The Ungraceful Art of Falling

by buckyfuckybarnes

Summary

Bucky Barnes was cold.

He felt like he’d been cold for months now; doing nothing but experiencing one unending chill after another. He’d been cold in England, and again in Italy, and again especially in Austria – both while he was kept in an underground cell, and when he was strapped without cover to the unforgiving metal of Zola’s lab table.

But Steve… Steve Rogers was sunshine. Everything about him was warm, from his crinkly-eyed smile to his white-hot rage. Steve was Coney Island on a summer’s day; lying back on high rooftops to watch fireworks on the 4th of July; drinking stolen whiskey in his parent’s living room…

Loving Steve was a fact – simple and plain, like breathing air or bleeding red; loving Steve was soldered into his skin like a tattoo – it buzzed in his brain like its own kind of high. It was a part of who he was.
Chapter 1

Bucky Barnes was cold.

Huddled in on himself, both arms drawn close to his chest, he tried not to relay just how fucking freezing he was to the other men — all of whom, it seemed, remained completely unaffected by the autumn chill. As he tried not to visibly shiver where he sat, his eyes scanned over an open page in the comic book that had been lobbed over to him for his consideration.

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

Admittedly, when the first batch of comics had been delivered to the camp, Bucky Barnes was among those who were… less than receptive to the character of Captain America, to say the very least. Staring in bewilderment at this monstrosity of a comic book, it was clear that nothing of either its content, nor his opinion of it, had altogether changed that much.

“Garbage!” he said, astounded by the sheer absurdity of what he was reading. “Complete garbage. Who the hell do these assholes think they are, pandering to kids like this? Look at this — look at how… look at this,” he brandished the offending page up so that the men around him could share in his disgust. They all looked faintly amused.

“No better than the newsreels back home,” one of the men replied, not unfairly. “Men and women all across America’ yadda, yadda, ‘brave American soldiers!’ yadda, yah,” he continued, in a passable impression of the newsreels’ emphatic voiceovers.

“You know they’ve based this ‘Captain America’ off of a real guy? They’ve got some poor bastard parading around the country in tights selling war bonds.”

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me,” Bucky repeated, far less amused this time. Disgusted, he swapped over the comic for an open tin of peaches that Dum Dum held out for him, paired with a slightly bent fork. Bent forks, Dum Dum had announced, added “authenticity” to their time at camp — to which Bucky had responded with the quiet suggestion as to exactly where he could stick his authenticity. Obviously, Dum Dum had heard this, because now he took it upon himself to actively search out the most mangled set of eating utensils he could find whenever he retrieved food for Bucky.

“Poor bastard’ — more like ‘lucky bastard’. Need I remind you that while he’s prancing around like a show-pony, we’re out here in the mud with holes in our socks and living off spam. I’ll bet a carton of Marlboros that every single pair of socks that that man owns are clean and completely void of holes,” Dugan said, with a bitterness to rival Bucky’s. “Look at him,” he thrust a thick forefinger at the page, “never tasted Spam in his life.”

Dum Dum’s never-ending distaste for Spam was often a great source of amusement to Bucky.

“Yeah, but I’d still rather be out here with the rest of you whiney little girls than where he is,” one of the men pointed directly at the large, illustrated dick-bulge that they were all laughing at earlier, “least staying here keeps my dignity intact.”

“Yeah, definitely rather him than me,” another man laughs.
Bucky didn’t laugh, but silently agreed nonetheless. He briefly entertained the idea of what Steve would say seeing an eligible man shirking his role in the war in favour of becoming an on-stage showgirl — made to pander the war to kids of all people…

“Sergeant Barnes,” a voice called from behind him. Bucky turned to see his second lieutenant standing stock-still with a piece of paper clutched in one hand.

Dutifully, Bucky hurried to set down his peaches and dash over to where the other men couldn’t eavesdrop. Righting himself to attention, he saluted, “sir!”

“At ease,” Lieutenant Harrison said, and Bucky switched to his rest position. “We’re prepping the 107th for duty; have your squad ready to make the trek down to the front at 0600 tomorrow.”

Bucky’s heart sank, hard and fast, and he swallowed down the lump in his throat before saluting once more. “Yes, sir. Understood, sir.”

Lieutenant Harrison swallowed anxiously, and Bucky knew that there was something he wasn’t being told.

When he slouched off back to his men, they were still talking about Captain fucking America.

“He’s scheduled to come here in a few weeks,” one of the men was saying — Bucky didn’t know his name. He had the comic flipped to the back page, where a list of tour dates had been printed alongside a portrait of Captain America, who pointed out to the audience like he was Uncle Sam.

“Can’t fucking wait,” Bucky replied blandly, slumping back down on his place in the dirt and resuming work on his tinned peaches.

As the night grew darker, more men trudged off to their quarters for lights out, intending to squeeze in as much sleep as they possibly could before tomorrow.

For Bucky and several other men, however, they drew it out, wanting to enjoy their last calm night together in peace. Bucky didn’t care that he needed to get up at ass-o’clock tomorrow to prep his squad — he’d feel shitty in the morning regardless of how much sleep he’d had.

Cigarette dangling from one hand, packet of army-ration sweet biscuits in the other, he stared into the flickering fire pit they’d sparked.

He kept zoning in and out of the conversation, mind wandering from one awful hypothetical scenario to another against his will. He looked up at the faces of the men he was sitting around with: Dum Dum (loyal Dum Dum, with his patched bowler hat; his white-toothed, wrinkly-eyed grin; his hearty laugh; his enormous hands, always caked in dirt, with fingernails gnawed short. Hands which had jubilantly slapped Bucky on the back so, so many times…), Gabe (genius Gabriel Jones, who spoke in such low, soothing tones, he could probably pacify Hitler himself; Gabe, who had sloged through worlds of crap in order to get where he wanted to be; talented musician Gabe, who had a girl back home, Alice, who he intended to marry…), Smithy (barely of age to join, his young, round face constantly beamed at everyone; able to force his sunny disposition down anybody’s throat, cheer anybody up, make anybody laugh…) and Burke, (quiet Burke, who had probably read every book ever published; who spouted more useless-as-crap facts than anyone Bucky knew; whose demure nature contrasted forcefully against his thick-set frame, faded tattoos stretched over too much muscle and buried under the thick dark hair on his forearms…)
Would they all come back from battle tomorrow? The next time Bucky saw any of them, would they still be alive? Intact? Would deep, twisted scars soon mar Smithy’s perpetual smile? Would Burke’s tattooed forearms be blasted away? Would he ever hear Dum Dum’s booming laugh again after tonight?

Bucky shook himself violently out of his reverie, and forced himself to re-join the conversation.

Gabriel was chuckling wistfully, “My dad died in the first Great War, and mom couldn’t afford to send me to college and keep the house I’d grown up in. In the end, she decided to sell the house so I could go to school, and we moved to Washington with my grandmother. First day there, I decided to take a lunch break from hauling all of our furniture into the house, and so I walked down to this tiny little café we had on our street. Alice was working as a waitress there, and she comes to the front to offer me a table, and I swear, I’d never seen anyone as beautiful as her. When she asks me if I wanted to sit in a booth or at the counter, you know what I say? Like a big idiot, I just blurt out ‘I go to college!’ and man alive if that isn’t the single stupidest thing I’ve ever said. She never let me live it down,” the men laughed.

“My Jenny was a waitress too,” Dum Dum laughed, “I was working a lumberjack job up in Montana, and I’d worked a double shift that day to cover a buddy of mine. The usual place I went to for a meal after work was closed by the time I’d finished, so I found this shitty all-night diner. Completely dead — only people there was the cook, some skinny fella drinkin’ coffee in the corner at midnight for whatever reason, and her. Lips red as cherries with shoes to match, her hair all curled...” Dum Dum giggles, “You know, first thing she says to me after giving me my order? She snatches the napkin outta my hand and snaps ‘what, were you raised in a barn? Eat with your mouth closed; I’ll thank you to be showin’ some manners when you eat in my restaurant, sir.’ And then she tucks my napkin into my shirt for me like I was her toddler.”

“Did your mama like her?” Smithy asked, sounding absolutely enraptured by these stories.

Dum Dum gave another one of his hearty laughs, “you know, first thing she says to my mama when she met her: ‘you know, your son here is probably the biggest oaf I’ve ever met’, and my mama says back ‘don’t I know it — he gets it all from his father.’ Mama loved her; said she had spunk.”

The men laughed again, and there was a brief moment of comfortable silence among the group.

“Bucky,” Burke said to break it, “you’ve haven’t said anything this entire time, what about you? Tell us about your family — you got a girl back home?”

“No, no girl, just me and my best pal, Steve.” Bucky smiled at the thought.

“What’s his story then? How’d you two meet?” Dum Dum asked, extracting another sweet biscuit from his packet.

Bucky’s ass was going numb from sitting on the hard ground, and he shifted uncomfortably. “Well,” he began unsurely, “I think I might’ve been ten? I was in an orphanage at the time, not exactly an amazing one either — I’d wonder about the streets for hours without anybody asking where I’d been. Anyway, so I found a quarter in the street one day — which is a fortune to a ten year-old who owned nothing but a few shirts and a couple pairs of socks, so I immediately went to the nearest candy store, three cents a bag. I just started loading my pockets with as many as I could carry — I made the phrase ‘kid in a candy store’. I started to make my way back to the orphanage so I could share one of the bags with the other kids, but before I could even walk five steps I heard a scuffle in the alleyway beside the store. I think there were about four boys in there, about twelve or thirteen, and they were shoving around this... absolutely tiny kid, telling him that he had to pay a two-cent toll to walk from eighth avenue to tenth.
“Course, this kid ain’t having a single bar of it. ‘Not givin’ you a red cent!’ he tells ‘em, and so they punched him,” Bucky smacked one fist into his other palm, “square in the face. I clocked the biggest one in the shoulder — caught him off guard, and he ended up crashing face-first into the brick wall. So, another kid tries to come at me with a brick, but then out of nowhere, the kid they were beating up and smacked him with the lid of a garbage can, right on the back of his head. The bullies ran, and I finally get a good look at this kid. Tiny runt of a thing; Steve was only a year younger than me at the time, but he looked about seven or eight. I remember his suspenders were tightened the whole way, but they still fell off of his shoulders — might’ve been his dad’s, I guess. Anyway, he turns to me, with a black eye, and he gives me the most sour look I’ve ever seen. ‘I woulda worn ‘em down eventually y’know’ he tells me, and I laughed and said ‘yeah, when they died of old age’. He didn’t like that, brought his fists right back up to fight me. I told him to holster his guns, and offered him a sweet out of my pocket — we’ve been best friends since.”

“You're giving me cavities, Barnes,” Dum Dum teased good-naturedly, and Bucky pulled a face in return.

“You grew up in an orphanage? Pretty sure I’ve heard you talk about your ma before,” Smithy said.

“Adopted,” Bucky replied simply, “when I was thirteen — me and my little sister Becca. I’ve known Steve longer than I’ve known my own parents.”

And loved him just as long, Bucky didn’t say.

He allowed himself to subtly fade back out of the conversation after that. He didn’t say much of anything for the rest of the night, and after the men had finally felt their eyelids droop and could no longer fight the irresistible pull of sleep, he’d followed wordlessly, taking it in turn to give each of them a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder before they separated, tiptoeing to their allocated cots.

Bucky felt exhausted, but he didn’t sleep — couldn’t sleep, because of the nervous buzzing in his brain. At dawn, he rose with the other men, and followed them to breakfast, but Bucky didn’t eat any — couldn’t eat any, due to the uneasy roiling his stomach was subjecting him to.

The march to the front was silent but for the rhythmic sounds of stomping military boots. The battlefield was vast, smoggy, and for a while, completely devoid of any enemy threat.

But when the Germans came, they did so with an almighty force Bucky could never have imagined.

To say that Harrison’s rumour concerning the German weaponry was an understatement was in itself a complete understatement.

Taking up the space of where eight normal tanks would have comfortably fit, the Germans had brought along with them three specialised battle-tanks unlike Bucky had ever seen. In the place where explosive rounds would generally be fired from, there was instead what looked like some kind of super-gun. It fired great, luminous balls of electric blue light at his fellow soldiers, and appeared to disintegrate them completely on impact. Nothing of his former comrades was left behind after being blasted — not even a shadow to mar the clean-cut grass of the hills.

There was no choice left — radio contact was down, they were losing men fast, and nobody was coming to rescue them.

Bucky issued surrender.
Bucky Barnes was cold.

He was unsure if it was that the winters in Austria were simply colder than the winters in Brooklyn, or if it was purely because the metal chamber they’d been isolated in was so poorly insulated.

The survivors were marched away single-file, with their hands on their heads, their weapons stripped. Like animals, they were crammed into small cages; around five or so men to each. There appeared to be no real organisation as to which men were stored with which. Bucky’s heart had sank when he saw that it wasn’t only most of the 107th who were captured, but also what looked like two or three other complete companies from different divisions, mostly European.

Bucky’s container was shared with the comforting faces of Dum Dum and Gabe, as well as with two other European men whom Bucky hadn’t met before. ‘Awkward’ didn’t even begin to describe that introduction.

James Montgomery Falsworth was a lieutenant with the 3rd independent English parachute brigade. He was a tall, slender man who spoke with a refined sort of dignity that was often a cause for good-hearted jibes from Dum Dum. While at first unamused by Dum Dum’s… particularly American sense of humour, he eventually thawed out more the longer they were kept in proximity to one another, and turned out to be capable of giving as much as he got in the way of good-natured digs.

Jacques Dernier, on the other hand, was a short man, with course, dark hair reminiscent of Burke. Although he apparently understood English fluently, he chose to only speak in French — a trait that was a source of endless amusement to Gabe, and irritation to the others. Gabe, being the only other man to understand French beyond the basics, and whose peaceful demeanour and soothing voice provided a source of great calm, was the only person Dernier seemed to really trust out of the lot. Bucky, who wasn’t exactly fluent, but understood enough French to be able to poorly uphold his end of a conversation, was a close second, much to his own satisfaction.

In the first morning after their capture, Bucky hadn’t understood why Dernier and Falsworth had recoiled so violently when a masked German guard had come early to the POW cells. They had shrunk back so far that they were pressed flat against the bars at the back of the cell, immersed in as much shadow coverage as they could muster. At first he extrapolated that it was because of the gun — that sleek, elongated gun, which glowed with the same kind of strange blue-light ammunition that had so thoroughly decimated his forces the previous night.

What they actually feared, however, turned out to be much, much worse.

Wordlessly, the guard had raised one thick, gloved finger to one of the cells, pointing directly at the towering figure of a very alarmed Chester Burke.

Out of nowhere, it seemed, two more guards had appeared out of that heavy metallic door. With a practiced ease, they unlocked Burke’s cell, and had swiftly grabbed hold of each of his arms in the matter of seconds, dragging him out.

As soon as they had grabbed a hold of Burke, the men in each surrounding cell had began shouting, screaming their pleas to leave him be — to choose someone else, to show him mercy. Their begging fell on deaf ears, and Burke was hauled out of the room, bellowing and pleading, until the heavy metal doors shut, and he was heard no more.

“Where are they taking him?” Bucky whirled around to face Falsworth and Dernier, both of whom had their eyes trained directly on the floor. “Don’t ignore me, Falsworth. Tell me where they’re
taking Burke.” He stalked forward, fists clenching, and chest tightening with panic.

Falsworth sheepishly raised his face to Bucky — not meeting his eyes, but rather addressing his left shoulder. “Every few mornings or so the guards come and pick out a soldier at random. They’re taken into an isolation ward on a higher floor.”

“Isolation? But he didn’t do anything wrong!” Bucky exclaimed.

“None of them ever do.”

“Well it’s just a power-play, right? Something to keep us in line so we don’t try any funny business? How long until they’re let back into their cells?”

“Ils ne le font jamais,” Dernier murmured quietly.

Gabriel stiffened, horrified. “They don’t? They don’t come back at all?”

“What?” Bucky whirled around and clutched at the bars with both hands, rattling their cage. “Hey!” he bellowed at the steel doors they’d dragged Burke through. “Come back! Bring him back, he didn’t do anything wrong, bring him back!”

Hands grabbed at the back of his sweatshirt and hauled him backward. His ass hit the floor hard, and he stared up in bewilderment at the four other men who surrounded him.

“Êtes-vous fou?” Dernier spat harshly.

“You want to be next?” Falsworth hissed. “There’s nothing you can do, Sergeant — I’m afraid there’s no hope here for your friend.”

Bucky slumped, and brought his knees to his chest, burying his face in both hands.

After weeks of assembling weapons in Schmitt’s factory, Bucky had fallen ill.

It had started as tightness in his chest, which then evolved into serious back pain, and then a raw cough that left his throat inflamed and tender following a fit. He’d suffered alongside Steve enough times to be able to recognise the symptoms of pneumonia when he saw them.

His endless coughing and bleary clumsiness had enraged one of the German guards on Bucky’s last shift on the main floor. After Bucky had accidentally run over his foot with one of the transport carts, he had taken an empty bomb cartridge and beaten Bucky with it, catching him over the head and on his ribs before he had been shoved away by one of his more sympathetic associates. Clear that he was no longer going to be of much use, Bucky had been dragged, bleeding, back to his cell — much to the horror of its other residents.

“This is no good,” Gabe fretted, one broad hand massaging Bucky’s back gently. “He needs a doctor, and soon.”

“Oh yes, I’m sure our German imprisoners will gladly supply us with supplies and medicine if we ask them really nicely for it,” Falsworth said sarcastically. “In fact, if we ask really, really nicely, I’m sure they’ll even give us a hot meal, and hey, maybe a goose-feather bed. They love handing out favours, those Nazis.”
“Be serious Monty,” Dum Dum snapped. He had been smoothing his great moustache over and over again for the last hour, staring at Bucky with wild concern as he winced and wheezed his way through one coughing fit after another.

“No, he’s right,” Bucky groaned softly, “I just gotta tough it out — Steve’s been through this at least six times since I met him. He’s a strong little punk, but I’m sure that if he can do it, I can too.”

“Your Steve also had medicine, Sergeant Barnes,” Falsworth said softly. He was clearly far more worried than he was letting on, and it upset Bucky that he was causing so much distress.

“He didn’t always,” Bucky said softly.

“Regardless! You need warmth and bed rest — neither of which you are going to find in a German prison. You won’t survive another shift, Sergeant.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Bucky said — a suggestion that lost most of its impact after he was wracked with yet another coughing fit. “I just need to sleep!” he insisted forcefully, glaring at each of the other men’s anxious faces in turn.

“Well then,” Dum Dum scooped up both his and Bucky’s blankets from where they’d been piled in a corner of the cage. “If you’re gonna sleep, you’re gonna stay warm.”

Falsworth nodded, and followed suit, handing out Bucky his blanket as well. Dernier did the same. Bucky was shaking his head forcefully. “I’m not going to take your covers, you’ll all be freezing without them! I’m just one man — I can’t look after all four of you when your own stupid nobility gets you all sick,” he coughed loudly again.

Dum Dum took the blanket out of Falsworth’s hands and pushed two of them into Bucky’s hands forcefully.

“Me and Frenchie will share his, and Monty will share with Gabe,” he insisted. “Besides,” he patted his belly with both hands, “built-in insulation!”

Bucky laughed weakly, and didn’t argue.

They’d come early. He hadn’t heard the lock rattling.

He had no warning that they were there at all, until suddenly he was being hauled upright — yanked out of his slumber by two sets of gloved hands, which fastened tight around his upper arms. Before the others could register what was happening, the cage locked behind him, leaving them all scrabbling against the bars, roaring and pleading — rousing men from other chambers out of their sleep.

“Let me go!” Bucky shouted, “get your hands off of me, you lousy fuckin’!”

Dum Dum had both arms between the bars, clawing desperately, trying to reach any part of Bucky that he could to reel him back in. He bellowed fiercely at the guards, yelling and swearing as Bucky’s heels dragged on the concrete floor further and further away.

Another guard appeared, this time holding one of their high-tech arms, training the barrel so that it
was in direct line with at Bucky’s heart. Bucky only glowered at him, disgusted, and fought to pull his arms free as best he could with broken ribs and an injured head.

“You want to go free? Back into confinement?” the guard with the gun demanded in a heavy accent, shifting his grip so that the heavy weapon stayed aimed at Bucky, supported one-armed, while his other hand rounded to point at Dum Dum and the others. “You go back if you choose who will take your place.”

Bucky froze, and his eyes locked with Dum Dum’s in a panic, mouth working wordlessly before he slumped in their grip, defeated.

Without further struggle, he allowed himself to be dragged from the room; out of the heavy set of metal doors, through which he had seen so many men go through — men who had never returned.

Before the door swung shut, he caught eyes with the men again. Dum Dum, Gabriel, Falsworth, and Dernier all wore matching sets of devastation and horror on their faces.

Bucky gave a sad wave goodbye, and the door closed behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I actually started writing this back in February, before AOU, but haven’t worked up the nerve to start posting until now, so thanks to my friends for encouraging me to do so. Since this entire thing was conceived before AOU, it's only canon-compliant up until Post-CA:TWS.

Updates are (hopefully) every week, but it varies depending on my study load.
Chapter 2

August 2013

A clock ticked loudly from a nearby shelf. Aside from the scratching of a pen on paper, this was the only sound that filled the room, and it thrummed inside Steve’s ears gratingly.

“I want to talk about the elephant in the room,” her voice was calm, and yet it cut through their uncomfortable silence bluntly.

Steve merely frowned at her in response; not unkind — simply confused.

“I want you to try discussing your friend Bucky with me,” she elaborated. "Specifically, his death, and how you think that has affected you."

Steve’s frown was less kind this time. “No,” he told her firmly. He chose not to justify his reasons why. It should have been obvious why.

“Steve,” she fixed him with a stern look, sounding exasperated, “this needs to be addressed at some point. You know it does. The earlier you’re able to open up about this, the more progress we’ll be able to make in these sessions.”

“I can’t talk about that,” he said. “I won't. Not yet.”

“Then how about you tell me something else about him? How did you two meet?”

Steve shook his head and didn’t say anything.

Doctor Vaselli sighed and placed her clipboard on the table, arranging her pen neatly on top. “Listen, Steve, I’m not going to force you to discuss anything you’re not comfortable with, but I want you to seriously take into consideration the good it might do you to be able to talk about these things in a safe environment. You’ve spoken to me about your place in the war at great length — your recruitment, the serum, your place in the pro-war propaganda, various missions — but you’re still refusing to discuss anything even bordering on personal with me.”

Steve didn’t reply, but he also didn’t argue.

She sighed. “Very well,” Doctor Vaselli collected herself and stood, “if that’s all you’re willing to discuss with me today, I believe our time is up.”

Relieved, Steve leapt from his seat on the therapy couch and made quick strides toward the exit.

“For our next session,” her voice made him pause before he could reach the door, “I’d like you to come up with something that you’re willing to share from your past — something that I won’t be able to find just as easily in a history textbook. I want you to try to tell me how you felt about something, not just the facts about it.”

Without meeting her eyes, Steve gave her a short nod and exited the building.

Depending on the traffic, the drives from his therapist’s office back to his apartment were often worse than the session itself. There were many advantages to riding a motorcycle that Steve could
appreciate; the fact that he had no stereo to distract himself from his thoughts was not one of them.

Of course, Steve knew that the subject of Bucky had to be broached in these sessions eventually. Really, it was a wonder that it had taken this long in the first place.

Steve was completely aware that his unwillingness to talk to anyone about anything substantial was the subject of real annoyance, both his mandatory SHIELD appointed psychologist, and to SHIELD itself. But the thing was, Steve didn’t want to talk to anyone. The only person Steve could have possibly envisioned himself talking to about any of the things they demanded answers for was Bucky.

The ring of keys jangled in the lock of his apartment door. Why the hell did he have so many keys anyway? The only ones he actually used were those for his house and motorbike, what were these other ones even for?

“Well this certainly is a real depressing setup you’ve got going on here.”

Steve gave a jolt, barely restraining himself from assuming an offensive position on instinct before realising who had spoken.

Of-fucking-course Tony Stark was in his apartment. How else could this day possibly get any better?

Steve shrugged off his jacket and hung it up on the hook by the front door, sighing heavily. “What do you want, Tony?”

“You know, for a guy who’s been topside less than a month, you’ve got a pretty good basic grasp on this whole ‘technology’ thing,” Tony had managed to make himself completely at home, entertaining himself by scrolling contemplatively through Steve’s personal laptop. He took a sip out of one of Steve’s coffee mugs, “just for future reference though: the word ‘Password’ is not a secure password. Even with a capital P.”

Steve shrugged. “Security wasn’t exactly my highest priority when I came up with it. I’ve got nothing to hide, and Fury said to choose something I wouldn’t forget. You still didn’t answer my question though — what the hell are you doing here?”

“Hadn’t heard from you,” Tony turned the screen around so that Steve could see what he was peeking through: his Internet search history. “Figured I’d come down for a little surprise visit — have a couple beers, see how my new ‘bff’ is holding up. You know, I don’t know whether to feel sad or disappointed that you haven’t looked up even one dirty movie on here yet.”

“I know that you can access that thing remotely, Tony, so I probably never will look up anything like that on there,” Steve responded dryly. He moved to slam the laptop lid closed, but Tony yanked it away too quickly. Steve sighed, rolled his eyes, and then made toward the fridge for a beer instead. “You want one?” he asked casually.

Tony ignored him. “In fact the only videos I see you’ve saved on here are ancient wartime flicks involving your old army buddies.”

Steve gave a humourless huff of laughter, and shook his head. “I just got back from my therapy session, Stark. I don’t need another one.”

“Wasn’t much of a session, according to Doctor Vaselli.”

Steve slammed the fridge door and stomped back over to the table, “you hacked into her records.”
Tony didn’t even blink. On the contrary, he looked rather pleased with himself. “Fury’s been keeping tabs on your progress. Or lack thereof, I suppose I should say –”

“You had no right,” Steve snapped.

“And it occurred to me,” Tony turned the laptop to show Bucky’s name in red on Steve’s Wikipedia page, “you haven’t spoken to anyone at all since you were found. I’ll admit, it took me a while to find the right information — James Barnes isn’t exactly a unique name — but I found his dates. He went down two days before you did.”

“So what?”

“So, you haven’t spoken about him once, to any of us. You’d think the death of your best friend would warrant a mention, y’know, even just casually.”

“I did speak to someone — after New York. And he chewed me out for being a sorry sack of shit,” Steve’s voice was even, but tired. “We’ve had one mission together, Tony. We’re not friends. If I’m not talking about it with Doctor Vaselli, what the hell makes you think I want to talk about it with you?”

Tony seemed to consider him for a moment, offended, but understanding. “I’m here because Fury asked me to be. He’s concerned that your mental health profile isn’t up to scratch for the job.”

Steve snorted humorlessly, “And you’re the poster boy for picture-perfect mental health, I’m sure.”

“Not even close, but Fury seems to that that’s exactly what you need; a completely impartial ear to talk into.”

“There isn’t a world in this universe where you qualify as a completely impartial ear, Tony,” Steve leaned forward, placing both elbows on the table and glaring at him with his full might.

Tony sighed, and then chuckled. “You know, half the things my dad told me about you haven’t been true. Don’t get me wrong, he was right about you being all noble, and loyal, and a tactical genius with excellent biceps, all that crap,” Tony gagged theatrically, rolling his eyes, “but I’ll tell you, one thing he never mentioned was how much of a stubborn asshole you can be.”

Steve stared at Tony like he didn’t know whether to be amused or offended.

“I may not want to spend every waking hour jerking off over you the way he did,” Tony continued, “in fact, if we’re being completely honest with ourselves, I’m just as stubborn an asshole as you are. But even when I was at my lowest I had people to talk to, and you don’t have anyone. We’ve got more in common than you’d think, and I think it’d do you some good to talk.”

Steve picked at the label on his beer bottle and continued smirking. He wasn’t looking at Tony, but his tone had defrosted considerably. “Last I checked, growing up in a lavish Malibu penthouse isn’t exactly what I’d call ‘in common’ with a one-and-a-half-bedroom sublet in the Brooklyn slums.”

Tony shrugged. “We both had to grow up real tough, real fast, we both have apparently rocky relationships with our fathers, we’ve both lost our parents, and our wizened father-figures, me with Yinsen and… was it Erskine? That was his name, right? Erskine?”

“Even if you broke into my therapy records, you can’t possibly know about my relationship with my father,” Steve said dryly.

“Alright, alright, I’ll admit that that one was a stab in the dark, but seriously, I want to know
something — I’m interested. Why have you been looking up everything you can possibly find on about Barnes on the web, and then refuse to even mention his name to anyone else?”

Steve was silent. His teeth grit tight, and he glowered at the table, pointedly refusing to meet Stark’s gaze. For several long moments Tony thought he was going to refuse to speak, and then –

“I just… I wanted to make sure that Bucky didn’t end up as a footnote in the story of the great Captain America, that’s all.”

The unbridled hostility he used when speaking about himself startled Tony a little. “And?” he prompted, “Were you satisfied with what you found?”

Steve barked out a laugh — a cold, humourless sound, which, in all honesty, sounded more like a sob than anything else. “Worse than a footnote. Nothing. Nothing I’ve seen has any individual information on James Barnes — he’s no more than a listing with the names of the rest of the Commandos.”

“And how are the rest of them remembered?”

“As they should be,” Steve said fiercely, “they’ve got articles, and webpages, and interviews with biographers all about all of their accomplishments during and after the war. They all made it for themselves, and I honestly couldn’t be happier for them, but…”

“But,” Tony supplied, “Barnes never got the recognition he deserved?”

“Nothing. Everything I managed to find about him only ever talked about him being ‘Captain America’s beloved sidekick’, as if he weren’t ever anything else. You know, he was the best sniper in the entire infantry? Possibly the entire army — I always thought so, but he always just told me I was just an asshole whenever I brought it up. I had to practically arm-wrestle General Fisher to keep him in my division and not promote him out of the country, before the Commandos developed their reputation. He was… he was the reason…” Steve trailed off, throat closing up.

“The reason you went to Austria? My dad told me that story about a billion times — was his thanksgiving specialty.”

Steve grimaced. “Everyone loved to make out like I was just so selfless, and brave, and full of duty, and that was why I went to rescue the first batch of POWs, but really, if Bucky weren’t one of them the thought never would have even entered my mind. I was too busy feeling sorry for myself to think I could do anything about it — and after all, soldiers died every day, right? It wasn’t up to me to save them, so why should I? Until it was Bucky.” Steve drained the remainder of his beer, looking at it like he wished it were something a lot stronger.

“You know something?” Steve continued, twisting the bottleneck between his fingers, “that phase two weapon I found on the SHIELD helicarrier on the day of the New York attack? It was the same kind of weapon that HYDRA used to kill Bucky.”

Tony’s eyes widened, and he felt his chest clench with sympathy. “I thought he fell off of a train?”

“No, Bucky was a sniper — he was used to high places. He never fell unless he was pushed.” He nudged at the beer bottle with one finger, slowly edging it further and further across the table. “Bucky didn’t fall off the train, he was blown off of it while trying to cover my ass.”

From the numerous recounts his father had about the Commandos in the ‘good old days’, Tony had gathered quite a lot about Barnes. He’d known he was a sniper, and a damned good one at that; knew that he’d died in an accident involving a train; knew that he’d been closer to Steve than Tony
had ever been to anyone — closer even than Rhodey was to him. He felt stupid that he’d never thought about just how much Barnes’s death would have affected Steve. Of course he didn’t want to talk about it — the guy was fucking miserable.

“You wanna know what the worst part is?” Steve asked softly.

Tony really didn’t.

“He held on,” Steve said. “He held on, and all I needed to do was reach down and grab him, pull him back to safety. But he fell anyway. Bucky waded in and pulled me out, just like he always did, and the one time he needed me to return the favour, I couldn’t.” The bottle slipped off the table, and they watched it explode across the hardwood floor.

Tony wasn’t too proud to admit that he was completely out of his depth here. When he’d imagined this conversation earlier, he seemed to have spent a lot more time thinking about what he’d say in order to get Steve to speak, rather than what he’d actually say if he managed to accomplish it.

He wasn’t naïve, of course; he knew there was nothing he could say to Steve that would be of any sort of comfort. The most tragic losses Tony had ever experienced were those of his parents, but Steve? Steve had lost every single person he’d known — not one person remained who he could confide in.

Steve looked up suddenly, as if he forgot that Tony was there. He obviously sensed Tony’s discomfort, and gave a sad, rueful smile — as if he was apologising for being unhappy. He cast his eyes down sheepishly, “I’m sorry Tony. I shouldn’t have…”

“Rogers, you stupid, self-sacrificing moron.” Tony sighed, understanding finally clicking in place.

Steve looked back up, surprised.

“When I avoided therapy, it was because I chose to internalise everything that had happened to me — because talking about it would mean admitting that something was wrong. I was in denial about my trauma, but you? You’re avoiding therapy because you think that talking about your problems is the same as forcing someone else to carry your burden for you.” Tony shook his head. “You stupid, self-sacrificing idiot.”

Steve quirked an eyebrow, still with that weak half-smile, as if nothing was wrong. “And to think I said I didn’t want another therapy session today.”

“Two for the price of one,” Tony responded brightly. The underlying fragility to their conversation remained, but with that, the sombre mood was effectively lifted.

“Not exactly, since I’m not technically paying for either,” Steve crouched by the table and began gingerly gathering the shattered beer bottle pieces in one cupped hand.

“Well mine’s better anyway — I’m giving you homework,” Tony rummaged in his pockets and waved out a small flash drive between his fingers, “get you caught up on all the required viewings of today’s modern cinema. Soon you’ll be quoting shitty mid-80s movies with the rest of us. Jarvis sorted them by genre and year for you.”

He tossed it to Steve, who caught it in his free hand. He turned it over in his fingers curiously, and for the first time that night, smiled genuinely. “If there are any dirty movies on here, I’ll be out for blood, Stark, I mean it.”

“Do I look like an animal to you? I’d give you a separate drive for that.”
Steve chuckled. “Don’t even think about it.”

November 1944

Bucky Barnes was cold.

He felt like he’d been cold for months now; doing nothing but experiencing one unending chill after another. He’d been cold in England, and again in Italy, and again especially in Austria — both while he was kept in an underground cell, and when he was strapped without cover to the unforgiving metal of Zola’s lab table.

But Steve… Steve Rogers was sunshine. Everything about him was warm, from his crinkly-eyed smile to his white-hot rage. Steve was Coney Island on a summer’s day; lying back on high rooftops to watch fireworks on his birthday; drinking stolen whiskey in his parent’s living room…

He felt different to how Bucky remembered: too tall, too broad, too firm, without protruding bones beneath thin cotton shirts, but in that moment, he also strangely felt exactly how Bucky remembered — still warm to the touch, still refusing to shy away from showing too much affection for fear of being misinterpreted. Steve’s hands clutched at the back of Bucky’s grimy sweatshirt, and he squeezed him hard. Bucky didn’t even care that his ribs were still in pain, and that he was having trouble breathing, and that he felt like he could pass out at any moment, because Steve was here. Steve was okay.

For a split second, he allowed himself to bury his face into Steve’s neck, to breathe him in, and clutch at his shoulders, soaking up his warmth, but eventually pulled away, remembering himself.

Steve reluctantly released him from the embrace, but still kept his hands on Bucky — one on his shoulder, and one on the side of his neck. “Never ever do that to me again, you hear?” he commanded weakly.

“I’m fine,” Bucky replied firmly. “Honestly, Steve, I’m… I’m grand.”

Steve looked completely unconvinced, but before he could get any further than opening his mouth to retort, a loud bellow cut him off from behind.

Before Steve could manage to turn to see the source of the noise, it had come barrelling through, shoving Steve aside and tackling Bucky to the ground in a flurry of a dark-green uniform and ginger facial hair.

“You son of a bitch, you goddamn bastard, we thought you were dead!” Dum Dum was now the one squeezing Bucky too tight — littering the side of his head with scratchy, wet kisses.

Bucky screwed up his face in disgust, amused nonetheless, and attempted to shove Dum Dum’s great face away with one hand. Dum Dum refused to relinquish his hold, and Bucky grinned despite himself. “Dugan, c’mon, cut it out,” he laughed.

Bucky looked over Dum Dum’s shoulder to see Gabe, Denier, Falsworth, and another man he hadn’t met before as they jogged over, each one of them wearing the same expression of dumbfounded shock and relief.
“You’re alive!” Falsworth exclaimed.

“Yeah, I’m alive, but I won’t stay that way if you don’t let me breathe,” Bucky finally managed to shove Dum Dum off with one hand, and he accepted Steve’s hand-up with the other.

“You got all the others out?” he addressed Steve, holding onto his shoulder for support. Steve, in turn, wound one arm around Bucky’s tender ribs to keep him upright.

The others, apparently, hadn’t noticed that Steve was there until that moment.

“Oh man, you shoulda seen it, Jimmy, this guy’s a one-man army,” Dum Dum was clearly very taken with Steve. “Completely insane.”

“I’ll bet. Always was,” Bucky replied, caught somewhere between pride and disapproval.

“The men are awaiting orders,” the man Bucky hadn’t met spoke up impatiently — an Asian soldier with a heavy American accent, “we’ve secured a few of the Hydra tanks, and about half a dozen jeeps, but the rest of us will have to travel on foot.”

Steve squared his shoulders and nodded very seriously. “Alright,” he took off with long strides, hoisting Bucky along with him, and the men followed. “Jeeps will carry the injured, tanks by whoever’s able to operate them, and any leftover can be shared among the others for a few hours at a time to conserve energy. We’ve got a long journey ahead of us, and it doesn’t look like I’ll be able to radio in for more transport,” Steve pulled out a small receiver from his pocket, which had appeared to have saved Steve’s outer thigh from taking a bullet.

“How many are there?” he asked the man, who shrugged.

“I didn’t exactly stop to take attendance, but I’d register a healthy guess at around four hundred? Give or take.”

“We’d better get moving then.”

_____________________________________________________

“What are you staring at?” Bucky finally snapped, exasperated.

They’d walked for about four consecutive hours — Bucky didn’t know the exact time now, only that it was still night. The thick smoke penetrating the air had dissipated somewhat over the last hour or so into their journey, and now, away from the constant cloud of smog and glaring spotlights, he could once again see the stars. Lying beside Steve on the ground, he allowed himself to be fully taken in by the sight — hadn’t realised just how much he missed being able to view the stars while in captivity. It was a simple pleasure, but no less one that swelled his chest with satisfaction.

“Your lips — they’re really pink, Buck,” Steve spoke without thinking, and his eyes widened and darted back to the sky quickly.

This effectively sobered Bucky. His face warmed, and he looked away to try and hide his amused half-smile. “So they fix that too then? Your colour-blindness?”

Steve still didn’t meet his eyes; face flushed a dark red, “yeah…”

It turned out that walking from Austria back to their base in Italy was going to take them a while.
With nothing else to do, the journey had afforded them the opportunity to talk — specifically, for Steve to explain what the *fuck* had happened to him in the months since Bucky had seen him last.

To say that Bucky was horrified by Steve’s recount of exactly how he’d come to be two hundred and twenty pounds of six-foot-two hulking muscle was an understatement. He was fucking livid.

(“Five minutes! I left you alone for five fucking minutes, and you’ve signed yourself up to be a medical test subject for a crazy German scientist and his experimental death-juice!”)

“He wasn’t crazy,” Steve had muttered petulantly, “and it wasn’t death-juice. I am very much alive, as you can clearly see.”)

Bucky did see, but it wasn’t exactly much of a comfort.

Truth be told, the entire story had left Bucky’s head spinning worse than it had in Zola’s laboratory. He’d been managing mostly on pure instinct and adrenaline on leaving the facility, but once the tremendous flight instinct had dissipated and the overpowering relief Bucky felt at seeing Steve *safe* had settled in, he was left with stark reminders of the torture he’d endured. His legs were swollen, his feet too tight in his shoes, and his sweatshirt and gun strap chafed along the puncture wounds and scalpel cuts across his skin. He desperately longed for a bar of soap and a toothbrush, not to mention that it’d been weeks since he’d last jerked off. He sensed that that was precisely what he needed to take the raw edge off.

“So are you actually a captain now, or is it just a publicity thing?”

“Both, actually. My promotion was official, but they never thought I’d actually do my job with it.”

“And now you’re *fifteen* ranks ahead of me with zero effort,” Bucky shook his head and smiled, “you know, some of us actually worked for our positions. Spent years in service working up to our ranks.”

“Day and night, I’m sure.”

Bucky tore his eyes away from the view of the stars in order to look Steve over.

There he was, still glorious in his might — looking as if he could effortlessly rip a tree right out from its roots if the idea took his fancy. Looking at him made Bucky’s heart clench, and his throat tighten. He felt panicked, displaced — *purposeless*. He hadn’t even realised that this fear had resided within him, but now, seeing Steve like this, he realised that that fear had finally come to fruition. Steve had rendered Bucky redundant — useless.

Steve didn’t need him anymore.

It was stupid, *selfish* beyond reason. Arrogant, egotistical, *hypocritical*. Bucky made himself sick just thinking about it.

“I guess it takes some getting used to, huh?” Steve was smiling at Bucky, clearly misinterpreting Bucky’s tight expression.

Bucky cleared his head with a small shake and smiled wryly, in a way he hoped was convincing enough. “Guess you no longer hold the title of ‘world’s most annoying armrest’ anymore, hm?”

“I guess *you’ve* gotta look up to *me* now, hey Buck?” the ‘neener neener’ was left unsaid, but Steve’s juvenile grin compensated for its absence remarkably.
Bucky only continued smiling at him softly, “I’ve always looked up to you, kid.”

Steve sobered from his teasing stance, and stared at Bucky, clearly touched.

Steve led the march back into base with his shoulders back, and his jaw set firm. He walked like a man with conviction — radiating confidence and satisfaction from his very bones. He looked perfect — grimy, and covered in ash and debris, sure, but perfect nonetheless.

Bucky needed a shower. He needed a fresh pair of socks, and a clean pair of underpants, and to feel dry for the first time in what seemed like months.

The closer they came to the camp, the more the other soldiers began to take notice.

“Well look who it is!” one of them cried. As the gates came up, the men began to applaud, whooping and clapping their hands to the backs of their once lost comrades.

Bucky felt a pang as he spied the messy blonde head of Smithy barrelling through the crowd, eyes frantically searching one face to another to find Burke. Someone was going to have to tell him, he thought grimly. Someone was going to have to set him aside and watch the perpetual smile drain from that face — tell him that his best friend and father figure had been taken by German soldiers, had been killed where Bucky had survived…

The group came to a halt when Steve stopped face-to-face with a grizzled man with a deep-set scowl. Colonel Phillips.

Steve snapped to a salute. “Some of these men need medical attention,” he wasted no time in saying. “I’d like to surrender myself for disciplinary action.”

Bucky almost laughed. No military authority in their right mind would even consider actually punishing a soldier for accomplishing something as insane and heroic as what Steve had managed to pull off.

The Colonel’s glower didn’t relent in any way. “No, that won’t be necessary, Captain.” He sounded completely sarcastic, and Bucky wondered for a wild moment if his deeply embedded look of disapproval was merely his default expression. Then the Colonel smiled.

With a sharp nod to Steve, he turned away, pausing only to address a beautiful woman with elegantly styled brown hair, and lips painted red as Dorothy’s slippers. “Faith, huh?”

Those red lips quirked into a delighted smirk, as she stepped forward into Steve’s personal space, “You’re late,” she scolded him flirtatiously, wide, brown eyes scanning over his face — simply marvelling over the sight of him.

Steve matched her flirtatious smirk effortlessly as he fished out the destroyed com he’d shown Bucky when they’d first made it out of the Austrian weapons factory — an item Bucky had been wondering why he hadn’t just simply thrown it away. “Couldn’t call my ride,” he said coyly.

There was something palpable, something electric, about how they stared at one another. Steve was looking down at her with more admiration and adoration than Bucky had ever seen from him. He stared into her eyes, at her plush red lips, and Bucky could tell that he wanted to kiss her. When she
looked at Steve, Bucky saw that same pride and admiration he himself felt for the man — what he’d always felt for that man. She looked like she wanted to both punch him in the face and tenderly kiss him in equal measure, and Bucky could relate — so much that it turned his insides to ice.

When she looked at Steve, she saw sunshine.

Bucky’s breath gushed out of him like his chest had been stepped on — like he’d been rolled over by a tank. It was with a painful jolt that Bucky felt his heart crack — a long, jagged fissure, like the gaping crevice of the Grand Canyon.

He swallowed, and tried to school his face into something that didn’t show that fucked up devastation poisoning his innards — to appear that he was happy for Steve, because he was. He really was.

And when he calls for a cheer for Captain America, Bucky smiles; gives an encouraging little nod at Steve, and doesn’t let that smile drop until Steve’s face turned away once more.

Chapter End Notes

I know that in canon, the battle of New York took place in 2012, but for the sake of the story, it’s in 2013.

Headcanons referenced: (x)
Bucky’s medical examination had lasted no more than fifteen minutes.

He allowed the nurses to peer into his eyes with small flashlights, take his temperature twice, squeeze his arm with a blood pressure cuff, and remove his shirt for inspection, but when they told him to stay still as one of them prepared a needle intended for blood samples, he felt a thrill of genuine fear go through him, and he decided that he’d finally reached the limit to his finite source of patience.

“Enough! I’m fine, nothing’s wrong with me, I’ve had enough,” Bucky snapped, yanking his shirt back from one of the nurses. They all spared him affronted glares as they left, but Bucky couldn’t bring himself to regret his callousness. He’d had enough of sitting on medical tables and being impassively prodded at — he needed a goddamned break.

And he knew he was being an asshole, but it wasn't like it was helping to see Steve and his girl hovering around by the tent entrance, both of them standing a little too close together for comfort, the tension thick and palpable between them.

The woman carried herself with such authority and conviction, it was no wonder that the two had been so drawn to one another. She flicked idly through the pages on her clipboard, and talked at Steve evenly as she penned down a detail or two more. She was very convincingly feigning that she was all business, but Bucky could see the light smile ghosting those perfectly painted lips. Steve, in turn, looked like he was absolutely trying to pay attention to whatever she was saying, but was entirely too mesmerised by watching her — her lips, her eyes, her glossy painted fingernails. A delicate flush bloomed on his cheekbones, and he gave a small smile that seemed to be lost on everyone but Bucky.

“Well, well, what have you got for me here, Sergeant?” Bucky had been focusing so intently on Steve and the woman that he hadn’t even registered Colonel Philips entering the tent. It appeared Steve hadn’t either, and he snapped out of his reverie and sobered immediately, striding to Bucky’s side at once.

“Take five, Captain. You’ve earned a shower, and a good night’s sleep,” Phillips drawled.

Steve jutted his chin out stubbornly. “With all due respect, sir, I think I’d rather be here,” he said firmly, daring Phillips to argue.

Bucky interjected calmly before Phillips could retort. “It’s fine, he can stay.” He really wasn’t in the mood.

“Very well. Agent Carter?” Phillips turned to the woman.

She snapped to attention at once, and Bucky couldn't help but note that the way that she set her chin was starkly reminiscent of the way Steve always had: a silent dare to anyone who tried to underestimate her.

“Take notes for questioning,” Phillips ordered, and she nodded, fixing Bucky with her full attention, and obediently readying her pen over the clipboard.

“Questioning?” Bucky’s brow furrowed. “Wouldn’t you be talking to the lieutenant about our
“Under normal circumstances, absolutely, but this isn’t questioning about your capture, Sergeant. We’ve already got all the information we need to know about your capture, and now about your rescue, too,” Colonel Philips clapped Steve on the shoulder pointedly. “But one of the lieutenants mentioned that over your stay, several men were picked off from the group and put into isolation — the cause of which is so far unknown. We heard that you were among them, and so we want your account of that.”

Bucky stiffened in his seat. He fought to train his expression into something, anything, that wasn’t blind panic — to keep his forehead from perspiring, and to ease his fingers surreptitiously from where they clamped on the frame of the medical cot.

“I hate to disappoint, Colonel,” he managed eventually, giving Phillips his best apologetic look and swallowing thickly, “but I really don’t remember anything.”

Phillips looked completely unconvinced. “My new friend Lieutenant Falsworth tells me that of the twelve men he saw taken into solitary, not to mention however many there were before he arrived, you were the only one they’ve seen come back from that alive. And nobody else was taken after you were. Now, you were in isolation for more than eight days, Sergeant. You have to recall something from that time.”

One of Steve’s large, comforting hands found its home on Bucky’s shoulder.

A round face, bespectacled.

A harsh green light focused directly into his face.

Beads of sweat rolling down his forehead.

Being boiling hot on the inside and icy to the touch on the outside.

Silence, stinging in his ears like nettles.

Sounds of drilling.

Being left alone to sleep in the dark atop cold, hard metal.

Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038…

“Nothing,” Bucky told them, giving a feeble shrug. “I honestly don’t remember a thing, Colonel. I remember being dragged off from the group, I remember one of the krauts sticking a needle into my neck, and then basically nothing until I see your dirty mug looming over me like some kinda big ugly blimp,” he patted Steve’s hand on his shoulder. “To be honest, I’m not even sure I remember everything right after getting out either — did Schmidt really take his face off? Please tell me I hallucinated that.”

Steve fought to remain professional in front of Carter and Phillips, but Bucky caught the minute twitch of his mouth. “Yeah, Buck, that really happened.”

“Gross.” Bucky said.

The tent entrance flew open once more, and admitted a very harassed-looking Dum Dum Dugan.

“Jimmy,” he sighed, a mixture of annoyance and relief.
“Hey, Dugan,” Bucky smiled wearily.

Colonel Phillips cleared his throat. “Very well then, Sergeant, if you’ve got nothing further to say, we’ll leave you be. But if anything comes back to you, you tell Agent Carter here. And I mean anything at all, are we clear?”

“Yes sir,” Bucky gave a dutiful nod.

“Very good. Carter, with me,” he gave a sweeping beckon, and Agent Carter followed him out of the tent, shooting Steve a brief encouraging smile as she went.

“So…” Bucky started casually, one eyebrow raised, “Agent Carter, huh? You know, we were walking for about four days, and you never mentioned her.”

Dum Dum’s eyebrows shot up, and he gave Steve a slow, mischievous sort of smile — one that Bucky knew all too well from their campfire stories.

Steve rubbed the back of his neck, looking sheepish. “Yeah, I wanted you to meet her first before I started running my mouth too much. Peggy’s… she’s really great, I think you’ll like her.” He looked completely smitten, and Bucky’s heart lurched painfully once again.

“Listen,” Steve continued lightly, “why don’t you get cleaned up and get some sleep in my quarters? They’re not huge, but you’ll have it to yourself for a few hours.”

“I’m not going to take your bed,” Bucky mumbled petulantly.

“I’ll be fine, Buck. I’m not going to get a chance to sleep for at least a few more hours anyway, I’ve got too much to do,” it was a lie, and Bucky knew it immediately. He shook his head, ready to argue, but Steve placed both hands on Bucky’s shoulders, staring him firmly in the face. “Bucky, please, for once in your life, don’t fight me on this. You need to get some sleep.”

Bucky gave a reluctant, heaving sigh, but nodded reluctantly nonetheless. "Fine, fine, I’ll go. Go tend to your captain-ly deeds, I’ll be out in a minute,” he offered a small, tense smile.

Steve nodded back, a pinched line of concern still evident between his brows. “See you in the showers then,” he said hesitantly, and gave a brief wave before leaving the tent.

There was silence for a few moments, and then Dugan gave a long, low whistle. “Trouble in paradise between you and the Captain, Jimmy? The tension in here was giving me the sweats,” he fanned his underarms theatrically.

“We’re fine, they just wanted to know what happened in… when they took me into confinement.” Bucky admitted, and Dugan’s teasing smile dropped.

Dum Dum’s eyebrows drew together in confusion, but nonetheless nodded unquestioningly. Bucky took a deep breath, and pushed up the sleeve of his right arm, clearly exposing a collection of angry red puncture wounds that littered up the entire bruised inside of his forearm and inner elbow. It was obvious what they were from, and Dum Dum immediately seized Bucky’s wrist to get a better look, turning his arm this way and that

“Shit, Jimmy,” he exclaimed. “What the fuck did they do to you?”
“I don’t know,” Bucky replied honestly. “I was honest when I said I didn’t remember much, but I’m pretty sure it was some kind of drug trial.” He fixed Dugan with a grave look as he gingerly took his arm back, rolling the sleeve back down. “You can’t tell him.”

“What, are you kidding?” Dum Dum admonished, not unfairly.

“I mean it, Dugan,” Bucky snapped. “If they know I’ve been experimented on — to this extent, and with unknown drugs, they’re going to consider giving me an honourable discharge. Or else have me stuck in a lab being prodded at by American doctors trying to figure out what they were trying to do to me. And I can’t take that — I need to stay here. I need to be able to stick with him and cover his stupid giant ass, otherwise who knows what kind of trouble he’s going to get himself into. If you tell him, he’s just going to work himself up into insanity with worry. And he clearly doesn’t need that right now. I feel fine — there’s nothing wrong with me.”


“Alright, alright, I get it,” Bucky snapped. “But seriously, all I need’s a shower, and a good night’s sleep. And maybe a stiff drink, if I can find one,” he reached down to lace his boots back up, ready to leave.

“Bucky.” Dugan never called Bucky by his preferred name, not unless he was conveying absolute seriousness. Dugan being serious always made Bucky nervous. “You were tortured. Rogers found you after you’d been tortured. He’s going to be worried no matter what you tell him. Hell, maybe you should even consider taking that honourable discharge. If anyone deserves to go home at this point, it’s you.”

“No,” Bucky said coldly. He forcefully secured the final knot of his laces, and leapt from the medical cot, ready to push past Dugan and leave.

“Jimmy, wait,” Dugan caught Bucky’s arm so he couldn’t leave, and then remembered Bucky’s injuries and hurried to unhand him immediately.

For a moment, Bucky thought that Dugan was going to try and force him to at least consider taking the discharge. But instead, he merely took a deep, steadying breath, and offered a small smile as a peace offering. “The boys and I planned to go get a drink or five at that little English-run place few miles from base. If you’re awake by six to join us, that first stiff drink of yours is on me.”

Bucky felt some of his tension evaporate. He didn’t have the energy to stay mad at Dugan, especially after watching Steve and his new girl. “Yeah, Dum Dum, of course I’ll come.”

Dugan gave that white-toothed, wrinkly-eyed smile that Bucky loved, and thumped him on the back heartily.

When Steve invited them to their favourite pub close to the London base a little over a week later, Bucky knew immediately why. There were a great many numbers of things that Steve was good at — being, subtle, however, was not one of them.

Steve had emerged from another one of his mystery-meetings with the Colonel with squared shoulders and a purposeful stride, and when he suggested that they all go out to The Whip and
Fiddle for a pitcher on him, he’d sounded far too innocent for his own good. To anyone who wasn’t Bucky, it didn’t mean a whole lot — free drinks are free drinks, after all; they weren’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth — but to Bucky, who had heard that tone of voice far too often during their adolescence, it signalled trouble.

The Whip and Fiddle had a lot of things that Bucky admired: it was a good driving distance from headquarters, had a decent line of musicians most nights, enthusiastic challengers on the dartboard, beautiful women seeking out short-term company, and best of all, they accepted American money. It was only this combination of things that had Bucky putting up with the sheer number of watered-down drinks he’d been receiving — six glasses of straight bourbon from this place, and Bucky could barely feel a thing. He may as well have not bothered to drink at all, all the good it did him.

He’d been spending quite a lot of time at the bar lately.

Two drinks in each hand, Steve gently set them down at the polished surface of the bar that they were seated at, gesturing expensively for him to have at it. Bucky very enthusiastically obliged.

“I know what you’re going to ask me,” he said casually after taking a swig of bourbon.

Steve, who had opened his mouth in order to awkwardly attempt to broach the conversation casually, pursed his lips — looking almost petulant, but not surprised. “You do, huh?”

“Absolutely I do. You’re good at what you do, and you’ve gotten excellent press lately — they want you on real missions, and you’re here to ask us to join you.” Bucky shot a smug smile Steve’s way. “Although why you want those guys, I’ll never know. Biggest bunch’a idiots I’ve ever met,” he said fondly, not meaning a word of it.

Steve continued to not look surprised, but he rolled his eyes nonetheless. “Why do I even bother talking to you at all? You’re clearly a mind reader.”

“I take after your mom,” Bucky smirked, “can’t tell a lie to me, kid. I see through you like a cheap sheet’.”

It was something that Steve’s mother had often said to them — mostly to Steve, but Bucky was never exempt from it just because he wasn't her kid. Hands on her hips, with the most devastating look of disappointment Bucky had ever encountered in his life. Lying to Sarah Rogers probably felt worse than lying to God himself.

“It was Stark,’ Bucky eventually relented, “he kept not-so-subtly asking what kinds of specs I preferred on my sniper rifles. Between him and those not-so super secret meetings you’ve been having at the base, that I’m absolutely not supposed to know anything about, it wasn’t hard to connect the dots.”

Steve huffed a laugh, “of course it was Stark. Man’s as subtle as a car wreck.”

Bucky threw back the remainder of his first drink in one go — ready to get the night started as soon as possible. “Go talk to the others first — I’ll be here when you get back. Leave the bourbon though.” He gathered three of the four glasses in a row on his side of the bar possessively, earning an eye-roll and huff of laughter from Steve as he rose from his seat. He gave Bucky a hard pat on the shoulder as he went, and Bucky’s stomach clenched.

It wasn’t like he was disgusted by dames. On the contrary, he appreciated them quite a lot. He loved their soft laughs, their sweet voices, the way that their hands fit inside his own... and he definitely enjoyed fucking them.
He dates girls — *fucks* girls. Allows them to kiss at his lips, and clutch his arm in a crowded movie theatre; drag him sweetly around by the hand at a fair…

The problem wasn’t with girls. It was him. It was that no matter how much he enjoyed their company, he’d never once felt for a woman as he did for Steve.

Loving Steve was a fact — simple and plain. Like breathing air, or bleeding red. Loving Steve was seared into his heart like a brand; soldered into his skin like a tattoo — it was a *part* of who he was.

Watching Steve with Peggy… Bucky thought he’d rather go another round on the table with Zola.

He may as well not have even been there at all, the way she point-blank ignored him after striding into that bar, dressed to the nines in a tight red dress, beelining straight for Steve. Bucky had asked her questions, perhaps flirting a little too obviously, but she’d merely answered him as if the questions had come from Steve instead — not taking her eyes off of him the entire time. She may even have come out of that conversation completely oblivious as to what Bucky even looked like.

Steve, in turn, hadn’t even said a word to her beyond confirming for a weapons consultation in the morning, yet still managed to be as suave and charming as Bucky ever had. What truly got to Bucky, though, was the way she continued to looked at him. Because it was exactly how Bucky had been looking at Steve for years. She saw Steve, and she saw sunshine.

And, fuck, Bucky couldn’t stand it — couldn’t *stand* that incessant, whining voice inside his head that jealously seethed, stomping its feet and screaming ‘he was mine first!’, because he knew that that simply wasn’t true. Steve had never been his, not really.

And now he’d found someone who saw him just as Bucky did — who respected and admired him just as fiercely; who wanted to keep him *safe* just as much as Bucky did. Who loved him just as much.

“So,” Bucky settled back down at their side of the bar with a slump, downing the final glass of bourbon. “Agent Carter seems real keen on you.”

Steve either ignored the subtle undertones of bitterness in Bucky’s speech, or simply didn’t register them at all; face lighting up in that dopey, sheepish smile he always did whenever Carter was mentioned. “Peggy? Yeah, Peggy’s uh… Peggy’s really great,” he sounded downright smitten, and Bucky wanted to gag.

“‘Peggy’, huh? You two that close already?”

“Well I wouldn’t say we were *that* close, I mean—”

“Yeah, I bet Peggy was real *keen* before the serum, huh? Real *eager*.”

Bucky felt horrified by his own words — as if he was watching, helpless, from inside his own body, as some horrible alternate force dictated his words. As he tried to swallow down those completely unwarranted accusations, even more came helplessly tumbling out of his mouth. “It’s not like you weren’t good enough before, you know.”

“Whoa, hey, why are you angry at me?” Steve raised both hands in a gesture of surrender, looking very alarmed.

“I’m not, I just… I mean…” Bucky ran both hands through his hair. Sighed. “*Why would you do this to yourself, Stevie? Did you really hate yourself that much?”*
“Buck,” Steve’s expression softened, clearly understanding that the conversation was no longer about Peggy. “I didn’t hate myself — I never hated myself. I never wanted to be big, I just wanted people to stop treating me like I was small.”

And Bucky really couldn’t argue that. Couldn’t fault Steve for finally getting what he wanted — what he very much deserved after all the years he spent scraping in the mud, fighting to be respected. And he couldn’t blame Peggy for her interest in Steve; couldn’t blame Steve, in turn, for his interest in her, or his apparent newfound confidence in talking to women.

If there was one thing Steve Rogers refused to put up with, it was being patronised. Before the serum, everyone had treated him as if being small made him akin to a child, and there probably wasn’t anything in the world that had infuriated Steve more.

“It’s one of the things I like most about you,” Steve had told him one night, on his 23rd birthday, when he and Bucky had split nearly an entire bottle of whiskey, and were lying side-by-side on their living room floor together, drunk off their asses. “Y’never pat-patrins- you never talk down to me,” he eventually got out. “Y’bitch about my health and my safety a whole lot more than I like, but you never, like, talk t’me like imma kid or nothin’. I really, really ap-aprec I really like that about you, Buck.”

“No,” Bucky eventually sighed, and stared down miserably into his empty glass of whiskey. “No, I get that, of course I get that, I’m not… I know. And don’t think I’m not happy for you, bud, ’cause I am — I really, really am, it’s just…” he sighed, “It’s going to take me some getting used to.”

Steve gave a rueful sort of smile. “I get that, Buck. Trust me, I really do.”

He smiled warmly at him for another few moments, before giving a small huff, and standing. “Now go lick your wounds and dance with someone — there are plenty of dames in this joint who are dying for a chance with a roguish and handsome soldier like yourself.” He gestured expansively to the crowd behind them, where, sure enough, several finely dressed young girls were sitting without a partner. As an afterthought, he threw back his practically untouched bourbon in one go, and shuddered, “I apparently now have to go to a weapons consultation in the morning, so I guess I’d better go get some sleep,” he said, eyeing his stool at the bar almost mournfully.

Bucky gave a weak laugh, and smacked him on the ass like he was mushing a horse. “Go on then, get out of here grandpa.”

Steve smiled, gave his shoulder another mighty pat, and left.

And so Bucky was alone.

It’d be simple enough to charm one of the girls. Easy. Bucky had had plenty of experience in charming his way into a lady’s skirt before (not that he’d ever manipulated or coerced them into it. He was merely good at finding girls who had as little a problem with non-romantic sex as he did). He supposed that Steve was right, and the best way to get out of his rut would be to start flexing his charm once more, but it all just felt like it’d be too easy; too dull. And he didn’t quite feel in the mood for it tonight, not with everything that had happened.

Bucky had known men who had been arrested for being queer.

A boy who used to live on Steve’s street when he was a kid had been taken into custody when he was twenty. His name had been printed in the papers, and as a result, he had lost his job, his landlord kicked him to the curb, and his family had disowned him out of disgrace. Bucky didn’t know what
happened to him after that, but in the end, he came to the conclusion that he didn’t quite want to know...

He’d only done this twice before in his life. The first was when he was eighteen — with a mutual friend of his and Steve’s, who had stuck a hand down Bucky’s pants after Bucky had sought him home safely after a night of drinking, and who hadn’t objected when Bucky cautiously returned the favour. The second time was with a mid-height blonde sailor who Bucky had met while hauling crates at one of his jobs at the docks — a man named George, who liked to have his neck kissed and his shoulders squeezed.

Both times he’d been terrified of getting caught. He’d feared for his family — about how they’d become social pariahs, accused of encouraging a sinful lifestyle, or else pitied for making an understandable mistake in adopting him. Bucky didn’t know which would be worse. He didn’t think he could handle being turned away by the people who had so delicately put him back together after being left, abandoned, in an orphanage for a sizable portion of his life. He just couldn’t.

Another part of that fear, however, had included Steve. He knew exactly what kinds of conclusions people would draw from finding out about their roommate situation if Bucky were caught, and it wasn’t fair on Steve. He shouldn’t have to share in Bucky’s punishment, when he hadn’t done anything wrong. He was already looked down upon by their peers; he didn’t need Bucky ruining that for him that any further.

Tonight though, tonight he needed something more. Tonight he felt he deserved the risk.

The bartender manning the on-tap beer that night had been appreciatively eyeing Bucky through the whole night. It was subtle enough that nobody could really call him on it, but Bucky didn’t exactly mind.

Catching his eye once more, Bucky turned on that familiar charisma, feeling at once more like his usual self than he had in months. This — the flirting, and the charm — this, he knew. This was easy — natural for him.

He ordered another bourbon, and, not taking his eye off of the man, Bucky allowed his gaze to darken suggestively while he took a long gulp from the glass, leaning forward over the bar to display his long neck and the sergeant stripes on left shoulder. The bartender’s eyes swept over Bucky slowly, and he returned Bucky’s heated expression in a most favourable way. Bucky smirked. He looked a lot like Steve did, before: small, slight, with high-cut cheekbones, and wavy blonde hair. The only major differences Bucky could see laid in the smaller details: this man had deep-set dimples, and thinner lips, and had brown eyes, smaller, but still with that same thick fringe of lashes that Steve had.

Bucky felt sickened by himself. This was the kind of self-loathing he only ever experienced when thinking of Steve like this; only this was worse, far worse, because he wasn’t just using Steve’s form in his imagination whilst frantically jerking at his own cock, but rather was actually considering using another man as a stand-in for this unhealthy fantasy.

Guiltily, he forced himself to quash those feelings. He needed this, at least for tonight. He could consider it some kind of fucked-up closure to the man Steve used to be if he truly needed some kind of excuse, but either way, it was happening. He may as well enjoy it.

Bucky quirked an eyebrow, and inclined his head toward the exit as a silent suggestion that they find somewhere more private. The man gave a wicked grin in response, and glanced upwards to indicate the upstairs level.
“Algie?” The bartender turned to a short, plump man with a thickset moustache and tired expression. He gathered the white rag off of his shoulder and set it on the bar purposefully, “I think I’ll be taking my break now — gonna head up to one of the inns for a small kip.”

The plump man, Algie, raised one doubtful, bushy eyebrow, and his eyes flicked over to where Bucky sat. He huffed a laugh. “Whatever you say, kid, just change the linens back over when you’re done,” and with that, he gave a great eye roll, and bustled back off to the other side of the bar.

Bucky, in turn, had to force himself to reel in his completely astonished expression before he could break his suave demeanor.

The bartender looked completely unfazed, and when he spoke to Bucky, it was with a tone of superb professionalism. “If you’ll care to follow me, sir, I’ll be able to show you to your room?” he unhooked a key from a nail behind the bar, and held out one hand toward the wooden staircase at the back of the bar. Although sounding completely professional, he had that mischievous glint in his eyes that had Bucky grinning.

He led them up the staircase, where a collection of rooms were being serviced as an inn for tourists. No doubt there was plenty of vacancies with the war looming right by the area; The Blitz may have been over, but with its proximity to base, the place was still under constant bomb threats all the time.

The bartender’s name turned out to be Thomas. As they made their way down the long corridor at the top of the stairs, counting their way down to the room Thomas had the key to, Bucky awkwardly made an attempt at small talk.

“So, your boss seems… progressive.” he said, aiming for a casual broach to the conversation, but failing abysmally.

Thomas gave a knowing, dimpled smile, and shrugged nonchalantly. “Algie’s a friend of the family. Says that he’s got no problem with what I do in my free time, so long as it doesn’t get me into any long-term trouble. And it hasn’t yet.”

“And he just lets you wander off with strange men? Just like that?”

Thomas shrugged again, as if it were the simplest thing in the world. “Algie and I have an agreement — we keep each other out of trouble. He helps me out, and I do the same for him.”

“Keep each other out of trouble, huh? Doesn’t exactly seem the type to get into the same kinda trouble we would. What do you cover him for?” Bucky gave a playful smile, but dropped it immediately when Thomas returned it with a decidedly severe look.

Bucky, in turn, raised both hands in a mock surrender, “alright, alright, I didn’t mean to snoop there, darlin’. I was just curious.”

Thomas gave a satisfied huff, and turned to slide the key into its lock for room 12.

The room was neither large, nor grand, but it did have that same cosy, charming feel to it that the bar downstairs possessed. It had minimalistic value — with wooden floors and ugly floral wallpaper; a well-made writing desk along the back wall topped with nothing but a lamp and a bible; a lone armchair sitting in the corner beside an unlit fireplace; and (what drew Bucky’s eye immediately) a large, sturdy wooden bed frame neatly made with dark tan-coloured linens on a pliable mattress.

Eager to get down to business, Bucky drew one hand around the slim waist of the barman, drawing him in and allowing him to skirt his eyes over Bucky’s face appreciatively. Thomas closed the door wordlessly behind him, and tentatively allowed one hand to drag along Bucky’s arm, up his wrist,
and around his shoulder, feeling out the solid muscle beneath his thick uniform with approval.

Bucky brought his other hand up to Thomas’s hip and walked him backwards slowly, pressing the smaller man up against the back of the door and crowding into his space. Feet spread apart, he leaned in to ghost his breath over Thomas’s face, not touching him — not touching any part of him other than at his waist, waiting for Thomas to grant him some kind of sign as to what he wanted first.

Thomas, in turn, let his lips curl into what Bucky assumed was an attempt at a sexy teasing smirk, although he really was too adorable to be able to pull it off properly, and his other hand rose to curl into the hair at the nape of Bucky’s neck. Tentatively, he leaned upward, capturing Bucky’s lips in a shy kiss, and relaxing when Bucky stepped further into him, pressing him flush against his chest.

“Tell me what you like, babydoll,” Bucky teased softly in his ear, and he ran his thumbs along the hem of Thomas’s sweater vest.

Thomas pulled back to give him that ‘begrudgingly accepting, but altogether unimpressed’ look that Bucky had seen on Steve many, many times, “I feel like I should mention that the only reason you’re getting away with these cheesy nicknames is because I find your American accent oddly charming.”

Bucky grinned lasciviously, but said nothing, pulling Thomas forward by looping his fingers beneath his belt and ducking his head forward to continue trailing his lips along Thomas’s jaw. Fingering along the strip of leather, he could feel the jagged holes Thomas had obviously had to puncture in himself, just like Steve used to have to do. The thought made him laugh, but thankfully, Thomas interpreted this as a mere pant against his throat.

With quick fingers, Bucky quickly looped the belt out of his trousers and trailed his hands back up the fabric of that sweater vest, now sucking lightly at the skin of Thomas’s neck.

Thomas, it appeared, very much appreciated this treatment. He sighed contentedly as his head thumped backward against the door. “Where would you like me, Sergeant?” he asked breathily. “On the bed? The desk? I’d certainly have no objections to doing this up against the door, but I do believe we’re at least attempting to be cautious.”

Bucky huffed out another laugh, and mournfully removed his face from under Thomas’s jaw, bringing himself to look back into those dark brown eyes again. “Wherever you want, sugar, just so long as you’re comfortable.”

He bunched the sweater vest upward, and Thomas compliantly raised his arms for Bucky to strip it off. “The bed, I think,” he decided, tugging on the knot of his tie and snaking it out of his collar. “There’s slick in the top bedside drawer.”

Bucky’s eyebrows shot up in appreciative surprise, “prepared, are we?”

Thomas smirked again, “always.”

They clashed their lips together once more, kissing enthusiastically as they worked to get the buttons on Thomas’s professional work shirt undone.

They fell onto the cheap cotton bedsheets on their borrowed bed in a tumble.

Thomas kept his back to him the entire time. Bucky fucked him from behind — ass in the air, forehead resting on his arms, keening in broken little gasps, trying to force himself to keep quiet.

Bucky’s own groans of pleasure were poorly restrained. With both hands grasping at the barkeeper’s narrow hips, watching his cock slide in and out of that tight little hole, it was all too easy to imagine
that the man underneath him was Steve; Steve who was the one who opened up so sweetly for him, who made those noises because of what Bucky was doing to him.

The thought made Bucky groan in a mixture of desire and gut-twisting shame; he felt disgusted with himself — chest roiling as if birthing a monster made up of all things sharp and cold; one that tasted sour in the back of his throat. He felt selfish, and dirty, but above all, he felt sad. Sad that Steve had moved on — that he’d changed, and finally managed to gain everything he’d ever wanted, all without Bucky’s help — without Bucky even needing to be there with him for support.

From this angle, it was so easy to picture Thomas as Steve. But he didn’t.

Even so, when Bucky came, it was with a strangled gasp of Steve’s name — one that, thankfully, Thomas hadn’t heard — too taken with his own orgasm to pay him any attention, and Bucky fucked him through it graciously, reaching underneath him to fist the man’s cock until he began to shudder from overstimulation.

He slumped forward over the smaller man, taking care not to crush him as he kissed along a sweaty shoulder blade, and swiped one hand through tangled curly blonde hair.

Thomas sighed contentedly, eyes drifting closed sleepily, before giving a displeased groan and righting himself back up onto his forearms. “Have to change the linens and get back downstairs,” he said unhappily, turning himself around to look at Bucky full in the face.

“Oh,” he said awkwardly, averting his eyes from Thomas’s brown-eyed gaze. “Do you… need any help? Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Thomas smiled blissfully, running one set of fingers through Bucky’s hair beside his ear, “I’m grand, absolutely grand. And yes, if you please, a spare set of linens should be in the basket under the bed.”

Begrudgingly, they both rose from the mattress, Thomas a little unsteady on his feet. He assured Bucky with a laugh that it was nothing to be worried about, and sought out his underpants from where they were discarded on the floor. Bucky did the same, and silently, they worked together to switch out the sheets.

“We certainly made a mess,” Thomas remarked with a smug kind of satisfaction, smoothing out the last of the creases on the remade bed and glancing at the pile of ruined sheets on the floor.

Bucky snorted, stuffing the sheets into the empty basket, and then seeking about the floor for where his pants and accompanying belt had been shed. He pulled them on hurriedly, suddenly feeling a newfound awkwardness between them the longer they didn’t speak.

Thomas, it turned out, was the one to break the silence. “I have to say, I was rather impressed with your performance, Sergeant. If you apply that much enthusiasm to your work, I’m confident the war will be over in no time.”

Bucky huffed a laugh, and for the first time that night, he felt a genuine smile break across his face. Thomas looked delighted to have achieved that reaction, and as they locked eyes, they both laughed once more.

Their laughter didn’t last long, however — as a loud pounding sounded from the door, both expressions of jubilation immediately turned to twin sets of horror.

“Rise and shine Jimmy, the boys and I are gonna head back to base, we- oh!” Before Bucky could do more than whip his head around in terror, the door’s lock gave a shuddering clatter, and the door
swung open, revealing a very shocked Timothy Dugan standing in its open frame.

It would be obvious to anyone what their state of undress meant. Midway through the process of buttoning his shirt back up, Bucky froze on the spot, locking wide eyes with Dugan. Thomas didn’t really look much better — hurriedly shoving the hem of his shirt back into his fastened trousers with a newfound haste, face burning.

“The door wasn’t… I didn’t mean to open it, it just…” Dum Dum tried to explain feebly, lowering his fist from where it was still raised mid-air in a knocking position. “Swung open.”

Neither of them had locked the door. Bucky couldn’t believe how stupid they’d been.

“Dugan,” Bucky dropped the unfinished button on his shirt and started to slowly make his way to him, holding both arms aloft as if Dum Dum were some kind of animal he was trying not to spook.

“I should go, I should-”

“No, Dugan,” before Dum Dum could scurry from the doorway, Bucky grasped him by the back of his jacket and hauled him into the room.

“I have to return to my shift, Sergeant Barnes, thank you for the, uh… thank you,” Thomas stumbled clumsily, messily balling up the remainder of his clothing in one arm, and shooting panicked glances at Dugan’s dumbstruck form as he dashed from the room.

Dum Dum, in turn, looked as though he would rather be administering a self-inflicted lobotomy than standing where he was at that precise moment. “The barman, he… he said that you’d come up here for a kip — that you’d had one too many, I just…”

“Dugan, you — it… it wasn’t what it… I…” Bucky floundered for some kind of excuse, both hands still raised up as if to catch Dum Dum if he ran, but very decidedly not touching him. Dum Dum’s eyes were fixed on the floor.

“Jimmy, y-” in a sign of true distress, he removed his bowler hat and scrubbed one hand over his messy red hair.

Bucky dropped all pretense, shoulders slumping. Anxiety clenched at his chest, and he fixed his eyes on Dum Dum’s face grimly. “Are you going to report me?” he asked.

Dum Dum jolted, and to Bucky’s surprise, snapped his eyes to Bucky’s, offended, “of course not.”

Bucky took an unsteady step forward; leaning in to fix Dum Dum with the most genuine, pleading look he could muster. “Please, Dugan, Please, you have to promise me — you can’t tell him. Promise me you won’t tell him, Dum Dum, please, please promise me.”

Dum Dum pursed his lips uncertainly, clearly not needing clarification as to whom Bucky was talking about. For a long, tense moment, Bucky thought that Dum Dum would refuse, but instead, with a long, loud exhale, he shook his head, as if disgusted at himself for actually considering it, “no, no, of course not. Shit, Jimmy, no; I swear: not a word.”

Bucky let out a sharp sigh of relief, and pulled a hand down his face, “thank you, Dum Dum.”

Chapter End Notes
For those of you who don't know, the English bartender in the scene in the Whip and Fiddle is actually played by the guy who was Chris's body double for Skinny Steve:
Chapter 4

June 2013

It had been Thor who eventually found him.

Standing alone in a military graveyard, staring down at a single, white, rounded gravestone, Steve looked completely unperturbed by the icy rain coming down in sheets around him. Despite the fact that he must have been freezing, soaked through and wearing nothing but a pair of loose khaki pants and a t-shirt, he wasn’t shivering. He didn’t even have his arms wrapped around his chest in order to conserve warmth — just kept them loose and empty by his sides.

Thor was completely aware that his typical entrances, especially that by lightning, were never exactly unnoticed by surrounding midgardians. Therefore, Steve clearly must have been aware that he was standing behind him, but was ignoring him regardless.

“Captain,” Thor let out a breath of relief as both feet settled on the ground. He looked both pleased and annoyed to have found Steve. “We grew concerned. Locating you these past few days has been a task of no small difficulty; Stark was beginning to take to the idea of flying around New York with his suit in search of you… What on earth brings you to such a mournful place?”

Steve gave a pithy, one-shouldered shrug, not bothering to look up. He looked smaller without his battle suit, Thor noticed. Vulnerable.

He was staring down at a well-worn headstone — whitewashed and unremarkable, with the name ‘Chester Burke’ engraved in bold letters above a set of dates.

“I’ve… been looking,” Steve eventually said, voice thick and raw. He swallowed, “I mean, I suppose that the SSR was never officially military, but… I knew there was enough overlap, I figured…”

Thor had read Steve’s file — had been briefed through the basics of SHIELD's history, although no matter how much he learned, it never really felt like enough — he had a basic understanding of what Steve was trying to articulate, but chose not to interrupt for clarification, instead lifting Mjolnir above his head in order to shield his face from the rain.

“I’ve searched every single one of these graves,” Steve still didn’t turn around to acknowledge him. “Every single one, up and down, and not one of them has the name of James Buchanan Barnes.”

The name was unfamiliar, but he still said nothing.

“The SSR was more government intelligence than strictly military, but the Commandos were still technically with the army. This was Bucky’s unit, and I thought he must’ve been here, but I…” his voice cracked, “I can’t find him anywhere.”

He finally turned to Thor. Although Steve’s voice wavered, he wasn’t crying. “Bucky was the most selfless, and courageous… he put his life on the line for his country again and again, more times than anyone. He died in the line of duty even when he didn’t have to — when he could have chosen to go home, to be safe, to be away from all of this, and he still chose to stay. He shouldn’t be forgotten, not after everything he sacrificed.” His voice closed off, and he swallowed thickly, willing himself
not to cry. He was better than that.

“This is what you have been occupying yourself with for the time you’ve been missing?” Thor asked, not angry, just curious.

Steve turned away from him and offered another sullen, one-shouldered shrug. “I’m an adult, I can go wherever I want. You’re not my keepers, any of you,” he said resentfully.

“Your home was empty,” Thor said.

“That’s not my home,” Steve snapped.

“You made people worry,” Thor retorted, but then reeled himself in, noting the hard set of Steve’s shoulders, and deciding that being scolded wasn’t what Steve needed right now.

He peered at him thoughtfully, and said nothing more, clearly waiting for Steve to speak.

He didn’t though — merely continued staring down at the headstone with a locked jaw and clenched fists.

Thor flexed his jaw, and nodded, coming up to stand beside Steve and staring down at the grave with him.

“The lives of midgardians,” he began slowly, “burn as short, bright, and beautiful as fireflies, Captain. From all that has been said by you, this ‘Bucky’ died a hero’s death; in noble combat. And now, because of his selfless valour, he strides the eternal halls of the great Valhalla — where the brave live, forever in revelry and celebration.”

This finally made Steve look up to him; eyes now shining with unshed tears.

“You would deny your Bucky of that?”

Before Steve could get as far as opening his mouth to snap a response, Thor continued, shaking his head and raising an appeasing hand. “Do not misunderstand me, Captain — I sympathise with your loss. I too have known great many a friend who have lost their lives in the midst of battle, and I’m well aware of the grief it carries. But I have no care to allow you to wallow in your self-pity. It is no way for you to honour a friend.”

Steve hung his head, and for the first time, Thor could see the shadow of the small man Steve had once been.

“I miss him.” Steve admitted lowly. “I miss him so much, I can barely stand it. He’s been with me for my whole life, what am I supposed to do without him now?”

Thor brought a hand down onto Steve’s shoulder in what he hoped was an adequate display of consolation, thumb pressing into the dip of his collarbone. Steve appreciated it a lot more than he thought he would — it was a warm, reassuring gesture, reminiscent of the way Bucky used to do it whenever he felt Steve needed wordless support: the morning Bucky had left for basic, the first time Steve had been turned down by a girl, when he’d first been rejected from enlistment, after he’d followed Steve back to his apartment from his mother’s funeral…

The nostalgia didn’t pang like it usually did, but rather, it comforted him in an oddly familiar way.

“As to that, Captain,” Thor said regretfully, ‘I am afraid I have no answer. For now, shall I take you back now to your…” he pondered over an appropriate wording to substitute ‘home’, ‘temporary
living situation? Or maybe you’d perhaps prefer to get a drink?"

Steve looked up at him, surprised, but then allowed his face to soften into something gentle and appreciative. “I’d like that,” he said. “But maybe after you change clothes,” he gestured to Thor’s grandiose red and silver armour. “You’re looking a little conspicuous.”

February 1944 — England

Bucky Barnes was cold.

Made from dense fabric, and underlaid with bulletproofing materials to ensure a sufficient level of safety, his new uniform was thick, and heavy, but did a surprisingly shitty job of keeping him from freezing his ass off. Especially considering that it was supposed to be designed to be worn in colder territories such as the Northern and Eastern European regions.

Admittedly though, it could have been worse. The blue coat was tight, and heavy, and didn’t exactly allow for an altogether impressive range of motion, but the mesh underlay sewn into the sleeves did a surprisingly good job of keeping his forearms and elbows from getting scuffed on rough surfaces when positioning his snipers’ rifle. Bucky was impressed that Stark had thought to consider that, and often found himself grateful for its implementation.

However, while the uniform pinched and chaffed and dragged at his body, he wryly considered himself lucky that he wasn’t the star of this show; Steve’s uniform was difficult enough to withstand that time Bucky had simply tried it on simply for kicks — he’d hate to consider how he would fare if he actually had to regularly wear it on missions.

Stark had become a little overzealous in his design of Steve’s uniform. Aside from the frankly embarrassing colour scheme, the thing weighed about as much as Steve did, and felt abrasive and stiff, and had sewn-in plating that dug into Bucky’s skin almost unbearably. Steve, of course, argued that it was fine, and that the discomfort was only so bad for Bucky because it wasn’t designed to his specific proportions. However, Bucky suspected that this might have been one of those not-quite lies that Steve was so fond of telling. He lightly accused him of being full of shit.

“Steel micromesh for the sleeves!” Stark had enthused, running his hands along Steve’s shoulders to feel out the evenness in both, “carbon polymer over the torso, which you already knew, and there’s titanium panelling for your more vulnerable parts: chest plates and… such.”

Bucky managed not to laugh, but the same wasn’t true for the rest of the men, who snorted and wolf-whistled like adolescents. Steve fought to remain professional, but ended up grinning at them indulgently all the same.

Stark smirked just as immaturely. “Now, your most susceptible parts aren’t going to be the areas that your enemy’s likely to shoot at, like your shoulders, chest, kneecaps, and middle-abdomen, but keep in mind that they’re not impenetrable. Both your suit and your helmet should withstand your average sidearm bullet without killing you, but you’d still be out of commission for a good couple of weeks, so for the love of god, be careful.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes when Steve made that face — that same pinched-up face that he put on every single time Bucky had told him to be careful. It was Steve’s knee-jerk reaction to being told what to do, and while Bucky knew it was simply a result of leftover defensiveness from being
infantilized because of his previous size, it still infuriated him just the same.

“When it comes to the suit,” Stark continued, either ignoring Steve’s childish grimace, or simply not picking up on it at all, “your weak points are gonna be threefold: your thighs, your glutes, and across your obliques and flank. Other than that, it’s really just your face and neck you have to really watch out for, but I wouldn’t be too worried if you’ve got your shield handy.”

“Face like that? I’d be more worried about getting shot in the ass.” Dum Dum winked good-naturedly. Bucky snorted.

Steve and Bucky had been having a lot of fun practicing with his shield. Frisbee-ing it back and forth, rebounding it off of one surface to the next so that Steve could work out which recoil angles provided the best damage, and, Bucky’s personal favourite, throwing old fruit and pebbles at Steve while he ducked behind the shield — trying to perfect his form so that none of his parts were left open for attack.

While Bucky didn’t like his uniform all that much, he could very safely say that he loved his new issue weapons.

Going from his Springfield rifle to a Stark-modified Johnson (lovingly nicknamed ‘Betsy’) was like going from his rust-chained bicycle to the sleek, black automobile his parents had inherited from his great uncle. The gun had excellent control, minimal recoil, and operated as a semi-automatic — handy for quick-succession shots. This, paired with the high-tech custom scope Stark had gifted him with, made for a damn-near perfect shot every time, much to the delight of both his team and Colonel Phillips.

Likewise, the rest of the team were thrilled at their new range of weaponry — especially Dum Dum, who, for several days, enthused loudly to anyone who would listen about both his new Winchester shotgun, and the standard Colt sidearm that the entire Strike Unit had been issued.

Bucky and Dum Dum were the first two of the group into the firing range to test their new weapons, firing from all angles, heights, and distances they could think of. Dum Dum still struggled in his accuracy with far-off shots, but made up for it in his skill in hand-to-hand combat — able to best everyone but Steve and Bucky.

“No more Bucky the buck-sergeant, huh?” Dum Dum laughed one afternoon after getting his ass handed to him by Bucky in a sparring session. Bucky grinned, and said nothing.

They hadn’t talked about it since that night.

After Dum Dum had promised Bucky that he wouldn’t tell Steve what he’d walked in on that night at The Whip and Fiddle, he’d politely allowed the issue to drop. However, for several weeks afterward, things still remained tense and awkward between them. Bucky got the feeling that there was a lot Dugan wanted to say, but every time he to opened his mouth as if to speak, nothing ever came out, and he always ended up closing his mouth again with a slight shake of the head. Bucky was caught between wanting to prod him to just fucking come out with it already, Dugan, Jesus, and honestly not really wanting to know what he was thinking. Nor did he have any wish to answer whatever questions he might have to ask.

Soon enough though, things eventually just kind of fizzled back to normal. While there were still a lot of things that were clearly unsaid between the two, they were back to laughing rowdily at one another’s completely inappropriate senses of humour in no time — teasing Steve about his cartoon-counterpart’s illustrated dick-bulge, swapping wistful and amusing anecdotes, and arguing over which brand of beer was the best. (The answer was Schlitz. Always Schlitz.)
Bucky didn’t dare to hope that Dum Dum had simply forgotten the whole thing, but remained grateful nonetheless that, at the very least, the man was able to put it behind him and not let it affect the team dynamic they’d so meticulously built up.

It wasn’t until three days before their first outer-country mission as part of the SSR’s Strike Unit One team, when Dum Dum had offered him his regular beans, and a bent-to-hell fork, complete with hazardous tines, that Bucky knew without a doubt that they would be okay.

March 1944 — France

It was Dum Dum who settled on the final nickname adopted for the SSR Strike Unit One.

The name had been inspired by a soldier they’d had dealings with when organising Monty’s loan to American forces — a young man who had worked alongside Monty in the Independent Parachute Brigade, in a division known as the ‘Red Devils’. He (reluctantly) went by the name of ‘Pinky’ Pinkerton. Upon hearing the division’s nickname, Dum Dum had insisted to him that they needed their own.

Bucky figured it was a personalisation thing; each member of the Strike Unit One went by their own nickname, after all — perhaps it was merely Dum Dum’s way of ensuring that they were set apart from the masses. That, in order to prevent being forgotten, they had to be made unforgettable.

And that apparently started with a name.

“The Howling Commandos!” he’d announced one day, bursting into Steve’s tent and waving aloft that morning’s edition of the paper, which boldly proclaimed that the Mighty Captain America and Co. had done it again.

He was rewarded with a symphony of loud groans from every other man in the room.

“Dugan, why do we need a nickname?” Gabe reasoned beseechingly.

This wasn’t the first time they’d had this argument. At least once a day for the past three weeks Dum Dum had brought it up, offering one suggestion after another that ranged from the completely awful to the downright horrific — and it was from a young soldier named Juniper, whose sunny disposition actually managed to rival that of Smithy, that the answer had come to him.

Steve shrugged awkwardly. “I kind of like it,” he said, and all of the men groaned, louder this time.

Dum Dum grinned triumphantly, slapping Steve heartily on the back. With Steve’s approval came confirmation — they were now the Howling Commandos.

It was amazing just how quickly the name had caught on after that — one mission after another, and steadily, the name became more and more commonplace; printed in the stead of ‘Captain America and Co.’ in all of the papers, and even Bucky had to agree that anything was better than that.

“Junior will be thrilled,” Monty had grated, defeated.

It was in France that they began to weed out the weaker Hydra stations: twelve small bases, all newly set up, and therefore only just trying to find their secure footings on shaky foundations.
Security at each was sparse, and none of the buildings had appeared anywhere close to being finished in their construction. Taking them out had been easy enough, if not time consuming as hell.

But hey, Steve had laughed, at least they had time to practice their French while they were there.

August 1944 — Poland

Bucky shot a lot better these days.

He’d insisted to the men that it was simply his improved weaponry that contributed to his near-perfect kill strike, but in truth, there were other factors — ones which he didn’t really feel comfortable admitting to. What they didn’t know was that his eyes were sharper now; that his hands remained steadier than they’d ever been capable of before; and that with each kill, he began to feel more and more at ease with the idea of executing someone. It almost sickened him to think that his greatest talent was murder — that not only had he improved so significantly at it, but that he was actually celebrated because of it.

But this, Bucky knew. Having Steve’s back was second nature — a thoroughly tried and tested routine they’d perfected to the tee years before a battlefield had entered the equation. Scuffed knees and bloodied knuckles became broken fingers and bullet wounds; a well-aimed punch to the head became a well-aimed shot from a sniper’s rifle; conquering the Brooklyn slums became the entirety of Europe.

It was in Poland that Steve’s standard issue compass saved his left buttock from a flying bullet — a lucky save considering that he almost never stowed it away there, usually. Dum Dum had laughed himself hoarse at the idea that Steve had actually been shot in the ass.

It was Bucky who had bought him a replacement — a far sturdier-looking model that he’d stumbled across by chance in an old antiques store. It was made from scuffed, heavy brass, and had a hidden compartment in the back that could possibly store something small (probably a cyanide pill, originally, although Bucky imagined far less grim intentions for its reuse). Bucky didn’t know what Steve would, or possibly even could store in there, but foresaw that it would delight him all the same.

In what little Polish he understood, Bucky garnered from the store clerk that the piece had served as kind of a lucky charm for the original owner, who had been a surviving soldier of the first Great War. Not exactly an antique then. There wasn’t much more that Bucky could make out to the story, but even as non-superstitious as he was, he figured Steve needed all the luck he could get in these coming months.

Bucky bought it for two-thirds of its original listed price. The clerk had tried to make out like he was insisting so because the compass was missing its original leather case, but Bucky knew that it was really more because the man respected his service as a soldier. Or perhaps pitied it.

It was also in Poland that, only a few days later, he’d first seen that his gifted compass now bore a circular picture of Agent Carter, roughly cut from an English newspaper and pressed messily into the lid. Every time Steve’s eyes glanced upward at it before snapping the compass closed, the ghost of a small smile graced his lips.

Each time, Bucky’s heart sank a little lower.
February 2014

When it came to Bucky Barnes, there was a great long list of the ways he could piss Steve off.

Of that great long list of things, however, Steve had to eventually concede that the thing that pissed him off most — the thing that frustrated him more than anything else in the world when it came to his best friend, throughout the entire time that he knew him, had to be the absolutely effortless way that the asshole seemed to be able to pick up new talents and skills.

Bucky was a polyglot. Bucky was ambidextrous. Bucky had the best aim out of all of the players in any of their street-sports teams. Bucky could charm his way into the pants of the first lady herself, if the idea took his fancy. Bucky seemed to have had more friends than there were actual people to befriend in Brooklyn.

What truly served as the cherry on top of all of this, however, was that Bucky apparently had no idea about any of it. The flippant way that Bucky would dismiss the impression that his ludicrous talents were indeed talents, was an endless source of aggravation.

“‘S not really a talent, Stevie, it’s just… I dunno, a neat quirk,” Bucky had said once in response to Steve grumbling jealously at the way he was effortlessly switching from one hand to another intermittently throughout penning homework into his schoolbook. Meanwhile, Steve worked through another cramp in his wrist.

“I just kinda… pick it up?” Bucky tried to explain another day, this time after earning a remark that was simultaneously impressed and bitter from Steve at how he’d just wished a good day to three different long-time neighbours in three different European languages. “I mean, it’s not like I practice or anything, not like you with your art. It doesn’t really feel like it’s worth anything if I haven’t worked for it, y’know?” Steve did not know, and frankly, he didn’t care — if he had Bucky’s capacity to learn languages that effortlessly, he’d most definitely be calling it a talent.

Bucky never seemed to be aware of it, but every time he’d introduce a woman to Steve after obviously having talked him up for several hours beforehand, the typical reaction they tended to have wasn’t exactly favourable toward Steve.

“That was really rude,” Bucky spat indignantly on Steve’s behalf, apparently seething, “I mean you were right there. It’s one thing to not be interested, but to go off with another guy right in front of you like that…” he shook his head, outraged.

Bucky very rarely said anything even bordering on ungentlemanly when it came to women — he must have really meant it.

Steve didn’t really hold it against her though. His sense of self-esteem was in the gutter, sure, but he was perfectly aware that he wasn’t repulsive, thank you very much. He was short, and often standoffish, and was completely aware that he wallowed in self-pity more than was entirely necessary, but the truth was that no matter how likeable or attractive Steve could be, when standing next to Bucky, he may as well not have been there at all. And he understood it completely — Bucky was a tall, suave, talented soldier, with a great (and rich) family, and probably the handsomest smile Steve had ever seen outside of a theatre screen. Steve was small, sick, and irritable — he could see how he’d make for a pretty shitty consolation prize.
Still, no matter how many times it happened — how many times Steve had to watch his date’s face fall when they saw him, or completely lose interest through the night, or actually laugh in his face, Bucky never seemed to understand that the dating game simply didn’t work for Steve the same way that it did for him. No matter how many times Steve was ignored, or rejected, or outright abandoned, Bucky never seemed to give up on the idea that Steve had just as much a chance with these girls as he did, and that it was simply because of Steve’s lack of trying that had the girls driving away. It was simultaneously endearing and frustrating as hell to Steve. He appreciated Bucky’s attempt to unwaveringly consider him equal, but even Steve could admit that, in regards to women, he was at a woeful disadvantage.

Any attempts to set Steve up were futile, really, and sadly, even 68 years later, this was still true.

“What about, uh,” Natasha’s brow furrowed, and she repeatedly clicked her fingers in the air as if trying to summon the name, “Claire! Tall, red hair? Think she’s in analysis? Or maybe IT? The one who always orders Mocha frappuccinos from the lunch room at 11am sharp,” she elaborated, pointing at him expectantly. “She seems nice and efficient.”

Steve wanted to groan — to roll his eyes and heave a childish sigh, but instead he settled for a raised eyebrow. “And have you met Claire’s girlfriend Jillian? The one who serves her the coffee every morning at 11am?”

Natasha waved the idea off with one hand, “alright, what about the pretty one in linguistics? Bella, or Belle, or something?”

“Natasha,” he levelled her with an unimpressed stare.

“Or Gail from defensive weaponry development?”

“Natasha.”

“Can’t have me, I’m afraid, although I’m flattered at the offer,” she teased.

“Natasha,” he ground out, “really, I appreciate it, but I can get my own dates.”

She didn’t outright laugh at him, and he appreciated her for it, but she did survey him with a look that was one part doubt, and another part faintly amused. In fairness, it was the same excuse he’d given Bucky many, many times, all those years ago, and it had never really worked for him then either.

“If you could, then you would, Steve. You’ve been here over a year now, and not once have I ever seen you go on even one date,” she said.

“You know, I wouldn’t expect you to understand, but it turns out that catching up on nearly seventy years worth of history is actually a lot more time-consuming than you’d think. Especially when Tony keeps editing the Wikipedia pages of things he knows I’m trying to read up on.”

“Steve, by this point, you’re about as educated on our basic history as your average American adult. You know enough to be able to take a break. A break with a lady, to be specific.”

“I’m always on a break. I’m on a break right now — and what do you know, it’s with a lady!” Steve saluted her with his coffee cup.

It truly was amazing how much control this woman had over her eyebrows.

“I don’t count,” she said. She righted herself to her feet, wiggling her own empty coffee cup between her fingers as she looked around for a trashcan. “You’re a tall, rich, handsome, and sensitive artist,
with 1940s style and etiquette, but without the racism. If you’re worried about women not liking you, I can almost definitely assure you that that won’t be a problem.”

“What do you mean 1940s style? Are you saying my clothes are old fashioned?” Steve demanded defensively, smoothing a hand down the front of his shirt. “Because Thor dresses way worse than I do!”

Natasha batted his hand away blithely, “you dress fine — that’s what I’m saying. C’mon Steve. What about Sarah from the STRIKE team? It’ll be fun; she might even find it charming if you do the old-fashioned dinner and a movie date. Or you could maybe instead take her out for a little drinking, and a little dancing…”

Steve frowned. “No. No dancing.”

“You don’t like to dance? Wasn’t that all you people did back then? Recreationally, I mean?” Natasha’s abilities with dry sarcasm were so well-honed that sometimes Steve found it hard to discern whether or not she actually was joking.

“Felt like it, sometimes,” Steve mumbled, although his chest clenched at the wave of memories — of Peggy’s eyes trained on his, ignoring Bucky’s advances and telling him almost outright that, yes, Steve was perhaps her right partner; of Bucky twirling his dates around dance halls with effortless grace — that charming smile never faltering; of Peggy’s wavering voice over the radio, promising to teach him how to dance as he pitched forward in that plane; of Steve glancing around a too loud and too bright New York, and realising that he was never going to get that dance after all.

“I never really did though,” he said after a moment. “Dance, I mean.”

“You telling me you never once participated in the jitterbug?”

“Natasha,” Steve said, mock-serious, “the jitterbug wasn’t something you did, it was something you were.” Natasha snorted, and Steve took a sip of his coffee before continuing. “But seriously, I’m doing my best not to dislike youth culture — I really am — but if I didn’t know how to dance in the 40s, I’m certainly not gonna know how to dance now. Dancing seems to mean something else nowadays.”

“Something else' meaning 'sex'?” Natasha’s smart-ass smirk was by far the most irritating thing about her, Steve decided.

“No. Not necessarily. Just that is seems to be less serious nowadays. Back in my day, the idea of sweeping a girl off her feet was literal. You wooed a girl when you danced with her — nowadays dancing is more of a group activity with friends than something for a date.”

“Alright, alright, I get it,” Natasha conceded. “But this isn’t about dancing. My point still stands — you’ve waited long enough. It’s time for you to get back out there, big guy.”

Steve gave another longsuffering sigh. “Can I at least find my own date? Preferably in my own time.”

“Your own time passed seventy years ago,” she said, and yeah, he probably should have seen that coming. “You’re a twenty-something year old man — if you were going to ask someone out without a helpful push, you probably would have by now. And you haven’t. So I’m offering you one. And if it wasn’t me, it’d probably be Tony, so count yourself lucky.”

Steve conceded her point.
In the end, he accepted the number of Gail from weapons development (“No, not Sarah — my mom’s name was Sarah, Nat, I’m not going to date someone with the same name as my mom”), if only to shut Natasha up.

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**December 1944 — Czechoslovakia**

The thing about Agent Carter? She was a very difficult woman to hate.

Something that Bucky could tell bothered Steve a lot was how hard Carter seemed to have to push in order to be involved in her job. From what Bucky heard, Colonel Phillips was surprisingly progressive when it came to women in the army, but the fact still remained that she was shunted to code-breaking and data analysis a lot more than she was allowed out on the field. For all intents and purposes, she was an honorary member of the Howling Commandos, however her involvement in their raids and scrimmages on Hydra bases around Europe were severely limited depending on how well she was able to negotiate with the higher-ups. Unfortunately, this wasn’t as often as they all would have liked, meaning that she was really only with their unit when they were able to convince the SSR that Peggy’s skills as either a translator or a codebreaker were absolutely essential for a mission.

Bucky was well-versed in many languages, having grown up around many immigrant orphans and neighbours, and he operated well as a makeshift interpreter when they were able to intercept Hydra transmissions, but he was nowhere even near the league of Peggy Carter when it came to Russian.

Dum Dum absolutely adored her. Whenever Steve announced that Peggy would be joining them for an incursion, Dum Dum’s entire face lit up with a great, white-toothed grin. The Commandos all teased him about having a great big crush on her, but that was more to watch Steve get all puffed up and indignant rather than to actually rib Dum Dum. They all knew that he was completely in love with Jenny, and would never even dream of looking at another woman like that.

Anyway, they’d all be lying if they said they didn’t each have at least a little crush on Peggy Carter themselves.

Bucky forgot who it was who suggested it. One moment they were all sitting in their customary circle by the fire pit (Peggy having taken her usual fleeting spot between Morita and Dum Dum, perfect for locking eyes with Steve for uncomfortable lengths of time over the top of the fire), and the next, they were all facing off in a push-up contest.

To begin with, Peggy had merely watched from the sidelines, red lips quirked in an amused smile at Dum Dum and Morita as they hefted and grunted their way through one push-up after another. The others counted each one as if announcing it to a crowd, growing more and more amused as they went. Eventually, it had been Morita whose arms had given out, and he fell into the dirt with an exhausted huff.

The men cheered, and Morita slapped the ground twice as if tapping out of a wrestling match. The men continued counting for another twenty, until Dum Dum finally relented. He made it to eighty-four.

“So I’m in the lead so far, who goes next then?” Dum Dum asked, delighted, despite being seriously out of breath.
Bucky set down his bowl to take on the challenge, but levelled Steve with an unimpressed stare when he tried to stand up as a contender. “No way, big guy. You have an unfair advantage — I rule, no serum-infused players allowed.”

“No fair,” he muttered, sounding childishly put-out.

“Agreed. Sit down, Rogers,” Dum Dum ordered good-naturedly, and Steve slumped back against his log with a huff.

“Monty, you up?” Bucky asked, ignoring him.

“With these noodle-arms?” Falsworth wiggled them in the air, as if to illustrate their noodly-ness. They weren’t really — Monty was a beanpole, but he wasn’t weak, not by a long shot. “You’d be better off facing Agent Carter.”

Peggy’s eyebrows shot up dangerously, and Bucky winced sympathetically at Monty, expecting him to be on the receiving end of one of Carter’s infamous ear-twists.

Instead, however, Peggy merely calmly set aside her titanium bowl of beans, and began to roll up her sleeves with a dignified grace. The men all Oohed, and Bucky figured that any chivalrous attempt to deny to challenge her was just going to earn him his own twist of the ear, so he said nothing, and hurried to roll up his sleeves too. He had sisters — and he’d been in enough wrestling matches with them to know better than to underestimate how strong women could be. Now, Peggy versus Becca, that’d truly be a match for the ages.

As they set themselves onto the dirt ground, facing each other, Peggy brought her left arm behind her back, steadying herself with only her right. Not one to be so easily one-upped, Bucky only hesitated a little before following suit, and then they waited for the go. The men Oohed again.

“Alright, on my mark: get set… go!” Steve swung his hand down, and on they went.

In the end, Bucky surprised himself with how well he was able to keep up — eyes fixed on each other the whole time, they grinned at one other widely. She didn’t even seem to be tired by the time they’d surpassed Dum Dum’s record, and kept going on one hand, until finally, finally, her arm seemed to wobble on the 102nd push-up.

Bucky’s arm had well and truly given up on him by the 105th, but he managed to stick it out for another two more before his support collapsed. Thankfully, 107 seemed to be Peggy’s ultimate limit too, and they both crashed to the floor at the same time.

“Finally,” Dum Dum said, sounding a little put-out that his record had been so thoroughly decimated, “thought my arm was gonna fall off just watching the two of you. Cap over here looked just about ready to shoot off in his pants,” he winked at Peggy, and Steve spluttered, flushing deeply.

Peggy threw her head back and laughed, accepting a large drink from Dum Dum.

“Jesus, Peg,” Bucky laughed, cradling his arm to his chest and massaging his bicep with the other hand. “If I’m not able to lift my rifle tomorrow I’m gonna be blaming you in my report.” He fell back into his spot by the fire.

“Y’know, I’m starting to think that you were serumed-up too, and they just don’t want us knowing,” Monty said, narrowing his eyes at Peggy in mock-suspicion.

“Oh, please,” Peggy rolled her eyes. “Like I’d need any kind of serum to beat you lot at anything.”
“Hey, my arm and I take offense to that,” Bucky pouted, accepting his own cup of bourbon from Steve. It was a draw after all.

“Except for Sergeant Barnes,” she humoured him graciously.

“Hey, Steve, betcha one fair fight we could have is a drinking competition,” Dum Dum held out two untouched bottles of bourbon.

Steve smirked, “betcha I’d still win.” He crushed Bucky’s foot under his own lightly as a silent warning, and Bucky bit back a laugh and slumped against his side of the log, still cradling both his arm and his cup of bourbon sulkily.

To his further surprise, instead of resuming her usual spot across the fire, Peggy slumped down right beside him, stealing Steve’s abandoned plate of beans for herself with relish.

She watched Steve with an expression of complete adoration, as if he were serenading her on bended knee instead of throwing his head back and chugging down great gulps of alcohol while dirty soldiers chanted and egged him on. “You know, he cares very deeply for you, Sergeant Barnes,” she said appreciatively.

Bucky snapped his gaze to hers, startled. “Huh? How do you mean?” Where had this come from?

She sipped delicately from her cup, not wincing or shuddering at the bourbon’s bite, but more savouring it as if it were nothing more than hot tea. “Well, if it weren’t for you, none of this would have happened. He’d probably be heading back from an extensive European tour selling more bonds, rather than leading his own specialised tactical team.”

Bucky looked away. He was suddenly very starkly aware that Peggy was the only one there aside from himself who had known Steve as he was before the serum. They’d been stationed together many times before, and had covered amiably, however this was the first time the two of them really talked about it. Bucky wondered where this line of thought of hers had come from, and he inclined his head curiously, still not really looking at her.

“After his show in Italy, I found him sketching in that book of his by himself in the rain. He loves a good dramatic scene, our Steve,” she laughed lightly, and Bucky returned it, secretly delighted at her calling him our Steve. “I swear, I could have flirted with that man nonstop day and night, and he would never have gotten the hint. Just loved to sit around feeling sorry for himself.”

“Now that definitely sounds like the Steve I know and love,” Bucky said, just as fondly. “Sure loves a good sulk, that guy.”

“But when he found out… you should have seen him after I mentioned that it was your regiment that was taken — damn-near broke my heart. That was the kick in the rear for this entire thing,” she gestured around expansively, illustrating the existence of the Howling Commandos, their camp in Czechoslovakia, her involvement in being there, “if he didn’t care about you so much, he never would have gone on that insane mission to bring you all back.”

Bucky pursed his lips disapprovingly.

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re jealous of him, Sergeant Barnes?” Peggy said, clearly misinterpreting Bucky’s peevish expression.

“What? No, no way. I’m happy for the little punk — can’t think of anyone more deserving,” he was firm on this, “I just wish he didn’t use it as an excuse to be even more reckless than ever before. Guy nearly commits accidental suicide at least twice a day, I swear. It’s giving me ulcers — grey hairs!”
“One might call that recklessness bravery,” she argued, not unkindly.

“And another might call it stupidity,” he finally looked over at her. “He’s not invincible, Peg. I don’t want him to get hurt because of his own disregard for his wellbeing.”

Her expression softened, and neither of them spoke for another few minutes, sipping from their cups of bourbon and watching Frenchie face off against Gabe in an arm-wrestling match. Steve watched them with a wry look, arms crossed over his massive chest.

“You could have left, you know. After Germany,” she tactfully didn’t say ‘after you were tortured’, but Bucky heard it anyway, “you could have gone home. I know you have family, and I know you must miss them. One might even say you’re being as reckless as he is.”

Bucky shrugged. “I love my family. And I miss them — and my other friends back home too, I guess. But I’ve been watching this kid’s back my entire life. I’m not about to stop now.”

Peggy smiled. “He really is lucky to have you.”

Bucky smiled back, and looked her genuinely in the eyes. “You’d be good for him,” he said, and was surprised to find that he really did mean it.

“Well, if he ever gets his act together that is.” Peggy lit up, and she tried to hide it by turning her head bashfully.

Bucky laughed. “Now that definitely sounds like Steve.”

Peggy hummed pensively. “Well, despite nothing happening between us yet, it is nice to see that my supposed relations with Captain America are certainly limiting the number of men I have to… discourage.”

Bucky grinned. “Yeah, I’ve heard all that discouraging can be real rough on the fists.”

“Well, I do hate to ruin a perfectly good manicure,” she grinned right back at him.

February 2014

Steve took Gail out to dinner and a movie — a boring choice, according to Natasha, but it afforded him the opportunity to cross two things off of his list: Thai food, and Godzilla (watching the remake was just as good as watching the original, right?).

In the end, he enjoyed his night out with her. The Thai food was delicious, the movie interesting, and her company really was enjoyable. He told her briefly about growing up, about his mom, and his art. He walked her back to her car and wished her a lovely night.

Gail was an extraordinarily interesting and beautiful woman, and honestly it charmed Steve to hear her talk about her work, and babble so fondly about her pet dogs (there were five of them, but Steve could only remember the names of Qubert and Ozzie).

The next day, however, Steve overheard her confiding to a friend in a regretful voice that, perhaps the idea of dating Captain America was a lot more exciting than actually going out with Steve Rogers.
Steve didn’t call her again.

March 1945 — Germany

It was in Germany that Bucky found out about Smithy.

It was their largest siege yet: the biggest Hydra base — the very last one they had mapped out (although it was doubtful that this was the very last one at all.)

By the end, they had taken out every filthy Hydra agent they could find, and they had well and truly decimated their systems to the point where a rebuild would have been unquestionably impossible.

They should have felt relief — elation. They should have been celebrating. Instead, however, they felt tired.

Smithy — wide-eyed Smithy, the eternal optimist, had been shot in the head.

Bucky couldn’t help but remember every time that they had sat around a campsite fireplace, relaying stories to one another. Typically, the others would lose focus when hearing Bucky’s stories, unless it involved a girl, or else a particularly amusing reminiscence about his misadventures with Steve. But Smithy had always acted as if Bucky’s stories were the most enrapturing things in the world, maintaining unbroken eye contact and nodding enthusiastically every time he started up.

“When I get home, I wanna write,” Smithy had once told him determinedly, as he made a start on dismantling his rifle again, “not as a career or anythin’, but I like kids — I reckon it’d be fun to write books for ‘em, y’know? Somethin’ that’ll really spark their interest.”

Bucky missed his mother. He missed his sisters — Becca, the youngest, in particular. Smithy had relayed ideas for children’s books off of Bucky for months, and he knew that there were many ideas that Smithy had which Becca would have completely adored.

And now Smithy was dead.

Bucky felt sick. Not for the first time, he wanted to go home.

May 1945 — Russia

Bucky Barnes had not slept in five days.

Staring up at the canvas roof of his military tent, he felt as though he were on the verge of tears. Surely, he reasoned, surely by this point he should be tired enough that his body would opt to shut it out in favour of getting some goddamned rest, but no. Of fucking course not.

It wasn’t that he wasn’t comfortable. Well, sure, he was as far from comfortable as you could get, but he was hard-luck to remember a time when he wasn’t. For months, he’d been sleeping either in a bag on the ground, or on one of the equally hard surfaces of the military cots. Shit, he’d even managed to
get at least a few hours every night that he was strapped to a goddamn metal gurney whenever Zola
chose to retire his poking and prodding and endless questioning for the day in favour of getting a few
hours of shut-eye for himself.

It wasn’t even the nightmares that kept him awake, like he knew Steve thought. He supposed that the
smell of the place was starkly different enough in both places to keep his brain where it was —
Zola’s lab being pristine and sterile, smelling of ammonia, and whatever the fuck it was they’d kept
injecting him with, while their bases and camps smelled the same all the way throughout Europe, no
matter how far they went; like sweaty men, dirt, gunpowder, and car fumes. The smell of the place
was enough like his shitty Brooklyn apartment that Bucky hadn’t had many nightmares.

It was the snoring.

The goddamn fucking snoring.

Since he was a kid, Bucky had never been able to sleep a lick if there was anyone in the house who
snored. He could sleep through the sounds of cars, and trains, and construction workers, and even for
a while, the sounds of those rowdy neighbours living below him who chose to fuck at extremely
inconsiderate hours of the morning, every morning, until he’d eventually moved in with Steve.

But not snoring.

And when sharing quarters with the Howling Commandos, there was no escape from the snoring.

Not that each of them all slept in the same tent every night. Being captain, Steve had his own tiny
one-person quarters to retreat back to every night, much to Steve’s insistence otherwise. The others
shared two tents between them; three to one. The only member of the Howling Commandos, sans
Bucky and Steve, who did not snore, was Gabe. Sometimes Morita too, depending on the day, and
how he was sleeping that night.

Tonight though, Bucky had well and truly drawn the short straw.

His sleeping bag was situated directly in between that of Dum Dum and Frenchie — the worst
snorers of the lot. He was well and truly losing his mind.

He didn’t know what time it was, or how long he’d been staring up, murderously, at the tent ceiling.
He watched a beetle of some kind crawl up and along the slanted canvas roof, climbing higher and
higher.

“Fuck this,” he eventually hissed. In jerky movements, he shed the thick sleeping bag down his body
and kicked his legs free, not really caring if he woke the other two up. It would serve the bastards
right, those noisy assholes.

He threw back the opening flap and climbed out, grousing and muttering obscenities under his breath
as he went.

“Can’t sleep?” he heard a voice ask, sounding amused.

He jerked his head upright to see Steve, illuminated by the light of two dim lanterns and surrounded
by papers. He nodded his head toward the quietly rumbling tent Bucky had just emerged from with a
knowing smirk.

“Not a single fucking wink,” Bucky groused. “What about you? Shouldn’t you be resting up for
tomorrow? You’re frontmanning this suicide mission, after all.”
Steve shook his head, and his eyes fell back onto the maps he was examining. “I just keep going over the plan in my head — there’s so much that could go wrong, I need to make sure I’ve ironed out any details that aren’t perfect.”

“Pretty sure you’ve well and truly thought it through, Steve,” despite his attempts to not take his frustration out on Steve, his tone came out sharp anyway. He was tired, and Steve was being a stubborn asshole.

True to said title of stubborn asshole, Steve frowned at Bucky touchily. “You still think this whole thing is a bad idea, don’t you?”

“If by ‘bad idea’ you mean ‘walking into a death-trap’, then yes, I do think it’s a bad idea. A terrible, death-inducing idea.”

“Bucky, we’ve been over this –”

“And you’re still not hearing me!”

“Bucky, I’m hearing you! I know that this has the potential to just be an elaborate trap, but if it isn’t, then this could mean something huge for us. We’re looking at probably the biggest find we’ve made in the last year,” Steve said seriously.

“Sure, and those POWs we rescued in Bavaria mean squat,” Bucky said coolly.

“Don’t be like that — don’t twist my words. You know what I mean,” Steve made that stupid disappointed face of his again, and Bucky wanted to throttle him. “We’re looking at something that could completely tip the scales in our favour, maybe for good,” he gathered himself up to stand, facing Bucky with that stupidly earnest face. “The tail-end of the war is so close, Bucky, can’t you feel it?”

Bucky could not feel it. Honestly, the longer they remained out here, the less and less he felt it would ever end at all. He paused for a moment, looking away from Steve so that he didn’t have to watch that sincere gaze of his try and worm its way into all of Bucky’s soft spots.

“That castle in Bavaria... when you blew up the lab, for a good few minutes, I thought that it really had taken you down with it — all the men did. Do you have any idea how that felt?”

Steve faltered, but did not relent. “Yes, I do, you know I do. But Buck, this isn’t the same-”

“Of course it’s the same!” Bucky shouted, “It’s all the fucking same! Every time we go out on these suicide missions, it’s always you who takes most of the risk.”

“And I always come out of it fine!” Steve argued back, not shouting like Bucky was, but certainly speaking with force behind his words, stubborn and angry, as if this were simply another one of Bucky’s chides about starting fights in alleyways.

“And what happens when you don’t? You’re not invulnerable, you jackass — you keep taking risks, and one day, one of them is gonna to backfire on you.”

“I’m not ignoring the risks here, Buck, I’m strategizing. It’s my call as captain to decide what is and isn’t worth the risk, and I’m telling you, if I’m right about this, it is worth it.”

“And what happens if I’m right? What happens if you get caught? Or captured? Or worse?” Bucky’s throat worked over a nauseated swallow at the idea, “they know what you are and what you have inside you Steve. And they’ll torture you to get it for themselves — that’s if they decide you’re worth
more trouble alive than dead.”

“Bucky—”

“No. When I saw that explosion in Bavaria, it… I…” Bucky’s hands were trembling by his sides, and he finally looked up at Steve to see that his face had gone soft and understanding, “I can’t… I can’t fucking lose you, Steve.”

“Buck…”

Bucky didn’t think. Couldn’t think. One moment he was yelling in Steve’s face, the next he had him seized around the collar, and was yanking him forward into a hard, searing kiss.

Steve stood, stock-still in Bucky’s grip — frozen in complete shock. Eyes squeezed shut tightly, Bucky gripped at his uniform with urgency, clinging onto this moment with a desperate fervour before it inevitably came crashing down around him — before Steve could shove him aside, clock him in the face, fix him with a repulsed look, and tell him that he was disgusting, that he was sick.

Steve didn’t shove him away though.

Instead, he allowed his stiff posture to fall into something else: something minutely more relaxed — not reciprocating Bucky’s actions exactly, but not altogether rejecting them either. For several long moments, Bucky allowed himself to simply push his lips into Steve’s, feeling Steve’s surprised intakes of breath, his day-old stubble, his soft blush against his face. And then –

And then Steve’s lips began to press back, ever so gingerly.

It was testing. Curious. Bucky’s heart pounded roughly in his chest, and Steve’s lips parted cautiously under his own, allowing Bucky to fit their mouths together more deeply. He could taste Steve on his tongue; feel the heat of skin at Steve’s neck grazing his knuckles where he was still clutching at his collar. His face burned, and he let one hand slide upward behind Steve’s ear to card gently through the back of his head…

And then, all of a sudden, Steve’s hands were fastened on Bucky’s shoulders. Firmly, but not angrily, Bucky was pushed back from him at arm’s length.

One look at Steve’s face was all Bucky needed to see for his heart to shatter in his chest.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky blurted out, clapping one hand over his mouth in horror.

“Buck, I…” Steve’s face was still flushed, his lips still shiny, and he looked completely perplexed, shaking his head in confusion.

“No, I know, Steve, shit, I know, I’m sorry…”

“Bucky, no, It’s fine, I just—”

“No, I get it, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t’ve…”

“Bucky.”

“Forget it.”

There was a tense silence. Neither seemed to know what to do or say next, the both of them averting their gazes wildly, awkwardly rearranging their stances, and fiddling their hands about, as if unsure of what to do with them.
Eventually, it was Bucky who broke the silence, hesitantly allowing himself to bring his eyes back up to Steve’s. “I know you don’t… but we… we’re okay, right?” Please, he thought, please tell me I haven’t fucked this up for good.

Steve’s face softened, and he looked back up at Bucky with a somewhat comforting smile. “Of course we are, Buck.”

“I- I won’t do it again — I swear,” his throat clicked as he swallowed thickly. He willed himself not to cry. “I swear I won’t. I’m sorry. I’m just… I’m tired, Steve.” His hands were shaking, and balled them roughly into fists by his side. "I'm so fucking tired."

“Bucky,” Steve’s arms suddenly came around his shoulders, pulling him into a tight, reassuring hug. “I promise, we’re okay.”

Bucky’s eyes burned, and he blinked hard, trying not to cry.

Steve released him gently, still with that warm smile plastered on his face, which didn’t completely cover the remaining shock Bucky had shaken him with. “Try to get some sleep, okay? Take my tent; I’ll bunk with Dugan and Dernier for tonight. You look like you haven’t slept in days.”

It was an out — an excuse offered for Bucky to justify his actions, to save himself the embarrassment he would no doubt feel in the morning, when he was sane and rested. Bucky took it.

Bucky gave a fake-sounding laugh, thankful for both the change in subject, and the excuse. “I haven’t, exactly. Remind me next mission why I always refuse to sleep next to those guys.”

Steve chuckled, and Bucky made his way over to the Captain’s tent, pausing, however, as he came to the entrance. “I’ll… I’ll see you in the morning, yeah?” Bucky asked tentatively.

“Bright and early,” Steve smiled. “Try not to sleep in too late — we have a train to catch.”

Chapter End Notes

First section of this chapter is shamelessly borrowed from 616 (Captain America: Man Out of Time, #4), however, it has been tweaked for a) the purposes of this story, and b) adjusting Thor’s character to more reflect his personality in the MCU!Verse rather than the comics. As I understand, MCU!Thor is a little more tactful and understanding than his comic book counterpart.

Art for this chapter:
(x)

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Off the mountainside, on solid ground, the Schnellzug EB912 came to a grinding halt.

Using one of the code transceivers they’d stolen from a captured base in Greece, Gabe had managed to intercept a radio transmission from the last Hydra base they conquered — one that hadn’t been on the maps. It claimed that a large transport of Hydra supplies was on the move through a nearby alpine pass, and contained not only Hydra’s biggest shipment of advanced experimental weaponry yet, but also their top scientist: Arnim Zola.

Minus the Captain, Bucky, and Gabriel, the remaining Howling Commandos were gathered at their negotiated rendezvous point — ready with their lone transport truck and a heavy-set radio, ready to call in their extraction vehicles to the airstage as soon as they confirmed their mission to be successful.

With the emergency brake pulled, the train’s halt was hardly as graceful as they’d imagined it’d be. The high-pitched squeal of metal grinding on metal was loud — far louder than they’d expected, and they each clapped their hands over their ears in response. A shower of sparks rained over the snow where the wheels locked over the tracks, until finally, about twenty yards from where they stood, it jerked to a final halt.

The train gave a loud hissing noise as it settled, and Dum Dum took both hands off of his ears to applaud triumphantly, the sound muffled by his thick winter gloves. “Right on time, you punctual bastards!” he exclaimed. The others clapped too, whooping and laughing right alongside him as they all began to lope through the snow in a jog.

Something was wrong. All of them realised it at the same time, jolting to an abrupt halt in their strides toward the train. Their hands halted their applause, and the smiles immediately slid off their faces as their eyes finally settled on exactly what they were looking at.

The entire side of the train’s third compartment down had been torn open, gaping and exposed. Twisted metal ripped a crude new entryway into the section, allowing the Commandos to see all of the Hydra weapons stored neatly inside, along with two apparently dead Hydra agents lying motionless on the floor.

Their stomachs collectively lurched at hearing the voice of Gabriel Jones, low and consoling; “C’mon, Cap, c’mon, you’ve gotta stand up.”

Mortia took a jolting step forward, as if he made to run toward the train, but he halted in his tracks suddenly when a guttural choking noise was heard as Gabriel’s answer.

It didn’t sound as if the other person was crying; more like they were fighting to breathe — taking hard gulps of air as though they’d been saved from drowning.

Gabe appeared out of the tear in the train, stepping over the twisted metal and dragging a large, blue figure behind him by the underarms. Captain Rogers.

“I need some help here!” he shouted, almost angrily, to the others. They scrambled forward at once, stumbling through heavy snow as if his words were a literal kick in the rear.

“Cap, come on, you need to stand, you need to-” they heard Gabe say comfortably, but was cut off...
when both of Steve’s large hands suddenly shot out to clutch at the front of Gabe’s uniform, gripping tight and making him lurch forward.

Steve let out a panicked stream of incoherent babbling, which sounded like words, although none of them could work anything out except the words “Bucky”, and “Zola, he-” before he’d thrown Gabe to the side and dropped fully to his knees. Steve vomited messily into the snow, still trying to force his words to become comprehensible between painful, gasping breaths.

Shaken by his CO’s behaviour, Dum Dum turned to Gabe, still not really taking his eyes off the trembling mass that was their commander. “What the hell happened?”

“Is he alright?” Falsworth said anxiously, then amended; “is he hurt?”

Gabe only gaped wordlessly, eyes wide.

“Where’s Barnes?” Morita asked slowly.

Cold dread slipped through Dum Dum’s body like he’d swallowed ice, and for a moment, he didn’t understand why.

Steve turned on his knees and fell on his ass. He drew both legs up, burying his face in his kneecaps and clutching at his hair with both hands, trembling violently and making muted noises of distress.

When he finally spoke, his voice was sounded wet, as if his mouth were still full of bile, and more than slightly hysterical. “They shot at us, they — he... Bucky lead the fire away, he... the fucking idiot,” the Commandos all recoiled at the words, “he lead the fire away from... and... they — they blasted him... right off his feet, right out the side, and he... he held on,” his eyes flickered to the torn side of the train again. His voice rose in pitch again as he spoke, “he held on, and I couldn’t…” he choked, shuddered, and buried his face further in his knees.

Dum Dum wanted to refuse — to tell them to stop joking around — to order them to reveal to them where Barnes was hiding for this sick, sick joke.

Nobody spoke.

Dum Dum’s rucksack dropped from his hand onto the snow with a dull thump.

“-status report? Hello? Jim, come in, is everything alright?” Dugan jumped at hearing the staticy voice of Peggy Carter from their portable radio. She sounded mildly concerned, but with an undertone of annoyance, as if she perhaps thought they’d simply forgotten to radio in. Which, in her defence, they had.

Dugan watched as Jim swallowed thickly, blinking hard as he apparently remembered that he was in charge of communications. His hands trembled when he lifted his headset from where it was strung around his neck. He pressed two fingers into the PTT button, and spoke in a strained voice, “Peg? Morita here... We-” he drew both fingers away as all the air seemed to expel from his lungs in one go, and he made a strangled noise in the back of his throat when he tried to breathe back in. His jaw clenched, and he closed his eyes, trying to compose himself, and failing.

Dum Dum watched as Gabriel squared his shoulders, and with sharp, businesslike movements, seized the handheld mic from its clip on the radio side. He pressed the PTT, “Jones here, Peggy.”

“Gabe? Is everything okay?” all the annoyance drained out of Peggy’s tone, and she at once sounded uneasy.
His jaw clenched. “How long until extraction?”

“They should be there any minute. What happened? Is everything alright?”

Dum Dum didn’t want to hear this — didn’t want to hear those words, not again, because they weren’t real, they couldn’t be real. Hearing them said aloud would make it real, this couldn’t be real…

“We…” Gabe made that same strangled noise Morita had, all of the air leaving him in a heavy gush. He blinked hard, grit his teeth, and forced himself to breathe in. Eyes clenched shut, he opened his line back up, “we have a man down, Peggy.”

Static-y silence sounded over the line as she registered this horrible news.

“We’ve lost Barnes.” His voice cracked over Bucky’s name.

Dum Dum could practically see Peggy go still at her station, eyes going as wide and disbelieving as the rest of the Commandos’ were — Bucky was, after all, as much her teammate as he was the rest of them. More silence, and then, in a small voice, she spoke. “Steve?”

In unison, each of the men glanced up anxiously at Steve, who remained shaking and gasping in his spot on the snowy ground. Dernier was now crouching beside him, slowly extending a hand out to touch his shoulder. Dum Dum had never seen Dernier look so at a loss of what to do; his entire face seemed to wilt with it — that hopelessness he felt as he tried to summon up a way to comfort his Commander.

“Steve,” Dernier said gently, in English, bringing one hand to smooth over his back tentatively. “C’mon, Steve, breathe.”

“I’m trying…” Steve said.

“He’s… we’ve got him,” Gabe said eventually, because he couldn’t say that Steve was alright. They’d never seen him any further from alright.

“And Zola?” she asked, voice hardening.

“Captured and restrained,” Gabe replied.

At the sound of the name, Steve’s head snapped back up, and Dum Dum almost took a step back in fear at the unbridled rage he saw there. His handsome face was twisted cruelly, looking ready to destroy, to conquer, to breathe fire — to rip Zola apart with his bare hands.

“Zola,” he spat, low and gravelly, and he launched himself up to lunge at the train.

At once, Dernier, Falsworth and Morita all charged to restrain him, grasping at his uniform and hauling him back, which really only succeeded in keeping him from taking a step forward.

“Cap, no, we need him in alive — our orders were to bring him in alive!” Morita reminded him, voice hard, as if the words burned him to say aloud.

“Accidents happen,” Steve said, cold and resolute. Irrefutable. Another chill went through Dum Dum.

“Steve, no, we can’t, we need him for information,” Falsworth said, knuckles turning white against the straps at the front of Steve’s uniform.
“I don’t care.”

“Without him we won’t be able to find Schmitt,” Falsworth redoubled, digging his heels into the snow as if to brace himself against being thrown aside. “We won’t be able to find that last base — we need to find that last base, Steve. We need to end this, we’re so close to ending this, you can’t—”

“I DON’T CARE,” he roared, and all the men released him and fell back at once, terrified.

Steve’s face crumpled again, and with a swallow, and a hitch in his breath, he fell back to his knees. Both hands came up to cover his face again, trembling, and finally, he began to weep.

Whenever the nights were particularly cold — when wrapping themselves up and huddling by the campfire wasn’t quite enough, Barnes would begin to reminisce. He always had a seemingly endless supply of amusing anecdotes — stories about the hijinks he and Steve would get up to before the war, when they were kids, or stupid teenagers, or sometimes just particularly reckless young adults. It was like he saved them up for when he knew they needed them to take their minds off of the cold.

In these stories, Steve was always, without fail, that tiny version of himself that the rest of the Howling Commandos had never had the opportunity to know. Barnes, however, had only ever known that version of Steve for pretty much his entire life — ‘a tiny ball of righteous fury’ Bucky had once called him, which earned a great eye-roll from Rogers (looking more amused than really annoyed).

Listening to these stories, Dum Dum had lost count of the times he’d attempted to accurately picture what a scrawny, asthmatic, anaemic, diabetic, crooked-spined, colour-blind Steve Rogers would look like, and never seemed to be able to do so properly.

Right now though, sitting on the snowy ground, curled into a ball and crying, he somehow looked far tinier, far more fragile, than Dugan could ever have thought possible. And suddenly, he had no trouble picturing Steve as that tiny version of himself at all.

The flight back to London headquarters was a blur.

Shoulder-to-shoulder inside the tiny aircraft, each of the men sat in complete silence.

Zola had been locked in a back compartment with a rifle pointed in his direction by a stone-faced Gabriel, who still remained the most levelheaded of them all. It wasn’t something they’d really come to a unanimous decision to as a unit, just more of Gabe’s infallible initiative — deducting real fast that Zola was to be kept the hell away from Steve if they wanted to keep him alive. To be honest though, Steve didn’t really look much in the mood for murder anymore. On occasion, each of them would look up in unison to spare him a nervous glance. He was no longer sobbing — no longer wearing that twisted face of pure agony — instead, he merely sat demurely in his seat, staring into space at the floor with a blank, stilted look on his face. If it weren’t for the tears that continued to roll freely down his face in a constant stream, they’d’ve thought that their captain had simply just checked out completely.

Upon arriving back at base, Steve seemed to have to physically drag each foot in front of the other, moving sluggishly, as if fighting his way through mud or swamp water; as if there were physical weights strapped to each leg.
Peggy and Colonel Phillips were waiting for them at the base when they landed. It was the first time they’d ever really seen Peggy anything other than completely composed, however subtle it was. Her jaw clenched and relaxed rhythmically with her breathing, and every now and then they’d catch her blinking hard, as if banishing the beginnings of tears in those large brown eyes.

Colonel Phillips wore his sadness with far more composure than the rest of them. His default scowl never really left, but there was something behind it that made their hearts hurt — something sad and tired. Although, Dum Dum didn’t really know if it was because of the loss of Bucky, or more because of the pity the man felt for Steve.

They kept busy while there were still things to be done, because it was the best way to distract themselves — because if they spent any more time not moving, there’d be nothing to stop them from thinking about it. It’d hit them, and Dum Dum didn’t want to accept it. Not yet.

He pictured Bucky on the side of the ravine, blue-grey eyes staring lifelessly up at the clouds overhead. He felt nauseous.

As the strongest (aside from Steve), Dum Dum put himself in charge of carrying some of the equipment down to Stark’s for inspection, and then made his way to the large storage unit attached to his workshop to drag in some of the larger of the Hydra weapons they’d seized. As the only one who really knew how to safely contain any of it, Dernier joined him for the more volatile of the lot — explosives, mainly.

Gabe and Monty both escorted Zola to the prison containment block for processing before he would be interrogated. Idly, Dum Dum hoped, with a raw kind of bitterness, that they’d be invited to sit in, or else that they’d at least be able to watch from behind one-way glass. It’d be truly satisfying to see that pig finally squeal.

“Are any of you prepared to do a report?” Peggy was very decidedly not looking at Steve as she said it. She was standing beside him where he sat at the Colonel’s desk. The top half of that ridiculous blue uniform was shed and draped over the back of the chair he sat in, leaving him in a ratty undershirt, and he stared blankly through the steaming tin mug that he’d obviously been handed, but had not touched.

Each of the men looked at him nervously, before Gabe cleared his throat and spoke up, clearly still prepared to shoulder the brunt of the responsibility, “I… I’ll do it.”

She nodded at him, but to everyone’s surprise, was cut off before she could speak by a mechanical-sounding Steve. “No,” he didn’t meet any of their eyes as he spoke, “It’s my job, I’ll do it.” And before any of them could speak up to offer a gentle protest, he set down the untouched mug and swept out of the room, not even bothering to scoop up his uniform as he went.

Peggy sighed, and her lips pursed in a telltale sign of distress, clearly concerned. She gathered his limp uniform in both arms, and turned to the rest of the men.

“You’re dismissed for now, gentlemen. If I can make a suggestion — go on and get yourselves drunk.”

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The Blitz was supposed to be over.
While they knew that bombs were still occasionally dropped on towns close to known military headquarters, nonetheless, each of them stared in shock at the bombed-out wreck that was once the Whip and Fiddle.

For one mad moment, Dum Dum wanted to laugh at the kind of fucked-up metaphor that this shitty, bombed-out bar made of their current situation. For an even madder moment, he wondered what became of that skinny blonde bartender he’d caught Bucky with that night over a year ago. Had it really been a year?

The place may have been a wreck, but there were still parts of it that remained somewhat untouched by the damage — including a bottom shelf under the bar that contained a row of bourbon bottles of varying fullness, and a storage crate, in which they’d found a practically undamaged collection of glasses, clearly brand-new and unused. Probably to cater for the influx of patrons the place was serving since the war.

“You don’t understand,” Bucky had insisted once, rolling his eyes and gesturing grandly with a half-empty bottle, “This isn’t just bourbon, this is American bourbon. Germans are geniuses when it comes to beer, but nobody, nobody, knows bourbon like the U-S-of-A.”

For several minutes, they worked to make out what they could of their usual drinking table, stepping amongst rubble, and sweeping dust off of tabletops before they eventually found one that could stand upright well enough for them to stand at without it tipping into their laps.

For several long moments, they drank in silence, passing around bottles to fill their glasses when they emptied, each willing the others to gather enough courage to speak first.

Eventually, it was Morita who spoke, sounding small and confused, as though nothing had still quite registered within him yet. “What happened?” he addressed Gabe.

In the original plan, Bucky and Gabe were the ones to be going after the explosives and clearing the train of any unwanted passengers, while Steve acted in Gabe’s place as the one to apprehend Zola. After receiving the transmission, argument after argument between the two men had taken place as to the recklessness of boarding a Hydra train without all the information — Bucky was convinced it was a trap, while Steve insisted that the benefits outweighed the risks. In the end, a compromise was reached, apparently while the rest of the commandos slept, that Jones would switch with Rogers so that Bucky could keep an eye on him.

Gabe gave a hard exhale, and drained the rest of his bourbon. He shuddered, and then slammed his glass on the table. Dernier refilled it without prompt. “I just heard this scream… I thought it had been… I…” Gabe looked nauseous, “I cheered. I didn’t see, wasn’t looking properly, I thought they’d thrown a Hydra agent off the train, and I cheered. I don’t think Cap heard me, but I didn’t stick around long enough to see… I mean, I didn’t see Rogers hanging there until…” a lump formed in his throat, cutting him off, and he tried to cover this by taking another long sip of bourbon. “After I’d restrained Zola,” he continued, “I knew I had a little time before I had to pull the brakes, so I moved down the carts to re-join Steve and… well, I thought they could use a hand going after the explosives, y’know? Didn’t realise it was a trap — it had all been a trap, just like Barnes had said. The Hydra goons were all dead, and I just see Steve hanging out of the side of the train like he was about to jump. I grab him by the straps and haul him back in, and…” he paused, and took another great swallow of bourbon.

Gabe took another deep breath, and moved on to continue, but Dum Dum was no longer listening. Could not listen any longer — his ears only hearing noise like an untuned radio as memories of Barnes stop-started in his brain like a flickering reel of film.
“Someday, when all of this is over,” Bucky heaves a heavy rucksack over one shoulder, “I’m going to take Stevie and we’re going to go see the Grand Canyon. Always wanted to see it, ever since I was a kid. Bet Steve’d love it too — love to draw it; he eats up all that artsy landscape shit.”

“What do you think you’re lookin’ forward to most? When I get back home, I mean.” Gabriel asks curiously.

Barnes replies with a small smile, eyes flickering to the back of Steve’s blonde head as he dug through his pack for more sweet biscuits. “I’m mostly lookin’ forward to sleeping in my own bed, if I’m honest. Bet it’d be sweet being able to sleep without Dum Dum here snoring like a rhinoceros. And without all you bums hangin’ around,” he adds with a grin, “I haven’t slept in the buff for months. Months!”

“We’re all thankful for your brave and noble sacrifice, Sergeant Barnes,” Gabriel replies dryly, and they all laugh again.

They’d grabbed him in his sleep. Two of them, with their arms hooked under Barnes’s pits, dragging him behind them with his feet scraping the floor as a third flanks them — long, heavy gun trained directly at Barnes’s chest. Barnes, the stubborn bastard, doesn’t give them the satisfaction of looking scared — only trains all of them with the deepest look of disgust and fury Dugan had ever seen. Dugan, of course, was pressed against the bars of his holding cage, hands clawing at the thin air, and yelling angry obscenities and useless threats their way. Barnes’s voice is still raw and weak from pneumonia, yet he still manages to give them a shouting of a lifetime. It’s only when they order him to instead choose his replacement from the commandos’ cage that he shuts up. He lets himself be dragged the rest of the way, looking defeated, and Dum Dum continues to scream.

Bucky’s eyes are pleading. He looks desperate, and it’s the first time Dum Dum has seen him truly terrified. He hadn’t ever looked this scared — not ever. Not when he was appointed sergeant, not when the 107th was captured by Hydra, not when he was dragged, kicking and screaming, to be tortured at the Red Skull’s labour camp...

This though, this, he looked petrified of even the thought of it.

“Please, Dugan, please, you have to promise me,” again with those wide, pleading eyes, “You can’t tell him. Promise me you won’t tell him, Dum Dum. Please, please, promise me.”

Dum Dum promises.

Twenty-seven.

The kid had only been twenty-seven years old — his birthday barely a week away.

Of course, birthdays during the war often bore little significance. Occasionally, they’d see a soldier receive packages from home bearing some sort of small gift that they were able to fit into their packs, but beyond that, there were never any real celebrations beyond vague toastings of cheap alcohol in
shitty tin mugs.

The Howling Commandos though, as usual, were the exception.

It had been Dum Dum who had insisted that they all celebrate when Falsworth’s birthday had rolled around — on December 25th, of all days.

“It’s not like there are hundreds of dates for us to remember — just the seven of us,” Dum Dum had asserted, and they all agreed. It hadn’t been a huge affair — whatever was in their means was what they got when birthdays were concerned. Denier, being upset that they hadn’t done the same for his birthday in August, had been given a belated celebration on New Years to make up for it.

Bucky’s birthday fell at the beginning of May, and Steve, who didn’t usually like to use his influence in order to get his way, had made an allowance this one time in order to procure him a cake.

Aside from Steve, Bucky had been the youngest out of all of them — Monty coming in third at thirty-five.

“You both act like an old married couple,” Monty whines, rolling his eyes at the bickering men.

“That’s because Steve here has prematurely aged me. You seein’ these grey hairs? Stress.” He cards a hand through flawless dark hair.

Steve snorts. “Don’t blame your premature aging on me, old man.”

_Bucky gasps in outrage. The men laugh._

Dum Dum grunted, valiantly trying to hold back tears.

“Dugan?” Monty said.

“He… he was just a kid…” Dum Dum pinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger to try and stave off the tears.

The men all pursed their lips grimly in response, ducking their heads and taking drinks from their steadily emptying glasses. For a long few minutes, nobody spoke, until a low creaking noise drew their attention to the decimated door between what was once the dance hall and bar.

Dressed smartly in his dress uniform, Steve hovered awkwardly at the shattered glass door, looking as if he wasn’t quite sure he was welcome there.

“How do I look?” Steve asks Bucky the first time he puts on that new uniform, holding his arms out beside himself as if to say ‘ta-da!’

_Bucky gives him a little shove toward the door. “Like a credit to the nation, now let’s go.”_

Dum Dum scrubbed one hand over his eyes, and located the one seat he’d eyed on their raid of the bar upon entry. Without saying anything, he uprighted it by the table, and gestured grandly for Steve
Steve fell into the chair as if he were a puppet with severed marionette strings. The singed chair made a squeaking noise of protest at the sudden weight.

Although obviously seeking their company, Steve didn’t meet any of the commandos’ eyes as he sat, but nonetheless accepted the remaining glass from its box as Dernier handed it over, filling it with double his usual serving of bourbon.

“Steve?” Morita asked gravely, “Are you going to be okay?”

Steve looked up from his glass despondently, and after a brief pause, shook his head slowly as if to say ‘I don’t know’. His throat clicked as he swallowed dryly.

“My fault. It was my fault…”

Every head snapped up to glare at him in denial.

“No. If I hadn’t been there — if I hadn’t agreed to let you frontman instead — if I’d just stuck to the plan, none of this would have happened. If I hadn’t been there, the train wouldn’t have exploded. He wouldn’t have taken my shield and tried to cover me like that.”

“You don’t think Barnes would have covered my ass the exact same way he covered yours?” Gabe asked seriously. “Man was a courageous son of a bitch, Steve; odds are he’d’ve gone down the same way, and I’d’ve gone down with him.”

“No,” Steve insisted, “that’s just it — he wouldn’t have had to. If I hadn’t gotten cocky, and… and reckless, we never would have been in that situation. He warned me that something like this would happen. He warned me, and I still didn’t fucking listen. You — you’re smarter than me, Gabe. You never would have put either of your lives in danger that way.”

“I am pretty damn smart,” Gabe said with dignity, “but there’s a reason I’m the grunt, and you’re the strategy guy, Cap. It was a crazy plan, but it worked. Because of you, we’ve probably saved most of Europe from getting bombed by German-Russian Hydra nutjobs.”

Steve’s eyes dropped back to the table, brows drawing in and lips pursing. “But we lost Bucky.” His lower lip wavered, and damn if that didn’t just break Dum Dum’s heart all over again.

He was suddenly starkly reminded just how young Steve was, too.

Lord knows, he’d certainly felt like a grown man at twenty-six, but looking back, he really was still just a kid. Steve Rogers had shouldered a lot of responsibility, and led the team with such a seamless, authoritative grace — Dum Dum often forgot that Steve hadn’t even been old enough to join the army for very long.

Shit, what had Dum Dum even been doing when he was twenty-six? Was he still in the circus? Or had he quit the travelling strongman show to be a lumberjack by that point? Certainly, he’d been naïve as hell — never truly worked a real day in his life, unless he counted the grocery-bagging job he’d had for three months as an eighteen year old. Never lost anyone either, beyond estranged grandparents who still lived in Ireland. Hadn’t ever lost anyone actually, until his mother passed away when he was forty.

But Steve? Steve had lost everyone.
Dum Dum peered into his emptying glass despairingly, mostly to avoid catching anyone’s eye.

They sat in near-silence for the next half hour — the only sounds being the sloshing of liquid. Before long, however, a loud voice began to ring across the street; automated, from several speakers that still hung from random spots among the town. It announced that a blackout was about to take effect, and that citizens of the London area should get indoors as quickly as possible to turn off all lights and electronic devices.

“I suppose that’s our cue,” Monty said distastefully, throwing back his remaining bourbon and gathering himself up in a dignified fashion, only a little unsteady on his feet. “Anyone fit to take us back to headquarters?” he added, sounding a little slurred as he jingled aloft the keys to the Jeep they’d used to drive there.

“I’ll be fine,” Morita replied, and unhooked the set of keys from around Monty’s finger.

They turned to leave, but gave pause before reaching the door at finally noticing that Steve hadn’t risen to join them. Hadn’t, in fact, moved at all from where he sat, staring into his glass as if hypnotised by its contents.

“Steve?” Monty prompted gently, sounding concerned.

Gabe shook his head quickly, and placed a comforting arm on Monty’s bicep to lead him from the room. “Leave him. He’ll be okay.”

With a dour look, Monty nodded, and reluctantly turned to follow them from the bar.

Outside, Dum Dum was surprised to see a familiar face leaning against the cleanest spot of their transport jeep. Peggy stood there with both hands stuffed into the pockets of a snug overcoat; her makeup looking a lot more crisp than it had before — newly-refreshed, he supposed. Dum Dum felt yet another raw pang in his chest at the idea that she had been crying. To his knowledge, Peggy had never once cried in the entire time they’d known each other.

“Is he inside?” she said as a greeting, looking fretful.

Dum Dum nodded. “Gettin’ drunk. I should tell you though, I dunno if he’s really up to company at the moment, Peg.”

She pursed her lips grimly, “well, I don’t know about the first part, but I do know that he really shouldn’t be alone right now. Even if he thinks he needs it.”

Without a goodbye, she began gingerly stepping over the rubble toward to blown-out entrance of the bar, taking care not to allow her heels to slip on the pulverised brick and dust strewn about the street. She held her head high, and Dum Dum felt yet another swoop of affection for her.

She really would be good for him.

As they loaded themselves into the jeep, Morita spoke in a low, almost regretful tone of voice. “Cap can’t get drunk.”

“What?” Dum Dum said, surprised.

“You kept betting him in drinking games, so he made us promise not to tell you. But yeah, for whatever reason, no matter how much he drinks, he can’t feel a thing.”

Dum Dum thinks back to the one and a half bottles they’d watched Steve put away in the bar, and
his stomach twisted. “Can’t even get drunk.” He shook his head sadly, and gave a humourless laugh. “Little bastard swindled me good though, huh?”

Morita didn’t respond, just fired up the jeep and threw it into first without a word.

Off the mountainside, on solid ground, Bucky Barnes blinked himself awake with heavy struggle.

It wasn’t the first time he’d done this in the time since he fell, and he figured it certainly wouldn’t be the last. Every time he managed to work himself into consciousness, he always found himself slipping back under again only moments later. He had no idea how much time had passed. At least a day, he figured.

He knew, objectively, that he was in pain, but in all honesty was too numb to feel it — too cold.

So Bucky Barnes was cold. What the fuck else was new?

He’d managed to get his eyes open last time. If he struggled only a little more, he should be able to do it again, just a little more… little… more…

The sky was dark — not with night, not yet; but instead with heavy grey clouds. Snow fell onto his face in tiny, delicate clusters; when he blinked, it clumped in his eyelashes; and he could see his slow breath curling in the chill.

He was alive.

He was alive.

How the fuck was he still alive?

Gingerly, he made to twitch at his lower limbs to see if he could get a sense of how much he had broken.

He twitched his left foot — the entire side of his body, from femur, through pelvis, to ribcage.

He twitched his right foot — his knee was broken.

He twitched his left ha-

He couldn’t move his left hand.

Opening his eyes, surprisingly, had required more of an effort than moving his head. Blearily, it took him a few seconds to focus on what was in front of him — the back of his head felt as if it had been taken off and sewn back on again.

His blue coat stood out with starkness against the pure white snow — as did the large pool of what appeared to be his own blood. The blood didn’t bother him — he knew there’d be blood; could feel it trickling out from his mouth, nose, and ears in great rivulets.

He couldn’t see his arm, buried in snow. He tried to jostle his fingers — he needed to shake off the snow, to get the snow off of his arm, he needed to see his-
Oh, fuck.

He forced himself to snap his gaze back up the heavens, swallowing forcefully, repeatedly, in order to keep himself from vomiting. If he vomited, he was sure to pass out again — he was certain.

His left arm was missing.

In its stead, a frosty, blackened stump lay, useless — sleeve torn from the shoulder; thick blood, almost black, staining the snow, although he wasn’t so much bleeding from it anymore.

He was not going to throw up. He wasn’t.

He wondered idly what the other commandos would make of him when he was finally found. ‘Oh, this? This is just a delayed reaction to my push-up contest with Carter’ he’d say to Steve. He wanted to laugh at himself. He couldn’t.

Why was he alive? Staring up at the mountain now, he could barely make out the place where he knew the train tracks were set — a fall from that height should have left him in more pieces than two; he should be a pancake.

It was with a horrible, sick feeling that an answer dawned on him.

He thought back to right before their mission, when Zola had been confirmed to be accompanying the cargo transportation to their base in Russia aboard the Schnellzug EB912. Bucky had hated the way that the men’s gazes had all snapped to his at hearing that part of the message: a complete set of that same stupid, fretful expression that made Bucky’s skin feel too tight, and ignited a familiar spark of humiliation in his chest. He was not scared of Zola. Not anymore.

Except that he was.

Fuck — he really, really was.

Lying in pieces at the bottom of a gorge like a porcelain doll that had fallen from its shelf; alive, in pain, and barely able to move — that’s where he’d ended up because of that vile little rodent.

The wind whipped up again, whistling through the mountains in a low, almost musical way.

He blinked hard as he felt tears sting at his eyes. With each breath he managed to suck in, it felt like his lungs were getting smaller and smaller.

If he wasn’t found in time, would he die here? Would he survive the fall, only to die of exposure? Would he even be found at all? Will they deem it too risky to go searching for a man who should so obviously be dead?

He thought of his mother. She’d only been his mother for little over half of his life — fourteen years of making up for lost time with homemade meals, and sweet kisses littering all over his face, and an endearingly poorly knitted scarf, or sweater, or set of gloves received every birthday, usually tacked onto something store-bought and expensive. Fuck, she’d made such an effort to become the perfect mother to him, and now, the next letter she would receive will be the notice letting her know that her only son is dead.

He thought of his father, who had fought just as hard as she had; taught Bucky how to shave, how to talk to girls, how to box — had given Bucky his first drink after the prohibition ended.

He thought of his sisters.
Fuck, his sisters…

Becca, as his only biological sibling, was probably the person he loved most in the whole world. He cherished her, and she, in turn, adored him. After his parents died, or left, or whatever, Bucky had assumed the fierce responsibility of making sure that his baby sister remained safe, even in the orphanage.

It was why it had taken so long for the two to be adopted — even the nuns understood that Bucky and Becca Barnes were a matched set, thank you very much. This time away from her in the army was the longest they’d ever been parted, and he ached every day that he couldn’t see her.

“Bet you can’t wait to marry Steve,” Bucky had ribbed her once, with a cheeky grin.

*Her eyes had snapped back to his dangerously, a silent shut up, Barnes*, which was a look only ever properly mastered by her and Steve. “Bucky, cut it out! I do not have a crush on Steve! I don’t!” she stamped her little foot and pouted while Steve shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot, looking embarrassed, and fuck if Bucky was about to let that go.

“You’d go from Becca Barnes to Rebecca Rogers,” he insisted, grin widening.

“Or maybe you should marry Steve,” she shot back with a sassy cock of the hip, which only made Bucky want to laugh harder, “then you’d be Buck Rogers.”

Bucky lit up. “Oh yeah, it’s decided. Steve, we gotta get married.”

“Buck!” Steve had spluttered...

A tear finally slipped its way out of the corner of his eye and down the side of his face, tickling at his temple.

He didn’t want to die here — cold and alone at the bottom of a mountain in the middle of the Alps in fuck-knows nowhere.

His bottom lip wavered, and it was with a dull sort of realisation that he recognized his vision beginning to black out again.

As he slipped under once more, his last thought was to vaguely wonder what those sounds of crunching snow behind him were...

Chapter End Notes

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May 2nd 1945

When taking part in strategy meetings, Steve Rogers typically wasn’t the kind of guy to be content in taking a back seat while everyone else made the decisions for him.

Usually, he was animated and involved — cutting in on discussions at every opportunity in order to supply them with his opinions or ideas, and was typically met with a mixture of mild annoyance and begrudging approval for almost anything he said.

During this meeting, however, he remained practically silent the entire time as he looked over the files and papers tossed to his end of the table. He flicked through them with a kind of detached disinterest, not really letting on too well if he was actually taking in anything he was being told, or just lost in his own little world. Occasionally, there was a pause in the discussion, where the members around the table expected Steve to cut in and offer his own input into the matter.

Steve didn’t speak, only stared blankly at the distinctly empty seat to the left of him.

He looked ragged and angry, like he hadn’t slept properly since Barnes fell. Perhaps he hadn’t at all.

The Howling Commandos were a group of grown men who were perfectly capable of acting professional. Usually, however, they generally preferred not to — smiling and joking about, speaking with excited vigour about their missions as they came to plan. Although he feigned disapproval at their childishness, Phillips actually greatly appreciated it. He felt that it inspired hope to see these soldiers approach a difficult situation with not only optimism, but downright enthusiasm.

In this meeting, however, that jovial enthusiasm and joking about were remarkably conspicuous by their absence. Hell, none of them were even smiling — it was almost bizarre to see, especially in Dugan, who always seemed to have a dopey smile on that great moustached face.

“If he gets across the Atlantic, he will wipe out the entire eastern seaboard in an hour,” Stark said seriously, almost overdramatically, and pretty much directly addressing Steve.

Rogers said nothing. He merely looked disinterestedly over his paper, and then threw it to the tabletop without a word.

Phillips outlined the information provided by an all too-helpful Arnim Zola with the bitterest kind of relish, slapping down the photographs of Hydra’s last known base and staring around at the table’s occupants expectantly, waiting for any of them to begin to pipe up with a plan.

Morita shook his head lightly, gesturing with the photographs still in hand. “So what are we supposed to do? I mean, it’s not like we can just knock on their front door here…”

“Why not?” Everyone turned in surprise at finally hearing Rogers speak up.

He looked up with the fiercest kind of determination Phillips had ever seen, jutting out his chin defiantly — daring any of the others to debate him. “That’s exactly what we’re gonna do.”
May 8th 1949

In the years following the war, the Mighty Howling Commandos had inevitably gone their separate ways.

While over half remained in the military, each were back to their stations in their own countries, with the exception of Dum Dum, who now led a team of sporting young faces in the reformed grouping of the Howling Commandos.

He loved his team as much as he did his last, but even Dugan had to admit that there was always something missing from the group, no matter how well they all got along and functioned like a well-oiled machine. He supposed that being the only original member really did have its major drawbacks.

He still received the occasional letter from his former teammates, sometimes updating him with major news from their lives, other times asking him about his own. While none of them could ever simply drop contact from the rest, keeping in touch often proved to be a rather exhausting task.

One letter he didn’t need, however, was the one reminding him that he was expected at the Whip and Fiddle on the anniversary of V-E Day.

It hadn’t been rebuilt exactly as they remembered it. The place was far more open now, with brighter-coloured walls and floors. Modern, he supposed.

It wasn’t the same, but perhaps that was for the best — after all, they didn’t keep up this tradition in order to mourn the past, but rather to celebrate their ongoing future.

As he joined the table with the rest of his former teammates, a large, toothy, white grin spread across his face.

“And how are we this afternoon, my fine gentlemen?” he addressed Gabe and Monty specifically, each looking extremely spiffy in a sharp suit and tipped fedora, and a crisp military uniform emblazoned with pins medals across the entire breast, respectfully.

“Feeling the celebratory spirit!” Dernier said, raising one fist as if to punch the air.

“That we are. Drinks on me?” Dum Dum offered, and was certainly not met with any objections.

Skilfully manoeuvring without dropping or spilling any of them, Dum Dum managed to set seven full pitchers of beer to their regular table without hassle.

The five Commandos each raised their pitchers to toast, and looked down sadly at the two remaining mugs left over.

Dugan perked himself up, refusing to dampen the mood before they managed to get any talking done. Both Barnes and Rogers would probably be telling them to lighten the fuck up if they were here, after all.

‘What is this, our funeral?’ Barnes would say.

‘Yeah, you all need to loosen up.’ Steve would add with that impish smirk of his.

“So,” Dum Dum looked around admiringly at the others, a big grin on his face, “anyone have any news worth sharing? Trips to Europe ain’t cheap y’know.”

Gabe’s face split in a great smile, and he drew himself up proudly, “well, as you all know, Alice and
I moved into a bigger house in Georgia so that my mom could move in with us.”

The men nodded in assent, and waited politely for him to continue.

“Well, as of this coming September, we believe, we’re going to be adding a new addition to our little family. Alice is expecting.”

A holler of joyous cheering chorused around the table, and Gabriel found himself at the receiving end of a series of congratulatory slaps on the back from each of them. They knew Gabe and his wife had been trying for a child since he’d returned from the war — this was amazing news.

“Any thoughts as to whether it’s a girl or boy?” Falsworth inquired giddily.

Gabe shrugged sheepishly, “Alice wants it to be a girl, but honestly, I don’t think I’d care either way.”

“Still, a kid,” Dum Dum said, sounding bewildered at the idea. “That’s a pretty a big deal. Lotsa responsibility, y’know.”

Between him and Jenny, the two had tried for many years before the war to conceive, and it had never really ended up happening. Once Dugan had returned from service, Jenny had announced not long after that she was far too old to have a baby now, and they decided instead to get a dog, which soon thereafter turned into two.

“I know,” Gabe gave a great dimpled smile, “I can’t wait.”

“What about you, Jim?” Dum Dum asked Morita, who looked put on the spot all of a sudden. “Found yourself a girl yet?”

Morita shrugged. “Few weeks ago my mom introduced me to a girl she met in the internment camp. Her name’s Makoto,” he shrugged again, sheepish, “she’s nice.”

“Any developments in Shield?” Falsworth wondered.

“Ah, plenty,” Dugan said importantly.

“Is it true then? About the rumours?” Morita asked, “Zola? Fennhoff?”

Dugan’s smile dropped, and he brought his pitcher of beer up to his face to cover the dark look he gave at the mention. “Yeah,” he said bitterly, “yeah, it’s true. Operation Paperclip’s involvement with SHIELD is a go — and it’s out of my control, before you ask. Out of Stark’s control too, or so he tells me. Sneaky bastard doesn’t seem all too cut up with the idea that he’ll be working with that Nazi piece of shit though. I clocked him right in the face when I heard. Peggy said if I hadn’t, she would have.”

“Still — working with Zola,” Morita said grimly, “can’t imagine Stark’d really be okay with that. I mean the guy practically killed Barnes.”

“Trust me,” Dugan said darkly, “I haven’t let him forget it.”

Dum Dum felt bile rise in his throat at the thought of seeing Zola again. The only closure the lot of them had had was in knowing that Zola’s sentence had been one for life. At the time, it had been a very small consolation to the raging bloodlust they all felt toward the man, but it had been a consolation nonetheless. The fact that he was being let out now, scott-free, barely four years after his imprisonment — it downright burned them to have been cheated out of that rightful resolution. It was
a cruel injustice, plain and simple, and what was worse was that there appeared to be nothing that they could do about it.

Their gazes all drifted once more to the far end of the table, where those two untouched beers still sat. The foam had dissolved, and condensation ran off of the glasses and onto the table in twin shining puddles that reflected the lights of the hundred red, white, and blue string lamps surrounding them.

“May eighth,” Dum Dum said wistfully, deciding to finally acknowledge the elephant in the room. His eyes followed along the obnoxiously patriotic decorations strung up around the bar. “Bucky’d be thirty two today.”

Monty chuckled sadly, “remember his twenty seventh? Wouldn’t shut the hell up about all of the ‘worldly wisdom’ he had over Steve now that he was officially two years older than him.”

The men tittered at the memory.

“And then Steve’s twenty sixth not long after,” Jones added. ”Never did find out where those two had pissed off to halfway during the night.”

“I did,” Dum Dum suddenly laughed, “Bucky made me swear not to tell — said he didn’t want the lot of you taking the mickey out of them for it, but those idiots had a tradition for Steve’s birthday — find the tallest roof they could, drink something strong, and watch the fireworks until they all stopped.”

The men didn’t laugh, in fact, they all felt oddly touched by the idea, and their hearts ached at the memories of their loss.

Dum Dum swallowed dryly, and his stomach twisted at the idea that the two would never get to do that ever again. His stomach twisted worse, however, at the idea of Steve having to do it alone had he never gone ahead and crashed headfirst into the arctic like he had…

Swallowing, Dernier raised his glass in one hand for another toast. “To the captain!”

“To the captain.” they chorused.

“And to Bucky,” Dugan added in an undertone, and the men nodded and echoed his sentiments again.

June 15th 1951

Nobody ever spoke to Bucky directly — and if they did, it was rarely in English.

Nobody explained to him what had happened, or what they had done to him, but in the end they didn’t really need to. Bucky wasn’t what he’d call a genius, but he was certainly no idiot; he could work out what they’d done to him well enough all by himself.

Same pain — slower burn.

The vita-rays Steve had been subjected to in the saturation chamber had acted as a catalyst for the serum; causing it to do what it was supposed to at a hundred times the rate. That’s what Erskine had
told Steve.

That pain — the pain of growing nearly twice in mass and a foot more in height — was a pain Steve had had no intention of ever telling Bucky he’d experienced. Bucky knew though — oh, he definitely knew. Even without Steve telling him, he understood firsthand what that pain was like.

The differences between Erskine’s serum and Zola’s were really too marginal to be called ‘differences’ at all. In reality, the serums were almost identical. The real difference had turned out to not be within the serum, but instead in the vita-rays — in that Bucky had none. Hydra’s version of the serum worked, but at a snail’s pace — leisurely taking its sweet time to extend and harden his bones, swell his muscles, tweak his brain — overall make itself at home within every inch of what made up Bucky Barnes.

The constant ache he felt was not something he’d ever complained about to the other men. He’d assumed, naturally, that all the soldiers felt that same bone-deep ache from the constant exertion they put themselves through for the sake of missions. The same went for the gradual tightening of his clothes as his chest and arms gradually began to swell and harden. He figured that significant muscle growth was something that they all experienced — it was quite physical work, after all.

To Bucky, everything had been as normal as could be under those circumstances. He didn’t know if he’d been ignorant, or if he simply chose not to see that anything was wrong. In retrospect, his first clue really should have been that everything alcoholic he’d drunk in the past year had tasted weak, and had little to no effect on him whatsoever. He wondered if it was too late to find Thomas the Barkeeper and apologise for his unwarranted internal accusations of them watering their drinks down.

Fuck, how he wished he could move.

Strapped to a table, the most he’d been able to garner from his situation was that the people who had found him were very decidedly not US military. They weren’t even American — a bunch of Russians in big furry hats, a few Polish doctors in surgical masks, and right then, one Swiss-German scientist he recognised all too fucking well.

“Perfect specimen: significant language skills, extraordinary marksmanship, impressive hand-to-hand combat capability, interchangeable limb preference, unwavering loyalty to his commanding officers.” Arnim Zola listed these in German with an almost loving nature, staring at Bucky as though he were a son whom he was very proud of. He placed a small hand on Bucky’s forehead, and Bucky felt a sudden rage swell within him that was almost overwhelming. It rose in his throat like bile, or vomit — like all that fury and hatred had taken real, physical form and was trying to worm its way out of him through his mouth.

He wanted to scream — to slash, and bite, and rip this man apart. He moved as if to lunge at him, but was held back, rooted to the spot by the thick restraints across his wrist and ankles, and around his head.

Zola’s smile widened excitedly as he continued looking down at Bucky. “Sergeant Barnes…” he said, sounding almost reverent.

Bucky swallowed thickly, trying to focus around the haze of fog still surrounding his brain, and blurring the edges of his vision. He suddenly became very much aware that he was naked on the table — dignity preserved only by a thin white sheet across his legs and hips. He shivered at the cold.

“Where am I?” he demanded shakily.
That slimy, patronising smile on Zola's face grew somehow even fonder. “Ah, you can speak — that’s good,” he said, in English. “We were not sure if you had sufficiently healed enough to regain higher brain function for speech yet. This is a good sign, yes?” He looked up, addressing someone else in German.

“Good sign? What- what are you talking about?” Bucky blinked again, hard, trying to unscramble everything; to make sense, to regain order inside his own head. “Where have you taken me?”

“Incredible,” a new voice sounded right behind where his vision cut off — a calm voice with a very distinguishable Russian accent beneath the fluent German. “And you say he’s been recovering on ice how long?” the man asked.

“Since 1945,” Zola replied happily. “I ordered the Russians to keep him healing in stasis while I bided my time in American captivity.”

“Incredible,” the voice said again. “Simply incredible. His X-rays are perfect — not a single thing to indicate his previous injuries. However, see this?” a pause while the voice indicated something to Zola, “we may have to take exceptional care in the Phase Three processes, Arnim. This fracture along his temporal bone may be healed, but we’ll want to take caution. Cannot risk any more impairment.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Bucky demanded, and gave another hard jostle at his restraints.

“Yes, of course,” Zola said, ignoring Bucky completely.

“Sir?” a third voice, Russian, cut in timidly from somewhere off of Bucky’s field of vision, and he strained to translate. “Doctor Parsifal says we’re ready to begin now.”

“What? Start what, what are you starting?” Bucky’s anger had begun to fizzle back into something else — something raw and panicked. It felt as though his lungs were shrinking, becoming too small, and he wondered idly if this was how Steve felt every time he’d had one of his asthma attacks.

“Very well. Begin preparations now,” Zola said.

A sudden flurry of doctors in bluish scrubs began to swarm the room — talking rapidly in a mixture of languages that Bucky’s brain was too addled to keep up with.

“Now this is truly exciting,” Zola said, in English — not addressing Bucky, but making sure he understood him nonetheless. “Are you prepared, doctor? After this, I’m afraid the real work begins for you.”

The Russian voice also replied in English, sounding delighted, “I am definitely prepared, Arnim. Excited too — this will certainly be the most fascinating of all my experiments. I am anxious to begin.”

An unexpected burst of blinding light suddenly trained onto the table. Bucky’s eyes slammed shut in response, and stars began to dance behind his vision, tempting his brain to shut down again in panic.

He cracked one eye open minimally, squinting against the light, and felt a stab of humiliation at realising that his eyes had begun to tear up, blurring his vision further. The light was harsh, and tinted green, almost as it had been in that filthy lab back in the Azzano POW faction. It tinted the doctor’s blue robes a sickly lime colour, and blinded him to anything beyond those three robed figures stalking to his table.
A silver tray of heavy-looking tools was brought beside his head, and for one wild moment, Bucky felt sure that they were going to lobotomize him, until he spied the tallest of the three, holding aloft what looked like a strange titanium pistol with a thick power cord.

“Wait…” he squirmed within his restraints, straining to wriggle loose, “wait, no…”

A cold, rubbery hand came to probe at the inelegant stump of a left arm Bucky had been left with, and he recoiled from the touch.

What the fuck were they doing?

“Stop!” he cried.

“Shh,” a small, sweaty hand came to rest on his forehead once more. “Be still, Sergeant. This is a momentous occasion. When this is complete, you will emerge a new man — the procedure has already started. You are to be the new fist of Hydra.”

Another hand wearing those sterile black gloves intruded in his line of vision, and he spied a metallic syringe edging its way toward his face. Bucky tried to throw his head back, to recoil from it, but the hand on his forehead pressed him down and restrained him further.

A dull sort of sting in his throat, and he fell limp, eyes swimming in still unshed tears.

Bucky’s head lolled to the side, and his eyes fell onto the frostbitten stump of his left arm. He felt alert — aware, and fully conscious. Whatever they’d given him, it hadn’t been a sedative, and it certainly hadn’t been a painkiller. It was a paralytic.

His throat tightened at the sounds of whirring. The corded, handheld weapon he thought the doctor had been holding aloft was indeed not a weapon at all, but a bone saw. Carefully, surgically, the doctor lined the blade up just outside of the most blackened part of what remained of his arm, and then pressed the whirring blade into the flesh.

Bucky didn’t scream — couldn’t scream. He couldn’t thrash, or yell, or plead, or cry. He could only sit there helplessly as his eyes whirled around the room, trying desperately to fixate on something — anything — that wasn’t the sickening separation of flesh happening right in front of him.

There was a flash of red, and the pain intensified for a moment before, thankfully, finally, it became too much.

Bucky finally passed out.

He didn’t know how long it had been.

When Bucky finally opened his eyes, the lightings had changed. They were less harsh, less green. Trained away from the surgical table, he realised.

What remained of his left bicep felt swollen, and tender, and he groaned as he instinctively shifted to test if his paralysis had finally worn off yet. He was relieved to find it had, mostly.

He remembered very little of the surgery itself, only that he’d woken up twice during. The first time, he’d seen nothing but a bustle of green, and a flash of silver metal. The second time, he felt a tugging
sensation at his arm, and suddenly became very aware of why the paralytic agent was necessary as an exposed nerve was handled. He’d screamed then — the paralytic obviously wearing off, but not enough that he could bolt upright and jerk away like he’d instinctively needed to.

As his mind swam, and he began to try and make sense of those memories, he became distinctly aware that it had taken a suspiciously long amount of time if they were only removing the arm’s dead tissue. Oh god, what had they done?

He shifted carefully beneath that sterile white sheet, and was surprised to note that he was no longer bound and restrained to the table, not even by his ankles. Both hands lay unrestricted on top of his stomach-

Wait.

Both hands.

His eyes snapped open in a panic, and he darted his gaze down in horror to stare at where his hands were draped across his middle.

He didn’t remember the last time he’d eaten — could have been days, or weeks, he didn’t know. Either way, in that moment, he found himself oddly grateful that there was nothing for him to throw up.

In the stead of the former, flesh arm he originally possessed, a gleaming, silver fist lay across his torso.

Carefully, he lifted both hands off of himself to stare in a mixture of horror and awe down at this abomination, watching those artificial lights dance and gleam across the smooth metallic surface. He tried to make a fist, and was appalled to see that instead of remaining still, as most prosthetics do, the metal plates shifted and curled to comply.

In front of him, the tallest of the men began to take note of his wakefulness, and looked up from where he was scribbling on a clipboard. Gingerly, he set aside the pen he’d been using and stepped forward to address Bucky in Russian.

Bucky didn’t hear him — took no heed of the words coming out of the man’s mouth as he pointed and gestured to different parts of the hand, obviously attempting to give an explanation as to how it worked, and what they’d done. Bucky heard none of it behind the steadily rising volume of white noise inside his ears, and the pounding in his brain like drum rhythm.

Anger swelled and roiled within him again like vomit. It heated his blood, and zinged in his nerves — fizzling out any residue of the paralytic that may have remained in his body.

He didn’t want this — this twisted, unforgiving imitation of what he’d lost, made up of interlocking plates and unexposed wires.

In a flash, as if to test the reflexes of it, he uncoiled the metal fist and used it to curl around the delicate flesh of the doctor’s neck.

It was a curious sensation to feel in the new instrument. Sensations within it were dulled in some aspects, however, simultaneously heightened in others. He was able to feel every minute individual razored hair on the technician’s throat, and exactly how each flex of those metal plates interacted with the tendons and blood vessels underneath the flesh. Yet, he was unable to register any sensation of strength limitations, or temperature — only more cold.
He continued to squeeze, harder and harder, tighter and tighter, testing to see just how far he could go with this new appendage. Could his fingers rip through skin? Could he crush everything inside? Could he take this man’s head off one-handed?

Before he could reach any conclusion, however, there was a dull sting in his upper thigh, and the world turned dull and heavy. Another technician had stabbed him with a tranquiliser, and idly, he felt another pang of outrage in knowing they’d had some form of sedative on hand all along.

The last thing he saw before he fell yet again unconscious was the small, piggy face of Arnim Zola, wearing that look of delighted pride.
June 22nd 1951

The quarters he was given were small. Stone walls, and a hard floor — no windows, because the entire facility must have been underground. Although, there was little Bucky had seen besides the operating room and this one — he could be wrong.

After he’d almost killed that doctor, or technician, or whoever it had been who’d affixed this awful appendage, he’d merely woken up there, alone, wearing nothing but a pair of loose, grey sweatpants, and a heavy set of bandages that wound around his left shoulder, and across his chest. His entire ribcage felt as though it had been set alight, and his stomach kept intermittently growling with apparent starvation. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been given a meal.

The new arm was heavy. Every time he tried to stand up without supporting the forearm in his right hand, it felt as though the entire thing was going to rip right out of his body. What use was giving him a new arm if he could barely use it?

He shared his quarters with nobody but a particularly energetic beetle, which had a tough black exterior, and tended to fend for itself rather well, considering how little food sources there were underground. Bucky didn’t name it, because he didn’t feel that he was quite that mad just yet, but he did often sometimes find himself talking to it as if it could answer back.

Honestly, he was bored. Bored, and restless, and growing ever still more frightened of what the hell they had planned for him.

You are to be the new fist of Hydra.

His new hand curled closed into a tight fist. While he certainly was a man to appreciate a good double-entendre, the ambiguity of such a statement rang through him in a downright terrifying way. What the fuck did they have planned for him?

It had been five days since he’d woken up, and he hadn’t seen anyone since. There was a small flap in the bottom of the door, not dissimilar to the letterbox Bucky and Steve had had in their shared apartment, years ago now. He expected food to be dropped through there, or at least water, but the only time in the last five days he’d had any visitors drop anything through the door was when some unknown person had thrown in a fresh batch of medical supplies with instructions to change the dressings on his left shoulder.

That alone was a harrowing experience. The flesh fusing skin to metal was exposed and raw, tender to touch, but in an oddly disjointed kind of way, as if there were plastic or rubber over the top of his skin, dulling the sensations. Nerve damage, he figured. Warped scarring twisted its way across his back and chest like spider webs — like the strange, spindly branches of leafless trees during the wintertime. He was sickly reminded of a French soldier he’d seen in one of their Hydra raids, who had been subject to electrical-stimulation torture that left similar-looking markings all the way across his face and torso. Lichtenberg figures, Gabe had called them.

For five straight days, he’d had no visitors but for anonymous gloved hands dropping bandages and iodine from the flap in his door. It was a surprise then, on that fifth day, when Bucky heard the
telltale jingle of keys and scraping in a lock, before his heavy door swung open.

It revealed a mid-height balding man in a set of baggy pyjamas. He wore a soft smile, and Bucky could see that there was very faint scarring trailing from the corners of his mouth to his ears, and across his forehead. He strolled into the room, and the door slammed shut behind him.

“Good afternoon, Mr Barnes,” the man said, and with a jolt, Bucky all of a sudden felt as though he remembered that voice somewhere, but was unable to place it.

The man looked around at Bucky’s cell regretfully, “I feel that I must apologise for the state of your… accommodations. There are little resources for comfort here, I’m afraid.”

Bucky didn’t respond — didn’t know what to say, or even what to make of the man. He trailed his eyes up the set of filthy pyjamas the man wore — typical POW wear. His words suggested Hydra, but his clothes… was he Hydra, or another prisoner?

His face was kind, sympathetic. Bucky felt an instinctive trust in the man — similar to that of a parental figure. He caught himself in those feelings violently, wrenching himself out at once with narrowed, suspicious eyes.

“Who are you?” Bucky asked in German, testing.

The man’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Forgive me Mr Barnes, I do not understand. I was led to believe that you were American.”

“I am. You’re not,” Bucky replied.

The man nodded in confirmation. “I am Russian.”

“Why are you here?” Bucky demanded, although he didn’t quite sound as authoritative and demanding as he intended.

The man’s lips pursed thoughtfully, and he seemed to genuinely consider his answer before speaking. “I believe that we have a… common enemy, as you would say,” he traced one stocky thumb significantly along the long scars trailing up his face.

“Hydra do that to you?” Bucky wondered.

He shrugged. “In Russia, I am doctor. I help people, you see, using only my voice — when I was captured, they put me in big helmet that keeps my mouth shut,” he made an expensive sort of gesture around his head as if to illustrate a large headdress.

“Seems like you’ve been let out of it now,” Bucky noted — still distrustful, however, still not entirely convinced that he wasn’t just Bucky’s talkative new roommate.

The man smiled again, and gave a delighted nod. “It is good to be eating solid food again. And you? Do you know why you are here?”

Bucky’s face screwed up in distaste, and he scowled pointedly at the arm. “I’m Hydra’s new pet rat.”

The man nodded understandingly, sympathetically. “Do you know how long you have been here?”

On instinct, Bucky’s eyes were drawn to the furthest wall, where four thin parallel lines had been drawn into the brick with a small piece of chalky stone, and crossed through diagonally. “The guards shift out every twelve hours, I’m pretty sure,” he admitted. “I can hear them walk in and out. I can’t
know how long I’ve been at this facility for, but I know I’ve at least been here in this cell for five.”

The man nodded his head, looking faintly impressed. “That is good idea. When I was captured, I had no way of keeping time. I only worked out not long ago that it was 1951,” he gave a chuckle at his own foolishness, waiting for Bucky to join, but cut himself off abruptly when instead Bucky only gaped at him in horror.

“Six years?” he said breathlessly, feeling his heartbeat pick back up dangerously.

Had they really kept him unconscious that whole time? How much had he aged? His hair didn’t feel any longer, had they cut it for him? How did they keep him alive, without food or water, for that entire time?

He idly prodded at his own stomach, almost surprised that his abdomen felt just as solid and full as it had been before the fall — not withered and emaciated, as it rightfully should be. He longed for a mirror.

Had they gone looking for him? Or his body, he supposed? Had they found nothing more than a spatter of crimson gore by the riverbank, or a single dismembered, frostbitten arm? Had Steve seen?

*Steve.*

He swallowed nauseously, and the other man peered at him curiously. “You are alright, Mr Barnes?” he asked.

He was uncomfortable looking into the man’s eyes — those open, understanding eyes — and he hastened to avert his gaze somewhere else — anywhere else.

The man absentmindedly twiddled the polished gold ring worn on his third finger.

Bucky didn’t know much about his cell, only that it was underground — deprived, therefore, of much, if any, light, but for a single swinging bulb in the hallway outside of the cell. It shone a sickly, yellow-tinted light through the barred window of his door in three perfect rectangles onto the floor.

This light, however feeble it was, seemed to be trained directly onto the man’s slowly rotating ring. It drew Bucky’s eye, kept his focus…

“Why are you here?” he asked, ignoring the man’s question.

He didn’t seem to mind. “They sent me down,” the man said slowly, still rotating his ring, “to speak to you. I am here to help… to try and take all the burdens… away from your mind…”

Bucky’s brow furrowed. “Burdens, huh? You know, still haven’t told me if you’re with Hydra or against them,” he pointed out.

He could feel the man’s smile. “I am on your side, Mr Barnes. I volunteered… to help…”

“Focus…”

Focus on what, Bucky didn’t know. He didn’t respond; only stared, transfixed, on the ring.

“You cannot be helped in your current frame of mind. You must… focus…”

“Focus…”
September 27th 1951

On the furthest wall of Bucky’s cell, the bizarre mural of thin white scratches now added up to an even hundred. A hundred days — ninety-five sessions.

He was back in restraints. It wasn’t always that they’d put him in restraints — preferring to keep him under a kind of sedation using Fennhoff’s particular brand of psychological witchcraft. This time, however, he was chained on a chair — iron restraints around each wrist and ankle, and a brown leather muzzle across his lips.

Zola sat in another chair in the far corner, underneath the markings on the wall. He fiddled idly with a large, spherical device in his lap, prodding and twisting at it with a screwdriver. A large machine Bucky knew to be a generator sat by him on the grimy floor.

Bucky’s beetle was by the bed — he could see it between the shadows of the bedsprings peeking out from his thin, shitty mattress.

“You must understand, Arnim,” Fennhoff said gently, using that pacifying tone of his that made Bucky’s skin crawl, “this process is a delicate one. We want him to forget his past, but also retain his military training. The difficult part is that it is also important that he is able to watch and observe his enemies for patterns in their behaviour; therefore while we are erasing his past, we must remember that he must be able to create new memories. You understand?” He spoke in English — he wanted Bucky to understand.

“Yes, yes, of course, however, are you able to pick and choose what we remove?” Zola asked, annoyed.

“Oh of course! It is difficult, but not impossible, I am sure.” He peered at Bucky with the wistful kind of smile a person gives as they stare into the glass of an aquarium — watching the fish as they scatter about from corner to corner of its enclosure. It made Bucky feel naked, and uneasy, but it wasn’t exactly something he was unused to. He was only ever a subject for idle observation. A glass-trapped specimen destined to both live and die in its prison. At this point, he was just bored — waiting for this part to be over so he could once more go back to slinking around his cell in solitary.

“Are we able to implant new memories ourselves?” Zola wondered.

Fennhoff and his unsettling smile disappeared from Bucky’s vision, but he still heard his voice as he walked around him, circling like a bird of prey. He made an uncertain noise. “I am unsure; it depends on exactly what you mean. I may be able to refine and grow what knowledge he already has, such as language skills and fighting patterns — things he does not necessarily need to think so much about. I understand that your candidate already has significant skills in both, and so I can certainly exercise those skills, not unlike a muscle. However, I do not believe I can create new memories from scratch, if you are asking me to try and make him remember things which did not happen.”

“What about Stark?” Zola said.

“I can make a subject believe what I want during and after a session, however, it is sensitive. It can be shaken off in time, especially for this subject. He has a strong will — it will not bend so easy.”
Zola sounded slightly disappointed, “I understand, yes, I understand.”

Bucky’s brows furrowed. What did they mean, about Stark? What had they done to him? Had they captured him as well? Was he in another of these cells, subject to the same (or at least similar) treatment that Bucky was? Had they gotten inside his head, made him do something horrible?

Fennhoff gave a cheery hum. “Memories are a funny thing, Arnim,” he said wistfully.

Making his displeasure known was a process — one that was surprisingly difficult. Bucky figured it had something to do with those sessions with Fennhoff. He felt that poisonous rage, and that hard defiance, but there was a curious kind of detachment from those feelings and the rest of his body. He felt that need — that burning impulse to lash out, and attack his captors with brutal strikes and ripping fingernails, but he simply couldn’t order his body to do so. If he struggled, if he focused on controlling his body, willing it to move with every ounce of defiance he was capable of, the most he could do was give a wordless scream, and rattle at his restraints. But as much as he wanted to, he couldn’t attack them — never attack them. He felt certain that bad things would happen if he even tried.

There was never any point though — the men never even paused their conversation when he did this, or even so much as looked over at him. They acted as if they weren’t aware of his movements at all; they merely raised their voices over his yelling, and kept on talking. Today, Bucky felt nauseous with rage — downright quivered with it. But he didn’t bother with the thrashing or yelling. There was never any point to it.

“So what is your plan from here?” Zola asked, finally setting aside his screwdriver and clamping the weird device in both hands, studying it critically with squinted eyes.

“Today,” Fennhoff said importantly, “we begin the first in a series of implantation experiments during sensory deprivation — see if we can induce the increased skillset of sense and reflex memory we discussed, if not make him remember new situations entirely.”

“And after that?” Zola asked.

Fennhoff’s face was back in Bucky’s line of vision. “We work on making him a blank slate. The chair.”

*The chair.*

Dense and wooded, with thick leather restraints at every point Bucky could ever hope to squirm from — the chair looked like the kinds that they use in criminal executions. It looked like a death sentence.

“No!” Bucky cried; voice garbled behind the gag. “No, no!” He shook his head vigorously back and forth, chains rattling.

Neither of the men looked up.

“Alright, I think we may begin now,” Zola said happily, turning the device this way and that to inspect it.

“Excellent,” Fennhoff said, just as happily. “If you would be so kind, Arnim, could you please put the device in place?”

Zola stood abruptly, clutching at what Bucky now saw was an oversized helmet with blacked-out eyes and closed-over ears. Bucky squirmed in his restraints, trying to shake his head vigorously back and forth to make it as difficult as possible for them — but Fennhoff merely reached out and tugged
at the strap over his mouth, tightening it painfully and pulling his head back against the seat.

Yet again, the last thing Bucky saw before he was enveloped in silent darkness was the smug, smiling face of Arnim Zola.

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January 20\textsuperscript{th} 1952

There were two hundred and ten marks on the wall.

He knew there were pieces of his mind that were missing. His memories were fuzzy and unclear, yet still very much intact; still very much \textit{there}, however, partially out of his reach — like he was viewing them from the other side of a foggy window. He remembered a young blonde man whom he was in love with; a preteen brunette girl, his sister; a great big man with bushy tufts of auburn facial hair…

He couldn’t remember their names, but he remembered their faces almost perfectly, and he clung to those memories like a life-raft in a storm-tossed sea.

They shaved his head — something about it getting in the way of cable connections. He ran his metal hand through his hair curiously at the memory; it must have been a few weeks ago then, he thought, or months, maybe. He didn’t know how quickly his hair grew, but it was now long enough to curl out beside his ears.

\textit{“That’s it — give me the scissors, would you? If you won’t go to a barber, then I’m going to cut it for you; you look like a koala bear,”} he remembered the small blonde boy saying, shaking his head as if exasperated, but with a fond smile all the same.

Who \textit{was} that boy? What was his name?

He stared at those marks on the wall absently, trying to piece together those fragments of frayed memory. Names were all gone — everything but those of his captors. His beetle wiggled its antennae at him, as if sensing his distress.

He didn’t even remember his own name, even though he felt sure that he once had one. Every time he tried to remember it, it felt as if there were cold, heavy blocks in his mind obstructing the pathway to it. Every time he came across a memory he felt sure involved someone saying his name, the sound fizzled out — understanding just a jumbled tangle of unintelligible noise in lieu of it.

In his sessions, he was referred to as ‘The Asset’, or ‘The Soldier’, or occasionally, ‘Sergeant’. He honestly didn’t know which he preferred.

He spent his days training. For what, he didn’t know, but he felt as though it were important, like there was some kind of supreme outcome if he just trained hard enough. At that moment, straining his mind and staring up at the wall, he did push-ups.
He remembered scattered panic, and quivering fury. Remembered staring at the arm with horror, laying on a metal operating table.

So he hadn’t always had it? He couldn’t place how long it had been — long enough for it to have healed, albeit in an ugly way, however soon enough that it still ached and cramped and pulled if he used to for too long. It was getting easier though. He wasn’t quite sure if it was because it was still healing, or if he was merely getting used to the constant pain. He wondered how far he could push himself until he could bear it no longer.

241

242

243

There was the sound of a heavy door opening, and shoes scuffing along the ground. He paused, holding himself still as he strained to listen. Two sets: one small and shuffling, the other larger, and with longer, more confident strides. The smaller one sounded stiff, and gave off odd squeaks with each step — new shoes.

With a grunt of distaste, he righted himself into standard military rest, waiting for Zola and Fennhoff to enter his cell. Sure enough, there was the sound of a key scraping through a lock, and his door opened to reveal a pleasantly smiling Fennhoff, and Zola, who wore a strange expression of resolve on his face, as well as a shiny new pair of leather shoes on his feet.

“Love the new kicks, Doc,” he said sardonically, cocking an angry eyebrow at Zola.

It was a mistake as soon as he said it — wouldn’t have bothered, if not for the pulsating resentment and frustration he’d worked up in himself over the last half hour of trying to scrub his mind clean from their interference. Perhaps the fact that he’d been able to make such a statement in the first place was proof enough that he’d managed to do knock something loose.

Without dropping his smile, Fennhoff stepped forward, drew a hand back, and struck him clean across the face, backhanding him with such force that his head jerked roughly to the right.

“Mind yourself, Sergeant,” Fennhoff admonished him, face still pleasant, but with a low undertone of warning in his voice.

He clamped his mouth shut, and nodded dutifully; however, he seethed on the inside at how automatic his obedience to them could be conjured.

Fennhoff sighed, disappointed, “yes, I suppose I can see your point now, Arnim. I did hope to delay this further, but you’re right — we’ve made as much progress as we can with our current methods.”

A thrill of fear shot up his spine, and for a moment, he didn’t quite understand why.

“I am glad to hear it. I’ll assemble the guards then.” Zola turned on his squeaking heels to stride through the door, leaving a mollified Fennhoff and a panicking Soldier behind. The door swung closed, and the Soldier snapped his seething glare to Fennhoff in a silent demand for an explanation. Fennhoff only looked regretful.

“You know, in spite of everything,” Fennhoff said, “despite what we are striving to achieve, I find myself… very fond of you, Sergeant.”

Bile rose in the Soldier’s stomach, but he said nothing.
“You have one of the strongest minds I have ever worked with — it is a shame, then, what we must do to you now.”

Footsteps sounded from the hall — more than the Soldier could count, and suddenly he understood.

At least eight or so armed men filed into the cell, each with thick gloves and heavy body padding. The Soldier dropped out of his resting stance at once, bringing up both hands in front of him in preparation to throw off anyone who tried to come near him. Eyes fluttering about from face to face, he found himself taken completely off-guard by a pinprick of sudden pain striking him from behind.

Fennhoff had taken advantage of his momentary distraction watching the guards come in, and had stuck him with a now empty syringe. It lasted no more than a second, but it was enough to surprise him just long enough for those men to crowd in around him at every angle. They grabbed at both of his arms, around his waist, and the back of his neck, and began to drag him out of his cell.

The tips of his feet dragged along the cement floor, up the hallway, down another, and through a set of double doors, into what looked like a large operating room.

He recognised it. In some dark, horrible corner of his mind, the memory suddenly came bursting forth, bleak and terrible.

You are to be the new fist of Hydra…

Fennhoff had dosed him with that same paralytic agent he’d been given that day, all those months ago. However, it didn’t feel exactly as it did the first time, when he hadn’t been able to move any part of himself at all. It was just enough that he couldn’t fight — couldn’t squirm, and wrangle, and resist the way he always imagined that he would were he to find himself being dumped unceremoniously into the hard wooden seat of The Chair.

Each of the guards rushed to begin fastening him down, strapping him in by each of those stiff leather belts, moving with an air of high-strung urgency, as if concerned that he could still break through his mental conditioning and will his drugged body to move — to rip them apart one by one. He certainly wanted to.

“Levels are normal,” he heard Zola’s conversational voice from somewhere on his left, followed by the sound of noisy clacking. “Begin preparations.”

He was no stranger to having electrodes stuck to his forehead, but this time it felt different. Usually there would only be four — one on each temple, and two on his forehead. This time, however, there were over a dozen: littering down his head, the back of his neck, down his spine, and across his face. They were hooked up to something behind him, where he couldn’t see.

As the last was attached to the top notch of his spine, the men suddenly released him, backing up several steps as if afraid he might explode in their grasp.

“What do you mean, ‘levels are normal’? I thought you were sure of your confidence in these methods? I do not have to remind you what can happen if it goes wrong.”

There was another clacking tap, and the sound of whirring of mechanical gears as a circular halo of steel encased around his cranium. Despite the paralytic, he was trembling, completely involuntarily. His restraints didn’t budge.
“Johann, I assure you — you have my full confidence.”

“Very well,” Fennhoff replied doubtfully.

“We’ll start him off small to begin with,” Zola nodded, and reached to lift a small metal device from his workbench — one with a dial.

Sounds of electricity began to crackle beside his ears.

“Commencing episodic memory reconditioning in… three… two…”

Zola turned the dial.

He could feel hot, metallic blood seeping out of his mouth, but he couldn’t summon the energy to swipe it away. He was slumped over in the chair, boneless and exhausted, his entire head pounding in time with his accelerated heartbeat.

Fennhoff’s cold fingers probed at his jaw, turning it this way and that, and he tutted, sounding almost disappointed. “We must remember to put something between his teeth next time, Arnim. He has almost bitten right through his tongue.”

He tried to speak — to say what, he wasn’t sure, but all that ended up coming out was a weak, wet gurgle.

His entire skull felt as though it were on fire — pain ricocheting from temple to temple, down his spine, embedding itself on the very inside of his skull. He felt certain that he was accustomed to pain, and yet he couldn’t recall ever having felt it so deep inside the centre of his brain.

He’d blacked out — he was sure of it, and yet, despite his certainty, there was evidence of a conscious struggle — deep bruises from tight restraints, fallen electrodes, a torn strip of skin from his inner arm from where an IV needle had been ripped out.

He struggled to keep his eyes open — to focus. A voice was speaking to him crisply, and yet he couldn’t place the words behind his cotton-stuffed ears.

“Stand!” he heard the voice commanded sharply.

Pained and exhausted, he complied, trying to restrain himself from vomiting, although it felt as though there was nothing for him to throw up in the first place, beyond water.

His eyes opened, and he saw the tiny, hard-set expression of Arnim Zola standing barely a foot from him.

“Who are you?” Zola demanded.

It took several seconds, along with multiple failed attempts to force his swollen and sluggish tongue to form words. “I… I don’t know.”

“What is your name?” Zola tried again.

“I don’t remember…” His brow furrowed with sudden anxiety. His name… his name… what could
he remember being called last? Asset? Sergeant?

“What is your purpose?”

The response was automatic — no more than a reflex, but a response nonetheless. “To serve Hydra.”

Except… no… that didn’t feel right…

“Amazing,” Fennhoff said, almost in awe, staring at him with wide-eyed incredulity. “Simply amazing — I have never seen such impressive results. I felt sure that this was where it would go wrong — that we would kill him, or cripple him… but he is perfect! Not a scratch on him!”

The Asset begged to fucking differ, but didn’t argue.

“What happens now?” Fennhoff asked eagerly.

“Now,” Zola said, “now his real training begins. Take him back to his cell — he must rest to heal his brain. We have a way to go yet…”

Two sets of arms fastened around his own, and he felt himself slump in their grip, exhausted, as he allowed himself to be dragged from the room. He recognised neither of the men, or their uniforms.

They threw him into a small and dirty stone cell; furnished with a single stool, a bed, and a metal toilet — nothing more. He was tossed informally onto the rickety bed with the thin, stained mattress, and his head banged against the back wall, igniting another burst of pain inside his brain.

The heavy door with the barred windows closed. A lock slid shut.

Idly, The Asset wondered what those strange markings on the wall were supposed to be…

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

What? Two chapters in two days? Yeah, It's procrastination season. Please enjoy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

November 10th 1959

His first official mission as The Asset found him on the border of West Berlin, crouching by the military transport jeep of a group of English and American servicemen outside of a nightclub at 1am.

It was an exercise in stealth more than a test of skill in assassination — there were only so many times he could throw knives, and shoot guns, and incapacitate Hydra agents before his abilities regarding killing were no longer brought into question. Trying to count the number of times he’d been brought into the shooting range was useless — they wiped him clean too often to tell.

During his simulation missions, something that The Asset found curious was that he was not only often permitted, but also mostly encouraged to make a spectacle of himself. Hydra liked messes — liked ample civilian casualties (or what they called “collateral damage”), buildings reduced to smouldering rubble, people in a panic. They liked copious visibility on the devastation that they could cause, especially with The Asset — wanted to show that with only one man, they had the power to unravel everything.

Devastation, however, could be quiet or loud. If executed properly, one quiet assassination in the dark was capable of causing just as much panic as a large-scale, public attack in broad daylight. When there was no warning, limited evidence, and nothing more than a lingering doubt that it had only ever been an accident, panic could reign just as loud.

It was nearly past 1am — the club would be closing soon.

The mission parameters had not specified a specific method for assassination — no doubt a deliberate test of The Asset’s ingenuity and decisiveness. The only things specified were that there were to be zero civilian casualties, and no evidence of foul-play leftover at the scene. An accident — that’s the only conclusion that should be able to be drawn from the wreckage.

It wasn’t a difficult mission to undertake, and certainly not one that would exactly strain The Asset’s critical thinking abilities, or showcase his talents. A simple puncture in the brake line of the men’s transport jeep — big enough to cause a leak, but small enough that they’d be able to drive a significant portion of the way before the jeep finally begun to fail.

From the shadows, nonchalantly leaning up against the wall with a cigarette in his flesh arm, The Asset’s gaze flicked over to the entrance as he heard the doors bang open, and finally, he saw his targets exit the building.

Five of them: three brunettes, one blonde, and the other a redhead.

They were swaying drunkenly as they exited the building — staggering over their feet clumsily and
leaning against each other for support, laughing raucously.

Idly, The Asset wondered if his interference was even necessary tonight — they seemed perfectly capable of killing *themselves* by driving in this state. But then, that was the goal for this mission — to manufacture the situation so that there was no question of it being an accident.

“I’m driving!” one of the brunettes announced, shoving his hand into the suit pocket of the blonde and extracting a jangling set of keys triumphantly. Privately, The Asset he agreed that the one offering to drive certainly did look the most sober of the lot, although not exactly by a wide margin.

“Fine by me,” the redhead mumbled, hiccupping. “By all means, you be the one to kill us all. I’m going to take a nap in the back seat — wake me if I sound like I’m going to puke, I don’t want to ruin the upholstery.”

They stumbled off of one another and into the frankly oversized transport jeep, completely unaware that they were in any semblance of danger — which was foolish, considering what they’d done to become marked men…

Except, what had they done?

The Asset remembered being told — was outlined of their crimes explicitly before being sent on the mission — he was sure. Except he remembered *being* told, but not *what* he was told…

The Asset shook his head, deciding to worry about that later — and finally pushed off from the wall, stepping on his discarded cigarette and grinding down his boot.

Later, when the mission was ruled a success, and The Asset was picked up for extraction, he stared pensively at the ground, a small frown etching a line of disturbance between his brows.

“Well done, soldier,” a voice told him, in Russian.

“These men…” The Asset said, voice thick and hoarse from a mixture of the smoke inhalation inflicted when he was confirming all five deaths after the crash, and plain disuse. “Why were they targets? What were their crimes?”

He looked up, and saw that the Russian who had spoken to him was Johann Fennhoff. He looked down at The Asset with a mixture of shock, disappointment, and pity. He sighed, and brought his wristwatch to his lips, pressing down onto the crown, “*mission success — begin preparing the chair for episodic reconditioning by return.*”

The Asset’s frown deepened in confusion, and in answer, Fennhoff sighed once more, shook his head sadly. “You should know better by now, Soldier, not to ask questions. You serve, and you serve unquestioningly, do you understand? Unconditionally. Doubt breeds insolence, and I will not tolerate that, am I clear?”

The Asset blinked in surprised, closed his mouth, and nodded.
As was the case with most situations that made Steve uncomfortable, it was Natasha’s idea.

“C’mon, it’ll be fun!” she’d insisted. “Relive old times — nostalgia for nostalgia’s sake. And I can’t miss an opportunity to see you in those famous tights I’ve heard so much about.”

Steve rolled his eyes with a dramatic huff, “why don’t you just go by yourself then? Hell, take Tony; I’m sure the guy’d love to see all the displays about his dad.”

It wasn’t the first time they’d had that conversation, and Steve suspected that it might not be the last if he didn’t just agree to it. Nonetheless, he was stubborn, and he was willing to bet that maybe, just maybe, his stubbornness outweighed Natasha’s.

...And then Natasha crossed her arms over her chest, and Steve knew immediately that he’d already lost.

The drive to the Smithsonian felt like one to his own execution. Steve stayed pointedly silent through the whole trip, clearly sulking, although he couldn’t exactly admit it to himself.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Stop being so dramatic. I’ll even pay for your admission — think of it as an apology for setting you up with Gail.”

Steve’s nose wrinkled at the memory, and he moved to switch on her car’s heating wordlessly, tucking both hands under either armpit to warm them up.

Steve really hated being cold.

He supposed, technically, it wasn’t winter anymore, but that knowledge didn’t stop him from feeling that gnawing emptiness every time he stepped outside — remembering the plane crash, the slowly rising water creeping up his neck, enveloping him completely; remembering his mother, dying in the cold, unheated apartment that they’d shared in order to take care of one another when they got sick; remembering himself clutching onto the side of that train, watching helplessly as his best friend fell, hand still outstretched toward him...

It really didn’t help that he’d always associated the colder winter months with Bucky, even before the war.

Growing up during the great depression meant things like regular hot meals and a warm home were luxuries that could afford to be given up for the sake of filling their home with enough non-perishable food to last them at least a week. Even after the depression had lifted, Steve hadn’t been left with much, and his income was (to say the least) quite poor. To compensate, they’d have to push their shitty single beds together and double up on their blankets, huddling together for warmth like penguins.

Despite how much he’d hated it — how desperately he had wished for his life to change, and to be given luxurious beds and unlimited heating — now he had it, Steve would probably have traded all of that for one more crummy night in his shitty apartment with his stupid best friend...

It’s not like Steve mentioned him every day — or even at all, for that matter. But he sure as hell thought about him every day. He’d see a movie, or hear a song, or a joke, and would immediately think about how much Bucky would love it. Every single time he caught himself making a mental reminder to show it to him as soon as he got the chance, it felt like losing him all over again.

His Smithsonian exhibit wasn’t open to the public yet — Natasha had sneakily organised their viewing so that they could look around it together without anybody but the staff interrupting, bustling
about and making sure everything was ready for the official unveiling tomorrow. Admission to the Smithsonian was free, and Natasha had only blinked up innocently at him when they told him this, so Steve felt sure she’d known.

“You owe me a sundae,” he decided, with a teasing smirk. “For Gail.”

‘Captain America: The Living Legend & Symbol for Courage’ was proclaimed in block letters by the exhibit entrance, and Steve fought the urge to roll his eyes. After so many years with the title, he figured he should probably be used to the spiel that was often proclaimed in his favour, but instead he always just felt a little embarrassed.

He had to admire the artwork done for the first mural: a blown-up image of his face, saluting off to the distance in front of an American flag. Embarrassing as it may be, the colouring was exquisite.

He blinked in surprise at one of the nearest glass displays, feeling the odd desire to laugh. “This was my old bike,” he told Natasha, pointing, “the one I used to deliver newspapers on for extra money during the summer. My satchel too — although it wasn’t technically mine, it was the paper’s. I wonder if they were the ones who donated it.”

“Yeah, or maybe Mavis from down the hall stole it and kept it once you started getting famous,” she said.

“Don’t laugh — I actually did have a neighbour named Mavis. Awful woman though, just horrible; I remember when Bucky was about eighteen—” he cut himself off, throat constricting. “Never mind,” he mumbled, and continued walking.

Every few steps or so, he would point out an old trinket or two he had once owned — offering up an anecdote, or an explanation, or a correction; saying that it had actually belonged to his parents, or to Bucky, or in one case, had been stolen from another boy who had threatened to make Steve eat his brand new baseball after school. In retaliation, Steve and Bucky had responded by liberating it from his desk during lunch break and keeping it for themselves. All for the good of their own self-protection, of course.

As they rounded another corner, they found themselves in a room dedicated entirely to the Howling Commandos, and Steve felt his small smile drop instantly.

Another mural was painted along the back wall: a line-up of each of the Commandos, each looking proud and tall, behind Steve.

Steve could practically hear their voices now. “Of course they put the white guys in front,” Morita would scoff and roll his eyes, “typical. Seventy years of so-called ‘progression’ and they put both of the coloured guys in the back.”

Steve stepped forward slowly, taking in the masterfully painted mural — which captured every detail of the men so perfectly, Steve had to wonder if they’d really been reconstructed from grainy old footage and photographs, or if at some point they’d had their pictures taken by Stark with a far more modern camera than was typical of that time. He wouldn’t put it past him.

At the base of the mural, underneath the mannequins stating wonderful replicas of their uniforms, a glass case was situated in front of the red separator partitions, bearing seven slightly browned pieces of paper.

He curiously leaned forward to see what they were, and a wet laugh bubbled from Steve’s lips as he read one of the documents within the glass case: his old SSR file, which had once been classified.
Under the section ‘Title’, where operations command had been printed, a large scribble had been put through, and in Bucky’s slanted writing, giant reckless jerk had been penned in underneath.

“Damn it Bucky, these are official!” Steve had groaned.

“Well, then I guess you’re officially a giant reckless jerk!” Bucky shot back, not completely undeservedly.

He glanced to the one to the left, and saw that it was Bucky’s.

**Name: James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes**

DOB: 5/8/1917

Height: 5'11”

Rank: Sergeant

Title: Sniper

Steve snorted at the sudden ghost of Bucky’s outraged voice at seeing it. “I am incensed. Outraged! I’ll have these people know, I’m an even six feet tall, Steven Rogers. You are not three whole inches taller than me.”

Steve felt his forehead crumple at the thought, and he felt it again — that feeling of urgency building in his chest, like a rising scream.

It hurt.

It hurt how much he missed him…

Suddenly overwhelmed, Steve turned away from the case, swallowing around a dry throat, only to stop dead once more at the sight of a huge glass commemorative monument to the left of the next walkway — Bucky’s memorial.

Steve wished that they had used another picture of Bucky for it.

It had been taken not even a week after Bucky’s experience on Zola’s table, freshly tortured, with bags of sleep deprivation hanging under his eyes, his face was pale and unshaven. He was still handsome, of course — Bucky was always handsome — but there were so many photographs Steve remembered of Bucky looking happy, and healthy; he wished they’d used one of those instead.

And then he noticed the dates.

Steve wanted to feel the fury he knew he was capable of at seeing the dates on Bucky’s memorial display: the first claiming Bucky to have been born in 1916, the other in 1917, and then a third claiming that he had died in 1944, not ‘45.

He wanted to feel outraged — to storm up to whoever organised this thing and demand it be fixed — to shout that you at least owe it to him to get his damn dates right.

He wanted to feel it — his old sense of righteousness — but he couldn’t. At that moment, all Steve
felt capable of feeling was a muted bitterness, and a hollow feeling that painfully resonated within him, because nobody cared. Nobody cared enough to bother to show even the bare minimum of respect by fact-checking their dates before publishing them for the world to see. It seemed blatantly clear that, to them, Bucky was nothing — only important enough to warrant a place here because he was a footnote in the story of the great Captain America.

Steve felt sick.

He stared at the dates again, and shut his eyes.

Bucky was only twenty seven when he fell — his birthday less than a few days away. Steve had already organised with the culinary staff to have a cake made in celebration — one to be shared amongst the commandos, and maybe Peggy and Howard. Phillips too, if he’d asked. They hadn’t had cake on either of their birthdays in years, not since Bucky’s 24th (or had it been Steve’s 23rd?).

It wasn’t until weeks after he’d woken up that Steve found out that it was on Bucky’s birthday that VE Day had fallen. He imagined what Bucky would have been like to hear the news that day — the outrageous party Steve would have had thrown for him, how happy Bucky’d have felt knowing that the war was at last coming to an end…

“Who was this?” he heard Natasha say, pointing at the screen.

Steve swallowed, and didn’t answer. He knew she knew perfectly who it was — she could read, and she wasn’t an idiot; it was her way of asking for more personal details, and Steve wasn’t prepared to give any. Not yet.

There was another display to the right of the wall, and Steve’s stomach dropped at the sight. Flickering newsreels were compiled together of him and Bucky, showing on a loop. Them in the back of their transport jeep, going over the maps for their invasion into Hydra’s Polish base; them frisbeeing Steve’s shield back and forth, pausing to wave at the cameraman, who had caught them off guard; both of them standing in front of an old church, shaking their heads and laughing at some unheard joke. That last reel affected Steve the most — feeling his stomach drop out, and his shoulders slump further. Tears pricked at his eyes, and he turned his face away hurriedly, embarrassed.

Natasha gave a low, sad huff, and Steve turned, surprised, and blinking those tears back swiftly. She looked sorrowful — a thin line of worry etched between her eyebrows as she stared at the grainy picture of Bucky up on the wall.

“What’s wrong?” he asked in surprise.

Natasha pursed her lips and shook her head. “Nothing, just… I’m sorry.”

Steve frowned, confused. “For what?”

She shrugged uncomfortably, still not really looking at him, “I thought dragging you here would be funny, but…”

Steve frowned, a little crestfallen at the thought that he’d ruined their outing together. “Sorry, I’ll try not to be such of a downer.”

She shook her head. “No, I mean…” she sighed, frustrated, “I didn’t consider that the reason you didn’t want to come… wasn’t because you hated the attention.” She didn’t elaborate further, and Steve felt grateful for it. He was sick of being psychoanalysed.
“Well, if it helps at all, I do feel a *little* embarrassed,” he said with a false smile, trying to cheer her up, “just tell me they don’t stock my merchandise in the gift shop.”

“Oh, I really hope they do,” she smirked. “We’ll check it out before I buy you your sundae.”

“You don’t really have to buy-”

“Can it, Rogers.”

April 1960

The Asset sat still in his seat, glancing around curiously at the furious exchange taking place between the two men in front of him.

“Foolish of us-”

“Should never had-”

“Lucky that-”

He had only the briefest idea of what they were fretting about: his last mission had been a solo affair — another covert operation in London, taking out a top MI6 agent by drowning him in his bathtub and having it overruled as an over-drinking accident. As The Asset’s hands had made contact with his upper shoulders, the man’s eyes had snapped open, and his face fell into a look so shocked that it was almost comical. Before being hauled under, he had spluttered out a watery gasp of “Sergeant Barnes?” and then spoke no more.

The Asset was confused, but altogether relatively unconcerned with the man’s behaviour. He didn’t see why being mistaken for someone by a dead man was enough to cause his handlers to fly into a panic, squabbling in hushed tones and making wide gestures with their hands.

Eventually, however, the two silenced, and turned to look at The Asset in unison.

The risk of exposing his identity, they said, was a risk that they were careless to overlook. A good spy, and indeed, a great assassin, should never risk additional exposure to the enemy, and that includes the possibility of becoming recognisable. With an almost angry edge, they informed him that from then on, the incorporation of a new element was to be implemented into his standard mission gear — one that he would be penalised on if ignored: a stark, black mask.

Soon after, his first mission with the newly fitted piece took place: a brutal assassination of Colonel Jefferson Hart in Mexico City.

It was on this mission that he first ever heard himself called ‘The Winter Soldier’.

August 1967
The first real malfunction The Asset ever experienced came in the form of the aftermath of a mission to Switzerland. A simple operation: his objective was to kill the Vice-chancellor of Wakanda by throwing him off of a train.

The man had screamed as he fell — an echoing, terrible scream that rose the hackles of even The Asset, which is not an easy thing to do. He'd watched as the man twisted and tumbled and whirled through the air like some sick kind of acrobat, and suddenly, The Asset felt as though he were falling right alongside him.

He’d fallen to his knees, clutching at his head at the sudden onslaught of rushing memories, crushing his brain from the inside out. He screamed, and thrashed, and called out a name he didn’t quite remember, and then there was only darkness.

When he woke up again, he was sitting upright, but limp, in a seat in front of Zola and a man in a crisp suit and polished shoes.

Fennhoff was nowhere to be seen — apparently replaced by this far younger-looking man, who had sandy hair and wire-frame glasses. Zola was speaking to him in hushed tones — in English, because the man was apparently American.

“-needing to wipe him almost after every single mission now. He’s becoming resistant to our methods — displaying curiosity and insubordination. Just eight months ago he attacked a fellow officer, with no provocation, and is still to this day unable to explain his actions.”

The man chuckled unconcernedly, and The Asset noted that he had a very obvious charisma about him — a politician, perhaps, although he looked far too young to be very high profile: twenty-six, maybe.

“Zola, I have complete faith in your judgment.” Despite his age, he spoke with an authority far beyond his years. “But I think that canning the project entirely is a drastic step — too drastic. We just have to take more care in the future,” he shrugged, as if his response was all the answer they needed.

“What do you suggest?” Zola asked.

“You mean for now? My recommendation — and you can put this on record — is that we should keep him on long-term stasis. And in the meantime, we can work on developing our… methods a little further. Make them more sophisticated — infallible, if we can.”

“Long term-?” Zola spluttered, and then composed himself, “with all due respect sir, we are at war.”

“We’re always at war,” the man replied simply, “and we’ll most likely always be at war, Arnim. We don’t need our star player to be brought out to the field every time we need a threat eliminated.”

“He is our greatest-”

“Greatest asset, I know, I’m aware — I’m not trying to disregard how valuable The Winter Soldier is to our organisation, Arnim. But we do have other means of eliminating choice targets — other men who are trained to do almost the same things that he is, if a little slower. All I’m suggesting is that perhaps we should be working on conserving him for our more high-profile cases — the difficult ones — and leaving the smaller-fry to our Modoc Squad.”

Zola looked at The Asset almost mournfully. “I suppose you have a point.”

The man nodded, seemingly pleased that Zola was seeing sense. “It’s the most logical solution. Less cases mean less room for errors, which I don’t need to tell you can have major repercussions on our
Zola nodded impatiently, apparently in no further need of convincing. “Yes, yes, I see your point, I understand,” he huffed, “I won’t pretend to be completely content with this solution, but I will not pretend that it is not the most logical action to take.”

“Cheapest too,” the man said happily, “bringing him out of the ice is expensive, you know,” and with that, he looked over his shoulder to where two armed guards were standing — ramrod-straight and very still, very pointedly not talking to one another, as if they were actually intimidated by this man.

“Prep the cryo tank,” the young man ordered firmly. “We’ll further this discussion later.”

The men gave a synchronous bark of “yes, sir!” and then moved to capture The Asset under each arm.

The Asset complied wordlessly.

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November 1972

“Dernier is dead.”

The words resonated through Dugan with an awful, sinking realisation.

There had been no greeting, or self-identification (not that he needed it — he knew what Monty’s voice sounded like), just those words — awful and bleak, needing no padding or pretence: “Dernier is dead.” That was it.

Although he was the oldest of the lot, nobody had really considered that this meant that Dernier would ever be the first to die. To be honest, Dugan hadn’t given any thought at all as to that matter at all — either consciously or unconsciously, he didn’t know, but in that moment, he was grateful, because no amount of thinking and worrying could ever have possibly prepared him for it.

A great gush of air fell from his lungs, and he massaged the bridge of his nose and eyes with a thumb and forefinger. “What- how did it happen?” he eventually said thickly, dreading the answer, but needing to know nonetheless. Heart attack? Liver disease? Either way, Dugan was definitely not going to argue with his wife about salad for dinner.

There was a long pause, and Dugan’s hand fell away. “Monty?” he said, almost convinced that the line had dropped.

“You remember our last meeting in London?” Monty said, sounding decidedly less emotional than he had when delivering the initial news. His voice was hard, almost icy. “Dernier was saying that he was tracking a lead in Russia after following a trail of assassinations dating back to more than ten years ago?”

Dugan’s frown deepened, and he felt confused, but with a sudden spike of dread that he felt all the way in his heart. “No,” he said, shaking his head, even though he knew Monty couldn’t see him, “no, Monty, no — those were just stories!” he insisted, “old-man ramblings! At best, the Winter Soldier’s just a rumour, at worst, a Russian ghost story — nothing more. He had no proof, nothing
more than a hunch!” the more he spoke, the more panicked he felt, denial slipping away with each word.

“Well that hunch obviously led him somewhere, didn’t it? Barmy codger was hiding out in a shack on the Swiss border; the entire place was burned to the ground. No question of foul play — definitely deliberate. Almost as if the bastards wanted us to know that it was on purpose.”

Dugan swiped a hand out behind him blindly, reaching for a chair for him to fall in as his knees grew weak. He slumped into a kitchen stool, and fingered the rotary dial on the telephone thoughtlessly.

“Has anybody called Peggy yet?” Dugan asked hollowly.

“Who do you think told me?” Monty said. Dugan’s mouth twitched at that, just barely.

“Did she happen to mention a funeral date?”

“No. I called his daughter though — she said she’d give each of us a ring when she had the details.”

“Did she say anything else?”

Monty paused, and Dugan heard a deep, weary sigh, “she said that he hadn’t been himself the last few months, especially after London. Said he spent his days locked in his study, or disappearing for days or weeks on end to god knows where; always returned with files and papers — littered his study with them. But he took them all with him to Switzerland.”

“Let me guess,” Dugan said dryly, “they all went up with the building.”

Grim silence was his confirmation.

Dugan sighed again, and resumed massaging his eyes with his fingers. “So you think he got too close to something?”

“Oh, I’m damn-near certain of it.”

“Did you tell Peggy?”

“No, but I did tell Howard. He probably passed it along.”

Dugan gave a grim hum. “We sure it’s a good idea to go poking around though?” he wondered, “I mean, like you said, they made no effort to hide the fact that it was deliberate. Might’ve been a warning not to go poking around where we don’t belong.”

“When have we ever not gone poking around where we didn’t belong?” Monty replied, sounding close to wry.

Dugan felt a sudden flash of anger. “Maybe since it got one of our teammates killed?” he said hotly. Monty sobered at once. “Dugan,” he said slowly, “you can’t be thinking of letting this be, can you?”

Dugan huffed again, and rubbed harder. “Yes. No. I don’t know!” his hand fell to smack against his bad knee, and he rubbed his thumb along it firmly. “We’re old, Monty — old and retired. I’m not saying we should let this one go, but… maybe it would be in our best interests to hand it over to someone more qualified.”

“More qualified?” Monty said derisively.
“I don’t want to lose another team member over this!” Dugan said. “Not again — not another one. I’ve already lost three of my best friends, I can’t handle losing any more. Not yet. And I may not have grandchildren to leave behind, but the rest of you do.”

Monty seemed subdued by those words, and hummed his reluctant assent. “Well, Howard knows now,” he said, “at least he can pass the torch. Can’t expect Gabe to keep himself out of it though — the man will probably walk through fire for answers, grandchildren or not.”

Dum Dum didn’t respond, but privately, he knew it was true.

November 1972 — 10 days earlier

The Asset’s head swam — suddenly feeling as though his skull was too tight for his brain.

The sensation sent him keeling over into the snow, retching, as deep-set emotions suddenly ripped their way free from confines he didn’t even know existed.

The old man’s face had been battered and withered — a thin, silver comb-over and a patchy moustache the most noteworthy things about him.

But those eyes…

Those eyes, he recognised. Without a doubt. He’d seen them before, somewhere, some time long ago, in the parts of his memory that were too dense and foggy to see through.

The man had recognised him too — had widened those dark eyes in astonishment, and then horror, before stuttering out a raspy, disbelieving name: Bucky.

He hadn’t reacted — hadn’t said anything; only continued spreading gasoline around the room wordlessly, robotically. The man’s screams had followed him all the way outside, and as he watched the shack be consumed by flames, it was with a thunderclap inside his head that he heard them cease.

Something jostled in his mind, and all of a sudden, he felt panic — deep and urgent. It overwhelmed the need to contact base — to get back to headquarters and give a mission report.

He needed to do something. He needed to go somewhere, he needed to get something, he needed… He needed to run.

December 1991

The Asset was cold.

Coming out of the ice was a horrible experience — not quite as bad as the chair, but certainly a close second.
Uncontrollable shivering, aching bones, a splitting headache, and almost overwhelming nausea. He wondered if that was the reason they kept him underfed — sustained by nothing more than IV fluids and the occasional bread slice: making sure that when he emerged from the ice, he didn’t immediately vomit over his handlers.

After being brought out from cryo, he was wrapped in something hot and heavy, which burned his skin, but did nothing to quench the iciness still residing within his bones.

There were more guards this time — some younger, with matching expressions reflecting fascination and terror, while the more veteran soldiers merely looked bored. His teeth had only just ceased chattering, and his breath stuttered, but they carried on as if completely unaware that he was still in the hour-long recovery process that followed a long freeze period.

Eventually, they removed his heating wrap, leaving him shirtless and exhausted, sitting upright on the metal operating table.

One of the newer faces looked like he was debating with himself whether or not to say anything, and upon catching The Asset’s eye, darted his gaze to the soldier The Asset recognised the best — the one who was occasionally in charge of establishing orders to The Asset on missions.

“Isn’t he-?” the younger one started tentatively, but was cut off by a sharp gesture and a look of warning.

“Not anymore,” his CO growled tersely.

“You mean…” the younger one paused, debating, “he doesn’t remember anything?” he said it in a conspiratorial whisper, and The Asset didn’t blame his CO for the great eye-roll he gave.

“He remembers nothing,” the man told him loudly, cuffing the side of The Asset’s head as if to illustrate its emptiness.

The Asset frowned, bothered by this somewhat — not so much because of the implication of idiocy, but rather because it wasn’t completely true.

He remembered a pair of small brown shoes at the ends of his own legs, which had laces that never remained tied no matter how tightly he secured them. He remembered itchy grass underneath his body, and exploding fireworks igniting the sky in showers of colour. He remembered a blonde face grinning toothily at him, dirt on his cheeks, blood on his knees. He remembered a small, piggy face with round spectacles, staring down at him with impersonal interest — and again, that same face, smiling up at him proudly as the world began to fuzz around the edges. He remembered a little girl. Монстр. ‘Monster’, she had called him.

He remembered that one of them called him ‘Barnes’ once.

He didn’t know why he remembered it, only that it tucked itself away into his mind, somehow relevant, although he couldn’t place why.

Not Zola — not in the beginning, when everything in his memory was fuzzy and disjointed, like a film he’d watched a long time ago that he couldn’t quite remember the plot to. No, it had been a younger man — taller, with dark hair and a tattoo over his bicep, who wore practical clothing and a headset on his right ear. He had crouched at the Asset’s feet to peer curiously up at his face, trying to make it out clearly behind the curtain of long hair. He’d said the name with such trepidation — almost as if he was sure that he was mistaken, but felt as though he had to make sure.

The Asset said nothing in turn; merely peered back with mirrored curiosity before averting his gaze.
dutifully back to its designated spot on the floor. The Asset had learned long ago that prolonged eye contact could be perceived as a kind of challenge to these kinds of agents, and he wasn’t really in the mood to be threatened.

He later found out the man’s name was Rumlow. Not that he cared — not that the knowledge of the man’s name meant anything to him.

It had been his one act of subtle, untouchable defiance: not calling anyone by their name. His handlers, his superiors, his footmen on missions — none of them referred to him as anything other than ‘The Asset’, or ‘The Soldier’, and so The Asset, in turn, chose not to refer to them at all. In fact, when he wasn’t required to, he chose not to speak at all, period.

Not that they ever listened, if he chose to speak. Outside of an ongoing mission, when The Asset called most of the shots, nothing The Asset chose to say was of any significance to anyone. Better remaining silent than being ignored.

The man — Rumlow — turned out to be the newest recruit to the assault team now under his command: formerly known as the Modoc Squad, now Strike.

“Soldier,” a voice snapped, and The Asset looked up immediately, establishing that they had his complete notice.

He gave no verbal answer to establish his attention or his assent, and the officer liked it like that.

A well-dressed man with light hair and dark glasses swept importantly into the room, raising his hands to the men to make them step aside, putting a wide berth between them and The Asset.

The Asset peered at him curiously, a weird feeling niggling at him that he recognised the man, but couldn’t quite place where from.

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The man gave a tug at each pant leg to lift his trousers some, and crouched in front of The Asset to peer up at him. “Do you know who I am?” he asked kindly.

The Asset shook his head no, but then hesitated. “No sir,” he answered, because he couldn’t refuse to answer a direct question from a commanding leader.

“Not surprising — we’ve only met a few times before, and you were wiped right afterward each time,” he gave a small chuckle, as if commenting on how droll the situation was.

The Asset didn’t laugh.

“My name is Alexander Pierce. I’ve been overseeing your missions for a while now.”

It suddenly clicked where The Asset had seen this man before: a flash of a memory of a young blonde man speaking with his former doctor and handler. He said nothing.

Pierce glanced at him curiously, “do you remember your last mission, Soldier?” he asked as if he genuinely wanted to hear the answer, and The Asset frowned, not recalling exactly which mission had been his last.

“No, sir,” he replied after a few moments of thought.

The man nodded, apparently satisfied. “Good.” He righted himself, placing both hands in the pockets of his well-pressed pants and looking down at The Asset with interest. “Your last mission was in 1972 — nearly twenty years ago now.”
This surprised The Asset, but he didn’t let it show on his face. He certainly didn’t feel as though he’d been sleeping for twenty years.

“After your last mission,” Pierce continued calmly, “you defied direct orders on behalf of your commanding officers, and went off-grid completely for almost a full month. Since then, you’ve been recently re-awoken several times for continued reconditioning treatments.”

If The Asset felt surprised before, he was almost downright shocked to hear this. He had absolutely no memory of that occurring — not like the other memories that were too distant and unclear to get a grasp on, but more like there were simply never any memories there in the first place.

“Sir,” a balding technician bent forward to hiss in Pierce’s ear frantically, eyes darting to and from The Asset wildly. “I don’t think you should be telling him—”

Pierce waved him off indifferently. “You were decommissioned,” he continued, “because you were deemed too temperamental for further use. Stored away in a Soviet weapons lot like an obsolete, misfiring weapon.”

The Asset frowned, still trying to garner some shred of memory from this supposed month, and surprisingly shamed by Pierce’s words.

“You’ve been reanimated under American Hydra jurisdiction — under my orders,” his tone turned sharp, and The Asset’s eyes quickly flicked up to lock gazes with the man. “This is a test.”

He looked oddly clean in the dingy underground lab that The Asset was clearly being stored in — pressed suit, polished shoes, expensive wristwatch, and whitened teeth. His eyes fell away from The Asset dispassionately, those polished shoes stepping over dirty stone flooring as he walked to the other side of the room. He paused to look at illuminated images of x-rays beside more images of an MRI scan — both, The Asset assumed, from himself.

“My colleagues think,” those shoes circled back around to stand in front of him, “that you’re still too unpredictable to be able to be used for Hydra’s gain. I disagree.” He crouched again, and those earnest blue eyes felt as though they were burying right into The Asset’s brain. “I’ve ordered the recommission on you because I have faith in you — in your loyalty. I truly believe that you can step up to be what you were created for: the greatest asset that Hydra has. Your work has helped our organization in ways too numerous to count. And I fully believe that you can do it again.”

The Asset continued peering at him, not exactly sure what angle the man was coming from with this spiel. His words were kind, but there were underlain threats interspersed throughout that made him feel trapped somehow — like an insect pinned by its wings. Helpless.

“Sir,” a timid voice piped up from the door: another anxious technician, “the device has been calibrated — it’s all finalised. We’re ready for you at any time.”

Pierce nodded affably, “thank you, Fink. We’ll take him through in a minute. Charge the magnets.”

“Yes sir,” the man disappeared from the doorway again, and Pierce turned back to The Asset, fixing those probing blue eyes on him once more.

“After your next session, your new assignment will be given to you in full. Your target is a man named Howard Stark, and his wife, Maria. His son Anthony too, if possible, however, his death isn’t a top priority — not explicitly required like his parents.” He searched The Asset’s face for something, and when he didn’t see it, nodded contentedly. “Alright, follow me.”

He led The Asset down a long, cold hallway with only one other door at the end, open, and
revealing inside a team of doctors and technicians scurrying about the room around a large metallic chair that The Asset recognised all too well, except… it was different somehow. Upgraded, or else entirely rebuilt, with fewer, yet far more durable restraints, and a jigsaw headpiece. The machine branched off onto four separate screens, each showing different levels and images — some no doubt intended to measure The Asset’s vitals, and the others perhaps for the machine controls.

“Sit,” he was ordered, and without hesitation, he turned and sat back into the machine.

Men and women in starched shirts and bleached lab coats bustled around him, tinkering oddly with mechanics behind his head, under his arms, murmuring questions to one another before stepping back and giving each other firm nods.

“Ready to begin reprograming,” a female’s voice announced, and there was tapping at a keyboard. Solid steel restraints closed over The Asset’s biceps and forearms.

“Soldier,” Pierce’s voice called once more from the hallway.

The Asset lifted his head to acknowledge the address, and saw that Pierce’s good-natured smile and welcoming eyes had turned cold and steely. “I will not accept failure again, do you hear me? The next time you attempt anything like that escape again, I will send out the order for your immediate termination — no more second chances. I can tolerate a lot from my men, but insubordinates and deserters are neither of them. Do you understand?”

The Asset nodded, “understood.”

“Glad to hear it. I look forward to seeing you in an hour,” and with that, he swept from the room.

A rubber separator was forced between The Asset’s teeth, and he felt a jolt against his spine that straightened him flat against the backrest, head cushioned against plush rubber stoppers at four points at the back of his head.

Another tapping noise, and a loud whirring sounded as the headpiece began to lower over his face.

Chapter End Notes

So, I know that in 616 Bucky was born March 10th, not May 8th, but with all due respect to the comics, they also made him born in 1925, so I can change whatever I want.

Btw: not that any of you were wondering, but please forgive any inconsistencies in my grammar when it comes to UK vs US spellings — I’m actually Australian, so we kind of differ between the two (although tending to lean more towards UK). But whenever I read fics set in America that are written in a heavy UK language style, I find that it kind of throws off the feel, so I typically try to write with an American grammar style.

However, ‘Colour’ will be spelt without a ‘U’ when I’m in my cold, dead grave.

Headcanons referenced: [x]
Follow Me on Tumblr: (x)
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 2014 — DC

Hydra’s STRIKE unit was made up mostly of ex-soldiers, all recruited with the very clear understanding that they were only taking in the best.

Among their ranks was a soldier named Brock Rumlow: an ambitious, yet unwaveringly dutiful man recruited in 1989. He had worked his way efficiently through the ranks, quickly surpassing his peers in only a matter of a few short years until, in 2011, he found himself promoted to the position of STRIKE’s team leader. He was their boss — the big say-so. He took orders directly from the top, and his team took orders directly from him. He’d witnessed firsthand what kind of chaos weakness in the ranks could cause, and the consequences that were dealt out when it did.

He never bothered to kid himself that he was in any way a good person. There was a certain kind of contentment that came from understanding and accepting that not every murder he was ordered to commit was fully justified. And he did commit them. Unquestioningly, and without guilt.

He was fine with that. He didn’t need to feel like a good person in order to get to sleep every night. He didn’t need to rationalize each and every action he carried out under order, and the simple answer as to why that was was that it simply wasn’t his place. Having a positive impact on the world didn’t mean that everything it took to get there had to be unquestionably moral or ethical — it was the results that reflected his work.

Nobody ever changed the world without getting their hands a little dirty first.

Brock Rumlow was a liar, and a murderer, and he served in the business of liars and murderers — yet he never really felt like a monster because of it.

There was, however, an exception…

He knew perfectly well, as did many of the others, who The Asset was. He’d seen the grainy photographs in history textbooks growing up, heard Cap mention him in passing once or twice — hell, he’d read the damn tribute dedicated to the guy in Cap’s Smithsonian exhibit. In fact, before he’d dropped out to join the military, his freshman year of college included him putting together a paper about wartime history, of which he’d dedicated a solid body paragraph to Captain America and his Howling Commandos.

Nobody ever acknowledged it out loud, and so he never did either — not even in his own head, if he could help it. Thinking of him as anything other than ‘The Asset’ usually roused a very sudden feeling of tight guilt in the base of his throat, which made him angry. That feeling was a weakness, and weakness could not be tolerated. Not after all he’d worked for.

If Brock was honest with himself, being told that he was going to be working alongside the infamous Winter Soldier was a far better experience than actually working with him.

During a mission, the Asset was silent, lethal, and completely merciless. They weren’t fucking around when they’d claimed that they’d created the perfect soldier, and even Brock wasn’t too proud to admit that that’s exactly what the man was: the perfect soldier.
He was quiet, polite, and never asked questions. Never spoke at all, in fact, unless he was providing short, sharp orders during a mission, or else when answering a direct and specific yes or no question — always responding in that same flat, unhurried tone, barely heard to anyone who wasn’t closely listening.

The only exception to The Asset’s automatic responses came in the form of personal questions: ‘what is your opinion on this?’, ‘is there anything you need?’, ‘how are you feeling?’, ‘are you okay?’. Any question given to The Asset regarding himself or his opinions only ever brought a blank, hollow stare — not as if he didn’t understand the question, but more so as if there were simply no answer to give.

Rumlow was uncomfortable to admit it, but he almost felt relief when The Asset was suited up and fitted with that solid black mask during missions. When his face was covered, when he couldn’t be seen, it was far easier for Rumlow to forget exactly who The Asset was — for that squirming guilt inside him to dissipate, if only for a few hours, until it came off again post-mission.

It was a popular rumour amongst those who had met him that the Winter Soldier had been lobotomised. The truth turned out to be much worse.

“Sir!” the doctor looked very frazzled — anxious. “He’s- he’s unstable. Erratic.”

Rumlow doubted this very much.

He’d served nearly nine missions with the Winter Soldier over the past twenty-odd years, and not once had he ever seen the man behave in any way that could even closely be considered ‘erratic’. He was hard-pressed to think of a time that he’d ever seen The Asset behave as anything other than completely composed, even in the midst of an ongoing fight. He was ruthless, pitiless, and lethal as hell, but even when embedding a knife in between the ribs of a target, he never acted like anything other than his usual impassive, listless self.

Rumlow’s doubts were only furthered when he entered the room, flanking Secretary Pierce, to find The Asset sitting quietly at his station, demurely seated with his mechanical arm open for maintenance, and allowing an IV drip to slowly feed an unmarked bag of liquid into the back of his flesh hand. He’d been stripped of his shirt and mask, and looked completely unconcerned (if not entirely oblivious) to the fact that every gun in the room was trained directly at him.

Pierce gave a short wave of his hand, and the weapons fell away at once.


To Rumlow’s disbelief, The Asset didn’t answer — didn’t even look at Pierce, or in any way acknowledge that he’d even heard him at all.

“Mission report, now,” Pierce tried again, voice hardening further.

Still, the Asset said nothing. He kept his eyes trained on the floor, where he looked deeper in thought than Rumlow had ever seen him before.

The entire room winced when Pierce’s hand cracked hard across his face — the slap dealt with such force that it nearly sent The Asset careening to the floor.

The Asset, in turn, merely blinked — confused, but seemingly unperturbed by this violent handling. He looked up at Pierce as if just noticing he was there.
“The man on the bridge,” he said, voice low and gravelly with disuse. “Who was he?”

Rumlow had to restrain himself from letting the surprise show on his face. In all the time he’d known him, he’d never once heard the Winter Soldier speak freely before, and certainly never had he ever asked a direct question, even one which reasonably related to his mission.

Pierce seemed intrigued by this new behaviour as well, but nevertheless answered him, “you met him earlier this week on another assignment.” It wasn’t exactly a lie, but everybody in the room heard it as one.

The Asset, on the other hand, seemed to have not heard him at all.

“I knew him,” he said after a moment — unyieldingly certain. He fixed Pierce with a deeply troubled look.

Rumlow’s eyebrows drew together in muted apprehension. There was no way that this kind of talk would be classed as anything other than insubordination in Pierce’s book, and a rather uncharacteristic level of concern squirmed inside his chest at the thought.

Calmy, Pierce pulled up a chair. When he spoke, it was in a voice that wasn’t entirely dissimilar to that of a father speaking to a small child.

“You work,” he said, ”has been a gift to mankind. You shaped the century. And I need you to do it one more time.”

Rumlow watched The Asset intensely, trying to decipher just exactly what the hell the man was thinking as his eyes focused and unfocused between the floor and Pierce’s face.

“Society is at a tipping point between order and chaos,” Pierce continued, “and tomorrow morning we’re going to give it a push. But if you don’t do your part, then I can’t do mine, and Hydra can’t give the world the freedom it deserves.”

The Asset seemed to wilt under Pierce’s words, looking deflated and shamed under his earnest gaze. He seemed to struggle with what to say for a moment, and then…

“But I knew him.”

He said it with such a feeble insistence, like he was bothered that he couldn’t adequately articulate just how important this realisation was to him — how significant the fact that he remembered something on his own was. It was a plea, and everyone in the room heard it as such.

That lump of guilt he’d come to associate with The Asset swelled inside Rumlow’s throat like a balloon, and his tongue suddenly felt too big for his mouth.

Pierce gave a disappointed sigh, and stood from his chair. When he looked back at The Asset, it was with an expression of complete disgust, and The Asset, realising he wasn’t going to get a real answer, looked more dejected and miserable than Rumlow had ever seen.

“Prep him,” Pierce ordered harshly.

“He’s... been out of cryofreeze too long,” the anxious doctor with the bowtie said, looking terrified at the thought of coming close to The Asset.

“Then wipe him, and start over,” Pierce said.
A look of deep resignation suddenly clouded over the The Asset’s mournful confusion.

Rumlow once thought that the infamous Winter Soldier was completely incapable of emotion — nothing more than a discarded and despondent shell of a man who not to be pitied, because there was nothing there left to pity anymore. He said nothing; he thought nothing; he had no opinions of his own; and he was incapable of feeling compassion for anyone.

He’d once seen the Asset rip a man’s head clean from his shoulders: a French benefactor for a once prominent Russian mob, whom the Asset had been taken out of cryofreeze eight months previously to assassinate. It was perhaps the fifth or sixth mission Rumlow had accompanied him on. While Rumlow and six other members of the Strike team had been with him for the mission, their presence was quickly established to have all been for show.

Before Strike had even managed to complete their entry into the building, The Asset had already managed to mow through every member of the benefactor’s bodyguard entourage, and by the time they rejoined him, the benefactor was already in a tight chokehold within The Asset’s metal grasp — The Asset’s flesh hand secured around his chest. Before anyone could even so much as react, the metal hand had jerked up and away, and the man’s head was swiftly, and messily, liberated from its body.

It wasn’t Rumlow’s first mission with the Asset, but it sure as hell was the one which had effectively reconfirmed just how terrifying the Winter Soldier was — how ruthless, how cold; how clear it was that he was nothing more than a high-tech, and frankly terrifying, weapon. What had made it all worse, however, was how completely unfazed The Asset had been by the carnage he’d inflicted. He looked utterly indifferent, almost bored, as he casually tossed aside the larger part of his victim, drenched in blood, empty eyes reflecting only more emptiness. It was a look that had haunted Rumlow’s dreams for months afterward, turning them all to nightmares.

Rumlow had thought that nothing could scare him more than the Winter Soldier did.

He was wrong.

Watching this — watching the Winter Soldier tremble and shake uncontrollably within his steel restraints, whimpering and hyperventilating with a rubber separator between his teeth — this was scarier.

However much guilt he’d felt while watching the man feebly try to piece one portion of his broken life back together, it was nothing to what he experienced at that moment.

The loud sounds of crackling electricity sounded, and the Asset’s body stiffened.

And then he was screaming — screaming as though his throat was full of glass; like his mouth was full of blood; like Rumlow had only ever heard from victims of the cruellest forms of torture — only this was worse, because Rumlow had never heard The Asset in pain before. He’d seen the Asset take three bullets during a mission once, and the man had acted as he didn’t even realise he’d been hit; like the pain simply wasn’t there.

As he dutifully allowed himself to be lead out of the Hydra vault by Pierce, he fought down the rising bile as those screams followed him.
This filler chapter is dedicated to a friend of mine, who, upon seeing CATWS for the first time, remarked on this face with “why is he staring at him like he wants to fuck him?”

Rumlow, you creepy bastard, you.

Anyway, huge thanks to all of the people liking/commenting on my fic, you all make me feel so validated, and I adore each and every one of you.

Also big thanks to the THREE people who recced this fic to thestuckylibrary, I’m totally not worthy, you’re all awesome.
Alright, so despite not publishing it until October, I actually began writing this at the beginning of the year, before AOU came out. From this chapter onward, things aren’t going to be very canon-compliant anymore, however, I’ve obviously altered it at least a little to include AOU plot points.

Just a heads-up: no, Clint will not have his farm or his family, because that was a dumb storyline and I hated it.

Secondly: Bruketasha will not be a thing. I’ve always headcanoned Natasha to be Aromantic, so any relationship she had will be purely platonic, or possibly casual sexual.

Thirdly: the Maximoff twins will not be villains in this story. Sorry Ultron – you’re at it alone, buddy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

May 2014 — New York

This, Tony told himself, was a very well earned glass of whiskey.

He padded behind the bar, bare feet lavishing in the feel of brand new carpet, and yawned loudly, scratching his belly. He was tired, but not in the heavy, drowsy sort of way; he felt wired — overstimulated — and he clung to the feeling of motivation and focus that accompanied it. God knows when he’d feel this focused again without the aid of Adderall or uppers of some kind.

His fingers were burned and blackened with grease, and he was pretty sure he’d given himself about a thousand new calluses, but shit if the new set of unmanned suits he was working on weren’t starting to look polished as hell — finally able to move their heads and arms independently without any difficulties. They were still a way away from installing flight stabilizers for the moment — attempting to synthesise a human-like sense of balance in robots without super sophisticated AI software was not easy.

Tony whistled happily as he plunked ice cubed into his glass, and he wiggled his fingers thoughtfully over his selection of fancy spirits in weirdly-shaped bottles.

“Ooh, Royal Salute,” Tony said, giving the bottle a salute with one hand and scooping it up with the other.

He wrenched the stopper out with his teeth, but when he began to pour, a voice to his right startled him into slopping whiskey all over the bar.

“Stark?”

Tony swore, and began to dab hastily at the bar with a dishcloth. “This is a two and a half thousand dollar bottle of scotch!” he said indignantly, and then paused, eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Who the hell are you? And how the hell did you get up here without triggering Jarvis’s security protocols?”

He squinted into the darkness, only able to make out the silhouette of the person: tall, with chin-
length dark hair and a well-built frame — stocked to the brim with concealed weapons, if the way he was standing was any indication.

“Trackers,” the voice said quietly.

“What?” Tony asked.

“Trackers,” the voice repeated, louder. He sounded low and gravelly, as if the user had just woken up, or perhaps simply hadn’t spoken in a very long time.

“Come again?”

The voice huffed impatiently. “There are trackers in my arm. GPS, vocal ID, heart rate monitor — I need you to remove them.”

“In your- what? How are there trackers in your arm?” Tony said, flabbergasted.

The man stepped out from the shadows, and into the pale moonlight streaming from Tony’s floor-to-ceiling balcony window.

He had a pallid, unshaven face, and a set of guarded blue-grey eyes that darted apprehensively around the room, as if expecting something to jump out at him at any second. Most notably, however, was the gleaming silver appendage he had in the place of a left arm — flawless metallic plates interlocking to form what looked like a perfectly functional human limb. His other held a wrinkled jacket.

Tony’s eyebrows shot up, and he gaped, for once without words.

“It’s… I… you can fix this,” the man insisted determinedly, and despite the very obvious threat he provided, Tony could plainly see that ill-disguised look of complete desperation on his face, and he immediately grew very interested.

“Are you being traced right now?” he asked, setting his whiskey down slowly, so as to not inadvertently off set the incredibly edgy man.

The guy’s brow furrowed, and he gave a noncommittal kind of gesture. “Bigger problems than me for the moment, but it won’t be long.”

“Okay,” Tony nodded, and extended both hands upward in a pacifying gesture. “Okay, I think I can help. You think you can follow me to my workshop, or do you trust me enough to let me go get my tools and bring them back up here?”

“Workshop,” the man replied bluntly, and gave a short jerk of the head that said for Tony to lead the way.

He hated the idea of turning his back on the guy — presuming that anyone able to get past his security systems was certainly a man to be feared — but he figured that as long as his help was needed, he was unlikely to be attacked just yet.

They padded into the elevator without words, and the doors slid smoothly shut behind them. For the first time that night, Tony wished he were wearing shoes. He’d feel much safer if he were wearing shoes.

“Sir,” Jarvis’s voice rang out, and Tony shifted warily at seeing how Metal-arm-guy tensed in response to the noise. “There’s been a security breach.”
“Yeah,” Tony stared directly into the elevator camera with a dry look, “I noticed that. Thanks. Do not engage for now — take us both to the lab.”

“…are you certain, Mr Stark?”

He side-eyed Metal-arm-guy warily, and shrugged. “Sure, why not? It’s been a while since I last made a really dumb decision. Gotta keep Pepper on her toes somehow, right?” And yeah, he could already tell that this was going to be a really, really dumb decision.

“Very well, sir. Going down now,” Jarvis replied in a doubtful tone. Nevertheless, the elevator began to descend at once.

Tony eyed the stranger warily once more, taking in the way that he glared with absolute distrust into the elevator’s camera lens. For a moment, Tony thought he might actually try to destroy the thing, but then the elevator halted, and his eyes slid away and back to Tony. He jerked his head to tell Tony to lead the way.

Tony did, and as he exited the elevator, clapped both hands together to summon up the lights throughout the room.

His new lab in Stark tower was certainly a gaudier sight to behold than his old lab-slash-garage back in his Malibu home — with high glass walls, sleek metallic workbenches, and the most sophisticated tech he and Banner were collectively capable of procuring. This lab also usually came with the added benefit of being shared with Bruce, but unfortunately for Tony, who was beginning to question his own decision-making skills more and more by the second, Bruce was out of town, completing some reluctantly accepted research mission from Shield. His station in the lab, however, remained practically untouched — specifically, the makeshift medical assessment area that they both utilised for their bi-weekly check-ups, monitoring each other’s bodily conditions and potential rate of deterioration, respectfully.

“Take a seat,” Tony said, and extracted his precision tool kit from under an empty box of donuts on the main workbench. He opened it up to confirm that all the pieces were accounted for with a quick count, and then turned back around to see that Metal-arm-guy was standing hesitantly capable of procuring. This lab also usually came with the added benefit of being shared with Bruce, but unfortunately for Tony, who was beginning to question his own decision-making skills more and more by the second, Bruce was out of town, completing some reluctantly accepted research mission from Shield. His station in the lab, however, remained practically untouched — specifically, the makeshift medical assessment area that they both utilised for their bi-weekly check-ups, monitoring each other’s bodily conditions and potential rate of deterioration, respectfully.

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“Take a seat,” Tony said, and extracted his precision tool kit from under an empty box of donuts on the main workbench. He opened it up to confirm that all the pieces were accounted for with a quick count, and then turned back around to see that Metal-arm-guy was standing hesitantly beside the medical chair, surreptitiously fingering at the leather armrests as if checking for something hidden in the upholstery.

“Everything’s kosher,” Tony reassured him, tossing the toolkit onto the workbench carelessly and pulling up his own stool beside the chair. “There are attachments to monitor vitals, from back in my arc reactor days, but no science-fiction manacles are gonna come out of the arms or anything, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Metal-arm-guy immediately stripped off his shirt and took a seat, and Tony realised that perhaps that was exactly what he was afraid of. He felt that he would usually want to laugh at the ridiculousness of such an idea, but something in the man’s face suggested that he had genuine cause behind his concern, and Tony wasn’t really sure he wanted to know.

“Alrighty then.” He made himself useful by starting to unload his tools, setting them out on the workbench by size and probability of use. Metal-arm-guy eyed Tony warily, still looking as though he was ready to spring into action and fight anyone who made a wrong move at a millisecond’s notice. Nevertheless, he lifted the arm up onto the workbench for Tony’s appraisal, making sure that the access port in the tricep was easiest to reach.

The kind of interlocking mechanism between the shifting plates in this guy’s arm seemed to be similar to the kind Tony himself had been using around the abdomen section in most of his suits.
They’d been designed so that they wouldn’t come off of the front of the main torso piece when the suit was disassembled, but could still have their separable panels individually removed for internal maintenance when needed. Using his smallest needle-nose L-key, he ran the tip under one of the plates, and made a small noise of triumph when the head sunk into a small keyhole, and the plate sprung off smoothly.

He paused, glancing up at Metal-arm-guy for any sign that this had caused him pain. The arm was probably the most sophisticated piece of technology Tony had ever seen that hadn’t been expressly designed by himself, and so he didn’t know how much sensation the thing was capable of, if any at all.

Metal-arm-guy didn’t even flinch — staring down stoically at the ground, apparently deep in thought.

“How’re you holding up, big guy?” Tony asked as he removed a second panel.

Metal-arm-guy didn’t reply.

The GPS was the easiest to find, but the hardest to get to: a small, coin-shaped piece located deep inside the man’s bicep, slotted neatly in amongst live wires and circuit boards. Curiously, it wasn’t actually connected to anything — wirelessly operated and floating independently amongst the interconnecting pieces, as if it hadn’t been a part of the original design; added as an afterthought. It was a smart idea though— meaning that even if the arm suffered a complete malfunction, the GPS could still remain active and traceable.

“So who are you, anyway?” Tony asked, hopefully sounding more inquisitive than apprehensive.

The man’s eyebrows drew together. After a long few moments of silence, Tony figured that he wasn’t going to answer again, but eventually, the guy murmured a response; quiet, as if he were merely speaking to himself. “I don’t know.”

Tony paused to shoot him a deadpan look. “Okay, that’s pretty deep and everything, but I was more referring to your name?” he tried again.

The man blinked, and looked up at Tony with that same frustratingly blank expression. “I don’t know.”

Tony sighed, ready to give up on having his question answered.

“Rogers said…” the man cut himself off, pursing his lips.

This reignited Tony’s interest at once, increasing it tenfold. “Rogers? As in Steve?”

Still, the man said nothing.

“Hey, Jarvis?” Tony called, not looking up from where he was buried knuckle-deep in the stranger’s mechanical bicep, “pull up facial recognition, would you? Maybe help our friend here jog his memory a little?”

“Of course, sir,” Jarvis responded.

“No!” Metal-arm-guy snapped at once, his fist whirling as it clenched beside Tony’s resting elbow. His blank expression morphed instead to one of fury, and he scowled at Tony with terrifying intensity. “No.”
Tony extracted his fingers from the arm immediately, raising both hands into the air in a pacifying surrender. “Hey, whoa, okay there, big guy, okay. No identification, I promise.”

Metal-arm-guy relaxed in his seat, face smoothing once more into calm, and his eyes slid back to the floor.

Slowly, Tony lowered his hands back inside the open port, working silently and diligently so as to avoid setting the guy off again and ending up with the business end of this arm getting shoved up his ass.

The heart rate monitor was next, and once again, it wasn’t too difficult to find. As there appeared to be absolutely no blood running through the appendage whatsoever to measure heart rhythm, Tony figured that it would most likely be somewhere close to where metal met flesh inside of the arm, and he was pleased to find three small wires running into the man's body through his shoulder. Unlike the GPS, this device actually was interconnected throughout the arm's circuitry, making it slightly more difficult to detach.

Tony felt sweat start to bead on his forehead at the precision necessary to begin removing it without causing a spark — not to mention the effort required to keep from being physically sick at the idea of this entire thing.

"So what made you decide to come here for help?" he asked, trying to distract himself.

"Building says 'Stark'," the guy replied.

Tony paused to glance doubtfully up at him for a second. "You don’t know your own name, but you know who I am?"

The man’s eyebrows drew together. “Not you. Howard,” he said, and the crossover tweezers almost slipped out from Tony’s fingers in surprise.

“You knew my dad?”

Metal-arm-guy somehow looked even more confused than Tony did. His eyes flickered back and forth along the floor as he tried to piece something together in his mind. “Stark was the engineer,” he said slowly. “He was the only one who would be qualified to fix it. Only one who I knew wasn’t with them.”

"Who is 'them'?" Tony asked with a forced patience — irritated by the lack of answers this guy was giving him.

He didn’t answer.

Irritably, Tony gave a final tug to the last wire connecting the monitor to shoulder, and Metal-arm-guy jerked like he’d been electrocuted.

Holding the heart rate monitor gingerly between the tines of his crossover tweezers, Tony grimaced at the sight of the gooey substance that coated it, and he dumped it onto the metal tray atop his workbench distastefully with a dull ‘thunk’ beside the equally slick GPS device. The arm was filled with a thick, clear gel coating the entire interior — a kind of cooling system, Tony figured.

Looking back, his eyes fell to the mess of twisted scarring that marred the flesh of the man’s left shoulder, extending all the way across his chest like climbing cracks in drywall. He wondered how heavy that thing must be, and how on earth the man was able to lug it around so effortlessly.
“Vocal ID transmitter,” Metal-arm-guy's voice cut through Tony’s ogling, and turned the arm over to show his inner forearm, glaring.

Dutifully, Tony began opening up the panels.

The transmitter, it turned out, was actually quite a bulky piece of equipment. Dated, perhaps — with information written in Russian along the underside in raised lettering. To Tony’s further surprise, it had a second GPS disk soldered onto the back of it, and he worked to begin chiseling it out at once.

“So, you knew my dad, huh?” he asked casually, his patience running too thin to keep his mouth shut for very long. “You know, I don’t really see how that could work, seeing as you can’t be older than thirty, and my dad died more than twenty years ago. Wasn’t much for the company of children, my dad, so—”

“You look like him,” Metal-arm-guy interrupted. He said it slowly, as if he were only realising what he was saying as the words came out of his mouth. “You didn’t when you were a kid — looked more like your ma.”

Tony's brows drew together further. “You knew both of my parents?”

Metal-arm-guy didn’t respond.

Tony gave a frustrated huff, and tapped at Metal-arm-guy’s inner elbow with a screwdriver, perhaps a little more forcefully than was necessary. “Who gave you this?”

No response.

“Where did you come here from?” he tried again.

“DC,” the guy answered, and then his face got all pinched, like he instantly regretted admitting it.

Tony was only happy to have finally gotten a straight answer. “DC. Okay, yeah, I know a guy living up there. It’s a nice place, if you like boring American historical sites, and hate the sun. Hell of a way to come though — what brings you to New York? Other than me, I suppose.”

The guy hesitated, as if wondering whether or not he should speak. Eventually, however, he answered, in a voice so quiet that Tony could barely make it out. “I grew up here, I think. The memorial said Brooklyn.”

Tony stopped working — staring up at the guy in shock. “Memorial?”

Metal-arm-guy looked angry with himself again, and didn’t respond.

After a few seconds of waiting, Tony sighed, and placed his screwdriver down onto the tabletop. “Okay, listen — I think I’m starting to get a sense of what’s going on here.”

Metal-arm-guy looked up at him cagily.

“Let me guess,” Tony said, “illegal experimentation?”

No response.

“You know, as a connoisseur of non-consensual body modifications, I’m pretty sure I know one when I see it,” Tony tapped meaningfully at the empty space in the middle of his chest. “You gotta admit: the tracking devices were a bit of a dead-giveaway.”
The man looked away, still frowning.

“But you said you had a memorial. Like a war memorial? So you’re a POW of some kind, right?”

No response.

“Does this have something to do with the massive Hyrda fallout a few days ago?”

The man flinched, but still didn’t reply. Tony rejoiced internally for a moment at finally having hit upon something substantial, until the implication behind his guess truly hit home. He felt a cold nausea begin to creep in at once.

The guy couldn’t even remember his own name.

“You can’t send me back,” Metal-arm-guy suddenly said, and Tony blinked in surprise at the raw emotion he put behind those words. “I won’t go back there. I won’t.”

Tony felt his heart sink a few inches further, and he leaned in to fix Metal-arm-guy with the most genuine look he could muster.

“Hey,” he said softly. "Nobody here's gonna sell you out. Believe it or not, I've been there before. I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy, let alone a complete stranger.”

Metal-arm-guy seemed to relax at his words, if only minutely, and Tony went back to work.

After another few minutes of working in silence, the final piece clicked loose, and he promptly tossed it to join the others on the metal dish.

“Hey, Dum-E,” he whistled, and the robot immediately came to life and obediently wheeled over. “Take these to the incinerator, would you? And whatever you do, for the love of god, do not drop them.”

The robot gave a low whine, as if indignant at the assumption that it would, and it gingerly gathered the platter between its tines.

Tony wiped the coolant gel off of his fingers with a dirty rag, and began to replace the metal panelling back where they belonged — the pieces fitting back together with rather satisfying 'clicks'.

“How long did they have you for?” Tony asked, not really expecting an answer.

Still not really meeting Tony’s gaze, Metal-arm-guy surprised him by responding nonetheless. “I have no idea. A long time, I think.”

Tony gave the arm a final wipe-down with his rag to remove any excess goo, and began to pack up his tools. “Do you know where you’re gonna go from here?”

Metal-arm-guy shrugged, and pulled his shirt back over his head. He tugged down the left sleeve almost self-consciously, and replaced his long-sleeved jacket over the top as an afterthought.

“Ever thought about becoming a guard for Buckingham Palace?” Tony joked.

Metal-arm-guy didn’t laugh.

Tony sighed, and turned to place his toolkit on the shelf underneath his workbench, where it was supposed to go. “Well, do you want a drink before you hit the road? Whiskey? Vodka?”
“I like bourbon,” Metal-arm-guy said behind him. “American bourbon.”

Tony actually cracked a smile at that. “I’ve got bourbon. I’ve got *good* bourbon too, if you-” he turned to face Metal-arm-guy, only to reel back in shock to find that he wasn’t there.

“Metal-arm-guy?” Tony asked, craning his head to peer around tall devices, and through glass walls, trying to capture a glimpse of where he’d run off to.

“Sir,” Jarvis said, “there’s been another breach. It appears that our intruder has exited through the window on the lower floor.”

Tony sighed, “of course he has.”

He felt a sudden gnawing apprehension in his gut — worry for the guy.

“Hey Jarvis?” he said.

“Yes sir?”

“You ran that ID, didn’t you?”

“Naturally.”

“Any hits?”

“Unfortunately, facial recognition did not hit upon any matches.”

Tony frowned. “What do you mean? How can there be nothing? Guy was military, right? He was a POW — there has to be *something*.”

“I’m afraid that nothing in the past fifty years matches his profile. However, I think I’ve come across something else: the cybernetic prosthetic that the man was fitted with is quite infamously associated with the international assassin known as The Winter Soldier. He has only ever been captured in photographic evidence while wearing a mask.”

Tony frowned, bewildered. “Assassin? Guy had *trackers* inside his arm — no way he was just hired help. Have you had a look through the leaked Hydra files? There might be something in there.”

“Minimal information, I’m afraid. All files were either mostly redacted well before the leak, or else not kept electronically. The Winter Soldier is a very old case, sir.”

“Hard copy only,” Tony grimaced. “You think it’d be worth it to call in a family meeting?”

“You mean the Avengers, sir? I’d give them all a few days — it appears that Ms. Romanov and Captain Rogers have both gone off-grid in light of recent events. And, of course, Mr. Banner is still completing his last assigned mission in Portugal.”

Tony massaged over his eyes with a thumb and forefinger, and gave deep sigh. “Alright,” he said. “Put it on a backburner, will you? And if anything pops up about this guy, I wanna hear about it. Anything at all.”

“Of course, sir.”
5 Days Earlier

After the events at the Potomac River, he’d wondered upward — northwest — and then changed course along Peninsula Avenue after figuring that his presence would remain more inconspicuous closer to the city. The crowds were larger, and there were more plentiful roads to wonder.

Things were much easier an hour ago, when his objectives stretched no further than a fresh set of clothes, and an escape route. Wandering around DC with one arm indisposed, and the other too conspicuous to be shown, The Asset’s head now began to swim dangerously. The way he staggered about, his hair still wet, and wearing clothes that he’d fished out of a charity donation bin, he probably looked as though he were drunk to all the wary onlookers he passed. Well, drunk, or crazy, perhaps.

After walking for several miles, eventually the probing stares felt like too much, and he found an alleyway to duck into between a parking garage and a pizza joint.

The Asset’s head felt tight and hot — too hot. But he daren’t take off the cap. Fear and overwhelming confusion battled it out within him, and his chest constricted with anxiety.

He had no orders.

That, he thought, felt like the real problem: there was that helpless itch underneath his skin that gnawed and grated at his senses, like he was disobeying orders simply by not having any. He felt overwhelmed and helpless, and yet he knew that he was certain of at least one thing: there was no way in hell he was going back. He’d rather die.

He was grateful for the chill of the weather that day — providing the much-needed excuse for the extra layers he’d donned in order to provide anonymity. That, at least, was one positive thing that he was able to single out of the messiness that was this entire fucked-up situation.

Not for the first time in that last hour, his thoughts drifted once more to Rogers — unconscious and injured on the side of the riverbank, where The Asset had abandoned him. He thought of the fight, and how Rogers had looked as he fell through the air amongst flaming debris into the water below. He thought of his beaten, bloodied face — that expression of genuine devotion he wore as he said those words…

“I’m with you to… the end of the line.”

The Asset buried his hands in his hair, trying to shut himself up — to make the thoughts stop — why wouldn’t they stop?

He couldn’t explain why he’d stopped fighting. Couldn’t explain why those words had felt like bullet wounds through his heart and gut, and tears had welled in his eyes at those final sentiments. He couldn’t explain why he’d saved him.

These were the things he knew: Rogers had known him before — whenever before was. They’d obviously cared for one another, but under what circumstances, he couldn’t say. Beyond a distraught face screaming his name behind a desperate, reaching hand, he couldn’t remember Rogers at all.
No. It would be reckless to allow himself to trust in this man, no matter how strong the pull of that gut feeling of trust was. Idiotic.

The Winter Soldier was a valuable asset to have, especially for an organisation like SHIELD. And despite whatever it was that he felt for the man, there was still the unquestionable possibility that Rogers was merely an agent sent to claim him out from under Hydra's control.

And he’d be damned if he’d let anyone try to make him their possession ever again.

He couldn’t even allow himself to reach out with the benefit of the doubt. Not until he was sure.

“Your name… is James… Buchanan Barnes…” Rogers had said.

The Asset shook his head again in a vain attempt to clear it.

He needed something. He needed to get his head in order. He needed answers. He needed…

He needed a plan.

Steve Rogers wasn’t to be trusted, but that didn’t mean that there couldn’t at least be a semblance of truth to his words. He’s said a name: James Buchanan Barnes. Whether this was his name or not, he couldn’t be sure, but it was the best building block he had toward finding answers.

Despite the fact that he had no working memory of ever being in this city before, he has a curious sense of working knowledge regarding the location of notable landmarks. He knew that he wasn’t too far off from the White House, and he knew that if he headed south, he could see the Washington Monument. He also knew that if he headed north, he’d see the St. Regis Carlton Hotel, and for a moment, he wondered why the thought made him feel sick…

He shook his head once more and tried to focus his thoughts. The National Archives and Records Administration was on the corner of Constitution and 9th — if he was going to try and find any records relating to James Buchanan Barnes, that’d be a good place to start.

The smell of the pizza joint he was hiding beside hit him in full force, and at once, he realised just how hungry he was. Usually they kept him going with a cocktail of IV nutrients in the stead of real food, and appetite suppressants during missions. On longer affairs, he was often given bread and water, but generally there was a consensus among his COs that it would be unseemly for The Asset to need bathroom breaks, and so eating was generally discouraged.

Now, away from it all, The Asset would probably mow through a hundred of his former commanders in order for just one slice of pizza. For now though, his priorities were set; he could stand to go a little while longer without food for the meantime, and he didn’t even have any money to pay for it anyway — first thing was first: get to the National Archives.

It was a surprisingly short walk from Peninsula to Constitution: a two-street walk down 17th and onto the main road, where cars and people bustled to and from every direction. As he neared his destination, however, he almost stopped dead at the sight of an advertisement banner hanging off of a streetlamp beside the sidewalk.

‘Captain America: The Living Legend & Symbol for Courage’ the advert proclaimed. The text was set in front of a blown-up photograph of Rogers posing with his hands on his hips, his sharp jawline
shown off in profile.

The Smithsonian Museum of American History.

The Asset clenched his jaw uncertainly, not quite sure if it would be worth it to go look into the exhibit. He had a plan, after all, and those plans should be stuck to…

Then again, it was information that he was after. Information regarding himself, and the possible correlation between himself and Rogers, to be specific. Where better to find information on Rogers than an entire history exhibit dedicated to him?

Entry was free — another thing for The Asset to be grateful about.

He drew his hat over his face in an attempt to avoid the gazes of passing civilians. There wasn’t a hugely enormous crowd inside the building as he’d initially pictured there’d be, but he was cautious enough to not be willing to risk the chances. The people inside were mostly children, some wearing newly purchased Captain America merchandise like t-shirts and badges, others were merely lounging about disinterestedly as their overexcited parents, or friends, or siblings dragged them from display to display.

As he looked around at the items arranged artfully inside of glass cases, the back of his head began to grow curiously hot again.

The exhibits appeared to be displayed in an order estimating into a rough timeline — beginning with Rogers’s pre-war days in the beginning, and leading the audience through till after the war at the end.

In front of a large glass case containing a rusted bicycle and a worn leather satchel, there was an open book lying on a wooden pedestal. It was connected to the wall by a thin metal chain, and its pages were laminated and rebound to avoid damage. A group of children were flicking through them eagerly, talking too fast amongst themselves for The Asset to really gather what they were saying.

He peered over the tops of their heads, and saw that what they were looking at was a very old sketchbook — with yellowing pages and faded charcoal drawings pressed between fused plastic.

“Sit still, would you Buck?” the ghost of a voice rang in The Asset’s ears, young-sounding, and irritated, “honestly, I’d have more luck tryna sketch Mrs Mavis while she throws spoons at your big dumb head.”

The Asset clenched his jaw and moved on, ignoring the ghost, even as it sent an icy chill down his spine — like a taunt that hit a little too close to home.

Down a narrow hallway that contained a replica of Rogers’ wartime motorbike, The Asset emerged into a bigger room — this time with several large murals painted along the walls, and a grand display of seven uniforms modeled on blank mannequins along the back.

His eyes skated over the mural, over the image of a burly man with a great orange moustache and bowler hat.

“What’s this?” the man eyes Rogers teasingly. “Not a star or stripe to be seen, Captain — why, I
“This country could do with a little less patriotism if you ask me.” Rogers replies, bitterness tainting his voice.

Dugan gasps scandalously and clutches at his chest in response. The Asset laughs.

Dugan.

That man’s name had been Dugan. Had he actually remembered that? Or had he simply read it on one of these information plaques?

The Asset walked on. He felt rattled, but remained composed, not wanting to draw attention to himself.

Although his mission was to find out information regarding himself and Rogers, he found it oddly difficult to actually force his eyes to take in his surroundings. In some regards, he had absolutely no ideas about anything he was seeing, but in others, there was a niggling kind of recollection — like déjà vu. He wasn’t even sure that he was remembering anything — it was more of a feeling: a dull sense that what he was seeing made him feel... comfortable. But it was oddly displaced — like the things he were seeing were from a half-remembered dream, or a film. Like the life he was getting a feel for wasn’t his own at all, but someone else’s entirely.

That was, until he found himself standing in front of a large, 3-paneled glass partition, staring up at what was very unmistakably a picture of his own face.

‘A Fallen Comrade’ the memorial stated in bold lettering, spanning across two panels of the wall.

Underneath, there again was that name: ‘James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes’.

That’s what Rogers had called him — winded, and pleading, refusing to lift a hand to him on the helicarrier. “Bucky”, he’d been called, and also “Buck”.

So Rogers hadn’t been lying — not about this, at least. This was for sure. This was at least one piece of unmistakable truth he’d been given.

Feeling oddly unfocused and lightheaded, he slowly began to read through the brief epitaphic summary of his life.

And then read through it again.

And again.

Although he was never a particularly verbose man, it was the first time that The Asset could recall that he’d ever felt felt well and truly utterly speechless.

A feeling of raw, unquenchable rage swelled within him.

This had been his life. That had been his history, and his family, and his name, and it had all been stripped away from him like it had never happened.

Now he was nobody. Nothing more than Hydra’s most prized Asset.

The rage turned sour, and he felt it — felt it in his blood like poison as it slowly consumed his body.
He needed something. He needed revenge. He needed to *quench* that sudden insatiable bloodlust. He needed to take measures to ensure that they would never find him again.

He needed to get out of here.

Throwing one last look over his shoulder at the memorial, The Asset clenched both fists inside the pockets of his hoodie.

He’d been born in Brooklyn. He’d start there for more information, and then…

And then, as the very weapon that they’d so scrupulously perfected, piece by unwilling piece, he was going to rip Hydra apart.

Piece by fucking piece.

Chapter End Notes

I know Dum-E was destroyed with the mansion in Iron Man 3, but Tony’s a sentiment softie, and I know in my HEART that he rebuilt him from the salvaged parts.

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4 Days Earlier

He crept along the deserted sidewalk with the paranoid sense that he was being followed.

Of course, he objectively knew that he wasn’t actually being followed. He’d know if he were actually being followed. But the lingering sense that he was always being somehow monitored was a very hard one to shake.

He remembered being told once that constant supervision was a strictly non negotiable part of his missions.

They told him that he’d masterminded an escape, perhaps sometime in the early seventies, which had then resulted in a deep freeze for nearly twenty years. Since then, Hydra had never once let him out of their sight — monitoring him with undercover Hydra agents posing as witnessing civilians, as well as the trackers embedded in his arm. Everything from his position, to his path, to his damn health status were always available and observable through the readings in those devices.

Of course, the trackers had been removed now, so his paranoia was mostly unfounded. Nevertheless, he ducked yet again into another alleyway, emerging out the other side and following along in the same direction as before with only the smallest of glances around to check for suspicious activity.

The buildings were all very old brick structures, with varying-sized garage doors, and sturdy barred windows. With an oddly disjointed sense of familiarity, however, came the distinct feeling that something wasn’t altogether quite right with the place.

Maybe it was the brightly coloured signs and banners along the entrances of every business he walked by, or the young trees planted in single-file lines down the sidewalk, or perhaps the surplus of graffiti littering along practically every upright surface in sight.

He didn’t know exactly where he was. Downtown Brooklyn, perhaps. Maybe the Heights. Either way, he definitely knew that his bus had come off of the Brooklyn Bridge, and that he hadn’t stopped walking since he’d gotten off at the next stop.

Not once had he paused in his stride to contemplate his path or direction, or wonder if he was lost. He just knew. Dragged along by pure instinct. Sense memory, perhaps, and he grew oddly hopeful at the idea, and quickened his pace further.

Taking pause to occasionally weave in and out through open alleyways and remote side streets, he walked nonstop for perhaps a quarter of an hour until coming to a dead halt in front of a large brick building — all thoughts of Hydra surveillance and trackers effectively and instantaneously eradicated from his mind.

He recognised this place.

And not from somewhere dingy and far away either — it was definitely more recent than the murky depths that were the memories of before his time with Zola and Fennhoff.

Slotted between two, much larger, complexes, a tall, narrow apartment building stood, flanked by a
cramped, fenced-in alleyway to its left. The apartment block was old — made from sturdy brick, with an exposed, rickety fire escape that wound along its front (which, if ever used, would most likely be risking more lives than it’d save). It had a black wooden door, and a downright pathetic excuse for a garden penned in by a spiked fence in the front; nothing but a patch of brown, dead plantlife remaining in its bed.

It was completely nondescript; nothing particularly noteworthy or exciting about the place at all, and yet…

He’d been here before. He felt absolutely certain of it — which was saying a lot, as he was certain of practically nothing these days. The Asset stepped forward cautiously, craning his neck upward as if trying to peer through one of the windows on one of the upper-middle floors. The curtains were drawn.

He turned his gaze to the alleyway, at the barbed wire circlets winding along the top of the tall black gate, which had been padlocked shut.

He felt his hands twitch. He’d cut himself on that barbed wire before, on his right hand and shins, some time long ago. He’d been running; running from something horrible — something that wanted to hurt him. In a haste, he’d tried to scrabble over the top of the gate, not caring about the wire, or about the resulting deep gashes in his arm and legs — focusing only on getting away from the voices yelling behind him…

“Stand down, Soldier!” someone shouts at him, raising a gun at shoulder-level in his direction.

“Come quietly!” another man adds, extracting a taser from a pocket on his belt and pointing it at him menacingly. “If you do not comply, we will be forced to manually subdue you — stand down!”

‘Manually subdue’ was always their code word for ‘be as violent as we please’ when taking him out.

He felt desperate, wanting to run, wanting escape…

Before he could stop and think about what the hell he was doing, The Asset reached out with his metal hand and crushed the padlock securing the gate. He threw it carelessly into the garden to his right, and it immediately became lost amongst decaying florae.

He ran the tips of his fingers along the rough brick wall, stepping onward slowly. His brain felt too hot — his skull too tight — as he remembered.

He’d boarded a bus. Several busses. He could have taken a train, but chose not to — preferring the longer journey with easier room for quick escape if needed. He’d come to this place then also — had stood out the front of it for almost an hour before a stranger had confronted him about it — accusing him of being weird. Creepy, they’d called him…

“Stand down!” one of them shouts. They appear to be German.

“Please!” he implores, his defensive position growing weak.

They ignore him. “Stand down!”
They’d been his handlers, The Asset suddenly remembered.

Although they worked under American jurisdiction, the last set of handlers he’d been made to work with were all Russian. He had been ‘owned’ by the main American Hydra base, (aka: Alexander Pierce), of course, but was frequently given out on loan to the highest bidder on international cases. Keeping one set of handlers meant that there would be less of a headfuck when it came to organising which orders were to be listened to, and which ones were to be ignored, as well as keeping in with the habit of keeping The Asset ignorant of how much time had passed between each reanimation.

These ones, however, were German. Which meant that this string of memories was from a time before Pierce was the one calling all the shots.

He’d scrambled away, backing up against the wall and stumbling over his feet, somehow completely without his usual infallible finesse.

They’d tasered him, and he’d seized and jerked and screamed through ground teeth, but he still managed to remain standing.

He took a bullet through the meaty part of his right calf, but still, he remained standing.

They tasered him again, but still, he remained standing.

It wasn’t until one of them cried out the word “Sputnik!” that he’d finally collapsed to the ground, mind suddenly going absolutely blank, and all of the fight draining out of him at once. It was almost painful, how abruptly he’d been made to shut down — it left him exhausted, right to his very core, and he fell unconscious.

When he’d come to, he was in the back of a van, a set of heavy-duty restraints around his legs, arms, and waist — thick, durable steel ones. His metal arm did nothing to budge them, which meant that they’d clearly developed them with him specifically in mind. He may as well have been paralysed.

His handlers had stared at him with a mix of apprehension and confusion.

“Soldier,” one of them said, “explain yourself immediately.”

Bound by the order of answering a direct question, he absolutely would have answered if he could. However, he really did have absolutely no explanation for his actions — couldn’t remember a thing. There was nothing in his mind that he could pick out that hadn’t been anything more than the primal need for freedom. But he didn’t know why he’d left, or where he’d been going — he’d simply let himself be led by pure instinct.

And so he’d said nothing. His handlers looked at one another uneasily, but didn’t ask him again.

Twice now, he’d managed to break free, and both times he’d returned to this place — completely without reason beyond a niggling set of instincts he was unable to place any memories to.

There was nothing special about the place — honestly, the entire building looked completely unremarkable. But this was what he’d come looking for — with or without knowing it. His mission to unravel all of the Hydra bases he could was put on hold for this express reason — he had to follow that nagging sensation, and it had led him here.
He peered upward at the windows stationed single file along each row of apartments. He could climb up there if he really wanted to. Could probably remain covert, even if the current residents were awake inside — stealth was his specialty, after all.

But no, that would be a stupid idea. It was unlikely that the place would be the same as it was when he’d been here last — perhaps not completely renovated, but certainly remodelled, at the very least. There’d been a massive shift in desired home aesthetics in the last few decades, after all, and he was pretty sure he remembered there being a bathtub in the kitchen of the specific apartment he had in mind. Completely impractical nowadays.

Either way, he felt sure that he would find no answers inside, even if he did risk entering. It simply wouldn’t be worth it.

He needed to focus on something more important.

He needed to make a start on a plan.

Five Days Later

He didn’t know why he came back to DC.

He probably shouldn’t have even risked it in the first place. It would have been better — more prudent — to remove himself from any of this entirely; to head east, somewhere where there was looser surveillance and a better chance of keeping himself off the grid entirely. Especially after he threatened and invaded the home of one of the most powerful men in the world.

He stayed in DC.

The second time he chose to visit it, there was a gaggle of high school students at the Smithsonian. Enough pupils to make up perhaps three or four classes, he supposed — some of them in casual wear, others in private school uniforms. One of them was definitely an all-girls school.

He surprised himself with how little he seemed to mind the added traffic to the place. It was easy to remain anonymous in a large crowd if he kept his left hand securely pocketed. The lights inside the Smithsonian, while excellent for making dramatic presentations of their displays, were the kind that glinted off of reflective surfaces far too conspicuously to allow himself to chance taking his hand out into the open.

He felt less on edge this time. He still felt that deep-set urge to flee — to reject what he was seeing and to move on with his mission. But for now, he simply let himself look — allowed himself to actually take in what he was seeing, while ignoring that level of deep-set fear and paranoia he felt during his last visit.

He roamed over each display slowly, trying to take in all of the information he could from each one. Most of it surrounded around the life of Rogers, but The Asset only slightly minded — there were mentions of his name scattered throughout, even from the very beginning of the timeline; hiding in plain sight like little Easter eggs for him to find. It made him wonder just how long he and Rogers had been comrades, even before the war. The displays never offered any information regarding how they met, beyond a simple flyaway statement regarding a schoolyard that he knew was false without even having to remember the specifics.
The Asset wandered about from display to display until he came to the entrance of the room he’d been dreading the most since arriving: the Howling Commandos’ tribute display room. He felt his jaw clench, and his hands curl into fists, still buried in either jacket pocket. He peered up at the sign, and gave a great, calming huff before striding inside, drawing his hat closer over his face with his flesh hand as he went.

There it was again: that grand collection of murals scattering along each wall, blending into one another as it went. He noted that the colourings executed on his own face were very contrasted; rich dark hair and red lips, and he wondered if that was another thing that had changed through his time in Hydra captivity — if his entire body, from his hair to his eyes, were simply dulled after having spent so long underground. He knew he looked waxy and ghoulish — unhealthy — but in that moment, he had to take a second to wonder just how drastic the change had been. Then he wondered if the painters had simply inadvertently exaggerated the natural colour scheme due to lack of colour references — every photograph of him before his capture was, after all, sepia-toned and aged.

“Dude,” he heard the voice of one of the private school girls say in a teasing voice, smirking over at her friend, who stared up at the wall with palpable disinterest.

The girl sucked in air through her teeth, making a noise like she’d been burnt. “Wh-ooof! Sergeant Sexy reporting for duty,” she inclined her head upward at the mural, and saluted it dramatically.

Her friend quirked an amused eyebrow, but the expression of intense boredom didn’t exactly change. “You mean the brunette?” she asked blandly. “Totally. American Armed Forces' Next Top Model.”

The Asset peered up once more at the picture of himself, baffled.

The idea of his former self having a love life wasn’t even something that he’d considered. Did he have a lover? Was he married? His memorial didn’t mention leaving behind a wife, or kids, so he doubted that he’d completely settled down by the time he’d been captured. Perhaps a fiancé though — that certainly seemed plausible.

“… You haven’t said anything this entire time — what about you? Tell us about your family; you got a girl?” a man with burly shoulders and a hairy set of forearms had asked him once.

He couldn’t remember who the man was, or what his response had been.

He surged on, turning quickly on his heel and making yet another beeline toward his memorial.

He read through it again, for perhaps the dozenth time. It wasn’t necessary, really — he’d all but memorised the thing by this point, but still, he read through, trying desperately to somehow extract any kind of new intelligence from what it offered.

There was an abysmal level of information on the thing, really. Nothing more on it than impersonal hogwash regarding his place in the war.

’Barnes’ marksmanship was invaluable as Rogers and his team destroyed Hydra bases and disrupted Nazi troop movements throughout the European Theater.’
He felt his metal fist clench once more inside his jacket pocket.

So it had always been there: that potential for himself to become the Winter Soldier. That merciless talent for murder, all done under the guise of the ‘greater good’; like he was never anything more than a gun for other people to take — to point and shoot at their leisure.

He’d be damned if he’d be reduced to that again.

The Asset hadn’t staggered away from all of that just to be dragged back to ground zero all over again. Hadn’t fought and clawed his way from that life like scrabbling out of debris following an explosion. He couldn’t stand the thought of going back — of being hauled back into that freezing chamber, only to be later thawed out and extracted, tortured, when it suited their needs. To be forced into committing unspeakable acts — and worse, to be forced and muzzled into silence when he objected. No more people would be dying because of his actions.

No innocent people, at least.

Of all of the choices made around him in order for his story to play out like it had, Bucky Barnes had never actually had a choice of his own.

He’d never chosen to go to war — had only responded due to the nation-wide sense of obligation that had been foisted after the attack on Pearl Harbour; his memorial all but said so. He’d never chosen to be infused, infected, with Zola’s toxic serum — had in fact been dragged, kicking and screaming all the way to the surgical tabletop. That much he remembered.

And he had never, ever chosen to become the Winter Soldier.

But one thing he had decided — one thing that he had full autonomy over — was his name. No matter what choices made by others he’d been forced to comply with, the name ‘Bucky’ was one thing that he’d once decided himself. Decided that he wanted to be referred to as.

James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes

That was his name.

That was his name.

And that had been taken from him too.

He stared up at that name, neatly etched into the glass beside his portrait.

No matter what they’d erased from him — no matter what they’d changed, and how he’d been manipulated, this was the one thing — one thing — that they couldn’t take from him. Not again.

He was under no illusions that he could simply just pick up his old life from where he left off. The mere thought of that made his stomach twist — like he was trying to steal the identity of a dead man.

But this was different — this wasn’t about trying to don the mask of the man he used to be; he was merely trying to reclaim a piece of himself — something small, practically insignificant, but weighty all in its own right, because for seventy years he’d had nothing at all to claim for himself in regards to
This, he could do. This, he felt he could reclaim — could decide for himself.

He licked his lips, and in a tentative murmur, he tested it.

“Bucky.”

And that was it. That was him. No longer Hydra’s asset, but the true makings a real person. A person with a name — with tentative foundations now set in place for an identity of his own.

Bucky. Bucky Barnes.

He stared up at the sign once more, and for the first time in nearly 70 years, he gave a small, barely-there ghost of a smile.

As he formulated a plan, squatting in the horrible corners of an uninhabited set of DC apartment buildings, Bucky often found himself gravitating back to the Smithsonian several more times — sometimes after hours, sometimes amongst a crowd.

He was still getting used to calling himself that: Bucky.

After so long without a title, it was often that he had to remind himself that he was no longer completely without identity. He’d ordered coffee from a chain joint a few days ago, just to see if he could — they’d asked his name for the order, and while he knew that it was certainly a bad idea to state his real name if he could avoid it, he felt a wild thrill of pleasure at doing so. Just because he could. Because it was his name.

He never went to the exhibit with the intention of garnering back his old memories. In fact, if he was honest, he held very little interest in the idea of reclaiming his life as it was. It didn’t feel right — still didn’t feel like his.

On his third visit, in that same week, there had been another school outing — another all-girls’ school, as well as two co-ed.

He’d been staring, as was typical, at his own memorial. He didn’t know why he always ended up gravitating back to it — he had, after all, memorised all there was to know on it. Perhaps it was because of the kind of personal tone the monument offered — trying, no doubt, to make its audience feel a semblance of sadness for his passing; however, he suspected that the pity was intended to be more for Rogers’s loss than Barnes’s actual death. Still, he supposed, it offered more personal information than anything else he’d been able to find. All of the old war records he’d been able to find always only offered very minimal material — and it was all cold, impersonal information; little more than his name, date of birth, former residence, and serial number and rank.

*Sergeant Barnes, 32557... 0... Barnes...*

He did, however, manage to discover the name of his younger sister. Old, *old* records scrounged
from the database of an orphanage that had closed in the 1960s, which held details of a brother-sister
duo several years apart in age: James “Bucky” Barnes, and Rebecca “Becca” Barnes.

Although he now had her name, he hadn’t yet attempted to find what had become of her. He was
afraid, he supposed, of what he might find. She could be dead, and he’d’ve truly lost the opportunity
to reconnect with her. Or worse: perhaps she was alive, and he may still never be able to seek her out
and go to her. The mere idea of facing someone who once loved him the way she must have terrified
him. He could never be the man she once knew, and he knew it. Seeing him as he was now would
only cause her more heartache, and it just wasn’t worth it.

His plaque said that he was the eldest of four. He found no information regarding his other two
siblings — didn’t even know what ratio of brothers to sisters he had. The only one he could be sure
of was Becca.

He frowned down at the LCD panel displaying a loop of flickering digital films, obviously originally
taken from back during the war. It displayed one grainy colourless scene after another of himself
with Rogers — undeniable proof of their once close relationship. Bent over a map on the hood of a
transport vehicle, throwing Rogers’s shield back and forth, pulling faces at whoever was behind the
camera, and both of them standing in front of an aged brick wall, shaking their heads and laughing at
some unheard joke.

This was the clip that affected Bucky most of all.

It didn’t inspire memory exactly, but there was a strange kind of tight nostalgia — a hotness centred
in the back of his head — which compelled him to stay rooted to the spot, watching the clips loop
over again to see it just one more time.

He had been so drawn into his appraisal of the memorial that he hadn’t noticed a short girl with curly
brown hair take a place beside him, reading the inscriptions with an intensity almost equal to his
own. She wore a school uniform, and held either hand inside the pockets of her fitted blazer.

“Are you… related to him?” the girl asked tentatively, staring at him with a puzzled kind of look.

Bucky looked at her and said nothing, but drew his eyebrows together, confused.

“Bucky Barnes, I mean. You look an awful lot like him, are you his grandson?” she elaborated.

He shook his head, and swallowed dryly. “No,” he said, “I’m not his grandson.”

Her head tilted in confusion, but before she could ask him any more questions, he had turned on his
heel and strode purposefully away from her, ready to leave.

He’d been recognised — albeit indirectly, but the detection had still been there.

If this teenage girl could recognise him in under a minute, there was a good chance that the other
patrons could recognise him too — more specifically, that the staff would begin to take note of him,
and possibly draw a far more accurate conclusion from his… resemblance than the girl had.

He felt oddly mournful in knowing that he could no longer return to this place, but at the same time,
he knew that he needed the excuse. His curiosity regarding his past was beginning to eclipse his
attention focusing on his primary mission goals, and that was unacceptable. He needed to get on the
road — ideally within the next few days. No point in hanging around, especially since there was
nothing else waiting for him here.

Sparing one more mournful glance over his shoulder to the commemorative display, he took pause at
seeing that flickering LCD panel, which displayed that scene of himself and Rogers laughing together.

He clenched his teeth, and without another word, rounded the corner to leave.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

What's this? Two chapters in two days? Yeah, I have as little patience as the rest of you. Anywho, please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

July 2014

Since the fallout of Shield, and, by extension, Hydra, Tony had once again chosen to keep himself busy and distracted by completely burying himself in his work.

He never doubted for a second that Fury wasn’t really dead — these things always seem to pan out that way. Now involved with Stark Industries, Maria Hill had been focusing her duties around involving herself in ensuring that every remaining Hydra base was eradicated, which began with finding them. No doubt, however much on paper that she was working for Tony, she still only took orders from one man.

Tony, as well as a majority of the Avengers, had also thrown themselves into the same task. Now no longer working under an official government agency, their actions were no longer controlled, dictated, and monitored like chess pieces. The benefits of this were great — no more answering to higher-ups, no more drowning in paperwork every time they so much as wiped their noses, and, of course, no shadowy Hydra underbelly poisoning them from the inside. That was certainly a plus. The drawbacks of no longer working for Shield, however, were certainly more prevalent than ever while trying to work a case like this in particular. For one, they no longer had access to a lot of Shield’s resources and equipment, which turned out to be far more of a pain than Tony had first anticipated. For another, there was a chance that deeper consequences would meet them were they to fuck up. Still, they soldiered on, and as the weeks went on, they slowly but surely managed to make some progress.

It was, however, progress that was made without the help of a few key players; Natasha had still not been seen since her stint on Capitol Hill, basically telling the senate to go fuck themselves, and had since fallen completely off the face of the Earth without any warning. Rogers had too, although he had actually made an effort to remain in contact — reassuring them that he was safe, and (although he said he hadn’t personally seen her since she’d given him a brief farewell after his release from hospital) so was Natasha. However, he refused to divulge any information as to where the hell he was, or even his reasons for leaving in the first place. If Tony was honest, that was what concerned him most: Rogers wasn’t exactly the most open person in the world, but he rarely intentionally kept people in the dark unless he had a damn good reason to.

With half his team missing, and the world shaken by the catastrophe of the Hydra leak, Tony did what he did best: lost hope, and ignored the problem by getting drunk — and then pulled himself together to throw himself into constructing a solution.

The Avengers were only six people. Six people without an agency to guide them. Only three of them had superhuman components that could safeguard against dying on a mission — leaving himself, Clint, and Natasha vulnerable. There could be no argument that they were incredibly skilled at what they did, but there was no avoiding the fact that they weren’t invincible.
Tony was making do with what he could to keep the peace, but the fact of the matter remained that there was simply no way for him to ensure that the help of the Avengers could be accessed even in just North America, let alone the rest of the world.

His answer, when it came to him, was almost anticlimactic in how predictable it was.

His solution to everything was almost always robots.

The past two months, in between conference meetings and regular self-enforced mandatory date-nights with Pepper, had been spent in the lab, working on his newest project. Pepper understood this a lot better than she had when he’d been obsessed with adding and improving on his Iron Man suits — this was a project born out of necessity, rather than obsession. And as long as he didn’t allow it to consume him as projects of this magnitude had before, she gave her tentative blessing for him to get to work.

A suit of armour around the world — that’s what he told everyone. The Iron Legion was a large, expensive, and time-consuming project, but one which yielded quite fulfilling results.

This wasn’t, however, the final step.

He hadn’t told anyone, only Jarvis really knew, but the final step wasn’t the completion of the Iron Legion bots. It was inaugurating them with artificial intelligence.

Winding a screwdriver round the inside of one of his Iron Legion bots, Tony sat at his workbench with the head between his knees, a pencil behind his ear, and two other screwdrivers between his teeth. With a noise that sounded quite disproportionate to how heavy the actual thing was, Tony dumped the head back onto the workbench, and began turning it this way and that, examining it for any obvious faults.

“Sir?” Jarvis interrupted politely, and Tony gave a half-annoyed grunt in response. “Just letting you know, there’s been another sighting of our guest.”

‘Our guest’ was the name the both of them had been substituting for Metal-arm-guy since the day he’d fled the tower — saying it with a surreptitious kind of inflection that, in retrospect, would have fooled nobody were they to overhear. Mostly, they used it less because they wanted to keep their search for him an absolute secret, and more because Jarvis was too dignified to refer to him as ‘Metal-arm-guy’ the way Tony did.

His announcement caught Tony’s attention immediately, and he sat up, spitting out the screwdrivers onto the bench with two resounding clatters amongst spare wiring and circuitry. “Anywhere on our list?” He pushed off from his desk and rolled his chair over to the main computer, at once opening the appropriate file and skimming through his map of predicted locations.

“Affirmative. A Mumbai intelligence agency now believed to be a cover for a leftover HYDRA base was raided, and almost the entire building was destroyed. Externally stored security footage was tampered with, but there was a brief instance of a sighting of a hooded man walking alone along one of the main corridors. In one of the still-frames, it can be partially seen that the man has a metal prosthetic in place of a left hand.”

Tony nodded contemplatively, “definitely sounds like our guy, alright.” He rested one elbow on his bench, and buried his hand in his hair, grasping at the tuft just above his forehead. He sighed deeply, mind whirling at a million miles an hour about several different matters all at once. It was giving him a headache. “Third one this month,” Tony said, mostly to himself, but also to Jarvis. “Our guest’s been real busy, Jarvis.”
“Indeed, sir,” Jarvis replied disinterestedly.

“Any hints on where he might be hitting next?”

“None, sir. Geographically, according to the leaked Hydra files, there is a remaining base in Iran still believed to be under American Hydra jurisdiction that is closest to his last known location.”

Tony sighed. “Which does us diddly-squat, because the guy jumps around like a damn frog hopper. Any surveillance of him leaving the building?”

“None, sir.”

Tony huffed, annoyed. “Clever guy,” he said. “Clever enough to get past my security systems, too. He’s got some real experience sneaking in and out of places — say, have there been any break-ins at the Smithsonian by any chance? Hope Diamond still in tact and where it should be?”

Jarvis ignored this. “To be fair, sir, since you were still in the building at the time of said breech, security wasn’t at its maximum capacity.”

“No need to stroke my ego here, Jarvis. It’s not like he took anything but my dignity.”

“Nothing we didn’t have a surplus of already then, sir,” Jarvis said dryly.

Tony smirked, and lent back in his chair to appraise the file thoughtfully.

There was very, very little information to be collected on the Winter Soldier. Everything Tony had managed to put together was either generalised assumption, or straight-up rumour. The leaked Hydra/Shield files were truly useless in this case — providing absolutely nothing beyond the occasional reference to “The Asset”, and a bunch of redacted information. If Tony found one more page of blacked-out writing, he was going to scream.

He leaned back further in his chair and looked back over to the gleaming metal head sitting on his workbench. He exhaled heavily. “Keep me posted, Jarvis,” he said, and with that, minimised his current window and rolled in his chair back over to the bench.

“Of course, sir.”

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September 2014

“Third one this month,” Sam said, leaning back in his chair and staring at his laptop screen with a sigh. “Hasn’t been on a streak like this since July.”

“Any hints on where he’s headed next?” Steve said, pointedly ignoring Sam’s defeatist tone of voice.

“Absolutely none. There’s nothing — not even a smidge of surveillance footage of him entering or leaving the building. The guy’s a damn ghost, Steve.”

Steve tapped his thumb against his lips contemplatively. “Would it be worth it to go see the scene for ourselves? Maybe he left something behind — a clue, or a message, or something?”

“Steve, the man’s probably halfway across the world by now. More to the point, we’re halfway
across the world right now — by the time we get back to the US, they’ll already have cleaned everything up and we’d still be right back where we started. It’s probably for the best if we just hang tight for a little while longer, he’s bound to come to this base eventually.”

For the past three weeks, Sam and Steve had been hoveled up in a dingy motel by a Hydra base in Moscow. It had taken them a little while to work out the exact location of said base, as a lot of the information leaked in Hydra’s files was blacked out and redacted due to region-specific classifications, but if they could work it out, there was no doubt that the Winter Soldier could as well. Especially if he was as thoroughly hell-bent on murderous revenge as he seemed to be.

“No,” Steve said, “Not if he knows we’re here, he won’t. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that he always ends up halfway across the world when we manage to catch up a little. He’s avoiding us.”

Sam pursed his lips. “Maybe. We don’t know that for sure. It might not be us he’s running from.”

He didn’t know which idea was worse.

In the time they’d spent together since he’d taken up temporary refuge in Sam’s apartment and then led him on a worldwide manhunt for a once-dead supersoldier, there were a few things about Steve Rogers that Sam had realised:

1. The pedestal on which Captain America was upheld to was one that no human being could sustain indefinitely. Steve was many of the things the idea of Captain America represented, and he shouldered it well, but nobody was flawless. Sam’s blood boiled at the thought of how much pressure Steve had been put under to maintain that spotless public persona, and the kind of guilt Steve therefore associated in straying from it.

2. Years of being the weakest person he knew had fashioned Steve into a man who substituted physical strength with mental. He was stubborn — perpetually ready to strike out if provoked, and didn’t like to talk about his problems. In Steve’s mind, problems were associated with weaknesses, and it took a lot to coax him out of that mindset (unless, Sam figured out, it was the 1940s, and you were Bucky Barnes).

3. Steve had more of a martyr complex than anyone Sam had ever met. It came with the territory of being a soldier, and a team leader. Steve often equated unloading his problems onto someone as being the same as literally doing so; that if he did, it was the same as forcing the other person to share his burden.

But if there was one thing Sam could say about himself with absolute certainty, it was that he was a good listener.

It was a quality he’d had even before becoming a therapist; his mother had suffered a myriad of mental health issues, and while she functioned well, and was an excellent mother to him and his brother and sister, it was often that she would become overwhelmed and needed someone to talk to. Sam never minded — he liked listening.

He’d always had a naturally calming effect on people. His mother said it was because he had a ‘non-intrusive soul’ — people could feel comfortable interacting with him without feeling pressured to talk about more than they wanted to share — and if he was honest, it was kind of awesome that he was able to make people feel better without doing much at all.

When they talked to him seeking advice, he gave it (and while Sam didn’t like to brag, he gave some pretty damn good advice). But when it came to Steve, the man never really sought advice. In fact, he never spoke much at all, really.

Sam was a good listener. But he was also a therapist.
When three days of searching for the Winter Soldier stretched into three months, Sam watched as Steve’s hopefulness began to dwindle; withering away more and more with each empty place they searched. He began to talk to Sam.

Sam had initiated it; thinking that it would do Steve a lot of good to remind himself why he was subjecting himself to this kind of hellish mission in the first place.

Sam had nudged him lightly with his hip. “Hey,” he gave him an easy smile, “what was he like?”

For the first time in ages, Steve’s face had split into an almighty grin. “He was an asshole,” he said affectionately. “I mean, I was too, but Bucky could probably rival Tony with how much of an asshole he could be. Couldn’t take anything serious in his life — always cracking jokes to try and lighten the mood when the rest of us were miserable.”

Sam nodded. “Did he have younger siblings?”

“Oldest of four.”

“Yeah, it’s a big brother thing.”

After that, it became easier for Steve to talk. Every other night or so, Steve would come out at random with some new kind of thought, or theory, or, most often, a memory, regarding Bucky Barnes. Small, wistful things at first; whimsical little nothings that Steve focused on as he tried keep his hopes alive:

“His favourite candies were Gumdrops — the red ones.”

“He would always tease his littlest sister about having a crush on me. I dunno if she ever actually did, but she would punch him so hard in the arm whenever he brought it up”

“When he was thirteen he saved up his pay from the paper route for weeks so that he could buy my mom a bunch of flowers for her birthday — right before he and his little sister were adopted. They were nice ones — lilies, I think.”

“He’s the one who got me into the habit of morning runs — before I went in for my first enlistment, Bucky tried his damnedest to get me fit for training. Busted my ass, too — I’ve never been so sore for so long in my life, not even through basic. Wasn’t enough in the end though, I still got a 4F. Five of them, actually.”

Truth be told, Sam still had a lot of difficulty placing these light-hearted anecdotes to that stoic, haggard, and deadly image of the Winter Soldier. He still refused to call him ‘Bucky’, even in his own head, because really, Bucky…

Eventually though, the stories turned heavier. As time dragged on, and dead leads only turned into more dead leads, Steve’s hopes began to dwindle more and more, and that crushing guilt and anxiety that had been steadily building began to show.

“I should have noticed something was wrong after Zola…”

“There were signs. Afterwards, I mean. Little things, like how all of his old clothes suddenly became too small, and how much better his vision had gotten — was probably why his kill-streak was so impressive. Never missed a shot, not once.”

“I should have noticed, especially after he started drinking more. At the time, I thought it must have been because of the trauma — that he had shellshock or something. It never occurred to me that he
This was the only time Sam really saw Steve’s urgent desperation manifest itself and bleed through his determined optimism. Those tiny moments of sheer, thoughtless honesty — speaking as if he weren’t really addressing Sam at all, but rather just voicing those thoughts aloud, keeping them from being bottled up inside his head too long.

Sam understood this, and he always listened in politely, pausing whatever he was doing in order to give Steve his undivided attention. While he was undoubtedly glad that Steve was allowing himself to voice his feelings, it was through an unspoken agreement that he tended to keep his opinions on these matters to himself — understanding that his advice in these situations wasn’t necessarily needed, however much it pained him to watch Steve grow more and more anguished as time stretched further and further along without any sign of his former best friend.

No, what Steve needed wasn’t advice, but rather, someone to merely hear him out — to provide a comforting presence to be spoken at. A sympathetic, understanding, and impartial ear.

That was, until the five-and-a-half month mark of their expedition.

Steve had been fidgeting with a frayed corner of his shirt for going on six minutes — biting his lip and opening and closing his mouth over and over again, as if he were trying to work himself up to speak, only to chicken out at the last second.

“The night before Zola’s retrieval mission…” Steve eventually said. He bit his lip, as if wondering whether or not to continue, “before Bucky fell…”

Sam looked up from his book expectantly, keeping one fingertip at the paragraph he was up to and waiting patiently for Steve to continue.

Steve wasn’t meeting his eye, which wasn’t exactly usual of these little flashbacks, except this time he looked oddly… embarrassed? Sam supposed that was the right word — Steve’s shoulders were set strangely stiff, and his cheeks were stained pink. If Sam didn’t have on his ‘understanding therapist friend’ persona at that moment, he probably would have been teasing him for it.

Steve swallowed. “He… he kissed me. Bucky.”

Now, even when applying to special cases like Steve, there was a lot Sam could handle. He was a professional, after all — he didn’t condone gossip, nor did he particularly enjoy partaking in it. Usually, he would have absolutely zero issues sitting down and shutting up — he was a therapist after all. He could keep his mouth shut.

But, as it turns out, there was a finite limit to even Sam’s unending patience, and if anyone was to ever find that line and cross it, of course it had to be Steve.

Unconcerned with losing either the page or paragraph of his book, Sam snapped it shut and set it aside, leaning forward with elbows on his knees and staring at Steve with his full and thirsting interest.

Yes, Sam Wilson was an excellent therapist, and a very good friend, but he was human goddamn it.

“He kissed you? Barnes? As in-?”

Steve’s shoulders awkwardly rounded in even further, and he continued to not meet Sam’s eyes. “We were arguing about the mission… he kept saying that the whole thing felt like a trap, but I wouldn’t listen. He said I was being reckless, that I was taking too many risks…”
Sam eagerly leaned in further.

Steve quirked a humourless smile. “You know, at first I thought he was going to hit me? Usually, Bucky and I never hit each other, no matter how mad we were. Never in the face, either, not once, but this time I thought I’d pushed it too far — pushed him too far. He grabbed me by the front of my shirt and,” he swallowed, “but he didn’t hit me. He…” Steve trailed off pointedly.

“You mean instead of laying into you, he laid one on you?” Sam guessed with a juvenile smile.

Steve paused, looking self-conscious, “I never expected… I mean, I didn’t…” he gave a steadying exhale and trailed off, looking as though he wished he’d never brought it up in the first place.

“And…?” Sam prompted after a moment of waiting for Steve to continue.

Steve blinked. “And what?”

“Did you kiss him back?”

Steve’s gaze snapped up to Sam’s in surprise, looking genuinely alarmed at the question. He swallowed, averted his gaze again. “I guess I… for a moment?” He looked tense, and Sam felt a sudden stab of sadness, remembering just what kind of environment Steve had woken up from. “I… pushed him away.”

“Why?” Sam asked, not demanding — just curious.

Steve shook his head. “I didn’t know what to think — what to take of it. I was… confused.” He finished lamely. “He told me that it was a mistake, told me to drop it.” Steve’s jaw clenched, and he looked at once filled with a dreadful kind of grief. “After that, I just didn’t want to argue with him anymore. Didn’t think our relationship could handle any more strain than it was already under, so I folded — I agreed to compromise on the plan. Bucky wanted to stick with me, to keep me safe… and in the end…” he trailed off, and with a dawning realisation, Sam already gathered the remaining gist of that story.

“Steve…” Sam said gently, “it wasn’t your fault.”

“You know, people keep telling me that,” Steve said, “but it was my fault he was on that cart with me. My fault that he took that blast, and that he fell. If I’d just taken my head out of my ass for twelve seconds, maybe I’d’ve thought it through more. Played it safe.”

“Steve.” Sam said firmly, “since when have you played it safe?”

Steve looked up.

Sam scooted his chair forward and leaned back into his ‘therapist’ stance: one leg crossed over the other, hands folded in his lap. “You and me both know you were never going to back out of that plan. And I’ll bet that nobody knew that as well as Barnes did either. I mean, you’re not exactly the most ‘ask first, shoot later’ kind of guy. Hell, most of the plans you come up with are stupid, and reckless, and dangerous as hell. But they all work, Cap.”

Steve grimaced.

“And you know that I read Barnes’s file too. They’d been planning this project since before you were even enlisted. Without you, they’d have had him from the day they had his unit in that POW camp. Whether he fell off that train or not, odds are he probably would have ended up right where he is now — but don’t forget that right now, because of you, what he is is alive. Alive and free.”
Steve sighed sadly. “What happened to him not being someone you save?”

“Honestly?” Sam shrugged, “I’m still not a hundred percent sure that he is. But I do know one thing: whether he’s beyond help or not, he still saved you that day on the helicarrier. That doesn’t sound like something someone would do if they were beyond help. And whether this road trip of his is for revenge, or justice, or redemption, or whatever, I say the guy’s pretty entitled to it.” Sam shrugged again, “I reserve my final judgement until we find him. We’ll get a beer.”

Steve smiled at the ground.

Sam cleared his throat. “So… that kiss?” Steve rolled his eyes at his graceless segue back into that topic. “You think you ever felt that way about him? The way he felt for you?”

Steve sighed, and once again looked like he wished he’d never brought it up. He shook his head. “Honestly Sam, I have no idea. With the war, and the mission, and Peggy back at base… I figured that we’d get around to talking about it eventually, so I didn’t push. I thought there was all the time in the world. I thought we had all the time in the world.”

Sam inclined his head, “And now?”

“Now, Bucky doesn’t remember a thing about me.” Steve frowned.

“That’s not what I meant — I meant now you’ve had time to think. Do you know what you’d have said to him if you had the chance to speak?”

Steve cocked an amused eyebrow, “that’s some sneaky therapy you’ve snuck in here, Sam.”

Sam smirked, “just answer the damn question.”

Steve sighed again, sparing a longing glance to the minifridge in their shitty kitchenette, no doubt wishing for a drink. “There were… factors. I was in love with Peggy. I was a national icon — we both were. If we’d been caught, we’d’ve been stripped of our ranks and each given blue discharges.”

“You really think they wouldn’t’ve just covered it up?”

“Maybe. Can’t be sure. Either way, I still don’t really know if that’s something I would’ve wanted.”

“Do you love him?”

Steve looked annoyed. “I just said I-”

“No, no, I don’t necessarily mean in a romantic way, just… do you love him?”

Steve gave a huff, and flushed again. “Of course I do,” he said unquestionably.

“Then, for now, I think that’s all that matters. Like you said, he doesn’t remember you. You’ve got plenty of time to figure out what you want — we haven’t even found the guy yet. Rebuilding your relationship with him is going to be tough enough as it is without you having to worry about complicating it further.”

“Baby steps?” Steve said.

“Baby steps,” Sam confirmed, and then: “but if anything like that happens again when we all get back, you call me straight after, you hear?”

“Didn’t take you for a gossip, Sam,” Steve said, mock scandalised.
“I wasn’t before I met you. You and your entire group of friends are nothing but drama, it’s like living inside of an action movie crossed over with a soap opera crossed over with a romantic comedy.” He shook his head. “Fuckin’ superheroes, man.”

“Fuckin’ superheroes,” Steve agreed.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

January 2015

Truth was, it was by complete accident that he happened to stumble upon perhaps one of the only remaining Hydra bases in the world.

The last base he’d taken out had been back in October — the last in a string of four that month. It had been a small, underground operation — a weapons development base most likely, with only several dozen members working there.

Since then, he’d been at a loss. Finding the locations of the bases was a real endeavour on his part, mostly done so through a mixture of educated guesswork in scouring through what he could in the Hydra files, and the lingering memories regarding the locations of neighbouring international bases he was sent off to in his time working as Hydra’s assassin — when his abilities were loaned out and auctioned off to the highest bidder. But his memories only supplied him with the roundabout locations of thirteen of these international headquarters; and now, nine months later, he’d well and truly exhausted that supply.

Bucky had neither the money nor the means to own his own computer in order to access more of Hydra’s leaked files online, and anyway, he was trying to stay as far off the radar as possible. Even if he did choose to have access to said files, it was still terabytes of data. He didn’t own or even have access to the kind of software that was necessary to accurately sift through that kind of information. When he knew what he was looking for, it was simpler, but now...

His best (and possibly only) option at this point would probably be to pay Stark another visit. But that had been risky enough the first time he’d done it — attempting to repeat the action again now that Stark was aware that Bucky could break past his security systems would be downright careless. Not to mention that before his first break in, he hadn’t been aware that Stark and Rogers were acquainted. He’d already avoided being intercepted by Rogers in Moscow once; he didn’t altogether relish the idea of doing it again by providing him with his exact location.

And anyway, as the months stretched on, it became starkly apparent that he didn’t actually need to go searching for the bases anyway. The remnants of Shield, led by Tony Stark and several other members of the Avengers Initiative, had taken it upon themselves to do exactly what Bucky was doing: taking down every last remaining base that they could uncover beneath the woodwork. So far, Shield had been responsible for seven of the twenty bases that had been blown to kingdom come over the past nine months.

Rogers had been tellingly absent from their actions.

Three months had since passed without any more activity from the Winter Soldier — no doubt his trail had run so cold by now that it may as well never have existed in the first place. He had to give Rogers credit for one thing though: the man was stubborn as hell. His companion, too.

Since his elegant disposal of the Moscow base in October, done with an illegally obtained collection of high-intensity explosives, Bucky had had naught to do but to remain alone with his thoughts for three long months. He planned ahead for his next attacks on Hydra in hopes of uncovering any more bases, and he took care of himself physically as best he could with the limited resources he was able
to scrounge up, but the truth was that without a substantial supply of suitable information as to where to move onto next, he was beginning to flounder — alone, and once again without purpose.

And then, of course, there were the memories.

He understood now why Hydra had wiped him after every mission — why they’d kept him on ice when he wasn’t needed: the longer he was out, the more his memories began to return. He suspected that it had something to do with the serum — that the continuous regenerative healing it provided didn’t just apply to his body, but also his brain. He doubted very much that he would ever fully recover from Hydra’s periodic invasive ‘recalibrations’, but it was almost alarming to behold the increasingly progressive rate of which he was regaining memories of himself as time went on.

It also alarmed him to realise just how many of these memories involved Rogers.

After several weeks of moping about in Russia by himself, waiting for a new piece of information to spring up, he began to travel. At first, he didn’t have a clue where he was leading himself, however as he travelled deeper and deeper into Europe, he eventually came to realise that the roads along which he travelled were ones that he actually had seen before. He remembered wearing a thick blue coat — his coat — and being accompanied by a small group of big men whom he recognised from the murals at the Smithsonian. They’d travelled these paths before, on their missions. Some had changed a lot — becoming barely recognisable underneath all the change fashioned by time — while others remained surprisingly similar. But throughout every route he took, there was always something that he managed to recognise, however faintly it was.

He’d stolen cars back then, too.

Granted, they had all been Nazi transport vehicles, and therefore felt far more justified in stealing than those of random civilians like he was now, but he reasoned that in this day and age he wasn’t really doing more than severely inconveniencing someone. He couldn’t steal any of the cars found at Hydra bases — there was too high a risk of them being tracked — but he made sure that he was careful in the selection of these ones. Never anything too fancy, which could be easily recognised, but never anything too shabby that he would run the risk of stealing from an owner who did not have insurance to cover theft.

He felt rotten stealing from undeserving people, but if it meant not having to take the train, he was willing to do anything.

It was always the first of his memories to come back: the day he died. Three to four days out of the ice, every time, and it would come back to him — that howling of wind, the squeal of metal shredding, an explosion, the sounds of chugging wheels, his own screams filling his ears…

All it ever took were the sounds of a train running against its tracks for the hairs on the back of his neck to stand on end. He’d be damned if he willingly returned to one if it meant experiencing a flashback, especially if it meant potentially harming a civilian during one of his episodes.

And so he stuck to long bus rides, and stolen cars, and long, long days of endless walking. His boots were well and truly fucked by now; he’d have to remind himself to steal a new pair before he entered the next city.

He was in Bavaria, at the edge of a forest surrounding what he knew to be the ruins of a blown-apart castle, which had once housed the lab of Arnim Zola.

He wondered if it would have been torn down by now — or perhaps rebuilt, as a tribute to its historical significance. No doubt a castle that old had a rich history that stemmed out further than
pseudo-Nazi invasion.

It was a surprise, then, when he heard the telltale sound of a bullet sinking into snow beside his feet, and the subsequent explosion of dirt and slush that rained over his shitty boots as a consequence.

He snapped to action at once, diving behind a tree and executing every manoeuvre he knew in order to throw off a searching long-distance attacker.

His backpack was dropped, spilling tinned non-perishables all over the ground, and he sighed mournfully at the sight of another bullet hitting one, blasting beans across the snow.

“You assholes better have food stocks,” Bucky squared himself up and moved onward.

As he darted through the trees, it became clear that it was not a sniper shooting at him, but rather a motion-sensing firing tower — crude security for whoever was unauthorised for entry, aka: wearing either a vest or wristband that the sensors knew to skip over. This was not a defence that was commonly used in the 1940s, even by an organisation as technologically advanced as Hydra was, which meant that this had to be a recent addition to the territory.

Which meant that this place was most likely still under use by modern Hydra.

“Fuckin’ Nazis…” Bucky said through gritted teeth.

Taking the unmanned tower out was simple enough, but it did mean sacrificing one of his remaining cherry grenades. His previous uniform had been a Swiss army knife of hidden weaponry, but now, he was confined to keeping only the basics: the smallest of what he could carry without being too conspicuous. The grenades he’d walked away from the helicarrier with were all he had — it wasn’t like he could go back to Hydra and ask them to restock his supply. He’d actually been pretty impressed with himself that after nine months alone on the road, he’d only had to use three of his stock of six — but now, of course, only two remained.

The tower went up with a downright satisfying explosion of snow and debris, and as it did, Bucky immediately lunged toward the nearest tree, certain that the destruction of such a defence would trigger a silent alarm. When the expected battalion of men in heavy SWAT gear and arms didn’t come marching into the clearing after several minutes, Bucky relaxed marginally, but still felt confused.

He moved onward, darting from tree to tree until he was sure that there were no more towers to be taken out on his path to the castle. He spared a moment to wonder exactly why that line of defence had been so poorly backed up, only to come to the edge of the forest and see exactly why: a great canyon was split between the forest and the enormous stone castle.

On first glance, he realised that he had been wrong about at least one thing: the castle had very much not been rebuilt since he’d first visited it in 1945. In fact, it somehow looked worse-off than how he’d left it all those years ago.

He stared at the building contemplatively for another few minutes, feeling a strange sort of niggling in the back of his mind, before an abrupt explosion went off behind his eyes, and he fell to his knees with a cry.
cheering comes to an abrupt halt when a final explosion triple the size and force that they were expecting blows apart the entire right side of the castle, igniting the sky with burning orange flames. The three men duck behind their arms to shield themselves from the heat of the subsequent blast wave, and at once Bucky feels an almighty coldness within his chest. They right themselves slowly, staring out at the heap of burning rubble across the valley. Bucky can tell that they’re all thinking the same thing, and for several moments, none of them dare to speak.

Eventually, however, it’s Falsworth who breaks the silence. “If Rogers… was still in there…” he says uncertainly.

“He got out,” Bucky replies with a false bravado, not letting any of that raw panic he was feeling to seep out into his tone. Confidence is key — don’t lose all hope until something is confirmed, don’t lose all hope until something is confirmed, don’t lose-

“Buck…” Dugan says uncertainly, like he’s preparing himself to deliver hard news to a small child, “that explosion took out the whole side of the mountain. You should prepare yourself for the possibility that-”

“He got out!” Bucky snaps, far less composed this time around. Dugan swallows, nods once, and stares back at the ground shamefacedly, not saying another word.

For several long, long, long minutes, they stare in silence at the smoke billowing from the mouth of the explosion point. Bucky’s eyes scan furiously over the terrain the entire time, looking for any sign of life he can — a shift of movement, or a flash of blue, or the sound of… well, anything. Anything at all. As the seconds drag on longer and longer, Bucky’s chest begins to constrict — his lungs failing to inflate the whole way. His blood turns colder and colder, and he tries and fails to take in a deep calming breath.

For another moment, the terrible thought begins to blossom in his head that he may actually need to start taking Dugan’s advice, until-

“There!” Bucky cries, pointing toward a bulky blue shape emerging from the smoke not far from where they stand. Steve, battered, dirty, and exhausted-looking, walks toward them with a grim kind of expression on his face. He has that disappointed look about him that suggests that not everything went exactly according to plan, but Bucky can’t care less — he’s alive. He’s alive.

Bucky claps his hands together, resuming his whooping and cheering right alongside the other two men as he jogs over to Steve, ready to either punch him right in his stupid face, or kiss him right on his stupid lips.

“Well done, Rogers!” Falsworth says.

“Never doubted for a second,” Dugan lies good-naturedly.

When Bucky reaches him, he unthinkingly throws both arms around Steve’s neck, and he squeezes him gratefully, as tight as he can. “You did it, Cap!”

Steve gives him a relieved squeeze back, but appears too tired to show quite the same amount of enthusiasm as Bucky. “The POWs?” he asks.

Bucky releases him. “In the forest — we got ‘em all out.”

“Then you did it,” Steve smiles, “you got those men out — you saved their lives.”
He then proceeds to drone on with another one of his ‘morale speeches’, talking about their actions being fundamental keys to winning the war, how important the power of friendship and teamwork is or whatever; well done team, yadda, yadda, yadda. In truth, Bucky doesn’t hear a word of it — too engrossed in staring at Steve with complete reverence, relieved to the point that it almost brings him to his knees with how grateful he is that Steve is okay — that he’s alive, that he’s miraculously completely unhurt.

When he tunes back in, Dugan certainly looks very pleased with himself — chest puffed out like a preening peacock — and Falsworth is smiling at his shoes. Steve always did have a way with words — it’s really only too bad that Bucky’s completely aware that he’s mostly full of shit.

“Come on then,” Steve says, clapping a hand on Bucky’s shoulder and walking them into the forest, “let’s get these men home…”

Bucky jolted back from the memory with a feeling not unlike having a bucket of ice water dumped over him. He gasped, bringing both hands to either side of his head as if to physically hold his brain together as it seemed to swell more and more — more than his skull could physically contain.

The splitting pain of it aside, the recollection itself rattled him; in all of the memories that had returned to him so far, he’d never once experienced a flashback unrelated to his fall that was so vivid before.

When he opened his eyes, he half expected his vision to be blurred, and to feel an overwhelming sense of vertigo, however, when he did so, he seemed to be fine. Aside from the residual feeling of throbbing and severe overheating on the inside of his brain, he felt absolutely normal.

His hands and feet still shook as he righted himself out of the snow, but that was mostly from shock. He dusted off his knees with dignity, and stared back at the castle, breathing deep.

It appeared that the only way in or out without attempting to leap across the crevice like an idiot was to cross a narrow bridge on the far-east side, and to then be granted access from whoever was on the inside. It wouldn’t be such a big deal if he had some kind of aircraft to carry him to the roof, as he could then access the place from above. But then, that was probably where all of the security was actually concentrated.

Bucky fondled his two remaining cherry grenades contemplatively, but ultimately decided that there were stealthier ways to enter the building besides blowing a bigger hole in it after crossing the bridge.

Security this lax meant that this was likely not a hugely occupied facility — newly reinhabited, or (most probably) one of Hydra’s smaller science facilities. Bucky had only taken two of those out in the past nine months: the base in Moscow, and a tiny settlement in France. That too had been lacking in defence, although that had been far, far smaller than this downright gargantuan monstrosity of a building.

He counted and recounted his accessible weaponry, spied around for anything else he’d missed around the perimeter of the canyon, and moved onward.

The entire facility, it turned out, was not inside the castle itself, but instead underground, inside of the mountain. Getting in turned out to be the easy part — once he was across the bridge, there was a large courtyard stretching around the place which allowed stealthy one-man access to inside the
castle through many points. Once inside, Bucky recollected the path he’d taken in order to free the POWs from their confinements, and by extension, found the entryway into the underground labs through a secret door inside what was once Zola’s main lab.

In regards to this base, he was mostly correct about it having been a scientific development and research facility, however, once inside, it was far more heavily guarded than he’d first assumed.

Mowing through the armed agents was something he was used to — had been trained to do, and to do well, for over fifty years now. It gave him a cold, cruel sense of pleasure to be using Hydra’s greatest weapon against them. Taking them out hadn’t been especially difficult, but it sure as shit wasn’t exactly easy either. He’d had to resort to stealing their own weapons off of their bodies, unconscious or dead, in order to preserve ammunition, which was a crude thing to do — he’d always hated being forced to do it.

“To think I started off just wanting to have a look around the place,” he said irritably, dragging his gunstrap over his chest and securing a rifle to his back.

There were four levels to the facility, each with denser security the lower he travelled. Eventually though, he managed to empty the building; killing most of the agents, however, uncaring of the many who managed to safely evacuate. It made no difference — the building was going to be destroyed with or without them in it, the cowards. Either way, there would be no base to return to.

When it came to destroying a Hydra base, there wasn’t exactly a set system in place for doing so. Mostly he just did what he did best: which was to kill everyone in sight, showing no mercy. Following this, he would then destroy their computer systems beyond repair, so that any secrets that had managed to slip through the cracks of the Hydra leak would be lost, along with most if any of the surveillance footage they’d managed to capture of him entering the building.

His favourite method by far, however, was when he got to blow them the fuck up.

Bases he got to do this to were only ever the ones that were stationed in the middle of nowhere, such as the one he’d taken out in France. If there were any chance at all that the demolition could cause civilian casualties, it was an immediate disqualifier, so he sadly didn’t get to do it very often — Hydra bases were usually hiding in plain sight in the middle of a city, after all. But a secret base on a secluded mountain, in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but empty forest for miles around in every direction? Conditions couldn’t be more perfect if they tried.

His plan had all been going great, until he’d rounded a corner on the lowest level of the facility, coming face to face with something that made his entire plan come to a screeching halt.

Though they clearly had those dark, golden undertones typical of an ethnic complexion, their skin looked pale, and waxy. The girl was thin — almost dangerously so; her dark eyes bulged from her head, and her stark cheekbones cut a dark shadow across her face. The boy looked no better — with scraggly, overgrown hair, and a shabby beard. While he looked almost as muscular as Bucky did, it didn’t do anything to make him look any healthier — too much muscle straining under not enough skin. Underfed. Both looked no older than nineteen.

The girl hung limply from iron shackles bolted to the wall — on her knees, with both of her thin wrists suspended above her head. She wasn’t unconscious, but she did look as if she were almost completely detached from reality — staring at Bucky with an almost awed kind of look on her face, pupils blown out wide. The boy was crouched low in his cell, kneeling down to her level with both hands pressed up against the glass. He spoke to her in a hushed whisper, pleading, in what sounded like Bulgarian.
When she continued to not respond to him, he looked up at Bucky frenziedly.

“My sister,” he beseeched, in heavily accented English. His arms and legs twitched and jerked, apparently involuntarily, as if they were trying to detach themselves from the rest of his body. Bucky wondered if he was having a kind of fit, or possibly going through withdrawal.

Because that’s what these kids were, he realised with an awful dawning sensation: lab rats. Test subjects for experimental Hydra drugs, exactly as Bucky had been.

He wondered if this was yet another attempt at recreating Erskine’s serum.

He felt that immense loathing he felt for Hydra immediately reignite, almost to the point where it made him feel nauseous. His blood boiled in his veins, and he had to close his eyes for a few seconds in order to steady himself again.

They were kids. They were just fucking kids.

He exhaled heavily; taking his hands off of his offensive weapon to sling it round to his back again.

He moved toward the girl slowly, trying to see if his movement would trigger anything in those dark eyes, but no. She remained limp and listless, staring into space as if she were merely sleeping with her eyes open. He crouched by her, nearly at eye level, and reached out a hand as if to touch her, but paused, reconsidering.

“What’s her name?” he asked her brother gruffly.

The boy opened his mouth to answer, but snapped it closed instead, eyeing Bucky with a look of wary distrust.

Bucky admired the initiative this boy had in not trusting anybody, but they didn’t really have the time for this right now — odds were that the escaped Hydra operatives had called in for some kind of backup by now, and he needed to get out of here. “Her name,” he snapped, levelling the boy with a serious look.

The boy didn’t look entirely convinced it was a good idea, but answered anyway. “Wanda. Her name is Wanda.”

Bucky put his flesh hand on Wanda’s shoulder, trying to coax her attention. He gave her a gentle shake, “Wanda.”

Her eyes cleared, but only marginally. He tried again, this time gently grasping her by the chin to look into his face. “Wanda, can you hear me? Do you understand me?”

She blinked, and those dark eyes seemed to focus on his face enough to make him believe he had her attention.

“What’s her name?” Bucky asked.

She opened and closed her mouth a few times before managing to give an answer. “I… I can hear… yes…”

Bucky wanted to make it easier on her by speaking in Bulgarian, but unfortunately it was one of the few European languages he actually wasn’t completely proficient in.

“Are you okay?” he said, because there wasn’t much else he could think to ask.
She swallowed thickly, “I am… I’m fine.”

“They shot at her with big iron balls,” the boy said venomously, twitching fists still resting on the glass of his enclosure, “they fired them at her with a machine — different weights and speeds, to see what she could do.”

Bucky felt an itching kind of instinct to immediately begin checking her over for injury, but he couldn’t properly do so without lifting up her dress, which he certainly wasn’t going to do. “Are you badly hurt? Do you think you can walk?”

“I… Perhaps. Do you have a key?” he ratted at her shackles. Her skinny wrists looked badly bruised, and Bucky frowned at them unhappily.

“Give me a second,” he said, and stood back up to face the great glass wall separating her and her brother. “Stand back,” he told him shortly.

The boy looked at him as if he’d just asked him to do a cartwheel. “What are you going to do, try and break the glass? The glass is indestructible — not even bullets can—”

“Stand back,” Bucky repeated sharply.

The boy raised both hands in surrender, taking six large steps backwards, and looking very doubtful. Once he was sure that the boy was far enough away, he reared back his metal fist and swung it forward, punching clean through the glass exterior, and shattering a large hole in it. The boy looked positively dumbfounded — a look that only grew more pronounced as Bucky gripped a handful of the remaining wall and yanked it toward himself, pulling apart the glass to make a hole large enough for the boy to easily fit through.

Although barefoot, the boy spared no second in darting through the hole at once, stepping over thick shards and gritty powdered glass — however, when he did so, it was at a speed Bucky had never in his life seen before. He took a step back in alarm, feeling a cool breeze of air rush into his face as the boy passed, hastening to his sister’s side at once.

He cradled her face in his hands gingerly, as if afraid of hurting her more, and she smiled at him adoringly.

Bucky’s brain burned again.

“Bucky, get off me, I’m fine!” a girl with dark hair and blue eyes snaps, batting his hands away from her face.

Bucky, of course, ignores this, and continues his fussing by grabbing at her arms for inspection. Any more scrapes or bruises that he finds will equal another tooth that he’s going to knock out of the face of whoever did this.

“Who did it?” he demands to know, looking her right in the eyes.

She sighs, rolling said eyes grandly. “Nobody,” she tells him grumpily, “Just a couple’a boys from 10th. All they did was push me down — didn’t hit me or nothin’.”

“I don’t care if they only looked at you funny,” he says in a growl, “those punks are going down.”
“I’m fine, Bucky! And anyway, Steve already took care of them.”

This doesn’t surprise Bucky even a little bit, “I’ll bet he did. I’ll bet that’s also why I haven’t seen him all day, reckless little-”

“Language!” she tells him.

“Yeah, yeah,” he rolls his eyes, “I know, I know.”

“Mama will wash your mouth out again.”

“I know,” Bucky scowls at the memory of the last time she’d done so. He’d practically been coughing up soap bubbles for hours afterward. “But she’ll be way more upset with you if she knew you’d been fighting. I’ll get in trouble — she’ll say that Steve and I are a bad influence on you.”

“You are a bad influence,” she quips right back, “but I haven’t even been fighting! I called Joey Higgins a miserable drip because he stole money from Ricky Stewart, and he pushed me down. Steve appeared outta’ nowhere and jumped him before I could take a swing.”

“So it was Joey Higgins, huh? I oughta tell his mama, you know. He shouldn’t be getting away with shoving around girls.”

Becca scowls, but doesn’t exactly argue, however much she looks like she wants to.

Bucky blinked rapidly following the flashback, his breathing a little heavy. It hadn’t been as violent as the last one was, thank god, but it was still far more vivid than he was used to, which was unsettling.

The two kids were babbling away to one another in rapid-fire Bulgarian, thankfully missing Bucky’s momentary zone-out. He shook his head to clear it, and stepped forward.

With his metal fist again, he gripped the iron ring securing the chain shackles to the wall, and yanked them forward, wrenching the bolts out of the concrete wall almost effortlessly.

The brother and sister fell silent at once, staring at him with identical expressions of boggled disbelief. Standing beside one another, Bucky could now clearly see the resemblance between the two, as well as the nonexistent age difference, and figured that they must be twins.

He knelt down again to her level, sliding one hand into the right calf pocket of his cargo pants and extracting his lockpicking kit. However, before he could so much as reach out to take her shackled wrist in hand, she held up a hand to stop him.

“No, wait, I think I can…” she stared hard at the manacles, apparently deep in concentration. As she did, a bizarre kind of substance began to grow out of her eyes and palms — a wispy kind of cloudlike radiance that moved as if underwater — stark red, and luminescent. It curled up and inside the skinny keyholes, appearing to be working around inside of either lock, until each of the manacles popped open simultaneously, and fell onto her lap.

Wanda rubbed at her bruised wrists, looking very pleased with herself. “I couldn’t do it before, when they were firing at me — couldn’t concentrate enough when I was trying to slow down the balls before they hit me. And it’s easier when I can see what I am doing up close, rather than above my head.”
The boy somehow looked even more delighted than she did, dragging her in by the back of the neck for another tight, brotherly hug.

Bucky, on the other hand, felt more confused than ever, standing up and taking a step back, as if getting a fuller view of the both of them would somehow make the situation clearer. “You have abilities,” he said, not as a question, but more as a confirming statement. “The both of you.”

The twins shared a look, suddenly apprehensive.

“Did Hydra do this to you?” he probed.

The boy suddenly looked defensive. “Hydra do that to you?” he nodded at Bucky’s gleaming metal hand, which then curled into a clenched fist in response.

The girl stood slowly, inclining her head to the side, staring at Bucky without blinking. Her bulging eyes surveyed him penetratingly, looking both puzzled and intensely fascinated. She crept forward to get a better look into his own.

“You,” she said, “you are the same. You are like us.”

Her brother eyed Bucky suspiciously, edging in slowly behind her as if ready to jump forward and protect her at a millisecond’s notice. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“I can see it… a dark room, like ours, but small. Cold.”

“Stop,” Bucky said firmly, and she finally blinked, and stopped inching toward him.

Bucky frowned at her, but moved on, “do you know the way out of here? Do you have a place to go?”

The twins looked at one another grimly, and shook their heads.

Bucky sighed, realising that he wouldn’t be getting to blow up the mountain today. It would be unsafe to try and demolish the place when there were two children around, after all. Any chance of civilian casualties, superpowered or otherwise, meant that he had no choice but to leave the place standing. That was his rule.

He eyed the Hydra shells along the walls sorrowfully, and sighed again. “Can you both walk?”

The twins nodded.

“Then follow me. Try to keep up, and stay together.”

The twins nodded again, this time with a matching set of eager smiles.

Christ, what was he thinking?

As he stared at his slightly scuffed map of the world, Steve ran one hand through his hair despondently, heaving a great, exhausted breath, and frowning deeply.

It had been months since they last hit on a legitimate lead regarding Bucky’s whereabouts. The
longer he was missing without a trace, the more Steve’s anxiety began to grow. Was he okay? Was he injured? Or captured? Or worse?

Steve couldn’t bring himself to consider that last option — the idea of it made him feel physically sick. He couldn’t lose his best friend twice in one lifetime — he couldn’t.

His thoughts were interrupted sharply as his cellphone began to ring from his pocket, and he huffed a laugh at the sound of the ringtone, which Sam had apparently changed to ‘I Like Birds’ by The Eels.

He smiled as he answered, “Hey, how was your flight?”

Sam sounded happier than Steve had heard him in weeks. “Someone named ‘Pepper’ called to inform me that Tony Stark’s personal jet was waiting for me at the airport to take me to New York — and let me tell you, Stark does not mess around with his personal jets. The flight attendants doubled as strippers, Steve. Stunning, pole-dancing strippers, who delivered fancy-ass foreign meals that were clearly prepared in a five-star kitchen, and whiskey that was probably more expensive than my car. Then when I got to the airport, some guy named ‘Happy’ was there with a sign with my name on it — an actual sign, mind you, not like a hand-written one either, my name was printed on there.” Steve laughed at Sam’s enthusiasm, and Sam continued, “Nice, people, but seriously — Pepper? Happy? Who the hell names their kids stuff like that?”

Steve smiled broadly. If ever there was a person who could cheer Steve up in a matter of sheer seconds, it was Sam. Sam always knew how to cheer people up — it was one of his best qualities.

“Pepper and Happy’s names are actually Virginia and Joseph,” Steve told him.

Sam gave an exaggerated huff. “Why is it that almost every white adult I know goes by some weird-ass nickname except you? I met the most infamous, lethal assassin in the whole world a few months ago — the scariest man I have ever met in my entire goddamn life — and his name ended up being Bucky. Bucky, Steve.”

Steve snorted despite himself. “Natasha doesn’t have a nickname,” he pointed out.

“Natasha isn’t even her real name.”

“Her name’s Natalia, she’s Russian. A lot of people westernise their names when they travel.”

“Ah, but do you really know if Natalia is her real name?” Sam said dramatically.

“Yes,” Steve said, trying not to encourage him by laughing again. “So you’re settled in fine in New York?”

“Casa de Stark,” Sam said grandly, and Steve imagined him falling back onto one of the gigantic beds Steve knew Tony kept in the guest suites at Stark tower. “I could most definitely get used to this, Steve. Everything but the robot.”

“You mean Jarvis? Yeah, took me a while to get used to as well.”

“Yeah, but you’re old,” Sam retorted. “Microwaves and television sets also took getting used to for you. Are you sure there’s no chance I can convince you to join us? Not that I’m willing to share much of the glory or anything, but I don’t really like the idea of you being out there by yourself.”

“I’ll be fine, Sam. It’s not like we’ve found anything in months anyway — it’s like he’s disappeared,” he tried not to let any of his harrowing concern bleed through his tone, but Sam heard it anyway.
“Look,” he said, suddenly serious, “if you ask me, Barnes knows that he can’t avoid you forever. He’s going to let himself be found eventually, but when he does, it’ll be in his own time. When he’s ready. But you can’t keep letting your entire life go on hold while you try and force that to happen any sooner.”

Steve sighed, looked back at his maps. “I know.”

“But you still won’t come with me to New York?”

“I can’t — I don’t like the idea of going back to being an Avenger while Bucky’s still missing.”

“What if we tag-team?” Sam suggested, “I’ll Avenger for a while while you search, and then you Avenger when I search?”

“What, you sick of me already?”

“I’m just providing options here, Steve.”

“I know. I’ll think about it, okay? If you really need me in a firefight, I’ll be there as soon as I can, but for now…” he fingered the pockmarked holes in his map from where he’d previously stuck thumbtacks into it, “I just can’t give up. Not yet.”

Sam gave a heavy sigh, but relented. “Alright then. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Appreciate it — same to you. Have fun Avenging.”

“Oh I will — I most definitely will.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a pre-warning regarding the twins: I don’t know how much I’ll be able to delve into their heritage, having never met Jewish OR Romani people to provide a basis of their culture off of (I live, and always have lived, in an area that is about 90% non-religious of any kind). But I can at least do them the very minimum by ensuring that sure they aren’t Nazi-sympathizing white kids volunteering to be locked up and experimented on. I mean, really.
When Bucky arrived back at the dingy hotel room, he opened the door one-handed to find the boy sitting on the floor with a towel around his shoulders, bracketed by his sister’s knees as she sat on the bed and applied liberal amounts of gooey product into his hair. Both were surrounded by candy wrappers.

Their faces lit up at the sight of the large paper bags he had cradled in one arm, both of them apparently unruffled by Bucky’s disapproving glare.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Chewing, Wanda held a nozzle-bottle aloft, wiggling it back and forth between gloved fingers. She was now wearing dark lipstick and heavy eyeliner, and her long hair had been brushed and untangled. “You were taking a long time — we went to the drugstore and lifted a few essentials.”

“Essentials?” Bucky said, eyeing the mass of goop atop Pietro’s head doubtfully.

“Perhaps maybe a few luxuries also, but I feel that we have earned them, yes?” Pietro said fairly, breaking off a square of chocolate and popping it into his mouth with smug satisfaction.

“We saved you one,” Wanda said, and a candy bar flew at Bucky with a burst of red.

He caught it on reflex, but merely stared at it in his palm wordlessly. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d had candy, if ever at all.

But then another memory, clouded and warped, as if viewing it from underwater, burst forth from the back of his mind: an image of the Rogers boy — smiling, despite his face being bruised and bloodied, snorting at an unheard joke. He had one hand held below his face to catch any of the loose grains of sugar that fell from his lips as he chewed around a mouthful of colourful, gelatinous pieces of candy.

Bucky gripped the bar of chocolate tightly for a moment, and then stowed it gently away in his back pocket for later.

Pietro’s hair was beginning to turn a very light orange. “So, what’s for dinner, Pops?” he teased.

Another memory: another one of that girl — his sister — with untidy brown hair and missing front teeth. She was grinning at him with her chin resting up on the back of the sofa. “You cooking dinner for us again tonight, Pops? Lemme guess — potatoes again?”

Bucky clenched his jaw and tried to work his brain around the sudden recollection. “Don’t call me that,” he grumbled. He set the bags on the counter, and began unloading the groceries from them. “You’re dyeing your hair?”

“Yep,” Pietro shook his head back as if to flip his gooey hair.

“Why?”

“Well, how else are you going to tell us apart?” He reached behind his head to pinch his sister’s
thigh. She pulled at his hair roughly in response.

“Big arms, scruffy face, overgrown hair — you look more like his twin than mine,” she said.

“Don’t talk about our father that way!”

Watching the two bicker made something small and content begin to warm his chest, and it conjured up the smallest ghost of a smile to Bucky’s lips.

He’d been doing that a lot in the past day and a half — ever since he and the twins had left the Hydra castle to find a hotel in Bucky’s stolen car. He found the twins’ preservation of good will and humour throughout their captivity admirable, and he appreciated their presence far more than he thought he would.

“What is for supper though?” Wanda asked, leaning back to try and peer around Bucky as he emptied the grocery bags onto the bench of the kitchenette.

“Soup,” he grunted.

“Is that it?” Pietro sounded disappointed.

“And bread.” Honestly, there wasn’t a whole lot Bucky remembered how to cook. He wondered if he’d done a lot of it before the war, or if he’d perhaps just left most of the cooking to his mother instead. Or Rogers, perhaps, when the two had lived together. While on the road, he’d mostly kept himself fed with the same few variations of eggs, soups, and potatoes that he knew how to make. Having lived off of IV nutrients for several decades, there wasn’t a whole lot his stomach could handle, and honestly, basically anything he ate now tasted like it was the most delicious thing in existence. He wasn’t exactly picky.

“Should have picked up some boxed macaroni while we were out,” Pietro sulked. Bucky rolled his eyes, but gave another small smile nonetheless.

Pietro was only slightly smaller than Bucky, and so he fit into his clothes well enough that neither of them minded if they shared. Wanda, on the other hand, was considerably shorter than Bucky, and very, very thin. For the moment, she was in a pair of his drawstring pants that were tightened all the way, and a plain t shirt that she positively swam in. They wouldn’t do in the long run, but it beat the dirty prison garb that Hydra had forced her to wear, at least.

From the second of his two brown paper bags, Bucky extracted out a mid-length black dress, and a red jacket, and he tossed them over onto her bed with a sheepish expression. They were nothing special; just more stolen thrift store clothes — and he’d had to estimate the sizing — but he figured they had to at least be better than what she wore now.

But upon recognising them as clothes for her, Wanda positively lit up at the sight of them, smiling broadly, and she quickly shed off her dirty plastic gloves and shoved them into the empty dye box to dash across to the other bed at once. She picked up the dress by its straps and held it up to herself, twirling in a circle. “Thank you, Pops,” she smiled at him with exaggerated sweetness.

Bucky groaned wearily. Pietro was a terrible influence on his sister.

“Fifteen minutes,” she called over her shoulder, before disappearing into the bathroom, dress in hand.

“Fifteen minutes until what?” Bucky asked with a confused frown.

“My hair,” Pietro responded disinterestedly, picking another caramel candy out of the packet on the
floor and popping it into his mouth with relish.

In the car ride over to the hotel, Bucky had wasted no time in asking how long they’d been kept there.

The twins both sat side-by-side in the back seat, apparently either not trusting Bucky enough to allow each other to ride shotgun alone, or else simply just not willing to leave each other’s side after their lengthy physical separation. He wouldn’t have judged them for either.

They looked at one another, made a few interesting facial expressions, seemed to come to a mutual agreement, and then faced him again in the rear-view mirror.

“Five years, we think,” the boy responded.

Bucky almost slammed on the brakes — once more feeling that white-hot rage explode inside him, paired with a desire to fishtail the car around and blow the fucking place up once and for all, original concerns be damned. His hands tightened on the steering wheel. The twins didn’t notice.

“They took us from our village,” Wanda continued. “They didn’t start the trials on us for a very long time — not until maybe eighteen months ago. They tested us all, kept us in fish bowls and observed us for any effects. There were only four of us who survived: us, and another girl and boy. They buried the rest. Called us ‘The Enhanced’.”

“Or ‘The Volunteers’,” Pietro added with a disgusted scowl. “As if we’d ever volunteered for anything.”

“After practice, the other girl, she could make herself walk through walls. They shot her in the chest after she escaped her cell, and tried to free us,” Wanda continued, looking troubled at the memory. “The other one — the boy — he was too young. Couldn’t survive any more of their treatments, and so he died not long after.”

“He could make things explode — and couldn’t be hurt by fire. They burned him with matches to test.”

Bucky gripped the steering wheel very tight. Not just these two then, but there were more people — ones who Hydra had actually murdered in their pursuit of power. *Children.*

“Did they ever tell you why they… did what they did to you?” Bucky asked, not quite sure how to tactfully word it.

Pietro scoffed, a dark, humourless sound, “*scientific progress*’,” he quoted bitterly, “‘progress for the sake of progress’.”

“They wanted us to become like you,” Wanda said, and Pietro and Bucky both looked at her in surprise, “they wanted to make us obedient, like their well-trained dogs. Fight the fights they could not win for them.”

Bucky’s ears went staticy, and for a moment, he wondered if he should pull over.

Newer, fancier models of brainwashed assassins. Perhaps that’s why they’d chosen them so young: so that they wouldn’t be as temperamental as he was. These kids weren’t just lab rats for Hydra’s sick experiments — they were going to be his fucking replacements.
Wanda’s eyes grew large as she peered at him in the rear-view mirror, but she didn’t say anything.

“You never told me that,” Pietro said, in a small voice. He sounded hurt.

“There was nothing we could have done to stop them. You did not need to share the burden of knowing,” Wanda said simply, and Pietro scowled.

The two had bickered all the way up until they reached a hotel, and Bucky felt a curious mix of faint amusement and grim recognition at their dynamic. It had been the same between himself and Rogers — that easy, well-meaning squabbling over each other’s well-being.

“What do you think?” Wanda interrupted his perusal of the memory by emerging from the bathroom dressed in her new outfit. She did a theatrical twirl to show it off, a great smile across her face.

“Ah, you look magnificent!” Pietro grinned, obviously enjoying his sister's palpable delight.

She grinned happily. “So will you, when your hair is done. And we still have to cut it afterwards.” She fingered gingerly through the goo on Pietro’s head to see how it was developing, and then turned to Bucky, “I can cut yours also, if you like?”

Bucky made a face at the idea, and she laughed again.

“So, are you getting another room?” Pietro asked, peering over Bucky’s shoulder into the pot of soup barely beginning to boil over Bucky’s hotplate — a completely random combination of ingredients that Bucky was really only half-guessing would go well together.

Bucky indicated his head, confused.

“Two beds,” Pietro jerked a thumb over his shoulder to where he sat up against one of the two twin beds that lay side-by-side.

Bucky shook his head no, “they’re for the both of you — I won’t be sleeping here.”

“You’re leaving us?” Pietro said, sounding suddenly angry.

Bucky turned to face him, confused. “I’m not leaving you,” he said, a firm promise, “I’m just not sleeping here.”

Sleep hadn’t been something that came easy to Bucky for many years now — decades, even. However, since he’d escaped Hydra, the last few months had been particularly bad.

If he thought the resurfacing memories were bad enough when he was awake, when he was asleep, they were a downright nightmare — vivid, inescapable recollections that were often so intense he’d wake up screaming, and clutching at his head in agony.

However, even without the frequent flashbacks, he didn’t much like to sleep anyway. He didn’t like leaving himself open, and vulnerable, and completely defenseless against stealth attacks — liked it even less now that he had the twins to look out for. Despite how short a time they’d been with him, he’d already found himself to have grown strangely fond and fiercely protective of them both. The idea of either of them getting hurt on his watch was abhorrent, and he’d rather suffer through exhaustion than leave them unprotected.

“Hair!” Wanda called out, eyeing the time, and Pietro immediately dropped the issue in lieu of
grinning at her, and then zipping into the bathroom as an overenthusiastic blur.

“Don’t forget to wash with the toner!” Wanda called through the door.

After several minutes of running water, he emerged, his face clean-shaven, and his hair a very pale silvery colour. He did an exaggerated version of Wanda’s little twirl, earning him a screwed up face and a middle finger, which he lovingly returned.

“Soup,” Bucky called out, ladling out even portions into small plastic bowls and distributing them on the small rounded table by the kitchenette.

The soup was horrible, but to Bucky’s surprise, neither of them complained. Pietro even requested second, and then third helpings, and ate it all, along with half of the bread loaf to himself.

“Metabolism,” Wanda explained without prompt, sounding both amused and disgusted as they both watched him rapidly spoon soup into his mouth. “He needs to eat a lot to keep from burning out too quickly.”

“This is so much better than protein bars and IV goo,” Pietro decided.

“Can’t argue that,” Bucky agreed, collecting his and Wanda's bowls for washing up.

“Turn on the TV!” Pietro said loudly, mouth full of bread.

Wanda smacked him over the head for his terrible table manners, and Bucky absently took the remote from the top of the mini-fridge and turned on the TV over his shoulder without looking.

“C’mon, kid, this is the perfect spot,” Bucky insists, holding out a hand to help Steve up.

Steve swats his hand away impatiently, and climbs the rest of the way up by himself, tentatively finding his footing on the questionable roof tiling.

“What’s with the bag?” Steve finally begrudgingly accepts Bucky’s helping hand, holding him by the sleeve to help steady the both of them as they gingerly walk along the roof as if it were a tightrope.

“Show you when we sit,” Bucky promises conspiratorially, shooting a mischievous grin over his shoulder as he leads them on.

He hefts himself up with one leg to the very top of the roof, and then carefully slides down so that his ass is firmly seated on the much sturdier ridge cap shingles. Steve follows suit, clutching onto the chimney for support.

“Oh wow!” Steve stares up the stars with wide eyes, his mouth falling open in awe. “Are you sure they’re letting them off nearby?” he asks excitedly.

“When am I ever not sure?” Bucky replies. “Do you wanna know what I brought you or not?” he holds the heavy leather messenger bag aloft, and Steve nods enthusiastically.

Bucky feels almost giddy with delight as he rushes to unbuckle the thing. From the depths of the bag, he extracts two boxes of milk duds, gumdrops, and a bottle of whiskey in a brown paper bag.
Steve’s eyes widen impossibly far as he sees the bottle. “You didn’t,” he says, snatching it from Bucky’s hands in his haste to see it.

“My dad gave me my first drink when the prohibition ended,” Bucky explains with a sheepish shrug, “I wanted to be the one to give you yours.”

“Isn’t it still illegal? I’m not eighteen yet,” Steve points out, unstoppering the bottle anyway.

Bucky gives him a look.

“I just don’t want to get you into trouble, you ass,” Steve elbows him, and takes a swig. He immediately gags, and nearly sprays it all over the roof. “Ugh, that’s horrible!”

“You get used to it,” Bucky says with a suppressed laugh, and takes the bottle from Steve for his own sip.

“When do they start?” Steve asks excitedly, leg bouncing on the spot for a moment in his barely contained glee.

Bucky grins, checks his watch, “six minutes. Strap yourself in, kid, I got us prime seats this year.”

For several minutes, the two of them sit in silence, occasionally passing the bottle back and forth for small, tentative sips, and sharing the boxes of candy between them (Steve passing Bucky the red ones without being asked, and Bucky passing over the green ones in turn).

As the crowd of people in the distance becomes thicker and thicker, Steve’s leg begins to bounce impatiently again, his face a broad grin. Finally, they hear a hush settle over the nearby crowd of bystanders, and Steve straightens his back at once, his leg halting.

The sight of the first firework shooting upward and then exploding across the sky as a shower of red is completely lost on Bucky — too taken with carefully watching Steve’s face as he drinks in the sight with a look of absolute reverence. Bucky can see the bright lights exploding in the reflection of Steve’s big blue eyes, widened in awe, and a soft smile comes to his face at the sight of seeing him so happy.

Red, white, blue, and gold showers of sparks are visible from three different locations — and sitting on a rooftop at the very corner of the street grants them full view of them all. They rain down out of the sky and out of sight, only to be immediately replaced by an even more spectacular display, occasionally drawing out an awed gasp from Steve. The steady warmth of creeping drunkenness seems to significantly slow Bucky’s brain, fuzzing it around the edges, and removing his ability to think about more than a few things at a time. For the moment, he’s completely content in this — enjoying the sight of Steve’s expression trained adoringly up at the sky.

The fireworks carry on for another two full minutes before ceasing, but not before one last crescendo — a huge explosion of every single colour, painting the sky a glittering mosaic of light — and the crowd below them cheers. Bucky can see them waving small US flags on sticks, some of them wearing funny hats, some even still dressed in over-the-top parade gear.

“We should do this every year,” Bucky decides, the final climax of the show having left him downright breathless.

Steve looks the same — his eyes left glassy from a combination of the alcohol and leftover exhilaration. He blinks quickly, regaining himself, “I want that in writing, Barnes, you hear? Promise me: cheap booze, a rooftop, and fireworks. Every year.”
Bucky laughs, pleased at Steve’s reaction. “Every year,” he promises, handing said bottle of cheap whiskey over.

Steve takes a deep swig, and shudders. He looks back up at the sky — now illuminated only by stars. “You know,” he says, “I think this was probably one of my favourite birthdays ever.”

Bucky feels his heart flutter zealously in his chest, emitting a warmth that only Steve is capable of inflicting; and for a single, thoughtless moment, Bucky has to restrain himself from leaning in — from just saying ‘fuck it’, and reaching out to claim Steve’s lips in a deep, consuming kiss.

He decides that he probably shouldn’t drink anymore tonight.

“You wait,” he says after clearing his throat thickly. “Next year will be even better — and the year after that, and the year after that. I’ll just keep thinking up stuff to make it better and better, every year, until we’re both dead.”

Steve chuckles, and begins to pat around himself where he sits, eventually finding the cork and stoppering the partially emptied bottle of liquor. “Every year,” he says again, and then peers down the side of the roof. “How’re we gonna get down?”

Bucky laughs.

The ghost of laughter still ringing in his ears, Bucky’s eyes snapped open. For a moment, he simply lay there, staring up at the ceiling in muted confusion, mind racing. He was vaguely aware that there were tears streaking down the sides of his face, dampening his hair beside his temples, and the realisation of it took him by surprise.

He’d woken up crying. He’d actually **woken up** crying.

It was probably one of the first sleep-induced flashbacks he’d endured that hadn’t involved blood, and gunfire, or whirring mechanical tools, or crackling electricity — and this, *this*, was what he ended up crying over: two teenage boys watching fireworks on a Brooklyn rooftop.

He turned his head to glance over at the other bed, and felt an immediate stab of guilt.

At the request of the twins, he’d begrudgingly complied with their demand to lie back on the bed to watch television with them for the remainder of the night, only to have apparently fallen asleep halfway through. They were both now curled up together in Wanda’s bed — Bucky having forced them to share the cramped space by accidentally stealing Pietro’s. He wondered why they hadn’t woken him.

He sat up, and felt more tears rush down his face as he did so. He scrubbed them away almost angrily with the back of his hand, and immediately stood to get off the bed.

During his journey, a hotel room such as the one he was staying in now was never something he’d really allowed himself to have. He preferred to sleep on exposed rooftops, or inside unoccupied houses and apartment buildings — somewhere where he’d be alone, and unlikely to hurt anyone were he to suddenly lose control following a flashback. The hotel room wasn’t a luxury he could dole out on often, as he had neither the money nor the peace of mind to do so, but he’d figured that the twins deserved at least a few days of comfort before going back to… well, wherever they wanted to go, really. Perhaps they’d choose to return to what was left of their village, and find their parents.

Falling asleep with them nearby like that was foolish, and irresponsible — he could have lashed out,
and ended up hurting them.

Following a flashback, he often felt extremely panicked — especially if he was inside. No matter how open and bright a place was, he always seemed to awake feeling restless and claustrophobic — like (despite all evidence to the contrary being clearly visible) the place felt underground and inescapable, and getting smaller and smaller, threatening to suffocate him unless he got outside. It was mostly why he often chose to sleep on rooftops, except when it rained.

He felt marginally better escaping to the balcony. Marginally.

Except that he couldn’t stop fucking crying.

Unremitting tears continued to roll unchecked down in his face — an unstoppable stream. It probably wasn’t helping that the lights of the cityscape felt a little too familiar — too much like those exploding fireworks above the Brooklyn Bridge. Coloured lights and illuminated advertisements, streetlamps, and moving headlights — all creating a magnificent moving picture across his view behind glass railings.

He drew his hood up self-consciously, stuffing both hands into his pockets and balling them into tight fists. His neck felt cold from tears running off of his chin, soaking into the neckline of his hoodie, and he vainly attempted to rub them away with his shoulder.

“You cannot sleep,” a voice came from behind him: Wanda — who was apparently stealthy enough to even sneak up on him without warning. She didn’t say it as a question — in fact, it sounded like more of a chastisement.

Bucky shrugged, hitching his shoulders up to try and hide his tear-streaked face, embarrassed. “Pietro’s snoring,” he said, with forced nonchalance, “I can sleep through anything but snoring — god help me.”

“Just kick him,” Wanda shrugged, “it’s what I do.”

Bucky chuckled despite himself, and Wanda walked up, and folded both arms over the glass railings of the balcony beside him, smiling a little as a warm, gentle breeze fanned over her face and through her hair.

“You talk in your sleep, you know,” she mentioned happily.

“I know.” He always had. Yet another reason why he usually only occupied vacant places.

“You said ‘goddamn it, Stevie,’ at least twice.”

Bucky’s lips twitched at that, but only barely. The tears had stopped for the moment, but he felt as if he were still on a hair trigger. He itched to reach up and swipe them away from either cheek, but couldn’t — because then she’d then know he’d been crying.

For a moment, she didn’t say anything more, merely switching between looking serenely out onto their balcony view, and looking up at Bucky curiously, trying to peer around his hood to see his face.

“You do not need to worry about hurting us,” she said, finally dropping all pretence, and Bucky sighed grimly. “You think that you are beyond control, but you are wrong. You were never beyond control — you’ve simply never had anyone there to help anchor you.”

“Get out of my head,” Bucky snapped.
Wanda ignored him. “Your memories are not gone.”

Forgetting for a moment that he was trying to hide his face, Bucky turned to stare at her in bewilderment. “I beg to fuckin’ differ.”

“No,” she huffed a laugh, shook her head, and tactfully didn’t mention the tears. Perhaps she’d known before she even followed him outside. “I could sense it from the moment I met you. The information is not gone — merely lost. They didn’t erase you.”

“How is ‘lost’ any different from ‘gone’?”

Wanda shrugged, looking a little clueless on how to explain it, exactly. “Things are not… firing as they should be,” she expanded. “But the information is still there — it always has been. They’ve simply removed your ability to access it.”

Bucky grit his teeth, hating the reminder of exactly how they removed said ability.

Wanda looked sheepish. “You… you saved us — me and my brother. You have made us feel safe, for perhaps the first time in years,” she said. “Pietro always tried to stay optimistic, but I could see in his heart that he never truly believed that we would ever be free again. He thought we would die in that place — and now, because of you, we won’t.”

Tears began to prick Bucky’s eyes again, and he strained to fight them back, suddenly feeling very overwhelmed.

“You are not a monster,” she continued softly, and Bucky loses that fight at once, “you are a hero.”

Bucky feels a hand on the side of his face, and he turned his head reluctantly to look into her eyes. “You cannot keep punishing yourself for what was done to you. You deserve happiness again.”

A thought occurred to him, and he frowned at her. “Did you… did you make me remember that dream?” he demanded, and Wanda’s hand fell away from his face. She exhaled heavily, and nodded. “Yes, I did.”

Bucky took a step back from her, feeling betrayed. “You had no right-”

“I know,” she said, at least having the good graces to look a little ashamed of herself, “believe me, I know how people feel about me… doing that. But sometimes I cannot help it — I can see into people’s heads like it is nothing, and it… it’s still very new to me. It can be hard to control.” She looked down at her hands, furling and unfurling them. “And it made me upset to see you suffering,” she admitted, sounding miserable.

“And you think remembering my past will help me?” he growled.

She looked up at him with a look of surprise in those gigantic dark eyes, tilting her head in confusion. “You… you do not want to remember?”

“No, I don’t. Whoever that was, that… it’s not me anymore. I can’t… I can’t go back to being that — not ever. And St-… and Rogers…” he swallowed, “I’ve already caused him enough suffering. He deserves better than a stranger wearing his best friend’s face.”

She inclined her head curiously. “Is that why you’ve been running from him?”

He fixed her with a glare. “I’m not running.”
“You are totally running,” she reached behind herself, and heaved herself up onto the glass barrier between balcony and open sky. Bucky felt an immediate rush of alarm, picturing her tumbling backwards to her death, and he unconsciously took a small step forward in case he had to make to catch her if she began to fall.

She immediately took advantage of his proximity, grabbing him by the upper shoulders and looking him right in the face. “Pops,” she said seriously, “running away from someone for what you believe to be their own good is still running away from them. You are not a stranger. You are everything and more the man that he remembers: a caretaker, a soldier, and a man who is too afraid of his own feelings to ever allow himself to be happy.”

She continued speaking before Bucky could angrily interrupt with a demand that she quit delving into his memories as she pleased. “I can help you. Like I said before: everything is all still there — they simply removed your ability to access it. I can rebuild all of those bridges to that lost information.”

“Lost, but not gone,” Bucky quoted her quietly, eyes wide. Then he shook his head. “I don’t need your help.”

Wanda opened her mouth to speak, but Bucky cut her off. “No. I mean it, Wanda — I don’t want to remember.”

“But—”

“Wanda, please,” Bucky plucked her small hands off of his shoulders delicately, taking them within his own, and looking at her in the eyes as earnestly as he could. “I know what you’re trying to do. And I appreciate it — I really do. But please stop. Remembering a life that I know I can never go back to, it’s… it’s cruel. It wouldn’t be fair — not to myself, and especially not to Rogers.”

“I want that in writing, Barnes, you hear? Promise me: cheap booze, a rooftop, and fireworks. Every year.”

Bucky laughs. “Every year,” he promises.

Wanda looked like she wanted to argue more, but relented with a small sigh, looking despondently at where her hands were still caught between his own. She nodded once, and Bucky leaned back, tugging her off of the precarious ledge of the balcony railing and safely back onto her own two feet.

He walked her back into the hotel room with an arm slung over her shoulders, and she frowned. “But you still need to sleep more,” she said, and Bucky rolled his eyes in exasperation.

“Whatever you say, Ma,” he teased, and she finally cracked a small smile.

Chapter End Notes

Before you ask, NO, the Pops thing is NOT a Terminator reference.
Also, MASSIVE thanks to the awesome Jules for her wonderful artwork of this story – I love it!

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Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Kinda short, very dialogue-heavy chapter this week - sorry guys

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was stupid, unreasonable, unfair that Steve had never had the opportunity to have closure with anybody he’d left behind.

The commandos had all died long before he’d been found — Dernier first, a lot earlier than Steve felt comfortable with, and Gabriel last, living to the downright overripe age of a hundred and one.

Howard died in a car accident. Peggy’s mind only ever lived in the present for short bursts before reverting back to the time in which she knew him to be dead.

Everyone he knew was either dead, or had no memory of him.

And Bucky…

Bucky was somewhere between those two. Because the man he used to be was gone — could probably never be recovered, and Steve knew it. Not to say he loved him any less, or would fight any laxer to get him back, but for once in his life he was trying to be a realist.

He wished, desperately, that he could go back to that last night they’d had together. That he could prevent his best friend from dying; that he could use that time they’d had by the fire to talk to each other by themselves for the first time in what had seemed like forever; that he could have gone down with that plane with Bucky in tow, and for both of them to have woken up together — relied on each other, and had each others’ back for support throughout their endeavour to discover and rediscover how the world worked…

“Eyes front, Cap, where’s your head?” Tony’s teasing voice cut through Steve’s depressing internal monologue and drew him back to the present with a jolt.

It had been months since Steve had been in actual contact with any of the Avengers besides Sam.

Tony and he had been swapping the occasional phone call, and he and Natasha sometimes sent text messages to check up on one another, but besides that, Steve had really been allowing his responsibilities to his friends to slip. Finding Bucky had been such a high priority for so long, he was a little ashamed of himself to realise that he’d allowed the rest of his life to dwindle on a backburner during his search.

While ensuring that Bucky was safe and alive was still Steve’s top priority, after a few choice (and rather harsh) words from Sam, he’d reluctantly conceded to rejoin the Avengers rather than just allowing Sam to go in his stead. Not to say that Sam didn’t love it — he loved every second of it — but, after all, Steve couldn’t shirk his duties off on him forever. No matter what else was occupying his time, he was still a superhero. And being a superhero meant that he had responsibilities — both to his team, and to the world.

And so there he was: in the middle of a snowy, freezing forest outside the perimeter of a castle he’d once nearly killed himself trying to destroy.
Well, he actually had succeeded in destroying it the first time, but apparently Hydra didn’t get the memo — refurbishing the castle’s charred and hollow carcass into another base under the guise of it being a ‘scientific research and development facility’. None of them knew exactly what that translated into from cryptic bad-guy speak, but Steve had a rough idea, at least, and it wasn’t exactly looking good.

He shook his head at Tony as if to say ‘it’s not important’, unclipped his helmet, and kicked out the kickstand for his rental motorbike. He allowed the helmet to dangle from its chin strap over the handlebars, and then swung a leg over the seat to stand on solid ground.

“Tony,” he gave a respectful nod of the head and a wooden smile that he hoped looked at least a little convincing.

“Cap,” Tony returned the nod dramatically, with a smirk that suggested he was making fun of him more than actually greeting him. “What’s it been, like five years?”

Steve rolled his eyes, “try a few weeks, Tony.”

“Well it’s been nearly a whole year since I’ve actually seen that handsome face of yours in person. You still not willing to share with the class where you’ve been for the last, what, ten months?”

“Nine.”

“Nine months is a long time, Cap. Babies have been made in that time. Tiny, fragile human beings have been created from scratch since I’ve seen you last.”

Steve rolled his eyes again, and Tony stepped into his personal space with a serious look.

“Seriously, Steve, where have you been? I don’t want to sound like a nanny or anything, but you made us worry.”

Steve rucked his straps up over his shoulders a little higher, and gave a cryptic smile. “Sorry Tony, it’s not that I don’t trust you, it’s just that you’d be better off not knowing.”

“Plausible deniability? That’s seriously what you’re going with?”

Steve ignored him, and pushed passed to walk onwards toward the castle.

Tony huffed. “I know you’re looking for something — you’ve been jumping around the globe since the Hydra fallout. Maybe I can help?”

“Stop asking questions, Tony.”

Tony snorted. “Wow, that sounds menacing. What are you gonna do, get One-Eyed Joey and Ricky the Nose to come round and break my legs? Could you be any vaguer?”

Steve glared, unamused, “no, but keep talking, and maybe I’ll break your legs.”

“Wow, touchy.”

“Tony,” Steve snapped, clearly out of patience, “how soon can we get moving?”

Tony glared at him, “eager to leave us already?”

Steve didn’t answer, just waited patiently for Tony to continue.
Tony sighed. “Tasha and Bruce should be here any minute with Birdman.”

Steve’s eyebrows went up in surprise, “you called in everyone for this?”

“Big job — we don’t know what exactly we’re gonna face in there. It’s been nearly a year since the Hydra fallout — no incoming funding, which means if they’re still going strong after this long, it can’t be good. Figured a family meeting was in order to come storm the castle, as it were.”

“You really think all of us are needed for this?”

“Not all of us, no. Rhodey has military crap to deal with, and you didn’t bring along Birdman the Second, so we’re down by two. Maybe three if Thor doesn’t get the message in time.”

“Wait, why do you need me if you’ve got everyone else? They might be well-organized, but it’s not exactly a very big base. And like you said, months later, surely their resources have been depleted by now.”

Tony glared at Steve, suddenly irate at the man’s palpable foot-dragging and growing impatience. “Nobody knows this place like you do, Cap; you’re an asset. You were here in 1940-whatever — my dad mentioned the Bavarian castle incident about a million times, but I’d never made the connection that it was this particular castle until recently. There’s like a billion castles in Europe. He said you ended up having to spend a good few days here with the crew before you blew it the hell up — scared the shit out of Barnes, apparently.”

Steve winced at the mention of Barnes’s name, but Tony couldn’t bring himself to feel too bad — he was sick of Steve’s glib attitude toward him deserting his friends, and resented his reluctance to join them in the first place.

Still, Wilson had assured him that it was a damn miracle that he’d manage to talk him into coming in the first place, so he really should be counting himself lucky.

“You think we’ll find something interesting, then?” Steve asked curiously, standing on tiptoe to try and get a better look through the trees.

“It’s a scientific research facility,” Tony shrugged, “when is there ever not anything interesting to be found?”

Steve gave Tony a look. “I mean,” he said pointedly, “are you looking for something specific?”

Tony grinned, “fifty bucks says there’s something glowy and mysterious.”

Steve huffed, amused despite himself, but before he could think of something something witty to deliver in response, there was a loud rumbling noise that cut him off.

They both turned to look into the trees, and saw a large open-top military transport vehicle lumbering its way through the trees, jolting and bumping over the uneven terrain. Steve grinned widely at recognising the bright red hair of Natasha clearly visible over the top of the windshield, where she had her arms folded, standing up in the back seat and leaning over the driver.

“Gentlemen,” she said with a grin as the car rumbled to a stop in front of them, “how long’s it been, like twelve years?”

Tony gave Steve a smug look, and Steve rolled his eyes.

“It’s good to see you again,” Steve said with a smile.
“Yup,” Natasha jumped smoothly out of the car and landed on her feet, returning his smile as she greeted Steve with a hug. “Any luck with the search?” she asked under her breath.

“Nothing,” Steve says back, “haven’t hit on a solid lead for months.”

She gave a grim sort of sympathetic look, and moved on to giving Tony a chummy slap on the back in greeting.

Clint poked his head out of the door of the driver’s seat, looking slightly put out. “Hey — I’m feeling very little love over here!” he called, and exited the car.

“Get over here then, you can have a hug too,” Steve said, opening his arms invitingly.

Clint only sniffed, and shook his head. “I don’t accept pity-hugs Cap. It’s bad for my self esteem.”

Steve hugged him anyway, giving him three solid pats on the back. Clint grinned indulgently.

Bruce and Steve nodded respectfully at one another — Bruce not really being as comfortable with physical contact as the rest of them were. He did smile, however, as he continued awkwardly ringing his hands a few feet away from the group.

“No Thor?” Tony asked, peering around into the back of the car as if expecting to see Thor hiding behind the seats.

“No Thor,” Natasha confirmed, and began unloading a duffel bag from the trunk.

“Damn. I was hoping to have all of the old team together.”

“Family reunion can wait,” said Steve, “any idea of the security inside?”

Tony shook his head. “Jarvis isn't coming up with anything. Which means it’s either very, very bad security, or very, very good security.”

Steve nodded gravely, and turned to the others. “Standard formation. Tony, you scout the perimeter for signs of life — tell us if there’s anything big coming. Bruce, gear up — you’re going to lead us into the castle — fight off anything big that Tony spots from above. Hawkeye, Widow, with me. Once we’re inside, I want Tony with me, Natasha and Clint, I want you two manning stealth — see if you can break into any of their computer systems and scavenge for anything worth finding. There might be some stuff that dodged the Hydra dump. Bruce, you stay outside and smash up anything that looks like it might be an oncoming threat.”

“Uh, you might wanna broaden your description there, Cap — the big guy can be pretty generous in his description of what he considers a ‘threat’.”

“Aircrafts, trucks, jeeps, unmanned weaponry, transportation of any kind. Anything that looks like it might be trying to ambush us from the outside, take it down.”

“Allrighty then,” Bruce said awkwardly, and then reached up to begin slowly unbuttoning his shirt and toeing off his shoes. He folded it up and laid it gently on the hood of their vehicle with the shoes, looking uncomfortable. After a few seconds of heavy breathing, and violent lurching, The Hulk then stood where Bruce had been.

“Tony?” Steve said.

The faceplate on Tony’s suit snapped shut, and the eyes illuminated. “On my way!” he said
cheerfully, and blasted upward into the air.

“I thought you said that this was an active base,” Steve hissed to Tony after rounding yet another deserted corner.

At first, they had just assumed that the lack of agents coming at them with guns was due to the actual base itself being underground, beneath the castle, rather than inside, but upon dropping down into the first floor, they’d found that there was nothing.

It was eerie to be walking through an abandoned lab like this — empty rooms, abandoned weaponry, maps and papers and computers still open and untouched on workbenches, as if the people inside had been forced to evacuate immediately, without warning.

It wasn’t until they reached the second floor that they seemed to garner a better idea of what had gone on.

There were bodies.

The smell of it hit them first — that putrid, rotting smell of human carcases that sent Steve right back to the trenches of the Second World War. They weren’t freshly killed, but they weren’t exactly old either — no more than two or so weeks since they’d died. Around them were scattered weaponry, as if suddenly dropped or thrown aside, and they wore tactical uniforms typical of that of a Hydra Strike team. The blood pooled around them had turned a rusty brown in the time they’d been left to fester, however, some of it was still purplish where it was pooled the thickest.

“Okay, I really don’t like the look of this, Cap,” Tony said, sounding like he was going to be sick.

They moved down another floor, stepping gingerly over dead bodies and discarded equipment, and peering around at the aftermath of what was quickly establishing itself as a slaughter.

They peered around at the maps lining the tables and walls, broken bulbs of illuminated destination points dotting around the globe.

“Oh, now this is just too perfect,” Tony said.

There, sitting perfectly preserved on a mantle atop a kind of housing unit that scanned and analysed it, was the still-glowing, absolutely unblemished artefact of Loki’s sceptre.

“Oh, Thor’s going to be thrilled,” Tony said, wiggling his fingers over it gleefully. Gently, he began to pry apart the housing unit, which had been completely powered down since the computer system it was hooked up to had apparently been beaten to scrap metal by something heavy. Tony wrenched the sceptre free, and then held it gingerly in both hands.

“Definitely a Hydra base, at least,” he said grimly. “Who do you think — hey, Cap!”

A hard lump had caught in Steve’s throat — there, seamlessly indented into the solid steel wall beside the door, was the perfect shape of a human fist.

_Bucky._

He ghosted his fingers over the concave mark in the wall, jaw clenched tight. It certainly wasn’t the
first time he’d come across the aftermath of one of Bucky’s invasions, but it didn’t exactly get any easier with time.

“Why didn’t he blow it up?” he said under his breath, confused.

“Hm? What’s that? Speak up, son,” Tony said loudly, cupping one hand around the smooth metal covering his left ear.

Steve quickly withdrew his hand from the dent in the wall, and turned to face Tony. “We should get out of here,” he suggested quickly.

“What? No way. I know it looks a little… grim, but Barton and Romanov haven’t even finished downloading the database yet.”

“Yeah, uh, about that?” Clint’s voice came over their coms. “The entire thing’s been erased. More than erased, actually, most of it looks like it’s been run through a blender — had to bring out Nat’s piece to scavenge what we could out of the lesser damaged hard drives. It’s not exactly meticulous — whoever did this looked like they were in a hurry.”

“Any externally stored security feeds?” Tony asked.

“Nat’s on their intranet looking for it now — looks like there’s mostly nothing. Most of that’s also been erased, except for footage from a few weeks ago, when the place was still active.”

“Mm,” Natasha’s voice came over the line, sounding frustrated, but with a heavily manufactured disinterest covering it. “I’m trying to recover what I can, but it looks like whoever came in shot out the cameras before they could get a good look at them. Seems like it couldn’t have been more than one person, though,” she said weightily, obviously trying to get across to Steve what he already knew.

“One person could do all of this?” Clint said, sounding both impressed and horrified.

“Something a little more concerning: why didn’t they take the sceptre with them?” Tony wondered.

“You found it?” Clint exclaimed loudly.

“Sure did — it was just sitting there like an unwrapped birthday present. Just for us.” Tony looked the staff up and down, apparently apprehensive.

“Good. We can throw it into the sun the first chance we get,” Clint said bitterly.

Tony snorted. “Sorry big guy — usually I’m first in line for the chance to destroy stuff, but we promised Thor we’d bring it back for him.”

“No we didn’t.”

“Okay, not in so many words, but I like to think it was an unspoken agreement between friends that we don’t destroy the shit that we find left from Asgard on our planet.”

“He’d never know,” Clint insisted.

“Guys, we’ve got something!” Natasha interrupted. “Routine satellite imagery of the place — complete coincidence that the aerial rounds took place right as they were leaving. A few minutes later, and we’d’ve missed them completely.”

“They?” Steve asked.
“There’s… there’s three of them.”

“On our way now,” Tony said, and began leading the way up the staircase to where Natasha and Clint were rifling through Hydra’s security feeds.

“I’ll be damned,” Tony said lowly, tucking his helmet under one arm.

There, clear as day, on the tiny screen of Natasha’s portable notebook, was the bird’s-eye image of a tall man with long dark hair and a shiny metal hand, flanked by two teenagers who Tony had never seen before.

“Timestamp?” he asked.

“Fifteen days ago, 5:34pm,” Natasha replied efficiently.

Tony whistled lowly.

“Who are the other two?” Steve asked, his throat tight and thick for some reason.

“Unknown. We think they might’ve been Hydra prisoners — they’re looking pretty rough, and they’re both wearing prison garb,” Clint said.

“Do we know the direction they went?”

“Nada. Still-shots only — they disappeared north into the forest, but they could have gone anywhere from there.”

“Our guest has been busy,” Tony said under his breath, mostly to himself.

The others all turned to stare at him, confused.

Tony shrugged sheepishly. “You were all busy — wasn’t really the time to be talking about it.” He nodded at the low-res silver-armed figure on screen, “Metal-arm-guy there managed to bypass my security systems a few months back. Broke in and told me to fix that arm of his — said there were trackers, and he needed them to be removed.”

Steve stepped forward as if to make to grab Tony, but was held back by Natasha, who gripped his forearm tightly.

“And did you remove them?”

“Steve…” she said, both as a consolation and a warning.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Steve demanded.

Tony’s eyebrows drew together, confused. “He didn’t hurt me, or even threaten me, if that’s what you’re worried about. He didn’t seem dangerous, really — just desperate. I fixed his arm, put my tools down, and by the time I looked back up, he was gone. I didn’t tell you because it was right after the Hydra fallout — you had bigger problems to deal with.”

Steve ran a hand through his hair — a move that was quite uncharacteristic of him — and Tony’s
frown deepened even further.

“Wait, I’m confused. You know this guy?”

Steve huffed, and looked away, dragging a hand over his face repeatedly as if hoping to scrub away whatever it was he was feeling.

“Steve,” Tony said seriously, “what’s going on?”

He only ever very rarely called Steve by his first name — choosing instead to refer to him as ‘Cap’, or ‘Rogers, depending on the mood. There was no real reason for it — at first it was because he felt uncomfortable with the overfamiliarity, but now, it was moreso just because it was a thing. Breaking out the first name meant that he was being serious, and he knew that Steve knew it too.

Steve gave a deep, steadying breath, and let his hand fall away from his face. His skin was left red in some places from where he’d been rubbing it so hard. “I’ve been tracking him. The Winter Soldier,” he replied, glancing back onto the screen.

Tony inclined his head, as if sure he misheard. “You? You’ve been tr- is this what you’ve been doing? This is why you’ve been gone for the past twenty eight years?”

Steve ignored him, glaring in a way that suggested now wasn’t the time. “What you said before, about him being ‘busy’? Have you been tracking him too?”

Tony gave a half-shrug, “Kind of. Been sort of slacking since July — the guy’s just too hard to predict where he’s off to next. Pretty sure he’s been laying false trails, too. Why are you looking for him, anyway? And why didn’t you tell us you were looking for him? We could have helped.”

“It’s complicated,” Steve dismissed

Tony scowled. “Are you ki- is he kidding me with this?” he transferred his scowl to Clint and Natasha.

“Tony,” Natasha said, in that same, low warning of a voice as she’d given Steve before.

Tony’s eyes widened, “Oh my god, she knew too?” he pointed a finger at her accusingly. “The ex-Soviet superspy — you trust her, and not me?”

Natasha’s jaw clenched almost imperceptibly, clearly hurt.

Steve shook his head. “It’s not like that, Tony — she was with me when this was all going down. And she had access to information that I didn’t.”

“If you wanted information, why not come to me? If anyone’s capable of finding the Metal-armed needle in the Information haystack, it’s gotta be me, right?”

“I did it for his safety.” Steve snapped. He looked as though he regretted it immediately, his jaw working, clenching and unclenching furiously.

Tony felt stunned, and hurt. “His safety? You thought I’d try to, what, hurt him? Lock him up?”

Steve bowed his head, looking a little awkward, but still resolutely stubborn. “I didn’t know what you’d do. I couldn’t risk it.”

Tony shook his head, hurt and disbelieving. “Unbelievable. Unbelievable — you can’t even give me the benefit of the doubt, can you?”
Steve looked at Natasha pleadingly for an out, but she only shook her head and shrugged, as much at a loss as he was.

Steve huffed. “He doesn’t remember anything. He’s confused, and he needs help. I’m just trying to offer it.”

“For nine months?” Tony snapped, fists clenching. “For nine months you’ve been chasing this guy? To what — offer him a hug?”

Steve’s jaw clenched angrily. “He’s scared, and he’s dangerous — it’s a bad combination. He’s hurting people.”

“Wait, I’m confused — so you do want him locked up, then?”

“I want him safe,” Steve insisted. “I want him rehabilitated — so far he’s only gone after Hydra bases that we haven’t found first, but it’s been months since I’ve hit on a lead. Any lead. Which means he’s out of places to go. What happens when he exhausts his supply? What’s he going to do when there’s no one left to get revenge on?”

“You’ve been following him?” Tony said incredulously. “Are you an idiot? I mean, I’m worried about the guy too, but you said it yourself — he’s dangerous. What happens when he finds out you’ve been tailing him?”

“He already knows,” Steve said.

Tony wanted to fucking throttle him. “He knows? He knows you’ve been following him, and you’re still alive? He hasn’t decided that you’re a huge threat? You’re lucky you haven’t ended up with that metal fist of his buried in your ass.”

Natasha made a face like she agreed, and Clint only looked more and more confused by the minute.

“Wait, hold up — the Winter Soldier? Steve’s been looking for the Winter Soldier this whole time? Cap, are you kidding me? You know what he did to Natasha, right?”

“He knows, Clint,” Natasha murmured.

Clint looked furious. “And he’s okay with it? Are you serious?”

“I’m okay with it too,” Natasha said, only half-convincingly.

“Well I’m not — Cap, what the hell were you thinking?” Clint rounded on Steve with a glare.

“Why, what did he do?” Tony asked.

Natasha opened her mouth, probably to dismiss the question, but Clint butt in angrily instead. “He shot her, that’s what. Twice.”

Tony’s eyebrows shot up, and he boggled at Steve. “You’re looking to rehabilitate a guy who shot your team member? Who the hell is this guy, anyway? Nobody gets the drop on Natasha like that — I thought seeing her with a few cuts and scrapes was bad enough, I’ve never seen her actually injured.”

Natasha smiled, amused, but spoke in a very serious tone nonetheless. “He’s right, Tony.”

Clint opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off cleanly. “Really, Clint, Steve’s right. It’s a really complicated situation.”
“Clint,” Steve’s shoulders hunched like a guilty child, and he spoke in a soft, sad voice, “you of all people should know what a good person is capable of when someone else is calling the shots.” He looked over at Loki’s sceptre pointedly. “The Winter Soldier’s as much a victim as Natasha is.”

Clint looked a little shocked, but after a few moments to process, he sobered, glared, and then gave a reluctant little nod and looked away.

“Natasha,” Steve turned to her seriously, “do you have anything for me regarding where he went?”

Tony scoffed, rolling his eyes up at the ceiling as if to say ‘typical’.

Natasha pointed at the computer screen, trailing a finger upward. “North — that’s all I got. No traffic cameras, no more satellite images, nothing.”

“He have a known alias? Credit cards?” Clint asked.

“No. We have no idea how he’s paying for anything — the only trail this guy leaves is usually in the form of a smoking pile of rubble,” Nat said blandly.

“Why didn’t he blow this one up?” Tony wondered, looking around at the cracked walls, as if mystified by the fact they were still standing. “He usually explodes the bases that aren’t in the middle of a city.”

Natasha shrugged, then pointed at the screen again. “My best guess is only my best guess, but I’d say that the two prisoners he took with him must have not been with Hydra.”

“Or he’s taking hostages,” Clint muttered darkly.

“Unlikely,” Natasha said curtly. "Usually he just lets people evacuate if they don’t get in his way — unless they’ve done something to make it personal.”

“Like the vault,” Steve said gravely, and she gave a grim look in response. “They look young though. His file said that he’s never killed a child, even under orders — they might be Hydra after all.”

“The vault?” Tony asked. “Wait, you have a file on him? I combed through the Shield database and the Hydra files for hours and couldn’t find a single thing on the guy beyond the footnotes.”

Steve looked apprehensive, as if worried Tony might stick out a hand and demand to see it right away. “They kept him in a vault in Washington for a while — stored him there in between missions.”

“Sam said the place looked like it’d been hit with an indoor tornado,” Natasha said.

Steve nodded grimly. “Like a scene from an apocalypse movie. Damaged electrical equipment, sparks flying everywhere, blood on the walls…”

“Jesus,” Tony said. “This kid’s not fucking around.”

“He’s not a kid, he’s barely older than I am.”

“In that case, this ancient relic is not fucking around.”

Steve’s lips quirked, as if Tony was missing an inside joke.

“You know, biologically, Steve’s technically the baby of the group,” Natasha piped up. “Remind me
how old you are again, Stark?"

“Young at heart,” Tony said, with dignity.

“If there’s nothing more for us to see here, can we go already?” Clint whined. “We’ll be able to get a better picture where there’s somewhere with actual computers — and Nat and I can scour through more databases to see if we catch a glimpse of Steve’s bestest friend here on any security feeds in neighbouring towns. Hairy man with a metal hand and two teenage companions — seems like he’d be easy enough to recognise.”

“You’d be surprised,” Steve said testily.

“We probably shouldn’t leave the Hulk out there too much longer anyway,” Tony said, “without anyone coming to shoot at him, he’s probably going to get real antsy real soon. Can’t have him ripping trees out of the ground for the sake of it — what would Al Gore say?”

“And we need to call Thor again,” Steve added. “He’ll want to get down here ASAP for the sceptre.”

“I totally called it on us finding something glowy and mysterious thing by the way — you owe me fifty bucks.”

“I never accepted that bet.”

“Don’t be a tight-ass, Cap.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh Steve, quit being such a cryptic asshole already...

I drew some art earlier this week from a scene in chapter 4 - check it out!

Also, please follow me on Tumblr
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Please remember that Steve’s segments are set a few weeks after Bucky’s are. They’ll sync up in the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Steve had consented to join Shield, he’d been given a briefing packet on who would later become his allied teammates.

During his stint with the SSR, he’d come into technology that was… unprecedented, to say the least. Stuff that he’d never have thought to dream up were he writing the most outlandish sci-fi novel in the world. Weapons made of incinerating light; streamlined one-person submersion crafts; aircrafts that could carry enough force to level an entire continent. Hell, even he himself was something that he couldn’t have dreamed up in his wildest imaginations: a biochemically enhanced superhuman engineered to peak possible human performance and physique in under two minutes. ‘Microwave-fresh’, Tony had called him once.

So yeah, he’d learned pretty early on to save himself a lot of trouble by suspending as much belief as possible when taking in new information.

It was really no different in the modern world.

It made sense that technology’s progress continued to climb higher — higher than Steve, at one point, would have thought possible at all. Music that had once come on record disks larger than dinner plates were now freely available on a device smaller than a box of matches, and could hold over a hundred times the amount. Movies and news weren’t only shown in communal theatres anymore, but streamed directly into a person’s home, and displayed on personal screens.

A cocky man in an expensive metal suit could fly around the world saving people. A regular scientist could grow four times in mass and turn a vivid shade of green simply by allowing himself to feel too much of something at once.

All this, he could buy with no issues. Exasperation and dread, sure, but he didn’t really doubt it all for more than a second.

But, as is with everything, there was always an exception.

Norse myth wasn’t something that was exactly new to Steve upon coming out of the ice and into the new age. He’d never intensively studied it, or even pretended to care about half of it, but even he could recognise a name like ‘Thor’.

Thor was said exception.

This was something that Steve simply refused to suspend disbelief for — which was ironic, considering that that was the only thing he actually recognised from his own time.

He’d seen the man’s picture, read his file, saw some clips on how he supposedly saved a Mexican town from being annihilated, but he’d only ever been humouring the people who were trying to get
him caught up. They could tell that that was what he was doing, too, and it amused him to see how annoyed they were by it. Files, pictures, videos — all of that can be faked and staged now. Erskine was the smartest man he’d ever known, and he’d never believed in it, so neither would he.

That was until he’d been told with absolute seriousness that his first mission out of the ice was to bring down a supposed Asgardian war criminal named Loki.

But he’d only really admitted true defeat when he’d finally seen Thor firsthand, barrelling out of the sky on a bolt of lightning, with Mjolnir in hand.

He hadn’t exactly been comforted by the reassurance his handler gave that Thor wasn’t a God, per se — no, of course not. He was just an alien superbeing from an advanced, ancient, superior race, who travels to different realms of the universe by a rainbow bridge made of light and magic. Of course.

Steve fucking hates the future sometimes.

When he’d arrived at Stark Tower after their expedition to Germany, Thor wasted no time in snatching up the sceptre and turning it this way and that, examining it loosely.

He’d then looked up, gave a grim smile, and said three words:

“The Mind Stone.”

To Thor’s apparent dissatisfaction, this dramatic announcement had invoked only five blank faces.

“Before the creation of the universe,” Thor explained slowly, “there were six singularities. Following the universe’s formation, these singularities were then forged by the Cosmic Entities into stones — sometimes called the ‘Infinity Stones’ — to represent the makeup of all the different aspects of the universe.”

They all gaped at him, absolutely baffled, and Thor seemed a little more gratified with that reaction.

“This here — this is one of those six Infinity Stones. They’re the greatest power in the universe — it’s unparalleled in its destructive capabilities. I believe you’re familiar with our last encounter with one?” Thor inclined his head at Steve, whose eyes widened disbelievingly.

“The Tesseract?”

“The Space Stone,” Thor corrected. “The Tesseract was merely its containment vessel.”

“Do you know why the Red Skull was disintegrated when he touched it?” Steve asked. It was a question that had irked him for years.

Thor shrugged. “It would only be my best guess, but I’d say that it takes severe power to be able to wield the stones — my dear Jane became quite ill when she was exposed to the Aether. Then again, it is the Space Stone, so he may have just been transported by its power to another realm.”

Steve very much did not like the sound of that, but before he could probe for more information, Tony cut him off.

“So, wait, I’m sorry, what?” Tony asked, holding a hand up and shaking his head, clearly confused. “Are you saying that the greatest power in the universe is in the form of a handful of little glowing rocks? Because that seems a little too much like a videogame solution for my liking.”

Steve privately agreed, but he didn’t say so, as Thor looked a little offended. “Wait, so we’ve got
two — what are the rest, then?” he asked instead.

“Uh, let me see if I remember.” Thor scrunched his brow in concentration, and ticked them off on his fingers. “There’s the Mind Stone, of course, and then there’s the Space Stone — your Tesseract; the Reality Stone — the Aether. Then I believe there’s the Power Stone, and the Time Stone, and the Soul Stone.” He looked very pleased with himself for remembering them all.

“What can this one do, exactly?” Steve probed, pointing tentatively at the sceptre still in Thor’s hands.

Thor gave a hefty shrug. “Lots of things,” he answered vaguely, “mind-things, one would assume.”

Steve scowled. “You know, you’re probably the most unhelpful person I know.”

Thor didn’t look too bothered by that.

“Well, we know it controls people,” Natasha said. “Is that all it does? Brainwash them?”

“No, no, that’s just what Loki used it for,” Thor said, placing a hand on the head of the sceptre almost defensively. “One use I have heard of is that it can be used to ‘complete a broken mind’.”

Steve stood up a little straighter, and Natasha met his eye understandingly, knowing exactly what he was thinking.

That stone could potentially be used to revive Bucky’s memories — undo that awful trauma and get him on his feet once again.

Tony, however, had obviously come up with his own interpretation. “Complete a broken mind — like a human mind? Or do you think it could be used in software too?”

Bruce’s eyes widened, and he gaped at Tony in shock. “Are you talking about artificial intelligence?” he actually sounded a little angry.

“Why not?” Tony said, unconcerned.

Thor seemed to think on it for a second. “Honestly, I wouldn’t know. You’re welcome to borrow it for analysis for a few days, if you’d like to find out. It’s the least I could do in return for you finding it.” Tony looked delighted, but Thor followed his statement with a stern look. “Under my supervision, of course.”

“Aw, where’s the trust? I thought we were friends,” Tony teased, but he didn’t argue.

Steve rocked forward on the balls of his feet, unsure of how to broach the question without immediately giving away his intentions. “We know it can brainwash people,” he began casually, “but do you know if it can undo brainwashing too?”

It fooled nobody.

“You mean like Metal-arm-guy?” Tony asked dryly, levelling him with a very unimpressed look.

“As an example,” Steve said faux-nonchalantly.

“You want to use the sceptre on the Winter Soldier?” Clint said, sounding testy. “The thing that turned me into a mindless killing machine — you want to use it on a guy who is already a mindless killing machine?”
“Hey, maybe the two will cancel each other out,” Tony suggested brightly. Steve and Clint shot him twin looks of sour displeasure.

“He’s not a mindless killing machine,” Steve insisted forcefully.

Clint looked like he wanted to argue, but Nat shot him a look of warning, and he gave an irritated huff instead.

“You know, we thought that you might have been the Winter Soldier at first, actually” Clint segued easily, nodding his head at Thor, who only looked still more confused by this exchange by the second.

Steve’s head snapped back, bewildered. “Thor?” He looked him up and down, baffled.

Clint shrugged. “Well, when we first caught him in New Mexico, he mowed through almost every single armed agent we had like it was nothing. Seeing something like that done by only one guy isn’t exactly common, and Shield tends to not like coincidences. The only Intel we had on the Winter Soldier’s physical appearance came from blurry black-and-white photographs taken from far away — we’d never seen his face. Thor looks like he’d be similar enough in height and build, he had same hair length, at the time. And the same level of skill in a mass takeout, if not the same finesse. Coulson actually interrogated you on what kind of military black-ops training we thought you had, didn’t we, buddy?” he slapped Thor’s massive bicep, who gave a polite smile, but still looked very perplexed.

“But the arm-” Steve started.

“Well, we’ve never actually known if the arm was a high-tech prosthesis, or some kind of armour. For all we know it comes off and on again in between missions.”

“It doesn’t,” Tony said, sounding a little harrowed. “Trust me, that thing was soldered into his skin. I’d say his real arm ends about… here?” he levelled a hand about midway up his bicep, just under his deltoid.

Steve hadn’t known that. He stared at Tony’s hand in dismay, feeling nausea creep in at the image.

“I’d like to get him in for some x-rays,” Tony continued thoughtfully, “no way he’s supporting that thing through unreinforced muscle and bones. Maybe he’s even a third attempt at the experimental liquid metal ‘Weapon X’ process from the 70s.” He sounded far too excited by this idea, and he inclined his head considerately at Bruce, who only shrugged cluelessly.

“No, the Winter Soldier predates that,” Natasha said.

Tony looked puzzled, and he wagged a forefinger in front of his lips considerately. “See, there’s another thing I don’t understand: I’ve seen his face — it’d be a real stretch to say he looked older than thirty. How is this case so old if he’s so young?”

“Can we focus please?” Steve interrupted quickly, ignoring Natasha’s pointed glance at him. “Thor, do you know if it can be done?”

Thor gave a hesitant look. “I cannot be sure. Certainly one would think so, in theory, but the Mind Stone is unpredictable.”

“Would it be worth the risk?” Steve pressed on.

Thor gave another shrug. “It would depend on how deep the control lies.”
“I’d say pretty damn deep,” Clint muttered darkly, eyeing at Natasha’s left shoulder, where Steve knew there to be a bullet hole scar — the second one inflicted on her by the Winter Soldier.

“You’d need to *find* the guy first, Cap,” Tony reminded him. “Either way, I have first dibs on the pretty rock.”

Steve rolled his eyes.

There were two things Bucky was starkly aware of when he blearily woke up:

Firstly: it was the first night in a long time he’d allowed himself to sleep and didn’t have any dreams — flashbacks, nightmares, or otherwise. He had a very high suspicion that Wanda was behind it.

Secondly: The twins were giggling. This couldn’t be good.

He opened his eyes, sat up, and immediately set a suspicious glare on the both of them. They stopped giggling at once, only to look at him, snort, and resume their giggling even harder.

“What’s the joke?” he said, groggy and annoyed.

Wanda gave a sympathetic look, her lips pressed together to smother more laughter. “You have been asleep for almost thirteen hours.”

“And you look like it too,” Pietro made a halo motion around his head, pointing out Bucky’s wild hair, which had conformed to the shape of his pillow and stayed like that.

Bucky scowled, and tugged his hair into what he hoped was a far less amusing shape.

“Thirteen hours?” he said, directing an accusing glance at Wanda, who shrugged and raised her hands in a gesture of surrender.

“I had nothing to do with that.”

He gave her a doubtful look.

“I mean it! All I did was... help shut off your dreams,” she admitted sheepishly. "But you slept for that long all on your own!"

He gave another disapproving grimace, but couldn’t really bring himself to scold her. Honestly, he was grateful for the lack of dreams — the quiet in his head had probably been the most peaceful night he’d had since 1942.

He groaned as he swung his legs over the side of the bed, his back stiff, and his arm aching. He pressed a thumb into the jagged scar tissue at his metallic shoulder, running it up and down over the seam from shoulder to armpit in an attempt to soothe the soreness.

When he looked back up, the twins were both staring at him with matched expressions of concern, their lips pressed together, eyes following the trail of his thumb worriedly. He dropped the hand and summoned up a fake smile in an attempt to ease their nerves, but he could tell it didn’t really work.

“Does that always hurt?” Pietro asked quietly.
Bucky shrugged apathetically. He threw his shoulder in a slow circle, and then again in the opposite direction. “Sometimes.”

Which was mostly true, but there was always some part of him that was in at least a little pain. If it wasn’t his arm, it was his spine, or his sternum, or his replacement shoulder blade. Something was always being strained under the pull of the arm’s immense weight.

“How long have you had it?” Pietro asked.

Bucky shrugged again. “I don’t know,” he said.

It was a lie. He knew for a fact that he’d gotten it in 1951 — it was one more of the memories that always tended to resurface quite early on upon coming out of the ice. Both the surgery itself, and his first meeting with Fennhoff, when the man had jokingly thrown out there that he hadn’t even known the date until quite recently.

But he wasn’t really sure if he wanted to delve into his past to these kids yet. Not only because he didn’t completely trust them yet, but because he didn’t feel that he was (or perhaps would ever be) in a place to talk about it.

Besides, knowing himself was bad enough — passing that trauma onto others, particularly ones as young as they were, was worse. Far worse.

“Can you take it off?” Pietro probed.

Bucky’s lips quirked wryly at the idea. “No.”

Wanda elbowed her brother with a sharp look, silently berating him for asking so many questions.

Pietro ignored her. “So you are stuck with it forever?”

Bucky shrugged again. “Well, I guess you could say I’ve always got a trick up my sleeve,” he said evenly.

Pietro blinked, visibly surprised at Bucky actually making an attempt at a joke, and then threw his head back in laughter, slapping an open palm on the table.

There. That was better.

“I didn’t know you could be funny, Pops,” Pietro said, voice full of mock-wonder.

Bucky huffed, and rolled his eyes. That stupid-ass nickname will be the fucking death of him, he swears.

Pietro lit up even more at his reaction.

“Breakfast time?” Wanda asked, stepping up from where she sat at the rounded table, and coming to the kitchenette. She peered thoughtfully inside of the mini fridge, where Bucky had stored their limited food stock. She pulled out a carton of a half-dozen eggs.

“Yes please!” Pietro called with a pleased grin.

She glared at him. “You’ve had two servings already. We’re running out of eggs.”

“I am a growing boy,” he argued, that dumbass grin never budging an inch, “I need food to live.”
Wanda gave him a very irritated look. “Pops gets first serving. And no more eggs for you, only toast,” she compromised indulgently, and cracked one egg into the flimsy frypan on their hotplate.

Bucky, who had opened his mouth to politely decline, closed it, figuring that it would be more impolite to refuse now that she’d gone ahead and started it anyway.

When she happily presented his plate of breakfast to him (one egg and a slice of buttered toast cut up into strips), he snorted before he could help himself — a sharp, sad bark of laughter that startled both of the twins.

Mama Rogers used to cut his toast like that with his eggs whenever he stayed over for the night. ‘Little soldiers’, she’d called them, and then told him very seriously to dunk their heads into the egg yolk before he ate them.

He stifled the memory away to somewhere for him to examine later on, and shook his head at the twins, dismissing their looks of confusion.

For a few minutes, he and Pietro both ate in silence with Wanda, who sat by them and absentmindedly braided a strip of hair, looking bored.

When he finished his meal, he set his utensils down, and cleared his throat, summoning both of their attention.

“I need to know what the both of you are you planning to do,” he said.

They looked at each other.

“What do you mean?” Pietro’s brow furrowed, looking at once on edge.

“I mean, where are you planning to go?”

“You’re getting rid of us?” Pietro demanded, sounding both outraged and genuinely upset.

“I’m not getting rid of you,” Bucky reassured lowly, “but you have a family, don’t you? Back in your village?”

The twins looked at each other again. Bucky was beginning to really hate those weird silent conversations the two often shared.

“We were orphans,” Wanda shrugged, sounding unconcerned.

“And our village was devastated after the Hydra raid — we do not know if there would even be anything to go back to,” Pietro added sadly.

Bucky exhaled a long stream of breath, sympathetic, but still apprehensive. “The life I lead isn’t something I’d share with two children if they had an alternative.”

“We are not children,” Wanda said, narrowing her eyes in resentment.

Which… Bucky couldn’t exactly argue. They were, legally, adults, after all. But he still didn’t like it — they were too young to be dealing with this kind of shit.

“The hotel room — it really was just for the comfort of the both of you for a few days,” he warned, “I can’t afford to keep it up, especially if you end up tagging along with me. They won’t always be safe, or even comfortable conditions.”
Pietro inclined his head excitedly at that last part. “You’d let us travel with you?”

Bucky frowned, annoyed that they weren’t taking this seriously enough. “I mean it. It’s dangerous.”

“But you’d let us come with you?” Pietro reemphasised.

Bucky sighed. “I can’t leave you alone — especially if Hydra’s out looking for you,” he confessed grudgingly.

The twins’ faces fell, as if they hadn’t actually considered that.

“But there are alternatives,” he added quickly, “places where you’d be safe.”

“You own a safe house?” Pietro asked, sounding intrigued, if a little amused by the idea.

“No. But there are others — people who can keep you protected. People who you can trust.”

“People as trustworthy as you?” Wanda demanded.

Bucky wanted to reply ‘yes’, but couldn’t. Because as much as he was beginning to remember Rogers, and however much he’d appreciated Stark’s help when he was in need, he still didn’t really trust them. They were good people, and they did a lot of good for the world, but they were also people who had worked as spies, and abetted in the keeping of secrets, and hurt people who got in their way, either directly, or by contribution to an organised effort.

Bucky was obviously no better, but at least he knew that he could be aware of his own motives — Rogers and Stark’s were anyone’s guess, beyond general altruism. And in Bucky’s experience, nobody was ever purely altruistic without some kind of ulterior motive behind it. Nobody.

The twins took note of his pause, and both looked greatly unappreciative of it.

“I can’t move on without knowing that the both of you are going to be safe,” Bucky admitted quietly, almost afraid of their response. “With me, you’ll not only have the people who are out looking for you on your tail, but also the people who are out there looking for me. And if I’m honest… I don’t trust myself, not completely. I’m temperamental, and I’m dangerous. There’ll always be the chance that I’ll lose control, and that I could hurt you without meaning to.”

Pietro looked like he wanted to roll his eyes, but Wanda only leaned forward, placing a gentle hand over where his were clenched atop the breakfast table. She levelled him with the most earnest look Bucky could ever remember being at the receiving end of, aside from Rogers.

“You saved us,” she insisted forcefully. “You could have left the both of us there to die — or even dropped us off on our own in the middle of nowhere at the first chance you could. But instead, you do even more than you were obliged: you give us clothes, you give us a warm bed, you feed us, you make us feel safe.”

Bucky looked away, face heating as he remembered their conversation on the balcony the night before.

Wanda leaned in further, her hair falling in a curtain over the right side of her face, shielding it from Pietro. When she spoke, she did so in a murmur, making sure that her brother couldn’t hear. “If you won’t go back to him, then please, at least let us make sure you are not alone.” Bucky looked up at her, and she held his gaze. “I know you remember what you told him. And it is still true, even for you: you may be able to get by on your own, but you don’t have to.”
Bucky withdrew his hands from hers with a heavy breath, and then cleared his throat. “Fine,” he relented. “Is there anywhere they’d be looking for you first, so we know where to avoid?”

They both looked delighted.

“Home, I guess,” Pietro said, with a happy little shrug, looking completely unconcerned. “Near our village.”

“Bulgaria,” Bucky mused, pursing his lips. “Alright then, we’ll need to make sure that we get out of Europe completely. And we need to do it undetected — pack your things.”

He stood, ready to pack up his few belongings and hit the road. The twins followed, looking baffled.

“Where are we going?”

“America,” Bucky said, not really knowing that he was going to say it until the words were already out of his mouth.

“And what do we do once we get there?” Pietro asked, sounding expectant.

Bucky made a noncommittal gesture, honestly completely clueless as to the answer to that particular question. “We’ll figure it out when we get there, I guess.”

Perhaps he’d take them both back with him to Brooklyn, so that he could find more information on his family. No doubt their abilities would come in useful in that regard somehow.

He balled up a pair of sweatpants from a pile on the floor, and threw them into his duffle bag on the foot of his bed.

“Great,” Wanda deadpanned, “I’m fulfilling my childhood dream: wandering aimlessly around the world with two sarcastic, long-haired hobos.”

“Two handsome, sarcastic, long-haired hobos!” Pietro grinned, and slung an arm around Bucky’s shoulders.

“If you say so,” Wanda responded dryly, rolling her eyes.

Bucky smiled, and continued lobbing clothes into his bag.

“As a scientist,” Tony said, “I’ve come to the conclusion that just because I can do something, doesn’t mean I should.”

“You’re not a scientist, you’re an engineer,” Bruce said irritably.

“Don’t be such a buzzkill.”

“You gotta be fucking kidding me,” Steve said, staring bitterly at the robot-shaped hole in the wall of the tower.

Tony gasped, hand going to his chest. “Captain, I’m surprised at you — what would the children say if they heard such potty-mouth language from you?”
“Go fuck yourself,” Steve responded sharply, earning a snort from Natasha.

Steve felt purely justified in this reaction. It’s not like he’d overreacted by lifting Tony up by the throat like Thor had — he was just pissed. Understanding, yes, sympathetic, yes, but still pissed nonetheless.

“I can’t believe you, Tony,” he said, squeezing the bridge of his nose tightly.

Tony made an indignant noise. “It’s not like I meant to-”

“Of course you fucking meant to, I watched you do it. Just because it didn’t turn out the way you wanted, doesn’t mean you didn’t mean to do it. This was your fault, Tony.”

Tony’s gaze fell, looking chastised, and Steve actually felt a little guilty at that one.

To be fair, it wasn’t like Tony could have predicted that the stone at the centre of the sceptre was one that could freely think and reason on its own; it was alien, after all.

And it wasn’t like anyone could have predicted that not only was the Mind Stone compatible with artificial intelligence software, but that it could literally channel itself into the operating system and possess it like some kind of fucked-up science-fiction ghost — taking complete control of the Iron Legion robot it had been uploaded into and infecting its system almost without any intervention at all.

And it was even more unpredictable that said Mind-Stone-powered artificial intelligence would then be perverted by the Iron Legion robot’s original directive to protect humans and wipe out any oncoming threats to humans at all costs by coming to the conclusion that humanity itself was its own greatest threat, and must therefore be destroyed.

Even better, however, was the fact that, because the Iron Legion robots operated in a hive-mind system, there now wasn’t just one of them — there were twelve.

So yeah, there couldn’t possibly have been any way for Tony to predict all of that in advance, but Steve still reserved the right to be pissed, okay? Good intentions be damned. It had been a very long few days, and now evil robots were flying around the city trying to blow people up.

“What were they made of, anyway? Bullets just ricochet right off of them,” Natasha said, sounding more annoyed about her useless attacks than the robots themselves.

“Well, the Iron Man suits are made of a gold-titanium alloy, which isn’t a hundred percent bulletproof, because the weight of a human pilot limits how much the suit itself can weigh before it can’t fly anymore. Since the Iron Legion bots didn’t have to worry about that, I was able to use a heavier substance that would limit external damage, and still be able to stay in the air. And because they didn’t have a human host inside them to be careful of — all those squishy parts, you know—”

“Tony,” Steve said warningly.

“Adamantium,” Tony quickly amended. “There’s a little of it in your shield alloyed with the vibranium to help it hold shape. It’s the closest thing to vibranium we have in the modern world.”

Steve smoothed a hand over the edge of the shield possessively.

“You didn’t install a failsafe?” Clint said, mopping up his bloody forehead with one of Tony’s cleaner work rags.
“Of course I installed a failsafe,” Tony said, offended, “but the AI disarmed it. Apparently the Mind Stone has given it enough awareness to be able to mess with its own hardware, as well as the OS software.”

“So what do we do?” said Bruce.

Everyone looked at Tony expectantly. They could see his eyes flickering back and forth as he tried to work his brain around a solution, and came up with nothing.

Steve sighed. Pulled out his phone.

“You’re calling someone?” Clint asked incredulously. “Who the hell do you know who’ll be able to fix this?”

“I’m not fixing anything,” Steve replied tersely. “I’m calling in Sam. The more people we have for this firefight, the better — especially people who’ll be able to get these things while they’re in the air. Tony, you should let Colonel Rhodes know, too. We’ll need everyone we can get.”

“Roger that, Rogers,” he turned his face to the ceiling, “hey, Jarvis, would you give the good Colonel a call and tell him that evil robots are destroying the city?”

“Again, sir?” Jarvis said drolly.

“Do you know where we can get Adamantium bullets?” Steve asked Natasha as the phone began to ring.

She nodded uncertainly, but before Steve could probe her for more information, Sam picked up.

“Hey big guy, you got any new leads?”

“Not today Sam, sorry, listen — I need you and your wings in New York as fast as you can.”

“Something up?”

“I don’t know, Tony, is something up?” Steve called over his shoulder.

“I said I was sorry!” came back as his response.

“Can’t ever leave anything glowing and mysterious alone.”

“Did you find a cursed amulet in that castle?” Sam said, sounding humorously unbothered by this. “’Cause if it’s a cursed amulet, I owe my sister a twenty for believing in that crap.”

“It’s a sceptre, actually. Still looking into whether or not it’s cursed.”

“With our luck, I’d put money on it actually ending up being cursed.”

Steve smirked. “We’ll see you in a bit, Sam. Bring bullets.”

Sam gave a weary sigh.

Chapter End Notes
Please comment and kudos!
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bucky Barnes was cold.

Even before his encounters with the cryostasis chamber, and the long missions in the Russian snow, he’d always hated winter. He hated the biting chill, and the uncontrollable shivering. Hated being sick, and worrying about caring for the sick — usually his sisters, or Rogers. Nothing good was ever associated with the cold for him, and he hated that fact.

Just as he remembered it in his patchwork recollections, New York was freezing. The twins had teased him for shoving his hands in his coat pockets and ducking his face behind his collar — being from Bulgaria, they were suitably unaffected by the cold. Bucky wasn’t about to tell them that he was probably more used to it than they were, having spent a fair majority of his life in Russia when he wasn’t literally frozen in ice, so he didn’t retort to the teasing digs.

New York was simultaneously the best and worst place to hide out in. Worst, because there were so many people — presenting far greater opportunities to be recognised; best, also because there were so many people — it was easier to remain anonymous when you’re just another empty vessel among a sea of faceless strangers.

The twins, to his surprise, were able to blend in far easier than he’d initially thought they would. After years without any contact to anyone who wasn’t either a captor or a fellow prisoner, Bucky had figured that they would become easily overstimulated by the onslaught of people they were able to interact with now that they were somewhere so densely populated. However, while the twins were quite sociable, and didn’t exactly shy away from talking to strangers when they could, they knew when to keep their heads down and their mouths closed.

And despite Pietro’s tendency to complain a lot, he hadn’t uttered a single word about their living conditions, whether it was about the shitty places they had to squat in, or the food they ate. Pietro seemed to appreciate that Bucky was doing his best, and Bucky was grateful for their cooperation. Finding enough resources for food for three instead of one turned out to be far less of an issue than Bucky had originally foreseen, too — Pietro’s handy ability to zip out of places undetected meant that he was able to shoplift groceries whenever they were low. Bucky never asked him to — feeling a nagging sense of wrongness at the idea of asking someone to steal for him — but Pietro seemed to realise this fairly quickly, and now did so without prompt (although Bucky had a sneaking suspicion that it may have also had something to do with the fact that Bucky only ever didn’t chastise him for eating nothing but frozen meals and candy if Pietro was the one risking himself to get them in the first place).

As a team, they functioned quite well, with only one exception toward the beginning, after they’d arrived in America.

They’d needed to come by airplane. Acquiring fake identification was never easy, but it helped that Bucky had contacts leftover from Hydra who weren’t actually affiliated with the organisation itself — merely places and people who regularly conducted shady (but quality) business without asking too many questions. They’d had to travel into the German capital in order for him to find the man he was looking for: a dealer in counterfeit identification, usually for illicitly smuggling people in and out of the country (which, Bucky realised, he actually was technically doing).
Bucky had only remembered why he knew of the man when he’d approached him in person — and the man was, to say the least, very unhappy to see him.

He’d had a mission in Berlin in the early 2000s: a covert assassination of some politician — Bucky didn’t really care enough to try and work out who it had been. Afterwards, instead of coming to him with a transport vehicle and a shot of sedative before being returned to cryo, his handlers instead took him to this place in order to flank them while they roughed this guy and his business partner up. They hadn’t seriously injured them, really, but they had scared them — which was probably their initial intention anyway. When he’d asked why, the only answer he’d got was ‘disloyalty’, which could mean a great many number of things in Hydra’s book.

So yeah, he was probably a little entitled to refuse Bucky business. Entitled also to lash out and literally spit in Bucky’s face, shout that he was a monster.

Bucky had only frowned, and wiped away the spit on his cheek with the back of his gloved left hand.

There it was again: monster...

Pietro had reacted very negatively to seeing Bucky treated this way, and had shoved the man backwards, yelling at him in rapid-fire German. The man had shoved him right back, and shouted with an equal intensity.

They only stopped when that curious red substance Wanda’s abilities emitted floated through their ears, illuminating their eyes and making their jaws go slack.

“Calm down, both of you,” she snapped. The redness faded, and they both shook their heads to clear them.

“I can pay you.” Bucky said softly, almost pleading. “I have my own identification, I just need some for the children, please.”

Wanda and Pietro had scowled at him for calling them ‘children’, but seemed to understand that he was only doing so to drum up sympathy, so they said nothing.

The man snorted. “You think I’m going to deny you service? That I even can? Hydra may be pretending to be dead to the world, but you and I both know better. Cut off one head, two more takes it place.” He made a snipping motion with two fingers, and said it so bitterly that Bucky thought that he might spit in his face again.

Bucky handed him a fistful of Euros, and the man snatched them out, shoved them in his pocket, and jerked his head: a reluctant invitation inside.

The aforementioned confrontation had come in afterwards — when they’d arrived at the American airport following a long flight from Berlin.

An officer who collected their passports had squinted at them suspiciously, and turned the passport this way and that, obviously seeing some irregularity that had been overlooked. Before he could open his mouth to say anything, however, more of Wanda’s illuminated red cloud wafted through the man’s head, and his expression turned dreamy and docile.

“There is nothing suspicious about our identification,” she said.

“There is nothing suspicious about your identification,” the man repeated cheerfully.
"You will step back, tip your hat to us, and wish us a good day before sending us on our way."

The man’s face split into a wide smile, and he did exactly so. Bucky furtively ushered the twins away, and Wanda dusted her hands off, looking smug.

Once out of view of the public, Bucky whipped around to stare at her in muted outrage.

Wanda made some wavy hand movements in front of her face, looking quite pleased with herself. “These are not the droids you are looking for.”

“Damn it, Wanda,” Bucky smacked her hands down, and scowled, “Don’t do that. Don’t ever do that — to anyone, you hear?”

Wanda looked shocked, then hurt, and then defensive, all in the space of under a second. “I got what we wanted, didn’t I?” she snapped. “He let us through!”

Bucky ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “There are other ways,” he said with a very forced calm, “of getting what we want other than having you get inside people’s heads that way. Nobody deserves that. Please, Wanda, it’s important to me that you never do that again.” He sounded like a parent scolding their child, and he hated himself for it, but refused to back down nevertheless. He was right, damn it.

Wanda’s peevish expression turned into dawning comprehension, and then absolute horror. She flushed indignantly. “I wouldn’t… I’d never…”

“I know,” Bucky said quickly, placing a gentle hand on her slight shoulder in reassurance, “hey, I know.”

“I wouldn’t…”

“Hey,” Bucky wrapped the hand around her shoulders and tugged her in for a reassuring hug. “I know you’d never hurt someone that way, Wanda. Not on purpose. But it’s important for you to understand that with powers like that, it can be easy to… well, to become careless. There are ways of getting our way without having to force anybody’s hand if we don’t have to.”

She nodded glumly.

“Besides,” he released her with a smirk, giving a final few pats on the back, “lying through your teeth the American way.”

She snorted half-heartedly, and gave another nod.

He turned to Pietro, expecting to see him glaring at him for his lecture. But Pietro merely stared at him with a tragic look of sympathetic understanding, jaw clenching and unclenching as if he were dying to ask something. He didn’t, after all, have Wanda’s abilities, and didn’t know Bucky’s story the way that she did.

Bucky pretended not to see it. The middle of an international airport was no place for that kind of conversation, and he was still adamantly of the opinion that he’d be better off not knowing anyway.

This whole thing was new to him — affection.

It was strange to acknowledge that the hands that had caused such devastation in the past were now being used to comfort others, even if the twins still sometimes flinched at the unexpected cold when he carelessly used his left hand to grip them.
Having been locked up, separated from each other, for five years of their lives, Wanda and Pietro were very fond of physical reassurances — or, really, contact of any kind. While Bucky only really understood the concept of such a desire, not really feeling it too much himself, he recognized that it was important to them, and made an effort to contribute to it as much as he felt comfortable with. Mostly to (and from) Wanda, usually in the form of hugs, but also to Pietro, whose expression always grew the slightest bit softer when Bucky gripped his shoulder in a familial way, pressing a thumb over the dip of his collarbone.

He’d given that same kind of reassurance to Rogers, who knew how many times, and it had inspired that same reaction — the smoothing of the line between the brows, the minutely more relaxed set of their shoulders, the release of a tense breath.

There was an apartment complex that was unfinished in downtown New York, subsequently leaving it open for squatters who were well-versed in the art of breaking into places without a trace. Having Wanda around helped greatly in that regard — she was really getting the hang of locks and keypads, and of course, since she never had to physically touch anything to manipulate it, she would never leave fingerprints.

She was also working towards teaching herself to scramble the data transferred from security cameras in a certain radius of them, however, found that it was very difficult, especially if the cameras differed in their design and quality. Bucky felt frustrated that there was no way for him to help teach her — he knew how to make it as if he were never in a place, but his knowledge regarding hacking into security systems was a far cry from *metaphysically entering into one to alter its contents*.

Christ, her abilities were cool.

Bucky didn’t like the idea of them wandering around New York alone, but of course they did it anyway — Pietro, mostly for food; either bringing back armfuls of stolen groceries for Bucky to cook with, or coming back with ready-made food from takeout joints (some of them quite frankly bizarre). Bucky had a suspicion that Pietro was attempting to try everything he possibly could while in New York, especially from the places that sold sweets. Pietro was an absolute sucker for anything with caramel, and Bucky was a total pushover in regards to trying to limit his sugar intake.

Twelve days since their arrival, however, Pietro had come bursting into the building with such a panicked force that he nearly sent the door flying off of its hinges.

Bucky immediately leapt to his feet from where he’d been peacefully reading a book against the back wall, standing to attention in a position ready to fight at a millisecond’s notice.

“Robots,” was all Pietro said for a moment, eyes wild, and his arms held out grandly.

“Robots!” Pietro tried again, jerking his hands back and forth as if he were shaking an invisible person in his grip.

“Pietro, what the hell are you talking about?” Wanda huffed, looking up from the cheap keepsake safe she’d bought from a knickknack store. She’d been trying to get the time in which she could unlock it down to ten seconds without using her hands.

“There are robots,” he gestured outside, through the windows, “attacking New York. *Flying, crazy* robots. Shooting *lasers* at people.”
Bucky stood stock-still for a moment, processing this, and then hardened his gaze again and stalked forward. “Hydra?” he asked tensely.

Pietro shook his head, paused, reconsidered, and shrugged cluelessly. “I don’t know. There were television sets in the windows of an electronics store; people were crowded around to watch them. It was a news report broadcasting from further into the city — the Avengers are fighting them.”


Pietro nodded.

Bucky pressed a palm over his forehead and dragged it slowly down his face. “Is anybody dead? Injured?”

“None as far as I can see.”

“No, I mean civilians,” although that was a huge relief…

Pietro made a grim face. “News reports did not say anything about injured. I don’t think there have been any confirmed dead yet, but there’s going to be. Last I heard they were on 7th, heading for Times Square. They showed the Captain scouting ahead, trying to clear out the streets. He looked a little beat-up.”

“Fuck,” Bucky strode purposefully over to his corner of the room, where he’d stowed his bags for a quick getaway. He quickly upended them onto the floor and began refilling one of them with only weapons, leaving behind his clothes, shoes, canned foods in lieu of guns, ammunition, and his two precious remaining cherry grenades.

“You’re going?” Pietro said, sounding incredulous.

Bucky didn’t look up from where he was inelegantly rearranging his sniper rifle so that it could fit more securely into the one bag — not willing to lug behind more than one if he had to.

“We’re coming with you,” Wanda said decisively, squaring her shoulders.

“No.” Bucky did look up this time, fixing them both with the sternest possible look he could muster.

“We can help! None of the Avengers have abilities like we do!” Pietro argued.

“No,” Bucky said again, sharply, “it’s too dangerous. We don’t know exactly what we’re facing here, and you’re both still only learning how to control yourselves — one wrong move could mean that I have to come back here alone, and I’m not risking it. I’m not risking you — either of you.”

Wanda and Pietro wore matching expressions of pure outrage, but Bucky cut them off before they could argue further.

“And if these bots are Hydra, then you’d be giving away your location to them. For all they know, you’re still in Europe — most likely dead. If I go alone, you’d still be safe.”

“And what if something happens to you?” Pietro demanded. “If they are Hydra, then it’ll be your location that you are giving away.”

Bucky shook his head. “I’ve been laying false trails for months. I can create more if I have to.”

“Why go at all?” Pietro pressed on.
“I can’t leave him to fight alone!” Bucky shouted.

Pietro looked shocked, Wanda even more outraged than before.

Bucky didn’t bother explaining himself, only rucked his duffle up over one shoulder and yanked on the laces of his boots to test their secureness. Honestly, he didn’t think he was capable of explaining to either of them why it felt so vital to be there right now — to make sure that Rogers was protected. His intention to keep his distance had been frayed to nothing the second he was made aware that he was in danger — that he’d already been hurt.

“Stay safe,” he commanded over his shoulder before he reached the door, apologetically, “stay indoors. Use your burner phones to call me if anything makes it down this far, you hear?”

The twins nodded, still glaring at him furiously with their jaws clenched and their hands balled into fists.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, and then left the building at a running pace.

This was going badly.

Like Tony had said, Steve’s shield was stronger than they were — able to cut through their metal encasing if he got close enough, however, he hadn’t yet had a chance to actually put that into practice. They were just too quick for him to get at, and mainly stayed up in the air, well beyond his reach.

The bots were smart — smarter than any of the Avengers had initially given them credit for. They weren’t exactly graceful fighters, but they were destructive, and very capable of defence. And they were quick. He’d almost lost his shield to one of them the first and only time he’d dared to fling it at them through the air. The bot had caught it one-handed, with complete effortlessness. Steve only gotten it back because the bot decided to free up its hands to use its repulsor blasters, hurling the shield so that it cut cleanly through a streetlight before open firing at Steve, who dove behind a parked car (which now sat with several smoking black holes in its once shiny paint-job).

The only disadvantage he could see that could work in his favour was that the repulsor blasters required a fifteen-second interval in between firing in order to build charge.

“Steve, incoming!” Natasha said over the coms. “I’ve got bullets. Heading your way; be on 7th in a few.”

“It’s about time!” he called back, sprinting after the four robots who blasted forward overhead.

True enough, by the time he’d made it to Times Square on foot, after clearing as many civilians as he could from the path, the Iron Legion were already being chased by most of the other Avengers. Tony and Natasha were the only ones in sight — the rest obviously on neighbouring streets, no doubt fighting as hard as they were.

Tony grappled with one in mid-air; each firing repulsor blasts at one another and zipping around like clashing insects.

Natasha fired a handgun at one at close range, ripping through its Adamantium casing again and
again, in its limbs, its torso, its head — and yet, nothing seemed to bring it down for very long. It only became more sluggish, eventually losing the ability to keep itself in the air, but remaining no less deadly.

Natasha ducked, and dodged, and dove behind cars to avoid the blasts of white-hot energy firing around her. The bots seemed to have had their aim skewed off at least a little from the inflicted damage, which was a relief. Natasha’s gear was excellent for movement in close-range combat, and her belt stored many small weapons, but it didn’t exactly have amazing protection. He should probably talk with her about wearing a helmet on the job.

Steve continued running into the fray, toward the closest bot, who ran on foot straight for Natasha. Steve dove for its knees, and sent them both tumbling to the floor.

A discharge of white-hot repulsor energy blasted to the right of his head, ruffling his hair and almost burning the tip of his ear. Straddling the body of the thing, he tucked his shield under his chest, slipping it under the bot’s jaw, and thrust it downward, effectively decapitating it.

Panting, he spared barely a few seconds to try and contain himself, shaken by such a near miss. It was a few seconds too long.

“STEVE, LOOK OUT!” he heard Natasha cry, and he whipped his head around to the left in time to see another bot tearing full-blast toward him.

Steve’s eyes widened in terror — it was coming at him too fast, he couldn’t react, he couldn’t—

The robot jerked out of midair and slammed into the ground to its right. A bullet hole marked the flawless metallic finish on the left side of its head, revealing twisted metal and sparking wires. The robot didn’t die from this exactly, but it appeared to have had its movement capabilities severely damaged. It clawed blindly at the asphalt underneath it, apparently unable to use its legs.

Steve whirled around to scan upward to where the shot must have come from, expecting to see a flash of Natasha’s red hair beside him, but instead, he caught only another glimpse of metal, and his stomach swooped so suddenly he thought he might be sick.

It was Bucky.

It was Bucky.

He was there, perched in a crouch on the railing fringing the rooftop of the huge toy store, a sniper’s rifle cradled into one shoulder, his forefinger still on the trigger.

He looked up from the scope to glare balefully at Steve, and jerked his head as if to say ‘quit staring and get on with it, Rogers!’ as another robot came roaring round the corner to Steve’s left.

Another bullet went through this one’s head, but instead of dropping near-lifelessly to the ground like the other one had, it merely stuttered, and dipped in its path, gradually lowering more and more until it came to a tumble-landing at Steve’s feet.

He righted the shield in his grip, and then sent it swiftly and sharply downwards, beheading it once more with a shower of sparks, and the electrical draining noise of it powering down.

He whirled around once more in order to see Bucky again, but found that when his eyes settled on the zigzagging railings, they were empty.

He gaped for a few moments, eyes scanning wildly over the area, trying to catch another glimpse of
brown hair, or silver metal, or a brown jacket, *anything*, but there was absolutely nothing to be found.

“Rogers!” Tony snapped, “are you napping over there? We’ve still got three of these things left!”

Natasha fired one more time into her robot’s face, and it finally slumped backwards, lifeless.

“Two!” Tony amended.

“You know, I’m feeling a little redundant here,” Clint groused over the coms line, “you haven’t exactly given me Adamantium arrowheads, after all.”

“Wouldn’t be enough — you need the right force behind something to make it go through, an arrow won’t cut it,” Tony said.

The robot Tony was fighting slipped out from his range and ducked under, heading in Steve’s direction. Steve picked up the pace to a run, bracing his shield in front of his chest.

Steve huffed. “Keep a scout for civilians then, Barton, we need everyone off the streets for- hey!”

Steve’s boots skidded on the asphalt, nearly sending him toppling over in his haste to change direction.

A civilian — a girl with dark hair and heavy eyeliner — stood in the middle of the street, looking absolutely petrified at the chaos storming around her.

“What are you doing?” Steve bellowed, rushing over to the girl at top pace in a panic.

The robot changed direction, rocked toward her with its hands raised — the telltale white-gold glow in its palms charging up, readying itself to kill. Her large eyes widened in terror at the sight; she appeared rooted to the spot — Steve wasn’t going to make it to her in time, he-

The bot suddenly crump to the ground, completely listless, the lights in its head and limbs dimming slowly, before shorting out to nothing. Steve skidded to a halt, mouth falling open in shock as he realised what he’d just seen.

The girl still had both hands raised, fingers arching and wrists rotating as a curious red, glowing substance like illuminated cloud curled through the air, into the chassis of the bot, and began ripping it apart from the inside. Her head tilted from side to side, again and again, as if mesmerised by the action of sending metallic limbs flying across the road.

Once she was satisfied by the mangled heap of metallic junk strewn across the street, she inclined her head upwards — the red substance fading to nothingness in front of her. She looked up at Steve almost disapprovingly.

“Shouldn’t you be doing something?” she prompted sharply, effectively snapping Steve out of his open-mouthed bewilderment. “How many more are there?” she asked anyway, kicking aside a dismembered hand distastefully.

“Uh,” Steve gaped lamely, “six, I think.”

“Five!” a voice behind him called cheerfully. He turned to see a tall boy with silver hair and a bluish running shirt slowing to a jog.

“Your tall friend — the one with the hair and the biceps — he’s playing whack-a-mole, and he took another one out by braining it with the big gavel,” he wheezed, digging the side of one hand in the
space between his pelvis and his ribcage as if to soothe an aching stitch. “And I think I saw the green one grab one out of mid-air — I can’t be sure, I was going too fast,” he panted again. “They’re all coming in from 10th. Brace yourself.”

Before Steve could respond, the boy zipped forwards at a pace so quick that Steve’s eyes were unable to follow him. He scooped up the girl in his arms, and darted away around the corner down 47th, leaving nothing behind but a blue-grey streak that tattooed the air around him.

Steve allowed himself another few solid moments to simply stand there, gawping stupidly.

He was too old for this...

—

He didn’t know what he was more annoyed about: the fact that the twins had ignored his direct request to stay out of the fray, or the fact that he’d actually expected them to listen.

Wanda was right on one count: the twins were far more powerful than the other Avengers. While they both lacked that superhuman physical strength that most of the others had to their advantage, they more than made up for it with their abilities — Pietro being the only one quick enough to outmanoeuvre the bots, and Wanda’s abilities bypassing the near-indestructible metal encasing with ease, and ripping them apart from the inside out.

It was the second time that Bucky was made consciously aware of how simple it was for her to dispose of whatever posed a threat — the second time that Bucky realised that he could actually be afraid of Wanda, given the right circumstances.

The first time had been in the airport, when she’d demonstrated just how easy it was for her to open up and take charge of another person’s mind — so effortlessly that it could barely be called a chore. And now, again, Bucky was realising that her method of destroying these bots could just as easily be applied to real living beings. The sight of these humanoid drones sparking and tearing and flying apart in explosions of red inspired the vivid and gruesome image of her doing the same to a human being. Bucky felt a sense of ice-cold terror at the idea that Wanda had nearly been subject to the same conditioning that he was — and realised with a shudder that, if she had remained in their control, Wanda really could have brought this all crumbling down. She really could have ensured Hydra’s victory, and they’d all have been absolutely powerless to stop her.

He’d tried to remain inconspicuous during the fray — he really had. But when he’d seen Wanda nearly blasted away by that first bot she fought, he’d completely lost all intentions of making himself scarce. He’d lept his way down the rooftop, fingertips breaking through and dragging down the solid outer wall to slow his fall, leaving five long, straight lines scarring up from rooftop to ground.

By the time it had been narrowed down to the last two of the bots, the rest of the Avengers had all completely halted in their fighting — gaping with a mixture of horror, bafflement, and absolute awe as the twins worked as a team to capture and destroy the last of them.

Bucky, however, ended up having the last.

His left hand lifted the thing up by its throat, leaving its legs flailing wildly in the air. Rogers and several of the other Avengers had all frozen in place, watching him with wide, disbelieving eyes as he slowly began to squeeze the robot’s neck.
Grunting with effort, he forced his fingers to close tighter and tighter, hearing something mechanical pop, although whether it was his arm, or the robot, he couldn’t tell. The mechanics in his bicep whirred beside his ear louder and louder with effort, until finally, finally, the thing’s throat began to concave under the shape of his fingers. He whirled the thing around in his grip, pressing it tight against his chest and fitting his right hand over its torso to grip its shoulder. He tightened his grip once more on the thing’s neck, and then with a final straining yell, jerked it upward, ripping its head up and away from its shoulders with a sound of twisting metal.

Panting, he tossed aside each part of the robot with disgust, and its body crumpled to the ground beside him listlessly.

He looked up, over to Rogers, and gave a deep, resigned sigh.

Steve stepped forward slowly, as if fearing that any moves made that were too sudden would send Bucky tearing away in the opposite direction.

“You’re here,” he whispered, fingers going slack on the strap of his shield.

Bucky ducked his head uncomfortably, his jaw clenching. “Well, I’ve been watching your back for this long, I ain’t gonna quit now.”

It was the wrong this to say, and he knew it immediately, because Steve’s expression broke. He looked as ready to slump to his knees in pure defeat as he had when Bucky had been unmasked underneath the Roosevelt Bridge that day in DC.

“Buck…”

“No,” Bucky cut him off firmly before he could say anything more — before he could say something that would crumble away his resolve to nothing. “I’m leaving as soon as this is done. You won’t see me again.”

Steve’s expression only grew more devastated. “Bucky, please, I can help, I can—”

Bucky felt hot tears sting in his eyes — of frustration and hurt, because he wanted it. He wanted it so badly that it made his entire chest feel hot, and tight, and aching, but he couldn’t. He wouldn’t. Steve deserved better.

Without saying anything more, he walked onward, stalking with angrily toward the twins, who were watching them as anxiously as the other Avengers were. Their eyes widened, and they both ducked their heads as he drew himself up and crossed his arms over his chest.

He glowered at them for a moment. “Are you hurt?” he eventually asked.

They both looked at each other warily, and shook their heads no. Bucky gave an inward sigh of complete relief.

“You’re both in a lot of trouble,” he said seriously.

“You’re welcome,” Pietro groused childishly, but quailed once more under Bucky’s look.

“Buck,” Steve’s voice sounded quietly behind him, and he realised that Steve had followed along behind him. “Please, I—”

“Leave it alone, Rogers,” Bucky snapped, his back still turned to him. “You can’t help me. Go home.”
A hand suddenly gripped his right bicep, squeezing tight. “No. Not without you,” Steve said firmly.

“Just go!” Steve bellows across the blazing inferno between them, “Get out of here!”

“No, not without you!” Bucky yells right back.

Bucky wrenched himself out of Steve’s grip with a scowl. “Leave,” he demanded coldly, watching Steve’s stubborn expression fall into something hopeless and devastated.

Bucky turned on him. “Quicksilver, get your sister out of here,” he glared pointedly at Pietro, who tilted his head in bewilderment at the nickname.

Bucky jerked his head in another silent ‘go!’ and Pietro wound Wanda’s arm around his neck dutifully, and hoisted her onto his back. She ducked her head into the back of his neck and squeezed her eyes shut, taking in a deep breath and holding it in preparation before they took off in a bolt.

Bucky turned to Steve again, schooling his expression into something cold and distant.

“Stop looking for me. If I wanted to be back with you, I would. And I don’t, so just… just leave it alone.”

Without sticking around to see Steve’s face, Bucky turned, and fled.

By the time Steve thought to chase after him, he was already up and out of sight.

Chapter End Notes

Name for the Roosevelt Bridge stolen shamelessly from: tin soldiers

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“We’re fine,” Wanda bit out frostily, squaring herself up for a fight.

It was the first thing she said as Bucky walked in — she hadn’t even given him time to shut the door.

Bucky scowled, closed the door behind him, and didn’t say a word.

“We helped,” Pietro continued anyway.

Bucky sighed, and ran his metal fingers through his hair wearily. “You did more than help,” he eventually said, “you took out nearly the entire fleet by yourself.”

Wanda blinked, surprised. “You are not mad?”

“No, I’m definitely mad,” Bucky said seriously. He folded his arms over his chest and glared. “What the hell were you both thinking?”

The twins looked outraged.

“There were cameras out there!” Bucky said hotly, “there’s no way you’re not going to be on the news now — you’re probably going to be the top story for weeks; ‘Mysterious Superpowered Teens Save City’. You’re exposed now. They know about you, and they know what you can do. Do you think they’re just going to let that go? That they’re not going to try and find you? Not only that, but you’ve given away your faces, your powers, and your location all in one go. Hydra will know you’re alive now. And now not only will they be looking for you, but now the Avengers will be too.”

Wanda and Pietro looked at one another again, although now it was with a mutual look of slight concern that made Bucky inwardly sigh with relief, because they were finally getting it.

Wanda made a grim face, and then turned to him again. She took in a deep, steadying breath, as if working herself up to something, and then –

“We want to join up with the Avengers,” she said.

Bucky fell utterly speechless at how abruptly he felt the rug being pulled out from under him. He gaped at them wordlessly for a moment, blinking rapidly in an attempt to clear his mind from the sudden astonishment, and then spluttered out a pitiful response; “You… you want to what?”

The twins exchanged nervous glances.

“We helped,” Pietro eventually said forcefully. “We helped them today — and not just the Avengers. You said it yourself: we saved the city. My sister is probably more powerful than the rest of them put together,” he placed a hand on Wanda’s back proudly, “they could not have stopped them on their own — half of them did not even have weapons that could get through the chassis.”

“We do not want to spend the rest of our lives running,” Wanda continued, her voice soft. “We want to help. If we are a part of the Avengers, not only will we be able to do that, but we will also have their protection.”

Bucky only gaped at her wordlessly, trying to organise the flurry of sudden no, no, no echoing in his mind. He felt stunned, and hurt, and betrayed — which was stupid, and selfish, and he knew it,
but, *fuck*, it didn’t make it any less true.

“You think I can’t protect you?” he said in a small voice.

“That’s not what we said,” Wanda appeased him quickly. “You know how grateful we are to you — don’t think we are doing this because we want to leave you.”

“Then why?”

Wanda squared her jaw irritably, but when she spoke, it was with a carefully enunciated calm. “We… we were given these… these *abilities* to hurt people,” she eyed him seriously, “we were *designed* to cause chaos. You realised it today too, I know you did. If Hydra had had their way, we would have been made to cause more devastation than…” *than you*, she didn’t say. “But now we have another chance. These abilities are not going away — in fact, they are getting stronger still by the day. I’m going to have them for the rest of my life, and I… I don’t want them to be used to hurt people. Not ever.”

“We cannot spend our lives running,” Pietro continued. “You gave us our freedom, and we want to do something good with it. With the Avengers, we can do that — we can use our abilities to help people, instead of hurting them.”

Bucky shook his head, again and again, trying to dispel this, because he couldn’t be hearing this. He couldn’t be losing them, not now, not after he’d only just gotten them to begin with. He’d only just let himself get used to the idea that he wasn’t going to be alone anymore.

“We’ve made up our minds, Pops,” he said regretfully. “With or without you, we want to try. Although… we were *hoping* that… that it would be *with* you. We want to do this, but we do not want to lose you in the process. You can come with us,” Pietro touched Bucky’s upper arm gently. “You are a good fighter — the best fighter I have ever seen, in fact. And you *know* them, they will let you—”

“No,” Bucky said suddenly, taking a step away from them and shaking his head again. “No, I… no.”

“Why are you so mistrustful of them?” Wanda questioned, very decidedly back to being angry and defensive. “I know you know that they are good people — you went out there in the first place to have their backs and make sure they were safe.”

“And what is the deal between you and Captain America anyway?” Pietro asked abruptly, causing Bucky to stiffen, and look away from them. “You *know* him and you didn’t *tell* us?”

“Pietro…” Wanda said, a low warning.

“Did you two have a bad breakup or something, because he looked like you were about to make him cry back there.”

“Pietro!” Wanda barked.

They shared an angry look, inclining their heads oddly at each other for a moment, and then Pietro’s eyes widened in apparent understanding. “Oh,” he said softly, and Jesus fucking *Christ* Bucky hated those wordless conversations of theirs.

“We knew each other before the war. I don’t remember a lot about him,” Bucky finally admitted, ill at ease, but doubtlessly truthful.

“*War*?” Pietro demanded, and yeah, Bucky had forgotten that he hadn’t known that.
“It’s not important — I’ll explain another time,” Bucky massaged his temples, “he won’t bother us again.”

Wanda folded her arms. “And does he know that? Because I looked into his head—”

“Wanda!”

“Why are you pushing him away?” she spoke sharply, back on the brink of anger once again.

Bucky didn’t answer.

“He will not give up on you, Pops. No matter how much of a lost cause you want him to think you are. He will keep chasing you, maybe forever, and you know it.”

“He’s better off without me.”

“He loves you,” Wanda argued back fiercely, and Bucky’s throat constricted like a vice. “He loves you, and you’re running from him like a coward.”

Bucky didn’t respond — didn’t argue.

Wanda threw her hands up in frustration.

“We’re leaving within the next few days,” Pietro went on, an edge of frost to his words.

Bucky’s head snapped up, and he looked at them pleadingly. “No. Not yet.”

“You cannot keep us from going,” he snapped, that full-fledged anger making a quick return in their defence — hothead that he was.

Bucky raised one hand, looking away, at the floor, because he couldn’t stand to be subject to that damn disappointed and angry look that they were both giving him. “I’m not going to keep you from going, okay? I just… I need to go poking around a little. I need to make sure that you’re safe — that you’ll be safe, just… just not yet. Please. Not yet.”

Pietro blinked in apparent surprise, and then his expression turned back to that soft look of saddened understanding. Bucky turned away, discomfited, and swallowed thickly.

“I… I’m going out for a few hours. If I’m not home by dinner, get yourself something with the money in the safe,” he nodded at the cheap safe Wanda had been practicing unlocking over and over again.

“Pops—”

Bucky didn’t hear their response, because he fled — out the door, and racing down the hall without a backward glance. He walked at a near running pace, drawing his hood up and ducking his head.

Outside, he felt a rush of cool air hit him as the doors banged shut behind him, and he recoiled at the sensation. He allowed himself a few seconds to compose himself — screwing his eyes shut tight and forcing himself to breathe in deep, slow breaths.

He needed to do something — he needed to go somewhere, he needed to get something, he needed…

He needed a plan.
After the fallout of Shield, Steve had been left without a place to live.

Having been on the road for the past nine months, he obviously hadn’t had much cause to revisit home since he’d initially left, but he still needed a place to keep all his crap in the meantime. His apartment in DC was nice, and he didn’t hate living there exactly, but now that he knew it was laced from top to bottom with surveillance and bugging devices, as well as being under observation by his closet-spy neighbours, it was a widely agreed-upon decision between him and his teammates that it was no longer a hospitable place to live. Not to mention that since he’d last been there, there’d been the delightful addition of several bullet holes riddling the walls, as well as a nice big pool of Nick Fury’s blood staining his floor.

On explaining his situation to Tony, the man had simply scoffed, leaning back in his chair grandly with a glass of whiskey, looking a healthy mix of refined and completely pompous. He told Steve that when he’d built the tower, he’d ensured that there were a number of residential floors built in should he ever need to host long-term guests, and that he was welcome to any of them that he wanted, rent-free, sans the penthouse (Tony’s floor).

After having Tony repeatedly reassure him that he wasn’t imposing, and that the place wasn’t bugged or under any recording surveillance beyond Jarvis’s basic audio income and output for requests, Steve had gratefully agreed, and had his possessions boxed and sent over within the week.

Since he hadn’t been back there in the meantime, his belongings still hadn’t been unpackaged. His entire bedroom consisted of nothing but dust-covered boxes, a bed without sheets or covers, empty coat hangers in the open closet, and more boxes piled in high stacks. Christ, he owned a lot of crap.

Now, he stood on the balcony, resting his elbows on the smooth titanium edge of the glass barrier surrounding it. He ran his hands over his head and down the back of his neck repeatedly, almost compulsively, for several minutes, trying to reel in his breathing. Then he righted himself, and strode purposefully out, through the lounge, into the bedroom, his chest puffed out, and his chin held high.

He tore open the topmost box in the stack piled high in the closet, one that had ‘clothes’ scrawled onto the side in messy black sharpie. He upended the box onto the unmade bed, and scattered them about with one hand.

Moving quickly now he’d gathered the motivation, Steve gave the same treatment to his suitcase, which he’d merely tossed in through the door upon arriving back in Stark Tower before the robot debacle. Instead of messing them up on the bed, however, he merely distributed his dirty clothes from there into the corner, where he imagined he’d eventually put a laundry basket.

He brusquely began to stuff more clothes into the case — clean ones this time — from the mess on the bed, gaining more and more speed and momentum in his actions as his brain continued to plan and strategize more and more frantically.

He didn’t notice Sam come in behind him until he heard his voice.

“Steve, can you just- Steve. Steve. Steve, can you slow down for just a minute?”

“He’s here, Sam!” Steve insisted, almost angrily, cramming his bag of toiletries — toothbrush, toothpaste, soap, deodorant, razor, floss — into the duffle. “He’s here, and he’s probably still here. This is the closest we’ve been in months, I can’t lose him now.”
Sam sighed. “Steve, the guy’s probably already long gone by now.”

Steve was shaking his head before Sam even finished his sentence. “He had two companions with him. Brother and sister — he called one of them Quicksilver.”

“That doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means he won’t be able to run completely undetected on the fly, not if he’s taking them with him. A dark-haired man with two younger companions is an easier thing to recognise than just him on his own — someone’s bound to have seen him,” he jerked the zip on his case roughly and immediately hauled it off the bed by its strap. “They’ll either be on public transport or in a stolen car — either way, there’ll be a way to track them,” he continued in a rush, ready to hurry through the door and out of this place, but Sam held him fast, one hand clutching at his case as well.

“Steve, you heard what he said.”

“I know.” Steve said gravely, and then deflated miserably, hanging his head. “I know — I know what he said, but Sam, we still have the Mind Stone. He doesn’t know that we have a way for him to… to…” his hands shook, overwhelmed, and Sam let go of his case in lieu of putting both hands over and around Steve’s shoulders, bringing him in for a tight, reassuring hug.

“It’s okay, man, it’s okay. Just… let’s think this through a little before you go charging into action, can we? I mean, we don’t even know if Thor will let us use it again, after what happened with Tony.”

Steve gave a deep breath in and out against Sam’s shoulder, feeling marginally comforted by his closeness, but still with that tight ball of anxiety that clawed, ever insistent, against his insides.

“He remembers, Sam. Not everything — not all of it. But he remembers something.”

“I know. I heard him.” Sam released him with a final few hard pats on the back. “I don’t think Tony did though — the guy’s still confused as hell. When are you planning on telling them what’s going on?”

Steve didn’t look at him. “I don’t know.”

Sam huffed impatiently. “You at least owe Stark a goodbye,” he offered fairly. “This is his place, after all.”

Steve pursed his lips impatiently, but didn’t argue. “Are you coming with?”

Sam made an uncertain face. “Yeah, I’ll tag along, but it’ll have to be in a few days. I haven’t seen my family in weeks, and it’s my niece’s birthday. Told my sister I’d help out with the face painting.”

Steve faltered for a moment, suddenly struck by an overwhelming sensation of guilt. He swallowed. “That’s fine. Wish Janie my best, would you?”

Sam snorted, “yeah, well, it’s a shame — I was kinda looking forward to guilting you into coming along too. Captain America shows up at your birthday party, it’s bragging rights until you graduate middle school.”

Steve smiled, not really having an response beyond more guilty apologies, which he knew Sam wasn’t interested in hearing.

“Strap on your wings and fly there then — entrance like that, she’ll have bragging rights ‘till she’s in
“Yeah,” Sam gave a grin, “but I’m not the original Avenger. Anyway, you have stuff to do, go on and get out of here already would you?” He slapped Steve on the back with an open palm and gave him an encouraging little shove toward the door.

“If you want, you can borrow the shield?” Steve offered.

“Fuck your Frisbee,” Sam replied good-naturedly.

“I just don’t get this guy!” Tony exclaimed, throwing up his hands and glaring down at the disembodied head lying, unresponsive, on his workbench.

“But doesn’t look like there’s much to get,” Clint peered down at the head blankly.

“Not the Legion; Metal-arm-guy,” Tony replied snappishly, crossing both arms across his chest and pouting, still not looking up from the head. “He’s been off the radar for months running from us, and then he willingly comes in to fight alongside us?”

Clint made a considerate noise. “Would have pegged him for an ‘every man for himself’ kind of guy, to be honest.”

“And what’s with the two freaks?” Tony said louder. The more he thought, the more frustrated he seemed to get at the situation — he fucking hated not knowing things. “They’re the ones from the satellites in Bavaria, I’m sure of it. They look a little more cleaned up, but it’s definitely them, right?”

Nobody responded, but Tony wasn’t actually expecting an answer.

“Did he go in there to specifically look for them? Has he been looking for them from the start all along? Are they his kids? He doesn’t look old enough to have kids that old.”

“Winter Soldier called the boy ‘Quicksilver’. Must be a codename, I’ll run it through the database,” Natasha offered in her usual bored tone, and, without looking, dragged Tony’s monitor over to her and began typing, her long fingernails clicking against the glass finish loudly, her eyes zipping back and forth across the screen in a rush. “Although to be honest, I’m more interested in the girl.”

“I don’t have time to worry about the Wicked Witch, or whatever you’re calling her.”

“It’s the Scarlet Witch, Tony,” Rhodey said with an eye-roll.

“Whatever. I need solutions, not speculation. Can somebody call Rogers in here so we can get some damn answers? Or is he still crying into his pillow over his flighty mystery boyfriend?”

Sam snorted, and cleared his throat to cover it, smothering a wry smile into his fist. He schooled his face into something more serious. “He’s gone; he left about an hour ago. Told me he was going to say goodbye before he left, though, did he not swing by?”

Tony sniffed. “Swanning in and out as he pleases — he’s taking advantage of my magnanimity!”

“Or he just didn’t want to get probed for answers when he could be spending that time searching,” Nat said pointedly, not looking up from the flashing monitor. She frowned. “Nothing in our database
or the Hydra files about Quicksilver. Must be either hard-copy only, or more recent than the leak.”

“Of course it is — why on earth would anything be that simple.” Tony grit his teeth. “Next time I see Rogers, I’m going to strap him to a chair and interrogate him, mobster-style. I’m tired of being left out of the loop.”

Sam frowned. “He has his reasons, Tony. You know Steve’s not the type to withhold information unless he absolutely has to.”

“Yeah, the Hydra leak is proof enough of that,” Rhodey pointed out generously.

Tony inclined his head at Sam, a glint of understanding in his eyes. “You know what this is all about, don’t you?”

Sam didn’t falter an inch. “You’re not going to get anything out of me, Stark. If it was my information to give, I’d give it, but it isn’t.”

“Loyalty,” Tony spat distastefully. “You know, I’m sick of being left out of the loop.”

“I know, you’ve said so about a billion times,” Sam said dryly, “Steve won’t leave you out of the loop forever. He just needs to convince Ba- The Winter Soldier to come home with him first — then he’ll tell you all what’s going on.”

“You know, if Rogers is looking for a challenge, or a conquest or something, there are easier people to start off with than the world’s most deadly international assassin, I’m just saying.”

Sam snorted again.

“Hey, you want the head?” Tony gracelessly changed the subject, holding up the Iron Legion bot’s head and turning its ruined face toward Sam; “you can give it to your niece for her birthday.”

“Please never have children.”

Tony grinned, and turned the head back to himself, clutching it between both hands and simpering theatrically. “I’m in love!” he said in a hammy voice, “with a waltz, and a town… and a man…” he leaned in as if to kiss the head, and was cut off by several boos from the surrounding Avengers.

“The remake sucks, don’t make it even weirder,” Clint demanded.

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Four. Four false trails, each leading in a different direction. If Rogers had caught up with even one of them, it means he has time to gather up a plan without risking the chance of running into him again.

He had, at best, a few days before Rogers figured out what he was doing. Maybe weeks, if he didn’t figure it out until those trails ran completely cold.

Stark’s systems had improved since the last time he’d instigated a breaking and entering into Stark Tower, but only in the regards that security no longer slackened if the Tower was occupied at the time of said attempted break-in. It was a pain, but otherwise not totally impossible for Bucky to enter — just not through the penthouse bar window like he had last time.

There were ten empty residential floors built in to Stark Tower — only partially furnished, however,
for all intents and purposes, ready to accommodate guests at a moment’s notice. He’d committed most of them to memory last time he was here in case he needed a plan B on entering — a plan which he was now going to put into effect.

He scaled the building from the penthouse down, and chose a floor at random — the seventh one, he was pretty sure, but he couldn’t exactly be certain if there were any non-residential floors between Stark’s and the guests’ without a detailed blueprint of the building stipulating exactly which facilities were built into each floor, such as bathroom and kitchen utilities.

This floor had a simple glass sliding door separating what looked like the main room from the balcony. How simple. The door locked from the inside, and couldn’t be picked from the outside — and while the glass divider was shatterproof (a meaningless effort when paired up against the arm), it had sensors for detecting that kind of breach, were he to damage it at all.

He thought longingly about how simple this kind of thing would be for Wanda, who could have simply phased through the lock like it was nothing, but he quickly snapped out of it. He was doing this for her after all — it wouldn’t be prudent to risk bringing her to the scene of a crime at a place where she was trying to get a job. It’d make for one hell of an awkward interview, at the very least.

Eventually, he managed to carefully tamper with one of the sensors enough so that it wasn’t able to distinguish between a break-in, or a resident merely opening the door. Luckily for Bucky, it went in his favour, and did not go off when he ripped off the exterior handle in order to tamper with the lock from the inside. The lock opened passively with a small click, and he slid open the door quietly.

He furrowed his brow. There was furniture on this level, all new and practically unused. The couch still looked stiff and pristine, if a little dusty — as if it had been delivered here and abandoned, never being sat on in the meantime. For a moment, Bucky considered that perhaps Stark had merely finally gotten around to properly furnishing the residential floors since the last time Bucky had been here, but then he noticed that there were stacks of boxes piled high in the corners of the room, all of differing sizes, and with different words haphazardly scrawled along the sides.

His eyes widened as he recognised the shield resting up against the wall to his right, between two open doorframes.

It wasn’t a replica — Bucky could tell from the imperfections in the paint-job that had occurred in their last battle: big patches of metallic paint had been singed off by repulsor blasts, leaving blackened marks that inversely faded to silver.

The place was empty. What an idiot. Not only had Rogers actually left his shield behind after returning from the battle in Times Square, but he’d apparently also returned only to leave again right away. However, Bucky’s throat grew tight as he realised that the only reason for such a sloppy, hasty exit was if Steve had simply rushed in to collect his things before leaving again to find him before he disappeared.

Bucky swallowed, pocketed his pocket toolkit, and for a moment, simply stood there.

He didn’t know why he ended up doing it. Certainly, he was looking for something, but what that thing could be was anyone’s guess.

He supposed he was scouting for clues — evidence. Anything to confirm, or even remotely suggest that Rogers would indeed be better off without him. Because he was weak. Because he was selfish.

He should be leaving this floor altogether — should be attempting to break into Stark’s files, electronic or otherwise, for information. He was supposed to be scouting for Intel regarding the
Avengers, and deciding on their trustworthiness from there; not digging around in Rogers’s personal belongings like he had any right to go snooping after taking such drastic measures for months on end in order to avoid him.

And yet still, he found himself ripping off the tape to the topmost box in the stack in the living room, and began to dig through it with both hands. From there, he carried on to the next box. And then the next one. And then the next one — all the way through to halfway to the bottom of the stack before he gave up on the living room and instead entered the bedroom for a more intimate collection of things to rummage through. Realising what he was about to do, however, he suddenly snapped himself out of it.

What the fuck was he doing, acting like he had the right to do this, when he’d been actively avoiding anything to do with this man for so long? What did he expect to find?

Ashamed of himself, Bucky turned to leave, however, not before catching sight of one more stack of boxes piled high in the back of Rogers’s closet. Each of them had completely innocuous things written on the side of them (‘clothes’, ‘more clothes’, ‘books’, ‘art supplies’, ‘spare uniform’), except for one, which was completely unmarked, unsealed, and separate from the rest, partially hidden behind the closet door.

The attempt at making it look completely innocuous inspired a flare of curiosity inside Bucky’s chest. He tilted his head a little, wondering what could possibly be in there that would make it the only box out of the entire lot that Rogers had opened, other than the clothes. The cardboard flaps were crossed over one another, creased and bent like they’d been opened and reopened before. Rogers couldn’t have been here more than a few times since moving from DC — had he opened it and folded it back over again each time he’d returned? Or had the contents already been in the box to begin with, before the move?

Then he noticed a cut-off, faded blue stamp across the topmost flap, which partially read ‘Smithsonian Museum of American History’.

He thought back to all of the personal belongings he’d seen in the museum while stalking the exhibit, and was blindsided by the sudden burning desire to know what the hell Steve considered too personal to be displayed. Or perhaps it had been the museum who were the ones that considered it too personal, and had sent it back to him.

Either way, Bucky rapidly found that his shame was suddenly appallingly outweighed by his own thirst for answers, and before he could think to stop himself, he fell to his knees to fish out the box from behind the closet door.

Taking care not to rip the cardboard, he yanked out the creased box flaps from where they were crossed over one another, and pushed them down so that they would stay open and out of his way.

And there it was — another box.

Simple, and plain, but doubtlessly extraordinary in its own right. It was old — incredibly so — with a peeling, faded, bubbled finish to it. It was once probably a very attractive-looking shoebox, with a brown body and a (presumably) white lid, with an illustration of three different kinds of women’s shoes and the words ‘I. Miller’ across the top. A woman’s shoebox.

He remembered a woman — Carter, who had brown hair, big eyes, and ruby lips. She’d been his friend, he was sure of it — they drank bourbon and ate beans together by the fire. She had been a fellow soldier, or something similar at least. He’d seen her briefly before he left the US last May... He felt suddenly sure that she’d been the one to donate the box, whatever was inside. Perhaps they
were love letters to Steve, or personal trinkets of some kind. Something intimate, and personal. Loving.

Despite his theory that the contents of this box would be quite that degree of personal, Bucky found himself gingerly lifting it from the box anyway, taking special care not to damage the already aged and flimsy shoebox.

He settled, cross-legged, on the ground, and arranged the box atop his lap. For another few minutes, he wondered if he should leave — place the box back where it belonged, and go back to pretending as though he’d never found it.

It was only after taking several long, steadying breaths that he began to pry away the lid, eyes squeezed shut, before opening them suddenly as if to reveal a surprise to himself. And he gasped.

Bucky had seen his face frosted into glass, and his name carved into stone, his papers in a display case, and his wartime uniform up on a pedestal for the world to see, but this, this right here — this was his true memorial. The only memorial that had ever managed to feel truly real to him.

He ghosted his fingertips over each and every item in the box: old cigarettes, a small bottle of what was once his favourite whiskey, a flask that he felt sure had belonged to his adoptive father, the scope from his modified Johnston rifle, a battered paperback edition of his favourite Aldous Huxley novel, one of Steve’s journals…

He wondered if these items were simply what little personal trinkets he must have had with him in his pack before dying, or if they had been chosen with a series of specific meanings in mind. It wasn’t a large box, after all — they could surely only put in so much.

He eyed the cigarettes and the whiskey bottle for a moment, and wondered what the meanings of either could be.

Of course, Bucky had only ever smoked socially — liking the look of a cigarette dangling between his lips as he smirked at a lady across the room. He remembered that much. He wasn’t hooked on ‘em, like he knew a lot of people were (although he’d be lying if he said he didn’t get a real itch for them every now and then). He supposed it might have been representative of his love for female companionship, or perhaps a reminder of the times he and the boys played poker with them in the stead of betting chips. That, he also remembered.

That whiskey had been his favourite, not because of the taste (in fact, it was pretty foul stuff), but because of tradition. It was that exact brand of whiskey that he and Steve always bought for their annual viewing of the 4th of July fireworks. Cheap swill, but still — tradition.

The flask had belonged to his father — no questions as to why that was significant.

Then there was the journal.

The pages weren’t clean-cut or even, like they should be, even after the wear of age. He furrowed his brow in puzzlement, and, after hesitating for only a moment; he plucked it gingerly from the box, and wound the leather strips around and off of the soft brown book. Upon the journal falling open without him even having to lifting the cover, his eyes widened upon seeing what they were.

The pages were torn and yellowing, frayed like they’d been ripped from another source — because they were. Inside contained every one of Bucky’s favourite drawings Steve had ever done. Sketches of himself, his sisters, his parents, Steve’s mother, a few of girls who he didn’t recognise, one of an actress who Bucky couldn’t remember the name of.
And upon turning to the last few pages, Bucky started in surprise as a thick wad of paper slid out from where it had been crammed in the back — bound by several worn rubber bands.

A bundle of letters, unopened, all addressed to him.

Bucky’s breath caught in his throat.

His heartbeat, which had been steadily elevating in pace since finding the box, suddenly redoubled.

The letters were old — dry, yellowed envelopes with faded ink looping again and again to form his own name on each. He could probably once have identified who wrote each from the handwriting alone, but now, the authors of each were basically nothing more than a lucky dip. One had his full name, another had a variation his given first name: ‘Jimmy’, but most of them simply read ‘Bucky’.

A small tug on the weathered rubber band securing them all was all it took for it to completely fray and snap, falling limply to the ground and sending the letters scattering about in his lap, falling from shaking hands.

He gulped loudly, trying to regain some of the feeling back into his throat, and following this by looking up to the ceiling, closing his eyes, and taking in a deep breath in and out — trying to slow his breathing before it turned into full-blown hyperventilation. He did it again. And again. Then, after ten long, deep pulls of air, he finally felt composed enough to glance back down to the mess in his lap.

His hands still trembling, he gingerly picked one from the masses, and gave a gentle yank to the envelope flap — the dried glue giving way easily under a long silver finger.

He began to read. Once he was finished, he moved onto the next. And then the next.

Falsworth, Jim, Gabe and Morita’s letters were all basically variants of the same overall content: regret for his death, apologies for allowing Steve to meet the same fate (for those which had been written after the separating days between his and Steve’s ‘deaths’), reminiscences of the past — friendly recollections of memories Bucky had no remembrance of whatsoever.

It wasn’t until he got to the second-to-last letter in the bunch that he came across something that made his breathing stop altogether.

Jimmy,

I’m sorry

I hope

I wish

Fuck me, this is harder than I thought it’d be.

Lord knows why the hell we’re doin’ it in the first place anyway, but Jonesy said it’d be ‘therapeutic’ or some shit. I get why, but it’s not like you’re ever gonna read this. You’re dead. You’re dead. You’re fucking dead, and you’re not comin’ back.

Fuckin’ devastated the whole lot of us, you big stupid asshole. Devastated. We had plans — Rogers
even batted his eyelashes at the culinary staff in order to get you a big dumb cake for your stupid birthday, and now there’s not even gonna be anyone here to eat it.

You know, we’ve lost a lotta guys fightin’ this war. We lost Burke, and Smithy, and Slick, and that weird bony guy with the snout I know you were friendly with — Harrison, or whatever. I thought I’d gotten used to my pals droppin’ dead left and right around me, but shit if you didn’t just flip my world upside down when you didn’t get off of that train with the others.

I’ve never seen Rogers like that. Didn’t even know he was capable of it — babbling, and sobbing, and breathin’ real heavy, like his lungs had gone and shrivelled themselves back up again like you said they were when he was littler. First time I’ve ever been scared of the guy, too — it took three of us to hold him down so that he wouldn’t try to rip Zola’s head off with his bare hands. If I’m honest, part of me wishes that they’d just let him go. That little rodent deserves every inch of the hell he’s headed for. If he suffers even half as much as we did — as you did — then I’ll be satisfied.

Only one who’s had his head on right since he dragged Steve off of that train by his pits is Gabe. Just been distracting himself by being a great big nanny this whole time, the poor bastard.

Did you know Rogers couldn’t get drunk? I’ll bet you did, you little bastard. When I see you up there, the first thing I’m gonna say to you is that you’re a smarmy little con artist, and then I’m gonna stick out my hand, and you’re gonna have to dump a whole carton of cigarettes in there to make up for all the winnings I lost trying to out-drink that fathead mountain-man of yours while you watched on like a complete crook, you no-good hustler.

Christ, if you two weren’t a pair though.

You know, I didn’t know if I should write about this, but what the hell. Even if they do decide to open a dead man’s mail, what are they gonna do? They gonna drag your ass down from the heavens to court-martial you? If they do, tell ‘em that they’ll have to get in line to kick your skinny little ass — I have first dibs.

I won’t pretend to fully understand why you are the way you are, but shit if I regret not talking to you about it when I had the chance. I won’t deny, it was probably the biggest fuckin’ shock of my life when I went to wake you up from what I thought was a peaceful nap that night at the Whip and Fiddle, only to see you fiddlin’ your own little whip right there in the hotel room. I dunno who was more scared — me, you, or that skinny little bartender.

(You know, after you died, we went back there to get plastered, and the entire thing was bombed-out and burned to the ground. How much fuckin’ shittier can that situation get, huh?)

It probably doesn’t even matter now, but I never got to say it while you were alive — and if there’s one thing I regret more than you dying, it’s that I never told you that I don’t care about any of that crap. Took me a while to wrap my head around the idea, that’s all. You know me; I’m a total dolt. Dum Dum Dugan. It’s right in the name (the name you gave me, if memory serves). By the time I’d picked my jaw off the floor and processed it all, it was too late to bring it up again, but I wish I had. You might not have cared what I thought, but I guess it’s important to me that you know that I don’t care what choices you make. What you are, who you fuck, whatever. I don’t care. I don’t care that you’re a queer.

I know I ain’t your best friend — that’s Steve’s job, and he’s damn good at it, too.

So I might not be your best friend, but shit if you ain’t mine, Jimmy-boy. And I love your big pansy-ass the same either way. (Although maybe not the same way you love pansy asses, amirite?)
And I want you to know that I kept my promise to never tell Steve. I guess that probably doesn’t matter, in the grand scheme, but I know that it was important to you at the time. Not that he’d’ve loved you any less either, either way. The kid’s as damn forgiving as God — and I say that with the absolute belief that God would forgive you too. I know it. I don’t even know if he’d’ve judged you for it in the first place — God or Steve.

I doubt he’d’ve judged you if he knew that you loved him, either. Don’t try to deny it, neither — once I knew, I couldn’t stop knowin’. And I saw it every time you looked at him, you big fuckin’ turtledove. I can’t be sure if it’s in the same way that you do, but the big oaf loves you too.

I don’t really know what else to say. I love you, I miss you, life’s never gonna be the same without you. Maybe I’m a big fuckin’ sap, but it’s all true.

I miss you like crazy, Jimmy-boy. When I get up there, you owe me cigarettes and a beer, and I owe you big fat glass of bourbon. You can quote me on that, you hear?

- Dugan

P.s: You’re still wrong, by the way — the best beer is Budweiser, not Schlitz. Hopefully ascending to a higher plane has granted you a superior enlightenment, and you understand this now.

P.p.s: You were right about the bourbon though — American do make it best.

Bucky’s eyes stung with tears, and his hands shook even more violently — however, it wasn’t just with nerves this time, but with overwhelming anguish, and anger. He hated this — hated the fact that a man so close to him was only someone he remembered passing glimpses of. In the timeline of his life, he supposed that his interactions with the Howling Commandos weren’t for a great portion of that time — two, three years, maybe — but they were important. They were important to him, and they’d been stripped away, made invisible in his brain as if they were glossed over with thick coats of whitewash. It was cruel enough that the friend they once thought dead had been resurrected without their knowledge, that he’d been alive this whole time without any of them knowing. But it was even crueler that now they would never know at all — about him or Steve — all of them having died before any of this shit had gone down.

Except for Dernier. Frenchie. Him, Bucky had killed first-hand. He knew — he had seen him with his own eyes, and Bucky hadn’t even recognised him until it was too late. He’d murdered his friend, and he’d never be able to take that back or atone for it.

He tossed his head back, trying once more to forcibly steady his hitching breath, blinking tears out of his eyes. Gently, he folded the letter back up and slid it neatly back into its envelope.

There was one more left.

He could tell right away that it was from Steve — and not only because Steve was the only one who ever called him ‘Buck’, but because the letter was new. Clean, pristine white cartridge paper, written with a smooth ballpoint pen, rather than a fountain pen or pencil. The envelope wasn’t yellowed and creased and smudged, and it wasn’t brittle and frayed with age.

He tore it open without preamble, moreso desperate than eager in his movements. His hands
continued to tremble as he began to read.

_Buck,_

_I wasn’t there when the guys decided to each write you a letter._

_We didn’t have a whole lot of time between you dying and me ‘dying’, but the boys managed to fit it in somehow. Gabe was the one who suggested it — said it’d give us closure, since we couldn’t have a funeral. I didn’t want to. I don’t know if it’s because I thought it was pointless, because you weren’t coming back, or because I was still in denial about the fact that you weren’t. But I know you’re not coming back now. Nobody is._

_I never spent a lot of time thinking about the future. Especially not this far into the future. Every now and then, I’d think about what would happen after the war, but not really in depth. I didn’t know where I wanted to live, or what I’d do once I wasn’t a soldier anymore, or if I wanted a family. I mean, I know Peggy might have, but you know how terrible I am with kids, especially babies. I know I wanted to marry Peggy. I know I wanted to stay in contact with the guys, even after we parted ways. I know I wanted to have you by my side for the rest of my life._

_But the future’s not what I thought it’d be. The future is confusing. It’s bright, and daunting, and it’s just too fucking busy. On top of all of that though, I don’t get to have any of the things I knew for certain that I wanted for myself. I don’t get Peggy. I don’t get the guys. And I don’t get you._

_I suppose New York is one of the busiest places in the world, though — maybe I’ll like it better in DC. Maybe it’ll be less overwhelming. I guess we’ll see._

_The only person still alive from our time is Peggy, and… well, let’s just say that it’s heartbreaking to watch someone as fierce and capable as her lose control of herself like this. It makes me wonder what’ll happen when I’m old — does the serum mean that I’ll never get sick like that? Will I age right? Can I even die the natural way, like God intended, or is the only way I can die by getting killed? Is it a soldier’s death, and nothing else? Then again, nose-diving into the Arctic and getting frozen for decades on end didn’t kill me, so maybe nothing can._

_I know you’d’ve loved it, though — the future. You’d’ve loved it all, every part of it. You always knew how to roll with the punches — probably would have cracked some stupid joke, told them that it was a real funny coincidence that the game they played on the radio when we woke up was the same one I took you to for your 24th birthday._

_People walk on eggshells around me. It’s like they think that if I hear something too ‘forward thinking’ without being ‘prepared’ for it, my head’s gonna rocket right off my shoulders. I thought that I’d outgrown people treating me like I’m made of glass, but I guess it doesn’t altogether matter what I look like or how I act — there’s apparently just something about me that makes people treat me like I’m a hypersensitive child. I hate it._

_I know what you’d do — you’d definitely try to fuck with everyone. I gave it a crack, but it didn’t last long, because I can’t hold a straight face to save my life. Ended up giving up the game when I tried to convince Tony, in all seriousness, that we used to actually call saxophones ‘gobble-pipes’._

_Then again, even if you were with me, I’d probably still end up ruining it, especially if it were just you who was trying to mess with everyone. If I can’t hold a straight face when I’m doing the talking,
there's not a hope in the world that I'll be able to do it if you're the one talking. Ain't a person in the
world who can make me laugh as hard as you can, Buck. Not then, and not now. Never was, and
there never will be again.

Oh yeah, remember when Howard said he’d name his firstborn after you after you introduced him
to the French belle we met while scouting in Paris? You know, the one who kept calling me
‘Stefan’? Well, anyway, he went back on that promise, in the end. His son’s name is Tony, and he’s
a complete asshole. I can’t decide whether you’d love him or absolutely hate him.

He spends a lot of his time in a red and gold metal suit, flying around and shooting laser beams at
people out of his hands. Yes, I’m serious. We fought off aliens from New York City together — no,
I’m not kidding. Actual aliens. From outer space.

The future’s fuckin’ weird. But, like I said: I know you’d love it.

I can’t really decide on one thing when I think about what your favourite thing would be. I know
you’d love computers, and by extension, the Internet, because you have a total hard-on for
technology (don’t try to deny it. Can’t tell a lie to me, kid. I see through you like a cheap sheet.)

I know you’d love all of the new movies. I saw your face the day we saw The Wizard of Oz together
in the theatre — I thought you were gonna actually start welling up at how beautiful all of the colour
was. Well, every movie is like that now. Some are better than others, and I’m only a little way
through the collection Stark gave me.

Oh, but how could I forget to mention the dancing. Jeez, if you thought I was a dead-hoofer before,
you should see me now. You’d probably take to it like a duck to water, you coordinated bastard,
you.

So far, my favourite thing has been the coffee. I know you don’t really care so long as it’s hot and
caffeinated, but the first time I tasted Starbucks, I swear I saw stars it tasted so good. Wondered what
you’d think of coffee that actually tasted decent for once. (I don’t know how you made it so
consistently terrible — I’ve watched you make it! There’s nothing I’ve seen you do to it that should
make it taste that awful, but it always does, every time.)

Remember the summers all through the 30s, when we’d dangle our legs off of the pier and watch
people fling themselves into the ocean? Ice cream would melt over our fingers, and popsicles would
turn our tongues funny colours. We’d pool what money we had together for a pair of tickets on the
ferris wheel, and eat cotton candy off of the stick. My skin always went red and sore and peeling, but
you always just went golden. When you were a kid, you’d get a few freckles along the bridge of your
nose, but that was about it. You were always best fuckin’ friends with the sun, you bastard.

I know you hate the cold. And I know the cold doesn’t exactly get along with you either — never got
sick, like I did, but when the sun goes away, you go paler than I ever have. When we got out of
Austria, honestly, I was kind of scared of how pale you looked. Like chalk. Took weeks for you to
regain your colour.

I miss the way you look during summer, when your skin was gold, and your tongue was green, and
your hair was all salty and damp from the ocean. I hate that I never got to see that in this bright,
technicolour way I can now, now that my eyesight’s been fixed. I hate that now I never will. I hate
that my last memory of you is pale, and cold, and stark, and sad.

I know you thought I was naïve, or at least overly optimistic, but that was never the case. Since the
first day I decided to enlist, I always knew that there was the very real (and probably very likely)
possibility that I’d end up dead. I didn’t think I was naïve; I just didn’t really care. Because I knew
that if I did buy the farm, it’d all be for the greater good. For something worthwhile. And I knew that you’d be able to get along fine without me.

But turns out I was naïve, in the end. Not because I never understood that I could die, and leave you behind, but because not once did I ever consider that you would be the one to die, and leave me behind. Being alone was never something I thought to plan for.

Fuck, I miss you. I miss you more than anything — anything in the world. I can’t even begin to list the things I miss you more than, because there are just too many to count. I’d give anything — anything — to have you back. Even just for a day. Even just for a goodbye.

Now and then I’ll hear a joke, or see a movie, or listen to a song, and I immediately think ‘wow, Bucky would love this’. Present tense. And then, of course, I remember, and it’s like losing you all over again.

I miss that stench of too much pomade reeking up the bathroom. I miss your stupid trousers being left draped over everything I own after you decide it gets too hot to wear them anymore. I miss fighting you for the milk in the kitchen in the mornings, both of us in our socks and skivvies, your hair a downright tragedy. I miss drinks on Saturdays, and lunch with the Barneses on Sundays (you, Ruth, and Dot all teasing Becca about having a crush on me), and telling you how brain-dead bored I am with boiled potatoes for dinner every night in between.

I miss your teasing. I miss your shitty fucking coffee. I miss you carrying me under one arm when I annoyed you, even though it made me spitting mad every time. I miss ice cream and ocean views on the pier in summertime. I miss rooftops and whiskey and fireworks on the 4th of July.

I miss you.

I miss you so much it hurts. It fucking hurts, Buck. Every damned day.

Bucky covered his mouth with a hand. His cheeks were wet and itchy from the fat, hot tears rolling down his face. The collar of his jacket felt damp, and his vision blurred so bad that he was almost unable to make out the last few lines of Steve’s letter.

“He loves you. He loves you, and you’re running away from him like a coward.”

Fuck, he was being a coward.

This entire time, he’d been convincing himself that he was staying away for Steve’s own good — that he deserved more than a stranger wearing his best friend’s face.

But Wanda was right. Dugan was right. He couldn’t keep running anymore. He couldn’t keep shutting his eyes and running away, and refusing to remember.

He needed…

He needed Steve.

He needed to go.
The twins didn’t look surprised when Bucky came slinking back in through the door, sloughing off his jacket and dumping it gracelessly onto the marble kitchen counter. No doubt, Wanda had been keeping an eye out for him.

They both looked grim, but not blazingly angry anymore, and he was grateful for it. He felt far too emotionally drained for a fight now.

“You’re back,” Pietro said softly, sounding grateful, and they both tentatively stepped forward behind him.

Bucky squeezed the bridge of his nose, not facing them. Then, he gave a deep, hitching inhale, and turned suddenly on the spot, lunging forward to grasp the both of them by the backs of the necks, and dragging them in for a tight hug, one arm over each of them.

Pietro petted his back, apparently shocked, but Wanda hugged him back tightly. He kissed her on the top of her head, feeling grateful — so fucking grateful — to have them both in his life.

He released them, and Pietro surprised him by looking a little guilty.

“What is it?” he asked, voice thick and hoarse.

Pietro rubbed the back of his neck, avoiding his gaze. “We left the apartment. We followed him for a while. He’s looking for you again.”

Bucky gave an exasperated little laugh, and shook his head, running his fingers through his hair.

“Are you hungry?” Wanda asked. “It’s almost 3am — you haven’t eaten all day.”

Bucky gave an indifferent shrug. Without taking those huge dark eyes off of Bucky, she addressed Pietro. “Go. Get us some TV dinners from that all-night convenience place.”

Pietro opened his mouth as if to argue, but then stopped as Wanda finally looked at him. He inclined his head curiously, frowned, quirked an eyebrow, and then gave a grim nod. Without saying another word, he took off in a bolt of silver and blue.

Bucky fucking hated those silent conversations.

Wanda gave a gentle tug to his sleeve, between thumb and forefinger, gently requesting his attention. He looked back at her, and she jerked her head, gesturing to the sliding door to the balcony, and without waiting for a response, she walked, and he followed.

They leaned against the barrier with their forearms on top of the railing, not looking at each other, but instead out at the sprawling, illuminated cityscape below them. Just like they had that night in the hotel in Germany. Just like when she had told him that he wasn’t broken — that he wasn’t a monster.

He eyed her bare shoulders critically. “Aren’t you cold?”

She rolled her eyes. “Aaand the transformation is complete! Tell me, how does it feel to be my mother?”

“Oh, shut up.”

They grinned at each other.
For several minutes, neither of them spoke, merely spending those moments in comfortable silence, before Wanda softly broke it.

“Did you find what you were looking for?”

Bucky didn’t answer. Had no answer, because he hadn’t really been looking for anything in the first place. He’d known that there was nothing stopping the twins from joining the Avengers. He’d known they were trustworthy.

“I didn’t mean it when I called you a coward,” she said softly, twisting her fingers together over and over again anxiously.

“Yes you did,” Bucky said. “And you were right anyway — I am being a coward.”

She glanced up, her face unreadable.

“I’m going to join with you,” Bucky continued decisively, and she blinked in surprise.

“What changed your mind?”

Bucky smirked wryly. “Read some old letters. Got a kick up the ass from an old friend, and… you were right. I’m being cowardly by running away like this. Cowardly and selfish. You were right — you and your brother. We were given these… abilities to hurt people. Designed for chaos, all that jazz.” He watched multicolored lights dance across the gleaming silver finish of his metal hand as he clenched and unclenched it into a fist again and again. “I can’t spend my life running. He gave me my freedom, and I should be doing something worthwhile with it, not holing up in squalor trying to pretend I don’t exist. Did you know, I’m ninety seven years old?”

She made no noise of surprise, only continued to watch him with her unwavering full attention.

“I should have died in that ravine in 1945. Hell, I should have died on that table in 1943. But, instead, I’m here. I’m here, and Steve’s here, and…” he swallowed. “And I met you. All of that, it just seems a little too much like fate for me to keep sticking my head in the sand. And, anyway, I’m tired of running.”

He felt a small hand gently squeeze his shoulder, and he looked at her with a faint little smile.

“You want me to…?” she said softly, amazed.

He swallowed, and nodded. “Yes. It’s… yes.”

She smiled at him blindingly, and then, oh so gently, she slowly moved both hands up to press thin, chilly fingers to each side of his head. Her fingertips dipped into his temples, and immediately, his eyes fluttered closed.

“Don’t fight it,” she said warningly in a whisper.

For a moment, all he saw was darkness. Then, behind his eyes, there was a flash of bright, blinding red.
May 2014

“Margaret Carter?” he murmured quietly.

The old woman in her bed was not asleep — merely lying peacefully with her eyes shut, content. At the sound of his voice, however, her eyes immediately snapped open, and despite her fragility, she looked at once ready for a fight.

His face was uncovered — a doubtlessly risky move, but he was leaving the country tomorrow anyway. No point in hiding while he ran, at least for the moment.

He glanced over her small form, and held no recognition for her at all. Her face was without makeup, her silver hair curled elegantly down her shoulders, and her nightgown was clean, and unremarkable. It wasn’t until their gazes locked — that he saw those wide, brown eyes staring into his own — that a dim (but sure, so sure) sense of recognition hit him in full force.

“Bucky,” she said softly. Her tone didn’t express any of the shock or horror one would typically associate with witnessing an old comrade resurrected after seventy years of being dead. Bucky’s eyebrows drew together in confusion.

He thought back to one of the more recent of his recovered memories: his second-to-last mission before his escape, when his mask had come off, and Rogers’s mouth had dropped open, eyes growing wide. He’d looked as though the pit of his stomach had completely fallen through — like his heart had broken a thousand different ways, and he’d been gutted from the inside.

Peggy Carter showed none of this kind of confounded shock; in fact, she sounded oddly resigned, as if she knew he was coming.

“You know me?” he asked, and at once her face looked as confused as his.

“Of course — do you not know me?”

He didn’t respond, only moved closer to her, keeping his back to the walls. “I know you,” he eventually said, quiet as ever, and she nodded, placating.

It was a lie, of course. The only things he remembered about Margaret Carter were either from her cameos in the wartime newsreels he’d found, or the exhibits in the Smithsonian — either depicting her as the subject, or listing her name as a contributor to the conception, such as her recollections of the Commandos’ invasion into Germany in 1944. That, and her continued involvement in founding and directing Shield in the early 50s. She was a very influential woman.

“You know, if Steve catches you in my quarters, he’ll have something to say about it, Sergeant,” she chastised.

Bucky frowned. “Pardon?”

She gave a smile, her eyes glinting playfully. “Oh, don’t you go putting on that face, James Barnes. You and I both know you don’t play dumb well.”

Bucky only continued frowning, confused.
She gave a loud huff. “Alright, play it however you like, but I’ve got your number, Barnes, you hear?” she wagged her finger, as if scolding him, but she smirked cheekily. The smile dropped, however, when she noticed that he wasn’t smiling back. Her withered face turned downward in an abruptly concerned expression. “Bucky? Is everything alright?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but ended up merely closing it once more, unsure of what to say. He averted his eyes — he shouldn’t have come. What was he thinking? This was a stupid idea…

“Is Steve alright?” she tried again, sounding more concerned still. “Did something happen on the mission?”

Bucky looked away, and cleared his throat, growing more and more uncomfortable by the minute. “He’s fine. Nothing to report.”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously at him, but didn’t argue.

Bucky tentatively edged his way closer, searching her face intently as he tried to piece together some sort of memory. He knew her. He knew there was some memory lurking in the back of his mind. He could feel it niggling there like it was a physical thing — a spooked creature that would dart away the second he got too close to catching up to it.

It was obvious that he knew this woman. It was obvious she had known him. And it was obvious to anyone who may have walked in on them that she clearly was not in her right mind. She didn’t seem able to understand exactly what was happening; her brain coming to the most reasonable conclusion it could as to how he could be here by concluding that it was simply 1944, and that his presence was therefore completely ordinary. He wondered if she behaved this way around Rogers, if and when he came to visit her.

“You’ve only been gone six weeks,” she said softly, thin eyebrows drawing together in confusion. Bucky tilted his head, also confused.

“Do the others look this rough?”

He absently carded a hand through his hair, all of a sudden very conscious of how different he must look to her now. Of course, he was very much aware of the startling differences between what his reflection looked like now, compared to the aged photographs and newsreels displayed in the Smithsonian. The biggest difference he always noticed was in the eyes; Bucky Barnes’s eyes had been bright and cunning and charming, whereas his own were dark, and cold, and empty. The only photograph he’d seen in that place which had barred any resemblance to his eyes as they were now was the photograph that was frosted into the glass of his own memorial. He wondered when it had been taken — what he’d done, or had had done to him before that photograph had been taken.

“Does Steve have a beard?” she sounded oddly excited, and Bucky blinked, perplexed. “I haven’t thought to ask, but I’ve been curious as to whether he could even grow a beard.”

Bucky pursed his lips, frustratingly unsure as to how to go about talking to her.

“You don’t remember if he told you?” he asked quietly, trying to segue away from that discussion. “That I was… back?”

She frowned, clearly not understanding. “Of course not — I haven’t seen him in six weeks either.”

Bucky nodded grimly. Even if Rogers had chosen to inform Carter that Bucky had been confirmed alive, she wasn’t in a position where anybody would believe her even if she did choose to pass it
along. He didn’t know if he was more sad or grateful for that, and he felt disgusted by his own selfishness.

Carter, blessedly, seemed satisfied with his answer, and she settled back into her pillows with visible contentment.

For several minutes, they both sat in silence, until Bucky nearly wondered if she’d fallen asleep. Before he could turn to leave, however, he had one more thing to ask — the reason he’d come at all.

“Tell me about him,” he requested softly.

“Hm?” she said distractedly.

“About Rogers… about Steve,” the name felt foreign on Bucky’s tongue.

Carter lolled her head around to face him musingly, slightly confused by the complete non-sequitur. Cogs turned in her head as she thought of something to say, but before she could come up with something, he watched as her face suddenly drained of all colour, and her brown eyes bulged in obvious shock. “James? Bucky?” she said softly, astounded.

Bucky sighed.

“You’re alive? You’re here?” she said, disbelieving.

“Course I am,” he mumbled.

“You… does Steve know? Oh, Bucky, we thought… we thought you were dead. How… how are you here? Oh, you have no idea, he’s going to be so happy to see you…”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Bucky said lowly, turning his face away.

Before she could say anything more, Bucky turned swiftly on his heel and back toward the open window, and then he ducked out and into the night without another word.

March 2015 — Present Day

“You’re not sleeping again,” Wanda said as she settled down next to him, a spoon half in her mouth and a bowl in her hand.

Bucky didn’t answer her right away, arms folded.

“When is the last time you slept?”

“Last night,” he said truthfully.

“When is the last time you slept a full night?” she rebutted. “Three hours every other day do not count.”

Bucky shrugged pithily. Wanda gave an annoyed grunt, and nudged him with her foot.

“I’m too wired,” he admitted with a frown. “There’s still so much I don’t understand. I thought you
said you fixed all my memories?” Bucky said, a lot more accusatory than he’d intended, but whatever. He was feeling a very complex jumble of conflicting emotions, and he wasn’t exactly equipped to deal with it very well.

“I did,” Wanda said, sounded slightly offended that he’d think otherwise.

“Then why are there still huge gaps in my memory? Why is everything before the fall clear as day, and everything after all jumbled?”

Wanda shrugged. “Reconditioning methods. I was not lying when I said that they did not erase anything, just destroyed the connections to that information. But during the later part of that time, they erased you again and again — it was too frequently for your brain to be able to store all that new information long-term. At least, that is my best guess,” she shrugged again.

“So you’re saying what I remember now, that’s it?”

Wanda shrugged again. “I have no way of telling. The mind is not as simple as people like to think it is — and seeing into it is not as easy as I make it seem. What I have restored is all I can restore, but that does not mean that you cannot fill in the blanks yourself.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Then what is the problem?”

Bucky pursed his lips, not quite sure how to articulate that while he desperately did not want to remember everything that he’d done under Hydra, he felt that he needed to anyway. How could he atone otherwise? How could he possibly be deemed worthy of forgiveness if he was unable to even repent for all of the devastation that he’d caused? How could he face Steve again otherwise?

“Hey,” Wanda drew him out of his depressing internal monologue by nudging him with her foot again. “What are you thinking?”

Bucky exhaled heavily, and ran his fingers through his hair. He supposed it was no use lying to her by dismissing her valid concerns — lying to women was never something he was very good at. They all have a kind of emotional perception that men simply didn’t — Wanda especially, although she did her best to reign in the most invasive parts of her abilities most of the time.

“I’m fucked up,” he admitted instead. “I’m so fucked up. I’m fucked up from the war, and I’m fucked up from Hydra, and I’m just… so fucking fucked up. I don’t know how to… I mean, I…”

She placed a small hand on his shoulder, but didn’t angle herself so as to force eye contact, which he was grateful for. “Nobody expects you to not be,” she said simply, and Bucky ended up looking up at her anyway, surprised. “You have to allow yourself room to heal, Pops. Nobody expects you to be perfect — especially him. He doesn’t expect you to go right back to being who you were back when dinosaurs roamed the Earth, or whenever you came from. He doesn’t want you back just because he misses you, he wants to be there to help you heal.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “Is that so? You get anything else off’a him when you dug through his brain like that?”

She gave him an innocent look, and he shrugged her hand off.

She tilted her head inquisitively. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking of going back to avoiding everything again?”
“No,” he said firmly. And he wasn’t. “No, I’m not running. And I’m not breaking my promise to either of you, you’ll join the Avengers, and I’ll try to join with you. I just… I need a little more time to get my head right before all of that. It was too much, all at once, and I can’t… I can’t throw myself in like that. Not yet.”

She nodded fairly, going back to her cereal, and Bucky bit his lip, once again feeling that squirming sense of guilt deep in his gut. “But, you know, in the meantime, I don’t expect the both of you to stick around for my sake.”

Wanda rolled her eyes, didn’t look up from her cereal. “We’re not going to leave you behind, you big idiot.”

“Why? You had no problem doing that before,” he said, only a touch accusing.

“Only when we thought we’d have no other option but to do it without you. We’ve been with you this long, what’s another couple of weeks?”

Bucky bit the side of his cheek, inwardly grateful, but still with that tightly coiled feeling of guilt over the fact that he’d taken probably the biggest step he could toward recovery, and he still felt no closer to it. And what was worse still was that he was holding them back with him.

“Stop it.” Wanda said simply.

Bucky scowled.

“Don’t look at me like that, I’m not in your head,” she said, “I don’t need to see inside your head to know what you are thinking. I can feel the self-loathing and self-pity radiating off of you from here, and I’m telling you to stop. You’re not doing anything wrong by needing time to… uh…”

“Recuperate?”

She shrugged. “Whatever works in English.”

Bucky snorted softly.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to say to him?” she segued conversationally, as if that question hadn’t been the bane of Bucky’s entire fucking existence for the last week and a half since he’d had his brain screwed in properly.

He sighed, dragged a hand through his hair and down his face. “I haven’t got a damn clue.”

“You swear a lot more nowadays,” she said, sounding amused.

He smirked, but didn’t respond; still mulling over what the fuck he planned to do from here.

After another full minute of silence between the two of them, the door burst open, revealing a widely grinning Pietro holding two plastic grocery bags aloft triumphantly. “Quicksilver comes bearing food!”

Bucky groaned, and pushed his face into his palm shamefacedly. “I haven’t got a damn clue.”

“You swear a lot more nowadays,” she said, sounding amused.

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After another full minute of silence between the two of them, the door burst open, revealing a widely grinning Pietro holding two plastic grocery bags aloft triumphantly. “Quicksilver comes bearing food!”

Bucky groaned, and pushed his face into his palm shamefacedly. “C’mon, give me a break, I made that up on the spot. I just didn’t want to use your real name.”

“And you came up with ‘Quicksilver’?” Pietro grinned.

“Well, you’re quick… and silver,” Bucky said lamely, and gave a pithy wave to Pietro’s hair — now tinged at the roots with dark regrowth.
Pietro only continued grinning, and Bucky groaned again.

Wanda set aside her cereal eagerly, and skipped over to the kitchen counter to rifle through the bags. She frowned. “You did not buy any of the things for tarator.”

“Wanda, I love tarator as much as the next Bulgarian, but if I so much as look at soup again, I am going to wither away into dust and die,” Pietro deadpanned.

“And how much of those groceries are just bags of candy?” Bucky asked with a smile.

Pietro put one hand to his chest, hurt. “Pops, come on, after all this time together, you still don’t trust me?”

Bucky quirked an eyebrow at him, and neither confirmed nor denied it.

“So what do you have in mind for dinner instead?” he asked eventually.

“Palneni chushki!” Pietro announced.

“Come again?”

“They’re stuffed peppers,” Wanda said, amused. “We never learned how to make the more difficult meals before we were captured. Soups, kebabs, sarma, eggs, mekitsi, and peppers — that’s about it.”

“To be fair, I probably know how to cook even less,” Bucky smiled.

“We know,” Pietro and Wanda said at the same time, and Bucky made an offended noise.

Of the ever-infamous duo, Bucky Barnes was never the brave one. Certainly, at first glance, one would have assumed that he would be the braver of the two for the first fifteen or so years of their friendship, being that he was taller, and stronger, and the more charming of the two. But the truth was, Bucky was never the brave one. Not when they were nine and ten years old, scrapping in an alleyway; not when they were in their mid-twenties and fighting in a world war; and not now, when they were each nearly a hundred.

Especially not now.

No — that was always Steve. Always. From the very first day that they met, and Bucky had watched Steve brain that Palmer kid with the lid of a trashcan, Steve had always been the brave one. Bucky was slicker, always the slicker of the two; master of slithering out of unwanted situations. It was how he’d developed a reputation around town as a troublemaker — able to talk his way into or out of anything, and seal it with a smile to boot. But he was never brave.

No, if Bucky were braver, there would be nothing standing in the way of him reuniting with Steve — not a damn thing. But he was a coward. A slippery coward, just like he’s always been.

Bucky followed two of his own leads before he finally found Steve — booked up in a shitty Virginian motel. Another day or two, and he’d probably move on to the tip in Columbus, and then probably back here, to New York.

He’d considered following to meet up with him in Virginia. To finally put a stop to watching this
poor bastard run around in futile circles. But he didn’t. Instead, he moved on from their empty apartment in Harlem to an abandoned safehouse in Greenwich Village. The ugly wallpaper peeled from the walls, and the carpet was filled with dust, and the walls made loud cracking noises whenever the place settled, but at least it had an actual refrigerator, and was connected up to the utilities despite years of neglect.

After another week, he finally relented — slinking back to Steve’s apartment in Stark tower again in the dead of night in order to reread his letters. He spent almost four hours there, reading, and rereading them, and going over all of Steve’s sketches left in the journal in painstaking detail, taking in every line, every scribble.

Five days later, he went back again, only this time, it was to break in and steal the entire box completely.

Fuck you, they belonged to him anyway. It doesn’t matter how long Steve had been holding onto them, they were his property. You can’t steal your own property.

There wasn’t a whole lot of stuff that he or the twins owned, and between them, there wasn’t exactly a divide in what belonged to whom — they shared everything, and nothing was off-limits. Keeping things from them didn’t feel right, and so he didn’t make an effort to hide anything from them — particularly the box. The box felt like a true acknowledgment of their mutual trust, and the twins understood that — didn’t go any further than opening it up to see what was inside, and didn’t go prying or indelicately rummaging through once they saw what it was. He didn’t mind the twins opening his cigarettes, or turning his father’s flask over and over in their hands curiously, or flipping the lid of his zippo lighter again and again... however, the letters were different. They were the exception to what Pietro called the ‘sharing is caring’ rule; kept tucked up and folded away, stowed inside of the pockets of his pants and jacket (Steve’s being the one closest to his heart at all times). The letters were special to him — sacred. Those were personal, and while he didn’t like the idea of not being honest with the twins, he didn’t like the idea of sharing their contents anyway. Especially Steve’s and Dum Dum’s.

The other exception was the note.

Among the pocketed letters, he kept a small note that was found slid underneath the door of Steve’s place along with the rest of his mail.

Now, he wasn’t so hypocritical so as to go through Steve’s mail after Steve had afforded him the same respect regarding his letters — he hadn’t opened anything. But the note in question had been written on the back of a flashy postcard, which had drawn his interest, because it was one that had been sent from New York. Who the hell sent a postcard to someone who lived in the same city as them?

The answer, it had turned out, was Peggy Carter.

Turning the postcard over, his eyes had positively bugged out of his head at the note written in perfect cursive along the pale grey lines on its backside. It contained a very enthusiastic message from Peggy, who briefly detailed a transfer from her DC nursing home to one in New York. Now that her niece Sharon was working for the CIA, it sent her travelling quite a bit, and so Peggy had decided to make the move down to New York while she still had at least a small measure of her marbles left in order to be closer to her eldest daughter, Emily.

So Peggy was in New York — a nursing home on the Upper West Side. Real classy joint, according to her. Bucky trusted her judgement. She was a classy lady after all. And he knew from firsthand experience that she had good taste.
Absentmindedly, he swept back his long hair through metallic fingers while he fingered the sharp corners of the folded postcard through the pocket of his cargo pants, thinking hard.

He remembered seeing her, all those months ago, when he was still fresh out of Hydra’s grasp — scared, alone, and probably more confused than he’d ever been in his entire life. It had been a complete impulse decision — one that he’d initially regretted, because it had only succeeded in making him more confused than ever.

Peggy had probably been left no better off. Hell, she was probably more confused than he was. Thoughts of Peggy, and of her New York postcard, continued to plague him throughout the rest of the following week.

He owed her an explanation. That was the best reason he could think of for why he felt so utterly obliged to see her again. It was just too coincidental to be anything other than fate that had them not only alive in the same century, but within a half hour travel distance from one another.

It was a complete impulse decision to see her that first time, all those months ago, and it was an impulse decision now as well; a completely arbitrary urge that compelled him forward almost involuntarily a week after he’d stolen the letter.

It was just after midnight by the time Bucky had very decidedly stood on both feet and exited the safehouse. He hadn’t even bothered to leave a note for the twins — just sheathed the knife he’d been thoughtlessly flipping about and walked right out the door.

He hadn’t stopped to think once on the entire way there. Didn’t allow himself to — because if he did, he felt certain that he’d just overthink the whole damn thing, and turn back with his tail between his legs like a coward.

The security at her facility wasn’t bad. But he was better.

The window made only the quietest of sliding noises as he gently lifted it and ducked inside, boots falling onto plush carpet and not making any sound at all.

“Honestly Barnes, you can’t use the door like a regular person?”

Bucky smirked. Of course she would awake that easily. “I just didn’t want to have to go through check in,” he said lightly. “Those laminated guest badges really clash with my style.”

She struggled for a moment to right herself to sit up on the half a dozen pillows stacked up against the charming mahogany headboard. She clicked on the lamp, and the room was immediately flooded with a warm yellow light.

Her face turned downward in a frown — not angry or disgusted, but rather hurt and disappointed. Bucky flushed, and dropped his lighthearted smile at once.

“Peggy?” he asked tentatively, stepping further into the room anyway.

She pursed her lips severely at him for a moment.

Bucky bit his lip uncertainly, and awkwardly lowered himself into the chair beside her bed, ducking his head sheepishly, and not meeting her eye. He jammed his left hand underneath himself, irrationally concerned that she’d be able to see it, even though it was still gloved and sleeved.

“You put me in a very frustrating position after your last visit,” she said sharply.
“I know,” he said softly.

“I already have everybody thinking I’ve gone completely barmy, I didn’t need you showing up here without an explanation and making matters worse.”

Bucky looked away guiltily.

“It’s just as well. The only person who may have given me the benefit of the doubt was the one person I couldn’t get a hold of for weeks afterwards.”

Bucky made a regretful noise, and cleared his throat. “That was… I hurt him. He was in the hospital after the Hydra fallout.”

“I know,” her face softened then, and she held out a small hand on the bed for him to grab a hold of. He eyed it longingly, but didn’t dare reach out and hold it — not trusting himself to touch her in any way, especially not with the hand closest to hers — the one he was currently sitting on.

Peggy inclined her head at him curiously, but didn’t move her hand, merely leaving it there for him to reconsider later.

“You’re very lucky,” she said. “Most days I’m not quite this… lucid anymore.”

Bucky didn’t say anything.

“So, there must be a reason you came back? And I’m hoping that part of it is an explanation, because I’ll be honest with you — I’m very confused about this whole thing, Bucky.”

Bucky frowned, confused. “You mean Steve didn’t tell you?”

Peggy rolled her eyes. “Steve didn’t tell me anything, beyond confirming that I hadn’t hallucinated the whole thing. He’s very cryptic nowadays. Haven’t seen him in months — but he calls, sometimes. I believe he’s been looking for you,” she levelled him with a stern look, and Bucky nodded grimly.

“It’s… kind of a long story,” he said.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she replied softly, never taking those large brown eyes off of his face. And though every part of her seemed to have changed so drastically over the intervening years since they’d seen one another, those eyes had stayed exactly the same.

And so Bucky explained it to her — the serum, the brainwashing, being captured by Hydra, and frozen on and off for years at a time, the training, the assassinations, the Hydra fallout, and the events which had led to his last reunion with Steve, the twins, the letters, and finally, Wanda reversing Hydra’s block inside his head.

He finished dully, looking away from her and forgetting himself by removing his hand from underneath himself to rub awkwardly at the back of his neck.

Only, when he looked back at her, he didn’t see that expression of disgust or disappointment that he so rightly deserved, but rather, her worn, old face smiling up at him affectionately.

“Disqualification,” she said, and the smile turned cheeky.

Bucky tilted his head at her, confused. “Ma’am?”

“The push-up contest. You ruled that no serum-infused players were allowed to compete — you
cheated, so therefore you’re disqualified. I win,” she said triumphantly.

Bucky blinked, gaped, and for the first time in days, his face broke out into a wide grin, and suddenly he was laughing. Head thrown back, completely thoughtless, simply filled to the brim with joy and relief over her complete lack of anger, or betrayal.

“I think it was that night that I worked out that you were in love with him, you know,” she continued casually.

Bucky’s laughter came to an immediate halt, and the smile slipped and fell from his face entirely.

“I mean of course I’d wondered — I think everybody had at that point. I suspected Dugan knew as well — he’d always get this absurd concerned look on his face every time he’d catch you making goo-goo eyes at Steve.”

‘Please, Dugan, Please, you have to promise me. You can’t tell him. Promise me you won’t tell him, Dum-Dum, please, please promise me.’

“But it was that night I think I knew for sure.”

Bucky swallowed, his throat suddenly drier than the fuckin’ Sahara. When he spoke, it was as if his tongue had been replaced with sandpaper, and his voice came out thick, and gritty. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t make me twist your ear, Barnes,” she warned lightly.

He ducked his head, blushing.

“Am I wrong?” she inquired, still teasing, but with a hint of genuine curiosity to it that made Bucky blush even harder.

“Thought so,” she said smugly, nodding to herself. “Did Dugan ever say anything to you?”

Bucky kept his eyes fixed firmly on his shoes as he answered. “He left me a letter.”

“Oh?”

“I knew he knew. He… he walked in on…”

Peggy’s eyes widened, clearly scandalised.

“No, no, not with Steve,” Bucky amended quickly, and, impossibly, felt his face heat even further. “Just a bartender I met at the Whip and Fiddle. I never… with Steve…”

Peggy laughed. “Give me a heart attack why don’t you, Barnes?”

Bucky returned the chuckle awkwardly. “So, what gave me away?” he asked.

Peggy’s expression turned thoughtful for a moment. “It wasn’t one thing — you’re not exactly a terrible actor, Barnes. It was just… in the end, I realised that the reason that the way you looked at him felt familiar was because it was exactly the same way I looked at him.”

“Like he was sunshine,” Bucky said quietly, nodding understandably. “And you didn’t…”

“Didn’t what? Report you? Hate you?” Peggy chuckled again, and shook her head slowly. “No, I didn’t hate you for loving Steve. Loving Steve was one thing I understood best, and I couldn’t blame
you for it. I still don’t.”

“He deserved you,” Bucky said.

Peggy gave a sad, regretful kind of grimace, and looked away.

“He did,” he said firmly. “And you deserved him. You were meant to be, the both of you. I’m sorry that you never even got the chance.”

Peggy’s throat clicked as she swallowed. “I have loved Steve… throughout my whole life. Since the day he threw himself on that bloody dummy grenade, probably. But I love my husband,” she smiled adoringly at the photograph of a kind-looking man with dark hair in one of her photographs on the bedside table. “I truly do. I can’t imagine a life without him — or without my children. I’m not usually one to believe in fate, but perhaps this is one instance where I’ll make an exception. As much as I loved Steve — as much as I still love him to this day — we were never meant to be. Not really.”

Bucky frowned remorsefully. “I… I still love him too.”

She nodded thoughtfully, and then gave him a pointed look. “Well, like I said: as much as I choose not to believe in fate, the fact that the both of you are here — that you’re still young, and alive, and together again? That sounds a lot like fate to me.”

Bucky shook his head, squeezing his eyes closed. “No, no, Steve… I can’t do that to him. I can’t ask that of him.”

Peggy frowned. “What do you mean?”

Bucky fidgeted uncomfortably, pinching one solid silver fingertip between two others on his right hand and frowning. “I haven’t seen Steve since before I got my memories back,” he admitted.

Peggy scowled. “James Buchanan Barnes…”

“I know. I know I can’t stay away from him forever, and I don’t plan to, but… I’m worried. I don’t want him to have to deal with me — not like this. He doesn’t deserve that. I can’t be the person he needs me to be, doesn’t matter what I remember. He shouldn’t have to deal with the version of me that’s shitty, and broken, and fucked up beyond repair. I thought that getting my memories back would help, but it seems to have just made things worse.”

Peggy’s face softened, but it’d have been a stretch to call it sympathetic exactly. “You’re not broken, Barnes,” she told him firmly. “You were never broken. Just look at you — you’re walking and talking and being an ass, just like you always have. You don’t think Steve’s changed too? You don’t think going to war, and watching you die, and living in this world utterly alone for, what, three years, has done anything to him?”

“He’s not alone. He’s got the Avengers. And he’s got you.”

“I’m hardly ever here,” she pointed to her head meaningfully, “and when I am, I’m hardly ever really here. Sometimes I forget that he was found alive, sometimes I forget that he died at all, and sometimes I forget who he is entirely. I’m getting worse by the day. Pretty soon, I won’t be able to remember any of you. I won’t be able to speak, or walk, or look after myself at all.”

Bucky ducked his head again, and Peggy’s tone softened considerably.

“Look; even Steve seems to forget sometimes that he was a person before he was a symbol. No matter how you’ve changed, no matter how you’ve both changed, one thing that will always remain
consistent is that you need each other. He deserves you,” instead of waiting for him to take her hand, Peggy took it upon herself to reach out and grab it herself; grasping it with a grip Bucky would have thought she wasn’t capable of. She looked directly into his eyes, holding his gaze. “And you deserve him. You deserve to be happy again, Barnes. So quit lolling about feeling sorry for yourself. Man up, and go see him,” she ordered.

Bucky snorted quietly, and squeezed her hand, very gently. “And what do I say when I get there?” he asked.

Peggy shrugged. “Something profound and dramatic, I’d expect,” she waved her free hand about airily, then squeezed his hand hard with the other. “Just go find the poor bastard and put him out of his misery already. You deserve to be happy. Both of you.”

Bucky clenched his jaw, gave Peggy’s hand a final squeeze, and released it, bringing himself to his feet.

“You’re leaving then?” Peggy said excitedly.

Bucky nodded tightly. “I’ve gotta… check on the twins.” He made his way back to the window. “And find Steve.”

“Visit me again, won’t you?”

“Course I will, Peg.”

“You bring Wanda and Pietro next time, you hear?”

Bucky chuckled. “Yes Ma’am.”

“Oh, and Barnes?”

He paused by the window frame, one leg out, and looked at her expectantly.

She smiled. “Cut your goddamned hair.”

“You’re checking the house again,” Wanda said sadly.

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, and then resumed running his fingers down the seam of the curtains. “You’re not supposed to be up,” he said in a tight voice.

Before Wanda could reply, Pietro came shuffling out behind her, the bottoms of his sweatpants dragging along the ground under his heels. He yawned loudly, scratching his belly, but when he caught sight of Bucky, he dropped his hand, and his brow furrowed. “You’re checking the house again.”

Bucky huffed and turned to glare at them both, but didn’t remove his hands from the curtains.

“You only check the house like this when you’re agitated,” Wanda explained, as if Bucky didn’t already know that. “What happened?”

“Where did you go last night?” Pietro added, clearly preemptively calling Bucky out on any bullshit.
Bucky’s jaw flexed, and he moved onto the other curtain, “I went to see a friend,” he admitted.

Wanda’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“The Captain?” Pietro asked, astonished.

“No, not him. Carter. You both hungry?”

The twins looked at one another, faces grim.

Bucky didn’t look at either of them as he abandoned his search of the curtains and marched into the kitchen. He pulled out one bowl and a box of cereal, and dropped two slices of bread into the toaster. “You want coffee?”

“I didn’t know Carter was still alive,” Pietro admitted, and yeah, he wouldn’t’ve. Bucky hadn’t glossed over a whole lot when he’d finally sat both of the twins down and told them his story after regaining his memories, but there were a few things he had simply forgotten to mention, such as his first visit to Peggy after the Hydra fallout. It is a long story, after all.

“She’s not doing well — Alzheimer’s. Just a coincidence I caught her on a good day.”

“What did she have to say?”

Bucky shrugged, and sprinkled gratuitous amounts of sugar over Pietro’s cereal, just the way he liked it. He finished up Wanda’s toast, turned, and set both of their breakfasts onto the round kitchen table. The twins obediently sat and began eating, however, neither of them ceased staring at him with those goddamn expectant and overeager looks on their faces.

He sighed. “Mostly she just listened to me explain. She chewed me out for not seeing Steve yet, though.”

Pietro snorted. “As she should.”

Bucky grimaced. Wanda kicked Pietro hard under the table.

“And?” she prompted gently.

Bucky sighed, ran his fingers through his hair, and kind of held onto it, elbow on the table. “I’m going to try and find him tonight.”

“Ah, you’re nervous — that explains the obsessive checking,” Pietro nodded understandingly. “You want us to stay here, or do we find another place first?”

Bucky let his hair go, and it flopped straight into his eyes. He put his face in both hands, and groaned. “I haven’t thought that far ahead,” he admitted, and he dragged both hands down his face.

“Pops? Without a plan?” Pietro feigned shock. “Planning’s practically all you do!”

“Our sarcasm is actually physically revolting, you know that?” Bucky replied grumpily, frowning.

Pietro gave a milky-mouthed smile, and Wanda kicked him again. “Keep your food in your mouth.”

Bucky chuckled, and then, for another few moments, merely watched as they continued eating their breakfast in silence, mulling things over in his head, again and again, which mostly felt like he was going in circles.
Eventually, Bucky cleared his throat. “Wanda?”

She hummed distractedly in answer, gathering crumbs off of her plate onto her fingertip.

“Would you… cut my hair?”

She looked over at him now, completely taken off guard.

Bucky gave a wry smirk. “My Ma would be horrified if she saw the state of it now.”

Wanda nodded slowly, took one more large bite of her breakfast, and then set it aside on the plate, dusting off her fingers and chewing quickly. She smiled indulgently through a mouthful of bread, and swallowed. “Get me the scissors, would you?”

Pietro gasped in outrage. “You’re cutting off the man-bun?” he demanded.

Another fifteen minutes later, Bucky’s knuckles grew white as he clenched his hands into tight fists on his knees.

It seemed that no matter how implicitly he trusted Wanda now, the sense-memory of people messing about with his head set him on edge — sent his pulse rising dangerously, and his knees bouncing with barely-contained anxiety. To his relief, however, Wanda seemed to understand this completely without needing to be told, and she took great care to be as gentle and slow as possible so as to not set him off. Bracketed on the floor between her knees, Bucky was close enough that he could seriously hurt her if she caught him off guard, and it warmed him to know that this wasn’t just a significant display of trust for himself, but also for her.

Bucky watched as clumps of hair began to fall to the floor around him with each *snip, snip, snip* of Wanda’s scissors. Brown curls littered the floor, and he suddenly remembered having Steve do this very same thing for him all through their early twenties, and his Ma doing it for him throughout his teens.

“I’ve been stupid, haven’t I?” he said eventually, frowning slightly.

Wanda gave a small humming noise, like she neither agreed nor disagreed. Bucky pinched her leg lightly in response, and she giggled.

“I wouldn’t say you’ve been stupid, exactly. Paranoid, maybe, but not stupid.”

Bucky hummed grimly.

“Pietro and I were thinking that we’d head down to Avengers tower without you. Introduce ourselves before you meet us there.”

“You don’t want to be there when I find Steve?”

“Pietro does, but only because he loves drama.”

Bucky snorted. “You know, it might be a few days, you sure you don’t wanna wait here until I come get you?”

“No. I do not want you worrying about us while you work out your drama with the Captain. You have earned a few days. It would give you the opportunity to… you know, talk about things. Talk about your relationship.”

“You mean the time I kissed him without his say-so?” he said dryly. He didn’t feel embarrassed at
saying it, because she knew — she always knew.

Except Wanda paused, surprised. “You kissed him?”

Bucky groaned.

“I thought you just weren’t saying anything,” he squeezed his eyes shut tight, mortified.

Wanda spoke in a tight voice, like she was suppressing laughter. “You don’t like it when I go through your head, remember?”

“Didn’t really stop you, before.”

She actually did giggle this time. “When did that happen?”

“Night before I fell,” he admitted in a mumble, and Wanda ceased giggling immediately.

“Oh, Pops…”

“Yeah, I know, it’s fuckin’ tragic, isn’t it?”

The snipping continued, and for a while, Wanda didn’t reply.

“You still love him?” she eventually asked.

Bucky pursed his lips. “Course I do.”

“You planning on telling him that?”

“Not if my life depends on it.”

She gave a dramatic huff, and snipped a tad more forcefully than necessary at the hair by his ear. “Turn around so I can check the front,” she ordered, and Bucky did.

She brushed the fallout off of his nose, and inspected his hair thoroughly for anything she’d missed. “You get off on making yourself miserable, don’t you?” she asked casually.

Bucky made an offended noise.

Before she could continue, however, Pietro made his presence known by letting out a loud wolf whistle, and fixing Bucky with a comically lewd look, waggling his eyebrows.

“Looking good, Pops. Real good. You know, if you weren’t my father and everything…”

“Shut up,” Bucky couldn’t help but snort. “I’m not your father.”

“Oh, well in that case,” Pietro’s hand went to his fly as if to yank it open, and Bucky held out a hand and shook his head, laughing.

Pietro looked delighted to have made Bucky laugh, but his smile dropped a little at the withering glance Wanda shot him.

“Must you?” she asked.


“Are you done?” Bucky asked her quickly, before they dissolved into another petty argument.
Wanda sighed, set aside her scissors. “Yes, I’m done.”

Bucky got to his feet immediately, but was stopped from taking any steps forward by a loud halting noise from Pietro.

Pietro flipped a tin of his styling wax in one hand, and grinned wickedly. “Hold still for a minute.”

Ignoring Bucky’s protests, Pietro lathered his hands in goo, and began pushing and shaping Bucky’s hair back, up and out of his face. Once he was done, he covered Bucky’s eyes with one sticky hand, and began to lead him into the bathroom.

Once Bucky had been adequately positioned in front of the mirror to Pietro’s liking, he lifted his hand away.

“Ta da!” he said delightedly, and Bucky’s eyebrows shot upward.

It was like he was looking into a window to the past — at himself, perhaps not before the war, but at least during, Back when he still gave a margin of a fuck about what he looked like. He didn’t know if Pietro had managed to find pictures of him online, or if it was simply a coincidence that his hair had been styled so similarly to how he used to do it with oily pomade in that time.

He gave a small, surprised little laugh, and reached up to furtively drag his fingertips through the front, sweeping it in place to the side, as was habit before.

He spied Pietro’s smug expression in the mirror, and gave him a small smile. “C’mon,” he said, turning away and giving him a slap on the shoulder as he exited the bathroom.

When he returned to the lounge, Wanda was sweeping up his hair with a dustpan, and humming to herself distractedly.

“You’re both going to Stark tower,” he said, and both of the twins looked at him in surprise.

“Without you?” Wanda asked, setting aside the dustpan onto the coffee table.

Bucky shook his head. “No, not without me exactly. Steve’s moved into one of the residential floors of Stark tower. I’m going to check to see if he’s come back there first before I start looking anywhere else. He could be anywhere by now. You think you can survive a few days without me?”

They both nodded unquestioningly, identical looks of excitement growing over their faces.

“We promise we won’t do anything to be disruptive guests in Mr Stark’s home,” Pietro said sweetly, and Bucky narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“We won’t! We’ll be perfect house guests, you’ll see.”

“Can’t tell a lie to me, kid. I see through you like a cheap sheet.”

Pietro wrinkled his nose. “Wow, you really are from the 1940s.”

Bucky snorted.

“So you’ll both come with me to Stark tower, and…” His stomach twisted with anxiety. “And then I… I guess I’ll go find Steve…”

The twins both nodded in assent, looking eager.
“Pack your things.” Bucky said. “I’m going to… I need to check the house again.”

“Sir? There’s been a breach of security on the upper floors.”

Tony didn’t look up from his work. “Where?”

“Seventh residential floor, sir — Captain Rogers’s quarters. There may be damage detected on the balcony’s exterior doors or walls. I’m unable to get a signal from the sensors for a routine diagnostic, and so I cannot receive confirmation of working order.”

“Hm. Might have something to do with that hail storm the other day.”

“Unlikely, sir. Weather damage would have triggered the security alarm before it damaged the sensors. My best guess would be that the damage is deliberate.”

Tony frowned. “It’s like a billion floors up — how the hell could there be deliberate damage?”

“I’m afraid I’m unable to diagnose anything more at this time.”

Tony sighed, dropped his screwdriver, and picked up a rag to wipe off the grease coating his blackened fingers.

“It might be another bird-related thing, like on Nat’s floor. I’ll get a dustpan and broom,” he said dryly, tossing the rag into a dirty heap on the table and delicately lifting his whiskey glass between thumb and forefinger for one more sip before leaving.

He drummed his fingers on his outer thighs the entire way up to Steve’s floor, whistling to himself. Steve was right — the elevators do need music. He wondered which would be more annoying: country, or disco?

When the number for Steve’s floor lit up, and the elevator halted, the doors didn’t open right away, and Tony glared at Jarvis’s main camera.

“My apologies, sir, but according to the lease agreement, I’m required to notify Captain Rogers about all unauthorised entrances into his quarters while he is absent.”

“Lease agreement?”

“Ms Potts—”

“Got it. Fine, notify him all you want — and ask him where the hell he is while you’re at it. Tell him I want to send a care package, or something.”

“Very well, sir,” Jarvis replied dryly, and obligingly, the elevator doors slid open at once.

Once granted a clear view into Rogers’s apartment, however, Tony’s mouth immediately fell open in shock.

Standing there, frozen in his tracks as if Tony had actually managed to catch him off-guard, was Metal-arm-guy.
He looked far better than the last time Tony had seen him close-up; he’d filled out quite significantly — no longer looking gaunt and undernourished, but rather strong and healthy. He was still pale, of course, but he no longer looked as though he could be mistaken for a corpse if he sat too still — no longer pallid and waxy, with deep, dark circles under his eyes. His blue-grey eyes no longer looked tight and exhausted, darting about as if expecting attack from every corner, but rather bright and unwavering, and were those actual laugh lines around his eyes? Had they been there before, and just hidden by masses hair and grime?

The most significant change, however, was that his once messy, shoulder-length dark hair had now been cropped short, swept upward out of his face in a kind of handsome quiff. He looked a great deal younger than he had before — and very decidedly less homeless.

The Winter Soldier blinked once at Tony in shock, and then immediately schooled his face into something stony and determined.

Tony only gaped, looking him up and down. “Metal-arm-guy? Holy shit, you—”

Metal-arm-guy cut him off impatiently, “where’s Rogers?”

Tony opened his mouth to respond that he had no idea where Rogers was, or even how long he’d be gone, but instead snapped his jaw shut at once, frowning. No matter how pleased he felt to be seeing this guy safe and alive again, he was all of a sudden very starkly reminded of just who the Winter Soldier was, and what he was capable of doing. His eyebrows drew together in a defiant frown, and his jaw clenched stubbornly. He’d be damned if he allowed this guy anywhere near his friends, let alone willingly give away their exact location to him. “Why?” he demanded.

Metal-arm-guy stepped into Tony’s personal space, and Tony fought the urge to take a wary step backwards. He was a lot taller than him.

But Metal-arm-guy didn’t seem to be interested in intimidating him — in fact, he looked rather desperate. “I need to see him — speak with him. He’s looking for me.”

Tony cocked an eyebrow unsurely. “What, so you’re like a kid lost in a grocery store? Both of you looking for each other?”

Metal-arm-guy looked annoyed and impatient, but nodded nonetheless. “I’ve been laying false trails for months to keep whoever may be following me off my tail. He could be anywhere now.”

Well that certainly explains Tony’s two-places-at-once observations when he was looking for the guy at least. “Why is he looking for you?”

Metal-arm-guy huffed irritably. “It’s complicated. And personal.”

Tony crossed his arms, not buying it.

Metal-arm-guy sighed, and in a surprisingly normal gesture, ran a hand through the front of his hair.

“I know he’s staying here — I recognized some of the artworks from his apartment in DC. All of his stuff is here. Where is he?”

Tony gaped some more, and then scowled. “He said his place had been compromised — said there were recent damages, and the place had been bugged. I offered him a place here until he could find somewhere new, and then I sent someone for all his stuff. He’s barely set foot in the place, he’s been too busy chasing after you.”
Metal-arm-guy blinked. “So he told you about that?”

“Eventually,” Tony said resentfully.

“No, it’s… it means he trusts you. It’s good.”

Tony felt the sudden urge to grasp at handfuls of his own hair and start tearing at it. “What do you mean? How do you know that? Who are you to him?”

Metal-arm-guy blinked again, then gave something between a grimace and a sympathetic smile. “Okay, so maybe he doesn’t trust you that much, then.”

Only Tony’s impeccable sense of self-preservation prevented him from grabbing at the guy’s shoulders and bodily shaking him.

It was only out of pure shock that Tony felt his sudden onset fury disappear. Metal-arm-guy had actually reached out and placed his hand (the regular one) on Tony’s shoulder, levelling him with a serious, downright pleading look. “Please. I don’t want to hurt him — I’d never hurt him, not again, I just… I need to see him. Please, it’s important.”

Tony, completely thrown by such an… emotional display from the man who was practically incapable of looking him in the eye during their last meeting, folded. “I’ve got no idea,” he admitted tightly. “After we watched you and the wonder twins rip my robots to pieces, Cap came back to reload his supplies and didn’t even stop to say goodbye before he was tearing out of here. I haven’t seen him since.”

Metal-arm-guy slumped a little in defeat, and ran his fingers through his hair once again. A tight line of frustration appeared between his brows, and his hand slid from Tony’s shoulder dejectedly.

“I can give you his number?” Tony offered.

Metal-arm-guy shook his head. “No, I can’t call him — it has to be in person.”

“What, are you breaking up with him or something?”

Metal-arm-guy’s lips curled — not quite a smile, but close. Tony gaped.

“Take care of them, alright?” Metal-arm-guy said, before turning on his heel and retreating back toward the exterior door leading out to the balcony.

“Wait, what? Take care of who?”

“The twins.”

“What?”

Metal-arm-guy gave another sly smile, and slid the door open.

“C’mon, you’re gonna leave without answering anything? Will you at least tell me how you knew my parents?” Tony pleaded.

Metal-arm-guy’s smile slipped right off, immediately replaced with an expression of sorrow, and fear. Without another word, he ducked his face, swung one leg over the balcony, and hurdled up and over the railings without a backward glance.

When Tony reached his lab again, he found himself once again starting in shock.

The girl appeared to be waiting patiently, fiddling with one of his wrenches between her thin fingers, while the boy merely looked bored. Upon Tony catching their attention, they both looked up at him, and gave him an identical pair of mischievous grins.

Right. The twins.

“Hi!” the girl said cheerfully, waving.

Tony groaned loudly, and dragged a hand down his face. “I don’t suppose you’re planning to tell me what’s going on with Metal-arm-guy and Captain America, are you?”

The girl’s dimpled smile turned cryptic, and she didn’t say a word.

In the end, it took less than a day for Bucky to find Steve.

He’d followed the same method used the last time he’d tracked him down: by following his own false leads until caught up to him.

Steve was in a hotel this time — a relatively nice one, too, which was unusual for him. Steve typically only booked himself into shitty motels when he was searching by himself, which meant that he had probably reunited with his companion again — the one with the wings. Bucky had never actually managed to catch his name. Steve didn’t mind living in shitty places — never had — but Bucky knew that whenever he had his partner with him during his search, he’d typically try to set them up in nice places if he could. Bucky understood the desire to make sure that anyone who he was with was comfortable, no matter the extra cost of it — in fact, he had done the same thing with the twins at every opportunity he could these past three months.

It had taken all damn day to track him down. It was mid-morning when he and the twins had infiltrated Stark Tower, but by the time he’d managed to hit on Steve’s location and hack into the hotel database for confirmation, it was damn near sunset.

Now, it was dark — well past nightfall, in fact. And it wasn’t because finding Steve had required time to travel either, because Bucky’s prediction that Steve would be led back to New York after Virginia and Columbus was right.

No, Bucky had just been sitting there this entire time — outside of the hotel, on a park bench across the road, staring mournfully up at what he counted as Steve’s floor. And now it was nearly midnight, and he still hadn’t made a move.

He figured, at first, that at least he no longer looked homeless now that he’d allowed Wanda to cut his hair, and allowed a very insistent Pietro to trim his beard to an even length. That was, however, until it began to rain, and he was still immobile on the seat — soaked through to the bone, and utterly miserable.

And so here he was — sitting by himself on the side of the road in the pouring rain. Christ, could his life get any more pathetic?

He didn’t understand why it was so difficult for him to take this final leap — he’d made it so far
already, why could he not just close that final gap and be done with it? He knew what floor Steve was on — didn’t even need to go through the tedious chore of lying through his teeth to the people behind the front desk, because it was easier just to climb up and go in through the window.

Yet no matter how much he psyched himself up to go, every time he seemed to ready himself to stand, his muscles would lock up, and he’d be completely frozen in his seat, unable to breathe for the sudden panic that constricted his entire body.

Jesus, he needed to get it together.

A gush of wind swept through him, freezing his face, and Bucky at once clapped both hands inside his jacket to preserve his own body heat.

So Bucky Barnes was cold. Great. Something new and different for him to experience.

He sighed, ducking his chin inside the collar of his jacket to try and breathe some hot air beneath it, when suddenly, he stopped dead at the feeling of something inside.

Christ, of course — how could he have forgotten? Since the day he’d broken back into Steve’s apartment to reclaim his box of crap, he’d kept Steve’s letter secure in his breast pocket.

As he fingered the now damp envelope beneath his jacket, he felt a tightness close in around his throat.

Even Bucky didn’t know how many times he’d read and reread that stupid thing since that first night. He’d had the damn thing near-memorised by now.

Fuck, I miss you. I miss you more than anything — anything in the world. I can’t even begin to list the things I miss you more than, because there are just too many to count. I’d give anything — anything — to have you back. Even just for a day. Even just for a goodbye.

Bucky grit his teeth; squeezed his eyes shut tight against the sudden influx of hot tears of pure frustration.

I miss you.

I miss you so much it hurts. It fucking hurts, Buck. Every damned day.

Fuck.

A hulking figure of a huge blonde man was slumped over a large map, covered in different coloured dots and squiggly lines, with tiny notes penned in over the margins.
Steve’s head was buried in his hands, his back turned on the main window. He looked completely defeated — at his wit’s end, and hot shame and regret flooded Bucky’s chest.

“Bucky…” Steve whispered, mostly to himself. “God, Bucky, where are you?” one hand fell to the map, his fingertips brushing over roughly penned red crosses along the stretch of map passing through Columbus to New York.

Bucky swallowed dryly — could feel his heart beating faster than it probably ever had…

_C’mon, Barnes_, he chastised himself firmly, setting his shoulders, _it’s now or never._

“I’m…” he swallowed again, throat thick, “I’m right here, Stevie,” he said softly.
Steve lurched where he sat, and then whipped around and stood so fast that it sent his chair careening to the floor with a loud clatter.

He stood still for a moment, dumbstruck, and then made an aborted movement, as if making to rush forward and envelop Bucky in his arms, only to halt himself abruptly.

For several long, tense moments, they merely stared at each other wordlessly. Bucky floundered for something to say — anything to say — while Steve only continued to look at him, apparently working through an intense mixture of incredulity, ecstatic relief, and nervous fear. He opened and closed his mouth over and over again, like he was trying to speak, but no words were coming out.

Eventually, he managed to say something — a tiny, hopeful sounding word that damn near broke Bucky’s heart.

“Bucky?”

Bucky gave a small smile; one he hoped was reminiscent of that charming smirk he used to give, and not just a cheerless grimace.

“Yes, Stevie,” he said softly, “It’s me.”

Steve’s hands twitched, like he was restraining himself again from roping Bucky in for a tight hug, and Bucky suddenly wished he would just do it already.

“B- how-? What do you-? I mean… do you-?” Steve stumbled over his words, inching forward with tiny steps that could almost be called a shuffle.

“Yes, you big lug,” Bucky did smile this time, “I remember. I remember everything.”

Relief, so intense it looked almost painful, broke out over Steve’s face — and suddenly, Bucky couldn’t resist it anymore. He stepped forward, reached out, grasped Steve by the front of his shirt, and hauled him right into his arms.

A huge gush of breath flooded from Steve’s lungs, and he collapsed into Bucky’s embrace, bringing both hands around his back and clasping at him with such intensity that it damn near pulverised Bucky’s ribcage. Bucky didn’t care — squeezing back just as hard, feeling fit to burst at any second.

Bucky heard ragged gasping, felt hot gusts of breath against his neck, and he realised that Steve was sobbing dryly — trembling in his arms like Bucky had never seen him before.

Tears pricked Bucky’s eyes, and for the first time in as long as he could remember, his chest clenched, not with panic or anxiety, but with an absolute, overwhelming joy.

Bucky gave a wet laugh, and ducked his head into Steve’s shoulder. “You are the most stubborn… stupid asshole I’ve ever met.”

Steve laughed, a little hysterically, and only tightened his grip, burying his face further into Bucky’s neck and breathing him in deeply.

Bucky lifted one hand around Steve’s shoulders to grasp the back of his head, feeling the soft hair, and never wanting to let go — never wanting to lose this moment with him. Not ever.
“What happened?” Steve mumbled — barely legible, as he hadn’t removed his face from Bucky’s skin before speaking. “Why did you change your mind?”

Bucky’s smile didn’t waver, but turned only a little sad. “I… I found your letter,” he admitted, and to his immediate distress, Steve pulled back to frown at him in puzzlement, hands still braced on Bucky’s shoulders.

“What letter?” He asked. His entire front was now soaked with rain from Bucky’s jacket, and the sight left Bucky oddly amused.

Bucky extracted his hand from Steve’s hair in order to reach inside his own jacket, rummaging until his fingertips found the still-damp and slightly floppy letter in his breast pocket, and drew it out.

Steve’s eyes widened.

“I broke into the tower and went through your stuff. I’m sorry,” Bucky said sheepishly. “I stole my box.”

Steve’s eyebrows drew together, puzzled.

“You and Dum Dum — you’re both a bunch of sappy bastards. Ended up giving me the kick in the ass I needed to come back.”

“You read it?”

“I read it.”

Steve flushed. “I didn’t… I mean…”

“Can’t tell a lie to me, kid,” Bucky gave a watery smile, “I see through you like a cheap sheet.”

Steve’s eyes grew wide again, and he threw himself back into Bucky’s arms. “Fuck, Bucky.”

Bucky snorted.


“The girl I was with, Wanda, she…” Bucky swallowed, “she has these… abilities. You saw her that day in New York — that barely scratches the surface. I don’t even know what to call them.”

Steve leaned back, but same as before, didn’t remove his hands from Bucky at all — almost as if he was afraid that Bucky would take off running the second he ceased contact.

“Those kids — who are they, Buck?”

“Hydra experiments. I found them held prisoner in that Hydra castle you blew up in Bavaria — the one where they tortured Monty. They had her chained to the wall, under some kinda drug. Pietro was locked in some kinda glass cell for observation. He loses control of himself a little whenever he gets really upset — jerking and jumping about and shaking like a leaf. I couldn’t leave them there, I had to… I… They… they were just kids, Stevie, I couldn’t…”

Steve smiled, and fuck, he looked so fucking proud. And of Bucky, of all things — he couldn’t understand it.

Bucky swallowed thickly, averting his gaze. He felt like an overexpanded balloon — ready to explode at any second from the sheer, overwhelming raw emotion he was being subject to. “She
uh… she can get inside people’s heads — I don’t really understand how it works, and she never
knows how to explain it. Said that they didn’t dump my head out good and empty, like they must’ve
thought, but more like they… severed my connections to everything. She said it was tricky, but she
could repair them if I let her.”

“So you remember everything?” Steve’s eyes widened.

Bucky shrugged, one shouldered. “Mostly. It gets a little fuzzy around the sixties; Wanda said they
started wiping me too often to be able to hold onto much, but I remember some. I…” Bucky
blanched, ducked his face. “I’ve done some really horrible things, Stevie.”

“Buck, no, it wasn’t you, you know it wasn’t. You-”

“I killed Dernier,” Bucky blurted out sharply, and Steve physically recoiled, hands finally flying off
of Bucky as if burned.

“I killed him — set his place on fire with him still inside. And I killed Stark — Howard. I attacked
him the same way I attacked you and your friends that day on the bridge. Jumped onto his car and
wrecked it — made it look like an accident. I left your friend an orphan,” he squeezed his eyes shut
tight against the sudden hot tears that broke free and began to fall. He turned his face further from
Steve, trying not to let him see.


Steve’s hands found their place again on Bucky shoulders — his thumb pressing into the dip above
Bucky’s collarbone, just the way Bucky had done for him a million times before.

“I don’t blame you,” Steve insisted firmly, and Bucky scoffed disbelievingly. “I don’t. I read through
your file — I saw what they put you through. No way anybody comes out of that the way you did.
Hell, the doctor who brainwashed you in the first place, Fennhoff? He got to Howard once too.
Nearly had him blow up New York after only a few hours with him. Peggy’s boss died because
Fennhoff brainwashed him into strapping a bomb to himself — nearly took out the entire SSR
building.”

“But-”

“No. Buck, listen to me — I’ll say it every day for the rest of our lives if I have to: nothing they made
you do was your fault. No way in hell.”

“Steve…”

Steve ignored Bucky’s unsure tone to bring him into yet another hug.

Something that was universally assumed, but almost never experienced first-hand, was that Steve
Rogers was an excellent hugger.

Big arms, warm chest, strong hands, light stubble around his jaw scraping against yours… yeah,
Steve Rogers is a damn fine hugger. Even when he was small, it always felt like that — like he could
drain all of the hurt out of you just by squeezing as hard as he could. He’d reach up on his tiptoes
and draw you in tight, pat your back with surprising strength, and all your worries would melt away
like snow in the spring.

Bucky still didn’t quite agree with what Steve was saying, but he didn’t argue further — didn’t want
to lose contact again for another century. At least.
Eventually, the two got tired of standing, and moved to lay side-by side on the bed instead, not bothering to even kick off their shoes first. They spoke softly, not about any one subject in particular, but rather simply whatever came to mind — soft admissions that they’d been unable to confide in anyone since they lost one another.

“Does it hurt?” Steve asked softly.

“Hm?”

“The arm. Is it painful?” His fingertips brushed those of Bucky’s metal hand, curious.

“Sometimes. Depends on the day. Do any of your old war wounds hurt?”

Steve shook his head. “Haven’t even got any scars.”

“I do.”

Steve’s hands trailed up the arm to give Bucky’s metal bicep a reassuring squeeze.

“Your birthday is on VE Day,” Steve said.

“I know. Fourth of July is still a bigger deal though.”

“Not to me.”

“I hated the tours,” Steve admitted. “Hated them so fucking much, I could barely stand ‘em most days. You know, after I got out of that serum chamber, I thought I could never get sick of seeing everything in full colour. But the world loves to make a liar out of me. The colours they used up on stage gave me headaches — all the uniforms and ribbons and fireworks — it was too much.”

“I can’t believe I shot you in the ass,” Bucky giggled, a little self-deprecatingly.

Steve’s face twisted into a small frown — still visibly amused. “You did not — it was my upper thigh.”

“Should have listened to Stark when he told you about the suit’s weak-points; thighs, ass, and flank.”

“Of course you remember that. Were you aiming for my ass?”

“I dunno. I was still a little woozy.”

“For a while, they wouldn’t let me sleep,” Bucky said. "It was in the early days, when I still remembered mostly everything — when Zola and Fennhoff were the only ones in charge of my reconditioning. I overheard them talking one day about how sleeping accelerated the process of healing in my brain. It was why they kept me on ice for six years after the fall — so I could heal. They didn’t like that so much of their work was being undone overnight, so they strapped me to a
chair in my cell and didn’t let me sleep for days. Every few minutes, there’d be a flash of light, or a high-pitched ringing noise, and it’d always jerk me back awake before I could actually manage to fall asleep. I dunno how long they kept me there — at least eight days. I know that because Zola and Fennhoff would both disappear for around nine hours at a time to eat and sleep in their own beds, the bastards. Lost count after that; I was too delirious to process anything.”

Steve’s eyes were wide and horrified, but he didn’t say anything.

“I dunno know how long it had been, but I remember thinking that I couldn’t take it anymore. I lashed out — shredded my restraints, busted the door out, and killed two of the guards outside of my cell. When they pinned me down and finally managed to restrained me again, I burst into tears like a damn little kid. Couldn't help it. First time I’d ever let them see — I didn’t have any strength left to stop myself. Was the first time I ever pleaded with them for mercy. Probably the only time. Must’ve rattled them though, because they let me sleep after that.”

“Jesus, Buck.”

“I couldn’t find your grave,” Steve admitted. “I looked all over the military cemeteries, but…”

“My family got one for me,” Bucky said. “I found it. They bought a plot for the whole family in Green-Wood after I died. Same cemetery as Mama Rogers.”

“You remember Peggy’s boarding school stories?”

Bucky snorted. “How could I forget? Nearly made beans come outta my nose with the one she told us that night we had that arm-wrestling contest.”

“What was that? The one with the brandy?”

“And the headmaster’s wife’s underpants.”

Steve laughed.

“What happened to Betsy, after I fell? I didn’t see her in the Smithsonian.”

"The gun, or the girl?"

"She's more than a gun, Steve."

“The army kept it, Buck — it was Stark’s property, y’know.”

“Sacrilege.”

Steve snorted lightly.

After what felt like hours, eventually their eyes started to grow heavier, and they both began to relax even further into the pliable hotel mattress. Before finally closing the gap between wakefulness and sleep, however, Steve managed to mumble one more thing as his eyes fluttered closed: “don’t leave.”
A small smile graced Bucky’s face, his own eyes closing. “Wouldn’t dream of it,” he promised, and with that, they both nodded off, still facing one another, limbs and foreheads touching.

Steve awoke to the sound of the hotel door opening and closing behind him. Bucky, who obviously hadn’t slept a full night in days, perhaps weeks, remained asleep beside him — lips parted, breathing softly, his face a truly peaceful picture. Steve turned slightly to the side to see who had come in, and smiled when he saw Sam, frozen in his tracks, his arms full of grocery bags.

“I’ve obviously missed something very important here…” Sam said, eyeing Bucky’s sleeping form with bewilderment.

“Hey, Sam,” Steve said softly, not wishing to rouse Bucky just yet. He very gently righted himself up into a sitting position against the headboard, and Bucky huffed irritably in his sleep, and swung an arm over Steve’s legs.

Steve chuckled fondly, and carded a hand through Bucky’s newly cropped hair.

“Steve, why is there a former brainwashed assassin sleeping in your bed?” Sam asked casually, setting both bags of groceries down onto the kitchenette bench beside the door.

“He came in through the window last night,” Steve said.

Sam snorted. “I had a pigeon do that once. Totally not as romantic.”

Steve gave him a look.

“Why are you sharing a bed? There are two beds in here, you know,” Sam pointed out, looking thoroughly amused.

Steve looked back to Bucky, his lips pursed unsurely.

“I just… didn’t want to let him go,” he admitted, and Sam’s smile turned from teasing to completely understanding.

“Think you can get yourself free in order to get a cup of coffee?”

“What, you can’t give it to me here?”

“I’m a civilized person, Cap — I don’t allow people to eat or drink in bed. Especially in beds they don’t even own. C’mon, scoot.”

Steve sighed wearily, and then very, very cautiously, began to lift Bucky’s hand off of him, sliding his legs out from under it until he had both feet on the floor.

As the kettle boiled, the both of them leaned against the bench, staring at Bucky’s sleeping form wordlessly; Steve with a small smile gracing his face, Sam with a small knot of unsurety between his brows.

Not long after the two were clutching their steaming cups of coffee did Sam finally speak up — his voice soft, so as to not rouse Bucky in the smallish room. “Bucky… you know, I’m pretty sure there was a cartoon I watched as a kid that had a kangaroo in it called Bucky…’”
“Sam.”

“Then again, maybe it was a beaver…”

“Sam, please.”

Sam gave a humourless smile. “Seriously, Cap; what the hell’s going on? I go out for one night, and this is what’s waiting for me?”

“Mhm. How is Natasha by the way?” Steve sipped his coffee, eyeing Sam slyly.

“She’s fine — and I keep telling you, it’s not like that.”

“Mhm.”

“It’s not!”

“I believe you.”

“You don’t sound like you believe me. And we’re not even talking about me — stop changing the subject. Why is the Winter Soldier in my hotel room?”

Steve frowned. “Don’t call him that.”

“Steve.”

Steve set his coffee to the side with a yielding sigh, and crossed his arms across his chest defensively. “I wrote him a letter,” he mumbled, flushing a little.

This caught Sam off guard a little. “You what?”

Steve massaged his forehead with the heel of his hand. “After Bucky died, we didn’t get a funeral. Nobody did, during the war. Gabe suggested we all write him letters so we could get some closure, and after I woke up, the Smithsonian gave me the box they were all kept in. I added my own, and Bucky found them. I kind of… indirectly convinced him to come back.”

“What? I thought all of your stuff was in Stark Tower?” Sam said.

“It is. We should probably tell Stark to up his security.”

Sam shook his head. “Okay, so Jason Bourne over there reads your no doubt sappy as hell letter, and…?”

“The kids he was with — the twins — he rescued them from a Hydra lab. Said they were doing experiments on them, and they’ve got… abilities, I guess. He said the girl was able to put his memories right again — something about repairing severed pathways.”

“That’s convenient.”

“Sam…”

“No, don’t… don’t get me wrong here, Cap — I’m thrilled he’s back. But you can’t forget what happened the last time we were together. I saw you in the hospital — you were a wreck. You nearly died. I’m not saying he doesn’t deserve the benefit of the doubt here, but I wouldn’t be so quick to trust him right away, Cap.”
“Well he didn’t kill me in my sleep now, did he?” Steve retorted coldly.

“That’s not funny.”

Steve huffed.

“What about these twins? Were they here? Where are they now?”

“They’re in Stark tower,” Bucky’s voice answered from the bed.

Sam and Steve both jumped around in surprise to see Bucky sat up and rubbing his right hand over his eyes groggily. Steve was caught somewhere between deep chagrin at Bucky overhearing their conversation, and being thoroughly amused at the state of Bucky’s hair after having fallen asleep on his side after being out in the rain.

“I wouldn’t leave them behind without somewhere safe to stay. Stark’s security is good, but Wanda is better. She’s even better at breaking into places than I am. Stark says ‘hi’ by the way.” Bucky continued.

“Buck…” Steve began, attempting to cobble together some kind of excuse for what he’d overheard, but Bucky held out a silencing hand, and levelled him with a grim look.

“He’s right, Steve. Seventy years later, you still got the self-preservation instinct of a landmine tester.” He dragged his fingers through his hair, combing it back up out of his face. “I shouldn’t have fallen asleep like that.”

Sam looked completely floored — taken aback, either by Bucky’s complete civility with what he was saying, or by the casual and smartass way he chose to say it. Steve realised that Sam had never actually heard Bucky speak before.

Bucky winced as he ran a thumb in a line along his left shoulder, and then he stood up and shuffled forward, as if he were approaching a judge’s bench. He looked up at Sam with a completely guilt-ridden expression — his shoulders rounding over like they used to whenever he was embarrassed or ashamed.

“I don’t… I don’t know your name,” Bucky confessed quietly. He ducked his head like he was trying to hide his face behind hair that he didn’t have anymore.

“Sam Wilson,” Sam introduced himself a little tightly — visibly wary, despite Bucky’s completely unintimidating stance.

Bucky’s jaw worked for a moment, furtively glancing up at Sam’s face again and again before he spoke. “I ripped off your wings…” he said, looking positively crushed at the idea.

Sam sighed, and unfolded his arms. Steve could clearly tell that he wanted to keep being pissed off and suspicious, but Sam had always been a sucker for a sad face.

“Sounds to me like you had your wings ripped off a long time before mine were, man,” Sam said softly, and Bucky flushed.

Steve gripped his shoulder reassuringly, and Bucky shot him a small, appreciative smile in return.

“So what’s going to happen now?” Sam asked, resuming his work on his mug of coffee.

Bucky made a face. “The twins want to join the Avengers,” he said, and Sam spluttered a little.
Steve looked a little taken aback as well. “Buck, are you sure?”

“No,” Bucky said wryly. “But they are, and I think I’ve illustrated pretty well over the years that I’m not very good at convincing people not to do things that they wanna do.”

Steve didn’t look amused. Sam did.

“They qualified for that, man?” Sam asked.

Bucky snorted. “I believe the exact phrasing they used was ‘more powerful than the rest of the Avengers combined’, and ‘could have done it with one hand tied behind my back’.” His eyebrows drew together softly, and his teasing half-smile faded. “They’ve both been through a lot. The things Hydra put them through…” he swallowed. “They deserve the chance. When I found them, they weren’t… they weren’t in a good way. Especially Wanda. The twins weren’t just a one-off experiment to Hydra; they were engineered in order to be my replacements. Superpowered assassins.”

Sam and Steve both wore matching looks of utter horror and disgust. Sam had set his coffee aside again distastefully, and Steve’s hand had tightened almost painfully on Bucky’s shoulder.

Bucky cleared his throat awkwardly. “They, uh… they want me to join too.”

The looks of horror turned immediately to ones of astonishment, tinged with uncertainty.

“I haven’t promised them anything,” Bucky said quickly. “I know there’ll be a lot of hurdles to jump through, and a lot of shit to work through, and a lot of people to convince. But you gave me my freedom, and I owe it to you and to myself to do something good with it,” he stared earnestly at Steve, who looked about ready to envelop him in yet another bone-crushing hug.

Sam scrubbed a hand over his head, looking overwhelmed. “Shit, man.” He took in a deep breath, and put both hands on his hips. “You know, I thought I was just gonna come here today to drink cheap coffee and listen to Steve pine all day — this is completely left-field for me, I’m sorry.”

Bucky gave a wry smirk, and then turned to Steve considerately, a thought suddenly occurring to him. “You still haven’t told any of them.”

Steve averted his eyes. “I… I didn’t know if you, uh…”

“Oh,” Bucky smiled a little, and he nodded, understanding. “You didn’t know if I’d want you to.”

“Do you want to now?” Steve asked, and Bucky looked at once completely terrified.

“I mean, I guess… I’m going to have to at some point. And I’m pretty sure if we don’t explain what’s going on to Stark, he’s going to burst a blood vessel pretty soon.”

“He may have mentioned a mobster-style interrogation the last I saw him,” Sam added helpfully.

“You sure you’re ready?” Steve asked.

Bucky gave a humourless laugh. “If I’m going to be sticking with you from now on, I should probably get used to going into things half-cocked again.”

“Man, if you really have got your memories back, you should know as well as I do that there’s never any getting used to it,” Sam said, amused.
“Hey, you remember that time Ms Mavis chased me around the entire apartment block with armfuls of wooden spoons?”

Steve snorted. “How could I forget? My only regret of that day was that camera-phones hadn’t been invented yet.”

“I think I’d rather go another round with her.”

Steve’s face softened, and he reached over to give him a reassuring pat on the arm. “You’ll be fine, Buck. You want me to go in first?”

“Pretty sure that a gentle introduction’s going to be the only thing that keeps me from getting tackled to the ground, big guy,” Bucky joked weakly.

Steve’s eyebrows twitched like he didn’t disagree, but he didn’t reply — instead, walking through the double doors into Stark’s lab with Sam in tow, leaving Bucky outside to wait for his cue.

With the exception of Rhodey, all of the Avengers were present; Nat and Clint perched at Tony’s bench with mugs of coffee, Thor standing beside it, frowning down at more dismembered body parts of the Iron Legion.

Tony stood in the middle of the room, his arms folded, and glaring at Sam and Steve with all of his might.

“Tony?” Steve said, a little taken aback by the sheer fury in Tony’s face.

“Where’s Metal-arm-guy?” Tony demanded abruptly, his arms crossing immovably across his chest. “I know he’s here — I have Jarvis on red alert since I caught him skulking around your apartment yesterday like a crazy stalker.”

Two familiar faces peered out from behind Tony, and upon seeing Steve, broke out into a matched set of enthusiastic and excited grins.

Tony jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Tweedles Dum and Dee have been infuriatingly unhelpful, and I want some damn answers, Rogers. No more jerking me around.”

“You’re right,” Steve said quickly, and Tony blinked, surprised.

“What? What do you mean I’m right? I mean — of course I’m right, but why do you agree with me that I’m right?”

Steve and Sam exchanged a nervous glance. Sam gave Steve a one-shouldered shrug, and jerked his head back toward the doors.

Steve sighed. “Buck, you can come out,” he said.

Slowly, the doors opened, admitting a very ashen-faced looking Bucky, who had nervously pocketed his left hand, and refused to look up from the ground. He stood closely beside Steve, and shot meaningful looks at both of the twins — both of whose faces only lit up more with unadulterated admiration and pride at his entrance. He flushed.

“What?” Tony said blankly.
Bucky kept swallowing nervously over and over again, ducking his head and flittering his eyes around the room as if trying to track down every possible escape point he could.

The Avengers all peered up at him curiously, not looking frightened or angry exactly, but they certainly never lowered their guard.

Bucky opened his mouth to try and speak, but nothing came out. He huffed, apparently in irritation at himself, and for a few solid seconds, Steve thought he might turn and run.

But then Wanda held Bucky’s hand.

Bucky looked down at it in surprise, and his expression immediately melted from anxious terror into something soft. He squeezed back gently, and then took a long, steadying breath.

“I… I’m…” he began. “I, uh…” he looked to Steve for help, who smiled at him encouragingly. Bucky cleared his throat. “I probably should have scripted this before I came in,” he joked weakly. His face set, and he finally looked up at all of them. “My name is James Barnes,” he said, determination now prevalent in his voice.

Tony sobered at once, his eyes going wide and serious, and his crossed arms fell to his sides limply. “Barnes?” he asked tonelessly.

Bucky didn’t meet his gaze, but nodded.

“Barnes?” Tony asked again, shock and disbelief now heavily colouring his tone.

Bucky flushed even darker, but he didn’t allow his conviction to waver. “Call me Bucky,” he said.

Tony couldn’t help but snort, and Steve glared at him.

“I’m sorry, really, but Bucky? The most infamous and lethal assassin in the world is named Bucky?”

Sam shot Tony a look over Steve’s shoulder that very clearly said ‘right?’

“Wait, your name is Bucky?” Pietro suddenly said, and all of the Avengers looked at him incredulously.

“Hold on,” Tony said, “you’ve been running around with this guy for weeks, and you didn’t know his name?”

The twins looked at each other. Pietro shrugged, “we’ve just been calling him ‘Pops’ this whole time.”

“Unbelievable.”

“I don’t understand,” Thor suddenly piped up, his brow furrowed. “This is the same ‘Bucky’ who you were found mourning in the graveyard after the battle of New York?”

Steve blinked, surprised that Thor would remember something like that from so long ago.

“Yeah,” he confirmed, a little sheepishly.

“Is spontaneous resurrection common in Midgard?” Thor continued curiously.

“No, not usually.” Tony said.
“In my defense, I never actually died in the first place,” Bucky reasoned helpfully, clearly a tad more relaxed now that it was obvious nobody was planning on attacking him just yet.

“What the fuck?” Clint suddenly said, sounding completely bewildered. Nat gave a sympathetic little smile.

Bucky sighed, and Wanda gripped his hand a little tighter. “What have you told them?” he addressed the twins.

“Only what they needed to know about us. Nothing about you, other than you helping us to escape, and keeping us on the run,” Pietro responded.

Bucky shot Steve a pleading look, who returned it only by smiling, and gripping his bicep with one hand.

With one foot, Clint dragged out one of the remaining stools around Tony’s bench and kicked it toward Bucky — not exactly in an inviting manner, but Bucky took it anyway.

“It’s kind of a long story,” Bucky warned weakly.

Nobody responded, all looking at him with patient expressions on their faces.

“Uh…” Bucky rubbed the back of his neck uneasily. “I guess I should probably start in Azzano,” he looked to Steve for confirmation, who nodded.

He drew a deep, steadying breath, and began to talk.

To Steve’s surprise, Bucky hadn’t taken the effort to alter his story any to leave out the more indelicate details. It was raw, and undiluted, and downright horrifying to hear from start to finish — even if Steve had already known most of it to begin with. He hadn’t even glossed over details such as Dernier’s murder, or his subsequent temporary escape, and the nineteen-year long decommission as a result.

He also didn’t lie about his assassination of Tony’s parents either.

The other Avengers had all tensed upon hearing this — their eyes wide and horrified. They didn’t turn to stare, but each of them did spare a split second to peer over warily at Tony, their faces cautious, as if expecting him to Hulk-out at the confession.

Tony, on the other hand, only continued sitting still and demure in his seat — his face the picture of perfectly composed blankness, and nothing more. He hadn’t spoken throughout Bucky’s entire speech, and while his mouth had dropped open in shock at the reveal of that particular detail, he still remained silent.

Bucky hadn’t looked at him since, his face flushed with shame and guilt as he barrelled onward until he finally reached the end of his recount of the helicarrier collapse, and then he skipped over a lot of detail in how he extracted justice by taking it upon himself to destroy Hydra as best he could alone. He didn’t tell the Avengers about finding Steve’s memorial box in the back of his wardrobe, but did explain Wanda returning his memories to him, and (to Steve’s utmost surprise) a brief visit to Peggy Carter in her new care facility in New York. Lamely, he finished off by saying that he broke into
Steve’s hotel room the previous night, and there was nothing more to it, and he then ducked his head low and clasped both hands nervously in his lap, fidgeting slightly.

After a long, tense silence among the group, it was eventually Natasha who cleared her throat and spoke first. “This needs to stay quiet,” she instructed firmly. “Nobody finds out — you hear me? If this gets out, people won’t hesitate to pounce on the opportunity for a scapegoat. And I’m not interested in watching any more innocent people be lynched for actions beyond their control,” she shot a sideways glance at Clint.

Out of all of them, it surprised Steve to see that Clint actually seemed to be the one who was most enraged by Bucky’s account of his internment. His fists were balled tightly by his sides, visibly quivering from the barely-suppressed rage.

“Clint?” Steve prompted gently, feeling a touch concerned.

“You know, just when I think I’ve heard it all — just when I think that it can’t get possibly any worse…” his voice tapered off furiously, and he had to press a hand into his face and take several deep breaths in to calm himself.

Wanda was nearly in tears, very decidedly not touching Bucky, but looking as though she very much wanted to. Steve had wondered at one point if she had finally been driven to the point where she was unable to hear any more, and had expected her to excuse herself from the room. But she didn’t. Probably only for Bucky’s sake, she stayed, and listened, comforted by her brother, who had drawn her into a consoling hug by the shoulders.

Sam and Tony had both taken a moment to walk around the lab, both hands on the backs of their heads — visibly troubled and overwhelmed. Steve knew Sam had had a lot of experience with Vets before, but none of them had endured the kind of things Bucky had, and certainly not for as long.

After several more minutes of muted condolences and reassurances to Bucky, who looked more emotionally fragile than Steve had ever seen him, Tony finally dropped his hands, and turned to face Bucky — eyes locking with his.

Bucky didn’t shrink back, but he did steel himself a little, as if bracing himself for what was about to come.

“Hey, can I borrow the T-800 for a few minutes?” Tony addressed Steve casually. Everyone stared at him in surprise — particularly Bucky. Tony gave a reassuring smile at Steve’s unsure face, and his tone turned soft. “Don’t worry Rogers, I’ll return Buckback Mountain here to you just as I found him.”

Steve still looked unsure, but Bucky touched his arm gently, smiling resignedly. “It’s okay, Steve.”

Unable to argue with him exactly, Steve gave the tiniest of nods, and watched anxiously as Bucky righted himself and followed Tony demurely out of the lab, down the short corridor, and into the elevator.

When the doors opened, Bucky was vaguely surprised to see that the room he’d been taken to was the same one where they’d first met: the bar of the penthouse — Tony’s floor.

“Take a seat in one of the chairs, would you, Robocop?” Tony requested politely, and Bucky complied, not really sure of what else to do.

For several long, tense minutes, Tony rustled about behind the bar, making an odd assortment of noises that Bucky couldn’t exactly pick out. Eventually, Tony emerged, carrying a smallish toolbox
under his arm, and two glasses of amber liquid in either hand.

Wordlessly, Tony pressed a glass into Bucky’s hand, and set the toolbox down on the glass-top end table situated between their two armchairs.

With a loud exhale, Tony took a seat, and pulled a deep gulp from his own glass, which Bucky noticed was far fuller than his own perfectly reasonable serve. Eventually, Tony noticed that Bucky wasn’t drinking. “It’s bourbon. You said you liked bourbon, right?”

Bucky nodded, but still didn’t drink. After another lengthy pause, Tony sighed, set his glass aside on a coaster, and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees to stare at Bucky intensely.

“You know I don’t blame you, right?” he said gently, and Bucky looked up at him in surprise. “To be honest, I kinda suspected it the minute I found out who you were that day we first met. But there’s very limited information on the Winter Soldier in Shield’s archives — it’s all mostly just vague mentions of a metal-armed soldier dropping in on missions to fuck everything up, and a mostly redacted profile that’s about seventy percent pure speculation. You’re good at what you do, and you’re good at covering your tracks, so I couldn’t be a hundred percent.” Tony frowned a little, his eyes falling to the ground. “To be honest, it’s kind of a relief, knowing for sure. There’d always been the possibility in the back of my mind that the crash had been deliberately set up, but honestly, all these years I’ve mostly been under the assumption that my dad’s alcoholism and reckless driving were what killed him and my mom. Knowing that it was planned and unavoidable on his part makes me feel a little better about the whole thing.”

“You don’t blame me for murdering your parents?” Bucky asked incredulously.

“No,” Tony shook his head. “You’re as much a victim of Hydra as me — no, actually, you way more than me,” he took another sip of bourbon, and for a moment, he simply frowned at the floor. “You know, I’ve been tortured before.” Tony revealed, a little angrily, “I lasted eight minutes. The things they put you through, I can’t even imagine. It makes my skin crawl. And what really gets me is that you didn’t even give in. That’s not what happened. They had to erase you in order to get you to conform. The whole thing makes my three months in terrorist captivity look like a vacation in the Bahamas.”

Bucky ducked his head, and cleared his throat a little.

Satisfied with his piece, Tony leaned back in his seat and took another long pull from his glass of whiskey, then set it down and opened up the toolbox.

“So what’s with the tools then?” Bucky asked.

Tony smiled, obviously waiting for that question. “Let me guess — you used to get a regular service on this thing, am I right?” he tapped Bucky’s metal arm with an L-key meaningfully.

“Yeah, I guess?” Bucky said, peering down at it neutrally.

“I noticed that you’ve been holding your elbow out at a slightly unnatural angle all day. And I can see that you’re being weighed down on your left side — more so than usual. You’re tilting when you sit and stand, and you’ve been rubbing at your shoulder.”

Bucky blinked. He honestly hadn’t noticed any of that — must’ve been such a gradual change...

“How much of your skeleton is fitted with reinforcements for this thing?” Tony asked.

Bucky gave him a blank look. “To be honest, you’d probably know more about this thing than I do.
They never answered any of my questions, and if I heard them talk about it, it was never in any language I could understand very well in the beginning. You think they did something to my bones?”

Tony shrugged. “Best explanation I can come up with for why the thing doesn’t just rip right out of your body. Must weigh a ton.”

Bucky shrugged unconcernedly, and angled his arm so that Tony could get at it easier. “You get used to it.”

Tony frowned, clearly discomfited by that. “Is there anything you do know that I wouldn’t? You knew about the trackers and whatnot.” He slid the L-key under one of the plates in Bucky’s bicep, and the panel popped off cleanly.

Bucky shook his head. “I only knew about those because they wanted me to know about them. Telling me that they could always find me was their way of letting me know I could never escape. Not forever.”

Tony’s look of queasy revulsion only intensified. “When he ran his scans, Jarvis wasn’t able to get anything out of you but what the arm was mostly made of, and the fact that it’s famous for being attached to the Winter Soldier — it’s kind of distinctive.”

Bucky smirked a little, “thought you said you weren’t going to run that identification software,” he said teasingly.

“Well, for a super spy-slash-assassin, you were kind of trusting.” Tony teased right back.

“Hey, give me a break, alright? My brain was Swiss fuckin’ cheese.”

Tony laughed, and for a few more minutes, Bucky let him work in silence.

Eventually, however, the silence grew tense, and Tony felt compelled to break it. “So how’s the future treating you?”

Bucky shrugged, one shouldered so as to not disturb Tony on his left. “’S not bad. Better than the seventies, from what I can remember.”

Tony smirked. “At least the eighties weren’t bad.”

Bucky screwed his face up. “Bad fashion.”

Tony fitted a pair of plastic safety goggles to his face, and bent in close with a small handheld device lined up to the open panelling in Bucky’s arm. Bucky flinched a little at the sight of small electric sparks flying off of its pointed tip, and he remembered that this kind of treatment was common during repairs and services while he was under Hydra’s care.

Tony seemed to notice his momentary panic, and quickly worked to carry on a conversation to keep him distracted. “Well, this generation’s probably the stupidest — planking, and vining, and the cinnamon challenge…”

Bucky chuckled weakly. “People in my generation had a fad at one point where they’d swallow live goldfish as a dare, I think a spoonful of cinnamon is actually a pretty sensible alternative.”

“That is without a doubt the most hilarious and horrific thing I have ever heard,” Tony said, mirth drawing the corners of his mouth up high. Bucky smiled.
“So looks like you’re a little more up-to-date with meme culture than your big blonde better half.”

“Living with the twins has been very… illuminating,” Bucky said generously. “Pietro gets bored easily. When he does, he tends to do stupid shit to amuse himself.”

“I noticed,” Tony groused. “Thank you, by the way. Both of them are a delight. You know, the girl lifted me into the air when I tried to get her brother on a modified treadmill to test his speed.”

“He can get to Mach 5,” Bucky answered reflexively. “And I’m not surprised that she’d do that — a lot of the tests Hydra did on him usually involved a treadmill just like that.”

“You’re a real downer, you know that?”

“I’ve been told,” Bucky said, and smirked again.

“God, would you look at that face?” Tony exclaimed dramatically a little over half an hour later. “No way that face belongs to a world-class assassin, he’s way too pretty for it,” he gestured grandly over to where Bucky sat, innocently chewing over a mouthful of turkey cranberry sandwich.

Bucky raised one eyebrow at him, a little amused, and took another bite to avoid dignifying it with an answer. He hadn’t realised how hungry he was until he started to eat — not having had anything besides a stolen mouthful of Steve’s coffee since breakfast the day before.

“So what’s the plan for your living situation?” Tony asked, suddenly all business.

Bucky shrugged. “There’s a Hydra safehouse nearby, I figured I’d just keep staying there.”

“He’s staying with me,” Steve said firmly — and it was in that stubborn kind of voice that said there was no room for argument. He folded his arms and glared just to hammer home his point.

Tony gave him an odd look. “I can give him his own floor, you know,” he said, and oh, he was probably trying to offer that up to begin with, Bucky realised.

“I don’t need to—” he said, but Steve cut him off with a shake of the head before he could finish his sentence.

“You’re staying with me,” he said insistently. He smiled, and Bucky returned it gratefully.

Tony gave them both a strange look, but didn’t say anything.

“I’ll need to get some new clothes,” Bucky realised, “I only have two pairs of pants and three shirts. One jacket.”

“You can borrow my clothes for now — I’ll let you go through my closet later,” Steve assured him.

“With the exception of all your pretty cocktail dresses and heels, right?” Bucky goaded him cheekily.

“With your legs? Don’t be silly,” Steve shot right back, and Bucky laughed, and gave him a light swat on the shoulder.

Tony only continued staring at them bizarrely.
Chapter 21

After all the obstacles he’d hurled himself over to get where he was, after how tightly-wound he’d felt for months and months on end, however worse things seemed to get with each step forwards, Steve had never truly allowed himself to succumb under the weight of it all. After all, he had a job to do.

Can’t lose it now — I’m trying to save the world from Hydra.

Can’t lose it now — I’m looking for my brainwashed amnesiac assassin best friend.

Can’t lose it now — I’m fighting against alien Mind-Stone-powered robots destroying New York again.

Can’t lose it now — I’m so close to finding him.

Can’t lose it now — I just got him back.

After each blow he’d suffered in his journey to get to where he was now, he’d only allowed himself to take them as they came — to brush himself off, right himself to his feet, and continue struggling onward.

When he finally did lose it, he felt completely mortified by how ridiculous the cause of it was. It was coffee.

Plain black coffee with sugar, set into his hands by his bleary-eyed best friend one morning several days after Bucky’s return. Bucky often woke up after Steve did, if only by a few minutes — it had been the same when they’d lived together in Brooklyn. Since Steve was often the first one up, it was usually him who brewed up their morning coffee — but not today. Bucky must have had another nightmare again, because by the time Steve shuffled out of his bedroom, Bucky was already in the kitchen, pouring up two mugs of coffee, and adding sugar to one, and milk to the other. He’d smiled at seeing Steve enter the kitchen, and Steve patted him thankfully on the back as he accepted his mug.

Upon taking the first sip, Steve had been plunged back in time so abruptly that it sent his head spinning — to the image of himself, as he was now, only a foot shorter and a hundred and fifty pounds lighter, standing around in his rumpled underpants and undershirt in his cold-floored kitchen, being handed coffee by an even more grumpy and even more rumpled Bucky Barnes.

It was something so small, so stupid, and yet so undeniably precious to him: that after everything that had changed, Bucky’s coffee still tasted the same. Shitty, bitter, and burnt — just like it always had.

Midway through his first sip, he felt his breath hitch. His fingers tightened on the mug, and his lower lip quivered, completely involuntarily. Hot, fresh tears sprung to his eyes so suddenly that it stunned him, but once he started, there was absolutely no way he could force himself to stop — they simply would not stop coming.

He set the mug aside on the kitchen counter and ducked his head down, covering his mouth with a shaking hand and just finally allowing everything to crash over him all at once. It was completely overwhelming — too much, too fast, all at once, and he felt his knees begin to give way.

Bucky’s face had completely drained of colour, and he looked immediately panicked, setting aside
his own mug to step into Steve’s space and begin to run his hands over Steve’s form — not touching him, but rather readying himself to catch him if he fell. Or perhaps he was restraining himself from touching Steve at all.

Steve brought his other hand up to cover his eyes, mortified by this sudden loss of control. He wished with all his might that Bucky would go away — that didn’t have to be there to bear witness to this…

“Steve, are- wh- wh-” Bucky stop-started jerkily, completely unsure of what to do, how he could help.

Steve bowed down further, his shoulders beginning to shake with unrestrainable sobs, and he turned, facing away from him. He shook his head forcefully, willing Bucky to go away — to not worry about him — to disregard this and pretend like it never happened.

But when had Bucky ever done anything of the sort?

As if triggered by Steve’s refusal for help, Bucky’s arms suddenly flung themselves around his shaking form, forcefully turning him in his grip so that they were chest-to-chest, and squeezing him tight, as if trying to physically hold him together. “Steve, Stevie, it’s okay, it’s alright…” Bucky said softly, soothingly.

Steve’s stifled crying broke through his closed throat, and he began all-out sobbing in Bucky’s arms. He drew his hands away from his face and instead fastened them tightly around Bucky’s shoulder blades, probably constricting him so tightly that it hurt, but he couldn’t bring himself to loosen his grip any. He buried his face into Bucky’s flesh shoulder, his nose pressed in close to Bucky’s throat. He felt Bucky’s pulse beating — too fast — against his lips, and his shuddering gasps only grew louder.

Of the two of them, Steve had never been the crier. In fact, Bucky was completely hard-pressed to find a time when he had ever seen Steve cry in the entire time that he had known him. He knew Steve had cried when his mother died — had heard him sniffling quietly to himself in the days following her funeral, after they’d moved in together. It was always at night, when he thought Bucky was sleeping — so he hadn’t actually seen it. Steve had never allowed Bucky to see him cry. Steve hadn’t allowed anyone to see him cry. Not once.

“Hey, I know my coffee’s bad, but it’s not that bad, right?” he joked weakly, and Steve sobbed a laugh into his shoulder. Bucky kissed the side of his head tenderly, and rubbed both hands up and down the length of Steve’s back.

“God — I’m sorry, I-” Steve hiccupped.

“Hey, no, none of that, alright?” Bucky nudged his chin over Steve’s head and rested it there.

“Fuck,” Steve ground out, teeth clenching furiously. “Goddamn it, I just… I missed you so goddamn much, Bucky, I couldn’t… I can’t…” his hands squeezed hard on the material of Bucky’s borrowed shirt, and his breathing hitched and trembled, and his throat closed over whatever else he was trying to say, but Bucky got it.


“I know, Steve…”

“You can’t leave me like that again — please, please promise me. It’s stupid, and it’s selfish, but that’s why I need you to do it. Please, I can’t lose you again — not again. It’s too many times in a
lifetime, don’t make me do it.”

Seeing Steve cry was one thing — hearing him beg was another. That makes it twice now that Bucky has had to hear Steve beg in his lifetime, and what made it worse was that he was the reason for it. Both of those times.

Bucky had done a lot of shitty, fucked up things in his time, but this? This honestly felt like the worst.

Bucky felt his own tears begin to gather, and he worked to make his voice sound completely steady. “I’m not going anywhere,” he promised, and impossibly, Steve clutched him even tighter.

Bucky had said the same thing, all those years ago — right before he’d kissed him by the firelight the night before their last mission in Russia. “I can’t… I can’t fucking lose you, Steve. You mean too much to me…”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he repeated softly, whispering it into Steve’s hair. “I promise. Till the end of the line, you hear?” Bucky continued and Steve let out a long, loud breath of air.

Eventually, the pair abandoned their unmade breakfast and allowed their mugs of coffee to go cold on the kitchen countertops in order to sit by each other on the couch — curled up as if Steve was still stick-thin and five feet tall. Bucky’s chin hooked over his head, and he absentmindedly doodled random shapes into Steve’s shoulder blades as the two of them simply sat together and talked.

“God, I’m sorry, I don’t know what came over me…”

“Hey, didn’t I tell you to shut up?”

Steve looked away uneasily. “I haven’t lost control like that since you fell. Don’t think I’ve cried at all since you fell…”

Bucky hummed. “You never were much of a crier. Dum Dum’s letter said you really freaked them all out after I fell. Said you looked like you wanted to rip Zola apart with your bare hands.”

“I did. I would have, if they hadn’t held me back. Didn’t care about the mission, didn’t care that he had information, I didn’t care about anything. Felt like I was going to die. Probably the first time I ever really wanted to kill someone. I wanted to kill him so badly, I couldn’t stand it. Scared myself.”

“He’s dead now though, isn’t he?”

Steve nodded. “Cancer, I think. In the seventies.”

“Damn.” Bucky screwed up his face. “Hope the little rat suffered.”

Steve made a dark noise like he agreed.

“It’s called Protanomaly,” Steve told him. “I looked it up online. See, I wasn’t completely red-green colorblind. The reds were there, they were just weak — really weak. Always looked… I guess kinda orange or brown. Couldn’t see pink either, not really.”

“I remember,” Bucky said with a small huff of amusement. “‘Gee wiz, Buck, your lips are really pink’, ” he imitated him in a chirpy voice.

“I have never said ‘gee wiz’ in my life,” Steve admonished.
“I figured you must’ve been able to see it at least a little. I remember, you always handed me the red gumdrops without me having to point out which were which,” he shrugged, “you sometimes handed me a few extra orange ones, but I didn’t complain.”

“You crook.”

“Hey, you never did tell me what the deal was with the forks.” Steve said.

“Forks?”

“I’ve seen you — you took the bent fork when we had dinner last night. I remember Dum Dum, he’d always give you the most mangled-looking fork out of the lot whenever he dealt out the utensils. Sometimes he’d bend em up a little more if he knew you weren’t looking.”

“And you didn’t tell me? Jeez, you call me a crook…”

Steve grinned. “So what’s the story?”

“Dum Dum always said that they added ‘authenticity’ to our camp. I may have made an… inappropriate suggestion about where his authenticity could go, and…” Bucky let the end of that story speak for itself. Steve laughed again. “I kept doing it because it reminds me of him. I miss the guys, you know?” his voice grew sad, and Steve felt his fingers halt their path on his back.

“Hey — Dernier wouldn’t have blamed you,” Steve said firmly. “None of the guys would.”

“I know. That’s kind of what makes it worse — I know they wouldn’t’ve. But I deserve it.”

“You don’t.”

Bucky didn’t argue any more, but he certainly didn’t agree with him.

“Stark told me to put lube in my arm.”

Steve paused for a second. “He what?”

“Lube. In between the plates on my arm. I thought he was kidding at first, but no — apparently it helps it shift when I move.”

Steve ducked his face to snicker childishly, and Bucky grinned. He’d hoped that that would make Steve laugh.

“I should have listened to you,” Steve admitted.

“Mm? What time? You ignore me a lot.”

“The night before the mission. Before we captured Zola.”

Bucky stilled once more.

“You were right. You’re always right — the plan wasn’t thought through well enough. You warned
me something like that was going to happen, and I didn’t listen.”

“You’re only saying that because of what happened to me. The mission was successful, wasn’t it? You took Zola into custody, and you found the main Hydra base, and you saved the world — just like you planned. Don’t get me wrong, if we could do it over, I’d rather not die again, but it was worth it, wasn’t it? Long-run?”

“Wasn’t worth it. Could never be worth it.”


Steve clenched his jaw and didn’t say anything. Couldn’t say that if it were a choice between Bucky and the world, he honestly didn’t know which he’d choose…

They didn’t talk about the kiss. But they both thought about it.

After a while, Steve began to feel himself growing drowsy and warm in Bucky’s arms, and his eyes flickered shut peacefully.

“You fallin’ back asleep there, Cap?”

Steve hummed his confirmation.

“Could have at least got off of me first, punk.”

Steve made a noise like he agreed, but made no effort to move. Chuckling softly, Bucky gently manoeuvred them both into a slightly more comfortable position, lying back against the length of the couch just as they used to when they napped together sometimes before the war, when the heating wasn’t working, and the apartment was cold. He felt Bucky’s lips curl into a small smile in his hair, and then they dipped down to press a small kiss onto his forehead.

Once again, Steve’s thoughts wandered back to the kiss Bucky had given him the day before the retrieval mission, and probably not for the first time, found himself wondering when exactly he’d become so comfortable with the idea…

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Tony said, levelling Sam with a very serious look and pointing at him with a slice of toast. “And I’m asking you, because you’re the only one who’d know for sure: in the entire time he’s been topside, has Cap ever dated anyone? Anyone at all?”

Sam, graciously, did not roll his eyes, but he did level Tony with a very unimpressed stare. “Not that I know of, no. Why, are you teaming up with Natasha to try and set him up? Because I think he might punch you, you know.”

“Natasha’s been trying to set him up? Without me?” Tony demanded, sounding a little offended.

Sam gave him another look, and didn’t answer.
“Seriously, what’s his deal? He asexual?” Tony inquired, leaning in conspiratorially onto his elbows.

“You’d have to ask him that, man. Steve and I have had better things to talk about lately.” Sam shrugged, and pointedly unfolded the newspaper on the kitchen counter and began to read.

Tony folded the top of his newspaper back to look over it at him. “You were on-and-off on the road with him for almost a year. You telling me you never had any late-night truth-telling sessions during those sleepovers?”

“Well, mostly we just had pillow fights in our negligée and gossiped about boys until our moms called for lights out,” Sam replied dryly. “But even if we did, I wouldn’t tell you,” he added, and then righted his newspaper again.

“Well that’s as good as a confirmation.”

Sam didn’t reply, just turned to the next page leisurely.

Tony brought down the newspaper again with one hand. “What about Barnes and Rogers? Are they…?” he trailed off pointedly, and Sam quirked an eyebrow. This was obviously what Tony was trying to get at from the start.

“No. They’re just friends, man,” Sam said smoothly. “They’re friendly.”

“No, you and I are friendly. Captain Retro and the Barnacle, they… they’re something else. They’re always touching each other — hugging, and whatnot. It’s kinda weird. And have you seen the way he looks at him? Rhodey and I have been best friends for pretty much over a decade, and I’ve never looked at him like that.”

“Have you ever seen Colonel Rhodes spontaneously come back from the dead after you watched him plummet a thousand feet into an icy ravine?” Sam asked casually, privately amused.

“Can’t say I have.”

“Then that’ll be why. It’s only been a few weeks — physical reassurances like that aren’t unusual for people who have spent a long time apart. And friends were generally more touchy-feely in the forties anyway. Leave them be.”

Tony harrumphed, but nevertheless relinquished his hold on Sam’s newspaper.

“Where are the geriatrics, anyway?” Tony continued casually, leaning back in his stool and folding his arms. “Usually they’re up and about and wrecking my gym by this time.”

“Maybe they’re having sex in their apartment,” Natasha’s voice suggested glibly as she began to make her way down the stairs, looking perfectly put-together with her day outfit on, and hair and makeup done, despite it being fairly early still. Tony was only awake because he’d yet to sleep. Sam was used to rising before the sun.

Sam did roll his eyes this time. “Don’t encourage him.”

Natasha gave a sly little smirk. She delicately plucked a shiny red apple from the top of the fruit bowl, and took a bite.

“You know,” Tony said sadly, “that day Barnes came back? I don't think I've ever seen Cap smile like that before. Not once.”
Natasha and Sam sobered a little, and they exchanged a grim look with one another like they agreed.

“You know, I’m not exactly a good replacement for Doctor Vaselli.” Sam gently cautioned. “I’m a counsellor, not a psychiatrist.”

“Shrink’s a shrink, isn’t it?” Barnes shrugged, unconcerned.

“Not exactly…”

“Does Steve trust her?”

Sam opened his mouth to respond ‘yes’, but found that he couldn’t — because while Steve had visited every appointment for the stretch of time he was required to, he’d never actually trusted her with anything personal. Not in the way he did with Sam.

Barnes took note of Sam’s silence, and gave a pointed little tilt of the head to prompt Sam into continuing.

Sam sighed, surrendering, and then leaned back in his seat to cross one ankle over his knee and arrange his expression into what Steve called his ‘therapist face’.

Of course, beyond his general concerns over not feeling qualified enough to deal with a case as intense as Barnes’s, he had absolutely no quarrels in being the one to act as his counsellor. He didn’t like the idea becoming the Avengers’ personal therapist or anything, but he felt oddly touched (if not completely bewildered) by Barnes trusting him enough to be put under his care after such a short amount of time knowing him. Obviously, without Steve to wholeheartedly vouch for him, Barnes would never have considered it in a million years, but it was nice to hear nonetheless.

He was actually a little surprised at how agreeable Barnes was, especially compared to Steve. While Steve had whined and bitched and dragged his heels during the entire duration of his mandatory therapy sessions with Dr Vaselli, according to Natasha, Barnes’s only objection to the whole thing was a request for the therapist to not be a complete stranger. And after what Sam had heard and read about Doctor Fennhoff, he thought that this was actually pretty reasonable.

Barnes never complained, or argued, or dug in his heels about it — and he understood completely that these sessions were a non-negotiable requirement if he was going to be considered for the Avengers like he wanted. But despite his show of easy compliance, Sam could tell that Barnes doubted that it could do him much good. It made him a little sad to think that the man considered himself so beyond help (despite the fact that Sam had thought the same thing about him not even two weeks ago).

“Alright, but just so you know, I can’t prescribe anything you might need: anti-anxiety, depression meds, sleeping aids, anything like that,” Sam forewarned him again.

Barnes snorted humourlessly. “I’m cautious around aspirin these days, doc — I’d refuse anything you’d offer me anyway.”

Which, fair. If Sam’s trauma had involved huge cocktails of unknown drugs, he doubted that there’d be much comfort in involving them in his recovery too.
He settled in comfortably, and nodded. “Are you settling in okay?”

Barnes shrugged. “’S alright. Beds could stand to be a little firmer.”

Sam smirked, remembering himself making that same observation to Steve all those months ago. “How are you finding everything with Steve?”

Barnes actually smiled at this. “Just like it used to be — it’s actually kinda weird how quickly we’ve fallen back into old habits again, to be honest.”

“No more reservations about settling down?”

“It’s not like I’m marrying the guy.”

“I meant, have you revisited any thoughts about taking off on your own again?”

Barnes’s eyes turned to the floor awkwardly. “No. I don’t… I didn’t like being alone. It was easier in some ways, but in others… it was hard to deal with, especially at first.”

“Panic attacks?”

“A lot, in the beginning. Less now, and not really when I’m with Steve, or the twins. They keep me calm, I guess. Calmer. Grounded. I think maybe Wanda might’ve had something to do with it too, but she’s never said so if she has.”

Sam nodded understandingly. “Have you had any seizures?”

Barnes looked up again, and inclined his head curiously. “No. Why would I?”

Sam gave a small shrug, “a relatively common side effect of PTSD that a lot of people don’t know about are seizures. Doesn’t affect everyone, but I figured that with your experiences with electro-shock and everything, it might’ve made it more likely.”

“’S probably the serum,” Barnes’s nose wrinkled at the idea. “Scrambles my eggs up pretty good, but any physical damage doesn’t last too long, even in my brain. ’S why I don’t really get concussions or anything.”

He remembered Steve pulling the handbrake in his car, and watching the masked figure fly from the roof and slam his head into asphalt at high-speed, only to twist around and get right back up as if nothing had happened.

Sam surveyed him for a long while before speaking again. “Have you had any suicidal thoughts or intentions?”

Barnes didn’t flinch at the question, but his brows did draw in further, and he hesitated for a long while before answering.

“I can’t kill myself,” he admitted. “There are…” his lips twisted as if he were tasting something bitter, “failsafes in place if I ever try.”

“Would you care to elaborate?” Sam asked, frowning a little in confusion.

Barnes swallowed. “In the beginning, when I still had most of my marbles, I tried a few times, but they’d always come in and restrain me. Sedate me. After they brought in the chair, I tried it once more, with a rusted nail from my bed, but they caught me before I could go through with it — and took away my bed too, so my cell was completely empty. Then, every time after that, after more
sessions with Fennhoff, if I ever went to try, I’d just pass out cold. Or my arms would go limp — it differed.”

“Have you made an attempt since breaking out of Hydra’s control?” Sam felt the tight clench of anxiety constrict his heart, but he didn’t let any of his concern show on his face. He was supposed to act as a support system for Barnes, after all — the guy didn’t need the extra unease that came with Sam reacting negatively to anything he might have to say.

Barnes shook his head, and Sam felt a little relieved at the earnestness of his denial. “No. All those other times, I,” his throat clicked as he swallowed again, “it was like when a caged animal tries to chew its own leg off to escape a bear trap. That’s all it was. It wasn’t that I wanted to die, I just... I couldn’t stand living like that anymore.” He looked down at his hands, and absentmindedly ran his thumbnail along the edges of the plates in his left hand.

“Do you still feel that way? In any way?”

“No,” Barnes said immediately, and then looked away, thought for a moment, and answered again. “No, I don’t. I feel... skittish, I guess — but not trapped. Not really.” He shrugged. “Maybe I feel a little bound by obligation — I don’t want to disappoint Steve again — but I don’t feel trapped. It’s not the same thing.”

The two were silent for a long moment, Sam waiting patiently for him to continue, if he wanted to.

“Is it weird? Being friends with Captain America?” Barnes eventually asked, a little randomly.

Sam snorted, and took it in stride. “You ask as if you don’t know what it’s like.”

Barnes shook his head. “That’s not really what I meant. I became friends with a scrawny idiot who could start a fight in an empty room and couldn’t get the beans down from the top shelf without a chair to stand on. You became friends with a national icon with a reputation for spontaneous resurrection and punching aliens out of the sky. It’s a little different.”

“Please tell me that thing with the beans is true.”

“He’d thump me whenever I’d offer to get them down for him,” Barnes admitted with a cheeky lopsided smirk.

Sam laughed at the image, and then shrugged. “Well, I never let him know, but it was definitely kind of unnerving, at first. I mean, it’s not like I ever put posters of him up on my walls or anything, but I did grow up hearing about him, you know? And then one day I go out for a jog, and there he is, running circles around me, and being a cocky little smartass. It was weird, meeting an icon like that. I mean, every kid wanted to grow up to be Captain America, you know?”

“I actually think Steve wants to be more like you when he grows up,” Barnes gave a soft smile. “He admires you a hell of a lot, Sam.”

Sam blushed, and his smile widened at that.

Barnes’s own smile slipped a little, and he looked away, back down to his fidgeting hands. “He, uh... Steve told me about Riley,” he admitted, looking a little guilty.

Sam only nodded, completely unbothered by Steve sharing this about him — he’d made no secret about Riley, and never intended to. And a big part of recovery, he’d found, especially among fellow soldiers, was that it was easier to get them to open up and tell their story if he offered them the same respect; that way, it felt less like an interrogation, and more like a simple conversation.
“I remember Steve’s face when the bar broke, you know. Absolute hopelessness. Nothing he could have done, and he knew it. He told me you said something that really hit home: about it being like you were up there just to watch,” his eyebrows drew together. “I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’m grateful. For you. That you were there for Steve when I couldn’t be. Steve deserves a friend like you.”

Sam tilted his head a little, genuinely touched. “You’re gonna make me start wellin’ up here, Barnes,” he said lightly, and Barnes snorted.

After another moment, Sam leaned forward seriously, his elbows on his knees. “You mentioned before — about feeling bound by obligation? Have you spoken to Steve about that?”

Barnes snorted. “And give him another reason to beat himself up? C’mon, I’m smarter than that. And it’s not his obligation anyway,” he added quickly when Sam opened his mouth to reply. “I mean, it is him a little, but… it’s an obligation to myself, I guess…”

Sam nodded encouragingly, egging him on to expand.

“I missed him,” Barnes admitted in a rush, sounding guilty beyond all hell. “At first I didn’t trust him as far as I could throw him — wanted nothing to do with him in case it was just another trap. But then the memories started coming back, and I remembered… more. I remembered him. You know how many of my memories have him in them? I don’t think we spent more than a day apart the entire time I knew him; at least, before I was drafted.”

“You were drafted?”

“Mhm. I’m not… I’m not like Steve,” he said, as though it pained him to admit it. “Always knew who he was fighting, and why. Morals were clear-cut. But I never really understood why I was fighting, who I was fighting. I wouldn’t enlist on my own — I was too much of a coward. Am too much of a coward,” he frowned. “Told myself I had to stay to look after everyone — Steve, my parents, my sisters… but really, I was afraid. I’d seen soldiers come home with their limbs blown off, and their faces mangled, and their heads on wrong,” he smirked humourlessly, looking back down to his left hand, which was firmly pocketed inside his hoodie. “Two out of three ain’t so bad, I guess.”

“Not wanting to go to war isn’t cowardice, Barnes. Self-preservation isn’t cowardice — it’s common sense.”

“You went to war,” Barnes pointed out.

“I chose to go to war,” Sam said firmly, “I always had a choice. I made the choice when I joined the army, and I made the choice when I left it, too. And I’ve been making my own decisions ever since — including that first debacle with Steve, and then joining the Avengers, and putting everything on hold to help Steve’s search for you. Those were my choices. You? You’ve had the freedom of choice stripped away from you since the day you got that letter in the mail. All the way up until you chose to save Steve’s life that day on the helicarrier.”

Once again, Barnes looked away.

“Talk to me about the choices you’ve made since Hydra fell. You saved Steve’s life; you single-handedly took down most of the other Hydra bases on your own; you saved the twins; took them both under your wing; made sure they were safe, and healthy, and cared for,” Sam ticked them off on his fingers, “and when you decided you were ready, you chose to come back. You decided to get your memories back. That means something.”
Barnes’s face flushed with embarrassment at Sam’s words, but his expression softened a little despite himself. “You should try hitting Steve up with that sneaky therapy of yours, Sam,” he said, clearly deflecting a little.

“I did — we talked a lot in those months we spent on the road. Mostly, he talked about you.”

Barnes paled a little at that, and Sam felt like he knew exactly why. “What did he tell you?”

“He told me you were an asshole,” Sam said simply, and Barnes barked out a surprised laugh, looking a little relieved.

“Yeah, well, he was an asshole too. He ever tell you about Johnny Mulloy’s baseball? He tells it like it was my idea, but he was the only one who could fit through the window.”

Sam chuckled.
"Now see, you’ve heard the story where he rode the Cyclone, but you haven’t heard the one of me managing to convince the carnie running the thing to let him on, even though he didn’t meet the height requirements,” Bucky told the surrounding Avengers, brandishing around a piece of toast.

“Don’t be an asshole Buck, I was not that short,” Steve replied, rolling his eyes with a small smile.

“We should tell them about the Sentinels of Liberty,” Bucky suggested instead, in a sly voice.

Steve’s head snapped up, horrified. “You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I?” Bucky’s smirk widened.

“What are the Sentinels of Liberty?” Tony wondered.

Bucky’s eyes widened innocently. “You mean Mr Freedom over here never told you?”

“Buck,” Steve said, a warning

“You know. About his fan club.”

Steve groaned, and buried his hands in his face.

Tony looked delighted.

Friday and weekend mornings in Stark Tower were dedicated to breakfast in Steve and Bucky’s floor. Sometimes, they had waffles, sometimes pancakes, sometimes Sam treated them all to his amazing French toast, and sometimes Steve and Bucky simply felt that being hosts to communal gatherings so early in the morning was unfair and unjust, and so the residents of Stark Tower simply rifled through their kitchen and scrounged up their own meals. What they ate wasn’t really of consequence; it was the ritual of it that mattered. And as much as Bucky loved to gripe and grouse about how loud and imposing they all were, secretly, he delighted by the company. It was a very stark reminder to how he, Steve, and the Howling Commandos would all gather together to share their breakfast rations around the dying embers of the fire pit — whoever was on shift last tipping slightly in their exhaustion. Of course, the Avengers didn’t need to take turns keeping watch, but it was still amusing to see Clint drooping exhaustedly on his stool before they funnelled around four cups of coffee into him.

Now on his fifth, Clint piped up cheerfully from the couch, where he had been shamelessly stealing Steve and Bucky’s account in order to watch The Flash on Netflix. “Hey, Speedy Gonzales!” he called over to Pietro. “I have a question: who do you think could run faster, you or the Flash?”

Pietro, who was unloading a can of aerosol whipped cream directly into his mouth, snorted — nearly choking.

“Who cares who’s faster? Just think of all of the wild, amazing sex the two of you could have,” Tony said to Pietro, a lewd grin stretching across his features.
Pietro licked the canister’s tip thoughtfully. “Okay, I know that you are joking, but that is literally the biggest fantasy I have.”

“Talk about a quick fuck,” Bucky said, and then grinned as Steve just about sprayed a mouthful of coffee over the kitchen island.

“Can we not?” Wanda piped up weakly, her nose scrunching in distaste, and they all laughed.

Tony squared his elbows up onto the counter, staring at the twins with what Steve would most definitely call a sinister look. “So,” he said intensely, smiling, “you kids ready for your first 4th of July party tonight?”

The twins looked at each other evenly, and then Wanda turned back and gave a completely indifferent shrug. “We do not care about your American holidays so much. We’ll celebrate this day when you celebrate Unification Day,” she said fairly.

Tony looked a little disappointed. “What about you, Barnacle?” He turned on Bucky expectantly.

“No can do, Stark.” He smiled as he nudged Steve with a metal elbow, “Steve and I have birthday plans tonight.”

“Wait, your birthday is seriously on the 4th of July?” Clint asked. “I thought that was just Captain America’s birthday — a publicity thing.”

Steve scoffed a little, embarrassed. “I wish.”

Bucky paused in drawing his mug back up to his lips, and drew his eyebrows down thoughtfully at Steve. “You haven’t celebrated your birthday with these guys since you woke up?”

Steve shook his head a little and shrugged. “Never really felt like my birthday without you,” he admitted in an undertone, quiet enough so that only Bucky could hear.

Bucky didn’t say anything after that; merely continued staring at him with sad eyes and a grim set to his mouth.

“Your face’ll stick that way you know,” Steve said pleasantly, averting his eyes a little so he didn’t have to look anymore. That tragic expression on Bucky’s face would be the death of him — it was that same one he used to wear whenever he saw kids eating alone during lunch breaks in school, or when he saw old people struggling on their own without help in the grocery store.

“It’s been stuck like this since I met you in 1928,” Bucky countered, expression turned into something distinctly bitchy. “Why do you think they made me wear that mask all the time?”

Steve spluttered over an unexpected laugh, and Bucky looked a little smug.

“So what do you and Inspector Gadget over here have planned for tonight then?” Tony asked, taking a deep pull of some green smoothie Steve had yet to subject himself to. Healthy eating had never been so much of an issue when Steve was growing up — it was eating at all that was usually the problem. He understood the theory behind wanting to eat healthily, but really, witnessing the practice of it made him wonder if it was really worth it. Mostly in regards to yogurt, and the different smoothies Stark subjected Steve’s blender to every weekend morning.

In response to his question, Bucky and Steve only looked at one another — Steve curious, Bucky mischievous.
“You’re not invited,” Bucky said with a smirk, and Tony paused in his sipping.

He looked at them both oddly for a minute, eyes flicking back and forth between their faces. “Sorry I asked,” he eventually said, and he looked away with a very meaningful look at Sam.

Sam only curled his lips at him a little, and didn’t reply — neither to Tony, nor to Steve and Bucky’s matched set of inquiring curiosity. He shook his head, and grinned.

“Are we invited?” Pietro asked hopefully.

Bucky smiled. “Nice try, kiddo, but no. Enjoy Stark’s party.”

Pietro looked a little put out by that, but mostly, he seemed suddenly exceptionally interested. It really wasn’t often that Bucky intentionally kept things from the twins nowadays, but when he did, they knew that there was always a damn good reason for it.

This time around, however, he was mostly doing it because he knew how much it annoyed everyone. And tradition is tradition, after all — Steve’s birthday was sacred. A major part of their rituals for the event included the cryptic secrecy. At first it was merely because they only wanted it to be something that only the two of them shared without anybody else tagging along, but now, it felt less to do with wanting solitude, and more to do with the simple juvenile fun of keeping it a secret.

“You sure you’re gonna alright with that, daddy-kins?” Tony asked. “There’ll be drinking and debauchery up on my floor.”

“They’re adults,” Bucky rolled his eyes. “They can do what they like — including getting shitfaced, if they want.”

“Drinking age is twenty one now, Buck,” Steve informed him in a murmur.

Bucky screwed up his face, outraged. “What? Are you kidding me?”

“In Bulgaria,” Pietro said distastefully, “we can drink whenever we like.”


“Hey, we lived through the prohibition. We earned our first drinks at eighteen,” Bucky vehemently protested.

“Great!” Pietro said delightedly, “then you won’t mind if we have our ‘firsts’ at nineteen,” he curled his fingers around the word ‘first’ and winked.

“Just don’t take any pictures if you do. Maria and Pepper will both throw fits if the media thinks we’re being bad influences and encouraging underage drinking,” Steve said, and sipped his coffee.

“Well, we kind of are,” Bucky reminded him with a smile.

“Yeah, but they don’t need to know that.”

Wanda and Pietro bumped their fists triumphantly, and Tony made a scandalised face at Steve.
Being back in close quarters living with Bucky had taken a very little stretch of time to get refamiliarized with. In some ways, it was weird how much things between them hadn’t changed — and in other ways, it was downright bizarre how much they had.

Their morning routines were different, but also the same. They still fought over the milk, and walked around in rumpled pyjamas or underpants, and (to Steve’s utter dismay) Bucky still occasionally hooked an arm around his waist and hauled him around if Steve annoyed him.

Now though, their mornings were also filled with occasional wakeups where they’d jolt upright in bed, screaming, or pleading, or swearing. They’d sweat out their nightmares by either sprinting around Washington Square Park, or inside the Stark Tower gym, lifting weights, or beating punching bags until they split. Their favourite method by far, however, was when they got to spar it out on the mats.

Sparring matches were never really a true challenge unless they versed each another. The other Avengers all lacked either the finesse or the upper body strength to match them on their fighting skills, and so generally refused to take part — claiming that the super soldiers had an “unfair advantage”. Which was mostly true, but still.

Eventually, however, after many long weeks of sizing Bucky up and declining to give them a challenge, Natasha finally relented, and conceded to join in.

Out of the two of them, objectively it was Bucky who was the better fighter. While Steve was the better at defensive moves, Bucky was better at striking to attack, as well as the element of surprise. They knew each other’s fighting styles too well to really be a true challenge to one another, which eventually left the fighting a bit stale without something new thrown in to shake it up a little. Enter Natasha.

Steve’s superior strength worked for him in regards to versing against Natasha, however, he often lacked the swiftness and finesse required to get the drop on her. Bucky, on the other hand, was the true challenge in these situations; able to match Steve blow-for-blow in strength, but also managing to match Natasha for her speed and cunning.

More than skirmishing with Natasha himself, Steve often found that he enjoyed it just as much when he merely sat by and watched her and Bucky spar it out by themselves. At first, the two of them were quite tentative around one other — primarily making only defensive moves, and circling each other like wolves while they sized each another up. It took a few weeks, but eventually, they grew out of seeing one another as genuine threats during sparring sessions, and the real fighting began.

When Bucky and Steve fought, the combat was hard, and fast, and brutal — satisfying to be a part of, but not really that interesting to watch. Bucky and Natasha, on the other hand, fought like it was a dance — smooth, and sinewy, and graceful; like a choreographed ballet sequence. It was beautiful to behold.

It wasn’t that he hadn’t thought about it since Bucky had come back. Indeed, he’d actually recently begun to think about it a lot.

Ever since the morning of Steve’s embarrassing outburst, or breakdown, or whatever you wanted to call it, the memory of their shared kiss had sort of stuck there — lingering, and circling his thought every now and then like a looming vulture that nipped and picked away at his brain until he caught himself, and hurriedly shooed it away.

Thinking about the kiss wasn’t exactly new, but this…
There was something about watching the way that Bucky moved in the midst of a sparring session — so sleek and powerful, with downright effortless refinement... Steve couldn't quite explain why, and perhaps it made him an awful person to think so, but every time he took a step back and paused to watch him spar against Natasha, he came out of it feeling a little... hot under the collar.

“Hair’s burning,” Bucky’s voice appeared out of nowhere beside him, cutting through his thoughts with a jerk of surprise.

“Huh?” Steve said, a little dumbly.

Bucky gave him an odd look. “You — you’re thinking too hard. I could probably smell your hair burning from all the way on the other side of the building. What’s going on up there? Do I gotta call the firehouse?” he flicked Steve’s forehead lightly.

He was wearing one of his fitted dark shirts with the sleeves rolled past his forearms, sucking nonchalantly on the plastic straw on his water bottle, and Steve flushed as he caught himself staring.

“I’m wondering about tonight. You said you made birthday plans?” he shrugged, and put on his most earnest-looking smile.

Bucky’s drinking halted, and for a moment, he only gave him an odd look. Then, without another word, he bent the straw lid on his water bottle closed with one forefinger, set it aside on the edge of the kitchen bench, and left the room.

Steve stared at Bucky’s retreating figure bewilderedly.

For several split seconds, Steve wondered if perhaps he’d inadvertently said something to offend him — deliberating over whether or not he should go follow — but then Bucky came back in, ducking his head and offering Steve up a stupid, sheepish little smile, left hand hidden behind his back.

“I, uh, I was gonna wait until after we were all set up, but — here,” he pushed a slim, heavy object into Steve’s hand, and shrugged, looking embarrassed.

Steve’s eyes widened, and his heart gave an almost painful clench in his chest, like a fist had plunged itself inside and squeezed. He can’t believe he’d actually forgotten...

Steve laughed — his head falling back a little as he revelled in the ridiculousness of the whole thing. All wrapped up in spiralling curls of shiny red, white, and blue ribbon around the neck, Bucky had handed him a slim bottle of one of the cheapest whiskeys on the market. “Oh, you didn’t.”

Bucky grinned at Steve’s reaction. “I made you a promise, didn’t I? Cheap booze, a rooftop, and fireworks. Every year.”

Steve couldn’t help it — he fell forwards and enveloped Bucky in a tight hug, still chuckling to himself.

After a few good pats, he pulled back, and stared down at the bottle fondly, inserting his forefinger into one of the looped tunnels of curled ribbon and feeling around absently.

“Wanda helped with that,” Bucky admitted, pointing lamely at the tangle of ribbon. “Just drag a pair of scissors up it, and it goes all curly like that — weird, huh?”

Steve cracked open the lid, and gave it a tentative little sniff. He wasn’t exactly a connoisseur in alcohol tasting, but the whiskey didn’t smell too much like gasoline, so he figured it couldn’t be all that bad.
“So when do the fireworks start?” he asked brightly.

“Not long,” Bucky said. “Internet said nine thirty — was hoping to get set up before you came back. Should be a pretty good view from here,” he gestured out the window, clearly signalling to the immense height from which they were situated above the city.

“You wanna head out now then?” Steve asked excitedly, jerking his head a little toward the door.

“You go, I’ll meet you there in a sec,” Bucky said cryptically, that mischievous little smile back on his face.

Steve eyed him suspiciously, but didn’t say anything more; giving an unbothered little shrug before walking over and opening up the glass balcony door, stepping outside.

A cool, pleasant breeze drifted through, ruffling his hair up a little, and he left the door open behind him to try and get some of that in the house a little.

As Steve plonked himself down into one of the chairs out on the balcony (‘official housewarming gifts’ from Natasha and Clint after he and Bucky moved in together), he idly wondered if they were technically breaking tradition by being on a balcony rather than a rooftop.

Considering how substantial the size of Stark tower was, it really was pretty amazing how conservative the roof space was. After the rebuild following the attack on New York, it looked from a distance as though there should technically be more room up top than the previous model — however, with the quinjet landing port right below, and solar panels, or skylights, or whatever covering up a majority of the rooftop, it was never actually designed to be accessible like their old apartment block back in Brooklyn was. What wasn’t covered in glass was a smooth, sloping metal that went straight upwards with no safety railings. Stupid modern exterior designs.

He started in surprise at the sound of something loud rattling beside his ear, and he jolted around to see Bucky, holding out a slim box and grinning at him toothily. Steve scowled; he didn’t think he could ever get used to the way Bucky would slink around without making any noise nowadays.

“ Tradition’s tradition,” Bucky said proudly, and he tossed his fistful of stuff into Steve’s lap — a longish box, and a fat plastic packet. Steve laughed as he realised what they were: Milk Duds, and Gumdrops — of course. Just like every year.

He lifted up and inspected the box of Milk Duds with a smile, and Bucky dumped himself gracelessly in the chair beside him, bringing one foot up to rest against the glass barrier with quite a satisfied look on his face.

After a moment, he gently pried back the packet of Gumdrops from Steve’s hand, and tore open the corner with his teeth. He tipped out a small pile into one palm, and began wordlessly picking out the green Gumdrops from the rest.

“You sure they’re letting them off nearby?” Steve wondered, staring up at the stars as if concerned he’d miss them if he looked away for even a second. Wordlessly, he held out a hand to collect all of the green gumdrops Bucky had separated out for him, and then he dropped one of them onto his tongue, softening it up and sucking off all of the granulated sugar he could before chewing around it with relish.

Bucky chuckled around his own mouthful. “When am I ever not sure? ‘S way easier now, too. Don’t have to go off running around and badgering all the pyrotechs for advice on the best viewpoints anymore. Now the Internet tells you when and where they’re going off.” He shook his head a little at
the wonder of such an idea, and wordlessly handed off the packet to Steve, who exchanged it for the Milk Duds. Bucky pressed a thumb in through the lid of the box, and threw his head back to empty a good portion of them directly into his mouth.

After chewing thoughtfully for a moment, Bucky swallowed, and then held the box of Milk Duds aloft as if cheering with a glass. “Happy thirtieth, Stevie.”

Steve bit back the smartass correction that he was actually technically ninety-seven, and bumped the side of Bucky’s milk duds with his bottle of whiskey. Steve took a long swig, and then damn near sprayed it all out again.

“Fuck!” he coughed. “Jesus, that’s awful — where did you find that?”

“Liquor store,” Bucky shrugged nonchalantly, looking far too entertained at Steve’s expense than he liked.

Steve wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, grimacing. “God, this tastes like I’ve licked an old, sweaty saddle covered in turpentine.”

Bucky nudged him with his elbow. “Tradition trumps distaste. Now shut up and drink your piss,” he ordered, and tossed back another mouthful of Milk Duds.

Steve laughed, took another sip anyway, grimacing. He handed off the bottle to Bucky distastefully, and then busied himself by pouring out his own handful of Gumdrops, separating out the red ones with his other hand.

As if to show off how much better he could take it, Bucky threw his head back and took a hearty gulp from the bottle, only to come out of it spluttering a little, and wincing. “Oho, oh, man, we’ve really been spoilt with the stuff Stark gives us, huh? This stuff’s like acetone,” he took another sip anyway.

Steve shook his head, smiling, and held out his handful of red gumdrops for Bucky to take.

“You remember the first time we did this?” Steve asked, not really taking his eyes off of the sky.

Bucky made a happy little noise of confirmation, his cheek bulging with half-chewed Gumdrops. “And you nearly brained yourself trying to get down from the roof?”

“Hey, you nearly fell too,” Steve rebuked, not unfairly.

“Yeah, saving your ass.”

“Oh, is that how you remember it?”

“C’mon, when has my memory ever failed me before?” Bucky said sweetly, and Steve couldn’t help but crack an indulgent little grin at that.

For several more minutes, they sat together in a comfortable silence, occasionally passing the bottle back and forth for shuddering sips, and swapping the boxes of candy back and forth until they emptied completely.

“You remember the last time we did this together?” Bucky eventually asked, a little wistfully.

Steve gave a sad little smile. “Yeah. Those guys with the stolen fireworks thought I was going to drag ’em both down to Phillips by the backs of their necks. Looked at me like they thought I’d been
replaced by a pod person when I asked if they thought they could get some more.” Steve’s eyes
turned a little downcast, and he circled the rim of the bottle absently with a forefinger. “You know, if
I’d known that that was going to be the last time we were going to be able to do that together…”

“Hey, don’t do that,” Bucky berated him softly.

“I’m just saying, I might not have made us leave so early…”

“Steve,” Bucky said firmly, making Steve look at him. “Don’t. That night was amazing, just like
every year. And it wasn’t our last. We’re both out here, right now, doing it again.”

Steve lowered his gaze a little guiltily. “Right, no, I know…”

Bucky inclined his head curiously. “What did you do last year? What did you do in any of the years I
wasn’t here with you?”

Steve shrugged. “Tried watching the fireworks by myself that first year. They didn’t even start before
I decided I couldn’t go through with it. Year after that, I watched the Wizard of Oz again on my
couch.”

“By yourself?”

Steve shrugged awkwardly. “Didn’t ever feel right without you, and I never wanted company
anyway. Was never the same, after you fell…”

“Steve…” Bucky said, voice a little strained. “Jesus, Steve, that was never supposed to be you. That
wasn’t supposed to be your life…”

Steve frowned. “What do you mean?”

Bucky hesitated, and busied himself by staring at his thumb smoothing over the back of his gleaming
left hand. “Look, I never told you... but truth is, I never saw myself coming out of the war alive. I
knew I’d die, right from the beginning. Of the both of us, it was always you who was supposed to
survive the war. You were meant to fly home, and get married, and live comfortably for the rest of
your life, happy, and healthy — just like you said you wanted to in your letter. Couple ‘a kids, a
picket fence — whole nine yards.”

“Buck…”

“I knew it was supposed to be you because I knew that you were the only one who could handle it.
I’ve known it since we were kids, ever since I waited outside your house on the front porch while
you were given last rights that late fall in ’31. I watched the priest go in, and a while later, I watched
him leave again. He ruffled my hair both’a those times, and just gave me this…
this pitying goddamned look — like he understood. Like he could possibly understand. I waited for
hours, hoping Mama Rogers would let me see you one last time, and while I was out there, all I
could think of was how I knew I wouldn’t be able to keep going without you. You were always
stronger than I was, Stevie, always.”

“That’s not true.”

Bucky snorted. “Of course it’s true. I’m not saying it to be a self-deprecating asshole — it’s just the
truth. Of the both of us, it was always you who was the strongest. If one of us had to die, it made
sense that it’d be me. But I never dreamed you’d be stripped away from your support system like you
were. Never thought you wouldn’t be able to fall back and lead the life we’d both had dreamed out
for you.”
“You thought that I’d be able to just ‘get over’ you dying?” Steve demanded coldly. “That I’d ever be able to get over it?”

Bucky blinked up at him in surprise. “Steve—”

“No. Buck, when you…” Steve swallowed thickly, voice raw. “When you fell, my entire world died. That future I saw myself in — it didn’t mean anything if you weren’t in it, and I knew it from the moment I watched the bar break.”

“Yes it did,” Bucky said softly, sadly. “You coped just fine on your own without me here.”

“I never wanted to cope without you, Buck. And I never do again.”

Bucky nodded softly, his eyes fixed on Steve’s as they studied each other for a moment. “Yeah, well, same to you. You know, Nat told me about the parachute thing — if I ever see you jump out of another plane without one again, I’ll kill you myself, you hear?”

Steve blinked at him for a moment, and then his face cracked into a wide grin, and he chuckled. Bucky soon followed.

For a moment, they merely smiled at one another, muted admiration, and tenderness in their faces. Then, there was a small popping noise, and a whistling, paired with a streak of light that conjured up their immediate attention. The lone firework exploded across the sky in a shower of white, and was then quickly followed by a second explosion of blue.

Steve felt, rather than saw, Bucky stiffen a little in his seat beside him.

He looked over for a moment to see that Bucky’s jaw had clenched tight, and that every muscle in his body had grown taut. He stared at the sky with wide, alarmed eyes, obviously not expecting the fireworks to sound so similar to gunfire.

Steve dropped his hand on top of Bucky’s on the armrest to his side, and Bucky looked at it in surprise. Slowly, Steve slid his hand up Bucky’s forearm, and curled it around his hand, fingers interlocking. He squeezed it tight in a reassuring grasp.

Bucky’s face softened, and his body relaxed some as he readjusted his hand in Steve’s grasp and squeezed it back. After a moment, he looked back up to the sky, and he relaxed some more at the sight of the fireworks showering downward in the distance.

The sight of the next few fireworks exploding outward and blooming over the sky was nearly completely lost on Steve — watching the colours burst and glimmer in the reflection in Bucky’s eyes instead. He looked positively reverent at the sight — eyes no longer wide with fear, but instead with awe.

The fireworks lasted for nearly a full fifteen minutes, but not before one last crescendo — a huge explosion of every colour, each painting the sky above the lit-up cityscape like a dazzling mosaic, drawing out a positively awed gasp from Bucky’s parted lips.

Steve felt his heart flutter zealously in his chest, emitting a warmth that only Bucky was capable of inflicting; and for a single, thoughtless moment, Steve found himself wanting to lean in — from just saying ‘fuck it’, and claiming Bucky’s lips in a deep, consuming kiss…

The last of the sparks fluttered downward and extinguished — leaving behind a sky illuminated only by starlight, and Steve froze as he realised exactly what he’d been thinking. He stared at Bucky in muted shock — and Bucky didn’t seem to notice, eyes still trained up at the sky in wonder.
Those parted bow lips soon closed, and curved instead into a cheeky half-smile. “You wait,” he said, turning to Steve with a shine of playfulness in those light grey eyes. “Next year will be even better — and the year after that, and the year after that. I’ll just keep thinking up stuff to make it better and better, every year, until we’re both dead.”

It was what he’d said to Steve that first time they’d done this together — all those years ago, on the rooftop facing the Brooklyn Bridge.

Steve swallowed thickly, his throat closing over with the sudden swell of overwhelming emotion. “Every year,” he confirmed, and Bucky grinned — his smile as dazzling as the fireworks.

“You alright, man?” Sam said in lieu of a greeting, his eyebrows drawn together in clear concern.

Ashen-faced, eyes wide, Steve nodded, and he strolled inside of Sam’s floor with broad steps. He tried not to begin pacing.

“We… we watched the fireworks together,” he eventually said, and Sam’s concern immediately turned to grim understanding.

“Oh, yeah, I get that, man. Flashbacks, right?” he asked carefully, moving to switch on the kettle at once.

“What?” Steve frowned, forgetting for a moment those few minutes of tense not-quite panic he and Bucky had felt at the sounds of the explosions — and also forgetting that Sam probably would have experienced that too. “Oh, no. I mean, sort of — at the start, things were a little rough, but… fireworks are fireworks, you know? Tradition trumps distaste,” his lips quirked a little, remembering Bucky’s words.

Sam looked a teensy bit miffed, and Steve felt at once a little guilty that he hadn’t considered Sam’s own anxieties at all. Fireworks, Sam had once told him, were the absolute bane of his existence. He’d said nothing triggered his PTSD quite like seeing and hearing explosions happening in the sky, and Steve could at least sympathize, if not totally relate.

“So why do you look like you’re coming off of a panic attack then?” Sam asked.

Steve bit his tongue a little, cursing his own self-centeredness. He could see a hint of redness at the tips of Sam’s ears — most likely from pressing his hands over them throughout the display. “Are you okay?” he said instead, immediately concerned. “Fireworks didn’t rough you up too bad?”

“Nah,” Sam said, only a little uneasily. “It gets a little easier every year. And my mom bought me this huge, overpriced pair of super-headphones for my last birthday. Only sounds I heard were the sweet lulling tunes of mid-seventies soul, and R&B.”

Steve gave a small smile at that, greatly relieved to hear it.

“But we’re not talking about me — stop trying to talk about me when we’re talking about you. Why do you look like that?” he pointed at Steve’s face meaningfully.

Steve’s eyes went downcast, and he felt, rather than saw, Sam’s little head tilt, and that suspicious set of eyes taking critical note of the sudden flush he felt heating down his face and neck.
“We watched the fireworks together,” Steve repeated, and then swallowed nervously. “Bucky… I don’t remember if I ever told you — we were never supposed to tell anyone, was supposed to be a secret, I guess — but we always had this stupid tradition: find some place high, split a box of gumdrops and a bottle the cheapest whiskey we could find, and watch the fireworks for my birthday.”

Sam could feel his teeth loosening up and rotting away at the mere thought of how insufferably sweet that sounded, but he refrained from commenting on it for the time being. He was an excellent friend.

The kettle clicked on its green light, and Sam shifted to pour them each a mug — decaf for himself, regular for Steve. Steve always bitched about the taste of decaf, and caffeine never did anything for the guy anyway, so he never had to worry about being kept up by it when drinking after 8pm.

Sam stirred sugar into both and milk into his own, and then slid Steve’s over to him without a word. Steve, in turn, only fiddled with the smooth ceramic of the mug’s handle for a moment, and his face grew redder.

“I almost kissed him”

Sam’s face went slack with shock, and he only very nearly managed to save his own mug from dropping to the floor. It took him several full seconds for him to compose himself, staring at Steve in downright astonishment.

“Kiss him? As in-?”

Steve’s blush darkened further, so much so that Sam could swear he saw it creeping out past the sleeves of his t-shirt. How could Sam have known Steve Rogers for this long, so intimately, and never pick up on the fact that he was apparently a full-body blusher?

Steve’s eyebrows angled upward in an upset kind of way, and he dumped himself in a stool at Sam’s kitchen island. He fidgeted at his mug again for a bit, and didn’t meet Sam’s gaze.

“Okay,” Sam said patiently, leaning forward onto his elbows on the island in a casual way, “so… why didn’t you?”

Steve slumped, and pushed his face into his hand, fingers tangling in that stupid tuft at the front of his hair, and he groaned. Apparently, this was his only answer.

“What happened?” Sam asked instead.

Steve gave a long, loud sigh, and shut his eyes, pushing his forehead harder into the heel of his hand. “He surprised me. I thought maybe he’d forgotten, or that things had changed too much, or maybe he thought we’d outgrown it — I don’t know. But I didn’t know if it was going to happen this year until he handed me a bottle of whiskey and told me to park my ass outside.” A small smile grew over Steve’s face as he gave a recap to Sam of what had happened throughout the night — omitting most of the details of his and Bucky’s conversation, however, because he felt that that would probably be better suited to staying private. When he looked back up at Sam, Sam was giving him a very odd look — his head tilted, and his eyes soft and full of an understanding that made Steve feel at once a little uneasy.

“Is this the first time you’ve… thought of him like that?” Sam asked, a little too casually, and he took another sip from his mug.
Steve flushed some more, and looked back down to his own steadily cooling coffee. “No, not exactly. When he first moved in a few months ago, we had a… thing. A talk!” he quickly amended after watching Sam’s eyebrows shoot up. “A talk. We sat on the couch, and we talked, for ages. I fell asleep on him, on the couch, just like I used to, and since then I haven’t really been able to get him out of my head. All the things I’d forgotten about living with him, they’re just… they’re exactly what I didn’t know was missing from my life, you know? And when I’m around him, we just fall into such an easy pattern, and I feel so calm, and… happy, I guess. I feel happier with him back than I’ve felt since 1945.”

Sam’s look of understanding turned softer, and after a moment, he lowered his mug slowly back down to the countertop.

“You’re in love with him,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

Sam watched Steve’s face immediately drain of colour. Then, after another moment, Steve lowered his gaze, flushed a dark pink once more, and gave one small, barely-there nod.

Fuckin’ superheroes, man…

“You know he feels the same way, at least,” Sam said reasonably, privately amused somewhat, although he did his best to hide it.

Steve shook his head, and he stared at Sam a little hopelessly. “I can’t know that. I can’t know anything. After everything he’s been through — how long it’s been — who says he even feels that way anymore? Who says he ever felt that way? He never said he had feelings for me — the kiss kind of caught both of us by surprise. Who knows why he did it?”

Sam couldn’t help it — he snorted. “Okay, if you really believe that, I’ll grab a knife and fork and start eating my wings, right here in front of you. The guy’s crazy about you, Steve.”

This only seemed to make Steve’s eyebrows draw up tighter.

“Have you tried asking him?” Sam tried instead, donning a light, conversational tone in an attempt to calm Steve the fuck down from whatever mental tizzy he was working himself up into. “I mean, you’ve talked about it, right?”

Steve didn’t answer.

Sam put his mug back down a little heavily. “Steve.”

“I’ve been meaning to, alright?” Steve muttered petulantly. “I just… things between us have been so good lately. I don’t want things to go back to being all tense like they were after I pushed him back the first time. You’re his councillor — you know how cagey he gets about his feelings.”

“Less than you do.”

“Than you obviously haven’t been with him long enough.”

“I’ve been with him plenty long.”

“Oh?” Steve made a sarcastic show of perking right up. “Has he said anything to you about that night then?”

Sam made a face. “Do you have to call it ‘that night’? It makes it sound like you two had sex or something. Honestly, it was only one kiss.”
“Sam,” Steve said, abandoning his sardonic demeanour and slumping back down a little. “C’mon, will you throw me a bone here? Please?”

Sam sighed longsufferingly, and took a nice, long sip of his coffee, just to draw it out a little. “He hasn’t brought it up. And I won’t bring it up without him prompting it first, so no; we haven’t talked about it. But even if he had said something, I couldn’t tell you. Doctor-patient confidentiality — Barnes trusts me, and I’d like to keep it that way.”

Steve looked guilty for having asked, and Sam at once felt like kicking himself a little. Damn his lovable, gooey centre. Damn Steve’s stupid kicked-puppy face.

“C’mon, man. Why are you so afraid?” he asked.

“Because I want it!” Steve shouted, making Sam jerk back a little. “I want him — I want… I want to be with him, and not just in the way I feel like I should. I want him the same way I wanted Peggy — and the thing is, I think I’ve always wanted it. And that just… it scares me to death.”

“Didn’t know a good thing while you had it?” Sam guessed gently, and Steve gave a miserable nod.

Sam paused for a moment, thinking, and then he leaned in a little to make Steve look back up at his face once again. “Look,” he said, “Odds are, Barnes still feels the exact same way he used to feel about you back in 1945. The only way you’re gonna know is by talking to him.”

Steve made an uncomfortable face. “But how do you even start that kind of conversation?” he said — part bewildered, part pleading.

Sam only smiled. “You’re an adult, Steve. Despite all evidence to the contrary, you’re both adults — you’ll figure it out. You’ve dealt with way worse before. If you can take down an international Nazi terrorist organisation, you can have a fifteen minute conversation about your feelings, okay?”

“I think I’d rather just go drown myself in the Potomac again,” Steve muttered.

Sam didn’t dignify that with an answer — just drained the last of his coffee in one gulp, and moved to go rinse out his mug in the sink.

Chapter End Notes

“wow lotte, you sure do love those balcony scenes.” I am a suburban gremlin who romanticizes city apartment living and pretty lights, let me live.

Next week's chapter may be a tiny bit delayed due to me being a lazy piece of shit - sorry guys!
“So what were the secret happenings of the Rogers-Barnes birthday extravaganza that we were all definitely not invited to? Run off to Bristol for a 13-shot artillery salute? Serenade each other with the national anthem? Did you feed each other apple pie and ice cream? Did you eat apple pie and ice cream off of each other?” Natasha greeted him with a rather self-satisfied looking smirk, arms folded across her chest.

Bucky didn’t look up from where he was laying fist after fist into the dangling punching bag in the Stark Tower gym, but gave an impish grin in response anyway. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he told her evenly, “it was apple cake — Steve’s favourite!”

Natasha barked a short laugh, and shook her head at him. “To think, you were one of the only things I was scared of at one point,” she marvelled bemusedly, and Bucky felt the cocky smile slip off his face a little.

Natasha’s sense of humour was often a little bleak for his taste, especially when she brought up his time as the Winter Soldier. She always meant it in a teasing way, but there was an underlying hardness to her tone that made his chest feel crushed with the guilt and shame — particularly when the reminder was concerning the time Bucky had shot her. Times. Plural.

He sighed, and caught the bag between his hands as it swung in a pendulum motion back toward him. “You come in here just to make innuendos about me fucking my best friend, or do you wanna spar?” he asked, gesturing with one hand out to the empty sparring floor.

Natasha’s lips quirked, and she gave an interested look to said space. “Tempting, but no. We’ve got a hit on some German weaponry engineers who worked with Shield for a spell. Old friends of Obadiah Stane back in Tony’s manufacturing days. We think they’re Hydra,” she told him, adopting a far more business-like tone, and transferring her arms from folded across her chest to placed firmly on each hip.

Bucky blinked, a little confused.

It wasn’t like he’d ever allowed himself to forget that there were undeniably still going to be pockets of Hydra activity around the world from organisations none of them had managed to pinpoint a location on and take out yet — but these past few months, he’d honestly kind of let his obsession with it slip. He wasn’t a part of the Avengers yet, and had had no part in either the planning of missions (concerning Hydra or otherwise), nor the executions of them since he’d moved into Stark Tower. He hadn’t even been able to worm out any of the explicit details concerning said missions from any of the Avengers — even Steve.

“Oh?” he prompted, confused as to what this had to do with him, exactly. When Natasha didn’t speak, and only fixed him with one perfectly arched eyebrow and a look of derision, he tried again. “Okay, so… what, you want me to pack a lunch for you guys? Wave you off at the bus stop?”

Natasha continued looking at him like he was an idiot. “No, genius, I want you to suit up with the rest of us.”

And Bucky… honestly hadn’t been expecting that. He faltered for a moment, blinking repeatedly,
and staring at her with dumbfounded disbelief. “I… what?” he asked, and her lips curled in the tiniest of amused smiles.

“You heard me. We’ve got a debrief in a half hour — I want you to put on your scary leather dominatrix getup and meet us in the debriefing area by nine.”

Bucky still only gaped at her. “You… you’re making me a part of the team?”

A sparkle of mirth glinted in Nat’s eyes as she finally relented, and gave him a congratulatory grin.

“Officially?” he asked, in a small voice.

“Officially,” she confirmed.

Although Natasha was clearly expecting him to pump his fists in the air and start whooping madly for joy, instead Bucky’s eyes fell downcast, and he pursed his lips unsurely as the reality of the offer settled in. The ghost of Natasha’s smile fell, and a line of confusion creased her brow.

“What did Sam say?” he asked hesitantly.

She pursed her lips at him disapprovingly. “Sam is probably your number one supporter at this point. He reviewed your therapy notes before we all took the vote — I thought he was gonna start welling up with pride at the progress you know you’ve made over the past few months.”

“Vote?” he asked.

Natasha rolled her eyes grandly, and gave a longsuffering exhale. “We’re not government anymore, and there aren’t any committees or higher-ups to convince. Sam reviewed your progress, shared his thoughts, and then we took a unanimous vote on whether or not to make you a part of the team. You’re in.”

Bucky felt elation begin to swell within his chest, but swallowed it down again, still hesitant. He thought back to the counterfeit identification supplier in Berlin; the little Russian girl who’d witnessed her father being shot in the head; the screaming wife of US senator Harry Baxtor - all of the people who had looked at him right in the face and had called him a monster.

He peered down to where his metal hand was still pressed in an immobile fist against the leather punching bag, frowned at it contemplatively. “The world won’t like it…”

“Join the club,” Natasha said, and the steely harshness to her tone made Bucky look up at her in surprise. She fixed him with a hard scowl. “You’re not the only one with a questionable past, Barnes,” she said. “After the Shield-Hydra leak, there were a lot of people who wanted to see me off the Avengers team. Wanted me in prison. Actually, I think my favourite ones were the ones who wanted to see me executed — death by firing squad was a popular suggestion.”

Bucky’s eyes widened in horror, but she pressed on without allowing him a chance to interject, looking distinctly uncomfortable with her own honesty. “Everyone’s got their reasons for why they’d be better off working in a Dairy Queen,” she said, in a slightly softer tone. “You and me probably more than any of the others. I know better than anyone the kinds of doubts you have, and trust me — they probably won’t go away any time soon. But you said you wanted a chance for redemption, and here it is. And if you want to sit this one out and wallow around in your own self-pity, that’s your choice. But we have a job to do. And like it or not, we’re the best people to do it. That includes you, Barnes.”

Bucky swallowed down the lump in his throat that grew from her words, and he bit down on his
lower lip to try and keep in his pleased little smile. “And the twins?” he asked brightly, the thought suddenly occurring to him.

Natasha didn’t answer immediately, and Bucky’s smile shrunk back down. Her eyes stayed on his face squarely, but there was a very subtle pursing of her lips that gave something away. “They’re sitting this one out,” she told him evenly. “We need people back at home base. And honestly, Wanda’s abilities are kind of wasted on small-fry like this.”

“But… they are a part of the team now, right?” Bucky asked slowly.

Natasha gave a nod. “They’ve probably proved themselves as much as you have by now. Unfair advantages included, Wanda can probably mop the floor with both you and me at the same time. Good fighters, smart kids. Great assets to the team.”

“So why are they being left out of this one? The two of them could have the engineers rounded up and restrained in a matter of a few seconds all by themselves. Why waste our ammo?”

There it was again — that almost imperceptible tick of her lips pursing.

“Natasha, what aren’t you telling me?” he probed seriously.

She gave him an annoyed huff, obviously irritated, and dropped her arms by her sides in defeat. She looked for a moment as though she was seriously debating with herself whether or not to say anything, but then she looked back up into Bucky’s face, she pursed her lips once again distastefully, and save a soft, surrendering exhale. “This isn’t an ambush mission,” she admitted grudgingly. “It’s an intercept. We think the agents we’re targeting came from the facility in Bavaria — they’re headed for New York, and… and we think they’re coming for the twins.”

Bucky felt his blood turn to ice.

“It’s just the most likely theory we have at this point,” Natasha scrambled to reassure him, bringing both hands up gently as Bucky began to yank and rip at the tight bindings taped around his right hand. “Jarvis’s transmission of their intercepted radio was garbled — the most we know for certain is that they came from the region close to where the twins were recovered from. It might not even be the same base — we’re just taking precautions just in case.”

“I knew I should have blown up that base,” Bucky seethed acidly, pitching the unwound wrappings to the ground and turning on his heel. “Fuck, I knew it. I let most of those people evacuate — I let them go. Most of the agents in that base got away completely scot-free — everyone who knew about the twins, fuck.” His fingers found their home in the front of his hair, and he gripped it hard at the roots. This was his fault — all of it. He’d let all those undeserving people go, and now the twins were in danger again. Because of him.

Fuck.

Fuck.

“Bucky, calm down,” Natasha’s voice was an order, and it was with surprising strength that she clasped his shoulder and yanked him around to face her. “This is exactly why I didn’t want to tell you—”

“Who’s staying behind to protect the twins?” Bucky demanded, cutting her off angrily. “How many of them are there?”

together that arsenal I know you’re not supposed to have hidden around your apartment. And get your head on straight — you’re no good to the team if you allow yourself to get overemotional and reckless.”

Bucky let out a hard breath of air, and closed his eyes to compose himself. She was right. He couldn’t afford to let his emotions fuck him up on this one; there was too much riding on it. And hell, he was the Winter Soldier for fuck’s sake — callousness and cold efficiency was his goddamn *forte*.

“No, you’re right, I’m sorry,” he said, and slid his hand out from his hair to squeeze the bridge of his nose, breathing in and out slowly. “I’m sorry.”

Natasha’s grip on his shoulder eased up a little, and she gave him a few good sympathetic pats before stepping around him and leaving the room.

“Kiss the twins goodbye and tell them you’ll be home for dinner,” she said softly. “Half an hour. Go.”

It had taken a whopping grand total of around eight minutes to follow Natasha’s instructions. His uniform was on, his boots were secure, his arsenal was strapped to himself… all that was left now was to wait another twenty goddamn minutes for the debrief room to open.

Failing to reign in his restlessness, Bucky felt as though he were on a frenzy — stalking from room to room, dragging his hands along the walls, prying inside nooks and crannies in everything, feeling along curtains and bedspreads and the undersides of the leaves on those stupid fake potted plants Steve kept around the house to add “greenery” where it wasn’t needed…

The good thing about doing those stupid compulsive checks of the house for any bugs and surveillance was that modern housing was typically pretty minimalistic — the downside, however, was that this stupid apartment was huge in comparison to anywhere else Bucky had ever lived, so there was a lot more ground to cover. This was only a two-bedroom place — why on earth was it so big? *Why* did they need this much space? Why did each bedroom need its own bathroom? Back in Brooklyn, they’d shared one bathroom with everyone on their damn floor, and they’d been perfectly happy.

As he zipped the cover on one of the couch cushions back up and replaced it back to its place in the sofa, he heard the sound of the elevator doors opening, followed soon by the sounds of familiar giggling.

Wanda and Pietro — both apparently a little hungover — had their arms looped around each other’s shoulders, and they shuffled into the apartment with rather self-satisfied looks on their faces. Wanda’s heeled shoes dangled off of Pietro’s fingertips, and Bucky could see dark, rounded hickies littering up the side of Pietro’s neck.

The twins walked in, took one look at him, and both slumped a little — matched sets of sad and disappointed looks on their faces. They dropped their arms from around one another and stood up straighter. Bucky flushed, and immediately turned to busy himself behind the TV cabinet.

“You do remember that Stark’s AIs scan everything for foreign bugs and surveillance, right?” Pietro reminded him, sounding
Bucky gave a grunt, and didn’t look up.

Wanda shot her brother an annoyed look, and tried again, with a soft face, and a much more compassionate tone. “Did something happen?”

Bucky sighed, and halted his rummaging, but didn’t emerge from behind the cabinet. “Nothing happened,” he said, “I’m just…” he trailed off, not quite knowing how to end that sentence.

“You weren’t at breakfast,” Pietro said accusingly, sounding far more hurt by this than Bucky felt he reasonably should be.

Bucky saw the knuckles on his right hand whiten as he clenched both fists on his knees.

While Sam had assured him over and over that he was making progress — had made a lot of progress — the simple fact of the matter remained that there were parts of his brain that would probably always be permanently altered by his trauma. While he certainly functioned a lot better nowadays, both generally and socially, nothing seemed to be able to help the fact that he still had nightmares. Granted, they didn’t happen every night — and indeed, had probably been slowly decreasing in frequency these past few months — but they did still happen a lot.

They simply wouldn’t stop. No matter how hard he worked, no matter how hard he tried, no matter how deep he buried them, they just simply would not stop unravelling. Every time, he’d either have to relive something horrible he remembered with perfect clarity, or his brain would somehow manage to unearth something new, just like Wanda had said it might.

“Was up earlier than usual. Worked off some steam in the gym. Forgot about breakfast — sorry,” he said, a little more sharply than intended.

The twins looked at each other, concerned by the jerky tone of his voice.

“Nightmares again?” Wanda guessed — annoyingly accurate as ever. Bucky finally extracted himself from behind the entertainment unit to give her a look of sheer exasperation.

“No,” he lied tightly.

Wanda and Pietro exchanged a disbelieving look, and he scowled.

“So where is Steve then?” Wanda asked pleasantly, moving around to take a seat on the reassembled sofa. She brought one foot up onto her knee and began to gently knead at it, working at a tender spot on the ball of her foot with a thumb, massaging away the discomfort that had probably been brought on by wearing tall high-heels all night long.

“Probably already suited up — might’ve gone to let Sam know about the debrief,” Bucky said distractedly, eyes following the circular movements of her thumb.

The twins gave him a confused look, which he didn’t see.

“Did you have fun last night?” he suddenly asked, genuinely curious.

The twins were only nineteen, after all. Kids their age usually had far more opportunities for fun like this on the regular, and it made him anxious to think that they were being deprived of that experience while they still had the chance. He’d had a serious think about talking with them about college before, but was quick to remind himself that that was never going to be a very realistic option — the entire reason he’d taken them to America, and to Stark Tower, was because he’d wanted them to be safe. This mission today was only one more reminder that they were in constant danger of being
recaptured by Hydra, and sadly, that they probably would be for the rest of their lives.

“We had a lot of fun,” Wanda enthused. “Although Pietro probably more than me,” she added slyly, and Pietro beamed, looking quite pleased with himself.

“Stark has some very interesting friends — *excellent* dancers. I felt up *three* of his guests last night,” he said proudly, and Bucky snorted despite himself. Christ, he loved these kids.

“I got to meet Doctor Foster last night,” Wanda said brightly. “Brilliant woman, just brilliant — very interested in working in the stranger fields. She is very eager to work with me sometime in the next few months to study what I can do.”

Bucky inclined his head at her, a furrow of concern appearing between his brows. “And you’re… you think you’d be *okay* with that?” he asked.

Wanda nodded eagerly. “Yes. She is very enthusiastic about the science behind my abilities — not so much how they can be *used*, but rather how they *work* instead. It is… refreshing to see.” She sounded a little amused, and Bucky was both relieved and delighted to see her taking such a liking to this woman. Usually, she wouldn’t trust a scientist as far as she could throw them, let alone approach and engage with one without the help of a ten-foot pole in her grasp to keep them separate. He thought back to Stark’s indignant recount of how she’d flipped him upside down and dangled him in mid-air when he’d tried to investigate their capabilities for himself.

(Since learning to do that, sparring with Wanda had become truly terrifying. Most of the time she didn’t even bother changing into gym gear, since she never broke a sweat while tossing her challengers about. Not to mention that since she’d learned how to levitate people, she now often did so to everyone at increasingly minor provocations, regardless of whether or not they were in the sparring ring. Mostly to her brother.)

“I’m glad,” he said sincerely, and gave her a warm smile. His fingers drummed against his thighs a little at the agitation of still being partway through his check, however, and Wanda clearly caught the way his eyes darted over to the piece of artwork hanging on the wall to his left which he had yet to search behind.

Her face pinched up with worry. “Pops? What happened?”

Bucky hesitated, and didn’t answer.

“You said there was a debrief, is there a mission?” Pietro probed worriedly. “Something bad?”

“No.” Bucky answered right away, firm. “Nothing bad — just a milk run.”

Lying to the twins left a taste in his mouth like battery acid, but he held steadfast. There was no way he could bring himself to admit to them the kind of threat that they could be under. Telling them would accomplish nothing more than frightening them — set them on edge and make them panic. Or worse, the other option was that they’d pull a Steve Rogers and muscle their way onto the team for this dumbass assignment in order to reap their own justice. Pietro, he felt sure, would want to come for blood, but Wanda was a little more unpredictable; there was no way he could tell what she’d do in the face of the men who might have been involved in keeping her and her brother imprisoned for most of their teenage life. And he didn’t relish the idea of finding out.

So Bucky settled on a half-truth. “Some ex-Hydra goons slipped up on their radio, and we caught a blip. We’re going to waylay them on an intercept and hopefully take them out. Depends on if we want them alive or not — Captain’s orders, I guess.”
“We?”

“Yeah, they, uh… they’re including me this time…”

The twins’ fretful expressions melted away in lieu of sudden delight. Wanda clapped her hands together excitedly, and she bounced in her seat, overjoyed.

Bucky waved them off with a hand before either of them could say anything. “Yeah, yeah, I know, I know,” he indulged them with a small smile. “Guess I’m just a little nervous before my first mission.” It was another lie — he’d honestly never felt less nervous. He felt restless and agitated, and he wanted to hurry up and have his thirst for justice sated already, but it wasn’t the same thing as nervousness.

“Why aren’t we coming too?” Pietro suddenly asked, a little petulant.

Bucky mustered up a smile, and stood to ruffle Pietro’s hair. “Like I said — it’s a milk run. Bringing you two to the mission would be like bringing a bazooka to a BB gun fight. You’re in on the next one — Natasha promises.”

The twins grinned at him, but before anyone could say anything more, the elevator doors into the apartment slid open again, revealing Sam. He was fitted with his flight suit, sans the wings, and had a pair of goggles resting on his forehead.

“Hey, Barnes — time to go,” he said in a rather uncharacteristically business-like voice. The twins exchanged one more excited look, and then they both stood and stepped into his personal space to envelop him in a suffocating group-hug.

Bucky laughed weakly. “C’mon, c’mon, get off.”

“You will be careful?” Wanda said, and Bucky’s heart clenched a little at hearing the genuine worry there.

He put a hand on her head reassuringly, “I’ll be fine. Milk run, remember?”

They released him, and he gave each of them a final pat on the back before turning on his heel to follow Sam out into the elevator.

“Hey, Brain Freeze, it’s about time,” Stark said, amused, as Bucky and Sam filed into the conference room.

The Avengers were all crowded around one end of the long table, standing up and leant over a large map that Tony was pressing one forefinger into. Bucky gave a sheepish half-smile, and went to take his place beside Steve, giving him a small nudge with an elbow as he did so.

“I thought Captain Small-Ass over here was going to get separation anxiety if you waited any longer,” Tony continued lightly, and Steve gave an indignant frown.

“Don’t be a jerk, Tony, they’re not even late. And I don’t have a small ass, do I?” he addressed the group at large — a look on his face suggesting that he’d fight whoever responded in the negative.

Bucky snorted, and made a show of letting his eyes fall appreciatively to said ass. “Looks pretty fine to me,” he said. He smacked one hand to it and groped, hard.
Steve gave Bucky a little shove as he pinked up with embarrassment, and Bucky grinned.

Bucky couldn’t recognise the jets from any specific division, but was definitely able to confirm that they were Hydra’s — or at the very least, perhaps stolen from one of the international Shield headquarters.

There were two of the Hydra aircrafts — approximately eight or so agents inside each. They flew in an Alpha formation, forming such a perfect parallel that they looked like they could be a mirror image of one another. As far as Bucky could tell, there was barely an inch difference in the trajectory between the two.

They’d taken the long way — circling around as best they could to avoid a head-on confrontation, and remaining unseen due to both the high cloud coverage, and Stark’s ingenious cloaking system that erased any visuals they may have had from any third-party radar sensors.

“Alright,” Natasha spoke into her headset from where she piloted the Avengers quinjet, and the sound of her voice crackled slightly in Bucky’s earpiece. “We have eyes on target. Stark, are you ready to engage?”

“Ready and rearing!” Tony’s voice answered back, sounding slightly more garbled than Natasha’s due to wind. Bucky could see the gold and scarlet streak zooming along beside the quinjet through the windows, and at Natasha’s command, Stark adjusted the position of his hands, and put on a burst of speed.

Bucky craned his neck slightly in order to catch the sight of Stark landing elegantly onto one knee on the back of the left enemy aircraft, pressing a fist into it as he found his balance. After a tense moment of anticipation, Bucky let out a small sigh of relief when the aircraft didn’t immediately begin to roll to shake him off — meaning that he was still undetected for the moment.

“Alright — Falcon, do you follow?”

“Give me a minute here, would you? My wings weren’t built to be as fast as Mr Moneybags’ suits, okay? And it’s freezing up here!” Sam’s voice snapped in response, and Bucky watched Nat’s lips purse and curl a little in muted amusement.

Moment later, Bucky saw the dark chrome figure of Sam land on the aircraft directly opposite Tony’s with light feet, and the wings retracted at once.

“Goddamn. Remind me to add some sleeves to this outfit, would you?” he said, adding a theatrical shivering noise to the end of his sentence.

“Hey, you’re the one who wanted to show off your biceps,” Steve teased.

“Please, I’m doing a public service. Everyone deserves to see these biceps.”

Bucky stifled an amused snort, but privately, he absolutely agreed. Sam’s arms really were a pretty amazing sight to behold.

“Oh, bitch, bitch, bitch,” Tony’s voice interjected, an edge of exasperation behind the amusement. “Do I bad-mouth your designs? No!”
“Can we please focus here?” Natasha ground out, rolling her eyes.

“Couldn’t agree more. Cap, Barnes, you’re up.” Stark said.

Bucky and Steve spared a moment to grin at each other eagerly, bumping the backs of their fists together before reaching up to fasten their respective headgear — Steve with his helmet, and Bucky with his new set of wind-resistant goggles.

“Alright — we get one shot. Rogers, you’re in first with Stark. Barnes, you with Wilson. You’ve both got a six-second window to get your butts inside the aircrafts on my mark unless you wanna spend the rest of the mission floating out in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.”

“Not fun,” Steve said mildly, and Natasha snorted despite herself.

Bucky lost sight of both Sam and Tony as the quinjet ducked below the Hydra aircrafts, immersing itself partway into more cloud coverage and edging forward, veering to the left in order to get underneath the left aircraft.

“Think you can get up top without a boost?” Bucky offered, jerking a forefinger upward to indicate the roof of the quinjet.

Steve made a face like Bucky had insulted him, and gave him three firm pats on the back to give a silent reassurance that he’d be okay. Then, he grasped Bucky’s shoulder, as a wordless plea for him to please be careful, for the love of god.

Bucky rolled his eyes, but clapped a hand over Steve’s shoulder to give an answering squeeze. His thumb fit in comfortably at the point between Steve’s clavicle and shoulder, and Steve’s responding smile looked almost heartbreakingly tender.

“Boys! C’mon, you can gaze into each other’s eyes later — this is time-sensitive!” Natasha interrupted them exasperatedly, and Steve’s hand dropped from Bucky’s back with an eyeroll.

Dutiful as ever, he double checked the fastenings on his chinstrap, and jogged over to the rear of the jet, where Natasha had opened up the drop port at the push of a button. Wind whipped round inside the quinjet, ruffling up Bucky’s hair around his ears and drowning out any sound that wasn’t the thump, thump, thump of pressurised air flooding the cabin.

He watched Steve give an almighty jump and grasp onto the mouth of the entrance, then, with a soft grunt of exertion, he heaved himself up and out of sight over the top of the quinjet.

“He took a parachute, right?” Natasha wondered as she closed back up the quinjet port.

“You think I’d let him go without?” Bucky demanded indignantly, peering over the top of Natasha’s head while they eased themselves under the aircraft, guided on by Tony beckoning them inward as a signal that Steve hadn’t entered the Hydra craft yet.

A flash of blue, and a halting signal from Tony, and Natasha lowered the ship at once, allowing it to fall back and away from the other aircraft.

As they edged back, he caught a split-second visual confirmation of Steve levering himself into the port of the Hydra plane — Tony having managed to open it remotely from the outside.

“Alright Barnes, you’ve probably got even less time than Rogers here — they’re definitely aware of us by now, so try not to die, will you?” Natasha asked, shooting him a meaningful look.
“I’ll do my best,” Bucky responded dryly, and began to make his way to the back of the quinjet to replicate what Steve had done, only on the other side.

The first thought Bucky had as he righted himself on top of the jet was that Sam had definitely been downplaying the cold somewhat. It really was fucking freezing up here — the chill stinging his face and numbing his ears, and making his teeth chatter like a fuckin’ windup toy. No matter how well-made his uniform was, the wind seemed to not give a shit — rushing through his jacket, through his skin, around his bones, and out the other side. He ignored the ominous voice inside his head that oh-so-helpfully reminded him that these were the exact conditions he’d felt that day on the backside of the Schnellzug EB912 as it hurtled along the mountainside in the Russian Alps that day in 1945.

“Watch your head!” Natasha’s voice advised over the crackling coms system.

The Quinjet ducked under the Hydra aircraft, and Bucky crouched just in time to avoid getting his head caved in by the craft’s belly. Seconds later, they partially emerged out the other side, and Bucky looked up to see Sam crouching by the gaping entrance with a gloved hand outstretched, the other holding onto the aircraft in a vice.

“Upsy daisy!”

Bucky’s cybernetic hand wrapped around Sam’s wrist, and as he jumped, the quinjet fell away from under him. Sam gave a grunt of exertion, and heaved until Bucky was able to take his own weight and ease up onto the platform.

“Jeez, and I thought Rogers was heavier than he looks,” Sam groused, and threw his shoulder in a circle as they both began to make their way inside.

“In my defence, at least forty five pounds of that is pure arm,” Bucky wiggled the fingers on his left hand pointedly.

“My life is so weird,” Sam muttered, rolling his eyes good-naturedly. He pressed the interior door release to close it up behind them, and fell in line behind Bucky.

Guns at the ready, the two men fell into a slight crouch, edging along the walls as they crept to the other side of the cargo bay, peering curiously into a large glass room that took up a good third of the place, separated by a pair of sliding pressure doors. It looked like an unoccupied lab.

Bucky tapped the release button to the doors directly in front of them, which slid open to admit them at once. Out the other end of the lab, he repeated the action. It led them out into a long hallway with shiny floors and a door at either end, blinking lights of control panels blinking behind a glass wall to their right.

“You know,” Bucky murmured, “in my day, military aircrafts were only big enough to carry the pilots and soldiers inside — they weren’t the size of a goddamned cruise ship.”

“It’s not that big,” Sam reasoned, only to have his point thoroughly eradicated as they exited the opposite door into what looked like a huge communal recreation area with leather seats and a foosball table.

Bucky gave him a smug look, but rather than shoot him an answering look of irritation, Sam frowned around at his surroundings — distastefully staring at the plush carpeted ground and fully stocked bookcases.

“Did my tax money go toward building these things? I feel like this whole government organisation thing was really overfunded,” he eyes the expensive-looking mahogany coffee table meaningfully.
“This kind of money could have gone to getting Janie some better facilities at her school.”

Bucky didn’t answer, falling at once into a defensive stance, gun at the ready, as he heard crashing footsteps enter in from a sectioned off portion of the room.

Three men and a woman, all in matching grey uniforms and combat boots, filed into the lounge, looks of bewilderment on their faces that quickly turned into scowls. In a flash, all of them had their weapons raised.

“Soldier,” the woman spat, and it was with a wave of pure revulsion that Bucky recognised her as one of the pleading escapees he’d allowed to evacuate from the base in Bavaria that day. The others were unfamiliar.

He said nothing in return, but his hackles rose at the address.

“Friends of yours?” Sam said, glaring at the woman down the length of his handgun.

“Oh yeah, best buds,” Bucky returned, just as flatly. “You know, considering I let you live that day, you’re not showing very much gratitude,” he told the group in a faux-pleasant tone.

The woman’s lip curled unpleasantly. “Not bothering with the small fry is what you were trained to do,” she said with a sneer. “Stealing valuable equipment from base, however…”

“You’re lucky I didn’t blow it the fuck up,” he snapped, feeling white-hot rage seep into every part of him at the idea of the twins being called ‘equipment’. They were human goddamn beings. Kids.

“I have an idea,” Sam suddenly contributed pleasantly. “How about we all lower our guns? I’m pretty sure that bullets plus a pressurised metal air container is a very, very bad idea.”

“Oh, that won’t be a problem,” the woman replied cheerfully.

“Why’s that?”

“Because,” she said mildly, “these guns don’t have bullets.” And with that, she pulled the trigger, and Bucky felt a prick of something sharp pierce the outside of his thigh.

It didn’t hurt, exactly, but he gave a cry of surprise nonetheless. He looked down to see a short dart protruding out of his leg, and he quickly yanked it out.

“Mother fucker,” he cursed, letting the dart drop to the floor. “God damn it. Are you insane?”

The woman shrugged, unconcerned.

Bucky raised his own handgun, and before any of the agents could respond, he pulled his own trigger, neatly putting away three bullets into the heads of the agents, leaving one of the men alive.

The man yelped in shock as his teammates tumbled limply to the floor, and Bucky felt a second dart sink into the material over his abdomen. The Kevlar was too dense for anything to actually manage to pierce through, but the tip of the needle stuck out oddly from the jacket.

Bucky brushed the dart away, stalked forward, and brought the butt of the gun down over the man’s head, sending him careening to the floor and clutching at a bloody wound over his hairline.

“Jesus, Barnes,” Sam breathed, looking around in shock at the limp bodies.

Bucky hauled the live agent up by his bicep, and then turned him in his grasp to hold him by the
throat in a vice grip. The man clawed ineffectually at the metal hand, eyes bulging. “I’m not known for my pussyfooting around,” he reminded Sam. “And besides, she pissed me off.”

He dragged the agent over to one of the white leather sofas arranged in a circle in the middle of the recreation area, and held him steadfast with a metal hand over his shoulder.

“How many more of you are there?” he demanded firmly.

The man snarled, and attempted to throw Bucky off of him, but Bucky didn’t budge — jolting him back by slamming him into the chair, and then pressing the muzzle of his gun into the man’s shoulder.

“You get one chance to answer me, you understand? And I don’t need to tell you that this gun,” he pressed the muzzle further into his shoulder, “doesn’t have tranq bullets in it.”

The man shuddered a little, but didn’t speak.

Bucky pulled the trigger.

The man’s guttural scream was music to Bucky’s ears, and when he tried to thrash away from his grip, Bucky merely holstered his handgun and fastened his hand over the wound on man’s other shoulder to keep him pinned.

“C’mon you piece of shit — how many more of you are there?” he spat, voice rising.

The man’s eyes shone with tears of agony, but he only screwed his face up and shook his head violently, remaining silent.

Bucky pressed his thumb into the bullet hole, and another scream was ripped out of the man’s throat.

“E-eleven!” the man finally shrieked, and Bucky eased up on the pressure, but didn’t remove his thumb completely. “There are eleven of us — two pilots, nine agents.”

“You planned to kidnap two superhumans from Stark Tower with eleven people?” Bucky said incredulously, looking over to his right to share a look with Sam.

The man shook his head frantically. “Only one.”

“Wanda,” Bucky realised coldly.

Without another word, he extracted both hands from the man’s shoulders, took his gun back in hand, and then shot the man cleanly through the head.

“Jesus Christ, Barnes,” Sam said, blinking rapidly, obviously not expecting it. “You really weren’t kidding about the pussyfooting thing…”

“C’mon,” Bucky ignored him, and stepped disgustedly over the bodies slumped around the floor. “We’ll take out the pilot, and then I’m radioing the others. This was way too easy — I don’t feel right about it.”

They took off down the narrow hallways twisting around the aircraft at a hard and fast pace — eyes darting around suspiciously. Despite how sincere the now dead agent had sounded, Bucky wouldn’t be Bucky if he weren’t taking the words of cowardly Hydra agents with a grain of salt.
After taking a brief moment to share an intense look with Sam outside the entrance to the cockpit, Bucky took in a deep breath, flicked the hammer on his handgun, and stoved the door in with his boot, weapon at the ready.

There was no one.

The cockpit was completely empty — not a pilot or co-pilot to be seen anywhere.

“What the hell?” Sam said, sounding both baffled and annoyed. He stepped around Bucky tentatively to inspect the lights and switches across the control panel. “It’s on autopilot,” he said, and the confusion in his voice increased. “So one of the agents we killed was the pilot? Why have a vessel with only four people?”

“Because this ship was the decoy,” Bucky realised, and then raised his hand to push the PTT on his com. “Steve?” he demanded, voice a little louder than necessary. “Steve, you there? Status report, Rogers.”

“Can’t get a hold of him, Barnes,” Natasha responded over the open line. “Line’s been dropped — there’s only static from the both of them.”

“Shit,” Bucky hissed, and then immediately stepped forward to check over the aircraft controls.

“Widow,” he said through the coms, his tone firmly businesslike, but nonetheless urgent, “ship’s clear — you’re free to dock.”

“Roger,” came Natasha's reply, “boarding now”.

Bucky pushed off from the controls and turned on his heel at once, only to find himself caught back by Sam’s hand clenched tight around his inner elbow.

“Barnes,” Sam said, an uneasy warning in his voice, “what are you about to do?”

Bucky gave an unsure shrug. “Something stupid,” he said, and with that, took a deep breath in, and then took off running at a bolt toward the upper level on the craft.

“Fuckin’-” Sam hissed, and took off after him.

As Natasha exited the quinjet through the open docking bay, she twirled a set of keys on a lanyard around her index finger, which were quickly nabbed by Bucky in mid-swing.

She glared at Bucky for a moment, annoyed at him for ruining the lanyard’s momentum, but quickly sobered at seeing Bucky’s grave expression.

“Still no word?” he demanded, knowing for a fact that if there was, he probably would have heard it on his own com — it was an open line to the whole team, after all.

Natasha shook her head, and pursed her lips. “They’re probably fine,” she assured him, sounding astoundingly certain. “Coms have been known to fuck up a little at high altitude sometimes. And these aircrafts are Shield’s — there are external defences put in to scramble third party audio.”

“Against Stark’s? I doubt it, Tasha,” he said evenly, and she pursed her lips again gravely. Bucky jerked his head at Sam. “Sam, you head to the controls and pilot this oversized piece of junk to the negotiated landing base according to plan. Nat, you think you can hack the other one to open its docking port from here to let me in?” he asked.
Without delivering her usual sardonic look whenever asked if she can do something, Natasha merely nodded determinedly, not asking any questions, and then she watched as Bucky sped off through the Quinjet to take a seat at the pilot’s chair.

After exiting the jet, Bucky fully expected to be held at gunpoint by several armed agents — what he didn’t expect, however, was to see Steve with both hands laced behind the back of his neck, on his knees in the middle of the room. He had a gun trained point-blank to the back of his skull, and the men around him were positioned so that Steve would be the sole point of focus in the room — each with smug looks of clear triumph on their faces. As Bucky’s eyes fell to Steve in horror, the muzzle of the gun pressed further into his golden hair, and Steve’s jaw clenched.

Bucky made to stalk forward furiously, his metal fist clenching by his side, but before he could even shift his weight to step forward, every gun in the room cocked their hammers and collectively adjusted their aim onto him.

“Ah, ah, ah,” the man holding Steve at gunpoint tutted, shaking his head with a delighted look on his thin, twisted face. Bucky longed to crash his fist into those pointed, yellowing teeth so that he would never have to see that smug, condescending smile again. So that nobody would ever have to see it again.

The man jerked his head. “Stand down, Soldier. You wouldn’t want anything to happen to your Captain now, right?” the gun’s aim angled further down, and Steve’s arms tensed.

Bucky clenched his teeth, and kept himself calm by picturing all the ways he was going to dismember this smug asshole as soon as he got the chance. Maybe he’d start with the teeth — but then again, there’d be real satisfaction in snapping those fingers one by one on the hand that was poised to strike on the trigger…

“Air must be a little thin up here, Rogers,” Bucky said conversationally instead, looking down to where Steve was kneeled with a look of raw disapproval on his face. “Never thought I’d see the day where you’d come out worst in a fight.”

Steve gave a wry smile. “What are you talking about? I’m completely on top of this,” he said, just as casually.

“Yeah, clearly.” Bucky’s eyes flicked up to the yellow-toothed man pointedly, but still addressed Steve in that calm, even tone. Just to unnerve everyone. “They take your coms?”

“Blocked the signal,” Steve’s eyes flicked over to the right, where a crude-looking modem with six straight antennas protruding from its top was placed on a glossy coffee table. Bucky screwed up his face.

“Right, of course. So, this bunch’a third-rate TV villains revealed their dastardly plot to you yet? You get ‘em to start monologuing?”

“Wow, who knew the Asset could be so funny,” the yellow-toothed man interjected, looking both surprised and amused. “Never seen you this verbose, Soldier. Must be why they kept you muzzled.” He gave another wicked grin, and Bucky’s teeth clenched. “Love the haircut, by the way.”

Asshole.

“Not that this isn’t a touching family reunion and all, but what do you want?” Bucky asked tensely.
The man’s grin widened.

“Our property was stolen,” he said simply, “we want it back.” Bucky’s vision clouded over with a haze of red.

“They’re not your fucking property,” he spat, thoughtlessly taking another step forward, only to halt suddenly when those guns adjusted onto him again, hammers clicking. “They’re kids. They’re just fucking kids. They don’t deserve any of this.”

To his surprise, the man’s head dropped back, and he gave a loud cackle that once again made Bucky want to punch his fucking teeth in. “You mean the Enhanced?” he said incredulously, “those dirty Bulgarian orphans? They’re more trouble than they’re worth. We were instructed to kill them only if they got in our way. They’ve become too high profile to be of any use to us now, you see.”

Bucky and Steve exchanged a look of deep-set confusion, and unease began to trickle into Bucky’s mind.

“Then why are you en route to Stark Tower?” Steve asked slowly, but the man didn’t even look down to acknowledge him. His eyes remained fixed on Bucky, glinting wickedly.

“We didn’t come for the children, Soldier,” he admitted conspiratorially, a twisted grin splitting his face cruelly, “we came for you.”

Bucky went cold.

Fuck, no.

They’d played right into their hands. God, shit, fuck, no.

How had they known he was there? Had there been active trackers still remaining in his arm that Stark had somehow missed? Had he been seen attending a press conference in disguise amongst the crowd? Had the cameras managed to catch a glimpse of him the day that Stark’s Iron Legion attacked the city? Were they in contact with a double agent? Fucking.

Briefly struck dumb by panic, Bucky almost didn’t see Steve’s next move coming.

With the muzzle of the gun pressed into the back of his head, mere inches from his clasped hands, Steve took advantage of the split-second lapse in attention that the yellow-toothed man was giving him, and he punched his hands upward to knock the barrel of the gun. He tucked his chin, and the gun fired off with a bang.

The very tips of Steve’s hair ruffled at the narrow miss of the bullet going off over his head, and said bullet sank into the left thigh of one of the agents to Bucky’s immediate right. Taking advantage of the split few seconds of surrounding shock, Bucky snapped into action, dropping to the ground immediately and rolling forwards so as to snatch the gun out from the yellow-toothed man’s spindly fingers. Without taking a second to even right himself to his feet, Bucky span around on one knee, and pulled the trigger — two, three, four, five, six — before the clip ran out, and four dead Hydra agent lay slumped over on the cream-coloured carpet, oozing red into the fibres. Three remained: the yellow-toothed man, the man he’d shot in the leg, and the one who had moved just right in time for the bullet to sink into his right shoulder instead of the middle of his chest.

Without taking a second to spare the remaining men by not shooting them in their shithole Hydra-hailing faces, Bucky tossed the empty handgun aside, and then fished his own out from the holster at his thigh to shoot.
When he turned back around, Steve had managed to grapple the yellow-toothed man into a tight chokehold between his chest and one straining forearm. The man’s eyes bulged unpleasantly from his head, and every vein in his forehead stood out, distended against the reddening skin.

With a gurgle of fury, the guy clasp both hands around Steve’s forearm and began to shove Steve backwards, walking him back, one foot after the other. He crushed Steve’s feet with his heels, and clawed at his skin with overgrown fingernails, and beat at his midsection with pointed elbows, but still, Steve’s grip didn’t budge.

Neither of them saw it coming when yellow-toothed man’s fist suddenly flew outward, and slammed into a release catch on the wall of the aircraft parallel to the plane’s airdrop door.

There was a strained grinding noise of metal-on-metal, and then the door tore open. Almost immediately, the pressurized air rushing into the craft stole the breath from his lungs, leaving him gasping, and the rushing, thumping wind deafened him.

The sudden pressure from the battering airstream shoved at Steve’s form, nearly sending him stumbling over, off-balance. With another twisted, triumphant grin, the yellow-toothed man’s hands went from scrabbling against Steve’s grip to holding him steadfast against himself, and it was with a horrible sense of dawning realisation that Bucky realised exactly what he was trying to do.

“Steve!” Bucky shouted, scrambling forward at once to try and separate them — Steve’s arms now straining not to keep the man steadfast in his grip, but instead fighting to shove him away.

Unthinking, Bucky fastened his arms immediately around the man’s chest, and he yanked him back, effectively breaking his grip on Steve. A moment too late, he realised his mistake when those surprisingly strong hands then shot out around Bucky’s neck, locking him in place against his chest instead.

Bucky’s entire body was dragged forward by the back of his neck. Fighting in vain against both the fastened arms around his head, and the thumping winds that threatened to sweep him off his feet the second he so much as stumbled, Bucky’s feet stepped forward of their own volition to try and keep him upright.

After another second of struggling, he felt himself be whirled around with the yellow-toothed man, and was granted the sight of an infuriated-looking Steve over the guy’s shoulder reaching out to grasp him by the back of his shirt. Steve’s hands twisted in the material, and he heaved backward. Likewise, Bucky struggled for a moment to worm his mechanical hand between himself and the man to shove him away.

Up against two super soldiers, the man’s grip broke easily under their combined force, and Bucky felt those determined arms slip and finally release their grip from around his head.

Upon being freed, Bucky felt intense relief and triumph over having not let this slimy little bastard best him through sheer luck. It was a feeling that lasted even less than a full second before he felt a heavy boot collide into his lower abdomen — a brutal afterthought — that sent him reeling backwards.

The last thing he saw was Steve’s anguished face, screaming his name through deafening wind — the same thing he’d last seen that day on the Russian mountainside in 1945.

Bucky fell.
Chapter End Notes

Please, please, *please* leave comments; I love hearing what everyone has to say.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Coming back from the mission, Steve had still yet to say a word — quietly simmering with barely-contained fury that Bucky could feel radiating off of him in waves. But the bright side was that the mission had gone off without a hitch.

Well, mostly without a hitch.

Well, how many missions don’t end up having small hitches, really? It had ultimately been a success, hadn’t it? Nobody had died, or gotten seriously hurt (among the Avengers, at least). That sounded like a win in Bucky’s book.

Following his backward tumble out of the Hydra parachute door, for a solid three seconds of feeling himself drop through the freezing open air, Bucky had genuinely thought he was going to die. There was no ravine to break his fall this time, no Hydra agents to come drag him out — just endless, freezing ocean for him to helplessly drown in. He hadn’t screamed this time, like he had the last time he’d plummeted to his death, but he did find his hand extended outward as if to try and make a futile grasp for Steve’s own — just like he had last time.

His eyes stung and watered against icy rushing wind, and he squeezed them shut, bracing himself for the feeling of sudden submersion.

But the feeling didn’t come.

Instead, to his complete and utter blindsided shock, rather than feeling himself smack into the open freezing waters of the Atlantic Ocean, he felt the sensation of two solid, bulky arms lace themselves underneath him, around his back and under his knees — like a damn damsel in distress.

Surprised, his eyes had flown open, terrified for a moment that the arms belonged to Steve, and that he’d thrown himself after Bucky in a fit of… bravery, stupidity, complete reckless idiocy, whatever. Instead, to his intense relief, he’d opened his eyes to see the scarlet-gold faceplate of Tony Stark’s Iron Man suit.

Tony righted them in mid-air, and with the sound of the jet boosters in his feet putting on a burst of speed, they began to rocket upward, back toward the open door of the Hydra aircraft.

“Oh… oh, Jesus Christ,” Bucky panted breathlessly as he returned to the solid carpeted flooring of the plane, leaning heavily on Tony’s shoulder while he steadied himself on shaking feet.

Tony’s fist flew out to slam the release catch again, and the parachute drop door slid closed at once, effectively silencing the frigid winds that thumped and battered around the cabin.

“Fuck. Oh, you — you are my fuckin’ hero, Tony Stark,” Bucky said exaggeratedly, and he dragged Tony in by the back of the neck to plant a loud, sloppy kiss to the shiny surface of his helmet’s faceplate.

Tony shoved Bucky’s face away lightly with one hand. “Alright, alright, hey, no need to get all mushy on me there, Bro-chanan. Save it for Rogers,” he suggested, amused, and Bucky’s smile slipped at the reminder.
He’d dropped his arm away from Tony at once and turned to see the slumped-over form of his shell-shocked best friend — fallen to his knees, the tips of his fingers gripping hard into the plush fibres of the plane’s carpeting. He stared at Bucky with wild, terrified eyes, and his face was chalky. To his left, Bucky saw the body of the yellow-toothed man lying dead on his back — neck twisted round a little too unnaturally to be anything but broken.

For several long moments, he and Steve had merely stared at one another, speechless.

Sensing the awkwardness, Stark had tactfully cleared his throat, and went on to grandly explain that after he had taken out all the agents who had him held up on the upper floor, he’d grown suspicious when Rogers missed the rendezvous point in the cockpit, and so he had come down to investigate just in time to see Bucky be literally kicked out of the plane.

Bucky had thanked him yet again, patting Stark’s metal shoulder with his flesh hand before making his way over to the glass-covered coffee table, picking up the audio transmission scrambler, and pulverising it in one hand.

Upon arriving back at Stark tower, Steve had wasted no time before tearing out of the quinjet, out the bay adjacent to the bar on Tony’s floor, and storming right on to the elevator, where he spared Bucky a meaningful look before the doors slid closed.

Bucky, however, had not been so quick, and was subsequently forced to remain trapped in acting as a bystander to Tony and Natasha’s squabbling.

“I’m not sitting down for a follow-up Natasha. We all know what happened. Let us at least have a shower before we start with the instant-replays and nit-picking over what didn’t go according to plan, okay?” Tony reasoned. He paid absolutely no attention to the dozens of robot arms that had sprouted from the ground in order to remove his armour from him, piece-by-piece, as he casually poured himself a glass of scotch. No matter how many times Bucky had seen it done before, it still never failed to make him feel completely weirded out. In some ways, the future was inarguably better than the past — in other ways however, it still never failed to feel like one gigantic headfuck.

“Call me crazy, but I don’t exactly relish the idea of Hydra attempting to recapture and restore their number one weapon. We need to go over what we know and see if there’s anything we missed.” Natasha replied frostily, her arms folded over her chest. Sam nodded beside her in vehement agreement.

“They mentioned stolen equipment,” Bucky said slowly, taking his time to slip the fingerless leather gloves he wore off of each hand. “I thought they were talking about the twins at first, but if they really aren’t interested in recapturing them like they said they’re not, then they were probably talking about the sceptre.”

Natasha and Sam exchanged a look, and Bucky pressed on.

“When I attacked the base in Bavaria, I disabled and destroyed all of their security footage — they wouldn’t’ve known that the rest of you were there at all, much less that you were the ones who took the sceptre, and not me.”

They looked considerate for a moment, Natasha and Sam both looking away with looks of serious contemplation on their faces.

“Alright, look, either way, it doesn’t matter,” Tony interjected as he stepped forward out from behind the bar, now completely void of any remaining pieces of his suit. Ice clinked around in his glass as he gesticulated with it in the direction of Bucky. “Mr Trigger-Happy over here blew holes through most
of the agents on board, and the remainder have been safely handed off to the authorities and are awaiting to be boxed up and shipped out to bad-guy summer-camp, or wherever they go. Maria’s tag-teamed us to look over the planes, and she’s working on finding out if they’re in contact with any other bases.”

Natasha nodded affirmatively.

“So it’s over. Poof. Gone forever! Officially not our problem anymore!” he rejoiced. “Hurray for scary leather-bound nonagenarians and their complete mercilessness, am I right? And while we’re at it — hurray for me for saving his ass when he took a skydive.” Tony saluted Bucky with his glass, and Bucky rolled his eyes. “We’ve done our part for now, Natasha. I think we’ve all earned a shower, a stack of cheeseburgers, and a nap before we do anything else. And I’m pretty sure Rogers agrees with me,” he added, gesturing around to where Steve noticeably absent.

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“Oh my god, enough,” Bucky’s voice cut through their squabbling immediately, and Tony and Natasha both turned to him in surprise. “Natasha, if you want them brought up to speed, you and Sam can do it together. I’m done for today,” he said, and with that, turned on his heel to exit the room. “And I’m not trigger-happy. I’m efficient,” he added by the doorway, annoyed by the insinuation that he was just a complete psychopath. He was a professional, damn it.

Upon returning to the apartment, the first thing Bucky saw as the elevator doors slid open was Steve — more specifically, the tense set to Steve’s shoulders — and he knew at once that something was seriously wrong.

He gave a small, hopeful little grin, and opted for feigning casualness as he watched Steve roughly strip out of his bulky uniform jacket. “Hey Stevie.”

Steve turned, and his eyes narrowed at him dangerously.

“Don’t. Don’t you ‘hey Stevie’ me,” he demanded roughly, his voice thick and raw. He threw his jacket sharply over the arm of the sofa, leaving him in a plain white undershirt that, like all his damn clothes, looked obscenely small for him. Folding his arms, he leant back against the back of the couch, and fixed Bucky with a frown.

Bucky sighed. “It’s not like I kicked myself out of the window,” he reasoned fairly.

Steve ignored him, his scowl deepening.

Honestly, Bucky had kind of expected Steve to be angry with him. When Steve was frightened, there were really only two ways he dealt with it: to snap to attention and do something about it, or to ball his hands into fists get angry when he couldn’t. How far he was willing to go for something always depended on how frightened he was — an example of that being the time he’d parachuted
into an active Hydra military base on his own in order to recover Bucky and his team. Since Bucky was now safe, and there was nothing more to do about his fear, Steve had apparently settled on anger for now.

“Why the hell did you come after me?” Steve demanded. “You knew it was a trap. You knew that something wasn’t right. Why would you come for me if you even suspected that you might be playing right into their hands?”

Bucky hesitated, not quite sure what Steve wanted to hear.

Eventually, he sighed, settling for honesty. “I needed to be sure you were safe,” he admitted, only to immediately regret it when Steve’s look of frustration turned to downright furious.

“You fucking hypocrite,” he spat, and Bucky flinched. “All those times you chewed me out about flying in half-blind, and half-cocked, guns blazing, with a half-assed plan to boot, and you just go ahead and do it for yourself anyway,” he grit his teeth, shaking his head furiously. “Don’t you get that that’s how I lost you last time?” Steve demanded, his voice cracking under the last word, and oh, fuck…

Comprehension dawned on Bucky with the force of a falling anvil, and at once, he felt his heart soften, and then twist with abrupt guilt. “Steve…” he said gently, extending out a hand to touch Steve’s arm.

Steve shoved him roughly, jolting Bucky, who reeled backward in shock.

“You promised me,” Steve shouted. “You promised me you wouldn’t leave me again.”

Bucky’s mouth worked around the silent stop-starts of his response, looking a mixture between hurt and confused, until-

“You think I don’t feel exactly the same way about you?”

Steve’s head snapped up, bewildered, to see Bucky locking his jaw in a resolute set — not angry exactly, but undeniably defiant.

“They had a gun to your head, Steve. I watched you miss a bullet by a fucking inch. If I hadn’t gone out that door, it’d have been you. Am I supposed to sit by and take that? Sit by with my thumb up my ass and watch you take all the risk again and again and again? You think that after all this time, after everything, you’ve somehow earned the right to look out for me, while forbidding me to do the same for you?” he demanded roughly, throat constricting.

“That’s not why-”

“That’s exactly why. Don’t bullshit me Rogers — I see through you like a cheap sheet.”

“You kissed me,” Steve blurted out, and immediately flushed a deep red.

Bucky froze. “What?”

Steve didn't respond.

After another long, tense silence, Bucky’s shoulders slumped, and he sighed, sounding completely resigned. “I was wondering when you were gonna bring that up,” he admitted. “I guess it was too much to hope you’d just forgotten about it…”
“You’re goddamned right,” Steve snapped, and although his tone remained hard and angry, a flush of embarrassment stained further across his face. “You kissed me, Buck. You kissed me — and if you’d died today, it means I’ve never gotten the chance to talk to you about it.”

“Why do we need to talk about it? I thought we agreed to drop the whole thing.”

“Don’t you get it?” Steve snapped. He swallowed, took a deep breath, and suddenly deflated — all of that anger rushing out of him at once, immediately replaced with palpable anguish and defeat. “I… I can lose anything — anything — except you, Buck. Not you. Not again.”

Silence hung in the air — so thick and dense that it seemed almost tangible; like Bucky could swipe a hand in front of him and actually feel the solid tension between them.

As Bucky fumbled for words, Steve swallowed, tasting that same bitterness he drank away in that bombed-out London bar burning away at the back of his throat. For a long moment, neither of them said anything, and Steve worked his jaw furiously for a moment, until-

“I’m in love with you,” he said firmly.

All of the breath rushed out of Bucky at once, his tight defiance immediately replaced by open-mouthed shock. His body went lax, his hands unfurling from balled fists by his sides, and his eyes snapped to Steve’s at once — wide and disbelieving.

“You… what?”

Steve could feel the hot blush working its way over his face and down his neck, and the feeling only worsened at the embarrassment of knowing that Bucky could clearly see the evidence of his awkwardness stained across his face.

“I love you,” he repeated anyway, more gently — stepping forward into Bucky’s personal space and looking up at him determinedly.

If the situation weren’t so serious, Steve would have probably found the dumbstruck expression on Bucky’s face downright comical. Now, however, it only served to make him feel more and more uneasy as the seconds ticked on — a tight coil of anxiety growing steadily more compact inside his chest as it went.

Steve brought up a hand to rub awkwardly at the back of his neck, the silence eventually becoming too much for him to handle. “I… I think I have been for a while,” he admitted softly. “Maybe I always was. And I don’t expect you to still feel the same, even if you ever did, but—”

“Shut up.” Bucky said, and there was something in his tone — something sharp — that made Steve drop his hand and finally meet his gaze.

Though his tone was clipped, there was something raw in Bucky’s eyes that made Steve’s throat go tight.

“Don’t. Don’t do that. Don’t say that unless you mean it, Steve,” Bucky said, and Steve’s heart gave an almighty, painful clench at the desperation he heard there.

Slowly, he shuffled forwards, further into Bucky’s personal space, until the two-inch difference between their heights seemed to be way more exaggerated than usual.

“I mean it,” he said softly, adamantly.
Gently, before he could talk himself out of it, Steve brought one hand up to trail tentatively over Bucky’s stubbled jawline, and Bucky’s breath hitched. For a moment, he merely kept his hand there, watching the movement of his thumb over Bucky’s cheek closely while he waited for Bucky to give some kind of indication that the touch was unwelcome — that Steve was overstepping — that he wasn’t wanted.

When no such indication came, Steve’s eyes moved to Bucky’s, and he gave a small, uncertain smile.

He licked his lips, and slowly, he began to lean in.

Unlike their first kiss, which had been all passion, and anger, and fervent desperation, this one was nothing but a sweet, tentative press of lips on lips. Testing. Easy.

After a few seconds, Steve pulled back to gauge Bucky’s reaction, his eyes flicking nervously over his face. For a moment, Steve expected Bucky to shove him off — to push him away, just as he himself had done all those years ago. Just as he’d deserve.

Bucky didn’t shove him away though.

Instead, a hand clasped around the back of Steve’s neck to drag him back down again, and suddenly, they were kissing.

He could taste Bucky on his tongue; feel the heat of skin at his jaw on the palm of his hand, and the scrape of stubble along his fingertips. He let the hand slide upward behind Bucky’s ear to card gently through his hair, and the sensation made Bucky sigh contentedly into Steve’s mouth, his soft breath washing over his face…

Eventually, there came a natural parting, and with one final kiss to Bucky’s lower lip, Steve pulled back a little, his hand still in his hair. He curled the fingers on his other hand around Bucky’s strong forearm, which had come to rest one hand on Steve’s hip, and he ran his thumb along the inside, sighing as he rested his forehead against Bucky’s. Their noses brushed, and he smiled, big and genuine.

Bucky looked just the same — a mixture of awestruck, elated, and downright bemused. After another moment, Bucky’s eyes flicked down to Steve’s lips, and then he dragged him back in.

Steve had had the pleasure of kissing people before, of course. His first kiss had been with a girl named Bernice — Bernie — when he was thirteen. She’d had thick, curly brown hair, and had been even shorter than he was at the time. It had been brief, awkward, and was never again attempted.

From that, there hadn’t been a hellovalot of experience following that; he’d kissed a few girls on the blind dates Bucky set him up on, had kissed one or two while he was on tour with the USO, had kissed Peggy, and had been kissed by Bucky, and by Private Lorraine, and also by Natasha...

None of them compared. None of them even came close.

He worked his lips over Bucky’s slowly, drinking in the taste of him; the feel of his plump lips and hot tongue; the drag of course stubble across his chin; the way Bucky’s metal hand flexed on the back of his neck, and his thumb pressed into the hard line of Steve’s hipbone. For several long minutes, they kissed languidly, dragging tongue over tongue, teeth over lips, until finally, they had to break apart, breathless.

“God, Bucky,” Steve huffed. He tilted Bucky’s face up to press another kiss to his mouth, chaste this time.
There was a feeling rising up inside him, creeping outward from his chest and radiating his limbs with bursting warmth that tingled in his toes, his fingertips, his lips, the place where Bucky was grasping enthusiastically at his hip…

_Happiness_, he realised dizzily as he slid his hand from around Bucky’s forearm to press into his lower back instead.

Steve’s eyes fell shut as he savoured the feeling of Bucky’s lips ghosting against his own. They weren’t kissing anymore exactly — not applying any pressure necessary to make it a real kiss by any means. For the moment, they simply allowed themselves to revel in the feeling of the tease — the barely-there brush of skin that made Steve’s stomach _coil_. Slowly, he began to drag his lips down Bucky’s chin, and then gently across that sharp jawline to the place where he felt his hot pulse just underneath the hinge.

He pressed a kiss there — a real one — just to feel it pick up in pace, and was rewarded with a gasp when it did just that. Steve let out a hot breath of air over Bucky’s throat, and then pressed in harder at Bucky’s lower back in order to bring their hips flush up against each other.

Bucky’s breath hitched, and Steve felt the hand in his hair tighten, dragging his face back up so that Bucky could get back at his lips.

Gone was the sweetness of their previous kisses — replaced instead by red-hot burning _passion_. It was aggressive, and wild, and demanding, like being kissed by a thunderstorm, and his hair hurt, and his lips hurt, but Steve didn’t care, because Bucky was _hard_.

He didn’t know when they’d started to walk themselves further into the lounge, but all of a sudden, he found himself suddenly taken out at the knees, tumbling backwards, and landing on the soft cushions on the sofa. He scooted up eagerly, tugging Bucky back in by the collar of his shirt, and suddenly, Bucky was _everywhere_.

Tangled legs, and hot chests, and firm hands clasping at hair, and hips, and the hard line of Bucky’s zipper pressing down against his own, and _oh_…

“B-Buck,” Steve gasped the moment they parted again for air, Bucky’s lips making their way down Steve’s jaw to mouth lazily along his pulse point, just as Steve had before.

At hearing Steve’s exclamation, Bucky let up a little, leaning back in order to see Steve’s face in full view. “You alright, Steve? Is this okay?” he said breathlessly, sounding so genuinely filled with concern that it made Steve’s heart clench.

God, he loved him. He couldn’t understand how he possibly could have thought otherwise for so goddamn long…

Nodding enthusiastically, he dragged Bucky in for another hard kiss, and made a pleased little noise when Bucky responded with fervent enthusiasm — licking and sucking and nipping at his lips, groaning.

And Steve wasn’t a _virgin_, of course. Sexually inexperienced, maybe, but not a _monk_.

He’d lost his virginity when he was nineteen, to a girl Bucky had set him up with named Betsy, who he’d utterly embarrassed himself with. After that, there’d been a pretty blonde dame named Emily while he was on tour with the USO shows, who had utterly charmed him while asking for an autograph. And then there was a one-night-stand with one of the only dates he’d allowed Natasha to set him up on — the night of the anniversary of Bucky’s death a year after Steve woke up from the
ice.

He’d liked his experience with them well enough, but it had always felt forced in a way — so preoccupied by his own performance that he couldn’t really enjoy his side of the whole thing. And with no real emotional connection to these women, his experiences had always felt quite hollow. He realised then that perhaps that was why he’d never really held much of an interest for sex; thinking that it would always be like that, with any partner.

Now, though, oh, now he got it. The feeling of Bucky’s hands burning through his shirt, slick lips sliding against his own, the feeling of solid, warm weight pressing in over him — he felt downright intoxicated by the whole thing.

“M’hard, Buck,” Steve admitted softly, pressing a hand down into Bucky’s lower back to make him feel for himself. Bucky gave a low growl, and ground down hard into Steve’s pelvis, circling his hips purposefully.

Steve moaned.

“God, Steve,” Bucky glanced downward, thumb inching closer and closer between them to Steve’s dick. His hand rubbed gently at his hip, treacherously close to where Steve wanted it most, but still, he didn’t budge any further, clearly waiting for something.

“Fuck, Bucky, touch me,” Steve demanded, and almost immediately, Bucky obliged — metal hand sliding up and over the zipper on Steve’s jeans, grinding the heel of his hand down hard. Steve gasped, and his hips bucked upward, drawing out a heavy sigh from Bucky’s lips.

“God, Steve,” Bucky said again, taking a moment to simply watch Steve’s face with dark, hungry eyes as he rubbed at him purposefully. After several seconds of watching Steve gasp and twitch beneath him, Bucky ducked his face back down, mouthing along Steve’s clavicle and bringing his other hand to Steve’s shirt to creep up the hem, rucking it up to mid-chest and revealing most of Steve’s solid abdomen.

Slowly, Bucky’s kisses began to trail lower — down his sternum and across his stomach, just shy of his belly button, and then he skipped across to each hipbone, feeling out those V-shaped muscles descending below Steve’s waistband with soft, eager lips. Bucky hummed low in his throat, and Steve’s eyes damn near rolled back into his head at the sound.

Slowly, Bucky’s metal hand slid up from teasing Steve through his jeans to wrap around his hip, and he pushed himself up to look down at the sight greedily. He stretched his fingers out wide, curling them both around the narrow curve of his hips, thumbs dipping in just above his hipbones and pressing in.

He gave another quiet groan, and dipped down to kiss Steve’s lower belly again. “God, I love how small you are here. Was always the part of you I found sexiest, even when you were small — this tiny little waist. Every time I saw you in your undershirt, I pictured holding you like this — wanted to touch you,” he, stroked the pads of his thumbs over Steve’s hipbones, wearing an expression of downright awe, “right here, just like this. Drove me crazy.”

Steve’s breath shuddered, and he let his head fall back heavily onto the soft couch as Bucky continued kissing along from hipbone to hipbone, moving downward at such a glacial pace that it just about drove Steve insane. Then, finally — finally — Steve felt one smooth, metallic fingertip dip just below his waistband, right underneath the button at his fly.

“Steve,” Bucky said softly, bringing Steve’s attention back to him at once, and god, he looked divine
swollen lips, flushed cheeks, his eyes heavily-lidded and blown. God knows, Steve had probably pictured him in this position a thousand times since they’d been reunited, but if given a million years he’d never have been able to envision this.

Bucky licked his lips slowly, and Steve tracked the movement with hooded, lust-blown eyes. “I want to touch you,” he said roughly. “Can I…” he stroked a thumb over the button on Steve’s pants, and Steve groaned again.

“Yes. Yes — please,” he panted softly, and Bucky’s lips twitched upward at one corner in a fleeting smirk.

He made quick work of his fly, drawing him out of his pants, and—

The hand on Steve’s dick wasted no time on teasing — jerking him with quick, brutal tugs that made Steve’s mouth fall open in a choked-off cry, eyebrows knitting up tight.

It wasn’t until he felt the soft flick of Bucky’s tongue at the head that he realised that he’d been biting on his lower lip to keep the noises at bay, and he gasped out loud at the sensation, hips jerking. Judging by the catlike leer on Bucky’s face, that had been his exact objective, and his hand slowed a little as he did it again, drawing it out purposefully and making Steve moan, long and loud. Steve’s head dropped back down, and his eyes fell shut.

“Tastes like sweet, humble, American apple pie,” Bucky said smugly, and Steve opened his eyes again just so that he could roll them at him. It was half-hearted at best, and Bucky knew it — grin widening delightedly at the reaction.

For another few leisurely minutes, Bucky alternated between short little kitten licks at the head, and long, wet stripes up his shaft, leaving behind cool trails of saliva that only served to make the slide of his hand feel all the more better.

“Steve,” Bucky’s voice was firm, and for a moment, Steve worried that he’d accidentally done something wrong — until he looked Steve dead in the eye and said “keep your eyes on me,” as he took him into his mouth and sucked.

Steve cried out — of course he did — and Bucky’s eyebrows gave a smug little quirk as he continued working him over.

“Bucky f-fuck, oh, fuck!” Steve choked on a moan, writhing underneath Bucky as he began to hum low in the back of his throat. “Wait, is that-? Are you serious?”

Bucky was humming The Star Spangled Man With a Plan around his dick.

He pulled off to give a wide, innocent grin, snorted, and immediately went back to work, redoubling his efforts.

He massaged it with the flat of his tongue, sealing a vacuum around it and moaning. Steve made a noise halfway between a sob and a choke, and Bucky felt his cock give an almighty twitch at the back of his throat. With one hand, he jacked at what he couldn’t fit into his mouth, and with the other, he reached between his legs to palm at his own aching hard-on through the material of his uniform.

“Bucky, shit,” Steve’s hands gripped at Bucky’s shoulders, and his head fell back. His hips rocked upward into Bucky’s mouth. “Like that, just like that.”

The wet, squelching noises were fucking filthy, and Steve stared down in awe at Bucky’s lips,
transfixed by the way they slid smoothly up and down his length, taking him so well, so deep — and Bucky never once made those gagging or retching sounds that Steve had previously found to turn him off.

Bucky looked to fucking die for like this — blown grey eyes staring heatedly up at him, pink lips wrapped firmly around Steve’s dick, his Adam’s apple working as he sucked and swallowed him down. Mesmerised, Steve’s fingertips dipped into the sharp cut of Bucky’s jaw, and he groaned at the feeling of coarse, dark stubble at the working hinge. Bucky’s head bobbed quicker and quicker, and he sucked Steve greedily down between hollowed-out cheeks like his life fucking depended on it.

Steve’s eyelids felt heavy with the need to simply squeeze them shut and revel in the feeling of Bucky’s hot, wet mouth working tirelessly over his length — but still, he kept them open, staring down at Bucky with absolute veneration. Bucky increased his rhythm, eyes never leaving Steve’s face as he did so. He jerked and squeezed and fondled at the base of Steve’s cock until he heard another hitch in his breath.

“Fuck,” Steve gasped, and brought the hand to fasten at the hair on the base of Bucky's neck. Bucky moaned, long and loud, and the vibrations made Steve's dick pulsate. “Shit, Bucky, oh fuck.”

Steve felt Bucky's hand working more furiously now, fist flying, and his hips fucked forward as Bucky worked his way closer… closer…

“Wait, wait, stop,” Steve said urgently, and Bucky let up and retreated back immediately, looking anxious. Realising that Bucky probably thought he had done something wrong, Steve hurried to grasp his face between his hands and press a deep, hard kiss to his lips — a silent assurance that he hadn’t done anything wrong.

Pulling back, Steve let his fingers trail over his face to rub over those perfect bow lips, feeling a shudder go through him at how slick and swollen they felt under the pad of his thumb.

“Don’t want it like this,” Steve admitted sheepishly in a murmur.

Bucky’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean? Want it like what?”

Steve’s face burned, and he looked away.

Bucky’s eyes widened as he gathered what Steve was hinting at, and he gaped for a moment, speechless. “I- Steve, you don’t have to- I mean, we don’t have to do everything right away. There’s no rush here, sweetheart.” He said it urgently; desperate to get across that he was in no way attempting to hurry Steve into doing anything he wasn’t ready for.

Steve smiled, and kissed him again gently, and yeah, he was pretty sure that he could easily become addicted to this. “I know,” he said softly, carding his thumb through the hair above Bucky’s ear. “I’ve thought about it. Waited long enough. I want you.”

And Bucky really couldn’t argue with that.

With a small nod, he tugged off Steve’s pants the rest of the way, letting them fall wherever they dropped as he hurried to divest him of his shirt as well. Steve laughed at Bucky’s enthusiasm, and entangled in each other’s arms, they extracted themselves from the couch and began to walk themselves backward into the nearest bedroom (Steve’s), kissing, and touching, and groping as they went.

They fell onto the bed in a tumble, their lips never breaking contact as they scooched up enough so
that their feet no longer dangled off the edge of the mattress.

Sitting with his knees slotted underneath both of Bucky’s spread thighs, Steve attempted to make quick work of the straps securing Bucky’s uniform jacket. Trying and failing.

“Fuck,” he cursed, frustrated. He leant back from Bucky’s face to get a better look at what the hell he was doing, and Bucky chuckled. Eventually, Steve made a noise of triumph once he managed to divest Bucky of his top half, quickly followed by the bottom — tossing the scary leather numbers over his shoulder and looking back down with a renewed appreciation.

While Steve was two inches taller, Bucky was undeniably still the bigger of the two. He hadn’t been during the war — still more wiry and slim — but now, he probably had more muscle than even Steve did. While Steve’s slim hips and tapering waist remained consistent, even after the serum, Bucky had seemingly thickened with muscle all over — most noticeably in his chest, arm, and legs. Oh, his legs…

Steve rubbed his hands along the tops of Bucky’s thighs slowly — from the crease of his pelvis to almost his knees, again and again, as if hypnotised by the feel of him under his hands. “Fuck, Bucky,” he said roughly, “I swear, I can’t get enough of these legs. Makes my mouth water every time I see you in your battle suit. Can’t help picturing how they’d feel clenching around my hips while I fuck you — drives me up the fucking wall.”

Bucky growled at Steve’s words, surprised and aroused, and he spread his legs further in invitation. “You wanna find out?” he offered enticingly, looking up at Steve from under his lashes and smirking.

Steve leaned back in to kiss deeply at Bucky’s lips. “Mm, not today,” he murmured against his mouth. “Today, I want you to fuck me.”

Bucky let out a heavy gush of breath, and then leaned back to study Steve’s face intently. “You sure about this? I mean it that we don’t hafta do anything if you don’t want it.”

“I want it,” Steve said assuredly.

Bucky smiled, and with quick movements, he sat up and flipped them over so that their positions were reversed.

Steve felt breathless with anticipation — his cock still hard and twitching between them, and when Bucky’s eyes flicked down to see it, his look of affection and sincerity morphed back to heavy-lidded arousal. “Whatever you want, sugar,” he purred, and then leaned forward to nip softly at Steve’s lips. He gave a low, appreciative moan at the feeling of their hips rocking together, and his eyes bored into the other man’s intently.

“You got any slick?” he asked quietly, and underneath the gravel in his words, Steve heard that same kind of impatient anticipation he felt low in his core.

“Top bedside drawer,” he answered, and Bucky immediately leaned over to yank it open and fish around inside. Steve flushed at the look of surprise Bucky gave him as he pulled out the half-empty tube of cherry-flavoured lubrication.

“It was in the housewarming basket Tony gave me when I moved in,” he explained, flushing further when Bucky’s amused eyebrow twitched upward in dry scepticism.

“It’s half empty,” he teased.
“It was a _well appreciated_ gift,” Steve appended grudgingly, and then he smirked. “And like I said: your battle suit drives me crazy.”

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky gave a pitiful laugh, dropping his head to Steve’s chest with a groan. His hands slid upward along Steve’s hips and over his ribs to fit under each pec, and Steve shuddered — goosebumps rising along his forearms.

He mapped him out with both hands — fondling, and stroking, and tweaking as he went, and _fuck_, it drove Steve insane. They trailed along his sides, and clutched at the short hairs on the back of his neck, and played with the skin at his hipbones…

The touch, when it came, was slightly unexpected, and Steve jolted a little in surprise at the feel of cold, slick fingers pressing tentatively to his entrance. Bucky paused, waiting for Steve to protest — and when nothing came but an eager huff of air, he continued, circling and pressing and teasing at him until Steve finally pleaded, “c’mon, Buck. _Please_."

Achingly slow, his finger slid home, and Steve gasped into Bucky’s mouth.

"You like that, Stevie?" He growled. Fucking _growled_.

For several long, _aching_ minutes, Bucky took his dear sweet time preparing Steve as slow and as sweet as humanly possible — pressing, and curling, and rubbing his fingers inside of him until his thighs were downright _trembling_; his cock solid, curving upward to wetly kiss the space just below his belly button.

All the while, his eyes never left Bucky’s face — slack, and flushed, open-mouthed, eyes fixed on where his own fingers were disappearing into Steve’s pink, slick hole.

“Jesus, Steve,” he exhaled hotly, “can’t believe how fuckin’ tight you are. Taking me so sweet, _god_…”

“Fuck, Bucky, c’mon,” Steve growled, digging his fingers tight into the fleshy bicep in his grip. “M’ready, c’mon, please.”

Bucky slid his fingers out obediently, and moved that hand down to his own cock, slicking it up from root to tip with the excess lube off of his fingers.

Before he could move up to line himself up with Steve, however, he felt two solid hands push him back by the shoulders — gently manoeuvring him onto his back until he found himself staring up at Steve’s face where he hovered above him. Steve positioned himself comfortably in Bucky’s lap — a small, bashful smile on his face.

Gently, Steve’s fingers curled in around the base of Bucky’s dick, and Bucky moaned at the realisation of what was about to happen as Steve lined the head of his cock up to his slick, stretched hole.

Slowly, very, very slowly, Steve began to ease himself down — adjusting to the stretch with his eyes squeezed shut, and his mouth open in a soundless cry. Bucky’s fingers clutched tight at the meaty tops of Steve’s legs, and his body trembled with the restraint necessary to keep from fucking up into him too suddenly. Eventually, with a deep gasp from the both of them, Bucky bottomed out, their hips pressing flush against one another.

Save for tiny rocking motions as they each adjusted to the feeling, they both stilled — bodies taut and quivering with the intensity of the whole thing. Steve’s hands reached back down to yank Bucky up by the back of his neck, drawing him in for a hard, searing kiss — shifting his balance so that Bucky
was sitting up with Steve planted firmly in his lap. His thick, warm thighs clenched and shook around Bucky’s hips, and their heaving chests moulded against one another.

“You weren’t close enough,” Steve breathed against the side of Bucky’s head in explanation.

“Jesus, babydoll,” Bucky huffed breathlessly into Steve’s clavicle as he tried to regain basic brain function. Thoughtlessly, he carded his left hand through Steve’s hair, and Steve sighed at the feeling of cool metal on his overheated skin.

Despite the fact that Steve was now the one in control, he felt completely flayed open — raw and exposed under Bucky’s heated gaze. He shuddered, and slowly, he gave a long, purposeful roll of his hips, grinding down and extracting a loud, pitchy moan from the both of them. They twined around each other close, gradually finding a deep, rolling rhythm that hit all the right spots, and made the both of them gasp and keen hotly into each other’s mouths.

“Oh fuck,” Bucky breathed, his red lips falling open, “Christ, I can feel you tryna’ milk me, Stevie — oh!”

Heat exploded across Steve’s face at the words — making his spine grow weak, and he arched forward to bury his face in Bucky’s neck. While Steve had never really considered himself as being one for dirty talk, when it was Bucky growling those filthy things into his ear, tonguing at the fleshy lobe and scraping coarse stubble along his throat — fuck.

“You like that?” Bucky growled, and Steve whimpered, clutching hard to the yielding muscles of Bucky’s back.

Bucky fucked the way he fought: all passion, and powerful energy; every movement controlled and measured — intense…

He smoothed his hands down Steve’s sides, feeling him tremble as he moaned and gasped Bucky’s name. Bucky groaned at the sight of his face; flushed and sweating, open mouth gasping moans and whimpering profanity, and all because of Bucky — Bucky’s cock, Bucky’s fingers, Bucky’s lips…

Hoisting Steve above him, Bucky began to move in earnest; setting a rhythm that was still slow, but hard — causing Steve’s spine to inch up straighter and straighter with each thrust, breathy gasps and moans falling from his lips at each one. Steve’s fingers dug into his shoulders hard enough to bruise, grasping for more leverage to start riding Bucky with abandon.

Bucky’s eyes rolled back in his head at the feeling — that slick clench and drag over his cock; the solid, heavy weight in his lap; the blunt fingernails biting into the skin over his shoulder blades.

Bucky’s head fell forwards into Steve’s chest, and he squeezed his eyes shut with the effort of keeping his hold of himself. “Fuck,” he cursed, “Oh, god, babydoll, fuck, you feel like fuckin’ heaven…”

“Bucky…” Steve whimpered.

Bucky was caught off guard by the feeling of one of Steve’s hands coming up to fasten on the hair at the back of his neck — jerking his head back roughly to reveal the pale expanse of Bucky’s throat. Steve licked hungrily at the rough stubble along Bucky’s jawline, all the way up to his earlobe, where he nipped and sucked at it until he felt Bucky’s hands tremble where they clung to his hips for dear life.

Bucky gave a deep growl in the back of his throat, jerking his head back from Steve’s ministrations and staring up hungrily at Steve’s lips. Without warning, his hands slipped down to the juncture
between Steve’s ass and his thighs, Steve gave a sharp cry of surprise as Bucky suddenly flipped them over, gracelessly pushing Steve’s back into the mattress and manhandling his legs so that they draped wide over Bucky’s thighs. A metal hand curled in hard in around his lower back, and Steve *keened* as he felt Bucky grip him tight and tug him forward onto his dick, redoubling his efforts with intense enthusiasm.

He met Bucky thrust for thrust, gasping for air as if he were running out. He shuddered; gorgeous lips puckering around sweet gasps and breathless moans as he clutched at the sweaty bed sheets beside him.

“What do you need, baby? Tell me.”

“Fuck — harder! Please, c’mon, Buck—”

Bucky obliged — grasping hard at one of Steve’s thighs to pull him in roughly, again and again.

He wanted to toss his head back and *groan*, but couldn’t — because Bucky’s forehead was pressed against his, and their breaths mingled hotly, and he’d never felt more *vital* and *needed* before in his entire life.

With each hard thrust, Steve gasped at the instroke, and Bucky’s needy pants and moans eventually became animalistic grunts and broken swearing. As their rhythm increased, their thrusts turned deep and hard and shallow, and Steve’s hand found its way to Bucky’s ass to push against it demandingly, drawing him in deeper and deeper on each thrust. Sweat dampened each of their chests, creating a slickness between them, and Steve could not only feel his own heart hammering away, but Bucky’s as well.

Bucky mouthed and whispered nonsense in his ear, drilling his prostate with an intense fervour, and Steve choked back a dry sob at how *overwhelming* it all felt. His entire ribcage was tight and swollen from the intensity of it all; the passionate lovemaking filling him up and making him grow light-headed in a way he’d never felt before in his life — because that was what this was: lovemaking.

His thighs hugged tight at Bucky’s hips, and his lower abdomen clenched and undulated as his spine bowed in rhythm with Bucky’s rolling hips.

Eventually, the buildup became too much, and Bucky released Steve’s thigh in order to reach between them and start jerking roughly at his pink, leaking dick — making him throw his head back and cry out loudly.

“Fuck, you’re fucking *dripping* all over me sweetheart, oh, *god,*” Bucky breathed, positively *reverent,* and Steve shouted out again, hips stuttering.

Bucky’s eyes were glassy and intent, his slick lips open and panting as he watched Steve writhe beneath him.

“You gonna come?” he growled, and Steve gave a hearty whimper as the fist began to fuck over his cock faster, losing all finesse and pacing as Bucky’s control slipped. Steve nodded frantically, and Bucky’s hips shifted, lowering him into the bed and pressing his weight into him even more fully. Steve’s gasps grew quicker, and louder, the slick fist around his cock tightening and twisting on each upstroke, and his arms hugged around Bucky’s body even tighter — clinging to him for dear life.

“C’mon, Stevie,” Bucky rumbled low in his ear, pausing to trace his tongue over the shell hotly, “C’mon, I’ve got you. C’mon. Come for me — I wanna see it. Wanna feel you. Come—”
Steve’s spine bridged, and his body coiled, and suddenly, he was coming — heavy ribbons falling across his own chest, toes curling into twisted sheets, his fingers digging into Bucky’s skin so hard there’s no way it couldn’t have hurt.

Above him, Bucky’s hips stuttered and stilled as his own orgasm rushed over him — whiting out his vision, and ripping an unbroken string of profanity directly into Steve’s ear. As he came down, his hips continued to pump in and out of him shallowly; riding through their aftershocks with slow, measured movements, until they could no longer stand it, and then Bucky slid out of him with a groan.

For several long, drawn-out minutes, they simply stayed in that position, kissing languidly, bodies limp and heavy against one another. Steve sighed contentedly, and he swiped a hand through Bucky’s sweat-damp hair. And god, he looked incredible… panting heavily, lips red and swollen, cheeks still flushed — his hair an ungodly tangled mess from Steve’s tugging fingers…

Looking down at him, Bucky grinned widely at whatever it was that was showing on Steve’s face, and then he ducked down for another sweet, unhurried kiss.

Rolling them gently, Steve adjusted himself so that he was lying on top of Bucky — his nose pressing into his clavicle, and his hand resting gently on his chest. He gave a deep, satisfied sigh, and nuzzled him lightly, revelling for the moment in the sensation of deep-seated fulfilment that washed over his entire body. He felt relaxed and satiated down to his very toes, and he couldn’t stop smiling — especially when he felt Bucky’s lips press a sweet, tender kiss into his sweaty hairline.

“I suppose I probably should have lead with this,” Bucky said nonchalantly, stroking a thumb down the skin on the back of Steve’s hand, “But I just realised that I never said it back.”

“Said what back?” Steve mumbled sleepily.

“I love you,” he replied, and Steve’s attention snapped back up to him at once. Bucky smiled. “I love you Stevie,” he leaned back in to kiss him, deep, and slow, and heartbreakingly sweet. “Love you so goddamn much.”

Steve felt lightheaded — giddy with happiness, and he laughed dizzily as he returned it.

For a long moment, they merely lay contentedly together — basking in the quiet afterglow and tangling their fingers together distractedly, until Steve felt him grin against his hair, and Bucky just had to go ahead and ruin the silence.

“So what else did you think about?” he asked slyly.

“Hm?”

“Earlier; you said you’d thought about it — me fucking you. What else have you thought about?”

Steve groaned, and buried his face back into Bucky’s chest.

Chapter End Notes

Please comment/kudos this fic, as it honestly means the world to me :)

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Bucky Barnes was warm.

Waking up with Steve in his arms, he felt lighter than he had in years. Eyes still closed, Bucky revelled in the feeling of it — the soft, heavy limbs tangled with his own; the sunlight streaming onto the bed through the uncovered bedroom window; the soft quilt and pliable mattress that still carried the dimly-scented reminder of their lovemaking the night before. Absentmindedly, he began to trail his fingertips softly along the expanse of Steve’s upper arm, doodling vague patterns and realising that for probably the first time since 1944, he’d slept through the whole night without any nightmares.

In all his life, he didn’t think he’d ever felt more blissed-out and content, and it was a feeling that only increased as he felt the slow stretch of Steve’s lips pressing a small smile against his chest.

“Mm. You smell nice,” Bucky murmured, lips brushing Steve’s forehead as he buried his nose into the soft, golden hair atop his head.

“Mm?” Steve asked sleepily, nuzzling his face closer and wrapping his arms more securely around Bucky’s waist. “What do I smell like?”

Bucky slowed the trail of his fingertips over Steve’s shoulder and snorted. “What do I look like, a fuckin’ connoisseur? You want me to swill you in a glass and tell you you have subtle hints of leather and caramel?”

“You brought it up!”

Bucky laughed, and before he could help himself, he gently rolled him back, pressing a long, languorous kiss to Steve’s lips and smiling dopily.

“God,” he rested his forehead against Steve’s with a sigh, “I’m never going to be able to stop kissing you. We’re gonna be that weird PDA couple who can never find a goddamn room.”

Steve snorted, and then he leaned up to kiss him again.

For several slow, sweet minutes, they kissed lazily, fingers caressing up and down each other’s arms, and sides, and cheeks — feeling out soft, warm skin. Just as Bucky was considering slipping a hand beneath the blankets, however, the moment was ruined when Steve’s stomach gave an almighty rumble, and Bucky laughed at the indignant flush that crept over Steve’s face.

“C’mon,” he said, squeezing Steve’s hip in one hand and delivering a final peck to his lips. “I’ll make you breakfast.”

Steve groaned, flopping listlessly back onto the bed. “Was hoping for a round two,” he admonished grumpily, but conceded anyway, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and shuffling over to the set of drawers by the wall.

He tossed Bucky a pair of long, grey sweatpants, and then swiftly pulled on a pair of his own navy ones. He didn’t bother to offer Bucky a shirt — feeling that if he wasn’t going to be treated to a round of slow, sleepy morning sex, he was at least entitled to the sight of Bucky walking around
shirtless for the rest of the morning. And what a sight he made…

Fully aware of what Steve was doing, Bucky gave him a knowing smirk, and ducked his head again to peck swiftly at Steve’s lips. “Pancakes or eggs?” he asked, and pulled Steve gently forward toward the door with a hand at his lower back.

“Eggs,” Steve decided firmly, letting Bucky lead him on. “With toast and bacon. I deserve it after what you put me through yesterday.”

Bucky opened his mouth to give a witty retort regarding exactly what he deserved after yesterday, but the response died immediately on his tongue as he opened the bedroom door.

Each with a look of either slack-jawed shock, or slow-growing lascivious grins of comprehension, almost every resident of Stark Tower was lounging about in his kitchen like they fucking belonged there — eyes zeroing in on the place where Bucky’s hand rested on the bare skin of Steve’s lower back as they exited from the same bedroom together.

Shit.

Of course; it was Sunday morning. How could he possibly have forgotten?

Steve paused for a moment, clearly as taken aback by the presence of their guests as Bucky was, but he shook it off quickly, walking out with a carefully put-together look of complete indifference on his face. He stole the juice from out of Natasha’s hand, draining the last of it in three long pulls and making a satisfied noise, smiling at her look of outrage.

“Looks like someone got laid last night,” Tony said, his eyes twinkling.

Steve feigned a scandalised gasp, “out of wedlock?”

Bucky snorted.

Shuffling into the kitchen, Bucky hummed happily under his breath as he extracted a carton of eggs from the refrigerator, counting out the remainder before taking three out and laying them on the counter beside the stovetop.

“So how’d the post-mission follow up go?” he asked casually, swirling a thin spiral of oil into the bottom of the frying pan and switching on the burner.

“It went fine,” Natasha said.

“Funny story,” Pietro piped up cheerfully, “after we were caught up, Wanda and I came up here to see if you were alright. You know, after the fall.”

Bucky paused, one empty eggshell still in one hand, hovering over the frying pan. He sensed with a trickling feeling of horror that he knew exactly where this story was headed.

Pietro left it open-ended for the moment, taking his sweet time to sip leisurely at his cranberry juice with a wicked smirk on his face. Wanda looked like she was trying very hard not to laugh.

“When we got up here, we heard moaning, and then found clothes strewn all over the lounge room floor. We figured you were just fine,” she said with an innocuous smile, and Bucky narrowed his eyes at her in betrayal. He anticipated this much from her brother, but he expected better from her, damn it.

Steve gave a soft, mortified groan, and dropped his head onto the counter. Bucky scowled at the twins, who grinned — clearly very pleased with themselves.

“Seriously though, should I be worried or flattered that you make the same noises when you’re having sex as you do when I service your arm?” Tony continued, and Bucky held the metal spatula aloft threateningly.

“I do not. And seriously Stark, I Googled you, you know — you’re the last person to be teasing us for a little bit of jazz in our own damn house.”

“Jazz?” wondered Sam, and Bucky rolled his eyes.

“Sex, Wilson. Jeez, what else?”

“’S not a common euphemism anymore, Buck,” Steve informed him casually, extracting himself from leaning against the counter to come join him in the kitchen, away from Tony and his waggling eyebrows.

“What?” Bucky looked heartbroken. “Damn kids, can’t stick to one set of slangwords. Does that mean I still have a whole vocabulary to re-learn?”

Steve hummed in the affirmative, amused, and Bucky scowled.

He cracked the remaining two eggs into the pan, sunny-side up, and Steve’s arms came up to wrap securely around his waist, apparently uncaring about their friends’ teasing. Bucky smiled, and covered Steve’s hands with his own free one.

The elevator dinged, and as Bucky laid out four strips of bacon into the pan beside the sizzling eggs, the doors slid open. As was typically the norm for most weekend-breakfast-mornings on Steve and Bucky’s floor, Clint strolled in late — thoroughly exhausted-looking, and yawning. He was still in his rumpled pyjamas, made up of a pair of shabby grey sweatpants and a purple t-shirt.

Opening his eyes blearily, he did a double-take as he took in the sight of Steve and Bucky embracing by the stove.

“Noa, whoa, hold up — when did this happen?” he demanded, pointing between the two.

Natasha pretended not to notice what Clint was talking about, her voice completely even as she replied, “when did what happen?”

“This. What’s happening right now — when did this happen?” Clint gestured more obviously between them.

“Dunno what you’re talking about,” Steve said sleepily, wrapping both arms more securely underneath Bucky’s and hooking his hands up over his shoulders, resting his face on the back of his neck. Bucky smiled, and leaned back into the touch.

Clint turned to glare at each of the Avengers in turn accusingly. “Tell me that this isn’t completely weird,” he demanded.

“Doesn’t seem strange to me,” Sam said, sipping his coffee.

“You’re overthinking it,” Tony suggested.
“Oh, c’mon,” Clint snapped.

Steve sighed serenely, “twenty first century homophobia has destroyed male closeness,” he said, and promptly began mouthing along the back of Bucky’s neck and shoulders. Bucky sighed contentedly, head falling back a little against Steve’s.

“Oh, fuck this.” Clint snapped, and he stalked forward to snatch the coffee pot out of the drip machine. “Nobody tells me anything anymore,” he sulked.

“You’d have found out along with the rest of us if you were here on time,” Natasha said fairly, dropping her clueless act.

Clint wrinkled his nose at the idea of an earlier wake-up, and took a deep pull straight from the coffee pot.

“Some of us knew before the rest of you,” Wanda pointed out, exchanging identical haughty looks with her brother.

“You told them?” Steve wondered curiously, sounding oddly pleased at the idea.

“No. Not to begin with, at least. The both of them are just incapable of *minding their own business,*” Bucky said, shooting a look at them. They both grinned innocently.

Steve cleared his throat awkwardly. “I might have told Sam.”

Sam shot them that same innocent grin.

“You traitor,” Tony accused, looking a mixture of exasperation and pride at Sam. “You told me that they were just friends. Told me right to my face that nothing was going on — that I was overthinking it.”

Sam shrugged. “Wasn’t lying — they *were* just friends at the time. Didn’t mean they weren’t both pining away about it like idiots.”

Bucky snorted. He liked Sam — he really, really did.

Lifting the eggs from out of the frying pan with the spatula, he leaned over to fish out the pieces of bread out from the toaster with his other hand — arranging it all artfully onto Steve’s plate. He made quick work of buttering the toast, and then cut them into even thirds.

Steve snorted, realising what Bucky was doing: crafting his bread into “little soldiers” — just like his mom used to do.

Bucky turned around in Steve’s arms, and presented the plate to him with a smile. Steve took the plate from him and set it down onto the kitchen bench without circling round to take a seat.

Steve smiled appreciatively at him, tweaking the drawstring of his pants with two fingers as silent thanks for the meal before digging in, elbows resting nonchalantly either side of his plate as he stood.

“Oh, god,” Clint moaned, “we’re all going to have to endure that unbearable *honeymoon phase* now, aren’t we?”

Bucky ignored him.

“Do you think it’s too early to start calling the Captain ‘Ma’?” Pietro wondered.
Bucky reached over and cuffed him upside the head.

“Seriously,” Steve ignored the exchange pointedly, his tone suddenly very business-like. He addressed Natasha. “How’d the follow-up go?”

She shrugged, chewing disinterestedly at a piece of overcooked bacon held between her thumb and forefinger. “Hill’s reports following the inspection of both of the Hydra aircrafts came back as a bust. We’ve got nothing. No outgoing or incoming signals to home base, or allied bases, no leads to any other contacts, no leads to any other bases, and the agents that Bucky the Vampire Slayer over here left alive had nothing to say we didn’t know already. By the looks of it, they’ve either covered up their tracks well enough for even Hill not to find anything, or there really isn’t anything to be found.”

“Vampire slayer?” Bucky’s eyebrows drew together, confused.

Natasha shot him a pitying look.

“So we shouldn’t expect any more surprises waiting to kill us for at least another couple of months?” Steve asked.

“Well hey, speaking from experience, you are not an easy guy to kill,” Bucky said brightly, and while Sam and Natasha laughed, Steve pinched his side roughly, glowering at him through a mouthful of eggy bread. It wasn’t nearly as intimidating as he probably thought it was — still wearing that completely visible air of bone-deep contentedness that seemed to illuminate not only himself, but everything around him as well. But it was cute, regardless.

Bucky stole one of his soldiers and dipped it into his egg, smirking as he took a large bite.

“We’re in on the next mission, right?” Pietro said, staring pointedly at Natasha. “Pops said you promised.”

Her eyebrows jumped, and she gave Bucky an unimpressed look. “Did he now?”

Bucky blinked at her innocently. “You’re not really gonna make me into a liar now, are you Romanov?”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not the authority on who stays or goes on missions. Ask the higher ranking of your foster fathers,” she jerked her head at Steve.

“Excuse me, Steve may be a man, but he is our foster mom,” Pietro insisted.

“Neither of us are your foster parents,” Bucky groused. “Christ, you’re both legal adults. You’ll be twenty next month.”

The twins ignored him happily.

Bucky scowled, and reached for another strip of Steve’s toast.

“Hey, quit stealin’ my soldiers,” Steve slapped his hand away, and Bucky made a show of rubbing at it sorely, pouting.

“How’s that for gratitude? I slave away makin’ you a wonderful breakfast, and you don’t even have the good graces to share. Mama Rogers is rolling in her grave, you hear?”

“I’ll show you gratitude,” Steve muttered under his breath, ruining it somewhat with the stupid happy little smile that accompanied it.
“I bet you will,” Bucky said, heavy with innuendo as he leaned forward into his space as if to make to kiss him. He didn’t, however. He wouldn’t go quite that far in front of the others just yet — particularly in front of Pietro and Wanda, who already had enough ammunition to last for months by this point. But he wanted to.

Steve’s smile grew wider, and his eyes flicked briefly down to Bucky’s lips, as if he were thinking the same thing. Indulgently, he rolled his eyes and held out one of his strips of toast to Bucky’s mouth, and Bucky took an enormous bite with relish.

Looking him over thoughtfully, Bucky briefly lamented the fact that all of the marks from the night before had faded, leaving Steve’s golden skin flawless and unmarred once again — free from any of the beard burn or hickey Bucky had so painstakingly put together over the course of their night.

Noticing Bucky’s staring, Steve raised his eyebrows at him in question. Bucky smirked filthily, and gave him a look that plainly said ‘later’.

“You know, I’m not sure I like this post-coital, morning-after Cap,” Clint said spitefully, narrowing his eyes at the both of them and screwing up his face. “He’s too damn cheerful.”

Wordlessly, Bucky reached over and tipped the coffee pot back up to his mouth. Clint drank from it heavily, still scowling.

Steve gave Clint a winning smile, and then folded the remainder of his eggs into his mouth with one hand. With the other, he picked up his plate and dumped it gracelessly into the sink, and then he wound an arm around Bucky’s waist and led them from the kitchen.

“So, wait. Were you a couple this whole time? And just not telling us?” Tony swivelled around in his seat to face Steve and Bucky, who distributed themselves gracelessly onto the sofa to turn on the TV and open up the Netflix application.

Steve and Bucky looked at each other, completely poker-faced but for the subtle glints of mischief in their eyes, and pointedly didn’t answer.

“And who taught you how to use the Smart TV?” Tony continued after a moment.

Bucky snorted. “Well golly-gee Mr Big-Brain Dilly Humdinger — this newfangled future is just so gosh-darn confusin’,;” he chirped animatedly. “Couldn’t expect a couple’a fathead geezers like us to figure out how to work this magic picture-box on our own, couldja?”

“Please talk like that all the time.” Sam said.

Tony’s eyebrows ticked upward, looking annoyed. “Well if you’re so well-versed in our ultra-contemporary modern technology, it must mean you can service your own arm from now on, right?”

Bucky raised his hands in surrender. “Whoa, hey, Stark, no need to snap your cap at us — we were just joshin’ is all.”

“Yeah, don’t flip your wig,” Steve added.

“Blow your gasket,” Bucky said.

“Get your dander up.”

Tony shot a half-amused, half-exasperated look over to the rest of the Avengers. “Who invited these smartass nonagenarians into my building? Shouldn’t we put them in a home already?”
“Yeah Steve,” Bucky grinned. “Stop being such a crud. Stark won’t stand for this kinda rambunctious malarkey.”

Steve chuckled.

“Alright, alright, so you know how to use the TV,” Stark rolled his eyes, and then sipped at his coffee. After a moment, he perked up again, grinning. “I was right about one thing though!” he said cheerfully.

“What’s that?”

“I did say when I found out you were following him that you’d end up with a metal fist buried in your ass.”

Tony laughed manically as two couch cushions came flying through the air and smacked him.

Chapter End Notes

And on that stupid, fluffy, domestic-y note, we finally come to a close.

First of all, MASSIVE thanks to my wonderful betas, who were always gleefully willing to deliver a sharp blow to the back of the head and tell me to quit being a whiney bitch whenever I writhed and moaned about how terrible I am at writing – these guys are the true heroes here.

Second, huge thanks to my awesome readers – particularly my regular commenters. I won’t name all of you individually, but just know that I appreciate each and every one of you, and you’re the whole reason I kept this up till the very end.

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