The Life of Bucky Barnes

by stephrc79

Summary

The ongoing story behind the pictures from the Instagram The Life of Bucky Barnes.

This work is a series of ficlets that tells the story of each picture. As each chapter progresses, it will encompass one or two of the images, how they appear chronologically. These are inspired works for petite-madame with her blessing.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Today, Steve offered me this weird ass teddy bear.

Morning sleepy head,

Don’t forget what Doc told you about being more ‘open and expressive’. We talked about this last night, and I’m not going to let you forget. I know you started that Instagram account a couple weeks ago. Maybe it’s time you actually posted a photo? I’m already following you, so I hope to see something on there soon.

I’ll be home late tonight, and before you even say anything, no I won’t be jumping out of any planes. Or helicopters. Or anything that’s airborne. Anyway, I love you. I’ll see you tonight.

Steve

PS: I hope you like the bear. ;)

Bucky glanced over the plush bear he held in his other hand. What the hell was this thing supposed to be anyway? He turned it around, taking in the bright blue uniform with red trim and big red buttons, the black mask over the bear’s eyes... It looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn’t quite place
where he’d seen it before. Not that that meant anything; there were still lots of things he constantly
found ‘vaguely familiar’.

“What the hell did you give me, Stevie?” Bucky muttered to himself. He could swear he’d seen this
thing before, but dammit if he couldn’t place it.

With a shrug, he set the bear aside and reread the note. He’d switched psychiatrists a month ago and
this new doc had been making all kinds of suggestions about ‘getting out more’, not just physically,
but emotionally as well. Something about you’ve been back in the world for over three years now,
James. It’s time you started living in it.

Bucky grumbled at the thought. He was back in the world. He was working for SHIELD, he was in
a steady healthy relationship, he was making friends... What more did she want?

With a sigh, Bucky turned over and set the note on his nightstand, then reached for his phone. Steve
was right; he had started that Instagram account for a reason — if nothing else than to appease his
stupid doctor. Maybe he should finally post something on it.

He swung his legs around and stood up before grabbing the bear. If he was going to do this thing, he
was dragging Steve along with him. And since he couldn’t remember where he’d seen the bear
before, maybe someone out there in Instagram Land could tell him.

He walked to the mirror hanging over their dresser and held the bear up with his metal hand. He
quickly snapped a couple photos before turning the phone around to glance them over.

Wow. He really needed to learn how to smile. Was he always that scary looking? Man, that would
explain so much.

With a huff, he turned the camera back around and, trying for at least a small smile, snapped a few
more.

When he scanned the photos again, he was only mildly happier with the new set, because at least he
no longer looked like he wanted to slaughter a small village.

He flopped back down on the bed, dropping the bear next to him. He pulled up the Instagram app
and started to add the photo. He skipped over the stupid filters section — it was just a damned photo
— only to freeze up when he got to the caption. What the hell was he supposed to say? He just
wanted to know how he knew this bear.

He glanced sidelong at the bear, assessing it, trying to figure it out one more time. He shook his head
and turned back to the phone.

Today, Steve offered me this weird ass teddy bear.

That was good enough. Someone out there would tell him what it was. He clicked share, then tossed
his phone aside before rolling back over onto his pillow. Then he picked up the bear again, turning it
over and over in his hands.

That’s when he noticed the small tag sewn onto the bottom. He grabbed hold of the tag to read what
it said: Official Bucky Bear

What the —?

That’s when it hit him. Those stupid comics from the war! Bucky hated those comics.
“Dammit, Steve!” Bucky threw the bear across the room. It hit the corner of the dresser and bounced across the floor.

Steve knew Bucky hated those comics. Well, that was fine; two could play at that game. With a sly smile, Bucky got up and retrieved the bear, throwing it back onto the bed. He didn’t know when or how, but he would get Steve back for this.
Bucky was awake. Had been for the last couple minutes, but he didn’t want to open his eyes. He was just so *comfortable*.

He turned slightly to stretch out on the bed, a small whimper escaping his lips as he felt his bones crack and sigh. Then he rolled right back over and buried his face into the mattress. Just five more minutes...

With a quiet groan, he eventually turned over, cracking an eye open. The sun was warm across his face and he knew it was later than he probably thought it was. He glanced over at the clock on the dresser, and yep. It was almost ten o’clock.

He remembered Steve trying to wake him up some time around seven to go running, but good god, that was *early*. And it was Sunday. What self-respecting person got up early to go running on a *Sunday*? Wasn’t that supposed to be some sort of day of rest, or something? It was in the Bible, and everything.
Well. Steve *clearly* had no respect for the classics.

He reached over and grabbed his phone to fire off a text to Steve. He was most likely done with his run by now and out grabbing breakfast with Sam. If they were at the shop down the street, then he wanted Steve to bring him back a bagel.

*Everything bagel. Garlic cream cheese and jam. Also coffee.* - *B*

Bucky barely had to wait a minute to get a response.

*Oh look. Someone FINALLY decided to join the land of the living. :) Get up and come get your own damn bagel.* - *S*

A moment later, a second text followed.

*That bagel’s really gross, btw.* - *S*

Bucky snickered to himself. After subsisting for seventy-odd years on tasteless food that was meant for nothing more than sustenance, Bucky was constantly trying new variations of things. And if he took a distinct sort of pleasure in turning Steve’s stomach in the process, well that was just too bad for Steve.

*Add anchovies to it.* - *B*

*Are you trying to make me sick? Also, seriously, I’m not getting your food for you. Putting my foot down here.* - *S*

*Yes you will. Because you love me and you love doing things for me. It’s your purpose in life, Steve, don’t fight it.* - *B*

There was a whole minute before Bucky got a response.

*I refuse to order that disgusting concoction for you. I’ll agree to an everything with PLAIN cream cheese and jam, or nothing at all.* - *S*

So it looked like Steve had moved on to negotiating. Bucky could handle that because he knew Steve would cave. Steve *always* caved.

*Wasn’t the serum supposed to IMPROVE who you were? I don’t remember you being this boring.* - *B*

*No bagel for you.* - *S*

*I love you, Stevie.* - *B*

*I exist in this world because of you.* - *B*

*A *better person* because of you.* - *B*

Wait for it. Wait for it...

*Lay it on thick there, why don’tcha. :P Okay, fine, but NO ANCHOVIES.* - *S*

Bucky smiled in victory. He was just about to type out ‘*deal*’ when another text came through.

*Oh, btw, you need to check above your head.* >:)* - *S*
Bucky turned to look above him, and that’s when he saw it. There was something on the wall over their bed. Curious, he twisted around to get a better look at the thing. What he saw made him shake his head with fond exasperation.

Apparently Steve had drawn on the wall after Bucky had fallen back asleep that morning. It looked to be a quick picture of Bucky in that chibi-style Steve had been practicing lately, with the added words ‘I don’t want to go run. I’M LAZY’ next to it.

Bucky grabbed his phone and quickly shot back another text message.

You’re a dick, you know that? - B

Steve’s reply came back almost as quick.

Yeah, but you still love me. Bagel’s otw, btw. - S

It better be. ;) - B

Bucky gave a quick glance back at the drawing, and with a small laugh, opened Instagram. He turned it on selfie mode and snapped a quick pic of himself and the drawing. Under the caption, he typed out, Too lazy to run this morning. Woke up to this. Sharing the life of an artist is hard. Thanks Steve!, then hit share.

If Bucky had to put up with Steve’s antics, then the rest of the world would have to suffer right along with him.
Had a meeting at SHIELD's HQ this afternoon. Got distracted and didn't listen to a word Fury said. I really wonder why... (Photo: Natasha)

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**Chapter Notes**

IMPORTANT NOTE: Sometimes there's a photo credit given on the images. When that happens, the chapters will possibly be from that character's POV. With that in mind, this story is from Natasha's POV.

“Bucky, pay attention.”

“This is boring, Steve.”
“It won’t be boring when the info here keeps your ass from getting shot off.”

“But that’s what I have you for.”

“If you’re lucky.”

“Would you two shut the hell up?”

Bucky and Steve looked over at Natasha, twin wide-eyed expressions of guilt on both their faces.

“Pay attention, Bucky,” she ordered, parroting back Steve’s words. She winked at Steve as Bucky glared daggers at her.

“You’re supposed to be on my side, Natalia,” Bucky hissed, using her given name while jabbing the lit cigarette he was holding in her direction as he leaned across his boyfriend.

Steve jumped back in his chair. “Jeez, Buck! Watch where you’re swinging that thing!”

Bucky glanced down at the cigarette, then back up at Steve. “Oh. Sorry.”

“Just be careful,” Steve chided, shaking his head before turning back to the meeting.

Bucky stuck the cigarette between his lips and turned back to Natasha. “We’re Russian, remember? Loyalty to the motherland, and all that?”

“Except that you’re Irish Catholic, Buck,” Steve pointed out, never taking his eyes off of Fury up front. “And speaking fluent Russian doesn’t count. I speak French fluently, but you don’t hear me going around saying I was tight with De Gaulle.”

“Wait, didn’t you meet him once?”

Steve smirked, eyes still forward. “Once.”

Natasha laughed and shook her head. She turned back to listen to Coulson and Fury’s debrief of their upcoming mission. There was a hostage situation at O’Hare, and from the sounds of it, they were going to need the Big Guy for this one.

She glanced over at Banner. To anyone else, the man looked calm and composed, even a little understanding to the situation. But Nat could see the bead of sweat forming just under his hairline. Banner had slowly been coming to terms with working with the Big Guy, but that didn’t mean he still didn’t hate it. He never liked losing that level of control.

She turned to mention something about it to Steve — he was Second on this mission behind Agent May, after all — only to find Bucky quietly watching him, his cigarette hanging from his fingers, forgotten. It wasn’t staring outright — Bucky would never be that obvious — but his sidelong glance was practically glued to Steve’s profile.

Her breath caught as she watched him. There was so much love and affection in his eyes, mixed with concern and just a hint of wonder. She knew Bucky still felt like he didn’t deserve Steve. That any moment Steve would come to his senses and finally leave Bucky — pack up his bags and move out of their home in Brooklyn. Maybe head to the tower, where Bucky couldn’t follow if Steve didn’t want him to. Or maybe he’d just get on his bike and leave town for good.

She knew that was Bucky’s biggest fear. Bigger than Hydra, bigger than the Winter Soldier. And it haunted Bucky every day.
Too bad he refused to acknowledge that the fear of being left also haunted Steve every damn day. He was forever on edge that Bucky would realize he wasn’t the same guy he was back before the war, and he didn’t need to be tethered to Steve anymore. Not that Bucky saw himself as being tethered...

God, those boys were idiots.

As she laughed quietly at her guys, she slipped her hand into her pocket and pulled out her phone. She had to get herself a picture of those two.

She was just about to snap the photo, when Bucky caught sight of her, his eyes finally sliding off of Steve’s face. His eyes narrowed and he smiled at her curiously.

‘Picture?’ she mouthed as she held up her phone. Bucky eyed her for a moment before nodding. He glanced back at Steve, falling into that easy smile again, and Natasha snapped the pic.

It was perfect. Steve either hadn’t known what they were up to, or was simply trying to ignore them. But there was no mistaking that look in Bucky’s eyes. It was rare to capture real emotion in a photograph, but it looked like she might have just nailed it.

Bucky waved at her, motioning for her to pass the phone over. She slid it across Steve and dropped it into Bucky’s waiting hand. The same smile she saw in that image instantly lit up Bucky’s bright blue eyes as he glanced at the screen. He quickly tapped away at her phone before handing it back to her.

“What was that?” she whispered. He just gave a small shake of his head, waving her off as he pulled his own phone out of his pocket. He futzed away with it for a minute or two before quietly sliding it back into his pocket again.

With a shrug, she turned back to watch the rest of the meeting. It droned on for another thirty minutes, as FitzSimmons went over details that involved Tony more than anyone else on the team.

When the meeting finally broke, and everyone stood to head out and change, Natasha lightly smacked Bucky on the shoulder as they walked out the door. “Seriously, what did you do with that picture?”

“Check your Instagram,” he replied and followed Steve down the hall.

She leaned back against the wall and pulled up her feed. Sure enough, the first picture that popped up was the photo she took — this time in black and white — with the caption, Had a meeting at SHIELD’s HQ this afternoon. Got distracted and didn't listen to a word Fury said. I really wonder why... (Photo : Natasha)

Natasha pushed off the wall with a laugh and made her way down to the lockers. Those two really were idiots for each other.
Bucky woke with a start, still holding his breath.

He blew out hard, his lungs grateful for the change in air pressure. His eyes ticked about the room as he took in his surroundings. No threats that he could see; Steve was tucked in next to him, still sound asleep. It appeared Bucky suddenly jerking awake hadn’t disturbed him. Thank god for small favors.

What the fuck? He hadn’t held his breath in his sleep in months.

Bucky slowly turned over and grabbed his phone off the nightstand to check the time. 2:16AM. Well, it could have been worse. He’d actually been asleep for almost three hours this time.

He gently set the phone down again then rolled over onto his back. He doubted he’d be going back to sleep anytime soon, but he wasn’t ready to get up just yet. He was too exhausted. Maybe sleep might take pity on him this time and pull him back under.
Yet every time he closed his eyes, all he could see was the inside of the cryo chamber. He could feel the cold creeping along his skin, and as he pictured the container sealing shut, he again felt an overwhelming need to hold his breath and conserve the little bit of air inside that he didn’t actually need.

So apparently sleep wasn’t going to be his friend tonight.

Bucky growled under his breath and threw off the covers, only to remember Steve still sleeping peacefully up against him. Slowly he dropped his feet onto the floor and stood up, then turned around and pulled the covers back over Steve. He made a low snuffling sound, wrapping his hands just a little bit tighter around his pillow, but otherwise didn’t wake.

Picking up his phone, Bucky padded out to the kitchen, making a beeline straight for the freezer. If he had to be awake at this ungodly hour, then he was going to enjoy some of that vodka Natasha had brought back for him from Russia.

Pyccknn Ctahoapt Vodka wasn’t anything special by Russian standards, but it was far superior to the swill that was generally served at bars in New York City. Natasha, bless her, had brought a couple bottles back for Bucky after her last trip to Moscow.

Bucky knew — he knew — he wasn’t Russian, but sometimes his childhood of growing up Irish Catholic felt like a distant dream in comparison to his time in Russia. Sometimes it was just easier to think of himself as Russian. If he could only get Steve to stop looking at him like that whenever he lapsed into Russian...

He wandered over to the couch and plopped down, facing the big picture window that overlooked the New York skyline. Bucky always felt they were lucky to have found this place in DUMBO. It was still Brooklyn, but the skyline over the East River made it feel like they were right in the heart of Manhattan. It was the best of both worlds.

And tonight was no different. Except for the fact that it was. When Bucky looked out over the twinkling lights of the city, flushed with the heat from an August night, all he could see was cold. An icy chill from the depths of a HYDRA cell and a cryo chamber he couldn’t escape if he tried.

He screwed open the top of the vodka and took a hard swig, relishing the taste of a different kind of cold. The kind that burned on its way down, warming his belly and reminding him that he was alive, and he was free from the far-reaching tentacles of his former handlers. No one owned him anymore. Sure, he belonged to Steve, but only because that’s where he chose to be. That’s where he’d always choose to be.

He glanced down at the bottle again, reading the label. Forty percent ABV; eighty proof. No amount of alcohol could get him drunk, but that just meant he could keep drinking until he was bored, or the bottle was empty. Most likely the latter.

He picked his phone up off his lap from where he’d absentmindedly dropped it, and held it up to take a picture of the bottle. His follower count on Instagram had slowly started to grow, and he was curious how many of them had ever even heard of the brand of vodka he was holding. He snapped a quick picture and then set the bottle aside to finish posting the image to his account.

3:00am. Can’t sleep. Nightmares again. Enjoying some vodka from the "Mother Land".

He laughed to himself, because honestly, would any of them out there even know what the motherland was? He seriously doubted it. It was an old phrase used mostly when Russia was part of the Soviet Union, and none of these ‘millennials’ were even alive when the USSR was still in power.
God, he felt old.

He hit share, then slipped his phone into the pocket of his sweats before grabbing the bottle and taking another swig. Half full and wide awake. It was going to be really long fucking night.
Steve convinced me to go back to bed. Can't say "no" to Captain America, I guess.

As 4:30am crept up on him, Bucky downed the rest of the bottle. He couldn’t help the snort that escaped him because, sure enough, he was sober as a church. Fucking serum. Steve had told him about how, after Bucky had fallen, alcohol had had no affect on him when he’d tried to drink himself stupid, and this was just another reminder of how much the two of them were alike. Sometimes it was fantastic, but other times... times like now... Bucky would give anything to have that godforsaken juice out of his system, just so that the things he did choose to put into his body worked the way they were supposed to. He’d kill to be drunk right now.

Because it was still there. Zola, Pierce, Rumlow, the Red Room, the chamber, Tony, all of it — the last seventy years of his life were playing through his head on repeat and in hyper rotation. The only thing keeping him from screaming was the image of Steve’s loving face slipping in where it didn’t belong, though it was welcome above all the other things he saw.

“Buck?”
He jumped up off the couch, the bottle flying out of his hand instinctively, slamming into the wall next to Steve’s head.

Steve jerked out of the way from where he stood just inside the living room. “Shit, Bucky, I’m sorry,” he said, mollified, his hands reaching out before he let them flop back down at his sides. His cheeks were pink, even in the dark. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Bucky shook his head, even as a shiver still ran down his spine. Awesome. Now he was more awake than ever.

“S’not your fault,” he answered, his voice tight. He couldn’t help the way his eyes scanned the room, despite the fact that he knew there was no threat.

“Still.” Steve’s focus skipped over to the shattered remnants of the bottle. “I should have been more careful.” He huffed out a hollow laugh. “After all, that could have been my head.”

Guilt immediately swept over Bucky. “Aw, shit, Steve.” He glanced at the bottle, then back, stepping around the coffee table and immediately into Steve’s arms. He didn’t hesitate to wrap Bucky up in a warm embrace as Bucky apologized. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to wake you, I just —”

Steve tightened his grip on him and silenced him with a quick kiss. As he pulled back, he rested his forehead against Bucky’s and said, “Bed feels empty when you’re not in it. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

Bucky took a deep breath and turned to rest his head on Steve’s shoulder. “Bad dreams,” he answered. “Haven’t been able to sleep for over two hours.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

Bucky huffed out a laugh. “Seriously? I’m not gonna wake you over a bad dream, Steve.” He lifted his head to find piercing blue eyes watching him. “Just because I can’t sleep doesn’t mean you need to be awake along with me.”

“Where you go, I go,” Steve said, matter-of-fact. Then his eyes drifted over Bucky’s shoulder, towards the big picture window of the Manhattan skyline. “Do you think sometimes we should have just stayed in the tower? Lived with everyone else, where it’s safer?”

Bucky glanced over his shoulder and snorted. “You mean more locked down, don’t you? I’m not even going to pretend we aren’t being watched here, Stevie. But at least it doesn’t feel like there are eyes on us at all times.” He turned back to look at Steve. “I spent the vast majority of my life being monitored. Any place I live where I don’t have to feel that feeling is all right by me.”

“Well, like I said. Where you go, I go,” Steve repeated. Then he placed his hands along Bucky’s jaw. “Come back to bed,” he whispered.

“I can’t sleep,” Bucky answered sadly.

“Then we won’t sleep together.”

“I don’t want to keep you awake.”

Steve leaned in and brushed his lips against Bucky’s. “Come back to bed,” he whispered again. “For me.”

Bucky couldn’t argue with that. “All right.”
With a smile, Steve slipped his fingers into Bucky’s metal hand and gently pulled him along, back towards their bedroom — the shattered bottle all but forgotten.

Steve crawled into bed first and Bucky followed suit. He turned over and tucked himself up along Steve’s body, an arm snaking around his middle.

“Wait, hold on one sec.” He reached down into his sweats pocket and pulled out his phone. He glanced back at Steve. “Mind if I take a picture of us? For my Instagram?”

“What, right now?”

Bucky shrugged. “Why not? I mean, it would take Captain America himself to convince me to do something I didn’t want to do — like going back to bed when I’m wide awake — and I feel like I need to document this for prosperity.” He gave Steve a sly little grin. “You know. Lest we never see it again.”

Steve turned into Bucky’s shoulder, snickering. He finally lifted his head, an indulgent smile playing across his face. “That just fine, Buck. If for anything than to prove that I can get you to do what I want you to do sometimes.”

“Well, now you’re just being a bully. You’re supposed to hate bullies, Steven,” Bucky said, his voice turned playful.

“Yeah!” Steve groused, digging his fingers into Bucky’s side.

“All right, all right,” Bucky laughed, easier this time. The horrors from earlier that night slowly slipping away. “You’re almost as handsome as me. Satisfied?”

“Nope,” Steve replied, his voice pitched lower, as he ground himself along Bucky’s hip. “But in the interest of saving time and getting you undressed, I’m willing to call a truce.”

Bucky’s smile turned heated as he said, “Deal. But let me get this picture up first.”

“You have ten seconds.”

Bucky had never typed out a comment and hit share so fast in his life.

And if all anyone ever knew was, *Steve convinced me to go back to bed. Can't say "no" to Captain America, I guess.*, well that was more than good enough for him.
Chapter Summary

First pic after I surrendered to S.H.I.E.L.D 2,3 years ago. I was later transferred to D.C for a full debriefing.

What a difference 3 years can make: first official photo as a S.H.I.E.L.D agent (even if technically, I don’t exist) . I wore my old uniform as a tribute to the Howling Commandos and the 107th. I’m the oldest S.H.I.E.L.D operative currently working on the field.
“Steve, have you ever heard of Tumblr?”

Bucky looked up as Steve poked his head around the corner from the kitchen. “The glassware?” he asked, his face pulled in confusion.

Bucky laughed. “Not a tumbler, doofus. The website, Tumblr. The one with the missing ‘e’?”

Steve stepped fully into the den, his eyes lit up in amusement. “I’m sorry, the missing what?”

“The missing ‘e’.” Bucky huffed and stood up, grabbing his laptop from where it had been perched on his knees. He walked over to Steve and handed the computer to him. He tapped lightly at the edge of the screen and said, “This website, Tumblr, is another one of those social media sites. Clint’s on it, and he was telling me it was a great site for us to check out for keeping up with pop culture and shit.”

Steve slid his fingers along the track pad, stopping every so often to look at the images that scrolled past. He stopped and snickered at a moving image of a fox jumping over a dog. “Buck, I’m not sure how”— his eyes narrowed in on the text below the image— “‘quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog’ here is supposed to help bring us up to speed on current events.”

“Not current events, Steve,” Bucky grumbled, snatching the laptop out of Steve’s hands. “Pop culture.”

He stalked back over to the couch and plopped down. Then he patted the seat next to him, inclining his head for Steve to come join him. He started scrolling again as Steve sat down next to him, only to stop on a particularly powerful photograph of a young black man in an American flag t-shirt, throwing what appeared to be either a flair or a molotov cocktail. “Well, maybe some current events.”

“Isn’t that from Ferguson?” Steve asked.

Bucky scrolled down to read below the image. “Yeah, looks like it is.”

“Wait a second,” Steve murmured as he reached over to press his fingers into Bucky’s arm. “You’re scrolling through the website.” He turned an amused smile on Bucky. “Did you already create a profile?”

Bucky shrugged self-consciously. He could feel the heat traveling up his nape. “Maybe.”

Steve continued to smile gleefully, until finally Bucky let out an irritated huff and snapped, “All right, I did. Satisfied?”

“I was just curious,” Steve answered, his eyes wide and full of mock innocence.

“Curious, my ass,” Bucky muttered, turning back to the laptop so he wouldn’t have to put up with Steve teasing him. “It was the only way I could check out what Clint was talking about, and besides”— he tapped over to his blog page, where he’d already loaded his recent Instagram images— “I figured I could put my photos up here, too. Make Doc proud or something.”

“Wow, Buck, that’s a really good idea.”

When Bucky glanced over at Steve, all he saw was affection in those blue eyes. “You really think so?” he asked quietly.
Steve nodded. “I do.” He leaned in and brushed his lips against Bucky’s temple. “People really seem to have taken to your Instagram. Why not put them up somewhere else, as well?”

It was then that Bucky remembered what he’d seen earlier on the site. He leaned in and quickly kissed Steve before giving him a delighted grin. “You know, we’re already on here.”

Steve shook his head, clearly thrown by the change in conversation. “I’m sorry, we’re what?”

Excited now, Bucky turned back to the laptop. He went up into the search bar to pull down the tags he’d saved. “Yeah. You and me, we’re in here. Apparently”—he pointed at one of the tags in particular—“we have a moniker.”

Steve leaned over to read the word Bucky was pointing at. “Uh, what the hell is a Stucky?” he asked, his expression lost as he sat back up, looking to his boyfriend for some sort of answer.

“Us!” Bucky answered, almost giddy. He waved back and forth between the two of them. “You and me. We’re a Stucky. Steve and Bucky. Stucky.”

“What?”

“We’re the next Brangelina!” Bucky said with a wide grin.

Steve stared at Bucky for a solid thirty seconds before letting out a peal of laughter. He tipped sideways onto the couch, lost in mirth. It wasn’t long after before Bucky saw the absolute absurdity of the situation and busted up laughing himself.

“How do you even know who Brangelina are, Buck?” Steve managed to get out between fits of laughter.

“Hey, I do my research!” Bucky exclaimed.

“You’re obsession with the Kardashians and that E! channel does not count as research,” Steve countered as he sat back up, only to have Bucky shove him over again.

He immediately reached down and dragged Steve up by the sleeve of his t-shirt, ignoring the indignant squawk he got for his troubles. “Anyway, yeah we’re on here.”

Steve leaned into Bucky’s side, his laughter petering out as he looked back at the laptop. “So you’re telling me there’s a section on here devoted to us?” He glanced back up at Bucky. “I mean... Why?”

Bucky gave him a withering look. “Damn sap.”

Steve wrapped his fingers around Bucky’s nape and pulled him in for a slow, heartfelt kiss. “Never forget that I love you, okay?”

Bucky nudged his shoulder. “Damn sap.”

Steve wrapped his fingers around Bucky’s nape and pulled him in for a slow, heartfelt kiss. “Never forget that I love you, okay?”

Bucky touched his forehead to Steve’s, his eyes closed, and whispered, “I never did.”

Steve leaned in for one more kiss before pulling back and resting his head on Bucky’s shoulder, his attention back on the laptop. “So, you gonna show me what’s under our tag?”
It’s all kinds of stuff, actually,” Bucky said as he clicked on the tag. “Pictures of us, news articles about us and the Avengers, stuff like that.” Immediately an image popped up of a cartoon the two. Someone had drawn them arguing over Bucky’s next Halloween costume.

Steve smiled, clearly delighted by the drawing. “Wait, what’s that?”

“Oh, well apparently there are a lot of people out there who also draw pictures of us, either from real life, or little made up cartoons like this.” He kept scrolling until he landed on one of the link posts. “There’s, uh, even a bunch of fictional stories written about us.”

Steve’s eyebrows crumpled in confusion. “I don’t understand...”

“Well...” Bucky paused, scratching the short hairs on the back of his neck. “From what I can tell, people might know about us, but we’re still pretty private, so....” He turned a side eye on Steve. “People like to make up stories about how we got together.”

Steve snickered. “Don’t lie. How many of them have you read?”

“You know, it’s funny. Some of them are fantastical, some are really pornographic, and some are so dead on, I’m convinced that Coulson’s taken up writing fan fiction.”

“You know, you should really be nice to the director of SHIELD”

“I have a super-soldier serum and a bionic arm that has its own superhuman strength. I don’t have to be nice to anyone.”

“So, I noticed you haven’t posted anything on Instagram lately,” Steve commented, changing the subject. He waved his hand at the laptop. “What’s the point of having this account if you aren’t even posting on the one you already have.”

Bucky sighed. Steve had a point, but they hadn’t done much lately other than putter around Brooklyn, or work — something they couldn’t always talk about. True, they had been having an abnormally mild summer that had had them outside more often than not, but nothing that was worth noting.

“Yeah, I know. But I haven’t taken any photos recently that seemed important enough to putting up.”

“Well, what about old stuff?” Steve asked, turning his eyes up to meet Bucky’s.

“Old stuff?”

“You know, it’s been about six months since it became official, but it’s still a really big deal that you’ve come back so much that you’ve been able to rejoin SHIELD as an operative.”

“Well —”

“No, stop.” Steve reached over and took Bucky’s hand, threading their fingers together. “It very much is a big deal.” He shrugged, rubbing his thumb along the back of Bucky’s hand. “I was thinking maybe you should post your official SHIELD I.D. photo?”

Bucky huffed out a laugh. “Wait, you mean the one of me in my dress uniform?”

Steve smiled and blushed. “Well, you do look especially hot in that photo.”

If Bucky ever had to admit one thing to himself, it was how much he loved watching Steve turn
crimson at the sight of Bucky in uniform.

He shifted around so he could look Steve in the eye. “Oh, well then, are you sure you want me flashing the goods to the entire world? Want all those people thinking impure thoughts about me?”


Bucky burst out laughing. God, he loved this man. He wrapped his arm around Steve’s shoulders and pulled him in to smack a kiss on his forehead.

“Sure you will, Stevie,” he responded affectionately. He turned back to look at the computer, a metal finger scratching against the surface absentmindedly. He liked the idea of posting that image, but he had something else in mind, if he did. “You know…” He looked over at his boyfriend. “If I post that one, I should also post my mug shot.”

“Seriously?” Steve asked. He pulled back to look at Bucky fully. “Why would you want to share that?”

The laugh that escaped Bucky’s lips was full of derision. “Did you forget what the whole point of this exercise was?” He set the laptop down on the coffee table and sat up to turn and face Steve. “I’m supposed to be using this as an outlet to be more open and expressive with people. If I’m going to be ‘open’ — he made air quotes — “then I need to be honest, too. I can’t show the good if I’m not willing to show the bad.”

Steve reached up and rested his hand along Bucky’s jaw. Bucky immediately turned into it, kissing Steve’s wrist. When he turned back, he saw nothing but love and concern in Steve’s eyes. “That was a really bad time for you, baby,” Steve said. “Don’t share it just because you think you have to. Do it because you want to. Because you think it’ll help.”

“I think it’ll help,” Bucky whispered immediately. He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. When Steve opened his arms for him, he went into them gladly. “This is supposed to be therapeutic. Cathartic. And honestly, I think sharing that side of me will be like — for lack of a less gross term — lancing a boil. Stick a pin in it and drain out the poison.”

“Yeah, I get it.” Steve’s arms tightened around him. “Completely gross analogy, but I get it.”

Bucky reached down and pinched above Steve’s knee, where he was especially ticklish, making the man squeak and jump, jostling the two. Bucky smirked to himself.

“Such an ass…” Steve muttered.

“Dick.”

“Jerk.”

“Punk.”

When Steve buried his lips in Bucky’s hair, he finally reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. After opening Instagram, he brought up his mugshot and loaded it onto the app, then clicked the button to simultaneously load it onto Tumblr (he’d linked his accounts earlier in the day). He paused for a second, though, as he tried to figure out what he wanted for a caption. He was willing to share the image, but he wasn’t comfortable going into detail about the events surrounding it. Finally he settled on First pic after I surrendered to S.H.I.E.L.D 2,3 years ago. I was later transferred to D.C for a full debriefing.
Only his thumb hovered over the share button. He wanted to get it out there for the people following him, but he’d had to handle the criticism and backlash the first time around, when he’d come out of hiding. What if that started all over again?

“Hit send, baby,” Steve whispered in his ear, pulling him even closer. “I’m so proud of you. You can do this.”

Without giving himself a chance to second guess again, Bucky hit share. After that, he didn’t wait before pulling up his I.D. photo and loading it. As he typed out the new caption, he whispered back, “I love you so much, Stevie,” and hit share.

*What a difference 3 years can make: first official photo as a S.H.I.E.L.D agent (even if technically, I don’t exist) . I wore my old uniform as a tribute to the Howling Commandos and the 107th. I'm the oldest S.H.I.E.L.D operative currently working on the field.*
Bucky checked his watch again. Three minutes since the last time he'd looked at it.

Where the hell was Steve? He’d told Bucky he’d be home ten — Bucky checked his watch again — no, eleven minutes ago.

Steve was almost never late getting home. Not that Bucky was worried about him, per se, but goddammit, why did he have to pick tonight of all nights to be late?

The low tap-tap sound hit his ears, and he jerked his hand back before his conscious mind had even fully registered that he’d started drumming his fingers on the package. Again.

Bucky didn’t do this. He didn’t do presents. That was Steve’s thing. So why did Steve have to go
and be late?

He pushed up off the couch and headed into the kitchen, only to stop the second he passed through the door because he had no idea why he’d gone in there.

Water. That would work.

He grabbed a glass off the dish rack, then yanked the handle on the faucet so hard, it groaned in protest.

“Shit,” he muttered to himself. It would just be perfect if he broke the damned sink tonight. He set the glass back down and rested his hands on the counter before taking a deep steadying breath.

Four years. Four years since that fucking phone call. Most people saw the day Bucky surrendered to SHIELD as the anniversary worth celebrating, but not the two of them. No, for them it would always be the day Steve stopped looking. It would always be the day Bucky called Steve.

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“Hello?” Steve answered on the first ring. Bucky, scared, didn’t respond right away. “Is there someone there?”

Bucky took a deep breath. He’d made the call, but it wasn’t until Steve answered that he realized he had no idea what to say. He was just getting ready to open his mouth and say — what, he still didn’t know, when, “Bucky?”

He knew. Of course he knew. He would always know.

“That’s what you used to call me,” Bucky answered, almost automatically, his voice rough from disuse.

A hitch of breath and a soft whimper came down the line and touched Bucky’s ear.

“Bucky,” Steve breathed. It was no longer a question.

“I —” Bucky paused and took another deep breath. “I want to say ‘yes, it’s me’, but I don’t know who ‘me’ is.”

“I know who you are,” Steve responded quietly.

“I know who you are,” Steve responded quietly.

Bucky felt the first fraction of a smile curl at his lips. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Come home.” Zero pretense. Of course there wouldn’t be.

“Not yet.”

“Why?”

Bucky opened his mouth to reply, but closed it just as quickly. How was he supposed to explain this? He counted to thirty in his head before giving it a little shake. “I’m not safe. Right now, I will still try and attack you, and most likely everyone around you —”

“Buck —”

“Wait, stop. Let me get this out.” Another deep breath. “Let me guess; you either think I won’t or that you can stop me. But the thing is, you can’t — or, more likely, you won’t. You made it pretty
clear on the helicarrier that you won’t fight me. So I’m not going to take the risk of accidentally killing you.”

“I won’t let you —”

“I don’t trust you,” Bucky cut in, blunt and to the point. That shut Steve up. “I don’t trust you not to do something stupid that might get you killed. And I will not be the cause of that stupidity. Please don’t make me.”

“Will you ever come home?” Steve asked tentatively, quietly. It didn’t escape Bucky that Steve asked about coming home and not about Bucky ever trusting him. He understood the game. Good.

Bucky thought very carefully before answering him. “Look, I have to go and I need you to stop looking for me. But in exchange, I’ll give you two things.”

“And what are those?”

“First off, I promise I will come back when I feel like it’s safe. You have my word.”

“And the other?”

This time, and for the first time in decades, Bucky really did smile.

“I remember you, Stevie.”

~~~

And tonight was the anniversary of that phone call. After that, Steve stopped looking, and instead, returned to New York, where he knew Bucky would look to find him.

After that, Bucky tried in earnest to find his way back to him.

A soft click hit his ears, followed by the sound of the front door opening. “Bucky?” Steve called out.

Bucky came skidding out of the kitchen into the front entryway, stopping just in front of Steve.

“You’re late,” Bucky accused.

Steve snorted, clearly trying to hold back a laugh, his eyes dancing.

Bucky just looked at him in confusion. “What’s so funny?”

Steve shook his head, still smiling. “I just — I’m sorry, Buck — I really want to say ‘couldn’t call my ride.’”

Bucky narrowed his eyes, going right back to accusation. “You know, if it had been anyone other than Carter, I’d be really offended right now.”

“Aww.” Steve let the front door go in favor of wrapping his arms around Bucky’s waist. “Are you jealous, baby? Because, you know, it’s kind of hard for you to be my best girl with you standing there being all guy-like.”

Bucky swatted at Steve’s shoulder. “Like I said, if it was anyone but Carter...” He shrugged and leaned in to kiss just behind Steve’s ear, earning him a shiver for his troubles. “Can’t really be jealous when she was the best gal either of us ever knew.”
Steve hugged Bucky tighter. “And also, even when she was in her nineties, I’m pretty sure she could’ve still kicked both our asses.”

“That too.”

Steve started to slowly run a hand up and down Bucky’s back. “I’m so sorry I was late, baby,” he whispered — in earnest this time — and rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder. “I know how important today is. I got you something, but I almost forgot to grab it from Tony before I left.”

Bucky snickered. “You had to stop by the lab? Hell, I’m surprised you made it home at all.”

“I almost didn’t,” Steve said with a laugh. He pulled back so he could reach down and pick up the black plastic bag Bucky hadn’t noticed. He handed it over and smiled. “Happy Anniversary, baby.”

Grinning widely now, Bucky took the proffered bag. He was just about to open it when he stopped himself. “Oh!” He looked up at Steve. “Actually, can we do this in there?” He inclined his head towards the living room. “I, uh, sort of got you something too.”

Steve smiled. “You didn’t have to do that.”

Bucky shook the bag at him. “And you did?”

“Fair point.”

Bucky turned and headed toward the living room and sat down next to the abandoned package, setting his own present in his lap. Steve walked around the back of the couch and took a seat on the other side of the package, a look of amusement and curiosity playing across his features.

“You first,” Bucky croaked out. He cleared his throat, instantly nervous again. “I really want you to go first.”

“All right,” Steve said. He picked up the package and tore off the wrapping paper. It was metallic and blue and had reminded Bucky of Steve’s shield. When Steve saw what was underneath, his breath caught. He glanced back up at Bucky, shock written all over his face, before looking back down again. “Oh, Buck...”

It was the Nikon D750 digital camera that Steve had been coveting for months. The problem was, it was ridiculously expensive, and Bucky had known from the moment Steve had seen the price tag that, as much as he wanted it, he’d never actually buy it for himself.

“I, uh, gave it to Tony first, and he made a few modifications to it,” Bucky muttered, brushing his fingers along the top of the box. “Something about better ISO and LCD dots. I genuinely had no idea what he was talking about; he could have been pulling a fast one on me for all I know.”

Steve gave a tiny shake of his head, still staring reverently at the gift. “No, I know what he’s talking about. But, Buck.” He finally tore his eyes away and looked up. “I can’t accept this; it’s too —”

“Rogers, if you try and tell me it’s too expensive, I’ll shoot you. Again.”

Steve laughed as color crept up his cheeks, and he dipped his head down. “I know you hate it when I say that, but Buck —”

“Okay, enough with the ‘but Bucks’,” Bucky said, placing his hand over Steve’s on the box. “Look at me for a sec.” Steve lifted his eyes. “We’re not super rich or anything, but we’re also both pretty frugal guys. The Depression really wasn’t that long ago for us.” That earned him a small laugh.
“So, we’ve got the money for this. Actually, we’ve got the money for this a few times over. And honestly, today is important, and I want to do something special, not just for the man I love, but the man who saved my life. You think you can get on board with that?” He didn’t wait for Steve to answer before he leaned in and kissed him.

When he pulled back, Steve’s eyes were still closed. After a few beats, he finally opened them and smiled. “Yeah. I can get on board with that.”

Bucky smiled back. “Good.”

They didn’t immediately break eye contact, but sat there for a moment enjoying the love and affection that Bucky could practically feel radiating between them. Eventually Steve set his present on the coffee table and turned back.

“It’s your turn now,” he said, nodding at the bag on Bucky’s lap.

Bucky blinked and looked down. The shiny black shopping bag lay forgotten perched on his knees. Now that the anxiety of giving Steve his present was over, curiosity had reared right up on Bucky. He immediately slipped his hand into the bag before pulling out a white box he knew all too well. That is, until he saw the 9 printed on the top of it.

“Is this the iPhone 9?” he asked in disbelief. “They don’t come out for another week!” Like a little kid at Christmas, he didn’t hesitate before ripping into the box and pulling out the phone. Sure enough, it was the iPhone 9 that Bucky had been drooling over since the announcement two days prior.

Never let it be said that Bucky wasn’t a technology whore. Because he absolutely was.

“Well, like I said, I paid Tony a visit today,” Steve said as Bucky turned the phone on and waited, impatiently for it to boot up. Steve laughed at Bucky’s giddiness. “Sometimes I guess it really does pay to have friends who are connected.”

Bucky snorted. “Please. You could have called up Tim Cook personally and told him that ‘Captain America needs one of your new phones,’ and the guy would have been tripping over himself to give you ten.”

“I doubt that.”

“I don’t.”

~~~~

The two originally had plans to go out to dinner at their favorite pizza joint down on Fulton Street, but after they’d exchanged gifts, neither of them could be bothered to leave. So instead, they’d both changed into sweats and spent the evening getting acquainted with their new toys. Luckily, Steve and Bucky were close with the owners over at Emily Pizza, so even though the place didn’t deliver, one of the owners, Matt, was more than happy to send over a few pies.

When they finally crawled into bed to watch TV, it was well past midnight. Bucky was lazily flipping through channels as Steve laid next to him taking random photos as he continued to test out some of the features on his camera.

“Are you ever going to put that thing away?” Bucky asked, glancing at Steve out of the corner of his eye.
“You spend over two grand on a camera for me, and not six hours later, it’s already ‘that thing’,” Steve admonished. “This is your fault and you must accept it.”

“You brought a camera to bed, Steve. Unless you plan on getting interesting with that thing, I’m not accepting shit.”

Steve turned a wicked smile on him. “You know, the resolution on this thing really would make for some quality videography.”

Bucky nodded. “Now you’re talkin’.”

He was just about to lean in and kiss the smirk off Steve’s face when a loud grumble hit both their ears. They looked down just in time for Bucky’s stomach to do it again.

“Buck, we just ate five whole pizzas. You can’t possibly still be hungry,” Steve said.

Bucky shrugged before rolling over and getting out of bed. “When have you ever known me to not be hungry?” he asked as he padded out to the kitchen. Steve was full of shit anyway. With the way their metabolisms worked, they were both always hungry. He quickly fixed himself a bowl of cereal before heading back to the bedroom.

As he crawled back into bed, Steve gave the bowl a dirty look. “You know I hate eating in bed, Bucky.”

“And if it were any other day of the year, I’d respect that.” He pulled the covers back over himself before turning his most innocent look on Steve. “But today of all days, I don’t want to be any sort of distance from you, Stevie.”

“You’re so full of shit.”

“Baby doll?” Bucky batted his eyelashes.

“Seriously, completely full of shit.”

“Sugar?”

Steve shook his head as he tried to keep the smile off his face. “Not falling for it.”

“Honey bear?”

“Go away, Buck.”

“Sweet love muffin?”

“What?” Steve finally cracked and busted up laughing. “Did you seriously just call me sweet love muffin?”

Bucky gave a small shrug as he smiled and said, “Hey, whatever works,” before turning to take a bite of his cereal.

“Okay, I need to get a picture of us right now.” Still chuckling, Steve got out of bed to put the camera on the TV stand. Bucky set the cereal aside and lit a cigarette while Steve provided an excellent view of his backside as he fiddled with the camera.

When he crawled back into bed, he wrapped an arm around Bucky and pulled him in close. “All that and you’ve already forgotten the food?”
“Well, after the little show you just put on for me, bending over like that, a cigarette was definitely in
order,” Bucky responded, smiling.

Steve just laughed and leaned in to rest his head on Bucky’s. “I love you so much, you know that?”

All Bucky could do was smile as the camera clicked and took their picture.

~~~~

The next morning, Bucky was up long before Steve. He crept quietly out of bed, grabbed Steve’s
camera and his new phone, and headed out to the kitchen to make coffee. As he waited for it to
brew, he plugged the camera into his laptop to transfer the photo Steve had taken to himself.

After he’d sent the picture to his phone, he pulled up his Instagram account and loaded the photo
onto it.

He quickly typed out, First photo with Steve's new camera. I know, I know Cap: I'm not allowed to
eat in bed..., before hitting the Tumblr button and hitting share. Once it had processed, he gave
himself a moment to just sit and stare at the picture. It might very well be the best photo he and Steve
had ever taken. Later on that day he would have to go down and have it printed out and framed.

But right now, he had coffee to drink, breakfast to eat, and a new phone to play with.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT NOTE: Due to continuity issues, I've realized the whole of TLBB needs to be set
a few years in the future, so to that effect, I've changed Bucky's present from an iPhone
6 to an iPhone 9. I'm jealous. Why does he always get the cool gadgets???
Chapter Summary

Relaxing at the park with Steve.

Hey, relax buddy! I'm not gonna hurt you! I only kill Hydra agents. You don't work for Hydra, do you?

Chapter Notes

Relaxing at the park with Steve.

Hey, relax buddy! I'm not gonna hurt you! I only kill Hydra agents. You don't work for Hydra, do you?

Lucky took off at top speed, jumped, and turned just in time to catch the frisbee in his mouth. He bounded back to Clint, his tail wagging, excitement vibrating throughout his whole body.

Clint jumped and whooped in the air, “Yeah, pizza dog!” He ran to meet Lucky halfway, taking the frisbee from his mouth and ruffling his fur.
Natasha laughed from where she was sitting on the grass with Bucky, Steve, and Sam. “He has a real name, Barton!” she called out.

“Pizza is his favorite food,” Clint called back. “He is pizza dog!”

At that moment, said dog grew impatient that Clint wasn’t throwing the frisbee, and rammed himself into his owner’s legs. Clint lost his balance and yelped as he fell over, landing on his ass.

Natasha laughed again and sat back on her elbows shaking her head affectionately. “He’s such an idiot.”

Bucky smiled at her from where he was laying down on top of Steve, enjoying the last rays of New York sun. “Yeah, well, you’re the one dating him, so whose fault is it really?”

Natasha shrugged and kept her eyes on Clint. “No one said we were dating.”

“Oh, come on Natasha, everyone knows,” Sam said without looking up from the book he was reading. “We all bow down to how scary you are, but you’re not as stealthy as you think.” He finally set the book aside and looked at her. “Not to us and not when it comes to him. We know, all right?”

Natasha tilted her head inquisitively at him. “But do you? Do you know? What exactly is it you think you know?”

At that point, Bucky tuned them out in favor of nuzzling closer to Steve. The five of them had just come off a mission the day before, and while none of them had had any serious scrapes, they’d all come back slightly worse for wear. SHIELD had ended up issuing all of them two weeks leave to recuperate, and Bucky planned to enjoy every last second of it. Preferably in Steve’s arms, if he had any say in the matter.

“You think we can just stay right here for the next two weeks?” he asked Steve quietly.

Steve, who’d been reading his own book, set it aside and gazed down at Bucky. “You don’t think the grass might start to feel a little gross when night rolls around?” He brushed a few strands of hair off Bucky’s forehead and leaned down to kiss the top of his head “And let’s be honest. We might begin to smell a little rank after a few days. Especially you.”

Bucky dug his fingers into Steve’s side, laughing when Steve twitched and squirmed underneath him.

“Why do you have to be such an ass?” Steve huffed, trying to come off sounding perturbed, only to fail miserably when he buried his face in Bucky’s hair again.

“You said I smell,” Bucky tried to scowl, failing just as horribly.

“I said you might smell,” Steve pointed out. “But, you know, I like your smell.”

Bucky hummed in contented agreement. “True. You always do love the weirdest things about me.”

He went to rest his metal hand on Steve’s side, only to stop at the last moment when he remembered the bruises on Steve’s upper torso. Instead, he let his arm fall onto the grass and closed his eyes, allowing the warmth to pull him into a doze.

He had no idea how much time had passed when he felt gentle fingers running along his back, and Steve talking to him.

“Buck. Hey, Bucky, are you awake?” Steve asked, his voice finally touching Bucky’s ears.
“Hmm?” Bucky slowly opened his eyes, but didn’t lift his head. “What’s up?”

“Look at your hand.”

Bucky looked down to see a ladybug crawling along the back of his metal hand. He slowly brought his hand closer, watching as the little red bug marched along the side, heading out toward his index finger.

“Stevie, you think you can reach my cell without jostling me?”

“Where is it?” Steve asked.

“Back pocket. Get a picture of this, if you can.”

Steve slowly reached down and pulled the phone out of Bucky’s pocket. He unlocked it and handed it over to Natasha. “Here, Nat, would you take a picture of us?”

“Yeah, sure.” Bucky heard more than saw her take the photo; he was too focused on the ladybug that had come to a halt on the tip of his finger. It was so tiny yet stood out so much against the grey metal of his hand. He couldn’t help but smile at the little guy, the way he seemed to be staring right back at Bucky.

Natasha handed the phone back to Steve, and as he went to put it back where he’d retrieved it, Bucky stopped him and said, “Wait a sec. Can you get in and take a picture of this thing. He’s just standing here, and I swear he looks petrified.”

“Oh, that’s because the Winter Soldier’s a legend,” Sam commented, very matter-of-fact, from behind him. “He recognized you and now he probably thinks he’s a mark.”

“Not everything’s a mark,” Bucky mumbled. He tried to look up without moving too much, only to be blocked by Steve’s hand reaching around in front of him to get close and get a picture of the ladybug. That said, it didn’t totally block the sight of Sam laughing at him.

He narrowed his eyes at the man. “Except for you. You’re a mark. My next one, in fact. Time to start watching your back, Wilson.”

“You were a lot scarier with the long hair and the black eyes, Barnes.”

“I still do the black eyes.”

Steve finished taking the picture and tucked the phone into Bucky’s pocket. The ladybug flew away the minute Steve was done. “I don’t know, I gotta agree with Sam on this one. Your rock god hair was definitely your scary hair.”

Bucky sat up on his knees, straddling Steve’s thighs, and arched an eyebrow down at him. “Rock god?”

Steve nodded solemnly, tucking his hands behind his head. “Very eighties death metal.”

Bucky just laughed and took Steve’s face in his hands before leaning down to kiss him. “God, you’re such a dork.”

Steve didn’t say anything, just smiled, clearly pleased with himself. Bucky shook his head and gave him another quick peck. He sat back up with a soft sigh and pulled his phone out of his pocket to check out the photos Natasha had taken. She’d actually taken several, but one in particular was just
kind of perfect.

“What are you doing?” Steve asked. Bucky peeked over the top of his phone to find Steve smiling lazily up at him.

Bucky smiled back at him before going back to his phone. “Instagramming. I wanna share today with my followers.”

“Instagramming?”

Bucky snickered as he typed away. “I’m all about the lingo now.”

Steve shook his head before reaching out and running a hand up and down Bucky’s thigh. “It has been a good day, hasn’t it?”

Bucky stopped mid-caption to look at Steve again, happier than he’d been in a while. “It really has.”

“I love you,” Steve said quietly, for no one’s ears but Bucky’s.

Bucky leaned down again and kissed him. “I love you too,” he whispered back. He sat back up and finished the caption for his photo.

“What are you putting up?” Steve asked. Bucky handed him the phone of the picture of them with the lady bug on his finger. The caption read: Relaxing at the park with Steve. He couldn’t think of anything else to put, and yeah, that was good enough.

“This is a really good pic, Buck,” Steve commented. He looked up at Bucky over the phone. “Is it all set?”

Bucky nodded. “Yeah, go ahead and share it. Just make sure you hit the Tumblr button first,” he said, waving his hand at the phone.

Steve tapped on the phone, then nodded himself. “There.” He went to hand it back and stopped. He looked up and grinned. “Just one second,” he said, holding up a finger.

He started tapping quickly at the screen, his smile growing by the second. Curious now, Bucky tried to glance around the side of the phone, only to have Steve turn it away from him.

“What are you doing?” Bucky all but whined.

“Just hold on a sec.” After a moment of yet more typing, Steve’s grinning turned to chuckling. Bucky was an actual second away from snatching the phone out of Steve’s hands when he abruptly handed it back, his grin turned completely wicked. “There you go.”

Bucky eyed him. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Steve answered, oozing buckets of faux innocence. He started tugging at Bucky’s arms. “Come kiss me again.”

“Nuh-uh.” Bucky shook his head, pulling his arms out of Steve’s reach. “No way. You tell me what you did on my phone.”

Steve snickered. “Check your Instagram.”

“You didn’t.”
Steve just shrugged and Bucky fumbled with his phone, as he got the app open. The first picture up was the shot Steve had taken with the ladybug, and the caption read, *Hey, relax buddy! I'm not gonna hurt you! I only kill Hydra agents. You don't work for Hydra, don't you?*

Bucky closed the app and calmly put his phone back in his pocket. He got to his feet so he could hover over Steve and look down, making sure his eyes took on the steely glint that was all too familiar on him during missions. Steve’s expression went from playful to wary in a heartbeat.

“You know, Steve,” he started, his voice toneless and even. “I think you look like a Hydra agent to me. And you know what I do to Hydra agents.” He glanced around to see everyone’s attention was now on him. “But I’m feeling particularly generous right now. I’m going to give you some advice.”

“And what’s that?” Steve asked, his voice cracking as he swallowed down the last word.

The smile Bucky let slip was nothing short of gleefully sinister. “*Run.*”
“Where the hell are we?”

“Siberia”

“Not possible. Siberia's friendlier than this.”

“Actual Hell?”

“The only way Hell would freeze this far over is if Fury threw away his life of espionage and took up musical theater.”

“I’m gonna tell him you said that.”

“Please don’t.”
Bucky sighed to himself as he slid the clip back into place before chambering a round. Right now, they were in a holding pattern, strategizing their plan of attack. But they were waiting for a message back from SHIELD (had been waiting for the better part of two hours), and listening to Steve, Nat, and Clint bicker was about the only entertaining thing he had going for him.

He scowled at the gun. At this rate, there would be no HYDRA takedown for him tonight. Maybe Steve would let him use the shield for target practice later — burn off some of this energy.

Well. He had much better ideas for burning off energy with Steve, but the four were bunking together, and he didn’t feel like giving Nat and Clint a show.

“Steve, when was the last time you checked in with SHIELD? I mean seriously, this is getting ridiculous,” Bucky complained. He turned to look balefully at the good Captain. “I’m bored, and you of all people should know, that way leads to madness.”

“If you start randomly shooting things, Buck” — damn Steve for knowing him so well — “you’ll blow our cover, and you know what that means.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes at him. “You wouldn’t.”

Steve gave Bucky a knowing smile and nodded. “That’s right. No TV for you for a month.”

Fuck. Bucky growled low and turned his back on the man, leaning sideways against the barrier wall they were hiding behind.

“You do know Bucky’s not ten-years-old, right?” Natasha asked, a hint of humor in her voice. “How is revoking TV gonna stop him?”

Bucky could practically hear Steve shrug from behind him. “No TV means no *Master Chef*.”

“*Master Chef Junior!*” Bucky snapped over his shoulder. He frowned, then flipped the safety on his gun before holstering it, only to pull out his pack of cigarettes from his front pocket. He took one out and lit it, taking a slow drag. The smoke in his lungs cleared his head and calmed him down. For how long, though, he didn’t know.

A hand slid around his waist, Steve’s head coming to rest on his shoulder. “I know you’re getting antsy, Buck,” he murmured in Bucky’s ear. “But you’ve gotta stay calm.”

“But it’s fucking cold,” Bucky grumbled.

Steve laughed. “Ya think? You only have one human hand, and that’s completely covered.” He held up his own gloved hand and wiggled his exposed fingertips in Bucky’s face. “I mean, I know the cold can’t hurt me, but goddamn, my fingers are freezing.”

Bucky stared at Steve’s hand as concern started to creep up his spine. “Are you sure those gloves are a good idea? Cold extremities can compromise skill, Steve.”

Steve shrugged against Bucky’s back and dropped his hand. He turned Bucky around so they were facing, and then leaned up against the wall next to him. “Normally, yeah. But ever since I came out of the ice, while I feel the cold, it just doesn’t affect my abilities the way it normally would.”

“Are you sure?” Bucky asked, not convinced.

“I’ve tested it, actually. In controlled circumstances. So no worries —”
Right at that moment, Steve’s SAT-phone began to ring. He didn’t hesitate to pick up, pushing off the wall as he did. “This is Captain Rogers,” he said into the mouthpiece as he walked back towards Clint and Natasha.

Anticipation thrummed through Bucky and he quickly dropped the remains of his cigarette, stubbing it out with his boot. He headed over to the rest of the group, just as Steve was finishing up his call.

“We going in?” he asked excitedly. He pulled out his gun and flicked the safety off.

Steve nodded. “We have some logistics to go over, but yeah.” He grinned at Bucky. “We’re going in.”

Bucky returned the grin, a vicious edge coming to his. “Excellent.”

Steve immediately launched into tactics and strategies, where the HYDRA agents were most likely to be in the compound, and how best for the four of them to get in as quickly and quietly as possible.

This was it for Bucky. He could feel himself coming alive, because this was what he did best. And the fact that he could turn it on the people that made him what he was held a particularly gruesome sort of satisfaction to it. He whipped out his phone to get a picture of the four of them — prepping to kick some Hydra-ass — and turned it on himself to snap a quick selfie with his friends in the back, before stuffing the phone quickly back into his pocket.

“Bucky, you ready?” He turned around to find Steve glaring impatiently at him. “Now’s not the time.”

“Already done,” Bucky answered without an ounce of guilt.

“You’re not as pretty as you think you are, Barnes,” Clint commented as he pulled an arrow out of his quiver.

Bucky smirked. “Just remember, I used to sleep with your girlfriend, and now I’m shacking up with the very embodiment of America itself.” He patted Steve on the shoulder.

Natasha shook her head. “I wouldn’t, Barnes. You may be a master assassin, but Clint really has never missed a shot.” She caught Bucky’s eye and held it. “Ever.”

Clint just stood next to her, grinning proudly.

“I thought you guys wanted to get this show on the road,” Steve growled next to Bucky. “Or would you rather hang out here for another two hours?”

“Oh, fuck no.” Clint pulled his bow off his shoulder. He took a deep breath, looked solemnly at Steve, and said, “We’re ready when you are, Cap.”

“Kiss his ass as much as you want, Bird Boy, but he’s still going home to my bed,” Bucky said with a snicker.

Steve just shook his head and cuffed Bucky behind the ear. “Not if we don’t get this mission done, I won’t,” he shot back.

Bucky turned and waved a hand at the barrier wall. “Then lead the way, Cap.”

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Four hours to get to the compound, two hours of waiting, and it took them less than twenty minutes
to turn the whole place to rubble. Bucky felt cheated.

He let his head thump back against the fuselage of the quinjet. The extraction team had airlifted them all out barely five minutes before and he was already on edge. He needed another target. He wasn’t done.

He looked sideways in time to see Steve walking towards him. “Bucky, how—”

Whatever he was going to say, Bucky never got the chance to hear. He grabbed Steve by the front straps of his uniform and spun them around, slamming Steve up against the wall. Steve had barely huffed out a breath before Bucky was on him, kissing him hard and rough. He wedged his knee between Steve’s thighs, his hands searching for purchase among the rest of the straps of Steve’s uniform. Steve ran his hands up Bucky’s arms, and gripped his shoulders.

Only to gently push Bucky back. Confused, Bucky whined as he tried to mouth along Steve’s jaw.

“Bucky, no,” Steve urged quietly.

“Steve, please,” Bucky begged. He buried his face in Steve’s neck and pushed his body flush against his boyfriend’s. “I feel like I’m going to crawl out of my skin, here.”

“I know, baby. But people can see us.” Steve said. At that moment, Bucky heard Clint wolf-whistling from the cockpit. Awesome.

Steve again gently pushed Bucky away, but only enough so they weren’t grinding against each other. He still held Bucky close, though, running his hands up and down Bucky’s back. “I’ve got you; you’re okay.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” Steve assured him. He turned and pressed a kiss to Bucky’s temple. Then he slipped out from underneath Bucky — much to Bucky’s chagrin — and took his hand, guiding them over to one of the benches in the back. He sat them down and pulled Bucky in next to him. “Talk to me.”

Bucky turned wild eyes on him. “Six hours, Stevie.” He rested his forehead on Steve’s shoulder. “Six hours and then” — he waved his metal arm around vaguely — “nothing.”

Steve chuckled in his ear. “It wasn’t nothing, Buck. We took down another HYDRA base. We did good!”

“But it was so short!” Bucky whined.

Steve laughed, louder this time. He wrapped an arm around Bucky and pulled him in for an affectionate hug. “I swear to God, there’s no pleasing you.”

“You shut up,” Bucky grumbled, but he started to smile.

Steve nudged him. “Hey, show me that picture you took.”

Bucky looked up in confusion, until he remembered — oh, yeah. He’d taken a picture of them right before they’d set off. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. “I completely forgot about that,” he said as he swiped through his pictures. He pulled up the image and handed Steve his phone.

As he glanced over the photo, a smile slowly tugging at the corner of Steve’s mouth. He turned to look at Bucky, eyes lidded. “You look pretty fucking hot in this photo.”
Bucky gave him a crooked smile. “Do I, now?”

Steve hummed in affirmation, and looked at the image one more time before handing the phone back to Bucky. “You know, you can’t tell where we are in that picture.”

“I guess not...” Bucky waited, no clue where Steve was going with this.

“So...” Steve gazed expectantly at Bucky, but Bucky really had no idea what he was getting at. Eventually Steve laughed and rapped on Bucky’s thigh. “You should post it to Instagram!”

“Oh really?” Bucky made a face, bewildered. There was nothing professional about Steve’s suggestion. The guy was a rule-breaker, but not an unnecessary one. He also didn’t know what the point would be. “Why? I mean — how is that a good idea?”

Steve took the phone back from Bucky and pulled up the app. “Well, your Instagram is to show people your life, right? Let them in?” He loaded the image and turned back to smile at Bucky. He held out the phone, and Bucky took it without thinking. “You can’t show people most of what you do, but it’s not like the public doesn’t know you work for SHIELD Why not show them what you can?”

Well, huh. So there was a point — a good one actually. He typed out Under attack in the middle of nowhere. Why is the bad guy's lair never located in Acapulco or Honolulu? FML... and hit share, sending it out to his Instagram and Tumblr followers.

Steve’s phone pinged and he pulled it out of his utility belt. He swiped across the screen, and Bucky saw Steve’s Instagram feed open up. “Your phone tells you when I post something?”

Steve snorted. “Of course it does.” He looked over the image, his eyes narrowing more and more as he read the caption. “Uh, Buck?”

“Mhm?” Bucky asked innocently as he actively avoided looking at Steve. He already knew where this was going.

“Don’t ‘mhm’ me.” Steve waved his phone at Bucky. “We weren’t ‘under attack’. We were the attackers.”

Bucky sat up straighter, but still refused to look his boyfriend in the eye. “Being under attack is way more badass than what we were actually doing, which was sitting around on our asses in temperatures so cold, God himself wouldn’t have stepped foot in there.”

“Well then, I promise you I will make sure the next HYDRA base we take down is somewhere in the tropics.”

“Now see, Rogers?” Bucky thumped his hand against Steve’s chest and smiled. “Good to know you’re finally coming around.”
Bucky yawned as he walked out to the kitchen. He took the coffee mug out of Steve’s hand, barely registering the look of shock on Steve’s face. What he did register, though, was his impressive skills at not spilling the coffee when he hopped up to sit on the counter. Thank god for small victories at six-thirty in the morning.

“Uh, Buck?”

Bucky slowly turned his head towards Steve as he took a sip. “Hmm?”

“You’re awake.”

“Not sure that’s what I’d call this.” Bucky took another sip before he continued. “Pretty sure I’m actually not awake at this exact moment.”

“Ohkay...” Steve tilted his head curiously. “But why are you ‘not awake’ right now?”
Bucky’s furrowed his brow and he looked down at the t-shirt and shorts he was wearing before looking back up at Steve. “I don’t understand. Didn’t you say last night you wanted to run this morning?”

“Bucky, I say that about every morning,” Steve said, exasperatedly.

Now Bucky was getting annoyed. There was not enough coffee in the world to be having this ass-backwards conversation at this ungodly hour. He hopped back down, still not spilling his coffee (victory again) and glared at Steve. “And every night you ask me to come with you. Did you not mean that?”

Steve’s exasperation slipped instantly into shock. “Wait, you mean you’re actually coming this time?”

Officially frustrated now, Bucky slid past Steve on his way back to the bedroom. “Yes, Steve. I’m coming.” He stopped and looked back. “Unless you don’t actually want me to go, which in that case, the bed sounds like a lot more fun than this fucking conversation.”

Steve quickly walked over and threw his arms around Bucky’s waist, jostling him. He watched in horror as a fair chunk of the contents of his mug splashed out onto the hardwood floor.

“Aw, dammit.” He watched forlornly as the warm puddle on the floor slowly seeped beneath his toes. With a scowl, he turned to Steve and said, “Now look what you’ve done. You yelled at me and you made me spill my coffee.”

“I never yelled at you, Buck,” Steve pointed out before turning his head to plant a sloppy kiss against the side of Bucky’s neck. “Your sleep-deprived brain is making you delusional.”

“Delusional.” Bucky huffed and elbowed Steve in the ribs. “You got pissy with me and made me cranky before even one cup of coffee. Delusional, my ass.” He couldn’t help the whimper that escaped his lips as he stared down at the last dregs of his coffee. “And affection will get you nowhere, Rogers. You made the coffee go away. That’s a deal-breaker right there.”

Steve hummed in Bucky’s ear. “Yes, I can see the headlines now: ‘Star Spangled Man and his Young Buck Split over Cuban Coffee Crisis’.”

Bucky snorted. “Did you actually just call me your young buck?”

“It’s not the worst thing I’ve ever called you,” Steve said — and in all fairness, that was completely true.

“It’ll be my chance to dethrone you as Crown Prince of America,” Bucky went on, picking back up the thread of their conversation. “Everyone knows you don’t fuck with someone and their lifeline to caffeine.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve mumbled. He wrapped his arms tighter around Bucky. “Okay, fine. I’ll play nice. Will you please come running with me this morning?”

When Bucky turned to look at him, his guard immediately went up. Steve was resting his head on Bucky’s shoulder, giving him the saddest puppy-dog eyes anyone had ever seen.

“That’s playing dirty, you know,” Bucky grumbled.

Steve kissed Bucky’s shoulder before smiling at him. “I know.”
"I should go back to bed on account of that face alone."

"You could, but you won’t," Steve countered.

"I could if I took you with me," Bucky responded with a wicked little smirk.

That got Steve’s smile to falter. Bucky could practically see the wheels turning in his head as he thought that one through. After a moment, though, he shook his head and sighed. "No. Can’t. Sam’s expecting me, and you know I hate missing an opportunity to kick his ass around Prospect Park."

Bucky reached up and patted Steve’s cheek. “Such a good sport, you.”

Steve chuckled before swatting Bucky on the ass, giving him a light shove towards the bedroom.

"Go finish getting dressed, would ya? We’ve gotta meet Sam in 20 minutes."

The coffee squelched beneath Bucky’s toes as he walked through it. He set the useless mug on the counter as he passed and said, “Might take me a bit longer since I have to, you know, wash my feet.”

The least you could do is —

“I’m already making a fresh pot,” Steve interrupted from behind, effectively cutting off Bucky’s grumbling.

Instead he just gave a short nod. “Well, then. All is forgiven. This time.”

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After Bucky had cleaned his feet and thrown on a pair of sneakers, he grabbed his phone and headed back out to find a fresh, steaming cup of coffee waiting for him. He snatched it off the counter and immediately took a sip.

Oh, sweet baby Jesus, bless Steve; he had used the light roast.

Once Bucky had come back to the world he’d become viciously snobby about coffee, especially considering that, once he’d actually tasted decent coffee, he’d quickly realized all they’d ever had growing up was swill. He’d gone so far as to study coffee, and he’d found out that, contrary to popular belief, light roast coffee actually had more caffeine than dark roast.

And bless Steve’s little heart, he knew exactly what Bucky needed right then.

Bucky walked back through the kitchen and into the living room, where he heard Steve moving around. Sure enough, he found him putting on his shoes over by the front window.

And what a sight he found. Steve had his foot propped up on the windowsill as he laced up his sneakers, giving Bucky a glorious shot of that super-soldier ass.

Bucky coughed, sputtering out his coffee as he tried not to choke on the hot liquid. He lifted his phone up to quietly take a picture, but he was still working to clear his throat and Steve turned just as Bucky snapped the photo.

“You okay Bu — what are you doing?” Steve questioned when he saw Bucky’s phone pointed at him.

Bucky gave a half shrug as he looked down at the picture. “Oh, nothing. Just taking a picture of that exceptional ass God — and more importantly — Science gave you.”

“You’re not gonna post that to Instagram, are you?” Steve asked, a hint of trepidation in his voice.
Oh, now *there* was an idea.

Bucky looked up and grinned widely at Steve. “Well, I wasn’t planning on it, but I think you might be onto something there.”

“Aw, Buck, come on!” Steve whined, standing up straight. “Do your followers really need to see that?”

“Steve, you’re just wearing running shorts!” Bucky exclaimed, waving his phone in Steve’s direction while he set his mug down on the coffee table. “And not even the really hot kind that are all skin tight and shit.” He couldn’t help but smile, because really, the look of consternation on Steve’s face was reason enough right there to post the photo.

The two men stared each other down, waiting to see who would break first. If Steve cracked first, Bucky knew he could get away with posting the picture. If Bucky cracked, there was no way Steve wouldn’t chase him down and try and steal the phone.

Bucky took his chances. “I’m doing it,” he said and turned, running towards the bathroom and locking himself in. Sure enough, Steve slammed into the door not two seconds later.

“You’re not showing the world my ass, Bucky!” Steve shouted as he banged on the door.

“Too late, Stevie!” Bucky shouted back gleefully. He threw the image up onto the app and quickly typed out his caption: "*You're not gonna post this pic on Instagram, Buck?* Me? No! ! *I'll never do that, Stevie...*"

Once he’d hit share, he opened the door — completely smug — to find his boyfriend glaring daggers at him, his face red and splotchy. He opened his mouth to say something — most likely to call Bucky an asshole — when Bucky cut him off.

“Keep something in mind, Rogers. *You’re* the one who pushed me to use my Instagram account. And if I’m going down” — he swung his metal arm out dramatically — “I’m taking *everyone* with me.”

“Was that *really* necessary?”

Bucky leaned in to give Steve a small kiss — only to be rebuffed when Steve turned his head — and caught his cheek instead. He sighed and pulled up the image on his feed. He turned the phone to show it to Steve.

“It’s really not that bad, you loon,” he pointed out. Steve just stared at the picture, his eyes narrowed into slits as he took in the shot of his backside.

After a few seconds, he finally grumbled, “I guess it’s really *not* that bad.” He turned to shoot Bucky a dirty look. “You’re still an ass, though.”

“Pretty sure you’re the *ass*, Stevie,” he commented, snickering.


Snickering turned to outright laughing. “It was a good joke!” he defended as he pushed passed Steve, heading back for his coffee.

“Yeah, maybe for a nonagenarian. Taking up the mantle with the dad jokes now, are we?”
“Well, it’s time one of us acted our age.” Bucky picked up his coffee and turned to smile at Steve. He took a drink, finishing it off, since it wasn’t really hot anymore. He set the cup back down where he’d found it. “You ready to go? I wanna see how many people recognize you after you pass them on the loop.”

“Why would they recognize me after —” Steve cut himself off the second he caught Bucky’s meaning. He just shook his head and headed toward the front door, opening it. “I regret you, you know that.”

“Oh, I know,” Bucky responded as he followed Steve out, grabbing his keys off the hook as he went. “It’s why I stick around.”

Steve smiled at him as Bucky shut the door and locked it. “Jerk.”

“Punk.”
“On your right!”

“On your left!”

“You two need to shut the hell up!”

Bucky and Steve blazed past Sam for the third time that morning, as they made their way around the Circle Drive loop at Prospect Park. The loop was almost four miles around. Sam was aiming to run it once. Bucky and Steve were aiming to see how many times they could lap him while he did.

As they passed the edge of Prospect Park Lake, they turned to smile at each other. Bucky had to admit that, despite getting up at such an unholy hour, he was having a blast. It had been a long while since he’d deigned to go running with the pair (because seriously, who the fuck wakes up at six-thirty in the morning? Crazy people, that’s who), but after the childish pleasure he was taking in both getting that picture of Steve, and now making Sam look bad, he had to admit, this was kind of fun.
He glimpsed back at Sam in time to see him disappear behind them as they turned the bend by the lake. He shook his head and cast a sidelong glance at Steve. “As we know, I have the emotional maturity of five-year-old, so I know why I don’t feel bad, but it doesn’t bother you that you basically make him look like shit every morning?”

Steve huffed out a small laugh. “Nah. He and I wouldn’t be friends if I hadn’t impressed him that one time with my zombie-survival skills.”

Bucky instantly came to a halt because, no. No zombies. Hydra and aliens and robots were enough. Zombies could just fuck right off.

It took Steve a second to realize Bucky wasn’t next to him anymore. He stopped and turned back, and his face would have seemed curious to anyone else, if it wasn’t for the glittering mischief behind his eyes.

“Oh, no you don’t, Rogers!” Bucky glared at Steve and marched up to him, pointing a finger in his face. “Fuck you, Steve. Fuck you and all your zombie bullshit. No zombies. I forbid it.”

Steve just shrugged and grinned wider. “Not my call, Buck. But don’t worry.” His face turned solemn as he clapped a hand down on Bucky’s shoulder. “If the zombies do come, just remember, they’ll get Sam before they’ll get us.” He burst out laughing, turned and bolted up the road, away from Bucky.

“Hey!” Bucky shouted with a laugh and took off after him. As he came up next to Steve, he punched him hard in the arm. Steve yelped and turned to smack Bucky in the shoulder in retaliation.

Oh, it was on.

Bucky slowed down a fraction of a step so he could get in behind Steve, then jumped him, knocking them both to the ground. They rolled as they hit pavement, and Steve wasted no time taking the advantage. He flipped over and straddled Bucky, then grabbed his wrists to pin them over Bucky’s head. He couldn’t get purchase on the metal arm, though. Grinning viciously, Bucky snaked it around so he could grip Steve’s upper arm, and using the full strength of its biomechanics, threw Steve off to the side, where he sailed through the air and landed with hard thud in the grass.

He groaned and rolled onto his back, but then he just stayed there, unmoving. Bucky instantly went into panic mode because what the fuck did he just do?

“Steve!” he shouted as he jumped up and rushed over. He dropped down next to his boyfriend, his hands fluttering over Steve’s body as he looked for signs of injury. Stupid stupid! What the fuck was he thinking, using his arm like that?!

Scared, he turned to face Steve, where he was staring up at the sky. “Steve, what did I do? Tell me. Where are you injured?” When Steve still didn’t answer — just blinked a of couple times — Bucky let out a tiny broken cry and leaned over, cupping his boyfriend’s face in his hands. “Stevie, please,” he whispered, his eye frantically searching Steve’s face. “Talk to me.”

“You know...” Steve paused, and blinked a couple times, still not looking at Bucky. “I’m wondering something.”

And his voice sounded... fine. It was clear and normal. Bucky narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

When Steve finally did turn his head, he was grinning stupidly at Bucky. “Do you work out? Because damn son, you’ve got some strength behind that arm.”
Bucky froze for a full second before fear bled directly into anger. “Oh, you asshole!” he barked out, then shoved Steve away as the man started to laugh.

“No, really,” Steve continued between huffs of laughter. “What sort of training do you do, because that arm is buff, baby.” He snorted into the grass as he rolled over to stand up. When he looked back at Bucky, his eyes were positively dancing. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think it was made of steel or something!”

“Titanium-based alloy, you shit, but who’s counting?” Bucky grumbled, his hands on his hips.

Steve’s eyes turned sinful as they raked over Bucky’s arm. “Well not me, obviously.” He reached out and took Bucky’s metal fingers in his own before wrapping their joined arms behind his back. “Just, you know. You seem quite handy with it.”

Bucky snorted. “Aaand the jokes just keep on coming.”

“I only save the good ones for you.”

“What a lucky guy I am.”

Steve nodded and leaned in for a quick kiss. “And it’s about time you figured that —” he stopped as something over Bucky’s shoulder caught his eye. “Well, shit,” he muttered. “Busted.”

Confused, Bucky looked over to find Sam standing on the path, his arms folded, as he gave them both a stern glare. “Busted is right,” Bucky responded.

“I thought we were running,” Sam said. “If I wanted to watch you two canoodle, I’d have come over to one of about a hundred movie nights you two have invited me too.”

“I knew you didn’t really have an excuse!” Steve shot back.

Sam just shrugged and waved a hand at them. “Canoodling,” he repeated, as if that proved some sort of point.

Bucky huffed and turned around, out of Steve’s arms. “We running, or what?”

Sam stared at him aghast. “I just — what did you — never mind.” He shook his head and laughed. Then he turned to look up the path and asked, “Think you guys would mind sticking with me for a change?”

“Aww.” Bucky walked over and threw his arm around Sam’s shoulder. “Is someone feeling left out?”

“I’d just like to run with my friends, if it’s all the same to you.” He gave Bucky a pointed look.

“Yeah, sure, buddy,” Bucky replied quietly, heat rising in his face. “Sorry about that.”

Sam sighed and patted him affectionately on the back. “I’ll make you guys a deal,” he said as he looked between them. “I don’t give a rat’s ass if you guys lap me at the beginning — I mean, I get it. Super-soldier need to burn calories, and all. But maybe you could run the last mile with me? Like right now?”

Bucky smiled. “Sounds like a plan.”

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One that lasted for about five minutes

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“On your right!”

“On your left!”

“A plague on both your houses!”

When they reached the top of the loop, back near where they’d started, they finally came to a stop and collapsed into a fit of laughter as they waited for Sam to finish. They were still laughing a couple minutes later when Bucky spotted him coming up the hill.

“There he is!” Bucky shouted, pointing towards Sam. “There’s our friend!”

“He just cursed us with the plague, Buck,” Steve replied, just as loud. “That kind of friend is a friend to no one.”

“And damn straight, you better believe it!” Sam snapped as he came to a halt in front of them. He collapsed, out of breath, on the grass next to Bucky. Then he turned and nodded at Steve. “You. Go get my stuff from Sara. She runs the lavender stand over there.”

Bucky followed his gaze, only to come up short at the sight of a farmer’s market at the park entrance. It appeared to be in full swing. “Wait, when did that get there?”

Steve glanced down at Bucky, one eyebrow arched. “Seriously?”

Bucky gave him a blank stare. “Yes, Steven. Seriously.”

“We passed that on the way in, Buck.”

“Nu-uh.” He shook his head. “No, we didn’t.” He would’ve remembered a fucking bazaar.

“It was just as busy then as it is now,” Steve said with a tiny smile

Bucky watched the people milling about and racked his brain, trying to remember if Steve was right — if it had been there earlier. But all he could remember was wanting to go back to bed. Finally, he turned to glare at Steve and replied, “Seven. In. The. Morning.”

Steve shook his head and laughed before walking off to retrieve Sam’s stuff.

“You two are strange, you know that?” Sam observed.

Bucky shrugged. “Yeah, but it works for us.”

“Oh, no doubt about that,” Sam said and fell back to rest his head in the grass. “For everything you two have been through, you actually have one of the healthiest relationships I’ve ever seen.”

Slightly taken aback, Bucky turned to Sam. “You think so?”

Sam nodded. “Seriously, man. You guys have something good.”

With a smile, Bucky turned back and watched as Steve talked to a pretty brunette girl over at one of the stands — Sara probably. She was laughing as she turned around and picked up a bag and three water bottles before turning back to hand them to him. As he swung the bag onto his shoulder, he
looked over to see Bucky watching him. He gave a little wave, a shy smile turning up one corner of
his mouth. Sara glanced back to see what Steve was looking at, then turned to say something else to
him. Steve ducked his head bashfully as he replied. Finally he shook her hand and walked back over,
the smile never leaving his lips.

“What was that all about?” Bucky asked quietly.

“Nothing,” Steve answered with a tiny shake of his head. “Just talkin’ about you.”

“Good things, I hope.”

“The only kinda things I got.”

They smiled goofily at each other until Sam snapped them out of there reverie. “Think I can have my
bag now, Cap?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!” Steve gave him a lazy salute, then dropped the bag on Sam’s chest. “Just remember
that I outrank you, though.”

“Maybe so, but you can’t fly,” Sam pointed out.

“And you can’t run,” Steve countered.

Bucky burst out laughing as Sam grumbled at the pair. He yanked the bag off his chest and tucked it
under his head. “Just give me my damn water.”

Steve laughed and tossed him one of the bottles before turning and tossing another one to Bucky.

Yeah, coming out had definitely been a good idea. He opened his water and downed about half in
one shot. Then he took out his phone and turned to Sam, who’d already completely downed his
own.

“Thirsty, are we?” Bucky noted.

“Well, someone had me running at top speed this morning, just to keep up.”

“Which you couldn’t do,” Bucky responded just as Steve said from where he’d sat down next to
Bucky, “It’s good for you, Sam. Puts hair on your chest.”

Sam chose Steve to flip off, even as Bucky opened up his camera and said, “I’m taking a picture of
you.”

Sam scowled at him. “I’m flipping you off too if you do.”

Bucky leveled his eyes at Sam. “No you won’t, because you know how important my
instagramming is to my recovery and you would never do anything to jeopardize my recovery,
would you, Wilson?” Then he gave Sam an evil grin as Steve snickered next to him.

“You’re both assholes and I regret all my life choices that lead to my becoming friends with either of
you.”

“And yet...” Bucky held up the phone and Sam gave him a cheesy grin as he snapped away. Bucky
smiled at the ridiculousness of it, his water bottle having been caught in the picture, almost
tauntingly. He loaded it quickly, with the caption Sam, after running 30 minutes with us. Need some
water, little bird?, and hit share. “You still love us enough to smile for me after we kicked your ass
on the circle.”
Bucky laughed hard as the bag smacked him squarely in the face.
Ever since Bucky had started his Instagram project — and later, included to Tumblr — all he’d done was add the images to both platforms without really paying attention to how many people were actually *looking* at his photos.

Until now.

“Hey, Steve,” Bucky whispered in awe as he stared at his phone. “Stevie.”

“What is it, Buck?” Steve asked absently. He didn’t even look up from his sketchbook.

Bucky sat up from where he laid pillowed on Steve’s lower back and turned over onto his stomach, his elbows propping him up in the grass. He shoved his phone under Steve’s nose and said, “Look
how many followers I have.”

With a sigh, Steve set down his pencil and took Bucky’s phone out of his hand. He peered at the little number on the upper right hand side of the screen. “This says you have zero followers, Buck.” He looked over, his brow furrowed. “That can’t be right, can it?”

Bucky shoved his shoulder into Steve. “No, you doof. That’s how many people I’m following.” He reached over and tapped on the screen. “Look at the number next to it.”

But Steve’s eyes still hadn’t left Bucky’s face. “Wait, you aren’t following anyone? You aren’t even following me?” he asked, his voice tiny.

Bucky gave him a flat stare. “You’ve posted exactly nothing on there, Steve. You created the damn thing to follow me.” He tilted his head and continued. “Which, I gotta say, for an artist whose boyfriend just bought him a ridiculously expensive camera, it’s kinda hurtful that you don’t.”

Steve blushed crimson. “You know I don’t like sharing my stuff that much.”

“Then you get no follow from me,” Bucky responded, but leaned in to kiss Steve on the cheek anyway. He was rewarded with an even deeper flush.

“Yeah, well.” Steve coughed lightly and turned away, finally looking at Bucky’s phone again. His eyes went wide not half a second later. “Holy shit, Bucky!” he exclaimed. “Really?”

“Over two thousand followers,” Bucky answered proudly.

Steve grinned widely at him. “That’s awesome, baby!” He leaned in and pressed a firm kiss to Bucky’s lips. Then he sat back and asked, “What about Tumblr?”

“What do you mean ‘what about Tumblr’?”

“I mean, what’s your follower count there?”

“Oh!” Bucky snatched the phone out of his hand. “I hadn’t even thought about that.”

He pulled up his Tumblr app that he never used (it all went through Instagram, after all), and had to thumb around for a minute, but he finally found his number. What he saw rooted him to the spot.

“What is it?” Steve asked curiously. He slipped the phone easily out of Bucky’s slack fingers and looked at the screen. “Holy shit,” he whispered.

“Yeah,” was all Bucky could muster.

“You have over three thousand on here.”

“I can see that.”

“That means over five thousand people follow you.”

“Some might overlap”

Steve snorted. “I doubt there’s that much overlap.” He dropped the phone back in Bucky’s hand — which still hadn’t moved from when Steve had taken the phone from him — and turned to place his own hand against Bucky’s cheek. Without thinking, Bucky leaned into it.

“You okay?” Steve asked quietly, his brows knitted in concern. “How do you feel about that many
people looking at pictures of you? Of us?"

Bucky shrugged awkwardly before pressing his cheek further against Steve’s hand. It was exciting to think that that many people cared about what he was doing, but he got what Steve meant. They were both really private people — Bucky especially. There were still some days where he didn’t even want to share his time and thoughts with Steve, and yet here he was, posting away for thousands of people to see.

Now that he knew how many people were looking, though, did that change anything for him?

He took a deep breath and turned to press a light kiss against Steve’s palm. Then he turned back and said, “I think I’m okay. It’s a little daunting, but I haven’t posted anything that I don’t want people to see, I don’t think.”

He lifted his head and looked around at all the people milling about Central Park. “You know, one of these people could be following me.”

“One of them could be, sure.” Steve nudged him in the shoulder and Bucky turned to find him lost in thought. “Honestly, Buck, I’m actually excited for you. And a bit proud.” He glanced sideways at Bucky and gave him a half smile. “You posting for anyone to see is such a huge accomplishment for you. The fact that you posted even one, when the only follower you had was me, speaks volumes about how far you’ve come in the last several years. Hell, even in the last year.” He let out a hollow laugh. “If it’d been a year ago, you’d have sooner smashed your phone than share anything public with anybody.”

Bucky huffed out a self-deprecating laugh. “You’re not wrong.”

He looked back out at all the people enjoying the park. It would soon turn cold as fall gave way to winter, but for now, the city of New York was taking advantage of the light air and warm sunshine.

And any of these people could be following him — the guy playing catch with his dog, the couple out for a run, the mother watching her kids play. Any one of them could possibly be counted among his followers. Curious about his life, and cheering him on as he continued down his path of recovery. He wasn’t scared of them knowing about his life. No, if he was honest with himself, he was grateful that so many people genuinely cared about him, especially after spending an entire lifetime’s worth with people who only cared if he lived or died because it meant losing their precious asset.

It gave him an idea.

He turned and planted a light kiss on Steve’s temple and hopped up. “Wait right here,” he said before Steve could open his mouth and ask what he was doing.

He shoved his phone in his back pocket and ran back out to the street. On their way in earlier, he’d spotted a bunch of collapsed moving boxes in front of one of the fancy apartment buildings over here on the west side. As he headed back the way they’d come, sure enough, he spotted them again. He grabbed one of the boxes, ripped off a side, and turned to head back to Steve.

As soon as he made his way back, he plopped down next to where Steve was now sitting up and handed over the cardboard box. “Let’s make a ‘thank you’ sign to post to my accounts,” he said by way of explanation.

Steve’s face split into a warm smile. “I think that’s a really good idea. But I think you should make it,” he replied and went to hand the cardboard piece back.

Bucky held out a hand to stop him. “Would you at least draw the icons for me? I was thinking I
could say thanks and then put my follower count next to an Instagram icon and a Tumblr icon.”

“All right.” Steve’s smile turned affectionate. “But you do the rest of it.”


Steve just laughed and laid back down, getting right to work. Bucky sat back and people watched while Steve drew, himself enjoying the afternoon sun. Barely ten minutes later, Steve was handing the piece over to Bucky. He’d put little Instagram and Tumblr icons off to one side of the sign.

“Okay, now your turn,” Steve said, waving at the cardboard.

Bucky smiled and swung around to lie on his stomach again. He set the cardboard down and, grabbing Steve’s pencils, wrote out a thank you and his follower counts next to the icons.

He was just about to hand it back to Steve when a thought occurred to him. If Steve hadn’t pushed him (not just on this project, but in every way possible), Bucky wouldn’t be where he is today. So he turned back to the cardboard, picked up a few more pencils, and drew a little cap down in one corner, with the words ‘Steve says Hi!’ next to it.

Finally satisfied, he smiled and handed it over to Steve. “All done.”

Steve glanced over the sign, his eyes resting on the little drawing of him. His mouth twitched as he tried not to laugh. “Uh, Buck? What is that?” He smiled, a small huff escaping his lips. “Is that supposed to be me?”

Buck felt heat crawl up the back of his neck, and a small stab of hurt bloomed in his chest. “It’s not bad, Stevie,” he mumbled.

Steve looked up at the sound of Bucky’s voice and his smile immediately gave way to chagrin. “Aw, baby, I didn’t mean anything by it. It’s cute!”

Bucky shook his head, still feeling slightly put out. Okay, so he couldn’t draw. That was for Steve. He just wanted to put a little something of his boyfriend on the sign.

“I’m taking it off,” he mumbled again as he reached out for it, only to have Steve hold it out of reach.

“Oh no, you don’t.” When Bucky tried to reach around him to grab it, he leaned in and captured Bucky’s mouth in a kiss. Then he set the sign down and took Bucky’s face in his hands. “I didn’t mean to offend you, baby. That was rude of me.”

“I’m not an artist,” Bucky replied stupidly. He didn’t understand why he was so bothered by this.

Yeah, but you were,” Steve said as he stroked his thumb over Bucky’s cheek.

“Wait, what?”

Steve smiled and leaned into kiss him. “Back before the war. We took art classes together. In fact, we were in class when we found out about Pearl Harbor.”

It was that moment that the memories clicked in Bucky’s head. They had taken classes together. He had never been at Steve’s level, but he vaguely remembered being not half bad.

So that’s why he was so annoyed. His subconscious knew he should be better at this than he was.

“I remember,” he said quietly. Still frustrated though, but not wanting to deal with the thought of a
lost talent, instead he asked, “Why didn’t you ever tell me that?”

Steve’s smile turned sad. “Doctor’s orders, remember? No pushing the past on you. Only remind you of things if it looks like you might remember them.”

Bucky just nodded. Steve was right. Bucky never remembered anything that people tried to force on him. Whatever came had to come in its own time.

“I can’t draw like that anymore,” he finally said, feeling just a little heartbroken.

“What do you wish you still could?”

Bucky shrugged. Truthfully, until this moment, it hadn’t really occurred to him. “I guess not.” He paused as he tried to figure out his thoughts. Then he took a deep breath and continued. “I guess... I mean, it’s a memory gained, but I still feel like I lost something, ya know?” He looked up into sad blue eyes watching him.

They stared at each other for a few moments before Steve finally leaned in and kissed Bucky on the shoulder. “I know,” he whispered against the fabric of Bucky’s shirt.

Bucky rested his head on Steve’s and gave them both a bit to collect themselves, both lost in thoughts of the past and all that it took to get to where they were. They both had been through so much, but it really was a miracle that they got to come back to each other at all.

“Let’s take this picture,” he said after a few minutes, shaking off the melancholy of the moment. Steve hummed in response and kissed Bucky’s shoulder again.

They both sat up and Bucky pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Here,” he said and handed it over. Steve handed back the sign for Bucky to hold up.

“You know, it really is a gorgeous day,” Steve commented as he thumbed open the camera app. “This is gonna be a great picture.”

“Well, it may not be with that fancy-ass camera I bought you, but I still expect nothing less than your very best, Rogers.”

Steve rolled his eyes over the top of the phone. “Just shut up and smile.”

“Only because you asked nicely.” Bucky held up the sign and did as he was told.

Thank you so much guys for the 3000+ followers on Tumblr and the 2000+ on Instagram. Steve says “Hi” by the way and yes, the little doodle at the bottom IS Steve not a blue Ninja Turtle. I can’t draw, sue me.
Chapter Summary

"Shrink told me: 'James, you should focus on outdoor activities with your boyfriend. It's good for your recovery.' Working on it, Doc! But I'm not sure that close combat and blowing up an entire Hydra base with C4 count as "outdoor activities" though.

"Oops."

"Oops?"

"You have a better word for it?"

"How about, 'maybe next time I should listen to my boyfriend and not detonate the place until, you know, after we’re no longer in it'?"

"Like I said. Oops."
Steve laughed and leaned in, only to bump into Bucky’s injured shoulder, causing Bucky to hiss in pain.

They were sitting on the gurney in the back of a medi-van, on their way to the hospital. The SHIELD EMS agents had just finished patching the two up as best they could. Bucky’s left eye was swollen shut and bandaged over. His uniform was also singed and he knew he was bleeding in numerous places on his chest and arms. Steve only had a bandage around his head, but most of the top half of his uniform was burned or shredded away, and there were small gashes all over his torso.

“Shit. Sorry!” Steve apologized and jumped back, only to slam his injured back against the wall of the van. He groaned in pain and doubled over before tipping sideways onto Bucky’s lap. He looked up at Bucky, accusation buried deep in his bright blue eyes. “It’s a good thing the explosion didn’t finish you off. Now it just means I get to.”

“Aww.” Bucky laughed. “But we saved the day! We’re heroes! You wouldn’t kill a national hero, would you?”

“National hero, my ass,” Steve grumbled. He turned his head to press his uninjured cheek into Bucky’s knee. “National menace, more like it.”

“Hush, baby,” Bucky said soothingly as he carded his fingers through Steve’s hair and tried not to laugh. “You’re talking nonsense now.”

“You’re so lucky I’m invalid right now. Otherwise I’d be kicking your ass for that stunt.” The van hit a bump in the road and both men grimaced in pain. Steve thumped Bucky hard in the shin. “You see? See what you did to us? Thirty seconds, you jackass. Thirty seconds.”

“Thirty seconds, and Hydra goons would’ve escaped. I did us a favor.”

“You also laid us both up for the next couple weeks.”

“Steve, we can both stand and walk right now.”

“Well, not in a van we can’t.”

Bucky flicked Steve in the ear and smiled when his boyfriend let out a small yelp. Bucky then bounced his knee under Steve’s head and said, “Serves you right.”

Steve turned onto his back as best he could, and glared up at Bucky. “Is that any way to treat the man you almost blew up?”

“Probably not, but then I wouldn’t be me, and well, we just can’t have that.” Bucky’s face split into a cheeky grin and Steve laughed before turning back onto his side. Bucky resumed stroking Steve’s head and let his own rest gingerly against the van wall.

Okay, admittedly, he felt a tad guilty. He hadn’t really been sure if any of Hydra would have escaped if he’d waited. Even more so, he wasn’t sure they’d rounded up all the civilians that worked there. As much as he and Steve both hated everything Hydra stood for, they weren’t stupid enough to think that everyone who worked for Hydra was evil. Some were just doing a job.

And every time they took down another Hydra base, he had that sick feeling in his stomach that more than a few of those people died because they were just doing a job.

He shook his head, trying to break off the dreaded disgust that settled into him after every mission like this. But he and Steve had talked about it time and again. This wasn’t like his time as the Winter
Soldier. He wasn’t mindlessly killing anyone that got in his way. This time they at least tried to save as many people as they could.

“Steve?”

“Hmm?” He looked down to find Steve settled, his eyes closed. For someone who was just about beat to hell, he looked surprisingly peaceful.

“Never mind.” Bucky sighed. “It can wait.”

Steve turned his head and opened his eyes. “No, baby, what is it?”

Bucky’s fingers stillled in his hair. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, never taking his eye off Steve. “We did good, right? It wasn’t that bad?”

When Steve smiled at him, there was so much love and affection in his eyes, it almost made Bucky’s heart break, it was so overwhelming. “Yeah, Buck. We did good. You did good.” With a groan, he gingerly pushed himself up out of Bucky’s lap and pressed a hand against Bucky’s cheek. “Could the detonation have waited, though? Yes. You really didn’t need to set it off when you did.”

Bucky opened his mouth — whether to apologize or defend himself, he didn’t know — but Steve shook his head, cutting him off.

“Yes, it was reckless, but we’ve all been caught up in the moment, so I’m not gonna blame you for that.” He pressed his lips to the corner of Bucky’s mouth, and Bucky closed his eye as he lightly trailed his fingers along the back of Steve’s hand. When Steve pulled back, he rested his forehead against Bucky’s. “You did real good, baby. The only thing that ever worries me during missions is the possibility of losing you.” He pulled back again and caught Bucky’s eye, holding it. Serious. “When you hit the trigger, I’m not gonna lie: The first thought that went through my head was, ‘Well, if we have to die, at least we die together’.”

Bucky’s eye went wide. That thought hadn’t occurred to him at all.

He made a choked off sound in the back of his throat as he surged forward and crushed his lips against Steve’s. There was no hesitation in the way Steve pressed back, the pain that coursed through them both be damned.

He constantly forgot that, super-solder serum aside, he and Steve were still human. Maybe they were harder to kill, but they could be killed. The fact that he almost beat Steve to death on the helicarrier was evidence enough.

As he continued to press his mouth against Steve’s, he realized that with each kiss, a whispered I’m sorry escaped his lips. And with every I’m sorry, Steve met him with his own it’s okay.

Bucky pulled back, his eyes stinging with tears he hadn’t known were there. When he looked up, Steve’s face mirrored his own, and his heart broke all over again. “It’s not okay, Stevie.” His voice was small and tinny. “I almost— I didn’t mean—” He shook his head hard, letting his eyes fall. He just couldn’t get the words out.

Steve rested his hands along Bucky’s jaw, and Bucky held back the wince of pain. “Bucky, look at me,” Steve said, his voice soft but commanding. Bucky shook his head, so Steve gave a slight push with his hands, forcing Bucky to look up. When he met Steve’s eyes, there was no anger there. None of the accusations that Bucky knew he deserved. Just love and understanding.

“Baby, it’s okay,” Steve said quietly. He sighed and dropped his head before looking up and meeting
Bucky’s eye again. “I shouldn’t have said that and I’m sorry.”

Bucky opened his mouth, but Steve cut him off. “No, really, I am sorry. I just... I hate the idea of either of us ever having to live without the other.” He huffed out a growl, clearly frustrated. “No one in history has ever been given the kind of second chance we’ve been given, and it scares me every day that the universe will realize its fuck up and take one of us away from the other. But” — he leaned in and kissed the corner of Bucky’s mouth again — “I should never have put that on you, not when you’re already questioning yourself. That was selfish, and I’m so sorry.”

“I love you, Stevie.” It was the only thing he could think to say.

Steve pressed their foreheads together again. “I love you too, baby.”

A throat cleared, and Bucky turned his head to see one of the EMS agents, face red, as he tried to get their attention.

“What is it?” Bucky asked as Steve leaned back and looked over as well.

The medic’s gaze shifted nervously towards the back of the van, then back to them. “Um, we’re here, sirs.”

At some point, the van had stopped moving, and neither of them had noticed. Bucky blinked and looked around at the other team members piling out of the back.

He saw the New York Presbyterian Hospital (SHIELD approved and close to Avengers Tower) and his insides shriveled up. God, he hated hospitals.

He frowned and turned to Steve. “Do we really have to do this? Can’t we, I don’t know, just go home and do this ourselves.”

Steve didn’t hesitate to look Bucky over, his eyes taking him in and, most likely, assessing the damage done to him. Finally he met Bucky’s good eye, his own eyes hard in that way they got when the next question demanded the truth, and asked, “How badly off are you? Do you think you need stitches anywhere? Is anything broken?”

Bucky took a second to answer, taking in what Steve was asking, and going over his injuries in his head. The eye was swollen shut and his eyebrow was cut up. The injury to his shoulder might need a stitch or two, but nothing Steve hadn’t done for him before. Truthfully, he was more concerned with the gash on Steve’s head than any of his own injuries.

Finally he shook his head, and said, “The shoulder might need a couple stitches, maybe the eyebrow, but you can handle those.” He nodded towards Steve’s temple. “And that? How’s that?”

“I have no idea,” Steve answered honestly. He lifted the bandage and leaned in so Bucky could get a good look at it. “What do you think?”

Bucky gazed over the injury. It was small, but deep. It would need stitches too. “You’re gonna need about three in there.” He met Steve’s eye. “You trust me to do it?”

Steve held his gaze for a second before a smile pulled at the corner of his lips. “Let’s get the fuck out of here,” he whispered.

Bucky returned the smile and looked around. The last medic — the one who’d interrupted them — was just climbing out. Bucky put a finger to his lips and tilted his head towards the driver’s seat. Understanding, Steve turned and made his way up front while Bucky went back and quickly pulled
the back doors shut behind them.

The van was hot-wired and in gear before any of the outside team even registered what was going on.

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Steve was trying desperately not to laugh as he put his phone on speaker. Their bathroom was instantly filled with the sounds of Fury’s voice booming expletive after expletive, with the occasional ‘theft’ and ‘SHIELD property’ thrown in for good measure.

Steve hit mute and set the phone on the counter before turning back to look over the gash on Bucky’s arm. Bucky’s uniform had been stripped away and he was sitting on the edge of the tub in nothing but his boxers.

“This looks like shit, Bucky,” Steve commented before he reached over for the alcohol and cleaning swabs. “This wasn’t from the explosion, though. What happened here?”

Bucky glanced down at the gash that ran almost the entire length of his forearm. “I think that was from the guy who pulled out the switchblade,” he answered with a shrug. “Did you know Hydra was handing out weapons from the eighties? They must really be getting desperate.”

Steve snorted and shook his head. “Switchblades aren’t an eighties thing, Buck.”

“They are according to Van Damme.”

“You and your fucking eighties action movies.”

“Hey now. They’re better than any of the shit that gets put out today.”

“My boyfriend, ladies and gentleman. An action movie purist.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

Bucky laughed and sat back, letting Steve work on cleaning up his arm. As he sat there, he thought back to his last therapy session. His doctor had said how proud she was that he was venturing out more, but maybe it was time to take another step, maybe find some hobbies that he and Steve could do together.

For someone who was S.H.I.E.L.D issued — and knew his whole history— it was surprisingly hilarious how both on-the-mark and off-the-mark she was.

Steve stopped and looked up at the sound of Bucky laughing. “What’s so funny?” he asked with a smile.

Bucky shook his head. “I was just thinking about what Doc had said to me last week.” He returned Steve’s smile. “She said that you and I should get out and explore more activities together.” He waved a hand between them. “Think this is what she meant?”

Steve barked out a laugh and leaned back to sit on the balls of his feet. “I’m gonna go out on a limb and say no to that. I’m thinking her ideas were probably a little less dangerous. Like, you know, going out running together.”

Bucky gave Steve a flat stare. “And yet, the last time we did that, I threw you fifty feet across a field.”
Steve shrugged. “Still less dangerous than a packet of C4.” He smiled and leaned back in to Bucky’s arm.

Bucky looked up into the mirror. What a fucking mess the pair of them made.

“You know, we should get a picture of this.” He turned to Steve. “I mean, seriously, we look ridiculous.”

Steve looked up at him, then turned to look at them in the mirror, as Bucky had done. “We really really do,” he said. He pushed off the ground and held out his hand. Bucky took it and stood up.

They stepped in front of the mirror and positioned themselves to make sure the worst of their injuries were showing — worse so on Bucky than Steve, Bucky noted. No surprise there. He grabbed his phone out of his back pocket and held it up to take the picture.

As he looked it over, he couldn’t help laughing. “Wow,” he whispered, more than a little impressed. “We really fucked ourselves up on this one, didn’t we?”

He felt Steve’s lips brush his temple. “No more blowing up buildings with us still in them, deal?”

Bucky smiled. “Deal.”

He pulled up his Instagram app and loaded it with the caption *Shrink told me: "James, you should focus on outdoor activities with your boyfriend. It's good for your recovery. " Working on it, Doc! But I'm not sure that close combat and blowing up an entire Hydra base with C4 count as "outdoor activities" though.,* before shoving the phone back in his pocket.

As he sat back down on the tub again, it was only then that he noticed Steve’s phone.

“Is Fury *still* yelling at us?” he asked in amazement, as Fury’s voice continued to blast its way through the speaker.

Steve snickered, even as his cheeks turned bright pink. “I’ve maybe been timing him since I set the phone down.”

“And he hasn’t noticed once?”

“Would this job be any fun if he did?”

Bucky just sat back and smiled. Maybe next time they’d steal a quinjet.
A scream pierced the night air, and Bucky was out of bed, gun in hand, before he realized the scream had come from him.

It took him that much longer to realize the gun was trained on Steve.

Blood rushed to Bucky’s head, and sound vanished with the pounding in his ears. Steve was kneeling on the bed, his hands up, his eyes staring imploringly at Bucky. He was saying something, but Bucky couldn’t hear it. He couldn’t hear anything.

He tried lowering the gun, but his arm refused to cooperate. A rush of panic surged through his system, and the edges of his vision began to blur. The world was fading around him, pinpointing itself on the man in front of him.

It was Steve. His Stevie. But... But why couldn’t Bucky hear him? And why was his body refusing...
to lower the gun?

Steve was his lover, his friend, his everything. And yet Bucky couldn’t lower the gun.

Something was wrong. And it started with Steve (not Steve, can’t be Steve, he knows Steve...)

With the man on the bed.

The man moved to inch towards him and Bucky yelled at him to stop. Yelled at him to stay where he was. The man came to a halt, but Bucky couldn’t stop screaming at him.

Where’s Steve? What did you do with him? YOU TELL ME!

He couldn’t hear any of that, but he knew he was making sounds — could hear himself in his own head.

The man could hear him too — was trying to respond. But —

Fuck!

Bucky screwed his eyes shut and gave his head a hard shake. This man knew — he knew — where Steve was, and Bucky — goddammit! — needed to be able to hear him!

I can’t hear you! Bucky shouted at the man. It was a bad idea telling him this — never show your enemy your weaknesses — but right now, all that mattered was finding Steve.

The man began to slowly lower his hands and Bucky retrained the gun on his face. But the man just gave a tiny shake of his head, lifting his hands up, only to lower them again. He repeated the motion several times, in slow succession.

Bucky narrowed his eyes as he watched the action over and over again. He knew this; he knew this gesture. As he continued to watch, his heart rate slowed down, and his breathing began to even out.

After another minute, he realized he not only could hear his own breathing, but could just make out the breathing of the other man as well.

No. Not breathing. The man was saying something. Bucky strained to hear what he was saying.

“Calm... Calm... Calm...” the man whispered behind barely-moving lips.

Bucky shook his head and asked again, “Where’s Steve?” only to feel a sense of relief when he realized he could hear himself. But his voice was rough and unsure. Like he didn’t know if he was allowed to use it.

The man took a deep breath and his eyes softened. He stopped moving his hands, but kept them where Bucky could see them. “Bucky, it’s me. It’s Steve.”

No, that— that couldn’t be right. He knew Steve. He didn’t know this man. He shook his head again and gripped the gun tighter. “No. No, you’re not. You tell me what you did with him,” he demanded through gritted teeth.

“Baby, please,” the man whispered. “Come back to me.”

Bucky blinked and tried to clear his vision. But the rest of the world refused to come back to him. Even the man on the bed began to shimmer. Faded into someone else...

Bucky smiled.
There was his Steve. His Stevie. So small and frail, but a determination in those blue eyes that could be matched by very few. There was the man he loved.

“Stevie,” he breathed, relief an almost physical sensation. He began to lower his gun, when—

“Yeah, Buck, it’s me,” the man said, and Bucky’s vision shifted again. His small, beautiful boy disappeared, leaving behind again the man who stole him.

Everything after that happened in quick succession.

As Bucky cried out and stepped back, the man’s eyes went wide and he rolled off the bed just before Bucky pulled the trigger. The bullet missed the man by inches.

Bucky growled and shook his head angrily. But before he had a chance to gather himself and search for the man, something heavy slammed into him and he fell to the floor. It was barely a struggle before the gun was out of Bucky’s hands and his wrists were pinned above his head.

“Bucky!” someone screamed above him. He twisted his wrists and thrashed his legs as he tried to free himself. He growled and opened his mouth to yell at the man to let him go, when he looked up—

“Steve?” he choked out. The world slammed back into place just as fear ripped through Bucky’s body. He’d shot at Steve. He’d shot at Steve.

He immediately began to struggle again. “Oh god, Steve! Are you okay?” He tried to pull his hands free but they wouldn’t budge. “Please tell me you’re okay. Shit, shit, shit.” He looked up into blue eyes assessing him.

“Bucky?” Steve asked, his voice calm even as he strained to hold Bucky in place. Bucky couldn’t help it; he kicked out, slamming his knee into Steve’s groin. “Stop,” Steve commanded. “Stop!”

He held both of Bucky’s wrists in one hand and reached down to grab Bucky’s chin, holding him still. “Stop fighting me!”

Bucky whimpered but stilled, letting his body go lax. He held Steve’s gaze and willed the tears not to fall. “Please tell me I didn’t shoot you,” he whispered, small and broken.

“You didn’t shoot me,” Steve assured him. He let go of Bucky’s chin in favor of stroking a thumb over his cheek before wrapping his fingers around Bucky’s nape. “What happened, baby? Where did you go?”

“I don’t know,” Bucky whined. Fuck it all, the tears slipped out anyways. He made to wipe them away only to realize Steve was still holding his wrists. Just as well.

He turned away from Steve and continued. “I was having a nightmare. You were in it, but you were small — like before — and Pierce... He came and took you from me. He took you somewhere and was torturing you, trying to make me come back, but the more I looked for you, the harder it got to find you, and I... God...”

His voice hitched as the tears began to flow uninhibited. He turned back to Steve, but his eyes were so wet, all he could see was the blurry outline of his boyfriend’s face inches from his own.

“They” — a hiccup — “I could hear you screaming, Stevie. It didn’t matter where I was in that godforsaken place” — a cough — “I could hear you screaming like you were right next to me” — another hiccup — “and no matter what I did, I couldn’t reach you!”
Bucky felt something wet hit his cheek, and when he blinked back his own tears, he looked up to find Steve silently crying above him.

“I thought you were him,” Bucky went on. “Well, not Pierce, exactly, but you weren’t the Steve in my dream, and so I thought…” He looked away again. “I thought you were the one who took him from me. So I tried to kill you.”

Bucky lost it after that. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d cried so hard. Maybe once, after he’d found his way back to Steve, but this was… He’d tried to kill Steve in an attempt to save Steve. How fucked up was that?

He barely felt it when Steve let his wrists go; even less when Steve pulled him up and into his lap. He wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist, burying his face in Steve’s neck, and cried. Steve’s chest hitched against his own and fingers buried tight in his hair.

They sat on the floor and cried into each other’s arms. They cried for all they’d lost and all they’d become, and all they had to sacrifice to get there. Bucky cried for the Steve he’d never get back, and Steve cried for what he’d had to do to never leave Bucky again.

Bucky had no concept of time. He had no idea how long it had been since he’d woken up, and he had no idea how long they sat on the floor like that. All he knew was Steve. The smell of him, the feel of him, his heartbeat, his strength. He missed the small boy who had a fight in him bigger than the sun, but he wouldn’t trade this Steve for anything in the world. This Steve meant forever, and that was worth every sacrifice he’d ever had to make, and every fight he had to forge from now until the end. It was all worth it. It had to be.

Eventually the tears dried up, their breathing evened out, and they both were doing nothing more than holding onto the other like the lifeline they were to each other.

“JARVIS?” Steve called out suddenly, but quietly.

“Fuck…” Bucky muttered, just as he heard the AI respond, “Yes, Captain Rogers?”

Bucky gripped Steve tighter, but whether he didn’t notice or was choosing to ignore it, Bucky wasn’t sure. Instead, he said, “Please inform SHIELD that the situation is secure.”

“As both your vitals returned to normal quite some time ago, I already took the liberty.”

“Thanks, JARVIS,” Steve answered. He pressed a kiss into Bucky’s hair and muttered, “Well that explains why the door hasn’t been busted down yet.”

“Captain?” The AI asked.

“Oh!” Steve huffed out a laugh. “Right. Uh, you’ll always be my favorite, buddy.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“Anytime, JARVIS. And tell Tony if he doesn’t change my code phrase soon, I’m going to throw in a lot of really colorful expletives if I ever have to use it again.”

“Duly noted, Captain.”

Steve huffed out another small laugh and kissed the top of Bucky’s head. He knew how much Bucky hated having that thing around, always felt like it was his fault that it was here. But Bucky grudgingly knew it was a safety measure all high ranking SHIELD agents — but really, just the
Avengers — had to deal with if they chose not to live in the tower. And the AI was never called on unless it was an emergency.

“Hate that thing,” Bucky mumbled.

Steve sighed. “I know.”

They stayed on the floor for a few more minutes, but eventually they had to move. Steve took the initiative. He turned to place a gentle kiss in Bucky’s hair, his fingers carding through the strands. “Let’s go to bed, baby,” he whispered.

“Yes, all right.” Bucky leaned back just enough to look into Steve’s eyes. “I love you so much, you know that, right?” He took a deep breath to keep the tears from coming again. “You’re everything that’s ever been important to me, and I am so sorry.”

Steve kissed him. Once. Twice. Then he pulled Bucky back in and held him tight, assuring him. “I’m fine, Buck. A little thing like a gun can’t stop me.”

“That’s not funny, Steve.”

“Wasn’t trying to be.” He leaned back again and caught Bucky’s eye. “I know you, you understand? I won’t let you do something you’ll regret.” He sighed and looked back at the bed. “I knew long before you pulled the trigger what you were gonna do.”

Bucky choked on a whine, and Steve turned back, a sad determination in his eyes. “And I will always know. You and me?” He ran a hand up to press against Bucky’s nape. “We’re one. We’re the same. So I’m always gonna be five steps ahead because they’ll always be the same five steps I’d take, if the roles were reversed.” He leaned in for a quick kiss. “You can’t hurt me, you understand?”

Bucky nodded, even if he didn’t really believe it. Bucky was deadly when he wanted to be. If his subconscious decided that Steve was a threat and needed to be taken out, Bucky could only pray Steve saw it coming. And he wasn’t exactly a praying man.

“Ready to go back to sleep, then?” Steve asked.

“Yeah,” Bucky answered quietly. They untangled, and as they stood up, he looked around and asked, “Where’s my gun?”

“Buck...”

Bucky turned and gave Steve a hard look. “No, Steve. I know I should forget it, I do.” He looked again and spotted it over by the dresser. He walked over and picked it up, immediately flicking the safety on. Then he turned back to Steve and added, “But I can’t sleep without it. You know that.”

Steve shook his head sadly, his hands on his hips. “I get that telling you there’s no threat means nothing. We’re both paranoid enough to find the idea ridiculous. But this?” He waved a hand back in the direction of where Bucky had fired his gun. “Maybe it’s time you start learning to sleep without the clip in the gun.”

Bucky opened his mouth, but came up short. That... actually wasn’t a bad idea. Just not tonight. It couldn’t be tonight.

Instead, as he walked towards Steve, he un-chambered the round he knew was in the barrel. “Is this good enough for now?”
Steve sighed. “It’s a start.”

Bucky dropped the gun on the mattress behind Steve before he wrapped an arm around Steve’s waist. “Give me time, okay?” He kissed Steve’s cheek. “I promise to at least try and get there.”

But Steve wasn’t having any of that. His eyes went hard and his voice took on that commanding edge when he said, “Promise me you’ll more than try.”

Bucky swallowed and nodded. “Promise.”

Steve watched him, taking him in, before his eyes narrowed, and he said, “Get in bed. Put the gun under your pillow.”

“Okay...” Confused, Bucky did as he was told. As he pulled the covers up, Steve reached down and picked Bucky’s phone up off the nightstand.

“I’m gonna take a picture of you and your gun. Anytime you get scared, I want you to look at it and think about what happened here tonight.” He crouched down in front of Bucky and reached up to run his fingers through Bucky’s hair. “I want you to remember how scared you were at nothing and what it almost cost you.”

“Steve —”

“No.” Steve cut him off. “This is just another thing you need to work through, Buck. And it’s my job to help you get there.”

Bucky snorted in derision. “It’s not your job, Steve.”

“Fine, then.” Steve sighed, irritation creeping into his voice. “How about, it’s my privilege. Where you go, I go, remember? End of the line, and all?”

“I remember,” Bucky answered quietly, slightly mollified.

Steve smiled. “Well, all right, then.” He held up the phone. “I’m taking your picture now.”

Bucky gave a small, shallow laugh before pulling the pillow back to show the gun. Steve snapped a quick picture, only to reach over and set the phone aside.

Bucky followed the movement, confused. “Don’t I get to see it?” he asked.

Steve leaned in and kissed him. “Only when you’re scared.”

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It took a week.

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Bucky was sitting on the bathroom floor, in the dark, his gun in hand. Steve had been out on a mission, and wasn’t supposed to be home for another day, but it had ended early, and Bucky had missed the text saying he was on his way.

It had taken one door opening unexpectedly to have Bucky out of bed, gun drawn, and his back against the wall. He practically had a breakdown when he’d heard Steve call out his name.

After that he’d rushed to the bathroom and locked himself in, with just enough time to spare before
he was throwing up everything he’d eaten for dinner.

One week. One week, and he was drawing his gun on Steve again.

Steve had been outside the door for the last ten minutes. He must have known he’d scared Bucky, because after only one quick check on him through the door, he’d kept quiet, giving Bucky the space he needed to come out on his own.

It took him another ten after that, but eventually he got up and unlocked the door. He found Steve sitting on the bed, waiting for him, patient but evidently concerned.

He looked up when Bucky walked into the room. “You okay?” he asked.

Bucky nodded. His stomach was in knots, but he was okay.

Steve shifted his gaze to the nightstand before looking back at Bucky. “Um, do you need to see that picture tonight?” His face turned pink, but what he was embarrassed about, Bucky had no idea.

Because yeah. That probably was what Bucky needed. He walked over to the bed and sat down next to Steve. With a tight smile on his lips, he held out his gun. “Trade ya.”

A smiled ghosted across Steve’s lips, and picked up the phone, swapping it out for Bucky’s gun. Bucky unlocked his phone and opened up his picture app. He really hadn’t looked at the picture once since Steve had taken it the week prior. He hadn’t wanted to — didn’t want to know what he’d looked like that night.

And apparently that was for good reason.

Because Bucky looked so scared in the picture. And so lost. The gun not so much the lifeline he always took it for, but a crutch he couldn’t seem to get rid of. That night had been bad, but even now, he hadn’t realized just how bad until he looked at this.

And yet...

He still didn’t know how he was going to sleep without that thing under his pillow.

Unless...

He looked up at Steve, feeling the smallest tinge of hope wrapped in an idea. “I was thinking...” Bucky glanced back at the photo before turning to Steve again. “What if I post this on Instagram?”

Steve’s eyebrows knitted in confusion. “Why?”

Bucky shrugged. “Well, after the whole thing with discovering the follower count, I’ve been reading through the comments and such. People seem to be really supportive and all...”

“And maybe showing them this will help you come to terms with it?” Steve finished for him, smiling.

Bucky let go of the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “Yeah...” he said.

Steve palmed the back of Bucky’s head and pulled him in to kiss his forehead. “Then do it,” he said after letting go.

Bucky smiled and turned back to his phone to open up his Instagram app. He loaded the photo, but hesitated with the caption. This was, hands down, the most personal thing he’d ever shared with his
followers. He had no idea what to say.

“Just be honest,” Steve murmured into his hair, sensing his reticence. Finally, Bucky typed out *Steve keeps on telling me that I'm safe, that now everything is fine but I can't help sleeping with this thing under my pillow*. He hit the Tumblr icon and then hit share before he could back out.

“I did it,” he breathed out. He turned to smile at Steve, and was met with blue eyes full of nothing but pride.

“Yes, you did,” was all Steve said in return.
Bucky lay sprawled out along the couch and stared up at the overhead fan. It sat lifeless, having been shut off for almost a month now, as the late summer had given way to autumn. Bucky didn’t care, though. He was much too annoyed at the world right now to care about the stupid fan and the stupid weather on this stupid day.

“I hate everything,” Bucky announced from his throne of canvas and squishy pillows.

“No, you don’t,” Steve called back from the dining room.

“What are you doing in there?” Bucky whined. “And why won’t you let me see?”

“Shut your yap. I’ll be done in a few minutes.”

Bucky grumbled to himself and burrowed further into the couch. Steve had been holed up in the dining room for the better part of two hours now, and he refused to let Bucky anywhere near it. Not
that it mattered. Bucky’s various injuries meant he wasn’t going anywhere that wasn’t absolutely necessary at the moment.

Stupid mission. It was supposed to be a quick in-and-out job. Grab the scientist that Hydra had kidnapped, and get out. He wasn’t even heavily guarded. Too bad the guards who were on him quickly realized who Bucky was, and after that things had gotten... messy.

Three cracked ribs on his right side, multiple contusions on his face and shoulder, a dislocated kneecap, and what he’d thought had also been a dislocated finger, but yeah, it had turned out to be an exceptionally impressive clean break.

All that, and Bucky was now laid up on the couch so his body could heal. And with Steve yelling at him if he so much as shifted in a way that sounded like standing up, Bucky had barely moved from this spot in almost seven hours.

There was simply only one solution. Steve would have to die. None of this to the end bullshit. He knew how Bucky felt about torture, and this was the worst form of it. How could the man be so cruel?

“You should know I’m going to kill you when you get back in here!” Bucky yelled.

“Highly doubtful, you gimp!” Steve yelled back. Bucky heard a soft laugh drift across the apartment.

“You know, snickering will only prolong what I have planned for you,” Buck shot back. “I am the Winter Soldier. I am legend. You should fear me, asshole!”

“If you kill me, then no present for you.”

“But, Steve,” Bucky whined. “I’m so bored! This is mean, the way you won’t let me move.”

A scrape of a chair from the other room, and Steve was standing in the archway to the living room, glaring at Bucky in exasperation. “What are you griping about, you big baby?”

Bucky frowned and turned his saddest eyes on Steve. “I wanna move,” he said, making his voice as small as possible.

Steve just laughed and walked over to stand above Bucky’s head. He brushed a few loose strands away and leaned down to gently press his lips to Bucky’s forehead. “You’re pathetic, you know that?” he murmured, his blue eyes glittering, inches from Bucky’s own.

Bucky reached up with his metal arm — his only good side, at the moment — and palmed the back of Steve’s head, pulling him in for an upside-down kiss.

He let his lips part and sighed as he felt Steve’s tongue slide against his own. The kiss was soft and intimate, but languid, like they had all the time in the world. Bucky tilted his head back just enough to grant better access, and Steve tangled his fingers in Bucky’s hair, resting his thumbs along Bucky’s jaw, so he could hold him in place and deepen the kiss.

It was nice. The sort of kiss you’d expect on a lazy Sunday afternoon, when there were no pressing matters to attend to, and the two of them had nothing better to do than just enjoy each other because they could.

Bucky’s mind immediately went to ways they could take this further, but then he had to go and shift.

“Ow,” he muttered against Steve’s lips.
Steve chuckled, and turned to mouth along Bucky’s jaw. “You know,” he said between kisses. “If you think you can be patient for another twenty minutes” — he pressed his lips to Bucky’s chin — “I’ll take you over to Main Street Park.” He brushed his nose against Bucky’s cheek before meeting his eyes. “Get you out for a bit?”

Bucky hummed and closed his eyes, letting his arm fall back down. “You mean I get yard time, Warden?”

Steve snorted. “Yeah, Buck. You get yard time. If you behave.” Then he smacked his lips to Bucky’s forehead, and Bucky opened his eyes just in time to see Steve walking away.

“I want my present!” Bucky whined stubbornly after him.

“If you behave!” was the equally stubborn reply he got in return.

“I always behave,” Bucky mumbled to himself, only to start giggling at the sheer ludicrousness of the statement. Yeah, there was no way that was true.

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Thirty minutes later found Bucky dozing lightly where he lay. Boredom had reached peak levels, but that kiss from Steve (the bastard) meant Bucky’s need to kill him had seeped away, and all that was really left to do was sleep.

He wasn’t so asleep though, that a light, “Buck?” didn’t reach his ears.

“Mhm?” he asked without opening his eyes.

Fingertips brushed his forehead. “You awake, baby?”

“Gimme sec,” he murmured back. “But” — he flapped his metal hand to where Steve was petting him — “fingers.”

“All right,” Steve said with a soft laugh and slowly carded his fingers through Bucky’s hair. Bucky smiled and snuggled deeper against the couch. God, that felt good.

It was a few minutes later when soft lips pressed against Bucky’s cheek. “Wake up, sleepyhead,” he whispered into Bucky’s skin. “It’s time for your present.”

Bucky hummed happily. He tilted his head slightly so Steve could lay kisses along his cheek and down his neck.

“My present?” he asked. “Does this also mean outside time? I behaved, you know.”

Steve huffed out a tiny laugh against Bucky’s neck, making him twitch lightly from where it tickled. Steve pressed his lips firmly over the spot and said, “Yes you did, you loon. So, time to get up.”

Bucky opened his eyes and muttered, “Presents,” before glancing up to smile at Steve.

“And freedom,” Steve reminded him, smiling back.

“Of course Captain America would say something about the freedom,” Bucky commented with a snort.

“Just keepin’ it real.”
Bucky quirked an eyebrow at him. “Never say that again.”

“Can’t pull it off?”

“Can’t pull it off.”

Steve laughed. “All right, Jerk, let’s get you up.” He moved to the front of the couch and held out a hand for Bucky to take. Bucky grabbed hold with his metal hand, and the two slowly, gingerly, helped Bucky to his feet, Bucky wincing in pain every step of the way.

Once he was standing, Steve wrapped an arm around his waist to hold him upright. He kissed Bucky’s temple and said, “And you wonder why I didn’t want you moving off the couch.”

“Tell me again why I couldn’t blow the facility to kingdom come?” Bucky growled.

Steve let out a long-suffering sigh. “Because intel reports state Hydra is working on something big, and we need to find out what that is first before we go in again,” he rattled off for about the tenth time in two days.

“Yeah, well...” Bucky wrapped his metal arm around Steve’s back and shifted to put more weight on his good leg. “SHIELD should know better than to send me in unless they don’t want witnesses.” He looked up and caught Steve’s eye. “I’m too recognizable to those people, Steve.”

“No one knows the layout of that facility better than you, Buck,” he tried to explain.

“And you have an eidetic memory. You didn’t need me.”

Steve leaned in and kissed him again. “I’ll always need you,” he said quietly.

“Sap.”

Steve grinned and kissed him one more time. “You want your present or not?”

Bucky’s annoyance instantly evaporated at the thought. He smiled and said, “Yes, please.”

“Come on,” Steve said as he inclined his head toward the dining room. Then he wrapped his arm tighter around Bucky’s waist and the two inched their way into the other room.

Just one more day of this, Bucky reminded himself. He could already tell he was better than the day before, but Doc had told him at least two days of rest.

“You sure Doc would approve you taking me down to the park? He did say two days, and it’s barely been one.”

Steve smirked. “If it gets too much for you, I’ll just carry you, princess-style.”

“You do and I’ll kick your ass.”

“You can try.”

Bucky reached down and swatted Steve’s backside, earning him a chuckle for his troubles.

As the two made their way into the dining room, Bucky spotted a nondescript cardboard box sitting on the table amongst Steve’s mess of art supplies. He snickered and said, “Aww, just what I always wanted. A plain brown box!” He turned to smile cheekily at Steve. “How’d you guess?”
Steve’s lips quirked up in an amused smile. “Your present’s inside the box, wiseass.”

“And that’s some damn fancy wrapping you did there, artist.”

“Tell me why I put up with you again?”

“Because I’m adorable and you know it.”

Steve turned Bucky so he could sit against the dining room table before taking his face in both hands. “Kitten videos are adorable, Buck. Piglets in rain boots are adorable. You are not adorable.”

Bucky squawked in indignation, but Steve moved in for a kiss before he could respond. Then he pulled back, a mischievous half-smile on his face, and said, “Gorgeous, beautiful, dangerous, sexy-as-hell... But never adorable.”

“Saved your ass on that one, buddy,” Bucky muttered, then poked Steve in the chest. “But you’re still a sap.”

“Your sap?” Steve asked, his eyes full of mock innocence and hope.

“Sadly, yes.” Bucky answered, rolling his own eyes. He leaned in to kiss Steve on the cheek and whispered, “Always.”

“Now who’s the sap?” Steve whispered back, even as he tangled his fingers in Bucky’s hair.

Bucky hummed and moved to lick a stripe on Steve’s neck before biting down. He slid his good arm around Steve’s waist and pulled him in to stand between his legs, bringing their bodies flush together. A hand snaked around Bucky’s back, holding him close, and Bucky took that as permission to suck along the skin, leaving behind angry red and purple marks he knew would be gone within the hour.

As Steve’s breathing began to shallow out and his grip tightened in Bucky’s hair, Bucky moved up and crushed their lips together. He wasted no time getting his tongue in Steve’s mouth, only to swallow the moan he was rewarded with.

It was just as he tried to wrap his other arm around Steve, and his ribs screamed out at him, that he was reminded of why they weren’t supposed to be doing this.

“Shit,” he hissed and jerked away from Steve’s body.

Steve jumped back, and Bucky could instantly hear the guilt in his voice. “Oh, shit, baby. I’m sorry.” His hands fluttered around Bucky’s body, and his eyes roamed, probably checking for injuries. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Bucky ground out. He screwed his eyes shut and rubbed them, trying to block out the pain. “Hurts like hell, but you didn’t break anything. I don’t think.”

“Look at me,” Steve said in that soft, yet commanding voice of his, as he placed a hand on Bucky’s shoulder and another on his cheek. Bucky took several deep breaths — or as deep as his ribs would allow — before opening his eyes. He found blue eyes staring back at him, watchful and assessing. “You sure I don’t need to take you back to the hospital?”

“For a couple of cracked ribs?” Bucky asked incredulously. “You’re not that much of an animal in the bedroom, Rogers.”
Steve’s eyes went flat as he said dryly, “Yeah. You’re fine.”

Bucky laughed and shook his head before glancing sidelong at the forgotten box. “So, we doin’ this, or what?”

Steve eyed the box as well. “Now see, I was thinking about taking you down to the park first, and opening it there. It’s better as an outdoor thing.” He sighed and looked back at Bucky. “Honestly, though, are you still up for it?”

“Get me out of this fucking apartment, Rogers.”

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The distance to Main Street Park was little more than a tenth of a mile, but with Bucky the way he was, it took them the better part of fifteen minutes to get there. At one point, Steve started laughing and threatened to hail a cab to take Bucky the last twenty feet. Bucky started reassessing the need to kill Steve.

They got to the park and found a bench, just as dusk began to hit. Twilight in the fall was one of Bucky’s favorite times to be outside, though, and he secretly wondered if maybe Steve planned it that way.

Okay, so maybe not kill Steve.

The air was cool and crisp, the leaves finally turning a golden brown. As they settled onto the bench overlooking the Manhattan skyline across the East River, Steve reached over and set the box in Bucky’s lap.

“You know, after all of that, I’m wondering now if maybe this is kind of stupid,” he said as he scratched the back of his head. There was still enough light out for Bucky to see the blush of pink creeping up his cheeks.

Bucky leaned over and kissed a particularly large splotch. “You made this, right?” he asked. Steve nodded. “And you really were working on it that whole time? You weren’t screwing around just to fuck with me?”

Steve shook his head. “Well, I mean, it took me an extra hour or so because of some last minute details I had to add.” His mouth quirked into a tiny smile. “But yeah. I was working on it the whole time.”

“Then whatever it is, it’s perfect,” Bucky answered, giving Steve the kind of smile reserved only for him.

“Open it.”

When it came to presents, real curiosity only ever settled into Bucky when it was time to open the gift. He wasn’t the kind of guy to shake a box to figure out the contents. Not with his line of work.

And this was no different. As soon as his fingers slipped under the lid, he immediately had to know what was inside. After that, he wasted no time getting the box open and reaching in to pull out its contents.

What he grabbed made him burst out laughing.

It seemed Steve had gotten his hands on a child’s plastic jack-o’-lantern candy basket, and had
painted one side to look like Bucky’s metal arm. But apparently he hadn’t stopped there. The last-minute additions he’d mentioned were carbon copy injuries to the ones Bucky was currently sporting on his face. It was glowing softly, and Bucky looked inside to see a bright orange glow-stick lighting the basket.

“It’s a Bucky-O’-Lantern!” Bucky cried out in glee, even as his ribs protested the mirth he couldn’t contain. He wheezed out in pain, wrapping his bad arm across his chest, even as he continued to chuckle.

“Bucky, are you all right?” Steve asked from next to him. He tried to reach out take the jack-o’-lantern, but Bucky pulled away, holding it out of reach.

“No, mine,” he snapped playfully. He glanced at the basket again before turning back to grin at Steve. “You do realize this is the fucking best thing ever, right?”

Steve’s eyes lit up at the compliment. “You really like it?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” He turned to look at the mini-pumpkin him. “I have a sweet tooth a mile long, and you decorated a candy basket to look like me!” He turned back to grin widely at Steve as a thought occurred to him. “You know this means we have to go trick-or-treating, right?”

“We have Nat’s party on Halloween,” Steve pointed out.

Bucky huffed. “Fuck Natalia’s party. We can show up late.”

Steve laughed, and then pulled Bucky in to kiss the top of his head. “We’ll see.”

“Damn right, we’ll see.”

He turned the jack-o’-lantern around in his hand, taking in the detail from all sides. It was absolutely perfect, and even if they didn’t end up going around collecting candy, Bucky sure as hell was going to make sure it was full of the stuff anyway.

He had to share this thing with someone. He thought about texting a photo of it to Nat or Clint, but Nat wouldn’t get the sentiment — she preferred useful gifts over trinkets — and Clint... Well, he would just try to steal it.

Then he remembered the last picture he’d put up on Instagram and Tumblr. It had only been the week prior, but honestly that was a week too long to not post something new and push that down the line.

“This needs to go on my channels,” he said, then turned to Steve. “I need something new on them that’s a little bit more upbeat.”

“You really do,” Steve responded. Then he started to look Bucky over, searching. “Where’s your phone?”

“In there,” Bucky said as he nodded at the front pocket of his long-sleeve shirt.

Steve reached in and pulled out the phone. He unlocked it, then turned to face Bucky fully. “You think you can hold it up?”

“Thank god for bionic arms,” Bucky remarked with a smirk. He held up the basket next to his face and smiled.
Steve snapped the picture. As he looked it over, he asked, “You want me to load this for you, too?”

“If it means I don’t have to set my new toy down, sure.”

Steve shook his head and laughed. “All right, you five-year-old, what do you want it to say?”

Bucky shrugged. “Just put something about it being a custom jack-o'-lantern that I think is perfect, and that you made it. That should work.”

“You got it,” Steve answered as he typed away. Then he held up the phone to show Bucky. “This work?”

Bucky tore his eyes off his present to read the text.

100% custom Jack-O'-Lantern. Yeah, you can tell it's mine and let's face it, it's perfect. (Present from Steve).

“Yeah, that works,” he said with a nod.

Steve finished up, and then slipped the phone back into Bucky’s pocket, only to grab his chin and hold him for a chaste kiss. “You really like it?”

Bucky smiled at the unbelievably thoughtful present Steve had made for him, and in that moment, he couldn’t remember ever being more in love. “Best present I ever got.”
On our way to Tony's pre-Halloween party. Stevie lost at Rock-paper-scissors. Guess who grabbed the super cool Batman suit? Come on Robin, we're late!

Revenge was a dish best served cold.

Bucky had bided his time — waited for just the right moment. Steve had this coming, and whether he knew it or not, Bucky was about to exact some sweet sweet justice on his boyfriend’s troll-stomping, Bucky Bear-giving ass.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not wearing that.”
“The hell you’re not. I won, jackass.”

“The costume has *fucking tights.*”

“I saw that chorus girl outfit, buddy. You should feel right at home.”

“Do you have *any* idea how much Tony will torture me if I show up in this?”

“I do have an idea, as a matter of fact. Lots of ideas.” Bucky unlocked his phone and pulled up the message app to show Steve. “After I texted a picture of the outfit, my phone got flooded, so yes. Lots and lots of ideas.”

Steve’s eyes just about bugged out of his head. “You already *told* them?”

Bucky’s grin was practically feral. “Maybe next time you’ll think twice about giving your boyfriend a teddy bear meant to represent him as a *teenage sidekick.*”

“But that bear’s adorable!” Steve protested, his eyes going, somehow, impossibly wider.

“You’ve sullied your own argument there.” Bucky jabbed a finger at Steve’s chest. “Wasn’t it *you* who said — not that long ago, I might add — that I’m, in fact, *not* adorable?”

Steve smacked Bucky’s hand out of the way. “That just proves my point,” he countered stubbornly. “The bear *clearly* wasn’t directed as an insult to you.”

“That’s a weak argument and you know it. You’re not getting out of this, Steven,” Bucky said as he folded his arms across his chest, his smile absolutely wicked. “You lost at rock-paper-scissors, and a deal’s a deal.”

Steve stared forlornly at the costume. “You’re *really* gonna make me wear tights?”

“Well, *I’m* certainly not wearing them.”

Steve glared daggers at Bucky as he snatched the costume up off the couch. “*Fine.* You think I can’t tough it out in this thing for one night? Watch me.” Then he turned on his heel and stalked off to bedroom, grumbling something about “worse than my fucking USO getup” as he went.

“No backing out, Rogers!” Bucky called after him.

“Not on your life, Barnes!” Steve shot back.

Bucky snickered to himself before turning back to the other costume laid out on the couch. This was... This was just *epic.* Two days prior, they’d played what Steve had thought was a friendly game of rock-paper-scissors to figure out who was going to decide what they wore to Tony’s Halloween party. Bucky had *conveniently* let Steve think that they both hated the idea of having to pick something out. Steve could never think of anything that didn’t sound ridiculous to him, and Bucky had just let him think that the whole prospect of a party at the tower in *any* form was a shitty idea.

The thing was, Bucky was actually looking forward to this. And yeah, he knew he could have lost. Steve didn’t have some sort of magical pattern to choosing one of the options, but none of that mattered when Steve most likely would never have made Bucky dress up in some ludicrous getup. He just didn’t want to choose.

Bucky did, though. Oh, did he ever.

Hell, he’d secured these costumes *weeks* ago, almost immediately after the ‘bear incident’.
He and Steve were going as the exceptionally awesome Batman, and his lame, but trusty sidekick, Robin.

And to make it all that much better, he’d deliberately secured one of the cool, Christian Bale-era versions of the Batman suit for himself, but the Robin costume? While it was slightly modernized, it was still straight up out of the nineteen-sixties TV show.

And every single one of their friends knew about it.

The group was doing everything from laughing their asses off, to demanding more pictures (preferably with Steve in the thing), to bets on how long it would take to get Steve to say one of Robin’s trademark phrases, as well as who would be the one to get him to say it.

(Bucky had placed his bet at just shy of three hours, and that it would be Natasha. He knew she wouldn’t let him down.)

Bucky picked up his own costume and sauntered off to the guest bedroom to change. He could have gone into their room, but he wanted to see Steve in all his glory. Besides, he was fairly certain his presence wasn’t welcome at the moment.

He laid out the various pieces on the bed and slowly worked his way into it. He quickly discovered, the more he put on, the more it reminded him of his own SHIELD uniform, as well as his old Winter Soldier uniform. He guessed those guys in Hollywood must really have had an attention to detail.

It took him about 20 minutes to get the whole thing on. At one point, he considered switching out the costume’s utility belt for his own, but people always got twitchy around him when he carried weapons outside of missions. Too bad they didn’t realize he was always carrying.

When he made his way back out to the living room, he found the place empty. There was no way Steve should still be putting the thing on, and Bucky immediately got suspicious. It would be no fun if Steve backed out now.

“You better not be trying to get out of this,” Bucky called out as he headed back towards their bedroom. “Stop being such a sore loser and —”

Well, shit.

That wasn’t part of the plan.

Steve was fully dressed in his Robin costume, and was currently mumbling to himself as he paced in front of the window. He’d also apparently taken some of Bucky’s camo eye-paint (it’s not fucking eyeliner, you dick) and had applied it around his own eyes.

So, Steve backing out definitely wasn’t the problem.

No, the problem was that, well, Steve looked fucking delicious in that thing. Seriously, really fucking hot. Like maybe now the problem was that both of them would be backing out.

Because Bucky had no idea how Steve was going to make it out of their bedroom without Bucky ripping the damn thing off of him.

“Um, uh...” Bucky said, stupidly. He cleared his throat just as Steve looked over at him, brow pinched.

“I put the stupid thing on,” he grumbled.
It took Bucky a second to realize he was supposed to respond to that. “Uh, yes,” he croaked. Cleared his throat again. “Yes, you did.”

Steve was obviously so caught up in his own misery, he hadn’t noticed at all that, yep, Bucky was drooling a little. Instead he walked around the bed to stand in front of Bucky, flung his arms out, and asked, “Be honest. How stupid do I look?”

“No stupid,” Bucky got out, and goddammit voice! Cooperate!

Steve glanced quickly at his reflection in the mirror, then turned nervously back to Bucky, his eyes flitting back and forth between consternation and hopefulness. “I, um... I used some of your black eyeliner (it’s not eyeliner!) instead of that mask.” He waved a hand back to where the piece of fabric lay on the bed. “I hope that’s all right?”

Bucky’s eyes had started traveling down Steve’s body somewhere around the end of him speaking, taking in the way the small shorts and tights showed off Steve’s impressively large quad muscles and calves. The shorts were small, and fit him snugly, and Bucky didn’t even need him to turn around to know that his ass probably looked fantastic in them.

“Hey, Buck?” A finger snapped in front of him, and Bucky immediately looked up.

“Huh?”

Steve smiled at him. “You okay, there?”

“Huh?”

Steve looked at Bucky like he’d gone nuts. “Seriously, you okay?”

“What?” Bucky shook his head. “Oh. Yeah. Good.” He nodded as his eyes started to travel down Steve’s chest. “Outfit’s good, Stevie.”

A light chuckle met his ears just as Steve stepped closer. Bucky looked up into mischievous blue eyes and a wicked, knowing smile.

“Outfit’s good, huh?” When had Steve’s voice gotten so deep?

“Outfit’s good,” Bucky repeated. And when had his voice gone so soft?

An arm snaked around Bucky’s back, and hard muscle pressed up against faux kevlar. Steve leaned in to nose along Bucky’s neck, and he tilted his head without even thinking, to allow better access.

“You know Buck,” Steve started as he left tiny kisses in his wake. “I think we have a problem here.”

“What’s that?” Bucky asked breathlessly. He closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around Steve’s shoulders, holding him close.

“Well” — a kiss just behind the ear — “you seem pretty hard up” — a light tongue along the shell of his ear — “about getting back at me over that bear.”

“Slanderous lies,” Bucky murmured before fisting the back of Steve’s costume.

A low chuckle met his hears. “From Captain America? Doubtful,” Steve said as he mouthed across Bucky’s throat, switching to the other side. “But see, you forgot that you gave me permission to answer your phone whenever you weren’t around. You know, in case Hydra decides to call you, or some such nonsense.” He bit down on Bucky’s earlobe, worrying it between his teeth before letting
Some part of Bucky’s brain knew he should be keeping up with this conversation, but dammit, if Steve wasn’t hitting all of his favorite spots.

“And you know what I found out?” Steve turned to press a heady kiss to Bucky’s lips. Then he pulled back to meet Bucky’s eyes, his own heavy and lidded. “Do you?”

Bucky shook his head before he surged forward, capturing Steve’s bottom lip between his own. Steve huffed a laugh against Bucky’s lips, only to turn his head and start nuzzling Bucky’s neck.

“What I found out,” he continued, pressing his body flush against Bucky’s and grinding forward, making Bucky’s brain short out. “Was that someone had reserved a pair of costumes for Halloween.”

Bucky’s eyes flew open, and his brain shorted out again, but for completely different reasons. As Steve continued to grind against him, he tried to replay the last couple minutes in his head. Steve had mentioned the bear, and now seemed to know about the costumes. Did that mean that he...?

“Steve?” Bucky asked tentatively.

His boyfriend only growled against his skin, followed by an absolutely sinful laugh.

Oh, fuck. He knew.

“You know, Buck, you’re not as stealthy as you think you are. Not to me anyway.” Not once did Steve let up on his ministrations. “Which means only one thing, really.”

“And what’s that?”

Steve instantly dropped his hands from Bucky’s back and pulled away to look him dead in the eye. “It means we’re late for the party.”

Bucky could only stare in shock as Steve turned to walk out of the room, laughing the whole way.

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Ten minutes later and they were walking over to Brooklyn Bridge Park, where they were supposed to meet the driver from the tower to pick them up. Tony always insisted that people didn’t drive to his parties, even super soldiers who couldn’t get drunk. It was supposed to be a nice night, so earlier they’d told the driver to meet them here, so they could walk over and enjoy it. Of course that was before they’d both tried to troll all over each other.

“I can’t believe you fucking knew,” Bucky grumbled as they passed under the Brooklyn Bridge. He couldn’t help but notice they were getting more than a few stares. “You played me, you dick.”

“You were gonna play me!” Steve pointed out with a laugh.

“But that was different!” Bucky exclaimed. “You had that coming!”

Steve continued to laugh. “I did not, and you know it.” They passed the Brooklyn Ice Cream Factory and turned down Furman Street, where they’d told the driver to meet them. “The Bucky Bear is adorable and, okay fine, so are you.”

Bucky tried to fight back the smile threatening to show. He was mad at Steve, goddammit. “So you’re conceding? You think I’m adorable?”
Steve huffed and grabbed Bucky’s hand to pull them to a stop. He turned and reached up to hold Bucky’s face in his hands. “I want you to think of every descriptive compliment that’s ever existed in the history of existence. You thinking of them?”

Bucky quirked an eyebrow and nodded. He had no idea where Steve was going, but he had to admit, he was amused.

“You got them all in your head?” Steve asked, and Bucky nodded again. Then Steve leaned in, placed the most gentle kiss to Bucky’s temple, and whispered, “Every single one of those applies to you.”

_Damn._ If ever there was time Bucky could go weak in the knees, this was it. He breathed in deep, taking in the smell of _Steve_, and turned to bring their lips together.

“I love you so much,” Bucky whispered against Steve’s lips as they parted. He reached up to stroke his fingers along Steve’s face. “You’re a damn sap, but fuck, if it doesn’t work every time.”

Steve smiled and reached up to kiss Bucky’s forehead. “Then that’s all I care about.”

“I’m still going to get back at you for the bear, though.” Bucky muttered playfully. “Don’t think you’re off the hook, Rogers.”

Steve laughed, quick and light. “I look forward to it.”

Bucky thought about it for a second, staring hard at Steve. He waited until the other man started to eye him warily, then —

“Orgasm denial,” he said with a definitive nod, and Steve’s mouth dropped open. “That sounds like fair punishment.”

“Awe, come_on, Buck!” Steve exclaimed as Bucky turned and walked away. He allowed himself a little victory smile at that.

“Nope. Sorry, Rogers!” Bucky called over his shoulder. “Your body belongs to me, and you get nothing till I’ve decided you’ve suffered enough over that damn bear.”

Steve caught up to him, and when Bucky glanced over, the man looked positively crestfallen. And if Bucky laughed to himself, well he was already going to hell. Might as well show up careening in sideways.

“I’ll get rid of the bear,” Steve tried reasoning. “I’ll wear this getup the next time we have a mission. Give the press a field day, calling me ‘Robin’ for the next several months.”

Bucky stopped and turned to smile at Steve. Okay, now _there_ was an idea.

Unfortunately the smile had the wrong effect. Relief began to color Steve’s face when he asked, “Did I pick right? Because, you know, Buck, orgasm denial is nobody’s friend.”

Bucky just laughed and shook his head. “You’re wrong _and_ you’re right. You didn't hit the mark, but to be fair, orgasm denial really isn't anybody’s friend.”

Steve tried to smile but Bucky waved him off. “I’m not done here,” he said. “That outfit isn’t mission-friendly, but I like this idea about handing you off to the masses in that.”

Steve’s eyes narrowed. “What are you getting at?”
Bucky smirked and leaned in, his eyes locked on Steve’s. “Instagram.”

Steve’s gaze went flat. “That’s supposed to be for your recovery, Buck.”

Bucky sniffed and looked away. “I was traumatized by the world thinking I was a teenage drama queen.”

“You were not!”

“I was,” Bucky said solemnly, laying it on thick. He turned sad eyes on Steve and slowly shook his head as he said, “Nobody ever took me serious ever again.”

Steve stared at him incredulously for a solid thirty seconds before he finally cracked and busted up laughing.

“Oh my god, you are a drama queen!” he exclaimed, and Bucky split into a wide grin. Then Steve looped an arm around Bucky’s shoulders before smacking a kiss in his hair. “Fine, you idiot. Let’s get this damn picture over with.” He bumped his hip against Bucky’s. “But if I’m in it, you're in it.”

“Fine by me,” Bucky said with a happy shrug. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and looked around. He needed someone to take their photo if they had any hope of getting their costumes into it.

He spotted a young woman leaning against one of the concrete roadblocks, picking through a bag of popcorn. He jogged up to her and smiled. “Hey,” he said. “Can I ask you a favor?”

If Bucky were anyone else, he might have missed the way her eyes widened just a fraction, before darting to look over his shoulder. “Uh, yeah,” she said, clearly aiming for casual. “What do you need?”

Bucky inclined his head back to where he knew she was looking at Steve. “I picture of me and my boyfriend?”

She nodded as she smiled at him. “Sure.”

He didn’t miss the way she twitched slightly at the request. Oh yeah. She knew who they were. And, apparently, she approved.

He guided her back to where Steve was standing before and handed her his phone. “Just a picture of us together.”

She took the phone, the smile never leaving her face. “No problem,” she said and held it up.

As he turned around to pull Steve in though, his boyfriend held up a hand, his face intent. “We do this in superhero pose or nothing at all.”

Then Steve affected the most ridiculously serious pose Bucky had ever seen. He couldn’t help but burst out laughing. “Really, Stevie?”

Steve didn’t answer, just gave a single curt nod.

Bucky laughed again and shrugged, before turning back to the girl, who was smiling goofily at them. “You two are so cute, you know that?”


She shrugged. “No problem.”
Then Bucky tried to affect his own serious, *Batman Begins* pose, only to crack up every time he got into position. And each time he laughed, he could hear a quiet snicker behind him as Steve tried valiantly to hold his own.

“I can’t do this, Stevie,” Bucky wheezed after about a minute.

Steve immediately shifted behind him. “Oh, thank god,” he breathed. “I didn’t think I could hold that much longer.”

“It’s okay,” the girl said. “I snapped a few, and honestly, there’s a bunch in here I love.” She held out Bucky’s phone for him, and he took it to thumb through the ones she took. There definitely were several in there that he loved as well. They both looked like big dorks, and if he was honest with himself, it was his favorite look for them.

He turned to smile shyly at her. “Thanks,” he said quietly.

She shifted where she stood, a look of mild embarrassment coloring her features. “If I could just say” — she lifted her hands in an aborted gesture — “I know who you guys are, and if I could just tell you, I think you guys are great. Of all the Avengers, you two just seem the most... honest and heartfelt.”

Surprised by the compliment, Bucky smiled and turned back to Steve, to find his love blushing.

“Um, thank you,” Steve said softly, and Bucky turned back to look at her.

“Yeah, I just...” She glanced around, seemingly looking for the right words. Finally she turned to look them both in the eye. “The thing is, you guys give people hope. And I don’t mean the Avengers; I mean you two. Me and my best friend? We’ve been fans of you guys for a while — follow you on both Instagram and Tumblr — and we just really love the fact that second chances genuinely exist in the world, and you two are perfect examples.”

Bucky just stared at her, floored by her words. This was one of them; one of his followers. And she was so kind.

He couldn't speak, but apparently he didn't have to. It was Steve who rested a hand on Bucky's lower back and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Shannon,” she said, the proud smile making her eyes crinkle.

“Thank you, Shannon,” Steve said. “We're not always met with kindness, so it means a lot to hear you say that.”

“Anytime,” she said, her smile growing wider.

“Got a phone?” he asked.

“Obviously,” she answered, laughing as she pulled it out.

Steve smiled. “Unlock it.”

As soon as she had, Steve took the phone from her and pulled the three of them in for a selfie. Bucky couldn't remember the last time he'd smiled that hard.

As soon as they were done, she said her thanks and walked away. As he watched her go, he wasted no time loading one of the pics she took to Instagram. He was about to type out what she'd said, but
faltered. It felt self-serving sharing her lovely words with the masses. Instead, he settled for the same old banter he and Steve were known for.

*On our way to Tony's pre-Halloween party. Stevie lost at Rock-paper-scissors. Guess who grabbed the super cool Batman suit? Come on Robin, we're late!*
October 31st, Natasha's Halloween Party. This time, it's me who lost at Rock-paper-scissors. Ok, Steve, you're so gonna pay for this. Seriously? The Snow Queen?! I don't care that it's a male reinterpretation of the costume or whatever, I don't care that you find me "hot as hell" dressed like this, I don't care that six girls and four boys left me their phone number, you are a DEAD MAN. (PS: Barton doesn't count. He was drunk and left his phone number to Nat's cat, a green plant and Sam's 82-year-old grand-mother. She seemed delighted, though!)

Chapter Notes

October 31st, Natasha's Halloween Party. This time, it's me who lost at Rock-paper-scissors. Ok, Steve, you're so gonna pay for this. Seriously? The Snow Queen?! I don't care that it's a male reinterpretation of the costume or whatever, I don't care that you find me "hot as hell" dressed like this, I don't care that six girls and four boys left me their phone number, you are a DEAD MAN. (PS: Barton doesn't count. He was drunk and left his phone number to Nat's cat, a green plant and Sam's
Bucky stared at his reflection in the mirrored doors of the elevator as they traveled up to Nat’s apartment. How the hell he’d let Steve talking him into this, he’d never know.

Okay, the silver wig was kind of badass, and it helped that it was a really good one. Even the ones he’d worn on missions before weren’t as good a quality as this one. It fit him perfectly, and he thought that maybe Steve’d had it custom-made using pictures of Bucky’s old hair. Steve had been a bit of a sucker for the longer hair, after all. Used to play with it for hours...

“How is this fair?” Bucky griped, catching Steve’s eyes in the mirror (only to shiver, because those blackout contacts were just wrong). “Why do you get to retaliate for the Robin costume? Why?”

Steve’s reflection smirked back at him. “Because, again, you were stupid enough to tell me I should answer your phone when you weren’t around —”

“I’m revoking that, by the way.”

“— which meant I’ve had the last seven weeks to plan this out.” He threw an arm around Bucky and pulled him in, jostling him. “You troll me, I troll you, baby.”

“This is such bullshit,” Bucky grumbled, folding his arms across his chest. He glared at the glittering blue across his chest, the white and gold lace trim at the cuffs and collar, and the long cape that draped across his shoulders, and scowled. “The fucking Snow Queen, Steve? Really?”

“Don’t even pretend you don’t look hot as hell in that thing.” He leaned in to kiss Bucky’s temple, then smiled wickedly at him. Just then the elevators dinged Natasha’s floor and the doors open.

“At least you get to where that killer suit,” Bucky said, as they stepped off the elevator. They walked up to Nat’s door and rang the buzzer. As they waited Bucky turned to Steve to continue his bitch-fest over their costumes. “I mean, yeah. Those black contacts are freaky as hell, but that’s the only thing off about your whole getup. Without those, you’re just a hot guy in an even hotter suit.”

Steve huffed at him. “You think the suit’s hotter than me?” He widened his eyes in what Bucky assumed was his favorite hangdog expression, but the entire effect was, again, lost on those contacts.

“I’m going to this thing as a fairly authentic interpretation of the Snow Queen, and you’re supposed to be going as the devil from the story, but the last time I checked, that story wasn’t set in modern times. Why do you get to be modern?”

“Remind me again who got to wear a badass utility uniform — granted, one with a cape — and who had to wear an outfit that would have fit right in at the circus?”
“You had that coming,” Bucky valiantly tried one more time.

“Well, just think of it this way,” Steve said as the door opened. “Now it’s your turn.” He turned and smiled at Natasha who was standing there, dressed as... Bucky had no idea. Some woman in a white frilly dress and hat.

“Hey there, boys,” she said with a smile. Then she turned to Bucky and said, “Or should I say, Your Majesty?”

He turned to Steve and growled, “I hate you.”

Bastard just laughed right back.

“I gotta say, Rogers,” Natasha continued, turning to Steve. “You are legitimately frightening looking.”

Steve beamed at her, instantly ruining her compliment. “You’re actually scared of me?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “No one’s that frightening, Rogers.”

He shook his head, giving her an affectionate smile, and she smiled back, just as sweetly. Then he took her hand and held it up, examining her outfit. “And who, fair lady, are you supposed to be?”

“Really?” she asked flatly. “Mary Poppins?” The two men just exchanged confused glances and shook their heads. Bucky knew that was some movie, but there were a lot of ‘some movies’ out there they still hadn’t gotten around to.

She eyed them both, but when neither offered up a response, she huffed in disgust and turned to walk away, leaving them to let themselves in. “It’s been years, boys. You have no excuse!”

“She does realize there’s, like, thousands of movies out there, right?” Buck muttered to Steve as they followed her in and closed the door. “When are people gonna realize that our lives don’t revolve around playing catch up all the time?”

“We’re almost a hundred years old, Bucky.” Steve leaned in to whisper in his ear. “Pretty sure all we’re supposed to be doing is sitting around, watching TV and bitching about how ‘when we were kids...’”

Bucky snickered. “Ten feet of snow.”

“All year.”

“Uphill both ways.”

“Hard work that no one ever complained about.”

“With our phonographs, and our horses, and our slow-as-molasses living.”

“Fuckng kids today...”

They laughed at each other as they headed into the party. It was already in full swing, and Bucky felt that ghost of anxiety he always got in large crowds of people. But he trusted Natasha not to invite anyone he needed to kill, so he let himself acknowledge the feeling before letting it slide (Doc would be so proud).

Steve must have recognized Bucky’s reticence, though, because not a second later, fingers were
sliding into his and giving him a light squeeze. He turned a grateful smile on Steve and mouthed *I’m okay*. Steve’s eyes softened in relief, and he gave Bucky a small nod back.

They moved further into the party, taking in Nat’s decorations and what everyone had come as. Nat’s apartment was a 3-bedroom in the West Village, with large picture windows, and gorgeous modern fixings, but right now it was virtually unrecognizable. Where Tony’s party had pulled out all the stops as far as entertainment was concerned, Natasha had clearly put her money into making her home look straight out of some haunted house horror movie.

If Bucky had to pick, Natasha’s won out for sheer authenticity, and he’d only been here five minutes.

They wandered over to the bar, where Sam, dressed as Jack Sparrow, was chatting up a girl neither of them knew, dressed in another costume he didn’t recognize. Whoever she was though, he was turning up the charm big time. He spotted them as they walked up and smiled. “Hey, guys! Nice costumes. Angel and the Devil?”

“You mean there’s someone you *didn’t* tell?” Bucky asked Steve with a laugh.

“Tell what to who?” Sam asked, his head swiveling between the two.

Steve shrugged. “Well, unlike some ungrateful boyfriends I know, *I* don’t send out ‘let’s embarrass the significant other’ texts en masse.”

“You guys gonna clue me in here?” Sam waved a hand in front of them. “What are you talking about?”

Bucky let out a long-suffering sigh and folded his arms, pursing his lips together. He wasn’t explaining this to anyone.

Steve raised an eyebrow at Bucky, before shaking his head and said, “He’s the —”

“You’re the Snow Queen!” The girl Sam had been talking to exclaimed. Then she turned to Steve and nodded her head at him. “And you’re the troll!”

Steve blinked at her. “Uh. Yeah.” He glanced sidelong at Bucky. “Well, I’m the devil, but yeah.”

“Troll. Devil. It doesn’t matter.” The girl waved a dismissive hand at them. “It all depends on the story’s interpretation.”

Steve smiled at her. “You know the story of the Snow Queen?”

The girl nodded. “Been a favorite since I was a child.” She turned back to Bucky and added, “Honestly, your costume is one of the coolest versions I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m dressed up like a girl,” Bucky grunted at her, only to get a sharp elbow to the ribs from Steve. “Be nice,” he admonished.

“Sorry.”

Steve gave him a sharp glare before extending his hand to the girl. “I’m Steve, by the way. And this surly idiot is Bucky,” he greeted with smile.

“Autumn,” she said, shaking his hand.

"How do you know Natasha?"
"Oh, she and I go way back. I worked R&D back during SHIELD 1. They brought me back to head it up when they realized I wasn't a crazy Hydra fanatic."

Steve laughed. “Nice eleventh, by the way” he said, nodding at her outfit.

“Thanks!” she said, beaming.

Bucky looked her over, but absolutely nothing came to mind. Eyebrows knit in confusion, he turned to Steve and — “Huh?” He glanced at her outfit again. “What’s an eleventh?”

“You refused to watch Doctor Who with me.” Steve answered, like that was supposed to explain everything.

Sam stared at him. “You’ve never seen Doctor Who?”

“Doctor what?” Bucky asked, wracking his brain for the reference. “Wait, you mean that kids show?”

Autumn snorted. “Not anymore, it’s not.”

Bucky shook his head, getting more frustrated by the second. “Okay, someone explain.”

Steve turned to face him. “It’s that British show I told you about. Yes, it used to be a kids show, but now it’s definitely skewed more adult.” He waved a hand at Autumn’s outfit. “It’s the one about the time traveler who goes around in an old blue police box he calls the tardis —”

“Time and relative dimension in space.” Sam interjected.


“Okay...” Bucky was still confused as hell, but whatever. “It still doesn’t explain what you mean by eleventh.”

Sam huffed and opened his mouth, but Autumn put a hand on his arm to stop him. “The doctor can regenerate. The show, so far, has had twelve doctors —”

“Technically thirteen,” Steve interjected this time.

“—and each one had a specific outfit,” Autumn finished.

“Ah,” Bucky said — some of it finally making sense — and waved at her costume. “And this was the outfit the eleventh doctor wore?”

“Exactly.”

It was then that Bucky noticed Sam was staring at him kind of hard. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“You know, I get that you’re annoyed at your costume, but honestly, man? You look kind of menacing in it.”

“That’s just Bucky’s resting face,” Steve said with a snicker.

“Asshole,” Bucky muttered, and thumped him in the stomach. Then he folded his arms again and smirked at Sam. “He’s not wrong, though.”

Sam pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Hold that pose,” he ordered, then lifted his phone to snap a
couple pictures. Finally he turned the phone around to show Bucky. “See what I mean?”

Bucky laughed, because yeah, he had to admit he looked a little bit menacing. He handed the phone back. “Send that to me.”

“You got it.”

They spent a few more minutes talking to Sam and Autumn, and Sam took a bunch of pictures, first of Bucky and Steve together, then of all four of them.

Beers in hand, they wandered around for a while, flitting from group to group. They found Pepper and Tony talking to Coulson, who (surprise, surprise) had come dressed as Captain America.

Actually, they’d count something like almost thirty guys as Cap by night’s end, but Coulson was the only one who’d had the decency to not show up in an outfit from the comics.

“Did you steal that from the Smithsonian tour?” Steve had asked at one point, eyeing the almost perfect replica of one of his old WWII uniforms.

“That’s Level Eight clearance, Cap.” Coulson answered with a wink. Steve and Bucky just blinked at him. Okay, may not a replica.

Tony and Pepper, on the other hand, were dressed as Sleeping Beauty and Prince Philip.

“Sleeping Beauty was a favorite of Pepper’s as a child,” Tony had explained, chest puffed up, like it was his idea. But...

“And it’s only fair after I dressed up as a Playboy Bunny for you, Hef.” Pepper countered, smiling serenely.

(Tony had been Hugh Hefner at his own party, and while he’d managed to get Pepper to wear a Playboy Bunny costume, he’d also managed to get Rhodey to wear one as well. When asked what it had taken to get him into it, all Rhodey would say was, “That’s not worth the stone over your grave.”)

As Tony and Pepper talked, Bucky couldn’t help noticing how Steve turned bright red as soon as Pepper mentioned the outfit. As they walked away, Bucky nudged Steve and said, “How is it that you can say fuck in fourteen different languages, have an almost insatiable sexual appetite, and yet the thought of a chick in a bunny —”

“Pepper is a lady, Buck,” Steve hissed at him.

Bucky laughed and waved a hand at Steve. “Well, there you go. That explains everything.”

“Explains what?”

“All this time, and you still can’t talk to girls.”

Steve opened his mouth to respond, when all of a sudden —

“QUEENY!”

Bucky jumped, practically out of his skin, and turned around just in time to get slammed into by a blur of red, black, and blue.

“Whoa, there.” Bucky stumbled but held his ground. He grabbed whoever it was by the shoulders
and pulled them back. “Well, hey there, Spidey.”

‘Spiderman’ stumbled in Bucky’s grip, cackled to themselves, then planted their hands on either side of Bucky’s face. “Queeny,” the masked person whispered, patting Bucky’s cheek. “Queeny, it’s me.”

“Not really sure who ‘me’ is with that mask...” He trailed off when he noticed Steve laughing behind them. Bucky inclined his head questioningly, and Steve made a motion of shooting an arrow.

Oh. Oh god, this drunk asshole was Clint.

Bucky’s grinned wickedly, and he let go of Clint so he could wrap an arm around his waist instead. “Well, hey there, you sexy little spider thing, you,” he breathed. “What brings you to these parts?”

“You’re so pretty,” was Clint’s response, slightly slurred.

“Am I, now?” Bucky hummed and tightened his grip on Clint’s back. “Well, that’s mighty kind of you, sweetheart. But aren’t you here with someone?”

Clint’s head swiveled around, like he was looking for said someone, and Bucky had even money that Clint’s eyes were probably wide with terror at the moment.

When he didn’t spot Natasha (who, incidentally, was standing at Clint’s six, watching the whole exchange with amusement), he turned in to Bucky’s side and rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder. It was everything Bucky could do not to start laughing.

“I am,” Clint confessed with a sigh, and he started petting Bucky’s chest. “But you’re so pretty. And she won’t mind.”

“You sure about that?” Bucky asked, his voice cracking. He pressed his lips into a hard line, because really, Clint was as straight as those arrows he liked to cart around, and this was just.... Well, Bucky just really really hoped someone was filming this.

“I’m sure. But oh!” Clint’s head shot up off Bucky’s shoulder. “If you’re worried about getting caught, I could always call you later?”

Bucky eyes turned almost predatory, and pulled Clint flush against him. “Sounds perfect,” he growled into Clint’s ear.

“Let me give you my number,” Clint whispered, only to hiccup then start giggling. Bucky pulled him tighter, and was rewarded with a huff and a quiet Oh! before a series of digits came tumbling out of Clint’s mouth — too many to resemble an actual phone number.

“Thanks, baby.” Bucky smiled and patted Clint’s cheek. “You run along now. I’ll call ya once I’ve ditched the big dumb blond.”

Steve, who was in tears from trying not to laugh out loud this whole time, immediately sobered up. Hey! he mouthed, glaring at Bucky.

Bucky just chuckled to himself before giving Clint a light shove, sending him on his way.

Bucky snickered and walked up to wrap his arms around Steve’s waist. “Aww... Was somebody jealous?”

“Insulted at the ‘dumb’ insinuation, is more like it,” Steve grumbled.
“Aw, but, baby! You’re *my* big dumb blond!”

“Fine, then. *You* can do all the mission planning next time.”

“Finally! And maybe not so dumb after all.”

“It means you have to pay attention during meetings.”

“Have I ever told you how smart and intelligent and amazing I think you are, Stevie?”

That earned Bucky a laugh, and he leaned in to nuzzle against Steve’s neck.

“What was that all about?”

Steve and Bucky both looked up at the sound of Bruce’s voice, the man walking over from the bar. He was dressed pretty casually, except for the fact that his button-down was the fucking *American flag*.

“Hey, man!” Bucky smiled wide and held out a hand to shake Bruce’s. He was always one of Bucky’s favorites. “When did you get here?”

Bruce looked back at the door as he shook both their hands. “Just, actually.” He turned and nodded in the direction of Clint, who was currently talking to a plant. “What did you do to him?”

Bucky laughed as Clint started to stroke one of the branches. “Well, it would seem our dear archer over there is completely off his ass right now.” He turned back to Bruce and grinned wolfishly at him. “And I may have given him the impression that hitting on anyone other than Natasha was a good idea. Starting with me.”

“He may kill you for that.”

“He has to catch me first.”

“What are you supposed to be?” Steve spoke up, changing the subject. He stepped out of Bucky’s embrace, but still kept an arm around his back.

Bucky smiled. “Oh, I know.”

“Really?”

“Yup.”

Bruce nodded and waved a hand at him. “Go ahead, then.”

Bucky smiled even wider. “You’re the fucking Star-Spangled *Banner*, aren’t you?”

Steve blinked at them before he burst out laughing, and Bruce nodded, chuckling along with him.

“That’s great!” Steve said. “I need a picture of this. Bucky, take a picture.”

Bucky laughed. “Agreed.” He pulled his phone out from his side pocket, almost getting tangled in his cape in the process. “Fucking costume,” he muttered as he opened his camera app. Then he held up his phone, and said, “All right, pose pretty for me!”

Bruce struck a little pose for the camera, laughing the entire time.
“How very Colbert-esque,” Steve commented from next to Bucky.

“I try,” Bruce said before standing up straight again. He waved his beer at them, and asked, “You two here for a while?”

Steve shrugged. “For a little while, at least.”

“Good, because I need to go find Tony and make fun of his costume.”

“Tell him we think he’s quite dandy in his little tights.”

Bucky snorted. “Says the man who was wearing a pair not one week ago.”

“Yeah, but I was dressed up as a superhero.”

“Prince Philip defeated a dragon. Robin couldn’t even defeat puberty.”

~~~

They hung around the party for another three hours, chatting with everyone they knew at least a few times. They’d also started a betting pool to see how many people Clint would give his number to before he passed out. Sam won.

As it turned out, quite a few people thought Bucky looked hot in his costume, and Steve had spent the whole night laughing as Bucky collected phone number after phone number, much to Bucky’s chagrin. He hated admitting Steve was right. About anything. It meant never hearing the end of it. It also meant being wrong, and that just pissed him off.

As they sat in the back of a taxi, on their way home, Bucky thumbed through his pictures from the night. He’d saved the ones Sam had sent, including the photos of them, as well as the one of Clint sitting on his grandmother’s lap, mask gone, and clearly hitting on her too.

For the first time since he’d started using Instagram, he was excited to share a bunch of photos, and it took the whole ride home for him to settle on a couple.

“But I wanna put them all up, Stevie.”

“Save some for yourself, Buck. This is therapy, not a chance to be one of those people who has to share everything with everybody.”

Bucky huffed. “Fine.”

Eventually, he put up the photo of himself that Sam had taken, with the obscenely long caption, *October 31st, Natasha’s Halloween Party. This time, it’s me who lost at Rock-paper-scissors. Ok, Steve, you’re so gonna pay for this. Seriously? The Snow Queen?! I don’t care that it’s a male reinterpretation of the costume or whatever, I don’t care that you find me “hot as hell” dressed like this, I don’t care that six girls and four boys left me their phone number, your are a DEAD MAN. (PS: Barton doesn’t count. He was drunk and left his phone number to Nat’s cat, a green plant and Sam’s 82-year-old grand-mother. She seemed delighted, though! ).

(It was late, he was tired, and he was in a sharing mood.)

He also put up the one of Bruce, because really, the costume was so understated, and so... Bruce.

*Ladies and Gentlemen, the Star Spangled BANNER! Great pun, man! At least, people got the joke this time: last year, Bruce dressed as the Higgs Boson and nobody understood what the hell his
costume was all about except for Tony who found the idea excellent. Oh, and before you ask, the man at the back isn't Steve. It's Natasha's neighbor, one of the 27 dudes (including Coulson) who wore a Captain America costume for the occasion. Well played guy, well played...

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Two days later, there was a computer hack inside of both SHIELD and Stark Industries, and every screensaver was changed to one image, and if Clint spent the next six months trying to live down hitting on Sam’s grandmother, well, you’d never find a way to pin that on Bucky. Or Tony, apparently.
Guess who Steve's biggest inspiration is? James Buchanan Barnes: soldier, international spy and muse, on occasion.

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Nailed it!

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STYLE SHIFT, GUYS! I wanted to try this for awhile, and figured these images would be the best for it. BE GENTLE IF YOU HATE IT!

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It was the kind of weather that bit just this side of crisp. Not to say it was cold; it had not even begun
to flutter around cold. No, this was the kind of crisp that had one eyeballing something a little bit more than a light jacket. Made one look twice at that scarf for today that, come January, would get laughed right out of the closet.

For those of us New Yorkers who are only along for this tale, we do not bat an eye at that jacket or that scarf. We do not think twice about that drop in weather. We simply reach for a simple denim jacket and be on our way. It is New York! There are places we must be.

But this story is not about us. This story is about our favorite pair of super soldiers. Two boys who have respectively spent more time on ice than any human should dare have to endure.

And you can be certain. Our boys? They are not fans of the cold. Especially the one we call James Buchanan Barnes.

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“I’m not going outside.”

“It’s barely 45 outside.”

“It’s the Arctic Tundra outside.”

“You say that every year.”

“Tell me why we aren’t living in California? Or Hawaii? Or the fucking Congo?”

“You hate bugs.”

“I do not,” Bucky grumbled as he cocooned himself further inside the comforter.

“You yelled at me not two weeks ago when you spotted a Daddy Long Legs and I didn’t kill it fast enough,” Steve pointed out, his voice slightly muffled as he dug around in the trunk by the foot of the bed.

“Well, those things are unnatural. They clearly wouldn’t be able to walk on two legs. Why does Nature have to be unfair and give them eight?”

“To give them a fighting chance, maybe?”

“Not my problem.”

Steve chuckled as he dropped several items on the floor next to the trunk and closed the lid. He stood up and walked back to the bed. “You do realize that, unless you’re on mission, you’re kind of a ninny, right?” he asked before crawling up in behind Bucky and wrapping his arms and legs around him.

“Do you even know what ninny means?”

“Ninny predates us. Yes, I know what it means.”

“Whatever.”

Now, anyone paying attention to the story would see immediately that Steve was not cooperating with Bucky. Our tortured hero felt, among other things, put out by the fact that Steve simply refused to get on board with Bucky’s stance about winter. He believed that his senior citizen brethren had the right idea when it came to flying south for the duration of the colder months, and coming back to
their blessed New York when the weather was of a friendlier nature.

Steve — the sadistic little shit that he was — thought otherwise.

“Bucky, it is barely cold outside. Not even cold enough for —”

“Do not say the S word.”

Steve took a deep breath and let it out, long and slow, before resting his forehead on Bucky’s shoulder. “The snow isn’t —”

“You fucking said it!” Bucky hissed and thumped Steve, hard, on the shin.

“Ow.” Steve reached up and flicked Bucky on the forehead (his face was, after all, the only thing visible at the present moment). “As I was saying, the S stuff isn’t evil. It’s not going to bite you.”

“Then why do they call it the biting cold?”

“I... all right, fine. You get that one.”

Bucky nodded to himself at his little victory, childish though it may seem to us, the readers. But we are hardly to blame for the flaws of great men, nor are we ones to hold those flaws against them. We, the readers, simply must watch our heroes in action, and take each piece they give us so that we might reflect upon them later.

Bucky burrowed impossibly further into the thick comforter, and by proxy, Steve’s arms as well. If he must take on this great burden of enduring the winter for his love, then there really was no place he would rather do so than in the man’s arms.

(If I may take a side note here, surely you have noticed that Bucky will only refer to this time of year as winter. As you may have also noticed, it is only the beginning of November. You may want to be made aware that Bucky does not believe in fall. He may — if I may be so bold as to reveal this particular secret — believe that fall is a government construct meant to delude the masses in preparation for enslavement during the bitter cold months of January and February. In fact, should you ever be given the chance, say the words fall or autumn in his presence, then listen closely. You might just be given the privilege of hearing him mutter Hydra under his breath.)

“What are your plans for the day?” Steve asked, clearly trying to change the subject.

“You’re looking at it.”

Bucky felt a soft press through the comforter against his neck, and he idly wondered if Steve was kissing him or trying to head-butt him. He would not have been surprised by either, considering the thickness of the comforter. Our boy may or may not have had it specially ordered from a shop in Alaska.

“Well, my little burrito, I’m going to go draw for a while. If you feel like coming out, I’ll make a fire for you.”

Bucky’s ears, much like those of a dog, perked up at that. “And turn the heater on?”

Bucky felt a rustle behind him and knew Steve was shaking his head. “I swear to god, next year I’m starting a savings account specifically to pay for our electric bill this time of year.”

“It’s your fault for not thinking of it sooner.”
Steve laughed, then began untangling himself from Bucky, to which Bucky resolutely whined in protest. “I’m just standing up,” he said as he got to his feet. Then he held out his hands, one eyebrow arched, and asked, “Are you coming?”

Bucky glared at Steve’s offering. “Those things require me to remove mine from inside of here. I’m gonna go with no on that, thanks.”

“You’re left arm doesn’t feel cold, Bucky,” Steve reminded him.

“Shh!” Bucky hissed at him. “Don’t tell it that; it might believe you.”

Steve Rogers — bless his soul for lasting as long as he did — threw up his hands in defeat. “Fine, you child.” He leaned over to pick up the items he had left by the trunk, then walked towards the bedroom door, leaving Bucky to wallow in self-pity. “I promised you a fire, but if you won’t even get off the bed, you get nothing.” He stopped at the door and turned back to eye the mass of blankets on the bed. “Not even the heater turned on.”

Now that, as you might imagine, had our sad hero out of that bed like a shot. “Wait, Stevie! Don’t leave me here!” He ran as best he could, wrapped up as he was, only to slam into the door jamb when he inevitably tripped. That got a resounding oof! before he righted himself and kept on after Steve.

Bucky remarkably made it all the way to the edge of the coffee table before, sadly, tripping once more. But, luckily for him (and for us), he managed an excellent twist of the body, granting him the ability to land safely on the couch, a loud thud following in his wake.

Steve, for his part, watched this entire feat of death-defying skill safely from the other end of the coffee table, where he was currently setting up some space for himself to draw.

(Most people are not aware of this, but Steve likes to draw sitting on the floor. He does not always do this, as sitting at his drafting table, or standing in front of an easel, are sometimes required depending on the project. But Bucky knows — as Steve had once told him — when he sits on the floor, he feels small again, and somehow, the art just comes much easier to him that way.)

He was still standing when Bucky’s entire acrobatic routine had taken place, and deigned to stay that way, it would seem, so that he might have the upper hand at looking down on Bucky. Or so Bucky would assume.

“And you’re the guy who managed to kick my ass more than once back during Project Insight,” he commented with a slow shake of his head. “I am deeply shamed.”

“S’not my fault,” Bucky muttered from where he still lay sideways on the couch. “I think you moved the floor while I was in there.”

“I am nefarious that way, it's true,” Steve replied solemnly.

As you might imagine, at this point in the story, Bucky was in a bit of a predicament. He was completely wrapped up, which meant no hands to push himself into a sitting position. He glanced around to assess his options, but came up with very little in the way of good ideas. At least none that didn’t involve removing his metal arm and possibly letting the heat escape, or asking Steve for help. Both ideas had too many consequences attached for him to entertain those notions for long.

But then it came to him. Aha! If he simply rolled over, he would be able to slide his (socked) feet off the couch and reposition himself. And as you can bet, dear readers, that is exactly what he did!
Except for the sliding his feet off the couch part.

And the repositioning part.

As Bucky rolled over, he realized all too late the fatal error in his otherwise-brilliant plan: He couldn’t really bend his knees. Alas, the momentum he had created for himself in his efforts meant rolling off entirely and landing in a puddle between the couch and the table.

And damn that other bastard in the room, if he didn’t burst out laughing at Bucky’s plight.

“Help me!” Bucky cried out from where he was buried, face-down, into the floor.

“Oh, hell no!” Steve exclaimed between peels of absolutely hateful laughter. “You got yourself into that mess. You get yourself out. I’ve got a fire to build.”

Now Bucky only had two options at this point, and he knew it. He could lie where he was and resign himself to the sad sack he had become, or he could admit failure and finally extricate himself.

Bucky Barnes is a decorated war hero, with well above-average intelligence and reasoning skills. I am certain you have figured out which one he chose.

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That is correct, readers. Our boy did not move from that spot for another ten minutes.

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As it turned out, the items Steve had been searching for in their trunk had been old photos and drawings of Bucky. The pictures, Bucky had found out some years prior, had been ‘saved’ by Miss Carter before the government — and eventually the world — could get their hands on them. It would not have done well for the masses to learn that Captain Steven Grant Rogers and Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes — the two most famous soldiers in the war — had actually been sweet on each other. Not during the forties, anyway.

“What are you doing with these?” Bucky asked, as he flipped through them. The fire was roaring, the heat was on, and Bucky had allowed himself the use of his hands again. Just his hands.

“Reference,” Steve answered absently from where he was sketching on the other side of the table. Bucky looked up to see that, yes, Steve was drawing a picture of him.

“You know I’m sitting right here,” Bucky pointed out, smiling. He gave Steve a small wave. “Hellooo. Right over here.”

Steve laughed softly but didn’t look up. “I need wartime references. Uniform, two full arms, your old smile, all of it.”

“Oh, basically, a less broken Bucky.” The response slipped out, softer than intended.

Steve’s head shot up, eyes stricken. “That’s not — I didn’t mean it that way. I’m sorry.”

Bucky, sadly, just shrugged. “It’s okay. I’m aware that I’m not the same person I used to be. I’m not as bothered by that as it sounded. I’m sorry for phrasing it that way.”

Steve gave him a small, hesitant smile before turning back to his drawing. “Truth is, I’m doing both. I’m drawing you then and I’m drawing you now. There’s beauty in both, and I want you to see it.”
Bucky ducked his head and smiled, touched by Steve’s words. As we’ve come to see during our time together, these boys were absolutely smitten with each other, and this just proved that yet again.

Bucky reached down into his swarm of blankets to dig his phone out of his pajama pocket. He then opened up his camera so he might photograph an old drawing Steve had done of him.

“Was this one from the night before I shipped out?” he asked as he snapped away.

Steve looked up at the drawing in Bucky’s hand, and nodded before going back to his work. “Yeah. Just before you frog marched me out onto that god-awful double date.”

“Still think you should have come dancing with us,” Bucky said as he switched over to his Instagram application.

“And miss the chance to follow you into war? That doesn’t even sound half like me.”

Bucky laughed, small and to himself. That was still, to this day, painfully true.

He loaded the image and added just the sort of caption we’ve come to expect from our hero. Funny, irreverent, and full of love.

*Guess who Steve's biggest inspiration is? James Buchanan Barnes: soldier, international spy and muse, on occasion.*

“I have an idea,” Bucky said as he finished with his own picture. He looked up and flashed Steve his favorite smile. “If you’re doing drawings of me, then and now, why don’t I do the same.”

“Really?” Steve beamed at him, excitement swelling across his beautiful features faster than Bucky would have believed possible.

With a smile of his own, Bucky nodded. “Yeah, but let’s try and recreate what you looked like when you were smaller, and maybe I can draw Little Steve in a Big Steve body.”

“You know” — Steve snapped his fingers and stood up — “I think I have just the clothes for that.”

Dear readers, please be aware that it is never advisable to leave one Bucky Barnes alone for any length of time. If not attended to properly, he is liable to make mischief. For poor Steve Rogers, this day was no exception.

Now, Bucky did not, per se, partake in any sort of shenanigans while Steve was away. No, our hero spent his time sitting quietly. The issue, one would see though, is that he sat quietly. For just like a left-alone Bucky, a quiet Bucky cannot be trusted.

You see, readers, Bucky spent his quiet time scheming. Oh yes, he sat there and thought up all kinds of fraughtful plans. Did he let Steve dress up, only to draw him in the nude? Did he take on the style of Dali, and draw his partner as, once again, the devil in the piece?

(Please, also remember, Bucky used to be able to draw, but he has been out of practice for seventy of his ninety-odd years on this earth. He had no idea if he could even put up a proper *stick figure* of Steve.)

Yes, Bucky spent his time turning out idea after idea, picking just the right one that would... how would Bucky put this... do his Stevie justice.

“Are you ready for me?” Steve reemerged from their shared room, and oh, what a sight he was! He
had on a sharp pair of brown slacks, with a white cotton shirt that buttoned at the collar, and a pair of brown suspenders.

I understand, of course, that that may not sound like the most exciting wardrobe choice, but you must not forget what era our heroes come from — and what would have been an everyday outfit of sorts for Steve.

This outfit, right here? This was everything representative of that little boy lost in three pieces. And Bucky was speechless.

“I forgot that I can’t draw anymore,” was the first thing that came out once he found his voice again, all thoughts of games and scheming gone from his mind for the foreseeable future.

Steve, sweet boy that he was, simply shrugged happily, and said, “Doesn’t matter. Just draw what you can. I’m sure I’ll love it all the same.”

He could feel the rosy tint as heat began to color his face, and Bucky let out a self-deprecating huff of laughter. “I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

As our hero (well, Bucky’s hero, if we were to be so honest) went to sit by the window, he gave Bucky’s hair a soft ruffle and said, “If you can’t figure it out, take a page from Picasso and draw me in the abstract.”

“That’s a good idea,” Bucky said, and he reached for a sheet of paper and a pencil. “I already think you’re weird and lopsided. Might as well draw it like I see it.”

So, wrapped up cozily in a comforter, fire roaring at his back, heater blazing overhead, Bucky took Steve’s advice, put pen to paper, and drew what he would like to think was a nice abstract rendering of his greatest love.

Which would be true if we were not already so well-versed in our hero from stories past. No, Bucky took Steve’s idea of drawing him in the style of Picasso to a grand extreme and gave it the sort of attention to detail one might find in the portfolio of, say, a kindergartener.

And as his mischievous nature began to creep back in, rest assured, readers, that Bucky showed pride in his artistry the very way you would expect him to.

He posted his handiwork online with the caption Nailed it!

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It was the kind of weather that bit just this side of crisp. Not to say it was cold; it had not even begun to flutter around cold. No, this was the kind of crisp that had one eyeballing something a little bit more than a light jacket. Made one looked twice at that scarf for today that, come January, would get laughed right out of the closet.

On one such day in early November, inside a home that rested along the East River in Brooklyn, warmth had finally won over, and pair of super soldiers wiled away the afternoon drawing each other in every style they could think of. Steve took his drawings seriously, where Bucky took great joy in making his as nonsensical as possible.

And as day turned into night, they would find comfort and pleasure in each other’s arms next to the fire that Steve had so lovingly tended for his Bucky.

But that story. Well... That story is for another time.
Steven Grant Rogers, you hopeless romantic, do you REALLY have my photo in your wallet? What? No, these 500 pics of you I have on my phone don’t count. Shut up.

The house was settled on a nondescript street in the heart of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, not two miles from the Mississippi River. It was an adorable split level home, painted a soft white, with a large porch in the front and plenty of open space surrounding it. The homes that ran up and down the street had fallen a bit to the wayside, but Sharon had told the guys that the neighbors were friendly, and would leave them alone, if they wished.

Steven Grant Rogers, you hopeless romantic, do you REALLY have my photo in your wallet? What? No, these 500 pics of you I have on my phone don’t count. Shut up.

Back when Peggy had been with SHIELD she’d apparently had a safe house. A few, in fact, stashed all over the world. The only person who knew about any of them was Howard Stark, and later, Tony, after his father had died. All the homes were listed under a dummy corporation that was connected to Stark Industries by a very thin thread. One that no person ever discovered. After Peggy had passed, Tony had given all the homes to Sharon, and she’d sold all of them except for the one
Steve and Bucky were currently standing in front of.

“This is ours for the weekend?” Bucky asked, as he took in the quaint little house in front of him. The other homes on the street might have been run down, but this one was clearly tended to lovingly. He still had his phone in hand from the ride over and quickly opened it up to snap a picture of the house.

Steve finished paying the cab driver and turned around, placing a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. “After your mini meltdown over the weather shift in New York, I figured you could use a couple days where the weather shows to be consistently sunny.”

“Mini meltdown, my ass.” Bucky mumbled good-naturedly. He turned to snap a quick pic of Steve, catching him off guard, then added, “That was a legitimate human response to drastic shifts in weather patterns.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “The temperature went down five degrees, Buck.”

“Five Celsius degrees, maybe.”

“You do realize, that depending on Fahrenheit, that means almost nothing?”

“But it does mean something at some point.” Bucky snickered and gave Steve a big gooey grin.

“You’re ridiculous, you know that?” Steve said with a laugh, smiling at Bucky like he lit the sun. Then his hand slid down to cup Bucky’s elbow and pull him in fractionally closer. “And I love you so much for it. Just so you know.”

Bucky grinned softly at him and reached over to give his hand a quick affectionate squeeze before they both let go. Sharon had assured them that Baton Rouge was more liberal than most towns, but Steve and Bucky were always wary of new places. They were famous war veterans, members of the Avengers, and Steve was supposed to be the actual face of America. Some people hated their relationship on those principles alone.

Steve gave a tiny shake of his head and cleared his throat before reaching down to pick up their bags. As he handed Bucky’s over to him, his wallet, which he’d been gripping at an odd angle while holding out Bucky’s bag, slipped from his fingers and clattered to the pavement.

“I got it,” Bucky said, and he leaned down to pick it up before Steve could. He swiped it up off the ground and stood back up to hand it back to Steve. It was then that something on one side caught his eye, and he pulled it back to look. He flipped it over to see what it was, only to be hit with the spread of loving warmth at the sight of his own face smiling back at him.

“You have a picture of me in your wallet?” Bucky asked, amused and just a little bit touched. Okay, a lot amused, because it was always entertaining to watch the flush spread up Steve’s face when he became embarrassed. He tried to snatch it out of Bucky’s hands, but Bucky held it out of reach, laughing.

“Give that back, Bucky,” Steve grumbled, a hint of irritation in his voice. He tried to grab it again, but Bucky danced out of the way. Steve caught his waist mid-turn, trying to reach around the other way, only for Bucky to hold it over his head.

“Seriously, Bucky?” Steve asked, exasperated, but he couldn’t hide the huff of laughter that escaped him.
“Hold on a sec!” Bucky giggled and twisted around, so he could hold the wallet out and get a better
look at the picture. “Is this from our day at Coney Island back in June?”

“You mean the day you threw me into the ocean and ruined my phone? Yep. That’s the one.”

“Ah yes.” Bucky nodded and smiled. “That was a good day.”

“You ruined my phone,” Steve repeated, pinching Bucky’s side.

“Hey!” Bucky squeaked and jumped back, making Steve laugh. Then he thumped the wallet against
Steve’s chest. “I must not have ruined it too bad if you were able to get that photo off of it,” he
added.

Steve grabbed at the wallet before Bucky could drop it, and shrugged. “That’s what the cloud is for.”

“It’s adorable that you have a picture of me in your wallet, Stevie,” Bucky teased, and kept an eye on
his boyfriend as he quietly opened his camera app.

So when Steve shook his head and made to put his wallet back into his pocket, Bucky stopped him
with a hand on his arm and a, “Wait, is that my missing red shirt?” before quickly leaning over to
snap a picture.

“Wait, do you just —”

“Nothing! I did nothing!” Bucky shot up straight, trying his best to look as innocent as possible.
When that failed miserably, he just shrugged, laughed shamelessly, and said, “Yeah, I totally did.”

“You’re incorrigible.” Steve laughed as well before hitting Bucky with his bag. “Get inside, you
ass.”

Bucky swung his bag over his shoulder and gave Steve a wolfish grin before heading up the walk.

The house, at least from what he could tell on the outside, was really lovely. Small and charming,
and it reminded him so much of what Peggy was about when she wasn’t busy being Agent Carter.

“Hey, do you know if Sharon did any work to this place?” he asked over his shoulder. “Or did she
leave it as Peggy had it?”

“I think how Peggy had it?” Steve answered after a second. “Actually, yeah. She’d said of all the
safe houses Peggy had at her disposal, this was the one that reminded her the most of her aunt. I
think she may have said something about Peggy having used it as a little vacation place eventually?”

A small chuckle then met Bucky’s ears as he walked up onto the porch. Half a second later, and
Steve was standing next to him, peering at the front door. “Leave it to Peggy to convert a safe house
into getaway spot.”

“Not a very nice one, if the neighborhood is anything to go by,” Bucky commented as he looked
around at the other homes.

Steve shrugged as he glanced around as well. “I’m sure it wasn’t like this when Peggy acquired it.
And besides” — he turned back, his hands digging in his pocket for the key — “it was never meant
to be a getaway spot.”

“Fair point,” Bucky conceded.

Steve opened the front door, and sure enough, the inside was just as charming as the outside. Just
inside was a staircase to the second floor alongside a hallway that led to the back of the house. There were rooms on either side of them, and as they each peered into a room, it was clear that Peggy’s English heritage had played a part in decorating the place, with rich wallpaper and various pieces of antique furniture dotting both rooms.

“God, this is just Peggy all over, isn’t it?” Steve asked quietly, and when Bucky looked at him, his gaze was far off. Lost. Wherever Steve was, it wasn’t in this room.

He dropped his bag so he could lace his fingers with Steve’s. “You’re missing her right now, huh.”

It wasn’t a question. And Steve didn’t answer right away. When he did, that lost look still hadn’t left his eyes.

“I am, but...” He sighed and turned to face Bucky, a sad smile slowly taking over that faraway look. “I mean, I loved her, and I miss her all the time, but...”

When he still didn’t finish, Bucky gave his hand a small squeeze. “But what?”

Steve took a deep breath before he finally continued. He never took his eyes off Bucky. “I loved her. And when I look at this place, I think of the life she and I probably would have had, because... Well, because that’s just the way it was back then, you know that.”

Bucky nodded, even though it hurt. He knew Steve was right. They hadn’t had a choice.

“But the thing is,” Steve went on. “I realized a very long time ago that we were never the loves of each other’s lives. We were never meant to be. You were always mine, and she...she found hers eventually.”

Without letting go of Steve’s hand, Bucky wrapped his other arm around Steve’s neck and pulled him in for a deep, heartfelt kiss. Steve’s bag hit the floor, and he wrapped his own arm tightly around Bucky’s waist, holding him close. When they broke apart, Bucky turned to whisper in Steve’s ear, “I love you so much. Don’t you ever forget that. And don’t, for one second, ever think I don’t know the same in return.”

“God, I do,” Steve breathed into his ear. He fisted his hand in Bucky’s shirt, pulling him in even tighter. “I love you, baby. I may have loved her, but you are the love of my life.”

Bucky had to fight back the sting of tears, instead choosing to press a hard kiss to the side of Steve’s neck as he got himself under control. Finally, with a slight shake of his head, he pulled back and smiled. “Let’s get our stuff upstairs already. I have plans for you for the foreseeable future, and they don’t involve us spending it unpacking.”

Steve laughed and leaned forward to kiss Bucky’s forehead. “Sounds perfect.”

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It was some hours later that found Bucky and Steve lying in bed, naked and tangled up together, Bucky’s head pillowed against Steve’s stomach. He was idly flipping through his pictures on his phone while Steve sketched above him.

As he reached the last photo in his phone, the one he’d taken earlier of his picture in Stevie’s wallet, he smiled to himself, because he knew Steve had meant what he’d said earlier. Steve still had his compass with Peggy’s picture, but that wasn’t the photo he carried with him at all times.

And it wasn’t that Bucky was jealous — far from it — but he’d always felt bad that Steve had never
had his chance with Peggy. And now, even though circumstances had made that chance impossible, he’d still always felt like he’d taken something from Steve. His chance at a normal life.

But the truth was, he really hadn’t. If Steve and Peggy had ended up together, he knew they would have been really happy. But that was never the path either of them was meant to be on.

That wasn’t Steve’s path. This was. It was always supposed to be Bucky.

And if there was one thing Bucky always felt was the greatest gift he never deserved, it was Steve.

“I love you,” he whispered. Bucky turned to gaze at Steve and smiled, just as Steve lifted his notebook. “In case I haven’t said it enough today.”

“You could never say it enough,” Steve whispered back, reaching down to run his fingers from temple to chin. “Because I’ll never get tired of hearing it.” He moved to brush his fingers against Bucky’s lips and added, “I love you, too.”

Bucky kissed the tips, and hummed contentedly. Then, without saying anything more, both men went back to their respective lazy activities.

Bucky decided he wanted to post the photo he’d taken, but as soon as he got to the caption, he stalled again. Lately, when it came to the times when he wanted to say something more serious, he found he just... couldn’t. He’d mentioned this to his doctor, and she’d said that the fact that he was sharing at all was huge progress for him, and to try not to push himself further until he was ready. Maybe at some point he could write something that was a bit more personal, but now wasn’t the time.

So instead, feeding off the playful memory from when the picture was taken, he added the caption

Steven Grant Rogers, you hopeless romantic, do you REALLY have my photo in your wallet? What? No, these 500 pics of you I have on my phone don’t count. Shut up.

and called it a day.
Images Twenty-Four and Twenty-Five

Chapter Summary

Ladies and Gentlemen, America's awakening! *National Anthem playing in the background*

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Chapter Notes

_Ladies and Gentlemen, America's awakening! *National Anthem playing in the background*_

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What do you want me to tell you, my mornings aren't as perfect as Steve's...

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A moan, pulled deep from his chest.

The feel of teeth grazing down his neck.

An arm, tightened, around his waist.

He keened and his back arched off the bed.
Bucky slowly woke up, the taste of Steve still on his lips, the man in question pressed along his back. A smile tugged at his mouth before he even bothered to open his eyes. He didn’t want the night before to officially be over.

Steve and Bucky were no different than any other couple. Sometimes they went a couple weeks without sleeping together. Sometimes they went through periods where the sex could be described as mediocre at best.

But sometimes...

Well, most times...

It was the best sex Bucky could ever even imagine having. He couldn’t think of anything better than being wrapped up in Steve’s arms, sweat-slicked bodies moving in tandem, and losing all ability to tell where one ended and the other began.

Last night was definitely one of those nights.

Not quite ready to open his eyes, Bucky pressed back against Steve’s body, both still blessedly naked. It wasn’t long before he felt hard muscles ripple along his spine as Steve stirred, pulling Bucky impossibly closer. A second later, a deep inhale met his ears and teeth sank into his shoulder.

Bucky groaned softly, and reached behind to palm the back of Steve’s head, holding him in place. Hips undulated forward, slowly writhing against him.

“Stevie...” Bucky whined softly, rolling with the motion, and Steve bit harder, turning Bucky’s whine into a moan. Bucky let go long enough to slide a hand down Steve’s thigh, hooking it behind his knee, and sliding it over his own.

Cool air hit Bucky’s back as Steve pulled slightly away for a second, making him whimper at the momentary loss. But then the click of a cap hit his ears, and soon two fingers were inside him, giving him what little prep he needed leftover from the night before.

“Please,” he whispered, pushing back. “I don’t need this, I’m good, just... please.”

That was all it took before Steve was pushing in, filling him up, and making him release the breath he hadn’t realized he’d started holding. He gripped Steve’s leg tight, pulling him in deeper, and rolled, soft and unhurried.

They moved like that for a while, slow as molasses, neither of them chasing toward that inevitable end. Their bodies flush together, Steve wrapped his arm around Bucky’s shoulders, and pressed his hand to the side of Bucky’s neck, a thumb brushing lightly across his cheekbone.

This was how every morning should start, Bucky thought — and how every night should end. Buried into each other, their souls intertwined (if you believed in that sort of thing), and finding no solace in the world that didn’t beat within the heart of the other.

Other than the growing warmth of the rising sun, Bucky had no concept of time as it passed. All he knew was the feel of Steve’s body, and really, that was all that mattered.

He could do this all day.

Time, such as it was though, began to creep back into existence once Steve, with every thrust of his
body, gradually began to push in just a little bit harder. It wasn’t until then that Bucky knew he was close, and this moment — this precious ecstasy that belonged only to them — was finding its way to the end.

“Stevie, touch me.”

The hand that had rested so lovingly along the side of Bucky’s neck began to trail down his body — a swirl of nonsensical patterns left in its wake as Steve took his time reaching his destination.

Bucky smirked to himself. He knew Steve was close, but apparently that didn’t mean Steve was ready to be.

But finally, finally, Steve took him in hand and began moving in time with his own thrusts. Bucky hissed as pleasure coursed through him, and yeah, neither of them were meant to last much longer.

Bucky reached back to pull Steve closer, taking over each thrust to bring him to his release, just as Steve’s wrist twisted, making Bucky see that white light he so desperately sought within the man he loved.

Afterwards, Bucky stayed wrapped up in Steve’s arms, neither making any inclination to move.

“Good morning, baby,” Steve whispered in his ear.

Bucky snorted softly. “Damn right, it is.”

Steve shuffled in just a little bit closer, his nose buried in Bucky’s hair. He slowly trailed his fingers up and down Bucky’s chest and hummed contentedly. “You enjoy that?”

“Well, I’m not enjoying how disgusting the sheets are at the moment, but...” Bucky lightly swatted him on the thigh and smiled. “You even need to ask?”

“Every day should start like this.”

“With gross sheets?”

“If they’re a bi-product of that, then hell yes.”

“Is that a challenge, Cap?”

“Well, you know me, Sergeant. I’m always game for anything.”

Bucky snickered as he turned over in Steve’s arms. “And that is why we spent the entirety of the thirties with scraped knees and bloody noses.”

“Part of the forties as well,” Steve pointed out as he nosed underneath Bucky’s chin to mouth at his throat.

“Actually, I spent all of the forties that way. You got to spend it taking a fucking nap.” Bucky tilted his head back a bit to allow better access. “I would have liked to take a nap. Naps are awesome.”

Steve snorted, tickling Bucky’s throat, and making him squirm. Bastard just tightened his grip, holding Bucky in place.

“Watcha doin’ there, Cap?” Bucky breathed out. Steve just hummed along Bucky’s skin. “You up for Round Two or somethin’?”
Bucky felt a smile pressed against his skin before Steve licked a hot line over his pulse point. His eyes fluttered closed, a smile tugging at his lips as Steve leaned in and —

_blew a goddamn fucking raspberry instead!_

“Holy shit!” Bucky screamed and pushed out, knocking himself into the back wall, and sending Steve and all the blankets crashing to the floor.

“Steve!” he shouted, but all he was met with were peals of laughter. He scrambled over to the edge of the bed, ignoring the slight ringing in his ears from where he’d smacked his head, and looked over the side.

There, lying in a heap of sheets and blankets and nonsense, was Bucky’s idiot boyfriend, laughing so hard he was crying.

“God, you’re such a _dick,_” Bucky exclaimed, a huff of laughter escaping as he stared down in awe at that glorious fucker on the floor.

Then, as Steve tried to extricate himself, only to get so tangled up he got stuck, Bucky just lost it, flopping onto his back, as the two of them laughed so hard, he was sure they both were in pain.

“You kicked me clean off the bed,” Steve wheezed from the floor.

“You _raspberried_ me, you shit,” Bucky shot back.

“Well, yeah, it was funny.”

“So was this.” Bucky waved a hand over his head at Steve.

“We’re ridiculous.”

“You’re just figuring this out now?”

“Well, I knew already, I was just hoping to spare you.”

“Steve, we’ve been ridiculous since we were ten years old and Frankie McDougal tried to push you into that pond, remember?” Bucky rolled over to look down at Steve. “You were such a slippery little shit, you managed to push _him_ in instead.” He snickered into the mattress before glancing at Steve again. “You remember what we did?”

Steve nodded. “You jumped in after him, and tried to beat him up for bullying me, getting yourself soaked in the process, only for me to jump in there after he clocked you over the head.”

“See?” Bucky waved a hand between them. “Ridiculous.”

Steve shook his head, a hint of wonder in his eyes. “I can’t believe you remember that.”

Bucky shrugged as best he could from the mattress. “I remember a lot of things from when we were kids.”

“Well, I know.” Steve flopped over until he could scooch up and kneel in front of Bucky. He planted a soft kiss on his lips and said, “I just didn’t know that was one of them.”

“Well, it is, ya mook.” Bucky smiled and brushed his lips against Steve’s again. “Now go away because I want a cigarette.
Steve laughed and pushed off the bed to stand up. “I’m gonna go make coffee anyway. Ya want?” he asked as he made his way over to their dresser. He didn’t take anything out, just leaned over to pick up the tank top he’d gone to bed in off the floor.

“Actually, grab me a Monster,” Bucky said as he rolled over towards the nightstand. He grabbed his phone to check the time, only to glance up to see Steve throwing the tank on over his head as he walked towards the door. “Uh, hey sailor, you maybe wanna grab some pants?”

Steve smirked and stopped right in front of Bucky. Then he slowly pivoted to face him before bringing his hands above his head in a long languid stretch, exposing everything from the waist down.

“There a problem, officer?” Steve asked, a wicked little glint in his voice. Then he reached around to arch his lower back, and in the process, thrust his hips forward.

“You’re devious,” Bucky murmured, taking in the whole show. He opened his camera app to snap a couple pictures, until —

“No nudes, Buck.”

“Buzzkill.” Bucky pointed his camera at Steve anyway. “That’s fine,” he said and just snapped some photos of Steve being his cute self anyways. “I’ll be tasteful, but I’m still gonna post them to Instagram, and tell everyone you’re naked from the waist down.”

Steve gave him a flat stare before turning to stride out of the room.

Bucky laughed as he loaded his app to get one of the pictures up. He wasn’t really about to say that, and Steve knew it, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t at least out to get under his boyfriend’s skin. They wouldn’t be any fun if they both didn’t.

He picked the image of Steve rubbing at his eyes because, to be honest, Bucky was a schmoopy idiot who would always fall back on his boyfriend looking utterly adorable. That might even be his default setting.

Of course, that didn’t stop him from adding the caption Ladies and Gentlemen, America’s awakening! *National Anthem playing in the background* because if Bucky was anything, he was also an ass.

He picked up the mess of blankets off the floor and threw them haphazardly back on the bed for now. Everything needed to be washed, but he was more interested in a cigarette at the moment, and some much, much needed caffeine.

“Steve!” Bucky shouted, as he lit a cigarette. “Where’s my — shit.” He snatched the drink out of midair as Steve suddenly walked back in, throwing it at his head. He stuck the cigarette between his lips and went about tapping the drink to settle it. “Sorry, didn’t know you were coming back,” he said, feeling just a touch guilty.

“Oh, I wasn’t mad.” Steve shook his head, an impish little smile on his face. “I just wanted to see if you’d catch it.”

“Oh, well then, go fuck yourself.” Bucky cracked the drink and raised it up in a toast.

“No need, Sarge.” Steve waved his hand at the bed. “Already got you to take care of that for me not twenty minutes ago.”
Bucky pointed the drink at him, the cigarette dangling from his lips. “And best not forget that, Cap!” Then he smirked, took the smoke out of his mouth, and proceeded to chug the whole drink in one shot.

Steve nodded approvingly when he stopped. “Impressive.”

Bucky answered him with a long, drawn out belch.

“And that is why we’re not allowed to date girls anymore.”

Bucky crushed the can and tossed it on the bed before letting out another small burp. “Is that why I’m stuck with you?”

“Well, it’s either me or Barton, and I heard he snores.”

“I can handle snoring.”

“Like a log saw with broken blade.”

“Never mind. Nat can keep him.”

Steve snorted. “Thought so.” He reached over to snatch Bucky’s phone off the bed. “You post a picture of me yet?” he asked.

Bucky laughed at Steve’s complete inability to act casual. “No nudes, you dork.”

“That’s good. That’s good,” Steve said absently as he played with Bucky’s phone, most likely checking up on him. Bucky just continued to smoke his cigarette while he waited Steve out.

When he finally looked up, Bucky shook his head. “Satisfied?”

“I trust you.” Which was clearly a lie considering the way Steve’s voice went up about two octaves.

“You sound like Miss Piggy on helium, you know.”

Steve didn’t bother with a response. Instead, he cleared his throat and then grabbed Bucky’s shirt from the night before off the armchair. “Here, cover yourself,” he said, tossing it at him.

Bucky dropped the shirt in his lap and looked back up at Steve. “Why?”

“For this,” he said with a cheeky grin, and snapped a picture of Bucky.

“Tell me something,” Bucky wondered as soon as he realized his cigarette was still hanging out of his mouth. “Just how classy do I look?”

Steve glanced down at the photo. “I’d fuck you,” he answered with a shrug. Then he looked up and smiled. “Mind if I post it?”

Bucky waved a hand at Steve. “Knock yourself out.”

It was then that he realized what he’d just said. His therapy project, and he didn’t give two shits if Steve posted a photo to it sight unseen. But of course he wouldn’t. He trusted Steve with his life, with his heart, and with his recovery. Steve could post all the fucking pictures, if he wanted.

He stubbed his cigarette out in the Monster can before turning back to watch Steve as he typed idly away on Bucky’s phone.
It was a wonder if Steve would ever truly know just how precious he was to Bucky.

“Do you...” Bucky trailed off, unable to finish the thought. When Steve looked up and smiled questioningly at him, he changed course. “Uh, you know that only proves you’re no classier than me.”

Steve’s smile immediately turned sly. “No, what it actually proves is that my master plan is working.” He sauntered over to the bed and pulled the shirt off Bucky’s lap, tossing it carelessly aside. Then he slowly lowered himself down onto Bucky’s lap, legs bracketing his thighs.

Bucky could take a hint. He wasted no time scooting back on the bed, pulling Steve with him. “So, what’s this master plan of yours?” he asked, breathless the moment Steve pressed into him.

“Well, you know.” Steve rolled his hips, sending a tremor up Bucky’s spine. In retaliation, he wrapped his arms around Steve’s back, and pulled down, grinding them together, causing both men to gasp.

“You were saying?” Bucky teased.

A soft thud hit the mattress next to Bucky. “Oops,” Steve whispered, though his smile was completely shameless. He braced his hands against the wall over Bucky’s head and rolled again. “Dropped your phone.”

“One sec.” Bucky tucked up his knees to hold Steve in place while he grabbed his phone. He pulled up Instagram really quick to check out the picture that had turned Steve predatory. What he saw was — not what he expected. He turned the phone to Steve, and with an incredulous half smile, asked, “This is what gets you off?”

“Bucky, Bucky, Bucky,” Steve chastised, even as he continued his ministrations. “You’re naked. You’re in our bed. What more do you think I need?”

Bucky pushed up into Steve, earning him a small whine. “Okay, but, ‘What do you want me to tell you, my mornings aren’t as perfect as Steve’s...’” Bucky read back the caption. “How’s that hot?”

“Oh, no, that’s funny. But this...” He undulated his hips, and Bucky growled, low and needy. Not giving a fuck where it landed, he tossed his phone aside and grabbed onto Steve, already desperate for the man riding him.

Steve just stared at him avariciously. “This is hot.”
OK, I may have exaggerated a bit last week when I said that Steve's mornings (and nights) were perfect. He's like me, he has nightmares sometimes (often...) and wakes up in the middle of the night. That's when I fix him a special "4:00am Superhero Breakfast" with a banana split, croissants, pancakes, eggs and bacon and waffles. What? He's Captain America. Do you think a bowl of Cheerios is enough for him?

It was the moaning that pulled him out of sleep.

Two seconds later, it would have been the fist to the chest, but Bucky caught it in time — something he probably shouldn’t have done, because the moment metal fingers wrapped around flesh, Steve started thrashing.
That woke Bucky right up.

He let go so he could quickly roll out of bed, giving Steve the room he needed to not feel trapped wherever he was. It barely helped. As Bucky crouched next to the bed, Steve continued to toss and turn, his moaning quickly devolving into painful cries.

“Steve,” Bucky murmured. He needed to keep his voice even. Yelling induced panic.

He slid his hand onto the bed and waited. “Steve,” he said again, a touch louder, though he kept his voice even and firm.

As Steve still continued to grunt and cry out — words that were nonsensical interspersed with Bucky’s name — Bucky finally reached over with his other hand and flicked on the wake-up light. It would take ten minutes to fully light the room, but if he couldn’t pull Steve out of his dream, this would. It never failed either of them. It was the whole reason they had it.

“Steve.” He stood up enough to be able to lean over his boy just a little bit. “Stevie, you gotta wake up.”

It was the ‘Stevie’ that did it. The second the word was out of Bucky’s mouth, Steve started curling in on himself, whimpering.

Bucky slowly lowered himself back down onto the bed, sitting on the edge. He reached over and tentatively rested his flesh hand on Steve’s head. When Steve just curled in further, softly crying in his sleep, Bucky began to gently card his fingers through his lover’s hair.

“Oh, baby, it’s time to wake up, all right? You gotta get up now, Stevie.” Sure enough, the ‘Stevie’ part did the trick again, as scared blue eyes began to show themselves, still wet with tears.

“Bucky?” Steve asked, his voice cracked and small. He glanced up, though he still seemed far away and lost. “Bucky, are you okay?”

“Yeah, you loon.” He huffed out a relieved laugh, even if it was a touch sad. He leaned down to press his lips into Steve’s hair just as fingers closed around his wrist. “I’m right here, baby,” he whispered into Steve’s ear. “It was just a bad dream.”

“God, Bucky, you —” Steve let out the tiniest whimper and tightened his grip on Bucky’s wrist, making him wince. He didn’t move though — just stayed close, right where Steve would need him. “I was fighting you — Winter Soldier you. And we were on the train. And I pushed you. You went over. But when I ran to look...”

He turned in on himself even further, pulling Bucky’s hand with him. Bucky dropped his other hand down on the mattress to steady himself and keep from falling over onto Steve.

“Shhh...” He brushed his lips across Steve’s temple. “It doesn’t matter, okay?” He leaned around so he could give Steve a reassuring smile. “I’m right here, Stevie. Nothing bad’s happened to me, see?”

“But it wasn’t the Winter Soldier who I saw falling,” Steve whispered, his eyes wide in horror. “It was you. You now.”

Steve gave his head a hard shake, and Bucky turned around so he could lie down next to him, taking both his hands. He kissed across the knuckles and said, “I’m not going anywhere, baby. I’m right here, and we’re not fighting, and I love you.” As he looked up, he gave Steve’s hands a small tug to get him to lean in, and he touched their foreheads together. “The train was a long time ago. The Winter Soldier was a long time ago. You didn’t lose me either time — not really — and you aren’t
Steve didn’t immediately respond, but when he did, he just nodded.

Bucky kissed Steve this time and grabbed both hands in his metal one. Then he reached over and slowly started running his fingers up and down Steve’s back. Steve immediately melted into it. He pulled his hands free so he could roll them both over and rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder.

They stayed like that for a while — Bucky rubbing Steve’s back, while Steve stayed wrapped up in his arms, their legs tangled together. He kept checking to see if Steve had fallen back asleep, but his eyes never closed, just continued to stare off at some unknown distance.

The world never saw Steve Rogers like this — none of the media, no one at SHIELD, not even their friends. Bucky knew that Steve had talked to his psychiatrist about his nightmares, but he seriously doubted Steve had gone into detail about what exactly those nightmares did to him — how small they made him feel. He only ever shared that with Bucky.

It would actually astound him the amount of things about Steve Rogers that never made it outside their front door if the same couldn’t absolutely be said about him as well. It didn’t matter what they said to the press — or what the press found out — or what he posted on his Instagram and Tumblr. No one knew them, not really. Not like this.

Eventually, Bucky reached for his cell to check the time: 4:15 am. He sighed to himself as he set his phone down before going back to trailing his fingers along Steve’s spine. He was wide awake now, and if he ventured a guess, he figured Steve was as well. He wondered if maybe they should get up instead of both lying here buried in thoughts neither of them wanted to have.

“You awake, Stevie?” he asked quietly, just to be sure. He got a tiny nod as he leaned in to kiss the top of Steve’s head.

Then he had an idea. “You hungry?” he followed up, and sure enough, he could feel the smile spreading across Steve’s lips. Another nod and Bucky laughed. He gave Steve’s back a swift rub. “All right, then. I’m gonna go make us some food. You coming or do you want to hang here by yourself for a bit?”

“Like hell if you think I’m letting you out of my sight tonight,” and Bucky smiled. That sounded more like his Steve.

“Fine, fucker, but if you’re coming with, then you’re helping.”

Steve snorted. “You’ll burn the bacon if I don’t.”

Bucky let out an indignant squawk before ruffling Steve’s hair and shoving him away. “Burn the bacon...” he huffed. He sat up and grabbed his sweatpants off the edge of the bed, then turned to glare at Steve over his shoulder as he slipped them on. “You want a reminder about the undercooked pancakes?”

Steve winced. “Yeah, okay, those were gross.” He rolled over to sit next to Bucky. “But still. Burnt bacon is worse.”

Bucky turned on his best flat stare. “No, Steve. It’s not.” Then he smiled — because really, he never lasted around this man — and took Steve’s hand, pulling them both to their feet. “Come on, food awaits.”

He headed out to the kitchen and Bucky immediately made his way to the fridge. Steve leaned
against the counter as Bucky began piling everything he’d need for breakfast onto the counter, though he actively avoided one particular bowl in the back.

“I was thinking the usual — eggs, bacon and pancakes.” He grinned into the fridge as he handed the cheese for the eggs to Steve. Then he stood back up to face him, his grin safely tucked away. “But was there anything else you wanted?”

“Waffles, maybe? And do we have everything for croissants?”

Of course. “Pillsbury croissants or from-scratch croissants?” Bucky feigned.

“Do we even have the canned kind?”

“That’s beside the point.”

“From scratch?” Steve asked with a hopeful smile and his eyes ticked to the fridge.

Bucky stared Steve down. “You peeked in the bowl, didn’t you?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Steve responded, eyes impossibly wide.

Bucky’s, on the other hand, narrowed. “I call bullshit.”

Steve shrugged, either because he knew he was busted, or because he couldn’t think of a good enough answer, Bucky had no idea.

He just shook his head and turned back to the fridge to pull out the croissant dough that had been rising since yesterday. “Pain in my ass,” he muttered under his breath, but still chuckled to himself. These, at least, had been the plan for breakfast all along.

Steve snickered back and bumped Bucky’s hip, making him stumble slightly into the fridge door. Without looking, Bucky reached out and shoved Steve, making him stumble as well. Light laughter hit his ears, and Bucky melted into a contented smile. Steve already sounded better than he had earlier.

Bucky shifted around to the cupboards to pull out the dry goods he would need, and immediately got to work making Steve what they had dubbed ‘A Superhero Breakfast’. It had started about six months into Bucky’s recovery, when he still felt like he was worthless to the world. Steve had actually been the first one to do it.

After a particularly nasty nightmare that involved Bucky’s bullet’s ringing true on the helicarrier, he’d had woken up first convinced that he’d killed Steve, and then later thinking there was no part of him that should be allowed to roam the world ever again. Steve had proceeded to spend the rest of the night soothing him and reminding him that he’d been a victim, not a villain, and that he was strong and a hero for working so hard to find his way home. When dawn had rolled up on them, Steve had set about making them a breakfast big enough to feed a family of six, and had called it The Superhero Breakfast because he wanted to make sure Bucky always knew that he was Steve’s hero.

The next time a nightmare had snuck up on them, it had been Steve that time. Bucky still didn’t know what he was doing, but he went about repaying Steve’s kindness from before with his own superhero breakfast.

This wasn’t something they did after every bad night; they only did it when there was no chance of going back to sleep. That and when they were too freaked out to even think about getting turned on. Because sometimes that worked too.
“Are you gonna work on the bacon, or are you just gonna stand there staring at my ass?” Bucky asked after about 30 minutes. He was just about to put the croissants in the oven and get started on the rest, and in that time, Steve hadn’t moved at all except to get in Bucky’s way.

“Stare at your ass. It seems like a better use of my time, to be honest.”

Bucky reached over and picked up the pack of bacon off the counter, before pivoting around and shoving it at Steve. “Make the goddamn bacon, you lazy shit.”

“Sorry,” Steve whispered, his tone suddenly serious. He put his hand over Bucky’s where he’d slapped the bacon against Steve’s chest. “I say I’m staring at your ass, but it’s your alive ass, and I’m getting distracted.”

Awash in guilt, Bucky opened his mouth to respond, but closed it when nothing came out. As Steve continued to gaze at him though, his guilt wavered, instantly replaced by suspicion. “Are you fucking with me right now?” he asked, eyes narrowed.

It took good thirty seconds before Steve dissolved into giggles.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake...” Bucky pushed off of Steve and turned back to the mess on the counter. He picked up the eggs and pointed them at his boyfriend. “You want your breakfast, you get to work, Mister.”

Steve held up his hands — and the bacon — in surrender. “All right, all right.” He smiled at Bucky as he grabbed the scissors to cut open the pack. He leaned against the counter next to where Bucky had begun cracking eggs into a bowl. “I wasn’t kidding, though. That was why I’d gotten distracted.” He gave a small shake of his head. “Dream really fucked me tonight...”

Bucky leaned over and planted a kiss on Steve’s cheek. “The point was that it was just a dream. Remember that.”

Steve snorted. “You sound like Dr. Meyers.” He turned around and placed the open packet of bacon on the counter next to the stove. “I just... I can’t handle train dreams, you know that. And I especially can’t handle the dreams where you’re” — he leaned against the counter and shuddered — “him. I’m fighting you, when you are.” He turned to fix his gaze on Bucky. “Every single time.”

“I know,” Bucky responded quietly, and their lips met before Bucky had even realized either of them had moved.

When they broke apart, he let out a hollow laugh and turned back to the eggs to start whisking them. “You know, you still fight me all the time,” he pointed out with a smile, trying to lighten the mood. “Only this time, it’s because I used up all of that weird shampoo you like.”

“Which you’re replacing, you dick,” Steve huffed in irritation, despite giving Bucky his own smile.

“It’s weird and smells like wood chips, and I used it up for your own good.” He waved his fork at Steve, getting egg on the counter and the floor. “You’ll thank me later; you know you will.”

Steve laughed and turned on the burner. “Yeah, we’ll see about that.”

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It was just approaching six by the time all the food was laid out on the table. It was all of Steve’s favorite breakfast foods, but Bucky had taken it a step further with a waffle ice-cream sandwich and an absolutely massive banana split.
Steve let out a low whistle as they surveyed the table. “You outdid yourself this time, Buck,” he whispered.

Bucky preened at the compliment and turned to smile at Steve. “You think so?”

“Yeah. I do.” Steve reached over to pull Bucky into his arms, kissing him deeply. Bucky immediately tried to return the kiss — wrapping his arms around Steve’s neck — only for Steve to step back and place a finger over Bucky’s lips. “Hold that thought.”

Without another word he turned and disappeared into their bedroom, and Bucky just stood there feeling slightly wrong-footed. That had actually been a pretty damn good kiss. Who the hell did Steve think he was breaking a kiss like that?

Bucky was about to open his mouth and shout those exact words at Steve, when he reappeared holding his camera. He waved it at Bucky with an excited smile and walked back over.

Bucky just eyed the thing. “Seriously, Stevie?”

“What?” Steve glanced at him in confusion.

“Tell me you did not just break that kiss so you could go be one of those weird ass people who has to take pictures of their food.”

Steve laughed and leaned in to give Bucky a fucking peck. “Oh, but it’s your food, baby.”

“Damn right, it is,” Bucky grunted. Steve laughed and turned back to the table to snap a few photos of all the food laid out. There was so much there, most people would probably assume they had made breakfast for about a dozen friends, but when push came to shove, both men could easily put away all the food in front of them.

After a minute, Steve moved to the other end of the table to prop the camera up on a few of his sketchbooks. “I want to get a picture of us in front of it,” he explained before Bucky even had a chance to ask.

“You are so weird, Stevie,” Bucky said with an affectionate laugh. Steve didn’t look up when he smiled, but Bucky could still see the blush that had crept up his face. He’d embarrassed his Stevie. Success.

Bucky went and sat down while Steve fiddled with his toy. When he finished, he came and sat next to Bucky and pulled him close. “Thirty-second timer,” he said, and turned to smile at the camera. Bucky followed suit just before the flash went off, signaling that their picture had been taken.

“Good job, baby,” Steve whispered into his ear, then he turned and dug into the first thing he could grab, which turned out to be the ice cream sandwich.

That’s when Bucky remembered the timer feature he’d been reading about on his own camera phone. “I’m gonna take one of us with my phone too. This spread needs to go online.”

Mouth full, Steve just smiled at him, so Bucky got up and ran back to grab his phone off the kitchen counter. He wiped it on his pants to get the flour off of it and went back to replace Steve’s camera with his own.

As he sat back down, Steve had switched to the banana split. “All this food, and of course you start with the ice cream,” he commented with a laugh.
“Well, see the thing is, I’m of the philosophy —"

FLASH!

Both men turned to look at the camera.

“Oops,” Bucky murmured. He turned back and caught Steve’s eye. They gazed in mild shock at each other for half a second before they both dissolved into a fit of laughter.

All it took was Steve being ridiculous again, and it seemed Bucky had completely forgotten what he was doing. Still laughing, he stood up to reset the camera and try again.

“No, wait, look at it first,” Steve said. “Candid shots are always better than staged photos. Trust me on this.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Because you’re the artist?”

“Because I’m the artist,” Steve answered, ignoring Bucky.

Bucky chuckled to himself, but did as he was told. Sure enough, the picture seemed to have captured the two of them perfectly. He was starting to think his phone was better at this than he was.

“All right, fine,” he conceded. He walked back to his chair and showed Steve the photo. “You win this round. The phone got it right.”

“See? Told you.”

Bucky shook his head as he pulled up his Instagram and loaded it.

OK, I may have exaggerated a bit last week when I said that Steve’s mornings (and nights) were perfect. He’s like me, he has nightmares sometimes (often...) and wakes up in the middle of the night. That’s when I fix him a special ”4:00am Superhero Breakfast” with a banana split, croissants, pancakes, eggs and bacon and waffles. What? He’s Captain America. Do you think a bowl of Cheerios is enough for him?

He hit the Tumblr button, but first turned his phone back to Steve before sending it out. “This work?” he asked.

Steve, spoon halfway to his mouth, stopped and peered at the little screen, reading the text. After a second, he nodded. “That works,” he said before shoving the mound of ice cream into his mouth.

Bucky smiled and quickly hit send. Then he set his phone aside to grab his fork and the nearest plate. He was starving.
I met Clint today, visibly on his way to a date. He refused to tell me the name of the lucky lady but he was a bit baffled when I told him to say "Hi" to Natasha.

Bucky ignored the weird glances he got as people passed him on the street. Okay, fine, maybe he was dressed up like snowmageddon was coming, but did these lemmings not realize how fucking cold this rain was? Especially when it had soaked you to the bone?

Fucking idiots.

He stood under the glass awning of Avengers Tower, just outside the side entrance that was used for residents only — namely him and his friends. True, he and Steve didn’t actually live here, but that hadn’t stopped Tony from giving them their own floor just in case.

And that just in case turned out to be Steve politely asking him to stay at the tower while he was out on a mission. They’d both had some pretty horrific nightmares this past week, and Steve wasn’t all that comfortable with Bucky being alone in their apartment if he had another one. Most times, Bucky would have scoffed at the idea, but for once he chose not to argue. For once he agreed.
When it came to their living quarters here, it was just like at home — Bucky could do what he wanted, including smoking inside. But sometimes, like now, Bucky actually preferred smoking outside. As ironic as it sounded even in his own head, he liked the clean air that rain brought on. Just not the goddamned cold.

It was just that there wasn’t a chance on this side of hell or the other that he was gonna stand up on the fifty-first floor where the wind chill factor dropped the outside temperature by almost twenty fucking degrees.

So he’d come down here. The elevator ride was only about a minute anyway.

He took a drag of his cigarette, enjoying the head rush he got from the nicotine hitting his body. Most cigarettes didn’t affect him all that much, but he’d went out and bought a pack of Turkish blacks earlier, and it was the closest he’d been able to get in a while to the feel of a real cigarette hitting his lungs.

“Hey, Bio-Man!”

Bucky turned to find Clint climbing out of the back of a cab some twenty feet away. He popped open an umbrella before inching his way out of the back of the car — from the looks of it, trying to avoid the puddle at the edge of the curb.

When he’d fully stood up, Bucky smiled and waved at him, but didn’t bother with his own hello. Even with his hearing aids in, Bucky seriously doubted Clint could hear him over the torrential downpour that had descended upon their heads.

Clint waved back, then reached in to grab something off the seat before shutting the door. As he turned back around, Bucky saw a bouquet of red roses in his hand.

It was then that Bucky really took in what Clint was wearing. The man had never been a master of cleanliness or fashion, yet right now, he was dressed to the nines in a dark blue suit, complete with a tie and everything. He was carrying roses, his shoes were shined, his hair was combed, and aside from a few scratches on his face from their last mission, he looked damn good. *Clearly* he was going on a date with Nat.

He whipped out his phone really quick and snapped a picture as Clint walked up. He *had* to send this to Steve later; he’d never believe it otherwise.

He shoved his phone back in his pocket for now, though, and stuck his cigarette between his lips, so he’d have access to both hands.

*Well, don’t you just shine up like a new penny,* Bucky signed slowly. He knew he fumbled a bit on the ‘shined up’ part, but Clint seemed to get the gist of it.

“Well, what can I say.” Clint smirked. “Some of us were just born so damn handsome, it barely takes any effort at all to look this good.”

Bucky laughed. *And by barely, you mean a twenty-man team, right?*

“I think you’re projecting yourself on to me there, buddy.”

*Fuck you. Steve thinks I look hot.*

“Because the guy who tried to get checkered shirts and khakis to make a comeback is a reliable source.”
A flash of childish irritation hit Bucky, and in response, he ended up throwing every single swear word he knew in ASL back in his friend’s face.

Clint, the bastard, didn’t even blink. Instead he just snickered and gave an approved nod. “Not bad, there. You’ve been practicing.”

Bucky took his cigarette out of his mouth and shrugged. “Truth be told, it annoys Steve to no end that I speak Russian with Nat, and instead of learning French again so that he and I could talk in another language, I decided to learn ASL instead.”

“Aw, poor Steve.” Clint laughed. “Guy can’t catch a break, can he?” He shifted the flowers around so he could get under the awning with Bucky and close the umbrella. “Of course, if he were a real friend, he’d learn ASL along with you.”

*That’s what I told him!* Bucky signed, cigarette waving precariously around. He pulled his hand back and gave Clint an apologetic half smile before adding, “I’ll have to make him a deal. He learns ASL, I’ll learn French again.”

“You used to speak French?” Clint asked, tilting his head, and Bucky had to suppress a laugh because, right then, the man looked *exactly* like his dog, Lucky.

“You and your damn dog make quite a pair, don’t you?” He laughed and took one more drag of his cigarette before dropping it on the ground.

Clint shook his head and smiled. “Why do you ask?”

“That head tilt you just did?” Bucky mimicked the move as he stomped out his smoke. “Exactly like Lucky.”

Clint barked out a laugh. “Aw, man, it was not!”

Bucky nodded solemnly. “*Just* like Lucky.”

“I’d hit you, but it’s not worth my neck to get into a brawl right now.”

“Speaking of which.” Bucky pulled out another cigarette and eyed him shrewdly. “Watcha got goin’ on tonight? You look mighty fancy for a guy heading home.” He lit his cigarette before sticking a thumb over his shoulder at the building in question.

“Oh, I’m not going home, I’m —”

Bucky smiled sweetly at Clint. “Yes?”

“Hey, where’s that boyfriend of yours?” Clint glanced around, like he was actually looking for Steve. “I thought you two were surgically attached or something.”

“Don’t change the subject on me, Barton.” Bucky stepped forward and jabbed his cigarette in Clint’s direction, on purpose this time, making him flinch back slightly. “Just admit it. You’ve got a date with the Russian, don’t you?”

Clint smiled cheekily at him. “We have a date tonight?”

“Very funny. The *other* Russian.”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about.”
Bucky narrowed his eyes at Clint, who in turn, stared back, unblinking. Okay, so that was how this was gonna be. Bucky took a deep breath.

“Who are the flowers for?”

“Nurse up on ten who patched me up yesterday.”

“Why bring her flowers?”

“She ordered pizza for me while I waited.”

“You dress up for her, too?”

“Thought about hitting up a jazz joint later that someone in Logistics told me about.”

“You hate jazz and you never say joint. Try again, Barton.”

“Expanding my horizons?”

“You’re expanding something tonight, but I seriously doubt it’ll be your horizons.”

At this point, something in the back of Bucky’s head told him he should be impressed at the way Clint was holding his ground, but right now that didn’t matter. All that mattered was that the fucker had a date with Natasha and Bucky was gonna make him fucking admit it.

“Everyone knows Nat was your date on Halloween.”

“Pretty sure my hitting on everything under the sun is proof enough that she wasn’t.”

“Actually, that wouldn’t be the first time I’ve seen Nat drink a date under the table, only to let the guy make an ass of himself for being too stupid to know when to quit.”

Clint sighed, like he was put out. “If you must know, she went with me to keep the new guy in the weapons lab from asking her.”

“The new guy in the weapons lab is gayer than me and Steve combined.”

“How the fuck do you know that?”

“We have a club.”

That got Clint to falter, and Bucky took on a sort of smug satisfaction as he watched the idea of an LGBT group at SHIELD kick around in Clint’s head. Not that there was, though. Bucky just knew the weapons guy was gay after he’d caught him checking out Steve’s ass.

Bucky may have growled at the man. Words may have also been exchanged. Politely, in Bucky’s opinion. Not so much in Steve’s.

Finally, Bucky laughed and took a drag off of his smoke, shaking his head. “Just admit it, man.” He smiled at Clint, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Everyone knows you guys are a thing.”

Clint huffed in exasperation. “I swear, I don’t have a date with Nat! I’m just dropping off some flowers — because I’m a nice guy — and then heading out for some music.”

“Then you won’t mind if I tag along?” Bucky arched an eyebrow. “Unlike you, I actually love jazz.”
“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” Clint replied stubbornly. He turned to walk in, but Bucky shot out a hand to grab his arm and stop him.

“I’m gonna find out, you know,” Bucky said, locking eyes with Clint when he turned back around. “Steve’s gone for another week, and I have no assignments coming up. I’m bored, and you two aren’t getting out of this.”

A slow smile spread across Clint’s lips. A challenge, if Bucky ever saw one. “Still don’t know what you’re talking about.”

With that, he shrugged Bucky off and headed inside.

Oh, this was gonna be fun. Bucky dropped the cigarette in his haste to get his phone out of his pocket, but he hardly cared. He fired off the picture to Steve first.

*Clint is either too stupid to know that everyone knows, or too locked in his own little world with Nat to care. — B*

A text came back a minute later.

*I’m going with option B. And wow, he really does shine up like a new penny, doesn’t he? — S*

*That’s what I said! — B*

*I’m gonna crack them, you know. — B*

*Good to know you’re spending your time wisely. — S*

*Well, maybe next time you’ll think twice about going off on a mission without me. I should never be left to my own devices. This is your fault, really. — B*

*Well, when you get caught, don’t tell Natasha it’s my fault. I would much rather her kill you than me. — S*

*Why do I love you again? — B*

It took another minute, but all Bucky got back was a picture of Steve half naked, lying in a bed somewhere, smirking at the camera. Bucky quickly saved it to his favorites folder.

*That’s an acceptable reason. — B*

*Thought so. — S*

Bucky laughed and turned around to head back in himself. Now that he wasn’t smoking, the cold and rain had reared their ugly heads, reminding him of their presence. As he headed to the bank of elevators that led to the apartments, he opened up his Instagram app and loaded the picture of Clint.

The challenge had been placed in front of Bucky with that stupid little smile Clint had given him, and now Bucky was gonna throw down the gauntlet by posting the picture for all the world to see.

He hit the button to call the elevator, then typed out his caption.
I met Clint today, visibly on his way to a date. He refused to tell me the name of the lucky lady but he was a bit baffled when I told him to say "Hi" to Natasha.

Just as he added Tumblr, the doors slid open, and Bucky hit share before stepping inside. Those two clowns were hiding from him, and he would get them to admit it, or die trying (because Nat might actually kill him).

Not that he cared. He finally had something to do while Steve was away.

He smiled to himself as the doors slid closed. The game was fucking on.
Chapter Summary

"Blah blah blah, we're not dating", "Blah blah blah, shut up Barnes". Ha! Ha! I knew it! What? I'm a spy, I spy. Don't judge me for doing what I do best! And Stevie is out of town, I'm bored.

"Blah blah blah, we're not dating", "Blah blah blah, shut up Barnes". Ha! Ha! I knew it! What? I'm a spy, I spy. Don't judge me for doing what I do best! And Stevie is out of town, I'm bored.

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Bucky sat on his perch atop of Grand Central Station and inhaled the last drag of his last cigarette of the pack he'd bought before ascending to the roof. He hadn't expected that fuck off, Clint, to take so damn long to leave the tower, but here Bucky was, two hours into his stakeout, and bored out of his fucking mind.

Small price to pay if it meant catching that jackass out with Nat.

Steve had called it an exceptional waste of his time (and also a death sentence, when he eventually caught up with Natasha).

Bucky called it honing his skills in the art of espionage.
Steve then tried to remind him that he was a soldier and a sniper, not a spy.

Bucky had called him a goddamned dirty liar, and just you watch me prove you wrong, I’m gonna nail them for this, you’ll see.

That’s when Steve had called him Jason Bourne, and the joke hadn’t been lost on Bucky, and if he’d been able to reach through the phone and slap Steve, well there would have been a super soldier handprint across that super fucker’s smug face.

He dropped the cigarette and stared forlornly at it as he stamped it out next to the other nineteen that littered the ground around him.

“Seriously, Barton,” he grumbled to himself, and looked up again to watch the residential exit of Avengers Tower. “I know you have plans with her tonight. Just fucking leave already.”

Still no movement from the door. Bucky crouched down at the edge of the roof again and waited.

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After he’d run into Clint a week earlier, he’d sworn he’d figure them out — either get them to admit it or catch them in the act. Neither of those had been easy.

Truth be told, he knew they’d never crack. Natasha was twice as good as anyone he’d ever met when it came to withholding information, and while Clint was a lot easier to crack, he was much too afraid of Nat to open his mouth when it came to these sorts of things.

Simply put: If Natasha didn’t want you to know, you weren’t going to know. At least not by extracting it from anyone around her, anyway.

That meant that Bucky had to do some digging on his own. And true, maybe he wasn’t a spy, per se, but he was damn good at paying attention and unlike the rest of the world, he was smart enough to know that two plus two never equaled four.

If you weren’t looking for the simple, then the obvious would always present itself.

Now, Nat always stayed at the tower whenever Bucky was there. She was the closest friend he had outside of Steve, so it was nice having her around.

That had worked to Bucky’s advantage.

For starters, that was the whole reason Bucky had caught Clint. Bucky suspected right away that the reason Clint had been out all dressed up was because he’d actually forgotten to pick up the flowers and went to get them before heading to get Nat. Otherwise, they probably would have just headed straight for the underground garage and left together without anyone being the wiser.

That bit Bucky had figured out after tapping into the tower’s security feed. He couldn’t see inside of Nat or Clint’s apartments, but he could see the elevator feeds and the whole of the garage itself.

And amazingly, both just happened to malfunction for exactly thirty-eight minutes and twenty-two seconds after Clint had left Bucky.

After that, Bucky had carefully stalked Natasha’s schedule. He also followed Clint around, but that was more to throw off Natasha’s scent than anything else. She would expect him to assume Clint would slip up. She would never think Bucky would expect her to.
Which is how he’d found himself in the air ducts above her living room that morning, as she chatted with Hill over coffee, cereal and those godforsaken blood oranges (no fruit should be the color of blood — it was just unnatural).

They spent the better part of their time together going over mission tactics and the latest tech from R&D. There was apparently a new set of Widow’s Bites Natasha was itching to test out.

At one point, the pair had talked about fighting styles, and ended up have a lively ten-minute argument over who would win in a fight — Agent May or some chick named Buffy Summers. Bucky had never heard of her, but she sounded kind of awesome. He’d made a mental note to figure out what division she was in and see if she’d wanna go a few rounds with him. Something about their conversation made Bucky think she might actually be able to kick his ass, and he was painfully curious to see if that was true.

It was while he was running over the various agents’ faces in his head that he caught Natasha say, “...and I doubt I’ll be home before two, if I come home tonight at all.”

Bucky had perked up and twisted around to hear a little better.

“What time are you heading out?” Hill had asked.

Natasha didn’t answer right away. After about ten seconds, she said, “I think around five? But reservations aren’t until eight.”

“Then why leave so early?”

“Because Catulus is bored and if I leave—”

Whatever else she’d said, Bucky hadn’t heard, because the moment she’d said catulus, he knew she’d fucked up, and he’d turned to head back to his floor.

Because catulus was Latin, and sure, it meant a lot of things, like puppy, cub, and whelp...

But it also meant kitten — a nickname Natalia had given to him a very long time ago. She usually called him kotenok in their native Russian, but she’d also called him kitten in about twenty-five other languages, including Latin.

She’d been talking about him, which meant she knew he was after them.

It meant she had something to hide.

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Ten minutes after his cigarette lifeline had extinguished itself, Bucky just about jumped out of his skin at the sound of Steve’s personal ringtone blaring from inside his pocket. He yanked his phone out before Sir Mix-A-lot could start rapping about ‘rump-o’-smooth-skin’.

“This better be good, Rogers,” Bucky barked into the phone.

“He’s not there,” was Steve’s reply. Bucky pulled the phone back and blinked at it before putting it back to his ear.

“How the fuck do you know who’s not where?”

Steve snorted. “I told Sam what you were doing.”
“Of course he did.

“You know, one of these days, you could maybe not tell your other boyfriend everything I get up to,” Bucky muttered.

“You mean like you don’t tell your girlfriend everything about me?”

Steve never had to know that Bucky responded by sticking his tongue out at him.

“She’s not my girlfriend. She’s dating Clint now, or have you not been paying attention to everything I’ve been doing all week?”

“I have, actually. Which is why, if you’d stop being weirdly jealous and bitchy for two seconds, you’d know that by telling Sam, I was able to gather intel for you, since neither Clint nor Natasha would ever expect Sam to fall to the dark side and help you out.”

“I thought you said this was — and a quote — ‘a colossal waste of your time that can only lead to death and destruction at the hands of one redheaded Russian assassin’?”

Bucky could practically hear Steve shrug through the phone. “Yeah, well, just because this is all of those things, doesn’t mean I’m not gonna help you. If I didn’t follow all of your insane ideas, you never would have found out Mary Richter was kissing Tommy Jacobs behind your back.”

“Would too have.”

“You keep thinking that, buddy.”

Bucky took a deep breath and shook his head. “So what did Sam tell you?”

“Clint left just over an hour ago,” he said, letting Bucky change the subject. “He took the new tunnel that leads to the subway station.”

Bucky’s brows knitted in confusion. “I thought the tunnel wasn’t ready yet.”

“It’s not.”

Bucky switched the phone from his metal hand to his flesh one when it started to creak from gripping it too hard. “So you’re telling me the bastard actually, I don’t fucking know... thwarted me?”

Steve mercifully kept his laughing to a minimum. “Looks like it.”

Bucky wasted no time standing up and heading towards the roof access doors. “Any idea where he went?”

“You know those weird security stickers they put on books and stuff that have little metal strips in them that go off if you try and leave the store with them?”

Bucky pulled up short halfway to the doors, because what the fuck?

“Uh, yeah...” he said slowly. “What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

Steve kept going like he made perfect sense. “Did you know those things could be made into tracking devices?”

Bucky’s confusion trickled into a wicked grin. “I didn’t actually,” he answered. “Tell me more.”
“Uhuh. Yep. And as I’m sure you do know, Clint loses everything. Including his phone. For about ten minutes this morning after Sam dropped by his floor.”

“Steve?”

“Yes?”

Bucky’s voice dropped sinfully low. “Just so you know, when you get home in two days? Plan on me fucking you into the floor.”

Steve’s laugh was just as low and just as dirty as he said, “Happy hunting, baby.”

The line went dead only to be followed by a text message with a link a few seconds later.

*You’ll need this to get the tracking app. — S*

Bucky quickly downloaded the app and opened it. It was simple enough — just a map of the city with a few moving dots on it. He saw a search bar up top, and typed in ‘Hawkeye’. Sure enough, the map zeroed in on a purple dot not far from Times Square.

As he headed back through the door and down the stairs, he grabbed his headphones, plugged them in and hit play on the Spotify playlist he’d been building while he’d been unnecessarily waiting Clint out.

The first song may or may not have been the theme to Mission Impossible.

The second may or may not have been the theme to James Bond.

Everyone could just shut the fuck up; his playlist was *glorious*.

~~~~

Times Square was actually only a few blocks from the tower and Grand Central. He followed the little dot closely as it made its way up Broadway before stopping on the corner at 44th St. At this point, Bucky was only a block and a half away at 6th and 43rd.

He ran down 43rd Street, past the Stephen Sondheim Theatre and the ABC building, quickly rounding up onto Broadway as the little dot moved further north towards 45th, and the main section of Times Square.

As was usual with, well, every point in the year ever, Times Square was a crowded mess of tourists and street performers. Bucky hugged close to the buildings, wary of all the people around him, but still keeping an eye out for any sign of Clint or Natasha. She may not have been a dot on his map, but he knew she was with him.

Bucky just barely missed tripping over some little girl who was trying to get her picture with the worst rendition of Mickey Mouse he’d ever seen in his life when he spotted a shock of red hair and purple winter coat.

*Gotcha.* Bucky smiled to himself and slid to the left to get behind an equally vulgar-looking Elmo. The person in the suit jumped slightly when Bucky stepped in close, only to start mumbling something about taking a picture, though Bucky was too preoccupied to pay attention.

He crept around the Elmo so he could bleed in with some random family that was walking up the street in the direction he needed to go, his eyes never moving from the red hair, purple coat, and from
what he could make out now, a black and white-striped beanie.

He still wasn’t sure though. Red was definitely with some blonde guy, but Bucky wasn’t a betting man. He wasn’t calling it until he got a good look at their faces.

It wasn’t until he was no more than five feet away when Blondie finally slipped an arm around Red’s waist, pulling her close. It was then that Red turned to smile at him, and —

“Fancy meeting you two here,” Bucky murmured in Natasha’s ear.

Which is how he found himself flat on his back, a heel to his neck, in the middle of Times Square, because one should never sneak up on a Russian assassin who’d been trained to kill since she was about eight years old.

Totally worth it.

Natasha groaned the second she saw who was on the ground. “Goddammit, Barnes,” she snapped, moving off of him and reaching a hand down to help him up. “Couldn’t you just leave well enough alone?”

Bucky took her hand and jumped to his feet, the wolfish grin he was wearing making him feel every bit as smug as he was. “And miss finally catching you two? Not a chance in hell.”

“How did you even find us, anyway?” Clint asked from where he stood off to the side, holding what appeared to be a couple shopping bags from some lingerie store.

“Buying yourself a new garter belt there, Barton?” Bucky asked, nodding at the bags.

“Actually, it’s a teddy for you, princess,” Clint shot back. He hit Bucky with the bags and added, “Don’t change the subject. I know you didn’t see me leave. How did you find us?”

“That’s classified, my friend.” Bucky threw an arm around Clint’s shoulder and smiled at the two of them. “But if you must know, our friends like me more than they like you.”

Natasha folded her arms. “Start talking, Barnes, or your balls are coming home with me.”

Bucky sighed. He took his arm away from Clint so that he could wrap it around Nat’s shoulders instead. “No,” he said evenly, looking her in the eye. “And you know why? Because the only reason anyone even helped me is so that you two could stop feeling like you need to hide from us.” Natasha opened her mouth to respond, but Bucky touched her cheek to stop her. “Now hold on a sec, crazy girl.” He glanced back and forth between the two. “No one’s saying you have to go big on the PDA, but we’re your friends, and we wanna be happy for you guys. All I’m asking is that maybe you let us.”

Natasha and Clint exchanged a look before Clint finally shrugged. “He already knows, Tasha. And I don’t think Steve would take too kindly to you killing him to cover it up.”

“You don’t think Steve isn’t in on this?” she asked. “I’m killing him too.”

“Which I would be all for, except, you know.” He waved a hand a Bucky. “He has a point.”

Natasha watched Clint for a moment longer before she sighed and turned to Bucky, wrapping an arm around his waist. She kissed him on the cheek and whispered, “Moy malen’kiy kotenok.”

“Vsegda,” he whispered back. Then he smiled at her. “That’s how I caught you, by the way.
Catulus?"

Her eyes went wide. “How did you...?”

Bucky just snickered and leaned in to kiss her on the forehead. Then he stepped out of her embrace so he could pull his phone out. “I want a picture,” he said, waving it at them. “I worked fucking hard to get to you two and I think I earned it.”

“Is this going on your Instagram?” Natasha asked, eyeing the phone.

“It doesn’t have to if you don’t want it to,” he replied honestly. “It’s just that, I had a lot of fun chasing you two down this week, and I’d really like to share it.”

Again, Clint and Natasha exchanged a look, silently communicating and clearly understanding each other. It made Bucky wonder just how long this thing had been going on between the two of them.

Eventually Natasha looked back at him, a steely glint in her eye. “All right, fine. But one condition.”

Bucky nodded. “Name it.”

“You tell us how you found us.”

“You promise not to kill any of the other parties involved?”

“I most certainly will not make that promise.”

“Even if certain parts of it were genius and might come in handy on future missions?”

“Fine. We can negotiate.”

Bucky smiled at her. “That’s all I ask.”

He held up his phone as Clint pulled Natasha in for a picture of the two of them. Truthfully, the picture turned out really sweet, and seeing how much the two were clearly in love made Bucky miss Steve something fierce.

He loaded the image quickly and added the caption, "Blah blah blah, we’re not dating", "Blah blah blah, shut up Barnes". Ha! Ha! I knew it! What? I’m a spy, I spy. Don’t judge me for doing what I do best! And Stevie is out of town, I’m bored., before sharing it with the world.

It was barely thirty seconds later that a text message came through.

I see you found them. And that you’re still alive. — S

Bucky smiled and typed back his own response.

I am, but you should maybe consider not coming home in two days. Stay hidden until I’ve negotiated immunity for you. I’ll send up a flair when the coast is clear. — B

I should have known I wasn’t coming out of this unscathed. — S

Would you have it any other way? — B

Life wouldn’t be much fun if I did. — S

Bucky was still giving his phone a goofy grin when he looked up to find Natasha and Clint nowhere
in sight. Guess they were done with him encroaching on their date.

With a contented smile, he turned and strolled back down Broadway. He looked up at the yellows and blues, the reds and greens shining down on him from the billboards of Times Square. He’d never been much of a fan of the area — not even back during the thirties, when it was a fraction of what it is now.

But the thing was, maybe this all wasn’t so bad. He’d had a few friends back before the war, but for the most part, Steve had pretty much been it. Now, though, Bucky had so much more in his life. If someone had told him even before Hydra that he would one day have a slew of great friends and the love of his life standing proudly at his side, he would have laughed that person right into the loony bin.

Maybe ending up over seventy years past his time wasn’t so bad after all.

Bucky turned to his phone to send Steve one more text.

*Come home — B*

*On my way :) — S*
Normal couples spend Christmas under the tree, opening their presents, giggling and drinking champagne. But we aren't a normal couple, are we Steve? Merry Christmas, love. I wish I could have offered you the Xmas you deserved, I know how important it is to you.

---

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry.

~~~
The wind swept around them in tufts of white and grey. With the ruin of a Hydra base in the background, it was hard to decipher what was ash and what was snow. Too cold to melt, it all just stuck to them in little flakes that dusted their hair and shoulders.

That was another reason Bucky hated the cold. Falling snow looked no different than falling ash, and he’d set the world on fire, only to be frozen over, too many times to be comfortable with either.

An arm snaked around his waist, and Steve rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder. “If it wasn’t so morbid, I’d call it beautiful.”

Leave it to Steve to know what Bucky was thinking about without even trying.

“There’s nothing beautiful about it,” Bucky snapped, only to flinch. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay, baby.” Steve kissed just behind his ear. “We’re almost out of here, anyway. We just need to do a sweep of the areas we didn’t turn to rubble, and then we can go home.”

Bucky smiled before turning in Steve’s arms and wrapped his own around Steve’s neck. “We get to go home soon?”

Steve nodded. “Just in time for Christmas.”

Bucky hummed in contentment before leaning in for a kiss.

~~~

CRACK!

Bucky heard the livewire snap from somewhere far off, but he could barely make out the flash of light underneath the rubble.

It was so dark in here.

So dark...

A whimper escaped his lips, and he pushed again from where his metal hand was trapped by his stomach. But it was the slab of rock above his head that shifted instead, and Bucky immediately snapped his hand back, driving his elbow into the floor beneath him.

A loud buzzing noise filled the small space he was trapped in, pitching upward, culminating in a deafening pop!, and instantly his arm went dead.

“Fuck,” he hissed out, only for fire to rip through his throat.

God, how long had he been screaming for Steve? A couple minutes? An hour?

Was Steve even alive?

Bucky shook the thought out of his head.


Steve was fine. He’d been nowhere near this place when it had blown out.

Had he?
Bucky opened his mouth and screamed again.

~~~~

Bucky watched as Steve ran through the holographic layout Clint had pulled up on his Stark phone. They’d leveled most of the compound, but there still seemed to be a couple outlying buildings that needed to be checked.

“What’s that?” Sam asked as he ran his finger along a tunnel that just stopped about halfway to the edge of the compound. It didn’t seem to go anywhere.

“No idea.” Steve answered, eyeing the spot on the map. He switched on his wrist commlink and held it up. “Hey, Tony. You there?”

“For you, Mr. Universe, always.” Tony’s voice rang out, crystal clear.

Steve just shook his head. “This the only map you’ve got of the base? We’ve got a tunnel on here that leads to nowhere.”

“You doubt me? I’m hurt, Cap.” Steve opened his mouth to say something — probably to tell Tony this wasn’t the time — before Tony cut him off. “As it is, that is the only layout of that place in existence. Either the tunnel goes nowhere, or no one’s supposed to know where it goes.”

“Lovely.”

“You know, you could use with a—” Steve shut off the comm before Tony could finish, and Bucky snickered softly to himself. As much as he liked Tony — they both did — it still tickled him to no end when Steve stopped Tony’s self-importance in its tracks.

“So, what’s the plan, Cap?” Clint asked from his perch on what had once been a support wall. He was busy counting the arrows he had left.

Steve glanced at Clint before he cast his eyes on Bucky. “We’re gonna have to scout it out.”

~~~~

When screaming turned to a forced whisper, Bucky finally gave his voice a rest. For what felt like the hundredth time, he took in his immediate situation.

There were no more than a few inches of open space surrounding most of his upper body. The chunk of wall above his head was close, but not pressing in – and thank every god out there – not moving anymore. And while his legs were completely trapped, he was also thanking the same gods that he could at least still feel them. He didn’t need to lose another limb.

The problem was the slab pressing in on his stomach. That, combined with the limited air flow, was making it hard for him to breathe.

Way to go with the screaming there, jackass, he chastised himself. He had no idea where anyone was, or if there was even a sliver of chance they could hear him –

But, if they could, they would have yelled back.

The thought had panic trickling down Bucky’s spine. If they couldn’t hear him, he wasn’t going to be able to hear them either. And if his screaming hadn’t caught them, then who the fuck knew where they were. If they were out there at all.
His ears began to ring, and the tiny fraction he could see began to get fuzzy around the edges. He thought his heart was going to burst out of his chest, it was pounding so hard, and it took him a second to realize the faint wheezing sound he could hear was his own labored breathing.

He’d tried to get out, he did — he’d even been able to make it into a side tunnel just before the explosion ripped through the place. But everything had caved in. And he’d been so far in when it’d happened, and he was trapped, and where the fuck was Steve?

He shut his eyes and began to count backwards from a hundred, breathing with every few beats. It was somewhere around the sixties before that evened out and somewhere around the twenties that he stopped feeling his pulse thrumming in his veins. He didn’t stop until he hit zero.

He kept his eyes shut and concentrated on breathing the thin air as best he could. He stopped paying attention to his body — what worked and what didn’t. None of that mattered. All that mattered now was Steve. He had to stay alive for Steve.

He wished they were home.

~~~~

Bucky already knew what Steve was getting at. “And how long is that gonna take?”

“I don’t know, Buck,” he answered honestly, the barest hint of an apology already on his face. “If we don’t know where it goes, we have no idea how big –”

“Can’t we just fucking nuke it and be done with it?” Bucky cut in.

“No, Buck,” Steve ground out, pressing his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “We can’t just nuke it and be done with it.”

“Why the fuck –”

“Because we don’t know if there are civilians in there or not!” Steve shouted, throwing his arms out.

Bucky flinched back, like he’d been slapped. Steve rarely ever yelled at him, and usually it was because Bucky was yelling right back.

He glanced around and found the other three eyeing each other, but refusing to look in Steve and Bucky’s direction.

Slowly, he turned a wary eye back on Steve. Guilt was already etched across Steve’s face, but for some reason, Bucky couldn’t bring himself to look him in the eye. Instead, he ducked his head down and took a step back. He wasn’t entirely sure if that step was voluntary.

“Buck?” Steve’s tone was tentative at best. “God, I’m sorry. I just...” Bucky heard, rather than saw, Steve step closer to him. But this time, Bucky felt frozen to the spot. Almost like his brain wouldn’t allow him to move.

It wasn’t until Steve’s hands came into view, held out for Bucky to take if he chose, that he felt himself relax in fractions.

No one was going to get violent with him.

Bucky’s cheeks began to grow warm with mortification. Christ, had he really just thought Steve was going to hit him?
He shook his head and took a deep breath before tangling his metal fingers with Steve’s. A gentle tug on his hand, and Bucky stepped closer, his eyes on their joined hands.

“Hey, look at me,” Steve murmured. When Bucky still couldn’t bring himself to lift his head, Steve tipped his fingers under Bucky’s chin. “Baby, please.”

Bucky finally, slowly, glanced upward — nerves shot, his breath shaky. Steve leaned in and kissed him on the forehead.

“I’m so sorry I yelled at you,” Steve said, his eyes sad. Bucky tried to shake his head, but Steve just pressed his fingers against the side of Bucky’s throat. The touch had always had a calming effect on him, and tonight was no different. He leaned into it as Steve continued. “Really, I’m sorry. I thought we were gonna get to go home, but it seems we’re nowhere near that and I...”

“Steve, it’s Christmas,” Bucky pleaded quietly. “Can’t we just, I don’t know, come back in a couple days?”

Steve chuckled softly. “And let these bastards have a chance to regroup? I don’t think so.”

Anger and frustration quickly warred out any embarrassment Bucky had been feeling. “You deserve better than this.” He locked eyes with Steve. “It’s fucking Christmas, and you should get to spend it with the ones you love —”

“I am spending it with the ones I love, you doof.” Steve wrapped his fingers around Bucky’s nape and brushed his thumb along Bucky’s jaw. “Anywhere you are is the only place I need to be.”

“But —”

“No.” Steve had his Captain voice on. Then he leaned in and kissed Bucky with the same level of authority. “We might have to spend Christmas working, but as long as you’re by my side, that is the only thing that matters to me.”

“Stevie...” How the hell Bucky ever deserved this man, he would never know. Their hands still locked together, Bucky reached up with his free one and pulled Steve in for a kiss. It was sweet and chaste, and not the kind of kiss he really wanted to give him right then, but that didn’t matter, he guessed. It was four in the morning on Christmas day, and Bucky had Steve in his arms.

~~~

Every time Bucky blinked, he saw spots. It was so strange to see spots when there was no light to create them. But there they were, swimming in and out of his vision whenever his eyes opened and closed.

He tried to take a deep breath, but each time, the pressure on his stomach and lower chest ached just a little bit more. He licked his lips, but there was no saliva, and all he tasted was dry skin.

That’s when the needling began. With every spot in his vision, a tiny pinprick of pain would show itself behind his eyes and across his left temple.


He was dehydrated, he knew it. How long had he been in here? Sometimes it felt like minutes — most times it felt like hours upon hours. The latter was most likely the case.

He tried to lift his metal arm again, but still nothing. He wasn’t surprised; he knew it was fried out.
But *fuck*, he’d hoped...

He was sure he’d heard somewhere that the sign of insanity was doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result. And he was sure he was going insane, but god, he needed his arm.

“*Stevie.*” Bucky cried into the darkness. He knew he was supposed to be strong, to hold on until Steve got him out (*he would get him out, goddamnit*), but right now he felt so small. So helpless. He hadn’t felt this at a loss for himself since he was strapped to that fucking table back in ‘43. At least when he’d been the Soldier, he never really remembered it. Or when he did, he expected it.

Bucky ground his teeth together, and tamped down on the hysterical fear that was growing inside of him. Steve had rescued him then, and he would rescue him now. There was no *fucking way* he was going to his grave. Not on Christmas.

If it even *was* still Christmas.

~~~

Steve, Sam, and Clint stood hovering over the layout of the Hydra compound, talking strategy. Bucky took a drag off his smoke, and watched as Steve broke down the remaining two buildings and the godforsaken tunnel system, while Sam pointed out what seemed to be weak spots and Clint talked vantage points.

They were better at this than he was. So was Nat, but after Bucky’s freak out, she’d chosen to sit out this conversation so she could stay next to him. Keep him on the level.

“You need to stop beating yourself up over this, James,” Nat reminded him. Again. He cast a warning eye on her, but said nothing. She just sighed and pushed off the wall they were leaning against to turn and face him. “I’m serious. No one thinks less of you for having moments of relapse, especially him.” She nodded in Steve’s direction. “He loves you.”

“I know he loves me,” Bucky muttered around his cigarette. “But I’m a fucking soldier, and we’re *in the field*. I can’t have moments like that.”

Nat huffed out a derisive laugh. “We all have moments of doubt, Bucky, *especially* in the field. It’s what you do when you’re in action that counts.”

“And what about Steve?”

“What *about* Steve?”

Bucky threw his cigarette on the ground and turned towards her. “No matter what he and I are to each other, when we’re out here” — he waved his hand at the ruins around them — “he needs me to be the soldier. Not the man he *constantly* has to up pick the pieces of.”

Nat was watching him, her eyes narrowed. “You meant a soldier, right?”

He shook his head in confusion. “What?”

“You said *the* soldier.” She took a step towards him, arms crossed. “I’m assuming you meant Steve’s Sergeant, and not the Winter Soldier, because if *that’s* what you’re trying to be when you come out here, then go the fuck home *right now.*”

“That wasn’t...” For the second time that night, Bucky took a step back. He stared at her wide-eyed. “*No*, Natalia. I’m not trying... I would *never* try and bring him into this.” He scrubbed his hand down
his face before turning pleading eyes on her. “I’m not him anymore.”

Nat’s piercing stare bored into him as she assessed him. She must have been satisfied with whatever she saw, because she nodded and said, “Damn right you’re not.”

Bucky breathed out before turning to lean up against the wall again. “I just want to do right by him when we’re out here. I don’t ever want to give him a reason to doubt me or think less of me.”

“You can’t honestly believe you do that.” Nat laughed and came to lean next to him. She had her phone in her hand and was tapping away on it. After a moment she handed it over and asked, “When are you going to realize that you’re his entire world?”

Bucky took the phone from her and his breath caught at the photo it was opened up to. Natasha had apparently taken a picture of them when Bucky was trying to calm down, and even though Steve’s back was to the camera, there was no mistaking the love that was there. He gripped the phone tighter as his eyes began to sting, because god, he did not deserve this man.

“Can I have this?” he whispered, the picture swimming a bit in his vision.

Natasha laughed quietly in his ear. “Of course you can, kotenok.”

Bucky kissed her on the temple before quickly sending the photo to himself. “I’m gonna put it on Instagram,” he told her as his own phone buzzed in his pocket. He pulled it out and flipped it on. “Is that weird?” he asked uncertainly.

“Why would that be weird?”

Bucky shrugged, feeling a bit self-conscious. “It’s just really personal, I guess.”

“Aren’t you ready to post something more personal?”

He glanced up at her. Was he?

~~~

The sound was faint, no more than a whisper on the wind. Bucky wasn’t even sure he’d heard anything. His eyes fluttered back open.

No. Too heavy.

He closed them again, letting the peace wash over him. Yes. That was better.

But there it was again. That rustling noise. It was so... distracting. He just wanted to sleep.

“Steve,” he mumbled. “Steve, stop makin’ a racket. M’sleepin’ here.”

He tried to shift, but Steve must have been holding onto him pretty tight because he couldn’t move. No matter, he was too tired to care.

This time the noise sounded like grinding stone, and Jesus, what the fuck was Steve doing?

“S’rsly, buddy, stop,” he whined. His voice sounded funny to him. Being tired would do that. If only the fucker would just knock it off...

“Bucky?” Steve asked. He sounded so far away. Why was he calling to Bucky from the front room? He was right next to Bucky in bed.
“What, Steve, m’sleepin’.”

“Bucky?”

That... That didn’t sound right. That sounded...

Bucky hit share and tucked his phone back into his pocket just in time to see the guys head over to them.

“What’s the plan?” he asked.

Steve was all Captain now. “We go in.”

Bucky’s grin was positively feral. “Excellent.”

Bucky dragged his eyes open again just as the chunk of wall above his head was ripped away. He blinked and looked up, but all he could make out was a halo of gold and white.

“BUCKY!” Steve shouted at him. He blinked again and the world slowly came back into focus.

“Steve?” he asked tentatively.

Steve let out a broken whine and reach over to throw another chunk of rock away. Searing hot pain shot up his legs as they were met with a gust of cold air.

Bucky screamed.

The tunnel was dark and Bucky kept to the side, his gun drawn and low, at the ready. He swept up slowly, his eyes darting around the open space, looking for any sign of movement.

“Anything?” Steve asked over the commlink.

Bucky shook his head, and then snorted at himself.

“What’s so funny?”

“I shook my head like an idiot.”

“Why do I let you tag along?”

“Comic relief?”

“That would imply you were —”

“Hold up,” Bucky cut in. He slowed down as he reached what should have been the end of the tunnel, according to the layout. “I’m here.”

“What do you see, Sarge?”

Bucky sighed. “A door.”
“Oh, god, Bucky!” Steve cried out, his voice frantic. Bucky felt fingers on his face, but he couldn’t open his eyes from the pain.

Instinctively, he went to reach down to where the pain was, but he’d forgotten his metal arm was dead, and his other arm was still pinned beneath him.

“Jesus Christ, Steve!” he moaned. “Make it stop!”

“I am, baby.” Lips brushed against his forehead. “I’m gonna get you out of here. Just hold on, okay? I can’t believe you’re alive...”

“Don’t go in there until we get there, Bucky, do you understand me?”

Bucky crept closer to the door. It was a simple metal door, with handle lock and a small window in the middle. There was a red pulsating light coming through it.

He slid along one wall as he inched toward the door. “I’m not gonna open it, Cap. I’m just gonna look inside.”

“Bucky, I know you. You wait for backup,” Steve ordered. “Do you fucking hear me?”

“Yeah, Cap. One sec.” As he reached the door, he eased around to look inside the window. What he saw made his blood run cold.

The pulsating red was counting down.

It was at fifteen.

At a dead run, it would take him at least a minute to get out.

“Shit.”

Bucky turned and ran.

“Steve, you gotta help me with this.”

Sam. When did Sam get there?

“Yeah, yeah. I’m on it.” Steve moved away to help and the loss of his fingers on Bucky’s face was palpable.

Almost instantly, though, he was crouching back down in front of Bucky. “There’s a piece on your abdomen that we have to move, okay? The medics can’t land this far in, so we have to do it ourselves.”

Bucky whimpered, but nodded for Steve. He would be strong for him.

Steve smiled at him. “Okay, baby. You’re doing so good. I’m so proud of you. Just one more piece and then we’ll get you out of here, okay? Just hold on.”
Bucky nodded again as Steve leaned in and kissed his forehead one more time. Then he moved back out of Bucky’s field of vision.

A second later and Bucky bit down on another scream as rock shifted over him again. Then another rush of cold air hit him as the last of the rubble was pulled free.

“Oh fuck. Apply pressure!” Clint yelled. When did Clint get there?

Something small pressed against his stomach, and Bucky glanced down to see Natasha’s hands on him, soaked in red.

There was so much red.

When did Natasha get there?

“Steve, what...” But Bucky couldn’t finish. Everything became so heavy and he let his head fall back against the ground.

“Bucky, no...”

And the world went dark.

~~~~

Normal couples spend Christmas under the tree, opening their presents, giggling and drinking champagne. But we aren’t a normal couple, are we Steve? Merry Christmas, love. I wish I could have offered you the Xmas you deserved, I know how important it is to you.
James Buchanan Barnes, you stupid idiot. The doctors told us you were gonna be fine eventually but there was a brief moment we all thought you were not gonna make it. When you wake up, I want you to have a good look at this pic and swear that when your boyfriend or any of us tell you "Don't go in there alone, wait for backups", you FREAKING wait for backups. Just so you know, Steve didn't leave your bedside all night. I hope you are satisfied now, you imbecile. Happy New Year by the way. Sam W.
Okay, so this one was a bitch to write. Several rewrites, a few freakouts at some friends, and about a gillion beta sessions before this was ready to go for you guys.

Thanks for being patient!

Just like before, when a photo credit is given, the POV goes to that person. In this case, Sam.

Fingers to the neck. Take a pulse.
Low and threaded.

“Clint, take over!” Sam yells. “He’s bleeding out too fast.”

“It’s not gonna make a damn bit of difference if we don’t get him back to the quinjet right now,” Clint snaps back, but he does it anyway.

Sam turns to Steve. “Man, you gotta get him back. You’re the only one strong enough and fast enough.”

Steve turns in his direction but he doesn’t see him. Sam grabs his straps and shakes him. Hard.

He’s never seen Steve like this. It frightens him.

“Steve, look at me!” He does. “You can do this.”

He shakes his head, then nods. He glances back at Bucky.

One beat. Two. Then a snap.

His eyes harden. He’s the captain again.

Orders begin spilling out of his mouth.

“Nat, grab the med kit; I know you have it. Wrap him as tight as you fucking can.” He points to Clint. “You’re gonna roll him when she needs it.” He turns to Sam. “You’re gonna hold his head.”

Everyone has their orders. Steve helps Clint, and they keep Bucky as stable as possible while Nat does a quick and dirty field dressing.

“Team, on standby! Man down!” Sam looks up to see Steve barking into his commlink.

“Med team ready,” he hears back in his own earpiece.

Steve wastes no time. He slowly picks up his one connection to sanity, cradling the man close to his body.

“I’ve got you, baby,” Sam hears on a whisper.

Then Steve’s on his feet and gone.

Sam turns to Clint and Natasha — both watching Steve’s retreating form, white as ghosts. It’s eerie
looking against the stark contrast of blood that paints their hands and faces.

But there’s no time for this. Sam’s got to get the team back. Clint needs to get them in the air.

“Time to move.”

Quinjet’s already fired up, and the ramp is lifting, when Sam makes it back. Never let anyone say that Clint’s not a fucking fast runner. A hysterical thought flashes through Sam’s head that he should invite Clint along next time he goes out running with the guys, just to really make himself feel like a fucking snail. Just really drive that point home.

But then he thinks that there may not be a ‘guys’ anymore.

Sam’s stomach drops out, and he forgets how breathing’s supposed to work.

He shakes it off, because no. This is not how Barnes is supposed to go out.

Sam’s supposed to get to kill him for being such a fucking idiot.

“Bucky, I know you. You wait for backup. Do you fucking hear me?”

Bucky always listens to Steve.

Why the fuck didn’t he listen?

The quinjet takes off and he heads to the middle area where the team is working on Bucky. He finds Steve standing off to the side, surprisingly not interfering. But that might have something to do with the tiny ball of righteous redheaded fury standing in his way.

Each time Steve goes to take a step — panic streaked across his face — there’s a hand to his chest, and he stops. In the fifteen steps it takes to get from the cargo doors to where they stand, he watches Steve and Nat do this dance three times.

It isn’t until Sam gets to them and goes to stand next to Steve that he sees why this has been so effective. Steve’s face is streaked with panic. Nat’s face is streaked with tears.

There are gonna be some scars on these souls tonight.

Sam places a hand on Steve’s shoulder, and then turns his back because, in all honesty, he doesn’t want to see his friend on that table. He did that once with Riley, and... never again.

Instead he focuses on Steve and ignores the med team as they shout orders at each other in a language he doesn’t understand.

“They’ve got this, man,” Sam whispers. “You gotta stay —”

That’s when a new sound hits, and for one single heartbeat, everything stops, and the only thing he can hear is the monitor hooked up to Barnes’ heart.

Flatline.
Sam, Clint, and Nat sat lined up in a row on a single bed in the ER. They did this because they were all five-years-old right now, and the doctors and nurses who kept telling them they’d be more comfortable on individual beds could just fuck right off.

They’d each needed their hands worked over after having dug through rubble for the better part of three days.

God, had it really taken them that long to find him? Sam didn’t think any of them had paid attention to the passage of time. All he knew was that Steve never gave up looking, so neither did they. Sam was still reeling from the fact that Bucky had actually been alive when they’d found him.

“Anybody know where Steve went?” Clint asked quietly, his bandaged fingers trailing through Nat’s hair.

She cleared her throat. “He was still sitting on the floor outside the operating room when I left him. That was” — she glanced up at the clock on the wall — “just over an hour ago.”

“How long has he been in surgery now?” Clint asked.

Nat looked over at the clock again, her eyes widening slightly as she did. “God, like eight hours?”

Sam turned to her. “How was he?”

“Which one?” she asked, and there was nothing funny about the laugh that escaped her lips.

“Both, I guess.”

She took a deep breath before answering. “They were still patching Bucky up last time I checked, so I’m assuming it’s going well enough. Steve, though...” She turned to him, a hint of fear in her eyes. “I’ve never seen him like that before.”

Sam gingerly wrapped an arm around her and kissed her forehead, but he didn’t answer. He already knew the answer because regardless of what Nat saw, Sam could picture it.

There was no mistaking that Steve had been clinically depressed when they’d met. Sam was no doctor, but he could see the signs. And when Bucky had come back — and things had really started to change for the two of them — Steve had gone so far as to confess that very thought to Sam one night over a few beers. Before Bucky had come back, Steve didn’t have a whole lot of reasons for living.

So Sam knew that whatever look Nat saw on Steve’s face outside that room, it was the look of a man staring down the barrel of a past he wanted no part of. Steve had barely survived losing Bucky once. Sam wasn’t sure if he would survive it a second time.

“I’m gonna go check on them,” Sam murmured to the two of them. When he got a twin set of nods in return, he narrowed his eyes and added, “You know that’s creepy when you do that, right?”

“There’s a reason we’re so effective in the field, Wilson,” Clint commented.

“It’s that brain we share.” Nat tapped a bandaged finger to her head.

Sam hopped down off the bed. “Let me guess. Right half, left half?” he asked, first nodding to Clint,
then to Nat.

“Please.” Nat snorted. “I’m way more creative than he is.”

Clint nodded. “Accurate.”

Sam chuckled and shook his head. “I’ll come find you guys when there’s news, okay?”

“Thanks, man.” Clint gave him a weak smile.

He smiled back and nodded before leaving to go search for Steve.

The hospital was military, at Fort Bragg, just outside of Fayetteville, North Carolina. He’d been here once before, back when he’d first come home from the field. A friend had been recovering here. But he wasn’t entirely sure where the surgical ward was, so it took him a few wrong turns and a few more helpful staff to point him in the right direction.

He finally found the doors marked SURGERY PERSONNEL ONLY. He knew Steve was in there because no one said ‘no’ to Captain America. He was just about to figure out if the ‘no’ applied to him, though, when the doors swung open and Bucky was pushed out, Steve right next to him, his hand on the side rail. When he saw Sam, he gave him a watery smile.

Relief swept through like a tidal wave — the force so strong he almost dropped right where he stood.

He gave himself the briefest of moments to brace a hand against the wall. Then he let his feet take over, propelling him forward until he could pull Steve into a fierce hug.

Arms closed tightly around him as a wrecked sob pressed itself into the crook of Sam’s neck.

“Hey, man, it’s okay,” he soothed. “I’ve got you.”

“He’s gonna be okay,” Steve cried into his shoulder. “They said he’s gonna be okay.”

Sam smiled as his own tears burned at the edges of his eyes. “Yeah? Seriously?”

Steve pulled back and nodded. “‘Full recovery’, they said.” He sniffled before turning them to follow Bucky down the corridor. “They said they have to keep him under for a few days, but as long as he keeps healing as fast as he does — and thank God for his serum — he should eventually make a full recovery.”

Sam threw an arm around Steve and gave him a shake. “That’s fantastic, Steve. Really.”

Steve kept his eyes forward as they walked, no longer smiling. “You saw the damage to his abdomen?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I guess when the roof collapsed on him, it fucked up his stomach, but it was also holding all the damage in place.” Steve paused as they turned a corner towards recovery.

Sam glanced over to see haunted eyes. Steve swallowed hard, his jaw flexing as he did. When he continued, his voice was barely above a whisper. “When we ripped it off of him, we basically tore him open.”

Sam put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “That’s not your fault, man. We didn’t even know he was alive.”
“I know, but —”

“No.” He squeezed Steve’s shoulder before letting go. “He was alive and we had to save him. There was no way any of us could have known.”

“We could have gone slower,” Steve pleaded. They stopped as the staff wheeled Bucky into a room, and waited outside while they got him settled in. “He was alive and we didn’t need to —”

“And he’s still alive. He’s gonna stay alive.” He punched Steve in the shoulder. “Your boy’s a fucking idiot, but he’s also a fighter. He’s not going anywhere.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right,” Steve scrubbed a hand across his eyes. “I just....”

“I know, man.”

Steve turned and leaned up against the wall next to the door. He dropped his elbows to his knees and laced his fingers behind his head. “I feel like I’m gonna throw up.”

“You might actually,” Sam answered honestly. Steve turned to give him a dirty look as he leaned against the wall next to him. “Hey, don’t look at me.” He laughed. “The turmoil that’s going on inside of you? How you’re even standing, I can’t fathom.”

Steve snorted bitterly. “Well, I’m not really, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Sam gingerly rested his bandaged hand on Steve’s back. “You mind if I text Clint and Nat?” he asked. “They’ll wanna know.”

Steve took a deep breath, and Sam let his hand fall away as he slowly stood back up. “Yeah, go for it,” he said. Then he nodded toward Sam’s hands. “You sure you’re gonna be able to do it?”

“What, these old things?” Sam laughed, holding them out. Then he nodded at Steve’s own slightly mangled hands. “I may not have superpowers that make mine damn near healed already, but I think I’ll survive.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket, only to wince as his fingers dragged along the rough cotton of his jeans.

Steve cracked a tiny smile and Sam felt a small victory, even if it was at his own expense. He tilted his head in the direction of the door. “You go be with your boy. I’m gonna update the troops.”

“Thanks, Sam.” Steve eyed him before suddenly pulling him into another hug. “Seriously. For everything.”

Sam hugged him back. “Anytime.” He leaned back and patted Steve’s cheek. “Just, you know, finally do me that solid and get me a date with Hill.”

Steve laughed softly. Another small victory. “When are you gonna realize you’re much better at talking to women than I am?”

“Well, that’s true.” He chuckled, then stepped back until he could see inside of Bucky’s room. The staff was just finishing up, and Sam finally got a good look at Bucky. He looked beat to hell, bruised and damaged all over. He had a tube down his throat helping him breathe, and despite being unconscious, no part of it looked peaceful.

His stomach twisted, and he turned away to message Clint and Nat.

~~~~
The tunnel blew on Christmas morning. It was almost three days before Bucky was found, miraculously, alive. Two and a half hours from time of recovery to landing on the helipad at Womack. Another ten hours for Bucky to get in and out of surgery. It was another three days until the doctors gave the okay to start waking him up.

Happy fucking New Year’s Eve.

Steve never left Bucky’s side, not once, since the time of recovery. The furthest distance Sam had seen him allow himself to get was the fifty-or-so feet between the operating table and the floor outside the operating room. After that, Steve was never further away from Bucky than the bathroom.

Sam, Clint, and Nat had all taken turns sitting with him, though they were all respectful of giving Steve time alone to break down, or do whatever it was he needed to do when no one was around to watch.

Clint sat in the far corner of the room and just watched them. He was very good at being stoic when he needed to be, and Sam figured Clint was doing his best to keep an eye on the two of them, but also give Steve the space he needed. Steve never once tried to engage him in conversation. Clint followed suit.

Natasha, on the other hand, would scoot her chair right up next to Steve, prop her feet up on the edge of the bed, and rest her head on Steve’s shoulder. She never said anything either — just brought a book along to read — but after a while, Steve would always wrap an arm around her shoulder.

Nat later confided in Sam that every time she did this, she was petrified that she was overstepping until he held her.

“But every time you do it, he puts an arm around you.” He’d pointed out. “What do you think it is that’s scares you so much?”

Nat shrugged and looked away. “That I’m not the one he wants on his shoulder.”

“Doesn’t mean he doesn’t appreciate it.”

Natasha had just hummed in response.

When it was Sam’s turn, he would try and engage Steve in some form of a conversation, if anything, to keep the guy lucid and out of whatever nightmarish thoughts Sam was sure were running through his head. Mostly he kept it light, talking about things going on in their lives, but one time he did turn the conversation to Bucky’s actions back on the base.

Sam sat in a chair at the end of the bed, his feet propped up on the footboard. It was the morning after Bucky’s surgery, and while he’d nodded off countless times throughout the night, he wasn’t sure Steve had slept a single wink.

Once Bucky had been settled, the other three had convinced Steve to use the shower in Bucky’s room to clean up, and had brought him a change of clothes. Afterwards he’d sat down in the chair next to Bucky’s bed, and proceeded to not move for the next twelve hours. Sam may or may not have watched him for a few minutes to see if he was at least blinking. He was.

“Have you eaten at all?” Sam asked.

“I’ll get to food,” was all he got in response.

Sam kicked his feet off the bed and sat up. “No one’s saying you have to leave. At least let me get
something for you.”

He made to stand up, only to get a, “Not hungry,” in reply.

Sam sighed and settled back into his chair. “Well, super soldier that you are, I don’t think Bucky would appreciate waking up to find you passed out from low blood sugar.”

“If he wakes up.”

“Drop it, Steve. You know he will,” Sam muttered. He watched the rise and fall of Bucky’s chest as he worked through the jumble of thoughts in his head. Finally, he just went for the punch. “This is shit, no question. But you trying to get maudlin isn’t helping anyone. And besides…” He took a deep breath before turning to watch Steve out of the corner of his eye. “Exactly zero part of this is your fault.”

Just as he suspected, Steve’s head snapped in his direction. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means probably exactly what you think it means. You gave an order.” Sam waved a hand in Bucky’s direction. “He didn’t follow.”

“We don’t know what he did or didn’t do,” Steve ground out, the flex of his jaw visible under the harsh lighting. “He said he wasn’t going in, just having a look. Then all we heard was him swearing before the place was blown to kingdom come.”

“Fair enough.” Sam leaned forward in his chair, to keep in Steve’s line of sight. “So what do you think happened that would cause him to swear like that?”

He didn’t respond, just slid his eyes back over to Bucky’s sleeping form. After several minutes, Sam assumed he wasn’t going to answer at all, so he also went back to watching Bucky.

It was another ten minutes before Steve spoke, startling Sam out of his stupor. “Bucky’s reckless, but he’s not stupid. He doesn’t disobey orders directly. He’ll fudge them if they’re in any way vague, but if I tell him not to do something specifically, he doesn’t do it. So why he would this time, I…”

He trailed off, his voice dissolving into a hitch, and Sam looked over to see tears flowing freely down his face. Sam rested a hand on his arm, but Steve still wouldn’t take his eyes off Bucky.

“God, it was real this time, you know?” he whispered, his voice cracked around the edges. “That’s twice now I’ve been certain he was gone, and all I keep thinking is that, well at least this time I wasn’t an asshole and actually went looking for him.” He scrubbed at his eyes, but still didn’t look away. “But really, at the time I thought, this time... this time, I actually go look for him, and this time he’s either turning up shattered and dead in my arms, or we find nothing but pink mist.”

Steve leaned forward and rested his head on the bed. He took Bucky’s hand in his own. “Because, here’s the thing. You strip away the Captain America persona, and you see a guy who’s had a pretty shit life. Every good thing I’ve ever had has come at a price most people would find too high to pay.”

He sat up and pulled Bucky’s hand to his cheek. “And I’m just waiting for this good thing to be taken away from me. Because it will, you know. People have always told me — even back when I was small — that I was destined for greatness, whatever the fuck that means.” He let out a bitter laugh. “What they never told me was that I was also destined to be alone.”

That’s when Steve finally broke down entirely. A wrecked sob tore out of him and he laid his head down on the bed, holding tightly to Bucky’s hand. Sam knew better than to say anything else. Instead, he ran his hand up and down Steve’s back, as the last several days finally caught up to his friend.
And all it did was make Sam just that much angrier at Bucky. He knew he shouldn’t be — not until the man woke up and defended his actions. But right now, watching Steve just lose it over him, all Sam could see was a fuck up that almost cost his best friend what, according to him, was the only thing in this world that made him truly happy. And based on everything Sam had seen and learned about the pair over the years, he absolutely believed it to be true.

It was a solid thirty minutes before Steve had cried himself out. Sam just stayed next to him the entire time, hand on his back, being there for him in any way he needed. When Sam was eventually greeted with a soft snuffle and an, “I’m okay. I’m fine,” he quietly sat back in his chair and let Steve do the same.

“I’m gonna take a picture of him like this,” Sam said, surprising even himself. He wasn’t really the ‘for posterity’ type.

Steve looked over at him, an eyebrow arched. “Why?”

It took Sam a second to answer, but he still pulled out his phone as he did. “Bucky really needs to see what he’s done to himself. He needs to see what recklessness gets him.”

“I...” Steve sighed and turned back to Bucky. “Fine.”

Sam nodded, even though Steve couldn’t see him. He watched the rise and fall of Bucky’s chest again, the tube in his mouth helping that along as his lungs healed from the debris. He took a deep breath and held up his phone to take a quick photo. The picture was more haunting than the very room itself.

When he was done, he tucked the phone away without showing it to Steve. The picture wasn’t for him, and he was here anyway. He didn’t need the image burned into his mind as well.

No, this one... This was gonna be the second thing Bucky saw when he eventually woke up.

First he would see Steve’s grief. Then he was gonna see why.

~~~~

Just before midnight on New Year’s Eve, the doctors stopped the sedatives being used to keep Bucky under. They said it would take a few hours for Bucky to really wake up, so the group had nothing to do but wait.

Steve had asked them to leave because he didn’t want Bucky overwhelmed when he came around, so Sam, Clint and Nat decided to head to a bar across the street and ring in the New Year.

They were about to leave when Steve put a hand on Sam. “One sec.”

Sam turned to Clint and Nat. “I’ll catch up with you guys.”

“Sure thing.” Nat smiled at them before reaching over and giving Bucky’s foot a gentle squeeze. “Uvidimsya utrom, kotenko,” she whispered, then followed Clint out.

Sam turned to Steve. “What’s up, man?”

“You should put that picture you took a couple days ago on his Instagram,” Steve said, nodding at Bucky. “Force the issue.”

He got where Steve was going, but the idea made Sam a little uneasy. The Instagram was supposed
to be for Bucky’s recovery, after all. “You sure that’s a good idea? You sure Bucky would want the world to see him like that?”

“I don’t care,” Steve replied, still just as blunt. “Give me your phone.”

Not bothering to argue, Sam grabbed his phone out of his pocket and handed it over.

“Your Instagram?” Steve asked. With a sigh, Sam tapped on the screen to open the app.

Steve logged Sam out so he could log Bucky in. Then, he did something inside the settings before, confusedly, handing the phone back to Sam.

“You don’t want to do it?” Sam asked. “And what did you do to the app?”

“Oh, I attached his Tumblr that he puts them on.” Steve shrugged. “But it’s your picture. And you’ve had a better perspective about this than I have. You should write the caption.”

“My *better perspective* thinks this is a bad idea.”

“I —”

“Don’t care,” he cut in. “Yeah, I got that.”

“Please?” Steve pleaded quietly. “I can’t lose him, Sam. I need him to see what not following orders did to him.”

“You think he won’t be able to see it in a mirror when he wakes up?”

Steve tapped a finger against the phone. “He won’t see this.”

“I was gonna show it to him anyway,” Sam tried to reason, but Steve just shook his head.

“If it’s out there, he can’t hide behind anything. He’ll have to deal with it.”

“All right,” Sam answered softly.

He loaded the photo quickly, but spent a minute thinking about what he wanted to write. Bucky really needed to know what he’d done wrong. Finally Sam settled on the straightforward approach.

*James Buchanan Barnes, you stupid idiot. The doctors told us you were gonna be fine eventually but there was a brief moment we all thought you were not gonna make it. When you wake up, I want you to have a good look at this pic and swear that when your boyfriend or any of us tell you "Don’t go in there alone, wait for backups", you FREAKING wait for backups. Just so you know, Steve didn't leave your bedside all night. I hope you are satisfied now, you imbecile. Happy New Year by the way.*

When he was done, he showed it to Steve, who nodded in approval. Sam then hit share and immediately logged Bucky out. He didn’t want the temptation of deleting it later.

Finally he put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “You let us know when it’s okay to come back, okay?”


Sam smiled and left without another word. It was New Year’s, and his friends were gonna be okay. He wanted to celebrate with the people he called family and not worry about what tomorrow would hold.
Because right now, maybe the world wasn’t so gray after all.
What do you mean I'm not allowed to smoke in here, Ma'am? I'm alone in my room and...I'm dying you know! You're not gonna refuse his last cigarette to a dying man?! What? The Doctor said I was gonna be alright? I wouldn't bet on that! Look, I'm barely alive! OK, what if my boyfriend here signed a little something for your kid? OUCH! Steve, stop pinching me, I'm in the middle of a serious negotiation here!

(Photo: Sam)

What do you mean I'm not allowed to smoke in here, Ma'am? I'm alone in my room and...I'm dying you know! You're not gonna refuse his last cigarette to a dying man?! What? The Doctor said I was gonna be alright? I wouldn't bet on that! Look, I'm barely alive. OK, what if my boyfriend here signed a little something for your kid? OUCH! Steve, stop pinching me, I'm in the middle of a serious negotiation here!

(Photo: Sam)

Chapter Notes

HAPPY CATWS DAY!
“Bucky?”

A soft hum and he smiled to himself. He knew that voice. That was his Stevie.

“Bucky, can you wake up for me, baby?”

Bucky frowned and whined to himself. It wasn’t time to get up; it was too early. He knew. His body was excellent at waking up when it was time, and right now, his body was telling him this wasn’t it.

“No’sleep,” he mumbled. He sighed and let himself drift —

“Baby, I really need you to wake up for me. Can you do that?”

He whimpered a little. “Don’t’wanna. Gosleep’Stevie.”

He felt lips brush against his forehead. “Baby, please.”

That... That didn’t sound right. That sounded like —

Bucky slowly opened his eyes, only to squint at the bright lights. He turned his head toward where Steve’s voice had come from, and found himself staring at a blurry vision of cream and gold.

“Stevie?” he asked uncertainly.

The blurring vision leaned in to kiss his head again. “Yeah, baby. It’s me,” he whispered.

His voice was— why was it cracked— that wasn’t...

He blinked a few more times, and... There he was. Steve was smiling at him, but it wasn’t right. It didn’t meet his eyes— were those tears?

“Steve, was’wrong?” Bucky tried to lift his arm and touch him, but it felt like lead. Steve, though, bless him, took Bucky’s hand instead.

“Baby, do you know where you are?”

“Captain Rogers, I think we can—”

Steve looked off to Bucky’s left and glared at someone. “I’ve got this,” he snapped.

Bucky turned his head (slowly, because also lead, what the hell?) and glanced over to see a man he didn’t recognize. He opened his mouth to say something, when fingers brushed along his jaw, turning him back to Steve.

“Bucky.” Steve’s smile was calm. Patient. “Do you know where you are?”

Thorroughly confused now, Bucky looked back at the man and the surrounding room.


He turned back to Steve. “Hospital?”

remember what happened?”

Bucky racked his brain, but it was so muddled.

He remembered there was a mission; he remembered that it was Christmas. There was something about...

“A tunnel?” he asked, his eyes searching Steve for confirmation.

He got a short nod in return. “Yeah, there was a tunnel. It blew up. You—you almost…” Steve ducked his head down, pressing it into Bucky’s shoulder. A sob pulled from his chest.

“Stevie, no” Bucky whispered. He leaned down to kiss the top of Steve’s head. He tried to lift his metal arm to wrap around him, but that was even more of a dead weight than —

Tunnel.
Trapped.
Fried out.
Arm dead.
Roof collapse.

“Countdown,” Bucky muttered.

Steve lifted his head, his eyes red and wet. “What?”

Bucky shook his head. “Countdown,” he repeated. The details were still fuzzy, but a flashing red light and the number fifteen stuck out in his mind.

“There was a countdown,” he continued, and more pieces came back. “Through the window. I looked.” He turned pleading eyes on Steve. “I saw a countdown in the window and I ran.”

With each word, Steve’s eyes grew bigger. More horrified. “You mean you didn’t go in there?” Bucky had to strain to hear him. “You didn’t engage?”

Bucky didn’t understand. “You told me not to.”

For no reason Bucky could understand, Steve broke down again in tears.

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“Where’s my favorite T1000?”

Bucky chuckled softly as he looked over at the man standing in the doorway. “Hey, Tony.”

Tony smiled, big and bright, and strode into the room, going right over to the seat on Bucky’s left side. Bucky eyed with relief the box Tony set down on the floor. He hoped it was the tools he would need to fix Bucky’s arm. “You bring me a present?”

“Only for you, tough guy.” He immediately turned Bucky’s arm over, examining it. “Now you want to tell me what the hell you did to this thing?”

Bucky shrugged as best he could. “You tell me. You redesign my arm, and I slam my elbow into the
ground one time, and the fucking thing blows out.”

“Bullshit. My designs don’t break.” He turned to the toolbox and started rooting around in it. “Shoddy work was Dad’s department.”

“And yet, there’s Dum-E,” Bucky reminded him with a laugh.

Tony pointed a screwdriver at him. “I’ll have you know, Dum-E is exactly as stupid as I want him to be.”

“You do realize calling him stupid is like kicking a dog, right?” Bucky shot back, watching as Tony started pulling panels off his arm. “When I was a kid I knew someone who had named their dog Ugly. And yeah, the dog wasn’t gonna be winning any prizes, but I don’t know. It felt mean.”

“Says the man who takes way too much pleasure in lapping a guy he knows will never be as fast as him.”

“Hey now.” Bucky scowled good-naturedly. “Wilson should know better than to come running with us. He gets what he deserves.”

“Speaking of ‘us’, where’s your big, dumb blonde?” Tony asked without looking up.

Bucky eyed the door that Steve had left through about half an hour ago. “Cafeteria I think?” He snorted. “He kept getting upset and getting in the doc’s way, so I told him to go grab coffee or something for a few minutes. He looked like he needed it.”

“Which he probably did.” Tony pointed out. “You scared the fuck out of everyone, Barnes.”

“Yeah.” Bucky fiddled with the edge of the blanket. “I sort of figured that out when Steve went white on me. He asked me if I had engaged, and when I said no, he just kind of — he waved his arm out — “lost it.” He took a deep breath and finally looked over to where Tony was buried in his arm. “It’s why I told him to leave. He would never admit it, but he looked like he needed a break or something, I don’t know.”

Tony shrugged. “Could also be that he and Sam spent the last week thinking that you’d disobeyed a direct order.”

“Wait, what?”

Tony looked up, one eyebrow arched. “I take it you haven’t seen your Instagram account since you woke up.”

“My...” Bucky automatically reached for his back pocket, only to stop. Of course he didn’t have his phone — if his phone made it out at all.

He turned to Tony, who was back at his arm. “Can I see your phone?” he asked, his voice hollow. “I don’t have mine anymore.”

“What?” Tony asked absently. Then his head snapped up. “Oh! I do. I have it. Your phone.” He reached into his pocket and presented Bucky with what looked like a brand new iPhone. He dropped it on Bucky’s chest. “Yours got a little, well, smashed, obviously. But this one’s all backed up and ready to go.” He shook his head and turned back to Bucky’s arm. “It really says something that your phone was obliterated, and your arm fried out, but you managed to survive.” He laughed to himself. “I should probably be looking into replicating you somehow.”
But Bucky wasn’t really listening. He was too curious to know what Tony was talking about. What the hell was on his account that would upset Steve? He remembered everything from the explosion, so he knew he hadn’t put something up right before. He wasn’t following anyone, so whatever was on there would be the first—

Bucky froze.

His breathing turned shallow, and it wasn’t until the image became blurry that he realized his hand was shaking.

“Why would Sam do this?” Bucky asked through gritted teeth. “This is my...” He shook his head. “Steve would never allow this. How did this get on my account?”

“You got me, buddy,” Tony answered. “I wasn’t here when it happened.” He looked up, a hint of suspicion in his eyes. “Do you really not follow anybody? Not even me? I’m hurt, Barnes. Really.”

“Why would Sam do this?” Bucky ground out, ignoring Tony’s words, but pleading with him for answers, just the same.

“Because I asked him to,” came a soft voice. Bucky’s head swung around to find Steve standing in the door. “Can I come in?”

“What do you mean you asked him to?” Bucky brandished his phone at Steve, hurt and confusion ripping into him. “This is supposed be my therapy, Steve. Why would you do this?”

Steve strode into the room and dropped down next to Bucky’s bed. “Baby, I’m so sorry, but you have to understand, we thought you’d disobeyed an order, and I almost lost you because of it.”

Bucky glanced over at Tony, who was resolutely ignoring them. He looked down at his phone. He didn’t want to see Steve’s face. “You posted this publicly. If you wanted me to see this, why didn’t you just show me?”

“Again, I almost lost you, Buck.” Steve’s voice cracked, but Bucky still wouldn’t look over.

Lips pressed to his shoulder instead. “I did lose you. You—you flat lined on the quinjet.” That got Bucky to look over. Tears were slipping out of Steve’s eyes when he whispered, “You died, baby.”

That was news to him. Apparently the doctors hadn’t felt that was knowledge he needed, but that’s not what made his blood run cold. Steve had actually seen him die.

“I scared you,” Bucky whispered back, and Steve nodded. It was starting to make sense, and he continued. “You thought if you didn’t make an issue out of it, I’d be flippant about this.”

“Because you almost always are,” Steve said hesitantly. “It wasn’t that long ago that you actually blew up a base with us still in it.”

“Yeah, but...” He glanced back at the photo again. But what? What had he been about to say to Steve? That’s when it clicked into place.

“You think I’m reckless.”

Steve huffed out a laugh. “Of course you’re reckless. I’m reckless. We wouldn’t be able to be us if we weren’t.” He took a deep breath. “But sometimes you go too far. Sometimes you—“

“Got it!” Tony exclaimed.
Bucky jumped and they both looked over to where they’d clearly forgotten Tony was working on Bucky’s arm.

“Uh... what?”

Tony looked up and pointed what looked like some sort of screwdriver at him. “Do you realize that what you did to your arm is impossible? Well. Not impossible — you made it a possibility. But seriously.” He tapped his tool on Bucky’s arm. “The only way to do what you did was to have hit it at just the right angle on a space near your elbow no bigger than a dime.” Tony laughed and turned back to Bucky’s arm. “I swear to whatever deity is trendy this week, only you, Barnes.”

Bucky turned back to Steve, only to be hit with an, “Aha!” He looked over again just as Tony reached into his arm. A second later, a soft whir hit his ears as his arm came back online. Tony smiled at them both, a hint of arrogance mixed in with his triumph.

“Thank god,” Bucky muttered as he flexed his metal fingers.

Tony snorted. ”Excuse you. Pretty sure that thanks belongs to me.”

Buck nodded. “And also thank Stark.”

“Damn straight. Oh, and one more thing.” He leaned over and started to collect his stuff. When he sat back up, all humor was gone from his face as he stared at both of them. “First off, Steve.” He looked over at him. “Putting that photo up was a dick move, and not your style. I’m surprised at you. You might be a snarky shit at times, but seriously, you just said it yourself. You’re both reckless.” He waved a hand between Steve and Bucky. “You know, pot/kettle, and all that jazz.”

“And you.” He turned to Bucky. “Your golden retriever over there apparently sees something in you, and he’d like you to go on breathing a little while longer. Don’t get pissed at him for taking measures to ensure that happens, even if they were a bit drastic.”

“You’re calling him drastic?” Bucky stupidly asked.

Tony just shrugged. “You guys aren’t the only pot and kettle in the room.” Then he turned back on his smile, and waved at Bucky’s arm with a flourish. “And with that, children, I’m off.”

Steve laughed. “Wait, so you’re just gonna give us that speech and leave?”

“I’m an engineer, not a therapist, Cap,” Tony said as he started to leave. “You guys made me have feelings, and now I feel the need to go blow something up.” He stopped at the door and turned to smirk back at them. “Pun absolutely intended.”

“Asshole!” they both shouted in unison at Tony’s retreating form. They could hear him chuckling all the way down the hallway.

It was a minute before they would look at each other again, but eventually Steve turned back to Bucky, his eyes wide and unsure. “He’s not wrong, though, Buck. I spent three days thinking you were dead —”

“I know —”

Steve shook his head. “But you don’t. I lose you during the war; I get you back. I lose you in that explosion; we find you alive. Then you flat line on the quinjet, and I...” He dropped his head down, only to look back up at Bucky, his eyes hard. “I can’t lose you anymore.”
“I know, Stevie” Bucky answered quietly. He reached up to place his hand on Steve’s cheek. “But those...” He hesitated, nervous about whether or not if he wanted to voice the thoughts running through his head.

“But what?”

Bucky sighed. He looked at his metal hand and flexed his fingers again, steeling himself. When he looked back, he tried to hide his apprehension and knew he failed. “The thing is, Stevie, not one of those was my own doing.” Steve opened his mouth, but Bucky shook his head, pressing his hand against Steve’s face to stop him. “We lead dangerous lives, and you can’t protect me all the time. But don’t you think for one second that you aren’t the one and only thing I think of before I ever make a decision about something. If you tell me not to engage, and there’s a chance I could get hurt and get taken away from you, I’m not doing it. I’ll find another way.”

“And the building you blew up with us in it?”

Bucky shrugged and he let a hint of mischief creep into his voice. “Well, I figured if it was my time to go, at least you’d be going with me.”

“Wow.” Steve gaped at him. “That was really fucking morbid, you know that? And now I’m a little concerned you might be trying to do me in.”

“Aw, baby not a chance.” Bucky leaned in and stole a kiss. “You’re too pretty to kill.”

“At least one of us is,” Steve countered with a nod, his eyes taking on a faint twinkle.

Bucky gasped. “Are you saying I’m not pretty?”

“What’s that saying about ‘blondes have more fun’?”

“Shut it, Rogers.” Bucky pulled him back in for a kiss — a real one this time. It occurred to him that they hadn’t really shared a decent one since he woke up, and it suddenly felt like he wouldn’t be able to breathe again until he got his fix.

When they broke apart after a couple of minutes, Steve pressed a kiss to his throat before getting up so he could grab a chair and sit down properly. When he’d settled back down, he took Bucky’s hand between his own and kissed his knuckles. “So what do you want to do about the picture?” he asked, resting his cheek against their joined hands.

Bucky eyed him for a minute as he thought about it. He agreed with Tony that it was a dick thing to do. But he also understood Steve’s side of it. Just like Steve, there was no way Bucky could survive if something happened to his love. But unlike Steve, Bucky had never had to go through life thinking Steve was gone, not even for a minute. He hadn’t had the pleasure of living that kind of horror yet.

But that didn’t mean he didn’t get it. And he did. Truthfully, had the roles been reversed, Bucky couldn’t be sure he wouldn’t have had the same kind of freak out. It might have been stupid and mean to use Bucky’s therapy as a way to get at him, but it was crystal clear to him it was done in an act of love.

Finally, he sighed, and said, “Keep it.” When Steve looked at him in surprise, he smiled and went on. “There was no ill-will in what you guys did, so I’m not going to hold it against you. And besides, you know how because of us being relatively private, people tend to romanticize us too much?”

Steve laughed. “Yeah.”
“Well, maybe this will make people realize that it’s not all fun and games.” He pulled his hand from Steve’s and picked up his phone again to look over the picture. “Maybe people will stop seeing all of this as ‘cool’, and see that bad things can happen, even if you’re careful.”

“But the caption doesn’t read that way, Buck.” Steve pointed out, waving his hand at the phone. “It looks like you fucked up.”

“Regardless. The image is scary enough. People can take whatever they want from it, as long as they learn that dangerous shit can get you killed.”

Fingers plucked his phone out of his hand, and he turned to face sad eyes staring back at him. Steve sat forward so he could rest his head on Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky tucked his arm around Steve and pulled him close, careful not to jostle the line in his hand.

“Don’t leave me,” Steve whispered.

Bucky just turned and kissed the top of his head.

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Two hours later and neither of them had moved. Thank god for the fortitude of super soldiers, because there was no way that would have been comfortable for anyone else.

Staff came and went, and eventually Sam, Natasha, and Clint had shown up. Sam got as far as opening his mouth — clearly shaped around an apology — when Bucky cut him off.

“Don’t mention it. Seriously. I’m not hashing this out again.”

Sam held up his hands and smiled. “Consider me not mentioning it.”

Bucky nodded. “Good boy.”

Sam smacked him in the leg.

Natasha walked over and held out what looked like some sort of small knitted purse.

“What’s that?” Bucky asked, eyeing the bag with suspicion.

“Presents.” She said, matter-of-fact, shaking the bag like a taunt.

Bucky waved his metal fingers at her. “Tony already got me a present.”

“Mine are better.”

“Only better if they go boom. Do yours go boom?”

She tilted her head. “Not boom, but they do catch fire.”

Intrigued against his better judgment, he grudgingly snatched the bag out of her hand. “Fine.”

Of course, all grudging went out the window when he saw the contents.

“You got him cigarettes, Tash?” Clint asked as Bucky dumped out a fresh pack of Lucky’s and a lighter, as well as new headphones and a charger for his phone. He immediately went for the smokes as Clint added, “You do realize this is a hospital, right?”
Bucky snorted. “Like someone’s gonna stop Captain America’s boyfriend.”

“Captain America might stop his boyfriend,” Steve mumbled into his shoulder.

“And this is a military hospital, young man.” Bucky jumped as one of the nurses came in. She walked around his bed to check his IV bag, giving him a stern look the whole way over. “I don’t care what your boyfriend’s a captain of. You light one of those things, I’m lighting you on fire.”

“Really?” Bucky asked, batting his eyelashes at her. “You’d really ruin a pretty mug like this one?”

She hummed as she eyed him, and Bucky felt like he was back in kindergarten, getting a once-over from one of the nuns. Finally she cracked a smile. “He’s the pretty one,” she concluded, nodding at Steve. “I’ll spare him.”

“What?” Bucky squawked as everyone, especially Steve, burst out laughing. “Bullshit!”

Nurse Ratched (as Bucky had now decided she would be known) smirked at him. “Just callin’ ‘em like I see ‘em, doll face.” She laughed as she left the room.

Bucky squeezed Steve tighter to him, and shook him a little. “You paid her to say that, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I paid her to say those exact words on the off chance you mentioned how pretty you were,” Steve said, snickering.

“But I say that all the time!”

“Oh. Huh. Good point.”

“Hey, man, smile.” Bucky looked to see Sam with his phone out.

“Another one, Wilson?” he asked, eyeing the phone.

“Not mentioning it!” Sam parroted back again before snapping the photo without waiting for approval. He looked down at the photo and laughed. “Yep. You’re definitely pretty, Barnes.”

“See?” Bucky pulled his metal hand out from where Steve was holding it and waved it at Sam. “He may be a kiss-ass, but he knows good looks when he sees them.”

“Wait, let me see that.” Natasha held her hand out and Sam dropped his phone in it. She glanced over the picture and hummed thoughtfully. “Can’t see why she wouldn’t let you smoke in here. I don’t think I could deny a face like that.”

“I don’t even need to look to know you’re a pretty pretty man, Bucky Bear,” Clint added from his perch on the counter next to the in-room sink. “Plus, I think I much prefer the live show.”

“You’re all assholes,” Bucky muttered.

“Now I wish I hadn’t logged out of your Instagram,” Sam commented wistfully as he took his phone back. “A face this pretty? It needs to be online.”

“Too soon, jackass!” Bucky threw back, even as he fought to hide his smile. “You know what? Fuck you. Give me that.” He held out his hand for the phone. “I’ll put that up, just you watch.”

Sam handed it over just as Clint shouted, “No, wait!” He hopped down and skidded over to Bucky’s bedside. “Can I write the caption? I bet I could do you.”
“Pretty sure that’s my job,” Steve said.

“Seriously?” Bucky asked, eyeing Clint and flicking Steve in the ear. “You want to write the caption. You people do realize this is a form of therapy, right?”

“And laughter is the best medicine.”

“I regret every single person in this room.” Bucky said with a sigh, but he still logged himself back into the app on Sam’s phone and handed it over. Slowly. And with a few tugs from Clint. “If you make me sound horrible, just remember that I’m a better shot that you.”

“You wish you were a better shot than me,” Clint murmured as he typed away. It took him less than a minute before he grinned at Bucky... and handed the phone over to Sam.

When he burst out laughing, Bucky turned to glare at Clint. “Wait, you didn’t let me see it first?!”

“Now where would the fun be in that?” Clint asked as he went back to the counter and hopped back up. At this point, the phone had been passed to Nat, and she too was laughing.

“This isn’t fair,” Bucky whined. He made a grabby hand for the phone, but all she did was pass it off to Steve. His boyfriend — the traitor — turned the phone away so Bucky couldn’t see it.

“Oh wow, Clint.” Steve snorted trying to hold in a laugh. “That’s actually kind of dead on.”

“See?” Clint called from across the room. “I could do Bucky.”

“Still a ‘no’ on that one, buddy.”

Bucky, for his part, finally snapped in frustration and tried to snatch the phone out of Steve’s hand. He held it out of Bucky’s reach and laughed.

“Give me the phone, you dick!”

To his absolute horror, Steve tossed the phone at Natasha, who deftly caught it before tossing it to Sam, like a goddamned game of keep-away.

Then Steve turned to Bucky, and with the kind of affection in his eyes usually reserved for a toddler, he pointed out, “You have your own phone, you idiot.”

Bucky blinked at him. “Oh.”

Steve smiled and handed him the phone from off his lap. “Oh.”

Bucky scrambled to get his own app open so he could look at the picture.

“Hey, Clint?” Bucky asked as he scowled at the caption.

“Yes, Princess?”

He looked up and glared at Clint, who held his gaze right back. “Have I ever told you that I think you’re an asshole?”

Clint just smiled serenely at him. “Love you too, baby cakes.”

What do you mean I don’t have the right to smoke in here, Ma’am? I’m alone in my room and...I’m dying you know! You’re not gonna refuse his last cigarette to a dying man?! What? The Doctor said
I was gonna be alright? I wouldn't bet on that! Look, I'm barely alive. OK, what if my boyfriend here signed a little something for your kid? OUCH! Steve, stop pinching me, I'm in the middle of a serious negotiation here! (Photo: Sam)
Images Thirty-Two thru Thirty-Five

Chapter Summary

Back home from the hospital! Let's do something not dangerous in order not to piss Steve off (and you know how he is when he's pissed...) Wanna browse our album?
Go!

A rare photo, me during my military training, right before joining the 107th.

The first time Steve saw me after I surrendered to S.H.I.E.L.D, 3-4 years ago. This one isn't really a photo. It's a still from a surveillance camera footage stolen by Nat.

One of the first photos we took home after I was finally released from a high security S.H.I.E.L.D facility. We tried to pretend that everything was gonna be alright now, forget about the tracking device in my arm, the 30 so-called "undercover" agents specially assigned to my surveillance, and the fact that I was just unbearable and wanted to be left the f**k alone 10 hours a day. Stevie wouldn't have it and I'll never be able to thank him enough for that. Otherwise, yes it was Tony on TV. This guy practically lives on TV sets!! OK, enough with our album, we'll come back to it later.

There was a crack in the ceiling. It started by the bedroom door and lazily made its way over to the wall next to the far window. Bucky smirked because he was pretty sure that crack came from when they'd slammed into the doorframe a few months ago during one of their more exuberant sexcapades.

(And yeah, he would forever hate Clint for teaching him the word sexcapades.)

God, he was so bored. He’d been laid up for almost a week now, trying to heal. As much as the
serum had kept him alive, nothing could have prepared his body for being ripped open the way it had been. Honestly, he still had no idea how he’d survived at all. He guessed the Powers That Be weren’t done with him yet.

“Steve!” he called out, only to wince as his stomach tightened in the process. He took a few steadying breaths as he rubbed small circles over the healing wound, and tried to tamper down on his frustration. Anything longer than a few days, and annoyance always crept in that he still wasn’t healed yet.

“Steve!” he called a second time, against his better judgment. Christ, he would never learn. He gingerly rolled out of bed and stood up, his hand pressed to his stomach. He took a deep breath through his nose before slowly padding out to the living room. It was bright in there, midday sun peeking through, despite the miserable chill outside. Steve had built up a roaring fire for him, even though Bucky hadn’t left the bedroom, except to go the bathroom, since he’d woken up a couple hours before. He smiled at the crackling flames. He might have been a little stir-crazy, but he had Steve home tending to him. That he would never get enough of.

He glanced around the room, but there was no sign of his love. He walked over to the kitchen, but nothing there either. He was just about to make his way over to a spare room they used as an office/gym/art studio when, sure enough, Steve came out, his headphones plugged securely into his ears and flipping through a book.

“No, he’s doing a lot better,” Steve said into the book, and Bucky arched an eyebrow, because what? Then he noticed the headphones again and saw Steve’s phone in his hand under the book. “Well, you would hate being laid up too if it were you.” He sighed at whoever he was talking to and stopped to lean against the couch. Bucky had to bite down on a laugh because Steve clearly wasn’t paying attention to the fact that Bucky was standing not twenty feet away from him.

“I’m not gonna do that, Natasha.” (Ah. Natasha.) “He’s a grown-ass man, and honestly, he’s on track to be completely healed in the next few days. At most, his injuries now are nothing more than the wrong end of a bar fight, and we’ve all been —” Steve huffed as he got cut off. He leaned back, resting his hands along the couch, the book tucked into one, the phone in the other. “I should have trusted….No, he’s not that stupid….I swear to God, Natalia —” Bucky blinked at the name, but then Steve added, softer, “Yeah, well, I guess he’s rubbing off, isn’t he.”

Of course, Bucky couldn’t help himself. “Well, I would love to be rubbing off, but someone thinks sex is too strenuous for a healing invalid.”

To Bucky’s delight, Steve jumped about a mile in the air. “Christ!” he exclaimed as he fumbled the book and his phone, dropping both. He swore as the headphones ripped out of his ears, and he swooped down, scrambling to pick up the phone.

He pulled the ear jack out and held the phone up so he could talk directly into it. “Nat, you still there?” he asked as he turned to glare at Bucky with a mouthed asshole. “Yeah, my dick of a boyfriend decided to sneak up on me.” He paused while Nat responded, only to sneer before adding, “I’ll be sure to tell him you said that. You suck too, by the way. Talk later.”

He hung up and Bucky laughed as he slowly walked over to plant a light kiss on Steve’s temple. He got a dirty look for his troubles, but ignored it in favor of the book on the floor. Only now did he recognize it as the photo album Steve had given him for Christmas the year before. They hadn’t exchanged presents yet this year. Neither had been in the mood, and finally Steve had said they would save it for the day Bucky’s doc gave him the all-clear.
“What did Natalia say?” he asked as he leaned over to pick up the album, only to abandon the effort about halfway down with a hiss of pain.

“Idiot.” Steve huffed as he gave him a look and scooped the album up himself. He passed it off to Bucky. “She said if that crippled moron is capable of sneaking up on ‘Captain Obviously in the Room’, I get what I deserve.”

“Well, I never!” Bucky scoffed, and clutched the album to his chest like a string of pearls, making Steve roll his eyes. “Little Miss ‘Yells into the Comms’ needs to learn some manners!”

“I’d think you were mocking me if that wasn’t a hundred percent true.”

“Stevie, never mistake my truthfulness for lack of mockery.”

Steve cuffed him on the shoulder with a muttered, “Jackass.”

Bucky laughed and walked around him — knocking into his shoulder as he went — and went to lean up against the couch. “What do you have this out for?” he asked as he began to idly flip through the pages, taking in the mix of photos, old and new, that Steve had carefully culminated for him, each one with its own small caption.

Steve came up to his right side — away from the worst of his injuries — and leaned against him, looking at the images too as Bucky scanned through them. “No particular reason. I was on the phone with Nat for a while and I think I just picked it up for something to do.”

“I’m gonna tell her you just called her boring.”

“How did you get ’she’s boring’ out of ‘picked up for something to do’?”

“If the conversation was interesting, you wouldn’t have been looking for something to occupy your attention,” Bucky explained with a shrug. His mouth tugged up as he watched Steve turn pink out of the corner of his eye.

Soft lips brushed the spot behind his ear he loved so much, and he shivered. “Tell her nothing and we’ll see about springing you free early” — Steve cupped Bucky’s groin — “for good behavior.”

Bucky turned slowly and stared, wide-eyed, before he couldn’t take it anymore and burst out laughing. Steve pulled back and scowled at him

“Are you fucking kidding me with that line, Rogers?” Bucky wheezed, rocking against the couch. “I’m sorry, but spring me free? Oh my god, ow.” He clutched at his side in pain and leaned against Steve, breathing through his nose but unable to stop the giggling.

“That’s it. No sex for you.” Steve grumbled, folding his arms. “Ever.”

“Aw, Stevie, don’t be like that.” Bucky huffed, getting his laughter under control before pecking Steve on the cheek. “Because we both know that will never hold up.” He wrapped his arm around Steve’s waist and jostled him, a big goofy grin on his face. “We both know you’re a bigger horndog than I am.”

“Wow,” Steve whispered, shaking his head and looking at Bucky in exasperated wonder. “That’s... That’s just so far gone out of the realm of reality.”

Bucky snickered and turned back to the photo album. “Yeah, I can’t keep a straight face on that one,” he admitted. He turned the page, and it settled on a photo of him from basic training. He was...
leaning over some guardrail, smiling, and looking like he didn't have a care in the world.

He never could remember much of basic, and this photo was no exception. But he’d long since stopped wondering if that was from Hydra or just time.

“Now, there’s a handsome fellow,” Steve commented quietly, his head coming to rest on Bucky’s shoulder — his hand on the edges of the image.

“Handsome and whole,” Bucky added, just as quietly.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” He touched the photo as well, his fingers brushing against Steve’s, and suddenly he felt a little melancholy. He gave Steve a sad smile. “In a lot of ways, I’m glad for our lives here, but I miss us from then, ya know?”

Steve lifted his fingers to brush against Bucky’s cheek and touched their lips together. There was no pity in the kiss, only understanding, and Bucky was grateful for it. When they broke, he leaned back against Steve, and sighed happily when he felt a hand in the middle of his back.

“What about you?” he asked as he stared down at himself. “Do you ever miss it?”

A huff of air tickled the top of his head, and Steve’s cheek came to rest on his forehead. “Do I miss being a ninety-pound asthmatic? No.” Bucky could feel Steve’s smile. “But do I miss when things were a lot more innocent? Sometimes.”

They both lapsed into silence and Bucky resumed flipping through the album. There were images of Coney Island, France and England during the war, and the pair at various bars and various outposts with the rest of the Commandos. There were also new pictures — one from Steve during the Battle of New York (Bucky had told him he looked debauched in it), one of Bucky after he’d turned himself in, and a whole bunch of the two of them since.

He loved every single one of them. He really really did.

After a while he remembered his reason for coming out into the living room. “I’m bored, Steve,” he said. He shifted so they were facing each other. “This bed rest is getting a little ridiculous.”

“So what do you wanna do?” Steve asked, pulling his knee up along the couch to face him. “And before you ask, we’re not going out anywhere.”


“Because, I —”

“I mean you just told Natasha I’m no worse off than a bar fight,” Bucky cut in, a touch of hopefulness in his voice as he echoed back Steve’s words. “I think I can handle myself outside by now.”

“I’m sure you can. To an extent,” Steve replied, a blunt edge to his own words. “But can’t you just wait it out for a few more days? Please?”

Bucky pushed off the couch, exasperated. “What are you so afraid of?”

Steve stood up as well.” Honestly?” He reached over and pushed his hand into Bucky’s side. The touch was gentle, but Bucky still cried out and bent over in pain, dropping the album on the floor.
“The fact that it’s been two weeks, and you’re still in that much pain means that any normal person ever would have been dead. And you did die on me there for a minute, Bucky. I mean, forget the three days I spent convinced you were dead. No, I got to watch that horror happen with my own eyes.”

Bucky finally looked up, all set to glare in absolute betrayal, but the icy stare he got back shut him down fast. “It wasn’t my fault,” he ground out, even as he tried to take in several deep breaths to force the pain back down. He fought to pull himself back up into a standing position. “You know that wasn’t my fault.”

“Your fault or not, it makes no difference if you’re dead. You’re still dead.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Steve pressed his hands along Bucky’s face, his gaze fierce. “It means that it was real this time, and I’m sorry, but I’m just not ready to let you back out into the world yet.”

“So you’re keeping me prisoner?” Bucky dared to ask, seething before he’d already gotten an answer.

“That is so not fair.” Steve bowed his head. “You know I would never do that.”

“Then I don’t understand.” And he didn’t. He hurt, sure, but even going out to dinner or down to the park should have been fine. Right now it seemed he wasn’t even allowed to walk out the front-fucking-door.

Steve took a deep breath and met Bucky’s eyes, his own now edged with fear. “It means that twice now, despite you doing nothing wrong, I almost lost you. It means that the outside world scares me right now, and I’m asking you not to go out into it until you’re fully capable of defending yourself. I can’t stop bad things from happening, but I need to know you can at least defend yourself when they do. I need to know you have a shot at coming back to me.”

The look on Steve’s face — the way his eyes all but begged Bucky — knocked the fight right out of him. He hated to admit it, but Steve had a point. A poke-to-the-stomach kind of point.

“All right, fine,” he conceded, and he couldn’t help but smile at the look of cautious relief on Steve’s face. “But that doesn’t help me with my boredom.”

“So what do you wanna do?” Steve repeated, grasping. “We’ll do anything you want, as long as we can keep it here.”

“I don’t know.” Bucky shrugged and looked around, defeat sneaking in at the prospect of still being stuck in their place for several more days.

He glanced at the TV, but he and Steve had already binge-watched Game of Thrones, as well as a string of movies. He thought about reading, but he’d already reread all of his favorite books. Twice.

Then he glanced down and spotted the album on the floor. It gave him an idea.

“Hey, can you pick that up for me?” he asked, pointing at it.

“Uh, sure.” Steve grabbed the album off the floor and handed it over, an inquisitive expression on his face. “Not done looking at it?”

“Actually...” Bucky flipped it open and found the page with him from Basic. He turned it around to
show Steve. “Do you think it's too personal to show people these online?”

Steve eyed the book before shaking his head. “Not as long as you're comfortable with it. I mean” — he waved a hand at it — “I don't mind, if that's what you're asking.”

“Yeah,” Bucky replied absently as he turned the album back again and looked it over. He was still skittish about getting too personal with his accounts, especially after Steve and Sam had posted something so personal without his permission. But maybe this was okay.

He snapped the book closed and smiled at Steve. “Yeah, I'm gonna go play around on Instagram for a while.”

Steve nodded. “Okay, that's a — oh!” He snapped his fingers at Bucky, his eyes gone elsewhere. “I have an idea.” With that he started back toward their spare room, only to stop halfway and turned back to Bucky. “Don't start yet, okay?”

“Oh... Okay,” Bucky said with a laugh.

“Just go rest for a few minutes or something,” Steve added, flapping his hand in the direction of their room, his eyes now completely alight with excitement.

“What, you lunatic.” Bucky shook his head affectionately and started walking back to their room. “But if you make me wait too long, I'm killing you slowly, Cap.”

“All right!” he exclaimed, and tossed the phone onto his thighs. He grimaced as Steve's smile got impossibly wider. “Just fucking show me. I mean, you kept me waiting long enough...”

With an excited squirm, Steve turned the chalkboard around for Bucky to see.

“Well?” he asked excitedly — and completely without patience.

Bucky wanted to stay angry. He so wanted to. But the dork had drawn up a Steve and Bucky's Photo
Album sign, and the best part... The best part was the little circle in the corner with words pointing to it, Captain America ninja turtle goes here.

Yeah there was no staying angry at that.

Bucky laughed and gently turned around so he could crawl over, just as Steve asked, “Do you like it?”

He got up on his knees and placed a hand on top of the board, being careful of the chalk as he leaned in to give Steve a kiss. “I love it, you idiot.”

“I left a space for you, did you see?” Steve asked. He pulled two pieces of chalk out of his back pocket — white and blue — and held them out for Bucky.

”Yeah, I saw,” Bucky answered affectionately as he took the chalk out of Steve's hand.

“Where's gonna be most comfortable for you to do this?”

Bucky looked at the drawing then up at Steve. “Could you just hold it up for me?”

Steve smiled at him. “Yeah. I can do that.”

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One smudged out corner, a blue ninja turtle, and a string of lights around the sign later (it's festive, Buck!), and Bucky was sitting up in front of it, holding open the album. All that, and now he was exhausted. Stupid fucking injuries.

“How do you want me?” he asked, only to have his phone's flash go off in his face.

Steve smiled sheepishly above it. “Sorry. Thought you were ready. One more.” He held up a finger and a second later, the flash went off again. Bucky was pretty sure he'd smiled that time. Sort of. Maybe not.

“We get anything?” he asked.

Steve glanced at the picture and gave him the thumbs up. “We got it.” He crawled over to lean against the wall next to Bucky and passed over the phone. The picture was good enough, as far as Bucky was concerned, though he did look ridiculously tired. He loaded it quickly, and added a caption:

Back home from the hospital! Let's do something not dangerous in order not to piss Steve off (and you know how he is when he's pissed...) Wanna browse our album? Go!

“How’s that?” He snickered as he showed the phone to Steve.

All the man did was nod. “ Fucking right, I would be,” he said and turned to give Bucky an evil grin. “You don’t wanna see me angry.”

“So scared,” Bucky replied, deadpan, only to twitch when Steve pinched him above the knee. “Dick.”

Steve just leaned in and kissed Bucky's head. “So what’s next?”

That was an easy one, Bucky knew. He flipped right to the picture of himself from Basic. “This one?” he asked, looking over.
Steve wrapped an arm around Bucky’s shoulder, and he snuggled in tight as Steve kissed him again. “You really love that picture, don’t you?”

Bucky gave a half shrug from where he was tucked up under Steve’s arm. “I was happy,” he said honestly. “Well, as happy as one could be drafted into a war.”

“We both wanted to fight,” Steve gently reminded him.

“And look where we are now?”

Steve didn’t answer, just pressed his cheek into Bucky’s hair. So Bucky propped the album up on his lap and positioned his phone to take a picture of the image. He made sure to turn the flash off.

“Look Stevie,” he said quietly as he loaded the photo onto his app. “That’s my left arm.”

“I know, baby,” Steve whispered.

He couldn’t decide what to put, but he really was trying to be more personal, so he typed out, Here’s *me as a whole person. Two good arms and all.* He passed the phone off to show Steve, but he just handed it back with a quiet, “No, Bucky.”

Bucky frowned and deleted the words. He stared at the image, himself so young, with a light in his eyes he rarely saw anymore.

But Steve didn’t like the words he’d chosen. And maybe he was right; maybe that was less personal and more self-deprecating. But Bucky was having a hard time thinking up words that could mean anything else.

After punking out for a couple minutes, he finally just fell back onto what he knew:

*A rare photo, me during my military training, right before joining the 107th.*

With a sigh, he added Tumblr and hit share without bothering to show it to Steve. It was so generic; he would never disapprove, even if he wanted to.

“What’s next?” Steve asked. There was a falseness to his tone that suggested he knew what Bucky was thinking of the last one. He was trying to force past it.

So Bucky fell in step and flipped through the album. He glanced over their trips to Coney and his images during the war. He loved his old unit, but there were enough images of those guys already floating around.

Then he flipped the page. A surveillance shot. The day Bucky had turned himself in.

It had taken years for Bucky to admit this to Steve, but that day, he’d been convinced they were going to put him down. In fact, in the moment this particular picture had been taken, Bucky had thought Steve was gonna do it. A mercy kill. He would’ve welcomed it.

He’d also had a hard time admitting that it had taken years for him to see Steve in the photo as anything other than pitying. Even after they’d made their way back to each other, Bucky simply *could not* recognize the look on Steve’s face for what it was: Love.

“You know I dressed that way on purpose that day?” Steve murmured. “It sounds stupid, but I thought that if I made myself look more like how you’d remembered me, maybe it would’ve been easier on you.”
“It wasn’t,” Bucky said, and he winced at the hardness he heard in his own voice. He tried to backtrack. “I mean, all I knew until that point was death. They woke me up, sent me out to kill, and put me back. There was nothing else.” He turned to look up at Steve. “I never failed. But I failed with Fury, and then with you.” He sighed and tucked his head under Steve’s chin. “I mean, you know. I failed, so I figured that meant I would be executed. Didn’t know who was gonna do it, but someone had to.” He touched the edges of the photo and snorted, hollow and empty. “Just figured it would be you. Even then I remember thinking it was poetic justice.”

So much for backtracking.

“You don’t need to post this one, baby,” Steve said and hugged Bucky close. He felt a twang of pain in his side, but ignored it.

“No, this is a good one.” He nodded at the photo and propped it up. “No one sees me like this. Remind them of what I used to be.” he added and took the photo.

“Are you sure that’s healthy?”

“I’ve told you. It’s better they see me as human. They think I’m a hero, or a victim, or whatever. But heroes and victims are human too.”

Steve didn’t say anything to that, just grabbed the book off Bucky’s lap. He flipped through it before stopping on a picture of the two of them taken not long after the one Bucky was working on. “What do you think of this one?”

Bucky glanced down at the picture of the two of them, snuggled up on the floor in front of Steve’s old TV. There was food and random things strewn about, Tony’s face on the screen, and Bucky could not remember for the life of him who took the photo.

He scowled at the image. “Who took that?” he asked. “Do you remember?”

“Uhhh...” And Bucky felt a twinge of relief because it sounded like Steve didn’t know either. He just turned to Bucky, his brow creased. “Clint?” he asked. “Sam? They were both over that night.”

Bucky laughed. “What are you looking at me for? I have the Swiss-cheese memory, remember? You’re the weirdo with the photographic one. You should know these things.”

Steve turned back to the photo, his eyes wide. “Wow, I really don’t know. Does that mean I’m losing it?”

“Well, if you are, I’ve got a spot open in my little club for a secretary. I mean, right now it’s just me and Clint, but we’re always open to new prospects, and the two of us can’t write for shit.”

“Yeah, you really really can’t.”

Bucky shoved into him with a laugh and turned back to the task at hand, which was getting up the surveillance shot. And of course, he punked out again on the caption.

The first time Steve saw me after I surrendered to S.H.I.E.L.D, 3-4 years ago. This one isn’t really a photo. It’s a still from a surveillance camera footage stolen by Nat.

He hit share quickly and grabbed the photo album to take a picture of the image Steve had opened to. At this point he’d given up on trying to post anything personal on his captions, and for good reason, especially with this one.
Because people didn’t need to know that Bucky had been screaming inside when the photo had been taken. People didn’t need to know that this had been during a period where he’d just assumed every night he went to bed that he wasn’t waking up the next day. People didn’t need to know that the very last thing he wanted was to be touched by another human being, including Steve.

Especially Steve.

Yeah. People didn’t need to know that he’d been screaming inside.

One of the first photos we took home after I was finally released from a high security S.H.I.E.L.D facility. We tried to pretend that everything was gonna be alright now, forget about the tracking device in my arm, the 30 so-called "undercover" agents specially assigned to my surveillance, and the fact that I was just unbearable and wanted to be left the f**k alone 10 hours a day. Stevie wouldn’t have it and I’ll never be able to thank him enough for that. Otherwise, yes it was Tony on TV. This guy practically lives on TV sets!! OK, enough with our album, we’ll come back to it later.

He glanced over the text and hit send, even as he felt Steve reading over his shoulder.

“That’s all your doing for now?” Steve asked.

“There’s always tomorrow,” Bucky replied with a nudge.

“So what you’re saying is I did all this work for four pictures?”

“Yes, Stevie.” Bucky turned his best sad eyes on Steve and willed his own sadness away. “I’m so tired now. You wore me out.”

Steve snickered even as his eyes became lidded. “Are you saying it’s nap time?”

“Are you joining me?”

Steve leaned over and kissed him even as he kicked the covers out to try and pull over the two of them. They laughed against each other’s mouths when their legs got twisted up in the mess of cotton because really, covers weren’t supposed to be that difficult.

Eventually they slid down into the warmth of their bed, Bucky lying on his right side and Steve pulling him in by his chest to keep his arm above Bucky’s healing stomach.

“I love you, Stevie,” Bucky mumbled as he felt himself drifting off, safe and content.

“I love you too, baby.”

It was the last thing Bucky would hear for the next several, blissful hours.
Chapter Summary

We had a couple of days off and flew away to California. Pretty awesome but I already miss NYC.

Chapter Notes

CALIFORNIA!!!!

*sounds of 2Pac playing in the distance*

SO! These next few images are the ones I have been fucking waiting to get to since they got posted!

Why, you ask? Because this is my HOME TOWN! I may live down the street from our Brooklyn Boys now, but I grew up in the land of sunshine, and I know it better than the back of my damned hand. So keep in mind that any place you hear mentioned in this fic are all real places. And because I am SO excited about this one, I've posted a chapter end notes with mass love to all places mentioned here. Have fun!
“Oh, shit!”

Bucky caught sight of something small and black under foot before he pitched backward into the surf.

The last thing he heard before he went under was the sound of Steve laughing.

The water wasn’t that high, and he was only under for a second before he shot up and scrambled around onto his shins. He looked around frantically for the little Shih-Tzu Steve had been playing catch with.

He almost missed the little bastard as it came bounding into the water at him, barking muffled around the ball in its mouth. Bucky caught it as it jumped at him, but that didn’t stop him from falling backwards hard on his ass.

Steve, who was standing up by the water’s edge, just laughed that much harder.

“You shut up!” he yelled futilely at his boyfriend before turning back to the little Kujo in his arms. He held the dog up as the low tide came in at his back again, and glared at it. “Are you trying to kill me?” he demanded of the beast. In response, it dropped its ball in Bucky’s lap and panted at him, wiggling in his hands. He held it up to his face. “Oh, no.” he scolded. “If I put you down, you’ll do me in, I’m sure of it.”

“Afraid of a little dog, Buck?” Steve teased and dropped down into the water next to him. He reached out and scratched the dog behind its ear. It turned into the gesture, closed its eyes, and whined.

“This hell-spawn just tried to kill the Winter Soldier,” Bucky informed him. He pulled the dog close again. “No one takes down the Winter Soldier, you understand? And the Soldier takes no prisoners.”

The ‘hell-spawn’ closed the last inch of space and began to lick his nose.

“Aw, man, quit it!” Bucky cried out as the little dog lapped at his face. He cringed when he felt tongue graze teeth. “That’s disgusting, you little —” the dog shoved it’s snout against Bucky's mouth, effectively cutting him off.

Steve cracked up all over again next to him, and fell backwards into the water. He knocked his hand against Bucky's metal arm. “Oh my god, Buck,” he wheezed out. “This little guy really has taken down the Winter Soldier!”

“Which is why it has to die!” Bucky whined, as he pulled the little dog back.

“What?”

Uh oh.

Bucky looked up as the dog’s owner, Kim, came barreling towards him through the water, off to his right. He shrank back, instantly more afraid of the panic and absolute fury raging across her features than of the tiny beast still trying to get at his face.

Kim swooped down, and Bucky flinched as she scooped the dog up out of his arms.
“Did you just threaten to kill my dog?” she bellowed at him.

“Way to go, dumbass,” Steve whispered in his ear, but then she turned her glare on him.

“And you!” she shrieked, and he felt Steve shrink back as well. “You're Captain America!” Bucky nervously ticked off at least ten pairs of eyes that swiveled in their direction. “You're supposed to be better than this!”

“Well, ma'am, I'm certain he didn't actually mean —”

“Shut up,” she snapped, pointing a finger at Steve. “I let you play with my dog, and the next thing I know he's running out into the surf, where the water level is way too high” — she waved a hand out at the ocean — “and being manhandled by this brute” — she pointed at Bucky — “who first steps on my dog and then threatens him over it.”

“Now ma'am, I think that’s a bit out of line —”

She glared death in Steve’s direction, and he shut right up, going red out of the corner of Bucky’s eye. Then she turned her vengeance on Bucky, her eyes glinted with steel.

She grabbed his chin and forced him to look at her. He tensed up — shocked by her audacity, his mind screaming at him to attack — until she spoke. “Let's get something straight, pretty boy.” Her tone was like ice, and Bucky shivered involuntarily. “Maybe you were joking and I'm overreacting. Maybe you weren't. But I protect what's mine. Understand that I know who you are and I don't give a shit. You threaten my dog again, and I. Will. End. You.”

With that, she turned and stalked away, dog tucked safely under her arm. Bucky just stared after her.

“Stevie?” he breathed out after a couple minutes.

“Yeah?”

“Scarier than Natalia?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Never tell her I said that?”

“Oh, hell no.”

They locked eyes and stared at each other in horror, only to crack up a moment later. Bucky fell forward, his head hitting Steve’s shoulder, and he snickered into the salty skin.

Steve wrapped his arm around Bucky’s back and shifted, bringing him closer. Then he kissed behind Bucky’s ear. “You know, I'm surprised she didn’t actually try to kill you. You should know by now that people like dogs more than, um, people.”

“Oh, I’m well aware,” Bucky agreed. Sand ground against his ass as he swiveled around to sit in Steve’s lap, his legs bracketing his boyfriend’s hips, as water rushed all around them. He wrapped his arms around Steve’s neck and turned innocent eyes on him. “But you should also realize that if she was gonna take me out, you were next in line. She let you play with her dog, and you betrayed her,” he whispered, shaking his head disapprovingly. “You should feel ashamed.”

Steve nodded solemnly. “Oh, I do,” he said and leaned in to give Bucky a soft kiss. “Deeply.”

Bucky smiled against Steve’s lips and laughed. “You don’t sound very remorseful.”
“She threatened my boyfriend,” Steve replied and kissed him again.

“I threatened her dog,” Bucky reminded him before stealing his own kiss.

Steve shrugged. “It’ll live.”

Bucky laughed and finally leaned back to smile contentedly at his love. He let his arms drape loosely across Steve’s shoulders because he knew Steve was holding on and wouldn’t let go.

“So,” he said. “We finding another dog to torment or are we moving onto the next leg of this tour?”

“Well, what else is on our list today?” Steve asked, his brows knitting. “I mean, we went for a run down the coast —”

“Almost all the way to Laguna Beach and back,” Bucky cut in proudly with a nod.

Steve gave him a wicked half-smile. “I already texted Sam that we basically ran a marathon this morning, and he responded by calling me a gloating asshole and to never speak to him again.”

Bucky snickered. “I know. He texted me to say he wasn’t speaking to you, so now it was my job to get him Halle Berry’s phone number.”

“That man has no shame.”

“Obviously not. He’s friends with us.”

“Fair enough.” Steve smiled, then gave his head a little shake. “Okay! Back on topic.” Bucky nodded oh-so-seriously, but Steve just ignored him. “Anyway, we went for a run, then tried out that diner in Newport that Clint mentioned.”

“God, I thought that kid was gonna have a hernia when we got there,” Bucky murmured with a laugh as he remembered their morning. When they’d pulled up to what was clearly a locals-only diner — it was against the harbor, but every other side was surrounded by houses — a little girl playing with her dad outside had screamed so loud at the sight of Steve, Bucky had actually stepped in front of his boyfriend until he realized where the source of the noise had come from.

Leave it to Steve, though, to be so utterly charmed by her, he’d asked if he and Bucky could join them for breakfast. The little girl — whose name turned out to be Katlyn — spent the whole time sitting between them on their laps, chattering at them like she’d known them her whole life.

“Aw, Bucky, she was cute.” Steve whined at him, evidently remembering the stars that literally never left Katlyn’s bright blue eyes for the entirety of breakfast.

Bucky just shook his head. “I thought you were gonna try and take her home with us.”

“She would have made an excellent mini-me, it’s true.”

“Steve, if we’re gonna have a little blonde-haired, blue-eyed rugrat running around our place, I’d much prefer their genes belong to you,” Bucky replied without thinking. At least not until Steve froze, his eyes wide.

Shit.

Bucky looked away as heat traveled up his face at record speed. He rubbed at his neck and barked out a laugh. He glanced in Steve’s direction, but barely registered his expression before turning away again.
“Uh, yeah. I, uh…” was all he could think of before he let out another nervous laugh. Jesus, what was wrong with him?

A hand cupped his face, warm and solid, if a little wet, and he was finally forced to look over at Steve. There was a teasing smile on his lips, but his eyes were full of affection

“You want kids one day, Buck?” he asked quietly.

Bucky shrugged and tried to turn his head again, but Steve wouldn’t let him. Instead he looked down and mumbled, “Well, not right now, but, you know, maybe one day.” He flicked his eyes up to Steve. “If we ever leave this life behind, that could maybe be something we talk about?”

Steve didn’t answer immediately, just stared at him with the same quiet expression. Bucky’s stomach started to lurch, but then Steve slowly nodded and leaned in for a slow, heartfelt kiss.

“Yes, baby,” he whispered against Bucky’s lips. “That’s definitely something we can talk about. One day.”

“One day.” Bucky smiled in relief. So maybe he hadn’t just made a total ass of himself after all.

“So,” Steve said and pulled back so they were actually looking at each other again. “We went to breakfast and then came here to Dog Beach. How long have we been here?”

“Three hours and twenty-six minutes,” Bucky answered automatically, and gave his head a rueful shake. “Thank god neither of us can burn anymore.”

“Yes, but we can’t tan, either,” Steve pointed out. “But anyway, again I ask the question: what’s next on our agenda?”

“Lunch,” Bucky answered. He scooted back along the sand so he could stand up. He held out his hand for Steve, pulling him up as well. “Then motorcycles,” he added as they turned back to the shore. “I want to pick them up while it still looks like this out.” He gestured up at the gorgeous California sky, blue as Steve’s eyes, with only a trace amount of clouds dotting the horizon.

Steve looked up and then turned to smile at Bucky. “That definitely sounds like my kind of afternoon.”

They walked up the short embankment to where they’d dropped their stuff, mindful this time of the legions of dogs running around under foot. Bucky snatched up the towels and handed one over so they could quickly dry off.

A tennis ball rolled up next to his foot, and he picked it up in time to see a Dalmatian come running over. “Oh, did you want this?” he asked with a laugh, waving the ball at the dog. It bounced happily in the sand and barked at him. “All right, all right,” he finally relented with a smile. He turned back to the water and drew his arm back to throw the ball, but thought better of it, and switched it to his metal hand. He picked a spot about a hundred yards down the waterline where there were no people, and threw it hard in that direction.

The Dalmatian tore off before the ball had barely left his fingers, and Bucky watched as it wasted no time figuring out where its ball had gone.

Steve whistled under his breath next to him. “Damn, that’s impressive. How do you think it figured it out from this far away?”

Bucky let out a long suffering sigh. “Dogs are smart, Steve. Unlike you, apparently,” he added
before knocking into him.

Steve shoved him back just as the Dalmatian came back with its ball. It dropped the toy in front of Steve this time, and he immediately picked it up before tossing it in the same direction. It landed about 20 yards short of where Bucky's had. Bucky smiled. Steve scowled.

“Don’t say it.”

“Wasn’t gonna.”

“I can hear you thinking it.”

“You hear nothing, Rogers.”

“The serum fixed that, Barnes.”

Steve gave Bucky a playful shove, and he wasted no time shoving Steve back. The next thing he knew, they were wrestling around, laughing as they tried to one-up each other, and grimacing every time sand ended up someplace God never intended sand to be.

Bucky had just secured Steve on top of him in a headlock when another tear of dark fur — this one a lot bigger — collided into them with a loud bark. They barely had time to register the impact of what looked like about eighty pounds of dog before Bucky caught a streak of blonde coming at him from the other side.

“Oh, shi—” was all he could get out before he was cut off by a face full of muzzle. The two dogs immediately started some sort of aggressive form of nuzzling as they tried to get in between Bucky and Steve, snuffling and snorting out little grumbles as they apparently tried to separate the two.

Bucky loosened his grip on Steve with a surprised laugh just as they heard a woman shout, “Captain! Bear! No!”

At the names, both men swiveled around to look at her as she came running towards them, and Bucky narrowed his eyes, because of all the dogs to come attack them, what were the odds the pair would be named after him and Steve, and hold up...

Did she really name her fucking dog Bucky Bear?

She reached out and grabbed hold of the chocolate one, but not before it had time to lick a hard stripe up the side of Steve’s face. Bucky momentarily forgot the names and burst out laughing as Steve grunted in disgust and wiped at his face. But as he rolled off of Bucky a second later, he was laughing too.

“Jesus, I am so sorry,” the woman pleaded as she held a struggling dog back. The blonde one — free to do as he pleased — chose to abuse that freedom by jumping up on Bucky with a happy bark, and knocking him into Steve. The woman cringed. “Bear, stop it!”

“Oh, it’s okay ma’am, we love dogs,” Steve assured her as he kneeled down in front of the one she was holding to scratch its head, and Bucky followed suit with the blonde one — Bear apparently.

Bear tried to jump into his lap, and Bucky grabbed his collar to hold him steady. “Can you sit for me?” he asked. The dog just whimpered and wiggled in his grip, so he looked him in the eye and added a more firm, “Sit.” Bear responded that time, but not without a fair amount of whining. Bucky still scratched his chin for being a good boy.
“What kinds of dogs are these?” Steve asked, and Bucky looked over at the chocolate one — Captain, he guessed. They actually didn’t look like any dog he’d ever seen. They had a solid build, with really curly fur, even if it was wet, and broad, but somewhat familiar-looking snouts. Also, Captain had weirdly long legs in proportion to his body.

She smiled as she crouched down behind Captain, so she could rub his belly. “They’re labradoodles, actually. Half lab, half poodle.”

“Really?” Bucky asked as he turned curiously back to Bear. He scratched him behind his ear. “I thought there was something familiar about their muzzles...” He looked at the dogs before turning a questioning glance her way. “But, um, did you name your dogs after us?”

Her frown of confusion lasted for about five seconds before it slowly gave way to recognition, her eyes going wide. “Oh!” she exclaimed, and quickly glanced back and forth between the two of them. “You guys are Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes, aren’t you?”

“That’s what they keep telling us,” Steve answered with a rueful laugh.

“I like to think of us more as Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum, but they won’t let us put that on our I.D.’s,” Bucky added.

The woman laughed and leaned over to hug her dog, only to freeze a second later. Bucky watched in fascination at the sight of tanned skin turning a very interesting shade of red.

“Oh...” She looked at the dog she was holding before glancing over at Bear. “Their names are Captain and... Oh.” She trailed off and turned her head into Captain’s neck as she let out what sounded like a nervous snicker. Then she glanced up sheepishly at the two of them. “You think their names are Captain America and Bucky Bear, don’t you?”

Bucky nodded, and Steve asked, “Aren’t they?”

She snorted. “Oh, uh, no,” she said with a shake of her head. “So yeah, their names are actually Captain Bearbosa and Bearlock Holmes.”

“Seriously?” Bucky asked as Steve barked out a laugh. Bucky couldn’t decide if he was offended that the pair weren’t named after them, or if it was just a really funny coincidence. “Wait, though, isn’t that confusing?” he decided to ask instead. “I mean, they’re both named Bear, technically.”

She shrugged. “I wanted a dog named Bear and I didn’t know I was getting two. Went with both options I’d picked out ahead of time and now I call them Captain and Bear. They’re half-brothers, total menaces to society, and completely live up to their namesakes.”

“That’s... actually really funny,” Steve commented. He grabbed Captain’s face with both hands, gave him a playful shake, and said, “Who’s a good Captain, huh? Who’s a good Captain?”

Captain answered by trying to jump up, lurching at his limited mobility, and smacking his muzzle against Steve’s face before falling over. Steve laughed and fell over the dog as well to rub his belly.

Bucky felt a tug in his metal hand, and he caught Bear as he’d begun to whine and bark, trying to wrench free and go join the fun. Bucky, because he was a little shit, let go, and sure enough, Bear ran around him and slammed into Steve. All three toppled over, and then it became an all-out play war as Steve tried to wrestle with the two giant dogs.

With a laugh, Bucky stood up and stepped over to the woman, dusting the sand off his hands as he did. “So, what’s your name?” he asked as he watched the tangle of limbs — both human and fur —
“Roll around in the sand.”

“It’s Renee,” she answered with a smile, and held out her hand.

“Bucky Barnes,” he said as he shook it. Then they turned back to watch the battle ensue.

After a minute, she waved a hand at the melee in front of them. “Is he always like this?”

“You mean is he also a menace to society?” Bucky crossed his arms and nodded. “Yes. Absolutely. Hundred percent.”

“Think we should separate them?”

“Pretty sure Steve can outlast your dogs, so maybe he’ll wear them out for you.”

“You speak of better plans. I approve.”

“I have my moments.”

They spent the next twenty minutes like that, picking sides — Bucky for the dogs, and Renee for Steve — and cheering them on as they razzed the other. Sure enough, Bear tapped out first, followed quickly by Captain. Bucky’s own captain then flopped down and pillowed his head on Bear’s belly.

“Victory,” he huffed out, thrusting his arms in the air.

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky muttered as he walked over. He held out his hands and helped Steve up. “You kicked a couple of dogs’ asses. You’re a real hero.” Steve opened his mouth in protest, but Bucky shut him up with a kiss. “Ready to go, Cruella?”

Renee spoke up before Steve could. “In all fairness, Cruella was mean to a bunch of puppies,” she reasoned as she sat down next to her two extremely-exhausted dogs. She squinted up at Steve and Bucky, and smiled. “These two here could stand to be taken down a couple pegs once in a while. So your boyfriend actually is a hero, in my book.”

Steve turned a wide, triumphant grin on Bucky. “See? Hero.”

“All right, fine. Let’s go, Hero.” Bucky smiled down at Renee. “It was nice to meet you,” he said. “Your dogs are actually kind of awesome, even if they aren’t named after us.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” she said before her expression turned solemn. “And that was a major oversight on my part, Sergeant. Won’t let it happen again.”

Bucky pointed a stern finger at her. “See that it doesn’t.”

Steve waved goodbye as they walked over to grab their stuff. They headed back up the hill to the parking lot, but not before stopping at the outdoor showers to rinse all the sand off. When they got to their rental, they dried off again, grabbed a set of dry clothes out of the trunk, and tossed their bag and wet towels in.

They then got in the car to change as discreetly as possible, though Bucky actually couldn’t have cared less who saw. Steve fired up the engine, and Bucky jumped out to toss their swim shorts in the trunk with the rest of their stuff. He grabbed a towel to throw around his shoulders and catch the water in his hair, before slamming the trunk closed. Steve was already pulling out by the time Bucky got back in.

“So, lunch?” he asked as he buckled his seatbelt. Steve turned the car out onto Pacific Coast
Highway, heading north.

“Yeah, I was thinking we’d drive a little up the coast. See if we could find an In ’N Out.”

“Pretty sure there’s probably one here in Huntington Beach, Steve,” Bucky replied, jabbing a thumb behind them.

Steve shrugged. “Probably, but you know”— he swept a hand out in front of them—“scenic drive.”

Bucky snorted. “Fair enough.”

When they came up to a stoplight, Bucky grabbed his phone to take a quick selfie of them. He’d probably already taken about a hundred since they landed at LAX the day before, but he didn’t care. They rarely got to go on real vacations, and he was gonna document the hell out of it. Dammit.

“How’d it come out?” Steve asked absently as the light changed and he started to drive.

Bucky glanced it over. They both looked relaxed and happy—something he hadn’t seen on either of them since before Christmas. “It’s pretty good. I think I’ll post it.”

“Well, as long as you don’t post that video of me doing the whole ‘king of the world’ thing from our run this morning, I’m solid.”

“Well, as long as you continue to be nice to me, take me on vacations, and buy me pretty things, I promise I won’t.”

Steve laughed, but didn’t respond; he knew Bucky’s threat wasn’t serious. Maybe. Probably. Bucky still made sure to save that one to the cloud for future blackmail.

He loaded the photo before deciding to go with a caption that was about as easy-going as the picture.

*We had a couple of days off and flew away to California. Pretty awesome but I already miss NYC.*

The last part was only half-true, though. He did miss New York, but god, did it ever feel good to get out of town for a while. He hit Tumblr, and then hit share, before tossing his phone into the center console.

“So, lunch, then hotel to clean up and change, then bikes,” he said as he settled back in his seat.

“Are we really taking them later to that place you were talking about?”

Bucky leaned against the door to look over at Steve. “What, Black Star Canyon? Fuck yes. The place is haunted, Stevie. We need to ride the motorcycles through there tonight.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve gave Bucky a deeply withering look. “You don’t actually believe that stuff, though.”

“Hell yeah, I do!” he exclaimed and batted at Steve’s arm. “I read some story about how a couple of kids got pulled over by a cop up in there, right? And apparently, when the cop came up to their window, *his eyes were just empty sockets.*”

“Gross,” Steve huffed.

“Awesome,” Bucky countered.
Steve just shook his head and smiled. “Only you would want to spend vacation hunting down ghosts.”


Chapter End Notes

So, here are pics of all the places I mentioned in the fic!

**First up, Dog Beach in Surf City, USA (aka Huntington Beach)**

![Dog Beach in Huntington Beach](image1)

**Huntington Beach (aka Surf City USA)**

![Huntington Beach](image2)

**Their Run (25.36 miles round trip)**

![Their Run](image3)
The cafe they had breakfast at, Galley Cafe.

Black Star Canyon (during the day)

Black Star Canyon (at night. heh)
(Note: The story mentioned in this fic isn't actually one of the more famous urban legends, but one that a few different groups of people I knew growing up claimed to have happened to them. If you want to read up on BSC's urban legends, there's a few listed on its [wikipedia page](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brattleboro_Springs_College).

**Finally, most importantly, Captain and Bear. ;)**

There's also a video of these two knuckleheads [here](https). :P
Steve, you're dead. This is the worst day of my life. I didn't survive Hydra for this s**t, goddamnit!! I said "yes" to Disneyland because for I-don't-know-what reason you wanted to visit this place, I said "yes" to the mouse-shaped apples too but the ears? Hell NO!! I swear to god that if you'll force me to keep them on my head, I'll set them on fire!!

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Bucky had seen a lot in his extremely long life. He’d been all over the world, met people from all walks of life, and experienced cultures, places, and events that no one human would ever be able to relate to, no matter how hard they tried. Really, there wasn’t much out there that he could say he hadn’t come across at one point or another.

Except for this. This thing was... different. Inhuman. This was a creature far removed from any
reality he’d ever known. And it had taken over his boyfriend’s body. Had him bouncing around like a puppy, talking faster than a mile-a-minute, and losing all ability to focus on any one thing for longer than a few seconds.

This creature was not Steve Rogers. No, this creature was nothing more than a five-year-old hopped up on giant, crack-filled lollipops and helium from balloons shaped ominously like the heads of mice.

This is what he got for agreeing to go to Disneyland.

“Bucky, are you even listening to me?”

“Mhm.” Bucky responded absently for the tenth time in as many minutes. They were still wandering down ‘Main Street’ (so fucking fancy this place was), and while Steve was busy chattering about what random factoid he’d learned in the last 24-hours about this place, Bucky was busy being wary of the sheer number of people they were surrounded by.

But really, the factoids.

So far Bucky had learned the following, whether he wanted to or not:

“Did you know that the reason the sidewalks are red is because Walt wanted people to feel like they were getting the red carpet treatment?”

(Sure, Steve. That’s the reason the ground is red...)

“Walt had a full-blown apartment above the firehouse. See Buck? Right there? Are you even looking?”

(Fuck. Yes. He was looking.)

“See those names up there on those windows? Those are the people who contributed to the creation of Disneyland, and they’re meant to be read like credits in a film.”

(Credits. Wait, did that mean the end? Could they leave soon?)

“That one up there says Elias Disney, but it’s actually Walt, he just didn’t want a noticeable credit, so they went with his middle name.”

(Bucky began to wonder how he could make himself less noticeable.)

“Oh my god, do you smell that, Bucky? Know what that is?”

(No, but he was certain he was about to find out...)

“That’s the vanilla they pump out near the bakery to make people think of baking, and make them hungry. During Christmas they also pump out peppermint.”

(And now he knew.)

“There are Hidden Mickeys everywhere, Buck. Natasha said some are easy to spot, like the plates in the Haunted Mansion. But there are others that are much harder to find, like some of the ones on Pirates, the rock formation in line at Big Thunder, and the skeleton with the Mickey Ears on its head in the Indy ride.”

(What the fuck was a Hidden Mickey? Why must this place have things that were hidden? Was he gonna need a gun for this?)
“Oh, you have your utility flashlight, right? Cause Nat says that’s the only way we’re gonna see the hidden Eeyore in line at Indy.”

(Bucky wondered if Steve would think it was on purpose if he suddenly ‘lost’ his flashlight. Fucker probably would.)

“And oh! Did you know that Pirates used to have real skeletons on its ride? They’ve been gone for years, though.”

(Too bad. It would have been a fun guessing game to see if any of them were the remnants of his enemies. Did people really think Disney got this big on sunshine and rainbows?)

“Hey remember when we passed under the train back there? Well, we were passing this thing called the berm, and now we won’t be able to see anything outside the park. It’s to maintain the magic. Ooh! I’ll bet that’s why that giant tree is over there. Otherwise, that’s a really weird place to put a tree...”

(And now Bucky had a new mission for the day. Aside from keeping all of these people away from Steve, he was bound and determined to find a spot where he could see something outside the park. Otherwise he was marking this place down as fucking not natural. Oh wait...)

He felt a thump on his chest, and his eyes shot over to Steve with an automatic, “I’m listening!”

Steve just gave him a flat stare.

“What?” Bucky said with a shrug. He watched a family of eight walk by, all in identical bright green shirts. He snickered as one of the little kids jumped out of the way of a double-decker cable bus that was barreling towards him. “I heard what you were saying. There’s a berm thing and we’re now trapped inside the Tragic Kingdom —”

“You really need to stop listening to No Doubt.”

Bucky turned to him, aghast. “If you speak ill of my Gwenny, Steve, I swear to god...” he warned and tried to lean into make himself look all threatening and stuff. Them were fightin’ words.

A couple months prior, Tony had mentioned that Bucky should check out some old-school style of music called ‘ska’ — said he’d dig the modern take on big band music— and ever since Bucky had become obsessed with No Doubt, especially their ridiculously hot lead singer.

“I would never speak ill of your ladylove, Buck.” Steve held up his hands with a playful smile, only to turn and give Bucky a light shove. “But that’s like the fiftieth time you’ve referenced that song since I said ‘let’s go to Disneyland.’”

Bucky narrowed his eyes for a moment, before straightening up and letting his glare turn into a mischievous smile. He opened his mouth and begun to quietly sing.

“Once was a magical place, over time it was lost, price increased the cost...”

Steve blinked at him. “Okay, I get that this place is expensive, but —”

“His tears are frozen stiff, icicles drip from his eyes...”

Bucky stalked closer, and Steve in turn took a step back — his eyes still playful, but wary. “You know Walt Disney isn’t actually in cryo, right, Buck?” he asked and tried not to trip over the curb as he continued to back away.
Bucky feinted to the right and glided around a green mailbox. He came up on Steve’s left, who, for his own part, was now eyeing Bucky with a touch of fear. “Midgets that disguise themselves as tiny little dwarfs...”

“Well that’s just rude...” Steve mumbled, his eyes locked on Bucky’s movements.

Bucky stopped where he was, three feet to Steve’s left, and the two stared each other down. Bucky bit his lip to keep from laughing at the way Steve was staring at him like was about to jump him.

(Which he then did, of course. Hey, he never claimed he wouldn’t.)

Bucky snapped his arm out, and Steve barely had time to react before Bucky spun him around, grabbed his shoulders, and started singing at the top of his lungs, “The parade that’s electrical, it serves no real purpose. Just takes up a lot of juice, just to impress us!”

Steve then burst out laughing at Bucky’s complete lack of attack, even as the people walking around them stared at Bucky like he was crazy.

“All right, I get it!” Steve exclaimed between huffs of laughter. He grabbed Bucky’s face and surged in for a quick kiss. “This place is tragic and scary, and apparently No Doubt had it pegged all the way back in ‘95.”

Bucky nodded. “And best you don’t forget that.” He turned back around and wrapped his arm around Steve’s waist, if anything to steer him towards the corndog truck at the end of the street. Steve threw his arm across Bucky’s shoulders as they walked towards it. “But seriously, Steve, what’s with the newfound Disney obsession?”

“Oh, I don’t know...” Steve trailed off with a slight shrug. Bucky waited for him to continue, but he just stayed quiet as they walked up and got in line. It was surprisingly long for corndogs. Even here, there were just... people. Everywhere.

It was a couple minutes of Bucky eyeballing everyone around them before Steve spoke again. “I mean, I guess if I had to put my finger on it... This is actually something from our childhood, ya know?”

“Disneyland was built in the fifties, Stevie,” Bucky pointed out with rueful grin.

“No shit, smartass.” Steve laughed before leaning in to kiss Bucky’s temple. “But Disney is something we had back when we were kids, and it’s still here. Only bigger and more visual, and you know how I like the visuals.” He wagged his eyebrows at Bucky.

To which Bucky just shook his head. “You’re the biggest dork, you know that?”

Steve laughed and moved to wrap his arms around Bucky’s waist. “Well, yeah, but that’s one of the things you love most about me, right?” He turned his big sad eyes on Bucky, and fuck, if that didn’t get Bucky every single time.

He pulled Steve close and rested his chin on his shoulder. “You know that it is, you big oaf.”

Steve hummed just before Bucky felt lips brush against his neck. “I know I’m acting like a huge nerd right now, but at least try to have fun today? For me?”

“The crowds are freaking me out, Steve,” Bucky answered honestly. “I can’t protect you here.”

Steve pulled back and rested his hands on either side of Bucky’s neck. It took him a second to pull
away from scanning the crowd, but when he did, he was met with concerned eyes.

“You don’t need to always worry about protecting me, baby,” Steve quietly assured him.

Bucky huffed in frustration, because yes he did. He grabbed hold of Steve’s wrists and grumbled, “Any of these people could be a threat to you, Steve.”

“That’s true,” Steve agreed with a nod. “And I’m not telling you not to worry. But maybe if either of us needs protecting, we do it together?” He kissed Bucky softly before giving him a tiny smile. “That’s all I’m saying.”

Bucky took a deep breath, waiting to see if he would continue. When he didn’t, Bucky asked, “So you’re not calling me paranoid?”

Steve arched an eyebrow. “When have I ever called you paranoid?”

Bucky huffed again. “Never.”

“Exactly.” Steve pulled him in for another hug, and Bucky turned to nuzzle against the crook of his neck. When he brushed his lips against soft skin, Steve blessedly held him tighter. “Look, I’ll make you a deal,” he murmured in Bucky’s ear.

“I’m listening.”

“I promise to be careful and vigilant around all these people today if you promise to at least try and enjoy yourself?”

Bucky grumbled to himself because, really, he hated when he got like this, but there were just so many people, and this was his boyfriend. This was Steve...

“All right,” he answered quietly.

Steve leaned back and smiled at him, his eyes just a little bit brighter with hope. “Yeah?”

Bucky scowled in return, though he didn’t really feel it. “Yeah,” he agreed. “But only because you were acting like a hilarious man-child earlier, and if you keep it up, Nat’s gonna want pictures.”

“That’s fine,” Steve said easily. He turned to loop his arm through Bucky’s as they moved forward in line.

Oh, hell no. Bucky wasn’t having that.

He jostled Steve as he side-eyed the man. “What do you mean, ‘that’s fine’?”

Steve just shrugged. “I mean, it’s fine. You are more than welcome to send Nat all the pictures you want.” Everything about Steve screamed amiable right now, but that was the problem. His body was screaming it, which meant Steve was anything but.

“And if I choose to send photos to Nat, what comes after?” Bucky asked carefully.

Steve stepped forward in line, seemingly ignoring Bucky because, fucking hell, he started humming ‘Once Upon a Dream’ under his breath, and it wasn’t the cute Disney version. It was that creepy, Lana Del Rey version.

“Hm, what?” Steve blinked and looked over at Bucky, all innocent and fake, like he hadn’t known he was there. “What’s up, Buck?”

Bucky poked him in the shoulder. “Don’t give me that ‘what’s up, Buck’ bullshit. What are you gonna do if I send photos of you to Nat?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing...” Steve replied absently. He patted Bucky’s arm and smiled. “Send her whatever photos you want, baby.” Then he turned to stare off again and resumed humming to himself.

Bucky huffed in frustration and glared at him. “Steven Grant Rogers, so help me God —” And that was when Bucky noticed that Steve wasn’t staring aimlessly; he was actually looking at something.

Bucky followed his gaze until it landed on the tiny human standing in front of them in line with his family. There didn’t seem to be anything special about the kid; he was just standing in line quietly, holding his mother’s hand (well, Bucky assumed it was his mother’s).

He frowned in confusion, because really, what was Steve staring at? Bucky did a full check of the kid: Plain black converse, cargo shorts, white t-shirt, mouse ears —

Oh. Shit.

“No,” Bucky said, flat and even.

“No, what?” Steve asked innocently, his voice light. Oh, that fucker was smooth.

“Don’t care how many pictures I send. I’m not wearing them.”

“You will if I ask nicely.”

Bucky scoffed. “Oh, you think so?”

Steve just smiled, never taking his eyes off the kid. “Not a doubt in my mind I’ll have you in those” — he nodded at the ears — “by day’s end.”

“I call bullshit.” There was no way. Bucky was the Winter Soldier. He was both feared and awed the world over. He was too cool for this shit. He had standards.

Steve just turned and kissed him on the cheek like none of that mattered (it mattered, goddammit!).

“By day’s end.”

So, it maybe sort of only took Bucky another hour before he was firing off stuff to Natasha.

Steve, the dick, made him sweat bullets for another three hours before he made good on his threat, and now Bucky was regretting all life decisions that lead up to this particular moment in his own.

But, come on. They had been over at California Adventure, having just gotten off Soaring Over California, and Steve was fucking flittering around Bucky, talking about how cool it was, and it was just like flying with some sort of jet-pack hang glider, and oh! wouldn’t that basically be like Sam’s wings, and do you think he’d let me borrow them, and on and on, and Bucky couldn’t help it. His boyfriend was just too much of a dork for his own good, and he ended up taking a video of it before he accidentally tripped and emailed to Nat.
Oops. Fucking metal fingers. They were slippery like that.

He wondered if they were slippery enough to shred the stupid thing on his head before Steve could stop him.

“You know, I’m fairly certain I’ve never hated anyone in my life as much as I hate you right now,” Bucky announced from his perch on the metal railing that surrounded the center plaza garden in front of the castle. He glanced over to make sure their apple treats hadn’t fallen over off the railing. They were covered in chocolate and caramel in the shape of Mickey and Minnie’s ass, and they looked completely stupid, but Steve had said ‘chocolate’ and Bucky had been sold instantly.

The ears were another thing though.

He reached up to adjust them just as Steve quirked a very unimpressed eyebrow at him. “Really, Buck?” he asked. “Not anyone ever?”

Bucky frowned and crossed his arms. “Okay, well maybe Hitler,” he grumbled.

Steve snorted as he held his phone up in Bucky’s direction. “Well, it’s good to know I rank below that genocidal dickwad.”

“Just barely,” Bucky teased, and held out his pinched fingers to show Steve how just how much of an asshole he was right now. Bigger men had died for lesser things than what his dick boyfriend was making him endure right now.

Steve held his phone and tapped on the screen, and Bucky heard the fake shutter go off as he snapped a picture.

“Do you think you could at least try to smile?” Steve asked as he glanced the picture over.

“Is this better?” Bucky asked back and flipped Steve off just as he looked up from the phone.

Steve grinned big and bright, with a “that works,” and snapped another photo.

Bucky shook his head and pushed off the railing, remembering to grab the apples before heading over.

“Steeeeeve,” he whined as he shoved the Minnie apple at his boyfriend. “Why are you making me wear these?” He whimpered and tried to give Steve his best pout, but the fucker just laughed and took a bite directly out of Minnie’s butt. “You know, I’m pretty sure that’s considered rude in most countries,” Bucky tacked on and nodded at the apple.

Steve chewed the piece and swallowed before saying, “What can I tell ya, it’s a tasty ass.” He turned to give Bucky a dirty little half smile. “Just like someone else I know.”

Bucky had just taken a bite of his own apple, only to almost choke on it as he tried to fight back a laugh. The ears jostled precariously on his head as he started coughing, and he reached up to catch them before they slipped off. “You’re disgusting, you know that?” he wheezed as he righted them back in place.

Steve thumped him on his back and the ears slid down to his forehead. The man caught them though, just as Bucky was about to reach for them himself. He pushed them back up onto Bucky’s head before he leaned in for a little kiss. “So adorable,” he whispered against Bucky’s lips.

“I’m not wearing these all day, you know,” Bucky said, then gave Steve a kiss of his own. “It’s your
own tough shit if you think I am.”

“Not even for me?” Steve asked, eyes big.

“Not even for Hydra,” Bucky countered with a soft laugh.

He walked them over to one of the nearby benches and plopped down before pulling Steve down next to him. “Here, hold this,” he ordered and made to hand over his own apple. Just as Steve went to tuck his phone into his back pocket so he could take the apple, Bucky reached out and snatched it out of his hand.

“Hey!” Steve complained, and Bucky held the phone out as Steve made a grab for it.

Bucky brandished his apple like a weapon. “Nuh-uh. I wanna see the pic.”

“You’ll just delete it.” Steve tried to duck under and around the apple, but Bucky smacked him in the face with it before jumping up and out of reach. Steve swiped at his cheek and stared at Bucky. “Did you seriously just slap me with a candy apple?”

“Yup!” Bucky said, all proud of himself. He danced in and away from Steve, giving the apple little swings as he did. “You want the phone, you gotta get past Captain Buck Rogers, keeper of Candyland and —” he paused as he tried to remember the name of that candy movie he’d just seen. “And Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory.”

That small pause cost him, though, because even as Steve burst out laughing, he took the opening and surged forward right into Bucky’s (accidentally) open arms.

Bucky tried to step back with a “no phone for you!” but Steve just wrapped a secure arm around his waist and pulled him in for a kiss that both men giggled right into.

“You gonna give me my phone back, Buck?” Steve asked as he nipped Bucky’s bottom lip.

“You gonna let me take the ears off, Steven?” Bucky shot back before pressing the apple against Steve’s cheek again. Steve squawked and tried to lean away, but Bucky caught his face and held him so he could lick the chocolate off.

“You do realize we’re in public, right?”

“And we’re at Disneyland, baby. The one place on this godforsaken rock where it’s practically a requirement for two men to be affectionate with each other.”

“You sound proud of that fact.”

“Aren’t you?”

Steve answered with a kiss that was so full of force and passion, Bucky felt it all the way down to his toes.

“Guess so,” he said breathlessly when Steve eventually pulled away. His eyes were dark and his expression was nothing short of avaricious, and now Bucky had plans for whenever they got to leave this cracked out wonderland.

For now, though, he settled for turning in Steve’s arms and leaning up against him as he pulled up the photos Steve had taken. He snorted because, “Wow do I ever look like Grumpy Cat in this first one.”
“M’gonna frame it.”

“Over my dead body.”

“Yeah, that picture might just be worth it.”

“Gonna have to catch me first, old man.” With another snicker, he went to find Steve’s Instagram app and pulled it up. “Am I still logged into this?” he asked casually. Or tried to anyway.

Steve shook his head from where it rested on Bucky’s shoulder. “No, I learned my lesson on that one,” he said quietly.

“I’m not mad about that anymore, you know.”

“Still.”

Bucky just shook his head and logged Steve out so he could log himself in. He added the photo, but turned his head to glance at Steve one more time before he wrote the caption. “You gonna let me take these things off today?”

Steve smiled at him. “Most likely not.”

Bucky smiled back. “Well, all right then.”

*Steve, you’re dead. This is the worst day of my life. I didn’t survive Hydra for this s**t, goddamnit!! I said "yes" to Disneyland because for I-don’t-know-what reason you wanted to visit this place, I said "yes" to the mouse-shaped apples too but the ears? Hell NO!! I swear to god that if you'll force me to keep them on my head, I'll set them on fire!!*

~~~~

“You wouldn’t fucking dare.”

“Don’t test my resolve, Stevie.”

“You *really* wanna get us kicked out of Disneyland?”

Bucky just reached into his pocket where he kept his lighter, and smiled.
I take it all back. Disneyland is AWESOME! I didn't have so much fun since that hostage situation in Uruguay. Apparently, it IS forbidden to set your hat on fire and now, the management is threatening to ban us for life. Can I burn the second ear to celebrate this?

The plastic burned bright yellow — a slow seep down the black of the ear, and Bucky was mesmerized. He had extensive knowledge of the mechanics of burning plastic, but the little bit of pyro in him still looked at the flame and thought, Ooooh. Pretty fire.

Well, it did until the sniping began.

“Oh my god, Bucky, are you kidding me right now?” Steve snapped and tried to reach out for the ears, only for Bucky to snatch them away, grinning maniacally at the little dancing flame.

“I warned you, Steven,” Bucky said as he watched the fire flicker and wave from the swooping of
his arm as he continued to keep it out of Steve’s reach.

“You’re gonna get us in trouble,” Steve hissed. He tried to duck under Bucky’s free arm and come at him from the back, but Bucky was too quick for him, switching the ears from metal hand to flesh, keeping them at bay from his absolutely livid boyfriend.

Not that he cared, really; this was too much fun. He gave Steve a quick smile before darting around to the backside of the Walt Disney statue. The flame started to burn out, and Bucky quickly grabbed his lighter to reignite it.

Two seconds he shouldn’t have wasted, because just as he went to flick the lighter on, two hundred and forty pounds came barreling into him.

“Shit,” he huffed out as he stumbled forward, and both hat and lighter fell out of his grasp. He watched as the hat spun off in one direction and the lighter skittered off in another, coming to a stop underneath a bench.

Steve ran around him and quickly scooped up the hat. He gave it a hard shake to knock out the rest of the flame, then began to blow on what little embers were left as he stalked back towards Bucky, his shoulders rigid.

“You’re an asshole, you know that?” he growled and shoved the hat into Bucky’s chest. Bucky caught it with his metal hand just as Steve turned and retrieved his lighter as well. When he came back, he yanked at Bucky’s other wrist so he could shove the lighter into his hand. With his mouth set in a hard line, he glared at Bucky. “I asked one thing of you today — one thing. And that was to try and have a good time for me. Why is that so difficult?”

All humor drained from Bucky at the anger and frustration absolutely radiating off of Steve. Okay, so maybe he hadn’t found that as funny as he had.

“Aw, fuck, baby, I’m sorry,” Bucky apologized. He shoved the lighter in his pocket so he could try and take Steve’s hand. But Steve just yanked it away before walking off towards Main Street. Bucky ran to catch up, dropping in next to Steve.

“Just forget it Buck, all right?” he ground out, his strides long and purposeful, and Christ, Bucky actually had to try and keep up with him. “I get it. You didn’t wanna be here, so we’ll leave.” He shrugged then shook his head. “Should never have brought you here to begin with...”

“Wait, Stevie, no.” Bucky jogged up a bit so he could step in front of Steve and grab his shoulders — the hat squashed against muscle — forcing him to stop. He gave Steve an embarrassed, half-smile. “I was just messin’ with you, okay? You gotta know that. I wanna be here, I swear.”

“No, you don’t, Bucky.” Steve shook his head again, hurt in his eyes. “You’ve made it pretty damn clear since I mentioned coming that you didn’t wanna be here. So fine.” He waved a hand past Bucky, towards the entrance. “We’ll go.”

Bucky huffed in frustration, but he wasn’t upset — at least not with Steve. Thinking back on their day so far, he hadn’t realized just how childish he’d been behaving about the whole thing. Truthfully, he wasn’t that bothered by the park. He was actually having fun. But apparently he hadn’t been getting that message across in his mission to give Steve shit over his love of this place.

Well that needed to be rectified immediately.

“Steven, listen to me,” he started, and slid his hands down to wrap around Steve’s waist. He went to give a quick kiss, only to be met with unresponsive lips, so he leaned back and gave Steve his best
hangdog expression. “I’m really sorry if I made you think I wasn’t having any fun. I am, I promise. But you gotta understand, you’re —”


“You’re just...” Bucky took a deep breath and looked away. His fist tightened around the hat as he felt his face go red, and he wondered for a second if he was ripping the damn thing. Would serve it right.

As heat traveled up his spine, he finally stepped back and folded his arms before muttering in exasperation, “You’ve just been too damn adorable and — and excited these last couple days not to tease, all right?” He waved the hat at him. “And I told you I was gonna burn it if you made me keep it on.” He gave a sort of half shrug, still refusing to look at Steve. “I just figured that was why you didn’t want me taking it off. Thought you were calling me out.”

“You thought I was calling you out,” Steve parroted back, slowly, like he was talking to a child.

Bucky nodded, still refusing to look at him. And the more he thought about the pictures to Nat, the bitching about the ears, the teasing and just the overall general grumbling; yeah he could see exactly how he was, in fact, being an asshole.

He blew out a raspberry, letting his shoulders sag. He then pursed his lips and said, “I may or may not have been acting like a bit of a brat today.” He dared a glance upward, only to be met with an arched eyebrow. He quickly looked back down again and mumbled, “May or may not.”

“May or may not.” There was the repeating again.

“May have,” Bucky conceded. Sort of.

“Have been.”

“A little.”

“Only a little?”

Okay, now Bucky was frustrated. “Yes, Steve, only a little,” he snapped and looked up. “I haven’t been a complete ass all —”

He cut himself off as he took in Steve's expression. Quirked eyebrow, lips twitched in a half-smile, amusement dancing behind his blue eyes...

“You —” Bucky narrowed his eyes, affronted and accusing. Steve started to shake with silent laughter. “You’re — are you fucking with me?”

Steve’s only response was to burst out laughing.

“Oh, you complete dick,” Bucky exclaimed, aghast. He smacked Steve upside the head with the offending hat. “Tell me that wasn’t since the fire.”

“Oh, um...” Steve gave a quick glance back at the statue, his face turning an interesting shade of pink. “Yeah, that was since the fire.”

Bucky stared at him in shock. The man — his true love — had actually played him!

“So you weren’t really trying to leave?” Bucky asked.
Steve coughed into a laugh. “Well, not really.”

Bucky took a step closer and poked Steve in the chest. “What do you mean ‘not really’?”

Steve just shrugged. His face was still splotchy, and Bucky could practically see the embarrassment bleeding out of him. The game was up when the fucker opened his mouth. “Well, you know, I would have if your slow ass had taken that long to catch up.”

Bucky had committed murder for less than the smirk Steve was giving him right now.

He let his expression slip into the Winter Soldier as he eyed Steve. He took a step forward, only to smile viciously at the way Steve’s eyes went wide. “Step too far, Rogers. You and me?” He trailed a finger up Steve’s rib cage, reveling in the way Steve shivered. “We are done. Gonna go find myself a nice boy who treats me right. Someone who loves me.” He stood up straight and slammed the crumpled hat back onto his head, adjusting it with a little tilt. “Charred ears and all.”

With that he turned and strode past Steve, a little smile on his lips because —

Wait for it. Wait for it...

He barely made it five steps before he was slammed into for a second time. And again he stumbled, as strong arms wrapped around him in a vice grip.

“Bucky, don’t leave me!” Steve whined in his ear, nuzzling at his neck.

“Uh-uh. Nope.” His smile got that much wider as Steve practically squeezed the air out of his lungs. “You obviously love the mouse more than you love me. I simply cannot compete with that.” He let out the most dramatic sigh he could and turned to gaze forlornly at Steve out of the corner of his eye. Then he gave his voice a weepy edge and added, “Think this might be the end of the line for us, pal.”

“I’ll do the dishes for a year,” Steve pleaded.

“You already do do the dishes.”

“You don’t gotta wear the hat anymore.”

“I like the hat. The hat understands me.”

“I’ll buy stock in Hershey so you never have to worry about that pumpkin going empty ever again.”

That got Bucky’s attention. He thought for a second, then said, “Make it Cadbury and I’ll consider it.”

“That’s not very American of me, Buck.”

Bucky could practically see the air quotes around ‘American’. “Tell the press it’s what Peggy would’ve wanted.”

Steve expression turned bemused. “So you're telling me I need to use the memory of my lost girlfriend to keep my now boyfriend from leaving me?”

Bucky shrugged, unimpressed. “Pegs would’ve made you work harder for it than I am.” He wriggled in Steve's arms until the man loosened his grip and Bucky could turn around. He looped his arms around Steve's neck and continued. “And I'll even do you a solid. You don't actually have to buy stock in Cadbury. Just make sure all my favorites are never not in the pumpkin and you got
yourself a deal.”

“So all I gotta do is keep the pumpkin stocked and you'll stay?” Steve stole a quick kiss. Bastard. “Candy for life equals Bucky for life?”

“Well, I don't know about for life...” Steve swatted him on the ass and Bucky laughed. He snuck his own kiss before smiling at his love. “All right, fine. I'll suffer through for the candy.”

“Well, it's good to know the candy'll keep you around,” Steve mumbled.

“Well something has to,” Bucky responded. “It sure isn't gonna be your ugly mug.”

“Please. You like my ugly mug.”

Bucky leaned in for another kiss. “Maybe sometimes,” he ghosted across Steve's mouth.

“Only sometimes?” Steve asked, and Bucky could feel the smile as Steve nipped at his bottom lip.

Bucky hummed in affirmation. “Especially when you forget to shave.” He pulled his hands back so he could scratch at Steve's jaw, their lips never parting. “Those times I like the best.”

Steve tightened his arms around Bucky's waist and deepened the kiss. It was brief — they were in public, after all — but heady. Just the sort of kiss he liked from his Stevie, regardless of who saw or not.

When Steve pulled back, his smile was distant, almost dream-like. He placed a light peck on Bucky's nose and said, “A beard, huh? I'll have to remember that at some point.”

Bucky gave him a small, loving smile — the kind reserved only for them. “See that you do.”

It took a few more moments, but eventually one of them blinked, and Bucky remembered where they were. With a soft laugh, he stepped back and took Steve's hand. “So where to next, Cap?” he asked as he looked around at the entrances to the various 'lands' surrounding the center plaza. He tipped his head towards Tomorrowland, the remains of the mouse ears wobbling where they sat. “Wanna go check out the future?” He snickered as he realized his own joke. “I mean, even more into the future? You know. Than us?”

Steve smiled. “You mean see where we're gonna end up next? Probably a good idea to —”

“Excuse me, sirs?”

They turned around at the same time, only for Bucky to come up short at the man who'd spoken, because holy shiiit, he looked exactly like Director Coulson.

By the way he blinked out of the corner of Bucky's eye, he could tell Steve was thinking the exact same thing.

“Uhhhh,” Bucky answered stupidly. The guy wore a pressed suit, had short, thinning hair, and an even, solid build. It was only as Bucky took that all in that he noticed the name badge that said ‘Brian’ on it. Bucky shook his head and looked up at him. “Can I help you?”

Brian looked back and forth between the two, sweating mildly, and obviously nervous. “I'm very sorry to disturb you, sirs, but Security detected a fire on their cams. When they saw who it was, they felt it might be more prudent if I was sent out to speak to you, as opposed to one of them.”

Steve shot Bucky an accusing glare before turning back and plastering on his best Captain America
smile. “And who are you, exactly?”

“Oh!” Brian's eyes went wide and he stuck out his hand. “Excuse me. Brian Edgings, sirs.” He shook Steve's hand, then turned to shake Bucky's as well. “Head of park relations for the Disneyland Resort.”

“Wait, head of all of this?” Bucky asked making a sweeping gesture around at the various lands.

“Yeah. This, California Adventure, and Downtown Disney,” Brian answered, nodding in the direction of the other two outside locations.

Oh, Jesus. Bucky sighed to himself and ignored Steve as he continued to eye him accusingly, because of course Disney would turn a little thing like a pair of mouse ears on fire into practically a goddamned international incident.

They should've sent Security. Now Bucky was just gonna have to fuck with the guy.

“And you were worried about this?” Bucky asked as he plucked the hat off his head with his left hand. He waved it around a little bit as he smiled sweetly at the man. A smile that may have widened slightly because Brian wasn't looking at the hat. He was looking at shiny hard metal.

Bucky watched the lump in Brian's throat as he swallowed.

“Sir, we understand that accidents happen,” the man said, his voice hollow. He coughed and shook his head, finally snapping his gaze away from the arm to look at Bucky. When he spoke again, though, his voice wasn’t much clearer. “And we would be more than happy to replace the ears for you.”

Bucky laughed easily. “Oh, this was no accident,” he muttered under his breath as he glanced down at the hat.

Steve shifted around slightly, out of Brian's field of vision, and began motioning for Bucky to knock it off. Bucky just smirked before diverting his attention back to the suit.

“That’s real kind of you, but see, here’s the thing.” Bucky leaned in slightly and waved the hat around again, more to flash the arm than anything. “I like the hat the way it is. Gives it a bit of character.”

Brian huffed, his eyes snapping back to the arm briefly. “I can appreciate that sir, but we really can’t—”

“And if we’re bein’ real honest here,” Bucky cut in. “My Steve over here bought me this hat, and I can’t think of no reason I shouldn’t be keepin’ the one he bought.” He shrugged and looked down at the hat like it was something precious. “It’s sentimental, is all.”

The more Bucky talked, the more visibly uncomfortable this Brian guy became. There was a reason you didn’t send PR people to talk to the Winter Soldier. It never ended well for any of the parties involved. Well, any of the parties that weren’t Bucky or Steve. Okay, maybe just Bucky.

And Bucky decided he wasn’t quite done yet. Unfortunately, Steve chose that moment to cut in.

“I think what my boyfriend is trying to say, sir.” Steve edged in between Brian and Bucky on Bucky’s left, effectively cutting the guy’s view of the metal arm. The set of his shoulders and the tone of his voice told Bucky he was all Captain now. “It’s our one chance to come to Disneyland, and Bucky would hate to have to give up something I got for him, even if it was accidentally”— he
glanced back meaningfully at Bucky — “damaged in a fire.”

“Still wasn’t an accident,” Bucky muttered, only to get a hard thump to the stomach from Steve. He smiled to himself and glanced over at Brian to find his attention completely on Steve. There was no surprise there. Steve may have been an intimidating person when he was in Cap Mode, but he would never be as scary as Bucky. The metal arm sealed that deal every time.

Brian glanced quickly over at Bucky before turning back to Steve. He cleared his throat. “May I speak with you for a moment?” he asked Steve, sneaking another glance at Bucky.

Steve — the shit — did the same before turning back to Brian and answering, “Sure.”

The two turned and walked away, even as Bucky squawked at them, “But I love my hat!” only to deflate as neither turned back, because really, there was no truth in that statement. And the Disney guy clearly would do anything at this point to get away from Bucky and his death metal arm.

He idly flipped the hat end over end as he watched them. He couldn’t really hear what they were saying, but he caught things like ‘inappropriate image’ and ‘can’t let you stay’ from the suit. The more the guy spoke to Steve, the more he seemed to loosen up to the idea of asserting whatever authority he thought he had. Worse though was that Steve was letting him. He’d used his captain’s voice earlier, but now he seemed to be visibly deflating in front of the guy, and Bucky knew it was because the guy was threatening to kick them out if Bucky didn’t get rid of the damaged hat.

Oh. Okay, no.

No one upset Bucky’s Stevie. No one.

Incensed, Bucky dug into his pocket for his lighter. Once he had it in hand, he whistled over to the men. When they turned to look at him, he let his expression completely dissolve into the Winter Soldier before turning the full effect on that ass clown spouting off to Steve.

Bucky quirked an eyebrow at him, and the man blanched. He flicked the lighter open and ignited the flame, never breaking eye contact. He held the hat up and took the lighter to it, setting the ear on fire again. As the flame picked up, Bucky watched as the man’s face went from completely white to a splotchy red.

And Bucky waited. Let the ear burn as the man glared. Because there was no way some little man in a suit was gonna outlast Bucky. It wasn’t even a competition.

Sure enough, the man cracked first. But then, so did Steve. Bucky ticked his eyes over just in time to see Steve nod in his direction.

Okay, so maybe Steve wasn’t done playing people today. Bucky shook his head and chastised himself. He should have known his baby would never let some random get the best of them.

Sure enough, as Brian turned back and began yelling at Steve, Bucky could see behind the apologetic eyes that Steve was just letting the man have his moment. After all, the guy had a job to do. And even if he was doing shit at it, he still had to do it. Let him have his moment putting Captain America in his place. It did happen so rarely. And usually not by people who weren’t named Fury or Romanoff.

Bucky needed to capture this moment.

He pulled his phone out quickly and turned the camera onto selfie mode. He gingerly set the burning hat back onto his head and positioned the pic to make sure he captured the man yelling at Steve. He
snapped it really quickly, then dropped the hat onto the ground.

He glanced quickly at the photo, only to almost lose it over how put out Steve looked in the photo. Aw, his poor boy was trying so hard to keep the peace.

Which was probably the sole reason Bucky opened his Instagram app.

He threw up the photo quickly and typed as fast as he could to get the caption up, before hitting Tumblr and hitting share.

*I take it all back. Disneyland is AWESOME! I didn't have so much fun since that hostage situation in Uruguay. Apparently, it IS forbidden to set your hat on fire and now, the management is threatening to ban us for life. Can I burn the second ear to celebrate this?*

Then he turned back to the offending hat and made a show of stepping on the ear to put it out. Regardless of Steve putting in his best efforts, Bucky honestly didn’t want to get them kicked out, as funny as this had become. Luckily, Brian saw him, and his exceptional bout of yelling got a little bit quieter. He was still lecturing Steve, but at least not quite on such a grand scale.

Steve, for his part, kept glancing at Bucky. His eyebrows were drawn in consternation, like he was put upon by the whole thing. But as soon as Brian’s voice dropped, so did Steve’s expression. Where he’d looked like a punished puppy not one minute before, his eyes had now begun to take on a harder edge. He was practically glowering when he turned back.

And while Bucky couldn’t hear what they were saying, he knew — he knew — his Stevie was giving it to Brian. Showing him why sending a PR suit down to talk to Captain America and the Winter Soldier probably wasn’t the best option. And okay, sure, maybe Bucky was in the wrong for setting the hat on fire, but he wasn’t hurting anybody. And Disney needed to fucking unknot their panties.

It was another minute, but Steve eventually stood up to his full height, said one more thing to Brian, then turned and strode over to Bucky. Brian turned and walked off towards the castle. Bucky didn’t miss the way Steve’s angry expression didn’t slip when he’d turned away from the suit.

He grabbed onto Bucky’s arm — his metal arm — as he came up and looked Bucky dead in the eye. It was strong and it was powerful, and it was all the things Bucky loved most and feared most in Steve. He would have been lying if he said it didn’t turn him on just a little bit.

“Buck, you really need to do me a favor,” Steve said, his voice low and even.

Eyes wide, Bucky nodded. “Anything, Stevie.”

Steve watched him, not breaking eye contact. But then he slowly started to soften around the edges as he broke into a smile. “If you plan on attempting to get us kicked out again later, try and be more impressive than just burning a damned hat. You’re a world-renowned assassin. Fuck off with the child’s play.”

Completely thrown, Bucky broke into a grin. “I could always scale the Matterhorn, then throw myself off of it?” He snickered again, a little bit more vicious this time. “I mean, we both know I can survive a fall off a snowy mountain.”

Steve made a choked off sound and gaped at Bucky. And he would have felt bad, but the light in Steve’s eyes told him he hadn’t actually hit a nerve. Not really.

“Too soon?” he asked playfully.
“Too soon, Buck,” Steve answered, even if he was smiling. He bent over to scoop up the mess of a hat before turning and looping his arm around Bucky’s waist, steering him to the mountain in question. He dropped the hat into one of their bags. “But just for kicks...” He looked up at the white face of the mountain, shielding his eyes from the sun. “Did you know that when the Matterhorn first opened, they used to have guys up there with rope and fake hooks, pretending to scale the thing?”

“And your point?”

Steve turned and smiled at Bucky. “Think we could do it without ropes?”

Bucky smiled back, sly as all get out. “You’re on, Rogers.”
Alright, alright, I stopped acting like a little s**t and apologized to the Disneyland management so that they didn't throw the famous Captain America and his dead boyfriend out. It was worth it though: I haven't seen Stevie this happy for months. And I MAY have enjoyed myself too after all (but don't tell Steve!)

“Sergeant Barnes, report.”

Bucky slipped forward to peer over the rock ledge he was currently lying on, rifle tucked neatly at his side. He tapped the commlink on his phone to open up the channel and respond.

“I have one of the enemy agents in my sights, Cap, but he’s currently blocked by a female bodyguard. There’s a possibility she’s a civilian, but something about her demeanor suggests
otherwise. She appears to be protecting the asset — whether that’s voluntary or not, I have no idea.”

“Did you say just one of the agents?”

Bucky took a quick visual sweep of the area before responding. “That’s affirmative, sir.”

“That’s not good.”

“No, it’s not.”

“We have to find the other, and fast, before —” Steve cut off with a sharp intake of air, and suddenly Bucky was met with the sounds of a scuffle on the other end of the comms.

“Captain?” Bucky hissed into the commlink. “Captain, do you need back up?” He itched to run and find Steve, but without a direct order, he had to keep the one agent in his sights.

The scuffling stopped, and then it sounded like Steve was running. “Stay where you are, Sergeant,” he huffed into the phone. “I may have lost him in these tunnels. I —”

Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow!

Bucky’s blood ran cold, and he was up instantly, rifle in hand, orders be damned. He scrambled over the rock ledge and jumped down into a melee of people, ignoring the shouts as he took off to find Steve.

“Steve!” he shouted into the comms. “Steve, talk to me!”

“Bucky?” The voice sounded distant and weak. “Bucky, save yourself.”

“Wait, Steve, no!” Bucky doubled his efforts as he took off for the tunnel system he’d seen upon their arrival.

“It’s too late for me.”

“I’m coming to save you, Stevie!”

A soft breath came down the comms, and then silence. It lasted one heartbeat, maybe two, before Bucky was met with a horrifying new sound.

Unabashed, high-pitched giggling.

Bucky cried out once, but never broke pace as he ran into the tunnels. He ran through the twists and turns, across the small bridge, out towards the other end. It was then that he saw him. Steve, lying on the ground, and not moving.

But he should have been paying attention — he should have — because the fact that he only had sights for his fallen boyfriend meant Bucky didn’t see the two figures waiting for him on either side of the tunnel opening, and the second he stepped into view —

Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow! Pow!

And Bucky was down. He barely had time to register that he’d been shot before the two enemy agents were upon him and Steve, and —

Tickling them to within an inch of their lives.
The noise Bucky made was resolutely not a squeal, it wasn’t, even as Steve shouted in laughter next to him, turning protectively in on himself.

The two little brothers they’d been playing soldiers and spies with on Tom Sawyer’s Island were relentless in their onslaught, and Bucky knew the only way to survive would be to return fire.

“Oh, you think that’s funny, do you?” he gasped as one of the boys, David, began tickling at his shoulders and arms. “You think you got us?”

“I think we’re outgunned here, Buck!” Steve huffed out, as the other little boy, Liam, started tickling the back of Steve’s neck.

“We got you!” David shouted.

“Yeah, we got you!” Liam echoed.

“Oh you think so?” Bucky pretended to bat at David’s hands. “Think you bested the great Captain America and his sidekick, Bucky Barnes?” He caught Steve’s eye, who nodded back.

He turned back to where David had started tickling his belly. “I think it’s time for... RETALIATION!” Practically in sync, he and Steve grabbed the boys around the waists and flipped them around so they could both sit up and start tickling right back.

The two boys did let out squeals of laughter at the attack, and Bucky smiled in delight at the looks of unguarded innocence and fun lighting up their small faces.

“Oh, ho ho!” Bucky looked up to see the boys’ mother, Brooke — Liam’s ‘bodyguard’ from earlier — walk up with her husband, Scott, at her side. “Looks like they got you!”

“Save us!” David cried out.

“Nope. Looks like there’s nothing we can do,” Scott answered with a laugh, folding his arms and watching. “We lost you both. We’re just gonna have to leave you here.”

“Noooo!” Liam wailed, or tried to between bouts of laughter.

Their mom seemed to have other ideas, though. “I’ll save you!” she exclaimed and jumped in, crouching behind Steve and Bucky to start tickling their necks and ears.

“No fair!” Bucky tried to turn away as Steve immediately let go of Liam. “Moms can’t play; this is cheating!” He tried valiantly to keep his grip on a squirming David, but the fingers dancing along his nape were too much, and he released the boy in defeat. He twisted away and scrambled across the ground to get on the other side of Steve. He held up two fingers in the sign of the cross and shouted, “Back, woman!”

Brooke just sat back, her smile insufferably smug. “You attack my boys, I attack you.” She eyed them both shrewdly, but her smile never left her face. “Superheroes ain’t got nothin’ on a mother.”

Steve laughed and ducked his head. “Yes, ma’am, I believe it.”

“And this one’s particularly scary,” Scott called out from where David and Liam were now running circles around him with their bright orange and green wooden guns, pretending to shoot at each other, Bucky and Steve all but forgotten now that the game was over. “She’s a bit of a mama bear. It was probably best you didn’t pick up one of these toys for her. You’d’ve lost inside of two minutes.”
Bucky laughed as he glanced back at Brooke, whose smile had turned proud. “I believe that too.”

Luckily, though, the last hour had just been about him and Steve getting a chance to play with these two little kids, and seriously it may have turned into the highlight of Bucky’s day. So sue him, he was a five-year-old at heart.

When Bucky and Steve had gotten off of Pirates of the Caribbean, they’d headed into the little pirate shop just off the exit, just to look around. While there, a pair of little boys had spotted them and immediately flipped out, tugging and pulling at their parents, pointing Bucky and Steve out. Charmed by their exuberance, Steve had gone over to chat with them, both of whom had turned out to be big fans of both Captain America and Bucky.

Liam, the younger of the two, wasted no time inviting them to come play on the island. Their mother had tried to protest, not wanting to bother the two of them, but Bucky wouldn’t have it. He’d said they would love to go, but only if the boys agreed play soldiers and spies with them. So, with their parents’ permission, Bucky had bought them all colorful, antique-looking guns from the shop — a rifle for himself, and two-shots for the boys and Steve — and they’d set off to battle it out.

And, apparently, to lose spectacularly. Not that Bucky — and he suspected Steve — minded. They wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Brooke turned and scooped up David with a, “Gotcha!” before turning back to Steve and Bucky. “Thank you guys so much for playing with the boys. You may have just made their whole lives.”

It was Bucky’s turn to duck his head as heat traveled up his neck. “It was no trouble, ma’am, really.” He glanced quickly at Steve. “We had a lot of fun.”

“We really did,” Steve confirmed with a nod just as Liam ran up and practically jumped into his arms. He hoisted the boy up before settling him on his hip and smiling at him. “Did you guys have fun?” he asked.

“Yeah! But...” Liam fiddled with Steve’s collar and huffed out a breath. Bucky couldn’t hide his smile. “But you guys lost, right? We beat you!”

“Liam, be nice,” Scott reprimanded, but Steve just shook his head as Bucky chuckled lightly.

“No, it’s all right,” Steve assured. Then he turned back to Liam and gave him his most serious expression before admitting very solemnly, “Toughest opponents we’ve had in a long time.”

“I mean, I know you guys gave me a run for my money,” Bucky added with a nod. “And I’ve got this,” he said as he waved metal fingers at the boy. He turned to eye his hand like it was some great disappointment. He shook his head slowly. “Metal arm and I was still taken down...”

David squirmed out of his mom’s arms and ran up before throwing his arms around Bucky’s legs. He looked up, eyes wide with wonder. “You mean we’re stronger than your metal arm?”

Bucky reached down, hooked the metal around David’s waist, and with a delighted shriek from the boy, tossed him up into the air so that he’d land seated on Bucky’s arm. The weight was negligible and Bucky smiled at him.

He leaned in conspiratorially and said, “If I can do this, and you still beat me and Stevie, then I’d say, yeah. You and Liam are pretty freakin’ strong.”

“Yeah!” David exclaimed and fist-pumped the air, just as Liam shouted, “That’s right, we are!”
Bucky laughed. “All right, get down, you,” he said as he set David back on the ground.

At that moment, an overly cheerful voice came over a loudspeaker announcing ten minutes until the island closed for the evening.

“Guess that’s our cue,” Steve said as he turned to look at the group.

“No!” Liam whined from where Steve was still holding him.

“Sorry, buddy,” Steve apologized as he gave him a little bounce. “But I think they have to set up for Fantasmic. Don’t you wanna watch that?”

“No,” Liam grumbled as he folded his arms and pouted. “I wanna stay here and play spies some more.”

“Why, so you can beat us again?” Bucky asked with a small laugh. He walked over so he could dig a finger into Liam’s side, making the boy squirm in Steve’s arms. Bucky almost laughed again at how hard Liam was trying to maintain his anger at having to leave. So he dug his fingers in again until Liam finally cracked a smile. Victory was so sweet.

Brooke walked up behind them and grabbed onto Liam. “We really do have to leave, sweetie.”

All of Bucky’s hard work just about went down the drain as Liam’s face began to screw up. But before he could open his mouth to protest, Steve jumped in and saved the day.

“How about we make you a deal,” he started. Liam close his mouth and eyed Steve. “What if we give you all the guns, and that way, next time we’re in town, we can get together and play spies again. Would that be okay?”

That go the kid’s attention. His eyes went wide and he looked down to where the toys were strewn across on the ground. “You mean all of those?” he asked.

“Yup.”

“We get the big one too?” David piped in, holding up Bucky’s rifle.

“Good question.” Steve turned to Bucky. “Do they get to keep your rifle, Buck?”

“Oh, absolutely.” Bucky nodded. “As long as your parents don’t mind, we don’t mind.”

Liam practically spun out of Steve’s arms in his attempt to turn and face his mom. “Can we? Pleeeaaase!”

Brooke just laughed. “Of course, you can.” Then she held out her arms for him. “But that means we have to go now.”

Liam actually did kick Steve in the chest in his haste to go with his mom so he and David could keep their shiny new toys.

“Watch out! God, I’m so sorry,” Scott apologized as he stared in horror at the smudge of dirt on Steve’s shirt.

“Oh, it’s fine.” Steve laughed and brushed the dirt off his chest. “It’s not the worst kick to the chest I’ve ever taken.”

“Probably not even the worst this month,” Bucky added with a snicker.
Steve’s only response was to smack Bucky on the arm. Then he made a sweeping gesture towards
the wooden rafts they had to take to get back. “Shall we?”

The family filed past as they headed toward the boats and Steve and Bucky fell into step together.
“I’m gonna get you for that dig later,” Steve whispered in his ear.

“Pointing out your flaws isn’t a dig, Stevie,” Bucky whispered back. “Is it my fault you drop your
guard on the regular, leaving government property open to attack?”

Bucky laughed when Steve chose the back of his head to smack this time.

“I am not government property, you ass.”

“Steven Grant Rogers!” Bucky hissed in mock-admonishment. “There are children present.”

“Refresh my memory Buck,” Steve said as they climbed onto the boat. “But was it you or me that
turned back and flipped off the PR guy earlier, even though he was already gone at that point?”

“Sign language doesn’t count, Steven. Stop deflecting.”

“Pretty sure that sign is universal at this point.”

“Okay, but he deserved it.”

“And you deserve to be called an ass.” Steve poked Bucky in the arm as they settled against the
railing. “Government property my ass.”

Bucky just shook his head, giving Steve a disappointed look. “Sarah Rogers must be spinning
right now.”

He was saved from a retort by the boys as they came running up with a camera in hand.

“Picture! Picture!” David shouted at them.

“You got lucky, Steve mouthed at Bucky before reaching down to scoop David up, and Bucky did the
same for Liam. Their parents came over and, after finding someone to pass the camera off to, they
took a keepsake photo for the boys.

And in that moment, as the flash went off with the six of them all huddled into frame, Bucky took
back every bad thing he’d said or thought about coming to Disneyland.

This may have just made one of the top best days of his entire life.

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It was a couple hours later that found Steve and Bucky wandering aimlessly in front of the ‘Pacific
Wharf’ back over at California Adventure. World of Color was set to go off soon, and Steve had
wanted to watch it and its accompanying fireworks display.

“I love you, Stevie,” Bucky murmured from where he was tucked up underneath Steve’s arm. He
gave his waist a small squeeze, pulling him just a little bit closer. He was rewarded with a kiss to the
side of his head.

“I love you too, baby,” Steve murmured back. “Did you end up having a good time today?”

“Honestly?” Bucky pulled himself out from under Steve so he could turn and wrap both arms around
his love’s waist. Steve met his eyes curiously, and Bucky smiled reassuringly at him. “I actually don’t remember the last time I had this much fun. I gotta apologize for griping at you earlier, because seriously, this was absolutely the best day.”

Steve’s eyes lit up with a smile that damn near broke Bucky’s heart with its beauty. “Really?”

Bucky nodded and leaned in for lingering kiss. “Really.”

“So, maybe Disney World next time?” Steve asked, bouncing a little on his toes.

Bucky couldn’t stop himself from stealing another kiss. “I think you might be able to talk me into it.”

Steve pressed their foreheads together. “Best boyfriend ever.”

“And don’t you forget it, mister.”

Another kiss, and the water exploded behind them. Flashes of bright color danced across Bucky’s closed eyes as music filled the air, but in that moment, the only thing he cared about was the man wrapped tightly around him. There was no place he was happier — no place he felt safer — than being held in Steve’s arms. And if he were honest with himself, he would gladly spend the rest of eternity exactly where he was in this moment.

Steve was happy, and Bucky was in love, and with the world alight around them, this was the perfect end to what had turned out to be an absolutely perfect day.

When the kiss broke a minute later, Bucky was practically humming from head to toe. He shared a dazed smile with Steve before they turned back around so they could watch the show. It was mesmerizing, the way the water danced and moved in time to the music, as an array of colors splashed across it like on a canvas. No wonder Steve wanted to see this so badly.

As strains of one song bled into another, Bucky fished into his pocket and pulled out his phone. They’d left Steve’s camera in a locker, and had forgotten to go back for it after their outing on the island. But this was too spectacular not to capture, and he knew Steve would want a memory of it. So he spent the next ten minutes taking pictures and videos of the spectacle, making sure to record at times when he recognized the song playing, and focusing his pictures on the more amazing moments of the show.

Once the fireworks started, he turned to Steve with a smile and held up his phone. “Picture?”

Steve tightened his arms around Bucky’s waist and kissed him just behind his ear. “You’re only now asking if you can take a picture? Haven’t you already been at it for a while now?”

“Smartass.” Bucky elbowed him lightly in the ribs. “I meant of us, dick.”

Steve buried his face into Bucky’s hair and chuckled. “Don’t you already have enough shots of my ugly mug?”

“Yeah, well, maybe I want one more to take home.”

Arms tightened around him that much more. “Anything, baby.”

Bucky smiled to himself before turning his head for a quick kiss. But just as Steve leaned in to meet his lips, he stopped and pulled back with a blink.

“What...” Bucky turned back, only to almost jump out of his skin because Mickey and Minnie were
standing right there. Steve’s hold turned to a grip because, yeah, he knew Bucky, and they were so close, Bucky had to fight down the urge to attack.

“Uh, hi,” Steve greeted, a bit tense. Bucky suspected that probably had more to do with him than with their general closeness. Steve was better about those sorts of things.

The characters didn’t seem to notice though, as Mickey waved at them. Then he pointed at Bucky’s phone before sweeping his arms out in an encompassing motion. Bucky had no idea what the mouse was getting at.

But apparently Steve did. “You want to take a picture of us?” he asked.

Mickey nodded, then pointed to himself and Minnie as well.

“A picture of all of us?” Steve added. That got him another enthusiastic nod.

Then Bucky felt fingers on his chin and he was being guided to turn and look at Steve. Only then, at the resistance he gave, did he notice how rigid he was.

When he finally tore his eyes away from the mice and looked at Steve, did Steve finally whisper, “Are you okay? Do you want a picture with them?”

Bucky glanced back over his shoulder before turning back to Steve. They’d freaked him out when they’d snuck up a second ago, but he wasn’t really that upset. Not with Steve holding him.

He smiled and nodded. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

Steve smiled back and kissed him. “Okay.”

They turned back to the characters. “We’d love to get a picture with you guys,” Bucky answered.

It was then that he noticed Minnie bouncing a little with her hands behind her back. She was definitely hiding something, and clearly excited about whatever it was. Bucky laughed and nodded at her. “You got something there, Miss Mouse?”

How an unmoving face managed to show excitement like that, Bucky would never know, but it was evident all over her. Luckily, she didn’t make either of them wait. She brought her hands out with a flourish to show them the most adorable little stuffed Mickey Mouse.

It was a classic-style Mickey, right out of the first cartoon, Steamboat Willie, and Bucky was absolutely delighted. When he turned to smile at Steve, it was clear he was right on the same page as Bucky.

“We know that Mickey!” Steve exclaimed, and Minnie nodded vigorously. Steve pointed at the stuffed toy. “Is that for us?”

Another nod and Minnie was thrusting it at them. Bucky took it from her, and Steve rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder as they both looked at it in wonder. These characters obviously knew who they were, and had gone out of their way to give them a toy they knew would be a bit closer to home for them. Bucky couldn’t help himself. He was touched.

“Thank you,” he breathed and smiled at them. He laughed as Mickey took a deep bow in thanks.

“Now we definitely need that picture,” Steve said.

“I can take care of that, sir.” A cast member swept in out of nowhere and held out her hand.
Bucky fucking jumped again at the sudden intrusion. He couldn’t help it; he turned an accusing eye on her. “You know, I’m a world-class soldier, and — dammit — how do you do that?”

The cast member just smiled indulgently at him, her hand still extended for his phone. “That’s my job, sir.”

Bucky grumbled to himself as Steve laughed in his ear.

“What’s your name?” Steve asked as Bucky reluctantly handed over his phone.

“Maggie, sir.”

“Maggie, you ever think about working for SHIELD? You’re clearly stealth enough.”

She fiddled with Bucky’s phone and laughed. “You couldn’t pay me enough for my skills, sir.”

All reticence bled out as Bucky burst out laughing. “Oh god, never tell Black Widow that. She’ll demand a pay raise.”

Maggie just shrugged as she held up the phone. “She probably deserves one, sir, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“Not at all,” Steve said as Bucky shook his head in agreement. Nat deserved all the money ever for her abilities.

“Well, for right now, let’s just focus on my picture-taking skills. These two mice really wanted a photo with you guys.” She wiggled Bucky’s camera at them.

So Steve turned them to get the fireworks in the background and pulled Bucky in next to him. Mickey and Minnie jumped in behind them, getting in close. Then Steve took the stuffed toy from Bucky and held it as Bucky turned into him. Again, a feeling of contentment and calm swept over him at being pulled in at Steve’s side. God, there really was no place he wanted to be. Ever.

Maggie took a few pictures before handing the phone to Bucky. “Thank you,” he said. Then he turned to Mickey and Minnie and added, “I’m gonna pick one of these and add it to my Instagram account. If you follow it, then you can get it from there.”

That seemed to work, because both characters jumped up and down in excitement. Then, without warning, they hugged him and Steve. He froze for half a second as Mickey threw his arms around him, only to realize the feeling was more a ghost of a sensation than any actual nerves. He hugged Mickey back happily before switching and hugging Minnie.

One last wave from them and the three were gone, Maggie slipping away as quietly as she’d slipped in.

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Later that night, the two laid in bed in their hotel room, both flipping through photos — Steve on his camera, Bucky on his phone.

“We really had a good day, didn’t we,” Steve said into the quiet.

“We really did,” Bucky answered with a nod as he flipped past the photos of them on one of the rides. When he finally came to the photos from the end of the night, he smiled because, damn, they looked really really happy together. This vacation had done everything it needed to do.
He finally felt real and truly recuperated from the explosion over Christmas. Maybe now they could go back to their life.

He looked over the photos of them with Mickey and Minnie, before settling on one that he thought summed up their trip the most. He wasn’t looking at the camera, but he was happy, and so was Steve, and that was all that mattered to him.

That would be all that ever mattered to him.

Alright, alright, I stopped acting like a little s**t and apologized to the Disneyland management so that they didn’t throw the famous Captain America and his dead boyfriend out. It was worth it though: I haven’t seen Stevie this happy for months. And I MAY have enjoyed myself too after all (but don’t tell Steve!)

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“Wow, you so did not apologize to management...”

“Jesus fuck, Steve, it’s four in the morning. Go to sleep!”

“You know, this lying on Instagram can’t be healthy for your recovery, Buck.”

“I’m pretty sure stabbing my boyfriend for waking me up in the middle of the night also isn’t healthy for my recovery, but funny enough, I’m entertaining that one too.”

“Please. You love me.”

“That just means I can call it a crime of passion.”

“Go to sleep, Bucky.”

“Fuck you, Steve.”
Johnny Storm of the Fantastic Four dropped by the Avengers Tower today. I have no idea why people keep on saying this guy looks like Steve! I mean...Please! Stevie is more...he's less...Well, he has nothing to do with this pretentious frat bro who spends more time partying in nightclubs V.I.P rooms than fighting on the field! Tss...
Bucky was annoyed. Cranky and annoyed, and why the fuck had Steve thought it would be a good idea to hit him with that shit before even his first cup of coffee?

You don’t talk to Bucky before coffee. You especially don’t throw big life shit at him before coffee. That was just fucking rude.

And the fact that he hit Bucky with big life shit before his first cup of coffee while they were staying at the fucking Avengers Tower because someone had left a block of cheese on the counter before their trip to California, resulting in a truly rank smell that had driven them out not one hour after they’d landed two days prior, was just going to far. Steve was lucky he could still walk.

Bucky grumbled to himself as he snuggled further into the blanket on the couch, his lifeline clutched tightly in flesh and metal.

Why Steve felt he always had to be a fucking martyr was just beyond Bucky. Couldn’t he let lying dogs sleep, or whatever the fuck that saying was?

It was as Bucky was cursing his boyfriend in every language he could think of while simultaneously planning out how he could burn down the Smithsonian without getting caught that light footsteps hit his ears.

“What are you still doing here, kotenok?” Natasha came up behind him and sat down at the other end of the couch. She rested her hand against her head and eyed him shrewdly. She obviously knew something was up, but whether that was because she’d talked to Steve after he’d headed up to the common room floor, or had managed to figure it out on her own, Bucky didn’t know. And until he’d downed at least one more cup of coffee, he genuinely didn’t care.

“I’m not going to the meeting today,” Bucky announced before taking another sip. “You guys can just tell me what I need to know. It’s too early for this shit, anyway.”

“That’s not gonna fly, and you know it.”

“Don’t care. Not in the mood.”

“Could this have to do with certain art piece that might be making its appearance at the Smithsonian soon?” she asked with a little smirk.


Natasha reached over and snatched his coffee out of his hands, and even Bucky would admit the squeak he let out was completely undignified. He didn’t care. He still reached after her with grabby hands.

Horrible girl that she was, she held it out of his reach and quirked an eyebrow at him.

“No,” she scolded. “You’re acting like a child, and children should not be drinking coffee.”

“I am not,” he grumbled, and burrowed further into the blanket.

“Really?” she quirked an eyebrow at him. Again.
“Shut up,” he mumbled. He really didn’t like her right now.

Something she obviously knew, because instead of showing mercy, she laughed at him before standing up and heading into the kitchen.

“You’re really going to want to come to this one,” she called over her shoulder just as he heard his cup hit the counter. Huh. So she wasn’t dumping it out.

“No, I’m not,” he answered stubbornly. If she was telling him he should go, that meant something, but he was far too annoyed to let that get to him. She took his coffee away, which meant he still held license to be petulant.

He turned an eye toward the kitchen, ready to pout, only to find her watching him, lightly drumming her fingers against the counter next to his cup. He puffed up slightly and added, “Go away until you’re willing to give me my caffeine back.”

“Again. You’re really going to want to come this one,” she repeated, ignoring what he said. She stared at him, unblinking.

Oh, okay. So they were doing this.

He eyed her back, giving as good as he got. There was no way he was going to crack first. No way. He was annoyed at Steve, and now at her, and his coffee was a good twenty feet further away than it should be, and it was too fucking early, dammit.

He wasn’t gonna crack. He wasn’t.

She narrowed her eyes at him. She still hadn’t blinked.

It was too early and his eyeballs were starting to hurt.

He’d survived worse. He could do this.

She quirked that damn eyebrow at him. Still no signs of a blink coming on.

Whatever. It was too early for this shit, anyway.

He heaved a sigh and caved. “Fine. Why do I want to come to this one?” He made grabby hands at his coffee again, ignoring her triumphant smirk. “I asked the question, now give that back.”

With a soft laugh, she picked up the coffee and brought it back over. As she handed it to him, her eyes took on that mischievous glint that meant trouble.

“You will never guess who’s coming today.”

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The Fantastic Four. They weren’t part of the Avengers, but they did a lot of good in the city. That said, they were part of SHIELD now, if on somewhat of a freelance basis, which meant every once in a while, they teamed up with the Avengers on missions.

Just not since Bucky had rejoined SHIELD Truth be told, he knew all about them — had studied every superhero on SHIELD’s roster when he was training — but he hadn’t actually met any of them yet. After all, they did their thing, and the Avengers did theirs. They didn’t overlap that much.

Bucky was right back in the same spot he’d been three floors down — end of the couch, coffee in
hand. Only this time, the coffee had been joined by the biggest apple fritter he’d ever seen in his life. He couldn’t decide if the size was offensive or a challenge.

He glared at the thing before finally ripping into it, only to let out a groan, because oh good god, that was delicious.

Challenge. Definitely.

Of course, taking the biggest donut in the box and treating it like a personal mission had nothing to do with the fact that Steve was sitting at the other end, watching him, while the rest of the team filed in. Nothing at all. He was just hungry.

“Bucky,” Steve murmured.

Bucky took another bite.

“Bucky,” he repeated, exasperation in his voice. (good)

At that moment, Sam sat down between them and Steve huffed as he leaned forward to keep staring at Bucky. “Are you just gonna ignore me the whole meeting?” he hissed.

“Yes,” Bucky hissed back across Sam, finally cracking (he seemed to be doing a lot of that today). He turned to face forward, resolutely not looking at Steve.

“Did I miss something?” Sam asked, looking between them.

“It’s nothing,” Bucky and Steve snapped in unison.

“Oh, yeah, because you two are a paragon of a happy relationship right now.”

Steve ignored him as he leaned even further over, getting into Bucky’s line of sight. Bucky tried to turn further away, but a smack to the knee had him turning back to glare at the asshole.

“Don’t touch me, you dick. I’m not talking to you,” he whispered furiously.

“See?” Sam cut in, waving a hand at Bucky. “Paragon.”

Steve just shook his head. “Will you at least give me a chance to explain why I think it’s a good idea?”

“No.” Bucky pointed the fritter at him. “And I’ll tell you why. Because you hate that fucking thing, and I’m not gonna let you put in any sort of effort to help that joke show.”

“You won’t let me?” Steve scoffed at him, shoving the donut out of his face. “Since when do you get to decide what I can and cannot do —”

“Um, guys?” You know I’m right here, right?” Sam asked, eyeing them both.

Bucky just shoved his donut at him. “Here, eat this.” Sam grabbed the donut before it could hit his shirt, but Bucky barely noticed as he turned back to Steve and spit out, “Since you started making dumb decisions!"

“Okay, I’m gonna have to call a timeout —” Sam tried to interject as he leaned forward between them.

“Dumb!” Steve all but squawked as he leaned back to continue glaring at Bucky from behind Sam.
“How is this dumb?”

“What part of ‘you hate that fucking thing’ went over your head?”

“Guys, really —” Sam tried to lean back only to have Steve shove a hand against his back, keeping him bent over. “Oh, well okay then,” he huffed out. “This is just going swimmingly.”

Steve just pointed a finger, and that snapped something in Bucky. The two immediately started arguing over each other.

“You know I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t have a good reason —”

“How can you so willingly give your art to the exhibit that made a mockery of —”

“Did it ever occur to you that this is a chance to change what they —”

“Your work is too precious to just hand it over —”

“And I’m done.” Sam stood up, forcing the two back and jostling Bucky’s coffee.

A small splash hit his leg and he angrily swiped at it. “Shit.”

“Too fucking bad,” Sam snapped as he turned to stare down at them. “I don’t know what’s going on with you guys, but in case you hadn’t noticed” — he waved a hand around the room — “now isn’t exactly the best time for you two to be sniping at each other.”

“Oh, don’t stop them,” Tony piped up. It was then that Bucky noticed the room had gone quiet, and it seemed everyone was there, staring at the two of them. Tony, for his part, was grinning like a loon. “We’re getting to see the infamous Lucy and Ethel finally have a squabble. This is infinitely better than some committee meeting.”

“I’m certain this is more than just a committee meeting, Stark,” Coulson commented from where he stood by one of the armchairs. “Pretty sure you insisting we meet like a group of camp counselors around a fire saw to that.”

Tony pretended to look affronted. “I’ll have you know, Phil, this is an effective way to build team cohesiveness, as well as spark the creative flow among like-minded individuals.”

“You really need to stop reading the mission statements of your competitors like that’ll tell you something about the company.”

“Why bother? I’ve got Pepper for the hard stuff.”

“I’m not even going to dignify that with a response.”

“What?” Tony came up full stop and looked around at the collective eyebrows raised and quiet snickering. Then dawning came across his face and he nodded. “Oh, I see how it is. First thing in the morning, and you classless fools already have your minds in the gutter. Fine!” He stood up and headed to the kitchen. “I’m going to get more coffee while you all get your Beavis and Buttheads out of your systems.”

Bucky laughed, because really, there was no way Tony had meant that, and he was certain the man had slipped away to be mortified in private. Which was Bucky’s favorite kind of Tony.

Almost on instinct, he looked over in Steve’s direction, but the moment he locked eyes with his boyfriend, he remembered why he was angry and immediately turned his attention back to the room.
And it seemed everyone was there. Clint, Nat, Sam, Bruce, Wanda, Pietro, Vision, Thor, and half of Coulson’s team. May wasn’t there — neither were FitzSimmons — but Bobbi, Hunter, Skye, and one of the Koenig brothers were there.

He smiled when he saw Hunter. It had been awhile since they’d hung out. For reasons neither understood, they just... got along. Whether it was trading stories, hitting the shooting range, or hitting a bar, the two got on like a house on fire. He was probably Bucky’s closest friend outside of Natasha, even if he only ever saw the guy a few times a year.

He nodded when Hunter smiled back. Okay yeah, they’d be getting into trouble later. No question. He just wondered if he had enough vodka left to do the job justice. They’d burned through about eight figures last time.

His eyes kept scanning the room, but no one else stood out for him. He’d already taken in everyone who was present, and not a single person made up a quarter of a percent of the Fantastic Four.

And Natasha had gone and promised him.

He was starting to think Natasha was a damned dirty liar. She’d lured him up with promises of fresh meat he could induct, but there was nobody here he hadn’t already give his Murder Glare to. His coffee mug ground in protest as he gripped it to take a sip, only to make a face, because fuck. His coffee’d gone cold. Everyone and everything hated him today.

And of course — of course — the elevator dinged at that exact moment. As Bucky turned back to see which of the four had arrived, his brain was running through movie-scenario coincidences at the ridiculously perfect timing, only for his brain to pull up short.

Because Steve was standing by the elevator’s double doors.

Bucky’s head whipped to the side, only to find Steve sitting on the couch next to him.

For one brief moment, his logical brain blew out, and instinct took over. He was off the couch and gun drawn at the new intruder. “Identify yourself!” he commanded as he leveled the gun at center mass.

The guy, whoever the fuck he was, threw up his hands. “Whoa, buddy! No need for violence!” He glanced around as he took a step back towards the elevator. “Is this how you guys always greet the newbies? Send Terminator-esque assassins after them? Because, you know, I’ve got a list of girls I could call right now if I really wanted someone jumping on my balls.”

Bucky assessed the man in front of him. There was... Okay yeah. There was no way that was Steve. He ticked a glance back to who should be his boyfriend, and saw a look of shock on his face that he was certain mirrored his own.

But that wasn’t going to stop him from an interrogation. He was already in a shitty enough mood.

“Name!” he barked at the man.

“Johnny Storm!” the man almost shouted back at him.

Bucky shorted out, because there was no way this was the same guy he’d studied. His photos didn’t do him justice, clearly. Not once did it ever occur to Bucky that the guy looked like Steve. But, then again, Bucky didn’t always remember everything about Steve back then. He’d still been relearning.

He was about to voice his concern about this ‘Johnny’ guy when the man in question seemed to find
his bravado as he shrugged, tilted his head, and added with almost a slither to his voice, “But the ladies call me the Human Torch.”

Oh. Oh god. Okay that definitely wasn’t his Stevie.

*Again* he glanced back to the boyfriend in question. He found eyes blown wide and staring back at him. Bucky barely got out a, “Okay, you’re good,” before holstering his gun, dropping back onto the couch — coffee miraculously still in hand — and sliding right up next to Steve, their earlier argument all but forgotten.

They just stared at each other.

“What the fuck?” Steve murmured.

Bucky tried to stifle a laugh. “I know, right?”

“Tell me they didn’t try to clone me.”

“I could see it. He’s a smart ass; you’ve always been just an ass...” A smack to the arm and Bucky was snickering. He continued. “But seriously, how the hell would I know? You’re the guy with the fancy Super Blood.”

“Peggy said she had the last of it!” Steve glanced warily back at the Not Him. “Said she dumped it off the Brooklyn Bridge.”

“Honestly, Stevie, I have no idea.” Bucky shook his head, only to have a new thought occur to him. “Wait a sec. Haven’t you worked with him before?”

Steve looked over again at the Not Steve guy as he took tentative steps into the main room. “I have, but now that I think about it, we’ve only ever crossed paths when he was in torch form.” They both tore their eyes away when the guy took up Bucky’s previous spot at the end of the couch — an eye on both of them. “It’s kind of hard to see what he looks like when he’s like that.”

“You know.” They both gaped at the voice that was just *too much* like Steve’s. “I can actually hear you.” The guy — okay fine, Johnny — shrugged. “And it’s cool. Been compared to Captain America my whole life. Though I gotta say.” He leaned back against the arm of the couch to gaze at the pair. “I think I expected someone a little cooler and a little less stiff for my facesake.”

Bucky instantly saw red.

He went for his gun again, only to end up with a vice grip around his wrist.

“No, Bucky,” Steve whispered in his ear with a half laugh, just as Johnny pushed back against the couch.

“Hey now. Let’s not scare the ol’ Torch here,” the douche said. “Don’t want to level the place.”

“Please don’t,” Tony whined as he walked back in and sat down.

“Yes, let’s not give Mr. Storm here a reason to turn into the sun, thank you,” Coulson added. Johnny smiled at him, only for Coulson to continue, “It’s just too much paperwork. I hate paperwork.”

Bucky snickered and leaned back against Steve as he let go of Bucky’s wrist. Bucky kept his eyes on that *torch thing* sitting across from him. “You know, I’ve seen you in action. How is it I’ve never noticed the resemblance before?”
“It is a wonder...” Clint added, from where he sat on top of the kitchen counter. “Considering we’ve all noticed it before.”

Bucky smirked. “Not helping, cupcake.”

“Wasn’t trying to, sweet cheeks,” Clint shot back.

Bucky shook his head, his eyes never leaving Johnny’s face. The guy was giving a look not that dissimilar to what Nat gave him earlier, but on this guy, it just looked like some sort of fuckboy fight call. If the guy wanted to play with the big leagues, he was gonna have to do better than that.

Bucky, the saint that he was, ignored it in favor of finding out more about this clown. “Forget about the pigeon making a nuisance of itself. Tell me how this has never come up.”

“Actually, I would like to know, too,” Steve said. “This can’t be a coincidence.”

If Bucky were anybody but Bucky, he wouldn’t have noticed the slight tick back to Coulson that Johnny gave. Since Bucky was Bucky, he chose to bore his eyes into the face competition.

Johnny seemed to take the bait. He flicked a glance between Coulson, Steve, and Bucky, before finally settling back on Steve. “You really wanna know?” he asked.

Steve nodded. “If I believed in coincidences, I never would have thought Bucky was Bucky.” He tightened a (grateful) grip around Bucky’s waist. “Why do you look like me?”

Johnny, for his part, still looked to Coulson and didn’t say anything. It wasn’t until Coulson nodded that he sighed and turned back. With a half-smile, he said, “I guess you should know, my sister has a twin because I was artificially inseminated. I was implanted after a half-clone splicing of your DNA with our mom’s.” The kid then looked solemnly at Steve.

Because that would mean...

Not possible.

Steve couldn’t possibly have...

There was just no way...

Bucky opened his mouth to respond, only for Steve to blurt out — his grip on Bucky getting more than a little uncomfortable. “Wait, does that make you my son somehow? My grandson? Something?”

Johnny — oh god — just nodded. “Fraid so, Cap. Looks like I might just be your kid.”

Bucky couldn’t breathe. The lack of push against his back meant Steve was right there with him. Did that mean that this kid — this utter punk — was technically Steve’s offspring?

There may have been a fevered whisper from Tony of, ‘this is better than a telanovela,’ but Bucky couldn’t hear that over the sound of his heart thumping in his chest. The best he could do was stare at the kid.

“Bucky...” was all Steve was able to get out as they both eyed the man at the other end of the couch. Bucky couldn’t see Steve, but he knew his boyfriend was just as fixated as he was.

It was at least a good two minutes of eyes locked on the other, the room silent, before Johnny finally busted up laughing. “Wow,” he wheezed out. “Can’t believe you guys fell for that!”
Bucky, for his part, just blinked at the guy. Steve, on the other hand, huffed in his ear before leaning over to mutter at the man, “So, what you’re saying is, you’re not my kid, right?”

Johnny just laughed harder. “No, man!” He doubled over, lost in his just-so-fucking-funny joke. “Not that I know of, at least. Just a random circumstance of genes, I guess.” He took a deep breath as he sat up, and smiled at the two. “Though, I will admit this: We are pretty fucking hot.”

Bucky smiled, because yeah, the guy had them there. But that wasn’t going to stop him from being his own brand of asshole.

“Well, at least we can all agree that the origin of the pretty genes lies with my Stevie, here,” he commented as he reached up and patted his boyfriend’s cheek. “It seems to me you’re not much more than a less-than-perfect copy.”

Johnny laughed and tipped his head at Bucky. “I would say touche, but that would imply we actually were related. Sorry. That’s a no go, as far as I can see.” Then he twisted off the couch and walked into the kitchen. “Now someone tell me where those donuts live.”

“You’re an asshole, Coulson,” Steve muttered from behind, even as his grip on Bucky eased.

“It was entertaining,” Coulson answered with a shrug. “I like to be entertaine.”

“What the fuck?” Bucky hissed as he watched Johnny walk away.

“That’s what I keep telling you!” Steve whispered back to him.

“Think he’s lying about the cloning?”

“I think he lies about a lot of things, but not that.”

“How so?”

“Coulson would’ve told us,” Steve said pointedly.

“Maybe,” Coulson shot back.

“Doubtful,” Hunter threw in with a smirk.

“Okay yeah, but how does that stop Flame Boy from fucking with us,” Bucky continued, ignoring the two.

“Because he knows that.”

“Now that this not-so-family reunion is out of the way, think we might be able to hold our campfire sing-along now?” Coulson cut in.

“I resent that!” Tony called out.

Coulson smirked. “I know you do.”

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The meeting took almost twice as long as it normally did. A certain fire breather couldn’t seem to keep his mouth shut about, well, everything. The funny thing was, it helped a lot. Because the more he talked, the more Bucky saw just how different the two men were. After a while, he stopped seeing any similarities at all.
Not to say he didn’t want to document it.

“Okay, I need a picture,” Bucky announced as the meeting ended. He turned his most charming smile on Johnny and added, “Need a shot of the two hottest guys in the room.”

“Excuse you,” Clint muttered, as he walked past the couch on his way over to chat with Sam, who’d ditched them in favor of sitting with Maria.

“You’ll always be my princess!” Bucky called back, only to have Clint flip him off. He laughed and turned back to Johnny before pulling out his phone. “Come on, just one.”

Johnny eyed the camera before nodding at it. “Is this for your Instagram?”

“How did you —” Bucky stared at him, nonplussed, only to give in a few moments later. Damn, he needed more coffee.

“Yes, it is,” he said, looking Johnny over with a little glint in his eye. “The way I figure, if Steve and I couldn’t tell, even with our level of access to photo and video surveillance, no one else probably has, either. We should show them.”

Johnny smiled at him and shrugged. “Hey, anything for the fans, right?”

And that’s the other thing Bucky forgot. The guy was a fame whore, of course. That he could work with.

He wiggled the camera as he smirked at Johnny. “Gotta put on a show.”

“Smooth,” Steve whispered next to him, even as Johnny stood up and walked over. “Can’t take you anywhere.”

Johnny plopped down next to Steve and jostled the man until they were next to each other for the shot. “Only get my good side, all right?” he asked.

Bucky snickered, “Sure thing, Torch,” and snapped the picture anyway.

“Hey, I wasn’t ready!” Johnny exclaimed with an indignant huff.

“Okay, one more,” Bucky agreed.

As Johnny got himself all situated (because seriously, how does one man preen so much?), Bucky took a second shot.

“Got it?” Johnny asked.

Bucky flipped through the pictures. “Got it.”

~~~

The Human Torch was gonna flay him alive.

Okay, so maybe he could have chosen the photo that was a little more formal. (Which he hadn’t.)

And maybe he could have written something that didn’t make the guy sound like a total douche. (Which he didn’t.)

Bucky read over again what he’d posted just as Steve hung up his phone and fell back on the couch
next to him.

“How’s the homestead?” Bucky asked.

“They give it another couple days,” Steve answered. He curled up against the arm of the couch and nodded to Bucky’s his phone. “You post the picture?”

Bucky eyed his phone and smiled. “Yeah, but I’m not sure it was a good idea.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because that guy has the ability to burn me from the inside out?”

“He wasn’t that bad.”

“Well, no, not to you,” Bucky mumbled into his phone.

Only to have Steve snatch it out of his hand. “How do you figure that?” he asked, as he began playing around with it.

Bucky just sighed and sat back, watching Steve as he most likely looked up the image on Bucky’s app. “Because he’s a narcissist.”

Steve shook his head and his brows knit together, but he didn’t look up. “I have to preface this by saying you’re absolutely right, but how do you figure here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Bucky smiled. “He looks like you. Damaging you would be like damaging him. Wouldn’t want to ruin a pretty face and all.”

Steve finally snapped his head up, only to gape at him before finally bursting into laughter. “Is that really what you think?” he huffed out.

“You think different?”

It was a good minute or two before Steve stopped laughing long enough to answer. “No. I don’t think that I do.”

~~~~

Johnny Storm from the Fantastic Four dropped by the Avengers Tower today. I have no idea why people keep on saying this guy looks like Steve! I mean...Please! Stevie is more...he’s less...Well, he has nothing to do with this pretentious frat bro who spends more time partying in nightclubs V.I.P rooms than fighting on the field! Tsss...

~~~~

“We still need to talk about earlier, Bucky.”

“I know.”

“I’m doing the work for the Smithsonian. You need to get on board with this.”

And they were having such a nice morning...
IMPORTANT

This is a series work, and even though there's no image, technically *Shattered Pieces* follows this chapter.
After a five year successful world tour, the Captain America Exhibition is finally back to the Smithsonian for a final round and Steve insisted on painting a tribute mural HIMSELF to celebrate the event. Look at him! It's 2:30am and he's still working on the verge of tears on a portrait of his (formerly) dead boyfriend! I told you it would wreck you, you idiot! Come on, get down from that ladder, time to bring you home!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At seven-thousand square feet, the warehouse wasn’t massive by warehouse standards, but it was pretty damn big. That said, they did live in an apartment in Brooklyn, and they’d needed someplace
to store all of Steve’s work. Because, *Jesus*, if the guy didn’t have his shield in hand, he had a paintbrush. Or a pencil. Or clay. Or Bucky.

Basically anything he could use to make art.

And, okay, Steve’s art wasn’t the only thing they kept in here. They’d both grown up during the Great Depression, so the space may or may not have also given them the chance to be the mild hoarders that neither wanted to admit to being. There were a couple cars in here, a bunch of furniture, and *possibly* Bucky’s old arm.

Yes, they had attachment issues. Luckily, they could afford it now. So the arm stayed.

Plus the place wasn’t too far from where they lived — only a few miles, really. When it came to whatever tickled Steve’s fancy at the moment, they could just load the pieces into the back of Bucky’s truck, and they’d be there in less than twenty minutes, if even that. It was handy.

It also helped at the moment that the place had fifteen-foot high ceilings, because Steve seemed to need all the space he could get to create that *fucking mural* for the Smithsonian.

The museum had offered to actually let him paint one of the walls at the exhibit, but he’d told Bucky that he hated the idea of his work eventually being painted over. And even if the Captain America exhibit became a permanent fixture there, he’d just wanted to make sure that *this* piece wasn’t. Which is why he’d also made sure that everything he contributed was nothing more than a loan.

Bucky was lying on their old couch — some weird green and blue plaid thing Steve had picked up from a stoop sale the day they’d bought their apartment, because they’d both wanted a completely fresh start, only to realize that, fresh start or not, buying furniture *ahead* of time probably would have been a good idea — in one corner of the warehouse, watching his love get more and more aggressive towards his mural by the second.

They’d been there for the better part of — Bucky checked his watch and groaned — *fifteen hours*, as Steve had put, what he’d called, the *final touches* on the damned thing, since it was due to be shipped down to D.C. the next day.

*Final touches, my ass*, Bucky thought to himself. *Final touches* had turned into, “this looks good, but what if I add another white star here,” or “okay, I see how this would appear to be ready, but there’s just *something* missing,” or “now, now, I have an idea for a thing I wanna do that would involve you when I’m done, but I need to just...figure out how to make it work...”

There had been a lot of that throughout the day, mixed in with even more “this is complete SHIT,” that had made everything just really colorful and fun, as far as Bucky was concerned.

It was why he’d retreated to the couch. It was about as far away from Steve as he could get without actually leaving. And he’d promised he wouldn’t.

He leaned over and picked up his beer off the floor, his eyes never leaving Steve and the mural. He brought it to his lips and took a slow pull, the malt flavors tickling his senses, and giving him a moment to slip away from the room at large. A room so big that felt so small to him, the longer they stayed.

Steve was angry. Had been for most of the day. Frustration and anger and something that reminded Bucky uncomfortably of desolation, just radiated off the man. It hurt Bucky to watch, and he was, according to the floorplan in his head, a good two-thousand feet away.

Two thousand feet, and Bucky wanted to shrink into the cushions and disappear. Because yeah,
Steve had said he wanted to involve Bucky in his piece, but what he had now had Bucky fighting back tears for at least the last several hours.

The work was gorgeous — Bucky couldn’t deny that. Steve had done it in two parts. One section was of the Howling Commandos in stark contrasts of black and white with splashes of color — eyes, hats, insignias, weapons, things like that — and at the center was Peggy, in full color, as though it was her that had lead the Commandos, instead of Steve. And truthfully, she really had been their ringleader. There wouldn’t even have been a Howling Commandos without her, both before Steve’s rescue and during their missions, so it was fitting.

But that wasn’t what kept drawing Bucky’s eye. It was the second part. The part that was wholly about him.

It was beautiful, and the way Steve had captured Bucky — the way Steve saw him — was absolutely breathtaking. He’d painted Bucky as he’d been back as a Commando, uniform and everything. But there was glint in the eyes that suggested both how Bucky had been before the war and how Bucky was now. Like he’d seen too much and not enough.

There was also an American flag around Bucky in the painting, but not really. It wasn’t a true flag, but the design it symbolized. And it was ghosted around him, almost draped, like ‘America’ would always protect him. Of course, Bucky knew what that really meant: It meant Steve would always protect him.

But it was the last few bits that made Bucky think that the aggressive addition of the flag was to make up for Steve not catching Bucky’s hand back in ‘44.

Because Steve had created the whole thing like a memorial.

Across the top, in a stenciled typeface, were the words IN THE MEMORY OF OUR WAR HERO, where across the bottom...

Across the bottom.

Steve had put his name, and underneath that 1917 — 1944.

And that was it. A war memorial with a birth and death date on it. Bucky lived. Bucky died. Steve had made no mention on there of a life after.

When he’d added it earlier that day, Bucky had wanted to ask, but fuck. How do you ask about something like that? How do you casually drop in that your boyfriend was in the process of creating a giant mural that basically treated Bucky like half the media still did — like he was dead and in the past.

Bucky tried not to let it get to him, he tried. But the words kept burning their way into his brain like some festering virus he couldn’t get rid of.

1917.

1944.

Bucky lived.

Bucky died.

Was that all he was?
He took another sip of his beer, and watched as Steve leaned precariously over the edge of the ladder he was using, as he worked on the upper corner of the painting. Steve could fall, and he’d be fine. Hell, he could fall from the very echelons of the atmosphere, and probably still survive.

Maybe that was being a bit dramatic. After all, there was a big difference between a six-foot drop and a drop that reached into the thousands.

Bucky bet he could. Steve could do anything.

Bucky could do anything. Had done everything. And had done it after he’d ‘died’.

The numbers seemed to pulsate on the overlarge canvas.

1944.

1944.

Bucky died.

And the Winter Soldier was born.

He couldn’t take it.

He set his beer back down and pushed off the couch, heading over to where Steve was now leaning on the ladder, staring at the mural. He felt hesitant at best, because really, this was Steve. What could the love of his life possibly mean by putting Bucky’s death year up on that thing?

Steve still hadn’t turned around, even though, as Bucky got closer, he was sure Steve’d heard his approach. His love just kept staring at the mural, his head swiveling back and forth between Bucky’s section and the Commandos’.

Bucky stopped a few feet from the ladder. “Steve?” he whispered — or maybe he hadn’t. He barely heard it himself.

Though it seemed Steve had.

“Yeah,” he answered, his voice rough and low. He sounded distracted, or maybe it was sad. Either way, there was no happiness in his response.

Bucky sighed. Took a deep breath. Sighed again. He could ask this; he could.

“It’s the middle of the night, baby,” is what came out instead. So much for courage. He kept going anyway. “Think it’s time we called it.”

“It’s not done.” The reply was blunt. Still distracted.

There wasn’t anything Bucky could see that needed finishing — well, except for maybe his death year. But maybe that was finished. He didn’t want to know.

He closed the distance between them and placed his hand gently on Steve’s thigh. “It looks done to me,” he said quietly. “It’s beautiful.”

It was then that Steve’s head whipped around, making Bucky take a startled step back. He couldn’t help the way he bowed his head, that old sense of nervousness creeping up on him.

“Sorry,” he muttered. He took a second, but finally he peeked up at Steve. What he was met with
was not what he’d been expecting.


Steve was... God, Steve was just gone. And Bucky had never seen him look more beautiful.

Apprehension out the window, Bucky raised a hand. “Don’t move,” he whispered, as he hastily grabbed for his phone in his back pocket.

“Bucky, what —”

“No, Steve, just... Don’t. Wait.” He held up his phone. “May I?”

Steve’s eyes darted to the painting and back. Repeated the process. Finally settled on Bucky. “It’s not done,” he repeated.

Bucky nodded. “I know, sweetheart.” He waved the phone at Steve. “I just want a picture of you.”

Eyes darted again. “Okay.”

Bucky smiled. “Okay.”

He raised his phone slowly, as though he was going to spook the man if he worked too fast, but it didn’t seem to matter. The moment Bucky stopped talking to him, Steve was immediately lost in thought again. Mind possibly going at warp speed. Possibly staring into an empty abyss. There was no sign of either, save for the grief that was still etched across his face.

Bucky didn’t ask him to smile. Didn’t ask him to stand next to his work and pose for the camera. Steve didn’t think the mural was done. Bucky wanted Steve just as he was in this moment. An artist, bleeding for his work.

Bucky quietly snapped the photo.

He shoved his phone back into his pocket without looking at it. He didn’t need to see that it was already perfect.

Instead he walked forward and put his hand on Steve again. “Baby, come down from there.”

His request was met with a slight hitch in Steve’s breathing. “It’s not done,” he repeated yet again, only this time his voice cracked at the end. Bucky glanced at his watch. It was after two in the morning. Maybe Steve was tired.

But then. Oh. Steve was repeating himself.

He was tired. And he needed Bucky to answer him.

With a melancholy sigh, Bucky stepped up onto the ladder next to Steve and wrapped the arm not holding on around his love’s waist. He lightly kissed his cheek. “What’s not done, Stevie?” he asked.

“It’s not...” Steve crumbled slightly in his arms as he glanced back at the mural. Then he turned into Bucky’s embrace and just... cracked. “I can’t do this,” he cried quietly.

“Yes, you can,” Bucky answered and held Steve tighter, metal arm giving the protection his boyfriend seemed to need. “You’ve already done it.”
“But I haven’t. It’s not done.” Steve sniffled in his ear. “Something feels off about Peggy, and you haven’t done your part, so I can’t even look at that right now —”

“What about my part?” Bucky cut in tentatively.

Steve leaned back and shook his head even as he placed a hand against Bucky’s cheek. His eyes bored into Bucky’s. “You haven’t done your part yet. You haven’t crossed out your death year, and I can’t look at it because —”

“Wait, what?” What was Steve talking about?

Steve tilted his head. “I told you earlier. I said I had an idea that I wanted you in on, but I had to figure it out first.”

“Yes, you did.” Bucky eyed him, waiting for Steve to catch up with the less than vague comment he’d just made. When Bucky got no response other than his own look staring back at him, he smiled and went on. “And exactly what part of what you just said tells me what you’re talking about it?”

Steve opened his mouth, only to shut it quickly. His eyes ticked back to the mural before landing on Bucky again. “Didn’t I tell you what I wanted you to do?” he asked.

Bucky slowly shook his head, amused.

Steve, though, didn’t seem to find it amusing. He looked horrified, actually.

Bucky let go of the ladder in favor of cupping Steve’s jaw with both hands before leaning in to kiss him. “What is it, Steve? What do you want from me?”

Steve waved a hand at the numbers on Bucky’s memorial. “Yeah?” Bucky asked as he tried to keep the rough out of his voice.

Whether Steve heard the catch or not, Bucky didn’t know. His expression never faltered as he watched Bucky. Finally, he laid it on him. “I wanted you to paint over the 1944.”

That... wasn’t what Bucky had expected to hear.

“What?” He shook his head as the numbers swam across his vision.

Steve just nodded. He slowly walked them down off the ladder and over to where the numbers were painted on. His fingers lightly touched against the now-dry canvas. “You survived the fall, but everyone still thinks you died this one time.” His fingers slid against 1944. “But you never did. You never died. There is no death date for you. And yet...” He turned back to Bucky, his sad little half-smile fixed in place. “The world always wants to treat you like you died in ’44, and that the only thing to exist for the next seventy years was the Winter Soldier. But see, the thing is, that’s not true. Even when you weren’t Bucky, you were still Bucky. The Winter Soldier was something that was done to you, but underneath all of that, you were still my Bucky.” A tear slipped from the corner of Steve’s eye as he placed a hand against Bucky’s cheek. “You never died, baby. You were always in there, fighting and living and just waiting for me to wake up.”

“Stevie...” Bucky’s face tickled from where the tears slipped from his own eyes.

A quick kiss to his lips. Foreheads pressed together. “Cover it up, baby.”

He felt a paint brush pressed into his flesh hand, and he nodded.
Steve turned them to point at the paint can that was sitting on the floor underneath the piece. It was a deep, visceral red that reminded him of —

“It’s the same shade as your old star,” Steve commented, answering Bucky’s thoughts. “I had to do some digging, but I was able to find out what the exact shade was.”

Surprised, Bucky turned to him, only to be met with a shake of the head. “Don’t ask.”

Bucky laughed. “Okay, I won’t.”

They smiled softly at each other, and the overwhelming sense of what Steve was asking slowly started to sink it. There was no 1944. There never was. And Steve wanted to erase it — wanted Bucky to erase it.

Bucky didn’t miss the poignancy of the fact that this piece was going to the Smithsonian — the very institution that loved to treat Steve and Bucky like they were relics from the past. Hell, their updated piece on Bucky still actually said he’d died from his fall, only to be brought back by Hydra. That was never the truth.

So, paint brush in hand, Bucky dipped the bristles into the violent red and stood back up. He eyed the painting as he thought about exactly how he was going to do this.

It wasn’t until he felt a gentle squeeze that he realized Steve was holding his metal hand. He squeezed back. Easy as anything.

And it was really that simple. Nothing fancy, no designs. Just cross the fucker out. So that’s what he did.

Three quick swipes and the deed was done. Bucky never died in 1944.

He dropped the brush on the ground, his eyes trained on the trail of red down the canvas. “Can we go home now?” he asked.

“But what about Peggy? She’s still rough around the edges.”

“Well, yeah, Stevie. Would you have our girl any other way?”

A deep sigh and an arm around his waist had them heading out towards the truck. “No,” Steve admitted. “I probably wouldn’t.”

~~~

“What are you doing?” Steve asked as they sat at a red light. Bucky kept typing out the caption on his phone.

“You know texting and driving is illegal, right?” Steve continued.

“We're stopped at a light,” Bucky answered without looking up. He glanced over his Instagram before hitting send.

The light turned green and Steve waved an impatient hand at it.

“Yeah, yeah,” Bucky muttered with an amused huff. He shoved his phone at Steve and hit the gas to turn right onto Vanderbilt. “Just look that over and make sure you're okay with it.”

“You already posted it.”
“No shit, Sherlock.”

“What if I don’t approve?”

“There’s a handy delete button, you know.”

“The internet is forever, Buck. Someone already has this. SHIELD probably already has this.”

Bucky gave him a light shove. “Just check it already.”

“Fine.”

Bucky watched out of the corner of his eye as Steve took in the picture he’d snapped earlier. He wasn’t sure if he should’ve posted it, but it was such a beautiful picture of Steve, in the middle of what he loved doing best, that Bucky couldn’t help it.

The way Steve’s breath caught as he took it in, he could see his love felt the same way.

And sure, again, he’d thought about getting more serious in his caption, but even Doc had told him to stop trying to force it. He had a good voice going with his posts, and his ‘personality was shining through.’ Whatever. He’d take it. All he cared about right now was home and bed.

After a five year successful world tour, the Captain America Exhibition is finally back to the Smithsonian for a final round and Steve insisted on painting a tribute mural HIMSELF to celebrate the event. Look at him! It’s 2:30am and he’s still working on the verge of tears on a portrait of his (formerly) dead boyfriend! I told you it would wreck you, you idiot! Come on, get down from that ladder, time to bring you home!

Chapter End Notes

The work that inspired Bucky's piece in this story is this piece done by petite-madame. The part we see Steve working on reminded me so much of an updated, stylized version of this earlier piece done by her, I just decided to run with it.
"Blah blah blah I'll be fine", "Blah blah blah, now that you're here it's different", "Blah blah blah, don't worry Buck"... My a**. How could you think even ONE minute that working on a giant portrait of me and all the friends you lost during the War would be a good idea? Ok, come here, don't think about this exhibition anymore and just relax. What? My sweater? It's a present from Pepper, a limited edition made especially for the Smithsonian. Stark Industries owns the Captain America merchandising, remember?

~~~~
Bucky punched his foot on the gas, causing the truck to lurch and stall out. Instantly horns blared behind him.

“Shit,” he muttered and threw the car into neutral before firing it back up again. A horn went off again behind him, and he glared at the irate driver in his rearview mirror.

“Oh, fuck you,” he mumbled at the mirror as the guy gesticulated at him to go. Jesus fuck, he was not in the mood for this. He threw a middle finger out the window before stepping on the gas to cross over Atlantic Avenue.

On his way to the warehouse. To go clobber the Idiot Boyfriend.

He and Steve had gotten back so late the night before, it was damn near morning by the time they’d finally gone to bed. Steve’s pieces weren’t getting picked up until four, so Bucky had assumed they’d sleep in till at least the early afternoon.

How did that saying go about assuming again?

Because Idiot Bucky should have known he’d be waking up to an empty bed. At ten in the morning. And it had taken him exactly no seconds to figure out where Steve had gone and why.

Idiot Boyfriend was going to ruin those pieces if he didn’t just leave them the fuck alone.

The truck had barely pulled up next to Steve’s bike in the warehouse’s little garage before Bucky killed the engine and hopped out. He yanked open the side door that led into the main space and stormed across to where, sure enough, Steve was up fucking with the curls around Peggy’s face.

“You tryin’ to make your girl ugly or something?” he shouted.

“Shit!” Steve slipped on the ladder and the brush went flying out of his hands. He scrambled to grab onto the side rail before he could fall off the thing entirely.

Bucky stopped mid-stride and doubled over in laughter.

“You asshole!” Steve exclaimed, glaring at him.

“Serves you right,” he wheezed out, wiping at his eyes as Steve clomped down the steps. “Why the fuck are you even here right now?” he asked as he started back over again.

Steve began to nose around the floor, searching for the lost brush. “I told you last night: Peggy’s too rough around the edges. Aha!” He leaned over to swipe the brush from behind a can of red paint.

“And I told you” — Bucky snatched the brush from between Steve’s fingers before the man had barely had a chance to stand up — “Rough around the edges is how we like our girl.”

“Give that back.” Steve stuck out his hand and glared at him.

Bucky just shook his head. “No.”

Steve huffed, annoyance creeping into his voice. “Will you just give it back to me already?” He made a grab for the brush, but Bucky yanked it out of reach with a chuckle.

“You gettin’ hard of hearing in your old age, Rogers?”
“I’m not playing around here,” Steve all but snapped.

“Neither am I.”

“Just give me the fucking brush, Bucky!”

Bucky pulled up short at the flush of absolute anger on Steve’s face. He blinked at him, completely nonplussed. He knew Steve was stressed about the exhibit, but he hadn’t expected to be yelled at over it.

“Seriously?” he managed to get out.

A flash of guilt crossed over Steve, only to settle right back into irritation. He didn’t say anything, just gave a short nod.

Fucking whatever. “Fine,” Bucky growled and slapped the brush into Steve’s still-outstretched hand. “You wanna be a stubborn asshole about this? It’s your fucking funeral.”

He turned on his heel and strode right back the way he’d come. Seriously, fuck Steve if he was going to act like a fucking child. Bucky got that he was a perfectionist, and this was his art, but there was a line between wanting to get it right, and pile-driving yourself into the ground. This was exactly what he was afraid —

He stopped and whipped back around. “You know, this is what I was talking about. This right here.” He waved a hand at Steve, who was staring after him, that stubborn anger, and sadness, and something like guilt again all seemingly at war across his features. “I didn’t want you doing this because I knew it would kill you, and I was fucking right. Those murals behind you? They’re fucking perfect, Steve. But you can’t see that. You can’t let it go — can’t walk away.” He crossed his arms and glared daggers at Steve. “You’re so caught up in what they’re being used for and the fact that you essentially agreed to create a giant fucking memorial for your dead fucking family, even though you still, to this day, struggle with the fact that everything and everyone you ever loved is gone, that you have made yourself blind to what it’s doing to you.”

“No one.”

“Not everyone I love is gone,” Steve spit out, and pointed at Bucky’s piece. Bucky’s eyes darted to it, before settling back on Steve.

“No,” he agreed, trying to keep his tone even. “Not everyone is gone; I’m still here.” He slowly started walking back over. “But, Steve? That still doesn’t change the fact that this hasn’t exactly been the healthiest project in the world for you. You’re always talking to me about my pictures and my therapy, and how what I put up is supposed to help me. Hell, there were times you stopped me from putting up photos or captions that you knew weren’t good for me. And yet...” He stopped in front of Steve and folded his arms again. “You couldn’t listen to me when I gave that same advice back to you. Why is that?”

“It’s fine —”

“No, you’re not.” He grabbed Steve by the shoulders and spun him around. He pointed over Steve’s shoulder up at Peggy’s face, looking every bit as fierce and loyal and loving and beautiful as she had been in life. “Can you not see how gorgeous that is? You breathed life into her, Stevie. And the rest of the Commandos?” He waved his hand at the whole piece. “That’s not a painting of our squad up there. That is our squad.” He turned Steve back around. “And you’re not working on it like it needs
finishing details. You may say that you are, but answer me this: If the museum called you right now and said they were pushing back the re-opening another few weeks, you’d scrap these and start all over from scratch, wouldn’t you.”

Steve opened his mouth, only to close it without saying anything, his jaw working over.

Bucky nodded; he knew he was right. “See? You hate them.” He took a deep breath and slid his hands up to cup Steve’s jaw. “The problem though is that you don’t hate them because they’re bad. You hate them because, deep down, you really hate the idea of contributing to our family being on display at the exhibit.”

Again, Steve opened his mouth, only to close it again, his eyes following suit. He sighed and turned to nuzzle against Bucky’s hand. Then, in a whisper, he said, “I should never have agreed to do this.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.”

“Why did I?”

“Because you’re a stubborn idiot who didn’t listen to his clearly superiorly intelligenced boyfriend?”

Steve snorted and opened his eyes, and there… There was that smile Bucky loved. “Which I can’t give you because you said superiorly intelligenced.”

Bucky shrugged. “Hey, it makes sense in my head. S’all that matters.”

“Obviously.” Steve’s smile turned small and adoring. Bucky leaned in and kissed it.

“You’ve done gorgeous work, baby,” he quietly assured Steve. “Really.”

Steve bowed his head and took a deep breath. “I just…I can’t seem to let this one go,” he confessed, just as quiet.

Now, Bucky liked to think that he knew how to be a good boyfriend — how to be there for Steve when he really needed it. And this was one of those times; he was sure of it. This project had cracked Steve, and right now, he needed Bucky to be the stronger of the two. A bit of a role-reversal, sure, but not exactly new territory.

Except, see, the problem was that Bucky was currently trying really hard not to laugh, and last he checked, that wasn’t conducive to being the Good Boyfriend.

He was shaking in silent glee by the time Steve looked up in confusion.

“What?” he asked, brows creased. “What’s so funny? What did I say?”

Bucky couldn’t take it. He threw his head back and burst out laughing. “Seriously, Rogers?” he huffed out. “You can’t let this one go?”

“What!” Steve cried out, taking a step back. He folded his arms and frowned, looking hurt and confused, and Bucky instantly felt bad, even if he couldn’t stop laughing.

“Ah, baby, I’m sorry.” He tried to pull his laughter under control and moved forward to press a hand against Steve’s face. Steve batted his hand away.

“No, you don’t get to touch me. Why are you laughing at me?”

Bucky ignored him and placed his hands back on Steve’s face anyway. When Steve tried to squirm
out from his grasp, Bucky held on tight and gave him a quick smack to the lips. “No, I’m sorry, really.” He huffed as Steve continued to frown at him. “It’s just that” — he couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped again — “you of all people saying you can’t let something go? You’re the most stubborn person I have ever met, Stevie. You can’t let anything go.”

“That is just... that is so not true,” Steve grumbled between Bucky’s hands. The way he was pouting right now, Bucky could see why people liked to compare Steve to a puppy. Because right now, he looked exactly like one that had just been kicked. Bucky found it simultaneously one of the most heartbreaking and most adorable things he’d ever seen.

“Aww. Don’t be sad, Stevie.” He stepped in completely and wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist. The man again tried to squirm out, but the effort held a lot less conviction this time. Mostly he was just back to glaring at Bucky. For his part, Bucky tilted his head to the side and smiled. “You know I’m not wrong. You know you’re a stubborn ass, and that serum of yours only amplified it. You rarely let things go, and this?” He nodded towards the artwork. “It’s got your emotions on lock, so of course you can’t let it go.” He gave Steve a soft kiss on the cheek and smiled at the little hitch he heard in return. “It’s what you’ve got me for.”

That got Steve to crack a smile. “But you just said I don’t listen to you.”

“That is true,” Bucky answered with a nod. Then he smiled and wiggled his metal fingers for Steve. “But that’s what you’ve got this for.” To show what he meant, he lightly smacked Steve upside the head with his hand.

“Hey!” Steve laughed and batted Bucky’s hand away before giving his shoulder a light shove. “No hitting the boyfriend.”

“What if the boyfriend’s being dumb?”

“Then other boyfriend should talk about it.”

“Except the boyfriend just admitted that he doesn’t listen.”

Steve eyed him for a minute before answering. “All right then, but if other boyfriend hits with his metal hand, he should expect, at some point, to get beaned upside his own head with the shield.”

Bucky shrugged. “I think the boyfriend is forgetting that metal hand is capable of catching metal shield.”

Steve shook his head. “Not worried. The boyfriend will find a way.”

“How long are we going to keep talking like this?”

“How long are we going to keep talking like this?”

“How long are we going to keep talking like this?”

“Till one of us cracks?”

Bucky laughed. “Pretty sure we’re both cracked, Steven.”

Steve snickered and finally, finally wrapped his arms around Bucky. He leaned in for a soft kiss, only to keep giggling against Bucky’s lips. He turned to press his head against Bucky’s shoulder, silently shaking with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Bucky asked and turned to kiss his temple.

“Honestly? I have no idea.” Steve shook for a minute longer before he pulled it under control. He grabbed Bucky in a tight hug, and Bucky squeezed back, holding on. They stayed like that for a
while, because really, Bucky knew that Steve’s emotions really were all over the place right now, and the best thing Bucky could do was be Steve’s anchor.

When they finally broke apart, Steve turned to give the mural a long look. “I really need to walk away from this, don’t I.” It didn’t sound like a question.

“You really do.”

“But I started back on Peggy, and now...” His eyes had traveled up to where he’d been working earlier, his expression torn.

So Bucky slowly stepped behind him to wrap his arms around Steve’s waist before resting his head on Steve’s shoulder. He too looked up to where Steve had been working. “Well, then, if you started making changes that need to be finished, then finish them. Just don’t keep making new changes. Let the rest go.”

“All right.”

Bucky turned to kiss Steve on the neck. “I’ll be over on the couch when you’re done.”

“The curator will be here in a few hours.”

“Then you have a few hours.”

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Steve actually listened to Bucky for once. It had taken him another couple of hours to complete the changes he was making to Peggy, but he did stop when he was finished. Bucky knew there were probably a hundred other edits he wanted to make, but he’d stopped when he was done with the one, and Bucky had to say, he was proud of his Stevie.

The two sprawled out on the couch together, napping, until the woman from the Smithsonian had shown up with her crew of movers. Once she’d arrived, she’d damn near tripped over herself gushing over Steve’s work, calling it the best he’d ever done, and this was going to one day be considered up there with the rest of the greats, and on and on.

Bucky knew she was kissing Steve’s ass, but personally, he believed every word she’d said was right on.

Since the murals weren’t the only pieces going — Steve had also donated several from his own personal collection to be displayed — the woman actually didn’t leave for almost three hours. By the time she did go, both men were starving. Luckily Emily Pizza was just up the road.

When they finally stumbled into their apartment later, it was after ten, and they were exhausted. The day had been more than a little long.

Bucky dropped his jacket right inside the door and kicked off his shoes. He tried to stifle a yawn as he made his way over to the kitchen. He grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge as Steve shut the front door and locked it.

Bucky turned to lean against the kitchen counter and Steve walked over and plopped down onto one of the bar stools. “So, it’s done,” he commented as he folded up his arms on the counter so he could pillow his head.

“Yes, it is,” Bucky answered. He cracked open the bottle and took a sip. “Now all we have to do is
“actually attend this thing.”

Steve groaned and turned his head into his arms. “Noooo. Can we just not have to attend the thing? Can’t we just skip it?”

Bucky reached over and patted Steve’s shoulder. “‘Fraid not, there, Stevie. You agreed to this thing. Now you gotta pay up.”

“I hate you,” Steve mumbled against the counter.

“I know you do.” Bucky set the water bottle aside and walked around the counter to drape himself over Steve’s back. He purred in Steve’s ear. “You know what we could do, right now.”

That got Steve’s attention. His head perked up a little and he turned to catch Bucky out of the corner of his eye. “I’m listening.”

“Well.” Bucky ran his hands up and down Steve’s torso. “We could head to our bedroom...”

“Yes...?”

Bucky licked along the shell of Steve’s ear before lightly nipping it. “Take off these clothes...”

“Keep talking.”

He let his hands ghost along Steve’s thighs as he sunk his teeth into Steve’s shoulder. He waited until he felt a slight shudder ripple through Steve before he let go entirely with a laugh.

“And go the fuck to sleep!” he announced as he turned and walked away.

“What the fuck?” Steve squawked from behind him. “Are you kidding me?”

“I’m fucking tired, Rogers!” Bucky called out with a laugh as he headed into their room. He grabbed the sweater Pepper had given him a few days prior off the chair, and threw it on before flopping back onto the bed, waiting for Steve to come storming in.

He glanced up at the wall behind his head. It was almost completely taped over with reference drawings of Bucky for the mural, as if Steve didn’t know every angle of his face by heart now. Bucky found it especially ironic that it was only him that Steve obsessed with over references. There were only a few images of Peggy and the commandos. At last count, Steve had put up twenty-seven of him.

He finally heard footsteps heading in his direction. Three... Two... One...

“I can’t believe, after a day like today, you’d tease me with sex, only to — what the fuck are you wearing?!” Steve pulled up short at their bedroom door.

Bucky looked down at his sweater and laughed. “Present from Pepper.”

“Nu-uh. I call bullshit.” Steve walked in and flopped down next him, and the drawing nearest his head came fluttering down. He grabbed at it and taped it back up. “That came from Tony. Don’t lie.”

Bucky glanced down at his sweater again. The article in question looked like old cheesy Captain America propaganda had thrown up all over him. It was bright blue with white and red trim, and white stars splashed across the shoulders. The center of it was a reprint of one of the first comic covers. It was absolutely garish and Bucky had fallen in love with it the moment Pepper had handed to him.
“Well, Stark Industries does own all the Cap merchandising, so it wouldn’t surprise me if Tony had a hand in designing it.” He quirked an amused eyebrow. “But Pepper really was the one who gave it to me, so you gotta think she approved the final look.”

Steve grimaced at Bucky. “She spends too much time with that man. He’s starting to rub off on her.”

Bucky laughed. “Just think how much worse it would be if she’d never been there at all.”

“I shudder to think of it.” Steve hopped back up off the bed and made his way over to the dresser. “We need a picture of that thing,” he said as he grabbed his camera off the top. He turned to Bucky and gave it a little wave.

“Actually, wait.” Bucky reached into his back pocket and pulled out his phone. “Take it with mine and I’ll post it on Instagram.” He waved his hand at the sweater. “I mean, come on. This thing is kind of hilarious.”

Steve laughed. “Okay, but first” — he held up his own camera really quick and snapped a candid of Bucky smiling goofily at him — “let’s just get one with the real camera. You know, to make sure we get the colors of that thing in all their glory.”

“Such a dork...” Bucky said with a small shake of his head. Then he held out his phone. “Take this though and go set it up.”

Steve took the phone with a small, confused frown. “Wait, you don’t want me to just take the picture?”

Bucky shook his head and smiled. “Want you in it. Then I can comment about how tired and shitty you look.”

“Yes, because that’s inspiring me to get in the shot.”

“Will you just get that handled and come sit your sorry ass down?”

Steve began to set the camera on the windowsill as he muttered, “Why I keep you around, I have no idea.”

But Bucky barely heard what he’d said, because at the current moment, Steve was bent over in such a way that put his ass on glorious display. There wasn’t a whole lot of blood swimming around in Bucky’s brain for him to form coherent thought.

When Steve stood back up and smiled at him with a, “What?” Bucky blinked and shook his head out of his lusty stupor, only to find a smirk planted firmly on Steve’s face. Bucky narrowed his eyes in return.

“Yeah, you did that on purpose,” he accused.

Steve’s eyes went wide. “No idea what you’re talking about, Buck,” he said, voice dripping with innocence as he plopped back down on the bed. He tucked in next to Bucky and turned to smile at the camera.

“You’re such a shit, you know that?” Bucky mumbled out of the corner of his mouth as he too turned toward the camera.

“Well, if you’re gonna call my ass sorry, just gonna have to make you stare at it and remind you how much you love the goods.”
Bucky slowly turned to look at Steve, only to find him with the most ridiculously smug look on his face.

“Oh, hell no, you did not.” He reached over and grabbed Steve, pulling him down into his lap. The camera went off right at that moment, and they both looked over at it in surprise before looking back at each other. He knew that look of oops! that was written all over Steve’s face had to be mirrored on his own, and they both began to crack up.

“Oh my god, baby.” Steve huffed and rubbed at his eyes. “What is wrong with us?”

“Too much time on our hands?”

That just made Steve snort. “Yes, that’s exactly it. We’ve had just heaps of free time lately. Clearly we need something to do.” He smiled up at Bucky, who took his cue to lean forward and give Steve a sound kiss.

“Here, get up.” He gave Steve a small push. “Let’s see how stupid we look.” Steve laughed and rolled over, giving Bucky room to get up and go retrieve his phone. He came and sat back down before pulling up the picture.

“Huh,” Steve muttered as he leaned his head on Bucky’s shoulder. “That’s actually not that bad.”

Bucky hummed in agreement as he looked the photo over. How the hell they pulled this off, he didn’t know, but the camera caught them at just the right moment where Steve appeared to be pillowed in Bucky’s lap, the two smiling at each other, like they were sharing some private moment. Which, Bucky guessed, they probably were.

“I actually love this,” Bucky said quietly. “I think I’ll post this one.”

“Wasn’t the point to get a shot of the sweater?”

“Close enough,” Bucky responded with a shrug. He opened up Instagram and loaded the image. When it was time for the caption, after the day they’d had, it came to him fairly easy, and he quickly typed out, "Blah blah blah I’ll be fine", "Blah blah blah, now that you’re here it’s different", "Blah blah blah, don’t worry Buck”...My a**. How could you think even ONE minute that working on a giant portrait of me and all the friends you lost during the War would be a good idea? Ok, come here, don’t think about this exhibition anymore and just relax. What? My sweater? It’s a present from Pepper, a limited edition made especially for the Smithsonian. Stark Industries owns the Captain America merchandising, remember?

He added Tumblr and hit send before turning to kiss the top of Steve’s head, who hadn’t moved away from Bucky’s shoulder. “Ready to go to bed, baby?”

“God, yes,” Steve breathed out. Then he slid over until he was in Bucky’s lap again. He turned over and rested his hands under his head. “This is good. Night, Bucky.”

Bucky laughed softly and ran his fingers through Steve’s hair. “If you wanna sleep there all night, I’m more than happy to keep vigil for you.” He smiled down at his love. “You did good today, baby. I’m so stupidly proud of the work you did, I can’t tell you.”

“You think so?” Steve asked as he reached one hand under Bucky’s thigh to tuck in even closer.

Bucky nodded, even though he knew Steve couldn’t see him. The murals they’d sent off today were probably the most ambitious pieces Steve had ever done, and the world was about to see just how fucking good of an artist Steve really was. Secretly, Bucky hoped it would be Steve’s chance for the
world to see him as more than just the shield. That before the war, and before the serum, he was already a talented genius in his own right. Maybe this would be his chance to move artist out of the footnotes of all that had been written about him and into the forefront.

“Yeah, Stevie. I really, really do.”
Chapter Summary

An unfinished oil painting Steve lent to the Smithsonian for the Captain America Exhibition. He has always refused to sell this one, not even for kids or Veterans’ charities. I never understood why because it was just one portrait among the 2500 Steve drew of my sad face, until he finally confessed that this painting represented the last happy memory he had of me before I fell from the train.

“What size were you looking for?”

Bucky walked out into the living room, rubbing a towel against his neck to catch the sweat dripping down from his hairline. He found Steve planted at the kitchen counter, typing away on his
phone, airpods jammed into place. He smiled at him, but all he got was an absent, barely half-smile in return, Steve deep into whatever was going on at the other end of that line.

“I mean, yeah, I can do it, but you were here for hours last week. I don’t understand why you didn’t mention this to me then.”

Steve set the phone down and scrubbed a hand across his face. Bucky quirked an eyebrow, but he just shook his head. With a shrug, Bucky dropped the towel by the sink so he could grab a glass of water. He turned to lean against the counter, eyes on Steve and the growing frustration spreading across his face.

Steve rested his head against his hand. “No, no. It’s fine. I’ll go pull another one and have it shipped to you tomorrow,” he answered, with a deep resigned sigh that seemed to draw out right up until his eyes went hard, and he snapped straight into Captain Angry. “Yeah, well, you should have thought of that last week,” he barked, and hung up.

Bucky set his glass down and gave Steve a tentative smile. “Let me guess. Smithsonian?”

Steve pulled his airpods out and nodded. “Apparently they have room for one more piece, and they think it would be ‘just really great of me’ if I submitted something that was a bit more personal than the work I already gave them.”

Bucky stared at him, dumbfounded. “Seriously?”

Steve rolled his eyes in response.

“Were they not paying attention to the giant fucking murals you created specifically for them?”

Steve waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, no, those were fantastic, but — and I quote”— he clasped his hands together in mock imitation of the curator — “‘You know, we’d really like to see something that tells us who Steve Rogers is. Inside. You know, something that represents that old, small little artist who was always waiting in the wings to burst forth and show his creations to the world.’”

All Bucky could do was gape. Steve took that for the exasperated understanding that it was, and nodded solemnly back at him.

“Yep.”

“No.”

“Hand to God.”

“Please tell me you told them to fuck off.”

Steve waved a hand at his discarded phone. “You know I didn’t.”

Bucky laughed and crossed his arms. “I’m shocked, Rogers. You, of all people, not telling someone where they can stuff it? You feeling okay?”

“Feeling just fine, though I don’t mind telling you where you can stuff it right about now,” Steve countered, flipping Bucky off.

Bucky pushed off so he could lean across the island, right into Steve's space, and smiled avariciously. “Now, see, Stevie, I would stuff it, but unless you plan on joining me in the shower,” — he nodded his head in that direction — “I don’t think you want my sweaty dick anywhere near
Steve’s eyes narrowed and he stared Bucky down, before a smile slowly spread across his face. Then he was up, grabbing Bucky’s hand and yanking him towards the bathroom.

Bucky laughed as he allowed himself to be dragged along. “I take it that’s a yes, then.” He smiled heatedly as Steve shoved him up against the counter and unceremoniously yanked his shorts down.

“Hey, I just found out I have to go back to the warehouse again for those people.” He grabbed Bucky’s tank top and pulled it over his head, tossing it aside. Then his mouth quirked up into a tiny smile as he pressed full length up against Bucky. “I’m all for anything to take the edge off.”

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A couple hours later, Steve and Bucky pulled into the warehouse garage in Bucky’s truck. The shower had been fantastic, and Bucky had tried to talk Steve into staying in there a while longer, but Steve was dead set on getting the Smithsonian business over with.

“What piece you’re thinking of using?” Bucky asked as they headed into the open space. There were literally hundreds to choose from, and Bucky couldn’t even begin to fathom how Steve was supposed to pick one. He couldn’t figure out how Steve had been able to choose the pieces already sent.

“I have a few ideas,” Steve said as he veered off towards the far back corner, passing the ‘68 Mustang that Bucky always secretly suspected Steve loved more than him, as well as the gaping hole of space that had housed the murals — now just a litter of drop cloths, half-empty paint cans, and brushes.

They were heading back towards what Bucky liked to teasingly call Steve’s Bucky Corner. Every piece that Steve had ever done of him all seemed to live in one area of the warehouse. There were notebooks full of sketches, watercolors, oils, some acrylics, if Bucky remembered correctly, and even a few sculptures.

Bucky once joked that Steve was obsessed with him. When Steve had responded with, “of course I am, Buck. You always have been, and always will be, my greatest muse,” Bucky never teased him about it again.

“Bucky Corner, huh?” Bucky asked as they reached the area in question.

Steve shrugged and smiled absently as he gazed at all the pieces tucked away. “Well, they did say they wanted something personal and representative of me.” His smile turned shy as he looked over at Bucky. “You represent me, so I figured...”

Bucky let his fingers lightly trace along Steve’s jaw and he leaned in for a chaste kiss. “You sure you didn’t already send them enough pieces of my mug?”

Steve chuckled before pecking Bucky on the cheek. “Not as many as you’d think.”

“So no nudes of me, then?”

“Didn’t feel like giving the little old ladies any heart attacks.”

“Please.” Bucky snorted. “Those little old ladies are our peers. Half of them probably fantasized about you naked back in the day.”
Steve turned around and began walking backwards before waving a hand at Bucky. “But we aren’t talking about me, now are we,” he shot back, only to turn around with a laugh as Bucky flipped him off.

“You’re not as pretty as you think you are, Rogers.”

Steve hummed as he ran his fingers across the various canvases around the maze. “You know, I distinctly remember you saying something different not one hour ago.”

Bucky huffed as he followed behind. “I, uh, do not recall any such conversation.”

“Of course you don’t.”

Bucky gave him a light shove, but didn’t say anything else, just followed behind as Steve walked around. He kept pulling out pieces and examining them, but most of the time he would shake his head and put them back. Every so often, though, he’d set one of them aside.

Bucky had no idea what he was looking for; the only common denominator he saw was they all looked about the same size. The art themselves all looked amazing, even the one Steve didn’t choose.

And it wasn’t vanity that drew Bucky to the paintings. He would argue that Steve made him too beautiful for the broken man that he’d become. And if he was honest with himself, as handsome as he knew he’d been before the war, he’d been nowhere near as stunning as Steve liked to paint him.

He used to try and argue that point, but Steve would just counter by telling Bucky that when it came to himself, the serum made no difference — he still saw himself as small and sickly most of the time. People always liked to tell him that he was really handsome now, but the only time he ever felt beautiful was when Bucky was looking at him.

So if Bucky couldn’t see himself the way Steve saw him, then he should just remind himself of that. They might both be a little broken and insecure, but they had each other, and they could find the beauty in themselves through each other’s eyes.

“Not that one,” Bucky threw out, breaking the silence, as he saw which one Steve was currently examining.

“No?” Steve asked as he glanced between the painting and Bucky. He had in his hands on what looked like a smaller version of the artwork that hung above their fireplace — the one Bucky had almost destroyed in their epic showdown over this godforsaken exhibition project.

“That one’s special.” He shrugged before waving at it. “How come you have that?”

Steve looked down at the painting again before giving Bucky a sheepish grin. “I hadn’t originally planned to give this to you. I’d painted this one just for me. I just really loved that picture of us from that day and it had inspired me.” He gently set the picture back down. “When I figured out that I wanted to give it to you for our anniversary, I decided to make a bigger one.”

“One that I had to go and damn near destroy,” Bucky muttered regretfully. He glared at the unblemished painting, angry with himself all over again at the tear in the one at home that Steve’d had to fix.

Bucky’s view was immediately blocked by Steve, right in front of him. Earnest eyes pleading with Bucky to look his way. “Hey,” he whispered, wrapping his arms around Bucky’s waist. He ducked his head, finally forcing Bucky to look at him. “I don’t blame you for that. You know that, right?”
Bucky snorted. “You mean about the part where I picked up the bust, and I threw it at the wall, and I sent the painting crashing to the floor?” His voice was dripping with derision even as he tried not to scowl at Steve. “Is that the thing you don’t blame me for?”

“Okay, stop.” Steve framed Bucky’s face and pulled him in for a quick kiss. “Of course it upsets me when you getting violent like that, you would hate it if I did, we both know that. But again, you only ever seem to get like that when you’re in pain. And you were in pain, baby. For me. I can’t be mad at you for that.”

Bucky just nodded and returned the kiss. He knew Steve was right. And besides, they’d already talked about this. He had to stop rehashing things, especially when it was things that condemned him. Doc had talked to him about that, too.

“Let’s just pick a painting so we can go home,” he answered instead.

“And get back to the sex?” Steve asked, a tiny twinkle in his eye.

That got Bucky to smile. “Oh yes. Definitely to get back to the sex.”

Steve laughed and grabbed Bucky’s hand, turning them back to the task at hand. He headed toward the back corner, passing a row of watercolors all lined up against one wall. Each one depicted the two of them at Coney Island during various stages of their lives. He didn’t recognize every one, but he knew enough of them that he suspected each one of those days actually had happened, whether he remembered them or not.

“When did you do these?” he asked as he passed one in particular he did remember — a memorable summer day back in ‘32 that had turned into a torrential downpour and one of the craziest thunderstorms Bucky had ever seen. Steve had captured the lightning off the coast beautifully.

“About two months ago,” Steve answered. He glanced at them, but kept walking. “I was thinking of hanging them at our place in the Tower, but I don’t know. They seem kind of silly now that I’m done —”

“They’re gorgeous,” Bucky cut in, squeezing Steve’s hand.

Steve glanced at him from over his shoulder. “You think so?”

“If you don’t hang them, I will.”

Steve smiled, but didn’t answer. That was fine. They both knew Bucky never backed down from a threat, so they were as good as hung.

Finally, Steve stopped in front of a small stack in the farthest back corner. The first piece was an unfinished portrait, and Bucky expected him to set it aside, but instead Steve held it up and examined it. It was another minute later before a satisfied smile slowly spread across Steve’s face.

“This one,” he breathed out, barely above a whisper. “This is definitely the one.”

“Really?” Bucky asked curiously, and he stepped up behind Steve to get a closer look. He recognized it immediately as one of the pieces Steve had done before he’d known Bucky was alive. It was an oil painting of him in his old Howling Commandos uniform, smoking a cigarette against a stark backdrop — clearly from during the war. It was still rough around the edges, the paint not even reaching the far corners of the canvas. “Are you gonna finish it first?” he asked, eyeing the missing edges.
“It is finished, Buck,” Steve answered, quietly.

Bucky continued to peer at it, more confused than ever. More than once over the years, people had asked for it for auctions and what not, but Steve always refused. Bucky had just assumed it was because he had never completed it.

“Okay, but if it’s done, how come you’ve never sold it?” he asked, voicing the thoughts in his head. “All those times you turned people down...”

“Not this one.” Steve tilted the painting up towards the light, making the highlights around the lit cigarette look as though it was shining through the canvas itself. “Not this memory.”

“I don’t understand.”

Steve sighed and set the paint back down. He stepped aside so he could wrap an arm around Bucky’s waist as they both continued to look the painting over. “Well, you have to understand, this was back during your time as a Commando —”

“I can see that.”

“And it was the last night that you were one,” Steve continued, thie hitch in his shoulders barely conveying his reticence. “Well, you’re still a Commando. It’s just that this...” He waved a hand at the painting. “This was the last happy memory I had of you before you fell from the train.”

And that’s when Bucky remembered. They’d been camped out near the base of the mountain, set to climb up just before dawn. The commandos had all been huddled around for warmth, telling stories of their most disastrous dates ever — Bucky’s involving a girl name Linda and an apparently not-so-ex-boyfriend, and Steve’s first double date with Bucky ever. They were smiling and shooting the shit, and the whole group was laughing as they practically tried to climb on top of Steve and Bucky because, “You guys realize you’re like human furnaces, right?”

Bucky had tried to deflect, saying it was all Steve, but even then he knew something was different about him. Things had been different ever since Zola. In the coming days he’d found out exactly just how much.

“Oh,” was all Bucky said, all he could think to say. He leaned against Steve, resting his head on his shoulder. As he glanced over the painting again, the colors seemed to become more vivid, the contrasts between dark and light more stark, the smile in his eyes reflecting back at him...

The painting had been done before Steve knew Bucky was alive. Most likely when Bucky’s death was still fresh in Steve’s mind.

Suddenly Bucky could see what Steve had been trying to paint. Sadness and longing...and love.

Bucky’s eyes stung as he fought back tears. “So you’re gonna give this one?” he asked, quietly choking on his words. Steve’s hand tightened on his waist.

“They wanted something that was more me. This is it.”

Bucky wiped at his eyes before going into his pocket for his phone. He crouched down and took a picture of the painting. “Gonna post it,” he said, proud that his voice had stopped shaking. “Is that okay?”

Steve smiled at Bucky and nodded quickly, his own eyes glistening. Bucky returned the smile and pulled up his Instagram app. He added the image and typed the caption up:
An unfinished oil painting Steve lent to the Smithsonian for the Captain America Exhibition. He has always refused to sell this one, not even for kids or Veterans’ charities. I never understood why because it was just one portrait among the 2500 Steve drew of my sad face, until he finally confessed that this painting represented the last happy memory he had of me before I fell from the train.

He shoved his phone back into his pocket, then took Steve’s hand. “So, are we done, then? Can we go home?”

Steve laughed and nodded. “Yeah, baby. We can go home.” He picked up the painting and the two made their way back to the truck. Steve grabbed the blanket he’d thrown in the back and wrapped it up before jumping in.

As Bucky pulled out, he smiled at Steve. “Only one week to go, you know.”

“Yep.” Steve took a deep breath. “Only thing between now and then is your birthday party.”

Fuck. In all the chaos over the exhibit, he’d forgotten about the damn party on Saturday. Hell, he probably would have forgotten his own birthday two days before if Steve hadn’t woken him up with a ‘birthday blowjob’. “No presents, though,” Steve had said at the time. “They’re not ready yet.”

The next week was going to be really fucking busy for them. Like that was anything new.
I know you wanted to be here to put all of this behind us once and for all but I keep on thinking it wasn't a good idea for you AND for me. Enough with this exhibition and all the memories it brings back to the surface. If you've got to keep only one memory of it, just remember me, ok? Remember that I'm here, holding you. That's it, just remember this. And also the guy behind us with his Bucky Bear because he's freaking hilarious. (Photo: Sam)

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“Are we underdressed? I feel like we're underdressed.”
“What'd you wanna do? Come in uniform?”

Steve glanced up from where he was tugging at the hem of his shirt, a slight panic in his eyes.
“What should we have come in uniform?”

Bucky chuckled affectionately. “No, we should not have come in uniform. It’s fucking freezing out there right now, and my dress coat does nothing for that shit.”

He looked over at the side entrance they’d just come through, cursing the damned March weather up one side and down the other. Soon it would be actual spring and Bucky could stop with the godforsaken hundred layers he’d just peeled out of and dumped on the table that was back here. He probably could’ve gotten away with wearing his winter coat instead of his dress coat, but it wouldn’t have felt... right. He looked down at his jeans and shirt instead. He and Steve were somewhat casual, sure, but they’d both always had a ‘for the people’ attitude anyway, and weren’t expecting any of the public to dress up. So why should they?

“Not that it matters anyway, since we’re running so fucking late,” Steve responded in a rush as he glanced at his watch. “We should have gotten here an hour ago.”

“Uh, Stevie, the exhibit only opened thirty minutes ago —”

“We should have been here before it opened. The artist should always be there at the start of the exhibit,” Steve cut in, not looking at Bucky because he was still too busy with his current favorite tasks of glancing between the doors and his watch, and tugging at his shirt.

Bucky sighed and stepped in close to wrap his arms around Steve’s neck. He leaned in for a soft kiss before letting his lips drift to Steve’s cheek for a quick peck. “We’re fine. We’re not underdressed, and to answer the thing you’re trying so hard to not think about, the public is going to love your work.”

Steve’s eyes snapped to Bucky’s. “You think?”

“It’s not even a question.”

“I don’t know, Buck...” Steve’s eyes ticked to the door. Again. “I really could’ve used more time on Peggy, and now that I think about it, Dernier’s cap wasn’t exactly the right shade, and I’m wondering if I even picked the right portraits to showcase —”

And that was where Bucky was done. With his metal hand he grabbed Steve’s chin in a firm grip and kissed him good and proper. Steve still tried to mumble against Bucky’s lips, so Bucky took that for the permission he decided it was, and kissed harder until Steve shut the hell up and melted into him.

This was so rare for them. Steve was the rock in their relationship, not him. It was a precious thing for Bucky to need to take control. And while he didn’t revel in it — he really did prefer Steve’s strength — he loved knowing that this need for support went both ways.

Bucky didn’t let up until he felt Steve’s arms slowly snaking behind his back. When he finally pulled back, Steve didn’t immediately open his eyes, making Bucky smile. “Feel better, my love?” he asked quietly.

“Mmhmm,” Steve answered as he swayed lightly on his feet, eyes still closed. He gently rested his head on Bucky’s shoulder, turning into the crook of his neck, and tightening his hold on Bucky’s waist. Bucky followed suit, and held his baby just a little bit tighter.
“I’ve got you,” he whispered. “Not gonna leave your side at all tonight, so no worries about somehow getting thrown to the wolves.”

“Promise?”

“You ever known me not to watch your six, Rogers?”

“Well…” Steve laughed when Bucky reached down and swatted him on the ass.

“Shut it, you.” He turned his head enough to place a kiss on the side of Steve’s neck. “Never not been there for you when I knew it was you.”

Steve stood up straight and took a deep breath before catching Bucky’s eye and smiling at him. “Fair enough.”

“So you ready, then?”

One last eye tick to the door. “As I’ll ever be.”

“All right, then.” Bucky nodded and pulled out his phone. He was supposed to text Pepper when they got there and were ready to come in. For all Steve’s bitching about being there before the exhibition opened, that’s not what Pepper had sat down with them and planned out. Bucky just suspected Steve was doing his level best to avoid what was waiting for them on the other side of the doors.

Without thinking, he fired off his text.

_We’re here. Time to get this fucking shitshow over with. — B_

It took less than thirty seconds for him to get a text back.

_Manners, James. I’ll be down to collect you both in one minute. — P_

The blush that crept up Bucky’s face was an instant thing, hot and uncomfortable. He never swore at Pepper. Just went to show how much even he hated what was about to come. But that was still no excuse.

“What?” Steve asked, clearly catching onto Bucky’s embarrassment. Sure enough, when Bucky looked up at him, he was staring back, eyebrows raised, and an amused expression on his face.

Bucky just shook his head quickly and glanced back down at his phone. He couldn’t decide if he should apologize or not, but Pepper _would_ be out at any moment, and he could just wait, but then he would have made her wait for that apology and —

His phone was no longer in his hand. He reached out for instinctually as Steve snatched it out of his grasp to look it over. It took all of one second before his eyes went wide and he was slowly raising his head.

“Bucky!” he admonished.

“I know!” Bucky hissed, completely mortified.

“You cursed at a lady!”

“I know!” Bucky repeated. He tried to grab at his phone, but Steve held it out of reach and just shook his head slowly, tsking Bucky as he did.
“You know, Peggy would kick your ass for this,” he said. “I mean, like, genuinely kick your ass.”

“And she would win — we know this — but you think you could give me my phone back now?” He swiped at it again, only for Steve to frustratingly laugh and dance out of the way. Bucky charged right after him, and was just about to make a play for the phone, when one of the doors opened and Pepper stepped out.

Both men froze — Bucky in mid-lunge, Steve in some weird half-backwards step to get away from him. They stared at Pepper, and by the way she quirked a bemused eyebrow at them, they knew they were both busted.

“I thought you told me you were ready,” was all she said as she folded her arms.

Dual mumbles of “sorry, ma’am,” and they scrambled to stand up straight. Bucky folded his hands behind his back and ducked his head, avoiding the look that seemed to be boring a hole into him. He flicked his gaze over to Steve long enough to see his boyfriend was right where he was on this.

“Sorry about the text, Pepper,” Bucky blurted out.

“It’s all right. I’ve heard much worse from Tony, just today.” She then waved a hand at them. “So, are you ready to go in now?”

“Yes, ma’am,” they both mumbled again.

“Because, as much as I know you’re both going to hate this, there is an entire press corps in there, as well as a few thousand fans here to see you gentlemen. Tonight is no small deal.”

Bucky watched as Steve finally hazarded a glance up at Pepper. “We understand, ma’am. And you’re right.” He glanced quickly over at Bucky, who just looked back at him, confused, until he added, “We’re absolutely loathing the idea of walking through those doors.”

Bucky breathed out at the truth of it all, and muttered, “Ain’t that just on the mark.”

At that, Pepper’s face softened. “Oh, boys, I know.” She walked down towards them and lightly touched them both on the cheek, her eyes sympathetic. “I understand, I really do. And, like we discussed, you don’t have to stay all night. But, Steve.” She turned her eyes on him. “You’ve done some truly gorgeous work, and I think everyone just really wants to congratulate you on that. Including myself.”

Steve’s face lit up at the compliment, and he positively beamed at her. Bucky smiled as well, because god, Steve needed to hear that. Pepper’s taste was impeccable, and she was never the person to throw compliments out for the sake of ego-stroking. It was the very thing that made her relationship work with Stark.

So, if she was saying that Steve had done a good job, Steve had done a good job.

And as much as Steve believed Bucky when he said Steve’s work was good, Bucky was sure that he’d been hearing it for so long, the compliments didn’t hold nearly as much stock as they used to. It was evident all over his boyfriend’s face that a fresh perspective — especially Pepper’s fresh perspective — meant the world to him.

“Told you,” Bucky leaned in and whispered in his ear.

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve muttered back, but Bucky could still see his cheeks turning a pleased shade of pink.
Pepper took a step back and, smiling at them, swept a hand towards the doors. “Shall we, then?”

A look of determination settled over Steve’s features and he turned to follow Pepper through the door. Bucky followed right behind.

Here went everything.

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The grand reopening of the Captain America Exhibition — and more importantly, Steve’s work — was a resounding success. Not one single person had a negative thing to say to them about the pieces on display — neither the public nor the press.

It looked like people really were starting to see Steve as more than just his shield. It was kind of amazing to watch.

They’d spent the first forty minutes or so walking the press line (Bucky refused to think he’d just walked a red carpet). After everyone had congratulated Steve, they’d asked about his inspiration behind the mural (Bucky), the meaning behind the crossed out date (Bucky), and how he’d come about choosing the other pieces from his collection (Bucky). Steve was clearly the star of the evening, but there was no shortage of praise being passed Bucky’s way. Honestly, it made him blush just a little bit and fall that much more in love with the talented idiot standing next to him.

Afterwards they headed into the main hall of the exhibition, where the rest of crowd was waiting. There was a cordoned-off path that followed the line of the exhibit, separating the general public from them and the rest of the Avengers, as well as any other VIPs that were at the event. Bucky recognized several celebrities, as well as more than a few politicians in the mix. Most likely there to glad-hand Steve, and hopefully get his support for... whatever it was they were working on at the moment.

Bucky thought it was kind of hilarious. Steve was a rabble-rousing, pro-choice, feminist bisexual, but his name still carried more weight across the whole of the country than the President himself. If Steve supported something, it was as good as passed.

They stopped at the barrier for another chunk of time to sign autographs and take a few pictures. At one point, some kid had all but shoved a Bucky Bear in Bucky’s face, enthusiasm practically vibrating off of him as he asked Bucky to sign the bear’s foot. Bucky obliged with a laugh, because really. The second he handed the bear back, the guy let out an ear-splitting squeal so loud, it turned more than a few heads, and could have shattered glass, had any of the glass in the place not been reinforced. He might have ended up Bucky’s new favorite person.

Eventually, they finally got their chance to take a tour of the place. Steve’s giant murals were on special display in the very back, creating bookends to the mural of the Commandos already in the front, with his donated pieces scattered about throughout the entire exhibit.

“Doesn’t look like they changed much of it,” Bucky commented after a while as they meandered through from display to display.

“Yeah,” was all Steve said in reply. He gazed quietly at one particular display of items from their old apartment, now living behind a glass case.

There were a few items of clothes, one of Steve’s sketchbooks that he let them keep, along with a few pencils of varying lengths, pots and pans, and a keepsake box Becca had apparently made for Bucky when he’d moved out of their parents’ place — one he didn’t care about getting back at all
because, sister or not, it was one of those things he had no memory of. He only knew what it was because Steve had told him about it. They’d asked to see it once, and Bucky had ended up taking back a couple of pictures that were in the box, but only because he remembered the events in the photos. Other than that, everything else about it had just been a blank space in his mind. So he let the Smithsonian keep it.

Bucky slipped his hand into Steve’s and gave it a small squeeze. “Hey, you okay?” he asked.

Steve took a deep breath, but didn’t answer. Didn’t tear his eyes away from the small remnants of their past together. Eventually, he turned and continued down to the next section of the exhibit — a piece on both their times in training.

(And that was one thing that had changed about the exhibit. When Bucky had come back to the world, the Smithsonian had made substantial changes to the Captain America exhibit to include whatever they had on Bucky. He never could decide if he hated it or not.)

As they stood reading about their respective experiences, and in Steve’s case, his stats pre-serum, Steve finally squeezed his hand back. “Can I ask you a question?” His voice was quiet.

“Anything.” Bucky looked over at his boyfriend.

“Are you happy that we’re here?” he asked, and his gaze finally turned to meet Bucky’s. “In the future, I mean?”

“I don’t understand,” Bucky said. And he really didn’t. He had no idea what Steve was getting at.

“Well...” Steve sighed and turned to pull them along down the exhibition line. “I just wonder sometimes if I made a mistake getting involved with Project Rebirth.” He shrugged and went right back to not looking at Bucky as they walked along. “I mean, we can’t know what would have happened to you over there — if you would’ve made it home or not — but if I hadn’t been Captain America, I never would’ve formed the Commandos and you wouldn’t have fallen from the train. You wouldn’t have become the Winter Soldier, and neither of us would’ve been ripped from our time.

Bucky pulled him to a stop, ironically enough, right in front of the giant display of mannequins in their old unit’s uniforms with the even more giant wall mural of them all behind it. Huh. Bucky hadn’t realized they’d made the full loop.

As he turned Steve toward him, though, he was shocked to find his love’s eyes swimming. As Steve stared back at him, a mix of anguish and embarrassment written all over his face, the tears finally spilled over. No sound came out of him, though. Not a hitch in his breath, nothing.

“Hey, now,” Bucky whispered. He cupped Steve’s jaw before brushing his thumbs across his cheeks, wiping the tears away. “None of that, okay?”

“Bucky...”

“I know, baby.” Bucky pressed a kiss to Steve’s lips then pulled him into an embrace. Steve gripped him tight while Bucky ran a hand up and down his back, soothing him. “It’s okay, all right? And yes, Stevie. I am happy we’re here. Because even if I had come home from the war, I don’t think we would have ever gotten our chance. Not for real. Not like we get now. So if that means we both had to live through the horrors that we did to get to where we are, I wouldn’t change a thing. Truthfully, I’d do it all over again, and gladly, if it meant —”

“Bucky, you can’t mean —” Steve tried to pull back, but Bucky clung on tighter.
“No, you hush, Rogers. I’m talking now.” He kissed behind Steve’s ear before he went on. ‘We know I’m a selfish man, Steve, but when it comes right down to it, there’s only one thing in this whole world that I want. Really want. And that’s you and me together. So if I have to suffer the world’s atrocities, there’s almost nothing on this side of heaven and earth that I wouldn’t do to make that happen.

“And that means willingly, and happily, leaving our entire past behind. Because here and now I get what I want. Back then, when you were small — especially when you were small — I would never have risked it. Because it meant risking your life. And that’s the only thing that could stop me from taking what I want.” He pulled back just enough to drive his point home against Steve’s mouth. When they parted, he locked eyes with Steve, not letting go. “I would risk anything and give up everything to be with you, except you. So yeah, baby. I get to be with you here, and that makes me really fucking happy that we are.”

He glanced over Steve’s shoulder at the display and his breath caught because, even though it was his turn to hold his boyfriend together, he still understood. Seeing the huge works up on the wall of their friends filled Bucky with the ache he knew Steve had been dealing with all night. Hell, had been dealing with since coming out of the ice all those years ago.

“Doesn’t meant I don’t get it, though,” he muttered absently, putting words to thoughts.

Steve turned to look at the display as well. “Why did I agree to this project, Bucky? Why did I think even coming here would be a good idea?”

Bucky hummed. “Because you’re stupid?”

Steve snorted, before turning back to Bucky, his eyes full of derision. “I may actually have to agree with you on this one.”

“I could have told you that,” a voice cut in, and Bucky glanced over to see Sam walking up, his smile cutting through the din of the mood. And that’s when Bucky remembered all the people again. He’d completely tuned them out in favor of Steve, and only now did he notice how packed it was in there.

He pulled out of their embrace before plastering a smile on to face his friend. “You know, I’ve been trying to point out how much of an idiot he is since 1926 and I watched him try and shove Bobby Anson over — a kid who was damn near three times his size — because he was picking on some little girl.”

“Ruthie Crawford,” Steve cut in.

“Was that who that was?”

Steve nodded. “He pulled a ribbon out of her hair and was taunting her with it. I yelled at him to give it back.”

“Nooo, you shoved him, and then yelled at him to give it back.”

Sam smiled. “And let me guess. This Bobby kid probably shoved you back?”

Bucky laughed, and it felt good, like maybe the thing from earlier had passed, at least for now. “He wishes,” he said. Then he clapped Sam on the shoulder and turned to grin at Steve. “No, what actually happened was that Bobby socked him in the face and knocked one of his teeth out.”

“Hey, that tooth was already loose!” Steve protested, doing his damndest to look affronted, just as
Sam burst out laughing.

Bucky smirked. “Still got it knocked out.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely your own damned fault, man,” Sam said, grinning. He waved a hand toward the back of the exhibit. “I saw that comparison thing of you, you know. The one that shows you before and after? And, buddy, a stiff breeze would have knocked your ass over as an adult.” He shoved Steve lightly in the shoulder, who just scowled back at him. “I can’t even imagine how small you were as a kid.”

“I wasn’t that small,” Steve grumbled as he shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Yes you were!” Bucky exclaimed with a laugh. “Until you turned into this” — he waved a hand at Steve — “there wasn’t a time I couldn’t have picked you up and put you in my pocket!”

“Oh, it was not that bad!”

“You keep telling yourself that, Stevie.” He walked over and threw his arms around Steve’s neck, smiling against his boyfriend’s glare. “You were teeny tiny, and you know it.” He pecked Steve on the cheek, who petulantly made a show of wiping it off. With a sigh, Bucky gave him a tiny smile, and added, “Okay, then if it helps, there wasn’t a size I didn’t love you at. I consider all versions of Steve perfect versions of Steve. Happy now?”

Steve continued to glare at him, until finally: “Maybe.”

“Wow...” Sam breathed, eyes wide and amused, as he rocked back on his heels. “Think we can add giant child to giant idiot?”

“You know, feel free to kiss my ass whenever you’d like, Wilson.”

“Not really my flavor of whiskey, Rogers.”

Steve smirked and waggled his eyebrows at Sam. “Pretty sure I’m everybody’s favorite flavor.”

Sam gaped at him and laughed. “Cocky much?” Bucky immediately opened his mouth to respond, because too easy, but Sam pointed a finger at him. “No, you don’t get that one, Barnes.” Then he shook his head and smiled. “Anyway, are you guys enjoying the event?”

Bucky dropped a hand from around Steve’s neck and turned to look at him, a little lost for words. Steve didn’t seem to know what to say either.

Something Sam must have picked up on. “Or not.” he commented. Then he looked around. “Have you talked much to any of the other guys tonight, at least?”

Bucky shook his head guiltily. “Not really. I mean we saw Pepper when we got here, and have had a few passing hellos, but no one’s stopped to really talk to us.”

“Not that we’ve made any sort of effort to talk to anyone either,” Steve added, his voice laced with the same guilt Bucky felt. “Just... haven’t really been in the mood.”

“Well, you know, you guys don’t have to stay if you don’t want to.” Sam nodded towards the exit. “Just leave, if you want. You made your appearances, and I don’t think anyone would think less of you if you ducked out early.”

Steve turned to gaze longingly at the exit. “You think?”
“Pepper did say we could,” Bucky reminded him.

Sam reached over and squeezed Steve’s shoulder. “Get out of here, man. No one’s gonna care.”

Steve nodded. “Yeah, okay.” He turned a hopeful expression on Bucky. “You ready to head back to the hotel?”

Bucky gently squeezed him around the waist. “Yeah, let’s go. Thanks, Sam.”

“No problem.” Sam gave them both a hug before turning them towards the door they’d come through earlier. “Now get out.”

With a final wave, they headed towards the back room from earlier where they’d stored their coats and stuff. Bucky was in the process of wrapping his scarf around his neck when his phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out to see a message from Sam.

*This is why I told you guys to leave. — S*

There was a picture attached of Steve and Bucky holding onto each other in the middle of the crowded exhibit. It looked like Sam had taken it when Bucky was trying to calm Steve down, because Steve looked nothing short of tormented as Bucky whispered into his ear, practically holding onto Steve for dear life.

“Look what Sam sent me.” He held his phone out to Steve, who was shrugging into his jacket.

Once done, he took Bucky’s phone to look over the picture. “Huh,” he said, his voice flat. Then he handed the phone back. “Looks about right.”

Bucky glanced down at the picture again, his eyes glued to Steve’s face in it. This event had been a clusterfuck from start to finish, and this picture just proved it.

“I should post this on Instagram,” he muttered, more to himself. “Maybe then you’ll listen to me when I tell you revisiting our past like this is a bad idea.”

“You should,” Steve answered, and Bucky looked up to find the man eyeing him as he draped his own scarf around his neck. His face had that stubborn look about it as he nodded at Bucky’s phone. “Think of it like the gun thing. That was your crutch and I think we both know my past is mine. Maybe it’s time I learn to let that go, too.”

Bucky’s gaze flicked between the phone and Steve. “You’re serious?” he asked, a touch incredulous. He hadn’t really planned to post it. He didn’t think that would be right to do to Steve.

“Yeah, baby.” Steve wrapped a hand around Bucky’s nape and kissed him on the forehead. “I just...” He shook his head and turned away, heading toward the main exit. Bucky barely heard him before he walked out the door. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

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Bucky didn’t post the picture. Not right away, anyway. The whole cab ride back to the hotel and as they got ready for bed, the picture was on his mind, but he couldn’t bring himself to post something that was so deeply personal. Steve had told him it was okay, but Bucky still couldn’t get past the fact that he would be putting his love on display like that.

It wasn’t until much later, as they were lying in bed, Steve tucked up under his arm, sleeping soundly, that he reached over and grabbed his phone off the nightstand. He pulled up the picture
again and looked it over. Steve had been dead on about the past being a crutch for him. He was certain that part of the reason Steve had agreed to do this thing was to try and settle all of that for him, but all it did was just completely backfire.

The problem was, this was Steve. If he still didn’t feel settled about the past, then his stubborn ass would continue to chase down the ghost. So maybe posting this picture would be chance for Bucky to help him give it up.

His hand shook as he quietly loaded the image onto his Instagram. He thought long and hard about the caption because this time — this time — he needed to get over his fear of being personal and put something up that had meaning. It took him four tries before he thought he finally got it right.

*I know you wanted to be here to put all of this behind us once and for all but I keep on thinking it wasn't a good idea for you AND for me. Enough with this exhibition and all the memories it brings back to the surface. If you've got to keep only one memory of it, just remember me, ok? Remember that I'm here, holding you. That's it, just remember this.*

Satisfied, he was just about to hit share, when the rest of the photo finally caught his eye. Standing behind them, making the most ridiculous face, was Bucky Bear Guy from earlier in the evening. Bucky couldn’t believe he hadn’t noticed him in the picture at all until now. With a laugh, he went back and added one more line.

*And also the guy behind us with his Bucky Bear because he's freaking hilarious. (Photo: Sam)*

And there. He hit share, then reached over to drop his phone back on the nightstand.

Steve snuffled against his shoulder. “Bucky?” he mumbled sleepily.

Bucky kissed the top of his head and whispered, “It’s nothing, Stevie. Go back to sleep.”

“My’kay.” Steve burrowed further into the sheets and wrapped his arm tightly around Bucky’s torso.

Bucky smiled softly and allowed himself to be pulled down. He held Steve close as he drifted off to sleep, hoping as he went, that maybe, now that tonight was behind them, they both just be a little less broken than they’d been before.

Maybe.
It was my birthday about 15 days ago and I didn't post any pictures! My friends spoiled me but Nat offered me the best present EVER: an original MK2 grenade from 1942. I used to have tons like these back in the days. And look at Stevie raising from the couch and shouting "Buck, no!! We can't keep this at home!!" Come on! Why could you keep your shield in our bedroom and I couldn't keep my grenade? Screw you, it's a present!

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Chapter Notes
Hey Guys! Few notes.

This chapter is shorter than normal. Sorry about that. The other thing is, this image doesn't actually take place AT Bucky's party. I write the images chronological to posting, so this chapter is almost entirely a remembrance of that day.

Oh, and don't forget, I wrote another part to this series! It's called Saturday Night's All Right (For Birthday Shenanigans). It's a birthday fic for Steve that's entirely porn, so go love up on it.

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So, remember when I said your birthday present wasn't ready? — S

I had a birthday? My GOD, it was so long ago... I barely recall such a thing. — B


You might have to refresh my memory. Brain's swiss cheese, after all. — B

You be nice, or nothing for you when I get home. — S

Oh, you mean it's finally time? Damn, it's really been so long, you might as well just loop around to the next one. — B

IT WAS TWO WEEKS AGO. — S

FOREVER IN BUCKY YEARS. — B

No present for you. — S

I love you. — B

Uhuh. Thought so. Be home in a little bit. — S

Bucky smiled as he flopped back down on the couch and dropped the phone onto his chest. He adjusted his earbuds as the first strains of Creedence Clearwater Revival’s Proud Mary slipped through, then closed his eyes to let the soft sounds of the music float over him. The weather outside was shit, Steve wasn’t home yet, he was bored, and it just felt like a classic rock sort of day. Maybe he’d listen to Blue Oyster Cult after this. The irony behind (Don’t Fear) The Reaper was never lost on him.

It looked like he’d have at least one good thing to look forward to later, though. At his birthday party two weeks before, Steve had pulled him aside and said that he didn’t have a present for Bucky — that it wasn’t ready yet. Bucky had been binned, to say the least, but had tried to hide his disappointment. Steve still ended up apologizing over and over again, promising profusely that when the present was ready, it would be worth it.

But that had been two weeks ago, and Steve hadn’t said a single word since — not with the Smithsonian exhibit and all that had dredged up. The only thing he had done was bitch about the live grenade — a truly awesome present from Natasha — that was currently taking up residence in the
utility closet they’d built for their tac gear and other various weapons.

He still didn’t understand Steve’s issue with the damned thing. First, it was in a bomb-proof case, and second, it wasn’t the first time they’d kept live ammo at the apartment. Maybe it just had to do with the fact that this particular live ammo was from 1942. Steve probably didn’t think it was stable.

Bucky just shook his head. Where was the man’s sense of adventure?

As CCR wound down, Bucky grabbed his phone to find something else to listen to, eventually going for Pink Floyd’s The Wall. As David Gilmour’s harsh guitars picked up, Bucky settled back again and lazily started flipping through the pictures from his birthday.

The party had actually been pretty fantastic, if the couple hundred photos Bucky had taken that night were anything to go by. Steve might have been the artist with taking photos, but it was Bucky who was insane when it came to the sheer number of pictures he took of anything.

“Well, Doc did warn you about this,” he muttered to himself as he eyed the total count of photos on the phone, it somewhere up in the thousands. “Just because the brain’s full of holes doesn’t mean you need to document everything, moron.”

He shook his head again because he knew he’d never take his own advice. Hell, he didn’t listen when Doc told him he could lay up with the photos — and he tended to take her advice above anyone’s, even Steve’s.

“Aha!” He smiled triumphantly when he managed to get back to the beginning of the photos the first from Natasha’s apartment. The party had been at their own home, but Nat had kicked them out hours before and told them to get ready elsewhere. They’d chosen to take a very liberal approach to what exactly she meant by ‘elsewhere’.

Bucky smirked at the way Steve was smiling in the photo while he held Natasha’s couch over his head. They didn’t really need to get ready, per se — it was a birthday party, not a receiving of the damned Queen of England — so hazarding the wrath of Natasha, they’d broken into her apartment to wait it out, only to prank her by moving all of her furniture over exactly one inch. Sure, it was stupid and childish, but anything more and neither would have been alive today to tell the tale. They knew their limits.

(And, okay, maybe they had ended up taking a shower there, and maybe the next several photos were of them having sex in said shower, but really, that definitely wasn’t something she ever need know about.)

The first photo he found at the party itself had actually been taken right after they’d arrived. Just a simple photo with Sam and Nat, who’d both planned the whole thing for him. They’d transformed the apartment into a mini carnival, complete with a ring toss and water gun race set up by the balcony, food ‘stands’ in the kitchen and dining area, and even rides in the form of an electronic horse and rocket ship. Bucky had been more than a little dubious that either could take the weight of any the adults present — something that had been proven when Clint’s drunk ass had broken the rocket ship later than night.

The two had even gone so far as to have the furniture removed and stored so he could have the party in their home and not at the Tower. And for a little while he’d felt bad about fucking around at her place, but then he got over it because, roles reversed, she would have done the exact same thing. There was a reason she was his best friend.

As The Thin Ice slipped into Another Brick in the Wall Part 1, Bucky quickly flipped through the
next several — all various shots like the first, as he and Steve had made their way around the room, saying hi and getting pictures with all their friends.

“All in all, it was just a brick in the wall,” he sang to himself, only to dissolve into a snort when he came across the picture of him with Clint riding piggy back, pressing his soaking wet face against Bucky’s cheek.

It had been after he and Steve had grabbed some corn dogs and a couple of beers, and had made their way over to where Clint was holding court by the games. Bucky couldn’t stop laughing because Clint kept yelling at everyone to challenge him in either game, but no one was stupid enough to do it, and the man had become increasingly frustrated at each rejection.

Bucky would have liked to say he felt bad for the guy, but really Clint knew better than to challenge Bucky in anything ever, especially with Steve around. Because Steve had stepped up as the middle shooter of the three-man setup, and about halfway through, when it looked like Clint might win, Steve had turned his gun on him, spraying him in the face so Bucky could take the lead.

Really. Clint should have known there was no way Steve wasn’t gonna let the birthday boy win.

Bucky snickered as fired off the image to Clint.

You look so good when you’re wet for me, sweetheart. — B

Clint sent back a shot with him grabbing his crotch through his jeans.

Can’t help it, sugar lips. You just DO things to me. — C

Bucky barked out a laugh, because leave it to Clint to be just the asshole he needed when he was bored. Christ, to this day, very few people got his ridiculous sense of humor, but Clint, though... He’d been one of the very first ones to do so, and they’d been talking shit ever since.

He slipped passed a few photos he’d taken of Tony, Bruce, and Jane arguing over some recent breakthrough, only stopping to watch the short video he’d taken of them battling it out. Bucky had found it highly entertaining because, even with his own love of science, he’d only understood about every fifth word they were saying. Yet, they all seemed to just be so angry with each other, that not long after Bucky’d started filming, Pepper and Thor had come over to break the party up, literally dragging Tony and Jane away while they still shouted obscenities at each other.

Seriously, how were these his friends?

He restarted the music, giving himself a minute to get his head back into it. Because that was the thing with Pink Floyd. Even if you were idly listening, you weren’t really being idle about it. He didn’t pick up his phone again until Part 3 started playing.

Most of the shots after were of everyone just enjoying the carnival. Sam getting his ass handed to him by Steve at the ring toss, Thor eating almost the entirety of the funnel cakes, Nat, Maria, and Sharon trying to one-up each other at the water gun race (there never had been a clear winner), and several pictures of that one solid hour where Steve and Bucky had been drunk off their asses on Asgardian booze. Like everything else, they’d metabolized it quickly, but line up half a dozen shots of that stuff in front of them, and even they were bound to get roasted.

He stopped when he landed on the one from when Nat had given him is present: an MK2 grenade from the war — live and beautiful, he was just itching to throw it at something. But Nat had told him that, surprisingly, it had been hard to come by, so he was saving it for a special occasion.
More than a few times since Steve had asked him if the special occasion was leveling their apartment in some spectacular fashion. Bucky had told him that was ludicrous — that it was never gonna happen. At most it’d just take out their back rooms and the kitchen.

Nat had sidled up to him during a lull in the evening and made the pretense of kissing him on the forehead so she could quietly slip the box into his hand. Unfortunately, he’d taken one look at it, and completely lost his shit, damn near jumping up and down in excitement.

He’d tried to show it to Steve, but his stupid, buzzkill of a loser boyfriend had started shaking his head and spouting off that there was no way they were keeping a possibly volatile piece of ammo in their apartment.

Bucky, ever being the wiser, funner of the two, just chose to flat out ignore him.

He flipped over to Instagram, because if there was any photo he was going to put up, it had to be this one. Not only did he still need to throw something up from his birthday, but this particular image would have the added effect of pissing Steve off. Two birds. One stone.

It was my birthday about 15 days ago and I didn’t post any pictures! My friends spoiled me but Nat offered me the best present EVER: an original MK2 grenade from 1942. I used to have tons like these back in the days. And look at Stevie raising from the couch and shouting “Buck, no!! We can’t keep this at home!” Come on! Why could you keep your shield in our bedroom and I couldn’t keep my grenade? Screw you, it’s a present!

“Stevie’s gonna be so pissed!” He giggled at the post before switching back over to his music to put on the aforementioned Blue Oyster Cult. Now seemed like the perfect opportunity for a little (Don’t Fear) The Reaper magic.

He closed his eyes and started singing to himself again, “Seasons don’t fear the reaper. Nor do the wind, the sun or the rain...”

He got lost in the music after that, humming and singing along, while the ice-cold rain came thrashing down, and the room grew steadily darker.

When the click of the door met his ears, he had no clue how much time had passed, but it was damn near black in the living room.

“Bucky?” Steve called out.

“Yeah, in here!” he called back, pulling his earbuds out. Instantly, his eyes were assaulted as Steve flipped the light on.

“What are you doing, lying here in the dark?” He smiled down at Bucky from over the back of the couch.

Bucky smiled right back. “Just waitin’ for you, handsome.” Even as he still adjusted to the sudden brightness, Bucky didn’t miss the way Steve’s eyes went dark at the comment, and he let out a stuttering breath. “You’re home now. Is it time for my present?”

The smile slipped from Steve’s face, intense heat taking its place. That look was all the warning Bucky got before Steve walked around the couch and manhandled him off of it.

“What —” Bucky was cut off by the press of hard, insistent lips against his own.

“Shut up,” Steve breathed into him before kissing him again. Bucky smiled, immediately on board
with whatever was going on with Steve, at the moment. He even allowed Steve to pick him up and carry him to the bedroom, legs wrapped tight around Steve’s waist.

But Steve didn’t drop him on the bed like he expected. Instead, he shut the door behind them, only to turn around and slam Bucky up against it. The air left Bucky’s lungs in one swift, pleasurable groan.

“Happy Birthday, baby.” Steve mouthed along his neck. “I know I’m two weeks late, so I think it’s high time you got your present.”

“And what would that be?” Bucky huffed out.

“Well...” Steve leaned back to catch his eye. There was want there, and a hint of mischievousness that had Bucky’s body thrumming. “I thought we’d start with these.”

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out two long silk scarves, and Bucky’s eyes went wide.

_Fuck, yes._
Oooook, I take it all back... Maybe Nat's present wasn't "the best present ever" after all. Where did you learn... no, you'll tell me later. My, my, my Stevie... How did Time Magazine call you again? "The Only Remaining Symbol of America's lost Innocence"? So much for "America's Innocence". Alright. What?! What do you mean EXACTLY by it's not my real present? Because in my book, nothing can top what we just did, you know!

This?! This is my real birthday present?! F**K, I can't believe it! These are my dog
tags from the army, the ones I gave Stevie back in 1943 and that he had around his neck when the Red Skull's plane sunk into the ice. These sons of bitches of S.H.I.E.L.D kept them into a secret vault until Steve finally got the authorization to have them back a couple of months ago, YEARS after coming back. Huh? No, I have some dust in my eye, it's nothing, shut up.

“Holy shit!”

Bucky’s grip tightened on the silk scarves around his wrists as his back arched off the bed, only for him to have to loosen up the metal one when he heard tearing.

That didn’t stop Steve from sinking his teeth in that much further. Bucky cried out and let go of the tie around his metal wrist altogether in favor of slamming his hand back into the headboard. He cringed when the sound of splintering wood hit his ears, and he just fucking gave up.

Stevie’s gonna be so pissed I broke the new headboard, he thought hysterically as pain and pleasure coursed through him, making his fingers and toes tingle.

“So pretty, baby,” Steve murmured against his skin before running his tongue over the spot once more.

This was new territory for them, and Bucky was loving every minute of it. It had only been recently that Bucky had suggested being tied down — something that was a monumental step for him. It was a matter of trust, and that was the only reason Steve had agreed to try it at all.

The silk ties, as Steve had explained earlier, were meant as his sign of trust in Bucky. They needed to work up to actual restraints — if they ever went that route at all — but with these, he’d said he trusted Bucky not to tear through the silk. That it was going to be Bucky’s job to keep himself restrained, and Steve knew he could do it. Bucky had hoped Steve could feel his swell of pride in the furious kiss he’d placed on him in that moment.

As for the pain, though... Well. They liked to bite and kiss and lick, just like most other couples, but they’d never experimented with actual pain before. Had never really tried to mark each other. But that was also Steve’s way of showing trust. In the beginning, Bucky would have let it go as far as Steve wanted, and he wouldn’t have stopped him, no matter how much he didn’t want it. This right here was Steve’s way of showing that he trusted Bucky to stop him if it became too much.

Tonight had been the first night in years they’d gone back to using their safety words, and the fact that it had everything to do with pleasure and nothing to do with fear, had Bucky painfully hard before they’d even fully undressed.

“Yeah?” Bucky stuttered out a breath. “Are you making me one of your works of art, Stevie?”
He tried to look down his body, but Steve was already slithering his way up, covering Bucky with his own. Hungry lips met his as hands slid under his back to hold him tight. The position was awkward, forcing Bucky to arch his back and press into Steve.

“That feel good, baby?” Steve mouthed along his jaw as Bucky nodded.

“Uhuh.” He twisted just so to press their erections together, and was rewarded with a startled moan, buried deep into his neck. He smiled and let his head fall back, exposing his entire upper body for Steve to take however he wished.

“Fuck me,” he breathed, just as Steve flicked his tongue over a taut nipple. “I want you to fuck me now. Please.”

“But I’m not done with you yet.” Teeth closed over the nipple and Bucky cried out. Then Steve licked straight up his sternum and into his waiting mouth. Bucky would have given anything to wrap his arms around Steve right then, but he was gonna be good, dammit, and not break the bindings.

“You can... you can always” — a small noise escaped as Steve brushed his thumb over the sensitive nipple — “come back to... your work later.”

Steve growled low before letting up where he’d started working his tongue and teeth along Bucky’s throat. “Spread your legs for me,” he whispered. Bucky did as he was told just as he heard that wonderful sound of a cap being snapped open. Steve coated up his fingers quickly before his hand disappeared out of site between Bucky’s thighs.

There was no pretense — no teasing. Steve locked eyes with him for one brief, glorious moment, then he was bending over to bite down on Bucky’s shoulder at the same moment he shoved two fingers up inside his body.

His whole world lit up like Christmas — from the tips of his hair all the way down, his body became a live wire. He had no idea where the pain ended and the pleasure began, or if there even was both pain and pleasure. Everything felt wonderful and everything felt awful. He never wanted it to end.

Despite the initial rush of sensation, Steve worked him open at an almost a glacial pace. If Bucky didn’t know any better, he’d think Steve was doing it on purpose to keep everything from becoming too much — too overwhelming.

But, see, Bucky did know better. Steve absolutely was doing it on purpose, if the tears of frustration rolling down Bucky’s face were anything to go by. Asshole.

“Steve, I don’t — why — I’m ready.” He glared at Steve before letting his head thump backwards against the pillow. He chose to glare at the ceiling instead, jaw locked. “Just fuck me, all right?”

Bastard chuckled at him. “You’re not ready, baby.” Light kisses peppered up the side of his neck, even as the now-three fingers twisted slowly inside of him. He squirmed at the sensation, desperate. “Tonight, I decide when you’re ready, and I say you’re not ready.”

Bucky’s breath hitched, because oh. He knew that tone. That wasn’t the tone of a man taking his sweet-ass time. That was tone of a man who had plans.

He turned his head to find blue eyes boring into his own. It took him a second to find his voice.

“When... when will I be ready?”

Those eyes continued to stare, bleeding from intent to inquisitive, before raking down his body and back up again. Then a calm seemed to come over Steve as his gaze settled back on Bucky’s face,
and Bucky knew that whatever it was Steve had been thinking, a decision had been made.

Bucky breathed out in time to the loss of Steve’s fingers. But then Steve was over him, untying Bucky’s restraints, and instantly he began to panic.

“No, wait.” He batted at Steve’s hands, trying to stop him, his heart pounding in his chest. What had he done wrong? “Don’t untie me, I’m sorry.”

Steve froze and looked down at him. “What?”

“I’m fine, Stevie, I swear. You don’t need to untie me.”

“Bucky, I’m not —”

“Brooklyn.”

It was like Bucky could physically see the chill run down Steve’s spine.

“Baby, you don’t need to —”

“I’m telling you I’m good, Steve.”

The air left Steve’s lungs in one long, fluid sigh of air. But Bucky didn’t understand; he’d used their green word. Brooklyn for green, Frozen for red. It was simple, and he’d checked in. He didn’t understand what the deal was.

Not until Steve wrapped him up in his arms and pulled him to his chest. Bucky kept his arms at his sides, because honestly, after two hours of them being tied up, he wasn’t sure what to do with them.

“You are good, baby.” Steve kissed him, slow and soft, one hand tangled in his hair, the other at the small of his back. “You are so good,” he murmured against Bucky’s lips. “I’m not worried about you. I just...” He pressed a kiss to Bucky’s cheek. “I need your hands elsewhere.”

Bucky slowly brought those hands up to rest against Steve’s face. “Elsewhere?”

Steve hummed before licking into Bucky’s mouth, and he gave himself over to the kiss. He would be happy with whatever Steve would give him, and if that meant Steve needed his hands free, then fuck it, Bucky would keep his hands free.

Or not. The thought had barely left Bucky’s head before there was a vice grip around each wrist. Bucky’s eyes flew open to find trouble staring back at him.

The shift was quick. One minute Bucky was underneath Steve, wrapped up in his arms. The next, they were kneeling on the bed, Bucky pressed against him, back to chest. Never let it be said that Captain Rogers wasn’t efficient.

“What are you doing, Steve?”

“I said — he held Bucky close as he lined his dick up with Bucky’s hole — ‘I’m getting you ready.’

Steve was past the first ring of muscle before Bucky’s senses came back to him and he realized his hands were still free. “My hands?”

“Yeah, about those.” Once seated, Bucky felt the press of a smile into the hollow behind his ear. Then Steve grabbed hold of the blue silk and gently snaked Bucky’s arms behind Steve’s back. With just enough slack to allow Bucky some sort of range of movement, Steve deftly tied the ends of the
silk together.

"What are you doing?" he asked again. Strong hands massaged his shoulders only to be replaced by Steve’s warmth as his tongue dragged along the seam of Bucky’s scars.

Bucky shuddered, bone-deep, at the sensation. Such sensitive skin, those scars were. And having Steve’s mouth on them did things to him. Things he couldn’t describe — maybe never wanted to. He just wanted to feel.

“Here’s how this is going to go,” Steve whispered into his ear. Bucky bowed his head and closed his eyes. He was listening.

Lips brushed against the back of his neck and Steve held him close. Grinded them together, making Bucky whimper. “I’ve got you, baby. Right now, you can’t go anywhere. I’ve seen to that.” Steve gently pushed him over as far as he could go, and the shift in position — Steve pressing into Bucky and brushing up against his prostate, as his arms strained for freedom — had Bucky groaning, deep and feral.

“Steve...”

A shift again as Steve leaned over to mouth against Bucky’s back, and the tears spilled over again. Steve’s mouth, and his hands, and his everything all over Bucky, for hours now, and Bucky hadn’t come once.

And it was at that exact moment that the tension Bucky hadn’t known was there came crashing down. He sucked in a ragged breath as he used every last ounce of willpower he had to hold back. Steve nosed at Bucky’s hair and held him tighter.

“We’re tied to each other, you and I. I’ve got you and I’m not letting you go until I’m done with you — until we’re done with each other. I will wring every last orgasm out of you that I can. I also won’t be pulling out of you until your body has done the same for me. How does that sound?”

Head still bowed, all Bucky could do was whimper because, oh my god...

“How does that sound, baby?” Steve repeated. “Check in with me.”

It sounded amazing. Glorious even. Bucky loved a challenge, and it had been a while since they’d tried to see how far the serum could take them. But in the position he was in? Holding back the orgasm that was just hanging on the precipice? He gave his head a shake. How was he supposed to answer that?

“I need you to check in with me, baby. Please.”

It took everything Bucky had to open his mouth and whisper one more time: “Brooklyn.”

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Four hours. Four hours and eleven orgasms apiece later, Bucky’s fell face first onto the bed, his body wracked past the point of exhaustion. Steve followed suit right next him. They’d been ready to call it quits at ten, but something about the idea of going past that round fucking number had fired off both their stubborn streaks, and they rallied for one more.

“I’m taking a page out of your book, Rogers,” Bucky mumbled into the sheets.

“Hmmm?”
“Think a seventy year nap sounds fucking fantastic right about now.”

Steve snickered and kissed his shoulder, feather light. “How’re your arms, baby?”

“Sore as fuck, you asshole.” Bucky used the fraction of energy he had left to turn his head and face Steve. “You should be glad I’m too fucked out to be all that mad about it.”

“You look beautiful.” There was adoration in Steve’s eyes, and Bucky had to swallow the lump in his throat.

He smiled. “Yeah?”

Steve brushed damp strands away from Bucky’s forehead. “Yeah. You should see it.”

“Phone’s on the nightstand.”

“Roll over.”

“You’re funny, Steven.” Bucky huffed out a laugh. “I can’t move.”

“Such a fucking baby...” Steve gave Bucky a half-hearted shove, but even for him, it was enough to get Bucky to roll over. He smiled at his little victory and reached back to grab Bucky’s phone.

“These sheets are beyond disgusting right now, you know that?” Bucky commented, draping his arms over his head, and watching Steve clamber up to stand over him. “I’m not sleeping in this, Rogers. I have standards.”

Steve snorted, but didn’t look up from the phone. “And you think I don’t? Pretty sure I’m the one who introduced you to Egyptian cotton, Buck. Now smile.” He held up the phone, and Bucky gave him a toothy grin just as the flash went off.

“How’d it come out?”

Steve smiled as he looked over the picture, small and knowing. He dropped down onto his knees over Bucky and handed over the camera. “See for yourself.”

Even Bucky had to admit the photo was gorgeous. He looked sated and fucked out, and marked. It didn’t capture everything, but what he did see made his breath catch. This needed to go up on Instagram.

“So, uh, maybe shower first, then change the sheets?” He cast a wary eye up at Steve. There was no way Steve would be down with this photo going up online.

Luckily Steve just shrugged and crawled off of him. “Sure. You coming?” he asked, stopping in the doorway of their bathroom.

“Just a second. Wanna stretch first.”

“Okay.” Steve smiled then disappeared through the door.

“I gotta admit, Stevie,” Bucky called out as he quickly threw the photo up. “This was a way better present than the grenade.”

He typed out the caption, **Oooook, I take it all back...Maybe Nat's present wasn't "the best present ever" after all. Where did you learn...no, you'll tell me later. My, my, my Stevie...How did Time Magazine call you again? "The Only Remaining Symbol of America's lost Innocence"? So much for**
“America’s Innocence”, and was just about to hit share when Steve answered back.

“Oh, that wasn’t your present.”

Bucky’s finger froze over the share button. “What do you mean that wasn’t my present? I thought —”

“That wasn’t your present.” Steve appeared in the doorway again, and Bucky quickly dropped the phone. If Steve noticed, he didn’t mention it. “I owed you really good birthday sex, so that was just for fun.”

“For fun,” Bucky parroted back.

Steve nodded, that knowing smile from earlier back on his lips. “For fun.”

“So what’s my actual present, then?”

“Shower first, then sheets, then present.”

“What?” Bucky exclaimed as Steve turned back to the bathroom, chuckling as he went. “You can’t do that to me!”

He grabbed his phone off his chest and quickly added to the caption before hitting share.

Alright. What?! What do you mean EXACTLY by it's not my real present? Because in my book, nothing can top what we just did, you know!

Then he jumped up to follow Steve into the bathroom. He’d get the information out of him somehow, starting with a shower blowjob. He knew how to get what he wanted out of his boy.

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He didn’t know how to get what he wanted out of his boy.

Bucky grumbled as he flopped back down onto the bed — fresh sheets courtesy of his stubborn-ass boyfriend.

“Why won’t you tell me?” he whined, watching as Steve dug through their dresser.

Steve laughed. “I am going to tell you, Buck.” He turned around, and Bucky immediately zeroed in on the small flat box in his hands. He came over and placed it on Bucky’s chest before brushing his hair aside to kiss him on the forehead. “I just wasn’t gonna tell you in the shower. You would have hated me if I did.”

He brushed metal fingers along the black edges of the box. “What’s in it?” he whispered as Steve settled in next to him.

“You’ll have to open it and find out,” Steve responded before pulling Bucky in closer, draping an arm over his shoulders.

Bucky turned to smile at him, only to meet nervous eyes, mouth in a thin line. Without thinking, Bucky reached up to pull Steve in for a reassuring kiss. “Hey, none of that. I’m sure I’ll love it whatever it is.”

“It’s not...” He sighed and shook his head. “Just open it.”
“Okay.” Frowning, Bucky turned back to the box and slowly shook the lid loose. Inside was a nestle of tissue paper, and sitting on top was...

Bucky’s eyes narrowed in confusion, only to widen the moment he realized what he was looking at. He quickly sat up, pulling away from Steve to get a better look at the box’s contents.

Because no.

There was just no way.

How did he...

“Where did you get these?” he asked, his voice nowhere even close to a whisper.

Steve didn’t sound much better, his voice shaking on every word. “So, um, when I was pulled out of the ice, SHIELD had taken everything that had been on me and stored it somewhere. I hadn’t known about any of it. I mean, I didn’t ask. After I came out, I just... Well, I didn’t want to think about what I’d lost that day. Anyway, when they’d returned my stuff, I asked about my ma’s ring, and they said they hadn’t found a ring on me. See, that ring had been on the same chain as your tags, so I figured... Well, it turns out the chain had been ripped off and my ma’s ring had been lost, but your tags... Your tags, they found.”

“Wait a sec.” Bucky gently, reverently, picked up his old dog tags, and held them in the palm of his hand. “Are you telling me these are my original tags? The ones we’d traded?”

Steve’s forehead came to rest against the back of Bucky’s head. “They are, yeah. I only found out SHIELD had them about six months ago. Been fighting to get them back ever since.”

“You had these on you when you went into the ice?” he asked, his voice cracked. He wiped at the tears now running down his face. “And they didn’t get lost?”

“No, baby. Turns out they didn’t get lost.”

Bucky broke down, tears flowing, unbidden. They’d all received new tags one week before Bucky fell, and he and Steve had traded their old ones. And that day he’d been carrying on him everything he’d held important, only to have lost it all. But if Steve had these, then maybe he hadn’t lost everything that day.

He’d gotten his Stevie back, sure, but these. These were real and proved he’d been a person the day he’d fallen from the train. He’d been someone — someone fighting alongside his best friend and being the hero everyone always tried to convince him he’d been. Here was proof, in his hands, that he’d been James Buchanan Barnes, Sergeant of the 107th, serial number 32557038.

“Hey, hey now,” Steve held him tight, brushing still-damp hair off his forehead. “It’s okay. I didn’t mean to upset you, I’m sorry.”

“Upset me?” Bucky asked in confusion, only to hiccup. “You have no idea...” He scrambled around into Steve’s lap. Dog tags clutched in hand, he wrapped his arms around Steve’s neck and kissed him. The salt from his tears mingled in as he bled every last ounce of gratitude he could muster into that kiss.

“Thank you,” he breathed.

Steve huffed a broken laugh and kissed him back. “You’re welcome. You really like them?”
“Like them. Stevie, I love them.” He sniffled as he dropped the tags into his metal hand between them. He turned them over to read the information printed. “I was — I was somebody back then. Not just a name in a history book or a display at a museum that couldn’t even get my fucking birth date right.” He took a deep breath and fought back fresh tears. “I was real, ya know?” He looked up only to find Steve’s own eyes swimming. “I was in that war and I was at your side, and you and these? They prove that.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He took Steve’s face in his hands and surged forward for another heated kiss. Lips parted and he slid in, tasting nothing but home.

There was no urgency this time — no overwhelming need to make it good. When Steve took his time reopening Bucky, there was nothing but caring and warmth behind it. They made love, languid and unhurried, with nothing but each other to anchor themselves to this world. Bucky’s orgasm this time wasn’t like the ones earlier, with Steve practically ripping them out of him. This time it crept on slow, tingling down his spine until he came with a sigh, Steve’s name on his lips.

Afterwards, they laid in bed, wrapped up in each other’s arms. Steve trailed his fingers up and down Bucky’s side as he played with his tags, slowly turning them over in his hand, letting the lamp light catch on them and watching as it bounced off the sheets.

“Hey, where’s your phone?” Steve asked after a while, snapping Bucky out of his own head.

“On the nightstand again,” he replied absently. He went back to playing with the tags. “What do you want it for?”

“Just want to get a picture of us.”

“Be sure to get my tags, too.”

Steve chuckled low in his ear as reached over Bucky’s head to his side of the bed. “Obviously.”

Bucky didn’t bother to move from where he was — not as Steve practically squished him as he set up the phone on the nightstand, not as Steve arranged the tags across his arm, not when he heard the click of the shutter, not once. He was too fucking content for any of that.

“Lot of fucking help, you were,” Steve grumbled as he settled back down behind Bucky.

“It’s fine, Stevie.” He was too blissed out to care about anything at the moment. “I’m sure it’s a good picture.”

“No thanks to you.”

“Don’t even pretend you don’t love me.”

“Which I’m certain will eventually lead to my doom.”

“Meh. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Or the fifth, but who’s counting.”

“Certainly not us.”

“No real point in it.”

Bucky snickered and finally turned over in Steve’s arms. He pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “Well, for what it’s worth, I love you. And these?” He held up the tags. “Not to discredit
anything you’ve ever given me, but this is the best present I have ever received.”

Steve’s eyes softened as he smiled at Bucky. “You really love them that much?”

Bucky nodded. “Almost as much as I love you.”

This?! This is my real birthday present?! F**K, I can’t believe it! These are my dog tags from the army, the ones I gave Stevie back in 1943 and that he had around his neck when the Red Skull’s plane sunk into the ice. These sons of bitches of S.H.I.E.L.D kept them into a secret vault until Steve finally got the authorization to have them back a couple of months ago, YEARS after coming back. Huh? No, I have some dust in my eye, it’s nothing, shut up.
What an impatient spoiled brat I am! I couldn't wait any longer to try the MK2 grenade Natasha gave me for my birthday so as we got a little alien situation this week, it was hard to resist to not make the invaders go out with a BANG. (Photo: Thor. The guy's good! If I need a photographer one day, I'll know who to call)

Chapter Notes

THOR'S POV!!!
Mjölnir had barely touched his fingers before he sent it flying again, right through the open mouth of... well, he still wasn’t entirely sure what these creatures were. Doctor Banner — before he’d turned into the Hulk — had likened them to some Midgardian creature known as an octopus, but these were things Thor was not familiar with yet. However, it mattered not. Whatever these beings were, they were threatening the safety of his adopted planet — and by extension, the safety of his Jane — and as such, he would stop at nothing to see this foe extinct.

The creature slumped to the ground as Mjölnir reappeared out of the back of its head, and Thor laughed, loud and boisterous. This would be an easy fight.

He called Mjölnir back as he took off at a run, vaulting over the remnants of a barrier wall along the Hudson River, only to duck at the last second as a repulsor blast came careening right over his head, tearing apart the creature right in Thor’s path. Limbs went flying everywhere and Thor couldn’t help but appreciate the spectacle.

“Watch where you’re going, Conan!” Stark called into the commlink as one of his Iron Suits swooped past.

Thor shook his head in amusement even as adrenaline shot through him, and he picked up the pace. “Do not make me laugh, Stark.” He turned toward the great battleship just ahead where the bulk of the fight was taking place. “Are you even in your suit? Or are you only pretending you are in this fight from your seat high up in the Tower?”

“Hey, now, I’m in this fight. Or did I not just save your hide back there, Blondie?”

“Uh, pretty sure your suit saved his ass, Tony,” Barton piped in. “Pretty sure all you’re doing is playing a glorified video game up there.”

“You wound me, Barton.”

“Why don’t you come down here so I can actually wound you, Stark.”

“You know, as much as we’re all enjoying your less-than-witty banter, let’s try and keep the comms open for actual mission reports.”

“Hush up, Steven. You’re just sad you aren’t the one doing the talking.”

“Kiss my ass, James.”

“Again? Because after this morning, I thought —”

“Aaaand that’s where I bug out,” Barton cut in. “I’ve got a host of these things crawling up the side of the ship, and I don’t need to hear your sex talk while I keep them from making it on board.”

“I will be there shortly to assist,” Thor said and he shot Mjölnir into the air to carry him the rest of the way. “These creatures are easily defeated.”

Barton barked out a laugh. “Tell me that again when you’re taking on twenty at once.”

“You say that like I never have.”

Thor landed off the back of the carrier, right in the middle of everything. Barton was perched near the back edge, arrows flying as the eight-legged beasts came, one after another, out of the water, trying to get on board. Barnes and Rogers were on opposite sides of the ship, with Barnes shooting
at everything that moved, while Rogers had the shield flying at a blur, heads and limbs scattering about with every throw. Just as he would be doing himself, he thought with approval.

Just as he should be doing himself.

“Where am I needed most, Captain?” he asked before throwing Mjölnir at one of the creatures coming upon Barnes from behind. Barnes barely looked over with a short nod before turning back to the task at hand.

“Bucky and I have a handle on port and starboard” — it took Thor a moment to remember the various names for each part of the ship — “and Stark has the bow under control. The worst of it is coming from the stern, though, so get in there and help Hawkeye. Falcon tells me he, Widow, and Hulk have almost taken back Liberty Island, but until that happens, it’s just the five of us. And it seems we have the worst of it.”

Thor turned to where Barton was valiantly defending — but unfortunately losing — the back of the ship. “Understood,” he growled.

With a warrior cry his friends back on Asgard would have been proud of, Thor took off to help his comrade. There would be no losing today.

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“Now that was a glorious battle.” Thor sighed happily as he leaned back against the ship’s tower. He smiled as he looked around, only to be met with several stares, all in varying stages of incredulity.

Barnes, for his part, stared at Thor in suspicious wonder. “You and I have very different definitions of what constitutes glorious.”

“Oh, come, my friend!” He clapped Barnes on the shoulder. “Can you not tell me that wasn’t a great battle? They fought well, but we fought better. We didn’t lose a single man —”

“Or woman,” Lady Natasha cut in, and he nodded at her.

“Or woman,” he corrected before turning back to Barnes and giving him a little shake. “And yet, they lost their entire army. How can you not consider that glorious?”

“We fought giant octopuses — octopi...” Barnes looked around at the group. “Is it octopuses or octopi?”

“There are three definitive names for the octopus plural,” Doctor Banner answered from where he was curled up next to Wilson, his eyes closed, exhaustion weighing heavy upon him. “Octopuses and octopi are both correct, as well as octopodes — though no one ever uses the last one, and most use the first anyway.”

Barnes shook his head. “Whatever. The point is, we just fought an army of octopuses. That’s not glorious, Thor, that’s fucking weird.”

Thor laughed, giving Barnes one more shake before letting go. “Weird can also be glorious. We won. That is all that matters.” He held Mjölnir up in triumph. “We looked our foe in the eyes and were victorious!”

“You’re not invited to the party anymore, Thor.”

Thor shrugged, good-natured and undeterred. “If you feel that way, Sergeant, then remind me not to
invite you to the next feast we have on Asgard.” Barnes’ eyes went wide in horror, but Thor ignored him. “I mean, if you’re choosing not to invite me to your parties, then I see no reason to extend that same invitation.”

Barnes slid right up next to him, knocking him in the shoulder. “I love you, Thor.”

Thor laughed, long and loud. Then he turned and lightly patted Barnes on the cheek. “You are a fine specimen, Sergeant Barnes, but if it’s all the same to you, I think I’ll save my affections for Jane.” He then nodded in Steven’s direction. “And I believe the Captain here would prefer you save your affections for him.”

“Nah, you can keep him,” Rogers said.

Thor shook his head and smiled at Barnes. “But yes. You can come next time.”

“Yes! Knew you’d see things my way, big guy!”

“Think we can get out of here sometime soon?” Wilson asked. Doctor Banner had fallen asleep and seemed to slowly be knocking him over. “I’d like a shower or ten to wash the River off of me.”

“Still checking the perimeter, buddy,” Stark chimed in. “And that might be a good idea because… yep. It looks like there might be incoming up near 49th.”

Instantly, everyone was on their feet and at the ready. And everyone started talking all at once.

“Stark, you’re gonna need to give us more than that.”

“Bruce, just stay here, we don’t need you.”

“Should I just fly there now?”

“They’re coming in from the embankment, Cap. Not a lot, but still more of the same.”

“I can have eyes on them in two minutes.”

“I can just use the grenade, if it’s not that many.”

“You brought that with you? Nice.”

“Wait, what grenade?”

“The Other Guy could be useful —”

“NO!”

“We’ve got this, Bruce.”

“Stark, I need better information! How many are there?”

“Seriously, Steve, I can nuke this shit —”

“Bucky, wait.”

“Sonar readings are giving me about fifteen total. Last hurrah maybe? The suit can easily handle this.”

“No, I want an actual man on the ground, Stark.”
Thor kept quiet, as he knew waiting for Rogers to give the final call was the wisest choice. Everyone had their ideas, but the Captain always knew the best direction to take. Sure enough, when eyes turned on him, he knew that had been the right choice.

“Okay fine, Thor you go with Bucky and finish off the rest.” Rogers turned back to the comms. “And Stark, you check everywhere. I don’t want any more surprises coming our way.”

“You got it, Capsicle.”

“Really, fucking stop calling me that.”

Thor ignored the rest of the conversation in favor of Barnes, who had come to stand next to him. “We flying or running?” He nodded back towards land. “49th is only three blocks up from here.”

Thor hummed as he looked in the direction Barnes had pointed out. “Fastest would be flying, it’s true.”

“Then flying it is. We don’t have time to debate this.”

“No, you are correct.” He grabbed Barnes’ waist in a vice grip. “Flying it is, then.” He pointed Mjölnir towards the sky before smiling wolfishly at Barnes. “I suggest you hold on.”

“Nothing new for me here, big guy.”

“Then off we go.”

Mjölnir launched them off the ship and towards land. It took no time at all to spot where the creatures were crawling out of the water and towards a construction site across the main road.

And it was much more than fifteen.

“Stark, you really need to get your equipment checked!” Barnes shouted into the comms. The moment they touched down he opened fire. “This is not fifteen!”

“I never said fifteen, Helen Keller. I said fifty.”

Thor launched Mjölnir into the nearest creature. “To be fair, Stark, I heard fifteen as well.”

“We all heard fifteen,” Rogers’ voice came down the line.

“Fuck you all; my comms are excellent.”

“Then you really need to have that speech impediment checked. Bucky, do you need help over there?”

“Nah, we’re good, Stevie. Fifty isn’t the several hundred we took on earlier.” Thor looked on, impressed, as Barnes smiled at him, yet still managed to put a bullet right through the eye of their foe. Well then. He was most welcome at any feast Thor threw after that.

“You are a skilled warrior, Sergeant Barnes,” Thor commented as he leapt over the falling creature to get at the one behind it. “I am unsure if I’ve ever told you that, but it is true.” He slammed Mjölnir into its midsection, lifting it up and sending it flying into several of its brethren.

“No you haven’t, so I appreciate the sentiment.”

“Any time, my friend.”
They worked in tandem after that — a balanced pair taking on these alien beasts wishing to do them harm. Barnes fought well, and it occurred to Thor more than once that a man like him would fit in well among his warrior friends on Asgard — and as more than just an excellent drinking companion.

When there were but a handful left, Barnes smiled and reached into his pocket to pull out what Thor recognized to be the weapon Lady Natasha had presented him with at his birthday party not that long ago. He nodded in its direction. “I take it you have plans for that, do you not, Sergeant?”

Barnes gave it a light toss in his hand. “You know, Thor, I think I do.”

“It is a thing of beauty, but are you certain you wish to waste it so soon?”

“Never save the good wine for a rainy day, Odinson.” Barnes looked back to where the last few were crawling over their fallen brethren to get to them. “You drink the good wine because it’s there to be drunk.”

Thor burst out laughing. “Wise words, my friend. So, shall we then?”

Barnes smiled at him, big and wide. “We shall.” Then he froze for a second before reaching into his pocket once more. “This sort of thing needs to be documented, you know.” He tossed Thor what turned out to be his mobile device, which Thor deftly caught. “Think you could get a picture of this?”

Thor shrugged. “Of course.” Midgardian technology wasn’t lost on him, as some people (Stark) liked to believe. Truth be told, most of it was actually ancient by his own standards.

He gazed upon the half built structure before tilting his head towards a particularly sturdy section near the base. “We should take cover over there. Then you’ll be free to destroy the very last of our enemies.”

Barnes clapped him on the shoulder, and said, “I like the way you think,” before trotting in that direction.

They crouched behind the low wall and waited until the last of the creatures were just close enough to launch their final attack. As soon as they were within range, Barnes pulled the pin from his grenade and threw it around the wall into the cluster heading towards them. Thor held up the camera and aimed, snapping the photo just as the explosion went off.

“Good timing!” Barnes laughed with obvious glee. He held out his hand for his phone, and as he checked over Thor’s work, his smile grew even wider. “Wow, man. This is amazing!”

“I take it you’re pleased, then.”

“You could say that again.” He waved Thor over. “Here, come have a look.”

Just then, Rogers’ voice came over the comms. “Bucky, report! What the fuck was that?”

“Oh just the truly lovely sound of an MK2 grenade getting the job done.” He waved Thor over again. “So you can calm your ass, already. We’re done over here.”

“Area secured?”

“Of course it’s secured. Natalia gives me good presents.”

“Damn right, I do.” Thor and Barnes smiled at each other as Lady Natasha’s voice joined in.
Rogers sighed over the comms. “All right, just head back after you’ve done a sweep.”

“Aye, Aye, Captain!”

Thor crawled over and kneeled next to Barnes, who turned back to the phone so that he could show Thor the picture. It was quite spectacular, if he were so inclined to say. He’d captured the explosion at just right moment, when the blast was at its greatest, and the mess of their fine work could be seen flying past them.

“This is going up on Instagram.” Barnes immediately began typing on his phone, bringing forth the application where he posted his pictures on the internet. It was only recently that Thor had learned of Barnes’ online therapy from Darcy.

“You’re putting the photo online?” he asked.

Barnes’ smile faltered as his hands stilled over the screen. He turned to Thor. “Would you prefer that I didn’t?”

Thor shook his head quickly. That had not been his intent at all. He waved a hand at the phone. “No, please. By all means.”

Barnes gave him a shy smile before turning back to his task. “Thanks. You know, this project has been really helpful for me, and stuff like this?” He held the phone up quickly. Then he finished his work before turning to Thor. He sighed, seemingly content, as he put his phone back in his pocket. “I like posting the fun stuff as well as the serious stuff, ya know?”

“Yes, I can understand that.” He stood and held out his hand to hoist Barnes up to his feet. They walked around the barrier to survey the fantastic disarray they’d left in their wake. “What is life, if not a series of battles, both glorious and hard won?”

Barnes laughed, low. “You like that word, don’t you?”

Thor turned to him. “What word?”

“Glorious. You use it a lot.”

He waved a hand in front of them. “Does it not seem fitting?”

“No, I guess it does.” Barnes sighed again, this time more to himself, as they began their sweep, looking for any creatures still left alive. “And I get it, you know. The glory of battle? Steve hates it when I talk like that, so I don’t really anymore. But I like what I do, and I’m good at it. I’m just happy the work I’m doing is actually good.”

Thor scanned the area, but there seemed to be no moving bodies among the mess. “As I’ve seen it, you’ve come a long way. You should be proud of your hard work.”

They stopped and Barnes turned to smile at him. “You know, I really am.”

“May I see the post you put up?” Thor asked.

“Oh sure!” Barnes pulled his phone back out and tapped on the screen before handing it over. “You know, I have to say, I had a lot of fun working with you on this one.”

Thor took the offered phone and smiled. “As have I.”

Just as Barnes smiled back at him, movement caught Thor’s eye to the left. Without breaking eye
contact, Barnes pulled out his gun and fired. The movement stilled. “We really should do this again sometime.”

*What an impatient spoiled brat I am! I couldn’t wait any longer to try the MK2 grenade Natasha gave me for my birthday so as we got a little alien situation this week, it was hard to resist to not make the invaders go out with a BANG.* (Photo: Thor. The guy’s good! If I need a photographer one day, I’ll know who to call)
Something isn’t as it used to be, huh? No, this pic isn’t photoshopped and I didn’t magically grow an arm like an alien lizard or something. It’s synthetic skin coupled with a high-tech hologram. Autonomy: 12 hours. It’s gonna come in pretty handy (pun intended) when working undercover. It’s awesome and frightening at the same time and I still don’t know what to think about it TBH. I’m not looking forward to showing this to Steve because god knows how he’s going to react.

“Okay, James, I have to ask one more time — are you absolutely sure about this?”
“And Jane, I have to ask you one more time — can you please stop calling me James? Just because I can lap you several times over in the age department does not mean you get to make me feel old. Call me Bucky or no answers for you.”

Bucky smirked as heat traveled right up Dr. Foster’s face and straight into her hairline. She was absolutely brilliant, but so easy to goad. And Bucky was nothing if not the worst troll among their friends. Steve had nothin’ on him.

She picked up her tablet and fussed about on the screen, and Bucky had even money she was tapping aimlessly, not really paying attention to anything on it. He would have felt bad, but that girl knew how to take any single one of them to task with an almost deadly accuracy. If he’d really upset her, he’d be getting his ass handed to him right about now. Truthfully, he almost wished he could see it.

Because good lord, she was adorable. And awesome. And a firecracker, the likes of which he’d only ever really seen from Nat and Peggy. If she wasn’t taken by Thor and he wasn’t taken by Steve, he might have designs on someone like her. Because with her looks and her mind... well, he had to be honest, he’d always loved a girl who knew how to keep up with him. And damn, could she ever.

She huffed then glanced up, a steely gaze in her eyes as annoyance replaced her initial embarrassment. “Okay, Bucky. I need you to tell me, one more time, that you’re on board with trying this out.” She brandished her tablet at him, showing him an arm covered in the synthetic skin that would project any sort of holographic image he needed — including (hopefully) a human-looking arm. “Because, remember, this has never been tested on a human — only on prosthetics. It’s never been tested on a fused body part. Remember what we talked about? What if there’s a malfunction in the projection? What if it fuses to you, and we have to surgically remove your entire arm to get the thing off —”

“Jane. Sweetheart,” Tony piped in from over the material as he ran final tests on it. “Shouldn’t that infinity stone you swallowed have made you less boring? Where’s the old fire, woman?”

Bucky flashed with anger, and rounded on him, half a second away from showing Tony where his fire came from, when without warning, Dr. Foster swung out and hit him, hard, in the arm with the very same tablet she’d been shoving in Bucky’s face not moments before. Tony cried out as a resounding crack! filled the air, and Bucky smiled with a swell of pride as he watched the screen spider web.

“You show ‘im, Jane,” he muttered as Bruce chuckled next to him where he was hooking up the monitors to Bucky’s chest. He cast a quick glance at the doctor, and the two exchanged an affectionate smile for her. That girl really took shit from nobody.

“Shut up, Tony,” she spat at him. “Just because your philosophy is ‘experiment first, ask questions over the body later’, doesn’t mean we all have to subscribe to your insane way of thinking.” She pointed a finger in Bucky’s direction. “He gets the chance to say no, and it is so not your place to make him feel like he can’t.”

“Woah, there!” Tony threw up his arms in surrender. “Never said he couldn’t back out if he wanted to.” Jane opened her mouth to respond, but Tony beat her to the punch. “But if I’m not mistaken — and Barnes is more than welcome to correct me — he’s already agreed to do this. Multiple times.”

Bucky reached out and lightly placed his human hand on her arm. “He’s right,” he said quietly. “I appreciate you looking out for me, but really. I’m okay with this.”

“You sure.” The question was for Bucky though she continued to side-eye Tony.
He nodded. “I’m sure.”

Her eyes narrowed as she turned to scrutinize him before eventually blowing out a huff of air. “Fine.” She then shoved the broken tablet at Tony. “Get me a new one of these,” she demanded without looking at him.

Tony caught the tablet before it could fall. “Oh, yes, your majesty.”

She ignored the comment, instead bending over the material to analyze it herself. “But, hear this, Bucky. If something happens to you, I will be telling you I told you so.” She glanced back up at him, a smirk playing at her lips. “Multiple times.”

Bucky burst out laughing and held his hands up in surrender. “Completely fair. If the material turns this thing sentient” — he wiggled his metal fingers at her — “you have my permission to call me out on my stupidity before it kills us all.”

“I doubt it’ll kill us all,” she answered with a shrug, fighting another smile as she turned back to the material. “At most, I think we’ll just need to determine if it’s smart enough to become friends with Vision or if we’ll have to resign it to a life of hanging out with Dum-E.”

At hearing its name, the machine made a little chirp and lifted its arm hopefully, only for Tony to shout from the other end of the lab, “That wasn’t a compliment, you idiot!”

Bruce sighed. “You know, Tony, has it ever occurred to you that the reason Dum-E does that is because it’s looking for affection anywhere it can get it?”

“Are you accusing me of being an abusive father, Bruce?” Tony asked as he walked back over with a new tablet for Jane. “I think you’re accusing me of being an abusive father. I’m hurt. I know abusive fathers, and that ain’t me. I’m an amazing papa.”

As if to prove his point, he gave Dum-E an affectionate pat, only to have the machine betray him when it turned into the hand almost embarrassingly. Everyone laughed, except for Tony, who just looked affronted, especially as Bruce shook his head, waving a hand at them.

“Wow, that has to suck for you,” Bucky commented. “And you shut up about your dad. He was cool.”

“Yeah. To you.”

Bucky gave a half shrug, but bit back on a snarky response. He and Tony had made peace a long time ago about what Bucky’d had to do as the Winter Soldier, but between that and the fact that Howard had apparently been an ass to Tony growing up, Bucky would never fully get into it with him. He had absolutely no right.

Tony watched him for a moment longer — possibly waiting to see if Bucky would respond — before pursing his lips and turning away to help Jane.

“So, uh, are we ready to do this?” Bruce asked, glancing between Bucky and Tony.

Bucky nodded as Tony said, “Ready whenever Wormtail is.”

Bruce quirked an eyebrow. “Wormtail?”

“He of the silver hand brigade.”
“But that was Wormtail’s right hand,” Bucky reminded him.

“Which makes you a matched set.”

“Just how I want the world to remember me.” Bucky sighed and turned back to Bruce for the last of the electrodes. “The hand of the most dangerous and sinister man the world has ever known.”

The ironic truth almost pulled him up short until Tony turned to him with a gasp. “Does the Captain know you feel that way about him? I should tell him. I’m calling him right now in fact.”

He made a show of pulling his phone out of his pocket, and beginning to call Steve. Bucky quickly grabbed one of the rubber stress balls Bruce always had lying around, and with an accuracy he’d picked up long before his sniping days, knocked the damn phone right out of Tony’s hand.

Tony stumbled forward as the phone cracked and skittered across the concrete. He then turned to glare at Bucky as he and Jane gleefully grinned at the sight of another one of Tony’s tech pieces getting destroyed. “Would you people please stop breaking my stuff? I’m going to stop paying for it, I swear to god.”

“No, you won’t,” Bucky and Bruce answered in unison, and smiled at each other.

“Yes, I will.” Tony stomped over to the phone and picked it up, wiping at the screen like that would somehow magically fix the shattered glass. “Instituting a new ‘you break it, you bought it’ policy around here.”

“Except for the fact that we break things that only cost a few hundred for you,” Bruce pointed out. “How much does one of your Iron Suits cost again?”

“That’s different. I already bought it. Since, you know, it was already my money.”

Bruce smirked as he pressed the last of the electrodes to Bucky’s chest. “I think Pepper would beg to differ on that.”

Tony just grumbled into his broken phone something about Pepper not being here before trudging off to the same corner where he’d gone when Jane had cracked the tablet.

Bucky turned back to Bruce. “So, Doc, tell me again what we’re doing with this thing? How does it work exactly?”

“Well.” Bruce walked over and picked up the material, holding it out for Bucky to see. It was thin, and somewhat mesh-like, with an iridescence to it that caught the surrounding light in an array of muted colors. “It goes on like a long-sleeved glove, except this stuff will be adhered to the skin just past where your metal arm ends”—he nodded towards Bucky’s shoulder—“and down your ribcage.”

He walked over and held the covering up next to Bucky’s arm. “It’s been measured and cut to a very precise length, and designed with all of your scarring in mind.” He smiled at Bucky. “It’s designed to be a tight fit, but it won’t pull or come loose once we fix it to you.”

“And, um, how do you fix it to me again?” Bucky asked, and didn’t miss the scratch in his voice. He still wasn’t sure about this part, and the idea of another something bonded to him made him nervous.

“A glue, actually,” Tony answered, as he came to stand on the other side of Bruce. He held up a jar that contained some sort of dull grey, gelatinous substance. “Simple enough, really. We coat your arm and body with this stuff, and then we have a ten-minute window to get the synthetic skin over
your arm before it adheres. After that the material won’t come off without the proper dissolvent.”

Bucky eyed the substance in the jar. “I can only guess you invented that stuff, right?”

“Obviously.”

“Then please tell me also have already invented the dissolvent that goes with it?”

“What do you take me for?” Tony scoffed and bounced on his feet. The other three just stared at him, because seriously, it wouldn’t have been the first time.

Tony glanced around as everyone eyeballed him before sighing and reaching into his back pocket. He pulled out a fast, plastic syringe. He held it out and dropped it into Bucky’s hand. “Here’s your antidote, buddy. Only takes about a tenth of that to get rid of this,” he answered Bucky’s unspoken question as he held up the jar.

Bucky just nodded and handed the syringe back. “Okay, I get all that, but how is it supposed to make my arm look flesh? And also make it feel like flesh and bone?” He waved his arm at them. “This stuff ain’t exactly the softest of materials.”

“That’s the interesting part!” Jane piped up; her eyes alight with excitement for the first time since Bucky got there. She quickly walked over and took the material out of Bruce’s hands. “This is the first holographic projector of its kind that’s completely moldable. It doesn’t need to be a flat surface because it projects back onto itself, instead of out.”

The more she talked, the faster she got, and Bucky had to fight back a smile at the way her cheeks flushed over finally getting to talk about the parts she loved.

“And what about the feel?” he asked, guiding her along. He also didn’t miss the way she talked in a way that made sense to him, and not in the pseudo-science speak Tony and Bruce had been throwing at him since they’d brought it to him a couple weeks prior. Hell, it was half the reason he was asking her. He was all for trying this out, but that didn’t mean he still totally understood all of what was going to happen.

(And if the other half of the reason he was asking her was because she had such a pretty smile, well that was just for him to know.)

He wasn’t disappointed when the smile lit up her entire face. She grabbed his metal hand and the jar from Tony’s hand, and guided him to a stool to sit down. “Air pockets,” she answered, matter-of-factly, as she began to coat his hand. “Microscopic air pockets that we’ll adjust to create the feel of pliant skin while simultaneously separating from the top layer and your arm to give the feel of hard bone underneath and not hard metal.”

“That’s all it really is?” Bucky asked, not masking the hint of wonder in his voice. It sounded so simple.

Jane looked up and smiled at him. “That’s all it really is.”

“Neat,” he said, and returned the smile.

“And once that’s done, we’ll start the process of creating a holographic projection of your human arm,” Tony added. He walked over to one of the computers on the wall and started typing away. “We actually spent days pouring over old images and footage of you to get a precise representation of what your old arm should look like.”
It took a second for Tony’s words to sink in. But once they did —

Bucky’s head snapped up, and he barely breathed out, “Wait, are you saying...”

Now it was Tony’s turn to smile. “That’s right, big guy. We aren’t just projecting an arm on you. We’re projecting your arm.”

Just then, a large 3D projection of Bucky popped up in the center of the room, looking as he did now, but with two flesh and blood arms. Whole.

“Oh,” was all he managed to say.

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They didn’t tell him about the fucking twelve hours part.

When they’d asked him to come in at stupid o’clock in the morning, he’d assumed it was to run tests and check out various looks with the arm, before finishing up by lunchtime. He had no idea that getting the settings just right on the synthetic skin, coupled with the creation of the holographic image, would take so damn long.

He was halfway in, and bored off his ass, when he got a text from Steve.

*How’s your day going over there? Wanna grab lunch? — S*

Bucky hastily typed out a reply.

*Can’t, baby. :/ They’ve got my arm open and I’m sort of hooked up to this machine. Can’t really go anywhere. — B*

*You okay? Where’s your head at? — S*

Bucky smiled tightly at Steve’s concern. Of course Steve would immediately worry about Bucky being strapped to anything. The problem was that Steve had no idea they were doing this. Bucky hadn’t known how to explain it, and he wasn’t sure what he’d been more worried about: Steve trying to talk him out of it because he would be worried that Bucky might get his hopes up about having a real-looking arm, or Steve being the one excited about Bucky looking whole again.

So he hadn’t said anything. And right now, the only thing he was strapped to was the electrodes monitoring the arm and his vitals. Nothing that would cause Bucky to panic.

He probably should have worded his lie a little bit better.

*My head’s good. I’m just really fucking bored. Made Tony promise me Cuban food from that one place over in Hoboken. ;) — B*

*OMG, PLEASE tell me you’re bringing me back some potato balls?? — S*

*Sure. When you finally learn that they’re called PAPA RELLENAS, I’ll bring you back a truck load. — B*

*Do it anyway because you love me. I’ll remember next time, I promise. — S*

*Fuck you, you remember every time. You just live to be difficult. — B*

*It worries me that it’s taken you this long to figure that out — S*
I've known since we were five. :/ — B

“Who’re you talking to?”

Bucky fumbled the phone at the sound of Jane’s voice, catching it at the last second. Heat rose up his spine as he turned to her. “Oh. Just, um...” He gave his phone a half-hearted wave in her direction. “Just Steve.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him, folding her arms. “Would that be the same Steve you’re hiding this from?” She gestured at his arm.

And there was heat again. “He wouldn’t have understood,” Bucky answered, just as his phone pinged at him. He frowned at the sight of Steve’s name. Without looking up, he added, “He would have talked me out of it.”

You’re good though? Don’t need me to come down? — S

Shit, Steve was gonna be so pissed at him...

No, Stevie, I’m good. Love you. — B

“Are you sure about that?” Bruce asked as he came over to gently massage a spot on Bucky’s forearm. He’d been doing that off and on for the last several hours.

Bucky shrugged as he watched Bruce work. “Honestly, I don’t know. But he either would have tried to talk me out of it, or gotten excited at the idea of it, and neither of those options sounds like a lot of fun.”

“Nothing wrong with a little bit of excitement,” Tony said and glanced up at Bruce from over his monitor. “How are the pods holding up?”

He gave Bucky’s arm one last press and nodded. “That was the last of the bubbles. I think we’re ready to give it a go.”

Bucky’s phone pinged and he looked down again.

:) <3 — S

With a sigh, he shoved his phone into his back pocket. “What’s next?” he asked, as he glanced between the other three.

Tony smiled at him. “Time to turn your arm on.”

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Two hours to go until full autonomy. At least that’s what Bruce had just told him.

All he knew was that, when he looked down at his arm, only the barest hint of metal shone through what looked more and more like flesh — changing now by the second. Hell, when he glanced down at his shoulder and upper arm, all he did see there was flesh.

“How’re you holding up, big guy?” Tony asked.

Bucky coughed and cleared his throat, eyes still trained on his arm. “Trying not to freak out, thanks.”

“Not freak out in a good way or a bad way?”
“Uh...” Bucky honestly had no idea. “Both, I guess?”

“You’re doing great, Bucky,” Bruce quietly reassured him from where he was bent over the arm. “This all looks really really good.”

“I can see that, which is part of the problem. I can see my arm.”

“Well, let me take a picture of it then.” Jane held out her hand expectantly.

“How is that going to help?” Bucky asked, confused. “That’s just showing me what I can already see.” He glanced down at his shoulder again. “And believe me. I can definitely see it.”

“But not the whole picture,” Jane countered. She walked over to Bucky and wiggled her fingers at him. “You see what’s right up against you, but not how you look as a whole person. Let me show you.”

Okay, that made a little bit more sense. With a nod, Bucky grabbed his phone out of his pocket, and handed it to her. She went back to the other side of the work station then turned to face him.

“How does your arm feel?” Tony asked, while Jane held up the phone. “Any discomfort where it’s stuck to you? Any of your sensors blaring?”

Bucky twisted and turned his arm, giving it a full range-of-motion test. He ignored the flash of his camera, focusing instead on anything out of the ordinary. Other than just being able to feel the pull of something stuck to his own skin, nothing stood out to him.

“No, I think I’m good,” he answered. Then he nodded toward Jane. “How’d the picture come out?”

“Fine,” she said, and held out his phone. “Here, have a look.”

He took the phone and opened it up to the picture she’d snapped. His breath caught at the sight of him almost looking completely whole again. It was fucking unreal. If this worked, he might actually be able to do undercover work with Steve. Those were the only missions of Steve’s he never went on. The arm had always been too noticeable.

So of course he immediately wanted to post it to Instagram.

“How top secret is this?” he asked, to no one in particular. He glanced around at all three of them.

“Not very,” Jane answered with a shrug. “This stuff’s already been in a multitude of science and medical journals.”

“It was designed for amputees, like you,” Bruce added. “It’s just, people don’t usually have their prosthetics fused to them. Why do you ask?”

Bucky gave them a tiny, half smile. “I was thinking about posting it to Instagram.” He shrugged as he turned his phone over in his hand. “I mean, I know this could be useful in the field, but most people don’t believe I’m me now. It’s not until they see the metal arm that they figure out who I am. Pretty sure I could blast this on the cover of Time, and people still wouldn’t think I’m me without the metal arm.”

“Well, you know my vote,” Tony answered, still without looking up.

“You mean the guy who announced to the world that he was Iron Man?” Jane asked with an innocent tilt of her head. “Yeah, no idea which way you’d swing on that one, Tony.”
Bruce just sighed and shook his head. “You do whatever you’re most comfortable with, Bucky. I’ll support that.”

“I’m with him,” Jane added.

Bucky smiled at them. “Thanks guys.”

So he opened up his app and pulled up the picture Jane had taken of him and his ‘new arm’. He debated his caption for a second, but really, he wasn’t worried all that much about putting this up and people suddenly recognizing him. So instead, he just went for broke:

*Something isn’t as it used to be, huh? No, this pic isn’t photoshopped and I didn’t magically grow an arm like an alien lizard or something. It’s synthetic skin coupled with a high-tech hologram. Autonomy: 12 hours. It’s gonna come in pretty handy (pun intended) when working undercover. It’s awesome and frightening at the same time and I still don’t know what to think about it TBH. I’m not looking forward to showing this to Steve because god knows how he’s going to react.*

Without really thinking about the implications of everything he’d written, he added Tumblr and hit share. But yeah, he probably should have thought it through a bit more.

Because it wasn’t two minutes later when his phone rang. With Steve’s ringtone. And that’s when it sank in.

He’d lied to Steve about what he’d been up to, and then proceeded to share it with the world instead.

Shit. *Shit shit shit.*

He quickly hit deny on the call without answering. Maybe if he ignored Steve, he’d go away.

No such luck. He winced at the fucking loud-ass ping of his text message.

*What the FUCK are you doing down there?? — S*

*SHIT.*

Bucky was in so much trouble.

Well, maybe with his new arm, he could go hide somewhere. Hawaii was always nice this time of year.
"Hi Honey, I'm home...". Steve stayed in disbelief a good minute at the door, without saying a word. He didn't even dare to touch my hand. I told him quickly on the phone the result was very realistic, but I guess he didn't expect something like this. When he was finally able to form coherent sentences, Stevie COULDN'T stop talking, he had so many questions but I only got one: "WHY THE HELL ARE YOU WEARING - MY- SPRINGSTEEN T-SHIRT?!"
Hey, hey, hey, big guy...I should be the one collapsing in my BF's arms! S'okay! And you know, there's no way in hell I'm gonna keep this thing except for undercover missions from time to time. It took me enough shrink sessions and reassuring words from you to accept who I have become so it's not to make it disappear behind a hologram. However, we have to admit that from a strictly scientific point of view, the two nerds did a great job, huh? (And I'm not saying this because Bruce is here taking the pic and that he could turn green at any moment if I contradict him...)

Bruce's POV!!!

Bucky’s foot tapped incessantly against the floorboard, and Bruce had an overwhelming urge to shove it and the man attached to it into the side door of the car, hopefully knocking both out. Maybe then the obnoxious pleas would stop.

_Breathe, Bruce._

He tried not to close his eyes as he followed his own instructions — just filled his lungs and willed himself to calm down. The tapping was annoying, but nothing he needed to get angry about. Letting the Other Guy loose over it would probably be overkill, even for him.

“Steve, I just —” . . . “Okay, but if I’d _told_ you —” . . . “Steve, _I_ know. But, baby, I —” Bucky caught Bruce’s eye and shrugged, a tight apologetic smile on his lips as Steve continued to yell down the line at him.

He could hear almost every word, and it was clear that Steve was _less_ than happy that Bucky hadn’t told him. And while Bruce couldn’t blame Steve, he at least understood on some level why Bucky had done what he had, even if he didn’t agree with it. It would have been another Doctor Foster situation, with two people badgering Bucky to wait, when it had been clear from the get-go that waiting was the last thing Bucky had wanted.

Doctor Foster, it would seem, Bucky could handle. It was common knowledge amongst the group that Steve was someone he could not.

So Bruce pulled in a strong gulp of air, tried to remember that this wasn’t _solely_ Bucky’s fault, and turned back to face the road. It was his job to take Bucky home so Bucky could show Steve the arm, then instruct them both how to take the piece off _and_ put it back on again.

If Steve didn’t end up killing Bucky first.

“Steve... _Steve_, just _listen,_ ” Bucky continued. “It’s not like anything you would believe. It’s _so_ real looking. Almost like I got my arm back —” Bucky huffed as Steve cut him off again, and Bruce stole a quick glance to find him curled up in the seat, turning the arm this way and that, his face a mingle of frustration and awe.

“Maybe you should just save it for when you get home,” Bruce mumbled to himself. The constant _whining_ on Bucky’s part was starting to grate on Bruce’s nerves (_again_ ) and really, did they _need_ to have this conversation over the phone? They’d be at the apartment in _five fucking minutes_. Because,
swear to God, the begging and the pleading made Barnes sound like a goddamned child and —

Breathe, Bruce.

“Bucky?” he asked quietly, and glanced over.

“Hold on a sec, Stevie.” Bucky turned to Bruce. “Yeah?”

Bruce gave him his own apologetic smile. “Think you could save this for when you get home?” He shrugged and glanced back out the front windshield, not wanting to look Bucky in the eye as he added quietly, “Your conversation is setting my teeth on edge.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah, sorry.” Bucky turned back to the phone, and Bruce smiled at his understanding.

After all this time, he still got it. “Stevie, I gotta go. I’ll be home in just a few minutes, okay? Don’t be mad— aaand he hung up.” He sighed and threw the phone up onto the dashboard. Bruce watched as it skittered into the windshield before coming to rest over the air vent.

“Well, what did you expect?” he asked. “You knew perfectly well this wasn’t a small deal, and yet you lied to him about the whole thing. I mean, what were you planning to do? Just stroll in the house and hope he didn’t notice?”

“Or maybe convince him there was a freak accident on the way home and I grew a new arm?” Bucky offered with a snort.

Bruce chuckled and shook his head. “Yes, because that would have sold. Last time I checked, Steve was definitely one of the brighter crayons in the box. I think he would have started asking questions after I left and, you know, your arm was mysteriously metal again.”

“I could have sold it,” Bucky grumbled with a huff.

“You keep telling yourself that.”

“Bruce, I gotta ask...”

Bruce looked over to find Bucky curled even more in on himself — if that was possible — fear and uncertainty clouding over what were normally really vibrant eyes.

“Anything, Bucky.”

“Do you think...did I really fuck this up?” he asked quietly. “How mad do you think he’s gonna be?”

“Honestly?” Bruce sighed and ignored that tiny flicker of frustration making itself known in the back of his mind. He didn’t answer right away, as he worked to choose his words carefully.

“I think you have a lot of explaining to do,” he finally said, his eyes fixed on the road, watching as headlights steadily streamed past on the left. “I don’t think you’ve ever fully grasped the sheer enormity of this project. I mean sure, it came on pretty fast, but Bucky.” He looked over to make sure he had the man’s full attention. He did. “I can’t help but think this might be one of the biggest things you’ve done since you came home — since your rehabilitation. And the one person who should have been by your side during all of this is the one person you kept as far in the dark as possible.”

“So, um.” Bucky’s voice scratched where it caught, and Bruce couldn’t help but notice the way his eyes began to glisten. “So, you’re saying I fucked up.”

It was a rare occurrence when Bruce felt more bad than angry — usually he felt some mixture of
both — but this was definitely one of those times.

“I’m saying you have a lot of explaining to do.”

They pulled up in front of Steve and Bucky’s apartment just then, and Bucky handed over the code to the underground parking. Bruce drove in and parked in one of the guest parking spots, quietly laughing at the fact that there even was guest parking here in Brooklyn. He reminded himself to never ask how much they paid for their place.

As he got out of the car, Bucky made no move to follow suit — just sat in the front seat, his breathing shallow, with his fists balled up on his knees. Bruce closed his door and walked around to Bucky’s side, opening it and crouching down to his level.

“You have to go in at some point, you know.”

“But do I really have to go in?” Bucky asked, his voice light despite how tight his jaw was.

“I’m not sure how I feel about you living permanently in my car, so I’m going to say yes. You have to go in.”

“Okay, but that only means I have to get out of your car,” Bucky reasoned. “That says nothing about me actually having to go inside.” His eyes flicked up, presumably in the direction of the building’s entrance. Bruce didn’t bother to look.

God, how long was this fucking merry-go-round going to spin —

Bruce bowed his head and counted until his breathing evened out. And huh. Forty-two. Well, that was at least better than the eighty-seven he’d made it up to earlier with Tony.

But that didn’t mean he couldn’t let his anger slip through a little bit...

“Barnes,” he said through clenched teeth. He snapped his head up to give Bucky a hard stare. “Get the fuck out of my car and go deal with your shit. I don’t have time for this.”

The unmistakable growl had Bucky’s eyes going wide, and he flicked them around, most likely assessing his predicament and calculating escape routes.

Finally he settled for placing a hand on Bruce’s arm. “Hey, big guy, I’m sorry.” Bruce noted the fact that Bucky didn’t actually tell him to calm down. Instead he turned kind eyes on him. “Not really looking forward to this, ya know?”

Bruce quirked an eyebrow and smiled — not quite easy, but not forced either. “Could it have anything to do with you posting that picture before telling Steve anything?”

Bucky groaned and his head dropped forward. “Aw, man. Why’d you have to go and remind me of that?” He whimpered pathetically, but it was just ridiculous enough to ease some of Bruce’s tension. He smiled and stood up, backing up a few steps.

“Sorry, my friend, but it’s time you face the music.”

Bucky cracked one eye up at him. “You sure I have to?”

“Pretty sure, yeah,” he answered with a nod.

Bucky sighed, then grabbed his phone and heaved himself out of the car. He held onto the edge of the roof and pulled himself out without using his metal hand at all.
“Uh, you know you won’t damage the material, right?” Bruce asked as Bucky shoved his phone into his pocket and shut the door.

Bucky looked down at the arm and shrugged. “I know,” he said, but his entire demeanor spoke of distrust of the words coming out of his own mouth.

“It’s made of a carbon fiber polymer, mixed with faint traces of vibranium and adamantium. You’ll no sooner damage it than you’d damage the shield.”

“I could damage the shield,” Bucky muttered in quiet protest.

Bruce chuckled. “You keep telling yourself that, Bucky.”

They headed inside and into the elevator, silent as they made their way up to Steve and Bucky’s floor. Truthfully, Bruce wasn’t sure what to expect. Steve had never really shown himself to be the type to hold grudges, but he’d heard more than enough of that phone conversation earlier to know that Steve was righteously angry. And for good reason. Honestly, this could go either way.

As the elevator dinged their floor, Bucky pulled his phone out of his pocket, and began fiddling with it, nervously turning it over and over again in his hand as they walked down the hall.

“What’re you gonna do with that?” Bruce asked, nodding at the phone.

Bucky gave a little half shrug, frowning as he did. “Take a picture of Steve’s reaction, if I can,” he admitted, glancing sidelong at Bruce, like he was gauging his reaction. “I mean, I figure he’s upset, but he also hasn’t seen me with two good arms in years, regardless of whether or not you count his time sleeping on ice.” He sighed as they reached the door, giving that same shrug again as he stared down at his phone. “Figured it might be important at some point.”

Bruce placed a hand on Bucky’s shoulder and gave it a small squeeze. “When he’s less angry, I’m sure it will,” he assured him as best he could.

“Well, here goes nothing,” Bucky said, and reached for the doorbell, ringing it once.

Bruce shook his head in confusion. “You aren’t just going to go in?”

“Not sure if I’m allowed.”

Bruce noted the empathy he felt and cataloged it for later. He was starting to hope this one came down on Bucky’s side.

Footsteps carried through, getting closer. As soon as they stopped in front of the door, Bucky immediately tucked his arm behind his back. He barely had time to give Bruce a sheepish grin when the door was suddenly yanked open, and a truly livid Steve Rogers was standing on the other side.

“Oh, so you actually decided to show you face after that stunt, did you?” Steve shot out, with absolutely no pretense. The tone instantly turned the burner up on Bruce’s blood, and he took a step back without even really thinking about it.

“Oh, so you actually decided to show you face after that stunt, did you?” Steve shot out, with absolutely no pretense. The tone instantly turned the burner up on Bruce’s blood, and he took a step back without even really thinking about it.

“Steve, please, just listen to me,” Bucky pleaded, wary eyes traveling back and forth between his boyfriend and Bruce. Not that Bruce could be of any help in the matter.

“Why?” Steve snapped, taking a step toward Bucky. “So you can lie to me some more? What the fuck were you thinking keeping this shit from me, huh?” He waved a hand at Bucky’s hidden arm. “What made you think —”
And that’s when Bucky brought his arm forward — slowly, tentatively — and words instantly failed Steve. His breath hitched as his eyes went wide, his hand instantly going over his mouth.

“See, Stevie?” Bucky was quiet as he turned his arm slowly between them. “I told you it was real looking.”

Steve didn’t say anything. Just stood there, looking lost, his eyes shiny and wet, caught somewhere between awe and grief. A few more blinks and the tears slowly began to trickle down.

They didn’t take their eyes off each other — Bucky watching Steve as he stood, transfixed, at the sight before him. Bruce knew the holographic sleeve really was something, but he’d never imagined it would have this kind of effect on either of them. It slowly dawned on him, more so now than ever, why Bucky was so scared to tell Steve what they’d been working on.

Maybe it wasn’t that Bucky was scared of Steve talking him out of it. For the first time, it occurred to Bruce that maybe Steve couldn’t handle it.

Bruce quietly slipped his hand inside of Bucky’s and took his phone from him. Grateful that he was one of the few people Bucky trusted his passcode with, Bruce unlocked his phone and quickly began snapping photos of them.

Whether they noticed or cared, neither of them made a move to get out of Bruce’s way. True, Steve had been righteously angry (the Other Guy would have been proud), but whatever was happening now between the two of them, all thoughts of anger were buried, and this really was something Bucky would want documented to go over with Steve later.

Because this was the first time in over seventy years Steve was seeing Bucky the way he’d remembered him before the fall.

That pulled Bruce up short, all air pushed out of his lungs, as he watched history catch up with itself. He had his own demons to face, every single day, but he would never understand the gravity of what these two had been through.

He watched as Steve lowered his hand, the tears flowing freely now, no sound escaping his lips. Just harsh breaths, pushed in and out, little hitches escaping as he dealt with what he was seeing in front of him. Bruce lifted the phone and snapped again, right over Bucky’s shoulder.

“Steve, are you...” Bucky’s own breathing hitched, and he held out his covered hand, offering it to Steve, who only continued to stare at it. A caught sound escaped Bucky’s lips, as Bruce imagined, he was trying to hold back his own quiet son. “Steve, talk to me.”

That seemed to snap Steve a little, but only a little. He reached out, slow and unsure, only to snap his hand back before he completely broke down.

Bucky stepped forward to catch him as Steve began to openly weep. They held onto each other, tight, as Steve buried himself into the crook of Bucky’s neck. The only word Bruce could make out was Bucky’s name over and over again.

He held up the phone again, letting it rattle off several more shots. He felt like he was on autopilot.

“Hey. Hey.” Bucky stroked his human hand over Steve’s head, rocking back and forth, turning them in place. “Stevie, please don’t cry. Please.” He pressed a kiss to Steve’s temple before resting his forehead where his lips had just been. “I’m still me, okay? S’why Bruce’s here. He’s gonna take this thing off of me, okay? You don’t have to worry.”
“But B- Bucky, it’s…” Words failed Steve again and he turned to capture Bucky’s mouth against his own. That was when Bruce turned away. For once he wasn’t angry, but he was more than a little embarrassed. This moment wasn’t for him.

He walked away, stopping in front of the big picture window at the end of the hallway outside of their apartment. The view was incredible, and it made something ache inside for what was in front of him and what was behind him. His family was out there, somewhere high up in the tower he could see, even from where he stood on the other side of the East River. But the love that was behind him? He hadn’t known love like that in a long time. If he ever had at all.

If anyone ever had, really. He tried to at least take comfort in that.

He had no idea how long he stood there, watching the lights of the city unfold in front of him. It wasn’t until soft steps fell behind him that he finally shook himself out of his thoughts and turned around.

Bucky was standing there, a shy smile playing across his face. He held up his metal arm. “We’re ready for you to show us now.”

Bruce just gave a small nod. “Of course,” he said, and waved Bucky back to his apartment.

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Four hours later found Bruce pulling into his spot at Stark Tower. He was exhausted, and after the emotional roller coaster that had been Steve and Bucky, all he wanted was some tea and whiskey, one of his favorite movie soundtracks, and his ridiculously comfortable chair that Tony was constantly threatening to throw out. It was old and broken in, and Bruce liked to call it the Three Hour Chair because once he sat down… Well. Only problem was, Tony didn’t do old and broken in. Even if he had fallen asleep in it on more than a few occasions.

Surprise, surprise — the moment he stepped onto his floor, there was Tony, camped out in the chair, typing away at one of his many laptops.

“How’d it go?” the man asked without looking up, or even pausing. Bruce barely registered the twinge of annoyance he felt.

“Fine, all things considered,” he answered as he dropped his keys in the little bowl by the door and kicked off his shoes. He padded into the living area and flopped down on the couch, his arm resting on the edge. “Just showed them how to get it off and on, and how to activate it. Oh.” He knocked his hand against Tony’s knee. Gave a knowing smile when Tony finally looked up. “I also showed them how to change it up? Give it tattoos and all that?”

That got Tony’s attention. “Oh, I was hoping to show them that!” He sat up, excited like a puppy with a new set of toys, and dropped the laptop on the floor. “And? What did they think?”

Bruce shrugged and sat back, still smiling. “Bucky was really excited about trying that out on some mission at some point.” His thoughts darkened for just a moment, but he shook them off, letting his ease wash over him again before continuing. “Steve was still in a bit of shock over the human arm, but I think once that wears off, he’ll be as excited about it as all of us.”

“Yeah, I figured as much.”

Bruce frowned in confusion. “How so?”

Tony snorted and reached for the laptop. He typed away on it before turning it around to face Bruce.
Up on the screen was Bucky’s Instagram account with one of the pictures Bruce had taken. It was one of the photos of Steve, still lost in the sight of Bucky and his new ‘arm’. Tears were streaking down Steve’s face, and Bruce was just a little bit heartbroken for him.

“Oh,” was all he managed to say before reaching for the laptop. He set it on his lap so he could read the caption that was attached.

"Hi Honey, I'm home...". Steve stayed in disbelief a good minute at the door, without saying a word. He didn't even dare to touch my hand. I told him quickly on the phone the result was very realistic, but I guess he didn't expect something like this. When he was finally able to form coherent sentences, Stevie COULDN'T stop talking, he had so many questions but I only got one: "WHY THE HELL ARE YOU WEARING -MY- SPRINGSTEEN T-SHIRT?!"

Bruce chuckled to himself. Leave it to Bucky to not go anywhere near the true emotional resonance that had been going on at the time the picture had been taken.

“Yeah, I see what you mean,” he eventually answered, still looking the photo over.

“So?” What actually happened?” Tony asked, knowing exactly what Bruce was thinking. Bucky was known for shoving his feelings to the side in his Instagram posts.

But Bruce didn’t feel like answering him. Maybe in the morning, but right now, he was just too tired to go into it. Physically and mentally.

Instead, he shook his head. “Sorry, buddy. Not in the mood to talk about it.”

“What? You can’t leave me hanging like this.” Tony tried to reach for the laptop, but Bruce held back. “There’s more to that story. I can see it on your face.”

Bruce nodded. “There is, but —”

“Share. It’s what friend’s do. Or so I’m told.”

Bruce just ignored him, because, at that moment, the page pinged a new update. Bruce hit refresh, and his breath caught at the new image that popped up.

Bucky and Steve, holding each other so tight, it was almost impossible to tell where one ended and the other began.

Hey, hey, hey, big guy...I should be the one collapsing in my BF's arms! S'okay! And you know, there's no way in hell I'm gonna keep this thing except for undercover missions from time to time. It took me enough shrink sessions and reassuring words from you to accept who I have become so it's not to make it disappear behind a hologram. However, we have to admit that from a strictly scientific point of view, the two nerds did a great job, huh? (And I'm not saying this because Bruce is here taking the pic and that he could turn green at any moment if I contradict him...)

Bruce shook his head and smiled. Without another word, he handed the laptop back to Tony and got up, heading back to his room. He ignored the indignant squawking come from his friend, and just gently closed the door behind himself.

Yeah, the day had been an emotional rollercoaster. And part of Bruce thought that maybe Bucky had added that last little bit, not as a silly dig, but in acknowledgement to what he’d must have put Bruce through.

The two had been friends for a long time — Bruce being an integral part of Bucky’s recovery. And
Bucky... He’d always been very sensitive of that. Grateful, some would say. And Bruce was certain, that last little line was his way of apologizing for dragging Bruce through Bucky’s own ringer — one he’d actually brought on himself.

Bruce would have to remember to placate him in the morning. But for now though, Bucky could stew in it. After all, what were really angry friends for?
Steve spent the whole week kissing my metal arm. I think it was his way of telling me that metal arm or not, he loves me for who I am and that he doesn't care about what I have become. As if I didn't know that, you stupid a**! Now look at the road, Tony is gonna blow a fuse if we scratch his $1 million little toy (that I may have borrowed without permission *cough*).

Bucky smiled at the feel of soft lips just behind his ear, pulling him slowly from sleep. A quiet shiver tingled down his spine as those lips moved along the seam where metal met flesh, before the feeling disappeared entirely.
He blinked his way to wakefulness and turned his head just enough to watch as Steve ghosted across his shoulder before stamping out a shiny path down his arm.

“I love you,” Steve whispered between reverent kisses. “All of you.”

There was no daylight to speak of as Bucky turned his wrist and presented a metal hand for Steve to nuzzle against. A gentle pull, and before Bucky really could call himself properly awake, he was bringing those gorgeous lips to press against his own and getting lost in the predawn hours.

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Bucky swiveled around and bent over into a reverse kick, catching Steve right on the chin, sending him flying back onto the mat. Before Bucky could even get himself back up into a defensive stance, though, the shield came flying at his face, and he had just enough time to bring up his metal arm before another sparring match had him seeing the inside of Medical.

“Not quite, Steven,” he huffed out. Then he pounced, landing on top of him, legs bracketing Steve’s chest, knees shoved up under his armpits.

Steve laughed, a fire in his eyes as lifted his head. “You don’t think this will actually hold —”

Bucky wrapped metal fingers around his throat and shoved back, knocking Steve’s head into the mat, effectively shutting him up with a grunt. “Don’t I?” he asked, giving Steve his best wicked little smile.

Returning the smirk, Steve’s body went slack under Bucky before he slowly, purposefully opened his mouth just wide enough to rest his tongue against his bottom lip.

If Bucky were a betting man (he was), he’d put even money that his pupils went wide in perfect time to that little gesture. His dick certainly got painfully hard in the same span of seconds.

He knew what Steve wanted. He loosened his grip enough to press a finger against that shiny pink tongue.

The way Steve took that one digit into his mouth was obscene, as though the very feel of that metal in his mouth was going to be enough to send him over the edge, untouched. Bucky knew, from the sight alone, if he could feel that tongue on his finger, it would certainly send him over the edge.

Steve locked eyes with him and let the finger slide out with a wet pop!, before brokenly whispering, “More.”

Heat flooded Bucky from the top of his hairline down, and yeah, their training session was more than over.

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One arm wrapped around his waist, Steve tangled their other fingers together — flesh and metal — and pulled Bucky’s hand up so he could gently kiss along the tips of his fingers, all the while his chin pressed against Bucky’s metal shoulder.

“God, you’re beautiful, Buck,” he murmured into Bucky’s ear. Bucky smiled to himself as he watched a boat lazily meander up the East River from where they were hanging out in Brooklyn Bridge Park. It was long after dark, but nobody had seemed to tell the little boat that.

Not that Bucky could complain; he felt as content as the boat seemed to be.
He pulled Steve in just a little bit tighter as lips dusted against the metal through his shirt. “Do you know how beautiful you are, baby? How precious every part of you is to me?” He turned his head to catch Bucky’s eye. “Do you?”

Bucky smiled. “Well, you remind me every day, so... Yeah. I think I have an idea.”

“I just don’t want you every doubting how I see you. I don’t want you to ever feel like you have to hide from me — not ever. Is that such a bad thing?”

Oh.

The arm cover.

So that was what had been going on all week. “Stevie...”

Steve touched his fingers to Bucky’s face, gently turning him into a kiss. As soft and as gentle as it was, it still made Bucky tingle.

“I love all of you, baby.”

“I know you do.”

Steve smiled, though Bucky didn’t miss the touch of sadness in it. He still accepted the next proffered kiss. And to show he understood, he reached up to tangle metal fingers into Steve’s hair.

He also didn’t miss the tiny whimper he got in return.

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The Koenigsegg sat tucked in a corner of Tony’s vast garage, the steel gray of the machine almost lost in the shadows. To the casual observer, it looked like Tony didn’t care all that much about it, but Bucky knew better. The damn thing was actually one of Tony’s pride-and-joys, and in uncharacteristic fashion of the man, he actually didn’t put it on display, like the rest of his toys in here.

Which, to be honest, was fine with everyone, because if anyone did manage to ask him about it, they got sat down for a very long tale about a 22-year-old who couldn’t find his dream car anywhere, so he just decided to design and build one himself. And that story was exciting to only two people: Tony and Steve.

Tony loved the arrogance of the kid who’d designed it, and Steve loved the ingenuity. Plus, the car was fast as fuck, and the one and only time Tony had deigned to let Steve drive it, he’d taken it out to the airstrip at Avengers Facility and proceeded to cap the speedometer out.

At almost two hundred and seventy five miles an hour.

Tony damn near had a heart attack that day, and swore up and down Steve was never allowed to so much as breathe on it ever again.

As Bucky stood in front of it — pilfered key fob in hand — he smiled at his plan to change that.

“It won’t start for you, Sir,” JARVIS stated as Bucky took all of one step towards the vehicle.

“What do you mean, it won’t start?”

“Mr. Barnes, as I’m sure you’re aware, Mr. Stark is one of the most advanced engineers in the
world.” *Kiss ass.* “So I’m sure you are also aware, he would have programmed the starting mechanism with a biometric lock.”

Oh. Well. Shit.

“I don’t suppose you know of an override, do you?” Bucky asked, hopefully.

“I do apologize, Sir, but my programming forbids me from giving that to you.”

Bucky put his hands on his hips and sighed. He could probably figure out a way around it, but that would take him a few days, and he’d wanted to take the thing out *now.* When he and Steve both had a night off, and nothing for the next few days.

And, okay, maybe he was a *teeny* bit curious to see how far away they could get before Tony figured it out, and remotely shut the thing down.

Bucky did always love a challenge.

His mind had just started rolling through alternatives when JARVIS spoke again. “Sir, I thought you might like to know that while it goes against my protocol to tell you how to override the lock, it actually *doesn’t* go against my protocol to inform you that just last week Mr. Stark had been going over the workings of his lock — including its override — with Mr. Banner.”

Bucky perked up at that, and opened his mouth to ask how he’d be able to get his hands on that footage, when JARVIS went on. “Sir, you should *also* remember, in case this part of your Avengers training has escaped you, that all senior Avengers team members have full access to any and all security footage of Avengers Tower, with complete override access.”

Oh. Okay. Bucky could work with that.

With a wicked little smile, Bucky turned to the closest open wall space. “JARVIS, please project for me, all conversations between Tony and Bruce that took place on the —”

“The eleventh, sir.”

“On the eleventh, between the hours of —”

“Two and three pm, Sir.”

“Between two and three in the afternoon.”

As the video feed projected onto the wall, Bucky smiled with a dirty sort of glee. JARVIS *definitely* wasn’t a kiss ass. If anything, JARVIS was possibly the shadiest motherfucker of them all.

If Bucky could buy the machine a drink, he’d drown Manhattan to do it.

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“How?”

“*Magic.*”

“Fuck off, Bucky. come on. How’d you get it?”

“I *told* you. Magic.”
“So, I’m expected to believe you somehow apparated this out of Tony’s garage? Because I’m pretty sure Tony’s got a little bit of Dumbledore in him, and he’d have found a way of keeping that from happening.”

“Please. Tony is so not Dumbledore. Gandalf, maybe...”

“Okay, no, Tony is, like, the supreme overlord of Avengers Tower, and I’m pretty sure he can make himself omnipotent and omniscient, if the situation called for it.”

“Exactly. Which means Tony would be the guy who would use everything you never knew about yourself to make you go on an adventure you never thought you’d want to go on.”

“That is so — okay, yeah, that’s sounds a bit like Tony.”

Bucky smiled and nodded in approval as they stood over the car parked in one of the guest spots of their building.

The look on Steve’s face was still as inscrutable as it had been when Bucky had first gotten home, but he knew Steve was probably freaking-the-fuck out on the inside.

Bucky held up the key fob, dangling it like a carrot. “You wanna take it for a test spin?” he asked with a little smile.

Steve didn’t take his eyes off the car. “How long do you think we have?”

“Well, I chose tonight to steal it because we have the next few days off. I also chose tonight because I have been informed by reliable sources that Tony has a date with Pepper tonight.”

“They still go on dates?”

“Funny enough, I asked the same question. According to my source, apparently Pepper insists on it.”

Steve smiled at him. “Is your source Natasha?”

“Actually, no,” Bucky said with a laugh. “Maria.”

Steve gasped. “She turned Red Coat on him?”

“Filthy traitor,” Bucky responded, all solemn and head-shaking.

Steve’s hand shot out and snatched the key fob out of Bucky’s hand. “So, what you’re saying is, this is my toy for the next... however?”

Bucky made a deliberate show of wrapping his metal arm around Steve’s waist to pull him in for a kiss. “Would seem so, Cap.”

Because that was the real crux of the evening. Bucky wanted to do something special for Steve after the way the man had been tripping over himself to dote on Bucky all week long. And Bucky knew it was all about the arm. The piece of metal that was just as much a part of him as anything. Steve had just been so unnerved by the cover that had made it look real. Apparently he was embarrassed by that, because he’d spent the last week trying to, from what Bucky had finally surmised, make up for giving the impression that the ‘flesh’ arm was more important to Steve than Bucky’s metal one.

“We taking this for a spin?” Steve asked before going in for another kiss.

“Ready when you are, sweetheart.”
Steve gave him a conspiratorial grin before turning and sliding into the driver’s seat. Bucky was half-tempted to slide across the back, but it really was a million-dollar car, and he could respect that. Instead he bolted around to the passenger’s side and jumped in.

“Wait, before you doing anything...” Bucky leaned over to the air-control buttons on the dash and entered, what turned out to be, the A/B sequence of the original Super Mario Bros. He leaned back and smiled as the engine purred to life. “Okay, we’re good.”

Steve smiled appreciatively at him and threw the car into reverse. “Hold onto your ass,” was all the warning Bucky got before they tore out of the basement and onto John Street.

Steve flipped around the side streets, barely slowing down to make a single turn. Even if they didn’t crash this thing — which, with Steve’s driving habits, was a real possibility — they were going to have to at least replace the tires. Bucky could live with that.

“So, where are we going, baby?” Bucky asked as they turned onto Flushing Avenue.

“Well, I thought we’d turn up Kent and take the drive up along the East River before doubling back and jumping onto the I-278.”

“You plannin’ on headin’ out of town?”

Steve grabbed Bucky’s hand and kissed it. “Anything that gets us as far away as possible, and make it that much harder for Tony to get this thing back, I’m all for.”

Bucky snickered and turned back to face forward. “I like your thinking, Cap.”

“Figured you’d see it my way.”

“I would call it ‘your way’ if I hadn’t had the same thought when I stole the damn thing,” Bucky countered.

“You were just channeling me.”

Bucky laughed. “You mean ‘channeling asshole’, and if that’s the case, I want my money back.”

“Please. You love my asshole.”

Bucky slowly turned towards him, wide-eyed, just in time to watch Steve turn a spectacular shade of red. He couldn’t help the snickering as he asked, “I’m sorry, what?”

“That, um, maybe wasn’t what I meant.”

The smile that spread across Bucky’s face wasn’t anything short of gleeful. “I’m sorry, Stevie, I’m not sure what it was you didn’t mean to say.”

He gave Steve’s knee a small squeeze, and reveled in the way it made him jump. The car jerked to the side and Steve gave him a nasty look — one that was entirely lost behind the splotches on his face.

“You’re an asshole, you know that?”

Fuck, he was making this _too easy_.

“Maybe so, Steven.” He patted Steve’s leg. “And while we’ve apparently established that I love your asshole, can the same be said in return?”
The change from red to puce was truly a sight to behold.

“I’m... Okay, I’m not answering that.” Steve shook his head and focused on the road.

“Aw, come on, Steven! I thought you said you loved all of me.”

“That is not what I meant!”

Bucky burst out laughing then leaned over to kiss Steve on the cheek. “Don’t be like that, sugar tits.” He giggled and leaned back in his seat. “Tell me you love all of me. Come on.” Steve shook his head and Bucky nudged him. “Do it, Steven. From arm to asshole. Tell me you love all the parts of me.”

That finally got Steve to crack. He let out a short laugh and shook his head. “This isn’t a joke, Bucky,” he tried to reason.

“Oh, but it is.” Bucky reached over to cup the side of Steve’s face. Steve turned into it, nuzzling against Bucky’s metal hand. That was reason enough for Bucky to continue, just a little bit more honest this time. “Look, I’m sorry if you thought the arm cover was anything more than it was. But Steve, you gotta know I’m not upset about your reaction. I never was.” Steve eyed him, but he kept going. “Look, from your perspective, I can see how you would be horrified at your reaction, because you don’t want me to think you prefer me one way over the other.”

“Bucky —”

“No, hush, I’m talking.” Bucky brushed his thumb across Steve’s lips. Steve opened his mouth in invitation, but Bucky didn’t take it. He had things to say. “The thing is, Steve, I’m not upset because I don’t prefer me one way over the other. And, the thing is, I know that you prefer me however I prefer me.” He sat up a little straighter so he could lean in. He took Steve’s hand in his and gave it a squeeze. Steve cast a quick eye on him, but it was back to the road, all concentration while he listened.

Bucky sighed and turned to watch what Steve was watching. The world, just speeding along. “I’m not offended, Steve. I mean, I’ve loved the attention — I always will. But it’s misplaced. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“I don’t want you to think I wish things were different.” The response was quiet, even in the small space, but heartfelt.

Bucky huffed out a laugh. “You think I do? Sure, I wish the shit that happened to me hadn’t happened, but Steve.” He turned back to him. “We somehow, freakishly, got transported to a time where we get to be. We get to steal million-dollar cars” — Steve snorted at that — “and get to fight the good fight, but still get to live our lives, and get to be together, and all the other crazy shit we could have never fathomed.

“If you think this’ — he wiggled his metal fingers — “was too big a price to pay, you got that backwards. It was the smallest price I could ever imagine. This was all worth it.”

Steve snatched his hand out of the air and brought it close, grasping on like a security blanket. He looked so vulnerable — so beautiful — holding onto Bucky like that. Bucky grabbed his phone really quick and snapped a picture. That wasn’t something you let go of.

They were quiet after that, driving along at breakneck speeds, but still not burying the needle. Bucky knew Steve was waiting until they got outside the city and the crowds thinned out. Steve was reckless, but never at the expense of others.
It wasn’t until they swung out onto I-95 that Steve really opened her up, and then they fucking **flew**. Bucky’s heart leapt into his throat and he smiled. He and Steve had it **made**, their life the way it was.

He pulled his phone out again and opened up his Instagram. Sure, what he was about to do might get them busted, but maybe Tony would take pity on the photo and give them a short reprieve before he shut the car down. He loaded the recent image of Steve kissing his hand and added the following caption:

*Steve spent the whole week kissing my metal arm. I think it was his way of telling me that metal arm or not, he loves me for who I am and that he doesn't care about what I have become. As if I didn't know that, you stupid a**! Now look at the road, Tony is gonna blow a fuse if we scratch his $1 million little toy (that I may have borrowed without permission *cough* )*

With a little laugh, he hit send and sat back.

“What? What are you laughing at?” He caught Steve’s eyes with a smile.

“Oh, nothing,” he answered. “I just called Tony out on Instagram, and now I’m curious to see how long it takes before he notices his Koenigsegg is in the photo, and how much longer before he shuts it down.”

“Except, you said he’s with Pepper.”

Bucky nodded. “You think she’ll let him call the evening early to retrieve one of his favorite toys?”

Steve smiled, wolfish and knowing. “I think we’ve got this baby till morning.”
Chapter Summary

I found this thing hidden under a box in Tony’s lab. I asked him if I could keep it but he screamed "NOOOOOO! NO F**KING WAY!!" before snatching it out of my hands. Dude, relax! I know what it is. I just thought it would look great on my desk, that’s all! It’s not as if you didn’t deactivate this early prototype years ago, right Stark? RIGHT?!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Legs crossed at the ankles, hands behind his head, Bucky stared up at the scorch marks on the ceiling of Tony’s lab. The patterns were fascinating, the way they seemed to bleed out on one side and flare
out on the other. What was even more fascinating was the fact that there were seven of them. So it wasn’t like they were created by some accident on Tony’s part. Whatever Tony had been doing, it had been deliberate.

Not that Bucky knew what that was. When he’d asked earlier, Tony had just responded with, “Repulsor incident,” and went back to doing... whatever it was he was doing. Bucky had gone back to staring.

God, he was bored.

A hand knocked against his foot as Tony walked past him. “You do realize that holographic table under you is worth more than you make in a five years, and is therefore not for lying on?”

“I haven’t broken anything yet,” Bucky answered with a shrug, only to wince at the sound of metal scraping against glass.

“So, about that yet part...”

Bucky sighed and sat up, swinging his legs around to hop down. He ambled over to where Tony was fixing a welding mask onto his head as he stood over what looked like the early makings of a sentient food processor.

“What are you doing?” he asked as he tried peeking over Tony’s shoulder to get a better look at the thing. There was some sort of hard plastic swivel top over a metal base, with large tubing running between the two sections. For the life of him, Bucky had no idea what it was.

“Glad you asked!” Tony turned and smiled at him. “This, my friend, is a large-scale model of the new coolant system for the next series of Mark suits. I’m designing the suits with stronger repulsors and thrust, at an increase of almost 300%.”

Bucky stared at him, nonplussed. Tony ignored it and brought the mask down before turning back to the thing that Bucky still didn’t understand, and kept going, albeit muffled. “The problem is, the new repulsors and back-end thrusts are producing heat at about three-thousand degrees Kelvin —”

“Uhhh....” Bucky interrupted, intelligent as ever. “Isn’t the surface of the sun just over five-thousand Kelvin?” Of that he was damn near certain.

“Yep!” Tony reached over and picked up what looked like a soldering iron on steroids (seriously, where the fuck did he get this stuff?). “So, as you can see, my little ice pop, I need a new coolant system that can handle those temps.”

Bucky waved a hand at the contraption on the table. “And that’s what that thing’s supposed to do?”

“Well, a smaller version of this, but yes. This one’s just for scanning purposes.”

“Can’t you just put the schematics into JARVIS and have him do the layout?”

“I could, sure. But, you know.” Tony turned to him, and something about the way he held himself, Bucky had even money he was smiling. “This sounded like more fun.”

“Why am I not surprised.” Bucky laughed and turned away, though nothing came to mind in terms of where he was going. He was killing time while Steve was away on a mission — one he might be joining in on at some point, hence him not having anything to do other than eating, training, and annoying Tony.
He glanced aimlessly around the workshop, taking in all the tools and toys Tony had stockpiled around the joint. Bucky snorted to himself, because seriously, if not for Pepper, he was certain Tony would have ended up on one of those 20/20 specials about obscene hoarding.

Nothing special really caught his attention, so he took to meandering about, first walking around the table he’d just been lying on. He gave it a few semi-hard taps with his metal hand as he went, because Bucky was rebel. Damnit.

As he wandered around, his fingers dragging randomly across various artifacts — old pieces of Tony’s suits, a couple of Steve’s shields, in various stages of construction, random bits of machinery he couldn’t identify, Dum-E hiding in a corner.

Bucky made sure to sidle past the hapless robot and give it an affectionate pat. “You’re doing good, buddy,” he whispered, and the machine made a soft chirping noise at him. Bucky just chuckled and kept going.

When Bucky stumbled upon three of Tony’s old suits, he stopped dead. “Hey, what happened here?” he asked, inclining his head towards Tony, though his eyes stayed glued to the suit in front of him. It looked like someone had taken a katana — or possibly a lightsaber — to it, slashing it open crosswise from shoulder to waist.

“Huh?” The welding stopped behind him. “Oh, that one. Yeah, that was that incident in Sinai. You know, right after Sokovia?”

Bucky finally pulled his gaze away to turn and stare incredulously at Tony. “Yeah. I read about Sinai — I know all about it. What I don’t understand is how the fuck you survived” — he waved a hand back at the suit — “whatever caused this.”

Tony just smirked at him. “That is a story for drinks. So later. When I’m not playing with hot things.” He turned back to his project. “Pep says I’m not allowed to anymore.”

“That’s because Pepper’s smart,” Bucky commented with a smirk.

“Anyone ever told you you’re not funny, Barnes?” Tony shot back.

“Does that mean you think Pepper being smart is a joke?” Bucky countered with a serene smile.

Tony blinked at him. “I... That’s not what I meant.” Without another word he turned back to the table.

“Uhuh. I’ll be sure to ask Pepper about that later,” Bucky muttered under his breath, amused. He cast one last glance at the destroyed suit and kept going. The second suit was damn-near blackened, like it had been caught in a fire, and the third suit Bucky couldn’t help snorting at because, while it just looked worse for wear, somebody (Tony, probably) had taken the head and placed in an outstretched hand, Hamlet Style.

Seemed fitting. Both of those guys were fucking nuts.

“Hey, Johnny Five.” Bucky rolled his eyes but still stopped. “If you’re going to be nosy, make yourself useful. I need seven, four-inch galvanized pipes out of the drawer over back by Dum-E.”

Bucky glanced over at the robot. “Can’t you just ask Dum-E to get —”

“He’s on time out.”
“Of course he is.” Bucky shook his head and sighed as he headed back over there. He gave Dum-E another pat as he went. “Mind telling me which drawer they’re in?” he asked as his eyes roved over the five in question.

“One of them,” Tony answered with an absent wave back at him, nose still buried in his machine.

“Do you know where they are?” Bucky mumbled to Dum-E, but all he got in return was a sad little hum — whether that meant Dum-E wouldn’t help or that it took its time out seriously, Bucky had no idea.

He picked a drawer at random, yanking it open to a surprisingly neat and clean layout of everyday tools. Bucky hmphed at the normalcy of it, having half expected to find a drawer full of arc reactors, or some such whatever that would level the building. Well, there were still four more drawers to open.

The one next to the first held vials upon vials of what Bucky assumed was vibranium, if the cases they were in were anything to go by.

When he opened the third drawer, that was where he found the piping Tony was looking for. He grabbed a bunch and shut the drawer, and was just about to hand them over when curiosity got the better of him and he opened the next one down.

And thank God he did.

He broke out into a huge grin, excitement thrumming through him, because nestled in the drawer were three Iron Man helmets, two early War Machine helmets, and holy shit!

In the very back of the drawer was one of the fucking Ultron legion heads!

Bucky absolutely did not squeal with glee (he did not!) as he reached in to pull the thing out. It was lightweight, but dense, and Bucky remembered reading that the entire Ultron legion was made up of mostly vibranium. Completely entranced, he turned the thing around, only for it to slip out of his fingers.

“Shit,” he murmured, catching it at the last second before it tumbled to the floor. He held it up in front of him, his own eyes wide at the actual glowing red sockets staring back at him. “What the fuck?”

He turned and walked back to where Tony had resumed soldering... whatever the fuck it was he was soldering. He dropped the piping on the table before holding the head out in front of him. “Uh, Stark?”

“Yeah,” Tony replied absently, not stopping what he was doing.

“This thing isn’t actually active, uh, is it?”

“Is what —” Tony turned back around only to stop mid-sentence, his eyes bugged out, comically wide, and he was out of his chair like a shot, soldering iron clattering to the floor.

“Oooh no! No no no.” Bucky took a step back just as Tony snatched the head out of his hand. He tucked the thing under his arm. “No one touches this thing, not even part machines.”

“What? Why?” Bucky frowned at the thing, feeling like a toy had just been taken away from him. “Why can’t I see it? I’m not gonna do anything with it.”
“That’s not the point.”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed at the head, noticing only now the way the hollow of its cheeks glowed as well. He took an involuntary step towards it and asked, “I mean, it’s _not_ active, right?”

Tony countered Bucky’s move, taking his own step back. “Of course not. Despite what people like to think of me, I’m not actually the village idiot.”

Bucky took another step, this one much more calculated. He was getting that damn head. “No one thinks you’re the village idiot, Stark. _Doctor Finklestein_, maybe…”

“When did you watch Nightmare Before — never mind.” Tony slipped behind his stool, like it could act as some sort of barrier between him and Bucky. “So, not the village idiot, just the local mad scientist. I can live with that. The point is, you still aren’t getting this head.”

Bucky arched an eyebrow at him. “It’s amazing how you keep thinking that.” Between one blink and the next, Bucky shot his metal hand at Tony, taking advantage of his flinch long enough to snatch the head out of his hand. He smiled down at his little victory. “All mine now.”

“Seriously, Barnes?” Tony glared at him, so Bucky yanked the head back, making sure Tony couldn’t reach it. Instead he just rolled his eyes and sat back down, waving a dismissive hand. “Whatever. Just don’t go starting another World War Three, okay?”

“No, I believe weapons and wars are your thing.”

“Hey, I resent that. I got out of that racket a long time ago, I’ll have you know.”

“So did I.”

Tony turned to smirk at him. “Touché.”

Bucky smiled and walked away, turning over his new find in his hand. He stared into its eyes, trying to gauge if they moved or not. He kept feeling like they were following him, so he turned it side-to-side, tracking them, but best he could tell they were just glowing and creepy. Because, honestly, Tony wouldn’t keep a sentient head around, would he?

Of course he would.

Bucky ticked his eyes once more at every glowing point before flipping it over and peering down its neck. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for — gears moving, or something — but all he saw was more of the faint glowing.

“So, what’s the deal with red eyes and such,” he wondered aloud as he walked up behind Tony. When he didn’t answer right away, he stuck the head over Tony’s shoulder and affected his deepest murder-voice.

“Well, Tony, seems you can’t keep your hands out of anything can you.” Bucky imitated Ultron’s intonations as best he could while bobbing the head around. “But it seems your friend Barnes here has found my on switch. Looks like I’m going to break into some shenanigans again! Muahahaha!”

Bucky smiled as Tony flipped the mask up and stared at him, a bemused expression on his face. “You know that sounds nothing like Ultron, right?”

Bucky’s answer to that was to shove the legion robot head In Tony’s face and screech out, “RED RUM! RED RUM!”
“Back off, Buffy. Pop culture references are my thing.” Tony hopped up and headed over to the holographic table.

Bucky smirked, lightly tossing the head in his hands, as he followed. “Weren’t you the guy who, not last week, gave me and Steve shit for not having seen enough eighties movies?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean you get to start using the references less than twenty-four hours after watching the film.” He threw his hands up like he was raising water, and a schematic popped up out of the table.

Bucky huffed. “I’ll have you know, Steve and I saw The Shining years ago.”

“All right, you can have the one.”

Damn straight he could. Bucky smiled as he continued to toss the head. He watched it go up and down, admiring the way it really was almost as light as Steve’s shield. It had a lot of extra parts to it, accounting for a weight difference, but the feel of the vibranium in it was giving Bucky all kinds of ideas about stress tests against the shield.

Or, you know, just using the shield as a flat bat to see how far they could make this thing fly. Purely for testing purposes, of course.

“Hey, so do you have any real use for this thing anymore?” Bucky asked.

“Not at the moment, but you never know.”

“Well, because I was wondering,” Bucky continued, eyes still fixated on head. “Think maybe I could keep it?”

“What?” Tony’s head snapped to him. “No!” Shockingly, he managed to grab it back from Bucky. Then he turned and headed back across the lab. “Jesus, Barnes, this isn’t a toy. This thing is responsible for the death of a fuck ton of people, and I’m not going to let you keep it as a souvenir.”

“I’m aware it’s not a toy, Tony,” Bucky snapped, even though, yeah, okay fine, he was gonna use it as a toy. He followed the head in pursuit. “I just figured, since you didn’t need it anymore...”

“That still doesn’t mean you get to use it as a doorstop.”

Bucky frowned at him. “Okay, fine, but can I at least get a picture with it?”

Tony spun around to face him. “Seriously?”

Bucky shoved his hands into his pockets. “It’s fucking cool. Why not?”

“I... Fine.” Clearly annoyed now — to which Bucky took no small amount of pleasure — he tossed the head back at Bucky, who deftly caught it. He reached into his back pocket and grabbed his phone, tossing it right back to Tony.

“One picture, and then you go find Barton to play with.”

Bucky held up the head again and dropped his voice. “Now, Tony. Is that any way to talk to an old friend?”

“Explain to me how you’re a master assassin again?”

Bucky laughed, but ignored the comment in favor of holding up the head for his picture. This thing
was just too fucking cool to let Tony put a damper on any part of it.

Tony held up the camera and a moment later the flash went off. Immediately he put up a hand. “Wait. I can do better.” Bucky held still as eyes narrowed into the viewfinder on his camera. A moment later another flash went off and a satisfied smile spread across Tony’s face as he looked it over. “Huh. I should’ve have been a photographer.”

“You should have been a lot of things.” Bucky plucked the phone out of his hands and turned it around to see. “At least according to you.”

“Hey.” Tony pointed his thumbs at himself. “Genius here.”

Bucky just smiled and waved the robot head at him. “You sure about that?”

“Absolutely sure. Even if Ultron did want to destroy the world, it would take still take a genius like me to invent him. Now give me the head back.” He held his hand out to Bucky.

“Aw, come on.” Bucky frowned and gripped the head tighter. “It’s been years. You don’t actually need it anymore. Can’t I just hang onto it for a while?”

“No,” came Tony’s blunt reply. “You really would find a way to launch the next world war. Gonna have to pass on that one, soldier, give it here.”

“Just for a week? I promise I won’t do anything with it.”

“No.”

“Okay, but what about just until Steve gets back, so I can show him.”

“That’s longer than a week, so still no.”

“You know, metal arm and all, I could just take it.”

“Pretty sure my suit could stop you, Scrappy. Still no.”

“When did you become such a funsuck?”

“When I crash-landed an entire city.” Tony wiggled his fingers expectantly and Bucky, who with a reluctant grumble, thrust it into the outstretched hand.

“Thank you,” Tony said and walked over to put the head back in the drawer before going back to his project. “Now wasn’t there something about you going to bug Barton?”

“Yeah yeah.” Bucky scowled at the back of Tony’s head before switching over to his Instagram. If Tony wasn’t gonna let him keep it, he could at least troll the asshole about it. After adding the photo, he threw up a caption that may or may not have been an outright lie about where he found it and what type of head it was.

_I found this thing hidden under a box in Tony's lab. I asked him if I could keep it but he screamed "NOOOOO! NO F**KING WAY!!" before snatching it out of my hands. Dude, relax! I know what it is. I just thought it would look great on my desk, that’s all! It's not as if you didn't deactivate this early prototype years ago, right Stark? RIGHT?!_

Okay, sure, it wasn’t his most creative revenge, but maybe if someone thought Tony’d just tossed it somewhere, some of team might give him shit for it. It was small and petty, but fuck everyone, it made Bucky smile. He hit send and immediately turned for the door.
Of which he made it about five steps before, “Whoa there, horsey.”

He slowly turned back around, eyes all wide and innocent. He knew nothing. “Yes, dear?”

Tony was glaring at him, phone in hand. “Really, Barnes? That’s the best you’ve got?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he answered with a slow shake of his head. He had to fight to keep the smirk of his face. They both knew he could delete the image, but it wouldn’t do Tony any good. Everyone on the team had Bucky’s posts on notification at this point. Most would have seen it by now.

“Was there anything else you needed?” he asked, voice just as sweet as cherry pie.

Tony eyed him shrewdly before pointing his phone at him. “If this blows up in my face in any way, I’ll get you back for it. And clearly” — he turned the screen to face Bucky — “I’m much more creative at this stuff than you.”

Bucky just smirked at him and turned to leave, only to have another shout meet his ears.

“And that!” Tony brandished his phone at Bucky again. “That, right there, is why you can’t keep it.”

Bucky peered at the screen, but nothing about his words jumped out at him. Confused, he glanced back up at Tony. “I don’t understand.”

“That” — he thrust a finger in the direction of the head — “Brick Tamland, is not an early prototype.”

Bucky shook his head, more confused than ever. “Than what it is?”

“It’s Ultron’s actual head.”

“Wait, you mean —”

“Yes.”

“From Sokovia?”

“Got it in one, slugger.”

Bucky turned to look at the helmet, completely thunderstruck. So turns out he was wrong about his lie, as well. “So you’re telling me, what, you scavenged the head from the site?!”

His gaze snapped back to Tony, who only shrugged. “It’s science, man. You don’t throw out science. I mean, I had to clean it up a bit, but —”

“Anthony Edward Stark, what the fuck are you doing with a genocidal megalomaniac’s head in a fucking workshop drawer?!”

If Tony was fazed at an assassin screaming at him, he didn’t show it. He just shrugged again at Bucky and gestured at the head. “Again. Science.”

“Okay, then are you sure I can’t keep it?”

“NO.”
Special thank you to ohcaptainmycaptain1918 for the absolutely brilliant idea of using the Ultron head like a puppet. She cracked me up so much with the idea, I had to include it!
Pietro!! For the love of God! Come ooooooon!! OK, Nat, my Sokovian is rusty. How do you say: "Stop moving because I want to take a photo of the three of you together and if you don't, I WILL break your f**king legs with a baseball bat and don't think I'm not gonna be fast enough, you son of a b**ch"?

Bucky smiled as he walked out onto the veranda off the common floor. He lifted a hand to wave at Clint.

“Hey, sexy legs! What’s — shit!” Bucky’s back hit the ground hard as his legs got kicked out from underneath him by an unseen force. Bucky scowled at the streak of silver laughter that disappeared through the stairwell door.

Bucky turned back to glare at Clint, who was standing there — the asshole — doubled over in
laughter. “Was that completely necessary?” he grumbled as he pulled himself upright.

“It was, actually.” Bucky jumped slightly as Wanda came up from behind him and smirked. “If he plans on winning the bet he made with Barton, you will find it to be absolutely necessary.”

Bucky’s eyes flicked to Clint, who was finally straightening back up — a knowing smile on his face — before he narrowed them at Wanda. “And what bet would that be?”

Clint picked up a laptop off one of the tables and turned it to face him. It was a simultaneous feed of several rooms in the tower. Rooms all containing the various Avengers currently in residence.

As Bucky watched in growing horror, he saw Tony’s work stool disappear out from under him, only to be followed by Sam’s wings flying out of his hands and landing across the room a few minutes later. Next up, Thor was shifted two inches to the left, which led to him catching the hammer with his chest instead of in his hand.

Then Bucky shivered in fear as Natasha went flying up into the air in the gym, only to laugh as Pietro came into focus when he caught her and kissed her lightly on the cheek. Before she could do anything, he gently set her down and took off again. She responded by turning to the security camera and flipping them off. Bucky had to high five Clint for that one.

But then his eyes rested on the last feed, and Bucky’s blood ran just a little cold. “Uh, Clint?” He pointed to where Bruce was quietly working in his lab. “You sure that’s a good idea?”

Clint just shrugged, arms crossed, an evil little smile on his lips. “Only one way to find out.”

Bucky wondered about his friends sometimes.

He slowly turned back to the feed and watched, a hint of genuine fear creeping in, but nothing was happening. Bruce just continued to tap away at his computer, intent and focused on whatever he was doing.

A gust of wind hit the side of Bucky’s face, and he glanced over to find Pietro standing next to him, arms cross like Clint’s, staring eagerly at the screen. “Did I miss it?” he asked.

Bucky looked back at the screen. “Missed what? You didn’t do anything.”

Pietro smiled, small and knowing. “Didn’t I?”

At that moment, Bruce lifted his tea mug to his lips, only to gasp and sputter, spitting the liquid out of his mouth and sloshing the cup all over the place.

Bucky turned to shoot a glance at Pietro, who was smiling triumphantly, just as the doctor muttered, “What the hell?”

He peered down into the mug before bringing it up to his face and sniffing it. Whatever he smelled made him twitch, and he gently set the mug down, only to grip the table a little less than gently.

“Goddammit, Pietro,” Bruce spat out. His gaze snapped up to the camera, nostrils flaring, and a flash of green flashed over his eyes.

“Shit.” Clint snapped the laptop shut and grabbed it. “Okay, time to go.” Without another word, he took off towards the roof, and it was all Bucky could do to follow. Two minutes later found them all climbing into one of the small helicopters.
“What did you do?” Bucky shouted at Pietro over the sound of the blades coming to life. And the kid, the absolutely bastard, was smiling back at him.

“I switched his tea on him!” he shouted back with a laugh.

“Yeah, I could see that. What did you put in there?”

Pietro’s grin turned wolfish. “I changed it out for that Asgardian moonshine he hates so much!”

Bucky just stared at him in shock before he burst out laughing. A few weeks before, when Thor had first come back into town, he’d brought some homemade alcohol he’d been playing around with back on Asgard. After taking only a sip, Bruce had gotten a bit drunk, and proceeded to use his newfound loose tongue to tell those in attendance that the ‘moonshine’, as it was, tasted like ‘Hulk ass’.

Bucky, Pietro, Clint, and Tony had spent the next solid hour teasing Bruce and pondering exactly what ‘Hulk ass’ tasted like, and who was gonna take one for the team to find out.

(Steve hadn’t been there that night, so the resounding vote had been in favor of him. He had, surprisingly, declined.)

Bucky shook his head and turned back around to face out the window. How the hell had his day turned into this? Well, so much for his earlier boredom. That had been good and taken care of at this point.

“Where are we going?” he asked as he watched the city pass underneath them. His phone vibrated in his pocket, and when he pulled it out to see a text from Steve, he resolutely ignored it. He wasn’t so stupid as to think news didn’t travel fast.

“Well, my concern is how well the Hulk can track us,” Clint started conversationally. “So I was thinking we might want to leave the country. But seeing as how this thing hasn’t been fueled up recently, we may only get as far as Massachusetts before we all die in a fiery crash.”

“So, maybe not leave the country is what I’m hearing from you.”

“I believe I can keep us in the air so that we can land safely,” Wanda chimed in from behind Bucky. “If that is your plan.”

“You know, I thought about that,” Clint said just before he veered the chopper west. “But even if the giant green bastard can’t track us —”

“I’m still not sure how you think he can track us when he’s raged out —”

“Shut up, Barnes; I know things,” Clint said. “Anyway, even if he can’t track us, your little balls of red energy aren’t exactly subtle. We need to lay low.”

Bucky laughed. “Jesus, Barton, this isn’t some — I don’t fucking know — clandestine mission.” His phone buzzed again and he shoved it between his thighs before waving a hand at Clint. “We’re not even sure he did hulk out.”

“We all saw the green in his eyes,” Pietro said.

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean he was actually going to change,” Wanda countered, and Bucky nodded in agreement.
“See? Wanda gets it.”

Clint shrugged. “Better safe than sorry.”

“And you think we won’t be sorry when we get back?”

“We’re still getting the hell out of dodge.”

“Whatever. Ass.”

“Love you too, sweetheart.”

Bucky smiled and sat back, fine for now with letting Clint steer them all wherever. He finally picked up his phone to see a few missed texts from Steve.

What the hell is going on at the Tower??? — S

Did you make Bruce HULK OUT??? — S

Are you alive? You better be alive. I can’t kick your ass for this if you aren’t alive. — S

Okay, now you need to answer me. — S

NOT FUNNY, BUCKY! — S

Bucky quickly opened his phone and fired off a text.

Not dead. — B

He was about to start another one, but the response to the first was almost immediate, and Bucky couldn’t help but cringe.

Thank god. Seriously, though, are you okay? What happened back there? — S

“Uh, guys?” Bucky piped up. “I’m not entirely sure, but we really may have made Bruce hulk out. Or, well, more accurately, you and Pietro did. I’m not taking the fall for this.”

Clint’s eyes went wide, and his grip tightened on the gears. “No shit, seriously?”

Bucky glanced back down at the phone. “Well, Steve is making it sound like that’s what’s going on.” He typed out a response and hit send.

I’m fine. With Clint, Speedy Gonzales, and Wanda. Did Bruce really go green??? We actually don’t know. — B

Bucky sat back and waited for a response. No one said anything, and he thought for a moment maybe they had actually fucked up on this one. He jumped in his seat a minute later when his phone buzzed in his hands. He fumbled to answer it as Steve’s face flashed across the screen.

“It wasn’t me, I swear;” he repeated, by way of a greeting.

“Just how stupid are all of you?” Steve growled back.

“Well, that depends. I mean, if Bruce didn’t change, then we obviously aren’t that stupid, but —”

“No, I’m going to go with epically stupid.”
Bucky glanced at everyone on board, a hard expression on each face. “So, he did change?”

The line was quiet, and Bucky began to sweat. It was almost a minute before a light chuckle met his ears. “No, you idiot. Despite what you think, Bruce actually has better control than that."

“But his eyes went green.”

Another laugh. “Yeah, also despite what you think, you and Clint aren’t the only trolls roaming the halls of Avengers Tower.”

“Aren’t the only... Motherfucker!” he snapped as Steve’s words sank in. He hung up on the loud laughter that rang down the line at him.

“What!” Clint’s grip on the gears was damn near white as he shot a look over at Bucky. “What happened?”

Bucky huffed and turned to look at everyone. “Well, it would seem —”

“We got played,” Wanda finished for him.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “You know, it’s creepy when you do that.”

She just shrugged. “I think you will find I actually don’t care all that much.”

“Of course you don’t,” he muttered. He still quirked a smile at her. They all had their weapon of choice, and he respected every one of them.

“So, what was that, then?” Pietro asked, even as he visibly relaxed. He turned and propped his legs across his sister’s lap, who promptly pushed them off. He did it again, and she let them stay.

“It would seem Bruce was giving us — how shall I put this — his own special brand of an organic light show.”

“What?” Clint turned to him, aghast. “Bruce did not fuck with us. Bruce is not allowed to fuck with us. There are rules, Barnes. Tell him about the rules!” He was almost whining at this point.

Bucky laughed. “You tell him! I was just coming up from Tony’s lab because he said I wasn’t allowed to play with him anymore —”

“Ooh, I saw your Ultron head photo,” Clint cut in, suddenly smiling. “Nice.”

“Right? Anyway, Tony kicked me out and told me to go hang out with you. How did he not think that would end well for anyone?”

“Well, to be fair, you said it yourself. You didn’t do it this time,” Pietro said as he pulled out his phone. Then he smiled and added, “This is a great picture. Is this real?” He turned to show the photo to Wanda who just sighed and shook her head. They all knew how she felt on the subject.

“It is, yeah.” Bucky grabbed his own phone and snapped a picture out the front windshield. It looked like they were heading toward Indian Head Mountain, which was a really gorgeous place. “You should ask him about it sometime.”

“I might have to do that,” Wanda answered, her voice completely flat. Bucky smirked at Tony’s doom.

It was another five minutes before Clint found a clearing to land on at the edge of what looked like
Fish Hawk Cliffs.

As they all climbed out, ducking low against the slowing rotors, Bucky asked, “So, I take it we aren’t heading back then?”

Clint smirked at him. “What was your first clue? Besides, I told you. Not enough fuel.” He headed out to the edge of the rock to take in the view of Lake Placid.

“So, are you saying we’re stuck here?”

“Nah, Natasha will come and get us.”

“I think you’re confusing your girlfriend’s love for you with her love for teaching you a lesson.”

“That would be true if I thought that being ‘taught a lesson’” — he gestured at the scenery — “would be a hardship.”

Bucky laughed. “Fair point.”

“So how long are we out here, then?” Pietro asked as he came to stand next to Bucky.

Clint looked down at his watch. “I’d say at least three hours for punishment and then however long before she gets here with fuel.”

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It took two.

Bucky and Wanda were wandering around a copse of trees behind where Clint had set up a makeshift target practice. Pietro was running along the edge of the finger of the lake, trying to beat some mythical time in his head of how long it should take him to get to the mouth of it. He kept apparently coming in about point-two seconds too slow, with Wanda laughing at his increasing frustration.

“Come on, asshole, get back here!” Bucky shouted at the retreating form he couldn’t see. “I want a picture of you guys!”

“Oh, he won’t stop until he beats his time,” Wanda commented with another laugh. She hooked her arm with Bucky’s and smiled at him. “You’re better off just getting a picture of us without him.”

“But I want a picture of both of you.” Bucky pouted. “I don’t have any photos of you guys on my Instagram.”

Wanda just shrugged. “I keep telling him to stop running, but he won’t listen.”

Pietro was suddenly at her other side. “I listen; I just choose to ignore you.”

“Are all big brothers such jerks?” she asked with a fond grin.

“Wouldn’t know,” Bucky said. “I was the big brother.”

“So you don’t know if you were a jerk or not?”

“Please,” Bucky scoffed. “I was a perfect angel.”

She nudged him in the side. “I’m sure you were.”
Pietro reached across his sister to swat at Bucky’s stomach. “All right, big brother, you want my picture, you have thirty seconds to make it happen.”

Bucky liked a challenge. “Thirty seconds?”

“Twenty-eight now.”

With a laugh, Bucky pulled Wanda along and ran up to Clint. Pietro was already there. “Quick, I need a photo!”

“I’m shooting here!”

“Twenty seconds now!”

Bucky huffed in frustration and almost pushed Wanda into him. “Sorry!” He grabbed his phone out of his pocket. “Just let me get this, then you can shoot all you want.”

“Okay, do it quick —”

“Ten seconds there, camera man!”

Shit. He could to this.

“Nine!”

Fuck that silver-haired shit.

“Eight!”

He tried swiping open his camera app, but it wouldn’t cooperate.

“Seven!”

He growled in frustration because now the fingerprint unlock was being weird.

“Six!”

He got the phone unlocked and opened his camera.

“Five!”

He glanced up to find Clint and Wanda laughing at Pietro. “Guys, get serious!”

“Four — no, three now!”

Dammit! “Clint, don’t let Pietro go!”

“Two!” Pietro was practically vibrating with glee.

Bucky quickly held up the phone and snapped the photo. When he lowered his phone, Pietro was gone. “Did I get it?” he asked, almost hysterically.

Clint laughed at him. “How the fuck should I know? You’re the one who took it!”

Oh, right. Bucky pulled the photo up, and Jesus fuck, Pietro was nothing but a blur in the background.
“Dammit!” He glanced around, but that fast fucker was nowhere to be found. “Dude, get your ass back here! Let me get this!”

A swift ‘Nope!” and Pietro was there and gone.

Bucky glared in the direction he thought Pietro had gone, only to turn back to his phone in frustration. “Fine, you little shit. You wanna play this way? We play.”

He opened up his Instagram app and just threw up the photo he had, even if Pietro was damn near a ghost in the background. He added his caption and hit send.

Pietro!! For the love of God! Come ooooooon!! OK, Nat, my Sokovian is rusty. How do you say: "Stop moving because I want to take a photo of the three of you together and if you don't, I WILL break your f**king legs with a baseball bat and don't think I'm not gonna be fast enough, you son of a b**ch"?

He knew Nat would see it, and help him set Pietro right whenever she got there.

“Fuck him,” Bucky muttered. “One day, I’ll get him on my Instagram.”

Wanda laughed. “I highly doubt that.”

Bucky stared at her, trying to suss out if she was being serious or if she was just like her brother. Who, apparently, only ever wanted Bucky to be miserable. Did they not realize that Instagram was life?

“Whatever.” He shook his head and held out his arm. “Back to exploring?”

Clint gave her a squeeze before letting her go. “You treat my lady right, Barnes.”

“You’ve already got a lady, Barton.”

Clint snorted as he turned back to his bow. “That I do.”

Bucky smiled as he took Wanda’s arm, and was just about to turn back to the trees when someone called out to them from the cliff’s edge above them. Right where they’d left the chopper.

“Anybody looking for a ride?” came Natasha’s voice. Bucky turned to find her standing up there, hands on her hips, smiling down at them.

“Speak of the devil,” Bucky said, a little nonplussed

“That was fast,” Clint shouted back as he looked up at her, his smile suddenly goofy. “We get time off for good behavior?”

Natasha shook her head, but even from where he was, Bucky could see the fondness in her expression. “That would imply you knew how to behave.”

“It wasn’t my fault!”

“It was your bet,” Wanda pointed out, waving a hand at him.

Pietro slowed down just long enough to add, “Which I still need to collect on,” before taking off again.

Bucky frowned at them. In all the chaos of getting out, he’d completely forgotten how this had all
“Yeah, what’s that all about?” he asked. “I mean, I get what you’d dared him to do — that was obvious. But what was the deal you made?”

“Well.” Clint let an arrow fly into a tree before turning back to Bucky. “First I bet him a hundred bucks he couldn’t run to the bottom of the tower and back up again in under five minutes. I mean, come on, running and climbing stairs are not the same thing.” He pulled out another arrow and let it fly. “Surprisingly, I lost — lost by almost a minute actually. So then I doubled down that he couldn’t ‘check in’ on each of you in the same amount of time.”

“Which I won!” Pietro shouted as he passed them again in a blur, only narrowly missing Natasha, who’d climbed down to join then. Suddenly he was standing right in front of her, arms on her shoulders. “Sorry about that.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, barely flustered by the sudden presence in front of her. “I still owe you for earlier.”

He quirked a smile at her. “You will have to catch me first.” Then he was off again.

“Actually, he didn’t win,” Clint said. “I checked the time, and he was short by three seconds.”

He let go of another arrow, only to have it stop, midair, just short of the target. An aura of red light held it in place, and Clint turned around in a huff. “Aw, Wanda, seriously? That one was gonna split the last one!”

The smile she gave him was eerily like her brother’s. “I know.”

Clint murmured something about the Wicked Witch of the East as he stalked over to hide behind Natasha. “Why do I hang out with you?” he grumbled over Natasha’s shoulder, who looked supremely amused, even as she reached up to pat his cheek.

“Because, Barton, no one else but me or Barnes will hang out with you,” she so kindly pointed out.

“Steve likes me.”

“No no no.” Bucky snickered. “Steve likes me. And since I like you, he puts up with it.”

“Aw, honey, you like me? You really like me? C’mere you!”

Clint lunged at him, and before Bucky even had a chance to duck, he found himself in some sort of weird headlock-hug, with Clint plastered against his back and an arm wrapped tight around his neck.

“Get off me, you jackass!” Bucky whined as Clint added a leg in his endeavor to octopus Bucky. “I take it back! I don’t like you that much!”

“Nope! You like me!” Clint snickered as he tried to nuzzle against Bucky’s neck. Who was about five seconds away from debating the merits of throwing Clint off. “Does Steve know how you feel? Is he open to our love? Don’t fight it, baby!”

Bucky chose to fight it.

He grabbed Clint’s forearm and flipped him over his shoulder. The man landed in a heap on the ground at Bucky’s feet in a huff. Still laughing, he grabbed at his sides and wheezed out, “See? You do love me!”
Bucky just shook his head with an exasperated laugh of his own, and held out his hand to help Clint up. Then he turned to Natasha. “So, Barton here said you were gonna leave us stranded for a while. Any special reason you chose to grace us with your presence early?”

“You’re needed in the field,” she answered, all bluntness, and Bucky immediately sobered up.

“Steve?” he asked. He’d just spoken to Steve, though. Surely he would have said something.

Natasha nodded. “He needs you and Clint in Murmansk.”

“But Steve isn’t in Russia,” Bucky replied automatically, his playful mood gone, giving way to frustration. Steve’s mission was in Botswana. The southern part of Africa.

Natasha just stood there, eyebrow quirked, not even deigning to respond to that. Of course she wouldn’t; Bucky knew the score. It was a mission. Things changed.

“How long till wheels up?”

“Four hours.”

He exchanged a glance with Clint before turning to Wanda. He nodded at her, and whatever connection she had with her brother had Pietro back at their side in less than ten seconds.

“Time to go, then.”
Chapter Summary

Alien situation #56248. In other words: another day at the office. Steve has been on site for weeks and didn't have the time to shave (*cough* and it's a good thing *cough*). Barton and I on the other hand, were busy with another mission and arrived yesterday, hence the clean-shaven look. I have no explanation for Clint's fashion model pose, though. I guess it's just reflex whenever the guy sees a camera!

Chapter Notes

Alien situation #56248. In other words: another day at the office. Steve has been on site for weeks and didn't have the time to shave (*cough* and it's a good thing *cough*). Barton and I on the other hand, were busy with another mission and arrived yesterday, hence the clean-shaven look. I have no explanation for Clint's fashion model pose, though. I guess it's just reflex whenever the guy sees a camera!

I know that Stevie is gonna shave as soon as he gets back home so it was my last chance to take a pic of him sporting a beard. (Note to self: ask Thor to take the pic next time, not Barton. At least the Viking knows how to frame two people correctly...}
and NO Clint, stop looking for excuses! I wasn’t interested in capturing the ”explosion + sunset” in the background even if I love explosions, I just wanted a NORMAL photo with my boyfriend, that’s it...

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The soft *thwip* of the arrow leaving the bow — goddamn, there was nothing like it.

Except for maybe Lucky. Or coffee and cold pizza for breakfast. Or that thing Nat did with her tongue, that if Clint were a betting man, he’d be pretty sure would be illegal in some parts of this country.

He wondered if Bucky knew about Nat’s tongue thing. They used to sleep together. He bet Bucky did. He bet he knew all about it. Maybe he even was the one who taught it to her. He’d taught Nat a lot of things. Some of them were probably tongue things.

Aw, hell. He was ruining the tongue thing for himself. Fucking Barnes.

Clint shot Bucky a dirty look even as he pulled another arrow and sent it flying off into the eye of.... whatever fucking alien thing they were fighting this week. He stopped keeping track after New York.

Bucky arched an eyebrow in his direction. “What?” he asked, not looking either as he took down three of his own.

Clint shook his head. “Nothing, man.” He pulled two bows in quick succession, then he narrowed his eyes at Bucky. Because he bet Bucky knew. “The term ‘Dirt Devil’ mean anything to you?”

Bucky just stared at him. “You mean like the — oh.” His eyes went wide, and much to Clint’s absolute horror, so did his grin. Going straight from knowing to wolfish in a barely a second flat. “I see you and Nat have taken things to the next level —”

Clint had an arrow pulled and pointed at his friend before Bucky even had a *chance* to finish that sentence. “You know, you can shut the hell up any second now.”

Bucky held up his hands up in surrender, though that didn’t seem to stop him from busting up laughing. “Woah there, Romeo. You were the one who brought it up!”

Fuck Barnes for having a point. Fucker going around ruining tongue things for Clint.

His eyes caught movement just past Bucky’s shoulder, and he gave a truly wicked smile before shifting three degrees and letting the arrow fly. He took double satisfaction in another target down as Bucky jumped to the side. “Fucking Christ!”

Clint shrugged, completely unconcerned. “It was you or it. Be thankful I chose it.” He laughed and started to turn around, only to come face to face with a less than happy Steve Rogers.

He most *definitely* did not take a step back from the storm cloud in Cap’s eyes. “Oh, there you are, Cap. We were wonderin’ when you’d get here.” Thank fuck for an always steady voice.

“‘There a reason you’re firing arrows at my boyfriend, Hawkeye?’”

Clint coughed to cover up the way he cleared his throat before jerking a thumb over his shoulder.
“He started it,” he answered, showing Steve his best five-year-old.

“I did not!” Bucky shouted from behind him, though the mixture of sounds around them meant his hearing aids only just caught it. He did hear several shots ring off, though, and Steve looked up tracking whatever Bucky was firing at.

Then things got quiet. Like, really quiet — quiet for him, quiet. Except not completely quiet, because the weird-ass aliens communicated through a constant litany of clicking noises, and there were explosions and other shots being fired from the SHIELD agents there with them, and his aids actually made it really fucking loud, but other than that, yeah. Quiet.

Steve hadn’t torn his eyes away from where they were focused over Clint’s head, and as his brows slowly pulled together, Clint finally turned to see whatever-the-fuck it was Bucky was doing.

Well, okay, that was new. Bucky was...he was just staring. Staring at Steve, Clint could only guess — his jaw gone slack. And there was no way that was lust Clint saw in his eyes. No way at all. Nope. Because Clint was not paid enough for that.

He turned back to Steve, trying to figure out what Bucky was looking at, but it was just... Steve. Just the Captain — who apparently knew what Bucky was staring at based on the glint in his eye — and Clint had no clue what the hell —

“Okay, what the fuck are you staring at?” He finally snapped, turning back to Bucky, who was still looking at Steve like some kid at his first strip club. It was weird and lewd, and if the two started fucking in front of him in the middle of a mission, Clint was definitely asking Coulson for a raise.

“Uh...” Bucky started stupidly. He cleared his throat and waved a hand at Steve, ignoring Clint entirely. When he continued his voice wasn’t any less rough. “Uh, nice beard there, Stevie.”

What. Clint turned back around, and that’s when he noticed Steve was sporting a truly impressive face full of hair. Huh.

Okay yeah, sure, it was a nice beard, but was that really what was getting Bucky off right now? Clint turned back around — he felt like he should be put on a goddamn swivel at this point — and sure enough, he looked like he really wanted to jump Steve right then and there, aliens and his precious explosions be damned.

Man, he would never understand gay dudes. Or bi dudes. Or whatever dudes.

He stood there helplessly as Steve walked passed him, snapping at his chin strap, and offering up a, “Oh, you like this?” as he went. He didn’t give Bucky time to respond before his cowl hit the ground, and he practically picked up the guy and started kissing him.

Okay, they were kissing now. Over a beard.

Clint just sighed, deep and put-upon. “Fuck this, I have aliens to kill,” he mumbled, then sent a grappling bolt into the nearest wall and launched himself up and over it. Time for all those little gray bastards to die.

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“Okay, I get that you guys haven’t seen each other weeks, but was it really necessary for you two to start practically climbing each other? I was standing right there!” He adjusted the now-full quiver Steve had brought to him before ducking back down behind the overturned train car.
The three of them were positioned along the train tracks in front of the last station that lead out of town, not far from the field where the aliens had finally barreled down a few hours before. Steve had been down in Botswana under false intel leading to an expected touchdown on the African continent. Thor, having dealt with whoever these creatures were before — Sozentrians, Clint thought he recalled — had been trying to negotiate their peaceful retreat, but the bastards apparently needed a new planet, and Earth had the best water supply. And something about a healthy supply of catfish, though Clint was still calling bullshit on that one. No one liked catfish.

The Sozentrians apparently also knew there was a defense waiting for them, so they’d changed course. Too bad they hadn’t taken Thor’s flying into account or the speed at which Agent May could get her quinjet from one side of the planet to the other. (Not as fast as Clint’s, though. There may have been a race once or three times between the two of them. He won. Obviously.)

Once they’d landed, Steve had called for reinforcements — namely Clint and Bucky and about six dozen SHIELD agents — and now they were finally gaining the upper hand, with the aliens slowly falling back towards their ship. At this rate, he might actually make it home to spend some quality time with his lady. Wouldn’t that just be a fucking change.

He pulled one of the new self-detonating bolts out of his quiver and sent it flying, smiling at the way it took out ten of the bastards at once, while still continuing his rant at the two lust bunnies. “I mean, I’m all for your happiness, and you two getting to suck face —”

“Suck face?” Steve cut in, calm as anything, even as he turtled himself behind his shield against a spray of laser fire from the Sozentrians.

“Yes!” Clint all but shouted, exasperated. “Suck face! It’s a fucking beard, and we’re under attack —”

“Well...” Bucky cut in this time as he tossed one of his guns to Steve, who deftly caught it and opened fire. “I wouldn’t so much call it under attack, seeing as how we’re clearly winning here.”

Steve flipped around off the top of the overturned train car and tossed both the gun and his shield at Bucky, who in turn threw his Skorpion submachine back to Steve. The fluidity between the two was truly a sight to see — not that Clint would ever tell them that.

Steve took out a dozen of his own before adding, “Yeah, and the only reason we even are winning is because they sent a scavenger ship down and not the whole armada. We’re just lucky Thor’s already sent his people after them. Otherwise, we’d all be toast.”

It was at that moment that Clint’s stomach decided to make itself known. A low grumble and he realized he hadn’t eaten in about thirty-six hours.

Aw, damn. Why did Steve have to go and mention food. “Seriously, man? Toast? I’m starving now!”

Steve just turned and eyed him like he’d lost his marbles and a few other sets along the way. “Really, Barton? That’s what you got out of that? Food?”

“And that’s surprises you?” Bucky laughed as he sent the shield flying. It skipped off the top of the train car before a satisfying squelch met their ears. He turned to smile at them. “Be right back.”

Then he launched himself over the train car and the sound of gunfire and metal hitting flesh (or whatever it was that caused the Sozentrians to look gray and weirdly shiny) hit their ears. They both snapped their heads up at the sight of a truly spectacular explosion barely forty yards from where
they stood. The fireball hadn’t even dissipated when the shield came flying back over the car, followed by a slightly singed and maniacal-looking Bucky.

“Did you see that?” he cried out, way too gleeful. And okay, sure, Clint got a certain satisfaction out of a good shot, but damn, that was so fucking close to them, and really, Barnes was an idiot.

“You know, sweet cheeks, one of these days you’re going to have to explain to me how you’re still breathing after your constant close shaves.”

“The Winter Soldier knows no limitations, baby cakes.” Bucky patted Clint’s face as he ran past towards their small arsenal at the far edge of the train car. “Don’t be jealous, Barton. Not everyone can look this hot doing what I do.” He turned to Clint, a dirty gleam in his eye. “Or do it as well.”

“Yeah, and all you got out of it was this blond oaf.”

“Hey!” came Steve’s indignant shout.

“At least I scored the hot redhead.”

“I may not be sleeping with her anymore, but Nat’s still my best friend.” Bucky trotted back up next to him. “So it seems I got the blond oaf and the hot redhead.”

“Will people please stop calling me a blond oaf!”

Clint huffed, getting annoyed, because fucking hell, Bucky wasn’t wrong. He shoved a finger in Bucky’s face. “Tongue things, Barnes. She does tongue things for me now.”

Bucky slapped his hand away with a laugh. “And you don’t think I didn’t teach Steve the Dirt Devil?”

“Wait, is that the — Oh my god, Bucky!” Steve turned an exceptional shade of pink, and yeah, Clint had to grin at that one as Bucky laughed even harder. “You are such an asshole!”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the point of the Dirt Devil, Stevie!” Bucky wiped at his face, smudging up his black cammo a little. Then he grabbed two grenades from his belt, hooked them together, pulled the pins, and launched them over the car with his metal arm. When the truly spectacular explosion hit this time, it was at least a hundred yards out, and Clint let out a low whistle.

“Impressive,” he commented with an approving nod.

“Isn’t it just?” Bucky shot back with a smile. “I aimed it to where I saw a set of their pods clustered together. Wanted to see if I could make them go boom.”

“I think you succeeded.”

And the quiet just kept on coming after that, getting eerily so, regardless of Clint’s hearing aids, and the three gave each other a look before he and Steve both hopped up onto the top of the train car to check out the aftermath. The shots were still coming from the aliens but had diminished substantially and weren’t being fired off anywhere near them. There was just a giant billow of black smoke curling up into the air about, yep, a hundred yards off. Arrow and shield at the ready, Clint and Steve didn’t let their guard down, despite being exposed like this.

“Do you think Bucky actually got ‘em?” he asked Steve quietly, then turned to glance at him. “I mean, it was only two fucking grenades...”
Steve shrugged. “Yeah, two grenades he managed to lob into their cluster of ships. And besides” — he nodded out towards where SHIELD agents a mile or so out were still in full fight mode — “it’s not like he got all of them.”

“Best not tell him he got all that many.”

“You mean to avoid the unending gloating?”

“We don’t need a repeat of the Amman incident.”

“I thought we agreed never to speak of that again.”

Clint quirked an eyebrow at him. “Just as long as you remember whose job it is to reign in your boyfriend.”

“Nat’s job?”

“Oh, definitely Nat’s job.”

“What are you two ladies bitching about up there?” Clint and Steve looked over to find Bucky buried in his phone, not even actually paying attention to them.

“And what are you doing, Sergeant?” Steve asked, and Clint smiled at the hint of Captain in his voice at catching Bucky distracted. Steve hopped down and stalked over to where Bucky still hadn’t looked up from his phone, only to snatch it out of his hand. “Seriously, what the fuck are you doing?” He glanced at the screen for all of a second before he turned to give Bucky a withering glare. “Really, Buck? Instagram?”

Bucky huffed before snatching his phone right back. “This picture is awesome, I’ll have you know, and it needs to be documented. Wait, hold on a sec.” He typed quickly into the phone before holding it up with a smile just as Clint’s phone buzzed in his pocket signaling Bucky’s new post. “See? All done.”

Steve just shook his head. “Fine, whatever. But we need to figure out what’s going on with the rest of the team.” He pointed at their pile of weapons. “Grab what you can and let’s go. Agent Morse, come in. Where are you guys right now?” he added into his commlink before launching himself over the train car.

“God, he looks damn good when he does that,” Bucky breathed as he came to stand next to Clint. He turned to smile at him, and oh good god, he actually looked dreamy right there. Clint shuddered at the sight and shot him another dirty look.

“You know, earlier I thought you just had beard goggles on, but I’m pretty sure that look was directed purely at his entire backside. Is there no part of his body that doesn’t make you want to bone him?”

“Well...” Bucky looked off before smiling wolfishly. “No. There isn’t. In fact!” He snapped his fingers and Clint knew then he’d made a calculated mistake bringing up Steve’s whatever. “When his hair shifts a certain way, it reminds me of this time he held me up against the railing on our apartment roof — my legs pulled up so high, I was practically bent in half...”

Whatever else Bucky said was lost the moment Clint launched himself over the car, taking off after Steve and making his escape.

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Alien situation #56248. In other words: another day at the office. Steve has been on site for weeks and didn't have the time to shave (*cough* and it's a good thing *cough* ). Barton and I on the other hand, were busy with another mission and arrived yesterday, hence the clean-shaven look. I have no explanation for Clint's fashion model pose, though. I guess it's just reflex whenever the guy sees a camera!

Clint smiled and shook his head as he tucked his phone back into his pocket. Bucky was such an unbelievable asshole sometimes, and for that reason alone, Clint was never going to tell him how much he found Bucky’s Instagram a real fucking delight. The way Bucky had improved since he’d started the account was an absolute marvel, and Clint would be forever grateful to Bucky’s therapist for suggesting it. That just really wasn’t something Bucky’s ego needed to know.

He looked over at his friend to find him deep in conversation with Hunter, the two laughing at something — Bucky so hard he was leaning on Hunter for support. The two looked over at Steve, who was talking strategy with Agent May, only to bust up all over again.

Seriously. A thousand roses and whatever else Bucky’s therapist wanted. Anything for the doc who’d gotten his friend to the point where he could laugh like that.

“Hey, Barton!” Clint quirked an eyebrow as Bucky trotted over to him.

“What’s up?”

Bucky held up his phone, waving it at him. “Do me a favor and get a picture of me and Steve? He never wears a beard — even if he knows I like it when he does — and I was hoping to get a picture of us with him like that before we go home and he shaves.” He glanced over at Steve and a shy smile crept onto his face. “Please?”

Clint just laughed and shook his head. “You’re hopeless, man.” But he took the phone anyway.

The two walked over to where Steve was standing and Bucky apologized for interrupting before he turned to Steve and took his hand. “Can I borrow you for a second?”

“I’m in the middle of something here, Buck.”

“Just for a minute, okay? I mean, we’re almost done here anyway.”

A crease appeared between Steve’s eyes as he looked between Bucky and Clint in confusion. “Okay, sure. For a minute. What’s this about?”

Clint didn’t miss the way Bucky tried to hide his tentative smile by turning into kiss Steve. He also didn’t miss the way Bucky nuzzled slightly against the beard before pulling off Steve’s cowl that he’d slipped back on at some point. Seriously, what the fuck was up with this beard thing?

Then Bucky turned in to whisper in Steve’s ear, and at first Steve looked like he was on the fast track to pissed off (probably from being interrupted over a fucking beard — at least someone was seeing reason here), only for his eyes to soften as a flush spread across his face.

Jesus fucking Christ, what was the deal over this thing? It. Was. A. Beard! First thing he was going to do when he got home was ask Nat about it. A lot more guys these days were sporting them and maybe she would get it. Explain this weirdness to him.

Steve fingers ended up threaded in Bucky’s hair, and there they went with the kissing again. Clint cleared his throat and waved Bucky’s phone at them. “Think you two could can it with the tonsil hockey long enough for me to get this picture?”
“Tonsil hockey, Clint?” Steve asked drily as Bucky turned around, eyes rolling as he went. “You do know this is the twenty-first century, right?”

“You want this picture or not?”

“Doesn’t change the fact that outdated colloquialisms are nobody’s friend.”

“Says the guy who had to explain to everyone what ‘are you rationed’ meant.”

Steve shrugged. “Not my fault they don’t teach you guys anything in history class.”

“Any day now, you two!” Bucky admonished. He dropped Steve’s cowl onto his own head and smiled in Clint’s direction. “Picture please, and be sure to get this mug in it,” he added as he gripped Steve’s chin and gave it a little shake.

“Yeah, yeah,” Clint muttered and held up the phone. As he looked at the screen, he caught site of the background view in it, and shifted the camera slightly to also catch the sunset and another of the endless explosions that were still going on around them. He held the phone out for Bucky to take back. “Here you go. You’re welcome.”

As Bucky looked over the picture, his face hardened into a scowl. “You cut off half of Steve’s face!”

“Yeah, but I caught a really awesome fireball in the background!”

“Steve’s. Face.”

“Fire. Ball.”

“Enough, children,” Steve cut in. “Clint, can you take another?”

Clint opened his mouth, a snarky response at the ready, when Bucky cut him off. “Oh no. I’m using this one. Putting this up in Instagram, if for anything so I can give you shit for your shit picture-taking skills.” He started typing away on his phone, so he missed the way Clint flipped him off.

“See if I ever take a photo for you again, princess.”

Bucky squawked at him. “Like I’d ask.”

“Oh, you’ll ask,” Clint muttered as he turned around to find where he’d set his extra quiver. “You always ask.”

Clint felt his phone buzz in his pocket signaling Bucky’s new post, but ignored it in favor of the Sozentrian he caught crawling over the top of the quinjet, weapon in hand.

The world seemed to slow down at that point. The Sozentrian stood up, weapon pointed as Clint reached back to draw an arrow. But it was too late. The weapon fired just as Clint’s arrow went flying.

Steve screamed. “Bucky, look out!”

Clint barely acknowledged the Sozentrian as it went down. He spun around just in time to see both Steve and Bucky go flying through the concrete wall behind them.

He wasted no time in running after them, but barely making it a few steps before the whole wall began to shudder. He pulled up short and watched in horror as the whole thing came crumbling down.
Everyone stood frozen to the spot as the dust cleared away, waiting to see if the wall had actually fallen on them.

It didn’t take long before their worst nightmares were confirmed. Because just peeking out of the top of the rubble was a sliver of Steve’s shield.

_Aw, hell,_ Clint thought. _Not a-fucking-gain._

Half a second later and the team was in motion. Because Christmas hadn’t been that long ago, and _no way_ were they going through that again.

They just _couldn’t._

_I know that Stevie is gonna shave as soon as he gets back home so it was my last chance to take a pic of him sporting a beard. (Note to self: ask Thor to take the pic next time, not Barton. At least the Viking knows how to frame two people correctly and NO Clint, stop looking for excuses! I wasn't interested in capturing the "explosion + sunset" in the background even if I love explosions, I just wanted a NORMAL photo with my boyfriend, that's it...)_
NO, I don't need a hug. YES, I am satisfied with my care or...whatever. Now Tony, can you tell this stupid invention of yours to let me go? What? What do you mean this thing isn't developed by Stark Industries?! EVERYTHING in this country is developed by S.I, even my freaking underwear so...DO SOMETHING OR GOD HELP ME I CUT HIM IN HALF WITH A SCALPEL!!!


The repetitive noise was soft, distant. He wasn't sure if he was dreaming it or not, but either way, it grated on him, and if he could just shut the damn thing off, he could go back to sleep, thanks.

He let out a soft groan — or he thought he did; it was barely audible to his own ears — and tried to
blink, but his eyes didn't seem to want to cooperate. Too fucking heavy.

Bucky? That was his Stevie. Buck. Are you awake, baby?


“Steve, shut the fucking alarm off. S’too early.”

Oh, thank God. Huh? Thank God, you’re okay. Again, huh? It’s time to get up now, sweetheart.

“No.” What was Steve going on about, and why wouldn’t he just shut the damn alarm off?


Mr. Barnes, we’re going to need you wake up now.

Okay, but that one wasn't Steve. Who the fuck —


Aw, hell.

Bucky slowly blinked his eyes open and looked around at the hospital room. His first thought was
that it looked like a generic recovery room, so he wasn’t in any danger. Okay, that was good. He
lolled his head over to find Steve in a bed next to him, looking worse-for-wear — his head wrapped
in bandages with scrapes and bruises running up his neck, and a gash across his cheek just above his
beard — but at least sitting up a little. He was watching Bucky with a mixture of worried relief, and
god, Bucky hated it when he had that look on his face. It meant Bucky was a little more than worse-
for-wear.

“How bad is it?” he croaked out, his voice shot from sleep and disuse. “And how long have I been
out?”

“Just about a day or so,” Steve answered with a tight smile. “And actually, you got lucky — we both
did, I guess.”

“What happened?”

“What happened?” the doctor who’d spoken earlier tried to cut in, but Bucky held up a
finger to shush her. He didn’t need her, he needed Steve.

“What happened?” he repeated.

Steve’s eyes flicked over to the doctor before answering, “I guess one of the Sozentrians snuck up on
us, and Clint couldn’t take it down before it fired on you and me. The shield took most of the hit, but
it knocked us back through a wall.” He brushed his fingers against the bandage circling his head, his
expression pained. “I guess the wall came down on us.”

Bucky tasted bile in the back of his throat, because they were both thinking the same thing. It hadn’t
been that long ago when another wall had come down on him.

“I didn’t, you know” — he cleared his throat and gently waved his hand at Steve — “code this
time.” He finally looked over at his doctor. “Did I?”
The doctor — a pretty redhead with fierce eyes that reminded him of Steve’s — gave him a gentle smile and shook her head. “No, Sergeant Barnes, Captain Rogers here is right. You both got lucky and escaped any major injuries, for the most part. I’m Dr. Tanner. I’m going to check you over, all right?” She had a clipped British accent, and Bucky figured Clint or May had flown them to England.

He nodded once. “Okay.”

“Oh, okay.” She came around and started checking him over as she went on. “Actually, I saw your charts from your previous incident. You haven’t even come close to what happened then — most of your injuries are superficial, though you did fracture a couple ribs. But as superior as both of your bodies may be, you still heal much faster if you rest. So we kept you out for about a day to give your body a chance to kick start your healing process.” She stood back up and gave him a satisfied smile. “And from what I’m seeing here, it seems to have worked.”

“Well, it usually does. Naps are awesome like that.”

She chuckled. “That they are, Sergeant.”

“How long until we can go home, Doc?” Steve asked. As he turned to sit back, he winced, and Dr. Tanner rolled her eyes at him.

“I think you just answered your own question, Captain Rogers.” She walked over to the wardrobe and pulled out what looked like an industrial grade toolbox. It was bright red, like a fire truck, and made Bucky immediately think of Tony.

She set the box down at the foot of Bucky’s bed with a huff, then smiled at them both. “If either of you need anything, just call out, and Baymax here will be alerted.”

Steve and Bucky glanced at each other in confusion. “I’m sorry, Bay-what?” Bucky asked.

“Baymax,” she repeated, and yeah, they’d heard that right. It still made no sense, though. “He’s your healthcare companion. Brand new tech from out in California. Designed by a genius kid and his older brother.” She gestured at the box Bucky could no longer see. “Honestly, this thing is going to revolutionize the medical industry.”

“Uh, okay?” Bucky glanced over at Steve again, who shrugged, clearly just as lost.

“Anyway.” She smiled at them. “You both rest and hopefully we’ll have you out of here by tomorrow.”

Steve nodded at her. “Thanks, Doc.” With that, she turned and left them alone, both sore and cracked around the edges, but healing.

Bucky turned to smile at Steve, small but happy to see him alive and whole in the bed next to him. Visions of his own close-call were still swimming in his head and it made his heart lurch at the thought of anything like that happening to Steve. He slowly stretched his metal hand out toward him.

“I’m glad you’re all right, baby,” he said quietly.

“Same,” Steve answered with a sigh. He gave Bucky a half smile as he reached out to twine their fingers together. “Enough with things falling on you, okay?”

Bucky huffed out a laugh, and groaned at the pain in his chest. “Fucking hell... I’ll do my best. Wait, what are you doing?” With a grimace, Steve started pushing himself up again. Eyes shut and jaw clenched, he gingerly turned until he was sitting on the edge of the bed, facing Bucky. He took a few
deep breathes as sweat began to bead on his temple. Bucky just watched the idiot, his stomach flipping over at the sight of Steve in so much pain. “Seriously, what the fuck are you doing?”

“This,” he ground out. With another tight grimace, Steve lifted himself off the bed, took the two steps over to Bucky’s, and gave Bucky a light push to the shoulder. “Shove over; I’m getting in.”

Bucky stared at him, aghast, but did what he was told. Slowly. “You really are a fucking idiot, you know that,” he pointed out as Steve crawled in next to him. “Be careful of my wires.”

Steve just grunted, then proceeded to jostle them around, doing his best to get them into as comfortable a position as possible. Bucky hissed when his ribs shifted, but truthfully, having Steve in bed with him, where he could feel him, solid and warm and alive in his arms, was worth any pain he endured in return.

“Better, you big loon?” he asked once they were settled, Bucky pillowed up against Steve’s chest. It actually hurt like hell, but fuck it. He wasn’t re-breaking anything, so he didn’t care.

Steve hummed above him. “Better. Got you right where I want you.”

Bucky smiled. “My thoughts exactly.”

“Sleep, my love,” Steve said, his voice faint and slurred, already on his way. And yeah, everything hurt, but sleep still sounded like the best thing ever right about then.

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Pain shot through him, and Bucky’s eyes flew open. “Ow, fuck!” He bit down on the inside of his cheek and tried to breathe through the pain from where he’d shifted and pressed one of his cracked ribs into Steve’s side. “Shit.”

“What? Whazit?” Steve shifted again and Bucky whimpered. He grabbed onto Steve’s hip to keep him from moving again.

“God, fuck, stop moving.”

“Jesus, baby.” Steve’s hand pressed against Bucky’s jaw, tilting his face up. Worry creased Steve’s sleepy features. “Are you okay? I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay, I just —” He was interrupted by what sounded distinctly like an air mattress being blown up. They both looked to the end of the bed, and Bucky watched in shock at the sight of what looked like an oversized white balloon extending out from the floor.

“What the hell?” Steve muttered as the thing began to take on a humanoid shape — large and squishy and round. It slowly turned towards them, and Bucky found himself staring at an almost-faceless... was it a robot? It looked like it was made out of some sort of white, opaque material, with an oblong-shaped head, like a watermelon, that had two black eyes and slit running between them.

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“What the hell, is right.”

Then the thing spoke, though it’s mouth (was that the mouth?) didn’t move. “Hello, I am Baymax, your personal healthcare companion. I heard a sound of distress. What seems to be the trouble?”

“Wait, what?” Bucky asked stupidly. He glanced up at Steve who was staring at the thing with a mixture of fear and awe, like maybe he’d lost his own mind, and wasn’t sure if he should be bothered because he was too impressed.
“I was alerted to the need for medical attention when you said ‘ow, fuck.’” The Baymax monstrosity ambled around the side of the bed and, good lord, seemed to actually peer down at him. “On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your pain?”

“How would I rate my — Steve, stop snickering.” He tried to elbow his boyfriend, only to shift and hiss out in pain. “This thing is freaky as hell!”

“I think it’s awesome,” Steve countered, just as the robot said, “You seem to still be in distress. I will scan you now.”

Bucky shrunk back against Steve as a low hum met his ears. “Scan complete. You have a three fractured ribs, a fractured cheekbone, multiple contusions and abrasions over sixty-two percent of your body, and your endorphin levels are above normal. You appear to have increased bodily functions and abilities, and a metal arm, making you one of the super humans. I suggest 55 CCs of Hendriproxicodine to alleviate pain down to a more manageable level.”

“Hendri-what?”

Suddenly the Baymax thing’s chest lit up with a side-by-side shot of Bruce and what looked like some sort of chemical compound. “Hendriproxicodine. A drug invented by Dr. Bruce Banner to work as a pain suppressor for those embodied with the super soldier serum.” Then it looked up at him and Steve. “For you two.”

“Oh, that?” Bucky breathed out and shook his head. “I forgot what it was called.”

“May I administer the drug for you now?”

“Uuuhhh.” Bucky eyed the robot suspiciously. He’d never met their doctor before and she dropped this thing off at their feet, and what. They were just supposed to accept it? That was a big no in Bucky’s book — all kinds of warning bells going off in his head. Instead, he breathed again through the pain still emanating from his healing ribs and shook his head. “Sorry, buddy, but no. I don’t know you and no one gives me anything unless I’ve got a source to back it up.” He turned to glance up at Steve. “We verify the doc yet?”

Steve shrugged as he eyed the robot with that same curiosity from earlier, but now with an undercurrent of his own suspicion. “Clint was here this morning and had talked to her. And Melinda’s been stationed outside our door since we got here. Wait hold on. Hey, May!” he called out.

“Christ, Stevie,” Bucky bit out at the shift against him.

“Sorry,” Steve murmured as May walked in. “Hey May, by chance have you verified our doctor —”

“I see you got yourself a Baymax,” she stated, eyes trained right on the robot.

“You know what this is?”

“The Baymax robots? Sure.” She shrugged, completely unconcerned. “Had one after my mission last month. It’s like a personal nurse. Coulson had them installed at all SHIELD-sanctioned hospitals, since we tend to overtax the actual nurses here.” She smirked at the pair of them.

“So, this thing’s legit?”

“Would I let anything near you that wasn’t?”
“Good point,” Bucky cut in. Then he turned to the robot and added, “That’s okay... Baymax. Don’t want the drugs.”

“It would aid in the speed of your care,” it said, matter-of-fact.

“Nah, I’m good. Just” — Bucky flicked a hand back towards the foot of his bed — “go deactivate or something. I don’t need you.”

“I cannot deactivate until you say you are satisfied with your care.”

Bucky quirked an eyebrow at it. “Um, okay. I’m satisfied with my care.”

The Baymax robot immediately went back to its station and deflated.

“Swear to fuck, Stevie.” Bucky shook his head as he, Steve, and May watched it disappear behind the end of the bed again. “Every once in a while. The here and now? Freaks me right the fuck out.”

“You’re telling me.”

May just eyed them both shrewdly before muttering, “Children,” and walked back out.

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Bucky never lost a staring contest. And he wasn’t about to lose now. Didn’t matter if Baymax didn’t blink. He wasn’t fucking losing.

“Are you still staring at that thing?” Steve asked incredulously as he came out of the bathroom. Bucky just adjusted himself on the edge of the bed, careful of the IV in his arm, and continued to think laser eyes as he tried to bore his into the robot.

“It won’t shut down, Steven.”

“Because you keep turning down your meds, Buck.”

“I got meds. See?” He gave his IV stand a little shake. The heart monitor attached to it gave him an angry beep in return. “Meds.”

“I can spell saline, Buck.”

Bucky’s eyes snapped up to the bag being used to help rehydrate him. “Dammit,” he grumbled guiltily.

“You broke eye contact first.” The robot suddenly spoke up and Bucky turned back in shock. “I win.”

“Wait. How did you — there’s no way —” He huffed and pointed at the robot as he glared at Steve. “How did it know I was staring it down?”

“A ‘blinking contest’ is a game played by children when they are bored. You are here at the hospital while you heal, and without your usual activities to keep you occupied.” Baymax tilted his head like a curious dog. “Are you not bored?”

“Well, yeah, but that’s not why I was staring at you.”

“May I administer your pain medication now?”
“I’m not in pain anymore.” Bucky huffed in frustration, only to wince at the traitorous twinge in his ribs. Still, he tried again to shut down the thing for what felt like the hundredth time. “Baymax, I am satisfied with my care.”

Baymax tilted its head and gave Bucky its own same response. “My protocols have been changed and I am not allowed to shut down until your endorphins reach manageable levels.”

“My endorphin levels would be fine if some seven-foot Stay Puft Marshmallow Man would stop stressing me out.”

“Buck, is there a reason you're being such a petulant, stubborn ass?” Steve asked as he threw himself on the bed. “Seriously, what's the deal?”

Bucky turned pleading eyes on him. “I just... I don’t like it, Steve.”

“How could possibly not like Baymax? He’s new tech. You love new tech.”

“Yeah, but...” Bucky glanced back over at Baymax, who was just standing there, watching him. Judging him. With those weird beady eyes and smile that literally sat between those eyes and — “It’s not people, Steve. I like human people to be the ones to fix me when I’m broken.” He turned sad eyes on his boyfriend. “Like you.”

Steve snickered, “Sorry, baby, but you aren’t dragging me down with you in your refusal to get better.”

“I'm better!” Bucky snapped.

“Do you possibly require a hug?” Baymax asked.

Bucky slowly turned his head at the completely random question and blinked at the thing. “What?”

“Now there's an idea!” Steve exclaimed. Asshole.

Baymax tilted its head, only to amble over, its feet squeaking against the tile, before it stopped right in front of Bucky, who may or may not have taken a step back. “You continue to refuse your medication, and now my sensors have indicated that your blood pressure has also risen. Based on my knowledge of stress remedies, a warm embrace can help you relax and feel safe, both of which should bring you back down to normal levels.”

And without even waiting for Bucky's response, it lifted its arms and started moving toward him, and oh, hell no.

Bucky ducked down underneath the outstretched arm and spun around to stand behind Baymax. He pointed an accusing finger at it when it turned around to face him. “Nu-uh. No, you don't there, big guy. I already said, I’ve got Steve for that, thank you very much.”

Steve, the dirty traitor, laughed as he threw up his hands and shook his head. “Oh, no. Baymax, you are more than welcome to him. Feel free to hug away.”

“What?” Bucky stared at his now EX-boyfriend in complete betrayal. “What the hell, Steve! Why would you —” Everything else came out in a muffle, as he found himself with a face-full of latex as the two giant arms pulled him right into Baymax's chest.

Steve’s laughter turned into outright cackling, and Bucky shouted every expletive he could think of, in every language he could think of, as he tried to push away from the robot that actually turned out
to be really fucking strong.

“Try not to damage the hospital property, Buck.” Steve wheezed between big gulps of air.

“I’m gonna kill you!” Bucky growled, finally able to turn his head. “No prisoners, Rogers! Starting with this giant thing!”

“There, there,” was all Baymax said, softly, as it began to fucking stroke Bucky’s hair.

“Oh my god, I need a picture of this.”

“No pictures!” Bucky squawked.

“Hey, Baymax. Turn him around, so I can get a shot of you two.”

“What?” Bucky huffed and Baymax began to jostle him around, turning him in place. He came face to face with Public Enemy #1, who was currently holding Bucky’s phone. “Put my phone down! What part of no pictures did you miss?”

Steve was shaking as he tried to hold back his laughter in, his eyes bright. “Aw come on, Buck. One picture.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I will kill you.”

“As long as I get the picture first, we’re good.”

Bucky growled in frustration at his predicament. Weirdly strong robot was wrapped around him on Steve’s orders, and Steve, dammit, was way more stubborn than Bucky could ever hope to be. He’d hold out through the next three apocalypses if it meant getting his way. Bucky just folded his arms and glowered at him.

“Hold him tight, Baymax,” Steve instructed with wide stupid grin, and the next thing Bucky knew, the robot was actually resting its head on top of Bucky’s. Oh, this was just fucking rich, is what this was. Steve looked at him over the top of the phone. “Aw, come on. One smile.”

“You can have a picture or you can have a smile. You can’t have both.” Steve could be stubborn, but he was no match for Bucky’s petulance.

Steve just shrugged. “Whatever.” He looked back at the phone and proceeded to fire off a couple shots. “Got it. Gonna put this on your Instagram.”

“What? No! Fine.” Honestly, Bucky was way past caring at this point. Steve smiled as he merrily tapped away at Bucky’s phone, and Bucky tried wiggling out of Baymax’s embrace, to frustratingly no avail.

“Here’s your phone, Buck.” Bucky didn’t even look as he stuck out his hand for it, his eyes still on Baymax, who, if Bucky didn’t know any better, almost looked serene. Steve passed off the phone, and Bucky immediately went to the photo in question, only to have to bite down on his cheek to keep from laughing. God, he looked so pissed.

NO, I don’t need a hug. YES, I am satisfied with my care or...whatever. Now Tony, can you tell this stupid invention of yours to let me go?
“Seriously.” Bucky snorted. “What do I have to do to get this thing to let me —”

Bucky’s phone rang in his hand, the Instagram image replaced by a picture of Tony, in full Iron Man gear, as Bucky balanced upside by his metal arm in Tony’s palm. He immediately swiped to answer. “Is there anyone on the team who doesn’t have my Instagram notices turned on?” he asked by way of greeting.

Steve mouthed who’s that, and Bucky turned the phone quickly for him to see. He shrugged in response and laid back on the bed, grabbing his own phone off the table and resolutely not helping Bucky out of his current predicament.

“Nope, sorry, tough guy. We all just love you too much.” Tony’s voice came through clear despite the background noise that sounded suspiciously like wind. Tony was out in California right now, and Bucky wondered if he was driving somewhere. “Anyway, doesn’t matter. Just wanted to tell you that Baymax isn’t mine.”

Bucky shook his head and turned to look up at the robot in question. “What do you mean, Baymax isn’t yours? All tech is yours, Tony. You are all tech.”

“Sadly, not this time. Tried to buy him up early, but the kid who owned him was pretty determined not to sell. Had to respect the little entrepreneur.”

“Wait, really?”

“What is it?” Steve asked from the bed.

Bucky covered the mouthpiece and turned to Steve. “Apparently, Baymax isn’t one of Tony’s.”

“Bullshit.”

“That’s what I said.” He turned back to Tony. “Seriously, man? He’s not yours?”

“Nope! But have fun. I’m thinking about ordering one as a friend for DUM-E.”

“As a —” Bucky sighed in exasperation. “Goodbye, Tony!”

‘Have fun, kids!” And the line went dead.

“How can this thing not be Tony’s,” Bucky mumbled to himself as he went back to Instagram to edit the caption. But first he turned up to Baymax. “Think you could finally let me go?”

In answer, Baymax, the infuriating beast, stroked his hair again. “My scan reveals that your blood pressure is almost back to normal. So, soon.”

Bucky snorted. “Scan, my ass. My heart monitor told you that. Don’t need your fucking scans.” He quickly added to the original caption:

What? What do you mean this thing isn’t developed by Stark Industries?! EVERYTHING in this country is developed by S.I, even my freaking underwear so...DO SOMETHING OR GOD HELP ME I CUT HIM IN HALF WITH A SCALPEL!!

“Please don’t cut me with a scalpel, Bucky,” Baymax said, and Bucky turned to glare at the robot.

“Cut him with a what?” Steve piped up.

“Stop being nosy, Baymax.” Bucky shoved his phone into his pajama pants. “All right, I’ll give you
two minutes, but then you gotta let me go.”

“That should be an acceptable amount of time.”

Resigned to get this over with, Bucky leaned back into Baymax, and okay, sure. He could admit on some level that the squishiness and the head stroking were actually a bit soothing. Soon enough, he found himself — against his will and better judgment, of course — relaxing into the touch.

“There now,” Baymax announced quietly after too-short a period of time. “Don’t you feel better?”

“Yeah, whatever,” Bucky mumbled. “Can I go now?” Immediately, Baymax opened his arms, and Bucky wasted no time making a beeline over to Steve, who laughed and lifted his own arm up without question. Bucky happily tucked himself into it. They both watched as Baymax walked over and stood, stock-still on Bucky’s side of the bed. “What is it now, Baymax?” he asked warily.

“You have been a good boy. Have a lollipop!” And from God-only-knew-where, Baymax brandished a lollipop at him.

“Jesus...” Steve sputtered and flinched at the sudden movement.

Bucky just glared at it, grumbled because he really liked lollipops, okay, then glared at it some more before finally snatching it out of the robot’s hand, careful not to dislodge himself from Steve’s embrace. He shoved it into his mouth with a mumbled, “Thanks, Baymax.”

“Now are you satisfied with your care?”

Despite his better judgment, Bucky couldn’t help but give the robot a little smile. “Yeah, Baymax. I’m satisfied with my care.”
Bucky’s head thunked against the wall of the elevator, and it took every ounce of the tiny bit of willpower he had left not to just slide to the floor right there. Good God, he was tired. Could sleep for a week. Maybe even a year.

“Steeeeeve,” he whined into the wood paneling. “I’m tired.”

“Yeah, me too, Buck.”

Bucky cracked an eye open and turned his head just enough to find Steve slumped against the wall...
next to him, eyes closed, and looking every bit as exhausted as Bucky felt.

Once Bucky had gotten over his stubborn aversion to Baymax, his and Steve’s recovery had actually been fairly speedy. So much so, Dr. Tanner had seen fit to release them a few days early. They’d been only too happy until it had actually been time to head out.

The Sozentrian situation hadn’t been resolved a hundred percent, which meant no May, no Clint, and no super-fast quinjets. It hadn’t helped that a massive storm had blown through London, grounding all flights for a day, which meant that by the time Steve and Bucky were finally able to get out of the country, they were stuck on an over-packed flight with not one but three screaming infants. Where was Tony’s fucking private jet when they needed it?

Bucky refused to admit he was slowly turning into a snob. He wasn’t, dammit.

The doors finally slid open on their floor, and they ambled over to their apartment, thoughts of plush leather seats and a personal chef taunting the inside of Bucky’s head. As Steve dug in his pocket for his keys, Bucky leaned against the wall and thought about how many pennies it would set them back if they got their own private jet.

He was just about to needle Steve about it, when the door opened, and they were both instantly assaulted by the sounds of rap music absolutely pouring out of their apartment.

“What the hell?” Steve was barely audible over two girls versing being tigra and money, and liking the boom. Bucky had no idea what was going on.

“Steve, what —” There were no words for the sight that met his eyes as he stepped into the apartment, his eyes following Steve as he stalked over to turn the stereo off. The living and dining room looked like a college frat party had blown through town, with beer bottles, glassware — both their everyday set and their ‘company’ set — and snacks strewn about in complete disarray. But the worst of it... No, the worst of it seemed to have nestled itself in the kitchen area.

The counters were covered in every type of baking good known to man — including Bucky’s ridiculously expensive mixer — with egg shells scattered across the granite surface, sugar coating several fixtures, measuring cups and bowls, little vials and jars of things like vanilla and baking soda, and flour leaving a fine dust over all of it. But that wasn’t what had Bucky’s eyes drawn. No, what had him and Steve transfixed was the brown substance flung over everything — the counters, sink, oven, stove, walls...

And at the center of it all was Wade Wilson — aka Deadpool — frozen mid-stir as he stared in shock at Steve and Bucky, who were staring right back.

(Or, okay, maybe he was staring. It was hard to tell given that he was in full fucking battle gear.)

It was a solid minute of an old western showdown, but it was Wade who cracked first. Obviously.

“Lucy, you’re home!”

Bucky ticked an eye towards Steve, but it seemed he couldn’t make his vocal cords work either.

“Wade?” Bucky stupidly managed to finally get out.

“That’s Carmen San Diego to you, buddy,” Wade answered, his special brand of snark on full display. “Were you expecting someone else?”

“I was expecting an empty apartment.” He cringed as he glanced around at the mess. “And also a
clean one.”

Wade gasped and slammed the bowl on the counter, and both Bucky and Steve winced at the slight cracking sound it made.

“And where was I to go?” Wade clutched a hand to his chest, and Bucky could feel the exasperated looking coming through the mask. “Are you really so cruel as to throw a friend out on the streets?”

“We have an apartment,” Steve pointed out with a sigh. He plopped down onto one of the barstools.

Wade picked up the bowl and resumed stirring. “No can do, my compatriot. Place is getting a deep clean after a recent dead body incident.”

“And where was I to go?” Wade clutched a hand to his chest, and Bucky could feel the exasperated looking coming through the mask. “Are you really so cruel as to throw a friend out on the streets?”

“Wade, you have an apartment,” Steve pointed out with a sigh. He plopped down onto one of the barstools.

Wade picked up the bowl and resumed stirring. “No can do, my compatriot. Place is getting a deep clean after a recent dead body incident.”

“Yours or someone else’s?”

“Excuse you, I’m going on” — Wade stopped to count of on his fingers — “four, five, SIX days since my own last death incident.”

“That a personal record?”

Before Wade could answer, Bucky dropped down next to Steve and cut in. “I don’t care if he beats your record, Stevie, it doesn’t change the fact that I’m tired. And you” — he pointed a finger at Wade — “gotta go.”

“Not until he cleans up this goddamn mess,” Steve interjected.

“And abandon my masterpiece? I would be shunned out of my next Martha Stewart Collective meeting.”

“I’m sorry, your Martha what?”

“The Martha Stewart Collective over at Sunny Side Memorial Home. We trade recipes every third Tuesday.” Wade nodded at Steve. “Speaking of which, Gertrude Pierce — our indelible president — wanted me to pass along a message that she thinks you have a sweet ass.”

Bucky snorted as Steve turned bright red. He reached over and patted Steve lightly on the shoulder. “Hey, honey, you should go for it. I mean, you’re probably about the same age, so...”

Steve swatted his hand away. “You’re two years older than me, asshole.”

“Good point,” Bucky said with an appreciative hum and turned to Wade. “Think she’d go for an older man?”

“She’s actually younger than both of you by about a decade. Also, she bats for the lesbian team, but who knows. I mean, Steve makes my dick go all aflutter, so anything’s possible.”

“That’s not news.”

“Well, obviously it’s not, have you seen him?” Wade waved his spatula at Steve, who flinched as what Bucky could only assume was chocolate icing splattered across Steve’s chest. “The guy’s built like a brick shithouse and could probably fuck me ‘til I broke in half.”

“You know, funny enough, there was that one time Steve actually did break my tailbone as he slammed me —” A hand clamped over Bucky’s mouth, covering his muffled snickers as Steve glared daggers at him.
“Really, Bucky?”

Wade just nodded his approval. “You know, if you filmed that, we could actually make, like, a few million —”

“You can it, too!”

Bucky shoved Steve’s hand out of the way so he could thunk back down onto the countertop, bursting with laughter. Seriously, sometimes Wade was just his kind of asshole.

He let his head loll to the side just for the sheer pleasure of seeing the exceptional shade of puce Steve had turned, and was not disappointed in the slightest. Steve looked like he was just on this side of murder at the moment, and okay, maybe that was overkill, but he was just as tired as Bucky, and frayed nerves were nobody’s friend.

Bucky reached over and gave his thigh a squeeze. “We’re just teasing, baby,” he said soothingly, smiling up at Steve.

“I know that,” Steve shot back, though Bucky didn’t miss the petulant tone. He gave Steve’s leg another squeeze.

Instead of answering, Steve glanced down at his shirt and grimaced. He reached up like he was going to touch the stuff, only to pull back at the last minute with a sigh. “Well, at least I fit right in with the rest of this shit sprayed all over the place.”

“Funny you should mention that,” Wade said as he went back to stirring. “Today’s recipe inspiration is from the wonderful Octavia Spencer, God rest her soul.”

“Oh, Octavia Spencer isn’t dead, Wade,” Bucky answered, confused.

Wade just shrugged. “Well, you know, one day.”

“No words coming out of your mouth are making much sense to me right now, you know.” Bucky blinked at him and turned to Steve to ask what the fuck Wade was talking about only to catch eyes as wide as saucers staring back. Slowly, Steve turned back to Wade.

“I know this chocolate, you ass. I can smell it.”

“Funny enough, I’m pretty sure that’s just what Miss Chastain said.”

Bucky didn’t think it was possible for Steve’s eyes to grow any larger, but horror would do that to a person. Bucky still had no fucking clue what was going on.

Steve glanced around the room and down at his shirt again. “Please tell me this isn’t actually...”

It was a full heartbeat before Wade finally snorted. “Relax, Spanx, it is in fact just chocolate.”

“Just chocolate?”

“Just chocolate.”

“Seriously, what the fuck are you two talking about?”

“Other than the fact that Wade is this side of the world’s biggest dick?” Steve commented dryly.

“That wasn’t a compliment, Red.”

Bucky huffed, slightly irritated. “Again with the not getting this.”

Steve turned to face him fully. “Remember that movie *The Help*?”

“Yeah...”

“Remember that special pie Octavia Spencer made for her rude employer?”

That’s when it hit him. Oh. Okay, gross. Though, coming from Wade, not even remotely surprising.

He made a face and dropped himself into Steve’s lap, wrapping his arms around Steve’s waist. “Okay, he can go now.”

“Not until he cleans up —”

“Call our fucking *cleaning service*, Steven. I wanna go to bed.” He whimpered into Steve’s lap and held on tighter.

“Give me five minutes!” Wade exclaimed. “Then I’ll be done and you can enjoy the fruits of my labor.”

Bucky shot up and turned to glare at him. Wade was already slathering the gunk onto a couple hunks of chocolate cake. As much as he wanted to tell Wade to just go the fuck away, he had to admit that the cake did look good. And he was more than a little shocked that the man had legitimately baked them a cake.

“Five minutes, you said?”

“Five minutes. Maybe fifteen.”

“You have five.”

“I can work with that.”

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It took him thirty. *Motherfucker.*

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“Can you just hold still?”

“Well, you haven’t told me how you want me? That said, no pictures from my left. It’s like the less attractive side of Two Face over there.”

“You’re in a *mask*.”

“Am I? Well that explains the fuzzy vision. Hope I got the measurements right.”

“Knowing you, you probably ‘accidentally’ laced it with arsenic.”

“I would never... No, it’s actually cyanide. No one uses arsenic anymore, Jimmy.”

Bucky dropped his head in exasperation. Wade was *insisting* Bucky take a picture of his disaster of a cake — “This thing is a *masterpiece*, dude. Sort of like what I did to that Colombian drug lord’s
head that one time.” — and post it to Bucky’s Instagram. But honestly, if it would get Wade to leave so he and Steve could finally crash, well, he’d do just about anything at this point.

Wade turned his back to Bucky and rested his hand on his hip, still holding onto the spatula, the cake held out to the side. “Do you prefer ‘Coquettish Ingénue’?" He turned around to face them, sticking his arm out and holding the cake like it and his arm were resting on some sort of raised platform. “Or would you prefer ‘High School Senior’?”

“I would prefer you hold still so I can just take the damn thing,” Bucky grumbled. This was going nowhere, and he was so done with all of this. Just as Wade stood up straight, probably to snark at him further, Bucky snapped the shot.

“Did you just take a picture of my left side?”

“It’s in focus.”

“That’s not my good side.”

“You have no idea how much I spectacularly don’t care.” He pointed over to Steve, who was snoring softly from where he’d fallen asleep at the counter about twenty minutes ago. “He’s gone, and I’m about to follow suit, whether you’re happy or not.”

Wade spun around and all but dropped the cake onto the counter with a dramatic huff. “Annie Leibowitz would never treat me like this.”

“Good thing she’s not here,” Bucky countered, even as he opened up his Instagram app. He pulled up the picture and was just about to write in a caption when his vision was suddenly blocked by an absolutely enormous slice of cake.

“You simply must try some,” Wade offered.

Bucky tried to ignore him and brought his phone back around, only to have Wade shove the slice of cake in his face again. He breathed through his nose and started counting backwards from ten.

You are not the Winter Soldier anymore, which means murder is illegal now, he sadly reminded himself. But then, Wade couldn’t exactly be killed, he reasoned.

Nope. No. Steve would be mad at him for making a bigger mess of the kitchen.

He turned his back on Wade and started typing:

Yes, Steve and I were released from the hospital earlier than expected —

“Just one little bite.” The cake was back in his face and his eyes shot up to Wade. His phone protested from where he was gripping it and he dropped his metal hand before he broke the damn thing.

“I don’t. Want any. Right now. Thank you,” he ground out. He stepped away and began typing again:

but it doesn't explain what the f**k you're doing in our apartment and how you got in!

He sputtered around a forkful of cake suddenly shoved into his mouth, and stumbled back, glaring at the giant walking testicle.

“Good, right? I baked it myself,” Wade said, oblivious to the definite murder Bucky was about to
commit. “I’ll bet it tastes fantastic. Sort of like my ass. Or your ass. Or his ass.” He tilted his head over to Steve, and added wistfully, “I’ll bet his ass tastes fantastic.”

Now, if you were to pull Bucky into in interrogation room, under penalty of death, he would swear on his mama’s grave that his arm moved of its own volition, because the next thing he knew it was wrapped around Wade’s throat.

“Get. Out.”

“Well, this escalated quickly,” Wade choked out. His hands flew up in surrender. Unfortunately that meant the plate of chocolate cake went crashing to the floor.

“Whowazzit?” Steve shot straight up at the noise and looked around, bleary eyed, before landing on Bucky, who still wasn’t letting go of Wade. He stared for a moment, his lips smacking together. “No killing in the house, Buck, you know the rules.” Then he laid his head back down and went right back to sleep.

He turned back to Wade who was still looking at him (maybe, probably), his hands still in the air, and Bucky slowly uncurled his fingers, one at a time. Seriously, he had to actively think about pulling each one back individually. Steve said he had to. Stupid rules.

He vibrated with controlled menace and let his voice drop straight into Winter Soldier. “Thank you so much for the lovely cake, Wade,” he said, sweetly, through gritted teeth. “But I think it’s time for you to leave now. Yes, I think that would be best.”

Wade sighed, shook his head, and patted Bucky’s cheek with a, “We’ll always have Paris,” before turning and walking straight out the door, whistling as he went. It took Bucky a moment to realize it was the theme song to Terminator.

He blinked at the sudden Wadelessness of his apartment. Quiet and free of chaos, save the disaster the man had left behind. He glanced down and saw his phone still in his flesh hand. He brought it up to his face and opened it back up to Instagram. He quickly finished typing out the rest of his caption and sent it off into the ether.

“There you go, you silly idiot,” he murmured quietly into the apartment. “You’re Insta-famous now.”

He shoved his phone into his pocket and walked over to Steve, wrapping an arm around his waist to lift him up. “Come on, Stevie. Bedtime.”

“Wade gone?” Steve mumbled into Bucky’s shoulder as they wandered back into their room. He crashed onto their bed and Bucky had just enough energy to pull their shoes off before crawling in after him.

He pulled the covers over them and murmured against Steve’s skin, who was already gone, “Yeah, baby. It’s finally just us.”

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AND NO, I DON’T WANT A PIECE OF CHOCOLATE CAKE, WADE!! ASK ME ONE MORE TIME AND I WILL SLICE YOU WITH A PIE SERVER!!
Hey! Look what Stevie found in one of his old phones. It was the very first time I felt comfortable enough to let him take my pic without hiding behind my hand or anything else I could find! I tried to smile a bit but well...I wasn't exactly in the mood at the time. The completely OTT velvet jacket belongs to Tony. I "borrowed" it when I was transferred to the Avengers Tower, before finally coming home. I promised Steve I would give it back, but it's still in a closet somewhere, next to one of Barton's scarves. I should wear it again even if it's a bit too small though.

Chapter Notes

**Hey! Look what Stevie found in one of his old phones. It was the very first time I felt comfortable enough to let him take my pic without hiding behind my hand or anything else I could find! I tried to smile a bit but well...I wasn't exactly in the mood at the time. The completely OTT velvet jacket belongs to Tony. I "borrowed" it when I was transferred to the Avengers Tower, before finally coming home. I promised Steve I would give it back, but it's still in a closet somewhere, next to one of Barton's**
scarves. I should wear it again even if it's a bit too small though.

"Jaaaames! What a lovely jacket you've got there! It's funny because Tony bought the same one about 4-5 years ago, but he never wears it! Well, you know how he is, worse than Carrie Bradshaw! He wears things once and then his clothes vanish into his wardrobe! Oh, I'm SO sorry to bother you with this! No, no, I know I'm bothering you, your little smile tells it all!"

“Oh my good god, Bucky, look!” Steve walked over and shoved something under Bucky’s nose. He blinked and glanced down at the phone that was now blocking the sketch he’d been working on.

“What am I looking at?” he asked as he took the phone and sat up against the arm of the couch. It appeared to be one of Steve’s old phones, some Samsung thing from several years back.

Steve lifted up Bucky’s legs and plopped down next to him. “I was going through our pile of phones, trying to consolidate all our old photos, right? And I found that.” He nodded at the phone.

“Didn’t you steal that jacket?”

Bucky glanced down at the phone again, and holy shit, Steve was right. The picture was back from when he and Steve had still been living at the Tower. In a fit of boredom one day, Bucky had wandered down to Tony’s workshop to see what the guy was up to, only to stumble upon the most ridiculous velvet jacket he’d ever seen. So of course he’d had to steal it. He’d immediately headed back upstairs to find Steve, who’d agreed: it was the most hideous jacket that had ever existed ever. He’d made Bucky put it on, and he’d ended up taking a few pictures of him wearing it, which had been a miracle in and of itself. Bucky hadn’t been one for pictures back then.

“That thing is still ridiculous,” Bucky remarked, staring at the photo. “And apparently, so was I, at least back then.”

Steve’s brow furrowed as he leaned over to look at the photo. “What do you mean? You don’t look ridiculous to me.”

Bucky snorted a derisive laugh. “Seriously? I was a mess. Look at me; I looked like barely a shell of a human back then.”

“Bucky...” Still frowning, Steve reached up to press a warm hand against Bucky’s cheek. “I’m not exactly sure what you’re seeing, but to me, you look beautiful. Then and now.”

Okay, Bucky melted a little bit at that. Couldn’t be helped. He leaned into Steve’s touch. “Such a sap,” he said quietly.

Steve just gave him his favorite lopsided smile and leaned in for a soft kiss. Leave it to Steve to only ever think Bucky looked amazing, even when Bucky knew he looked like one of the less pretty zombies of The Walking Dead. Hopeless idiot.

Bucky turned back to the picture and tried to see himself through Steve’s eyes. Steve had always seen the best in him, even when Bucky was at his absolute worst (not when he was the Winter Soldier — that time didn’t count). When he’d turned himself in, he had fully expected to be executed for his crimes; part him had even hoped that it would be Steve to pull the trigger. Would have been poetic justice in his mind.
So he hadn’t cared. Hadn’t cared about himself or his needs — not mentally or physically. He’d had to be forced to eat in the beginning, and later, constantly reminded. He’d just... Really, he hadn’t cared. It wasn’t that he wanted to die, he just couldn’t figure out how any part of him had been worth anything.

But Steve — stupid, loving Steve — had thought him worth everything, and had spent months tirelessly working on breaking down Bucky’s barriers. And this picture? Bucky thought he looked like shit, but he recognized it for what it was. He’d let Stevie take his picture. Another barrier broken down.

“This thing on wifi?” he asked, looking up.

Steve shrugged and took the phone from him. “No idea, let me check. Why?”

“I don’t know. Figured I’d post that picture to my Instagram.”

Steve stopped from where he was thumbing through the phone and looked up, suspicion in his eyes. “You aren’t gonna talk shit about yourself, are you?” Bucky barely had a chance to think that over before Steve kept going, setting the phone down in his lap. “Because, baby, you’ve made so many strides since you started this therapy exercise, and I just can’t, in good conscience, let you take a step back.”

Bucky couldn’t help but feel slightly irritated by that. He swiveled off of Steve’s lap, and headed towards the kitchen. “Okay, but isn’t the point of getting better knowing that sometimes it’s okay to take a few steps back?” He had no idea if that had been his intention or not, but now he felt he had to make some damn point. Steve had no place dictating his Instagram like this.

He stopped in front of the coffee maker and turned a snide eye on Steve. “That’s not your decision to make, Steven.”

“I never said it was my decision to make, James,” Steve shot back.

“Except for how you just did. You just said you weren’t going to allow me to take a step back.” Bucky waved a hand at Steve, irritation giving right over to anger. This was ridiculous. “I didn’t know you got to call the shots on my therapy. Seriously, who the fuck do you think you are?”

“Are you fucking kidding me right now?” Steve shoved off the couch and stalked over to the kitchen, though he smartly stayed on the other side of the island. Getting in Bucky’s face when he was angry wouldn’t end well for either of them, and Steve had learned that lesson the hard way more than once. “Who the hell am I? Are you really asking me that? I’m the person who loves you, you asshole. I’m the person who cares more about you than any single person on this planet, including you — don’t even try to deny that. I’m the person whose job it is to take care of you —”

“No one said you had to take on that job —”

“Fine!” Steve shouted, gesturing wildly. “It’s not my job, it’s my goddamned right and privilege! That better? Because, I swear to God, there is nothing more important to me than seeing you healthy and happy, and if there’s anything I can do to prevent you from hurting yourself, or looking down on yourself, or basically taking any sort of step away from the person you’ve become, you can bet your fucking ass I’m gonna do it!”

Bucky just stood there, rigid, nostrils flaring, fury coursing through him as he stared Steve down. He had no idea how they’d gone from relaxing together to this, but whatever, fuck Steve. He had no clue what it was like in Bucky’s head sometimes, no matter how well he thought he knew him.
It was a solid minute before Bucky finally breathed out, tired and defeated. “I don’t fucking need this.” He strode for the door, grabbing his keys as he stormed out.

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It was mid-afternoon and Bucky watched as the sun slowly crawled across him on the floor, making its way towards its own exit for the day. It had been hours since he’d left Steve standing in their kitchen. The moment he’d walked out the door, he’d felt lost, so he’d made his way down to the subway and hopped the first train that had come by — the one heading into Manhattan, it would seem.

He’d jumped off at 42nd St and had wandered around for a bit, grabbing the coffee he hadn’t made back at home before finally, slowly, making his way over to the Tower. He’d quietly slipped in and made his way up to his and Steve’s floor, silently praying Steve hadn’t thought to look for him there. There was no Steve when he got off the elevator. He wasn’t sure if he’d been relieved or just a little bit sad.

Of course, it wasn’t like he knew if Steve even had been looking for him. He’d had nothing but radio silence from his other half since he’d left. Now he found himself lying, bored, on the floor of their living room, staring around aimlessly, his thoughts turning over in his head. The fight had left him a long time ago, but he was a stubborn son of bitch, and he wasn’t going to crack first.

(Which meant he would probably be living out his days here alone, since Steve wasn’t exactly a paragon of knowing when to back down, either.)

He honestly couldn’t figure out who’d been right in that fight. Steve had no place telling him what he could and couldn’t do when it came to his therapy, but then again, Steve was his biggest champion and cheerleader. He was always in Bucky’s corner, and that included making sure Bucky was constantly moving forward. Of course he would have had reservations about Bucky going all self-deprecation. He always took it as his personal mission to make sure Bucky only ever saw the best in himself. This was no different.

But still. If Bucky wanted to trash how he looked back then, he should have that right. It was part of that whole autonomy thing he had now. Because back then he had been trash. He cared very little about how he looked, he questioned his self-worth on the hourly, and he wanted almost no part of the world around him — sometimes even from Steve.

He’d been in a bad place, dammit, and it had shown.

So why couldn’t he say that? Why couldn’t he talk about that? How the fuck did Steve think he was allowed to tell Bucky how he could or could not view himself.

A low rumble met his ears from somewhere around his stomach area, and Bucky groaned in hunger. He gave himself another minute of wallowing before he pushed up off the floor and headed into the kitchen. It had been a while since either of them had stayed at the Tower, so Bucky had no idea what they had by way of food.

The fridge was empty, which wasn’t surprising, but there were a few frozen pizzas in the freezer — sacrilegious here in New York, but sometimes a man was just too lazy to make his way to the corner pizza joint.

He was just about to pull a couple out when he heard the elevator ding. He froze, hand still inside the freezer, his eyes on the doors as they slid open. His chest tightened when Steve stepped out, glancing around until his own eyes landed on Bucky.
He gave Bucky a tight wan smile, his wave almost an aborted gesture. It was only then that Bucky realized his metal hand was about to freeze over as he continued to stare at Steve, unblinking. He put the pizzas back in their spot, uselessly adjusting them, then slowly closing the freezer door, stalling for something to say. He had no idea if he was still actually mad or not — still no idea who had been right in the whole thing. He couldn’t decide if he should tell Steve he loved him or tell him to go fuck himself.

As he rubbed his cold hand against his pants and finally turned around to fully face Steve, the best he could come up with was: “Hey.”

“Hey.”

Oh, they were doing great.

“I, uh, um... There’s pizza” — Bucky waved a hand behind himself — “in the freezer.”

“I saw.”

“Was thinking of making a couple.”

“Figured.”

“I got hungry.”

“Eaten since this morning?”

“No.”

“Then probably a good idea.”

“Yeah.”

Absolutely fucking stellar.

“Bucky, listen —”

“Steve, I —”

The both chuckled — quick and awkward — in their attempt to talk over each other. But still, it felt like the ice breaker they needed.

“You go first,” Steve said, gesturing at Bucky.

“No, you go.” Bucky shrugged. “I got the last word when I walked out. You should at least get the first word when you get here.” He attempted a half-smile. “I hear that’s how it’s supposed to work.”

Steve returned the smile and slowly walked over to the kitchen area, stopping on the other side of the island, just like he had at home. But this time, instead of yelling at Bucky, he just stood there, looking down, as he nervously turning his keys over and over in his hand.

“I wasn’t sure you were going to be here,” he finally started. “I, um...I looked at the warehouse first, but you weren’t there. So I went over to Prospect — spent a good hour wandering around — but you weren’t there either. Then I thought about that time you went over to Brooklyn Bridge Park after our fight, and I almost ran back there, so afraid that I would miss you because I hadn’t thought about that first. You weren’t there either, so I went home, hoping you’d come back.” He finally looked up, and god, his eyes were so sad, and Bucky’s heart broke a little. “But you hadn’t. This was my last
resort.”

“I was here the whole time,” Bucky answered quietly.

“You were?”

“Honestly, I didn’t know where else to go. Hopped the first train that came along and ended up in the city. Turns out I’m not a city person, and yeah. This was the only place I could think to go.”

“Not a city person?” Steve smirked and Bucky’s chest unclenched. “Buck, we live in a city.”

“No...” Bucky drew the word out and pointed a finger at Steve. “We live in *Brooklyn.*”

“Buck, *Brooklyn* is a —”

“*Brooklyn.*”

Steve just laughed, his eyes finally turning fond. He reached out and grabbed at Bucky’s hand before lacing their fingers together. He gave a little tug and Bucky came willingly. Lips brushed against his forehead, and he closed his eyes briefly at the touch.

“I’m sorry,” Steve whispered against his skin and kissed him again, slowly trailing down to kiss his cheek. “I got no right telling you how to handle your therapy.”

“No, you don’t,” Bucky agreed, then winced when he felt Steve go still. He turned to kiss Steve’s jaw. “But you’re my best friend, and I have no right expecting anything less from you. So, I’m sorry —”

“Bucky —”

“No.” Bucky leaned back and put his free hand on Steve’s chest, meeting his eye. “I overreacted. I shouldn’t have flipped out the way I did. And also...”

“Also?”

Bucky looked down, steeling himself because he knew he was *really* wrong about the next part. With a deep breath, he added, “I should maybe, um, you know, *stop* storming out of every fight we have.” He grimaced as he cracked an eye up at Steve.

“Ya think?” Steve teased as he fought back a smile.

“Maybe just a little,” Bucky grumbled, frowning, and Steve began to shake against him in earnest as laughter overtook him. Slightly affronted, Bucky punched him in the arm, though there was no heat behind it.

“God, you’re *impossible,*” Steve said, fond and exasperated, and ducked down to capture Bucky’s mouth in a kiss. Bucky wasted no time melting into him, because that meant they weren’t fighting anymore, and maybe he could let go of some of this anxiety that had been steadily building up in him since he left.

“So, we’re okay?” he asked quietly when they pulled back.

Steve nodded. “Yeah, baby. We’re okay.”

Bucky wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist and nestled against his shoulder. They stood there for who knew how long, just holding each other and letting the calm take over the last of any
apprehension still lingering between them.

“I brought my phone with me,” Steve said after a while, breaking the silence. “My old one, I mean. If, you know, you still wanted to post that picture.”

“It’s not important.” And it wasn’t. It was just a picture of a silly jacket from a silly afternoon.

(Thought, if he were honest with himself, it was probably one of the first — if not the first — silly moment he’d had since breaking the Winter Soldier’s hold, even if he hadn’t recognized it at the time.)

Steve leaned back and cupped his jaw. His eyes searched over Bucky’s face. “You sure, baby? You wanted to post it before this all went down, and I don’t want you feeling like you can’t because of whatever happened between us.” He frowned and shook his head. “It was important to you earlier. And you should post whatever you want.”

Steve had a point, Bucky had to admit. He had wanted to post it earlier, and truthfully, the only reason he wasn’t doing it now was because of the stupid fight. Silently, he held out his hand.

With a smile, Steve reached into his back pocket and handed over the phone. “We’re in the Tower, so it should already be connected to wifi. JARVIS automatically connects all Avengers’ —”

“Steven, I’m an Avenger,” Bucky reminded him. “I know how JARVIS works.”

Steve huffed out a small laugh. “Right, right. Sorry.”

Bucky just shook his head at his idiot boyfriend and stepped back to fiddle with the phone. It didn’t take him long before he was logged onto his own Instagram and had the picture up.

But after the fight he and Steve’d had, he stalled out on the caption. He still thought he looked awful, but maybe Steve had a point. And really, he’d never been a fan of people throwing pity parties for themselves online. It was passive aggressive and lacked any true sense of honesty. And wasn’t that was this was supposed to be? An honest snapshot of his life as he continually got better?

After that, his fingers flew across the keyboard:

*Hey! Look what Stevie found in one of his old phones. It was the very first time I felt comfortable enough to let him take my pic without hiding behind my hand or anything else I could find! I tried to smile a bit but well...I wasn't exactly in the mood at the time. The completely OTT velvet jacket belongs to Tony. I "borrowed" it when I was transferred to the Avengers Tower, before finally coming home. I promised Steve I would give it back, but it's still in a closet somewhere, next to one of Barton's scarves. I should wear it again even if it's a bit too small though.*

He uploaded it to the app and turned to show it to Steve. “What do you think?”

Steve’s eyes skimmed the caption. When he looked back up, he was smiling. “Perfect.”

“Really?”

“Wouldn’t lie to you, Buck.”

Bucky snorted. “Mean you can’t lie.”

“Whatever.”

Bucky laughed, and reached around to shove the phone back into Steve’s back pocket. Then a
thought occurred to him. He turned back to Steve, excited.

“You know, I think the closet this thing is in is the closet here. I think it’s in the closet of our guest room.”

Steve stared shrewdly at Bucky because, bless him, he already knew where Bucky was going with this. “Think it’ll still fit you? You’ve bulked up since then, you know.”

“Good point, good point.” Bucky nodded solemnly, then shrugged. “Well. Only one way to find out.”

Steve smiled wolfishly at him. “Lead the way, Sergeant Barnes.”

With an answering wicked grin, Bucky turned and pulled Steve back toward the spare bedroom.

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Bucky kicked his boots up on the chair in front of him as he watched people come and go around the atrium of the Tower. He picked his beer up off the table and took a sip before turning too Steve.

“So, on a scale of douche to fabulous, where would you say I rank in this jacket?”

Steve looked Bucky over, all seriousness, before taking a sip of his own beer, deep in thought. Finally he set his beer down and sat up straight. “Tool. Definitely a tool.”

“Oh, fuck you, Rogers!” Bucky wadded up his napkin from their late afternoon snack of burgers they’d procured from the dining hall (they’d gotten too lazy to bake pizza), and threw it at Steve’s head. Steve laughed and batted out of the way just before it hit him square in the forehead.

“Buck, it’s a ridiculous jacket. You said so yourself!” He grabbed the offending napkin and threw it back, which Bucky deflected only too easily. Why they even tried, no one knew. “Though, I have to say,” Steve went on. “You do look a touch hotter in it all mussed up the way you are.”

“And whose fault is that?”

Steve shrugged, clearly unconcerned. “Sex just sounded like more fun than finding the jacket.” He wiped his mouth with his own napkin, tossing it on his plate this time. “Got no regrets about deterring you from your mission for a bit there.”

“Yeah, I really can’t complain about that.”

“Didn’t think so.”

“James! Steve!” They both snapped their attention to where Pepper was approaching from across the atrium.

Bucky was on his feet before he’d even registered the movement. She was just the kind of girl you stood up for. (Which, okay, all girls were the type, but there was just something about her... )

He nodded at her. “Ma’am.”

She leaned in and kissed his cheek as she gave his hand a squeeze, and Bucky felt himself blush. “What have I told you about this ‘ma’am’ nonsense. Please, call me Pepper.”

Bucky’s blush just deepened, and he ducked his head and nodded. “Yes, ma’am. I mean Pepper.”
“You’re impossible, James, You know that?”

“That’s what I said earlier!” Steve piped in from behind him, the traitor. He turned and glared at Steve.

“No one asked you.”

“Now, gentlemen, no fighting.”

Bucky snorted because really, she had no idea. He turned back to smile at her while casually sneaking the finger to Steve behind his back. The answering snicker he heard meant Steve definitely got the message.

“So what are you gentlemen up to this afternoon?” she asked before her eyes fell on the remnants of their burgers. “Oh! Did I interrupt your meal? I’m so sorry!”

Bucky shook his head and waved a hand at her. “Oh, no, please. Don’t worry about it.” He glanced briefly back at the table. “We were more or less done, anyway. Just people watching at this point.”

“Are you sure? Because I —” She stopped and her gaze narrowed at Bucky. She tilted her head, her brows furrowed. “That…” She gestured at Bucky. “I know that jacket.”

Oh. Oh.

Bucky’s eyes flitted down the horrid, velvet atrocity that was too tight in the shoulders and arms, and he had no idea why he was wearing it, let alone in public, and oh god, he could handle Tony knowing he stole the jacket, but not Pepper, because she was a good person, and now she was going to look down on Bucky for being a thief — stealing from her partner of all people — and how the fuck was he going to get out of this —

“Tony also owns that jacket. At least, I think he does.” Bucky, still frozen like a goddamn deer, watched her eyes soften, a smile spread across her lovely features. “But I must say, it looks much better on you. Brings out your eyes.”

All the air left Bucky in a rush as relief flooded through him. She didn’t think he’d stolen it. Or, at least, wasn’t saying anything about it. And why would she? Not a classy lady like her. She wasn’t the type to accuse people of something without proof — unless, of course, it was Tony, who himself was proof enough.

He ducked his head and smiled, and nervously shoved his hands into his pocket, He rocked a little on his feet as he said, “Thank you ma’am.”

“Pepper.”

He laughed softly. “Thank you, Pepper.”

Then she smiled, conspiratorially, and leaned in. “I must say, it’s not often I’m glad Tony has as many clothes as he does. He doesn’t usually wear things more than once or twice, which means that velvet jackets he looks hideous in won’t show up on his person again. Better chance for them to end up on someone they do look good on. Even in old photographs on Instagram.”

Oh. Okay. So she did know. Because she followed him — they all did. And she still wasn’t saying anything. Not really.

Bucky flushed all over.
“Now.” She straightened back up and smiled at him. “I really should let you guys get back to what you were doing.”

“Oh, we really weren’t doing anything,” Steve said. “Honest. Just hanging out.”

“Yeah,” Bucky added, rocking again on his feet as he smiled shyly at her. “If you’d like, please join us.”

She waved a hand at him. “No, it’s fine. I actually have a meeting to get to and I don’t want to disturb you. Have a good day, you two.” She turned to leave, and Bucky watched her all the way out, turning in place, until he suddenly found himself facing Steve.

Who was staring at him, wide-eyed and gleeful.

“Woooow.” A smile spread wide across Steve’s face. “Am I gonna have to tell Jane your crush-cheating on her?”

Bucky glowered at him. “Oh, fuck off.”

Steve just burst out laughing, long and loud, enough that several people turned to look at him. He doubled over, and really, was this necessary? It wasn’t that funny.

When Steve straightened back up, there were tears in his eyes, and Bucky couldn’t remember the last time he wanted to deck Steve so badly. “You know, Rogers, you’re an asshole.” He turned to stomp off, only making it a few feet before fingers grabbed at velvet.

“Aww, baby, don’t be like that.” Steve laughed as he wrapped around Bucky like a limpet. “And didn’t you just promise not to walk away when you were pissed?”

“Low blow, Steve.”

“No, I’m pretty sure a low blow is what you just did to me upstairs.”

That pulled Bucky up short. He slowly turned to face Steve, blinking at him. “Did you just... You did not just say that!”

All Steve did was burst out laughing again.

Bucky folded his arms — really to keep from punching Steve — and waited it out while Steve got himself under control. When his laughing finally petered out after a minute or so, Bucky asked, “Are you done?”

“For now. Oh wait!” Bucky’s eyes narrowed just as Steve’s lit up, but all Steve did was grab his phone (the current one) out of his pocket, opened it up and passed it over. “First, I have this. Don’t delete it!”

Bucky took the phone to find a picture Steve had taken of himself and Pepper, just before Pepper had left. And ha! Steve thought he was sooo slick. Thought he’d gotten a picture of Bucky all flustered and nervous.

“Joke’s on you, Stevie,” he announced. He quickly texted the picture to himself before handing the phone back with a smile. “It would seem, even when you’re trying to get a picture of me being embarrassed, I can’t help but look good.”

Steve gave him a flat stare. “Yes. Go right ahead. You keep stroking that ego.”
Too easy.

Bucky gave him a dirty little smirk. “No, I’m pretty sure that was what you just did to me upstairs,” he countered from earlier, patting himself on the back at Steve’s stupid expression. “Now. If you’ll excuse me, I have a hot hot photo of me I need to post online.”

With that he turned and walked off, leaving Steve laughing at him, as he pulled up the image and loaded it to his Instagram:

“Jaaaames! What a lovely jacket you’ve got there! It’s funny because Tony bought the same one about 4-5 years ago, but he never wears it! Well, you know how he is, worse than Carrie Bradshaw! He wears things once and then his clothes vanish into his wardrobe! Oh, I’m SO sorry to bother you with this! No, no, I know I’m bothering you, your little smile tells it all!”
Speaking of old pictures...My first time out without thirty S.H.I.E.L.D agents following my a** around. Yup, just Stevie and I wandering quietly through Brooklyn. Steve insisted on me wearing something warm but I didn't give a damn TBH, I could have gone out with just a T-shirt on my back. I found it quite ironic to ask the freaking WINTER SOLDIER who survived the Siberian blizzard and who was held years in cryo to be careful of the NY winter. Rogers, what a mother hen you are sometimes, don't ever change...
I think this one was taken the same day. Damn, look at the state I was in. This pic could be a cover for a teenage emo-metal band or whatever. "Barnes and The Infinite Sadness. Now on sale". More seriously, it was still better than the first day I came home, though. I was starting to listen to music again, shave without using the razor to hurt anyone around and drop to one pack a day instead of three. A bit less nightmares too. Believe it or not but it's a rather positive photo. Considering.

Another blast from the past. Steve and I after our first mission together for S.H.I.E.L.D. You know you are f**ked up when your BF congratulates you because "yes, you gunned down 153 Hydra agents today but I'm sure you only killed them if it was necessary and not just because they were getting in the way. Buck...it's...it's positive, OK?". Seriously, Rogers... And a round of applause for Stevie for managing to use the timer mode of his camera properly for once! *clap clap*

It was a rare thing that Steve and Bucky didn’t head home from the Tower at the first opportunity. Their home wasn’t that far away — maybe thirty minutes in light traffic — and they always did prefer the comfort of not being under such heavy surveillance.

Today didn’t seem to be one of those days, though. After their fight, and Bucky’s retreat to their Tower apartment — eighty-five floors up from the bustle of New York City — and after their afternoon together, playing around with that damned jacket, they just...hadn’t left. They eventually wandered back upstairs to their place, and laziness at the idea of having to go home had led to lazy making out on the couch (it was a real segue, it was), which in turn had led to another round of sex, this one slow as molasses.

It was now after ten at night, and neither had really moved from the couch, naked and tangled together, while Steve flipped through channel after channel. Looked like they would be calling it a night here in Manhattan.

“Anything interesting?” Bucky asked from where he was lying on top of Steve, flipping through his Instagram pictures on Steve’s old phone. (His own phone was in the kitchen, and that was just...too far away.)

He snickered as he came across the picture of Nat and Clint from Christmas. That had been a proud moment for him.

“What are you laughing at?” Steve asked.

“Oh, nothin’, just that time I caught out Nat and Clint.”

“You know, I’m still surprised she never tried to kill you.”

Bucky snorted. “Well, give her time. Nat’s all about the slow burn. My time may still come.”

Steve hummed in acknowledgement. “I’ll keep that in mind. And to answer your question, no. Though I did pass Casablanca about two hundred channels back. May go back to that.”

“Two hundred channels.” Bucky repeated. Then he propped his head up on his arm and looked up at
Steve. “Isn’t that crazy, Stevie? I mean, we’re from a time when TV hadn’t even been invented yet, and now...” He waved his metal arm at the giant screen on the wall. “How did we even get here?”

“You know, the funny thing is, we can’t even joke and call it some next level, sci-fi spy shit, because it really is some next level, sci-fi spy shit.”

“Oh my god, it really is.” Bucky turned and giggled into Steve’s chest. There was no better description for their lives, because honestly, if they hadn’t lived it, they would have never believed it. Not either of them.

He pressed a kiss into Steve’s chest, reveling in the insanity of both of them ending up damn near eighty years in the future. He slowly made his way up, trailing kisses as he went, until he found Steve’s mouth, pulling him in for a long, lingering kiss.

“What was that for?” Steve brushed Bucky’s hair off his forehead. Then he gave a wicked little half smile. “You ready for Round Three here, soldier?”

Bucky leaned back in for another kiss before shaking his head. “Nah. Guess I just wanted to show my gratitude.”

Steve’s smile slipped into a curious frown. “Gratitude?”

Bucky shrugged before resting himself against Steve’s chest again. “For you living, I guess? For being too stubborn to die in that ice. You lived, and you...you came back for me. You made it so we could be here. Together.”

Steve cupped Bucky’s face in his hands and surged forward for another kiss. The angle was awkward, and Bucky had to strain to meet him, but that didn’t stop the fierceness behind it — the determination pouring out of Steve. When he pulled back, there was a fire behind his eyes.

“I will always come back for you, Bucky Barnes,” he promised, and Bucky’s breath caught. Steve spoke those words like truth.

A thud met his ears as he dropped the phone and crawled up into Steve’s lap. Their lips met in a mess of need and desperation, and Bucky was instantly hard. He ground down, seeking friction against Steve’s own erection pressing into his hip. Somebody whimpered at that, and hand to God, he couldn't tell if the noise came from him or Steve.

There was nothing sweet about it as they moved together. There was just love and lust, and an overwhelming driving need for them both to get off as quickly as possible.

“Ah, fuck,” Bucky moaned as Steve sank his teeth into Bucky’s throat, thrusting up as Bucky pressed down. “Stevie, please...”

Bucky had no idea what he was begging for, but Steve seemed to get it. He quickly turned his head to lick a stripe up his palm, then took both of them in hand, jacking them off quickly, with little finesse.

“I’ve got you, baby,” Steve murmured into his ear, as deft fingers slid across his dick. It took no time at all before pressure built up at the base of his spine, and he was crying out Steve’s name as he came all over his hand.

He had barely come down before he was knocking Steve’s hand out of the way to finish him off himself, jerking clumsily and swallowing Steve’s moans when he dove back down to Steve’s waiting mouth. When Steve came, Bucky swallowed that cry down, too.
They breathed into each other, Steve’s chest heaving against Bucky’s as he shuddered underneath him. He leaned up to capture Bucky again for a quick kiss.

“Where did that come from?” he asked, voice rough and weak.

Bucky huffed a laugh against him. “Not sure.” He reached over Steve’s head to the box of tissues on the end table, grabbing a few, and cleaning them up. “You just had to go and say such pretty things. Couldn’t help myself.”

“Couldn’t help yourself, huh?” Steve smirked up at him, his hands gliding up Bucky’s thighs. Bucky shivered at the touch. “Slave to your hormones there, Buck?”

Bucky reached between them and gave Steve’s dick a gentle squeeze, reveling in the gasp it pulled from him. “Slave to something...” he answered with a sly grin.

“Such a little shit.”

Bucky hummed in agreement, then bracketed Steve’s head before stealing another kiss. “I love you,” he said quietly, pulling back only so far as to be able to catch Steve’s eye, seriousness taking over. “Be patient with me, okay? Sometimes I’m not always gonna be moving in a forward direction.”

“I know,” Steve acknowledged, just as quiet, running his fingers up and down Bucky’s back. He regarded Bucky before adding, “Just as long as you know it doesn’t matter how far forward or backwards you go, I’ll always be next to you to take your hand.”

“Sap.”

“Tell no one.”

Bucky just smiled and crawled back down to lay on top of Steve again. Honestly, he was so sated and so content, he couldn’t wrap his head around the fact that they’d been fighting earlier that day. They weren’t perfect, not by a long shot, but they always managed to find their way back to each other. That would forever be the only thing that ever mattered to him. It had to be.

“Hey, Stevie?” He broke the silence softly.

“Yeah, baby?”

It took him a moment to respond. “Do you think you’d ever get sick of me, though? Like, maybe us fighting would be too much? I mean, it wouldn’t be the first time in history a couple broke up because one of them couldn’t get their shit together, and I’m not the easiest —”

“Bucky, stop.” Fingers carded through his hair and he turned his head to glance up at Steve. The look on his face was indecipherable. “You don’t honestly believe that a little bit of squabbling would be enough to drive me away, do you? I mean, you can’t actually think that.”

Bucky shrugged, awkward from where he’d tucked himself around Steve. “Fighting drives a wedge between people. I’m not stupid, I get how the real world works. Love isn’t infallible; not even ours. I’m difficult, Steve. My issues can wear on a person.”

“Your issues can wear on a person...” Steve parroted, eyes narrowing. Then suddenly he burst out laughing, full-bodied and loud. Enough that he damn near shook Bucky loose.

“Not sure how this is funny,” Bucky grumbled as he gripped onto Steve’s sides.
“You don’t?” There were tears in Steve’s eyes, and where was Bucky’s contentment now. Not with Steve laughing at him.

“No, I really don’t,” he snapped and made to pull away, only to have Steve grab on and start peppering him with kisses.

“Oh, baby, I’m sorry. Really. But seriously.” He gently pushed on Bucky’s shoulders, guiding him into a sitting position. Once they were both upright, he took Bucky’s face in hand and kissed him. “I love you, but you are such a dunce sometimes, you know that?”

“A dunce? Did you actually just call me that?” Bucky huffed in frustration and reached over to grab his smokes off the coffee table. He quickly lit one, then turned back to Steve, waving a hand at him. “This outta be good.”

Steve just sighed and shook his head, affection painted across his face, despite Bucky trying his best to glower at him. What the hell was Steve getting at?

“Where’s my old phone?” Steve glanced around. “I need to show you something — aha!” He reached under the table from where Bucky had dropped it earlier. He tucked himself back up on the couch and started flipping through the pictures. “Okay, here it is. Take a look.”

He turned the phone to Bucky, and despite still being cranky at getting laughed at, Bucky slid closer into Steve’s side to look over whatever it was Steve wanted to show him. He had to admit, he was curious now.

“I don’t understand,” he said as he frowned at a picture of himself from several years back. He wasn’t sure exactly when it was from, but if he had to guess by the obscenely long hair and the fact that there was a damn blizzard going on around him, he thought it might be from around when he and Steve had moved out of the Tower and back to Brooklyn after Bucky’s deconditioning. That time was a bit hazy for Bucky, but he knew they’d made the move during winter.

“Is this from when we’d moved back to Brooklyn?” he asked.

Steve nodded and slid his finger across to the next photo — this one some of Bucky smoking inside their bedroom. “Yeah, remember? We bought this place —”

“You bought this place.” Bucky hadn’t been allowed his own bank account at the time. Buying this place had been all Steve.

“We bought this place so we’d have a fresh start together, and it was about a week after we moved in that a big snow storm hit, remember? You wanted to go outside and check it out.”

Bucky snorted. “Bullshit. That looks cold. I don’t do cold.”

“You don’t do cold now. Back then, you didn’t... You were doing so much better, but you still didn’t care all that much about much of anything.” An arm slipped around Bucky’s shoulder and Steve pulled him close, pressing a soft slow kiss to the side of his head. Bucky didn’t miss the hesitation in his voice when he continued. “You didn’t so much want to die anymore, but I don’t think you would have cared much if you did. You still would have thought it was just desserts.”

Bucky didn’t know what to say. He vaguely remembered that day, the more he thought about it. And while he was under no illusions that massive depression had been something he’d dealt heavily with back then, he didn’t always remember being that melancholy.

“I still don’t understand what this has to do with us fighting now, though. What does me being sad
personified back then have to do with” — he gestured vaguely between the two of them — “any of this.”

Steve turned Bucky to face him. Then he gave Bucky that favored little half smile of his. “I know you don’t actually think I’m going to get sick of you. I know you’re just asking for asking’s sake.” Bucky opened his mouth to respond, but Steve shook his head. “No, let me finish. Whether you think I will or not, I can’t believe that you really do. Because you have to know how stupidly happy I am to see the way you react to things today.” He paused and looked around, as though searching for the right way to keep going. “Back then, when you were, as you put it, ‘sad personified’, you were just so...flat. Happy, sad, angry, frustrated, it didn’t...it didn’t matter. There was no life in your eyes, baby.” Steve brushed a thumb along Bucky’s cheek. “And now? Now there’s life. And passion. Now you get angry and sad and scared and happy and excited and just — just all the things you weren’t before. So if having you scream at me means I get thunder and lightning behind your gorgeous eyes, I will gladly take that every day — every fucking day — for the rest of our unnaturally long lives.”

Bucky blinked, feeling a little prick at the corner of his eyes. He turned away, trying his best to will the tears away. And God bless Steve for not saying anything, he just held Bucky closer as Bucky curled into him. Christ, he would never deserve someone like Steve in his life.

To distract himself, he glanced over the two pictures again before opening up his Instagram app on the old phone. He uploaded the first one of himself standing in the snow...

He wanted to say something serious. He was trying. But all the words in his head blanked out as he tried to think of how to caption out what Steve had said about him back then. He didn’t want to give people the impression that he’d been suicidal, because that had never really been the case. At least not in the strictest sense. But he still couldn’t bring himself to talk about just how fucked up he’d been back then. The idea of telling the world just how bad it had been at times made his chest seize.

And the worst part — the part that had him almost barking out a hysterical laugh — was the part where, if he was remembering correctly, this had been a good day. He remembered that he hadn’t woken up screaming the night before. And it hadn’t one of the days where Steve found him hiding in the fetal position in the far back corner of their closet, or where he couldn’t remember how to speak English. Or even one of the countless, endless days where the Winter Soldier had surfaced and tried to kill Steve.

And yet.

Steve was right. It had been a good day, and yet there was no life behind his eyes. He’d been...not happy — happiness hadn’t come for a long time — but at least content. But anyone who looked at this picture would only see the eyes of a man who had nothing left to live for.

He couldn’t tell people that.

He sighed and started typing.

Speaking of old pictures...My first time out without thirty S.H.I.E.L.D agents following my a** around. Yup, just Stevie and I wandering quietly through Brooklyn. Steve insisted on me wearing something warm but I didn't give a damn TBH, I could have gone out with just a T-shirt on my back. I found it quite ironic to ask the freaking WINTER SOLDIER who survived the Siberian blizzard and who was held years in cryo to be careful of the NY winter. Rogers, what a mother hen you are sometimes, don't ever change...

He looked over what he wrote, and shrugged. He wasn’t happy with it, but he just couldn’t bring
himself to say any of the other shit that had been going on in his life at the time. With a sigh, he hit send, then turned to show it to Steve.

“I can’t be honest,” he admitted, a small hitch to his voice, as he handed over the phone. As Steve looked it over, he added, “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I just tell people what happened to me?”

Steve’s face fell as he turned back to Bucky. He leaned in to kiss him. “Baby, there’s nothing wrong with you. It’s one thing to talk about what’s going on in your life now. But honestly?” He turned back to glance at the photo. “I’m surprised you posted this at all. You don’t have to show people this. You know that, right?”

“Weren’t we just talking about me moving in a more forward direction, though?”

Steve huffed a laugh. “Actually, I think we were fighting about me not letting you talk shit about yourself.”

“There was that too.”

They smiled at each other before Steve kissed him again. “I really don’t want you talking badly about yourself, but there’s a difference between being honest and talking yourself down. I um...” He glanced at the phone again before turning a tentative gaze on Bucky. “Can I show you?”

“Show me?”

Steve pulled his arm free and turned back to the phone. “Um, yeah. I promise I won’t hit share.” Seriously confused now, Bucky watched as he pulled up the next photo — the one of Bucky smoking — and loaded it onto Instagram before quickly typing up a caption. Then he handed the phone back.

Bucky sat up and read over the caption.

*I think this one was taken the same day. Damn, look at the state I was in. This pic could be a cover for a teenage emo-metal band or whatever. "Barnes and The Infinite Sadness. Now on sale". More seriously, it was still better than the first day I came home, though. I was starting to listen to music again, shave without using the razor to hurt anyone around and drop to one pack a day instead of three. A bit less nightmares too. Believe it or not but it’s a rather positive photo. Considering.*

He reread it a few times, taking in the words that Steve had put. They weren’t quite how he’d phrase it, but it was almost spot on. Well, it was Steve who’d written it — the man who knew Bucky better than any living soul ever had. But regardless, he could see what Steve was getting at. It was honest without being depressing. Hell, it was even a tiny bit funny at the beginning, because really, he did look like he belonged in some emo band. Without thinking, he hit send.

“Bucky wait —” But it was too late. He turned to Steve and smiled with a shrug.

“Nah, it was perfect. I get what you’re saying.”

Steve shook his head and smiled. “But this is supposed to be your therapy. You’re supposed to write the honest stuff yourself.”

“But one could argue the fact that me even allowing those words to be posted — written by me or not — is a step forward. Isn’t it?”

Steve already had his mouth opened to respond, only to quickly shut it. He fish-faced at Bucky a
couple more times. “I... hadn’t thought of it like that.”

Bucky just gave him a little smug smile before tucking himself back into Steve’s side and turning back to the phone, flipping through the pictures once again. Steve turned back to the TV.

God, there were so many pictures of Bucky from back then on this phone. Pictures of them at the park, of him sleeping, of him reading. There were a couple of him sparring with Natasha — an especially good one where she used his long hair against him, and it looked like she was flipping him over by it. There was even —

“Oh my god, is this from our first mission?” Excitedly, he turned the phone up towards Steve, shoving it in his face. “The one where we took the Hydra base down just outside of Pittsburgh?”

Steve leaned back at the sudden intrusion of his space before finally peering down at the photo. Then he smiled. “Yep. The one and the same.” He took the phone from Bucky and looked it over. “You were still barely functioning at the time, but damn, baby. Watching you in combat like that? You just... changed.” His brow furrowed as he continued to stare at the image. “You were just a completely different person, like...like you were...”

“The Winter Soldier?” Bucky offered up quietly, and Steve’s smile turned sad as he looked Bucky over.

“I didn’t wanna say it.”

Bucky huffed. “What’s not to say? I mean, we’ve talked about that in a couple of my therapy sessions before, remember?” He pushed himself up until he was sitting in Steve’s lap. “I did use to regress into The Asset when we went on those missions. I mean, there was a reason I wasn’t allowed to officially join SHIELD for the longest time. It had nothing to do with my proficiency, you know that.”

Steve nodded. “Yeah. I know.” He wrapped an arm around Bucky’s waist. “Did I ever tell you that I hated you being on those missions? I really hated it. You never killed people you shouldn’t have, but there was still a ruthlessness about you. Made me realize that you truly earned every bit of your legend. Made me scared.”

“Of me?”

“For you. I was scared that it would have an adverse effect on your recovery. You were so good at what you did, I was scared you might not want to come back from it.”

Bucky took the phone back from Steve and looked the image over. Steve seemed so chipper in the image, but Bucky... He still looked dead in the eyes. And yet, there was a hint of a smile on his face. The first smile Bucky had seen on the entire phone.

“I don’t think you were wrong in those fears, Stevie,” he said, touching his own face on the screen. “But, uh, why do you look so... I don’t know, I guess happy in this?”

He turned to Steve in confusion only to be met with a smirk. “Honestly? I was trying to be positive for you. I figured most people hadn’t been all that nice to you after you completed your missions with Hydra. So I thought that if I was, maybe it would help bring you back to me faster.” He blushed a little, and shrugged. “I don’t know. It was all I could think to do at the time.”

Bucky reached up and pressed light fingers to Steve’s cheek. “They weren’t nice to me, not at all. They weren’t mean to me either, but then, I was literally just a machine to them. As long as I was compliant, I just... existed. I was just...there.” Then he barked out a derisive laugh. “Funny enough,
the only one who ever treated me like a human being was Pierce. And after Zola, he had been the biggest asshole of them all.”

Steve turned in to place a gentle kiss on Bucky’s wrist. “Well, they’re all gone now.”

“Damn right, they are.”

Bucky turned back to the image and looked himself over. Bruised and battered after their mission, his stupidly long hair getting in the way of Steve trying to look over the damage his forehead in their bedroom over in Brooklyn.

(Bucky hated hospitals even more back then than he did now, and God, was that ever saying something.)

He looked worse for wear, but hey. It had been another first step in a series of many that had gotten him to where he was today. That had to count for something, right?

He flipped back over to Instagram and added the image. Unlike earlier, though, he actually didn’t want to go for seriousness. The image was serious enough.

Another blast from the past. Steve and I after our first mission together for S.H.I.E.L.D. You know you are f**ked up when your BF congratulates you because "yes, you gunned down 153 Hydra agents today but I’m sure you only killed them if it was necessary and not just because they were getting in the way. Buck...it's...it's positive, OK?". Seriously, Rogers... And a round of applause for Stevie for managing to use the timer mode of his camera properly for once! *clap clap*

He stopped and looked over the caption. The beginning was more serious than he’d intended, and he was worried that Steve would take issue with the way he called himself fucked up. Hell, that was how they’d ended up at the Tower in the first place

Fuck it. It was what he wanted to say.

Nervously, he hit send and passed the phone back over. And sure enough, as Steve read over the caption, his eyes stormed right over.

“Really, Buck? Really?” He huffed and smacked the phone back against Bucky’s chest. He caught it before it could fall as Steve ranted on. “I mean...that’s not — that’s not even remotely true!”

The next thing Bucky knew, Steve was standing up, dumping him unceremoniously on the ground. He turned wide eyes up as Steve rounded on him.

“I know how to use the damn timer on my camera!”

What?

Bucky blinked at him, the words taking a second to process. “Wait, that’s what you got out of that?!”

“I am very technologically advanced!” Steve barked and Bucky burst out laughing. Steve let out a frustrated growl before storming off to their bedroom.

“Wait!” Bucky wheezed, and crawled up onto the couch to watch Steve slam the door shut at the other end of the hall. He shook his head affectionately. “Stevie, wait. Don’t go. No, really.”

Lord, that boyfriend of his could be a giant idiot sometimes.

With that, he vaulted over the couch and chased after Steve. Seemed like they were headed for
Round Four.
Contrary to popular belief, I don't spend my time killing people or collecting grenades (What? I have my hobbies, you've got yours, get over it). I also enjoy watching stupid stuff on YouTube like the smallest fennec in the world (it's REALLY tiny, OK?). Alright, alright, there's *maybe* a Kalashnikov at my feet but you are never too prepared, no?
It wasn’t the sound of the front door that woke him up, opening and closing with a quiet click, the way it did. Steve usually went running without him, because he usually slept through Steve going running. So it definitely wasn’t the door that did it.

He’d been up for a few minutes before that.

No, it was the swearing that woke him from sleep. Steve ranting in the kitchen as he banged around. Muttering shit under his breath over and over again. If Bucky hadn’t been so cranky at being woken up, he would have found it alarmingly amusing.

He pushed himself up, blinking the sleep out of his eyes. A quick glance at the clock told him it was a little past ten, so okay, that wasn’t so bad. If Steve’s temper tantrum — whatever the cause — had actually woken him up early, well there would be one less super soldier walking the earth.

With a groan, he rolled out of bed and padded over to the bathroom to take care of business before grabbing his cell phone and smokes, and heading into the kitchen, where the coffee lived.

He looked around in confusion. Whatever had put Steve in a tizzy, there was no evidence of it in the empty kitchen. About the only thing amiss were the two cabinet doors, left open. That said, something was missing; he just couldn’t put his finger on it.

With a grunt, he planted himself at the kitchen counter and called Steve. When he answered, Bucky didn’t even give him a chance to say hello.

“Why are you not here?”

“Don’t be mad, okay?”

Well, there was just no way Steve could say that and not expect Bucky to get suspicious. He narrowed his eyes.

“Steven...”

“It was an accident, I swear.”

“What? What was an accident, Steven?”

The silence at the other end was deafening. Whatever Steve had done, Bucky could practically feel the man bracing himself through the phone line.

“So, we ran out of coffee.”

His head snapped up, and that’s what was missing. The damn French press was empty.

“WHAT?”

“It wasn’t on purpose!”

“Where are you?” Bucky growled. If Steve wasn’t out taking care of this epic travesty, Bucky was going to kill him.

“I’m standing in line at Starbucks right now.”

“Starbucks?” Bucky groaned and let his head drop down onto the cool granite counter. “You forget
to get me coffee, and then Starbucks? Why not —"

“IT’s closer than Brooklyn Roasting, Buck. Figured if you had to choose between good coffee and your caffeine lifeline, you’d want the latter.”

Bucky was too fucking tired to admit Steve was right. Steve wasn’t right. Steve was a dick. Steve was supposed to make sure the house didn’t run out of coffee. This was all his fault and he was a major asshole.

“I’m getting food, too. I know you like their muffins and scones.”

Bucky’s jaw ached from where he was biting back a response. No way did Steve get this one.

“And then later we’ll go into the city and I’ll take you to that burger joint.”

“The one inside the hotel?”

“That would be the one.”

“You have exactly seven minutes to get back here.” Bucky didn’t give Steve a chance to reply before hanging up. Then he dragged himself over to the couch and collapsed, face down, as he waited the fucking eternity it was going to take for Steve to get home.

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Exactly six minutes and forty-three seconds later (a fucking eternity, goddammit), Steve walked in the door.

“Bucky?”

“Mmmrph!” Bucky stuck his hand out from where he was still face-planted into the couch and waited, because that was the best Steve was gonna fucking get.

A snort met Bucky’s ears before a cup was being pressed into his fingers. “Here you go, princess.”

He turned his head just enough to glare daggers at Steve, who’d crouched down to his eye level. “I have killed men for less than this, you know.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it.”

“Where’s my food?”

Steve held up a bag between them, the familiar brown and green a welcome sight, even if the white and green cup in his hand wasn’t. He wanted to whine because it wasn’t good-tasting coffee, and tired or not, Bucky had standards to maintain.

None of which stopped him from pushing himself up to take a sip. Only then did he sigh in satisfaction, because even if Steve had forgotten to buy coffee, he hadn’t forgotten that Bucky didn’t hate the Starbucks pour over.

“This isn’t their mass-produced drip shit,” he commented as he eyed the cup.

Steve plopped down on the couch next to him, and tossed the bag of food onto Bucky’s lap. “No, it’s not.”

“You got me a pour over.”
“Consider it penance.”

Bucky couldn’t help but crack a smile at that. “Consider yourself forgiven,” he said and turned to sneak a quick kiss to Steve’s cheek. Then he turned back to take another sip, the caffeine finally kicking in. “You know this won’t be enough.”

Steve wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him in close, kissing the side of his head. “I’ll go get you another one when you’re ready.”

“Okay, but wouldn’t that just be enough time for you to go over to Brooklyn Roasting and grab something better?”

“You know, it would.” Steve’s grip on him got that much tighter. “But we’re going to consider this your penance for putting me in charge of your obsession.”

Bucky let out an indignant squawk and turned to glower at Steve, only to come face to face with the Captain Stare. Well, that was just rude.

“You know, that’s not fair, Steve, I —”

“Your obsession.”

“Yeah, but you love coffee, too!” Bucky tried to point out, and nodded to the second cup sitting on the coffee table. He certainly knew that one wasn’t for him.

“Ob-se-sion.”

Bucky turned back and grumbled into his cup. “Coffee is delicious.”

“And you’re a little weird.”

“Your face is a little weird.”

Steve just huffed a laugh and pushed off the couch, plucking the bag back off of Bucky’s lap and grabbing his coffee as he went. He turned toward the kitchen. “Okay, loon, I’m going to heat this stuff up for you because I am a nice person, and you’re going to drink your coffee and learn how to be a human being.”

“And your face is a human being!” Bucky shot back, all petulance and crankiness. It took a second for what he’d said to sink in — just long enough for Steve to turn and stare at him — before he shrunk in on himself.

“I may not have thought that one through.”

Steve blinked at him a second longer, then laughed and shook his head. “You, James Barnes, are seriously the eighth wonder of the world.”

Bucky wasn’t entirely sure that was a compliment.

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Fascinating, Bucky thought, eyes transfixed to the screen.

An hour later and he was on his second cup of coffee (after sending Steve back to Starbucks, because really, their pour over wasn’t actually that bad, all right?) and third pastry. He’d settled into a morning of doing exactly nothing more strenuous than clicking the next YouTube video on his feed.
“Hey, Steve!” he called out, pulling his headphones down around his neck. “You ever heard of a fennec?” he asked, as he watched the freakishly adorable creatures take a bubble bath. He glanced over just as Steve walked into the bedroom.

“I'm sorry, a what?” He kissed the top of Bucky’s head as he passed by. “Present for you, by the way.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes at his favorite t-shirt, currently in Steve's hands. “Did you get the blood out?”

“Clean as the day you got it, babe.” Steve smiled at him as he hung the t-shirt up on a hook against the wall. The smile didn’t last, though, dissolving right into a glower. “That said, the next time you want ‘comfort clothes’ after a battle, and put on your favorite shirt, you are getting the stains out.” This time when he walked past Bucky, he smacked him upside the head. “Stop wearing the good stuff post-mission!”

Bucky scoffed at Steve’s retreating form as he rubbed the back of his head. “Asshole!”

“Slob!”

“Come back and say that to my face!” Bucky shot back, infuriated at the snicker he got in return. First Steve forgot his coffee, and then...and then he bitched about having to clean one goddamn shirt. It wasn’t not like Bucky was asking that much, the whiny bastard.

When Steve didn’t come back, Bucky shouted, “Definitely an asshole!” for good measure before giving a sharp nod. That was telling him.

He turned his crankiness back to the video in front of him, only to dissolve into a schmoopy smile as he watched a baby skunk and baby fennec play together. Okay, that was it. He was just gonna have to convince Steve that they had to get one for a pet. Seriously, he needed one. For...therapy or something. That was it. He needed their squeaky little voices and giant ears and soft-looking bodies to become a more whole person. This Instagram shit wasn’t cutting it anymore. He needed a fox running around their house.

“I want one,” he muttered as he reached for his coffee. “Steve’ll let me have one. Steve loves me.” He slipped his headphones back on because he could hear the little fennec’s insane screeching through the speakers, and he was missing out. Sure enough, the little guy was flipping his shit as he tried to play with some wolf dog. It was amazing.

“Smile, Buck.”

Bucky turned, grin already in place like he was fucking Pavlov’s dog, because sure enough, Steve had his camera plastered to his face. A shuddering click, and Bucky was already back to baby fennecs.

“I want one, Steve,” he said, and nodded at the screen. He turned hopeful eyes on his sweet, loving, giving boyfriend. “Can I get one?”

“What the fuck...” Steve muttered as he came in to look over Bucky’s shoulder. “That is the ugliest —”

“Hey!”

Steve turned incredulous eyes on Bucky. He pointed at the computer. “You like that thing? It’s weird looking!”
Bucky’s mouth dropped open in silent outrage. The fennec wasn’t weird looking, it was fucking adorable, is what it was. He poked Steve in the chest. “You know, you were weird looking once. Still are!”

And Christ, if Steve wasn’t on a tear this morning with pissing Bucky off. Bucky wondered how long the bruise would last if he punched that smirk with his metal hand right off that smug face. It was a relatively close proximity, but still, he was gettin’ real curious about it at this point.

And yet still, Steve didn’t recognize Murder Defcon One all over Bucky’s face when he set his camera down so he could take Bucky’s face in hand and kiss him.

“But maybe so,” he murmured against Bucky’s valiant effort to pout in his face. “But you loved me then, and you love me now, and I think I’m okay with being a little weird looking.” And aw damn, Rogers, why did he have to go and — Bucky didn’t get a chance to finish that thought before warm lips were pressed against his again. Perfect wonderful lips that he was supposed to be hating right now.

He huffed against said lips before pulling back to frown at Steve, trying to get the conversation back to where he actually wanted it. “Okay, but the fennec is adorable.”

“But it’s weird looking, too. So can’t it be both?”

Bucky quirked an eyebrow. “You mean like you?”

Steve’s smile turned soft. “Yeah, I think I can live with that.”

With a sigh, Bucky pulled back and grabbed at Steve’s camera to see the picture he took. It was a pretty good one, he had to admit. All soft lighting from the morning sun and Bucky’s smile at least made him look content — but hell, he probably was. Steve could forget his coffee all the live-long day, but as long as Steve was around to forget, Bucky was solid.

He passed the camera back. “Hey, send that to me okay?”

“Right now?”

“Yeah, sure.” Bucky shrugged. “Gonna Insta that.”

Steve just smiled and walked to his own computer up on the ledge. Then he connected his camera and fired off the picture to Bucky’s phone. The second Bucky got it, he saved it and pulled it up on Instagram.

Contrary to popular belief, I don’t spend my time killing people or collecting grenades (What? I have my hobbies, you’ve got yours, get over it). I also enjoy watching stupid stuff on YouTube like the smallest fennec in the world (it’s REALLY tiny, —

Bucky looked up at the sound of clanking just long enough to watch Steve stumble. As Steve righted himself they both glanced down at what had caught on his foot, only for Bucky to shy away guiltily from his AK lying haphazardly on the floor.

“Please.” Okay, that was definitely a growl. “Tell me that thing isn’t loaded.”

“It’s not,” Bucky hurriedly answered, then winced at the way his voice squeaked.

“I swear to God, Barnes, if that had shot me in the foot, I would currently be using your metal arm as target practice!”
Bucky spun around in shock. “And what if you had missed?”

Steve’s face just twisted. “Small price.”

Bucky’s mouth opened and closed after him as Steve stomped out of the room again. It took Bucky another minute before he finally remembered what he’d been doing and turned back to his phone.

— OK?). Alright, alright, there’s *maybe* a Kalashnikov at my feet but you are never too prepared, no?, he added guiltily. Hey, at least he was owning up to his shit. He hit send.

He reached down and gingerly picked up his precious AK, checked that the safety was still, in fact, engaged, and then released the mag before ejecting the bullet in-chamber, setting both up on the ledge. The thing had been propped up next to him until Steve had tried to invade his space, and well, just served him right.

He set the rifle down again at his feet and turned back to his computer, and no he did not flail at the screen — he did not — but there was a kitten grooming a baby fennec, and holy fuck...

“Steve!” he bellowed into the apartment. “We’re getting a fucking fennec, right the fuck now!”
I spend my time laughing at him when we are working together but deep down, I have a profound respect for Barton. He's not an Asguardian god in a shiny armour, he didn't receive any serum that made him almost invincible, he doesn't have a billion dollar suit to protect him but in spite of all this, and even if he spends three weeks minimum at the hospital between each mission, he ALWAYS comes back on the field. I sincerely think we're asking the poor guy a bit too much sometimes.
I sincerely think we're asking the poor guy a bit too much sometimes.

“Then he was all, ‘Not a chance in hell.’” Bucky leaned around the low wall just long enough to fire into the kneecap of the Hydra agent closing in on them. The guy went down screaming. “We’re not having a wild animal running loose in here —”

“Wait, has Steve even” — thwip! of an arrow, and one of the snipers on the opposite roof came down — “met you?”

“Hey!” Two shots to the torso took down the chick who came in after Kneecap. “I’m only a wild animal in the bedroom, Barton. I mean, Steve does this thing where he puts his tongue —”

“Oh my god, shut up, you asshole!” Clint yelled, mid-twist over Bucky, before sending a single arrow straight through three men. Bucky watched, dumbstruck, as they all crumpled to the ground. Then Clint turned to him, a wolfish grin on his face. ”New arrow. Heats up upon release. Can get up to four-hundred degrees if it travels long enough.”

“Nice!” Bucky smiled at Clint and fired just past his head, sending it straight into the head of the guy across the plaza holding the Zastava. He debated for half a second about stealing it to compare it to his Kalashnikova, before his thoughts were interrupted by the explosion of concrete directly overhead.

“GET BACK!” Clint shouted just as Bucky raised his metal arm to protect them from the falling debris. Something shoved against him, and the last thought he had before everything went dark was that Steve was gonna feel so bad about not letting Bucky get that fucking fennec now.

White spots dotted Bucky’s vision as he groaned. He allowed himself five seconds to take stock of himself (a possible cracked rib, head throbbing and a ringing in his ears, which could mean a concussion, and definitely some sort of short circuit in the arm making it twitch) before lolling over to find concerned eyes staring at him.

Oh good, you’re alive, Clint signed from where he was kneeling next to Bucky, a smirk planted firmly in place. Blood oozed down the side of his head and around his ear, slowly dripping off of his jaw. But aside from the sudden signing, his eyes were clear and he was alert. The head wound was most likely superficial. Would have been a shame if you’d died and left all that big blond around for someone else to pick up.

Bucky flipped him the bird, since the arm was down and he couldn’t properly sign out a solid Fuck You. He winced as he pushed himself into a sitting position — shit, he hurt all over — then tapped his own ear before pointing at Clint.

Damaged when I got hit in the head. Clint shrugged, unaffected. This was a common occurrence for him on missions. Hell, it was the reason he was signing instead of talking. It was how he let the team know his hearing was down without letting the enemy know. Turned it off for now.

Bucky hummed in acknowledgement. Help me up? he asked, lettering it out. Clint wasted no time hefting Bucky up, only to grunt in pain as Bucky’s weight settled on him.
dmg? Bucky signed as best he could from the tweaking metal. He gave Clint a once over, but nothing jumped out at him.

*Just a twisted ankle,* Clint answered. He was *a lot* faster at signing one-handed. *Your fat ass weighing me down isn’t helping.*

Bucky — ever the adult — just stuck his tongue out since he couldn’t sign what he was really thinking.

Clint — ever the *child* — tried to bite it. The shove Bucky gave him helped no one as they both stumbled a bit, with Clint squeezing Bucky’s cracked ribs as he landed on his own bad ankle. They both managed to keep their pain to a low grunt, because they were also manly men who didn’t make noise when things hurt.

(Except for that time Bucky got video of Clint fucking *squealing* after he’d been bitten by a recluse. *Pansy.*)

Clint shot Bucky a dirty look, though there was no real heat behind it. “We need to go,” he actually said out loud, even if it was barely above a whisper. “No idea if another unit is on the way.”

Bucky only then realized how quiet it was. He glanced around the shell of a room they were in, then out onto the plaza. It was just before dawn and dark as shit out, but what little he could see wasn’t moving. Whatever had happened after he’d gotten knocked out had been thorough.

He gave Clint a short nod. “Understood.”

They made their way out of the bombed out building, slow but steady. They had gone to investigate a possible Hydra outpost after they’d gotten stirrings that the organization was going to take over an abandoned building in Wawer, just on the edge of Warsaw. It had made Bucky’s stomach turn — Steve’s too — because they’d *both* seen the Warsaw Ghetto during the War, and as much as Bucky wanted Hydra wiped off the fucking map, no way was he going to let them even step *foot* there. Warsaw had seen enough for a few lifetimes.

They managed to make it to their abandoned car half a mile away, only to find the tires completely shot out. Well, that would explain the ambush: Hydra had seen them coming.

Bucky sighed, even as he propped Clint against the side of the car. He held up a finger and made his way to the trunk, pulling out their bags of gear, including their med kit. He grabbed that before rummaging around for Clint’s spare set of hearing aids. When he passed them over, Clint smiled in visible relief, then swapped them out.

“Thank fuck,” he breathed. He grabbed the med kit from Bucky and dumped it on the roof of the car. He pulled out a handful of gauze and some cleaning supplies. “Seriously, man, I was *dying* back there. Had to take care of the rest of those fuckers with you out of commission and *insane* screeching in my ear because I didn’t have time to pull the damn thing out. Arrows were flyin’ too quickly.”

“Yeah, what the fuck happened?” Bucky asked as he searched around for the tool kit to fix his arm. It was still so fucking *dark* out. With an annoyed grunt, he pulled out his phone and switched the flashlight on. “Last thing I remember was concrete rain before waking up to those sexy lips of yours right in my face. Wait.” Bucky turned imploring eyes on Clint. “Was there mouth-to-mouth? Tell me there wasn’t mouth-to-mouth. I will be *so bummed* if I was out for mouth-to-mouth.”

Clint snorted. “Isn’t the point of mouth-to-mouth that you have to be out for it? And not breathing?”

Bucky shrugged. “Steve and I do mouth-to-mouth all the time. And sometimes it’s not even mouth-
to-mouth; it’s mouth-to—"

“I will kill you where you stand, Barnes, if you finish that sentence!”

“What?” Bucky turned wide eyes on Clint, all innocence and bullshit. “Are you saying you and Nat don’t do mouth-to—"

The punch came flying out of nowhere, and suddenly Bucky found himself on his ass, intermittently laughing and crying in pain. He looked up into the sight of Clint hovering over him, thunder in his eyes. He’d be scary as hell if it wasn’t for the gauze hanging haphazardly off his head and he wasn’t hobbling on one foot. Bucky wheezed around his cracked ribs as he tried not to laugh even harder.

“Talk about Nat’s ass again, Barnes,” Clint growled at him. “Come on. Talk about it. I may have just killed a bunch of dudes, but it’s been awhile since I’ve had the chance to really beat the shit out of someone. Give me a reason.”

Bucky just stared at Clint in awe. If there was any single female on the whole of the planet who could take care of herself in any situation, it was Natalia. And yet, here was Clint, ready to go to the mattresses over a harmless joke.

Bucky couldn’t remember a time he’d been more proud of his friend.

He let his smile spread wide even as he shook his head. “I gotta say, cupcake.” He rolled over and pushed himself up, hissing a little. “Don’t know that I can think of a better man for my girl than you.” He wiggled his jaw. “Solid punch, by the way. Pretty sure if I wasn’t juiced up, you’d’ve broken it.”

Clint didn’t back down from his fighter’s stance. “You done talking about Nat’s ass, then?”

“I was never talking about Nat’s ass.” He patted Clint lightly on the cheek. “So sensitive, you are.” Then he bent over to pick up his phone and brush off the dirt. And bless the gods, there were no cracks. He went back to the trunk, finally finding his tool kit. Clint, for his part, hadn’t moved, was just eyeing him. Bucky sighed and looked up. “Dude. No one’s making passes or talking badly about your lady. Ease up.”

“Yeah, but you said —”

“Nothing about Nat’s ass. For all you know, I was talking about your ass.”

Clint watched him for another moment. Then he grunted and went back to wrapping his head. “Well, my ass is worth talking about. Like two refreshing rounds of cantaloupe on a hot summer’s day.”

Bucky turned, blinked, then burst out laughing. Good god, leave it to Clint to wax poetic about his own ass. There was a reason they were friends.

He bumped his shoulder lightly against Clint’s and turned back to his arm. “I love you, buddy, you know that?”

“You’re still ugly.”

“Like the underside of your mama’s feet.”

“I will punch you again.”

Bucky ran the weird sonic screwdriver looking-thing — as Steve had called it — over the cables in
his arm, and gave a satisfied *ha!* when the twitching stopped. “Go for it, Rocky.” He smiled and waved his metal fingers around. “I’m ready for ya.”

“Whatever.”

They finished patching themselves up, changed into civvies, and began the trek back to town on foot. Bucky took on Clint’s weight this time, now that he was well into healing. Dawn was finally coming on — the sky slowly giving way to the day, midnight bleeding into oxford, bleeding into royal, bleeding into a baby blue.

(Bucky really needed to stop hanging out with Steve when he was painting.)

“You still didn’t tell me what happened after I got knocked out,” he said, and hoisted Clint next to him as they walked. At this rate, they’d be close enough to find a ride in the next hour or so. He prayed they’d killed enough Hydra agents to keep any of the rest of them from finding him and Clint. They still had to get across Warsaw to get to the field where Clint had parked the quinjet.

Clint gave a sort of half shrug. “It was no big deal. The wall above us got blown out, and I shoved you out of the way. I got hit in the head too, but I was able to stay conscious, though I lost my hearing. Then I did what was necessary. I took out the rest of the agents as fast as I could. Twisted my ankle after that dick you couldn’t be bothered to kill got a clean shot to my chest. Thank God for Kevlar.”

Bucky felt a wave of guilt. A kneecap in the dark may have been a good shot, but it wasn’t efficient. Bucky was better than that. He gave Clint a tight smile. “Sorry.”

That got him a smirk in return. “Hey, I’m still breathing. I would have been more pissed if you had been talking about Nat’s ass.”

“You were more pissed.”

“Clearly not that much. You’re still breathing.”

“Valid point.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Bucky went on. He shifted Clint’s hand from where it’d slipped over still-sore ribs. “You’re telling me, you got knocked in the head, lost the ability to hear where your enemy was coming from, took a shot to the chest, and still managed to take out...” Bucky quickly counted off how many he knew had been left. “Fifteen more Hydra agents on your own?”

That only got him another shrug. “Like I said. I did what was necessary.”

“You’re amazing, you know that?”

“I’m not a superhero like you. I just do what needs to be done.”

“Yeah, you’re amazing.”

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“So, I showed him this ridiculously cute video of this fennec, right? This little baby guy who was jumping and playing, and I almost had Steve, until the next fucking video came up.”

“What was it?” Clint winced as he leaned back against the bus stop bench next to Bucky.

“Fucking Kimmel!”
Clint just stared at him, nonplussed. “Aaaaand Steve doesn’t like Jimmy Kimmel?”

“Not that,” Bucky grumbled. “There was a fennec fox on there, and this jackass animal planet asshole had to go and say right at the end of it that fennecs don’t make good pets!”

Clint snickered. “So what you’re saying is... You got outfoxed by a video about a fox?”

“Why are we even friends?”

Clint began to laugh outright at that, only to double over in a whine. “Shit.”

The further along in their walk back to town, the worse Clint seem to get. His gait had been bad enough at first, but then their walk kept getting slower and slower, and now he seemed to have trouble breathing.

“What is it? What aren’t you telling me?

Clint made an aborted gesture at him, but Bucky just knocked his hand out of the way and grabbed at his shirt, pushing it up. He couldn’t decide if he was more worried or pissed.

“You know, Barton.” He didn’t look at Clint, but continued to stare at the mottle of red and purple blooming across the right side of Clint’s chest. “I get that we like to play macho, but I actually do heal faster than you. I can ignore a few cracked ribs. You, though...” He finally looked Clint dead in the eye. “Not so much. When the fuck were you planning on telling me about this?”

“When it became necessary?”

“It was necessary when you were dragging my ass around. Try again.”

“Well, I figured if I passed out at the controls of the quinjet, you’d get the hint then.”

Bucky sat back in a huff. “You’re as bad as Steve, you know that?” He waved a hand at Clint’s chest. “This is fucking serious. If it’s bad enough, you could end up puncturing a lung, and where would we be then, huh? I’m not a fucking doctor, Clint. I can’t fix shit like that!”

Clint took a big, albeit shallow, breath. “SHIELD base in Berlin, and another in Prague. We could get to either in forty.”

“Forty by quinjet. You’re conveniently forgetting that we have to get to the quinjet.”

“You run fast. We’d be fine.”

“You’re a fucking idiot.”

“Funny enough, Nat tells me that all the time.”

Bucky glanced sidelong at Clint, genuinely worried now. He was paler than he had been earlier, a fine sheen of sweat beading across his brow. But at least his breathing was steady. It was clear it was harder for him, and definitely more shallow, but still steady. At least for now. Bucky suspected it all had more to do with pain than it did with serious injury. His ribs were clearly broken, but no damage to his lungs, at least.

“I’m driving,” Bucky announced into the quiet.

“Have it your way, snookums.”
The bus pulled up right then, and Bucky loaded them onto it. He stuck Clint in the closest seat he could get to on the full, rush-hour bus, then sat himself down on the other side, a couple rows back. It was a crosstown, so luckily, no need to change at any point, and he settled back, Clint in view, for the hour-long ride across the city.

Clint spent most of the trip fidgeting around in his seat, most likely trying to get comfortable around all of his injuries. First, he tried to slump against the window, only to pull back when his bandaged head hit the glass. Then he tried to stretch out his feet, but the position of his body noticeably aggravated his chest and he sat up, only to wince when, Bucky suspected, he put weight down on his foot.

Bucky felt kind of horrible for the guy. Especially where he himself barely hurt at all anymore.

“Jack,” he called out, in a hushed whisper, using Clint’s current alias. He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “Hey, Jack.” When Clint turned around, he held it up quickly and snapped a pic.

What the hell? Clint signed, confusion all over his face.

Bucky gave him a stupid grin and signed back, Just capturing your beauty, my love.

I hate you.

It’s why we’re so good together.

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“Next time you don’t tell me you need a hospital, I’m going to make sure you actually do need one, you got it?”

Clint sat back in the wheelchair at the SHIELD facility in Berlin and gave Bucky a tiny smile, looking at least somewhat abashed. “If it helps, I think I was still running on adrenaline and the will of the gods when we got back to the car. I didn’t start feeling real pain until we were halfway into town.”

Bucky folded his arms. “And the other half of the way? You know, the half where you told me nothing?”

“Machismo?”

“Madicksmo, is more like it.” Then Bucky clapped a hand on Clint’s shoulder. “Seriously, buddy, don’t do that to me. If you die, Natalia would have my ass, and no part of that would be a pleasant experience.”

Clint barked a laugh, then cringed. “No... No, it wouldn’t.”

That was when the nurse showed up to take Clint back for scans. She gave Bucky a concerned look. “Sind Sie sicher, dass wir Sie auch nicht überprüfen können, Agent Barnes?” she asked in German.

“Nö.” Bucky waved her off with his most cocky, charming smile. “Mir geht's gut.”

Sure enough, the blush traveled right up to the roots of her hair. “Alles klar. Bitte lassen Sie mich wissen, wenn Sie Ihre Meinung ändern.”

“Ganz sicher.” He smiled at her as she turned and wheeled Clint away. “Be safe, honey bear!”

Clint just flipped him off and he chuckled, finally wandering off to pull up a chair and wait it out. He
first fired off a text to Natasha, then one to Steve, letting them both know the mission was done. Nat
didn’t seem fussed at all about Clint’s injuries, probably used to them by now. Though he suspected
she would be getting a little less sleep until they got home and she could baby Clint in private.
Despite how close he and Nat were as friends, Bucky still had no clue what the she and Clint were
like as a couple behind closed doors. He wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to know.

Then he pulled up the picture he’d taken of Clint earlier on the bus. His friend looked like shit, but
Clint was always dealing with some injury or other, and it wasn’t exactly like Bucky could argue.
But still, Clint wasn’t Bucky, or Steve, or even Nat. He was just a guy. Just a regular person who
stood next to gods and fought tooth for tooth. Bucky had no idea how he did it.

He pulled up his Instagram app and loaded the image, and for the first time in forever, the caption
came easy to him:

*I spend my time laughing at him when we are working together but deep down, I have a profound
respect for Barton. He's not an Asguardian god in a shiny armour, he didn't receive any serum that
made him almost invincible, he doesn't have a billion dollar suit to protect him but in spite of all this,
and even if he spends three weeks minimum at the hospital between each mission, he ALWAYS
comes back on the field. I sincerely think we're asking the poor guy a bit too much sometimes.*

With a satisfied sigh, he sat back and waited.

Clint would be fine. It might take him longer than most of them to bounce back, but he would be
fine. He had to be, or Bucky would never forgive himself.

After all, Steve might be the head of their weird little band of misfits, but Barton was, without
question, the heart. And if there was one thing Bucky knew about their group, it was that their heart
was their center. And their heart would always beat strong.
It was Steve's birthday last week. When we were kids, I used to tell him that all the fireworks in the sky of NYC on the 4th of July were for him and it took him years to realize it was just a big pack of lies. I'll never forget the tears in his eyes when he found out the truth and I must admit I still feel a bit guilty today even if I never meant to harm him in the first place. (Photo: Nat)
Bucky loved Amazon. Like loved Amazon. As close as everything was in this city, there weren’t that many shopping options in DUMBO. It was mostly just offices, apartments, and the occasional café. If he wanted anything normal, the closest big box store was Target off of Atlantic, and fuck no. Too many people.

But Amazon. It was a rare thing when he couldn’t find something he was looking for on that site. — from books to movies, to fucking groceries. He’d been in love since the first time he’d hit purchase.

He was on another Amazon bender at the moment, deliberately not looking at the total cost, because he knew he would just have a hernia. He hit the aforementioned purchase button on his phone and looked back up from where he’d been lounging on the grass at Brooklyn Bridge Park. Steve and Nat had wandered off a while before to take about a million turns on the carousel, leaving him with Sam and Clint to argue over who had better starting pitchers this year — the Mets or the Yankees. As far as Bucky was concerned, the Yankees were an abomination in the eyes of God, and therefore, he would always pick Mets over Yanks. It wasn’t until Sam started to drag the Nationals into the conversation that Bucky tuned out.

After his recent mission with Clint, he and Doc had had a serious conversation about Bucky’s progress with his Instagram therapy. Despite the rare occurrence — like on the picture of Clint — he was still having issues speaking freely, falling back on humor instead of honesty. Doc had suggested he practice in private, coming up with alternative captions that were more thoughtful. He’d decided to go old school and keep them in an actual journal.

So while Sam and Clint argued over baseball, and Nat and Steve were off arguing (most likely) over who got the white horse in full battle gear, Bucky went on Amazon and ordered about a metric ton of paper and ink for their printer at home.

He glanced across the river, the waning sunlight bouncing off the water in little flashing peaks, and he couldn’t help feeling that same sense of contentment that had flowed through him since he’d woken up that morning. The weather was perfect for July, warm and inviting all day long, with only the slightest dip expected for the evening. Normally the temps began to pick up this time of year, but so far, the sun had been playing fair, and had decided to not scorch them off the face of the earth.

Perfect weather for Stevie’s birthday.

He and Steve had spent the day relaxing with Sam, Clint, and Natasha, barbecuing on their roof before heading over to the park to hang out. They’d played a game of touch football before lounging around, enjoying the weather and surrounding people, and just really, each other.

It had been a good day.

“Hey stranger.” Steve plopped down next to him, and leaned over to press wind-chapped lips against
“Miss me?”

Bucky closed his eyes and hummed. “Always.” Then he turned a knowing smirk on Steve. “So who got the horse?”

“No idea what you’re talking about.”

“Uh huh.” Bucky pinched Steve’s side, and Steve batted his hand out of the way. “Give it up, Rogers. You ride the Great White Beast or did she?”

Steve rolled over to pillow his head on Bucky’s lap. “It’s my birthday. What do you think?”

“I think you pushed it on her because, birthday or not, you’re a hopeless gentleman who will always defer to what the lady wants.” He brushed his thumb against Steve’s jaw and smiled down at him. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re wrong.” Steve coughed and surreptitiously turned away. “We, uh, were arguing for so long, this little boy showed up and took it out from under our nose.”

Bucky snickered. “And let me guess, you stood there playing the Safe Adult, and took pictures with him the entire time.”

“Well, just for the first go round. He eventually left.”

“And did you get to ride the horse after that?”

“Umm.....”

God, Steve was hopeless. “Same thing happen?”

“Not exactly the same thing,” Steve said, still not looking at Bucky. “It was a little girl the second time. A set of twins, the third.”

Bucky burst out laughing, Steve’s head bouncing against his stomach. He grabbed hold so he could sit up and kiss the scowl right off that beautiful face. He smiled, fond and exasperated, and so full of love he might very well burst from it one day. “You’re ridiculous, you know that? Ridiculous and perfect, and such a decently good person, I’m not entirely sure what I’m gonna do with you.”

“Keep me forever? Save me from the unsuspecting masses?”

“Probably wise,” Bucky agreed, then leaned in for another kiss, taking his time with this one. Steve’s tongue slipped into his mouth and he sighed, cradling Steve’s head in his hands, precious as it was. All of him was precious.

They didn’t part until someone cleared their throat, though it was only to separate himself from Steve by inches. “Love you, Stevie.”

“Love you too, baby.”

Bucky finally laid back down, only to glance up into a single quirked eyebrow.

“You know there are children present,” Nat pointed out, and cocked her head behind her.

Bucky nodded. “I know, I heard. Apparently Steve kept giving up everyone’s favorite horsie for them. Did either of you get a chance to ride it?”
“Nah. The kids were too cute, and so little, we gave up pretty early on.” She waved a hand towards Steve. “I think this one has about a hundred photos on his phone with all of them.”

“A hundred and seventeen, but who’s counting.”

“Not you, clearly.”

“Shut up, they were cute.”

“They were cute.”

“Who was cute?” Clint came over and wrapped himself around Natasha like a limpet. “We talking about me again?”

Steve ticked off his fingers. “Five years old, easily excitable, steals the best horses on the carousel...yes!” He smiled up at Clint. “I do believe we were talking about you.”

Clint narrowed his eyes, and pointed Steve’s way. “Only because it’s your birthday. Any other time and I’d shoot you in the ass with an arrow for that.”

“Okay, but man, you’re implying he’s wrong,” Sam piped up. “Any part of that not remind you of, you know, you?”


Bucky scoffed. “Please! You were practically giddy over that heated arrow you used in Poland a couple weeks back.”

Clint just shrugged, completely unconcerned. “It was cool.”

“Yeah, I can’t argue with that.”

Sam cracked open a round of beers after that, and they lazed about, waiting for the show to start. They were in a prime spot — reserved for them as it was every year for Steve’s birthday — to see the Macy’s fireworks display later that night. The city used to try and get Steve involved in the festivities, and before Bucky’d come back, he had, but now, they were all about the quiet. As it was, they only took this spot about every other year or so, choosing to sometimes spend the day at the Tower, or that one year they’d been down in DC.

Not that any of it mattered to Bucky. He didn’t care what they did. The only thing that mattered to him this time of year was that Steve was happy. That he got to do whatever he wanted to do on his birthday. So much was expected of him the rest of the time, it was a rare thing that he — hell, that either of them — really got the chance to just be. There was always some mission or some training session with SHIELD either just behind them or right in front of them. Or, if not, they were too injured to do much of anything else.

But Bucky had healed up quick since Poland, and hadn’t had a mission since. Steve had just come off of his own a few days before, completely unscathed for once. And right now, neither of them had anything on the docket for at least a little bit. Bucky suspected their friends had called in a few favors, but he wasn’t gonna complain. Steve deserved a rest for his birthday.

Well. He deserved a rest tomorrow. Bucky had plans for him tonight.

“How long until the fireworks?” he asked, glancing down at Steve.
“You have a watch, Buck.”

“It’s attached to the hand currently playing with your hair.”

“And your phone?”

“It’s in my back pocket.”

“And your highly skilled mind can’t guess how long it’s been since the sun set?”

“That would imply I know — oh my god, just tell me the damn time, Steve!” Bucky glowered when Steve snickered at him, and he lightly smacked him over the head.

“All right, all right.” Steve held up his hands before grabbing his own phone out of his pocket. “Looks like they’ll be starting in about ten or so. Hey.” He rolled over to face Bucky, tucking his arms under his head. “You remember what you used to tell me about the fireworks when we were kids?”

God, did he ever. Steve, the asshole, liked to remind Bucky of it every single year.

“No, Steve,” Bucky answered, with a resigned sigh. “Why don’t you tell me all about it.”

“Well.” Steve wiggled up until he was practically in Bucky’s face. “You used to tell me that the fireworks were all for me. That New York would set them off just for my birthday, and not the country’s. You remember that?”

Bucky rolled his eyes. Hard. “Did I do that, Steven? I don’t recall ever doing that.”

“Yes, you did.” Then Steve shifted until he really was nose to nose. “And do you remember what happened when I found out they hadn’t?”

Bucky cringed at the way Steve stared imploringly at him, the evil little shit. Bucky was never going to live this down.

“You...you cried.”

“I cried!” Steve exclaimed. “It was like fucking Santa Claus all over again.”

“Uh... Didn’t you find out about the fireworks before you found out about Santa?”

“Oh that’s right. I found out about Santa not four months later. Right at Christmas!”

“That wasn’t my fault!” Bucky flipped them over and pinned Steve to the ground. “Actually if I recall, that was your own fault. You were mouthing off to Ira Grosensky, calling him a dirty liar for tagging me out during a game of stickball, and he was the one who told you. And to this day, I can’t believe you took his word for it!”

“Well, after my best friend lied to me about my birthday...”

“Oh, you fucking...” Bucky slammed his mouth against Steve’s, if anything, to get him to shut the hell up. Every year he liked to torture Bucky with this story.

When Bucky pulled back, he made sure to bite down on Steve’s lip for good measure. “You’re a dick, you know that?”

“And yet, my best friend ——”
Bucky cut him off with another kiss. “Shut up.”

“Make me.”

“People can still see you two.” Bucky and Steve both snapped over to where Sam was staring at them, completely unimpressed. “Modern love, we get to be free now, yada yada yada — get a damned room.”

“You would make me walk all the way back to our apartment just so I can kiss the boyfriend?” Bucky gave Sam the saddest eyes he could muster. “Why are you so cruel?”

“Because I have better things to do with my time than watch you two swap spit?”

“Admit it. It’s because you don’t have anyone to suck face with yourself.”

Sam scoffed and held back the beer he’d just been about to hand Bucky. “I resent that, man! The ladies love me.”

Bucky gave him a wolfish grin as he wiggled his hand at Sam. “The Finger Sisters don’t count, Sammy.” Steve snickered, and Sam just flipped them off.

“You know what. I don’t need this. I’ve got ladies, Barnes. Ladies.” With a huff, he stood up and stalked off toward where a group of women were sprawled out across a bunch of blankets. Bucky could just make out when he said, “Hello, ladies. That’s right, I’m the Falcon. Got room for one more?”

They barely got a yes out before he was plopping down amongst the group. Then he turned a smug, petulant look Bucky’s way, and Bucky absolutely lost it. He fell back on the grass, howling with laughter, Steve laughing right along with him.

“Oh my god!” Bucky exclaimed, wiping tears from his eyes. “He is such a jackass.”

Steve sat up and grabbed them both a new beer. He handed one to Bucky. “I apologize for my ludicrous friend, honey. He’s... Well, I don’t know what he is. I have no excuse for him.”

“Oh god, don’t apologize. Invite him to everything.”

“You’re all children,” Nat observed, eyeing them each in turn. “Why am I friends with any of you?”

“Cheap entertainment?”

“That would imply you’re entertaining.”

Bucky snickered and crawled over to sit on Steve’s lap. He pointed his beer at Nat. “I’m a laugh, fucking, riot-a-minute. You should feel privileged to know me.”

She patted his cheek. “Well, I definitely feel something.”

Bucky opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off by a sudden explosion above the river. His head shot up, smile spread wide, as blue and yellow rained down overhead.

“Stevie, look!”

“I see, baby!”

They fell into silence as the world lit up along the East River in a kaleidoscope of shapes and colors,
movement and sound. Golds bled into reds and pinks, followed by pinwheels of purple and green, before willow trees of white fell from the sky. Macy’s annual show was spectacular, as always, and Bucky couldn't help but think that each year it got just a little bit grander.

He grabbed Steve’s hand and pulled them up off the grass, feeling like he needed to get just that much closer to it all. He turned to smile excitedly at Steve, only to find the same look mirrored back at him. The fireworks may not have been for Steve’s birthday, but that didn’t change that fact that Steve did get fireworks, every year, on his special day.

God, it was beautiful. Steve was beautiful. His beautiful birthday boy.

He stepped in to wrap an arm around Steve’s waist, his chin on Steve’s shoulder. “Happy birthday, my love. I love you, you know that, right?”

“I do.” Steve tilted his head back and pulled Bucky’s arm tighter around him. “And I love you. You being here is the best birthday present I could ever ask for.”

The world was dark save for the bright colors up in the sky, but Bucky was still certain his blush lit up like a neon sign. He pressed his lips against Steve’s neck, more to hide than anything else. He wasn’t sure he would ever deserve words like that, especially from someone as amazing as Steve.

“You know, I was just thinking. When we were kids, okay yeah, the fireworks weren’t for you, but I like to think they are now. You’re Captain America; you’re so special and so important to so many people in this world. But also? To the people of this city, you’re Captain America, but you’re also Steve Rogers. You’re also a son of New York.” He took a deep breath, and could see the way Steve was paying more attention to him now than the show. “I think it’s why everyone respects your decision to decline events in your honor today — and let’s not lie, there’s a ton,” he said with a soft laugh. “People in this city get the need for anonymity, so they let you be, but I like to think that every single person in this city sees you as family. So I think that these fireworks? They’re to celebrate Independence Day, sure. But here in New York at least, they really are to celebrate your birthday. You’re family here. And that’s what families do.”

Bucky barely had time to smile at Steve before lips were on his, and he grunted in surprise. But it was dark now, and fuck everyone, he was kissing the birthday boy. He guided Steve around until they were facing each other, and wrapped his arms around Steve’s neck, holding him close. The kiss was deep, but soft, his tongue sliding against Steve’s, unhurried, even as the sky continued to light up around them.

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Bucky drummed his fingers along the top the notebook and laughed before grabbing his coffee and heading into the living room to see if there was anything new on Hulu. Summer shows still weren’t as much fun as all the regular shows, but there had to be something he hadn’t watched yet. Or maybe he’d just go watch more Deadliest Catch. There was just something about violence and crabs that always cracked him up.

He was three episodes in when boredom over took and he grabbed his phone to text Nat.

I’m bored. Shooting range? — B

Can’t, baby boy. Testing the new suit today against some of Clint’s rubber arrows. — N

CAN I WATCH???? — B

Bucky had totally forgotten Nat and been working with Tony on a new Black Widow suit that was
supposed to be about five steps past bulletproof. They’d tested real arrows on it when Nat wasn’t in it, but no way was Clint taking that chance the first time out with his girl. That said, rubber arrows or not, watching Nat parkour with arrows flying at her would be a hell of a lot more fun than sitting on his ass all day.

I’d say yes, but Clint’s nervous enough as it is. Just us and JARVIS this go-round — N

But oh! Meant to send you this a few days ago. Took it on Steve’s birthday. — N

A photo popped up right after of Steve and Bucky. It looked like Nat had taken it right after the fireworks had started, when they were still mesmerized by the display above them. He smiled at the picture’s simplicity. Just them, enjoying Steve’s birthday, and the fireworks that, dammit, really were all for Stevie.

(Then his mind supplied everything that had happened after the fireworks had ended, and a shudder ripped through him. How long until Steve got home again?)

He pulled up Instagram, because really, he should have shared at least one photo on Steve’s birthday — but better late than never. And, he had to admit, this was better than any photo he’d taken himself that day.

He stalled again when he got to the caption. He’d just spent all morning filling out his journal, trying to get his thoughts down in a more open and insightful manner, letting his feelings be more clear. But this was different. There wasn’t anything overtly thoughtful about the photo, and he wasn’t sure how to get at what Doc was working with him on.

He thought on it, finally settling on at least being truthful, if not anything else:

It was Steve’s birthday last week. When we were kids, I used to tell him that all the fireworks in the sky of NYC on the 4th of July were for him and it took him years to realize it was just a big pack of lies. I'll never forget the tears in his eyes when he found out the truth and I must admit I still feel a bit guilty today even if I never meant to harm him in the first place. (Photo: Nat)

He read and reread — and reread — the caption. He couldn’t decide if he should send it or delete it. Because, sure, it was honest, but was he supposed to sound like a dick? Did he sound like a dick? Steve had forgiven him, but what about everyone else? Would the internet people start yelling at him for being such an asshole when they were kids? Would they be cool, considering it had happened something like eighty-five-ish years ago? Maybe he should leave off the part about lying to his best friend. Did people really need to know that?

He could feel his breathing start to shallow out, and he hit send before he could talk himself out of it. Then he chuckled his phone across the couch like it was branding-hot. If he had it in hand now, he’d just delete it, but if he let it sit for a while, then it would be out there and he couldn’t take it back and —

buzzzzz

He scrambled to grab his phone at the new text.

You told people THAT story??? — S

Panic instantly welled up inside him.

Should I not have???? I can delete it! Did I fuck up??????? — B
He almost dropped his phone when it started to ring.

“Stop panicking.” Steve said, by way of greeting. “I can hear you panicking in your text.”

“Yeah, but —”

“Deep breath.”

“But —”


Bucky knew he was going off the rails — knew he needed to get it the fuck under control — and began copying Steve’s breathing pattern. He counted out slowly on each inhale and again on the exhale, until he stopped feeling light-headed.

“Better?” Steve asked, slow and concerned, but still grounded.


Steve chuckled. “Don’t apologize, baby. You just told the world you made me cry once. I get why you’re upset. But you did good, okay?”

“I did?”

“Doc’ll be proud. Just like me.”

Bucky breathed out, tension instantly seeping away. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Seriously, honey, I’m proud of you.”

That was all he needed to hear. “Okay, I’m good. I’m good. But you’ll still come home soon?” Steve wasn’t due back for a couple hours, but Bucky was shameless.

“You need me there?”

“I think a repeat of your birthday night will really help calm me down the rest of the way.”

“I’ll be there in twenty.”

Totally. And completely. Shameless.

Chapter End Notes

In case you missed the opening notes, this chapter also involves the one-shot Saturday Night’s All Right (For Birthday Shenanigans), which is NSFW, and does contain arts. HAPPY READING!
Hi Scott. No, no, Steve didn't forget your appointment, he's parking the car and should be here in a minute. However, it doesn't explain WHAT THE F**K YOU ARE DOING IN MY COFFEE...and...JESUS CHRIST THAT'S A HELL OF A BIG ANT!! No offense of course...Ma'am...? Sir...? Anyway, no, that's fine, you can stay in there if you want. I don't feel like drinking coffee anymore. Don't ask...

Hi Scott. No, no, Steve didn't forget your appointment, he's parking the car and should be here in a minute. However, it doesn't explain WHAT THE F**K YOU ARE DOING IN MY COFFEE...and...JESUS CHRIST THAT'S A HELL OF A BIG ANT!! No offense of course...Ma'am...? Sir...? Anyway, no, that's fine, you can stay in there if you want. I don't feel like drinking coffee anymore. Don't ask...
The view out of the main windows of Brooklyn Roasting Company wasn’t the prettiest — it faced a power grid that ran along the edge of the Hudson River — but Bucky didn’t mind. It reminded him of how truly industrialized the area had been when he and Steve had been kids. It hadn’t been called DUMBO back then; it had just been a bustling area of factories, warehouses and shipping docks. Hell, he thought maybe he’d even worked the docks in the area at one time, but he wasn’t entirely sure of that. Just one of those memories that had never been important enough for him to focus on remembering.

He lazily twirled a magnifying glass along the countertop as he sipped at his coffee. It was way too fucking early on a Saturday to be up and presentable. He glared at the little numbers on his phone, and the hateful lack of a 1 at the beginning of them. Too fucking early.

But Steve had asked him to be here in case he was late for his meeting with Scott. Something about some irrational fear of Scott getting stepped on or something. Never mind that both he and Steve had watched Scott in his Ant Man suit lift things that weighed more than the two of them combined. Scott would be fine if left unattended.

Bucky’s phone clattered against the glass as it rang. “‘Lo?” he asked, as he picked up, his alertness in direct correlation to the level of his coffee — which was about half.

“Hey, baby.”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed. It was too early. “Why?”

“Because you love me? And you’re willing to do this for me after a straight seventy-six hour mission where sleep was a joke at best?” Steve sounded like he was giving exactly zero fucks at the moment.

Bucky scowled into his coffee, slightly mollified. He’d actually slept something like six hours the night before. Longer than usual, especially with Steve being gone, when he normally got about three, if he was lucky. But then, Bucky hadn’t slept much in the last three days either, only conking out when he’d gotten word that Steve was on a quinjet, on his way home. It still wasn’t an excuse, and he knew it.

“Sorry,” he responded. He wasn’t entirely sure even a casual joke wouldn’t result in his ass being handed back to him.

Steve sighed, deep, and Bucky could hear the bone weariness in it. “Is he there yet?”

Bucky lifted his head only to immediately drop back down, idiot personified. He knew Scott was coming in his suit. He wasn’t gonna see the guy from a quick glance around this place.

“No idea,” he said. “Want me to text you when he is?”

Steve grunted, and God, all Bucky wanted to do was wrap him up in the ridiculous comforter Bucky had from Alaska, and let him sleep for a year. Kill anyone who dared try and get close and disturb him.

Wasn’t gonna happen. Steve had another mission in less than twelve hours. Yet another one Bucky couldn’t go on (Hydra covert, and they would see Bucky coming a mile off), so Scott was going instead. You couldn’t get more covert than a guy who could shrink down to the size of a thumbnail.

“Don’t worry about it. Leaving the Tower now, so I should be there in twenty, max.”
“Okay, baby,” Bucky answered softly. “Wait, Stevie?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you have any time for sleep? You know, before you have to be back?”

“I’m not entirely sure that’s possible.”

“Steve, you need to sleep.”

“Bucky, I —”

“No.” Bucky cut him off. No way was he letting Steve go back out like he was. Not as tired as he sounded. “You're giving me at least four hours when —”

“Four? I can maybe promise you two.”

“Four hours, Steven, or I'm cuffing you to the bed.”

“I —”

“With my cuffs.” Specially designed for a metal wrist.


“Fuckin’-A, I'm fine.” Bucky smiled at his own stupid joke. Steve just groaned.

“Oh, I'm going now. See you in twenty. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

He hung up, then stood, draining the rest of his coffee as he did. He turned to go get a fresh cup only to come face-to-face with Misha, one of the baristas here. A tiny little thing with hair that was not only insanely long, but in perfect rainbow colors. She was smiling at him, a fresh latte in one hand, and familiar clear plastic container in the other.

He pointed at the pink swirls of sugar floating on pillows of fluffy vanilla goodness he could see under the very familiar label. “Those are from Brooklyn Cupcakes.”

Her smile turned amused. “They are.”

“Why do you have Brooklyn Cupcakes?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She gave a little half shrug. “Someone you know thought you might need them. Something about 'Bucky doesn’t do mornings and I need to appease him.'”

“Wait, did he really say that?”

“Yeah. He really said that.”

“Aw, hell.” Bucky thunked down on the bar stool. “Okay, I feel shitty.” He looked back up at her and frowned. “He’s just coming back from no sleep in over eighty hours, and I was my usual cranky self to him when he called.” He glared at the treats Steve had procured and had sent over just to make Bucky happy. “I. Am an asshole.”

“Didn’t I just overhear you threatening him to get some sleep?”
“Yeah, but...”

“Buck.” She set the items on the glass top and sat down next to him, taking his hand. “You aren’t an asshole. You just aren’t a morning person. He knows that. I know that. Hell, I’m pretty sure everyone in a ten block radius knows that.”

“I am not that bad!”

“Uh, Bucky, when was the last time you chose what brew you were getting when you came in?”

He looked at her, nonplussed. Whatever the hell that meant. But actually, the more he thought about it, he realized he couldn’t remember the last time he’d said what blend he wanted. “Um... I don’t remember?”

She snickered at him, even as he watched her turn an interesting shade of pink. “That’s, uh, well...the thing is, we have a Bucky-Face ratings system. Flat stare means bold, rapid blinking means medium, and if you start glaring at people, it’s light roast. And oh, if at any time there’s even a mild concern we’re going to get a piece of the old Winter Soldier, it’s the special Blue Mountain roast. That includes the times you’ve stumbled in with your war paint still on.”

He stared at her in shock. Was he really that bad? He didn’t think he was. He loved this place, and everyone who worked here. He had no clue he’d been setting everyone on edge.

“I...” He gave her hand a squeeze. “I’m so sorry if I’ve been a bad customer to you guys. I wish someone would have told me.”

“Oh my god, no.” Her eyes widened in surprise. “Bucky, no. That’s not what I meant.” She huffed softly before pressing a hand to his cheek. She let out a quiet laugh. “No, Bucky, we love you. Both of you. But you, my friend, are hilariously non-human when you come in void of any caffeine in your system. We jokingly came up with the Bucky System after you walked in on six separate occasions and could only grunt the word coffee in the general direction of the registers. We all know what you need and when, now. Works out for everyone.”

“So, you guys don’t hate me?”

“Do you think I’d tell you about the Bucky System if it was just a way to make fun of you?” She shook her head. “Thanks, but I’d really like to keep my job until after grad school, if that’s cool.”

“You know, if you’d just let us —”

“You’re not paying for my grad school, Barnes.”

“Yeah, but you’re gonna help puppies.”

“No.” Her face had gone hard, and for an instant, she reminded him of Steve. She stood up and began pulling the cupcakes out of the box. “Now you, drink your latte, and eat your sugar coma, and I’ll be behind the counter if you need me. And, oh.” She ran to the counter and came back with a little container of whipped cream. “Freshly made. Figure if you plan on sugaring yourself, go big or go home, right?”

He laughed and took the extra bit of sweet sweet deliciousness for his drink. “Right.”

She smiled at him and headed back to work.

He was gonna have to find a way to thank the staff here somehow. It wasn’t everyday your baristas
banded together to make sure you always had a cup of coffee that was perfect for you. Especially considering he only came in a few days a week.

He was also really going to have to thank Steve. He’d already felt like crap about earlier, but now...this just made it worse. Full blown mission that kicked everyone’s ass and Steve still thought to arrange for Bucky to get treats from his favorite cupcake shop, that he was sure Misha had picked up herself that morning, which meant the place had opened early for her. All to appease him because Steve knew how much Bucky hated waking up early.

Bucky really was an asshole. And he had the best fucking boyfriend in the world.

With a sigh, he turned back to his coffee. And just about jumped out of his skin.

“Jesus.” The barstool screeched as he stumbled, and several people looked up in annoyance at the noise. Not that he cared; he was too busy staring at the thing that currently amiss in the middle of his latte.

“Are you fucking...?” He grabbed the magnifying glass, and sure enough, there was Scott, fucking standing in the middle of his drink, waving at Bucky like a fucking idiot. “Really, you dick?”

Scott just tapped at his ear, then pointed to Bucky. Oh, right.

Bucky grabbed the earwig out of his pocket and shoved it in, glaring at Scott the entire time. “Is there a reason you’re standing in the middle of my coffee?” he finally asked, voice low so as not to attract curious eyes.

“Heya, Buck! Yeah, so about that. New flight tracking. Landed wrong.”

“You don’t have flight tracking,” Bucky said, exasperated. Scott was still in his coffee. “You don’t fly.”

“Well, yeah, true. But Antony here does.” Bucky glanced over at Scott’s pet ant, or soldier ant, or whatever it was, and tried not to shudder as it hovered close to the coffee Bucky was pretty sure he wouldn’t be drinking anymore. “Just had a little issue with a GPS module that’s supposed to help navigate through large areas better. Screws up the landing.”

“Okay...” Bucky drew the word out slowly, suddenly nervous. “But you can still perform during the mission, right? The last thing Steve needs is for the guy watching his six to suddenly —”

“Oh, no!” Scott waved at him. “No, I’m fine, I promise. I know what the issue is, I just need to make some adjustments.” He pointed at himself. “Engineer, remember?”

“How could I forget.”

“Anyway, do you know where Steve is?” Scott glanced around. “I’m supposed to be meeting him right now, right?” Antony lowered himself down and settled along the plate underneath the mug. Bucky prayed no one glanced over and saw what was going on. The last thing he needed was to be responsible for his favorite coffee shop to be known as the place with an ‘ant problem’. That or the place that lets in nut jobs, as Bucky would surely be known, if people thought he was talking to himself.

“Uh, he’ll be here soon. On his way back from a debrief. He was over at the Tower, but he already left. Should be here any minute.”

“But I just came from the Tower.”
“Yeah, well.” Bucky shrugged. He had no idea why no one had figured that out. But still, anything that got Steve to him faster, that was all he cared about. He winked at Scott. “Looks like you’re stuck here with my beautiful mug for the bit. You should feel honored.”

“You’re a weird guy, Barnes.”

“It’s why they keep me around.”

They talked after that, playing catch up because, really, Scott was not only actually extremely useful in battle, he was also a really nice person. He had a daughter that Bucky adored, the couple times he’d gotten to meet her, and his friends were hilarious. Bucky could probably listen to Luis tell stories for hours.

It was as they were discussing Luis’s recent antics (something about covering a job for some best friend’s sister’s boyfriend’s brother’s girlfriend, who knows some kid...or something), that Bucky realized Scott was still standing in the damned latte.

“You ever gonna get out of that thing?” Bucky asked with a laugh, nodding at the coffee.

“What?” Scott looked down. “Oh! Shit, I forgot. Can’t really feel the liquid inside my suit. Has to do with molecular displacement at this size.” He moved to get out, and Bucky, now totally tickled that Scott had been just standing in that thing, held up a hand.

“Wait, hold on a sec. I need a picture of you in there.” He gave his phone a little wave. “Do you mind?”

“No, not at all. Oh, wait a sec.” Scott sloshed over to the edge of the mug and reached over, picking up the container of whipped cream.

Bucky had no idea what was going on, but the last thing he wanted was for people to see what looked like a tiny container floating around on its own. He quickly lifted it out of Scott’s hand. Scott snatched at it, but Bucky pulled away.

“Wait, I was just gonna —”

“Give the patrons here a heart attack from the sight of whipped cream hovering around on its own?” Bucky finished with a smirk. Actually, he was shocked no one had seemed to notice them yet, but then, that was DUMBO for you. He held it back out. “Whatever you’re gonna do, fine, but not with this thing in your hand.”

“Seriously?”

Bucky just arched an eyebrow.

“I’ve already told you you’re weird, right? Let me reiterate the point: You’re weird, Barnes,” Scott said, but he made no move to take the container back. Just dipped his hand into the cream and quickly spelled out HELLO into the edge of the latte. Bucky had to fight back to keep from bursting out laughing.

“Wait, are you serious? That’s what you wanted to do?”

“It’s not like I can smile for the camera for you.”

Bucky shrugged. “Good point.” He quickly rearranged the cupcakes to get them in the shot, then held up the magnifying glass in front of his camera. He looked over at the ant. “You. Antony. Get in
It took a second, but the ant moved up to the side of the mug. Bucky knew it had to do with mind control on the ant, but he wasn’t entirely sure. He’d have to ask Scott or Dr. Pym about it sometime. It sounded fascinating. He wondered if it would work on giant blond super soldiers.

He took the photo quickly before the whip cream could dissipate in the latte, which was probably cold now, but still. He turned the phone around. “Whaddaya think?”

Scott looked it over, then nodded. “I like it.”

“Like what?” Bucky turned and smiled as Steve walked up. He looked absolutely dead on his feet, his movements sluggish and slow, but he still smiled back as he leaned down for a quick kiss. “Hey, baby. See you got my treats.”

“I did. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He dropped onto the stool next to Bucky. “Uh...Why is Scott in your drink?”

“This is the guy who thinks shrinking down to nothing is a good tactical maneuver. You really have to ask?”

“Not really,” Steve answered even as Scott gave Bucky the finger. Bucky laughed.

“Okay, my job here is finished.” He turned and brushed a kiss against Steve’s temple. “Seems I need to get a new drink. You want anything? You got your earwig on you?”

Steve nodded. “Yes and yes. Can you get me a —”

“All right, fine. Half-caf. You’re still sleeping later.”

Steve pointed a finger at him. “Nurse Ratched.”

“That would imply you’re insane. And you are.”

“Of course I am. I'm tied to you, aren’t I?”

“That’s it. All the decaf.”

“You know, watching the two of you is like watching a really intense tennis match of one-upmanship.” Scott piped in. “Is there ever a last word between the two of you?”

“No,” Steve and Bucky answered in perfect unison. They looked at each other, and Bucky knew that look on Steve’s face because he was giving the same one right back — a dare to speak. One that only ended when they both busted up laughing.

“Anyway.” Bucky kissed Steve’s forehead, then stood up. “Be right back.”

He got in line while the two began talking about the next take down. He pulled up Instagram and
loaded the image up. He made sure to tag the coffee shop because, in all actuality, it would be funny as hell if any of the patrons saw it while they were still there. He loved their neighborhood, but the level of pretentiousness of some of the people in the area was just unreal.

He almost didn’t add a caption at all — the picture itself spoke volumes — but he really wasn’t the type of person to go caption free. Even if he still had issues with being more open (his new project was helpful, but he’d just started it), he still at least liked telling stories on here.

He couldn’t think of anything interesting, though, so he typed Hi Scott. No, no, Steve didn't forget your appointment, he's parking the car and should be here in a minute. However, it doesn't explain WHAT THE F**K YOU ARE DOING IN MY COFFEE...and...JESUS CHRIST THAT'S A HELL OF A BIG ANT!! No offense of course...Ma'am...? Sir...? Anyway, no, that's fine, you can stay in there if you want. I don't feel like drinking coffee anymore. Don't ask..., and figured that could stand as is. He hit send just before he stepped up to the counter.

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“You gonna nap with me?” Steve asked as he slithered under the sheets next to Bucky.

“Well, someone’s gotta make sure you sleep.”

“Yeah, pretty sure that’s not gonna be a problem.”

Bucky hummed and pulled Steve in close. It was mere seconds before Steve’s breathing evened out and he was under. Bucky wasn’t sure how much sleep he’d get himself, but that didn’t matter. All that mattered was later. He’d go in with Steve to the Tower, not just to see him off, but Bucky and Coulson were going to have a little chat over this bullshit.

Steve was their strongest soldier; that was true. But SHIELD was an entire division of soldiers and spies. It didn’t need to always be Steve. Worse still, Steve would never step back if he was called on, and it pissed Bucky off up one side and down the other, because Coulson knew that. And he was exploiting it.

Luckily, Bucky could be very persuasive.
Steve and I travel a lot for the job and we were in France last spring. On May 1st, French celebrate Labor Day by offering lilies of the valley to family and friends so, we bought TONS! When in Paris, do as the Parisians do!

Chapter Notes

Steve and I travel a lot for the job and we were in France last spring. On May 1st, French celebrate Labor Day by offering lilies of the valley to family and friends so,
we bought TONS! When in Paris, do as the Parisians do!

Lock: €5. Pen: €2.5. The smile on Steve's face when I said I was OK to respect this cheesy as hell tradition that consists in hanging a lock on the Passerelle des Arts, a bridge right in front of the Louvre Museum in Paris: priceless. I mean, come on! If we, "The Greatest Love Story Of All Time ~", as Tony loves to call us sarcastically, don't indulge in this kind of stuff, who will?

I is so sorry

*offers cookies and whiskey*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He ran.

Blood pumped through his veins, nothing but white noise and his own heartbeat in his ears. There might have been people in his path, but he never slowed. He slammed into the wall as he turned the corner.

He ran.

The door was at the other end of the hall. It was so close and so far, and he wasn't sure how to get to that door, and Bucky was certain he'd never known fear like this. Not in all the countless missions where Steve had been injured, nor when Bucky'd snapped out of the Winter Soldier fog to find Steve's face under his metal fist. Not even when Steve had made the impossible jump in Azzano.

This was something else altogether. And it was threatening to eat him whole before he even made it to that godforsaken door in front of him.

He ran. And he tried not to scream.

Seven minutes earlier.

“That's not a cake!” Bucky shouted at the TV. The monstrosity that was being wheeled out on the latest episode of Bride Wars looked like its own unholy matrimony of blue and brick red, and Bucky was finally convinced that this particular bride belonged in the nut house and not at the end of an aisle. His phone buzzed on the coffee table.

“Nat, why are you not up here watching Bride Wars with me?” he whined by way of greeting. “This cake looks like some sort of Little Mermaid massacre. It's awesome.”

“Bucky...”

Bucky stiffened, the TV officially background noise at the hesitation in Nat's voice. Something settled low in his gut.

“What happened?” She didn’t answer immediately, and Bucky was already on his feet. He headed straight for the elevator. “Nat? Seriously, what's going on? You’re freakin’ me out here.”
“Bucky...” she started again. “We think... It looks like Steve’s been taken.”

All the air left their spacious apartment in one quick, single rush. His vision whited out and sound ceased to exist. For one brief moment, Bucky’s world became a void narrowed down to a singular thought.

*Steve had been taken.*

He stumbled onto the elevator as the doors opened. “Are you sure?” he growled into the phone. “Are you absolutely sure, Natalia, because it wouldn’t be the first time Steve’s gone off grid to —”

“We aren’t sure.”

Bucky swung around and slammed his metal fist into the mirrored back wall. The shattering rain of glass barely pierced where he saw red.

“What the fuck do you mean, you aren’t sure?” he yelled and spun back around. “Why the fuck are you calling me and scaring the shit out of me, if you aren’t sure!”

“Because it’s the Nash Mir.”

Bucky pulled up short. The Nash Mir were a group of extremists out of Eastern Europe that were on the rise, in a serious way, and they had a deep deep hatred of the United States.

And if what Nat was saying was true, they’d just gotten their hands on the living *poster boy* for the U.S.

There was no part of Bucky that wasn’t a hundred percent certain the group wouldn’t kill Steve, then bathe the streets in his blood so they could hold a parade across it.

But this was supposed to be a Hydra mission. Where the fuck did the Nash Mir come in?

“What makes you think you aren’t sure?” Bucky asked again, quiet this time. Controlled. “And how the fuck did the Nash Mir end up in the middle of this?”

Nat’s deep breath sounded tinny across the line. “We aren’t sure because, like you said, it’s not the first time Steve’s gone off the grid to complete a mission. He could have turned himself in, or maybe he’s simply lost communication, or whatever.”

“So what makes you think he was taken?”

“That’s the other thing. The Nash Mir shouldn’t have been there — not unless we aren’t that good at our jobs and had no idea Hydra was actually working with them. We think the Nash Mir found out we were in the area and ambushed us. Scott said —”

“You talked to Scott?”

“He was in his shrunken form. They didn’t know he was there.”

“And the bastard left Steve?”

“Bucky wait. Let me finish, please.” Bucky took a breath as the elevator doors slid open into the basement of the Tower. S.H.I.E.L.D.’s Level Eight facility. He waited for her to go on. “Scott said they were just about to infiltrate the Hydra facility when they were descended upon. I guess at first, Scott thought it was Hydra, but he saw the insignia on their sleeves. That was right before they seemed to have taken Steve.”
“Taken him,” he parroted back.

“Yes.”

“Steve doesn’t get taken.”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out.”

Bucky’s grip tightened around his phone. “Nat, they won’t hesitate to kill him.”

“I know.”

Bucky huffed in frustration, and glanced around. His instincts were screaming at him to get on a plane and go after Steve himself. He started heading toward their locker room. “Nat, I’m suiting up,” he informed her. “Get a quinjet ready; we’re wheels up in twenty.”

“Bucky, I don’t know if that’s the best —” She was interrupted by an eruption of noise and voices on her end. Bucky could hear Coulson shouting at someone.

“Nat, what —”

“Shhh.”

“Natalia, I swear to Christ —”

“Bucky, shut up.”

He grunted in frustration and turned around to head in the direction of the Comms Room, where he knew she was. He growled at anyone who dared walk in front of him, the mindless idiots scurrying away under the weight of the Winter Soldier glare.

But when a sharp intake hit his ears, he froze. “Nat?”

“Bucky?” Ice slithered down his spine at the sound of her voice. “Get here. Now.”

He ran.

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“What is it?” He distantly registered the sound of the door splintering as it hit the wall of the Comms Room. He looked around wildly, until his eyes fell on Nat. She was standing over one of the techs, but her eyes were on him, and Bucky’s heart seized at the silent horror in them. He strode across the room and grabbed her. “Fucking talk to me. What happened?”

She opened her mouth, only to be cut off by Coulson. “They have him.” Bucky spun around to face him. “It was an ambush, of that we’re certain. They definitely took Captain Rogers.”

“How do you know?”

In answer, Coulson eyes ticked up to the main screen in the room. Bucky followed, only to spasm where he still held onto Nat’s arm. Because up on the screen — taken in some dingy back room, where the paint was peeling, and mold was visible in the faded green carpet — was a picture of Steve’s shield and, draped across it, the upper part of Steve’s stealth suit, ripped and covered in blood.

“Where was this taken?” His own voice sounded distant and hollow.
“We don’t know.”

Bucky was across the room in an instant, Coulson pinned up against the wall by a metal hand. “What the fuck do you mean, you don’t know?” Coulson’s gaze was unflinching, despite the fact that Bucky was slowly cutting off his air supply. “He has a tracker —”

“It was disengaged three minutes after he disappeared.” Bucky tightened his grip, but all Coulson did was tighten his jaw in return. Bucky held him there, shaking, watching with fascination as Coulson turned redder with each passing second, but not once did he struggle against a hold that was most definitely killing him.

It wasn’t until small fingers closed around his wrist that he finally snapped out of it, gaze flicking over to Nat, who just shook her head. He unclenched his hand, setting Coulson back down.

“Well, that’s gonna smart,” Coulson commented, rubbing at his throat. He stepped around Natasha and walked back over to the command center. Natasha laced her fingers with Bucky and pulled him over, numb as he was. Coulson continued. “As I said, the tracker was turned off minutes after we lost him. Scott had his signal until just about the edge of the compound, when it dropped off. That’s when he notified us.”

“How long have you known?” Bucky couldn’t take his eyes off the screen, the uniform ripped at the shoulder and sides, as though someone literally tore it right off of him. The deep burgundy that ran across its front, and the smudges littered across the red, white, and blue metal underneath.

“We’ve known for about an hour.”

“Then why —”

“Because while Agent Romanoff may have told you we weren’t sure if he was taken, we were even less sure when it all went down.”

“Bucky, you said it yourself,” Nat cut in, her voice gentle. “Steve’s gone off the grid before. Hell, you both have. We wanted to make sure it was worth calling you before we actually called you.”

Bucky just shook his head. “Then what do we know?” He rounded on her. “I keep getting this ‘we don’t know’, and ‘we aren’t sure’ bullshit. Tell me what the fuck you do know!”

“Scott had just infiltrated the compound and was working to shut down their security grid, when we heard commotion over the comms. Assuming Steve —” Her eyes flicked to Coulson. “— Captain Rogers had been spotted, we had Scott double back out. He had just made it out when he saw Rogers go down. That was when he saw their insignia. He tried to get to them, but they drove off with Rogers, and he couldn’t catch up. His tracker went down three minutes and twelve seconds later. He went back to where he’d seen them take Rogers and found what we believe to be a tranq dart among the leaves.”

“What would take a tracker offline?”

Nat opened her mouth, only to close it. She looked around helpless. It was one of the techs who spoke up (one whose name Bucky didn’t know nor care about at the moment).

“Um, there are a, uh, number of factors.”

“And those are?” Bucky demanded. He didn't have time for this shit.

“Well.” The tech glanced at Coulson, only for Bucky to snap his fingers in the kid’s face. He might
“Eyes this way, sport.”

Kid figured it out and turned back to Bucky. He took a deep breath. “Well, there’s several ways. One, it could have been cut out” — Bucky flinched — “and destroyed. Or, um two, a localized, uh, EMP of sorts would do the trick.”

“Wouldn’t that potentially shut them down as well?”

“Not if it was, um, hyper localized...”

“Meaning?” Bucky snapped. The kid just stared at him in wide-eyed terror, and swear to fucking God, Bucky was inches from snapping his —

“Meaning they electrocuted him,” Nat answered softly.

Bucky let out a choked gasp and turned to stare at her. Her eyes were kind, but hard, and Bucky didn’t know if he wanted to kiss her or deck her for being straight with him.

He opened his mouth, but when no sound came out, she went on. “It might not be as bad as it sounds. It could be they simply tased him. Whatever tranq they used on him, I'm certain it wasn't enough to keep him down for long. He probably started to come to and they stunned him.”

“But you don't know that for sure,” Bucky pleaded with her. He pointed at the tech. “And I bet there are more ways than that they could have turned that tracker off!”

“There are actually about —” The tech cut off, no doubt leveled by the look on Natalia’s face.

She turned back to Bucky. “There are, and we aren't sure. But what we do know is that one, yes, his tracker is off. But two...” She touched his arm, her eyes piercing. “Two is that we’re certain he’s alive.”

“Are you seeing this?” Bucky waved a hand up at the screen. “There’s no way you know that.”

“Bucky think about it. This image was actually sent directly to us. Do you think, if Steve was dead, they would send us this? If they'd killed him, they would have made that news global already. Or, at the very least, not sent us anything. They would have sat on that, and figured out a game plan.” She walked over and tapped on the screen. “They want something from us. We just need to find out what.”

Bucky shook his head, hard. “Nuh-uh. No.” He started pacing, no idea where he wanted to go, even needed to go. “No way I'm waiting for that shit. No way I'm waiting for them to make demands, I'm going after him now.”

“Sergeant Barnes, we don't even know where —”

“Natalia,” he begged, ignoring Coulson. “They will start sending him back in pieces if we don't —” He cut himself off with another shake of his head, and headed towards the exit. “No. I'm not waiting. I'm going after him.”

“Sergeant Barnes —”

He rounded on Coulson. “And I will kill anyone who gets in my way!”

The last thing he heard was a quiet, “Natasha,” before his entire world went black.
The brightness behind his eyes did nothing to dissipate the raging headache blooming there. He cracked an eye open, only to slam it shut with a wince. Groaning, he pushed himself up to sit on the edge of the bed.

A bed...

He forced his eyes open and glanced around. Floor-to-ceiling white, a small bed, table, and commode directly behind him. It took him half a second to realize where he was and why.

It took less than that for him to spot Natasha watching him from the small observation window, and for him to launch himself across the S.H.I.E.L.D. containment pod to slam his fist into the glass. It didn’t even shutter.

“Let me out!” he screamed at her. She just watched him, face blank, stoic as always. A perfect soldier and spy.

He slammed his fist into the glass again, desperate, and screamed at her again. “Natalia, let me the fuck out right now! I will kill you, if you don’t let me out.” When she didn’t so much as flinch, he changed tactics, dragging metal down glass. He forced his voice to go low, even, barely a growl. “Let me out of here, or I won’t just kill you. I’ll kill Clint first and make you watch.”

That got a nostril flair out of her, but her mask was up just as fast. “You do what you need to. But for now, I suggest you get comfortable. You are beyond compromised, and I’m not losing Steve or you because you decide to go Four Horsemen on the Nash Mir.”

The fuck kind of unprofessional did she think... “I am not compromised!”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Really?”

“Natalia, please!” The tears slipped out, unbidden, and he didn’t bother wiping them away; he didn’t care. He needed out! He needed to go find Steve, he needed to bring him home. He pressed his head against the glass, bit back the sob jammed in his throat. He whispered: “Nat. Please.”

He looked up at her and she stared at him. Waited for her to see reason. She’d gone after Clint before. She had to know he could do this. He had to do this.

She didn’t see reason.

“No.” The word was final, a nail in a coffin — in Steve’s coffin — and the scream that tore out of Bucky shook the world.

“You bitch!” He yelled after her retreating form. “I’m going to kill you, do you hear me? If you don’t bring Steve home to me whole, it will be the last thing you ever don’t do!”

She stopped at the door and turned back to him. “If I don’t bring him home to you, I’ll give you the gun myself.”

She left and Bucky broke down, the pain visceral. He was trapped in this fucking cage, and Steve was out there, alone, no one watching his six. He didn’t have Bucky to protect him, and when — when — Bucky lost him, it would be Bucky’s fault. He should have known they would try to stop him. Should have anticipated this. Should never have turned back to the Comms Room, and just fucking gone after his love.
Steve was going to die. And it would be all Bucky’s fault.

He ran at the door, only to slam right into it. The vibration tore through him instead, and he growled, slamming his metal fist into the door jam, again and again, but the door wouldn’t budge.

Nothing made sense, not the door, not the pod, nor anything in it. He grabbed the chair from the desk and flung it to the other side. There was no satisfaction when it simply hit the wall and bounced to the ground. It was unbreakable, unlike his soul.

*Steve.* Oh God, *Steve.* He needed *Steve.*

He slid to the floor, sob after wretching sob being ripped out of him. What was he gonna do if something happened? How was he supposed to live without Steve? His rock. His center. There *was* no life without Steve — hadn’t been before and wouldn’t be after.

He pulled out his phone and unlocked it, immediately dialing Steve’s number. It rang, and hysterical hope nudged inside of him.

*Please pick up, Stevie. Please.*

It rang and rang — *please* — until he finally heard his favorite sound in world.

Too bad it was only a recording.

He cried out and tried again. And again. And again.

Nothing.

He gave up when his battery life hit thirty percent. *Must conserve for when Steve calls.* Instead he flipped over to his photos. The most recent was a picture of the two of them, in bed, that Steve had taken with Bucky’s phone. It had been taken right before Bucky had woken up from their nap, before Steve’s current mission. Steve was holding him close, kissing the top of his head as Bucky slept.

It was a thing Steve did. When they had separate missions, he always took a photo of them together right before either one left. Just in case.

Bucky just never thought (or maybe never wanted to believe) that *just in case* might become an actual thing.

He changed his lock screen and background to the photo and went on, slowly scrolling through the admittedly thousands of photos he had of them together. He couldn’t do anything else — couldn’t *think* about anything else. If this was the only way he ever get to see Steve’s face again, he wanted to start committing it all to memory now.

The photos were silly and serious, beautiful and obnoxious. There were photos of them lounging around, on mission, exploring New York, exploring the world. It was on their recent trip to France that he stopped scrolling.

Their jobs had taken them all over the world, but surprisingly, they hadn’t been back to Paris — at least not together — since the War. But they’d been back there after a mission a couple months back. Stuck around because of a festival of flowers...lilies or something, if he was remembering correctly.

He came across the photo they’d taken with the Eiffel Tower in the background, flower petals littering the air. Steve had bought a mountain of flowers to pass around, but not before he’d shoved a
few in Bucky’s hair, sticking some in their clothes, and kissing him senseless, because they were in Paris, and that was just what you did. Before they’d gotten around to handing out all the flowers, Bucky had taken a quick selfie of them.

With shaky hands, he pulled up his Instagram and loaded the picture.

*Please see this, Stevie,* he thought, helplessly. He didn't actually believe there was a chance of that, but maybe...maybe they’d found Steve. Maybe they would come in any second and tell him they had Steve, and Steve was on a quinjet, so he’d see this.

None of his followers needed to know what was going on — *not yet* — so Bucky kept it short. Took him a minute to really remember that it had been about France’s Labor Day, though.

*Steve and I travel a lot for the job and we were in France last spring. On May 1st, French celebrate Labor Day by offering lilies —

Wait, no. That wasn’t right. It wasn’t _lilies...* it was — Oh. It was that other flower — the one Nat loved._

*lilies of the valley to family and friends so, we bought TONS! When in Paris, do as the Parisians do!*

That was it. He hit send.

*Stevie, please see this.*

He kept going.

There was a litany of photos of them passing out flowers. To Parisians, to tourists, to people hawking tchotchkes, to young and old alike. To some little boy in a Captain America t-shirt, and a sweet old lady who’d seen Steve on a USO stop all those years ago.

He slipped through them all. Only stopped again when his heart lodged in his throat.

The lock.

He’d thought it was a silly tradition — putting a lock on a bridge to commemorate love. But Steve loved it, and he would forever and always do anything for Steve. So they’d hunted down a lock from one of the tourist shops nearby, only to have to hunt down markers that could actually write on the damn thing.

It was a silly tradition. And after it was over, Steve had changed his lock screen photo to the picture while Bucky had spent the next hour talking Steve’s ear off about how the structure and the load bearing of the bridge was surely damaged from the one-sided weight of the locks on it. Went over the structural engineering of a bridge like that, and Steve had quietly listened and stared at Bucky like he hung the moon.

Bucky couldn’t have hung the moon. Not when it was Steve who already did.

Bucky loaded that one too.

*Stevie, please. Please see this.*

*Lock:* €5. *Pen:* €2.5. *The smile on Steve's face when I said I was OK to respect this cheesy as hell tradition that consists in hanging a lock on the Passerelle des Arts, a bridge right in front of the Louvre Museum in Paris: priceless. I mean, come on! If we, "The Greatest Love Story Of All Time*
~", as Tony loves to call us sarcastically, don't indulge in this kind of stuff, who will?

The snort that escaped him was derisive at best, and loathsome at worst. Tony had said that. Countless times. But then, maybe they were the greatest love story of all time. After all, didn’t those kinds of stories always end in tragedy?

He couldn’t look anymore. He wanted to, but God, the possibility that, from now on, every time he saw Steve’s face, it would be in the past tense, was too much. He slipped his phone back into his pocket and curled up on the floor.

He waited.

Chapter End Notes

PS: When in Paris last summer, I did this, because, you know, it's Paris. How could you not?
Paris hasn't changed at all since the last time we came here. The subway was on strike so we borrowed a scooter and did our best to avoid the bloody pigeons that were getting in our way. (Photo: Sam)

Speaking of France, here's a rare and pretty old photo of Steve and I taken during the war, right before a mission. When I see these kind of pics, I still wonder how there was something better in time. I'm not sure that a lot at their Sergeant that way.
nobody figured out there was something between us at the time. I'm not sure that a lot of Captains look at their Sergeant that way. And vice versa...

I'm still so sorry


Bucky’s headache had subsided to a dull throb — one he relished in, and spurred on with each crack of his skull against the back wall.


It had been hours. Hours of no answers and no visitors, and nothing else. No news should be good news, right? Obviously not. Nat would be smart enough to swing wide of this place if Steve was dead.

Maybe Bucky would die in here. If the rest of the team had any level of intelligence, they would know to let him rot in this cell. That or face his wrath.

A wrath he’d had decades to perfect.


He brought his hand up again to check for blood, only to glower when his fingers came back clean. What was the point of trying to join Steve if his head was too hard to get the job done?

He pulled his phone out again. No missed calls. Why wasn't Steve calling him? He should have called by now. Bucky should have a hundred missed calls by now.

Steve was gonna be in so much trouble when he got home — making Bucky worry like this. It was rude, is what it was.


Twelve percent battery left. Steve was definitely going to be in trouble for making Bucky worry.

The numbers on Bucky’s phone swam and he wiped, frustrated, at the tears streaming down his face again. Because, chances were, there would never be a Stevie to get mad at ever again.

Eleven percent.

Thud. Thud. THUD. CRACK!

Bucky smiled, slow and pleased, relieved at the pain that coursed through him, from the back of his head, straight down his spine.

One step closer to Stevie.

He went back to the photos from Paris, looked them over again. He should put up another one. Steve was probably upset that Bucky hadn't uploaded another one for him yet.
I know you started that Instagram account a couple weeks ago. Maybe it’s time you actually posted a photo? I’m already following you, so I hope to see something on there soon.

Steve would be upset if Bucky didn't take his therapy seriously. He could be good, though. He could do this, and make Steve proud. He found the photo Sam had taken of the scooter they’d ‘commandeered’. Or, as Stevie had called it, ‘borrowing’. Because he always returned what he stole. Or so he said.

The hysterical bark of foreign laughter echoed around the small cell. Bucky thought it maybe it had come from him — who else would be in here? — but he didn’t trust the sound of it.

His hands shook as he loaded the image onto his Instagram. Please see this, Stevie. And it took him a whole two percent to get the caption up. What was the name of the pastry shop again? Oh right, Ladurée. There was one in New York, actually — Tony had said so. He and Stevie would have to —

Paris hasn't changed at all since the last time we came here. The subway was on strike so we borrowed a scooter and did our best to avoid the bloody pigeons that were getting in our way. (Photo: Sam)

He hit send and stared at his phone. Stared for so long, willing a little heart to pop up from Steve. Please see this, Stevie, please. He stared until eight percent.

It didn't occur to him until now that he even had wifi in here. Why was that? Why allow it? He didn't under—

He didn't care.


The pain wasn't as visceral as it had been all those minutes ago. He reached up and found a closed wound.

“Nnnnghh!” he cried out. This wasn't working. Why wasn't it working?!

He slumped back against the wall, the effort draining out of him in one quick rush. He sighed in defeat, though it felt hollow. He couldn't join Steve, not as long as he was in here. He wanted to be angrier about that, but there was too much gray around him to properly see red.

He had nowhere to go. And soon he would lose his lifeline to Steve. No phone meant no connection meant Steve really would be gone.

He stared ahead, seeing nothing. It was all a blur anyway, whites and greys and nothingness. There was nothing.

He let his head drift off.

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Tap. Tap. Tap.

Bucky blinked, but didn't move.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“Hey, buddy.”
Bucky lolled his head over to find someone watching him through the observation window. He turned away again.

“Come on, cupcake, you gotta look at me.”

Bucky tipped his head back over to find blue eyes and blond hair staring back at him. He frowned at the wrongness of them.

“You with me there, Barnes?”

Bucky blinked again, narrowed his eyes at the face in front of him.

“Clint.”

A smile ghosted across Clint’s face. “There you are, buddy.”

“What do you want?”

“Got news for you. But I have a question first.” Bucky didn't answer — just waited for Clint to go on before he got to the part about Steve being dead. Clint didn't keep him waiting. “You really threaten to kill me and make Tasha watch?”

Again, Bucky didn't answer. Didn't need to. Didn’t care enough to.

Clint must have taken his silence for the acknowledgement that it was. He hummed with a nod.

“Well, I'd say I'm offended, but if the situation was reversed...” He waved a hand between them. “You know.”

“What do you want?”

“Right.” Clint gave a short nod. “So, we found Steve.”

Bucky'd figured as much. “In how many pieces?”

Clint frowned at him. “What?”

The red was starting to deep in along the edges of his muted vision. He ground his teeth and spat out, “How many pieces did you find him in?”

“Pieces?”

The next thing Bucky knew, he was across the cell, his fist slamming into the glass. “Stop being such a fucking idiot!” he shouted as Clint took a satisfying step back. “How fucking dead is he?!”

Bucky watched as the wheels finally clicked into place, and Clint’s eyes went wide. “What? No! Bucky, no.” Clint took that step forward. “Buck, he’s alive. We think.”

Everything in Bucky came slamming back at once. It took hanging on to Clint’s last words to keep him from throwing up. He parroted them back. “We think.”

“A drone found the building he was taken to, and at last flyover” — he looked at his watch — “two hours and thirty-seven minutes ago, there was at least one heat signature running too hot to be a normal person.”

Two hours and thirty-seven minutes. “Why am I only being told this now?”
“Well, two reasons, really. One, we didn’t know about it until thirty minutes ago — wasn’t our drone; we’d just tapped into the intel. And two” — he shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged — “wasn’t supposed to tell you. But fuck it, because again, reversed situation and all.”

“Yeah,” was all Bucky said, his response distant. Clint wasn’t wrong about that. Not that it mattered; his mind was too much of a live wire over the knowledge that Steve’s death sentence — possibly — hadn’t been carried out yet.

“Let me out.”

“Buck...”

“Let me out now.”

“Look, man, there’s a difference between telling you and letting you go off half —”

His fist slamming into the glass was enough to vibrate the entire cell, even if it wasn’t enough to create the slightest crack. But it had the desired effect of drawing Clint back those beautiful, deeply satisfying steps. So much so that Clint put himself into a fighter’s stance and — wide-eyed or not — stared Bucky down.

“Let me out now, or I’m making good on my promise. You know this cell can’t hold me forever.”

He needed out. If Steve was alive, Bucky needed to be out there, saving him, and blazing a trail straight to Hell for all those who’d taken him from Bucky.

He didn’t break eye-contact. Kept his breathing even. Clint wasn’t Natalia; he would cave eventually.

It took three minutes and twenty-six seconds.

“Fucking hell,” Clint muttered under his breath, and went to punch in the code that would open the cell pod. Bucky schooled his features, proud of how easily he walked right out of there, even if his insides were screaming at him to run. He would find his Stevie tonight.

They hadn’t made it two steps before Bucky stopped and turned to Clint, assessed him. Then he pulled back and cold-cocked Clint right in the face. Clint grunted and stumbled over.

He pressed a hand to his cheek, a look of betrayal in his eyes. “What the fuck was that for, man?”

“That was for not leading with the part about Steve still possibly being alive.”

Clint stared him down again, only to shrug a moment later. “Fair enough.”

“Roles reversed?”

“Roles reversed.”

Bucky let Clint lead them through the halls, trusting they were headed to a quinjet. It was better if they weren’t seen, but Bucky wasn’t above a few hospital trips for the peons if it meant their healthy fear of the Winter Soldier stayed intact.

The problem was, Bucky was expecting the lesser-mortals to make themselves known. He wasn’t expecting fucking Coulson. Mistake on his part. He knew better.

They had just reached the hangar bay, Clint sliding the doors open, when they came face to face with
Coulson and Nat, standing between Bucky and Steve’s rescue. Clint eyed him, but neither of them backed down

“Move.” Bucky didn’t have time for this shit. “Move, or I’ll move you.”

“Sorry, Barnes, I can’t —”

Bucky grabbed Coulson by the shirt and threw him across the bay. Nat instantly drew her gun, but Bucky ignored her. His gaze bore down to where Coulson had skidded to a halt.

“Did you think I was joking?!” Bucky shouted. “Steve is out there, and you had me locked up! By one of my best friends! Be thankful I haven’t killed you!”

Coulson slowly began to push himself up, but Bucky turned away from him — the fucking suit wasn’t really a threat — to glare at Nat. “I’m only going to ask this once, and then I’m going to get testy. Lower the gun and let us go, or you and me are gonna dance.”

She just stared at him, unflinching. Bucky gave it one more shot.

“You told Clint what I said, but he agreed that if the roles were reversed, he would have done the same thing. And you know we’re both right. If the roles were reversed for you, no way you wouldn’t move heaven and earth to find Clint and bring him home.”

They stared each other down. Bucky waited her out. He heard Coulson finally approach from behind.

“Sorry, Sergeant Barnes, but Romanoff understands —”

Nat’s gun was suddenly trained on Coulson. And Bucky internally breathed a sigh of relief.

“Sorry, Coulson,” Nat said smoothly. “But Bucky’s right. You pulled me in once to go after Clint when he’d been compromised. I should never have contained Bucky. He deserves the same respect.”

“This is different.”

“You’re right.” She smirked at him. “Bucky let you live. I would have been less kind.”

With that she turned and strode past Coulson, Bucky and Clint following suit. Bucky knew they were all going to have their asses handed to them when they came back (with Steve, goddammit), but that didn’t stop him from mouthing ‘fuck you’ to a truly seething Coulson. It was petty, but whatever. Bucky was on his way to get Steve.

“Where is he?” he asked as jogged up the gangplank of the quinjet. Clint was already strapping into the pilot’s seat, Nat right next to him.


“Do we know yet why he’s still alive?” Or was, a couple of hours ago.

Bucky shook the thought away. He’d already spent enough time in a tailspin. He had his autonomy back now, and he was doing something with it. Which meant bringing back Steve alive and whole. Otherwise Bucky would set the world to burn.

“We think it’s because they want to make a production out of it.” Of-fucking-course. “We don’t have a lot of intel, but the Nash Mir want a place on the world stage.” She turned grim eyes on him.

“What better way to do that than to live stream the murder of Captain America.”
Bucky tightened his fists in his lap. No point in losing control now and punching a hole in the fuselage. Crashing right after take-off wasn’t going to help anyone.

The flight wasn’t a short one, even with Clint at the stick, though considerably shorter than any regular flight would be. It was too long as far as Bucky was concerned.

He grabbed his phone, only to see it was down to two percent. He immediately attached it to the charger in his seat before going right back to flipping through the images. He had thousands. Thousands upon thousands — not just all the photos he’d taken in their current life, but every photo he could get from their past, scanned right into the little bit of tech in his hand. He had them all. He’d lost enough memories, and having every bit of his life captured in image form was almost a compulsive response at this point. He’d lost enough.

There was one photo in particular he wanted. Another photo from France, but this one was different. He flipped through his admittedly endless list of albums. He knew it was in here somewhere, he just couldn’t remember where it was. He searched under France, but found nothing. Then he checked in his Second World War album, and nada. Maybe it was in the How He Sees Me album — the one Steve had made for him when Bucky felt like his was a face that shouldn’t be loved — but it wasn’t there either. Where the fuck was it?

It took half the flight, but he finally found it in the Black and Whites album. He quickly added it to the other albums it should’ve been in before pulling up Instagram.

*We’re coming for you, Stevie. You will see this.*

He loaded the image and quickly wrote out the caption — he’d been thinking about it since he’d started looking for the image. He wanted something for Steve to smile at when they picked his stupid (alive, dammit) kidnapped ass up. He looked down at the way Steve was smiling at him in the old photo, taken the last time they’d been in France together: 1944. He wanted Steve to smile at the post the way he was smiling at Bucky in it.

Speaking of France, here’s a rare and pretty old photo of Steve and I taken during the war, right before a mission. When I see these kind of pics, I still wonder how nobody figured out there was something between us at the time. I’m not sure that a lot of Captains look at their Sergeant that way. And vice versa...

He hit send and sat back, ready for his chance to burn them all.

~~~~

The landing was quick and quiet, ten miles out from where Steve was being held. They unloaded the motorcycles out of the back and set out, Bucky gunning it because Steve was so close, and Bucky was done waiting.

It was as they were ditching the bikes half a mile out that Nat received a message on the secured comms. She grabbed it. “Yeah?”

Bucky didn’t have time for this. He turned toward the building up ahead only to have strong, lithe fingers grab his wrist. He was just about to bark at her to let go when he turned back to find hard fear in her eyes.

Bucky’s stomach dropped.

“What is it?” he managed to get out. They couldn’t be too late. *Please,* don’t let it be too late.
“ Seems our gut instinct was right. We made it just in time to catch the live show.”

Bucky’s world spun out in an instant.

The Nash Mir was going to kill Steve on live feed.

And they were going to do it right now.

Bucky pulled his arm free and ran.
I think this is one of the most intimate photos I've ever posted here, yes even more intimate than my birthday pics from March. This one is...different, actually. It was taken the night Steve and I slept together for the first time after I finally came back home. Some couples take "a break", ours lasted more than 70 years which we didn't even ask for. (Photo: Steve, OBVIOUSLY)
Inspired by Hosier's *Work Song*

Steve finally gets his own POV

*Bucky, no.* Steve tried not to smile, he tried. But Bucky was swaying his hips just so, giggling against the Asgardian whiskey Thor had given them, and Steve was so stupidly in love with him, he thought he might suddenly burn from the inside out.

Maybe that was the whiskey talking. He was pretty sure it wasn’t.

But still, he tried. Pulled back from where Bucky had gone to tug on his hand, and shook his head playfully. “I’m not dancing with you, Buck. You know I can’t dance.”

“How,” Bucky swiveled around to give Steve a glorious shot of his ass, arms hooked over his head. “You say that every time, but then you go out in the field.” The tilt of his hips as he turned back around bordered on obscene. “And I see you dance almost every day. The way you move?” He slithered onto Steve’s lap, dirty smile and hooded eyes, and Steve brought his hands up to Bucky’s waist on instinct. Lips ghosted against his own. “Those are dancer’s moves, baby. No one can dance like you.”

Steve hummed, a smile on his lips as they stayed hovered against Bucky’s. “Is that what we’re calling tactical fighting these days?”

“It’s dancing, is what it is.” A light tongue flickered against his bottom lip. “Dancing with the enemy.”

“Enemy, huh?” He nosed along a stubbled jaw, took in the rich scent of home. “So what does that make you?”

Steve shivered as a tongue flickered down the shell of his ear before Bucky bit into his earlobe. “The worst kind of a bad decision.”
Steve Rogers never thought he would go out like this. When he was small, he thought an illness would take him down. After the serum, he figured it would be the War that did him in — and in a way it had: for a grand total of sixty-seven years. Since then, he always hoped he’d either go out in a blaze of glory, or be blessed with one single gift in life, and get to grow old with Bucky.

He never thought he would be taken out, bound and blindfolded, execution-style. When they realized drugs couldn’t keep him knocked out, they’d broken both of his legs, repeatedly, with a sledgehammer to keep him from being able to run. He smiled viciously at the two he’d taken out earlier simply by throwing them across the room. They’d broken his arms after that. Repeatedly.

Healing fast was painful business.

He assessed his situation again, letting his hearing pick up what his eyes couldn’t: Two flanking his sides, armed and trained on him. Three in front of him — one setting up the camera, one over by the station they’d set up to broadcast his death, and one barking orders at the other two. He knew there were also at least two more just outside the door, plus the two he’d taken out. He wasn’t sure where their bodies had been taken, but since his enhanced senses were already picking up the smell of decay, he was sure they were still in the building somewhere, and somewhere close.

He felt a painful shift in his tibia as the bone snapped into place. He kept his features schooled this time; he’d already been ‘punished’ once for giving away that his bones were healing. If he could just get his femur to get with the program before they were set to air, maybe he’d stand a chance at getting out of this. His shield was just short of seventeen feet from where he was kneeling. If he could take out Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum to his right and left, he would have at least two body shields until he could get to the real thing.

He felt the rush of air from the movement before a hand clamped around his arm. “On istseleniye. Dolzhny li my snova slomat’ yego kosti?” Aw, shit. They’d figured out the tibia.

“Razbeyte yego.”

Fuck. He’d been so close.

He ground down on a scream as the sledgehammer slammed into freshly-healed and still-broken bones.

Bucky was gonna kick his ass for getting caught like this.

~~~

There's nothing sweeter than my babe

I'd never want once from the cherry tree

Cuz my baby sweet as can be

She give me toothaches

Just from kissing me

~~~

Steve’s back hit the wall, hard, lips crushing against his own before the vibrations had even made it to his toes. Bucky bit down and Steve tasted blood. Didn’t stop him from hooking his hands under Bucky’s thighs so he could spin him around and slam him back against the wall. Steve growled as he
swallowed down Bucky’s wanton cry.

The mission had been a shitshow from start to finish, and they’d barely made it out of the quinjet before they’d begun to paw at each other. Brooklyn wasn’t gonna happen, not when there was perfectly good apartment, with all kinds of breakable furniture, eighty-five floors up. The elevator ride had only *just* been fast enough.

Uniforms and under-clothes landed everywhere — most of them in tatters from being ripped off in a blatant, animalistic need to bury themselves in each other. It was frustrating, the fact that he couldn’t find a way to get closer to Bucky. He needed him. As close as he could get.

“Fuck!” Bucky cried out as Steve raked his nails down Bucky’s sides. He watched, fascinated, as welts appeared, then disappeared just as quickly. He tilted his hips to press Bucky harder into the wall, then scraped again, this time over taut nipples and washboard abs. He reveled in the cry it ripped loose.

“*Steve.*” Bucky hands scrambled along Steve’s back, already slick with sweat. “*Fuck, I need —*”

“Me first.” Steve yanked Bucky’s head to the side and sucked in the salty flesh. “Me first this time.”

Bucky pressed metal fingers against the back of Steve’s head, driving his teeth further into Bucky’s neck. He sucked hard when he felt skin break. Bucky whimpered. “Yes. God. *Anything.*”

He licked over the wound that would close all-too quickly before setting Bucky back down. Instantly lips were on his again, the kiss hungry and filthy, and *not deep enough.*

He grabbed Bucky’s shoulders and spun them back around until his own back hit the wall. He didn’t need to say anything — didn’t need to wait for Bucky to get with the program. Not when a metal arm was already sliding under his ass and lifting him up, pinning him where Bucky had been just moments before. He locked his legs around Bucky’s waist and grinned.

“You don’t fuck me enough. Think it’s time you fix that.”

“Baby, screw what those alien bastards *tried* to do to you. They got nothin’ on me.” Bucky licked a hot stripe from collar to jaw. “When I’m done with you? You *definitely* won’t be walking for at least the next year.”

~~~~

Two to each side, three in front, one just inside the door now, one still outside in the hallway, two decomposing somewhere nearby. Unfortunately, they’d managed to break both femurs this time. Well, at least they were smart enough to go for the biggest bones in the human body. He’d give them that.

His thoughts turned to Bucky. He wondered where Bucky was, hoped he was safe. He knew Bucky would be raising fire and brimstone to get to Steve, but he couldn’t think about that. It’s not where his thoughts really wanted to wander. His mind was simultaneously split between excited voices as equipment fired up and quiet murmurs of the only voice he wanted to hear.

He could *feel* it — feel him. Feel soft lips against his own. The cut of sharp hips writhing up under his thumbs. Silky brown hair, slipping through what Bucky liked to call ‘artist fingers’. Cool metal pressed between his shoulder blades.

He would never feel any of that ever again. It ripped an unholy sort of anger through him for every terrorist asshole in the room.
Because while it bugged him to no end that this was how he was going out, it actively pissed him off that he was going out without Bucky by his side.

“My onlayn.”

Things were up and running. It wasn’t going to be long now.

Well, at least they weren’t gonna take his head. Bullet to the back of the skull. It would be quick.

Or, at least, it would be quick for him. He had no doubts each man in the room was looking at the wrong end of a slow and excruciating death. He was unsurprisingly okay with that.

“You know,” he started, cool and calm, proud that his voice didn’t shake around the pain. “If you’re going to kill me, it would probably go a lot better for you if you didn’t film it and let the Winter Soldier get a bead on you. Because if you think a mask will keep him from finding you and turning you into his violent playthings, you clearly have never read up on arguably history’s deadliest assassin.”

The fist that connected with his jaw was swift, but not only did Steve feel it coming — fucking Tweedle Dum, telegraphing his punches — there was no weight behind the force. They should have just used the sledgehammer again.

~~~~

Boys when my baby found me

I was three days on a drunken sin

I woke with her walls around me

Nothin’ in her room

But an empty crib

~~~~

The red splashed angrily across the canvas, covering the mottled green and black. He dipped into the paint and flung again. Another bloody line across once-pristine white.

It hadn’t been white for hours. Maybe longer.

Nothing in his life was pristine anymore. If it ever had been.

He dipped into the paint again, lifted his hand to fling across the canvas, only to stop. With a soft cry, he turned and flung the paint across the room instead. Watched as red splattered across their brand new studio-slash-office. It hit the desk and the back of his laptop, but he didn’t care. The tears were running down his face again, and if he was totally honest with himself, that little flip of rebellion in their new home felt like maybe the frustration and pain were finally bleeding out.

He repeated the process.

The nightmares in the wee hours of that morning had been horrendous. Bucky, deep inside the Winter Soldier wherever he was, had flung out, metal cracking Steve’s jaw and splitting the flesh. The damage had been reversed in just a couple of hours, but only to Steve’s face. Bucky’s psyche was another story; he’d scrambled into the corner of their room and hadn’t moved since. Refused to speak, refused to listen, refused to blink.
It had been almost fifteen hours before Steve finally called the doctor, who’d told him to just let Bucky come out of his headspace on his own. Giving up and waiting it out had been damn near impossible.

The once-pristine white canvas had paid the price. Now their new home was being made to suffer too. Because Steve refused to suffer alone.

Red, then bright orange, deep green, followed by black. He didn’t bother with the brush when he made it to blue — just picked the bottle up and flung it across the room. Watched in fascination as it shattered against the wall —

“Steve?” His head whipped around to find Bucky, arms closed in on himself, as he hovered in the doorway, frowning at the mess.

Steve turned back for the bottle of gray and threw it hard enough to dent the wall.

“Wait. Steve.” Bucky rushed into the room and clamped down on Steve’s wrist where he’d turned to go for another bottle. He tried to twist out of Bucky’s grip, but Bucky just held on tighter. Metal trumped flesh. Just like it had that morning.

“Bucky, let go.”

“No.”

Steve tightened his grip around the bottle. “Bucky, let go now.”

“Not gonna happen, Steve.”

“Dammit!” The bottle shattered in Steve’s hand. He ignored the way blood mixed with paint and turned angry eyes on Bucky. “Why can’t you just listen to me?”

“Because, Stevie.” Bucky’s voice was quiet, and he returned Steve’s look with soft, sad eyes. “Sometimes I can’t hear you. Not past the rush of noise in my head.”

The plaintive cry that broke out of Steve was muffled, even to his own ears, from where he dropped his head on Bucky’s shoulder. “I don’t know how to help you.”

Bucky finally let go in favor of wrapping his arms around Steve. Of all the times and ways Bucky had inflicted damage on him, he still never felt more safe than when Bucky held him close.

“Sometimes you can’t help me. Sometimes you have to let me just work through it.”

“But I can’t —”

“Shhh.” Soft lips pressed behind his ear, and how fucked up was it that Bucky was comforting him when it was Bucky who’d spent all day trapped in his own mind. Steve would never deserve this man.

He ran his hands up Bucky’s back, and watched as the paint — orange, apparently, now mixed with blood — left streaks in its wake. It was oddly beautiful. He leaned back to look Bucky in the eyes.

They were searching, wondering. “What are you thinking, baby?” Bucky whispered.

Steve just smiled and reached back for the bottle of red. When Bucky immediately lifted his hand again to stop him, Steve gave a small shake of his head. He silently poured some of the red into his mess of hands before setting the bottle back down. He gently pressed his hands to Bucky’s chest.
The gasp that escaped Bucky’s lips sent a shiver down Steve’s spine and he slowly slid his hands down, slipping them just past Bucky’s waistband before circling his hips. The way the colors streaked across Bucky’s skin — the way Bucky’s chest rose and fell as his breathing became labored, his eyes dilating with every breath — was one of the most exquisite sights Steve had ever seen.

He reached back again, only for Bucky to press into him and reach past, coming back with a new bottle of blue. He coated his own hands, then with a smirk, tossed the bottle aside, where it bounced across the hardwood floor, more blue splattering everywhere. Steve smiled at him.

Bucky cupped Steve’s jaw and brushed his thumbs across Steve’s cheeks. He could feel the paint coating his skin, and he’d barely flicked a glance down at Bucky’s pink, plush lips before he was diving in.

The only sounds in the room were the twin roars of their pounding hearts, breaths turning to broken whimpers as they stepped into each other, and new bottles of paint shattering around them as Bucky pressed them into the work table.

“Don’t leave me,” Steve cried against Bucky’s lips.

“I can’t promise you that,” Bucky replied, and Steve felt that pounding heart shatter.

“Then promise me you’ll at least come back?”

“Always.”

~~~

Two to each side now, and one behind. One on the camera, and one on the satellite equipment. He could see it all now, blindfold gone. Guess they wanted the world to see the light leave his eyes.

If he could find a way, he would give anything to keep Bucky from ever seeing it.

He took in his surroundings again: terrorists, shield, computers, satellite, camera —

That’s when it hit him. The soft thrum of spinning blades, the shift of leaves as each thwip rustled the branches of trees far out. He knew that sound.

He grinned, tight and knowing. He’d recognize a quinjet anywhere.

Two to each side, one behind, one at the camera and one on satellite. And thanks to him, no one guarding the doors.

Not that it mattered. Bucky was out there, he just knew. There was no going after Bucky without him, and that went both ways. Bucky would kill anyone in his path who tried to stop him.

They hadn’t gagged him. They’d left him able to speak so he could confirm that he was, in fact, Steve Rogers a.k.a. Captain America. He was supposed to tell the world right before they put a bullet in his brain. Right before they declared war on the Western World.

Whether he lived or died in the next several minutes no longer mattered to him. He could hear the motorcycles — three of them — flying across the terrain, which meant that even if the world watched him die, the world would also find out exactly what would happen when you fucked with the Winter Soldier.
Steve knew he should be more worried about the fact that a snuff film was about to be broadcast globally. He’d get right on worrying about that. Later.

The little red light blinked on just as the motorcycles stopped. They were no more than half a mile out. The enemy had barely started speaking when the sounds of heavy footfall hit his ears.

With a gait as familiar to him as breathing.

Ignoring his own scream, he used the only ounce of strength he had to flip over backwards and connect boot to jaw. Executioner went sprawling just as the two to the left dropped right where they stood, no time to react.

“Bucky, the camera!” he yelled, and Bucky swung out from where he’d come barreling into the room. The camera and tripod flew across the room, shattering where they hit the wall.

It was a clusterfuck of insanity after that. He caught chaos and movement outside and fuck, he’d actually missed the now obvious people in the building next door. He could hear Clint and Natasha picking people off, even as Bucky dropped the two to Steve’s right. Satellite turned out to have combat training, disarming Bucky quickly, but he was still no match for a metal arm, and he and Camera were dead before Steve had had time to drag himself over to grab a gun and put a bullet in Executioner.

The ensuing silence was only matched by the roar of white noise from the truly righteous pain coursing through his body. He dropped the gun and collapsed onto the floor.

“Steve!” Bucky rushed over and dropped down next to him, a sob breaking through as he pulled Steve into his arms. Steve screamed.

~~~~~~~~

And I was burnin’ up a fever
I didn’t care much how long I lived
But I swear I thought I’d dreamed her
She never asked me once
About the wrong I did

~~~~~~~~

“Are you sure about this?” Steve trailed his hands across Bucky’s shoulders, then a light caress of fingers sliding down strong biceps as Steve took in the sight of him, beautiful and whole, and in his arms after so long.

Bucky leaned in and nosed softly against Steve’s ear. “It’s time, Steve.”

“It’s time when you’re ready, baby.”

“I...”

Steve slipped a hand through long, silky strands of hair, and leaned in to brush his lips across Bucky’s. “Only when you’re ready.”

“That’s just it.” Bucky pulled him backwards towards the comfy chair by the window, turned him
around so he could straddle Steve’s thighs. “I’m ready. I’ve been ready for a long time, I’m just...”

“Nervous?”

“Scared,” Bucky whispered.

Steve rested his hands on Bucky’s hips and tried to hide how his heart hurt, even as his voice shook. “Is it me you’re scared of?”

“No.” Bucky swooped in for a kiss. “It’s just...” He looked around, and Steve waited for him to find his words. “If we do this, then it’s all real. We’re real. And I can’t lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere, baby.” Steve searched Bucky’s face, trying to understand. “How are you going to lose me?”

Bucky ducked his head, and even in the faint glow of the moonlight streaming in from the window, Steve could see the flush spreading across Bucky’s cheeks. “When they come to lock me up permanently...”

“Oh, Buck.” Steve pulled him in for another kiss, tears slipping for real. “You’re free, baby. No one is going to take you away. You know that.”

Steve tasted salt from where Bucky’s tears mixed with his own. “Yeah, but...”

“But nothing.”

“The world thinks I’m ugly, Steve. It’s only a matter of time.”

“But you aren’t ugly, baby. You’re beautiful.” He pulled Bucky in closer and lined them up, both stuttering at the contact. He grabbed Bucky around the neck for a bruising kiss. “And you are mine to protect.”

Bucky whimpered against his lips and ground down. “I’m ready, Stevie. It’s time.” He mouthed down Steve’s throat. “Make love to me.”

“You...you’re absolutely sure?”

“Seventy-three years, Steve. It’s been long enough.”

~~~~

Teeth clamped shut, Steve hissed around the pain as the quinjet thrust itself skyward. He squeezed harder and tried to focus on the silver lining of not being able to break Bucky’s metal hand.

“Shhh, baby, I’ve got you.” Bucky stroked his hair where he held Steve against him on one of the back bunkers. “Clint is taking us to London, and we can get you to the hospital there —”

“No,” Steve ground out.

“Steve...”

“No hospitals, Buck. I'm fine.” He could feel sweat dripping down his brow, betraying his words.

“You're really not.”

Steve tried a different tactic. “It’s just...broken bones, Buck.” He took a deep breath. “I can already
feel...them shifting back together.” He turned his head up to meet Bucky's concerned gaze. “All...a hospital is going to do...is try and give me...pain meds. That won't work. Please.” He gingerly reached up to stroke Bucky's cheek. “Just take me home.”

Bucky didn't answer him for the longest time. Just searched him over, again and again. Steve knew he was weighing the options. Trying to figure out if going up against Steve’s stubbornness — he knew he was — was worth working him into a hospital bed. Probably already figured out he might re-break something if Steve tried to kick up a fuss (he wouldn't, but Bucky didn't need to know that).

Eventually Steve turned back and rested his head against Bucky's chest — closed his eyes and waited Bucky out. Steve might be the stubborn asshole of the two, but that didn't mean pushing Bucky would work out in anyone's favor. So he waited.

“It's really just broken bones?”

“Nothing I haven't...dealt with before. Just not...so many at once.”

“Fine,” Bucky finally conceded, and Steve smiled. “But you’ll tell me...”

”Yeah, Buck. I'll tell you.”

He slowly reached up again to card his fingers in Bucky’s hair. Stupid move, but he didn’t care. He was alive. He would live, and he was here with Bucky, and fuck. How had he survived that?

“What about you?” he asked after a minute, because if he thought too long on what had just happened — about almost being taken from Bucky again — he’d freak out. “Any injuries.”

Bucky shook his head against Steve’s hand. “None that I know of. Unlike you, nothing hurts.” He huffed a laugh. “Other than your heavy ass laying into me.”

“You like my ass.”

“Guilty as charged.”

That’s when Steve’s fingers caught on Bucky’s hair, and he grunted at where his arm jostled as it stuck slightly. He pulled back, only to glance flakes of red on his fingers. “What the...” He turned back to Bucky, holding his hand up. “You sure you aren’t hurt?”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed at the blood. “You sure that didn’t come from you?”

“Broken bones, Buck. Lots of them, sure, but I’m not bloody.”

Steve didn’t miss the way Bucky wasn’t looking at him. Didn’t miss the shrug he barely committed to. Steve poked him in the thigh. “Hey, talk to me. Blood in your hair means head injury. Do we need to...”

“No hospitals,” Bucky said, echoing Steve’s words back at him. He reached up and ran his fingers through his hair. When he came back, there were barely any more flecks on his fingers than there were on Steve’s. “See? Probably from the fight with that one guy. Nothing I can’t handle.”

“But you’ll tell me...”

“Pretty sure that was my line.”

“Bucky.”
He smiled down at Steve, soft and reassuring. “Yeah, Stevie. I’ll tell you.”

They really were such a pair.

~~~~

My baby never fret none
About what my hands
And my body done
If the Lord don’t forgive me
I’d still have my baby
And my babe would have me
~~~~

He breathed at the pain still in his legs — bones knitted back together, but still so far from healed. Bucky was trying to be careful as he carried Steve to their bed, but there was only so much he could do, and Steve hurt. God he still hurt.

He probably should have gone to the hospital, but. Hospitals.

Bucky gently laid Steve down, worry still etched across his features. He was so beautiful. “How are you doing, Stevie? What do you need?”

“Nothing.” He shook his head. “I’ll be okay, I swear.” He grunted as he slowly reached up to run his fingers through Bucky’s hair. No blood this time, so instead he tried to give Bucky his favorite little half smile. “Thank you for coming after me.”

“Of course I came after you. I will always come after you, you idiot.”

He couldn’t take the way Bucky’s voice broke, the way he was losing it as he hovered over Steve. Ignoring the way his body screamed at him, Steve grabbed Bucky by the shoulders and pulled him down, crushing their lips together. It was frantic and messy, and Steve might not have been able to move much from where he lay on the bed, but that didn’t stop him from damn near ripping Bucky out of his clothes. Bucky was a lot more gentle with Steve’s.

When Bucky started to line himself up with Steve, Steve put a hand against his chest. “Roll me — me over,” he stammered against Bucky’s lips. “Take me, please.”

“Steve, you’re still —”

“I don’t care.”

“I do. It can wait, Steve.”


Bucky sighed and dipped down for another kiss. “Are you sure?”

He skimmed his fingers against stubbled skin, savoring the way Bucky’s breath mingled with his own, and took in the smell of him.
Here was the thing: Bucky always had this way of smelling like a man. The way a man should smell—like earth and musk, and just a little bit like fire. It was the most intoxicating thing Steve had ever smelled in his life, and been the thing Steve had sought since he was a teenager back in Brooklyn, and the first time he’d ever looked at Bucky and saw him as something more than just a friend. It had been the way he’d smelled. One day it had just been...different. He no longer smelled like dirt and spit and too many fights. He’d started to smell like the sun and the earth combined, and in that moment, Steve’s gravitational pull had shifted.

“You can’t hurt me, baby,” Steve finally said. He kissed away Bucky’s protest. “We’re home and we’re safe, and the only thing you could ever make me feel is free.”

Of all the times and all the ways they’d made love to each other in their unnaturally long lives, Steve couldn’t remember Bucky ever being so gentle.

~~~~

*When I was kissin’ on my baby*

*And she put her love down*

*Soft and sweet*

*In the low lamp light I was free*

*Heaven and Hell were words to me*

~~~~

“Do you remember the first time we ever had sex?” Steve winced as he shifted in Bucky’s arms so he could face him. “I still firmly believe that was the most awkward moment of our lives.”

Bucky snorted. “No, I’m pretty sure us trying to navigate how we worked with Peggy in the picture was the most awkward.”

Okay, Bucky had a point there. “God bless that woman.”

“There aren’t enough of her in the world.”

“No, there are not.” Steve rested his head back on Bucky’s shoulder. “But as far as singular incidents go, our first time was the most awkward.”

“Yeah, I can’t argue with you on that one. All of Red Hook at our disposal to ask questions to, and we still were too stupid to figure it out.”

“You know, going into the ice, I knew the exact number of times we’d been together.”

“Seriously?”

“I have no idea why, but subconsciously, I’d always kept track.”

“And now?”

Steve hummed. “Eidetic memory, so I could probably figure it out, but...” He pressed his lips into warm skin. “The thing is, when I got you back, and we started sleeping together again, my brain started doing it again. I made myself stop, though. Took some time, but I basically trained myself to stop counting.”
“Why?”

As much as Steve hated to think about it, he had an answer to that. “Because a physical number is finite. And it scared me that I was maybe still thinking of us as finite. I mean, I know I told you the first time after I got you back that nothing would happen to you — that no one could take you from me — but truthfully?” He lifted his head again and caught Bucky’s eye. “I was just as scared of that as you were.”

“Stevie...”

“I almost left you today.” It hurt to say the words. It hurt to see the fresh pain in Bucky’s eyes.

“I know,” Bucky whispered. “I actually thought you had. I spent most of my time in confinement thinking you were already dead.”

That actually hurt worse. “God, baby.” Steve pushed himself up to get at Bucky’s lips. Murmured against them. “I’m so sorry.”

Bucky’s breathing hitched and Steve sat back to find him openly crying. “I — I thought you were... were gone. I —” Bucky hiccups and pulled Steve close. He buried his face in the crook of Bucky’s neck as his own tears started. Bucky went on. “Steve. Stevie, I’m sorry. I tried” — another hiccup — “I tried to join you today.”

Steve stilled. Bucky couldn’t mean...

“That’s where the blood came from. On my head.” Oh god. “It wasn’t from the fight.”

Steve pulled back to find Bucky actively looking anywhere but at him. He touched Bucky’s jaw to force him to look over, only to find nothing but shame in Bucky’s eyes.

“Bucky, what —”

“I tried to...hurt myself today.” Steve didn’t miss the way Bucky’s voice caught on ‘hurt’, and his blood ran cold. “I’m really sorry.”

He wanted to ask Bucky why. He wanted to scold him, shake him, do something to make Bucky understand how not okay that was. Panic welled up inside of him, and healing be damned, a hysterical cry tore out of him as he instead yanked Bucky into his arms. Held on in a vice grip, because there was no fucking way he was ever letting go. Here to fucking eternity.

A litany of apologies tumbled out of Bucky’s mouth, even as Steve’s own litany of ‘don’t leave me — please don’t leave me’ came pouring out of his own. They stayed like that for the longest time, each gripping the other, afraid that if they let go, the other would vanish right out of their arms.

They stayed like that ‘til the sun came up. ‘Til they woke up like that, still wrapped so tightly around each other, neither knew where the other ended. ‘Til Steve, almost fully healed now, laid Bucky out and took his turn burying himself so deep inside of him, there really was no end point between them.

‘Til even hours later still, where, in another fit of reminiscence, Steve pulled up on his phone the picture he’d taken of Bucky right after the first time they’d made love in this century. To his utter surprise, Bucky had actually put it on his Instagram, in what turned out to be his most personal post to date. Part of Steve wondered if Bucky did it because he was scared that his passive attempt at suicide had been a setback. That maybe showing he could be personal with his therapy might cancel it out.
It didn’t, but Steve couldn’t bring himself to tell Bucky that. Because he wasn’t entirely sure he wouldn’t have done the exact same thing had he found Bucky dead all those months ago.

Instead, he focused on the photo and Bucky’s caption:

*I think this is one of the most intimate photos I’ve ever posted here, yes even more intimate than my birthday pics from March. This one is...different, actually. It was taken the night Steve and I slept together for the first time after I finally came back home. Some couples take "a break", ours lasted more than 70 years which we didn’t even ask for. (Photo: Steve, OBVIOUSLY)*

He really couldn’t remember how many times they’d come together since then, and he never wanted to know. Because if an endpoint ever did come, whether his own or Bucky’s, he didn’t want to go to his grave again with a number on his lips and regret in his bones that it hadn’t been more.

He never wanted to feel that ache again.

~~~

*When my time comes around
Lay me gently in the cold dark earth
No grave
Can hold my body down
I’ll crawl home to her*
"Bucky? BUCK! We are working UNDERCOVER, do you understand? So stop looking at me as if I were some kind of...delicious muffin or something! We don't KNOW each other, OK?" - Yeah, Steve, sure...If you didn't want me to stare, you should have chosen a different outfit for this mission, don't you think? And please, you COULDN'T take your eyes off me either, so shut up Rogers!

"Bucky? BUCK! We are working UNDERCOVER, do you understand? So stop looking at me as if I were some kind of...delicious muffin or something! We don't KNOW each other, OK?" - Yeah, Steve, sure...If you didn't want me to stare, you should have chosen a different outfit for this mission, don't you think? And please, you COULDN'T take your eyes off me either, so shut up Rogers!

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“Target has been spotted. He’s entering through the backdoor now.”

“Is Agent Rogers in place?”

“Uh...no. I've lost sights on Rogers. Does anyone know where —”

“Found him. He's over by the register.”

“Again? Christ. Is he talking to Agent Barnes?”

“Uh, no, ma’am. He's...”

“Yes?”

“Well, best I can describe it is he's preening.”

“I'm sorry, repeat that: Did you say preening?”

“I did, ma’am, yes.”

“Seriously?”

“Unfortunately yes, ma’am.”

“Rogers! You're not a fucking peacock; get back to the goddamn table.”

“Oh. Uh. Sorry, Nat.”

“Aren't you supposed to be the responsible one?”

“My fault, Nat. I think I broke his brain last night after I spent two hours with my tongue shoved up
his —”

Bucky snickered into the espresso machine at Natasha’s colorful expletives and Steve's choked off
sound coming through his earpiece. He flicked his eyes over just long enough to watch Steve turn a
spectacular shade of red as he slid back into the booth he was supposed to be in. It wasn't like Steve
was some sort of prude, but he also wasn't an exhibitionist, and there were about ten agents on site
and on the comms right now, not including the whole team listening in back at HQ. Bucky was
going to catch hell for that later, and it only made him laugh harder.

“What do you plan on finishing my drink anytime soon. Or would you prefer to continue blubbering at
thin air.”

Bucky looked up to find an obnoxiously overdressed woman (it was eleven on a Tuesday, for fuck’s
sake) tapping hideously long, blood-red nails on the counter, and staring daggers at him. He tried to
smile sweetly at her, but wasn't entirely sure it didn't come out as a grimace.

“My apologies, ma’am, I'm finishing it up right now.”

“I'm in a rush, so get it done.”

He gritted his teeth, even as his hand twitched. He tried not to reach for his gun. He might blow their
cover if he killed a customer.
One last piece of the puzzle and they could possibly maybe finally put this whole Nash Mir business behind them. Bucky could play nice until then. He handed over her drink with a sardonic, “Have a nice day,” even as she snatched up the drink and walked out in a huff. She passed by where Daisy was sitting across from the bar, and Bucky pursed his lips to keep from smiling as she discreetly flipped the woman off.

Bucky turned away from her, only to catch his reflection in the espresso machine. He looked down at the green apron and grimaced. “Is this more of your punishment, Coulson? Is that why we’re in a Starbucks?”

“It’s a Starbucks in London, Agent Barnes,” Coulson responded in his weirdly monotone air that meant he was actually being a snarky sonofabitch. “You like London.”

“But I hate Starbucks. And I’m starting to like you even less.”

“Remind me to pencil in how much I care for after my two o’clock massage tomorrow. Regardless, next time you want to go on a vigilante tear, maybe you’ll try and avoid the whole ‘throwing me across a hangar’ thing. Think you really jammed my shoulder there.”

Oh yeah, the Starbucks was definitely punishment. Bucky tried not to scowl at the smell of burnt coffee and went back to Steve Watching. He was posing as a barista in this land of wrong coffee and Steve as an arms dealer, meeting with the guy who’d sold the weapons to the Nash Mir. The pretense was, Steve was familiar with the Nash Mir’s work and wanted a similar type of arsenal to help overthrow a drug lord in in Hungary, but in actuality, their plan was to get the intel on the person in charge of the entire terrorist cell.

Bucky had immediately rankled at the idea of sending Steve in — the Nash Mir knew what he looked like, Christ — but Steve had actually been the one to point out that one, despite how it felt, there actually were people in this world who didn't know or care about Captain America, and this guy was one of them; two, this wasn’t a stealth mission with little backup; and three, Steve was, unfortunately, intimately familiar with the Nash Mir’s arsenal. Bucky had tried to make the argument that after the raid to save Steve, a lot of SHIELD was now familiar with their cache of weapons, but there was no swaying Steve. Bucky suspected it had less to do with logic and more to do with wanting to be the one to finish the job.

Bucky wasn’t stupid. It was like 1945 and the Red Skull all over again. Hydra had been indirectly responsible for Bucky’s fall from the train, and Steve had lost it. When Steve had found out that, because of the Nash Mir, Bucky had tried to kill himself, it had sent him into a slow-burning rage. And since then, Steve had refused to allow anything to go down with the Nash Mir that he wasn’t involved in.

The joke to Nat about fucking Steve stupid may have been just that, but there really had been a sense of desperation between the two the night before. If this was successful, next stop would be a full take down of the Nash Mir. Steve would be going right back into the lion’s den.

“How’s the arm working?” Tony asked. He was back at HQ, monitoring the holographic arm’s first real outing. “Any discoloration? Limits in your movement?”

Bucky huffed as he finished up the flat white he was making, and mumbled under his breath, “Discoloration. Seriously? I have a sleeve tattoo on it. The whole thing is one giant discoloration.”

“Fair enough. But just remember, you break it, you bought it.”

“You can add it to my tab.”
“Your tab is fast approaching indentured servitude, buddy.”

Bucky snorted and handed off the drink. He looked up to find the target — a middle-aged, balding man by the name of fucking Peterson, who didn’t let the fact that he was rotund get in the way of a well-tailored suit — next in line for a drink.

“Target’s at the register,” he quietly announced before heading over to the man. “What can I get you, sir?”

Peterson didn’t answer right away, just eyed him, and for a brief hysterical moment, Bucky thought maybe his cover was blown already. But Bucky was a professional, for fuck’s sake. He wasn’t cracking unless Peterson did.

Finally, Peterson spoke. “You’re not British.”

Shit.

He’d forgotten to strap on his accent.

He plastered on an easy smile instead and shrugged. “Nah, I’m from Maryland. Finishing up my Master’s at UCL.” He let his smile go just a touch wider, boastful. “One semester left, and I’m graduating the top of my class. Getting an art degree, and hoping to take that back to New York to work in comics. See, I wrote this fantastic comic that I know the people over at Dark Horse are gonna love. It’s all based around this theory I read on online about the slayer lineage going all the way up to Firefly —”

“That’s nice, can I have a large coffee, black?” Peterson waved a hand at Bucky to cut him off, and Bucky had to bite back a laugh at how easy that had been. Bucky nodded and rang him up quickly, turning to pour the coffee.

Mid-pour, he dropped in a mild sedative that wouldn’t be noticed by Peterson, but would still make him compliant and more than a little willing to answer any question Steve had. Designed by Dr. Cho, it was similar to a truth serum, but worked better on undercover missions as the recipient always thought they’d given up trade secrets of their own accord.

Bucky turned back and handed Peterson his coffee. “Here you are, sir. Have a great day.” Peterson gave him a curt nod before walking away. He scanned the room before he spotted Steve, and headed right over. Bucky watched out of the corner of his eye, immediately itching now that the guy was sitting in front of Steve. It was taking everything he had not to go over there and snatch Steve away.

A soft click on his ear — his channel changing — and suddenly, “You okay, Buck?”

Bucky sighed. Of course Nat could see he was off. He had no customers, so he forced himself to turn away from Steve and start cleaning the back counter as he answered her. “He shouldn't be here, Natalia. He's not an undercover agent, he’s a soldier. Why is he here?”

“You know why.”

“Yeah? Well maybe I don't give a shit about that. He's too recognizable, and this place has civilians who will spot —”

“This is Steve’s choice, kotenok; you need to respect it.”

Bucky’s head dropped and he tried not to break the cleaning brush in his hand. “But what if something happens to him? Natalia, I can’t...”

“I know, Bucky.” Her voice was soft, soothing. “Which is why we’re all on high alert, okay? We've
got our top agents — several of whom are inhumans — on this. And just... I mean look at the guy. You really think we couldn't take him? That *Steve* couldn't take him?"

Bucky glanced over to where Peterson and Steve were deep in conversation. It was true, forget everyone else on the team, the guy didn't stand a chance against one super soldier, especially not two.

“You need to let him do his job, Bucky.”

His skin prickled and his brain was going a mile a nano-second, but he listened to Nat. He knew the score. He and Steve had made peace with that a long time ago.

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“In and out, Buck. I'll be back here before you know it.”

Bucky couldn’t focus, Steve’s voice barely registering above the ringing in his ears. He glanced around wildly, unable to focus on any one thing. The dark gray of the quinjet’s interior a blur across his vision.

“Okay, but what if —”

“They won’t.”

“But there could be a —”

“There won’t be.”

“You don’t know —”

A kiss broke him off, and Steve whimpered as he twined his fingers into Bucky’s hair. He pressed their foreheads together and Bucky forgot how to breathe. “I *have* to finish this, baby. I can’t sit by for this one. *Please* understand that.”

“But what if —” Bucky broke himself off this time as the tears actively streamed down his face. He held Steve’s shoulder straps in a vice grip as he gritted his teeth and tried everything he could to will himself to let Steve finish this. He understood where Steve was coming from — his obsessive need to complete a mission. He *especially* understood Steve’s need to complete *this* mission. But he just...couldn’t. He couldn’t let go. Because down the ramp was the one enemy that had come the closest to taking Steve away from him since — well, since Hydra.

“Please don’t leave me,” he whispered.

The silence that passed was deafening. Steve’s arms slid down to encompass him, and he swore to God, if Steve let go, he would raze heaven and earth if it meant keeping Steve here with him.

“I get it, Steve, I do.” His voice was reed thin. “We have a job to do. But *Steve.*” He pulled back just enough to catch Steve’s eye, and saw uncertainly staring back at him. He ran with it. “You almost died on me a couple weeks ago, and I almost... I almost had to live in a world without you.”

“Bucky, you tried to —”

“Please don’t say it, Steve.” He couldn’t hear it. He *knew* what he’d almost done, and he’d been hating himself for it ever since. He hadn’t told Doc yet, because *man*, she was going to be so disappointed with him when he did. “Just, maybe we could skip over that?” He turned hopeful eyes
on Steve. “You could stay here and let the rest of the team deal with it, and we could go home, and just, you know, move on.”

He could do that. With Steve by his side, he could do anything.

Steve pressed into him again, hard lips against his own. He released Steve’s straps, only to reach around and grab the ones on Steve’s back. Now Steve wasn’t going anywhere.

“I have to finish this mission, Buck.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Bucky.” Steve’s voice was hard, authoritative, and Bucky huffed. It wasn’t everyday Steve used his Captain’s voice, especially not on him. “I can’t let anyone else finish this, don’t you get it? They tried to take me from you, and I just... It has to be me. I need to make them pay.”

“Okay, I get that, but —”

“You ready to go?” Bucky turned sharp eyes on Natalia, who’d sidled up next to Steve. For once, she seemed to look like she actually felt bad as he glared daggers at her. “All the teams are set.”

Steve stared at him, waiting for permission to go. But how was Bucky supposed to give it? What if Steve headed out there, and that was it. Poof. No more Steve forever.

But then Steve’s eyes turned pleading, and Bucky barely caught the way he mouthed please.

“You need to do this,” Bucky said quietly, defeated, as Steve gave a minute nod, and Bucky finally forced a step back. “Fine. Go.”

The look on Steve’s face was a mixture of guilt and relief, and Bucky knew this was what Steve needed, but when he stepped back in to kiss Bucky goodbye, Bucky held up a hand to stop him.

“Don’t touch me, Rogers. I won’t let go a second time.”

“Yeah, all right,” Steve said and nodded. “I get it.” He turned to Nat. “Ready when you are.”

She gave a curt nod before giving Bucky an apologetic half smile. She turned down the ramp and Steve followed.

Bucky couldn’t remember how he found the willpower not to pull Steve right back.

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“Mission complete.” Steve’s voice was clear and all Captain coming through the comms. “The Nash Mir have left the building.”

A sob broke from Bucky’s chest as relief coursed through him in waves. His knees hit the deck and he allowed himself the tears that flowed freely and silently down his cheeks.

Mission complete. And Steve was fine.

It would be another hour or so until the team returned to the airstrip where the three quinjets were parked. Another hour until Bucky could lay eyes on Steve and see for himself that the world would indeed still go on spinning.

Bucky turned his commlink on. “Steve?”
“Yeah, Buck?”

His smile damn near split his face in two. “Nothing,” he said, his voice shaky. “I just wanted to hear your voice directed my way.”

Steve chuckled lightly even as Nat grumbled, “You two are such losers.”

“See you soon, okay?” Bucky heard the unspoken I love you in that.

“See you soon.”

It was another few minutes before he pushed himself off the hard metal floor, only to find himself face-to-face with one of the deadliest people he’d ever known.

He just winked at her. “Hey, Daise.”

“Hey, Bucky,” Daisy responded. She was trying — and failing — not to smile at him. “So, Steve’s on his way back, I hear. We got the bad guys.”

He hummed and nodded. “No thanks to you, I hear.”

“Oh, you know what!” She scoffed and punched him in his flesh arm, and no way she wasn’t using some of her abilities. “You can bite me, you know that? If it wasn’t for my computer skills...”

“Yeah, yeah.” He frowned and rubbed at his arm, though he was far from upset. He thought her abilities were the stuff of magic.

He turned and strode over to sit on one of the back benches. “Yeah, I got it. You’re a badass at the ass kicking as well as a badass at the internet. You’re a regular MI6 quartermaster.”

She gave him an appreciative nod. “Ooh, a James Bond reference. I’m impressed. Didn’t know grandpas like you —”

“I swear to God, if you finish that sentence, our mutual fists of fury are gonna have to go a few a rounds.”

She smiled and held up her hands in surrender. “Well, it’s better than being Bond, anyway. That guy’s nothing more than a glorified weapon. Me, on the other hand...” She smiled at him, wide and feral, and stretched her arms out to crack her knuckles.

Bucky just laughed and shook his head. “Okay, Q.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

They sat back in companionable silence. It really had been a full SHIELD team effort on this one. As it turned out, kidnapping everyone’s fearless leader (Coulson could stuff it) seemed to bring out the loyalty in them. Bucky was more than a little on board with this.

As it was, the only three that had stuck behind were Bucky, Daisy, and Clint. Daisy was their tech on the ground, Clint was on watch over the three Quinjets parked eight miles out, and Bucky...

Bucky was benched until he told his therapist what he’d done. He was working up to that, he really was.

“So, about an hour, huh?”
Bucky nodded. “Yeah. Final sweep and cleanup, and then he’ll be safe with me.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t try to fight your way onto the mission with him.”

“And take you on?” He turned knowing eyes on her and tried to feel bad about the way she blushed. “I’m not stupid, Daise. All joking aside, you may be one of the best in the world, but we do have some amazing hackers at SHIELD” That blush turned damn-near crimson. Bucky just arched an eyebrow. “So tell me, was it Coulson or Steve that sent you out here to babysit me?”

It took her a second, but then she cleared her throat and stuck her chin out. A dare. “Both, actually. Steve wanted you out of this fight, and Coulson says you aren’t even allowed to fight, so I was sent.”

He continued to stare her down, but truthfully, had the situations been reversed, he absolutely would have done the same thing. Hell, he’d actually tried.

Instead he just nudged her shoulder. “I’m not mad, okay? Really. I know the score.”

“Yeah, okay.” She relaxed a touch before nudging him back, her eyes suddenly full of mischief. “Hey want to see something?”

“Always.”

Her smile widened as she grabbed her phone. She turned it around to show him a photo. “Took this right before Nat yelled at Steve.”

Bucky barked out a laugh as he took the phone from her. Steve was standing in front of the register back at the Starbucks, looking utterly ridiculous has he buttoned up the coat on the somewhat ostentatious outfit he’d been wearing. Apparently Peterson had liked the cut of the suit, though, so it had helped.

Of course, that didn’t change the fact that Bucky couldn’t stop staring at him. The outfit was a bit much, but the glasses Steve had been wearing... They were doing all kinds of things to Bucky. It probably explained the goofy grin he himself was wearing in the photo. Tatted up, meant to look like some grunge, London Underground art student, and he was staring at Steve like a love-struck fool.

But, then again, it was a day that ended in a Y, so...

He waved the phone at her. “Can I have this? I wanna put it up on Instagram,” he explained. He smiled back down at the goofy picture. “I mean, the mission’s over, so it’s not like we’d be blowing our cover or anything.”

She just shrugged with a, “Yeah, sure,” before grabbing the phone and firing it off to him. Then she tilted her head curiously. “You aren’t worried about the world seeing your fake/fake arm?”

He shook his head. “Nah, I already posted about that before. Besides, I’m not nearly as recognizable as Steve is, and yet, he can still pull off an undercover mission from time to time,” he said with a shrug, even as he began loading the image. “So I’m going to have less of an issue. And really, the one thing that people look for with me is my metal arm. Even if people know that I can hide it, from a psychological standpoint, since looking for a flesh arm won’t do much good amongst the human population, people’s eyes will still just slide right over this.” He wiggled his ‘flesh’ fingers at her. “I mean, it’s not like people are going to go ‘that guy has a flesh arm! He must be the Winter Soldier!’”

She laughed softly and nodded. “Yeah, okay, I see what you mean.”

He smiled at her and went back to typing. He made sure to leave out any major details about their
mission, aimed for being his normal, snarky self, and hit send. Then he sat back against the fuselage wall and waited for his boy to return.

~~~

“James Buchanan Barnes, I swear to God, I did not call myself a delicious muffin!”

Bucky cackle-laughed even as unfettered joy ripped through him at the sound of Steve’s voice. He was off the bench and in Steve’s arms before the man had even made it halfway up the ramp.

He kissed him senseless first (because priorities) before holding him back at arm’s length to check him over. “Are you hurt anywhere?” The suit was singed in a couple places, but no clear holes or tears anywhere in it. He ignored Steve’s grumble as he manhandled him to turn around. “Don’t lie to me, or I swear, I will hurt you.”

“That a promise, soldier?”

Bucky didn’t hesitate to smack Steve over the back of the head. “Don’t be an ass, Steven.” He turned him back around and grinned. “Now kiss me, you idiot.”

“But didn’t we just —” He cut off Steve’s nonsensical words with another searing kiss, ignoring the mild gripes of the rest of the team as they pushed around the two of them to get into the quinjet. They could all fuck right off.

After a minute, Bucky pulled back and took Steve’s face in his hands, reveling at the miracle that was in front of him. “It’s over? We’re really done with this shit?”

Steve’s eyes softened. “Yeah, baby, it’s really over.”

“And we can go home now? Like, for real, go home? We can finally relax?”

“God, yes. Please.”

Bucky smiled and wrapped his arms tight around Steve. Steve hugged him back just as tight, and the two stayed like that for who knows how long, only shuffling over just enough for Clint to raise the ramp and take off.

It was sometime later when Steve finally spoke. “I still can’t believe you posted that,” he muttered.

“Are you saying you’re not a delicious muffin, Steven?”

“Aw, shit, you just reminded me that I’m hungry.”

Bucky couldn’t remember the last time he laughed that hard.

"Bucky? BUCK! We are working UNDERCOVER, do you understand? So stop looking at me as if I were some kind of...delicious muffin or something! We don't KNOW each other, OK?" - Yeah, Steve, sure...If you didn't want me to stare, you should have chosen a different outfit for this mission, don't you think? And please, you COULDN'T take your eyes off me either, so shut up Rogers!"
And...back home from our undercover mission! Just before going to bed, I'd like to thank all of you for following me on Instagram, and also on Tumblr. You guys definitely have good taste (well, as long as you don't follow Stark's Instagram too, of course). What? The creature from Hell who thinks I'm his personal sofa? Baryshnikov, alias "Bary", Nat's cat. His owner is still on the field so I'm cat sitting. He hates EVERYBODY, except Nat and I. On the other hand, he doesn't really appreciate when you don't speak to him in Russian...OK, time to drop the holographic arm and to go to sleep. It's been a long day. Goodnight everyone!
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Steve and I aren't the only ones to work undercover. Here's Natasha during a mission. I never managed to know for what kind of job she was dressed like this but she looks cool as f**k. I'm sure she's gonna kill me for posting this. In fact, I think that I'm already dead. I'd like to tell my boyfriend that I love him and that it was a pleasure sharing my pics with you all. RIP J.B Barnes (for good this time).

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“What time is it?”

“Uh, sometime around three?” Steve answered.

Bucky groaned as he slid down the wall next to their front door. Holy fuck, he was exhausted. The mission had drained him more than he thought it would — albeit more emotional than physical — and Steve’s insistence that they grab food before heading home hadn't help the situation. He’d just wanted them home.

Now home was too far away. Home required him to move.

He glanced up at Steve with doleful eyes. “Can’t I just sleep out here, Stevie? Do I have to trudge all the way in to our bedroom?” He rubbed his hand along the hardwood floor of the hallway. “It’s so comfy. You could stay with me. We could make this work.”

Steve bit back a smile. “Not sure the neighbors would approve. Want me to carry you?”

Hope blossomed in Bucky. “Not sure the neighbors would approve. Want me to carry you?”

Hope blossomed in Bucky. “Would you?”

Steve observed him for a second before — “No.” He broke into laughter as Bucky squawked, hope giving way to crankiness as Steve opened the front door and went in, leaving Bucky alone out in the hallway.

“Why are you such an asshole?” Bucky shouted after him as he begrudgingly pushed himself up off the floor. He tried (and mostly succeeded) at not slamming the door behind him. Steve was already halfway to their room, his clothes like a breadcrumb trail leading back to the one place Bucky had been dreaming about since they’d shut the Nash Mir down.

As Steve yanked off his tank top. Bucky’s mouth watered at the sight of wide, strong shoulders, and muscles that rippled and stretched as he tossed the top aside.

Just before Steve disappeared around the corner, Bucky’s eyes zeroed in to where he’d gone for his
belt, and Bucky went from trudging to stalking as he followed Steve into the bedroom — only to smack right into him where Steve had come to a dead stop just inside the door.

“What?” he asked stupidly. He shook his head and looked up to stare into the back of what was apparently a solid human wall. “Uh, Steve?”

“Oh, Buck?” Steve turned to eye him. “Something you wanna tell me?”

“I didn’t do it,” he answered on rote, his defenses instantly up. “What did I do?”

Steve stepped out of the way, and that’s when Bucky saw it.

Sprawled right in the middle of their bed like he fucking owned it, the apartment, and possibly the entire borough of Brooklyn, was Nat’s cat, Baryshnikov.

_Bary_ was a black stray Nat had found some years back, prowling around behind a corner Chinese place over in the Meatpacking District. Or, at least, she’d claimed he was a stray, though Bucky always thought he looked way too fat and smug to have been totally without somewhere to go. Despite her unending work with SHIELD, she’d still managed to bring Bary home and nurse him into a full-fledged Russian Spy Cat, whose eyes you couldn’t trust, and claws that were more deadly than Bucky on his _best_ day.

(That said, the cat did seem to like Bucky, but only on his terms. Bucky wasn’t stupid enough to _volunteer_ to pet him.)

“Huh.”

“Huh?”

“Bary’s in our bed.”

“How very observant of you, Buck. You gather that intel all on your own?”

He flicked Steve on the ear. “Why is Bary in our bed?” When he finally glanced over to Steve, he was eyeing Bucky shrewdly, which — why?

“I didn’t do it.”

Steve waved a hand at Bary. “You don’t know about this?”

Bucky just shrugged. “No idea.” He grabbed his phone and fired off a quick text to Nat. He then turned back to Steve, who was still watching him like he expected Bucky to start dropping some truths about the situation. Things Bucky did not have.

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“I didn’t do it.”

Steve waved a hand at Bary. “You don’t know about this?”

Bucky just shrugged. “No idea.” He grabbed his phone and fired off a quick text to Nat. He then turned back to Steve, who was still watching him like he expected Bucky to start dropping some truths about the situation. Things Bucky did not have.

“Honestly, Steve, I have no idea why he’s here.” He waved his phone in Steve’s direction. “See? Texted Nat and everything.”

A small mewl hit their ears and they both turned to watch Bary stretch out, languid as anything, before rolling himself onto his back, presenting his belly to be rubbed.

Oh, _hell_ no. Fuck that. Bucky knew a trap when he saw one.

He reached out and latched onto Steve’s arm and held him back, eyes never leaving the hellspawn-in-fuzzy-fluffy-clothing on their bed.
“Don’t do it, Steve,” he whispered fervently. “It’s what he wants. Gives you his belly and then takes an arm off when you fall prey.” Bary began to purr, and both he and Steve took an involuntary step back.

“Isn’t that what you have a metal arm for?” Steve whispered, just as anxious.

Bucky wiggled his very much not-metal-looking fingers. “You want to explain to Tony how my holographic sleeve got shredded to shit?”

“I thought Tony made it mission-durable. You should be fine.”

“Okay, but why does it even matter if I touch him?”

“Because I want to fucking sleep.”

Bucky frowned, suddenly put out. “I thought you wanted sex. Missed each other sex. Almost died sex.”

Steve blinked at him in surprise, and they both looked down at Steve’s very naked torso. Color instantly rose in Steve’s cheeks. “Oh, I, um — I just thought. I mean, I figured, you know, we did that a few nights ago. And also it’s been a long mission, so...” He shook his head. “But, of course, if you want to, I mean of course we can. I didn’t think you —

“Oh my god, can it.” Bucky smacked him hard on the chest. “You’re fine.”

He turned back to find Bary watching them, eyes roaming back and forth, and — okay, no normal cat looked that human when they were staring at you.

When Bucky’s phone buzzed in his hand, he about jumped out of his skin.

Was in and out, and now gone for two weeks. I left a note. — N

Bucky glanced up, but nothing stood out — not on the bed, or their nightstands, or anywhere around Bary’s general vicinity.

Where?? — B

Kitchen counter. — N

“Nat says she left us a note on the kitchen counter,” Bucky grumbled, even as he kept typing. Steve immediately left the room, probably to go find the damn thing.

You know, a text would have been better than a note. For, you know WARNING purposes. — B

Steve came back in, obnoxiously shoving the note under Bucky’s nose.

Gone for two weeks, can you watch Bary? Thanks, you’re the best.

XOXO
Nat

“What —” Bucky huffed and went back to his phone.

That’s not a helpful note, Natalia! — B

But you’ll still watch him, right? — N
Bucky growled and tossed his phone onto the chair by the window. He turned to glare, first at Bary — who was *still* sprawled out, waiting for something to attack — then at Steve. “So, yeah, looks like we’re stuck with Black Widow-Cat over here for the next two weeks.”

Steve sighed, and Bucky knew that sigh. It was the sigh of a man who knew when he’d lost. Something Bucky rarely heard from Steve. Ever.

“You know,” Steve began, his eyes on the cat. “I actually *don’t* mind looking after Nat’s beast over there, but after the mission we just had — after *everything* — you’d think she would have thought of that.” He eyed Bucky. “I was hoping for some alone time with you.”

“Uh, Steve, it’s a cat. We *are* alone.”

“Yeah, but.” Steve grunted, clearly frustrated, and waved a hand Bary's way. “We’re not *alone* alone. The no responsibilities, kind of alone. I uh, may have asked Coulson to bench us for a while.” He smiled apologetically. “Both of us.”


Steve’s shoulders sagged as he picked up Bucky’s phone up off the chair before falling down into it himself. When he spoke he sounded just so done. ‘Because, Buck. This mission was almost the end for us. The actual literal end. And I just...” He glanced around, his eyes a little lost, and whatever was going through his head, Bucky's heart broke for him.

He went over and straddled Steve’s thighs, sinking onto his lap. He cupped Steve’s face and placed a tentative kiss on his lips. When Steve’s hands wrapped around his back, he rested his head on Steve’s shoulder and allowed himself to be pulled into a hug.

“We need some time, Buck,” Steve quietly went on. “I need to decompress, and you need to talk to your doctor about what happened.”

“Steve, I —” He tried to pull back, but Steve held on tighter.

“No, baby.” Steve’s voice cracked in his ear and he clenched his eyes shut. He wasn't *ready* for this. But Steve seemed to have other plans. “Baby, *please*. I'm not going to have you going all Romeo and Juliet on me if you think something’s happened to me. We’re soldiers first. I need to know you’ll always finish whatever I can't.”

Bucky didn’t know how to answer him. He wanted to say, duh, of course. He knew the score, always had. But he also knew that actions spoke a hell of a lot louder than words, and he definitely let his actions betray him this time. He *should* have put the mission first — let his team do their job. Instead he’d gone completely fatalist on everyone and ended up putting a lot of lives in danger. He got that now.

And yet.

And yet, he was having a damn hard time getting the words out. Telling his doctor and dealing with this setback. He knew there was no way Coulson — or anyone at SHIELD, for that matter — was going to let him out in the field again if he didn’t deal with this. He just...needed to come to terms with it.
“I get it,” he said quietly into Steve’s shoulder. “I’m trying, I promise.”

Steve’s hand rubbed up and down his back, slow, soothing. “I know you are, baby. And until you do, we both aren’t going anywhere. It’s not just about my own need to deal with what happened to me. I’m also not selfish enough to force you to deal with what happened while I’m out in the field without you. That’s not healthy for either of us.”

Bucky didn’t say anything; he didn’t have to. And truthfully, he wasn’t entirely sure what he would say. Steve was right. He knew that much. But being benched...it wasn’t them. They didn’t do well sitting on the sidelines for very long.

But, at the same time, losing Steve had been a very real thing for a moment there. And it was something Bucky had never had to experience. It had always been the other way around, he thought grimly.

They sat quietly for a while. Bucky tucked onto Steve’s lap, while Steve slowly rubbed a hand along his spine. His breathing evened out eventually, and he was halfway to falling asleep when Steve’s hand came to a shuddering stop.

“Uh, Bucky?”

“Hmm? Yeah, Stevie?”

“Don’t move.”

“I wasn’t plan—” He stiffened in Steve’s arms, suddenly on high alert to the soft noise coming in from behind him. “Why?”

Steve had no time to reply before he was yanking his hand out the way, and suddenly there were goddamn claws digging into Bucky’s back. He hissed in pain, even as he used every ounce he had to hold still as Bary shimmied up his back and onto his shoulder. The next thing he knew, there was a cat making itself comfortable much to the fur-filled sputtering protests of Steve, whose face happened to have just been right there.

“What? Why?” Steve pushed himself as far back into the chair as he could manage, even as Bucky held himself perfectly still and tried valiantly not to laugh.

“I think ol’ Bary here was gettin’ a bit jealous of you there, Stevie.”

“Ol’ Bary here is about to get jealous of us being on the inside of the apartment when I throw his annoying ass out onto the balcony.”

Bucky snickered, only to have Bary mewl loudly at the clearly rude disruption to his new resting spot. Bucky understood the feeling.

“So, um, what do we do?” He ticked an eye over to Bary, who’d curled up enough to shove his head against Bucky’s neck. Bucky couldn’t remember the last time Steve had looked so put out.

“We get up so we can take a shower, then go-the-fuck to bed.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” He reached up and scratched Bary behind an ear. The sudden roar of a purr was damn-near deafening. He frowned at Steve, giving him his best puppy-dog eyes. “Look, Steve. He’s so comfortable. Why would you disrupt that?”

“What do you suggest? We just crash like this all night? Sitting awkwardly in this chair with Nat’s
hell-cat perched precariously on your shoulder?” He peered at the cat, curiosity mixed with distrust all over his face. “I’m not even sure how he’s doing that. He weighs, like, fifteen pounds. How has he not fallen off?”

Bucky just shook his head at his sad sad boyfriend, who was clearly losing his mind. “Because he’s a damn cat. Don’t you remember the McLintock’s cat? From two streets over? That thing was almost as big as you, and yet he could tight-rope a wall no wider than his paws. Cats are fucking weird like that.”

“Oh, yeah... Fucking forgot about that thing. Didn’t it get hit by a car?”

The sudden hiss from Bary made both of them jump. They turned to eye him.

“I’m telling you, Steve, Nat has trained this thing to understand human speech, I’m sure of it. You can’t say the c-word around him.”

Steve held up his arms as best he could. “Color me chastised.”

Bucky eyed Bary again. The cat really did need to get down. No way was Bucky going to sleep on this chair like this. Then an idea struck him.

“Hey, hold on tight to my waist, okay?”

“Why?”

“Just trust me.”

Once Steve’s hands were securely around his waist, Bucky slowly began to lean backwards. And thank God for Nat’s insistence he do stretching exercises, because he had to go pretty far before Bary growled and hissed at his perched slowly sliding out of whack before he jumped down with a loud yowl. Bucky smiled triumphantly.

Steve nodded approvingly. “Nice.”

“Why, thank you.” He leaned in for a quick kiss before pushing himself off of Steve, and turned around to find Bary back on the bed, glaring at him. As he headed to the bathroom, he tried to ruffle Bary’s head, only to chuckle at the paw-smack he earned for his troubles. “Yeah, yeah, buddy. I feel your pain.”

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He flopped back down in the chair, comfortable in a hoodie and sweatpants, though he still hadn’t removed any of his ‘accessories’ from the mission. The plugs in his ears were going to hurt like hell when he took them out (even if both ears would be totally closed by morning), and the arm was, well, frankly a bitch to get off, and fuck it, he was too lazy and tired to deal with it right now.

He pulled out his phone and began to flip through his Instagram. He hesitated for a moment over the pictures from the SHIELD pod, but only for a moment. He figured if he was going to eventually deal with what happened, he’d need to go over the images with his therapist. His Instagram was a therapy exercise, after all.

It was then that his eyes wandered over his follower count, and Bucky had to grip his phone to keep from dropping it.

He had something like fifteen thousand people following him.
“What. The fuck.” He quickly ran over to his Tumblr — a thing he rarely checked these days — only to finally drop the damn phone entirely.

Over twenty-three thousand.

There were over twenty-three thousand people on his fucking Tumblr account!

When the hell had that happened? Where was he? Last time he’d cared enough to look at that sort of thing, the count had been less than half that on both accounts.

He glanced around quickly, his eyes landing on some of Steve’s art pencils. He grabbed them and immediately turned around to start scribbling on the wall behind him. Steve was gonna be pissed, but Steve was taking his sweet-ass time in the bathroom and he could just fucking deal with it, okay?

Besides, he’d have to. Bucky needed him to draw the Tumblr and Instagram icons for him once he came out. Bucky was gonna document this shit, no question.

He smiled at the numbers and where he’d scrawled ‘THANK YOU’ right above the chair. It needed something else though. Something to fill in the space above the ‘THANK YOU’ —

“Are you fucking kidding me?” He turned to find Steve staring, aghast, at the wall. He just smiled back in return, too excited to feel any sort of guilt over the situation.

“Oh, perfect, you’re out!” he answered, ignoring Steve’s outburst. He thrust the pencils at him. “I need you to add the Tumblr and Instagram icons here and here” — he pointed out the spots — “and help me figure out what should go here.” He pointed to the space above the ‘THANK YOU’.

“We talked about the writing on the walls, Buck,” Steve muttered with a sigh, and yet, he still took the pencils out of Bucky’s hand.

“You can’t contain the awesome, Steve!” He waved a hand at the wall, excitement taking over as he smiled like an absolute lunatic, he was sure of it. “This is how many followers I have now!”

“Wait, really?” Bucky opened the phone to show him, and Steve audibly gasped at the count.

“Wow, Buck. That’s amazing.”

“I know!”

Steve turned back to eye the wall. “So you want the icons up there?”

“Yeah.” Bucky nodded. Then he pointed at the other blank spot. “Just not sure what to put there.”

Steve smiled at him. “You think on that, while I do this. Go feed the beast or something.”

With a smile, Bucky kissed him quickly before heading into the kitchen, whistling at Bary to follow him. He was in no way surprised to find a whole stack of cat food in the cabinet above the fridge and Bary’s food bowls next to it. He pulled out a can — some Swedish brand he’d never heard of — and fed the cat really fast.

He headed back into their room, deciding a drawing of he and Steve would work, only to frown, completely unimpressed at Steve’s stupid smile, and the little post-it note Steve had tacked just under the icons that he had drawn.

Buck, STOP writing on the wall!

Without even blinking, Bucky grabbed a pencil at random, and wrote OK! and a little arrow right
next to it. He turned to smile wolfishly at Steve.

“Very funny.”

“Oh, so are you,” he answered sweetly. Then he turned back to the wall. “But if we’re gonna be completely honest here...”

He stepped back to reveal where he’d written *MAYBE* and another arrow just under the note, only to burst out laughing when Steve smacked him over the head.

“All right, comedian, what’s going over there?” Steve nodded toward the open space. “Any idea what you want me to draw?"

“Actually? I think I got this one.” He smiled, shy, because he really wasn’t the artist anymore, but he still wanted to put his mark up here himself.

Steve raised his arms and smiled as he took a step back. “All yours, Picasso.”

He got to work drawing a ridiculous rendition of him and Steve kissing with little hearts around it — again, not the best, but he liked it. When he leaned back to look it over, inspiration struck, and he hastily added an Iron Man next to them, writing ‘*Blah! Barnes! Rogers! We are busy! Blah! Blah! Blah!*’ around it.

“Well?” he asked as he joined Steve to admire his work. “What do you think?”

Steve wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him close. “I love it.” He captured Bucky in a kiss, humming softly as he sucked Bucky’s bottom lip into his mouth.

Bucky barely registered the pencils as they all tinkered to the floor, too busy making sure he gave as good as he got. He wrapped his arms around Steve’s neck and held him close, dipping his tongue into Steve’s eager mouth.

Bucky wasn’t sure how long they made out. Didn’t really care either. Not when he was too pleased at himself at the high flush on Steve’s cheeks and his kiss-bruised lips when they finally came up for air. He leaned in for one more chaste kiss.

“Ready to take your picture, baby?” Steve asked.

He answered by stealing yet another kiss. Then he turned and flopped down into the chair. “Ready for my close up. Mr. DeMille!”

Steve laughed and shook his head as he went to retrieve his camera off the dresser.

“You know you can just use my phone, right?” Bucky pointed out.

“Yeah, but this seems important enough to make it high quality. Your phone is good, but my anniversary present is better.” Steve smiled as he gave his camera a little shake.

“Whatever you want, Stevie.”

“Damn right.”

It was then that Bary made his presence known, purring as he jumped onto Bucky’s lap and immediately made himself comfortable. He leaned back, presenting only his neck this time for petting. Bary trusted that move enough to offer a few scratches. Sure enough, Bary was too fat and happy at the moment to try and retaliate. Just leaned his head back further, his purr reaching jet-
“Aren’t you two just a picture,” Steve commented.

“We are. So why don’t you take one already.”

“Oh, sir, yes sir.” Steve snapped a lazy salute. “Right on it, sir.”

Bucky snickered and leaned back, but not before first making sure his head didn’t block any of the work on the wall. “Am I good like this?”

Steve’s camera was already up against his face. “Yeah. Don’t move.”

Bucky smiled and let Steve snap a few photos. Steve came over and adjusted Bucky a bit, before going back to what he was doing. Bucky indulged him, though, honestly, one photo would have been fine, regardless of how it looked. Bary just seemed content to sit there and watch Steve curiously as he worked.

Finally, Steve looked up and smiled. “Perfect.”

“Yeah?” Let me see.”

Steve sat on the edge of the chair and began to flip through the photos. Bucky had to admit, with the plugs and the tattoos, he looked kind of badass.

“I look good like this,” he observed. “All hardcore and dangerous.” He gave Steve’s hip a squeeze, only to notice that high flush going right up Steve’s face again. Bucky's smile widened as he let metal fingers slip under Steve’s t-shirt. “You think so too, Stevie? Huh? My tattoos doin’ it for ya?”

Steve didn’t answer, just cleared his throat.

Oh, fuck yeah. Bucky’s tats were apparently doing all kinds of things to Steve. Bucky burst out laughing before he leaned in to nip lightly at Steve’s arm, the closest bit of flesh Bucky could get his mouth on.

Steve ignored him in favor of showing Bucky another picture. “So, uh, I think this should be the one you use.”

“Oh, is it?” Bucky asked, and licked along the now warm flesh.

Suddenly lips were hot and insistent against his own as Steve leaned over and kissed him. He pressed in, pushing Bucky back against the chair, and Bucky groaned as he threaded his fingers through soft blond hair. It only lasted bare seconds before Steve pulled back just enough to catch Bucky’s gaze, his eyes dark and hungry.

“Yes, baby. This is the picture. And also yes. You look so fucking good, I’m not going to lie, if I wasn’t about to pass out right here, I’d be fucking you into the mattress right now.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Oh.” He leaned in to give Bucky one more searing kiss, then pulled back to only shove his camera in Bucky’s face. “This one.”

Dazed, it took Bucky a second for his brain to catch up on the photo and let it register. And sure, Steve took a great picture, but honestly, he’d already forgotten what they were taking a picture of.
“Kiss me?” he asked, breathless. “Screw sleep, take me to bed.”

Steve groaned, his eyes fluttering closed. “Fuck, you’re going to be the death of me.”

Bucky’s heart lurched at the words, but he ignored them in favor of wrapping his fingers around Steve’s nape. “But not anytime soon right?”

“That’s right, baby. Not anytime soon.”

Who really needed sleep anyway?

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Bucky clicked through the photos on Steve’s camera as he laid across him, naked and blissed out. He was just as fucking tired as he was before, but sleep wasn’t ready for them yet. He felt Bary shift from where he was tucked in between Bucky’s legs.

He stopped when he came across a photo of Nat. “Uh, Steve?” He held up the camera. “When did you take this?”

Steve glanced down from where he’d been doodling on one of his tablets. “Uh... Oh. I didn’t.” He went back to his tablet. “Nat needed some photoshop work done and I asked her if I could do it instead of someone at SHIELD. It just happened to be on that flash drive.”

It was kind of nuts. She looked nothing like herself. It looked like she was sitting in some backhouse bar bathroom in God-knew-where, wearing a long gorgeous blue wig, her own arms done up in tattoos similar to the ones Bucky was sporting right now, and dressed like her life had seen better days. She was putting Bucky to shame in the hardcore department, that was for sure. It also didn’t help that an Intratec was hanging next to her head, and her boots sitting next to her where something no human should be able to walk in, let alone her tiny-ass self.

And oh, there was blood. Everywhere.

Even in picture form, Bucky was a little scared of her.

He fired off the picture to his phone, along with the one Steve had suggested he put up. Then he rolled over to set the camera down, ignoring Bary’s whining protests, only to grab his own phone, the images already in his notifications.

He opened up Instagram and added the one of him. Honestly, he was so stupidly proud of it. Sure, they were just followers, but part of the reason Doc had suggested he do this was to allow the outside world into his life — to stop him from living like such a recluse. And here he was, thousands of followers in, all these people checking out his life, and he was...okay with it. He really was.

And...back home from our undercover mission! Just before going to bed, I’d like to thank all of you for following me on Instagram, and also on Tumblr. You guys definitely have good taste (well, as long as you don’t follow Stark’s Instagram too, of course). What? The creature from Hell who thinks I’m his personal sofa? Baryshnikov, alias "Bary", Nat’s cat. His owner is still on the field so I’m cat sitting. He hates EVERYBODY, except Nat and I. On the other hand, he doesn’t really appreciate when you don’t speak to him in Russian...OK, time to drop the holographic arm and to go to sleep. It’s been a long day. Goodnight everyone!

He was just about to hit send, because fuck, sleep was needed, when a text popped up from Nat.

_Timeframe has changed. See you guys in three weeks! (hopefully) — N_
“Oh — you know!”

Steve glanced up from his tablet. “What?”

“Natasha!” Bucky said, because, you know, perfect sense.

_I will get you for this, Natashenka! — B_

Her reply took seconds.

_Love you too. Kisses. — N_

“What happened?” Steve asked again as he tried to read over Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky turned the phone so he could see. “Wait, seriously?”

They both looked down to where Bary had set up his throne at the end of the bed, eyeing the both of them like it was their fault he wouldn’t be back with his owner for several weeks.

“Oh, screw this. She is so dead.” Bucky pulled up Instagram, and had barely hit send on his own image before he was pulling up the photo of Nat on assignment. She would _kill_ him for posting a shot of her like this, but payback was a bitch, and right now, it seemed, so was Bucky.

He added the photo, and for the first time ever, used one of the filters to make everything stand out in _stark_ detail. Really drive her whole look home.

“Oh. Oh, Bucky, _no_,” Steve whispered as Bucky tried not to crack the screen as he jabbed his fingers at the keys. “She will _end_ you if you post that.”

“Bring it.”

“Be sure to let me know minimum safe distance when this goes nuclear, okay?”

“Oh, it won’t go nuclear,” Bucky said and sighed in satisfaction as he hit send. He turned hard eyes on Steve. “Nat’s a spy. Her retaliation will be a lot more subtle.”

“Yeah, like a full-blown torture session on your sorry ass in the bowels of some dungeon in a country no one’s ever heard of.”

“Exactly.”

“Christ,” Steve grumbled and rolled over to turn off the light. “Go take your sleeve off and let’s go to sleep. Not gonna waste the precious few hours I still have with you.”

Bucky snickered. “On it.”

As Bucky got out of bed, his phone buzzed, and anticipation shot through him as he first eyed Bary, then his phone.

_Hope you’ve enjoyed your life. It’s about to come to an end. — N_

_You don’t scare me — B_

All he was met with was silence.

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Steve and I aren't the only ones to work undercover. Here's Natasha during a mission. I never managed to know for what kind of job she was dressed like this but she looks cool as f**k. I'm sure she's gonna kill me for posting this. In fact, I think that I'm already dead. I'd like to tell my boyfriend that I love him and that it was a pleasure sharing my pics with you all. RIP J.B Barnes (for good this time).
Look what I found in my bed when I came home tonight! Presents from Nat! I knew she was going to get her revenge after I posted her pic last week. I have no idea what I'm gonna do with these two but Steve doesn't want me to keep them. I don't understand Steve sometimes! It's just two cute little inoffensive tarantulas! They are like fluffy black rabbits with...eight legs, that's it!
understand Steve sometimes! It's just two cute little inoffensive tarantulas! They are like fluffy black rabbits with...eight legs, that's it!

Ah, a letter from Nat. Wait...what do you mean, THREE?!!

A car door slammed somewhere in the dimly lit parking garage, and Bucky just about jumped out of his skin, his senses a live wire he could feel crawling through him. His eyes darted around the even as he repeated the same mantra he’d been telling himself for weeks now.

She won’t actually kill you. She won’t actually kill you.

It sounded good in theory. But Nat wasn’t a theoretical person. She was a woman of action.

And right now, Bucky was going on almost three weeks of stone silence from his best friend, and the longer it went on, the more he had to convince himself that his life wasn’t actually going to come to an end.

He took ten steadying breaths. Closed his eyes and concentrated on each one. Once his heart rate returned to something resembling normal, he pushed away from where he’d plastered himself against the side of his truck, and began to head upstairs.

And so what if his eyes darted all over the place as he went. He was a spy and an Avenger. It was part of the job description, okay?

He almost took the image down. About a dozen different times, he almost took it down. But the thing was, the damage was done. The image already had thousands of likes, which meant everyone who mattered had already seen it. Hell, he’d even gotten an earful from Coulson for posting an image of an undercover operative. He had to remind Coulson that the image was months old and Nat wasn’t known for duplicating her undercover looks. She was too creative for that.

“Hey, Buck.”

Bucky did not scream as he slammed into the wall next to the elevator, his gun out and trained before he’d even registered that he’d moved. He blinked, only to find the gun leveled right between Steve’s eyes. Who was currently looking at Bucky like he’d lost his damned mind.

“Aw shit, Steve,” Bucky groaned as he holstered his gun. “Do not sneak up on me when I’m under fire.”

“Uh...” Steve glanced around. “You aren’t under fire. Least not as far as I can see.”

“Natalia still hasn’t responded to me.”

Steve snorted and reached passed Bucky to hit the up button. “She’s not actually going to kill you, Buck. Though, honestly, I am curious now to see what she does.”

Bucky jabbed a finger at Steve as he followed him into the elevator. “You do realize that you will have to deal with collateral damage of whatever she does, right? What happens to me happens to you.”
Steve shrugged, which, just. Did he not realize how very dire everything was right now? Unless...

“Why don’t you care?” Bucky asked, suddenly suspicious. He narrowed his eyes. “What do you know that I don’t?”

Steve chuckled and shook his head. “Nothing, honestly. Nat’s creative enough to minimize whatever happens to you. Hopefully I’ll just be there to watch. And point.” He turned to smile at Bucky. “And laugh.”

“I hate you.”

“I know, I love you too.”

“Where were you anyway?” Bucky asked, skeptical. “Your car was parked right next to mine. Why were you in the parking garage?” He crowed Steve right up against the wall. “What were you up to?”

Steve was openly laughing now. He placed his hands on Bucky’s hips, and Bucky grunted when he stole a kiss.

“I was down by the water. Saw your truck come around the corner, so I came back home.” He leaned in to steal another kiss, and when he pulled back this time, his smile was softer. His voice quieter. “How was therapy?”

Bucky frowned. He knew what Steve was really asking. Also knew Steve wasn’t going to like the answer. Just then the elevator slid open, and Bucky took the excuse for what it was, and pulled away.

“I didn’t tell her,” he answered, glad he could no longer see Steve’s face. See the disappointment there. Bucky shrugged. “Almost did, but...there wasn’t time.”

He stopped at their front door when hands came to rest lightly on his shoulders. He sighed as soft lips pressed against the back of his neck. “There’s no pressure, baby, you gotta know that. But you need to deal with this. We both do.”

“I know, Steve.”

“Would, um...” Bucky turned around at the hesitation in Steve’s voice. Found him looking anywhere but at Bucky. “Would it, um, help if I came with you?” He finally glanced at Bucky. “I mean, I did almost die. Maybe this is something that needs to be talked about when we can talk about it together.”

Huh. Bucky hadn’t actually thought about that. But it made a certain kind of sense. Because every time Bucky had gone to tell her, his hand began to itch. Now he wondered if that itch came from Steve’s hand not being in it. Bucky hadn’t just tried to slowly kill himself. He’d done it as a direct result of thinking Steve was dead. He’d needed Steve then; maybe he needed him now too.

He laced metal fingers with Steve and wrapped his other arm around Steve’s neck, pulling him in close. He rested their foreheads together. “You know, I think that might just be what I need. You wanna come with me later this week?”

Steve’s smile was small and full of relief. “Gotta check my very full schedule of doing nothing, but I think I can pencil you in.”

“Oh well, don’t go out of your way for me or anything. Wouldn’t want to interrupt such an important
man.”

“So important.”

“Ass.”

Steve kissed him slow, tentative at first, but the second Bucky pulled him in closer to let him know that the kiss was more than welcome, Steve melted in his arms. Maybe this was what Bucky needed — what they both needed. It wasn’t enough that Bucky needed to talk about what had happened. He needed to talk about it with Steve.

“Hey, Stevie?” he asked quietly after a minute.

“Yeah, baby?”

“Do you think we’re codependent.”

“Oh, fuck yes.”

“Do you think we’re doing our jobs effectively despite that?”

“I think we need to figure that out before we go back out there,” Steve answered, and it was a hard truth. “We’re a great team, you and me.” He opened the door and let them in. “Fury’s talked about our silent language on more than one occasion — said it’s more than what he’s even seen with Nat and Clint. But times like this last one? It’s a detriment.”

It was exactly what Bucky didn’t want to hear. Even if Steve was right. Guess that would be what they’d start exploring later that week.

It was only then that he noticed how quiet it was in the apartment. His skin prickled, and he immediately looked down, because there was no Bary winding his way through Bucky’s legs.

“Hey, Steve?”

“Yeah?” Steve was sorting through the mail at the counter, and not paying attention to this new and very real problem Bucky had just discovered.

Bucky huffed in frustration. He swept his arm out around the apartment. “You notice anything missing?”

Steve’s head snapped up. “What?” He immediately took stock of his surroundings. “I don’t see anything off. Was something stolen?”

Leave it to Steve to not care about Nat and her retaliation, but immediately assume someone could break into the Fort Knox that was their place.

“We seem to me short one black cat.”

“Wait, what?”

Bucky waved around again, and finally Steve took in the quiet apartment that was suddenly without its furry beast — one that always wandered between their legs and annoyed the shit out of them until he got fed. Every single time Steve or Bucky walked out the door.

Bucky rounded the island, taking in the lack of food bowls by the fridge. He yanked open the cabinet, and sure enough, all of Bary’s food was gone too.
“Shit,” he murmured into the empty cabinet.

“What is it?”

He turned a grim look on Steve. “Nat’s been here.”

“You sure?” Steve was at his side in an instant. His eyes swept to the floor before landing on the cabinet.

“Yeah,” Bucky answered when Steve’s eyes finally fell on him. “Pretty sure.”

They both turned to take in the living area. Other than the lack of cat, nothing else seemed out of place. “You think she did anything here?” Steve asked. “Or maybe she’ll take pity on me and save her retaliation on you until I’m as far away as possible.”

“I thought you said earlier that you didn’t care if you were caught in the crossfire.”

“That was before she came home. She’s in the same city now. The blasé has given way to the fear.”

Without saying a word, they went in separate directions and scouted out the apartment. They checked all the fixtures, looked under and around the furniture, and as Steve headed toward the dining room and the office, Bucky headed back toward the spare bedroom and bathroom.

When he still found nothing, he headed back out, meeting up with Steve just outside their very closed bedroom door. A door they never shut. They both stared at it.

“I told her I wasn’t scared of her,” Bucky blurted out. The door suddenly felt like an ominous barrier, thick and solid, larger than normal, and keeping Bucky and Steve separated from their fate. Bucky was more than fine with that.

“Why would you do that?” Steve hissed at him. “When did you do that?”

“The night I posted the photo.”

“So,” Steve started, his voice hard, “you’re telling me that, almost three weeks ago, you told Nat she didn’t scare you. Three weeks she’s had to sit on that. Three weeks to plot and scheme and come up with the perfect plan to execute on your ass. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Something like that, yeah.” Bucky gave a weak half-shrug. “But, you know, she was on mission. She didn’t have the whole time to plan...whatever it is.”

“You do realize this is Natasha we’re talking about, right?”

“Yeah. Stupid comment.”

“Very stupid.” Steve waved at the door. “Well, come on, then. You dug this grave. You’re jumping in first, not me.”

Bucky steeled himself before finally grabbing the handle and throwing the door open.

To nothing.

They both peeked in, and as far as Bucky could tell, there wasn’t anything out of place. Nothing was missing, or broken, or off at all. There was nothing added as far as he could see, no knives being triggered by the door, no guns hanging from the ceiling.
(A joke he and Nat once played on Clint. After he beat them both spectacularly at pool one night, he came home to find thirty loaded guns hanging from the ceiling, and all pointed at him. A joke that backfired because, after that, not only did Clint make it his personal mission to always kick their ass when they played, each time they went into the field, he grabbed yet another one of the guns they'd aimed at him.)

“I don’t see anything.”

“Why are you whispering?”

“I don’t know. Voice activation or something?”

Steve nodded. “Good point.”

They both slowly, cautiously, entered the room, on high alert for anything that might fuck up their world. There really wasn’t anything —

Bucky’s hand shot out and he grabbed Steve’s arm, stopping him at the movement that had caught his eye. His gaze was now trained on their bed, and sure enough, there was something moving underneath the sheet.

“Steve.” He nodded toward the bed. “Look.”

“What the fuck is it?”

“Like I’m supposed to know?”

“This is your death sentence. You should go check.”

“You are such a fucking baby, you know that?”

“It’s not like I see you going to investigate.”

“Fuck. Fine.” Bucky resolutely locked metal fingers around Steve’s wrist as he slid closer to the bed. There was more than one something under there, crawling across the bed. Bucky gingerly reached down, grabbed the corner of the sheet and pulled back.

— only to slam right back into Steve.

“Holy shit!” he yelped at the two tarantulas ambling around their bed. “What. The fuck?”

“Did she seriously leave spiders for us?”

It made sense actually.

“Well. You know.” Bucky flapped his hand around hysterically. “Black Widow, and all.”

It was a long time before Steve said something. So long, Bucky finally tore his eyes away from the sixteen legs to find Steve staring at them in something resembling frustrated concentration.

“Knock, knock, Steve. What’s going on up there?”

Steve huffed. “You know, I just can’t decide what bothers me more. The fact that she leaves us with her cat only to exchange him for spiders, or the fact that honestly? How did we not see this coming? It’s like you said. She’s the Black Widow. And neither of assumed her special brand of retaliation wouldn’t involve some sort of arachnid-themed torture.”
Bucky turned back to find one of them marching up onto his pillow. “Both. Definitely both.”

“This is all your fault, you know that.”

“Well —”

“The cat, maybe not, but this” — he waved at the spiders — “is definitely your fault.”

Bucky resolutely ignored the heated guilt that he felt flush across his cheeks and went over to sit on the very far edge of the bed, careful not upset the furry little creatures. He pulled out his phone.

*Got your present. You’re so sweet. What would I do without you. (They didn’t scare me, btw) — B*

He went back to watching the expedition while he waited for a response. “What do we do with them?” he asked, as Steve circled round to sit on the opposite side of the bed. “We can’t leave them wandering around. I mean, can we?”

“No idea. What did Nat say?”

“Uh...” Bucky glanced down at his dark screen. “Nothing. She hasn’t responded.” He fired off another text.

*Were you planning on leaving them here? What do we do with them? — B*

It was several minutes before Bucky realized that he still hadn’t gotten a response from her.

*Nat? — B*

*You planning on answering me? — B*

*Gonna put them out on the balcony. Think they’ll be fine out there? — B*

A solid thirty minutes went by — thirty minutes that included one of the two spiders crawling up onto Bucky’s thigh and parking itself there — when Bucky figured out Nat wasn’t going to answer. So this was how it was gonna be.

Bucky, not surprisingly with a best friend like his, had a weird vast knowledge of spiders — the different breeds, how they ate, where they lived, which ones were poisonous, etc. And he knew that tarantulas were basically small furry cats with eight legs. They didn’t do much, were usually pretty friendly, and actually made pretty decent pets for people who weren’t, as Nat liked to put it, ‘nine kinds of a little bitch.’

“She’s not going to answer us,” Bucky finally announced. He turned to find Steve over in the chair, sketchpad out, *drawing* the damn things. Bucky quirked an eyebrow at him.

“What?” Steve shrugged and went back to his sketch. “They’re interesting looking.”

Bucky perked up at that. “Does that mean we can keep them?”

“No.” Asshole didn’t even look up to answer.

“You know, every time you say that, I can see a new gray hair show up on your head. Old man attitude, old man look.”

“We’re still not keeping them.” He finally looked up. “Go find something to secure them in for the night, then tomorrow you will get a hold of Nat and give them back to her.”
Bucky gently picked up the one that was chilling with him and set him down on the bed. Then he frowned down at the spider. “Yeah, I think he’s a funsuck, too.”

He went into their office and grabbed one of the cardboard boxes Steve’s supplies usually came in. He then pulled his knife out of its sheath and punched a series of holes around the top and sides, careful to cut from the inside out so the two little guys wouldn’t snag themselves on the shreds.

He went back into the bedroom, shaking the box. “This should do the trick.”

Steve looked up and smiled. “Perfect.” Then he set his sketchpad aside. “Okay, I’m getting ready for bed; you deal with Dracula and Nosferatu over there.”

With a sigh, Bucky set the box on the bed, only to sit down instead and set his hand out. He waited patiently, and sure enough, the same one from earlier started inching its way up his metal arm. He slowly twisted around to place his other hand by his pillow, hoping to attract both. It took a bit longer, but eventually he had both of them balanced on his forearms. He held them closer to his face.

“Hey guys,” he murmured. He didn’t want to frighten them. A million eyes stared back at him. “So you’re Nat’s protégés, huh? Of course you are. She only hangs with the best. Not entirely sure why she thought this would be payback for the photo, but I’ve learned not to question her. I’ll only end up regretting it.”

He twisted further until he was lying on his stomach, arms bent in front of him. “So what do you guys do?” He turned to his original friend. “You the sniper of the two? So am I.” He turned to the other. “And I’ll bet you’re the soldier, right? Gotta have a soldier and a sniper. Can’t have one without the other.”

“What are you doing?” Bucky looked up to find Steve standing in the bathroom doorway. “Don’t make friends with the arachnids, Buck. You’re already friends with one spider, and she’s tough enough to handle.”

“What. They’re cute. And besides, if they’re from Nat, you can bet they’re useful at something.”

Steve walked over to grab a t-shirt out of the dresser. “I’m sure they are. Which means keeping them as pets would be doing them a disservice. Clearly they need to be out in the field.”

“They go out in the field when we go out in the field.”

“Doesn’t work that way, baby.” Steve came over and kissed the top of Bucky’s head. “You gonna put them away so we can go to bed?”

Bucky hummed and turned to press a kiss to Steve’s palm. “Not tired yet.”

Steve chuckled and kissed his head again. “All right. But let’s at least get into bed. They can hang with us until we go to sleep.”

“Brilliant.” Bucky slowly reached over to remove one and then the other, setting them both back on the bed.

He quickly got ready. Steve for his part was sitting on the bed, both spiders balanced on his legs, laughing over a copy of The Daily Bugle. Which, way to throw it back to the days of actual paper, Steve.

“There a reason you’re killing a tree over there, Stevie?” When Steve glanced up in confusion, he nodded at the paper. “You know there’s this newfangled thing called the internet, right? They have
all the same stories and so much other stuff, and it’s amazing.”

Steve smacked him with the paper as Bucky crawled in next to him. “I’m collecting newspapers for an art project, dick. And I was just reading it because there’s a really funny story of Tony in here.”

“Wait, really?” Bucky snatched it out of Steve’s hand. He flipped through it until he found Tony’s face staring back at him, and the rest of his very naked body blurred out in the photo.

CAUGHT! STARK NAKED
Former CEO of Stark Industries found in the nude in Central Park

Bucky read through the article, something about an experiment near the great lake going wrong and Tony ending up completely nude, standing in the lake, in broad daylight.

“What the fuck? How do we not know about this?!” Bucky asked in total shock. He barely noticed Steve setting the tarantulas on him as he read through the entire thing.

Tony had been able to secure a phone to call the Tower, but best he could manage was a tiny yellow sweater to cover himself up. And Bucky was ready to hand all of his money over to the Bugle in thanks for the picture they so helpfully supplied

“Fucking framing this shit,” he muttered to himself. Then he glanced up to where Steve was fiddling with his camera. “Seriously, did you know about this?”

Steve shook his head and laughed. “No clue. Knowing Tony, it probably wasn’t an accident that he got caught. Probably why we didn’t hear about it until now.”

“What are you doing?” Bucky asked as Steve continued to play with his camera. “You wanna get a picture of your new family?”

“Not new family, Buck. We’re not keeping them.” He looked up from what he was doing. “I’m serious, Buck. We already had to deal with Nat’s cat when we’re supposed to be taking downtime. I’m not about to take on something else.”

“Spoilsport,” Buck grumbled as one of his new friends crawled up his hand. “Why doesn’t he love us, huh? I think we’re all pretty loveable. He should want to keep us.”

“I want to keep you. Now smile.”

“No.”

“Fine.” Steve took the picture despite Bucky's disgruntled look, then laughed at the screen. “Well damn, aren’t you a picture.”

“Let me see.” Bucky dropped the paper in favor of taking Steve’s camera. And yeah, disgruntled definitely came across. He fired the picture off to his phone and handed the camera back to Steve. “I’m posting that one,” he announced.

He set the tarantula on his head to free up his hand then set about adding the image to his Instagram. Posting these guys in such a casual shot would definitely irk Natalia, and Bucky ran with that, making the caption as lighthearted as possible:

Look what I found in my bed when I came home tonight! Presents from Nat! I knew she was going to get her revenge after I posted her pic last week. I have no idea what I’m gonna do with these two but Steve doesn’t want me to keep them. I don’t understand Steve sometimes! It’s just two cute little
He hit send and set his phone aside before reaching up and giving the little guy on his head a friendly pat. “How ya doin’ up there, buddy? Think I could get away with you sleeping up there tonight?”

“Doubtful,” Steve answered, his face buried in his own phone. “Oh, hey, you typo’d. You said a week since you posted the image of Nat. It’s been three.”

“I can math.”

“You sure about that?”

“You wanna fuck off?”

Steve just gave him the bird. “Did you wanna fix it?”

Bucky waved him off. “Nah, I don’t care enough. Too busy with my new friends here.” He gently patted the other one currently perched on his knee.

“Okay, but you will get hold of Nat in the morning, right?”

Bucky sighed, deep and put upon, as he tilted his head for Steve to lift the spider off and put him in the box. He reached down for the other one on his knee.

“Yeah, yeah. If she’ll talk to me.”

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“Yo. Barnes. Wake up.”

Bucky whined and grabbed the pillow to put over his head as he rolled over. That should make the bad noise go away.

“Not kidding, Bucky, get up.”

Fuck, Steve sounded cranky. Cautiously, Bucky rolled back over and cracked an eye open. Looming over him, holding two cups of — oh god, Starbucks — coffee, was a slightly annoyed-looking Steve.

Slightly annoyed was definitely what Bucky was going with.

“I didn’t do it,” he answered before he tried going back to sleep, only for the whole bed to jostle where Steve must have fucking kicked it. Irritated, he sat up. “What?” he snapped. “I’ve been sleeping. What did I fucking do now?”

He thought maybe he should feel bad, but it was too fucking early for whatever had crawled up Steve’s ass.

Steve, seemed less than impressed with Bucky’s attitude. “We got another present last night.”

“We — what?”

Steve glared at him. “Follow me.” He held out one of the coffee cups. “But take this first. I got you Starbucks.”

“Because you hate me right now, I can only assume.”
Steve didn’t bat an eye. “Something like that.”

Bucky took a sip and grimaced as he followed Steve out into the living room. There, sitting in the middle of their coffee table was a pink note, clearly from Nat.

If the fact that the note was sitting on a damn habitat was anything to go by.

“So she answered you.”

“Yeah,” Bucky growled. “I can see that.”

The two tarantulas were already in it, which meant that not only did Nat drop off her little present while they were sleeping, but she’d managed to get in and out of their room without either of them waking up. Bucky couldn’t decide if he was impressed with her, or just deeply shamed at the two of them.

It was too fucking early for him to care.

He grabbed the note and shoved it in his pocket, then picked up both spiders before stalking back to their bedroom. He set them on his desk before dropping into the seat and staring out the window.

Why was Steve snapping at him? So it was a joke – they joked and played pranks as a group all the time. Why was this pissing him off so much.

“What’s your problem?” He knew Steve was standing in the doorway, even if he didn’t bother to look. “Why are you acting like I’ve committed some cardinal sin? It’s a couple of spiders, Steve. They have a cage and I’ll deal with them for now.”

“And the next time Nat leaves a present for us to watch?” Steve snapped. “Gettin’ real sick and tired of this shit, Buck.”

“With Nat.” He turned to glare at Steve. “You’re sick and tired of this shit with Nat. I don’t understand why this suddenly makes me the huge asshole?”

“You’re not a huge asshole, Buck. It’s just...” Steve sighed, and dropped down into the comfy chair right next to Bucky. “I just keep hoping for some alone time with you. You know, no responsibilities and nothing to worry about. And as much as I love her, I wish Nat would have thought about that before she kept dropping things off. This is not a dumping ground for her pets.”

Bucky looked at the two spiders wandering around on his desk. One of them had walked across his keyboard, waking up to the desktop picture he’d changed to one of the images from France. One of the pictures Bucky had posted when he’d thought Steve was dead. He’d changed it to remind himself what a good time that had been, and to hopefully re-associate that trip with good memories and not one of the most horrific he’d had in recent memory.

“I’ll talk to her,” he said quietly. “She will come get them if I explain it to her.”

“No — Buck.” Steve grunted. “It’s fine. I mean, it’s not, but...shit.” He pushed himself up and came to wrap an arm around Bucky’s shoulder. “You guys are having fun, and I’m the one being a dick about it. I’m sorry. Truth is, Bary wasn’t really an inconvenience, and these guys seem pretty chill, so I’m going to stop being pissy about this, okay?”

Bucky turned to place a kiss on the part of Steve’s arm he could reach. “I really can talk to her, Steve. I mean, yeah, this is funny to me, but not at the expense of us. I’ll get her to come get them.”
Steve eyed him, and Bucky wondered if Nat would find a way to retaliate in some other way. Something that really didn’t involve encroaching on Steve’s life too. And yeah, Bucky got it. They were supposed to be in downtime mode, and she really was dumping pet after pet on their doorstep. He loved her, but he loved Steve more, and he would do whatever he had to do to fix this.

But then Steve’s eyes softened and he smiled that fond exasperated smile that he seemed to always have at the ready for Bucky.

“I’m not a fan of this.” He waved a hand at the spiders. “So we aren’t keeping them, but you know...whatever. I guess this can play out for a few more days.” Then he snapped a finger at Bucky. “But then they have to go!”

Bucky nodded. “Okay. Got it. A couple days and then I’ll call her.”

“God, you’re such a nuisance.” Steve laughed and captured Bucky’s lips in a soft, languid kiss, his tongue slipping in so Bucky could taste him — coffee and toothpaste and home. He reached over his shoulder to tangle his fingers in Steve’s hair and held him in place as long as he dared. He hated fighting with Steve.

“Does this mean I get to have good coffee now?” he asked hopefully when they parted. He unconsciously licked his lips.

Steve laughed. “Yeah, I’ll go grab some for you.”

“Thanks, baby.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Steve left and Bucky snickered as he picked up one of the tarantulas and set it on the Starbucks cup. Truthfully, it was kind of hysterical that Steve had bought him Starbucks as punishment. He’d bought coffee that he knew Bucky didn’t exactly love because he was mad at him, but he’d still gone out and bought Bucky coffee.

He shook his head and reached into his pocket to pull out the note. It was pink with black lace trim and a bow on the corner, the writing in Nat’s pretty lilt. Only she would go all out on stationary to send Bucky a warning shot.

James

Next time you’ll think twice before posting my photo on Instagram.

I hope that my three little protégés delivered the message.

Love, Nat.

Bucky stared at the note. He looked up at the two spiders on his desk, then back down at the note. Then back up again.

‘three little protégés,’ it said.

There were only two on his desk.

Shit.

He grabbed his camera and fired off a picture, making sure both spiders were visible. Then he opened up his Instagram:
Ah, a letter from Nat. Wait...what do you mean, THREE?!!

He didn’t want to hit send until Steve got back, though. Better to break the news that someone planted a third during the night, or that they’d lost one from the get-go. Though there was always the chance she was bluffing.

Not likely.

“Hey, Steve?” He shouted into the apartment when the door opened a few minutes later. He grabbed his phone and hit send. Sure enough, the tell-tale ding of an Instagram notification coming from Steve’s phone hit Bucky’s ears just as Steve came into the room. Bucky smiled hesitantly at him.

“Okay, now don’t be mad...”
It's been a bit more than a year now since I started this Instagram account. Time to celebrate with an awesome custom cake and...YOU GUYS, CAN YOU WAIT A MINUTE FOR ME TO TAKE A PIC?!! And who the hell ate Steve's head?! I'm the only one allowed to eat my boyfriend!! OH, COME ON!! Give me a break! How old are you to giggle at stuff like that? You are all FIVE!! You too Steve, PARTICULARLY YOU!!
“SURPRISE!”

Bucky spun back, pinning Steve between himself and the wall of the elevator, already slamming the emergency button that sent the elevator at Avengers Tower straight to the basement. The doors slammed shut; the sudden shift in equilibrium dropped through Bucky as the elevator began its fast descent.

“Bucky?” A hand touched him and metal dented metal as he slammed a wrist back into the wall, eyes wild. Suddenly, an arm was around his waist, and he fought hard even as he was turned around to face concerned eyes. Steve’s eyes.

“Bucky,” Steve repeated, with more force this time. “Bucky.” Steve had his face in a vice grip. “Hey, baby, look at me.”

“There’s a threat.” Bucky didn’t have time for whatever Steve wanted. He had to get Steve to safety.

“No, baby,” Steve leaned in to press a soft kiss to Bucky’s lips, and Bucky jerked as the elevator suddenly stopped. The doors opened up to flashing lights and several bewildered-looking SHIELD agents. Coulson suddenly came into view and Steve waved him off, even as Bucky tried to drag him out of the elevator.

What the fuck. Why was Steve resisting? He had to get Steve somewhere safe, had to get him —

The faces up on their floor suddenly flooded his head, along with what they’d been shouting at him. Sam, Nat, Clint, Tony, Wanda. Shouting surprise.

“What?” Bucky blinked in confusion and looked first to Steve before clocking in the equally confused expression on Coulson’s face. He turned back to Steve. “What’s going on?”

Steve gave Coulson an apologetic smile. “I’ve got this.”

Coulson nodded. “JARVIS, Override Code 32557, Coulson, Phillip J.”

“Yes, sir,” came JARVIS’s reply, and the doors closed again. Steve silently reached over and pressed the button for their floor. Then he pulled Bucky close to him. Bucky went willingly.

“What the hell’s going on, Stevie?” he asked, his voice small, tight. Nerves still shot.

“Shit, it’s my fault. I should have messaged ahead after our therapy session. I just didn’t think...” He sighed and pulled back to give Bucky an apologetic smile and a tiny half-shrug. “Surprise party for you.”
“Huh? A surprise-what now?”

“Uh, well.” Steve barked out a strange laugh as he pulled out his phone. When he handed it over, Bucky’s first Instagram post — that damned teddy bear — was staring back.

“I don’t get it.”

Steve tapped on the screen. “See the date? It’s been a year since you started this.”

Bucky still didn’t get it.

“This was your therapy, and honestly baby, despite recent...setbacks...you’re still leaps and bounds further along than you were a year ago, and I’m just so damned proud of you. And I figured...” He ran a hand through his hair before waving at the door.

Bucky maybe wanted to melt a little. Actually, between Steve’s adorable sappiness and the sheer magnitude of embarrassment running through him at the moment, maybe more than a little. Maybe he could just melt right through the floor.

So, of course the doors decided to open up right then. Flushed red, he turned away from the looks of confusion and concern, and buried his face in Steve’s neck with a groan.

“I would like to die now,” he mumbled into Steve’s collar.

Steve just laughed and rubbed a hand over Bucky’s back. “No can do, sweetheart. Not when there’s cake.”

Bucky immediately perked up. “Cake?”

Steve laughed harder before tugging him out of the elevator.

Bucky waved sheepishly at everyone. “Uh, hey guys. Sorry for being a nut job.”

“Bucky, what have I told you.” Sam was the first to speak as he slung an arm around Bucky’s shoulder. “You gotta stop apologizing for being crazy, man.”

“Thanks...I think?”

“It’s just about all you’ve got going for you.”

Bucky thumped Sam hard enough in the stomach to knock the air right out of his lungs. “Love you too, asshole.”

“So, we’re okay with the unhinged cyborg now?” Tony asked, even as he pressed a tumbler of amber liquid into Bucky’s hand. He handed another to Steve. “I saw that movie. Skynet eventually wins.”

“You know, Tony, one of these days you’re going to need to pick new material,” Natasha shot back. “Terminator again? Really?”

“Terminator will always be fitting for our neighborhood assassin over here,” he answered with a solemn nod and a tilt of his tumbler in Bucky’s direction. Buck reluctantly clinked back.

“I hate you most days, Stark, you know that.”

“Hate is not the opposite of love, my friend, indifference is. If you hate me, you obviously love me.”
“Yeah, pretty sure that's not how that works.”

“Who's the genius here, buddy, you or me?”

Bucky bit down on a retort and looked instead past Tony into the living area. A large digital banner was floating over the fireplace, the words HAPPY BUCKY PHOTO TIME ‘floating’ merrily in the air.

The place was actually decorated up nicely. There were streamers and balloons, all very very colorful, just like the Instagram app theme. There were also blown-up posters of what looked like every one of his posts, styled to look like polaroid photos.

Tony stopped in front of the picture of Bucky testing out the arm with him and Bruce, before turning narrowed eyes back on Bucky. “Is this really the only image you’ve posted of me? I’m certain we’ve hung out more than this. I thought we were friends, Barnes, I’m hurt.”

Bucky couldn’t help but feel for the guy, the way he looked like a rejected prom date. He wouldn’t have been surprised if Tony suddenly started toeing at the ground.

He went over and pulled the guy into a half-hug. “Aw, don’t be sad, Anthony. We’ll get you up there somehow. Just, you know, be more therapeutic and less...you. I’m certain we can find a spot for you.”

“Get out of my house.”

“Pepper might take exception to you kicking me out.”

“She might if she were here. Luckily for all parties involved — those parties being me — she’s not.”

“That’s because you're a one-man party, Stark,” Clint commented.

“Thank you.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.” He looked up from where he was fiddling with the sound system. “What’s a man gotta do to get some tunes going around here?”

Bucky snatched the controller from the pile on the end table and flipped his Spotify over to the classic rock station. Tony audibly sighed, a serene smile on his face, as AC/DC came on.

“I always knew I liked you, Barnes.”

“Oh, so all is forgiven now?” Bucky dropped down onto the couch next to Steve and pressed into his side. He still felt slightly off, and sighed gratefully at the casual arm Steve draped around him — one Bucky knew was more protective than affection. “You know, now that I think about it, every time I turn on that station here, it starts with AC/DC. I’m may have to call you a liar if you try and tell me you haven’t hijacked Spotify somehow. Hell, I’m surprised every station doesn’t start that way.” Bucky frowned. “Unless you own Spotify. I’d believe that too.”

Tony didn’t answer, but the wink he threw Bucky as he walked into the kitchen was all the response Bucky needed.

“Okay, but seriously, what’s going on here?” Bucky asked. “I mean, I get what’s going on, but it’s just my therapy. I mean...” He shrugged at the strangeness of everything around him. “Who has a party to celebrate therapy?”
“Uh, lots of people?” Clint pointed his beer bottle at Bucky. “Hell, man, when I’d completed my therapy after the whole Loki thing, Nat threw me a party.” He grinned slyly. “Of course, it was a party for two, so...”

Sam cringed. “No one wants to hear about your sex life, Barton.”

“Sam.” Clint clasped Sam hard on the shoulder, his eyes solemn. “I was an acrobat in the circus and I’m sleeping with the deadliest, most beautiful — and might I add — most flexible member of the team. Everyone wants to know about my sex life.”

“I am pretty bendy,” Nat added.

“You just had to go and make it weird, didn’t you.” Sam knocked Clint’s hand out of the way and took a hard swig of his own beer. “I thought you were supposed to be the adult of this crew. It’s what you keep telling everyone.”

Nat just shrugged, completely unconcerned. “I am the adult of the crew. Which means I’m allowed to have the adult sex. Unlike all you freaks.”

“You’re sleeping with him, and you call us freaks?”

“Well, see, he does this thing where he bends my leg around his neck, and still manages to —” She barely looked as she caught the pillow, only to whip it back around at Sam, hitting him square in the face. Bucky immediately tipped over into Steve’s lap, cackling, even as Sam stomped off to the kitchen, muttering something about needing better friends.

“I’m the one who taught him that move!” Bucky called out for good measure

“You taught me nothing, Jon Snow!”

“Hey Tony, what is this?” Steve asked, and Bucky finally sat back up to find Steve sniffing at his tumbler. “It smells like rye, but there’s something, I can’t put my finger on it.”

Tony lift his own glass and smiled. “Gift from the gods, my friend. Or more a god. Our Asgardian compatriot sent it in his place.”

“Wait.” Bucky smelled his own glass. It did remind him of a good rye, but there was a floral scent to it he wasn’t sure he’d ever come across before. “Is this from Asgard?”

Tony nodded. “Some sort of fire whiskey. Thor promised me a drunken good time for you two boys. He said — and I quote — ‘if the whiskey of the gods cannot let loose the minds of two enhanced humans, I’m not certain there is anything in the Nine Realms that could.’”

“It can.”

Bucky whipped around. “You’ve tried this.”

Steve hummed in assent as he took a sip. “A few years ago, just before Ultron and Sokovia. Thor had brought some to a party Tony had thrown.” He stared down into the glass. “I, uh, didn’t have that much, though. One sip, and I knew this could knock me on my ass eventually, and, well, at the time, I was constantly on high alert for you, so...”

“So, you haven’t actually tried to get drunk on it yet. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Why...? What are you getting at?”
“Oh, nothing.” Bucky shook his head, projecting all the innocence in the world that he knew Steve wouldn’t buy for a second. Then he took his own tumbler and knocked the whole thing back in one shot, the burn a promise as much as a warning. He smiled surreptitiously at Steve. “I’m just looking for a nice quiet evening with my love and my friends. What are you getting at?”

Steve watched him, the wheels damn near visible as they turned in his head. Then, with a tiny smile, a quiet ‘fuck’, he slammed back the rest of his own.

They both tried to adamantly ignore Tony’s cheering in the background.

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Bucky blinked. Narrowed his eyes, then he blinked again. He tried for a third time, because that had to make the bright colors make sense.

“What is it?”

“It’s your cake.”

Bucky smacked his lips again and stared the thing down. “It’s shiny.”

“Okay, I’m thinking, we need drunk Bucky every day,” Tony said from...elsewhere in the room.

“I’m not drunk.” Bucky draped his arms across Steve’s shoulders and leaned heavily on his back. Steve stumbled forward, and Bucky nodded like this explained everything. “See, Steve’s the drunk one, not me.”

“No, I’m...fine.” Steve half-patted, half-smacked Bucky across the face. “You’re the one leaning on me, remember?”

“And you... you. Wait, you?” Bucky’s brain whited out entirely; he had words to say, he was certain of it. He smacked his lips together again and dug into his brain for...whateverthefuck it was he’d been trying to — oh! “You, sir.” He poked Steve in the side. “Are the one who almost fell because I put arms on you.” He snorted because he was fucking hilarious. “Super soldier, my ass.”

“Hey now.” Steve poked him back, and no Bucky did not giggle; fuck off. “My ass is a national treasure.”

“We should emblazon it on the back of the Declaration of Independence, then,” Bucky collapsed onto one of the dining chairs in a fit of laughter. He smiled up at Steve. “Get it? Because it’s a National Treasure?”

“Yeah, we all get it, Barnes.” Sam shook his head, but Bucky only had eyes for the cake. He blinked at it, certain that his superior skills as a top-notch spy and the world’s deadliest assassin (ass ass in, ha!) meant that surely no one saw him sway a little.

The thing was glittery and shiny and it reminded him of the old Instagram logo — the polariod-looking thing before they made it all colorful, which...okay, irony.

There were also little chibis on top, meant to look like him and Steve. And of course Steve’s looked cute and adorable — a giggling tiny little cute thing — where Bucky looked more like Grumpy Cat.

He jabbed a finger at the Steve one, only to fumble when it started to tip over. “Shit,’ he mumbled as he righted it. Then he patted it on the head, all pleased with himself, before jabbing a finger at it again. “Are you responsible for this, Steven?”
‘What am I what?’

“This.” He poked its cute little nose. “This one is sweet and adorable, and mine looks like it wants to kill everyone in the room.”


“Okay, but if morning, why is your face not angry?”

“Oh. Easy. I don’t get pissy without coffee — ow.” Steve rubbed at where Bucky smacked him upside the head. Served him right.

“I can’t take a picture of this thing.”

“What? Why?”

“It sends wrong impressions.”

Steve swiveled around to look at him. “To who?”

“The masses.” Obviously.

“What masses?”

“The people who live in here, masses.” He shook his phone in Steve’s face.

“The internet people?”

“Duh.”

“Why are the, uh, impressions wrong?”

“The internet people like me, and this thing makes me look evil.”

“You’re not evil, Buck.”

“Well, yeah, but they don’t know that —”

Nat nudged him, flashing a cake cutter. “If you two drunk assholes are done discussing the social significance of edible cake tops, maybe we get this show on the road? I love you, catalus, but some of us would like to go home at some point, you know.”

“Go home? We just got here...” Bucky glanced down at his watch, because he and Steve had only been there for like an hour, tops.

Okay, that wasn’t right. He shook his wrist and checked again. Nope. Still said one-thirty.

Okay, but he and Steve had gotten to the Tower around six.

He glanced up, only to blink owlishly. “Uh...” He glanced around at the blue wallpaper, familiar couch, and spider webs for days. He shook his head. “We’re at home.”

“Ten points for boy-genius over here,” Tony announced.

He stepped back and took in his surroundings. How the hell were they at home? They’d just been at the Tower, like, a minute ago. The Tower wasn’t even on the same fucking island.
“I thought we went to the Tower. Did we not go to the Tower?”

“Uh, yeah…” Steve side-eyed him. “Buck, we’ve been back home for three hours.”

Well, that just made no… “What, huh?” He glanced around again. “You sure?”

Steve smack-patted his face again. “Oh, yeah. Definitely drunk.”

Bucky knocked his hand away. “I am not.”

“And yet…” Sam waved a hand around the apartment.

Bucky opened his mouth, wanting to bitch about not being a fan of time displacement. He closed it and opened it again, but he couldn’t bring himself to be as angry as he wanted to be. He glanced at Steve, who was watching him expectantly — probably knew where Bucky’s thoughts were going — and took his hand, giving it a squeeze.

He leaned in, murmuring, “As long as I haven’t danced naked, we’re good.”

Steve snickered and stole a kiss. “Nah, you’re fine. Besides, your body’s for my eyes only. I wouldn’t letcha dance naked.”

“You better not.”

Steve answered by stealing another kiss. He tasted of Asgardian whiskey — like oak and cinnamon and the sea, and just a hint of something sweet and sugary. Bucky licked into his mouth for a better taste.

“Barton, I swear to God, if you don’t give me that thing, I’m just going to take it from you. And that won’t end well for you, because then it won’t just be the candle on this thing I set on fire.”

Bucky broke off from Steve’s lips to find Clint staring aghast at Nat, his hands covering his ass. “You would never.”

“You say that like I’ve never done it before.”

“Okay, what’s the problem, kiddos?” Bucky interrupted. Steve immediately slipped a hand around his waist. “Why are we fighting over a lighter?”

Clint waved a hand at Nat, who was just standing there, arms crossed and lips pursed, looking way too deadly for someone so dressed up and beautiful. Or maybe that was why she looked so deadly.

“So, okay, I was going to light the candle on your cake, okay,” Clint began, “and Natasha over here seems to think I can’t be trusted with a lighter.” When she simply raised her eyebrows at him, he pointed an accusing finger at her. “No, don’t you give me that look. You literally said those words. ‘You can’t be trusted with fire, baby,’ that’s what you said.”

Nat just shrugged. “I did say that.”

“See?”

“To be fair, buddy, you did set the side of the Kremlin on fire once,” Bucky pointed out.

“There was also the incident with the catacombs in Rome and that fireball,” Steve helpfully added.

“What are we talking about?” Sam asked.
“Clint’s penchant for fire.”

“Oh, you mean like that time he blew up one of my suits, and all he could say for himself was ‘Oooh. Pretty’?” Tony interjected. “You mean that time?”

“That wasn’t me! That was Barnes.”

“That was me,” Bucky conceded. “Clint did call the explosion pretty, but I was the one who took that suit down.”

“You know how much those suits cost?”

“Well…” Bucky puffed up his cheeks before blowing the air out. “In my defense, the suit had gone rogue.”

“You still blew it up.”

Nat held out her hand. “Lighter, Clint. Before you burn down the apartment.”

“That was one time,” Clint huffed, even as he slapped the lighter into Nat’s palm. She just smiled triumphantly and turned back to the cake. She lit the little Bucky top and led the whole room in a loud, drunken rendition of ‘Happy Anniversary’, and Bucky was pretty sure the warmth in his cheeks had nothing to do with the whiskey running through his veins. He was surrounded by friends, with Steve at his side, and okay, maybe now he understood why celebrating this was so important. Even a year ago, he would have hated the idea of a party. Now he couldn’t think of anywhere else he wanted to be than with all these people he loved.

He blew out the candle and Nat had just started cutting into the cake when his drunk-addled brain caught up with him. He waved at her to stop, and held up his phone. “No, wait, picture!”

She stared at him from where she’d just dropped the first slice onto a plate. “I thought you said it sent the wrong message.”

‘Yeah, but that was when I cared.” He grabbed the bottle of whiskey off the table — only a quarter of it left — and took a hard swig. “I care less now.”

‘Fuck. Fine.” She sighed and set the cake cutter down. “But make it quick because one, some of us actually have to work tomorrow, and two, some of us have also been eyeing this cake for six hours. And your ‘no one eats cake until the party’s over because cakes are for ending parties’ rule means we’ve all been denied cake for over six hours. Oh, and also that.” She waved a hand at the bottle still in Bucky’s hand. “Because, from what Tony has assured us, it would probably kill anyone who’s from earth and also not a science experiment.”

Bucky looked around. “Wait, you’re all sober?” That was no fun.

“Oh, no, I brought this.” Tony smiled, wide, as he held up a bottle of Macallan Sixty. It had even less in it than the other bottle did. “We’re good.”

“Oh. Okay.” Bucky nodded. “It’s good that you're good.”

“So, picture now?” Sam asked.

“Oh! Yes.” He draped his arms around Steve again and held up his phone. “Picture.” The chibis had already been taken off the top, and a slice was missing, but — ‘Oh my god, it’s even shinier on the inside!” He smiled, way happier than he should be, and he pointed at it. “Look, honey, my cake is
“I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.”

“What.” Bucky shrugged. “It is — hey, wait! He took a bite out of your head?” He pointed to where a chunk was missing out of the side of Steve’s chibi head. Bucky’s Grumpy Cat was burning merrily and Steve’s looked — “And why is my head burning? I know I blew that thing out.”

“You want a picture don’t you?” Nat asked.

“Well, yeah. But I wanted a whole cake with cake tops and a boyfriend head that doesn’t look like the wrong end of the Walking Dead.”

“Well, this is what you get.”

“Fucking disaster,” Bucky mumbled as he fumbled with his phone. It took him about five tries, but he finally got a picture that didn’t look shaky (last time he ever drank, swear to God...), only to glance over it and find fucking fingers in the shot. He glared at his friends. “You think you could maybe not take swipes at my cake?”

“Almost two in the morning, zalupa.”

“Ukus moyu zadnitsu, Natashenka,” Bucky shot back. “Besides, you’re spies. You should be able to go all night.”

“Oh.” Clint’s smile was pure letch. “We do.”

“That’s another thing.” Because the cake tops were still a problem he’d just remembered. “No one eats my boyfriend but me.”

Everyone was suddenly staring at him, for reasons he couldn’t possibly fathom, because they were his cake tops and his cake, and he was just really really drunk and he wanted cake and Steve and his bed in the very near future to sleep this off and —

“Oh, fuck you,” he grumbled as the room erupted into laughter. He buried his face in his phone as he uploaded the photo to Instagram, with the caption, It's been a bit more than a year now since I started this Instagram account. Time to celebrate with an awesome custom cake and...YOU GUYS, CAN YOU WAIT A MINUTE FOR ME TO TAKE A PIC??! And who the hell ate Steve's head?? I'm the only one allowed to eat my boyfriend!! OH, COME ON!! Give me a break! How old are you to giggle at stuff like that? You are all FIVE!! You too Steve, PARTICULARLY YOU!!, and hit send.

He grabbed the bottle off the table and chugged. “I deserve better friends than this.”

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Bucky started awake. Fuck, what time was it. He groaned as he tried to sit up, only to come up against the very real two-hundred-plus-pounds of weight on top of him, snoring softly. He glanced around, taking in his living room, lights still on, people still there. By people meaning Clint and Nat sitting at the island in his kitchen. He frowned and patted at the coffee table until he came up with his phone. Five-thirty.

“Why are you still here?” he asked, his voice rough from sleep. Neither looked over, though, and he wondered if maybe he was dreaming. He at least knew he was still drunk. Either that or being a super soldier also meant no hangover. That would be fantastic.
He laid back and smiled giddily to himself, carding his fingers through Steve’s hair. There were massive pockets of the evening he could not remember to save his life (including how he ended up passed out on the couch), but all in all, he’d had fun tonight. All his progress and people had noticed, even if he barely did. But it didn’t matter because they did and they cared.

He didn’t deserve friends like these.

He watched (see: attempted to focus) on Nat and Clint as they sat in the kitchen, a slice of cake between them, both still looking top-notch despite the party coming up on the twelve-hour mark. He wasn’t surprised Sam and Tony had tapped out early, because the both sucked, but not Nat and Clint. He was certain the comment he thought he made earlier about going all night or something had been seen as a challenge. And Nat never backed down from a challenge, especially one from Bucky.

Something caught his eye and he looked up just in time to see one of the tarantulas drop slowly down from the ceiling, right over Clint’s head. He squinted at it, trying to see its coloring and figure out which one it was. But all the patterns on its legs and back were wrong, and either his brain was playing drunk tricks on him, or...

Oh. Oh.

“Clint,” Bucky whispered fervently. “Clint.” He pointed in wonder and excitement at what his super spy eyes had found. Goddamn he was good at his job.

Because, that right there, sir, was spider numero tres. He’d found it!

He wiggled a little from his Steve-cage, smiling as he wagged a finger at it, but neither of them was paying him any attention. Why were they not paying attention? It was slowly lowering itself from the ceiling and no one was watching this magic unfold, and — but ooooooh, fuck. It was gonna...

“Clint. You have a — a thing. It’s going to grab your... well, shit.” Bucky flapped his arms and looked around at nothing, saying to nobody, “He’s not gonna be able to hear me now.”

That was just...this was all no good. Clint was basically deaf without the ear thingy and Bucky sure as shit couldn’t sign right now, because, well, the drunk business and the Steve business. The universe was against him.

But ooooh. A picture would work. Then he could show Clint who stole his ear thingy.

He held up his camera and aimed true, tongue stuck firmly to the side in concentration. This was a picture for the ages: a spider stealing the Great and Powerful Hawkeye’s hearing aid, and Natasha was right there watching it all go down!

She was evil, that one.

It still didn’t stop Bucky from very carefully snapping the photo.

He stared down at it. It was excellent composition, and he just really wanted to show this to Steve. He nudged him carefully, jerking a little at the snort he got for his troubles.

“Whowasit?” Steve blinked and wiped at his mouth. He turned and frowned down at Bucky. “Buck. Why’re you under me?”

“How should I know? You fell asleep on me — ooph!” Steve pressed against Bucky’s ribs as he righted himself and looked around again. His eyes landed on Clint and Nat, who’d both finally
looked over.

“Why’re you here?”

Nat gave a half shrug. “No one said we had to leave.”

“Cuz we were passed out, maybe?”

“Semantics.”

‘Can u hear?’ The signing was slow and one-handed, but Bucky was pretty sure he got at least the letters right. Ish.

“How can I know if I can hear if you’re signing to me, cupcake — oh, hell.” Clint slapped a hand to his ear and looked wildly around. “Where the hell is my damn hearing aid?”

“No idea, honey.” Nat shook her head, all innocence and bullshit.

“Can you help me look for it?”

“Oh sure, sure.”

It was too fucking late/early for this. Bucky grabbed his phone and fired off the image via Instagram. He was sure he would pay for this too, but he was way too drunk to care. He waved his hand until he caught Clint’s attention and mouthed Instagram at him.

Ah! I think we found the third one! Nat, maybe you should tell Clint that...oh well, he'll find out soon enough!

Brows furrowed, Clint pulled out his phone, only for confusion to give way to suspicion, to suddenly, his head shot up toward the ceiling. “Natasha, you are responsible for this, you get it down.”

Natasha broke into giggles before finally vaulting up onto the counter and holding her hand out. She murmured quietly to the tarantula, and of course it immediately went to her hand. She plucked the hearing aid out of its grasp and tossed it to Clint before she began to pet the spider, cooing softly to it.

“I knew you’d trained those things,” Bucky exclaimed. “You know, it’s a good thing you’re on our side. You would have made an amazing super-villain.”

She glanced over her shoulder, smile more than just a little wicked, and winked. “And don’t you forget it.”
I found someone reliable, AT LAST, to take care of Nat's spiders. He showed up two hours late with Starbucks and a basket full of homemade chocolate and cherry muffins but I guess he's the right guy for job! I'm gonna miss my fluffy friends. Goodbye Huey, Dewey and Louie! By the way Parker, you've got 10 minutes to get us rid of the big spider web outside, got it?
“Huey, ida syuda.” Bucky held out his metal arm and waited patiently, if not a little gleefully, as Huey crawled up his leg and onto the back of his hand.

“Net, Louie.” Bucky quickly held up his other hand and glared at the dominating little fucker who’d tried to sneak in behind Huey and clamber up as well. “Ostanovit.”

Louie was never happy unless he was in charge. And, as Nat had so helpfully explained once Bucky had been sober enough to listen, the back of the hand was considered a place of honor for her three little spider-spies. And anytime Huey or Dewey was perched up there, Louie wasn’t far behind, trying to steal the spotlight.

He gave Louie is best Steve Rogers, ‘I’m not happy with your shit’ look. “My ob etom govorili. Eto ne vasha ochered’.”

If a tarantula could look suitably chastised, Louie was doing an excellent job of telling Bucky to fuck off.

“Oh, so that’s how it’s gonna be? Fine. tanets dlya menya.” Right on cue, Louie shot out a stream of webbing, attaching to the fireplace, and swung out before spindling a web faster than he’d ever thought possible for a spider. Just like the command asked, it really did look like he was dancing for Bucky. It was oddly beautiful to watch.

The front door opened and not long after a light kiss dropped onto his head as a cup of Starbucks appeared in front of his face. “Another web, Buck? Really?”

“It’s pretty.” He grabbed the cup and took a sip. He knew why he was being punished with Starbucks — the tarantulas had more than outstayed their welcome — so no way was he going to bitch about it. And at least Steve had gotten him a pour over. “That said, you’ll be happy to know, I have a new babysitter for these little guys,” he announced as he watched Dewey crawl across the back of the couch and up onto Bucky’s shoulder.

Steve suddenly plopped down on the opposite end, an excited smile on his face. “You mean we can finally have our apartment back?”

Okay, yeah, that was fair. As much as Bucky loved having Huey, Dewey, and Louie around (their actual Russian names were damn-near unpronounceable), there was hardly a surface left that wasn’t covered in webbing. Nat had shown Bucky all their commands, but that still didn’t change the fact that they were here out of revenge, and getting buried in spider webs seemed to be Nat’s master plan. It was a light revenge, as far as revenges went, but Bucky had a feeling that, after what had happened with Steve, Nat was going easy on him on purpose. If, by easy, it meant that Bucky literally could no longer see the face of the TV.

Bucky nodded. “Mhm. Peter’s picking them up in a little while.”

“Huh. You know it never occurred to me to call him?”

“It’s because you’re losing it in your old age, Rogers.”

“You’re older than me, Buck.”

“And yet, I’m still better looking.”

Steve kicked him in the shin. “Asshole.” Then his smile softened, and he picked up Bucky’s feet, placing them in his lap. “Hey, uh, we never got a chance to talk after therapy.”
Bucky stiffened. He'd known this conversation was coming. It had been a hard session, and the surprise party right after hadn’t helped, even if Bucky had eventually had fun.

“Vremya dlya krovati, mal'chikov,” he commanded, and all three launched themselves across the room and into their habitat over by the window. He was going to have to take Nat out for drinks and congratulate her on being so impressive.

He turned back to Steve. “Okay. So talk.”

It was harsh, he knew it was, but he still wasn’t sure where his head was at, and right now, he didn’t want to deal with any of it, outside of the doctor’s office.

Steve, though, seemed to have other plans. And the ever patient asshole just began to massage his ankles and calves instead of getting mad at Bucky’s snap.

Bucky couldn't decide if his tentative smile was sweet or infuriating.

“Look, baby, I get it,” Steve said, calm and a little placating. “I was right where you were last December —”

“I know that.”

“I know you do — I know you do. But, Buck...” Steve took a deep breath and ran his hands up until he was gripping just behind Bucky’s knees. “Bucky, I love you. I love you more than my own life, and I would gladly have given it then if it meant finding you alive. It’s why I literally spent three days digging for you with my bare hands. Nat, Sam, Clint, they all tried to get me to wait for reinforcements, but I was so crazed, I couldn’t even hear what they wanted, I was too busy moving actual heaven and earth to get to you.”

“I don’t understand...”

Steve twisted around to crawl over Bucky and settled between his legs. Bucky instinctively wrapped his arms around Steve, hooking their ankles together. Lips pressed lightly against his own.

“I’m proud of you for telling Dr. Lyn what happened, but she was right when she said we needed to take a hard look at how dependent we are on each other. We have both jeopardized missions, as well as the lives of our friends because — because, well...” Steve’s breath hitched and he buried his face into Bucky’s neck, clinging to him tight.

Bucky felt his own tears slip, and he returned as good as he got, gripping onto Steve for dear life. “I can’t lose you, Stevie. I can’t do this without you.”

“And you think I can?” Steve lifted his head, his eyes red-rimmed and hard. “That’s my point. That was Dr. Lyn’s point. You and I, we shouldn’t be...we do more damage than good...” He let out a frustrated grunt and pushed up until he was sitting in Bucky’s lap. “Buck, I’ve been thinking, and I gotta say, I agree with her. Now I know you aren’t going to like it, but I really think either we figure out a way to come to terms with the fact that we could very well lose each other one day, or we retire.”

That was not what Bucky thought Steve was going to say. He stared back in shock. “Are you serious?”

Steve’s nod was quick, decisive. “Yes. The fact that it’s hard to kill either of us has made us complacent, and I think we’ve lost sight of the fact that we’re not actually immortal. We just assume the other person will always be there, and our reactions at the idea that that may not be true... You
“You think I don’t know that?” Bucky all but yelled at him. “You think I don’t worry about that every single day?” He barked out a short, bitter laugh. “Believe me, Steve, I am hyper aware of just how easily one of us could be dead tomorrow. I don’t need a fucking reminder —”

“Yes, you do!” Steve was up and instantly in Bucky’s face. He shoved a finger against Bucky’s chest. “Yes, you do, and so do I. What happened to you in December, and what happened to me last month only proves that. We both effectively lost our shit when we thought the other might be dead. I almost destroyed myself to get to you, and you — you almost killed yourself!”

“You’re right, Jesus fuck, okay? I tried to kill myself!” Bucky yelled back. He shoved Steve away, his voice strangled as he tried to hold back the seemingly unending emotions tumbling through him. “I thought you were dead” — he shoved Steve again — “and however passive it might have been” — and again — “I tried to crack my own skull open, get myself to bleed out” — and again — “or maybe even set off one of those mini strokes Dr. Cho can’t figure out, just to get it over with.” He shoved Steve one more time, only to have whatever was building up burst wide open, a sob ripping right out of him. He grabbed onto the front of Steve’s t-shirt and pressed his forehead against Steve’s chest. “I can’t lose you, Steve.”

Arms wrapped around him, gentle now, and Steve rested his cheek in Bucky’s hair. “Then we pick the other option. We retire.”

“I don’t wanna do that either.”

He couldn’t explain it, but the idea of giving up the fight — of living the quiet life — sounded almost as horrific as going at this life alone. Almost.

Steve slowly began to rub his back and Bucky finally let go to wrap his arms around Steve’s waist. “Steve,” he whispered, “I don’t know how to do this. I can’t not be on the front lines, but I can’t not be with you, either.”

“I know, baby.”

“So then what do we do?”

“Honestly? I have no idea.”

Bucky was afraid he was going to say that. Being part of SHIELD, being soldiers and fighting the good fight, that was them. It’s all they’d ever known, even when they were kids and it was standing up to bullies. They were soldiers to the core, but they were also soulmates. And Bucky suddenly had no idea which one was supposed to come first.

“Maybe we just work up to it, then?” Bucky asked, grasping at the first idea that made any sense.

“Huh?” Steve pulled back enough to catch Bucky’s eye. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you got us this leave, right? Maybe we take some time, work a bit more with Doc, and then maybe we try the easier missions. Fact finders, undercover work like what we did in London, things like that. Stay out of the wet work for now. Eventually build up to the more dangerous stuff and figure out how to do it without compromising everything else.”
“You know,” Steve said slowly, his eyes full of hesitation, “if part of this is learning how to work without each other, we, uh, might also want to consider spending some time apart —”

“No.” Bucky’s grip on Steve was hard enough to make Steve hiss, but Bucky didn’t give two shits about that. “Not a fucking chance, Steve. We figure out how to do this together — as a team — or not at all.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“I genuinely don’t care.”

Steve sighed and shook his head, but the tiny smile on his face spelled defeat. “Okay, Buck. We do this as a team.”

“Therapy together.”

“Joint missions.”

“When we’re ready.”

“And only the easy ones.”

“For now.”

Steve captured Bucky’s mouth in a heartfelt kiss — slow and perfect. “So no retiring then?”

Bucky shook his head. “Not for now. I agree that we need to work on not being a crutch to each other, but I think we’d be bored off our asses inside of a year, and then we’d just kill each other, which would sort of defeat the whole purpose.”

“You mean I would kill you because you’re a monstrous pain in my ass?”

“I am not,” Bucky exclaimed, affronted. He gave Steve’s ass a squeeze and smiled. “I’m always gentle with your ass.”

“Not exactly sure how you can call what you did the other night gentle, Buck. And by the way, when I said pain in my ass, I’m fairly certain I meant this.” He swept an arm around the room, completely covered in the ruins of Bucky’s and Nat’s revenge battle. Then he pecked a kiss to Bucky’s nose and pulled away, heading toward the office. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go hide in the one room not redecorated in spider webs, while we wait for Parker to get here.” He stopped and turned around, his eyes hopeful. “Which is gonna be soon, right?”

Bucky glanced at the covered clock on the wall, just barely able to make out the time. “Sometime in the next hour, yeah.”

“ Fucking better,” Steve muttered and headed into his hidey hole.

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“SHIT!”

Bucky came skidding into the office just in time to see a huge clay bust go crashing to the floor, bits of gray scattering in every direction. Steve slammed the door shut on his mini kiln and grabbed at what looked like a burn, high up on his bicep, with a hiss of pain.

“Fuck, are you okay?” Bucky immediately went to him and gingerly took Steve’s arm in his hand.
The burn looked pretty good, third degree even. The skin was black and charred, and thank God for a strong stomach, because it was still smoking slightly. “ Seriously, Steve, fuck. What the fuck happened?”

“That,” Steve said, with a nod over Bucky’s shoulder. “That is what the fuck happened.”

Bucky turned, and oh, holy hell. Peter Parker, in full Spiderman gear, was perched on a web, spun just outside the window, some sort of basket in one hand, and his other hand holding his mask up as he looked on in abject horror. Fucking Christ...

“You,” Bucky shouted, pointing a finger at Peter, only to crook it towards himself. “You come here.” He walked over and unlatched the far window, just outside the web’s reach. He leaned out and glared at the little red and blue bastard. “Get your fucking ass in here, Parker.”

Peter shook his head, hard. “That’s...that’s okay. I, uh, I think I’m okay — yeah, I’m okay right here.”

“I swear to God, Parker, I will kill you if you don’t get the fuck in here right now.” It didn’t help that the kid was two hours late, but to show up at their fucking window, and cause Steve to get burned in the process... “Actually, on second thought, you should stay there because I’m going to kill you regardless.”

“Bucky, leave him alone.” Bucky turned back, ready to protest, only to find Steve stalking over to bang on one of the window panes. He instantly pulled back with another hiss, and that’s when Bucky saw another burn on his hand. “He’s mine to kill.”

“Okay, but! I really am sorry!” Peter held up the basket. “I brought muffins, you like muffins right? Aunt May made you muffins, and Tony wanted me to wait for him so he could be around when I tested out this new webbing” — he gave a small bounce on the web — “and I didn’t mean to be so late, but I really did —”

“Wait, what do you mean, ‘wait for Tony?” Bucky cut in, only to fall back with a shout when he suddenly found himself with a face full of Iron Man. “What. The fuck.”

Tony gave a short wave. “Hey there, Frosty. Also, Cap. Hey, Cap. Both of you.” He nodded at them in turn before inclining his head towards Peter. “Don’t blame the youngin’. I really did want to be around for his first test.”

“Okay, but why is he running a test outside our window?” Steve wasn’t looking at Tony, but down at his hand. He gave it a little shake. “The front door just seems safer. For everyone.”

“Well, you know, can’t have Petey here fighting crime on last year’s webbing. What would the cool kids say?” He perched himself on the window ledge and lifted his mask, only to reveal the most pathetic, solemn face. Bucky didn’t buy it for a second. “Do you want him to get picked on in school?”

“I’m not in school any—”

“Well, actually, while the webbing is stronger, it’s designed to break down faster, and we needed to test the volatility —”

“Anyway.” Bucky waved them all off. “Are you even able to take the triplets with you?” Bucky’s eyes then fell on the basket still in Peter’s hand. “And are you going to give me the goddamn
muffins?” He made grabby hands at them. “I’m hungry.”

“Oh! Yeah.” Peter crawled across the web, only to come up short where Tony was sitting on the open window ledge. Actively not moving. “Uh, excuse me,” he muttered as he began awkwardly climbing over him.

“Oh, you’re not bothering me,” Tony replied with grin. Still very much not moving, even as Peter stumbled and fell the rest of the way into the apartment, his super reflexes just managing to keep the basket upright.

He jumped to his feet and presented the basket to Steve. “Here, Mr. Rogers. Captain. Sorry. Captain Rogers. Chocolate and cherry muffins from Aunt May. Oh! Also, there’s coffee.”

“Uh.” Steve lifted the towel on the basket, only to glance back up, brows furrowed. “Where?”

“Well, Mr. Wilson has them.”

“Wait, Sam?” Bucky peered out the window, and sure enough, Sam was on his way up, a tray of yet more Starbucks in his hand. Bucky took the tray as soon as he was close enough. “What, mom and dad couldn’t let little Petey go off to school on his own?”

“Fuck you, Barnes,” Sam shot back, as he glided back and forth in front of their apartment window. “And to think I brought ya’ll coffee.”

“You brought me Starbucks. This doesn’t make us friends.”

“You love me.”

“Only on Tuesdays.”

Bucky set the tray down before taking the basket out of Steve’s hand. He gave him a light kiss. “Go put something on those burns, okay?” That said... “How did you even burn your hand?”

Steve glanced down at it. “No idea.”

Bucky snorted. “Color me not surprised.”

Steve went to take care of his burns while Bucky grabbed a muffin and shoved it whole into his mouth. He groaned. “Chritth, thas good,” he said around a mouthful of chocolate chips and cherries. He swallowed then pointed at Peter. “Okay, you get a pass. Let me just go get the children.” He walked back out into the living room, where the tarantulas were still chilling in their habitat.

“Podpisvaytes’ na menya,” he commanded with a snap of his fingers. All three scrambled out and after him as he headed back to the office. The room was completely free of web, and goddamn however Nat had trained them, because they immediately started in on their special brand of decoration.

“Yeah, they gotta go,” he muttered, just as Steve walked back in, scoffing from behind him.

“Did you have to bring them in here?”

“I’ll clean it up!”

“Damn right, you will.”

“It’s amazing how quickly they work,” Tony commented. “Think we can take them back to the lab
so I can test their —”

“*No!*” It came from not just Bucky and Steve, but Peter as well, and Bucky had to hand it to him for sticking up for his new pets. It wasn’t often that Peter showed real backbone around some of them.

Bucky couldn’t help but be a little proud of him as he went on: “They aren’t your science experiment, Stark. You get that enough with the rest of us.”

“Woah, Spider Rights.” Tony held up his hands in surrender. “No experimenting, got it.”

“Anyway.” Steve held up his camera and gave Bucky a half smile. “Think you can get the troops under control long enough so I can get a picture?”

Bucky grinned before turning to where the three were currently covering the shield where it sat on the floor. He held out his arms. “*Soldaty. idy syuda.*” It only took a moment for him to have an armful of little spider spies.

He smiled big as Steve snapped a few photos, then released them to go about their business. He turned to Peter. “Before you go, I need to teach you some Russian commands for them.”

“Okay, sure.”

Bucky spent the next hour working through all the phrases Nat had given him. He was impressed at how quickly Peter picked them all up, but it took a bit for him to get the right level of inflection to make the three listen to him. Finally, it was time to go.

The three were now perched up on the desk next to where Steve was playing with his camera. Bucky bit back a laugh because, Steve’d been sitting there for so long, they’d ended up ‘securing’ him to the desk.

He held up a hand. “Oh my god, you all stay right there. I need a picture.” He waved at Peter. “You get up on the desk next to them.”

“Uh, why?” Steve asked, eyebrow arched. “Why are we having the full-sized human jumping up on the desk?”

“Oh, please, Stevie. We’ve totally had sex on that desk, and we *easily* weigh —”

“Okay, point taken!”

Bucky snickered and grabbed his phone out of his pocket. Not surprisingly, as soon as Peter was in place — mask back on now — Louie had made his way up onto Peter’s knee. Always in the seat of power, that one.

Bucky fired off a couple pics before loading one up onto Instagram:

*I found someone reliable, AT LAST, to take care of Nat's spiders. He showed up two hours late with Starbucks and a basket full of homemade chocolate and cherry muffins but I guess he's the right guy for the job! I'm gonna miss my fluffy friends. Goodbye Huey, Dewey and Louie! By the way Parker, you've got ten minutes to get us rid of the big spider web outside, got it?*

He hit send and shoved his phone back into his pocket. “All right, Parker, their habitat is in the other room. Time for you all to leave before I change my mind and Steve does me in.”

“No arguments here,” Steve agreed.
“Yeah. Yep. On it.” Peter held out his arm, and in halting Russian, managed to get out the command for them to crawl up. He headed into the other room, returning with their habitat. Then he started toward window.

“Uh...” No way was Peter about to... “Are you seriously taking them out the window? Wouldn’t the elevator be easier this time?”

Peter looked down, eyes wide, like it never occurred to him that he shouldn’t go out the way he’d come. “Good point.” He turned to leave, only for Bucky to grab his arm.

He pointed back out the window. “That thing first. Then you can go.”

It was another few minutes to get the web outside cleared away, and for Peter to leave, but finally, blessedly, for the first time in weeks, they were truly and absolutely alone.

Bucky collapsed onto Steve’s lap and snuggled in close. “It’s finally quiet around here.”

“It really is,” Steve answered, a hand rubbing up and down Bucky’s back. He kissed Bucky’s hair. “And we have indefinite downtime in front of us.”

“What are we supposed to do with all of that?”

Bucky shivered at the quiet hum Steve let loose. “Oh, I can think of a few things.”

They were up and out of the chair in an instant, broken cobwebs flying every which way as Bucky pulled Steve loose and they made their way to the bedroom.

The apartment needed an epic cleaning. But, the webs would still be there tomorrow, and for the first time since Bucky came home all those years ago, they had all the time in the world to take care of it.
A short video Steve and I shot at the park behind our apartment building. It’s only September but it’s freezing as hell outside and we even had snow for at least a good hour. It’s Steve who edited the vid and chose the music. It took him 5 hours only for these 15 seconds because he couldn’t make up his mind between all the footage we filmed that day. (Music: Bensound - Acoustic Breeze, Camera: Steve, me and...a tripod)

A short video Steve and I shot at the park behind our apartment building. It’s only September but it’s freezing as hell outside and we even had snow for at least a good hour. It’s Steve who edited the vid and chose the music. It took him 5 hours only for these 15 seconds because he couldn’t make up his mind between all the footage we filmed that day. (Music: Bensound - Acoustic Breeze, Camera: Steve, me and...a tripod)

SPECIAL NOTE: The image in this chapter is a video, but it won’t play here, so click on the text above so you can go watch it. Right now, the embed feature on AO3 isn't
Steve’s breath shuddered hot against Bucky’s collar, and Bucky held tight to sweat-slick skin as he lifted off of Steve’s lap, sliding almost all the way off of his dick, before driving back down.

The apartment was sweltering, with the heater on and a fire going mid-afternoon. It was unnaturally cold for September — normally New York was in the middle of an Indian Summer — and Steve and Bucky were taking full advantage by doing whatever they could to stay warm. Well, whatever they could to keep Bucky warm. He wasn’t fooling anyone.

“Fuck, Steve, I —” He choked on his own words as Steve tilted Bucky back and hit that sweet spot deep inside him. He cried out — so close now — his whole body on fire, only to have Steve lift him up just enough to slam him back down.

Bucky’s eyes flew open as his entire brain whitened out. He came on a silent scream, even as Steve laughed wickedly in his ear.

“You — bastard,” Bucky growled when he finally was able to form words. He grabbed Steve’s hair and yanked back. Steve hissed, but there was a glint in his eyes, and just. He knew what he was doing, and he really was a bastard.

Bucky slowed down, nothing but shallow little circles along the head of Steve’s dick. “I should...just do — this...for the rest...of the day. Not let you come...for that dick move.”

Steve just grinned avariciously at him. “What about my dick?”

Bucky groaned. “You are the wor—” He broke off with a whine when Steve gripped his dick, still sensitive, and began jacking him off. “Fuck you.”

“That’s sort of the point.”

“How do you constantly have the worst —” His eyes ticked to the window behind Steve as something outside caught his eye. “What the...”

“What is it?” Steve turned to look. “What are you looking at?”

Bucky narrowed his eyes, wondering for a second if he was losing it — nope, there it was again. A small white something fluttering past the — aw, Christ.

“You have got to be kidding me.” Bucky came to a full stop on Steve’s lap.

“What?” Now Steve was really craning around. “What the fuck are you looking at?”

Bucky waved a hand at the little white bullshit puff that made its appearance at that moment. “It’s fucking snowing.”

“No way.” The next thing Bucky knew he was on his ass, unceremoniously dumped onto the floor as Steve scrambled up to go look out the window. “Holy shit, it is!” He turned back to smile at Bucky, who just snarled in return. His smile slid off only to be replaced with a long-suffering look. “Really, Buck? Really?”
“It’s fucking September.”

“I know! How fucking cool is that? Snow in September!”

Bucky wondered if Steve had grown three heads he couldn’t see. It would explain the insanity. “You have met me, right?”

“Let’s go down to Trinity Park!”

Okay, Steve really had grown three heads. “Okay, now I’m starting to wonder if I should ask this question for real — you actually have met me, right? Wait, I know this one.” He pointed at Steve and then himself. “You are Steve Rogers. And I’m Bucky Barnes. We’re in relationship — which may be on rocky ground after you stopped sex to make that request — and when you remember me, you’ll remember you love me and would never force me out into the cold if I didn’t have to go. Because I hate the goddamned cold, Steven.”

Steve came over and plopped down in front of Bucky. And oh, hell no, he was not pouting.

“Please, baby?” He tried to take Bucky’s hand, only for Bucky to yank it back. He pouted harder. “Pleeeaaase? It could be fun. I’ll take my camera.”

“If that fucking face doesn’t work on you, how can you possibly think it’s gonna work on me?”

“Please?”

“No.”

“But snow. And fall leaves.”

“It’s cold.”

“It’s pretty.”

“It’s also you stopping in the middle of sex to ask me to go play in the one thing I hate.”

Whatever automatic response Steve probably had died on his lips, and Bucky couldn’t help but feel smug. Steve stared at him, a little fish-faced.

“Oh...It never snows in September? We have sex all the time.”

“I am actively holding back from decking you right now.”

“I promise to make you scream at least six times —”

“Eight.”

“— eight times tonight, if you’ll do this one thing for me.”

“I’m not cracking.”

(Except for how he was cracking a little.)

“Do it because you love me?”

“Something that’s clearly not reciprocated.”

It was at that moment Steve started batting his eyelashes, and Bucky just lost it. He burst out
laughing, because seriously, he wasn’t sure Steve had ever looked so ridiculous in his life. And that was saying something. How the hell was Bucky supposed to hold his resolve against that?

He leaned and kissed that adorable (goddammit!) lip sticking out. “I’m going to hate you for the rest of our lives for this.”

“As long as I get my way, I’m good with that.”

“As long as you...” Bucky shook his head. “I feel like I’m in some alternate universe, where everything is reversed. Stop learning from me!”

Steve just smiled beatifically at him.

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“How is it you bitch about the cold on a near-constant basis, and yet you’re wearing that?”

Bucky glanced down at his jeans, boots, jacket, and admittedly thin white t-shirt. He flat-out ignored the violent shiver that went down his spine, and looked back up at Steve, defiant. “The cold can bite my shiny metal ass.”

“Oh, okay, Bender.”

They were standing in a copse of trees at Trinity Park, about half a mile from their apartment. Bucky refused to admit it out loud (and he would commit murder against anyone who tried to make him), but it actually really was pretty here. The leaves had just started turning a golden brown, creating a breathtaking backdrop to the falling white flakes, the likes of which Bucky had never seen. The last earliest snowfall in New York had been in October. Of ’79.

(Bucky knew everything there was to know about snow in New York. It was always best to stay on top of the enemy.)

He picked up a leaf and started playing with it while Steve worked to set up his tripod. “You know this early snowfall is because of global warming, right?” he commented, as he twirled the leaf around in his finger. “It doesn’t just warm up the planet, but also creates extreme weather fronts.”

“Yeah, I saw The Day After Tomorrow, too.” Bucky didn’t miss the hint of a smile from behind the camera, so he flipped Steve off. Because he was an adult like that.

“Jack ass.” He pulled out his phone and began recording the little dancing leaf in his hands. “No, I’m serious,” he said, as the leaf twisted this way and that as the snow fell around it. His fingers were slightly numb, but he was trying to be a good fucking boyfriend and ignore it. “I saw a documentary on it once. Who knows. In ten years, we might even see this shit in fucking July.”

Steve’s head popped up from behind the camera, a smiling lighting up his face. “You mean snow for my birthday? Fireworks and snow?”

“I will kill you, Rogers.”

“Such a fucking spoilsport,” Steve grumbled and went back to his camera.

The little leaf snapped off from its stem and blew away. Bucky dropped the remaining twig on the ground and put his phone back. Then he shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and walked over to see what was taking Steve so long. “You know this isn’t some Terrence Malick footage, right? What are you even doing over here?”
Steve stepped back and looped his arms through Bucky’s, pulling him close. He kissed Bucky’s temple, and Bucky may or may not have leaned into the touch, into Steve. Warm and solid Steve.

“I just want to make sure I’m setting this up to get the best view of the park. I’ve got it going right now, filming the snowfall. I was thinking I’d test out the latest Premiere update, and I don’t know...” He nodded out towards rest of the park. “This just seemed like a good place to start. My best guy and a snowfall in September. Two of the most gorgeous things I’ve ever seen. Why wouldn’t I want to capture that on film?”

Bucky tucked his head into the crook of Steve’s neck, hiding his smile. He wanted to say something snappy, something witty that would skate over Steve’s comment. But all he could think about was how close he came to not having this, and how stupidly happy he was that it hadn’t been taken away from him. He would gladly freeze to death in the barren wastelands of Siberia if he could do from the confines of Steve’s arms.

He planted a quick kiss to Steve’s neck before pulling away, tucking his smile in just for himself. “So.” He shook his head. “What are we doing out here? You dragged my freezing ass out here. What are we doing?”

“I don’t know.” Steve gave a slight shrug. “Having fun, maybe?” He grabbed Bucky’s metal hand and pulled him further into the trees. “Shocking as this may seem, Buck, it is possible to have fun in the snow.”

Bucky just snorted. “Says you.”

“Says me,” Steve confirmed. “And you know, I’m Captain America, and Captain America is never wrong.”

“Never —” Bucky coughed on a laugh, and Steve was getting it for that. He reached over to pull down a giant leaf covered in snow, and quickly flicked it, catching Steve right in the face. He burst out laughing even as Steve sputtered snow out of his mouth.

“What the hell, Buck!” he exclaimed, but he was laughing right along with Bucky. He reached out for his own leaf, but Bucky easily danced out of the way, and it was on after that.

There wasn’t much snow, even if it was sticking, but that didn’t stop the two of them from making use of what little they had. They raced in and out of the trees, launching tiny snow missiles at each other, and Bucky couldn’t remember the last time they’d had this much fun.

He used his metal arm to launch himself up into one of the trees so he could shake it out over Steve’s head as he passed underneath. Steve must have missed his climb up, because he shrieked when the snow hit him, and Bucky doubled over in laughter, shaking so hard his sides hurt. Steve used Bucky’s momentary lapse in attention against him, though, and the next thing he knew he was in a freefall, knocked out of the tree when Steve slammed into it. He hit the ground hard, all the air leaving his lungs mid-laugh in a quick rush.

“That’s what you get, asshole!” Steve shouted with a loud whoop. He came into Bucky’s field of vision, grin wide and cheeks flushed, and Bucky was coughing through another bout of laughter at the look of sheer joy on Steve’s face.

Steve held out a hand to pull him up and into his arms. Bucky ruffled Steve’s hair, knocking the last of the snow out of it. Wet as it was, it ended up sticking out in all directions, and good God, how did Bucky ever luck out on someone so beautiful.
“I love you, Stevie.” He took Steve’s face in his hands and kissed him, deep and heartfelt. He felt Steve smile against his lips, and the arms around him became that much tighter. They made out like that, standing among the trees, slightly wet, and ridiculously cold. And Bucky didn’t want to think about how long it had been, but for the first time in probably forever, he felt real bliss. Real happiness and just a touch of the peace they both had sorely missed since Steve’s rescue.

“See, Buck, not so bad,” Steve said when they finally, reluctantly, pulled away from each other. He looked to where the snow seemed to be slowing down a bit. “But snow’s almost gone, so you know, you’ll get to go back to the blazing apartment again soon.”

“That’s true.” Bucky nodded. Then he stepped back just far enough so he could thread his fingers with Steve’s. “Or, you know, we could maybe stay out here a while longer.” He pointed a thumb over his shoulder. “I mean, you can’t have enough footage for a full video, right? Think we’ll have to spend a little while out here capturing some more stuff.”

“Yeah?” A smile slowly spread across Steve’s face, and that was everything in the world.

Bucky gave his hand a little tug. “Come on, Stevie.”

~~~~

They stayed at the park into the early evening, first grabbing a bunch of footage with the camera on its stand, but eventually with Steve following Bucky around with it. By the time they were done, they had hours of footage. The moment they got home, Steve disappeared to the office and studio to start putting something together.

“You want me to order pizza?” Bucky called out to his retreating form, phone already in hand.

“Yeah, sure!”

“Not even sure why I asked.” He called up Juliana’s and ordered three large pies for them. They didn’t deliver like Emily’s would, but they were only around the corner, and he knew Steve was going to be a while. Sure enough, by the time he got back from picking up dinner, Steve had only just finished rendering his files and was practically glued to his monitor as he began sorting through it all.

Bucky dropped a pie on the desk and a kiss to the top of Steve’s head. “Oh, hey before I forget, I took a video, too.” He pulled out his phone and emailed Steve the video of him playing with the leaf. “Maybe you can use it for something.”

“Thanks, baby,” Steve answered absently, his eyes not leaving the monitor, even as he blindly pulled out a piece of pizza and shoved it in his mouth. Bucky just laughed and headed back to the kitchen, where his own food was waiting for him. “Love you!” Steve called out, after the fact.

“Yep!” Bucky called back with another laugh. “Love you, too.”

He grabbed his tablet off the counter, and opened up his Kindle app to go back to reading Old Man’s War. He’d already read it a few times over the years. It had actually been on his docket to read later that day, after he was done binging Bride Wars, but, well... He hadn’t gotten that far.

The memory hit him like a punch to the gut, and Bucky had to set his tablet back down, afraid he was going to crack the screen from where his grip had tightened around it. He closed his eyes and took deep, steadying breaths — just like Doc had told him to, just like he’d practiced with Steve — and waited for the panic to subside. It was in the past. Steve was in the next room, fucking around on the computer, healthy and whole, and probably already halfway through his very large pizza.
Probably hadn’t even noticed he was halfway through it, because Steve was a goddamned vacuum when it came to food.

And he would continue to be a food vacuum. And he would continue to nag Bucky about cleaning up his messes (even though he was just as bad), and he would continue to make art, and make love to Bucky, and he would continue to be there. To live. He hadn’t died on Bucky, and Bucky wasn’t facing a dark void of a life without Steve in it.

It took him a couple minutes, but eventually his breathing stabilized, and he could open his eyes again to remind himself that he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Don’t fucking die on me, Stevie.

One hand shook as he grabbed for a slice of pizza, the other steady as a rock as he picked up his tablet again. He shook off the last few minutes and turned back to his book and his dinner. He could fucking do this.

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A notification popped up just as the last of the Consu had come out in prep for battle. A message from Steve.

“Uh, Steve — Jesus Christ,” Bucky jumped about a mile out of his seat at Steve’s sudden appearance at his side. He set his tablet down and glared at where Steve was, admittedly, looking at him with sheepish eyes. “Really?”

“Sorry, Buck,” Steve apologized. Then he nodded at the tablet. “But, uh, I’m done. I sent it to you.”

“Fucking finally,” Bucky grumbled, only to be smacked upside the head. He gave Steve a light shove before picking up his tablet and opening up the message.

The video was short, only about fifteen seconds or so, set to a simple acoustic guitar. It opened up on from when Bucky had been screwing around, blowing smoke into the camera when Steve had gotten it stuck on the tripod and spent almost ten minutes trying to get it off without breaking the thing. It transitioned into the little video Bucky had shot of the leaf — he smiled at that — and finally ended on the two of them, just holding each other, Steve rubbing his back just the way Bucky liked.

When it was over, he set the tablet down and turned to Steve. “So this is what took you hours to do?” He waved a hand at the tablet. “You dragged me out into the snow for that?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered, not missing a beat. “You gonna post it, or what.”

“Yeah,” Steve answered, not missing a beat. “You gonna post it, or what.”

“Wait, why am I posting it? You have an Instagram; post it on yours.”

“You know I only have it to look at your stuff. I don’t want to be...public like that.” His face shuttered for half a heartbeat, and Bucky had to pull him in for a kiss.

“Okay, you big baby, I’ll post it,” Bucky said against his lips. “After all, you did work so hard on it.”

“I really did.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Bucky grabbed the tablet and opened his Instagram app to load the video. He’d never done a video before, and it was kind of exciting to put something different up. And really, Steve had been working exceptionally hard on it. He knew most of that time had been spent probably stressing over what parts he should add and what he should leave out. There were probably also about ten
other versions on the computer right now, and he’d picked one at random because he would never have been able to choose.

“Hey, what’s this music?” Bucky asked as he started typing out the caption.

“Oh, just some free music I found online. Called ‘Acoustic Breeze’ by Bensound.”

“Acoustic...” He paused mid-caption and turned incredulous eyes on Steve. “Seriously”

Steve just shrugged. “It was free.”

“It’s not like you’re using this for a fucking ad, Steve,” but Bucky added it into the caption and hit send:

_A short video Steve and I shot at the park behind our apartment building. It's only September but it's freezing as hell outside and we even had snow for at least a good hour. It's Steve who edited the vid and chose the music. It took him 5 hours only for these 15 seconds because he couldn't make up his mind between all the footage we filmed that day. (Music: Bensound - Acoustic Breeze, Camera: Steve, me and...a tripod)_

Once it was up, he had to admit, he got a little bit giddy at there being a _video_ on his Instagram now, and he and Steve watched it on loop for a while.

“Proud of your hard work, Stevie.” He smiled at him. “You did good here.”

“You like it?”

Bucky looked Steve over, healthy, whole, and _here_. And with video proof that all of this was real.

“Yeah, sweetheart. I really, really do.”
Chapter Summary
Hey, look at that! Instagram allows new photo formats! Time to post something a bit different from the usual "little squares" then! (and if you go to Tumblr, the pic is even bigger.) Anyway! Here's Steve and I in the car enjoying a ride in the forest. And as you can see, it's never too early to think about pumpkins and Halloween. What do you mean it's still a month and a half away? Who cares, you bunch of killjoys! I told you: "IT'S NEVER TOO EARLY TO THINK ABOUT HALLOWEEN"!

“The smartest option is to go in separate directions. You go high, I’ll go low — there and there. We’ll keep in contact via Voxer —”

“Not standard comms?”

“No, I’m concerned they’ll be compromised in a place like this.”

“Okay, yeah, makes sense.”

“Good. Okay, from there we work our way to the center. That’s where this all comes to a head. It’s not gonna be easy though, so if you get cornered, you know what to do.”

“We took on Hydra, Steve. No one’s taking us down. Not here.”

“OH MY GOSH, ARE YOU CAPTAIN AMERICA?!”

Steve and Bucky turned away from the giant maze and braced as three feet of excitement came barreling around a row of pumpkins, right towards them, and the next thing Bucky knew, there was a ridiculously adorable little girl — pigtails and all — propped on Steve’s arm, staring at him like he hung the universe.

“Why, uh, yes I am,” Steve answered, staring back like he had no idea how all his life choices got him here. Bucky just smiled goofily at the way every word that dropped out of Steve’s mouth just
had her in rapt attention. “And what about you? I could call you the prettiest princess, but I’ll bet there’s a name to go with that title.”

The little girl suddenly huffed at him. “I’m not a princess, I’m a warrior!” To prove her point, she started to flex, and it was everything Bucky could do not to bowl over in a fit of giggles.

“Oh! Well.” Steve coughed, trying to hide his own laugh. He turned very serious eyes on her. “Did you know that Wonder Woman is both a warrior and a princess?”

“She is?”

Steve nodded. Still all very serious. “That’s right. So, your majesty, if you don’t mind, what might I call you.”

“Cassidy! Oh my god, what are you doing with my — oh!” A woman in her mid-thirties — presumably the little girl’s mom — pulled up short, right in front of them. “You’re Captain America.”

Steve, his face gone beet red, immediately set Cassidy down. He began nodding emphatically, and stuck his hand out. “Um, uh, yes. Yes, ma’am. I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you, but your little girl — Cassidy — Cassidy came up to me because she recognized me, and well, I try not to —”

Bucky couldn’t take it any longer, and grabbed Steve’s arm, effectively shutting up his nonsensical tumble of words. He turned toward Cassidy’s mom and turned up the wattage on his Bucky Barnes charm (patent pending). “I’m so sorry, ma’am. It would seem Warrior Princess Cassidy here” — he winked down at her and she giggled — “recognized a fellow high-ranking officer, and came to introduce herself. We were just about to bow our allegiance in the face of such nobility when the queen herself made her presence known.” He waved a hand at her. “I can only assume that would be you.”

He smiled wide, more interested in her effort to fight back her amusement than in the way Steve was looking at him like he’d gone completely off his rocker.

“Bow your allegiance, huh?” she asked, and Bucky silently cheered at her smile.

He couldn’t help himself; he bent low at the waist, bowing like he’d promised, only to scoop a delighted Cassidy right back up, propping her on his metal arm. He eased into a natural smile and stuck out his hand. “But in all seriousness,” he cocked his head toward Steve, “this fish-face over here is Steve Rogers. I’m Bucky Barnes.”

She took his hand and shook it. “Jennifer. And yeah, I know who you both are. This one over here is, um, maybe just a little bit in love with Captain Rogers there.”

“I am not!” Cassidy squealed, only to bury her face Bucky’s neck.

“Aww.” Bucky rubbed her back soothingly — this kid was too much. “It’s okay, sweetheart, you aren’t the only one here who loves this big lug.” She peeked her head out and Bucky winked at her again. “We’re in this together, kid.”

She cautiously sat back up, first glaring at her mom before turning a speculative eye on Bucky. “You love him, too?”

He smiled softly at her. “Sometimes it’s the only thing I think about.”

She glanced around before motioning him to come closer. Confused he turned his head to cover the
two-inch difference. Then she cupped his ear and leaned in to whisper, “Me too,” only to sit back, eyes wide, and so serious, like she’d just told Bucky the location of the Lost City of Atlantis. She might as well have.

He held up his pinky finger and she took it, locking their little secret up tight with a sharp nod. Then he set her back down and she ran over to her mom, locking around her leg and staring up at Steve. When he smiled and waved, the blush that crept into her adorable little face was just about the cutest thing Bucky had probably ever seen.

“Anyway,” Jennifer started with a brush over Cassidy’s head, “we were just about to leave. But it was really nice meeting both of you.” Suddenly Cassidy was tugging hard and Jennifer bent down so she could whisper something into her ear. When she straightened back up, her face was alight with amusement. She nodded down at Cassidy. “Someone would like a picture, if that’s okay.”

“Oh, sure!” Steve smiled big and held his arms out. “Come on up, little lady,” Cassidy jumped back onto her perch just as Steve grabbed Bucky, pulling him in. “Can’t take a picture with my new best girl if I don’t have my best guy in the photo, now can I.”

“You’re ridiculous, Rogers, anyone ever tell you that?”

“You do, but only every day.”

“Well, someone’s gotta.”

“Sshh!” Cassidy hushed them both with a stern look, and they both clammed up, though Bucky was doing it more to keep from laughing than anything else. “Now smile.”

Steve gave a sharp nod. “Yes, ma’am.”

All three smiled as Jennifer snapped a few photos. Once she was done, they said their goodbyes, and Cassidy was off, talking a mile a minute as they walked away.

“Kids love you, you know that?” Bucky observed. “Like really love you.”

“They love you too, Buck.”

“No, most kids are scared of the metal arm. They only warm up to me when they see you’re cool with it.”

“Cassidy didn’t seem to have that problem.”

“Well, no,” Bucky said as he turned back to face the mouth of the maze. He smiled wolfishly at Steve. “But she has good taste.”

Steve snorted. “Oh, is that it?”

“I see no other plausible reason.”

“Such a fuckin’ dork.”

“Yeah, but I’m your dork.” Then Bucky waved a hand at the tall corn stalks that made up the walls in front of them. “We doin’ this, or what.”

“Oh, we’re doing this.”

“Last one out makes dinner?”
“I thought this was a team effort.”

Bucky just laughed and took off, into the maze, and down the first left turn he could find.

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Exactly fifty-seven minutes later and it was a dead heat as they both found themselves facing the long stretch of the exit. Neither was running at top speed — too many tiny humans and all — but it was a close thing, and yeah, okay, there may have been a shove or two when the coast was clear.

Bucky burst out of the exit with a glance over to find Steve barely an inch away. They stopped before barreling into a cart, and Bucky turned thrusting his arms into the air.

“I won!” he whooped. “Beat that, motherf—duckling!” he finished, cutting himself off as a family of four walking by.

“Mother duckling? Really?” Steve’s eyebrows ran right up in his hairline as he laughed, only to shove Bucky in the shoulder. “And you didn’t win. It was clearly a tie —”

“Nuh-uh. Nope! I won because you weren’t in my line of sight when I came out, which puts you behind me, which means I won!” Bucky stared Steve down, defying him to come up with better logic.

“Or.” Fucking hell. “I still wouldn’t have been in your line of sight if I was right next to you, only if I had been in front of you, as vision becomes narrow when running like that. You wouldn’t have seen me unless I was winning. And I’ll concede I didn’t win, but neither did you.”

“That’s just...” Bucky scoffed at him, because that was just the stupidest...

“That’s just dumb, you know that? Why are you wrong, Rogers? Why are you like this? You could just admit defeat, you know.”

“I’ll admit defeat when I actually get defeated.”

They glared at each other, neither conceding the floor, though Steve’s tiny smile probably matched Bucky’s epic fail at holding back his own.

“I cook, you clean?” Bucky finally asked.

“Only if you promise to make enchiladas.”

“Those take fucking forever — fine. Fine! We’ll have enchiladas and I’ll make sure the pan is extra sticky for you to have to clean later.”

“Okay, now that’s just childish, Buck.”

Bucky shrugged, totally unconcerned. If Steve was going to make him cook a complicated dinner, he was going to have a complicated mess on his hands.

Steve just shook his head and grabbed Bucky’s arm, pulling him close. He wrapped his arms around Bucky’s waist and pecked him lightly on the lips. “As long as you’re making dinner, which means you admit I at least didn’t lose, then we’re good.” He ducked out of the way of Bucky’s hand as he tried to smack Steve upside the head, laughing as he went. “Gotta be quicker than that, Barnes!”

“All right, funny man, are we picking pumpkins or what? I apparently have a not-small dinner to make, and we live nowhere around here.”
That pulled Steve up short. “But...what about the hayride? And the petting zoo!”

“And you call me childish!”

And oh good god, Steve was giving him the fucking sad eyes. He turned away, trying to valiantly to look anywhere but at the puppy dog that was his boyfriend, an effort seriously impeded by the arms that snaked around his waist.

“Please?” Steve murmured in his ear. “We drove all this way. Can’t we just stay for a little while longer? You gotta admit, the maze was fun, and they don’t have anything like this in the city —”

“Fiiiiine,” Bucky groused. He threaded his fingers through Steve’s hair and leaned back to kiss his temple. Steve’s eyes were so blue up close like this. “I’ll admit, the maze was a win. But if the hayride doesn’t live up to my lofty expectations, I’m calling quits on you.”

“Lofty expectations?”

“There are carriage rides in the city.”

“And when was the last time we went on a carriage ride?”

“Good point.” Bucky pulled away, but only far enough to take Steve’s hand as he pulled him along through the pumpkin patch. “I forgot how unromantic you are.”

“Unromantic, oh, fuck you, you ungrateful ass—”

Bucky cut him off with a kiss, arms wrapped around Steve’s neck, holding him close, a smile on his lips the entire time. Steve was the furthest thing from unromantic.

Still didn’t help though, when he pulled back to find narrowed eyes staring him down.

“I’m not unromantic,” Steve grumbled. “At least I’d like to think not.”

“Stevie,” Bucky sighed deep, “you are probably the most romantic person I’ve ever met, you big goober. And you know that.”

“Well, you know, I do at least try to be, when I can.”

“And you succeed. Every time.”

Steve finally cracked a half-smile and leaned in to lightly suckle on Bucky’s bottom lip. Bucky was hyper aware of the people around him, but he doubted the kiss was that obvious. At least not the heat of it.

“So, hayride?” he asked when they finally broke apart. “And then something about petting some llamas?”

“Llamas?” Steve’s head perked up and he started looking around, eyes darting over the whole farm. “Do they really have llamas here?”

Bucky laughed and went back to meandering through the pumpkin patch. “Yeah, I think they have all kinds of animals here.”

The wide smile he got from Steve was worth everything in the world.

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The hayride, as it turned out, wasn’t a two-seater, but a giant cart holding a load of people. They both made sure to let the attendants know their combined weight — since they were certain that would mean fewer people on their cart — but Steve still ended up with a little boy in a Cap t-shirt sitting on his lap the entire time, the boy more interested in staring wide-eyed at Steve than anything that was going on around them. The farm was beautiful, fall colors starting to dot the area as they passed bright pumpkins and tall corn stalks, a beautiful old red barn, and rows upon rows of delicious treats. It was all pretty spectacular, but it was Steve and his way with kids that seemed to glob up most of the photos Bucky took.

There was animal petting and carnival-style games, hotdogs and popcorn, and even a little haunted house that honestly bored them more than anything. It was cute, but they’d both seen what real horrors looked like. A haunted house was a little bit lost on them.

Bucky wasn’t going to lie, he was having a blast. They hadn’t done anything like this before — not since he’d been back, and certainly not when they were young and poor — and it was beyond precious to watch Steve’s childlike wonder at all the things on the farm.

If Bucky spent most of the day with his heart clenched that this outing might never have happened, well, that wasn’t something he was going to worry Steve about. Steve had been through enough. If Bucky had his way, he’d make sure Steve never worried again.

“So, what’s it gonna be, Cap?” Bucky asked as finally started picking out their pumpkins. “You going with the biggest pumpkin here, or are we going to be normal folk and get the baby, carving ones.”

Steve eyed the eight-hundred-pound pumpkin Bucky was carrying on his metal shoulder — which was decidedly not the biggest one there, thank you very much, it was second biggest — with more than a little trepidation. “Not sure about this whole we business, Buck. Pretty sure if you walk out of here with that thing, we’re mostly definitely not ‘normal folk.’”

“Well, okay, but yeah.” Bucky held the pumpkin — Big Bessy, he’d named her — one-armed, over his head. Because he could. “We haven’t been normal since 1943. What’s that saying again? Go big or go home?”

“You should have grabbed the thousand-pound pumpkin, baby. Show everyone what a real man you are.”

“I’m going to lob this pumpkin at your head, Steven.”

“Like I said. A real man.”

It was tempting, what with the way Steve was smirking at him. But Bucky was sort of in love with his precious giant baby, and he wasn’t about to waste her on the assclown standing in front of him. With a quiet hmph, he lowered Bessy back onto his shoulder and headed off toward the smaller pumpkins. The less fun pumpkins.

“Uh, you know, you could just leave that thing back up by the checkout, right?” Steve asked as he caught up to walk alongside Bucky, dodging out of the way when Bucky turned to glare at him.

“And leave Bessy all alone? What would the PTA say?”

“Bessy?”

“She’s gotta have a name, doesn’t she?”
“I question you sometimes, you know that.”

“It’s fine, I question me all the time.”

Steve chuckled and went back to his own pumpkin search. He would probably pick out smaller ones for both of them, honestly. Bessy wasn’t exactly for carving, and Bucky was already thinking about where he was going to put her. He couldn’t put her in the hallway of their apartment building, since she was both too big and there was only one other tenant on their floor who could admire her. He was sure the Patterson’s dog would love her, but probably not so much them when they couldn’t walk around her.

Maybe in the lobby. He loved their apartment, but the lobby of the place was a special kind of boring. It could use a little color. He could just drop her off when they got home. It wasn’t like anyone on staff could move her.

“What about these?” Bucky shook his head to find Steve holding up two perfectly round, medium-sized pumpkins.

“Yeah, those look carvable. You sure they’re going to hold out till the end of October?” It was barely the middle of September now.

Steve just shrugged. “We’ll get more if they don’t. Lots of places around us selling pumpkins; this place just seemed like a fun idea for the day.”

As he walked passed, Bucky tucked away a happy smile. Steve was constantly trying to find things for them to do, making sure neither of them went stir crazy on this self-imposed hiatus from work. God, he loved that man so much.

They paid for their pumpkins — Big Bessy included — before loading up the truck and heading the two hours back home. It was a slow drive that involved a lot of driving along back roads to avoid the highway as much as they could. Not only was it scenic, but i95 was just gonna be a mess.

“So, Starbucks, then?”

Bucky tucked himself further into the passenger seat and glared at Steve. Bastard just smiled back.

“Are you saying you don’t want a pumpkin latte?”

“I really hate you most days, you know that.” And himself too for loving the oh-so delicious fall drink. He cursed whoever invented it.

They pulled into the closest Starbucks and Steve ran in to grab their drinks. Bucky tried not to get excited — he had standards, goddammit — but he still hadn’t had one since they’d popped back up on the menu — the menu he most certainly did not know — and it was long (three days) overdue.

When Steve hopped back in the car, Bucky wondered briefly how well the serum would handle him shooting that smug look off of Steve’s face. Probably not that well, sadly.

“Boba Fett?” Bucky asked, reading the name on his cup. Steve turned his cup to show Bucky the name on his own, and Bucky burst out laughing. “Han Solo? Hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but
I’m the roguishly handsome one of this duo.”

“Yeah, but since I figure Boba Fett was always after Han Solo’s ass, it seemed fitting.” Steve was smiling into his drink, his cheeks flushed bright, and Bucky’s breath caught at how beautiful he looked. He couldn’t put his finger on why — Steve was just in a beanie, t-shirt and jeans, nothing overtly special — but there was just something in that smile that made Bucky’s heart catch in his throat.

“Okay, I need a picture before we head home,” he said, grabbing his phone from the center console.

“Don’t you want to wait until you can get, uh, what’s her name —”

“Bessy.”

“— Bessy in the picture?”

Bucky shrugged. “We can do that too, but I want one right now. Please?”

Steve’s eyes softened and he wrapped his fingers around Bucky’s nape, pulling him into a kiss. “Of course, baby. Always. Is this for Instagram?”

Huh. He hadn’t thought of that, but sure, why not. He gave Steve another tiny shrug. “Yeah, I guess so. Maybe you with your pumpkin? You’re certainly proud of it.”

“I’m proud of it...” Steve huffed as Bucky grabbed one of the pumpkins from the backseat and handed it off.

“Take your pumpkin, Stevie, and look happy.” He held up the camera and took a few photos of them, him with his Boba Fett cup of goodness, and Steve with his prized tiny pumpkin.

As Steve headed back onto the road, Bucky pulled up Instagram to load one of the photos. Problem was, he couldn’t find a crop of it that he liked. He kind of always liked using the original full frame option on the app, but every angle he tried didn’t look the way he wanted it to.

“Ah, fuck it.”

“What?”

“I’m going to load a long shot,” he grumbled. “It’ll fuck up my whole aesthetic, but I can’t get any of the angles right.”

“Baby, this is your therapy, not an art project, Load what you want.”

Bucky side-eyed him. “Well, if you’re gonna be all logical about it...” He was almost tempted to crop it just to be contrary.

“Admit it. You’ve never used a long image because you didn’t know Instagram did that.”

Bucky turned to him, aghast. “Fuck you, sir, I did too!”

“You don’t follow anyone! How would you know!”

“This is only supposed to be for therapy, Steven, remember?” Bucky waved his phone at him. “I’m not supposed to be using it to look at how much the world sucks.”

“Well, I can’t exactly argue with that.”
Bucky went back to loading his image, choosing to get a little dig into Steve in the process. He did too know you could post in any shape, at least, but no, he rarely ever looked up other things on here, so it wasn’t all that often he saw how to load the images differently.

*Hey, look at that! Instagram allows new photo formats! Time to post something a bit different from the usual "little squares" then! (and if you go to Tumblr, the pic is even bigger.) Anyway! Here's Steve and I in the car enjoying a ride in the forest. And as you can see, it's never too early to think about pumpkins and Halloween. What do you mean it's still a month and a half away? Who cares, you bunch of killjoys! I told you: "IT'S NEVER TOO EARLY TO THINK ABOUT HALLOWEEN"!*

He was sure he was going to get a shit ton of people telling him the format wasn’t exactly new, but he didn’t care. He still only read his comments sporadically. There was a lot of love out there, but also about a metric ton of hate. He didn’t need that in his life, if he could help it.

He tucked himself back into his seat and finally, finally, took a sip of his coffee. He groaned in pure ecstasy. “Good God, that’s tasty.”

“You need to be alone with that thing?”

Bucky refused to dignify that with an answer. He and Boba Fett were very happy together; Steve could never understand their love.

He took another sip and smiled.
Remember when we worked undercover at that Starbucks Coffee back in August? We kept the glasses and the fake tattoos because, well, you know...we love to spice it up a bit in the bedroom sometimes. Unfortunately, we received an official letter from Fury telling us that these accessories were "property of S.H.I.E.L.D, thus the American Government" (no less!) and that we had to give them back pronto. Honestly, I know it's the economic crisis but these guys are f**king stingy! Never mind, we're gonna buy our own. And other stuff too..."cough"
Honestly, I know it's the economic crisis but these guys are f**king stingy! Never mind, we're gonna buy our own. And other stuff too...*cough*

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Chapter Notes

PORN WITHOUT PLOT! PORN WITHOUT PLOT! WHEEEE!

Bucky lazed back in the chair, one leg hanging off the edge, the other dangling over the armrest. He smiled as the rain came crashing against the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out over the East River. He could barely make out the Manhattan Bridge that passed over their apartment, let alone the Brooklyn Bridge on the other side of it, and certainly not Manhattan across the way. It had been a long time since they’d had rain like this, and normally, he’d shy away from the cold windows, but the apartment was warm, and he liked the inch of chill he felt along his heated skin.

He shifted a little and smiled at the feel of soft leather along his naked body. Well, naked save for the apron he’d put on, as well as the sleeve of tattoos he’d spent all afternoon applying to his right arm and upper back. Not an easy feat getting them perfectly aligned, so he was pretty impressed with how they’d turned out.

All the lights were out in the apartment, save for the string of lights hung along the walls. It added a soft glow they both liked, and sure it was a little silly, but there had been more than a few times when neither of them could handle sleeping in total darkness, and the little twinkling lights reminded them of the stars they’d slept under during the war.

The soft snick of the lock in the front door met his ears, and he smiled as he picked up the pair of glasses that had been resting on his chest. He held them between his teeth and tilted his head back to watch Steve walk through the door.

“Bucky?” Steve called, as he hooked his keys by the door. Bucky didn’t answer, just waited as Steve worked his jacket and shoes off. His hair was sopping wet, his clothes sodden from head to toe.

“God, it’s a fucking mess out there. I couldn’t take the bike home, which meant calling Uber, and that ended up taking almost an...” He trailed off as his eyes finally landed on Bucky.

Bucky just smiled at him, calm and serene. Took the glasses from between his lips and slowly began twirling them around. “How long did it take? You were saying?”

“What.” Steve cleared his throat, and nodded at Bucky, unblinking, as he took in the full tattoo sleeve and Starbucks apron Bucky’d positioned in such a way that left very little to the imagination. Even from here, Bucky could slowly see the blue of Steve’s eyes giving way to black. “What — whatcha doin’ over there.”

“Oh. Me?” Bucky widened his eyes, nothing but innocence as he held the glasses up. “Well, it would seem, Mr. Rogers, you left something behind during your business meeting at my shop last month.’ He held out the frames. “Thought you might want these back.”

“You thought I might want my glasses back.”
“If you wanna come over here and get them, yes.”

A smile spread across Steve’s face, dirty and heated, and Bucky’s body thrummed with anticipation as Steve slowly began to saunter across the living room. He stopped right in front of the chair. When he reached down to take the glasses, he let his fingers slide along Bucky’s wrist, and Bucky was certain Steve could feel his pulse pounding.

He slipped the glasses on, and fuck, the sight went straight to Bucky’s dick. “That sure was nice of you...”

“James,” Bucky answered to Steve’s unspoken question.

“James.” Steve hummed. “Pretty name for such a pretty man. You traveled all the way from London to return my glasses, huh?” He ran his hands through Bucky’s hair, trailing down to cup Bucky’s cheek. “Anything I can do to make it up to you? I mean, you came all this way...”

“Well, actually, there is.” Bucky nuzzled against Steve’s hand before swinging his legs around to pull him into the vee. Then Bucky fluttered his eyelashes as he ran his hands up the back of strong, lean thighs. “You could let me suck your cock. Baby.” He batted his eyelashes one more time and smiled.

Steve just stared at him.

Bucky stared back.

Steve began to fish-face, and Bucky locked in on him, refusing to be the one to crack first. Instead, with as straight a face as he could muster, he cupped Steve’s ass and gave it a quick double-squeeze.

That did the trick. Steve burst into laughter, and Bucky finally gave in, following right along with him. Steve dropped to his knees, his head thunking against Bucky’s chest, water from his hair seeping through the apron, and it was all Bucky could do but to wrap his arms around him.

“Oh my god, Buck!” Steve exclaimed. He lifted his head and smiled. “I mean, was it part of your plan to go for the bad porn intro? Or was that just all off the cuff?”

Bucky thumped him on the back. “Excuse you! I don’t remember feeding you lines ahead of time. ‘Pretty name for a pretty man,’” he mimicked. “I mean, what the fuck was that?”

Steve just shook his head, his laughter subsiding into giggling huffs. “Reading the room?” Bucky parroted back, aghast. Oh, Steve was just hilarious. “Reading the room?” Well that was enough of that. He gave Steve a slight shove, just enough to get his own bearings so he could scoop Steve up in one fluid motion. The shocked little noise Steve made was reward enough, even as he turned and slammed Steve up against the window. He leaned forward to nip at Steve’s neck, and Steve gasped. “This reading the room enough for you?” He yanked Steve’s hair back with his tattooed arm, both their eyes ticking to it as he did. “Don’t think I don’t remember how much you loved these on me last time. Caught you staring more than enough.”

“Just like you and these glasses?” Steve growled, his voice gone rough. He was definitely reading the room right now. Good boy. “Didn’t miss the little frown you made when I took them off before suitting up; knew that had nothing to do with the mission. You like me in glasses.” He ground his hips against Bucky, and Bucky gave into the groan.

He dropped Steve onto his feet.
“Naked,” Bucky ordered. “Now.”

It was all the invitation either of them needed as they damn near ripped Steve out of his clothes. Then Bucky did rip off the apron before picking Steve right back up and pinning him up against the glass again. He dove back in, getting at Steve’s neck.

“Not worried about people seeing?” Steve gasped out, even as he arched into the touch.

Bucky pulled back just enough to gape at him. “Steve. We’re seven floors up, and it’s practically black outside from the storm, and you’re worried about being spotted? The only two people in the area who could possibly catch us are us. And hopefully we’ll be too busy fucking to care.”

“Good point,” Steve conceded and grabbed at Bucky’s bottom lip, the kiss fervent and visceral. Now this was more like it. He grabbed Steve’s hair and rocked against him, the frisson exactly what he’d needed since he’d woken up that morning and Steve had gone off to paint.

“I need you,” Bucky whined, the feel of Steve’s dick pressing against him its own kind of nirvana. “I need you so fucking bad.”

“I’m right here, baby.” Steve squeezed his thighs tight around Bucky’s waist. “I’ve got you. You’ve got me. We’re both — I’m right here.” The words were all over the place, and Bucky kissed the ramble right out of him. Then he pushed against Steve hard, the pressure already building in his spine.

“I’m not...gonna last much longer,” he huffed out. He’d been achingly close all day and hadn’t bothered to do anything about it. Wanted to save it for Steve, and shit, now he was already set to tip over that edge.

Steve turned his hand to Bucky, and Bucky took the cue, licking a hot stripe up salty skin. Then Steve reached between them, taking them both in hand, and jacking them rough, even as Bucky thrust forward, awkward and uncoordinated. Steve’s breath was hot against his skin, and it made Bucky feel like he was being set on fire. How the hell had they gone from their ridiculous little foreplay to this heat — this need — in just a few short minutes?

“Steve...” Bucky moaned, the pressure overtaking him.

“Let go, baby, I’ve got you,” Steve said again, his own words taut as he moved that much faster.

Twice more, and Bucky slammed Steve back against the window. He tried biting down onto Steve’s shoulder to muffle his cry, but it did little good. The noise filled up all the spaces around them as he came, quickly followed by Steve’s own groan as he came right after. Hot spurts painted their bellies, and it was all Bucky could do to keep from collapsing right there.

He leaned into Steve’s heavy and solid weight as he took long steadying breaths. Fuck, that had been more intense than he’d expected.

Maybe he really did like the glasses.

He tilted his head back just enough to gaze at Steve. His eyes were closed, and he was still catching his own breath, his skin flushed pink, sweat already slowly trickling down his brow. And okay, yeah, the glasses did look ridiculously hot. For half a second, Bucky kind of wished Steve actually needed them.

When Steve opened his eyes, he turned a soft, serene smile on Bucky. “Hey there, handsome.”
Bucky pressed a quick kiss to Steve’s lips. “Handsome, huh? Admit it, you’re only saying that because the tattoos are doin’ it for you.”

“Well, yeah.” Steve laughed and reached up to adjust the glasses. “You know, since you were so kind to return these, I can really appreciate you now.”

“Oh, is that it?”

“Well, I really couldn’t see you before.”

“And now?”

If possible, Steve’s smile became even softer. “Now you’re the only thing I ever wanna see.”

Bucky just snorted. “Fuckin’ ridiculous, you know that?”

Steve hummed into another kiss. “You saying you don’t love it?”

“I’m saying I tolerate it.”

“Oh. Well, then.” Steve gave Bucky a playful shove even as he unhooked his legs and lowered himself back to the ground. He didn’t let Bucky pull away, though, instead hooking a hand around Bucky’s waist. He used the other to take hold of Bucky’s tattooed arm, turning it this way and that, checking out the intricately laid work that covered him from wrist right on up and over his back.

Steve’s brows furrowed. “You did all this yourself?”

“Tolled the better part of three hours, but yeah. I put them all on myself.”

“Huh.” Steve nodded thoughtfully. “I’m impressed.”

“Oh, thanks?”

“No, seriously.” Steve shook his head and leaned over Bucky’s shoulder to get a better view of his back. “I don’t even think I could have done this.” He leaned back to eye Bucky. “How’d you get it so perfect?”

Bucky shrugged. “You can’t do what I do without a talent for intricate detail and a fuck ton of patience.”

Steve snorted before wrapping both arms around Bucky’s waist. “No, I guess you can’t.”

“You know I’m not done with you, right?” Bucky said and gave Steve’s chest a light tap. “You don’t think that was it for the night, do you?”

“God, I hope not.”

“Good.” Bucky smiled against Steve’s lips. “Because, sweetheart, I have been waiting all day just for you to come home. And there’s no way I’m letting you — or these damn glasses — out of our bed anytime soon.”

There was no urgency in the way Steve rolled his hips — urgency had left them some hours ago. This was barely a movement, like slow dancing alone on a hot summer’s night. Bucky ran his hands down Steve’s back to hold him in place, and keep him from lifting off Bucky’s lap in any sort of
meaningful way.

They traded kisses, whispered against each other’s lips, and left soft trails of warm electric current along any part of skin they could reach. It was perfect.

Bucky wasn’t even entirely sure if either of them were even aiming for to this end. After five orgasms apiece, he knew he certainly wasn’t. This wasn’t like some of the marathons they’d had before; they were just taking the time to enjoy each other’s company.

“Gotta tell ya, Stevie.” Bucky tilted Steve’s hips, and hissed at the tiny spike of pleasure. He leaned in for a quick open-mouthed kiss. “If this is what our days are always gonna be like, I’m thinking I’m not exactly in any hurry to go back to work.”

“You” — Steve stole his own kiss — “and me both.”

Bucky smiled, happy to have Steve on the same wavelength as him. Lazy days turned into heated nights, and it had never been like this for them — where they could take their time with each other in any sort of meaningful way, where there wasn’t something major to worry about. Sure, they both might still have been recovering, but unlike the last time — right after Bucky had come home — there was more enjoyment now, both just a little bit more content.

He tightened his hold on Steve’s hips and lifted him just enough to drive home, put a little bit more friction into the way Steve was riding his dick. The sensation licked down his spine, and he shivered, arched his back just enough for Steve to suckle at his collarbone. He cradled the back of Steve’s head with metal fingers, taking the most dangerous part about him and using it to hold what was most precious. God, he loved this man.

Bucky’s orgasm slowly slipped through him, like a long satisfied sigh, Steve’s name on his lips in much the same way. He reached between them to take Steve with his free hand, and moved, up and down, bringing Steve to the edge in a leisurely stroll, tipping him over to land just as softly as Bucky had.

Afterwards, Bucky fell back among the sheets, Steve right on top of him, holding him tight. He pulled the glasses off and dropped them on the bed before tucking his head under Bucky’s chin. Bucky traced figure-eights along his sweat-slick back, neither in any rush to go, well, anywhere.

“I like the tattoos,” Steve murmured.

Bucky smiled. “I like the glasses.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Bucky shrugged. “Maybe because it’s something we could never actually have? Neither of us can get tattoos and neither of us will probably ever need glasses. So I guess it’s fun to pretend to be two people we could never actually be.”

“Like if we were just normal guys. Living our normal life.”

“Something like that, yeah.”

Steve pushed himself up, and Bucky was surprised at the seriousness in his eyes. How contemplative he looked. “It is fun, sometimes, but I like our lives, Buck. I like what we do, and what we have. That’s not something I want to give up.”

Bucky felt like he’d just gotten mild whiplash. “Uh, me too? I wasn’t saying I wanted us to be two
normal guys. I think it’d be boring if we were.”

“So you like our life, too?”

“I love our life. This” — Bucky waved a hand between them — “is all temporary. And no, I don’t mean us having sex — get that look off your face. I mean all this downtime. I’ll miss it when it won’t be so readily available for us to take advantage of, but I want to get back out in the field just as much as you do.”

Steve smiled, seemingly placated, and leaned down to capture Bucky’s lips. Bucky licked along the seam of his mouth, and Steve didn’t hesitate opening up for him, deepening the kiss. Bucky rolled them over, settling himself in between Steve’s legs. Time for round seven.

~~~~

“Would you please stop making that face?”

“I look roguishly handsome.”

“You look like a tool, is what you look like, Buck.”

“How dare...”

“Just...just c’mere so we can take this damn photo, already.”

“Sir, yessir!” Bucky snickered, but did as Steve asked and moved close, wrapping his tattooed arm around Steve, making it more visible for the photo. A second later, there was a soft flash, and Bucky scrambled to grab his phone to check it out. “See?” He shoved the phone at Steve. “I most certainly do not look like a tool!”

“Like a shovel in a bucket.”

“You motherfucker!” Bucky shoved Steve over, only to grab the nearest pillow and thwap him as hard as he could with it. It was game on after that as Steve twisted around to barrel at Bucky’s midsection, knocking them both clean off the bed. Luckily, the pillow was in his metal hand, so he managed to keep his grip, hitting Steve over and over, even as Steve tried — and failed — to tickle him.

Bucky couldn’t remember the last time he’d laughed so hard.

~~~~

Remember when we worked undercover at that Starbucks Coffee back in August? We kept the glasses and the fake tattoos because, well, you know...we love to spice it up a bit in the bedroom sometimes. Unfortunately, we received an official letter from Fury telling us that these accessories were "property of S.H.I.E.L.D, thus the American Government" (no less!) and that we had to give them back pronto. Honestly, I know it's the economic crisis but these guys are f**king stingy! Never mind, we're gonna buy our own. And other stuff too...*cough*

~~~~

(“Buck! Did Fury really send a letter for us to return this stuff?”

“Maybe? But come on, Stevie! This shit costs, like, nothing. There is no reason he should be asking for it back!”
“Jesus-fucking-Christ, Buck. Fuck, fine, looks like we only have one option here.”

“What? Seriously? Fine. What? What do we have to do?”

“Make sure that when you go back to tag Fury in the post, you make sure to tag his personal account over the arm, and oh! Tag Coulson over the glasses.”

“Knew I fucking loved you for a reason.”}
I can stay perfectly still for 12 hours during a stake out but when I have to pose for Steve, god help me, I'm the worst model EVER...and I let him know!

Bucky jolted awake, shaking, fear roaring through him like a bat out of hell. He immediately scanned his surroundings, looking for any sign of a threat, but all he could see was...nothing. A black nothingness so dark, it felt like a void in space. All he could hear was white noise. His breathing hitched harder and he rolled to the side, dropping down from wherever he’d been lying and stumbled his way out of the room. He knew where to go, but he didn’t know how. He didn’t care.

He just barely made it to the sink or basin or whatever it was, on the other side of the room, before he was retching into it, so violently he wondered if he might actually rip a hole in stomach. He felt like
he was turning himself inside out, and he wasn’t even entirely sure it was totally physical. Like a
purge, though instead of feeling cleansed, it just left him feeling hollow.

It didn’t last long, though, the vomiting. When the contents of his stomach were empty, he
whimpered and slid down, curling up on the tiled floor...

He blinked rapidly, forcing the fog over his eyes to dissipate, and almost cried out at the sight of the
island in his and Steve’s kitchen, right in front of him. He was at home. He’d woken up in their
room, had fallen out of their bed, and fumbled his way to their kitchen before throwing up in their
sink. The white noise was just the rain, still coming down in sheets outside their windows.

His breathing was still short, forced and quick, and he realized the lack of vision had been a
byproduct of the panic attack. The one he was currently still in the throes of. He tried to blink back
the tears, but they refused to retreat, sliding silently down his face as the last vestiges of his dream
continued to wash over him — a dream where he’d been too late. Where he’d found Steve’s body
mangled, his eyes lifeless, the color drained from those beautiful lips, his warmth gone.

Bucky snatched the dishrag off its hook and shoved it into his mouth so he’d have something to
scream into. Steve didn’t need to hear this, didn’t need to find him. Steve had his own trauma to deal
with — he didn’t need to be dealing with Bucky’s backslide too.

Once the screaming stopped, he dropped his head between his knees and slowly worked on evening
out his breathing. He needed to calm down and clean out the sink so he could go back to bed.

He was still a bit shaky and clammy when he pushed himself off the floor, but he didn’t care. He
rinsed the sink out as quietly as possible, took a swish of water, then headed back to the bedroom.
Steve was sound asleep, and Bucky brushed his bangs back before leaning down to press his lips to
Steve’s forehead. He breathed in the smell of him — clean and earthy, and the only home Bucky
ever wanted to know.

He crawled back into bed and pulled Steve to him. And like always, he came willingly, gravitating to
Bucky, even in sleep. Bucky kissed his head again and whispered into sleep-warm skin, “Don’t
leave me, Stevie. Can’t do this without you.”

The only response he got was a soft snuffling as Steve burrowed his nose further against Bucky’s
neck. He smiled and closed his eyes, calmer now, and waited for sleep to take him.

~~~~

Sleep didn’t take him.

He picked his phone up off the nightstand and checked the time. Three hours since he’d woken up,
and he was still as wide awake as ever.

God, but earlier had been so wonderful. Steve coming home to find him lounging in the armchair,
naked save for the apron and sleeves of tattoos. It had led to such fantastic sex, both going to bed so
sated and so happy, it felt like nothing could touch them. Except, it would seem, Bucky’s dreams.

“You’re awake.”

Bucky jolted slightly at Steve’s soft voice. He glanced down to find those blue eyes wide open, and
staring back at him. There was no sleepiness to them, no soft blinking, no gogginess when Steve
had spoken.

“Hey.” Bucky frowned as he brushed Steve’s hair back. “How long have you been awake?”
Steve just shifted and held Bucky that much tighter. “Not sure. Maybe twenty, thirty minutes?” He kissed Bucky’s shoulder then pushed himself up. “What time is it?”

“A little after four.”

“How long have you been up?”

Bucky didn’t meet his eye when he said, “About three hours?”

“What?” Steve cupped his face and turned Bucky reluctantly toward him. “Why didn’t you wake me? I would’ve stayed up with you.”

Bucky snorted. “Yeah. Like I’m going to disrupt your sleep just because I can’t? I don’t think so, Steve.”

“Not for you to decide, Buck.” He leaned in for a quick, hard kiss before meeting his eye. “If I say you wake me, you wake me, okay? I hate the idea of you lying here alone.”

Bucky couldn’t help but melt a little. “I wasn’t alone, Stevie. I had you in my arms.” Steve had no idea how important that alone had been. Didn’t need to.

“Still.”

Bucky laughed and leaned in for a kiss. “All right, fine. If you want me to wake you, I’ll...try my best to keep that in mind.”

Steve eyed him, probably trying to figure out a way around Bucky’s backwards agreement, before finally giving up and lying back down. “Why were you awake, anyway?”


“Same.”

At least Steve wasn’t pushing. Bucky cradled his head and breathed him in again. He wanted to ask if Steve felt like talking about it, but that would lead to Bucky getting questions of his own, and he just...wasn’t up for that.

“You want a superhero breakfast?” he asked instead.

“Nah.” Steve sighed. “I’m actually not that hungry.”

“Okay, anything else you wanna do? I’m pretty much giving up on sleep, at this point.”

Steve grinned wolfishly at him, and Bucky snorted. He wasn’t falling for that trick.

“Don’t give me that face, you leech. You already got yours. Repeatedly. For hours.” Steve started to grumble, and Bucky wasn’t having that either. He cupped Steve’s face. “Hey, you. Don’t let the bright eyes fool you; I’m exhausted. Just can't sleep. Pick an activity that’s, you know, less strenuous.”

“Less strenuous?”

“Anything you want.” He pecked Steve lightly on the nose, his own nightmares slowly seeping from his bones at Steve, here, real in his arms. “Just nothing that involves a workout.”

Steve slowly peppered kisses up Bucky’s shoulder, along his neck. He stopped and breathed softly,
just behind Bucky’s ear. “Would you let me draw you?”

Aw, shit. He should have seen that coming. He sucked at being Steve’s model. It meant being still and not moving, and oh good god, it was boring.

He bit back a groan, because this really was about what Steve needed. “Yeah... Okay.” He gave Steve a tight smile. “Tell me where you want me.”

~~~~

“Stop moving.”

“But I have an itch.”

“You used that excuse an hour ago.”

“I can itch more than once in an hour, Steven.”

“Tell me again how long you managed to hold position during that joint mission in Wakanda?”

“Twelve hours, eight minutes, and forty-seven seconds.” Bucky smiled, smug at the memory. “Even T’Challa was impressed.”

Steve looked up, his own smile put-upon. “And yet you can’t hold still for a couple hours so I draw you?” He shook his head and tsked as he went back to his drawing. “M’gonna tell T how quickly you crapped out on me.”

“You wouldn’t dare...”

“Then hold. The fuck. Still.”

Bucky grumbled but did what he was told. It was better than the alternative, which would involve talking, and no way. He’d break that Wakandian record if it meant not telling Steve about his panic attack earlier. He just...couldn’t put that on him.

He looked at Steve, his head bent, tongue slightly sticking out, colors switching out from between his fingertips at an almost rapid-fire rate. But Bucky knew that look was fleeting. These days, he didn’t miss the blank stares. The way Steve’s smile didn’t always meet his eyes. How it took him point-four seconds longer to laugh at something, and wasn’t quite as loud and boisterous as it used to be. Just a touch. Not enough that anyone else saw it, but no one knew Steve like Bucky did. No one else could gauge the mere fractional tension that sat in Steve’s shoulders since... well. Bucky would even bet money Steve’s shrink couldn’t see it.

So, no. Bucky could keep his own shit to himself for now. Steve had spent so long taking care of him, Bucky could give him this. Take care of him for once. After all, it wasn’t Bucky who’d almost died not that long ago. He’d done his own time earlier the year before. This was Steve’s time to heal.

Still didn’t change the fact that Bucky, lying here on the bed, boxers pinned up so Steve could see the muscles in his thighs, twisted around to look almost coquettish — as Steve had helpfully put it — was bored off his ass.

“Okay, what did I do with...?” Steve had set the drawing aside and was glancing around, digging through the cushions of the chair. “I know I brought — it was right here...” He grunted and pushed up out of the chair. Then he pointed a finger at Bucky. “You, don’t move. I need...” And then he was gone. Out the door, presumably to grab something from his art supplies.
Bucky just sighed and shifted. Steve would complain that he’d moved some important fraction of an inch and was gonna have to reposition Bucky, but whatever. The joint of his metal shoulder was digging slightly, so Steve could just deal with it later.

Truth be told, he really didn’t mind posing for Steve. He actually loved being Steve’s muse, being his inspiration. Truth be told, the only times that usually only got to him were when he was in the middle of doing something and Steve would make him drop everything and freeze where he was because he liked the way the light caught Bucky’s hair, or something. This wasn’t one of those times, but Bucky was still antsy from earlier. Lying still like this was becoming a problem.

Bucky could hear clamoring and swearing coming from the other room, the pencil Steve was probably looking for apparently having gone rogue.

Or, maybe not so rogue. Because, from Bucky’s vantage point, he was fairly certain he was staring at the runaway pencil right underneath the chair. He was just about to call out to Steve, when an “I swear to God, I know I grabbed that fucking thing!” met his ears, followed by an exceptionally loud clang that could only mean Steve had taken out his frustration on the poor filing cabinet.

Bucky knew he should say something. Knew Steve was angrier than usual, most likely from his own nightmare. But it was a pencil. And Bucky Barnes was nothing if not a massive asshole, and listening to Steve stomp around and throw a hissy fit was just really fucking hilarious, and it was all Bucky could do not to laugh loud enough for Steve to hear him.

Instead, he slid quietly off the bed and retrieved the pencil in question, before slipping back up to face the wall. Then, as quiet as anything, began scrawling across the wallpaper. Because while he was an asshole, it was only ever really funny if Steve witnessed his assholery.

When he was done, he ninja’d off the bed to place the pencil among Steve’s stash on the side table. He had just enough time to get back and put himself in a new position before Steve came stomping back in.

“I swear, I don’t know what the fuck — are you kidding me right now?” Steve stared, aghast, at Bucky, who had arched himself off the mattress to match the arch of I’M BORED he’d written across the back wall. It took everything he had to school his expression, as though this was always the intended pose, because the look of sheer murder in Steve’s eyes was everything.

“I tried to keep as still as possible, like you told me to,” Bucky said, all innocence. “Let me know if I need readjusting.”

“Rea...” Steve trailed off, and Bucky suddenly was hyper aware that Steve might actually do him in. They stared at each other, Bucky blinking owlishly while Steve worked his jaw over. Bucky admittedly flinched as Steve finally moved, instead of beating the crap out of Bucky, he just walked right past him. Bucky craned his neck to see Steve pick up one of the Captain America Pop!Funkos off the shelf before coming back to hover over him. Confused, and still a little terrified, Bucky started to drop back down, only for Steve’s hand to reach up under his back.

“What part of ‘don’t move’ did you not understand?” he chastised, then gave Bucky’s back a little shove to lock him back into place, only to set the Pop!Funko down on Bucky’s abdomen.

“What part of ‘don’t move’ did you not understand?” he chastised, then gave Bucky’s back a little shove to lock him back into place, only to set the Pop!Funko down on Bucky’s abdomen.

“Uh, Steve?” Bucky was thoroughly confused now. He wasn’t entirely sure he’d thought this one through. “What are you doing?”

“No, Barnes,” Steve said, “I’m working.” He went back to the chair and picked up the pad he’d been drawing on. When his eyes landed on the pencil, he hmphed, but didn’t say anything else.
Instead, he picked up his phone and gave it a little wave. “I need a picture of you like this.”


“Oh, baby, no. I’m not mad.” He held up his phone and smiled, waited for Bucky to properly pose himself, then snapped the photo. Bucky went to lay back down only for Steve to hold up a hand. “Oh, I’m not done.” He turned the phone slowly over in his hand. “No, you just gave me new inspiration.”

Oh. *Shit.*

“I did?” Bucky asked weakly, dread slithering down his still-arched spine.

“Mhmmm.” Steve nodded. “But first, do you mind if I post this photo to your Instagram? For posterity, over course. You look so cute like that.”

“You know that’s for my therapy, Steve…” Bucky said slowly.

“Which is why I’m asking. You really should have a memory of this exact moment that you can cherish. Forever.”

“Why do I feel like I’m about to regret every decision I’ve ever made in life that’s lead up to this moment?”

“Because you are.”

Yeah, Bucky *definitely* didn’t think this one through. A cranky Steve was *always* a vengeful Steve.

“Aw, hell.” Bucky awkwardly waved his metal arm at him, resigned to his fate. “Go ahead.”

“Thanks, baby.” Steve smiled sweetly at him and typed away before eventually setting the phone aside. “Now, if you could just hold that pose for me, I simply can’t *not* draw you like that. And, oh” — he settled back in the chair, a nasty glint in his eye — “this might take a while.”

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*I can stay perfectly still for 12 hours during a stake out but when I have to pose for Steve, god help me, I’m the worst model EVER...and I let him know!*
Chapter Summary

the_life_of_bucky_barnes “By the way, no offense but you remind me a lot of... what’s his name again? Stewart Rodgers? You know... Captain America or whatever but the guy wouldn’t ride the subway with us ordinary folks, huh? He must have some big Royce Rolls with a chauffeur like that Stark idiot. These people have lost touch with reality a looooong time ago if you want my opinion. I can’t believe that my taxes pay for this Avengers bullshit. Anyway, as I was saying young man, I prefer purl when I knit a scarf...”

the_life_of_bucky_barnes my ass off at people who allergic to technology, the old sketchbooks and orig pens from the 1940’s. Je boyfriend is the biggest completely addicted to his computers and don’t get his graphic tablet! He always latest model and constant excuse to buy a new one.
“By the way, no offense but you remind me a lot of... what’s his name again? Stewart Rodgers? You know... Captain America or whatever but the guy wouldn’t ride the subway with us ordinary folks, huh? He must have some big Royce Rolls with a chauffeur like that Stark idiot. These people have lost touch with reality a looooong time ago if you want my opinion. I can’t believe that my taxes pay for this Avengers bullshit. Anyway, as I was saying young man, I prefer purl when I knit a scarf...”

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I’m laughing my a** off at people who think Steve is allergic to technology, that he only uses old sketchbooks and original fountain pens from the 1940’s. Jesus Christ, my boyfriend is the biggest geek EVER! He’s completely addicted to his phone, his computers and don’t get me started on his graphic tablet! He always needs the latest model and constantly finds an excuse to buy a new one!

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“I’m still sorry, Steve.”

“It’s fine, Buck.”

“I know, but —”

“It was a sparring session. You got the better of me. Case closed.”

“Yeah, but that wound looked kind of nasty —”

“It’ll be gone by the end of the day. Tomorrow morning, at the latest.”

“Yeah. Which means I seriously injured you —”

“Bucky.” Steve turned in his seat on the subway car, and grabbed Bucky’s arm, giving it a quick jostle. Bucky frowned in frustration, but Steve just shook him again, looking more than a little exasperated. “Seriously, stop it. I wasn’t mad earlier; I’m not mad now. And your freak out is freaking me out.”

Bucky dropped his head on Steve’s shoulder, Steve’s frustration doing nothing to quell the guilt slithering down his spine. He should have been paying attention, he should never have been using live ammo, he should —

“Baby, please stop.” Soft lips pressed into his hair, and he tried to bite down on the anger welling up inside of him — directed at himself for being so callous, directed at Steve for his lack of anger with Bucky... he didn’t know. But Steve was having none of it, and instead was wrapping his arm — his good arm — around Bucky’s shoulder, trying to comfort him. Bucky didn’t deserve comfort. He deserved pure, unadulterated hatred for what he’d done. He tried to pull away, but it seemed Steve was having none of that either.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Steve whispered, practically reading Bucky’s thoughts. “We both decided this. We both agreed we needed to up the ante if we were ever going to feel comfortable
going back out there. Better it was us aiming for each other than the enemy aiming at us, right?”

“I guess.”

“You guess.” Steve snorted. “That’s the spirit.”

“It was just...” Bucky sighed and turned into Steve’s embrace. The train slowed, knocking him further against Steve, and he just went with it. Allowed Steve to hold him that much tighter. “Seeing you go down like that? I mean, it’s not like I’ve never seen you take a hit in a fight — hell, it’s not like you’ve never taken a hit from me before. But I just...”

“I get it.” Those lips pressed against his temple this time. “I really do. Guess this means we aren’t ready to go back out?”

“Coulson would want to say different. So would Fury.”

“Two people who can fuck right off, for all I care.”

Bucky giggled and turned in his seat, back to chest, only to cringe at the way Steve gingerly pulled him in with both arms this time. God, Steve was right. Fury and Coulson could bitch all they wanted, but they had no real hold over either of them. The fact of the matter was, if either pushed too hard, Bucky had no doubts Steve would back his play when he suggested they quit. Sure, they loved what they did, and both got an enormous thrill out of being out in the field, but there were other ways to do what they did. Other agencies, or hell, even freelance. If Coulson and Fury pushed too hard, he and Steve would just tell them to go screw themselves and branch out on their own. Do things on their terms. Just because the Avengers were made up of a bunch of superheroes didn’t mean they had to have all the superheroes.

He rested his head back on Steve’s shoulder. “We go back when we’re ready, right?”

“That’s right.” Steve gave him a small squeeze. “Next week or next year. We do what we want.”

Bucky smiled. It sounded good in theory, but as much as he liked to think he and Steve would leave if they had to, really, it was all hyperbole. Eventually something was gonna happen that pulled them back in. This was the mob, and they were both Michael Corleone.

They rode in silence after that, and Bucky people watched. It was Known Rule in New York that you didn’t look at other New Yorkers on the subway, but Bucky had always fucked off to that rule. You couldn’t be hyper-vigilant and not know that the couple down their row was arguing and trying to hide it, the rich chick by the doors was high as hell, or that the exceptionally large man across from them, who was man-spreading to the point where the tiny girl next to him was squished against the barrier, was also a huge homophobe, if the way he was quietly scowling at Steve and Bucky was anything to go by.

Bucky, ever the asshole, just smiled at him, all kinds of dirty, and flicked his tongue out.

“Buck?” Steve’s voice rode low in his ear.

“Hmmm?”

“Should I be worried about the guy across from us?”

Bucky bit back a laugh. Of course Steve was paying just as much attention as he was. He gave his head a small shake instead. “Nah, I’ve got it under control.”
“That makes me feel even less assured, if you can believe it.”

“Shocker.”

The subway road into a station, and the tiny girl got off the train. Bucky took it for the opening it clearly was, and jumped out of his own seat.

“Buck!” Steve whispered fervently, and Bucky shook off the pull on his shirt to plant himself in the open seat. He turned practically sideways, enough to knock into the guy’s knee and force his legs closed, and smiled his best wolfish smile.

“Hey sugar,” he purred. “Come here often?”

“Bucky, get back here.”

Mr. Homophobe just stared straight ahead, doing his level best to ignore Bucky, and that wouldn’t do, not at all. So Bucky patted the guy’s knee instead. “I’m talking to you, sweetheart. I asked if you came here often.”

The guy knocked Bucky’s hand away and folded his arms tight across his chest. “I would prefer that you don’t touch me, sir.”

“And I would prefer you not make faces at me and the BF, but we can’t have everything, can we.”

“Free country, asshole. I don’t have to like what you guys are about.”

“Bucky!”

“True!” Bucky went on, ignoring Steve. He gently nudged the other man, delighted in the fact that he looked about ten seconds away from attempting to deck Bucky. “It is a free country, and you actually have us to thank for it being free, so maybe take your shitstain face away from ours, huh?”

The guy scowled, but didn’t move. “Free country was given to us by our military. Avengers ain’t military, dickwad.”

“So, you know who we are.” This was just getting better and better.

“Damn right, I do.”

“Oh great! Then I probably don’t need to remind you that me and Captain America here both served in World War II. Which means that if it wasn’t for us, and the things we did in the Army — the Army is military, in case you forgot — you’d be speaking German under a Nazi regime right now. But you’re not, so you’re welcome.”

The guy glowered, but there was no argument to that, so he kept his mouth shut. Smart of him, Bucky thought.

“Let me also remind you that we’re not the only LGBT to serve in the military — not by a long shot. So when you wanna talk about the Land of the Free, remember that there are legion of us who helped give that to you. You’re welcome for that, as well.”

Satisfied, he was halfway out of his seat to go back, only to find the spot next to Steve now occupied by a tiny old lady, already knitting away at something. He harrumphed and sat back down.

Steve laughed and shook his head. “It’s what you get, Buck. Shouldn’t have tried to start shi—something,” he corrected as he side-eyed the old lady, “on a crowded subway.”
“Yeah, but this was fun.” He jammed a thumb at the guy. “Don’t even pretend you didn’t enjoy the show.”

“Watching you put a piece of homophobic trash in his place — you take that look right off your face, buddy,” Steve growled and jabbed a finger at the guy. Bucky glanced over just in time to watch the guy jerk his head away. Bucky turned his attention back to Steve, who shrugged, face unrepentant. “Of course I enjoyed it.”

Bucky smiled and batted his eyelashes at Steve. “That’s my baby boy.”

Steve burst out laughing, and the little old lady finally looked up at the noise with a huff. “Is that really necessary, young man?”

Steve immediately snapped his mouth shut, and turned to look at the old lady, his face burning bright red. “I’m so sorry, ma’am.”

“We like a quiet subway ride.” She gazed imperially at him behind a pair of giant coke bottle glasses. “No need to guffaw like some hyena. You look like a civilized man; no need to act as if you were a wild animal.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Now do a kind service today, and help an old lady out.” She then proceeded to dump her yarn into Steve’s lap, and Bucky was gonna pull something trying not to laugh out loud. She nodded at the yarn before going back to her work. “Keep that from getting tangled for me, would you?”

“Uh, yes, ma’am.” Steve turned wide eyes on Bucky. Help me, he mouthed. Sorry, you’re on your own, Bucky mouthed back, and Steve looked like he wanted to stab him.

Bucky just waved a hand his way. “You know, Steve, it works best if you loop that around your hands.”

“What, are you a yarn expert now?”

“Don’t sass your boyfriend, son,” the old lady scolded without looking up, “he’s right.”

“Here, let me help you,” Bucky added and stood up enough to grab Steve’s hands and wind the yarn around them. Then he patted Steve’s knee before sitting back down. “There you go, all set.”

“Gee, thanks,” Steve answered dryly.

The old woman tapped him on the thigh with one of her needles. “What did I just say about sass, young man.” She looked up at him again, eyes narrowed behind thick glass. “You look familiar. Like that Captain America fellow.”

She nodded over Steve’s head, and he turned to look just as Bucky glanced up at the ad above them. It was one of the posters for the Captain America documentary currently airing on cable. Not authorized, of course, since Steve didn’t do interviews for things like that. He had after he first came out of the ice — felt he had to, or some such bullshit — but it got exhausting over the years, and he wasn’t sure what else needed to be said. So, he stopped.

It helped that Bucky’d bullied him into it, pointing out that his body already belonged to science and the government. Society didn’t need to own all of his life.

“Do I?” Steve asked, but didn’t elaborate. He never did.
The old lady nodded as she went back to her knitting. “Mhm. But, you know, he’s an Avenger —
big shot celebrity, who I’m sure has no use for the subway. And besides...” She winked at him.
“You’re prettier. If I was sixty years younger, I think I might just have to get us off this subway
myself, and grab us a cab. Get us to a bedroom that much faster.”

Steve sputtered, his face now a spectacular shade of red, and it was too much. The tears were rolling
down Bucky’s cheeks in silent laughter, and he pointed at her, then mimed a telephone. You should
call her, he mouthed as he waggled his eyebrows.

The old lady huffed at Steve’s jostling and grabbed his hands to hold him still. “Don’t move, boy. You’ll mess up my stitching.” Then, thank God for super soldier hearing, because he didn’t miss her
mutter, “Should take you to bed, just to teach you how to behave,” and Bucky was immediately
crying into Homophobe’s shoulder.

The guy shoved him into the barrier, then abruptly stood, making a beeline for the back of the
subway car. Bucky waved after him with a feeble, “No, but come back!”

Steve just shook his head, probably realizing there was no stopping Bucky at this point. Bucky, for
his part, couldn’t let the moment pass, and grabbed his phone to snap a photo of Steve and the old
lady. They were just too cute not to.

He opened up Instagram and loaded the photo. He seriously debated adding what she said to the
caption, but truthfully, as sassy as she was, he didn’t have her permission to put something so racy
online, and he certainly wasn’t about to ask.

“By the way, no offense but you remind me a lot of...what’s his name again? Stewart Rodgers? You
know...Captain America or whatever but the guy wouldn’t ride the subway with us ordinary folks,
huh? He must have some big Royce Rolls with a chauffeur like that Stark idiot. These people have
lost touch with reality a looooonng time ago if you want my opinion. I can’t believe that my taxes pay
for this Avengers bullshit. Anyway, as I was saying young man, I prefer purl when I knit a scarf...”

The second he hit send, Steve’s head snapped down, then back up, accusation in eyes. Well, looked
like he got the notification... Bucky always wondered how fast those actually came through.

“What did you say?” Steve asked, calm as anything, though his face said something else entirely.

Bucky shrugged. “Nothing my ma would disapprove of.”

“Buck, need I remind you what our mothers were like the few times they got together for a cocktail?
That’s not helpful.”

Bucky just sat back and smiled. Steve could sit there and sweat it out; it would be good for him.
After all, apparently some adorable little old lady thought he needed to learn how to behave.

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“How’s the shoulder?”

“It’s fine.”

“Steven.”

“James.”

“You know, didn’t Bea say you needed to learn to behave? Don’t make me follow through where
she didn’t.”

“You gonna take me to bed and teach me a lesson?”

“Gonna teach you something...”

“That makes no sense — oh, hey!” Steve smiled at his laptop, the screen making his face glow white in the dim light of their living room. “I found that little page she was telling me about. Did you know she helped build Springfield rifles? That was your gun, right?”

“Yep,” Bucky answered absently, his eyes not leaving Steve’s shoulder. It still looked like crap, but it seemed to be healing, he guessed.

“Wait, where’s my phone?” Steve immediately sat up, but Bucky shoved him down with a huff.

“Stop it. I’m trying to see what’s going on here. You might need stitches.”

“I don’t need stitches. I need my phone so I can compare this photo of her” — he gestured at the laptop — “with the one we took when we dropped her off.”

Because they had. Dropped her off. Steve, the giant lovable doof that he was, sat there, all the way down the A line, refusing to get up because she’s not done with her knitting, Buck, until they got to her stop. Seriously, it was all the way out at Far Rockaway, and Bucky had ended up making a crack that taking a plane from JFK back to their apartment was probably a better option than taking the A all the way back in. Which had gotten him a resounding crack off his chest from Beatrice’s purse. He’d had that coming.

They’d also spent the whole time chatting with her, and it turned out she’d also served in World War II. They’d still kept their secret, though, and let her tell them all about it as though they were outsiders. It had actually been pretty riveting. For a second, Bucky almost felt bad that Steve hadn’t participated in that documentary. Almost.

Bucky grabbed Steve’s phone off the coffee table and dropped it onto the keyboard before going to grab their first aid kit. Seriously, he would strap Steve down and stitch it himself if Steve didn’t stop being such a stubborn ass about it.

“Hey, Buck,” Steve shouted, “can you grab my graphing tablet out of the bedroom while you’re back there? ‘M gonna draw her.”

“Uh, sure!” Bucky detoured into the bedroom and over to the little desk, only to come to a halt. There were, not one, not two, but three graphing tablets on the desk. And they all looked damn near identical. What the hell. When had Steve gotten three of these things?

He snatched them all up and stalked back out. Steve was playing on his phone, the laptop forgotten at the end of the couch. Bucky dropped the first aid kit onto the coffee table with a loud clunk, and held up the three tablets. “Wanna tell me which one you need?”

Steve barely ticked a glance up. “The gray one.”

“Wanna also tell me why you have three?”

Steve definitely didn’t look up this time. “The same reason you get a new iPhone every year. Same reason you have seven Apple watches in the back of the sock drawer — yes, I know all about your little stash. And finally, the same reason you have three different KitchenAid mixers. Which, last time I checked, we weren’t opening a bakery.”
“Yeah, but they all do different things.” *Obviously. “I need them.”*

“Exactly.” When Steve *did* look up this time, he smirked, *right* at Bucky, the smug bastard.

“Bastard.” Then Bucky climbed up onto the arm of the couch and grabbed his phone out of his pocket.

“Uh...” Steve stared at him, eyes wary. “What are you doing?”

“Hold still, and smile.”

“If you drop those tablets, you’re replacing what you break.”

Like Bucky would *ever... “Just hold the fuck still.”*

“Seriously, Buck, I have a lot of work on all three of those...”

Bucky grunted and looked up over his phone to give Steve his best Scold. “Hold. Still.” But also: “And smile.”

Steve looked like such a nerd like this. He was laying across the couch, his feet propped up on their laundry, his uniform strewn all around him, the laptop just sitting there, and Steve only in his boxers because he thought he was so clever stripping to almost nothing when Bucky had said he wanted to examine his shoulder.

Bucky loved the fuck out of him, and he needed a photo of exactly this.

He snapped the thing — the tablets in *no* danger, even with the way he was balanced on the arm of the couch, because he was a badass — then hopped down, hand out, Steve already taking his precious babies away from Bucky.

“You’re a child about your art stuff, you know that?” Bucky muttered as he opened up Instagram. The picture was a little private, and Steve would have a mild conniption, but Bucky couldn’t help it, with all the loving of his giant dork like this.

“Says the guy who grabbed me with his *metal* hand when I tried to dip a spoon into that cake batter last week.”

“You were upsetting the balance...”

“Weirdo.”

“Freak.”

“Love you, too.” Steve nudged Bucky with his toe, and Bucky smiled into his phone, eyes glued to Instagram so maybe, hopefully, Steve wouldn’t see his blush. He finished his caption — just a thing about people thinking Steve had no grasp of technology — and sent it off into the Social Media Ether, then dropped the phone on the couch so he could go back to Steve’s shoulder.

“You know,” Steve murmured, “this caption reads more like *you* than it does me.”

“Well, *according* to you, it actually reads like both of us.” He grabbed the supplies he needed and set to work, but not before placing the lightest kiss he could along the edge of the injury. Steve brushed a hand over his head in response. “Guess that means we’re doing okay here in the twenty-first century.”
“You know, Buck, I think we’re doing just fine.”

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I’m laughing my a** off at people who think Steve is allergic to technology, that he only uses old sketchbooks and original fountain pens from the 1940’s. Jesus Christ, my boyfriend is the biggest geek EVER! He’s completely addicted to his phone, his computers and don’t get me started on his graphic tablet! He always needs the latest model and constantly finds an excuse to buy a new one!
We were too tired to get back home after a mission so Steve and I crashed at Nat’s place. (Photo: Nat, the only person on this earth who can take my pic without me noticing)

Nat’s POV

There were a lot of things rewarding about being an Avenger. The comradery, the notoriety, the fact
that people feared you before you even walked in the door.

Everyone and no one feared the Black Widow. The moment people laid eyes on her, they knew their days were numbered, of course, it was just that no one ever saw her coming. So most had no idea their days had been numbered for quite some time — from the moment she crossed the threshold into their world.

Not once they saw her, though. Once they saw her, they knew.

Nat thought that might be what she liked best. Being an Avenger meant having a family, sure, but she’d been born a spy and an assassin, first. And before, people underestimated her, which contrary to popular belief, wasn’t always that fun. When people didn’t take you seriously, it took twice as long to get what you wanted. At least, as an Avenger, the world knew she was someone to be reckoned with.

Of course, there was also the part of the job she loathed. The one thing that, sometimes, was worse than the water torture she’d endured back in Vantaa. The slow drip drip drip that ran both hot and cold, and there was no knowing what she’d get next.

She cared about people. She had people to lose.

Would she trade that? Of course not. For the first time in her life, she was happy. She had good things, and good people, and it wasn’t all darkness, all the time. The tabula rasa of nothingness that had cloaked her wherever she’d gone.

But still. She cared about people. She had people to lose.

And not that long ago, she’d almost lost one of her best friends. Because if Steve had died, there would have been no coming back for Bucky.

She sat in the passenger seat of the Stingray, Clint at the wheel, and she tapped a nail against the screen of her phone. They were almost to the Tower, and she needed to hit send, but this was a call she was hoping she would never have to make — not while Steve and Bucky were on their self-imposed leave of absence.

But sometimes, the world didn’t care if you needed a break from it. Until some asteroid, or alien, or demigod said otherwise, the world was supposed to keep on spinning, and like Fury used to always say, treat it like it intended to stay that way. So, sometimes the world needed you.

“You gotta call him, babe.”

“I know.” She still didn’t hit send.

Clint reached over and gently squeezed her thigh. “We need them on this one.”

“I know that, too.”

Clint whipped around a cop car, and Nat caught the smirk, reflected in the windshield, when the siren flared up, then died down.

That was another thing she liked about being an Avenger. Special license plates meant, under no circumstances — absolutely no circumstances — were the police allowed to pull any one of them over. She and Tony had tested that theory on countless occasions. Just a couple weeks before they’d taken a little drive through the Lincoln Tunnel, and —
She was stalling. Get it the fuck together, Natashenka.

With a sigh, she finally hit send. It took a couple rings until, “Lo?”

“Bucky…” It was not like her to stall, but she cared about him, and neither he nor Steve were ready for this.

“Nat?” His voice was like sandpaper, but still, more alert. There was a rustling on the other end, probably from Bucky waking Steve. “What is it?”

“Catulus, I’m really sorry about this.”

“Nat, what’s going on?”

A beat. Long enough for the entirety of Steve’s near-death experience to flash before her eyes. Long enough to remind her of why she didn’t want to make this call, but also long enough to steel herself for what she had to do.

“Avengers Assemble.”

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It had taken less than twenty-four hours to obliterate an entire island off the coast of California. A heavily populated one too, but, luckily, they were able to get most everyone off of it.

The fight had been brutal, with casualties on both sides. None of the Avengers had been lost, but several SHIELD agents had, including a female agent, Perez, who’d been friends with both Hill and May. Both of them sat off to the side during the debrief, stoic, blank, and most likely burning from the inside out.

They were always better at hiding it than Nat was.

But that wasn’t what kept drawing her eye. No, what kept pulling her out of Coulson’s speech was her kotenok and her kapitan, sitting on the back couch, absolutely fused together. They looked feral, almost, the way they clung to each other. Steve was paying attention, with a weird sort of fierce intensity, but it was Bucky who seemed truly wild — eyes darting all over the place, fidgeting where he sat, only to become hyper-focused on some new injury he thought he found on Steve, and then right back to staring the room down, as if daring anyone in it to come within feet of his Steve.

Truthfully, it would be fascinating, the study in human contrast between Steve and Bucky, and May and Hill, if Nat didn’t care so much. But she did, and it wasn’t.

The meeting broke with Coulson calling it a success, but people were dead, and a town (an island) was gone, and while they’d saved the world, no one felt like celebrating.

As they stood, Nat grabbed Clint’s arm, her eyes still on Steve and Bucky. “Hey, come back to my place, if you want, but I think I’m going to ask them to come crash there, was well.” She nodded at the pair. Steve was trying to stand up, but Bucky was forcibly holding him back until the people passed. Steve looked frustrated; Bucky looked ready to commit murder.

She shook her head and turned back to Clint. “I don’t think leaving them alone right now is a good idea.”

“Nat, they’re big boys, they —” Clint cut off at Bucky’s, “NOT NOW, COULSON!”
They turned to see Bucky half off the couch, Steve gripping his metal arm, and Bucky trying to break free, probably to either punch Coulson, or strangle him. Nat’s money was even on that one.

“Or, you know, not leaving the Buckster to his own devices might not be such a bad idea,” Clint finished. He and Nat eyed each other. She knew what he was thinking.

“Yes, I can keep him under control.”

“He seems ready to strike at anyone, at this point. Are you sure?”

Nat shrugged, unconcerned. “Bucky only listens to two people, and right now, one of those people is the person he’s hell-bent on protecting. That leaves me.”

“You make him sound worse than Lucky, you know that.” Nat just shrugged again, and Clint snorted. “I swear, I will never understand the dynamic between you two.”

She patted his cheek, and smiled. “Probably best that you don’t.”

She headed over to the couch, slow and calculating, weaving in and out of chairs, around a table that put her right in his line of sight. She stopped as close as she dared, about five feet away. Steve was pressed up against one corner, an arm around Bucky’s waist. To anyone outside this room, they were the picture of a couple casually snuggling together, but Nat could see the tension in Steve’s arm, see the way he was holding Bucky back. When Bucky’s eyes snapped to her, honestly, she was half surprised he didn’t start growling.

“Hey, Buck,” she said, calm as anything. “You guys planning on heading out anytime soon?”

Bucky opened his mouth, but it was Steve that responded. “We’re waiting until everyone leaves so that Kujo, over here —”

“Ha!” Clint laughed. “See, just like a dog.”

“— will stop snarling at anyone who gets too close.” Steve eyed Bucky, fond, but there was an undercurrent of fear there that Nat had rarely seen in recent years — not since when Bucky first came back. “Someone isn’t all that down with people talking to me, at the moment. Or, apparently, looking in my general direction, it would seem.”

“Coulson wanted to talk to you about another mission,” Bucky bit out.

“You don’t know that.”

“I know him.”

Steve sighed before resting his head on Bucky’s shoulder. “I would have said no, you know. I am capable of saying no, you idiot.”

“And yet, here we are.”

“Uh...” Nat waved a hand at him. “Remember me? I’m the one that called you in.”

“And I know who you take your orders from.”

She carefully sat down beside him. “You know.” She folded her hands in her lap, and smiled at him. “It’s late on a Friday, which means the subways’ll be wonky and the cabs will take forever. Why don’t you guys crash at my place. It’s not that far.”
“Why would we do that?” Bucky asked, harsh and confused. “It’s not like we’ve never dealt with a fucking Friday night before. Never mind the fact that our car is here.” Shit. She forgot they drove. “And besides” — he jerked a hand above his head — “we’ve got this handy little apartment here, just a few floors up.”

“Exactly.” She could work with this. “An apartment within the same walls as the very Coulson and SHIELD you’re trying to avoid. You sure you want to be here right now?”

Bucky scowled. “Then we go home.”

“You could do that. sure,” Nat said, keeping her cool, because Bucky was about ten seconds from spooking right out the door. “But if you came with me, you could be in bed and asleep in the next twenty, as opposed to it taking at least that long just to get to the bridge.”

But Bucky still didn’t look convinced, probably wouldn’t. So, she did what she did best: She adjusted her posture and leaned in, eyes downcast to make herself look small. When she spoke, it was tentative and quiet. “And, you know, maybe then we don’t all have to be alone tonight.”

She ticked the barest glance upward to him, and once over to Steve, before looking down again. Bucky looked cautious, but also like maybe he was thinking about it. Steve, though, had shrewd eyes on her, and she knew he’d cottoned on to what she was doing. It would have struck her as funny that Steve had figured her out, when her best friend — and fellow spy — seemed to be unawares, but one, she knew what she was doing; and two, Bucky wasn’t...all there at the moment. It helped, in situations like this.

“Bucky, please.” It was Steve who spoke up, and years of experience had Nat containing her sigh of relief. “I think we can both count on nightmares tonight, and you know, maybe it would help if Nat and Clint were around.”

“Steve. What if...”

“I know, baby.”

Nat glanced up to find them clinging to each other. She was honest enough that she could admit it broke her heart a little. She found herself blindly reaching for Clint’s hand, her grip like death, and him holding on as if ready to follow her straight into Hell.

She had no idea what she would do if she lost him, but burning the world down, and dragging it with her into the 10th Circle, didn’t seem entirely out of the realm of possibility.

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She dropped her keys into the little seashell on the front table, brushing a finger along its side. She’d killed the entire family of the little girl who’d given it to her, but it had been for the best. The family was abusive and deeply corrupt, and Nat was supposed to eliminate everyone — the girl included — but this had been one of her last missions for the Red Room, and by then, she’d been done killing innocents. The little girl had given her the seashell before she’d left, and Clint had found her five weeks later. She always touched it when she came home. It was a reminder, and also her good luck charm.

She waved a hand toward the back. “You guys know where the spare bedroom is. Go crash or something.” She pulled her jacket off, a slight hiss escaping where her entire left side twinged. The jacket was suddenly out of her hands, and she smiled gratefully at Clint’s retreating form as he went to hang it up. They didn’t talk injury.
Bucky, on the other hand... “You okay?” He was standing right next to her, crowding her space, but she allowed it.

She shrugged. She’d ignored the pain when they’d been at SHIELD, but this was home, and home meant she didn’t have to hide anything. That said, she wasn’t used to outsiders being here post-mission, and right now, Bucky and Steve were outsiders. Anyone who wasn’t Clint or Lucky was an outsider, most days.

“I’ll be fine.” It wasn’t a lie. “Just need to rest for a bit, take the edge off.”

“Are you sure about this?”

“No place I’d rather have you than here.”

Bucky nodded, once. He knew not to question her. She nodded back, and closed the door. They followed Steve in, who made it as far as the couch before collapsing right onto it, dropping his gear as he went. He gave them the saddest eyes she’d ever seen that didn’t personally belong to Clint’s dog.

“How far is the bedroom again?” he asked, voice drawn, whiny as anything. She held back a smirk.

Bucky nodded in the direction of the bedroom. “About twenty paces that way. Want me to carry you?”

“You wouldn’t dare…”

“Well, you do look pretty invalid.”

“Why do I put up with you?”

“Well, when I shove this shiny thing up your —” Nat smacked him over the back his head, no way was he finishing that sentence.

“Barnes. Since I’m aware that making jokes right now about killing you probably isn’t in the best taste, may I remind you that, since you’re in a relationship with a man, your balls aren’t exactly needed.” She waited the requisite couple seconds to see the whites of his eyes. “You catch my meaning?”

“Loud and clear, ty zlaya suka.”

She gave him a dirty little half smile. “That’s Miss Evil Bitch to you, honey.” She gave his shoulder a shake and turned toward her bedroom. “Now, I don’t know about you two, but I’m going to bed.” She stopped just outside her door. “Bedroom, couch, kitchen countertop — I don’t care. Just sleep, you idiots. Please.”

They both gave her a lazy salute before she turned back to her room. Clint was already on the bed, snoring lightly. She smiled softly to herself, though she wished Lucky was here, instead of back at the Tower. Too many people with too many issues under one roof. They both figured Lucky was better off sleeping with Bruce tonight. The man did love to snuggle when he was in Hulk Hangover mode.

She made quick efficient work of getting ready for bed. It had been more than a long couple of days, and she figured they were all overdue for a bit of rest. She grabbed her and Clint’s phones off the nightstands and turned the alarms off, before putting her own in her pajama pocket. She would be up early enough, sure, but she didn’t need an alarm to make that happen, and she certainly didn’t need
his.

She was on her way back to the living room to turn off the lights, when she stopped in her tracks. Bucky and Steve were still on the couch, talking.

“Steve, I can’t do this,” Bucky whispered, muffled, like he was buried under something — or maybe wrapped up in something. Like Steve’s arms. “Why did we do this?”

“Baby, I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine —”

“Oh, you mean like this? That gash is nasty, Buck.” Steve huffed what maybe passed for laughter in some countries. “No need to lose a leg when you’ve already lost an arm. You’re not a pirate.”

“Because you’re just so funny. Asshole.”

“True. But I’m an asshole who’s here, Buck. You need to remember that. Stop trying to kill the friendlies.”

“But what if you weren’t here? I mean, that one shot was so close...”

“Close. Not a money shot. I’m here, okay?”

“Stevie...”

And that’s when she heard it, Bucky crying. It ripped something in her, and she couldn’t help but gravitate toward him, ready to protect. He was her responsibility, him and Steve both. And if either one was in distress, she would do what she could to keep them safe.

She slowly crept out into the living room, unsure what she would find. Only some of the lights were on, the room bathed in a soft glow. She found them on the couch still, stripped down somewhat, both gripping the other like the world was hell bent on ripping them apart, and just let it try.

They looked so in love, and so lost. She’d seen what Bucky’s accident had done to Steve, and she’d been laid witness lately to how well Bucky had not been handling the almost assassination of his lover. He could hide it from Steve, but she knew Bucky wasn’t dealing. At all.

Calling them in had been the worst possible decision. It sucked that it had been the only one.

She’d made it all the way to the edge of the room, and yet, neither of them seemed to know she was there. She wasn’t entirely surprised — they were pretty into each other, at the moment. Plus, she had a lifelong skill if skulking in the shadows.

The tears had subsided, and Steve leaned in to press a soft kiss against each one of Bucky’s eyelids, then against each cheek, kissing the salt away. It was delicate, intimate, and maybe something she shouldn’t be witnessing, but she wasn’t ready to leave Bucky alone, so she stayed.

“I need you, Stevie,” Bucky whispered into the quiet room. “Please don’t leave me.”

“I’m not going anywhere, baby.” Steve kissed a smile against his lips this time. “You’re stuck with me, unfortunately.”

“I’ll take that kind of misfortune any day.”

She slipped her phone out of her pocket, then, gentle as a dancer, and as silent as could be, she lept
up onto the end table, just next to the couch. Neither of them so much as flinched. She rolled her eyes, because really. She did want a picture of them to send to Bucky, but not even a twitch? Seriously, she was standing right over them! How were either of them even still alive, the two clueless idiots.

Now wasn’t the time, but later. Later, Bucky was never going to hear the end of this. She wasted no time snapping a picture before turning back to her room, just as silent, leaving them be. They needed their rest, even if they never made it back to the other bedroom.

She crawled into bed and was immediately pulled into Clint’s arms. Strong, sure, and the only truly safe place she had ever known.

“What were you doing out there?” he whispered, rough, into her ear.

*Checking on the boys. I may have ammo on those two assholes now,* she signed, knowing his aides were already out.

“You gonna share?” he yawned, barely understandable.

*Tomorrow. Give them a day before we attack.*

Clint huffed in her ear, but didn’t say anything more. Sure enough, his breathing became even again, and he was out in less than sixty seconds. No one could sleep like he could.

She pulled her phone out again and opened the picture to send to Bucky.

*You two look sweet. Turn your damn alarm off, and get some rest. We’ll discuss your complete and total lack of spatial awareness tomorrow.* ;) — N

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It was easily mid-morning by the time Nat opened her eyes, instantly alert. It took her a moment to realize her phone’s buzzer was what had woken her. She grabbed her phone, because fuck, she thought she’d turned that off. Except it wasn’t her alarm, but an Instagram post from Bucky. She slipped out of Clint’s still-sleeping arms and padded out to the living room to find it empty. A quick check of the other room showed her that not only had Steve and Bucky already left — typical — but they really had ended up crashing on the couch.

She wandered into the kitchen to start the coffee, then hopped up onto the counter while she waited. She opened her phone to find no text replies, so she went to check Instagram, and sure enough, it was the picture she’d taken last night. The caption, though — *We were too tired to get back home after a mission so Steve and I crashed at Nat’s place. (Photo: Nat, the only person on this earth who can take my pic without me noticing)* — had her curious, and she immediately fired off a text to him.

*That’s not why you came here, you know.* — N

*That’s no one’s business.* — B

Well, fuck you too, Barnes. Not that they were the beat around the bush type, but still. It was too early for this.

*When you say no one, you talking about your adoring fans, or you talking about Steve?* — N
I’m not stupid, tupitsa. — N

Stay out of it, Natalia. — B

I just care about you — N

I know — B

Please talk to your doctor, especially about yesterday. I wouldn’t have called you in if we’d had any other choice, and as much as it was the right thing to do, you AREN’T doing okay. — N

He didn’t respond after that. She just hoped he got the message.
“Barnes, I mean…seriously. This is a lab, I WORK here. This is not some sort of...personal lounge where you can enjoy a drink and a magazine when you're tired! Are you even LISTENING to me?!! And for the last time put that helmet back where you found it, for god's sake, it's not some cool toy, it's high technology. CAN ANYONE HELP ME WITH THIS GUY?!! BRUCE, PEPPER, ANYONE?!!” (Photo: Sam)

I SWEAR it’s not my fault. Ok, maybe. I just asked the two nerds if they could make the autonomy of my holographic arm last longer because 12 hours was a bit short for...
undercover missions. Tony said “Should have asked sooner Barnes, give us 2 days”, Bruce said “No, it's far too dangerous, we need more series of tests”. Yes, no, yes, no. It went downhill from there and… I AM SORRY, OK? I JUST ASKED A SIMPLE QUESTION!!

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“Oh please, you’re such a drama queen! Yes, things got *a bit* out of hand and Pepper is gonna be really pissed, I can’t deny that, but seriously Bruce, I DARE YOU to tell me what’s better than blowing up a 250 million dollar lab with your best friend! Enjoy these little moments life gives you and stop always seeing the glass half-empty for god’s sake! And we can still blame this one on Barnes anyway…”

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Bucky snorted at the photo on his phone, then looked up to give Sam a lazy salute with it. Sam flipped him off before going back to whatever adjustments he was making to Redwing. Probably some new way to bypass the protocols on Steve and Bucky’s apartment, and get inside. But not a chance in Hell was that thing gonna catch Bucky singing in the shower, not again. Bucky would shoot it on sight if it tried.

“Aaaand now he’s on his phone. Seriously, Barnes, what the hell are you even doing here? And why is there a lounge chair in the middle of the room? This is a lab, Barnes. Show some respect.”

“Uh, Tony,” Bruce piped up, “that’s your lounge chair that you keep in here.”

“But why is it in the middle of the room? And what’s with the umbrella drink? The Bahamas are a few thousand miles, due South.”

Bucky looked up at Tony, though it was kind of fuzzy to see him with the Iron Man helmet on, especially when it was turned off. “Stark, you know, you really should design better blackout vision for this thing,” he commented, flat out ignoring Tony’s rant. “I mean, what if the suit goes dead, mid-flight. You can’t navigate like this.”

“You’re right, Lollipop Kid, how did I never think of that.” There was a hard thunk against the side of his head, and suddenly, everything was crystal clear. And by crystal clear, that meant a deeply unimpressed Tony Stark staring back at him. Or maybe that was annoyance. With Tony, it was always hard to tell.

“Huh.” He smiled up at Tony, only to realize no one could see his face. “How about that. You thought of everything.”

“Yeah, it’s like I’m a genius, or something.”

“Or something.”

Tony flicked the helmet again, and everything went back to being fuzzy. He set his drink down, and picked up the magazine he’d been kind of, sort of reading, and thwacked Tony on the leg with it.

“Are you kidding me, Barnes?” Tony squawked. “Rogers, get your fucking boyfriend out of here, Bruce and I are working.”

Wait, Steve?
Bucky shot up straight in the chair, and looked around, only for his heart to drop right to his stomach at the sight of Steve, still in uniform, standing with Pepper in the back of the room. Bucky barely caught his bemused expression as he ripped off the helmet and tossed it aside. He was immediately across the room, on his own mission, and in Steve’s arms. He kissed him, hard and hungry, and just relieved to have him home.

Steve chuckled against his lips. “I’ve been gone less than twelve hours, Buck.”

“Less than twelve hours on a mission. You were on a mission, and I was worried. Deal with it.”

Steve fondly rolled his eyes, but he still tightened his arms around Bucky’s waist, holding him close. “It wasn’t a mission, you nut. It was just a lunch at the White House —”

“That they told you.”

“That it was. Pretty good one, too. They served duck.”

Bucky kissed him again for want of anything else to say. He wanted to get Steve home and stripped out of this fucking uniform, and get them in bed, and destroy all forms of modern technology so that Coulson, or SHIELD, or even the goddamn U.S. government couldn’t get hold of them, and then maybe — maybe — he’d be able to get his heart to stop tripping double time.

“I hate your uniform,” he admitted, with a frown.

One that was instantly matched by the look on Steve’s face. “You love my uniform…”

“Not right now, I don’t.”

Steve slumped a little before taking Bucky’s face in hand. “Hey, look at me.” Bucky looked up from where he’d zeroed in on the Kevlar padding of Steve’s chest plate. “I’m okay. I wasn’t tricked into a mission, and you know it, I know you do.” He brushed a thumb across Bucky’s lips. “If you really thought it was an actual mission, I seriously doubt you would have let me go alone. Or at all.”

Bucky didn’t deserve someone who cared so much about his feelings, not when the greater good was at stake. Instead he just pulled Steve into a hug, gripping tight.

When they broke apart, Steve was wearing Bucky’s favorite half smile. “I need to finish talking to Pepper, okay?” He nodded over to where Pepper was politely scrolling through her tablet, ignoring their moment. “Then, after, why don’t we go grab a nice dinner at Emily’s before heading home and locking ourselves in for the next week.”

Bucky smiled, wide, relieved. “It’s like you read my mind.”

“I know you too well.” Steve kissed his forehead, quick, then released him completely. “Okay, twenty minutes?”

“I’m timing you, Cap.”

Steve gave his arm a tiny squeeze, then turned back to Pepper. Bucky wandered back to his chair and plopped down, ignoring Tony’s grunt of annoyance. He opened up his Instagram to load the image Sam had sent over, only to notice Steve standing in the background. How the hell had he missed that? Steve was right there, and... whatever. He’d been so pissed about Steve leaving, so on edge, maybe his brain had just refused to accept him there and safe and whole. At least now he’d felt Steve in his arms, and knew he was fine.
He added the image and wrote the first thing that came to mind. Which, surprise, surprise, would annoy Tony to no end:

“Barnes, I mean...seriously. This is a lab, I WORK here. This is not some sort of...personal lounge where you can enjoy a drink and a magazine when you’re tired! Are you even LISTENING to me?!
And for the last time put that helmet back where you found it, for god’s sake, it’s not some cool toy, it’s high technology. CAN ANYONE HELP ME WITH THIS GUY??! BRUCE, PEPPER, ANYONE?!!” (Photo: Sam)

The moment he hit send, he was hit again by the sound of a multitude of phones buzzing all over the lab.

“Seriously?” he exclaimed, exasperated, and glanced around to find everyone looking over their phones, at what was certainly Bucky’s recent post. “Is there anyone on the team who doesn’t have my posts on notification?”

“’Fraid not, Buckaroo,” Tony said as he tossed his phone onto the nearest table. “Shocking as it would seem, you — not I — are the social media influencer of the crew. I’m actually surprised sponsors haven’t asked you to promote their teas, yet, that don’t work. Also,” he picked the helmet up and thunked it back on Bucky’s head, then gave it a sharp rap, “I’m loud and boastful; I don’t yell. So ease up on the all caps next time, wouldja?”

“Aye aye, Captain!” He smiled up at Tony, and shit. Again. Man, he was thankful he didn’t have to wear the bottom half of his Winter Soldier mask anymore. Obscured facial expressions was not helping his end game of being the biggest smart ass among them.

The vision was actually clear this time, so he went back to his magazine article — something about how to make yourself a more glamorous you — and quietly ignored the room around him. Sam had already left, so it was really just Pepper and Steve chatting about his trip to D.C. while Tony and Bruce worked on some new tech, specifically for Nat and Clint.

After five minutes of staring at the same paragraph, Bucky finally tossed the article aside. If he was being honest with himself, it was Nat’s words to him the week before that he couldn’t get out of his head. She knew. Of course, she knew. She knew he was hurting, and hiding it from Steve. She probably also knew about his unbridled fear of him and Steve eventually going back to work — all the more compounded by last week’s outing.

He was fine, in training. He could spar for hours, run obstacle courses, both here at SHIELD, and at the compound, upstate. Hell, he could even handle some of the more rigorous aspects that have, on the odd occasion, sent him to the hospital. Because, no matter how injured he or anyone else got, it was still all controlled, to an extent. He could handle that.

But out in the field... where the enemy, and their tactics, were unknown? Steve’s mission was supposed to be routine, and he’d almost died. Bucky had obeyed a direct order, and he’d almost died. All within the last year.

Every day, a new fear had been edging its way to his consciousness: He and Steve, no matter how souped up they were, were also hopelessly mortal. And this wasn’t the kind of work where people usually retired to old age (Pegs notwithstanding).

He and Steve were most likely going to die in the field. And factoring in all probabilities, they probably wouldn’t die together. One of them would have to watch the other’s demise. And Bucky honestly couldn’t decide which fate was worse: having to watch Steve die, or dying with the knowledge that Steve would have to go on without him.
Either option made him want to throw up.

“You break it, you buy it, Barnes.”

“Huh?” Bucky shook his head and looked up at Tony, confused. Tony nodded toward Bucky’s left hand, and Bucky glanced down to find the arm of the chair twisted at an odd angle.

Shit.

He tried to fix it, but the arm was pretty fucked, and now he was pissed, at the chair and at himself, and shit!

“You okay?”

He looked at Tony again, who actually looked mildly concerned, but Bucky waved him off. “Fine. I’m fine.”

Tony watched him for a second longer than shrugged. “Whatever. Have fun going Full Metal Hand job on my chair.”

Bucky glared down at the hand in question, and a spike of irrational anger flashed through him. That fucking thing would live on, regardless. Silver and garish, and once he was gone, some fucking museum would take it and shine it up, and put it on display as part of another goddamn Captain America exhibit. He wondered how long they would have to wait to get their hands on it. Chances were, being that his metal arm was more famous than he was, that’s how he would get taken down. Someone would see that fucking thing coming, and take a shot, straight at his head.

“The arm needs more autonomy,” he gritted out.

“What was that?”

He yanked the helmet off, and glared at Tony. He jabbed a finger at the arm. “This. This thing needs to be covered for longer than twelve hours.” His words tasted like bad lemons. “I mean, are you guys serious with this twelve-hour crap? When was the last time any undercover mission lasted only twelve hours?”

He was spitting vitriol, he knew he was, but he couldn’t get his brain to shut himself up.

Truth was, though, twelve hours was crap, and what the fuck had they been thinking?

Tony ticked a glance over Bucky’s head, and a moment later Bucky flinched at the gentle hand on his shoulder. He snapped his head up to find Steve standing over him, brows furrowed. “Hey, everything okay, Buck?”

“Well, Bucky,” Bruce cut in, slowly, “those were all prototypes,”

“Prototypes,” he repeated dully. “You’ve been giving me prototypes this whole time, and it never occurred to you that we should maybe, oh I don’t know, move past that phase? Get me something that doesn’t shut down in the middle of most missions? I thought you two were fucking geniuses. Why am I doing all the heavy lifting?”
“Hey, still a genius here,” Tony came back, his hands up. “If you want a more autonomous arm, you get a more autonomous arm.” He nodded at Bruce. “Right?”

Bruce grabbed a different tablet off his workstation, and began typing away on it. “I don’t see why not. I mean, it’ll take some testing, but I think we can have it for you in...” He glanced up and gave a small shrug. “A couple weeks? Three at most?”

“And if we have to fucking Assemble sooner than that?” Bucky snapped. “Then what?”

“Bucky, I’m sorry, but that’s the soonest I can promise —”

“Forty-eight hours,” Tony cut in, and ripped the tablet out of Bruce’s hand. “Does that work?”

A tickle of relief settled in Bucky’s spine. “Yeah, that’s —”

“Not safe.” Bruce walked over and grabbed the tablet back from Tony, whose fingers had been flying across it ever since he’d taken it. Whatever he’d done had Bruce’s nostrils flaring, and Bruce immediately started typing away himself, probably to undo what Tony had been working on. He shook his head and grunted. “I’m sorry, Bucky, but I’m not going to attach anything to that arm that hasn’t been thoroughly vetted. The last thing you want is for the mechanics of the sleeve to cause an electrical shortage right when you need your arm the most. No, it’s going to have to wait. Besides” — he cocked his head — “if you guys are on leave, I don’t see why waiting is a problem.”

Bucky shot up out of the chair. “Does this” — he waved a hand at Steve — “look like a leave of absence to you?”

“Buck, for the last time, I wasn’t on a mission.”

“Shut up, Steve.”

“Hey.”

Bucky just rolled his shoulders, in no mood to deal with Steve trying to placate him. This was serious. He glared at Bruce. “Look. I get where you’re coming from, but I don’t have time to wait for you to figure shit out. We could get called up at any moment — hell, we already have. I need a functioning arm, dammit!”

“But you have a functioning arm,” Bruce pointed out. “And the sleeve works fine, for now —”

“I’M NOT LOOKING FOR FINE!”

His human arm was suddenly in a vice grip, and he whipped around to find Steve staring at him, tense. “Okay, you need to back off. I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but you are not helping, right now.”

Bucky felt muscle and sinew shift under Steve’s grip as he flexed his fingers. “Let go of me Steve,” he growled, his vision narrowing.

“No. Not until you calm down.”

“I am calm.” He tested the grip, but Steve was unyielding. Seriously, who the fuck did he think he was? “But I promise you, if you don’t let go of me, right the fuck now, I will show you exactly how not calm I can be —”

“Oh yeah, paragon of control, right here.”
“— and break your arm if you don’t let go of mine!”

It was a slap to the face, and Bucky instantly tried to pull the words back. Especially the way Steve was staring at him, in abject shock, he knew he’d gone too far.

“Steve, shit, I didn’t mean...” He trailed off as Steve’s gaze shifted from him to directly over his shoulder, his eyes going that much wider. It wasn’t until then that Bucky noticed the decibel shift in the room, and he turned, only to take an involuntary step back. Bruce was yelling at Tony, his skin dissolving from a sallow yellow to a putrid green, his shirt ripping along the edges.

“Fuck,” Steve muttered, then suddenly, there was nothing but air, as Steve took off, vaulting over one of the tables, and grabbed Pepper, taking her to safety.

Bucky watched him go, rooted to the spot, only to turn at the sound of metal snapping into place. Tony barely had time to encase himself in the Iron Man suit before Bruce had fully hulked out. Then it was instant chaos.

The closest table was upended as Bruce tore through it, before putting a fist through two different projector screens. Bottles and electronics, papers and tablets, equipment of all shapes and sizes were being ripped to shreds, and Bucky couldn’t move — just watched it all unfold.

It only lasted a couple minutes before Tony was able to secure Bruce in an energy field, brought on by the repulsors in the hands of the suit, but the damage was done. Alarms were blaring as two different types of fire retardants fell from the ceiling, working to put out the fires that had sprung up everywhere. Bucky wasn’t sure he’d ever seen so much destruction in such a short period of time.

“Barnes, I think I might require your help, and possibly your attention, at this point.”

His name is what snapped him out of it. He shook his head, water and foam flying everywhere, and looked over. “What do you need?”

“See that one and only cabinet still standing in the far back corner?” Tony nodded his head and Bucky glanced back at the shockingly unscathed. cabinet in question. Bruce let out a deafening roar. “Inside is the tranq kit. Grab it.”

Bucky could do this. He made his way as quickly and efficiently as possible to the other side of the lab, yanked the door off its hinges and grabbed the singular item inside; a long, military-grade case that he knew contained a sedation rifle, large and powerful enough to take down a rogue super soldier, a god, or an extremely pissed off Hulk. Only three people on the planet were trained to fire it.

Locked and loaded he spun right into position. The repulsor field needed to be dropped in order to fire the tranq, so Bucky gave Tony the signal, then counted down three seconds before pulling the trigger. The field dissolved right as the dart passed the point of no return. Bruce had just enough time to grab Tony and throw him into a wall before he hit his knees and passed out. It would take another thirty seconds for his heart rate to slow enough for him to turn human again, so Bucky launched himself over to where Bruce had gone down, and cleared the surrounding area as best he could to make sure there was nothing that could cause damage to Bruce himself, once he was back in human form.

He was just about to knock a shattered table out of the way, when it was blasted out from underneath his hands. “Out of the way, Destructor. I’ve got this.”

Bucky looked up in shock. “I didn’t do this,” he responded, because how was this his fault?
“Yeah. Okay.” Tony shot another blast at a mess of multicolored glass — beakers and test tubes, it looked like.

“Should I be worried about chemicals in the air?” Bucky asked, eyeing the debris as it went flying, as well as the flame-retardant foam mixing with pools of unidentifiable liquid.

“Probably, yeah.”

It was so nonchalant, the way Tony put it, Bucky knew he was seething. It was pretty clear he was probably the last person Tony wanted in the room, at that moment.

He awkwardly waved a hand toward the far exit, where Steve had gone with Pepper. “I’ll just...”

Tony barely spared him a glance, Bruce already on his way back to human. “You do that.”

Bucky didn’t hesitate. Just took off in search of Steve, and presumably, Pepper. The building was in chaos, people filing out of offices and heading toward exits. It was a sea of heads in front of him, none of which belonged to the ones he actually cared about. He was just about to call Steve when his phone buzzed in his hand, and Bucky pressed himself up against the nearest wall.

“Where are you?” he asked, the phone shoved up against his ear so he could hear above the cacophony of noise.

“We’re across the street from Grand Central,” came Steve’s voice down the line, harsh and jagged. “Where the fuck are you?”

“I...” Wait, why was Steve mad? “I’m still in the building, trying to get out. I was coming to find you.”

“I’m taking Pepper to Nat’s. Go home and wait for me.”

“But —”

“JUST FOR FUCKING ONCE DO WHAT I GODDAMN ASK YOU TO DO!”

The line went dead and Bucky stared at the phone. Someone knocked into him, but he barely noticed. Nor did he notice whatever announcements were being given overhead. He didn’t notice directions being given, or people shoving past to get out, or any of the general pandemonium swirling around him.

Steve never yelled at him. They raised their voices when they fought, sure, but Steve never yelled directly at him. What the fuck was that?

Why was everyone blaming him for this? He’d gotten upset, sure, but he hadn’t been wrong. He had a right to demand a better arm, or whatever. Anything that would be an advantage to him when it came down to protecting Steve, he would fight tooth and nail to make it happen. And yet, for some reason, caring meant he was responsible for Bruce.

Fuck this. Bucky huffed out through his nose and shoved his phone in his back pocket. He had to get out of there. And apparently, he had no choice.

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Bucky wasn’t sure how long it had been since he’d left, but darkness had descended hours ago. Once he’d made it out onto 45th, he’d felt directionless, and was in no mood to deal with Steve, his
stupid order be damned. So, he’d decided to walk home, to help clear his head. At some point, Tony had texted him a series of photo pulled from JARVIS’ feed that showed the entire incident, and as much as he hated to admit it, it actually looked really bad.

See what happens when you flip out and don’t let Bruce and I work? — T

And yet, there it was again. Bucky got that this wasn’t good, but that still didn’t change the fact that he couldn’t figure out how this was his responsibility.

You know, I’m not Bruce’s fucking keeper. Seriously, explain to me why this is MY fault. I’d love to hear this. — B

His phone buzzed immediately after, the Iron Man mask staring back at him. He answered it.

“Well?” he snapped.

“You know, I get it. I get going off the deep end. Hell, I get the whole irrational crazy-man act that comes from almost losing the one you love. I get it, I do. Question is, why don’t you get it?”

Bucky halted in his tracks, only to get sworn at as someone quickly walked around him. “Fuck you, too, buddy!” he shouted after the guy before moving off to the side.

“Sorry, Barnes, but you’re not my type,” Tony drawled.

“What?” Bucky shook his head. “That wasn’t for you.”

“Oh, well then, consider me hurt.”

“Whatever, Tony.” Bucky didn’t have time for this. “Just tell me how this is supposed to be my fault.”

“Do you think our favorite Jolly Green Giant paid us a visit because Bruce was just randomly pissed? Bruce is always pissed. Usually at me. And today was no different, to be fair. Except for one thing.”

Bucky had no idea what Tony was getting at. “Still not seeing how I’m the linchpin here.”

Tony sighed, deep and long, and long-suffering. Bucky knew that sigh. It meant Tony was going to have to start using his not-smart words. Bucky hated that sigh. “Bucky. Buddy. Pal. Arch-enemy. Bruce may have been fighting with me about the whole arm thing, but the spike in tension in that room was coming off of you in damn-near visible waves. You looked about one brain misfire away from declaring that winter was coming, and that put everyone in the room in battle positions. Even Steve was trying to detain you.”

“I know that part,” Bucky gritted out.

“And what causes Bruce to hulk out more than anything? It’s not anger, not always. It’s a protective armor. He hulks out when there’s an imminent threat.”

Oh. Oh, yeah. That was true actually, and Bucky...he knew that. He hadn’t really ever thought of it that way, but it made sense. Bruce hulked out willingly all the time, and it was always based on a threat. But that meant...

“And I was the imminent threat.” It wasn’t a question. He knew Tony was right.

“Well, looky there, Sherlock; you figured it out.”
Bucky slid down the side of the building and landed on the sidewalk with a heavy thud. He put his head between his knees. He hadn’t meant to freak everyone out. But still, he hadn’t been wrong about the arm. He knew he hadn’t. He needed it to better. Everything just needed to be better.

“I need to protect Steve,” he said quietly into the phone.

“Yes, you two have that in common.”

“I’m not doing too well, Tony.”

“Something else you have in common. Not that I would know. I’m not your therapist. Drinking buddy, maybe. Your friendly bomb expert who lets you blow off steam, that too. But not your therapist. T’Challa money couldn’t get me to take that job.”

Bucky could practically hear Tony shudder on the other end of the line, and he smiled. “Yeah, you and me both don’t want you in that position. But what were you saying about Steve? He’s fine.”

“You know, I think Pepper’s been lying to me. She keeps saying communication is the key to a healthy relationship, but then there’s you two, who don’t talk at all and you’ve been together for a couple millennia. Pep and I are gonna need to have a talk about this.”

What did that have to do with... “I don’t get it.”

And there was that sigh again. “If Steve thinks you’re fine, could it be possibly that, up until today, you thought the same thing about him?”

Oh. “I guess.”

“Well, that’s the best I can expect. Okay, I’m done Albert Ellising you. To quote the Late, Great Miss Carrie: you’ve affected all three of my feelings.”

“That’s not the quote.”

“Close enough.” Without another word, Tony hung up, only for it to buzz a bunch of times a minute later. Bucky hadn’t moved an inch.

*Feel free to post any of those pics on Instagram. It’s your therapy right? I’ll deal with the media fall out.* — T

*Hey, look at me, being your therapist anyway.* — T

*I’m billing you for this session.* — T

Bucky laughed and scrolled up to look at the images again. They looked almost as good as professional photos, but then, they were from Stark cameras. Bucky would be shocked if the security feed didn’t come in Dolby surround sound.

He picked one from when Tony had been holding Bruce at bay while Bucky had gotten the tranq gun, and the last one, of Tony and Bruce and the Stark fire department, looking completely worse for wear.

He spent a long thinking of the captions. He really wanted to come up with something serious, because he really had fucked up — he could admit that now — and it was time he faced up to it: he was slowly unraveling. The idea of them going back to work had him shaken to his very core, and he had no idea what to do.
But every time he looked at the images, he couldn’t find it in him to be serious. He needed the lighthearted caption this time; it might have been the only way to uncoil his spine. So, he went with his gut:

*I SWEAR it’s not my fault. Ok, maybe. I just asked the two nerds if they could make the autonomy of my holographic arm last longer because 12 hours was a bit short for undercover missions. Tony said “Should have asked sooner Barnes, give us 2 days”, Bruce said “No, it’s far too dangerous, we need more series of tests”. Yes, no, yes, no. It went downhill from there and…I AM SORRY, OK? I JUST ASKED A SIMPLE QUESTION!!*

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“Oh please, you’re such a drama queen! Yes, things got *a bit* out of hand and Pepper is gonna be really pissed, I can’t deny that, but seriously Bruce, I DARE YOU to tell me what’s better than blowing up a 250 million dollar lab with your best friend! Enjoy these little moments life gives you and stop always seeing the glass half-empty for god’s sake! And we can still blame this one on Barnes anyway…”

He loaded them both before finally pushing off the ground and heading home. He’d just made it to the Brooklyn Bridge when another text came in from Tony.

*If it HAD been 250M, you and I would have had a VERY different conversation. — T*

*Sue me, I’m not the money guy. — B*

*And thank Thor for that. — T*

Bucky smiled and shoved his phone back in his pocket before he finished his trek home. It was a clear night out, and he could see all the way to Liberty Island, from the middle of the bridge. He stopped for a second to look at her. She was such a majestic thing, but from here, she looked small. Like Bucky could reach out with his metal hand and crush her. He thought he understood that, as he turned his hand over, the metal gleaming from the lights on the bridge. He was a super soldier, with an even more dangerous arm, and yet, right now, he couldn’t remember the last time he felt so small. For all she represented, Lady Liberty wasn’t indestructible. And neither was he, it would seem.

With a sigh, he gave her one last fleeting look before he walked to his building, just on the other side. He only hesitated for a second as he pushed the button for their floor. He had no idea if Steve was home, but if he was, shit was probably about to go sideways. But Tony was right (words Bucky would never say out loud, under pain of absolute torture), it was time to deal with this.

When he opened their front door, he got his answer before he even crossed the threshold. Steve was standing there, right in the middle of the living room, holding up his phone, his expression unreadable. Bucky’s eyes ticked to the phone to see the picture of Bruce in hulk form.

“We need to talk,” Steve said, his voice neutral.

“Yeah, I guess we do.”

The soft click of the door, closing behind him, sounded like a gunshot.
My hair is getting a bit long, I know Stevie. I need a haircut. Not as if I had the time to take care of it in the past few weeks. But you know what? I’m gonna keep it like this for Halloween, I have an idea.

From his perch on the barstool at the kitchen island, Bucky had a good sightline of the entire front room. The living room, the back hallway, the front door, part of the dining room... It was all within view. Always was, actually, and he liked this seat when he wasn’t in a great headspace.

Kind of like now. It helped that he could see everything.

Or would, if he actually saw any of it. Except he hadn’t taken his eyes off of Steve since he’d walked in the front door and sat down. He was too afraid to. No one ever liked to hear the words ‘we need to talk’, and after the way Steve had yelled at him... He and Steve were rock solid, he thought (he hoped), but those were still Not Good Words.

“So,” he said quietly, waving a shaky hand at Steve, “talk.”

It was dark in the apartment, just one lamp on, but Bucky could still make out the way Steve’s jaw
“Just like that. Just... talk.” Steve responded, snide. “Do you have any idea what it is we need to talk about? What you caused today?”

“Yes, Steven,” Bucky bit back. “I have an idea.” What the fuck was Steve even getting at? Of course, he knew. He crossed his arms, jutted his chin, defiant. “But you’re the one who said we needed to talk. That’s what you said. ‘We need to talk’. So talk. You want this, you gotta start it.”

Steve barked out a laugh that dripped with disgust. “Oh, I’m definitely not the one who started it. Pretty sure that was all you, when you decided that yelling at everyone in the lab was an excellent use of your time. Which, what the fuck was that even about? You knew the autonomy on that arm was limited. Where the hell did this freak out even come from?!”

“Are you shitting me right now?” Bucky was out of his seat, a step in Steve’s direction. So much for trying to keep his cool. “We can’t have limitations, with what we do! We can’t run that risk, and you’re asking me what my freak out was about?! Mr. Tony Stark claims to be the best in the world. He needs to fucking act like it!”

The words made Bucky feel a little guilty, what with how Tony had been there for him earlier, but he brushed them aside. Tony wasn’t here to witness, and Bucky had a much bigger fish to fry.

“And you made sure he knew that, didn’t you.” Steve eyes flashed as he folded his arms, stood his ground. “So much so, you had to go and piss off everyone in the room, including the one person you don’t piss off!”

“Bruce isn’t my responsibility. If he can’t handle being around people who get upset, maybe he shouldn’t be around people.”

It was the wrong thing to say, and Bucky knew it, but there was no pulling the words back. But the way Steve just... stared at him, his face a mixture of shock and revulsion, it made Bucky’s stomach turn. Steve didn’t look at him like that, not ever. Bucky... couldn’t have Steve looking at him like that, not if he wanted to keep his sanity intact.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, contrite. “That was mean.”

“You think?”

Bucky decided to change tactics. “Look, I get it, okay. This wasn’t Bruce’s fault; it was mine. But I’m not wrong about the arm. We can’t have anything on us that can go wrong. I will not run the risk of my cover being blown, okay? Not when yo— not when lives are on the line.” Bucky kept his face as neutral as possible, prayed to God Steve missed his stumble. Steve didn’t need worry himself about what a fucking mess Bucky had become —

“What were you about to say?”

Shit.

“Nothing,” Bucky lied. “It was nothing.”

Bucky made to turn, but suddenly Steve was in front of him, and it was all Bucky could do not to flinch away. Steve wasn’t the threat, he was.

“What were you going to say?” Steve asked again, his words softer, and somehow that made it worse.
Bucky glanced at him and bit the inside of his cheek to keep from talking. He would not burden Steve with this, he didn’t care what Tony, or anyone else, said. Bucky had a therapist for his bullshit (even if he wasn’t talking to her, either, about it). He would not dump it on Steve, too. Not when he had his own recovery to deal with.

Steve huffed in frustration and Bucky couldn’t help the tiny shake of his head. Steve glared at him. “Why won’t you talk to me. Buck, I can see something’s going on in that head of yours. I know there’s something you aren’t telling me. But...I’m supposed to be the person you come to, remember?”

Everything twisted inside of Bucky. “Not about this.”

Steve recoiled, and it was the helicarrier all over again, Bucky had just shot Steve, in the gut, and the look — that look — on Steve’s face was staring right back at him. All over again.

It was everything Bucky could do to keep from throwing up, and he pushed past Steve without another word, making a beeline for their room. He just needed space. They weren’t supposed to storm off, but he just... this was different.

He stalked into their room, praying for release of the suffocation of the living room, only to come to a dead halt, his whole world crashing down around him. Because there, sitting on the edge of their bed, was Steve’s suitcase, open and half full.

His vision shimmered, then narrowed, zeroing in on the sketchbook sitting on top of Steve’s favorite sweats. It was the expensive, brown leather one Bucky had gotten for him last Christmas. Bucky knew it was full of drawings of the aliens they’d encountered, and all the screaming white noise that had flooded his mind at the sight of the suitcase, instantly dropped away down to one thought:

Well, if Steve was going to leave him, it really did make sense he would only take the sketchbooks that held no trace of their life together.

He dropped down onto the edge of the bed and buried his face in his hands. Anything to hide the hyperventilation.

How had he fucked up this badly? What had he done to make Steve hate him this much? He knew it was more than just the arm — it had to be. Hell, if Tony could see it, the last thing Bucky should be doing was hiding it from himself. He knew everything had been a culmination of his fear of losing Steve, which... well, wasn’t that just fucking ironic. The not-laugh that hitched out of him was probably the most pathetic sound he’d ever heard, and served him right. He’d been so petrified of losing Steve, he’d pushed him away.

Bucky knew he should get up — knew he should fight. He wasn’t the kind of person who gave up on the things that mattered, but he was just so lost. All he wanted was to keep Steve safe, and he’d failed at that. So spectacularly. If he couldn’t even do the one thing he was put on this earth to do, how was he supposed to figure out how to keep Steve from walking out the door?

Soft footsteps met his ear. “Buck, how many times do we have to talk about you not running from — what’s wrong?” Steve was immediately across the room and crouched in front of him, but Bucky couldn’t look up at him. Steve gently tugged at one of his hands, but he wouldn’t budge. Steve’s hand fell away to hold the inside of his knee. “Baby, talk to me, please. What is going on?”

He wasn’t crying, but he felt raw. Ripped open. He ran his hands through his hair and turned to face the suitcase instead. The sketchbook was mocking him.
“Guess...guess I should have taken your words at face value, huh.” Every word shook as they came out, and he hated himself for it. This was his fault, and he needed to be a man about it.

“What words?”

“When you said we needed to talk.” His eyes burned, but he was too empty for actual tears. “I know what those words mean.” He shook his head and looked down again. There was mud caked on the side of his boots. He’d need to clean that. “I was just hoping they meant something different.”

“Bucky, what — oh, God.” Suddenly hands were on his face, forcing him to look up. Steve was staring back at him, earnest, but scared, and Bucky was just so lost. “Bucky, no. That’s not what it looks like.”

It should have been a glimmer of hope, but there was just nothing in Bucky left to feel. Instead he watched Steve. There was dirt on his cheek. Bucky’s hand twitched to clean that off too.

When he still didn’t respond, Steve took his hand and pulled him off the bed and onto the floor with him. He went willingly. When Steve wrapped his arms around Bucky, and pulled him into a hug, he went with that, too.

“Baby, that’s not what it looks like,” he repeated quietly in Bucky’s ear. “Jesus, I’m so sorry. I’m not going anywhere, okay?”

Bucky blinked and tried to restart his heart. Steve said he wasn’t going anywhere. But — “Those are your favorite pajamas, though.” It was all he could think to say.

Steve huffed and held him tighter, and Bucky’s arms actually kicked in, and he tightened his own grip. Steve said he wasn’t going anywhere.

Steve placed a small kiss behind his ear. “Yeah, it was just a precaution, in case my trip to DC went long. I packed an overnight bag in case I had to stay down there.”

“But why is it open on the bed? You looked like you’d been waiting for me, when I got home.”

Steve snorted in his ear. “And when have you ever known me to wait sitting still.” He turned and pressed the next kiss to Bucky’s temple. “It’s open so I could unpack it.”

Unpack it. Not pack it. The word was what finally broke Bucky, and he burst into tears. “So, you aren’t trying to leave me?” he cried, muffled against Steve’s shoulder.

“Bucky, no.” This time Steve pulled away to take Bucky’s face and kiss him properly, and Bucky thought he tasted salt that wasn’t his own. “I’m never leaving, you understand me?”

“Except, you are.”

Steve kissed him again. “I swear, Buck. I’m not going anywhere. The suitcase really was just for the trip. You have to know that.” Another kiss. “You and me are forever; nothing’s gonna change that.”

“And when you die?” Bucky was certain he was going to vomit. “What then?”

Steve stilled in his arms. “Buck... Baby, what’s this about? Is this...is this about the kidnapping?”

He could taste the bile in his throat. “You almost died, Stevie. You can die, and I just...”

He wasn’t supposed to be doing this. He wasn’t supposed to be telling Steve about this. The fear that had been building, the unnerving realization that he could lose things — that he probably would lose
Steve, had been devouring him for weeks, but it wasn’t supposed to be Steve’s problem. Even during their joint therapy sessions, he’d managed to keep this hidden. Sure, they’d talked about their co-dependency, and they’d been working on how to be a team without relying so heavily on the other person being there, but after that recent mission… They hadn’t been ready. They weren’t ready, and Bucky felt like every drop of recovery he’d ever gone through had vanished the moment they’d suited up.

He grabbed onto Steve again, his grip unrelenting, and the tears flowed anew. Steve hissed, but Bucky couldn’t let go — couldn’t bear the idea of Steve being out of his reach, being anywhere where Bucky couldn’t see him, touch him, taste him, hear him, smell him. Bucky would be devoid of his senses if they didn’t include Steve, ever again.

“I can’t,” he sobbed, and twisted around to crawl onto Steve’s lap. To get that much closer. “I can’t do this without you, Stevie. Oh God, I can’t do this. You almost died, and I can’t…” He hiccupped, the tears flowing that much harder. It was like the dam had broken. He wasn’t supposed to tell Steve, and now he wasn’t sure how he was going to stop. “I’m so scared, all the time. I’m scared of losing you, of losing us. Or — or of you losing me. We lost each other once, and how are we supposed to do it again? How do we keep fighting when I know…I know that that’s only gonna lead to us losing. How is that okay?”

“Jesus, Buck…” A sob of Steve’s own broke from his chest, and suddenly his grip was as unrelenting as Bucky’s. They cried, they pair of them a shaking, bawling mess. “Is this what today was about? Why didn’t you tell me?” He turned to capture Bucky’s lips, the kiss uncoordinated and sloppy, but desperate, like it was the last one they would ever share. When they broke apart, he pressed their foreheads together. “Why won’t you talk to me?”

“Because…” Wasn’t it obvious? “You almost died. You were so fucked up, when we went out to finish the Nash Mir. I could see how hard it all was for you. I wasn’t about to add to your burden, no fucking way.”

“James Buchanan Barnes, you listen to me,” Steve demanded, and gripped Bucky’s face to catch his eye, his own like fire. “The very last thing you will ever be to me is a burden, do you understand? There is nothing — nothing — more important to me on this planet than you. Not even myself. But I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me. How am I supposed to be there for you if you just shut me out? You can’t do that, baby. Not to me; not when this is us. I would rather quit everything, than lose you. I would have Thor here in an instant, and us off this planet and away from everyone and everything, if that’s what I had to do to keep you safe and happy. But I don’t know what you need if you don’t tell me. You have to tell me. Talk to me, please.”

Bucky didn’t deserve this man; he never would. The way Steve watched him, his eyes pleading to match his words, it was all Bucky could do not to break down all over again. Instead he gently took hold of Steve’s wrists and tried to meet his eyes.

“I’m scared, Stevie,” he whispered. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this scared in my life. You…how did you do it? When I fell? And last December? How do you survive this? Because I’m not. I’m spiraling and I have no idea what to grab onto to keep from tumbling down completely.”

“You grab onto me,” Steve begged. He pressed their foreheads together again, and closed his eyes. Bucky followed suit. “I didn’t catch you once, but I promise you, that will never happen again. I am your tether, and you’re mine. You go, I go, remember? You grab onto me.”

“And when you aren’t there anymore? What do I grab then?”

When Steve didn’t immediately answer, Bucky opened his eyes to find Steve watching him, his face
twisted in pain. “I don’t know,” he admitted, and took a deep breath. “Buck...I can’t promise I’ll always be here. Just like you can’t make that promise to me. The best I can offer is that, as long as I am, you will always be able to reach to me for a life line.” He tuck his head against Bucky’s neck, and Bucky could immediately feel the seep of fresh tears along his jacket collar. “But, baby, you can’t...you can’t shut me out like this. Promise me you won’t shut me out. Please.”

Bucky wanted to protest, wanted to fight back and tell Steve that he’d done enough over the years, and right now, he needed to take care of himself for a change. But Bucky also knew there was no way Steve ever would, if he thought for one second that Bucky was in pain. This stupid man — the damn idiot love of Bucky’s life — would never put himself first, not when it came to Bucky. And now that he knew what was going on, there was no way Bucky could hide it from him.

“Okay,” was all he could think to say. He cupped the back of Steve’s head and kissed his shoulder. “Okay, Stevie.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.” It wasn’t like he had a choice. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

Steve’s huff of laughter was hollow. “I’m sorry I accidentally made you think I was leaving you.”

“But you...you aren’t, right?” Bucky had no idea why he was asking, but his eyes ticked to the suitcase anyway. It still mocked him.

“You know I’m not.” Steve pressed a kiss against Bucky’s cheek then leaned back to face him, his features soft, but sad. He went to brush Bucky’s bangs back, only to frown. “Hey, what happened here? Was this from today?”

“What —” Bucky reached up to touch his forehead, only to hiss in pain. Confused, he pushed back, and Steve helped to untangle them so he could go glance in the mirror above the dresser. There, just under his hairline, was a spectacular bruise. He leaned in to get a closer look. “Huh. I honestly have no idea how I got that.” He shrugged at Steve’s reflection. “I guess it was from earlier? I don’t remember getting hurt, but there was a lot going on...”

Steve stepped to the side to face him and gently carded his fingers through Bucky’s bangs. Bucky couldn’t help but lean into the touch. “Your hair’s getting long.”

Buck watched the way his bangs flopped into his eyes, and smiled, tight. “Yeah, I guess I haven’t really been paying attention to myself lately.” The double meaning of his words wasn’t lost on him. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and snapped a picture of his reflection, Steve’s fingers still entwined in his hair.

He stared at the photo, lost in the way he looked. Bruised and damaged, unkempt, slightly disheveled...he had no idea he’d been letting himself go lately. Sure, the hair didn’t look bad, per se, but Bucky had always been militant about his haircuts, after he’d cut off his 80’s hair. It was a slight shock that he hadn’t even noticed.

Maybe it all really was affecting him more than he’d thought.

Steve was watched him as he pulled up Instagram and fired off the photo really fast. He wasn’t entirely sure what the caption meant, in the grand scheme of things, but it was supposed to be his therapy. So, posting the photo of himself just seemed...logical.

He shoved his phone back into his pocket then grappled at Steve’s shirt, pulling him close, and hooking his chin over Steve’s shoulder. “I really am sorry, Steve. I thought I could deal with it on my
“Can’t seem to deal with it at all?” Steve supplied as he resumed his earlier ministrations, his fingers lightly scraping against Bucky’s scalp, sending a tiny shiver down his spine. “I know the feeling.”

Bucky huffed a laugh, even as he relished in the goosebumps. “I guess you would.”

“Wanna talk about it now?”

“...Not really.”

“Will you anyways? For me?”

For Steve. And wasn’t that just the kicker, right there. Because, if Bucky was being honest with himself, that was what he’d thought he’d been doing all along.

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My hair is getting a bit long, I know Stevie. I need a haircut. Not as if I had the time to take care of it in the past few weeks. But you know what? I’m gonna keep it like this for Halloween, I have an idea.
Why are you laughing? It's my hair, isn't it? I told you I would cut it after Halloween. Ooooh, wait a minute, you little piece of s**t. Let me guess, you drew one of your silly caricatures again, didn't you? You know what, I'm gonna chop your arm off with your own f**ing shield. Let's see how you can hold a pen with your arm missing. AND FOR THE LAST TIME STEVE, STOP LAUGHING!

Bucky sighed and snuggled deeper under the blanket. He was so warm and so comfortable; he could
stay here for the rest of the year. It was possible he already had — he had no idea what time it was. He cracked an eye open, but the curtains were drawn, and the only light in the apartment was coming from the roaring fire in the fireplace and the small lamp next to the chair by the shuttered window. Steve was sitting with his head bowed, pencil in hand, and deep into whatever it was he was drawing. Bucky smiled, secure in the knowledge that Steve wasn’t going anywhere, and tucked himself in further on the couch, letting sleep take him once more.

When he opened his eyes again, it was to the late afternoon sun streaming in softly now. The fire was still going, just as big and bright as before, but Steve was gone from his spot. Bucky’s heart clenched, only to calm again at the sound of Steve shuffling around behind him. He rolled over and propped himself up to peek over the back of the couch, where he found Steve putting up Halloween decorations. Bucky hummed softly in relief at the sight of him.

“Hey sleepyhead,” Steve said quietly, Bucky’s favorite half smile already on his lips as he turned. He leaned down to kiss Bucky softly on the top of his head, and Bucky couldn’t help but to reach up and hold him in place. Steve chuckled and wrapped an arm around Bucky’s chest, the hug awkward, but still the best thing on the planet. “How’d you sleep?”

“You made it warm in here,” Bucky said by way of an answer.

“Anything for the love of my life.”

Bucky snickered and let go of Steve to sit up. He kept the blanket wrapped around himself and smiled. “I’m going to remember you said that the next time you bitch at me for asking you to go grab coffee.”

“Oh, yes, because every one of those times was you asking,” Steve said with a laugh.

“Hey, I ask plenty.”

“You know, I’d normally agree, but considering that your morning growl is incoherent at best, I’m not entirely sure what it is you’re trying to say.”

“Ass.”

“Your ass,” Steve countered, but it came out soft and fond, and the moment Steve intertwined their fingers, Bucky had to look away.

“Still?” He hated himself for asking, but the last twenty-four hours had been an emotional rollercoaster, and he still hadn’t quite found his equilibrium.

“Always.” Steve kissed the back of Bucky’s hand. “I can promise you that.”

He shouldn’t feel so relieved — he knew Steve wasn’t going anywhere. Really, he did. But it was just... It wasn’t the first time (or the hundredth) that he’d thought Steve would wise up and leave his ass. And the suitcase hadn’t helped, especially with how irrational he’d been when he’d gotten home. He watched as Steve kissed his wrist this time, then walked around to sit back in the chair, and there was something about watching him move — seeing him simply walk from one place to another, and sit down, and be normal — that made everything inside Bucky lurch sideways. He let out a murmured gasp. Steve was alive. He was alive and whole, and Bucky needed help. Because for months now, he’d been walking in haze, either ignoring how much Steve’s kidnap had affected him, or damn near treating Steve like he was a ghost already. He should have been talking to his doctor, should have been dealing with his shit, and it wasn’t until right now that he realized just how much
he wasn’t.

“I need a new doctor, Stevie.” He wasn’t sure where it came from, the words hitting him like a brick. He nodded to himself. “Yeah, I... I think I need to move on from Dr. Lyn.”

Steve stared at him, eyes drawn in confusion. “Why, baby? And, I mean, if that’s what you want, I’ll support you, but you’ve been with Dr. Lyn for a while now. What changed?”

Wasn’t it obvious? “Steve, I’ve been spiraling. I’ve been completely ignoring how screwed up I’ve become over your capture, and the one person I should be talking to about it is the one person I’ve been keeping it from.”

“Well, not the one person.” Steve said it so quietly, Bucky almost didn’t hear him.

He reached over and squeezed Steve’s knee. “Okay, the two people. But I’m not getting rid of you. So, you know, that just leaves her.”

“And you’re sure about this?”

“No,” Bucky said, truthfully, and it was just so frustrating. “I’m not sure about anything anymore, if I’m gonna be honest.”

Steve absently picked up a piece of paper that was sitting on top of his sketchbook, and began slowly turning it over in hand. Bucky waited while Steve thought, because he needed Steve to tell him what to do. He was so lost right now; he was about two seconds away from burrowing under this blanket and just never emerging, ever again. It seemed like the smart plan.

“I wish I had a good answer for you, baby.” Well that wasn’t promising. “But...I guess...maybe it’s not about finding a new doctor. Maybe you just need to try telling Dr. Lyn what’s been going on. Just try, even if that means we stop our joint sessions for a while. And you know”—he shrugged and finally looked over—“maybe it’s not even Dr. Lyn that’s the problem? I mean, we did decide to go to therapy together to work on what’s going on with us, but maybe you just don’t do well in joint therapy. You said it yourself, you’ve been keeping this from me. Maybe it would be better if you talked about it with Dr. Lyn alone?”

He looked so open and sincere, but Bucky didn’t miss the little bit of heartbreak in his eyes. He was hurt by the fact that Bucky wasn’t talking to him, and Bucky felt so guilty for that. Why did he have to be such a fucking disaster?

“Maybe,” he answered quietly, and tried not to flinch when Steve did. Instead he tried to change the subject, and nodded at the little slip of paper still in Steve’s hand. “What’s that?”

Steve blinked and looked down. “Oh. Just, uh.” He tried to covertly turn the card away from Bucky. “Just something I was screwing around with while you slept. Nice evasion, by the way.”

“I am the master,” Bucky answered, now more interested. “No, come on. Seriously, what did you draw?”

Steve was turning pink, and Bucky was on the brink of snatching it out of his hands, when Steve sheepishly handed it over. When Bucky finally saw what was on there, he scowled. “Why are you such a dick, Steve, huh? Why?”

Steve burst out laughing, and reached out for the card, only for Bucky to hold it away from him. The damn card with a stupid caricature of him, wrapped up in the blanket like a burrito, little Bucky yelling I hate you Steve? I’m gonna kill you!, and the words Brooklynus Caterpillarus In it’s natural
*environment* scribbled across the top.

He was tempted to crumble it.

“You know,” Bucky groused, “I’m just lying here, all serene and content, and having a really nice moment with you, Steve, and — oh my god, why will you not stop laughing!”

Bucky grabbed a pillow and lobbed it at Steve, who deftly caught it and threw it back, laughing so hard at this point he was wheezing a little. “Why are you hateful? Honestly, I’m not the one doing the hating here, Steven; why are you like this.”

Steve’s laugh subsided into a chuckle, and he pushed out of the chair to place a light kiss on Bucky’s lips, one Bucky most definitely did not return. But Steve just smiled at him.

“Because it’s funny,” he answered, and snatched the card out of Bucky’s hand before escaping back to the chair. He’d barely sat down before his phone was already in hand and the card held up, and Bucky had about half a second to register what was going on before the flash went off.

“Seriously?”

“Aw, but it’s cute! Here, look.” Steve was out of the chair again, this time plopping down next to Bucky on the couch. He nudged at Bucky with his thigh. “Hey, shove over.”

Bucky just shouldered him in return. “You shove over. I was here first.”

Bucky should have seen it coming, except for how he didn’t, and had to brace himself from falling off the couch entirely as two-hundred plus pounds of super soldier knocked right into him.

“Asshole!”

Steve shrugged, looking completely unconcerned. “You say that like you don’t say that every single day.”

“I mean it every single day.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Then Steve wrapped an arm around Bucky’s shoulder and pulled him in close, and dammit, now Bucky couldn’t stay mad at him, not with the way Steve gently tilted Bucky’s chin so he could kiss him. Bucky couldn’t help it, he just melted. Steve was playing dirty, and Bucky was falling for it, like he always did. He sort of hoped he’d never stop falling for it.

“Just wanted to sit next to my baby,” Steve murmured against his lips. “Is that so bad?”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Bucky said, but kissed Steve again anyway. Steve smiled, small but warm, and held Bucky that much tighter.

“So here, take a look.” Steve held out his phone, and Bucky glanced over at the picture. He hated to admit it, but it was kind of funny — the look on his face was so stupid. Like he’d just woken up, but way less charming.

“I look like an idiot.”

“Well, it is true, a camera doesn’t lie — ow!” Steve jerked his leg away from where Bucky’d pinched it. Bucky grinned, but held on tight. Steve was here, and he was holding Bucky, and even if they were being little shits to each other, he would fight anyone or anything that tried to take him out of Steve’s arms right now. Including Steve.
“You think I should post this?” he asked, as they shifted around until they were lying back against
the couch, Bucky nestled comfortably between Steve’s legs.

“How do you still want to do that?”

Bucky frowned, and looked back up at him. “What do you mean.”

Steve eyes landed on the phone, still in Bucky’s hands. “Well, you’re talking about leaving Dr. Lyn,
and this whole Instagram thing had been her idea. I mean, I guess I’m just wondering if you were
thinking that leaving her meant you also wanted to not do this anymore.”

Which was a valid point, and not one Bucky had been thinking of when he’d mulled over a new
doctor. He looked at the picture of himself again, and wondered how he would feel not sharing these
photos anymore. He kind of hated the idea.

“No, I like doing this,” he said. “I like having this thing that’s mine, I love working on this. I think
it’s really helped — still helps. I mean, I don’t think Dr. Lyn’s work has been bad —”

“That’s not what I meant?”

“No, I know.” Bucky grabbed Steve’s hand to kiss the inside of his wrist before tucking it against his
chest. He smiled as lips pressed against his temple. “I think what I’m getting at is that I feel like I’ve
made a lot of progress with her, and this idea of hers” — he waved the phone — “has been a big part
of that.”

“Buck...can I make a suggestion?” Steve sounded tentative, and when Bucky looked up, it was only
to find a face that most definitely matched the voice. “Think on it? With Dr. Lyn? Let’s definitely
stop our joint sessions, and you just go and try to talk to her? See if it is us going together that’s the
problem before throwing in the towel?”

“Steve...”

“Just for a few weeks. Just to try?”

Deciding that he needed to move on from Dr. Lyn wasn’t an easy decision, and even if he still wasn’t
totally sold himself on the idea, he couldn’t help but feel frustrated that Steve wasn’t backing him on
this. But at the same time, it frustrated him more that he knew Steve was probably right. He really
should take more than a day to figure this out.

“Yeah...” he said with a slow nod. “All right. I’ll give it a few weeks. But if I decide to leave her,
you’ll back my play, right?”

Steve gave him a tight hug. “Always.”

“Okay...” Bucky nodded again, a little surer this time. Then he glanced back down at Steve’s phone.
“So I’m definitely posting this then.”

Steve huffed lightly against his ear. “Go for it.”

Bucky pulled up Instagram on Steve’s phone and loaded it quickly. The picture was silly, and
truthfully, he needed silly right now, so he kept the caption in the same vein:

Why are you laughing? It’s my hair, isn’t it? I told you I would cut it after Halloween. Oooooh, wait
a minute, you little piece of s**t. Let me guess, you drew one of your silly caricatures again, didn’t
you? You know what, I’m gonna chop your arm off. With your own f**ing shield. Let’s see how you
can hold a pen with your arm missing. AND FOR THE LAST TIME STEVE, STOP LAUGHING!

“Gonna cut my arm off, huh?” Steve mused, as Bucky hit send. His fingers twitched against Bucky’s chest. “Don’t think that might make it hard to hold you?”

Bucky laughed and held up his metal hand, wiggling his own fingers. “There are ways to fix that.” Then Bucky pushed slightly off of Steve, and nodded at him. “All right now strip. I wanna go back to sleep, and you’re joining me.”

Steve arched an eyebrow. “Oh, am I?”

“You got someplace else you need to be?”

“Anywhere I need to be is wherever you are,” Steve answered, and his smile was so full of love, even after all this time, that it made Bucky blush.

Steve stripped down to his briefs, and the two molded into each other on the couch, arms wrapped so tight there was no chance of either of them escaping. They slept well into the night, and for the first time in months, it was best sleep Bucky could remember getting.

Maybe there was hope for them yet.
Tomorrow, it’s Halloween. I KNEW I could do something interesting with my hair. I had to bleach it platinum, though. I haven’t done that since an infiltration mission in the 1960’s, if I remember correctly but hey, you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. And I hate wigs anyway. Oh, hi Stevie. Something’s telling me you’re not really convinced by the blond hair. Wait and see, I’m gonna rock my Halloween costume!

‘Bleaching your hair opens up a whole lot of doors into the world of hair coloring...’” Bucky read, then shook his head. “Yeah, I don’t give shit. Not my first go-round, website.” He scrolled through his phone till he found what he was look for, and proceeded to tick off the items he had against the list on the page, double checking that he had everything he needed.

This was going to be so fucking awesome.

He’d been halfway through his therapy session — his first really good one in weeks, thank fuck — when his brain had lit up at finally settling on a Halloween costume for this year. As much as he’d loathed the fucking lederhosen from last year, it had still been a pretty epic costume, and he was
determined to top it.

Which is why he’d decided against going as a ‘good guy’ superhero, like Tony wanted for his party (and pissing him off in the process, so bonus). Halloween was the next day, and Tony’s annual party to go with it. Per the invitation, they were supposed to pick a comic book superhero, and from the looks of it, everyone had picked someone from the Justice League, including Steve (Superman, the nerd). Which meant Bucky had to do something different.

Enter a whole butt load of bleaching products. Because if the anarchist in him was going to go as anything, it was going to be the beautiful, intelligent, crazy, perfect woman that was Harley Quinn.

Bucky had standards, goddamnit.

He’d already gone shopping for everything, picking up said bleach items, as well as costume pieces for a couple different versions of the good doctor. He’d loved Margot Robbie’s portrayal of her, but when he’d stopped in at Abracadabra to pick up his and Steve’s costumes, they’d had a version from the Arkham Knight game that actually fit him and... he’d bought both sets, okay? Sue him. Maybe he’d just blend the two or something.

The whole mixing process for the hair bleach turned out to be pretty easy, but he still took his time applying it all. The last time his head had been bleached, it was Hydra who’d done it, and they hadn’t given two shits about any damage to his scalp. They just bleached him, dropped him into his mission, then shaved his head and threw him on ice for several years. The bleach and the cryo had done a number on his head, and he really didn’t feel like reliving that burn. Not that he expected to go back in cryo anytime soon, but still.

He smiled to himself once the bleach was in — he could already see his hair lightening — then turned back to his phone, because fuck all, he couldn’t remember how long it was supposed to set.

“Forty to fifty minutes... wait, really?” He frowned at his phone, because wasn’t dye usually left on for something like, thirty minutes? He’d seen Nat do it enough times for missions, he was pretty sure. He pulled up some other sites to cross check, and huh. They all said the same thing.

He eyed the now-dark orange of his hair suspiciously. He really didn’t want to revisit that mission from the sixties, but also, this was supposed to be a lot safer than back then. Well, he’d just wash it out if it got to be too much.

He dropped down onto the floor and leaned against the wall, only to reach back up and grab his pack of cigarettes. He slid one between his lips and lit up, letting the smoke fill his lungs slowly. They had no effect on him, but there had always been something residual about the feel of it all. Like he could remember being just a normal human man with an addiction, same as everyone else around him. He’d always made a point not to smoke around Steve, back then, but that’s what fire escapes had been for.

The smoke seeped into his bones, and he let his therapy session from today fill in all the other spaces. Doc hadn’t gone easy on him, not even slightly. The thing he’d always liked about her was that she didn’t sugarcoat things for him — she didn’t pull her punches. She was there, and held his hand when he needed it, but a lot of the time tough love just worked better. And man, had there been a lot of that today. She damn near ripped him a new asshole, only to turn around and tell him that she’d known he was hiding something from her. She just knew he would never talk about it until he was ready.

She’d been really pissed that it had taken a multi-million-dollar act of destruction to get there.
He took another slow, languorous drag off his cigarette and let his head drop back against the wall, his eyes closed. How had he ever thought getting a new doctor was a good idea? This was his own damn fault, and he needed to take ownership of it. It wasn’t her fault he’d closed himself off. And here he was thinking he needed to find someone new to fix him.

The bitter laugh was barely audible, even in their small second bathroom. There was no fixing him. He liked to think he was better than he had been, in the beginning, but he would never be fixed. No point in dropping all that shit onto someone else.

He stayed like that on the floor through the entire processing of his hair, burning through cigarette after cigarette, none of them coming even close to taking the edge off. He wondered what Steve was up to. He’d had his own therapy session today — back to each their own. Then he’d said something about sparring with Thor and Clint afterward. Clint had some new arrows he wanted to try.

Bucky hoped he was having a good time. Doing something with their friends, without him. This separation was...good. It was good. Great even. Fine. Perfect. Exactly what they needed. Bucky didn’t need to be up in Steve’s hair, clinging on and making sure he was safe and whole and right there at his side, where he could watch him, and —

“Stop it, Barnes,” he chastised himself. “You’re being ridiculous. Steve wants you around, and wants you to talk to him. Stop acting like he doesn’t.”

Easier said than done, brain. Easier said than done.

He checked his phone, saw that he had just a couple minutes left, so he pushed off the floor to check the progress. What he saw made him jerk in surprise.

Good God, it was so blonde. Like bottle blonde. Gold digger blonde. Totally and completely bleached out blonde. He barked out a gleeful laugh and turned on the shower. He didn’t care that the time wasn’t up; it was already done.

He checked the instructions again on how he was supposed to wash his hair then stepped in, making quick work of double washing it with the shampoo he’d bought just for this. He then barely toweled off and dressed before he was back in front of the mirror, staring at his hair again. It was still soaking wet, little droplets of water falling onto his shoulders, staining it dark against the red fabric.

Not that he noticed, because no, he only cared about the shiny shiny mop of bright white/blonde sitting on his head. He grabbed his cigarettes and lit another one, his eyes never leaving his reflection. He was transfixed. He knew he’d done this once before, but that had been during his Hydra days, and a chunk of that was still spotty. He remembered that he’d been blonde — and the horrible pain from the damage they’d caused — but he guessed he’d forgotten just what he looked like as one. It was kind of fucking awesome.

He vaguely wondered how Steve would feel if he kept it.

“Ha!” he barked out, delighted at the new look, and set the cigarette against the edge of the sink so he could grab his towel. He wrapped it around his head, chuckling to himself the whole time. He couldn’t wait to see the look on Steve’s face when —

“Bucky?” Steve called out from somewhere in the apartment, and Bucky had to grab the towel to keep it from slipping off when he most certainly did not jump.

“Oh, Stevie, you’re home!” Bucky called back, an anticipatory smile sliding onto his face as he collected himself and turned to the door.
“I’ve been home for, like, forever, you dork, I — oh my god!” Steve stopped dead, just inside the door, his eyes the size of saucers.

Bucky smiled brightly at him. “You like?”

Steve just blinked back. “You’re blonde.”

“You’re observant.”

“Okay, but...you’re blonde.”

“We’re twins!”

“Never say those words to me, ever again,” Steve shuddered.

Bucky cackled, then stuck the cigarette back in his mouth as he turned to the mirror again. Even with the towel on his head, the tendrils that licked around his forehead and ears were definitely visible, and definitely a bright, sunny yellow. This costume was gonna be great.

Bucky held up his phone just as Steve came in behind him, scowling at Bucky’s reflection, and he barely had time to snap a photo before Steve was yanking the towel off of his head. It caught slightly, and Bucky stumbled, the cigarette falling out of his mouth and bouncing off his metal arm. It landed in the sink in front of him.

“Hey!” He elbowed Steve in the chest and glared at his reflection. “I almost burned myself, you jack hole.”

“Oh, my bad. I had no idea that a metal appendage designed to withstand a nuclear blast was going to be done in by a teensy tiny cigarette flame,” Steve shot back with a tsk, the sardonic shit. “It’s always the little things, isn’t it.”

“True enough.” Bucky shrugged. “Considering that the guy famous for jumping out of planes sans parachute is about to be done in by said appendage...” He shook his fist for added measure.

“Your jokes aren’t that funny, Barnes.”

“I thought it was pretty funny.”

“You also think videos of cats falling off of couches are funny.”

Bucky turned and looked at Steve like he had two heads. “That’s because they are.”

“Wanna explain the hair? And why aren’t you doing this in our bathroom?” Steve asked, ignoring Bucky’s remark. Then, inexplicably, his face shuddered. “I mean...it’s not because of me, is it?”

Bucky stared at him, completely nonplussed. “What is what because of you?”

Steve blinked and glanced at Bucky’s hair again. “Well, this isn’t...I don’t know, reactionary, is it?” He reached out and took Bucky’s hand, and Bucky just went with it, still totally at a loss. “Is there anything you want to tell me about your session today? You know. Only if you want to talk about it.”

Did something happen... “Steve, I have no idea — oh! No!” It quickly all fell into place, and Bucky couldn’t help but laugh. Steve frowned, and it was all Bucky could do to pull him in for a quick kiss. Then he smiled, soft and reassuring. “No, baby, I promise. Today’s session sucked — yes, we’ll talk about it later — but no, my hair is for tomorrow. And I used this bathroom because I care less about
a mess in here.”

“Says the guy who writes on every wall ever, like a four-year— wait, tomorrow?”

Bucky flicked him lightly on the ear. “Halloween? Tony’s costume party?”

“Holy shit, I totally forgot,” Steve murmured, his eyes suddenly huge.

“Lucky for you, I didn’t.” Bucky huffed and pulled Steve out of the guest bathroom and into their bedroom where he’d stored the costumes in the closet. He grabbed the bag with Steve’s costume and unzipped it. “See? One Superman costume, all set and ready to go.”

Steve took the bag and stared at it, shaking his head. “I can’t believe I totally forgot that Halloween was tomorrow.”

“Well, you know.” Bucky shrugged, self-conscious, and still a little bit guilty. “Shit’s been going on.”

“Yeah, it has,” Steve answered absently, still staring at his costume, and Bucky tried damn hard not to take that response personally. Steve was just transfixed by his totally awesome costume, and wasn’t trying to take a shot at Bucky for his behavior lately.

He wasn’t, really. Bucky just had to tell himself that. On repeat.

“Anyway, I remembered, and you’re all set. As for me…” He grabbed both Harley Quinn outfits and held them up. “Which do you like best?”

Steve finally looked up, only to bark out a laugh, one Bucky counted as a win. “Well, I guess that does explain the hair, then, doesn’t it. Harley Quinn, huh?”

“You can’t possibly expect me to go as one of the good guys, Steve, you know this.”

“Color me not surprised.” Steve hung his costume back up and grabbed the Arkham Night outfit from Bucky. He held it up next to the Suicide Squad version, still in Bucky’s hand. “Do you know which one you want to wear?”

“Not yet. Was hoping you’d help me?”

A slow smile spread across Steve’s face, and Bucky suddenly found himself with an armful of the only really hot blond in the room. And damn if that smile had nothing to do with Tony’s party, and everything to with the costume peep show Bucky was certain was now in his immediate future.

Then Steve’s lips ghosted against Bucky’s own. “I might have a few ideas.”

Oh yeah. Bucky could definitely get on board with that.

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Tomorrow, it’s Halloween. I KNEW I could do something interesting with my hair. I had to bleach it platinum, though. I haven’t done that since an infiltration mission in the 1960’s, if I remember correctly but hey, you’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. And I hate wigs anyway. Oh, hi Stevie. Something’s telling me you’re not really convinced by the blond hair. Wait and see, I’m gonna rock my Halloween costume!
At Tony’s Halloween superhero-themed party. Steve went as Superman and wanted me to be Aquaman or something, to form the Justice League with Tony (Batman), Sam (The Green Lantern) and Natasha (Wonder Woman). Dude, I don’t care about the Justice League, particularly Aquaman! Why being Aquaman when you can be Dr. Harley Quinn? Seriously! (PS: I used my holographic arm for something non-work-related. Fury is gonna go nuts!)

Here’s the first costume I tried when I had the idea to go to Tony’s party dressed as Harley Quinn. I finally chose something closer to the Arkham Knight game than the Suicide Squad movie; I’m digging the shirt, though. What? You seem surprised that a “heartless assassin” can enjoy this kind of fun. Contrary to what Stark and a lot of people who don’t know me think, I’m perfectly able to appreciate activities that don’t include explosions or pulling the trigger of a gun. (Photo: Marget Robbie painting on an old building behind our place. Steve)
Suicide Squad movie. I’m digging the shirt, though. What? You seem surprised that a “heartless assassin” can enjoy this kind of fun. Contrary to what Stark and a lot of people who don’t know me think, I’m perfectly able to appreciate activities that don’t include explosions or pulling the trigger of a gun. (Photo + Margot Robbie painting on an old building behind our place: Steve)

Ah, an outtake from last year. Remember when I lost at Rock, Paper, Scissors and ended up cosplaying as Elsa for Halloween? Well, I lost again a few hours later, this time against Nat. And Steve lost too. (What the f**k were we thinking? Playing against Romanoff...). If you wonder how Nat convinced us to wear male versions of Anna and Elsa’s costumes in “Frozen Fever”, the answer is simple: we were completely WASTED and would have walked the streets of NYC in a Winnie the Poo costume if asked to. And before you say: “But..but you guys can’t get drunk because of the serum!”, just try to drink a gallon of Thor’s Argardian booze and then we’ll talk. I think it was my first hangover since the 1940’s. Anyway, we rented the costumes at like 2:00am, took some pics and…voilà! I already had the wig anyway. It wasn’t the strangest thing about that night, though: Barton asked me if he could keep my green cape and my wig for his dog.

“Steve, put your arm up.”

“Uh, why?”

“It’ll be funny.”

“Why do I even ask you things. So, like this?”

“Yeah – oh my god, can you please not get that gelatinous mess near my hair? I swear there’s so much gel slithering off your head, it’s going to make mine curl up in fear.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure with the amount of hairspray you have in yours, I could bounce the shield off —”

“SAY JUSTICE LEAGUE!!!”

Both Steve and Bucky had just enough time to get into position before Wanda snapped a picture of them. “Perfect. And before you ask” – she waved Steve off, who was halfway to definitely asking for fifteen more – “I will not be taking a second one. You may not realize this, but you are both drama queens who took almost five minutes to decide how you wanted to take a simple picture.”

She stared them both down, and Bucky knew better than to argue with someone who could probably blast him into the Tenth Circle. Steve, on the other hand, just stood there, staring right back. Seriously, though, it was a losing battle. Steve should just give up while –

“Okay, fine, give it here,” Steve cracked, and thrust his hand out to take his phone from her. The moment he saw the picture, his face twisted into a scowl, but all he said was, “Okay, this fine, I guess.”
“It better,” Wanda huffed and turned to stalk off to wherever her brother had wandered off to, her headpiece like two wide spikes that Bucky would gladly like to avoid. She was dressed up as Hawkgirl, and Bucky had been certain Clint had had something to do with that, except for how Clint’s eyes had slipped through about fifty emotions when he saw her, a rough and cracked, “that’s a really great costume, Wanda,” tumbling out of his mouth.

Nat had bit back a laugh as she’d patted his arm and steered him toward the alcohol so no one would see how red he was. Bucky hadn’t been too sure about the alcohol part, not after last year’s hitting-on-everything-that-moved (or not moved, in the case of the plant), but it was still kind of ridiculously cute, and Bucky wasn’t about to fault the man for hiding his affection for the twins behind a keg of beer.

Bucky peered over Steve’s shoulder at the photo, and burst into a loud cackle-laugh. *He* looked fantastic as the Arkham Knight Harley Quinn (seriously, he hadn’t been able to settle on that until about two hours before they’d left), but Steve...oh. He looked so stupid trying to pose as Superman, Bucky couldn’t help but laugh his ass off.

“You’re just so fucking funny, aren’t you,” Steve grumbled, and elbowed him in the ribs. “I’m deleting this –”

“Like hell, you are!” Bucky snatched the phone out of Steve’s hand before he could commit such a travesty, and smacked him across the shoulders with his Harley Bat. “This is fantastic. I’m posting this!”

“Oh, first,” Steve started, as he rubbed his shoulder,” that thing has fucking *spikes* on it –”

“*Knub* spikes, Steven.”

“– so maybe let’s not hit me with it, okay? And second, why do you *always* pick pictures of me looking like a jackass to post? What did I do to you in a past life to deserve this?”

Oh, this was *too* easy.

Bucky didn’t miss a beat as he affected his best solemn, grim expression. “You let me fall from the train.”

Steve’s mouth practically unhinged itself, it dropped open so fast. “You did not...” he murmured, the whites of his eyes as visible as the back of his throat.

Bucky just shrugged, slow. “Well, you asked.” He laughed and walked away, in search of Sam, leaving Steve gaping after him like a particularly put-upon fish. It didn’t take long to find him, curled up on one of the couches and sandwiched between Maria and Nat, all three pressed front to back. Nat was dressed up as Wonder Woman, and Sam had come as Green Lantern, but Maria was also in some bright green costume he didn’t recognize at all.

“Who you?” he asked, wagging a finger at her.

“Fire.”

“Who?”

Maria grunted and rolled her eyes. “You’re so uncultured, Barnes. Justice League International? Series run in the late eighties, early nineties?”

Bucky sneered at her. “Oh, sorry, I was busy taking down the USSR during the late eighties and
early nineties.”

“Weren’t you working for the Russians during that time?” she asked, eyes suddenly shrewd.

He just smirked at her. “But was I. Was I really.”

“Yes. You were,” Nat cut in, then smiled as she opened her arms and made grabby hands at him.

“Come. Sit. Pull up a chest. We’re discussing Tony’s complete lack of originality at his own costume.”

Bucky did as he was told and sat down to lean up against Nat, the couch suddenly very very full. He threw a leg up over the armrest as Nat wrapped an arm around his waist, pulling him in close. Then he glanced over the back of the couch at Tony, who had taken up Bucky’s old spot, and was currently gesticulating at Steve. And he was dressed in a seriously elaborate Batman costume – way more elaborate than the one Bucky had worn the year before. Still, though. Bucky had worn it first.

“Why are we calling Tony unoriginal?” He turned back to his (Steve’s) phone and pulled up Instagram. “Other than the fact that, you know, he is by nature?”

Steve was logged into his own Instagram account, still without a single picture, and Bucky was half tempted to post it there just to fuck with him. Seriously the man’s account was verified and everything, and he had, like, a hundred thousand followers. Like they were all just waiting for him to start with something epic. It made Bucky want to post it there purely out of spite.

His therapy won out in the end, and he switched to own his account. He valued what he was working on too much to actually fuck with Steve like that. He was an asshole, but he wasn’t that big of a dick.

“Uh, maybe because a billionaire with parental issues who’s casted himself as a vigilante has dressed up as a billionaire with parental issues who’d casted himself as a vigilante,” Sam pointed out, and Bucky stopped halfway through his caption to look back up at Tony again.

“Huh. I can’t believe I never pieced that one together.” He shrugged at turned back to the phone to finish what he was doing. “But then, I tend to block out all the ways that Tony is Tony. Since, you know, I’m the reason he’s like that.”

Nat pinched him in the side, and he grunted and tried to squirm away. The move made everyone protest. “You aren’t responsible for any of it, kotenok.” Nat admonished, right in his ear. He tried to turn and glare at her, because yes, he was, but she grabbed him to keep him from again shifting against all of them. “Your person did a terrible thing to his parents, but you didn’t make Tony who he was before, and you aren’t responsible for how he chose to handle it after. That’s all on him.”

“Yeah, I don’t think he sees it that way,” Bucky mumbled, and hit send:

At Tony’s Halloween superhero-themed party. Steve went as Superman and wanted me to be Aquaman or something, to form the Justice League with Tony (Batman), Sam (The Green Lantern) and Natasha (Wonder Woman). Dude, I don’t care about the Justice League, particularly Aquaman! Why being Aquaman when you can be Dr. Harley Quinn? Seriously! (PS: I used my holographic arm for something non work-related. Fury is gonna go nuts!)

He folded his arms, and grabbed onto Nat’s. “And neither do I.”

“Well, that part’s on you, man,” Sam answered just as Maria said, “You can’t blame the weapon because someone chose to do harm with it.”
Sam snorted, and Bucky could feel it all the way at the front. “Since when did you get so philosophical?”

“Since I took up yoga after that time Fury told me that I had anger management issues and my gun wasn’t actually a stress reliever.”

“Fury said this.”

“Yep.”

“Fury. He does know you work with the Avengers, right?”

“And yet, here I am, knowing what the word *chaturanga* means.”

Steve walked up right then and leaned over the back of the couch, smiling down at Bucky. “And I stand by the fact that you would have looked hot as Aquaman.”

He huffed out a laugh and smiled knowingly up at Steve. “That’s just because you’re hopelessly in love with Jason Momoa.”

“But to be fair, who isn’t?” And yeah, Bucky couldn’t argue with that. Steve’s eyes then slid up and down the four of them, full of amusement. “Not that you aren’t all adorable like this, but is there a reason you guys have taken up the Snuggle Buddy System?”

“I...actually have no idea,” Bucky answered.

It’s comfortable,” Nat responded.

“Maria makes a great pillow,” Sam added.

“You calling me squishy, Wilson?”

Sam let out a truly undignified squeak at whatever Maria did to him, and Bucky smiled at Steve when they snorted in unison.

“I was not!” Sam protested, only to yelp, and Bucky finally had to push himself away from the pile, he’d started laughing so hard, followed right by Nat. Maria had taken the newfound freedom to wrap her legs around Sam in a vice grip as she tickled him under his armpits, and Nat and Bucky only barely made it clear of Sam’s own flailing legs.

“Someone needs to save me!” he wailed, but Steve and Nat were Bucky’s people for a reason, and the three took off in a fit of laughter, leaving Sam to his demise, and headed over to the bar.

“I’ll take that, thank you.” Steve snatched his phone out of Bucky’s hand as they leaned up against the bar and Nat walked around to the other side to start fixing them drinks.

Bucky swiped at it with a faux-whine, only to grunt as Steve shoved it behind his back, out of his reach. But when he came up with nothing in his hands, a smug smile painted on his lips, Bucky pulled up short.

“Uh...” He leaned the bat against the bar and blinked at Steve’s costume. The very thing that was tighter than that damn Man with A Plan number he used to wear. The thing with no pockets.

“Where’d your phone go, Stevie?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”
“Uh, actually, yes.” Because, seriously, where the fuck...

Steve snorted and turned around, pulling the cape to the side so Bucky could get a look at his back. There, sitting right at the base of his spine, was a small utility pouch, attached to nothing, his phone tucked snugly inside. Steve smiled as he glanced over his shoulder at it. “Pretty cool, huh?”

Bucky pointed at the little pouch. “Please tell me you didn’t stitch it into that very expensive rental that currently has its security deposit on my credit card, Steve.”

“Nope!” Steve gave the pouch a flick, and it bounced precariously against his back. “Magnets.” Bucky immediately leaned in and pulled on the pouch to look, only for Steve to twitch. “Just, please don’t pull it off. Otherwise the interior magnet’s gonna slide down my ass.”

Ooooh, Bucky was so tempted. He smirked up at Steve and pretended to tug on it, except it held itself stronger than Bucky was expecting. He frowned back down at it and tugged harder, only for the thing to hold, steadfast. “Let me guess,” he finally said, “same magnets as the ones used on your shield?”

Steve’s smile grew that much wider. “The very same.”

“If you two are done playing with Steve’s ass, I have presents for you,” Nat announced and they both turned back to find two martini glasses being pushed their way, chilled and filled to the very lip with a clear liquid.

“Vodka?” Bucky asked with a wide grin.

Nat shook her head. “A little something from Asgard.”

Bucky and Steve were halfway to picking up their glasses when they both froze. Bucky peered at the glass, more than a little suspicious, then glared at Nat. “Aiming for a repeat of last year, are we?”

“Now why would I do something like that.” She huffed a tiny smirk, then gave one of the glasses a tiny flick, the liquid vibrating in waves along the top. “It’s hederacea,” she explained. “It’s...I think Thor said it was like our gin?” She turned to grab a shaker off the back counter, working it easily like she’d been bartending for years. Which, if Bucky added up all the times she’d posed as one, she probably had. “Do you guys remember when Thor did that lecture thing at Pepperdine?”

Bucky nodded, remembering back to when Thor had been asked to speak on Norse mythology. He’d thought it was hilarious that Thor was speaking to a class about mythology when every story he had for them was very much not a myth, it had all just been told wrong.

Nat cracked the shaker open and dumped a third martini glass full of ice. She then slowly began to pour a glass for herself. “Well, he’d stayed at Tony’s place while he was out there –”

“I love that house,” Bucky cut in with a sigh.

“Views like that, how could you not?” Steve added.

“As I was saying, he’d stayed out there, and uh...raided Tony’s liquor cabinet –”

“Cheers to that!” Bucky declared with a raise of his glass, and gave Nat a wide smile, even as she huffed at him for yet another interruption. He so loved fucking with her.

“Are you done?” she groused.
Bucky pressed a hand to his chest, even as Steve snickered into his glass. “Oh, I’m so sorry. Did I interrupt you?”

“I can and will murder you, Barnes.”

Bucky just shrugged, playful and totally unconcerned. “Meh. Last time someone let me die –”

“Oh my god, Bucky!”

“– it didn’t stick. So do your worst.” He gave her a wolfish grin, delighted at the way her nostrils flared as she tried to school her irritation with him. He held her gaze, because someone was going to blink first, and with the two of them, it really was even money over who was going to be the one to crack.

Which turned out to be her, as she raised her glass to clink with his. “Here’s to mutually assured destruction.”

“Here’s to gods and monsters,” he replied, before taking a sip. He then waved a hand at her. “You may continue.”

“Oh, why thank you,” she replied sardonically. “Anyway, I guess he discovered Tony’s gin collection, and immediately sent for some of this.” She held up a beautiful crystal bottle, the liquid inside almost shimmering. “Said you two would love it, better even than the mead from last year.”

Bucky could damn near feel the headache from his hangover after last year’s drunken escapades, and cringed. It had been a blast, at least of what he remembered, but Bucky hadn’t been hungover like that maybe ever, and he really wasn’t looking forward to repeating it. Ever.

So, he sipped slowly. And it was delicious, actually, so he was all for savoring it. He could taste blackberries and something else, but he couldn’t put his finger on what. His heightened senses meant he could pick out different tastes and smells, but hell if he could ever remember the names of half the stuff his senses picked up. He only recognized the blackberries because he loved blackberries.

“I meant to tell you, I like your costume, by the way,” Nat said interrupting his thoughts. He shook himself out of his reverie to find an amused look lighting her eyes. She glanced down at his neck as she nodded at him. “I see you guys finally broke down and Steve got you a collar.”

“What –” His hand flew to his throat, only to scowl as Steve burst into laughter. He gave the metal ring on his leather collar harness a flick. “Very funny, Nat, but if anyone is in charge of this relationship, it’s me.” For some reason that only made Steve laugh harder, and he fell over, his head lolling across his arm along the top of the bar. Bucky shoved him, and he almost lost his footing, but managed to stay upright. “What, you think it’s you?”

It took Steve a solid thirty seconds to sober up long enough to answer. “Jesus, Buck, you can’t even function in the morning unless I take care of you.”

“Well, that’s just patently not –”

“When was the last time you even made coffee for yourself?”

Bucky clamped his mouth shut, because fuck, he actually couldn’t remember. And that, apparently, was answer enough for Steve, because he started to nod, a smug smile plastered on his stupid face.

“Uhuh. That’s what I thought.” He turned to Nat and jerked a thumb in Bucky’s direction. “That alone is why I have this one by the balls.”
“I believe it.”

“You both suck,” Bucky grumbled, very much ignoring the truth of Steve’s statement. He scowled down into his martini. Should’ve just gone as Margo, then at least I’d be wearing booty shorts.”

Nat turned to frown at him. “Who?”

“Margo Robbie?” he asked, but she just continued to stare at him. ”Suicide Squad?” He cocked an eyebrow at her, because no way she didn’t know who Margo was, no chance. When she continued to show no sense of recognition (seriously, had he really thought she was his people not twenty minutes before?), he sighed in immense disappointment and pulled out his phone. He opened up to the picture Steve had taken of him behind their apartment and slid it across the bar to Nat. “Her,” he said, tapping the screen.

“Woah.” Nat’s eyes bugged out a little and she immediately turned to Steve, the phone held up. “This your work?”

Steve smiled, his cheeks pinking up. “Yeah, that’s mine.”

Nat turned the phone back to look over the picture again. It was Bucky dressed up as Margo’s Harley with a mural of her as the character on the wall behind him. Steve had done it along the wall of the little side street that ran behind their building. It had taken him about two hours, including three stops by the police, but no one was going to write up, or stop, Captain America when he was arting.

“This is really good,” she breathed. “I forgot how good you are.”

“Steve’s exhibition at the Smithsonian wasn’t that long ago, weirdo.”

“I get that, you ass,” Nat said absently, and shrugged, “but, you know, I see more of him in combat mode than anything else, so it’s easy to forget that he has other talents besides being able to execute a perfect Flying Omaplata.”

“Uh, thanks, I think?”

“No, seriously.” Nat shoved the phone back at Bucky, her eyes serious but imploring. “You should post this. For Steve.”

Bucky turned to meet Steve’s equally curious face. “...why?”

She rolled her eyes like he was the densest person she’d ever met, and well, that was just rude. He was at least one or two smarter than Clint. “Because, numb nuts, the world should also be reminded sometimes of how talented Steve is. And since this one” – she flicked her wrist in Steve’s direction – “won’t post on his own Instagram –”

“I just don’t want to take away from what Bucky’s trying to do.”

“– then you should do it for him.”

Yeah, Bucky could see her point. Steve had been pretty resolute about not posting on his own Instagram for a long time now, which meant the world really was missing out on what he was capable of. And that just wasn’t right.

“I’m gonna do it,” he announced and quickly loaded the image onto his channel.

“Aw, come on, Buck,” Steve mumbled and placed a hand on Bucky’s arm. “don’t make this about
me. This is your therapy. No one needs to see my art.”

Bucky just pulled him in for a quick kiss. When they parted, he gave Steve his favorite smile. “Stevie, I think you’re forgetting that your art is also part of my therapy. You’re my therapy. You find beauty where no one else would see it.” He waved his phone a little. “You know, like the back of our building. Or, you know, me.”

Steve’s eyes had gone increasingly sappy at Bucky’s little speech, and by the time Bucky finished, he was already hauling Bucky in for another kiss. Bucky could practically feel his heartbeat in it.

“You’re ridiculous, you know that?” Steve whispered against his lips. He gave Bucky one more kiss before pulling back. “Okay, fine, post it.”

Bucky grinned at him. “I’ll make the comment more about me than you, if that helps,” he offered as he turned back to his phone:

*Here’s the first costume I tried when I had the idea to go to Tony’s party dressed as Harley Quinn. I finally chose something closer to the Arkham Knight game than the Suicide Squad movie. I’m digging the shirt, though. What? You seem surprised that a “heartless assassin” can enjoy this kind of fun. Contrary to what Stark and a lot of people who don’t know me think, I’m perfectly able to appreciate activities that don’t include explosions or pulling the trigger of a gun. (Photo + Margot Robbie painting on an old building behind our place: Steve)*

Satisfied, he hit send, and of course, not two seconds later, a smattering of pings and vibrations could be heard all over the damn room. There was no winning with any of them. He grabbed the bat off the floor and dropped it on the counter. “I swear, I’m going to start smashing phones, next time.”

“Aww.” Nat reached over and patted his cheek. “It’s only because we love you, Kotenok.”

“Love me a little less, next time.”

“Never.”

Bucky grumbled as he watched both she and Steve pull out their phones and open the image to double tap it. And okay, yeah, he liked that his friends got a kick out of his images, or something, but it was a little unnerving to watch the same thing unfold across the whole of the room. Comments complimenting Steve’s art and Bucky’s first costume could be heard over the din of the music, including Clint shouting, “Christ, Steve, why are you dating this troll when you could probably have that –” from across the room, only to be cut short when Bobbi smacked him hard over the back of the head as she walked past.

“It wasn’t anything bad!” Clint cried, rubbing the back of his head, but really, he should have been glad it was Bobbi that got to him before Nat had. Whatever had been about to come out of that mouth, Nat would have given him an up-close lesson on the term ‘disembowel’.

Sure enough – “Thanks for that.” Nat smiled and clinked her glass to Bobbi’s as she came to stand between Steve and Bucky.

“What do you think he was going to say?” Bobbi asked, a mischievous twinkle in her eye – a look Nat returned in equal measure.

“He’s male. Does it matter?”

“Not even a little bit,” Bobbi laughed, and they toasted again, like the evil evil people they were. “Why are boys such idiots?”
“Uh, excuse me.” Bucky gave them a little wave. “Boy here?”

“Also here, too,” Steve added raising his own hand.

Nat pointed at Steve and Bucky in turn. “Thinks tall buildings are more of a challenge than a death sentence. Once said bullet-proof vests were for fuckboys.”

“They are,” he and Steve countered in unison, then smiled wolfishly as they fist-bumped behind Bobbi’s back.

Nat just shook her head, thoroughly unimpressed. “Children.”

“Hey, Buck,” Steve said, eyes on his phone, “do you still have that picture that was taken of us from last year when we were laughing as Clint hit on his own reflection in the background?”

“Non-sequitur much?” Nat murmured into her martini, even as Bucky pulled out his phone. It wasn’t even a question, because of course he still had that photo. Hell, after Clint’s drunken lothario greatness of hitting on every single thing he came across last year, Bucky had even created a special folder in his phone just for the man.

“I like how you phrased that as a question.” Bucky said. “Like you could even doubt me.”

“Well, it wasn’t so much doubt, as a lead in.” Steve wandered past Bobbi to throw his arm over Bucky’s shoulder, watching as Bucky scrolled through his phone trying to get to the folder in question.

“A lead in to what?”

Suddenly Steve’s phone was in Bucky’s face, a picture of him and Steve dressed up in the costumes they’d woken up in the morning after last year’s Halloween party, and Bucky’s fingers stopped sliding across his own phone, the task at hand completely forgotten. He glanced up at Steve, whose expression was unreadable save for the small flicker of light in his wide eyes.

Bucky glanced back down at the phone, eyes narrowing in suspicion at the image he couldn’t remember. “I thought we agreed never to speak of last year.” He took the phone, his head cocked as he studied the two of them, lying on what looked like the bed in their spare bedroom, warm and comfortable, save for the fact that they were both totally plastered in the photo. “Also, where did you, you know, get this?” he asked, only for a new thought to occur to him, and he rounded on Steve. “You didn’t have this the whole time, did you?!”

“Hey, don’t look at me!” Steve’s hands immediately flew up in surrender, and he nodded in Nat’s direction. “She just sent it to me!”

Nat snorted her stupid ‘I’m always gonna know more shit than you’ snort, and smiled at him. “You think you’re the only one who likes to document your shenanigans? And besides” – she took a slow, calculated sip of her martini, her eyes never leaving Bucky’s face – “last year’s after-party was epic. I needed documentation to show Tony that my Halloween party was clearly the superior Halloween party.”

“...okay, yeah, that’s fair.” Bucky glanced back down at the photo, trying again to piece together what had happened last year. But he only knew three things for certain about that night: It hadn’t ended when they’d left the party. Nat and Thor were horrible people who lived to conspire against him and Steve by introducing them to Asgardian booze. And said booze was responsible for the worst (and only) hangover Bucky’d had in the last seventy-odd years. Just like his Clint folder, he also had a whole folder on his phone dedicated to last year’s late-night costume shop raid and
subsequent ‘fashion show’, which, now that Bucky thought about it, Clint hitting on himself in the mirror while dressed up as Conan the Destroyer had actually been the last clear thing either he or Steve could remember. Neither them had a single memory of putting on the Frozen outfits.

“That’s why I want the photo of Clint,” Steve went on, apparently reading Bucky’s thoughts. “I wanna show Tony that Clint’s more fun at Nat’s parties than his.”

“Excuse you, I’m fun at all the parties!” Clint announced as he sidled up to them. He knocked himself into Bucky’s back, and Bucky had to catch himself from slamming into the bar and knocking his drink over. “What are we all looking – hey, look it’s me! I look good.”

“Oh, we’re well aware,” Bucky answered drily, and held back a laugh. “You apparently thought so too, since you’re hitting on yourself here.”

“Well, what can I say.” Clint rounded the bar and slipped an arm around Nat’s waist, a smug smile plastered onto his face. “I am a handsome bastard.”

“Well, you got the bastard part right,” Steve murmured, low enough so only Bucky could hear, and they both burst into giggles.

“What’s so funny?” Clint asked, his smile falling right off his face.

“When it comes to you Clint, the list is long, but distinguished,” Bobbi answered, and clinked glasses with Nat again, much to Clint’s chagrin.

“Okay, this needs to be on my Insta,” Bucky announced, because yes, perfect decision. Everyone needed to see this magic, and he immediately opened up Instagram again.

“Didn’t you say not five minutes ago that we promised never to speak last year?”

“That was five minutes ago.”

“Okay, but I still want to send that other image to Tony.”

“Fine, send it.” Bucky handed his own phone over without looking up from his task. “Fifty-eighth folder down.”

“What, what number folder down?” Bobbi asked, sounding equal parts suspicious and mystified. “Do you seriously have enough images for that many folders?”

“He actually has three hundred and forty-two folders.” Steve answered before Bucky could open his mouth. “Some with duplicate images, sure, but the vast majority are unique. What was it at last count, babe? Something like twelve thousand pictures?”

“Seventeen-thousand, six-hundred and eleven,” Bucky responded, even as he typed out his message on the image – a short blow by blow of last year’s events. At least what had been told to him after.

“Holy shit,” Bobbi whispered.

“He does have an obsession, this is true,” Nat commented.

“Better it be photo-taking instead of life-taking,” Bucky finished, just as he hit send.

“Oh, no, that one’s just a hobby on weekends.”

“Well, they do say everyone should have one.”
“I fear both of you,” Bobbi concluded with a shake of her head. “Excuse me while I go hang out with Bruce, who, by the way, is less scary than either of you.” With that, she picked up her drink and walked off.

“Well, she’s not wrong,” Clint said, as he watched her go. “The general consensus among the crew is that the Nat/Bucky team is infinitely scarier than the Steve/Bucky team, despite the weird connection you two have.”

“As long as I’m both teams, I’m 100% happy with everyone thinking that.”

“VERY FUNNY, STEVE, BUT NO ONE THROWS A BETTER PARTY THAN ME!” came the sudden dulcet tones of Tony bellowing from across the room, and the four of them immediately fell over it fits of laughter.

“So, was it your text or my Instagram image?” Bucky asked between huffs of laughter.

“Does it matter?” Steve wrapped his arm around Bucky’s neck to pull him in for a hard, sloppy kiss to the cheek. “Just think of how epic he’s going to try to go for Thanksgiving now.”

“Not New Year’s?”

“Like Tony could wait that long.”

“Which means extra food for us.”

“Now you’re finally on my page.”

And of that Bucky certainly was as he turned and smiled into the next kiss.

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Ah, an outtake from last year. Remember when I lost at Rock, Paper, Scissors and ended up cosplaying as Elsa for Halloween? Well, I lost again a few hours later, this time against Nat. And Steve lost too. (What the f**k were we thinking? Playing against Romanoff...). If you wonder how Nat convinced us to wear male versions of Anna and Elsa’s costumes in “Frozen Fever”, the answer is simple: we were completely WASTED and would have walked the streets of NYC in a Winnie the Poo costume if asked to. And before you say: “But..but you guys can’t get drunk because of the serum!”, just try to drink a gallon of Thor’s Argardian booze and then we’ll talk. I think it was my first hangover since the 1940’s. Anyway, we rented the costumes at like 2:00am, took some pics and...voilà! I already had the wig anyway. It wasn’t the strangest thing about that night, though: Barton asked me if he could keep my green cape and my wig for his dog.
F**k off, Birdy. I didn’t have the time to take care of my hair, ok? So now, if you and your magic backpack could fly away and let me work, I would appreciate it. By the way, tell the two nerds I’m gonna need a new holographic arm, and if they tell you “What again?!”, yes, AGAIN! I’m not responsible if they build shitty stuff that falls apart the moment a bullet hits. (Photo: Pietro)

“F**k off, Birdy. I didn’t have the time to take care of my hair, ok? So now, if you and your magic backpack could fly away and let me work, I would appreciate it. By the way, tell the two nerds I’m gonna need a new holographic arm, and if they tell you “What again?!”, yes, AGAIN! I’m not responsible if they build shitty stuff that falls apart the moment a bullet hits. (Photo: Pietro)

“It’s a simple extraction,” Steve whispered quietly into Bucky’s ear, his fingertips forming light circles over Bucky’s back. It grounded him, made him feel present. The quinjet rumbled around them softly as they headed south into Mexico. “We get in, pose as common tourists, help Sam and May and Pietro complete their mission, and get out. Nothing we haven’t done a thousand times. Plus, you know” – Steve huffed quietly and smiled as he flicked at Bucky’s still-platinum blonde hair – “no one would ever figure out it was you with this Goldilocks mop sitting on top of your head.”

“And you?” Bucky turned sharp eyes on Steve, who still looked about as Steve as he could possibly get, with his cheekbones and his soft hair and his blue eyes and his Steveness just oozing all over the place. “You do realize that, like, literally every human on the planet knows who you are, right?”
“Peterson didn’t know who I was back in London, remember,” Steve pointed out. His hand had made its way up to Bucky’s neck and was gently pressing into the tendons on either side. He couldn’t help the way the tension eased out of him. Slightly.

Steve stilled just long enough to brush their lips together, before pressing his forehead to Bucky’s temple, his ministrations at work once more. “And besides,” he breathed into Bucky’s neck, “it’s not like I’m going to be involved that much, I’ll –” He sighed and sat back up, turned earnest eyes on Bucky, and dammit, if that wasn’t Bucky’s Achilles heel. “Baby, I’m not going to be involved all that much. I’m just – I’m just the fucking driver. I’m your cabbie, and that’s it. We grab the car, I take you to the drop zone, you infiltrate, then you get our people out. Done. And remember, they aren’t actually in danger, okay?” When Bucky couldn’t find his words to answer, Steve gave him a tiny shake.

“Okay?”

“Okay.” Bucky gave a minute nod and planted a tiny kiss to the corner of Steve’s mouth before staring again at the opposite wall of the quinjet. Sam, May, and Pietro weren’t in danger, not yet. They hadn’t been exposed, they just couldn’t get out. Not without doing the whole exposing thing, and something about some password to some cloud drive getting lost if they did. And this time, surprisingly, Coulson had been the one to ask for help. Showed up on Steve and Bucky’s doorstep and everything. But it wasn’t his earnestness that had caused the pair to cave, it was knowing how important May was to Coulson. Almost their own Steve and Bucky love story, minus the whole seventy years of ice and frozen torture. It actually made Bucky feel a little guilty, knowing that couples like May and Coulson, Clint and Nat, and even Sam and Maria, were out there sacrificing each other for the greater good, and here Steve and Bucky were, holed up in their home, screaming like banshees at anyone who even looked in their general direction. It would have been humiliating if it wasn’t so pathetic. So, they’d agreed.

“Just in and out,” Bucky repeated, imploring, “like you said.”

Steve smiled at him, reassuring in all the ways it wasn’t. “In and out.”

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Bucky ran at top speed, jumping over a parked car, then slid under a delivery truck before righting himself and taking off again. He turned back just long enough to fire a couple shots, not bothering to check that they found home – he knew they had, he was just that good.

“Data secure?” he huffed into his comm.

“Cloud drive has been transferred,” May confirmed, sounding about as out-of-breath as Bucky felt. There was a soft thump and a grunt, and May mumbled, “Okay, that wasn’t as short a drop as I thought.”

“You okay?” Bucky asked, tension bleeding over his words. “You on your way out?”

“Relax, Sergeant. Already halfway back to the jet.”

“Perfect,” he answered, ignoring her per-usual sass. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“If these bastards’ll let us,” Sam grumbled into the comms, and Bucky was right there with him, scowling as he fired another two shots down a side alley as he ran past, confident the target was the enemy.

Steve was somewhere on the other side of the building, doing his own damage, and he was fine, he was okay, Bucky knew he was. He could hear the clanking of the shield from here, and Sam was
right behind him, and Sam would have said if he wasn’t. He was fine, and he was still Bucky’s always, and he was gonna stay Bucky’s always. Because, if anything, they at least trusted each other to get the goddamn job done.

But he’s not supposed to be here.

He was supposed to have stayed in the cab. Be the getaway man. Get them the fuck back to the Quinjet. Not be in the middle of this clusterfuck of a mess. But then, when had a mission ever gone smoothly? Bucky knew better than to think that Steve would have just stayed the getaway man. Hell, that actually would have been a better job for Clint, so Bucky really should have known that there was no way they’d have both been called in if there hadn’t be a very real chance that this would have all gone sideways.

Gone sideways... More like careened across eight lanes of traffic. In a semi. During rush hour.

He parkoured over a dumpster and up a fire escape, only to have to grab the bottom of the first landing as the ladder gave out. He slammed hard into the side of the building, and winced at the at the sound of tearing. He had to twist around, but he caught sight of a gaping tear down the forearm of his holographic sleeve, and shit. Tony and Bruce were gonna be so pissed at him for this. He was still not on the best ground with either of them over the hulking out incident, and this was actually the first new version of the extended-life sleeve he’d had a temper-tantrum over that day. Great. Just fucking perfect.

He pulled himself up and shimmied the rest of the way up the building and onto the roof, only to fall back as a hail of bullets rained down around him. A familiar whoosh rushed him from behind, and he rolled just as Sam came flying in overhead, his own guns blazing.

“It’s about damn time!” Bucky shouted, and laughed when Sam did a midair somersault just so he could flip Bucky off.

“You’re lucky I like your dumb ass,” Sam shot back.

“Hey, who’s the dumb one here?” Bucky returned the gesture as he regained his momentum and shot across the roof. “I’m not the one who’s an open, flying target. Didn’t your fancy modern military training teach you anything? Never leave yourself exposed.”

Sam twisted and shot a sniper from two roofs over who’d just made his presence known. “Leave it to the army brat to think being grounded is the safest place to be.”

“And leave it to the fucking flyboy to think that if he just whoops around really really fast, no one can get a lock on him. I at least have places to hide.”

“You know, whenever you two are done squabbling, I could use a little help over here,” Steve grunted, and Bucky’s insides slammed into hyper-focus.


Bucky picked up speed, high-jumped over an air vent, and didn’t stop running when he hit the edge of the roof. He vaguely heard Sam shout, “Barnes, what the hell are you doing?!” as he went sailing through the air. He used his metal hand to grapple onto the far building, only to push off and land on top of a dumpster. He jumped down to ground level and quickly turned, trying to suss out where Steve had gone, except the alleyway was totally empty, save a few dead enemy agents.

“Steve!” he shouted. “Steve! Where the fuck are you?”
“Front of the building you just went Mission: Impossible off of, Jesus, Buck,” came the reply, and Bucky almost dropped in relief at the sound of his voice. “Get your – as Sam so affectionately called it – dumb ass over here.”

He didn’t need telling twice. He sprinted down the alleyway and rounded the corner, and the relief tripped his heart double time at the sight of Steve as he bounced the shield off of a set of heavy metal doors, the trajectory a perfect arc to take out three guys at once. The shield had barely finished the job when it was back in Steve’s hand as he twisted into the air, up and over a fucking morning star that had come swinging out of nowhere. He kicked out, the satisfying crunch of booting connecting to jaw, and took his would-be attacker down with one blow. He immediately grabbed the morning star and tossed it, hard. It whistled through the air before embedding into a face mask. The guy staggered back and Steve wasted no time shooting him, two to the chest.

Bucky couldn’t help but pause. It had been a long time since he’d seen Steve dance, really dance. He’d forgotten how beautiful he was, how he moved with a grace and fluidity that not a single person on their team (probably a single person in the world) could ever match. It took Bucky’s breath away, to watch him move. The way he knew exactly what his enemy was going to do, three moves before they did; how he used techniques in his fighting style that had nothing to do with fighting, and yet he managed to make them work. Steve was, without question, one of the most beautiful fighters Bucky had ever seen in his very long life.

It hit him, right then. Hard, like an inhuman punch to the gut. They didn’t belong at home, painting and reading and fucking and being lazy, at least not like this. Not like there wasn’t something out there – something more than them – that was worth fighting for. Despite their past, they were two of the luckiest sons-of-bitches in the world: they’d found both their soulmate and their calling. And in that moment, Bucky knew: it was about fucking time they learned how to work with both.

They didn’t belong at home, they belonged out here. And maybe the streak of terror running down Bucky’s spine as he watched Steve take a glancing bullet to the side meant they weren’t quite ready to be back full time, but it was about damn time they figured out how to get –

Wait. Steve had just –

Bucky barely trained his gun before he shot the guy who shot Steve, right between the eyes. He skidded over to where Steve had dropped, taking out three more in the process. He turned to Steve, his hands fluttering over the wound on his side. The entire right side of his shirt was already soaked in blood, and Bucky pushed it up to find a gash about four inches long, and about an inch or so deep.

“Oh my god, are you okay?” he asked, even as Steve winced and tried to push himself up. He gave Steve’s shoulder a shove to keep him down, then shot some guy in the leg who was hiding behind an abandoned truck. “Stay down, you dumb asshole –”

“So the whole dumb ass thing is a theme now, huh?” Steve gritted out, and not the time, Steven. He tried to get up on one elbow, and Bucky just pushed him down again, making him grunt: “Would you stop that? This is not the worst shot I’ve ever taken.”

“You don’t know that!” Bucky answered hysterically, but okay yeah, even he’d shot Steve worse than this. And the look on Steve’s face told him they were thinking the same damn thing. “Call it in, Steve, please,” he urged. “You aren’t suited up for this. Not anywhere.” Bucky looked pointedly at the very much not bullet-proof bloody t-shirt and cargo shorts Steve was wearing.

Steve studied him, eyes calculated, and Bucky wondered if he was going to try and argue again. But he finally breathed and laid back, then tapped his comm to hail Clint.
“Hey, Cap,” Clint answered cheerfully. “How’s it hanging?”

“A little to the left,” Steve answered, and Bucky snorted, despite himself, even as Sam groaned a few expletives in their general direction. “Think it might be time we get the hell out of here.”

“Already locked onto your coordinates, big guy. Pietro’s on his way to offer assistance.”

“Curl up.” Bucky ordered, and Steve surprisingly did as he was told, turtling himself so Bucky could lay the shield over him as best he could. Sam was providing cover overhead, but Bucky was glad Pietro was heading in. He and Steve were hopelessly out in the open, and he wasn’t sure how long he could provide cover for the two of them. Not even with his metal arm, which he held up to block a shot, then fired at the guy from underneath.

His gun clicked, and he quickly switched out the mags. He’d barely brought them up again when small blow to the back of the head knocked him forward.

“What the –” He swiveled around, ready to fire, only to come upon nothing but air. It was only when the faint chuckling hit his ears as targets started randomly dropping all around, did his anger turn to annoyance.

“What the fuck was that?” Steve asked, voice muffled but alarmed, and he started to peek his head out, only for Bucky to smack him back under.

“Swear to God, Pietro,” he shouted at the blur of silver as he looped around them, “I am going to shoot you, one of these days!”

“Are you fucking serious?” Steve grumbled, just as Pietro skidded to a stop in front of them.

“You will have to catch me first, Barnes,” he told them. “And I am always serious, Captain.”

“I’m not entirely sure you know what ‘always’ means, then.” Steve hissed as he pushed himself out from under the shield, coast finally clear, and Bucky helped him up. Once he was standing, he glanced around and gave an approving nod at the now dead silent parking lot. “Well, if this is your idea of offering assistance, you can smack Buck over the head anytime.”

“Hey!” Bucky punched him in the arm, even as he holstered his guns so he could grab the hem of Steve’s shirt and check the wound again. It seemed to already be knitting itself back together, though it would be a couple hours before Steve was fully healed. He patted Steve’s shoulder. “I think you’ll live, baby.”

“Color me shocked,” Steve answered, completely monotone. “The way you were going, I thought this would be the thing to finally do me in.”

Bucky blinked, and tried to school his features, but it wasn’t fast enough, not with the way Steve’s eyes softened and he looped an arm around Bucky’s waist pulling him in. So much for thinking it was time they find that damn balance.

“Hey,” Steve murmured and kissed his cheek. “You know I’m kidding, right?”

Bucky gave a sharp nod, because he knew, he knew it was fine, they were fine. He still believed what he thought earlier – that it really was high time they got their damn act together – but apparently thinking and doing were two different things.

“I know.” He nodded again, mostly for himself, and took a deep, steadying breath. He caught blue eyes searching his own. “And I was thinking –”
The explosion rang out, loud and all-encompassing, and sent them all flying in different directions. Bucky slammed into an overturned car, every bone rattling with the impact. He tasted blood inside of his mouth, and groaned as he rolled over. He vaguely heard shouting overhead, but it was drowned out by the ringing in his ears. He gave his head a shake and slowly pushed himself off the ground, every square inch of his body railing against him with every move.

Steve. He had to find Steve. But there was smoke everywhere, and the ringing wasn’t stopping. It was slowly roaring into a screech, and it was only as the smoke around him blasted out of the way that he realized it wasn’t a ringing in his ears, but the quinjet screaming into place overhead. His muddled brain couldn’t focus on that though, not when Steve was still out there.

He glanced around, frantic, guns already in hand. He heard shouting and spun in the direction of the noise to find a fresh wave of agents piling over the – was that a fucking tank?

“Bucky, duck!”

He dropped immediately as the shield came whizzing over his head, and he only allowed himself the briefest of moments to register the palpable relief at Steve’s voice. At least until he glanced back and saw the blood running down the side of Steve’s face.

Oh. Okay. Now he was pissed.

“MOTHERFUCKERS!” he screamed and charged into the melee. He knew Steve was right on his tail, that he was fine – he was fine, Barnes, it was just a little blood – but Bucky didn’t care. He was done with these assholes, and they were gonna pay. This mission had bit a shit-show, and he was fucking done.

Everything was a blur after that. He only saw red, and the red he saw, he made sure was the blood of his enemies. They were done shedding blood on his side. He lost track of time as he barreled his way through every last one of them, dropped his guns when he ran out of clips, picked up the guns of the dead, and kept going. He didn’t stop – would never stop. Not until the last of these assholes had taken their last breath.

“Bucky.”

The voice was faint, sounded like Steve, and Bucky snarled. Steve was fading, and someone had him in a vice grip, keeping him from Steve. He tried to shake loose from his captor, but the grip on his arms was iron steel. “Bucky, baby, come back to me.”

He blinked, his eyes untrained, his breath shallow. He shook his head, hard, and suddenly it was like a snapback of a rubber band, everything slamming into harsh focus. He was surrounded by dark, metal walls, and there was a familiar rumble around him. He glanced up, blinked again, and took in the face that was holding onto him like life.

“Steve,” he breathed. Holy shit, the person holding him was Steve. He collapsed into his arms, the quinjet finally registering around him. He grabbed Steve’s shoulders tight. “What the fuck...when did we get on here?”

Steve chuckled, low in his ear. “Oh, not too long after you went Terminator on everyone.”

“Yeah, after the tank had taken out this armored SUV, you looked at me and just...I don’t know, sort of lost it.” He ran a soothing hand over Bucky’s head and pressed a kiss to the shell of his ear. “Not sure what you saw, but even Pietro and Sam got out of your way.”
“I took pictures instead!” Pietro announced, and Bucky looked over at him sitting up front in the cockpit, happily waving his phone at them. “I have sent several of them to you. You should get angry like that more often. You look...” He frowned in confusion and turned to Clint. “What is the word for...how did you call it...crazy eyes?”

“Manic,” Clint helpfully supplied as Pietro’s eyes lit up.

“Yes! Manic!” He turned to smile back at Bucky. “You look manic.”

“Gee, thanks, buddy,” Bucky laughed.

“Anytime!”

Bucky huffed then pulled back to look Steve over. There was still blood all over his face, and Bucky gingerly reached up to where it was sludging down his forehead. “Are you okay? This looks pretty bad.”

“I’m fine, really.” Steve tried to give a reassuring shake of his head, but Bucky didn’t miss the little wrinkle between his eyebrows. He fixed Steve with a look.

“Why are you such a bad liar, Steve? How are you such a bad liar?”

“I am not and you know it.” He gave a small shrug. “Just can’t lie to you, is all.”

“Yeah, actually, I don’t know about that.” He guided Steve to one of the back benches so he could examine his head. “You’re pretty good at lying by omission when it comes to me.” He gently parted Steve’s hair to get at the wound. Two inches back from the hairline, about an inch across. It had taken a chunk of Steve’s hair with it, too. “Yeah, this is actually a little bit bad, let me stitch it.”

“How do I lie to you by omission?” Steve asked, somewhat crankily, as Bucky went to work on his head.

“Seriously?” Like Steve didn’t know. “It wasn’t exactly like either of us were talking to each other recently. I mean, I may be the king of keeping secrets in this relationship, but don’t think for a second you aren’t right there with me.”

Steve snorted. “Does that make me the queen?”

“You’re the queen of something, all right.”

“As long as I’m the queen of your heart.”

Bucky burst out laughing, the tension popping like a soap bubble. “Wow, Steven.” He shoved hard into Steve’s shoulder, unable to stop the affectionate smile spreading across his face. It felt good. They were fine – alive and whole, and **them**. “That was bad, even for you.”

“You love my jokes.”

“I love your ass.”

“Man-made and backed by the FDA,” Steve said, with a soft chortle.

It just made Bucky bust up laughing all over again. “Does that mean your ass is edible?”

“You ask that like you’ve never eaten it,” Steve countered.
“I will kill the pair of you,” Sam groused from a cot on the opposite wall, as May mumbled, “You’re both children,” from directly above. Steve and Bucky just glanced at each other before dissolving into another fit of giggles.

“Think you can finish this?” Steve huffed after they settled down. He waved at the stitching needle hanging from his forehead. “Not sure this is a good look for me.”

“Tony would appreciate it,” Bucky observed, but went back to fixing Steve up.

“Tony would make fun of it.”

Bucky smiled and shook his head. There was no arguing with that.

They fixed each other up, Bucky finishing Steve’s head and bandaging his side, before Steve fixed up an apparent nasty gash Bucky had on his own forehead and cheek. He made fun of Bucky for breaking his nose again, commenting that it was going to stop being perfect if he didn’t stop damaging it. Steve was one to talk.

They settled back onto their own cot, Steve pressed up against Bucky, back to chest, both really feeling the fight now that the adrenaline had worn off. Bucky had started flipping through what looked like about three dozen photos Pietro had sent him, as well as two videos. It was like, it wasn’t just that he could run fast, he apparently was fast at everything, or something. Bucky made a mental note to make fun of his sex life later.

The pictures were kind of amazing, though. Shot after shot of him flying through the air, his aim true, every hit dead on. It had all come back to him, eventually – he hadn’t actually lost time, had just shut down when Protect Steve mode had taken over. But these photos were an interesting perspective to take all that in. The blond hair almost made him feel like he was looking at someone else, assessing an asset with a critical eye. And he could see why he and Steve were such a good unit. He moved a lot like Steve did, a lot like Steve had been moving earlier. Like he’d been dancing. Because the guy in the picture...him...he was dancing too.

“Hey, wait, stop,” Steve whispered, after a couple minutes.

“Hmm?”

He took Bucky’s phone out of his hand and scrolled back a picture. It was of Bucky and Sam. Sure enough, Bucky had that manic look on his face that Pietro had been talking about, Sam standing behind him, smiling, letting Bucky do his thing. It had been taken right before they’d all loaded up on the quinjet. In fact, Bucky was pretty certain it had been taken right as he’d dropped the last agent. He knew that look of satisfaction on his face, on Sam’s face. That was a job damn well done.

“Look at you here,” Steve said, a hint of awe in his voice, and Bucky wondered what he was seeing in the photo. How was it different than what Bucky was seeing. How was it the same. “You look beautiful.”

Bucky huffed out a laugh. “You always think I look beautiful.”

“That’s because you always are.”

Bucky pressed a gentle kiss to Steve’s head. “Yeah, well, I think I look badass.”

“Jerk,” Steve teased.

“Punk,” Bucky shot back, on rote. He took the phone from Steve, looked the photo over once more.
“Think I should post this?”

“Actually, yeah – oh, but wait.” He took the phone again and launched some app Bucky didn’t recognize (didn’t even know was on his phone, what the hell, Steve), and started immediately fucking around with the pic. He couldn’t totally see what Steve was doing, though, the phone tucked up against his chest. He tried to grab at it, but Steve battered his hand away. “Stop that.”

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asked. “And what the hell app is that you just opened on my phone?”

“I need it.” Like that was supposed to be some sort of an answer. It was another minute before Steve let out a satisfied sigh and handed the phone back. “There,” he said, a smile in his voice and on his lips. “Now you look like a badass.”

It was all Bucky could do to keep from laughing his ass off and knocking them off the cot. Steve had gone and photoshopped a damn cigarette in his mouth. Like he was just so cool, he’d could kill with one hand and light up with the other, mid-dogfight.

“Are you kidding me with this shit?” he wheezed. “I can’t post this!”

“Sure, you can.” Steve shrugged. He turned that wide, sunny smile on Bucky, and fuck their injuries, Bucky needed those lips on his right now. He gently jostled them around so he could lean over and capture those lips he so desperately sought in an awkward kiss. Awkward and beautiful and perfect, and he loved Steve so fucking much.

“I love you,” he whispered, putting voice to what was in his head. “You still aren’t gonna leave me, right?”

“No more than you will, baby,” Steve whispered back. “I love you too, by the way. Even if you look like punk rock reject.”

“Hey, you love my hair,” Bucky said. “It’s the new me.”

Steve huffed. “Better not be.”

“We’ll see.” Steve gave him a look, one that Bucky kissed right off, and refused to let up until Steve yielded. Bucky finally resettled them and went back to the photo.

It was kind of funny, actually, with the cigarette and all. He pulled up Instagram so he could post it, then punked out for a second at the thought of publishing the damage to the sleeve when Tony or Bruce didn’t know yet what he’d done. He latched onto the hope that, maybe, if they saw it now, they’d get mad now, then most likely be calmed down by the time he saw them. Mostly likely. (Probably not.)

F**k off, Birdy. I didn’t have the time to take care of my hair, ok? So now, if you and your magic backpack could fly away and let me work, I would appreciate it. By the way, tell the two nerds I’m gonna need a new holographic arm, and if they tell you “What again?!”, yes, AGAIN! I’m not responsible if they build shitty stuff that falls apart the moment a bullet hits. (Photo: Pietro)

He hit send and set his phone aside so he could wrap Steve up in his arms. His insides roiled at the conversation they needed to have, at what they needed to finally do. And it was now or never, because if they made it home before he voiced what was on his mind, he’d start finding excuse after excuse not go back, and that would never work, for either of them. So, he pressed a light kiss to Steve’s shoulder, hugged him tight, and found his voice to speak:
“Hey, Stevie, I’ve been thinking about something...”
“F**k my life. I completely forgot that it was our yearly official photo session today and I still didn’t have the time to take care of my hair. Not to mention that the latest mission was harsh on my pretty face. JFC, look at that, I look like Sick Boy in Trainspotting. Steve, Nat and Sam are gonna laugh their asses off when they see this. Maybe I could bribe Coulson into losing the pic in S.H.I.E.L.D archives. Hmm, no. He’s such a fan boy that if Steve asks him for the photo, he’ll give it to him right away. I’m screwed.”

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Finally back to my normal self. It was about time! In other news, yes, we started to decorate the apartment for Christmas. And this year, Xmas will be awesome, believe me. Stevie has no idea of what I’m preparing. Be ready for some travelling and great photos of our vacation seaside!
“It’s your own damn fault, you know that.” Steve laughed as he lifted up a section of Bucky’s hair to get more dye underneath.

“How do you figure that?!” Bucky exclaimed. He slumped down on the barstool they’d set up in the bathroom and scowled at the picture on his phone again. “We were on a mission. Picture Day should have been rescheduled.”

“Picture Day, what are we, twelve?”

“We didn’t have Picture Day when we were twelve.”

“Yes, because that was the point I was making.” Steve started massaging the dye into Bucky’s hair, and he tried not to purr has he melted into it a little bit. “We don’t have a Picture Day, and you know it. You have a deadline to get it done, and it’s no one’s fault but yours that you put it off for so long.”

“But we had Halloween,” Bucky reminded him, and pointed at his head, which was quickly turning back to his natural brown, thank fuck.

“You had all of October to do it,” Steve countered.

“Yeah, but we didn’t know when we would be going back to work,” Bucky tried again. “We still don’t.”

“Wasn’t it just you who said we need to start actively working towards getting back full time?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean we don’t know when that will be.”

Steve stopped and looked at Bucky through the mirror. “And you think it won’t be for at least another year?” he asked, incredulously.

Bucky shrugged. “Who knows.”

“You’re impossible.” Steve shook his head, but luckily went back to lightly massaging Bucky’s head. “Regardless, you know very well we have to get them done no matter what. Active duty or not, if we’re on the SHIELD roster, we have to have up-to-date photos.

“Of which mine won’t match in the next five minutes.”

“Still your own damn fault.” He glanced at Bucky in the mirror again. “Maybe next time, you don’t hide from Tony and Bruce. Maybe next time you grow a spine and just admit you fucked up.”

Bucky gaped at him, those blue eyes, staring back, unrelenting. “I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Yes, you can.”

“I thought you loved me.”

“I’m saying it because I love you. Let’s not confuse things here, buddy.”

“Don’t call me buddy, you dick.”
By way of answer, Steve just leaned over and blew a raspberry onto Bucky’s cheek. He absolutely did not shriek as he batted Steve away, though he did cringe as hair dye flung around the bathroom.

“Smooth, Barnes,” Steve huffed and wiped a streak of dye off his own cheek with the back of hand. He then snapped the gloves off and tossed them lightly into the trash.

“Fuck you, Rogers.”

“Maybe later,” Steve answered, his smile sly, voice dropping to a low husk that sent a shiver right down Bucky’s spine. He turned Bucky just enough so he could lean over, their lips barely an inch apart, then ticked a quick glance up at his hair. “I mean, I’m about to get my boyfriend back, so you know, I figured some ‘I missed you’ sex is definitely in order.”

Get his boyfriend back...

Bucky snorted, then closed the gap so he could capture that bottom lip between his teeth. “Missed me that much, huh?”

“What can I say,” Steve said and licked at Bucky’s lips, “I like my man au naturale.”

“We have too many clothes on for au naturale.”

“That can be remedied.”

“Well.” Bucky smiled, slow and inviting, watched the way it made Steve’s eyes dilate. “Soon as we finish up here, how ‘bout you bend me over the couch. Show me just how much you missed me by reintroducing your tongue to my ass and making me forget my own name.”

“Fuck, Bucky...” Steve whimpered as he spun Bucky the rest of the way around, and dove back in for a kiss that was nothing short of carnal. Bucky stopped give two shits about the goddamn hair dye, and returned the kiss in kind, his phone clattering to the ground so he could thread his fingers into Steve’s hair and pull him closer. Steve stumbled into him, stumbled into the vee of Bucky’s legs, and the barstool skidded and rocked back as Steve lifted Bucky clean off the seat in his haste to yank Bucky’s sweats down.

Bucky laughed, delighted and so beyond turned on as he grabbed at Steve’s own sweats, pulling his cock free. Steve licked a hasty stripe up his hand then took them both in hand, and Bucky’s laugh turned guttural as Steve sucked at the hollow of his throat. He scrambled to find purchase, his fingers no doubt leaving divots in Steve’s shoulders. He wrapped his legs tight around Steve’s waist, bringing them that much closer together — needing them that much closer.

The slide of Steve’s hand, pressed tight between their bellies, was rough and sloppy and perfect, because neither of them were in any sort mood to make this last. It wasn't long before Bucky felt the tight coil of heat, low in his belly, and if the tiny whimpers coming from Steve were any indication, he was right there with him. As the first wave of ecstasy began to crest, he turned his head to get at Steve’s lips, crushing their mouths together, and muffling his cry. Then everything went white, the world narrowed down to Steve's hand and Steve's mouth and Steve’s tip over the edge with him, dragging him that much further under.

He shuddered a breath on the come down, kissed Steve’s ear, his jaw. “Well that's certainly a way to pass the time,” he commented on a broken laugh.

“That’s one way to look at it.” Steve smiled at him, dopey and blissed out, and Bucky just had to kiss him again. God, he prayed he never tired of this.
They slowly extricated themselves from each other, and Bucky grabbed a bunch of toilet paper so they could clean themselves off. He lifted himself off the barstool just enough to pull up his sweats. He’d barely grabbed his phone up off the floor when an incredulous huff met his ears and he looked up to find Steve staring at him, mouth agape.

“What?” Bucky asked, and Steve’s mouth dropped open that much more. He glanced around, looking for whatever he’d missed, and came up with nothing. When Steve still didn’t answer, he threw his arms out. “Seriously, what?”

“So that’s it?” Steve started, and mimicked Bucky’s hand gesture. “One good hand job and it’s right back to your phone? I don’t even have my pants up yet!” he exclaimed, waving a hand at his bare legs and dick hanging free. Bucky’s mind helpfully supplied all kinds of dirty things he could do to Steve, t-shirt still on, sweats around his ankles, and he couldn’t help but smirk, only to –

“Ow, you asshole,” he groused, rubbing at the spot on his arm where Steve had just punched him.

“Okay, first.” Steve wagged a finger in Bucky’s face. “That didn’t hurt – no it didn’t, wipe that look off our face. And second, I’m being serious – oh my god, stop laughing!”

Bucky couldn’t help it, though, Steve looked so ridiculous trying to chide Bucky with his pants around his ankles. It was funny, okay, and holy shit, did he love this fucker.

He grabbed at the front of Steve’s shirt and pulled him in. “Aw, I’m sorry, Stevie,” he chuckled and tried to kiss that adorable pout off Steve’s face, to little success. It absolutely tickled him. “Are you worried we’re turning into old marrieds? The fire’s gone out on the relationship? Fuck ‘em and forget ‘em?”

“Swear to God, I’m turning into your ball and chain over here,” Steve mumbled against his lips, but kissed Bucky back. He huffed a little as Steve shoved his tongue into Bucky’s mouth, apparently trying to prove some point or something.

He grabbed a handful of Steve’s hair and yanked, making him gasp, because two could play at that game, and Bucky liked to play dirty. He nipped lightly at Steve’s jaw before pulling him back by his hair to catch his eye. He was more than a little satisfied to find those pupils blown wide again.

“The very last thing you will ever be is my ball and chain, baby, promise.” He kissed him again, short but searing. “You’ll always be my tether, but never my chain, got it?”

“Promise?”

“Always.”

Steve smiled, wide and pleased. “Guess you’re forgiven then.”

“Well thank God for that.” He laughed and gave Steve a playful shove back. Then he waved at Steve’s semi-hard dick. “Now put your pants back on before that thing gets anymore ideas. We have some hair to finish.”

“Oh sir, yessir.” Steve gave him a quick, lazy salute, then did exactly as Bucky’d asked.

Bucky laughed and finally spun back around, back to the task at hand, which was actively trying to will his new SHIELD photo out of existence with just the power of his mind. “Hey, Stevie,” he said, an idea popping into his head, and tapped at the photo, “you think they’ll make me retake it if I post this publicly?”
“Why? They didn’t make you last time.”

Bucky frowned all over again. “Oh, yeah. Damn.”

“You should post it anyway,” Steve commented. “I will deny this if you ever repeat it to anyone, but you – you kind of look badass.”

“You do.” Bucky stilled, because no way Steve actually believed that. He glanced up at Steve’s reflection, which was a perfect mask of seriousness, his eyes on a point above Bucky’s head. Yeah, Bucky wasn’t buying it. “You think I look badass with my face fucked up and with hair you can’t stand.”

“What can I say, the blond is growing on me.” Steve shrugged and reached over to snap on a single fresh glove to start checking Bucky’s hair. And Bucky didn’t miss the way Steve was still actively not looking at him.

“So, if you love it so much, why are we dying it back?” he asked and held up his phone. “I mean, hey, my new pic is blond, I think it would make sense to keep it like that, right? Cuz, you know, the pictures are supposed to be accurate representations of what we look like right now. If the photo is blond” – he elbowed Steve hard in the stomach to get him to look up, and caught his eye immediately – “maybe I should be too.”

They stared at each other, and there was no fucking way Bucky was cracking first. Steve was so full of shit, he hated the blond hair. And Bucky knew better than to ever trust Steve when he changed course on, well anything. Fucker was way too stubborn for that.

“Out with it, Steven.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Steve answered, too quickly, finally looking away.

Bucky harrumphed. “Well if that isn’t just the biggest load of bullshit I’ve heard all day.”

“You look like, uh, sex on a stick.”

“Oh, you mean that think you won’t be getting anymore, because you’re a lying liar who lies?”

Steve frowned. “That doesn’t even make any sense.” Which, it totally did.

“You still won’t be getting laid,” Bucky pointed out, then smirked as the cracks began to form on Steve’s face. “And I think that’s really the only important thing that matters here, don’t you?”

He stared Steve down, putting on his best Winter Soldier glare, until finally – “Nat, Sam, Clint, and Hunter all took bets on how long it would take me to get you to post it.”

“What was the over/under?” Bucky asked, without missing a beat, because of course they did. Then – “Wait, wait, how do those assholes even know about the photo?” Steve narrowed his eyes slightly, and okay, stupid question. “You told them.”

“It’s funny as hell,” Steve explained, completely unrepentant, at least where this part was concerned. “Anyway, Clint had it at three days, Sam gave four, Hunter thought you’d hold out for a week, and Nat gave you” – he glanced at the time on Bucky’s phone – “till right about now.”

“And how long did you give me?” he asked, arching an eyebrow, because no way Steve hadn’t gotten in on that.
Steve opened his mouth, most likely to deny it, only to shut it at the look on Bucky’s face. He sighed, shoulders sagging. “I gave you till tonight,” he mumbled. “It’s why I only mentioned it about a minute ago. Figured you’d never want to post it, but, you know, I’d get the idea in your head, and I don’t know, maybe later I could fuck it out of you.”

“Fuck it…” Bucky just stared at Steve, incredulous, because – “You were going to try and fuck me into posting it?”

“Well, you tend to get loopy and compliant after marathon sex,” Steve explained, and shrugged again. “Figured if I could ever get you to post it, it would be then.”

Bucky shook his head at the absolute idiot standing behind him. That was just fighting dirty, using sex to win a bet. Sure, the picture was a disaster and a half, and literally no part of any of this surprised him, but damn, Steve was in it to win it. Which, speaking of...

“So what were the stakes?” he asked, and glanced at the photo again, idea already forming in his head.

“A thousand bucks each.”

“And what if nobody won?” He looked back up. “What if you couldn’t talk me into it?”

“What makes you think I couldn’t talk you into it?” Steve asked, and Bucky just stared at him. “Fine, we all have to throw in a grand, and it goes towards a Christmas party.”

And that was exactly what Bucky had been hoping to here.

With a liquid smile, he turned back to his phone to put the photo up on Instagram:

F**k my life. I completely forgot that it was our yearly official photo session today and I still didn’t have the time to take care of my hair. Not to mention that the latest mission was harsh on my pretty face. JFC, look at that, I look like Sick Boy in Trainspotting. Steve, Nat and Sam are gonna laugh their asses off when they see this. Maybe I could bribe Coulson into losing the pic in S.H.I.E.L.D archives. Hmm, no. He’s such a fan boy that if Steve asks him for the photo, he’ll give it to him right away. I’m screwed.

Not twenty seconds after he hit send, Steve’s phone began to blow up, and his eyes, wide, ticked over to Bucky. But before he could even grab it off the counter, Bucky snatched out and grabbed his arm, looked him dead in the eye. “You contradict me and tell them it was your idea –”

“Wait what does it say?” Steve cut in, and made another play for his phone

“– and next week,” Bucky kept going, but let him go regardless, “during the Thanksgiving Day parade, I will make you ride the float in that spandex number of yours, but first I’m gonna hand it over to Tony so he can bedazzle the whole goddamn thing.”

Steve’s head snapped up from where he’d been reading the caption. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Bucky just smiled at him, sly as anything, and pretty damn proud of himself, to boot. “But if you say you hadn’t talked to me yet, one, I’ll let you live, and two, I’ll let you play the hero when you humbly suggest donating that money to Toys for Tots for Christmas, since Tony’s going to go full tilt anyway, like he always does.”

Steve pulled up short. “That’s...actually a really nice idea, Buck.”
“What, the me letting you live part?”

“Aaaand there's the James Barnes I know and love.” Steve shook his head. “Okay, I think it's time to rinse, baby. Into the shower you get,” he said and swatted Bucky on the ass as he made to stand up.

“Excuse you!” Bucky smacked his wrist, but then thought better of it and grabbed on before walking backwards towards the shower.

“Uh, Buck?” Steve tried to pull his arm back, and Bucky laughed. “What are you doing?”

Bucky just kept slowly dragging him along, his eyes wide and innocent. “You said I had to get in the shower. You didn’t want to make sure I got all the color out?”

“I think you know how to wash your hair, Buck.”

“Nope!” Bucky snickered, and grabbed Steve with both hands. “I really really need your help, Stevie.”

“Buck!” Steve exclaimed, digging in his heels, laughter spilling from that beautiful mouth.

“I need your help, Steve!”

They were both outright laughing now, Steve trying to pull back as Bucky worked to drag him along. He tripped over the edge of the tub, but caught himself, even as Steve stumbled into him. He wrapped his arms around Steve’s waist, holding, him close.

“Shouldn’t we at least get naked first?” Steve murmured against his lips, his face so close, his eyes so blue.

“Now where would be the fun in that,” Bucky replied and leaned in to capture those lips even as he reached back to rain water down on them both.

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“Not that much hair.”

“This is how short you wear it.”

“Not that short.”

“Swear to God, every time...” Steve murmured so low Bucky almost missed it.

“You talkin’ shit, Stevie?” Bucky wanted to reach back and pinch him, but Steve was mid cut, and no way was Bucky going to risk some freaky sideways slip. He picked up his pack of cigarettes.

“Yeah, I’m talkin’ shit,” Steve snapped, though there was no real heat to it. “I swear, I love you, and I’ll always do what you need, so I don’t mind playing barber for you, but you know. Just once. Think maybe you could not bitch about it?”

Bucky thought about it just long enough to light up and take a long drag. “Well, I figure I could, but then how would you know it’s me and not some robot replacement?”

Steve snorted. “You rewatching Westword again?”

“Westworld doesn’t create replacements, Steve,” he pointed out, and tried not to sigh, deep and put upon. Steve was so ignorant of pop culture, it was just sad.
Steve paused and looked Bucky dead in the eye, eyebrow arched. “Then what do you call Bernard?”

Oh. Right. Shit.

“That’s different,” Bucky said, recovering as quickly as he could. “Bernard didn’t replace Arnold, he and everyone else thought they were separate people.”

“Yeah, you keep telling yourself that.” Steve laughed and went back to cutting Bucky’s hair. “And anyway, I would know.”

“Oh really? You sure about that, buddy? I could be a robot right now, trying to convince you I’m a robot, just trying to throw you off the scent.”

Next thing Bucky knew Steve was swooping down for a soft, but heartfelt kiss. When he pulled back, he ran a thumb along Bucky’s mouth. “No one has lips like yours, baby, and no way some machine would ever be able to duplicate how you take me apart with them. I’d know.”

Bucky’s lips parted on a breath, and he just stared at Steve as he stood back up. Bucky shook his head. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Just...” Bucky couldn’t even articulate what he felt inside, at that moment. Because this man. He ticked a quick glance at his phone, and tried not to smile at the string of texts between himself and Pepper from that morning. “You just...we’re just...joking around, being silly, and you always find this way to turn it into something...sappy?” He frowned; that wasn’t the right word. “No, not sappy. Heartfelt.” He nodded and looked back up. “Yeah, heartfelt.”

Steve had stopped, his hands hovering over Bucky’s hair, his eyes gone soft. He didn’t say anything right away, and Bucky could feel his cheeks warming. When a smile slowly began to spread across Steve’s face, Bucky had to duck his head.

Light fingers touched his jaw, and he turned to find Steve’s big blue eyes looking right at him again. “Because you make it really easy, baby,” Steve whispered and leaned in for a slow kiss that Bucky felt all the way to his toes.

Yeah...Steve definitely deserved what he and Pepper were working on.

Neither of them said anything, just shared one more kiss before Steve went back to finishing up Bucky’s hair. He watched Steve in the mirror – now the one in their bedroom. They’d started putting up the Christmas decorations earlier that day because they were admittedly huge nerds like that, and Bucky couldn’t help but notice how beautiful Steve looked, backlit by the twinkling lights of the glowing snowflakes. Bucky grabbed his phone off the dresser and snapped a quick pic of them because he really needed to capture this moment.

Steve looked so young, and so alive in the photo, and Bucky loved him so much. And even though it scared him, he knew that a lot of that...aliveness came from being out in the field – from doing good in this world. And it was time. But first, he wanted one last chance to spend some alone time with this man he loved so much. Just them – no one else around.

It was a good thing he knew people in high places who could help him plan last minute getaways like the one he’d hit Pepper up about earlier.

The only trick was going to get Steve there. Steve hated not being in the know on things – rankled hard every time he’d ever been kept in the dark about something big. And Bucky was so excited
about this trip he was planning, but it wriggled at him that Steve might be upset when Bucky plunked him into a plane going halfway around the world. Because as far back as the War – hell, even before – Steve had always been Mr. Tell Me Everything You Know Right Now.

But then...this was Bucky. Steve trusted him with his life, and that included everything that went along with that.

Still. Maybe Bucky could meet him halfway. And maybe have some fun with it, while he was at it.

Decision made, he quickly stuck his cigarette in his mouth so he could switch over to Instagram and loaded the picture he’d just taken of them, adding a caption that...okay, no, Steve wasn’t gonna like it. But hey, buddy, your ass is impossible to keep secrets from, so you’ll take what you can get and like it:

_Finally back to my normal self. It was about time! In other news, yes, we started to decorate the apartment for Christmas. And this year, Xmas will be awesome, believe me. Stevie has no idea of what I’m preparing. Be ready for some travelling and great photos of our vacation seaside!_

Steve’s phone vibrated softly and Bucky watched as he glanced quickly at the screen. “You post something?”

“Yeah, you know.” Bucky shrugged, perfectly nonchalant. He grabbed the cigarette and tamped it out. “Just us, right now.”

Steve snorted. “Yes, because me cutting your hair is just so riveting.”

“Hey, I’m riveted.”

“You’re also weird.”

“You still love me.” He waved a hand at Steve’s phone, nerves trickling up his arm to the now-short hairs at the back of his neck. “You gonna check it out?”

Steve just held up the scissors and gave him a _look_. “Bit busy here. Unless you want to cut your own hair.”

“Uh. No.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” Steve smiled and went back to Bucky’s hair. “Anyway, I’m almost done. You know I’ll look then.”

That was true. Steve was damn near always the first to like Bucky’s images. It was kind of cute, actually, how quickly he jumped at the chance to engage Bucky’s Instagram. Made Bucky smile every time.

Bucky’s phone buzzed in his hand, and he glanced down to see Pepper’s name flash across the screen.

_I thought you wanted to make this a surprise?? – P_

Bucky huffed and quickly typed back.

_I do. But SOMEBODY hates being kept in the dark on stuff. So figure at least this way, he knows SOMETHING is coming. Plus, this is funnier. B_

...how? – P
Simple. He can’t be mad that he doesn’t know anything, but it’s going to drive him crazy when I refuse to tell him anything else. Like a slow-burn meltdown, Super Soldier Edition. :D – B

I swear, I will never understand the two of you. smh – P

Bucky couldn’t help it, he burst into giggles. Because she wasn’t wrong. Steve and Bucky would fight and die for each other, but no one ever trolled the two of them as hard as they trolled each other.

“What are you laughing at?” Bucky glanced up to where Steve was removing the towel. He ruffled it through Bucky’s hair only to jump back with a low grunt. “Gross. There’s hair everywhere.”

“And whose fault is that?” Bucky pointed out, only to have Steve shoot him a dirty look.

“Don’t even with that one, Barnes.”

Bucky just shrugged and smiled. “I just mean, we could have done this in the bathroom, as well, you know.”

“Light’s better in here.”

“Again I beg the question.”

“Anyway.” Steve hit him light with the towel, and Bucky ducked away with a laugh. “What were you laughing at?”

“Oh, nothing,” Bucky said, and smiled. “It would seem our friends think we’re both weird.”

“Well, to be fair, they aren’t wrong.”

Bucky’s smile grew as he turned in on himself. “No, they most certainly are not.” He jumped up to go grab the broom and dustpan out of the kitchen. Because it had never occurred to either of them they should maybe have it on hand for this.

He was halfway back when Steve came barreling out of the room, phone in hand, and Bucky twitched, but refused to take a step back.

“Excuse me?” Steve asked and unnecessarily shoved his phone on Bucky’s face. “What do I have no idea about what now?”

He was glaring at Bucky, looking somewhere between disgruntled, accusatory, and hopelessly curious. Bucky had to bite his lip hard to keep from smiling.

He blinked and let his eyes go wide and innocent. “What are you talking about, Steven?”

“Don’t play dumb, Barnes. It’s not that cute on you.”

“Excuse you, I’m always cute.”

Steve turned to stare at his phone before turning it back again for Bucky to see, still completely unnecessary. “‘Stevie has no idea of what I’m preparing. Be ready for some travelling and great photos of our vacation seaside!’” Steve recited back perfectly.

Bucky just stared at him and nodded at the phone. “Seriously, how the fuck do you do that? You’ve only seen the image, like what, twice?”

“Eidetic memory, you know that. Don’t change the subject.”
Oh, this really was gonna be fun.

He smiled, slow, and turned to set the broom and dustpan against the couch. Then he slid past Steve’s outstretched arm to wrap Steve up around the waist, watched as he warred with himself about whether he should push Bucky away or not. When ‘or not’ became the clearer option, Bucky leaned in to peck a quick kiss to his lips. “Sorry, baby, but that’s all you get to know right now.”

“Wait seriously?” Steve grunted and frowned at him. “You tell the whole world, but you won’t even tell me?”

Bucky snorted. “The whole world knows exactly as much as you do, Stevie.”

“Okay, but why even post this much, if you aren’t gonna tell me anything?” Bucky just arched an eyebrow. “Yeah, okay, that’s fair. But you know I’ll get it out of you, at some point.”

“At some point,” Bucky conceded. Like when they got there.

“You know...” And it was like Bucky could see the gears shifting in Steve’s head. Sure enough, he licked a slow stripe along Bucky’s bottom lip, then gave him his best hooded, half-smile. “I could just fuck this out of you instead.”

Yeah, that wasn’t gonna happen. Bucky’d wizened up to that particular trick.

“Bedazzled spandex, Steven,” he just answered simply.

“You said that was just for the bet.”

“Wanna see if I won’t use it for this, too? Try and test me.”

“You’re on, Barnes.”

Oh, yeah. This was definitely gonna be fun.
Chapter Summary

Last year’s Holiday Season was shitty as hell but this year, we deserve a great vacation. Well Stevie, mostly. I told Fury that we would be unreachable during one month. Yup, ONE WHOLE F**KING MONTH. Suck it, Boss. “Bae and I” (as young people say) we’re flying to New Zealand. So, the suits stay home. The shield stays home. The Kalash stays home. The Glock stays home (hmmm, no...this one comes with, I can’t leave my baby). And you know what the funniest thing is? Steve has no idea where we are going! SURPRISE! (PS: Yes, Steve changed the decoration of the room again...IDEC anymore.)

Chapter Notes

THE LIFE OF BUCKY BARNES STORIES CELEBRATES 100 IMAGES POSTED!
Thank you to everyone who’s been along for the ride. I'm so pleased for all the places we’ve been, and so excited for everything that's coming up. But I wanted to take this moment to let every one of my reads know how much I appreciate them. This has been one of the defining projects of my life, and I will forever be grateful for you guys for coming along on this journey. More (and more and more and more) to come! LOVE YOU ALL!!

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Last year’s Holiday Season was shitty as hell but this year, we deserve a great vacation. Well Stevie, mostly. I told Fury that we would be unreachable during one month. Yup, ONE WHOLE F**KING MONTH. Suck it, Boss. “Bae and I” (as young people say) we’re flying to New Zealand. So, the suits stay home. The shield stays home. The Kalash stays home. The Glock stays home (hmmm, no...this one comes with, I can’t leave my baby). And you know what the funniest thing is? Steve has no idea where we are going! SURPRISE! (PS: Yes, Steve changed the decoration of the room again... IDEC anymore.)

Bucky hit send, then stood there in the middle of their room, and stared at his phone, murmured quietly to himself, “Five, four, three, two...”

Ooh, Rump-o'-smooth-skin, you say you wanna get in my Benz?

Bucky cackle-laughed as Steve’s face flashed across the screen, his personal ringtone blaring out of the tinny speakers. He could practically feel the irritation emanating out of the phone as SirMixaLot sang about average groupies. After plastering on his most innocent smile, Bucky hit answer.

“Yes, oh love of mine?” he asked, his voice honey sweet. “What can I do for you?”

“Seriously, Buck?” And, oh yeah. Dripping with irritation.

“You’re gonna have to be more specific, Stevie.” Like the fact that Bucky was just that kind of asshole who loved to fuck with the people he loved. “Hey, aren’t you supposed to be giving your speech at the UN right now?”

“The speech isn’t for fifteen minutes, you know that,” Steve said, and that was true. Bucky even had C-Span on out front so he could watch it. For reasons. Reasons that didn’t include Steve giving a speech. “Don’t change the subject.”

“How can I change the subject when there was no subject to begin with?”

“So apparently we’re going to New Zealand?” Steve went on, apparently ignoring Bucky’s very real and very important question. “And you again decided to tell the whole world before you told me.”

Bucky snorted and shoved the suitcase aside so he could flop down on the bed. “What part of I’m not telling you anything did you not get?”

“The part where I don’t give a shit and I want to know where we’re going.”

“Too fucking bad.”

“Why are you an asshole? And when did you stop loving me?”
Bucky ticked off his fingers as he answered. “Because it’s easier than having to be nice all the time – no one expects it of you – and March of ’45.”

“That’s cold, Buck,” Steve muttered, deadpan.

“That’s what she said.” Bucky snickered, and tucked his arm under his head. “But actually, stop being so arrogant and thinking my great fall was when I stopped loving you. No, it was before that, on my birthday. The sex was just...it was really lackluster, Steve, and yeah. Haven’t loved you since.”

“My god, that explains so much.” Steve chuckled softly, his voice coming down the line the best sort of music to Bucky’s ears. He was so excited about this trip, and sure trolling Steve was good times all around, but planning it – setting up such a massive thing without Steve knowing anything other than what Bucky chose to share – was the best part about it. He had to admit, he was pretty damn proud of himself.

A whole month, secluded at a tiny beach somewhere in New Zealand (he was leaving all those details to Pepper). He’d told Coulson and Fury they’d be gone for a month to hopefully work through the last of their shit because both of them wanted to get back in the field. And despite the couple times there’d been no choice but to pull them in, they actually weren’t cleared for active duty until signed off on by their respective therapists.

And Bucky was okay with that. All the Avengers had their backs – were all sticking close to home during the holidays, on call whenever and wherever needed. Hell, even Thor was staying on Earth for this. But then, they didn’t have Christmas on Asgard, so it wasn’t like he was missing anything back on his planet.

They needed this, he and Stevie. Ever since their mission to Mexico, they’d both started to really dig deep with their therapy. They were both tired of feeling useless and broken and scared, and frankly, it just wasn’t them. They didn’t turn their backs on a fight, not when they were too busy having each other’s. But this past year...this year broke them. For whatever reason, those two missions had been the ones to really fuck them both over. But if he and Steve were anything, they were stubborn motherfuckers who would always find a way back from whatever dark place they found themselves. Back to the world, back to each other. Always.

“So, question.”

Bucky snapped himself out of his head. He shifted slightly, his gaze following the crack that was still in the ceiling. “Hmm?”

“If we’re gone a month, how do you know what I would want to take with me? There could be all kinds of things I might need.”

Bucky pulled the phone away from his ear long enough to stare at it in disbelief. “Have you met me? Well, let me intro myself,” he said, all sarcasm and salt. “Hello, I’m James Barnes, the jack ass who knows Steve Rogers better than Steve Rogers knows Steve Rogers.”

“Okay, okay,” Steve chuckled. “Fair point. So you’re packing? Can I at least assume this trip is starting in the very nearish future?”

Bucky lightly shrugged. “That or I’m throwing you off the scent. Hey, where are you? You still at SHIELD or have you headed over?” The UN was a pretty short walk from Avengers Tower – barely five minutes away.
“Nah, I headed over. Standing in the Hall of Flags, at the moment, just waiting for Fury. He wanted to introduce me to the new head of the World Security Council, go over my talking points, so he could direct the conversation in the room.”

Bucky smiled to himself. He was going to have to send Fury a box of cigars for that one. It wasn’t like Steve would normally have to go over his points ahead of time, but Bucky and Fury had agreed that when Steve found out he didn’t get to address his issues with several new laws coming to pass, all to be whisked away for a vacation, he’d spend the whole trip pissed. Bucky just had no idea Fury would take it straight to the top.

“Well, good luck,” Bucky said, and finally pushed himself up to finish packing the last of their bags. Everything else was out in the front room where Pepper was on her laptop putting the final touches on the trip. “You’ve got great ideas, Steve, and people trust your voice. They’ll listen to you.”

“Hope so,” Steve breathed, and Bucky could hear the nerves in it. Steve was one for speeches, sure, but he still doubted himself from time to time. Bucky had no idea why. “Oh, hey, I see Fury. Gotta go, baby. Talk after?”

Bucky’s smile settled into a knowing smirk. “You can count on it.”

After they hung up, Bucky worked on closing up the last bag before running over the checklist he’d made on his phone. Everything seemed to be good go, so he grabbed the bag and their travel documents off the dresser and headed out to the living room.

“Why do you torture him like that?” Pepper asked without looking up from her computer. So, she’d seen the post too.

“Because he’d do the same thing to me, if the roles were reversed.”

“Doubt it.” She clicked away for another moment before closing the laptop with a satisfied smile. “That the last of it?”

“Yep.” Bucky nodded as he set the suitcase down with the rest. “And Steve’s all set. Still has no idea he’s about to be ‘kidnapped.’” He smiled as he made little air quotes at her.

“Good thing you have very stealthy friends.”

Bucky snorted. “Good thing we have friends in high enough places that they’re willing to stage this during the middle of an official UN meeting.”

Pepper laughed. “Good point.” She then picked up the controller and un-muted the TV just in time to hear Steve’s name being announced. “So. Ready to watch your man get rushed on live TV?”

Bucky huffed a laugh as he settled next to her on the couch. “Sugar, I was born ready.”
Steve on Tony’s plane (Miss Potts kindly offered to pay for the travel in form of a private jet because “you two deserve it. If Tony whines, I’ll take care of it”). He still doesn’t know where we are going. I practically “kidnapped” him after an official ceremony or whatever stuff he’s constantly invited to. Ha! Ha! Look at him, still in formal suit. And he seems so worried: he’s frantically texting Natasha to try to find out where I’m bringing him but I asked the pilot to activate the phone jammer. Nice try, Stevie!

Steve was supposed to be speaking at the UN about the work that needed to be done regarding global security, come the new year. Technically, he wasn’t exactly needed for the meeting, but truthfully, shit always got done a lot faster if Captain America directly backed it.

Bucky watched as the meeting was called to order and he gave Pepper a tiny smile. This was going to be so great. Steve was going to walk to the podium and almost immediately, Nat and Clint were going to ambush him and drag him out because of some ‘security threat’, except instead of dragging him to a quinjet, they were taking him to Tony’s plane and flying straight to Los Angeles, where
Bucky would be waiting for them to head to New Zealand.

It was a totally ridiculous plan, but he and Steve could use a bit of ridiculous right now.

“Any second now,” Bucky murmured, anticipation thrumming through him. He turned to Pepper. “You think Steve’ll freak out?”

“Well, I think you know him better than I do,” she pointed out, turning to face him. “Do you think he’ll freak out?”

Bucky shrugged. “Meh. It could go both ways. I think he’s gonna be pissed this was done on the pretense of a mission, but once I get him on our way, he’ll be fine.”

Pepper nodded slowly, then turned back to the TV. “And, hopefully by the time you guys get there, you’ll do what’s necessary to make him forget everything, including his own name.”

Bucky started coughing so hard he almost choked. His face was completely on fire. He turned wide eyes on her, but all she did was rub his back. “There, there, James. Don’t kill yourself before Steve even makes it to the podium.”

Well. That explained a lot – like why Pepper was with Tony. And all this time, Bucky had been trying to behave like a gentleman around her. He thought maybe he loved her just a little bit more right now.

Once Bucky got himself under control, he turned back to the TV, but there was still no sign of Steve. Victor Garcia, the new head of the World Security Council, was already speaking at the podium – but Steve was first on the agenda, and by now, Bucky figured they would have deferred to him.

He frowned, and ticked a glance at Pepper. “Shouldn’t they have moved to Steve at this point?”

Pepper shrugged, even as she checked the time on her own phone. “I mean, it only just started, most likely there’s some house cleaning to be done.”

Which made sense, except for the fact that this had all been planned out and Steve was supposed to walk out immediately. They were supposed to save all that stuff for later.

“Hey, can you turn it up a bit?” He nodded at the remote in front of her. “I wanna hear what’s going on.”

“...and as Captain America will not be able to join us today, I’ve taken the liberty of retrieving his notes and viewpoints on the subject...”

Bucky was already up and calling Fury. It took barely a ring for him to answer. “Fury here.”

Bucky jabbed at the speaker phone. “Wanna tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Okay, first of all, let me cut you off right there,” Fury said, just as Pepper’s head shot up, her eyes wide in horror. “You start making demands on me, I have you staking out little old ladies on twelve-hour shifts for the rest of you unnatural-born life. And second of all, just how stupid do you think I am?”

Bucky already had his mouth open at the old lady comment, but immediately snapped it shut. What the hell was Fury talking about? He glanced over at Pepper for some sort of an answer, but she looked just as lost.
“Um, not at all?” Seriously, what the hell was Fury talking about? “Yeah, totally lost, sir.”

“Well, let me use slow words, then: At what point did it not occur to you what would happen if we pulled Captain America out of a goddamn World Security Council meeting on live television?”

Oh. Huh.

Bucky slowly sat back down on the couch. “It, uh, may not have occurred to me at any point. Sir,” he answered, and he was pretty sure his own face was going to burst into flames for the second time in almost as many minutes. He just wasn’t sure if it was from embarrassment or the searing look he was certain was coming down the line.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought,” Fury admonished. “Steve was pulled right before the meeting started. I had your girl throw a blackout bag over his head and take him out the back way.”

“Oh. Well. That’s good. Did he put up a fight?”

“What do you think?”

Okay, yeah, stupid question. But, another question, why was Bucky only finding out about this now? If Fury thought this was a bad idea, why hadn’t he said something from the outset?

“Sir, can I ask you a question?”

“Well, now that you’re being so polite about it, sure.”

“Is there a reason you didn’t say something before?” Bucky asked, in a rush, because questioning Fury never had a middle ground between getting your answer or getting shot in the face. Metaphorically, of course. Sometimes. He cleared his throat and willed himself to sound like the badass, grown-ass adult that he was. “I mean, if you thought this was a bad idea, I’m surprised you didn’t say something to start?”

“You know, I’m glad you asked that.” Oh, that didn’t sound good. “Do you know what I pride myself in my agents?” When Bucky didn’t immediately answer, he added: “That wasn’t rhetorical.”

Trick question. Trick question. Trick question!

“I’m sure there are a whole list of items, sir, so I’m not sure which one you might be referring to.”

Smooth.

“Well, Sergeant, I think what I pride myself in most is that the agents in my employ have the strategic and tactical wherewithal to be able to see a plan at least fifteen steps out. Cap’s famous for being able to see a scenario almost to its conclusion. Am I right?”

“That’s true, sir, yes…”

“So imagine my surprise when I let what I thought was one of my top agents come to me with this absolutely idiotic idea, and at no point did he ever think, huh. Maybe there are parts of this that aren’t exactly workable.”

Shit.

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”
“You know, I like to think I’m smarter than this, sir.” And honestly, Bucky could kick himself for not thinking things through – it was his job to anticipate situations like these. How had that thought never occurred to him?

Steve was never going to let him live this one down.

“You know what, so do I.” Fury sounded more disappointed in Bucky than Bucky himself, which, after years and decades and centuries of self-flagellation, was actually kind of impressive. Bucky would’ve asked for pointers if he wasn’t so worried about his own demise.

“Please don’t fire me,” he absolutely did not beg.

“It’s kind of hard to fire a man who’s already benched himself,” Fury responded, then sighed. “That said, I damn well expect you and Cap to use this time to get your act together. I can’t have you back out there full-time if I think shit might go sideways.”

Bucky knew a lifeline when he saw it. “And I can assure that is literally the last thing me or Steve want. Hell, that’s kind of been the point of all this.”

“Yeah, well, I’m starting to get concerned you both have been out too long. So, get it together. I want you two back in the field after this trip, full time, or I’m sending you back to basic. Under Wilson.”

“Oh, now see, that’s just cruel.”

Fury just laughed and hung up.

“What's so bad about Sam?”

It took a moment for Bucky to register Pepper's voice. He blinked up at her. “Huh?”

“Sam?” She waved at the phone. “Why would being trained by Sam be such a bad thing. Oh, where to begin... “Well, think of it this way,” he started and sat down again. “Imagine after all the years of their particular brand of friendship, Stark suddenly found himself a grunt man under Rhodey.”

Pepper’s eyes went saucer-like. “Oh.”

Bucky nodded pointedly. “Exactly.”

“That’s...not a pretty picture.”

“Not exactly, no.” Sam would cheerfully own their asses. Bucky shuddered at the thought.

“So I guess now we just wait to hear from Natasha,” Pepper said and immediately started firing away on her phone again, all business. “She scrambled the signal on Steve’s phone so he couldn’t contact you, but I don’t know if that involved scrambling hers too –”

“Nah.” Bucky shook his head. “A full blackout would have screwed with the plane’s nav. It’s just his.” At that exact moment, Bucky’s phone pinged with a text from Nat. “And speak of the devil.”

He opened his phone to a picture of Steve, lounging in one of the chairs, a glass of champagne in his hand (and knowing Stark, it was a very expensive glass of champagne).

So I’m thinking alcohol is key to Steve’s stubbornness. The guy was swearing up a blue streak till I
shoved that glass at him. Then suddenly it was all, oh okay, happy as a clam. – N

Bucky snorted, because she wasn’t that far off the mark. But it was more about drinking Stark’s expensive shit than just the drinking.

Well you’re not wrong. As long as you're hitting Tony's pocket, Steve would probably be game for just about anything. – B

I’ll keep that in mind. – N

Bucky smiles and turned the picture to Pepper. “Steve’s enjoying the high life.”

“Well, if that’s the from the bottle of Armand de Brignac, he certainly is,” Pepper commented.

“How much a bottle like that go for?”

“About sixteen grand. Try not to choke,” she added, as Bucky promptly did just that.

“Nat gave it to him,” he croaked, once he could form words again.

“Then that’s absolutely what he’s drinking,” she said, with a huffed laugh. “All right then, let’s get you to the quinjet and get you to L.A.” Then she set her phone down and turned to him, a soft smile on her face and a gentle hand on his arm. “Ready to finally get away from all of this?”

Bucky sighed, happy and relieved, a weight he couldn’t name slowly sliding off his shoulders. “More than.”

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Steve on Tony’s plane (Miss Potts kindly offered to pay for the travel in form of a private jet because “you two deserve it. If Tony whines, I’ll take care of it”. ). He still doesn’t know where we are going. I practically “kidnapped” him after an official ceremony or whatever stuff he’s constantly invited to. Ha! Ha! Look at him, still in formal suit. And he seems so worried: he’s frantically texting Natasha to try to find out where I’m bringing him but I asked the pilot to activate the phone jammer. Nice try, Stevie!
And here we are. In New Zealand, on a beach in the middle of nowhere. We’re planning to come back another time to visit the place properly, the mountains, the museums, the local culture and all, but this time it’s just Steve and I, cut from the world in an old caravan. Yes, it’s hipsterish as hell (blame it on Miss Potts who helped me organize all this and spent 120 hours on Pinterest or whatever the f**k that s**t is called) but Steve’s gonna like it, I’m sure. And let’s face it, even if I love action and being on the field, a break will be more than welcomed.

“Yes, Buck, I know this is not according to plan. But come on, we can’t stay in that camper 24/7. What? Ha! Ha! Yes, yes, I enjoyed what we did this morning, and the night before…and…the night before that. Don’t derail the conversation. Alright! So, we’ll have a morning run, then I’ll shave this caveman beard, and then we’ll go to
that museum I spotted on our way here, you know the Maori Heritage one? It seems absolutely fantastic. No, stop finding excuses for not going there. We won’t be late, our plane for the Cook Islands is not until tonight!”

And here we are. In New Zealand, on a beach in the middle of nowhere. We’re planning to come back another time to visit the place properly, the mountains, the museums, the local culture and all, but this time it’s just Steve and I, cut from the world in an old caravan. Yes, it’s hipsterish as hell (blame it on Miss Potts who helped me organize all this and spent 120 hours on Pinterest or whatever the f**k that s*** is called) but Steve’s gonna like it, I’m sure. And let’s face it, even if I love action and being on the field, a break will be more than welcomed.

Bucky hit send, then tossed his phone aside as soft lips mouthed across his neck and shoulder. He tucked back further into Steve’s arms and undulated his hips to get the two fingers Steve had buried in him that much deeper.

“Oh, you’re done now?” Steve huffed playfully, as he twisted his fingers just so.

Bucky didn’t bother to bite back his moan. “It’s not...my fault someone decided – shit – that it was time for sex mid-posting.”

“What can I say.” Steve rolled them so Bucky was on his stomach, and Bucky had just enough time to shove a pillow under his hips before Steve was pushing into him, insistent and perfect. When he’d bottomed out, he brushed his lips against Bucky’s ear. “I have no self-control where you’re concerned.”

“You damn well better not.” Bucky pushed back, driving Steve in deeper, and they both groaned. “Now, move.”

“Oh, sir, yessir,” Steve laughed, but did as he was told. He slowly started moving, honeyed and unhurried, filling Bucky up and melting away every thought in Bucky’s head as their sweat-slick bodies moved together in the warm, New Zealand heat. It was ‘summer’ in the southern hemisphere, and Bucky was in heaven. Anything to get away from the cold of New York. Being here was Steve was just the best kind of bonus.

They’d been at their little hideaway for a week and a half now, and hadn’t done much more than what they were doing right now. Sure, they’d done their fair share of exploring the area, playing down by the beach, and just generally enjoying each other’s company. But sex had turned into their #1 Agenda. It was how they’d started and ended every day, and usually at some point in between and fuck, how had they not spent the last several months they’d been on leave doing exactly this?

“Stevie,” Bucky whispered, looking for some kind of friction. Heat was already coiling low in his belly, and he wasn’t looking to get desperate. That had been last night.

“I know, baby, I got you.” Steve tilted them to the side just enough to take Bucky in hand, still fucking him slowly. He matched each move with every thrust into Bucky’s body. Their little pocket of space in the back of the trailer was filled with the musk of sex and lust and Steve, and that was all Bucky needed to tip over the edge, his orgasm barely a sigh. He pushed back against Steve’s cock, and it wasn’t much longer before Steve was following him, his own name groaned into the air around them.
They laid there, tangled together in the sheets, neither in any hurry to get up, despite the mess around
them. Steve pulled him close, and Bucky was all too willing to snuggle back into Steve's arms.

“I’m content, Stevie,” Bucky murmured into the silence, putting words to what he’d been feeling for
the last few days. “I can’t remember the last time I actually felt content like this, but I think that’s the
word for it.”

Steve kissed just behind his ear. “Well, I know I haven’t felt any sort of real contentment since last
Christmas, not really. But I get what you’re saying.”

Bucky steeled himself before saying what was also his mind – what had been on his mind since Fury
had ripped into him the day they’d left. “But...I think I miss being in the field.” When Steve tightened
his hold a fraction, Bucky turned in his arms, took Steve's face in his hands. “I’m so happy right
now, and yeah, I think content is the right word for how I feel. But, I don’t know...” How did he put
this into words? “I just don’t think all of this is us. And Fury was right, we’ve been out too long.” He
huffed a derisive laugh. “Honestly, I’m starting to worry more that we’ve been out so long, that that
is what’s going to get us hurt next time. I’m worried we’re losing our edge.”

Steve watched him, his face unreadable. He then pulled Bucky on top of him and wrapped his arms
around Bucky’s waist. “You know, I think what worries me most is that we’re forgetting how to run
a mission without being hyper-focused on each other. That we actually don’t trust each other
anymore, does that make sense?”

Bucky nodded. “You’re worried that we can’t trust that we’ll come back to each other.”

“Because we almost didn’t.” Steve pointed out. “Both of us almost didn’t come back this year.”

“But we did, in the end.” That had to count for something, right?

“Yeah, we did, you’re right.” Steve kissed him, but he didn’t look satisfied. It was fine, they had a
few more weeks here. Then Steve’s gaze turned curious and he gave a slight nod of his head. “So
what were you posting about?”

Bucky glanced back quickly at his phone in the tiny nightstand. “Oh, nothing really. Just a few
pictures from here. People were bitching on my last pic that I hadn’t posted in a while, and I guess
the world was just as curious about where we were going as you were.”

Steve reached over him to grab Bucky’s phone and pulled up the picture. He smirked as he read over
the caption. “Do you have any idea how many typos are in this?” He gazed back up at Bucky, his
expression sly. “Any particular reason your typing was shit?”

“Hey, you try typing one-handed with several fingers buried in your ass.”

“I could do it.”

“No, you just wouldn’t hit send until it was perfect. I don’t care that much.”

“Clearly.” Steve gave him one last kiss before rolling out of bed and holding out his hand. “Time to
get up. We’ve got places to be.”

Bucky’s face scrunched up in distaste. Steve had decided last night they were going to leave their
little area today, and Bucky was so not on board with that. Especially since they were flying to a
different location tonight. “No, you have places to be. I’m being dragged along against my will.”

“We’ve been in this cabin for almost two weeks. We need fresh air.”
“Fresh air,” Bucky scoffed. “We’ve explored the area, played out in the water, we’ve gotten fresh air. Now I want stale air. Sex air.” He pouted. “Don’t make me go.”

Steve, the asshole, apparently wasn’t having it because he just shook his head. “Time to get up, Buck. You promised.”

“I did no such thing,” Bucky grumbled, but got up to follow Steve into the shower, because he had promised, because Bucky Barnes was a weak weak man who would always say yes to Steve Rogers.

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Bucky squeezed Steve’s hand and took a quick pic as he glanced back. They were taking a short walk to the water before getting started on Steve’s fucking laundry list of activities.

“Uh, what was that for?”

“Candids,” Bucky explained as he loaded it up onto Instagram. “Plus, the world needs to see what you look like with a beard.”

“The world has seen what I look like with a beard.”

“Not a sex-scruff beard.”

“Not a...” Steve snorted and kept walking out onto the sand. “Okay, weirdo.”

Bucky typed up his message one-handed, making sure to give Steve proper shit for ruining his absolutely stellar plans for the day. Their last day here, at least for the next week. They were off to a resort that night, a little something extra he’d planned, because he knew they actually would go stir-crazy in that camper for a month:

“Yes, Buck, I know this is not according to plan. But come on, we can’t stay in that camper 24/7. What? Ha! Ha! Yes, yes, I enjoyed what we did this morning, and the night before…and…the night before that. Don’t derail the conversation. Alright! So, we’ll have a morning run, then I’ll shave this caveman beard, and then we’ll go to that museum I spotted on our way here, you know the Maori Heritage one? It seems absolutely fantastic. No, stop finding excuses for not going there. We won’t be late, our plane for the Cook Islands is not until tonight!”

He hit send just as they reached the water’s edge, the light waves tickling his toes. Steve draped an arm over his shoulders just as Bucky snaked his own around Steve’s waist, the both of them enjoying the peace they sorely needed.

“Thanks for bringing me here, baby,” Steve said into the quiet morning. “You know, in case I haven’t said it enough.”

Steve had said it more than enough. Still didn’t stop Bucky from blushing with pride each time he did. “You’re welcome,” was all he said in return.

“You ready to keep going on this adventure?”

Bucky smiled. “As long as the adventure’s with you, I’m ready for anything.”
We left our old camper to spend a week at a fancy resort in Aitutaki, Cook Islands. Once again, an idea from Potts. What? I’m perfectly capable to organize events all by myself, like an exfiltration mission, a kidnapping or…a picnic in Central Park with a couple of hot dogs and beers but for an amazing vacation like this one, I was more than happy to receive the help of someone who is not only one of the most clever entrepreneurs around but also a trend setter and a fashion guru. And no Stark, I’m not talking about you, calm the f**k down.

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We’re enjoying our last hours at the Cook Islands. Our camera and its tripod almost fell into the water because of this freaking bird but this pic is so great that it was definitely worth it. We’re going back to our camper in New Zealand tonight. I can’t believe that Xmas is only two weeks away. Time flies when you’re having a great
When Steve had seen the glass floor in the middle of their bungalow at the Aitutaki Island Resort & Lagoon, he’d immediately sat down and spent an hour watching all the fish swim by. He’d been so fascinated, and so full of wonder, it had absolutely been worth Bucky putting his foot down about where they stayed here, if it meant letting Steve have this moment of innocence.

The overwater bungalow was actually the smallest of all the options, but when Pepper had tried to book the villa for them, Bucky’d reminded her that one, they were only staying for a few days; and two, he and Steve weren’t the ‘villa types’.

Shockingly, the resort itself was almost totally devoid of other guests, at least as far as the surrounding bungalows. The manager had tried to play it off that December was always a slow time, but Steve and Bucky weren’t trained in espionage for nothing. Pepper was going to get the biggest fruit basket ever.

“Do I even want to know how much this all was?” Steve asked, as they ambled through the small copse of palm trees behind their bungalow. “I mean, forget the trailer, this alone had to cost an insane amount—”

Bucky tried to shut him up with a kiss.

“— of money,” Steve finished anyway, an impish smile on his face. Bucky pinched his side, and Steve tried to swat it away, so Bucky reeled him back in for another kiss.

Once he was sure Steve was good and thoroughly done talking, Bucky pulled back and tried to glare sternly at him. “None of that is any of your business, buddy. This is my present to you – to us, really – so love it and let the rest go.”

“If you say so, Sergeant.”

“I do.” Bucky smiled as he leaned back in. Steve draped his arms over Bucky’s shoulders, so Bucky slid his hands up Steve’s back, skin was warmed by the sun, smooth and soft, and held on as the kiss drew itself out, long and languid and perfect.

“Thank you, my love,” Steve said, after a few minutes or years. He punctuated his words with a brush of lips across each of Bucky’s eyelids. “This is” (kiss) “one of the best gifts” (kiss) “you’ve ever gotten me.” He placed one last, gentle kiss on Bucky’s lips and smiled. “Outside of you, of course.”

Bucky frowned, confused. “Outside of me?”

Steve huffed a laugh. “Yes, you, you idiot. Every time you come back to me, it’s the best gift I could ever get.” He threaded his fingers into Bucky’s hair and held on, strong and safe. “Every time.”

One day, Bucky was going to figure out what he’d done to deserve this level of devotion and love.

Blushing, Bucky took Steve’s hand so they could keep walking. “You’re my gift, too, you know,” Bucky murmured shyly, after a few minutes. He didn’t dare glance Steve’s way, but the slight squeeze of his fingers was enough to tell him what Steve thought on the subject.
They came to a tiny opening, where the sun shone through just a little brighter, and stopped to take it all in. Everything was so beautiful: the lush green of the trees mixed with a shock of colors from wild, exotic flowers that Bucky couldn’t even begin to name. Birds flew here and there, hopping from tree to tree, their plumes as beautiful as the foliage around them.

Bucky watched, delighted, as one lazily swept down and landed right on Steve’s shoulder. “Stevie, look!”

“Wow,” Steve murmured, as he watched the little bird hop back and forth, chirping. Steve blinked up at Bucky. “Think you can get a picture of this?”

Hmph. Bucky was the master, of course he could. He slipped his phone out of his pocket and, as gently as possible, maneuvered them around so he could get a selfie of them with the bird. As Steve went to rest his arm on Bucky’s shoulder, the bird suddenly puffed up, and they froze, but all the little guy did was hop around until he was standing on Bucky’s metal hand, intertwined with Steve’s.

Bucky breathed out and slowly brought his phone up to snap a couple photos. This, right here, was why he was so happy to be on this trip. He and Steve loved living in New York – they were city boys through and through. But it also meant that things like this were just that much more precious. And more than anything, he loved giving this amazing world of color to the artist standing at his six.

Like it was just waiting for its photogenic moment, the bird flew off the moment Bucky was done. Steve hooked a chin over Bucky’s shoulder as he started thumbing through the photos. “I like that one,” he said, nodding at a shot of Bucky smiling, Steve looking away.

Bucky laughed and crinkled his nose. “Really? Only half my face is showing, and you aren’t even looking at the camera.”

“Yeah, I don’t know,” Steve said, and shrugged. “There’s something beautiful about it.”

He was blushing, the dork, and Bucky couldn’t help but lean back to peck him on the cheek. “Well, you’re the artist.”

He loaded it up on his Instagram, and was just about to write up about their little moment, when he stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Steve asked as Bucky froze over the keys. “You don’t have to put it up if you don’t want to.”

“No, that’s not it...I guess, I don’t know.” He frowned and glanced at Steve. “I know I’m supposed to be more serious in my posts, but this...I don’t know, this moment, right here? It feels personal.” He nodded at his phone. “I want the photo up, but do I have to get personal with the caption this time?”

Steve stared at him for a beat before he burst out laughing. “Oh my god, baby, no – wait, no, come back.” He reached out to take Bucky’s hand again, but what the fuck, Rogers? Why was he laughing?

Irritated, Bucky tried to shake him off and turn away, but Steve just held on, stupid super soldier. He pulled Bucky in and ducked down to meet his eyes. “I’m not laughing at you, I promise. I’m really sorry.” He leaned in to kiss Bucky, and Bucky barely let it happen. Barely. “I just think you’re cute, is all. And no, you don’t ever have to get personal if you aren’t feeling it.”

“Well, I’ve been trying to be better at that,” Bucky groused.

“I know, and you told me Doc was really proud of you, and so am I. Especially the way you got
personal and told the whole world where we were going on vacation before you told me,” he laughed, and Bucky couldn’t be irritated at that. It was pretty damn funny.

“You aren’t laughing at me, then.”

“I only laugh at you when you deserve it.”

“You’re an asshole, you know that?”

“Well, you haven’t told me that yet today, so I was starting to suspect maybe I was losing my title.”

“Oh, you mean like how you call me a dick on the daily?”

“Oh, no, you misheard.” Steve should his head, imperially. “I was talking about how much I love your dick, not that you are a dick.”

Bucky snorted and punched him in the arm. “Fucking liar.”

“Well, that wouldn't be very Captain America of me, now would it.” Steve then smiled, sheepish. “Sorry for laughing, I didn’t mean for it to come out like that. I really did just mean that you were being cute, and I love how cute you are.”

Bucky finally nudged him and gave him a half smile. “Yeah, all right.”

He turned back to his phone, and settled on a caption that he thought actually walked the balance a little bit:

We left our old camper to spend a week at a fancy resort in Aitutaki, Cook Islands. Once again, an idea from Potts. What? I’m perfectly capable to organize events all by myself, like an exfiltration mission, a kidnapping or...a picnic in Central Park with a couple of hot dogs and beers but for an amazing vacation like this one, I was more than happy to receive the help of someone who is not only one of the most clever entrepreneurs around but also a trend setter and a fashion guru. And no Stark, I’m not talking about you, calm the f**k down.

He finished up and shoved his phone back into his pocket before turning back to Steve. “Okay, where to next, Stevie?”

Steve smile turned heated and he captured Bucky’s lips in a hard kiss. Okay, yeah, Bucky could get on board with that.

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“Is Tony still bitching?”

“You know, one day he’s going to realize the world doesn’t actually revolve around him,” Bucky commented, as he thumbed through the pictures Steve had taken earlier, out at the beach. When he realized what he’d said, he glanced over to Steve, who was just staring back at him. “Yeah, I recognize how dumb that was,” he commented after a minute.

When Bucky had posted his photo the day before, Tony’d whined at him that, while Pepper was amazing and awesome and everything perfect, it was him who was famous and a legend. Bucky had taken it upon himself to forward that message to Pepper, and whatever had happened on their end had Tony threatening to make Bucky’s arm shoot him in the face the next time he came in for a tune-up. Bucky, in turn, had threatened to take all future tune-ups to T’Challa, and it was like Bucky had shot Dum-E in the face. For a guy who only liked Bucky every third Tuesday, he still got weirdly
possessive over Bucky’s arm. Or maybe that was it: it was the arm Stark liked, not Bucky. That actually made more sense.

He stopped on a photo of Steve falling off his shoulders into the water. They’d set up Steve’s camera and tripod on the sand by their bungalow because Steve had wanted to take a few pictures of them together with the ocean in the background. The staged photos of them had quickly dissolved into mayhem when Bucky had surreptitiously used the metal arm around Steve’s waist to pick him up and throw him into the water.

“Hey, Stevie, remember when you fell off my shoulders because you’re a loser who can’t keep his balance?” Bucky spun the laptop around to show Steve, his grin all teeth. “Remember that?”

“Oh, you mean, do I remember when you threw me off your shoulders?” Steve went back to drawing the fish under their bungalow. “Sure do.”

“See, I’m thinking we remember it differently.”

“And see, I’m thinking only one of us doesn’t have memory problems.”

Bucky gasped and clutched at his chest. “How dare you.”

“Oh, I dare.”

Bucky just grabbed a pillow from off the bed and chucked it at Steve’s head, reveling in the way his pencil skittered across the page when it smacked into him.

“WHY ARE YOU SUCH A DICK!”

“Aaaand there it is.” Bucky turned the laptop back around and went back to combing through the photos. He wanted one more post of their time here and their beach shenanigans had produced some pretty epic shots.

He came across one of Steve, still on his shoulders, the two of them horsing around, oblivious to the fucking seagull that was about to clip the camera with its wing. Yeah, this was the one, he was sure. It was funny, and it was them, and it encompassed pretty well what their trip had been like: silliness personified.

(Or, okay, their trip had also featured a lot of sex, but he wasn’t looking to get booted from Instagram for posting any of those photos. At least not today.)

“I’m going to post the bird picture,” Bucky announced as he airdropped the image to his phone.

“The what now?” Steve asked, not bothering to look up from his drawing. Bucky couldn’t help but notice that the pencil mark hadn’t been erased.

“The bird who almost knocked over the camera,” he clarified. “I’m putting it online.”

“That bird was a goddamn menace.”

“Pretty sure those were your exact words then, too.”

“True then; true now.”

Bucky loaded the image, but this time just gave perfunctory details about what they were up to. His followers had seemed less interested in how they got to where they were, and more interested in what they were up to. And it was unnerving, to say the least, that there were people out there –
people he couldn’t put a face or a fucking country to – demanding details about his private life.

We’re enjoying our last hours at the Cook Islands. Our camera and its tripod almost fell into the water because of this freaking bird but this pic is so great that it was definitely worth it. We’re going back to our camper in New Zealand tonight. I can’t believe that Xmas is only two weeks away. Time flies when you’re having a great time, I guess.

Wow. Two weeks until Christmas. Bucky had no real present to give Steve, but then, this trip had actually cost him a small fortune. One that would send Steve into fits if he knew how much, so Bucky figured it was probably best to no overdo it.

Bucky eventually slid off the bed so he could plaster himself against Steve’s back, arms tight around his waist. Steve surreptitiously tucked the drawing in where Bucky couldn’t see.

“Whatcha drawing there, Stevie?” he asked, actively curious now. “What’s got your attention this time?”

“Oh, not much,” Steve said, a little too evenly. “Just a drawing of the fish.”

“Yeah, not buying it.” Bucky made to grab the pad, only to have Steve quickly hold it out of reach. Bucky twisted his fingers into Steve’s side and scrambled over him to wrench the pad out of his hand. He quickly danced away to the other side of the room and turned the pad around.

Oh. Oh, Steve was such an asshole!

Instead of erasing the scratch mark, he’d drawn around it, and – “Oh my God, Steven, I AM NOT A GODDAMN MERMAID!”
Back from Aitutaki. Christmas is one week away and my boyfriend and I are taking silly pictures. I’m not sure we are gonna have enough Polaroid films for the rest of our vacation but never mind, we are having fun like a couple of 15 year olds on their first date and we are not ready to stop.

As I said: silly pictures. Here’s one of the Polaroids taken by Steve. Don’t worry about my dog tags by the way, they are on the nightstand. I don’t want to take the risk of losing them in the water when I go swimming.

“Swear to god, Steve, the next time I say I want to check my Tumblr, please throw my phone out a window, would you? Preferably a Tower window.”
“And have you murder me in my sleep?” Steve scoffed. “Not gonna happen, Barnes. Wait, look up.”

Bucky obliged, careful not to jostle the string of lights around his head, so Steve could take another photo on his Polaroid. Steve grabbed the picture as it slid out and tossed it with the others on the little kitchen table, only to wave at Bucky as he tried to go back to the horror show that was his Tumblr feed. “Set the phone down for a second, kay? Try and look serious.”

Bucky snickered, but again did what he was told. He adjusted the smoking jacket he had on – the only thing he had on – and folded his hands in his lap. “It’s kind of hard to look serious when you’re sitting there all naked-like. It’s very very distracting.”

“Oh yeah, you’re very distracted by me, I can tell. Explains why you haven’t looked up from your phone in the last ten minutes.” Steve snapped another photo. “So why am I throwing your phone –”

“Wait, now you don’t move.” Steve cocked an eyebrow, but Bucky just nodded at him. “Hold the camera up, I’m going full meta,” and Steve began to laugh even as Bucky took a picture of him holding his camera with the photo he’d just taken of Bucky sticking out of the end.

“Let me guess,” Steve said, as he finally grabbed the photo and set it aside, “Instagram?”

“Obviously,” Bucky huffed, only to have the string of lights slip down around his face.

Steve burst out laughing. “Oh my god, hold still.” He grabbed at the lights even as Bucky tried to bat at them, which only tangled them further around his head and neck. “Wow, you’re ridiculous, you know that?”

Bucky smiled wide, because Steve looked just as ridiculous, with a crown of berries looped around his own head. “At least I look festive, jackass.”

“Yeah, okay, Clark Griswold. You tell yourself – seriously, hold still.” He gripped Bucky’s metal wrist and pulled the strand from where it had somehow twisted around Bucky’s forearm. “You still didn’t answer my question: what’s Tumblr done now?”

“What hasn’t Tumblr done?” Bucky commented, as he waited for Steve to finally release him from the twinkle light death grip. Then he held up a finger with a, “Wait, hold that thought,” because he didn’t want to forget to post the photos to Instagram. He thought he would have posted a lot more from their trip, but Steve actually had been a bit of a...distraction, and he’d kept forgetting to post.

He leaned over the table to take a photo of the Polaroid of him, then opened his app, first loading the one he’d taken of Steve taking the picture of him, with the caption, Back from Aitutaki. Christmas is one week away and my boyfriend and I are taking silly pictures. I’m not sure we are gonna have enough Polaroid films for the rest of our vacation but never mind, we are having fun like a couple of 15 year olds on their first date and we are not ready to stop., before turning to the photo of himself.

He cropped out the edges of the Polaroid, added one of the filters that made it look faded around the edges, then posted that one too:

As I said: silly pictures. Here’s one of the Polaroids taken by Steve. Don’t worry about my dog tags by the way, they are on the nightstand. I don’t want to take the risk of losing them in the water when I go swimming.

“Uh, babe, what’s with the comment about the dog tags?” Steve asked, grabbing his phone to check out Bucky’s posts.

Bucky waved at the phone. “That’s where the whole Tumblr thing came from. There was some
argument going on in one of my last photos on Instagram about my tags not being on, and someone had referenced a post on Tumblr about why I should never take them off ever, yada yada yada, and I went to find the post to throw in my two cents because fuck you, my tags, my decision, and I kind of just” – he shrugged helplessly – “rabbit-holed.”

Steve stared at him. “Rabbit-holed.”

“It sucks you in, Stevie,” he hissed. “I mean, it was fun at the time to add my images there, but seriously, that place is an utter shitshow, and yet you can’t escape it. Forget the never-ending politics and the opinions people make about our lives, but then you’ve got the whole fandom side, which...”

He couldn’t even formulate it into words, so he just opened the app from where he’d left off and handed it over. The way Steve’s eyebrows rose higher and higher into his hairline was enough to tell Bucky that Steve was right there with him on the what-the-fuckery-is-this piece of art Bucky’d landed on.

“I, uh” – Steve cleared his throat, his face a deep crimson – “I thought Thor hated Pop Tarts.”

“He does,” Bucky answered, and grabbed his phone back to look at the artwork again. It was a fairly detailed, fairly graphic piece on Steve and Thor, the two laid out on a bed in the 69 position, Steve sucking Thor’s dick while Thor ate a trail of Pop Tarts leading down from Steve’s chest to one tucked right under his very hard dick. “Leave it to you, sweetheart, to fixate on the Pop Tarts, and not the, you know, dick sucking from one of our best friends.”

“Well, it’s kind of hard to take that part seriously when I know for a fact that neither of our dicks are actually that big.”

Bucky blinked and raised his head, patiently waiting as it slowly sank in Steve's brain what he’d just said. And, hand to God, Bucky would never have actually believed it was possible for someone’s face to go that quickly from red to puce. So, of course Bucky had to take a picture of him like that. Blackmail material for some later date.

“I...really just said that, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did, Stevie.” Bucky nodded solemnly, lips pressed together to keep from grinning. “Have you been thinking about the size of Thor’s dick, baby? Wanna share something with the group?”

Steve’s eyes were the size of his fucking shield, his mouth working itself over like a fish, and the only sound that came out was just about the tiniest fucking squeak, and oh good GOD.

Bucky tipped over against the arm of the chair, he was laughing so hard, and slipped down onto the floor with a light thump. “What was that?” he cried, gleeful.

Steve looked like he couldn’t decide between mortification and indignation, and it was too much. Bucky crawled over and pulled himself between the vee of Steve’s legs, ran his hands soothingly up Steve’s legs, and smiled up at him, wide. “Yeah, okay, Stevie, you’re gonna need to knock that off; nothing to be embarrassed about. Because, let’s be real here, there ain’t a single person on the team who hasn’t slipped a side-eye when our resident god has stripped down post-mission. Hell, I’d even call bullshit if Sam or Clint said they’d never looked, and they’re two of the straightest dudes I know.”

“Yeah, ask Clint sometime about a mission he took back in ‘14, outside of –”

“Marseille? Yeah, I know all about it. Guy still isn’t into dick.” He smiled up at Steve and cupped his face, pulling him in for a soft kiss. “I don’t care whose dick you check out, Steve, just as long as
“Always,” Steve murmured back, and fit their mouths together again. He licked along the seam of Bucky’s lips, and Bucky shivered and opened up for him. Steve wrapped strong arms around his waist, pulling him in, and Bucky took the opportunity to divest himself of the coat before wrapping his own arms around Steve’s shoulders. Bucky had no intentions of this going anywhere for now, but he didn’t want a single shred of fabric between them, wanted to feel Steve’s bare skin along every square inch of his own.

They made out like that for a while, trading between lazy kisses and hard and hungry ones, breath coming in short gasps only to dissolve into soft moans. Bucky gently laid Steve out along the couch and stretched over him, their legs tangling together. He mouthed along Steve’s jaw before finding his way back to Steve’s lips, Steve’s hands trailing along his back, holding him close, and this was just about perfect. It was more than perfect.

This was what they’d been missing, the perfection and contentment of the here and now. Sure, they’d had moments since The Incident, but true calm – the ability to just be – had been just out of their grasp. Too much niggling fear in the back of their minds – a fear he only now realized he hadn’t felt in a while. A short while, but still awhile.

“Hey, Stevie?”

“Hmm?” Steve smiled up at him, eyes glassy and serene. “What is it, baby?”

Bucky pillowed himself on Steve’s chest, giving himself a moment, because he needed to make sure he got his words right. “I think...I think I may be ready, after this trip. Ready to go back into the field,” he clarified.

“Are you sure?” Steve’s shifted to sit up a little, careful not to jostle Bucky because he was good like that. “Is it really what you want?”

“Well, I mean.” Bucky shrugged. “I’m only ready if you are, but yeah. After we get back, as soon as you give the go ahead, I’ll be ready.”

Steve petted a hand over his head, his hand coming to rest on Bucky’s nape, a small comfort. “Well, we’ve still got two weeks. First, we gotta get through Christmas and New Year’s. When are we due back again?”

“We fly back on the third.”

Steve hummed. “Plenty of time to let this sink in,” and that was most definitely not what Bucky wanted to hear. He finally pushed himself up to find uncertain eyes and a wary smile looking back at him.

“Hey...” He brushed his hand over Steve’s head this time, letting it rest against Steve’s cheek. “I did say when you were ready, too, you know. I go when you go, not a moment before.”

“Yeah, I know, I just...” Steve’s chest heaved with a deep sigh, his eyes drifting shut as he turned to nuzzle against Bucky’s hand. Bucky waited patiently, letting Steve work through his own thoughts. Eventually, his eyes blinked back open, and he smiled, small and a little sad. “I worry about you, is all.”

“I worry about you, too,” Bucky answered, truthfully. How could he ever not?

“We do need to get back, though. And I guess... The truth is, I am ready. I think I’ve been ready for
a little while. But it’s more the leap, ya know? Taking that final step and going, ‘Hey, we’re doing this. We’re going to put ourselves back on the line and we’re putting that first.’ It’s just, you think about this past year, and it’s been so long since either of us had really scared the other, I think I forgot just how scary that actually can be.”

Bucky nodded in understanding. “Makes sense. But I think...I don’t think we could be us if we weren’t both Bucky and Steve, as well as Captain America and the Winter Soldier.”

“Except you aren’t the Winter Soldier,” Steve growled, his eyes hard.

Bucky huffed a small laugh. “Yeah, you and I both know that isn’t true. The press, and even SHIELD, can call me Sergeant Barnes, or Agent Barnes, or whatever, but the scary scary bad guys we go after? The Winter Soldier is the thing that goes bump in the night for them, and I intend to keep it that way.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that,” Steve conceded, all traces of anger gone just as quickly as it had come.

“Damn right you can’t.”

Steve sighed, his smile a little easier around the eyes now, and tugged gently at Bucky’s arm, pulling him in for a kiss. “So. Christmas, New Year’s, then back into the field?”

“As long as we’re sure we’re both ready,” Bucky repeated.

“Well, at least we have the next two weeks, right?”

“At least we have that.”

At least they had that.
Wow, wow, wow, Stevie! NO WAIT!! No, we’re not leaving, no way! It’s CHRISTMAS! There, here’s some eggnog. Come on, I told you, the others have EVERY problem covered! ALL the Avengers promised to be 100% available during our leave, even Thor came back from Asgard. And how the hell do you even *know* that there’s a situation in London? We don’t have a TV or a radio, we turned off our phones and we’re just using the Wi-Fi to upload my Instagram pics so…HOW?

~~

HEY…WAIT A MINUTE!! You son of a b**ch! No need to hide, I CAN SEE YOU! Sam sent you, didn’t he? JFC, can’t we have a minute of peace?! Ok, you win, we are coming. It’s not as if I could spend a great vacation now that I know people’s lives are at stake. I’m not *that* heartless, mind you. Thank you, a**hole. THANK YOU VERY MUCH! But I’m not done with you.

~~

Before leaving, we took a last pic on the beach. Goodbye New Zealand and thanks for all the great times we spent here. (Photo: Scott, at his normal size, for once)

~~

SCOTT’S POV
Scott was a good person. Or at least, he liked to think he was. Sure, there was that whole incident of grand theft, but he had done it for *good* reasons – even if the authorities hadn’t seen it that way.

And sure, he’d *also* briefly been a war criminal and wanted fugitive, but that, too, had been for *good* reasons. You add in the fact that he was a *good* dad (when he wasn’t wanted) and an honest-to-god electrical engineer, with the master’s degree and the smarts, and yeah. Scott was a good person.

And yet. And *yet*. He’d somehow drawn the short straw, and after Strange doing *whatever* it was he did, him and Antony had been zapped halfway around the world, and were now standing just beyond the threshold of Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes’ private getaway spot. Because he had to bring them in. Because of aliens.

Damn aliens.

“*Lang*?”

“*JESUS!*” Scott shot about a mile into the air, his heart slamming to a halt, only to fire back up, *Free Bird* drum solo-style. He spun around to come face-to-face with said Captain Rogers. “Oh, heya, Cap.” He waved a little feebly. “How goes it?”

Cap just stared at him, and Scott could definitely get behind the weirdness of someone you barely knew just popping up out of the blue. Scott gave another single, awkward wave.

Cap finally blinked and shook his head. “Uh...what are you doing here?”

“Yeah, about that.” Scott was so fucked. “The thing is, there might be a situation happening in London, and as much as we would *love* to leave you guys here and deal with it ourselves, it’s kind of a possible aliens-are-gonna-take-over-the-world thing, and I know how much you and the Buckster –“

“Don’t call him that.”

“Right. So, I know how much you and Sergeant Barnes love those, and well, I was told to come get you.”

“Why you?” Cap had taken on that military stance he was so famous for, and it was more than just a little intimidating.

And this was the part that actually sucked the most. Scott sighed, deep and resigned. “Because I’m the only one who *isn’t* useful. They have these tentacles” – he flapped his hands in front of him – “that, when I was small, I kept getting pulled into the suckers. So, I tried going large, but that just had me wrapped up like the Kraken.” He pointed to himself. “So. Messenger.”

“Wait, wait.” Cap waved a hand, face pinched. “Are you saying the fight has already started? Why weren’t we called in beforehand?”

“Fair question!” And it was, kind of. “You know, it all happened so fast, even *we* barely had time to mobilize. We didn’t even take the quinjet there, Strange sent us in.”

“And yet you still had time to engage without informing us.”

“Well, you guys aren’t exactly easy to get hold of. It’s kind of why I’m standing here.”

“Yeah, fair enough.” He then nodded at the trailer. “I gotta go get Bucky, but uh.” He turned back to
Scott. “You might want to shrink down. Bucky’s going to wanna murder you, and in all honesty, I have no idea if it’s gonna be because you’re pulling us away from our vacation on Christmas Day, or because you waited so long to do it.”

“Uh. Right.” He wasted no time calling Antony off his shoulder, and as he shrunk down, landed right on Antony’s back as he flew in to catch him. They flitted in behind Cap, who just had the most purposeful walk Scott had ever seen, and how did someone even get like that? Was it the serum? Was he always like that? Scott just had so many questions.

Cap threw open the screen door on the trailer and Scott flew in after him. Barnes was standing next to a tiny stove in nothing but a raggedy tee and some sweats, spraying what looked like a can of whipped cream over something Scott couldn’t see.

“So, hey Stevie, I think I may have perfected it this time. It’s just the right mix of eggnog, coffee, cinnamon, and bourbon, you have got to try…” The words died, along with the smile that had been on his lips, as he turned, and how had Scott ended up on this detail???

Barnes frowned at the tense look on Cap’s face. “What’s wrong?”

Cap just stood there for a moment, not saying anything, only to give his head a small shake, and turned toward the back of the camper, where Scott could just make out a well-slept-in bed past some sort of half-wall. “We have to go, Buck. Apparently, it’s time to go,” was all Cap said, sounding resigned but determined. Like, maybe he was expecting Barnes to argue, which –

“Wait, what?” Barnes dropped the whipped cream and followed Steve to the tiny bedroom in the back. “What do you mean, we have to go? Go where? Why?”

Scott landed Antony on the kitchenette table, stepping behind the salt shaker, and wished that he could just fold up into existence. It hadn’t been so bad in the quantum realm, maybe he could go back there for the foreseeable future.

“Apparently ‘Avengers Assemble’.”

“WHAT?” Scott glanced around the shaker to find Barnes shaking his head, hard. “No. Nuh-uh. They promised. No one would disturb our vacation until we came back.” He stomped back to the counter, and Scott quickly ducked out of sight, his heart thundering in his chest. Barnes was going to kill him. “Even Thor stayed on Earth this month to make sure we wouldn’t be needed.”

“I know, Buck, but –”

“Look, Steve! I even managed to get your ma’s old recipe right, try it –”

“Wait, did you just take a picture of me?”

Scott dared to look again, and sure enough, Barnes was lowering his phone from where it looked like Cap was getting dressed, still holding out a very festive-looking Christmas mug, and nodding emphatically. “Of-fucking-course I did. Whatever this bullshit is, they promised. I’m sending this to Nat so she can see that we’re busy. Because if she’s going to call us in – wait.” Barnes’ back went ramrod straight. “How do you even know about this? You don’t have your phone on you, I know you don’t.” He set the mug down on a nightstand, only to yank its drawer out. He then tossed what Scott could only assume was Cap’s phone onto the bed. He pointed at it accusingly. “See? Phone. How the hell do you know we’ve been called in?”

Cap took a deep breath, eyes fixed off like he was looking for any reason other than the fact that there was a third party in their little love-haven, and, sadly, Scott knew a cue when he saw one. Even
if it was a march to his own death.

He hopped back up onto Antony, and he called up the small army of long-horned ants he’d seen under one of the windowsills as he’d flown in. They hadn’t earned the nickname crazy ants for nothing, and Scott wasn’t totally sure he wouldn’t need backup.

“As it turns out, Buck –” was all Cap got out before Scott flew between the two of them, and Cap’s mouth snapped shut as he followed the movement. Unfortunately, Barnes had caught sight of him, too.

“What the...” Barnes was pointing at him, slack-jawed, as Scott flew back passed them again, and it would have been funny, except for how a fire had started burning behind Barnes’ eyes. “Lang, what the fuck – WHAT THE FUCK!” Barnes shouted, stumbling away from the ants that had started marching up the bed. Huh. Okay, that was a hell of a lot more ants than Scott thought there’d be.

He circled around to land on Cap’s shoulder, then climbed off Antony so he could hide a little better. “Hey, there, Bucky, how’s life?” he asked, grateful his voice wasn’t shaking. He then tapped Cap on the shoulder and nodded at the ants. “You, uh, might want to watch out. They’re going to follow me wherever I go,” he said, even as the ants began climbing up Cap’s arm.

“Then maybe don’t hang out on my person?” Steve groused, and okay, fair point. Scott was just about to get back on Antony when a flash went off in his face, and he fell back, all the way down, and landed right on his ass. White hot pain shot down his entire spine.

“God, that hurts,” he groaned, but nothing was broken – never was – and he slowly rolled over and pushed himself onto all fours. Barnes was yelling at him about how it served him right or something, but he wasn’t listening. He gave himself a few full body shudders as he blinked the spots out of his eyes. When he looked up, Antony was in front of him, head cocked, and Scott gave him a lopy grin, because...he just really loved that dog-ant. Totally understood why Cassidy treated him like one.

_Cassidy._

Alien invasion. Right.

He finally flopped back over and stared up at Barnes who, yup, there it was. Murder stare.

“Sorry, Bucky, I really am,” he sighed. “But there are aliens descending over London, and not the fun ones.”

“Wait, there are fun ones – okay, pretend I didn’t just say that.”

Scott just nodded. “Yeah, and unfortunately, not only is the fun one busy helping out, but he had to call in all of his fun friends, and we’re kind of maxed out right now. We haven’t lost anyone, yet, and we’d like to keep it that way.”

Barnes quickly opened his mouth, only to shut it with a huff.

“We need to help, Buck,” Cap cut in, his voice gentle. He laid a now ant-free hand on Barnes’ arm. “We decided it was time, remember.”

“Yeah, but.” The pout on Barnes’ face reminded Scott so much of Cassidy, he had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. “You know, we’re supposed to have at least another week, Steve. Ten days, even. And then some time to re-up before we went out. I didn’t think coming to that decision last night meant we would be going into battle today.”
“I know, baby, but –”

“It’s Christmas, Steve.”

“So, what do you want to do, ask the alien invaders to hold off for another twelve hours?”

“Why not? It worked in 1914,” Barnes grumbled, only to wave Cap off when he opened his mouth to respond. “I know, okay. I’m not going to leave the team hanging, I just needed a moment to bitch.”

Cap’s eyes narrowed. “So, you’re really okay with going back in today?”

Barnes’ eyes softened (whoa, that was weird looking...), and he stepped closer, wrapped an arm around Cap’s waist. “You gonna be out there with me, Cap?”

“Ain’t nobody I trust more watching my six, Sarge,” Cap shot back and...now they were kissing. This wasn’t at all awkward.

“All right, then!” Scott announced, and jumped up. Cap and Barnes just slowly separated, both blinking at him like they’d forgotten he was there. Or just didn’t care that he was. “So, does this mean we can go? Strange is waiting for my signal to take us straight to London. Your gear’s already there.”

“Yeah, just let us change, and pack a couple things,” Cap said. “We’ll be ready in five.” He then gave Scott a pointed look, and Scott knew when he wasn’t wanted. He took Antony and made his way outside.

And wow, almost five minutes to the second, they both came out, dressed in jeans and clean t-shirts, a bag each slung over their shoulders. Cap blinked and looked around. “Uh, Lang? Maybe wanna come back to normal size?”

“Oh!” Scott slammed his thumb onto the particle actuator and instantly shot up to full height. He smiled and waved at them. “Hey, guys.”

Barnes gave him a short tilt of his chin. “What’s up, Lang?”

“Not much, just an alien invasion. You know, regular Tuesday.”

“I feel ya.” Barnes smirked, then nodded his head off to one side. “Hey, can you get one last picture of us down by the water? With the alien invasion and all, this place could be blown to smithereens by tomorrow.”

Scott had no idea if he was joking or not, and had no desire to ask. “Uh, yeah. Sure. No problem. Lead the way.”

He followed them the short walk to the beach, where they dropped their bags at the edge of the sand and Cap wandered off down by the water as Barnes turned to him, phone out. “Here. It’s all set. Just take a few pictures of us, then we’ll head out,” he said, only to stop and turn back, eyes narrowed like pin pricks. “Don’t touch anything else on there.”

“ Wouldn’t dream of it,” Scott answered, with an emphatic shake of his head.

He did exactly as instructed, took a bunch of pictures of them, some just standing there smiling at the camera, a few of them wrapped up tight together, and even a few of them kissing because Scott did not actually spend all his free time with an eight-year-old and knew how to be an adult about this.
Hope would be proud. Probably.

Once he’d returned Barnes’ phone (more like had it snatched from his hand, and geez, that guy could be the poster-boy for millennial phone obsession), he sent a message to Strange to call them back.

“It could be a couple minutes,” he informed them, as he grabbed onto Antony. “He said he could recall us easy enough, even if he was mid-fight, but it might take a few –”

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Wow, wow, wow, Stevie! NO WAIT!! No, we’re not leaving, no way! It’s CHRISTMAS! There, here’s some eggnog. Come on, I told you, the others have EVERY problem covered! ALL the Avengers promised to be 100% available during our leave, even Thor came back from Asgard. And how the hell do you even *know* that there’s a situation in London? We don’t have a TV or a radio, we turned off our phones and we’re just using the Wi-Fi to upload my Instagram pics so…HOW?

HEY…WAIT A MINUTE!! You son of a b**ch! No need to hide, I CAN SEE YOU! Sam sent you, didn’t he? JFC, can’t we have a minute of peace?! Ok, you win, we are coming. It’s not as if I could spend a great vacation now that I know people’s lives are at stake. I’m not *that* heartless, mind you. Thank you, a**hole. THANK YOU VERY MUCH! But I’m not done with you.

Before leaving, we took a last pic on the beach. Goodbye New Zealand and thanks for all the great times we spent here. (Photo: Scott, at his normal size, for once)
Chapter Summary

You know what Steve? New Zealand was great but this is AWESOME. Much more like *us*...if you know what I mean. Alright! Let's just show these sons of bitches who's boss so that we can be on time to all celebrate NYE tonight. We're in London. Fish & Chips? (Photo: Wanda)

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Stevie? Wake up. It's midnight. I know it's been a hell of a day but we're not gonna miss the occasion to kiss on New Year's Eve, alright? Happy New Year, love (and Happy New Year to all of you too. Yes, even you, Stark. You see? Miracles can happen on NYE. But tomorrow: back to normal!)

Chapter Notes

The shield came flying through the air and Bucky caught it as he spun into a crouch, just in time to keep from getting hit by the pulse of light that was some sort of weapon either attached to, or coming out of, or whatever from these weird octopus-looking alien bastards. Thor had broken down the
mechanics of their weaponry three days ago, but that was three days ago and didn’t much matter in the middle of all-out war. All that mattered was making sure you got them in the head. Cutting the arms off didn’t help, not especially when they grew back.

He was pretty sure there was a Hydra joke in there somewhere, but again, now wasn’t exactly the time for things like thinking.

Bucky drew his modified SIG and sprayed the motherfucker coming at him with a series of small repulsor blasts, screaming in triumph when he caught the thing right through the eye socket.

“Nice, babe!” Steve yelled as he ran past, grabbing his shield as he went, only to throw it in a high arc that scalped another one. He smiled back at Bucky and Bucky blew him an air kiss, even as he turned his gun on another one, heading right back into the melee, adrenaline and exhilaration coursing through him.

After Lang had come to get them, Steve and Bucky had barely touched down in London before the aliens had gone back to their ship that was orbiting Venus. A bunch of people had thought they were retreating, but Thor had shown up almost immediately after. He’d called them the Murvothyn species, and had told them that this was apparently their MO. Start a short fight, learn what they could about the other species form of warfare firsthand, then retreat until they’d modified their own tactics to take on whoever it was they were fighting. They’d stayed there, orbiting Venus, and outside Earth’s range, for almost a week only to come screeching in again about a day ago, different tactics, stronger weapons, and nearly impossible to kill unless you knew where to aim.

And the Avengers had been fucking ready for them, aim definitely not a problem.

It wasn’t until the fighting picked up again that Bucky realized how much he’d missed this – the fight, the battle. That feeling of knowing he was going to win this, because he hadn’t known that in so long. He and Steve had just exchanged a quick kiss and a ’see you on the other side’ and had run full tilt into what they’d always done best.

The warning light on his SIG went off, signaling that the energy reserve was low, and he barrel-rolled over the remains of some wall to get the cartridge changed. He’d barely had the new one in when a loud whistle ripped through the air, getting louder by the second, and he peaked over the wall – oh, okay, that was a ballistic missile about to take him out, just fucking great –

– and he was gone, tucked under Hulk’s arm, who’d also snatched the missile out of the air. He chucked it to the side, just past where Bucky had been hiding, and watched as a bunch of the Murvothyn went sky high.

And maybe it was the adrenaline of the fight, or maybe it was the way Hulk had just tossed a fucking ballistic missile like a damn football, or maybe it was watching the Murvothyn explode into the air, legs flailing cartoonishly – hell, it could also have been the way Bucky was being carried like some three-year-old’s favorite doll – but suddenly he was laughing, hard. It was a little hysterical and a lot giddy, and God, he had fucking missed this.

Hulk grunted, but kept running, jumping over tanks and launching off the sides of buildings, and Bucky patted his arm and smiled. “Thanks for the lift, big guy,” he said, only to get another grunt in return. Bucky craned to look up at his face, and yep, there was that etch of annoyance, and Bucky burst into giggles all over again. He patted Hulk’s arm one more time and settled in because this was just the best.

When Steve came into view a moment later, Bucky already knew what was coming and braced himself. “INCOMING!” he shouted, and Steve pivoted at the last second to catch him, not an ounce
of shock on his face to find a flying Bucky hurtling towards him. He quickly set Bucky on his feet, and Bucky turned back to give Hulk a cheeky salute. “Thanks for saving my ass back there, buddy.”

“This where you belong,” Hulk groused with a nod at Steve.

“Always,” Bucky agreed, because that was some truth right there.

“Stay,” Hulk grunted one more time, then ambled off, probably to pick more fights with weaponized projectiles.

“What was that about?” Steve laughed. Bucky just turned and threw his arms around Steve’s neck to kiss him, quick but thorough. When he pulled back, Steve was smiling at him, wide, eyes lit like the firefight around them. “Well, hi there.”

“Hi.” Bucky leaned in for another peck, then pulled away to check his gun. “And nothing much, Banner just saved me from getting taken out by a friendly.”

“Getting what?”

Bucky’s heart skipped a beat as he thought about what he’d just said, and he quickly looked back up, but all he was met with was exasperation, not fear. (Okay, maybe a tiny bit of fear.) He shrugged sheepishly. “I may or may not have accidentally put myself between a ballistic and an army of Murvothyn.”

“Pretty sure that’s not how this battle thing is supposed to go, Buck.”

“Hey, fuck off,” Bucky said and smacked Steve in the arm with his gun. “I’m rusty, okay?”

“Is it because you’re old? It’s because you’re old, isn’t it.”

“I will shoot you, Rogers.”

“Just make sure it’s not somewhere vital,” Steve requested, his grin all teeth, “we’ve still got a battle to win.”

“I make no promises,” Bucky shot back and grabbed the front of Steve’s uniform to haul him in for another kiss, this one downright filthy. “Now let’s get this shit handled, it’s New Year’s Eve and I wanna celebrate.”

The then turned as one – Steve, Bucky’s shield; Bucky, Steve’s weapon – and got to work.

~~~

“James!” Bucky smiled as he picked Wanda up in a bear hug, only to wince where her arms tightened around his neck. When he set her down, she took his face in her hands and smiled warmly back at him. “It’s good to see you. You seem happy,” she commented, even as her eyes raked over his multitude of injuries. “A little banged up, but happy,” and he knew she didn’t just mean by the smile on his face.

“I am,” he answered honestly, because he really was. He then poked her in the shoulder. “Wanna tell me why I haven’t seen you around all week? I got pulled from my vacation. On Christmas. Where was your lazy ass?”

She poked him right back, and he grunted at the pulse of energy she put into it. “I was working. Viz and I were at the Mullard Observatory, feeding the radio telescopes there so we could strengthen the
signal and see if we could get an idea of what the Murvothyn were planning.”

“Did it work?”

“You’re alive, aren’t you?”

He held up his hands in acquiescence before throwing an arm around her shoulder and guiding her over the bench in the back of the quinjet that Steve was currently occupying. They sat down and he turned so he could lean against Steve, who placed an absent kiss to the side of Bucky’s head, but didn’t bother to look up from his phone, didn’t acknowledge Wanda at all.

Bucky and Wanda just looked at each other, and Wanda leaned over into Steve’s line of sight, a bemused smile turning up the corners of her mouth. When he still didn’t look up, she glanced quickly at Bucky again and huffed a laugh before clearing her throat. “Something you would like to share with the rest of us, Steve?”

Bucky half turned to look at Steve just as he finally blinked up at them, surprise fluttering across his face. “Oh. Hey. Hi, guys.”

“Uh, Hi, Steve,” Bucky responded, mildly flabbergasted.

“How long have you guys been sitting there?”

Bucky cocked an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“We’ve been here for almost ten minutes, Steve,” Wanda answered with a completely straight face. “Did you really not know we were here?”

Steve’s eyes went a fraction wider, and he blinked owlishly between the two of them. “Seriously?”

“I think that was my question.”

“You guys have not been sitting here for ten minutes.”

They both stared Steve down, but Bucky couldn’t take the scared puppy eyes, and cracked. He snorted and bussed a kiss against Steve’s cheek. “No, you dork,” he caved, and Steve scowled. “We just sat down, but you were so engrossed in your phone, pretty sure we easily could have been before you noticed.”

“Sorry, okay?” Steve mumbled as he waved his phone. “But I was checking on the damage to city and the surrounding areas.”

Bucky sobered immediately. He then glanced over at Wanda and saw the same mollified look on her face. “And?” he asked, a little quieter.

Steve sighed. “It’s bad in some places – like really bad – but there doesn’t seem to be as much overall damage. I mean, from what I can tell, New York was hit worse during the Chitauri attack.”

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” Bucky slid his hand through Steve’s dirty hair, cupped the back of his head so he could press a kiss to his temple. “Less lives lost, right?”

“Well, see, that’s the thing,” Steve huffed, eyebrows furrowed. “Aside from their opening attack last week, there doesn’t seem to be any.”

“Wait,” Wanda cut in with a wave even as Bucky went to open his mouth. “Are you saying we didn’t lose anyone in the second wave? Not one person?”
“None that are being reported, no.”

“But there could be.”

“Well, yeah, there could be,” Steve answered with a shrug. “But as of right now, the casualty report and the missing persons report is at zero.” He looked up from his phone and smiled. “According to the most recent SHIELD report, our tactics, combined with how quickly we cleared out the populated areas while the Murvothyn regrouped, has so far meant zero deaths.”

Bucky sat back, dumbfounded. “Well, whaddya know. It’s a fucking Christmas miracle.”

Steve’s smile grew that much wider. “Right?”

They just stared at each other, happy and relieved and still riding a bit of the high of the attack, until Bucky couldn’t take it anymore and surged in to capture Steve’s lips. It was completely nuts, and Bucky had nowhere to put the feelings coursing through him other than right into Steve, and it seemed Steve felt the same way, considering how tightly he clutched Bucky.

It wasn’t until Wanda cleared her throat that they reluctantly pulled away from each other. “As much as I love how much you two love each other, there is only so much I actually want to see, if you don’t mind.”

“Sorry, Wanda,” they both replied in unison, and she giggled at them. Man, Bucky really loved his family.

“That reminds me,” she said and lightly smacked Bucky on the arm, even as she pulled out her phone. “I have something to show you.” She then turned the phone to Bucky and Steve.

It was a picture of him and Steve, mid-battle, the world blowing to kingdom come around them. Steve was crouched down, shield up, with Bucky standing over him, gun drawn. Bucky remembered that moment, it had been right after Hulk had dropped Bucky off and just before they’d jumped back into fray. Steve had been scoping out their point of ingress while Bucky’d covered his six, their standard move. It was a really great picture, but that wasn’t what got his attention: it was the fact that they both looked happy. Like where they were was where they belonged. In the fight, taking down the bad guys, saving the world.

The image washed over him, and he breathed out in a slow exhale. It felt like blinking, the way the world shifted between one moment and the next. The last year had been...Bucky didn’t know what to call it. It hadn’t exactly been a horror show – he’d seen true horror – but it had still rocked him, straight to the core. A year ago he’d almost died, and not even six months later, it had been Steve knocking on death’s door. It had ground their world to a screaming halt, and for the first real time in their very long lives, they’d seen fear. And it had made them afraid.

Maybe it was the fact that Steve had watched Bucky die once before. Or maybe it was how hard Bucky’d had to fight, tooth and nail, to find his way back to himself. Maybe it was because they’d finally learned, not just that they had something to lose, but that they had something they could lose. They’d seen what that loss looked like.


“I was just thinking the same thing.”

“You know, I honestly took that picture because I thought you both looked ridiculous,” Wanda interjected, and tilted her head. “But I guess...maybe not so ridiculous?” She had that look in her eyes, that scrutiny, that belied her question. She already knew the answer.
“Yeah, maybe not so ridiculous after all,” Bucky answered and gave her a tiny half smile. He waved her phone at her. “Can you send this to me? I...I wanna post it.”

“Yeah?” Steve asked, and despite the gash on his forehead and hand, the tears in his suit, and the way he looked about as bedraggled as you could get, there was still a new light in his eyes. Maybe they finally were back in the world.

“Yeah,” he answered with his own smile. His phone buzzed in his pocket and he took it out to load the image to his social channels.

>You know what Steve? New Zealand was great but this is AWESOME. Much more like *us*...if you know what I mean. Alright! Let’s just show these sons of bitches who’s boss so that we can be on time to all celebrate NYE tonight. We’re in London. Fish & Chips? (Photo: Wanda)

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Bucky glided his fingers slowly up and down Steve’s back, listening to the soft cadence of the quiet around him, the way Steve breathed even and deep against his neck. How the noise of the city drifted in like soft waves lapping gently against the shore. They’d both been exhausted when they’d finally gotten back to their apartment in Brooklyn, but where Steve had passed out almost immediately, sleep still hadn’t come for Bucky.

And that was fine, to be honest. He was enjoying the quiet, enjoying the way he could hold Steve close, safe and sound and home. Their trip had been truly amazing, but the last week had been pure insanity, and every bit of relaxation they’d gotten in New Zealand had been ripped away trying to ward off yet another alien attack.

Steve snuffled and shifted closer, his nose pressed against the crook of Bucky’s neck, and Bucky held him just a fraction tighter. He gently picked up Steve’s hand from where it lay across his chest and pressed a light kiss to the bandage there before setting it back down. He sighed, happy and content, and just really genuinely pleased with life around him.

“We did good, Stevie,” he whispered, a tiny smile tugging at him. The last year had been a hard battle for them, only to end in an actual battle, and here they were. Slightly worse for wear, sure, but safe, and in each other’s arms, and about to see the new year roll in.

“Whazzat?” Steve mumbled, voice rough, and Bucky cringed.

“Oh, Jesus, baby, I’m sorry,” he murmured, and placed an awkward kiss to Steve’s forehead. “I didn’t mean to wake you, go back to sleep.”

“’S okay,” Steve answered, then yawned as his he stretched, full bodied, along Bucky’s side. He lifted his head and blinked blearily at Bucky, sucked in a deep breath through his nose. “Time is it?”

Bucky grabbed his phone of the nightstand. “Uh, it’s almost midnight.”

“Why’re you up?”

“Um, maybe because I’m not an old man who has to be in bed by six – okay, okay, I’m kidding.” He laughed as Steve flicked his ear, only to grunt as the move pulled at some injury or another. Now that the adrenaline was gone, he was feeling that fight all over. Steve frowned, so Bucky gave him a small, reassuring smile. “I’m okay, don’t worry. And I’m up because...I honestly have no idea, my brain just doesn’t seem to be done with the day.”

“Anything you wanna talk about?”
“No, I’m okay. Really.” He cupped Steve’s face and pulled him in for a quick kiss. “Seriously, honey, go back to sleep.”

“You know I can’t sleep if you can’t,” Steve answered, but rested his head against Bucky’s shoulder anyway. He started tracing patterns along Bucky’s chest, careful to circle around any injuries there. “You sure you don’t wanna talk? Are you upset about the battle or anything?”

“No, I’m actually good there,” Bucky said, and it was the truth. Could feel it in his bones. “How about you? Where’s your head at?”

Steve sighed. “I’m okay too, I think. Whole flight home I was waiting for the panic attack to start – especially seeing you banged up like this. Every time I looked up at you, I expected to start freaking out, but I just...didn’t. Honestly, for the first time in a long time, seeing you wrecked and battle worn was actually turning me on,” he admitted, and Bucky could feel the smile against his skin.

“You too, huh?” he answered, a smile playing on his own lips.

Steve’s huff of laughter broke the quiet around them, and soon Bucky was joining him. He knew Steve was feeling the same relief he was. Relief that maybe things really were going to be okay. It was almost palpable around them.

“Hey, Buck?”

“Yeah?”

“Got a message from Fury on the way home tonight...”

“Yeah?” Bucky urged him on, even as his heart twinged a little.

“He...he has a solo mission he might want to send me on soon. He said it would be a quick infiltration and extraction – I shouldn’t be gone for more than 48 hours. He’s waiting for his operative to get some intel they’ve been after, and then he wants me to go in and get the operative out.”

Steve gone. Steve on a mission without Bucky by his side, watching his six. Steve someplace where Bucky couldn’t protect him. Steve out there on his own.

Bucky waited for his own panic attack to start.

“Where’s your head at now, baby?” Steve asked, quiet and reserved.

Bucky waited. Waited for the panic. Yes, there were all kinds of things that could go wrong racing through his head – all the ways Steve wouldn’t come back to him; it wasn’t any different than any mission they’d ever had before. He knew this part, he recognized it. They were both agents, and regardless of anything, there had never been a time when they hadn’t thought about the other’s mission from start to finish, and this was okay. He knew this part.

“Will you at least have time to fully heal before you go?”

“What? Oh, yeah. Yes. Fury said it would easily be a couple weeks, but his operative was close to what they needed, and he wanted someone on standby.”

Bucky nodded, let that knowledge work through him. They both knew this was a big deal, but Fury had told them, come the new year, they were both getting back in or getting out entirely. That was the deal. “You think Fury’s testing us?” he finally asked.
Steve snorted. “Oh, fuck yes, of course he is. Buck, I mean, come on, the new year hasn’t even –”

The sky suddenly exploded outside their window.

“– started.”

Steve sat up and stare wide-eyed at Bucky, his lips pursed in humored shock. Then another rocket of fireworks went off, turning the side of his face blue, and they both burst out laughing.

“Nice timing there, Stevie,” Bucky giggled and pulled Steve in for a kiss, this one deeper and full of love and wow, they’d made it. He pulled back and smiled. “Happy New Year, my love.”

“Happy New Year, baby,” Steve answered and leaned right back in for another kiss.

They made out for a few minutes, trading kisses but still mindful of their various injuries. It would take a few days for everything to totally heal, and Bucky couldn’t help but revel over the fact that they would. It was all that mattered to him.

When they broke apart this time, Steve went back to resting his head on Bucky’s chest, as Bucky fished his phone out of the sheets. He then held it out so he could snap a few selfies of them.

“Preserving the moment?” Steve asked.

“Always.”

“Are you gonna post it?”

Bucky snorted. “Always.”

He loaded one of the images – and holy shit, they were a fucking mess – and wrote up a short caption before showing it to Steve.

“We look like we’ve just gone a few rounds with a bunch of aliens,” Steve commented.

“That’s very observant of you, Steve,” Bucky answered, dry.

“Though, I think I’d call it less of ‘one hell of a day’, and more like one hell of a year, ya know?”

“You’re definitely not wrong about that, either.”

“Ready for the next one?”

“With you, baby? I was fucking born ready.”

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Stevie? Wake up. It’s midnight. I know it’s been a hell of a day but we’re not gonna miss the occasion to kiss on New Year’s Eve, alright? Happy New Year, love (and Happy New Year to all of you too. Yes, even you, Stark. You see? Miracles can happen on NYE. But tomorrow: back to normal!)
Chapter Summary

First post of the year. The perfect moment to thank you all for following me here on Instagram but also on Tumblr. As you can see, I have made some amazing progress in art (left). Shut up, it’s a thing of beauty. What? No, likeness and proportions are 100% fine. It’s MY STYLE, stop nitpicking. And I didn’t choose a good reference photo anyway. My portrait (right) was done by Stevie, obviously. The lil’ shit threw this together in about 20 minutes with cheap paintings bought at the supermarket. I don’t care, you can brag as much as you want Rogers, I’m still the little jazz genius of the duo. Last time you tried to play the piano, the neighbor came by and complained her beloved kitty was literally crying. At least, I don’t hurt anybody with my art. JUST SAYING. (Photo: Steve)

Cold weather – anything cold, really – was just about the most abysmal thing in existence. It made
bones ache and fingers go numb. It cut deep, like thousands of needles being stabbed into already sensitive skin. And for reasons that have always baffled Bucky, it also burned in equal measure.

Three days into the new year, heading right into the dead of winter, the temperature had taken a spectacular nosedive. Cold snaps were the absolute fucking worst, and – oh wait, that actually was better. It wasn’t needles stabbed into sensitive skin, it was like getting snapped over and over again with a wet towel. Just, you know, over your whole body.

Whatever. The temperature was subhuman, is what it was.

Fat little puffs of snowflakes danced around outside the bedroom window where Bucky sat. They still reminded him of falling ash, but as he peered down at the banks of the East River, he thought maybe it look quite as bad as he’d always thought. Where ash made the ground look as gray as death, the sticking snow looked clean. New. Like rebirth.

And maybe a little fluffy, like if he fell into it right now, it would burst around him in a cloud. He could almost hear the little poof! it would make.

He was certain Steve would want to go out in it later and do just that. The idea still made Bucky cringe, but these days, there was just something about the cold that bothered him just a little bit less. As much as he could still feel that same slither down his spine when his body froze over and his mind went blank, this wasn’t cryo. This wasn’t the loss of his agency – or even his life, really, for all the time that was lost when he was frozen. He could go outside with Steve later and feel the cold, and he would know that he wasn’t about to be put to sleep. They would play, and they would enjoy themselves, and they would still go home where there would be lit fireplaces and cozy blankets and tangled bodies as they lazed on the couch or in bed.

The point was, the cold outside wasn’t cryo. The cold outside was trivial and fleeting, and maybe, just maybe, it was high time he got over his aversion to it. Either that, or maybe it really was time to consider moving to California or Hawai’i. Who the hell stayed in New York if they hated the cold that much.

There was a soft rap of knuckles against wood, and Bucky tore his eyes away from the outside world to find Steve leaning against the doorframe. He was holding a couple of notebooks tucked against his chest, and his eyes were soft and fond, as was his smile. Everything about him breathed the same kind of quiet that was all around them.

“Is there a reason you’re knocking?” Bucky asked, as he huffed a laugh. “Last time I checked, you lived here, too, unless I missed something.”

Steve returned the laugh and pushed off the door to come into the room. “Nah, you just looked so peaceful, I wasn’t sure whether to disturb you or not. Shove over a little,” he added, knocking the notebooks against Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky obliged by scooting forward on the window seat so Steve could slide in behind him.

“You know, I actually was, despite” – he waved an absent hand at the falling snow – “you know.”

“Yeah, I was just thinking the same thing.” Steve tugged slightly at Bucky’s waist, fitting them closer together, and pressed a kiss to Bucky’s shoulder. “Actually, I was getting worried. You weren’t complaining. Thought maybe you’d suffocated to death in that weird blanket of yours. I had to come check on you.”

Bucky snorted, even as he used metal fingers to flick Steve across the knee. “Punk."
“That’s me, all right.”

“If you must know, I was sitting here thinking that maybe the cold doesn’t bother me as much as it used to.” He let his eyes wander back over the blizzard that had the city at a standstill. “I don’t know, after this past year, there’s a lot of things I’m starting to think are maybe a lot more trivial than I’ve allowed them to be.”

“Wow, really?” There was no mistaking the surprise in Steve’s voice, and just a slight tinge of hope. “So, maybe we can go play in it later?”

Aaaand there it was. Bucky laughed and shook his head. “Man, I knew you were gonna ask me that.”

“Buck, it’s snow. It’s fun.”

“Baby steps, Rogers.”

Steve just squeezed him tighter. “I’ll wear you down eventually.”

“I’d rather you be wearing me out,” he countered with a little wiggle, then ignored Steve’s groans by nodding at the notebooks that were propped on his legs. “Whatcha doin’ with those?”

“With what?”

Bucky picked up the notebooks. “Uh, these? You forgetting things in your old age again?”

“Excuse me, I was too busy cringing over your bad jokes to notice what you were looking at.”

“Fuck you, I’m hilarious.”

“You just keep right on telling yourself that, baby.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I will. But back to the question at hand.” He turned the well-used notebooks over his hand. They were both Moleskins, one black and the other a deep green. He didn’t recognize them, though that wasn’t surprising, considering the mind-boggling number of notebooks and sketchbooks littering their apartment. And that was just the apartment. There were boxes – stacks of them – at the warehouse, crammed full of Steve’s old notebooks. The curators at the Smithsonian would probably cry at the sight of them.

“Oh, um. I was drawing something for you.” Steve plucked them out of Bucky’s hand, but didn’t elaborate.

Bucky blinked in confusion and twisted to catch Steve’s eye. “And?”

“And...” Steve tapped the notebooks against his mouth, a tiny smile peeking out, and Bucky was really fucking lost. “When was the last time you looked over your Instagram followers?”

“Uh, I don’t know? Probably not since I did that,” he said, and flicked a wrist past Steve’s head to the wall, where the art from last summer, when they’d drawn up his follower count and took a picture of it, still lived. “Why?”

In answer, Steve handed over the black notebook, the smile finally breaking through. “You’ll know when you see it,” he said quietly.

Bucky frowned, but began flipping through the pages. Sure enough, he knew exactly which page Steve was talking about, and the air punched out of him in one awed gasp. “Holy shit.”
“Exactly what I thought.”

“This many people can’t be that interested in me.” He looked questioningly at Steve. “Can they?”

“See for yourself.”

Bucky dug his hand into his sweats, eager to get at his phone, because there was just no way. But when opened up Instagram, there it was, staring back at him in tiny black lettering:

Twenty-four thousand followers.

He quickly switched over to Tumblr for a second confirmation, and sure enough, there was the other thirty thousand Steve had drawn up.

“Holy shit,” he muttered again.

Steve chuckled and kissed the side of his head. “See? Told you.”

Bucky continued to stare at his phone, dumbfounded. “I’m not that interesting!”

“Almost fifty-five thousand people beg to differ.”

“Some of them could overlap,” Bucky answered, weakly.

“True, but you can count on at least a minimum 30k that aren’t.”

“This is insane.”

Steve wrapped an arm around his waist and tugged him back into the vee of his legs. He hooked his chin over Bucky’s shoulder. “You okay?”

“I...” Bucky wasn’t sure how to answer that. Was he okay? He prided himself on keeping his privacy as much as possible. He and Steve both routinely turned down interviews, and they were both fairly certain Tony had paid off the tabloids to keep all the Avengers off their pages as much as possible. Really, the only regular look into any of their lives were Bucky’s IG posts. And even those weren’t always that honest.

But still, this was a fuckton of people. Sure, maybe not as big as some of those weird-ass “influencers” who were always sending him DMs, but for him, it was a lot.

But then, wasn’t that the point? To share some part of himself with the world – share the parts he wanted to share? The parts he chose? It was why he’d started this to begin with.

He slowly nodded. “You know, I think I am,” he finally answered, then shrugged. “I mean, it’s not like I could stop them, not unless I want to go private, or shut the pages down. No, this is fine. No one sees what I don’t want them to –”

“Except that time last year I got Sam to post on your page –”

“Yeah, except that time.” Bucky took Steve’s hand to kiss his palm. “But you know as well as I do that I could take that down, if I wanted. So, you know, it’s still what I want to show.”

“Good point.”

Bucky tapped a finger against the page. “Did you make this for me to post? It’s what I did the last two times.”
He felt Steve nod behind him. “That was the plan, yeah. And, oh, this.” He grabbed the other notebook, opening it to a page before handing it over. “I made this, too.”

Aw, fuck, now Bucky really couldn’t breathe. Two pages, side-by-side, filled in completely, one all black with the words ‘Thank You’ scrawled in white across the middle of the page, the other...

“I will never get over how you see me,” Bucky murmured as he ran light fingers along the edges of the drawing Steve had done of him. “Not ever.”

“I see you as you are, baby, simple as that.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about all that.”

Steve placed gentle fingers along Bucky’s jaw, turning his head to face him. His eyes were so blue, and so full of love, it made Bucky’s heart ache. “You are the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen in my life, and that’s what I draw. Even if you can’t see it, at least know that there will never come a day when I don’t.”

The notebooks fell away, forgotten, as Bucky turned around fully to kneel in the too-small space on the too-small bench. And he didn’t care, not when his mind was singularly focused on taking Steve’s face in his hands and kissing him for all he was worth.

Steve surged up to meet him, his hands coming to rest possessively on the sides of Bucky’s neck. The kiss wasn’t gentle, but it wasn’t carnal, either. It was passion and love and an unstoppable train barreling towards the end of a line that Bucky knew, deep in his bones, would never actually come. Not even if the universe ended tomorrow.

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The red watercolor bled lightly into the page as Bucky put the finishing touches on his art project. When he finished, he smiled down in completion, because seriously, Steve’s drawing of Bucky could suck it against this masterpiece.

“All right, Rembrandt, show me what you got,” Steve said, as he came back into the room, a cup of tea in each hand.

Bucky lifted his chin hopefully. “Please say you made me Peppermint?”

“Like I would make you anything different.” Steve handed over one of the mugs with a soft chuckle. “You know, for a guy so obsessed with coffee your tastes in tea are really fucking Wei– wait, that’s your great drawing of me?!”


Steve just snorted, long and loud. “If you say so.”

“I do say so, asshole. Be nice, or you aren’t making an appearance in this post.”

Steve pressed a knee to the mattress, and cupped Bucky’s chin, slotting their mouths together. “It belongs in the Louvre, okay?”
“As long as we’re on the same page,” Bucky responded, and kissed him back.

Steve laughed as he brushed a hand over Bucky’s head, and swapped his own mug out for his phone. “All right, how do you want me?”

That was easy enough: Bucky wanted Steve close, always. He grabbed Steve’s hand and tugged, no words needed, and Steve slid in easily behind him. Bucky took a moment to arrange the work that Steve had done, along with his own artwork and the reference photo he’d used, his fingers lingering on the edges of the picture. He’d always loved this particular photo of Steve – kept it tucked away in his handwritten journals, the ones that were just for him. The world could have it for this one post, at least, Bucky didn’t mind. After all, he was the one who got Steve for always.

Bucky sighed, happy and content, and maybe the snow really wasn’t so bad. After all, it gave him an excuse to press up against the solid warmth at his back. He closed his eyes and took a moment, just for himself, here in the white silence of the first fall of the new year, the only sound the soft click of a camera shutter behind him.

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First post of the year. The perfect moment to thank you all for following me here on Instagram but also on Tumblr. As you can see, I have made some amazing progress in art (left). Shut up, it’s a thing of beauty. What? No, likeness and proportions are 100% fine. It’s MY STYLE, stop nitpicking. And I didn’t choose a good reference photo anyway. My portrait (right) was done by Stevie, obviously. The lil’ shit threw this together in about 20 minutes with cheap paintings bought at the supermarket. I don’t care, you can brag as much as you want Rogers, I’m still the little jazz genius of the duo. Last time you tried to play the piano, the neighbor came by and complained her beloved kitty was literally crying. At least, I don’t hurt anybody with my art. JUST SAYING. (Photo: Steve)
Chapter Summary

It’s been a while since we shared pics from our photo album! Ready for a step back in time and revisit our memories? Let’s go! (And…huh…yes, I’m the one who drew those masterpieces on the wall. Again. In spite of what Steve told me a thousand times. “Blah blah blah, Buck, don’t draw on the walls please…Blah blah blah, here’s a sketchbook instead”. You sound like a broken record, Rogers! I’m sorry but my art makes our ugly a** wallpaper look WAY better. I’m doing everybody a favor in the name of good taste, you should thank me instead of whining 24/7!)

New Jersey, 1943. The last photo of Steve as “the skinny guy from Brooklyn”. Two days later, this idiot was back at NYC and ready to be injected with the serum. You were damn lucky I didn’t know about your shenanigans at the time Steven Grant Rogers because I would have kicked you out of Stark and Erskine’s lab myself! (Photo: Peggy Carter, courtesy of the Carter family)
To all the people who follow this account and who keep telling me that I’m a bit harsh when it comes to Barton’s photographic skills, here’s a pic taken about two years ago on the 4th of July. Don’t ask me what he was even TRYING to shoot here. Clint…man, just curious, are you working in your spare time for the American Society of Ornithology? As a “hawk” it would make sense…But, I understand why you couldn’t resist: I must admit it’s a very very hot pigeon. No, really. Playboy centerfold material.

The exact same scene through the eyes of Thor. Every time I compliment the Viking on his true artistic skills when it comes to photography he just shrugs and tells me that “you know Brother, there’s nothing complicated about just pushing a stupid button! And this technology is so basic anyway. No Asgardian would dare to give that to their children!” Basic, really? Go tell that to Barton!

You’ve probably seen this one in the history books with the caption “Sgt Barnes, relieved to be back after being heroically rescued by Captain America!” Hell no! I was asking Carter what the f**k happened to Steve. I mean, put yourself in my position: I leave Stevie and his 92 pounds home and I find out he magically became Johnny Weissmuller or something. I still had no idea what to think of his transformation at the time to be honest and no, I wasn’t immediately happy that my skinny boyfriend had become all tall and muscular. Believe it or not, it took me some time to adjust. (Photo: courtesy of Time Magazine)

Italy, 1943. The caption of this photo, from a French magazine, only mentions a “wounded American soldier” but I guess you all recognized me. When Steve rescued me and the whole 107th, it wasn’t my first rodeo: I was almost killed during a mission a couple of months before. What do you think? It was war, not a vacation paid by the government. I almost lost an arm that day. The irony. I guess it was written in the stars or something that I had to lose an arm at some point in my life. (Photo: courtesy of Paris Match)

PLEASE FIND THE REST OF THE CAPTIONS IN THE END NOTES

“That was a cheap shot and you know it!”

Bucky ruffled his fingers through his hair, shaking loose wet chunks of snow, then blinked as a few flakes stuck to his eyelashes. He rounded on Steve, intent on giving him a piece of his mind, only to take another snowball right to the face. He batted at it uselessly, snow sputtering out of his mouth. When he finally opened his eyes, Steve was doubled over in laughter. “Oh my god, what is wrong with you?”

“Your face!” Steve wheezed, the rude motherfucker, which was just about enough of that. With Steve good and distracted, Bucky swiped at the snow collected on top of the dumpster, balled it up, and launched it.
“YES!” he whooped as it caught Steve in the ear, knocking him sideways. He didn’t wait for Steve to collect himself, just wrenched the door open to the stairwell, and took the stairs four-at-a-time straight to their floor. He ran to their apartment door, rushed in, and slammed it shut before turning to locked it. Then, just to be a dick, set the entire security system for good measure. Sure, Steve could get in, but it would take just those few precious extra seconds for Bucky to get into the shower. One, he was freezing and wanted to warm up, but more importantly, there was no way the inside of their apartment would be considered a safe zone; Steven Grant Rogers absolutely would bring a snowball inside to retaliate. It would just be a little hard to do if Bucky was standing under a hot spray of water. HA! Beat that, asshole!

Sure enough, barely a minute later, he heard the front door open, and Bucky immediately hid under said hot water. But when the shower door was yanked open, there wasn’t a snowball in sight, just Steve standing there, hand on his hip, eyebrow cocked, a bemused smirk firmly in place. Bucky didn’t trust it.

“You can’t get me in here,” he blurted out, flicking a bit of water at Steve. “Snow’ll just melt.”

“Do you see a snowball anywhere?”

“I know you. I don’t need to see it to know you’ve probably got one somewhere.”

Steve huffed and stepped back, both hands up in the air. “And where exactly would I put it, Buck? Down my pants?” He glanced down. “Behind my back? Pretty sure that would defeat the purpose.”

Bucky just narrowed his eyes, arms crossed. Steve was a man of many lies, even if he was bad at half of them. “All right, then, strip. Prove it.”

A new smile crept onto Steve’s face, slow and sly. “Strip, huh?” His voice pitched low and husky, and oh. Okay, that hadn’t been what Bucky meant, but he could get on board with this.

He returned the smile in kind and flicked his tongue across his bottom lip then bit down, reveling in the way Steve tracked the movement. He leaned back against the tile and crossed his arms. “You’ve got exactly ten seconds to prove there’s no snowball on your person, or I’m dragging you in here with whatever clothes you still have on.”

Fortunately, that got Steve moving, and quick.

Unfortunately for Steve, his boots weren’t exactly easy to get off, and Bucky was, if anything, a man of his word.

“Jesus, can you believe it’s only four o’clock?”

“Hmm?”

“You awake, baby?”

“No.”

Steve quietly laughed. “Didn’t think so.” He went back to stroking his fingers through Bucky’s hair, and Bucky wiggled, content and lazy, and very much not wanting to move from his comfy spot, lying between Steve’s legs.

“Whazzat about four?” he eventually asked, his words a little bit slurred, though he wasn’t actually
tired, not really.

“Oh, nothing. I just can’t believe how early it is. I feel like this day started five months ago.”

Bucky snorted. “Yeah, I know what you mean. Can’t believe it was only a few hours ago I posted that follower picture on IG.”

“Right? I feel like that happened yesterday. Or last year. Maybe we’re in a time loop. Maybe it’s like that Groundhog Day movie, but we’re the people that don’t actually know we’re reliving the same day. Maybe that’s why it feels so long.”

“Yep. Must be it.”

“It could be, you know. You wouldn’t know if it was. That’s sort of the point.”

Bucky opened his mouth to respond but pulled up short. “That...I have no argument for that.”

He was jostled slightly as Steve nodded. “Mhm. Exactly.”

The day did feel exceptionally long, but honestly, Bucky wasn’t bothered by it. It was shaping into one of those perfect days, the kind you look back on, years from now, and go yeah. That was one of the good ones (though, with Steve, there rarely were bad ones anymore). The world was still soft around them, just like it had been earlier, and the snow hadn’t been all that bad – kind of fun actually. And after spending the better part of the afternoon making love... “Today’s definitely been one of the good ones,” he said, voicing his thoughts. “Don’t think I’d mind if it was one of the groundhog ones.”

“Me neither,” came Steve’s soft reply, and Bucky smiled before pressing his lips against Steve’s chest. It was so smooth and soft – almost unnaturally so, if Bucky hadn’t known exactly what Steve’s body had felt like before the serum. Back then, he hadn’t had any hair on his chest, either, just some thin blond hairs on his arms, the ones on his legs only slightly thicker, a perfect little thatch of brown between them. But none on his chest. And Bucky had sometimes wondered if he would have, had he naturally grown into this body, instead of having it provided by science and the U.S. Government.

“Ever wonder if you would have had chest hair if your health hadn’t stunted your growth as a kid?”

“Wait, what now?” Bucky glanced up to find Steve’s brows furrowed in confusion. He scritched the back of Bucky’s head affectionately. “Maybe wanna backpedal a little bit on that segue there?”

Bucky chuckled because, okay fair. “Sorry, my head went a little sideways there. I was just thinking how smooth your chest is and was kind of wondering if, had you grown into this body as a kid instead of science taking a whack at it, would you have had chest hair.” He shrugged a little awkwardly. “You know. Testosterone and all.”

Steve stared back at him, eyebrow arched. “You saying you don’t like my chest?”

“Yes, because that’s what I said, you fucking paranoid nerd.” Bucky pinched said chest as Steve squirmed underneath him. “I love every part of your body, as I clearly demonstrated over the last two hours. What I’m saying is, say you grew up now, when medicine could have gotten a better hold of you at a young age and helped correct a lot of the shit you’d had to go through, would you have grown up different? Would you have, you know, grown? With the testosterone and all, and the – oh my god, why are you laughing?”

Steve was shaking he was laughing so hard. “Dude. Seriously. What the fuck is so funny?”
“You just –” Steve wiped at his eyes then smiled up at Bucky. “You – your brain is so odd, you know that? Where do you even come up with these things? And wipe that look off your face.” He pushed himself up to quickly kiss away Bucky's confused frown then flopped back onto the pillows. “I mean, babe, you’re always so curious about science and how things work, and you sit here and think about how I would have turned out if I’d had today’s medicine as a kid, and your thought is, I wonder if Steve would have had chest hair?”

“It’s a valid question!”

“So is me wondering how I got shacked up with such a fucking weirdo.”

“Dick.” Bucky smacked Steve on the arm and rolled off of him. He wanted to see if he could find a picture of Steve in one of their albums from before the serum without a shirt on to compare against –

“Wait, no, baby, I was just teasing,” Steve apologized, grabbing Bucky around the waist. “Please don’t be mad.”

Bucky looked back at a face full of Sad Eyes. “Now who’s the fucking weirdo.” He nodded toward the door. “I was just going to grab some of our photo albums to find a photo of you, pre-serum.”

Sad Eyes morphed into a confused frown. “Why? I didn’t have hair on my chest then, either.”

“No, I know, but I wanted to compare anyways.” Steve still stared at him, which Bucky returned it with a flat look of his own. “I’m having a moment of nostalgia, okay, humor me.”

That seemed to do the trick as Steve leaned in to softly press his lips against Bucky’s own. “I always humor you, you know that.”

“It’s cuz I’m humorous.”

“Very humorous,” Steve intoned.

“Are you coming with me to go a-picture huntin’?”

“Obviously.”

They untangled and made their way out to the living room bookcase, where they kept all their old photo albums. There weren’t that many – really just a handful – but it had been an utter bitch and a half just to collect the ones they did have. Funny how people assumed because they’d bought some fucking photo at an auction, or had curated it into their museum’s collection, it meant they had the right to tell Steve and Bucky they couldn’t have their own fucking stuff back. Luckily for them, Stark was nothing if not a generous spender when it came to fixing things that needed correcting. It had still taken years, though.

Bucky grabbed one at random, then wandered over to lean against the back of the couch. “I think this is the one we’d used in those Insta photos last year,” he commented as he flipped past the photo of him from Basic and the one from him in the hospital.

“Hey, is that the one with the picture of you from that French magazine?” Steve asked, flipping through an album of his own. “You know, the one where you’re all beat to hell, and yet still writing on the goddamn walls?”

It took less than half a second to find the photo Steve was talking about – before Azzano, on a train after almost getting blown to Kingdom Come. And yes, okay, he’d written Dernier’s name onto the rail car wall, but hey, he’d almost lost his right arm in that skirmish, and he wanted to see if he’d still
be able to write, sue him. Dernier had taken a photo of Bucky’s handy work and it had ended up in this French magazine, *Paris Match*, some ten years later. This one hadn’t been that hard to get back, actually. The magazine had the original and was more than happy to hand it over to Captain America.

“Yep, right here, asshole, page twenty-two,” Bucky said, then chucked it at Steve’s head. Steve instantly threw up an arm, blocking the book from hitting him. It thunked to the ground, bounced off one corner, then burst open, half the pages falling out, scattering across the floor.

They both stared at the busted album and scattered pages.

“Oh, right here, asshole, page twenty-two,” Bucky said, then chucked it at Steve’s head. Steve instantly threw up an arm, blocking the book from hitting him. It thunked to the ground, bounced off one corner, then burst open, half the pages falling out, scattering across the floor.

They both stared at the busted album and scattered pages.

“Oops,” Bucky murmured.

“Ya think?” Steve answered, flat and unamused.

Bucky bent down and started picking up the pages. “Well, if your fucking weird-ass Captain America ninja skills had caught the thing instead of just blocking it, we wouldn’t—”

“Oh my god, how is this *my* fault?” Steve protested, but he got up to come help Bucky anyway.

“You’re the asshole who threw it at me, remember.”

“I may be the asshole who threw it, but you’re the asshole making fun of my amazing wall art.”

“Oh, is that what we’re calling it now?”

Bucky swatted Steve across the head with the pages in his hand. Steve just swatted him right back.

“My art is beautiful and you’re just a harsh, snobby critic, admit it.”

“Drawing on the walls of our bedroom isn’t art, Buck.”

“Says the guy who’s been eyeballing a Basquiat up for auction at next month’s Christie’s thing, don’t even deny it, you’re horrendous at clearing out your browser history.” He crossed his arms, feet planted, and eyed Steve. “You do know how Basquiat got his start, right?”

Steve matched his stance (and Bucky tried hard not to laugh, very much aware they were both still naked and probably looked like idiots). “Obviously, jackass.”

“And yet.”

“It’s our *bedroom walls*.”

“You’ve drawn on them, too!” Bucky exclaimed, though he wasn’t really mad. Steve was just being difficult.

“Yes! Because I finally admitted defeat!”

“Yeah! Because I finally admitted defeat!”

“Oh my god, you drew on them first!”

“I—I” Steve started, all good and riled up now, only to cut himself off. He then huffed and turned away, suddenly very interested in rifling through the pages he’d picked up. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Bucky burst out laughing and reached out to snap Steve around the waist, yanking him back flush against him. “No idea, huh?” He gently nipped at Steve’s neck. “I thought forgetting things was my party trick.”
Steve turned his head just enough to eye him, but Bucky didn’t miss his failing attempt not to smile. “Well, you know, I’m very very old. I’m bound to forget things.”

“Yeah, not buying it.” He placed metal fingers against Steve’s jaw so he could kiss the corner of his mouth. “You remember the name of the teacher who scolded us the day we met?”

“Sister Francine.”

“– so definitely not buying that you don’t remember the little chubby Bucky you drew that day to make fun of me for fuckin’ sleeping in.”

“Yep. Not a clue. You must be confusing me with the other Steve you’re fucking.”

“The other Steve I’m – you’re such a dork, you know that?” Bucky laughed and turned Steve around in his arms. He tapped him on the ass with the pages still in his hand and captured that perfect mouth in a kiss. “It’s on my Insta, you know. I can always show you the proof.”

“Yeah, I think I’ll pass on that,” Steve gruffed, but there was absolutely no heat behind it, which was all the win Bucky needed. He was about to claim his victory with another kiss when Steve suddenly perked up with an excited “Oh!”

Bucky leaned back, instantly wary. “What?”

“I have an idea.”

“...and that would be?” Bucky pressed, when Steve didn’t elaborate. But, instead of being helpful and forthcoming or whatever, he just grabbed Bucky’s hand and began leading him through the dining room and into the office. “You know, they say speaking helps answer questions like that,” he commented.

“I know, I just –” Steve headed to a stack of canvases leaning against the far wall, stopping about halfway through to yank one out. He turned back around and held it up, a big smile on his face. “Wanna do another one?”

Bucky looked down to find the chalkboard Steve had used when Bucky had posted some old photos of them the last time. It still read *Steve & Bucky’s Photo Album* on it – along with Bucky’s little Cap drawing – though the lettering was smudged in a lot of places, and the white A on the cowl was completely smudged into the blue.

He looked back up at Steve’s excited, expectant face. “I thought we were searching for an old photo of you so I could compare the two.” He waved at the sign. “This doesn’t help me with my, uh, thorough inspection I had planned on doing.”

“We can do that later.” Steve bounced a little on the balls of his feet. “This could be fun.”

“This” – Bucky waved again at the sign – “requires putting clothes on.”

“Which you are more than welcome to divest me of later, in whatever manner you see fit.”

That piqued Bucky’s interest. “So, if I, say, wanted to cut you out of them, you’d be down for that?”

“I’d say one, there’s enough knives around here, I’m sure one could do the job, and two, wouldn’t it actually be more fun if you, oh I don’t know, strategically cut them off of me so that you could get at the various, uh, parts you need, one at a time?”
Suddenly the photo album was the last thing on Bucky’s mind. Not when all he could picture was slitting open the back of a pair of Steve’s sweats just enough to get his dick in there and fuck him. Maybe cut holes in the front of a t-shirt so he could play with Steve’s nipples while he did it.

“Like that idea, huh?” Steve laughed, effectively snapping Bucky out of his fantasy.

Bucky wanted to tell him no, just to be contrary, but they both knew he’d be lying, and he wouldn’t even be able to do it well. So, he settled for grabbing a laughing Steve by the wrist and pulling him out of the office. “Come on, we have pictures to choose, clothes to put on that you absolutely don’t mind losing later, and oh, you need to clean up that fucking board before it goes anywhere near my Instagram.”

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Bucky took a sip of his hederacea and flipped through the small pile of pictures they’d chosen as Steve finished hanging the chalkboard back up on the wall. They’d picked a few from the War, but Steve had also suggested some of the photos Bucky had been printing out for the journal he started last year. He felt a little bit guilty that he hadn’t gotten that far into the project, but last year had been...well, he’d had good reason, was the thing.

“Okay, all set,” Steve finally announced, and Bucky glanced at the new sign: Steve and Bucky’s Photo Album Part 2 with red stars and some white swirly lines all over it. And no room for him to add to it.

“How about you do the opening picture instead. This was your idea, after all.”

Steve’s brow furrowed. “But it’s your therapy project.”

“Yes. And I want you in this photo.”

Steve lifted his shoulders before letting them drop with a sigh. Then he dropped down on the bed before holding his hand out for the photos. “If you insist.”

Bucky snorted as he handed them over. “Yes, because you were just so hard to persuade.”

“They do say I’m stubborn.”

“Wow. Brand new information, right there. Okay, get settled.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket and opened up the camera as Steve got in up close to the sign.

“How do you want me?”

Bucky shrugged. “I don’t care, just make sure your big head doesn’t block the sign or the art.”

“Wow, sweetheart, you’re just so good at this.” Steve shook his head, but knelt up next to the sign before holding the pages against his chest. “Amazing, really. All that time posting to Instagram, and
the actual six-digit figure worth of photos you’ve taken over the years have really paid off.”

“Always gotta be a smart ass.”

“Well, it’s like they say, it’s better than being a dumbass.”

“You’re an ass,” Bucky muttered, then finally lined up the shot. “Okay hold still, I’m taking a few.”

“Color me surprised.”

Bucky didn’t dignify that with a response, instead just snapped away. He rearranged Steve a couple times before he was finally satisfied enough to post. Then he plopped himself down next to Steve on the bed and held out his phone. “What do you think?”

Steve scrutinized the picture – Steve holding the pages up, his arm snaked between the sign and Bucky’s wall art – then thumbed through a few more of them. He eventually stopped and handed the phone back. “I like this one better. My smile’s less goofy.”

Bucky frowned as he took the phone to look over the new picture. “But I like your goofy smile.”

“Okay, then use the one you chose,” Steve said, and leaned in to kiss Bucky’s temple. “I just liked this one better, but it doesn’t really matter. Your Insta, your choice.”

“Damn right, it’s my choice,” Bucky grumbled lightly. He squirmed against Steve’s side until Steve got with the program and lifted his arm so Bucky could snuggle up against him. He opened Instagram and loaded the image before quickly writing out the caption he’d been articulating in his head the last few minutes. He handed the phone over again so Steve could read it:

*It’s been a while since we shared pics from our photo album! Ready for a step back in time and revisit our memories? Let’s go! (And…huh…yes, I’m the one who drew those masterpieces on the wall. Again. In spite of what Steve told me a thousand times. “Blah blah blah, Buck, don’t draw on the walls please…Blah blah blah, here’s a sketchbook instead”. You sound like a broken record, Rogers! I’m sorry but my art makes our ugly a** wallpaper look WAY better. I’m doing everybody a favor in the name of good taste, you should thank me instead of whining 24/7!)*

Steve huffed as he handed the phone back. “You know, if you ever stop being such a sarcastic asshole, I’m going to assume you’re dead.”

“Or dead in the eyes,” Bucky added as he hit send on the post. “The Winter Soldier was technically a living, breathing human, but there wasn’t much going on in the way of being verbal.”

“He wasn’t all that funny, either.”

“Exactly my point.”

Steve leaned down to kiss him, squeezing Bucky tight. When they parted he added another kiss to Bucky’s forehead, then asked: “Okay, so what’s next?”

“Probably the picture you were holding on top. Here, booze me,” Bucky said, making a grabby hand toward the nightstand. The photo was one of Steve when he’d still been small – actually the last one taken of him before he’d stepped into the Easy-Bake Oven. Bucky looked it over, taking in how dapper Steve looked in his dress uniform. Peggy had taken it, with a promise that if something happened to him – if the project failed – she was to send the photo to Bucky’s family. Seeing it actually made Bucky a little melancholy.
He sighed as he traded the photo for his tumbler. “You know, sometimes I miss you being this small.”

Steve’s squeeze was infinitesimal. “You’ve said that before.”

“I don’t mean to make you feel bad.” Bucky sighed again, certain he wasn’t explaining himself right. “I just, I mean, that guy –” He tapped the photo. “That little guy was the guy I fell in love with, right? And I know we promised to set it – us – aside for the war, but I don’t know.” He shrugged and turned the glass slowly around in his hand. “I guess...I guess, after Azzano, for a while there, I kinda felt like I’d lost you. Here you were, looking completely different and falling for Peggy, and it just. Like you were two different people. Like that guy” – he nodded at the picture – “was my guy, and this guy” – he tapped on Steve’s leg – “was for somebody else.”

Steve didn’t answer for a long while, and Bucky wanted to look to see what Steve was thinking – but he still couldn’t make himself turn his head. He’d never really told Steve this before, and he was suddenly worried he’d dredged up something that didn’t need dredging up because his brain hated him, and word vomit was a thing it liked to do.

And for reasons that defied all rational sense, Steve actually snorted, his eyes suddenly bemused and alight (when Bucky finally deigned to look). He kissed Bucky on the temple. “You’re an idiot, you know that?”

“What!” Bucky exclaimed. “I was very injured and traumatized, and here you come showing up all Adonis-like – the very opposite of what I’d left back in Brooklyn – with one of the most badass chicks I’d ever met, on your arm, and yeah. Two people.”

Bucky flopped back against the pillows and Steve rolled to hover over him. This close, Bucky could see the hint of green in Steve’s eyes, and it never failed to make his breath catch. Steve took advantage of that fact to swoop in and steal a kiss. “Not two people, Buck. Two bodies, maybe, but not two people.”

“Well, duh, I just –” but Steve shook his head, shutting him up.

“Two bodies, baby.” He kissed the corner of Bucky’s mouth. “But those bodies shared the same heart and the same brain, and both have always been, and will always be, tuned to you.”

Bucky ran his fingers through Steve’s hair. “Pretty sure they were tuned to Peggy for a while there.”

“Not the same thing.”

“How do you figure?”

“Simple: I loved her, absolutely, but you...you’re my soulmate.”

“Sap.”

“Yeah, well.” Steve claimed another kiss, and Bucky cradled his head in place, holding him close to lengthen the kiss. Then Steve rolled off of him and back against the pillows, adjusting Bucky so he was tucked under his arm again. He dropped one more kiss to the top of Bucky’s head, and Bucky smiled. “You made me this way, so. Take responsibility for your actions, Barnes.”

“Oh, sir, yes sir,” Bucky snorted, using the tumbler to fire off a little salute before taking another sip. He handed it back to Steve, who put it on the nightstand, then nodded at the photos, now discarded on the other side of the bed. “Here, hold that one up.”
Steve did as ordered and Bucky snapped a shot. He cropped it down to get Steve’s fat fingers out of the shot, then loaded it online:

New Jersey, 1943. The last photo of Steve as “the skinny guy from Brooklyn”. Two days later, this idiot was back at NYC and ready to be injected with the serum. You were damn lucky I didn’t know about your shenanigans at the time Steven Grant Rogers because I would have kicked you out of Stark and Erskine’s lab myself! (Photo: Peggy Carter, courtesy of the Carter family)

“So, what’s next?” Steve asked as Bucky finished. “Wanna do the one of you from the French magazine?”

Bucky glanced up to see Steve holding out the photo in question. He looked at it for a long moment, then shook his head. “Actually, hold that thought.” He turned back to his phone and immediately dove into his photo app. “I have an idea.” It took him a bit to find the photo he wanted – he really needed to dump some off his phone – but eventually located it and handed the phone to Steve. “How about a before and after.”

“Wasn’t this from my birthday?” Steve asked.

“Mhm. Couple years ago.” It was of him during the Fourth of July fireworks display over the East River. Thor had taken it, and it had been absolutely gorgeous, Steve warmly lit, and expertly in focus against a backdrop of colorful explosions all around him. Bucky had been so fucking impressed. He knew that technology on Earth was a millennia behind Asgard, but that didn’t mean someone had an eye for photography, yet Thor apparently had it in spades.

“Wait, what the fuck is this?”

Steve had thumbed over to the next picture – which, while clearly taken at the same time, had Steve less the focus, and more a fucking pigeon that had ended up front and center, effectively cutting Steve mostly out of the shot.

Bucky barked out a laugh and shook his head. “Yeah, that was when I’d stupidly handed my phone to Clint so he could get a picture of both of us. Suffice it to say, that didn’t exactly happen.”

“You aren’t even in the shot.”

Bucky nodded, laughing to himself at the memory. “Yeah, if I remember correctly, he took something like...thirty?” Bucky had to think back on the exact number. “Yeah, about thirty damn photos of that pigeon and not one of us. Honestly, I thought I’d deleted them all.” He reached out to take his phone and do exactly that, only for Steve to hold it out of reach.

“Oh no,” he lamented, humor coloring his voice. “You gotta post this one, too. This is hilarious.”

“Wait, are you serious?”

“Yes.” Steve was practically giggling. “This is hysterical, how could you not wanna post it?”

Bucky shrugged, bemused. “Sure, why not.” It was a funny photo.

He finally took his phone back, deciding to load the pigeon photo first, use it as a lead up to the one Thor took:

To all the people who follow this account and who keep telling me that I’m a bit harsh when it comes to Barton’s photographic skills, here’s a pic taken about two years ago on the 4th of July. Don’t ask me what he was even TRYING to shoot here. Clint...man, just curious, are you working in
your spare time for the American Society of Ornithology? As a “hawk” it would make sense...But, I understand why you couldn’t resist: I must admit it’s a very very hot pigeon. No, really. Playboy centerfold material.

The exact same scene through the eyes of Thor. Every time I compliment the Viking on his true artistic skills when it comes to photography he just shrugs and tells me that “you know Brother, there’s nothing complicated about just pushing a stupid button! And this technology is so basic anyway. No Asgardian would dare to give that to their children!”. Basic, really? Go tell that to Barton!

“You know Clint’s gonna come after you for this, right?” Steve commented, reading over Bucky’s shoulder as he posted. “Even money on whether his ego gets the better of him or he tries to shoot you in the ass...”

Sure enough, Bucky’s phone buzzed in his hand, a notification from Clint popping up.

“– for making fun of him.” They both laughed, and Steve nodded at the text. “See? What’d I tell ya.”

The phone buzzed three more times in quick succession. Bucky glanced, wide-eyed, at Steve before opening them.

MY MASTERPIECE – C

MY MUSE – C

MY LOST LADY LOVE – C

I MISS YOU, BABY GIRL, WHERE ARE YOU!!!!!! – C

Three more messages popped up before Bucky had even finished reading the first set.

SEND THAT TO ME – C

I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE, BARNES – C

YOU GIVE ME BACK MY BABY GIRL – C

Bucky jumped a little when his phone started to ring, Nat’s dorky grin staring back at him. He fumbled has he tried to answer while simultaneously elbowing a snickering Steve in the ribs. He was finally able to hit answer, then turned on speaker phone. “Da, lyubov’ moya?”

“I took his phone away from him,” came Nat’s blunt reply. “Do not send that photo to him.”

Bucky had to bite his lip to keep from laughing. “Why? Is he planning on framing it and hanging it over the fireplace or something?”

“Yes.”

Bucky and Steve both finally lost it, each falling in opposite directions on the bed, his phone landing somewhere tangled in the comforter. He could hear Nat’s muffled voice yelling at him, but it took a second to compose himself enough to find the damn phone again. There were still tears in his eyes when he answered: “I’m sorry, what was that?”

“So, help me God, mudak, he may know where you live, but I know where you hurt, and I will commit violence against your person if you send that to him!”
“Bring it, сука!” he shouted into the phone. He didn’t wait for her to respond, just ended the call, then turned to Steve and added, “I need better friends.”

Steve eyebrows were practically at his hairline. “You sure it’s you who needs better friends? You did just call Nat a bitch.”

“She called me an asshole!”

Steve shoulders lifted in a deep sigh, then he grabbed Bucky’s nape and gave him a little shake. “Baby. Sweetheart. My dearest love. We just spent the last year grappling with our co-dependency and desperate fear of losing one another. Please do not give the scary scary assassin a reason to make that nightmare become a reality.”

“Okay, but counterpoint,” Bucky stated, pointing a finger at Steve. “If she kills me, then you kill Clint, and everybody wins.”

“How is that everybody winning?”

Bucky opened his mouth to respond, only to snap it shut. He may have phrased that wrong. “I... have no idea. But, you know. Eye for an eye, and all that.”

Steve shook his head, then pulled Bucky in to bustle a kiss against his brow. “You are so fucking weird, you know that.”

“Pot, Kettle.”

“Don’t I know it.” He finally let go and reached over for the forgotten photos. “So, do you want to do the French mag now?”

“Ummm, not sure, let me see.” He took the stack from Steve and rifled through them. He wanted to at least have some actual coherency of order, even if he’d just thrown in those last two. He grabbed all the ones from the war first. There were a few from Disneyland from last year, as well as some random ones of him and Steve they’d liked, but he wanted to finish up the past before getting to now.

He laid the images out on the bed: the French mag one, one of talking to Peggy right after they’d marched back from Azzano, and one where they’d traveled to this museum in New Orleans after one of his followers tipped him off that there was a gun on display that had a picture in its sweetheart grip that looked an awful lot like Steve before the war. Turned out it had been Bucky’s old M1911 pistol that he’d lost on the battlefield when he’d been captured by Hydra the first time.

He and Steve had no idea how it had ended up in New Orleans, but it had been funny as hell at the time because no one had put it together that the person in the grip was Steve. They’d ended up meeting with the museum’s curator, Phyllis, to let her know what she’d had and authenticate it for her, if anything to help a small business thrive. Last they’d heard ticket sales had gone up 2,000%.

He laid them out, with the Peggy one first, then the French mag. “What do you think of this?” he asked.

Steve gave a single nod. “That’s fine, if you want. I mean, I guess it doesn’t really matter?” He picked up the one of Bucky and Peggy. “Are you sure you wanna tell people this story, though?”

“What of me yelling at Peggy over what had happened to you?”

Steve huffed a laugh. “Yeah, I wouldn’t exactly call what you did yelling.”
“Steve.” Bucky looked at him, flat. “This was Peggy. Me going off was about as close to yelling as you could get with that woman. I knew that after only two minutes in her presence.”

“And I’m pretty sure the only reason she didn’t string your balls up for it was because you’d just been to hell and back.”

“Yeah, well.” You couldn’t see Peggy’s face, but the way Steve was smirking, it was pretty obvious that even if she’d eventually given Bucky a pass, in that moment, she was probably mentally calculating the various, creative ways she could dispose of him and make it look like an accident. He set it back down on the bed and took a photo of it to load:

*You’ve probably seen this one in the history books with the caption “Sgt Barnes, relieved to be back after being heroically rescued by Captain America!”*. Hell no! I was asking Carter what the f**k happened to Steve. I mean, put yourself in my position: I leave Stevie and his 92 pounds home and I find out he magically became Johnny Weissmuller or something. I still had no idea what to think of his transformation at the time to be honest and no, I wasn’t immediately happy that my skinny boyfriend had become all tall and muscular. Believe it or not, it took me some time to adjust. (Photo: courtesy of Time Magazine)

Once he was done, he set it aside and loaded up the other two in quick succession:

*Italy, 1943. The caption of this photo, from a French magazine, only mentions a “wounded American soldier” but I guess you all recognized me. When Steve rescued me and the whole 107th, it wasn’t my first rodeo: I was almost killed during a mission a couple of months before. What do you think? It was war, not a vacation paid by the government. I almost lost an arm that day. The irony. I guess it was written in the stars or something that I had to lose an arm at some point in my life. (Photo: courtesy of Paris Match)*

*Do you know what was called a “Sweetheart Grip” during WW2? Soldiers used to put photos of their loved ones under the clear grip of their 1911 gun. When the Howling Commandos asked me who the boy was in the pic, I OBVIOUSLY couldn’t say that Stevie was my boyfriend (or even a friend, it would have looked weird) so I just mumbled he was my “sick little cousin”. It wasn’t a problem until “Cap” showed up in Italy and Dernier put 2 and 2 together in spite of Steve’s transformation. He could have reported us but he never said a word. I guess he didn’t want to miss out on the opportunity to tease me on a regular basis by asking me, in French, if it was customary for Americans to be so close to their cousin. So yeah, when I had said once that nobody ever found out about us, I wasn’t telling the complete truth. (PS: “Owner unknown”…Ha! Ha! Get your s**t together, WW2 Museum!)*

“Get your shit together? Really, Buck?” Steve commented, scrolling through Bucky’s posts from his own phone.

“Wait, don’t you remember?” Bucky asked as he hooked his chin over Steve’s shoulder. “That’s what Phyllis said when we met up with her to talk about the gun.”

“Did she?” Steve flicked a quick glance at Bucky. “I don’t remember that.”

“Maybe that’s when you were on the phone with Tony, but yeah, figure if she saw this” – he nodded at the photo on Steve’s phone – “she’d get the joke.”

“Yeah, she was definitely a character.”

“That she was,” Bucky commented, then grabbed the pile of Disney photos. “You know, I still say you in your underwear was your own damn fault,” he mentioned as he shuffled through them, very
much not looking Steve’s way. “You can’t blame me for that, you should have been worrying about
yourself, not making sure I put clothes on.”

“You were naked!” Bucky looked over to find Steve sputtering around a sip of booze. He started to
snicker, only for Steve to backhand him against his bicep.

“Okay, ow,” Bucky grumbled and rubbed at the spot. “But so were you, and if I had time to make it
out with a shirt and pants on, you did, too.”

“You were in the tub when you set that thing off. How is that my fault.”

“Because I’m a grown-ass man!” Bucky exclaimed, arms thrown open, equal parts affronted and
amused. “I am fully capable of putting clothes on without your help.”

Steve looked completely unimpressed. “Yeah, jury’s still out on that one, you fucking pyromaniac.”

“Fire’s pretty.” Bucky sniffed. “Unlike your ratty face.”

“See? Mature.” Steve waved a hand at him, as though that proved some sort of point. Which it
didn’t. Fire absolutely was pretty.

“Whatever. Let’s not forget who actually took this photo of me with the ears on fire, Steven,” Bucky
groused. “I’m putting up Disney. Now, booze me.” Steve slapped the tumbler into his outstretched
hand, and Bucky downed the rest of it in one shot before handing it back. He then cricked his neck
from side to side and gave himself a little shake. “All right, let’s do this.”

Steve blinked. Blinked again. “Uh, you do realize there was almost half a glass in there, right? I’m
not picking your silly ass up off the floor later.”

“You most certainly will,” Bucky said as he put the images in some sort of acceptable order, saving
the pretty pretty fire image for last. “Asgard booze is the only way I’m gonna be able to get through
the memory of this traumatic time.”

“Oh my god, you are such a fucking drama queen.”

“TRAUMATIC TIME, STEVEN!”

“Uhuh. Just fuckin’ c’mere already,” Steve said and pulled on Bucky’s arm until Bucky relented and
settled back against him again.

Remember our trip to Disneyland in February last year? So here is another memory of this glorious
day: me, after burning my Mickey ears and promising Steve to behave. Jeeesus. The crowd. The
kids. The noise. The horror. At least, the food wasn’t so bad in this hell hole (where I STARTED to
have a bit more fun after maybe 8 hours but otherwise it...was...I don’t know, man! Hydra must
have designed this Pandemonium to secretly torture American people! That’s the only explanation I
can think of!)

“Hydra, Buck, really?”

“Remember that conversation we had that day about all the ways Disney tricks you into wanting to
spend money? You know, like those fucking vanilla scent-wafting vents outside their bakeries? Only
fucking Nazis would think up something like that.”

“Because they’re evil?”
“Because they’re evil.”

As I said, the food was pretty cool. Steve spent the whole day buying me delicious stuff but it wasn’t completely out of kindness, though. Apparently, I whine less when my mouth and my stomach are full. I can’t deny it! I plea guilty on that one. But Steve’s strategy worked. Well played, Rogers, well played…

“Oh, god, that actually sounds so good right now.”

“You’re making it, then.”

“Wait, why me? You’re better in the kitchen.”

“Yes, but your mom's fried chicken recipe is better.”

“That’s...okay, fine, I’ll make dinner.”

Yes, Princess, calm down, it’s Captain America and yes, he’s gonna sign you an autograph. But don’t ask him if he wants to build a snowman, ice isn’t really his thing. Me, on the other hand, “the cold never bothered me anywaaaaay”. –

“Wow, that’s the biggest load of bullshit I’ve ever heard.”

– Oh, shut up, it’s a great joke and…you know what? Kiss my a**, I’m high on Asgardian booze. It’s the only way I can look at these Disneyland pics without having the urge to bang my head against the wall, even though I can admit that Steve is pretty cute in that one. What am I saying? Stevie’s always cute…–

“Yeah, no more booze for you, you fucking lush.”

“Wait, where are you – fine, take the bottle, asshole, I didn’t want any more anyway!”

“Liar!”

– except when HE’S TRYING TO PREVENT ME FROM HAVING ANOTHER GLASS. BRING THIS BOTTLE HERE IMMEDIATELY, ROGERS OR YOU GO BACK UNDER THE ICE, AND FOR GOOD THIS TIME!!

“You know, I love how you always yell at me via Instagram. Because it absolutely does not make you sound less crazy.”

“Hey, I never claimed to be a member of the Sane & Safe Club. That club is full of losers.”

“Wait, didn’t Sam say something last week about how he and Clint and Scott are the SANE & SAFE Committee?”

“Sam maybe, but the day Barton is sane and safe on ANYTHING is the day I set down my Kalashnikov
and take up knitting.”

“The world’s most feared blanket maker.”

“Obviously.”

_When I came back to the hotel after our Disneyland trip, I did what I’ve been craving to do all day: setting the second ear of my hat on fire. Just some harmless fun, you know. Until it launched the fire detector and everybody had to evacuate the floor without even having the time to dress properly. The hotel management was not pleased but I told them I had nothing to do with it and that they should definitely check their safety equipment because this kind of inconvenience was an outrage at such a quality resort. The ones who were really pleased though, were the Korean tourists who took pics with Captain America wearing only a Mickey T-shirt and some pretty tight blue boxer shorts. Disneyland, where dreams come true!_”

“Do you think the Disney people are gonna call us?”

“Let’s hope so.”

“They could ban us for life, you know.”

“Ban Captain America? Send you a bill, maybe, but pretty sure even they don’t want that kind of PR headache.”

“True,” Steve said, even as he typed away furiously on his phone. “That cache does come in hand at times.”

“That it does—hey, what are you doing?” Bucky asked, trying to look at Steve’s phone screen. He expected to see Instagram, but all he saw was the Uber app.

“Oh, we’re missing some of the stuff I need for dinner, so I’m getting it delivered,” he answered as he hit confirm, then tossed his phone onto the comforter. “It’s still snowing. Don’t really feel like leaving the apartment.”

“Yeah, I don’t want you leaving either,” Bucky murmured, and leaned over for a kiss. Steve tasted a little like the alcohol they’d been drinking, and Bucky licked into his mouth to get at the taste of him underneath. Steve responded by wrapping an arm around his waist to pull him close.

They stayed like that for long minutes, trading kisses, chaste and sweet, only to give way to fervent and wanting. At some point, Bucky climbed onto Steve’s lap, holding him in place as he rocked, his ass grinding against the swell of Steve’s dick. He couldn’t help the low groan that escaped his lips, surprised at his own sudden desperation.

“Steve...” He moaned and tilted his head back as Steve gently sucked a line down his neck, then nudged Bucky’s t-shirt out of the way with his nose to bite down on his clavicle. Fire raced up Bucky’s spine. “Steve, please.”

Steve dipped a hand under the elastic of Bucky’s sweatpants and gently pressed a finger against Bucky’s hole, most likely testing to see how open he still was, and Bucky had to bite his lip to keep from whimpering for real at the sensation.

All too soon, Steve was pulling his hand free, and swiping at the bottle of lube on the nightstand. His hands were shaking, his own desperation showing, and Bucky shoved his sweats down around his thighs to give Steve the quick access they both needed. He leaned up enough to allow Steve to lift his own hips, only to scrabble awkwardly as he tried to get Steve’s sweats off of him too. It took
Steve a second to get with the program – too busy trying to get back at Bucky’s hole – but eventually they managed to get Steve’s pants down, and suddenly Bucky had two fingers buried deep in his ass. He turned to get at Steve’s lips again, trying to drown out the loud moan threatening to fill the quiet of their little haven.

Steve made quick, dirty work of opening Bucky up. Bucky patted blindly for the bottle of lube, refusing to tear his mouth away sucking bruises into Steve’s neck and shoulder. They’d be gone before he and Steve were even done, but Bucky didn’t care – he never cared. His real mark on Steve ran bone deep, and that mark was there till the end of time.

He flicked the cap back open with his thumb and dribbled the gel directly over where both their dicks were trapped between their bodies. It tickled as it smeared against their stomachs, sticky and wet. He took them both in hand to them properly slicked, mixing it with the precome already there.

“How’s so funny?” Steve asked, the words breathed easy, a lazy smile painted on his lips.

“I just...” Bucky huffed another laugh. “Where the hell did that come from?”

“You saying there’s something wrong with an afternoon quickie, there, Sergeant?”

“Oh, hell no.” Bucky glanced at the clock on the wall. “Though, I think this was more of an early evening quickie than anything.”

Steve just shrugged. “Quickie’s still a quickie, whether it’s afternoon, evening, or three in the morning.”

Bucky smiled. “And it’s not like we haven’t had our fair share of those.”

“Exactly,” Steve said, and Bucky leaned back down for a kiss, only to wince as the shift in angle made Steve’s softening cock slide out of him with an uncomfortable squelch.

“God, that is never pleasant.”

“Yeah, can’t say I disagree,” Steve replied, his face scrunched. He glanced around the bed – sheets tangled, pictures knocked everywhere – and sighed. “Does this mean we’re done with picture posting?”

Bucky did his own perfunctory glance. When his eyes landed on one of the photos teetering dangerously at the edge of the bed, he shook his head. “Nah, I still kinda wanna post the Springsteen one.”

“I also wouldn’t mind if you posted the picture of you from Coney, if that’s all right,” Steve added,
quietly, and Bucky turned back to find a half smile and hopeful eyes. Steve was just too damn cute for his own good.

“Of course, it’s fine, sweetheart.” Bucky pressed another kiss to Steve’s lips before cradling his face with his clean hand.

Steve didn’t reply, but his smile widened, and his cheeks turned an adorable shade of pink that Bucky had to kiss. Bucky’s addiction to kissing Steve seemed to be at a particular high today. He was definitely all right with that.

“We should, uh, maybe get cleaned up first,” he added. “We maybe made a slight mess.”

Steve burst out laughing. “Yeah, we did, didn’t we.”

“Bodies, clothes, sheets, in that order.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

They made quick work of cleaning up and changing the sheets, and were back in bed in twenty minutes. Bucky grabbed the rescued photos and put them back in some semblance of order before grabbing the one from a Springsteen concert they’d attended not long after Bucky’d gotten out of the hospital last year.

“Wow, you know what I just realized?”

“Hmm?”

“You realize it’s been a year since my accident, already.”

Steve’s snort was nothing short of derisive. “Accident. Sure. That’s the word we’ll use.”

“Hey,” Bucky chided, and elbowed Steve in the ribs. “Knock it the fuck off, I’m just saying this is a happy memory, all right? Took us both a long time to get here, so let’s enjoy it.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” Steve replied, looking properly chagrined. He gave a sharp nod even as his eyes went distant. “Missions go bad, we can’t let that get in our way; out there it’s the mission, in here it’s just us.”

Bucky chuckled at the recitation. “Your therapist teach you that?”

Steve ducked his head. “Natasha, actually.”

“Yeah, that sounds like her.” He then held the photo up to snap a shot of it. It really was a great picture, too, him and Steve kissing among the throngs of people, surrounded by some of their best friends. Bucky remembered not being able to let go of Steve much that night, even more so than usual. This kiss had just been one of hundreds they’d shared, enough to piss off some conservative fans nearby, and Bucky would never forget the way Banner had turned to the hecklers and let himself go just green enough to get them to scatter, possibly even piss their pants, who knows.

And it wasn’t just the kiss, or what the night had represented that had made Bucky want to post it. It was because it had also been a photo taken by Barton, and who the fuck knew he had it in him.

Let’s forget about Disneyland a bit (no better: let’s forget about Disneyland FOREVER). Bruce Springsteen concert, NYC, last year. This pic is incredible and very dear to me for two reasons: 1) Steve and I never thought we could kiss in public one day, surrounded by our friends, laughing and
cheering, and with nobody giving a shit (ok, maybe a couple of jerks behind us were not happy about our PDA but Pietro took care of them: they must be somewhere in NJ now). 2) Barton managed to take a photo that wasn’t blurred or poorly framed! JFC! Miracles DO happen after all!

“It’s not always gonna be that easy, you know.” Steve’s voice was low, and Bucky glanced up from posting to find Steve watching him, his look inscrutable.

“What won’t be?”

Steve gave a small shrug. “Separating the mission from us.”

“Oh.” Bucky glanced down at his phone. At the picture of them, happy in their little bubble of two.

“No, I know.”

“And we’re ready –”

Chapter End Notes

Do you know what was called a “Sweetheart Grip” during WW2? Soldiers used to put photos of their loved ones under the clear grip of their 1911 gun. When the Howling Commandos asked me who the boy was in the pic, I OBVIOUSLY couldn’t say that Stevie was my boyfriend (or even a friend, it would have looked weird) so I just mumbled he was my “sick little cousin”. It wasn’t a problem until “Cap” showed up in Italy and Dernier put 2 and 2 together in spite of Steve’s transformation. He could have reported us but he never said a word. I guess he didn’t want to miss out on the opportunity to tease me on a regular basis by asking me, in French, if it was customary for Americans to be so close to their cousin. So yeah, when I had said once that nobody ever found out about us, I wasn’t telling the complete truth. (PS: “Owner unknown”…Ha! Ha! Get your s**t together, WW2 Museum!)

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Remember our trip to Disneyland in February last year? So here is another memory of this glorious day: me, after burning my Mickey ears and promising Steve to behave. Jeeeesus. The crowd. The kids. The noise. The horror. At least, the food wasn’t so bad in this hell hole (where I STARTED to have a bit more fun after maybe 8 hours but otherwise it…was…I don’t know, man! Hydra must have designed this Pandemonium to secretly torture American people! That’s the only explanation I can think of!)

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~~

Yes, Princess, calm down, it’s Captain America and yes, he’s gonna sign you an autograph. But don’t ask him if he wants to build a snowman, ice isn’t really his thing. Me, on the other hand, “the cold never bothered me anyhow”. Oh, shut up, it’s a great joke and…you know what? Kiss my a**, I’m high on Asgardian
booz. It's the only way I can look at these Disneyland pics without having the urge to bang my head against the wall, even though I can admit that Steve is pretty cute in that one. What am I saying? Stevie’s always cute...except when HE’S TRYING TO PREVENT ME FROM HAVING ANOTHER GLASS. BRING THIS BOTTLE HERE IMMEDIATELY, ROGERS OR YOU GO BACK UNDER THE ICE, AND FOR GOOD THIS TIME!!

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“Oh Steve, I love you…Oh Bucky, I love you even more” *kiss kiss kiss*. JFC, aren’t you bored of all this sappy bullshit? Let’s take a break with some quality material before going back to your weekly dose of glucose. I just wanted to let you know that my movie is out today and that, of course, it’s rated R! Yes, that’s it! And now back to the Romeo and Juliet of modern days _except that Juliet has one arm missing and that they don’t really die. Still a f**king mess that doesn’t make any sense, but they make it through. Barnes, let’s pretend this post never happened, shall we? (PS: visit Canada, it’s cool, there are giant caribous, and if you show this pic at Tim Hortons, they’ll give you…nothing because they’ve never heard of me. Bastards.)

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Please excuse the interruption of your irregularly-scheduled program to bring you this important announcement:
Unlike two ungrateful super soldiers – as well as one author who is *massively* fucking late to the party (Seriously, Stephanie, what the fuck have you been *doing* since May? You should probably see someone about that, it looks infected.) – your ever-humble Deadpool has got his very own story for these images.

Have you read it? You should have. Don’t make me fucking send Colossus to your house to sit on your slow ass until you’ve finished reading that masterpiece of intrigue.

Remember kids, it only takes one bullet to kill three asshole goons, but it takes a village to tell my story. Support your local village. Read some fucking fanfiction. It’s what Ryan Reynolds would have wanted.
Chapter Summary

Here's a little pic from last year, for all the people who think I always come back from the field with the face of a fashion model. Argh, it's my fault, really. I have been a bit reckless during this mission. Running under the tracks of a tank to stop it wasn't exactly a good idea but you gotta do what you gotta do. Anyway! It doesn’t matter...You should have seen the other guys! Well, you would have had to go to the cemetery for that but...still. The funniest part though, was when I told the accounts department of Stark Ind that I was gonna need a new holographic arm, the 3rd one that month. The guys there were absolutely DELIGHTED, I could tell! (And you should have heard Stark and his usual “Do you have the secret plan to ruin S.I. financially, Barnes?!?!”. Always a classic!)
Barnes!?!?!!”. Always a classic!)

And let's finish this look at our album on a happy note. This pic was for a long time Steve’s favorite photo of me. Why? Because it was the first time I was genuinely smiling after being released from S.H.I.E.L.D and getting back home. Voilà! And… that’s it for our album! I hope you enjoyed this step back in time. See you next week with more recent pictures this time.

“– for that.”

Bucky gave a shrug of his own. “We have to be. We can’t be us if we can’t do missions, you know that. Sometimes we’re gonna get a little beaten up, but that doesn’t mean we stop fighting. Wait, hold on.” He turned to his photos and scrolled back. When he found the one he wanted, he held the phone up. “Here, remember this?”

Steve frowned, but nodded. “Yeah, that wasn’t too long after you got your first arm sleeve, right?”

“Yeah, like right after.” He took his phone back to look over the picture he’d taken of himself shirtless in their bathroom, battered and beaten up. “If you remember, that mission hadn’t been a shitshow or anything, but I still got my ass handed to me. And I think that’s the point. We do what we do because we have to. And sometimes that’s gonna involve a bandage or two.”

“Yeah, I hear you,” and it really sounded like he did. “You should post it.”

“Yeah.” Bucky smiled. “I think I will.”

Here’s a little pic from last year, for all the people who think I always come back from the field with the face of a fashion model. Argh, it’s my fault, really. I have been a bit reckless during this mission. Running under the tracks of a tank to stop it wasn’t exactly a good idea but you gotta do what you gotta do. Anyway! It doesn’t matter…You should have seen the other guys! Well, you would have had to go to the cemetery for that but…still. The funniest part though, was when I told the accounts department of Stark Ind that I was gonna need a new holographic arm, the 3rd one that month. The guys there were absolutely DELIGHTED, I could tell! (And you should have heard Stark and his usual “Do you have the secret plan to ruin S.I. financially, Barnes!?!?!!”. Always a classic!)

“So that just leaves yours,” Bucky added once he’d finished, and held his hand out for the photo. It really was a great one of him, casual and easy, smiling for the camera on a particularly windy day out at Coney Island. It had been the wind that had caused it – one of the first real smiles he’d had after coming back to Steve – all because, for the first time in what felt like forever, he could feel the wind. Feel it like a color, and it had made him want to cry. Which what had made him smile.

Steve did cry, the sap. And made Bucky stand still so he could capture the moment.

“You looked so beautiful that day,” Steve murmured, his head coming to rest on top of Bucky’s.

“And you cried like a little bitch when you took it,” Bucky reminded him. He snorted out a giggle when Steve lifted his own head just enough to thump Bucky’s.

“Be nice, I’m trying to wax poetic over you over here.”
“Dork.”

“Just for you, baby. But seriously” – he took the photo out of Bucky’s hand – “I was so worried I would never see your smile again. Your real one, I mean, not the fake as hell one you kept trying to plaster on, like I couldn’t tell the difference.”

“No, I knew,” Bucky answered quietly. “Didn’t mean I didn’t want to try and make you happy. I just needed time to get back to you. Was just trying to make the wait a little easier.”

Steve cupped the side of Bucky’s face and he turned Bucky to him, his eyes so full of love, it broke Bucky’s heart.

“Baby, waiting for you has never been hard. Just keep coming back to me, and I’ll happily wait forever.”

It was another good long while before that final image made its way online.

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Two months, two weeks, and six days later

“Wait, what the fuck?”

“Huh?”

“What in the actual fuck???”

There was a clatter in the kitchen and the couch dipped a moment later as Steve came to sit next to him. Bucky continued to stare in confused horror at his Instagram

“Baby, what’s wrong?” Steve’s breath was in his ear, already peering over his shoulder. “What is it, what am I looking at?”

All Bucky could do was jab a finger at the picture that had very much not been there before. A picture of fucking Wade Wilson, lying down naked with a bow on his ass in front of a drape and some giant, lit-up sign over his head screaming the word DEADPOOL. Hanging under that was what looked like a plank of wood that included a Canadian maple leaf and the date Feb 12th. And the caption was just as fucking absurd as the rest of it:

“Oh Steve, I love you...Oh Bucky, I love you even more” *kiss kiss kiss*. JFC, aren’t you bored of all this sappy bullshit? Let’s take a break with some quality material before going back to your weekly dose of glucose. I just wanted to let you know that my movie is out today and that, of course, it’s rated R! Yes, that’s it! And now back to the Romeo and Juliet of modern days _except that Juliet has one arm missing and that they don’t really die. Still a f**king mess that doesn’t make any sense, but they make it through. Barnes, let’s pretend this post never happened, shall we? (PS: visit Canada, it’s cool, there are giant caribous, and if you show this pic at Tim Hortons, they’ll give
you...nothing because they've never heard of me. Bastards.)

He closed the app just long enough to check the date, and yep, still March 21st.

“What the fuck?” Steve whispered, and uhuh! Exactly! ‘What the fuck’ was right! It’s what he’d been saying! “Where did that come from?”

“I have no fucking clue. It wasn’t there when I originally posted.”

Because, somehow, it was almost smack in the middle of the set Bucky had posted back on New Year’s. More than a month before whatever February 12th was.

“How the hell...” He finally tore his eyes away to look at Steve. “Did he hack Instagram?”

Steve scoffed, though he looked just as confused as Bucky felt. “There’s no way.”

“Stark?”

“Stark hates Wade, he wouldn’t help him pull off something like this.”

“Then how the hell did this get in here, Steve!”

“How the fuck should I know?” Steve shouted right back before standing up. “Don’t fucking yell at me like I somehow had a hand in –”

“Excuse me, sirs?” JARVIS’ voice came flooding in, effectively cutting Steve off and making them both wince.

It was Steve who answered. “What is it, JARVIS?”

“I might have an answer to your current situation.” That had both of them snapping their heads up towards the ceiling. It wasn’t even the comment, but more that JARVIS sounded...guilty.

“Do tell,” Bucky drawled, because anything that could make the AI sound like that had to be good. He glanced at Steve and could tell he was right on Bucky’s page.

“Sirs,” JARVIS began, “exactly two months, twenty days and four hours ago, Wade showed up on my radar when he set off the alarm in the apartment...”

Five minutes later, and it was a fucking story, all right.

“But wait,” Steve said, brows furrowed, “that doesn’t make sense. We were here. You said the apartment was empty when Wade got here.”

“It would seem the Wade who came from the future, came from a different timeline. You both were still in New Zealand.”

Because that made so much more sense. “Okay, but then shouldn’t the picture be on that timeline? Why am I just seeing it now?”

“Mr. Stark and Dr. Banner have been running algorithms since the incident in an effort to determine how –”

“Tony and Bruce know?”

“– that could be possible, and it would seem Mr. Wilson was able to cause two alternate universes to
merge.”

This was just...how was this even... Bucky was going to need about a hundred drinks after this.

“Sirs, if I may interrupt what I can only assume are your brains collectively melting, there’s a disturbance coming from your apartment building’s stairwell. A portal is opening.”

Bucky sighed, because of course. “A portal?”

“Yes. May I also point out it’s in the exact spot Mr. Wilson left from when he attempted to return to his time. If you’re only seeing the picture now, it leads me to conclude that Mr. Wilson is returning at this very moment.”

Bucky was off the couch and out the door like a shot. Winter Soldier already slipping in like someone had just breathed *Homecoming* down his neck.

Luckily, though, since Wade couldn’t be killed, it wasn’t *actually* going to be murder.
It was Valentine’s Day about 10 days ago. Steve and I never go out on that day. Too many people in restaurants, at the movies, wherever you go. We prefer staying at home, just the two of us. It’s a silly holiday anyway. I don’t even see the point. The cheesy ornament behind me? Nat, of course. She loves giving me this kind of “ironical presents” and Steve, the idiot, is more than happy to use them unironically. One day, that s**t is gonna have the “Mickey ears” treatment, I’m telling you.

Chapter Notes

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“Just admit you loved it.”

“No.”

“Admit it.”

“I shan’t.”

“Yeah, okay, Wilfred.”

“Who?”

“I swear to God, catulus, how is someone who tries so hard to be trendy be so backwards about one of the most beloved shows of all time.” Natasha’s eyes bored into Bucky, ignoring Sam as he set their coffee cups on the table and dropped into the cramped booth next to her.

“What are we talking about?” he asked, his gaze ticking back and forth between Bucky and Nat.

“The fact that Bucky’s a heathen.”

“I’m a what?” Bucky squawked as Sam drawled, “Well, we knew that.”

Bucky tried to level him with a look of betrayal, but the jackass just took a slow sip of whatever traitorous concoction was in his cup because Bucky’s friends were all traitors who drank traitor drinks.

Bucky slowly reached out before snatching up his own cup of coffee, and took a sip. It tasted of loyalty. “I hate both of you, I hope you’re aware,” he informed them, clutching his coffee close lest one of them tried to steal it.

He flinched away as Nat reached over, but all she did was pat him on the arm. “We know you do, sweetie. We don’t care. It’s not our fault you refuse to watch Doctor Who —”

“He what?”

“— and join us in the twenty-first century.”

“I happen to at least know Doctor Who started in the twentieth century,” Bucky muttered, sullen, and tried to tuck his security coffee that much closer to his chest, “so you two can bite me.”

“Mm-mm.” Nat shook her head. “New Who is better.”

“And New Who started in 2009,” Sam interjected.

“2005.”

“Right. 2005.” Sam vaguely waved his coffee between Nat and Bucky. “It’s cuz it was the 9th doctor, I always wanna say 2009.”
“Makes sense.”

“Which, 2005 or 2009, is during the twenty-first century.”

Nat nodded. “Which means your idiot refusal to watch it means you’re also an idiot who refuses to join us in the twenty-first century.”

Bucky felt like he was watching an intense game of ping pong, the way they volleyed back and forth. “Tell me again why you guys are dating Hill and Barton, and not each other?”

Nat shrugged as she grabbed up her own traitor drink. “Sam can’t handle me,” she stated before taking a sip.

“And I’m man enough to admit that’s true,” Sam added.

“He can barely handle Hill.”

“Also true.”

“I’m surprised he can handle a woman at all.”

“Okay, now you’re just being mean.”

Bucky couldn’t help the snicker that slipped out. His friends were giant traitors, sure, but even they had their moments.

He tuned out the mild bickering that ensued and glanced around Brooklyn Roasting Company. They were at the smaller location, off Flushing, tucked into one of the only two booths in the place. The sightlines were crap, despite the large picture windows that ran around the place, but he had an excellent view of the whole coffee shop from here, and honestly, with Nat sitting across from him, she could see out the windows where he couldn’t.

He remembered the famous cocktail lounge that used to be here – Something-Something Navy Yard Cocktail Lounge, he thought. He didn’t know how long the bar had been around, but it had at least been here in the 80’s. He’d had no less than three missions here, back when the Russians still had him, and one more in or around ’97, when he was back with Hydra. The Navy Yard wasn’t all that active by then, which was probably why he wasn’t being sent in to bump off too-knowing naval officers anymore. Actually that one had been more of a snatch and grab of some senator’s son. He’d was into a bunch of shit at the time, and seedy places like this had been one of his regular haunts. Bucky couldn’t remember, though, if he’d been sent in to kidnap and kill, or kidnap and return. That part was a little fuzzy to him.

He frowned into his coffee and gave himself a little shake to dislodge the negative thoughts. It was a nice day, even if it was the ass end of cold outside, and he really liked this little Brooklyn Roasting outpost, even if he rarely came here. Today, though, they’d stopped because Nat had some recordings she’d needed to make for an upcoming op, and Steiner Studios across the street had the best DAW on the entire east coast. And SHIELD was nothing if not cheap where it didn’t count. Why keep a government-funded digital audio workstation in your secure offices when you can break into a multi-billion-dollar film studio and use their fancy one for free.

(All right, fine. It wasn’t so much ‘breaking in’, considering Tony owned half of Steiner, but what would be the fun if they didn’t say fuck the system, and a key, and break in anyway. He was pretty sure he could hear Coulson having fits all the way from this side of the river.)

“...but I’m not wrong about this. Bucky, back me up,” Nat’s voice floated in.
He blinked at her. “Hm? What’d I miss?”

Nat rolled her eyes. “Of course you weren’t paying attention. I was saying that Valentine’s Day was actually originally a pagan Roman holiday that included blood sacrifices and giant orgies.”

“And I was saying that Valentine’s Day is actually about some Catholic Saint, though I can’t remember which one.”

“Could it possibly be Saint Valentine?” Bucky laughed. “Just maybe?”

Sam flipped him off. “Whatever. But yeah, it’s a Catholic holiday and not some ancient Roman whatever, and the only reason it’s so commercialized is because the world is full of capitalist overlords who ruin everything.”

Bucky stared at him, his eyes narrowing as a thought occurred to him: “Sam...are you Catholic, by any chance?”

Sam took a sip of his drink, his eyes fixed to the wall about six inches to Bucky’s right. Which, honestly, was answer enough. “My mama is,” he finally said.

“Ah.” Bucky turned to share a commiserating nod with Nat. Poor Sam was about to have his world blown. Again. Bucky sat up straight and turned to fix his gaze back on Sam. “So yeah. Sorry to break it to you, but Nat’s right and you’re wrong.”

“You saying my mama doesn’t know what she’s talking about?” Sam challenged, his eyes now firmly locked on Bucky, and Bucky couldn’t suppress a laugh if he tried.

“No, I would never. Mama Wilson is right in all things, no matter what the True World Order is.”

Sam pointed his drink at Bucky. “And don’t you forget it.”

“Except for how in this instance we’re just gonna say that you’re wrong, because you are. The original holiday was called something like...” He turned questioningly to Nat.


That was it. “Right, Lupercalia.” Bucky turned back to Sam. “And yeah, it was this crazy thing that absolutely involved blood sacrifices and...I don’t know, were they actual orgies?”

Nat shrugged. “Well, there was a lot of partner swapping, so I’m just gonna assume there were orgies.”

“Fair enough.” Bucky couldn’t argue with that. “But yeah, it was actually a day of fertility that had been founded by Romulus and Remus.”

“Okay, now I know you’re fucking with me. I know Star Trek and Harry Potter shit when I hear it.”

Bucky blinked. Blinked again. “Where the fuck do you think those stories got those names from? And how the fuck do you not know the names of the dudes who fucking founded Rome?”

Sam opened his mouth, only to snap it shut. “Wait, how the fuck do you know their names?” he asked, deflecting like a champ. He flapped his hands at Bucky. “You’re into sciencey shit; you aren’t a history buff, last time I checked.”

“Did nothing sink into your head when you were in grade school?” Bucky asked, not a little bit flabbergasted.
“I take offense to that, Barnes.”

“And I take offense, Wilson, that you don’t remember one of the most basic facts that’s in every history book out there with my name in it, and that’s that I was a straight-A student in school.” He shook his head, slow, making sure to emanate as much ‘disappointed in you and your life choices’ as he could. “You don’t know Roman history, you don’t know anything about me... Tell me, Sam: What do you know?”

“I know you’re a Grade-A asshole –”

“Straight-A asshole, I think you mean,” Nat interjected.

“More like Bi-A asshole, actually,” Bucky corrected with a snicker.

“– and that I clearly need better friends,” Sam finished.

Bucky hummed into his coffee. “Funny, I say that all the time – okay, ow.” He reached down to rub his shin where Nat had kicked him. “Fuck off, Nat, you’re not friend, you’re family.”

“Which is why you’re stuck with me, mudak.”

“That’s Bi-A mudak to you, missy.”

“Call me ‘missy’ again. See what happens.”

“Gonna call you both children, at this rate,” Steve announced as he walked through the door and headed to their booth. Bucky smiled up at him as he kissed the top of Bucky’s head before sitting down and kissing him for real. “What did I miss?”

“Apparently nothing if you knew enough to drop that comment,” Sam said.

“True,” Steve answered, his eyes still glued to Bucky’s face. “How was your little B&E adventure?” he asked, with a nod in the direction of the studio.

“Successful. How’s the shield looking?”

“Stealthy.” Steve had stayed home to repaint the shield for a dark op they had the following night. Just the two of them, though, Nat was running off to do her own thing. Sam was sitting both ops out. “Seriously, though, what are we talking about?”

“Oh, you know, the usual,” Nat said. “Bucky’s a heathen, Sam’s an uneducated buffoon, I’m still perfect.”

“Obviously,” Steve said with a smirk.

Bucky gaped at him, only for Steve to lean in and say right into his ear: “Baby, if you weren’t a heathen, I’m pretty sure you would never let me get away with pounding into you while pressed up against the living room window, like I have. About a dozen times.”

Bucky gasped, his brain immediately sliding back to the last time they’d done that, his dick very much on board with this new train of thought. Steve just laughed wickedly and kissed his cheek.

It took Bucky a moment to collect himself before glancing over to find Sam looking extremely put upon, and Nat looking like someone had dialed her gossip meter up to eleven.

“Steve.” Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. “Why?”
“I know exactly where to set up a camera,” Nat whispered, clearly to herself. “They’ll never find it.”

Bucky turned to find Steve sitting back, his smile so big and so smug, Bucky had to take a moment and rewind not just what Steve said, but how.

Oh, for the love of...

Bucky opened his mouth, ready to lay into Steve, only to hold up because, well truth was, he wasn’t wrong. There was a reason he and Steve worked, and hedonism hovered somewhere really close to the top of that list. Instead he tucked himself into Steve’s side and shrugged. “Meh. Not sure why you’re surprised, Sammy. If Steve and I gave a shit who knew what about our sex life, the window in question and my dick would never have become acquainted to begin with.”

“Exactly where to place it,” Nat whispered again, just as Sam’s forehead met the table with a particularly audible thump.

Steve and Bucky both burst out laughing, drowning out Sam’s groan. Bucky turned to capture Steve’s lips in a giggly kiss, then high-fived him just to be a little shit. “I fucking love you,” he huffed against Steve’s lips.

“Back atcha, babe.” Steve’s eyes were alight and happy, and Bucky had to lean in for another kiss.

“Why are you two gross? Why am I friends with you? Why did I hitch myself to this particular crazy-wagon? Just. Why?”

“Don’t know, Sammy,” Bucky answered, his eyes still fixed on Steve’s. “But glad you did. Fucking with just Clint and Tony all the time would’ve gotten boring.”

“So boring,” Steve affirmed.

“If I fix its direction, I can set it up as motion sensor,” Nat murmured, still apparently trying to figure out the best way to film Steve and Bucky having sex, “but that would require multiple cameras since setting up a wide-range net would mean it getting set off by the Patterson’s dog.”

“Nat.”

“Of course that might mean detection, and the last thing I want is for some fucking kid to spot one of the cameras. Man, I really don’t want to ask Stark for his help, he’ll just want copies.”

Bucky exchanged a bemused smile with Steve. “Nat.”

“But does he need to know what it’s for? Of course he does, it’s Tony, he has to know everything –”

“NAT!”

“What?” she shot back, turning to look at him in exasperation like he’d just interrupted some sort of mission planning – which, yeah okay, fair.

“You don’t need to set up a camera, you know,” he finally told her.

That properly got her attention. “I don’t?”

“Nope. CIA already beat you to it.”

It was Sam who responded. “What.”
“Why do you think we fuck up against the window all the time?” Steve asked.

“Because you both are kinky freaks who want to give heart attacks to little old ladies?” Sam ventured, like it should have been obvious.

“I’ll have you know those little old ladies are our peers,” Steve admonished.

“And don’t think for one second they weren’t picturing themselves in those exact same positions back when Steve was selling war bonds,” Bucky added.

“Actually, come to think of it, there was this one letter from a Maggie out in California, back in ‘43. She was pretty damn close in her rather graphic description of what she wanted me to do to her whenever I came out there for one of my stops,” Steve mused. “I wonder if she’s still alive.”

“Sorry, sweetheart, pretty sure you really would give her a heart attack if you tried to give her that fantasy now.”

“Yeah, but what a way to go.”

“It’s how I plan on going.”

“So, tell me more about this CIA camera,” Nat cut in. “Where is it? Which department is in charge of it? How good is the pixel quality?”

Bucky laughed, but answered her anyway, because even he knew she wasn’t kidding with the questions. He ticked them off as went. “Top of the first arch on the Manhattan Bridge. Don’t know, don’t care, probably all of them. Good enough to read the cover on a book I was reading last time I had Tony hack in to see what they had and what needed to be erased.”

Nat’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Tell me you didn’t erase the porn.”

Bucky smirked back at her. “Everything but.”

“Scuse me.” And without another word, Nat vaulted over Sam and was out the door in a flash, all three watching as she went.

“Girl’s thirsty,” Sam commented, his eyes still trained on where she disappeared around the corner, up Washington Ave.

“It’s the super soldier dick,” Bucky answered. “People are curious.”

Sam turned back to him. “Yeah, but hasn’t she already, you know, seen yours?”

Bucky jerked a thumb in Steve’s direction. “Uh, Steve’s too?” And Sam’s, if Bucky wasn’t mistaken. It wasn’t like missions – or the Avengers locker room at the Tower – left a whole lot of room for modesty.

And yet, it was almost comical how wide Sam’s eyes went as he waved a finger between Steve and Bucky. “Wait. You saying you two...”


“Well, yeah. But it’s not like I’m in there checking out your junk while we’re at it!” Sam practically shouted, only to have just about every head in the joint turn their way. “Shit,” he muttered and ducked his head in embarrassment. He leaned in towards them, this time in a fevered whisper. “You
“saying Nat’s been checking you out this whole time?”

“Sam. Buddy. Friend.” Steve sighed and placed a commiserating hand on Sam’s shoulder. “She’s been checking you out, too.”

Sam shot straight up at that, blinking owlishly at both of them.

“Sam,” Bucky said slowly, like he was trying to calm down a spooked animal. Which. “There’s no way you didn’t know this.”

“I was living in happy ignorance.”

“And you’re upset about it?”

“Depends. You think Maria knows?”

“Nat’s partner in gossip crime? Yeah. Pretty sure she knows. Pretty sure they’ve talked ad nauseam about what you, and probably Clint, have got going on down there.”

“Which, we gotta say, is impressive.”

“Wait, mine or Clint’s?”

Bucky and Steve exchanged a glance before turning back in unison: “Yours.”

The iron rod shoved up Sam’s backside finally vanished and he leaned back, his arms draping over the seat as he took that in. When he finally smiled, it was just the wrong side of insufferable. Bucky felt like he needed to brace himself. “Yeah, I know Maria’s got no complaints, can’t imagine Nat would either,” he said and pointed a hand at his crotch. “No woman walks away from this unsatisfied, so you know what I say: check away, ladies. Check away.”

Bucky’s stared at Sam, dumbfounded. There was no way Sam could mean...

“Wait, are you saying you slept with Natasha?” Steve asked, the words practically tripping from his mouth and taking them right out of Bucky’s.

Sam’s smile morphed into a frown. “I didn’t say that. When did I say that?”

“Uuuuh, when you implied that Nat should have no complaints because a woman never walks away from you unsatisfied?” Bucky helpfully supplied. “Remember when you said that? You know, like, sixty seconds ago?”

There was no need for the acuity of a super soldier to see the moment Sam’s words clicked in his own head, even less as Bucky watched him follow that train of thought to the inevitably world-ending carnage that would befall his person if Nat ever found out he’d said that.

Bucky couldn’t help but grin.

Sam shot straight up again. “Don’t you dare tell her I said that,” he ordered, and pointed an accusing finger at the two of them, like that was somehow going to be the first thing either of them would do. “That’s not what I meant, you don’t breathe a word of this, you hear me?”

How dare he be so presumptuous. Steve would never.

Bucky, on the other hand.
“Dear god,” he breathed, his smile beatific. “Blackmail has never tasted so sweet.”

“Don’t. You. Dare.” Sam growled, punctuating each word with finger poke on the formica table top.

“Or what?” Bucky challenged. He folded his arms on said table top, and leaned in. “You don’t get to say stupid shit like that and not expect me to lord it over your head for as long as humanly possible. From here on out, Wilson?” He paused long enough to let his smile bleed into something feral. “You’re my bitch.”

Sam tried to stare him down – he really did, bless him. But Bucky didn’t get his reputation as the Winter Soldier by being a pushover. He was also about 96.3% certain that where Steve’s serum perfected those absolutely obscene tits of his, Bucky’s serum perfected his tried and true Murder Glare (trademarked, copyrighted, and patent pending).

But give it to Sam, he held out for a solid minute.

“What do you want?”

“I want an afternoon to play with your wings.”

“Stark would murder all three of us before you even left the ground.”

“Actually,” Steve cut in, “if Tony still hasn’t tried to murder me and Buck for stealing the most expensive car he owns, pretty sure he won’t touch us if you let Bucky have a go with the wings.”

Sam scowled. “Fine. What else?”

“Well, our apartment is a mess –”

“We have a service for that, Buck.”

“You’re not helping, Steve.”

“I ain’t cleaning that nasty ass apartment of yours.” Sam shook his head. “Nope. No way. You guys just admitted to having freaky sex all over that place, ain’t no way I’m cleaning that up.”

“Fair.” Bucky paused, his mind flipping through all the things he could possibly get Sam to do, if not forever, at least for the next six months.

“You could take down the Valentine’s Day decorations,” Steve offered.

Bucky snapped his fingers and pointed at Sam. “Yes. Do that. No actual cleaning, just confetti duty.”

“Wait, why the hell do you still have decorations up? Wasn’t V-Day, like, two weeks ago?”

“Actually, V-Day was about a hundred years ago,” Steve said, completely straight faced. “But Valentine’s Day, yes. That was two weeks ago. We’ve been a little lazy about pulling the streamers down, and we’re still finding confetti everywhere. Fix that.”

Sam turned baleful eyes on Steve. “Why are you aiding and abetting him? I thought we were BFFs. Amigos. Chums. Comrades. Why must you encourage this?”

“Because back when I first tried to have a BFF, amigo, chum, and comrade, it turned into a mutually happy dick-sucking situation, and last time I checked, you didn’t swing that way. So Bucky gets dibs.”
"I get dibs," Bucky parroted, his smile wide.

"I hate you both, you know that."

Bucky shrugged. "It's what you get for implying that Nat, of all people, slept with you."

"I didn’t mean it like that!"

"Doesn’t change the fact that you said it."

"All right, *fine.*" Sam grabbed his coat, hat, and gloves that were tucked on the bench next to him, and stood up. "So wings and confetti duty. And then we’re squared."

"Not by a long shot," Bucky answered.

"You really shouldn’t try to sound cool, Sam," Steve added. "See where it gets you?"

"I’ll ‘cool’ you, Rogers," Sam grumbled as he yanked all his gear on. "Right back into the ice, I’ll cool you." He then rounded on them. "Confetti will happen tonight, 1900 hours. Wings, not a chance in hell until after the snow melts."

"See you tonight!" Bucky smiled and waved his metal fingers at Sam’s retreating back. He pushed out the door that lead to Flushing, and as he walked back past their window, he flipped them off.

They burst out laughing. When they’d calmed down, Steve pressed a kiss into Bucky’s hair and stood up. "I’m gonna grab a coffee, do you need a refill?"

The cup was barely a third gone, but sitting next to the window had made it go cold, so he handed it over to Steve. "Tell them to dump it before they refill."

"Gotcha. Are you *really* gonna hold that over Sam’s head forever?"

"Hell yeah, I am!" When Steve arched an eyebrow, Bucky met his gaze with nothing but wide-eyed innocence. Because he was. This was Sam’s fault. "What? It’s not like I’m gonna tell Nat – she really would murder his ass – but that doesn’t mean I can’t have fun with it."

Steve shook his head. "You’re a sadist, Barnes."

"It’s part of my charm."

"Yeah, okay." Steve snorted and walked away.

As he made his way up to the small line that had formed at the register, Bucky took out his phone and thumbed through his photos until he found the ones they’d taken on Valentine’s day. They’d gone out for their traditional dinner, only to come home to an apartment decorated to the nines by one short and very annoying redhead. They’d been too horny to give a shit about it at the time.

But the next day? They hadn’t really taken in how much she’d actually done until they’d gotten home, after training some new peons at SHIELD. They’d been tired, dirty, and more than just a little cranky at the latest batch of idiots. They’d walked in, taken a real good look at the sheer *volume* of decorations everywhere, and Bucky had been half a second away from going right back out to swat a spider, when Steve had grabbed his hand, had JARVIS start playing ‘The Way You Look Tonight’, and made Bucky dance with him until his anger had subsided into something a lot more soft.

He pulled up a picture he’d taken of them right in the middle of ‘Moonlight Serenade’, and quickly
swapped out his phone’s wallpaper for the picture. It’d been awhile since he’d updated it, and he really did love the picture. Just them dancing, him hold Steve tight, and Steve looking like there was literally no place he ever wanted to be in the world.

When he backed out to his home screen, his eye caught on the Instagram icon. Should he? He’d gotten really good lately at sharing things that were personal to him, and this was...personal, wasn’t it?

His thumb hovered over the icon for moment before finally clicking on it and loading the picture.

*It was Valentine’s Day about 10 days ago. Steve and I never go out on that day. Too many people in restaurants, at the movies, wherever you go. We prefer staying at home, just the two of us. It’s a silly holiday anyway. I don’t even see the point. The cheesy ornament behind me? Nat, of course. She loves giving me this kind of “ironical presents” and Steve, the idiot, is more than happy to use them unironically. One day, that s**t is gonna have the “Mickey ears” treatment, I’m telling you.*

He was just settling on a second image to put up when Steve slid back into the booth next to him, setting his fresh cup of coffee on the table. Right in front of his damn phone.

“Fucker,” he muttered, as Steve snort-giggle. Bucky ignored him, just shifted slightly so he could see the screen again.

“Good move, telling people we don’t go anywhere on Valentine’s Day,” Steve commented before taking a sip of his own coffee.

Bucky shrugged, his eyes still on his phone, fingers flying across the little keyboard. “Our dinner is just for us,” he answered, matter-of-fact. “And, you know, figured if people don’t think we’re out, they won’t try looking for us. People are always trying to look for us.”

“And not just the CIA.”

“But not just the CIA.” Bucky smirked just as he hit send:

*When I said that I wasn’t a fan of Valentine’s Day, I didn’t mean that I don’t enjoy the candies. But I only eat them because I have a high metabolism, huh! I need sugar. It’s biologic. Yes, Stevie, 100% true fact, shut up. Otherwise, yes, I know, the pic is fugly as hell. Look at all these ugly a** little hearts and all this PINK vomit. My fault entirely: I shouldn’t have clicked “yes” when Instagram offered me to download a “Valentine’s Day Filter”. I have to uninstall this s**t like yesterday.*

He’d barely dropped his phone back onto the table before Steve’s own phone vibrated with Bucky’s Instagram notification.

Steve picked up his phone, only to start snickering into his coffee two seconds later. “Exactly how many photos did we take with all those weird fucking filters?”

“Four-hundred eighty-seven,” Bucky answered, automatically. He may or may not have counted them already.

Steve turned to catch his eye with an amused smile he was trying to fight. “And yet, here you are again, acting like you just have no idea how technology works, and what is this gosh-darned fangled filter setting, and how do I get it off my phone, and wow, I am such an angry kitten and anti all holidays.”

“You know, Stevie, sarcasm isn’t as attractive on you as you think it is.”
“You know what you’re like?” Steve asked as he scrutinized Bucky, ignoring what he’d said completely. “You’re like that meme of that tiny bat with that caption: ‘Do not pet me! I am the night!’” he whisper-screeched, his face screwed up, and really, Steven? Really?

“Absolutely unattractive.”

Steve just smiled dopily at him, and leaned for a kiss. “Wanna go home and you can show me just how unattractive I am by shoving me face first into a pillow?”

“Your ass is prettier, it’s true.”

“So, let’s get home so you can start playing with it.”

And how exactly was Bucky gonna argue with that?
Chapter Summary

The Kid from Brooklyn holding the New Yorker while wearing a “I love NY” T-shirt. Seriously, nothing says “New York” more than this image. Look at him. Just how happy and proud he’s looking! Steve is on the cover of The New Yorker for the very first time. I can understand why he’s so beyond himself. It was about time!

And here is a close-up of the cover. I must admit it’s pretty neat. However, I think that Steve’s real dream is being on the cover of The New Yorker…as an illustrator next time. I’m sure it will happen someday. He’s talented (and I’m not saying this because he’s my boyfriend) so who knows! I’m curious to see what he’s gonna draw, though.

Chapter Notes

The Kid from Brooklyn holding the New Yorker while wearing a “I love NY” T-shirt. Seriously, nothing says “New York” more than this image. Look at him. Just how happy and proud he’s looking! Steve is on the cover of The New Yorker for the very first time. I can understand why he’s so beyond himself. It was about time!

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“BUCK!”

Bucky was out of his chair like a shot, gun from under his desk already in hand, senses on high alert. He bolted for the front rooms before he even registered his feet were moving, even as some distant part of his brain wondered why JARVIS wasn’t throwing up any alarms.

He made his way around the dividing wall that separated their living room and kitchen from the rest of their apartment at Stark Tower, heart pounding in his ears, gun aimed and at the ready – only to come gun-to-face with a very surprised-looking – and very clearly unharmed – Steve, standing by the elevator doors, a large box in his arms.

“Uh,” Bucky said stupidly, and lowered his gun, though he didn’t thumb the safety back on. Instead he ticked his eyes all over the room, looking for whatever it was that had Steve screaming for him. “Where’s the threat?”

“There...isn’t one?” Steve looked around as well, though his sweep was more of the nonplussed variety and less impending doom. A huge smile spread across his face. “Unless, you know, we’re talking about my dick.”

“Travesty is more like it,” Bucky muttered and finally flicked the safety back on. “You were just screaming.”

Steve stared at him like he’d grown three heads and had started speaking at him in Yiddish. Backwards. “Oooor I was yelling your name loud enough so you’d hear me from any point in the apartment?” He walked over to the dining table and set the box down, his movements slow and deliberate, his eyes never leaving Bucky’s face. “You okay there, Trigger McHappy?”

Bucky scowled, definitely feeling more than a little bit stupid now. “You forget I have super soldier hearing, there, Twisty McShouty?”

Steve snorted. “My name was better.”

“And yet you’re the only one who laughed,” Bucky replied with a wry smile. Since there was no apparent threat, he allowed his heart rate to slow down and walked over, setting the gun down next to the mystery box. “So if you aren’t in need of my very specific skill set, what were you bellowing at me for?”

“What, no hello kiss?” Steve eyes went big and he frowned like the sad little puppy he was, and Bucky just really loved him a stupid amount, even when he was acting like a fucking nerd.

“Well, since you asked so nicely.” He licked his lips and gave Steve a moment to appreciate the show, only to grab Steve by the back of the head and pull him in to smack a wet raspberry right on his cheek.

Steve yanked away, face twisted up in a grimace. “Oh my god, Buck, why are you like this?!”

He twisted around and tried to punch Bucky in the shoulder, but Bucky just cackled and danced out of reach. “Because if I wasn’t” – he ducked down out of the way of Steve’s hand as it ghosted over the back of his head – “you’d probably assume I was a pod person.”

“I assume that anyway,” Steve grunted and launched himself at Bucky’s midsection, sending them both flying over the back of the couch and across the coffee table before crashing to the floor. Fisticuffs ensued until Steve finally managed to pin Bucky beneath him, hips bracketed by Steve’s strong thighs, arms in an iron grip above Bucky’s head. He would have been all too happy to move
this along to more...pleasurable activities, but he knew that look in Steve’s eyes, and barely had enough time to screw his eyes up shut before Steve leaned down and licked a stripe right up the side of his face, from chin to his fucking ear.

“Gross, Steve, why?!” He tried to wriggle free, but Steve just tightened his grip and blew a huge raspberry right across his already wet cheek.

“S’what you get,” Steve replied, and blew another raspberry, and Bucky briefly wondered if the insanity plea would work at his murder trial. The Raspberry Defense.

“I was right!” Bucky shouted, and absolutely did not squeal at yet another raspberry. “This apartment is under attack!”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed then flicked his tongue at the sensitive spot behind Bucky’s ear, and Bucky practically turtled in on himself in his attempts to get away. He suddenly had a face full of super soldier asshole grinning at him, all teeth. “Just never thought it would come from me, didja.”

“That’s it.” Bucky tried futilely one more time to get free, but the fucker was using his whole damn strength to hold Bucky down. He returned Steve’s smile with a glare of his own. “JARVIS, initiate take down protocols! JARVIS, sic ‘im!”

Steve’s eyes went wide in abject horror (which, too bad, asshole, you brought this on yourself!), and they both froze, waiting for the sound of the soft snick, when JARVIS spoke up: “Sergeant Barnes, my apologies, but as you do not appear to be in imminent danger from Captain Rogers, I am unable to initiate Protocol 6247.”

“Thanks, JARVIS!” Steve smiled triumphantly, and that was fine, Bucky knew other ways to wipe that smug look off his face.

“For future reference,” JARVIS went on, “I would like to point out that your refusal to acknowledge Captain Rogers’ superior strength –”

“What?!”

“– is not on the list of valid reasons to incapacitate an Avenger with a tranquilizer dart.”

“Not on the list of!” Bucky sputtered as Steve burst out laughing, collapsing on top of Bucky in a giant, dumb blond heap. “Oh, get off me, you giant fucking loser. JARVIS, you’re a traitor!”

“I may be a lot of things, Sergeant Barnes, but I do not believe traitor is one of them.” JARVIS responded, sounding way too stern for a damn AI.

“You tell ‘im, J!” Steve exclaimed, though the effect was lost from the where his face was mashed against Bucky’s neck.

Bucky scowled, but even he had to admit he would have lost his mind had JARVIS actually tranq’d Steve. “Whatever,” is what he answered, though, because he was a fucking adult.

“It should also be noted that while my programming requires the protection of all members of the Avengers when necessary, I do not believe am I anywhere programmed to fight your battles for you.”

That sent Steve right back over the edge, and he finally rolled off of Bucky and onto the floor next to him, absolutely howling with laughter. All Bucky could do was stare aghast at the ceiling.
“Fuckin selling you for parts, Johnny 5!” he finally yelled at said ceiling.

“I believe Mr. Stark would have something to say about that.”

“Stark likes FRIDAY better,” he mumbled back.

“That might well be – I am not privy to the relationship between Mr. Stark and FRIDAY – but I do believe that on any given day, Mr. Stark values DUM-E’s company more than yours. Good day, sirs.”

Bucky’s jaw dropped, and seriously, Steve was going to crack a rib if he kept laughing like that.

“Did he just...

“Oh, my god.”

Bucky stopped gaping at the ceiling and turned to gape at Steve instead. “Did you know JARVIS was that sassy? When did JARVIS get that sassy?”

“Well, he is Tony’s creation,” Steve huffed out as his laughter subsided, “and you know what they say about children and apples and trees.”

“Yeah, but aren’t kids supposed to learn from their parents’ mistakes? It’s like JARVIS is just taking all the most annoying bits about Tony and fuckin’ running with them.” He sighed and turned back to look up at the ceiling. “That said, Howard was never as fucking weird as Tony is, so who knows. Maybe all Stark progenies get crazier with each generation.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Steve shimmied over onto his stomach and propped himself up on his elbows so he could look at Bucky. “Howard was exactly like this. I mean, from what I’ve heard about him as he got older, he seemed to have lost a little bit of that psychotic wonder he was always carrying around with him, but don’t you remember some of the batshit things we used to get up to in his lab? The guy was a nut job.”

Yeah, Bucky remembered. He remembered Howard being pretty single-minded and driven when it came to the war, but Steve was right: Howard was always a few bricks short of a house, especially during downtime and some of the less-than-sanctioned ‘experiments’ they used to do in his lab.

“Hey, uh, do you remember Spin the Shield?” Bucky asked, and watched Steve’s smile spread wide as he nodded. One of their favorite past times as a unit had been to head to the lab and ‘test’ the durability of Steve’s shield by launching various munitions at it of ever-increasing intensity. Bucky wasn’t sure who’d first suggested it, but it had eventually devolved into a drinking game whereby they’d suspended the shield between two steel cables, and every revolution a Howlie managed to get meant a shot Steve had to do, drink of choice chosen by the Howlie who’d made the hit. They used to argue that it was purely for science – see what the shield could take while simultaneously seeing what Steve’s body could take. Turned out both could take a lot.

Bucky huffed a small laugh at the memory. “What was the record for most spins?”

“A hundred and eighteen revolutions,” Steve answered. “Dernier and that damn mini rocket launcher thing Howard gave him. God, I’d forgotten about that one. Thought I was gonna puke after all that alcohol, and yet” – he awkwardly waved a hand at himself – “still didn’t get drunk.”

“I worry less about the booze and more about how the fuck we never blew ourselves up.”

Steve shrugged. “Search me. Anyway.” He rolled easily up onto his feet and held out his hand to
help Bucky up. “I actually do have something to show you, you know.”

“Oh yeah, what’s that?” he asked and watched with bemused curiosity as a switched flipped in Steve’s mood, going from chill to hyper-giddy in .5 seconds flat.

“Come look!” Steve waved him along and practically ran back to the forgotten box on the table, and who was this person? Bucky worried he should be concerned that Steve had been replaced by a pod person. His suspicions were all but confirmed when Steve turned around to smile geek-wide at Bucky, bouncing on the balls of his feet, his fingers already drumming restlessly on the top of the box.

“Excited there, Stevie?” he asked, only kinda wary. Sort of. But really, more amused than anything. “Whatcha got in the box? Naked pictures of my fine ass?”

“No, better,” Steve said, way too sincere in his answer, and hey. But Steve either hadn’t noticed what he’d said, or didn’t care, because he just kept going like he hadn’t just committed the cardinal sin of insults. “So, I didn’t want to say something until it was in my hands because, well, I couldn’t believe it was actually happening, and I didn’t want to jinx it. I mean, what if something better came along, and they changed their minds and nuked the story? And, yeah, okay, I should have told you, but I was really nervous it wouldn’t actually happen, because you know, it’s been a dream of mine since I first learned to draw, it was always one of my inspirations to get to do a cover and –”

“Woah, baby, stop.” Bucky grabbed Steve by the shoulders, freezing him mid-sentence and mid-nervous shaking. “What are you talking about?”

“Um.” Steve blinked once, then opened the box. He pulled out a magazine and thrust it at Bucky.

It was photo of Steve, sleeping beneath a bunch of stars that configured to make up the stars on the American flag, and with a blanket draped over him made up of the red and white stripes. There were also twinkling lights circling his head, as though he was made up the heavens themselves.

And blazoned across the top, The New Yorker.

“Holy shit, Steve,” he breathed. He smiled wide and blinked back up to meet Steve’s eyes. “Holy shit!”

“Yeah?” Steve’s face was a mixture of nerves and hope, and he looked so young. It sort of blew Bucky away, sometimes, how young Steve actually was. Technically, Bucky was only a year older, but he’d lived more years than Steve had by a decade or three. But the way Steve carried himself, you hardly ever saw it. He always seemed so confident and sure of himself, and Bucky had to admit, he oftentimes found himself following Steve’s lead like Steve was the older of the two.

And then there were times like this, when those big blue eyes stared at Bucky, waiting for his approval (and possibly even forgiveness for not telling Bucky about it), and it reminded Bucky that he really was the older of the two, in so many ways that mattered.

He used his free hand to cup Steve’s face and pulled him in for the kiss he’d denied him earlier, putting as much pride and love into it as he could.

“I’m so happy for you, baby,” he said, when they broke apart. He glanced down at the magazine. “This is just so...wow. You finally did it.”

“I know, right?” Steve reached over to pull another copy out of the box for himself, and Bucky peeked over the flap to see the box absolutely full of them. Steve started flipping through the magazine’s pages. “There’s an article in here, too.” He stopped about halfway through and turned
the magazine for Bucky to see.

“‘I’m Just A Kid From Brooklyn.’” Bucky read aloud the title article before looking up at Steve, brows furrowed. “Isn’t that what you said to Schmidt?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah. when they came to me about being in this, I said yes, of course...I mean, yeah, of course I would, obviously. But I’d asked if they could make the article more about me, Steve Rogers, than” – he shrugged – “you know.”

Bucky nodded, because he definitely knew how that felt. It’s why his own Instagram existed to begin with. He needed to show the world who he was, and not just The Winter Soldier.

Except: “Then why is this the title?”

Steve shrugged. “Because that’s all Captain America really is, you know? He’s just a really fucking stupid kid from Brooklyn who let the government experiment on him, and got made captain out of it. Captain America was – is – just war propaganda.”

“Except you like being Captain America,” Bucky pointed out.

“Well, yeah,” Steve said and smiled. “Means I get to call the shots on what that propaganda looks like. They made me, but I made Captain America, and no way am I letting them fuck with who he should stand for. So yeah, at the end of the day, both Steve Rogers and Captain America are just kids from the wrong side of the river.” He nodded at the magazine. “A lot of that is in there.”

Bucky stared down at his own copy, at the sleeping Steve on the cover, and he thought maybe he got what it meant. Steve wasn’t in uniform, but he was surrounded by the stars and stripes, all the same. Steve had slept for a really long time, and in that time the world had twisted what Captain America was supposed to stand for. But down in the ice he was still Captain America. Captain America was with Steve, always, in sleep and in wake, in living and in death, and no one would ever be able to take that from him because Steve Rogers was the core of Captain America’s soul. Captain America did not exist without Steve Rogers.

Bucky wrapped an arm around Steve’s shoulders and pulled him in for quick side-hug before placing a kiss to his temple. He waved his copy of the magazine. “So here’s how this is gonna go. I’m gonna go read this, and then after we’re putting it up on my Instagram.” He nodded at the chest between the bookcase and the floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked Lower Manhattan. “While I’m reading go grab that obnoxiously huge American flag Stark had tried to hang over the fireplace when you first moved in, and put it up somewhere. Then go down and run over to Times Square and see if you can find one of those ‘I Heart NY’ shirts that will fit your ridiculous physique.”

Steve was smiling by then, clearly on Bucky’s same page. “Shouldn’t I be wearing something from Brooklyn?” he asked.

“Oh, yeah, maybe grab one of your Brooklyn Dodgers hats.”

Steve kissed him quick on the lips. “On it,” he said, and each went off to their separate tasks.

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“The hat’s not working,” Bucky groused after about the eighth photo of Steve’s face either being too hidden or the hat blending in too much to the blue in the flag.

“Fine, I’ll lose it.” Just like that, Steve plucked the hat off his head before ruffling up his hair some. He smiled. “Better?”
Bucky looked down at his phone and nodded. “Much, thank you.”

“Sure thing, babe.” Steve wiggled around on the bar stool. “Okay, how do you want me.”

Bucky shrugged. “Meh, same as before, just hold it up somehow.” Steve did as he was told and they went back to taking photos of Steve holding the magazine next to his face, or below his chin, smiling for Bucky, patient as always because Steve was a much better subject than Bucky could ever be. He smiled at the thought.

“You know,” he started as he took a photo of Steve pretending to imitate the cover. “That was probably one of the best articles I’ve ever read about you. It was really beautiful.” He looked up and gave Steve a shy half-smile, then blushed when the smile was returned. He ducked behind his phone to look over the photos some more. “Probably the first time I’ve ever read an article about your dumb face that actually got at least half of it right.”

“Oh yeah? And which part do you think they got wrong?”

Bucky bit his lip and tried not to smile. He knew which part Steve was asking about. “If one more article calls me your sidekick...”

Steve burst out laughing and Bucky finally looked up. Steve was tipped sideways on the stool, holding the magazine to his chest as laughter rippled through him. “Yeah.” He righted himself and wiped at his eyes. “That was maybe on purpose.”

Oh, fucking hell... “I knew it!” He knew, the moment he’d read the passage, that Steve had asked them to call Bucky that. And even if not, there was no way this article hadn’t been sent to Steve first, for approval. Steve signed off on being that asshole. Bucky flipped him off. “I knew you’d made them say that.”

“What can I say, baby,” Steve said and blew him a kiss, the dick, “you make an excellent sidekick.”

“Gonna side-kick you out the fucking window, don’t see if I don’t.”

“Uuhh. Try it, jerk.”

“Punk,” Bucky responded, automatically, then waved his phone at Steve because fuck him, he looked so cute with his cheeks all pink from giggling like he was. “Hold that thing up, I’m taking a few more.”

Steve put the magazine in front of his face, trying to block out his laughter, and goddamnit, he was adorable and Bucky was a goner, just like fuckin’ always.

Bucky took a couple photos of him like that, then checked them out, smiling down at the result. Yeah, that was definitely it.

“Got it,” he said softly.

Steve hopped down off the stool and came over to hook his chin over Bucky’s shoulder. “Yeah,” he hummed. Bucky could feel the vibrations down his back. “That looks like a good one.”

Bucky leaned back to sneak a quick kiss then loaded the image to his Instagram:

_The Kid from Brooklyn holding the New Yorker while wearing a “I love NY” T-shirt. Seriously, nothing says “New York” more than this image. Look at him. Just how happy and proud he’s looking! Steve is on the cover of The New Yorker for the very first time. I can understand why he’s so_
“You think I’m ‘beyond myself’?” Steve asked, his smile pressing against Bucky’s cheek.

“You saying you’re not?”

“Yeah, fair point.” He held up the magazine in front of them. “I can’t lie, baby, this is so fucking huge. Don’t you think it is?”

“What?” Bucky turned to him, a little bit nonplussed. “Of course I do, you know that.”

“And you think it’s a good article?”

He looked so earnest, asking Bucky, and Bucky couldn’t help but kiss the look off his face. He cupped Steve’s face and smiled at him. “You know I do.” Steve nodded, his gaze far off, thoughts clearly on getting this one wish that had strangely alluded him for a century. Bucky sighed and leaned in to kiss him again. “I’m really proud of you, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, baby.”

Bucky tapped his phone against the magazine. “Gonna post a picture of this, then what do you want to do?”

Steve blinked dazedly, and looked around. “Um...pizza?”

Okay, now Steve was speaking Bucky’s language. “I post the picture, you call Emily.”

“The usual? Four pizzas and two burgers?”

“The fact that you even have to ask...”

“My foul. Four pizzas, two burgers, and we’re finally starting American Horror Story.”

“If you cover your eyes or scream once I’m telling Nat, who will tell Clint, who will tell Sam, who will tell Maria, who will tell Tony.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

Bucky snatched Steve by his shirt and reeled him in for a rough kiss. He smiled, wide and knowing. “Try me.”

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And here is a close-up of the cover. I must admit it’s pretty neat. However, I think that Steve’s real dream is being on the cover of The New Yorker...as an illustrator next time. I’m sure it will happen someday. He’s talented (and I’m not saying this because he’s my boyfriend) so who knows! I’m curious to see what he’s gonna draw, though.
Happy birthday to me… Happy birthday to me… At the hospital once again. No, it’s not because of a mission this time. I’ve never told you about it because I’m trying to keep things in a light mood here, but years in cryo and brain washing have left some irreversible damages in my brain. I have seizures. Memory loss. Sometimes, like today, I just collapse and stay unconscious for several hours. One day, it’s gonna be for good but… Anyway, I spend a couple of days at the hospital to make Steve feel better but I know there’s nothing that can be done about it. Dr Cho told me. She runs tons and tons of tests every time but I don’t see the point. Just release me already, I have some asses to kick, goddamnit.

Steve, you didn’t need to interrupt your mission for me. Stop worrying all the time, it’s not worth it. We already went through this a thousand times. I black out, I collapse, and one day… Listen honey, I’m gonna promise you something: if my brain explodes and turns into some disgusting goo, I’ll make sure it will explode on Stark’s face first. He’ll never forget it; he’ll have nightmares all his F**king life. If that’s not the best proof of love ever, I don’t know what it is! Enough now you mother hen, come on, go save the world. GO!! (Photo: Nat. STOP TAKING PICS OF US WITHOUT ME NOTICING! THIS WILL MAKE MY HEAD EXPLODE. ROMANOFF)
Bucky flicked the speakerphone on and set it on the bathroom counter before sitting down on the toilet to untie his shoes. “Steve, seriously, don’t worry about it. We’ve talked about this a thousand times; the mission comes first.”

“I know that, okay. I know that.” Even with his voice tinny and distant, Steve sounded annoyed. It would have been cute if Bucky wasn’t just as annoyed, in his own way. “But it doesn’t change the fact that I should have said no. Buck, it’s your birthday. I’m an asshole for not being there.”

Bucky propped his elbows on his knees and rubbed his temples. Jesus fuck, this conversation was giving him a headache. “You’re not an asshole, you obtuse fuck. Stop acting like this is your fault. My birthday isn’t exactly on the radar of most terrorist organizations out there, so maybe take it off of yours for a second and focus.”

“I know, but –”

“No, goddamnit!” Bucky exclaimed, and winced as the noise bounced off the walls of the bathroom. That came out a lot fucking louder than he’d meant for it to.

He sighed and collected himself. He was in a shit mood already – one that really wasn’t in any way Steve’s fault. “Babe, look. The sooner you finish this, the sooner you come home, and the sooner we can celebrate properly okay?”

Bucky’d woken up to an empty bed and a note from Steve that he’d been called in, and the day had just gone downhill from there. He’d felt completely out of sorts with Steve not being there, so he’d skipped his coffee and gone straight to the gun range at the Tower, which had just been a bad idea. A coffeeless Bucky meant a shitty-aim Bucky.

Frustrated and put out, he’d headed over to the training room in hopes of running into someone who could spar with him, but none of the other supers were around and Bucky wasn’t about to accidentally put some junior agent in the hospital. So he’d resigned himself to going a few rounds on the bag before hopping on one of the treadmills.

He hadn’t felt any better when he’d gotten off the elevator on their floor, too keyed up to actually head back to Brooklyn.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Yeah, okay, okay, you’re right. Look, we land in ten. I’ll get in there, beat the shit out of some ISIS dickwads, then I’ll be on the next flight home.”

“Good.” Bucky nodded sharply, only to wince again. Fuck, his head was really starting to hurt. He ignored it for now. “In the meantime, Nat’s coming by later today and taking me out. She won’t tell me where, all she said was to wear a tux, so I’m assuming it’s something either insanely decadent or insanely illegal.”
Steve snorted. “Or insanely both.”

“That, too.”

They both laughed, and Bucky could feel the tension bleed out of him.

It wasn’t Steve’s fault, it wasn’t. But he and Steve had only just started going back on missions, and he knew they both still had a ghosting fear that this would be the one the other didn’t come back from.

And all of this on his goddamn birthday.

“Okay, well...” Steve’s voice drifted back into Bucky’s thoughts. “It’s time for me to jet. I’ll message you when I’m done here, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” Bucky rubbed at his head again. He was gonna need to take something for this, he just knew it. “Bye, sweetheart. I love you.”

“Love you too, baby. Bye.”

The line disconnected, but Bucky didn’t get up from his seat. He really hoped Nat had something good planned for tonight because this day was already fast-tracking to shit, and it wasn’t even noon.

He gave himself a few more minutes. Then he stood up, only to immediately slam back down, the world spinning violently. He barely clipped the corner of the toilet before he crashed to the floor. He distantly heard a tile crack under the palm of his metal hand.

Shit.

The last thought to claw its way out of his fucked-up brain was that this was no headache.

Well, happy fucking birthday to him.

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It was the chair all over again.

Nothing but screaming white noise ripping the inside of his skull to shreds. He wanted to fucking scream, he wanted to rip the fucking contraption off his head, he fucking wanted Steve.

How the fuck had he been captured?

“Fuck,” he whined. It was the only word he was capable of articulating.
“James? Oh, thank god,” came a soft, tinny voice.

He knew that voice. Natalia Romanova. Red Room.

“Fuck,” he whined again. A tear leaked out before he even bothered to open his eyes. Everything was scalding water and lightning and razor-sharp knives and billy clubs and a rack stretched to the brink.

“James? Come on, kotenok, can you open your eyes for me?”

He shook his head and the lightning struck again. He gritted his teeth so hard he was certain they would break.

“No,” he mustered, his voice barely audible even to his own ears. That was probably a good thing. “Where am I?”

A hand, delicate and feather light, brushed over his hair. “You’re in the hospital wing, sweetie.”

A hospital. Not the chair. Not yet.

“Hospital wing of where?” he ground out.

“Oh. In the Tower. You’re still in the Tower.”

The Tower? What the fuck did that even...

Bucky winced when the present slammed back into him, but finally, slowly, he cracked an eye open. The room was pitch dark save for the soft glow of monitors attached to him. He could see his heart beating – somewhat erratically – but there was none of the usual beeping that went along with it. Wasn’t a surprise considering the pain he’d been in earlier. He gently lolled his head over to find Natasha in one of the chairs, her face devoid of its usual mask. Instead, she was an open book, and Bucky already didn’t like what he was reading.

“What happened?” he murmured. He dug around, but the last thing he could remember was sitting on a blanket with Steve in their living room, a spread of food and wine between them, a fire roaring in front of him. Steve had surprised him with a sort of winter picnic for his birth– oh.

“What day is it?”

“It’s still your birthday,” Nat answered and gave him a wane smile. “It’s only about seven or so.” She reached above his head to press a button. The pain immediately began to trickle out of him, and he breathed out. She settled back down and glanced over at the stack of monitors, her eyes glazed over. “I found you about two hours ago. You were on the floor of your bathroom.” She blinked back over to him. “Steve called me when he couldn’t get a hold of you, and I came looking when I couldn’t either.”

He had absolutely zero memory of being in any bathroom, here or back at home. “Where?” he asked. He was starting to feel lethargic from the drugs, but he needed this shit answered before he could pass out again.

“What do you mean?”

“What bathroom did you find me in?”

“Uh, here?” Her brow furrowed as she studied him. “Do you not remember coming here?”
“No,” he answered, frustrated. “I don’t remember anything after last night with Steve.” He’d already figured had happened and was making his stomach churn. “Was I conscious when you found me?”

“Yeah, but barely. You were, uh –” She studied her hands, then glanced around the room, eyes blinking like a broken turn signal. She cleared her throat and finally settled back on him. “You were foaming –” She cleared her throat again. “There was foam coming out of your mouth.

“I thought you were dying,” she whispered. She swiped her cheek with the palm of her free hand and squeezed his with the other.

Fuck. Bucky’s heart broke for her, even if he was the one in the hospital bed, and he would’ve given anything at that moment to be able to properly hug her.

“Yeah...” he breathed. “That...that happens when I...”

“When you have one of your seizures,” she finished, voicing what he couldn’t. “How long has it been?”

“Since my last seizure?” His brain was fuzzing out as he tried to remember how long. “Uh...” He blinked into the middle distance, willing the answer to come. “Three years? I think?" His whole body felt heavy, and even though he didn’t want to go back to sleep, the weight was better than the pain. He’d take it if he had to.

“Go back to sleep, moya lyubov.”

Bucky was already long gone.

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“What’s your pain scale right now?”

“About a six.”

“Where would you say it was when you woke up the first time?”

“Doc, the first time I woke up, I thought I was back in the chair.”

Nat stiffened from her perch on the edge of the bed, her hand tightening around his. Bucky gave her a small squeeze back. “There isn’t a number in existence you could put on that scale to describe it.”

“Smile.”

Bucky turned automatically to Hunter and did as ordered, only wincing a little at the flash on from the camera. He turned back to Dr. Cho, who was standing at the end of the bed, tablet in hand. Her face flickered red, blue and green from whatever was on the screen. A couple of lights had been turned back on, but it was still pretty dark in the room in general.

Dr. Cho gave a clinical nod as her fingers flew across the tablet. When she finished adding to his file, she looked up. “You feel up to getting some scans? I’d really like to get a look at your head before the migraine subsides entirely.”

Bucky shrugged and began the monumental task of sitting up. “Why not? It’s not like I haven’t had worse. Remember that time a building exploded with me in it?”

“That’s not funny, James,” Nat muttered as she moved to help him get up.
Bucky’s laugh tasted like under-ripe lemons. “No. It’s not.” He then nodded toward the pile of clothes Nat had brought down from his floor. “Help me change first before we head out. I’m not going out there into the masses in a fucking hospital gown.”

“Why do you care?”

“Excuse you, I have my dignity.”

“Since when?” Nat and Hunter both asked in unison.

“Hey. It’s my birthday.”

Hunter shrugged. “Your point?”

Bucky stared at him, but honestly, he had no good response to that. So he flipped him off.

“I rest my case.”

“Whatever.” Bucky wasn’t really in the mood for this. “Everyone except Nat get out. Hunter, send that photo to my idiot boyfriend so he can see I’m not actually at death’s door.”

“Aye aye, Cap.” Hunter saluted him and turned to go. Bucky flipped him off again, and Hunter didn’t miss a beat, returning the gesture of love has he exited the room.

Dr. Cho squeezed his shoulder and smiled at him. “Take as long as you need.”

“Thanks, Doc.” He smiled as she left, and wondered what kind of flower was her favorite.

“Peonies,” Nat said out of nowhere, and Bucky started, turning to her in shock.

“How the hell do you do that???”

“Trade secrets, Barnes.”

“We’re in the same trade.”

She smirked. “For now.”

The process to get Bucky out of the gown and into the sweats, tee, and hoodie Nat had brought was slow and painful, his entire body fighting him, but she never wavered, going as slow as he needed, unendingly patient. She might’ve been a scary scary person with scary scary mind-reading abilities, but that didn’t stop him from being forever grateful to have her in his life.

“You want me to have Hunter come back in and help you into the wheelchair?” she asked once they were done.

“Yeah. I don’t think I can make it myself.” He was already exhausted just from the ten minutes it took to get him changed.

“Okay,” she answered. She leaned down to press a feather-light kiss to forehead before leaving to get Hunter and Dr. Cho, and yeah. Forever grateful.

“Oh, mate, I sent it to him,” Hunter announced as he walked in, “but I don’t think it’s going to make a difference.” He shoved his phone into his back pocket so he could take Bucky’s elbow. “I’m pretty sure a mountain being dropped on him right now wouldn’t stop him from finding a way to get to you.”
Hunter hadn’t even finished the sentence before Bucky picked up the distant sound of heavy footfalls coming down the hallway. Of-fucking-course.

“Well, like I said, he’s an idiot,” he sighed and dropped into the wheelchair just as the door flew open...and fucking Captain America burst in, eyes wild.

“Are you kidding me, Steve? Really? Full uniform, helmet, and shield?”

Steve glanced down at the shield still attached to his arm. “What? There was no fucking way I was taking the time to get out of this thing, you know how many buckles and zippers it has.” He crossed to Bucky in three strides and crouched down next to him, the shield clattering to the floor, followed immediately by that absolutely ridiculous helmet. “Besides, figured it would get me in here faster. How are you feeling, baby?”

He cupped the side of Bucky’s face, and the scowl Bucky was trying to hold gave way. Steve’s chest was heaving, his hair was a complete mess, and there was a sheen of sweat covering him.

He looked beautiful. He looked terrified.

“We’re in the damn Tower, moron,” Bucky pointed out, with absolutely zero heat. He was happy to see Steve despite himself. “Who was gonna stop you?”

“Still.” Steve smiled and leaned up to press a kiss to Bucky’s lips. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

Bucky huffed out a laugh. “Like shit, but head’s still screwed on, so win.”

Steve glanced over at Dr. Cho. “Do we know how bad it was?”

“Not yet. I did a set of scans when he was first brought in, and we were just about to head down to get the second set to compare.” Her smile was patient, but her words were pointed. “As you know, with Bucky’s metabolism, the window to get the second scans is extremely small.”

Steve didn’t look a single ounce repentant, just like Bucky knew he wouldn’t be. He let go of Bucky’s cheek and took his hand. “Sorry, but I needed to see him with my own eyes.”

“Clearly,” Hunter muttered.

Steve smiled at him. “I assume that was you I felt buzzing in my pocket a minute ago? Yeah, I was already here.”

“Really? You were here? Hadn’t noticed.”

“Yeah, no one runs like this fucking elephant over here,” Bucky commented and nodded his head at Steve, only to wince at the pain.

Steve’s eyes snapped back to him, the smile slipping away like mist. “Baby, are you okay?” he whispered.

“I don’t know,” Bucky answered honestly. “I mean, it’s been years, but I get the feeling this was a bad one.”

“And you were alone.” Steve sniffled, his gaze dropping to Bucky’s lap.

“U-uh, no you don’t.” Bucky gave Steve’s hand a shake to force him to look up. “Steve, this is not your fault.”
Steve’s eyes were red and glassy. “Yeah, but I should have been there –”

“And how would that have made a difference? Look, I don’t remember anything from this morning” – Steve opened his mouth again, but Bucky waved him off – “but I do know I didn’t hit my head when I fell, I didn’t swallow my tongue or choke on my own vomit. Wait, did I vomit, too?” He frowned and looked over to Nat. She nodded. “Okay, so I didn’t choke on my own vomit. I had an episode and it looks like it was bad, and Nat said I was conscious, but I might as well have not been, okay. But that was earlier today, and I’m still here and up and awake. And talking to you. We both know it’s been worse than that before.”

“Yeah, but –”

“No buts. If you’d been there, about the only thing that would have happened is I would have gotten to the hospital earlier. Maybe.” He scrunched up, racking his brain for any scrap of detail from the day. “I really have no idea when any of this happened. The earliest message I have that I didn’t respond to was Nat texting me around 2:30 telling me to make sure I picked a tux that was more Dr. No and less Casino Royale.” He turned to her. “Where the fuck were we going tonight?”

She smirked at him, the look knowing. “Sorry, kotenok, but I’ve already rescheduled for next month. You get nothing till then.”

“Damnit,” he muttered but turned back to Steve. “So at least since 2:30, but still.”

“It’s your birthday,” Steve said, and Bucky was pretty sure the anguish in his voice would be what killed him, not his brain going to mush.

He shook Steve’s hand again and gave him a small smile. “And you’re here with me, So wish me happy birthday, you mook.”

That got him a smile. “Happy birthday, Buck.”

“Thank you. Now kiss me.”

“So demanding,” Steve groused, but the smile never left his face as he leaned in to capture Bucky’s lips. It was soft and gentle, but Bucky could still feel the possession in it. As if Steve was making sure that whatever god was trying to get its claws into Bucky knew that Bucky was his and they were going to have to go through him first. Bucky him kissed back in a way that let Steve know he was nobody’s human shield, especially not Bucky’s. Bucky liked to think Steve would listen to him.

“I love you so much,” Steve whispered against his lips.

“I love you too, baby.”

When Dr. Cho discreetly cleared her throat, they finally pulled apart. He looked up at her and smiled. “All right, all right. Scan me.”

Steve pushed up off the floor. “Want me to come with you?”

“Nah, it’s fine. Just wait here.”

“All right.” He leaned down to place a kiss on top of Bucky’s head. “I’ll be here when you get back.”

“Fucking change first.” Bucky made a show of sniffing. “And take a shower, you’re rank.”
“You love the way I smell.” Steve’s smile didn’t meet his eyes, but Bucky had to give him points for trying.

“I love the way you smell. Whatever’s on you right now ain’t it.”

“In Bucky’s defense, I can smell you from here,” Nat chimed in and winked at Bucky.

Steve laughed, his eyes softening at least a little. He held up his hands in surrender. “All right, I get it. Stop ganging up on me, I’ll go upstairs and shower.”

“Thank you.” Bucky smiled wide for him as Hunter moved to push the wheelchair out the door.

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Bucky pulled up Instagram and loaded the picture of him and Nat that Hunter’d taken. It’d been hours since his last scans, but Dr. Cho, the blood traitor and hateful woman who hated fun, had decided she wanted him to stay overnight for observation. On his birthday. Hateful, hateful woman.

Happy birthday to me… Happy birthday to me… At the hospital once again. No, it’s not because of a mission this time. I’ve never told you about it because I’m trying to keep things in a light mood here, but years in cryo and brain washing have left some irreversible damages in my brain. I have seizures. Memory loss. Sometimes, like today, I just collapse and stay unconscious for several hours. One day, it’s gonna be for good but… Anyway, I spend a couple of days at the hospital to make Steve feel better but I know there’s nothing that can be done about it, Dr Cho told me. She runs tons and tons of tests every time but I don’t see the point. Just release me already, I have some asses to kick, goddamnit.

“I’m bored,” he announced to the room as he hit send.

“You said that five minutes ago,” Steve answered without looking up from his tablet. His feet were propped up on the edge of Bucky’s bed, and Bucky had the sudden violent urge to kick them off.

So he kicked them off. Take that, asshole.

“And I’m still bored,” he pointed out, scowling as Steve just propped his feet back up on the bed. Bucky kicked them off again.

“Buck, stop it.”

“You stop it.”

“Mature, James,” Nat commented from her perch on the windowsill. He still couldn’t figure out how she was balancing herself on the whole half an inch she had up there.

“You’re mature,” Bucky mumbled, because if petulance wasn’t his forte, what was.

“Well, you’re not wrong about that.” She looked up at him, her eyes entirely guileless, and Bucky decided she was a hateful blood traitor, too. He made a mental note to tell her that. Once she was far far away. “But regardless, you probably won’t be bored soon. Idiot #2 is on his way in.”

“What did Clint do this time?” Steve asked, still not looking up from his tablet.

“Something about a bet and a helicopter exploding out at Hanscom?” She sighed, and if it was possible, looked more done with Barton than she already was with him. Yay him.

Bucky turned back to his phone, pulling up the picture Nat had snapped on the DL not long after
Steve had shown up. If it wasn’t for the fact that it was actually a pretty sweet photo, he and her would’ve been having words about her constant spy photos of him.

He probably should stop posting them on Instagram. It was probably sending a bad message.

“Yeah, well, knowing Clint, blowing up the helicopter was probably part of the bet,” Bucky commented, even as he wrote up his caption.

Steve, you didn’t need to interrupt your mission for me. Stop worrying all the time, it’s not worth it. We already went through this a thousand times. I black out, I collapse, and one day...Listen honey, I’m gonna promise you something: if my brain explodes and turns into some disgusting goo, I’ll make sure it will explode on Stark’s face first. He’ll never forget it, he’ll have nightmares all his f**king life. If that’s not the best proof of love ever, I don’t know what it is! Enough now you mother hen, come on, go save the world. GO!! (Photo: Nat. STOP TAKING PICS OF US WITHOUT ME NOTICING! THIS *WILL* MAKE MY HEAD EXPLODE, ROMANOFF!)

His finger hovered over the post button. He wasn’t entirely sure how Steve was gonna react to what he wrote. Bucky didn’t want to hurt him, but he had the feeling that Steve was only drawing right now because his stubborn ass was trying to act like there was nothing wrong with Bucky and everything was casual, and this was just another boring night in the Tower. And honestly, Bucky couldn’t decide if it pissed him off or just made him really really sad.

Three years since his last episode. Three years, and it had taken no time for either of them to pretend like there was nothing wrong with him. They had barely talked about it in that time – if at all. It was like Bucky’s head shit just didn’t exist.

One of these days that was going to bite them in the ass, and with everything they’d been through this past year, their fear of losing each other on a mission needed to not blindside them to the idea that they could lose each other in other ways.

He hit send before he could second guess himself, his eye on Steve the entire time. So he didn’t miss when Steve switched over to the app on his tablet, and he especially didn’t miss the tightness forming around the corners of Steve’s eyes, how his Adam’s Apple bobbed as he swallowed, the way his jaw set.

He also didn’t miss when Nat jumped down from her perch and grabbed Hunter by the sleeve on her way out the door. He assumed Hunter’s lack of WTF Face was because he’d probably seen it too.

His friends were not subtle.

Steve’s eyes ticked to the door, as well, and Bucky tried not to gear himself up for a fight. He was too exhausted for that.

“Bucky.”

“Steve.”

“We’ve talked about this, okay, we –”

“Yeah. The last time it happened, three fucking years ago.”

Steve’s nostrils flared and he pinched the bridge of his nose. “I know what Helen said, but –”

“Are you saying Doc is wrong?”
“No, but –”

“Then what?”

Steve’s eyes snapped up, a fire burning in them. “Maybe if you’d let me finish one fucking sentence, I could answer that question you absolutely did not need to ask. Think you could do that?”

Bucky just held up his hands in surrender. I knew better than to push Steve when he was gearing up for tear (not that that had ever stopped him before, case in point).

“I am aware of what Helen said, but Helen isn’t a super, nor does she fully understand how a super works. She’s said that herself. But that said –”

“That’s not the –”

“That said,” Steve ground out. “You are not a doctor.” He pointed an accusatory finger at Bucky. “She doesn’t get to be the definitive voice on your health and neither do you. You don’t get to say you know there’s nothing that can be done because you don’t. So, answer me this: Do you really think that between her, Bruce, Tony, and Shuri – hell, even Strange – that there’s no way they could find a way to fix this? Do you?”

Bucky took a calming breath to center himself. It was neither calming nor centering.

“Steven. I know me. I know what the fuck is going on in my body, and you and I both know this is gonna end badly one day.” He turned pleading eyes on Steve. “Do I wanna talk about it? Do I even wanna deal with it? No, not particularly. We have enough shit that we have to deal with now, okay. In the last year and a half we’ve both had to deal with the other coming a hair’s breadth away from dying on the job, and if it’s all the same to you, I’d rather focus on avoiding that than avoiding the inevitable.”

“You don’t know that –”

“Yes, I do!” Bucky shouted, incensed. He pushed himself up, only to have the room start spinning, and he had to grab the bed frame in a metal grip to keep from slipping out of the thing entirely. Steve was right there to catch him, cradling Bucky up into a sitting position. He wanted to shove Steve away, tell him to fuck off, but as frustrating as this conversation was, taking it out on Steve... This wasn’t about that. And this certainly wasn’t the time. So when Steve sat on the edge of the bed and slipped his fingers into Bucky’s gross, disgusting hair, Bucky allowed it – couldn’t help but lean into it.

He tried again. “Steve, I can’t promise you that I’m gonna make it through this. But you gotta believe me” – he grabbed Steve’s shoulder and locked onto his gaze – “I wanna grow old with you. I wanna see how long these bodies last, whether that’s 70 years or 700. I’m never gonna be done with you, and you’re never getting rid of me. I want us to retire one day because we can’t do the job anymore, and I wanna see what civilian life is like. I wanna see if we get married or get a dog, or I don’t know, maybe we do decide to bring a kid into the mix. Build our own army of mini super soldiers.”

Steve huffed out a laugh and Bucky smiled. “I want all of that, or who knows, something else entirely we haven’t thought of” he added. “Just as long as it's you and me.”

“I want all that, too,” Steve whispered.

Bucky leaned up to give Steve a chaste kiss. “But we also gotta be realistic here that we may never get any of that, okay, we gotta be realistic. My brain is broken.” He captured another kiss before Steve could try and argue. “So we gotta expect that none of that may happen and we should stop
assuming that it’s gonna be some building or some terrorist cell that’s gonna be what gets in our way. Otherwise, this fear we’ve been trying to get past? It’s never going away, and it’ll eat us both alive.”

“You know I can’t accept that.” Steve shook his head, fierce, his eyes locked somewhere around Bucky’s collarbone. “Helen is doing everything she can to figure this out, and Tony’s helping her. If we have to, we’ll call Strange, and you know, Shuri loves you, she’ll come help in a heartbeat, and that doesn’t even include any of the top neurologists here in New York, hell, anywhere really, we’ll get them all on this, baby, I refuse to accept there’s nothing we can do, not when there’s gods and monsters and magic in this –”

Bucky surged up and kissed Steve, hard, hands cradling either side of Steve’s face. Anything to get the rambling to stop.

“I didn’t say I was giving up,” Bucky breathed against Steve’s lips. He kissed him again – once, twice. “I’m just asking that we be realistic.”

“Well, like I said.” Steve rested his head on Bucky’s chest, and Bucky shifted them around until he had Steve wrapped up in his arms. “Gods and monsters and magic. Realism went out the window about eighty years ago.”

Bucky couldn’t help but snort, and Steve chuckled softly when his head bounced. That seemed to be the tension break they needed.

“Come here,” Bucky ordered. He pulled Steve fully onto the bed, tangling them up from head to toe. It was awkward and uncomfortable, but this wasn’t the first time they’d abused a tiny hospital bed, and it most certainly wouldn’t be the last.

“We’ll figure it out,” Steve whispered, still sounding way too hopeful for Bucky’s liking. So he just switched the overhead lights off, kissed the top of Steve’s head, and settled down to get some sleep for a while. They’d figure it out tomorrow.

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A soft groan pulled Bucky back into awareness. He tried to shake the sleep off, unsure what time it was or how long they’d been out. He glanced down, but Steve was still out cold, so either he was having a nightmare or someone else –

“Stop your bitching.” Nat’s voice floated over, barely above a whisper. “You did this to yourself.”

“It’s not – hng – that simple, baby.”

“Call me that one more time.”

“You wouldn’t hurt an invalid.”

“Ask Barnes when he wakes up exactly how much I absolutely would.”

“She absolutely would,” Bucky croaked, voice sleep-rough, and both Nat and Clint’s eyes snapped to him. Well, more like a slow creak where Clint was concerned, and even Bucky couldn’t help but bug out a little at the busted-up state Clint was in this time. There didn’t seem to be a square inch of him that wasn’t bandaged, bruised, or bleeding.

Bucky was a little concerned about the bleeding. “You okay there, buddy? You look like you maybe need an aspirin.”
“Or thirty, but who’s counting.” Clint’s laugh dissolved quickly into a coughing fit, every movement
seeming to hurt more than the last. Jesus, he’d really done a number on himself.

“You should maybe...not do that.” Bucky gestured vaguely at him and tried not to shudder at even
the thought of how much it looked like it all hurt. “The laughing, I mean.”

“Thanks, genius. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Just here for the sage advice, princess.”

“You both need to shut up,” Steve mumbled. “M’sleepin’.”

“Everyone needs to shut up,” Nat chimed in. She leaned across Clint to get at the cup of water on the
other side of the bed. Bucky tried not to snicker at the Merida of it all. Of course he’d have a cup
from Brave. “Seriously, Clint, James...both of you need to rest. And Steve, you just need to not stick
your foot in your mouth for a while.”

“Hey.”

“I heard the fight between you and James, I’m not wrong.”

“Of course you were listening.”

“When is she ever not?” Bucky asked.

Nat shrugged, completely unrepentant, as always. “How else can I keep all you idiots in line?”

“Hey,” all three of them grumbled, but, to a man, not one of them had any real heat behind it.

“Exactly my point.”

Bucky yawned, despite himself, and turned into Steve’s embrace, the pull of darkness already taking
him under.

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“I told them that if they tried to pitch the helicopter at those speeds and at that angle, the shut off
valve to the fuel tank was going to snap off and the damn thing was going to catch fire. And I was
right.”

“Okay, but that’s what drone testing is for,” Bucky exclaimed. “Why were you flying it?”

“Because being right in person is way more satisfying than being right from a distance,” Steve
answered instead, and Bucky swiveled around to gawk at him. Steve just shrugged. “I’m not
wrong.”

“He’s not wrong,” Clint agreed.

“vse zdes’ chertovski pridurok,” Nat grumbled.

“Hey!” all three men exclaimed at once, heat definitely there this time.

“I’m also not wrong,” Nat noted with a look that dared anyone to question here. No one did.

“Anyway,” Clint pointedly turned back to Bucky. “So yeah, helicopter did what I said it would. It
just, uh, did it faster than I was expecting it to.”
“So helicopter went boom,” Bucky deadpanned.

“Helicopter went boom.” Despite the heavy bruises and bandaging, Bucky could see Clint’s ears turning pink, which meant he probably really hadn’t been trying to blow the helicopter up. Still...

“Tell me at least you weren’t in it.”

“Well, I mean. No, not exactly, but...”

“But?” Bucky prompted.

Nat smirked. “Go on. Tell him what happened.”

Clint turned an even deeper shade of red, which, for a guy who took about as much glee in being reckless as Steve did, it said something. Bucky glanced back to Nat, who looked like she was taking far too much pleasure in all of this, despite the tightness around her eyes. It had to be hard on her, having both of her favorite guys in the hospital at the same time.

Clint made an aborted gesture with one of his bandaged arms, only to wince at the thoughtless movement. He sighed. “Okay, so look. I wasn’t totally stupid, okay, I wore my damn parachute into the cockpit. And, you know, I did jump when everything started to go FUBAR. It’s just that...” Clint made the same aborted gesture and swore under his breath. “It’s just that, you know, when a helicopter explodes in midair, pieces gotta fall somewhere, and the tail maybe kind of ripped through my parachute when I was maybe three...two stories from the ground. And the rudder may have caught on the material and sort of. Yanked me to the ground.”

Bucky blinked.

“Yanked you to the ground,” Steve parroted nonplussed.

“Um. Yeah.”

Bucky blinked again.

Steve opened his mouth, but Bucky held up a hand. “So let me get this straight. Not only did you blow up a multi-million-dollar piece of government property just to prove a point, but you ended up getting yourself completely thrashed in just about the stupidest fucking way possible.”

“That’s not even a cool injury story, man,” Steve added.

“Better not let Tony find out what you did,” Bucky tacked on.

“Too late,” Steve finished just as he looked up from his phone.

Not three seconds later, Bucky’s phone blew up.

he did WHAT?!?!?!? – T
WHO THE FUCK – T
*HOW* THE FUCK – T
HOW DUMB CAN YOU BE – T
PICTURES OR IT DIDN’T HAPPEN – T
Bucky snickered and handed his phone to Steve. “Why is he texting me? You’re the one who just told him.”

Steve opened his mouth only to smile and hold the phone back out.

“What did you say to him?” Clint cut in.

Nat patted his arm. “You knew this would happen, baby. Just accept it.”

“Oh, so it’s okay when you call me that?”

“Yes, Clint,” Bucky said, ignoring Clint’s comment, and took the phone back. “Just accept it.” Sure enough, there was another string of texts.

serious tho pictures. now. – T

You’ll do this for me I know you will – T

Steve will droll on about preserving dignity but you have none so you get it – T

Come on Buckaroo send me the goods. Consider it a birthday gift. – T

Except it’s MY birthday – B

Exactly – T

Tony was so fucking weird. But he was right, Bucky would be the one to take a photo of Clint in his sad state more than Steve ever would. So he held up his phone. “Smile, Mad Murdock.”

“Fuck you,” but Clint smiled anyway. “Why?”

“For the ‘gram.”

He pulled up the app and added the picture because Bucky couldn’t keep this kind of hilarity between friends. Tony would respect this more, anyway.

I’m in piss poor state but don’t worry about me 1) Dr Cho brought me some company and 2) I think that in spite of what doctors say, I’m in better shape than Barton…considering. See you in the field in one…hmm…maybe two months Merida! And I hope you’re enjoying all the presents from the team.

End Notes

Don’t forget! The Life of Bucky Barnes is officially a series, and you can read/subscribe to it [HERE]!

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Feel free to come play with me on tumblr at stephrc79.

I promise I don’t bite. Well, not unless you ask nicely.

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All the artwork for petite-madame's *The Life of Bucky Barnes* can be found here on Instagram, and here on Tumblr. Enjoy!

Works inspired by this one
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!