw himself at the glass. Running rooftops, his old apartment in DC, chasing after the metal arm sniper, chasing crashing through that window, landing in a roll and throwing the shield, both arms up to placate, careful step closer to the seething, masked assassin with one gun trained on Maria and one on him, hissed don’t look for me and Bucky was crashing through the glass--
The ground still hit like a train.

Fuck. Wasn’t thinking about that.

2016, he was in 2016, get up up and keep running--

Where was his bike when he needed it? Steve shook his head, trying to make the horizon stop fucking tilting and all he had to do was make those legs move faster, faster, unfamiliar surprise as he found exactly how fast he could go, running over cobblestone with barefeet, jumping on top of a 1930s taxi, arms shooting over his head as he dove after a submarine, little kid’s words echoing in his head - go get him! I can swim.

Well, it was too bad Steve crashed a plane and found out he couldn’t.

But he could run. Pick up, keep going, time to be amazed at that newfound strength later, just go go go.

Run.

“Did you have something against running away?” Peggy asked him, raising one stunning eyebrow and looking over from her half of the backseat, so close and pretty and she smelled like spring, like flowers in spring and Steve was about to change his life forever, no coming back; took a deep breath and told her.

“You start running, they’ll never let you stop.”

You start running,

They’ll never let you stop.

~*~*~

Did they get you to trade your heroes for ghosts?

Worst thing about ghosts was how damn quick they disappeared. Into thin air, a swirl of white smoke.

At least he didn’t have it as bad as his dad. Howard lost him over the arctic, lost an entire plane with bombs on board. Spent months, years searching. Never could find him.

Tony just lost a person, just Steve with no plane - and hopefully no bombs - attached. In a city they both knew, it couldn’t be that hard to find him, right?

Only, it really was.

And it was all his fault. All of this, this was his fault.

Yeah, he’d been pissed, yeah, Steve let him down so hard he got blinded and snapped right back, pushed him over the edge and that was his fault, he shouldn’t’ve blown up when Rogers needed him, moment of truth and Tony lit a hotter fire instead of calming the flames and.
It wasn’t worth it.

He had a responsibility for Cap. Not cause of Project Rebirth, cause he was family.

What has he done?

“Well, Dad, you proud now?” Tony mumbled, dragging one more input scan report from a bot camera over the map of NYC that was currently projected across the entire room.

Maybe he understood now, why Howard was so goddamned obsessed. You don’t lose somebody like Steve Rogers and just get over that you can’t find him. You fucking search, til the day you die. Hopefully not by the hand of his war-boyfriend this time.

Take us to the next grid point.

But there's no trace of wreckage. And the energy signal trace stops here.

Howard shook his head, staring at the ocean water they’d lost Steve to, and gave the order he’d give for years. Just keep looking.

His dad never found him, not in his lifetime. But Tony could do this. He could figure out how to bring Rogers back. To save the world, his world, one more time. To prove Howard wrong, one more time.

Or maybe prove him right. My greatest creation is you.

Tony pushed off the counter Barnes used to sit on stealing his blueberries, wheely chair gliding across polished floor and swept up a blue-tinged report, rotating it in the air, checking sidestreets spanning out from the hospital.

He’d never thought Rogers would run. The right thing to do was chase him, right? Not like it mattered, Tony could no more give up looking than he could give up inventing. Not for Steve.

“C’mon, Dad,” he murmured, pushing the road back in place, scanning a finger over a possible route, pulling up traffic cams, looking for something, anything. “How’d you let him go?”

If only Peg were still alive. If he could go visit Aunt Peggy who ruffled his hair and called him Anthony.

If only she could tell him what she told his dad -- the only way he’d survived, only way he started inventing good again.

“Howard, turn the plane around. Come back, and we’ll talk about it.” British accent heavier with all the tears gathering on eyelashes. How many planes would she try’n talk down, how many of them put that on her, all the crying she never deserved?

“I can’t do that. I’m done talking.” For the first time in his life, done talking, and Tony didn’t even know what speechless felt like.

“Howard, Howard. Steve is gone. He died, over a year ago.”

“I can fix this. Peg, all I’ve done my whole life was create destruction. Project Rebirth…he was the one thing I’ve done that brought good into this world.”

“Howard, Tony, I know you loved him. I loved him too. But this won’t bring him back. Howard, you are the one person on this earth who believes in me, I cannot lose you. Steve is gone, we have to
move on, all of us. As impossible as that may sound, we have to let him go.”

“...Peg?” Deep breath, pause, crackling over the line. *Steve?* “He was good before I got ahold of him, huh?”

“Yes, h-he was. He was.”

Come home.

Blue, empty streets blinking back at him. He was.

There was no one to turn his plane around, no one to drag him out before...

He couldn’t just. Drop this.

Steve couldn’t be that hard to find. The guy thought a damn baseball cap and sunglasses was incognito. Where would he go? First place he’d go?

Maybe the train station, where Barnes had--

The other half of the Rogers duo he’d come to accept as family. And yeah, he was pissed the guy had triggered all Winter Soldier and tried to kill him, but. He’d never kick him out for good. How could he? Bruce had done the same, and Tony’d begged him to move into the tower.

So one of them went green and the other slit throats, he had so many fuckin’ nightmares anyways, it wasn’t like one more made *that* much of a difference.

But jeez, he’d been so mad, so hurt for so long. After Bucky’d done that, betrayed all that trust he’d bestowed--

Betrayed Steve, too, every single member of their family and just fucking disappeared. Yeah, he was mad.

And it hurt like fucking *hell* to stand there in a hospital lobby, watch that corner TV play some video on loop, unable to tear his eyes away from the screen until the tears built up enough he consciously had to wipe his eyes, sniffle, look away from What Couldn’t Be Happening.

And that’s when he saw Rogers.

Frozen dead to the world, eyes entirely glazed over - found on ice all over again.

But see, Tony couldn’t cry. Not over Bucky, not over the asshole that had the audacity to do this to them all, how could he just *leave them*, destroy everything they’d taken so long to built, one more person to *fucking let him down*.

Couldn’t let himself cry over that, cause the moment he let all that hurt in it’d rip him to shreds. So he got pissed. He got so fucking mad because that’s the only way he knew how to deal, fuck Bucky Barnes for ever bringing them down this fucking spiral with him. He had to. He *had* to. He’d been hurt too many times. And he had to protect Rogers, now. So he’d turned to him, put a hand on his shoulder. Steve.

And then, just one more fucking betrayal.

He didn’t have Peg to talk him back into his senses. None of them had Peggy Carter to talk them back to their senses.
The difference she’d’ve made, if she’d been young enough to be here, scold them all into some sort’a sense.

There was nobody here with enough strength to pick up everyone else’s broken pieces.

How many paid the price before you did?

But...he wasn’t alone.

Pepper was right there, as always, perched on the edge of his desk. Beautiful, understanding, looking at him soft, softer than he deserved.

And there was the rest of the team, waiting patiently around the room in chairs, on tables, quietly stitching themselves back together while Tony stared at the blue map.

They weren’t letting go this easy.

“I’m gonna calculate out whatever goddamn equation I have to. I’m gonna find out where he’d go. I’ll search every street in Manhattan, Brooklyn, New York. Whole U.S.A. if I have to.”

Tony Stark spun around, blue streets winding silently behind him, and told his team.

“I’m gonna bring him home.”

Quiet eyes, quiet mouths, nodding silent confirmation they had now - the solid platform he’d somehow built when he’d taken out those floors of the tower and turned them into Avengers Headquarters. A floor for them all, and a tower to call home, and somehow?

A single echo across tile floors as Sam Wilson took the step closer, one big fightin’ hand clasping Tony’s shoulder.

“When do we start?”

*We’re insane but not alone
You hold on and let go*

In a cemetery what felt like years ago, she’d heard Sam Wilson say that same thing to Steve. The thread she’d warned him not to pull; look at them all unravel.

And try to tie themselves together again. She watched the suddenly unexpectedly hopeful team, Sam’s finger pointing over Tony’s shoulder, Pepper offering suggestions, Maria’s skype flashing in a corner as she gave input too, reports and ideas piling.

Stared blankly at the enthusiasm and wondered how they could all shove the guilt aside long enough to stand on two feet.

Then again, nobody was as guilty in this as she was.

She was friends, with Bucky. Tentatively before all the shit had gone down, but during those months he’d been J.B. Rogers? He’d been the only thing in her life. They’d been such good friends and it was supposed to be fake, but it’d felt as real as any role she’d ever slipped into and that’s all she was, all she had. And she’d honestly, truthfully, come to love him.
She was friends with Bucky, now he was dead. And if she’d never told him to--

The only thing she’d ever wanted was to spare all their broken hearts. Now she couldn’t feel the cold excuse she had for one, let alone the pieces it scattered.

How stupid was she? How could she let herself get attached to someone like that? She knew him. She’d been him. Right to the Russian-killer roots and that deep affectionate draw to the man she had to protect. All he’d ever wanted was to touch the sunlight and she’d been so afraid for what that’d do to all of them, she’d been so afraid he wouldn’t survive it--

She was right.

And she wasn't ready to let go of Bucky Barnes.

She wasn’t ready for the end of teasing over movie night, wrestling in the gym, nights out dancing and philosophy discussions at 2am. The one that could’ve potentially, after all this, been one of the greatest friendships she’d ever have.

But he was dead. Gone, forever.

At this rate, Steve Rogers might be too.

Let Stark search what he will. Tony wouldn’t find him. Howard couldn’t. Losing Steve Rogers, the new Stark legacy. The only thing Tony could hope for now was a son, someone to keep looking after he lost his mind trying. Maybe he’d have smooth red hair like Pepper, Tony’s big brown eyes.

But the only Stark who’d find Steve would be the one to find his bones.

She didn’t know when she put her head in her hands, but there was a strong, familiar hand closing around one of them and Natasha lifted, blinking wearily at Clint’s patient, hurting expression.

God, he didn’t deserve this either. She wasn’t the only one here who’d lost two of her best friends today.

So she let Clint take her hand, weave their fingers together.

Wondered if he was thinking about that day too. The day she and Steve’d wandered down to the shooting range during Barnes&Barton training hour, peering at them from behind the glass and raising eyebrows at each other cause damn, that was a fine view.

But of course Bucky and Clint caught on, turned around and made faces, waving hands to signal them inside. Twin shit-eating grins as they opened up the booth right next to theirs.

“How bout a little friendly competition?”

And it really wasn’t fair, Steve and Natasha with their pistols up against the two best shots in the world. But Steve didn’t back down from a challenge and Natasha rolled her eyes as she followed him - always would - right into battle. She did tweak Bucky’s ponytail on her way past him though, smiling deviously at the fake glare that twitched into a smile as the bow lifted to his shoulder.

It was only fair that Bucky be on arrows and Clint be on rifle, but. Steve and Natasha got their asses kicked anyways. Not without laughing so hard her sides had stitches for days.

What she’d give, to have those stitches instead of straining ones barely holding together now, fraying and fraying.
But it was gone. They were gone, and everything Tony Stark could do in the world wouldn’t bring either of them back.

She wondered distantly, how long ago she’d lost one of the greatest things that’d ever happened to her. How long ago she’d lost Steve Rogers.

Or maybe.

She’d never had him.

Maybe none of them ever had.

They’d let go, with time. They’d never get over it, she’d never get over it, but they couldn’t keep searching forever and she knew Rogers well enough now, if he ran? If that little guy from Brooklyn had finally wisened up enough to run away from a fight, he’d never stop running.

If he didn’t wanna be found? He was gone. Avengers count: 5.

What she’d give to start over. Go back to the beginning, when the scariest thing they had to face was a sky full of aliens.

*Take me back to the start.*

After their first battle as a team - edge of victory pulsing through veins only thing keeping them awake - they’d done the simplest, most mundane thing.

Just...gone out to eat. Like regular people did. Piled the whole colorful Avengers team into this dingy, rundown restaurant that served calories and shawarma.

Restaurant after restaurant since. It’d become a tradition, the only one they had: after big battles everybody patched up wounds and lumbered into some hole-in-the-wall with more grease on the menu than food.

Squeezing all of them - suits included - into the biggest corner booth they could find, dragging over chairs and apologizing to the entire wait staff between orders.

But god, the pretty laughter, all those smiling, rowdy boys. Bruce snorting as Tony clapped a hand on his shoulder, beaming wide enough to split the cut on his nose back open if he wasn’t careful. Thor’s booming echoing off peeling walls as that white-blonde head tipped back and laughed and laughed and laughed. Clint’s cheeks stuffed with half the food off Bruce’s plate, flicking a straw at Natasha’s cheek, affectionate glare and ripped the corner off Tony’s napkin to wad into a spitball she aimed perfectly into Rogers’ ruffled blonde hair, making him *hey! in indignation then Bucky was leaning over Steve’s shoulder to flick Natasha’s forehead and she was laughing, they were all laughing and.*

"Well," Dugan finally said, standing up from the booth. "It's been an honor, boys."

He shook each of their hands. Dernier handed him his bowler hat from the seat and Dugan nodded, fitting it firmly over his head. And then he was gone.

They all left, then. One by one. Handshakes to go around.

And then the sun broke over the sky, lighting up the world in bright color again, and it was over.
Don't do anything stupid til I get back.
How can I, you're taking all the stupid with you.

The stupidest thing he could do would be to go to his and Buck's apartment.

Which is why that's exactly what he did.

If Buck was part of the search party, he'd suggest it. Tony and Sam would shoot it down, he's not stupid enough to do something that obvious and Buck would snort, raising one eyebrow. Oh, he's stupid enough.

Only Buck wasn't there to suggest it so the Avengers wouldn't try it first, which meant he had time. Buck sure as hell wasn't leading 'em to Steve anytime soon.

And the Avengers weren't leading him to Buck either, so.

Here he was.

No one to see him dip into the alley, circle round to the back to squint up at the roof, taking a deep breath and a running start before coiling and springing up, nearly losing the baseball cap as he caught the second-story fire escape with on fingertips.

A bit of maneuvering and he had two solid feet on rickety metal, slow and quiet as he creaked up the remaining chutes and ladders, climbing patient as he could all the way to the tenth floor.

Something caught his attention, around floor seven. Flash of movement, something black above but when he looked up there was nothing, just darkness and night and he couldn't let himself lose his goddamn mind now.

All the way up one step at a time until finally, Десять.

One two wrench and the window was popping up, locks snapping as he slid the glass on its frame, to listen for movement, then he was ducking his head and crawling through the window.

Into their old apartment, Brooklyn 1.0 tiny and beaten bloody raw, didn't wanna face the wrath of his mum or Buck before he could clean up a little, it wouldn't look nearly so bad without the caked blood on his face.

Only somehow, Bucky always heard him anyways. Roll inside, tumble to the ground and look up from the broom-swept floor to see a very unimpressed friend looking down at him from his spot leaning casually in the doorway, making Steve look like an absolute fool.

Duck, roll, tumble and he couldn't help but look up, hope pounding in his split chest, eyes straining in the darkness for that figure leaning against the wall with impatient arms crossed over his chest.

But there wasn’t a best friend waiting for him this time. Empty, just like him.

Crawling inside with blood dripping inside his skull instead of out. Still beaten bloody raw. Still never giving up.
Not til he found Buck this time.

But he didn’t, in the living room where they’d kissed on the floor and slept tangled in limbs on the couch and laughed breathlessly against the wall as Steve moved inside that beautiful boy--

Delirious.

Didn’t find him in the studio, in the laundry room. Didn’t find him curled in the bathtub, smiling over his shoulder as he flipped pancakes in the kitchen.

Not in the hallways, on the fire escape, in the closets, under the sink.

Didn’t find him in the empty, empty bedroom.

Steve stood in the doorway of the dark bedroom and stared dejectedly at nothing as walls boxed him in like the painting on the wall.

He didn’t know if Buck could remember as far back as their sunburnt summer, or the conversation they’d had about it in the middle of some Commandos battle in early ’45, but Steve drew Bucky with angel wings long before Buck returned the favor.

Gave him a life he never chose. Where it stops, nobody knows.

Fuck, he had no idea where to go from here. He’d been so sure--

Steve’s shoulders sunk a little lower, two feet stepping slowly, tiredly into the bedroom where everything came together and everything fell apart.

Moonlight filtering through the windows, slowly, and he’d missed exactly when the sun sank under the horizon but it was long gone now, drowned off to some other side of the world and all he had was the silver to keep him company, the silver and the empty house that refused to collapse on top of him but couldn’t release its fucking claws either.

Funny, after all this time, it looked the exact same.

Same dresser, same door he’d slammed Buck into, same window he’d almost lost Buck outta, same bed they’d rolled together, same beautiful painting hanging over the center of two empty pillows.

That painting. He breathed in slowly, forcing his lungs to expand, contract, take one breath as his fingertips trailed down, tracing patterns over the empty bedspread.

The painting was crooked. You’d think, having two artists in the house, they’d be able to keep a damn painting straight on the wall. Showed how much they knew.

Steve climbed up on the bed, sighing softly as he reached out carefully, fingers hesitating just before they hit canvas.

Not straight. He almost smiled at the memory. You’re not straight. Steve’d mumbled back and Bucky’d rolled his eyes, starting for the door but he’d never made it. Shoved into white wood, chased down after Steve’d scrambled to him wildly, demanded from those beautiful crystals the truth, the honest truth, you love me.

Get a grip. Swallowing thick around the lump in his throat he couldn’t cry now, he had to find his best friend.

Steve’s chest expanded on a shuddery breath, reaching fingertips those last few centimeters, canvas
rough as he tipped the heavy thing back straight.

It slid in place easily, just off a peg so simple back to perfect, couldn’t they all.

He rocked back on his ankles, still looking up at those beautiful brush strokes, vibrant colors, and he almost missed it. Wouldn’t’ve caught it at all, if he hadn’t brought a hand up to his face to wipe watery eyes before the dam broke.

Saw it the moment his hand came into his field of vision. Fingertips dotted with that much red didn’t just slide by.

Blink and Steve cocked his head, brought a hand up closer in the fading light, eyebrows furrowing as he registered the blood on his hands.

Fuck, he was hallucinating again.

Touching a goddamn painting made him bleed and somewhere in his twisted mind that was s’posed to make sense?

What the fuck. Another inhale, sharp and quick and.

...what the fuck.

Copper didn’t hit him. Linseed did.

Again, to repeat himself, what the fuck. Linseed was what they made oil paints with. Why did his fingers smell like paint? Was that...red paint?

So the painting wasn’t bleeding, that at least made sense, but wet paint honestly wasn’t a lot closer to rational than blood at this point.

Steve pushed up on his knees, peering around the side of the painting and yeah, there was red paint, wet red paint on the side of the canvas.

Okay, that. Wasn’t possible. Paint did this fancy thing called drying and the last time he’d seen this painting, there hadn’t been a touch of stray red on the sides. What the literal fuck.

Well, he wasn’t gonna find out by staring at it. He shuffled his weight, both hands coming up to carefully lift the painting up, smush his blonde head against the wall to peer behind, eyes taking a second to adjust to the darkness.

And that’s when he almost fell off the bed.

Room sideways tipping off the mattress and fuck, fuck, no way. He was definitely hallucinating now but he had to see that again.

Scrambled back up, grip slipping but he got up anyways, almost fast as he’d scrambled to pin Bucky’s confession, only this time the confession wasn’t offered up with blood, it was carved in it, on the back of his goddamn painting.

And okay, it wasn’t blood, it was red paint but it might as well be blood for all Steve’s was draining outta his face right now.

Because he’d taken the painting down and now he was sitting in the middle of their bed staring at it because.
It was there.

He hadn’t hallucinated. It was there.

In big, red, arching painted letters. Red as the paint carved into his soul, as the star etched silently into his arm. A message, on the back of canvas.

Everyone knew not to touch it. It was on impulse Steve’d noticed, taken it down. But there was a message. The back of the canvas sure as hell wasn’t empty anymore. It had nine words. Written carefully, letters arching and rounding prettily. Unmistakable.

Only, it had to be a mistake. Because the canvas said *I love you.*

The canvas said...I love you.

And worse, right under it, right underneath the three words he’d never heard aloud, it…

It said. *To the end of the line.*

I love you, to the end of the line.

Bucky’s handwriting, sloping across the back of the canvas, taking up the entire space behind Steve’s wings, Bucky’s curled naked spine, the American flag stretched tight over the coffin on the other side, the coffin he’d seen with his own two eyes for the most horrifying flash of the future he’d experienced in his entire existence.

That couldn’t be the future.

No, the future was changed now.

Bucky’d painted the words I love you. And then right under them, he’d painted...to the end of the line. And Steve Rogers sat cross-legged on a bed with a four foot painting upside-down in his lap and realized for the first time in his life in the stupidest lightbulb moment, it wasn’t an extension, neither of them were. It was. A reiteration.

Bucky'd been saying *I love you*...all along.

His timeline, fucked up brain snapped in place like a string. Serum finally kicked in, common sense finally kicked in, adrenaline, whatever it was.

What it was, all the memories came rushing back, in perfect order.

From the first time they met in an alley to the last time he’d seen that beautiful body, seconds before the train barreled him outta sight on that tiny TV.

“You think...now we’re older, we can. Keep on bein’ best friends?” I love you.

“Ah, c’mon, y’know she don’t mean nothin’. You’re still the best thing I got, Stevie.” I love you.

“The thing is, you don’t have to.” I love you.

“Don't do anything stupid until I get back.” I love you.

“That little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb not to run away from a fight. I’m following him.” I love you.
“I can’t lose you asshole, the fuck you think’d happen to me then?” I love you.

"You ain’t getting rid a’ me that easy, Rogers. I'm sticking ‘round 'til the stars fall from the sky.” I love you.

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.” I love you.

“Your job description doesn't have anything to do with protecting my ass, sorry.” “But my life description does.” I love you.

"Yes, Steve, 'course I would. I'd take on anybody who fights you, idiot. Why do you think I'm out here?" I love you.

The look in his eyes, as that metal fist lowered on the helicarrier. And every time he’d lowered that metal fist since. I love you.

To the end of the line. I love you.

Silence. I love you.

Silence.

It was perfectly entirely silent. In the bedroom where he’d undone it all, the answer from the day he was born staring him in the face.

And suddenly he was left in the stark moonlit black and white, alone. No memories to sweep parallel gold green crystal gray blue. No memories to overlap and save him - it was all there, every bit, and the pieces of the puzzle he’d been tripping over his entire life finally resembled something real.

Something he’d taken a fucking lifetime to see. But that’s all they were, pieces in the past. Living in his head, and there was a lot more to him than his head. There was this moment, right now. That was all he really had. The moonlight, the darkness, the soft cushion of the bed, hard corners of canvas making dull marks against his inner knees.

Just the empty apartment. Him. And the painting.

The paint was wet.

.
.
.

The paint was too thin to still be wet.

No wait, seriously. That was physically impossible. The paint was too thin to be wet, it’d dry by now, it couldn't be dripping on his fingertips, couldn’t be lifting and staining, there was barely a single layer here, it’d dry, faster than --

He may not know a lot but one thing he did know was art and this was painted less than fifteen minutes ago.

It was in Bucky’s handwriting.

Jesus Christ. He'd just been here.

He'd just. been. here.
He'd known Bucky was alive but fuck, he'd never been so dizzy with relief in his life. Actually scratch that, he'd never been so dizzy in life period, punches concussions and tank explosions included.

Bucky was alive.

One more time, he'd been right; fuck he'd been right. Buck hadn't died, had somehow gotten outta the way in time, maybe staged the whole thing but it didn't matter how, all that mattered was that he wasn't crazy, he'd felt it and he'd been right, all the proof was right in his hands and Bucky was still breathing.

Bucky was alive and knew him and loved him and painted it on this very canvas less than fifteen minutes ago.

Bucky was here.

But…but he wasn't, still.

Shouldn't he be--

He'd come in here, in this room, knowing Steve'd show. Left this for him and...left. Kept going.

He'd left him behind.

Steve blinked, staring at the red sloping words, the bloody paint seared into his soul. Reached out two tentative fingers, carefully brushing the slope of an “e.”

Red came away on his fingers. The sound he'd heard, black shape he'd seen earlier. Bucky'd seen Steve coming for his message, and. Left him behind.

Alone.

Oh.

Steve’s fingers curled away from the canvas, bloody red smearing his palm as they kept curling, loose empty fist. There was...nothing left to fight, now.

Careful hands laid the painting gently on the cold dark earth. blank, slick bedspread.

Creaked as he slowly inched off, two feet landing on soft carpet stretched over wooden boards he could almost feel through plush threads.

It took a lot more strength than he had to walk across the room, stoop to balance on sturdy heels as numb hands flicked on the stereo, but he did it anyways. Never used this stereo, but his portable boombox was broken.

The iPod was still hooked up to the aux cord. Should be doing this on a turntable. Thumb through records, lifting a needle, waiting as the first few chords cracked out, black disk spinning spinning.

They’d never gotten a turntable. Wouldn’t that be easier, dramatic crackling voices instead of a thumb scrolling down a detached highlighted screen. Didn’t take long to find the song. It'd taken a long long time to get here, but there was the song a touch away and he pressed the little rectangle that'd take him from here.

A single pause and the first chord began, straight into crackling voices without one intro melody to soothe the blow and Steve’s lungs filled up so fast he worried for a moment he might burst.
But he didn’t, cause the song kept playing. The voices kept singing. And he kept breathing.

*Til then til then, my darling please wait for me. Til then til then, no matter when it will be.*

Well. About as much as one could breathe when every inhale hitched over stuttering tears he wasn’t gonna let himself cry.

*One day, I know we’ll be back again, please wait...til then.*

I know we’ll be back again. Bucky’d been so sure, that they’d come back. Next November, Thanksgiving in Brooklyn with the Commandos, right?

And they had come back. They’d finally come back to Brooklyn and the stars they’d sang to flickered on, fading as they slipped through bloody fingers and silently watched as two boys lost every damn thing they fought for in that war.

*Our dreams will live, though we are apart.*

The canvas was starting to dry. Just the ends were wet enough to drag trails of red on his fingertips, sliding over all the white, muddying tiny flecks. Steve just watched, traced fingers over the familiar strokes of Bucky’s caring hands.

Minutes. He’d missed him by minutes. Seconds, maybe.

It’d been inches, last time, inches further and red fingertips could close around those bare, freezing hands.

Apart.

*Our love, I know will live in our hearts.*

The song was recorded off a record player, crackled a little, fog layering in the background behind combined voices.

Soldiers’ faces in torn reminiscence, distance of two separated hearts. Steve glanced at Bucky, wondering who he was thinking of to have the same painting cross his features.

*Til then, when all the world will be free. Please wait for me.*

When all the world will be free.

Bucky drove and Steve pretended to sketch the road car clouds, anything but the perfect swoop of Buck’s hair back into its ponytail. Bucky hummed under his breath and Steve watched the wide open road stretch in front of them, epitome of the American Dream and the Western Frontier and wondered if anyone in that war knew this was what they’d been fighting for.

*Although there are oceans we must cross and mountains that we must climb,*

"I hate mountains," Bucky bitched, trudging up the snowy ground. "They're obtrusive and pointless and take days to climb."

"It's more like an hour," Dugan supplied, climbing up a few feet behind. Bucky made a face and kept stomping.

"Is it snowing even more?" Jones complained, looking up at the clouds above them. Bucky glanced to Steve, styled blond hair dusted with white, sparkling flakes. He looked kinda like an angel.
"Yep," bitter, pretending it was the snow he was pissed at and not his own stupid head.

"But at least it's--" Falsworth started.

"S'il vous plaît, ne parle pas," Dernier groaned.

"--insulating," Falsworth finished.

Less than two steps later, a distinctive smacking sound and a shout made everybody turn around. Falsworth was glaring at Morita, who'd pegged him in the back with a snowball.

Bucky snorted and turned back to hiking up the mountain. Having a snowball fight sounded like wicked fun right now, but it was a time sensitive mission and they couldn't stop or delay.

"Hey Steve, we almost there yet?" Bucky asked, shoulders so close to brushing.

Steve glanced over at him, blonde ruffling in the wind. "You haven't gotten an ounce more patient with time, have you?"

"And you haven't gotten an ounce less stubborn. So here we are, stubborn and impatient climbing a mountain in the hellish snow."

"Think we'll make it to the top in time?" one of the boys called behind them.

"We'll make it," Steve promised.

"Especially if you all pick up your feet instead of throwing snowballs," Bucky pointed out, his legs starting to strain a little from keeping pace with Steve.

Something cold and heavy thudded between his shoulderblades, explosion of snow. There was an instantaneous splattering of laughter as Bucky spun around to glare indignant and at whichever Commando had thrown the snowball. Thing was, they were all laughing - even Steve - so he had no way of telling who'd thrown it. Not like it mattered, anyone of them would’ve.

"I'm getting you all back after this train thing," Bucky swore, fake-glaring over the mountain between them.

*I know every gain must have a loss. So pray, that our loss, is nothing but time.*

They never had that snowball fight.

But boy, did Bucky have his revenge.

*Til then, til then, let's dream of what there will be.*

A dream, a hope, the soft-palette painted future, the edge of the sunstreaked horizon.

Bucky hummed in the dark, waiting for Steve to come and storm the damn place already. He was gonna, he could feel it in his bones.

Bucky hummed *Til Then* and propped his chin on his only arm, smiling cause the Commandos would throw a damn party when he got back. It'd be great.

Maybe he’d even convince Steve to get drunk. Last time he'd spent the night in Bucky's lap, clinging to him like a koala bear and it had probably been the cutest thing he’d ever seen. He could just picture the serum version of Steve doing the same, tripping to land his huge body drunkenly in
Bucky's lap.

The Commandos would howl with laughter and Bucky would smile, pinch a red cheek as Steve pouted, curled down to wrap himself around Bucky's shoulders. The boy'd break into aw's and Bucky would roll his eyes but rub his hands down Steve's back, call him a dame and tell him he still can't hold his liquor, his Irish roots would be ashamed of him.

Bucky was never ashamed of Steve, though. Steve was a goddamn angel. He was Bucky's goddamn angel.

When Steve finally came for him, when he pulled open that door and gathered Bucky into his arms from this hellish Hydra hole, Bucky was going to tell him he loved him.

It'd be the first thing he'd say.

*Til then, we'll call on each memory.*

The back of Bucky's hand brushed up against Steve's. He pressed back automatically, rush of warmth sparking up through chilled skin, muscles flickering as Bucky's fingers curled. If they were to overlap their hands, they'd be weaving their fingers together.

Neither of them moved.

*Til then, when I will hold you again. Please wait, til then.*

"I walked through hell for you," he started, eyes shining down, a hundred stories of army fields and bloody battles. Peggy'd told him, on that day, something Steve'd said when he found out Bucky was a prisoner of war. I'll walk there if I have to.

Steve'd walked through hell for him and maybe Peggy was right, maybe that was all that counted in the end.

Artist fingers found his, taking both Bucky's hands and entwining them onto the sheets. How many times had they entwined fingers? How many times?

"...It'd be an honor to burn hand in hand."

Bucky blinked up at him and Steve lowered his arms in a pushup to kiss him one more time. Bucky closed his eyes and his lips slid against Steve's, then oxygen filtered through parted wet lips and the air without Steve was cold as it'd been that day, wind and snow.

Hand in hand.

Until I hold you again.

Steve spread his red-smeared fingers over the back of that canvas, energy tingling in all that empty space between them, where letters were poking through.

End, line.

Just empty space between his fingers now. Empty space where metal slipped, where the same warm hand from the forties curled against white pillows, digging deep into his skin as Buck’s head tipped back, lips parted around the soft breath of ecstasy.

Empty.
There are oceans we must cross, and mountains that we must climb.

Waves crashing over toy soldiers, standing chest to chest, arms around each other and ocean lapping at their waists. Steve pinned Bucky's hair back with two palms, saving him from the salty wind, hands not shaking anymore.

"You alright?" Bucky puckered his lips to kiss Steve's cheek gently. The ocean reflected, then eyelids closed and another deep, controlled breath.

"Thanks to you," Steve murmured, lifting his arms to rest on Bucky's shoulders, caging their faces in close and personal. A soft press of lips, a breathy sound, and they were both pressing in deeper, tilting heads.

Water and chunks of ice flooded into his throat and Steve choked on reflex, lungs seizing heart pounding throat convulsing. Burned worse than fire, than the cold tingling fingers hands feet. Lungs filled as eyes spilled over with tears of pain the cold water sucked away. No one to see you cry in the ocean--

Gentle rocking, rustling wind, breaking waves.

Staring up at the treacherous sky
 maybe I am worth the fight
 tears gathering in his throat instead of his eyes.

Oceans they should've crossed. Oceans they should've ran, jumped, flew free, gotten away. Into the dark.

If you’ll be my boat, I’ll be your sea.
I live to make you free.

He’d been torn and didn’t listen to the right voice.

Part of him wanted to pack up with Buck and leave this place, never come back in their lives. Forget the bloody fists, forget everything but some beautiful green hillside in Ireland and waking up next to Bucky's sweet face.

Part of him couldn't imagine hanging up the suit, ever. What the fuck would he do? What good were these hands if they weren't killing to save a life, what good were these legs if they weren't standing between his country and chaos?

He should've gone.

Should’ve followed Buck right into the dark.

I know every--

"--gain must have a loss," they sang and Steve's eyes cut to Bucky, the peaceful expression as wind battered loose strands on his forehead. He'd never considered himself all that lucky, but he had so much when he had Bucky.

Steve couldn't lose him, couldn't imagine what it'd be like to live with that. To live without Bucky. Steve’d go headfirst into this war, give it his all, just so long as it didn’t take him.

"So pray that our loss... is nothing but time."
A long, long time. Seventy years. Longer, on both ends, all that useless fighting, waiting, pining.

I-It’s been...so long. So long.

The only villain in our story was time.

*Til then, let’s dream of what there will be.*

It could’ve been...they could’ve had anything. In some other universe; not the one they kissed and the stars didn’t come down. Steve couldn’t imagine a universe like that.

And he didn’t wanna try imagining the one where he lit the world on fire for Bucky to lose him to the flames.

But maybe that’s exactly what Steve’d done. He’d always thought the best yet to come, but maybe they’d been doomed the moment the moon stitched his heart into the bloody hands of the burning sun.

He’d just never could’ve imagined *this* as their future.

Never could’ve imagined.

*Til then, we’ll call on each memory.*

Only, Bucky couldn’t.

Not when he didn’t have them. And he’d lost them now, how many times? To the open arms of the sea.

Wait for me, wait for me,

Disappearing into the dark over and over and the punches to Steve’s gut hurt less from metal than that.

Always thought Bucky didn't love him enough to remember him. Now he knew, Bucky loved him too much.

Couldn't decide which ripped his heart deeper.

*Til then, when I will hold you again.*

When he held Bucky again. Would he *ever* hold Bucky again?

How long, how many more years until the spaces between his fingers filled, until he breathed in real oxygen, until familiar muscles wrapped around his spine and Steve pulled that precious boy into his arms again?

Maybe...he’d never get to touch Bucky again. Maybe everything he dreamed was something he’d never have. Floating away on some starry sky, lost fire smoke drifting to some beautiful new place.

"Please wait," The backs of their hands pressing closer, Steve's thumb running over the side of Bucky's.

The harsh, cold wind whipping around them as their heads turned, eyes met. The last streak of pink in the sky slipping to black. Stars twinkling through, a beautiful icy blue silver moon the color of Bucky's eyes washing light all over them. Something deep in those eyes Steve’d never had
permission to see before, didn't have the slightest clue to what it was.

I love you.

"Till then." The last notes slipped away in the wind, a whisper in a lover's ear. Steve leaned over, soft smile on his face as he knocked his shoulder into Buck's.

Bucky rocked, rocked, and disappeared into the wind, smothered flames in cold dissipating phoenix ashes, scattering on the wing of the last, fading words.

The turntable should scratch, needle readjust, pick up and start new only this generation didn't do that, didn't wait, didn’t stop.

He didn't register the next song playing, wasn't hearing much of anything right now. Wasn't seeing anything but the ashes settling in his palm, blowing away free.

Bucky’d never be free like that. Bucky’d never get to die and scatter on the breeze, lower a cold body in a frozen box one more time, no glass window to press, nothing but dark mahogany to stare up at Steve from the bottom of that open grave.

Arlington National Cemetery didn't fill in graves until after nightfall. No handful of dirt thrown on top, no soil to be seen, all cleared away before the ceremony.

And all those military funerals left the distraught spouse next to the grave for one last conversation before they left.

Before he left Bucky behind, one more time. Six feet under.

Steve’s knees were shaky, legs straining to lower him carefully to the perfect grass. It was chilly, damp against his uniform. The other soldiers had marched out, already dispatched and it was just him and Buck now, isolated to the back of the bar, the two of them surrounded by a thousand white stones and a burial flag folded in its careful triangle.

How was Steve supposed to say goodbye?

Deep anguish had his throat by its clawed hands, ripped out medicated heart and the serum couldn’t save him now.

Two fingers running over the cold blades, green slipping between his fingers like those days in Central Park. All those days in Central Park.

A shuddering gasp and he finally broke, “Buck.”

Bucky Barnes, his right hand sniper, his eternal best friend, the Sergeant he trusted with his life and the Winter Soldier who’d frozen by his side into the next century, the shadow under his feet, the stars in his eyes, and the love of his life.

Bucky'd said he couldn't believe in love when he'd been so in love it’d ruined him.

They’d had it. They’d had it all. It was so brief, so short, in all the years they’d been alive there’d only been months, a few in Brooklyn, a few in the war, a few with everything they’d ever dreamed in this century.

There’d been fewer nights in peace than there’d been years in pieces.

For so long, they’d been kept apart for so long and for what?
Too scared to face the overwhelming, crashing waves of it?

Too blinded by each other, too much light shed on shadows that’d been building darker since the beginning of days?

Too broken from the past?

Or maybe…they just weren’t destined to be together, not in this life. Maybe not even in the next.

“B-bound to be together,” Steve whispered to the grave, fingers reaching for smooth wood too far down beneath his feet. So far away, never touch that beautiful skin again.

There wasn’t even a quote on the headstone to run fingertips over, embed in his skin. Just that simple white stone: Buck’s rank division World War II day he was born and day he died, but that day couldn’t be right, he’d died so many fucking times.

It wasn’t enough, didn’t say enough for everything he’d done and sacrificed, single white arch for a red-star soldier. If he’d died back in the 40s when he really was just a war hero, if Steve’d attended that funeral, where’d they bury him?

Maybe in Brooklyn. Next to Sarah and his dad. All Steve’s family in one place.

That’d be his new drawing spot, spine curled up against Buck’s headstone, flowers for Sarah two graves over, oak tree casting shadows over his drawing pad as he sketched one more crooked soldier hat over shining crystal eyes.

Run graphite-stained fingertips over the etched words in old Brooklyn stone. That tavern song, spelled out like one’a those poems Bucky’d always accused him’a writing.

Oh! dig my grave both wide and deep
Put tombstones at my head and feet
And on my breast carve a turtle dove
To signify I died of love

That first night in the tavern, Peggy’s shining dime eyes, red dress, that’s what the boys’d been playing. The song in the background on piano with lifted drunken voices and how’d he never thought about that before?

He left me for a damsel dark
Each Friday night they used to spark
And now my love, once true to me
Takes that dark damsel on his knee

Why that song, that moment, the only moment he’d ever been with them both? Bucky’s sarcasm she’d dodged so easy and Steve’d never thought about it, why Buck’d glared at her so, in that tavern so long ago.

What if that’d been the night he’d first thought Steve was leaving him? My love, once true to me--

Fare thee well, for I must leave
Do not let the parting grieve
Remember that the best of friends must part
Adieu adieu kind friends adieu

Best of friends weren’t supposed to part. Bucky’d promised. He’d never leave Steve. He promised,
he promised.

I can no longer stay with you
I'll hang my harp on a weeping willow tree
And may the world go well with thee

That'd been what all the other soldiers sang that night and he couldn't, he couldn't say adieu. Not then, not the first night he'd had his best friend back. But...what if Buck had?

Was that the night he realized he was in love with Steve? He'd said once, that Peggy'd known before he did. And if all, I loved him first, all of it was about Peggy, it must've been that night. Farewell, do not let the parting grieve, and remember the best of friends must let go.

He'd never told Steve that. And now, he never would.

Pieces of stone crumbling under the edges of red-stained fingertips and Steve could crumple against this headstone or the white one in Arlington but nothing he did was gonna bring Buck back.

To signify I died of love.

He loved Steve, burned so bright and fast and hard, and Steve'd wondered if he did, if he loved him and lord.

He had. He had. He still did.

He'd spent his entire life fighting for a hundred different causes, wars, battles. But the one that mattered the most, it'd been about nothing at all. Bucky loved him. He loved Bucky. They'd always both known, even if they couldn't admit it to themselves.

Well. Now Bucky'd admitted it and Steve'd finally heard him. Here, at the grave, heard him one day too late.

The Commandos weren't here to pour bourbon on his grave. He sure as hell doubted the Avengers were going to.

No home to come back to.

Steve's turn to admit. This entire time, every battle war wound scream punch struggle to keep afloat...had been for nothing.

They'd fought for nothing. And somehow somewhere, they lost the line.

Gravestones, gravel, grass disappeared. Dark, empty bedroom, iPod singing soft in the distance, burial flag turned bloody canvas. He'd never get the honor, closure of going to Bucky's funeral. Buck wouldn't let him go that easy.

A long time ago he'd stormed a base in Azzano alone, absolutely sure Buck was alive. And now, he could still feel that, Bucky's breathing soul tethered however far. Just couldn't feel his own anymore.

If Bucky died, honestly died, then maybe, eventually, he could move on. He'd mourn cry haunt his grave and miss him every day, but. He could recover, maybe, from losing the soldier he loved. He'd spent half his life preparing for it, a couple months nearly believing it. Bucky'd been gone, but Steve still had him, still had his ghost and his memory.

But Bucky wasn't dead. And if he hadn't offed himself when he'd taken Peggy's life, he wasn't
gonna. So Bucky was alive, and loved Steve, and chose not to be here.

He couldn’t ever move on.

Still givin’ him hell, all these years later.

Fine. Steve Rogers was a soldier, and he was fighting til the end. Live and die for the Art of War and he would never fall. Neither would Bucky Barnes, ever again.

We’ve waited so damn long, we’re sick and tired.

Inhale.

Steve scooped up the painting carefully, turning it to carry secure against his chest as he pattered outta the bedroom, past the kitchen the bathroom into the living room, absentmindedly pulling the couch cushions to the floor, kicking them together with the side of his foot and sinking down to prop on both.

We are the beginning of the end.

You’d think, after the number of times he’d looked at this damn thing he’d’ve memorized it by now. But no, always found new things everytime he studied it. But right now, he wasn’t being an artist or a critic, ran fingers over the light spilling in bright blue windows to see the world, for one moment, the way Bucky did.

‘Cause see, Steve was gonna find him.

I won't leave any doubt or stone unturned.

He wasn’t gonna go out and search the planet, that’d get him caught and found embarrassingly fast. You can’t run away and chase at the same time, he’d learned that much by now.

Didn’t wanna know what’d happen if the Avengers ever found him. Didn’t wanna know if they were even looking. If they knew what was good for them, they’d let him go. Once his fists were raised, that was the finish line. Should’ve learned that much by now too.

Baby tonight I'll be...the liberty.

Night closed in, darkness slowly settling over his bones, growing shadows across all those sharp colors and he sat there on the couch cushions and thought.

If he was gonna find Bucky, he’d have to before he started running. Didn’t have long before Buck could be anywhere. But he’d been here and that meant he wasn’t far. Just had to figure out where.

Problem was, Brooklyn was the center of their lives for most of their lives and he could be...so many places. So many memories to sift through and it had to be the right one.

This was his last chance. He had to stop, think, form a battleplan and do this right. No more youth running into alleys with fists raised, no more swinging round corners with nothing but a shield. Settle down, ’cause he had something to prove this time. And he was damn well proving it.

Show me your love your love

Canvas slowly rotated, lingering moonlight cutting cold silver through windows, glass doors to the fire escape.
Steve sat on the couch cushions on the floor and ran his fingers over the words on the back of the painting until the paint was long past dry.

Bucky’d written I love you on the back of a painting that’d already said it in every brushstroke. He’d just never seen it.

Once, Bucky’d screamed at him, you didn't let me down, you let me fall.

"Jesus, Steve, I had to. It was the only way to get you to shut up. You know I didn't--"

"No, Bucky. Don't insult me like that. I know you. And I know you meant it."

Inhale. Quiet. "Not in the way you think."

You didn't let me down, Steve, you let me fall.

He wasn't talking about the train, was he?

Steve watched the sharpie mark on his wrist flex, shape with him as he traced every red letter, over over again.

I love you. To the end of the line.

He'd never heard the words like that, but wasn’t every other time enough? Wasn’t every memory of Bucky’s affectionate smile and whispered confessions in the dark enough?

Wasn’t everything Bucky’d given him enough? Without this, even without this, wasn’t it enough?

Show me your love.

It’d always been enough.

‘Course it had. How stupid had he been, how long did it take to realize, he didn’t need these three words when he’d had a lifetime of hearing them everyday in 9000 ways.


Of course he did. ‘course, he always had.

...before the world catches up.

All he had to do now was catch him.

Cause there's always time for second guesses, I don't wanna know...

Was everything fixed? No. Was there a fucking lot they had to talk about? Hell yes.

But here they were.

’course.

The couch cushions slid as he pushed off, cradling the painting again as he started back across the dark apartment, moving as easy in the shadows as his ghost had.

Nothing was fading, now. Crystal, crystal through all the dark as he didn’t turn on a single light, propped one knee up on the bed, reached over, and calmly hung Buck’s painting back in place.
He’d needed this, he’d needed Bucky’s confession, for so long. He’d been so sure what they had couldn’t possibly be enough.

But that was the thing.

On the best days, Bucky made him feel like he was worth the air in his lungs. On the worst days, he was the only thing Steve kept breathing for. And maybe he left him behind in the end, but he never once left him alone.

“You didn’t really need me,” Steve whispered to the beautiful dark. “But thank you for letting me need you.”

If you’re gonna be the death of me, that’s how I wanna go.

Eventually, barefeet found their way to the cold metal grates of the fire escape. Breathed in the open air, New York skyline blinking over the water in the distance.

They used to sit out on fire escapes when they were kids. Watching the stars.

Imagining what life’d be like past the black sky, world of their own with no more cold.

No more bloody knuckles.

No more reasons to have them.

We got it all worked out, so little time.

"This doesn't change anything," Bucky told him, softly. He blinked, repeated it in his head, then it kicked in.

"What the hell?" Steve threw his hands up and stared at the sky because of fucking course that was his luck. They were never going to catch a fucking break, were they?

He had to take a few breaths - probably needed them for going so long without oxygen anyways - to calm himself down before he turned back to Bucky, one hand on his hip and the other waving in the air.

"I just kissed you--"

"I noticed," Bucky interjected with a sideways smile.

"--and doesn't that change everything?" Steve continued, ignoring the sassy comment.

Bucky shrugged.

"I mean, I'm definitely not going to hit you if you do it again." The twinkle in his eyes made Steve's chest clench and that wasn't fair, they were trying to have a debate here. “But it's not some magical band-aid to fix me, Steve.”

"I don't want some...magical band-aid." Steve stepped forward, not missing the way Bucky eyed him warily as he took the metal hand with both his own. "I just want you to talk to me. To take comfort in...this."

Kissing Bucky had changed everything.
But those three words...I love you.

They didn’t.

He’d thought they would, Steve’d thought they’d mean everything. Thought it’d make that last piece of the puzzle slip into place, thought he’d finally understand, finally know.

But seeing them written for him, in Bucky’s handwriting...nothing changed. That was the part that shocked him, how...unsurprising they were.

Because...they weren’t some amazing revelation, confession he’d never known. Bucky told him he loved him but see, that’s just it. Steve already knew. Steve’d always known. He’d just been too stubborn to admit it, too insecure to fess up that yeah, after everything, he could. Maybe. Have it all.

So those final red words painted on the white spine of the angel didn’t change anything.

But time? Time had.

*Memories that I'd block out if you were mine*

Bucky’d forgot him twice, and came back to him both times. That screamed louder than the red bitemarks littered down his own white spine.

It hurt. He loved him so much it hurt and it wasn’t that Buck never said it.

*you've got a pocket full of reasons why you're here tonight*

It was everything else. Suicide lies pain masks, it was all so much and Bucky’d hid behind those three words like *that* was the problem, so long as he couldn’t say I love you they didn’t have to face everything else they’d never talked about and now that those three words were slid aside, there was this giant rearing red black dripping, terrifying face of everything they’d never solved.

*tonight may be the death of me*

And there was…the solution. The simple, easy, obvious solution. It wasn’t gold like the sun and it wasn’t white like the snow, it was red & navyblue like them. Black & blue, like them.

But it was simple. They’d faced war and brainwashing and memory loss and terror and identity crisis and in the end, it was so fucking simple.

Spent his entire life pushing and pushing and fighting, above beyond and impossible, always proving something, reaching one star higher, pushing for one step more.

He just had to. Breathe.

Stop, breathe, and realize. Forget the stars. Forget the stars. Peel away the five point carved into his chest and he was just flesh, blood and bone. Warm skin, feet on the ground. He’d been reaching up for so long he’d...forgotten to look down.

To realize he already had everything he needed. Spent a lifetime carrying the world on his shoulders while he stood on Bucky's and Buck pushed him higher, held him up on mountains and. It was time he hopped down. Everyone he knew had wings, but.

Not them.

Two *people*, flesh and blood human. Two boys from Brooklyn who spent so long staring at the stars
they missed the most beautiful light of all, standing there beside them.

Maybe he really did have nothing to prove. Not to Buck, not anymore.

All he’d ever had to do, all along, was ask Bucky to stay.

*Show me your love, your love, before the world catches up*

Maybe Bucky wasn’t a hero. And maybe Steve wasn’t his tragedy. But they were almost bloody and battered enough to taste freedom on each other’s lips.

And god, what Steve would give to have Bucky here with him one more time.

*If you're gonna be the death of me, that's how I wanna go.*

Today was the day he finally figured it out. Soldiers fight so they can come home to their loved ones.

The war was over.

There was only one place left to go.

It’d only taken him, y’know, the better part of two lives to figure out how fucking simple it all was. Talk, don’t leave, fight to stay, don’t fight to take. You don’t get to have all of him. But you get to be there, beside him, if you play it right. You get to have his arms around you and his smile at midnight and his bitchy groans when you wake him up at dawn.

God, that was so much more than enough.

So here, today, marks the day that Steve Rogers finally got his shit together and realized y’know what, the only place he’d ever called home had never been far at all.

Only took him 71 years. Today was what, Februrary...17th. Three days after Valentine’s Day. Eleven days before the day Buck fell from the train in 45.

...which also meant it was the anniversary of the day they went dancing.

Which could arguably be a great day for an anniversary in general but no, he and Bucky’d had that conversation once.

They’d been sitting on Stark’s barstools, on that floor with the landing platform, big arching crystal windows, two glasses of Sam’s stolen orange juice sitting on the bar while they bitched at each other and argued.

“No! No, you don’t getta pick some random day!”

“Buck--”

“It’s at least gotta be somewhat romantic, Stevie. Anniversaries last forever--”

“Buck!”

“--and I for one, refuse to have some anniversary in the middle of April with no significance whatsoever--”

“Buck, Bucky, Bucky. There’s no way we’re gonna be able to chose one day. There’s the day we met, the day we became friends--”
“Arguably the same day.”

“Ehh, debatable, I’d say it was a week later—”

“Do you even know that date?”

“Of course I do! But does it count as an anniversary?”

“It could be the day we finally went on our first date.”

“The hell was our first date? Soup at my mom’s house? Coney Island? The WWII museum?”

“Okay, okay, fine. What about the date you finally got over your stubborn ass and kissed me?”

“Bucky, I will push you off that barstool.”

“I’ll push you right back and Stark will walk in and rip into us about wrestling on the communal floor again, how bout that, Rogers?”

“Wait, what about the day I asked you to go steady with me?”

“Way too much bad shit went down that day too. Ooo, we should do the date you saved me from the dead.”

That lilting tease in Bucky’s voice and Steve couldn’t help but smile coyly, lean over to invade Bucky’s warm personal space and catch those bright eyes before dragging his gaze purposefully down to Bucky’s mouth. “Which time?”

Metal fingers curled quick in blonde hair and Steve was laughing before their lips smushed the sound, smiling into Bucky’s mouth as they tipped between barstools and soft pink was not-so-soft in its point-proving.

Their lips dragged on the pull away and Steve could feel it in his gut, heart stuttering in his chest as his breath caught on the edge of Bucky’s mouth, little pop as they separated slow, lips stuck a second long.

Bucky took a moment to recalibrate, dark eyelashes fanning as he finally opened silver-green-blue and blinked slow at him, noses brushing from how close they were, voice dropping low and velvety between them, “Or maybe the date you first rocked my world…”

“I’ve been rocking your world for years,” Steve teased, outta breath and too smiley to have any kick but it sure lit off something in those comet fire eyes.

Bucky surged against him, kissing him so hard and fast Steve couldn’t even gasp, tight all over until he sunk into the rough fingers holding him close and melted, giving in to the crashing wave of arousal, shuddering in Bucky’s hands as he closed his fists in the soft plain black tshirt he really really wanted off now.

“I’m k-kinda likin’ the anniversary,” Bucky gasped, Steve’s eyes still closed as the breathy words washed over the damp traces Buck’d left on his mouth, please fuck, let Bucky kiss him again, “...for the first time we banged.”

Mmm, fuck. Steve groaned low and tipped his head slowly, mouthing his way up Bucky’s jaw, eyes still cemented shut, just breathing in that warmth, memorizing all these lines and angles with a dragging lip, sucking up all the whining sounds outta that pretty throat.
“Or maybe it should be today,” voice an octave lower as Steve mouthed Bucky’s neck and curled his fingers tighter at the little shiver running down that pretty spine, “...’cause I'm about to give you the most mind-blowing experience you’ve ever had.”

A shot of cold between them as Bucky tipped his head back in a bright laugh, Steve’s eyes popping open, just as bright as he took in that bursting smile, the flush high on that pretty face as he tangled their fingers together and dragged Bucky off the barstool.

And then they were laughing, and gasping, so turned on and happy as the world spun perfect, running for the elevator with their hands entwined and their mouths catching again the moment they could breathe, Bucky’s laughter echoing behind them as twin metal doors slid shut.

It’d been seven, eight, nine months since they’d been that happy.

They might...never be that happy again.

If Bucky kept running.

If Steve couldn’t find him.

If either one of them got caught, got dragged off to some Stark care facility, he might never get to see his best friend laugh again--

The hollow pit in his stomach could knock him flat, gasp rattling empty chest raggedy lungs, blood-stained palm over bloody lips as his fingers curled, digging into his jaw like that might ground him, like pain might possibly still ground him.

All he knew was pain, only it was internal and he didn't know how to stitch that kind himself.

The Stars still danced behind his eyelids when he closed them shut this tight, soft breeze chilling the corners as water-tight started to crack.

All those walls were starting to crack.

Head spinning like Coney Island Cyclone with no anchor point, no warm hand on his spine, no laughter and giggling sincere apologies as he hurled out his insides in the grass this time.

Brooklyn, Brooklyn, take me in.

Crumble crumble and look at him, this broken young soldier who'd seen too much, been through too much, fought so hard with so many masks that he couldn't just peel off like the Winter Soldier did, he didn't get to do that, didn't get to do anything but break inside and try not to bleed all over everyone he knew--

But he bled all over ‘em anyways.

Time he stitched up those old war wounds. Stopped dragging families down with him.

’Cause here we are
We are shining stars
We are invincible
We are who we are

Shaking hands ran leather-red tips over the mark on his wrist. Traced, all the way round, black solid all the way to that dash, the three dots. Thud of a solid steady pulse under the thumb pressed to those
dots, *invincible*, and everything was still gold.

Golden flames for golden days, two stupid boys in war, best friends sharing a secret language, private eyebrow raise, smile across the distance between them and Bucky shook his head with that exasperated affection and Steve had the world.

Standing on the edge of a burning cliff and they weren’t so far now, fingers laced, the only arm Buck had. A deep breath, twin blues caught on each other as they looked, one more time, before one more something stupid.

“Meet you at the bottom,” Bucky whispered and Steve squeezed, glancing down to the fingers between his, last bit of fuel he needed. And there was that damn sharpie’d line, drawn round both their wrists. The promise, the only one they’d end up keeping, wasn’t it?

Locked wrists.

Leather-locked wrists and what would it be, if Bucky left him for good, if he let go off the cliff this time.

What was the worst place he could go and still leave Steve with these hollowed out rib bones?

If Steve was too late. Maybe Steve was already too late.

Where would that tortured hero go? Would he lose it, one more time, the only piece of Steve he could bring himself to erase? Would he kiss those memories goodbye one final time?

Come ’round with no line drawn round his wrist, who’d be there to trigger it all back next time?

Buck had chosen - twice - to destroy himself to get rid of Steve. What if that's what he chose now?

What if for him, the only way out was erasing, pink flecks dotting a smudged white paper that'd been so complex and beautiful only moments before. What if that's why Bucky left him behind in this apartment in the dark with couch cushions on the floor and his sentence painted red as their shared veins? To erase himself, one more time?

Where was he now, some rickety chair in an abandoned warehouse, devil machines blinking barrier as he held his breath and held back tears and stared up at the sky and tried to picture stars.

A sharp gasp and Steve’s hand shot over his mouth, eyes squeezing shut to the image of stars dancing on some dirty ceiling as the body he used to dance with carved itself out into nothing but a shell.

Maybe he’d get rid of it all this time. Wipe everything, no name, no life, no schoolbooks clutched in strong arms. Just blank. Nothing.

The way Hydra always told him he was. Nothing.

We've only ever been reunited in death. We've only ever been together in death.

Asthma attacks and pneumonia to torture tables to war to bullets in the leg. Fury's death Hydra’s death Steve's death. The Winter Soldier only came back on the verge of death or covered in it.

That's all they’d ever been. So I’ll meet you there one more time, my love.
In a chair seven blocks away, Steve could feel him, could feel the invisible gravity as the sleeping sun shone echo on the moon and was he screaming,

Screaming when no one could hear him.

Just like on those tables he’d been left to rot. During those nightmares he’d woken soaked in sweat and alone. Just like when Steve left him.

Screaming for Steve and Steve couldn’t hear him, couldn’t do anything but feel that goddamn fucking ache in his soul and what that beautiful mind had to be thinking, as the machine closed round his split, throbbing head.

This is it. My last breath.

Surrender...

No. No, he wouldn’t, not Buck. He’d go in there thinking he could but he’d remember, the very last moment, that final inhale, he’d remember that flash of shining light, the one in his own chest, and he wouldn’t leave him, he wouldn’t.

He’d promised Steve they’d have each other ‘til death.

Bucky couldn’t go through with this. Steve was his entire world, he’d take all the pain of everything for every day of his life, 70 years of condensed horror and the two wildfire burning since, take the worst of anything he’d ever felt, he’d take that on the 1% chance he got to see Steve’s beautiful smile one more time--

He couldn’t do this.

The metal arm flashing, angry whirr as he struck out, aiming for the closest scientist only no one was there, it was just Bucky this time.

Bucky, struggling to get out only the machine wouldn’t let him, they had him now and he was screaming, screaming into loneliness as the quiet buzz powered up, electricity crackling and it was gonna take him, Steve was running so goddamn fast to catch up, to stop it, Bucky was there and Steve was gonna get to him in time,

stared at the door and imagined Steve coming for him, barreling to his rescue, sweeping in here with that shield and the Commandos flanking him, barking orders and rushing to Bucky’s side, so young and water-run and beautiful--

Flash. Flash, black, and the dream was gone, something was gone he’d just been thinking of something, remembering something he didn’t know what, just that he was missing it, that there was a void now and no, no, they didn’t get to take Steve from him, not like this.

Steve. Steve, no, he’d never know, Steve no no no no,

Bucky thrashed and the lightning shot straight to his brain.

Hands curling burnt and charred around electric fence wire and then nothing, blank, fishing for something and he could remember the smell, the burning flesh but when, what’d happened, more black--

The outline of Steve’s shoulders, spine in the dark, shadowed in the middle of the night, rose softly, slowly, settled back down again, quiet quiet breaths and Bucky was holding his, watching, barely
able to believe Steve could trust him like this, lay in his bed like this and fall asleep without a lick of clothing to cover that beautiful body, sheets tangled haphazardly around his legs and not covering a damn thing, long smooth curvy lines down that mesmerizing spine he was too terrified to reach out and tou--

Ripped away, empty, black but hadn’t there just been shapes, there’d just been something, flash,

He was losing it. Losing it all and Bucky was screaming screaming couldn’t stop screaming and Steve had to be just outside the door, could swear those were bootfalls coming to save him one more time, please god be Steve, Steve, and he didn’t realize the screams were sliced into words until the echo came back to him, love you I love you I love you I love you I love you--

and they're all disappearing, every drop of sunshine and light and punched shoulder and sidesmile, draining the lifefluid right outta him down to the last memory he ever got, the last memory he always had.

Just Steve, small and sweet and feisty again, curled at the dinner table in their first apartment; pencil in hand as he scratched over faded paper. The sunlight was filtering through the windows, playing solar systems in the soft blond hair that kept falling over his forehead. One peaceful hand lifted, subconsciously brushing the bangs off glowing skin just for them to fall back down again, not a single noise to echo against thin walls but the simple scritch scratch of that pencil over paper, gray turning white into an entire world.

Bucky’s entire world.

The last flash of lightning came and he closed his eyes, soaked in the sunshine for just one more moment, just ten more seconds, please.

He wasn’t done here, didn’t wanna go--

It crackled and Bucky couldn’t risk it, they always pulled him out so soon he never got to see what Steve was drawing.

(It was him. It was always him.)

All he could do left was whisper into the darkness before it took him, forever, and maybe Steve’d at least get the chance to hear these, as he busted down that door ‘cause Bucky still knew, still knew he was coming.

And so he whispered.

“I’m not leavin’ you, pal. To the end of the--”

Then it was blank.

It shook him, the smell of New York’s rough streets, salt off the docks to focus on, fists curled so tight ‘round the fire escape ledge there were imprints of his hands and every breath could be his last.

The sound of metal creaking, the whisper breeze dancing through the light streaks in his hair.

Steve would be just as empty as that shell. Left to walk, talk, physical puppet they’d strung up on stage and nailed to the walls of museums.
Stripped of everything inside, stuffed to the brim with nothing at all as the memories left him, the only thing he had left left him. Even when he had nothing.

Buck’d left him, like that, twice now. It’d be a fucking miracle if Buck chose the end of a bullet instead of that damn machine. At least then he wouldn’t be taunted everyday of his life by the living ghost of the man he’d loved to the fucking ends of the earth and back.

I walked through hell for you. It’d be an honor to burn hand in hand.

It’d be his fucking honor to burn hand in hand.

Steve didn’t wanna start crying again, he didn’t, but there were already tears on his cheeks and at least none of it was real, just exulansis.

Every word in his story, every word he’d imagined and drew and felt inside, every word they’d spoken and screamed and never said, exulansis for it all and honestly, maybe Arlington was as real as that Fourth of July in Brooklyn that Steve’d wondered what it’d be like if Bucky kissed him.

But it didn’t matter, right?

Because Buck’d left that poem behind, in the hospital. The one he’d read, by Steve’s bedside, hadn’t heard but he knew. If there was anything he knew, it was the fucking mouth on that punk.

One universe has us right, of all the millions stacked on millions. So it's not this one. I can live with that.

But Steve couldn't live with that.

Had Bucky read that to him with a straight face? Without crying?

It was alright, though. He hadn't been alive for a long time anyways.

More poems, found the other one in the gun drawer. Only Buck wrote that one, which was worse, but his handwriting was off and the only goddamn time he could’ve been writing poetry was over these past months that’d he’d left, that he wasn’t Bucky at all but the damn Sonnet 14 was still about them.

Steve didn’t read that with a straight face. Or without crying.

He’d spent years, without crying.

Look at him now. Goddamn Bucky Barnes, look at him now.

There had to be some switch inside, something crossed in his wiring, wrong, but he didn’t know how to live when Buck just left him behind like this.

Or maybe Bucky was right, maybe neither of them’d ever been alive. They loved, but they weren't living creatures.

A love without life. A love entangled with the opposite of life. What was it that Buck always said?

Death, love entangled. Love stories were war stories, right?

Who was the weak one now?

He didn’t have the strength to get up. To pick himself off the metal rungs of the fire escape floor
hanging over the city, over that beautiful river as the dark blue sky shone lighter, the color of Buck’s winter peacoat now, not the black it’d been for hours, years.

But Steve didn’t have the strength to get up. Not even with the serum running through his veins, couldn’t do it, he couldn’t lift the bones that dragged on dirty cobblestone in back alleys. Where’s the sniper to come round the corner, pick him outta the dirt? He couldn’t keep doin’ it on his own.

"A weak man knows the value of strength. and compassion."

Compassion.

He’d been chosen, for Project Rebirth, because he was a good man. Because he knew compassion. Passion, fingertips on burnt fingertips.

And on the outside, he was weak no more. But Steve still knew the value of strength. Still, beneath all that, all the red white’n’blue bullshit and the fighting and the Captains and the shield and the running, knew compassion.

And compassion wasn’t to hate Bucky for a single goddamn thing he’d done. Steve didn’t know, had never been through that, but if it’d happened to him? Who’s to say he wouldn’t’ve turned out worse?

Compassion was forgiveness. More than forgiveness. The strength to take them both forward, to carry Bucky when he couldn’t fight any longer.

A weak man knew the value of strength.

You carry me.

And oddly enough, through all this, through everything Bucky’d done, everything he’d done, the world on fire as they rose one more time from ashes and flames?

Steve was a weak man again. And in his heart, where he was weak, he knew exactly what he had to do.

He knew Bucky Barnes, I know what you’re gonna say, Buck. And that’s all that mattered.

That’s all that mattered.

He knew exactly where Bucky was.

~*~*~*~

James B. Barnes.
32557038 T42 43 A

Steve ran his thumb over the embedded letters, the name hanging ‘round his neck, dangling, clanking against the engagement ring. Barnes always had complained about Steve stealing his stuff. He should
probably give these back then, shouldn’t he?

Two solid hands, planted on metal, and Steve Rogers pushed himself to his feet, one more time. Made himself stand, one more time. All he had to do was get up. And, y’know, sometimes storm enemy bases on his own just to get his best friend back, but.

All he had to do was get up, and stand. Stand by his side.

What do you plan to do, walk to Austria?

If that’s what it takes.

One foot in front of the other and Steve started down the rickety metal stairs. I always fall from your window to the pitch black streets, careful – see, careful, you’re welcome asshole - jump down and the soles of his running shoes were on solid ground, pitch black Brooklyn streets, for maybe the last time.

And Steve started home.

Bucky was alive. Bucky’d been alive, all this time. All this time. All. This. Time.

The team should be coming with him, it was the final battle after all. But the Avengers were gonna think he was crazy, for the rest of his life. He could show ‘em the damn painting, they wouldn’t believe him. Because Steve knew Bucky was alive and they’d never get that. They’d throw him in some padded room, get him help. But he couldn’t be Captain America, not for them. Their team captain was gone. It’d crushed him, it’d all crushed him and none of them would believe that. Not Nat, not Tony, not Clint, not Sam.

No one’d ever believed him about Bucky being alive, but this was different. This time, he couldn’t let the plane crash. It’d happened too many times, this feeling of Bucky being alive, to ever stop believing in it now.

Jane’s carousel was sitting dismal and dark, no lights to glitter off the water, spinning and flashing gold for the briefest memory and then it was cold and empty again, a hollow piece of what used to be Brooklyn. They used to be Brooklyn.

Steve shook his head and tipped his head back at the open, glittering New York sky. Goodbye, New York, Bucky’d made him the mad one again.

If you’re gonna be the death of me, that’s how I wanna go.

Just one more inhale. Brooklyn air, one more time, and Steve took the first step on the stairs older than he was. The stairs that hadn’t changed a bit.

He could swear the cobwebs were already forming, this darkness falling behind him but he wouldn’t be the fool this time, he wasn’t turning around. Wasn’t looking back.

Wasn’t much a home without those cobblestone streets and smiles round the corner.

This wasn’t the home he got to keep. This wasn’t where he got to stay. But that was alright, he’d leave it all.

On this bridge, one. last. time.

And off, in the distance, over all the sloping lines and beautiful arching brick, the water underneath
was glittering and the horizon, on the horizon, the sky was just beginning to glow.

It was sunrise.

Of course, it was sunrise.

The thing about the Brooklyn Bridge was the foot traffic really wasn’t as busy as you’d think, even now. It was a long bridge and taxis were fairly cheap. Not to mention that it was dawn, in February, cold breeze ruffling his hair – if he didn’t have the wicked metabolism and body mass that came with the serum, he’d be freezing his ass off. So, for once, there was no one in sight.

Well, no one but the figure in the distance, that dark silhouette he’d recognize anywhere.

Steve stopped in the middle of the footpath and breathed in.

There he was. Bucky Barnes, propped up on the ledge overlooking East, feet dangling over the edge, over the rippling water below.

They used to sit on the ledge as kids. Not as often as Steve would’ve liked, but Bucky was the more cautious of the two, kept soccer-moming Steve’s chest every three seconds, chewing his lowerlip in worry, so goddamn careful to make sure Steve didn’t fall.

The sky looked like it might snow, any second, the slow soft, peaceful kind. It didn’t, but he could feel it, in the air. That edge, that warning edge as distant clouds threatened low and passive, hovering, only this time not even the heavens were putting them through hell.

Steve took three steps closer, and that’s when he heard it. See, he’d known, in his heart, that it was Bucky sitting there on the ledge. But knowing it and hearing it, for yourself, for real, in that beautiful singing voice Buck’d always had, those was two entirely different things and Steve’s heart stopped in his shaking chest.

He’d recognize that voice anywhere.

He’d recognize that song anywhere.

And what a fucking best friend he had, sitting there with his back to Steve, all quiet and peaceful as he sang to the glow breaking the line where the ocean met sky, and Steve fell in love with him all over again.

“You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me hap-py, when skies are gray.” Soft and beautiful, floating on the wind and Steve’s feet were working again, somehow, silent as Buck’s as he walked slowly, so agonizingly slowly, closer. Closer.

This was the place, this was the sound. You can hear it on the air, feel it in the breeze, it’s comin’ for us both, before we try to leave.

“You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you.”

Oh, but he did.

Oh, but he did.

He shouldn’t have made it this far. This shouldn’t have worked.
But there he was.

Here they were.

Two ordinary people, too stubborn to let the world pull them apart.

*On our darkest day, when we’re miles away,*

I leave with no regret.

*Fall.*

The fall.

He was about to drop.

Steve could feel it in his bones.

The same way he’d felt it on that train, couldn’t believe it then, could barely believe it now. They were so close, so close he could run forward and pull that beautiful body into his arms and Steve couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak, drowning in the gold of that beautiful song,

“Please don’t take...my sunshine...away.”

*Sun will come. We will find our way home.*

And Bucky fell.

The sun broke the horizon, and Bucky dropped off the side of the bridge.

Steve dove.

The first flash of bright in the distance, the tiniest sliver of light more blinding than the round glow at noon. It almost blinded him. It almost blinded him, and he almost missed. Almost.

Steve dove, and his fingers locked around that falling hand.

The yank almost tugged him right off the edge too but he dug in his heels, fought gravity with every ounce he had, pulled back just enough, timed it just perfectly, this time, and.

Steve caught Bucky.

The first thing that crossed his mind, the suddenly light, summer mind, maybe should’ve been something beautiful and peaceful and romantic but the first thing, the only thing he could goddamn think, hanging on for dear life to that hand, that precious hand, body bent in half over the rail ledge, was: Jesus Christ, Bucky was heavy.

That brilliant head snapped up, fingers curling automatically around Steve’s wrist, crystal eyes wide as the wind rustled through the short dark pomade, little strands curling around the edges of his forehead, the way they had the day Steve’d saved him, the first time.

(It’s me.) Because all they’d had was each other, then. Me, the one for you. Me, when you heard it, *it’s me*, there was only person that could be and for Bucky, it’d always been Steve. Different body, different country, torture chamber hallucinations and all they’d ever had was each other so all
Steve’d had to say was, It’s me.

(Steve.) There’d been such broken relief in those eyes as he’d blinked up from the table, registering with that flash of light that’d scare away shadows down all the rail-lines and dark forest nights, soft, feeble pink mouth offering that prayer, dying breath and the first gasp of air in a century, Steve.

This century, all that terrified confusion bubbling behind mumbled words, clutching hands, dirty blood caking the side of his face, all that was gone.

This century, Bucky looked up at him and it was a Bucky he’d never seen before, and the only one he’d ever known. Innocence, comet fire all gone now, those sharp crystals were just as haunted as the soul that lay behind them - and in the facets, in the wide open sincerity, pure clean, there was nothing but white, silver. All those shadows almost killed his light. But there he was, there Bucky was, still holding on.

Literally, right now.

What a dramatic fucking asshole. The drop wouldn’t kill him. The ice below would be cold, maybe slash open a leg at the worst, but that drop wouldn’t kill him. It was pretty far down, but this was an assassin that’d survived a hell of a lot worse in Russia. So, dramatic asshole. He was just giving Steve one more chance to catch him.

How many sunrises was he prepared to jump off this bridge until Steve finally figured it out and showed up to catch him?

He had no idea, but Steve had a feeling it might be all of them.

Bucky was looking up at him and Steve’s heart was beating so damn fast, chest heaving, breathing so damn fast, looking back down at Bucky, at his best friend on the whole planet, right here, alive, and their hands were locked.

“Hey, Buck.” Steve said, with tender eyes and shaking knees as the river rushed below them.

“Stevie,” Bucky replied happily, lit up fond as hell, pure joy, sweet affection dancing through the shining eyes, mouth curling up on one side before it broke out wide, sincere smile taking over that whole beautiful young face.

The fist around Buck’s tightened a little, fingers curling against that warm, callused skin.

“About time I caught you, huh?” A little outta breath, a little shaky, and Bucky softened, just smiling up at him, all peaceful and sweet, slight twinge of Brooklyn as the pretty lips parted.

“I always knew you would.”

If it was possible, for someone’s heart to simultaneously stop and pound so fast and loud he might pass out all at the same time, Steve’s chest was doing exactly that.

Fuck, he was gonna cry. He was gonna cry and the tears were gonna land on Buck’s stupid face and he’d never live that the fuck down, he had to get his shit together right the fuck now.

And he should probably, y’know, pull Bucky back onto the bridge sometime soon, no point in catching him if he just left him to dangle there.
Steve blew out an unsteady breath through pursed lips, steeling himself before he engaged those ridiculous triceps, moved to hoist Bucky up--

When it suddenly struck him.

“Wait, hold on,” Steve muttered, squeezing Buck’s hand a little tighter with his right, freeing up his left and glancing down as he patted through the brown leather jacket pockets, searching--

“Hold on?” Bucky sounded more incredulous than Steve’d ever heard him and that was saying a goddamn lot.

But he could wait a damn minute-- there, there it was. He dug the Sharpie one-handed outta his pocket, biting the cap off with his teeth, popping the marker part free with this weirdly loud sound.

“What’re y--”

He spit out the cap over Bucky’s head, furrowing eyebrows looking up at him like he was crazy, that look on his face that said Steve Rogers, littering, how dare he? and it took a lot of internal strength right now not to roll his eyes at that sassy expression.

But Bucky thankfully shut up, the moment the tip of the marker brushed the inside of his wrist. He drew the three dots first, center out, the reverse of the way Bucky drew it. Complementary, like two strands of DNA, winding round on that twisted ladder they’d slid down to so so many pitch black waves.

Starting from the beginning, that’s how he drew it. Frankly, Bucky was left-handed now and Steve was still right-handed and of course they saw it as fucking opposites. Either way, he was matching Steve now, line wrapping over that dangling wrist, had to be pretty careful to keep a solid grip on Bucky’s arm while he angled the marker around that clean skin, pulled Buck right through the flames with him.

“It was never death standing in the way of you and me, stupid.” Bucky huffed in indignation and Steve kept right on going, right on tracing that dark line as he talked over that sassy look. “That last breath’s what’s always kept us together.”

Wasn’t looking at Buck, too busy being careful drawing that line straight, but he could guess the expression on his face, the three ways this could possibly go.

That brief dangerous moment as the silence closed in --

The last time, I’m sticking round til the stars fall from the sky, it’d come down to this: They could finally close that gap between their mouths, lean forward and seal the final nail of Bucky's coffin because once he kissed Steve he was never going back, not ever.

Or Steve could start crying. He’d done that before, and it always tore Bucky up. He used to pull Steve into his chest and squeeze him tight, but that might be harder with Steve big now. He may have to figure it out though, because Steve's eyes were wet enough to maybe start watering over.

Or there was option number three.

Silence and a promise laying between them, raw emotions and wounds opened up and exposed in the slowly blooming sunrise, wind whipping between them as Steve held Bucky’s hand tight, alive again. Bucky blinked a few times, looking at Steve as he opened his mouth, words spillin’ out sweet as honey.
“...jeez, Stevie, I didn’t know you were a poet.”

_Bucky grabbed his pillow before he could think, smacking it down over Steve's head. Steve laughed in surprise and fell backwards, flailing to try to catch the pillow before Bucky could hit him with it again. He got a grip on it and flung it across the room, leaving Bucky ammo-less._

_The silence fell again for just a moment, then Steve was looking at him with big doe eyes and Bucky glared, crossing his arms over his chest._

_“Shut up,” Bucky pouted._

_Steve laughed again, tossing his head back as the sound echoed in the tent. Bucky managed to sit and pout for at least ten seconds, then his mouth was cracking a smile at the corner too. How could he not, when Steve was so loud and perfect and beautiful, arms clutched over his stomach as he gasped from laughing too hard, giggles still slipping past the gasps._

_“I hate you,” Bucky tacked on, the smile on his mouth counteracting his declaration so strongly that Steve knew he meant the opposite._

_“I know,” Steve said breathlessly, finally sitting up straight again and meeting Bucky's gaze. The smile on Steve's face kept wavering at the corners like he wanted to smile even wider._

_If Bucky could have any picture of Steve in the world, it'd be of this moment. Of the look on Steve's face right now because it was more beautiful and shiny and happy than Bucky'd ever seen him. And Bucky’d been the cause of it. Somehow, Bucky was the one to make that smile._

_He didn't need a photograph, then. He'd just spend the rest of his life trying to get that same smile outta Steve. That was all he'd ever need._

_The fond exasperation Steve was aiming at him now, that single raised dark eyebrow under the soft blonde halo - which really did look like a halo right now, first glimpses of sunrise lighting him up gold, ‘specially from this perspective, hanging from those solid artist hands with his head tipped back, wind feeling weirdly detached as it ruffled the hair he still wasn’t used to having nice, short, cleaned up -- anyways, that fond exasperation was just about the furthest fucking thing from Steve’s smile in that memory, but Bucky’d never wanted a photograph of that beautiful face more._

_Maybe he’d paint it, or something. And, and, he got to spend the rest of his life getting that same smile outta Steve, and this same fond exasperation. Because what were best friends for if you couldn’t get both?_

_“Really? Really?” Steve was complaining, shaking his head down at Bucky and Bucky was pretty sure he was gonna break his own damn face from smiling this much. “You’re gonna give me that shit when you left a fucking sonnet in the gun drawer?”_

_That’s right. He couldn’t really tease Steve about being a poet anymore when Bucky was, y’know, actually one. However, he was also still Steve’s best pal and there was more in that complaint than a poem._

_“Why were you in the gun drawer? You weren’t gonna…”_

_His heart was pounding too fast in his chest, about to damn explode because he knew it’d been bad,
knew he’d wrecked Steve nine ways to Sunday and if he’d crashed a plane into the arctic on purpose without all this shit on top of it, sue him, Bucky couldn’t help but be a little worried.

But Steve didn’t even look up from the careful line he was drawing to circle around the far bone in Bucky’s wrist. “The only bullet I was planning was one in your dumbass head.”

Fuck. Of course. The relief rushed through him in an electric wave, every bit of tensed up muscle relaxing all at once.

It was all a lot, and he was still kinda torn between crying or cheering, so he went for the next best of both, which was fucking teasing Rogers right back.

“The person that you take the bullet for is behind the trig-ger--” Bucky sang, maybe a tad obnoxiously, that last Fall Out Boy tag and that, that made those pretty eyes snap up from his drawing, all on fire as Steve stared him down and threatened, perfectly dead serious,

“I will drop you.”

He couldn’t help it.

Bucky started laughing. Metal arm curling over his stomach, dangling legs kicking as it wracked up through his chest, tipping his head back against the gradual warmth of the sunrise, laughing and laughing because this, Steve had just threatened to drop him, so beautiful and strong and confident and this, this wasn’t gonna terrify either of them ever again.

“Hey, hey! Stop fidgeting.” It took him a couple of seconds to wrangle the laughter into giggles, fucking giggling as he hung here off the side of a bridge and let Steve fucking Rogers draw things on him with Sharpie.

“You messed it up!” Steve whined, right back to the tiny complainy version of himself, a flash of the little Steve he’d fallen in love with hidden right behind the layers of the big Steve he’d fallen in love with again.

Bucky held his breath, lips rolled in amusement as he watched Steve chew the side of his mouth, creased line between his eyebrows as he thought it over, paused, and finally lifted the sharpie again, tracing double spikes, “Fuck it, I’m turning this into a heartbeat.”

“You can’t just improvise!”

“Bucky. That’s all I’ve been doing my entire life.”

That was….devastatingly true.

He tipped his head back in an aggrieved sigh, the same one he gave after all those stupid reckless battleplans, and okay yeah, a heartbeat in the middle of the line on the back of his wrist definitely wasn’t a big deal, if anything it was a little fitting, but still.

“What else am I s’posed to do? The line’s not straight!” Steve defended, all raised fists and fireball and of all things to never change about that punk, it had to be that. And okay, he’d never admit it aloud, but. Buck was...really glad it was that.

“You’re not straight,” he shot back, lame and childish as their comebacks had always been only that one, he really liked using that one.

Mainly for the mixed-emotion glare he got back, the deep respect for pulling a pun that good tumbled
in with the annoyance of being pulled one over, only Steve wasn’t so grumbly this time, sighing high and histrionic as he pursed his lips, all woe is me and pure, no-chaser Steve Rogers dramatics.

“Clearly. M’over here professing my undying love off the edge of a bridge,” Bucky’s heart skipped a beat and Steve just kept right on going, the kid he knew, the kid he loved, the rascal of a jerk barreling right on like he hadn’t stolen all the breath outta Bucky’s lungs,

“...to somebody who not only has a dick, but also most definitely is one.”

“I love you,” Bucky told him.

Steve froze, mouth still open over whatever next part of the aggrieved ramble he had planned, eyes still on the sun breaking over the horizon for a moment before something clicked and those beautiful blues snapped down to him.

Bucky exhaled and smiled up at that pretty face. That same smile Steve could decipher just perfectly, the smile that said, c’mon Rogers, you knew all along.

Steve, Steve fucking sniffled. Teared right up like the softie he’d spent all those years pretending he wasn’t and maybe Bucky was being a dick but he couldn’t help it, Steve was being all--

All that and Bucky just. Had to roll his eyes. Affectionately, mind you, but yeah, he fucking rolled his eyes because duh, duh Steve. Which one of them was the stupid one, again?

Well, Steve sure was the nice one because he didn’t chuck the sharpie at Bucky’s head for it, sucked in a deep breath and marked the final dash on the inside of his wrist then tossed it aside like a kind, considerate human being, and Bucky’s head was safe. For now.

He’d’ve thrown it at Steve’s dumb head, personally.

Then that pretty blonde head was shaking, once, like Bucky was just the epitome of a clenched fist and exasperated sound at the sky but hey, something worked, because those hard artist hands were finally - finally - hoisting him up the side of the bridge.

Sharp inhale and blues rolled right back at him, shaky corners of his Captain’s mouth all wobbly and.

Jesus fuck, he wasn’t sure he’d make it back onto that bridge at all, his heart just might about give out in his chest first.

But Steve was pulling him up, over the ledge, feet away from solid ground - well, bridge, that wasn’t exactly solid or ground, but it’d been here longer than both of them so y’know what, good enough for him - and Bucky’d spent way too much time with Steve Rogers in his lifetime because he couldn’t figure out how to shut his damn mouth.

“This poor river,” Bucky murmured, looking down at it sadly as Steve’s hands jumped, searing summer into his biceps, his shoulder, helping him climb over like he’d climbed over that metal bar, not without you. “...it’s got your blood, my tears, a sharpie, my ring--”

Steve had a grip on both his arms, looking down between them to make sure he made it over the edge okay but when Bucky said that that wide gaze snapped right back up and Steve’s hard-angled beautiful-line jaw popped right open.

“You asshole, you dropped your ring off the bridge? How the hell am I supposed to make you a new, one, now?” Strained as he hauled Bucky off the ledge, didn’t even stumble under the extra weight, placed him down heavy and solid, two feet on the bridge, huff of an exhale and Bucky was
standing again.

Bucky was on his feet again. Steve’d caught him.

Bucky always knew he would.

It took a couple seconds, deep breath before his fingers uncurled, releasing their grip on Steve’s shoulders, all that brick swimming away as he finally dared to lift his gaze to the one that’d been watching, sketching, memorizing him for decades.

Fuck.

He was so fucking sorry.

He’d take it, any damnation Steve thought he deserved, but those blue eyes were looking at him so sincere, simple, like he was just Bucky Barnes from Brooklyn again. Bathed in gold, sunshine had just barely made its way over the line of the horizon now.

And Steve Rogers -- from Brooklyn -- pulled Bucky close, hand clapping his arm, soldier, brother-in-arms style. Radiating down metal plates with this impossible vibration and Bucky was warm all over, could barely breathe, Steve was so damn close.

Then he was dragging him in, for real, chests colliding hard and after everything, solid palm against Steve’s shoulder, the brutally short, rough, passionate hug he’d spent a lifetime wishing could be something more, this was all he ever wanted.

Bucky tucked his chin over Steve’s shoulder, didn’t dare close his eyes, squeezing as damn tight as he could with only one arm, the way they’d hugged so long ago and somehow, they’d made it back here. Standing there, and they’d made it back here.

One more clap and Bucky was leaning back, holding Steve at arm’s length, giving him the good lookover the kid hadn’t had in a damn decade. No visible bruising, no visible cuts or wounds or marks or anything, and that meant Bucky had his work cut out for him, he’d spend the rest of forever, however long it took, stitchin’ up all those battlewounds on the inside.

One’a which was about to leak over right about now. Stevie’s sweet face was twisted up, just a little, nose scrunched as the corners of his eyes gathered up with water, blue shinier than that spit-slicked shield in the war.

Bucky’d heard what he’d said. He’d always heard Steve, always listened to every damn word outta that radical, crazy mouth, and how’im I spos’d to make you a new ring now told him everything he needed to know.

So it was official, then.

They didn’t have Tony Stark anymore. Which he’d guess extended to the rest of the colorful winged team who’d flown through the clouds over their sparkling city.

The look on Steve’s face said enough. Behind those hands that refused to bleed on anybody else, that same broken, hollow as the moment Sarah Rogers disappeared from their lives.

Their family was gone. Fuck.

Fuck, Steve’d left it all behind for him, how was he supposed--
Stevie looked like he was damn near ready to cry, he’d be followin’ right behind if he thought about it too, about everything they’d fucking lost, but they’d be okay. Eventually, they’d be okay. Bucky’d show him. It was over, but they’d keep going, they’d keep breathing, because that’s what you did when you woke up and all your boys were gone, that’s what you did when the band of misfits you’d joined wanted you dead or locked up.

When all the golden days were gone.

But this, Steve’s hands grounding him to the earth and Bucky’s gaze holding the wild fists at bay, this was all they needed. They’d always miss them, forever, but. This was a hell of a lot happier ending than he’d ever thought he’d get.

The price of freedom was high. It always had been.

Bucky’d fought for a lot of things in his longass lifetime; he’d like to cash in that card now. He’d like to be free.

They would be enough.

“Hey now,” Bucky softened, running a hand up Steve’s shoulder, all those strong muscles under his palms he never thought he’d get to touch again, blue eyes steady on him - *don’t you dare look back. keep your eyes on me* - as he cupped a palm against his vulnerable, thudding neck. “I do happen to know a pretty good engineer who trained in two of the best Stark labs in *both* centuries.”

I thought you were dead.

Never again.

It took a few seconds before the wobbly mouth curved into a bit of a smile, just a little one, but Bucky was as in love with that one as he’d ever been, that tiny admission like it’d simply destroy that stubborn heart to smile any wider.

“Both centuries, huh?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said slowly, watching the light grow behind the morning sky, the stars blinking out, one by one. “Dumb kid, fell so hard in love with his best friend it almost tore him apart.”

Fingertips sunk into his sides and Steve was about to cry underneath those desperate, barely-believing tipped up corners and they weren’t gonna have any of that.

“Both centuries…” Bucky echoed, biting the inside of his cheek, nodding to himself. Of course. “...a damn lifetime ago. Figured it out some crazy night in a bar, this badass lady walked in wearing this *killer red dress*--”

Steve broke into a smile, a real, watery smile and Bucky could fall at his feet, could kiss the soles of those shoes and the shoes of that soul. He’d been right. He’d guessed, y’know, that if Steve came to catch him off the side of a bridge, givin’ him shit the way he had for the first twenty-five years of his punk life, he’d figured. But he’d mentioned Peg, he’d brought up that hell he’d put them all through, that awful thing he’d done, and Steve was looking at him with those kind eyes, the understanding furrow between his pretty eyebrows and Bucky was right. He was forgiven.

He didn’t deserve this. God, he didn’t deserve this, but he’d told Peg once, if anybody deserved to love Steve, it was them. The only ones who ever saw him, so. No, he took that back.

They deserved this. They *deserved this.*
Spend forever proving it.

“But hey. He always knew, deep down...” Bucky ran his thumb over that fightin’ jaw, for once clean of muddled bruises, red purple blue but that was fine, there was enough red and blue between them now to last a fucking life time. He’d always known, fuck, he’d always known.

“...from the first time he saw that punk kid lower his fists for one. damn. millisecond.” His fingers paused, looking right into Steve’s blue eyes and told him, “…even if it was just to pick up a sketchbook.”

Bucky was always stealing glances of Steve drawing. Calm and almost mindless as he swept pencil over the page, white turning gray with the guidance of careful hands. Bucky liked watching Steve draw almost more than he liked the drawings themselves. It was just the only time he got to see Steve peaceful.

This could count for peaceful, maybe, if Bucky wasn’t making Steve tear up. To be fair, Bucky’d never told him any of that before. And now, Steve was gonna have to spend the rest of his life hearing every little piece, probably a dozen times over, at least, see, what exactly did he think was signing up for?

Bucky remembered it all, every single moment, and jesus fuck nothing in the world could make him forget it again. He’d trace over every time he’d looked across the dark sky, dark room, seen Steve’s beautiful shining face and fallen in love with him, he’d tell Steve about every single fucking one until he got sick of hearing it, until they made a hundred thousand more.

Blessed be the boys time couldn’t capture.

“You think they’re gonna be alright?” Steve whispered, two fists curling in the bottom hem of Bucky’s shirt, back to the very beginning and they were still so young, had the rest of their goddamn lives ahead of them. Just two kids from Brooklyn.

Don’t you know, that the kids aren’t all-

And in the end.

Bucky wrapped both his mismatched arms around Steve’s strong shoulders, folded that soldier into his chest, eyes slipping closed as he tipped his head against Steve’s temple and told him the only fight he knew left.

“I think they’re gonna be just fine, pal.”

I’m yours.

Didn’t mean he stopped being his own, too. Didn’t mean he let go of everything he’d ever known, every reservation he’d ever had, but if he’d never been captured by Hydra he would’ve loved Steve all his life.
And, in the reality of things, he had just released that terrified tight grip and jumped off a bridge to prove to them both, so. In a way, you could say he’d let go. But in a way, he’d just decided to hold on forever too. To carry on. Together, hand in hand.

But fuck, you wanna talk reality, real reality, he was never gonna be able to stop touching Steve fucking Rogers. Fuck, he’d missed this, the summer pressed up against his skin, both palms on Steve’s neck and the world dangling in his fingertips.

I and love and you.

Steve’s fingertips raked down his shoulderblades and Bucky reached up a metal hand, brushed aside that swoop of misplaced bangs that’d fallen from the high side-swoop, all polished and whatnot and when the hell, between now and the hospital, had Steve had time to do his goddamn hair?

It wasn’t fair, that boy was fine as hell and it wasn’t the least bit fair. Bucky had to work a half hour on his hair to get it right sometimes, and that was before it was long.

Which it wasn’t now, wasn’t anymore, but maybe, down the road, he might grow it out again. The short was great, he knew he looked hot as hell, but there was something about having those artist hands tightening in the long dark strands--

Mm, yeah. Yeah, he was pretty sure he was gonna grow it out again. On his terms, this time, and he’d actually - miracle of all miracles - fucking wash it more than twice a century. Or better, he’d get Steve to wash it. One more excuse to get that beautiful body naked and wet--

“What’re you smiling about?” Steve asked him, long fingers scratching in the short hair at the base of his neck. Bucky cocked his head, one side tipping up higher than the other as he studied the patient, curious expression on that face that’d get them into trouble a dozen more times this week alone.

“You,” Bucky answered simply, and Steve’s arms dropped, circling low around his waist, pulling him in close and proper now and Bucky couldn’t help the smiling crinkles next to his eyes, bottom lip snagging between his teeth as those glittering blues filled him up to the goddamn top.

He’d said it. Didn’t matter that Steve hadn’t even needed him to say it aloud, not in that many words, because he already had. So, so many times. To the end of the line, right?

I got nothing, but I love you, and that’s enough. They both knew now.

(...and Steve was pretty sure neither of them were ever gonna forget again.)

*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy, when skies are grey. And now you know, dear, how much I love you. Please don’t take, my sunshine, away.*

Bucky cupped Steve’s face, looked him over one more time, for good measure. They’d been in a lot of fights, he had to be sure. But there was nothing to clean up this time, they’d both seen the very worst of battles. And they were still here. That was all that goddamn mattered.

Steve’s eyes slipped closed as Bucky went up on his tiptoes, leaned forward.

Tipped that fiery head down and closed crystal eyes of his own, crossing the years between them, the distance that’d separated them too long, leaned forward, delicate, tender, and kissed Steve’s forehead.

The knit between his eyebrows, lingering residual mourn as the metal slipped up to cradle the back of his head and Stevie’s closed eyes softened. His lips pressed to smooth skin, holding tight, and the
curled fingers in his skin let go.

Peace. True peace, that smooth, gentle only white blank pages and a pencil could ever bring.

Breathe.

He could give him this. Bucky’d been so sure, for so long, he didn’t have enough to give, but he could give Steve this.

It’d be his honor.

The wind rustled him cold as he pulled away, freezing a streak before he realized the single tear that’d slipped down his cheek. The corner of Steve’s mouth turned up and he reached up one big artist hand, thumb swiping over his skin, and wiped the tear away.

Here they were. Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were best friends since childhood. Inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield.

Time to kiss this battlefield goodbye.

And run into the sunset together. Well, actually, sunrise, as cliché as Bucky spent his life trying to be, just to annoy Rogers, you couldn’t have it all.

Only, maybe, with Steve looking at him like that?

Maybe you really could.

This time when Steve's hands landed Bucky's jaw, there was no mask in the way. Just Bucky's soft skin under his palms and Steve's heart pounding loud enough that Bucky could hear it, could feel it. Beat in time with his.

So I’ll blame it on my optimistic heart.

Steve tightened his hold, short dark strands brushing the curl of his fingers, his stomach twisting in knots as the wind whipped around them, Bucky's crystal eyes staring at him, staring into him, and it was jump now or never, a lifetime of waiting, and with fists raised and blood pumping Steve leaned forward, destroying the space that had been between them for decades too long.

He tilted Bucky's face up and pressed their lips together, eyes slipping closed as their mouths connected and the world stopped turning.

Steve Rogers kissed just like he fought, with every ounce of that beautiful heart and soul and Bucky was hopeless to do anything but cave under the pressure of those lips - barely parted, a touch of lingering wetness against his mouth and the jolt of it spiraled through his body, rippling down his spine because god, this was Steve in his hands, Steve's face tipped down to meet his, their - their - lips pressing together. Agape.

In the middle of this carnage, this wreckage of memories and haunted New York streets, somewhere in the goddamn twenty-first century; he never thought he'd live to see this day but fuck, wasn't it fitting.

Fit just like Steve's mouth to his, crushed close and solid and so warm and--

Metal fingers tangled up in the front of the brown leather jacket, fabric catching and threatening to tear as the arm that'd done nothing but crush things permitted its favorite mission and hauled Steve
closer, their bodies crashing together this time.

He took it all back.

Everything he ever said about being too scared for this, he took it back. He was terrified, still positively terrified, but he’d spend every day of the rest of his life making up for it with this, the only thing he was sure in, the only thing he’d ever had faith in, ever fought for, and that was Captain Steven Grant Rogers.

Bucky arched up against his mouth, kissing back messy, hungry, and neither of them could breathe, he needed more than just his hands on Steve's face, he needed him so close he could never get away again. Crushed their mouths harder, Steve’s arms lifting to wrap even tighter around the muscles threaded over his spine, leather creaking as he squeezed their chests flush, twin hearts skipping.

Metal and real fingers shoved into that blonde halo, forget the Heavens, forget Hell, just dragging Steve down further, closer, and Bucky tilted sideways to adjust the angle, lips interlocked and pressing, hard enough to bruise, hard enough that Steve could taste the desperation, the fear he wasn’t afraid to show anymore. Fuck the masks, let Steve see this, the truth, the broken, terrified way Bucky was clinging to him like he'd disappear the moment their lips parted.

Let him see it so he could prove it, every single day, he was never leaving Buck behind again.

Cause you’ve got nothing to prove-- damn right I do. On va voir.

A stuttering wave of emotion, promises, only they weren’t making a single damn one this time but to always come back to each other and that was the one thing they’d never really had a problem with.

If seventy years and assassin horror stories couldn’t keep them apart, they’d make it through whatever war story was waiting now.

(They were all love stories anyways.)

The waves crashed on the shore, sunlight rushed through all the darkest corners of the shadows, threatening to knock him right off his feet.

Steve just bundled him close and kissed him deep, let them both drown in the sparking heat of their chests, carry on; all senses on fire to melt, melt years of freezing ice cold. Maybe this was how they were supposed to heal, in the warmth of their hearts combined, in the comfort of each other's bodies. Real, alive, here.

Real, alive, here.

Jesus Christ, it was hard to remember they hadn’t been doing this his entire life.

They’d taken each other apart and picked up the pieces, put themselves back together again and fought for, with, against each other but for the first time in a long long time, tomorrow sounded like the dream he never could've had yesterday.

Bucky’s lips parted on a gasp, breathing the oxygen straight outta Steve’s lungs as their overlapping lips slid so so slowly apart, barely apart at all as he exhaled, filled those precious lungs up again. He’d trade every yesterday for the chance to spark that fire back to the warmest it could be. He’d trade everything for the chance to bring Steve back to life again.

For the chance for him to come alive again, under the summer sun.
Your love is anemic, and I can’t believe that you couldn’t see it coming for me.

This was it, the grand finale to their war, their last battleground.

They drew apart, darkness blinking to soft red, gold as the sunrise lifted higher, higher, in the big bright blue sky.

Bucky's hand on his chest was solid and unbreakable, smile widening the longer Steve stared, breathless, those crystal eyes dancing with laughter at the eternity etched in his one-sided smile and he was so goddamned beautiful, stunning, **breathtaking**. It was a goddamn miracle Steve’d survived this long, that every risky stupid thing he’d ever done had ended just right enough for him to end up here and.

War was kind of like hell. But for *this* soldier?

It was worth it.

It was worth it.

Their foreheads pressed together and Steve breathed him in, breathed in the air ghosting over his wet mouth, over his stitched-up serum heart and god, there weren't words in any language he knew to describe this.

Well, Bucky’d been right about one thing.

They finally won the war.

And they finally came home.

“Where are we going?” Steve asked and Bucky smiled.

One hand carded through Steve’s hair and Bucky pulled his best friend into his side, throwing an arm around Steve’s neck.

Leaned over to kiss him on the temple, then twin footfalls started across the Brooklyn bridge, sunrise arching ever higher in the distance, in the New York distant stardust, to remember them by. Goodbye, goodbye.

“The future.”

So I cut the ties and I jumped the tracks. For never to return.

Gold flickered in the distance, and one by one, the stars blinked out in the blue blue sky.

Summer slid free from the night and Steve paused, in the middle of the bridge, and held out his hand. Bucky took it.
Follow me into the dark and I will lead you into the light.

Fingers laced, Bucky’s right, Steve’s left, mismatched sharpie marks overlapping, twin dashes on never-ending lines, to the end. The human hands that’d held on, burnt, lost, clutched, thrown, punched, and caught.

Hand in hand, they were never letting go.

He meant it, this time.

There’s no place like home.

There's a quote, something about living on the edge of death. Steve doesn't think that's true about them. They don't live on the edge of anything. They can't afford it.

No, instead they live deep in the throes. They live in the very core of it all. They live in the constant ever-wakeful presence of the feared shadowy darkness.

They live in death.

Till then, I had you.

Til Death.

He'd get to take his last breath against Bucky’s lips.

☆

And what a sweet last breath it was.

Chapter End Notes

☆

Final Playlist, This is My Last Breath.

Til Death - Barcelona
The Kids Aren't Alright - Fall Out Boy
No Place Like Home - Mariana's Trench
I and Love and You - The Avett Brothers
Better - Tyler Ward
Strong Hand - Chvrches
Boats and Birds - Gregory and the Hawk
You Are My Sunshine - Elizabeth Mitchell
Till Then - The Mills Brothers

xx

☆

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!