After The Bombs

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After The Bombs

by fedzqurl

Summary

Bucky Barnes never fell off of the train in the Alps. Steve Rogers didn't have to wake up alone in the future. Things aren't exactly perfect as they try to come to terms with a completely different future and work out the feelings that they've had for each other for decades, but at least they get to figure it out together. (The MCU re-imagined with Bucky as an original Avenger)
Now available in Chinese

Notes
Title is from my all-time favourite Stucky (and Steggy, for that matter) song, "After the Bombs" by The Decemberists.

See the end of the work for more notes.
It hadn’t occurred to Steve how fortunate the Howlies had been at avoiding casualties until he found Bucky pinned down by gunmen on Zola’s train. In their years of raiding Hydra bases, he had admittedly gotten confident – perhaps overly so. But it had been so easy, to bask in the glow of one victory after another, to develop increasingly more risky and complicated missions for their unit to inevitably succeed in, as their victories continued to mount. Seeing his best friend through the small window, pale-faced and wide-eyed and apparently out of ammunition, was a horrifying jolt of how stupid Steve had been, how much better a soldier his sergeant was than him.

Multiple times, Steve had brushed off Bucky’s muttered complaints that he’d get them all killed, blamed it on the stress that kept piling up on their sniper and the booze that he’d been doing his best to ignore, poured Bucky into his bunk and tucked him in and joined him in pointedly ignoring it all the next morning. As he considered their situation, it occurred to Steve for the first time that he might have been right – that they might both be snuffed out here, on their most important mission of them all. A surge of adrenaline pumped through him at the thought, and he readied his side-arm and shield before pounding on the locking mechanism to open the door between the compartments, catching Bucky’s eye and tossing him the gun before charging into the compartment. He’d be damned before he let them fail.

His pulse was still thundering in his ears after the final gunman went down, so much so that he barely registered Bucky’s shaky, and ironically familiar, insistence that he’d had everything under control. “I know you did,” Steve responded with a tight smile, checking his friend over and preparing to offer… something before they continued on through the train. As he took a breath to continue, he heard the ominous whir of the damned Hydra beams powering up, and looked to the door just in time to see the soldier he thought he had incapacitated filling the space, the blue glow of his weapon pulsing in warning. “Get down!” he shouted, pulling Bucky behind him as the entire compartment seemed to erupt with blue light.

The shield took the brunt of the impact, thankfully, although the force of it knocked it from his hands and threw Steve into the wall of the compartment. He was able to regain his bearings immediately, only to watch in horror as Bucky, the idiot, snatched up the shield himself and tried to face the soldier with his side arm. There wasn’t even time for Steve to react – one moment he was watching Bucky fire worthless shots at the Hydra armor, shield flopping uselessly on his forearm, the next he was blasted out the opening that Steve had barely realized was there.

Watching Bucky go flying sent Steve into immediate action: he snatched up the shield, flinging it at the Hydra goon with all of his might and smashing him in the neck plate with enough force to be certain that he was down for good, then rushed to the hole that had been ripped in the side of the train, tearing his helmet off as he screamed Bucky’s name. Thankfully, somehow, he found him still there, gripping on a teetering handrail for dear life as the frosty air of the Alps whipped past them.

“Hang on!” Steve shouted over the continued noise of the train, shimmying out onto another piece of railing, still too far from Bucky’s outstretched hand to do a damned bit of good. He inched as far as he could along the railing, stretching as much as possible as he shouted, “Grab my hand!” But it was obvious that there was still too much distance between them – Bucky’s hand flailed towards him but still missed by inches.

A horrifying creak pierced through even the sound of the train and the wind, and Steve realized that Bucky’s railing was coming loose. He let go himself, flinging his body thoughtlessly in the direction of his best friend in the world – his right hand barely managing to gain purchase on the molding of
the torn-out wall, and his left hand closing desperately around Bucky’s wrist. Steve’s fingers squeezed so hard that he felt the metal of the train compressing beneath them, clinging desperately against the force of the wind and the weight of two grown men.

Bucky’s left hand flailed for a moment, before gripping Steve’s forearm like a vice, his eyes wide and panicked as they both clung to each other. “Can you climb?!” Steve asked, uncertain of how long he would be able to support the both of them and unable to look away from Bucky’s face to see how close they were to escaping the pass. After a few more terrifying moments which stretched for far too long, Bucky nodded tightly, before pulling himself up against Steve’s grasp, first grabbing hold of his elbow, then his shoulders, and finally managing to hoist himself back to the undamaged railing. Steve followed suit, climbing the scaffolding of the wall until he was able to reach the railing as well, then shimmying his way back to the opening of the train.

Before Steve could travel the final foot himself, Bucky’s arm reached out of the train again, grabbing him with a strength that Steve was still too panicked to question and hauling him back inside of the damaged compartment. The momentum of the motion knocked them both to the floor, where they clung to each other in silence, barely noticing the continued howl of the wind outside of the train over the ragged sound of their panting breaths. Steve had no idea how long they remained there before Bucky pulled himself away, still grasping Steve’s shoulders tightly enough to be uncomfortable. Bucky’s pale blue eyes were as wide as Steve had ever seen them, his face still grey with fear, his hair windblown and disheveled, and yet Steve couldn’t help himself from thinking that in that moment… he was the most beautiful thing he’d ever laid eyes on.

Time dragged on, Bucky staring at him with an intensity that made Steve’s guts begin to twist in anticipation of what might come next, before Bucky drew a deep, ragged breath and pushed himself to his feet. “We need to move forward,” he croaked, moving to the body of the Hydra soldier he had shot and stealing the dead man’s rifle, “check on Gabe’s progress.”

Steve simply nodded in silence, standing on his own shaking legs and grabbing his shield with numb fingers. They moved through the next two compartments together, Steve doing his best to push the horror of the past few minutes out of his mind to focus on the mission. Bucky stalked ahead purposefully, seemingly recovered from the entire ordeal, before pausing at the door of the engine room, his grip on his weapon tight enough that Steve could see his knuckles go white.

“I’ll stand watch,” he said tightly, turning his back on the door and nodding to Steve, “make sure they don’t have any more security coming up from the rear… you go in and wrap this up.” Steve opened his mouth to argue, completely reluctant to let Bucky out of his sight, even for a moment, but Bucky turned to him, his eyes now dark and wild. “I can’t go in there, Steve… I know we need his intel, but if I see that little rat bastard, I’m gonna to fuckin’ kill him on sight.” It hadn’t even occurred to Steve until that moment that it had been Zola who had experimented on Bucky while he’d been a POW… all the more reason that he never should have brought his friend on the damned train in the first place. He swallowed down the bile that rose in his throat at the thought, reaching out and squeezing Bucky’s shoulder as he nodded – Steve would respect his wishes, would carry out the mission… but he needed the physical reminder that his best friend… his whole damned world, if he was being honest… was still here. “Bang the door if you need me,” he finally heard himself say, giving the blue coat one final squeeze before turning the release handle on the door and letting himself into the engine room.

Gabe stood at the control panel of the train, depressing a lever as he smiled over the bound bodies of both Zola and the Hydra conductor. “What the hell took you so long, Cap?” He asked jovially, a proud smile breaking out on his face as the tinny voices of the other Commandoes whooped in victory on the other end of his radio.
Steve instinctively glanced over his shoulder, again reassuring himself that everything had turned out as he caught sight of Bucky’s dark brown hair on the other side of the window.

It hadn’t occurred to him how fortunate they had been to make it this far in the war and not lose a man.

In that moment, Steve swore to himself that he wouldn’t take it for granted again – and that he’d die long before he put Bucky at such a risk again.
You might have thought that the plane sequences in CATFA couldn’t have gotten any more melodramatic.

You thought wrong.

Steve and Bucky take down the Valkyrie, and decide to go to the end of the line together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve was so focused on the enormous aircraft that was trying to make it out of the Hydra hangar that he noticed the battle going on around him only enough to avoid taking a hit from it, so it was quite the surprise when he stopped his sprint at the start of the runway (the plane was moving too fast to have a chance at catching it, now) to find Bucky panting at his side. “The hell do we do, now?” he asked, glaring as the craft picked up more speed and made its way down the runway, all hope seeming lost for stopping it.

Before Steve could answer, or puzzle out how in the hell his friend had caught up with him when Steve had been at a dead sprint himself, Schmidt’s ridiculous monster coupe pulled up next to them, with Colonel Phillips at the wheel and Peggy in the backseat. “Get in!” the Colonel shouted, and neither of them hesitated, Steve taking the front seat as Bucky squeezed into the back with Peggy. Phillips floored it after the plane, activating the thruster on the car so that they were rapidly gaining on both the aircraft and the end of the runway… it was going to be a close call for even one of them to make it onboard, but Steve was hardly surprised when he sensed Bucky standing and shifting behind him.

He was certain that Peggy hadn’t intended for him to hear her murmuring to Bucky, but even over the roar of the engines he picked up her choked plea, “Bring him home, James.”

Pushing down his own rush of emotion, Steve called out to Phillips to keep the car steady and stood in his seat, glancing back to see Bucky tucking another side arm into the back of his belt. “Wait!” Peggy cried, momentarily startling the both of them before pulling Steve down into a searing kiss. He had no idea how long they gazed into each other’s eyes after, but all too soon she murmured, “Go get him.”

Steve nodded, glancing first to Bucky and then Phillips, before the Colonel’s gruff voice chimed in, “Don’t even think about it, Barnes - get your asses on the damned plane.”

Bucky snorted, Peggy rolled her eyes and the spell was broken – although as he inched his way out onto the hood of the coupe, Steve did have to wonder what it was that Phillips had been warning against, joke or not. He kept his focus on the landing gear in front of them as the plane began to lift off, sensing Bucky as he joined him on the hood as well. They made momentary eye contact, Bucky giving him a brusque nod, before facing forward again and jumping in tandem – Steve grabbing hold of the left wheel, Bucky teetering for one horrifying millisecond before gaining purchase on the
right. “You first!” Steve screamed over the deafening sounds of the rushing wind and roaring engines of the plane, and thankfully Bucky followed his command without hesitation, struggling for only a moment before hauling himself up onto the axle of the landing gear, just before the entire apparatus was pulled up into the belly of the craft.

Bucky had barely had time to move his rifle into a ready position before they heard boots on the catwalk above them, and he glanced back at Steve momentarily before crouching into the landing gear and giving him a silent nod – the message was clear enough, they’d treat it as they had treated most of their missions: with Steve marching out into the open to draw out their opponent, while Bucky watched his six and picked off any of the Hydra goons that Steve missed.

The first few men went down without problem – Steve taking two down in hand-to-hand combat, while Bucky sniped another three before they had a chance to gain the upper hand. It wasn’t until one of them moved to one of the bombs, proudly labeled NEW YORK on the side, that Steve recognized how much of a challenge their really faced – they looked to have cockpits and propellers installed, meaning they didn’t just have to take the ship down: they had to make sure none of the passengers onboard were able to take off with any of the cargo. He immediately ran towards the soldier, ignoring the rush of air beneath them as the hold for the bomb opened as he focused solely on catching him before he could launch it.

“STEVE!” Bucky’s harsh warning rang through the cavern of the cargo hold, and Steve turned towards it just in time to catch the assailant that was charging him with his shield. Before he could turn again, two shots rang out from behind him, aimed not at his own back but instead in the direction of the warning.

Bucky went down with a shout and a spray of blood, and as soon as Steve processed what had happened he leapt onto the bomb himself, twisting the shooter’s head so that he felt the bastard’s neck snap then punching through the glass of the cockpit, pulling the second soldier out by his collar and then dropping him mercilessly out the open hold. The immediate threats eliminated, he raced back to the platform, insides churning with panic as he found Bucky writhing on the floor.

“Bucky… hey, Buck,” he murmured, dropping to his knees next to his friend. The blue sleeve of his coat was completely soaked through with red at the shoulder, where he was trying to tighten his belt while breathing sharply through his nose. Steve grabbed the strap of leather from his hands, threading its end through the loop a few inches higher and then pulling it tight with as much care as he could.

Despite his attempts at being gentle, Bucky screamed in pain, his face an ashy grey as he tore his gaze away from the gore and stared into Steve’s face, his eyes wide and panicked. “It’s gonna be alright, you’re gonna be fine…” Steve started, his voice stuttering as his mind completely blanked on him – he had no idea how to go forward; Jones had always taken care of first aid amongst the Howlies, but it was clear to see that whatever blood source the bullet had hit was a major one.

“Go,” Bucky moaned, reaching across his body with his right hand and grabbing the leather out of Steve’s hand, then jerking it tight as he cried out again. Steve remained frozen, his hands still hovering over his friend’s form, unable to focus on anything other than the awful sound of Bucky’s harsh panting. Time stood still for a few awful moments as he continued to stare into Bucky’s pale, twisted face, before his eyes flew open and glared up at Steve. “God dammit, get offa yer ass and go stop him, Rogers!” He growled, planting his boot firmly on the catwalk and pushing himself up to sitting on one of the support beams, “I’m not dead yet, Punk, but if you keep lollygagging a whole lot of people will be…”

Steve licked his lips, nodding stupidly but still unable to move. “Yeah, okay - you just - you stay
Bucky chuckled darkly at that, the knuckles of his right hand going white as they gripped the belt even tighter. “I ain’t going anywhere, I promise – just go finish this, alright?”

“Alright, Jerk.” Steve responded automatically, finally rolling to his feet as Bucky smiled weakly at him. Much as he hated the thought of leaving him in such a state, he knew that Bucky was right. With one final nod, he turned and ran as quietly as possible in the direction of the control room, ready to make Schmidt pay once and for all for the pain and horror he had caused all of them.

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Steve couldn’t move, still frozen in place as he stared into the space that Schmidt had been standing. One moment the madman had been ranting and holding the cube, then he’d just… vanished. Into a space portal.

“The fuck was that?” Asked a weak, shaky voice from the corner of the room.

Steve drew a sharp breath, pushing himself away from the wall and looking to the cockpit door just in time to watch Bucky stagger through it. “I told you to stay in the hold,” he scolded, although it was a relief to see his friend upright, if only barely. Steve tore off his helmet as he made his way across the flight deck, before slipping an arm around Bucky’s waist and helping to lead him towards the Captain’s seat, trying to assess his injuries as he slowly helped him to sit on the floor.

The space immediately beneath the tourniquet was so soaked with blood that it had turned black, and continued to soak down the majority of the sleeve on the left side. Bucky looked to be so deep in shock at this point that Steve doubted he noticed it. “There any way to land it?” Bucky asked, leaning his head back against the control panel as Steve frantically scanned his options.

“And I’m guessing you can’t just dump the payload?”

“You saw how many bombs there were back there, Buck,” Steve responded, their only option becoming clear to him as he began to plug in the code for Morita’s radio transmission. “We’ll be over New York within 40 minutes,” he added quietly, looking at the flight monitor.

“So put it down in the Arctic,” Bucky responded after a few moments silence, “crash it in the water, where they won’t be able to cause any damage. Then… then you could probably swim for Greenland.”

Steve had just finished setting the radio transmission up when he put together Bucky’s meaning. “I’m not leaving without you,” he argued, pulling his eyes away from the controls to glare down at Bucky’s prone form. “We’ll put it down as well as we can, I’m calling Morita right now – he can have Stark track us down, get us a rescue party…”

“Steve,” Bucky croaked harshly, opening his eyes and glaring right back, “this plane’s gotta weigh a hundred tons, and its thrusters are hot. She’ll melt through the ice and we’ll be underwater in minutes.” He licked his lips, which were far too pale for Steve’s liking, before shutting his eyes again. “And even if it didn’t, I’m gonna bleed out before they can even get a rescue plan in place.”

“Dammit, Buck… don’t say that,” Steve argued immediately, turning back to the control panel and turning the radio dial to Morita’s signal. He knew Buck was right – but he also knew there was no
way that he was leaving him to freeze to death on his own. “Come in, this is Captain Rogers; do you read me?’

Morita acknowledged him, but Peggy immediately came over the line, demanding a sit rep. “Schmidt’s dead, Bucky’s been injured but otherwise we’re alright - but the plane…”

“Give me your coordinates,” Peggy stuttered, her voice uncharacteristically anxious, “I can try to find you a safe landing site.”

“That’s the problem, we’re not gonna be able to make a safe landing. Buck and I already talked it over – this thing’s moving too fast and it’s headed straight for New York… but I think we can put her down in the water.”

She argued with him, of course, begged Steve to wait for a better option, but he knew there wouldn’t be one that wouldn’t end with too many casualties to live with. He looked down at Bucky again, surprised to find pale grey eyes locked on him and completely focused. “Peggy, I have to do this. This is our choice.” He responded thickly, holding Bucky’s gaze as he came to accept what it all meant. They wouldn’t get to go back to Brooklyn, wouldn’t get their happy ending with Peggy and whatever girl Bucky decided to finally settle down with… but he could die with his best friend, saving his best girl and the rest of the world while he did it. Steve figured there were considerably worse ways to go.

He reached down, gently squeezing Bucky’s good shoulder as he gave him a nod, then turned and grabbed hold of the wheel of the plane, pressing its course down into a nosedive without hesitation. As the nose of the plane came ducked under the clouds, he saw the ice shelf in front of them – they might still have a shot at being rescued, then… although the logical part of his mind knew that Bucky had been right. “Peggy,” he choked, remembering that they still had the line. “I’m gonna need to a raincheck on that dance.”

“Alright, a week next Saturday.” She responded immediately, “At the Stork club.”

“You got it.” Steve answered, swallowing around the lump in his throat as they continued to gather speed.

“Eight o’clock on the dot,” Peggy continued, and Steve found himself almost painfully glad for the distraction. “Don’t you dare be late, understood.”

Steve hummed his agreement, eyes locked on the ice as they continued hurling towards it. “You know, I still don’t know how to dance.”

There was a beat on the other end, and Steve was afraid they’d lost the connection for a moment. “Have James teach you,” Peggy responded thickly. “Tell him I’ll bring a friend… just… you just be there”

Bucky laughed quietly from his spot on the floor, before speaking up as well. “Sounds great, Pegs.”

They were nearly to the ice now, the ground approaching too fast for Steve to continue watching it – he kept the wheel depressed, but turned so he could face Bucky as well. “We’ll have the band play something slow… don’t wanna step on either of your toes.”

He’d barely finished the sentence before they were slamming into the ice, the lights of the dash going dead immediately. Bucky moaned as he was jostled on the floor, and Steve climbed out of the captain’s seat as fast as he could, knowing that there would be no power left in the radio, anyway.

“You should go,” Bucky said weakly, shaking slightly as he curled in on himself. “With the serum,
“Like hell,” Steve answered, sitting next to Bucky on the floor of the flight deck and hesitating for just a moment, before gingerly wrapping his arms around him, taking care not to disturb his injured arm. “This ain’t the end of the line, Jerk.”

Bucky went still at that, collapsing slightly against Steve’s chest with a wet laugh. The hull of the ship creaked ominously around them, then dropped a few feet as it began to crack through the ice. “Listen, Bucky,” Steve started quietly, only to have his throat close up as Bucky turned his face to him.

They sat there in silence, shivering against each other as the cold rushed in through the broken glass of the cockpit, before Bucky licked his lips, his eyes locked on Steve’s as he rasped, “Stevie - I…”

Whatever it was that he was preparing to say was swallowed up by a roar of noise, then suddenly icy water was rushing in through the front of the plane. Steve pulled him close, planning to swim to safety, but between the cold of the water and the force of the current, he could barely make headway, even with the power of the serum. He clung to Bucky as his vision began to blackout, glancing down and noticing with relief that his eyes were already closed, before bowing his head and allowing the darkness to take him as well.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for your comments and kudos, I really appreciate the great response! Also, I love feedback - hopefully this part doesn't come across as too rushed, the entire story has just really taken over my brain and I'm excited to get to share it with you all.
April 2012

Chapter Summary

A brief interlude with a bunch of random SHIELD agents stuck on a cold, tedious recovery mission above the Arctic Circle.

It had taken hours for the extraction team to finally find a body in the frozen wreckage, and for a moment they were all stunned to discover that there was not one man but two that were frozen solid in the ice. SHIELD historians had confirmed what they had all learned in fourth grade history class already: that James Barnes, Captain America’s second in command, had boarded the ship with him on the fateful day that Rogers saved the Western World at the expense of his own life, so of course it figured that they had died as they had lived - joined at the hip, fighting off bullies.

“Poor bastards must have huddled together for warmth before the hull crashed in,” Grimes muttered, his voice barely audible over the hiss of ice melting beneath the plasma beams.

“It’s too bad they couldn’t have given us a couple of inches to work with,” griped the nearest worker – Jones, if he remembered correctly – as he flipped the switch on his own plasma ray and rubbed his hands together for warmth. Grimes glared at him as they made eye contact, silently warning the young agent to show some respect for two of the greatest War heroes in American history, and after a few seconds Jones dropped his eyes again, sheepishly returning to his work. “At least it was quick,” he added quietly.

“Just make sure you get them both out undamaged,” Grimes huffed, before leaving the station to check on the team working on the tech recovery, “after all this time, they deserve to go home in one piece.”

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The work of cutting two grown men out of a solid block of ice was far more arduous and time-consuming than any of them had planned, and over the course of the next few hours it seemed as if the majority of the team that had been sent to examine the wreckage had been by to watch as he worked. Jones tried not to let it get to him – any more than he was letting the cold and the stress of the job get to him, at least – but it was definitely a relief once he had separated them enough that they could haul the Captain’s body away from the other and continue excavating without concern of permanently disfiguring the corpse of a legend.

It was around 14:00 that the flight surgeon for the mission stopped by, officially to check on the shape of the workers, although they all knew that she wanted to get a look at what they had jokingly begun calling the Capsicles as well. She stood for a long time over Rogers’ body, studying his face with an uncomfortable amount of scrutiny before making her way to Barnes; they were nowhere near as close to having the sergeant out, but had made it to the eerie level where both men’s features were easily distinguishable through the ice. “The tissue integrity is remarkable,” she murmured quietly, hovering closer as she studied the skin on their faces, so blue that it practically matched their outfits. “I suppose with the serum it makes sense for Captain Rogers, but…”

“They’ve been frozen the whole time,” Jones interrupted, before he could check himself. As the most junior agent on the mission he knew he should probably get better at keeping his mouth shut,
but he never had been particularly good at keeping his opinions to himself – probably the reason he had ended up with SHIELD instead of the Army. “I mean… wouldn’t the ice preserve them?”

“To an extent,” the doctor replied quietly, leaning closer to Barnes and pointing out the blackened, gnarled mess of tissue that was visible at the end of his left sleeve, “but given how long it’s been, I would have expected something more like this.” She stood back thoughtfully, looking again between the two bodies, before calling out an order. “Let’s take a break, gentleman – I want to examine them a bit closer before extraction is completed.”

None of the workers had to be told twice, and immediately shut down their equipment to make their way to warm up in one of the temporary shelters set up. Jones allowed himself a few minutes of shut-eye, hoping that whatever tests it was that the scientists decided to run would allow him at least an hour’s rest before getting back to the hard part of the extraction. He opened his eyes an indeterminable amount of time later to a flurry of action, watching with groggy surprise as the workers sprinted about among the wreckage and the flight surgeon shouted into the nearest com.

“I know how improbable it is, but I’m telling you… I have weak vitals on both of them. We need a medevac here immediately – I don’t have the equipment to safely thaw them, yet alone start resuscitation.”

Jones frowned at the words, his brain beginning to piece the information together – unless he’d slept for far longer than he’d intended to, that made it sound like… but there was no way that the bodies, the men, could still be alive after 70 years in solid ice.

“I don’t care,” the doctor continued heatedly, "we need to get them to New York, now. I know there isn’t a precedence for it, but - we’ll make one. Tell Fury I’ll be in touch with what we need, have him set up rooms at Sinai. Unless he wants SHIELD to be responsible for killing Captain America.”
Steve wakes up alone in an alien New York... the news gets worse from there.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Just an absolutely gorgeous day here at Ebbets’ field. The Phillies have managed to tie it up at four to four, but the Dodgers have three men on…”

Steve blinked gritty eyes open, groggily recognizing Red Barber’s voice as the Dodger’s game call played from the radio in the corner. It only took a moment for his eyes to focus, although the sense of disorientation continued as he glanced around the small, bright room he found himself in. It looked to be a medic room of some sort, although it seemed decidedly... off. With a deep breath, he pushed himself slowly off of the bed, sitting up and taking his surroundings in better. As he woke further, he began noticing the sounds from the street below his window, but again the quality was odd. Wrong. It was as if someone had created a facsimile of New York, but had rushed the details.

The sun was shining and the Dodgers were playing and Steve couldn’t smell a damned thing through the open window — that would have been an odd occurrence before the serum, but now that he wasn’t constantly battling with sinusitis.

His anxiety continued to build as the door to his room opened, a woman who Steve assumed he was supposed to believe was a nurse entering with a coy smile. “Good morning,” she said pleasantly, her movements slow and deliberate as he studied her further. She wore her hair in strange, loose curls — definitely not a nurse, then, but it seemed strange for a dame in any type of professional job. Steve would admit that he was the last person who could be considered an expert on women’s fashion, but he knew something was drastically odd when he saw it. “Or should I say afternoon?” She teased, stepping up to the foot of his bed.

Seeing her head-on made his impression even stronger — her tie was too broad for a woman’s, and (God help him, he couldn’t help noticing it) the lines of the brassiere underneath her shirt were wrong.

He’d spent enough time around showgirls to know what the most flattering of ladies underwear looked like, and he’d never seen such a thing.

“Where am I?” He demanded, keeping his voice as calm and quiet as possible as he began assessing his exit points.

“You’re in a recovery room in New York City,” the woman responded pleasantly, although the way she fidgeted was enough of a tell — she was lying.

“The Dodgers take the lead eight to four with an inside the park Grand Slam. Oh ho, Dodgers! Everyone’s on their feet... what a game we have here today folks, what a game indeed!”

Steve looked at the radio again, the call of the game suddenly providing him with an image clear as
the room he was sitting in – Reiser tattooing the ball into the right field corner, Steve spilling his beer all over Bucky’s lap as Herman rounded third, and neither of them giving a damn as Reiser crossed the plate and put the Dodgers up 8-4. It had been a beautiful day: Bucky had bullied him into going to the game with him, bought his tickets to try to get Steve’s mind off of the fact that his Ma was on death’s door…

“Where am I, really?” He demanded, pulling himself back into the present.

The woman laughed pleasantly, but tensed up as she answered, “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“The game,” Steve answered shortly, his anger growing by the moment, “It’s from May 1941. I know because I was there.” The smile dropped off of her face immediately and Steve rolled to his feet – although he wouldn’t usually dare try to intimidate a woman, he’d be damned if he continued to sit in this strange room and wait for whatever back-up she had coming. “Now I’m gonna ask you again, where am I? And where’s Sergeant Barnes?”

“Captain Rogers,” she murmured, pressing a button that flashed a red light in her hand.

“Who are you?” He demanded more forcefully, now towering over her, but before either of them could continue the door to the room opened again, and two soldiers in unfamiliar tactical gear made their way into the room. Before they could bother with weapons Steve pushed his way past the actress and kicked both of the men through the wall, following through the flimsy hole they left. Unsurprisingly, he found himself in an enormous soundstage, similar to those he’d been filmed in while in Los Angeles but far more empty.

Steve ignored the woman’s shouting and made his way for the stage’s door, his mind racing as he sprinted into a crowded, glassed-in hallway. The woman’s voice sounded over a tannoy system, sounding an alarm that immediately turned the attention of all of the suits on the floor towards him. While his instincts found the exit door immediately, Steve forced himself to focus for a moment, glancing around at the other doors in sight – whoever it was that had dug him out of the wreckage must have found Bucky, too, and he was hardly going to abandon him now.

He took off at a sprint in the direction opposite the main exit, shouting Bucky’s name as he ran and listening for any form of response - he could hardly hope for stealth at this point, as all of the workers in the building seemed to be making their way towards him, but if he could at least find Bucky…

The end of the corridor turned up nothing but a stairwell, which Steve burst into and ran up the stairs. Logically, he knew it was a lost cause, but the longer that he went without a response to Bucky’s name, and the stranger the building seemed to become, the more panicked he felt himself growing. It would occur to him much later that it was odd that none of the building staff tried to fire on him, but for the time he ignored the blessing, instead leading a frantic cat-and-mouse chase through the building, tearing into office spaces and meeting rooms but coming up empty in his search for any type of holding facility (or, God forbid, another medical lab).

He was finally cornered on the fifth floor, an entire wall of soldiers in flack suits and with some sort of electrically-charged weaponry blocking him into a conference room, when a tall, bald black man in a long leather jacket made his way into the room. “At ease, soldier,” the man drawled, gazing intensely at Steve with his eye that wasn’t covered.

“Who are you, and where the hell am I?” Steve demanded, his muscles bunching up as he tried to look imposing as possible, even though he knew there was no way he was breaking out of his current situation without back-up. Where was Bucky?

“My name is Nick Fury,” the man answered placidly, “I’m the director of an American defense
agency called SHIELD.” Before Steve could interrupt (surely he would have heard of such an organization before now), he pointed out the window, “And as for where we are, it should still look a bit familiar.”

Steve shifted so that he could keep the guards in his peripheral vision as he glanced out the huge bay of windows behind him, but as he registered the view, he dropped his guard, turning completely and walking to the window in awed confusion.

Two blocks over the unmistakable silhouette of the Empire State building rose above the surrounding buildings, although not by much. As he looked closer, Steve could make out the skeleton of Manhattan, but a Manhattan that he would never have been able to imagine. Stories below them, oddly sleek-looking taxis sat jammed in traffic, and Steve’s vision was good enough that he could make out the odd clothing of the people of the sidewalks – some similar to the slim suits the men in the lobby had been wearing, others… “What,” he heard himself begin, his voice choked and weak. “I don’t - I don’t understand.”

This was New York, that much he was putting together, and unless HYDRA had developed some sort of mind-control ability that was causing him to hallucinate the entire thing, it was far too big a hoax for anyone to pull off. The man, Fury, gave him a few moments to get himself together, before answering quietly. “You’ve been asleep, Cap. For almost seventy years.”

Steve turned back to him, his mouth hanging open in shock. He vaguely noticed that Fury had continued talking, but the words were lost to the roar of panic that buzzed in his ears. Seventy years. He’d been in the ice for seventy damned years, and they’d pulled him out alive.

“Where’s Bucky?” He asked again, raggedly. Whatever Erskine’s serum had done to his cells must have allowed him to survive while he was frozen, but Bucky…

Fury paused in whatever it was that he had been saying. “Sergeant Barnes is still at the Hospital for Special Surgery. I’m afraid he wasn’t in quite as good of shape as you were, Captain.”

“Take me there,” Steve ordered, stalking his way towards the door – his sense of relief over hearing that Bucky had survived was too great for him to question the circumstances any further.

The guard around Fury shifted nervously as Steve made his way towards them, but the man simply nodded, waving the majority of the security off before turning and stalking out the door, clearly expecting Steve to follow at his heels.

They exited the building in silence, Steve keeping his gaze focused on the back of Fury’s head as he did his best to ignore the stares of the workers that they passed; it seemed as if the whole of the building had come out to see him, which only made his sense of disquiet grow. He hesitated as Fury climbed into a large, black truck in front of the building – his tactical mind warning him that the entire set-up could all too easily be a trap, but as he glanced around the alien landscape around him he decided to damn the consequences and climbed in behind him.

He couldn’t imagine that things could get much worse - or any weirder - than they already were.

“I am sorry about that little show,” Fury spoke up quietly, after the truck had pulled into traffic. “We thought it would be easier to break the news to you slowly.” Steve remained silent – he couldn’t think of any appropriate response to the apology, and wasn’t about to return the sentiment for how he had reacted. Thankfully, Fury took the hint, letting the silence continue until they had turned onto what was marked as Park Avenue, although Steve would never have recognized it.

“You know, Rogers,” Fury began delicately, “it was surprising enough to come to the realization that
you were alive while we were digging you out, but the doctors have all decided to just hand wave it

to the effects of the serum.” Steve frowned as he continued staring out the window, waiting for the
man to get to the point – assuming he had one. “But Sergeant Barnes: there’s no medical or
scientific explanation for how the hell he was still breathing,” Fury continued slowly, “D’you have
any insight?”

Steve turned his gaze from the window to where his hands were folded in his lap, clenching his
hands into fists for a moment as he pictured Bucky strapped to the bench in Austria. “You said you
were intelligence,” he began, shaking the vision from his head, “so I’m assuming you saw our
records?” Fury simply hummed his affirmative, waiting for Steve to continue. “During his time, er,
while Hydra had him as a POW. Uh - the plant was a weapons-facility, but they were also
conducting human experiments.” Steve swallowed thickly, trying his best to keep a lid on his
emotions. “Bucky… Sergeant Barnes was one of them. The only one that survived, actually.”

“He ever say what they did to him?” Fury asked after a beat.

Steve shook his head miserably, in part to answer but also in an attempt to fight down the memories
that were bubbling to the top: Bucky, pale and disheveled in the bar in London, shakily joking *I’m
turning into you… it’s like a terrible dream*. The insane hours that he was able to pull taking watch
for the others when they grew too exhausted to continue, his strength on the train, his speed in
catching up to Schmidt’s plane. “No,” Steve croaked, “we didn’t; he swore he was fit for battle, and
the SSR doctors cleared him for duty.” The sounds of his nightmares on the other side of the tent
when he finally *did* sleep. “I didn’t want to make him remember it.”

Fury pursed his lips as he nodded. “But it’s possible…”

“That Zola injected him with something?” Steve interrupted, his face stony as Fury raised his
eyebrows at him. “Yeah, I’m sure they did. Hydra killed Erskine trying to get his formula, plus they
had Schmidt’s blood to work from.” He turned his attention back out the window, hoping that Fury
would take the hint and quit with the questions.

To Steve’s relief, he did – they rode in silence the rest of the way, until the truck pulled up between
two massive buildings, both labeled as medical centers. Steve followed closely behind Fury as they
made their way through bright, polished hallways that looked nothing like the hospitals of his youth -
he might have taken a moment to marvel over the difference, if not for his growing need to see
Bucky safe. He realized, as they took a seat in uncomfortable plastic chairs in an empty, well-
decorated room that he hadn’t even asked what it was that they were holding his friend for – Fury
had said that Bucky wasn’t in as good of shape as Steve (who had apparently woken up with no
consequences at all), but that didn’t actually give any indication as to how he was.

Before Steve could think to ask, a team of people in strange green pajamas came through the door,
the lead one pulling off a thin blue cap as he looked nervously at Fury. “Director, sir,” he hesitated
as he glanced at Steve, “if you wouldn’t mind stepping outside to discuss…”

“If it’s about James Barnes, I want to hear it,” Steve interrupted immediately, rising to his feet and
crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“Sir, I’m afraid HIPAA requires -” the doctor began uncertainly, but Fury shook his head shortly.

“Captain Rogers has clearance,” Fury stated calmly, “he can hear it.”

“Mr. Fury, you know I can only talk to next-of-kin and power of attorney about health information.”

“He’s my *family*,” Steve argued harshly, his patience growing thin over the entire argument. “Just -
The doctor looked at the others gathered around him before heaving an enormous sigh. “Mr. Barnes was still in significant hypothermic shock when he got here, but after a couple of blood transfusions and warm saline he became stable. We took him back to the OR once we were sure he wouldn’t crash, and we brought in a vascular surgeon from Presby to see what could be done about the arm, but there was too much necrotic tissue to even attempt to re-attach it.” Steve’s confusion must have shown on his face, because the doctor backtracked for a moment. “His left shoulder - the blood supply looks like it was cut-off before he was… frozen. Whatever it was that allowed the rest of him to make it through the freezing process – it wasn’t maintained in the arm. We had to amputate it.”

Steve exhaled harshly, shifting his weight as he let the information sink in – he still wasn’t one-hundred percent sure what he was being told, but - Bucky’d lost his arm. He couldn’t begin to imagine how he would deal with that. “But he’s… okay? Otherwise?”

This time another doctor stepped forward, a younger woman in the back. “It’s hard to say exactly yet – we had to use an enormous amount of sedatives to keep him under for the surgery, and we just wrapped up - but all of his vital signs have held steady, so barring any unforeseen brain damage from, well, everything else, he should make a full recovery.”

“We’ll be able to assess him better in the morning,” another doctor added, “once he’s more awake, we’ll assess his full neurological functions.”

Steve nodded, backing off a bit as he processed it all. “Take me to him,” he calmly demanded after pulling himself back together.

The doctors looked to Fury questioningly, but the director simply shrugged, apparently washing his hands of the debate. “The nursing staff will have just finished bandaging the arm, then we planned on moving him to a private room, so that he doesn’t have to go through the stress of waking up in the PACU,” the woman doctor spoke up, “but once he’s moved, we can have an orderly come down for you.”

Steve nodded tightly – while he would have liked a more immediate action, he was glad that he at least did not have to argue with them. Fury stepped forward once he realized Steve was done asking questions, speaking in an undertone about confidentiality forms and clearances, and before long the doctors were making their way for the exit. “I need to get back to work,” Fury said shortly, addressing Steve, “we’ll be leaving a couple of security guards here for you; no offense, but we can’t have Barnes pull an escape attempt here like you did.” Steve didn’t love the plan, or the implication, but he simply shrugged in response. “I’ll send someone by in the morning to talk to the both of you, once we know better how he’s doing and you’ve had a chance to discuss where you’d like to go from here,” Fury trailed off at the end, apparently waiting for Steve’s approval.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” he responded placidly, wondering if Fury was trying to do him a kindness by allowing him to stay with Bucky, or coming to his senses in realizing that he wouldn’t be able to make Steve leave without a hell of a fight. He hoped it was the latter.

Fury nodded in response, making his way towards the exit with a flippant, “Welcome back, Cap.”

As soon as the door had closed behind Fury, Steve sank back into the plastic chairs again, collapsing on himself under the weight of his emotions. He pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, finally allowing himself to feel the wash of relief over knowing that Bucky was still alive, while simultaneously being dragged down over his grief for all of the time that they had missed. Seventy years: the New York he had known and loved and longed to come home to was gone forever, and their friends – what were the chances that any of the Howlies were still alive? And Peggy... his
shoulders hitched on their own accord, just once, before he locked the thought down with a vengeance. He could mourn for what was gone later – soon, Bucky would need him, and Steve was determined to be the strong one for a change, to return the favor that his best friend had paid him time and time again in their youth.

Finally, after an indeterminable amount of time that seemed to drag forever, the door to the waiting room opened again, and a young woman in purple pajamas made her way into the room with a shy, “Captain Rogers? I’m here to take you upstairs.”

Steve was out of his chair in an instant, wiping his palms nervously on the front of his pants as he followed her out the door. Four large guards waited in the hallway, and he did his best not to feel disgusted by them, instead throwing his shoulders back and walking as proud as he could as they made their way through the empty corridors, ignoring the feeling that he was being marched to imprisonment.

After a long elevator ride and a subsequent march down another hallway (how many people were there in New York now that it required such an enormous hospital?) the orderly finally stopped outside a closed door, glancing back at first Steve, then the guards, before silently opening the door. The room inside was small and sterile looking, with two small beds separated by a flimsy cloth curtain. The bed closest to the door was empty, but next to it…

Steve’s entire body felt numb as he caught sight of Bucky, and it was a surprise when he suddenly found himself stooping over the railing to his bed. Bucky looked frighteningly similar to the last time that Steve had saw him – washed out and grey in a way that his friend never should have been, with dark circles under his eyes and a blue tinge around his lips. Worse, he looked far smaller than he had any right to, laying listlessly against the mint green sheets that matched the awful pajamas they had dressed him in. He was hooked up to what seemed like dozens of wires and tubes, all leading in to unrecognizable machines and monitors. Steve’s eyes froze on the thick, white bandage that extended an inch beyond the short sleeve of his gown, struggling for a moment to comprehend that there was nothing beyond it; while he had fully understood what the doctors had meant when they said amputation, actually seeing it, and at Bucky’s side…

He shook his head to clear it, tearing his eyes away from the injury and instead focusing on the steady rise and fall of Bucky’s chest, reminding himself of the most important bit of it all – he was alive. He was jarred from his thoughts by the sound of a chair scraping on the linoleum floor, and the orderly looked apologetic as she slid it next to where he stood. “In case you wanted to sit next to him,” she explained quietly, “the nurses figured that he would be waking up within the next hour.”

Steve nodded, dropping into the chair and half-listening as the woman pointed out the ‘call button’ and instructed him to use it if needed, and especially to alert the nurses once Bucky did come to. Finally realizing that he wasn’t interested in talking, she made her way out of the room, closing the door softly behind her, and Steve deflated again, gingerly grabbing up Bucky’s right hand between his own. “We’ve got ourselves in a god damned mess, Buck,” he murmured with a shudder, looking over his shoulder to confirm that no one was watching before leaning back in his chair, not bothering to remove his left hand from its hold on Bucky’s.

He settled in again to wait, focusing on the rise and fall of Bucky’s chest, and occasionally moving his thumb to his wrist to feel the steady pulse beneath it. He couldn’t help but wonder how many times Bucky had done the same, felt the same sense of helplessness as he watched Steve struggle through bouts of pneumonia and fever.

Steve’s thoughts were interrupted by a low groan, and his eyes immediately flicked to Bucky’s face, his own pulse rising as he watched his friend’s brows contract in pain. “Bucky?” He asked shakily,
letting go of his hand and leaning closer to the bed. It was unclear as to whether he was reacting to pain or coming out of a dream, but when he began to writhe against the bed Steve laid a gentle hand against his breastbone, rubbing it lightly. “Bucky? Buck, you can wake up. We’re alright; we’re safe.”

After a few minutes of coaxing Bucky finally opened his eyes, blinking sluggishly as he frowned up at Steve in confusion. “S-Steve?”

It was so similar to their first meeting in the HYDRA lab that Steve wanted to cry over it, but instead he swallowed down the lump in his throat and forced a smile. “Hey Buck - turns out we’re a hell of a lot harder to kill than planned.”

Bucky blinked at him again, his right eye slightly faster than the other, before huffing a short laugh. “Of course your ass was stubborn enough to survive an arctic plane crash,” he muttered, the right side of his mouth curling into a sardonic smile.

“Yeah,” Steve laughed brokenly, “and you’re dumb enough to follow me, so which of us is the real idiot?”

Bucky hummed in response, licking his lips then stilling as his gaze drifted to the tower of monitors Steve was sat next to. “Where are we?” He asked slowly, anxiety creeping into his voice.

“Manhattan, if you’ll believe it.” Steve responded, keeping his eyes locked on Bucky’s face, “I didn’t until they drove me past the Empire State Building.”

Bucky, who’d always had the better imagination of the two of them, was quiet for a moment, still frowning as he glanced at his surroundings. “When are we, then?” He murmured.

Steve rubbed the back of his neck, totally unprepared with how to deal with that question, considering he was still struggling with it himself. “Yeah… that’s the complicated part,” he started slowly, pushing his fringe sideways against his forehead. “Uh, apparently we were lost in the ice for a while. It’s - uh,” He sucked in a breath, knowing there was no point in continuing to stall with it, “It’s 2012, Bucky.”

Bucky laughed outright at that, his head falling back against his pillow. “C’mon Steve, you wanna try to prank me you could have at least picked a funny date. 1999 or somethin’, get me excited about seeing the millennium switch over.” He rolled his eyes fondly, smirking up at Steve, “Go ahead punk, pull the other one.”

“No, Bucky. I’m serious. Unless everyone I’ve seen today – and I’ve seen a hell of a lot of people – are all in on the world’s most elaborate hoax.”

“That’s sixty seven years, Steve,” Bucky responded, a frown line forming between his eyes even as he continued to smile, “It’s - that’s not possible.”

Steve shrugged helplessly, fully understanding Bucky’s argument but unable to explain it any better. It would be one thing if he could take him outside to see, but…

The smile had completely vanished off of Bucky’s face by now, and he continued to frown as he stared at the ceiling, licking his lips again in silence. Steve assumed he was probably thirsty and moved to check the water jug on the table tray behind him. He’d barely turned his back before he heard the exclamation of surprise, and turned back in time to watch Bucky scramble to sit up, staring down in horror at the stump of his left arm. Steve felt his stomach drop to the floor, hurrying back to the bedside and hovering awkwardly – he’d had no idea how to break the news to Bucky, but
somehow he felt like he’d failed already. “They, uh - they tried to fix it, but the bullets had done too much damage, and then the ice…”

Bucky made a strangled noise, his eyes still wide and shining as they stared down at his sleeve, and Steve wanted nothing more than to touch him, to try to tell him that it would all be fine, but he couldn’t bring himself to move either. It was incredible – in all of his life, Steve had never felt so out of his depth; comforting the person that meant the most to him shouldn’t have been this hard. “Buck?” He finally asked quietly, after far too long of waiting in tense silence.

Bucky didn’t look at him, but continued frowning at the sleeve, before responding quietly, “2012, you said?”

Steve nodded dumbly, before realizing that Bucky could hardly see it as he stared in the opposite direction. “Yeah, Bucky. Yeah, it’s 2012.”

It was like flipping a switch – Bucky turned his face back to Steve with a huge smile, one that was almost more painful to look at than his frown of despair moments before. “2012 –” he murmured giddily, “I can just imagine the crazy shit they can replace it with, then. Probably already have robot arms, just sitting in the supply rooms. Make me part robot, like Robert Crane in those stupid comics.”

Steve finally let his hand rest against Bucky’s good shoulder, squeezing it as gently as he could as he felt his heart break over Bucky’s obvious attempt at keeping a brave face. He was unsure what his own facial expressions were doing anymore, but whatever it was made Bucky stop talking, looking up at Steve with his usual lazy smile for just a moment, before the corner of his mouth wobbled, then his face collapsed completely, an awful keening noise escaping his throat. Steve reacted immediately, leaning across the bars of the bed and pulling Bucky gently against his chest, constantly aware of his injuries. “Fuck, Steve…” Bucky moaned, before giving in and sobbing openly.

Steve shifted closer, damning the guards and the orderlies and the opinions of anyone else that might happen to see as he cradled Bucky against him, stroking his back in stoic silence as he let him cry for the both of them.

Chapter End Notes

I'm really sorry.

Bucky's reference comes from the earliest cyborg reference I could find with limited research time - a DC comics character called Robotman who debuted in 1942. Also, I couldn't help but cry over the realization that the game broadcast SHIELD played for Steve to wake up to was from May 25 1941, and the MCU Wiki lists Sarah Rogers' death as June 5 1941 - I figured I'd throw that tidbit into the story so you could all suffer with me.
April 2012

Chapter Summary

Bucky gets discharged from the hospital, and both he and Steve are sent away for some R&R. It results in more problems than solutions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bucky was released from the hospital two days later – he likely could have left after he had passed all of the necessary health screenings the next afternoon, but his surgeons seemed too awed by the rate at which he was healing to accept it as safe. Steve spent his time alternating between uncomfortable hospital chairs and even worse hospital beds, too unwilling to let Bucky out of his sight to go anywhere without him. SHIELD agents brought him clothing and reading material, and while Bucky seemed worn and withdrawn, he had largely held himself together after the first day’s breakdown.

Neither of them talked about it again.

Fury stopped by again just before Bucky’s discharge, bringing a tall, imposing woman who introduced herself as Agent Hill with him. While Fury apparently handled the hospital staff, Hill informed the both of them that they would be flown out that evening to a SHIELD safehouse where they could recover and bring themselves up to speed in peace.

“No offense, Ma’am, but what the hell are we s’posed to do with ourselves in the boondocks?” Bucky groused, smoothing his hair down irritably from where he had mussed it up struggling to change into the short-sleeved shirt she’d provided him. “We spent our whole lives in New York; only time we’ve lived in nature has been because of the war… it ain’t exactly a comforting environment.”

If his outburst had rattled Agent Hill at all, she didn’t show it. “I understand your concerns, Sergeant Barnes, but there’s quite a lot that the both of you need to catch up on and become acclimated to, and…”

“And you don’t want freaks like us around civilians until you’ve got a plan in place,” Bucky muttered, jamming the stump of his left arm into his jacket and pointedly ignoring the empty sleeve as he shrugged the rest of it on.

“Bucky,” Steve sighed, giving Agent Hill an apologetic look and motioning for her to continue. It wasn’t like Buck to be so rude to a dame, but his patience with his current situation had been growing shorter by the day, and the news of the trip had clearly stretched his limits.

He remained silent for the rest of the encounter, placidly watching as Hill handed them both small tablets, which she explained had been loaded with books and newspapers, and quickly walked Steve through how to purchase further if they finished them or were interested in something else. Although the signs were subtle, Steve could tell that Bucky was at least interested in the technology, poking around on his own as Hill showed him a few key features before explaining that they would have regular visits from SHIELD agents who could help them with any confusions that they had once
they were at “The Retreat.”

After Bucky had signed the appropriate paperwork, and yet again refused to even discuss the idea of coming back to the hospital for physical therapy - “There’s nothing there to rehabilitate, what the hell is the point of it?” – they were finally cleared to leave, following Fury and Hill out of the hospital through an small, secluded exit that Steve had to figure wasn’t used for regular patients. He couldn’t help wondering if Bucky hadn’t been on to something: if SHIELD wasn’t scared of them, and trying to keep them hidden from the public at large. Unlike Bucky, though, Steve was somewhat glad for it… the idea of some time alone to reconcile it all, to get his thoughts in order with no one other than Bucky around to have to hide what a mess he really was, would be far preferable to being forced to perform with the world watching.

They rode through the city in another large black truck, both too busy observing everything they could that passed by on the streets to converse with either each other or the SHIELD agents that accompanied them. The thing that took Steve this time, when he could spend more time observing instead of riding in a low-grade panic over Bucky’s condition, was how much their home had changed. Manhattan was still packed tight with people and dirty and loud, but it seemed so bright and colorful now. And it wasn’t just because of his vision changes after the serum – the lights that illuminated everything, and the fact that even the billboards seemed to have moving pictures on them now, there was so much to take in that he couldn’t have imagined trying to talk around all of it, anyway.

Steve was somewhat surprised when they stopped outside of the building that he recognized as the one that he’d woken up in – SHIELD headquarters, he was assuming – but Fury paused before stepping out of the car to explain. “We have a jet on the roof to take you to the retreat, the cabin is in a classified location, so the more covert the transport, the better. I trust you won’t have a problem with that?” His tone implied that they didn’t actually have an option, and Bucky simply shrugged quietly, leaning out his window and craning his neck at the view of the Empire State building.

“That’s fine,” Steve answered quietly, waiting as both Hill and Fury climbed out of the car. “When will we be leaving?”

“The jet’s already prepped to go, we’ll just need to get you upstairs.” Hill answered efficiently, standing beside the door as Steve crawled out behind them.

After a few moments, Bucky followed as well, listing awkwardly to the right as he stepped out of the car before righting himself and rolling his eyes at what must have been the obvious look of concern on Steve’s face. “Christ almighty - the docs said my balance would be off while I got used to being lopsided, don’t be such a damned worrywart.” Steve frowned at him, but before he could grouse back Bucky’s eyes went wide, turning to Agent Hill with a look of mortified apology. “I’m real, real sorry Ma’am… it’s been a long coupla days.”

Hill actually cracked a smile at his words, shaking her head lightly. “It’s hardly the worst thing that I’ve heard today, Sergeant Barnes – no apologies needed.” She motioned towards the building, indicating wordlessly for them to follow her as she lead the way inside. “Let’s get the both of you gentlemen to your chariot, something tells me some R&R would do you both good.”

Bucky shot Steve a skeptical look, which he responded with a quick shrug before following in Agent Hill’s wake. The few workers in the main lobby seemed to be consciously avoiding them, a far-cry from the unabashed stares that Steve had dealt with a few days prior, but when he noticed the tight look on Bucky’s face and the way he had rounded his shoulders to draw attention away from his empty sleeve, Steve was glad for it.

The four of them got into an empty elevator alone, with Fury bidding them goodbye halfway through
the ride, promising that he would be in touch and instructing them to email if they needed anything while at the retreat. Steve frowned slightly, getting ready to ask what he meant, when Bucky murmured, “The automatic telegram thingamabob on the tablets.” Fury’s lips twitched slightly, giving them both a salute as the elevator doors closed and Agent Hill selected the ‘R’ button next to the door.

A few moments later the elevator opened again, the wind whipping in as they looked out to the open rooftop. Although theirs was far from the highest building, for a terrible moment Steve pictured the open train in the Alps, and it was all that he could do now to grab at Bucky, instead closing his eyes for a beat and shaking the thought off. Bucky was looking at him strangely when he opened his eyes again, but Steve pretended not to notice, following Agent Hill out and moving towards the small aircraft that was sitting on the landing pad in the middle of the dais in front of them.

“Not much of a jet,” Bucky muttered as Hill opened the hatch to the plane, and Steve couldn’t help wondering if his friend was experiencing as much anxiety about being in the air again as he was. The way he marched in immediately, finding a seat in the back and strapping himself in, told Steve that it wasn’t likely - but then, Bucky’d had the good fortune of not seeing over the top of the control panel as they took their nosedive into the Atlantic.

“You’re a pilot?” Steve couldn’t help asking stupidly as Agent Hill climbed into the cockpit, flipping a number of switches after she had pulled the hold shut behind them.

“I wear a lot of hats,” she responded flippantly, the dash in front of her lighting up and the engines beneath them coming to life. “Er… I do a lot of different jobs for SHIELD,” she explained, glancing back at them briefly, “you guys alright with the buckles?”

Steve took the seat next to Bucky, uncaring of how awkward it might have looked, considering the whole of the hold was empty, and quickly buckled his harness. “All set,” he responded neutrally, before turning his attention to his hands clenched in his lap as the plane lifted into the sky. It took all of Steve’s self control not to reach the couple of inches between them and touch Bucky; the physical reminder of where he was, of the fact that they were fine, would have been nice, but seemed to be overstepping their boundaries – and he hardly wanted to make Bucky uncomfortable, or for Hill to get the wrong impression of them.

A couple of hours later the sun was beginning to set, and Hill landed the plane near a small log cabin nestled in the valley of a set of rolling mountains. The artist in Steve couldn’t help admiring the way that the pink of the sun peaked over the range of the hills, and all was reflected on the pond on front of the cabin. He hoped that there was paper somewhere inside – he knew that before their time there was up he would be itching to sketch the place.

“Captain Rogers, if you could grab the duffels from the hold, please?” Agent Hill requested, cutting off his train of thought as she made her way out of the pilot’s chair. “We grabbed a few clothing necessities for the both of you to last through your stay.”

Steve did as instructed, lifting both easily before following Hill and Bucky out of the plane and up the trail to the cabin. “It’s… remote.” He heard Bucky murmur, although it looked as though he was grudgingly impressed with the place’s beauty as well.

Agent Hill unarmed a series of complicated locks before letting them inside, pointing Steve towards a couple of doors on the opposite side of the living room, “The bedrooms are through that way, if you want to pick your bunks, then I’ll show you quickly how to use the computer and the microwave before I head out.”

Steve nodded and made his way to the back, dumping each bag in a room without really looking:
they could work out their preferences later. When he returned to the living room Bucky was already
knelt next to the small screen in the corner, examining it closely as Agent Hill waited for it to ‘boot up.’

“It’s like a Turing machine, Steve,” Bucky said, motioning with his arm for Steve to gather around,
“Only capable of way more, apparently…”

Steve smiled a little as he stood by, watching as Agent Hill talked them through logging in, and
showed them the search function on the internet. “It’s essentially like having any library in the
world at your fingertips – so if you get bored with the reading on the tablets, or want to look other
information up, you can do it here.” There was a notepad next to the desk, where she wrote down
the addresses for a couple of useful sites. “Just - be aware that anyone can put things online, so take
what you read with a grain of salt.”

After a few more minutes of instruction, then very quick tour around the kitchen in the corner, which
had apparently been stocked to the gills for their arrival – “A whole basket of real fruit. Gosh, you
guys didn’t have to go so hog for us.” – Agent Hill gave them the directions for the door, informed
them that the grounds were protected and that, as a result, they couldn’t go off of them (a fact that
didn’t sit particularly well with Steve or Bucky, given the look on the latter’s face), then made her
way back to the jet and left them to it.

They made their way back inside, building themselves frankly ridiculous sandwiches for dinner
before picking through the fruit basket for dessert. Steve caught the longing way that Bucky had
watched him peeling his orange as he crunched on his own apple and immediately split it in half,
handing half of the peeled wedges over with a shrug and a “For tradition…” before Bucky could get
angry about being coddled. Afterwards Steve went for a banana as well, although he spit out his first
bite as soon as he’d taken it.

“Alright?” Bucky asked, frowning as he paused in eating a slice of orange.

“It’s… not right,” Steve shuddered, before handing it over for Bucky to try.

Bucky, for his part, laughed and shook his head, “Yeah - you’re not exactly selling me on it,
Rogers.”

“Just try it, I wanna make sure I’m right.”

Bucky gave him one more skeptical look before taking a tentative bite himself, only to scrunch his
nose dramatically and spit it out as well. “It’s bland and awful,” he said disdainfully, popping
another orange slice in his mouth to eliminate the taste. “It look like there’s something wrong with
it?”

If there was Steve couldn’t tell, and they both decided to avoid the bananas for as long as possible,
figuring there was plenty of other foods to hold them over in the meantime.

They picked bedrooms for the evening, but ended up spending the vast majority of it curled up on
the uncomfortable couches in the living room, reading on their tablets. Neither was particularly tired,
and it was nice to spend the time together without the stress of the hospital around them.

Steve was in the kitchen cooking oatmeal on their second morning, absentely considering having
Bucky look to see if there was some type of music on either the computer or tablets that they could
listen to – he wasn’t exactly bothered by the ambient sounds of the cabinet, the way that the odd
electric ice box would occasionally rumble to life and buzz for a while or the noise of Bucky
absently pecking away at the computer’s keyboard, but he missed the familiarity of Glen Miller
blaring in the living room while he cooked for the both of them, the way it always had been before everything went to hell. Before he could mention it, though, the slam of a door broke the quiet, and he dropped the wooden spoon on the floor in his haste to turn around and determine the source, half-afraid that they were under attack. No one was in the cabin, though, and the computer desk was empty - apparently it had been Bucky escaping to his bedroom in a rush, a thought that bothered Steve even more of an attack. He quietly made his way through the cabin, stopping outside of Bucky’s door, where he noticed the wood had half-split. “Buck... you alright?” He asked stupidly, leaning close against the door jam.

There was no answer from inside the room, no sound at all, and if Steve hadn’t fully believed Bucky’s suspicions that they were under surveillance, he would have worried that Buck had left the building altogether. “Bucky?” He asked again, knocking gently against the wood this time, “Breakfast is almost done, if you want…”

“Leave me alone, Steve.” Came the flat response from the other side of the door. Steve knew Bucky well enough to know what the thick quality of his voice meant; they’d both grown up with a pretty strong propensity towards crying, although Bucky had done a hell of a job at trying to suppress it as he’d grown older, Steve had still heard him enough times to recognize it when he heard it.

“Alright… I’ll just... put yours in the icebox, whenever you want it, Buck.” He responded, backing away and making his way back through the cabin. The entire incidence had left Steve without much appetite as well, but he had a bad feeling about skipping a meal given how recently it had been since they’d been thawed. He choked down a bowl of the oatmeal and odd bananas, if only to save the rest of the apples for Bucky when he finally decided to come out, then cleaned the kitchen restlessly, wishing that Bucky would come out of his room already. After spending an hour poking around on his tablet, Steve was even more antsy, and after glancing back at the still-closed bedroom doors, he made his way gingerly across the room, coming to a stop in front of the computer.

While he felt somewhat as if he were intruding on his friend’s privacy, Steve hardly felt it right to go back and bother Bucky about whatever it was that had set him off… but he did really want to know. With one more guilty glance over his shoulder, he sat down in front of the computer, noticing that the internet browser was still open. He looked around the screen for a moment, noticing the ‘back’ button, and clicked it once, hoping that it would hold the key to what had set Bucky off so badly.

The headline on the page made his heart clench uncomfortably in his chest: A TRUE BIONIC LIMB REMAINS FAR OUT OF REACH. After a brief hesitation, Steve read quickly through the article, understanding as he went – for all that technology had improved, prosthetic arms were a sad mockery of the real thing; although they looked far better than the hooks he had remembered seeing troops sent home with in the forties, they didn’t look to be functional at all. He finished the article, closing out of the browser completely and rubbing his face with his hand, unsure of what to do.

While he wanted nothing more than to comfort Bucky, he couldn’t think of a single thing to say that would be adequate – Lord knew that if Steve found himself in the same situation, he would probably be even more upset. So instead of going back to the bedrooms again, Steve decided to leave Bucky to himself, in the hope that he would be able to work through the information and find at least some comfort on his own.

Steve spent the rest of the afternoon picking listlessly through books on his tablet, pausing only to make soup for lunch. He’d started to walk towards Bucky’s room three separate times, before deciding that if Bucky was hungry, he would be able to smell the food and come out on his own. Despite his growing unease with the quiet in the cabin, Steve spent most of the afternoon reading up on an American history book that he had found on the tablet. There was far more war and social and political unrest than he would have liked, but it was interesting to see all that had been accomplished while they had been on ice. He bookmarked the chapter on the space race, confident that the fact
that men had been on the moon would be able to perk Bucky’s mood up.

Eventually he realized that the sun had gone down, and made his way into the kitchen to make dinner – shocked to find chicken in the meat drawer. He couldn’t remember ever being able to afford chicken, especially not while he and Bucky had been fending for themselves. He’d needed to look around on the internet first to figure out how to even go about cooking chicken breasts, but ultimately decided to try to make a decent spread, hoping that it would entice Bucky to finally come out of his funk.

The chicken turned out a little dry, but otherwise the food was incredible. Packing it up a couple of hours later after having eaten alone was a huge disappointment. Steve struggled to focus on reading after that, his worry over Bucky growing as the time continued to pass in silence, and he finally decided to simply go to bed himself, pausing for a moment outside of Bucky’s door to call “Goodnight, Buck,” before retreating to his own room in defeat at the complete lack of response. Two days into their R&R, and he was doing a hell of a job of helping his friend.

Steve spent most of the night tossing in bed, alternating between being unable to sleep in his concern for Bucky and being woken up from the fitful sleep that he did get by nightmares of Bucky falling off of the train in the Alps, or freezing to death on the plane. When he finally woke the last time it was with surprise to see that the sun had already come up, and he dressed methodically before making his way to the kitchen to start a pot boiling for coffee.

He glanced out at the water as he was waiting for the water to heat, doing a double-take as he noticed a familiar brunet form sitting at the edge of the pond. Steve turned the burner off and immediately made his way out of the cabin, padding out barefoot to the water’s edge before sinking down quietly on to sit on Bucky’s right.

It didn’t look as if Bucky had slept at all – his hair was uncharacteristically disarrayed, with a decent growth of stubble on his cheeks that Bucky never would have allowed, even before the military demanded they be well-groomed and clean shaven. Worse, though, was how dark the circles were under his eyes as he gazed out on the rising sun as it peeked out from behind the mountains.

“I just…” Bucky started, clearing his throat when he heard how raspy his own voice was from disuse, “I’m sorry for disappearing yesterday. I just - I had trouble dealing with how disappointing the damned future is turning out to be.”

“Yeah, considering Stark promised us flying cars by the Fifties,” Steve joked, hoping to lighten the mood.

Unfortunately, the teasing fell completely flat, with Bucky shaking his head silently, not even responding to it. “And I can’t stop worrying about what the hell I’m gonna do now, Stevie… Christ, the only things I was good at as an adult were hauling crates and shooting people. Can’t do either of those without two working arms.”

“There’s lots you could do, Bucky,” Steve argued immediately, frowning at the defeatist talk. “You’ve always been smart, it took you no time at all to figure out the computer and the tablets. You could go back to school, learn something new…”

Bucky snorted at that, “Somehow I doubt any colleges are gonna jump to take me, especially considering all I have to show is a diploma from George Washington High from 1935.”

Steve opened his mouth to argue, but Bucky bowled ahead. “I imagine you’re going to go back to the Army, wait until the world needs saving again?”
“If I’m called in I might go; haven’t really thought about it, yet.” Steve admitted uncomfortably.

Bucky shook his head, his gaze fixing on the water again. “The hell good am I if I can’t watch your back, then?”

Steve clenched his fists, unable to help turning his frown on Bucky. “Is that what this is all about? You’re afraid I’m going to go back to work and you aren’t going to be able to pull me out of fights anymore?”

Bucky shrugged silently, although his lack of response was all of the answer Steve needed. “I’m pretty damned capable of taking care of myself now, Barnes. Hell, if it weren’t for me…” his voice cracked embarrassingly, the realization hitting him as he said it, “you wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place.”

“You weren’t in the war yet when Zola decided to start using me as a pincushion Steve, you can’t take the blame for that one.” Bucky responded sardonically, his face softening as he looked over and saw how upset Steve actually was. “And the day you pulled me off that table was the best day of my life, so don’t you dare start feeling guilty about that – you saved my life.”

Steve’s responding laugh was more than a little watery. “Yeah, but - you should have gone home after that. Should have taken your honorable discharge and gotten the fuck out of that whole mess, and instead I talked you into wading in deeper.”

“I was cleared for duty, Steve, I wouldn’t have taken the discharge anyway, even if you hadn’t asked.”

“You were still going through the effects of the serum though, weren’t you?” Steve asked, remembering how worn and thin Bucky had been for the first few months out of captivity. “You were changing and holding all of that inside, you didn’t even tell me about it.”

“If I’da told them everything they would have forced me out of fighting, and God knows what would’ve happened to your dumbass if I hadn’t been there to have your six.” Bucky responded, equally as heated. “And even if you’d made it to Schmidt, then you woulda had to take the plane down on your own, and you’d been frozen alone and stuck here with no one. If anything, you should be grateful I stuck around.” He paused for a moment, squinting at the water as he rubbed at the stump of his left arm, his voice quiet as he continued. “Besides, it wouldn’t’ve done me any better going back to Brooklyn on my own. Wouldn’t’ve been worth surviving it all if you hadn’t, too.”

Steve’s throat closed up so viciously that, had he not trusted Erskine and his serum completely, he would have worried that he was having an awful asthma attack. He swallowed a couple of times, staring out over the water (if he looked at Bucky, he might really lose it) before nodding tightly. “Alright…” he finally responded, clearing his throat before continuing. “Alright, then. Glad we feel the same about that, at least.”

Bucky huffed a quiet chuckle, before throwing his arm around Steve’s shoulders, “C’mere, Punk,” he said fondly. Steve complied gladly, leaning into Bucky’s side and rounding his own shoulders slightly, so that Bucky’s arm could reach fully around him, surrounding him like Steve hadn’t felt since the night Bucky had shipped out.

“We’ll figure it out,” he murmured quietly, knowing the platitude was hardly helpful, but feeling a little bit better for saying it.

“Yeah,” Bucky responded after a beat, still staring out over the water. “Yeah, we always do, don’t
Chapter End Notes

A quick confession: I haven’t watched Agents of Shield past season 1, so I apologize if the description of the Retreat is entirely off. I suppose we could pretend that Bucky and Steve were kept another similar location for the sake of having two bedrooms ;)

And a reference: the article that upset Bucky so much is available here. I knew that prosthetics had come a really long way in the past couple of years, but actually reading the article really drove the point home.

As always, comments/reviews/suggestions are hugely appreciated. And you can find me on tumblr where I yell a lot about Sebastian Stan ;)}
May 2012

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Steve get a chance to start settling in to modern-day New York, but Fury interrupts it all with a visit and a mission.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rest of their time at the retreat was relatively uneventful – Bucky was still prone to sullen streaks, but they seemed to be shortening in duration - for the most part he was much like the old Bucky, if perhaps more quiet. They were able to find a music station online that would play music from their time, a fact which seemed to lighten the mood a little, especially when they took to the kitchen to attempt to prepare meals with the strange plethora of ingredients ; although they agreed that the entirety of the bunch of bananas were awful.

By the time Agent Hill had returned to take them back to New York, Steve had to admit that he did feel considerably less out-of-sorts than he had when he left.

He should have known better than to have expected it to last.

SHIELD put them up in an apartment in Manhattan, and when they stepped inside Steve could feel his expression tightening, much as he noticed Bucky’s had beside him – it was obvious that someone had made an attempt to furnish the place as if it were out of the forties, and it made the entire ambiance more foreign than it would have been had they simply furnished it normally. The carpet, the walls, the upholstery; all were in different depressing shades of neutral colors, which only made the modern touches to the apartment all the more noticeable.

At least, Bucky pointed out as soon as the proud agent who had shown them around their apartment left, it was considerably bigger than any of the shoeboxes they had lived in before – and had both a computer and an enormous television, which looked like some space-aged painting hanging on the wall.

They spent the following week much the same as they had the last at the cabin, reading up on things that they had missed, watching ‘classic’ movies on the television, searching the internet for suggestions on what to do next. Steve had taken to keeping a moleskin full of ideas on him at all times, with Bucky all too happy to chime in with ideas.

He tried to arrange it so that they had daily trips out into the strange landscape around them, although it was rarely anything more exciting than the nearby bodega for groceries. Before the week was out, SHIELD had them come by for observation – biometrics testing and evaluation on everything from their physical fitness to their physiology to analyzing their DNA. Bucky seemed to have a strong suspicion that they were likely trying to suss out the differences between the serum that he had been given versus Steve’s, and while he thought it seemed a bit paranoid, Steve could hardly argue the idea. Before they left, Steve had the bright idea to request any materials that SHIELD had on the Howling Comandoes and the SSR agents that they had worked with directly during the war. It turned out to be a bad idea.
Friday morning found them both flipping through SSR files in tight-lipped silence, looking over one dossier after another, all stamped with a large black “DECEASED” along the top. Although it was good to see that all of the other Howlies had lived what looked like long and fulfilling lives, the realization that it really was just the two of them left was a harrowing one. Stark being dead struck a blow as well, especially given how young he had been when he’d passed. For some reason a file on his son Anthony was slipped in to the pile – “Dead ringer,” Bucky had whistled, the only words that either of them had spoken in hours – but the one that Steve spent the longest staring at was Peggy’s.

It still hurt, remembering how everything had ended between the two of them, and there were few things he regretted as much as having never been able to keep their date as planned. He really had thought - he shook the idea off immediately, instead trying to stay positive on the fact that she looked to have had an extraordinary career, gotten married, had a couple of kids…

“Retired?” Bucky murmured, suddenly having materialized over Steve’s shoulder to read the packet as well. “Peg’s still alive, then? You should call her…”

Steve shook his head immediately, swallowing the lump in his throat before responding. “Nah, I don’t want to. She doesn’t need me interrupting her life, at this point. It’s been an entire lifetime for her, hardly seems fair for me to jump back into it now.”

“You and I both know she wouldn’t mind,” Bucky scoffed, moving back to where he had been sitting in front of the laptop, closing the last of the stack of files he’d had for himself and pushing them away to the corner of his desk. “And if she finds out from someone else that you’re still alive, she’s liable to kick your ass, Rogers.”

A surprise bubble of laughter came out of Steve’s mouth at that, imagining an aged Peggy, hair still in waves and lipstick as red as ever, knocking him out the same as she had Hodge on the first day at Camp Lehigh. Bucky looked smug as he leaned back in his chair, apparently thinking that he had solved the problem of Steve’s funk. Unfortunately, the aura of grief continued to hang over them for the rest of the afternoon, so that by the time the evening rolled around Steve was crawling out of his skin.

He stole the laptop from Bucky for a moment after dinner, making a couple of searches before announcing, “Ya know Goldie’s is still in business, and apparently open 24 hours…”

Bucky looked up lazily from his tablet, although Steve could tell that he was acting to cover something. Perhaps nostalgia over the gym they had trained at so many years ago? “Just - I need to get out and move for a bit. Want to see if we can make it to Brooklyn before their office closes, get ourselves a couple of passes?” While Bucky chewed his lip, Steve pressed on. “They might even give us a deal, especially if they still have us on the books from back in the day…”

Bucky snorted at that, “They won’t have books from 1942, Steve – I don’t think anyone does outside of museums, anymore.”

“Worth a shot.” Steve responded flippantly, already standing and collecting his wallet to go.

“I dunno,” Bucky said quietly, “I’m not exactly going to be an ace sparring partner; my moves are pretty predictable, nowadays.”

Steve shrugged at that, still uncomfortable with how to talk about Bucky’s injury. “We can work around that – to hear the docs at SHIELD tell it you can still punch damn near as hard as me: that’s better than any other chump there will be able to say.”

Bucky opened his mouth to respond, before pausing for a minute, clearly reconsidering. After a few
seconds his jaw set firmly before he gave a tight nod, apparently stealing himself for a decision he didn’t exactly like. “Alright, alright, I’ll come with. But if you try to go easy on me, I’ll beat your ass.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Buck,” Steve answered with a satisfied smile. “Let’s go get a bag around and get over there…”

They packed and changed quickly, Steve opting for some of the clothes that he had gotten himself – a nicer pair of pleated trousers and a plaid collared shirt, while Bucky wore one of the t-shirts SHIELD had given them and a pair of jeans, awkwardly shrugging into the black leather jacket he had bought for himself and self-consciously fixing his hair as he waited by the door for Steve.

Thankfully the subway to Brooklyn was relatively empty, and they were both able to grab a seat, Bucky seated so that his left side was to the window of the train, doing his best to make the amputation as unnoticeable as possible. Steve sat next to him, watching like a hawk for anyone who would even consider staring and making Bucky anymore uncomfortable. Of course, that was when a voice spoke up from behind them.

“Afghanistan or Iraq?” The young man asked, pointing at Bucky’s arm when they both turned and looked at him in confusion. “You served, right?”

“I… yeah,” Bucky responded quietly, his eyebrows still pinched in confusion at the original question.

The man waited for a few moments, before sitting back sheepishly. “Uh, thanks for your service. Sorry to bug you.”

Steve touched Bucky’s hand gently as soon as he had checked that they weren’t being watched, raising his eyebrows slightly in a silent check that his friend was alright. Bucky’s jaw simply tightened, and after a few seconds he gave a tight nod – obviously it wasn’t entirely truthful, but apparently he wasn’t bothered enough for them to need to get off of the train or go home.

The rest of the trip was uneventful, and they were able to make it to Goldie’s just before the manager of the gym locked up. Although Bucky was right in guessing that they wouldn’t still have the books available, the man asked if Steve was related to Captain America, thinking him a dead-ringer for the hero, which made Bucky snicker quietly into his hand. In the end, they’d gotten a discount just for that (Steve may or may not have lied through his teeth).

They changed in the locker rooms downstairs, Steve locking their bag up with the key he’d been provided with the membership and trying not to be too bothered by the fact that Bucky had felt the need to change into his gear in one of the bathroom stalls. He still struggled with dressing himself, but it meant that by the time they finally made their way back upstairs, the gym had emptied completely – a blessing in disguise, really, as he doubted that Bucky would have been as willing to actually go about sparring had they had an audience.

They started out slow, circling the ring and feeling each other out, telegraphing their jabs as they moved around each other; it would have been easy to have pretended that it was 1942 again, if one could ignore the enormous physical changes they’d both gone through. It was a completely different story once they began sparring in earnest, though – even with his missing arm, Bucky was incredibly fast and powerful, his balance clearly having righted itself in the couple of weeks since his surgery. Steve realized as they paused for a moment, that he had never had a chance to pay attention to Bucky during battle when they had been in the heat of it with HYDRA: if he had, he had to assume that he would have recognized his friend’s enhancements long before the ice had happened.
During their next round, Steve blocked a hook from Bucky, shifting to throw a jab at Bucky’s torso when Bucky socked him clean in the mouth, before stepping back with his eyes wide and guilty. “Shit… fuck, Steve, are you alright?” He asked, his voice full of regret as he stepped back up to examine Steve’s face, “I was thinking I wanted to jab with the left, which obviously wasn’t gonna happen, but apparently the message got crossed…”

Steve shook his head, wiping the blood from his teeth with a smile. “It’s alright, Buck, it’s sparring - it happens.” He readied his fists again to continue, but Bucky’s shoulders drooped and he made his way towards the corner of the ring.

“Actually, I think I’ve had enough for one day, pal.” Bucky responded shortly, pulling the tie of his glove loose with his teeth before placing it between his knees and pulling his hand free.

Steve watched him go regretfully, wishing that they hadn’t stopped – he’d been enjoying the distraction, and honestly thought that Bucky had as well. “Tell you what - I wanted to work the bag for a little while anyway, you alright sticking around for a few more?”

Bucky shrugged noncommittally, waiting until Steve had moved to one of the heavy bags before jumping back into the ring himself, working on footwork and shadow boxing as Steve simply focused on beating the hell out of the weighted canvas.

As he continued throwing punches, the noise of Bucky’s workout was drowned out, replaced entirely by flashbacks of memories: from unrecognizable battlefields, to the agonizing moments on the train, to putting the plane down, to one weird and hazy scene of scientists talking over them as they tried to thaw the ice around them - the next thing he knew, the heavy bag was flying across the gym, hitting the far wall with a sad thud as sand spilled out of the rip he’d left in it. Steve’s chest heaved for a moment, before he moved to grab another bag, moving it into position as he glanced to where Bucky looked to be just as lost in the rapid one-armed pushups that he was doing on the mat.

Steve readied his fists again, preparing to start from the top when he heard the main door to the gym open and close. A moment later, a familiar voice sounded through the dark of the lobby, “Trouble sleeping?”

Steve turned to see Nick Fury walking in, but it was Bucky who responded from his place near the ring. “We’ve been asleep for seventy years, sir. Think we’ve got some on credit.”

“You here with a mission, sir?” Steve interrupted, already beginning to unwrap his knuckles. He wasn’t in the mood to play games with Fury, and really didn’t want to have this conversation in front of Bucky in the first place. “Trying to get me back into the world?”

“I’m trying to save it,” Fury responded shortly, cutting to business as he handed a file folder to Steve. Behind him, Steve heard Bucky hop down from the ring, moving close enough that he was looking over his shoulder as Steve took a seat on the bench next to him, opening the file to find a photo of the cube he’d last seen open a portal into space which Johann Schmidt disappeared into. “Hydra’s secret weapon,” he muttered, angling the folder so that Bucky could see it as well.

“Howard Stark fished that out of the ocean when he was looking for you,” Fury continued, standing at parade rest as Steve flipped through the rest of the file quickly. “He thought what we think – that the Tesseract could be the key to unlocking unlimited sustainable energy. That’s something the world sorely needs.”
“And I’m guessing someone stole it?” Bucky chimed in, a tone of annoyance in his voice as he shook his head when Steve offered the packet for him to peruse - belatedly, he realized how difficult it would be to look through the loose leaf paper with a single hand.

“He’s called Loki,” Fury responded, seemingly unbothered by Bucky’s attitude. “He’s… not from around here. There’s a lot we’ll have to bring you up to speed on if you’re in. The world has gotten even stranger than you already know.”

“At this point, I doubt anything would surprise me,” Steve shot back flippantly, rising from the bench and handing the folder to Fury instead. He glanced back to Bucky, before nodding towards the stairs to the locker rooms, figuring they both had had enough for one night.

“Ten bucks says you’re wrong,” Fury retorted before they could begin walking away.

The way Bucky’s fist clenched didn’t go unnoticed by Steve; he hated it, but he already knew that he was likely to take the mission. He could hardly let the Tesseract fall into the wrong hands, not having seen first-hand what it could do, but he had hoped there would have been more time before he jumped back into action, so that there would at least be some option for Bucky in the meantime…

“There’s a debriefing packet waiting for the both of you back at your apartment,” Fury added before they could leave, raising an eyebrow as Bucky looked back at him in obvious surprise.

“I appreciate the sentiment, sir, but I don’t really see where I fit in the mission plan,” Bucky muttered.

“We lost our sniper in the attack in New Mexico, Sergeant, and according to SSR records you were one of the best shots in the European theatre – SHIELD will definitely have use for you.”

“Dunno if it escaped your notice,” Bucky responded sardonically, shrugging his left shoulder so that the stump of his arm waived under his sleeve, “but I lost my trigger finger.”

Fury smiled at that, an honest look of amusement that almost made Steve uncomfortable, it seemed so out of place. “We already took that into consideration, and I think we’ve come up with an adequate solution. Look the packet over, let me know if you’re in. Assuming you are, I’ll have someone swing by tomorrow at 08:00 to get you,” he pointed to Bucky, “that trigger finger.”

It was all Steve could do to turn and walk towards the locker rooms without raging at Fury… the bastard had done exactly what he had needed to do to get them both to join in – Steve wouldn’t leave the fate of the world to some lunatic who had stolen the Tesseract, while Bucky would do anything to watch Steve’s back and get a working arm so that he could do it effectively. And there was no way that Steve could argue against the idea of Bucky going back into action without being the bad guy, even though he wanted nothing more than to leave him home and safe in New York. Even with a gun and the serum, he failed to see how Buck would be able to defend himself in hand-to-hand combat with some flimsy prosthetic…

“There anything you can tell us about the Tesseract that we ought to know now?” Fury asked Steve’s back.

“You should have left it in the water,” he replied tightly, already kicking the door to the locker rooms open and making his way down the stairs without waiting to hear if Bucky was following.

Chapter End Notes
GUESS WHAT COMES NEXT!!

And thanks so much to everyone who is taking the time to comment/leave kudos/subscribe to the story... I'm so glad that you're all enjoying it :)
Avengers Assemble, Pt I

Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky take Fury’s mission, joining SHIELD and their team of freaks. Bucky gets an arm, as well as a couple of reasons to lighten up on his opinion of the future. It's all going well, until they meet Loki.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve hadn’t had the heart to put up much of an argument about Bucky joining him on the mission, especially since he could hardly tell his friend to turn down a working arm, knowing how much his handicap had been weighing on his mind, so they had accepted the assignment before they had even finished the debriefing packet. It didn’t stop them from pouring over the information inside, sitting across the kitchen table from each other with a pot of coffee and Bucky’s laptop between the stacks of dossiers. Of particular interest had been the file on one Dr. Robert Banner, who had apparently been working on a new form of Project Rebirth which had interacted with the resultant Gamma Radiation he sustained with disastrous results. Bucky frowned at the picture of the enormous green monster, simultaneously playing a video of the same creature tearing Harlem apart on the computer, before shaking his head and pushing the file back to Steve with a muttered, “Guess we really could have had it worse…”

Steve sighed as he tucked Banner’s dossier back into the packet, trying his best to shake off the vague sense of guilt that he felt, knowing that someone had suffered so severely because the US government had wanted to replicate the results they’d gotten from his own experimental procedures. He wondered if Erskine had left any sorts of reasonable notes behind to be followed, if he’d left any warnings about the creation of the Red Skull and why the serum should never be recreated, regardless of how well it had worked out for Steve.

“Did they zap you with the same stuff, then? Gamma rays?” Bucky asked tightly, interrupting Steve’s rapidly spiraling thoughts, “That where he got such a harebrained idea in the first place?”

Steve swallowed, picking up a file on a red-headed dame called the Black Widow and staring at it without seeing. “They used Vita rays on me, Stark built a tank, put me in it; the energy made the serum work instantaneously, so I could - grow - within a few seconds.”

“So you let them irradiate you, having no idea what it would do to humans, after they pumped you full of the same stuff that made Schmidt into a monster?” Bucky asked incredulously, his mouth tight at the corners.

“I trusted Erskine,” Steve shot back, before realizing that this was the first time he had ever talked to Bucky in earnest about his procedure. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask how Bucky’s was different, but he kept the question to himself, knowing well enough that it wasn’t a topic worth broaching at the moment. Judging by his reaction, and the fact that Zola’s lab hadn’t had the necessary equipment in it, Steve could tell that Bucky hadn’t had the benefit of any type of radiation to speed his serum’s activation - he couldn’t imagine the pain that Bucky must have been dealing with, changing so slowly throughout the course of the war, with no one else knowing…
“Think I’m going to turn in,” Steve said abruptly, rising from his chair and quickly making his way towards his bedroom, “I’ll see you in the morning.” He tried to force himself to sleep but it was a lost cause, especially since Bucky’s nervous energy was practically palpable throughout the entire apartment.

Their doorbell rang at exactly 0800, and a new agent named Coulson followed Bucky into the apartment, two SHIELD technologists and a large crate in tow. Steve did his best to give them space, but didn’t feel comfortable with the idea of leaving Bucky completely alone with the strangers, hovering around the living room as they outfitted him with an awkward, bulky metal prosthetic. “The weight might take some getting used to,” one of the techs explained apologetically as he attached the straps around Bucky’s opposite shoulder and chest, “but according to the tests we ran this week, it shouldn’t be so much that it’s a real burden for you…”

“It’s fine,” Bucky grunted as he rose from the couch, staring down in wonder at the metal hand that hung limply at his side before asking, “How do I control it?”

The second tech handed over what looked to be a tiny headset, quickly indicating that Bucky should hook it behind his right ear then activating the device once it was in place. “This will be able to pick up waves from your motor cortex - the part of your brain that controls movement - and is specifically programmed to the portion that controls the arm…”

“What happens if it gets knocked off my head?” Bucky asked with a frown, finally taking his eyes off of the hand.

“Oh,” the tech stuttered, glancing at his colleague with a frown.

“Make sure it doesn’t get knocked off,” the other responded, making one final adjustment to the straps before stepping away from Bucky. “Give it a try.”

Bucky glanced across the room at Steve, giving him a decidedly unimpressed look, before turning his concentration to the arm again. After a couple of seconds of him frowning down at it, the forearm jerked to life, bending at the elbow then extending again, before repeating the motion and simultaneously rotating the wrist. Each of the metal fingers tapped briefly against the thumb in turn, before curling into a fist. Finally, the elbow tucked in against his side and the index finger flexed and extended multiple times, reminding Steve all too well of the times that he’d caught a glance of Bucky at action from his sniper nests. Bucky let the arm drop to his side again, a small smile beginning to fight its way onto his face. “It’ll do,” he said gruffly, before nodding at each of the techs in turn, “Thank you.”

Coulson appeared in the room as soon as Bucky had dismissed the techs, swanning out of the corner from where he had been paying a little more attention to the framed photos than Steve was entirely comfortable with. “If that’s all set then, gentlemen, we have a flight to catch to meet up with Director Fury and the others.”

Bucky pulled a plain white t-shirt on over his head, the left arm delayed a moment behind his right, so that there was a slight hitch as he dressed, but with considerably more ease than he had shown while dressing in the hospital – the last time he had allowed Steve to see him put clothes on. When finished, he smoothed his hair down and rolled his shoulders, before glancing at Steve with a nod. “Lead the way, Agent,” Steve responded, pausing for just a moment at the door to grab his brown leather bomber jacket and hand over Bucky’s black one, then locking up behind them and following Coulson’s team out onto the street.

The ride to the airport was short and quiet, with Steve using the time to study the city further and Bucky surreptitiously continuing to articulate the joints of his new prosthesis. Coulson had grabbed
the debriefing packet before leaving the apartment, asking if they would like to look through it one final time before they reached their final destination, and Steve took it only to be polite – the serum had improved his memory such that he already had the entirety of it memorized, and Bucky’s complete lack of interest in the file made Steve suspect that he had the same abilities. Once this was all over, Steve thought they might need to eventually sit down and compare just what it was that they each were capable of, and workout how their respective serums set them apart from one another.

They were taken to what looked like a private airfield just outside of the city, where a familiar quinjet waited for them on the otherwise empty runway, the flight team already in the cockpit. Coulson lead both Bucky and Steve into the plane, taking a seat on the bench opposite Steve while he and Bucky sat side by side in the hold, strapping in to their seatbelts with slightly less anxiety than the first time that they had been passengers. The jet took off almost immediately, flying away from New York City so quickly that Steve wondered if he shouldn’t have asked about their destination before departure. His concerns were interrupted by Coulson standing over him, apparently having moved around the jet while Steve’s mind had been wandering.

“I just wanted to say,” Coulson began, glancing nervously at Bucky before turning his smile fully on Steve, “it’s an honor to get to meet you both, officially. I already sort of met you… I mean, I watched you. While you were sleeping.”

Bucky snorted quietly in the awkward silence that followed, and Steve wasn’t able to keep his face entirely straight as he glanced sidelong at him, raising his eyebrows minutely as they made eye contact. Buck bit his lip viciously, clearly fighting off a laugh, his manners still intact enough to not poke fun at the man intentionally, at least to his face. Steve couldn’t take it anymore – he unfastened his seatbelt, pushing out of the chair and moving so that he stood next to Coulson, moving Bucky completely out of his sight while he could still control his own laughter.

“I mean,” Coulson continued, a pained expression on his face as he tried to recover, “I mean I was present, while you were unconscious. From the - ice. You know, Captain, it’s really, it’s just… it’s a huge honor, to have you on board.”

“Well, I hope I’m the right man for the job,” Steve responded uncomfortably, leaning against the doorway to the cockpit and looking through the windshield, attempting to work out their location and where they might be heading to. Bucky, he could sense, had remained on the bench in the hold, apparently content to watch the interaction (instead of saving Steve from the painfully awkward interaction, the jerk).

“Oh, you are,” Coulson responded immediately, as good as tripping over his insistence, “Absolutely. Uh - we made some modifications to the uniform, to both of yours,” he added, his head barely turning towards Bucky as an amused “Can’t wait,” floated up from the hold, “I had a little input on the design…”

“The uniform?” Steve asked, unable to help interrupting in his confusion, “Aren’t the stars and stripes a little - old-fashioned?” He’d fully expected SHIELD to just throw tactical gear at the both of them; it wasn’t as if this was a war that needed a mantle to rally troops behind in the first place.

“Everything that’s happening? The things that are about to come to light? People just might need a little old-fashioned.” Coulson responded, his voice with a dreamy quality that Steve hated.

“Well, as long as you didn’t take the red tights from the comics, I’m in.” Bucky chimed in, looking up at the both of them with a shit-eating smirk on his dumb face. Steve turned his face away as the guffaw that he had been holding back finally burst loose, missing whatever it was that Coulson responded with.
Just for that, he hoped that Bucky was stuck in something equally ridiculous.

The rest of the flight was uneventful, and before long they were landing on what looked to be an enormous aircraft carrier, the jet settling down among other similar crafts and innumerable fighters. Steve stepped out of the quinjet first, glad to notice that Bucky was close behind him. A small, striking woman with bright red hair approached them immediately, and Steve recognized her as Agent Romanoff from their debriefing packet even before Coulson had the chance to introduce them.

“Hi,” Romanoff responded to Steve and Bucky’s greeting, before turning her attention to Coulson. “They need you on the bridge, they’re starting the face-trace.”

Coulson nodded importantly before leaving for the nearest entryway to the ship. If not for the shrewd way that Romanoff continued to study the both of them, Steve might have pulled a joke about losing their fan-club, instead he just huffed a relieved sigh, knowing that Bucky would pick up on the meaning behind it.

“It was quite the buzz around here, finding you two in the ice,” Romanoff said smoothly, turning and leading the way towards another quinjet on the deck. “I thought Coulson was gonna swoon,” she added with a smirk, which only grew when Bucky snorted in amusement – Steve continued to do his best to suppress his own amused smile, but could feel himself failing even as he tried.

“Did he ask you to sign his Captain America trading cards yet?” Romanoff added, the amusement plain on her face now.

“Trading cards?” Bucky asked gleefully before Steve could respond.

“They’re vintage, he’s very proud.” Romanoff chuckled. “And I’m sure he’s got Howling Commandoes pack somewhere as well - don’t think you’re off the hook, Barnes.”

Steve shook his head – he could sense that Romanoff was the type of dame who would destroy him in any type of verbal sparring, so he figured he would save himself the embarrassment, especially while Bucky was in the mix to egg her on. Further along the deck, he noticed a middle aged man in an ill-fitting suit, moving around the pilots scurrying on the deck as if he was trying to make himself smaller in the chaos.

“Doctor Banner!” He called out instinctively, already feeling drawn to the man. Steve knew all too well what it felt like to feel out of place in his body, and the residual guilt from the night before was still too fresh in his mind to ignore the man.

Banner turned in surprise, a quick look of recognition passing over his face as he looked at Steve, then crossed the deck to them with his hand extended. “Uh, yeah… hi.” He said awkwardly, shaking Steve’s hand, then hesitating before taking Bucky’s as well. “They told me you’d be coming,” he added, glancing back at Steve and looking him over awkwardly.

“Word is you can find the cube,” Steve responded pleasantly, trying his best not to think about the serums that set the three of them apart to everyone else in the world.

Banner clasped his hands together, looking around the deck anxiously with a forced smile before asking, “Is that the only word on me?”

“It’s the only one that matters,” Bucky answered fervently, his eyes wide and earnest in a way that made Steve’s stomach flop awkwardly for a moment.

Banner looked surprised for a moment, but then his discomfort with the conversation seemed to melt away, his hands falling back to his side as he looked around the deck again. “It must be strange for
the two of you, all of this.”

Steve watched as a group of pilots in PT uniforms marched along the deck in front of them, smiling slightly as he remembered his time in boot camp. “Well, this is actually kind of familiar.”

“Gentlemen,” Romanoff interrupted, stepping closer and addressing all three of them, “you might want to take a step inside in a minute… it’s gonna get a little hard to breathe.”

A nearby tannoy began to instruct the crew to secure the deck, sirens going off as the churning sound of engines coming to life underneath the ship filled the air.

“Is this a submarine?” Steve asked, not bothering to hide his surprise as he made his way towards the edge of the ship.

“Really?” He heard Banner chuckle behind him, “They want me in a submerged, pressurized, metal container?”

Banner stepped up next to Steve on his left, and a moment later Bucky was stood on his right, peering into the water as an enormous turbine emerged from the side of the ship, quickly gaining enough speed that they were rising out of the water. “It’s airborne…” Bucky murmured next to him.

“Oh, no - this is much worse.” Banner added sardonically, before they finally took Romanoff’s advice and followed her towards the nearest doorway into the ship.

They made their way to the flight deck, finding both Agent Hill and Director Fury commanding the huge team of SHIELD agents responsible for piloting the ship. The bridge was impressive, to say the least… Steve couldn’t help smiling slightly at the awestruck look no Bucky’s face as he wandered towards the impressive bank of computers in the middle of the room, while Steve’s focus remained on the huge bay of windows surrounding them, giving a view of the water that they were rapidly accelerating away from. Remembering their conversation, Steve pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, finding a ten dollar bill and handing it wordlessly to Fury before staring around openly, not bothering to hide how impressed he was with the entire outfit, listening with half an ear as Fury, Banner and Coulson began discussing their plan for locating the Tesseract. In the meantime, Steve sidled up next to Bucky, murmuring quietly, “Still disappointed with the future?”

Bucky finally tore his eyes away from the control panels, giving Steve a small, familiar smirk. “This was more what I had in mind, I guess. Still has a ways to go to impress me, though.”

They stayed on the command deck, Bucky continuing to watch the engineers with naked interest as they went about their tasks in maintaining the ship, Steve following along, occasionally commenting on things that he observed but otherwise just enjoying seeing his friend’s enthusiasm – he wasn’t sure that he’d seen Bucky this excited about anything since Stark’s World Fair in ’43. Unfortunately, Coulson was able to corner them eventually, asking for autographs as Romanoff had warned that he might, then awkwardly bragging about his collectables, occasionally adding comments about items of Bucky’s as well.

A nearby cluster of computers began trilling, thankfully interrupting Coulson’s bumbling (and Steve’s equally awkward encouragement of it, not wanting to hurt the man’s feelings). The call went out on the deck that they had spotted Loki in Germany, and Fury immediately called out for Steve and Bucky, instructing them to suit up and be ready to depart for his location ASAP.

Bucky and Steve followed Coulson through the winding halls of the helicarrier, finally coming to a small weapons armory that Coulson unlocked with his ID badge. The gravity of the situation was apparent when Bucky made no comment at all over the absurdity that met them – in a raised, lighted
locker hung a ridiculously bright, flimsy version of Steve’s battle uniform. He stepped forward, grabbing the suit and doing his best to not cringe at the bright red combat boots that came with it, shooting a warning look in Bucky’s direction as he retrieved a familiar blue coat from the locker beside his. “I’ll just - leave the two of you to change.” Coulson said reverently, pausing for a few awkward moments at the door before turning and closing it behind him.

Bucky snorted outright as the door finally closed, setting his coat aside and examining the black tactical pants, t-shirt and combat boots tucked behind it for just a moment before shrugging out of his leather jacket. “When he said modifications, I didn’t think he meant he was going to steal the designs from the comics…”

“Don’t even start,” Steve sighed, taking his own jacket off as he steeled himself, then swallowing his pride and changing out of his street clothes completely.

Bucky actually shut up, struggling a bit as his t-shirt got caught on the straps of his prosthetic, then turned to face the wall as he stepped out of his jeans and began himself. Steve was in the middle of wriggling his way into the suit when Bucky spoke up again, his amusement obvious, “Just give me a holler if you need a hand getting it on.”

“You are the biggest jerk, I fuckin’ swear…” Steve muttered, although he couldn’t help smiling as Bucky laughed in earnest for the first time in recent memory.

The flight to Stuttgart was short but tense, with Agent Romanoff piloting the quinjet while Steve and Bucky rode in the hold. Bucky spent much of the flight toying with an unloaded pistol and quietly lamenting the fact that he hadn’t had the opportunity to test firing a rifle with his new prosthesis before being sent on a mission. Steve wanted to instruct him to stay on the jet with Romanoff, figuring that it might be safer for Bucky anyway, given the unpredictability of his new arm, but he knew it would only result in a fight… Bucky was no more likely to sit a fight out than Steve was, even if it was an order.

Shortly before they entered German airspace Bucky growled in frustration, pulling a knife out of his boot and peeling his coat off, then roughly hacking the left sleeve off. Steve frowned as he watched, before raising his eyebrows questioningly when Bucky had finished his task and glanced over at him guiltily. “The material keeps catching on the bolts in the elbow joint,” he muttered, before pulling the mutilated garment back on. “It’s already hard enough to move the damned thing around, I don’t need it restricted by some attempt to make me look normal.”

Steve wanted to argue Bucky’s implication, to point out that if he was still struggling with controlling the arm, he had no business going to battle with someone who had the power of the cube behind him, but before he could speak up Romanoff called out from the front, indicating that they were already over their destination. After pressing a couple of buttons and indicating that the jet was in stealth mode, she took the plane down, until they were hovering over a crowd huddled together in a plaza.

Steve saw Loki advancing on an old man in the crowd, his scepter glowing ominously as he pointed it in his direction, and Steve acted on instinct, knowing there was no time to wait for a parachute, or for Romanoff to land the plane for him to get in the mix. He punched the button for the airlock in the rear of the plane, knowing that the drop wouldn’t be too far, and hopped out into the night – landing just in time for the all-too-familiar blast of blue light to hit the shield and reflect back so that it blasted Loki to the ground. “Ya know,” Steve announced, standing from his crouch and advancing on Loki, “the last time I was in Germany, and saw a man standing above everybody else, we ended up disagreeing.”

“Yeah,” Loki chuckled, leaning on his scepter as he used it to rise from the ground, “did you
bring your crippled sidekick along, as well? It should be great fun to put down a pair of men out of time…”

Bucky, apparently called out by the insult, stepped out of the shadows he’d dropped into, his arm whirring ominously as he raised his automatic gun to point at where Loki stood. “We aren’t the ones out of time,” he growled, as the quinjet flickered back into view and came to a stop in the air above him, adding its own considerable firepower to the threat.

Loki scowled, charging the scepter again and firing a blast towards the plane, giving Steve just enough time to fling the shield in his direction, striking him on the chest in his distraction. He launched himself forward the moment that he heard the shield make contact, throwing a punch as he caught the shield on the rebound. From the corner of his eye, he saw Bucky circling the two of them, keeping between the scepter and the civilians, his gun trained on Loki the entire time. Unfortunately, the Asgardian was considerably stronger than he looked, and after allowing Steve a few licks Loki began to fight back in earnest, knocking him down with the scepter even as Steve did his best to dodge the blows. He went into a roll, coming back to his feet in time to see Bucky grimace and take aim.

“Bucky, DON’T FIRE!” Steve shouted, tossing the shield with all of his strength to disarm – or at least distract – Loki. “He can teleport, or something like it. There’s too many civilians to risk.”

Bucky lowered the gun, and Steve launched himself at Loki again, fighting as best as he could with his fists, his shield too far out of reach to attempt to grab up again. After a few moments of fighting, in which it felt like Steve was wearing himself out more than he was actually doing damage to Loki, Bucky joined the fray as well – fighting as best as he could with his right arm, his rifle slung over his shoulder as he fought.

Loki spun wildly, knocking Bucky back with a blast from the scepter then turning back in on Steve again, striking him down with a solid blow to the sternum then looming over him ominously. “Kneel,” Loki hissed, the butt of his staff pressing into the base of Steve’s skull.

Almost instantaneously, Steve saw Bucky’s boots in his periphery, and heard the unmistakable sound of a trigger being cocked. “You’re getting one warning out of courtesy, then I have no problem blowing your brains out on the cobblestones.” Bucky warned harshly, before growling, “Stand. Down.”

Loki laughed darkly, applying even more force to the staff, so that Steve’s spine began to bend despite his best attempts to fight it. “You think your piddly Midgardian weapons can intimidate me, Sergeant?”

If Bucky had an answer, it was suddenly drowned out by a blast of awful music coming from the quinjet, and for a moment they all turned towards it in confusion, Steve freed from Loki’s threat. An object came streaking through the sky, rapidly growing larger, before a blast of light knocked Loki away from both Steve and Bucky, flinging his prone figure back onto the steps of the museum as a red and gold robot landed with a clang in the middle of the fray.

“Make your move, Reindeer games,” a tinny voice came from inside the suit, the propulsor in his hand lighting up and a gun suddenly appearing out of his shoulder to join Bucky’s in its target on Loki. Steve couldn’t help feeling wildly inadequate as he snatched up the shield and stood beside them, just in time for Loki to raise his arms in surrender, his armor disappearing into thin air. “Good move,” Stark responded airily.

“Mr. Stark,” Steve huffed, not taking his eyes off of Loki’s figure as he glared down at their target.
“Captain… Sergeant.” Stark responded lazily, remaining in full armor with his arsenal locked on Loki until Agent Romanoff had landed the jet and brought them the necessary restraints to take the alien in with.

Chapter End Notes

So... I can't even begin to talk about how much I struggled with the last half of this chapter, mainly because I've been freaking out about the Civil War trailer since it dropped last night. That said, I really hope that I was able to do the first act of the movie justice... thanks for all of your kudos and reviews, they mean so, so much to me! Hopefully the second act will be up soon :)}
Avengers Assemble Pt II

Chapter Summary

The mission to take back the cube goes from bad, to worse, to FUBAR.

Chapter Notes

I hope that this chapter works... I hadn't planned on writing from Bucky's POV - hadn't planned on changing POVs at all until another character came in much later in the story - but I felt like hearing Bucky's side added to this chapter, especially in explaining the parts that are different from the movie. Questions/comments/concerns/opinions on the decision would be greatly, greatly appreciated, especially for the sake of decision-making going forward.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky stood beside Steve and Stark in the doorway to the quinjet’s cockpit as they made their way back to the helicarier, unwilling to stow his rifle just yet. The Asgardian, for his part, sat placidly in the hold, occasionally smirking at Bucky, his gaze focused on the metal arm as Bucky kept watch over him.

“I don’t like it,” he heard Steve mutter, feeling the sentiment all too well himself.

“What, Rock of Ages giving up so easily?” Stark responded smartly.

Bucky bristled at the tone – despite the limited interaction they’d had so far, Stark was already rubbing him the wrong way, gloating as if he hadn’t noticed the way that Steve had been thrown around during their fight. “It wasn’t exactly easy,” he muttered tightly, glancing away from their prisoner for just long enough to shoot Stark a look over his shoulder.

“Buck’s right,” Steve murmured, “this guy packs a wallop.”

“Still, you’re both pretty spry for old folks.” Stark said with a smirk. “What’s your secret? Pilates?”

Bucky turned at that, so that he could fully face Stark, glad to see that Steve’s face looked just as confused as he was sure his own did.

“It’s like calisthenics,” Stark continued to ramble, the smugness practically rolling off of him in waves. “You two might have missed a couple things, doing time as Capsicles.”

“Fury didn’t tell us he was calling you in,” Steve interrupted evenly, completely ignoring the rant and phrasing the question as to what the hell Stark was doing on the mission in the first place much more diplomatically than Bucky had been preparing to.

“Yeah, there’s a lot of things Fury doesn’t tell you.” Stark answered ominously, dodging the question while making Bucky’s lingering uneasiness surrounding the whole damned organization
A flash of lightning suddenly flashed through the cockpit, the following clap of thunder loud and close enough that it drowned out any further questioning that either of the soldiers might have had. Bucky instinctively looked back into the cockpit, remembering the rumors that Loki could apparently perform magic and knowing all too well what the Tesseract was capable of, half-afraid that it might be warping the weather around the jet (or creating a damned portal like he still had nightmares of Schmidt disappearing through). Loki remained seated and restrained in the spot they had left them, though, looking around at the windows of the jet as if he was even more startled by the weather than the rest of them had been. “What’s the matter,” Bucky sneered, glad to have the upper-hand on the bastard for a change, “scared of a little lightning?”

“I’m not overly fond of what follows.” Loki drawled, craning his neck again as something seemed to land on the roof of the jet with a loud thud.

The alarm system in front of Romanoff began sounding again, both her and her copilot pushing a number of buttons, apparently trying to work out what had hit them as Stark grabbed up the helmet to his suit and Steve readied his shield again. A moment later the hatch to the jet was pulled open, and… although Bucky wouldn’t have believed it possible had he not seen it… an enormous blonde man wearing armor and a red cape of all things, flew into the hold.

“Is he a friendly?” Bucky shouted, his rifle trained on their visitor as he yanked Loki effortlessly out of his seat, as if he were a ragdoll.

“Doesn’t matter, if he frees Loki or kills him, the Tesseract is lost.” Stark replied, pushing past both Steve and Bucky as blondie turned back to the hatch, swinging a huge, old-fashioned hammer and dragging Loki out with him into the night.

“Stark, we need a plan!” Steve yelled, grabbing the arm of the suit as Stark made his way across the hold of the jet.

“I have a plan,” Stark’s tinny voice responded from inside of his helmet as he shook off Steve’s grip and made to jump as well, “attack.”

“Guy’s a hell of a teammate, I can see why Fury recruited him,” Bucky said with a scoff, stowing his rifle and moving to where Steve had already retrieved a parachute from beneath the seats in the hold, shrugging it on to go after the others.

“I’d sit this one out Cap,” Romanoff warned from the cockpit, as Bucky grabbed up a parachute of his own, knowing Steve well enough to predict his response.

“I don’t see how I can,” Steve said shortly, before glancing at Bucky, his eyes softening for just a moment before he continued in a lower voice. “But - Bucky, you stay here with the jet.”

“And let you take on a couple of gods with no one but Stark as back-up? I don’t think so, punk.”

“Buck – you heard Stark,” Steve argued, reaching over and halting Bucky’s progress as he struggled to get the damned left arm into the strap of the parachute pack. “We need to take him in alive, so the rifle won’t work…”

Bucky’s stomach dropped as he put together what it was that Steve wasn’t saying, nodding tightly and giving up on the parachute – they would have to rely on hand-to-hand combat, and with Bucky’s prosthetic he would be more of a liability than an asset.

Steve squeezed Bucky’s right shoulder after he’d finished securing his parachute, giving him a
lopsided smile before turning towards the hold. “Besides, you and I both know there’s only one God - and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t dress like that.”

And with the snappy line, Steve dropped out of the open hatch, leaving Bucky to stew as he pressed the button to close the door behind him. He kicked his discarded parachute back underneath the seat he’d taken it from, before shouldering his rifle and trying his best to suppress the rush of negative emotions he was feeling at the moment, hoping that the embarrassment wasn’t too plain on his face.

“Hey, Barnes?” Romanoff called from the front, beckoning him towards the cockpit as she did. “I think we’ve got an eye on Loki… can you confirm?”

Bucky frowned, knowing that the jet must have reconnaissance equipment on it more than capable of making the ID for them, but stepped up to the windshield, squinting down at the mountain ridge for a moment before nodding decisively. “That’s definitely him, but he’s alone; where the hell did the others go?”

“We can work that out after we’ve got him in custody again,” Romanoff interrupted, directing the jet forward, unfastening her seatbelt and giving over control of the ship to the SHIELD agent that had been co-piloting as they came to a stop on a ledge near Loki.

Bucky grabbed his rifle immediately, uncaring that he technically wasn’t supposed to shoot the prisoner – after the beating he’d taken from Steve, it wasn’t as if a shot in the leg would kill the bastard, anyway. He opened the hatch as soon as the jet had touched the ground, leading the way up the last few meters of the hill with his sights trained on Loki the entire way. “Don’t even think about trying to pull an escape,” Bucky warned as he approached, cocking the gun once he was close enough to be sure that Loki would hear it. “Just get back on the jet and no one needs to get hurt…”

“Oh, spare the theatrics, Sergeant Barnes,” Loki huffed, rising gracefully to his feet and keeping his hands visible as he made his way towards the quinjet, passing Bucky with a smirk.

“That’s rich coming from you, pal,” Bucky retorted, jabbing Loki roughly with the barrel of the gun in the back of his ridiculous green cape as he passed, then following closely behind him as they made their way to the jet where Agent Romanoff waited, keeping a careful eye on the proceedings.

“Besides,” Loki added, ignoring Bucky’s barb, “the way your team is at one another’s throats already, I think I’d like a chance to watch the show play out.”

Before Bucky could ask what Loki was talking about, an incredible clang, like a gong-strike, sounded from the valley below, causing him to startle and turn in its direction, just in time to see a flash of light and massive energy wave knock down the majority of the trees in the clearing. “Steve…” he breathed harshly, his feet already carrying him down the hill without his noticing, mind racing with concern that it had been a bomb detonation, that Steve had been caught in it…

“BARNES!” A harsh female voice cut through his racing worries, pulling his attention back to Loki and the quinjet where Agent Romanoff was still glaring out at them. “Get the target loaded in, then we’ll go pick up the others.”

Bucky swallowed thickly, doing his best to push down his concern for Steve, then again used his gun to roughly shove Loki towards the quinjet, ignoring the man’s laugh and the way that it sent shivers down his spine. Even if there had been a bomb – Steve had the shield, and had survived considerably worse. He might be a bit scuffed up, but he’d be fine. If you repeat it enough, a mean voice in Bucky’s head taunted, you just might start to believe it…

Bucky helped Romanoff strap Loki back into his seat, this time adding additional restraints in the
event that anyone else decided to show up and try to take off with their prisoner, as well. By the time they had him secured and had radioed the helicarier to let SHIELD know, both Stark and Thor had flown to their location, boarding the jet with a swagger that didn’t exactly hide the fact that they looked as if they’d beaten each other to Hell.

“Where’s the Captain?” Bucky asked as Stark took his helmet off, glancing out the open hatch andstraining to get a view of him while trying to mask his concern.

Stark snorted, “Cap’s fine, just refused a lift from either of us, so we’ll have to wait for him to finish running up the hill.” Sure enough, a couple of minutes later Steve was sprinting the final few meters into the jet, breathing heavily through his nose as he tried to hide how winded he was from the not-insignificant climb.

“You boys worked your issues out enough for us to head to base?” Romanoff asked testily from the front, barely waiting for their responses before lifting the jet from the mountainside and taking off.

The rest of the trip to the helicarier was uneventful, with all of them riding largely in silence, avoiding each other’s eyes as they cooled down from whatever had happened in the woods, and Bucky did his best to let go of his continued disappointment of being left out of it all in the first place - still stung by the fact that Steve hadn’t thought him capable of having his back in a fight. Steve, at least, didn’t look any worse for wear considering the explosion that had rocked the area; Bucky made a mental note to ask what the hell had happened when they had a moment alone together, but otherwise focused on quietly glaring above Loki’s head for the remainder of the flight, his rifle at the ready as he did his best (and largely failed) to ignore the creepy grin that remained plastered to his face.

There was a large group waiting on the flight deck for them when they finally landed inside the helicarier: an armed guard that shackled Loki and marched him towards what Bucky assumed would be the brig, a separate, smaller group which whisked Thor away, and a couple of agents dressed as the teams on the command deck had been, who took Bucky, Steve, Banner and Romanoff back to the bridge.

As soon as they had settled around the war table on the bridge, small screens showed up on the glass, projecting Fury’s discussion with Loki from the brig. They bickered back and forth with each other, trading barbs about power and the Tesseract, with Fury largely threatening the Asgardian and Loki responding in turn by mocking SHIELD and the team they had assembled to take him down. Bucky found himself even more unsettled by the entire situation by the time Fury had left the room and the screens disappeared from the table, the vision of Loki grinning out at the camera still stuck in his memory.

“He really grows on you, doesn’t he?” Banner chuckled sarcastically, and Bucky had to give him credit for his lack of response over Loki’s obvious digs at him.

“Loki’s gonna drag this out, so - Thor, what’s his play?” Steve asked, swiveling his chair so that his attention was fully directed in the Asgardian’s direction.

The enormous blonde guy had turned out to be a Norse God from space, and went on to describe an army called the Chitauri that Loki was going to use to take over the world.

“An army,” Bucky repeated incredulously, “from Outer Space?” Because the day hadn’t been weird enough yet… he glanced at Steve, glad to see that he looked every bit as gobsmacked as Bucky felt.

Banner mentioned a scientist that was apparently helping Loki to harness the energy necessary for
opening a portal with the Tesseract, someone who Thor apparently knew.

“Loki has him under some kind of spell, along with one of ours.” Natasha stated ominously.

“The sniper?” Bucky asked, perking up. After the way that Loki had been goading him, Bucky wouldn’t mind more information on the man that the Asgardian had apparently taken forcefully to fight on his side, so that he could avoid the same fate.

“I wanna know why Loki let us take him. He’s not leading an army from here,” Steve mused, before anyone could answer Bucky’s question.

Banner dismissed Steve’s concerns about Loki, pointing out how crazy the guy seemed, which led to Thor trying to defend him, only to have Romanoff dispassionately point out how ridiculous his kill count already was.

“He’s adopted,” Thor added with a grimace.

“I think it’s about the mechanics – Iridium, what do they need the Iridium for?” Banner asked.

“It’s a stabilizing agent,” Stark responded lazily, strutting into the room in street clothes as if he owned the place, “It means the portal won’t collapse on itself, like it did at SHIELD. Also, it means the portal can open as wide and stay open as long as Loki wants.”

The entire group watched incredulously as Stark marched to the main command deck, poking around at the monitors and shouting out mocking commands. Bucky had hardly been a model soldier, and he knew that SHIELD wasn’t exactly a military operation, but he couldn’t even imagine showing the insubordination that Stark seemed to consider himself entitled to. Finally, after calling some poor agent out for a game that he was apparently playing, Stark got back to the topic of the Tesseract.

“The rest of the raw materials Agent Barton can get his hands on pretty easily; the only major component he needs is a power source of high-energy density. Something to kick-start the cube.”

He turned back to the group, looking at Steve and Bucky’s bewildered faces with a sense of disappointment that made Bucky’s blood boil. “Am I the only one that did the reading?”

“Does Loki need any particular kind of power source?” Bucky asked, uncaring if it made him sound stupid at the moment; he just wanted Stark to get to the damned point already, so that they could stop sitting around and begin planning their next move.

Banner jumped in at that, nervously pacing from his corner of the deck as he rambled about heating parameters, the units of which Bucky didn’t even know existed. Stark jumped in, making a glib quip about quantum mechanics, which Banner immediately parried. It was the type of conversation that Bucky might have actually enjoyed listening to, had he had any background knowledge to work from so that he could actually understand what they were talking about.

“Finally, someone who speaks English,” Tony grinned, crossing the deck to shake Banner’s hand.

“Doctor Banner is only here to track the cube,” Fury interjected, making his way quickly onto the deck and thankfully diffusing the situation. “I was hoping you might join him.”
“I’d start with that stick of his,” Steve chimed in.

Bucky nodded in agreement as the attention turned towards the two of them, “It acts a lot like the old HYDRA weapons, and they were using the cube’s energy all along for production.”

“Sergeant Barnes is right in thinking that the staff is powered by the cube,” Fury chimed in, “and I’d also like to know how Loki’s used it to turn two of the smartest men I know into his personal flying monkeys.”

“Monkeys?” Thor asked with a confused frown, “I do not understand…”

“I do!” Steve called out, turning to Bucky with an excited grin that he couldn’t help smiling at in return, especially as he remembered how similar it was to the face he remembered Steve making the first time they’d watched Oz in theaters. “I understood that reference,” Steve added with a nod, glancing around at the others in the room.

Bucky forced himself to look away from Steve, afraid of what his face might give away if his thoughts continued down the path they had already started on, only to catch Stark’s over-dramatic eye-roll at Steve’s excitement. As a result, Bucky didn’t bother to hide the glare he directed at Stark’s back as he and Banner made their way off of the bridge, leaving the rest of them behind as they went to work on Banner’s progress in the ship’s labs.

Fury turned to Romanoff once they had gone, asking her to meet him outside the brig for her next assignment, then turned his attention to Steve and Bucky. “The two of you can take five for a while - until we have a location on the cube I can’t imagine there will be much for you to do.”

They simply nodded in recognition, remaining seated as they watched him go. Bucky wasn’t sure what they were expected to get up to – it wasn’t as if they could help with the search for the cube, or with any of the other tech around the ship. They weren’t even the only two who had seen the Tesseract in action anymore, given the fact that Fury had been there when Loki had used it to show up in the first place.

The longer they remained idle, the harder it became for Bucky to ignore the gnawing hunger in his gut. He was used to being hungry, of course; had spent most of his formative years feeling underfed thanks to The Depression, and ever since HYDRA had experimented on him Army rations had never been enough to keep the feeling at bay. The past couple of weeks with Steve cooking had helped somewhat, but given the fact that he’d barely had anything for breakfast in his excitement and it had been nearly a day ago at this point…

Swallowing his pride, Bucky stood up, unsurprised when Steve followed close behind, even as he approached Coulson who had been hovering nearby. “Uh, Agent Coulson,” Bucky began, feeling a little awkward for the way he had been wordlessly busting the guys chops since he first started drooling over Steve in the apartment. “We were just wondering where the Mess is around here, and when it’s open…”

Coulson had listened to Bucky’s question with rapt attention, before blinking in surprise. “Oh, God - I’m sorry, I forgot to mention – we packed your suits with high protein bars, taking your metabolisms into consideration.” He pointed to the awkward, tiny compartments in Steve’s belt (all of them that they had checked prior had held magazines for his sidearm – after the third compartment they hadn’t thought it worth continuing), as well as hidden pockets inside of Bucky’s coat. “Mess Hall is closed until 06:00, but those were formulated with the two of you in mind so they should hold you over.”

“Great, thanks,” Steve responded sincerely, already making his way off of the bridge before Coulson could make it any more awkward.
Bucky was more than happy to follow, grabbing one of the foil packets out of the aforementioned pockets and studying the contents skeptically. “Now they’re inventing food for us,” he muttered, tearing the foil open with his teeth, “Almost makes you wonder what weird shit they found in our blood when they tested it.”

Steve hummed in agreement, finding a packet of his own and opening it just as quickly before taking a large bite.

Bucky did the same, frowning at the gritty, sticky texture as he chewed. They wandered aimlessly through the ship, silently looking around as they suffered through choking down the protein bars.

“Never thought I’d miss powdered eggs and spam…” Steve mused, sucking on his teeth as he paused outside of a lab door, glancing through the window before pressing the button beside to unlock it.

“Tastes like sweetened gravel,” Bucky muttered around his last bite, jamming the wrapper in the pocket of his jacket. He was glad for the relief from the hunger, at least, but not for much else.

Steve turned the lever for the door, opening it to a small lab full of monitors and tools that Bucky couldn’t begin to guess the uses of. Before he could properly appreciate all of the possibilities, he followed Steve’s gaze to where Stark and Banner were standing next to each other at a monitor, watching with unease as Stark ducked behind Banner and poked him in the side with a probe of sorts, causing him to startle. “HEY!” Steve shouted, striding quickly into the room with his back ramrod straight, intimidation and demand for order practically oozing out of his obnoxious blue suit. It might have been funny, had Bucky not been bracing himself to face an enormous green monster.

“Are you insane?” Steve asked tightly, and although his back was now to Bucky, he could practically see the glare that his friend was directing at Stark.

“Jury’s out,” Stark muttered, not even bothering to look at Steve as he continued bothering Banner, who seemed to be doing his best to focus on the scepter.

“Is everything a joke to you?” Steve asked testily.

“Funny things are.” Stark answered flippantly.

“Threatening the safety of everyone on this ship isn’t funny.” Steve responded, his Captain voice taking over.

“No offense, Doc.” Bucky added, nodding to where Banner had been slinking into the background. While he understood Steve’s concern, it didn’t feel right not to acknowledge the man while he was standing right there.

“You need to focus on the problem, Mr. Stark.” Steve commanded.


“So you think Fury’s hiding something?” Bucky asked, the too on the end of the question left silent but heavily implied.

“He’s a spy,” Stark pointed out. “Guys… he’s the spy. His secrets have secrets. Don’t act like it isn’t bugging all of us.” He turned to Banner for backup.

Banner looked especially uncomfortable under their scrutiny, even more so than he had when Steve had been worrying about the Hulk. “Uh - I just wanna finish my work here, and…”
“Doctor Banner?” Steve asked, clearly wanting to get another opinion. Bucky did his best not to let it bother him, remembering a time when his word have been good enough…

Banner hesitated for a few moments, pulling his glasses off of his nose before agreeing uncomfortably, bringing up Loki’s jab from his conversation with Fury in the brig and arguing that it was an insult meant for Stark instead, “Even if Barton didn’t tell Loki about the tower, it’s still all over the news.


Banner nodded, going on to talk about the arc reactor in the building and its potential for clean, self-sustainable energy - Stark confirmed his understanding of it, bragging about how it had allowed him to create a monopoly in the energy business. “So why didn’t SHIELD bring him in on the Tesseract project?” Banner questioned, “What are they doing in the energy business in the first place?”

“Using it for something other than energy,” Bucky muttered, crossing his arms over his chest as he tried to suppress how uncomfortable the idea made him.

“Like weapons?” Steve asked, turning to face Bucky with a grim look.

“There’s precedence for it, isn’t there?” Bucky answered darkly, before looking across the table again, trying not to feel too proud by the fact that Banner and Stark looked interested. “It’s the reason that HYDRA wanted the cube in the first place, they used it to power all of their weapons during the war…”

“Yeah, well; I’ll put a search out specifically for WMD specs once my decription program finishes breaking into all of SHIELD’s secure files…” Stark said, pulling a tiny device out of the pocket of his jeans as he made his way around the table and studying its screen.

“I’m sorry, did you just say,” Steve started with a frown.

“JARVIS has been running it since I hit the bridge,” Stark bragged, “In a few hours I’ll know every dirty secret SHIELD has ever tried to hide.”

“And you’re confused about why they didn’t want you around.” Steve scoffed incredulously.

“An intelligence agency that’s afraid of intelligence?” Stark asked, pointing out the hypocrisy behind it all. “Historically not awesome, Cap.”

Steve straightened again, and while Bucky could see the conflict in his friend, he could tell that the soldier in Steve wasn’t going to let it get to him. “I think Loki’s trying to wind us up,” Steve started. “This is a man who means to start a war, and if we don’t stay focused, he’ll succeed. We have orders. We should follow them.”

“Yeah, following isn’t really my style.” Stark said with a flippant smirk.

“And everything’s about style with you, isn’t it?” Steve murmured, stepping closer so that he loomed over Stark. His tone put Bucky on edge – he knew it all too well, knew that when Steve Rogers started puffing up over something like this and didn’t get his way, a fight usually followed.

Stark rolled his eyes before responding smarmily. “I’m sorry, of the people in this room, which one is A, wearing a spangly outfit, and B, not of use?”

“Steve,” Bucky interrupted, grabbing his bicep before he could advance any further. “C’mon, let’s
let them get back to work. Jawing at each other ain’t helping anyone.”

Steve exhaled sharply, his jaw clenching for a moment before he commanded, “Just find the damned cube,” That said, he turned without so much as glancing at Bucky and marched angrily towards the door.

They made their way back into the hall in silence, the muscles in Steve’s jaw clenched so tight that Bucky had to wonder how he wasn’t busting a molar, serum be damned. They made eye contact with one another once the door had closed behind them, hesitating for only a moment before reaching a silent agreement – that something definitely was fishy, despite how they felt about Stark’s way of going about dealing with it. They turned at the same time, changing course so that they were moving back to the weapons hold again.

Despite their ridiculous outfits and the fact that everyone on the ship obviously recognized them by now, they were able to make it to the ammunitions stores without any interference. Bucky stood watch as Steve tried to pry the door open, letting him struggle with the powered door for a few seconds before joining him, his right arm adding enough strength to break the motorized lock that held it shut. That done they crept into the room, keeping to the shadows before leaping up onto the catwalk above. Bucky bit his lip to keep himself from smirking at Steve’s reaction when he landed behind him, knowing that it was hardly the time to gloat over the fact that he was finally able to show off the creepy abilities that he had slowly been gaining since his time in captivity.

They split up on the upper deck, Bucky going right and beginning to dig through seemingly endless crates of tactical gear and automatic rifles, while Steve began searching through crates on the opposite end of the hold. After a few moments of working in silence, his ears strained to pick up any sounds of approaching footsteps, he heard Steve whisper his name tightly from the other end of the room. Bucky made his way over immediately, stepping up next to the crates that Steve remained facing, his muscles wound as if he was ready to fight whatever was contained inside.

Bucky felt the same wave of anger as he looked at the contents – heavy-duty masks and vests in one, but in the other weapons that looked all-too-similar to those he remembered assembling with the other POWs in Austria. Bucky reached into the crate labeled PHASE TWO, pulling out the gun and unlocking the safety, his right hand trembling with rage as it glowed blue. Steve reached across him to turn it off immediately, his fists clenching at his side as he muttered quietly, “How could they… They didn’t fucking learn…”

Bucky swallowed down bile as it rose in his throat, knowing exactly what was going through Steve’s mind – all that they had done to take HYDRA down, all that they had sacrificed for the sake of saving the world – and now they were working for an organization stupid enough to try the same damned thing. Regardless of what it was SHIELD might have planned for the weapons, they both knew that even creating them in the first place was wrong. Steve closed the crates harshly, before shaking his head and taking long strides towards the hallway… Bucky followed behind, deciding to keep the damned gun as evidence, his anger continuing to churn in his gut as they made their way back to the lab.

Steve smacked the door to the lab open, and Bucky felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise as he noticed Fury standing next to the bench Banner and Stark were seated on. “What is phase two?” he heard Stark ask, clearly having finished his data-mining.

“Phase two is SHIELD using the cube to make weapons,” Steve responded tightly, folding his arms across his chest and glaring at Fury as Bucky sat the ray gun on the bench next to them.

“Sorry, Stark - computer was moving a little slow for us.” Bucky added, although his tone made it clear that he wasn’t sorry at all… if anything, he wished Stark had gotten off his ass and
accomplished more, so that they could get the cube back already before they faced an even bigger mess.

Fury tried to defend himself, insisting that they were only gathering information on the Tesseract, but Stark interrupted him almost as quickly, flipping the screen he was working on around so that Steve and Bucky could see the schematics of the missile plans he had uncovered.

“I was wrong, Director; the world hasn’t changed a bit.” Steve spat.

Thor and Romanoff entered through the door Steve had left open, and Banner immediately set in on Romanoff, escalating far too quickly for Bucky’s liking. From what he could gather, Romanoff had brought Banner in on the project to begin with, had probably promised him that no one would stress him into being a risk, and now was worried that Loki was going to force him into Hulking out. When Banner turned on Fury and demanded to know why SHIELD was blaming weapons, Fury turned and blamed Thor.

Bucky scoffed at the answer, “Is anyone born after 1950 capable of taking responsibility?”

Fury ignored it, of course, arguing back and forth with Thor: although Thor insisted that Asgard was no threat to Earth, Fury countered that there were other aliens, and that the last time that Thor had visited Earth he’d proven that human weapons stood no chance against those from other armies. “The world’s filling up with people who can’t be matched, can’t be controlled.” Fury insisted.

*People like me and Steve*, Bucky’s mind supplied, his anxiety only ramping higher.

“All you controlled the cube?” Steve asked sarcastically.

“You guys had no idea… you hadn’t seen what that damned thing was capable of…” Bucky added before he could stop himself.

“And your work with the Tesseract is what drew Loki to it, and his allies. It is a signal to all the realms that the Earth is ready for a higher form of war.” Thor warned, glaring at Fury all the while.

The situation only devolved from there, and within seconds they were all snarking at each other, trading barbs around the group as they all joined in, the insults and accusations growing increasingly more personal. Bucky was in the middle of advancing on Stark with Steve, not even caring about their difference in size or the fact that Stark apparently had no real physical enhancements outside of his suit, when Banner’s voice interrupted all of them.

“We aren’t a team, we’re a time bomb.” He warned, his tone still placid enough to make it chilling.

“We need to step away.” Fury commanded harshly, the rest of their arguments dying away as they turned to watch what happened next.

Of course, it meant Stark thought it was time to be a smartass again. “Why shouldn’t the guy blow a little steam off?”

“You know damned well why, back off!” Steve yelled, smacking Stark’s hand away from where he’d laid it against Steve’s arm.

“Oh, I’m starting to want you to make me.” Stark muttered darkly.

“Yeah. Big man in a suit of armor,” Steve sneered. “Take that off, what are you?”

“Genius, billionaire, Playboy, philanthropist.” Stark bragged.
“I know guys with none of that worth ten of you.” Steve responded harshly, and Bucky pictured each one of the Howlies, all dead now, same as he knew that Steve had. “I’ve seen the footage, the only thing you really fight for is yourself. You’re not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you…”

“I think I’d just cut the wire,” Stark interrupted flippantly.

“Always a way out,” Steve smirked, and Bucky found himself moving closer. “Ya know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero.”


The rage Bucky felt at Stark’s words propelled him forward immediately, and before he fully realized what he was doing he had grabbed Stark roughly by the front of his shirt, his left arm whirring as he shook him so hard Stark’s teeth made an audible clack. “You wanna say that again, pal?” He spat, blood rushing in his ears as he barely restrained himself from smashing Stark’s smug face in.

“Bucky!” Steve called out, and while Bucky didn’t take a swing, he couldn’t bring himself to loosen his hold on the fabric between his fingers, continuing to loom over the disrespectful little bastard.

“Call your dog off, Rogers,” Stark growled, glaring up at Bucky with what looked like the same amount of disdain Bucky was feeling for him.

“He ain’t the boss of me, Stark,” Bucky snarled back, “and I think it’s time you learned some damned manners…”

“Buck - Bucky, let him go,” Steve interrupted, although it was the gentle, familiar touch of his friend’s hand on the crook of Bucky’s elbow that had him finally loosening his grip. “He’s not worth the trouble.”

Bucky turned to Steve, unable to help giving the hypocrite a withering look; he knew full-well that had their roles been reversed, Steve would have probably put Stark in the Med Bay trying to defend Bucky’s honor. All the same, he remembered that Fury was still standing by, probably waiting for evidence to use as an excuse to label the both of them unstable and throw them in the brig as well. With one final glare at Stark, he released the shirt roughly, stepping away so that he didn’t end up forced into becoming Fury’s pet super soldier.

Stark remained puffed-up, smoothing the fabric down before snarking, “Good boy, Bucky Bear.”

“Why don’t you go put on the suit, Stark; we can go a few rounds.” Steve sneered, putting himself between Stark and Bucky.

Apparently their imminent fight set the group off again, with the others starting up their side-arguments as Steve and Bucky glared down at Stark. It wasn’t until Fury mentioned the cell that Bucky started to tune into the outside conversations again, frowning as the rest of them went quiet with Banner’s story about his suicide attempt… which the Hulk had apparently thwarted. The thought was so horrifying that Bucky couldn’t even focus on his anger with Stark, instead watching as Banner continued to escalate, becoming increasingly angry with Fury for having brought him into their situation in the first place.

“You wanna know my secret, Agent Romanoff?” Banner growled, grabbing the scepter from the
table and advancing towards her, the blue gem pulsing as he spoke. “You want to know how I stay calm?”

“Dr. Banner,” Steve interrupted calmly, his hands raised as Banner turned on him. “Put down he scepter.”

His words, at least, seemed to get through to Banner, who glanced down at his hand in surprise before dropping the stick back onto the worktop he had snatched it from. The entire room seemed to let out a sigh of relief, as Banner frowned heavily at all of them, his meek and bumbling persona from before completely gone. “Sorry kids, you don’t get to see my party trick after all.” He muttered, before being interrupted by the computer alarm sounding, a red target flashing on the map on the screen.

“We got it,” Fury announced, apparently meaning that the cube had been found.

“You located the Tesseract?” Thor asked, moving to the screen to see as well.

“I can get there fastest,” Stark bragged, already marching towards the door like the overconfident prick he was.

“The Tesseract belongs on Asgard, no human can control it.” Thor argued.

Stark, of course, ignored the warning and continued for the door, only turning when Steve grabbed his arm to stop him, arguing, “You’re not going alone.”

“You gonna stop me?” Stark sneered, knocking his hand away.

“Put on the suit, let’s find out.” Bucky smirked, parroting Steve’s earlier request and hoping that Stark would take them up on it - he sorely wanted the excuse to beat on him.

“I’m not afraid to hit old men…”

“Put on the suit.” Steve demanded coldly, stepping up so that he loomed uncomfortably close over Stark’s considerably smaller form.

Behind them, Bucky barely noticed the computers trilling again, although he did catch Banner’s panicked murmur. “Oh my God…”

A second later an explosion rocked the ship, blasting the lab apart and knocking all three of them to the ground. As soon as the shock of the impact had worn off Bucky looked to Steve, who thankfully was sitting up as well, looking to an equally shaken Stark. “Put on the suit.” he instructed breathlessly, which Stark immediately agreed with, getting to his feet and rushing to wherever it was that he’d stored his gear.

Tannoy’s overhead called all hands to stations, and after a minute Hill’s voice came over their personal earpieces, asking Stark to head out to fix one of the ship’s engines. Steve copied the request, grabbing his sidearm and starting in the same direction as Stark had gone to give him cover, before turning back to Bucky. “Someone needs to go make sure Loki can’t take command of the ship - go cover the bridge, Stark and I can handle the engine.”

Bucky wanted nothing more than to tell Steve to fuck himself, hating the idea of abandoning him in the middle of an attack, but he knew that he was right… especially as it became apparent over the coms that Romanoff was busy escaping the Hulk and Thor was trying to subdue it before it tore the ship apart. “Just radio if you need back-up, and don’t do anything stupid,” Bucky responded before turning and sprinting in the opposite direction, heading directly for the bridge.
By the time he made it to the bridge there were already men in SHIELD uniforms opening fire on the actual agents inside – Buckyshouldered his rifle for a moment, grabbing his sidearm with his right hand and firing off four shots in quick succession, dropping each enemy that he hit, before making his way onto the bridge. “Thanks,” Hill responded shortly, her own pistol at the ready as she waited for more to come through.

Bucky nodded, moving to the side of the command center and setting up with his rifle, deciding that it was the best location to view the main entry points to the bridge while also avoiding doubling up on shooters in any one spot. It turned out to be a good call – he was able to provide her, Fury, and those who were trying desperately to keep the ship in the air with adequate cover, dropping incoming attackers every few minutes until he began to feel confident that there couldn’t bemany left to follow. Meanwhile, though, he listened helplessly as the Hulk continued tearing the ship up and Hill tried to put plans into place that would eliminate its threat.

The windows of the command center gave them the perfect view of the huge green monster leaping out of the helicarier onto a nearby fighter jet, tearing the pilot out before plummeting to the Earth. Bucky watched him disappear with a wave of nausea, taking a second to hope that Banner could somehow survive it, even if it didn’t seem likely given their altitude.

He quickly shook the thought off – Bucky had watched enough of his men die during the War to know the consequences of focusing on death during a battle – and immediately picked up on the sound of Steve struggling with something through their headset. He glanced to Hill, who along with Fury seemed to have the situation well under control given the fact that the onslaught seemed to be over, before slinging his rifle back over his shoulder and taking off. “This is Barnes. I’m moving to engine three to give cover for Cap and Stark.”

He sprinted through the halls of the ship, navigating the twists and turns with ease, flying past agents who were scattered in all directions, trying to minimize damage as chaos reigned around them. As Bucky neared the location of the engine, he noticed a team of hostiles still engaged, and slowed just enough that his footfalls wouldn’t be heard before picking off three of them with shots that were so quick none had the time to turn to see him coming.

Bucky leapt over the remaining bodies, his heart sinking as he got closer to the hole in the side of the ship and failed to see Steve’s ridiculous outfit. He didn’t want to imagine… before his mind could provide him some horrible version of the worst case scenario, Bucky spotted Steve clinging to a loose wire, trying to pull himself back into the ship as the wind whipped against him.

“HANG ON!” Bucky screamed over the sound, making his way to the edge of the ship and grabbing the wire at his end, pulling it in with all of his strength. Between Steve’s weight and the force of the wind as the ship hurtled towards the ground, it took all of Bucky’s power to begin pulling the wire in, especially when the force pulled his prosthesis loose from his shoulder. Gritting his teeth against the pain Bucky focused on simply trying to hold the wire in place with his left hand, pulling with all of his strength as he backed his way into the helicarier, dragging the length of the wire along with him. After a few agonizing seconds of struggling, between the two of them Steve had closed enough distance that he stepped into the hole in the side of the ship, panting with exertion as he fell onto the floor. “Thanks,” he said breathlessly to Bucky, before Stark shouted through the headset, asking if Steve was by the lever yet.

Bucky did his best to shoulder his rifle, providing cover as Steve leapt across the hole in the ship, giving Stark an affirmative while Bucky shot down yet another damned gunman. Steve pulled the lever on Stark’s command, and they both heaved a sigh of relief as the ship stuttered then righted itself, the wind that had been rushing past in the freefall slowing to a stop as the engines righted themselves. Stark appeared next to the hole a second later, hovering outside for a moment. “See?
Easy peasy.” He said shortly, apparently ignoring the fact that Steve and Bucky were still breathless and surrounded by bodies. “I’m going to go check the rest of the ship for damage, you two might as well get to the detention level, make sure Barton doesn’t get to Loki.”

“There’s no reason for that,” Fury’s voice immediately interrupted, “Romanoff has subdued Barton and Loki’s gone, along with Thor and Banner. Agent Coulson is dead. Change out of your gear and report to the bridge for further instructions.”

For a second the three of them stared at each other in shock, processing the news, before Bucky pushed himself to his feet with a grimace, fully aware of his fault in what had happened. Granted, Steve might not have been able to help Tony adequately had Bucky not been there to have his back, they wouldn’t have lost the control room had Bucky stayed to his post. And while he didn’t know what Coulson’s situation had been…

“Buck,” Steve’s voice interrupted, his footsteps jogging quickly behind him so that he easily caught up to Bucky. “Thanks out there. You - you made the call you thought was the best one, I don’t know if we would have gotten the engine back online without you.”

Bucky gave him a weak smile, knowing that there was no point in arguing with Steve when he was in Captain Morale mode, even though they both knew what he said was bullshit. There was spare sets of undershirts in the same locker room they’d found their suits in, and they both cleaned up and dressed in silence, leaving their pants and boots on in case they were called back into action, before making their way to the bridge where Stark and Fury were both waiting for them.

Fury tossed Coulson’s bloodstained trading cards onto the table as he explained the idea behind the Avengers Initiative to them, and Bucky noted with a sick sense of guilt that there had been Howling Commando cards included as well… his own face looked up at him, hair slicked to the side with pomade and rifle held aloft as he stared into the camera, looking brave and stupid and impossibly young, even though he was going through hell when it was taken.

The three of them remained seated around the table in sullen quiet after Fury had left the table, the rest of the bridge too busy trying to pull command back together to even notice them. It was a far cry from when they had been big damned heroes earlier in the day. Steve and Stark started talking about Coulson, discussing his family which somehow lead to talking about how bad an idea it had been for him to take on Loki on his own.

“Is this the first time you’ve lost a soldier?” Bucky found himself asking, strangely disconnected from the entire conversation as his mind started providing him with images of all of the young privates he’d watched snuffed out in trenches, of the other prisoners in the HYDRA camp who had shriveled up and died on the lab benches next to him…

“We are not soldiers!” Stark suddenly raged, turning on Bucky with a wild glare. He took a deep breath as Bucky sunk back in his seat, honestly not having meant to start anything, this time. “I’m not marching to Fury’s fife.” Stark added darkly.

“Neither are we,” Steve responded calmly, standing from where he had been seated at the table and moving so that he was between Stark and Bucky. “He has the same blood on his hands that Loki does. But right now we gotta put that behind us and get this done. Now, you said Loki needs a power source. If we can put together a list of…”

“He made it personal.” Stark interrupted, his gaze locked on the bloody trading cards still sitting in the middle of the table.

“That’s not the point,” Bucky sighed, trying to get them back on track.
“No, that is the point,” Stark argued. “That’s Loki’s point. He hit us all right where we live, why?”

“To tear us apart,” Steve answered, although his voice hardly sounded certain.

“Yeah, but he’ll want to beat us all together, in public - he’ll want an audience.” Stark began pacing around again, apparently hoping to work himself up enough that he could get into Loki’s crazy mindset.

“You mean like his act in Stuttgart?” Bucky asked.

“Yeah, but that was just previews. This, this is opening night, and Loki’s a full-tilt diva. He’ll want flowers, he’ll want parades, he wants a monument built to the skies with his name plastered…” Stark’s rant trailed off, frowning as his brain apparently found a way to move faster than his mouth, although Bucky wouldn’t have thought it possible. “Son of a bitch.”

“What?” Steve asked, standing at the ready as he waited for Stark’s call.

“The tower. He’s going to use the arc reactor for his energy source. You two go get Romanoff and a quinjet, then head for New York as fast as you can; I’ll go grab the suit and meet you there.” Stark instructed, already making his way towards the exit to the conference room, his frenetic energy apparently having returned. He paused in the doorway, frowning for a moment before asking. “The arm alright, Barnes?”

Bucky had already jumped to his feet, more than ready to get moving and hit Loki back, but the question gave him pause. It was surprising enough to have Stark act like he cared about him, but it also occurred to Bucky that he hadn’t even thought about the arm since jumping into action after the explosions. He rolled his left shoulder experimentally – the prosthesis wasn’t at all comfortable anymore, especially where he’d strained it trying to haul Steve back onto the helicarrier, but it still seemed to be working. “It’s fine?” Bucky responded, still uncomfortable with where the question might be going.

“Good. Great…” Stark responded, turning out the door before pausing and spinning back to face them again, obviously working himself up to something. “Just, after we get out of all this, call me up – we’ll bring you by Stark Tower and build you a permanent one, figure out the neural-interfacing and what kinds of biomaterials we need for skin fusion, eliminate the need for straps and ear pieces and whatever other outdated, knock-off HammerTech SHIELD decided to settle on.” He’d rattled the last bits off so fast that Bucky had barely understood them, then fled through the door without another glance back at either of them.

Bucky took a deep breath, glancing to Steve in confusion, only to be meant by the same bewildered expression on his friend’s face. “I guess we’ll worry about it when all of this is over?” Bucky asked.

“Probably for the best,” Steve answered, leading the way off of the bridge. “Let’s go grab the others - we’ve got a score to settle.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so, so much for all of the kudos and comments you guys have been leaving, the response to this has been incredible! Unfortunately December setting in means that school is about to become crazy for me, so I’m afraid that the updates won’t be quite as frequent, but I swear to you that I will continue picking away at this project - I have SO
many ideas for both the MCU stories and our Brooklyn Boys, so rest assured that there is much, much more to come.
Avengers Assemble, Pt III

Chapter Summary

The Battle for New York.

Chapter Notes

I'll admit it right now... I don't love this chapter, and had to really force myself through it, so I hope that it lives up to the hype. Action scenes aren't exactly my forte, but I knew that I couldn't leave the Battle out. From here on there will be a little more canon divergence and character development/storyline, so hopefully it makes up for this mess.

And because I don't know if I did the best job of explaining it... here's tumblr post with visuals on how I picture Bucky and his uniform throughout this part: Avenger Bucky

Steve and Bucky made their way back to the locker room as soon as Stark had left for the lab, quickly pulling on the remainder of their suits. Steve grabbed his shield and made for the hallway, only to notice Bucky still sorting through his weapons, a perturbed frown on his face. “Everything alright?” Steve asked, pausing in the doorway as he waited for Buck to catch up.

“They’ve got me kitted with a rifle with a handful of extra clips, a side arm, and a switchblade,” Bucky spat, digging through the rest of his locker with a frustrated sigh. “That’s hardly gonna be enough for a battle, and it ain’t exactly like I’m going to be much use in hand-to-hand combat.”

Steve bit his lip for a moment, knowing that Bucky was right, before nodding in the direction of the weapons locker. “I’ve gotta go get Romanoff anyway, last I heard she was still with Agent Barton in the Med Bay. You go lift whatever you need from that arsenal we found earlier, then meet us down on the flight deck.”

Bucky glanced up at him with a momentary look of surprise, which just as quickly changed into a smug smirk. “Yessir, Captain.” He responded with a nod, before tucking his sidearm and knife into his coat then making his way out of the room. Steve watched for a second as Bucky casually strolled in the direction of the weapons hold, confident that his friend looked every bit as innocent from the front as his back did, before taking off at a much quicker pace in the direction of the Med Bay.

Steve found Agent Romanoff seated in an isolation room, thankfully uninjured. “Time to go,” he said simply as she glanced up at him.

“Go where?” she asked, already rising from the bed as a compact man with dark blond hair made his way out of the bathroom.

“I’ll tell you on the way - can you fly one of those jets?” Steve asked, remembering that on their
other flight she’d been copiloting.

“I can.” The man (Barton, Steve reminded himself) answered, stepping out of the adjoining bathroom as he finished putting a piece of purple plastic in his ear.

Steve looked at Romanoff, unsure of how to feel about the idea of trusting someone who had so recently been under Loki’s control, but she nodded back confidently. He immediately decided to trust her judgment; she’d been nothing but competent so far, and had clearly had a history with Barton as an agent in the past. “You got a suit?” He asked Barton, unsurprised by his affirmative nod. “Then suit up.”

It only took Barton and Romanoff a couple of minutes to get ready, then they quickly made their way to the flight deck. Bucky stood next to the main entryway, the pockets of his pants and jacket obviously stuffed with every bit of ammo as he could fit on his body. He stood at attention as they approached, although his eyes narrowed as he actually got a look at the newest member of their group.

“A bow and arrows?” Bucky asked, looking at Clint with a look of plain incredulity on his face. “You’re the sniper Fury was going on about... and you use a bow.”

“And you’re my replacement; with a knock-off HammerTech arm and a bad Carry Grant haircut,” Clint responded without missing a beat. “If you wanna keep a kill count through whatever shitstorm we end up in, I’d be happy to embarrass you with mine, Barnes.”

Steve half-expected another argument to start, but Bucky ended up grinning, shaking his head and falling into step with them as they made their way to an empty jet at the end of the flight deck. “You’re on, Robin Hood,” he responded with a dark chuckle, before muttering, “with a bow and arrow…” lowly enough that Steve was sure he was the only one to pick up on it.

They were all business by the time they hit the hold of the quinjet, stepping inside as a SHIELD pilot stepped out from the cockpit to confront them. “You guys aren’t authorized to-”

“Son,” Steve interrupted, in no mood to deal with protocol at the moment, “just don’t.”

Thankfully, the poor kid took a look at the four of them and immediately left without a word, looking a little green around the gills as Bucky saluted him before closing the hatch behind them. It only took Barton and Romanoff a few seconds to get the jet powered up, and the next thing Steve knew they were making their way out of the helicarrier, with surprisingly little pushback either from the radio or the staff on the deck.

Bucky sat in the hold as the jet raced its way over the open ocean, methodically packing ammunition and knives away in the pockets of his pants and coat. If not for the metal arm and the modern ship around them, Steve might have been able to pretend that it was 1945 all over again, that this was just another mission with the Howlies, getting ready to take down one more HYDRA outpost...

“Steve,” Bucky’s voice interrupted his thoughts, before he poked him in the side with the butt of a pistol. “If you have anywhere to store the thing in that ridiculous belt, or - somewhere.”

Steve accepted it, sure that he probably wouldn’t end up using it as long as he had his shield on him, but oddly touched that Bucky had thought of it in the first place. “Not that you’re shot’s worth a damn, but,” Bucky added slyly as he rolled to his feet, completely ruining the moment.

“You guys might want to see this.” Romanoff muttered from the front, so both Bucky and Steve turned, stepping into the entry to the cockpit with wide eyes as they looked out over the island of
Manhattan, watching in horror as a blue beam of light shot into the sky over Stark tower – a huge, black hole appearing in the otherwise clear sky around it.

“It’s like Schmidt’s portal,” Steve breathed, unable to take his eyes off of the hole as objects began to fly out of it, “only…”

“Ten times fuckin’ worse.” Bucky grumbled beside him, his face white as he stared ahead at the mess.

Barton made a choked sound of surprise, pushing the controls on the jet forward so that it moved even faster towards the mess, before asking, “Did Bucky Barnes just drop an F Bomb?”

“Bucky Barnes spent two years in the US Army at war,” Bucky sneered. “Believe me, cuss words were alive and well long before I was usin’ ’em.”

“Let’s focus on finding Loki,” Steve interrupted, before they could find a way to get any more off-track. “Barton, get us in as close to the top of the tower as you can.”

Thankfully, Barton did exactly that, taking them in a circle around the portal and Stark’s landing deck before coming up on a platform where Thor and Loki cornered in a fight.

“I’ve got a shot at him,” Romanoff announced, apparently for Stark’s sake, but before she could get the guns to engage, Loki had turned the scepter on them, blowing out one of the engines on the quinjet.

Alarms inside the cockpit began going off and the jet began a spiral downward – Steve grabbed on to the bracers in the hold, doing his best to keep himself steady as the jet seemed to go into free-fall. Bucky was doing the same on the other side of the plane; Steve looked to him as they took another hit, shaking the jet badly enough that even Steve struggled to keep himself upright. While Bucky’s grip held fine, the jarring clearly separated the stump of his shoulder away from the prosthetic before jamming it back into place, and even above all of the chaos Steve heard him hiss in pain, pulling the arm against his side as he held on with only his right.

Thankfully, Barton managed to somehow bring the bird down, rocking them again but otherwise leaving them uninjured. Steve let go of his hold a second before Bucky did and dropped back to the ground of the jet, not bothering to hide the concern in his voice as he asked quietly, “You okay?”

“Fine,” Bucky responded tightly, slamming on the button that opened the hatch of the jet with far more force than necessary and raising his rifle as he stepped out onto the street, surveying their surroundings as Steve and the others followed close behind.

They made their way towards the familiar edifice of Grand Central Station, and for a second Steve had to wonder if this was all some strange nightmare that he was having, watching as horrible, flying aliens streaked through his city, blowing chunks out of buildings and cars with plasma guns. His answer came when an enormous, robotic, flying slug came floating overhead, leaving even Bucky gaping in shock. "You remember the night we listened to War of the Worlds?"

"And you went on for the next two weeks about how awesome it would have been to be there?" Steve asked, not taking his eyes off of the sky.

"Yeah..." Bucky responded with a grimace. "Yeah, is it too late to take that back, now?"

“Stark?” Steve asked, aware that he hadn’t actually seen Iron Man since the plane had landed, “Are you seeing this?”
“Seeing it,” Stark’s voice confirmed over the com, “not sure if I’m believing it, yet. Is Banner with you?”

“Banner?” Steve asked, “You aren’t really expecting him to…”

“He’ll show up,” Stark interrupted confidently, “just let me know when he gets here.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but before he could think of anything to say a group of Chitauri seemed to materialize out of the flying monster – ship? Damned if he had any idea, at this point – dropping to the street below and making their way towards them, leaving a wave of destruction in their path.

“Well,” Bucky sighed, releasing the safety on his rifle as Romanoff pulled a pair of pistols out of her thigh holsters, “this oughta be fun.”

They fanned out in a circle, with Bucky and Barton taking out as many of the flying aliens as they could while Steve and Romanoff largely focused on the foot soldiers. Initially, it wasn’t too terrible; the aliens were tough, but far from unbeatable, and they didn’t seem to have noticed that the team of them were even there – instead simply flying around, causing as much chaos and destruction as they could.

That changed quickly when a large squadron of them flew overhead, a familiar green and gold figure at the lead. Steve had to assume that Loki had noticed them and made it known to his army, because they began attacking the bridge in droves, forcing the four of them to take cover behind a row of abandoned cars, the sounds of civilians on the streets below screaming as the attack carried over to them.

“They’re fish in a barrel down there,” Steve muttered, leaning around the side of the taxi to get a better view of the street below. He stood to make a move, before a shockingly strong hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back down, only for Bucky to lean forward and fire a shot at a Chitauri that had been hurtling directly at them.

“You’re about to do something stupid,” Bucky sighed, “you’ve got that look.”

“We can’t just leave ’em, Buck,” Steve argued, torn between the idea of abandoning a bunch of defenseless civilians and holding their post as planned.

“Go,” Romanoff chimed in, standing and firing both of her pistols as she targeted the new Chitauri that started bearing down on them, “we’ve got this.”

“You sure?” Steve asked, glancing to where Barton was in the middle of reloading his bow. He didn’t mean to insult the man, but compared to Bucky’s small arsenal…

“Cap, it would be my genuine pleasure.” Barton responded drolly, pressing a button that apparently activated his quiver, then turning and blindly firing off an arrow – which struck a passing Chitauri aircraft dead on, before apparently sending an electric pulse through it that sent both the vehicle and its passengers smashing into the pavement below, where it took out at least three of the foot soldiers.

Deciding that the shot was evidence enough of Barton’s competency, Steve turned to Bucky, who simply nodded as they made eye contact, evidently thinking the same thing. Steve took a deep breath, scanning the streets that ran between their position and the trapped civilians, quickly plotting out his course before taking off at a sprint. He could see Bucky in his periphery just before he leapt off of the bridge, keeping pace and firing shots at the squadron that set in on them but staying a few yards to Steve’s left. For his part, Steve leapt directly off of the middle of the bridge, landing easily on the bus below and using his momentum to roll so that he barely broke stride as he ran. Despite
the numerous Chitauri that continued falling around him, shots from their plasma beams continued to rain down around him, at one point actually hitting the vehicle that he had been running on, flinging him forward with enough force that he had to summersault through the air to land safely.

By this point he had lost sight of Bucky completely, but wouldn’t let himself worry for now; with the number of kill shots that continued to cover his back, he had no doubt that his friend was still fine, and covering his six as Steve had always been able to count on. Steve finally reached the group of police officers he had been running for, leaping on top of a squad car to get their attention before calling out orders.

“You need men in these buildings.” Steve commanded, pointing out the tallest structures around them. “There are people inside, and they’re going to be running right into the line of fire. You take them through the basements or through the subway. You keep them off the streets.” From the corner of his eye, Steve saw Bucky drop a couple of incoming Chitauri with single shots, even as the officers in front of him continued staring at him stupidly. “I need a perimeter as far back as 39th.”

“Why the hell should I take orders from you?” The policeman, who Steve assumed to be the chief, interrupted incredulously.

Before he could think of an answer, two Chitauri dropped onto the squad car next to him – Steve swung his shield, knocking the first one down, then turned and threw a punch that disarmed the other, before bringing his shield down with enough force that it chopped the thing’s arm off. As he turned back to finish the first one, Bucky swooped in from his hiding spot, blasting the thing’s head off before glancing at the officer in disgust. “You’re gonna ignore a direct order from Captain America?”

The officer blinked at the two of them, before turning away and speaking into his walkie. “I need men in those buildings. Lead the people down and away from the streets...”

Bucky’s snort drowned out whatever Steve might have been able to hear the chief continue to say, and a new onslaught of Chitauri took on their full attention, anyway. This group was small enough for Bucky to handle for a while, although things began getting dicey as their back-up rolled up Park Avenue, bearing down on their position. Steve pulled his own sidearm, unconfident that it would do much good to help - but before he was able to fire so much as a shot, an enormous lightning bolt splintered out of the sky, striking down every Chitauri fighter and aircraft within at least a block. There was a streak of red and an impossibly heavy impact next to them, which turned out to be Thor, apparently done fighting with Loki on the tower.

“What’s the story upstairs?” Steve asked, focusing on getting intel from Thor while Bucky scanned for the next attack.

“The power surrounding the cube is impenetrable,” Thor answered begrudgingly, glaring up at the continued beam of light the Tesseract was shooting into the portal.

“Thor’s right,” Tony’s voice interrupted over the coms, “we’ve got to deal with these guys.”

“Good thing we’ve got that under control, then,” Bucky scoffed, unloading the clip to his rifle and jamming a new one in before opening fire on yet another squad of Chitauri.

A hail of arrows joined his bullets, so that after a few seconds they were left alone again – Steve glanced over his shoulder to see Romanoff and Barton jogging over to join them. Romanoff asked how the hell they were supposed to go forward, a thought Steve was having himself, even as he answered shortly, “As a team.”
“I have unfinished business with Loki,” Thor interrupted, posturing as he looked to the sky.

“Yeah? Well get in line,” Barton muttered.

“Save it.” Steve ordered, trying to pull everyone back to the task at hand; the last thing they needed was a repeat of the helicarrier disaster, with all of them fracturing because of individual agendas. “Loki’s gonna keep this fight focused on us, and that’s exactly what we need. Without him, these things could run wild. We got Stark up top. He’s going to need us to…”

He trailed off, turning towards the improbable sound of a tired old motorbike rolling towards them – and the even more unlikely image of Bruce Banner riding it. “So,” he said cheerily as he stepped off of the bike, “this all seems horrible.”

“I’ve seen worse,” Romanoff responded, her face leery as she watched him approach. Banner, predictably, apologized – looking even more sheepish than he had before. “No, we could use a little worse.”

“Stark,” Steve announced into his own headpiece, remembering his request, “we got him.”

“Banner?” Stark’s voice asked. “Then tell him to suit up, I’m bringing the party to you.”

There wasn’t any time to wonder what Stark was getting at; a second later the Iron Man suit came flying into view, with one of the giant ships hot on his trail.

“Looks like parties have changed a lot since our day, Stark.” Buck drawled, raising his rifle even though all of them knew it wouldn’t do a damned bit of good.

“Dr. Banner,” Steve said as calmly as possible, watching as the man was already striding towards the oncoming monster, “now might be a really good time for you to get angry.”

“That’s my secret, Captain…” Banner said, glancing over his shoulder with a peace that was almost terrifying, his skin already beginning to take on a green hue. “I’m always angry.”

They all watched as Banner turned, tripling in size as he morphed into the Hulk, throwing an incredible punch in one continuous motion that actually stopped the giant Chitauri in mid-flight. Hulk roared in triumph as the thing crumpled to the ground motionless, and Steve felt his confidence in their chances rise.

“Call it, Captain,” Stark announced as he landed next to them, actually waiting on a plan.

Steve took one more look around, the strategy coming to him instantaneously, before he started barking orders. “Alright guys, listen up: until we can close the portal, our priority is containment. Barton, I want you on that roof, eyes on everything… call out patterns and strays. Bucky, get the corner opposite, you give us cover as long as Barton is occupied. Stark, you got the perimeter. Anything gets more than three blocks out, you turn it back or you turn it to ash.”

The suit actually nodded at Steve, acknowledging orders before grabbing Barton by the back of his vest, launching the both of them to the roof Steve had initially pointed out.

“Thor,” Steve continued, “you’ve gotta try and bottleneck that portal. Slow them down - you’ve got the lightning, light the bastards up.”

Thor nodded in agreement, spinning his hammer and glancing at Bucky who simply gave him a resigned shrug before being whisked away as well.
Steve couldn’t help watching until he knew that Buck was safe on his assigned rooftop before turning to Romanoff. “You and me, we stay here on the ground, keep the fighting here. And Hulk?” He asked, turning to the Hulk, who almost seemed as surprised by the command as Steve was by the fact that he acknowledged it. “Smash.”

From there, chaos reigned. Although Romanoff was an incredible combatant, and Bucky and Clint were dropping the flying Chitauri coming through their area like flies, it was still taking all that they had to hold their position… and the Chitauri only continued coming in droves. Steve tried to listen as Barton called out suggestions to Hulk, Thor and Stark, and while they weren’t exactly getting their asses kicked, it was obvious that they hardly had the situation under control.

Steve glanced to the portal, his stomach sinking as at least four more of the huge ships made their way through it.

“Captain, none of this is gonna mean a damned thing if we don’t close that portal.” Romanoff pointed out tiredly, pushing herself off of the ground and looking up to where the Chitauri continued to pour out of the hole above Stark Tower.

“Well our biggest guns can’t touch it,” Steve started, trying to think of any other option out loud.

“Maybe it’s not about guns.” Romanoff interrupted inscrutably, her eyes still locked on the tower.

Steve looked himself, trying to follow her train of thought… while he appreciated the idea of sending someone after it, they couldn’t exactly lose Stark or Thor’s abilities to it, and no one else would be able to get to it quickly enough. “If you wanna get up there you’re gonna need a ride.”

“I got a ride,” Romanoff answered immediately, walking away from him as she continued to track the Chitauri flying wildly around them. “I could use a boost, though.”

Steve put her meaning together, and for a second wanted to laugh at the joke - but in the little bit of time he had been working with Agent Romanoff, he already knew her well enough to tell that she was being completely serious. He readied his shield, watching again as another set of Chitauri streaked above them, barely avoiding Bucky’s shots. “You sure about this?” Steve asked skeptically.

“Yeah,” Romanoff muttered, clearly stealing herself, “it’s gonna be fun.”

Steve shook his head, talking quickly into his com as Romanoff took a running start at him – “Buck, hold your fire,” then hoisted the shield up, so that Romanoff could use it as a springboard, flinging her a good twenty feet into the air; just enough that she was able to grab hold of the aircraft that screamed past, whisking her away.

The second that she was gone the Chitauri on the ground set in on Steve en masse, racing towards him as they apparently recognized that he was alone and outnumbered. He was able to fight a few off handedly, then knocked another one away with his shield, before someone dropped heavily next to him and a spray of bullets fanned out, mowing down the majority of the foot soldiers that had been advancing on him.

Bucky stood next to him, scowling for a moment before turning an all-too-familiar smirk on Steve. “Had ‘em on the ropes, I know…”

“… did you just jump off the fuckin’ building?” Steve asked, his voice strangled and his heart racing as he put together the events of the past few seconds.

“Only the last six stories,” Bucky responded nonchalantly. “I reloaded when you gave your last
order and noticed that Stark was getting all he wanted from a group of the grunts that had knocked him down three streets over, so I repelled into a better position and got them off his ass - then looked down and had a good feeling about the rest of the drop.”

Steve gaped at him for a moment, but before he could even begin to think of a response his thoughts were interrupted. “Captain, the bank on 42nd past Madison,” Barton called out through the coms, “they’ve cornered a lot of civilians in there.”

“We’re on it.” Bucky responded for him. Steve ground his teeth together, still shaken up over his friend’s stupidity, but took off for the bank Barton had mentioned at a run – they hardly had time to argue (dumbass, overly-risky, borderline-suicidal) battle tactics, now.

The situation inside the building was about as bad as it could be – at least eight Chitauri that they could count from outside, most of them on the second level of the bank while a huge group of defenseless humans remained trapped in the lobby of the main-level below. Steve jumped in through the window, drawing their attention to him – thankfully the idea worked, as four of them immediately set on him, fighting from close range. A few seconds into their scuffle Steve heard another window break, then thankfully the familiar sound of Bucky’s rifle firing, counting off five shots before two of the Chitauri took him on at the same time, ripping his cowl free as they gained an advantage on him.

The alien let go of his arm just long enough for Steve to swing his shield at its neck, dropping it with the force he struck with. As he followed through on the swing Steve sensed something fly through the air just above him… then heard the other Chitauri he had been fighting fall heavily to the ground, a bullet hole dead in the center of its forehead. Steve glanced in Bucky’s direction with a thankful smile.

“Nice shot,” he started, then picked up on an ominous beeping noise that was clearly picking up speed. They both turned towards it, finding one Chitauri left; Bucky took aim and fired, but not before the thing could throw the beeping device in its hand towards the crowd. Steve didn’t need to be an expert in Alien technology to know that the thing was an explosive, and reacted on pure instinct, tucking the shield in close to his shoulder and diving off of the balcony, flinging himself directly at the bomb.

The shield easily took the force of the blast, but the impact sent him flying, smashing through one of the balcony windows and crashing in a heap on one of the cars still parked outside. Steve took a second to assess himself, the fact that he’d swore he’d heard Bucky screaming over the din of it all making him worried he might have taken a blow to the head, after all. While he was winded and sore as hell, he was able to stand back up, which meant he’d be able to get back in the fight soon enough.

Shaking himself to clear his head, Steve looked around behind him, glad at least to see police leading the people who had been inside the bank away from the building. A few vaguely familiar faces seemed to stare back at him as they moved along with the crowd, but Steve couldn’t tell if that was because they belonged to people he’d met in the past week, or because he was imagining it. Suddenly, someone jumped out of the second story window above him – although he landed as if the leap had been nothing, Bucky’s eyes were wild as he scrambled to his feet.

“You stupid punk,” he growled lowly, shouldering his rifle for a moment as he grabbed at Steve’s shoulders, looking him up and down as he checked for injuries. “Pull a stunt like that again and I’ll shoot you myself, Stevie, I swear to fuckin’ God…”

A plasma blast hit the wall behind them, sending a shower of concrete and announcing that another group of Chitauri were advancing on them. “Save the ammo for the aliens ‘til they’re gone,” Steve
responded, turning and flinging his shield at the nearest group.

They stood side by side, holding their position long enough to be sure that the building behind them was emptied. Steve stole a quick glance over his shoulder, confirming that there weren’t any civvies left in the area, before advancing into the middle of the street, hoping to be more effective by opening up the room to fight a bit. Bucky stayed directly on his back, and for an indeterminable amount of time he focused on nothing but fighting like hell, the sound of Bucky’s guns firing the only thing outside of his shield and his fists that Steve allowed himself to pay any attention to.

So of course, he didn’t miss the terrifying sound of an empty clip clicking uselessly, or Bucky’s growl of frustration as he had to turn the gun over in his hands, swinging it by the barrel as if it were a bat. For a while it was an all-out brawl; thankfully the serum that each of them had gave both Steve and Bucky the strength and speed to hold their own against the Chitauri, despite the aliens’ size and the fact that they still had functioning weapons. Steve handed his shield off to Bucky on the follow-through of swinging it into an attacking Chitauri’s face, giving Bucky just enough time to swing it into position and protect the both of them from an oncoming plasma blast, reflecting the shot back at the grunt that had fired it before handing it back to Steve and pulling a tactical knife from his jacket, readying it as a pair of Chitauri charged at him on foot.

Steve turned his attention back to his front just in time to block a blast from another alien’s gun, then set himself back to battling again, fighting back the seemingly endless onslaught as well as he could.

Things seemed to be going well enough until he heard a choked, “Dammit… get off!” Steve looked over in time to see the Chitauri grab Bucky’s head from behind, and threw his shield at the bastard as hard as he could while Bucky turned himself out of its course, leaving the Chitauri to get bowled over by the impact – but not before it’s scaly hand had scrabbled at his ear, ripping the controller for his arm off. The prosthetic immediately fell heavy and motionless at his side, pulling him down as Bucky dove for the device. He grabbed it off of the ground and tried to hook it back behind his ear, although even from a distance Steve could tell that it had been badly crushed. “No - no, shit - not now,” Bucky moaned, looking so panicked that it knocked the wind out of Steve.

A second later Steve was hit around the middle by another Chitauri, actually knocking the wind out of him. He looked around frantically to see what had happened to Bucky, half-afraid that they were finally at the end of their rope, when another jolt of lighting hit the ground, knocking down all of the aliens surrounding them before Thor took their place.

The Asgardian looked down at Steve – kindly, but without pity at least. While it didn’t do a lot for his pride, he had to admit that he was glad to see him. “Ready for another bout?” Thor boomed, extending a hand in Steve’s direction.

“Why, you getting sleepy?” Steve asked sarcastically. Thor grinned as he helped him up, then turned and flung the hammer at an incoming Chitauri foot soldier. From the corner of his vision, Steve saw Bucky, left arm still hanging uselessly at his side, kick a dead Chitauri over and pull a small plasma gun off of him, hoisting it experimentally in his right hand.

“Buck,” he said quietly, “Maybe you should…”

Bucky turned with a furious scowl, awkwardly pointing the alien gun and pulling the trigger - somehow managing to take out the Chitauri that had been coming up behind Steve without his noticing. “Shut the hell up, Rogers. I ain’t quitting until something makes me.”

Steve clenched his teeth, knowing better than to even try to argue with Bucky about his decision, then moved to his friend’s left side, deciding if he couldn’t get the idiot to stand down, he could at
least give him cover on his defenseless side. Bucky pursed his lips, then turned so that he could better face Steve’s back, firing the stolen Chitauri gun at anything that even looked like it might try to approach on Steve’s six. Having Thor fighting with them at least made it a more even fight, but the longer that it dragged on, especially with the continued radio silence on Stark and Romanoff’s parts, the more futile it began to feel.

“Guys, I’m in.” Romanoff announced through their headsets, as if reading Steve’s thoughts, and he almost wanted to cry with relief. “I can close the portal…”

“WAIT!” Stark shouted, his voice strained over the com. “I’ve got an inbound missile that’s about to go nuclear, and I know just the place for it.”

Steve was hardly going to argue against Stark’s logic, and so went back to simply trying to hold their position, looking to the sky as frequently as possible in hope of seeing the suit fly over. While he appreciated the need to save the city, he wasn’t sure how much longer they would last with more Chitauri troops pouring out of Loki’s portal. Finally, he saw a streak of red tear through the sky, and paused in his fighting to watch as Stark flew directly into the center of the portal, disappearing from view. A couple of seconds later, all of the Chitauri seemed to drop simultaneously – even the floating monsters fell from the sky, going motionless and unresponsive on the streets. Stark must have used the bomb to destroy… whatever it was they had been deploying from, cutting off the life force of those who had already come through the portal.

They stood in surprise for a few moments, Bucky hesitatingly toeing at one of the fallen with his boot, as if to confirm that they really were dead, before all of them turned their attention to the portal, waiting for Stark to pass back through it. The seconds dragged on, and with them Steve felt worry setting in – Stark was definitely taking too long for things to be normal.

“I don’t know how much longer I can hold it.” Romanoff radioed in, the strain clear in her voice from whatever it was she was trying to do to shut the Tesseract down.

“Close it.” Steve said tiredly into his headset. He already felt guilty for the loss of Tony, despite their differences – but they could hardly leave the portal open. Even if they had eliminated the Chitauri force they had been facing, there was no way of knowing what still might be waiting on the other side of the portal.

There was a tense moment of silence between all of them, then a pulse of energy seemed to surround the top of Stark tower before the beam of energy that had been flowing from the Tesseract puttered out, the hole in the sky shrinking around it. Just before it had closed completely, a familiar red and gold figure slipping through it.

“I’ll be damned,” Steve muttered, a relieved smile pulling at the corner of his lips.

He sensed Bucky move so that they were standing together, watching as Stark continued his decent towards them, when Bucky spoke up. “He isn’t slowing down - Stark? You copy?”

When the question was meant with radio silence Thor began swinging his hammer, apparently meaning to attempt a rescue flight (assuming he could get to Stark in time), but before he could take off an enormous green figure leapt between buildings, intercepting Stark as the Hulk leapt through the air before landing on a nearby bridge.

Steve, Bucky and Thor all ran to the two of them as quickly as possible, watching with no little concern as Hulk tore the faceplate off of Stark’s suit. Tony’s face remained motionless beneath it, disturbingly peaceful for how wound-up he usually looked. “Is he,” Steve started to ask, but before any of them could get closer the Hulk reared back, roaring horribly in Stark’s face.
Tony woke with a startle, screaming back in response then panting heavily as he looked wildly around between the four of them. “WOAH! What just happened?” he asked, his voice clearly panicked. “Please tell me nobody kissed me…”

“Last thing on any of our minds, Stark, believe me.” Bucky drawled, shaking his head as he shot a grin at Steve.

“We won,” Steve murmured, still staring up at Buck as he answered Stark’s question. He vaguely noticed Stark start rambling about - something again, but he missed the topic completely. Bucky’s smile was infectious, and he found himself returning it, even as his chest felt like it was constricting. Because… they’d done it. Against all odds, they’d somehow come out on top. And even more than that – he was in New York with Bucky beside him, a little battered and bruised but alive and together and dammit, they’d won.

It was exactly what they should have gotten in 1945, but for the first time since waking up, Steve could really let himself focus on something other than everything they had lost.

“We’re not finished, yet.” Thor spoke up, and Bucky immediately looked away, breaking the moment.

Steve nodded, feeling his ears heat up as if he’d been called out for something, and rose to his feet, knowing that Thor was right.

“And then shawarma after?” Stark whined, still trapped in his suit on the ground.

The trip to the penthouse of Stark Tower was thankfully quick – because of its power source, the electricity in the building was miraculously still on, meaning Steve, Bucky, Barton and Romanoff could take the ridiculously fast elevator to the top instead of relying on the other three to transport them. Loki was a mess, buried in a pile of rubble in the middle of the room when they walked in, and he thankfully surrendered easily as the entire team loomed ominously over him.

The rest of them milled around as Thor fastened the shackles on Loki, a heady mix of both exhaustion and residual adrenaline leaving them silent and restless. Steve watched as Bucky unbuttoned his coat, frowning as he crossed the room towards the bar, unhooking the straps to his prosthesis as he went. He dropped the powerless arm unceremoniously on the marble with a loud bang, his back still to the group, before turning to face them all with a smile that Steve could tell was clearly forced, nodding to where Thor had just sat his hammer on top of Loki’s restraints.

“He’s not goin’ anywhere, then?”

Thor nodded, “The seidr on the shackles and muzzle will prevent him from performing any of his usual tricks, and no one but I am capable of moving Mjölnir.”

“Yes, schwarma joint, just a couple of blocks from here; shouldn’t take more than 10 minutes to walk.” Bucky was the first one to fall into step with him, making their way towards the elevator, and although their backs were to the rest of them Steve could tell he was beaming obnoxiously. “I knew I liked you, Barnes. I’m telling you, drop by tomorrow, I’ll have the R&D lab open again, we can build you the most advanced go-go gadget arm the world has ever dreamed of…”
Steve followed closely behind the both of them, trying his best to repress his feelings of unease over how Bucky was acting. Of course, one successful mission was hardly going to fix everything for the both of them – and it gave them something to work from. And if Bucky could get a new arm and a friend out of it… well, that’d be even better.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I should probably say that I didn't intend for this chapter (or any of the rest of the story, for that matter) to come across as if I was trying to make Steve weaker in this story than he was in the actual movie-verse... This Steve Rogers would still be more than capable of taking on the Chitauri scenes that he did in the movie on his own, too, but *Bucky voice* thing is... he doesn't have to anymore. Kinda the whole point of the story, I suppose.

Thanks so much for the continued reviews and comments, the support this has been getting has been so much more than I could have hoped for! I've still got one more week of school craziness, but hope to be able to put up another chapter next weekend, so stay tuned.
May-June 2012

Chapter Summary

Bucky gets to know Tony Stark, makes a few discoveries about his body, and works on properly settling in to the future with Steve.

Oh... and there's the arm.

Chapter Notes

I added it to the last chapter as well, but in case you missed it... here's a tumblr post explaining the visual that I had for Bucky throughout the Avengers scenes, in case it wasn't clear in the written descriptions: Avenger Bucky

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The weeks following what was being hailed as “The Battle of New York” were… surprisingly uneventful. The following morning all of them had gathered at Central Park to see Thor off, giving a considerably less pleasant send-off to his prisoner. Stark had insisted that Bucky join him and Banner back at Stark tower, where they spent the better part of the day hashing out preliminary plans for his arm: Bucky listing his requests, Stark making ridiculous suggestions, and Banner chiming in with what would actually be feasible. In the end Bucky had left with a pair of tiny phones (StarkPhones, Stark had bragged, before yammering on about the technology and how much better they apparently were than EyePhones - Bucky missed most of it) so that both he and Steve could be easily contacted, as well as the promise that they'd have the mock-up for his new arm done in no time.

He woke around 04:00 the following morning to the sound of his StarkPhone ringing – Stark, who apparently hadn’t bothered to sleep, regretfully informed him that it would be a few weeks before he could begin on a working prototype; something about needing to contact a neurosurgeon and having a sports doctor look at the plans and other details that Bucky dozed off in the middle of attempting to listen to.

The odd interruptions from Stark at random hours continued, and in the meantime Bucky and Steve worked on settling in to their new, strange lives. At one point Agent Romanoff had stopped by their apartment, armed with Chinese takeout and a tiny moleskin notebook, which she handed off to Steve. “It’s a list of all of the restaurants around Manhattan that you boys need to try. Food’s changed a lot since your day, you’re welcome in advance.” She’d also set them up with some internet service called Netflix, showed them how to search for movies and documentaries on it, and added a page of recommendations to Steve’s notebook before leaving just as suddenly as she had arrived.

That encounter, though, had been nowhere near as surreal as the entire day they’d had to spend at the Veteran’s Affairs office with Agent Hill, filling out countless forms and surveys before some poor little grunt in a suit had taken them into a cubicle, tried to explain compound interest and back-pay
for soldiers who turned up after being declared MIA, and eventually handed the both of them sheets of paper describing how much the US Army was apparently paying them. Bucky, despite having always been good with numbers, was completely unable to comprehend that many zeroes behind a dollar sign - and only felt marginally better looked at Steve’s pale face as he stared blankly at his own sheet.

Hill told them on their way out that she’d be happy to have SHIELD financial planners talk to them about investing, which they both vaguely agreed to get back to her on. They’d both lived through the Depression of course, and read about multiple crashes during their time on ice. After discussing their options most of the night, they both decided to turn the offer down, and keep the fact that they’d ended up with fifty grand in cash stuffed under each of their mattresses to themselves.

Ten days after the attacks, Steve had finally gathered up the nerve to call Peggy, and had spent most of his night locked in his room on the landline, with Bucky puttering around in the living room – unable to sleep and trying his best to not eavesdrop on whatever was being said. Steve finally emerged just before dawn the next morning, eyes red and face pinched and exhausted, looking surprised to find Bucky seated on the couch watching Mythbusters. “I’m gonna take the train to DC tomorrow,” he announced on the walk back from their morning run, having sprinted around Central Park until they were both panting and shaking from exertion. “Spend a few days visiting with Peg.”

Bucky raised his eyebrows in surprise, before asking, “You want company?”

Steve shook his head emphatically, “Not this time, I think - I need to do this on my own, Buck.” He paused outside the door of their apartment complex, key fob in hand. “Unless… you’ll be alright here on your own?”

Bucky gave him his most confident smile, “I’ll be fine. Go sweep your girl off her feet, I’ll hold down the fort here.”

Which was how they’d ended up spending their first long weekend apart: Steve bidding him a quiet, nervous goodbye the next morning before slinging a knapsack over his shoulder and making his way out the door. Aside from a brief Made it, no problems. text a few hours later, Bucky heard nothing else from him. While it wasn’t exactly surprising, Bucky couldn’t really deny his disappointment.

By the end of his first night on his own Bucky was finding it hard to keep himself occupied, until he found himself wandering into Stark tower the following afternoon, awkwardly making his way past construction crews in the shell of a main lobby then heading up in the elevator to meet Stark in the same lab as they had worked in before. JARVIS announced when he had gotten to the appropriate floor that Stark was expecting Bucky (the AI was something that he was still getting used to, but at least it didn’t startle him like it had the first couple of days) so he made his way down he glassed in hallway, opening the appropriate door then stopping in the doorway in surprise.

The interior of the lab itself still looked the same as Bucky had remembered it a couple of weeks prior, only it looked as if the Iron Man suit had turned it into a production line. Components of at least twenty of the suits were lying around the room – most in pieces, but one disturbingly fully-assembled and seated in the computer chair Dr. Banner had favored the last time Bucky had been there. He stepped a bit further into the room, looking around at the chaos, trying not to look too overwhelmed, lest it give Stark ammunition to start in on him with. “Uh, Tony?” He called out, slowly making his way into the lab.

Stark popped up from beneath a desk in the corner, dark smudges under his eyes and his hair in disarray – it was clear that he hadn’t seen a bed in a few days. Bucky knew the look all-too-well – he’d seen it every time he’d made the mistake of glancing in a mirror the first few months after Kreishberg. “I promise to build you the most advanced prosthetic the world has ever seen, and you
walk into my lab wearing that hunk of junk again?” Stark asked peevishly, before Bucky could garner any further sympathy for him.

Bucky shrugged, slipping his leather jacket off and dropping it onto a chair not occupied by robotic armor parts. “It’s better than nothin’, and it helps with the phantom pains,” he responded, refusing to apologize. While he wouldn’t gripe at Stark about the amount of time it was taking to build something better, he was hardly going to apologize for not using what SHIELD had gifted him with in the meantime. “You said you needed measurements?” He added, hoping that it would work for changing the subject.

“Yeah,” Stark responded immediately, standing and making his way across the room, already talking a mile a minute as he poured himself a drink from the carafe in the corner of the room. “Talked to my guy about our basic design plans, I want to get your dimensions and start building the prototype; just something to confirm that the design specs work, then we’ll get to business on making the real thing. Vibranium isn’t exactly easy to come by, so it’s going to have to be a measure five times, cut once kind of deal.”

“Vibranium, you mean like the shield?” Bucky asked, unable to hold back his surprised frown.

Stark shrugged, as if he wasn’t promising one of the rarest and most expensive materials on the planet. “You said you wanted to be able to go into combat with it - nothing better for withstanding force, and as long as your bone and muscle tests add up to what I’m pretty positive they’re going to, your body won’t have any trouble supporting it. Anyway, pull your shirt off and get that damned Fischer Price model out of my sight, we can scan all of your basic measurements here and I’ll show you what I have in mind so far.”

Bucky shrugged in response, pulling his t-shirt over his head with only moderate difficulty then unfastening the straps for his prosthesis. He left it and the headset next to his jacket, before making his way across the room, waiting for Stark to indicate which of the hundreds of monitors he wanted him at.

“Alright, we’ll just - Holy shit.” Stark gaped, staring at Bucky with a surprise that made him feel horrifically uncomfortable. “What the hell have you and Rogers been doing the past week? Devouring oxen and lifting semis?”

Without thinking about it, Bucky crossed his right arm over his chest, staring Stark down as he spoke. “The hell are you talking about? We’ve tried a couple of restaurants Romanoff recommended and sparred at the gym. Why?”

“I mean - not to be weird, but have you looked at yourself?” Stark asked, reaching out hesitantly and poking Bucky’s chest. “You were built, but not like this. Now you look like you’re trying to give Cap a run for his money in the beefcake department.”

Bucky frowned, looking down at himself in earnest. He hadn’t paid much attention to his body since waking up, truth be told; he usually avoided looking as much as he could when he was in the shower, as the stump still made him uneasy – not just the fact that it was a reminder of what he’d lost, but also how perfectly it had healed, without a scar in sight… as if he’d never actually had it at all. But looking now, pointedly avoiding his left side, he had to admit that Stark had a point. He’d always had a lean boxer’s build, well-muscled and obviously powerful but in a compact sort of way. Now, though, his chest was noticeably broader, and his right arm looked as if he really had spent the entirety of the past month lifting heavy things. He felt thicker through his torso as well, still well-toned but substantial enough that the waistband of his jeans cut into his sides slightly, while the legs were practically shrink-wrapped around his thighs.
“Huh,” Bucky murmured, “Guess that’s why my clothes have been fitting so funny.”

Stark snorted, shaking his head and moving to a tower of monitors nearby. “Guess so,” he responded sarcastically, pulling a couple of scanners down from the wall. “At least it gives me more wiggle room in designing the arm, and a little less concern about the weight of it. If anything, bigger might be better – actually balance you out once you’ve reached Popeye proportions.” He flipped a couple of switches on the monitors, before vaguely pointing to a spot in the ground at the center of them. “How much more did you plan on filling out? In case I need to start planning on a bigger order…”

“You actually saw the SHIELD data,” Bucky responded begrudgingly, following as Stark had directed him, “All we got to find out was that we’d live. So, you tell me. My guess is it’s just the serum reacting to the fact that I’m off rations for the first time in my life.” He felt an uncomfortable rush of memories as Stark powered the monitors up, remembering the constant, gnawing hunger that he’d felt in the months after captivity, how tight his jacket felt by the end of the war despite how gaunt everyone else seemed. His mind unhelpfully supplied him with the image of himself as big as the Hulk, mindless and smashing shit, too massive for anyone to stop him.

His thoughts were thankfully cut off by Stark’s dark mutterings, his enhanced hearing allowing him to pick up some unsavory cuss words followed by Fury. “From what I saw,” Stark began, shaking himself and sounding as blithe as ever, “your cell turn-over rate runs at about 80% capacity as Cap’s does, so I would imagine your general metabolism does the same. Granted, he had the benefit of Dad’s magic superhero microwave so that his physical changes were immediate, but like you said; it’s probably just your cells getting used to finally having proper nutrition. I’m sure it’ll reach a steady state eventually.” He paused, checking the monitor one last time before moving away from Bucky with a small frown. “I’ll email you the data after you leave, if you want to look it over yourself.”

“Thanks, that’d be great,” Bucky drawled, although his appreciation was sincere – even if he didn’t understand a lot of it, it would be nice to have the opportunity to at least try to learn what the hell had happened to his body after Zola’s experiments.

Thankfully, Stark dropped the topic after telling JARVIS to send Bucky the information, instead focusing on the scanners as they worked their way around Bucky’s right side, blue and green lights slowly scanning from his fingertips all the way to his pectoral muscle. It was weird, Bucky thought, expecting to feel some sort of heat or other sensation as the scanners hummed and spun – instead of nothing. They finally powered down, apparently having gotten what they needed, and Stark moved back to his screen, muttering to himself as he input the data.

“How much more did you plan on filling out? In case I need to start planning on a bigger order…”

“Got what you need?” Bucky asked, beginning to feel chilly and more than a little awkward as he stood in the middle of the room shirtless.

As an answer Stark waived his hands, an image projecting away from the screen so that a hologram of a full-sized arm glowed faintly in the air between them. Bucky stared at it, not even bothering to hide his fascination – the basic structure was contoured to look like a real arm, down to slight definition in the muscles, but the casing itself seemed to be made of small, interlocking pieces – nothing at all like the bulky limb he had been wearing. Stark moved his hands again, separating the image so that the casing hovered above what looked to be the guts of the thing. “Alright, here’s my plan – we’ll start by putting a rod into what’s left of your humerus, so that we can use your actual shoulder joint as the anchor and give the thing natural range of motion. You’ll need a bone scan ahead of time to make sure that your bones will be able to stand the force and the weight, but based on the tests SHIELD ran on you it shouldn’t be an issue. Then there will be neurosensors that will act like real nerves, plug into your current nerves and run down directly into the engines in the
Bucky shook his head, still staring at the images in front of him, before reaching out with his right hand, taking the image of the outer covering and turning it around to examine it. “It sounds perfect. How are you going to attach it? And what’s the power source?”

Stark fell back into a lab chair near him, his usually confident air sliding a bit. “I’ll put an arc reactor somewhere in the upper arm; plenty of power to make the thing punch as hard as you want, no risk of tissue damage or poisoning from it, and it’ll last at least fifty years before you need to worry about replacing it with a new one – probably even longer.” He sighed, tossing the guts to the arm away and staring at the casing as well. “The other bit - I still need to work out. Obviously it will need additional anchors to keep the metal in place, then a way to fuse it tight to your skin so nothing can get into it. I’ve got some people looking into our options.”

Bucky had to bite his tongue to keep himself from asking how much it hurt Stark to admit he didn’t know something; amusing as it was, he figured it would be best to spare the lip, especially given all of the work the man was already putting in for him. “Alright, well - no rush, I suppose,” Bucky finally said instead, making his way back across the lab and slipping his prosthetic back on. “This’ll do as long as there aren’t any new aliens to fight, and it’s not like Stevie and I don’t have enough catching up to do to keep ourselves busy.”

“Speaking of the good Captain, where is he?” Stark asked as Bucky pulled his t-shirt over his head. “Took the train to DC a couple of days ago,” Bucky responded vaguely, wondering if he should be offended by Stark’s question – it wasn’t as if he needed Steve when he was out and about; the two of them were more than capable of doing things on their own.

“Ah, meeting with the President, I assume?” Stark asked sarcastically, his eyes still on the computer screen in front of him. “I’m sure he’d like nothing more than to pin a few dozen medals on him…” Bucky snorted at that, “I don’t doubt it, but he refuses to accept them until I get mine, too, so no. Catching up with a friend.”

Stark looked over at that, thankfully not prying any deeper into the friend bit (the last thing Bucky wanted to do was to talk about Peggy with him). “You both should head down there - it’d be good press, especially on the heels of the country realizing you’re both alive because they caught you in the middle of saving New York.”

“You give me something to show off and not look like a cripple in front of the whole country,” Bucky responded, shrugging his jacket onto his shoulders, “and I’ll get on it.” He paused for just a second at the door of the lab, taking in again how awful Stark looked, and for a second considered mentioning it - it seemed ungrateful to simply demand the arm and then wander off while it was obvious that the poor guy was dealing with some shit, but ultimately he decided against it. God knew Bucky had enough issues to deal with himself, and it wasn’t as if a guy appreciated someone pointing out that their battle fatigue was showing; soldier or not, he couldn’t imagine Stark wouldn’t be offended. “Anyway, let me know when you need to see me again,” he added awkwardly, before making his way to the elevator.

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Although it wasn’t exactly a surprise, Bucky still felt unsettled by the quiet hurt that Steve had been emanating for the two days since he’d returned from DC. He’d kept to himself mostly, rarely using
more than a couple of words to answer anything Bucky said to him, and constantly playing melancholy Nat King Cole singles on the gramophone they had set up in the living room. He never once mentioned Peggy - although, to be fair, Bucky hadn’t exactly had the stones to ask him about her, either.

Finally on the third day, while he was frying ham slices and waiting for Steve to get out of the shower after their morning run, Bucky came up with a plan, grinning to himself as he moved the meat onto pre-sliced bagels and plated them. “Let’s go to a game,” he announced, sliding Steve’s breakfast sandwich across the kitchen counter before he’d even cleared the kitchen door. “Weather’s been nice enough the few days, and I’m sure the Bums will be in town for a series - if not today, by the end of the week.”

Way back when, baseball had always been an easy way to get Steve out of a funk – even when he was at his lowest, when his Ma was sick and they were all quietly worrying how the hell he would survive on his own once she was gone: Bucky could save up a few days pay and talk him into going to Ebbets field. Between peanuts and box scores, it gave them at least a couple of hours to sit out in the sun and get away from all of the shit that was hanging over them; really, Bucky was embarrassed that he hadn’t thought of it before now.

“I doubt Ebbets is still standing, Buck,” Steve scoffed around an enormous bite of bagel, but Bucky was already moving to grab his laptop from the living room.

“Well, wherever they’re playing now. As long as it ain’t Yanks Stadium, who cares?”

The amused snort that he received from the kitchen was enough to raise Bucky’s spirits, and he logged in as quickly as he could, typing “Dodgers Tickets” into the search bar.

“Probably gonna cost us a thousand bucks,” Steve murmured, moving closer and leaning against the counter as Bucky clicked on the first link.

“Good thing we’re flush then, innit?” Bucky smirked. “And lookie there: they’re home this afternoon against the Cardinals, whoever the hell that is.” He’d already clicked on the link, grinning away; regardless of how high the ticket prices were (judging by how ridiculous charges were at the grocers he wouldn’t be surprised if Steve was right), Bucky was confident that the afternoon would do them both enough good that it would be worth it.

Steve leaned over to watch as Bucky browsed for tickets, chewing obnoxiously in his ear, but Bucky found himself glad for the change after the distance that had stretched between them. “Dodgers Stadium,” he murmured, pointing to the words across the top of the screen, “Real original, whoever picked that one out…”

Steve hummed in agreement, before pausing and leaning a little closer. “Hey Buck, hold on. It says the game is in Los Angeles….”

Bucky frowned, looking away from the seating chart on the screen. “What? No - I’m sure the schedule page said it was at home…”

“But that’s an LA address, not Brooklyn.” Steve responded, pointing to where the address was clearly listed underneath the stadium name.

Bucky clicked the link for the team’s homepage, already feeling his stomach dropping as it loaded up. There it was, plain as day across the top of the page. The Los Angeles Dodgers. “What. The. Fuck.”
“I could buy them, you know? If you want me to. Move them back to Brooklyn, I’m sure there’s space for a park.”

Bucky had barely finished explaining the disappointment that had been having to settle on a Mets game when Stark made his offer – his initial response was to chuckle at how ridiculous the statement was, before he realized that Stark wasn’t only perfectly capable of doing such a thing… he really might do it. “Ah, no, it’s fine. Just a shitty way to find out, you know? The Mets were fine.”

“Right. Anyway, back to shop.” Stark clapped his hands, turning around and grabbing something off of the desk behind him, then turning and presenting Bucky with a mock-up of the arm they had discussed. “This is just the casing for now, I’m still working out the mechanisms for articulation and whatnot, but I figured you should get a look, first.”

Bucky was already reaching out for it, barely listening as Stark spoke. He used his right hand to gently bend the fingers on the prosthesis, marveling over the amount of motion they could achieve - even as a rough model of the casing, it was obvious that this arm would be far better than the one he was stuck with now.

“And also,” Stark added smugly, clearly picking up on how happy Bucky was with the results, “Start talking about what kind of toys we’re going to put on it.”

“Toys?” Bucky asked, frowning as he pulled his eyes away from the mock-up.

“Sure; extenders, lasers in the fingertips for aiming sightlines…”

“No,” Bucky responded immediately, rolling his eyes. “No, I just need a damned arm that works, not some freak show trick.”

“Come on, Buckster, live a little! It’s 2012… Oh! I could put a repulsor in the palm!”

“No,” Bucky responded again, tightly.

“No, hear me out, it would be great! You could use it to fly, too: we could use someone else on the team with ups, given we have no idea of knowing when Thor will be around…”

“I don’t want damned lasers or repulsors or jetpacks or whatever other stupid shit you’re thinkin’ of,” Bucky responded, a bit more harshly than he had initially intended. “Wouldn’t do any good with just the one, anyway - I’d end up flying around in circles.” The look of surprise on Stark’s face only irritated Bucky further, so that he was grumbling on before he could stop himself. “Yeah, I know how physics work; me and Steve… we aren’t actually stupid, y’know.” Even to his own ears the words were petulant, but once he got going Bucky couldn’t stop, remembering how much Stark had gotten Steve going as well. “Just cuz we didn’t grow up with the kind of tech you guys are used to, and couldn’t afford some big fancy college… I like to read and tinker with shit, and Steve’s always been good at figuring stuff out.”

Stark, at least, had the decency to look abashed for a second before opening his mouth. “I’ve never actually thought that either of you were stupid,” he started, hastily adding, “Not as smart as me, of course, but who is?”

“Really? You rag on Steve enough that it feels a lot like it.”

“Oh please, that’s all just fun for me, I only tease people if I like them. And it’s not like getting knocked off of his pedestal is going to hurt Saint Rogers…”
“He ain’t remotely close to being a saint, and neither of us are used to total strangers being funny with us outside of bullies and assholes, so try showing a little respect for a change, okay?”

Stark watched him for a second, his face inscrutable in a way that made Bucky oddly nervous, afraid that maybe he’d said too much. “Fine, I’ll try to lay off the Cap jokes.” He finally said begrudgingly, before grabbing the arm and moving it back to the work bench. “Where is he, anyway? I figured he’d have stopped in by now. What’s he doing while you’re here?”

Bucky failed to see how that was any of Stark’s business, but kept it to himself. “Helping with clean-up, most days,” he answered instead, sincerely doubting that Stark didn’t know as much, given how many trashy news sources had started covering it since they had recognized Steve amongst the volunteers.

“Of course, should have known,” Stark muttered under his breath.

Bucky decided to leave it alone, poking around on a laptop that Stark had left open for his use awhile simultaneously trying to think up an excuse to leave. He felt like he’d probably already given too much of his own feelings away for one day, and it wasn’t as if Stark actually needed him around for the work, anyway.

“You know, he used to talk about him like he was a God.” Stark murmured a while later.

It took Bucky a couple of seconds to put together what the hell Stark was even talking about, or if it was supposed to be addressed to him. The man had an unnerving habit of chattering away to himself, or to the robots around the room. “Howard?” He finally asked quietly, unsurprised when Stark startled a bit at the response. “Cuz I mean, he’s the one who made Steve that way.”

“Yeah,” Stark laughed, “I read some of the notes after he died, never realized Cap was so scrawny before - they don’t exactly teach you that in the history books.”

“There’s a lot no one ever bothered to mention about Steve,” Bucky responded tightly. “Never bothered trying to figure anything out about him, once he went to war; it’s like the country just needed a face to rally around, so they blew his up and went with whatever character they wanted to put behind it.”

Stark was surprisingly quiet about that - as soon as he’d said it, Bucky was afraid that he would have jumped on the bitterness behind the comment. Instead, they sat in awkward silence for a few more minutes before Stark interrupted it again. “He talked about you sometimes too, though. Dad, I mean… said you seemed to like hanging around the field labs when you had downtime.”

Bucky shrugged, surprised to hear it… the way that Howard had ignored him during the war, he’d really figured that he hadn’t noticed anyone outside of Steve and Peggy, not that Bucky could really blame him. And he had enjoyed tinkering around in the weapons holds when Steve was busy with officer meetings; it was easy to get lost in them, a chance to hide from his worries and nightmares for a little while, without having to put a brave face on for the Howlies. “Your dad was a hell of a scientist,” he finally ended up saying awkwardly. “He talked about you sometimes too, though. Dad, I mean… said you seemed to like hanging around the field labs when you had downtime.”

Bucky shrugged, surprised to hear it… the way that Howard had ignored him during the war, he’d really figured that he hadn’t noticed anyone outside of Steve and Peggy, not that Bucky could really blame him. And he had enjoyed tinkering around in the weapons holds when Steve was busy with officer meetings; it was easy to get lost in them, a chance to hide from his worries and nightmares for a little while, without having to put a brave face on for the Howlies. “Your dad was a hell of a scientist,” he finally ended up saying awkwardly. “We didn’t exactly get along… didn’t see eye-to-eye on much of anything, but - underneath all of it, Steve said he was a good guy.”

“Yeah,” Stark responded flatly. “You don’t know the half of it.”

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Bucky was falling. It was cold and they were on Zola’s train, and when Steve had scrabbled out the hole in the compartment he’d lost his grip, leaving them both to fall to their inevitable deaths. Only
then Zola somehow managed to bring them back to life, and they woke up in 2012, only New York was now die Republik von Amerika and the entire world was united under the seal of Hydra, who happily gave Loki the throne when he arrived in return for his scepter, which they were about to force Bucky to use to kill Steve in the middle of Times Square.

He woke with a start, gasping for air as he sat up in bed and shivering as the sweat on his skin began to cool. After a second of convincing himself that none of it had been real, Bucky turned to glance at his alarm clock – it was a nice old twin-bell without any of the annoying glowy-bits that the future seemed to be so set on having, but Bucky’s sight in the dark was more than adequate to make out the hands on its face: 01:17. He blew out a long, low sigh, rubbing his face with his right hand as the annoying burning feeling set in on his missing left. He’d been able to sleep for a little more than two hours; better than he had been doing of late, at least, and the dream left him too unsettled to try to drift off again.

Bucky pushed himself out of bed, pulling on the pair of drawstring pants and cotton t-shirt that he had left draped over the footboard before he had crawled in, then padded his way out into the living room, deciding he could probably make a snack quietly and then settle in to read without waking Steve up. It turned out that he didn’t need to worry: when he flipped on the lights in the kitchen he found Steve standing at the range in a pair of boxers and undershirt, a spatula raised in defense as he blinked stupidly in Bucky’s direction.

“Couldn’t sleep, either?” Bucky asked, not bothering to smother his amused smirk as he made his way to the ice box to get the milk out. While he didn’t exactly like the idea of Steve having to deal with night terrors, he couldn’t help the selfish bit of his mind that was glad for the company.

Steve shrugged, turning back to the skillet on the stove and flipping the flapjack that he’d been cooking, “Lot on my mind, I guess,” he murmured, hedging the question. “You want me to throw some more batter together?”

Bucky shook his head – as good as flapjacks sounded, they really weren’t worth the extra trouble. “I’m fine with eggs if we have enough left – just leave ‘em out and I’ll throw it together when you’re done.”

Of course, his suggestion didn’t go over with Steve, who instead ended up splitting the cakes he’d already made between two plates, then piling them with scrambled eggs and bacon, which Bucky didn’t even remember them having in the apartment. Ultimately, they ended up on the couch half an hour later, half-propped against each other as they ate their way through their breakfast food, a random documentary about the Civil War droning on the television. It wasn’t the least bit interesting, but they had both agreed that it would be better to watch something that they knew - a decision that ended up being wise, given the fact that they both ended up nodding off not long after they’d cleaned their plates.

Steve startled them both awake some time later, awkwardly sitting up on the couch for a moment and blinking at the Netflix loading screen on the TV before jumping to his feet and collecting the dishes from the coffee table then disappearing into the kitchen. The clock on the wall read 03:35, so Bucky stood as well, stretching for a moment and dreading the idea of climbing back into his bed, despite the fact that he knew they both needed more sleep. He hesitated for a moment, listening to the familiar sounds of Steve cleaning up in the kitchen, staring at the couch in deep thought. Finally, he muttered a quiet fuck it, stalking quickly back to his bedroom where he yanked the blanket off of the bed then gathered up all of the pillows as well as he could under his arm, hauling them all awkwardly back to the living room.

The coffee table was light enough that it wasn’t a problem moving with just the one arm, although
the couch definitely made Bucky wish that Stark would hurry it up with the prosthetic. By the time
that Steve appeared in the doorway to the living room, Bucky had cleared enough space in the center
of the floor to throw the couch cushions down, and was in the middle of hauling the seat cushion out
of the arm chair. Steve just stood and watched him, his confusion so obvious that Bucky didn’t even
need to look at his dumb face to know how he looked, but Bucky didn’t bother acknowledging it
until he’d dropped the cushion next to the others and started stacking his pillows to fill the space out.

Once everything was arranged to his liking, Bucky sank down to the floor, pulling his quilt up to his
chin and finally glancing to where Steve was standing. “Get your skinny ass over here already,
Stevie,” he sighed, reaching across his body and patting the empty space on his left with his right
hand, “You already said you ain’t been sleeping right, either.”

Steve made a face like he was about to try arguing with Bucky, before he clearly thought better of it,
taking a deep breath and padding across the room. He shook his head as he looked down at where
Bucky had folded the blanket up for him, before kneeling down and situating himself in the pile of
cushions. “There,” Bucky said matter-of-factly, tossing the edge of the blanket over Steve once he’d
finally stopped moving. “Was that so fuckin’ hard?”

Steve chuckled lightly, although it sounded oddly strained, then turned his head to look at Bucky, his
eyes bright and blue despite the shadows in the low light of the room. “Like old times, eh?”

“You know it,” Bucky responded with a grin, remembering countless nights of the two of them
curled up together on the floor of his parent’s living room. “Hell of a lot more comfortable, though -
and don’t think for a second that I won’t kick you awake if you start snoring.”

Steve laughed earnestly at that, before turning on his side with a grin. “G’night, Buck.”

“Night, Stevie.” Bucky responded, closing his eyes and letting the sound of Steve’s deep, even
breaths lull him to sleep.

Bucky didn’t wake the next morning until sunlight was peaking over the back of the couch and
shining directly into his eyes. He was sore and disoriented for a few moments, trying to figure out
where the hell he was, but as he turned his head against the crick in his neck Bucky saw Steve’s
peacefully sleeping face next to him, and remembered the events of the night before. He slowly sat
up, doing his best not to jostle the cushions or the blanket enough to wake his bedmate, and finally
 glanced at the clock on the wall, shocked to realize that it was already nearly 10:00.

Bucky was half-way to the kitchen when he heard Steve’s pained groan, and he glanced back into
the living room, smirking at Steve’s sleepy glare as he stretched out on the floor. “That was the
worst idea your fathead has ever come up with, I swear Buck…”

Bucky laughed, feeling as good as he could remember – hell, since before he’d shipped out for
London, probably. There was no heat at all in Steve’s muttering voice, so he was all too happy to
chirp back sweetly, “But you slept like a baby, din’tcha Stevie?”

“Shut up and put a pot of coffee on,” Steve muttered, the grin already spreading across his face as
Bucky laughed and saluted him before doing just that.

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Bucky hissed in pain as the doctor turned the dial higher, unable to keep his reaction to the sudden,
strange feeling quiet. “And what does that one feel like?” Strange asked, sounding bored and
impatient as he kept the dial where it was, watching the screen instead of Bucky.
“Like a real bad Charlie horse in my thumb,” Bucky responded with a frown, glaring at the electrode sticking out of the stump of his arm. How the hell were they causing so much pain in parts that he didn’t even have anymore…

“Good,” Strange murmured, obviously without care for Bucky’s discomfort. “Now imagine moving it to alleviate the pain.”

Bucky sucked in a deep breath – it was at least the twentieth time he’d gotten the same ridiculous instruction. For as much as Tony swore that this guy was the best brain surgeon in the world, he sure seemed like a quack to Bucky. Frowning, he tried his best to focus on the task at hand, and imagined extending his thumb out to relieve the cramp.

“Good.” The doctor finally intoned, turning down the dial as Bucky exhaled in relief. “That was excellent news, Sergeant Barnes – the surgery should be relatively simple.”

“What’d you find?” Bucky asked petulantly, glad that the tests had come out alright but still wholly confused as to why the hell they had done it in the first place – or what Strange had even been looking for.

“Your brachial plexus is wholly intact.” Strange responded flippantly, beginning to peel the electrodes off of Bucky’s arm with a clear air of distaste. Bucky wondered if he ever actually did anything like this with his normal patients, or just forced nurses to do all of the talking and touching. It wouldn’t surprise him at all… What did surprise him, though, was when the doctor apparently put together Bucky’s blank, silent stare in response to his words. “Ah, there’s a large nerve bundle in your ax- your arm pit,” he began, “which is responsible for all of the commands going from your brain to your arm for movement and sensation. Yours wasn’t damaged in the accident or the surgery, so whenever Stark is able to finish the neural transmitters, we will be able to connect them to the plexus, rather than having to operate on your spinal cord or brain.”

“Nice,” Tony said with a grin as he made his way into the room, a carrier full of cups full of murky green liquid in hand, “So we won’t have to worry about paralysis or worse if there are mishaps during surgery.”

“There won’t be any mishaps during surgery,” Strange responded tightly, his brows furrowing as he hastily shut down the monitors around him.

Bucky had to wonder how there was a room in the tower big enough for containing both of their egos.

They sniped back and forth at one another for a while longer, Strange giving backhanded compliments to Stark about the neuroreceptors that Tony had apparently finished, while Stark bragged about his numerous doctorate degrees and poo-pooed on people who dared to specialize in just one area of hyper-intellectual science. Bucky played CandyCrush on his phone, wondering if either would even notice if he simply got up and went home. Before he could test the theory, Strange stiffly told Tony to contact him when the prosthesis was ready to be attached, and then stormed out of the room without even acknowledging Bucky.

“He’s a prick,” Tony said flippantly as soon as the elevator door had closed, “but I wouldn’t trust anyone else to do the surgery - his abilities make up for his attitude.”

“As long as you’re sure,” Bucky responded, biting the inside of his cheek to avoid saying anything else, such as how damned similar the two of them were.

“Positive,” Stark said, glancing quickly at the data that Strange had left behind before making his
way to another workbench, “Anyway, I wanted to show you what I had in mind for the skin interfacing…”

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Bucky advanced on Steve again, grunting with exertion as he thrust the plastic knife they were sparring with towards Steve’s side, only to have it batted away easily. He flipped it, changing his grip and coming back across his body, but Steve was able to sidestep away. They continued on for hours, Bucky actually getting a few hits in – while it was nothing compared to the number of times that Steve had either deflected or disarmed him, there was no doubt that Bucky was getting closer to matching him at hand-to-hand combat, a fact that made him almost giddy with excitement.

They paused for a water break, moving to the side of the ring as Bucky tossed the knife aside in favor of his water bottle – he hadn’t bothered trying with the prosthetic, knowing that between the headset and the awkward way it tended to respond to quick commands that it would only be a burden. “You know,” Steve panted between drinks, his lips quirking into a crooked smile, “I’m not so sure how I feel about you getting that new arm anymore.”

“Afraid it’s gonna be back to old times?” Bucky asked teasingly, “With me having to go easy on you again?”

“Try it,” Steve laughed, “just remember that I can beat your ass now.”

Bucky grinned, taking one final sip of water before moving back to the center of the ring. Maybe it was weird, but the thought of the two of them being equals for a change was one that actually excited him. He knew, logically, that he would always worry about Steve – would always want to have his back, and picture him as his small, smart-mouthed friend who had a habit of getting into messes he couldn’t get himself out of. But the idea that they could have this too, throw each other’s weight around and unwind completely, sparring like no other humans were even capable of: it was a disturbingly heady thought.

They finally broke apart and made their way to the locker room a couple of hours later, sweaty and feeling just exhausted enough that they might actually be able to sleep properly. Bucky peeled his sweaty shirt off with some difficulty, the tight material clinging even worse to his skin now that it was wet. He moved to attach the prosthesis, before thinking better of it and simply pulling on his sweatshirt, jamming the arm in the bag and trying to ignore the awkward way that his empty sleeve flopped at his side. Much as he hated it, it was late enough that no one would be around to see anyway, and it beat the idea of trying to shimmy into clothes with both the awkward-fitting prosthetic and sweat-damp skin. He begrudgingly remembered Stark’s comments about his physique, acknowledging that it was probably time to go out and buy some new clothes; his muscle mass was finally seeming to stabilize, and while they were still serviceable his clothes weren’t exactly always comfortable on his new, bulkier frame.

Bucky glanced across the locker room to where Steve had finished pulling on one of his own tiny t-shirts, the words dying on his lips as he watched the cotton stretch across his friend’s broad chest and back. He was tired enough that the dirty, obtrusive little voice in his mind that he could usually repress made itself known in full-force, insisting that he just go out on his own, lest Steve get the idea that he needed bigger sizes as well and Bucky lost his free show.

“You alright?” Steve asked, pausing in the locker room doorway with a look of concern on his face.

“Fine,” Bucky responded, snapping out of his daze with a bright smile, “just tired, is all.”

He’d ended up waiting until Steve was out with clean-up duty a few days later to wander out to the
stores on his own.

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“You know,” Tony muttered, sparks flying momentarily as he finished shaping the plate that he was working on. “We still haven’t figured out the most important part of this thing…”

Bucky frowned at the screen of his StarkPhone and went still, already dreading whatever stupid joke or suggestion Stark was going to make, before giving in and playing along. “What is that?” He asked, trying not to sound as if he was dreading whatever dumb shit Stark was about to answer with.

Stark paused what he was doing, flipping his mask up and turning to face Bucky with a dead-serious look on his face. “Your brand. We need to put some flash on this thing, after all.”

Bucky just frowned at him, trying to figure out if he was being had or not.

“Seriously, have you put any thought into it? Replica of Cap’s shield, kawaii little caricature of a Bucky Bear face?”

Bucky rolled his eyes, not bothering to justify either suggestion with any further response. He had finally gotten around to Googling this Bucky Bear thing that Tony kept bringing up, so he at least didn’t have to give him the satisfaction of asking what he meant – but it was still mortifying enough to know that people had actually sold the damned things (and were apparently thinking of bringing them back, dammit) that he preferred to pretend he wasn’t aware of them. Tony continued rambling about something, his mask coming back down and muffling out the majority of it down to a drone that Bucky could easily ignore, when the idea hit him. He hesitated for a moment, temporarily afraid of even mentioning it, but in the end entertaining Stark was worth not being stuck with an Arc reactor permanently etched into his prosthetic.

“My wing,” He said simply, refusing to look as he heard Tony’s instrument power down. “My jacket, during the war - the left sleeve had a wing emblem on it, it was half of the SSR logo, kinda like the ones on Steve's helmet. Put that up on the deltoid.”

Bucky glanced up to see Stark watching him, an odd smile on his face. “Sure,” he responded finally, “you want them in blue or white?”

“Blue would show up better,” Bucky decided after a minute – Stark had no smartass response for it, and just like that they fell back into companionable silence.

“So - this should be done by the beginning of next week,” Stark prompted an indeterminable amount of time later, powering his tools down again and turning in his chair to face Bucky, who simply hummed in acknowledgement. “I’ll talk to Strange and Doctor McKenney about their schedules, but we should be able to have them attach it before week’s end.”

“I’ll clear my calendar,” Bucky responded flippantly, still fiddling with his phone and trying to hide the nervous jolt he felt in his stomach over the announcement. “Can you show me how to switch ringtones on these things? I want to change Steve’s to Star-Spangled Man…”

Stark huffed a short laugh at that, shaking his head “Right, I’ll have JARVIS figure out a time that works best for them and call you with the appointment.” There was a moment of uncomfortable silence between the two of them before he continued. “Have you given any thought to what you’re doing after we’ve got you kitted up?”

Bucky shrugged at that, setting his phone aside and turning his attention to Tony. “We’re gonna go on a road trip, Steve and I - I promised him in ’41 that I’d take him to the Grand Canyon some day,
and we figured we’d make a whole adventure out of it now that we can.” Once again, he found himself rambling before he could really stop it – he and Steve tried to focus on the present and the things they had missed instead of talking about the past together, and it wasn’t as if Bucky had anyone else to talk to. “I visited my Nan in Indiana when I was 13 before she died, and Steve had the USO tour around the country in ‘43, but otherwise neither of us ever really left Brooklyn, so…”

“I’ve got just the car for you,” Tony interrupted, rising from his chair excitedly. “Might need a little work on the engine if it’s going to make it all the way to California, but it’s nothing I can’t soup up before you go.”

“Naw, we already got a couple of Harleys, I just have to prove that I can drive the thing with a prosthetic and get a license,” Bucky insisted. When Stark’s face dropped, he added, “Besides - one of us would need to learn how to drive a car, first, it’d just delay us even further. We’ll worry about that when we get back.”

Stark sighed, “Fine. I can hardly argue against the idea of the two of you going for an Iron Ass award, I suppose.” Bucky didn’t want to touch that comment with a ten foot pole, so he let the topic drop. “But,” Stark continued a second later, “I was actually talking about what you plan to do for good, now that you’re about to have the world’s best cybernetic arm and can get back to full ass-kicking commission…”

“Gotta talk to Fury,” Bucky responded blithely. “He refuses to even discuss plans with us until August, wanted us to acclimate and get our heads on straight, but I imagine we’ll join up with SHIELD and do whatever they need us to do.”

Stark paused at that, dropping back into his chair and fiddling with a random tool on the table. “That’s it? You’re both just going to run off and become SHIELD goons?”

Bucky shrugged, “Romanoff and Barton both seem to like it alright, and I’ve got no interest in going back into the Army.”

“Who says you need to fight at all?” Tony asked.

Bucky snorted, “Please, Steve ain’t gonna give up fighting evil as long as it’s still in the world.”

“That’s his fight…”

“And I’m gonna have his back, same as I have our whole lives.” Bucky insisted, not in the mood for philosophical arguments. “Besides, what else am I gonna do? There’s a pretty limited job market for people with my skill set.”

There was an uncomfortable second where Tony looked like he wanted to say something else; Bucky could only imagine how bad it was, if Stark was actually holding back with it, but in the end he gave a quick shake of his head and a smarmy smile. “You could model - Pep says the Vintage Hollywood style is about to make a comeback.”

“Shut the hell up and finish the arm,” Bucky shot back with a chuckle, hoping that his face wasn’t as pink as it felt warm.

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His eyelids felt impossibly heavy as Bucky tried to open them, blinking for a moment against the bright white of the room and trying to clear his groggy head. His mouth felt terribly dry, and for a second he panicked, imagining himself back in the hospital after thawing… or worse, back on Zola’s table in Kreischberg.
The weird, uncomfortable heaviness on the left side of his body was what grounded him, and suddenly things started rushing back. Bucky frowned for a second, before deciding to raise both of his hands in front of his face; for the first time since waking up, it worked. His right one came into view palm down, looking the same as always – the left followed at the exact same time, light reflecting off of the polished metal in a way that was strangely beautiful. Bucky turned both of them out, so that his palms were facing away, then flexed and extended his fingers a couple of times – the articulations in the prosthetic moved fluidly and with no hesitation at all. He couldn’t help sighing in relief, already confident that the surgery had been a success.

“Buck?”

He turned his head, vision still swimming a bit when he moved, to find Steve seated next to the bed, a book now closed in his lap and a wide grin pulling at the corners of his mouth. Bucky did his best to smile back, although he still couldn’t quite feel his face… Steve laughed, so he could only imagine what it looked like. “They were wondering how long it would be before you woke up, apparently you needed a lot more drugs than they had planned on to keep you knocked out during the surgery.”

Bucky vaguely recognized the words Steve was saying - or at least, he knew they were English, and they were probably good words. His brain couldn’t really process them properly at the moment; it was too busy working through the sensation of having proper feeling in his arm again, and taking in the sight of his best friend. The light of the recovery room lit up Steve’s blonde hair and white t-shirt like he was a god damned angel, and Bucky was just with it enough to know that the last thing he should do at that moment was to open his mouth… he’d only end up saying something stupid, like rambling about how fuckin’ beautiful Stevie was at that moment.

Pushing that thought as far out of his head as he could, Bucky reached his left hand out for Steve, the fingers wiggling a little as they extended past the railing of the hospital bed. Steve chuckled at the motion, but thankfully didn’t hesitate, instead just reaching out and lacing their fingers together. As if it were a perfectly normal thing for two fellas to do, hold hands like that. “I gotta admit,” Steve said quietly, “Stark did a hell of a job.”

Bucky pulled their joined hands back toward himself, so that he could rest them on the bed. The sensation in his fingers were exactly as Stark had predicted they would be – a little bit blunted and without any temperature, like he was wearing heavy gloves, but… he could still feel the weight of Steve’s hand in his own. “Mmm’yeah,” he murmured, his eyelids growing heavy again. “S’swell.”

With that, Bucky let himself drift back off, his mind going blank and peaceful as his brain registered the sensation of Steve’s thumb rubbing gently over his knuckles.

Chapter End Notes

OH MY GOD THIS WAS SO MUCH LONGER THAN I HAD INTENDED!!! lol, something about Bucky's POV brings out my wordvomit, apparently.

Anywho... thanks so much for your patience over the past few weeks! Hopefully I can knock out the next few chapters with a little more speed. As always, I can't say thank you enough for those of you who have taken the time to leave comments and kudos, hopefully this was worth the wait :)
Chapter Summary

The Great American Road Trip, Pt. I

Chapter Notes

Firstly: there are going to be a couple of instances in this chapter where the POV switches from Bucky to Steve, because I had to have Bucky as the focus as some of the scenes for them to work and I didn't want to cut them completely or take away the chronological order of the trip.

Secondly: for visual reference, here's a crappy MS Paint version of Steve and Bucky's map... this is why I don't have graphics for the rest of the story, I'm afraid ;)

![Map of the Great American Road Trip](image-url)
And lastly: for the sake of full disclosure, there are quite a few places along the way that I've included as stops that I've sadly never been to, and didn't have the time to properly research, so I apologize in advance for any egregious geographical mistakes... hopefully they don't distract too much from the story :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bucky had been allowed to leave the medical floor in Stark Tower (“Avengers Tower,” Tony insisted, swearing that he was in the process of rebranding it) the morning after his surgery, much to both his and Steve’s relief. However, his release came with the absolute requirement that he begin performing the appropriate physical therapy regimen that the orthopaedist prescribed him when they followed-up at his mid-week appointment. Bucky initially dreaded the idea, afraid that it would be time-consuming and tedious sessions that would only set their trip back even longer, and made sure to hem and haw about it enough that no one doubted his displeasure.

When the doctor told him that the bones and metal had already fused together perfectly, and instructed him to a single organized session with a trained sports therapist followed by regular sparring sessions with Steve and target practice sessions with Clint Barton, the bellyaching quit immediately, much to Steve’s relief and amusement.

It was almost frightening how quickly Bucky was able to adapt to the arm, it responded exactly as he needed it to, so that his reflexes when blocking and shooting moving targets were impeccable, but he also quickly worked out how to appropriately calibrate the power necessary to articulate the plates with appropriate force. He crowed in victory the first time he was able to throw Steve bodily across the ring at Goldie’s, the rush of his newfound abilities totally worth the way that Steve tackled him in return.

When they weren’t training or sparring, most of their free time went into planning out their road trip. They had immediately agreed on making sure to hit the water on every coast, and while Steve added stops along the route with his favorite historical battle sites (which Bucky teased him for incessantly, despite his own interest in each), Bucky set himself to scouring the internet for other, less traditional ideas as well.

They spent a handful of nights together around their tiny kitchen table, Bucky with his laptop and Steve switching between his Stark Pad and a US map, drawing out their intended route with a Sharpie.

“We should go to Disney World if we’re going to be in Florida,” Bucky pointed out, not looking away from his screen.

“Disney World?” Steve asked, surprised to hear the suggestion.

“Yeah, giant theme park in Orlando, one part of it’s based on all the Disney cartoons.” Bucky glanced up when Steve made no reply, shrugging at the look of confusion on his face. “I told Barton the other day at the range about the movies we were watching - he was making suggestions and then pokin’ fun at the idea of us watching cartoons, I explained how much you liked ‘em in the theaters, so he recommended it.”

Steve looked at the map, considering for a moment. “I guess, it could be interesting. And if we go down the East coast of the state then cut across we can hit it on the way to the Gulf of Mexico…”

“See? On the way,” Bucky grinned, “now we’ve gotta go. And I wanna stop for a day in New
Orleans, too.”

“New Orleans?” Steve couldn’t think of a single time Bucky had ever mentioned the place.

“Jazz and voodoo, Stevie, we gotta.” At some point during the past month Bucky had discovered an old record shop that sold beat-up vintage vinyls for cheap. He’d loved music for as long as Steve had known him, of course, but now he seemed dead-set on hearing every type of popular music that had come out since they’d been in the ice; the recommendation suddenly made sense.

“Fine, I want to see the end Sherman’s march in Savannah, then.” Steve said, tracing the route with the cap of the marker before marking a dot on each of the cities – so far the only set plans they had were Gettysburg while on the way to Washington, DC.

“Sure, and we head south into Florida, we can hit Disney for a day, drive across the state to the Gulf, and then head Northwest into Louisiana.”

Steve considered the route Bucky had traced out with his finger, before nodding and removing the cap of the marker, inking it for good. Bucky was insistent that they head North into St. Louis from there, for the sole purpose of meeting up with Route 66 to head West – and as Steve read over the plan he agreed that it made as much sense as anything. The Grand Canyon, of course, had been the first spot they’d marked off; along with Los Angeles, a stretch along the California coast, and a couple of wilderness parks in the mountains - they’d both seemed concerned about how the other would take the camping suggestions, but quickly agreed that voluntarily getting out in the American wild, especially at a time of the year when the weather was actually supposed to be nice, was far enough from Europe in the winter that it was worth exploring.

A few nights later, Steve traced the roads from Cooperstown back to Manhattan, before leaning back in his seat and considering their work with a smile. “Holy shit, I think we actually got it,” Bucky said with a grin, grabbing Steve’s shoulders in an excited one-armed hug before they started listing out all of the supplies they needed to get ready to go.

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Steve was beginning to think that getting their motorcycle licenses was going to be the hardest thing he had ever had to do - including enlisting. Both he and Bucky had passed their written tests with ease, and had put in the necessary number of practice hours on their permit; ridiculous, given how much of Europe Steve had covered by bike in 1944, but the state of New York wouldn’t hear his argument against it. Next had been the road test, which the instructors had seemed to especially have it out for Bucky, forcing him to prove his dexterity and reaction speeds with his new arm before they would even see him get on his Harley.

The dream of the open road across the desert was the only thing that kept Steve from giving the instructor the what-for.

Finally, they had all of their requirements and paperwork in order. Agent Hill had helped them to track down original copies of their birth certificates and even made sure that they had up-to-date passports, a feat that Tony made seem more heroic than saving Manhattan from Chitauri. It meant that only one hurdle stood between them and the trip of their dreams…

As the clock turned over on their third hour of waiting at the DMV office and Bucky’s knee bounced impatiently in the awful plastic chair next to him, Steve began to sincerely wonder if they would be able to overcome it. He pictured the views as they rode through the mountains, taking deep, calming breaths as the completely incomprehensible numbering system on the appointment board called up yet another ticket that was neither his nor Bucky’s.
He imagined watching the Ocean roll past them on the California coast when the lady at the teller’s window informed them that his forms – which he had filled out with the pencil the woman at the front desk had handed him for that very purpose – would need to be recopied in pen in order to be accepted, and asked him to sit down and wait to be called again.

All-in-all, Steve thought he was doing a damned good job of holding it together - until he began to overhear the worker speaking to Bucky at the window.

“… Sir, that would make you over ninety-five years old. I have no idea who made you think we’d accept these, but it’s an obvious forgery. If you can’t produce appropriate proof of ID, we can’t give you a license – I’m sorry.”

Steve actually saw red, and was at Bucky’s side at the window before he knew what was happening. “We need to speak to your manager,” He demanded, as calmly as possible given how tightly-wound he felt.

“Please don’t get hostile,” the man behind the glass responded with a bored sigh, pressing a button below himself as he attempted to stare Steve down, “the requirements pretty clearly state that you have to have valid ID to apply for a state license.”

“No, let’s not be hostile,” the manager behind the window said, frowning at the worker and Bucky, “I don’t have any idea who you are, but if you think you’re going to get away with this forgery, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“Do you have any idea who we are?” Bucky asked incredulously – it was a testament to how angry Steve was at that point that he didn’t feel a lick of embarrassment over it. “That is my damned birth certificate and enlistment card. Stevie, hand yours over, even this idiot will know your name…”

“What seems to be the problem here?” An older woman asked, having appeared behind the DMV employee as Bucky was winding himself up.

The worker rolled his eyes, handing Bucky’s papers over to her with a sneer. “This guy wants to apply for a motor cycle license; no idea how he got the permit approved, but take a look at his proof of identity.”

The manager gave him a quelling look, apparently unimpressed with the attitude - it was the only thing that kept Steve’s nerves intact as she frowned and read the paperwork over, pausing as she read the crumbling birth certificate then studied Bucky’s face closely. “Sir,” she asked Steve hesitantly, “I don’t suppose I could see your paperwork, as well?”

Steve thrust his forms and birth certificate through the window in the glass, crossing his arms over his chest and taking slow, deep breaths as they waited for their answer. The color began draining out of her face as she looked over the birth certificate, before she pushed the worker aside and sat down at the desk herself.

“Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes - I can’t apologize enough for the confusion, sirs. Just give me a few moments to enter you into the system and we’ll have your photos taken.” The worker looked like he’d been smacked, his eyes going wide as he looked properly at Bucky. “And you can go on break,” she added dismissively over her shoulder, continuing to type furiously into the computer as the abashed man scurried away.

Steve and Bucky finally left the office twenty minutes later, IDs actually in-hand as the manager had insisted that she could print them automatically, to make up for the inconvenience. “Next time,” Bucky said tightly, after they’d marched in angry silence for a good 10 blocks in an attempt to cool-down, “we’re taking Hill up on her offer to have SHIELD take care of this bullshit for us.”

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Somehow, despite all of the time and meticulous effort that they had put into planning for the trip, they found themselves rushing to finish packing the night before. Steve poured over their lists of supplies, checking and double checking that everything was appropriately stored in saddlebags. “The bedrolls ended up in yours, right?” He asked distractedly, pausing with his pencil poised over the moleskin.

“Yeah,” Bucky responded as he made his way out of his bedroom, “along with the StarkPad chargers and toiletries and sneakers and my share of the spare cash, same as when we checked an hour ago.”

Steve scowled and dug through his pack again, knowing that Bucky was laughing at him for being so anal but dreading the idea of them leaving something important behind. This was something they had been talking about for most of their lives, and God knew when they would have another chance to do anything similar again…

“Hey, come on,” Bucky sighed, making his way across the living room to where Steve was hunched over his bags and bumping him aside with his hips, “You’re gonna end up finding a way to give yourself a damned ulcer, super-serum or not.” Steve opened his mouth to argue, but Bucky barreled on ahead. “You’ve checked the bags twice that I’ve seen, if you forgot anything it’s nothing that’s so important that we can’t buy it along the way. There will be stores in most of the places we’re visiting, Stevie, and we’ve got plenty of money to use.”

Steve sighed, knowing that he was right, and finally took his hands out of the saddlebag in front of him, zipping it decisively and setting his helmet on top. It had been a disappointment to find out that a few of the states they’d be passing through required motorcycle helmets, but when Bucky’s griping about the law had caught Stark’s attention he’d kitted them out with ones that played music and allowed them to radio back and forth between each other, so in the end it made for a fair trade.

“There we go,” Bucky grinned, before reaching into the paper bag he’d brought out with him, his look becoming bashful. “I, uh - gotcha something while I was out yesterday. For the trip.”

“You didn’t have to,” Steve started, uselessly, as a thick leather-bound book and package of pencils was thrust into his hands.

“I know, I just thought - I’ve barely seen you drawing since we’ve been back; seems like the perfect opportunity to get back into it.”

Steve flipped through the book silently, taking in the heavy, smooth paper that filled it. “Thanks, Buck,” he murmured, closing it with a nod and swallowing around the lump he felt forming in his throat. “We’ll see if I still remember how.”

Bucky scoffed, before pulling the other item out of the bag. “Please, it’ll be like riding a bike, ‘specially good as you are. And don’t mention it; just call it an early birthday present.”

Steve laughed softly at that, remembering all of the times that Bucky’d gotten him exactly this gift for birthdays in the past - albeit of far lesser quality. “Little nicer than the year you stapled butcher’s paper between moldy old pieces of cardboard…”

“Hey,” Bucky chided, pausing as he opened the box he’d taken out of the bag and grinning as his cheeks turned pink, “I was ten years old and blew all my spare money on penny candy and pencils, that was an ingenious birthday present.”

Steve knew his grin was probably dopey as he laughed, shaking his head – Bucky was right, it was probably the best gift that he’d ever received, and not just because it was the first time he’d had a
friend to get him a birthday present in the first place. “What’s that, then?” He asked.

Bucky turned his attention back to the box, opening it properly and lifting out a camera. “My only hope of capturing things half as nice as you will.”

Steve laughed at that, before shaking the sketchbook in Bucky’s direction and then packing in gingerly into his bag, “I’ll do my best to put it to good use.”

“You’d better,” Bucky warned him, grinning as he snapped a photo in Steve’s direction without warning.

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They’d made their way out of New York on 95, but quickly turned off in Pennsylvania, making it to Gettysburg by mid-morning. After stopping at the main visitor’s center and picking up an official map, they decided to park the bikes and walk the touring trail, being fast enough to cover the miles of the old battlefield stations on foot. There obviously wasn’t much left to see, but the majority of the land was green and rolling, and the important battle sites were well marked with interesting tidbits of information: there was plenty to hold both Steve and Bucky’s attention for the afternoon, before finally agreeing that they’d seen all there was to see and jumping back on their bikes to make their way to the hotel they’d been instructed to stay at in DC.

They were up bright and early the next morning, showering and shaving and properly doing their hair up with pomade before changing into the awkward, tight dress uniforms that had been delivered to their room when they had checked in. Steve adjusted his jacket in the mirror behind their room door, before fiddling with the belt yet again, wishing that they’d been allowed to wear their old, familiar olives. At least he was used to that brand of uncomfortable.

Bucky was pulling on his white gloves as he came up behind him, looking so right in the uniform that Steve couldn’t help feeling jealous for a moment, but he forced a smile as Bucky handed his cap over, tucking his own beneath his arm. “Ready to go accept our proper recognition for saving the free world? Twice?”

Steve sighed, rolling his eyes at Buck’s antics. “Ready as I’m going to be, anyway.”

The ceremony itself actually wasn’t terrible, once Steve’s mind finally let go obsessing over the sheer number of press that they were stood in front of. He was used to crowds, of course, but seeing that many cameras and microphones was a different beast altogether. Bucky’s face was plastered with what was probably the world’s most charming grin, although Steve could sense the discomfort radiating off of him as well. “Thank God they don’t all got flashbulbs at least, right?” Bucky whispered during a lull in the president’s droning speech.

Once the speeches were finally over, President Ellis called Bucky to the podium first, pinning first the Purple Heart in recognition for his injuries sustained both in Kreischberg and in taking down the Valkyrie, followed by the Medal of Honor. Steve heard rumors that there had been whispers in congress that Buck should have gotten a DSC instead, but either the politicians had pulled their heads out of their asses in the nick of time or someone had pointed out the fact that Steve would never accept the higher award, when they both had taken on the same damned challenges.

Bucky accepted the honors with obvious pride, before saluting the President and making his way back to where Steve stood, giving him a tight smile as he returned to parade rest.

President Ellis called Steve up next, pinning the Medal of Honor to his jacket and thanking him for his service.
That bit finally over, they had to stand for photos, together and separately, with the President and the
Joint Chiefs of Staff and God only knew how ever many other Generals were paraded onto the stage
- Steve was exhausted by the time they finally wrapped, and could have cried with relief when the
Press Secretary turned down the reporters requests for interviews, instead ushering them away from
the podium for the formal reception.

Steve noticed how gray Bucky was looking as they walked along, trying not to think of how the
Bucky he knew before the war probably would have been eating all the attention up. “You
alright?” He murmured quietly, once he knew that their handlers were busy on their cell phones.

Bucky blew out a long, slow breath, giving Steve a stunned look. “D’you have to deal with that shit
all the time before they let you into active duty? Cuz if that’s the case, I don’t blame you for
storming the base anymore.”

Steve chuckled quietly, shaking his head as the doors to the reception hall opened in front of them
before setting his shoulders and putting on his best Captain America smile. “Nah, it was never this
bad before - just a couple more hours, though, and we’re free.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears, buddy,” Bucky muttered, before changing his stance as well,
putting on a face of pure charm as they were introduced to the crowd for mingling.

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Bucky and Steve had excused themselves as soon as it was polite to do so, shaking hands with
another smattering of politicians as they made their way out of the White House before hauling ass
back to their hotel, desperate to change out of their dress blues.

“Highest honor in the land,” Bucky said quietly as he boxed up his Medal of Honor, already
unpinning the Purple Heart and whatever other medals he’d been awarded before they’d even
arrived at the ceremony. “Means we never have to do that shit again, right?”

Steve scoffed, folding his pants so that the creases were sharp and hanging them on their hanger
before following suit with prepping his own jacket. “I’d like to say yeah, but - who knows. I’m sure
it ain’t the last time they’re going to ask us to come dance for the press.”

Bucky groaned but didn’t disagree, stacking his medal boxes on the desk before hanging his uniform
up as well. “I need to get out for a while, see something without a crowd of people following us
around,” he muttered, zipping the garment bag closed once he’d finished moving his uniform into it.
“Let’s head over to Arlington - there’s a Howlie’s memorial, right? I’m shocked they didn’t drag us
out there for pictures, too.”

Steve nodded in agreement, glad that the World War II Memorial had been close and impressive
enough to meet the press’s desires. “We could, if you want to. Pretty sure the Metro runs to it, too,
so we don’t have to worry about the bikes.”

He’d been right, thankfully, and they boarded a blue line train without any trouble, taking it to the
Arlington Cemetery stop while Bucky looked up walking directions to the memorial on his
StarkPhone. The walk was an easy enough one – the memorial had been set fairly close to the
cemetery entrance, just off one of the main roads through the huge stretch of white headstones.

They both approached it slowly and in silence, waiting until the few people milling around had
stepped away before actually stepping up to the structure. It was a large half-circle that had been set
into the ground, with a huge copper imprint of their seal – the wing from Steve’s helmet and Bucky’s
jacket – set in the center, and a tribute to each of the Commandoes fanning out around the outer
edges. Each had a bronze cast of their faces, along with plaques that marked their date of birth and
death underneath their images. Steve’s, of course, was in the middle of them all, with Bucky’s to his
right and Dum-Dum’s on his left.

There was an official-looking laminated sign taped down between their plaques, explaining the
circumstances of Bucky and Steve’s miraculous return from the dead and the plans to correct their
information on the monument. Steve wanted to try to make a joke about how many people must
have griped about it, especially considering the sign hadn’t been present when he had visited a few
weeks prior, but the look on Bucky’s face as his eyes roamed over each of the images, his lips pursed
and his right hand clenched in a tight fist, stopped the words in his throat.

Steve, of course, could sympathize with what he was feeling… He’d come by the memorial on his
own when he’d come down to visit Peggy – a terrible idea, in retrospect, but at least it had allowed
him to grieve already. He’d actually let himself break down in his hotel room that night, the only
time he’d really done so since coming out of the ice; and if Steve knew Bucky, he knew his friend
probably wouldn’t allow himself the same relief as long as Steve was around to see it.

Steve clenched his teeth for a moment, looking around at the surrounding gravesites, trying to find
something, anything that might be appropriate to take Bucky’s mind off his pain, when his eyes
catched on the house at the top of the hill. He cleared his throat softly before asking, “You ever hear
the myth of why the military came to put their cemetery here in the first place?”

Bucky frowned, scrubbing at his face with his right hand before turning to Steve. “Nah, I just
figured it was close to the Capital and had a hell of a view…”

“Well, that,” Steve conceded, before nodding at the mansion at the top of the hill, “but it also
belonged to General Lee’s family during the Civil War. The Union tricked them into foreclosure,
bought up all the land, then decided to turn it into a giant cemetery for all of the Union soldiers who
were dying, just to stick a thumb in his eye.”

Bucky scoffed at that, turning away from the Howlie’s monument to look up the hill. “You’re
serious?”

Steve shrugged, “I mean, ‘swhat I read somewhere about it.” He looked around contemplatively for
a moment, before continuing. “I’m pretty sure they do a tour around the whole thing, if you wanna
find out for sure. See some of the other important sites, too?”

Bucky took a deep breath, glancing back at the memorial to their closest friends one final time,
before nodding decisively. “Yeah, what the hell. We’re here, right?”

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Between the circus of the medal ceremony and the pain of visiting Arlington, the day before had
completely done Bucky in – although it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. They’d turned in
early after grabbing dinner in the city, and some higher power had actually let him sleep through the
night; if he’d had any awful dreams throughout it, Bucky didn’t remember them for a change.

When he woke at dawn Steve was already sitting awake in the window of their room, and they both
agreed that a quick run would do them both good – Bucky hadn’t gotten a chance to really
appreciate the monuments in the bustle of the day before, and Steve always felt better if he was able
to get his blood flowing.

They needed to be in as good a mood as possible, having already agreed that they’d visit Peggy in
the late morning.
Steve had explained Peg’s situation while they’d been planning the trip – that her health had been failing and she’d had a couple of falls, so her family had agreed that it would be best if she moved into a care facility. Bucky hadn’t really known what to say to that, especially as Steve had quietly and sadly droned on about how nice the place was, clearly hiding something that was bothering him. Bucky hadn’t had the heart to try to draw it out of him. But when it had become obvious that they would be heading to DC early in their trip, he’d surprised Bucky by mentioning that Peggy had asked after him when Steve had visited, and that they really should stop and see her while they were there.

Bucky wasn’t about to argue about it, so after they had cleaned up and had breakfast, they made their way into Northwest DC, stopping at what looked like an enormous, beautiful mansion that had been converted into a hospital.

“Let me just - I’ll go in first, remind her we’re here. She, uh… she has some trouble remembering things, sometimes.” Steve told his shoes, pausing outside of the door of a room marked Carter.

“Don’t worry about it, pal,” Bucky drawled, trying his best to lighten the mood. “I’m fine to wait out here; go make time with your girl.”

Steve’s smile didn’t come close to reaching his eyes, and he sucked in a deep breath before knocking quietly on the door and making his way in, far too hesitantly for Bucky’s liking. Bucky leaned against the wall as he waited, trying to pay attention to the TV that he had seen on in the common room so that he didn’t end up accidentally eavesdropping on the conversation on the other side of the door. Finally, after at least an eternity of waiting, Steve made his way back into the hallway, his entire body deflating as he moved out of the sightline of the door. “You alright?” Bucky asked automatically, kicking himself at how stupid the question was.

“She’s ready but wanted to talk to you alone,” Steve answered, hopefully having missed the idiotic question altogether. “There’s a coffee shop a couple blocks away, you want me to pick anything up for you?”

Bucky started to turn down the offer, when he decided better of it. “A medium coffee is fine. Coupla sugars - or, whatever you end up getting.”

Steve nodded, biting his lip and blinking a few times before making his way down the hall. Bucky watched him go, sighing to himself before standing straighter, knocking gently on the doorjamb with his right hand and jamming his left in his jacket pocket before making his way through the door with a bright smile.

Even though she was gray and thin, little more than a wisp of the incredible dame Bucky remembered, the woman seated by the window was easily recognizable as Peggy Carter. Her hair, although now completely gray, was arranged in familiar waves, and she looked at him with shrewd brown eyes that still held every bit of intimidating intelligence that Bucky had remembered.

“James Barnes,” she said with a smile, her eyes misting over as she looked at him. She patted the empty chair sitting next to her, before chiding him, “Quit hovering around the door and come sit where an old woman can actually see you - I’m not dangerous.”

Bucky laughed at that, shuffling his feet awkwardly for a second before crossing the room as instructed. “I dunno, Marge – dame like you asks to see me in private, guy like me can’t help bein’ worried that he’s in for a whooping.”

Peggy chuckled airily, shaking her head as he took his seat. “It’s good to see you again, James; I told Steve that he should have brought you by earlier.”
“Well, can’t exactly blame a fella for wanting to keep a dame like you to himself. Especially if it means keeping her away from a scoundrel like me.” Bucky joked. “I tried tellin’ him you had no interest in my ugly mug, but you know Stevie.”

“I do,” Peggy laughed, before shaking her head sadly. “How is he, James? Really? Because he puts on a brave face and is cheery whenever he visits, but… Steve’s never been a very good actor.”

Bucky sighed, debating on how best to answer the question. He hardly wanted to burden Peggy with the shit that it was obvious they were both carrying, but he didn’t necessarily want to lie, either. “He’s - we’re alright. There’s a lot that we still have to get used to, but we’re workin’ on it.”

“I didn’t mean in terms of settling in to our weird future,” Peggy chided him, “I meant… dealing with other things, considering most of his friends are gone and I’m not exactly the woman he seemed to be set on coming back to.”

Bucky swallowed and glanced around the room for a moment, noticing the framed photographs on the nightstand beside Peggy’s bed. He should have expected it, but still found himself shook by the image of Peggy in a wedding dress next to an unfamiliar man, then countless images of her and what were obviously her children; kids she should have had with Steve, if not for the damned mess they’d ended up in. He couldn’t imagine how hard the room must have been for Steve to look around at, or how hard it must have been for Peggy, moving on with life for all of those years, certain that Steve was dead.

“I’m… God, Pegs, I’m so sorry,” he finally choked, having no idea what else to say.

“You have nothing to apologize for, James,” Peggy insisted quietly, reaching a thin hand across the space between them and resting it on his sleeve, apparently uncaring of the metal plates that appeared where the fabric ended.

“No, I do. For both of you - he shoulda come back to you, Peggy. I promised…”

Peggy frowned, “I asked you to keep him safe and to bring him home – you did what you could, and he’s here now.”

“Yeah, but you…”

“I lived an incredibly fulfilling life, James,” she sighed, looking at the photos around the room with a soft, bittersweet smile. “I won’t lie and say that I didn’t miss Steve every day of it, because I did, but - I wouldn’t trade it. The two of you, on the other hand – we owe an apology to you for not having brought you back sooner.”

“No one could have expected us to survive that, Peggy, and I’ve already heard how much money and time Howard put into looking.”

Peggy smiled sadly, “Howard did that on his own, though, out of respect for Steve. Your country should have put in more of their own effort, for the both of you.”

“Yeah, well.” Bucky responded, clearing his throat. “It’s done now.”

“It is. And James, I’m so glad you have each other, I can’t…”

“It’s alright, Peggy. I promise I’ll look after him, alright?” Bucky swore hastily.

“Oh, Bucky… that was the last worry on my mind,” she said with a watery laugh. “You should - things have changed so much since our youth, you know?”
Bucky frowned in confusion, trying to follow where it was that she was going with the conversation and hoping that it wasn’t all a product of her dementia; he thought they’d been having a nice talk.

“‘I know that my mind is not what it used to be,’” Peggy continued shrewdly, as if she had read Bucky’s thoughts, “‘but today is a very good day. I remember how you used to look at Steve, James. It was a look I’m sure I wore all too often as well, given how much it annoyed Colonel Phillips.’”

“He’s been my best friend for as long as I can remember, Peggy,” Bucky interrupted, his heart suddenly pounding in his chest. “I love him like a brother, always have, but…”

“And don’t think I missed the way that he looked at you in return,” Peggy continued pointedly. “I won’t lie and say that it didn’t make me uneasy at times, but it’s irrelevant now. The three of us are all that we have left, and I’m not much longer for this world.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Bucky begged, even though he could tell by simply looking at her that it was the truth. “It ain’t like that at all: he’s only ever had eyes for you, y’know, and you’re tough enough that you’ll probably still outlast us, serum and all.”

Peggy scoffed and shook her head, “And here I was thinking that you were the practical one.” She chided, raising a thin hand before continuing. “I didn’t want to upset you, Bucky, that was my last intention. I’m not upset by it at all, and it’s hardly as if I’m going to blow the whistle on the two of you, now. I just - I worry. You’ve both already lost so much; please see what you have in each other. Before it’s too late.”

“I know that, Peggy,” Bucky responded fervently, “we both do. It’s… it’s nothing like what I’d hoped for us, but we’re makin’ do, okay? We’re good, we’re happy, and I swear on my ma’s grave I’ll do whatever it takes to make Steve happy. There’s nothin’ in the world more important than that Peggy, you’ve gotta believe me.”

There was a quiet tap on the door that almost launched Bucky out of his seat in panic, and they both glanced up to see Steve standing sheepishly in the doorway. “Sorry if I’m interrupting, I can head out to the lobby if you want, just thought I’d bring these by while they’re still hot,” he rambled softly. Bucky watched him like a hawk, looking for any sign that Steve might have heard any of their conversation, while Peggy airily invited him in. Steve crossed the threshold to the room with a smile, his shoulders rounded so that he seemed smaller as he set the take-away tray of drinks on the desk next to Peggy’s bed. “Americano for you,” he said quietly, handing Bucky’s coffee over, “and I hope Earl Grey’s alright?” he continued, carefully holding a smaller cup out for Peggy.

“It’s probably the usual shit brew, but God knows I’ve been in the States long enough to get used to it,” Peggy joked, taking the cup from Steve’s hand as he laughed and pulled up his own chair.

The conversation between the three of them after that was blessedly easy, with Peggy telling a couple of tales of the Commandoes that they had missed while the two of them told her of their plans for the road trip. They all carefully avoided talking about the events in New York, or what Bucky and Steve would be up to once they were sick of their motorcycles.

It became obvious as noon rolled around that Peggy was fading, her voice beginning to drift in and out and her memories seeming to become consistently more confused, so when an aide stopped by the room to bring her her lunch, Steve and Bucky excused themselves, promising to return in the near future.

Steve shrunk in on himself again as they made their way out of the building, clearly shaken by the
entire experience – not that Bucky could blame him; he felt the same, and had nothing close to the connection to the obviously failing woman as his friend had. Still, as they stepped out into the sun, he leaned over, playfully bumping their shoulders together and giving Steve his best smile. He knew it was nothing close to what the poor guy needed at the moment, but at least he was rewarded with a familiar crooked smirk of thanks.

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They spent the rest of the afternoon at the SHIELD office building in DC, where one of the secretaries helped to arrange shipment of their medals and dress blues back to New York for safe keeping and Fury refused to see them at all, except to gripe at them about being on vacation.

“On our way, sir,” Bucky responded cheekily, although they kept good on their promise. As soon as the shipment details were finished, they made their way back to their hotel, packing up the few belongings they’d removed from their saddlebags then getting on the road to avoid the apparently hellish DC afternoon rush.

They crashed for the night in a cheap motel just outside of Richmond, Virginia, before waking with the sun the next morning and continuing their way down the East Coast, finally coming to a stop around noon in Savanna, Georgia. The place was disgustingly hot and muggy, worse even than DC had been, but so full of Civil War history that Steve couldn’t help being excited.

They picked around the city for the afternoon, exploring the historical sites as Steve looked for any information that he could on General Sherman. When he complained about the lack of information that night in their hotel room, Bucky laughed at him outright, before chuckling, “They’re not exactly hot on the victories of the Union in this part of the country, Stevie, I dunno what you were expecting.”

They took their time getting on the road in the morning, stopping for breakfast before pointing it South. Somehow, the weather was even more oppressive in Central Florida. Steve did his best to finger-comb his hair into place after pulling his helmet off, waiting by the bikes while Bucky spoke to the ticket agent outside the main entrance to the Disney World resort. He came shuffling back a few minutes later, hands stuffed in the pockets of his jacket and a heavy soak of sweat around the collar of his t-shirt.

“Alright,” he said with a grin, patting the front pocket of his jacket, “we got two nights in the Art of Animation Resort, and tickets for both parks tomorrow - we’ve just gotta ride over to the hotel.”

Steve had been more than happy to follow directions – the sun was at least bearable while they were riding. They parked and locked up the Harleys, then hauled all of their luggage into the hotel; Steve only spared the drawings on the walls a quick glance, but made a mental note to come back and appreciate them properly when he wasn’t so damned sticky. Their room had a view of an enormous pool, with framed artwork all over the walls that was impressive, if unfamiliar.

“We have a lot of catching up to do, I think,” Bucky teased him, dropping his bags on the bed nearest the door and peeling out of his jacket, before pausing a moment and pulling his drenched t-shirt over his head as well. The air in the room was pleasantly chilly, so Steve didn’t say anything about the fact that Bucky immediately pulled on a long-sleeved shirt in its place - he knew that Buck still wasn’t exactly comfortable with the arm, although he did worry how the hell he would survive the heat the next day if he wasn’t willing to go sleeveless.

Steve kept his concerns to himself, figuring he could bring them up the next morning if he had to, and changed as well, listening as Bucky flipped through the pamphlet he had gotten from the welcome center, yammering about the special passes he’d gotten to spare time tomorrow. Steve
picked up one of the packets as well, sparing a quick glance at the tickets inside before nearly swallowing his tongue at the price listed.

“Bucky. There’s no fuckin’ way you spent a thousand dollars on one day in a theme park.”

“Wha?” Bucky asked, his smile dropping off of his face as he looked at the packet Steve was holding. “Ah, no, I didn’t spend that. I mean, that’s the price for them normally, yeah, but - I didn’t spend that.”

Steve continued to glare at him, trying his best to calm down about the whole thing but still feeling worked up over the fact that anything would cost that much, whether Bucky actually put the money down or not.

“Look,” Bucky sighed, “I got in there and saw the prices and knew you’d be like this, even though I know deep down you wanna go, so I asked them about military discounts, okay? And then while we were hagglin’ about prices the manager came out, and apparently she’s got family in New York and recognized me from all the press in DC, and long story short they gave it all to us as thanks, okay?”

Steve blinked in shock. “You mean - they just handed it over for free? All of it?”

“Yeah,” Bucky answered defensively, “And look, I thought about turning it down for a second, but dammit you’ve been stuck on Disney since you were a kid, and who the hell would have ever thought someone would just hand us over a gift like that? So yeah, I said thanks and took it for free.”

Steve gaped at him for just a moment, the reality of it all still sinking in, before closing his mouth and shrugging as he took a seat at the desk next to Bucky, grabbing up another one of the brochures.

“Alright… alright, that’s fair enough. So - what’d’you wanna see first?”

They’d ended up agreeing on The Magic Kingdom, and then sat around after dinner that night watching Cinderella, Alice in Wonderland, and Peter Pan in their room in an attempt to start catching up. He wasn’t about to say it out loud, for fear that Bucky might actually make fun of him for the rest of their lives, but Steve couldn’t quite help relating with Cinderella that night as he dozed off, his mind still trying to fathom how he ever could have imagined something like this otherwise.

Steve woke up early the next morning, not entirely surprised to see Bucky already awake and dressed – thankfully in a t-shirt and long cloth shorts. Steve got ready as well, dressing similarly in light of how hot the information packet had indicated the park could get; it felt a little weird, going out in so little clothing, but worth it after the taste of the humidity they’d gotten the day before.

“How nice would it have been to be able to get away with wearing something like this to Coney Island, huh?” He asked lightly, drawing Bucky’s attention away from where he’d been looking longingly at his jacket before leading them out to find breakfast in the hotel.

The park – while not as familiar as Steve might have hoped – was still pretty incredible, and it took no time at all for the two of them to get wrapped up in the sights. The big moment for Steve, though, came after they’d checked out Cinderella’s castle, walking out and practically bumping in to the real-life version of Snow White.

“Buck,” he whispered in wonder, not caring a lick that he was a grown man staring at someone dressed like a cartoon. He tried to remember how many times they’d snuck into the Pitkin to watch it when it had come out in ‘37, ignoring the fact that it was a kid’s story because of how incredible the artwork had been, and how easily he’d gotten drawn into it.
They were still debating over which cartoon had been the best to see in theaters while waiting in line for the bus to Epcot, Bucky swearing up and down that Jiminy Cricket was better than all of the seven Dwarfs, combined, when his voice suddenly cut off, leaving Steve to laugh and continue his argument in Dopey’s favor (even though he knew Bucky was right). Steve looked over questioningly at the abrupt silence, frowning when he saw the look of surprise on Bucky’s face before following his sightline towards the ground between them.

A tiny girl with blonde curls had somehow wormed her way next to Bucky’s left side and held his pinky finger in her right hand, studying it with a look of intense concentration. For a few seconds none of them moved, before Bucky slowly rotated his palm up, the plates articulating quietly as they gently shifted into place. She continued to hold on, so he slowly wiggled his other four fingers, drawing a giggle out of the child before she turned wide, grinning blue eyes up at him.

Bucky gave her an awkward smile in return, although it slowly turned into one of his warm, genuine ones as he looked at her more closely. Watching the interaction between the two of them drew Steve to the same realization – the girl’s left arm stopped just below the elbow as she used it to point at Bucky.

“Melody!” A woman behind them exclaimed, swooping in and gathering the girl in her arms with an obvious mixture of both relief and anger. “You know better than to run off like that, I told you back at the hotel…” She sighed, hugging her daughter tight before turning to Bucky. “I’m sorry about that; she knows not to bother strangers, too, but… we’ve had her working with an OT, trying to get her to use a prosthetic, and - I guess she’s never seen one so advanced.”

“Ah,” Bucky shrugged, his smile shy this time as he rubbed the back of his neck with his right hand. “It’s alright, really, she wasn’t a bother.”

The mother apologized again, anyway, thanking Bucky for his understanding, before carting the little girl off. Steve kept quiet as Bucky looked at his left hand after she’d left, before launching back into their interrupted debate.

The fact that he didn’t hide his hand in his pocket again for the rest of the day, though, definitely didn’t escape Steve’s notice.

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They’d stayed at Epcot until close, wandering around Future World without shame, and fell into bed immediately when they had made it back to the resort. The next morning they were up with the sun, leaving North and then West so that they arrived in New Orleans by late afternoon. After agreeing on a hotel (Steve refused to stay in a place that actually advertised that it was haunted, whether Andrew Jackson had stayed there or not), they found a small, dimly-lit bar near the French Quarter that promised both excellent gumbo and a live jazz band, and neither turned out to be disappointed by either offering.

The next day was spent wandering – Steve finding himself more and more impressed with the architecture of the city, particularly the churches (he wished he’d have thought to read up on it before they’d left), while Bucky pulled them into jazz bar after jazz bar. Steve chuckled quietly as he sketched a rough drawing of the view across the street, his eyes drifting back and forth between the impressive wrought-iron balconies and the excited tap of Bucky’s foot as he watched the bassist of the band pick away at a solo. Steve had a good feeling they would be listening to a lot of Creole jazz when they got back to New York, but had no problem with the idea.

After staying out late that night on a kitchy ghost tour around the old city – they’d both laughed at the ridiculousness of the idea, but it had been an interesting way to learn about the history of the
place, weird as it all was, they decided to take their time leaving the next morning, stopping for beignets and chicory coffee before heading North.

They stopped in St. Louis for just long enough to check out the Arch, before getting onto Route 66. From there it was just a matter of continuing West, keeping their eyes out for random roadside stops to explore, stopping when they were hungry or the Harleys needed gas or the view was just too pretty to continue flying past. They stopped to sleep in Tulsa, then again in Albuquerque when Bucky pointed out that there was no rush in getting to the Grand Canyon after dark, and that the sunrise in the mountains would be worth the wait.

He hadn’t been wrong at all – both had grabbed a pre-dawn coffee and made their way to an overlook, sipping their coffee in silent wonder as the sun lit up the horizon. Once their cups were drained and the sun was properly in the sky, they set out again, pushing a bit harder with the goal of making it in time to actually go for a hike in the Canyon before dark.

As soon as they turned North off of Route 66, Bucky took the lead, racing towards the Grand Canyon National Park like a man on a mission. Steve didn’t even bother radioing ahead as they blew past the main park entrance, sensing that something was already on Buck’s mind.

Bucky turned off of the park road at the first look-out point, parking the Harley in a lot that was blessedly empty and dropping his helmet carelessly onto the seat before marching towards the edge of the point, dropping to his butt like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

Steve gave him a second to himself, parking his own bike and stowing their helmets properly, before slowly making his way to where Bucky still sat, motionless. The view was incredible – Steve had known, of course, that the Grand Canyon would be beautiful; but as he looked out over the huge stretch of rock structures, seeing the vast drop and how wide the entire thing spread, he still felt a rush of wonder. It was so, so much more than he would have imagined, and he folded his legs underneath himself so that he was sitting too, before resting his hand gently on Bucky’s shoulder.

“You alright?” Steve murmured quietly, noticing the tight line of Bucky’s lips and the way that his nostrils were flared, as if he was trying to fight down a terrible surge of emotion. Distantly, Steve remembered all of the dark, cold nights in their drafty apartment, his own lungs rattling and fevers racking his body… hearing Bucky promise they’d see the Grand Canyon one day if he just hurried up and got well again, dammit. He could imagine him giving himself the same speech while locked up in Kreischberg, could practically hear Bucky’s voice bragging to the other Howlies over sad, damp campfires about the trip he’d make when they finally got to back home to the States.

Steve wasn’t exactly surprised to realize that his own eyes were wet, too.

Finally, Bucky turned to him, biting his lip before murmuring, “Yeah.”

Steve cleared his throat, biting his lip before murmuring, “Yeah.”

Steve cleared his throat, unable to take his eyes off of Bucky, even to look out over the view again. “Everything you imagined, then?” He heard himself ask.

It took Bucky a while to answer, his eyes scanning Steve’s face as he swallowed thickly. There was… something that Steve couldn’t exactly explain, something in Bucky’s eyes that were drawing him closer, telling him this was some enormous moment for the both of them. Finally, Bucky cleared his throat, blinking and then looking back out over the view in front of them. “It is, Stevie,” he whispered with a nod, “it really is.”

Chapter End Notes
This chapter got so, so far away from me that it isn't funny, so I decided to split it into two parts to make sure that I could post at least half of it before leaving on my own road trip at the end of the week ;) That said... most of the rest of it is almost done, so I'll do my best to post it asap.

As always, comments are my life-blood.

You can follow me on tumblr if you want to cry about these idiots together...
The craziest thing about Los Angeles, Steve determined within an hour of their arrival, was the horror that was the media there. A group of photographers had been waiting outside of the hotel across the street when they had parked their bikes and checked in for a couple of days, and another swarm that seemed to appear out of nowhere when they sat down for a late dinner at a café a few blocks away. In fact, it seemed like whatever he and Bucky did, there would inevitably follow the click of a camera shutter and someone calling out for Cap and Bucky.

“Fucking vultures,” Bucky muttered as they made their way through the lobby the next morning after being followed on their run.

Steve nodded in agreement, making his way towards the stairs – they’d had to cut the run short, being unfamiliar with the area and sick of having attention drawn to them, so he figured running up the thirty or so flights to their floor would help burn some of the annoyance off. “I can’t even figure out what the hell they’d need that many pictures of us for, it’s not like we were doing anything noteworthy.”

They went so far as to call down to the concierge desk to ask how to avoid the crush that was gathering outside the hotel entrance when they were ready to go out for the afternoon, and were mercifully escorted out a back entrance to a waiting town car by hotel security.

“So -we’re officially big wigs now, right?” Bucky asked sarcastically as Steve rolled his eyes and asked the driver to just take them to Dodger’s stadium.

The stands were enormous – Steve figured that he probably shouldn’t have been surprised, given how big everything seemed to be now, but he still couldn’t help feeling a little bit awed as they pulled to a stop in front of the stadium. It was nothing at all like what he remembered Ebbets to be, and he couldn’t decide whether he was glad for it or not. While too many similarities probably would have made the whole thing a little depressing, the idea that something he’d loved so much before could now feel so unfamiliar wasn’t exactly happy, either.

“Did you get a chance to read up on rules beforehand?” He asked Bucky while waiting in line for tickets.

“Rules? Who’d want to change baseball?” Bucky asked incredulously before handing over cash for
their tickets, completely ignoring Steve’s attempt to buy his own.

There was a bit of trouble making their way into the park when Bucky’s arm set off the security alarms at the ticket carousel, but as soon as the security guards recognized who the two of them were they were passed through without any trouble. Since it was still nearly an hour before game time, they decided to wander around the concourses, taking in the sights and sounds and trying to find familiar concessions.

Bucky whipped his head around so fast when they passed the clubhouse store that Steve was half-afraid he’d broke his neck, then almost tripped over himself pulling Steve into the store to buy them both familiar blue caps with a stylized “B” embroidered on them. He flat-out refused to let Steve pay for his, shooing him out of the way when he got out his wallet, so Steve ended up strong-arm himself in front of him in line for concessions, dead-set on paying for all of whatever they bought. He knew that Bucky would probably argue against it, but he wouldn’t budge on his decision; for the first time in his life Steve could actually buy shit for his best friend, and damned if he wasn’t going to take advantage of it for a change.

They were almost to the front of the line when a nervous-looking young man in a suit approached them, stammering the words “Captain Rogers, sir,” at least a dozen times as he welcomed them on behalf of the Dodgers organization, then asked if he and “Sergeant Barnes” would join them in the dugout before the game and throw out the first pitch.

Bucky, the asshole, accepted for the both of them, giving Steve a shit-eating grin as they followed the PR staff back out into the concourse, then down an elevator towards the team clubhouse. They were each handed jerseys in the dugout, then left alone for a bit as the team made their way onto the field to warm-up and the PR staff finally found other pre-game preparations to busy themselves with. Steve stared at the jersey in his hands in wonder: it was the same as the uniform that the team was wearing, unnumbered on the back but with the name “ROGERS” stitched across the shoulders. Next to him, Bucky was already shrugging his “BARNES” jersey on over the blue Henley that he was wearing, grinning like a loon as he began buttoning it up.

“Can you even imagine the look on the MacCarthy brothers’ faces if they saw us putting on honest-to-God personalized Bums jerseys?” He asked, his eyes crinkling with mirth at the thought.

Steve remembered all of the times the boys in question had begrudgingly let him join in games of stickball - only because they had wanted Bucky on their team, of course, and because he made a habit of refusing to play with anyone who wouldn’t let his best pal join them. Steve swallowed around the lump in his throat, forcing a grin onto his face and finally shrugging his jersey on over his t-shirt. “Probably swallow their tongues and die of envy on the spot,” he said quietly, shaking his head as Bucky laughed in response.

Even ignoring the time they had spent in the ice, it had been at least five years since Steve had thrown anything other than his shield around – so he was more than a little nervous as he made his way out onto the field, the crowd screaming deafeningly loud as the announcer droned on about his accomplishments in Europe and the battle of New York then finally introduced him as Captain America, while the organist for the park played a rendition of *Star Spangled Man with a Plan*. Steve waved and smiled before lobbing a reasonably decent fast-ball to the Dodgers catcher… it ended up over the plate, and it wasn’t so hard that it injured the poor guy, so he called it a win. He gave one final salute to the crowd as they continued to scream before jogging off of the field, shaking his head at the dopey way Bucky was grinning while he filmed it all on his StarkPhone.

The team, of course, refunded their tickets and insisted that they take a pair of VIP seats behind home plate, a gift in commemoration of their service. While they accepted graciously, Steve couldn’t help
nodding along in bitter commiseration as Bucky grumbled about the way that people were so willing to throw free things at them now that they were rich, but had never given them a break all of the years that they were poor. While part of Steve wanted to give people the benefit of the doubt, he was willing to bet that the same was true even now and kept the thoughts quiet.

It turned out that a lot seemed to have changed about the game, but it was still familiar enough to be enjoyable. Steve kept track of the player’s stats as best as he could on the scorecard inside the program. It was more difficult than he’d remembered – with the speed of the game having changed and the players being completely unfamiliar, but he still found himself smiling easily and jumping up to cheer when the Dodger’s third basemen hit a two-run shot in the bottom of the fourth.

To both of their surprise, Bucky’s phone alerts started going off in the sixth, and after ignoring the first five of them Steve finally looked away from the field. “Just check them…”

“I don’t even know who it would be,” Bucky responded indifferently, keeping his eyes locked on the field, “not like we’re supposed to be called in for anything for another five weeks.”

The text alert on his phone chimed again.

“My God, Buck - you ain’t gonna miss anything in the fifteen seconds it takes to see who it is.”

Bucky frowned and dug his StarkPhone out of his pocket, flipping through the text screens as the Dodger’s pitcher struck out his batter to end the inning.

“It’s Tony,” Bucky said neutrally. “He saw that we’re in LA, wants us to stay at his place in Malibu tonight. Says he’s unspeakably hurt that we’d stay at a hotel when we’re in his neck of the woods.”

Steve frowned, “I didn’t even know he had a place in California. How the hell were we supposed to know that?”

Bucky shrugged, beginning to type a message back on his phone.

“Is he gonna be there?” Steve asked pointedly. He didn’t exactly dislike Stark - at least nowhere near as much as he had when he’d first met him, but he wasn’t sure that he wanted to spend an evening with him. After all, this was supposed to be his time with Bucky…

“I dunno,” Bucky responded, “I’d guess so.” He looked up from the screen, “Wha’d’you want me to tell him?”

“Our hotel’s perfectly fine,” Steve responded simply, looking out on the field as the opposing pitcher warmed up.

Bucky was quiet for a couple of seconds, too quiet, before speaking up. “I dunno; I mean, I know the hotel is fine, I don’t have a problem with the hotel, but - he says he wants to show me something. And… I dunno, Steve, it wouldn’t hurt to spend a night with him. I think he could use a friend.”

Steve didn’t bother trying to mask his skepticism as he eyed Bucky disbelievingly, but Bucky didn’t budge at all, holding Steve’s gaze with serious, pleading eyes.

“Fine,” Steve finally huffed, turning his attention back to the game. “But just for tonight. And if he’s a complete asshole I’m going back to the hotel.”

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There was an impressive gate with an armed guard waiting at the address that Tony had texted Bucky, because of course there was. Steve approached slowly, well aware of how two unknown men on dirty Harleys might look rolling up into a neighborhood like this, cutting his engine and pulling his helmet off with a pleasant smile as the guard stepped out of his booth.

The man’s eyes flicked between Steve, then seemed to catch for a moment on Bucky behind him (Steve realized, belatedly, that Buck hadn’t bothered with gloves in the heat - doubtlessly it was the metal hand that threw him off), then settled on Steve again, widening in recognition. “Uh, Mr. Stark invited us,” Steve started awkwardly.

“Of course, Captain Rogers - he told me to expect you, come right on in. Welcome to Point Dume, Sergeant Barnes.”

The guard opened the gate immediately, waiving awkwardly as Steve and Bucky both rode up the long, winding driveway, which finally opened up to a frankly ridiculous structure. “Is this for real?” Steve heard Bucky scoff in his headset, the both of them pulling up next to a line of heinously expensive-looking cars and parking the bikes.

“I mean,” Steve responded as he pulled off his helmet, giving Bucky a rueful look, “you can’t say you’re surprised.”

The front door to the enormous mansion opened, and an unfamiliar version of the Iron Man suit made its way towards them, stopping a few feet from where they had parked the Harleys. “Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes,” a canned-sounding voice stated, “Mr. Stark says welcome - he’s waiting for you in the basement lab.”

“He’s automating the suits?” Bucky whispered, the look on his face as alarmed as Steve was feeling. “It’s only been a coupla weeks since we left… how is he already automating the suits?”

Steve shook his head, shouldering his knapsack and gathering the saddlebags off of his bike before following the thing into the house, already beginning to regret their decision to take up Stark’s offer. As soon as they were inside the giant vestibule, the suit closed the door behind them and held its arms out while the disembodied voice of JARVIS greeted them. “Good afternoon, sirs. The Mark 29 here will take your belongings to your rooms for you, and I shall guide you to where Mr. Stark is waiting.”

“Sure, why not,” Steve responded skeptically, handing his bags over to the suit with more than a little anxiety before following JARVIS’s instructions to a small elevator near the back of the house. He and Bucky made their way down a level, stepping out into a lab that was even larger than the one Stark had invited them to for his final check on Bucky’s arm… and at the moment, seemed to be actually covered in Iron Man suits of varying states of completion.

“Ah, Captain Dorito and Sergeant Roboto,” Stark announced cheerily from the opposite side of the room, stepping out from behind a bank of computers. “Welcome to my humble abode.”

“I’m a cyborg, Tony, not a robot,” Bucky muttered – Steve was still busy trying to work out what the hell a Dorito was.

“Touché, Buckarino, touché,” Stark responded with a grin. As Steve looked him over, the entire situation actually managed to become more alarming – it was clear that his clothes were rumpled, and the bags under his dark eyes made it look as if he hadn’t slept in days. “So how’s the Great American Road trip going? Saw your pitch at the Dodgers game, Cap - I’m disappointed you guys didn’t have it in you to call me.”
“We had no way of knowing you were in California,” Steve responded shortly, before gesturing around at all of the suits. “What’ve you been working on?”

“Oh, these old things… I’m just tinkering with the suit.” Stark answered flippantly.

“You said you had something you wanted me to see, though?” Bucky prompted.

“Yes, right!” Tony responded, clapping his hands and making his way to a packed workbench on the far side of the room. “I got thinking after the two of you left, actually - I’m already the unrivaled leader in clean energy in the world, and it’s not as if anyone is going to be able to match the arc reactor technology at any point soon without divine intervention - and what’s the fun of resting on your laurels while sitting on the top, right?” He grabbed an arm off of the bench; for a second, Steve thought that it was another piece of one of his suits, but as he held it out to Bucky it became apparent that it was shaped exactly like his prosthesis, only made of something other than metal.

“So, you’re building arms?” Bucky asked, taking the prosthetic in his left hand to examine it as Stark handed it over.

“Limbs in general, yeah. You saw how sad the prosthetic market is right now - even SHIELD and all of their great genius wasn’t able to come up with a functioning design for you, and I thought: hell, I built the Mona Lisa of cybernetic arm replacements. Why not find a way to mass-market them and take over the biomedical engineering world, as well?”

Bucky moved the prosthetic around as he spoke, articulating the wrist and the fingers before hefting it up and down in his right hand. “It’s so much lighter than mine; what are you using?”

Stark grinned, “Well, there aren’t many people out there who need to punch their way through walls, and even fewer who are capable of lifting Harleys, so I could give up some of the material strength requirements that went into yours to build ones that actual human beings are strong enough to cart around.” He dug around under a chair and pulled out a leg, as well. “Titanium alloys for the anchoring portions, they’re about the same weight and density as bones anyway, then fiberglass for the casing, for now. I’m working on figuring out an appropriate polymer structure - eventually we might be able to just make the casings in 3-D printers. Drop the price for a functional prosthetic from fifteen grand to one or two, allow families to actually buy them.”

Steve accepted the leg from Tony, moving the ankle joint around as the words set in. He glanced over and made eye contact with Bucky, sure that his friend was thinking the same as he was, remembering the little girl in Orlando who would benefit so much from something like this. And as Steve listened to Tony ramble on about the costs and the production times and the fact that they could make them removable and require less surgery than Bucky’s had, it struck Steve how thoughtful Stark’s idea actually was. “That… this is incredible, Tony,” he said quietly, “you’re gonna change a lot of people’s lives.”

Stark looked shocked for a moment, blinking at Steve before scoffing and waving his hand. “Sure, sure - and the more people who can afford them the more that go into market, it’s really just a matter of supply and demand, better business if I can get more people wearing it.” And just like that he launched into another rambling description of the economics behind the design and how he wanted to change it, how much fun Pepper’s people would have marketing it, how he’d probably design some in the same colors as the Iron Man suit; within a few seconds Steve tuned him out, deciding not to think on why it was that the man couldn’t just admit to wanting to do something good for others.

Steve and Bucky poked around the lab for another hour while Stark rambled at them about his projects, before breaking to ask what they’d had planned for the evening.
“Ah - we kinda wanted to Hollywood Hills, see the sign at dark,” Steve admitted, waiting for Stark to set in and make fun of them for being such tourists.

“Great idea, it’s been years since I’ve been. Let’s go grab dinner then head out, I’ll drive.” Tony said instead, throwing whatever he had randomly started working on down on his work bench. “Sushi okay?”

Steve looked at Bucky, badly wanting to turn him down, but as Bucky wordlessly rolled his eyes around at the mess they were standing in, he knew that they couldn’t. “Sushi’s great,” Steve heard himself answering instead, plastering his press smile on his face.

“We tried a couple places Natasha recommended in New York,” Bucky explained when Stark looked surprised at the easy agreement.

Steve nodded along, before adding, “We’ll just go change and freshen up, let us know when you want to leave?”

Stark sniffed at his own shirt and promised them JARVIS would have them called to the foyer, and then ran up a flight of stairs at the opposite end of the room. Steve and Bucky looked at each other for a moment more, before Bucky called out, “Um, JARVIS. Where’s our stuff?”

It turned out that they had an entire wing to themselves, each bedroom at least as big as their entire apartment back in Manhattan and with a private bathroom in each to boot. Steve was in the middle of washing his face when Bucky leaned against the doorway. “I told you something wasn’t right - how long d’you think he’s been holed up here by himself?”

Steve shook his head, drying his face off with a hand towel before continuing. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. He’s Stark, he’s supposed to be a little eccentric and brilliant. How do we know this is anything out of the ordinary for him?”

“Cuz he’s built a damned legion of fighting robots in the past six weeks!” Bucky hissed, looking over his shoulder like he was expecting JARVIS to yell at him. “I’m just saying, I know we don’t know him that well, but - this ain’t normal, Steve. This… I think he’s shaken up from New York.”

“We did fight off a giant army of flying alien robots, and he carried a nuclear warhead on his back through a space portal,” Steve deadpanned, “I don’t know why you’re so…”

“Look,” Bucky interrupted, sighing in frustration, “you didn’t - we had a real good run with the Howlies, did a lot of bad shit and saw a lot of bad shit but always came out on top. But some guys… I’m just sayin’, he’s got that look that some of the guys got in Kreischberg. I think maybe we should tell somebody - you know as well as I do that he’s not been sleeping.”

Steve frowned – it wasn’t like Bucky to call a guy out like this, especially with something as serious as canon fever. He didn’t like Stark that much, but he really thought that Bucky looked at the guy like he was a friend, making the accusations all the more strange. “Buck, I don’t like Stark, but I’ve got no reason to question his bravery or his… mental stability. Besides, he’s got a girl to look after him; Pepper’s smart, if she thinks he needs help she’ll get it.” Bucky opened his mouth to argue, but Steve continued on. “It ain’t our business to step in and embarrass him like that.”

Bucky’s mouth closed with a click before he cast his eyes down and nodded. “Yeah, alright.” he finally agreed quietly, pushing himself away from the door jamb and standing to his full height. “You’re probably right, I just - I was just thinking, is all.”

Steve smirked, “Well don’t hurt yourself, okay? We’ve still got a long ass drive before we’re home.”
Bucky shoved him away with a smile and a muttered, “Punk,” before making his way back to whichever room he’d been settled in to get dressed.

Stark insisted on taking them in a convertible, despite the fact that there were three of them and neither Steve nor Bucky could sit particularly comfortably in the back seat… Steve did have to grudgingly admit, though, that it made for a hell of a view as they drove into the hills. After dinner and sightseeing Tony continued driving through the exclusive neighborhoods, pointing out gates similar to his own and dropping names of people that Steve assumed must be hugely important.

“You’re sure you don’t want me to make a few phone calls?” He asked for at least the twelfth time. “I’m telling you, I put out the word that I’m having a party at my place for Captain America, there will be eligible ladies lined up around the neighborhood.”

“It’s fine, Tony,” Steve sighed, “We want to get an early start in the morning, anyway.”

Stark gave them both an incredulous look as he stopped at a light, before shaking his heads and muttering something about grandpas.

The mansion was blessedly quiet when they got back to it, and they both begged off any further adventures with Tony, insisting that they needed to sleep before heading out in the morning.

Bucky knocked on Steve’s door shortly before 08:00 the next morning, already dressed in a short-sleeved button-down and jeans, looking like he was ready to leave whenever Steve was. “Just give me a second,” Steve said around his toothbrush, opening his door and returning to the bathroom to finish washing up.

“Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes,” JARVIS spoke up, “Mr. Stark wanted me to let you know that there’s breakfast waiting in the sitting room, so to stop by before you leave.”

“He ask you to spy on us, too?” Steve heard Bucky mutter.

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that, Sergeant Barnes,” JARVIS answered pleasantly, causing Steve to laugh as he spat his toothpaste into the sink.

They hauled all of their gear downstairs once Steve was ready, grateful for the lack of the creepy Iron Man suits as help. As JARVIS had said, the coffee table in the living room was absolutely covered with food – an impressive feat, considering its size.

“I wasn’t sure what you’d like, so I made sure to have a little of everything made,” Tony explained, swanning into the room as Bucky and Steve stared at the spread. Steve wasn’t exactly surprised to notice the dark smudges under his eyes were even worse than they’d been the night before, or that he seemed to still be wearing the suit pants that he’d gone out in. “Anyway, there’s eggs, bacon, eggs benedict, crepes, the usual faire… then fruit and croissants and muffins and whatnot, and I wasn’t sure if you had any dietary restrictions, so; everything on this side of the table is gluten-free.” He finished, grabbing up a plate and a couple of waffles from the side he’d indicated.

Steve didn’t even know what the hell gluten was, but it all smelled good, and he wasn’t about to turn it down; especially when Tony’d apparently gone out of his way to make sure they were fed before they left.

They made idle chitchat as they ate, Steve and Bucky putting away three full plates of food to be polite, and in an attempt to sample most of what Stark had put out. Finally, Steve admitted that he couldn’t take anymore, finishing his coffee cup and setting his plate aside. “Well Stark,” he sighed, “I really can’t say thanks enough for having us, but we should probably get on the road - we planned
on stopping in Fresno for a bit and wanted to make it to San Francisco by evening.”

“Actually, there was one more thing,” Stark mentioned, gesturing between the two of them with a piece of toast. “I saw the specs for your apartment in the SHIELD data; sad, depressing rat-trap, if you ask me. So I took it upon myself to set aside a couple of floors in Avengers Tower… just stop by when you get back into town, Pep has all of the info so you can pick out your paint and furniture and whatnot.”

Steve shot Bucky a pained look, who finished his last bite of flapjacks before answering. “Ah, thanks, Tony, but we were thinking of looking for a spot in Brooklyn.”

Steve’s brow furrowed slightly, sending him a nonverbal we were? before he added, “And we have no idea yet where SHIELD is gonna end up stationing us, so…”

Stark sighed, shooting a dirty look at Bucky, “You’re still on the SHIELD train?”

“We’re keeping our options open.” Steve responded shortly, “And we’re not making any decisions until our vacation is over.”

That conversation ended, Bucky and Steve finally rose to their feet and gathered up their belongings.

“Don’t be strangers, got it?” Tony asked, walking the both of them to the door.

“Sure thing,” Steve agreed easily.

“And take care of yourself, alright?” Bucky added, earning a tight, awkward smile from Tony.

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They kept with their plans to detour up I-5 to Fresno to visit Morita’s grave. Although it was hours out of the way, and meant that they would need to nearly double back to Cambria if they wanted to ride up the coast through Big Sur, both Bucky and Steve agreed that it was more than worth the trouble.

That said, putting the wreath down in the spot where one of their friends was actually laid to rest ended up hitting them even harder than the memorial at Arlington had been – they spent a long time simply standing beside his headstone, shoulders nearly touching and heads bowed as they paid their respects.

“We should have made it a point to find the others as well; figured out where Dum-Dum and Gabe are,” Steve muttered after at least half an hour of silence, his voice full of guilt.

“I think if anyone would have understood, it’d have been them,” Bucky responded quietly, continuing on at Steve’s frown. “Seriously, we can do it another time. But the whole point of this was to get out and see the sites and start figuring out how to get on with life. Wouldn’ta been able to do that if we spent the whole time running sadness errands.”

Steve pursed his lips, clearly not happy with agreeing on the point, but didn’t bother arguing. After a short, silent prayer on Steve’s part and an awkward, quiet goodbye from Bucky, they finally made their way back to the bikes, neither of them saying a word as they headed back in the direction of the Pacific coast.

Although his head was filled mostly with memories and regret, Steve couldn’t help marveling at the views as they made their way onto the cliffs along Big Sur – the Pacific Ocean crashed against the beaches below them, while wooded mountains rose against the sky to their right. Bucky radioed him
as they were coming up on a scenic lookout, indicating that they really should stop for a bit and enjoy the view – and Steve was more than happy to agree.

After standing next to each other in silent wonder and taking in the views for a few minutes, Bucky moved to grab his camera out of its storage space in his saddle bag. “You mind hanging around here for a while?” Steve asked, an idea to clear his mind and truly enjoy the place forming in his head.

“Course,” Bucky answered, removing the cap from the lens and looking over. “Long as you want, pal. I’m not in any kinda rush.”

Steve nodded his thanks before digging into his knapsack and pulling out his sketchbook and satchel of pencils. He’d been trying to sketch as Bucky had recommended, wanting to put the gift to good use, and while they were nothing compared to some of the drawings he used to be capable of, he felt like he was getting at least a bit better. He flipped past pages of random doodles, a couple of attempts at capturing Bucky’s metal arm in different poses, Peggy sitting by her window, Cinderella’s castle and random mountain ranges and the Grand Canyon. Taking a seat next to his Harley, Steve started sketching out the view of the ocean off of the overlook, beginning to lose himself in the peace of the waves rolling onto the sand and the occasional click of Buck’s camera.

By the time they finally came into the city limits of San Francisco it was well after 15:30, and they were both starving. Steve noticed a diner that looked reasonably promising and radioed as much to Bucky, who of course agreed immediately on stopping for lunch.

The place didn’t look particularly special as far as diners went, but it meant that they recognized all of the food and had a sign in the front indicated that they had won a few awards for their food, so the decision to stay and eat was easy. They were seated easily in a booth in the corner, given how awkward a time of day it was, and quickly ordered burgers, fries and sodas, deciding there was no point in straying from what they knew.

The mood that settled over the table when the waitress left was a melancholy one, although Steve chalked it up to the events of the morning. After a few minutes of awkward small talk, Bucky pulled his camera out of his knapsack and began flipping through the photos he’d taken, while Steve offered compliments on the ones he decided were good enough to share and cleaned up his favorite of his sketches from the overlook. Steve vaguely noticed that a few other patrons had come into the diner since they’d been seated, but with his back to the door, he hadn’t paid them any mind.

They both stowed their belongings when their food was brought out, thanking the waitress pleasantly and then tearing into their meals. Or rather- Steve did… Bucky was eating, but seemed decidedly more focused on something going on out the window on the opposite side of the diner. Since he didn’t seem to be alarmed at all, Steve took it in stride, continuing to eat without calling attention to it, until finally his curiosity got the better of him, and he turned just enough in his booth to see what it was that his friend was so fixated on.

There were a couple of young men: boys really, Steve wouldn’t have placed them much older than twenty, sharing the same bench at a booth across the diner. They were speaking lowly enough that Steve would have had to consciously eavesdrop to listen in, their heads and shoulders pressed closely together as they murmured and laughed about something. He could see why Bucky had found the two so compelling – something about them held Steve’s attention as well, his chest feeling oddly tight as he watched the easy way the two just existed together. His reverie was interrupted when the waitress brought them a milkshake – a single glass, with two straws in it – smiling at their pleasant thanks. Suddenly the entire scene became that much more intimate; he knew this schtick, had played tag-along as Bucky had pulled it on countless girls back in Brooklyn. They weren’t just guys having lunch together, they were on a date.
Steve turned immediately, feeling his ears heat with shame for having watched in the first place. He noticed that Bucky had dropped his eyes to his plate as well, the metal fingers of his left hand toying around with a French fry. Steve’s stomach turned over and he took a quick sip of his soda, trying to figure out some surreptitious way to ask Bucky what was wrong. Finally, after a couple of minutes of painful quiet, Steve nudged Bucky under the table with his foot, frowning questioningly when he looked up with overly-bright eyes.

“Just - surprised me is all, I guess.” Bucky whispered, lowly enough that no one but Steve had a chance of hearing.

That much Steve understood; he’d seen plenty of guys make time with one another before, but only ever on accident, happening on them in dark alleys down by the docks… or once, in a seedy old speak-easy that had been converted into a queer bar. But the idea of two guys being romantic in broad daylight, next to an enormous restaurant window that faced a busy street, where no one seemed to give a damn about it? It was a nice change, for sure, but a surprising one nonetheless. “It’s - it’s a lot more normal now,” he murmured finally, just as quietly as Bucky had earlier. “Here especially, I suppose. I did a little bit of reading on it a few weeks ago… apparently the past ten years there’s been a huge movement for queer rights, making sure there’s more equality,” He finally trailed off – in part for fear that he’d be overheard whispering about the poor couple just trying to enjoy a milkshake on the other side of the diner, and in part because, inexplicably, Bucky’s face only seemed to grow sadder as he talked.

“Yeah, it’s great,” Bucky murmured with a small smile, although his eyes remained dark and pained as he continued to steal looks across the diner. Finally, when Steve had finished his own meal and the uncomfortable sadness hanging over the table had become near-to unbearable, Bucky spoke up again, pushing his plate aside. “Think I’m just gonna ask for a box, ‘mnot that hungry anymore. Want to get out of here and go find a place to stay?”

Bucky had barely touched his food except to pick at it and move it around the plate, but Steve wasn’t about to point out as much; instead, he nodded in agreement, catching their waitress’ attention after Buck had excused himself for the bathroom and getting both the box and the check taken care of. As they made their way through the city towards the bridge, already having agreed that a room with a view would be worth the extra cash, Steve puzzled over Bucky’s behavior in the diner, eventually deciding to chalk it up to residual sadness from visiting Morita’s grave.

He didn’t want to entertain the other, more disconcerting possibilities.

It took some looking, but they finally found a hotel near the Golden Gate strait that had vacancies. Bucky volunteered to haul in their luggage while Steve went ahead and got their room, so Steve made his way into the lobby with just his knapsack, pausing for a moment to appreciate the gorgeous view of the Bay through the enormous windows before approaching the concierge desk. The woman waiting to help was a beautiful blonde, and gave him an enormous, bubbly smile as she greeted him.

“Yeah, thanks,” Steve smiled, trying not to be too put off. “I’ll need a room for two, just for the night. Preferably with a view of the bridge, if you have any available.”

“I’m sure I can find something,” she responded pleasantly. “Is this your first time in San Francisco?”

Steve hummed an affirmative, leafing through the pamphlets of attractions as the concierge, Caroline, according to her nametag, worked on her computer.

He felt someone sidle up beside him before hearing Bucky’s voice ask, “Any luck?”
Caroline looked between the two of them, her smile dimming a bit before she resumed typing away at her computer. “Okay, looks like we have a room on the twelfth floor that should suit you guys, if that sounds good to you?”

“Sounds great,” Steve responded pleasantly, pulling his credit card out of his wallet and handing it over to reserve the room. Weird as it still was to think that a piece of plastic could take care of essentially all of their finances, Steve had to admit that he was beginning to truly appreciate its convenience.

“Alright,” Caroline said pleasantly, her smile nothing but professional as she swiped a couple of key cards to activate them and then handed them over with Steve’s credit card, “You’ll be in 1246, then. The elevators are just down this hallway here to the right. Checkout will be tomorrow at 11 am, and room service information is all in the brochure in your room, but you can call down if you have any questions or concerns.”

“Sounds good,” Steve responded pleasantly, taking back his card and the key card envelope.

“Thank you, ma’am.” Bucky added, his charming smile in place, although it didn’t quite seem to reach his eyes.

Steve made a mental note to ask him about it once they were settled in, before grabbing up his knapsack and one of the saddle bags and leading the way to the elevators.

They made their way in companionable silence to the elevator, although Bucky whistled as the door closed behind them. “Swanky digs…”

Steve shook his head at the comment – it really wasn’t *that* much nicer than most of the places they had stayed in – but couldn’t help smiling all the same. There were still moments when he had trouble wrapping his head around the fact that this whole trip was real, so knowing that Bucky seemed to be equally impressed was a pleasant thought. Their room was easy enough to find, at the end of the hall on the twelfth floor, and Steve shouldered the bags he’d been carrying so that he could slip one of the key cards into the lock, turning the handle and pushing the door open when the tiny light on it turned green.

Steve took a few steps into the room before coming to a stop, frowning as he took in the single bed in the center. Bucky nearly ended up running into him, making a questioning grumble of a noise before standing on his tip-toes to look over Steve’s shoulder. “What are you… oh.”

“I think she made a mistake with the room numbers,” Steve said awkwardly, already getting ready to turn around and make his way back to the lobby. “Let’s just go back down and ask her to switch, it doesn’t look like they’re that busy.”

Bucky chuckled darkly, shaking his head. “Nah, Steve. She meant to give us this room cuz she thinks we’re *together* together – ‘swhy she quit flirting with you when I showed up.” He licked his lips briefly (Steve tried but failed to look away from his mouth) before continuing nonchalantly, “But - if you want, we can go back down. I don’t mind setting her straight.”

Something about the way he said it set Steve’s teeth on edge; like Bucky was upset by the fact that Steve *wanted* to correct the mistake. “It’s fine.” He ended up hearing himself say, instead. “I don’t mind if you don’t.”

Bucky blinked at him in surprise. Steve looked back at the bed again – it was easily the biggest bed that he’d ever seen, and more than enough room for the two of them. And it wasn’t as if they hadn’t shared tight sleeping quarters for most of their lives; why would this be any different than piling the
“You sure?” Bucky asked skeptically, nodding towards the door behind him. “Cuz I’m fine if you want to…”

“No sense in making more trouble for her,” Steve responded matter-of-factly, before finally making his way out of the entryway and into the room, dropping his bag on the floor to the left of the bed and moving to the window to throw the blinds open.

They went about their usual evening routine, cleaning up one at a time in the bathroom and taking a minute to catch up on their StarkPads. Finally, 23:00 rolled around and they both climbed into bed, each turning onto their side to face away from each other, a good six inches of space between their backs. Nothing strange about it at all, Steve thought to himself.

“G’night,” Bucky murmured sleepily from his side of the bed.

“Night, Bucky.” Steve answered, before curling in on himself and trying to get more comfortable. Although he was hyper-aware of the heat he could feel coming from Bucky’s side of the bed, it wasn’t long before his familiar slow, deep breaths began to lull his mind.

When Steve next began to notice anything he was curled into a tight ball, as he tended to sleep every night – he figured that it was his body’s subconscious desire to feel normal again, making itself as small as possible, so that it could rest the only way it had ever known. His mind drifted between sleep and wakefulness, marveling over how warm and comfortable and safe he felt. Well-rested, too - more than he could remember in the recent past; probably since their ridiculous night on the floor in the living room.

Despite his baser instincts’ protest, Steve started to wake fully, and that was when he noticed the rest: the heavy, warm arm that was draped over his waist, and the familiar, even breaths against the nape of his neck. He opened his eyes completely, his brain finally computing the situation. At some point in the night Bucky had rolled over, and was now draped completely over Steve, his front pressed tightly against Steve’s back from hips to shoulders, his nose tucked into the short hairs on the back of Steve’s head. And even worse than that, Steve realized how his body was responding to having Bucky in such an intimate position. He’d been so uncomfortable the night that they’d shared the couch cushions on the floor that it hadn’t been an issue, but here, in an enormous, comfortable hotel bed, his morning woody was so hard that anyone with eyes would be able to see just how much he was enjoying his friend’s touch.

Moving as carefully as possible, Steve extracted himself from underneath Bucky’s arm, holding his breath as Buck whimpered slightly before blowing it out in relief when he simply turned into his pillow and returned to sleep. All the same, Steve was careful to keep his back to the bed, grabbing his jeans from the day before from where he had left them draped over the desk chair and silently locking himself in the bathroom to change. After splashing cold water on his face and situating himself so that his problem wasn’t completely obvious, Steve made his way out of the bathroom, insanely relieved to find Bucky still sleeping peacefully. He quickly pulled on a shirt and jotted a quick note to leave on the pillow next to him, before pulling on his shoes and making his way out the door.

He let himself wander around the neighborhood, the warm morning air filling his lungs and clearing his head of all of the unwanted thoughts the morning had filled it with. In a way, Steve figured he should probably be glad that there hadn’t been more awkward moments like that, given how much time they’d been spending together – even when they were living together before the war, they had the distraction of work and Bucky’s dates. But aside from everything that happened with the Cube, it had essentially been just the two of them since waking up; eight weeks of spending near-to every
waking moment together. Steve really, really didn’t want to complain about it, but - it made certain things considerably more difficult.

With a sigh, he made his way into a nearby bakery, looking over their selection of foods before picking out a couple of egg sandwiches and ordering plain coffees. A pan of the most outrageously huge cinnamon rolls caught his eye while he was waiting on the sandwiches, so on a whim Steve ordered a pair of them as well; considering Bucky’s sweet tooth and the both of their appetites, they wouldn’t go to waste.

Bucky was already dressed when Steve let himself back into the room, seated Indian-style in the middle of the bed in jeans and a t-shirt as he messed with his StarkPad. He looked up with a smile as Steve entered the room. If Bucky remembered anything about the morning, he didn’t give any indication of being uncomfortable with it, so Steve decided to write it off as well. “Sorry, woke up starving, I thought I’d run out and get breakfast,” he explained, even though the note he had left had said as much. He handed over the bag to Bucky as he toed out of his shoes, hesitating for a second before taking a seat at the desk instead of climbing onto the bed as he’d initially intended.

Bucky hummed as he opened the bag, grabbing out one of the Styrofoam boxes and taking one of the cinnamon rolls out of it before handing the rest over to Steve. “No complaints here,” he said pleasantly, before adding a quick “thanks.”

“Not a problem.” Steve responded, hesitating for a second before asking, “Sleep alright?”

“Like a dream, yeah,” Bucky answered after a second, jamming a bite of the roll in his mouth, just too slow for Steve not to miss his sad smile as he said it.

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They spent five days wandering around Yellowstone National Park, after locking their bikes and valuables away in a safe storage outside of the park and hiking in with their knapsacks. The plan had originally been to spend 48 hours at most, with the idea of going in, seeing Old Faithful and hitting the most highly-recommended sights, and then continuing on their way East - but after realizing how many campsites there were in the park and how gorgeous the land was, they both agreed it was worth taking the time and roughing it.

They stopped at the main campground before the south entrance on the morning of their fifth day for a much-needed proper shower and shave before picking the bikes back up and moving on. Bucky’s phone was in the middle of powering back up as he waited for a shower to open when he noticed the date, blinking in surprise as 3 July lit up the screen.

“Uh, Steve?” He called out, waiting until Steve’s head popped around the corner of the shower stall he’d disappeared to before continuing. “You might want to think about waiting to shave.”

“I’m pretty positive it’s well-past time, Buck,” Steve responded, automatically itching at the nearly week-old scruff that had grown in on his face. Between how sick he had been in their youth and then the regs in the Army, Bucky had never even imagined what his friend would look like with a beard. While he was definitely enjoying it more than he really wanted to admit to himself, Bucky had to agree that being outside in July was hardly the time to start growing one.

His own sad growth of whiskers itched in response. “I’m just sayin’,” he continued, lowering his voice so that he wouldn’t be heard over the sound of all of the showers running without enhanced hearing. “Tomorrow’s the Fourth of July and we’re gonna be at one of the most patriotic places in America.”
Steve blinked at him in confusion for a moment, before groaning and disappearing from the door of the shower stall to finish. Bucky was sure he was imagining how crazy people would go tripping over themselves to get pictures with Captain America at Mount Rushmore, especially on Independence Day.

Finally, one of the showerheads cut off, and Steve emerged a couple of seconds later, a towel wrapped around his waist and his hair and beard still dripping. “Fine, you’ve got a point.” He admitted grudgingly, “I’ll leave it until we’re heading out of there, but you gotta keep yours, too.”

Bucky laughed as he grabbed up his shower kit, consciously forcing his eyes to remain on Steve’s scruffy face instead of following the water droplets running off of it. “Alright, fine,” he agreed pleasantly, making his way to the abandoned shower, “I’ll suffer in solidarity.”

Although it was nowhere near as huge as Yellowstone there was plenty to be seen in Keystone, and when they heard there would be a fireworks show over the monument on the night of the fourth, Bucky insisted that they stay over in a campsite for the two nights. It wasn’t Steve’s birthday without a fireworks show, after all.

Which brought Bucky to the major, Earth-shattering problem that he now had to work out: the morning of July fourth rose bright and clear and lovely, and he had no way of getting access to a kitchen.

Bucky had spent a frankly ridiculous amount of time and money during the spring of ‘41 teaching himself how to bake Sarah Rogers’ apple cake, desperate to make sure that Steve would still be able to get his favorite on his birthday, even though his ma had passed. By the grace of God he’d actually figured it out, and had made sure that Steve had it every year that they were together since. Even while they were at war, Bucky had figured a way to procure the necessary supplies. He would never, ever let Steve know how many schillings he had blown ‘renting’ a little old lady’s kitchen from her in the tiny Austrian village they were passing through so he could bake it.

But now… they were sleeping in a damned campsite in the middle of nowhere, and it wasn’t exactly if he could simply walk up and knock on someone’s door to ask for the favor.

Bucky begged off joining Steve on his run, pretending to still be too sleepy to get off of his bedroll. The second that the big lug had finally quit badgering him and taken off on his own, Bucky had hauled ass into the nearest town on his Harley, praying there would be a bakery open despite the holiday.

He was lucky enough to find one, a small, quaint place whose sign said that they specialized in cupcakes - which were apparently just miniature cakes with extra frosting. Bucky shrugged to himself before opening the door, figuring that it made more sense given their circumstances, anyway.

He was browsing the options in the main case – they all seemed to be red, white and blue frosting decked monstrosities, when a young woman made her way out of the back, smiling broadly at him. “Sorry, didn’t hear you come in,” she started politely, thankfully ignoring the fact that he’d shoved his left hand in his jacket pocket in a rush. “Our specials today are firework cakes – they’re basically our version of funfetti, but we have most of our regulars available in the back as well. Anything in particular you’re looking for?”

“Ah, yeah,” Bucky answered, returning her kindness with his own charming grin even as he wondered what the hell funfetti could be. “I was wondering if you had any that were apple-flavored?”

The girl’s smile faded in confusion.
“It’s just - it’s my best friend’s birthday today, and his favorite dessert is apple cake, it’s kinda a family tradition…”

“We don’t have any apple cupcakes,” she responded sympathetically, before moving towards the far end of the counter, “but we do have some apple muffins left over from the breakfast rush.” She smiled proudly as she held up the aforementioned muffins – compared to the cupcakes they looked sad and brown and flat, and Bucky had no doubt that his disappointment showed on his face. “I know they don’t look like much,” she assured him quickly, “but they’re some of our best sellers. And they’re whole wheat and vegan!”

Yet more words he didn’t know, of course, but Bucky was starting to feel desperate; it wasn’t as if there were a lot of other places he could go in search of a proper cake, and Steve would be getting back from his run soon, anyway.

“Alright,” he said, forcing a smile, “I’ll take one.”

“I’ll box up a few for you,” the girl responded pleasantly, already grabbing a box. “We need to clear them out anyway, I’ll throw the other two in for free, a birthday present for your friend. Oh!” She left the box on the counter, ducking beneath the register for a few moments before coming out with a box of birthday candles. “And you’ll need this, too.” She added with a grin, dropping a couple of them in the box before ringing him up.

That night he’d waited until Steve wandered away to fill their water tanks after dinner before pulling the bakery box out of his saddlebag, arranging a muffin on one of the camp plates and lighting the sad little candle as he heard footsteps making their way back in his direction.

“We should probably get going if we’re gonna catch the…” Steve started, before setting the jugs down with a smile. “What’s this?”

“Well,” Bucky started, rubbing at the back of his neck with his left hand, hoping that the metal might cool it down a bit. “I realized this morning that I didn’t even think about how you were gonna get your cake this year, so I went to the bakery up on 16 but it turns out all people want anymore are big ridiculous fancy-pants cakes with butter cream and chocolate flakes and funfetti god knows what else, but they had apple muffins that they said were a real big hit, so…” He trailed off, holding the plate up for Steve to take and avoiding eye contact.

“It’s vegan,” he added hopefully, still not entirely sure what the hell that even meant – at least it made it sound special. Sarah Rogers was rolling in her grave.

Steve was quiet for just a beat too long, and Bucky looked at him properly just soon enough to watch his lips wobble funny before they pulled into a smile. “Thanks, Buck,” he murmured softly, eyes bright in the firelight as he stepped closer and finally took the plate from him.

He paused for a moment before blowing the candle out, and then -being Steve - immediately broke the thing in half, handing part of it over to Bucky. “No, it’s all you,” Bucky insisted, “I got a couple more for later if we want ‘em, but…”

“Then there’s plenty more for later,” Steve interrupted smartly. “C’mon, what’s the point of an apple birthday muffin if you can’t share it with your best friend?”

Bucky opened his mouth to insist, but shut it just as quickly – God and all the heavens knew how stubborn Steve Rogers was, and it wasn’t as if he didn’t have a point. So Bucky took the proffered
sweet with a rueful smile, raising it like a drink to toast with and saying, “Happy 95th, Punk.”

He waited until Steve had chuckled quietly and taken his own first bite before trying it. While the muffin was nowhere similar to their usual, Bucky had to admit that it wasn’t half bad. The texture was a little off, but it was dense and moist and kind of spicy, and nowhere near as overpoweringly sweet as most of the modern baked goods they’d tried. They ate in silence, staring into the flickering flames of their dying campfire, until Steve finished his half with a sigh.

“I… seriously, Bucky. Thank you.” He started, his voice a little thick as he wiped his hands on his jeans. “For this and the trip and - y’know, everything.” He took a deep, shuddering breath before continuing. “I have no idea what I’d do…"

“Hey now,” Bucky interrupted gruffly, jamming the last bit of muffin into his mouth. “We’re out in the wilderness around a perfectly good campfire. None of that sappy shit, okay?”

Steve barked out a surprise laugh, turning his face away from the fire and rubbing at it with the back of his hand for a moment before looking at Bucky, an amused smile on his face as he shook his head. “Yeah, alright ya big Jerk. Now can we get a move on over to the sculpture? They’ll be starting the fireworks at any minute.”

Bucky nodded, making sure that the box containing the rest of the muffins was locked up in the cooler they’d bought before getting to his feet and following Steve up the path to the nearest viewpoint.

~*~

It wasn’t necessarily that Steve didn’t like Chicago – it seemed like a nice enough city, and they’d both admittedly enjoyed the Shedd Aquarium before Bucky lost half of a day in the Museum of Science and Industry. But; the Sears Tower really hadn’t been any more impressive than 30 Rock usually was, and Navy Pier felt a hell of a lot like an unfamiliar, disappointing Coney Island, and well… they had both agreed that they weren’t going to bring up the pizza again.

“Wha’d’ya say we just check out in the morning and head towards Niagara?” Steve asked that night, looking out the window of their hotel room at the river while Bucky flipped aimlessly through the channels on their TV.

“I mean, I’m fine with it, if you’re sure,” Bucky said hesitantly. “You seemed pretty set on seeing a game in Wrigley.”

Steve shrugged and turned back to face the room. “It’ll still be here, right? We can come back, I just… I think I wanna go see the falls and head home.”

Bucky watched him carefully for a second before smiling. “That’s fine, Stevie. We’ll head out in the morning, then.”

They were out of the hotel by dawn the next morning, riding through the Northern parts of Indiana and Ohio and then skirting along the coast of Lake Erie, so that they made it to Niagara by the late afternoon. After dropping their belongings in a cheap motel they made their way to the falls, admiring the view from a distance as the crowds of tourists began thinning out for the night.

The view wasn’t quite as awe-inspiring as the Grand Canyon had been, but Steve could still appreciate the beauty of it, regretting the fact that he’d left his sketchbook behind in the room. “We should come back here at some point, too,” he murmured as Bucky’s camera flashed, turning with surprise when he realized it had been pointed at him.
“It’s close enough,” Bucky agreed, without an ounce of regret for having been caught sneaking pictures. “Maybe make a detour to Cooperstown, too, since we didn’t get it in this time.”

Steve nodded in agreement, knowing he probably should have tried to find the motivation to have finished the trip out as planned, rather than giving in and heading home. Bucky pointed his camera at the falls again, taking a few more pictures and considering them on the screen before picking up on Steve’s low mood.

“Look, it’s fine that you wanna head back, you know. God knows I probably should - I was thinking the other night, I don’t think we’ve ever taken this long a break from work in our lives.”

That much was true, but somehow Steve didn’t think it could completely explain away the itch that he was feeling that he should be doing something. He had no idea how to articulate as much to Bucky, though, so he simply hummed in agreement, watching the colors of the mist from the falls change as the sun moved lower on the horizon.

~*~

Nearly everything about Brooklyn had changed.

They knew that, of course – it had been impossible to notice when they walked through on their way to Goldie’s for training, and the couple of times they’d visited shops in the neighborhood, but the reality of it all didn’t really hit Steve until they’d decided to spend a day properly exploring their old haunts now that they were back in town. The theaters were mostly closed, the storefronts that Steve had been able to earn odd money painting had been converted into trendy boutiques and restaurants, and their old building had been knocked over at some point, replaced with a row of townhouses that Steve could only imagine ran for a fortune.

On one hand, he was glad that Bucky was there to see it with him – while his silent, tense face showed that he was just as affected by it all as Steve was, just knowing that someone understood how wrong it all was helped. But on the other hand; there was a part that almost made it worse, seeing this new version of Bucky, in this new version of Brooklyn, from his own new perspective where the colors and sounds and air all seemed full of so much more that it turned it into an alien environment.

They finally moved away from the corner they’d been stood on, not wanting to be caught out for loitering, when Bucky cleared his throat and spoke up. “Penny for ‘em,” he asked gruffly, apparently in a poor attempt to lighten the mood.

Steve shrugged helplessly, letting his feet lead them in the direction of the docks without even thinking of it. “It’s just - I think about all of the times over there that I imagined coming home, and I don’t wanna be ungrateful for it, but…”

“But everything’s ass backwards and you don’t know how to deal, now?” Bucky finished for him.

“Yeah,” Steve sighed, knowing he couldn’t put it any better.

A group of kids ran by them on the sidewalk, one of them sliding along behind on shoes that looked like they had wheels in the heel of the sole, and they moved aside to let them pass, Steve trying to figure out the purpose of the shoes for a second before continuing on their way. “I’m gonna call Fury tomorrow and tell him I’m joining SHIELD.” He announced, out of the blue.

Bucky was quiet for a long moment, before responding, “Yeah, figured you would.”

Steve glanced at him out of the side of his eye, trying to figure out what his tone meant. “You know,
you don’t have to, if you don’t want to. I don’t expect anything from you, Buck.”

Bucky snorted, shaking his head. “It ain’t that… I know you don’t, Steve, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to leave you to watch your own back.” Although the words were his usual, teasing reprimand, there was a bitterness in his tone that Steve hadn’t heard in ages – probably not since their first night after marching back to Azzano.

“What’s with the attitude - d’I do something?” Steve asked.

“Nothin’s wrong, what’re you talking about?” Bucky responded testily.

“That!” Steve insisted, “You tearing my head off for nothing… getting pissed cuz I want to go back to being useful.”

“Yeah, Steve,” Bucky drawled, “Cuz the only way you’ll only be useful to the world is trying your damndest to make a martyr of yourself.”

Steve sputtered for a moment. “Who the hell said anything about martyrs? I’m not sayin’ I’m gonna go sign up for every suicide mission I can find; look how long Romanoff and Barton have been working with them!”

In saying it, Steve realized that he didn’t actually have any idea how long either of them had been with SHIELD - but it was the principle.

Bucky shook his head, biting his lip for a second before turning and marching back towards the nearest train station without a word.

“So you’re just gonna storm off cuz I refuse to pack it in?” Steve grumbled at his retreating back, his resentment over the whole thing growing. “What the hell do you want me to do, Bucky? The whole reason I’ve gone through all this shit was for the sake of helping people, I can’t just… piss it all away now.”

“What more can they even ask?!” Bucky exploded back, his face red and angry as he spun around. “Christ, you gave them everything, Steve… this is the SSR and the Army and enlisting bullshit all over again!”

Steve blinked at the sudden outrage, opening his mouth to retort but getting cut off. “The last few weeks - the last few weeks have been so good, Stevie. And hell, the fame you’ve got now, the abilities; you could do whatever the hell you want. And instead you’re just gonna sign up to fight, again, let them…” He swallowed thickly, rubbing his face with his right hand.

“What?” Steve asked, his voice hollow.

“Let them turn you into a god damned weapon again.” Bucky croaked, his hand still over his eyes. “You... Christ, I left for a couple of damned months and - and my best friend, the best guy in the fuckin’ world gets overhauled into this shiny new toy for the war, then comes over and doesn’t even need me around anymore.”

Steve felt like his stomach was dropping through the sidewalk as Bucky continued to talk. He’d never, in a million years, have imagined Bucky would have felt like this, would have bottled up these kind of feelings about Steve and kept them from him; especially in all of the time that they’d spent fighting and living together. He cleared his throat roughly, trying to think of any appropriate way to respond to the outburst.

“I…” he finally said weakly, staring at his sneakers. “I’m still the same guy, Buck. The serum didn’t
do anything to me, just made it so my body wasn’t so worthless anymore, let me actually be an asset for the cause. But,” he swallowed again, forcing himself to look up. Bucky still stood a few paces away from him, staring silently. “You’ve gotta know I still need you, Buck. I always will.”

They continued staring at each other, breathing slightly ragged and looking so emotionally drained that the people passing them on the sidewalk gave them a berth of a few feet, despite the limited space. Finally, Bucky shook his head, making his way towards Steve with a shaky laugh and pulling him into a tight hug. “We’re a fuckin’ mess.”

Steve choked on a chuckle as well, returning the hug tightly. “We are… too much idle time together.”

Bucky gave him one more squeeze, before slipping out of the embrace, wrapping his right arm around Steve’s back in an impression of the way he used to lead him around by the shoulders, starting them both towards the subway again. “I know I’m not gonna be able to talk you out of signing up, then; but can we at least wait to go to Fury until tomorrow?”

“He’d kick us out if we walked in in this shape, anyway,” Steve scoffed. “But yeah, tomorrow sounds good. Take-out and movies tonight?”

Bucky nodded in agreement as they started down the stairs into the subway station. “Yeah, Dim Sum and Disney and a proper fuckin’ couch for a change.”

Steve laughed outright at that, pulling away from Bucky so that they could both pass through the subway turn styles. “What more could a guy ask for?”

He realized with a jolt, seeing Bucky's answering grin, that he really couldn't come up with an answer.

Chapter End Notes

The opinions expressed by Steve Rogers are his own, and in no way represent the views of the author of this story.

But seriously, I wanna make some preemptive explanations: firstly, I love Chicago, it's one of my most favourite cities in the world, but you know that homesickness that you get at the end of a really long trip when nothing is really going to compare to just getting back to your place? That was what was hitting Steve in Chicago... and I couldn't help putting a deep-dish pizza dig in. Secondly, regarding his reaction to Tony's obvious PTSD - I was trying to come at that conversation from Steve's point of view, the Steve who is still only 3 months out of 1945, who never had to deal with the trauma of losing his best friend, who saw some shit but never lost a teammate... I don't want to give the impression that he was trying to diminish or being uncaring of Tony's obvious issues, just that he doesn't have the capacity to deal with them and still lives with the mindset that Men Do Not Talk About These Things.

At any rate - I hope that you all enjoyed! Thanks as always for all of your wonderful feedback :)

Oh, and to make up for the pain... here's a gorgeous manip of Bucky with a bike. Obviously not my work, give the artist love.
September 2013

Chapter Summary

Sam Wilson has the most bizarre morning run, ever.

Chapter Notes

Just a short interlude leading in to the next arc in our saga...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As a kid, Sam had always enjoyed running – preferably in the context of team sports, especially basketball and soccer, but he’d been athletic enough that track and field events were fun, too. The Air Force had largely beaten the enjoyment out of running, of course, but he still felt best if he was able to make time for an early morning jog a few times a week. It had started as a way to cope with the nightmares; but as they had decreased, he’d found that keeping to the routine of running helped his mood, as well. And it beat the hell out of going to the gym on the regular, especially once he’d gotten his new place that was close enough to the Mall to run around the monuments when the weather permitted.

He’d gotten his usual start, heading out as the sun came up, before the tourists started taking up the sidewalks and the worst of the DC swamp-air could set in. As he was coming around the North side of the Tidal Basin he heard someone approaching from his six. The footfalls were coming fast enough that he tensed up for a second, preparing for someone to try to jump him. Instead, all he got was a breezy, “On your left,” as a massive body hauled ass past him, followed a couple of seconds later by, “On your right.”

Sam blinked in surprise as the guys sprinted on ahead – they were enormous, built like freaking Olympic rowers from what he could tell, all huge shoulders and muscular legs and moving way too fast for dudes of their size.

He didn’t exactly need to see the flash of metal coming out of the brunet’s sleeve to put together who they were. Shaking the crazy feeling of knowing that he’d just been blown past by Captain freaking America, Sam continued at his usual pace – no shame in getting smoked by a couple of super soldiers who looked like they were racing each other, after all.

He continued on his path, running alongside the FDR Memorial and crossing the Ohio Drive bridge towards the Jefferson Memorial, barely making it past the steps when he heard someone sprinting towards him again.

“On your right,” Barnes announced, an instant before Rogers huffed an “On your left.”

“Got it, thanks,” Sam snarked back automatically, before actually registering the fact that he had a pair of superheroes fucking with him. If he’d been asked to make a list of the top ten things he wouldn’t have ever expected to happen to him that morning, this scenario might have actually been included on it.
This time he picked up the pace – the sun was slowly climbing higher anyway, and only had a mile and a half left to go. He’d nearly made it to the Lincoln Memorial, rounding the corner of the Reflection Pool, when he heard the now familiar footsteps again and immediately took off sprinting as well. Of course, they were able to catch up to him in seconds, so Sam did the only thing he could think of to possibly spare his pride, shouting over his left shoulder, “DON’T say it!”

This time they passed him almost freakishly in-step with one another, shouting out their warning together – Barnes had the audacity to even smirk back at him, the son of a bitch, before bumping shoulders with Rogers and continuing to sprint ahead like they were on a 100-yard dash, rather than running a 3-mile circuit.

Sam, for his part, continued running as fast as he could until he reached his usual stopping point near the Washington Monument, sweaty and gross and heaving as he fell down in the shade of a nearby tree, trying to catch his breath. Admittedly, it had been the most fun he’d had running in years.

“Need a medic?” A voice asked nearby, and he looked up to see Steve Rogers in all his glory, striding up without even a ring of sweat visible on his ridiculously tight UnderArmor shirt.

“I need a new set of lungs,” Sam wheezed as Bucky Barnes jogged up to a stop, his long-sleeve gray t-shirt impossibly dry as well. “You guys just ran like – thirteen miles in thirty minutes.”

“Usually we’d take the C&O up to Potomac,” Barnes responded with a lazy shrug, “but we slept in this morning.”

Sam scoffed, wondering whether the guy was being a smartass or not. But then… the way they’d just sprinted the distance they had, he supposed twenty miles wouldn’t be that big a stretch. “You should be ashamed of yourselves, then – go take another lap,” he chided instead, wiping his brow with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. “Did you take it? I’m assuming you just took it…”

Rogers chuckled at that, before pointing to the insignia on Sam’s sweatshirt. “What unit were you with?”

“58th Pararescue,” Sam responded, “but now I’m working at the VA.” He held his arms up, beckoning them to help him haul his ass back to his feet and more than a little surprised when both stepped forward and actually lent him a hand. “Sam Wilson,” he introduced himself, figuring he’d use the boost as a handshake – it was a fair enough trade for him, anyway.

“Steve Rogers,” the blonde responded, before the brunet nodded and added, “James Barnes.”

“Yeah, I kinda figured that one out on my own,” Sam responded sarcastically, before standing back and trying to maintain his chill. “Must have freaked you guys out, coming back after the whole ice deal.”

Rogers sighed at that, “It takes some getting used to.” He shared a quick look with Barnes, before giving Sam a quick nod and starting to walk away, “It was nice to meet you, Sam.”

Well… shit, Sam thought, apparently not as chill as he’d intended. “It’s the bed, right?” He called out on impulse, watching as they both froze and turned back to him with a confused look.

“What’s that?” Barnes asked, his face weirdly closed off.

“Your bed - it’s too soft, right?” Sam explained, wondering if he’d somehow managed to offend them and barreling on with his explanation. “I’m a counselor for troops coming back, helping them integrate back into the world, and every single one of us has the same complaint. When I was over
there I slept on the ground, used rocks for pillows like a caveman – now I’m home, lying in my bed, and it’s like…”

“Like sleepin’ on a marshmallow,” Barnes finished for him, looking at Sam like he’d been in the middle of pontificating on the meaning of life.

Rogers glanced askance at him before nodding at Sam as well. “Yeah, feels like I’m gonna sink right through to the floor. How long’d you serve?”

“Two tours,” Sam responded, crossing his arms over his chest. “Took a while to finally get my head on straight, then figured I couldn’t help other guys in the same boat.” They both looked so earnestly enthralled by that idea that it set off Sam’s therapy alarm – he figured he’d change the subject, before it got too weird for any of them to stand it. “You must be missing the good ol’ days, huh?”

They both shrugged in tandem, Rogers smirking as he responded, “Things aren’t so bad. Food’s a lot better.”

Barnes hummed in agreement, “We used to boil everything, had to settle for cabbage and potatoes more often than not.”

“No polio’s good,” Rogers cut in as Barnes nodded on cue before snapping his fingers.

“And the internet!” Barnes crowed.

Rogers gestured towards him emphatically, his voice suddenly sounding like he was giving a press conference. “So helpful – we’ve been reading a lot of that, trying to catch up on things…”

“Watching hours of cat videos,” Barnes muttered as an aside.

Sam laughed outright at that, trying to ignore the tightness he felt in his chest as he remembered the way he and Riley had been able to dick around in the same manner. “You two should have a friggin’ show,” he chuckled.

“Nah,” Barnes drawled, “The History Channel asked us about it, but this one’s already had his fill of show business and I ain’t got a face they want the camera on all the time.”

That was decidedly not true, Sam thought, especially the way that it looked like he’d fixed his hair from the ridiculous vintage comb-over he’d worn when they first started doing press events, but he couldn’t think of any way he could say as much without it sounding weird. Especially not to a couple of strangers who were technically two white dudes as old as his grandpa. “Alright,” he agreed instead, as something else came to mind instead. “And if you’re looking for suggestions – Marvin Gaye, 1972, Trouble Man soundtrack. Everything you missed in music, jammed into one album.”

Rogers gave him a thoughtful nod, reaching into the back pocket of his track pants and pulling out a moleskin notebook. “I’ll add it to the list,” he said gratefully, jotting a line down on a nearly-full sheet of paper.

“Better than What’s Going On?” Barnes asked skeptically.

Sam must not have hid his surprise quite fast enough, considering Rogers rolled his eyes at him and shook his head. “Buck’s big into music, he’s been doing his damndest to hear everything we missed on his own…”
“Not that I don’t appreciate recommendations!” Barnes chimed in immediately, “I’m just askin’, is all. It was a hell of a record.”

“It was,” Sam agreed with a grin. “Give Trouble Man a shot. I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

Before either of them could respond two identical ringtones sounded – Rogers pulled his cell phone out first, frowning as he read the screen before giving Barnes a serious look. “You know who wants us you know where for a briefing by 10:00.”

Barnes rolled his eyes and muttered something that Sam couldn’t catch, while Rogers extended his hand again. “See you around, Sam, and thanks for the run… if you wanna call it that.”

Sam scoffed at his cheek – no history book he’d ever read had given the impression that Steve Rogers was such a shit. “Oh, that’s how it is?” He asked as he shook his hand.

“Oh – that’s how it is,” Rogers mocked back, pumping their hands quickly then starting to jog towards 17th street.

Barnes, though, remained rooted to the spot, pulling his own phone out of the pocket of his shorts and staring at it for a second. “Uh, your programs. At the VA.” He started hesitantly, still staring at the dark screen of his cell. “They for any Vet?”

Sam blinked at him owlishly, words lost to him – word had it that Barnes and Rogers were working for SHIELD ever since the Battle of New York had happened; surely a government agency of that size and notability would have already given them any necessary PTSD therapy - or whatever the hell else kind of therapy you give to a couple of guys who fight a World War and then get frozen alive while all of their friends die off, only to be reanimated and thrown into a world they had no way of recognizing - before taking them on board.

And if they hadn’t – this was so far out of Sam’s league that it wasn’t even the same sport any more. That said, he couldn’t exactly leave the guy hanging. “Yeah, anyone who experienced combat and is having issues dealing with the trauma that goes with it. I’m not a therapist, mind you, but we’ve got those as well.”

Barnes nodded absently, fiddling with his phone for a moment before powering it on. “You have an email? Or – or a website with the information on it?”

Sam bit his lip, waiting for himself to wake up already from the weirdest dream, ever, before nodding and holding his hand out. “Yeah man, I’ve got an email.”

Barnes tapped at the screen of his phone with both thumbs for a second – apparently whatever special government brand it was was somehow responsive to metal, or maybe that was his prosthesis? Sam’s thoughts were cut off when the phone was waived in his direction. He took it wordlessly, entering his email address in the appropriate spot, smiling a little at the contact header that read Running Sam VA.

“I… thanks.” Barnes responded awkwardly as he took the phone back.

“BUCKY!” Rogers shouted from a distance, standing on the opposite side of Constitution Avenue with his hands on his hips.

“I’ll be in touch,” Barnes said earnestly, shaking the phone at Sam before dropping it back into his pocket and taking off in Rogers’ direction as well, moving faster than Sam thought it should be
possible for any human to run.

He shook his head as he watched them go, both sprinting so fast up 17th Street that they were passing cars, before turning and beginning his considerably more sedate jog in the opposite direction towards home. The worst part was, even if he wanted to betray their trust and tell someone about the actual insanity of the morning, no one would ever, ever believe him.

Sam Wilson, spending the morning chatting with Bucky Barnes and Steve Rogers – who actually seemed to be really great, totally normal dudes if you ignored the whole super-human almost-centenarians thing.

What the hell, man.

Chapter End Notes

So I know that this is a change in the timeline from the MCU, but I swear there's a reason behind it.

Thanks so much for all of your continued comments and kudos!!
March 2014

Chapter Summary

Bucky becomes the face of a brand, performs a publicity stunt, has a birthday party, and has to face some uncomfortable truths about his feelings for his best friend.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this one is so short again, guys, I just couldn't get this scenes to fit in with any of the other chapters! And I won't even lie, the entire beginning was motivated by this video.

For timeline purposes, I'm following the dates listed on the MCU wiki page, wherein the events of Iron Man 3 happened in December 2012 and Thor 2 happened in November 2013.

Finally, for visual reference (you're welcome), This is basically how I'm picturing Bucky's modern haircut... just obviously with the WS physique.

Bucky toyed with his hair in the mirror before nervously fidgeting with his collar, wishing that Steve would hurry up already and finish changing so that they could go upstairs to the stupid party Tony had insisted they attend. He'd badly wanted to refuse, and probably could have gotten Steve to agree with him, but Tony had given them the puppy eyes, promised that it would be an Avengers-only event, and finally whined at Bucky about them all needing to celebrate his birthday seeing as he'd been on a mission the year previous and frozen in an ice cap for the sixty-odd prior. Bucky was still exhausted from the day-long ordeal of posing for cameras and playing with kids, but he really hadn’t been able to argue further with Tony by that point. So… here he was, adjusting the sleeves on his ridiculous cranberry-colored collared shirt, waiting to just go upstairs and get it all over with.

They had finally launched the civilian line of Stark’s cybernetic prostheses that afternoon, and Tony had been insistent that Bucky participate in the festivities, being the most famous face of that side of the company. Bucky could only imagine how hard it had been for Tony to admit as much, and figured that he did owe the guy for all of the work and money he had put into his own arm in the first place, so he had agreed to help however he could. That, in retrospect, had been an enormous mistake.

It had started with an 0630 wake-up call from JARVIS, only to find hair and make-up artists already waiting in the living room of the floor in Avengers tower that Steve and Bucky were sharing. They dolled him up as had been determined appropriate, leaving Bucky feeling sticky and ridiculous and Steve far too amused, especially considering his own history on the stage, which Bucky frequently and grumpily brought up. Once he’d been deemed camera-ready, Bucky was dragged upstairs to one of the floors of the marketing department, dressed up in gym clothes (which he thought completely defeated the purpose of all of the make-up, but no one was asking for his opinion), then put through literal hours of photo shoots, capturing his arm from all angles, both in poses and in
action shots. They’d finished by dressing him up in a replica of the suit he had worn during the Battle for New York – he still had a similar one for SHIELD events and the occasions that he and Steve made charity trips to children’s hospitals – and getting a final round of photos, before finally setting him free for lunch.

Stark had intercepted him immediately, of course, dragging both Bucky and Steve off to some random deli in Midtown to eat before they had to return to the tower for the afternoon program. Thankfully, Steve had agreed to suit up and join them as well, taking some of the pain out of the media circus, but it had still been a trying few hours. The kids had all been well-behaved enough, and it had been wonderful to see so many children who would otherwise not have had functioning limbs have their lives changed by receiving such remarkable tech. Even better was the knowledge that because of the modifications Stark had made to the manufacturing process, the line of prostheses would be cheap enough that the vast majority of people who needed them in the States would be able to afford them. All the same, Bucky had found himself with less and less tolerance for crowds since the war, and keeping up the friendly, normal act for an extended period of time was proving to be more grueling than any mission was nowadays. So when they had finally dismissed the media that had been covering the event and signed the last of the memorabilia that the kids had wanted it was an enormous relief.

And now came the culmination – they were given a couple of hours to themselves to change and decompress from the day, while Tony did his best to wrangle up the old crew. Or, at least, buy enough pizza that Barton would be lured over from his place in Bed Stuy… in all likelihood Romanoff would follow, provided she wasn’t on assignment in another continent. And for the rest – well, Bucky would let Tony worry about the party details. All he cared at the moment was that he would be able to avoid dealing with strangers again until their return to DC.

Finally, Steve made his way out of his bedroom, rolling up the right sleeve on his blue dress shirt. Bucky felt his mouth go dry, swallowing thickly as he gave himself a single second to appreciate how good his friend looked in modern-day clothing before pushing it all to its usual lock-down spot in the back of his mind. It was a feat that seemed to be getting increasingly more difficult – he’d been struggling his entire life with trying to downplay his inappropriate feelings for Steve, but now that they spent nearly all of their time together, and both had the means to really pay attention to what they wore and how they looked, well… Steve looked even more incredible than usual. All the damned time.

Bucky schooled his face as Steve finished with the sleeve, glancing up with a warm smile and standing still as he looked at him. “I like the shirt,” he finally ended up saying, his cheeks coloring slightly, “you ready to go?”

“Ready as I’m going to be,” Bucky responded dryly, “let’s get up there – it can’t be any worse than the rest of the day has been.”

Upstairs was considerably more sedate than either of them had been expecting, much to Bucky’s relief. Barton was seated on one of the couches in the center of the room, dutifully guarding the stacks of pizza boxes that were piled on the table in front of him, while Romanoff and Stark were talking by the bar in the corner of the room. There was no one else to be found – apparently Banner had been staying away from New York on principle, and Thor was still busy enjoying civilian life with his girl in London, as far as they all knew. It was incredibly nice, though… they’d settled in on the couches at the center of the room, shooting the shit and falling into a comfortable banter as they shared pizzas and beers. Although he and Steve saw Romanoff and Barton fairly regularly for SHIELD missions, it was the first time that they’d been together as a group since New York, and Bucky found himself unwinding easily, genuinely enjoying the evening as it went on.
Considering the company, he should have known better than to have expected it to last.

“Oh wait, wait,” Stark grinned, before calling out, “J – pull up twitter on the big screen, would you? Bucky needs to see the video that’s been trending all afternoon… I’m pretty sure it’s responsible for a fifteen dollar rise in StarkTech shares since it first went online.”

Before Bucky could protest, the screen in front of them lit up, immediately loading a clip of a boy fitted in one of the StarkTech arms they had unveiled today, the plates brushed with chrome paint and with the decal of familiar blue wings on the deltoid. The reporter responsible for the piece asked him who his favorite super hero was, to which he proudly responded “Bucky Barnes!” before the clip cut to the two of them meeting one another in the press room, sharing a fist-bump with their matching prostheses while cameras flashed like mad.

“I’m telling you, Barnes… forget about SHIELD, I’ll hire you on the spot for StarkTech marketing. Name your price.” Tony insisted with a grin as the screen went dark.

“I’m gonna have to pass, Tony,” Bucky had responded easily, rolling his eyes at the pleading look Stark sent him in response. “Seriously – not that I don’t appreciate it, but if you think about it, it’s better for me to be in the field showing off what the arm can do, anyway. I wouldn’t exactly be anyone’s favorite superhero if they only saw me posing in magazines, right?”

“Fair enough,” Tony sighed, and for one second Bucky was foolish enough to be relieved that he’d gotten off the hook; only for the conversation to move into even more awkward territory. “Speaking of –” Stark continued, “we need to get you a better code name, Buckaroo. You’re the only one of us without one, and as charming and whimsical as Bucky Barnes sounds…”

“Thor doesn’t have a nickname,” Bucky pointed out.

“No, but he’s a Norse God so we can make exceptions,” Tony responded smartly. Bucky rolled his eyes but otherwise didn’t comment. “Come onnnnnnnn, let’s come up with one – it’ll be fun.”

“Buck’s already got a badass code name,” Barton said lazily, his eyes going wide as Romanoff kicked him roughly underneath the coffee table.

“Wait, what? And you’ve been holding out on us?” Stark asked, feigning being hurt.

Next to him, Bucky felt Steve tense up. He’d have given anything to have avoided this conversation, especially with Tony, given how much the entire deal clearly bothered his friend. “It’s classified, Tony – we can’t start using it, anyway.”

“SHIELD gave you a code name? You’ve got an official, badass, government-sponsored superhero name and you’ve been holding out on me?” Stark whined, setting his drink aside and becoming even more annoying. “Come on, I wanna hear it; there’s no point making a new one up if you’ve already got one.”

“If we told you,” Romanoff pointed out, “we’d have to kill you.”

“Oh please,” Stark responded, rolling his eyes dramatically. “I’m still a SHIELD consultant, you know, I have just as high of security clearances as the rest of you. Besides… it isn’t as if I couldn’t just hack their mainframe and find the records, anyway.”

Bucky sighed, knowing that he was right. While he didn’t want to tell Tony, or to even have the conversation in the first place, he figured that giving the man what he wanted would at least limit the amount of time they had to spend discussing the damned thing. “The Winter Soldier,” he finally said blankly.
There was a beat of silence around the room as Bucky avoided looking into anyone’s eyes, before Stark snorted quietly. “Seriously? That’s what you’re keeping so hush-hush.” He looked around at them all incredulously before continuing, “Am I missing a reference? It sounds familiar…”

“It’s from Thomas Paine,” Steve responded stiffly. “It’s a play on what he wrote in *The American Crisis*, a contrast to the Summer Soldier and the Sunshine Patriot.”

Stark frowned at that, studying Steve’s face far too closely for Bucky’s liking. “So – he’s a contrast to you? Why are we all looking so upset over Bucky Bear’s ominous historical nickname…”

Bucky scrubbed his face tiredly before simply spelling it out. “The Winter Soldier does the things that the Sunshine Patriot can’t do; the dirty things necessary for the country to become greater.”

“So the state-sponsored assassinations.” Stark said it so bluntly that Bucky couldn’t begin to think of a way to refute him. “And they make a joke of it with your code name. Sounds like SHIELD, alright.”

“Don’t start, Stark,” Barton groaned.

“I’m just saying… how many snipers could one government organization need? Isn’t this making you worried about your job security, bird man?”

“Nah…” Barton said lazily, “we run considerably different missions.”

“Barely even train together anymore,” Romanoff chimed in, “it’s sad, honestly – you can’t exactly find opportunities to study wounded male egos like that anywhere else.”

Stark simply rolled his eyes and crossed his arms across his chest.

“It’s true, Tony – an arrow in a target leaves a pretty obvious mark as to who was responsible, so for covert ops the bow won’t do,” Bucky responded sardonically, gesturing towards Clint with his beer. “And Barton’s a shit shot with a rifle.”

“Hey!” Barton yelled with a frown, “That’s not *remotely* true. Jeez, a guy beats your course record one time and he thinks he’s the hottest shot that ever lived…”

“Pretty sure it was more than once, Barton,” Bucky responded with a laugh, “and when it’s by more than twenty points, it hardly matters.”

“I don’t have to take this kinda abuse,” Barton muttered, reaching up and flipping the switches on his hearing aids then slipping them into his pocket, before adding in a slightly garbled tone, “buncha dicks.”

They’d all chuckled at that, and as was usually the case with making fun of Clint, finally moved on to less divisive topics. At some point they’d decided to throw a movie on, and Tony had freaked out over the realization that he hadn’t gotten a cake for Bucky, leading to him and Romanoff running out of the room to work out a way to procure one, despite his insistence that it was really not a problem.

Bucky excused himself to use the restroom a few minutes later, making his way through the common room but pausing when he heard furious whispering coming from the area near the closed-off bar. He knew he probably shouldn’t be eavesdropping on whatever it was Romanoff and Stark were discussing, but Bucky was still more than a little sore over the stunt that Tony had pulled at the end of the previous year, taking on a terrorist organization entirely on his own instead of reaching out to any of them for help. Granted… he was pretty sure that he and Steve had been on a mission with Romanoff in the South Pacific at the time, but it had been the principle of it all. Even half a world
away on a mission, Bucky would have done whatever he could to help a friend in danger, especially one who’d done as much for him as Tony had.

So he silently leaned back against the wall, holding his breath and using his enhanced sense of hearing to catch the rest of their conversation. He’d blame his paranoia on years of having to pull Steve out of trouble, if he had to, and made a mental note to think on what it meant about him, that he had such a tendency to surround himself with completely reckless idiots.

“Come on, Nat, you can’t deny that *something* is going on there,” Tony muttered insistently. “I love Rhodey with my whole damned heart, but what we have is different than the two of them.” He paused for a moment as Romanoff stared at him stonily, before adding, “You know as well as I do that if they’d been born in the eighties, they’d be marching on the Capital demanding marriage equality.”

“Pretty sure Rogers has already done that one,” Romanoff responded with a bored tone, rolling her eyes as Tony choked on his drink. “Oh come on, Stark – there’s no way that’s a surprise to you. He fights for truth, justice, and the American way; of course he’s going to be willing to protest for equal rights of all citizens. Besides,” she added with a small grin, “I’m pretty positive he and Barnes have a bet going as to who can cause Bill O’Reilly to have a stroke first.”

Stark chuckled at that, “Okay, fine – you’re right, that does sound like Rogers. But the fact still remains – I can’t just sit back and continue watching them make moon eyes at one another. Barnes is a good guy, I like him, and watching him pine like a deprived puppy hurts me, it really does.”

“Listen, Tony: I’m only going to say this once,” Romanoff finally said sternly. “Even if you are right – which I’m not going to comment on, because it’s none of my business – they need to figure it out on their own. If we start poking our nose in it, it’s going to blow up in all of our faces, and regardless of what’s going on between the two of them, the team doesn’t need that kind of tension.”

Bucky missed whatever Stark’s response was as his heart started pounding so hard that he couldn’t hear much of anything over the rush of blood in his ears. He had honestly thought that he’d been good with keeping his feelings for Steve to himself – he may not have the same paranoia that he’d had in the forties, when keeping such unnatural thoughts buried were legitimately a life-or-death situation, but his diligence had still been there. And, granted, Stark and Romanoff were two of the people that he spent the most time with (outside of Steve, of course), if they were concerned that something was up… who else could tell? Steve had made no indication that he noticed anything off with Bucky, but if someone were to figure it out and tell him; Bucky didn’t even want to consider the potential implications for their friendship.

He took a few deep, calming breaths, swallowing his panic down before pushing himself away from the wall and returning to the common room, where Steve was still sprawled on the couch, his focus completely on the movie that Bucky had completely lost track of. Thankfully, Barton looked to be sleeping in the armchair he was draped across.

“I’m beat,” Bucky said shortly, quietly enough that he wouldn’t wake Barton who appeared to have slipped his hearing aids back in, “I think I’m going to just head down to bed.”

Steve frowned slightly, looking up at Bucky in the flickering light from the television. “Are you sure? I thought Tony was trying to get a cake up here…”

“I dunno where they ended up,” Bucky lied, “but I’m not much in the mood for sweets, anyway. You can stay, if you want…”

“No, it’s fine,” Steve insisted, already rolling to his feet and making his way towards Bucky. “I’m
good to go if you want to – our train leaves early enough tomorrow morning, anyway, wouldn’t hurt to get a good night’s shut eye.”

Bucky had half a mind to insist that Steve stay, not feeling entirely comfortable being in close contact with his friend at the time, but of course he couldn’t bring himself to say it, especially as Steve’s shoulder bumped against his own on the way to the elevator. “You alright?” He asked softly, a concerned frown forming between his eyebrows as they stepped into the light.

“Fine, just tired,” Bucky lied again, focusing his attention entirely on the elevator door as it closed in front of him. Clearly he had to do something, as his age-old attempt at simply ignoring his feelings for Steve wasn’t cutting it any more. By the time they’d reached their floor, he had the beginnings of a pretty good idea in mind, and locked himself away in his room with a quiet good night to ruminate on it.
Chapter Summary

Sam recounts 9 months of getting to know Bucky better, featuring PTSD support groups, how being overly-nice lead to becoming an unwitting therapist, and the story of how Sam Wilson got stuck in the middle of a super soldier soap opera.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sam hadn’t been surprised when he realized that three weeks had passed after their initial meeting without a single email from Barnes.

Disappointed, yes, although he told himself it was primarily out of concern for the poor guy. But then, it stood to reason that SHIELD, or whoever was responsible for the super soldiers now, should have far more advanced counseling services for their members than whatever Sam and the Greater Metropolitan DC branch of the Veterans Administration office could offer; at the end of the day Sam tried to think of it as a good sign.

So when he’d logged into his work computer on a Monday morning in late October to find an email from a j.b.barnes1917@gmail.com, it had most definitely been a shock. He’d remained sat in his uncomfortable desk chair, staring at the request for information and schedules for VA PTSD groups for a few minutes, before finally responding with the requested information, attaching the electronic version of the brochure they had available in the lobby listing their goals and services, as well as the link to their website and a listing of his own therapy group sessions, and those of his two coworkers. After dropping a few not-at-all subtle hints regarding their professional therapists as well, Sam had finally sent the email off.

That evening he’d received another brief but polite thank you email in return, and half-expected it to be the end of it all. And then “Jim Grant” showed up at his first Wednesday night meeting in November.

Barnes had done a hell of a job blending in: he wore a baseball cap pulled low to shield his eyes, a large sweatshirt and jacket that did a good job of hiding his frankly ridiculous muscle mass, and between the way he kept his left hand in his pocket the entire time and the awkward, stiff angle that he held the arm at, Sam would have expected a typical barely-mobile prosthesis under it, rather than the incredible custom cybernetic arm that Barnes was known for. Like most new veterans he had sneaked in a few minutes before start time and took a seat in the back near the door. He’d kept completely to himself during discussion, and no one in the crowd even raised an eyebrow when he’d bolted for the door at 20:00 on the dot, without having so much as introduced himself. Participation was entirely voluntary, of course, and most new members needed at least a few meetings before they felt comfortable speaking in front of the group. Sam watched him closely as he went, and thankfully was able to catch his eye as Barnes paused in the door, giving him an encouraging grin and nod before he disappeared into the hallway.

Sam had received another ‘Thank You’ email from Barnes very late that night, though. In it, he said that he had been surprised by how much people were willing to share with the group, and that he hoped that he would eventually be able to unload in the same way, especially if Sam thought it would actually help. Sam was very careful to point out in his reply that it could be a beneficial part
of the healing process for many vets, and that the group was a very supportive and confidential one – but that if he needed more in-depth, one-on-one talk therapy, that Barnes would need to look into formal counseling.

And just like that, Sam had a new regular PTSD support group member.

Five meetings in ‘Jim’ had finally introduced himself, saying that he’d been special ops and had spent a few years in active combat.

The next morning Sam arrived to another email in his inbox, this one long and rambling about Barnes’ struggles with having lost men, especially those in the POW camp his surrender had lead to in the first place. When he’d finally reached the end (and there was a lot of heavy shit that Sam was certain he’d never been taught in US History), Sam had noticed the timestamp on the email – 03:41. He sighed heavily, locked his computer screen, and made his way to the staff lounge for a much-needed cup of coffee before he tackled the response.

Two weeks later ‘Jim’ was willing to speak vaguely about being held as a POW, largely focusing on how thinking about his buddy being safe back home had kept him alive and sane during his time in captivity, how the idea of coming back to him some day had made whatever the enemy could come up with worth enduring, and ultimately how hard it had been when he’d come to find out his friend had joined the war as well. There was a murmur of commiseration that went around the room when Jim confessed that he felt like he’s worried about his friends in his unit ever since, like the stress of holding it together for them and trying to keep them all safe still hung over his head, even after being back for years.

His email to Sam that night had confessed that he had no idea how to help said friend, and that he’d refused to join Barnes at group, no matter how many times Bucky had tried to talk him into it. Sam couldn’t exactly blame Rogers for that… there were definitely a few group members at this point who had to have recognized Barnes, despite his attempts at disguising himself and the vague ways that he talked about his time at war. But if Captain Freaking America were to walk into the VA – well, there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him instantly. And while Sam knew that their group would be good for keeping secrets: they had all dealt with their shit and were willing to talk at length about their struggles, they would never go spilling someone else’s, regardless of how good the pay-out might be; there was no question that everyone would recognize him inst...
was an amicable enough guy and Sam found himself legitimately enjoying the conversation – until the uncomfortable topic of why Sam had asked him out in the first place came up. “I just worry is all.” Sam explained evenly, “It isn’t that I don’t want you in group, I just don’t want you to miss out on more appropriate resources.”

“Look,” Barnes sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose with the fingers of his right hand. “I get it, okay, I know I’m messed up, I know you think I need more help. But I don’t really see how a head-shrinker is gonna do anything more for me than group already has, and I like talking in group. It’s been good to get this shit off my chest, to know that other people are goin’ through similar stuff.” He shrugged nonchalantly and picked off a bite of his sandwich. “Besides – if I need one-on-one talk, I can just come to you, right?”

It was exactly what Sam had been afraid of. “Look man,” he sighed, “I’m not a therapist. I don’t have the formal education or training for it, and certainly not to properly help someone with as many issues as you have – no offense.” Bucky had shrugged instead of trying to deny the obvious. “But…” Sam continued, against his better judgment, “I can be a friend.”

It wasn’t that Sam didn’t want to be Bucky’s friend – the contrary, the better that he got to know the guy, the more that he liked him. But, as predicted, the more that they hung out, the more Bucky unloaded his problems on Sam, as well as his concerns about Steve, which seemed to be constant. Finally, Sam had taken up Bucky on his offer to come around for dinner at their place, in the hopes of getting to know Steve better as well. As a rule, Sam gave him the old not a therapist speech, even though he knew it probably fell on deaf ears.

He should have known something was up the second he walked into their apartment and saw the shit-eating grin on Bucky’s face. “Stevie’s in the kitchen,” he explained excitedly, “we’ve been cooking up our favorites, you’re the first guest we’ve had… well, I think ever.”

Their favorites, as it turned out, smelled – quite frankly, horrifying.

“Fried Spam and colcannon,” Rogers had exclaimed with a beaming grin, poking his head around the corner of what Sam assumed was the entry to the kitchen.

“Er – colcannon?”

“Smashed potatoes and boiled cabbage,” Barnes explained, taking Sam’s coat. “It’s an Irish specialty – Steve’s ma was an immigrant.”

Sam barely managed to keep a straight face at the explanation, silently reminding himself on loop about the importance of cultural appreciation and the rules of being a good houseguest. In reality, it was the knowledge that his own mama would beat Sam’s ass if she found out that he’d turned his nose up at a home-cooked dinner from a pair of new friends, especially if said friends were Captain America and Bucky Barnes, which kept Sam’s reaction limited to a pleasant smile and some vague “Sounds good.”

Sam and Bucky made small talk in the living room for a few minutes (and damn if their apartment wasn’t really, really nice – Sam couldn’t help being impressed, despite the wreaking coming from the kitchen), before Steve finally made his way into the living room, a look of bemused disappointment on his face. “Really? Nothin’?”

Bucky laughed and shrugged. Sam looked between the two of them, confused.

“Ah – we were pullin’ your leg about the food, honestly. We both figured you’d raise a stink about the idea of eating canned meat and boiled cabbage, so we were planning on eventually ordering a
pizza.” Steve said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“And waste the food?” Sam asked, frankly surprised by the admission.

“Er, no… it reheats alright; we’d just eat it on our own, later.” Bucky explained.

Sam insisted on eating home-cooking hot, and so told them both to bring their Depression Era finest on, before all of them settled in with Star Wars playing on the TV. The food was, surprisingly, not terrible.

January rolled into February, and without really intending for it Sam’s weekly lunches with Bucky and bi-monthly dinners with the both of them were becoming a tradition. Bucky continued to attend Wednesday night groups religiously, while Steve continued to deny any interest in either group or individual therapy.

Then things started getting difficult. Sam had noticed that Bucky seemed to have rough patches from the beginning, that there were days when he seemed worn and quiet, rather than being his usual talkative self. Initially, Sam didn’t think much of it – anyone could have bad days, which was especially true for someone who’d been through as much trauma, and then internalized it all for as long as Bucky had. After one particularly bad spell lasted for over a week, though, Sam brought it up at their next lunch together.

Bucky hesitated for a long moment, mulling the question over before responding. “I’ve had a couple of solo missions, lately.” He said evasively, “And I can’t go into the details cuz they’re all classified, so don’t ask. They’ve just been… hard.”

Sam frowned in response, before asking gently, “Because they’re disturbing in themselves, because they’re bringing up bad memories from before, or both?”

Bucky’s entire face scrunched in discomfort. “Both, I guess… I dunno. It’ll be fine, I’m used to it. I just need some time to get over it, is all.” Sam opened his mouth to respond, but Bucky rushed ahead to change the topic, cheerfully adding, “Steve and I finally got around to watching the new Star Trek the other night – it was pretty terrible.”

Sam wanted to discourage the deflection, he really did, but he decided to let it go in this situation. If anyone was used to taking on uncomfortable solo missions it was apparently Barnes – multiple times he’d alluded to the fact that he’d had to carry out nasty shit that couldn’t be tagged on Captain America’s name during World War II, so it was unfortunate but hardly surprising to hear that the tradition had carried on. Instead of harping on the topic now, Sam figured he’d just pay closer attention to his friend’s progress, and followed his lead in changing the topic to crappy reboots of classic sci-fi shows.

By the beginning of March, it seemed like Bucky had hit a plateau. He still participated in group sessions, still had lunch a few times a month with Sam and invited him over to dinner with him and Steve every other Sunday. But his periods of withdrawal seemed more pronounced, and the shadows under his eyes grew progressively darker, until finally Sam couldn’t ignore them anymore.

“Something’s got you down,” he pointed out over lunch-hour tacos. “And it’s getting worse.”

Bucky sighed, crunching a tortilla chip between his metal fingers, not bothering to even attempt to deny it. “Work’s been… rough. And it ain’t giving me enough downtime to decompress like you said, you know? So it all just kinda – spirals.”

“Have you thought about saying as much to your superiors?” Sam asked nonchalantly, as if he
hadn’t suggested the idea of Bucky leaving SHIELD a million times in the past couple of months.

“And do what?” Bucky asked with a frown, dropping the last of his tortilla crumbs back to his plate.

Having finally gotten a response other than a vague refusal, Sam jumped on the question. “Literally whatever you want, man.” He said with a comforting smile. “There are so many things outside of fighting that you could do.”

Despite his enthusiasm, all he received from Bucky was a blank stare.

“Honestly, Bucky, let’s think about it.” Sam continued, undeterred by the attitude. “What makes you happy… and don’t say something that makes Steve happy, or keeps him safe, or any other cop-out bullshit like that. What things make you happy?”

Bucky pushed the salsa that had spilled onto his appetizer plate around with his spoon for a while, frowning at the patterns he made as he thought on the question. There had been a couple of times that he had started to open his mouth as if to answer, but after a few minutes Sam figured he’d switch methods.

“Alright, let’s try another way of thinking about it… let’s pretend things turned out better, that the two of you came back to New York in 1947. What does Bucky Barnes do to live happily ever after?”

Barnes shrugged and pushed his small plate away. “Finds a job,” he started vaguely, “plans Steve’s bachelor party, stands up in his wedding to Peggy, is godfather to their kids and tries his best to avoid the bottle for the rest of his life.”

Sam stared at him for a beat before blowing out a long, low breath, trying his best not to let the answer defeat him as well. Truth be told, he was so far out of his depth it wasn’t funny – but after literal months of trying to get Barnes involved with a proper therapist, Sam knew better than to bother wasting his breath.

“Alright,” he started slowly, “Okay – you know that ain’t gonna cut it, right?”

Bucky sighed, shaking his head. “I figured – I’m sorry. I guess – I guess I never really thought about it, honestly. I never expected to come back; totally expected to die over there. So now… not only to come back, but to come back like we did? I can’t imagine doing anything other than covering Steve’s back, same as I always have.”

Well – at least he was being honest. “Fine.” Sam responded simply. “You’ve got homework for the week, then. I want you to do your damndest to come up with something else. Literally anything else that you can think of; it doesn’t even have to be a job idea, even if it’s just a hobby it’ll work. Then when you’re ready, you let me know and I’ll do whatever you need me to do to help you work on it, alright?”

Bucky gave him a skeptical look, but otherwise quietly agreed to do his best, then proceeded to chatter about pointless topics for the rest of their meal.

Sam wondered if he’d been out of place in voicing his concerns, when a couple of weeks passed with Bucky missing his regular Wednesday night meetings. He’d saw him on TV promoting Stark’s new line of prosthetics, so at least Sam knew he was alright, instead of off on some mission or worse. Still, when even the emails failed to show up in Sam’s inbox, he couldn’t help but worry. There were multiple times during the third week of March when Sam would have an email half-composed to check-in on his friend, only to tell himself to stop mother-henning and close out of the
It was the second week of April when, finally, Bucky showed up in Sam’s Tuesday morning PTSD group. On one hand, he was confused as to why Bucky would switch meeting times, knowing full-well the benefit that came with staying with the same group of people. All the same, Sam was so glad to see him again that he left it be, instead giving him an encouraging grin from the podium before launching into the day’s topics.

Bucky had kept to himself for the most part during the meeting, introducing himself sociably and vaguely referring to his combat experience in passing, but as the group wrapped up he was practically vibrating excitement, and hovered around at the back of the room as he waited for the other attendees to finish speaking to Sam before approaching.

“Are you free for a bit?” He asked excitedly once the last member had finally cleared out. “Could we just – grab coffee or something?”

Sam had a metric shit-ton of work to do, truth be told, but after so much radio silence from both Bucky and Steve he didn’t want to miss out on the opportunity to catch up – and saying no in the face of so much clear hope was something Sam had never been particularly good at. His sister warned him on the regular that Sam was too nice… what was one more instance of proving her wrong going to hurt? Twenty minutes later he found himself in the Starbucks around the corner, absently sipping his latte as Bucky finally picked his order up from the barista and made his way over.

“Ya know – prices in the grocery store were a big enough shock to get used to, but I don’t think I’ll ever get over how much a fuckin’ cup of coffee costs nowadays,” Bucky said with a rueful smile, shaking his head as he took his seat across from Sam. He tore the packaging of about 4 packets of Sugar in the Raw, dumping them all into his large Americano as he continued ranting. “Seriously, four bucks. For a plain coffee – our place was a half-condemned shoebox, but that’s only a dollar less than I used to pay in rent when Steve and I got our first place in ’41.”

“Firstly, you’ll have to forgive me for not being able to suspend my belief long enough to wrap my head around the idea of five dollar a month rent in New York, regardless of the year,” Sam responded drolly, before gesturing towards Bucky with his coffee cup. “And secondly – I really highly doubt you invited me out here to discuss the cost of coffee throughout the years.”

Barnes cheeks colored at that, and he dropped his eyes as he secured the lid on his cup, swirling the liquid inside of it a few times before quietly agreeing to Sam’s point. “No, you’re right – I… actually, I wanted to talk about my homework. I’ve been doin’ a lot of thinking about what you asked. About what makes me happy, or at least what used to.”

Sam nodded and raised his eyebrows, glad to hear that his recommendation hadn’t been completely blown off in Bucky’s time incommunicado, and otherwise waited quietly for him to continue at his own pace.

Barnes took a deep breath, his brow furrowing in worry before admitting quietly. “I’ve always liked dancing. Music is great to listen to, but – I always had a good time going out, being able to dance and neck and just have a time with the people and the music in a dance hall, the way it was supposed to be enjoyed.”

“That’s a good start,” Sam encouraged with a smile. “So – have you had a chance to go out and try it since? Take a night for yourself… hell, if we looked into it, we could probably find places that would still play music from your day – although the dancers are likely to be a little on the older side…”
“I haven’t bothered since we woke up,” Barnes interrupted. “I’m not great with crowds anyway, and Steve never liked ‘em so he’s not chomping to get out. I guess I’ve just been ignoring the fact that I missed it.”

“So what changed?” Sam prompted gently. “Other than my giving you homework to figure something out.”

Bucky laughed humorlessly. “We’ve got a… co-worker. She’s set on trying to get Steve and me dates. Or – get Steve one, at least. She usually just tries to pass the dames – ladies – off on me when Steve refuses them.”

Sam kept his face carefully neutral as he listened, not wanting his own response to color Bucky’s answers. “So – what? She thinks you guys need to get out more?”

“Well, yeah – but Steve’s still so hung up on Peggy that he’s never gonna take her up on it. He was never much for dating, anyway.” Bucky responded with a shrug.

“But… you want to?” Sam asked bluntly. Dating hadn’t exactly been what he’d had in mind when he’d told Bucky to think of a hobby – it generally wasn’t a great idea to start relying on outside relationships to try to get a handle over what’s going on in your own head – but something casual like dancing that could give him a healthy distraction was progress, at least.

Bucky shifted in his seat, looking supremely uncomfortable with the route the conversation was going. “I do… I just…” He made a vague gesture with his hand, apparently unable to explain his hang-up.

“Is it because you don’t have an interest in sex right now?” Sam guessed. “Because of…everything else? Because it’s totally normal for a soldier dealing with stress to…”

“Christ, Sam, no. No, it’s nothin’ about trauma or… anything like that.” Bucky answered, looking around to make sure no one was listening in on them as his neck flushed spectacularly.

Sam sat in silence, not wanting to try another guess. He knew well enough that if he continued offering a sympathetic ear, Bucky would volunteer the information – without Sam making him even more uncomfortable than he already had.

Bucky heaved an almighty sigh, apparently picking up that Sam wasn’t going to bail him out from whatever it was that was bothering him. He looked around carefully again, before leaning into the table and continuing in a low voice, “It’s cuz I never really liked making time with women to begin with.”

It took Sam a second to put together what he meant, but when he did he felt his jaw drop. It really shouldn’t have come as that big a surprise, especially given the way that Bucky and Steve interacted with one another, and how ridiculously devoted Barnes was to his ‘friend.’ But still, hearing him say it outright like that, Sam’s mouth ended up moving before his brain could catch up. “Oh. OH.”

Bucky frowned spectacularly, his posture becoming tense as he looked up and made eye-contact with Sam for the first time. “I thought that was fine, now… for…”

Sam waved his hands, realizing that he was failing to employ any and all sensitivity training he had ever received. “No, dude, it is. It totally is. I mean, there are some jackass bigots who make a big deal of it, but anyone who matters is completely cool with same-sex relationships.”

Bucky continued watching him, his look so skeptical that Sam continued to lay it on with the reassurances. “Seriously, Bucky. If you wanna go out on a date, or even just go dancing with
another dude, it is one hundred percent okay.”

Bucky bit his lip, staring at his coffee cup and nodding absently for a few moments before replying. “Alright. That’s… thanks, Sam.” He frowned as he went back to fiddling with the cardboard sleeve, before adding, “I don’t want Steve to know.”

“That,” Sam responded automatically, “is a spectacularly bad idea, my friend.”

Bucky opened his mouth to retort, but Sam continued on – there was no possible way Steve Rogers would have a problem with his best friend’s sexuality, Sam was sure of it, and keeping it all a secret wouldn’t turn out well for any of them. “Seriously, you guys work together and live together – he’s gonna find out. And when he does, he’s going to want to know why you wouldn’t tell him, first.”

“I’ve never told anybody other than you,” Bucky responded tightly.

Sam closed his mouth abruptly, recognizing the enormity of that statement and backing off for a second in deference to the courage it would have taken Barnes to admit as much in the first place. “Okay, okay man – that’s no problem. I mean… I really appreciate your trusting me enough to tell me, Bucky, I’m serious. And I wouldn’t tell anyone you didn’t want me to, okay?” He said it as fervently as possible, and was glad to see him relax at least marginally in his seat as he nodded. “This just – as close as the two of you are, this isn’t something that you should try to keep from Steve for too long, that’s all I’m worried about.”

Bucky sighed, worrying his lip for a moment as he finished completely shredding the sleeve of his coffee cup. “No, I know that. And I’ll tell him eventually, I just need more time to figure out how to. I really, really don’t want to fuck it up, you know?”

Sam bit back on pointing out that he wouldn’t fuck it up as long as he was just honest, instead saying encouragingly, “I get it, I really do. If you ever feel like you need help…”

“I know,” Bucky responded, rolling his eyes as he did. “But back to the topic,” Sam diverted. “Are you saying you want to try dating again?”

Bucky shrugged, looking a bit less uncomfortable, at least. “I dunno about that – maybe? I’m just saying I know I liked dancing; I like the idea that I could maybe go out and do it with someone I’m actually attracted to without worrying about getting my head smashed in or arrested or worse.”

“Alright,” Sam responded with a grin, “let’s get you out to a dance club, and see how it goes.”

“That’s it?” Bucky asked, his eyes going wide in alarm. “There’s not… some special way fellas are supposed to ask each other out?”

“I mean – if you’re looking for a guy to go steady with I suppose we could set you up with a match account or something,” Sam answered thoughtfully.

“No.” Bucky interrupted immediately, shaking his head. “No… I’m not – looking for that.”

Sam nodded sagely, more or less having expected the response. “Then no, if you’re just looking to casually have a good time with someone, all you have to do is get gussied up and go out to meet people. Guys or ladies, it really doesn’t matter.”

Bucky raised his eyebrows and took a sip of his coffee, apparently still not buying it. “Seriously,” Sam insisted, “there have got to be at least five gay clubs within walking distance of
your neighborhood. I'll ask a couple of buddies which one they think is best. Hell, I'll come out with you.”

“But you aren’t…”

Sam shook his head. “I’m pretty much straight, but I’m not exactly narrow. And that’s beside the point – I’m a hell of a wingman, alright? I swear, I’ll make sure you have a good time.” Bucky raised his eyebrows at that, and Sam laughed as he continued. “You know what I mean, smartass.”

Bucky laughed as well, before finally relaxing completely into his seat. “Yeah, alright. Okay, why the hell not?” It sounded an awful lot like he was psyching himself into it, so Sam remained quiet. “You free on Thursday?”

Thursday night found Sam waiting near the velvet ropes of a club in Logan Circle, dicking around on his cell phone and hoping that Bucky would actually show up as planned. He’d arrived fairly early, but the longer that he stood outside waiting, the more that Sam worried Barnes would chicken out on the idea of a night out. He was preparing to shoot him a text to ask for an ETA, when he glanced up and saw a familiar face making its way up the street.

Bucky had cleaned up incredibly well; his hair was styled in that seemingly careless messy fashion that was in style, and it was warm enough that he’d left his leather jacket open to reveal a sheer navy blue t-shirt that showed off his ridiculous musculature and made his eyes look stupidly blue, even in the dark streetlights. He’d paired it with tight black jeans and dark ankle boots – enough heads turned as he walked past the line waiting to get in that Sam sincerely doubted his services would be needed to get Bucky a partner.

“Hey man,” Sam said with a grin as he approached, “I was starting to worry you weren’t gonna show…”

Barnes gave him a casual shrug, glancing at the watch he had on his left wrist – Sam missed whatever it was that he replied with, too busy being surprised by the fact that it looked like a flesh-and-blood hand coming out of his jacket sleeve. After a couple of seconds of staring Bucky must have picked up on his surprise, his smile turning bashful as he shoved the hand back in his pocket. “Ah – SHIELD made a cloaking device for the arm to use on undercover missions. It’s a hologram… technically I’m not allowed to have it when I’m off-duty, but I figured what they don’t know can’t hurt ‘em.”

Sam chuckled at that, figuring that he couldn’t deny that it was a good idea; the last thing Bucky needed was some dickhead snapping a picture of his arm and outing him to a tabloid rag – it was probably something Sam should have considered himself. “My lips are sealed, dude,” he responded pleasantly, before leading the way towards the front of the line. He’d called in a couple of favors and gotten them on the list for the night, Bucky under a fake name that he apparently had ID for (thanks again to SHIELD), and a few minutes later they were already at coat check, stowing their phones and wallets in their jeans before handing their jackets over for safe-keeping.

The hologram covered the entirety of Bucky’s metal arm – Sam knew from pictures that the whole limb was a prosthetic, but even looking for it he couldn’t see where the metal should have met skin. It wasn’t just synthetic skin, though; an elaborate half-sleeve of steampunk plating and cogs looked like it was inked into the synthetic skin, with an enormous blue wing design peeking out from underneath the sleeve of his t-shirt.

“Nice touch,” Sam said honestly, pointing to the ink.

Bucky followed his finger before giving a shy shrug; even in the dark light of the club, Sam could
tell he was blushing as he replied, “Thanks – I didn’t want to give it all up completely, y’know?”

“I like it,” Sam replied decisively, before leading them both to the bar nearest to the dance floor.

Sam ordered a drink of his own, before turning to Bucky expectantly. “I’m good,” Bucky shouted over the music, but Sam wasn’t having it.

“Come on, man… I’ll get this one. Whatever you want.”

After some hemming and hawing, Bucky finally ordered a whiskey neat, sipping it as he turned to watch the dance floor.

“Anyone catching your eye?” Sam leaned in and asked after a few minutes.

Bucky shrugged, eyes still on the floor as he threw back the rest of his liquor. “Maybe,” he finally replied, “although not one of you knows how to dance…this is pitiful.”

Sam laughed hard at that, shaking his head and elbowing Bucky in the ribs. “Alright then, old man… go out and show us how it’s done.”

Bucky smirked for a bit, eyes roving the floor one last time before he turned and dropped his glass on the bar. “I guess someone has to,” he drawled, before pushing away from the bar and striding confidently through the crush of dancing bodies, apparently prowling for a partner.

It took approximately four seconds for the guys on the floor to notice him, and as Sam had expected he was bombarded with dance partners almost immediately. What he hadn’t expected, though, was to watch as Bucky took to it like a fish to water, matching his partners easily, occasionally adding in old-timey dance moves that somehow actually worked with the pulsing bass of the club’s dance tracks, and just looking like he was having the time of his life, while making sure to show the guys he partnered with the same courtesy.

Steve hadn’t been joking when he’d said Barnes was a charming son of a bitch. Hell, after a few minutes of watching him, Sam had half a mind to quit nursing his drink and join him for a dance as well.

His thoughts were interrupted by the feeling of his phone vibrating in his back pocket. With a frown, Sam set his drink on the bar and dug it out, sliding it open and reading the new message waiting for him on the screen.

23:19 Text From: Steve Rogers

Hey Sam, it’s Steve. Is Bucky w you? He isn’t answering his phone.

Sam rattled his phone against the bar for a moment, debating how to answer. He wondered how much Bucky had told Steve; if he even knew they’d gone out together… ugh, he hated this unnecessary covert shit.

23:21 Text To: Steve Rogers

hey steve yeah he’s here. kinda busy at the moment, is it an emergency?

23:22 Text From: Steve Rogers

No, it’s no problem. Just wanted to make sure.
k – it’s pretty loud and he’s on the dance floor, probably just couldn’t hear his phone

The reply text-bubble appeared almost immediately on Sam’s message screen, but then flashed away without a response. The same thing happened multiple times over the next few minutes, and Sam bit his lip, wondering if he’d already given away too much. He could practically feel the disappointment oozing through the phone from Steve’s end, without having even received a verbal response from the guy. Finally, a new text came through.

22:34 Text From: Steve Rogers

Oh.

Sam hadn’t thought it was possible to convey that much emotion in a single word of a text. Steve might as well have just snapped a selfie of the kicked-puppy face Sam absolutely knew he was giving his phone.

22:35 Text From: Steve Rogers

He didn’t say you were going dancing.

Sam frowned at his phone screen, feeling a sense of dread run down his spine. He’d felt bad about the situation with Bucky keeping – whatever this was – from Steve from the get go, but with the palpable disappointment in his text responses the ominous feeling only grew worse. While he respected Bucky’s privacy and whatever it was that was convincing him that he couldn’t come out to his best friend, Sam was fairly certain that continuing to keep it all under wraps would only blow up in all of their faces.

He glanced up at the dance floor again, searching for Bucky as he racked his brain for the best, gentlest way to convince him to tell Steve the truth. When Sam finally got a visual on him, though, his shock over what he saw overpowered his concern. Bucky was still in the same spot he’d last seen him, only now was busy grinding with a tiny blond hipster – or at least, Sam assumed he was a hipster, given his ultra-skinny jeans and ridiculous undercut. As he watched the two of them gyrate against each other, Sam started feeling his neck heat up… they’d started making out, and Sam had the uncomfortable suspicion that the blonde was about to climb his friend like a tree.

Sam immediately turned his attention back to the bar, trying not to feel like a perv as he picked up his drink and drained it in a single gulp. If he was honest with himself that had not been at all what he’d expected Bucky to go for. He’d figured he would be into more stacked guys, guys with muscular builds more like his own. Even as his mind turned the thought over, though, Sam remembered the Captain America exhibit the Smithsonian had been touting so heavily that he hadn’t been able to help poking his head in the week prior. In particular, his subconscious decided to focus on the image of little, skinny Steve Rogers before he underwent the still-classified procedures for Project Rebirth that turned him into the wall of muscle he was now.

“Fuck,” Sam muttered to himself, before signaling for the bartender as it all slid into place. He was so not trying to get involved with this kind of drama, tonight especially.

Before Sam could get another order in a white, sandy-haired guy with a decent build leaned into the spot next to him, giving Sam a once-over before smirking slightly. “Rough night?”

“You could say that,” Sam responded vaguely, his eyes immediately tracking to where Bucky and his knock-off mini-Steve were still having a time.
New guy chuckled, “I can only imagine – that’s the trouble with having someone so hot, they attract too much attention.”

“Oh,” Sam responded, shaking his head, “No man, he’s not my boyfriend. Just a friend I was here to provide obviously unnecessary moral support for.”

“Oh obviously,” the man responded drolly, using his straw to stir his drink in a clear effort to look casual. “So you’re just here to be a good friend? Or were you interested in having a good time for yourself, too?”

Now it was Sam’s turn to give the guy a proper once-over… he wasn’t bad-looking by any means (he pushed away the intrusive voice that pointed out how much the guy looked like Riley), and while Sam had no interest in hooking up that night, dancing would be a fun way to pass the time and blow off some steam. “I’d be up for dancing, yeah – if you think you can keep up.”

New guy laughed and drained his glass, before moving it back to the bar. “Yeah, I don’t think that’ll be a problem.” He said coyly, before making his way onto the dance floor.

Sam followed close behind, giving Bucky one more glance – he was still wrapped up in the music, dancing with the same tiny blond partner. Whatever came out of tonight was bound to be a mess, Sam was sure, but as the guy from the bar grabbed his hips and started moving to the rhythm of the song bumping over head, Sam decided to let it go. Bucky and Steve were both adults, and one way or another they were both going to have to deal with their shit, whether Sam interfered in it or not. Instead of worrying about it any farther, Sam let himself get lost in moving to the lights and sounds of the dance floor.

Chapter End Notes

The world doesn't deserve Sam...

Merry Christmas to those of you who celebrate it, and thanks so much for all of your continued feedback and support!
Steve did his best to focus on Rumlow’s rundown of the situation on board the Lemurian Star as the quinjet they were flying in hauled ass across the Indian Ocean, although the information he was delivering coupled with the irritation Steve had been feeling regarding what he was internally calling The Bucky Situation wasn’t exactly making it easy to stay impartial.

“Why are the demands so steep?” He asked, after Rumlow had quoted the price the pirates who had taken control of the ship were asking for was one and a half billion dollars.

“Because it’s SHIELD,” Rumlow answered smarmily, grinding Steve’s gears all the more.

“So it isn’t off-course, it’s trespassing.” He muttered, lowly enough that Natasha and Bucky were sure to be the only two to pick it up. “I’m getting really sick of being Fury’s janitor…”

“Relax,” Romanoff sighed, “I’m sure Fury has a good reason for stationing it where it was – the situation really isn’t that complicated.”

“How many pirates?” Bucky chimed in, nodding towards Rumlow as he finished inspecting his rifle.

Rumlow ran down the numbers and the known statistics on their targets – it didn’t seem like any of them individually would be too terrible of a challenge, but between their numbers and the fact that there were hostages to save involved, Steve knew it wasn’t going to be a walk in the park. And that he had to get his damned head on straight.

“Alright,” he started, “I’m going to search the deck and find Batroc. Nat, you get into the engine room – kill the engines and wait for instructions. Barnes,” a weird charge seemed to go through the air, and although he wasn’t looking at her Steve could feel the suspicious look that Natasha was giving them both, “you get yourself into position so that you have a view into the galley, be ready to take out any of the men inside in the event that they realize we’re on board and try to start killing the hostages. And Rumlow, you sweep aft, find the hostages – stay in touch with Bucky to make sure they’re alive, then get ‘em to the life pods and get ‘em out.”

There was a flurry of movement around the cabin of the quinjet as they all set themselves to preparing to drop onto the ship below. Steve checked his com system as Natasha finished securing
her parachute, confirming that they were both online. “So…” she said as she watched Steve secure
his ear piece, looking back and forth between him and where Bucky was stowing his rifle in its
water-tight case, “You boys do anything fun this weekend?”

Steve could see the muscle in Bucky’s jaw tense, and it immediately set off the same sick feeling of
hurt that had been churning in his belly since he’d texted Sam a few nights prior. “Afraid I didn’t get
up to much,” he responded, knowing full-well that it was petty but unable to bring himself to care.
Bucky’s insistence that he’d never invited Steve along in the first place was because he’d spent the
entirety of their youth listening to Steve bitch about dance halls while they were on double dates was
a relatively reasonable one, but it didn’t make the fact that he hadn’t even bothered to ask Steve
bother him any less.

Natasha gave Bucky a long, thoughtful look, before sighing. “Right. So we’re down to one hermit
to deal with… you know Steve, if you asked Kristin out from statistics, she’d probably say yes.”

“That’s why I don’t ask,” Steve responded with a dry smile, deciding to ignore her opening barb in
favor of pulling his helmet on and securing it. “I’m not really interested in anything at the moment.”

An announcement came over the PA system that they were nearing the drop point, and Steve moved
to grab his parachute as Natasha hit the button to open the hold doors. “Alright – Steve’s still busy
being a lame homebody. Bucky? You remember the cute blonde…”

Bucky had just finished securing his rifle pack to his back, and paused as he reached for a parachute,
obviously uncomfortable as Natasha watched him like a hawk. “Ah, yeah, actually. I, um – have a
date lined up this week, already.”

“You what?” Steve asked incredulously, his fingers feeling numb around the straps of the parachute
that he hadn’t even bothered to slide on yet. It had been bad enough that Bucky had gone out with
Sam and not invited Steve along – but the idea that he’d asked someone out and not bothered to tell
Steve a lick of it set off all kinds of warning claxons in his head.

Bucky shrugged nonchalantly, his eyes tracking very quickly to where STRIKE Team Alpha was
still prepping their gear before turning his attention back to Natasha and Steve and repeating himself.
“I said I’ve already got a date. Tomorrow night… I, ah, met someone. While I was out last
weekend.”

“What’s her name?” Natasha asked smoothly, as if they were gossiping around the office water
cooler and not seconds away from jumping out of a plane onto a pirate-captured ship.

Despite the absurdity of it all, Steve still hadn’t put the parachute on. He found himself unable to
move, waiting for Bucky to answer. For his part, Bucky looked even more worked up about it than
Steve felt, shuffling his feet and glancing uncomfortably in Rumlow’s direction, his own parachute
still hanging uselessly in his hands. After at least an eternity of frowning at the floor, Bucky
straightened his back, looking them both firmly in the eye before answering softly, “Brendan. His
name’s Brendan.”

If either of them said anything else, Steve didn’t hear it; he didn’t hear anything other than an odd
buzzing in his ears. For some reason he felt like he’d been doused in cold water, but his face felt like
it was on fire, and all the while the only thing his brain was good for was screaming at him about
what Bucky had just said. Bucky had a date he hadn’t told Steve about. Bucky had a date with a
man that he hadn’t told Steve about. Because Bucky liked men, apparently, and he’d never fucking
told Steve as much.

When his brain finally did come back online, it was to remind Steve that he was over the drop point
for the Lemurian Star, and that he might feel a bit better if he could just punch things really, really hard. The good news was there was a ship full of pirates who deserved exactly that. The bad news was, with the parachute that was now sitting at his feet, it would take a while to get to them, and very possibly give away the fact that he was inbound, making the fight that much harder. So... Steve did the most impulsively reckless thing he could think of, in desperate need of the adrenaline rush to get his head back on straight.

He turned and jumped out the open hatch of the quinjet, parachute be damned.

As the cold night air rushed past his body Steve finally felt his mind beginning to calm, focusing instead on how best to hit the water to not sustain an injury from the impact. He instinctively straightened out into a diver’s pose, increasing his velocity but also minimizing the amount of area that would break through the surface of the water. His fists ended up slamming through the surface of the ocean waters below, and while the force was jarring he had no problem reversing his course in the water and swimming back to the surface. He’d barely had time to locate the ship in relation to where he’d landed before there was a splash nearby – seconds later Bucky’s head surfaced, looking around anxiously before his face pulled an angry scowl when he caught Steve’s eye.

“What the FUCK was that, Steve?” He asked tightly, readjusting the rifle pack on his shoulder as an aside.

“The quickest and stealthiest way to the ship,” Steve replied nonchalantly, turning and beginning to swim towards the nearby ship.

“We were still over a mile above the water,” Bucky hissed, although from the sounds of it he had begun swimming as well. “You dove without a parachute – you could’ve fucking died.”

“Yeah, and you followed after,” Steve muttered over his shoulder.

“I have an indestructible arm to break the surface tension with, you didn’t even use your god-damned shield!” Bucky seethed. “And of course I followed after, I’m not about to let your dumb ass bust your arms and drown because you blew a fuse.”

Steve ignored him completely; it wasn’t worth the argument, and he’d already reached the hull of the ship – the last thing they needed was to draw the attention of the crew before they’d boarded arguing about something so stupid. Thankfully, Bucky must have realized as much as well, as he let the topic drop and started scaling the side of the ship a few feet away.

There was an armed guard passing a few feet in front of Steve as he reached the guard rail of the main deck, so he flipped himself over it effortlessly and choked the guy out before he could be discovered. A few feet to his right, Bucky had grabbed another guard, overpowering him easily with his metal arm and using the butt of the guy’s own gun to knock him cold. From there they set off at a sprint, making their way anticlockwise around the deck of the ship, silently taking down the guard as they went. They seemed to be moving quickly enough that no alarm had been raised yet – each man that they met was alone, and Steve did his best to stay in front of Bucky and take each one out well before he could radio for help. It wasn’t until they got to the middle of the ship, where the majority of the guard seemed to be stationed, that they met any real resistance.

The fight was short, quiet, and brutal; despite how awkward it felt to be angry with Bucky, a thought that was definitely still lodged in the back of Steve’s mind, fighting alongside him was every bit as routine as usual. He took a guard out with a single punch, simultaneously passing the shield off to Bucky who blocked the bullet that another had fired at them, before passing it back and kicking the guy so hard in the chest that he was thrown off the edge of the ship. One of the idiots came at Steve with a knife, which he easily pulled from his grip before kneeing him in the jaw, while some poor
bastard to his left dove at them and was met with Bucky’s left jab. He heard movement to their right and noticed one of the pirates reaching for an alarm on the ship’s wall – without thinking, Steve chuckled the knife that he still had in his grasp, and taking out the guy’s hand as it was still in motion. He leapt easily over the railing that separated them, and kicked the guy in the face before his screaming could draw any further attention.

Before he could turn away from the wall, Steve heard the safety of a gun disengage, and glanced over his shoulder to see a final pirate advancing on him, gun ready and aimed for his head. A split second later, Bucky appeared out of the shadows, and the pirate dropped to the deck with a hole in his forehead.

“Listen, Steve…” Bucky panted, stowing his sidearm and staring down at the dropped pirate at their feet.

“Sergeant,” Steve cut him off roughly, not wanting to deal with whatever he was about to say. “You have your orders, get up in the air and put yourself in position to take out whoever they have guarding the hostages, we have a couple dozen lives at stake.”

Bucky blinked at him for a second, his eyes wide and obviously hurt by the harsh rebuttal (Steve tried to remember if he’d ever pulled rank on his friend before – judging by Buck’s reaction, he hadn’t) before straightening up and giving Steve a harsh salute. “Sir, yes sir.” He barked formally, before turning and scrambling up a nearby pole.

Steve remained where he was standing, watching Bucky go with a pang of regret for a few seconds before his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone landing next to him. He glanced over his shoulder to see Rumlow surveying the scene, smirking at all of the pirates they lay prone around them. “Well… looks like you guys really need to have us around.”

“No one’s done, yet.” Steve responded with a grimace, before making his way towards the control deck of the ship, anticipating that he’d find Batroc there.

He’d been right, of course – a few minutes later Steve was positioned outside the observation deck of the ship, waiting for the rest of the team to finish their tasks so that he could take down Batroc himself. “Status report,” he commanded over the radio.

“Targets acquired,” Bucky’s response came almost immediately, “Five of these idiots are lined up across from a bay of windows in the mess.”

“STRIKE in position,” Rumlow followed. “We’ve got a heat signature for the other two and all of the hostages.”

Steve waited a few moments before breaking the radio silence. “Natasha, what’s your status?”
When he was met with no response, he transmitted again, “Natasha?”

“Hang on!!” Came her harried response, followed by the sound of some poor bastard meeting a world of hurt before she cut her com. A few seconds passed before she radioed again. “Engine room secured.”

“We’re on Rumlow’s mark, then.” Steve confirmed.

He listened to the countdown on STRIKE’s end, and within a minute Rumlow radioed again. “Targets eliminated, we’re moving in on the hostages now.”

That was Steve’s cue, and he was all too ready to take it. He launched the shield through the glass of the observation tower with all of his might, then jumped through the resultant opening, running after
Batroc as he saw the man sprint out of the closed space and onto the open deck.

The fight was a challenge, at least – Steve held back, knowing that it was imperative that they brought the jackass in alive for questioning… It was highly unlikely that the take-over of the ship had been on his own command, given the level of intel that would have been needed to decide to commandeer a SHIELD vessel in the first place. And Batroc certainly lived up to his billing as a high-level assassin; he was nearly matching Steve on a hit-for-hit basis, and continued getting up, regardless of what he hit him with. It was difficult, trying to find the appropriate level of power to use on the guy, especially given the fact that the only other person Steve had ever sparred with that could match him like this was Bucky, and he was sure that hitting him that hard would result in a dead target and more paperwork than Steve cared to think about.

Finally, after Batroc had taunted him into dropping the shield and removing his helmet, Steve was able to drop him with a well-timed roundhouse kick to the jaw. He knelt beside him after, glad to feel a pulse, before making his way back into the ship, following his instinct to make a final sweep for pirates and figuring that his main target wouldn’t be coming to anytime soon.

Steve crept quietly into the ship’s control room, sensing that there was still someone inside, only to freeze when he caught an all-too-familiar red headed woman leaning over one of the computers inside, typing furiously.

“Natasha?” He asked incredulously, “what the hell are you doing?”

“Backing up the hard drive,” Romanoff responded smartly, “it’s a good habit to get into.”

Steve frowned as he watched file after file of SHIELD data fly by on the screen in front of them. Why the hell would Romanoff feel the need to hack a ship of their own? “Rumlow could have used your help…” he griped, not bothering to acknowledge her teasing.

“Rumlow had an entire team of SHIELD’s finest and the best sniper in the world,” she responded in a bored tone, pulling a thumb drive out of the ship’s computer after a few final keystrokes, “I knew he’d have it under control.”

“But our mission,” Steve continued, “was to rescue the captives.”

“No,” Natasha drawled, “that was your mission, and you did a spectacular job.”

Before Steve could say anything further, he heard the door creak open and glanced up just in time to register Batroc’s retreating form, as well as the grenade he had thrown in their direction. Acting on pure instinct, Steve grabbed Natasha around the waist, pulling her tightly against his side and diving through a bank of windows into an adjacent room, using the shield to block the both of them from the worst of the blast. Although it had kept them safe for the most part, they both still ended up showered in suit and struggling for breath when they hit the ground.

“Sorry, that was on me,” Natasha groaned, pushing herself into a seated position.

“You’re god damned right it was,” Steve growled back, not bothering to hide how angry he was. After giving himself a moment to catch his breath, he rose to his feet, unable to even bring himself to look back at Nat before making his way out onto the deck.

Of course, the first thing he saw when he walked out of the charred computer room was Batroc’s dropped form and Bucky’s panicked face as he made his way away from it. “Steve! Are you alright? Where’s –”

“We’re both fine,” Steve responded coldly, hating how his guts still squirmed when Bucky looked at
him like that, despite everything that had happened between them over the course of the past few days. “Get him in shackles before he wakes up again, then let’s wrap this up and get the hell out of here.”

Thankfully, the arrangements for getting the hostages off of the ship safely, securing the remaining living pirates to be transported to a SHILED detention center, and finally getting their entire crew back onto a quinjet to head back to DC took enough of Steve’s attention that he wasn’t able to think about any of his personal feelings regarding the night’s events.

Onboard the jet, Steve grabbed a free StarkPad and set himself to typing up his post-mission logs, hoping that by keeping his mind busy, he would be able to ignore the hurt of realizing that both Bucky and Natasha had been hiding things for him. Of course, it didn’t actually work. While it was nice to have the paperwork out of the way, it meant that the entire trip back to DC was a nearly-silent, uncomfortable mess, with the entirety of STRIKE Alpha tiptoeing around the three of them.

They arrived shortly before dawn, with a message from Fury waiting for them that none of them were to report until the following day, and instructions to rest up in the meantime. Steve had no problem following the orders – he made his way directly to the parking lot below where he’d stowed his Harley, then rode back to their apartment on his own, not even bothering to change out of his uniform.

He spent the rest of the day holed up in his bedroom, ignoring Bucky’s single, half-assed attempt to apologize through the door and stewing in his anger. It was bad enough to be so consistently reminded that they couldn’t exactly trust the agency that they worked under; the fact that Natasha, and even worse, Bucky, had been keeping secrets from him as well were the final straws for Steve. He considered escaping around mid-day, hoping that a visit to Peggy or even Sam might cheer him up, but he remembered how poorly Peg had been doing lately and the fact that Sam had been in on the whole Bucky mess from the first place, and instead decided to roll over in bed and continue wallowing.

Steve waited thirty minutes after Bucky had announced that he was leaving before finally abandoning the room, finally giving in to his stomach’s angry demands and making a b-line for the kitchen where he threw together an enormous sandwich and devoured it over the sink, then downed half a jug of milk, sighing in relief when the headache that had been gathering all afternoon finally abated.

He frowned as the buzz of the front door’s call button broke the silence of the apartment, setting his empty glass to the side of the sink as he made his way to the intercom next to the entryway. He hadn’t expected Bucky to be back for hours, and he’d have taken his keys anyway – considering it wasn’t a Sunday so Sam shouldn’t be stopping by, Steve had no idea who would be ringing their doorbell at 19:00 on a Wednesday night.

“Hello?” He asked gruffly, pressing the ‘Talk’ button on the intercom before moving to the ‘Listen’ button, fully expecting it to be a stranger with the wrong apartment number.

“Hey,” Natasha’s voice answered through the speaker, “I thought I’d stop by with a peace offering… let me up for a second?”

Steve sighed as he rested his forehead against the door jamb – he wanted nothing more than to tell her to take a hike, all too happy to wallow in self-pity on his own for the rest of the night, but even as well as he knew Nat he couldn’t bring himself to be so rude to a lady. Especially to one who was apparently trying to make him feel better. He wordlessly hit the ‘Open’ button for the entry door, waiting listlessly in the entryway as he waited for her to make her way up the stairs.
A few seconds later, there was a sharp knock on the door. Steve took a deep breath before opening it part-way, looking out to see Natasha standing in the hallway, a paper bag under her arm and an unreadable smirk on her face.

“I’m still not going to apologize for the mission,” she said without preamble, “but considering what tonight is, I thought I’d bring by a peace offering.”

“What’s tonight?” Steve asked innocently, doing his best not to wince when she leveled him with an unimpressed glare.

“I might even stick around to commiserate with you,” Natasha continued on, completely ignoring Steve’s stupid question. “If you’ll answer something for me.”

Steve sighed and moved aside, pulling the door open completely so that Natasha could follow him into the apartment to ask whatever it was in private. She had the decency to do as much before asking, “What the hell was it about Bucky’s little announcement that set you off so badly last night?”

“It took me by surprise,” Steve answered simply. “We’ve been sharing everything our entire life, so hearing that he had a date out of the blue… it was just an unpleasant shock, is all.”

“So it wasn’t to do with the fact that he’s going out with a man?” Natasha asked bluntly.

“Of course not!” Steve answered immediately; offended that she would even assume such a thing. “Are you kidding? I mean, I know the stereotypes about our generation, but we lived in the queerest neighborhood in Brooklyn. There were plenty of guys around who had relations with other guys – I didn’t give a damn. Hell, you can ask Bucky next time you see him, I got my ass kicked a few times trying to keep them from getting their heads smashed in.” Natasha raised her eyebrows slightly, so Steve continued his ranting, incensed that anyone would think so lowly of him. “I ain’t got a problem with queers, and Bucky… Christ, Bucky’s my family. He’s my whole damned world. Who he wants to make time with doesn’t change that a lick.”

Natasha gave him a soft smile as Steve finally sputtered out. “I get it,” she responded quietly, before making her way into the living room. “And good… I figured that was the case, but I wasn’t about to stand by quietly if your hissy-fit was the start of some old-fashioned homophobia that was going to lead to Barnes getting hurt.” She opened the bag, pulling out a tub of ice cream and a full bottle of vodka and setting both on the coffee table, before nodding in Steve’s direction. “I brought vanilla bean and a bottle of Moscow’s finest – grab us a couple of spoons and glasses, would you?”

Steve paused for a moment to try to figure out what the hell the two had to do with each other, before retreating into the kitchen with a soft chuckle and a “Yes, ma’am.” He pulled the glasses down out of their cupboards, glancing at the adjacent door as he did. “Don’t we need bowls, too?”

“It’s not a proper girls’ night if we don’t eat the ice cream directly out of the carton, Rogers.” Nat called from the living room.

“Dunno if it’s escaped your notice, Romanoff,” Steve scoffed, grabbing the glasses in one hand and the spoons in the other, “but I’m not exactly a girl.”

“Semantics,” she replied with a lazy wave of her hand, not looking away from the Medal of Honor plaques, complete with their enlistment photos, which were hanging on the wall.

Steve came to a stop in the doorway to the living room, watching closely as Natasha made a slow circuit around the room, studying all of the photos that were displayed. It occurred to Steve that, outside of Sam, they’d never had anyone over to see the place – for some reason, watching her
applying what looked like the same level of scrutiny as she did examining mission briefs made Steve supremely uncomfortable. He tracked over the photos as she did, the huge collage of shots that Bucky took during their road trip, the strip of goofy black and white photos from the photo booth they’d found while visiting Coney Island, the countless prints of ‘selfies’ Bucky had insisted on taking and printing during the small side-trips they’d taken over the years, tucked in among the old prints of the Brooklyn they had called home in the thirties and forties, which Tony had insisted on sending as housewarming gifts when they’d moved to DC.

She spent a long time looking at a photo of the two of them, arms around each other and posed at the rim of the Grand Canyon – Bucky had asked someone in passing to get a picture of them once they’d finally gotten themselves together on the afternoon of their arrival, said that they needed to commemorate finally achieving a life-long goal. It sat on the mantle next to the framed wedding portrait of Sarah and Joseph Rogers (Bucky’s Christmas present their first year out of the ice, which he’d apparently found a way to wheedle away from the Smithsonian without Steve having known it had ever even existed), and the faded sepia print of the four Barnes siblings in front of their old Brownstone (Steve had gotten it from Becca’s daughter and given it to Bucky for his birthday a few months later). The intimacy of it all suddenly occurred to Steve, and he found himself needing to call Natasha’s attention away from them as quickly as possible.

“All set, then,” he called out, perhaps a bit too loudly as he tried to get Natasha to come back to the couch before she could pay too much attention to the series of Steve’s drawings from their road trip that Bucky had insisted on having framed. “Did you want me to put a movie or something on? We’ve been watching a lot of Breaking Bad lately…”

Natasha turned from the wall with a smile that was impossible for Steve to read and shook her head as she made her way to the couch. “No television, Rogers – it’ll interfere with our talk.”

Steve hoped that his dread wasn’t overly-obvious on his face as he sat down next to her, peeling the lid off of the ice cream container as Natasha poured vodka into their tumblers like it was water, then grabbed one of the spoons.

“You boys have done an impressive job of building a life here, all things considered,” she said mildly before taking a dainty bite of ice cream.

Steve shrugged, staring into the carton of ice cream instead of looking at Natasha. “I mean – we’ve had a lot of good suggestions on things to do. And it helps to have money to actually be able to go places, now. So it’s just a matter of making time to do stuff and one of us picking something. It’s not really that special.”

“No, I mean it,” she responded. “Part of the reason I’ve hounded you so much about the dating was out of concern that you were both just sitting here miserably in your apartment, but – seeing this all makes me feel considerably better.”

Steve shrugged, taking a spoonful of ice cream for himself and looking around at the photos again, considering. “It’s been hard,” he finally admitted, “everything is frightening and weird, and it hurts to know that everyone else that we ever cared about is gone. But…” his eyes stuck for a moment on the photo booth strip, and a smile began to tug at the corners of his mouth as he remembered how fun a day they’d had back in their old haunts on the boardwalk. “But it’s also been good.” He finished fervently.

Even as he was in the process of saying it, it hit him – that was ultimately what was bothering him most about the situation with Bucky. Steve had really thought that what they had here was good, was enough for the both of them to at least be content, but apparently Bucky needed more. And if that was the case, how much longer would it be before Bucky found someone better for him and
decided to abandon Steve altogether? Steve would hardly be able to blame him – who wouldn’t want to look for someone who wasn’t still plagued by night terrors that interrupted both of their sleeping schedules, or who still had awful days when he got stuck stewing in terrible memories for no discernible reason. He already had a new, more fun friend in Sam, apparently… and knowing Buck, it would take no time at all for him to have a proper boyfriend as well, assuming he wanted it.

Hell, a guy would have to be a complete, certifiable idiot to turn him down.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Natasha asked gently, interrupting Steve’s wallowing as she reached over and stole another spoonful of ice cream.

Steve felt his cheeks flush, hating the way that it really felt as if Natasha was capable of reading his thoughts. If she’d picked up on that last one… “Shouldn’t they be worth at least a couple dollars by this point? With inflation and all.”

“Ha,” Natasha said shortly, mocking his attempt at joking and taking a drink of her vodka before settling further into the couch. “Come on – something’s bugging you, you’ve got that weird emotionally constipated face going. Spill it; I swear it’ll make you feel better.”

Steve sighed, not believing Nat a bit but knowing better than to think that he could convince her otherwise. “I guess – I’ve just been really content with all of this, and didn’t really think that we could be any happier, given our situations,” he admitted. “So – finding out that it wasn’t enough for Bucky, and that I’d missed that, and everything else that he’s apparently been hiding from me; it’s hard, is all. And it makes me worry about what else I haven’t paid attention to.”

Natasha watched him carefully as he spoke, and continued to stare at him shrewdly after Steve finished talking. He shifted uncomfortably, hating the feeling of being examined – even though he’d been largely truthful, those piercing green eyes seemed to be digging for even more information, things he wasn’t willing to share with anyone other than James Barnes, for now.

“Here’s what I think…” Natasha finally said, throwing back the rest of her vodka like it was nothing and setting her glass down on the table. “And please appreciate that I don’t usually dole out advice lightly – I have always thought it better for people to figure their lives out on their own, but I can’t sit by and watch you two flounder any longer.

“You need to think about what Bucky really means to you, and how you want your relationship to play out, and then the two of you need to sit down and actually talk about it. Because I get the feeling that neither of you have been honest with yourselves or each other about how you feel,” she gave Steve a sharp look as she said it, effectively killing off any attempt that he might have thought of making at an argument, “and while your friendship has been strong enough to withstand it so far, especially while you’ve been so reliant on each other in dealing with our brave new world, the time is going to come when the strain of everything else starts to get to it.”

Steve could only nod silently; she was right, of course, and their history was even more complicated than Natasha could know – but he wasn’t about to admit as much. Hell, it involved things that even Bucky didn’t know yet, and after spending an entire day being sore over what had happened on the quinjet, Steve wasn’t about to turn around and be complete hypocrite.

“Just think on it,” Natasha said again, setting her spoon in her glass and rising from the couch, cutting off Steve’s train of thought. “You’ve both been victims of your situations for long enough – maybe it’s time you finally take advantage of the positive changes the future’s made.”

She was already pulling her coat on by the door before Steve realized that she was leaving, so he grabbed the largely full vodka bottle and capped it as he made his way to the door. “You don’t want
to forget this,” he said lamely, holding it out as he approached.

Natasha smiled kindly at it and shook her head as she paused with her hand on the doorknob. “Keep it – I have plenty at my disposal. It isn’t exactly the best for thinking, if you aren’t used to it, but it does a hell of a job at loosening tongues if you need it.” Before Steve could insist on her taking it, Natasha dropped a quick wink and made her way out the door, leaving him standing like an idiot in the empty entry to the apartment.

He blinked for a second at the door, before turning his attention to the bottle in his hand. He and Bucky had come to an easy agreement early-on after thawing that they wouldn’t keep more than a single bottle of whiskey in the house… they’d both seen far too many vets from the first great war lost to the bottle while they were growing up, and while neither really thought that they were as haunted as the poor guys they’d remembered, they still had enough nightmares and lost enough sleep that they weren’t willing to take the risk. Bucky had been especially adamant about it, but Steve thought that might have had to do with the amount of drinking he’d done immediately after getting out of Kreischberg – he’d been lucky enough to break the habit, and didn’t seem to want to take the risk of falling back into it.

But tonight – Steve thought back on how he’d been feeling since Bucky’s announcement on the quinjet, and since realizing that he and Sam had gone out without even a half-assed attempt at inviting Steve along. He thought of all of the years that he’d berated himself for obsessively sketching out Bucky’s lips, had indulged in unspeakable fantasies revolving around his mouth and his hands, had agreed to go along on insufferable double dates solely for the sake of watching Bucky work a dance floor and being able to pretend that it had been just the two of them out after they’d dropped their girls at home; only to find out that his best friend had liked guys (who were not Steve, of course) all along. He thought of how hypocritical he’d been over the years, and how difficult the conversation that Natasha had rightly insisted they needed to have was going to be.

The last time that Steve had been properly drunk had been February of ’42, when Bucky had left for Basic and Steve had spent the night emptying the pint of bourbon he’d left behind, then the following day being sick out of his mind. It wasn’t as if a single bender would turn him into an alcoholic bum, and considering the serum, he probably wouldn’t even have to suffer through a hangover in the morning. That decided, he took a swig directly from the bottle, grimacing as it burned its way down his throat and making his way to their record collection, picking out a few of his favorite old standards and putting them on the gramophone.

Steve wasn’t totally aware of how much time had passed between the vodka bottle running out, him digging the whiskey bottle out of the cabinet above the kitchen sink and switching records, the whiskey running out as well, the record player clicking off, and the sound of Bucky’s keys finally turning in the door; but judging by how dark the room was he knew it had been hours since Natasha had left. The bitch of it all was that he’d barely even felt a buzz, despite all of the hard liquor he’d apparently knocked back. He looked at the mess that was still sitting on the coffee table – he could rush around to dump it all in the kitchen and go back to hiding in his room, especially considering how long Buck seemed to be pausing in the entryway, but ultimately he knew he couldn’t continue moping as he’d been for the past week.

Finally, Bucky made his way into the living room, frowning slightly as he made eye contact with Steve. “It smells like a distillery in here…”

“Yeah – ’mafraid the whiskey’s gone,” Steve answered apologetically, gesturing to the empty bottle on the right. “I’ll get you another bottle. Turns out I can’t get drunk, though.”

“I coulda told you that…” Bucky responded with a rueful smile, hesitating for a second before
Steve frowned at that, glancing askance at Bucky. Immediately he felt his usual guilt for not having noticed how much trouble his friend had been having during combat, only tonight it was coupled with how shitty a friend he’d been lately – especially for the past week. Hell, based on the way he’d reacted to the news of the date, Steve could hardly blame Bucky for not having told him that he was into guys earlier. He licked his lips, doing his best to sound nonchalant as he asked, “So. How was the date?”

Bucky considered him for a moment out of the side of his eye, his face a bit skeptical before he shrugged and leaned further back into the couch. “It was alright… it actually went pretty good.”

Steve nodded encouragingly, before asking, “You gonna see him again?”

There, that was good, Steve thought, ignoring the way that his throat closed up at the thought. He could be supportive of Bucky having a boyfriend, or whatever they were called – even if the thought made him feel like he was going to die of jealousy.

“Ah – no, I don’t think so.” Bucky answered awkwardly. “We, uh, both agreed that it was fun but didn’t really see things going anywhere.”

Steve swallowed down a relieved sigh, trying not to be glad for the fact that his best friend’s date had been a bust and failing horribly at it. They sat in horribly awkward silence for a long while; neither of them making eye contact until Bucky finally sighed and picked at a rip in his jeans. “Steve, I really am sorry for everything. Can we… is there anything I can do to make things right? Cuz I fuckin’ hate this, right now, and I have no clue where to even start.”

Steve pressed his palms flat against his lap and stared at them in silence, feeling exactly the same but having no idea how to respond. Finally, he spoke up himself. “It’s not the fact that you wanted to go out with a guy, Buck – it was the fact that you never even told me that you liked them in the first place. That’s a pretty big secret to keep for your entire life.”

“I know,” Bucky responded weakly, “And I’ve wanted to tell you at least a million times, but I couldn’t really see things going anywhere.”

Steve swallowed down a relieved sigh, trying not to be glad for the fact that his best friend’s date had been a bust and failing horribly at it. They sat in horribly awkward silence for a long while; neither of them making eye contact until Bucky finally sighed and picked at a rip in his jeans. “Steve, I really am sorry for everything. Can we… is there anything I can do to make things right? Cuz I fuckin’ hate this, right now, and I have no clue where to even start.”

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“I know,” Bucky responded weakly, “And I’ve wanted to tell you at least a million times, but I could never figure out how to do it properly…”

“But you told someone else,” Steve said pointedly. “And then you dropped it on me out of the blue, right in front of Natasha and a quarter of STRIKE.”

“I told Sam cuz I knew he’d keep it to himself if I asked, and I didn’t want to hide it forever, and I admitted it when I did because I didn’t want to keep lying to you, not when you were already so mad at me,” Bucky explained. “I had been planning on tellin’ you eventually, I just… hadn’t worked out how, yet. I didn’t want it to make things weird between us, ruin all of the good things we had.”

“You being queer wouldn’t’ve mattered to me, Bucky – it wouldn’t have changed a damn thing.” Steve sighed, hurt that Bucky could even think that who he wanted to be romantic with would make Steve care about him any less. “You have to know that.” He added, hating the sad smile Bucky had given him in response.

“No, I do – I always did, it just…” Bucky huffed in frustration, pushing himself off of the couch and pacing back and forth along the length of the coffee table in agitation. “I’ve been trying my best to ignore it for so long, cuz it was easier to just pretend none of those feelings existed. Admitting it to
you would’ve made it more real, which would have made it harder to keep the skirt chasin’ act up, and then…” He swallowed thickly, his pacing extending to the length of the room so that he was looking out the window to the street below. “It was bad enough to have to worry about getting force-fed the business end of a baseball bat or bein’ thrown in the slammer – I was a coward and didn’t want that for myself, and the idea of what my parents and the girls would’ve had to face if everyone knew I was a queer…”

He trailed off, tapping his fingers on the glass of the window a couple of times, the metal drumming loudly in the quiet of the room. “But the worst part,” Bucky continued roughly, “the worst part was thinking –” he shook his head roughly, and Steve remained silent on the couch, not wanting to make whatever Bucky was about to say any harder on him.

“People already made such awful assumptions about you, Stevie. If they’d known you’d been living with an invert all that time? Fuck, you’d have been murdered before the day was out. And I… from the first day I realized it, I’d’ve rather killed myself than risked that.”

Steve drew in a long, slow breath, feeling nauseous as he imagined all of the fear thoughts like that must have caused Bucky over the years and came to terms with what he himself had been feeling – hell, had been doing – at the time. As he let the breath out, he remembered Natasha’s advice, and decided that if Bucky was going to be brave enough to spill his guts, he damned well could as well.

“It wouldn’t’ve been your fault if something’d happened to me for that, Buck.” He admitted quietly, “And… I might’ve kinda earned some of the gossip that was goin’ around about me.”

There was a long, horrible beat of silence before Bucky turned to face him, his features difficult to make out with the light of the street behind him. “What’re you saying?” He asked roughly.

“You remember Peter MacCaffrey? I’m pretty sure he was in that evening life-drawing class you came in and took with me…”

Bucky remained still as he thought on it, before murmuring, “The brown-haired Irish kid, right? With the curls?”

“Yeah, well… he was in most of my painting classes, too. And, ah – he had a room of his own in St. George.”

Steve hadn’t thought that Bucky’s eyes could have possibly gone wider, but he was proven wrong as Bucky put together what he was saying. It didn’t look like he’d so much as breathed before he finally responded, “I thought you were hookin’ up with that little redhead in your printing class. Marcie or whatever her name was.”

Steve felt his face flush spectacularly in response, and ducked his head as he nodded. “Er, yeah. I was. Pretty sure she knew about me and Pete all along, too, but – it wasn’t like either of us was lookin’ for anything more than a good time. Her dad had money and had been looking to marry her rich since she’d been born, we just kinda happened in the meantime.”

Bucky blinked at him owlishly. Steve bit his lip and continued on, his heart thudding so horribly in his chest that he wondered if it was possible for his anxiety to have overpowered the serum and brought his irregular beat back. “I’ve done some reading on it, since coming out of the ice – there’s a name for it, now. Bisexual. I, ah – I like some ladies, but I like some fellas, too.”

“You mean to tell me,” Bucky started, his voice perfectly even, “that you damned near killed yourself being reckless because you were mad I hadn’t admitted to having queer feelings, even though you’ve been hanging on to the same damned secret for seventy years?”
Steve bit the inside of his cheek viciously at that, his eyes dropping to the melted remains of the ice cream carton on the table. He could tell that Bucky was pissed by the tone of his voice, and couldn’t exactly blame the guy when he asked it like that – he had been a damned hypocrite. But… maybe he could make up for it by not being a coward any longer. He cleared his throat, trying his best to push down his panic, before answering. “I know, Buck – I know. It wasn’t right for me to be mad, and it sure as hell wasn’t right for me to keep it from you for so long. Er – I guess the jump mighta had to do with some jealousy, too.”

“Jealousy over what?” Bucky asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Steve scrubbed at his hair, psyching himself up. “Listen… I loved Peggy. Still do, truth be told,” he stated, eyes never leaving Bucky’s face. “But… Bucky, you’ve gotta know that I’ve loved you all along, too. The same damned way.”

Halfway through Steve’s admission Bucky’s eyes had dropped to his shoes, and they remained there long after Steve had finished. He could see his lips trembling awkwardly as he stood there, but the only sounds in the room seemed to be the thud of Steve’s nervous heart and the wall clock mocking their obvious discomfort.

“Please say somethin’ Buck,” Steve finally begged, unable to stand the tick of the clock any longer.

“You’ve always been it for me, Stevie…” Bucky finally whispered, his eyes shining brightly despite the low light of the room. “I’ve been settling since 1935 because I thought…” He ran the fingers of his right hand through his hair before scrubbing his face roughly. “Fuck, we’ve wasted so much time.”

“We have,” Steve admitted quietly, pushing himself off of the couch and moving across the room so that he was standing on front of Bucky, taking him gently by the shoulders and giving him a hopeful smile. “But… maybe we can try to make up for it?”

Bucky remained still for a moment, glancing at Steve’s hands where they still rested on him before turning his gaze to Steve’s and smiling gently. “Yeah,” he finally murmured, “yeah… I’d like that.” His grin grew wider as he finished saying it, then faded as he glanced at the clock with a sigh. “But – I got a call earlier this evening; I’ve got a solo mission tomorrow that they’re sending me on, extraction at 04:30.”

Steve glanced over his shoulder, disappointment setting in as he realized that it was already well-past midnight. So much for getting started.

Bucky pulled away from him, but took his hands as he did, squeezing them gently between them. “As soon as I’m back, though – we’ll talk about this further, figure out how to set it right, okay?”

“Yeah, alright.” Steve agreed easily, hating the fact that they were going to delay… whatever this was about to be even further, but glad to have it out in the open.

Bucky gave him one last smile, hesitating awkwardly for a few seconds before turning and making his way back towards his room. Steve tried not to think too much on the sense of disappointment he felt watching Bucky’s retreating back, chalkling it up to the fact that they were going to be separated again after finally feeling like they were getting their shit together. “G’night, Stevie,” Bucky called quietly from the end of the hall.

“Night, Buck.” Steve answered, before adding, “Be safe, alright?”

“Yeah – same, Punk.” Bucky chuckled, closing the door behind him before Steve could say
anything further.

He shook his head fondly, muttering “Jerk,” on reflex, before picking up the living room and getting ready for bed, grinning like an idiot the entire time.

Chapter End Notes

YAY, THEY'RE FINALLY MAKING PROGRESS.

Here's hoping nothing bad happens to throw a wrench in things. *maniacal villain laughter*
Chapter Summary

Steve learns some uncomfortable truths about the direction of the agency that he works for, then spends the day trying to cope with that knowledge and deciding whether or not to stay on with SHIELD.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve woke the next morning shortly before his 06:00 alarm but remained in bed until it went off, listening to the sounds of Dupont Circle beginning to bustle with the usual morning traffic and trying to ignore his disappointment at the complete lack of sound coming from the room next to his. When he finally made his way into the kitchen, he was pleasantly surprised to find a note resting on the counter in the kitchen.

Op should be <72 hrs, will message when en route back.

M: Take care, B

Steve couldn’t help smiling as he read it – three days away stunk, for sure, but he had a good feeling he knew what Bucky had been starting to write when he signed off, and he let that knowledge carry him through his morning run, making the fact that he was running solo around the Mall a bit more bearable.

After showering and getting dressed, Steve made his way to Arlington. He felt pretty good about having made peace with both Bucky and Natasha regarding the mess that had happened during the Lemurian Star mission, but as the Triskelion came into view he felt his anger being renewed, this time directed towards the person who could actually be held responsible for all of the damned secrecy in the first place. Without really meaning to, he’d worked himself into a real tizzy by the time he had finally arrived at the door of Nick Fury’s office.

“You just don’t know how to keep yourself from lying, do you?” Steve asked testily, stalking into the room without waiting for an invite. He’d known that the director would want to debrief in person eventually, and he was set on making sure that there was no question how he’d felt about the duality of the op.

“I didn’t lie,” Fury sighed, turning in his desk chair so that he was facing Steve with an unimpressed look. “Agent Romanoff had a different mission than yours.”

“Which you didn’t feel obliged to tell me,” Steve complained.

“I’m not obliged to do anything.” Fury retorted, his frown growing as Steve came to a stop directly in front of his desk.

“Those hostages could have died.”

Fury rolled his eyes before huffing, “I sent the two greatest soldiers in history to make sure that didn’t happen.”
“Soldiers trust each other,” Steve grumbled, “that’s what makes an army, not a bunch of guys running around shooting guns.”

“Last time I trusted someone I lost an eye,” Fury growled right back, pushing himself to standing and leaning over the desk towards Steve with a glare. They continued staring each other down for a beat, before Fury sighed and continued. “Look, I didn’t want you doing anything you were uncomfortable with – Agent Romanoff is comfortable with anything.”

“I can’t lead missions when the people that I’m leading have missions of their own.” Steve insisted, tapping his finger against Fury’s desk for emphasis.

“It’s called compartmentalization,” Fury stated slowly, as if Steve were stupid. “No one spills the secrets because no one knows them all.”

Steve didn’t bother to hide his contempt, sneering, “Except you, right?”

Fury recoiled a fraction before shaking his head. “You’re wrong about me, Rogers. I do share. I’m nice like that.”

Steve gave him a skeptical look, but followed after Fury as he made his way out of the room, leading them wordlessly to the main set of elevators in the hallway and gave the verbal command to take them to the “Insight Bay.” The security system on the elevator immediately denied Steve’s access on account of his security clearance being too low, but Fury gave a verbal override.

He then spent the elevator ride relaying the story of his grandfather who’d worked as an elevator operator – as they progressed to subterranean levels, the entire situation felt progressively more ominous, but Steve did his best to keep his face and his posture neutral. Finally, the view out of the elevator shaft opened up again, and Steve glanced over his shoulder, doing a double-take when the hull of an enormous helicarrier came into view. “Yeah,” Fury said smugly, “they’re a little bigger than a twenty-two…”

Steve could only stare as they continued toward the end of the elevator shaft. There were three ships contained in the huge underground hangar, and each looked to be packed with an incredible number of guns. In all of his years of fighting, Steve was sure he’d never seen anything like it – his brain struggled to wrap itself over the number of casualties even one of the ships would be capable of. “I’m required to tell you this is all impossibly classified – I’m not delusional enough to think that you’ll actually keep it from Sergeant Barnes, but outside of him both of our heads will be on a stake if you speak a word of this.”

“What the hell is this?” Steve asked tightly.

“This is Project Insight,” Fury explained as the elevator door opened and they stepped out onto the floor of the hangar. “Three next-generation helicarriers synced to a network of targeting satellites.”

“Launched by the Lemurian Star…” Steve filled in, the mission making more sense as they progressed through the work zone.

“Once we get them in the air, they’ll never need to come down.” Fury responded with a nod. “Continuous suborbital flight courtesy of our new repulsor engines. Their new long-range guns can eliminate a thousand hostiles a minute, and the satellites can read a terrorist’s DNA before he even steps out of his spider hole.” He paused on an observation deck overlooking the main hull of one of the ships. “These are going to neutralize a lot of threats before they can even attack.”

“I thought the punishment is supposed to come after the crime,” Steve retorted, unable to take his
eyes off the bay of guns pointing ominously at them.

“We can’t afford to wait that long,” Fury countered seriously. “After New York, I convinced the World Security Council to undergo a quantum surge in weapons development. For once, we’re way ahead of the curve.”

Steve scoffed, watching as a quinjet was loaded onto the deck of one of the adjacent helicarriers. “By holding a gun to everyone’s head and calling it protection.”

“Don’t act like the Greatest Generation didn’t do some nasty stuff as well, Rogers,” Fury argued testily. “Besides giving us the ability for preemptive strikes, this’ll get both you and Barnes away from the dirty missions you’re both so adamantly against.”

Steve finally turned to face Fury, incensed with the idea that he’d dare think that they were expected to appreciate so horrific a project. “Yeah, we’ve spent years making compromises, doing things that have kept us up at night… but we did it so the world could be free,” Steve countered, gesturing towards the ship behind him. “This isn’t freedom, Fury, this is fear.”

“SHIELD takes the world as it is, not as we’d like it to be,” Fury hissed, “and it’s getting damn near past time for you to get with that program, Cap. Barnes has figured as much out, at least…”

“Bucky wouldn’t stand for something like this,” Steve growled back, seething that Fury would even try to imply as much, “and don’t hold your breath for me to, either.” That said, he turned and made his way back to the elevator bay, not bothering to wait for Fury to dismiss him. He made his way directly to the nearest ready room and changed back into his civvies, badly needing to spend the day away from SHIELD.

Steve was still bothered by the entire Insight mess as he made his way out of the Triskelion, and wished like hell that there was someone that he could actually talk to, without being looked at like he was paranoid or simple. Bucky would still probably be in transit to wherever his mission was, but Steve didn’t want to risk giving his position away by trying to contact his cell – in all likelihood, he would have it turned off until the op was completed, anyway.

Unfortunately, he didn’t exactly have anyone else he could imagine would understand his feelings. Without really thinking, he found himself in Northwest DC, heading towards Peggy’s nursing home. He couldn’t talk to her about specifics, of course, but hoped that a visit would at least put him in a better mood in the meantime.

As always, her nursing staff was more than happy to let Steve into Peggy’s room, insisting that she’d been having a great week and that she’d be glad to see him. All the same, Steve entered her room with his usual hesitance, his chest feeling tight when she turned to him with her familiar, gorgeous smile.

“Steve,” she said brightly, gesturing to his usual chair by his bed, “What a wonderful surprise – I wasn’t expecting you until later in the week.”

“Well, I had an afternoon free,” he responded with a forced grin, settling into his chair and taking her thin hand gently, “and couldn’t think of a better way of spending it, as long as you didn’t mind putting up with me for a while.”

Peggy scoffed at him, shaking her head as she did. “You know that I’m always glad to see you, Steve – even when you’re busy having a mope.”

“I’m not moping!” Steve responded indignantly, still smiling as he said it and forcibly shutting down
all of his residual feelings from the ride over, when he’d been doing exactly that.

“Maybe not,” Peggy chuckled, “but you’ve clearly got a bee in your bonnet today. Something’s bothering you more than your usual.” He opened his mouth to defend himself, but she shook her head and cut him off, “Don’t try to deny it, darling – my mind may be going, but it will be a long while before I’m unable to read your moods, Steve Rogers.”

“Alright, fine,” Steve huffed, rubbing her knuckles gently with his thumb, “you win. It’s been – a tough week, I suppose… you’re too damned perceptive, Pegs.”

“And you’re overly-dramatic, you always have been.” She responded shrewdly.

Steve laughed at that, unable to deny the accusation, before chewing his lip and considering his answer. “Things have been rough with work, lately, and…” he hesitated, debating whether it was appropriate to tell Peggy or not before deciding he owed her the truth. “And Bucky and I had a trying conversation the other night. I guess it’s still weighing on my mind.”

While it had felt marginally better to say as much out loud, Steve immediately regretted it; a horrible part of his mind hoped that Peggy had forgotten that he worked for SHIELD now in the first place, not because he wished more of her memories gone but so that she wouldn’t feel responsible for all of the shit in the first place.

“Oh?” She asked with a grin, “Did the both of you nitwits finally get up the nerve to talk about your feelings?”

Steve felt his face flush horrifically at her teasing; it was weird enough to be admitting to the woman that he loved that he was actually making progress with the man he’d loved his whole life, but to have Peggy implied that she’d expected as much all along was a bit much for Steve to handle. “I like that you decide to focus on my love life instead of my job of protecting the free world,” he teased back.

“Well, the two of you did save the world, Steve; you deserve all of the happiness you can get.” Peggy responded warmly, before her face dropped a bit. “You can hardly be expected to keep it up forever, especially considering how badly the rest of us mucked it up while you were gone.”

“No,” Steve murmured, “no, you didn’t.” It was a topic that had been coming up increasingly frequently between the two of them, which Steve hated – the idea that Peggy had any concerns over her legacy, as incredible of a woman as she was, killed him. “Knowing that you founded SHIELD is a big part of what keeps me putting up with them. Both of us, we want to continue that legacy, make sure it remains everything that you and Howard intended it to be.”

“The world has changed, Steve.” Peggy countered softly. “None of us can go back, we can only do our best – and sometimes the best we can do is to start over. I’m glad that Bucky finally listened…” Her eyes bulged slightly as her sentence was cut off by a choking cough, one that she didn’t seem able to shake. Steve turned to the water jug on her bedside table on instinct, pouring a small glass out and turning to hold it for her as needed. As he settled next to the bed Peggy seemed to overcome the coughing fit herself, blinking at him as her expression morphed into one of shock. “Steve?” She asked breathlessly, as if it was the first time she’d seen him.

“Yeah Peg, it’s me.” He responded, forcing himself to maintain his smile – this was becoming all-too-familiar a scene during their visits, but never hurt him any less.

“You’re alive,” she sobbed, “oh… it’s been so, so long.”
“Well I couldn’t leave my best girl, not when I still owed her a date,” he responded gently, the same way he did every time that she lost their conversation like this.

As usual, she cried for a while, clearly having no recollection of the fact Steve had been visiting her on at least a weekly basis for the better part of a year and a half by now. She asked about Bucky, insisted that she needed to speak to him as soon as possible (Steve still hadn’t figured out what she had told Buck the first time they’d spoken since coming out of the ice; one day he would finally get the nerve to ask him what it was that weighed so heavily on Peggy’s mind). Finally, once she had calmed down enough that she’d let him go, Steve said his goodbyes and promised that he would see her again soon, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead and balling his hands into as tight of fists as possible, fighting like hell to keep himself together as he exited the nursing home.

He should have known better than to have thought that the visit wouldn’t upset him even further. While Steve still thanked God for the fact that he could at least see Peggy on a regular basis, watching someone he loved so dearly deteriorating the way that she was was also becoming a terrible curse. Not that he’d dare admit as much to anyone.

He remained still on his bike for at least a minute, torn by what to do next. There was no reason to show his face at SHIELD again, especially given what it would do to his already poor mood, and if he went home now it was unlikely that he would leave his bed until he was either called in on a mission or Bucky returned and forced him out… neither were options that he particularly wanted to visit. He could wander one of the museums in town for a while, or go for another run, but both sounded miserable to go about alone.

He hated how much he wished that Bucky was here with him.

Finally, it occurred to Steve that there was still someone around town that might be able to give him some peace of mind, without being related to SHIELD and setting him off again. He still remembered the VA therapy schedule from all of the times Bucky had left it on the refrigerator door in the kitchen, a subtle reminder of what he was doing to make himself better and a reminder that Steve was always more than welcome to join. The group meeting itself would be almost over – but that fit his needs even better. With a decisive nod, Steve finally pulled out of the parking lot of the nursing home, making his way back into the city and heading directly for the VA offices downtown.

He followed the signs indicating the direction of the PTSD meeting room, standing in the doorway as he listened to a group of young veterans talking about the struggles that they were having in their day-to-day lives while Sam stood at a podium in the front, providing encouragement and tips for how to handle intrusive memories and other products of trauma that sounded far too commonplace for Steve’s liking. He found himself listening in awe to the things that the participants were willing to admit to, and the complete lack of judgment that the rest of the group seemed to show. He had to wonder how much Bucky tended to say during the groups that he attended – was he brave enough to share his nightmares, too? Or did he keep them to himself, as full of shame over the idea of admitting his struggles as Steve was?

He was still wondering as much when the group finally wrapped up, and remained standing in the back of the room, keeping his head down as the group wandered out and sincerely hoping that no one would notice him or call attention to his presence. Thankfully, he was left alone, until the last vet had finally cleared out and Sam made his way towards him with an open smile.

“That was some pretty heavy stuff,” Steve said conversationally, nodding towards the podium where Sam had been standing for most of the meeting.

“Yeah, well – we all have our demons. Luckily, most of us can benefit from talking them out, learning how to lean on each other to overcome them. Did Barnes finally talk you into joining us?”
He asked evenly, in that calm, patient tone that somehow didn’t manage to get on Steve’s nerves, despite how tired he was of being needled about going to therapy.

“No,” Steve responded firmly, although he made sure to smile all the same. “No, I still don’t think it’s quite for me. I just wanted to say thanks, actually, for all that you’ve done for Bucky. And me, I guess – I didn’t realize how badly we needed another friend, especially one out of the game.”

Sam watched Steve from the corner of his eye as he organized a stack of brochures on a table next to the meeting room door, grinning all the while. “It’s no problem, man; that’s what I’m here for, to help anyone coming back from the shit that needs it.” He finally finished with his organization, quirking his eyebrow at Steve as he stood up straight again. “Even when they are vintage pains in the ass.”

Steve gasped dramatically, teasingly muttering, “Well I never,” before laughing along with Sam. It was so, so refreshing to have someone around who didn’t take him too seriously, and who appreciated the fact that he could be a wiseass from time to time. As their laughter died out, Steve remembered the awkwardness of the past week, and Sam’s role in how Steve had felt about Bucky prior to their talk. “Ah… sorry for the fact that you were stuck in the middle of the dancing – thing, by the way.” He added quietly, wondering if Sam had felt half as uncomfortable about it as Steve had.

“It’s alright,” Sam responded evenly, crossing his arms as he leaned back against the wall. “As long as things are cool with you and Bucky, anyway – I haven’t heard from him in a couple of days.”

“Yes,” Steve responded automatically, “Yeah… we’re okay. Had a bit of a rough spot, but we talked some things out,” he added uncomfortably, feeling his cheeks heat as he said it. Obviously Sam must know how Bucky felt about other guys, at least, as he presumably saw him dancing with them (Steve stamped down the tendril of jealousy that he felt in his belly while the thought crossed his mind) – but that didn’t mean that he had any idea how they felt about each other. Even as much as he trusted Sam, Steve wasn’t sure he was ready for anyone else to know that much, just yet. “He’s, uh, on a mission right now – he’ll probably be out of touch for a few more days.”

Sam watched Steve carefully, with a look so similar to the one that Natasha often fixed him with that it made Steve even more uncomfortable. Whatever he saw must have passed his concerns, though, because it quickly faded into another smile. “It’s great that you guys talked, then – I’m glad to hear it. I think… Bucky’s been pretty hung up on, ah, that secret for a while.”

“Yeah, I think so, too.” Steve mumbled, shoving his hands in his pockets and rocking on his heels, trying desperately to think of something that he could change the subject to. “Anyway, all of this,” he said vaguely, gesturing to the halls of the VA, “you like it? Being out? Of the service, I mean”

Sam nodded thoughtfully, thankfully picking up on Steve’s discomfort and meaning. “I mean, the number of people giving me orders is down to about… zero, so. Yeah.” He chuckled, before nodding at Steve. “Why? You thinking of getting out, too?”

“No,” Steve responded automatically, before his brain reminded him of how much he’d hated what he had learned of SHILEDs plans that morning, how much even Peggy was pushing for him to put his energy into trying to build a real life, and how reluctant Bucky had been to have joined up with them in the first place. “Maybe,” he corrected himself, before shrugging and sighing. “I dunno. I have no idea what else I’d do.”

Sam’s face looked so hopeful when he looked at it that Steve had to force himself to maintain eye-contact instead of looking away. He had the terrible feeling that Sam knew something that he didn’t, something that would make the decision considerably easier if he could just get the nerve to ask him.
“Ultimate fighting?” Sam asked teasingly, and Steve couldn’t help rolling his eyes and laughing. “Just one awesome suggestion off the top of my head.

“Seriously, though – you could do anything that you want to, dude. Whatever makes you happy.”

Steve sighed, wishing he had any clue as to what that was. Hell, there was part of him that wasn’t even sure he knew what happiness was any more. They chatted idly for a few more minutes, Sam recommending that they head out for drinks or something, especially while Bucky was out of town. Much as Steve liked the idea of spending more time with Sam, he didn’t think that he was up for as much at the moment, and ended up begging off with a rain-check.

Steve stopped at his and Bucky’s usual Chinese restaurant on the way home, hungry for dinner but not wanting to spoil his mood even further by cooking for just himself and eating in their lonely apartment. Once he’d finished and paid for his meal it was already dark out, and Steve couldn’t think of anything else to occupy his evening with, so finally forced himself to point his bike in the direction of Dupont Circle, figuring a decent night’s sleep wouldn’t do him any harm.

After securing the Harley in its usual spot on the curb, Steve made his way up the stairs two at a time, perfectly ready to throw a movie on in the apartment and try to take his mind off of the day’s events. He slowed down when the door adjacent to their apartment opened, smiling as the nurse who lived next door – Kate, he reminded himself – made her way into the hallway with a basket of laundry tucked under her arm and her cell phone pressed against her opposite ear.

She smiled widely when they made eye contact, excusing herself from her phone conversation and hanging it up apologetically. “Sorry, it’s my aunt – she’s kind of an insomniac.”

Steve shook his head, gesturing that it was no problem with a kind smile, before pointing to her laundry basket. “If you want, you can use the machine in our apartment tonight. You won’t have to haul it all downstairs, and I’m sure it’s cheaper than the machines in the basement.”

“Oh?” Kate asked her smiling turning coy. “And what would it cost?”

Steve felt his smile drop a bit, already trying to think of how to verbally backpedal – he hadn’t intended to flirt with her, and certainly didn’t want it to be reciprocated. Maybe, maybe he would have considered a week prior, but with what was going on with Bucky… “Ah – nothing, actually.” He responded kindly, shrugging awkwardly as he did. “Just; thought I’d offer. Trying to be friendly, is all.”

Thankfully, her smile toned itself down a bit, the message apparently received. “Well, much as I appreciate it,” she responded, “I just finished a rotation in the infectious disease ward, so you probably don’t want my scrubs in your machine.”

“Got it,” he responded with a chuckle, holding his hands up jokingly. “I’ll keep my distance, then.”

Kate laughed as well, making her way towards the stairwell as Steve turned to dig his keys out of his jacket pocket. “Oh, um,” she added hesitantly, “it’s no big deal, but I think your – uh – roommate left the stereo on. I haven’t heard anyone inside for the past few hours but the music has been playing all evening.”

Steve schooled his features to hide the dread he felt at her words, especially as he listened more closely and definitely heard the familiar sounds of Bing Crosby playing on the gramophone in the living room. “Sorry about that,” he responded pleasantly, “I’ll remind him to be more careful.”

“No worries,” she answered, before making her way down the stairs with a soft, “Good night!”
Steve waited until after he’d heard her make her way down the stairs, unzipping his shield from its carry-case and exiting the building, as well. There was no way that Bucky was home so early, and he hadn’t had any music on all day – meaning someone must have broken into the apartment in their absence. He wasn’t about to walk through the door and directly into a trap.

He made his way outside of the building, and then rounded it to the side of their apartment that was hidden from Connecticut Ave. Scaling the building to the fourth floor wasn’t a problem, and the window was easy enough to jimmy, knowing the specifications of the locks Bucky had put on the windows in the first place. Once it was open Steve climbed into the window as quietly as possible. The gramophone was blaring in the living room, Bing Crosby’s sad crooning about unrequited love filling the apartment the same as it had twenty four hours prior when Steve had been drowning his sorrows about Bucky’s date. Had the situation not been so serious, Steve might have paused in embarrassment when he realized just how melodramatic his musical choice had been, especially given the way the night had ultimately ended.

He inched his way around the corner of the kitchen – nothing looked out of place from when he’d left that morning, but Steve could sense another presence still in the front room, putting him even more on the defensive. He cautiously made his way through the hallway, slumping out of his position and glaring into the armchair tucked away on the opposite side of the room where Nick Fury was slouched and watching him in silence. Steve glared through the dark of the room, irritation taking over his previous dread. “I don’t remember giving you a key,” he grumbled.

“You really think I’d need one?” Fury scoffed, slumping further in the chair. “My wife kicked me out. Where’s Barnes?”

“I thought you’d be able to tell me, he left for a solo op this morning.” Steve countered, flipping the light switch beside him so that he could see the man properly. He halted in shock when he registered the sight in front of him – Fury looked awful, like he’d been beat to hell before breaking into Steve’s apartment. Even at a quick glance, he could make out multiple facial injuries on the older man, and judging by the way he was holding his right arm against his chest Steve was willing to bet money that it was broken. He opened his mouth to ask what the hell had happened, but Fury quickly moved his left index finger to his lips.

“Not on my orders,” he responded softly, as he slowly reached above him and flipped the light off manually. Once the room was dark again, he typed a quick message into his phone, before turning it so that Steve could read.

EARS EVERYWHERE

“T’m sorry to have to do this,” Fury continued in a normal tone of voice, turning the phone back to himself and typing a new message, “but I have no place else to crash.”

SHIELD COMPROMISED

“Who else knows about your wife?” He asked, his voice surprisingly even for the panic that he felt quickly rising. If Fury hadn’t sent Bucky out, and had no idea that he was gone while there was apparently a mole in the organization targeting them…

YOU AND ME

“Got it. So that’s what we are now? Friends?” Steve asked.
“That’s what I was hoping.” Fury responded as pleasantly as Steve figured he was capable of.

Steve wasn’t entirely sure of what happened next, but before he could respond there were three impossibly loud gunshots, while brick and plaster imploded into the room from shells that had apparently gone through the external wall. Fury was falling forward towards him, blood already blooming from enormous exit wounds that had formed in his chest. Steve acted on instinct, dragging him into the kitchen so that they were out of view of any of the windows on that side of the building.

As soon as they were in a safe position, Fury was reaching for him, waving the same jump drive that Steve had remembered Natasha having onboard the Lemurian Star. “Don’t… trust… anyone.” Fury gasped, before his eyes rolled back in his head and he seized up. Steve took the stick automatically, staring at it as his brain tried to figure out what the hell to do, still struggling to process the shock of the previous minute.

Before Steve could even think of reaching for his cell phone to call for help, the front door was kicked in. “Captain Rogers?” A female voice called out. A second later, Kate rounded the corner, a high-powered tactical sidearm raised in defensive position.

“Kate?” He asked incredulously, wondering if the night could possibly get any more bizarre.

“I’m Agent Thirteen, SHIELD special services, I’ve been assigned as protection detail for you and Sergeant Barnes,” she responded evenly, all traces of the friendly nurse next door act gone as she swept the living room for threats.

“On whose order?” Steve asked with a frown.

Kate – Agent Thirteen – finally rounded the corner completely, her face falling as she caught sight of Fury’s prone body on the floor. “His.” She responded, before kneeling next to him and checking his vitals while radioing SHIELD for help.

Steve searched the windows as he half-listened to the conversation on the walkie, catching a dark figure moving on the roof opposite at the same time as the voice on the other end of the com asked for a visual on the shooter. “Tell them I’m in pursuit,” Steve stated coldly, gripping his shield tighter as he sprinted for the window, gaining enough speed that he’d be able to clear the street separating them and crash through one of the windows on the floor below where he’d spotted the movement.

Thankfully it was an office building he’d landed in, meaning the entire floor was empty of civilians allowing Steve to gain full speed as he sprinted through the corridors, catching glimpses of the shooter on the roof above him through the building’s windows. Whoever it was seemed to be running impossibly fast – Steve could barely catch glimpses of him, even though he was running hard enough to crash through doors and dent walls when he ran into them in his haste.

The layout of the neighborhood was running through his mind, and he knew that both buildings backed up to one final apartment complex overlooking Dupont Circle, which was a story shorter than the offices Steve had been hauling ass through. The shooter would have no choice but to land on the same roof, allowing Steve to neutralize him with the shield as soon as he busted out the upcoming window. He lowered his shoulder so that the shield would take the force of the impact, rolling on the concrete of the roof as he landed then springing up, his shield tucked against his body so that he could fling it with all of his might.

But the roof was completely empty. Steve glanced over his shoulder, wondering if he’d overestimated the shooter’s speed – no one was on the roof of either of the buildings behind him. With a frown, he ran to the edge of the roof he’d landed on, looking out over the side of the building and to where Dupont opened up below. There wasn’t a single suspicious person in sight – only a
few bums sitting by the light of the Metro station, and ambulances wailing their way down Connecticut Ave.

Where the hell had the shooter ended up? He continued puzzling over it, his mind racing as his SHIELD phone began ringing in his pocket.

“This is Rogers…” he panted into the receiver after sliding it open. “I’ve lost visual on the shooter. What’s the director’s status?”

“He just left via ambulance, they’re taking him to GW Hospital in Foggy Bottom.” Hill’s voice answered. Steve hadn’t even known that she was in DC – last he’d heard she was still in charge of the New York SHIELD office.

Without waiting for further instruction, he hung up the phone and ran back into the building, making his way down the stairs at break-neck speed then taking off in the direction of the hospital on foot – it would only be an eighteen block run, and at this time of night, no one would be around to gawk at his speed; running made as much sense as taking his bike. On instinct, he punched in the number of another SHIELD phone as he sprinted down New Hampshire Ave. It was a long shot, he knew, but he had to at least try to get in touch with Bucky.

After four rings the phone finally picked up, but of course it was the voicemail recording. “This is Barnes, SHIELD special forces. I’m unavailable at the moment; either leave a message or contact Alpha level SHIELD command for further information.”

Although Steve hadn’t exactly been expecting an answer, he cursed under his breath, his unease over the entire situation growing as he continued running. On a whim, he grabbed his StarkPhone from his back pocket, hitting the number one on speed dial. This time, the voicemail picked up immediately. “Hey, you’ve reached Bucky – I can’t take your call right now, so leave one and I’ll call you back as soon as I can.”

He really shouldn’t have expected anything different after getting no answer on his mission phone, but for some reason the automatic voicemail on Bucky’s personal phone just made Steve even more uneasy. He took a deep breath as the tone sounded, trying to school his voice to be as even as normal… God knew where Bucky was at the moment, and Steve didn’t want to alarm him without good reason. “Hey Buck, it’s Steve – call me back as soon as you get this, don’t use the SHIELD phones. Some shit’s hit the fan, and I just… I want to know you’re alright.”

He hit the ‘End’ button on his phone screen, before he could say anything further. While he desperately wanted to make sure that Bucky knew what was going on, he didn’t want to worry him too much, either, especially not if he was in the middle of a dangerous mission. Steve looked across the street, taking in the giant façade of George Washington Hospital, before stowing both cell phones in his pocket and running inside to find out what he could about Fury’s condition.

To his surprise, the staff took him directly to the operating room floor, allowing Steve into a small observation room adjacent to the trauma bay that Nick had apparently just been wheeled into. Maria Hill was already standing at the window, stone-faced and silent as she watched the medical team rush around trying to stabilize the director’s injuries. Steve took his place beside her, crossing his arms and watching as well. Part of him felt guilty for how angry he’d been at Fury earlier in the day – while Steve might have disagreed with his methods of running SHIELD, he did know the man well enough to be sure that he only had the best interests of those people that he served in mind. He certainly didn’t deserve to have been injured the way he had, or to be laid out on an operating room table, apparently fighting for his life.

At some point during the evening Natasha came running into the observation room as well, looking
more shaken than Steve could have imagined possible. At least an hour passed of the three of them standing in silence, watching helplessly as doctors began cutting into Fury’s chest, trying to fish out bullets and stop the bleeding his horrific wounds had caused.

“What do we know about the shooter?” Natasha finally asked tonelessly, her eyes locked on the doctors working on the other side of the glass.

Steve had to clear his throat a couple of times, emotion and lack of use having done a number on his voice. “Shots were fired through the outer wall, the shooter must have extrapolated Fury’s position based on my eyeline, put three rounds in his chest without direct visual,” he responded quietly. As he said it, the enormity of the situation really began to set in; there was no way that someone should be able to pull off a hit like that, not without being an impossibly skilled sniper. “And he’s probably enhanced,” he added as an afterthought. “He’s fast and nimble – I never was able to catch up with him… he had a head start, but I was running as fast as I could, I should have been able to intercept him.”

“You know it’s a man, then?” Natasha asked suspiciously.

Steve hesitated – having known Peggy and Natasha, he should have been more cognizant of the fact that a lady was just as capable of taking someone out as a man was. “I guess not,” he answered sheepishly, “never really got a good look at them, just a quick glance on the roof and then again during the chase. I thought I’d be able to intercept but whoever it was on an adjacent roof but they were long gone when I made it there.”

“So you didn’t notice any physical characteristics at all?”

Steve racked his mind, trying to remember anything other than the adrenaline and the surprise that the person he was pursuing was actually faster than him. “Dark clothing and a hood,” he finally said, hating how unhelpful it sounded. “Was probably shorter than me, but it was hard to tell with the perspective.”

Natasha was quiet for a long time, leaning against the windowsill that looked into the operating suite before asking, “What do we know about the bullets?”

“Three slugs,” Hill answered. “No rifling, completely untraceable.”

“Soviet made?”

“Looks that way,” Hill nodded, glancing in Nat’s direction, “we’re still waiting on the full report from ballistics.”

“Why,” Steve asked, glancing at the red head as well, “you have an idea who the shooter is?”

“There are only a handful of people in the world who could have made that shot, Steve.” Natasha responded evasively.

“And you think you know who it was…” he pestered. Now was definitely not the time for Romanoff to be keeping shit to herself.

“I don’t make assumptions until I have all of the necessary data,” she responded flatly. “In the world of espionage, that’s the kind of habit that gets you killed.”

There was a flurry of motion on the other side of the window, as well as the dissonant sounds of the machines that Fury was hooked up to going nuts. Steve didn’t need to have any modern medical experience to know that none of it was a good sign.
“Come on,” Natasha whispered next to him, her face going pale. “Don’t do this to me, Nick…”

Despite her pleading, it was only a couple more minutes before the doctors stepped away from the table, shaking their heads. Steve felt numb as the nurses quit squeezing the bag that was attached to the tube down Fury’s throat – they were giving up. Nick Fury was dead.

Natasha groaned horribly next to him, before storming out of the room. Steve frowned and followed after her; he had no idea what he could say that would be able to make her any less upset, but it felt wrong to leave her on her own… and besides, he still had the feeling that she had a good idea as to who the shooter had been. There was nothing to do for Fury now, but they could at least take his killer down, before they were able to do any further damage.

“Natasha…” he started as they made their way into the hallway.

She turned on Steve with a thunderous frown. “What the hell was Fury doing in your apartment, Rogers?”

The question stopped him in his tracks – Fury had specifically told him, with his last words, apparently, not to trust anyone in SHIELD. And while he was almost positive that the shooter couldn’t have been Natasha, it didn’t mean that he could be certain she had nothing to do with what was going on. He ended up shrugging, probably stupidly, because he truly couldn’t come up with a better response.

“You’re a terrible liar,” she sneered, shaking her head and turning to leave.

He wanted to call out to her again, to find somewhere that he could hound her about the shooter, but was interrupted by a familiar voice calling his name. Steve turned to it, to find Rumlow standing at the opposite end of the hall. “You’re needed at SHIELD, sir. Secretary Pierce called for you himself.”

“Alright, just a minute,” Steve answered dismissively, getting ready to pursue Natasha one final time.

“He wanted to see you now.” Rumlow barked, any deference to Steve’s rank notably absent.

Steve glared at him, both for the cheek and for the fact that he knew there was no way that he could catch up to Natasha now. “Alright,” he responded, noting how heavily armed the STRIKE team was and not wanting to create any further scenes, especially in a hospital. As he shoved his hands in his jacket pockets, though, he felt the jump drive that Fury had left in his possession. He wasn’t about to walk into the Triskelion with it – undoubtedly there would be more suspicion over the fact that Fury had been killed in his presence, and Steve wasn’t going to risk the information falling into the wrong hands. “Uh, just give me a second, I’ll be right out.”

Rumlow gave him a hard, indecipherable look, but eventually nodded and turned away. Steve exhaled in relief, noticing the vending machine next to him was in the process of being restocked. It wasn’t the best hiding place that he could think of, but it would do in a pinch. He shoved the memory stick behind a row of bubblegum packets, looked around to make sure that no one had saw him, then made his way in the direction that Rumlow had left, stealing himself to face whatever music SHIELD had in store for him.

Chapter End Notes
I'm so sorry.

In case you didn't catch the link, this was the song I had pictured playing on the record player when Steve found Fury in their apartment. I've always thought that the musical choice for that scene in the movie was brilliant, giving how it paralleled Steve and Bucky's relationship at the time, so I was trying to come up with a song that would do similar in this 'verse. Fun fact: "Whose Dream Are You" was actually the B-side recording for the original single of Bing Crosby's version of "It's Been a Long, Long Time" - when I found that out, I knew I had to use it.

As always, thanks so much for reading and leaving feedback! And I hope that you all have (or have had) a Happy New Year ♥
Chapter Summary

Steve has to take on some of his most challenging opponents and more of SHIELD's secrets are revealed, but he also gains new appreciation for how badass his friends are.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rumlow and half of STRIKE team Alpha escorted Steve back to the Triskelion, allowing him to change out of his day-old, blood-stained clothes but only under supervision in the locker room where his uniform was stored. They even rode the elevator with him to Pierce’s floor – while no one explicitly said at any point that he was under suspicion for something, the message was loud and clear, and Steve was already on the defensive as he made his way down the hall to the Defense Secretary’s office.

His bad mood only got worse when he saw a familiar woman standing with Pierce as he approached. Kate – or whatever her actual name was – turned toward him with a sheepish look as she made her way towards the elevator, offering a brief, “Captain,” in passing.

“Neighbor,” Steve scowled in return, focusing solely on Pierce as he passed her by.

“Ah, Captain – I’m Alexander Pierce,” the man said with an oily-looking smile, extending his hand amicably. “Afraid I haven’t had the pleasure of introducing myself in person just yet.”

“Sir, it’s an honor,” Steve responded, his suspicions still elevated but trying to act as normal as possible, lest he give the man reason to go on the defensive as well.

“The honor’s mine, Captain – my father served in the hundred and first. I don’t know if Sergeant Barnes has had the chance to tell you as much, but the two of you saved his life in Normandy.” The random mention of Bucky’s name set off spikes of panic for Steve, although he supposed that it made sense that they had worked together – Steve was fully aware that most of Bucky’s solo operations involved stake-outs and hits for SHIELD, and he wasn’t naïve enough to pretend that the majority wouldn’t be politically motivated. It made perfect sense that a politician might be more interested in using him than someone like Fury, but the knowledge made Steve uneasy all the same.

He listened quietly as Pierce told the story of how he’d gotten to know Nick Fury, how they had worked together for years, long before either of them had been able to climb the ranks of power to their final positions, how Fury had made a habit out of bending rules in his favor even when he was a lowly SHIELD office manager. Steve was sure that the intention was to lull him into a false sense of security, to get his guard down before Pierce started hitting him with hard questions. The man definitely lived up to his expectations.

“Captain, why was Nick in your apartment last night?” Pierce asked, finally cutting to the chase.

“I don’t know.” Steve evaded, keeping his eyes on the file in front of him.

Pierce allowed for a beat of silence, before asking “Did you know it was bugged?”
“I did,” Steve responded mildly, “because Nick told me.”

“And did he tell you that he was the one who bugged it?” Pierce shot back, eyebrows rising innocently as Steve looked at him in surprise. “I didn’t even find out about the recordings until this morning.”

Steve had no idea how to feel about that. Somehow he doubted Pierce’s claim that he’d had nothing to do with the surveillance order, but he also couldn’t completely write-off the idea that Fury would have had an interest on spying on them, as well. It had taken Bucky months to get over his comment about ‘controlling’ enhanced people on-board the Avengers helicarrier, and while Steve hadn’t been quite as strongly affected by it, he did still have trouble trusting the man from time to time. But it didn’t mean that Steve didn’t respect him, or feel like Fury had respected the both of them as well, despite their mutual penchant for saying shit to get a rise out of one another.

“I want you to see something,” Pierce continued, pressing play on a nearby remote control and gesturing towards the large screen on the wall, now playing images of Batroc in an interrogation room. “He finally agreed to start talking last night –”

“Assassination doesn’t really sound like Batroc’s area,” Steve countered, “and it isn’t as if he could have organized a hit like this from inside SHIELD custody.”

“No,” Pierce agreed, “but he did tell us the location of the accounts that the persons who hired him had deposited his pay-out to when contracting him to attack the Lemurian Star. We had to trace the wire back through seventeen fictitious accounts, all of which linked back to a holding company registered to a Jacob Veech.”

Steve racked his brain, trying to remember if he’d ever heard the name. “Am I supposed to know who that is?”

“Not likely, Veech died six years ago. His last address, though, was the house next door to where Nick’s mother lived when I first met him.” Pierce responded significantly.

“Are you saying Fury hired the pirates? Why?”

“The prevailing theory is that the hijacking was a cover for the acquisition and sale of classified SHIELD intelligence. The sale went sour, and that lead to Nick Fury’s death.” Pierce answered.

“If you really knew Nick Fury, you’d know that’s not true.” Steve stated, uncaring of how cold he sounded.

“Why do you think we’re talking?” Pierce asked in an equally ominous tone, before pushing himself out of his chair and making his way leisurely towards the bank of windows on the opposite side of the room, overlooking the DC skyline. “I took a seat on the World Security council because Nick asked me to – we were both realists, we knew that despite all of the diplomacy, in order to build a better world, sometimes you have to tear the old one down. That makes enemies. Those people who call you dirty because you have the guts to stick your hands in the mud and try to build something better. And the idea that those people could be happy today? Makes me really, really angry.”

Steve listened in silence – while he felt largely the same, the direction of the conversation was continuing to put him off. Fury had warned him not to trust anyone; his instinct was telling him that Alexander Pierce should be at the very top of that list.

“Captain, you were the last one to see Nick alive,” Pierce continued, his stare boring into Steve as he
resolutely maintained eye-contact, “and it happened while your best friend, one of the only people in
the world with the abilities to have pulled off the shot that killed him, was conveniently MIA. I don’t
think either of those things are an accident. And I don’t think you do either. So I’m gonna ask
again, why was he there?”

The allusion to Bucky being a suspect had made Steve feel like he was being dropped in a tub of ice
water – he’d been getting the feeling that Pierce was trying to pin Fury’s death on the two of them
from the beginning, but the threats were making it all the more disconcerting. Steve rose to his feet,
swallowing down bile as he straightened his shoulders and refused to give away a damned thing.
“He told me not to trust anyone.”

“I wonder who that included.” Pierce stated simply, giving Steve a small smile that only made him
more uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry, those were his last words.” It was on the tip of Steve’s tongue to point out that Pierce
would have better luck finding the details of Bucky’s mission than even he would, but he didn’t even
want to say his name around the slimy bastard – he’d spent enough time in his presence already.
“Excuse me,” he said instead stowing his shield on his back and turning for the door.

“Captain,” Pierce called out before he could take more than a couple of steps. “Somebody murdered
my friend, and I’m going to find out why. If anyone tries to get in my way, they’re going to regret
it,” he stated coldly. “And I do mean anyone.”

“Understood, sir.” Steve said shortly, before turning and hurrying out the door, hoping that he didn’t
appear as spooked as he felt. He had to get the hell away from SHIELD – with Fury gone, chain of
command was going to fall to Pierce, and while he had no proof of it Steve would be willing to bet
money that the Defense Secretary had something to do with Fury’s death in the first place.

As soon as he reached the elevator bay Steve pulled his StarkPhone out of his pocket, pulling up the
messaging application as he pressed the call button for the elevator. Per usual, Bucky’s name was
still at the top of the screen. His heart dropped, though, when he realized that there was still no new
message in the app.

09:18 Text To: Bucky

ALL FUBAR. AVOID DC. PLZ SEND STATUS ASAP.

Steve typed hurriedly with shaking fingers, sending it without fixing the caps lock – Bucky would
probably end up giving him shit for it, or panic enough to call him in response, but both were worth
the confirmation that he was alive, at least.

The elevator doors finally opened in front of him and Steve stepped in, stowing his phone in his back
pocket as he did. Just before they were able to close again, Rumlow came into view with two
members of his team, waiving his arm between the sliding doors to hold them open then making his
way in with a smarmy nod. He tried to make small talk with Steve, bringing up fibers that had
apparently been found on the building opposite their apartment, but Steve shut it down. He wasn’t in
the mood for playing normal while a STRIKE team shadowed him through his own place of work
like a criminal.

“Hey man,” Rumlow muttered as the elevator finally closed and began moving downward. “I’m
sorry about what happened to Fury – that was messed up, what happened to him.”

Steve looked askance at him for a second, not bothering to hide his skepticism over the words, before
murmuring a quick thanks. There was no point in being blatantly rude, especially if Pierce was
looking for reasons to take him into custody.

After descending a few floors the doors opened again, letting in a large group of suspiciously well-built maintenance workers; one of which Steve couldn’t help but notice wouldn’t take his hand off of the hammer in his utility belt. Steve instinctively took a step forward, so that he closer to the elevator door, keeping his hands visible and his eyes peeled on all of the occupants of the elevator as his suspicion only grew.

They only made it two floors before the doors opened yet again, this time to let in four large men in suits. Steve stared at the one on his three o’clock from the corner of his eye, not bothering to hide his frown as recognition dawned on him. He was hardly a regular SHIELD employee – Steve couldn’t remember his name because he rarely worked with STRIKE team Delta directly, but he recognized him from enough of Bucky’s debriefings. Bucky’s solo missions always involved either the Alpha or Delta STRIKE teams, depending on the specifics of the operation. With both this guy and Rumlow in an elevator with Steve, he was even more convinced that there was some fishy shit going on with both of their situations.

When Rollins and two other goons packed into the elevator at the next floor, Steve had no doubt that he was about to be jumped. He’d thought that Pierce would at least let him get out of the building before he sent the hounds after Steve – but then, keeping it internal probably spared SHIELD a ton of messy explanations. He waited until the doors had closed and they were moving again before speaking up. “Before we start,” Steve asked darkly, sizing up each of the guys one last time and taking a final inventory of all of their visible weapons. “Does anyone wanna get off?”

It was Rollins who turned on him first, pulling his electrical club and trying to tase Steve with it. He was able to sidestep the blow initially, but of course four of the goons made to grab for him. Luckily, while they were all big, the majority of them were no match for Steve’s combat skills. He shook the initial attack off with a few well-timed kicks and elbows, only to have the guys from Delta come at him with magnetized handcuffs, trying to pin him to the beams of the elevator. He was able to withstand the initial cuff, although it required considerably more strength than Steve would have liked, and allowed the rest of the elevator to get a few good hits in on him. As soon as he’d broken the force of the restraint, Steve quit holding back, lashing out as fast and as hard as he could, surpassing the effort that he used even when sparring his hardest with Bucky. He didn’t particularly care at the moment what happened to the agents – they may have been his teammates once, but Steve’d be damned before he allowed them to throw him in a cell, considering what else could potentially be going on.

He finally dropped the second to last one, turning with a scowl to where Rumlow was advancing on him with dual clubs. “Whoa, big guy,” the bastard murmured, as if it was Steve who had initiated the attack in the first place. “I just want you to know, Cap – this isn’t personal.” Even as he finished saying it, Rumlow was launching himself at Steve.

He was considerably stronger than Steve had been expecting, and got in at least three good jabs with his prod – Steve lost count after screaming his way through the second, letting instincts take over completely as he punched Rumlow multiple times, finally throwing him into the glass-ceiling of the elevator car and glaring down at his body as it lay on the floor. “It kinda feels personal,” he raged, kicking the shield back into his hold then using it to bust the remaining cuff off of his wrist.

After taking a second to catch his breath, Steve pried the doors of the elevator open – only to be met with a full TAC team of SHIELD agents in full battle gear. He pulled the doors shut again, glancing around the elevator for the next best escape before slamming the shield into the cable system, letting the car drop a few stories before the emergency brake system brought them to a sudden halt between a couple of floors. Steve cracked the doors on the upper floor again, only to find yet another group
of agents advancing on him.

He let the doors slam back shut, pacing over the bodies on the floor of the elevator car as he looked out the window at his options. On the other side of the metal door, he could hear the SHIELD agents pounding and trying to pry it open – there wasn’t much time left to come to a solution. Steve stared out the windows to the main lobby of the building below, estimating that he was somewhere around twenty-five floors up. The highest that he’d ever jumped onto a solid surface had only been ten stories, and as far as Steve knew Bucky had never tried anything higher… but there didn’t look to be any other options for him. After taking a step back and a deep breath, Steve charged through the glass wall of the elevator, crashing through the shaft and going into freefall as he tucked his right shoulder as tightly against the shield as he could.

Despite the shield taking the brunt of the force of impact, Steve had the breath knocked out of him for a moment after hitting the ground. He shook it off as quickly as possible, forcing air into his lungs and shaking his head to clear it – for the first time in his life, he was actually glad for the experience of having grown up with his myriad of health problems. After a couple of seconds he was able to push himself to his feet with a groan, then turned and ran out of the lobby, quickly picking up speed as he raced for the parking garage and his Harley. He was met with suspiciously little resistance, so it wasn’t exactly a surprise when he came tearing out of the garage to find barriers shifting into place, attempting to close off the bridge into the city. Steve leaned into the handlebars of his bike, pushing her harder as he raced towards the strip of spikes in front of them.

Steve had never really thought that he would regret refusing to let Tony modify their motorcycles all of the times that he’d offered, but in this instance the ability to hover without relying on his own driving abilities would have been nice. Before he could attempt the jump, though, Steve was met with a considerably larger challenge, as a quinjet moved into the airspace in front of him, guns aimed at the bike as a voice warned him to stand down over the PA system.

He considered it for a second, remembering the basics that he’d learned about the ship designs during the week of sleepless nights when Bucky had randomly decided to obsess over modern aircrafts, then grabbed his shield from its holster on his back, flinging it towards the left propeller of the jet. It hit perfectly, jamming itself in the blades and causing the ship to spin.

Using the momentum of the motorcycle, Steve threw himself forward onto the ship, grabbing the shield as he flipped over it and then flinging it so that it would ricochet off of both of the engines. He hit each just hard enough to cause minor explosions, then dived off of the back of the jet as it went down. He knew it would take SHIELD a while to scramble new planes or get passed their self-imposed roadblock, so he took off on foot, sprinting as fast as he could into the District and hoping that the foot traffic would help him to cover his tracks.

Steve dropped into their local gym, glad that he’d been able to talk Bucky into the extra expense when they’d moved to DC – it wasn’t as if he would have been able to go back to the apartment, now, and he absolutely had to get out of the uniform, as there was no way SHIELD hadn’t put a public watch out for him. After sneaking into the locker room he ditched his suit, changing into a pair of running pants and sneakers, then digging a hooded sweatshirt out of Bucky’s locker and jamming his Dodgers cap low over his eyes.

Steve looked himself over carefully in the mirror (it wasn’t a great disguise by a long shot, but at least it provided him some anonymity) before stowing his shield in an oversized duffle bag he’d found in another locker, then made his way outside, walking in the direction of GW.

Steve hid the duffel bag in an alley near the hospital before making his way casually to the floor where Rumlow had picked him up earlier that morning, making sure to move slowly and keep his
shoulders rounded so that he would attract as little attention as possible from the countless number of staff and visitors that roamed the halls alongside him. He finally made it to the vending machine he’d left the memory stick in – only to find that the row that he’d used was now completely empty, gum and all. His stomach felt like it was sinking through the floor; who the hell had seen him hide the drive? And whose hands was it in now, the one thing Fury had seen necessary to give him before he’d died?

Before he could worry on it much further, he sensed someone standing closely behind him, snapping a gum bubble in his direction. Steve glanced over his shoulder with a scowl, which only grew when he saw Romanoff standing there, chomping on gum with a smug, challenging look on her face.

Steve could hardly breathe he was so angry, and after looking around the hall he grabbed her by the arm, hauling her into a supply closet and pushing her up against the wall before looming over her threateningly, lady be damned. “Where is it?” He demanded harshly.

“Safe.” Natasha quipped.

“Do better.” He growled, tightening his grip on the lapels of her leather jacket.

“Where did you get it?” She asked with a scowl, dropping the dumb look. It didn’t make Steve any less angry.

“Why the hell would I tell you?”

Natasha blinked for a second, apparently putting it together. “Fury gave it to you… why?”

“What’s on it?” Steve countered.

“I don’t know.” She said simply.

Steve shook her, hard, while growling, “Stop. Lying.”

“I only act like I know everything, Rogers.” Natasha whined – he wasn’t sure whether he was actually succeeding in intimidating her or not, though, so Steve went for proving that he wasn’t as dumb as she liked to believe, either.

“I bet you knew Fury hired the pirates, didn’t you?”

Romanoff shrugged. “It makes sense – if Nick knew the ship was dirty, he needed a way in…”

“I’m not gonna ask you again,” he warned, pushing her more forcefully into the wall. His ma would probably come back and haunt him for the rest of his life if she knew that he was roughing a lady up like this, but he hoped that wherever she was watching from she had also caught up on all of the shit that Natasha Romanoff was capable of and would be at least a little understanding.

“They’re going to try to spin it like you and Bucky killed Fury,” Natasha responded bluntly. “We need to figure out what is on this drive and who was after it… that’ll lead us to the person who really shot him.” She reached into her pocket, pulling out the jump drive and holding it out between them. “And we’re going to have to work together to pull all of that off.”

“Why the hell should I trust you?” Steve demanded, thinking that she was probably the last person in the world that he should be pairing himself with, previous missions be damned.

“Because Nick Fury did,” she responded, raising her chin, “and because we’ve worked well in the past, and this is the only way we’re going to find what the hell is going on and fix it.”
Steve clenched his jaw, glaring down at her for a few more moments, before finally releasing his grip on her jacket and taking the jump drive from her hand. He hated to admit it, even to himself, but she was right – he was in so far over his head that it wasn’t funny, and if anyone (outside of Bucky) could help him get around whatever Pierce was bound to put in their way, it would be her. He nodded tightly, flipping his hood back up and stuffing the memory stick in his pocket.

Natasha smiled at him momentarily, before pulling a thick pair of glasses out of her jacket pocket. “Put these on.”

“You regularly carry men’s glasses?” He asked incredulously, slipping them on anyway and looking around, relieved to find that they didn’t have real corrective lenses in them.

“No, but I knew I would run into you eventually and you’re not exactly an inconspicuous face,” she responded, leading the way out of the closet and down the hospital hallway. “Let’s get somewhere that we can open that drive without being traced – did you bring your shield?”

He retrieved the bag from his hiding place, keeping step with her as they made their way to the nearest metro station.

“You got cash on you?” Natasha asked as they made their way down the escalator of the Foggy Bottom metro stop.

“Yeah, old habits die hard…” Steve responded, wondering what the hell that had to do with anything.

“Good,” she stated with a smile, handing him a paper Metro fare card before putting her own through the turnstile. “We’ll need to do some shopping once we get to Pentagon City.”

“Is now really the appropriate time for you to be ragging on my fashion sense, Natasha?” Steve asked testily. She ignored him completely, leading the way downstairs to the Virginia-bound trains instead.

“Hold on,” Natasha whispered as a blue line train rolled into the station, “do you still have a cell phone on you?”

Steve frowned, pulling his StarkPhone out of his pocket. “Just my personal one,” he answered, “I left the SHIELD-issued one behind at the Triskelion.”

Nat grabbed the phone from his hand, dropping it in the garbage can beside them. Steve immediately began to go after it, his stomach twisting with the fact that he still hadn’t heard back from Bucky. “What the hell, Romanoff?” he hissed, glowering as she grabbed his arm to pull him toward the train.

“They’ll use it to track you, a standard-issue cell like that: SHIELD could hack the GPS and use it to find us in seconds,” she responded tightly, continuing to pull at his arm as the warning tone for the doors closing sounded on the train.

Despite wanting to protest further, Steve saw her argument and quit resisting, so that they ran through the doors and onto the Metro just in time for them to close. “I told Bucky to call me as soon as he could,” Steve muttered as the train pulled out of the station.

It may have been his imagination, but Steve thought that Natasha’s eyes softened slightly at that. “Once we get a better idea of what’s going on we can get a proper burner phone and try to contact him again,” she promised quietly. “For now we need to get you a better disguise and figure out what the hell is on this drive.”
They got off at the Pentagon City stop, quickly making their way into the outlet mall next to the Metro. Natasha wandered through the racks of clothing in the first store that they wandered into, handing him ridiculous-looking blue jeans and layers of patterned, bright clothing that Steve would never have picked on his own. After changing in the public bathroom and stowing the duffel again for safe-keeping, they made their way into the actual mall across the street, heading directly for the computer store Natasha had planned on using to hack into the jump drive.

Steve kept watch as she fought with the programming protecting the jump drive, but getting into it to access the information was proving to be too time-consuming. After voicing his concerns about being caught out before they could get anything of use from the stick and then having to deal with an overly-helpful Apple employee (Natasha was able to send the man away by pretending that they were fiancés planning their honeymoon – her ability to morph her personality to fit the situation was still so off-putting that Steve nearly gave the entire farce away), they finally had to settle with simply taking the coordinates of the drive’s origin and making a road trip to the source.

Steve looked at the screen when Nat pointed out that she’d found it, frowning as the words WHEATON, NEW JERSEY came up on the map. “Alright, that’s a four hour drive if we’re avoiding main highways… let’s get a vehicle and get the hell out of here,” he muttered, watching as she shoved the jump drive back into the pocket of her hoodie then leading the way towards the nearby garage parking lot.

His stomach dropped when he noticed Rollin’s familiar face making his way through the food court towards them, leaning closer to Natasha and murmuring his plan of escape – he knew he’d be able to take whatever tac team STRIKE had sent, especially considering a number of them would already be weakened after he’d kicked their ass just a couple of hours prior – but he had to make sure that Natasha was able to get away and head North as quickly as possible.

“Put your arm around me and laugh at something I said,” Natasha hissed back, completely ignoring his plan.

“What?” He asked, completely confused by the bizarre request.

“Just do it!” she hissed, and he complied immediately, giggling loudly and ridiculously as they continued to make their way towards the garage. After a few seconds he glanced over his shoulder, relieved to see that the STRIKE team had marched directly passed them.

From there on, he decided not to argue against the plans of a master spy.

Steve kept an eye out as they made their way down the escalator, watching for any familiar STRIKE faces, but was interrupted in sweeping the floor below when Nat turned to him, looking spooked. “Kiss me,” she demanded.

“Seriously?” Steve asked, completely dumfounded.

“Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable,” she stated, as if it were a perfectly normal explanation for her request.

“Yeah,” Steve sputtered, “yeah they do.”

Instead of arguing any further, Natasha stepped up on the stair between them, pulling him down and pressing their mouths together gently. Steve couldn’t do much besides freeze, his mind still reeling as to what the hell this had to do with their escape plan in the first place – unless she was still rolling with the fiancé cover and had saw an approaching SHIELD goon that he’d missed. Steve awkwardly put his hand on her hip, trying to look somewhat more natural, when she finally broke
away from him, stepping around the person in front of her and making her way further down the escalator.

“Still feeling uncomfortable?” She asked wryly, once they’d reached the bottom level and were heading towards the parking garage.

“I’m not sure if that’s the word I would use,” Steve muttered, keeping his head down in the event that his mortified blush was as noticeable as it felt.

He was able to redeem himself after hotwiring an enormous Ford Truck in one of the lower-levels of the parking garage; of course, Natasha didn’t say whether she was impressed or not, but she also didn’t tease him any further, either about the kiss or his driving as they made their way out of Arlington, and then Virginia, Maryland and Delaware, without problems. Of course, he should have known that the peace wouldn’t last.

“Alright, I’ve got a question for you – ” Natasha started with a smirk, a couple of hours into the drive, “and you don’t have to answer, but I feel like if you don’t answer it you’re kind of answering it…”

“What?” Steve asked, already knowing that he wasn’t going to like it.

“Was that your first kiss since 1945?”

Steve snorted dryly. “That bad, huh?”

“I didn’t say that,” Natasha retorted, “I just wondered how much practice you had.”

“You don’t need practice.” Steve scoffed.

“Everybody needs practice, Steve.”

“No, that wasn’t my first kiss since 1945.” Steve said with finality. It wasn’t entirely a lie – he kissed Peggy nearly every time he visited her, even if it was usually just on the cheek. “I’m ninety-five, not dead.”

“So… you and Bucky?” Natasha asked, raising her eyebrows at him.

“Don’t start,” Steve said shortly. “You know nothing’s happened there.”

“I know nothing was happening there before our last talk, but you said you were going to bury the hatchet,” she pressed.

Steve exhaled through his nose, keeping his eyes on the road – he really didn’t want to have this conversation at the moment. “We did talk things out and come to an understanding, but Bucky had to leave early in the morning for his op, so… we tabled the, uh, rest until he got back.”

“Not yet, then.” Natasha responded, so gently that it made Steve even more uncomfortable than the teasing.

Steve gripped the steering wheel so tightly that it groaned under his fingertips. Because that was the rub, wasn’t it? No, he and Bucky hadn’t kissed yet, even though they both wanted to (and that was still something that Steve was having trouble processing, if he was honest). But now, everything was FUBAR and God only knew where Bucky was, or what his status was.

If he lost Bucky now, and all of their time really did end up being wasted… “Can we just focus on
the mission?” He asked, swallowing around the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat.

“Look, Steve… Bucky’s smart, and he’s strong, and he’s an incredible soldier,” Natasha said earnestly, apparently picking up on his concerns in that way that she had. “He can hold his own, alright? I have no doubt that he’s perfectly fine.”

Steve nodded tightly, not trusting his voice enough to respond to her reassurances. Natasha was right, of course, and if Steve could escape the Triskelion on his own power, Bucky could surely take down a single STRIKE team, regardless of where they’d taken him. Still, if he could just get a text message from him, anything to prove that he was safe, wherever he was…

“Where did Captain America learn how to steal a truck?” Natasha asked lightly, interrupting his spiraling thoughts.

Steve glanced at her with a smirk, immensely glad for the subject change. “Nazi Germany, and we’re borrowing, not stealing… get your feet off the dash.”

She stared at him for a beat, apparently surprised to have been matched for smart-assery, before smirking and moving her feet as requested. The rest of the drive was uneventful, and largely consisted of Steve following Natasha’s instructions as she read coordinates off of her GPS tracker, until he finally brought the truck to a stop next to a huge, fenced-in and apparently abandoned military base.

“This is it, then?” Steve asked, unable to tear his eyes off the sign that read CAMP LEHIGH.

“The file came from these coordinates, anyway,” Natasha responded, double-checking the GPS gadget she’d been using to map their course.

“So did I,” Steve muttered, before using his shield to bust the padlock securing the door of the chain-linked fence. He did his best to focus as they made their way through the eerily familiar grounds, keeping close to Natasha as she scanned the area, looking for the exact location of the file’s origin, but he wasn’t able to completely ignore the ghosts the place seemed to have. He could still picture himself, his sickly, tiny self before the serum, pushing himself through drills and constantly falling behind, wondering what in the hell Erskine had ever thought trying to bring him onboard for the classified SSR project he kept mentioning in the first place. What would he think of Steve now, having survived all of the shit that he did but still managing to be in this current mess, separated from the one person he gave the most care of saving? As they made their way through the old training grounds and PT yard, he could still hear Colonel Phillips’ voice calling out orders during drills, shouting “ROGERS!” in that exasperated tone of his…

“This is a dead end,” Nat called out, breaking his reverie. “Zero heat signatures, no transmission waves, not even radio.”

She continued talking, but Steve’s attention caught on the building to their left, a weapons silo that was definitely not where it should have been. “Army regulations forbid munitions bunkers being built less than five hundred yards from the barracks…” he spoke up, already making his way towards the building. “This building is new.”

Another lock smashed with the shield and they were making their way into a huge office, lined with rows of desks and featuring a prominent, familiar seal on the furthest wall.

“This is SHIELD…” Natasha murmured, staring at the insignia.

“Looks like where it started, maybe.” Steve agreed, leading the way through the room, towards the
far end of the office. They paused again when they came to a row of old photographs, apparently commemorating the founding directors of the organization.

“That’s Stark’s father and… Agent Carter?”

Steve cleared his throat, staring ahead at the photos of his old friends, as he remembered them. “Howard and Peggy, yeah,” he confirmed quietly.

Natasha continued to study the wall with the portraits on it, but Steve followed his instincts and made his way towards the alcove to their left. He found an odd draft coming through something – considering how thick the concrete walls had appeared to be outside, it didn’t seem likely that it was a simple breach in the outer wall.

“If you’re already working in a secret office,” he called out, grabbing Natasha’s attention, “why do you need to hide the elevator?” Steve asked, pushing the panel of wall forcefully enough that it slid to the side, revealing what looked to be the door to an elevator shaft, a dusty keypad next to it.

Natasha pulled her device out of her pocket and used it to scan the keypad; apparently it was capable of reading the fingerprints on the numbers, because a few moments later she was punching in the correct code for the door to slide open ominously for them. After a brief hesitation they both gave each other a glance, and then stepped through the door.

The elevator shook for a moment before coming to life, and Steve could feel them being slowly lowered further beneath the building. When it finally came to a stop the doors opened again, revealing a huge, dark room. He raised his shield and cautiously stepped in front of Natasha, slowly entering the cavernous space. As he crossed the threshold of the door, the lights around the basement flicked on, revealing huge banks of old computers.

Steve was uncomfortably reminded of the couple of months that Bucky had been obsessed with eighties science fiction movies, and immediately forced the thought out of his mind, knowing that he needed to remain focused and on alert for whatever trap had been set for them.

“This can’t be the data point, this technology’s ancient.” Natasha murmured as she stepped around him, making her way to the main bank of computers in the center of the room. Despite her skepticism, she found a docking port for Fury’s jump drive.

After plugging it in, the huge screen in front of them came to life, green letters typing out a command prompt then leaving the cursor blinking, waiting for their answer.

INITIATE SYSTEM?

“Y-e-s, yes.” Natasha muttered to herself as she typed the answer in on the dusty keyboard connected to the screen. As soon as she hit enter her lips quirked into a small smirk. “Shall we play a game? It’s from a movie…”

“Yes, I know,” Steve cut her off. “Bucky made me watch it about five times last summer.”

She glanced over her shoulder, not bothering to hide her surprise to his answer, but before she could say anything smart the computer banks around them whirred to life. A device on top of the screen – it looked like a very primitive webcam – scanned Steve momentarily, before a tinny, frighteningly-familiar voice rang out through the room.

“Rogers, Steven Grant. Born 1918.”

Steve swallowed bile, his mind racing over how in the hell a dead HYDRA scientist could be
trapped in a computer in Jersey, as the camera turned and scanned Natasha as well.


“It’s some kind of recording…” Natasha murmured, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“I am not a recording, fraulein,” the voice responded creepily. “I may not be the man I was when the Captain and his troops took me prisoner in 1945 but I am still very much here – I have never been more alive.”

As it spoke, a small screen adjacent to the main prompter flashed a black and white mug shot of Zola’s small, round face, only increasing Steve’s dread.

“You know this guy?” Natasha asked him shortly, apparently noticing the fact that Steve was reaching a panic state.

“Arnim Zola was a German scientist who worked for the Red Skull,” Steve responded, his voice sounding considerably calmer than he’d have expected as he walked around the bank of computers, trying to work out how any of it was possible. “He was responsible for designing all HYDRA’s Tesseract-powered weapons, and… and he’s the one who – experimented – on Bucky at Kreischberg.”

“Correction, I am Swiss,” the computer chimed in. “But Captain Rogers is correct – Sergeant Barnes was to have been our greatest weapon to come out of the war, a match to even the American’s super soldier program. Unfortunately, he was stolen away before we could finish all of his procedures. It was an enormous blow for our war effort, perhaps as big a loss as that of the weapons facilities that your troops set out to destroying thereafter.

“We lost the war, of course, but I was allowed to live and work, even after the trials. In 1972 I received a terminal diagnosis. Science could not save my body, my mind, however, that was worth saving on two-hundred thousand feet of databanks. You are standing in my brain.”

“How did you get here?” Steve asked, still unable to piece together how any of what he was hearing could be possible.

“I was invited.” The voice replied, as smug as Steve could imagine a machine was capable of sounding.

“Operation PAPERCLIP,” Natasha filled in, apparently catching the lost look on Steve’s face. “After World War II SHIELD recruited German scientists for strategic value.”

“They took in Zola, knowing what he’d done to their own prisoners?” Steve asked incredulously, the image of Bucky strapped to the table in Kreischberg and the fear in his face onboard the train in the Alps fueling his rage.

“Oh, I could help their cause – but I also helped my own.” The computer replied.

“HYDRA died with the Red Skull.” Steve snapped.

“Cut off one head,” Zola responded, his face morphing into the HYDRA insignia, “two more shall take its place. You took away our greatest weapons, yes, but we still had the manpower and the knowledge to continue our good work, Captain.”

It felt like someone had slugged Steve in the gut. “Prove it,” he demanded, not wanting to believe that any of what the computer said could be possible.
“Accessing archive,” the computer droned, as even more databanks whirred to life. “HYDRA was founded on the belief that humanity could not be trusted with its own freedom. What we did not realize was that if you try to take that freedom, they will resist. The War taught us much; humanity needed to surrender its freedom willingly.” As Zola’s voice spoke, clips appeared on the screen like a newsreel: images of Hitler and the Red Skull, Steve and Bucky and the Commandoes taking Nazi and HYDRA hostages, and finally the end of the war and the treaties that were signed to bring about an ultimate peace.

“After the War,” the computer continued, “SHIELD was founded, and I was recruited. The new HYDRA grew, a beautiful parasite inside SHIELD.” The images this time showed Peggy, Howard and Colonel Phillips, the team involved in project PAPERCLIP, and Zola working alongside teams that looked to grow through the years, exactly as he was explaining.

The images changed again, this time to color reels of explosions, terrorist attacks, and wars. “For seventy years, HYDRA has been secretly feeding crisis, reaping war. And when history did not cooperate,” a photocopy of the New York Times declaring Howard Stark’s death in a car crash, a clip of President John Kennedy being shot, “history was changed.”

“That’s impossible, SHIELD would have stopped you,” Natasha interrupted, looking every bit as horrified as Steve felt.

“Accidents will happen. HYDRA created a world so chaotic that humanity is finally willing to sacrifice its freedom to gain its security – especially now that its most beloved leaders cannot be trusted.” A shot of the Washington Post with the date May 3, 2014 stamped on it. ENEMY OF THE STATE read the huge headline above Steve’s SHIELD ID photo. Defense Secretary Calls for information leading to arrest of Captain America after War Hero goes rogue. Worse than that though, was the secondary story above the fold: Long-Time Partner’s Foiled Assassination Plot Barnes killed in attempt on Saudi prince’s life.

“We have won, Captain,” Zola taunted. “Your death will amount to the same as your life – a zero sum.”

Steve couldn’t take it anymore, his vision actually blurring for a moment as his rage took over completely. Without thinking, he slammed his fist into the main screen of computers, shattering the glass and finally shutting Zola up. Although it hadn’t required much effort, he panted heavily, stomach roiling over the information. The thought that HYDRA was still alive and well, that they’d been carrying out their dirty work all along, that Bucky could be…

“As I was saying…” the voice returned, another bank of computers humming to life to the right of where Steve was still standing.

“What’s on this drive?” Steve demanded weakly.

“Project Insight requires insight, so I wrote an algorithm.” Zola answered.

“What kind of algorithm, what does it do?” Natasha asked quickly.

“The answer to your question is fascinating – unfortunately, you shall be too dead to hear it.” Steve was certain that if it was possible for a machine to sneer, Zola would have been doing exactly that.

“Steve,” Natasha said tightly, staring at the beeping screen of the same device that had opened the elevator doors. “We have a boogie incoming.”

“Who fired it?” Steve asked.
“SHIELD.” She responded, looking around the room with wide eyes.

“I am afraid I have been stalling, Captain.” Zola’s voice announced. “Admit it, it’s better this way: we are both of us, out of time.”

The elevator doors began to close, and Steve threw the shield at them, hoping to hold them open as they would doubtlessly be their only hope of escaping the bomb, but he was a second too slow. The doors closed tightly, the shield falling uselessly to the ground as Natasha’s device continued beeping with increasing volume and frequency.

“Steve, we only have a few seconds…” Natasha warned, sounding legitimately scared for the first time since Steve had met her. He ran to the opposite end of the room, snatching the shield up, before pulling a storm grate out of the floor, directing her into it and then jumping in beside.

“Get down!” Steve shouted, throwing himself overttop of Natasha’s prone form and bracing himself as tightly as possible, so that the shield would at least cover their upper bodies. The blast happened only a second later- luckily they were far enough underground that the heat of the bomb wasn’t an issue, but in no time tons of concrete and metal was raining down on them. Steve strained as much as he could under the shield, desperate to remain on his feet so as to avoid crushing the both of them under the debris.

He maintained the position as the world continued to crash down around them, then waited for a few minutes after before beginning to strain against the weight, pushing up with the shield with all of his strength, moving along with the shifting debris as he tried to force a hole in the rubble for them to escape. By the time he finally was able to push the final bit of concrete aside Steve was met with a dark sky above a smoldering pit of what had formerly been the munitions building. He glanced back down into the hole to find Natasha unconscious, although without any obvious injuries. After making sure that she was still breathing fine, Steve lifted her into his arms, noticing the quinjets sweeping the area and taking off running towards a nearby thick of trees.

Thankfully, Natasha came-to after a few minutes of fresh air, yelling at him for still carrying her and insisting that she was perfectly capable of running herself. They continued to make their way through the dark, finally coming out into a suburban neighborhood.

Steve chose a car this time, some tiny partially-electric thing that they wouldn’t have to stop to fill up with gas and that no one would expect someone of Steve’s size to be comfortable with driving, anyway, then hauled ass through the night back to DC. Neither of them were really sure yet what they would do once they got there, seeing as they had no one to go and no idea who could be trusted to help them in the first place, but both had agreed that they had to find a way to stop Project Insight before it launched.

They were half-way through Delaware when Steve finally pulled himself far away from his worry over Bucky that another thought occurred to him. “Have you heard from Barton, lately?” He asked quietly, completely unsure as to how Natasha would have been able to contact him in the first place, but certain that if anyone could do it, it would be her.

Natasha’s lips thinned for a moment as she stared out the windshield, before finally answering, “He’s been running missions for Hill out of New York for the past month, but we talk pretty regularly. Last I knew he was babysitting some French engineer in Afghanistan.”

Steve sincerely doubted that Natasha knew as little as she was letting on – he didn’t know exactly what was going on between her and Clint, but he wasn’t stupid enough to believe that they were just friends, anymore than he and Bucky were.
“Have you – uh – been in touch with him since all of this went down?” Steve asked conversationally, hoping that his real question came through without actually having to voice it. Despite having promised him in DC, Nat had made no move to contact anyone since she’d chucked his phone away, and after Zola’s taunts his dread over Bucky’s condition was growing by the hour.

“Steve, don’t do this to yourself.” She sighed after a few minutes of uncomfortable silence.

“Do what?” Steve asked automatically.

Natasha leveled him with an unimpressed glare. “There was a reason Zola generated those headlines. HYDRA wants you to believe that Bucky is dead, to try to goad you into doing something irrational and making it easier to take you out. Just – we can’t believe anything we don’t see for ourselves, right now. Worrying about what could be happening, or believing any of the shit that they try to feed us – we need to do our best to avoid it, okay?”

Steve exhaled slowly through his nose, keeping his eyes locked on the dark empty road. She was right, of course – it would be a bigger danger than it was probably worth trying to contact Bucky again, as it would give away both of their locations, but it didn’t mean that Steve had to like it. And while he absolutely knew that she was right about HYDRA trying to use the idea of Bucky’s death to make him lose hope, it didn’t change the fact that the mere thought made him want to burn the entire world down.

He pushed the thought out of his head, turning on the radio in hopes that whatever crappy music he found would drown out the sound of Zola’s voice and Bucky’s imagined screams as he continued pushing the car South through Maryland.

Instinct took over as soon as they crossed the DC line, and Steve drove them to the one other house he could say he’d honestly felt comfortable in outside of their apartment. While he and Bucky usually hosted Sunday night dinners, Sam had insisted that he return the favor on a couple of occasions – Steve hated the idea of getting him involved in their mess, but at least it would give them a safe space to regroup for a bit.

He parked the car a few streets away from Sam’s place, leading Natasha quickly through the streets. The drive had taken longer than he’d hoped, so that they’d just missed dawn, but they were lucky enough to only run into a couple of dog walkers giving their beat-up clothing suspicious looks as they passed through the neighborhood. Steve took Nat’s advice in avoiding the front door, and led the way over the row of hedges in the back lawn, scaling the deck easily and knocking on the sliding-glass rear door, praying that Sam was actually home and that none of his neighbors were nosey enough to catch them.

After a few of the most stressful seconds of Steve’s life, the blinds covering the back door finally opened to reveal Sam’s suspicious face. “Hey man.” Sam said as he opened the screen door, looking at the two of them warily.

“I’m sorry about this,” Steve apologized, hating the fact that he was putting his friend out like this, “but we need a place to lay low.”

“Everyone we know is trying to kill us.” Natasha added instantly.

Sam looked between the two of them again, before standing aside in the doorway. “Not everyone,” he said earnestly, glancing quickly around the yard and shutting the door behind them before pulling the curtains.

In a half-ass effort to make up for how poor of a gentleman he’d been over the past few days, Steve
let Natasha take the shower first, showing her to the bathroom before meeting back up with Sam in
the kitchen, accepting his glass of orange juice with a weak smile.

“So… busy couple of days, huh?” Sam asked, completely deadpan, as he dropped his newspaper on
the counter between them and swept his eyes over Steve’s disheveled clothing.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Steve muttered, his eyes automatically roaming over the headlines in
front of him, paranoia creeping its way in as he searched for any mention of Bucky amidst the
articles proclaiming Captain America a traitor. He leaned against the cabinets behind him in relief as
he noticed that the name Barnes never once appeared – it didn’t guarantee that he was safe, of
course, but the absence of the story in print certainly helped. “You, um… you haven’t heard from
Bucky, have you?” He asked as he pushed the papers away, clearing his throat midway through the
question and forcing himself to take a sip of juice after asking, despite the way the look on Sam’s
face churned his stomach.

“No, nothing – I’m sorry, man. I was wondering why he wasn’t with you…”

Steve shook his head shortly, “Haven’t heard from him since the night before he left. I sent him a
couple of messages when everything with Fury went down, warning him about all of this, but… we
had to ditch our cell phones when we realized SHIELD was coming after us so they couldn’t use
them to track. I guess I’d hoped he’d at least check in with someone.”

Sam shrugged, reaching into the refrigerator and pulling out a couple of cartons of eggs. “I wouldn’t
start worrying about it too much, yet,” he said evenly, although the way that he avoided Steve’s eyes
as he said it didn’t inspire a ton of confidence. “Who’s to say he didn’t think the same thing when he
got your warnings, and figured he should go on the lam as well?”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed weakly, draining his juice glass and setting it next to the sink. “I’d just feel
better knowing, you know?”

“Too well,” Sam said quietly.

Steve rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, before turning his head as he heard the water cut off
across the house. “I’m gonna go check on her and clean up myself… thanks again, Sam.”

He made his way quickly through the house, knocking on the spare bedroom door to announce
himself before making his way in. Natasha was apparently already changing in the walk-in closet, so
Steve let himself into the bathroom, washing up as well as he could with a wet washcloth and one of
Sam’s spare towels, leaving the bathroom door open so that Nat would know he was in the room
with her. She finally made her way out of the closet and sank onto the bed, staring blankly into
space as if she hadn’t noticed his presence at all.

“You okay?” Steve asked gently from the doorway, noting how shaken Natasha still looked.

“Yeah,” she said with a quiet nod, although the continued thousand-yard stare that she wore said
otherwise.

Steve made his way back into the room, sitting on the bench next to the bed gently. He wasn’t
exactly the best at this type of thing, but after all they’d been through and as much as Nat had helped
him getting his shit together earlier in the week, he felt it necessary to return the favor. Besides –
they would both need to be at their best to face what was likely to still come. “What’s goin’ on?”

Natasha shook her head, before finally answering. “When I first joined SHIELD, I thought I was
going straight. Turns out I was just trading the KGB for HYDRA. I thought I knew whose lies I
was telling, but…” she smiled sadly. “I guess I just can’t tell the difference anymore.”

“A pretty smart dame once told me that the truth was a matter of circumstance,” Steve pointed out quietly. “I think we can make up for the mistakes that we made while under faulty command, as long as we find a way to make-up for them with good of our own.”

“I owe you,” She said suddenly, finally looking up and making eye contact with Steve. “If it was the other way around, and it was down to me to save your life – and be honest with me – would you trust me to do it?”

He sat back in his chair, surprised by how desperate she looked for the answer. Steve never would have guessed that Natasha would care that much about anyone’s opinion, but given the circumstances he supposed it made sense. “I would now,” he responded earnestly, before giving her a small smirk. “And I’m always honest.”

Natasha stared at him in wonder, as if she was having trouble believing him. “I’ve got your back,” she finally said fervently. “And after we figure out what HYDRA’s plans are and nail the bastard that shot Nick, we’re going to track Bucky down and bring him home safe, too.”

Steve swallowed thickly, nodding along with her plan.

“I made breakfast,” Sam interrupted from the doorway. “Should be enough for all of us as long as you don’t eat like this one,” he added nodding towards Natasha while pointing to Steve with a smartass grin.

Natasha smirked before standing from the bed, following Sam towards the kitchen with Steve trailing after. He’d lost track of how long they’d been talking, but judging by the feast that Sam had put together, it had apparently been a while. Initially they ate in silence, Steve’s driven by hunger as he hadn’t actually had anything to eat the entire day prior, Natasha’s because of exhaustion and her continued torment of what Zola had told them, and Sam’s apparently because of the absurdity of the entire situation. Finally, once the eggs and pancakes and turkey bacon were largely gone, they settled in with fruit and coffee and began to reassess the situation, not bothering to hide their conversation from Sam.

“So who at SHIELD can launch a domestic missile strike?” Natasha asked, leaning back in her chair and considering the tabletop.

“Pierce,” Steve answered immediately. “The same guy who can send a top-level special service agent on a solo op without the director’s knowledge.”

Natasha gave him a thoughtful look, before sighing, “Who also happens to be sitting on the most secure building in the world.”

“He’s not working alone, though – Zola’s algorithm was on the Lemurian Star.” Steve acknowledged, trying to remember the captives they had rescued. If they could target a lower-level agent, they might have a chance to at least work out information regarding Project Insight.

“So was Jasper Sitwell.” Nat pointed out, giving him exactly what he’d been hoping for.

“Then the question now is how do the two most wanted people in America kidnap a SHIELD officer in broad daylight?” Steve sighed.

“The answer is,” Sam interrupted, marching into the breakfast nook from a door that Steve had never even noticed him leaving through. “you don’t.”
He dropped a file folder on the table between Steve and Natasha, standing back with his arms crossed and a determined look on his face. “What’s this?” Steve asked, already picking the file up.

“Consider it a resume.” Sam responded tightly.

Steve flipped through the pages inside, noticing a photo of Sam next to a white man with sandy blonde hair, the two of them laughing at each other in modern-day fatigues, wearing impressive looking pararescue gear with a desert scene in the background. “Is this Riley?” Steve asked gently, remembering Sam’s stories of the partner he’d lost in Afghanistan. Sam nodded wordlessly as Steve handed the folder over to Natasha.

“I heard they couldn’t bring choppers in because of the RPGs …” Natasha mused, flipping through the write-ups of Sam’s combat rescues, “what’d you use, a stealth shoot?”

“No,” Sam responded simply, before handing over a second folder, the front of it stamped with the words EXO-7 FALCON and a bright red CLASSIFIED over the top.

Steve blinked in surprise at a color photograph of two men flying against a bright blue sky, wearing impressive metal wings. Despite the fact that it was a still picture, Steve could tell that they were like no other machine he’d ever seen before – he could practically see the dexterity that they were capable of, as if they belonged to a real bird.

“I thought you said you were a pilot,” he muttered, giving Sam a bemused look.

“Man, I never once said pilot.” Sam retorted, a smarmy grin taking over his face.

Again, Steve handed his folder over to Natasha to keep her in the loop, but as he thought about it he shook his head fervently. “I can’t ask you to do this, Sam.”

“Good thing I volunteered then, huh?” Sam interrupted immediately.

“You got out for a good reason…” Steve countered – it was bad enough that he’d dragged Sam into this mess by showing up at his place and allowing him to hear their plans, but asking him to risk being imprisoned or worse solely for the sake of helping Steve out of a pickle that he was gullible enough to get himself into in the first place was unthinkable.

“And now my friends need my help,” Sam responded stubbornly. “There’s no better reason to get back in the game.”

Beside him, Natasha apparently decided that was a good enough reason to include Sam in their plans, as she shut the folder with a snap and dropped it back on the table between them. “Alright – where can we get one of these?”

“The last one is at Fort Meade between here and Baltimore, behind three guarded gates, a twelve-inch thick steel wall and surrounded by at least twenty armed guards.” Sam responded ominously.

Steve felt his stomach twist – he’d been involved with more complicated break-ins with HYDRA in his day, but they hadn’t had the type of technology that the US Air Force had now, and they didn’t want to tip SHIELD off to their plans by letting them get wind that the wings were missing in the first place.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Nat responded with a casual shrug, giving Steve a nonchalant look. “Meet us downtown at 12:15? We’ll go grab these bad boys for you then get a drop on Sitwell on the drive back.”
Natasha had been right about the theft being a relatively easy operation, although all that it required of Steve was to break through a couple of control room locks and then keep watch outside of the main entry point while she did the majority of the work. Sure enough they were back in DC exactly as planned, leaving Sam to lure Sitwell in before dragging him to the roof of a nearby office building. After the past couple of days, Steve was plenty angry enough to play the scary rogue super soldier role, bodily throwing the smaller man through the access door and sneering as he rolled across the pavement.

“Tell me about Zola’s algorithm.” Steve demanded, stalking after him.

“Never heard of it.” Sitwell replied flippantly.

“What were you doing onboard the Lemurian Star?” Steve continued.

“Getting seasick.” Sitwell retorted, apparently not taking anything seriously. Steve grabbed him roughly by the lapels of his suit jacket, marching him directly to the edge of the roof and looming over him as he held him on tiptoe.

Sitwell glanced over the ledge, before glaring up at Steve defiantly. “Is this the part where you scare me into spilling what you want by threatening to throw me off the roof? Because that’s really not your style, Captain Rogers.”

“You’re right,” Steve agreed easily, dropping his hands from the lapels and smoothing the shoulders of his coat gently, before taking a half a step back before nodding towards Natasha. “It’s hers.”

Natasha stepped into position immediately, leaning back and planting her boot in Sitwell’s chest as she easily kicked the man off of the edge. Her leg had barely returned to the ground before she snapped her fingers.

“So here’s a thought,” Nat said conversationally as Sitwell’s screams echoed in the distance, “Soon as this is over, you take Bucky on a nice vacation.”

“We’ve already done that, after New York,” Steve pointed out, jamming his hands in his pockets. He knew exactly what she was doing, trying to distract him from his worries to keep him on task for the mission – he really wished she’d stop.

“Then it’s overdue,” she continued, either missing or not caring how obviously uncomfortable Steve was about the topic. “And I’m not talking about your All-American road trip, Steve, I mean somewhere romantic. A beach.”

“Yeah… I don’t know if I’m ready for that, just yet,” Steve evaded, relieved to hear Sitwell’s screams becoming louder again. A moment later Sam soared above the roof, holding onto Sitwell’s leg as he roughly hauled him upward, dropping him on the cement of the roof with enough force that the man had to barrel roll to come to a stop. All three of them stalked towards his prone form immediately.

“Zola’s algorithm is a program!” Sitwell called out in fear, waving his arms in a wordless plea for mercy. “It identifies Insight’s targets…”

“What targets?” Steve asked sharply.

“You, Barnes, the TV anchor in Cairo, a high school valedictorian in Iowa City,” Sitwell ranted. “Bruce Banner, Tony Stark, Steven Strange – anyone who’s a threat to HYDRA. Now, or in the future.”
“In the future?” Steve questioned incredulously. “How could it know?”

Sitwell began to laugh hysterically, shaking his head as he continued to cower on the cement. “How could it NOT?” He finally spat in Steve’s direction. “The twenty-first century is a digital book, Rogers. Zola taught HYDRA how to read it. Your bank account activity, your medical records, voting patterns, emails, texts, cell phone calls, your God damned SAT scores…”

Steve hadn’t even considered the ramifications of the fact that all forms of records were digitally recorded, now… it took him a second to remember what an SAT was, when an unhelpful piece of his brain reminded him of the week that Bucky had been so set on thinking of trying college courses out, only to be defeated by the idea of taking all of the required standardized tests. Steve shook his head surreptitiously, drawing himself back to the present to pay attention to Sitwell’s information.

“Zola’s algorithm evaluates people’s past, and uses it to predict the future.” He finally finished.

“And what then?” Natasha asked.

“Pierce is gonna kill me,” Sitwell muttered at the ground, apparently realizing just how much he was spilling as his panic wore off.

“What then?” Steve demanded, stepping closer to him as Natasha and Sam closed the circle in as well.

Sitwell breathed heavily through his nose a couple of times, before glaring up at all of them. “Then the Insight helicarriers eliminate the people on the list, a few million at a time.”

Steve felt sick as they frog-marched Sitwell back to Sam’s car then headed in the direction of the Triskelion. They had a tentative plan to try to use Sitwell as a hostage while they leaked the HYDRA scheme to the public and somehow got control of the Insight control panel, although there was admittedly still a lot of details to work out.

“We’ve only got sixteen hours until the helicarriers launch,” Natasha pointed out as they made their way onto the Roosevelt Bridge, “cutting it a little close.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Steve muttered from the passenger seat, eying the civilian-grade Humvee that had come into view in Sam’s rear-view mirror.

Before anyone else could speak, there was a loud thud on the roof of the car, followed by the crash of glass being smashed before Sitwell was ripped out of the open back window and flung into traffic, like he weighed nothing. Sam shouted and slammed on the breaks, only to have the truck behind them smash into his bumper, flinging someone off of the car.

The person rolled to a stop in front of them, as if the impact had hardly affected them at all. Whoever it was was completely covered in black leather tactical gear, their face obscured by a mask and black hood. Steve stared in shock, wholly certain that it was the shooter who had killed Fury.

Sam slammed on the gas, but as he accelerated ahead the attacker raised their gun calmly, shooting out his front tire and something in the engine that hissed horribly. Steve didn’t need to wait for the overpowering smell of gas to guess what it was, instead throwing his door open and grabbing Sam by his shoulders, hauling him out of the car as Natasha bailed out of the back. They huddled against the guardrail behind Steve’s shield as the front of the car exploded – thankfully they had gotten out of the blast just in time, but as he rose to his feet Steve noticed a number of other dark cars stopping around the wreckage, with innumerable armed assailants pouring out and turning on them.

The original shooter pointed what looked to be a rocket launcher directly at Natasha, and Steve acted
purely on instinct, knocking her out of the way and righting his shield in front of him, just in time to take another blast head on, knocking him ass over tea-kettle into the air. As he continued to soar it occurred to Steve that he’d been blown off the bridge, and he curled into a ball just in time to smash through a bus window below.

His only relief was that he hadn’t hit any civilians, at least, but the feeling was short lived. Before he’d even regained his wits the men from the bridge opened fire on the bus, blasting through it with automatic rounds. Of course, Steve’s shield was nowhere to be found – he’d lost control of it on impact. Going with his gut, he made his way out of the back of the bus, relieved to find it tarnished but otherwise undamaged on the pavement twenty feet away from him. He made a run for it, vaguely noticing the fact that the shooters who had moved to the ground were being dropped by opposing gunfire before they could hit him. The familiar, comforting sense of someone having his back drove Steve to charge at the final gunman, ducking below his shield as he sprinted at the huge automatic gun, tackling the guy to the ground and kicking him in the head for good measure.

Steve glanced up at the bridge, his heart pounding with relief as he half-expecting to see Bucky standing there with his rifle and typical salute. He tried his best not to feel too-disappointed when it was Sam instead, apparently having commandeered one of the gunman’s weapons as he took out the remaining hostiles on the ground. “Go!” Sam shouted, motioning towards the entry ramps to the bridge, “I got this!!”

Steve took off at a sprint as directed, gathering that their primary assassin must have moved in that direction, likely after Natasha. The scene he found on the street confirmed his suspicions – Natasha was cowering behind a car, clutching at what looked like a wound on her left shoulder, while the assassin advanced on her like a predator, their gun raised for what Steve was sure would be a kill-shot. Before they had a chance to pull the trigger, Steve launched himself at them, knocking the gun away and trying to engage in hand-to-hand combat.

After having the hit disturbed, the assassin seemed all-too-happy to take on Steve’s challenge. Up close, Steve could tell that whoever it was behind the mask, they were incredibly powerful – a few inches shorter than he was, and nowhere near as broad, but when they came at him swinging the strength behind the hits and punches was immense despite the compact build underneath all of the leather armor.

Steve gave as good as he got, instinct and rage over the events of the week taking over – he held nothing back, kicking and punching and flinging his shield with all of his might, but the assassin was able to block them all with relative ease, coming back at him with equally powerful blows, bringing a couple of knives and guns into the mix that kept Steve on his toes, occasionally needing the shield to block.

The most disturbing part of the fight came when he wound up and chucked the shield for a knock-out blow, only to have them catch it easy, brandishing it for a second before flinging it back hard enough to embed it in the side of a nearby van. Steve ducked just in time, blinking in surprise at the sight – although they had occasionally brought the shield into play during training with Romanoff and Barton, no one other than Bucky had ever shown such proficiency using it as a weapon.

With the shield disposed of the assassin rushed Steve again, briefly getting the upper hand on him and putting him on his back. Steve kicked out of it instantly, narrowly avoiding the diving blow that they had intended to land on his face. He reached blindly as they started to regain their feet, grabbing the assassin by the hood and whipping them over his shoulder as hard as he could. The hood and mask slid off as the assassin hit the ground, but as before they rolled with the impact, standing immediately and turning to face Steve again.
It turned out that the attacker was a woman, after all – a blonde who probably would have been beautiful, if not for the horrible, wild look that she was glaring at Steve with. She lowered her shoulders and began to charge at him again, but before she could make it more than a couple of steps she was kicked over by Sam as he swooped in from above, finally having had time to don his wings.

She looked considerably more put-out when she gained her feet the next time, grabbing a pistol from her leg holster and beginning to advance on Steve. Before any of them could move, a rocket slammed into the car beside them, blasting the woman out of sight in a smoky blaze. Steve glanced over his shoulder from where the shot had been fired, only to find Natasha leaning against a pillar as she dropped the launcher, bleeding from her shoulder and looking as if she’d seen a ghost as she continued to stare at the spot where the assassin had been standing.

Steve made to move towards Nat, realizing that the blonde woman had booked it away after the blast, but he was interrupted as Rumlow and crew advanced on him with an arsenal of SHIELD guns, screaming at the three of them to get on their knees while choppers circled above.

There was no way in hell they were going to escape this alive, so Steve did the only thing that he could do, dropping his shield and going to his knees as Rollins jammed the muzzle of his gun into the back of his neck, allowing them to shackle him in frankly ridiculous restraints and then following silently as they loaded Steve, Natasha and Sam into the back of a transport van, jeering all the while.

“Who was she?” Steve asked after riding for a few minutes in silence, uncaring of the SHIELD goons in the van listening in – Nat was looking worse by the second, and he wasn’t sure how much longer she’d be conscious to relay the information, anyway.

“Her name’s Yelena Belova,” Natasha responded quietly, her brow still furrowed in pain. “We were… friends, I suppose.”

“You suppose?” Steve inquired. “So you knew her in Russia?”

Natasha closed her eyes and leaned further into her headrest, her lips quirking in an odd smile. “We had a weird, competitive, intimate relationship, those of us who actually survived the program,” she finally replied.

“What program?”

“Chyornaya Vdova,” she muttered with a grimace.

“Black Widows,” Steve repeated tonelessly, hoping that he actually had the translation wrong. When Natasha didn’t respond, he questioned further. “You mean there’s more than one of you?”

“I was one of twenty-eight principle ballerinas in the Bolshoi,” Natasha responded, her voice becoming eerily monotone. “And therefore one of twenty-eight widows in the Red Room. We were taken from our parents, trained by KGB operatives in all available methods of weaponry, espionage and assassination. I was the top pupil of our class – Yelena was my toughest competitor.”

“And you think she went over to HYDRA?”

“After the collapse of the Soviet Union, we were all without work.” Natasha responded, her voice becoming weaker by the minute. “Most of us were eliminated by the remaining Red Room officials, I’m sure. Those of us who escaped were willing to use our services for anyone who would pay us enough and offer asylum for a brief time – I was doing private dirty jobs for any mob boss that asked when Barton and SHIELD tracked me down and brought me in.”

“She needs a doctor,” Sam interrupted, leaning over as much as his restraints would allow looking at
her shoulder before glaring at the SHIELD guards. “If we don’t get pressure on that wound soon, she’s gonna bleed out.”

Predictably, the goon drew his taser, brandishing it threateningly in Sam’s face as he sat back and shut up. Unpredictably, he then turned the baton around, immediately jamming it into the chest of the second guard, immediately incapacitating him. There was a beat as the three of them watched in silent shock while the remaining guard pulled their TAC helmet off, to reveal Agent Hill, sighing with relief as she sat it on her lap. “Finally… that thing was squeezing my brain,” she muttered, before looking thoughtfully at Sam and then turning to Steve. “Anyway, who’s this?”

“A friend,” Steve heard himself respond, still too surprised by the turn of events to think of anything snappier. “You have any other brilliant tricks up your sleeve?”

Hill smirked at him, first unlocking the restraints on Sam and Natasha so that Sam could tend to Nat’s shoulder, then setting in on the considerably more challenging system that was keeping Steve captive. “We only have a few minutes before they reach the point they were planning on offing the three of you, so we have to move quickly as possible,” she said once she’d unfastened the last of Steve’s leg cuffs. “I have a moving truck parked two blocks away – Romanoff, will you be able to make it on foot?”

“Don’t think I have much of a choice…” Natasha muttered weakly, but Steve knew if she was truly worried she would have said as much.

Hill produced a plasma knife from her boot, cutting a hole in the bottom of the van while they were stopped at a light. Steve went last, rolling as the vehicle had begun to pick up speed again by the time his turn was up, but within a few minutes they were all safely tucked away into the back of Hill’s truck, racing away in the opposite direction as the HYDRA squad had left.

The truck finally rolled to a stop, and Hill opened the back door to reveal a heavily wooded area next to what looked like an abandoned power station. Steve didn’t have the energy to question things anymore, and instead focused on helping Natasha down gingerly from the back, supporting her on her uninjured side as they followed Hill through a heavily-secured door.

Hill slid between Steve and Natasha after locking the entry behind them, calling out to a man who had come jogging down the corridor. “She’s got a single GSW to the shoulder,” he heard Hill call out, moving ahead towards the guy who was already examining Natasha, but the rest was lost to Steve as his entire world seemed to grind to a halt.

Another door had opened down the corridor, and he blinked a couple of times, praying to anyone that would listen to allow the sight of Bucky standing a hundred yards away from him to not be a hallucination. He opened his mouth to try to say something, but before anything could come out Buck was charging down the corridor towards him, side-stepping the other three and barreling towards Steve with a look of fearsome determination on his face.

“Buck,” Steve choked breathlessly once they were a couple of steps apart, but instead of responding verbally Bucky grabbed him roughly by the front of his shirt, hauling Steve towards him and crushing their mouths together desperately. Steve’s nose smashed into Bucky’s cheekbone, and their teeth clacked together painfully, but Steve couldn’t find it in himself to give a shit. Because Bucky was here, he was alive, and they were kissing like their lives fucking depended on it. As he turned his head sideways to make the entire thing a bit more comfortable, Steve wasn’t entirely sure that they didn’t.

His hands moved on their own accord, so that they were clutching at Bucky’s back, pulling him even closer and further proving to Steve that he really was there. He didn’t really need the confirmation,
the familiar scent of leather and gunpowder and Old Spice and Bucky overwhelming his senses and telling Steve all he needed to know, but the solid weight in his arms made up for all of the terrible scenarios his mind had been torturing him with during their time apart.

Finally (but also far too soon), Bucky broke the seal of their lips, panting roughly as he pressed their foreheads together instead. “I can’t leave your punk ass alone for two fuckin’ days,” he murmured hoarsely, his hands finally giving up their desperate hold on Steve’s shirt, snaking up Steve’s back so that his right hand was splayed across his midback and the left ended up resting on the back of his neck, the cool, smooth feeling of its metal grounding Steve even further.

“Shut up,” Steve whispered harshly, the horror of the past forty-eight hours crashing over him, “just shut up…” He leaned in and kissed Bucky even more deeply, pouring all of the love and relief into it that he could. The regret and fear that he had felt the previous day was still too raw to be ignored. Apparently the message got through loud and clear to Buck; his tongue licked gently along the seam of Steve’s lips, which were all too happy to part at the wordless request – one of them moaned obscenely as their tongues slid against each other, although which one Steve couldn’t bring himself to care enough to wonder.

Steve was pretty sure that he could have gone on like that forever, and given the way that Bucky was responding to it all he had the feeling that it was mutual, but the harsh sound of a fake cough close to him finally brought his brain online to something other than Bucky’s mouth. Reluctantly, Steve pulled away this time, glancing in the direction of the noise and blinking owlishly as Sam shook his head at the both of them, a bemused grin on his face.

“Listen – don’t get me wrong, I’m ecstatic that the two of you are finally getting your shit together…but could we maybe put the dry humping off until after we’ve figured out how we’re gonna save the world?” He asked dryly, before nodding in the direction that Steve had last seen Natasha, Hill and the other man making their way towards.

Bucky narrowed his eyes in Sam’s direction, although the dopey way that his lips quirked up gave away his real feelings. With an almighty sigh he stepped away from Steve, but his right hand immediately grabbed at Steve’s left. “Yeah, yeah… fine. There’s some shit you guys need to see, anyway,” Bucky stated, pulling Steve along with him as he led the way down the corridor. “How’d you get roped into this mess?” He asked conversationally, glancing back at Sam.

Sam shook his head, laughing as he followed the both of them. “Something tells me I’m gonna be asking myself that question for a long, long time.”

Steve couldn’t help it – although he was fully aware that they were still in a world of trouble, he grinned so hard his face hurt. Whatever stood ahead of them, between the enhanced Widow and Project Insight, he found himself surprisingly ready to take it all on.
Project Insight, Pt III

Chapter Summary

Bucky and Fury tell their side of the story, and the Insight helicarriers go on their first, and last, mission.

Chapter Notes

So a quick warning because I don't want to trigger anyone - the violence and injuries described in this chapter are quite a bit more intense than they have been in the previous ones, and Bucky experiences a couple of dissociative events throughout the course of the chapter. There isn't any explicit gore, and his episodes are short and pretty non-specific, but please read with caution if you're triggered by such things.

On a technical note: these do-dads ~*~ represent POV changes. I wanted to tell the majority of this chapter from Bucky's POV, since everything else we've gotten in the last few chapters have been from Steve, but there were a few scenes where someone else had to take over for completeness sake - I'm hoping that the switches aren't too distracting/confusing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky kept hold of Steve’s hand as he led the way towards the make-shift hospital the doc had set up in Fury’s hideout – Steve didn’t seem bothered by the fact that Bucky wanted to maintain physical contact, and he sure as hell hadn’t had a problem with the kissing, so Bucky decided to take advantage of it for as long as he could. After the stress of the past few days, the warm reassurance of Steve’s hand in his was going a long way towards easing his mind.

“Where were you?” Steve asked as they made their way down the dark corridor. “And how did you know to find this place?”

“I was supposed to be in Iran,” Bucky responded, pursing his lips as he thought about the whole ordeal. “Something about a handful of nuclear engineers – but I knew from the time that my escort showed up at the apartment that something was up. They sent the wrong team.”

Steve nodded, squeezing his hand. “I noticed that, too – right after I texted you, actually, that both Alpha and Delta STRIKE were left behind to deal with me.”

Bucky frowned at that. “Yeah, well – I had a whole team of gunmen; didn’t really seem necessary if I was supposed to be the one making the hit, right?” He scoffed and shook his head, “I watched them the whole flight, four of the six were acting shifty from the second that we took off, and the pilot didn’t want me anywhere near the cockpit. Luckily the idiot didn’t think about the fact that I’ve got a friggin’ sniper’s eye – when I saw on the radar that we were landing in Saudi Arabia, I was pretty damned sure there was only one target for the mission and it was me.”

“How’d you get out of it, then?” Sam asked, still a couple of strides behind them.
“Waited until we’d landed,” Bucky responded coldly, remembering the hot rage he’d felt as the betrayal had made itself so obvious while simultaneously trying to not think about his exact actions that followed. “Prepped my gear as usual, deplaned with the crew; then made sure we had one less STRIKE team to deal with.”

Despite his efforts, the image of six dead STRIKE operatives at the exit of the plane and the pilot’s brains painting its windshield still flashed through Bucky’s mind. He could feel Steve tensing beside him, but thankfully neither he nor Sam asked for any further details. “I flipped my phone on and saw your messages,” Bucky continued after a pause, “but realized that I couldn’t really just text back or continue on with the quinjet… a couple of missions with Nat and Barton and I’m just as paranoid about being tracked, I guess.

“So I ditched my phone and the SHIELD phones, obviously, then disabled the GPS and com system on the quinjet.”

“Where the hell did you learn how to do that?” Steve asked, his brow furrowed as he stopped in his tracks.

“Again,” Bucky said with a small smirk, “tandems with Romanoff. The systems are actually pretty straight forward, once you know how the computers work.”

Steve raised his eyebrows, clearly impressed, and Bucky couldn’t help but preen a little. For as awful as the initial escape from the STRIKE team had been, he did feel pretty accomplished pulling off his own extraction. “Anyway, they’d put us down within a few clicks of Riyadh, so it wasn’t that hard to head into town and buy a new phone – then I just lucked out on the fact that Agent Hill still had the same secure line that I remembered. She gave me the coordinates and told me to get my ass here as quickly as possible, so I turned it around and did as the lady said.”

“You were trained enough to fly a quinjet on a trans-Atlantic mission?” Steve asked skeptically, “Without navigational assistance?”

“There was a GPS on my phone,” Bucky responded evasively, before adding jokingly, “and if Barton could do it…”

Steve didn’t seem to find it funny at all, watching Bucky with a calculating stare, but thankfully he didn’t push him away – at least not until they’d stepped through the doorway he’d lead them to and Steve was able to compute the scene before him. The doctor was tending to Natasha in a chair next to the wall – Bucky hadn’t even realized until that moment that she’d been shot, he’d been so intent on getting to Steve when he’d saw him enter the bunker. Fury was propped up in the bed next to her, looking like hell as he surveyed the two of them. “Captain Rogers, nice of you to join us,” he said sardonically.

Steve dropped Bucky’s hand and stared, his eyes wide and shocked. They remained that way until Fury began explaining his methods for faking his death – the more details that he gave, the more pinched Steve’s face became.

“Why all the secrecy, why not just tell us the plan in the first place?” Steve finally asked, frowning heavily.

“Any attempt on the director’s life had to look successful,” Hill pointed out.

“Can’t kill you if you’re already dead,” Fury agreed, before looking significantly between the five of them. “Besides, I wasn’t sure who I could trust just yet.”
There was a drawn-out pause as all of them looked around at each other before Bucky cleared his throat. “Well… the gang’s all here, now, right?”

Hill smirked at him and made her way out of the room, returning a few minutes later with a StarkPad and a briefcase. Bucky’d gotten the gist of her plans, but she went into proper detail with the entire group watching, projecting the basic layouts of the helicarriers, the amount of damage that each could do, and the basic launch plan that SHIELD had in place for them. The more details he heard, the more Bucky felt like they were completely out of their depth.

“Could we call Tony?” Bucky heard himself ask, shrugging when everyone turned their attention to him. “Just… this big of a mission, seems like it’d be nice to have backup. Especially if it comes in the form of the Iron Legion.”

“If we had a reasonable way to reach him within the next six hours without tipping SHIELD off to our plans and jeopardizing any shot we have…” Hill responded slowly. “But the chances of the information getting intercepted, or someone noticing the fact that Iron Man was inbound and blowing the whistle too early – they’re too great to risk it.”

“So we’re on our own,” Steve muttered, shaking his head as he motioned between Sam and Bucky. “The three of us, against the most deadly automated weapons the world has ever seen, plus the biggest defense agency on the planet.”

“Pretty sure there’s two top-level SHIELD agents sitting here that you forgot to count,” Natasha muttered darkly, glaring Steve down as if daring him to contradict her ability to fight. While the look was pretty convincing, in Bucky’s opinion, the pallor of her face and the fact that the doctor was still bandaging her shoulder said otherwise.

“You lost a couple’a units of blood, Nat, and you could barely walk on your own coming in here – you really think you’ll be up for a fight in twelve hours?” Steve asked skeptically.

“Besides that,” Fury interrupted, before they could argue further, “Romanoff – you’re going to have your own project, distracting the World Security Secretary for as long as you can. The rest of our plan only requires one person per ship. We need to breach each of the helicarriers and replace their targeting blades with our own.”

“One or two won’t cut it, we’ll need to replace all three in order to over-ride the triangulation system,” Hill agreed, advancing her operation notes and opening a briefcase to reveal the computer chips Fury had mentioned. “Once all of the chips are in place, I’ll be able to turn the guns on the ships themselves… but if even one ship remains operational, a whole lot of people are gonna die.”

Fury nodded before cutting in. “We have to assume that everyone we come into contact with on board the ships is HYDRA – but if we can get past them and knock out these server blades then maybe, just maybe, we can salvage what’s…”

“We’re not salvaging anything.” Steve interrupted loudly. “We’re not just taking down the helicarriers, Nick, we’re taking down SHIELD.”

“SHIELD had nothing to do with this, Captain.” Fury said hotly.

“You just said yourself that we have to assume all of them could be HYDRA,” Bucky pointed out, catching eye contact with Steve and nodding in his direction, making sure he knew they were on the same page.

“You’re giving us this mission, we’re telling you how it ends,” Steve continued. “SHIELD has been
compromised; HYDRA grew right under your noses and nobody noticed it.”

“Why do you think we’re meeting in this cave?” Fury spat, “I noticed.”

“And how many paid the price before you did?” Bucky asked coldly. Fury stared at him, his eye widening as he put the implication together. “I can tell you how many were at the end of my gun,” Bucky continued anyway, anger bubbling up as the reality hit him all over again – everything he and Steve had done, everything they’d sacrificed, had fucking died for, and at the end of the day he’d ended up getting tricked into doing HYDRA’s bidding.

“I didn’t know about that,” Fury admitted sheepishly. “Pierce asked me once or twice to use your services, but he never bothered to go into detail about the targets – I didn’t have reason not to trust him.”

“And even if you had,” Steve demanded with a sneer, “would you have told us? Or would you have compartmentalized that, too? SHIELD, HYDRA… it all goes.”

“He’s right,” Hill responded quietly, staring tearfully at the Insight specs in front of her.

When Fury turned to Romanoff, she simply leaned back in the chair, glaring him down for a long moment before turning to Steve and Bucky and giving them a short nod. As a last-ditch effort, Fury turned his attention to Sam.

“Don’t look at me,” he shrugged, “I do what they do, just slower.”

“Well,” Fury sighed, leaning back on his bed as well and turning his attention to Steve and Bucky. “Then it looks like you’re giving the orders now, Captain.”

Steve looked around at the group of them, focusing on Bucky last and holding eye contact for a few moments before nodding and setting his jaw. “Alright then – we’ll go with Agent Hill’s plan. The helicarriers are due to launch at 09:00 tomorrow, so that means we infiltrate the Triskelion shortly before 07:00; make our presence known, drum up as much support from SHIELD loyals as we can. Nat, you’ll be responsible with corralling Pierce, Maria, you’ll run control from the auxiliary flight command – it’ll be up and running with a launch as big as Insight, but the majority of the security will be focused on the main command center in the opposite tower.

“Bucky, Sam and I will each sneak on board a helicarrier before they launch, then switch the chips out so that Maria can take control of them and blow them all out of the sky. Any objections?”

Fury grimaced at him, but otherwise remained silent. He did turn to Natasha after a few seconds, apparently to start outlining whatever plans he had for her and Pierce, but the doctor soon intervened, watching the monitors around the former director and insisting that he needed rest before they proceeded with whatever the rest of the plan was.

Sensing that Steve’d had enough of being around Fury for the time being, Bucky touched his arm gently, jerking his head towards the door. “There’s a mess a little ways down the corridor, why don’t we let them finish getting taken care of and take a load off for a bit.”

A few minutes later the both of them were seated with Sam around a beat-up round table in a dimly-lit room, sipping from water bottles in exhausted silence. “I watched the fight on the bridge on TV,” Bucky heard himself say after an indeterminable amount of time, finally having grown sick of the buzz of the fluorescent light above them.

The local news had shown the majority of it live; great for Hill, who had been able to haul ass downtown and infiltrate the STRIKE teams that had taken the three of them hostage, but shitty for
Bucky, who’d had to stay behind on the insistence that his arm would give his identity away and potentially jeopardize the entire mission to stop Insight. So he’d sat and watched helplessly as assassins blew shit up and Steve got his ass kicked – his horror then had been a huge driving force behind his attacking Steve the way he had when they’d finally arrived at the bunker. “Who was she?” He finally asked when Steve didn’t bother to respond to his initial statement. “The woman you were fighting?”

“A Black Widow, apparently,” Steve responded mechanically, his eyes out of focus as he stared at the water bottle still in his hand. “Only… enhanced.”

“Enhanced?” Bucky parroted back, his guts feeling like they were turning to ice as he tried to work out what the hell that could mean.

“Probably with some type of super soldier serum,” a voice interrupted from the doorway, startling all three of them. Romanoff made her way into the room, pulling an IV pole behind her and taking the open seat next to Sam. “Yelena was as well-trained as I was, and was already an accomplished marksman when I knew her, but some of the things she’s done in the past couple of days have been well beyond what her physical capabilities should allow.”

Steve nodded tightly, “She’s faster than I am, Buck – and damned near as strong as you, unless you’ve been letting up on me when we’re sparring.”

“Strong as Betsy here?” Bucky asked, waggling his metal fingers stupidly in a half-assed attempt to lighten the mood. The idea of a modern super soldier was bad enough… if she could hit harder than Tony’s ridiculously souped-up vibranium arm could, they were in seriously deep shit.

“No,” Steve huffed, his lips quirking as he fought off a grin, “but bein’ strong as the flesh hand is bad enough.”

“So are we thinking that HYDRA treated her with something similar to what these guys got?” Sam asked Natasha, shaking his head at their antics.

“It certainly didn’t come from the Red Room,” she responded confidently. “And I would think that if anyone else had their hands on anything like it, there would be considerably more people running around with the same capabilities.”

“Of course,” Steve grumbled, frowning heavily as he closed his eyes. “They’ve had access to SHIELD’s files all along – they had our blood samples as soon as we were out of the ice, all they had to do was analyze them, figure out how to reformulate the serum from it.”

“They didn’t even need my blood,” Bucky corrected bitterly, everything sliding into place. “Just Zola’s paperwork and the confirmation that SHIELD had found me alive, too. They probably already had it ready for injection before we even went back to New York.”

A shiver went down his spine as Bucky remembered Kreischberg in flashes, the burn of the injections, the pain of the tests they put him through, the screams of the other prisoners as they were poisoned to death, and all along the pudgy, rodent face of fucking Zola, standing proudly over him and praising his strength, promising Bucky that he would soon be the Fist of HYDRA.

Turned out that the bastard hadn’t been entirely wrong – he’d just ended up being the gun, instead.

“Barnes?” A vaguely familiar voice asked nearby, shaking him out of his thoughts. Bucky blinked a couple of times, frowning as he noticed Sam crouching next to him instead of seated across the table as he’d been a moment before. “Where are you?” He asked calmly, watching Bucky as if he
were a scared animal.

“Some shitty bunker outside of DC,” Bucky responded after a few seconds, remembering the technique they’d talked about in group for flashbacks.

“And who am I?” Sam asked evenly.

“Sam Wilson,” Bucky answered shortly, unable to find the energy to add something smart to it.

“And what are you?”

“I’m safe,” Bucky finished after a long pause. “At least for the next couple of hours.”

Sam shook his head with a smile at that, standing with a grunt and making his way back to his seat as Natasha and Steve both watched Bucky with far too much concern in their eyes for him to be comfortable with.

“They’d had had Erskine’s notes by that point, too,” Steve added gently, as if it somehow made it so that he shared Bucky’s fault in the whole mess, “so they knew to use Vita-Rays on her, make it work better, faster.”

“Regardless of their source for the serum, neither of you had any fault in it,” Natasha said evenly, staring the both of them down as if she’d been reading their minds. Bucky still wasn’t convinced that she couldn’t.

They were all quiet for a few minutes, letting the topic drop. Finally, Steve cleared his throat and spoke up again. “Well, I think it goes without saying that she’ll be there tomorrow; outside of the helicarriers she’s the best weapon they have left. So Nat… what’s her play? When we meet up with her –” he hesitated for a moment.

“I have no idea,” she answered quietly, before he could finish his thought. “I haven’t seen her in years, and God only knows what HYDRA’s done to her in the meantime.”

Steve nodded tightly, “But if we have the option, between taking her out or taking her in… do you think she’s redeemable?”

“I was.” Natasha responded quietly, her eyes never leaving Steve’s. Bucky was fairly certain he’d missed something, something that had probably happened between the two of them while they’d been on the run together, but he kept it to himself. Once again, they all sat in awkward silence, until Steve turned and glanced at the clock in the corner of the room. Bucky followed his eyes, surprised to notice how late it had already gotten.

“You guys should rest up, get your gear in order,” Steve finally said, rubbing his own eyes tiredly. “We need to roll out tomorrow before dawn, if we’re gonna march on the Triskelion by 07:00.”

“You gonna fight in that?” Sam asked, nodding skeptically at Steve’s jeans and jacket.

Instead of responding immediately, Steve glanced at Bucky, giving him a smile that was difficult to read. “No way… if you’re gonna fight in a war, you need to have the right outfit.”

It took him a second, but suddenly Bucky remembered their first night in London, when he had been just drunk and shell-shocked enough to openly flirt with the man he was still trying to reconcile as the skinny punk he’d grown up in love with. “Up for a quick run?” Steve asked impishly, rising from his chair as he put together the fact that Bucky had figured his meaning.
Unfortunately, it seemed like Natasha was figuring them out, too. “You idiots aren’t really going back into the District, are you?” She asked bluntly, frowning as she looked between the two of them.

“We won’t get caught, Romanoff,” Bucky promised sincerely, standing from his seat and pulling his jacket back on, so that his left arm would be adequately covered. “I don’t love the idea of running in there tomorrow with SHIELD gear, either.”

“I will personally kill you both if you’re not back by 01:00,” she said darkly as they both made their way towards the door. Sam, for his part, just gave them both an incredulous half-smile.

“Yes ma’am,” Steve responded with a grin of his own, and then raced out into the night. Bucky gave them a jaunty salute before taking off, hot on his friend’s heels. The likelihood that he’d actually be able to fit into his old Howlies jacket was somewhere around zero, but Bucky wasn’t going to let Steve have all of the fun of stealing their shit back from the Smithsonian.

Breaking into the Air and Space Museum had been laughably easy – Steve had used his shield to knock out a couple of alarms, Bucky had sniped a single surveillance camera, and fifteen minutes later they were sprinting through the side streets of DC again, grinning like idiots as they hauled the duffel bags they’d stowed their uniforms in.

When they re-entered the bunker Romanoff was predictably still waiting up for them, IV pole gone and looking considerably better than she had when they had left, although Bucky could tell from the bulkiness under her jacket that her shoulder was still heavily bandaged. He had half a mind to ask her what Fury had in mind for her, that wouldn’t put her at too big a risk of fighting so soon after a major injury, but she had ended up leaving them in peace as they looked over their gear in the otherwise empty mess.

Steve ended up declaring his uniform to still be in working order, despite its age. Bucky was convinced that they were both replicas, but the body armor inside of Steve’s top still seemed to be adequate. Of course, Bucky’s jacket required some work – the sleeve was far too tight to be worn over his left arm, and he’d have to button it incorrectly if he wanted a prayer of fitting any protective gear underneath, but he was able to move around in it once the modifications were made. It was far from perfect, but it was better than putting back on his SHIELD gear, knowing what it really stood for.

“Maybe I will just go with the plain Kevlar…” he finally muttered, pulling awkwardly on the right sleeve, which still managed to be too tight to be comfortable.

“You can if you want,” Steve responded conversationally, eyes never leaving Bucky’s torso, “but… I think it works. As long as you don’t mind flaunting the arm and giving your identity away in the first ten seconds.”

“Oh,” Bucky responded darkly, “I want them to know who they’re facing.”

Steve raised his eyebrows before nodding slowly. Bucky was sure he felt the same way… just as bitter about the past few years, about everything that had happened after they thought they had died to stop exactly this. It was probably the same reason he’d thought to dig their moldy old uniforms out of a museum in the first place – so that they could take down HYDRA once and for all, as they’d meant to an entire lifetime ago.

It didn’t take long after that to prep their gear and store up ammunition. Once Bucky was sure that he couldn’t possibly fit another round of bullets into his pockets without making them all inaccessible the clock was well past 12:00. Steve had finished at least twenty minutes prior, and was still seated
tensely at the table.

“Uh,” Bucky started ineloquently, shouldering his rifle and tucking his jacket under his arm, “quarters are pretty tight down here, if you hadn’t guessed as much already, and – um – I kinda thought we might bunk together.”

Even as he mumbled the words, Bucky kicked himself for how stupid they were. They both needed to rest, they’d both agreed that they needed to talk shit out before they went any further, if they went any further, than kissing; but knowing what they faced the next morning, Bucky couldn’t really bear the thought of being rooms apart that night. Steve had turned to him, blinking in surprise as he processed the words, and before Bucky could think of a way to take them back he was grinning as he rose to his feet and picked up the shield.

“Yeah… yeah, alright. I’m alright with that, Buck.” He responded, smiling so brightly that Bucky had a sudden, irrational urge to cry.

Instead, he swallowed thickly, nodding as well then turning on his heel and leading the way down the hall to the last, tiny room on the right. Bucky had thrown his STRIKE gear on the floor of the room when he’d first gotten to the bunker, but otherwise the only things that met them inside were a single straight-backed chair and a thin, rickety cot.

Steve moved into the room like there was nothing odd about it, draping his uniform over the chair and leaning his shield against it, and then crossed the room to the bed, sitting on the foot of it tentatively. “It’s not that different than barracks, really,” he said breezily, although the pink that was staining his cheeks gave away the fact that Steve was probably feeling as nervous (or maybe excited, a hopeful voice in Bucky’s mind chimed in) as Bucky was.

In an effort to make things at least a bit easier, Bucky flipped the switch next to the door, plunging the room into darkness. Even without light to see, Bucky was still spatially aware enough to make his way back to the bed with relative ease, slowly taking a seat next to where he could feel that Steve was still upright.

“We probably should try to sleep,” Steve finally whispered after a long, tense silence.

There were only a couple of ways that they stood a snowball’s chance in hell of fitting on the mattress together.

They ended up curled tightly together facing one another; the cot was laughably narrow for how large the both of them were, but Bucky didn’t give a damn, making do by curling his left arm under the pillow, wrapping his right around Steve, and reveling in the closeness. For a few seconds they simply lay there in silence, breath mingling through the dark of the room and the mere inches separating their noses.

He had no idea who moved first, but in the blink of an eye they were kissing again, slowly and deeply.

It was a completely different experience than their first kiss when Steve had arrived – while the passion was still there, and the desperation more subtle but still lying close under the surface of it all, the forcefulness was replaced by something far sweeter. Rather than clutching at each other’s clothes, Steve’s hands were lazily trailing up and down Bucky’s back, briefly slipping under where his t-shirt had rucked up at his waist and tracing patterns along his spine. Bucky gasped at the sensation, groaning lowly as Steve’s tongue slid gently along his own. He swung his right leg over Steve’s hip in response, pulling them flush against each other as they continued necking like teenagers.
“Bucky…” Steve panted a few minutes later, even as he continued pecking brief kisses against his mouth. “Buck… we can’t…”

“I know,” Bucky murmured, nipping lightly at Steve’s lower lip before nuzzling against his cheek. “I don’t wanna explain the busted cot to Fury any more than you do, pal.”

Steve barked a surprised laugh at that, his hands moving along Bucky’s back for a short while longer before they paused. Although he made no move to push him away, Bucky could sense a change in Steve’s demeanor and moved his head back slightly on the pillow, wishing he could get a look at his face. “Something’s still bugging you – what’s up?”

“Besides all the obvious?” Steve asked bitterly. He chewed on his lip for a moment before continuing, “I guess – I’m still a little put-out about all the spy stuff. I mean; I’m glad you’re here, fuckin’ ecstatic that you’re safe, but…”

“You’re wonderin’ where I learned all the tricks with the plane and how to get a hold of Hill?” Bucky asked, not unkindly.

He could practically hear Steve’s wince. “Not even that, just trying to wrap my head around it all. I didn’t have the first damned idea about what to do when everything first went down. Hell, if it weren’t for Nat, I’d probably be sitting in a SHIELD cell right now.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” Bucky responded breezily, ignoring the skeptical look he had no doubt Steve gave him. “But if you think about it, it made sense for me to know more about taking care of myself, right? From the beginning I’ve been the one gettin’ sent into shit I might have to pull myself out of, so of course they taught me the basics on flying a quinjet. They just never anticipated I’d actually be smart enough to learn more than the little bits I was spoon-fed. But you – you’ve never been meant to go out on secret missions, so there was no point in troubling you with learning it.”

“There wasn’t a point for you to, either,” Steve muttered hoarsely. “Fuck, you didn’t even want to get involved with SHIELD in the first place…”

“Stevie,” Bucky interrupted dryly, “It wouldn’t have mattered if it was SSR or SHIELD or whatever other group would’ve eventually come askin’ us to join the good fight; I’ve been stuck with shit ops since 1943. You know that.”

Bucky didn’t like it, if he was honest with himself, never really had; but if it meant keeping Steve safe, and letting him maintain his goodness when the whole damned world seemed to be coming after it, then he was willing to do whatever was required. He’d been doomed from the start, anyway.

“But you shouldn’t’ve had to. Not then, and sure as hell not now,” Steve finally responded tightly. Bucky knew him well enough to know that Steve wasn’t angry with him, per say, but left the comment alone all the same, not wanting to pile anymore guilt on his friend – God knew he carried more than enough of it without the help.

“I want you to promise me somethin’,” Steve whispered, so much later that Bucky was beginning to think that he might have fallen asleep.

“Course, anything you want.” Bucky murmured automatically.

“If we make it through tomorrow…” Steve started after a pause.

“When we make it through tomorrow,” Bucky corrected him immediately, guts twisting at the mere potential of anything different. They’d finally made it this far – he’d be damned before he let either of them die before they could properly enjoy it.
“When we make it through tomorrow,” Steve amended, his voice fondly exasperated before becoming serious again, “I want you to promise that we’ll both be straight with one another, come clean about all of the shit that other people have forced us into hiding over the years.”

“I promise,” Bucky responded fervently, somewhat nervous about what it would entail but also relieved over the idea of finally getting to let things off his chest. “I’ll even teach you how to pilot a quinjet, if you want,” he added teasingly.

“I’m serious, you jerk,” Steve complained.

“So am I,” Bucky said, his tone evening out. “I swear, Steve – anything you wanna know. I… I don’t wanna keep secrets between us anymore, either.”

Steve stared at him through the dark of the room, eyes narrowed in concentration, before nodding shortly at what he saw. “Good,” he murmured, leaning in for one more quick kiss and then settling back onto his half of the pillow. “We should try’n get some shut eye,” he muttered softly, already drifting off.

Bucky was certain that neither of them had gotten any sleep in the past forty-eight hours, so he was hardly about to disagree. While they certainly could go longer, it would be better to take on the next day’s plans in top-shape. “G’night, Steve,” he said gently, not bothering to untangle their limbs unless Steve made the first move.

To his great surprise, Bucky actually dropped off to sleep, not waking until he heard movement outside in the hallway. He barely had time to recognize the fact that Steve was still curled under his arm, enormous shoulders rounded so that they fit more naturally and the crown of his head tucked underneath Bucky’s chin, before the light clicked on and startled them both.

“You boys were the ones who set the wake-up call,” Romanoff announced from the doorway, “let’s get a move-on already.”

Steve had blushed spectacularly, pink all the way down to the neckline of his t-shirt, but Bucky didn’t say a word about it. They both dressed quickly, silence hanging heavily between them as they made one final check of their gear and suited up to the sound of the rest of their crew moving around the bunker, doing the same. Finally, once he knew that he really couldn’t check his knives any further, Bucky took a deep breath and turned towards the door.

Before he could take more than a step Steve had reached out, grabbing his left wrist and stopping him in his tracks. Bucky looked back in confusion, only to be knocked breathless – it was Steve exactly as he’d remembered him during the war. Hell, they could have been prepping to storm Schmidt’s last fortress in the Alps, to take down the Valkyrie together… before he could finish the thought, Steve had closed the gap between them, pressing their lips together in a quick, gentle kiss.

“Let’s do this,” he muttered with a shy smile when they parted, before making his way past Bucky into the hall, calling out to the others and leading the way out of the bunker.

Bucky just hoped the dopey look on his face wasn’t noticeable by the time they made it onto the Insight decks.

Hill drove them to Reagan, dropping Natasha and the van in one of the lots. Steve, Bucky, Sam and Maria all traveled the rest of the way on foot, moving along the Potomac and covering the couple of miles quickly as the sun began to peak over the horizon. They gained access to the building through a stairwell near one of the parking garages, after Hill was able to disable the external alarm system using an old Stark device she’d brought along. They made their way directly to the auxiliary control
center as Steve had planned, meeting up with limited resistance until they reached the final door. The poor bastard who had come to check on the disturbance in the hall was met with the barrels of both Bucky’s and Maria’s sidearms, and gave them no trouble when evacuating the room, along with the rest of the techs that had been working there.

Maria secured the external door and Bucky kept an eye on the hallway, while Steve made his way to the main intercom and opened it up for the entire building, taking a deep breath before launching into a speech using his special Captain America the Great Motivator voice.

“Attention all SHIELD agents, this is Steve Rogers,” he announced calmly, pausing for a moment before continuing. “You’ve heard a lot about me over the last few days, some of you were even ordered to hunt me down. But I think it’s time you know the truth: SHIELD is not what we thought it was – it’s been taken over by HYDRA. Alexander Pierce is their leader. The STRIKE and Insight crew are HYDRA as well. I don’t know how many more there are – but I know they’re in the building. They could be standing right next to you.

“They almost have what they want: absolute control. They shot Nick Fury, then tried to kill both me and James Barnes. Now, if you launch those helicarriers today, HYDRA will be able to kill anyone who stands in their way; unless we stop them. I know I’m asking a lot. The price of freedom is high, it always has been. But, it’s a price I’m willing to pay. And if I’m the only one, then so be it. But I’m willing to bet I’m not.” He was staring across the room at Bucky as he uttered the last line, eyes bright and earnest, as if asking for approval.

All Bucky could do was nod – of course he was with him. Steve knew damned well that he wasn’t going to let anything take him down without it dragging Bucky to hell, first.

“Did you write that down, or was it off the top of your head?” Sam asked teasingly, interrupting their non-verbal conversation.

“Nah,” Bucky answered for him, clearing his throat when he noticed how tight it was with emotion. “Steve’s always been full of hot air; it makes for a surprisingly good kick in the ass when he wants it to.”

Hill frowned as one of the monitors began beeping frantically, stepping up to the main computer and typing away at its keyboard. “What is it?” Steve asked.

“They’ve pre-empted the launch sequence,” she muttered, turning to them with a significant look. “You’ll want to hustle down there – they’ll be airborne within the next ten minutes.”

With the plan changed Bucky, Steve and Sam hauled ass back down the stairwell, Bucky taking lead and keeping his sidearm at the ready in case anyone had figured out where Steve had transmitted his message from. They made it as far as the main level of the building without problem, but had to cross through to the tower nearest the river in order to gain access to the ships. Bucky kicked out the door onto the main floor, leading with his rifle as he put himself in position to cover Sam and Steve on their sprint for the launch bays. Thankfully, there were hardly any civilians in sight, just a couple of STRIKE teams that had been scrambled to guard the ships – Bucky opened fire on them immediately.

Although he couldn’t get a visual on the other gun, someone on the opposite side of the room was shooting at the STRIKE forces as well – between the two of them and Steve’s fighting with his shield as he ran through the fire, it only took a couple of minutes for the resistance to be eliminated. With that, the three of them sprinted towards the launch pads.

All three bay doors were already opened by the time they reached the river, and it was obvious that
they weren’t all going to be able to catch a helicarrier on foot. Luckily Sam would have his wings – he and Bucky boarded Insight-2 together, while Steve hurled himself onto Insight-1. “Take them out then meet up with me,” he huffed over the intercom – so Bucky and Sam set themselves to doing exactly that, as quickly as possible.

While Sam zipped around the helicarrier, keeping both the guns and the agents onboard the ship busy, Bucky was able to find a way into the guts of the ship, quickly working his way down to the control pod below. Given the minimal staffing that was apparently onboard the automated weapons and the trouble that Sam was giving them outside, Bucky only had to take out a single HYDRA operative before running up to the control panel, otherwise unopposed. He flipped the appropriate switch and changed the chips out, uneasy over how simple the entire thing had been.

“Alpha lock, complete,” Bucky reported into his com, watching as the control panel moved back into its ready position. “You two bums gonna do your part?” He asked teasingly, hoping that it belied his concern over how long it had been since he’d heard from Steve.

“REALLY, Barnes?” Sam responded incredulously, the sound of gunfire still ringing though his mic, “you’re really gonna put me on blast like that, after I just put my ass on the line and did all the work for you?”

“Still making friends up here,” Steve finally responded tightly. “I could use a hand when one of you is free!”

“I’m on it,” Bucky responded immediately, remembering the rows of quinjets on the deck of the helicarrier as he made his way back into the guts of the ship.

Bucky was stepping out onto the outer deck of Insight 2 when Sam responded again. “Alright, I’m in… Bravo locked.”

“Great –” Steve responded a second later, sounding a bit less stressed than he had during their last radio communication. The muffled sound of an explosion in the background kept Bucky from being convinced that he had it under control, though. “Buck, I need you to get down to the helipad, Fury should be inbound soon, we need to give him cover, especially since it looks like HYDRA’s about to start scrambling quinjets.”

Bucky flicked his com on to respond, but was immediately knocked off of his feet by a kick he hadn’t even seen coming. He rolled with the momentum, springing back into a ready position as he stared down a solidly-built blonde woman. She pulled a handgun on him, but Bucky was able to deflect the shots with his left arm, charging forward and knocking the gun out of her hands as he pulled a knife of his own.

Steve hadn’t been kidding about how fast and strong the Widow was – even as he changed grips on the knife, Belova was able to block his strikes. He held off using the power of his left arm just yet; he hadn’t felt this amped up during a fight in a long, long time, and he wasn’t positive that he would be able to keep himself from killing an opponent with it if he struck now.

The Widow knocked the knife out of his hand while he was busy with his thoughts, and he braced himself for another onslaught – but instead of launching at him again, she pulled a small disk out of one of her pockets, tossing it so that it stuck in the plates of Bucky’s arm. A second later a pulse of electricity felt like it was searing right into his brain, and his entire left side slumped as the arm became a dead weight. He pulled the disk off immediately, gritting his teeth as he flung it to the ground.

Thankfully, the ringing in his ears and the pain in his shoulder stopped almost immediately, but it
took a second or two for the plates of his arm to recalibrate and its responses to come back online. Bucky swung it in a circle as he began to regain normal feeling again, only to look up and see Belova sprinting down the flight deck. It took him a second to recognize that the balls she was rolling under each of the jets that she passed were cherry bombs; as soon as it clicked, Bucky was running after as hard as he could, determined to catch her before she could knock all of them out and cut off his ability to help Steve on the final ship.

Unfortunately, she was also every bit as fast as Steve had claimed. By the time Bucky had tackled Belova to the ground, there were only four quinjets left – and the racket of the explosions had brought the remaining STRIKE operatives on the ship to the deck.

Bucky dodged the lead one’s shot easily, kicking him with enough force that the poor bastard flew through the air, knocking Belova over before she could blast another one of the quinjets. His attention was stolen for the next couple of minutes by the swarming STRIKE agents, causing Bucky to lose sight on the Widow as he dodged bullets and returned fire on as many tactical suits as he could. He’d just taken one of the smaller ones out with a knife, tearing a small rocket-launcher off of the guy’s back as he dropped to the ground, when the quinjet nearest to him powered up.

Bucky turned and launched a rocket at it immediately, not wanting to allow Belova air transport as she’d probably use it to either take Sam out or, more likely, intercept Steve on Insight-1. The second that the explosion took out the jet’s left engine, though, the last plane on the ship powered up as well, and Bucky caught glimpse of a familiar blond head as it cleared the edge of the flight deck.

“Hey Sam!” Bucky shouted into his com, trying his best to remain calm as he watched the jet take off in Steve’s direction. “I’m gonna need a ride…”

“Alright, let me know when you’re ready,” Sam’s response came through, sounding annoyed. Before Bucky could retort, the door to the flight deck opened again and yet another stream of STRIKE agents came pouring out, this one looking like it had even heavier fire power. Knowing he didn’t have time to wait, Bucky took a running leap off the side of the helicarrier, calling out, “I just did!” as he hurtled over the side.

Bucky realized as he went into freefall, the main parking lot of the Triskelion growing larger at an uncomfortably quick rate, that he probably should have figured out Sam’s location before diving and counting on being caught – but it wasn’t as if he could do anything about it now. He noticed something approaching at incredible speed out of his periphery, and turned his head just in time to see Sam rocketing towards him, enormous metal wings tight to his back as he dove. He reached out and grabbed hold of Bucky’s right hand before reversing direction, shouting in effort as both he and the wings strained to change their momentum and hauled Bucky upward, correcting their flight path again and taking off towards the buildings.

Sam was breathless as he finally dropped Bucky to the pavement of the helipad, far enough to the Southwest corner that they wouldn’t be visible through the main windows of the Security Council boardroom. “Steve told me you were reckless,” he gasped, his voice rising as he continued, “but SHIT man!”

“STEVE said I was reckless?!” Bucky yelled back incensed by the hypocrisy of the statement.

He was about to bitch about the fact that Sam had grounded him, but Sam simply shook his head, wings already powering up again as he turned and jumped off of the edge of the helipad, soaring up towards the Insight-1 helicarrier. Bucky watched him go, trying to ignore his discomfort with the idea that it was Sam heading off to cover Steve instead of himself, but before he could think too much on it there was a loud crack from the top of the roof.
Bucky vaguely remembered learning about the anti-aircraft devices that had been mentioned during their SHIELD orientation, the barriers the building had put up as safety measures after terrorist attacks on the Pentagon in 2001 – and apparently Sam had never been told about them at all. His right wing had been hit with some type of energy beam, thankfully missing his body but sending him into a tailspin. Considering the height he was now falling from, it hardly mattered.

Bucky acted completely on instinct, grabbing the grappling hook out of his belt with his left hand and launching it in the direction that Sam was falling. The hook latched onto Sam’s wing pack and Bucky braced himself, taking a step back on the helipad so that Sam’s momentum couldn’t pull him forward as the line went taught. He reeled him up quickly, Sam making the job easier (or maybe just making sure that he didn’t smash into the windows) by walking his way up the building as Bucky pulled him in, finally reaching over the edge and hauling him back onto solid ground.

“Dude,” Sam gasped, his eyes still wide with panic as he grabbed at his chest, fingers scrambling to unhook the straps of his pack, “that is the exact opposite of how you’re supposed to use that thing.”

“Worked, didn’t it?” Bucky responded flippantly, although his own heart still racing as well.

Sam heaved a couple more deep breaths before turning his com back on, his voice surprisingly calm as he announced, “Wings are down, Cap, we’re both grounded… I’m sorry,”

“It’s fine –” Steve responded after a short pause, “I’m in, I’ve got this myself.”

~*~

After all of the resistance that he’d met on the deck of the helicarrier (he’d taken down at least three full STRIKE teams and support staff, by his count, but he was pretty certain that it was a gross underestimate) Steve couldn’t help feeling uneasy as he finally made his way into the control deck of the ship. It was eerily silent – surely there still had to be staff onboard the ship, waiting to take him out before he could switch the final chip and destroy HYDRA’s plans.

As he jogged towards the gangplank leading to the primary control board, a familiar blonde stepped out of the shadows, proving him right. Yelena Belova stood at the opposite end of the catwalk, staring at him with blank, emotionless eyes. “Yelena,” he murmured, “a lot of people are going to die if I don’t finish this. Just… stand aside.” She didn’t move, barely even blinked as he stated his case. “We’re gonna take HYDRA down once and for all,” he continued, hoping that the promise of freedom would seal the deal, “you won’t have to work for them anymore.”

At the mention of HYDRA she’d pulled her sidearm from its holster, but otherwise stood her ground. “Please,” he finally begged, “we’ve both hurt enough people today.”

Even as he said it, Steve had raised his shield, knowing that he didn’t have much time left to waste with trying to talk her down. While he preferred the idea of bringing her into custody, of gaining another ally, one who could be as important as Natasha had proven herself, he wasn’t ready to risk the lives of millions for it. Finally, he charged, bullets pinging off of the shield as he raced towards the Widow and engaged.

As had been the case on the bridge, they were remarkably well-matched. She’d emptied her clip without doing any damage to Steve, thankfully, but when she’d come back with an attack knife the fight had become considerably more challenging. Between her strength and quickness, she was able to sneak around the shield and land a hit – thankfully it barely grazed Steve’s shoulder, the resultant sting annoying but not costing him any strength. The close-call only inspired him to fight harder, and while he wasn’t having any trouble holding her off Steve couldn’t gain enough of an edge to actually attack for himself.
Eventually he had been able to get an opening, swinging the shield hard enough that he knocked the
knife from her hand, then whipping it back between them, knocking her to the side and over the
railing. Without watching any further he lunged towards the control panel, depressing the button that
brought the casing down and pulling the chip out of his pocket. Steve pulled the appropriate chip out
of its slot, but before he could replace it there was a sharp, stabbing pain in his right side – he yelled
out, flinging his elbow back to knock Belova away, but the damage was already done, evidenced by
the knife that was embedded deep in his trunk. For a second Steve could only stare at it stupidly, his
brain providing nothing more than the innate knowledge that he needed to leave the damned thing in,
otherwise he’d risk bleeding out.

The sound of rapidly approaching footsteps shook him from his shock, and Steve swung out with the
fist that wasn’t still gripping the chip as Belova came at him again. She parried the hit easily,
grabbing his arm and kicking at his opposite side, so that the chip fell out of his hand. This time
Steve made sure to land his punch, knocking her back onto the bridge then jumping over her prone
form, sliding towards the tracking chip where it still lay at the end of the platform. Belova slid after
him, of course, crashing into Steve at the edge of the final rail and knocking them both over the side.
He turned as he was falling, barely missing landing on the handle of the knife, but as he hit the floor
the chip was jolted out of his hold.

The Widow grabbed it up, and Steve jumped her immediately, using his weight to pin her down
while trying to pry the delicate chip out of her fingers without breaking it. In the end, he’d needed to
wrap his arm around Belova’s neck, applying pressure until the fight went out of her. Steve released
his hold immediately, not wanting to do anything more than knock her out, then scooped up the chip
where it had fell, scrambling back towards the control panel.

~*~

Bucky remained out of sight of the boardroom windows even after Sam had made his way into the
building, making sure that he had a decent idea of what was going on inside (or at least keeping a
headcount to make sure no STRIKE teams had broken in) without giving his position away. Finally,
after at least an eternity, the sound of an approaching helicopter drowned out the sounds of distant
gunshots – within a couple of minutes, Fury was landing on the helipad, giving Bucky a quick nod
before sweeping into the board room to help Natasha confront Pierce directly.

With his cue, Bucky moved into position, still staying behind the chopper so that someone would
have to be paying attention to notice him but now able to see clearly into the boardroom. He
immediately set his sights on Pierce, grinding his teeth as he thought of all of the evil the man had
done, had ordered him to do without Bucky realizing. “I have a shot; I can take him out now…”
Bucky announced, rifle perfectly still despite the adrenaline that was pumping through him as he
stared down his chance to take the bastard out.

“Hold fire until Fury’s finished what he needs,” Maria responded patiently, before adding, “Falcon –
Rumlow’s on his way to the council.”

“I’m on it,” Sam responded immediately, wherever he was in the building.

“You guys get all the fun,” Bucky muttered, flipping his mic off and remaining still.

He had no idea how long he remained in place, watching as Nat worked away on a computer,
surrounded by Pierce, Fury and the members of the Security Council. Natasha forced Pierce to do
something by gunpoint – Bucky was considering radioing for Steve, recognizing how long it had
been since he’d heard an update from the final helicarrier, when suddenly the council members
dropped to the floor, seizing as Romanoff and Fury both pulled side arms on Pierce. Whatever the
Secretary said stopped either from acting on the threat, though… Natasha was especially quick to
drop her weapon, moving stiffly, as if she were under significant threat.

“Hill?” Bucky asked quietly, keeping his breathing steady so that he maintained proper target on Pierce’s head. “Is Romanoff done with whatever she was up to?”

“Yeah, the data dump is complete,” Hill confirmed after a beat, “why, what’s going on in the council room?”

Bucky squinted instead of answering, moving the barrel of his rifle a half of a degree to the right to account for the thickness of the window of the boardroom, and then pulling the trigger. Pierce’s body dropped like a ragdoll before the glass had even finished cracking.

~*~

Steve heard the gunshot a split-second before the pain blossomed in his right hamstring, stopping him in his tracks as he’d sprinted towards the pillar that held the control panel aloft. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he began to climb anyway – it was definitely harder, not having full-strength in his lower limbs, but adrenaline had kicked in enough that he barely felt the pain in his side anymore, and his arms were plenty strong enough to carry him the fifty feet into the air.

Besides, there was no time to waste if Belova was already conscious again and opening fire on him; somehow, Steve doubted that her next shot would be a non-lethal one. It was completely nerve-wracking, pulling himself up onto the open platform without being able to look back at where the widow was below him, but Steve tried to keep his focus on the goal that still lay ahead. Another gunshot went off, the bullet rattling off of the steel just to the left of his head, and Steve groaned as he contracted his trunk as well as he could against the pain and pulled himself up onto the catwalk. It seemed like he was finally in the clear, running as well as he could towards the open control panel, chip in hand as he started to radio Hill.

Before he could flip his com on, though, there was an explosion of pain on the left side of his chest that knocked Steve to his knees– he tried to take a breath but could only gasp ineffectually, gaping down as blood began to bloom across the front of his uniform. For one hysterical moment he thought he was having an asthma attack… only to realize that the truth was far worse. The bullet had hit him in the lung, probably collapsed the damned thing.

Another ping of a bullet, and Hill counting down the seconds left before the Insight guns went online, brought Steve back to the task at hand. Gasping another breath of air, he turned and hauled himself to his feet, staying vertical just long enough to jam the chip into its place and punch the button for the control panel.

“Charlie locked,” Steve groaned, slumping back to the floor and panting ineffectually. The good news was shock was beginning to set in – the injuries didn’t hurt anymore, so much as he couldn’t feel much of anything. The bad news was… he had no idea how the hell he was going to get out of the helicarrier in this shape. If they had time to scramble a chopper for him, maybe, but…

“We’re online, Cap – get out of there!” Hill called out triumphantly.

Steve tried to get to his feet, vaguely aware of the fact that Belova was still below, still armed – he didn’t even have the strength to get his legs under him. “Fire now,” he finally ended up radioing back, recognizing there was no way out of this that didn’t jeopardize the entire mission.

“But…” Hill tried to argue

“DO IT!” He choked into the open com, praying that she’d follow the damned command before he
could change his mind.

“Steve?” Bucky’s voice came through his ear piece, painfully soft.

Steve closed his eyes tightly, swallowing down tears – it was so fucking unfair, to have to go out like this, to have to leave Bucky like this, losing everything he loved all over again… but Steve couldn’t see a way around it. “Hill, you have your orders,” he said harshly, reminding her again of the command.

There was a horribly long beat, before she began counting down for three.

“Steve?! Where are you?” Bucky again, sounding considerably more frantic this time.

“I’m sorry, Buck,” he choked, slipping further down the control panel.

“Firing,” Hill announced, her voice sounding watery.

Bucky screamed his name this time, but Steve pulled his earpiece out, closing his eyes as the helicarrier began to shake with gunfire.

~*~

At some point they’d moved into a helicopter, apparently – Bucky’s mind was aware of the fact that they were flying, circling around the Triskelion in search of something (Sam), but the only thing that he could focus on was the lone helicarrier drifting off-course over the Potomac in a fiery blaze and the God-awful sound of Steve’s voice apologizing to him. *I’m sorry, Buck.*

To his left there was a loud explosion, and then suddenly the chopper was tipping on its side. Someone must had strapped him in without Bucky noticing – it was a good thing, considering a second later there was a body freefalling into the cabin of the helicopter, kicking out the rear-door as Natasha barely managed to catch it before a male voice started screaming.

“Hill!” Natasha shouted into her headset, once the man had been pulled safely inside. “Where’s Steve – you got a location on Rogers?”

It was Steve’s name that broke through the fog in his head, and Hill’s response that finally cleared it. “Negative. He… he didn’t leave the helicarrier.”

“Take me there.” Bucky croaked, his voice barely recognizable to his own ears.

“The ship’s falling apart, Barnes, the debris will take us all out,” Fury responded, frowning as he looked through the windshield at the explosions that were still going on.

His left hand seemed to move on its own, drawing the sidearm from his thigh holster and pointing it directly in Fury’s face as the thumb disengaged the safety. “Take me there, now.”

“Bucky…” Sam said gently, his hands up and still as if he was trying to talk to a spooked animal. Natasha sat in the seat beside him, her eyes wide and her lips pressed tightly together. “Bucky, man… can you hear me?”

Bucky clenched his teeth so hard his jaw hurt, his vision blurring through what must have been tears, but his arm never wavered in its aim. They all sat like that, silent and still, before Fury finally exhaled slowly through his nose. “Alright, Sergeant, okay. I’ll get us as close as I can.”

~*~
There was a cacophony of explosions and shattering glass, loud enough to momentarily drown out Steve’s thoughts, even the sickening burbling coming from his own chest. Suddenly a shriek pierced the air, so loud and shrill that Steve couldn’t ignore it – gathering his strength, he rolled onto his side, then pulled himself up to slump over the side of the railing, looking down into the belly of the deck below. One of the main weight-bearing beams had crashed to the floor of the carrier, trapping Yelena Belova beneath it; despite her strength, it was obvious that there was no way that she would be able to lift the weight off of her, especially at the angle which it had fell. Steve swallowed thickly, grimacing at the taste of blood in his mouth – he couldn’t stand there and let her die, trapped like an animal while the ship was shot out around them. Despite whatever she might have done for HYDRA… no one deserved that. Especially not someone who had been forced to act against her will, probably for her entire life.

Dragging himself to her level was an enormous, painful struggle; worse than anything Steve had ever pushed himself through. Belova stared up at him in naked fear as Steve limped up to her – likely expecting him to simply finish the job, he thought with a jolt. “Just…” he gasped, bracing himself as well as he could against the pain as he knelt down and wrapped his arms around the beam. “Push up as hard as you can…” he continued, before straining upward with all of his remaining strength, every fiber of his body screaming at him for its latest round of torture.

His vision blacked out after a few seconds and the weight slipped from Steve’s fingertips, crashing back against the deck as he fell over, barely able to draw breath into his burning lungs. Belova must have scrambled out from under the beam at least, and was now crouching near him, watching Steve with such naked confusion that it made his heart hurt even worse.

“Why?” She rasped, hands reaching towards him hesitatingly but not touching.

“Everyone deserves a second chance,” he panted after a few seconds, pausing as the urge to cough became too great for him to stop – he tried his best not to pay attention to how much blood came up. “You can get better,” he continued once the coughing fit finally stopped, “you can make things right. Come to us after, find Natasha…”

There was a loud crash before he could finish the thought, and the next thing he knew Steve was falling out of the sky, the helicarrier and its ongoing explosions becoming increasingly smaller above him. The fall was finally broken when he smashed into a body of water, jarring his back and head with such force that Steve couldn’t make his limbs move. Even if his muscles would have had enough strength to pull him back to the surface – his body seemed incapable of following the commands his mind tried to give them. He continued sinking slowly into the murky water, watching numbly as even the light of the sun seemed to fade.

Suddenly, there was a flash of metal above him, and Bucky’s face appeared in the water as well – wide-eyed and green and somewhat ghastly, but still beautiful and whole and Bucky. Steve was pretty sure he felt his mouth smile, thankful that his subconscious had at least granted him this one last gift before it gave up as well. It was his last thought before everything went black and quiet and still.

Chapter End Notes

I'm truly, honestly sorry... I promise I'll make up for that ending in the next chapter.

On that note, my classes have started back up again, so updates are probably going to be
weekly for the rest of the way out - I just don't have the time to finish chapters every
couple of days like I did when I was free for winter break. That said, I do have
everything planned out through the events of AoU now, so it shouldn't be more than a
week between new material.

Thanks so, so, so much as always to those of you leaving kudos and comments - this fic
has gotten so much more support than I ever could have dreamed of, and probably
wouldn't be half of what it is without you guys. I'm on tumblr, in case you want to come
yell about this and other Stucky trash with me.
May 2014

Chapter Summary

To his great surprise, Steve wakes up alive, then both of our heroes have a few days to recover and regroup for a change.

Chapter Notes

I am complete garbage at writing fluff, apparently... I'm really, really sorry if this reads like a seventh grader's book report. I came *this* close to scrapping the chapter altogether and jumping right into the next plot line, but ultimately I figured these two deserved to have some calm before another storm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The first thing that Steve became aware of was the fact that there was something making a horrifically annoying beeping sound inside of his skull. After a few minutes of drifting in some fuzzy dream world, trying to figure out how the hell he could kill the sound, he also began to notice how heavy his limbs felt. That seemed like an odd sensation to have. Steve admittedly hadn’t been to church in a long, long time, and hadn’t paid anywhere near enough attention to the catechism when his mom had still had the time and energy to force him, but he was pretty certain that neither Heaven nor Hell were supposed to be anything like this.

He was pretty sure that he’d once heard one of the Catholic boys at school talk about some place called Purgatory, but Steve had no idea about its specifics.

As his ears grew used to the beeping, Steve started to notice another sound underneath it – something familiar, something Bucky used to play in the apartment in DC… Motown, maybe? Steve had never had much of an ear for music; he liked it well enough, had no problem with the fact that Bucky seemed to want background noise on all the time, but it was rare that he took the time to memorize song titles or lyrics unless they really spoke to him. It didn’t seem likely that he would carry something like this into the afterlife.

It required a near-Herculean effort, but Steve forced his eyes open, wincing in pain as the bright light of the room seemed to pierce through his skull. After blinking a few times his surroundings started to become more apparent, and then he noticed the horrible antiseptic smell.

Steve wasn’t dead. He was in a hospital, and a modern one. That meant it couldn’t be a dream – if he were going to imagine something like this, his subconscious would have put him back in one of the god-damned infirmaries he’d practically grown up in.

He swallowed thickly: it felt like his mouth had become a desert, and then had an entire family of furry animals die in it. He slowly turned his head to try to observe more, grimacing at the pain in the back of his head and neck. He could very vaguely remember falling out of a helicarrier from a pretty significant distance, plus tons of debris… Once the pain had finally become manageable he blinked his eyes open again, groggily recognizing Sam as he sat in a nearby chair, reading silently.
“On your left,” Steve croaked pathetically, unable to think of anything else to say.

Sam glanced up at him – there were a couple of minor cuts on his head, but for the most part his friend looked to be unharmed, to Steve’s great relief. “Hey Cap – welcome back to the land of the living,” he said with a huge smile, folding the dust jacket of the book into his page and setting it aside. “How’re you feeling?”

“Fuckin’ peachy,” Steve rasped, his mouth feeling even dryer as he licked at his chapped lips ineffectually.

Sam immediately rose from his seat, digging around on a nearby bed tray and coming away with a cup that Steve had to guess was full of water; he could have cried for joy, had he not been turned into a human sponge. Unfortunately, instead of handing the cup over, Sam unwrapped something that looked like a piece of bubblegum on a stick, dunked it in the cup, then handed it over apologetically. “Sorry man,” he said quietly, waiting as Steve performed the nearly-impossible task of raising his left hand to accept the stick, “they had to do a couple of surgeries on your guts for the stab wound… so nothing by mouth until the doctor comes by and says so.”

Steve frowned heavily at that bit of information, wondering how long he’d been out of it if they’d had time to do surgeries on him. He hadn’t even known how that would work, given how quickly his injuries usually healed – but then, Bucky’d had a couple of procedures with his arm… the thought stopped him dead, suddenly recalling his last memory before the hospital bed: ghostly, haunted Bucky, reaching for him as they both floated in the Potomac.

“Buck,” he asked desperately, shifting so that he could sit up more and look for him then gasping in pain at how badly the left side of his chest protested.

“Sam, where’s…”

“He’s fine,” Sam interrupted him, shaking his head slightly as he gently pushed Steve back onto the mattress, “you’re both like a broken record. Bucky’s fine, I sent him out for coffee in Old Town about an hour ago, before one of your nurses tried to kill him.”

Bucky was okay – the thought flooded him with so much relief that Steve could have cried, and he let his head fall back onto the pillow with a sigh. After everything, against all of the odds, they’d both made it out alive. The words Old Town finally registered after a few minutes, and Steve frowned as he opened his eyes again. “Where are we?”

“Georgetown.” Sam responded simply. “Closest hospital to where you’d ended up.”

It took him a while – Steve would have to ask later what the hell kind of drugs they had him on, to effect him so heavily – but the distance between Georgetown and Alexandria finally clicked. “But Old Town is –”

“A long ass ways away,” Sam responded with a chuckle. “I know… that was the intention. Trust me, he needed the walk; as soon as we got the good news from your surgeon this morning, I sent him out for bagels. For all of the time he says he played nursemaid to you growing up, the poor guy hasn’t handled all of this very well.” Sam waved vaguely at the tower of monitors and IV poles next to Steve’s bed.

“No, he wouldn’t,” Steve murmured, starting to feel guilty when he imagined how Bucky must have felt, pulling him out of the river in the condition Steve had been in. “He never liked me gettin’ sick… used to work his ass off to make sure we’d have money for antibiotics and aspirin in the winter, and mother henned me all the time about avoiding the cold.”
“I can imagine,” Sam responded fondly, before his expression grew more serious. “Your boy is pretty scary when he’s on the warpath, I’m not gonna lie.”

“What’d I miss?” Steve asked immediately, realizing that Sam still hadn’t mentioned how everyone else was.

Sam huffed a short laugh, running a hand over his face before sitting back in his chair and shaking his head. “Well, we obviously took out the helicarriers, but I’m guessing you remember that. Let’s see – Bucky killed Pierce, Romanoff downloaded the entirety of SHIELD and HYDRA’s secrets and dumped the whole history onto the internet so the general public knows what they’ve been up to, I fought Rumlow right before one of the helicarriers took out the whole North tower of the Triskelion. We all got out via helicopter, by the way – then Bucky flipped out about you still being on the helicarrier.” He paused for a moment like he was considering saying more, and Steve did his best to remind his groggy mind to ask Bucky about it later. “He really lost it when we did a fly-by and saw you falling into the river, though; ended up diving in after you, even though we were a good forty stories up.”

Steve blinked in surprise, turning Sam’s words over in his head and reconciling them with his memories. Maybe seeing Bucky hadn’t been a hallucination, after all – maybe Steve’s last memories actually had been of Bucky fishing him out of the Potomac. “But… he’s alright?” Steve asked thickly, trying to rack his brains to remember anything other than the look on Bucky’s face.

“Physically, yeah,” Sam confirmed, biting his lip for a moment, “Yeah, he got knocked around by Belova a little bit but otherwise he probably came out the best of all of us. Emotionally, though – I was kinda afraid we were gonna have to sedate him when the paramedics showed up for you. He was… pretty reluctant to let you go.”

Steve closed his eyes tightly, trying to swallow against the lump in his throat – a feat that was almost impossible given how dry his mouth still was. Even though completed their mission and everyone had made it out alive, he’d still put Bucky through the ringer; he couldn’t even imagine having been in the same position, and the guilt Steve felt for it almost overwhelmed him. “Anything else important?” He croaked, desperate to get his mind off of the topic.

Thankfully, Sam seemed to understand what Steve needed, and started giving a brief synopsis of the arrests that had been made while Steve had been out, as well as the mundane details regarding how much the public knew about the ‘Battle of DC’ and what the legal ramifications were looking like. Steve let the words wash over him for the most part, picking up the important details like the fact that Natasha seemed to be taking care of any chances that the four of them would be prosecuted for their roles and that Bucky’s innocence in the missions he’d carried out for Pierce wasn’t up for much debate, at least in the general public.

Whatever else he had continued saying was interrupted by the sound of paper rustling from the doorway. Steve shifted his weight as well as he could so that he could get a better look, groaning in pain as he did – but it was all the worth it to see Bucky’s face staring in at him in shock. Buck looked terrible – he didn’t have any physical injuries that Steve could see, but the shadows under his eyes were as bad as they’d been when he’d broken the 107th out of Kreischberg, and his hair was a greasy rat’s nest which seemed completely unfamiliar, given how meticulous he usually kept his grooming. Add to that the dark, thick stubble that had grown in on his cheeks and how raw and chapped his lips looked, and it was painfully obvious that Bucky hadn’t been doing well at all.

“Stevie,” he breathed, dropping the bag and coffee cup on the bed tray and crossing the room in a heartbeat, then bending down over the side of Steve’s bed to press a soft, reverent kiss to his forehead. His lips lingered for a while, soft and warm, and despite his continued guilt Steve noticed
that everything seemed to hurt considerably less.

“As soon as you’re cleared for it,” Bucky whispered after a few moments, his nose still pressed against Steve’s hairline, “I’m gonna kick your ass. Don’t you ever do that shit to me again, got it punk?”

“I promise,” Steve murmured back, his voice thick with emotion. He tried his best to reach up to hug Bucky, but his arms still felt ridiculously heavy, and in the end all he ended up accomplishing was hitting him weakly in the side. “I’m sorry,” he added pathetically, “msorry, Buck, I swear I wasn’t trying… I didn’t mean…”

“Shh,” Bucky responded gently, running the fingers of his right hand carefully through Steve’s hair and giving him a small smile, “shh, I know doll…”

“I think we do eventually need to talk about why you’re so eager to put yourself on the line for others,” Sam spoke up after a few moments, heaving himself out of the hospital chair with a small smile for the two of them, “but we’ll save that for another time. I’m gonna get out of your hair for a while, go make sure I’ve still got a house – I’ll be back to see you guys tomorrow?”

“Sure, sounds good,” Bucky responded for the both of them, not moving from where he was still leaned over Steve’s bed. Steve suspected that if the damned thing hadn’t been so narrow Bucky probably would have crawled right in with him, and found himself hoping that once the two of them were alone that he would anyway.

“Oh, and Sam?” Bucky called out, finally looking away from Steve for a second as their friend stopped in the door. “Thank you, for everything.”

“Oh, and Sam?” Bucky called out, finally looking away from Steve for a second as their friend stopped in the door. “Thank you, for everything.”

“Of course, man,” Sam smiled broadly, although even in his haze Steve noticed that it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “That’s what friends are for, right?”

It was three days before Steve was finally cleared to leave the hospital – within twenty-four hours of waking up he’d felt more or less pain-free, so the additional days of being kept under observation were especially annoying. He might have tried to have gotten himself discharged, had Sam or Bucky not been so insistent that Steve did exactly as the damned doctors said. Thankfully, Bucky was at least allowed to stay with him for the duration – while it was better than being left on his own, it didn’t exactly help with Steve’s restlessness, especially given the fact that there were so many doctors and nurses and orderlies coming in and out of his room that they could barely find a moment’s peace to hold hands, much less do anything more intimate. And after coming uncomfortably close to dying multiple times over the past week, Steve found that intimacy and Bucky seemed to be about all that his mind could focus on, even after they’d discontinued his pain meds.

After a long and fairly heated debate, they’d decided to head back to their apartment in Dupont. The super of the building had already had the bullet holes patched with plaster, and while Steve could agree with Bucky’s concerns that it wasn’t the safest idea to return to the home which was now public knowledge thanks to the SHIELD data leak, neither of them wanted to put Sam in even more risk by taking up the offer to crash at his place. Besides, any remaining HYDRA agents were more likely to be too busy scrambling for order and regrouping than to come after the two of them now, and staying with friends would mean they wouldn’t be able to have the quality time with each other that they both sorely needed. So, Bucky and Natasha had thoroughly swept the place the night before Steve was to be discharged, getting rid of all of the SHIELD bugs and checking adjacent rooftops for any signs of someone being foolish enough to target them again.

When it had been agreed that the place was as safe as anywhere else could be for them, Steve and
Bucky had gone home, agreeing on Bucky’s bedroom since it was the one with the least amount of street exposure. They’d spent the entirety of the first day back in bed together, fully clothed and necking like a couple of teenagers. The one time that Steve had tried to move them along to something a bit more strenuous, Bucky had refused him outright, pulling Steve’s hand out of his pants and holding it firmly as he pulled back. Steve did his best to look indignant – but one look at Bucky, his hair a wild mess from Steve’s fingers running through it, his pupils blown so wide that there was barely a sliver of grey around them, his lips swollen and so bright red that he could have been wearing rouge… well, Steve had a hard time thinking of anything with a distraction like that.

“Later,” Bucky had rasped, licking his lips as he stared at Steve, his eyes dark and full of promise. “The docs said you still needed to take it easy for a couple’a days…”

“I’ve been lying around for six days straight,” Steve complained, pulling his arm away from Bucky’s grasp. “I’m fine – a little foolin’ around ain’t gonna hurt me, Buck.”

“Maybe not,” Bucky murmured, leaning closer so that he could nuzzle their noses together, and dammit – Steve couldn’t possibly stay mad at him if the bastard was doing that. “But I’d rather not risk anything, pal. And I promise I’ll make it up to ya, alright?” He pressed a quick kiss to Steve’s lips then reclined back on his own pillow, giving Steve a roguish smile with hooded eyes that weren’t remotely fair.

“Besides,” Bucky continued after a few seconds, clearing his throat as his face became considerably more serious, “much as I’d love to just continue on like this, we probably should get to working out plans for going forward.”

“How d’ya mean?” Steve asked, his hand moving on its own accord so that his fingers started tracing shapeless patterns along Bucky’s side, over the thin cotton of his white t-shirt.

“I mean – we can’t stay here, right? Not much of a point to it anyway, with SHIELD being gone. And I’m sure the data dump is a mine of other HYDRA hidey holes, once we start diggin’ through it.”

“You want to hunt down the rest of them?” Steve asked, unable to hide his surprise.

Bucky blinked at him for a beat, before swallowing and asking. “You don’t?”

“I mean, of course I do,” Steve responded automatically, before backpedalling. “I just didn’t think…” Bucky had been pretty clear from the very start of all of this that he hadn’t wanted to get involved with SHIELD affairs, but Steve had dragged him in anyway, almost getting them both killed in the process. While he would have loved to rid the world of HYDRA once and for all, he wasn’t about to force Bucky into another fight for his own sake.

“It’s what we died for, wasn’t it?” Bucky asked quietly, his right hand brushing Steve’s hair back from his forehead. “If we can get the intel to do it, might as well finish the job, right?”

“If you’re sure that’s what you want to do,” Steve responded quietly, his eyes slipping shut as Bucky’s fingers continued massaging his scalp. “I’m all for it…”

“Alright,” Bucky replied after a long moment, “we can pack all our stuff up, throw it in storage for a while, then maybe check in with Tony about equipment and data. Wipe ‘em out, then come back and figure somethin’ else out. Get a spot in Brooklyn and play at being normal guys for a change?”

“Key word bein’ play, right?” Steve asked teasingly, opening his eyes with a small smirk.

For a second Steve thought he’d crossed a line – Bucky was staring at him blankly, not a trace of a
smile left. Before Steve could think of anything to say to try to rectify it, though, his face split into a wide grin. Bucky moved quickly, shifting his weight so that he was up and leaning over Steve, his hands braced on either side of Steve’s pillow. “You’re such a fuckin’ punk…” he murmured fondly, looking down at Steve like he was looking at the damned sun.

Steve felt his face heat spectacularly under Bucky’s gaze, but smirked right up at him anyway. “Yeah, but apparently I’m your punk, so what does that say about you, ya jerk?”

“That I’m one crazy lucky sonovabitch,” Bucky murmured as he leaned down, bringing their lips together for a slow, sweet kiss.

The only time that either of them left the bedroom for the rest of the day was when Bucky got up to grab food or water for the both of them, and as soon as the sun had set and the room was cast in shadows, they both ended up crashing hard. Given the fact that neither of them had been able to properly rest while in the hospital, meaning they’d gone nearly a week without a proper night’s sleep, it probably shouldn’t have been a surprise to Steve. Especially given how well they both seemed to sleep when they shared the couch cushions in the living room during their bimonthly nightmare camp-outs. Still, something about being curled in Bucky’s massive arms, feeling his impossibly broad chest pressed against Steve’s back so that he almost felt small (and normal) again, meant that they both slept soundly through the entire night, not waking until the sun was creeping through the blinds the next morning.

Steve had barely had time to stretch before Bucky had climbed on top of him and made good on his promise from the day before. As expected, Steve ended up far from disappointed.

After going a few rounds that had the both of them thanking anyone who would listen for the frankly ridiculous stamina that their respective serums had afforded them, both Steve and Bucky stumbled into the shower and then agreed that they probably should eat at some point and begin packing up the apartment to move. Steve had been relegated to packing up photos and records in the living room – Buck had insisted it was so that nothing breakable was at risk of his left hand, but Steve knew that it was all a ploy to keep him from doing any heavy lifting. Even though they both knew very well that he was as good as healed from his injuries, it wasn’t worth arguing any further; he decided to be grateful that he hadn’t had to fight to help, at least.

He was in the middle of packing up the third box of records, marveling over how many things they’d managed to collect over their couple of years in the apartment, when his StarkPhone began chiming in his back pocket. Steve frowned as he stood and fished it out – he hadn’t really given anyone his new number since they’d picked the phones up, and Bucky had already taken it upon himself to go through and customize each of the ringtones that corresponded to their friend’s numbers… but this sounded like a default ringtone. When he looked at the screen, Steve realized that it was the videocall application, and he slid the screen open with some trepidation.

A second later Tony Stark was looking up at him. “Oh good, you answered!” Stark said cheerily, “I was afraid you might not know how to work the app after I pushed it over, but since someone went incommunicado and decided not to share his number after…”

“Sorry, Tony,” Steve sighed, sitting back down on the stool he’d been working on. “Things were pretty crazy, and we’ve been busy getting packed up – I was going to get in touch, we just haven’t had the time yet.”

“Hey Cap, no worries,” Tony responded breezily, “I mean, you didn’t call when you were getting ready to bring down the biggest security agency in the world, I wasn’t actually expecting to be the one to hear from you guys after.”
Steve sighed, closing his eyes for a moment and asking himself why he’d answered the call in the first place.

“Y’know, Tony – now you know what it felt like for us after all of your issues with the Mandarin,” Bucky drawled from the kitchen, before making his way into the living room and standing over Steve’s shoulder so he could get in on the conversation, too.

“Touché, Bucky Bear, touché… anyway, now that you guys don’t have a reason to stay tied down to the swamp anymore, I wanted to make sure to remind you about your floors in the tower.”

“Er, yeah,” Steve responded, glancing up at Bucky then turning back to the phone, “we actually aren’t gonna be staying in New York just yet, just dropping our stuff in storage until we get – the rest of our business done.”

Stark pursed his lips, “All the more reason to bring your things here; there isn’t a more secure building in New York, maybe in the United States after what you guys did to the Triskelion, and it’s stupid for you to pay storage when you have a few thousand square feet sitting here with your names literally on them.”

Bucky snorted, “We’ll talk about it,” he responded evasively. “And hey, I was actually gonna call you about the arm – I had a little, ah, incident during one of the fights. I was hoping you might take a look at it before we go, and maybe come up with a way to rig it so it’s less likely to be shut down by electrical attacks?”

Steve looked up at Bucky in surprise – it was the first time he’d heard that Buck had been in trouble. “Electrical attacks? What the hell happened?”

“It wasn’t anything that bad,” Bucky responded immediately, rubbing the back of his neck like he was feeling guilty. “The Widow had one of those little disk things like Nat uses – buzzed the arm really good, and shut it down until I could tear the damned thing off.”

On the other end of the line, Tony was muttering something about an EMP and other things Steve didn’t recognize – especially given how busy he was glaring up at Bucky for having kept it from him. “Wait, is that…? Does Captain America have a hickey?” Tony crowed suddenly.

Steve turned back towards the phone, realizing he’d left the camera pointing at his neck and that the love bites Bucky had left that morning hadn’t quite faded yet. “Let’s try to focus, Stark.” Bucky responded mildly, although Steve could tell he was blushing as well as Tony inexplicably fist pumped on the other end of the screen.

“Yeah, alright, just… God, finally.” Tony sighed, “Okay – let me know when you’re coming up with your stuff, or if you need a mover or whatever, just come and bring the arm, I’ll look it over and see what I can do. Oh! And your friend with the wings – bring him too, I’ve already got a couple of prototypes that should work even better than the ones he was wearing.”

“I don’t think Sam is going to…” Steve started, before Tony cut him off at breakneck speed again. “I saw the footage from the helicarriers, the guy was ridiculous up there and we could use another member that can fly. I mean, it’ll be up to him of course, but even if we can just have him on reserve, Avengers second squad if you will, for when missions get really tough–”

“We’ll ask him,” Bucky cut in, his voice bemused as he shook his head at Tony’s rambling. “Although I wouldn’t be surprised if he was grateful for the new set of wings, at least.”

Steve nodded in agreement, “And we’ll discuss the storage idea then get back to you – I don’t think...
we’ll be ready to go before the end of the week, anyway.”

“Great, I’ll have J put in the work order right now to have your rooms cleaned up and ready, just tell me the official day and we’ll send a truck down. You need anything bigger than the usual two-bedroom mover?”

By the time they hung up with him they had apparently agreed to not only move their belongings into Avengers tower, but also that Tony (or, more likely, JARVIS) would be taking care of the actual moving details. Steve blinked as the phone screen went dark, before glancing up at Bucky skeptically.

“I mean – it does make sense to not pay to store our shit,” Bucky said with a shrug, already making his way back towards the kitchen, “and it gives us time to actually find a place that we like when we do finally get back.” Steve couldn’t think of any reasonable argument against his logic, so instead he shrugged and went back to boxing up records.

Late the next morning Steve stood beside Fury’s gravesite in Arlington Cemetery, with Bucky next to him, close enough that their shoulders were pressed together and Sam standing a few paces behind the both of them. To anyone else, it would have looked like they were paying their last respects, while Sam stood by and watched… as it was, they’d been asked to come by for one final debrief – given the fact that it was their first time out of the apartment since Steve had been cleared to leave the hospital, neither he nor Bucky minded the extra set of eyes. Besides, after his involvement in the entire mess, Sam definitely deserved to have a clue on the plans going forward.

“So…” a familiar voice called from a few paces down the walkway; Steve glanced over his shoulder to see Fury approaching, almost unrecognizable in a dark colored hoodie and enormous black sunglasses. “The two of you have experience with this,” he said, nodding at Bucky and Steve before coming to a stop in front of the headstone bearing his name, “any advice?”

“You’ll get used to it,” Steve responded with a dry smirk.

“We’ve been datamining HYDRA’s files,” Fury said conversationally after a few moments silence, “it looks like a lot of rats didn’t go down with the ship…”

“We noticed,” Bucky responded breezily, although Steve could feel him tensing up beside him.

Fury raised his eyebrows behind his glasses, “I’m heading to Europe tonight – figured I’d ask if you’d come.”

“We’ve got some things we have to wrap up here, first,” Steve responded evenly, shifting his weight so that his palm brushed against Bucky’s, hoping that it would calm him at least a bit. “But then… I think we’re prolly gonna end up going on our own for a bit. Taking out HYDRA was the Howling Commandoes’ mission from the very beginning – I don’t want to bring more people into danger helping us complete it than I absolutely have to.”

Fury nodded solemnly, seeming surprisingly okay with the answer, then turned enough that he was facing Sam. “What about you, Wilson? We could use someone with your abilities.”

Sam looked to Bucky, then Steve, before responding simply, “I’m more of a soldier than a spy.”

“Alright then,” Fury responded after a few seconds, rocking back on his heels and then extending his hand to each of them in return.

Bucky hesitated for a second before accepting it last, grimacing slightly as he muttered, “Uh – I’m sorry about the whole helicopter incident. I never did get to say that…”
“I should have expected it,” Fury responded with a scoff, “no hard feelings, Barnes.” There was another awkward beat of silence, before he stepped back and added, “Anyway – if anyone asks for me, tell them they can find me right here.” He nodded towards the headstone, then turned and headed off down the path he’d come from.

“You should be honored,” Romanoff’s voice called out, “that’s as close as he gets to saying thank you.”

Steve turned quickly, smiling as Natasha approached from the opposite direction. He’d only seen her once in the hospital before she’d gotten stuck on Capitol Hill, taking care of the council hearings and press conferences that had resulted from the aftermath of the Insight catastrophe. He couldn’t begin to think of words adequate for expressing his gratitude to her for giving both him and Bucky time to recover before they had to face the wolves as well. “You’re not going with him?” Steve asked, motioning in Fury’s direction as she came to a stop next to him.

“No…” she said with an odd smile. “I’ve been looking into a few leads, reading through the HYDRA files. I think it’s about time I tried catching up with an old friend.”

“You’re going after Belova? Alone?” Bucky asked, his eyebrows drawing together.

“I’ll have back up,” Natasha responded coyly, fingering the pendant on her necklace, “someone who has some experience with subduing brainwashed ex-Soviet assassins.”

“But you’ll call us if you need more help?” Steve asked – even with Barton, he didn’t love the idea of Natasha squaring off against the other Widow.

“Just like you’ll call me when you boys inevitably find yourselves over your head on your little adventure,” she said with a smug smirk.

Bucky snorted lightly, before stepping away from Steve’s side and pulling Natasha into a hug, “We’ll be in touch.”

“You’d better be,” she said with a smile, squeezing him tightly before stepping up beside Steve and reaching on tip-toes to press a brief kiss to his cheek. “And make sure to take care of each other,” she added, before giving Steve a sly wink, “you look good for a change.”

Steve felt himself flush to his ears – it was definitely going to take some getting used to, having friends who both recognized what he and Bucky were up to and were insistent on encouraging it so openly. “Er, yeah – of course we will,” he stammered awkwardly, pressing his lips together as she sauntered away.

“So,” Sam spoke up, crossing his arms over his chest as Steve and Bucky turned to him, “you guys are going after them, then? Whatever’s left of HYDRA?”

“Can’t see how we could not,” Steve responded with a shrug, glancing at Bucky to back him up.

“We just wanna finish what we thought we’d done by going into the ice,” Bucky added. “And then after that… probably work on getting out.”

Sam shook his head lightly, although whether it was at the thought of them retiring or taking down HYDRA, Steve couldn’t be sure. “Gonna be a hell of a job,” Sam said archly. “I’m sure there’s more than a few of them, probably spread from here to Lord knows where. And if there’s only three of us…”

“We’re not expecting you to come with,” Steve said immediately, cutting Sam off before he could
continue. Bucky’s brow was furrowed next to him, like he’d been getting ready to make the same argument.

“Good,” Sam laughed, “cuz I don’t plan on spending the next year plus globetrotting. But if you think the two of you are gonna be stuck doing this alone, or that I’m gonna turn down an offer from Tony freakin’ Stark to build me a new set of wings so I can join in on your shenanigans – then you’re dead wrong.”

There wasn’t much arguing to be had after that, and by the time they left the gravesite plans were already in place for Sam to join them when they left for New York, so that he’d have an opportunity to test his wings out and to be in on their planning.

The next few days passed in a flurry of packing, reviewing the daily SHIELD data files that JARVIS sent them by email, making preliminary plans for their mission, and between it all spending as much time together in bed as possible, since both Bucky and Steve knew that they weren’t likely to have the opportunity to feel relaxed any time soon. By the end of the week, there was only one item left on their to-do list, and they both agreed that they couldn’t in good conscience put it off any longer.

Steve paused outside the door of Peggy’s room, wiping the palms of his hands on his khakis and trying to ignore how badly his guts were rolling. He had no idea how much she knew about the SHIELD fiasco, but he hoped that it wasn’t much… he couldn’t bear the thought of her feeling guilty for the way the organization she’d worked so hard to build had come to be corrupted. Dealing with talking to her about that would make what he’d come to do even worse.

He swallowed thickly, switching the bouquet of roses to his right hand and again reminding himself not to think of it as a goodbye.

Before Steve could agonize over things any further, a large, warm hand slid into his left, the fingers threading between his own and squeezing lightly. He looked over to find Bucky giving him a sad-looking smile of his own, the collection of teas that he’d found online tucked underneath the gleaming plates of his left arm. “Why don’t we just go in together, huh?” He murmured gently, eyes suspiciously bright, “The nurses were saying she’s had a pretty good week.”

Steve couldn’t do anything but nod silently, immensely grateful that Bucky had picked up on his dilemma. As much as he would love the time alone with Peggy, he wasn’t entirely sure that he would be able to keep a brave face for it – and knowing that he’d have Bucky’s support felt like an enormous weight off his shoulders. It was Bucky who pasted a grin on his face, pushing his way through the door and announcing cheerily, “Hey Marge – you mind if we come in and bug you for a while?”

Peggy frowned in confusion as she looked over from where she was sitting up in bed, squinting slightly at them before her lips curled into a small smile. “Finally,” she huffed, “it was about bloody time, you two.”

Steve’s heart skipped a beat, worrying that she was upset that they hadn’t come to see her since the SHIELD fiasco, or that she’d forgotten that they’d been by to see her at all, but then Bucky interrupted his worries by squeezing his fingers and Steve remembered that they’d walked in holding hands.

“Well,” Bucky drawled playfully to break the silence, “a couple of schmucks like us, you’ve gotta give us some time to figure out the obvious.”

“Any slower and the two of you would have been a bloody glacier, I was starting to worry that I wouldn’t live long enough to see you pull your heads out of your arses.”
Steve’s face did drop at that – for as much as he’d always loved Peggy’s dark sense of humor, it was hitting a little too close to home at the moment. Peggy, of course, caught it immediately. “Steve…” she sighed, motioning to the chairs next to her window, “None of that, the two of you come in and sit down, I want to hear about the details.”

“I dunno how comfortable I feel about tellin’ an upstanding lady like yourself details, Agent Carter.” Bucky teased, grinning as he pulled Steve into the room and basically pushed him into the seat nearest to the bed.

“Oh please, James Barnes – I raised two teenagers through the sixties, there are very few things you could possibly tell me that would make me uncomfortable.”

Steve’s face felt like it was on fire as Bucky sat down next to him, and he groaned exaggeratedly before muttering, “Please don’t tell me the both of you are gonna team up to play ‘who can embarrass Steve the worst.’ I don’t think I’ll survive it.”

They both laughed like it wasn’t a guarantee, but then Bucky got Peggy talking about how she’d been since he had last been in to visit and the conversation became considerably more comfortable. Peggy eventually mentioned her kids’ plan for a family reunion that summer, insisting that Steve and Bucky join them, and things seemed to grind to a halt as Steve was brought back to the reality of why they’d come in the first place.

“Actually, about that,” Steve said, doing his damndest to keep a smile on his face even as his heart felt like it was constricting in his chest. “We’re, uh – we’re gonna have to leave DC for a while, Peggy. I’m not really sure how long it’ll be before we can come back to visit.”

Peggy smiled sadly at the both of them, “After what happened in Arlington, that’s hardly surprising. You’ll be going after HYDRA again, then?” They both stared at her stupidly, shocked yet again at how the frail old woman in front of them could so easily turn into the same old Peggy who’d run circles around them and the SSR. Her smile turned into a bemused one. “Oh, they tried to keep the news from me, but that whole debacle was too big of a secret to hide. Besides, my niece caught me up on it – I’ve already been able to make peace with my mistakes. Just…” she trailed off, her gaze slipping away for a moment before focusing in on Steve. “Just please, promise me that you’ll both come back safe. I’m tired of losing the people that I love too early to those bastards.”

The lump in Steve’s throat was far too large for him to speak around, but after a few seconds Bucky cleared his throat and made the promise for him, joking that he’d do his best to watch out for Steve’s reckless ass. They had almost another hour of playful small talk, during which Steve did his best to remain cheerful and participate, but as the time went on it became obvious that Peggy was growing tired and starting to fail. After the third time she referred to Bucky by her son’s name they agreed that it would probably be best to leave and let her rest.

“I’ll just – give you guys a minute,” Bucky said softly, pressing Steve gently back in his chair by his shoulder as he got to his feet. “Take care, Peggy.” He added, before stepping out into the hall and shutting the door behind him.

Peggy blinked at the closed door blankly for a moment, before coming back to herself and turning to Steve. “You know,” she said dreamily, “I told James this before – the both of you deserve all of the happiness you can find, Steve. Don’t you dare let some misplaced guilt about me come in the way of it… I won’t forgive you for that.”

“I won’t, Peg,” Steve promised thickly, “I swear it. I am – we are happy, happier than I thought could even be possible, really. I just – I didn’t want… you’re still my best girl, and I’ll still love you no matter what.”
“Oh Steve,” Peggy sighed, squeezing his hands as tightly as she could with her frail, arthritic fingers, “I know that, darling.”

Steve nodded tightly, before stooping down and pressing a soft, chaste kiss to her lips. “Go get them,” she murmured as they parted, her eyes bright with tears as Steve grinned down at her. He couldn’t help but wonder if she’d intentionally repeated the same parting words from when she’d sent him and Bucky off after Schmidt on the Valkyrie or if it was a coincidence.

“I’ll see you later, Peggy,” he said quietly, unable to bring himself to say anything else – certainly not goodbye. With one last smile and a weak wave from the door, Steve forced himself out into the hallway, straightening his shoulders as he looked up at Bucky.

Buck took one look at him and apparently realized that Steve was barely holding it together, because he immediately turned and lead the way towards the main lobby of the nursing home, pulling Steve into the public bathroom instead of making their way out the main exit. As soon as he’d locked the door behind them, Bucky pulled Steve into a tight hug, and Steve felt the damn burst, slumping against Bucky and crying his heart out over the heavy feeling that he’d never see Peggy again.

Chapter End Notes

So - you might have noticed that I’ve put in a final chapter count: there is an actual end in sight! Actually... I wrote the epilogue the other night, just to motivate my ass to power through this terrible installment so that we could eventually get to it XD

As always, I comments/kudos feed the beast.
June 2014 - April 2015

Chapter Summary

Steve and Bucky (and friends) vs. the remnants of HYDRA.

Or, here is the summary in a single frame from the Civil War trailer.

Chapter Notes

My god, guys, I'm so, so sorry it's been so long between updates. I had exams, then this chapter gave me a really hard time, and then the whole Trainer Bucky verse ate my brain, and then I had a massive case of the mehs about everything that I tried to write - but at the end of the day I really can't apologize enough for the month absence. Thanks so much to those of you who've stuck around during it, and hopefully this will make up for the long radio silence.

Finally, a billion thanks to @bibilijoess for all of her support while I've muddled through this, from letting me bounce ideas off of her to just listening to me bitch about my troubles. I wrote her an outtake that really should have gone in chapter 20 - you don't have to read it before reading this chapter, but if you'd like some fluff (especially after the pain of the new Civil War TV spot) it's basically a thousands words of cuddly sweetness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

By the time they had arrived in New York, Stark had already worked out and built a mechanism for Bucky's arm to repel electrical attacks. Unfortunately, implementing and testing how it worked was a considerably different story.

The first challenge they faced was running the appropriate diagnostics on the arm; while Bucky was relatively certain that the thing was fine – outside of the initial jolt and recalibration he'd felt when Belova had attacked him he'd had no issues with it since, Tony refused to make any modifications to it until he'd checked over all possible electrical and mechanical damage that could have been done.

"Well," Tony sighed, flicking the screen he had been viewing away and leaning back in to peer through the window he'd made by removing the plates in Bucky's forearm, "as far as I can see there wasn't any permanent damage done to the internal circuitry, just the burn marks on the plating. I'll have Dum-E Junior buff those out this afternoon, so it's just a matter of putting in your new toy and you'll be all set."

"I thought you said that it was already done?" Steve asked, looking up from his tablet on the other side of the room where he'd been going over the HYDRA files that JARVIS had already sorted out for them.

"It's built," Tony confirmed, "I just have to calibrate it to the right strength, install it, and make sure T-800 doesn't have any issues controlling it," he turned his attention to Bucky. "You understand
what the thing does, right?”

Bucky rolled his eyes, replying immediately so that Steve didn’t have time to take offense to the Terminator reference. “You mentioned an EMP on the phone; it’s an electromagnetic pulse, right? So it just – puts out a burst of energy to disable anything electronic around it.” He frowned as he thought over the idea of controlling the thing. “You’re just going to wire it into the neural interfacing, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” Tony scoffed, “it’d be stupid to give it a switch – anyone could disable it if it had an external control, and it would slow you down in the middle of an attack.”

“So I just have to – think about it?” Bucky asked incredulously. It seemed like terribly sketchy control for something that could do considerable damage.

“I haven’t programmed its command yet,” Tony admitted, “I was thinking of adding it as a reflex mechanism… you see an attack coming and flinch, and the thing emits an energy blast to shut it down.”

Bucky cringed as he thought about all of the things that could go wrong with that idea. Tony hadn’t necessarily given him reason to doubt the arm yet; within a week after the surgery, he’d been able to control it as if it were the arm he’d been born with, but he still had worries about breaking things with it if he let his emotions get away from him and failed to modulate his strength. The idea of being able to electrocute things on top of crushing them wasn’t exactly a pleasant one, and he couldn’t quite help but remember all of Howard’s mishaps in the field labs during his days of experimenting in the forties. “You’re sure that’s safe?”

“I mean, we’ll make sure that it is before I let you leave the lab with it in, and I kept your request and put a damper on it so that none of the energy will extend outside of the plates themselves, even though I still say you’re lame for not wanting a repulsor in the palm.”

“Thanks, Tony.” Bucky responded, ignoring the gripe about the added tech; it was a battle they’d been waging for a couple years by that point, so there was no point in rising to the bait. “Just… as long as it isn’t going to go off when it isn’t necessary and end up hurting someone.”

Tony rolled his eyes and raised his hand as if he was making an oath. “Don’t worry, Barnes – I swear that it will be designed so that you only electrocute shit that you want electrocuted,” he snarked, before spinning around on his chair and snapping his fingers at one of his robots to get to work on the plates he’d left on the table. “Captain America’s cojones will be safe as ever.”

Steve sputtered for a second before storming out of the room, while Bucky just scrubbed at his face with his right hand and tried his best to ignore Stark’s pleased laughter. “Are you done?” he finally asked after a minute, glaring at Tony as he finally got his giggles under control.

“Yeah, Jarvis just finished reviewing the specs on your neuroreceptor tracings; I’ve got everything I need to interface the EMP generator. Just – hold on a second, I’ve got a couple of temporary panels to cover you up while Junior finishes his work.”

Thankfully it only took a couple of minutes for Tony to slap the fiberglass plates over the window in Bucky’s arm – “just don’t get it wet until we put the permanent ones back on it tomorrow. The wiring will probably be fine, but it’d be best to avoid the risk altogether.” – and then Bucky was free to escape upstairs to the residential floors as well.

Neither he nor Steve brought up Tony’s comment or their own responses; instead they’d decided to order food in and spend a night relaxing and watching a movie. Despite the time that they’d taken
off after the entire SHIELD ordeal, the move from DC plus the stress of the mission hanging over them meant that they both could sorely use the down-time.

In addition to the Korean they’d ordered, a red-faced Stark intern had brought up a drugstore bag an hour later, simply stating that it was an apology gift from Mr. Stark. Given her obvious embarrassment Bucky had waited until after the door was closed and they could be fairly confident there wouldn’t be any further interruptions before investigating what was inside.

He frowned in confusion and handed it over to Steve, who seemed just as lost by the enormous bottles labeled KY inside as Bucky was. Writing it off to another one of Stark’s oddities, they settled back into the movie, curling up in a shared blanket and instead trying to focus on the random seventies ‘horror’ flick Happy had insisted was a sin they had never watched.

Bucky realized less than half an hour into it that Steve was just as bored as he was, but it made for a good excuse to have a necking session.

When he came out of the bathroom after brushing his teeth for bed, Steve was seated in the middle of the enormous bed that had been picked out for them, his ears bright red as he held a note up for Bucky to see. “Ah – I looked at Tony’s gift again. Apparently we missed the instructions.”

I promise it’s 100 times better than whatever Vaseline you’re probably using now. You’re welcome.

Three hours later, they had to agree that he was right, at least.

Neither bothered to set an alarm that night – Stark hadn’t given any indication of when he would want to see Bucky again to finish the arm upgrades, and it wasn’t as if they had anywhere else that they needed to be. Even planning the mission was a waste of time until they had all of the data from JARVIS. So it was something of a surprise when Bucky’s phone went off shortly before dawn.

“The hell?” Steve groaned as Bucky rolled away from him, groping blindly for the phone to turn off what he initially thought was the alarm. Instead, he found a message waiting.

From Sam W received 05:42

so just had a driver show up to take me to a private jet at Reagan, be there to test wings out by 0800

Bucky blearily typed back something that was supposed to say cool, before dropping the phone and curling back around Steve to steal a couple more hours of sleep.

When he came-to again, the first thing that Bucky realized was that he was alone in the bed, and that the indent Steve had left in the sheets was barely warm anymore. With a massive yawn and stretch he crawled out from under the covers, pulling on a pair of cotton draw-string pants and a t-shirt before making his way into the sitting room of their floor.

Steve was standing in front of the enormous bay of windows, idly sipping coffee out of the mug in his hand as he watched something in the Manhattan sky. Bucky made his way behind him, gingerly wrapping his arms around Steve’s slim waist and getting ready to ask what he was looking at, when Iron Man streaked past the window in front of them, a black man with red and chrome wings in close pursuit.

“I see Sam made it in okay,” he murmured instead, voice still rough with sleep.

Steve hummed an affirmative response, passing his mug back to Bucky so that he could clear his throat and begin to wake up a bit.
They were in the middle of watching Sam nosedive after Tony when Steve’s text alert went off, causing both of them to frown in confusion at the phone. The vast majority of the people who knew his number were currently within view, so it was mildly disconcerting for him to be receiving a message. Steve quickly crossed the room, picking the phone up off of the coffee table and swiping at the screen a couple of times before pausing to read. “It’s a blocked number,” he said a couple of seconds later, “claiming to be Nat.”

“Ask her for proof?” Bucky suggested, realizing that they probably all should have come up with some sort of codeword for dealing with similar situations before having gone their separate ways.

Steve nodded and typed out a response, leaning against the side of the sofa as he did. A few moments after he’d sent it, the phone chimed again. This time he opened it and snorted, shaking his head as he crossed the room and held it out for Bucky to see the photo on the screen. It was a selfie of a woman flipping off her phone – she had short, curly blonde hair and sunglasses that engulfed most of her face, but despite the disguise it was obvious that it was definitely Natasha.

The phone chimed a couple more times in succession, so Steve pulled it back to him, reading with a small frown and typing back quickly. Bucky figured he would be reading the texts out loud if they were meant to be shared, so he turned his attention back out the window, giving Steve a bit of privacy as he texted back and forth.

After a few minutes, Bucky felt something nudging against his right arm, and turned to find Steve handing his phone over so that he could read the conversation as well.

**Text from ## Blocked received 09:13**

*that good enough?*

*I meant to mention it before I left, but you really should get in touch with that cute nurse across the hall*

**Text to ##Blocked sent 09:13**

*Don’t know if you noticed but I don’t need a date anymore. B & I are perfectly happy, thx*

*And she’s not a nurse.*

**Text from ##Blocked received 09:14**

*not for a date, genius*

*she’s not. she’s got a CIA job now, she’d be a good ally while you’re in the states*

Bucky raised his eyebrows at the news. “She isn’t wrong, if that’s true. And Nat wouldn’t bring it up if we couldn’t trust her.”

Steve grimaced before nodding in agreement, and then leaned into Bucky’s side as he shot back a response. A few seconds later the phone chirped again, and Bucky felt Steve go tense next to him.

“What is it?”

Instead of answering, Steve passed the phone over again.

**Text to ##Blocked sent 09:17**
Alright, we’ll be in touch. What’s her number?

Text from #Blocked received 09:18

** Attachment: Contact – Sharon Carter**

Bucky blinked in confusion, trying to understand why the text had such an impact on Steve, when things started to click into place. “Wait, you don’t think she’s…”

“She said once that she had an aunt who was an insomniac,” Steve replied vaguely, “it could have been part of the act, but Peggy said that her niece had filled her in on the goings-on at SHIELD.” He licked his lips, before taking the phone back from Bucky and sending a quick text, then dropping it into the pocket of his pajama pants. “It’s just one more secret. Although – I guess despite all of it, if she really is close to Peggy, I suppose we can trust her.”

Bucky sighed, wrapping an arm around Steve’s waist as he debated how to respond. “I mean – we really just need a contact to leave info for if we take prisoners, right? I doubt the government is going to be thrilled about the both of us going avenging, so if we have someone who can help us keep it quiet…”

“Yeah,” Steve responded quietly, keeping his eyes on the window. Outside, Tony and Sam completed one more ridiculous flight pattern, before they both soared upwards and out of sight.

“Sergeant Barnes and Captain Rogers,” JARVIS announced a few seconds later, “Mr. Stark has asked me to inform you that he’ll be ready to finish the arm within the half hour, and also to let you know that I’ve finished the last of the data mining on the SHIELD files, so that you may begin planning the mission while Mr. Wilson is here.”

“Thanks, JARVIS,” Steve responded, “let them know we’ll be up shortly.”

It only took them a few minutes to get changed – Steve took a quick shower, but given Stark’s request that he keep the arm dry until the plates were finished Bucky simply washed his face and combed his hair out, before they both threw on casual clothes and made their way downstairs to the usual workshop.

They stepped out of the elevator to find Tony already out of his suit, while Sam was in the middle of slipping out of the pack that contained his wings, grinning like a madman. “No seriously, they’re perfect – I think the bank even better than the old EXO-7 did, don’t you dare change a thing, man.” He glanced up as Bucky lead the way into the room, beaming even wider. “Dude! Did you see them in action? Good morning, by the way… I figured you Army boys would be out for PT by 05:00.”

“We haven’t been army boys in a good seventy years, Wilson,” Steve chirped right back as Bucky wandered in and took a seat in his usual chair, waiting patiently as U-2 pulled the temporary plates out of his arm.

“The flying was pretty sick, though,” Bucky answered, before chuckling at the look of surprise on both Sam and Tony’s face over the colloquialism.

“Please don’t ever say that again,” Stark asked, grabbing a small device and an armload of wiring as he made his way across the lab to where Bucky sat. He briefly explained his final plan for the EMP generator, including the need to interface it with all of the plates in the arm if it was going to be fully effective, before getting Bucky’s permission and beginning to disassemble the entirety of the outer casing.
Bucky did his best to avoid watching, especially as Tony began working his way up the biceps – even though he knew full-well that what was left of his flesh arm had been present underneath the plates all along, actually seeing the stump with the anchoring rod and all of the wires coming out of it wasn’t exactly an experience he wanted to have. He wasn’t sure if Tony actually sensed his discomfort or simply got sick of listening to Sam and Steve’s small-talk; regardless of the motivation behind it, Bucky was grateful when he suddenly called out for JARVIS’s attention.

“Hey J – now that the gang’s all here, why don’t you go ahead and tell the class what you’ve worked out as far as the HYDRA-murder-Honeymoon planning details are concerned.”

Sam, Bucky and Steve all focused on a screen that appeared in the middle of the room, listening as JARVIS mapped out what he’d been able to sort out as far as HYDRA bases and safe houses were concerned. There were a ton of them, scattered over most of the Americas and Europe, but according to his findings the vast majority had already been under-staffed prior to the SHIELD debacle.

“So it looks like most of them would be better with a small team, anyway,” Steve mused, getting up to the screen and flipping through the bases by size once Jarvis had finished his presentation.

“Good to know,” Sam acknowledged, “just make sure you guys don’t keep all the fun to yourselves. After this morning, I wouldn’t mind using the new wings in action a couple of times…”

Steve paused as he went over the bigger bases, homing in on those that listed more than one hundred soldiers and noting their locations. “Oh, we’ll definitely be in touch,” he murmured, before turning the screen slightly so that both Bucky and Sam could get a load of some the schematics for an anti-tank security system that was apparently in place at one of the bases in Colombia.

“On second thought –“ Sam began teasingly, only to be cut off by a yelp of pain that Bucky couldn’t hold back as a shock of energy zapped up his arm and straight into his jaw.

“Sorry!” Tony called out, pulling his hands out of the cluster of wires near his armpit. “Sorry, it’s online now.”

“Warn a guy, geez,” Bucky griped, flexing his jaw as the pain wore off and avoiding looking in Steve or Sam’s direction out of embarrassment.

“I would have, but I didn’t want you to move while I was in there,” Stark explained nonchalantly, before wiping his hands off on his pants and grabbing a rag off of the workbench nearest to him. “Anyway, I’ve already got the regulator hooked into it, so all that’s left is to clean up the plates and put them back on, then we should be able to test it out – you guys carry on.”

Steve looked like he badly wanted to say something nasty to Tony, but Bucky shook his head, already wanting to forget about it. Thankfully JARVIS took the moment to butt in and going over the algorithm that it had developed that should lead to maximizing the efficacy of their attacks, so that they could capture the most amount of HYDRA operatives left while incurring the least amount of attention for as long as possible. Before long Steve had his own input to share, and an actual schedule and plan was coming into shape. They were working out Sam’s involvement when Tony snapped the last of the plates into place on Bucky’s arm.

“Alright,” Tony muttered, calling Bucky’s attention back to him. “We should be ready to rock and roll. Now – I ended up programming it so that the EMP is associated with a movement. Given the way the rest of the circuitry in the arm works it makes the most sense, and it’s the least likely to get caught up in the heat of the moment.”
“Something weird, I hope,” Bucky cut in, “this isn’t exactly something I want to do on accident.”

Stark shook his head, “It shouldn’t be a problem – even if you did, I’ve tuned the regulator low enough that it will barely pulse beyond the outside of the plates; it’s just enough to keep the arm safe. But either way, it isn’t exactly a normal motion.” He made a show of holding his arm out at his side, flexing the biceps with a slight bend in the elbow then rotating his wrist inward, as if he was going to shrug off an attack.

“That’s it?” Bucky asked skeptically.

“I figured it should be a relatively normal reaction, if you’re going to do it quickly enough,” Tony countered. “Give it a shot.”

Bucky sat forward in the chair so that the arm wasn’t leaning against anything, licking his lips and considering the metal plates for a moment before frowning and doing as Stark had showed him. He was a little nervous as he flicked the wrist, half-expecting another jolt of energy, but thankfully he didn’t experience anything of the sort. Instead there was a split-second of an odd buzzing sound as the plates recalibrated themselves, then a quick flash of white that extended across all of the plates, followed by it all returning to normal.

“That’s it?” He asked.

Stark’s grin was answer enough. “That’s it,” he confirmed, jumping out of his chair and grabbing a small prod off of the work bench. “Here, let’s see it in action,” he added, flipping a switch on the prod and jamming it at Bucky’s arm as the tip glowed blue with energy.

Bucky made the same action again – Stark was right, it was pretty intuitive, as far as defensive measures were concerned. The prod came a couple of centimeters from touching the arm, only to bounce off as the flash of white went over the plates. Stark hissed and dropped the prod, sucking on his fingers with a smirk as he picked it back up and showed off the fact that the power in it was dead. “Yup, that’s it – who’s your favorite genius?”

“We’ll see how it holds up in action, I’ll get back to ya,” Bucky responded, completely deadpan.

They spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon working out a definitive plan of attack, while Tony attempted to catch Bucky with surprise attacks on the arm from time to time. After he repelled the eighth modified Widow’s Bite, Steve finally turned on Tony with a sigh. “Alright Stark, you’ve made your point: the thing works. Can we please get this wrapped up?”

“Sounds to me like we’re already set,” Sam cut in, drawing their attention back to the strategy panel in front of them before Tony could say something smart. “You guys get things kicked off, take down the smaller bases around the US and gather whatever intel you can from them. I’ll get my stuff ready for hand-off in DC, then when you need aerial support, you’ll hit me up and we’ll get back to kicking HYDRA ass together.”

“Don’t forget that you’re always welcome to include some of the rest of us in the fun,” Stark pointed out, boxing up whatever other tricks he’d had in mind and handing them off to Dum-E for storage.

“If a job requires other Avengers, you’ll be the first one we call, Tony,” Steve responded, giving the map one final look over before nodding decisively. “Alright then, JARVIS, you think you could send this to our StarkPads for future reference?”

“I’ve already taken the liberty of doing exactly that, Captain Rogers, as well as upgraded the disk space and encrypted your remote access for the classified Stark Industries databases, so that I can
continue giving you updates throughout the mission.”

“You’re the best, J,” Bucky responded gratefully, pushing his chair back away from the workbench he’d been seated at and stretching. “Anything else we have to go over at the moment?”

Steve shook his head, “No – I think the planning is as good as it’s going to get until we actually start out on the road, so as long as you’re arm’s in order it’s just a matter of packing and heading out.”

“Great,” Bucky said, “who’s up for grabbing lunch, then? I’m starving.”

The four of them had made their way to their usual deli near Avenger’s tower, and then afterwards Sam and Tony’d had a brief discussion about finalizing the upgrades to the wings before Sam headed back to DC.

“I’ve got a group that meets tomorrow morning,” Sam explained. “I don’t want to abandon them with a substitute just yet – it’s better if I’m still there with the hand-off; the less abrupt the change, the easier it is on everyone involved.” He gave all three of them a handshake and offered profuse thanks to Tony, before turning on Steve and Bucky one final time. “For real, though – don’t do anything stupid out there, okay? And don’t hesitate to call if you need anything… I’d rather come in and give a hand than have to visit either of your asses in the hospital.”

“We’ll be in touch,” Steve promised warmly.

“Thanks again, Sam – we’ll see you soon,” Bucky added, before waving goodbye as Happy drove him off in one of Tony’s cars.

They spent the rest of their evening working out how they were going to pack all of their gear onto their bikes and still maintain some level of anonymity. There were more than a few times that Bucky seriously wanted to recommend getting a junker of a car for the work in the US – although all of the weapons that he’d taken in from his time with SHIELD and those that Tony had lent him broke down into a reasonable enough size to transport, there was really no way of carrying Steve’s shield that didn’t give away exactly who he was. In the end they’d agreed to look into the car options early the next morning, instead checking their gear over one final time and turning in early for the night, taking advantage of their last day with guaranteed comfortable accommodations.

Stark had met them on their floor early that morning, wired even more than Bucky had remembered seeing him after the battle of New York, with the answer to most of their problems. “I come bearing a couple more gifts for your journey,” he said proudly, before snapping his fingers and waiting as a couple of Iron Legion bots strolled into the room carrying large packages, one each for Bucky and Steve.

Steve opened his first, blinking in surprise before pulling out what looked to be an updated version of his suit. “Thanks, Tony,” he responded quietly, setting the box down and sorting through the rest of the gear inside. “We’d just planned on making do with our old SHIELD crap.” An unnamed source inside of SHIELD had managed to sneak Steve’s stealth suit into their apartment while he’d still been in the hospital, and Bucky had made a point of keeping spare tac gear on hand for surprise missions, but the idea of ridding themselves of the memories associated with that entire debacle was one they were both infinitely glad for.

“I’d figured as much,” Tony responded with a put-upon sigh, before pointing to Bucky. “You have a look as well, then I’ll talk you through the toys.”

It turned out that Steve’s suit had been styled similarly to the one he’d worn with the Howlies, but updated and lined entirely with reinforced Kevlar, so that it would have no trouble withstanding most
bullets. Additionally, Stark had designed gauntlets that would actually draw the shield back to him in the event that it didn’t properly return on its own, all Steve had to do was clip the trackers onto its straps.

Bucky, meanwhile, received a new coat – again, similar to his blue pea coat, only updated and actually large enough to fit him comfortably, along with a new rifle and updated scope that had modes for x-ray and heat signature tracking if needed.

“Nice touch,” Bucky scoffed, pointing out the A insignia that had been stitched into the shoulders.

“Better than the eagle, anyway,” Stark shot back with a smirk. “And the left sleeve is detachable on this one, so you can zip it off instead of destroying the damned thing, if you’re really set on making a fashion statement.”

Before they could thank him properly, though, Tony dropped the real bomb, taking them to the roof of the tower and handing over a manual and launch sequences for a decommissioned SHIELD quinjet.

“How the hell did you…” Bucky started to ask, only for Stark to wave him off.

“It was nothing. Actually, you can send the gift basket to Stark Industries’ newest hire, Maria Hill.”

“We’ll get on it,” Steve responded cordially, finally accepting the manual before extending his free hand to Stark. “But seriously, Tony – thank you for everything. We would have had a hell of a time getting resources in order without your help.”

Stark waved his hand off. “That’s what friends are for, Cap – I’m just glad that the both of you were willing to accept for once. If you find yourselves in a bind, you know how to get a hold of me… try actually calling for a change, huh?”

“We’ll give you a holler if the need arises,” Bucky promised. “Although based on JARVIS’s files and the number of operatives that went down with SHIELD, we should be able to handle most if it from here.”

Steve nodded in agreement, fidgeting for just a second longer before glancing back towards the quinjet. “Well… no time like the present to get started, I suppose.”

Bucky nodded along, before flipping quickly through the manual. “What’s the plan when we need to refuel?”

Stark gave an offended scoff. “Please, Barnes, you think I would have sent you off with a lemon? I put a modified arc reactor in it, that engine will be fine for a few years.”

“Shouldn’t take nearly that long,” Bucky mused, shaking his head at Tony’s thoughtfulness. For someone who acted like such a jerk to their faces, he sure had put an inordinate amount of time into things for Bucky and Steve. “Well then,” he finally said, thumbing the manual shut, “I guess that’s it.” Stark had the distinctive look of someone who was highly uncomfortable with goodbyes, and Bucky already knew first-hand how he was with thank yous, so instead he gave him a simple “Take care of yourself, Stark,” before turning and following Steve onto the jet.

It only took him a couple of seconds to get the thing fired up – outside of the encrypted command prompts, the quinjet was exactly the same as any other SHIELD jet they’d flown in. Bucky was getting ready to ease the thing off of the Stark helipad, when he remembered his promise to Steve.

“You ready for your first flight lesson, Stevie?” He asked teasingly, waiting the second for Steve to
They spent the first few months tracking down State-side leads, which proved to be largely uneventful. The vast majority of HYDRA agents still in the US had either gone down with SHIELD in DC or been taken into custody in the days that followed as their identities had been revealed for the remaining government security agencies to take care of the job. Bucky and Steve made a point of checking in to each outpost themselves, though, on the lookout for any remaining operatives that were on the lam or information on bases that might have been too heavily classified to have been included in the data dump. On the rare occasion that an office was still staffed, it was never with enough HYDRA agents to pose much of a challenge for Bucky, much less for the both of them.

That changed when they got to the ‘Homeland Security’ office outside of Grand Forks, North Dakota. The first major problem was that the entire thing was underground, making assessing the staffing situation considerably more difficult than it should have been. Bucky put Stark’s scope to use, setting up on a rooftop nearby and turning on its thermal mode to find that it was just strong enough for him to get an estimate of the number of agents working in the basement; but they wouldn’t have any idea about their weapons or abilities until they had actually walked into the facility itself.

“What’s the headcount?” Steve murmured from where he’d been laying on the roof next to Bucky.

“I’ve got forty-five, as well as I can tell. No saying how many of them are HYDRA, though; for all we know half could be Air Force.” Bucky sighed, taking his eye away from the scope and glowering down at the building.

Steve continued staring at the side door of the place, clearly still deep in thought. “So – do you think we should call in backup? Or go ahead with what we’d planned originally?”

When they’d first read about the Dakota base the two of them had agreed to take it down as they had most of the other staffed facilities, with Steve going in ahead in full Captain America mode and trying to work diplomacy on the agents that he encountered. For the smaller bases it had worked out well; they were usually full of clerical workers who were scared enough of what they had seen happen in DC to try their luck against a super soldier and all too happy to surrender whatever information they had available. On the rare occasion that any of them were stupid enough to try pulling something, Bucky would come in as well and help Steve in taking them out. So far he’d fired a total of five rounds on the entire trip, and while his gut told him that today would probably be considerably different, Bucky wasn’t exactly keen on waiting for help to arrive to finish the job – or the idea of pulling another one of their friends into danger if it wasn’t completely necessary.

“Your call,” he finally said nonchalantly, shouldering his rifle and turning his full attention towards Steve. “It wouldn’t be horrible to have another hand down there in case shit hits the fan, especially if a bunch of them end up having combat training – but at the same time, I don’t hate the idea of a challenge, either.”

Steve nodded vaguely, still studying the building ahead, before coming to a decision. “Let’s go pay them a visit, then; don’t want to get any rustier than we already have.”

For a terrorist cell that had been growing inside of a government intelligence agency, the security to the base was shoddy at best. Bucky shot-out the external security that they found, then the both of them waited in the alley adjacent to the building for the security guard to come out and check, quickly incapacitating him and using his credentials to enter the building. The layout inside was an exact match to the information that Jarvis had provided them: Bucky cut the main power to the building then followed Steve down the stairwell into the basement office, his rifle at the ready over
Steve’s shoulder as they cautiously made their way through the dim emergency lighting, watching for signs of any security agents who might be waiting for them.

When they made it to the bottom of the stairs without incident, Steve marched on ahead, kicking through the sad excuse of a security door and striding into the office where the agents waited in shock, blinking stupidly at his obviously recognizable shield.

“I have it on good authority that some of you in this room have been working for an agency known as HYDRA – I need everyone to stay calm and hand over whatever information that you might have related to other agents and facilities, and no one will get hurt.”

Bucky watched from the shadows of the stairwell as three idiots in the back of the room tried to be sneaky about reaching for something in their desks. One almost had his gun out of its holster before Steve dropped him with the shield, while Bucky buried a bullet in the forehead of the other two before his body hit the ground, stepping into the main room as the screams of surprise settled down.

“Anyone else feel like bein’ a hero?” He asked menacingly, making a show of using the site of his rifle to look the room over. The remaining agents all fell silent, slowly raising their hands so that they were visible and looking to Steve – the good cop – for instructions.

With everyone cooperating, it hardly took any time at all for the two of them to gain the information that they needed, including the locations of the rest of the HYDRA agents that lived in the surrounding areas, a couple of tiny Canadian bases that hadn’t been included on their original list, and a small database of politicians who had shown HYDRA sympathies over the years and could be trusted to show support when the organization needed future favors. Steve had one of the employees download all of the necessary information onto a couple of thumb drives, then set to calling his CIA contact on one of the landlines as Bucky made his way around the room restraining each of the agents for pick-up. He listened carefully to Steve’s end of the conversation with Sharon, as they discussed the bust and how Steve and Bucky would be leaving the prisoners for either the CIA or the FBI to pick up, as well as the information – it had all seemed small enough beans that the US Government could easily take care of them, plus a bone thrown to any of the big wigs in the intelligence community who might still be considering raising hell about the fact that the two of them were on such a self-appointed mission to begin with.

“Right. You’ve got it – thank you, Agent.” Steve paused for a second longer, before hanging up the desk phone and turning to Bucky. “FBI will have field agents here within the hour.”

“Guess our job here’s done, then?” Bucky asked, tightening one final zip-tie around the last agent’s wrists.

“Looks that way,” Steve agreed, his eyes scanning the room with a slight frown one final time before nodding and turning towards the door. “Yeah, come on – let’s get out of here.”

They were half-way to the stairwell before one of the idiots behind them started shouting. “CUT OFF ONE HEAD…”

Bucky heaved an almighty sigh before calling out over his shoulder, “We know, pal, we know – you guys are either going to need to start regenerating a hell of a lot faster or find a new shtick.” He didn’t bother to wait for the goon’s reply, slamming what was left of the security door shut behind them and following Steve up the stairs to the waiting street above.

If he was honest with himself, Bucky found it surprising, how little things had changed between him and Steve after everything that had gone down in DC. Bucky liked to think that he still kept Steve grounded, kept him from getting so wrapped up in the big picture and the mission that he forgot
about himself, while Steve helped Bucky maintain his sense of humor, so that he could still find the
good in things even on the days when he felt nothing but maudlin and anger over everything that had
happened to them. They still teased the hell out of one another, still spent nearly all of their time
together, whether it was eating or training or simply sitting around in silence and watching TV in a
hotel room in an attempt to decompress.

The only real difference was that when they checked into motels nowadays, they left fake names and
booked rooms with a single bed, then made a point out of making good use out of it, especially after
the more exciting busts. If Bucky wanted to touch Steve, or better yet, to kiss him, he had no reason
to hold back on the urge. Even better, Steve was always all too happy to reciprocate. It all felt right,
in a way that Bucky couldn’t even completely comprehend.

That wasn’t to say that things were perfect; they still bickered – Steve was still too damned stubborn
and reckless for his own good, and thought Bucky was a hypocrite who needed to worry less. They
still woke each other up with nightmares far more frequently than was probably healthy. And there
were still days where the both of them were absolute shit at talking their issues out, especially if they
had anything to do with emotion. But at the end of the day, Bucky couldn’t help admitting that this
was probably as close to happy as he’d felt since the day he’d joined the front in Europe.

He knew better than to expect the feeling to last, and did his best to savor it for as long as they could.

Three weeks after North Dakota they were running reconnaissance on an office they’d sniffed out
along the way outside of Seattle, Washington, when Steve’s phone woke him shortly before dawn.
Since they’d left them both charging on the nightstand closest to Bucky he grabbed it first, sliding
the phone open when he recognized Sam’s number on the screen and watching with amusement as
Steve promptly passed out again.

“Morning,” Bucky muttered into the phone, clearing his throat quietly when he heard how sleep-
scratchy his voice still was.

“Oh good, you guys are still alive. I was starting to worry, what with all of the news I’ve not been
getting,” Sam griped on the other end of the phone, although Bucky could hear that he sounded
relatively good-natured.

“Yeah, ah – things are still going pretty good, actually. We’ve been making do with the two of us
pretty easily.”

Sam hummed shortly. “Alright, man – I just didn’t want you guys forgetting about me, or thinking
that just because I said I didn’t want to come along for the whole damned ride that I wasn’t willing to
jump in if you needed me. Cuz I am… and Stark keeps building me ridiculous tech: I’ve got a
freakin’ drone to go with the wings now, too.”

“Yeah, he does that,” Bucky chuckled softly, glancing down at where Steve was sprawled across his
pillow, mouth slack and face smooth with sleep. “Actually, we’ve got two more jobs here in the
States and then we’re heading south – if you’re still up for it, we could use you for a couple of those
bigger jobs we talked about in New York.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying right now, Bucky – just give me coordinates and a timeframe and
I’m your man.”

“Alright,” Bucky responded, a smile pulling at his lips, “let me just get the boss and we can work the
details out.” He flipped the phone onto speaker mode and nudged Steve awake, careful to avoid the
couple of bruises that were still fading along his ribs from the night prior. “Rise and shine, Sugar –
Sam wants to talk battle plans.”
Steve rolled his eyes at the cheesy endearment while exaggerated gagging noises filtered through the phone’s speakers. After a brief greeting they set to work, running over what they’d come up with so far and confirming with Sam that their upcoming plans for the larger, more remote South American bases were largely the same. Within half an hour they’d worked out an exact course of action, including dates and a meeting spot for Sam to join them at and back-up plans on how to contact one another in the event that any details needed to change at the last minute. Steve sighed after Bucky’d turned the phone off, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes and muttering, “I guess that means we should get back to work then, huh?”

Bucky simply hummed, stretching languorously and letting the sheet that had been covering them slide off hips with a smirk as he watched Steve’s eyes follow it.

They left the hotel room an hour later.

The final missions on the West Coast – one near Silicon Valley and the other closer to the Mexican border in Arizona, went off without a hitch, and before they knew it Bucky and Steve were waiting in civilian clothes outside of the airport in Bogota, watching closely for Sam to arrive at his assigned terminal. When he finally made his way towards them he was hauling a military-grade duffel and an over-sized carry-on, which Steve smirked at as they began to make their way towards the car Bucky’d rented. “How the hell did you get everything through airport security?” he asked incredulously, loading the bag into the back.

“Stark has more cloaking tech on the carry-case than I think he has on the damned wings,” Sam responded with a broad grin, throwing the duffel in after and loading into the back of the car himself. “Now, where to?”

“We’ve got the quinjet stored away somewhere safe, and the main base we’d talked about is only a couple hours’ drive away,” Bucky responded, glancing in the rear-view mirror as he did. “Figured it’d be easier to drive to a nearby spot and walk in to get a better look, then take care of the big job today.”

“Works for me,” Sam agreed before pointing out the shaggy hair that the both of them had hanging out from beneath their baseball caps. “Digging the new look, by the way – very hobo-chic.”

“It’s not as if going to the barber has been a big priority for us the past few months, Sam,” Steve said good-naturedly, before taking his hat off as they pulled onto a larger road heading out of the airport traffic. “Although – it is getting kind of outta hand, now that you mention it. I don’t suppose you brought a pair of scissors with you?”

“I can’t say I travel with them regularly,” Sam teased, letting the topic drop for the rest of the trip and instead filling them in on the news that they’d missed while being wrapped up in HYDRA issues.

Suiting up in the car wasn’t particularly easy, but they had to make do once they found themselves within a mile of the coordinates of the compound. Once the three of them were dressed, with Bucky’s guns assembled and Sam’s wings unboxed and powered up, they made their way through the surrounding forest, stopping once the ten-foot high walls of the base came into view.

Sam pulled on the goggles that Stark had programmed for him and released the drone, watching as it flew over the wall then relaying the situation inside. “Alright – looks like the anti-aircraft guns are exactly what we were expecting… they’ll be tough but nothing I can’t handle. The guard is –” he paused, frowning as the drone must have continued moving around the perimeter of the compound. “Looking like thirty men: seven teams of four plus a couple of lookout gunmen on parapets. And three buildings inside, exactly as JARVIS thought.”
“Should be easy enough,” Steve responded sarcastically, grabbing his shield off of his back and watching as the drone came back over the wall and returned to Sam’s pack. “Alright, here’s what we’ll do – Buck, you head around to the North wall and get into position. Let us know when you’re set. Sam, you’ll go in first over the West wall, get their attention and mess with them from above. Bucky will take down the guys on the ground; I’ll come in from the West after you and start making a hole in the defense towards the main building. And seeing as we have no plans for hostages on this trip,” he added darkly, grabbing a couple of cherry bombs out of his pack and handing them over to Sam, “take ‘em out at your discretion.”

“Will do,” Sam said as he accepted the weapons, stowing them carefully in the cargo pockets of his pants. Bucky had already began jogging towards his spot, calling out his position when he arrived then scaling the wall with ease as soon as he heard the firefight begin inside. He was twenty feet from one of the parapets Sam had mentioned, so he took the guard out with his sidearm before swinging himself fully onto the top of the wall, then quickly moved his rifle into position and began dropping the guards below one at a time, giving Steve cover as he knocked the rest around with the shield.

A group of least forty agents poured out of one of the side buildings in the facility, but Sam made good use of the wings, dodging in and out of the line of fire of the anti-aircraft long guns on the ground before eventually taking all three of them out with the cherry bombs Steve had given him. Finally, once he’d already sniped the majority of the boots on the ground, Bucky ditched the rifle for his sidearm, hopping down from the wall of the fence and joining Steve in the thick of it. Within minutes they’d knocked out the entirety of the guard; Sam landed quietly next to Bucky, who gave him a teasing grin. “That was easy enough, huh?”

To his surprise, Sam actually laughed brightly. “Are you kidding me, dude? That was so sick… these wings are ridiculous.”

“We aren’t done just yet,” Steve reminded them, using his shield to bust out the locking mechanism on the front door of the main building then leading the way in, as Bucky followed at his six as usual. The firefight inside was nothing on what they had faced to get in, and they soon found themselves at the center of the compound, surrounded by quaking scientists and an enormous lab full of weapons in development.

Bucky’s Spanish was shit, but Sam spoke it just well enough to round them up in the center of the room, while Steve downloaded the information on both the weapons and their contacts off of one of the computers in the center of the room.

“What the hell are we going to do about all of the white coats?” Bucky asked quietly, wondering why they hadn’t even considered how many non-militarized employees they might encounter – at its core, HYDRA had started out as a scientific division, after all.

“The CIA can’t help us, but if they’re all HYDRA employees I suppose the World Security Council will want to know,” Steve responded, still staring at the computer.

“Does that even exist anymore?” Bucky asked incredulously.

Steve frowned as he finished loading Jarvis’s program onto the HYDRA server. “Contact you-know-who.”

Bucky sighed, pulling out his phone and sending an encrypted message to the last number that he’d had for Fury. He didn’t love his chances of actually getting a response, but he couldn’t think of a better idea. His text alert chimed almost immediately after.
Send me your coordinates, it'll be taken care of.

Bucky read the response skeptically, looking over his message again to make sure that he’d definitely sent that they were unarmed and harmless. “Uh… he says it will be taken care of if we tell him where we are.”

Steve pursed his lips, finally glancing at Bucky with the same look of trepidation that he was feeling. “What’s the story?” Sam asked from where he was still standing watch over their hostages.

Steve heaved a huge sigh before answering. “Uh – we’re gonna restrain them, then someone will be by to bring them in for questioning.”

Bucky raised a skeptical eyebrow, lowering his voice so that only Steve would hear him. “We sure about that? How do we know Fury’s not going to send someone in to just blow ‘em all up?”

“We don’t,” Steve answered heavily, clicking out of the program as the computer indicated that all of the files had been extracted from it and dropping the flash drive back into the appropriate pocket in his belt. “But we don’t have any other choice, either – if we leave them here to roam free they’re probably going to start alerting other bases that we’re here, if they haven’t already.”

Bucky sighed as well, knowing that Steve was right, before moving to help Sam in restraining each of the remaining agents.

They rolled out half an hour later, this time with Steve behind the wheel as Bucky did his best to ignore the gnawing feeling of dread in his gut over what would become of the men and women they were leaving behind. The feeling was mutual, judging by the quiet, tense atmosphere in the car for the majority of the drive.

After checking on the quinjet on the outskirts of town, the three of them made their way into Villavicencio, planning to spend the night while JARVIS reviewed their new data before taking off for their next location. “Why don’t the two of you head in and get us a double room,” Steve recommended as they passed a hotel off of the main road, “and I’ll go on and grab us some groceries from the market.”

Bucky didn’t miss the way that Sam’s lips thinned when he heard the recommendation, and waited a second to see if he would speak up before clarifying, “Just the one room for the three of us?”

Steve glanced at him as if it were obvious. “Well, yeah – tactically it makes the most sense. In the odd event that someone sniffs us out we’re safer together than if one of us is in a separate room.” The fact that the two of them obviously had no problem with sharing a bed went unspoken, and Bucky gave him a pointed look to say it wasn’t he who might have a problem with it.

“Er… if that’s okay?” Steve asked confusedly, glancing in the rear-view mirror at Sam as he brought the car to a stop.

“Totally fine,” Sam answered cheerily, already hopping out of the backseat of the car. Bucky still felt unsettled by his reactions, but shrugged and followed suit, grabbing his canvas backpack from the back of the car and leading the way into the hotel.

In their civvies and packs, he and Sam looked like they could have been any average pair of Joes backpacking through the mountains, so they had no trouble booking a room with Bucky’s fake ID and cash. The look on Sam’s face continued to stick with Bucky as they made their way to the
assigned room, though, so that he finally had to bring it up once they’d gotten in and scoped the place out. “You’re sure you’re alright with the bunking situation?”

Sam frowned in confusion for a second, studying Bucky closely before giving him an incredulous smile. “Yeah, of course – like Cap said, it makes more sense from a tactical standpoint not to split up.”

“You just – didn’t seem too comfortable about the two of us sharing a bed,” Bucky pressed lightly.

“I have zero issue with that, Bucky,” Sam responded immediately. “I told you, I have no problems with who my friends chose to sleep with – I’m sincerely happy as hell that the two of you have each other, now. After everything you’ve been through, you guys deserve it.”

“I’m not trying to call you a homophobe, Sam,” Bucky responded dryly, proud of himself for remembering the term on the fly. “Just – it’s seemed like, sometimes, you’re trying to hide the fact that you’re… sad when you’re around us. I don’t want to make that any worse.”

“You aren’t, Bucky – trust me,” Sam insisted. “We’re all good.”

Bucky let the topic go for a few seconds, listening to the drone of the sad ceiling fan in the room before finally licking his lips and gathering up the courage to bring up his next question. “Did you – is it Riley?”

Sam turned so fast, his face looking so betrayed, that Bucky couldn’t help but feel guilty for bringing it up. “I just mean,” he continued, “I know you said losing him made it not worth staying in combat. And, I guess I wondered…”

“Nothing happened between me and Riley,” Sam cut him off evenly. “We were – he was practically my brother.”

Bucky nodded silently, trying to think of a way to ask his next question without completely offending Sam. He knew all too well what it was like to be in love with a ‘friend’ – hell, if not for what had happened in DC, there was a very good chance that Bucky would still be saying the same thing about Steve. He couldn’t even imagine having lost him before they’d had a chance to open up about their feelings, and if Sam had lost Riley under similar circumstances…

“Listen,” Sam sighed, cutting off his train of thought. “I think I know what you’re trying to get at, and I’m not in the mood to talk about it right now, alright? Just – suffice it to say I’ve had my shit, and I’ve learned to deal with it, and I’ve come out the other side. You don’t need to worry about me, Bucky, and neither of you need to change the way you act on account of my feelings. We’re good.”

Bucky nodded once he’d finished, offering a quiet “Alright,” and dropping the topic as requested. He still had the nagging feeling that something wasn’t quite right, but he knew better than to push the point too much. They would be stuck in close quarters, working under stressful situations, for at least the next few weeks; getting on each other’s nerves over something so sensitive had the potential to yield disastrous results. Plus, as Sam had told him time and time again when it came to Bucky’s concerns about Steve – he couldn’t force someone into talking about their feelings if they weren’t ready to.

Besides, even if Sam did have issues that he needed help with, it wasn’t as if Bucky was going to be able to offer him anything in the way of solutions.

Things between them got a little less awkward once Steve arrived, and after eating dinner and watching a crappy telenovela on the hotel’s limited cable offerings the atmosphere amongst the three
of them was pretty much back to their usual Sunday night dinners. Sam was the first one to bring up turning in, which was hardly surprising given the amount of travel he’d done on the day and the fact that it had been his first fight of the mission. They each took their turn cleaning up in the bathroom, and when he climbed into bed Bucky did his best to put a respectable amount of space between himself and Steve. It was difficult, given how accustomed they had both grown to sharing space over the past few months, and even more so considering how little room there was on the Queen mattress for two men of their size, but as he drifted off facing the open window Bucky felt at least some of his guilt over the entire situation assuaged.

It wasn’t exactly a surprise when he woke up the next morning with his face buried in the nape of Steve’s neck and his right arm draped around his waist, with Steve’s left hand gently pinning it down. What was unexpected was the amused grin that Sam was giving him as he sat against his headboard, rolling his eyes when he caught Bucky watching. “You guys _would_ sleep like you belong on the cover of a damned Harlequin novel,” he snorted, before nodding towards Steve’s bag in the corner. “I think one of your tablets is going off – what time was JARVIS supposed to finish going over yesterday’s data?”

They’d been right to worry that HYDRA would begin catching on to the fact that they were coming after them—the security was greatly enhanced in the next four bases that they took on, to the point that Bucky was infinitely glad to have Sam around for help. Having him fly into the more heavily guarded bases as an aerial threat was a God-send… while he was sure that he and Steve could have probably taken them on their own, it would have been a much, much harder job. As it was, the fighting was already becoming exponentially more brutal, to the point that they took no hostages on their final two missions.

They sent Sam home after taking out the final outpost in Brazil – he’d already been with them for two weeks longer than they’d initially planned, and needed the time to recoup before they inevitably gave him a call about the bases in Europe, which only seemed to be growing in number and strength as they gathered more information and had Jarvis process it. Once he’d gone, Steve and Bucky made their way back north, taking out the bases in Mexico that they’d only recently gotten heard of. Bucky did his best not to think about how high his kill-count was getting, but was cursed by the serum yet again and the eidetic memory it’d given him.

It finally caught up to the both of them in a dingy hotel room outside of Mexico City. The base they had taken out that afternoon had been tiny, but inside they’d found an entirely new database of HYDRA locations spreading across Eastern Europe. Even without checking their existing list, Bucky knew it was going to add months to the job, and he’d been in a funk ever since he’d finished downloading the files.

“What is it?” Steve asked quietly in the hotel a few hours later, his lips pressed against the band of scar tissue on Bucky’s left shoulder as the sweat dried on their skin.

Bucky was silent for a long moment, wanting to blow it off as nothing, but he remembered their promise, and how good the both of them had been about not shutting one another out of late. He shook his head, closing his eyes before admitting, “I’m just – I’m so fuckin’ tired, Steve,” he finally admitted softly, keeping his eyes closed so that he didn’t have to see the look of disappointment on his face.

“I feel like I’ve been a weapon for so damned long that I don’t know how to be anything else, and just… I know we have to finish this, but I hate it.”

Steve was still for so long that Bucky finally cracked his eyes and glanced his way, unable to wait any longer for a response. Instead of the disappointment or anger that he was expecting, he got
something far worse: Steve looked fucking devastated, all wibbly lips and wide, wet, blue eyes as he stared down at Bucky’s face. “I’m sorry,” he croaked as Bucky opened his eyes completely. “Christ, I’m so sorry, Buck.”

“Cut it out,” Bucky replied gruffly, pulling him closer and holding on tight for a minute, feeling like complete shit for bringing it up in the first place. “You’ve got nothin’ to be sorry for, punk – I was the one who brought this whole mess up in the first place.”

“Yeah, but,” Steve started, his voice still watery.

“No buts,” Bucky cut him off immediately. “We ain’t playin’ that game today. There are a whole hell of a lot of people who owe me apologies, Stevie, but you aren’t on the list.”

Steve sighed and went still, but thankfully didn’t put up any further argument. They laid there in silence for at least five minutes, before Steve finally cleared his throat and spoke up again. “Listen – I know we kinda talked about it before, but I wanna say something.” He worked his throat again, pulling carefully out of Bucky’s embrace and sitting up on his elbow, looking down with a look of pure sincerity. “I swear, Bucky; as soon as we’re done with this shit, the second that we have confirmation that HYDRA’s done, we’re out of this. We’ll go back to Brooklyn or wherever we decide we wanna go, and do whatever the hell we decide we want to do, alright?”

It was a few seconds before Bucky could speak properly – Steve had mentioned the possibility of getting out in the past, but it had always been in the abstract, like he couldn’t imagine really doing it but was willing to pretend for Bucky’s sake. But this time he sounded so earnest about it, so willing to make the effort for both of their sakes, that Bucky couldn’t help but believe him. “Alright,” he finally responded thickly. “That… that sounds really, really good.”

He fell asleep that night holding onto the hopeful feeling that Steve wouldn’t let him down – that at the end of this whole mess they really would come out on top, and that despite everything that had stood in their way in the past, they really would be able to get out of the constant fighting and settle down with some kind of peace.

When they arrived in Europe he continued to cling to the idea, although it became progressively harder to believe the longer that they worked. All of their information had supported the idea that the majority of HYDRA’s influence outside of SHIELD had been located in Eastern Europe – without SHIELD to hide them it had been difficult for bases to stay out of the eye of international intelligence agencies, but after the fall of the Soviet Union there had been enough turmoil in the region that HYDRA had been able to infiltrate some of its old bases and maintain shop.

The soldiers and agents that they found in Europe were considerably more loyal to the cause than those they had found in the States; figuring out how to handle hostages was never an issue, as even the lab technicians seemed more willing to either die throwing themselves at Steve and Bucky in an attempt to stop them or to commit suicide instead of being taken captive. It was disturbingly similar to the campaign they’d launched with the Howlies, only their weapons were more efficient and there was no one else to share the burden with. Bucky had been tired in Central America, but he was exhausted in Europe, haunted by nightmares of the war and the fact that they just continued making new ones.

After successful campaigns in Bosnia and Serbia they were ready to call on Sam again – according to JARVIS there was an easy target on the Southwestern border of Bulgaria that housed a strategic office, but that the rest would be guarded with considerably heavier artillery and staffing. The initial plan had been to take the office, analyze the most recent data there, and then call in either Sam or even Tony as needed.
Unfortunately, instead of an intelligence office, they found a couple of bodies in a burned out basement. After heavy debate, Steve’s idea that they investigate the next base on the list before calling for back-up won out; they ended up finding the same results outside of Velingrad, Plovdiv and Shumen. Worse yet, JARVIS couldn’t help them with any new data – after their attacks in South America HYDRA had gone even further underground, so that even Stark’s best algorithms were having a hell of a time sniffing out any information on their current whereabouts, or who the hell could be so effectively decimating their hideouts before Steve and Bucky could even find them.

The final Bulgarian safe house in Ruse was at least standing when they approached it, but Bucky could tell from a single glance at it across the street that something was off about it. They waited until after dark to kick in the back door of the building, and his worries ended up being correct; the inside of the building had been completely trashed, with all of the appliances from the house sitting in the middle of the common room in a singed pile. “You don’t think they’re doing it themselves, do you?” Bucky asked as he made his way around the room warily. “I mean – if they picked up that we’re onto them, maybe they’ve decided to go deeper underground, and are just torching all of their old stuff to make it look like someone else is taking care of them.”

“It’s possible, I guess. But I mean… an organization like HYDRA; they’ve made more than a couple of enemies over the years. We can’t be the only ones out for revenge,” Steve responded casually, kicking a piece of debris aside and bending down so that he could type ineffectually at an obviously-dead computer in the corner of the room. Despite his apparent nonchalance, Bucky knew Steve well enough to catch the fact that it was a front; he was right in figuring that others would have reason to wipe HYDRA out as well, but the question of how many people would be capable of it was a considerably more complicated one. Hell, if it had already taken the two of them months…

“Anything?” Bucky asked, shaking off the feeling of dread in his belly and gripping his rifle a bit tighter as he kept his eyes and ears peeled for any other movement in the rubble around them.

“Of course not,” Steve responded with a sigh, finally standing up and returning the shield to his back. “Anything that might have been here is already toasted. How long is the flight to Bucharest?”

The answer was: plenty short enough for the two of them to make it before sun-down. Steve was double-checking their landing coordinates as Bucky avoided the city airspace, but as they flew over a smoldering bunker hidden in the surrounding forests they both knew they had found their spot. They put the quinjet down a half a mile away then jogged into the base, guns at the ready – although they hardly seemed necessary. The structural damage that this base had incurred was nowhere near as bad as the ones in Bulgaria, but the likelihood of there being survivors still seemed low given the number of lifeless guards that met them at the main gate.

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend, right?” Steve asked sarcastically, holding his shield in front of him as he stepped over the body of the first HYDRA goon and began creeping towards the first interior doorway.

“Yeah… not so sure that applies when we’re dealing with situations like these, pal,” Bucky responded tersely, flipping the safety on his rifle off and sweeping carefully behind them before continuing in on Steve’s six, his anxiety over the entire set-up growing progressively worse as they moved further and further underground.

The emergency lighting in the stairwell provided enough illumination for them to make their way into the main level of the base easily, although Bucky still felt the small hairs on the back of his neck rising in suspicion. Granted, he couldn’t see any one lying in wait to attack them, but the overwhelming feeling that someone was still there wouldn’t give up its hold on his brain.

Steve tracked through the bunker methodically, checking each room over, pausing when they came
up on functional computers to see if they could be hacked, while Bucky continued casing the rooms they were in, eyes and ears peeled for the slightest hint of movement. He licked his lips, ready to ask Steve if they had another bust on their hands, when the faintest noise of someone drawing a weapon behind them interrupted his thoughts.

Bucky turned towards the sound, aiming his rifle immediately as he felt Steve ready his shield to his left – he took a millisecond to orient himself before pulling the trigger, only to blink like an idiot as his brain registered the familiar red-head and blonde archer pointing their respective weapons back at them.

There was a long, awkward pause before Barton lowered his bow, frowning at the two of them.

“’The hell… Cap? Bucky?’”

Bucky snorted and lowered his rifle as well, flicking the safety back to on and hoisting it to his back.

“Don’t you idiots know better than to come sneaking up on friendlies?”

“It’s been a hell of a long time since we’ve met up with a friendly, Barnes,” Natasha responded drolly, returning her pistols to their holsters, “but I’ve gotta say you two are a sight for sore eyes.”

They finished sweeping the rest of the base together, the four of them covering the grounds with ease, given the fact that there was no one left alive to offer any resistance. Bucky had JARVIS’s program run a perfunctory search for any new information on the base’s hard drive, and when nothing turned up they wrote the whole thing off as a bust, agreeing to move out of range of possible remote ears before having any further discussions.

“I don’t suppose you boys have any spare charges on you?” Natasha asked, making her way into one of the back rooms as Steve and Bucky made for the door. She rolled her eyes when they looked at her in confusion. “We’ve been blowing the structures when we leave them, if they’re still standing when we get there – prevent other cockroaches from crawling in and using the facilities for their own nefarious purposes in the future.”

Her reasoning made sense, and explained why the bases they’d visited recently had been in the condition they’d found them in. The four of them were quickly able to get everything set up, then marched their way back towards the nearby ridge where Steve and Bucky had left the quinjet parked.

“How have you two been making out, then?” Steve asked conversationally as they began up the hill.

“How badly have I gotten my ass kicked, you mean?” Clint scoffed in response, before shrinking a bit under Natasha’s glare. “Uh… we’ve run into The Widow twice now.”

“Wait, really?” Bucky asked incredulously; he had figured that they’d either have her in hand or be dead if they’d actually met up with her.

“Yelena was – definitely not ready to talk. She went back to Russia as I’d figured she might, the first time that we ran into her was near Chelyabinsk. She was still pretty disoriented, probably still shaking off whatever programming HYDRA had sent her into the INSIGHT ordeal with.” Natasha explained slowly, staring straight ahead up the hill as she did. “Have either of you been to any facility intact enough to still have a chair in it?”

Steve shook his head in confusion, but Bucky vaguely remembered seeing what had looked like a dentist chair with an odd halo attached to it at the first lab in Colombia. “We did, in South America,” he answered for the both of them, glancing at Steve as the memory dawned on him as well.
“I found the specs for one of the chairs on one of the few hard drives she actually left intact, when she first decided to start taking out HYDRA facilities,” Natasha continued calmly, reaching the summit first then turning around and pulling a cell phone out of her pocket as she continued to speak. “Apparently they were built to send electric impulses into the brain – over-stimulate the hippocampus so that whoever it was used on, provided their neurons were hardy enough to survive it, would have their memories completely scrambled.” She finished the sentence and pushed a button on her phone dispassionately, not even paying attention as the charges began to go off below them. “I couldn’t help but be impressed, honestly – I never would have thought someone would become more effective at brainwashing than the Red Room was.”

“The second time we found her she was after she’d blown up a base in Kazakhstan, but she was doing a little better,” Clint continued after a long pause. “She recognized Nat, anyway, and told us to quit following her. From the looks of it she’s only targeting HYDRA right now, so – that’s gotta be a good sign, right?”

Bucky swallowed thickly, still reeling from the information about the chair. A quick glance at Steve told him that the feeling was mutual; they really shouldn’t have been surprised by HYDRA getting up to something so terrible, given all of the horrors they’d witnessed themselves over the years, but scrambling a person’s brain to make them a more efficient weapon was still unsettling. Instead of answering Bucky slumped into Steve’s side as they watched the base explode from the overlook, too exhausted to give a damn what Barton or Romanoff might have to say about it… the adrenaline surge from running into them was wearing off, and he was ready to have Steve to himself for a bit before they had to regroup and do it all again.

“So – where are you two headed next?” Steve asked as the final wall of the building caved in, his arm wrapping around Bucky’s waist so that his hand rested gently against his opposite hip.

Bucky glanced over to watch their reaction, sincerely hoping that they already had a plan in mind. While it wouldn’t hurt to have back-up going into Germany, he wasn’t sure that he was ready to be traveling as a team just yet.

“The nearest base to here is in Odessa,” Natasha responded, still focusing on the smoldering remains of the building. “We’re going to continue tracking her – if not to bring her in, to at least make sure she isn’t captured and turned back against us again. I’m sure we won’t find her again until she actually wants us to, but we have to make sure that whatever is left of HYDRA doesn’t reclaim an asset like that.”

If Bucky hadn’t known her as well as he thought he did, he would have been put-off by how cold Natasha’s voice sounded, by how inhumane her thought process seemed. But as he watched her face in the flames, Bucky could see her concern there, and could begin to guess at what she wasn’t saying. In the flames of the building, Natasha Romanoff saw that there had to still be something left worth redeeming in her friend, and Bucky couldn’t say he wouldn’t have done the same for any of the people standing around him now, if the roles were reversed.

“We’ll leave that one to you guys, then,” Bucky finally said. “According to the intel we got in South America, the next biggest base in Europe is supposed to be outside of Munich; we figured we’re getting far enough down on the list that it’s time to pay them a visit, see what we have to expect for the rest of our project.”

“You’re sure you don’t want to team up?” Clint asked skeptically. “Seems like it’d be a hell of a lot easier for all of us as a group than split into pairs.”

Steve shook his head. “No, you guys have a damned good reason for going after Belova, and like Natasha said, you should keep a close eye on her. We can’t continue getting in after her, though –
Bucky and I need to get to a base before she destroys it, look over their intel and make sure we aren’t missing anything.”

“If you’re sure,” Natasha responded, finally turning away from the burning building and focusing on Steve and Bucky. “Don’t hesitate to be in touch if you change your mind – we’ve got a Humvee that has a few convenient modifications made to it, we’ll only be a few hours away if you run into anything you can’t handle on your own.”

“Same goes for you,” Bucky replied, nodding towards the quinjet that was waiting for them, adding teasingly, “and we’ll be considerably quicker than a few hours.”

The Munich base was better hidden than the others they had sought out until that point, so that it took them a couple of days to finally locate its exact position and move in on foot. As they stood on a nearby lookout, Bucky’s feelings were completely mixed about the place. On one hand, it was a relief to see that they had finally beat Belova to a destination – the base below still looked to be in good working order, and given the amount of movement inside it seemed safe to assume that there were still plenty of HYDRA projects underway that they could garner data from. On the other hand, there were at least fifty guards around the perimeter of the compound, and given the size of the base inside Bucky had to guess that it represented half of their staff, if not less. From what he could see, all appeared to be heavily armed as well; it wasn’t Schmidt’s fortress in the Alps, but it would definitely be their hardest bust yet.

“You’re sure you don’t want to call in backup?” Bucky asked one last time, his eyes roaming over the groups of guards waiting in the courtyard below them.

Steve hesitated before shaking his head. “Nat and Clint are busy, and it would take Sam too long to get here – I want to get in there and look over their files, before they have time to start preparing for an attack.”

“Alright,” Bucky sighed, locking the final piece of his rifle into place and readjusting himself in shooting position. “I’ll wait for your signal, then?”

“Give me twenty seconds, then give ‘em hell,” Steve answered, fastening the strap on his helmet then taking off at a sprint towards the east side of the complex.

Bucky readied his rifle and counted down silently as Steve had asked, letting the seconds calm his nerves and settling in so that it was just him and the gun and the targets below. If they could successfully knock this base out, they should be able to put the final stages of their mission into action – finish wiping out the last couple of HYDRA strongholds in the world and then be done with the bastards forever.

With that thought he finished counting and opened fire, methodically taking down an entire team of guards before Steve came into view, a blue flurry of motion that was dropping men nearly as quickly as Bucky’s rifle was. He switched guns as the final guard fell, grabbing up his modified machine gun and jumping down from his nest, then sprinting towards Steve’s position so that they could take the interior of the base together. They were met with a human barrier at the main door, but worked through the agents with brutal force and efficiency, mowing down anyone who dared put up resistance with kicks, punches and a hail of bullets.

Without hesitation they made their way through the first level of the base. For each level that they penetrated, the guard became thinner and thinner, until it was only pairs of guys in lab coats and pistols, none of whom stood a chance against the two of them. Steve dropped the last two with a simple flick of his shield, hitting the first one hard enough in the head that he was knocked out on contact then punching the lights out of the second one while he was still watching his comrade fall.
Bucky took a deep breath as Steve called the shield back to him, waiting for his nod before kicking the security door open.

Steve barged into the room first, shield raised and in position to take someone else out, only to stop dead in his tracks. Bucky nearly ran into him, coming up short just in time then stepping to the side to see the single HYDRA agent that was left in their path. The guy was skinny and unarmed, clearly someone in either science or clerical work, and he stood with his finger hovering over the button of the computer behind him, which ominously flashed a warning screen as he sneered at them both.

Steve raised his shield again, calmly commanding, “Stand down,” but the kid remained exactly as he was.

Bucky was going to be damned before he was going to let the guy ruin their biggest mission in months. “You know who we are?” He asked in German, raising his gun again and keeping it trained directly on his head.

“I do. You were one of Herr Zola’s biggest successes, but also our greatest disappointment as you ended up escaping to become an even bigger fascist.”

Bucky laughed coldly in response. “Good, so you know what I can do?” He asked harshly, “You know that I could kill you before you can hope of hitting that button?”

“Buck…” Steve warned softly, but Bucky wasn’t having it. The guy opened his mouth to respond, probably to yell another freakin’ “Heil HYDRA” in their faces, and Bucky decided he’d had it. He gave a quarter pull on the trigger of his gun, taking the guy’s eye out with ease. Blood splashed on the computer screen behind him but the bullet buried itself in the wall, a dull thud that just preceded the agent swaying and falling over to the right.

Steve turned to him, and it wasn’t until he was being pulled into a hug that Bucky even realized how hard he was shaking. Whether it was from relief of actually succeeding in their mission or horror from how brutal it had been, he didn’t know; Bucky felt so numb that he didn’t know if he could recognize any of his emotions anymore. In a way, it was like Kreischberg all over again; he was gutted and lost, clinging to Steve like he was the only thing that could possibly prove that he was human anymore.

“Here,” Steve finally murmured after a long moment, gently pulling the gun from Bucky’s grip. “I’ll take watch; you go ahead and take care of the files, alright?”

Bucky nodded tightly, then turned and plugged in the last of the jump drives that Tony had sent them with, letting the code that JARVIS had wrote hack into the HYDRA database then watching as the files began to fly by. One disturbingly familiar image flickered by on the screen and caught his attention; as soon as the program had finished running Bucky clicked on it, instead of taking the drive and running with it as they usually did. He could sense Steve beginning to get restless as he clicked through the downloaded files – it had never taken this long to download data before, but as Bucky came back to the image he’d saw and clicked on its information, he had to sit down in the chair beside him.

“What is it?” Steve asked, looking back at where Bucky was now seated with concern all over his face.

“It’s… c’mere.” Bucky finally said, staring with detached horror at the plans in front of him.

He waited until Steve was standing over his shoulder, frowning down at the screen and reading
through Bucky had already committed to memory – Loki’s damned scepter, sitting in a base deep in Sokovia, a base that most of HYDRA apparently didn’t even know about… where they were now using it to build weapons.

“I think it’s time to call the rest of the team in.” Bucky finally said, watching the color drain out of Steve’s face. “All of them.”

Chapter End Notes

One more note on the hiatus - I am absolutely determined to get this done before Civil War comes out (because I know how badly it's going to wreck me), so my goal from here on out is to put out a chapter a week.

As always, thanks so so much for your comments and kudos, they've been especially helpful now that I'm getting close to the end and deviating from the stories I know - hearing that it isn't all crap is a huge motivation to actually continue, lol.
Avengers Assemble, Pt IV

Chapter Summary

The team comes together again to take down one last HYDRA base, then Bucky and Steve begin settling in to retirement.

Chapter Notes

First part is from Steve's POV, everything after ~*~ is Bucky.

ETA: So... I found this in the concept art for CW, and almost lost my shit because if you want a visual reference for Bucky at this point, this is EXACTLY IT. I mean, seriously - change the symbol on the arm and it's exactly what I was picturing, down to the jacket and holsters and just *flails*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been shockingly easy to get a hold of Tony – despite the time difference he’d picked up on Steve’s second ring, and he’d barely been able to get the word “scepter” out before Stark was already suiting up, telling Steve that he would have Banner and a quinjet in route within the hour and yelling for JARVIS to get in touch with Thor. He hung up after a couple of seconds, leaving Steve blinking at the blank screen of his phone as Bucky wrapped up his own call.
“Barton and Romanoff figure they can meet us twenty kilometers from the Sokovia base in six hours, tops,” Bucky informed him as he turned his phone off, “what’s the story on Stark?”

“He says he’ll have himself and Banner ready to go in an hour, so... probably the same timeframe, assuming they’re flying from New York,” Steve responded, giving him a rueful smile. “No idea on Thor – all I caught was him yelling at JARVIS to call and then he hung up on me.”

Bucky snorted, stashing his phone and leading the way back to the quinjet. “Well, I’m thinking it’s a half hour flight for us... might as well scope the place out and have a plan in mind sooner rather than later, right?”

It was actually Thor who had arrived first – apparently he’d been staying in London of late, so traveling by Mjölnir had been relatively easy. They caught up for a while, reviewing the data on the nearby base and bouncing ideas for a plan of attack off of one another. It was interesting, having a third person join them again, particularly one with as much battle experience as Thor had. Natasha and Barton arrived a few hours later, looking no worse for wear than they had when Bucky and Steve had seen them last. Finally, a quinjet set down in a clearing nearby, bearing Stark, Banner, a motorcycle that looked a hell of a lot like Steve’s custom bike from the Howlies era, and eight Iron Legion bots.

“I didn’t want to have to wait for the geezers going in on foot so I took the liberty of throwing her together, and there’s another dozen on standby in the event that we need them,” Tony said lazily, following Steve’s gaze towards the robots, “I just figured with the whole gang being back together, there was no reason to go too overkill just yet. Like the new look, by the way – super soldiers gone wild.”

“When the hell were we supposed to get a haircut?” Steve muttered, flattening his hair down with his fingers self-consciously while Bucky rolled his eyes.

“Not that I haven’t missed the hell outta you guys, but let’s save the jawing for later and get down to business, shall we?” Bucky flicked his StarkPad so that the schematics of the base projected for all of them to see. “Alright, their base is about ten kilometers from the capital of Sokovia, in an old castle on the hill outside of the city. We’re gonna have to watch out for civilian casualties if their missiles are anything like the Tesseract-powered ones were during the war, so the plan will be for all of us to attack from the South and East sides of the castle, keep firing towards the city to a minimum.

“According to the schematics, and JARVIS backed ‘em up, the main castle has some kind of force field protecting it, so regardless of what we can accomplish on the ground, we’ll need someone to take that down before we can actually overtake them and get to the loot.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Tony quipped easily.

Bucky sniffed lightly before continuing. “Alright, so we know of bunkers here, here and here,” he pointed each raised bit of ground out on the map, “safe bet is that each has at the least a type of anti-aircraft weaponry, probably even bigger to target a long-range ground attack as well. And according to the data we picked up in Munich, there will be a minimum of three hundred foot soldiers on-guard... probably more, given the damage we’ve been doing to the rest of their bases in the area.”

Steve nodded, waiting until Bucky had finished describing the lay of the land and then stepping in to go over strategy. “The lead scientist on the base is a Baron named Von Strucker – our goal should be to bring him in alive, see if we can work out how the hell he got his hands on the scepter to begin with and if there are any other HYDRA bases that we haven’t caught wind of yet, as well as what all he’s been up to here. Tony: you and JARVIS should prioritize on taking down the primary
protection on the Citadel; Thor, you give him back-up if needed, but until then stick to the ground with us… if they’ve worked out how to use the scepter to make weapons then we’re going to need all the help we can get. Bucky and I will come in from the South using the bike; Natasha, I want you and Barton to take out the defenses on the East with the Humvee.

“We’ll triangulate the attacks to meet up here,” he pointed out a spot on the map near to the main entry point of the castle, “with the intention of wiping out their men on the ground and storming the castle as soon as Stark has the gates lowered.”

Steve chewed his lip for a moment, looking over the weapons bunkers again before turning to Bruce with a twinge of guilt. “Doctor Banner, I don’t suppose you could summon up a Code Green and knock out the big guns?”

Bruce gave Steve a rueful smile. “I mean – that was the point of my coming along in this case, wasn’t it?” Before Steve could try to come up with something that sounded kinder, Bruce waved him off. “It’s fine, Cap, I get it. And yeah, I can definitely do that. Thor,” he turned towards him, nodding towards the quinjet beside them, “I’ve been working on something to, er, take the other guy down safely once the mission is over – I don’t suppose I could show you how to use it?”

“I’d be glad to help,” Thor responded graciously, looking back to Steve. “Is that all, Captain?”

Steve glanced at Bucky, who simply shrugged and wiped the projection away. “Yeah,” he ended up answering, addressing the group at large again, “I mean – we’ll probably have to play it by ear once we actually get a look at their weapons, so make sure everyone has their earpieces in… Otherwise, should be fun, right?”

“Like old times,” Tony responded with a dry smirk, letting the faceplate on his helmet lock back into place.

It only took a couple of minutes for the rest of them to gear up – Bruce handed off whatever it was that he would need Thor to use after the fight then made his way off into the woods to Hulk out on his own, Natasha and Clint brought their humvee around then took off to the East end of the compound, and Bucky quickly got his guns and ammo in order while Steve looked over the bike Stark had brought them.

“Just the one,” he warned Bucky, fastening his helmet and getting a leg over it.

“Not like I can fire a rifle while I’m driving myself,” Bucky responded dryly, climbing onto the back facing away from Steve’s six, already holding his machine gun at the ready. “Gimme a heads up before we hit any bumps, huh?”

With an amused shake of his head Steve powered the bike up, taking off into the woods in front of them. They were less than a mile into the route before the forest around them started lighting up with shots – once Strucker’s men realized that they were under attack, it took them no time to mobilize and strike out against the team.

Steve pushed the motorcycle on through the trees, finally hitting a clearing in the brush and speeding up as they made their way up the mountain. He was so focused on the oncoming truck of HYDRA soldiers ahead of him that he didn’t notice the one flying at the bike until it was nearly on top of them. Before he could even think to reach for the shield Bucky reached out with his metal arm, grabbing hold of the grunt’s suit with such force that Steve could actually hear the metal it was made of groaning under Buck’s fingers as its power source shut down. “You have any use for this?” Bucky yelled over his shoulder.
Steve was about to say no, when he considered the truck ahead of them. “Actually, yeah,” he shouted back, grabbing the guy like a ragdoll by the collar of his suit. He pushed the clutch on the bike again, picking up speed then using the acceleration to help him chuck the soldier into the HYDRA Jeep, smirking coldly as he heard the engines blow on the truck as they blew by it.

They continued racing through the forest, with Thor occasionally appearing overhead and helping to blast a hole in the HYDRA offensive before flying off again, presumably to help Natasha and Clint in the same manner. There was no way of contacting the Hulk, of course, but Steve was fairly confident he was still on track when they passed the second decimated bunker. The entire team made it through the meet-up point without problem, with Barton and Romanoff ditching their ride to attack what was left of the HYDRA defenses more directly as Steve and Bucky rode onward, listening in as Tony began his attack on the Castle.

It was hard to follow his quiet rapid muttering to JARVIS, but after announcing that he was going to try poking the castle’s shield his update was a loud and clear “SHIT!”

“Alright, Stark?” Steve asked shortly, swerving the bike to the left as they approached another group of soldiers ahead.

“The barrier’s more powerful than I was expecting - what’s the story down there?” Tony asked briskly.

Steve was too busy dodging an incoming blast to answer immediately, but Bucky’s frustrated exclamation as he weaved and ducked behind him came through the coms perfectly clear. “Y’know, I really fuckin’ missed this blue plasma shit. It’s a shame none of the other bases had it.”

“Strucker was probably the only one with an energy source powerful enough to build them,” Steve reasoned, chucking his shield at an upcoming guard tower and knocking the sniper out of his nest before continuing. “Stark – any progress on getting in there and shutting them down?”

“Still working on finding a weak point,” Stark muttered in response.

“Loki’s scepter must be here,” Thor chimed in, “otherwise they wouldn’t be able to mount so fierce an attack.”

There was banter back and forth on the coms as they all continued their own fights, calling out tactical victories and updates. For as outnumbered as they were, things were going remarkably smoothly; of course, as soon as the thought crossed his mind Steve noticed a massive force mowing its way through the trees in front of them.

With a start, Steve recognized that it was a tank that they were hurtling towards. He knew that the shield wouldn’t be able to do any damage to the damned thing, and he hadn’t heard from Thor or seen the Hulk in the last few seconds, but an idea came to mind that might let him take the incoming threat out on his own. “Hey Buck,” he shouted over his shoulder, “you alright goin’ on foot for a while?”

“What?” Bucky yelled, turning so that he could look over his shoulder. He blinked when he caught sight of the force ahead, apparently catching Steve’s meaning. “Yeah, I’m fine with bailing,” he added, tucking his gun in tight to his chest and jumping gracefully off the back of the bike.

Steve turned his attention back to the tank in front of him, turning the handle bars directly at it and picking up speed, then launching himself over the top of them. He kept his grip on the bars as tight as possible, tucking in on himself as he somersaulted over, and as soon as he landed on his feet he used the momentum to heave the motorcycle as hard as he could. The bike soared through the air,
hitting the tank exactly as planned. As it exploded in a blast of blue flames, a spray of bullets took out the remaining soldiers still standing around it, until all that was left was a pile of bodies and smoldering debris.

“Nice shot,” Bucky huffed as he jogged up alongside where Steve was standing.

“Thanks, yours weren’t shabby, either.” Steve said with a small smile, pulling his shield off of his back and taking off at a run up the hill.

For a while, the fight was no different than all of the others they’d had over the last few months; Steve flung his shield at oncoming opponents, usually with enough force to incapacitate them. On the rare occasions that they got back up they were met with a boot to the face, or Bucky caught them in the crossfire while taking out the soldiers that were stupid enough to continue attacking them from a distance. During one melee a handful of soldiers got the drop on them off of an overhead platform, but Steve and Bucky simply closed ranks, standing back to back and taking each one out in hand to hand combat, passing the shield back and forth between each other to block random shots and use it as a blunt object as needed.

The fighting was constant, but not exactly challenging – despite their superior weapons, the soldiers weren’t particularly skilled fighters and seemed to lack any form of real organization. For every wave that they sent out of the castle, Steve and Bucky mowed through them, listening over the coms as the rest of the team seemed to do the same from their respective spots. Eventually Stark announced proudly that he’d been able to take out the security system on the castle, leaving it open for infiltration, and the two of them turned and ran up the final hill to the castle, nerves thrumming with what felt like imminent victory.

It wasn’t until Bucky grabbed Steve and skidded to a stop, frowning heavily in confusion into the empty woods beside them, that Steve questioned his confidence. “Buck?”

“What the…” he muttered shortly. Steve spared a second to glance at him in confusion, puzzled as Bucky stared warily off into the middle distance to the North of them before shaking his head and firing a few more rounds into the trees ahead, knocking three snipers down in the process.

“Barnes, are you seein’ this, too?” Barton’s voice sounded as lost as Bucky’s face had looked.

“You mean the –” Bucky started, but before he could finish the sentence a light-colored blur knocked him off of his feet.

Steve rounded on it with his shield, his heart pounding in response to the bizarre attack, but he couldn’t see anything in the trees around them. He moved to check that Bucky hadn’t been injured, but before he could turn completely around a force slammed into Steve’s back, knocking him headlong to the ground beside where Bucky was just starting to get up.

“Too slow, old man.” A heavily-accented voice jeered.

“You little,” Bucky growled, firing five rounds in quick succession in the direction the voice had come from. Steve pushed himself to his knees, fully expecting to find a body lying beside them, but the woods were empty again.

“Did the gun misfire?” He asked, his gut filled with dread as he looked to Bucky for an answer he already knew.

Bucky was still staring into the space in awe. “No… no, the little fucker out ran the bullets.”

Steve grimaced as he turned his com back on, “We’ve got an enhanced in the field, folks.”
“Copy,” Natasha responded, her voice strained as she added, “Clint’s been hit, guys. Barton’s down.”

“Is it critical?” Steve asked automatically, his stomach dropping as Thor landed next to him. It wasn’t like Natasha to sound worked up about much of anything, especially in combat, and the idea of losing a teammate when they were so damned close wasn’t one that Steve wanted to entertain at all.

“It’s… not good,” Nat responded after a couple of seconds. “I think I have it under control for now, but we’ve gotta get him out of here.”

Steve chewed the inside of his cheek for a moment, glancing first at the citadel to the North and then at the new wave of gunmen and tanks that were coming at them in defense of it. “Bucky, go get them back to our jet and head to Avengers’ Tower. We’ll be on our way as soon as we get the scepter, but Barton shouldn’t be out here waiting for us.”

“Steve,” Bucky started to argue with a heavy frown, clearly getting ready to refuse to leave him behind.

Instead of responding, Steve turned to Thor, nodding towards the oncoming onslaught. “You remember the night we met? That little mishap in the woods?”

Thor looked confused but it passed in an instant, before a wide grin lit up his face. “Indeed I do – shall we show our guests our party trick?”

“Why not liven ‘em up a bit? Especially since they’re linin’ up so nicely…” Steve ducked down behind the shield, angling it so that the star was pointing directly into the middle of the HYDRA tank. A beat passed, and then Thor brought the hammer down on the side of the shield, sending a massive blast of lightning into the middle of the enemy offensive. Soldiers went flying and the tank was flipped into the air, leaving nothing but a pile of debris and a couple of signed trees in its wake.

Bucky was clearly trying to hide how impressed he was by the feat, but he looked at least a bit less concerned than he had when he’d started to put up his fight. “I’ll be fine,” Steve promised, stepping closer to him and dropping his voice as he laid his right hand gently on the side of Bucky’s neck. “But Barton needs medical attention and he needs it ASAP, and you’re the one best suited to fly him back. I promise you, we won’t be more than an hour behind.”

Bucky glared at Steve in silence for a long moment before rolling his eyes and heaving a huge, put-upon sigh, then pulling him closer into a tight hug. “I’ll never fuckin’ forgive you if you get your dumb ass killed, got it?” He muttered gruffly into Steve’s helmet.

“I won’t Buck, I swear it,” Steve responded fervently, turning into Bucky and giving him a quick kiss on the side of the mouth, despite the fact that Thor was still standing next to them. “I’ll see you in no time, okay?”

Bucky pulled back just enough to look at him in surprise, before shaking his head and releasing Steve completely. “Alright then,” he said a bit louder, before nodding over Steve’s shoulder. “Thor, keep an eye on this idiot, would you please?”

“He’s in good hands, Sergeant,” Thor responded cheerily, pitching his hammer into the trees and knocking out another two incoming foot soldiers that Steve hadn’t even noticed. “Have a safe flight.”

Bucky remained a second longer, still staring at Steve, then nodded tightly and turned on his heel,
contacting Natasha directly as he took off running in the direction that she and Barton had last been stationed. Steve watched him until Bucky was out of sight, before turning to Thor. “Think you can wrap up out here and go bring Banner in?”

“Absolutely,” Thor responded with certainty, already beginning to swing Mjölnir around, “go secure the scepter.”

Steve turned and took off up the hill, keeping his eyes peeled for any signs of remaining guards or enhanced hostiles as he approached the castle. There were still a few HYDRA agents inside the castle gate – Tony looked to have taken most of them out when he blew through on his way in, and none of the remaining ones were much of a challenge for Steve. He made his way up the stairway from the main entryway, knocking an oncoming guard aside with his shield before he could even get a shot off, only to round the corner and come face to face with the man he’d set out looking for.

“Baron Strucker,” Steve said with a shallow smile that he wasn’t quite able to resist as he saw the look of shock on the man’s face, “HYDRAs number one remaining thug.”

“Technically I’m a consultant for SHIELD.” Strucker responded with a smarmy smile, quickly hiding any signs of intimidation even as Steve rounded on him.

“Well then technically you’re just as unemployed as I am,” Steve snapped back, not in the mood to play games; they were too close to be wasting time. “Where’s Loki’s scepter?”

“Don’t worry, I know when I’m beat, Captain,” Strucker answered, raising his hands in defeat. While Steve was glad to hear that the bastard didn’t intend to ride it out, it still wasn’t the answer that he was looking for. “You’ll mention how I cooperated, I hope.”

“I’ll put it right under your illegal human experimentation,” Steve answered coldly, unable to help himself. “We saw the kid on the field… how many are there?”

Instead of answering, Strucker glanced slightly to Steve’s right; he turned just in time to catch a surge of some invisible force which knocked him bodily down the flight of stairs he’d been standing next to (like a God damned idiot, Bucky’s voice supplied in his head). Steve jumped to his feet immediately, running back up the stairs – he thought he caught a glimpse of a girl disappearing behind a closing door, but it all happened too fast to be sure.

“We have a second enhanced,” Steve announced into his com, infinitely glad that Bucky had already left – Steve never would have heard the end of it had he been around to catch that bonehead move. “A female. Do not engage.”

Strucker gave him a mocking grin, “You’ll have to be faster tha–” Before he could finish the taunt, Steve lifted his shield from where it had dropped with his boot then kicked it into Strucker’s chest, knocking him into the wall behind them.

“Guys, I’ve got Strucker,” Steve announced to the group, kneeling down to put restraints on the unconscious Baron.

“I’m taking Doctor Banner to the jet, now,” Thor responded over the com.

“I’ve got something… a lot bigger,” Tony responded distractedly, before cutting his communication completely.

“Stark? Stark, do you need help?” Steve asked, groaning in frustration when there was no response. He continued repeating Tony’s name, checking that Strucker wasn’t going anywhere before making his way through the castle in search of wherever Stark had ended up. The entire main floor was a
labyrinth of labs – Steve was reminded of Zola’s hell holes, shaking off the feeling of dread as he passed an all-too-familiar table with restraints on it and continuing deeper into the castle walls. All he wanted was to find Stark, get the scepter, and get the hell back to New York.

He made his way through a smaller door and down a short flight of stairs, pausing when he found an Iron Man suit standing guard at the bottom. “Tony? You alright?” Steve asked hesitantly.

The suit remained silent and motionless, but there was a commotion from the opposite end of the lab. A second later Stark was pushing aside a hidden door, striding out wearing one of the suit’s gauntlets, Loki’s scepter in hand.

“All right, Tony?” Steve asked, frowning when he noticed how pale and sweaty Stark looked. He didn’t get an answer; Stark didn’t even look at him as he blew past Steve and out of the room.

“Tony?” He asked, growing more concerned, “did you meet up with one of them? Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, Cap,” Stark finally responded shortly, snapping his fingers at the suit which immediately flew off in the direction of the quinjet. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Steve wasn’t exactly convinced by Tony’s answer but he didn’t raise an argument, instead taking one final look around the room before trailing after him, shield still in hand. They made it out of the castle without incident – along the way Stark called for JARVIS to bring the quinjet to them, and they both stood watch on one of the parapets as the Iron Legion took care of rounding up the few surviving HYDRA soldiers who were still around to surrender.

As soon as the hatch was closed behind him Steve powered his phone on, pulling his ear bud out and sinking back into one of the seats as he hit the number one on his speed dial. He couldn’t help but smile when Bucky picked up on the second ring.

“Hey, you guys out yet?”

“Yeah,” Steve said with a sigh, “yeah, we just loaded up the scepter and took off – how are you guys making out?”

“We’re about three hours out from New York yet,” Bucky answered, “but Barton’s feeling good enough to be bellyaching, so I think he’s probably gonna make it.”

“That’s good to hear,” Steve responded, “I’ll let the others know.”

“Is that Barnes?” Tony yelled from the front, muttering some things to JARVIS before asking Steve to pass the word about a doctor already en route to take care of Barton. By the time all of the necessary information had been passed Steve was acutely aware of the fact that they wouldn’t be able to discuss anything further without being overheard, so he let Bucky go, figuring it would be better to have him flying without the distraction anyway.

Banner was still seated next to him, his expression distant and troubled as he curled in on himself listening to music. Steve debated for a few minutes, before tapping him lightly on the shoulder, not wanting to let a friend stew in guilt over something Steve had dragged them all into in the first place.

“You doin’ alright?” he asked kindly as Bruce pulled the headphones off of his head.

“Well – hopefully he won’t have to come out again anytime soon,” Steve said with a soft smile. “I’m sorry we had to get you involved in this, Doctor Banner, but I can’t say thank you enough – it would have been a much different fight out there without your help.”
“That’s not exactly a comfort, Cap,” Bruce murmured, studying his hands, “but thanks all the same, I guess. I’m just glad we got what we came for.”

“It’s more than that,” Tony chimed in, spinning around in the pilot’s chair and making his way towards them as JARVIS took over the jet. “From the looks of it, between this raid and the Captain’s good work, it seems like we’ve now successfully eliminated the last of both HYDRA and the Chitauri threat that was still hanging around on Earth.” He made his way to where Thor was still standing watch over the scepter, clapping him on the arm. “Feels good, huh? You’ve been after this thing for, how long?”

“Since your intelligence agency leaked whose hands it had fallen into,” Thor responded.

“Hmm… as long as Cap’s been on the warpath, then.” Tony mused.

“Almost a year,” Steve confirmed quietly, pushing himself out of his seat and crossing the quinjet to stand next to them as well.

“So… what now?” Stark continued cheerily, still looking down at the scepter.

“I’ll take the scepter back to Asgard,” Thor answered immediately. “It will be safest in our weapons holds, where no one will be capable of using it for nefarious purposes.”

“Good plan,” Tony hummed, looking down into the case again. “I don’t suppose you’d mind if Bruce and I poke around at it for a couple of days though, before you go? Get a better idea for how it works, how Strucker was able to generate weapons from it in the first place…”

Thor nodded easily, leaving Tony looking oddly excited. The expression was gone almost as soon as Steve noticed it, but it took him a moment to shake the disconcerted feeling it gave him. “And you, Cap? You and Buckaroo coming back to the band full-time?”

“Uh – actually, we’re getting out.” Steve answered, staring awkwardly at his boots. It was the first time he’d said it out loud to anyone other than Bucky – while he’d meant it from the beginning, admitting it suddenly hit him like a ton of bricks.

“Getting out?” Bruce asked.

Steve nodded, rubbing at the back of his neck and frowning when he ended up pushing a tangle of hair away. “Yeah,” he finally said distractedly, “Buck and I agreed, it was HYDRA that got us into this whole mess in the first place; as soon as we finished wiping them out, we’d retire, figure something else out.” He looked around at the three of them, shrugging at the shocked looks on their faces. “So… guess that’s now.”

“Well, shit.” Tony scoffed, his entire face lighting up. “Thor – you’re sticking around for the weekend, right? JARVIS – we need to throw a retirement party together, email the caterers and have Happy start sending out the invitations.”

“Of course I’ll stay for this,” Thor responded with a grin. “Victories this large deserve revels anyway, but I wouldn’t miss a warrior’s feast for anything.”

The rest of the flight was an uncomfortable mix of party planning and questions about Steve’s plans. Luckily he was able to deflect most of them, pointing out the fact that he and Bucky hadn’t even had time to cut their hair while on the mission, much less to work out their plans for civilian life.

Thankfully Stark dropped the point, leaving him to fill out his last mission report for the sake of log completeness. Unfortunately Steve’s own anxiety over the entire situation was considerably more difficult to shake. By the time they finally entered the landing bay at the top of Avenger’s Tower,
he’d only been able to figure out one disturbing conclusion: he had no idea what the hell he was going to do with himself now.

He knew that Agent Hill had taken over as the commander of the Avengers Initiative in Fury’s absence, but Steve hadn’t expected her to be waiting on the deck the second that the jet came to a stop.

“Captain Rogers,” Hill said with a nod, handing over a StarkPad as Steve stepped out of the plane. “Figured you would want our information on the enhanced agents – NATO took Strucker in shortly after you guys left but there was no sign of these two.”

It was on the tip of Steve’s tongue to inform Hill that he wasn’t about to take over command – that he didn’t even have a plan to deal with these two again, unless it was absolutely necessary – but he couldn’t help but be interested in the two. Especially given the powers that the girl seemed to have.

“Pietro and Wanda Maximoff,” Hill explained as Steve flipped through the dossier. “They’re twins, orphaned at ten when a shell struck their apartment and killed their parents; Sokovia’s had a rough history.”

“What are their actual abilities?” Steve asked, giving up in attempting to make sense out of the files in front of him.

“He’s got increased metabolism and improved thermohomeostasis, she’s got neuroelectric interfacing, telekinesis, and mental manipulation.” Steve stopped in his tracks, not bothering to hide the fact that he was totally lost. “He’s fast and she’s got some elements of mind-control and force manipulation,” Hill summed up with a shrug.

“Any plans yet on how you’re going to take them in?” Steve asked, deciding the short version was enough for him to be going on. Hill stared at him in confusion as they approached the landing-bay elevator. “I dunno if Tony’s made it public yet, or if Bucky said anything, but… we’re done. Barnes and I, we’re retiring from active duty.”

Hill opened and closed her mouth a couple of times in shock so Steve turned and hit the elevator button, more than ready to escape the awkward tension. “Captain Rogers – these two are going to show up again, we should have a team ready to go against them. According to the files, they volunteered for the experiments.”

“What’s that got to do with them being a danger?” Steve asked, standing a bit straighter as he put her meaning together and stepped into the elevator. “I mean – we’ve never seen them before, and they didn’t do any damage when we attacked today.” He turned to face her, hitting the button for Banner’s lab in hopes that Bucky would still be there with Barton.

“It’s just… it’s nuts. No one who’s stable would agree to undergo experimentation like that if they didn’t intend to make use of the potential outcomes. Of course they’re a threat.”

“Right,” Steve sneered, not bothering to hide back how close her words were hitting to home, “what kind of monster would let a German scientist experiment on him for the sake of protecting his country?”

“That’s not what I meant,” Hill corrected him. “We aren’t at war, Captain.”

“But they are, Agent Hill,” Steve answered shortly. “If they become a major threat and the team has trouble reining them in we might get involved, but I’m sure you folks will come up with something on your own.” He gave her a tight smile as the elevator doors closed between them, before slumping
back against the wall tiredly.

Logically, Steve knew that Maria had only been doing her job, and that he made the most sense to lead the team in going after the rogue enhanced agents. He also knew that there had been nothing personal behind her words, but the more that Steve thought about the twins, and Belova, and the fact that there were probably dozens of others out there in the world for better or worse, the more that the thought of getting out now bothered him. If not for Steve and the lore of Captain America, would there even be such a drive for drastic human experimentation out there? And given his role in their development and the powers that his own enhancement had given him, didn’t Steve owe it to the world at large to continue using them for good?

Never mind the fact that he had no fucking idea what he was going to do for himself; what was he going to do for the world, if it didn’t involve fighting for the protection of others?

Thankfully, the elevator door opened before he could go too far down that line of thought, and Steve shook it off as he stepped out into the hallway. Although he had never been to Banner’s lab, he had a pretty good idea where he was going, and set off in the direction opposite the lab where Bucky usually had his arm worked on. His gut ended up being correct – Steve made his way up an open flight of stairs into another hallway, only to find Bucky leaned against the wall outside the door to the primary lab. Although his pea coat wasn’t anywhere to be found, Bucky still had his undershirt and tac pants on from the mission. Steve paused for a second, getting a good look at him; it was obvious that Bucky was exhausted, and still wore the evidence of the battle they’d fought just a few hours prior, but as far as Steve could see he was completely uninjured.

“Hey,” he called out softly, unable to keep himself from smiling as Bucky turned towards his voice and lit up the God damned sun.

“Stevie,” Bucky breathed, pushing himself away from the wall and making his way towards Steve automatically. He pulled Steve into a hug, holding on tightly to him for a beat before backing away and examining him at arm’s length. “You’re alright? You said you met up with another hostile…”


“He’ll be fine,” Bucky responded, nodding over his shoulder towards the lab. “The doctor Stark called in can print skin, if you can believe it – said the wound will be closed and good as new within another hour.”

“Good, and you guys didn’t have any other trouble on the way?”

“None at all – you guys able to take care of everything?”

“Stark’s about to bring in the scepter and NATO captured Von Strucker and the rest of the survivors, so… yeah,” Steve answered, nodding in emphasis and rocking back on his heels. “Yeah, I think we’re done.”

“Good,” Bucky responded with a nod of his own, his smile becoming a bit more knowing. “So – you want to wrap up the rest of this debriefing somewhere a little more private?”

“Absolutely,” Steve answered emphatically, letting Bucky drag him to the nearest bank of elevators.

As soon as the door closed in front of them they clung to each other, kissing hungrily all the way up to their floor, then ended up leaving a trail of discarded uniform pieces on their way to the bedroom. Between the waning thrill of a major fight, the relief of having made it out with all of them still alive
and well, and the sense of accomplishment that HYDRA was finally, *finally* defeated, they were both flying high enough that words weren’t necessary for the next few hours. Instead, everything was lost in a haze of touch and taste and murmured adorations. They dosed on and off, truly resting for what felt like the first time in months, only to wake up and go at it again.

Steve was shocked to notice that the sun was already beginning to set when he next came to. He rolled over in the bed, kicking the wrecked sheets away from where they had tangled around his feet, and then smiled like a complete dope as Bucky padded into the bedroom, naked as the day he was born with an armful of water bottles and protein bars.

“Hey gorgeous,” Bucky said cheerily, beaming right back as he dropped his haul onto the bedside table and crawled back in next to Steve. “We ain’t got much as far as food goes – according to JARVIS, Tony’s pretty set on the idea of all of us eating together up in the common room while we’re all here – but I was hopin’ we could make do for a little while longer… I don’t think I’m willing to share my guy just yet.”

Steve laughed and reached across Bucky’s lap, grabbing some of the food for himself and ripping the rapper with his teeth. “I can live with that,” he agreed amicably, before getting a little bolder. “In fact, you do that thing with your tongue again, I might be willing to stay right here forever.”

Bucky paused in bringing his water bottle to his lips, raising his eyebrows in challenge. “That a promise, Rogers?”

Steve knew better than to promise outright, but Bucky still ended up indulging him anyway.

They cuddled next to each other in the aftermath, breathless and sated, and Bucky managed to snag the comforter from off the floor and throw it over the top of them haphazardly. With a sigh Steve settled into his pillow, watching Bucky as he did the same beside him, his dark hair contrasted even more against the white of the pillow in the dim light of the room. He looked over at Steve with a broad, easy smile, looking just as happy and content as Steve felt at the moment.

Steve was so in love with him that it fucking hurt – he didn’t bother holding himself back from saying as much.

Bucky glanced at him in surprise, his right eyebrow rising slightly. “Who’d have thought that Stevie Rogers was such a romantic?” He asked teasingly.

“Not because of *that*, you jerk… you know what I meant.” Steve admonished, pushing Bucky away roughly.

Bucky laughed as he was shoved, only to move back to exactly where he’d been and pull Steve in closer. “I do, I just had to take advantage of the changeup,” he responded fondly, brushing a kiss to Steve’s temple. “I love you too, you know.”

It was far from the first time that they’d said it to one another, but Steve always got a thrill out of hearing it out loud all the same. He made a mental note to make sure he said it more often, going forward. Steve let his mind and his hands wander, absentmindedly enjoying the feel of Bucky’s skin under his fingertips as he let himself think further about his plans going forward, when Bucky cleared his throat and derailed his train of thought.

“Y’know, Doctor Cho – she’s the one who was here to help Barton,” Bucky started, sighing quietly and trailing off as Steve began tracing absent patterns across his chest. After a few seconds, Steve hummed affirmatively in case Bucky’d been waiting on him to continue. “She was telling me,” he started again, slowly, “she’s got this… she calls it a cradle, right? She’s figured out how to make any
kind of human tissue she wants, and then this machine just prints it onto a person, incorporates it right into their body.”

Steve’s fingers slowed as he started to put together Bucky’s meaning, his eyes automatically going to Buck’s left shoulder. “She said it’d take a while, and it’d definitely have to be at her lab, but she uh… she thinks she could prolly make me an arm. A real one.”

“This is real, Buck,” Steve murmured hoarsely, moving his hand so that he tapped lightly against the metal plates that made up Bucky’s biceps. He wasn’t entirely sure how to feel regarding Bucky’s news. On one hand, Steve had grown pretty enamored with the arm – it was a gorgeous piece of machinery that set Bucky apart, represented everything that they had been through and overcome. On a more selfish note, there was a strange, heady feeling that Steve got from it, knowing the strength that it was capable of; something about the knowledge that Bucky had that bit of power over him despite all of the modifications the serum had made to his own body made Steve feel at least a bit more normal. But on the other hand, it had taken Bucky years to get used to the thing, and Steve knew that there were still days when the visual representation of how much the war had changed him bothered Bucky. And if Doctor Cho was right, if she could give him a functional arm, Bucky would have his full sense of touch back, and would have an even easier time reintegrating into the normal world as he so clearly wanted to.

At the end of the day, it was hardly Steve’s decision, anyway. “You gonna take her up on it?” He finally asked quietly.

“Dunno yet,” Bucky whispered. “She said she’d need to run some tests on me and whatnot, just to make sure for certain that the serum didn’t make us too different from normal humans to use it, but she didn’t think it would be a problem. I said I needed some time to think about it, anyway.”

“That seems reasonable enough,” Steve mused. “Did she say when she would need a decision by?”

Bucky hummed, catching Steve’s hand as it continued to move and threading their fingers together. “Nah, she recognized it’s a big decision, said that I could give her a call whenever I’d made it and work out a schedule. She does want to take a tissue sample before she goes back to Korea, though; just to make sure the alterations from the serum will still hold up to her processes.”

“A tissue sample?” Steve asked, not loving the sound of it.

“Just a cheek swab,” Bucky explained, his eyes starting to light up again. “You know they can figure out all of your genetic information from a few cheek cells, now? It’s crazy…”

Steve settled down after hearing that, relieved to know they wouldn’t be taking a chunk of flesh. Even if he knew logically that Bucky would heal from it in no time, Steve preferred to think that they would be avoiding injuries and procedures for the time being. He drifted off to the sound of Bucky tiredly rambling about DNA.

They woke a couple of times during the night, lazily kissing on one another before rolling over and falling back to sleep, until Bucky woke him properly in the early morning sunlight, grinning like a mad man. After their fourth go-round Bucky finally fell back onto the bed, stretching languidly and smiling so hard that it was almost painful to look at. “Not that I’m complaining,” Steve started once his breath had evened out again, “cuz I’m definitely not, but what’s got you so worked up this morning?”

Bucky shook his head, his voice sounding dreamy when he finally answered. “Just, it’s all sinking in, you know? That we’re here, that we’re done - we can do whatever the hell we want. I was texting back and forth with Sam yesterday,” he continued at breakneck pace, “he said that the GI
Bill’s still around for vets. You remember, that program where the government will pay for your college tuition, *and* give you living expenses. I mean… I know we’re fine on funds, I wouldn’t ask for all the money, but having the tuition taken care of…” He trailed off with a sigh, settling more deeply into his pillow. “And I also got thinkin’, the testing was holding me back before, right? That’s just stupid, really - all either of us need to do to learn anything anymore is read it once, taking a couple’a standard tests will be a breeze.

“So yeah - I have no idea what I’m gonna study yet, but I think I’m gonna go back to school, get a degree and then a regular job.”

“That’s great, Buck,” Steve responded with a smile, swallowing down the lump that was slowly growing in his throat. He was happy for Bucky, truly ecstatic to see him so excited over his prospects, but it only drove home the feeling that Steve was in completely over his head. It felt like all he was good for anymore other than planning missions and fighting was drawing, and he wasn’t even that talented - certainly not enough to make a career out of it.

“I mean, we should probably work on finding a place first, of course… God knows I don’t wanna spend any more time in transit than I have to.” Bucky laughed, growing giddier as he continued. At least Steve knew he was doing an alright job of hiding his meltdown.

“Oh hell, we need to get a hold of a realtor, don’t we? I don’t even know what the neighborhoods are like in Brooklyn anymore.” And just like that, Bucky was out of bed like a shot, pulling on a pair of boxers as he raced out into the sitting room, presumably to start looking up realty listings.

Steve fell back into his pillows with a sigh, staring up at the ceiling and trying to get his feelings in order. His entire life had revolved around surviving and fighting… if he didn’t have to do either any more, what the hell did he have to offer anyone?

After ten minutes without Bucky’s return, Steve finally pushed himself out of bed as well, shaking off his growing self-pity to instead be more supportive of Buck’s happiness. He gingerly pulled on a pair of pajama pants and cotton t-shirt that he found in the chest of drawers next to the bed then padded out into the shared space of the apartment to see what Buck had gotten up to.

What he found wasn’t remotely expected – Bucky was standing in the middle of the living room, still wearing nothing but his underwear and a heavy frown as he stared blankly at the StarkPad in his hands. Steve made his way into the room, opening his mouth to ask what the problem was, but the look Bucky gave him when he finally glanced up stopped him in his tracks. They’d both always been pretty emotional guys, and of late especially neither had felt the need to hide his emotions from the other, but the look of raw hurt on Bucky’s face was one of the worst things Steve had ever seen.

“Buck?” He asked quietly.

Bucky flicked his eyes back down at the StarkPad again before turning the thing off dispassionately and setting it back down on the table. “Changed my mind, I’m gonna go get breakfast,” he said hollowly, quickly making his way across the room, passing Steve without so much as a glance and closing the bedroom door silently behind him.

Instead of following him to ask what was wrong, Steve grabbed the StarkPad off of the coffee table, frowning as he tried to work out what the hell Bucky had found on it that had him so upset. The second he’d entered the password in it the dossiers on the Maximoffs popped up, outlining their skills and the Avengers’ initial plans for tracking them down. It took a second of flipping through the other files – all on enhanced individuals, potential threats that the Avengers Initiative were keeping on their radars, when it all clicked. Steve sighed and made his way back to the bedroom, knocking once before letting himself in. Bucky was seated on the bed, dressed now in sweatpants and a
hooded sweatshirt, jamming his feet into sneakers. His hair was still wrecked, and just long enough that it fell across his face like a shaggy dark curtain, so that Steve couldn’t see it at all. “Look, Bucky,” he started, feeling guilty as hell.

“You promised, Steve,” Bucky started harshly, looking up at him for a second with red-rimmed eyes. He combed his fingers through his hair roughly, grimacing when the plates of his left hand got caught in the tangles. “You swore if we got through HYDRA’s bullshit and took the last of that threat down, we’d get away. As in you and me, not me on my own while you go off running after new superfreaks.”

“Bucky, it isn’t what it looks like,” Steve said calmly, making his way towards the bed.

Bucky was off the mattress before he could sit down, storming off towards the exit. “Don’t worry about it, Steve – do whatever you want. It’s not like I can convince you to do any differently.”

Steve jumped up from the bed as quickly as he had sat down. “Buck, Bucky – wait. It’s not…” he pleaded, trailing closely behind him. When Bucky couldn’t even be bothered to turn around Steve grabbed his wrist, pulling him back firmly, “Would you please just listen to me for a second? We are getting out, Bucky. I’ve got no plans on getting involved in any Avengers’ missions unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

“Then why the hell do you have target dossiers on the kids from Sokovia?” Bucky asked as he turned on him.

“Hill gave them to me,” Steve explained, glad that he was at least hearing him out. “She already had them ready when we landed, handed them off to me before I could tell her about our plans.” Bucky’s shoulders sagged a fraction of an inch, some of the tension going out of him as Steve continued to talk. “I didn’t ask for them, Buck, and I told her when it was over that they were on their own unless it was an absolute emergency.”

“For real?” Bucky asked quietly, his expression so hopeful that it hurt.

“Swear on my ma’s grave,” Steve uttered, pulling him closer. “I meant it, Bucky; I wouldn’t lie to you like that. Unless it’s a matter of the whole world going to hell without our involvement, we’re done. Alright?”

Bucky sighed, a shy smile forming on his lips. “Yeah; yeah, alright.” He answered quietly, looking down at his shoes. “M’sorry I doubted you.”

“It’s alright,” Steve responded easily, pulling him into a tight hug. He didn’t realize how tense the confrontation had left him until he felt Bucky relax into his hold. “Besides,” he added after a beat, “I don’t exactly have the best track record of leaving things well enough alone.”

“You really fuckin’ don’t,” Bucky laughed shortly, tightening his arms around Steve’s waist and relaxing completely.

“I am hungry, though,” he muttered against Steve’s shoulder after a minute or so, and Steve couldn’t help but laugh in response.

“Yeah, same actually. Let me grab some shoes as well and we can head up for something other than protein bars.”

They made their way upstairs to the common dining area, where Clint and Natasha were already seated at the main table with a frankly ridiculous pile of breakfast foods between them. They both gave a perfunctory good morning as Steve and Bucky entered the room, otherwise keeping to
themselves as they studied their options for food.

“What’s this?” Buck asked, lifting a carafe of green sludge from the center of the pile.

“One of the kale smoothies that Tony insisted on making,” Natasha answered, not looking up from the Russian newspaper that she was reading.

“What the hell is wrong with orange juice?” Bucky muttered, taking a tentative sniff before shrugging and pouring it into a glass. He took a short sip from it, licking his lips thoughtfully before handing it over to Steve without any indication of his opinion of it.

“Where’s Banner and Stark?” Steve asked, accepting the pitcher just as warily.

“Still holed up in the lab with Loki’s glow stick,” Barton responded, his eyes still half closed despite the three mugs of coffee in front of him. “I don’t think they’ve taken a break since they got back – but then, I didn’t expect to see you two again until the party tonight. And what’s with the twenty questions?”

“Wait, what party?” Bucky asked immediately.

Steve couldn’t help his snort of laughter at the bleary way that Barton glared across the table in response. It passed immediately, though, when he realized that he’d completely failed to tell Bucky about Stark’s plans.

“You mean to tell me you boys have been so busy for the past…” Natasha glanced at her watch with a growing smirk, “eighteen hours that Steve couldn’t take the time to mention the retirement party Tony’s throwing for the both of you?”

“We took some time to sleep,” Steve shot back automatically, waggling his eyebrows as Bucky laughed and reached for a stack of waffles.

“Nope, gross, too early for this shit,” Clint moaned, pulling his hearing aids out of his ears and burying his face in one of the mugs of coffee.

“Okay, but seriously – what plans?” Bucky asked as he continued loading his plate. “I’m flying blind here, guys.”

“Tony started planning a huge to-do the second that Rogers here told him that the two of you were hanging it up,” Natasha answered, grabbing a berry off of the plate in front of her and popping it in her mouth. “There’s supposed to be 150 guests showing up tonight, last I heard.”

“Wait, it’s tonight?” Bucky asked, his eyes bugging and his mouth still full of waffles. Natasha hummed into her teacup in response, turning the page of her paper.

Bucky groaned in frustration, downing the rest of his juice in a rush and grabbing his plate as he stood up. “We look like a couple of hobos and it’s a Saturday, where the hell are we gonna get a haircut on this short a notice?” He frowned in Steve’s direction, “You could’ve told me, punk.”

“I was a little preoccupied, jerk.” Steve responded, trying his best to lighten the mood and get Bucky to calm down. Although his lips quirked in response, Bucky shook his head and marched out of the room, breakfast plate still in hand as he made his way towards the elevators.

Steve sighed, looking longingly at the eggs he’d been planning on grabbing and instead settling for a bagel, shoving a couple of apples in the pockets of his pajama pants before shuffling off in Bucky’s wake. “See you guys tonight, then,” he said mournfully, ignoring the way that both Natasha and
Clint were laughing as he made his way out of the common room.

There was a fully-stocked grooming kit under the sink in their master bathroom, complete with a couple of pairs of fancy scissors and an electric clipper that had a number of attachments to adjust the length it shaved at. After watching a couple of video tutorials on how to use the clippers, Bucky swore that he’d be able to give Steve a haircut that was at least serviceable. Considering how he looked at the moment, Steve was willing to at least give him a shot – it couldn’t get any worse than the shaggy mop he had, now.

The final product had been a little uneven on the top, but Steve was sure that with some hair gel it would work for the night. Bucky was hesitant to let him return the favor, although Steve couldn’t be sure if that was because Bucky didn’t trust him or because he really did want to try leaving his hair long.

“I dunno, its grown on me, I guess,” Bucky murmured, pushing the dark strands back off of his face and letting them fall back to frame his chin. He glared in Steve’s direction when he snorted at the awful pun.

“You’re sure?” Steve insisted. “Not even a trim to even it up? You know I can do that much, Buck.”

Bucky stared in the mirror for a few seconds longer, pulling on the ends and holding them between the fingers of his right hand so that he could see how bedraggled they were. “Alright, just to even it out – don’t take any more off than you have to,” Bucky finally agreed, taking a seat in the kitchen chair that Steve had vacated.

In truth, Steve didn’t have a ton of experience cutting hair himself – Buck had been trimming Steve’s since they’d been teenagers, but he usually asked his Ma to trim his own. All the same, it was easy enough to do as he’d asked; Steve wet his hair down and let Bucky comb it out himself, then went around the edges, cleaning off the uneven bits until it all stopped in an even, neat line just above the level of his chin. Once he was finished with it Steve gave Bucky a moment to check over the final results in the mirror; as soon as he nodded in approval, Steve recommended they clean the short hairs off, given they’d inevitably get itchy and their room did have an enormous, luxurious shower in the bathroom.

They jumped into the shower together to rinse the hair off, then took a second shower to actually clean up from it.

Half an hour before they were due to be downstairs Steve made his way into the closet in the master bedroom, gaping as he looked around at it. “This thing is bigger than our bedroom used to be, Buck,” he muttered, still boggling over the rows of shirts in front of him as Bucky pulled down clothing off one of the racks.

“Yeah, and I’m pretty sure either Stark or Pepper had a stylist buy us shit – I don’t remember owning half of this stuff.”

Steve ended up going with the blue shirt he’d worn to Bucky’s birthday party the year prior; yes it was old, and something most of the people who would be there tonight would have already seen him in, but Steve liked the shirt and was relatively certain that Bucky liked the shirt, and really that was all that mattered to him. He paired it with a pair of black slacks that must have come from someone else… they were tighter than Steve would usually pick for himself, but they fit him well and worked with the shirt. He got dressed in the closet, looking himself over in the mirror as he rolled his sleeves to his liking, then stepped into a pair of dress shoes and made his way out into the bedroom.
Bucky was already dressed, standing in the open doorway of the bathroom as he finished slicking his hair back, and when he made his way into the room Steve’s mouth fell open. He’d gone with a plain white shirt and black jeans, his sleeves rolled like Steve’s to show off the corded muscles in his right arm and the shiny plates of his left; but instead of leaving it there, Bucky had thrown on a silver tie that was nearly the same color as his arm, and a black waistcoat to pull it all together. Steve was blown away by the look, remembering suddenly how Buck had worked his ass off after high school to afford a couple of decent three-piece suits to go dancing in. Even though his clothing had, by necessity, been just as cheap as Steve’s was, Bucky always managed to make himself look like a damned movie star.

Seeing the modern version of such familiar clothes juxtaposed on Bucky’s new frame made Steve feel like he was about to swallow his tongue.

Bucky smirked at him slightly as he pulled an ivy cap onto his head then stood with his arms akimbo. “What’d’ya think?” He asked brightly, “Is the hat too much?”

“It’s all too much,” Steve muttered, stalking his way across the room after him. “You should prolly just let me take it off of you, right now.”

Bucky laughed, grabbing Steve’s biceps as he caught him around the waist. “Much as I’d love to let you, I don’t think we’re gonna make it up to the party if that happens, and it’d be awfully impolite of us to ditch our own retirement shindig.”

“Promise I’d make it up t’you,” Steve murmured, running his teeth along Bucky’s pulse point and chuckling as he felt him shudder in response.

“After, Stevie,” Bucky gasped, pushing him away when Steve started to tongue at the same spot. “Jesus Christ, you’re gonna get me all worked up again.”

“Kinda the point, Buck.”

“Come on,” Bucky said with a laugh, grabbing Steve’s hand and pulling him towards the elevator. “I promise: we put in a few hours at the party, and then I’ll make it up to you after.”

Steve could hardly turn down that kind of offer, even though dealing with people and keeping his hands to himself for the next few hours wouldn’t have been his first choice. They were both decent by the time the elevator made it upstairs, and were glad to find the entire team already waiting for them amongst the sea of unfamiliar faces.

“Hey, look who cleaned up,” Natasha said with a sly grin, meeting them both in the entryway. “Where’d you find a stylist with openings on such late notice?”

“The eighty-fifth floor,” Bucky responded smugly as he returned her hug, laughing when she looked at him in confusion. “You think we could afford barbers in the forties? Please – we cut each other’s hair, same as always.”

“I’ve got an appointment to get mine fixed Tuesday afternoon,” Steve added cheekily, ducking Bucky’s jab with a chuckle.

“It actually doesn’t look half-bad; I’m impressed, Barnes,” Natasha said with a smile, eyeing Steve’s hair closely.

“Yeah, well… muscle memory and YouTube,” Bucky shrugged, although his cheeks flushed slightly with the compliment.
“You two never fail to surprise me,” Natasha chuckled. “That’s a pretty major accomplishment, by the way.”

She pulled Bucky away with her to talk more with Doctor Cho - while Steve was interested in what they had to say, he didn’t want to seem like too much of a mother hen, so he instead made his way around the room, trying his best to be gracious with all of the strangers in a rush to offer their congratulations and thanks. Luckily, it wasn’t long before he noticed his cell phone chiming from his pocket despite the ambient noise in the room, and excused himself with a smile when he saw Sam’s number on the caller ID, making his way through the crowded room to meet him in the entryway. While their friend had been to Avengers Tower enough times to know his way around, Steve knew he definitely wouldn’t want to face a room so full of strangers on his own, and figured he owed Sam the same courtesy.

“Sam,” Steve said with a smile, stepping off the last stair and pulling him into a hug. “It’s good to see you; thanks for coming.”

“Are you kidding?” Sam asked, pounding his back a couple of times then stepping away with a laugh, “I mean, don’t get me wrong – it’s good to see you again, too. But when Tony Stark invites me to a party, you’d better believe I’m going to get my ass to it. Even if it is still weird to get phone calls from his AI.”

Steve chuckled, turning and leading Sam back up the stairs towards the party. “That’s fair enough – did you drive up, then?”

“I did, but we’re not gonna waste time on small talk about traffic,” Sam answered with a grin. “Especially not with what Bucky told me this afternoon; are you guys really done?”

Steve gestured in the direction of the bar in case Sam wanted a drink, then followed behind when he nodded affirmatively, grabbing a beer while they waited for Sam’s mixed drink from the bartender. “We are,” Steve confirmed as he twisted the cap off, “the base in Sokovia was the last major HYDRA stronghold, we were able to knock out its power sources and arrest its leader, so NATO is going to be able to handle the rest.”

“Must feel good,” Sam mused, accepting his drink from the bartender with a nod. Steve hummed noncommittally, looking around the room instead. “And you guys are really gonna hang it up now? Try civilian life for a while?”

Steve ducked his head, wondering how it was that Sam could read him so easily. “Yeah – yeah, that’s been the plan all along. Bucky’s been looking forward to the chance to go back to school…”

“And what are your plans?” Sam interrupted gently. “You figure them out yet?”

Steve shrugged, digging in his head for an answer before sighing in defeat. “No, not really. But I mean, it’s been a day, so – we’ll get there.”

Sam hummed kindly, taking another sip of his drink. “I know you probably don’t want to hear it, but you do know that’s kinda what the VA is for, right? To help guys reintegrate. I worked with the offices in Queens when I got back cuz I was staying with my sister, but I could ask around about who’s best in Brooklyn, help get you guys set up.”

“We’ll see,” Steve responded, forcing a smile. “I haven’t really gotten to that point just yet.”

“You guys found a place?” Sam asked, thankfully dropping it.

“Uh – no. Bucky flipped through some listings this afternoon, I think… I’m not sure we can afford a
place in Brooklyn, though.”

“If you could afford your place in Dupont you guys can find a spot in Brooklyn,” Sam responded with a dry laugh, glancing sideways at Steve as he surveyed the room for himself. “You’re sure about this? That you’re ready to just go out into the civilian world? Just leave all this behind?”

Steve’s eyes tracked to where Bucky was playing pool on the opposite side of the room, taunting Barton as he attempted to make some ridiculous trick shot behind his back. He looked as happy as Steve could remember seeing him since before the war, chatting up a couple of the veterans that Tony had dug up for invites and laughing at something Clint must have said before sinking his shot off of the bank. As if he felt himself being watched, Bucky glanced up in Steve’s direction, his grin becoming a bit softer as they made eye contact; he gave Steve a flirty wink before lining up his own stupid shot, hitting all four bumpers on the table before sinking it in the pocket he’d called beforehand.

“Yeah,” Steve finally answered quietly, taking a sip of his beer and nodding decisively. “Yeah, I’m sure. I’ve got a damned good reason to get out.”

Sam followed his eye-line and gave Steve a knowing smile, but before he could say anything in response someone slid into the space between them. “Samuel, nice of you to make it,” Tony said dryly, snapping his fingers towards the bartender for a drink.

“Anthony,” Sam responded with a smirk, “wonderful of you to invite me, I’m glad I could come.”

“I’ve told you I like him, right?” Stark asked Steve as an aside, “You guys did good work finding him.” He accepted some elaborate drink from the bartender before turning back to Sam. “Anyway, I know tonight’s about kicking back, but I wanted to talk shop with you for just a second before the fun really starts – how do you feel about joining the team full-time? We’ve got a couple of open spots on the roster, now that the grandpas are finally hanging it up.”


“No, the pop band that we perform as when we aren’t busy saving the world,” Tony answered smartly, rolling his eyes. “Of course The Avengers – JARVIS told me a little bit about what you got up to with the Capsicles in South America, we could use someone with your experience.”

“You do realize that Bucky and I are still going to be around, right?” Steve cut in, “If you really need us…”

“Talking to the guy who isn’t abandoning the ship, Rogers,” Tony waved him off.

Sam shook his head with a chuckle, taking another sip of his drink. “I think I’m happy to stay part-time, Stark,” he finally answered. “No offense or anything, but I don’t think I could handle this kind of crazy all the time.”

“And there’s nothing I could do to change your mind?” Stark asked immediately. “I haven’t even started going into the benefits, yet; free housing in Avengers Tower, full health benefits through Stark Industries, all of the tech upgrades you could want…”

“And some you won’t,” Steve cut in sarcastically, sipping his beer as Tony turned a glare at him.

Sam laughed and shrugged, “I’m honored, I really am… but still gonna say no. For now, at least.”

Tony sighed dramatically as he stepped away from the bar, “For now, then – don’t think we’re done with this conversation, Wilson.”
“Sorry about that,” Steve sighed as they watched him go.

“Don’t be,” Sam said amusedly. “I knew what I was getting into when I accepted the wings, believe it or not. I can handle him.”

Steve dropped his attention to his beer bottle, picking at the label when he couldn’t think of anything to say in response. While he had no doubt that Sam was telling the truth, he still couldn’t help feeling guilty about getting him involved in the whole mess – pulling him into the fire in DC had been bad enough, the fact that they were still here, nearly a year later, with Tony Stark bothering him to be an Avenger just made it all the worse.

“Listen,” Sam said softly, nudging Steve’s arm to get his attention. “I appreciate you looking out for me, but you really don’t need to spend the night on babysitting detail. I wanna go catch up with Romanoff, since I haven’t heard from her at all since the whole DC fiasco… you go spend some time with your guy, he’s been making eyes at you this whole time, and it’s starting to get pretty tragic.”

Sam took off before Steve could decide to do anything other than to take his advice, crossing the room to where Bucky had joined Thor on one of the groups of couches along with a number of World War II veterans. Bucky slid over as soon as he saw Steve approaching, so that he could drop onto the couch a respectable distance away. Initially it felt like a tease, having to act so stilted around one another for the sake of a bunch of strangers, but it turned out that all of the men had been stationed on the European front as well – while none of them had served directly with either Steve or Bucky, it was easy to fall into discussions about battle victories and memories. Bucky especially lit up, recounting all kinds of lighter stories of the Howlies’ shenanigans. The fact that Thor was there to add fantastical stories about fighting off Ice Giants and Fire Demons and other epic battles throughout the nine realms only made the discussion livelier.

As he drained the last of his beer Steve cast his eyes around the room, debating heading back to the bar – while the alcohol had no effect on him, of course, it was nice to have something to do with his hands and fit in. He paused as he noticed Sam and Clint leaning in close to each other at the bar nearest to them, looking to be in an intense conversation. Steve watched the two of them for a moment, trying to work out why he was getting such an uncomfortable vibe. Barton looked guilty as hell, which didn’t make any sense, given the fact that he’d just met Sam… right?

“I’ll be right back,” Steve murmured into Bucky’s ear, pushing himself off of the couch.

“Get a Coke,” Bucky answered distractedly, pulling his attention away from Thor’s story. “Just trust me, Thor’s got something you’ll wanna try,” he added in explanation to Steve’s questioning look.

“Alright,” Steve responded pleasantly, turning and making his way across the room. Even though he knew it was cheap, he listened in as closely as he could, focusing on Barton and Sam’s familiar voices from a distance and trying to work out what they were talking about before they noticed his presence.

“I mean, that’s the way Nat is,” he heard Clint explaining from a few paces away, “especially about the two of them. She just wanted to make sure they weren’t being taken advantage of, no offense, and I was the one who would attract the least amount of attention…”

“Don’t worry about it man, I get it,” Sam interrupted easily. “I mean – I wish you would’ve just told me instead of going with the act, especially once I passed the test, but – it’s fine.”

“I still feel like an asshole,” Clint muttered. “I really didn’t mean to lead you on.”
“You didn’t,” Sam laughed. “Remember? I was just there to dance – if anything I was afraid I was giving you the wrong idea. But really, don’t worry about it. I promise I haven’t been heartbroken about the guy that got away that one night in DC.”

“You’re sure?” Barton purred, “Cuz I’ve been told I’m a hell of a catch.”

Sam laughed outright at that, and Steve approached them directly, completely lost as to what was going on. “I don’t know who you’re talking to, but I’m sure, man; I’ve actually been seeing someone for a couple of months now, it’s all good.”

“Alright, great,” Clint responded with a relieved nod, before starting as he saw Steve approach.

“You know he’s got enhanced hearing, right?” Sam asked with a smirk, turning his attention to Steve. “Dunno when you started eavesdropping on us, but Barton here chatted me up the night Bucky and I went out dancing,” he added, giving him a significant look. “Apparently your superfriends wanted to make sure I wasn’t trying to take advantage of your friendship… or get in the way of the greatest love story ever told.”

“It wasn’t like that…” Clint whined into his drink, making both Sam and Steve laugh.

Sam paused as he raised his drink to his mouth, eyes widening as he looked across the room. “Hold on, is that…”

Steve turned in the direction he’d been looking, trying to figure out who it was that had caught Sam’s attention. “Holy shit, is that James Rhodes?”

“Uh,” Steve responded inelegantly, recognizing Tony’s friend across the room. He’d only met Rhodey in passing, although he did know from some of the Avengers dossiers that he’d been an incredibly accomplished Air Force pilot, and that he still ran a number of missions using one of Tony’s modified suits. “Yeah it is?” He finally confirmed. “Do you know him?”

Sam downed his drink, putting the empty glass back on the bar and squaring his shoulders. “I don’t yet, but I’m about to find my chill and change that.” He turned back to Clint momentarily, “Anyway, Barton – nice to meet you properly. Cap, I’ll catch up with you later.”

Before Steve could respond Sam was already making his way across the room, leaving him to blink stupidly in response. Clint started laughing immediately. “That has to be weird for you.”

“What?” Steve asked, still utterly confused.

“Y’know, getting blown off…”

Steve laughed outright as he leaned against the bar, shaking his head. “No, that I spent most of my life getting totally used to.” He waited until Sam was out of earshot before reaching over the counter of the bar and grabbing a couple of glasses, filling them with ice before saying conversationally. “Y’know, Clint – I wouldn’t have picked you to be the type to be picking guys up in a night club.”

“I wasn’t,” Barton responded smoothly, “although if we’re being honest, I wouldn’t’ve pegged you
“Touché,” Steve smiled, grabbing the soda nozzle and reading the buttons for a moment, before filling each of the glasses half-full with Coke. “I was trying to get at asking about someone else in your life, though,” he continued vaguely, casting his eyes towards where Natasha and Maria Hill were seated at the opposite end of the bar.

“What about Nat?” Clint asked, sitting up a little straighter as he looked quickly back at Steve.

“Just… you two,” Steve said unhelpfully, “whatever’s between you guys, seems like it’s pretty special.”

“She’s my best friend,” Barton responded tightly.

Steve hummed in response, raising his eyebrows. “That’s important - but I think there could be something else there, too.”

Clint frowned heavily into his drink, muttering darkly for a moment in a way that made Steve think he might have pushed the envelope too far. He reached over before Clint could take his hearing aids out (or take a swing), giving him a kind smile. “Look, I’m just saying: as the world’s leading authority on waiting too long… don’t. The things we get up to there’s no telling which mission will be our last, and I can tell you from experience; things are a hell of a lot better once you man up and go after what you want. You both deserve it.”

“It’s different,” Clint insisted immediately. “It’s not that simple with Natasha.”

Steve shook his head as he pushed his weight off of the bar, grabbing up a glass in each hand. “Pal, if you think it’s been easy for me and Buck, you haven’t been paying attention. Just think about it, alright?” With that he left, making his way back to the couches without looking back – despite the way he sometimes acted Barton was a pretty astute guy, he’d get what Steve had meant.

Steve settled back into his spot on the couch next to Bucky, even closer than before considering the majority of the vets they had been talking to had migrated to the pool table while Steve had been gone. Bucky accepted his glass eagerly, before leaning back into the couch and motioning towards Thor, who had suddenly produced a flask out of his smoking jacket.

“What’s this?” Steve asked, already handing his glass over to be topped off.

“Asgardian mead,” Thor responded proudly, pouring a couple of fingers into the glass for him. “It’s aged for one thousand years in barrels made from the wreckage of Grunhill’s fleet. It’s not meant for mortal men… I thought that the two of you might enjoy it.”

Steve frowned slightly, taking a tentative sniff of the drink. For the most part, it just smelled like overly-sweetened Coca-Cola. “Not for mortals – what does that mean?”

“It means you should try the damned drink, Stevie,” Bucky said lazily, still leaned back against the couch cushions and watching him with lidded eyes.

Considering the fact that he knew neither of them would do him any harm, Steve took a tentative sip of the drink. There was a heat to it, and it was cloyingly sweet, but it went down smoothly enough. After waiting a couple of seconds he took a slightly bigger drink, swirling the glass contemplatively as he swallowed it. Within a minute it hit him – suddenly he felt like it was 1934 again, and he and Bucky had just been stupid enough to sneak George Barnes’ whiskey out of the cabinet while Buck’s parents had been away for the night. He turned to Bucky with wide eyes.
“Yeah,” Bucky chuckled throatily, taking another swig from his glass, “that’s what I said.”

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He’d already been having a good time, but the party picked up considerably for Bucky after Steve finally tried some of Thor’s mead. For the first time since Kreischberg they were both actually feeling the effects of alcohol, and while Bucky hadn’t exactly missed being drunk in recent memory, he was sure as hell enjoying the warm fuzzy feeling of it that night.

It only got better as the evening went on and the room began clearing out.

The first group to go was the veterans Tony had invited; while it had actually been nice chatting with peers and reminiscing on the old days, remembering that there actually were still some people around from their generation who knew where Steve and Bucky were coming from, there’d been an awkward tension in the air between the two of them with the men around. Steve started to loosen up as soon as the last of them were out the door, his hand casually making its way into Bucky’s back pocket as they stood around the pool table watching Clint anyone foolish enough to take him up on a game.

Sam begged off around midnight, which was something of a disappointment - both of them tried to convince him to stay, offering up one of the guest rooms on their floor, but Sam only laughed and turned the offer down.

“And not because I’m having flashbacks from South America, so don’t sweat it,” he insisted. “But if my sister finds out I was in the city and didn’t swing by for Sunday brunch I will literally never hear the end of it, and if I stay around with you guys much longer there’s no way in hell I’m making it to Queens before noon tomorrow.”

“Alright then,” Steve had conceded with a sigh, pulling away from Bucky and giving Sam a hug. “Thanks for coming, Sam – it was good to see you again.”

“Thanks for having me,” Sam responded cordially, slapping Steve’s back. “And don’t forget what we talked about when I got here… feel free to give me a call, alright?”

He turned on Bucky as Steve nodded awkwardly, pulling him in for a hug as well. “And you let me know once you guys have found a place, I’ll get you hooked up with one of the VA counselors in Brooklyn, they can talk to you about the GI Bill stuff, too.”

“Will do,” Bucky responded gratefully, returning the hug for a moment before releasing him and standing back. “Thanks again for everything, Sam - and don’t be a stranger, got it?”

Before long the vast majority of the party-goers had gone home, so it was down to just those of them who would be staying the night in the Tower: the team, Hill and Doctor Cho. They’d had just enough of Thor’s mead that things were getting fuzzy around the edges, and Steve was totally pliant in Bucky’s arms as they reclined on the couch. He wasn’t sure that Steve would have been so openly affectionate if not for the Asgardian booze, but given the fact that there was no one around that they couldn’t trust enough to be open with, Bucky didn’t feel too guilty about taking advantage of the situation.

“We should dance,” he murmured quietly, lips ghosting across the shell of Steve’s ear so that no one else would hear.

Steve turned, glancing up at Bucky speculatively for a moment – Bucky was perfectly ready for Steve to refuse, knowing how self-conscious he could be about dancing in general… the likelihood
that he’d agree to dance with Bucky in front of a room of their friends was slim-to-none, but he was so caught up in the moment and the good vibe of the night that he couldn’t help but ask.

“Don’t have the music for it,” Steve responded quietly. Bucky’s heart sped up a bit in anticipation; it hadn’t been a no.

“I can ask JARVIS to put some on,” Bucky suggested, unable to stop the hopeful smile that he felt tugging at his mouth. “We can stick to somethin’ slow if you’d prefer, I just… it’s been a damned good night, I’d like to end it by taking my guy for a spin.”

Steve snorted at the line, glancing up at Bucky through his eyelashes. “I was kinda hoping we’d end the night with something a little more exciting than dancing, Buck,” he whispered with a cheeky smirk, before licking his lips and adding, “but yeah, I’ll give you a dance if we can get the music for it.”

There had been a smart comment on the tip of Bucky’s tongue, but it died the second that Steve actually agreed with him. He sat up slightly, tilting his head to the ceiling and calling out, “Hey JARVIS, any chance we could get a song?”

There was a solid ten seconds without a response, and Bucky felt his frown growing, unaccustomed to having to wait for the AI. “JARVIS?”

“I’ve got him a little occupied in the lab,” Tony answered, glancing over from where he’d been holding court with Bruce and Doctor Cho, “what d’you need, lover-boy?”

Bucky refused to rise to Stark’s bait, answering placidly, “It’s been way too long since Steve’n’I have had a dance, I was gonna ask him to put something sweet on for us.”

“Oh vomit,” Stark scoffed in response, “you two are already gross enough, we really don’t need that kind of show tonight.”

Bucky felt Steve tense in his arms at Stark’s initial response, and as Tony continued talking it felt like he was being plunged in a vat of cold water. It made no sense that he’d have a problem with the two of them being romantic, especially given how much he loved to tease about their love-life, but the words still sent a sense of dread down Bucky’s spine. He hadn’t been so naive to have thought that the whole world would be accepting of the two of them being openly queer, but he certainly hadn’t expected to have to take flack from their friends for it.

“Tony!” Natasha admonished him harshly, glaring from the other side of the couches where she had been relaxing next to Clint. The offended looks on both of their faces did a little bit to ease the sting of his words, at least.

“What? I didn’t – Jesus, you know I didn’t mean it that way, I’m just asking America’s most perfect couple to tone it down a notch while the rest of us are stuck here being single tonight”.

“I meant to ask, where is Pepper? Or Jane or Betty, for that matter.” Hill cut in.

“She couldn’t make it,” Tony responded flippantly, “given that she is busy running the world’s most successful tech conglomerate.”

Thor relaxed back in his own seat, smiling indulgently. “Jane had a previous engagement as well, she was scheduled to be giving a lecture on her work with the Convergence.”

“She’s on the short list for the Nobel Prize for that, isn’t she?” Bruce asked placidly, smiling when Thor nodded in confirmation. “Betty’s still on the faculty at Culver, she’s got her classes and her
most recent projects.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Well who do you think developed the Lullaby formula?” Bruce asked sardonically.

“Listen,” Bucky cut in, the knot in his chest loosening as the atmosphere in the room returned to normal. “I feel for you all, I really do, but I’ve been waiting almost eighty years to get a proper shot with this punk, and I’m damned well going to enjoy it.”

“Alright, fine,” Stark huffed, pulling his phone out and flipping through menus. “I suppose it is your party, Buck Rogers.”

“Don’t call me that,” Bucky huffed, pushing himself to his feet and grabbing Steve’s hand so that they could walk away from the group before the blush he felt rising on his cheeks became too noticeable.

“Too early?” Tony asked teasingly as the opening bars of *Night and Day* began playing over the room’s sound system. “Or are you two planning on hyphenat– ow!”

Bucky was already too caught up in Steve’s hand on his waist to pay attention to who had smacked Stark for the teasing. “You wanna lead?” he asked Steve quietly, swaying slowly to the music.

“Song this slow, I just might be able to,” Steve responded breathlessly, rocking along himself. “Just remember this was your idea if your toes end up getting crushed.”

“I heal fast,” Bucky shot back, leaning in against Steve’s broad chest and going along with his steps. They were simple and stilted, and a little off-beat, a fact that Bucky couldn’t help feeling enamored by… even with all of the abilities the serum had given him and his time on the stage, Steve still couldn’t dance to save his life, although Bucky strongly suspected that it was more a matter of his stubborn insistence that real incompetence.

“We should have him step up the tempo and Charleston, next,” Bucky murmured as the song began to wind down.

“There’s no way in hell I’m doing the Charleston in front of people, Buck,” Steve responded with an amused huff, pulling away just enough so that he could look down and make eye contact. “Or the Lindy Hop, so don’t even ask.”

“Fine,” Bucky said with an exaggerated pout, “in our room after, then?”

“Maybe another time,” Steve answered, turning them both away from the group towards the windows. “We’ve got plans for tonight, remember?”

“How could I forget?” Bucky laughed, “But you owe me, punk.”

No one seemed to be paying any attention to them as the music faded out, so Bucky decided to press his luck, leaning in closer and pressing a gentle kiss to Steve’s lips. Thankfully he seemed all too happy to respond in kind, pulling Bucky flush against him and opening his mouth to deepen it. Bucky slid his tongue lazily into Steve’s mouth, swallowing the resultant moan and moving his right hand to the back of Steve’s neck to press him even closer. Steve pulled his hat off in response, burying his fingers in Bucky’s hair and holding on like there’d be no tomorrow.

Bucky vaguely recognized the opening bars of one of Marvin Gaye’s songs starting up as they continued kissing, and extended a single metal finger in Stark’s general direction, smiling helplessly against Steve’s mouth as the others laughed and cheered in response. Taking it as encouragement,
Bucky clutched even tighter to Steve’s back, losing himself to the music and his buzz and the even more intoxicating sensations of Steve’s mouth and hands in the moonlight.

When they returned to the couch Bucky’s mouth was still swollen and hot, and he settled back into the spot they’d abandoned, feeling like the cat that got the cream when Natasha shot him a knowing smirk as Steve settled back against his chest, pulling Bucky’s right arm around his side and listening intently to the conversations that were going on around them. Despite their earlier teasing, no one seemed at all bothered by what the two of them had gotten up to, and Bucky couldn’t help feeling overwhelmed by the fact that this was fine now – that they were alive in a time where he could be as affectionate as he wanted with Steve, in public, and not have to worry about it. Of course, Bucky was still realistic to know that not everyone would have the same positive reaction as their friends had; undoubtedly there would be assholes who would have issues with the fact that the two of them loved one another, but between their wealth, their health, and the power of the people that cared about them, there wasn’t a damned thing that could be done about it. As much as he knew that Steve still might mourn for the past, Bucky couldn’t help but feel grateful for the opportunities that the future afforded them, selfish as it might be.

He shook off the thought, trailing his fingers lightly over Steve’s side and tuning back in to the conversation that was growing increasingly heated around them.

“C’mon, it’s a trick – I grew up in the freakin’ circus, man, I know one when I see it,” Clint was ranting at Thor, waving his beer around as he gestured towards where Mjölnir was resting on the coffee table. “What do you use? Magnets? Some weird space-God force generator?”

Thor chuckled in amusement, nodding towards the hammer himself. “I assure you that it isn’t a trick, Barton – but feel free to examine Mjölnir and try lifting it yourself.”

Clint looked around at all of them for a second, before setting his beer down with a thud and nodding decisively as he pushed himself off of the couch and rounded on the coffee table. After a few seconds of close examination, including crawling under the table for a time while the rest of them jeered him, Barton stepped up to the hammer, giving Thor a smirk before grabbing hold of the hammer and trying to lift it. No matter how hard he strained, regardless from the angle he used, the thing wouldn’t budge – after a few seconds he slunk back to his spot on the couch, still muttering something about illusions.

“You’re all more than welcome to have a try,” Thor said smugly, turning his smile towards Tony, who looked to be itching to get in on the action. As expected, he bounced excitedly to his feet, rounding on the hammer with a broad grin.

“If I lift it, I have the full power of Thor, right? Ruler of Asgard and all that jazz?”

Thor hummed, an amused smirk growing on his face as he handed his flask over to Steve for a top-off.

“Crown jewels for Pepper, unlimited opportunity to study the Bifrost and replicate your wormhole technology?”

“Within reason,” Thor laughed.

Stark pulled on the hammer’s handle for approximately fifteen seconds, muttering something about physics, before snapping his fingers and calling one of the Iron Man gauntlets to him. Even with the thrusters of the suit firing at full-capacity, the hammer didn’t move on the table. In a fit of frustration he called out another gauntlet, this one black and silver, and talked Rhodey into joining him in the effort. They snarked back and forth at each other, repulsors whining loudly under the strain they
were putting on them, until they finally gave up on the attempt.

Bruce gave it a shot, pretending to Hulk out half-way through and jumping away from the table with a yell. The group gave a half-hearted laugh, trying to support the humor… while Bucky could appreciate the fact that the guy was trying to make light of his situation, the idea of the Big Guy busting out on the top floor of a building largely made of glass wasn’t exactly an amusing one.

Of course, as soon as he’d sat down the group was calling for Steve to take a turn. He blushed and stammered for a second, hesitantly pulling away from Bucky before giving in and approaching the hammer bashfully, rolling his sleeves up as he went.

If he was honest with himself, Bucky was most interested in seeing how his shirt held up under the stress, secretly hoping that it wouldn’t.

With a deep breath, Steve took hold of Mjölnir’s handle, adjusting his grip and then lifting against its weight. Bucky swore he saw the thing shift on the table – judging by the concerned look on Thor’s face he was pretty positive it hadn’t been his imagination – but otherwise the thing didn’t move appreciably. After about ten seconds of effort, Steve sighed and released his hold on it, backing away with a smiling gesture of defeat towards Thor.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise, but Bucky still had a start when Stark called out that it was his turn and the rest of the group agreed. He brushed it off initially, but couldn’t really say no when Steve gestured towards it on his way back with an expectant smile.

“Fine,” he sighed, pushing himself off of the couch and approaching the hammer. There didn’t seem to be much point – if the thing didn’t think that Steve Rogers of all people was worthy, there was no way in hell it was going to give Bucky a chance, but somehow he doubted that he’d hear the end of it if he didn’t at least give it a shot.

Bucky licked his lips and popped open the top and bottom buttons of his waistcoat before reaching down and gripping the handle with his right hand.

“C’mon, Robocop – use both!” Stark heckled from his spot.

“We’ve already seen how well the thing likes Stark Tech, Tony, I’m good,” Bucky shot back with a smirk, feeling smug as the rest of the team laughed in Stark’s direction. The noise died down just as quickly, and Bucky tightened his grip before pulling up on the handle as hard as he could.

It was like trying to move a mountain – no matter how hard he strained against it, and after a second of giving a half-assed effort Bucky applied his full strength, grabbing hold with his left hand as well, the damned thing wouldn’t budge. The plates up and down his arm shifted and whirred, recalibrating as he applied more and more muscle groups, but it was for naught – with a sigh he gave up on it, letting go and stepping away as well.

Clint spoke up before he could start back to the couch, “We saw the suits against it… what about both super soldiers together?”

Bucky rolled his eyes at the challenge; the point had already been proven well enough that Thor was the only one who could pick the damned thing up, he didn’t need to embarrass himself further, but Steve was already making his way back around the table and Bucky had always been shit at saying no to that smile.

“Alright, fine,” Bucky sighed, standing aside so that Steve could grab hold of it first then stepping up close beside him.
“On three?” Steve asked, gripping the handle with both hands as Bucky wrapped his left arm around Steve’s back and took hold of it with his right.

“Yeah, go ahead,” Bucky confirmed thoughtlessly – it wasn’t as if it was going to make any difference.

What happened next went so quickly that most of it was lost on Bucky; Steve finished the count and they both pulled upward, but instead of heaving ineffectually against the immovable weight as he’d been expecting, Bucky found himself applying his full strength to what felt like a twenty pound barbell. Steve had apparently put everything he had into the lift as well, sending them both sprawling backwards because of the overcompensation. There were a few startled yells, and Steve tripped over Bucky’s feet; then there was a loud crash as the hammer hit the floor like it weighed a damned ton and the two of them were on their asses like couple of total schmucks.

For a beat they all remained in stunned silence, gaping at where the hammer now sat heavily on the floor, before they all burst into laughter.

“That totally doesn’t count!” Stark yelled over the din, wiping his eyes as he did, “But oh my God, your faces. I so hope JARVIS got that on recording, I’m putting it on Vine…”

Thor grinned as he rose from his seat, his eyes full of mirth as he looked down at Steve and Bucky. “Well, I suppose one has to believe themselves worthy of wielding Mjölnir for her to give them more than a chance,” he said thoughtfully, grabbing the hammer off of the ground and flipping it in the air like it was a paperweight. “It was an admirable attempt, though.”

“Not like we were going to be able to fight with three hands on it, anyway,” Steve chuckled, pushing himself to his feet then turning and offering a hand to Bucky. “I think it’d be best if we stick to the shield.”

Any response that the rest of them might have had was cut off by a harsh, high-pitched squeal that sounded through the speakers of the room, leaving all of them but Barton cringing and covering their ears.

“Worthy?” Rasped an unfamiliar voice from the entry to the room. “Of course you couldn’t lift it… how could any of you be worthy?”

Bucky turned towards the voice, a feeling of sobering dread already coming over him as he noticed the look of concern on all of the others’ faces, then scrambled to his feet when he realized that it was coming from a Frankenstein version of one of the Iron Legion bots. It seemed disoriented as it stumbled about the room, muttering darkly as its broken limbs gestured towards them. “You’re all killers.”

“Tony,” Steve murmured, standing tensely and not taking his eyes off of the bot.

Behind them, Bucky could hear Tony typing ineffectually on his phone, calling for JARVIS but getting no response.

“I’m sorry, I was asleep,” the robot continued. “Or maybe I was a dream… then there was this terrible – noise, and I was tangled in… in, strings.”

“JARVIS, we have a Legion bot that is glitching, let’s shut him down,” Tony called out again, sounding considerably more frantic as there continued to be no response.

“I had to kill the other guy…” the robot muttered, “he was a good guy.”
“You killed someone?” Steve asked coldly.

“Wouldn’t’ve been my first call,” the robot answered, suddenly standing straighter. “But now that I’m in the real world I’m faced with ugly choices.”

“Who sent you?” Thor asked, his grip on Mjölnir becoming noticeably tighter.

Instead of answering directly, the robot played a recording of a familiar voice, “I see a suit of armor around the world.”

The rest of them glanced confusedly at Stark, but it was Banner who answered, his face going pale.

“Ultron.”

“In the flesh,” the robot – Ultron, because apparently the damned thing had a personality – “or no… not yet. Not this… Christmas. But I’m ready. I’m on a mission.”

“What kind of mission?” Bucky asked.

“Peace in our time,” Ultron responded, again stealing Tony’s voice. Before any of them could ask what the hell that was supposed to mean, the wall behind him burst open with a handful of Iron Legion pouring out of it, and chaos took over the room.

Steve kicked the table up, using it to shield them from the attack – while it worked to block the incoming robots the force that they hit the table with still knocked both Steve and Bucky on their asses. Those that were capable began firing bullets, so Bucky made sure to shield his head as well as he could with the arm as he ran for cover, wishing he’d done a better job of casing the room prior to the party and found where the hidden weapons were located.

After finding reasonable watch post under one of the open stairwells in the room, Bucky looked around the open space, quickly assessing the situation. They had six Legion bots plus Ultron, who at least didn’t seem to have any fighting capabilities – but knowing Stark’s designs Bucky knew better than to assume that was a guarantee. Thor was fighting one of the bots off with his hammer in the entryway of the room; Stark had managed to jump onto the back of one of them, and was attempting to either stab the thing or disassemble it with a skewer. Bucky noticed with a jolt that one of them had gotten hold of Steve, but quickly drove him into a wall and dropped him. Even though he could see that Steve was uninjured, watching the action was enough to throw Bucky into a rage – he jumped out from his hiding place, catching the bastard robot by one of its legs with his right hand. It turned on him, repulsors powering up to doubtlessly blast him in the face, but Bucky reacted on instinct, pulling it closer and driving the fingers of his left hand as forcefully as he could into its chest plate. To his surprise the fiberglass around the bot’s arc reactor actually gave, and Bucky closed his fingers around the power source and pulled, dropping both the reactor and the lifeless robot to the ground a moment later.

For a second Bucky glanced down at his hand in surprise – God knew he’d used the arm enough times in hand to hand combat, but he’d never thought of it as a weapon before. He flexed the fingers tightly, listening to the plates in the forearm recalibrate, before looking out at the room again; ready to take on another one of the legion. He was on his way towards where one of the robots had chased Natasha and Bruce onto a stairwell when he noticed someone cowering behind the piano near the windows. A part of one of the robots, just a hovering, ominous torso, had Doctor Cho cornered; Bucky immediately ran towards it, wrapping his left arm around its throat from behind.

Again he heard the repulsors firing up – the thing would shoot either him or the civilian before Bucky could get to its arc reactor, so he again went with his gut, adjusting the arm so that it was draped across the robot’s chest plate then turning his wrist, discharging an EMP for the first time
since Tony had first installed it. The plates in the arm buzzed, then a quick flash seemed to emanate across them. To Bucky’s relief, the robot powered down immediately, dropping them both to the ground.

“Stay there,” he warned Doctor Cho quietly, before turning back to the main room to see what was left to be done.

Four of the bots were already disabled on the floor, and a moment later Barton flung the shield towards Steve, who was able to hurl it with enough force at the fifth one that it fell to pieces on contact. Bucky looked around for signs of where the sixth robot had gone, but the only thing still standing in the room other than the humans was Ultron.

“Well, that was dramatic,” the robot huffed, shuffling awkwardly back towards the lab. It turned to face them all again in the doorway. “I’m sorry, I know you mean well, you just didn’t think it through. You want to protect the world, but you don’t want it to change. How can humanity be saved if it’s not allowed to… evolve?

“There’s only one path to peace,” it finished, turning back towards the door, “the Avengers extinction.”

Before it could walk out the exit, Thor chucked Mjölnir at Ultron, who fell to pieces on impact. Instead of powering down like the Iron Legion bots had though, the light from its arc reactor continued pulsing ominously, and it started to play one of the songs from Pinocchio – the one about puppets and strings – the voice growing progressively lower and slower until it finally petered out like a wind-up toy that had lost steam.

Chapter End Notes

In case it wasn't obvious from the description, I was inspired by this outfit of Sebastian’s in writing the party scene... just imagine it sized for Bucky's larger physique (you're welcome).

Meanwhile - we're hitting the homestretch! I'm thinking of making quite a few changes to the AoU storyline, so comments would be greatly appreciated. You can hit me up here or on Tumblr.
Ultron, Pt I

Chapter Summary

The team is forced back into action, against an enemy that only seems to gain advantages over them as they try to fight him. A run-in with the Scarlet Witch puts most of them out of commission, forcing them all into hiding in an unexpected safe house.

Chapter Notes

The ~*~ symbols are a switch between Bucky and Steve's POVs, they both needed to get a say in this chapter.

Also, a word of warning - Wanda is really, really good at her job, and the visions that both Steve and Bucky have are probably the most upsetting/disturbing scenes in the story so far, so please read with caution.

It took a few minutes after Thor had taken out Ultron and set off after the last Legion bot for the team to make sure that everyone was alright and that the onslaught was over. Steve realized that no one had been seriously injured, thankfully; Hill and Rhodes were both a bit worse for wear, but otherwise they all seemed to be fine. Considering the amount of damage that had been done to the room at large, it felt like a small victory - he could only imagine how catastrophic it could have been had the attack been a few hours earlier. With the crisis over, they had all ended up following Stark and Banner up to the labs, silently trying to work out what the fuck had happened.

The answer wasn’t a pretty one. It took Steve a few minutes to begin putting things together, listening to the two of them argue about the project they had been working on since coming back from Sokovia while the rest of the team picked through the wrecked lab, observing the busted robot parts and fried computer screens in quiet shock.

“Ultron’s been in everything – files, surveillance. He probably knows more about us than we do about each other.” Natasha sighed, pushing away from the computer she had been typing at and shooting Clint a nervous glance.

“Ultron,” Steve muttered in disbelief, glancing towards Bucky for his reaction. It didn’t get a rise out of him, though – Buck continued staring at the charred remains of one of the Iron Legion bots that had been left behind, his face completely closed off.

“If he’s been in your files, then he’s probably got out in the internet,” Rhodey reasoned, “what if he decides to access something a little more exciting?”

Hill glanced up from where she’d been picking glass out of her foot with a pair of tweezers. “Nuclear codes?”

Rhodey nodded ominously, “Yeah – we need to start making some calls. I have no idea who to,
“Who could even start to handle this?” Barton asked as he leaned against the work bench he’d been standing next to. “With SHIELD gone, who has the capacity? And who would even take the threat seriously… he said he wanted us dead.”

“He didn’t say dead,” Steve corrected. “He said extinct.”

“He also said he killed someone,” Natasha pointed out, looking around the room in consternation. “Who else was here?”

“No one,” Barton answered immediately, “all of the other guests had already left…”

“There was still someone,” Tony said, his tone empty as he flipped his phone towards the center of the room, projecting what looked like a giant set of interlocking orange holographic gears that had been smashed to bits. The entire group watched as it hovered in the center of the room, sadly immobile.

“JARVIS?” Bucky murmured, finally having turned his attention to the conversation.

Steve had never thought of the AI as having a physical form, holographic or not, but Bucky’s reasoning made sense. “He was the first line of defense,” Steve sighed, straightening up and crossing his arms across his chest. “He probably tried to shut Ultron down…”

“But this isn’t a strategy,” Bruce responded, shaking his head in wonder. “He could have easily assimilated JARVIS, reprogrammed him to help. This? This was rage.”

Steve didn’t even want to ask how the hell a computer program could feel and act on rage. As Bruce continued circling the remnants of JARVIS in the center of the room, Thor came striding in, still dressed in his full battle armor and stalking threateningly towards Tony. “Seems to be going around,” Tony quipped with a smirk.

Steve started as Thor grabbed Stark by the throat and lifted him off of the ground like a ragdoll, violently dragging him across the lab and slamming him into the wall with a growl.

“Thor!” Steve spoke up, intervening before Thor seriously injured the only one of them remotely capable of figuring out what to do about the robot situation. “The Legion bot, what’s the story?”

“The trail went cold about 100 miles out flying North over the Atlantic Ocean, but it definitely had the scepter,” Thor growled, glaring Stark down for a second longer and then dropping him back to his feet. “Now we have to go about finding it and recapturing it, again.”

“I don’t understand,” Doctor Cho muttered, looking at Tony with helpless confusion. “If you built the program, why is it trying to kill us?”

Stark looked at her, and then around at the rest of them, before breaking out in a fit giggles. Steve felt irritation bubbling in his gut – a nervous response to this mess was one thing, but it didn’t seem like Tony to become hysterical over a challenge, especially one that was tech related. The atmosphere in the entire room shifted as the rest of the team stared him in disbelief, watching as he continued laughing.

“You think this is funny?” Bucky asked coldly, his voice rough with disuse as he glared at Tony with such venom that Steve shifted automatically to put himself between the two of them.

“No?” Stark responded, turning around and staring Bucky down, although his smile that said
otherwise still firmly in place. “I mean, this is pretty terrible, right?”

“It wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t played around with something you knew nothing ab-” Thor started, only to be cut off.

“No,” Stark interrupted coldly, stepping into the middle of the room, gesturing back and forth between both Thor and Bucky. “No, I’m sorry; we’re not going to start this. It’s not funny, but neither of you gets what it means, or what we were trying to do. Spare us the self-righteous hissy fits, okay?”

“We don’t get it?” Bucky asked with a mean smile of his own, rising out of the chair he’d been slumped in and rounding on Tony, “I read at least a dozen stories exactly like this before 1940… Asimov could have told you this was a stupid-ass idea.”

Tony scoffed in his face. “Firstly, Methuselah, Asimov was after your time. Secondly, I’m sorry but I don’t use hokey science fiction authors as a resource when I’m making breakthroughs that will change the world. Y’know, on account of it being fiction.”

“That’s based on science fact,” Bucky shot back. “I thought you were supposed to be a fuckin’ genius, Stark. Anyone with a lick of common sense should know better than to create something they can’t control.”

“Oh yeah, Sergeant Barnes – please tell us all more about what I was thinking and why my plan, which you couldn’t even begin to understand – was such a terrible idea.”

“Now really isn’t the time, Tony.” Bruce interrupted from his corner of the lab.

“No, I think now is the perfect time, Bruce!” Stark retorted, turning on Banner as the two started arguing over the idea and how close they had been to success in the first place. According to Stark there had been no danger yet because they were nowhere close to interfacing the robots, but the damage they were standing in told a different story. Once again, they were all stuck in a giant mess because they’d been keeping secrets from each other - it was that thought that finally set Steve off.

“Well you did somethin’ right,” Steve interrupted, sick of listening to their bickering. “And you did it right here, without consulting the rest of us. I thought the whole point of the Avengers was that we were gonna be different than SHIELD.”

“Oh please, Rogers – any of you could have stopped in at any time during our process, it’s not as if I made the lab off limits. You were just too preoccupied makin’ time with Barnes that you forgot the rest of us still had a job to do.”

“I wasn’t aware I needed to babysit my own teammates to keep them from building an evil robot hell-bent on world destruction without supervision,” Steve shot back coldly, unable to help rising at the barb against him and Bucky.

“You’re all acting like I did this as a fun weekend project, you’re missing the damned point,” Stark complained. “Does anyone remember that time I carried a nuclear warhead through a wormhole over New York?”

“Nah, never heard you mention it once,” Rhodey muttered, speaking for all of them as he rolled his eyes spectacularly.

Stark ignored him, launching into a tirade about the Chitauri attack on New York, reminding them all of how unprepared they had been and how little things had changed since. “We can raid old HYDRA bases all the live long day, but that up there? Thor’s said from the beginning, that was just
the start of it… how did you guys plan on beating whatever the next big threat was?"

“Together.” Steve responded fervently.

“I’m sorry, I thought an hour ago we were toasting to you and your Bucky riding into the sunset?” Tony sneered at him.

“We said we were getting out but would help if we were needed,” Bucky corrected him, moving so that he was standing beside Steve. “That was the point of assembling – if the shit hits the fan, we all come back and handle it.”

“If we aren’t adequately prepared, we’ll lose.” Tony said decisively, staring the both of them down.

“Then we’ll do that together, too.” Steve stated decisively. He took a second to glance at Bucky, giving him an apologetic smile before launching into action mode, looking around at the team as a whole. “Thor’s right, Ultron is calling us out – we need to find him before he’s ready for us… what do we need to do to start tracking him?”

Bruce immediately began spouting off plans for an algorithm to track social media updates while Tony moved to the computer bank nearby and started writing a program to monitor security systems from around the globe. It hadn’t even occurred to Steve until that moment that with JARVIS gone, they’d have to find a way to do the detective work on their own – even with the group of them all, it would be an enormous undertaking, especially given how habitual it had become to let the AI do the busy work for them.

Steve turned his full attention to Bucky as the rest of the group started moving into action, grimacing regretfully. “I’m sorry,” he murmured lowly, “I know this isn’t exactly how we planned on ending the evening…”

“It’s fine,” Bucky sighed, shaking his head and putting on a smile that Steve recognized was only for show. “I should be used to it by now, right?” Steve opened his mouth to swear that once Ultron was contained they’d truly be done, but the words died on his lips when he recognized how hollow they sounded. “I’m just gonna go down and change into something more practical,” Bucky added after a moment, loosening his tie, “somethin’ tells me we’re in for a long night.”

Steve watched him go with a pang, his shoulders slumping in defeat. The entire situation was infuriating enough, given the threat and how easily it could have been avoided had Tony been honest with them all in the first place, but seeing how obviously disappointed Bucky was – especially compared to how happy he’d been since they’d arrived in New York – made it all hurt even more. He wished that there was some way they could get out, or at least a reasonable excuse to keep him out of the mess that was sure to come from it, but Steve knew better than to even consider the possibility that Bucky would take such an opportunity while the rest of them went to battle. After straightening his back and setting his shoulders Steve turned back to the room, calling out to Banner to ask what needed to be done to get the jump on Ultron.

From there, they all went to work. Hill made her way back to her office to monitor the surveillance program Tony set up, while Natasha and Barton hit the phones, contacting agents around the globe so that the team had more eyes out for Ultron’s movements. Rhodey took it on himself to see that Doctor Cho got out of the city safely, then planned to head back to DC to make sure that the appropriate officials were at least made aware of the potential threat. Tony had finished writing his programs by the time Bucky strode back into the room in his TAC gear and volunteered to do the busy work of wading through the data files, brushing off Tony’s attempt to teach him the computer coldly. “I know how to run a freakin’ search engine, Stark – you go apply superior intellect to figuring out what the fuck we’re gonna do to stop him once we find where he is.”
With the rest of the team pouring through computer databases and chasing online leads, Steve was left feeling pretty useless. He’d figured his way around computers well enough to get by while he was with SHIELD, and Bucky had taught him a few tricks during their months taking down HYDRA, but he was nowhere near as adept with technology as the rest of them were, and there wasn’t time to teach him or spare computers left for him to get involved, anyway. After a couple of hours of wandering around aimlessly, he grabbed up one of the remaining StarkPads and ended up floating between the groups of them, trying his best to keep track of what had come out of the different methods of searching, looking for recognizable patterns or hints of Ultron’s next move that might otherwise be missed.

It wasn’t until Hill approached him after dawn that they started making real headway. “Anything on the computers keeps getting corrupted and Nat and Barton’s sources are sketchy at best,” he started with a yawn, rubbing his eyes as the two of them walked through the wreckage from the night before that still littered the common room. “What have your sources got?”

“Just a bunch of jumbled reports about a metal man or men raiding unrelated robotics facilities and jet propulsion labs,” Maria answered tiredly.

“Great,” Steve sighed, “so he’s finding more places to replicate. Any word on casualties?”

“Only when engaged,” Hill replied, “the more common description of the sites is that all of the workers are wandering out, confused and muttering about nightmares and worst fears and something that moved too fast to see.”

“The Maximoffs.” Steve muttered, typing them into the file he’d been keeping – exactly what they needed to be dealing with on top of everything else. “I guess it figures that he’d get them on board, given their mutual contact.”

“Not anymore,” Hill said ominously, handing over her own StarkPad. Steve blinked at the gruesome picture of Von Strucker’s body on the screen, lying dead in a nondescript prison cell. “His captors found him this morning.”

Steve bit off a curse and sped up his pace towards the lab, rushing to tell the rest of the team in case none of them had heard about it yet, hoping that they were about to finally catch the break they needed. He could hear the tense conversation between Tony and Bucky even before he made it to the door.

“I know that, but the files keep getting deleted as soon as I try to access them,” Bucky groused, the clack of his fingers against the keyboard growing increasingly louder, so that Steve couldn’t quite make out Stark’s response over the sound of it. “Yeah, well apparently your fuckin’ robot spawn is smarter than me; maybe you should be the one doing this.”

With a sigh Steve made his way through the door – they were never going to get anywhere if they all continued at each other’s throats the way they had been the night before, but given their collective lack of sleep and the high-running tensions, Steve didn’t have the first idea as to how to fix things.

“Hey guys,” he spoke up as he entered the room, gathering the attention of everyone - Bucky and Tony, who had been gathered around one of the computer workstations glaring at one another, Bruce and Natasha who were sifting through data on a separate computer, Barton who was still on a telephone call, and Thor - who seemed to be as lost with what to do with himself as Steve felt. “I think we might have something.” Steve continued, waving the StarkPad as he made his way to the center of the room, handing the tablet over to Thor as he’d reached for it first.

“Ultron killed Strucker, or at least persuaded someone in the prison holding him to do it. Last night.”
“And he Banksy’d the crime scene,” Tony jeered as Thor passed it harshly along to him. “Just for us.”

“But why bother?” Natasha asked, crossing the lab to stand with them. “He’d already given us his speech, why put up a smokescreen – unless Strucker knew something Ultron didn’t want us to.”

Even as she was saying it, she leaned over Bucky’s shoulder, typing Strucker’s name into the SHIELD database – only to come up with an empty file.

“And there he goes…” Bucky muttered, dropping his head in frustration. “Everything we had on him, gone.”

“Not everything,” Tony corrected immediately. “We ended up with a ton of paper files from old HYDRA facilities while you guys were shutting them down, sent from anonymous sources during the clean up.”

“Fury –” Steve breathed as Bucky sat up and came to attention. “Where are they?”

Steve, Bucky and Thor ended up hauling the crates of paper from the Stark Industry archives, each carrying four at a time so that they could get to work as soon as possible. The entire team dug through the boxes, flipping through files aimlessly in search of Strucker’s name.

“Would’ve helped if you’d labeled them better,” Steve couldn’t help grousing.

“The barcodes were perfectly adequate…” Tony started.

“Yeah, we know, when the computers weren’t trying to kill us.” Steve opened the file in his hands with more force than necessary, already starting to throw it back into the bin when Stark stopped his hand.

“Hey wait, I know him.” Stark muttered with a frown, pushing the file open again then taking it from Steve’s hands and flipping through the sheets inside. “Ulysses Klaw, operates black market arms deals off the African coast.”

“You’re fuckin’ kidding me,” Steve muttered, not bothering to hide his disdain as he glared at Tony. It was bad enough that he’d gone ahead with the hair-brained idea of building Ultron without consulting the rest of them in the first place… if he was about to admit to still building weapons and sending them to potential hostiles Steve was actually going to strangle him.

The glare that he caught Bucky shooting at Tony told Steve he wasn’t alone.

“I wasn’t selling to him,” Stark sneered in response, flipping through the file and giving them both a dirty look, “get your panties out of their twist; word gets around, okay? You run in the right circles, you hear stuff.”

“What’s that on his neck?” Thor asked, stepping between the three of them and pointing to an eight by ten photograph of the arms dealer.

“The tattoos?” Tony asked, “I dunno – pretty sure he had them when I met him, though.”

“No, those are tattoos,” Thor corrected, pointing out the dark-inked patterns around the man’s neck and chest as Steve shifted so that he could get a better view. “That, though,” he continued, pointing out a raised, ugly scar amidst the markings, “is a brand.”

Natasha stood from where she had been seated, frowning down at the photo for a few moments before shaking her head. “It’s definitely a brand, but it’s not a symbol in any language that I’ve ever
seen before.”

Tony raised his eyebrows, looking more closely at the photo before glancing across the room at Bruce. “I don’t suppose we can manually run the facial recognition software with a scanner, can we? Figure out what the hell this mark is?”

It took a while for Stark and Banner to overwrite the computer program, but after a few minutes it was running through data, compiling images to work out the meaning behind the symbol. Bruce kept an eye on the program’s progress while the rest of them continued flipping aimlessly through files, until the computer finally chimed out with a result.

“Hey guys, we’re getting something,” Bruce confirmed. “The symbol, it’s an unpleasant version of the world ‘thief’ in Wakandan.”

Tony whistled lowly as Steve and Bucky both blinked in surprise. “He said he had a game changer, I didn’t think he was stupid enough to try stealing from the Panthers. Especially not that, I’m surprised he came away with a head.”

“Why, what comes out of Wakanda?” Barton asked, watching the three of them blankly.

Instead of answering, Bucky raised his left arm, gesturing towards where the shield sat in the corner of the room with his right.

“But what the hell does he need Vibranium for?” Bruce mused, tapping his fingers against his keyboard.

“Let’s pay a visit to Klaw,” Steve suggested immediately, grabbing up the shield and heading towards the ready room, “see if we can’t find out.”

They had all been mostly dressed for a fight anyway, so suiting up and shipping out took no time at all; the flight wasn’t necessarily a short one, even with the quinjet, but it gave them plenty of time to read up more on Klaw’s operations and find his exact location, docked near the coast of Johannesburg. It also allowed them all to work out a plan of attack for once they got on board, both in dealing with hostile arms dealers and any of the robots that Ultron might have inside.

Natasha boarded the ship first, making her way easily into one of the cargo holds and clearing it of any guards that might have otherwise raised an alarm. Bucky and Clint followed after her once the entry point was secure, clearing a way for Steve, Thor and Tony to follow behind. Nat went for the engine room to cut the communications systems, while Bucky and Clint went to the upper deck, providing cover as the rest of them made their way through the main level of the ship’s cargo hold.

It turned out that finding Ultron was relatively easy – they simply had to follow the screams, eventually finding Klaw writhing in pain on the ground as an enormous robot loomed over him. Wherever he’d been, Ultron had found the materials to rebuild himself; he now stood close to eight feet tall, and was built even more sturdily than Tony looked in his suit. The twins stood beside him, looking surprised by whatever had caused him to lash out at Klaw in the first place, which Steve started putting together as they approached them on an adjoining catwalk through the bowels of the ship.

“Stark is… he’s a sickness.” Ultron’s voice ranted out of its new body, shaking his head. “How could you possibly compare me to him, I’m nothing like Tony Stark.”

“Oh Junior,” Tony called out, interrupting him as the three of them made their way slowly across the walkway, “you’re gonna break your old man’s heart.”
Steve didn’t miss the way that Klaw’s men tensed as they continued advancing on Ultron. One went for his gun, but was dropped by a gunshot overhead before he could even pull it from its holster. “Shoot first and ask questions later,” Ultron mused, his head turning towards where Bucky’s shot had come from. “I was wondering where you were hiding the Missus, Rogers.”

Stark snorted in response, before catching himself with a short huff of laughter. “Sorry Cap, but that one was kind of clever,” he said over the coms, still chuckling, “no offense, Bucky Bear.”

Steve refused to rise to the bait, ignoring the both of them as he turned his attention to the Maximoff kids, hoping to capitalize on the unease he’d noticed when they’d first come up on the group. “You two could still walk away from this…” he said, stepping slowly ahead with his shield at the ready.

“Oh, we will,” the girl cooed sarcastically.

Steve sighed internally, pressing the point anyway. “I know where you’re coming from, and I know you’ve suffered. We can help…”

“Ah, Captain America. God’s righteous man,” Ultron chided. “Pretending that you can live without a war; that anything, anyone could possibly be more important to you than keeping up the good fight – I was half-expecting a thank you note from you.”

Steve froze in his tracks, clenching his jaw as Ultron continued taunting him and praying that Bucky wasn’t paying attention.

Bucky couldn’t make out everything that was being said on the deck between Ultron’s crew and their own group, not if he was going to continue keeping tabs on the growing number of Klaw’s thugs that were positioning themselves for attack on the periphery of it all, but he could tell that whatever was going on it was clearly getting to Steve. He adjusted his rifle, catching Barton’s eye across the deck and signaling that he was ready to open fire if needed, then turned his attention back to the situation below when Barton returned the same.

Ultron had a snappy response for something Tony had said to him, and the next thing Bucky knew the two of them were launching at one another, crashing together in mid air in a spray of sparks. Whatever had set the two of them off was apparently a sign for the rest of the bots to go to town as well; within seconds the entire deck was filled with robots that were after Thor and Steve. In the chaos Klaw’s men opened fire as well; Bucky went to work, targeting the guns with methodical precision while keeping tabs on the others’ progress with the robots. He took a headshot at one of the bots when he noticed Steve was pinned down by a pair of them, sighing in relief when Thor electrocuted the other and the two of them went about kicking ass again.

They held their own for the first couple of minutes – then Bucky noticed the streak of movement below, weaving in and out of the rest of the action. In the time that it took Steve to chuck the shield towards an on-coming robot he was knocked to the floor by the Maximoff kid; Bucky tried taking a shot at him, but once again the little bastard was too fast for his gun. He growled in frustration, firing at the robots himself, and then began moving closer to the action as he realized that Barton had the rest of the humans under control.

Bucky’d just taken a robot out, pulling its power source out with his left hand as he had the first he’d fought at the tower, when Mjölnir flew past him, dragging the Maximoff boy along with it. He wound up crashed into a pile of empty storage containers in a nearby corner; Bucky followed after him as fast as he could, determined to get him out of the game before he could get back up. Sure enough, the kid bounced back immediately, but before he could completely gain his feet Bucky gave
him a solid left hook to the chin, standing over him menacingly as he went back on his ass. “Just stay down, kid,” he muttered, before turning and making his way back to the main level of the ship.

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Steve really couldn’t tell who had the upper hand as he made his way around the deck; it looked like the majority of Klaw’s men had been taken out between their snipers above, but the robots were still running wild. He made his way towards the stores below, planning to keep tabs on the vibranium in case Ultron tried to sneak it out in the chaos. “I’m going below to watch the goods – Thor, what’s your status with the bots?”

It took a moment for Thor to come back with his answer. “The girl tried to warp my mind – take special care, I doubt humans can repel her;” he warned.

Steve tried to tell himself that it was only his imagination making him worry about the way he’d trailed off with the last bit – in all likelihood Thor was just dealing with another robot, not actively under attack by the Maximoff girl. He intended to ask the same question to the rest of the team, but before Steve could open up his com to the group at large he was hit again by an unseen force, knocking him head-first into one of the steel walls of the ship.

One second Steve was lying on the catwalk, groaning in pain and trying to drag up the strength to get back to his feet and get back in the fight, and the next second…

The next second he was walking into a dimly-lit dance hall, frowning in confusion as he read the WELCOME HOME banner that hung from the rafters. He made his way slowly through the sea of ladies with painfully familiar haircuts and troops in their olive dress uniforms, dancing and drinking and laughing over the swing music being played by the band on the stage at the front of the room.

Steve had no idea how the hell it had happened, but he knew without a doubt that he was somehow back in 1945, wandering through the Stork Club like a lost mook.

He took a moment to actually pay attention to the men and women he passed, looking for a familiar face or an explanation as to how he’d gotten there in the first place. Unfortunately no one rang a bell – the troops laughed and drank in celebration, the same as he had imagined the parties after their final victory would be, and the ladies danced with and kissed their men just as desperately as they had in the couple of newsreels he had watched about the aftermath of VE-Day, but there wasn’t a single SSR Agent or Howlie or even Avenger in sight.

Without knowing why, Steve slowly made his way to the bar, his blood running cold when he caught a glimpse of who was standing there. The soldier was thinner than it had been when he’d seen him last, his dark hair a bit disheveled despite the huge amounts of pomade in it, and the left sleeve of his dress uniform was pinned up, stopping a couple of inches below his shoulder. Despite the missing limb and the drastic change in build from what Steve had grown so intimately accustomed to, Steve knew he’d found Bucky. His feet continued moving him forward, slowly approaching the bar until he’d sidled up next to him.

Although he’d been expecting it, actually seeing Bucky’s face turn to him was like a slug to the gut. His eyes were sunken and dark, haunted worse than they’d been even when Steve had first found him on Zola’s table in Kreischberg; but the second he made contact with Steve’s they lit up, a broad, crooked smile spreading across his face.

“STEVIE, buddy!” Bucky slurred, dropping his tumbler of whiskey down on the bar and ignoring the way it sloshed over. “What the hell took ya so long, punk?”

“Buck?” He asked weakly, stepping up next to him and staring in horrified confusion. “What the
hell happened to you?”

Bucky swayed heavily to the left as he frowned at Steve, before giving him that same horrible fake smile. “Took a bullet from a Kraut before you were able to put the plane down and save the free world – I’m pretty sure you were there, pal. You brain yourself getting ready or something? I told you, tonight ain’t gonna be that bad.”

“No,” Steve insisted, looking around the room again – it hurt less than looking at Bucky. “No, it’s just…”

“Steve!” a familiar voice called from the dance floor, drawing his eyes so quickly that he felt a rush of vertigo. Peggy stood at the corner of the floor nearest to them, her hair done up in rolls, wearing a gorgeous blue dress that suited her even better than the red number she’d worn to the pub in London. Steve could barely draw breath as he looked at her – she was every bit as gorgeous as he remembered, standing proudly at the edge of the dance floor and standing out so completely that Steve couldn’t believe that no one else was giving her attention, that she was actually waiting for him.

“What’re you standing here for, you idiot?” Bucky scoffed, interrupting Steve’s thoughts and reaching over to push him. “Go get her.”

“What about you?” Steve asked automatically, finally tearing his eyes away from Peggy. In the few minutes he’d been gawping at Peggy, Bucky seemed to look even worse than before.

“What about me?” he laughed with a nonchalant shrug. “You promised Pegs a dance, Steve… you don’t back out on a dame like that.”

It was hell, being torn between the two – on one hand Steve desperately wanted Peggy in his arms, even if he was likely to make a complete ass of himself on the dance floor with her. But on the other hand, he was overwhelmed with the need to grab hold of Bucky as well, to hold him close and try to fix whatever had happened to him to leave him looking so lost and haunted. “What’re you gonna do, then?” He asked numbly.

Bucky looked surprised that it was even a question. “Probably finish this drink and see if I can’t get a pity spin out of one of the other fine ladies here,” he joked after a while, rolling his eyes at whatever Steve’s face must have looked like. “Don’t worry about me, alright? Unless you’re really about to be stupid enough to ditch her, in which case I’m gonna swoop in and take advantage of your loss.”

“No, I’m going, I’m going – just… don’t take off without me, alright?” Steve finally responded with a weird twist of concern deep in his chest. He had to dance with Peggy, he knew, but the idea of letting Bucky out of his sight when he was in such a state was still rubbing him the wrong way.

“I ain’t goin’ anywhere,” Bucky responded amusedly, turning back to the bar. Steve didn’t miss the fact that the smile dropped off of Bucky’s face the second that he thought Steve wasn’t looking any longer. He licked his lips, trying to think of something else to say, but Peggy called out for him again and he couldn’t do anything but clap Bucky on his good shoulder and take off towards the dance floor, heart racing as he got nearer to Peggy.

Somehow he was able to cross the room in an instant, barely blinking before he had her in his arms. The band had thankfully slowed down a bit, and they rocked against one another in time to the unfamiliar tune, Peggy smiling up at him with such love and happiness in her eyes that Steve could barely believe he’d almost missed his chance at this. He twirled her as the tempo of the tune changed, chuckling as she laughed and went with it – then immediately cast his eyes towards the bar.
to see if Bucky had seen, remembering that he’d been the one to teach Steve the cheesy move in the first place.

He tried his best not to feel too disappointed when he realized that there was no one at the bar anymore.

They continued to dance, finishing the first song and then moving on to a second, one with a slightly faster tempo. Steve was still so afraid of stepping on Peggy’s toes or missing Bucky leaving that his eyes were all over the place, darting between the floor and the bar and the rest of the couples on the dance floor, hoping to catch even a glance of Bucky’s familiar, radiant dance hall smile.

“What’s wrong, darling?” Peggy’s voice cut through his thoughts like a knife, and Steve immediately honed back in on her, feeling guilty as hell for having let himself get swept away. It was a God damned miracle that he was here now, he knew; he should be thanking his lucky stars and taking advantage of it, rather than worrying over everything else.

“It’s nothing, Peggy,” Steve said, smiling earnestly down at her as the dance steps got slightly more complicated. “Just… old habits, I guess.” The last bit was a lie, and even as he finished saying it and swung her gently, his eyes swept the room again, desperate to find Bucky’s location.

“The war is over, Steve,” Peggy murmured shrewdly, giving him another bright smile. “We can go home… imagine it.”

The words had barely left her mouth when Peggy and everyone else in the hall vanished. Steve came out of the turn they’d been making awkwardly, frowning as he looked around the empty, silent dance floor, kicking himself for not having realized that it had all been a dream earlier. Because that was the thing, wasn’t it? Ultron was right – who the hell was Steve, what the hell did he have, if it wasn’t a war to fight? He’d lost his chance with Peggy the second they had boarded the Valkyrie, and there was no way it was ever coming back.

He stalked through the room, looking for an exit, knowing that he had to pull himself out of it and get back into the present so he could continue fighting. If he didn’t, he’d likely lose his chance to even attempt making something with Bucky as well… assuming he could ever find a way to be man enough to figure his life out and give Bucky what he deserved.

Steve was so caught up in the search that he almost tripped over the pile of blood-soaked uniforms on the floor in front of him, before realizing with a start that they were groaning in pain. With a frown he dropped to his knees beside it, gently rolling the soldier over to check on his wounds. His heart stopped when he recognized the empty left sleeve, all of the wind going out of him as Bucky’s face came into view, bloody and beaten so badly that it was barely recognizable for all of the swelling and bruises.

“Christ, Buck…” Steve moaned, doing his best to hold himself together as he scooped Bucky’s broken body carefully into his arms. “Are you – what the hell happened?”

Bucky coughed harshly as Steve moved him, a trickle of blood running down his lips – although Steve couldn’t tell if it was coming from his battered face or somewhere more decidedly more concerning. “Stepped outside for a smoke - coupla’ the guys didn’t take so kindly to my lookin’ at one of the fairies in the alleyway, I guess…” he finally admitted weakly, eyes avoiding Steve’s.

“You shouldn’t’ve – Bucky, why didn’t you come to me?” Steve asked helplessly, pulling him closer as an ominous gurgling sound started in his chest.

“You were finally with your girl,” Bucky responded weakly, before looking at Steve with a tiny, shy
smile. It was horrifying on his busted face. “It wasn’t exactly the time to let you know that your best pal was a sad, crippled queer.”

Steve knew firsthand that a knife in his belly would have hurt less than Bucky’s words. “That doesn’t matter to me, Bucky,” he croaked quietly, using the sleeve of his dress uniform to carefully daub at the blood on his face, trying to get a better idea of how bad his injuries were. As he shifted Bucky in his hold, he recognized how much blood was coming from his torso as well. “Fuck - Bucky, were you shanked? Jesus, you should have gotten me... you idiot, nothing was more important than this is.”

Bucky started rambling, as if he wasn’t even taking in Steve’s words. “I just want you t’be happy, Stevie.” He said dreamily, smiling despite the fact that he was coughing up more blood. “The rest don’t matter – that’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

Steve couldn’t stop the choked sob that escaped his throat, ignoring the fact that they were still sitting in public and Bucky’s face was half beat-in and pulling him closer to press a careful kiss to his temple, witnesses be damned. “I’m happy with you, Buck, you’ve gotta know that. I... I couldn’t be happy any other way.”

“You’ve got Peggy,” Bucky murmured quietly. “You’ve got a future, Steve, someone you can love, can take care of. You don’t need me around anymore…”

“No, Bucky, no. Christ, I love you, too. I love you so damned much.”

“I love you, Steve - God forgive me, I always have. And I’d do anything for you, punk. This is... this is worth it.” His breathing had been getting progressively more strained as he talked, until his voice cut out completely with a dull, wet wheeze. Before Steve could ask what was wrong, Bucky took a deep, rattling gasp of air – and then went completely still in his arms, his steel blue eyes glassy and dull as they stared blankly in Steve’s direction.

“Bucky?” He asked brokenly, his entire body going numb with shock as he put together what had happened. “C’mon, buddy... stay with me.” It was no use, though – Steve knew he was never getting a response from him again. He started to yell out for help, hoping that someone would appear in the empty building, would take pity on them and work some miracle to bring Bucky back to him, but when he opened his mouth all that came out was a pitiful, broken wail. In the end all Steve could do was clutch Bucky’s lifeless body to his chest, sobbing in agony for everything that they both had lost.

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“Steve?” Bucky asked into his com again, doing his best not to panic as there continued to be no answer.

“Hey Barton,” he finally asked after a few moments, continuing to make his way forward through the bowels of the ship, “I don’t suppose you have an eye on either Cap or Romanof-” As Bucky came around the corner and stepped through the doorway in front of him there was a flash of red light, then the entire ship around him went hazy. Bucky was thirsty and hot and starving and stiff as a fucking board – he’d been in position on the roof of the building three streets over from DC Superior Court House for the past five hours, rifle at the ready for the target he was waiting on to finally show up so that he could finish this damned job and go home.

It had seemed unusual for Pierce to ask him to make a domestic hit, especially one in broad daylight
in so public of a space, but when he’d promised Bucky that it would be the last time that he needed him, Buck hadn’t been able to agree to the op quickly enough. The Secretary of World Security had been especially preachy of late, insisting that this was the hit that would shape the century for the better; quite frankly, Bucky was willing to make the hit if it meant he never had to listen to the creep wax poetically about state-sponsored murder again.

Finally – finally – a black SUV that matched the mission description Bucky had been given pulled up to the front of the building. He checked the license plate through his scope, confirming that it was the correct vehicle, and then set his site to the rear driver’s side door. How the hell Pierce’s men had known what seat the subject would be sitting on was completely lost on Bucky, but for the moment he didn’t care… he quickly did the math to account for the trajectory of the bullet and the wind speed coming from the North, adjusting his scope one and a half degrees to the right and six feet off of the ground – all he knew about the target was that it was six foot two and needed to be taken out before the public could catch sight of him getting out of the car. Quick headshot, then Bucky would disassemble his gun and get the hell out of dodge before authorities could follow-up on where the hell the bullet had come from. It wasn’t as if they’d think to check his current nest; for anyone else the shot would be an impossible feat, but for the Winter Soldier it was all in a day’s work.

His heart slowed as the door began to open and he held his breath, waiting as the target stepped right into his line of fire. Bucky pulled the trigger as he exhaled, a whoosh of relief going through his body as a flash of red bloomed on the back of the blonde head and the guy dropped to the ground like a ton of bricks. He was done, he could finally get out and go home and get back to normal missions with Steve, maybe even talk him into getting out of SHIELD altogether one day… for some reason that thought gave him pause, and Bucky froze in position, replaying the shot in his head.

Although it went against everything he ever did on these missions, Bucky put his eye back to the scope of his gun, pointing it at the ground below where he’d taken the shot. Something about the hit was wrong… he’d missed something; some important detail that was lodged in his subconscious, insisting that he’d made an unthinkable mistake.

The driver had already flipped the target onto his back, and despite the enormous exit wound on his forehead Bucky could make out the man’s face. In an instant, the entire world stopped – even with the top half of his head missing, Bucky recognized who it was on, but his brain seemed to have trouble processing what he was actually looking at. It was the face of the man he’d thought of every day since they’d both been in grade school, the face he’d recognized on sight even after spending months apart and the SSR changing every physical characteristic he’d had… but Bucky had never once in his life allowed himself to imagine seeing it under these circumstances.

Steve Rogers was lying dead on the steps of the courthouse below.

It seemed physically impossible for Bucky to catch his breath, and the only thing he was aware of (other than the gruesome sight still in front of him) was a terrible, animal-like wail that filled the air, drowning out the sirens that he knew must be sounding on the streets below. It wasn’t until someone slapped a muzzle over his face and lifted him away from the rifle that Bucky realized he’d been the one making the noise all along.

He was still in such shock that he couldn’t bring himself to fight back against the rough hands that were dragging him off of the roof, hauling him into the building and downstairs into its basement. He vaguely recognized his captors – Rumlow was grinning meanly, his hands wrapped far tighter than necessary around Bucky’s right arm and pinching into the flesh. On his left a familiar blonde woman stared blankly ahead, seemingly unbothered by either the weight or the presence of the metal arm that she was holding like a vise.
An instant later they were dragging him into a dimly lit room, full of computers and men in lab coats. Alexander Pierce stood at the center, smiling proudly as he stood next to a modern version of the chair they had come across in the HYDRA base in Colombia. “Remarkable work, Soldier,” he practically cooed, smiling paternally as Bucky continued to placidly drag his feet along the floor. He felt nothing when Rumlow and Belova threw him bodily into the chair, still numb with shock as mechanical restraints slammed down around both of his arms.

“I was afraid at the beginning that your - relationship with Captain Rogers was going to be too big of an obstacle to surmount, but you really have done a remarkable job of overcoming it,” Pierce said, smiling like a shark as he moved to stand in front of the chair. Hearing the bastard so much as breathe Steve’s name was enough to make Bucky want to scream, but the muzzle did its job, rendering him silent.

“With Captain America gone HYDRA can finally assume its rightful place in the world; now all that’s left to do is to get rid of the remnants of James Barnes, so that the Winter Soldier can take his final form.”

The lab coats were in motion around them now, setting up syringes and programming computers, but in his terror Bucky couldn’t move his eyes away from Pierce and Rumlow. This was what he’d been meant for all along: to be a weapon, to mindlessly follow orders and kill as needed, and he’d performed exactly how they’d planned.

Bucky blinked, and when he opened his eyes the small, round form of Arnim Zola was standing proudly alongside Pierce, checking his clipboard and grinning behind his glasses as he had all of those times he had in Kreischberg. “Yes; you turned out perfectly, after all.”

There was a whirring sound as a small machine fit itself around Bucky’s head, closing in tight against his temples. He barely registered the buzzing sound before white hot pain erupted through his skull, shaking him mercilessly while he prayed for oblivion.

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Steve shook his head, moaning in pain as the empty dance hall and the deadweight in his arms faded away to nothing. He blinked, trying to discern what hurt worse – his throbbing headache or the dull pain in his chest that hadn’t left since he’d found Bucky in the first place.

That thought sent him into action immediately; Steve had to find Bucky, had to make sure that he was still safe, that he hadn’t fallen into the trap Ultron had inevitably set for him, knowing that he’d follow Steve into it. He stowed his shield on his back, then staggered along the gangplank, unable to care at all about the shots still being fired around him on occasion… there was nothing more important than getting to Bucky, before it was too late.

He stumbled through the corridors of the ship as he continued yelling for Bucky, his panic only growing worse as he continued to receive no response, even over the coms. On a whim, Steve moved to the second level, half-remembering that Bucky was supposed to be on lookout with Barton. Maybe he’d just flipped his headpiece off, or was busy engaging hostiles.

Or maybe he’s already dead because you dragged him into this mess and abandoned him…

Steve shook his head roughly, opening his mouth to yell out Bucky’s name again, when he noticed a familiar dark figure crumpled on the ground around the corner in front of him. He blinked hard, making sure that it wasn’t another hallucination, and then dropped the shield in his haste to get to him, moaning in distress when he found Bucky unconscious. There were no obvious signs of injury on him, not like the horror that he’d been imagining, but Steve still felt a bubble of panic in his chest
as he staggered to a stop beside him.

“Buck-” he gasped, dropping to his knees next to Bucky’s prone form and grabbing him by the shoulders, shaking him as roughly as he dared when he got no response. “Bucky! Fuck, Bucky – no – come back…”

Bucky’s eyes opened with a flash of red, which he blinked off immediately before grabbing Steve’s forearms roughly and staring at him like he was seeing a ghost, his eyes wide and lost and utterly terrified. Before Steve could think of something reassuring to say, Bucky pushed himself out of his grasp, leaning over the railing of the stairwell and vomiting violently onto the deck below.

Steve did his best to holding Bucky’s hair back, murmuring nonsense apologies - whatever action might have been going on around them was barely background static, his whole world focused down to trying to make things right for Buck after years of failing him.

“Hey Thor – we’ve got a Code Green out here that is majorly FUBAR, could use a Lullaby right about now.”

It took him a minute, but Steve eventually recognized Stark’s anxious voice over the coms… he was still too busy trying to comfort Bucky to fully process the words, though.

“I’m afraid that’s not gonna happen,” a strained voice responded – Barton, Steve’s mind provided on delay. “The whole team’s down, Stark; the Maximoff girl got to ‘em. I’ll do my best to round them up and get back to the jet, but I think you’re on your own with Banner.”

There was a distant part of Steve’s mind telling him he should probably do something, should respond to them in some way, or grab up the shield and head out to help – but it was drowned out by the fact that every other molecule in his body refused to leave Bucky’s side. He had no idea how he would comfort, or really even protect him in this state, but it was absolutely imperative that Steve not let Bucky out of his sight. If he did…

He had no idea how long they stayed huddled in the corner together, Bucky still retching and shaking, Steve rubbing his back and begging for forgiveness through tears; it felt like hours had passed before Barton finally made his way around the opposite corner, supporting Natasha like a ragdoll. Steve couldn’t even find it in him to check if she was injured – it would require looking away from the back of Bucky’s head.

“Oh, Cap, no.” Clint groaned as he approached them, “Please tell me you guys can walk. There’s no way in hell I’m carrying all your asses back to the jet.”

Bucky shifted towards Clint’s voice, turning his face away from the railing he’d been clutching to for the first time since he’d come to, his eyes still wide and panicked. There was a pause between Clint’s words and Bucky’s grimacing in response, but then he was off the ground like a shot, marching in the direction they’d boarded the ship from.

Steve staggered to his feet as well, croaking his name as he swayed on the spot, but Bucky continued to stalk purposefully ahead. Steve pushed away from the wall and set out after him, desperate to pull himself together and keep up, completely ignoring the fact that he’d walked over the forgotten shield (and Barton’s resultant muttering as he stooped to pick it up behind them).

How they all made it back to the quinjet Steve had no idea – all that mattered to him as Barton opened the hatch was that Bucky still refused to make eye contact with him, shrugging off all of Steve’s touches and climbing into the jet immediately once it was open, settling himself into a corner seat and curling around the left side of his body as he faced the wall of the cabin. Thor sighed
warily as he glanced between the two of them, looking sweaty and pale himself as he clapped Steve on the shoulder and boarded the jet as well, taking the seat next to Bucky in the hold while giving him plenty of space.

Clint made his way past Steve, depositing Nat carefully into the seat next to Thor then moving into the cockpit to prepare for takeoff - leaving Steve to make his way to the spot nearest the captain’s seats, and farthest from where Bucky had closed himself off. The distance between them, coupled with the overwhelming sense of despair inside the hold, was almost unbearable as they sat in pained silence, barely listening to Stark’s updates over the com system of the jet. Finally, the Iron Man suit landed outside the hatch of the jet with Doctor Banner in tow, who looked even more disturbed and bedraggled than the rest of them as he crawled into the hatch and wrapped a blanket around his head and shoulders, shying away from all contact as he rocked on the floor.

Tony stepped out of the suit and sent it off on its way, sighing heavily as he stepped into the jet and going directly for the co-pilot’s chair. “We’re all alive, then?”

“In a matter of speaking.” Barton muttered, shutting the hatch to the quinjet and taking off immediately, leaving Johannesburg smoldering behind them.

It took everything that Steve had to hold himself together, putting on a brave front as best as he could, especially whenever Stark tried to address him - it was bad enough to have the rest of the team down, he was afraid that if they saw how badly their leader was disturbed they’d all be doomed. Bucky clearly wanted nothing to do with him, so Steve began doing his best to pay attention to the conversation between Clint and Tony, filling himself in on what he’d missed while under the Maximoff girl’s spell. Shortly after take-off Stark called Hill, who had nothing but bad news, outlining the amount of damage that the Hulk had done in the city and all of the bad press that they were getting for it. In order to make sure that no one tried to take Banner into custody, she recommended that they go off the grid until Stark Industries could come up with an adequate response to the situation - the absolute last thing that they needed was to lose their muscle to prison, regardless of how unstable he might be.

Barton promised that he had a place for them where no one would come sniffing them out; Tony was obviously skeptical, but given his lack of argument Steve figured that he was coming up blank on alternatives as well.

Steve stared numbly out the windows of the quinjet for the majority of the flight back towards the States, grateful for the dark of night. The distress of the rest of the team in the hold continued to be a palpable, ugly presence, which only fed the gnawing sadness that was still clinging on him after the dream, compounded by the fact that he couldn’t think of a single thing that would help the rest of them snap out of it. Sleeping was hardly an option – Steve was certain that if he so much as closed his eyes now, his own damned mind would force him to revisit either the hell that the Maximoff girl had planted there or one of his usual nightmares, leaving him even more worthless than he felt now.

He was still more or less out of it when the view out the window caught his attention. He blinked in surprise, getting out of his seat and moving towards the front of the jet, frowning at the familiar skyline of Manhattan as it grew larger in the windshield. “I thought you said we were gonna lie low?” Steve asked Barton, clearing his throat when he realized how hoarse his voice had gone with disuse. “I don’t think hiding out in Avengers Tower was what Hill had in mind.”

Clint smirked as he flipped the switch for the cloaking device to ‘ON’ and piloted the ship slightly east. “Who said we were going into the city, Cap?”

Sure enough, they didn’t make their way over Manhattan; Barton brought the quinjet in over the South Harbor, and then stayed on the East Side of the East river, eventually slowing to a stop in a
neighborhood that gave Steve a decidedly uncomfortable sense of déjà vu. “We in Brooklyn?”

“Bed-Stuy,” Barton answered for him, touching down with ease on the roof of the small apartment building they’d settled over and powering the quinjet down. “Alright guys… home sweet home. It ain’t gonna be much, but I’ve got a couple of relatively hot showers and floor space for everyone to crash as long as needed.”

They all filed out of the quinjet once the hatch was open, blinking as the sun began to come up over the horizon. The complex was a small one - not more than five stories tall, if Steve had to guess, and compact enough that it was only a few feet from the open hatch of the quinjet to the access door to the roof. Barton dug a key out of his pocket to unlock it and helped Natasha through, barely waiting for the rest of them to file in after. The stairwell they found themselves in was old and dark, but seemed clean enough for the two flights that they went down. Barton led the way through the first door, into a musty-smelling hallway that looked to have four apartments on it. He gestured to each of the doors that they passed as they made their way silently by. “The top floor is empty for now. It uh - it needs some work before I start renting the rest of the units out; so no need to worry about nosy neighbors putting shit up online about us being here.”

“You own the building?” Tony asked in surprise.

Clint grimaced as he struggled with the lock on the unit he was opening, before walking inside, arm still around Natasha. “Yeah - it’s a long story.”

They all followed in after, Bucky close on Clint’s heels, then Tony, Steve, Thor and Bruce shuffling in behind. The living room that they stepped into looked a little bit like a hurricane had swept through it -while it wasn’t exactly dirty, there were odds and ends strewn everywhere, including at least a dozen arrows in pieces and a number of magazines and take-out menus on most of the visible surfaces. Clint cleared out a pile of clothes from the couch before letting Nat down easily, his attention largely focused on her as the rest of them continued to look around the room in surprise.

A loud squeaking noise behind him almost made Steve jump out of his skin - he turned quickly to find Thor just as surprised, looking down at his feet where a blue pig re-inflated as he lifted his boot off of it. They were still frowning down at the toy when a loud bark sounded from the loft upstairs, and a second later a large, scruffy-looking yellow dog came bounding down the stairs, barking happily as it saw all of them in the room.

“Great job, Lucky, you did a hell of a job guarding the place,” Clint muttered, although he looked fond as it bounded up to him then jumped onto the couch and into Natasha’s lap.

“Lucky, no!” She admonished, pushing the dog down and sounding like herself for the first time since they’d left the ship in Johannesburg. “We’ve talked about this.”

“We?” Tony asked, frowning in confusion. “As in Romanoff and the dog? You have a dog? Is this real life?”

“Uh, yeah,” Clint responded, rubbing the back of his neck. “This is Lucky, he kinda picked me, actually.” He’d barely finished introducing the dog before it turned on the rest of them in the room, excitedly making its way from person to person as its tail wagged hard enough that it knocked magazines off of the coffee table. “And sorry - he’s annoying as hell. LUCKY, down!”

The dog didn’t listen at all, although given the way that Bucky had turned his palm over to let it sniff at him that wasn’t exactly a surprise.

“Yeah, but… who takes care of it? Weren’t you gone with SHIELD all the time?” Tony asked, still
hung up on the dog.

Clint laughed shortly, giving up on telling Lucky off when Bucky waved him off like it was no big deal. “I pay one of the neighborhood kids fifty bucks a month to make sure he’s fed and walk him while I’m away - it’s not that big of a deal. And as for the building,” he continued, hedging Tony’s questions before he could ask them, “Fury helped me set it up. I mean - I came into the money, but after everything with Loki we figured I needed a place to lay low, avoid any enemies who might have come to find my role in it. He made sure none of this went on the record at SHIELD.”

They all stood, awkwardly looking around for another moment, before Bruce cleared his throat and spoke up. “Uh - you said something about showers?”

Clint nodded, moving to a desk set under one of the windows and digging around for a keychain, while Tony started a circuit around the room inspecting the place further. In the commotion, Thor turned and made his way out the door without a word - when Steve leaned into the hallway to look after him, he was already opening the exit door to the access stairs.

“Thor!” Steve called out, jogging after him. He’d seemed to have recovered along with the rest of them, but Steve didn’t want to become complacent and lose one of the team to another vision.

“I saw something -” he called over his shoulder, still striding up the stairs towards the roof. “Something during the dream, something that brought up a number of important questions. I need answers; I won’t find them hiding here.”

He was already swinging the hammer around before Steve could ask him anything further, and a second later he had launched himself off of the roof and into the New York sky. Steve watched him go, trying (and ultimately failing) to shake off the feeling of betrayal as he turned and walked back into the building. Despite their limited interactions in the past, Thor had always been someone Steve felt a connection to - and here he was, when they were all at their lowest, abandoning them for his own agenda. Steve stewed on it as he made his way back to Barton’s apartment, trying to figure out a way to reconnect with anyone on the team; if Thor was gone and Bucky wouldn’t talk to him, and Natasha was in even worse shape than any of them were, who the hell could Steve hope to lean on for support? He paused when he got to the doorway, exhaling in relief at the sight he found inside.

Bucky had moved to the couch in the time that Steve had been gone, and had Lucky practically in his lap as he talked with Tony, absently scratching between the dog’s ears with his right hand. He looked as good as he had since Ultron had showed up the night before – nowhere near as happy as the party, of course, but at least not as betrayed or haunted as he’d seemed for the past twenty-four hours. Steve decided to count it as a victory, a small smile starting to pull at his mouth. He hadn’t even thought about a pet, but given how much Buck had loved the neighborhood strays that he regularly fed scraps against his Ma’s wishes it really shouldn’t have been surprising that a dog had pulled him out of his shell.

Steve made a mental note to keep it in mind for once the whole ordeal with Ultron was finally over with, and began to make his way back into the apartment.

We can go home.

Peggy’s voice stopped him in his tracks, the memory of the dream suddenly washing over him.

Imagine it.

This… this was what Steve could imagine, if he really let himself think about it: him and Bucky and a dog, in some little apartment in Brooklyn, picking out a life for themselves. He’d never really let
himself think about it before; it had always seemed like too big a risk, to start planning a pipe dream while they were still risking their lives on the regular for the greater good. But if he ever had allowed himself to fantasize what could come next, if he’d ever gotten over the mental block that had gone along with his fear of finding a place in the civilian world, the tableau in front of him would have been it.

A life and a family with Peggy was gone, a fact that would probably always hurt like hell, but he had no doubt that he could find a happy alternative with Bucky if given the chance.

Steve swallowed thickly, remembering how the dream had ended. Maybe that was the real source of his fear - the unconscious knowledge that he was too damned dangerous to deserve a happy ending, even one as simple as this. He’d signed himself over to the US Army when he’d agreed to Project Rebirth, unknowingly dragging Bucky into the hell that wound up following. Even when Steve had agreed to get out, their freedom had lasted less than a weekend before they wound up in an even bigger, more dangerous mess than before.

How could he ever have been so ignorant to have thought that it could end? Or so selfish, to continue letting Bucky put himself in the line of fire, over and over again? Steve didn’t deserve to go home, wherever the hell that was, or to play at being normal - such a thing didn’t exist for him. It would be kinder to the both of them if he just left Bucky to his own peace.

With a sigh Steve turned away from the doorway, instead making his way towards the empty block of rooms that Clint had mentioned at the end of the hall to change out of his uniform and get to work figuring out a plan to fix the mess they were in.

Unfortunately, without the programs or internet access available at Avengers Tower there wasn’t much that they could do but wait for Hill’s next update. Once the entire team had cleaned up and changed they were all well enough to be feeling restless, and were eager to keep their minds busy enough that they wouldn’t regress to the state they’d arrived in. Clint jokingly pointed out that he was a year behind on renovations, having been too wrapped up with SHIELD operations and then chasing leads around Europe in Natasha’s hunt for the other Widow… the next thing Steve knew he was under the sink in the kitchen of unit D, disconnecting the drain and faucet so that the entire countertop could be pulled out and replaced.

“Now this was definitely not what I was expecting to walk in and find,” he heard Tony’s voice call from the doorway, and slid out from where he’d been working to see the man making his way through the entryway of the apartment with a crowbar in hand. “Where did Captain America learn basic plumbing?”

Steve rolled his eyes as he grabbed a wrench from the toolbox beside him and went back to work. “The places my Mom could afford to rent for us didn’t exactly have the most reliable supers in the thirties, and the Barnes’ old brownstone was held together with elbow grease and a prayer for the last few years of the Depression. Bucky’s Dad made sure we were both hand enough to be able to take care of the basics - turned out to be a godsend, considering the rat traps we ended up renting when we moved in together.”

To Steve’s surprise, Stark didn’t have a smartass reply to his story - just a neutral inquiry as to whether or not Steve minded if he joined him in tearing the kitchen up. Steve had no problem with the company, as long as they were both being civil, and a few seconds later found himself lost in the mundanity of the task at hand, silently wondering how long it had been since the building had been refurnished given how familiar all of the piping components looked to him. He was nearly done with the task before either of them spoke up again.

“Thor didn’t tell you where he was going?” Tony asked, frowning as he worked his crowbar
carefully under the sagging old countertop in front of him.

“I’ve been getting used to accepting that my teammates don’t always tell me things,” Steve answered evasively from his spot under the sink, wiggling the wrench in his hands a couple of times before applying force in earnest to the coupling nut. “But I was kinda hoping Thor would be the exception.”

“We don’t know what the Maximoff kid showed him.” Tony reasoned, “I’m sure he has a plan.”

Steve snorted, pushing harder on the handle of the wrench until it finally moved; exhaling in relief when he realized it was because the nut was actually coming loose, not because he’d broken something in the flash of irritation he’d felt regarding the question. “Earth’s Mightiest Heroes,” he muttered sarcastically as he slid out from under the sink, “and she pulled us apart like cotton candy.”

“It seems like you walked away alright.” Stark mused, although Steve didn’t miss the buried accusation in his tone. His eyes immediately went to the hallway, looking through the open door into the adjacent room where Bucky was working a paint roller over the ceiling. They still hadn’t said a word to one another, although Steve had to admit that he was just as much to blame.

“That a problem?” He finally asked.

Stark smirked at him, again jimmying the crowbar underneath the counter. “I don’t trust a guy without a dark side; call me old-fashioned.”

“Maybe you haven’t seen it yet,” Steve responded as pleasantly as possible, trying to ignore the way his guts churned in annoyance over Stark’s words. On one hand it was nice to know that he was potentially getting better at bluffing about his feelings, but Steve thought the more likely explanation was that Tony was just too self-absorbed to recognize that he was hurting just as badly as any of the rest of them.

“You know Ultron’s trying to tear us apart, right?” Tony asked, interrupting his thoughts.

“Well I guess you’d know,” Steve replied, more hostile than he’d intended. He rolled to his feet, turning to make sure that the faucet was ready to come out as well as he added sarcastically, “Whether or not you’d tell us...”

“Banner and I were doing research so that we could end the team,” Stark retorted, pulling his crowbar away from the countertop and squaring his shoulders. “That was the whole mission; I thought that was what you wanted, too. To end the fight and go home.”

Steve’s emotions were rising just as quickly as Stark’s voice was - he wouldn’t let Stark pin the blame on him and Bucky for this, and he sure as hell wasn’t about to condone his actions, regardless of how good the intentions were. The word ‘home’ was barely out of Tony’s mouth before Steve dropped his wrench and worked his fingers underneath the damned countertop, heaving up and pulling so that he pulled the entire thing, sink and all, away from the cabinets and the wall in one fell swoop. Stark blinked in surprise as he carted it to the corner of the room.

“Maybe Bucky and I should have consulted the team before we made our decision,” Steve admitted, still facing the wall as he did, “and maybe we should have put a better plan into place, helped set up a chain of command, a contingency plan, something.” He shook his head and turned around, wiping his hands on his jeans as he crossed the room again to face Stark. “But ending an initiative like the Avengers couldn’t be a one-man decision, and it sure as hell can’t be done by cutting corners and making a pre-emptive attack without a plan for how to control it.”
“Ultron got away from us before we could get him under control,” Tony responded defensively. “If we’d have had more time to prepare and harness him, we would have ended the fight for good. For all of us.”

Steve shook his head, feeling bone tired as he turned back to Tony. “That’s the problem though - you couldn’t harness him. And you couldn’t have known if you’d be able to harness him from the beginning.” Stark opened his mouth to defend himself again but Steve continued on before he could.

“If we learned nothing else from the SHIELD and HYDRA fiascos we need to at least realize that every time someone tries to end a war before it starts innocent people die,” Steve sighed, leaning back against the cabinets as he was suddenly overcome with weariness, wishing that Stark would see the point. “Every time.”

“Hey, Tony?” Natasha’s voice called out from the hallway.

Stark looked like he had plenty more to say to Steve, but instead he huffed a sigh of his own and turned towards the door. “Yeah?”

Natasha stuck her head into the unit, looking between the two of them for a second before turning her full attention to Stark. “Clint said one of the fuses for unit B has been out since he moved in here and he hasn’t been able to get an electrician to come in and check it out - any chance you could take a look at it?”

Tony muttered something about wiring that was older than actual time but agreed to give it a shot. After she’d left he stopped in the doorway, looking back at Steve one last time. “Listen, I screwed up, okay? I know that. Just… I’m not the bad guy here, and I want to make it right with you guys. For the record.”

“I know that, Tony,” Steve responded earnestly, trying to hide his shock at the apology. “Let’s just - figure our shit out and get through this, then make sure it doesn’t happen again.” Tony gave him a stiff nod before disappearing into the hallway without another word.

Steve made to go back to work on the splashboard, but he caught a glimpse into the unit across the hall where Bucky and Clint were standing close to one another in the entry way, heads bowed as if they were discussing something too heavy for either of them to bear. It was a cheap move, Steve knew, but he wanted an idea as to what the hell was going on in Buck’s head before he approached him directly about it – after setting the crowbar down on the bare counter he made his way slowly towards the door, trying to listen in on their conversation.

It was difficult at first, given how thin the walls of the building were and how much ambient noise they let through, but after a couple of seconds of focusing on their familiar voices he started to make out the quiet conversation.

“… that’s what I’m trying to say, Bucky – if you’re aware of it she’s not controlling you.”

“Yeah, but what if it’s different?” Bucky asked, his voice panicked. “I know you know how it felt with Loki, but what if it’s not the same?”

“Her power comes from the same source,” Clint responded tiredly. “I think it’s a pretty safe bet that it works the same way. Sleeper-agents don’t tend to exist in real life, Bucky.”

“Neither do murderbots set on world domination, yet here we are.” Bucky retorted smartly. There was a long pause – for a moment Steve figured that one of them must have left, but then there was a deep breath and Bucky was continuing again. “Just… okay, maybe I’m wrong. But we’ll meet up
with her again, and who’s to say that she won’t try then?”

“Bucky,” Clint sighed.

“I want you to promise me anyway,” Bucky interrupted, his voice sounding desperate. “No, I’m serious, Barton. In case she can get a hold of me again and she does decide to turn me. You’re the only one I know who would be able to take me out before I hurt someone.”

There was another long silence between the two of them, one that killed Steve as he could only imagine the look on Bucky’s face. He wanted to step in before Barton could reply, to refuse to let him agree to Bucky’s request, but something kept Steve rooted to the spot. Finally there was a heavy sigh, and Barton replied tiredly, “Yeah, alright. I promise.”

Whatever else was said between the two of them was missed by Steve, who was too busy wrapping his head around what he’d heard to listen in any further. Whatever Bucky’s vision had consisted of had convinced him that he was a threat to the team, apparently, or that the Maximoff girl would be able to force him into doing her will rather than simply incapacitating them all again. It wasn’t really something that Steve wanted to accept as a possibility, anymore than he wanted to entertain the idea that Barton had agreed to take Bucky out by force if needed. While it would have been nice to believe that meant something as simple as knocking Bucky out, it wasn’t as if Clint would be a match for him in a combat situation; Steve was sure that he had tranquilizer arrows available, but didn’t want to bet on the fact that they would be potent enough to take a super soldier down. Which meant…

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of someone moving into the hallway - after shaking his concern off, Steve recognized it to be Barton’s footsteps that were walking away from the room, meaning that they’d wrapped up with whatever the rest of their conversation had been. The idea that Bucky had been so desperate that he would ask a teammate to kill him sat heavily on Steve’s conscience - there was no way in hell that he would ever allow it to happen, but the fact that it was even a possibility was a sign that they clearly couldn’t afford to continue avoiding each other.

Steve remained in his spot for a thirty count, barely breathing for fear that he would give away the fact that he’d been listening in the entire time, before casually making his way across the hall and through the door that Clint had left open. He nudged it closed and stood watching Bucky paint for a moment – there was no doubt in Steve’s mind that Buck had noticed him come into the room, but he didn’t react all the same. “Hey,” Steve said quietly when he was unable to take the stifling quiet any longer.

Bucky paused before setting the roller down and actually turning to him; while his face was still closed off, Steve figured it was a step-up from where they’d been an hour earlier. “Hey,” he responded, chewing roughly on his bottom lip for a moment. “How’re you holding up?”

“Y’know,” Steve answered immediately with a casual shrug, “as well as any of us can, I suppose.” They stood in awkward silence for a few moments, neither of them seeming to know where to look or what to say, before Steve shoved his hands in his back pockets and glanced up at the ceiling.

“They prolly should’ve put you in charge of this room,” Bucky murmured drolly, “but I’m guessing that you didn’t bother telling anyone you’re actually a trained painter.”

Steve shrugged, “You’re doin’ a good job, it looks nice. Er, it’s an even coat.”

There was a long beat of silence.

“Fuck me,” Bucky laughed coldly.
The response jarred Steve, pulling his attention back to Bucky’s face with a concerned frown. “What is it?”

“Just… she did a hell of a job, didn’t she? If the whole point was to tear the team down, and you and I can’t even act normal around each other.”

That thought gave Steve pause – it was so obvious, and yet it hadn’t even occurred to him until that moment; he’d been so afraid of his vision becoming a reality that he hadn’t thought to look for its real purpose. Over the years, the two of them had become an impressive force: of course their enemy would want to drive them apart. Hell, separating Bucky and Steve probably fucked with the morale of the team as much as any other move could.

Steve had been so, so stupid, had played along exactly as the Maximoffs and Ultron had wanted. “Can I,” he asked, clearing his throat when it came out considerably hoarser than he’d expected, “c’n I touch you, Buck?”

“Yes,” Bucky breathed in a sigh of relief, already reaching his arms towards Steve, “you know you don’t need to ask me that anymore, Stevie.”

Steve practically launched himself across the room, grabbing Bucky in a tight hug; it was unbelievable, how much tension went out of him with such a simple act, and he practically sagged in relief as he buried his nose in Bucky’s hair, breathing in the familiar, relaxing scent.

“I love you,” he murmured softly, uncaring of how watery his voice was. “I love you so much, Bucky – there’s nothing more important than you are, you know that, right?”

“I do,” Bucky sighed, pulling Steve even closer. “I do, Steve, n’I feel the same way, baby.”

Steve huffed a quiet, surprised laugh at Bucky’s response - he could be a charmer when he wanted to, but it wasn’t like Bucky to use such an endearment. It probably should have been embarrassing, but instead his words caused a warm swell of happiness deep in Steve’s chest, one that he desperately wished he could find a way to hold on to. “We don’t have to go back, if you don’t want to.” He heard himself murmur against Bucky’s temple before he could think otherwise. “We can just… go underground, get lost and escape this whole mess.”

Bucky went still for a long moment, before chuckling in response. “No, we can’t, Steve.” Steve pulled back to argue, but Bucky shook his head before he could start. “Seriously – even if we were able to get out without Ultron’s notice, it would only be a matter of time before he ended up taking everything over, anyway. There’s no point in you and I running off into the sunset now, if we’re only going to get a few days to enjoy it.

“We’ll stay with the team, and we’ll fight, and we’ll figure out way to win this – we always manage to pull something out of our asses.”

Steve couldn’t help laughing shortly at that; he knew that Bucky was right, even though this seemed so much bigger than anything else they’d had to face down before. But then – that tended to be the way their fights went, of late. “I just…” he started, swallowing thickly, “all I know is I can’t lose you, Bucky. Nothing’s worth that – nothing.”

“You won’t,” Bucky responded automatically. “I’ve meant it every time I’ve said it, punk… neither of us are going anywhere without the other, got it?”

“Yeah, I know – to the end of the line.”

“You’re god damned right,” Bucky sighed, before slowly leaning up and pressing their lips together.
He’d telegraphed it, presumably so Steve could brush him off if he wanted to, but Steve couldn’t imagine doing anything of the like – he leaned down hastily, turning his head so that their mouths met at just the right angle then deepening the kiss automatically.

Once they were actually touching one another again it seemed impossible to stop – Steve had no idea how long they stayed like that, making up with one another through quiet murmurs and soft caresses, and he couldn’t be bothered to care. As was typically the case, he became totally preoccupied with Bucky’s mouth; so much so that neither of them noticed the door being pushed open until something furry was forcing itself between their knee caps. They parted in surprise, glancing down to find Lucky wedged between them, tongue lolling as he begged for attention.

Barton came barreling into the room a moment later, grimacing when he caught onto what he’d walked in on.

“Oh, Lucky – no,” Clint groaned, grabbing the dog by the collar and pulling him out of the room in a way that was so overly-dramatic that Steve couldn’t help but laugh and pull Bucky close again, trying to pretend, at least for a few moments, that they were okay.

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Bucky still felt like a fucking wreck by the time Clint called them back to his apartment for dinner, but between making up with Steve and Barton’s promise to act as protection in the event that he went off, his fear was at least surmountable. He had half a mind to beg off dinner, still feeling queasy from the vision, but when Steve took his hand and started for the hallway Bucky was powerless to pull away from him.

It wasn’t even a surprise to find Fury seated in Barton’s train wreck of a kitchen, glaring down Lucky from the opposite side of an enormous pile of pizza boxes, in fact, no one had more of a reaction than waiving hello to him as they dished out their food and found spaces around the apartment to sit. It didn’t occur to Bucky how long they’d all gone without food until he was stuck to Steve’s side with an entire pepperoni pie between them – despite his nerves, his stomach had no problem reminding him that 24 hours without eating was totally unacceptable, so that he ended up mowing through the pizza in methodical silence along with the rest of them.

By the time the majority of the food was gone and Lucky had run off into a corner to devour the slice of pizza Bucky had snuck him to placate his pitiful whining Fury had started up a discussion amongst the group. He was running down the information that he’d obtained so far from various government and internet agencies and updating the team on Ultron’s current attempts at obtaining nuclear access codes; attempts which were being thwarted by an outside source that kept rewriting the firewalls before he could get in. There wasn’t much that either he or Steve could offer as the others postulated on who would be able to program fast enough and well enough to outwit a learning AI system or how they could go about finding the person’s locale in the first place. Bucky pushed himself off of the couch and started a slow lap around the living room of the apartment, too wound up to be sitting still but not wanting to miss the team’s discussion in the event that they started planning another offensive.

“Well I already contacted our friends at the Nexus about that,” Fury assured them, “they haven’t been able to work out the point of origin for the new code yet, said that whoever is doing it is smart enough to change proxies before they can track it.”

Stark started bragging offhandedly about his own coding abilities, but Bucky cut him off. “The Nexus?” he asked, uncaring of how stupid it made him sound – they may not be of much use on the science end at the moment, but that didn’t mean that he and Steve should be left out of the strategizing.
“The world internet hub in Oslo, all data that’s accessed online runs through there.” Bruce explained patiently.

“Only place in the world with the capacity to monitor that amount of data, not that any of them seem to know how to handle it - I think I’ll give them a visit myself, teach them how to -” Tony’s sentence came to an abrupt halt as a dart flew by within centimeters of his face. Clint stood on the opposite end of the room with a smug smirk, before launching another bull’s-eye at the target on the wall.

“So we have an ally?” Steve asked hopefully, ignoring their antics.

“Ultron has an enemy, you know as well as I do that’s not the same thing,” Fury answered with a frown.

Bucky glanced away from the bookshelf so that he could catch Steve’s eye, and the small smirk they shared over the inside joke was familiar enough that things between them almost felt normal.

The conversation started back up again with Bruce, Tony and Natasha debating the reasons that Ultron had gone after the vibranium in the first place, and how he might use it in producing an indestructible body. Bucky paused when he found a stack of science fiction paperbacks on the bookshelf, listening with half an ear as he thumbed through the titles, somewhat surprised to find them there. While Barton had proven time and again that he wasn’t as clueless as he sometimes acted, Bucky hadn’t been expecting to find a huge amount of reading material in his place – especially not titles that were actually interesting. He frowned as he read through the dust jackets, recognizing only that none of them were remotely familiar, when on a whim his mind went back to the stacks of Amazing Stories issues that he used to keep under his bed.

Despite Stark’s arrogant beliefs to the contrary, Bucky was damned sure that something useful might be able to come from all of the hours he spent reading fantastical stories in the thirties. He tried to recall anything about evil robots, particularly any that were manmade, but his mind kept drawing a blank. There were plenty on aliens and invasions and monsters, but…

Bucky blinked, staring at the title in front of him again, this time one that he knew very well – Brave New World.

“What if he isn’t just trying to rebuild a stronger version of himself?” Bucky asked the room at large before he could stop himself. To his surprise, all of the conversation around the coffee table and kitchen came to a halt. “He kept yammering on about change the other night at the tower, right? Said that the fact that we don’t wanna do it will be our downfall.”

He still had the attention of the room when he turned away from the bookshelf, so Bucky continued ahead. “Besides that, there’s no reason to go to the trouble of stealing something as valuable as vibranium just to build indestructible bots, not when he can make new ones faster than we could hope of destroying them. What if it’s not a matter of rebuilding - what if Ultron wants to evolve into something more advanced?” He licked his lips, looking back and forth between Stark and Banner – he didn’t know enough to even begin to figure out the specifics of it, but Bucky was pretty confident that it was a reasonable enough explanation.

“Can he do that?” Fury asked after a long, tense silence.

Bruce had gone pale as Bucky had finished talking, staring at him with a horror that was starting to put Bucky on edge. Fury’s question seemed to snap him out of it at least – Bruce turned to Stark, eyes still wide. “Has anyone been in contact with Helen Cho?”

In the flurry of activity that followed all that the team was able to gather was that no, no one had
heard from Doctor Cho since she’d left New York, and that her lab had been in lockdown for the past twelve hours – while no security breaches had been reported, the general consensus was that it was a safe bet that she and her staff had company that was compelling them to work on whatever Ultron’s plan was.

Steve put the plan in place that the two of them plus Barton and Romanoff would set off for Seoul to check in on her lab and confront Ultron directly if necessary; there was no way of knowing exactly what he was up to, but the team agreed unanimously for a change that it couldn’t be anything they wanted him to actually complete successfully. Tony was already suiting up to head to Oslo in hopes of sniffing out who it was that was giving Ultron hell as well – they would need all of the help they could get once they set up the final showdown with the bots.

Bucky looked at the sleeve of his jacket thoughtfully as he finished getting dressed to leave, before zipping it off and stowing it in his bag of civvies; he highly doubted it would be any help as far as stealth went, and after the way the EMPs had worked against the Iron Legion at the Tower, he wanted all of the advantage he could get over whatever they might face in Korea. He was making his way towards the roof to help Clint get the quinjet in order when he walked up on Steve and Tony’s final skull session in the stairwell.

“Just… watch yourself, Rogers - don’t engage unless you have to,” Stark warned, his voice sounding uncharacteristically concerned. “If Ultron really pulls this off - an android built by a robot? This thing could be more powerful than any of us, maybe all of us.”

“Y’know,” Steve sighed heavily, “I really miss the days when the weirdest thing science ever created was me.”

Bucky rounded the corner onto their flight of stairs, deciding to step in before Stark could say something stupid or Steve could get any more self-depreciating. “Think I’ve had you beat on that one for a while, doll,” he drawled, clapping Steve on the shoulder with his left hand as he passed then nodding at Stark. “We’ll be in touch, Tony – let us know what you’re able to dig up.”

Before they could step out onto the roof, Fury stuck his head into the stairwell as well. “Oh good – I was hoping I would catch you guys before you ran off. Cap, Stark – I’m going to go round up whatever help I can find, put people on notice so we’re ready to go when Ultron makes his final move. I’ll drop Banner off at the tower on my way; any chance I could steal Agent Hill from you?”

“She’s all yours,” Tony responded easily.

Steve didn’t seem quite as trusting. “What do you have planned?”

“I dunno yet,” Fury answered, flashing them an enigmatic smile. “Something dramatic, though.”

The door to the main hallway swung closed behind him while the three of them continued to stare down the stairs. “Yeah, I’ve really missed him – we totally had this communication thing down when we had Dread Pirate Loose Lips in charge.”

“Let’s just worry about figuring our own shit out,” Steve huffed, rubbing his eyes. “We’ll let you guys know as soon as we’ve got something on Cho.”

“Perfect – I’ll keep an ear out, let me know if you need back-up; I should be able to break our hacker’s firewalls within a few minutes.” With that Tony was out the exit door and airborne, taking off in the direction of the ocean.

Steve chewed on his lip for a moment as they watched him go, glancing at the waiting quinjet and
then back at Bucky uneasily. “You’re sure you’re feeling up to this? You don’t have to -”

“Steve,” Bucky interrupted, “you couldn’t get me to stay here if you tried.” He shook his head, clapping his right hand around the back of Steve’s neck and pulling him close. “We’re in this shit together, alright? Like we agreed after the DC mess, if either of us is doing anything stupid, we’re doing it while the other has his back.”

Steve snorted quietly, “I don’t remember agreeing to anything like that, Bucky.”

“Yeah… I might have rambled about it while you were still hopped up on pain-killers in the hospital,” Bucky teased, knowing that the reality was that it had been his angry promise to himself while they’d waited for help on the bank of the Potomac, praying that Steve would even make it to a hospital on time.

Steve’s laugh interrupted his thoughts before they could spiral much further. “That’s a dirty trick, Buck,” he said fondly, clapping Bucky on the shoulder then making his way out the door towards the quinjet, “but I guess I can’t say I’m surprised. Now let’s get the hell out of here before Ultron finishes his doomsday project.”

Bucky forced a laugh and fell into step with Steve, boarding the quinjet behind him and trying to shake off the uneasy feeling that they were all falling into a trap as he strapped into his seat next to Romanoff in the hatch.

Chapter End Notes

So here's a visual on what I imagined the star of this chapter to look like:
Confession: my real motivation behind this project was getting Lucky involved in the MCU. But seriously - no offense to Laura Barton, I just really, really, really prefer comic Clint (if it isn't abundantly obvious so far in the story) and I felt like this version of home would have resonated a lot more to Steve and Bucky than the idyllic family house in the country.

Comments/kudos feed the beast, or you can hit me up on Tumblr, where I ramble about writing on occasion and cry about these two a lot.
Chapter Summary

The team gains three unlikely new members and prepares for a final showdown against Ultron, but not before suffering a major hit.

Chapter Notes

I want to dedicate this chapter to @bibiliojess who basically listened to me scream while writing the entire thing, the webcomic Check, Please for giving me one of the happiest Fridays of my life (which somehow fueled the angst writing beast within? IDK), and Beyonce, who I've been listening to non-stop since Wednesday.

As for the chapter itself: please don't hate me, I swear I have a plan here...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite how long the flight to Seoul was, the four of them didn’t get much in the way of updates – Hill still had no new information on Ultron, while Bruce was still failing to find a contact who had heard from Doctor Cho in the past twenty four hours; all of which pointed to the growing concern that the robot had gotten to her before they’d thought to check in.

“Alright,” Steve sighed as the city finally came into view and Barton began his descent towards the coordinates of Cho’s lab, “I need you to get us close enough that I can drop in, but keep the jet in the sky – I’ll go in and sweep the building, see what we’ve got as far as hostiles, while you three…”

“Yeah, not a chance, buddy.” Bucky huffed, stalking towards the back of the jet and grabbing his favorite rifle out of the weapon’s hold. “I’m going in with you, especially if we think that metal bastard is already in there holding her hostage.”

“The only reason I’m going in is for recon and to draw him out, Buck,” Steve replied hastily. “I need the three of you-”

“If you jump I jump,” Bucky countered tightly. “That’s not up for discussion.”

They glared each other down across the hold as Steve tried to come up with a legitimate argument for why he needed Bucky to stay behind – the memory of the vision in Johannesburg was still too fresh, he couldn’t bear the thought of risking his safety if a confrontation with Ultron was inevitable. But it wasn’t as if Steve could say as much; hell, if Bucky knew that Steve was even considering the possibility of a fight, he’d refuse to let him go alone.

“What’s your plan for us, Cap?” Natasha asked from the co-pilot’s seat, giving Steve a bemused smirk when he glanced at her in confusion.

He gave Bucky one last hard look before giving in – he may be stubborn, but Steve still had enough sense to know when he’d lost a fight, especially against his best friend. “You two keep the jet
airborne; keep an eye on the perimeter in case there are bots inside that fly the coop. If Ultron is in there, we can’t allow him to leave with any of Cho’s tech.”

“Roger that,” Clint responded as the jet began to drop closer to the ground. “We’ll be over the lab in a couple of minutes.”

Steve nodded, grabbing his helmet out of the hold and strapping it underneath his chin as Bucky hit the release button for the hatch, bracing himself against the wall as the wind rushed in from outside. Steve stepped up beside him, looking down at the sky rises and sprawling roadwork of the city, before muttering so that only Bucky could hear him. “I really wish you’d let me go alone, Jerk.”

Bucky huffed a short laugh, “Yeah – the last time I let you talk me into a plan like that I ended up having to fish your half-dead ass out of the Potomac. We ain’t got time for that right now, Punk.”

Steve couldn’t quite help his smile, knowing that he’d lost the argument with that point. “Okay!” Clint announced over the coms, “Your target is going to be that third squat building to the right, before the giant overpass loop. Cho’s labs are gonna be on floors 28 through 30.”

Bucky gave him a thumbs up to acknowledge the information and Clint dove into the area, slowing just enough that the two of them could jump the final fifty feet onto the roof of the building before launching the quinjet back into the sky and circling as Steve had instructed. They took off immediately for the emergency door on the far end of the roof; before he could try busting the locking mechanism with his shield Bucky nudged Steve aside, studying the door for a second. Steve was opening his mouth to ask what the hell he was waiting for, but before he could get the words out Bucky put his left forearm in the center of the door. The plates of his arm shifted as he twisted it awkwardly, then the door swung open with a faint buzzing sound.

“No point in setting off the alarms any earlier than we have to,” he explained with a smug smirk as Steve looked at him in surprise.

“The EMP generator?” Steve asked, still dumbfounded.

“Messes up electronics, right? I figure I might as well use Stark’s stupid toys for something.”

Steve shook his head with a surprised chuckle and then took off into the stairwell, shield raised and ready for an attack as they sprinted downwards towards the floors that Clint had mentioned. The internal doors off of the stairwell had the same locking mechanisms, so gaining access to the thirtieth floor was no problem. They swept the labs efficiently – there were no signs of a break-in or struggle, but no employees present either, a fact that seemed ominous given the size of the operation and the midday hour.

The twenty-ninth floor was the same story, but the second they made their way through the door to the twenty-eighth floor Steve felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. The entire corridor was wrecked, with papers and busted electronics littering the floor and walls that were littered with burn marks, bullet holes and body fluids of various origin. “Think we’re a little late,” Bucky muttered behind him.

Steve exhaled sharply through his nose, turning his com on. “Hey Barton, there’s definitely been a fight in here – we’re gonna sweep the lab, see if we can find any survivors.” His adrenaline was pumping high enough that he didn’t catch Clint’s response in his earpiece, all of his focus on keeping an ear out as they worked their way through each of the smashed in rooms, searching for survivors – friendlies or otherwise.

Bucky covered his six as Steve continued leading the way from room to room, barely noticing the
empty benches and high-end computer banks as they passed. It wasn’t until they made their way to the end of the corridor, through a door that had been blown off of its hinges leading into the largest lab of all of them, that they finally found someone.

Steve recognized Doctor Cho with a jolt, running towards her and grabbing a handful of gauze off of a nearby cart. She’d been slashed across the chest with some sharp object, although as he pressed the pads to her wounds Steve was relieved to find that the wounds weren’t particularly deep. “Call for help,” he said over his shoulder, noting that Bucky had already picked up a nearby phone.

“Doctor Cho, can you hear me?”

Her eyes fluttered open and stared at Steve for a second in wonder, as if trying to work out whether he was real or not. “It’s gonna be okay,” he muttered uselessly, “we’ll get you a medic here, you’ll be fine.”

“You have to stop him.” She responded weakly, grabbing the gauze pads from Steve’s hands and holding them in place herself. “He’s uploading himself into the body already.”

“Where?”

Cho shook her head. “I don’t know where he was taking it, but the process was already nearly complete.” She grimaced as she pushed herself into a more upright position, before her eyes became clearer and she stared at Steve in terror. “The real power is inside the cradle. The stone – its power, it’s uncontainable. You can’t just blow it up. You have to get the cradle to Stark.”

“First I have to find it.” Steve nodded as he leaned back. She was looking slightly better, at least - Steve wasn’t as worried about leaving her behind, certain that if a medic could get to her relatively soon that she would be fine. The city, on the other hand - “Alright… okay, I’m gonna go after him, Buck, you stay here until help can arrive for Doctor Cho.”

Bucky had just finished hanging up the phone and rolled his eyes in frustration. “That’s not happening, Steve – no offense, ma’am.” To Buck’s credit, he actually took a moment to glance at the doctor, continuing when he realized she wasn’t in critical danger. “A rescue team should be here in a couple of minutes for you.”

Doctor Cho nodded weakly from the floor, but Steve wasn’t having it. “Someone needs to stay here to make sure she lasts that long, or in case one of them comes back to finish the job.”

“They have what they want already,” Cho insisted, pushing herself further up the wall. “And I’ll be fine until they get here.”

“Bucky, please,” Steve insisted, ignoring both of their arguments. “Just stay here, tell the police when they arrive – they can help us…”

“You really think any foreign authorities would listen to me, Steve?” Bucky growled incredulously. “Scary-looking Cyborg who doesn’t speak the language, standing in a torn-up lab and ranting about robots? Yeah, the chances they don’t arrest me are about as good as flying pigs descending on Ultron and saving the day.”

Steve huffed in frustration, thoroughly sick of the argument already. “Bucky…”

“Just GO,” Doctor Cho interrupted, her voice remarkably strong for the state she was in. “Both of you, we don’t have time for you to sit here bickering.”

Steve blinked at her in surprise, rolling to his feet as she glared up at the both of them. With one last huff of discontent he turned on his heel and jogged out of the lab, keeping any further comments to
himself as Bucky’s footfalls sounded close on his tail. “Barton,” he barked into his com as they cleared the exit to the building, scanning the layout of the city around them. “We found her, but Ultron’s already flown the coop and he’s got the cradle with him. We’ve gotta track it down, he can’t leave the city with it.”

“Copy that,” Clint replied tightly.

“I’ve got a private jet taking off across town, no manifest on it.” Natasha informed them all after a second.

“And I’ve got visual on a truck from the lab, about to come under the overpass.” Clint added as the quinjet came back into view a few buildings over. Steve turned his attention to the overpass as he and Bucky ran towards it, trying to get a visual on the truck that Clint was talking about. “He’s on your right, Cap – on the loop by the bridge. Heat signatures are telling me they’ve got three with the cradle and two in the cab… I can take out the driver.”

“Negative!” Steve yelled back immediately, noticing the blue truck with Cho’s insignia on it. “If the truck crashes the gem could level the city. We need to draw out Ultron and take the cradle for ourselves.”

He pointed the truck out to Bucky, figuring if it was inevitable that he’d follow after Steve at least needed to make sure that they were on the same page. “That one,” he said his voice far calmer than he was feeling. “Thinking we’ve got ten seconds before it’s under us.”

“Eight seconds before we jump, then,” Bucky responded matter-of-factly, dropping his rifle on the ground and backing up to get a running start. “Looks like they’re doing about forty miles an hour - this should be about as fun as that time in the Alps.”

The last thing that Steve needed was to be reminded of the mission on Zola’s train at a time like this, but there wasn’t enough time to tell Bucky off for saying as much. After a six count they nodded at each other, taking off at a sprint towards the wall of the overpass and hurdling over it, both landing side by side in the middle of the truck’s trailer and holding on for dear life as the thing continued picking up speed.

There was a barely-audible commotion inside the compartment below. “Alright,” Steve called into the com for Barton’s sake, “We’re onboard and it sounds like he’s unhappy, I’m gonna try to keep him that way.”

“You guys aren’t a match for him, Cap,” Clint’s voice responded as Steve began climbing towards the rear door of the trailer.

Steve huffed in response, muttering a sarcastic “Thanks, Barton.” He cut the comlink again as he swung his legs over the rear of the trailer, trying to work out a plan for how to open the rear door without getting flung into traffic.

Opening the door turned out not to be a problem - before Steve could get a hand on the main handle to the hatch a blast of energy blew the damned thing open, flinging Steve against the side of the truck exactly as he’d been trying to avoid. As the momentum of the blast swung him back towards the truck’s opening another blast blew the door clean off of its hinges - Steve would have been knocked backwards into the oncoming traffic, if not for the metal hand that grabbed the collar of his uniform as the door came loose beneath him.

With a frantic whirring noise as the plates in his arm reconfigured Bucky hauled Steve back onto the roof, giving him a brief smirk before. “Thanks,” Steve murmured breathlessly - before he could say
anything further two of the bots came flying out to join the party, and they both went to work.

There were too many civilians around them for Bucky to pull one of his sidearms, so they shared the shield instead; Steve tossed it at the first one, grateful to see that Ultron hadn’t been able to make upgrades to the smaller robots yet: the shield passed clean through it, then Bucky used his left first to drive a hole in its chest, flinging the powerless bot over the side of the bridge. Steve turned to help him as the second bot set in on Bucky, but before he could a much larger force came up behind him. He turned, ducking behind his shield as he did, and barely avoided getting a blast in the face from the repulsor in Ultron’s palm.

Mayhem broke out from there; Steve was too wrapped up battling with Ultron to be able to pay any more attention to Bucky’s progress than to make sure his friend was still on the truck behind him. There was a giant crash of metal and drone of an electronic device being forcefully shut down, and then a second later the limp form of the now-dead bot was flung at Ultron with enough force that he staggered back a step.

Steve chucked his shield at the same time, hitting him while he was still off balance, and he couldn’t help but smile after catching it on the rebound, glancing to his left as Bucky stepped up beside him and squared his shoulders to face off against Ultron as well. With no other smaller bots in sight, they both went after Ultron together, using the shield to distract him and tossing it back and forth between each other in between hits and punches. They held an advantage for the first few minutes, but the shield was doing limited damage to the metal body and it wasn’t as if they could physically wear down a robot. All it took was a lucky swing from Ultron to knock the shield out of Steve’s hands - in the millisecond that it took him to run it down and prevent it from skittering off the front of the truck Ultron was able to take control of the fight.

In an attempt to distract Ultron from firing at Steve’s back Bucky had gone at him alone - while the force behind his punch and the strength of his vibranium hand had been enough to put a small dent in Ultron’s chest plate, it hadn’t been enough to stop the robot from backhanding Bucky hard enough that he stumbled backwards, losing his footing and disappearing over the side of the speeding truck. Steve jumped to his feet and threw the shield as hard as he could, so that it lodged in the same dent Bucky had made, then took the second that it took Ultron to try to pull it out to give a panicked look around, exhaling in relief as he saw Buck already on the side of a nearby dump truck, unharmed and gaining on them.

A familiar redhead buzzed by on one of the team’s motorcycles as Steve ran along the length of the truck and used his weight and leverage on the shield to both pull it free and knock Ultron flat on the roof - before he could get back to his feet, Barton yelled at Steve to duck down, swooping in with the quinjet and pelting Ultron with bullets.

The attack was enough for the remaining smaller bots in the car to take off after the jet, leaving the cradle free for Natasha to take from the trailer; but it also seemed to send Ultron into a rage. Steve started to charge at him with the shield again, only to be knocked aside like a rag doll - before he could grab the shield from where it had fell on the roof Ultron grabbed him around the neck, lifting him at least a foot into the air and glaring up at him.

“I hope you weren’t getting the idea that you actually had a chance, Captain,” the robot taunted, it’s creepy red eyes boring into Steve’s as the metal fist continued closing around his throat despite his attempts to pry the fingers away from it.

There was a soft thud of boots hitting the roof nearby, and then Bucky was back in Steve’s periphery - which was getting steadily fuzzier as Ultron continued to squeeze as his windpipe. Buck grabbed Ultron’s arm with a growl, while he pressed his left forearm against Ultron’s wrist. Steve couldn’t
hear what he said to the robot over the hazy white noise that was filling his head and the whir of the plates in Bucky’s arm, but he did catch the flash of energy that pulsed over the plates as he fired an EMP into Ultron.

The fingers around his neck immediately spasmed and dropped Steve, who was barely with it enough to grab hold of the side of the truck as he fell. It was a struggle gasping for breath and pulling himself back up onto the roof, but his body was able to do it in under a second, the knowledge that he couldn’t leave Bucky alone against the robot powering him through despite the challenge.

Ultron was still shaking his arm as he glared Bucky down across the length of the trailer, a look of surprise on his oddly-expressive face. “Alright - I won’t deny that that was a clever trick,” the bot mused, “but you two are really starting to piss me off. I think I’ve had enough old-fashioned fun for one day.”

He launched himself at Bucky, and Steve found himself scooping up the shield and sprinting forward in the same direction; the robot crashed into Bucky, knocking them both off of the trailer, and Steve dove behind them, wrapping his free arm around Ultron’s waist.

The combined momentum of the three of them flying off of the speeding truck meant that they crashed through the wall of a passing passenger train like it was made out of paper. Steve rolled as they hit the floor of the train, grateful for the fact that he’d landed on the top of the pile. Before he could worry about him properly, Bucky sprang to his feet, looking ruffled but otherwise no worse for wear. Steve looked quickly around at the terrified faces surrounding them, yelling “Get out of the car!” as he flung the shield at Ultron, trying to keep the robot’s attention away from the countless civilians.

Unfortunately, it meant that he couldn’t pay much attention to their progress; Ultron was relentless, coming at them even harder than he had on top of the truck and tossing both Steve and Bucky around like it was easy. They remained on opposite sides of the robot as well as they could, attacking at random intervals and giving all that they had, but it seemed that Ultron was definitely learning their fighting techniques as time went on, outmatching them more and more even when they tried to mix things up on him.

“Allright, I’m in.” Natasha announced a few seconds later - Steve barely caught it as Ultron flung him back against the far wall of the train cab.

“Keep him busy, guys.” Clint added tersely.

“What the hell do you think we’re doin’?” Steve muttered back, pushing himself back to his feet with the shield as Bucky started in on Ultron again from the opposite side of the cab.

Their fatigue was starting to show, and Steve wished he’d had even a second to catch his breath and start trying to figure out an exit plan for the both of them. Of course, his train of thought ground to a halt as Ultron knocked him on his ass again, his repulsors already powering up as he turned back in Bucky’s direction. Steve grabbed his shield to throw it as a distraction, but was stopped when something hit his shoulder first.

There was a blur through the cabin that knocked Bucky and Ultron apart, and before Steve could so much as blink it shot back through the car again, pushing the bot back to the ground before coming to a stop next to Steve. He glared in confusion at the white hair of the Maximoff boy - it was the first time he’d gotten a real look at the kid outside of pictures, before turning back to check on Bucky.

Buck had gotten to his feet, but was staring in horror at the young woman next to him, too worked
up by the sudden appearance of the Maximoff girl to even be paying attention to Ultron anymore. “You’re okay, Buck…” Steve started, praying that there was a chance that he could overcome whatever she was planning on doing to him “Just listen to me, Bucky – listen to my voice.”

His words just drew Ultron’s attention, though – the robot immediately started advancing on Steve again, only to be stopped when the steel beams of the train’s overhead storage racks suddenly warped, interlinking to form a barrier of metal and an ethereal red light between them.

“Wanda, no - don’t do this.” Ultron begged, turning his attention to the girl as Steve looked on, completely confused.

“What choice do we have?” The girl asked, before launching a burst of the same red power at the robot.

Ultron stumbled back towards the hole in the side of the car, barely managing to keep himself upright as he glared between the four of them. Steve wanted to ask what the hell was going on, to try to piece together if the twins were intending to help them or simply to hurt Ultron, but he was still too caught up with monitoring the robot’s movements to bring himself to speak. It turned out to be a good call, with a grunt of frustration Ultron fired a burst of energy towards Steve; he was able to deflect the worst of it with his shield, avoiding any damage to himself, but a good deal of it still cut through the car, punching a hole clear through to the front of the train.

“This isn’t over between us, Captain,” Ultron warned menacingly as Steve looked over the top of the shield again. “I’ll still see you all burn in the end. But since you’ve taken everything from me,” he reached down more quickly than should have been possible, grabbing Bucky around the abdomen with one arm while choking him around the neck with the other, “I think I’ll return the favor.”

Steve’s mind went completely blank with panic; instead of responding he jumped over the barricade between them, reaching out as Bucky scrabbled at Ultron’s arms, too well restrained to move enough to fire an EMP on them. Steve lunged in their direction, screaming something that was supposed to be Bucky’s name, but it was hopeless – Ultron had already launched himself out of the hole in the side of the train, soaring up into the air over the city.

Steve landed on his belly next to the opening, still staring up in shock at the disappearing form as the train continued hurtling through the city. “BARTON!” he screamed into his com, scrambling to his feet. “Barton, do you have eyes on the main bot? Do you see Ultron?!”

“Little busy up here with the cradle, Cap!” Barton responded tightly.

Steve was vaguely aware of the fact that Natasha and Barton were arguing over something over the coms, something to do with Cho’s cradle, but he was still too numb with shock to comprehend it. Even if Clint did abandon the mission now and locate Ultron, the robot was likely going too fast for the quinjet to have any hope of going in pursuit. His guts rolled as Bucky’s panicked face disappearing out the ripped-out side of the car played over and over in Steve’s mind, taunting him, making even the loud crash at the front of the train seem completely inconsequential.

How could he have been so careless to have let them get separated in the first place? Or have not started moving sooner, so that he might have had a chance to at least go out the hole with them, to have some chance of fighting Bucky out of Ultron’s grasp, instead of just letting him… letting him…

“We’ve gone off the tracks!” A heavily accented voice shouted behind him, somehow shaking Steve from his misery.

Steve stumbled slightly as he turned, still disoriented from the shock – it took a couple of seconds for
his brain to shake off Bucky’s face and process what was going on around him. The train had apparently gone off of its railing after Ultron had blown out its conductor, and was now hurtling towards a walled-off market ahead, undoubtedly full of civilians. Despite the gnawing emptiness in his chest, a small part of Steve knew he had to do something; that Bucky would never forgive him if he simply rolled over and died now, tempting as the thought was.

Ultron was still out there, and innocent people were in danger that needed his help: damn the consequences, Steve would see the mission through to the end.

“There’s civilians in our path,” he said, surprised by the strength and clarity of his voice as he turned to the Maximoff boy, “you need to get them to safety.”

The kid nodded at Steve before launching himself out of the train in a blur. “Can you stop us?” He asked, turning his attention to the girl. They were within yards of the wall by now, so Steve didn’t bother waiting for a response; instead he ran towards the hole in the front of the train, ducking his head behind the shield and standing as forcefully as he could as they slammed into it, trying to minimize the amount of debris that made its way through to injure the passengers inside. It felt like an eternity of being pelted by brick and whatever foreign objects the speeding rain picked up in the market, but finally the train grinded to a sad stop in the middle of the narrow street.

Steve slumped against the side of the train, watching detachedly as the people on the street began pouring into the train, helping the wounded clear out. With the immediate danger gone his mind immediately went back to Bucky – he had to find a way to track them down, to determine if he was even still alive, but his brain still felt like it was made of mush, completely worthless to do anything other than replay that awful moment again and again and again.

He started when Barton’s voice spoke up in his ear again. “Cap, we have the cradle! Where are you guys, we’ll come pick you up and get out of here.”

Steve flipped his com on to respond, only to immediately turn it back off again when he couldn’t force any sound out of his mouth. What could even say, given the circumstances?

“Cap? You guys alright?”

With shaking hands, he turned it on again. “Bucky’s… Barnes isn’t,” Steve choked, unable to bring himself to say the rest out loud.

“Steve?” Natasha’s voice came onto the line, sounding worried. “Bucky isn’t what? What are your coordinates?”

Steve stared blankly out the opening in the train, blinking as he recognized the pair of familiar young people crouched next to a nearby stand. The Maximoff girl looked to be checking on her brother, who was still slumped and panting against the rickety building beside him. Steve felt a flash of rage, remembering their role in the previous battles, the fact that the girl had warped Bucky’s mind into thinking that he had to stick with Steve in the first place.

Hell, for all Steve knew she was the reason he’d stood there like a lump while the only thing in this shitty world that mattered to him flew out the side of the train and into oblivion.

“Go without me,” he heard himself say coldly as he started to step out of the train.

“That’s not gonna happen, Steve,” Natasha started to argue.

“Just GO. Ultron… Ultron took Bucky, I’m gonna find a way to track him down.”
“You can’t do that on your own, Cap,” Barton cut in. “We’ll come down and get you, see if Hill can get a location on –”

“You need to get that cradle to Stark, as fast as possible.” Steve snapped. “That’s an order, Barton, and it’s mission critical. You two take care of the android; Bucky’s my responsibility, I’ll take care of him.” Before either of them could broker a further argument Steve killed his comlink with a scowl.

He stalked up on the twins, wound as tight as a spring and seeing red even though he knew it had nothing to do with the girl’s powers. It took all that Steve had not to attack them both without warning, to completely forget their ages and their situation and to just pull them apart with his bare hands. “You’d better have a damned good reason for me not to eliminate you before anyone knows we ran into each other,” he growled, feeling like his anger the only thing holding him together. “And it’s going to have to be a hell of a lot better than one act of resistance against Ultron.”

The two shared a look, before the girl turned to him defiantly. “You have far bigger concerns on your hands, Captain, and you’re going to need our help if you’re going to stand a chance at winning.”

“I have no bigger concern than –” Steve’s voice broke, unable to even say Bucky’s name. To his surprise, the girl’s face actually softened.

“If he’d wanted your lover dead Ultron would have killed him in front of you,” she responded quietly.

“He enjoys the show,” her brother cut in, adding with a sneer, “he’s too much like his maker.” He shut up and looked away when she gave him a look of warning.

“As it is,” she continued, “he’ll keep him alive for now – he’ll want to use your fear to try to make you reckless, to use him as a trap for your whole team. Ultron knows you would do anything for Barnes, and that the team goes as you do.”

“You sound awfully sure of that – if you want me to even consider trusting you, you’ll take me to wherever Ultron’s taken Sergeant Barnes; the team will need him too, if we’re going to fight.”

“He’ll be fine for now,” the girl said. “Our main concern should be Stark; we have to stop him from getting what’s in the cradle.”

Steve shook his head in frustration. “He’s already got the cradle – don’t worry, Tony will take care of it.”

“No, he won’t.” She practically cried – there was a part of Steve that was waiting for a flash of red to convince him of whatever her worries were; the fact that he still seemed to have his faculties were a bit of a comfort, if only a very small one.

“Stark’s not crazy,” Steve insisted, although he was feeling less confident about the insistence the longer that they talked. He was pretty sure that the nagging feeling in his gut that something about the entire cradle situation was fishy didn’t have anything to do with the Maximoff’s power on his brain. Because while Tony wasn’t crazy, or evil, or any other inherently nefarious problem – he had been impulsive and desperate of late. Hell, they wouldn’t be standing here, Bucky wouldn’t be lost to wherever he’d been taken, if not for Tony’s recent lack of common sense.

“He will do anything to make things right. Anything.” The girl insisted, her voice pleading as she continued to stare at Steve.
Steve flipped his comlink back on with a sigh, unable to ignore her any longer. “Hey Stark? Banner?” There was no answer from anyone on the New York channel. “Hill – do I have anyone on coms at the Tower?” He didn’t even receive static for his trouble – either the long-distance link had gone dead during the fight with Ultron, or they’d turned off receivers at the Tower to avoid getting hacked.

Either way, it meant that Steve was well and truly on his own here. Unless you counted the enhanced kids that he still didn’t trust any farther than he could throw Thor’s hammer.

“You have every right not to trust us, Captain.” Steve blinked and glared at her, trying to ascertain if the girl had read his thoughts or not. “But you have to believe that Tony Stark can’t be trusted, either,” she continued urgently. “Ultron can’t tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it. Who do you think he gets that from?”

Steve looked back and forth between the two of them; he was still so torn up about Bucky that it was a physical ache, and the thought of abandoning him in Ultron’s hold still made him want to die… but he was with it enough to know that the Maximoffs were right. Even if Steve could find a way to track down Bucky’s location and launch a rescue attempt, the most likely outcome would be the both of them being killed. But if the girl was telling the truth – if she had information on Ultron that might allow the team to finally get an upper hand, they could save Bucky and everyone else before it was all said and done.

And Steve was positive that those were his own thoughts talking, scrambled by grief though they were.

“Alright,” he finally sighed, stowing his shield on his back and squaring his shoulders. “Alright, fine. I’ll take you back to the Tower. But so help me God – if this turns out to be a trick, or if we lose Sergeant Barnes because of this, I won’t rest until I know that you’ve hurt as much as I have.”

If looks could kill the boy would have had Steve flat on his back, but the girl gave him a tight nod of agreement. “I know where he is – we’ll do what we can to make sure that you get your man back, once we’ve stopped Stark. If he’s able to succeed, none of this will matter; we’ll all be dead before the end of tomorrow, anyway.”

Steve nodded, swallowing down bile as he realized what they had to do. “Ultron had a jet to get the cradle out with, didn’t he? Can you get the pilots to fly us to New York City, instead?”

The girl gave him a sly smirk and glanced at her brother. “That shouldn’t be a problem.”

Steve was nowhere as fast as the boy, of course, but was still able to sprint across the city within fifteen minutes – by the time he arrived at the airport the two of them were on a private jet, waiting just off of the runway. Steve ran through the security gate, uneasy of the fact that there wasn’t a soul around to stop him, but pushed the thought of the consequences down as he boarded the plane. This was his only hope, to have a chance at seeing Bucky again and to gain revenge on Ultron – and it wasn’t as if it was the first time he’d had to do something that went drastically against his morals for the sake of duty.

“Took you long enough,” the Maximoff boy snorted.

“Spare me the attitude – let’s go,” he commanded, surprised when the girl simply flicked her wrists towards the cockpit in response. They began taxiing immediately, making their way to the runway at top speed and getting into the air in no time.

“You didn’t kill them all, did you?” He asked quietly as they began to make their way over the
“Not at all,” she answered, momentarily looking offended. “They should all be waking up from a very restful nap, actually, with no recollection of the plane having been there.” The girl studied his face for a moment, before continuing on. “We aren’t actually evil, you know – we’ve done what we felt was necessary for the sake of our people. Something which you know all about.”

Steve pressed his lips together before moving and taking a seat in the cabin; she was right, of course – he’d said as much himself before this whole mess had started. If the Maximoffs were monsters then he fit the mould every bit as well as they did. He found his eyes tracking back to them throughout the flight, silently watching as the siblings comforted each other and spoke in quiet Sokovian. The seat beside Steve remained cold and empty, a cruel reminder of how badly he’d failed the man who should have been next to him.

If anyone on the plane was a monster, he was probably sitting in Steve’s seat.

By the time they were in radio distance of New York City Steve called ahead, briefly confirming with Natasha that he was en route and allowing them to land in the holding bay of Avengers Tower.

As they made their way into the building he stopped the twins, recognizing that marching in with the two of them wouldn’t exactly win the immediate trust of his teammates. “Just hold back for a second,” he said quietly outside of the ready room, straining to hear Natasha and Clint’s voices inside. “I need to talk to these two, then we’ll head up to the lab and confront Stark directly – the less drama we cause ahead of time, the better.”

“But we don’t have –” the boy started.

“You have a few seconds,” Steve interrupted coldly. “I’ll be less than a minute, just wait here.”

Steve made his way into the ready room purposefully, pushing down all of his worry as he approached Clint and Natasha. It was Nat who realized he was coming first, jumping out of her seat and running to give him a hug when she did – Steve tried not to think about how terrible he must look to garner such a reaction.

“Slava bogu,” she muttered as she tightened her arms around Steve’s waist, “I didn’t think you’d come back.”

“Change of plans,” he responded as normally as possible, grateful when she let go. “Figured I didn’t stand much of a chance catching up to him if I didn’t know where he was going – I hoped with the whole team working together we could figure out where Ultron went off to and plan a rescue mission.”

Clint and Natasha shared a brief, wordless look, before turning back to him. “Cap,” Clint said evenly, “are you sure that’s the best plan right now? Shouldn’t we be figuring out Ultron’s next play?”

“Oh, we’re stopping Ultron,” Steve responded boldly, “but Bucky’s a priority. We’ve gotta start putting out a net…”

“Isn’t that a pretty big leap, assuming he’s not already…”

“He’s. Not. Dead.” Steve ground out decisively, glaring at Clint for so much as suggesting the idea. There was a long, tense silence as Steve did his best to unclench his hands from the firsts they’d formed.

“Even if he is,” Natasha finally said quietly, “it isn’t your fault, Steve.”
It was like a damn breaking in his chest – Steve knew that there wasn’t time to waste on it, that the two of them needed to start searching for Bucky and he needed to get the twins upstairs, but the words wouldn’t stop. “It was my fault, though…” he responded brokenly. “It’s my fault that he got taken. I got in over my head: Bucky waded in to pull me out, the same as always. And when he needed me to return the favor, I couldn’t – I just let him…”

“We were there when you guys left, Cap.” Clint said softly. “He was the one who insisted on going with you. It was his choice to go along, neither of you could have known.”

Steve nodded blankly, gnawing on his lip the whole while before shaking himself and looking up again. “Either way, he’s alive – I know he is. You guys taught him all kinds of spy shit, right? Had special ways of contacting one another off of the internet and under the radar in case someone got left behind enemy lines?” Steve knew he sounded ridiculous, but he was desperate enough to not care anymore.

Clint glanced sidelong at Natasha before nodding slowly. “Yeah, we had a few methods that we toyed around with using.”

“We use them,” he commanded. “Anything, please.”

Natasha pressed her lips together into a sad line before nodding earnestly. “We’ll see what we can do, Steve.”

“We’ll find him,” Barton added confidently, already making his way to the lab that they’d set up as their search station what felt like a hundred years ago.

Steve turned on his heel as soon as they’d agreed, making his way back into the hallway – if he’d stayed any longer he knew he wouldn’t be able to resist following after Barton and Romanoff and spending the next who knew how long waiting anxiously while they searched for Bucky. As it was, he’d probably only end up in their way; and he had a job of his own to do, anyway. He was pleasantly surprised when he found the twins still waiting in the hall, and nodded wordlessly in the direction of the stairs.

Steve ran up the stairs to the lab, barely noticing the fact that the twins were on his heels. He felt his hackles rising as he made his way through the door and saw Banner and Stark busy at work, the cradle between them as they bickered back and forth about schematics and data. “You don’t fuckin’ learn, do you Tony?” The cold fury in his voice took even Steve by surprise.

Banner looked up from the cradle, his face instantly looking guilty. Stark, though, stayed exactly where he was at the computer, barely turning around to acknowledge him. “This isn’t what it looks like, Cap. We’ve got it this time - JARVIS has been alive all along, he was the one keeping Ultron away from the codes while we were playing This Old Hovel at Barton’s place.”

“You have no idea what you’re doing…” Steve started.

“And you do?” Banner cut him off, glaring over his shoulder with more anger than Steve had ever seen outside of when he was green. “How do we know she isn’t in your head, playing with your mind?”

“The situation’s changed,” Steve responded tightly, barely sparing the twins a glance. “They stopped him in Korea; they’re the main reason that Clint and Natasha were able to get the cradle out from under Ultron’s nose. Now I’m only gonna say this once. Shut it down.”

Stark chuckled and spun on his heel, immediately launching to his own defense. “No, you don’t
understand, Cap. This is our only shot; it’s the only way we’re going to stand a chance against Ultron.”

Steve clenched his teeth as tightly as he could, biting down the urge to scream in frustration as he pulled his shield off of his back. “I swear to God, Stark - I feel like we’re living in a fuckin’ time loop.”

“This isn’t a loop,” Stark responded immediately, gesticulating wildly towards the cradle between them. “This is entirely different, this is our last hope. Why can’t you see that? This… this is the end of the line.”

The words had barely left Stark’s mouth when a rush of high-pitched screaming filled Steve’s head, whiting out the entire lab around them. He didn’t even bother with the shield, instead dropping it and launching himself at Stark’s smirking face. How dare he throw Bucky’s words at him? How dare the smarmy bastard, when it was his fault they were in this whole fucking mess to begin with?

At some point Stark had called pieces of the suit to him - Steve was vaguely aware of the fact that he was hitting metal, that his knuckles were splitting with the force of it, that somewhere around them someone was yelling and computers were beeping and a red glow flashed intermittently. All that mattered was that Steve continue throwing punches, that he try to make Stark feel even half as much pain as Steve did.

There was a short whirring of a repulsor and then a bright white light, and Steve was thrown against the adjacent wall with the force of one of the Iron Man’s suppression blasts. The Maximoff boy stood beside him, holding the main power line to the cradle, while Bruce and the girl looked on. Stark was still panting as he moved to stand over Steve, who suddenly felt so exhausted that he couldn’t even bring himself to get to his feet and continue fighting.

“You don’t... you don’t get to say that,” Steve heard his voice say roughly, still totally disconnected as he glared up at Stark. “You’ve cost me everything because of this shit, and you Didn’t. Even. Learn.”

The faceplate of Stark’s helmet flipped up as Steve continued to talk, his face pale where it hadn’t been bruised by Steve’s fists. “What’re you talking about, Rogers? Where’s... where’s Barnes?”

An awful keening noise started in Steve’s chest, and he pressed his lips together, shaking his head and refusing to say the words out loud. Someone exhaled with a quiet curse, although Steve couldn’t tell if it was Banner or Stark; he was still too lost in his own head, desperately trying not to think of the look on Bucky’s face as Ultron soared out the side of the train and failing miserably.

“Ultron took him captive,” the Maximoff girl’s voice started quietly. “He’s holding him hostage, trying one last effort to make you all desperate and sloppy. I know his plan... we need to get to Sokovia.”

“I still don’t understand why you’d think we would ever listen to you,” Bruce interrupted her with naked hostility.

“Because we’re your only hope. Us and your whole team, working as one - like you planned and he feared.”

Steve looked up with surprise, blinking as the girl finished and none of them argued. He started to get up, intending to take advantage of the momentary peace, to begin formulating a plan of action that might allow them to attack Ultron, to get to Bucky before it was too late – the windows in the main corridor shattered before he could speak, and Thor came striding into the room purposefully,
Mjölnir already crackling with lightning in his hand. In the blink of an eye Thor had jumped onto the top of the cradle, ignoring all of them shouting out warnings as he charged the hammer completely then brought it down on the cradle, shattering the glass and cracking the metal casing of the chamber.

The blast knocked all of them to the floor. Steve rolled over, still confused by what had happened; and then watched in silent horror as a man – or something that looked like a man, at least, if one was made of red and green polymers, levitated out of the bed inside the cradle.

He crouched on the broken lid of the cradle for a moment, the bright yellow gem in his forehead pulsing with light, before he opened bright red eyes and looked about all of them critically. Tony was the first to move, raising his arm and firing a repulsor at the thing out of his gauntlet, but it bounced off as if it had done nothing. The thing – the android – launched itself towards the window, coming to a stop and apparently staring out at the streets below.

Steve pushed himself to his feet at that, watching as it surveyed New York; if Tony’s blast hadn’t touched the thing there wasn’t likely to be much that he could do against it, but that didn’t mean that Steve was going to let the damned thing attack his city without a fight. He scooped up his shield, ready to toss it at the still-levitating form, but Thor reached out to stop him, gently pushing him back and shaking his head before approaching the creature himself.

After a long, tense moment, the android turned around, surveying them all. “I’m sorry,” it said, and Steve started when he recognized that it was JARVIS’ voice. “That was – odd.”

“Thor?” Steve asked, hating how weak his voice still sounded. “You helped create this?”

“I’ve had a vision,” Thor started, before launching into some confusing explanation of Gods and pools and devastation of the realms… and Infinity Stones. For one hysterical moment Steve wished even more that Bucky was beside him, if only to share a look of bafflement. Although, knowing Buck, he’d probably have been able to follow.

“If it’s the greatest power in the universe and has the power to destroy us all,” Steve cut in, having heard enough of Thor’s mystical rambling – especially when there was no one else around who seemed to share his confusion. “Then why did you bring it here, to life?”

“Because Stark was right, the Avengers cannot defeat Ultron on their own.”

“But the creature he created to end us all will?” Steve asked skeptically.

The android turned his creepy eyes on Steve, studying him closely as he continued to hover a few inches above the floor. “You think I’m a child of Ultron?”

“Until I have reason to believe otherwise, yeah, I guess I do.”

“I’m not Ultron.” The thing replied. “And I’m not JARVIS. I am… I am…”

“I looked into your head and I saw annihilation.” The Maximoff girl cut in.

“Listen,” Thor demanded, before anyone else could get a word in. “Your powers, our visions, Ultron himself – they all came from the Mind Stone, and they’re just scratching the surface of what it can do. With it fighting on our side…”

“Are you?” Steve asked quietly, ignoring Thor to focus completely on the not-man in front of him, standing as straight and proud as possible. “Are you on our side?”
“It isn’t that simple.” The thing answered after a moment, looking dreamily around the room. “I’m on the side of life, unlike Ultron who wants to end it all. I don’t want to kill Ultron – he’s unique, and he’s in pain. But he’s ready to let that pain roll over the Earth, to wipe out everything else, and we can’t let that happen. We have to act now; we have to attack him, to wipe out every copy of him and every trace that he has on the internet.” The android finally quit floating between them, coming to a stop next to Thor and staring out the window again. “I’m not what you are, and not what you intended, so there may be no way to make you trust me. But we need to go.”

The android turned to Thor, holding Mjölnir out to him like it weighed nothing, as the rest of them watched in stunned silence.

“Guys!” Natasha’s voice split through the deafening quiet of the common room, “Guys, we’ve found Barnes! He sent out a radio message and a tracking signal, he’s in…” the excited grin that had been on her face as she’d run into the room slid off of her face as she caught sight of the android. “He’s – in Sokovia.”

Clint, who had been on her heels, shifted his weight subtly so that he had moved in front of Natasha, staring at the android, his eyes flicking back and forth between its face and the hammer in its hand. “Uh – who the hell’s this?”

“I’m the Vision,” the android replied, dropping to the ground and striding past all of them once Thor had taken Mjölnir back from it, “and we have to leave, now.”

Steve exhaled slowly as they all watched it stride out of the room, before shaking himself. The thing – Vision, because why the hell wouldn’t it name itself and make things even weirder – was right. They didn’t have much time left if the Maximoffs were telling the truth about Ultron’s plan, and even if they weren’t – it was taking them to the same spot as Bucky was. If nothing else, at least he and Steve could be together for the end of it all. “Okay, you heard him,” Steve spoke up, looking around at the rest of the team. “Five minutes, grab your gear and get to the quinjet.”

Steve couldn’t help himself, he grabbed Bucky’s spare sidearm from his locker, wrapping the holster around his thigh and adjusting it down so that it was small enough to fit him, then jammed a few extra rounds of ammo into his belt. He put the shield back in its holder on his back, turning as Natasha handed over a jacket to the Maximoff girl in silence before finishing up with her own gear. With a grimace, Steve grabbed a pair of running shoes out of his locker, throwing them to the boy… he wasn’t positive that they’d fit, but figured they would be better than the ones he’d nearly run the soles out of in Korea.

They all loaded into the jet, tense and quiet as Clint took them up into the dark New York City sky. Steve made sure to keep close to the cockpit, waiting in case Natasha received another communication from Bucky. After nearly a full hour of quiet, Stark finally spoke up, studying the StarkPad in his lap as he did. “The forces he’s probably amassed already, with the hold he has on the internet… there’s no way we all get through this. If even one tin soldier is left standing, we’ve lost. Safe bet is there’s gonna be blood on the floor.”

“I got no plans for tomorrow night,” Steve responded immediately, unwilling to let Stark bring down the already destitute morale of the team.

“Steve,” Natasha chided softly from the front, turning slightly in the co-pilot’s chair. “That’s a damned lie and you know it. We’re gonna get him, okay?”

Steve sighed heavily, staring up at the ceiling of the quinjet for a second; he could sense all of their eyes on him, feeling far more pitty than he had in years but hating it just as much as ever. “I’m just sayin’… we signed up for this. Ultron knows we’re coming, so we’ll be taking heavy fire – that’s
our choice. But it’s not the people of Sokovia’s.” He swallowed, pushing himself up and finishing his plan in his head. “So here’s what we’re gonna do: Barton, you’ll drop me outside the city. I’ll take the castle, get Bucky out and then we’ll join you. Thor, you’re gonna…”

“Steve.” Natasha interrupted, now turned fully around in her chair. “I think…” she bit her lip, hesitating in a manner that was so unlike her that Steve felt his blood run cold. “I think maybe, for this one, we should have someone else draw up the plan.”

“What?” He asked breathlessly, his stomach sinking even further as he frowned at her.

“Just – you’ve been compromised. You aren’t thinking straight. And I think it’d be best if you let one of us take the reins for a change.”

Steve felt his face heat furiously, desperately wanting to argue with her; this was hardly any different than the events in DC, so Natasha knew damned well that he was up to it. But with the rest of them looking on and offering no disagreements he could hardly kick up a fuss. Instead he swallowed his pride, turning to Thor with a small gesture of defeat.

Thor was on his feet at once, a commanding presence as he doled out instructions. He and Banner would sweep the castle, since they were the two who would have the easiest time getting back to the city and surviving an attack in the event that Ultron used Bucky as a trap. Stark and Vision would seek out Ultron, away from civilians since they were likely to be his two biggest targets, while the rest of them focused on getting the townspeople out of the city and away from the line of fire, drawing any bots to themselves in the name of protecting the innocent. Within a couple of minutes they all had their orders, and Steve was left to stew as the silence returned to the cabin.

At least half an hour passed before Natasha cleared her throat again. “Cap, listen…”

“I’m perfectly capable of handling my duties, Agent Romanoff.” He responded tightly, still hot under the collar over the way she’d embarrassed him; never mind the fact that Thor’s plan had denied him the chance to go after his main target for the mission.

“You announced to the team that you were suicidal forty minutes ago,” she shot back.

“I’m not – I didn’t say that,” Steve retorted, frowning as he turned in his seat and glared at her. “I never said I was planning to die.”

“What did you mean, then?”

He swallowed thickly – he shouldn’t have been surprised that Natasha would challenge him this way, but being forced to admit his thoughts wasn’t something Steve expected he would ever be truly used to. “I was tryin’ to rally the troops. To say that I was willing to do whatever’s necessary.”

She continued staring at him shrewdly, until Steve finally sighed and caved, rubbing his eyes tiredly. “I’m not planning on getting myself killed, Nat. But…” God, he hated even thinking like this, putting it out in the world was torture. “But I’m not leaving Sokovia without him, Natasha. I’m not.”

Natasha pursed her lips, although her eyes softened as she continued to watch him. “I suppose that’s fair enough,” she finally said quietly. “But what I wanted to say initially was that Bucky just sent another message – he’s breaking out, he says he’ll meet us in the city.”

She’d said the last bit loudly enough that the rest of the team would hear her; there were a couple of surprised exclamations and cheers that went around the main team. Steve tried his best to smile about it; he didn’t want to doubt Buck – God knew that he was as strong and as crafty as anyone
Steve knew, but something about it seemed fishy, especially when Natasha brushed off his question of how with the excuse that he hadn’t told her anything more.

The sun began coming up over the horizon of the Atlantic Ocean in front of them, lighting the cockpit of the quinjet as they continued rocketing towards Sokovia and their next huge battle. Steve tried like hell to remain optimistic, glad for the conformation that Bucky was still alive but unable to shake the gnawing fear that he’d done, or was about to do, something incredibly stupid.

Chapter End Notes

Only one more real chapter to go! The next one is going to be a monster (I really don't see how I can get through all of the plotpoints I have planned and keep it under 20K words), so it's probably going to take me a couple of weeks to finish, especially since I've got a round of exams coming up, but I'll do my best to be timely about it.

In the meantime, comments feed the beast ♥
The first thing that Bucky noticed when he started coming to was that he was so cold he was shivering – he decided to take it as a good sign; there was no way he’d be freezing and sore as hell if he were dead. His last thought before passing out as Ultron had hauled him over Seoul’s skyline had been that he was a goner, so waking up on a cold slab of concrete, while not exactly ideal, was a relatively pleasant surprise.

The next thing that he noticed was the sounds of nearby machinery; Bucky cracked his eyes open, observing his surroundings for a minute. It looked like he was in a giant lab, closed in completely by stone walls and housing at least a hundred automated stations, all of which appeared to be building robots. While he couldn’t say for certain, never having actually been inside the castle, he was almost positive from the HYDRA banners on the sides of the room that Ultron had brought him back to Sokovia – Bucky didn’t want to think about the possibility that he and Steve had missed another base of this size during all of their travels, and now that he thought about it, he never had heard if the rest of the team had successfully bombed the castle after he’d left with Natasha and Clint.

Ultron stood over the workstation nearest to him, methodically working on something himself as molten metal was poured into moulds nearby. Bucky shifted just enough to get a better look around his immediate surroundings, having noticed heavy-duty metal bars in his peripheral vision and trying to determine exactly how screwed he was as far as escape plans went. He tilted his head as subtly as possible, noticing that he was closed in on three sides by the bars, with the only possible escape being to run directly at Ultron’s station. Bucky let his eyes slide closed again, pretending to still be unconscious as his mind raced to fully assess the situation – somehow he doubted that Ultron had left his cage open for any reason other than to try to goad him into doing something rash. Unfortunately, despite his efforts at being discrete his movement didn’t go unnoticed by the robot.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” Ultron murmured. Bucky gave up his act, opening his eyes again as Ultron turned away from his work to face him, the features on his face looking almost shy as he
continued talking. “I wanted to show you something. Since I don’t have anyone else.”

Bucky snorted incredulously at his words, sitting up so that he could get a better feel on whether or not he was injured. It was a very pleasant shock to realize that all of his limbs seemed to be functional, including his left arm. “Funny, who’d’ve thought you’d have trouble finding allies when you go around bragging about your plans to kill us all?”

Ultron considered him for a moment, but Bucky couldn’t bring himself to worry about offending the robot - somehow he doubted that his situation would be any different whether he cooperated or not. “You know, Sergeant Barnes, I really had hoped that you would sympathetic to my intentions…” his creepy red gaze lingered on Bucky’s arm for far longer than he was comfortable with. “I knew the rest of the Avengers wouldn’t understand, but I’d hoped we could be allies.”

“How many times do I gotta tell you tech geniuses?” Bucky groaned, rolling his eyes as he stiffly rose to his feet and glared out across the lab at Ultron. “A cyborg ain’t the same as a friggin’ robot…”

“No, I suppose not,” Ultron responded disappointedly. “I will give Stark credit, though – at least he found a better use of vibranium than his father did. The arm is considerably more impressive than the Captain’s glorified Frisbee.”

It was on the tip of Bucky’s tongue to point out how many times the shield had saved countless lives, but he swallowed the argument down. What the hell was the point, anyway? It wasn’t as if he was going to be able to convince Ultron of the shield or the Avengers’ good, and he frankly didn’t have the energy to waste arguing with a demented bit of machinery. “Listen,” he said tiredly, “If you’re gonna rip it off of me or kill me or whatever awful thing you have planned, could you just do it already? Cuz I don’t see what either of us is gaining by dragging this out.”

The robot shook his head, chuckling lightly. “No no no, Bucky – that wasn’t my intention at all. I mean; the arm won’t do me any good, there’s hardly enough vibranium in it to make removing it worth the time and there’s no software in it to hack… I might have tried while you were out of it, I figured you wouldn’t mind.” Bucky stared at him, unimpressed. “And killing you – well, then I’d lose the bait for my trap; it would be no good to kill you before we have the Captain and the rest of the team here to see it.”

“So that’s it?” Bucky asked, moving to the edge of his cage and sneering out at Ultron, trying his damndest to hide his dread inspired by the robot’s words – because he had no doubt that Steve’s dumbass absolutely would come running in to save him, and the idea of watching him die… Bucky pushed it away and continued taunting Ultron instead. “That’s your big plan? Use one of the team’s least powerful members as bait then knock them out when they come to rescue him?” He scoffed and shook his head. “Not much of a plan; they wouldn’t be so stupid as to send everyone in for me – there will still be enough Avengers around to take you out.”

Ultron snorted coldly and stepped away from the robot he had been working on, stalking up to the still-open door of the cage. “Oh no, no – my ultimate plan is far bigger than that, this part is just for fun. I’m building a meteor, one that I’ll use the Avengers to drop and wipe out every living thing on the planet. When I’m done with you all, the only things left on Earth will be made of metal.”

Bucky’s stomach sank as Ultron continued talking. “A meteor, huh?” He asked after the robot had finished, surprised by his own acting when he heard how confident his voice sounded, a far cry from the panic that he felt rising inside of him. “Pretty ambitious for a guy who couldn’t even pull off building a new body without it getting taken from him.”

Ultron puffed up like he wanted to shout Bucky down, but after a split-second hesitation the metal
joints that made up his mouth smirked instead. “I like your spirit, Sergeant Barnes – I wish things could have turned out differently for us.” The robot moved again, until he was looming over Bucky, with only a few inches to separate them at the entrance to the cell. “And I’ll give you all credit where credit is due: you did hurt me, fair and square, when it comes to the Android; it’s been hellish having to come up with a plan B. But, you know what they say…”

Before he could finish the sentence a pair of metal hands grabbed Ultron from behind, tearing his metal casing apart so viciously that Bucky stumbled away from him in shock. “What doesn’t kill me,” Ultron’s voice continued, emanating from an even larger, sturdier-looking body that Bucky didn’t have to look too closely at to know was made of pure vibranium, “makes me stronger.”

Bucky remained where he’d fallen, sitting on his ass at the back of the cage while the new Ultron slammed the open door shut harshly. “I promise, as soon as the rest of the Avengers show up, I’ll personally drag the Captain in here so you can both watch as each other dies,” he taunted ominously before stalking out of the room, apparently satisfied with his intimidation tactics.

He waited a full minute after Ultron had left before rolling back to his feet, moving to the very edge of his cage and looking carefully around the room. He couldn’t see any surveillance cameras or robots that were yet sentient themselves – of course, he doubted that that particularly mattered; the likelihood that HYDRA hadn’t had them scattered around their labs was slim-to-none, but he was pretty positive that if there were any pointed directly at his cell he would have been able to see it.

After a couple seconds of debate, Bucky decided to say screw playing it safe – if Ultron caught him trying to contact the team or breaking out it would only mean he’d be dead a little earlier, and there was no way in hell he was just going to sit around and wait for them (for Steve) to run into a trap.

Luckily, either HYDRA or the bots had decided to use the holding cell as a storage space for old junk before they’d taken him hostage; Bucky started digging through the piles of old typewriters and lab equipment, setting a couple of screwdrivers aside as he methodically made his way towards the bottom of the pile and pumping his fist in victory when he found exactly what he’d been hoping for.

The wireless telegraph was dusty as hell, but at first glance it looked like all of its parts were still intact. He put the headphones over his ears and flipped the thing on, almost crying with relief when it actually powered up. The first time that Natasha had mentioned using Morse code to send an extraction signal in case of emergency Bucky had given her hell for pulling his leg: Steve had been the one to discover that it had gone completely out of use in 1999, made obsolete by all forms of digital communication available at the turn of the century. But Clint had backed her up on the argument; the fact that no one else would ever think to use such antiquated forms of contact made it that much more secure in cases that they were ever well and truly fucked.

Bucky licked his lips, taking the paddle into his right hand. He couldn’t really think of a more apt description for the situation he found himself in now. After setting the transmitter to the station they’d all agreed on that random night in Chechnya, Bucky exhaled and tapped out his message.

**JBB. SOS.**

He waited ten minutes, wishing like hell that there were windows in the lab so that he could get an estimate as to what time it was. While he was almost positive that he was in Sokovia, he had no idea how long it had been since Ultron had taken him hostage – which meant he had no frame of reference for where the team might be. If they’d made it back to New York then surely one of the spies would have thought to have booted up a radio and started listening for him… but if they were still en route, there was no telling how long it would take for his message to ever reach someone.

Bucky sent the same message three more times, each one spaced the same amount of time apart. Of
course, the other end of the station remained silent all along. After his fifth transmission he dropped the paddle with a curse, leaving the headphones on as he looked around the room again.

He would keep up with the radio transmission, but it was becoming obvious to Bucky that he needed to come up with an alternative plan to get himself out. He turned his attention to the door of the cell, looking for an indication as to how the locking mechanism worked. Ultron had simply slammed the door and walked away, meaning there was no way a key was involved. For an automatic lock to be in place on a cell this heavy-duty, there almost had to be an electrical component to it. Bucky tucked the radio under his arm and stood up, taking a couple of steps towards the door of the cage before he stopped again.

It was a safe bet that he’d probably be able to use the EMP generator in his arm to power the door to his cell down – as far as Bucky could tell it felt like Ultron had left the arm undamaged, so he could at the very least use it to free himself. But even if that was successful, he couldn’t see anything other than robot pieces in the lab around him, and he’d left his guns behind when he’d first flung himself into traffic with Steve. The EMPs might be good enough against the door, but he knew first hand that it wasn’t strong enough to incapacitate Ultron – and that was before he’d upgraded to the new body. Busting out of the cell now was tantamount to suicide unless Bucky could find a weapon to fight with, since he wouldn’t stand a chance in hell fighting against the robots on his own.

Bucky sank back to the floor, biting his lip in frustration and thinking further on it. Given how heavily armed the HYDRA forces had been when they’d attacked a couple of days ago there had to be plasma guns somewhere nearby, but Bucky couldn’t risk running into one of the robots before he had one on hand. He was still looking around the room for a better idea, letting his mind wander, when he heard Stark’s taunting voice in his ear, joking about putting extra toys in the arm and giving Bucky hell when he refused them all.

He immediately looked down at his left hand, rotating his wrist around and watching as the plates shifted in response. He wasn’t going to regret not asking for a repulsor or adaptable fingers or something equally ridiculous; even in that moment Bucky felt like they would all have wound up being overkill and more likely to end up posing an accident risk in his day-to-day life than to offer a real advantage in a fight. But, but, he did remember the delays that went into his most recent upgrades, when Tony’d had to come up with a last-minute adjustment for the generator after realizing that the EMPs it was firing would be far stronger than anything Bucky would ever need. If Stark had felt that way, then Bucky knew the unbridled generator must pack one hell of a punch. A punch that was specifically made to protect him against electronic attacks.

A punch that he already knew worked against the robots, provided it was strong enough to reach their power source.

Bucky frowned, grabbing one of the screwdrivers with his right hand and considering the arm again. He flipped through the schematics of the arm casing in his head, remembering Stark’s plans and the few times that he’d actually allowed himself to look at it while it was disassembled for maintenance. For as squeamish as Bucky felt about seeing the arm where it was actually attached to him, he’d been interested in the mechanics of it from the beginning, and had never been able to keep his eyes completely averted when Stark had worked on it in recent years. It was one of the very few moments since Kreischberg where Bucky actually found himself thankful for the enhancements that Zola’s serum had made to his processing and memory; while he couldn’t have begun to fully understand the ins and outs of the arm, he was relatively positive that he’d be able to at least take the outer plates off and figure it out from there.

With a deep breath, he put the head of the screwdriver into the locking mechanism at the crook of his elbow. Tony usually used a specialized tool, but Bucky was sure he’d heard him rambling at some
point about the importance of building the release in such a way that it could be universally opened, but tough enough to get to that it couldn’t be done as an attack. After a couple of minutes of careful prodding it occurred to him that the damned thing was made out of unbreakable metal – Bucky took a moment to tap his message out on the telegraph again, then jammed at the screwdriver with more force, applying enough torque that the handle of the tool creaked ominously in his hand.

He was about to give up and try the other screwdriver for a different size when there was suddenly a pop and a release of pressure around his forearm. Bucky grabbed at the plate he’d been working on with his fingers, grinning when it lifted away without resistance.

The two plates adjacent to the locking one slid out easily, and Bucky made sure to line them up together in order so that he’d be able to reinsert them without much thought. With a window now opened, he looked into the guts of the arm, frowning slightly as he studied the circuitry inside. There was a faint blue glow from the arc reactor at its core, and a couple of hydraulics buried underneath dozens of color-coded wires that carried his motor and sensory information. It was easy enough to recognize the EMP generator – Bucky still remembered seeing it when Tony had accidentally shocked him during its installation.

He brought the arm closer to his face, considering the small, round disk that was fitted over the reactor. Given the number of input and output wires running from it, he knew that it had to be the generator itself, meaning that the half-inch of insulation underneath it must be the regulator, preventing it from drawing on the full power of the arc reactor when Bucky fired it. He chewed the inside of his cheek thoughtfully, his instincts telling him not to grab at the thing without shutting the arm down first… Bucky wasn’t exactly sure that it would be an unsafe move, but he didn’t want to risk getting shocked in the process of finding out.

With a sigh, Bucky removed a fourth plate from the arm, this one just above the bend of his elbow, where Tony had installed the main power switch for the arm. They’d only gone over directions for using it once; it wasn’t as if either of them actually wanted Bucky attempting his own maintenance on the thing. Still – the plan that he had in mind seemed straight-forward enough; in the worst case scenario he’d simply wind up putting everything back together as he’d found it and trying to come up with another bright idea.

That decided, Bucky flipped the switch, frowning as a virtual keypad projected into his face. Stark had given him hell when Bucky had told him what he wanted his PIN to be to control the arm, but he hadn’t said that he was setting it any differently, so…

He held his breath as he selected the numbers 0-3-1-0 in careful order. After a second there was a soft whirring sound, then Bucky sighed in relief as the arm slumped into a dead weight against his knee, the arc reactor’s light fading away to nothing. The relief was short-lasted, though – he immediately picked up the pad of the telegraph, tapping his distress message yet again then set to work at figuring out the mechanism that connected the generator to the reactor.

After a few minutes of ridiculously gentle fiddling Bucky had figured it out, and carefully squeezed at the sides of the generator, sighing again when it easily popped away from the arc reactor beneath it. He carefully turned the thing over, watching that he didn’t damage any of the delicate wires that were attached to it, and studied the regulator on the underside. As far as he could tell it was literally just an insulation device that minimized the amount of power that could flow through the generator – he carefully pried the two discs apart, grinning wildly when he realized that his instincts appeared to be correct. Without the regulator, the EMP generator still snapped easily onto the arc reactor. Bucky was in the middle of flipping the switch to power the arm back up when a series of clicks came through his headphones, startling him enough that the arm slid out of his lap and the metal hand crashed heavily onto the floor with an obnoxiously loud clang.
Bucky choked on a short chuckle at the use of their call signs, his heart hammering in his chest at the fact that he might actually stand a hope of making it out of this one, after all. After hefting his arm back into his lap he grabbed the pad of the telegraph, Bucky tapped out his return message with a shaky right hand, thanking anyone willing to listen for the fact that his teammates had come through as he’d hoped.

Confirm this is JBB.

JBB what is your status?

Uninjured but captive. Can you trace signal? Think we’re in Sokovia.

BW working on it. Looks that way to us. You in danger?

Bucky snorted at the asinine question. “What the fuck do you think, Barton?” He muttered darkly.

Not immediate but U is busy.

We have your coordinates. Telling the team, will have extraction plan soon.

Bucky slumped back against the bars of his cell in relief. Roger, see you soon.

There was no further response, unfortunately – not that Bucky had really been expecting one. He’d have loved to have known how the rest of the team was, how Steve was handling what had happened in Seoul, but it wasn’t as if they had time to try to chat, especially over something as slow as Morse code. Once he was sure they were gone for good, Bucky went back to the arm, typing in 1-9-1-7 and closing his eyes as relief washed over him when the arm came back online.

He articulated each of his fingers carefully, grinning when they responded exactly as usual, then went about the quick work of locking each of the outer plates back into place. Once everything seemed to be in order he got back to his feet, swinging the arm around in a tight circle to confirm that it was in working order before setting himself to figuring out his next major obstacle: how the hell he was going to get out of his cage.

Given the fact that everything else in the room was automated, Bucky was certain that there had to be a powered locking mechanism on the door – he just had to find it and super-charge the damned thing. He gave the room one more look around, double-checking that no one was coming to stop him, and then prowled the perimeter of the tiny cell, momentarily climbing the bars at each corner in search of the power source.

After a few minutes of looking, he was almost certain that he’d found it. Bucky climbed back down to radio the team of his plans first, pulling the headphones on and tapping out the initial SOS signal again, only to be interrupted by the sound of a door on the opposite side of the room swinging open heavily.

Bucky scrambled back to the rear corner of his cage, dropping the radio’s headphones into the pile of junk and doing his best to look inconspicuous – while he was infinitely glad he’d finished putting the arm back together in time, he knew he still wasn’t out of the woods yet. He frowned as he listened to the approaching footsteps walking through the room; he didn’t have an eye on whoever it was yet because they’d entered from behind the cage, but the footfalls sounded more like they were coming
from boots than the metal of one of the robots. He cautiously moved back to the edge of the cage, straining his neck to look around the corner as he leaned against the bars – it didn’t seem likely that the team would have already made it, but it would be a pleasant surprise.

Bucky recoiled from the bars when a tall, familiar blonde woman came into view. Belova looked about as intimidating as she had when Bucky had last seen her on the deck of the INSIGHT helicarrier in DC: dressed in black leather, her blonde hair tied back in a tight ponytail and an enormous HYDRA gun held at the ready in her hands as she continued making her way through the room towards his cell.

“God,” Bucky muttered toward the ceiling in frustration, “I know I haven’t lived the best life, but would you please cut me a fuckin’ break?”

He made sure to keep his hands where she could see them as Belova made her way further into the room, trying to assess her threat level as she stalked around observing the machinery that Ultron had co-opted to build his bots. While her gait didn’t look anywhere near as predatory as Bucky had remembered a year ago, there was still a blankness to her features that set his teeth on edge. Even if she wasn’t working for Pierce or HYDRA anymore, Bucky didn’t get the feeling he could go about trusting her not to blow his head off just yet.

Finally, after she had apparently determined that there were no other threats in the room, the Widow approached Bucky’s cell, lowering her gun to her side. “Are you a HYDRA experiment?” She asked tonelessly, her Russian accent surprisingly soft.

Bucky chewed on his lip, carefully considering his answer before speaking. “In a matter of speaking, I guess,” he finally said cautiously, doing his best to keep his eyes off of the barrel of her gun. “I haven’t belonged to them for more’n seventy years, though.”

She continued to watch him closely, a small furrow forming between her eyebrows as she stared openly at his left arm. “And you’re not one of the robots?”

“No,” Bucky responded firmly, “and they aren’t HYDRA either. They’re something way worse.”

Belova’s eyes stayed on the arm for so long that Bucky held his breath, waiting for her to contradict him. Instead of asking about it, though, a brief flash of recognition passed over her features, before she focused on his face again. “I know you,” she murmured, although it sounded more like a question than a statement of fact.

She continued to watch him closely, a small furrow forming between her eyebrows as she stared openly at his left arm. “And you’re not one of the robots?”

“No,” Bucky responded firmly, “and they aren’t HYDRA either. They’re something way worse.”

“We’ve met,” Bucky responded vaguely, unsure whether it was a good time to bring up the battle in DC or not. On one hand, he may be able to prove himself an ally, considering the fact that they’d both spent most of the past year taking down the remnants of a common enemy. On the other hand… it didn’t seem wise, bringing up a fight with a woman who’d given him all he had wanted at the time and now had him trapped like a fish in a barrel, without a weapon to boot.

He completely lost track of how long they spent staring at one another, although eventually the pity he felt for her look of confused frustration won out over Bucky’s sense of self-preservation. He could only imagine what it would be like, to have had your brain scrambled so many times by HYDRA operatives in the name of keeping you compliant that you couldn’t even remember the people you’d faced off against. Not to toot his own horn, but Bucky knew he should have been a reasonably memorable opponent, even if she had come out on top in the end.

“We fought,” he finally added carefully. “In DC, on the flight deck of one of the helicarriers.”

“You’re with the Captain.” She said slowly, blinking like she was coming out of a fog. Bucky
simply nodded in response, letting Belova continue to make her own connections. “And Natalia Alianovna?”

“Romanoff?” He asked hesitantly, unwilling to blow one of his last hopes of survival on a miscommunication. Belova’s bemused snort was enough of a confirmation for Bucky to add a quiet “Yeah.”

Belova nodded tightly, relaxing her hold on her gun and standing completely at ease, while Bucky released the nervous breath he hadn’t even realized he’d still been holding. “The Captain,” she said after a few moments silence, “he saved my life on the HYDRA ship, despite the fact that it had been my mission to end his.”

Bucky pursed his lips but otherwise kept quiet – of course Steve had left that part out of his recounts of their fight. Although, in fairness, Bucky had never exactly asked for details on how the idiot had come to be in as bad of shape as he’d been when Buck had ended up finding him in the Potomac.

“He told me… he told me that I could get better. That Natalia could help.”

“She’s been looking for you,” Bucky agreed quietly, licking his lips before continuing. “Natasha; we do have team members who’ve been – brainwashed in the past. And resources that could help you get your head back together, if you wanted it.”

Belova grimaced. “I wasn’t ready – HYDRA… they had machines, methods of programming that I couldn’t break. I didn’t trust myself to be around anyone.”

“But you still did a number on HYDRA’s remaining bases,” Bucky murmured encouragingly.

“That was as much vengeance for what they took from me as it was penance for my sins.” Belova responded coldly as she glanced around the room again.

Bucky waited at least twenty seconds before speaking up. “And now?” He asked carefully.

“What are your intentions, now? Cuz frankly, the world’s probably gonna end if we don’t beat Ultron in the next few hours here, and we could use all of the help that we can get.”

Belova stared at him blankly.

“The Avengers?” Bucky added, immediately wondering if the name would even ring a bell. “Natalia and Captain Rogers and the rest of the team. They’re on their way now to fight the robots; I’ve been trying to figure out a way out of here so that I can join them. And, given the circumstances, you’d be more than welcome to get in on the fun.”

“I think,” she started, before hesitating and glaring up at the HYDRA banner that was mounted on the wall behind Bucky’s cage. “I think that I am ready, now. To turn myself in.” Bucky kept his mouth shut, seeing that Belova was visibly steeling herself to say something more. “And I will help, if Natalia and the Captain need it.”

“Alright… alright, they’ll be in the city, soon. They’ll need help saving the townspeople, beating the robots.” There was no response from Belova at all; she simply continued staring at Bucky, as if waiting for orders. He sighed, cussing HYDRA out in his head before continuing. “If you really want penance – if you really wanna start making things right, you’ll come help us today. Then after we can take you back with us and get you help, if you want it.”
Belova nodded tightly in lieu of speaking, before backing away a few paces from the cage and raising her gun again. Bucky couldn’t help his startled yelp in response, his arms flying back into the air as his mind raced to figure out what the hell he could have said that had set her off – he definitely didn’t remember implying that she should off him before meeting up with everyone else.

Luckily, his response seemed to startle her as well; Belova stared at him in confusion, before muttering, “Step away from the door, back behind the pillar. This gun… it will destroy the lock.”

Bucky still felt sick to his stomach with doubt and questioned the hell out of his decision to trust the Widow, but considering he didn’t have much in the way of other options he moved to where she had instructed, covering behind the pillar and closing his eyes against the all-too-familiar flash of blue light that followed the faint whir of the gun powering up. He released a long, low breath of relief when it ended, hesitantly glancing around the corner of the pillar to find the lock of the door blown to hell as Belova slid the entire cage open, watching him expectantly.

“Thanks,” he huffed shortly, doing his damndest to give her a grateful smile despite how fast his heart was still hammering in his chest. Bucky started to follow her out of the cage on instinct, before remembering that the team was still probably planning on digging him out of the castle. He turned back into the cage, pulling the radio out from where he’d hidden it and jamming the headphones on his head.

He glanced up to find Belova watching him suspiciously. “You go ahead for the city,” he said after a moment, sending out his initial SOS signal to get Natasha’s attention. “I need to send the team a message that they don’t need to break me out of here and find a gun for myself, then I’ll meet up with all of you.”

She looked doubtful for a moment, but Bucky was too busy listening to the tapping response coming from Natasha’s end - they were already en route, and nearly to Sokovia as it was.

Already free, will meet up with team in city. JBB

No need for extraction, then? BW

Confirm. Give ‘em hell, see you soon. JBB

By the time he’d finished the last message and turned the radio off the room was empty, so he figured that Belova had already taken off as instructed. As it was, Bucky knew he didn’t have time to worry about her whereabouts at the moment – there were a number of robots who looked nearly finished, now that he paid closer attention to his surroundings; the last thing that he needed was to be caught in a room full of them with nothing more than his arm to defend himself with.

With that thought Bucky took off in the direction that Belova had entered the room from, slowing down as he passed into an open hallway. When he failed to see any robots waiting to attack, he took off at a sprint, noticing the buildings of the city nearby out one of the windows to his right and deciding to move in that direction. Along the way he passed an open door to one of the HYDRA labs that had been left empty by the robots – inside was a small cache of weapons that Strucker’s men had apparently left behind during the Avenger’s attack on the castle.

Bucky grabbed a couple of the larger guns, studying them for a moment before flipping what looked like the safety switch off and firing the plasma beam at the HYDRA tapestry hanging on the wall. He watched with a grim feeling of satisfaction as the damned thing disintegrated into nothing, comfortable with the fact that the guns would do in a pinch, and then went back to figuring a way out of the damned castle.
He could tell that he was nearing an external door, given how much more light was coming through the windows that he barely paid attention to as he passed, when he caught a flash of a red cape moving around one of the stairwells in front of him. “Thor?!” He called out, only realizing after speaking that it might not have been in his best interest.

Thankfully, it was neither a trick of his imagination nor a trap set by Ultron - Thor came back down the stairs with Mjölnir raised in defensive stance, before grinning widely when he recognized Bucky. “Sergeant Barnes!” He called out jovially, immediately making Bucky feel infinitely safer for his presence. “I thought you’d have left for the city by now.”

“And I thought you guys wouldn’t’ve bothered coming in search of me. Steve’s not here, is he?” Bucky laughed, hoping that his concern over the idiot wasn’t too obvious.

Given the way Thor’s smile softened, he knew he’d failed. “He’s not; the Captain is in charge of leading the team that is clearing civilians out of the city… the Maximoff twins have joined us in our fight, you’ll find him with them. Go down the stairwell to your left ahead – it will take you out to the main gates, then it’s less than five kilometers to the city’s edge.” Thor tapped his ear bud as he finished speaking, giving Bucky another reassuring smile. “I need to finish sweeping the castle for signs of Ultron’s plans, but I’ll let the rest know that you’re well and on your way.”

“Thanks,” Bucky responded with a smile of his own, already taking off in the direction Thor had pointed him. It was only a matter of time before shit inevitably ended up hitting the fan, and he wanted to make sure that he was in the right place to help when that time finally came.

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It had taken every ounce of Steve’s self-control to stay in the quinjet while the team dropped off Thor and Bruce in the forest outside of Strucker’s castle; he wanted nothing more than to say forget the team’s plan and storm the castle looking for Bucky himself – but he also realized how little it would help them all in the long run. Thor was more than capable of busting Bucky out if need be, and Steve had no doubt that he could be trusted to keep him safe. Besides that, if the message he had sent to Natasha had been the truth, Buck was probably already out of captivity and heading for the city anyway, so Steve breaking ranks would do nothing but hurt the morale of the team even more while also proving Natasha’s assumption correct: that he was too emotionally unstable to lead.

If Steve was honest with himself he might have admitted that she had a point, but the rest of the team didn’t need to know as much.

So he stayed put, gnawing viciously on the inside of his cheek as the hatch closed behind Stark and Vision, who had elected to fly into the city on their own in hopes of keeping Ultron distracted and away from the rest of the team’s evacuation efforts. Steve went over the evacuation plan with the Maximoffs one last time, establishing the best routes to lead civilians on and assigning each of them to a location around the town. It wasn’t much, as far as strategizing went, but it left him feeling slightly less edgy as Barton finally brought the quinjet down near the center of the city.

The Maximoffs immediately took off for their assignments: Pietro was to alert the city’s police force so that they would have adequate help in protecting the civilians if it came down to it, while Wanda was to charm everyone in the city to get out. Steve didn’t love the mass mind-control idea, but he could hardly argue against her point that it was their only way of guaranteeing an organized evacuation without mass chaos.

He was in the middle of pulling his cowl on and taking off for his own station near one of the main exit points when Steve noticed the graffiti on the side of a nearby building; the largest was a caricature of Captain America, and Steve didn’t have to speak Sokovian to understand that the
harshly painted word over his face meant *fascist*. He paused as he read it, doing his damndest to ignore the ridiculous painting of Bucky next to it, decked out in the red spandex outfit that the comics had designed for him that he hated so much… Steve didn’t want to begin to guess what it was that was written next to it. With a sigh, he turned and chucked the cowl back into the hold of the quinjet; it wasn’t likely to do him a ton of good against the robots in the end, and if the people of Sokovia were that disgusted by the Avengers, maybe it would be better to approach them as Steve Rogers, anyway.

Behind him Natasha had just finished stowing her sidearms, and Clint paused while he looked at the wall himself. “Well,” he said awkwardly as he adjusted his quiver on his back, “at least you’re well-known enough to get hate paintings. I bet no one in the city even knows who Hawkeye is.”

“No, yours is the purple triangle,” Natasha corrected him as she strode out of the hold past the two of them. “And if it makes you feel any better, there aren’t words in English that are harsh enough to translate what they’re saying about the Iron Man.”

Steve snorted as Clint hit the button to close the hatch, pulling himself together – he still felt unsettled by the murals, but he could at least appreciate Nat’s sense of humor about them. He gave himself one final shake, pushing the sense of disappointment out of his mind, and then took off at a run for his corner of the city. It didn’t matter how the Sokovians felt about the Avengers; they still deserved their protection, which meant Steve needed to get his head in the game.

He was in the middle of loading the last wheelchair into the bus outside of a nursing home that he’d stumbled upon when Thor spoke up in his ear bud. “Captain! I’ve just spoke with Sergeant Barnes in the citadel – he’s unharmed and making his way to the city, now.”

Steve exhaled heavily, allowing his shoulders to slump in relief for a couple of seconds before turning his com on to respond. “That’s… that’s great, Thor. Thank you. Did you find anything else of interest in the castle?”

There was a momentary hesitation as Steve heard Thor bring the rest of the team online before continuing. “Yes,” he started, “Ultron’s been using Strucker’s machinery and some of the leftover Chitauri technology to manufacture more robots, as we had been expecting. And there’s – something considerably larger as well, but I have not yet been able to determine its purpose.”

Steve sighed in frustration, stepping around the continual stream of evacuees flooding the streets and making his way towards the next building. “Alright; Tony, you got news?”

“Uh, yeah…” the response was short and strained, and followed by a pause that was just long enough that Steve was about to ask him to repeat when Tony came back online. “Alright, Vision just finished locking Ultron out of the internet, so he’s limited to whatever he has already created here.” There was a muffled commotion on the other end of the line, and while the filter of Stark’s suit prevented Steve from making any actual words out, he could hear the angry voice of Ultron yelling about something to Tony. “Uh – he’s as happy about it as you’d expect. And all of you should probably get on your toes, you’ve got company coming.”

Steve heard shouts ringing through the evacuating crowds first, followed by an incredulous, “Oh, hell no…” in Barton’s voice – then chaos erupted as robots began to descend on the city.

Steve cursed under his breath, taking off at a sprint towards the bridge that he knew was acting as one of the main exits to the city. “Avengers, KEEP THE FIGHT TO US! Get busy distracting the bots, and try to get civilians who are on foot under cover until we get this under control. Doctor Banner, if the rest of us are getting hit as heavily as I’m about to, we might need to have the Other Guy help us get this under control.”
“This is definitely a Code Green!” Natasha agreed, the sounds of gunfire and whirring mechanical parts around her loud enough to be picked up by her headpiece.

“I’m on my way,” Bruce responded with a put-upon sigh; Steve was in the middle of taking down his first robot when he heard the unmistakable sound of the Hulk’s angry roar from the opposite side of his quadrant.

“Alright guys, let’s do this: minimize civilian casualties as much as possible and tear the bots apart, none of Ultron’s models can make it out of the city, take ‘em out at all costs.” He cut his com as soon as he’d finished giving the order, chocking the shield as hard as he could towards an incoming robot and sheering its head clean off. He sighed in relief as the shield returned to him; at least Ultron hadn’t been able to reinforce all of the models with vibranium. Steve called out an order for the civilians around him to take cover in the nearest building – a bus station that looked large enough to safely contain at least those who were about to find themselves trapped in the few blocks surrounding the bridge out of the city, then set to work defending them as well as he could from the robots that just seemed to keep coming, hell-bent on causing as much destruction as possible.

With the majority of the Sokovians that had been on foot out of harm’s way for the moment Steve put his full attention on lashing out at the robots around them, going as hard as he could with punches and kicks and the shield. He was taking a beating, but thankfully the distraction kept the bots attention off of the cars and the shelters around him – as far as he could tell, none had suffered any casualties in the area that he was working in. Steve was actually beginning to feel like he might have the situation under control, and prepared to radio out to make sure that the others didn’t need a hand, when the ground shook violently beneath his feet.

Before he could completely understand what was going on, Steve noticed the bridge in front of him swaying ominously; by the time he was running for it, determined to help the dozens of people that were stranded in their cars, the structure actually split in half. The half on the far side of the overpass remained unchanged, but the side nearest to Steve seemed to be rising into the air.

He froze in horror as he realized that the city was somehow beginning to levitate. The thought had barely crossed Steve’s mind before he sprang back into action, sprinting out into the center of the bridge as the car closest to the edge began to teeter over the side. He was able to pull the back door off of the car nearest to him, watching out of his peripheral vision as the family inside went running for land, but by the time he made it to the final vehicle it was too late – despite his desperate grab for the car’s bumper, the body of the car and the woman inside went over the edge, plummeting towards the Earth which already looked to have moved hundreds of feet below them.

A familiar streak of red pelted through the air, giving Steve just enough time to make eye contact with Thor and nod before the Asgardian grabbed the driver out of the car and tossed her in Steve’s direction. She wasn’t going to be able to clear the edge of the bridge at the speed that they were moving upward, so Steve dangled himself over the side, hanging on for dear life with his right hand to the asphalt of the road while his left hand closed tightly around the woman’s wrist. He tossed her gently back onto the pavement above them before pulling himself back up; thankfully she didn’t need to be told to run for cover – but before she’d made it more than a few paces another damned robot came charging in their direction. “You think you can save them all?” Ultron’s voice asked tauntingly.

Steve lashed out, launching the shield as hard as he could past the civilian’s head and striking the bot in the chest plate with enough force for it to stick. He used his gauntlet to call the shield back, catching it with ease and turning with the momentum so that the bot was flung over the edge of the bridge, its power source too damaged to fly any longer. “Yeah, that’s the intention.” He shouted after it, before setting his shoulders and running back into the fray at the foot of the bridge.
The fact that the bridge was now too unsafe to remain on meant that Steve had another wave of civilians to look after, as everyone who had still been in their cars fled for the cover of the bus station. As if they’d been anticipating as much, a new crop of robots descended on the area, firing blasts of energy at the unarmed humans and dive-bombing them as they ran for safety. Steve was about to radio for assistance; the robots he might have been able to handle on his own eventually, but he wasn’t going to be able to cover enough ground to keep them from harming civilians. Before he’d so much as turned his com on he caught sight of Natasha at the foot of the bridge, shooting down one of the flying robots before it could attack the bus it was on course for while simultaneously taking one of the foot soldiers down with a flying kick.

Steve turned his attention to the family next to him, glad to see that she clearly had the situation under control for the moment, and ran with them along the length of the bridge, using the shield to cover the kids as another robot flew over them and opened fire. As soon as the threat of one of them being shot was cleared Steve threw the shield at the damned bot. While it was successful in knocking it out of the sky, it left his side open to get pelted by an incoming ground bot that knocked Steve on his ass into a pile of rubble.

He groaned as he called the shield back to him and rolled to his feet again.

“We’re clear in this quadrant, Cap!” Barton announced matter-of-factly into through Steve’s ear bud.

“We are NOT clear!” Steve shouted in response, flinging the shield to Natasha so that she could use it to deflect the shots of the pair of robots that had descended on her then delivering a roundhouse kick to the robot that had made its way towards him, both to avoid its attack and in hopes of catching it off guard enough that he could land at least a stunning blow on it. “We are VERY not clear!”

Barton responded with something about coming for help, but as Steve caught the shield back from Natasha and chucked it fruitlessly into another line of robots, he didn’t see how the hell Clint would ever make it to them in time to make a difference. A few feet away a group of robots had Natasha held down; Steve caught the shield on the rebound and made his way over to help her, only to get intercepted by another pair of bots that knocked him to the ground before he could properly aim the shield.

He jumped back to his feet immediately, again delayed in throwing the shield when he needed to use it to block an overhead attack from another robot; when he looked back to where Natasha was trapped it was just in time to see shots of blue plasma from above take out the two robots holding her down; Steve caught the shield on the rebound and made his way over to help her, only to get intercepted by another pair of bots that knocked him to the ground before he could properly aim the shield.

Steve turned towards the direction of the shots, trying to find who it was that had been providing help, but was interrupted in his search by Natasha’s panicked shout.

Steve turned again, instinctively raising the shield to cover his head when he heard the unmistakable sound of an incoming robot hurtling towards him, but the thing never made contact with the shield; there was another single shot of blue plasma, and the robot crashed heavily to the ground at Steve’s feet. He exhaled a short breath and looked up, grinning with relief as he looked for Bucky; he couldn’t imagine who else could have pulled off such a shot, and if he’d been locked up in the castle it made sense that he would have raided Strucker’s old hideout for weapons before coming to battle.

Instead of Bucky’s familiar form, though, a blonde woman dropped heavily from the roof of the building across from the bus station, sparing Steve a brief glance before turning her full attention to Natasha. Natasha gaped openly at Belova as she made her way slowly towards the two of them, holding her gun loosely in her right hand and keeping her left visible. “Natalia,” she murmured quietly, looking as put-off by Nat’s look of befuddlement as Steve was feeling.
“Yelena,” Natasha finally responded quietly, glancing sidelong at Steve for just a moment and then launching into questions in rapid-fire Russian. The two were talking far too quickly for Steve to hope to understand them, so he turned away slightly, keeping an eye out for more robots and contacting Barton to tell him that they no longer needed his back-up. While the selfish part of Steve would have loved another hand, it felt irresponsible to gather too many of them at one spot in the city; it was inevitable that Ultron would have more foot soldiers for them to fight before this was all over.

After talking to Barton and catching his breath Steve turned back to the Widows, who had moved considerably closer to one another and seemed to be wrapping up their conversation. Natasha gave Belova a long, hard look before nodding tightly and turning to Steve. “She’s here to help.”

Steve was doing his damndest to come up with a response that didn’t sound accusatory – he wanted to ask how they knew she could be trusted, a question that hardly seemed fair given the fact that he’d brought the Maximoffs on-board, but given the level of mind manipulation he knew that HYDRA had put Belova through Steve couldn’t help feeling wary of her. Before he could say anything, Belova chipped in with her own two cents. “The one with the metal arm, he sent me. He told me the two of you would still be willing to help break my programming, if I would help to fight the robots.”

Steve blinked in surprise. “You saw Bucky?” He asked stupidly, knowing that it was irresponsible for him to get held up on that bit of information but unable to help himself.

“I found him, in the castle,” Belova confirmed quietly, “we spoke and I freed him from his cage.”

“Where is he now?” Steve asked automatically, unable to bring himself to worry about anything else.

“He needed to radio your team and find weapons,” she answered. “He told me to go on without him and to find the two of you.”

Steve barely bit back his sigh of frustration, not wanting to give the wrong impression but wishing that she’d had a better answer for him. “Alright,” he said instead, “okay, good. Thank you - are you alright on ammunition?” Belova nodded mutely. “Great; get back on the roof and keep an eye out, then; Natasha and I need to start herding civilians into the bus station for safety, but I’m sure it’ll only be a matter of time before more of the robots to show up – it’d be good to have cover when they do.”

Belova followed orders without questioning them, giving Steve a brief nod before turning to running to the bus station, scaling the side of it and setting herself up on the roof with ease. Steve glanced quickly at Natasha, still questioning whether or not they were making the right call in trusting her, but Nat had already busied herself with taking out one of the robots that had been grounded but still had enough power to drag itself towards a group of civilians that were pinned down in a nearby alleyway. Steve shook his head at the absurdity of it all, glancing one more time over the edge of the city as they continued drifting upward into the sky and realizing they really had no choice but to take whatever human allies they could get.

He raised his shield back into position and ran into the nearest group of robots before he could worry about their chances any further.

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Bucky figured he’d made it approximately ten steps inside of the city limits when the ground started to shake beneath his feet. He stopped for a moment, staring down at the street in confusion, before his instincts kicked in – without questioning it he sprinted as hard as he could in the direction he’d
already been heading, towards the center of the city. It turned out to be a good call: within seconds a fault-line opened up in nearly the exact spot he had been standing, and with a jolt the ground beneath him began to ascend into the sky.

A meteor, Ultron had said… the bastard had rigged the damned city to fly, somehow, and would drop it when it reached the height that would be necessary to cause a mass extinction. Bucky swallowed down bile as he put the plan together, kicking himself for not having bothered him further about it. He could have potentially found the source of its power, or stayed behind and helped Thor find it to destroy it and avoided the whole mess they were about to find themselves in. Fighting off an army of robots was going to be bad enough – doing it on a city that was flying and could eventually wipe out not only them, but all life on Earth?

There was no time to dwell on it now; it wasn’t as if Bucky would be able to do anything on his own, anyway. His priority had to be finding the team and getting in on the fight as quickly as possible. The streets he ran through were eerily empty, though – with the exception of the odd robot that found its way out of the alleyways to impede his process, Bucky was barely encountering anyone. That quickly changed as he followed the unmistakable sounds of a firefight coming from a couple of blocks over.

He changed course, shooting a robot out of the sky as he rounded the corner into a side street that was full of the smaller robots that Ultron had been building in the castle. It took him a moment to notice the girl cowering away from them against a storefront, but Bucky launched into action before he could think any further on it; a couple of quick shots with the HYDRA gun vaporized the three bots closest to her, and he sprinted forward in the confusion, punching at one that was stupid enough to approach him on his left and turning his forearm on the connection, a sick sense of satisfaction thrumming through his body as the EMP discharged directly into the things face and dropped it easily to the ground. While it was a relief to see the generator still worked, Bucky felt a disconcerting jolt run from the socket of his shoulder into his teeth: between the ease with which he’d taken down the robot and the residual effects on his own body it was obvious that the thing was considerably more powerful than he’d grown used to in the year since it had been installed, and he made a brief mental note to take care with how forcefully he discharged it.

Before he could think any further on it Bucky was standing between the robots and the store front. He swatted another bot away from the girl as it dove, before grabbing her and punching out the storefront window with his left fist, then pulling them both inside to momentary safety.

Bucky’s initial plan had been to simply leave the girl there and go back out to wipe the robots out himself, but he hesitated as he got back to his feet, recognizing her face; it wasn’t just any girl that he’d grabbed, but the Maximoff girl. He vaguely remembered her having saved Steve on the train, as well as Thor’s news that the both of them had decided to join up with the Avengers to save their city – the fact that Ultron had been going after her now only confirmed for Bucky that Belova wasn’t the only former enemy that might be an asset in their fight.

“Are you with us?” He asked her harshly, turning momentarily to blast a robot as it tried to climb through the broken glass then turning back to get her answer.

Instead of responding she continued to cower, but after a second of frustration Bucky closed his eyes for a moment and then actually forced himself to pay attention to the sight in front of him. Suddenly, rather than seeing the damned witch that had messed with his mind in Johannesburg or the scared little girl that he had originally noticed on the street, Bucky saw the face of every green private he had ever fought beside on the frontlines in Europe. Her wide, staring eyes and pale face could have been any of the other kids he’d gotten far too used to trying to talk up out of foxholes and back into firefight, before Kreischberg had happened and Steve had pulled him away from the regular lines
for the sake of fighting with the Howlies.

He swallowed thickly and ignored the mean voice in the back of his mind that reminded him what probably happened to most of the poor bastards that he’d told to chin-up in the past… for now they didn’t have time to dwell on the horrors of previous battles or the risk of what they were about to face; she was young and scared, but she was still a soldier that Bucky’s team needed if it was going to stand a shot at winning. He rolled his shoulders then squatted down next to her.

“Hey, Wanda?” He asked gently, hoping that he was still remembering her name right from the quick glance he’d had at their dossiers on Steve’s StarkPad. “It’s Wanda, right?” The girl nodded, still staring at nothing over his shoulder, her eyes seeming like they took up half of her face, leaving her looking even younger than Bucky remembered her being. “This is your first firefight, isn’t it?” Bucky asked bluntly, smiling gently when she blinked at him in confusion. “I mean… I know you guys have probably seen some shit, living here your whole lives, but this is your first time being in the fight, right?”

Wanda shuddered violently, nodding at Bucky and again staring out the window in terror. “Yeah,” he continued calmly, “you had that look about you – I think I’ve seen it on a couple thousand fresh cadets at this point.” This time, the words got no response; Bucky sighed before continuing, hoping he could get through to her before they were attacked again. “I’ll let you in on a little secret, though? My first time on an actual battlefront… some idiot in sniper training had decided a few extra months of specialized basic meant I was battle-tested enough to be an officer on a freakin’ line – anyway, my first real fight, twenty minutes in; my CO got half his head blown off two feet away from me. Pretty positive I shit myself before he hit the ground.”

That at least got the girl’s eyes on Bucky, although they were still more blank than he’d have liked. “And the worst part is? I’ve seen it happen to so many guys since that I’m not even sure I remember his face anymore. How fucked is that?”

Wanda frowned at him, mute but looking more confused than terrified. Bucky decided to count it as progress. “I’ll let you in on another secret,” he continued, lowering his voice and leaning in closer to her, “although you might already know this one… all these years? All the fights I’ve been in? I’m still scared as fuckin’ hell. I hate ‘em just as much today as I did seventy years ago – if I didn’t have Steve’s ass to watch, I’d probably end up desertin’.

“I used to think that made me a coward – but the more time I’ve had to actually think about it, the more I’ve realized it means I’m still kind of human, y’know?” Bucky paused and chewed on his lip for a moment, never breaking eye contact with Wanda. “But here’s the thing; I’m still a soldier. And I’ve still got a job to do – all of us who signed up to fight, as long as we’re in the battlefield, no matter how horrified we are… when the shit starts to fly, it’s fine to be scared, but you’ve gotta bottle that shit and bury it as deep inside of you as you can. Just hide it away from your brain and fight like hell until the threat has passed. And if you’re really, really lucky, you get out of it and are able to figure out how to deal with it afterward.”

She didn’t look catatonic anymore, but Bucky could tell that Wanda still wasn’t buying his motivational speech. He wished like hell that Steve was with them – he’d ended up better at this shit than Bucky anyway, and was much more in practice to boot. An idea came to his mind; even though it was a low-blow, Bucky figured he’d try a different angle to try to get through to her. There was another scabble at the hole in the window; Bucky didn’t even look behind him, just pointed his gun in the direction and pulled the trigger, letting Wanda’s blinking look of surprise confirm that he’d killed the robot when he heard it hit the ground.

“Our dreams,” Bucky asked carefully, “when you put those visions in our heads, or drew them out,
or whatever it was – did you see them, too?” Wanda frowned heavily, hesitating for a long moment before nodding in response.

“So you know. You know what all of our worst fears are.”

This time her expression at least changed, morphing from a mask of terror to one of guilt as she muttered something under her breath in Sokovian. Bucky didn’t have to speak the language to figure that it was probably dwelling on blame for her role in the mess.

“Have you ever thought about your own?” He asked, cutting off her muttering and drawing her back to the issue at hand. Her eyes went to one of the side windows, although this time they tracked a blur as it raced past, rather than staying fixed and scared. Bucky didn’t have to turn and try to see her brother; he’d have bet anything that would have been her answer to begin with.

“Cuz here’s the thing, Wanda: if we don’t win today, if we don’t beat Ultron here? We’re all gonna have to live out our worst dreams. We’re gonna lose everything that’s ever mattered to any of us.” Her eyes snapped back to Bucky’s; while they were still obviously scared, there was now a harder, more determined quality to them than the petrified kid that had sat in front of him a few minutes prior. “And I don’t think we’re gonna be able to beat him without you.”

She took a deep breath, staring out the door for a second more before setting her jaw and turning back to Bucky with a tight nod. “Alright,” she responded, her voice sounding like she was probably working on convincing herself more than she was actually responding to Bucky’s words. “Alright, let’s go then. I’m ready.”

“Fuckin’ right,” Bucky responded with a broad, encouraging grin, rising to his feet and holding his hand out to her. To his surprise, Wanda actually took it, allowing him to help her to her own feet and then moving with him towards the door. Her eyes were already beginning to glow red in anticipation when he glanced down at her one final time, and he shook off the disconcerted shiver that went down his spine in response; yes, he had a feeling that she was capable of even more than he already feared her for, but Bucky had to trust that she was on their side and go with it, despite the way his panicked mind protested the idea.

He kicked down the door before he could think any further on it, holding his gun at the ready as they both stepped out of the building together. Predictably, a crowd of robots had gathered in their absence, and a whole group of repulsors fired up in synchrony as they took aim at the pair. Bucky opened fire immediately, dropping two of them before they could get any shots off then grabbing a third by the leg as it tried to fly at him, twisting it to the ground and discharging an EMP that powered it down simultaneously. The rush of adrenaline that he felt with his own kills was nothing on what he got when he glanced back to Wanda: the scared, cowering girl that he had found was completely gone, replaced with a frankly terrifying young woman glowering up at the robots that were still hovering around them. A red mist had surrounded the area, and one by one the robots were being pulled to pieces as Wanda contorted her hands and arms, manipulating the metal as she dropped them all one by one. The remaining couple that had stayed out of her reach took off down a side street, leaving them both standing in a pile of rubble and disassembled robot parts.

“You alright to cover this quadrant, then?” Bucky asked, feeling stupid – as if he had much of anything to offer her, given the fact that she’d just proven that she was probably more powerful than all of the rest of them combined.

“There are still civilians down the street, but I’ll take care of them. You go; the Captain said they needed help by the bridge.” She pointed vaguely down one of the main streets nearby – Bucky didn’t bother checking in with her again, instead taking off at a run, as confident in her abilities now as he was anxious to get to Steve’s side.
With an extra gun in the mix and the last of the civilians off of the bridge and safely under the cover of the bus station, Steve felt like they were finally starting to get the robot situation under control—or as under control as they were going to get it, given the circumstances. However, as the altitude of the city continued to steadily rise higher, he also realized that none of it was going to mean a damned thing if they didn’t solve the far larger problem at hand. He tossed his shield at one final robot, taking a running leap at the thing when the shield got stuck in its chest plate then kicking it back into an adjacent van, driving the shield through its center and cutting it cleanly in half.

He picked up the shield as he stood again, flipping on his com when he looked around and saw no further robots approaching. “Stark – what’s the story about landing?”

“Uh, not great.” Tony responded quietly after far too long of a hesitation. “There’s no way to shut down the device that’s launching us without dropping the whole rock, we’re on one-way thrusters. But I have worked out a way that we might be able to vaporize the city.”

Steve pursed his lips in frustration, shaking his head at Natasha as she approached on his right before responding to the answer. “I asked for a solution, Tony, not an escape plan.”

“The impact radius is getting bigger every second, Cap. Eventually we’re gonna have to make a choice.”

Steve opened his mouth to argue that their only choice was to find a better option, but Natasha interrupted him with a gentle hand on his elbow. “Steve, these people aren’t going anywhere. If Stark can find a way to blow this rock…”

“No,” he interrupted tightly, giving the same command to Tony. “We’re not giving the order to blow the city until everyone is safe. Come up with a better plan.” He cut his com connection sharply, frowning as he looked around in hope of coming up with a better solution himself.

Natasha gaped at him openly. “You’d choose everyone up here versus everyone down there? There’s no math in that, Steve.”

“I’m not leaving this rock with one civilian on it, Natasha.” Steve responded tightly, still looking anywhere but her face. “I didn’t come up here to half-ass a battle and then sacrifice thousands of people for our mistakes.”

“I didn’t say we should leave,” she responded gently. “I mean… if we’re gonna go down, at least we’ll do it fighting. And it’s not like we’re ever gonna get a better view.”

Steve followed her eyeline, looking out into the mountains that they were now beginning to fly over. There still hadn’t been word from anyone on the team that Bucky had been sighted since Thor’s first call; if he’d been left behind, then at least he’d be safe in the aftermath of the explosion – he’d be able to start his own life without the constant threat of Steve’s exploits hanging over his head, dragging him back into battle. And if he was already dead… well, Steve had worked out a plan for that – it was still strapped to the outside of his right thigh. “I suppose there’s worse ways to go.” He finally agreed quietly, keeping his eyes on the horizon in lieu of seeing the look of pity that was inevitably written on Natasha’s face.

“No,” a voice behind them interrupted gruffly. Steve spun so fast on his heel that he nearly lost his balance, his knees going weak with relief when he found Bucky standing there, even if he did look livid. “Fuck that,” Buck continued harshly, “we didn’t make it all this way to die now.”
Before his brain had completely caught up with what his body was doing Steve was moving towards Bucky. He closed the space between them in no time at all, dropping the shield at their feet as he grabbed Bucky by the shoulders, pulling him close and pressing their mouths together with more force than was probably necessary. Bucky pulled back slightly, obviously shocked by the public, admittedly over-dramatic kiss, but Steve couldn’t find it in himself to care. “Buck,” he choked quietly so that no one else would hear, still clinging to him desperately, running his hands over his face and shoulders in an attempt to confirm that he really was still alive. “God, Bucky, I’m so sorry…”

“It’s alright, Stevie.” Bucky responded gently.

“No, it isn’t,” Steve argued. “I shouldn’t’ve… Christ, Buck; if anything woulda happened to you…”

“I’m fine, I swear,” Bucky responded softly, holding Steve at arm’s length so that he could get a better look at him. It was true, as far as Steve could see the worst that had happened to him was getting his uniform scuffed up and his hair blown into a wild nest of tangles. He could have cried with relief.

“But,” Bucky added, raising his voice and stepping back out of Steve’s embrace as he glared back and forth between him and Natasha, “if I hear either of you talkin’ like that again, I will absolutely kick both your asses. Now let’s quit moping around and start figuring out how the hell we’re savin’ the world today.”

Steve sighed, rubbing the back of his neck and looking around at the mess that surrounded them. “The problem is that the higher the city goes, the more damage it’s gonna do – Ultron isn’t kidding when he says he could use it to wipe out life on Earth. Right now Tony’s got a plan that could probably destroy the city into small enough bits that they wouldn’t be a problem down there, but nothing else.”

Bucky frowned at Steve’s explanation. “So what’s the issue? We finish clearing the city then do it.”

Natasha scoffed audibly. “I don’t know if it’s escaped your notice, Barnes, but we’re already at least a couple of miles in the air. Where do you propose we clear the people in the city to?”

“The ground seems as good a place as any,” Bucky responded with equal sarcasm.

“And how do we get them there? There’s still a few thousand people huddled in the buildings – it’s not like we have that many parachutes, and the quinjet can carry fifteen at a time, max.”

“So we figure out a way to jerry-rig a transport for them and have the guys on the team who can fly ship them down.” Bucky responded after a moment’s silence.

“Buck,” Steve chimed in exhaustedly, “we’ve got three people capable of getting civilians out of here, and I doubt any of them can carry more than a couple at a time. We could shuttle people on the quinjet for a while, but like Natasha said, between the space and weight restrictions it’d be a fool’s errand in the end. We might be able to get ourselves out before a blast, but…”

“I know,” Bucky interrupted, begrudgingly. “I’m not saying we leave the civilians behind as a sacrifice, Steve, I know we’ve gotta get them out, too. I’m just saying there’s gotta be a way to make it work…”

“And,” Steve continued on impatiently, “we need both Thor and Stark to actually blow the thing up once it’s clear. We ain’t got time for that – we’ll reach too high an altitude for people to be breathing
before we could pull it off, assuming Ultron doesn’t drop the rock first. So unless Tony can come up
with a way to lower the city back at a controlled speed, it’s not gonna happen; we don’t have the
manpower to pull it off.”

Bucky’s initial scowl at Steve’s argument started to fade off of his face before he could offer a retort,
leaving him wide-eyed and stunned as he stared over Steve’s shoulder. Before he could turn to see
what it was that had Bucky so worked up, another voice spoke up in Steve’s ear bud. “Maybe you
should try calling in a few more friends, Rogers.”

Steve turned slowly, a surprised smile already forming on his lips. He hadn’t doubted Fury when
he’d promised them something dramatic for a plan, but the last thing he’d expected was to see a
helicarrier – the one they’d first met the rest of the team on, if his memory served him right and the
scars on the side of the enormous ship weren’t his mind playing tricks on him. Where he’d found it
on such short notice, how the hell he’d put a team together fast enough that he could get it in the air
and to their location on-time was completely lost on Steve; right now, all that mattered was that it
would be plenty large enough to unload the civilians from the city safely.

“Fury, you son of a bitch,” he muttered into his com, shaking his head as Bucky laughed beside him.

“Lovely to see you too, Cap,” Fury responded sarcastically, launching into an explanation of how
he’d dug the ship and crew out of storage – Steve was still too relieved by the entire thing to really
listen; all that mattered was that they had a fighting chance again.

A small fleet of lifepods launched out of the side of the helicarrier as a flash of silver streaked past
them, stopping when the Maximoff boy leaned over the side of what was left of the bridge, his face
as happy and awed as Steve still felt. “This is SHIELD?” He asked over his shoulder, before
turning and giving Steve the first sincere smile he’d seen directed towards anyone other than his
sister.

“This is what SHIELD is supposed to be.” Steve responded proudly, watching as the lifepods began
to descend on the city. He allowed himself one more second of appreciation before turning around
and doling out orders; they were still on a time limit, after all. “Alright – Bucky, you get up on the
roof of the station here; safe bet is there will be another wave coming soon, you can help Belova give
us cover while we start getting these people onto the boats.” He flipped his com on to the rest of the
group at large, “Barton, Wanda – are you guys seeing this?”

“Not really believing it, but yeah,” Clint responded with a short huff of laughter that Steve couldn’t
help agreeing with.

“Yeah, well – we’ll take the miracles we can get,” Steve said. “Our priority right now is going to be
evac again, you two keep an eye out for any new bots, we’ll need to keep them away from the
civilians when they show up again. Pietro,” he turned back to the Maximoff kid, “think you’ve had
enough of a breather to start rounding up stragglers?”

Instead of a verbal response Steve got a smug smirk and a plume of dust as he took off into the city
center again; it was all that the rest of them needed to get back into motion, swiftly making their way
around to each of the buildings that they’d hid civilians in, leading them out in shifts so that they
could safely and efficiently fill the lifepods and get away from the city.

The first pod was almost full when the next round of robots came streaking towards them, repulsors
powered up and trained on the unarmed civilians. Steve raised his shield to cover as many as he
could; while the suppressive fire from Belova and Bucky was taking out an impressive number of the
offensive before they reached their targets, Steve didn’t see how the two of them would be able to
take the entire fleet down.
He was in the middle of trying to hash out a plan to get the lifepod safely off the ground, calculating the best place to move their snipers to, when Fury called out an order and a pair of figures flew out the side of the helicarrier. War Machine banked left, covering the carrier itself from a swarm of robots that were trying to take it down, but a familiar winged soldier swooped over the lifepod that Steve was covering, using a pair of modified uzis taking out the remaining bots with ease.

“Cap!” Sam’s voice chimed in Steve’s ear bud, “Man, I freakin’ told you to call me in for your next firefight. I’m starting to get the feeling that you guys don’t actually want The Falcon around.”

Steve chuckled lightly, stepping off of the lifepod with a sigh of relief and motioning to its crew to take it back to the ship, shaking his head as Sam flew back with it as protection. “Sorry, Sam,” he finally responded. “I got caught up in a few other worries, I guess… it’s really damned good to see you, though.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sam replied teasingly, swooping back as the lifepod landed safely on the helicarrier, “let’s spare the sappy shit for once this is all over, huh?”

“Yeah, alright,” Steve laughed, stopping an incoming bot with an uppercut then bringing the shield down hard on its neck, severing its head off before stepping out of the way so that the latest lifepod could land in its position. A pair of shots rang out overhead, dropping the robots that would have otherwise been a threat, and Steve gave a short, customary salute in Bucky’s direction as he ran forward to lead the next group of civilians to safety.

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There continued to be a steady stream of robots coming from the city center, occasionally trying to target in on the lifepods as the team continued loading civilians into them, but it turned out that Belova was every bit as good of a shot as Steve had told Bucky – between the two of them, they had no problem keeping the people on the ground in their area safe. The couple of times that a group of them moved too far out of range of their guns, or the one time that a group attempted to attack the helicarrier directly, the familiar silhouettes of War Machine and Sam with his Falcon wings swooped in to the rescue, eliminating the threats before they could cause civilian casualties.

For all intents and purposes, the fight had taken a shockingly positive turn in their direction – which meant Bucky was becoming progressively edgier as victory seemed more within their reach, waiting for the shoe to drop on the next disaster despite his best efforts to stay positive.

Without warning, both Steve and Natasha took off at a run for the middle of the city. Bucky cursed under his breath as he saw them go, wishing like hell that he had an earpiece in so that he could keep track of what the rest of the team was up to. As he saw Sam pass overhead and actually land, apparently moving in to take their place in loading the pods, Buck knew it wasn’t likely to be anything good.

“You cover them here, I’m gonna follow the others!” He shouted over his shoulder, not bothering to wait for Belova’s response before launching himself off of the roof at a sprint, rolling when he hit the ground and running as hard as he could for the center of the city.

While the increasingly thinning air and the head start they had gotten meant he wasn’t able to catch up with Steve, Bucky was only a few seconds behind him in stumbling into the ruins of an old church, where the rest of the group was already waiting for them. Stark stood at the middle of the group, next to a weird spinning piece of machinery that Bucky would bet money on being the engine of whatever the hell was powering the city’s flight. He was flanked by Thor and a weird-looking green and red man that Bucky guessed was the Android – he was looking forward to a free moment when this was all over to try to get a straight read on what the hell had happened in the few hours
that he’d been separated from the group.

Barton stood to the right of Steve, while the Hulk crouched down inside of the ruins, grunting and glaring out towards where Bucky guessed the robots were still congregating. Lastly, the Maximoff twins stood together at the far corner of the group, looking out of place but ready to join in on the action.

“Alright, what’s the drill?” Natasha asked after hopping down from the plow that she’d commandeered to get there, making her way into the circle to stand next to Clint.

Stark looked around at all of them before moving towards the raised mechanical platform that was turning lazily in the center of the ruins. “This is the drill – if Ultron gets his hand on the core, we lose.”

As if on cue, the main bot descended from the sky a few meters away, hovering ominously as they all closed ranks to circle around the core.

“Is that the best you can do?!” Thor shouted lustily, raising Mjölnir above his head.

Ultron simply waved his hand in response; within seconds the streets around the church were teaming with robots, which seemed to continue crawling out of every visible hiding place, buzzing with anticipation behind Ultron’s command.

“You had to ask…” Steve muttered, shooting Thor a dirty look.

“This is the best I can do,” Ultron called out proudly. “This is exactly what I wanted: all of you against all of me. How can you possibly hope to stop me?”

There was a beat of silence before Tony’s voice sounded out of the Iron Man suit. “Like the old men said,” he started, glancing towards where Bucky and Steve were already standing at the ready, “together.”

There was a beat of silence that allowed them all to close ranks even further, and then Ultron gave his final signal to the rest of the robots and all hell broke loose. In an instant the church was swarming with bots, attacking from the ground level and above. Given the sheer size of the offensive force, it was all that the team could do to hold their positions and fight them off, each playing to their own strengths to hold off the onslaught.

Bucky was practically attached to Steve’s hip, which worked well for the two of them sharing the shield – although Bucky’s main focus was his gun, it was nice to be able to block shots when the robots opened fire. He covered Steve’s back whenever one of them needed to throw the shield, dropping robots left and right as he noticed the rest of the team doing the same in his peripheral vision.

It was all going relatively well until a group of robots attacked them both simultaneously. While they were able to fight them off in hand-to-hand combat, one of the bastards was able to grab the HYDRA gun out of Bucky’s grasp, crushing it with a sickening groan of metal and hiss of the battery inside powering down. Bucky lashed out against the robot with his left arm, grabbing its shoulder and firing an EMP large enough to drop it on the spot. He was so keyed up by the moment that he was able to ignore the jolt of discomfort that accompanied the action – instead Bucky went into a frenzy, attacking the robots left and right, not even bothering to take the shield from that point on; Steve needed it more than he did, anyway. His vision went hazy as he discharged pulse after pulse from the EMP at growing strengths on the robots that continued to come at them, but Bucky squinted and continued fighting, honing his focus to nothing but Steve, the core, and the bastards that
kept coming at them.

The next few minutes were an odd blur of colors, flashing lights, pain, and the inexplicable smell of burnt toast – but the next thing that Bucky knew he was standing over a pile of decimated robots and half of the team seemed to have left the church. He couldn’t be bothered to try to figure out where they had ended up, though; instead all that he seemed to be able to focus on was how weird his tongue felt against the roof of his mouth and how garbled things sounded around him. With the immediate threat eliminated Bucky came back to himself, realizing with startling clarity how much damage his body had incurred from the sustained use of the EMP generator. The joints where the metal of his left arm met Bucky’s skin felt like they were on fire, and now that the sounds of battle were largely gone he noticed how loud the ringing in his ears had become. It wasn’t that he hadn’t expected consequences to playing around with the generator, but Bucky certainly hadn’t been expected them to be as painful as they were turning out to be.

He was in the middle of flexing his jaw, trying to relieve the cramp that had started to run from his shoulder all the way up his neck, when Steve touched his right arm; Bucky turned to him, frowning at the plain look of concern on his face. Steve’s voice was muffled when he asked if Bucky was okay – he’d have bet real money that it was an inquiry Steve had already made multiple times, given the look in his eyes.

Bucky tried to answer yes, but whatever came out of his mouth didn’t seem to have any meaning to Steve. Even worse, his right arm had started shaking violently enough that Natasha had moved over to check on Bucky as well, giving Steve a look of confusion before looking up at Bucky and speaking in irritatingly slow, even words.

“I just need some fresh air for a second,” he tried to say nonchalantly, glad that his left arm was still working well enough that he could gently push Steve away from him and then walking as calmly as he could out of the ruins of the church. It was a hugely pleasant surprise when no one tried to stop or rush after him.

Bucky made it a few paces outside into the sunlight before realizing with a start that he’d found the rest of the team. Ultron was facing down Thor, Iron Man and the Android, looking considerably worse for wear than Bucky would have thought he would be – he wished that the buzzing sound in his ears would let up enough that he could hear what was being said between the four of them. A second later the Hulk had also exited the building, running up to where Ultron had still been standing (although barely) and punching the robot hard enough that he went soaring into the air and over the rooftops of a number of buildings. His triumphant roar was loud enough that Bucky could actually make it out.

His jaw was finally starting to relax when the dust settled, and Bucky did his best to look normal as the team started to regroup and make their final plans for ending the battle. Before he could step back inside, though, Bucky’s progress was halted by a metal hand falling gently on his shoulder. He turned to find Tony standing behind him, his voice filtering tinny and quiet through his faceplate.

“It’s funny… I spend three years giving you endless options for tricks on this thing, and in the end you go ahead and mod it into a bug zapper in a single afternoon.”

Bucky looked down at the arm, unable to help feeling a little guilty for having gotten caught. He knew, of course, that he probably should have asked Tony about the possible repercussions of what he’d done to the generator before using it to the capacity that he had in the church, but it wasn’t as if they’d had time to talk shop. “Desperate times call for desperate measures, I guess,” he ended up muttering, before giving Stark a broad smile. “At least it’s workin’, right?” He instinctively clenched his right hand into a fist, thankful that the shaking had finally stopped, and that he was apparently able to speak again.
Even with the distortion of the helmet, Tony’s tone made it clear that he wasn’t returning the smile at all. “I don’t suppose you found something to act as a replacement insulator?”

Bucky shook his head, trying to look far more confident than he felt. “Nah, didn’t have much to go by as far as equipment went – I just pulled the regulator and plugged the generator straight into the arc reactor.”

“Be careful with that, okay?” Stark responded immediately. “I’ll put a new insulator on it when we get back to New York, just… make sure you don’t recruit all of your muscle groups when you discharge it.”

“I haven’t had any problems with it so far…” Bucky lied, hoping that Stark hadn’t been paying attention a few minutes earlier.

“No, seriously Barnes,” Tony continued, his voice disturbingly stern. “I know what you might be thinking, but the full power of the arc reactor discharging as an EMP would, at best, fry the arm. And I don’t mean temporarily… the neurocomponents weren’t built for that kind of power surge.”

Bucky grimaced, recognizing that Stark wouldn’t be worried about it if he thought it would be a repairable problem. “Okay – well, what’s the worst case scenario?”

To Bucky’s surprise, the helmet of the suit flipped up, revealing Tony’s pale, concerned-looking face. “That it would shut down everything that relied on electrical currents within a few meters’ radius,” he answered evenly, giving Bucky a pointed look. “Including organic components.”

“What’s that include?” Bucky asked quietly, already putting together what he was getting at… it didn’t take a genius to realize that the arm had already fucked up something in his head once today.

Tony’s mouth pinched even tighter as he glanced around, apparently to make sure that no one else was listening before answering. “Your heart or your brain. Possibly both.”

Bucky nodded silently in response; he’d kind of figured that Tony had been trying to hint at the fact that the arm was dangerous enough to kill him, so hearing it wasn’t exactly a surprise. Considering the fact that the effects of the fight in the church were already largely worn off he didn’t foresee having to use enough force to make it an issue, but he also wasn’t quite willing to promise anything as far as holding back went… if it became necessary to use the generator at full-capacity, if he didn’t see any other option for it, Bucky knew he’d do it instead of standing idly by. He was just glad that Steve hadn’t been around to hear the conversation – he could only imagine how impossible the hypocrite would have been, if he knew what Bucky had done and the risks it involved.

He moved back into the church with Tony; the team was already starting to disperse on Steve’s orders so Bucky put Stark’s warning out of his mind, instead deciding to focus on whatever their final plans were.

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Their jobs for the rest of the mission were relatively straight-forward, as far as Steve could see. Anyone capable of flight was to go after the remaining bots and take them out – they couldn’t risk any of them escaping the final blast, but between Vision, Thor and Tony, and with Sam and Rhodey’s help, Steve felt confident that they were up to the task. Given the proficiency she’d shown in fighting over the course of the day, Wanda was left in charge of guarding the core, while it was Pietro’s job to sweep the city on the ground, to take out any bots that were incapable of flight but still had enough power to be an issue, and to alert the rescue team of any civilians that hadn’t made it to the lifepods yet.
Natasha would bring in Belova: she’d been an impressive help in the fight, but none of them was certain yet how she’d react to being taken on-board the helicarrier, so it made the most sense to keep the two of them paired. With all of that done, it only left the Hulk to be dealt with – although that was proving to be a challenge, given the fact that Thor would be occupied with the bots and the Hulk had taken off into the city again once the fight in the church had ended.

Barton looked around at the team members who were left before giving a long-suffering sigh and holding his hand out in Thor’s direction. “Fine;” he sighed, “hand over the Lullaby stuff, I’ll do it.”

“Really?” Steve asked skeptically, perfectly ready to take on the challenge himself if needed.

“Yeah,” Clint said with a shrug. “Worst case scenario I’ll just strap it to an arrow and shoot him.”

Steve couldn’t keep himself from cringing, imagining how badly that idea could end up for all of them. “Thanks, Barton, but I think I’ll just take care of it…”

“No, seriously,” Clint interrupted. “I was kidding about the arrow, I know better than that. I’ll go take care of the big guy, you can cover more ground to check on civilians, anyway; we’re getting high enough that us mortal humans aren’t going to be able to breathe for much longer.”

“You’re sure?” Steve asked as Barton took the Lullaby vial from Thor – while he definitely had to agree with Clint’s assessment of the situation, he still worried about the guy facing off against the Hulk.

“Not even a little bit,” Clint responded with a grim smile, tucking the vial into one of the pockets on his belt. “But someone’s gotta do it and I’m free – I’ll figure it out.” Before anyone else could put up further disagreement Clint nodded at Natasha and the two of them made their way back to the plow that she’d left parked outside.

Bucky walked into the church a moment later and Steve paused, looking him over as closely as he could without being too obvious about it. He was still pale as hell and frazzled-looking, but his eyes at least looked more with it than when the battle had first ended. It had been horrifying, watching him stumble around shaking and mumbling in the aftermath of the fight, especially when Steve hadn’t known the first thing to do to help. Buck gave him a tight, awkward smile, obviously waiting for instructions, so Steve continued on.

“Alright then, I’ll sweep the area between here and the bridge for stragglers, make sure we’ve got everybody out, then meet you guys on the boats,” Steve said with a decisive nod. “Buck, you should…”

“Come along and help you, I agree,” Bucky interrupted, glaring Steve down when he opened his mouth to protest. “I heard that last bit… Barton was right, the air’s getting awfully thin, pal - it’s a bad idea for any of us to go off on our own at this point. Last thing we need is someone passing out and getting left behind.”

Steve wanted nothing more than to argue that Bucky should just focus on getting his ass safely onto one of the pods, but as he continued to look at him he couldn’t find a reasonable argument to prove his point. Nothing about Bucky looked injured now, and he was speaking perfectly normally – plus, his argument did make sense. With a sigh, Steve grabbed Bucky’s sidearm from its holster, handing the gun over by the handle. “At least take this, then,” he said quietly, deciding that saying anything different would be a waste of breath. They each gave a final nod to Wanda and took off at a light jog, sweeping the surrounding streets and poking their heads inside of each passing building to listen and watch for remaining survivors.
Thankfully, the job was already largely done; Bucky had managed to find one small pocket of Sokovians trapped in a cellar-turned-bomb shelter and sent them off to safety, while Steve had taken out a pair of robots who had been combing the streets for more nefarious reasons, but otherwise they made their way back to the bridge in good time. There were a couple of larger housing structures around the bus station where Steve reluctantly agreed to split up, making his way into the first building while Bucky ran up the street and shouted through the windows there. After sweeping the first two floors Steve called the building empty and made his way back outside, first glancing down the street to confirm that Bucky was still there digging through rubble and then looking into a nearby park where he’d caught a glimpse of the Hulk.

Steve watched Barton approach him cautiously, holding a nervous breath as he looked on. The Hulk threw his head back a couple of times, not appearing to be too pleased with Clint’s offering, but after a tense few seconds he held a giant green hand out, allowing Barton to prick his finger with the Lullaby syringe. The Hulk swayed and went down, his skin already growing paler and his proportions shrinking down to Banner’s size, and Steve couldn’t help smiling in relief, the overwhelming sense that they were actually going to pull the mission off washing over him.

The thought had barely finished crossing his mind when a pair of bots flew into the park, opening fire on the two of them. Barton moved to help Bruce, who was still shaking on the ground, but Steve didn’t see any way they were going to be able to avoid the attack; there wasn’t even a space in the park that Clint would be able to drag them to cover.

Steve blinked, and suddenly they were standing on the street corner opposite him, looking just as confused by what had happened as Steve was feeling. The robots continued on their course, flying overhead, but this time Barton was able to pull them underneath an overhang for cover at the same time that two shots rang out from down the street, dropping both of the robots in their tracks.

That was when Steve noticed the third person in their mix – the Maximoff boy was lying at Clint’s feet, writhing awkwardly on the pavement as Barton crouched beside him.

Steve moved towards the three of them instinctively, kneeling next to Clint at the boy’s side. There was a single, large exit wound in the upper right side of his chest that was staining his shirt deep red at an alarming rate – Steve began to move his hands to try to stem the bleeding from it, but as he looked closer at the wound he felt completely out of his depth. The fact that Bruce was still coming down from his transformation and would be no help made the situation feel that much bleaker. Steve knew enough to hold pressure to wounds or to put a tourniquet on a bleeding limb – but this seemed like a much, much bigger problem. In addition to the blood the kid was gasping for air, making terrible, rattling wet noises with every breath: if he was already struggling to draw air in, it seemed counterintuitive to put more pressure on his chest. Especially now that Steve could finally draw his eyes somewhere other than the blossoming wound and Pietro’s panicking eyes to see his lips were starting to turn blue.

Clint did finally move, shedding his jacket and using the sleeve to put pressure on the wound, but Steve was still too caught up in listening to Pietro’s increasingly frantic gasping to pay attention to whatever it was that Barton said. He had no idea how long he knelt there, looking around like an idiot, before a shadow passed low overhead. That got Steve’s attention, and he immediately sprung back into action, whipping the shield around to defend his teammates from whatever metal bastard was getting ready to come in and strike them while they were down.

He blinked in surprise when it was Sam who landed next to him, completely ignoring Steve and pushing Barton aside as his wings retracted into their pack and he squatted next to Pietro, concern and concentration etched into his face.
Hey man – hey, my name’s Sam. I’m a medic, okay?” He said calmly, stripping Clint’s jacket away and pushing Pietro’s shirt up before frowning heavily as he looked at the wound and his face. “Just the one hit?” He asked distractedly as he began tapping his fingers along the side of Pietro’s chest and put his ear below the wound.

“I think so – it all happened too fast to say for sure, but I think he beat the rest.” Clint responded hollowly.

Sam was already pressing gently against the base of Pietro’s throat. “Fuck, I’m pretty positive that’s a tension pneumo,” he muttered, so quietly that Steve doubted anyone else had heard. “Listen, Pietro… Pietro, can you hear me?” He asked more loudly, forcing a smile as Pietro finally looked at him with panicked eyes. “I think the shot hit your lung and collapsed it, and your chest is filling with air, which is why you can’t breathe.” The only response he got was more frantic gasping, but given the way he was already pulling supplies out of the pack on his hip Steve guessed that Sam had been expecting as much. “Now the good news is, I can put a little hole in the side of your chest to get the air out, and we’ve got docs on the main ship over there that will be able to fix you up the rest of the way…” he paused as he pulled the plastic wrapping off of an enormous needle and tore an alcohol pad open with his teeth, quickly wiping down a spot low on Pietro’s right ribs. “The bad news is, this is gonna really hurt for a second – I’m sorry, dude.”

Sam had barely finished talking before he stabbed the needle into Pietro’s side. The results were immediate: there was a loud hiss of air and Pietro coughed harshly, but the next time that he gasped the breath actually sounded normal. “Alright,” Sam said with a triumphant grin, leaning down closer and taping the needle in place, “just focus on breathing for a while here, but you can nod for me – did that help?”

It didn’t look to Steve like Pietro could have talked if he’d wanted to – Steve was all too familiar with the look on the boy’s face as he gasped air like it was the sweetest thing he’d ever tasted. The altitude that they were still gaining couldn’t be helping his oxygen deprivation, but at least his lungs seemed to work again; already his lips were starting to return to a more normal color as he nodded at Sam.

“Awesome,” Sam responded simply, stuffing a pile of gauze against the wound. Even as he was dressing the wound, Sam looked over his shoulder to Barton. “He should be alright to move in a minute or two; Clint, you help get Doctor Banner back on the life pod, they’ll be heading back as soon as we’re loaded on. Cap – can you help me carry this guy back? Air’s gettin’ thin enough that I don’t think I can do it, and I want to watch the stoma here, anyway.”

Steve nodded absently, relief washing over him as he looked back in Bucky’s direction – only to have dread flood through him again when he realized that the block was otherwise empty. He took a few steps towards the corner he’d last seen Bucky patrolling, but there was no sign of new damage or bodies left behind. Maybe he’d just continued on to the next block…

“Steve!” Sam yelled, drawing his attention back to the Maximoff boy. “’C’mon, he’s stable enough for now but we can’t keep waiting.”

Steve swept his gaze around one last time, looking for any sign of Bucky, before turning back to Sam and carefully scooping Pietro up. In all likelihood, Buck had just seen that they had the situation under control and headed to the pod himself, getting the last of the survivors on board and staying out of the way while Sam did his magic.

He continued telling himself as much, carefully avoiding Sam’s worried looks as they made their way to where the last lifepod was waiting.
Bucky was in between clearing out apartment buildings when he heard the pair of bots fly by firing; he reacted on instinct, grabbing his gun from its holster and discharging his own shots as they passed overhead, dropping the both of them with relative ease. As soon as they’d hit the ground he turned back in the direction they’d come from, his heart dropping as he watched Steve fall to his knees.

After a moment’s panic Bucky realized that Steve hadn’t been injured, but was trying to tend to someone who had been during the attack. He took a couple of steps towards them automatically before stopping in his tracks – if the smaller robots were still flying around the city, there wasn’t a chance in hell that the main bot wasn’t still kicking. And while Stark had seemed certain that vaporizing the rock would do away with the robots as well, Bucky was skeptical: he knew what Ultron had created his primary form out of, and if it had been able to withstand the combined forces of their three hardest hitters and a punch from the Hulk, it didn’t seem a stretch to think that it would make it through the city exploding and the resulting fall.

Given how much damage the team had done to him in their standoff, it wasn’t likely that Ultron would still be an immediate threat – but if Bucky had learned anything over the years it was that he couldn’t count on an enemy being defeated until he saw the bastard dead in front of him. If there was even a chance that Ultron could still be alive, that he could fall into someone’s hands and be recreated, it seemed inevitable that they’d be thrown into this mess again.

The team might not have destroyed the main bot yet, but Bucky remembered how rough a shape its outer casing had been in after the aftermath of the church. He glanced down at his left hand thoughtfully – if there was a way to deliver a powerful enough, targeted force to the reactor that was powering the robot, they could be free of it once and for all. Bucky bit his lip, looking up again and checking that Steve was still totally occupied with taking care of the Maximoff boy, then turned and ran, remembering the direction the Hulk had punched the bot in and calculating the trajectory it would have taken during its fall as he went.

Unsurprisingly, the Hulk had hit the robot with enough force that he’d nearly ended up on the opposite side of the city by the time Bucky finally worked out his course; it was a challenge, running that far with the oxygen levels in the air dropping as low as they were, but within a couple of minutes he found himself standing next to a bus that had an enormous hole punched through the top of it, exactly where Bucky figured Ultron would have landed. He slowly approached the bus, breathing heavily through his nose and keeping a hand on his remaining gun as he pulled the bus door open and stepped inside, tensing up when he saw the huge robot reclined on one of the seats at the rear.

Despite its lack of motion and the obvious strain that its face and chest plate had been through, Bucky could see that its eyes were still glowing. He took a deep breath, flexing the fingers on his left hand and listening to the plates of his arm recalibrate in response, psyching himself up for what he knew he had to do. Stark’s voice rose in the back of Bucky’s mind, annoyingly reminding him of the risk of his plan – he pushed it away violently; at the end of the day, it would be worth it. Sure, Steve would be devastated – but he’d have the rest of their friends to support him. He could still get out, could find someone else, settle down, live in peace. In the end, it would be better than the two of them living in fear of history repeating itself.

Besides, Bucky had no idea how much power taking Ultron out would require, and Stark had said there was a chance that the generator could kill him, not a guarantee. At the end of the day, he had to at the very least give it a shot – he owed it to everyone not to abandon the opportunity to free them all from Ultron’s influence.

With one more deep, steadying breath, Bucky stepped up into the cab of the bus; only to blink in
surprise when there was a flash of red light that greeted him.

The Maximoff girl was already standing over Ultron’s prone form, her eyes and fingertips glowing ominously as she glared down at the robot. After a beat, Ultron shifted, looking up at her in surprise. “Wanda… what are you doing here? You’ll die if you stay.”

“I just did,” the girl responded coldly, tears running down her cheeks as the red light in her palms pulsed even brighter. “Do you want to know how it felt?”

Before Ultron could respond she focused the light from her right hand at his chest plate, frowning in concentration as the vibranium casing began to warp. Bucky watched in silent shock as the robot shrieked mechanically. A second later its chest plate burst open, and the core inside of it flew easily into Wanda’s open hand as the bot powered down completely.

“It felt like that.” She muttered harshly, dropping to her knees like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

After a long pause Bucky approached them both slowly, unable to tell if Wanda had passed out from the lack of oxygen and the effort that must have been required to warp the vibranium or if she was in emotional distress from whatever had happened that had set her off in the first place (Bucky would have bet anything that it had to do with her brother, but wasn’t about to ask as much). “Wanda,” he murmured quietly once he was a few steps away, not wanting to startle her and face the potential consequences but also knowing that they didn’t have time to waste in getting out of the city. “Wanda - we need to go, now. We’re getting too high, and I don’t know how much longer the team is gonna be able to keep us in the air.”

He shook her shoulder gently when his words got no response, then ended up lifting her carefully off of the floor of the bus, carrying her bridal-style out of the wreckage and away from what was left of the bastard that had caused the entire mess. As soon as they were out of the wreckage of the bus, Bucky took off running as fast as he could in the direction of the bridge, praying that one of the lifepods would still be waiting for them.

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Steve paced a short, tight box around the side of the lifepod, keeping his eyes on the street corner where he’d last seen Bucky. It had hardly taken any time to get Pietro loaded onto the lifepod and settled so that Sam could continue giving him care, but Steve had refused to let them take off for the helicarrier yet; while Barton had already gotten a still-shaken Doctor Banner onboard and Romanoff and Belova had already been talking quietly together in a corner of the pod when Steve had boarded, Bucky was still nowhere to be found.

After he’d counted five minutes off in his head Steve couldn’t wait any longer: he stepped off of the lifepod, ready to run back into the city to find where Bucky had gone to.

“Steve!” Natasha shouted, rolling to her feet with surprising ease and grabbing his wrist before he had completely dismounted the ship. “Please; wait here for him. We won’t be able to search for the both of you if we have to go.”

“Nat, I can’t…” Steve started tightly.

“He’ll come.” She interrupted, pulling him back onboard. “He’s just making sure the sweep is complete, then he knows to come back; if you go after him it’s just going to make things more confusing.”
Steve looked over to where Sam was still working frantically on Pietro, then back to the helicarrier.

“Two more minutes, then I’m going after him, and you all can take off without me.”

“Steve…”

He pulled his arm free with more force than was probably necessary, swallowing as he turned back to stare at the bus terminal. “That’s how it’s gonna be, Natasha. I told you before, I’m leaving with him, or I’m not leaving at all.”

She sighed heavily behind him but otherwise put up no further argument – after a couple of seconds he heard her take her seat again, along with quiet, angry muttering in Russian that he couldn’t be bothered to try to understand. Instead, Steve put the full-force of his concentration into willing Bucky to just show the hell up, to be okay. If he wasn’t…

He shook his head roughly to clear the thought, then again when he saw a familiar blue coat round the corner he’d been watching. It was slow going – clearly the lack of air and the fact that he was carrying the Maximoff girl was slowing him down – but Bucky came into view, running heavily for the pod. Steve could have cried in relief, and flipped on his com to ask Stark to hold off on whatever he had planned for just a few seconds more.

Unfortunately Tony beat him to the punch, suddenly yelling into his ear bud, “Shit! I think one of them…”

Steve’s mind blocked out the rest, his head filling with static rather than processing Stark’s words. Bucky was still a few dozen paces from the lifepod, his eyes wide with panic as the ground lurched beneath him. The next few seconds were a blur: Steve shouted and moved towards him but someone grabbed him around the waist with enough force to hold him back, Bucky tossed Wanda towards the lifepod to safety, and Steve reached forward as far as the arms holding him back would allow, desperately trying to grab hold of Bucky’s outstretched hands as the ground dropped away beneath them, screaming his name all the while.

~*~

By the time they were within a block of the bridge Bucky was panting heavily with exertion; even though Wanda wasn’t particularly heavy, the air was getting thin enough that he figured he would have been lightheaded running the distance he had under his own weight – carrying her was making the job seem infinitely harder. He sucked air desperately, adjusting his hold on her so that he could expand his chest even a little more, before pushing himself onward.

Wanda startled awake with the sudden movement, blinking up sluggishly at him. Bucky was too winded to say anything more than a strained, “You did good, kid.” He could only hope that she didn’t end up cursing him in her confusion. Thankfully, he made it another block without a flash of red; realizing that they were only a couple of streets away from their final destination Bucky forced his legs to pick up the pace even more.

“It would have been his worst nightmare, you know.” Wanda’s quiet voice interrupted his thoughts, surprising Bucky so much that he nearly tripped over his feet. “If you’d gone through with your plan.”

Thankfully Bucky was able to right himself without actually falling over or dropping her, but he did have to slow his pace a bit, sucking air desperately and glancing down at her in confusion.

“The Captain.” She clarified gently, taking a deep breath of her own. “His greatest fear was that you would sacrifice yourself in his name. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself for it.”
Her words hit like a punch to Bucky’s gut, but he pushed the feeling down, knowing that they didn’t have time for him to really let the impact sink in. Of course, it figured that had been Steve’s nightmare, the hypocrite – as if he wouldn’t have done the exact same thing, hadn’t tried to do the same damned thing multiple times in the past. “Yeah, well…” he finally panted, rounding another corner and willing his legs to just keep moving, even as his vision began to get dark and fuzzy around the edges. “Thanks, then. You can tell him. He owes you.”

Bucky rounded another corner ahead, recognizing the bus station as they approached it, and could have cried in relief when he saw the lifepod still waiting at the foot of the bridge with Steve standing front and center and staring straight at them like the most welcoming beacon in the world. As it was, Bucky didn’t have the time or energy for tears – he put everything he had into one last push, trying to run for the ship and ignoring the way it felt like someone was holding him underwater, or the fact that despite how fast he tried to run, the destination didn’t seem to get any closer.

Finally, after at least an eternity, they were within a few meters of the lifepod, when three things seemed to happen simultaneously. First, Bucky noticed the sick sound of an engine shutting down, although it sounded far too loud for the lifepod to be powering off. Second, the ground shuddered slightly beneath him, an ominous warning of what was probably about to happen. And third, Steve’s face contorted into an expression of raw fear, his skin sickly pale and his eyes comically wide as he screamed something that Bucky couldn’t hear over his own pulse in his ears; Bucky was sure that the only reason his dumb ass hadn’t jumped off of the lifepod after them was because of the combined efforts of Natasha and Clint holding him back.

Bucky let his instincts take over, certain that their time to reach the pod safely had run out: he tossed Wanda forward with as much force as his heavy, worthless arms would let him, hurling her towards the edge of the pod in hopes that his efforts would amount to at least one of them would making it off of the city alive. With her added weight lifted he took one final step, actually beginning to feel the ground dropping beneath him, and leapt forward with all of his remaining strength, his fingers stretching desperately for Steve’s extended hands.

Although he logically knew it could have only been a moment, it felt like they stayed suspended there in limbo for ages, both terrified and reaching for dear life as the world dropped away beneath them. Bucky’s mind unhelpfully flashed back to the day on Zola’s train all of those years ago, when he’d been sure that he was seeing Steve’s face for the last time in his sorry life. He’d barely gotten to the bit where the bar he’d been clinging to had torn away from the wall of the train when a pair of bruisingly strong hands closed around his forearms; it took a moment for Bucky to realize that it wasn’t his mind playing tricks on him, remembering the day in the Alps. He opened his eyes and looked up into Steve’s wide, panicked ones, and before he could process anything further he was being hauled forward onto the lifepod.

Between the last bit of momentum from his jump and the force with which Steve had grabbed and pulled him in Bucky hit the star in the center of his chest with enough force to knock them both to the floor of the pod. He immediately wrapped his arms around Steve’s shoulders, clinging to him like a limpet, completely uncaring of the eyes of the other passengers around them. After a beat, Steve had grabbed hold of Bucky as well, squeezing him tightly enough that it became even more difficult to breathe. Bucky didn’t give a damn, he clung to Steve with equally crushing force, too consumed by his relief to worry about something so trivial as oxygen deprivation.

He had no idea how long they laid there on the deck of the lifepod, panting with both exertion and necessity. Bucky eased up on his hold when he came to the realization that Steve was shaking violently in his arms – he started to pull away to check what was wrong, afraid that he’d either injured Steve or missed the fact that he was already hurt in the rush of their reunion, but Steve only held onto him tighter, shaking his head and sobbing openly against the crook of Bucky’s neck.
Bucky put together with a jolt that Steve had been crying all along, and turned his head enough that it would shield Steve’s face completely, while bringing his right hand up to stroke gently at the sweaty, filthy hair on the back of his head. “Shhh,” he murmured softly, pressing his lips against Steve’s temple, completely uncaring of what the people who might see them thought. “It’s alright… I’m here, I’ve got you, Stevie…”

Instead of comforting him the words only seemed to make Steve cry harder, although Bucky figured it might be exactly what he needed, given the circumstances.

There was a sudden, deafeningly loud blast below them – Bucky couldn’t see well enough over the side of the lifepod to tell exactly what had happened, not unless he let go of his hold on Steve, which he didn’t foresee happening at any point in the near future – but given the cheer that went up from the crowd as they reached the helicarrier Bucky had to figure that Stark’s plan had turned out to be successful, and that the Earth below had been spared, after all.

Steve’s sobs seemed to be growing less violent, but Bucky continued to murmur quiet endearments in his ear, stroking his hair down and letting the sensation calm himself as well as his eyes roamed around the rest of the lifepod for the first time. The Black Widows sat tiredly on the floor nearby, their heads bent close together as they talked quietly to one another. Clint was pressed close to Natasha’s side, and the fact that they were holding hands didn’t go unnoticed by Bucky. Doctor Banner was slumped next to Clint, looking wan and exhausted but otherwise unharmed. Further down the deck, Sam was kneeling next to the Maximoffs; Bucky blinked in surprised when he realized that Wanda’s brother was alive and talking to her, albeit looking badly injured. She turned in Bucky’s direction as the lifepod finished landing inside of the helicarrier, giving him a small nod through her tears. He mouthed back a silent ‘Thank you,’ in return, smiling as she got to her feet and followed closely behind Sam and the group of medics that took Pietro’s stretcher away.

Bucky waited until the majority of the civilians had already disembarked the lifepod before squeezing Steve’s shoulders one last time and rubbing his back vigorously. “C’mon, doll… let’s go find a bunk and pass out for a few days.”

To his surprise, Steve actually complied, sniffling wetly against Bucky’s shoulder and then getting to his feet, although the moment that Bucky was standing they were clinging to one another again. Bucky had no complaints about it; if he had his way, it would be at least a week before they let one another out of arm’s reach.

Thor and Tony both boarded the helicarrier as they made their way slowly across the main flight deck, but both gave them a wide berth, thankfully not mentioning anything about how obviously wrecked Steve looked. Thor gave Bucky a nod as he passed; while he looked as exhausted as Bucky felt, his small, relieved smile was all the answer that Bucky needed to confirm that, against all odds, they’d actually pulled the mission off.

Chapter End Notes

Some notes on the changes because I figured they should get a little bit of an explanation:
1. It’s taken me multiple times watching AoU to figure out why the scene between Clint and Wanda on Sokovia bothered me so much, but it wasn’t until I decided to switch Clint for Bucky that it really clicked for me; as much as I liked the idea that Clint was the guy to rally the troops, I hated the way he interacted with Wanda in that scene… the
idea that she was some scared girl who needed talking down to has rubbed me the wrong way from the get go. So - yeah, here’s Bucky talking to her like she’s a young soldier, because, you know… that’s exactly what the situation was. Plus it gave him one last hurrah as Sarge and let him vent some of his own issues.

2. Deus ex Yelena pt II is something that I’m not entirely proud of, but I’m hoping the next chapter will help to justify the decision. And don’t worry if you don’t know her comics history - at this point she might as well be an OC. One day I’ll probably go back and edit the story to make that the case, but for now I just hope it isn’t too distracting from the rest of the plot.

And I actually think the rest should come out in the next chapter… but if you have any questions/concerns don’t hesitate to drop them in a comment. As always, thank you so much for your continued support; the last chapter and the epilogue are going to be considerably shorter than this behemoth was, so they should be up pretty soon. ♥
Seven weeks after the Battle of Sokovia there’s a changing of the guard and a parting of the ways.

June 2015

It felt odd, Steve thought as he ambled along next to Bucky, Thor and Tony, to be walking through the new Avengers training facility in street clothes; probably because they had spent so much time over the past few weeks working and training that it felt like the only time he wasn’t wearing a uniform was when they were in bed or spending the past couple of weekends in Brooklyn. But now the building was finally complete and largely ready for business, and the team was getting to the point that it was ready to run itself, and there was no point to still be milling about in training gear when the four of them were about to leave for good.

Well, with the exception of Thor, whose cape still swept out majestically behind him and looked completely out of place while the rest of them were in jeans and t-shirts; but considering his garb was apparently normal wear for Asgard it probably didn’t count as a uniform anymore.

After taking a couple of days to recoup from the Sokovia incident the Avengers had faced both each other and world leaders in deciding their best course of action going forward. Tony, in light of his role in the Ultron debacle, had decided to step down from the team, and would be working in a consulting position only unless a crisis arose that was large enough to require his participation. Thor had decided on his own to head back to Asgard, concerned about potential threats to the realms at large and feeling that he would be better able to anticipate and stop them from his homeland. Steve’s decision had been easy – once the team was ready to take over command for themselves, he and Bucky would step down as they had originally planned; after everything that had happened with Ultron they both saw the error in simply walking away without preparation, but after the near-misses in Seoul and again in Sokovia, Steve had all of the motivation that he could possibly need to walk away from fighting for good.

The first order of business had been to move the Avengers headquarters away from the Tower – the team agreed that it would be best for the people of New York, as it would move a significant target away from civilians. Meanwhile, the newly established World Security Council approved Doctor Banner’s conditional pardon for the catastrophe in Johannesburg, provided he remained on Avenger’s facilities and away from heavily populated areas, and the Lullaby project was further developed to help better control the Hulk. Likewise, extensive questioning and psychological evaluations had been ordered for the new members of the team, to insure that they were both capable of meeting the demands of being an Avenger and to safeguard against the possibility that HYDRA had left any secret programming behind in their minds that could turn them against their teammates. It had taken a couple of weeks, but Belova and both of the Maximoffs had finally gotten approval to join the Avengers on a probationary trial, while Rhodey and Sam had stepped in exactly as they had
in Sokovia – as if they’d belonged there all along.

After six weeks of tireless work, the team was set, the renovations on the training facility were completed, and the entire operation was in well-enough running order that Thor was ready to return to Asgard, while Steve, Bucky, and Tony were going to move back to New York and settle into civilian lives again. They would all remain available for consultation, and would join up with the team in the event that they faced an opponent powerful enough that they couldn’t handle it on their own, but otherwise the new Avengers would be left as a self-sufficient unit, training and working out of the upstate facility with the help of Maria Hill’s guidance and the new iteration of SHIELD.

While Steve had no doubt of the team’s ability to do fine work in his absence, he was still feeling anxious about the change. He’d been as excited as Bucky had to have found a place to live in Brooklyn and to have been approved on their application to buy the Brownstone, and was definitely looking forward to their free time together, without the weight of planning training sessions and assessing team strengths hanging over them. But while Bucky had gone forward with signing up for the necessary standardized tests and getting approved to start at a nearby community college in the Fall, and already had classes to plan and look forward to, Steve still had no clue what he wanted to do with himself. That, coupled with the residual guilt that he continued to feel over the idea of abandoning the team, and more importantly the people of the world that he’d promised to protect when he’d signed up for Project REBIRTH in the first place, left Steve with emotions too mixed to completely process as they finished up their final day as official Avengers.

They had already spent the morning working out the new chain of command, and setting up plans for how it would change and the circumstances under which the four of them might be needed for assistance, as well as working out a means of contacting Thor in the event that a catastrophe was big enough to call for his help. The only thing left to discuss was the issue of the Mind Stone - a conversation that hadn’t seemed appropriate to hold while in the presence of Vision.

“So one last time,” Bucky asked, his shoulder bumping absently against Steve’s as he looked past Tony to address Thor, “go over what we know about the stones?”

“The Aether and the Tesseract are two of them, they’re both stored in the palace safe on Asgard,” Thor explained patiently. “As for the others - I need to consult my Father’s library and likely speak directly with the palace oracles. The Norns showed me a Power Stone, but only a flash of it. With the exception of the Mind Stone I know not which powers the others hold or where they are located.”

“And the Mind Stone. It can just… stay here?” Tony asked hesitantly.

“I’m not in the habit of collecting living things,” Thor responded firmly, “even if they are in possession of such a force. And the Vision has given me no reason to think him incapable of wielding the stone appropriately.”

There was a quiet murmur of agreement from the other two, but Steve found himself frowning. “Is this about him being able to lift the hammer again? Because I feel like that’s not the best measuring stick…”

The question was only partially serious, and drew a healthy chuckle out of Thor as they made their way into the main lobby of the building.

“The rules have changed,” Stark nodded sagely, “Vision’s artificial intelligence.”

“A machine,” Steve agreed, nudging Bucky with his elbow when he scoffed and rolled his eyes. It had been a debate that had come up among the team multiple times over the previous weeks,
although had never escalated to the point that they had tried lifting Mjölnir again.

“So it doesn’t count,” Tony insisted, still walking but turning so that he was facing Thor more directly. “Besides, these two could lift it together – it’s not like you’d go leaving it with them, would you?”

“These guys are officially in retirement as of fifteen minutes ago, Stark,” Bucky interrupted bemusedly, before Thor had an opportunity to chime in. “We wouldn’t take it if we were offered; I don’t wanna mess with that kind of responsibility.”

“If he can wield the hammer he can keep the Mind Stone,” Thor said decisively. “It’s safe with the Vision, and these days safe is in short supply.”

There wasn’t much argument to be made to that point, and Steve saw no reason to try to think one up. He still felt that the Vision was a bit off-putting, but so far the guy had given them no reason to do anything but trust him. Until he proved otherwise, it seemed senselessly cruel to try to take him into custody, just because of the way he’d been made. All the same, Steve couldn’t quite let the hammer conversation go without a final quip. “But if you put the hammer in an elevator –” he mused with a frown.

“It’d still go up!” Tony crowed.

It took everything Steve had to keep a straight face when he turned to acknowledge Tony’s response. “Exactly, doesn’t mean the elevator’s worthy.”

“The elevator isn’t sentient, you punk,” Bucky sighed, rubbing his palm roughly over his face – but not before Steve caught his lips quirking into a smile. “It’s a totally bunk argument.”

“I’m going to miss these chats of ours,” Thor beamed as the doors to the facility opened in front of them and they made their way out onto the main lawn.

“You won’t if you don’t leave,” Tony pointed out.

Thor shook his head, his smile fading away. “I have no choice – the Mind Stone is the fourth of the Infinity Stones to show up in the past few years, that’s hardly a coincidence. Someone’s playing an intricate game, making pawns out of all of us. Once he or she has all of the pieces in position…”

“Triple Yahtzee?” Tony mused, although the look on his face didn’t match the smartass comment. Even knowing as little as they did, they all knew that the stones being used as a unit by someone with nefarious purposes would mean a disaster like none of them could even imagine.

“And you think you can find out what’s coming?” Steve asked as they came to a stop, realizing belatedly that he’d subconsciously listed to the left and was pressing lightly against Bucky’s side.

“I do,” Thor responded confidently, patting Tony on the chest and striding a few paces away from the group. “Besides this one, there’s nothing that can’t be explained.” He turned to face them all one last time, gripping Mjölnir in his hand as he looked back with a softer smile. “I hope that you all enjoy your time away from this madness, and that you take good care of one another.”

The fact that he was staring directly at Bucky and Steve for the last bit didn’t go missed. “We will,” Bucky answered for them, nodding in Thor’s direction. “And you take care of yourself, too. Don’t be a stranger, huh?”

With one final grin Thor nodded his goodbye and raised his hammer into the air – there was a brilliant flash of light, and a moment later the only thing left behind was a huge, intricate pattern of
runes burned into the lawn. Bucky was still staring at the sky where the beam had come from, and heaved a soft sigh as it flashed away.

“He’d probably take you with him one day, if you asked,” Steve murmured, quietly enough that Tony shouldn’t be able to hear over the sounds of the new SHIELD recruits drilling on the lawn opposite.

Bucky scrunched his nose and turned away from the sky, giving Steve a soft, lazy smile that was quickly becoming his favorite expression. “Nah; it’d be swell to see Asgard, but I’ve got a pretty damn compelling reason to stay right where I am.”

Steve could only imagine how stupidly sappy his face became at that, and was halfway to leaning in for a kiss when Stark cleared his throat and interrupted them.

“That man has no regard for lawn maintenance.” He tsked, turning away from the mark on the lawn and striding past them towards the parking garage. “I’m gonna miss him, though – and you guys are going to miss me. There’ll be so many manly tears.”

“We’re only gonna be a coupla miles across the bridge, Tony,” Bucky teased with a smirk, stepping slightly away from Steve and following him towards the driveway. “It’s not like we’ll never see each other again.”

“But it’s not the same,” Tony sighed dramatically, “I still don’t understand why the two of you couldn’t’ve stayed in the tower. I thought we had a good thing going.”

“We did,” Steve agreed quietly, moving along with the both of them, “but it was time for me and Buck to get out and put down some roots of our own.”

“Besides,” Bucky agreed, “you’re always welcome in Williamsburg. We could start up a Sunday dinner tradition.”

“Ugh, at the Tower,” Tony responded with a grimace as a ridiculous sports car cruised to a stop beside him. “No offense, but Brooklyn’s not exactly my speed, and if we’re gonna eat together I’m going to have to insist on letting Pep pick the menu. We don’t all have super serum to keep our coronary arteries clear after indulging in fried Spam.”

Steve couldn’t help his surprised bark of laughter. “That was one time to mess with Sam – we don’t actually eat canned meat on the regular.”

“All the same,” Tony drawled with an amused shrug. He turned to open the car door before pausing and looking back at them. “Oh, Robocop: I saw you talking to Doctor Cho, has she talked you into ditching the arm?”

“Ah, no, actually; I was telling her I’m not interested, at least not for now.” Bucky looked sidelong at Steve before glancing down at his left arm with a shy smile. “It’s kinda grown on me – even if she could make a new one, I think I’ll be sticking with the cybernetics.”

They immediately launched into a conversation about advancements that Tony had in mind, as well as the possibility for a permanent cloaking device that would allow Bucky to better blend in when they were out in public. Steve more or less tuned the conversation out, in part because of the unpleasant memories of the huge screaming match he’d ended up in with Buck after hearing about what he’d done to the arm in Sokovia and what it had almost cost him, and in part because he was drawn into watching as the SHIELD recruits continued training in front of them.

They all looked like they were young and moved like they were in impeccable shape, but Steve still
couldn’t help but see himself at Camp Lehigh amongst them. For a moment he felt a crushing sense of remorse for daring to walk away when he knew that he still had so much to offer, but he did his best to swallow it down. Both Bucky and Peggy had said time and time again that Steve had already given the world more than what he owed them, that he’d more than earned the opportunity to get away for a while and actually enjoy what the future had to offer. He couldn’t help hoping that Phillips and Erskine and everyone else involved with Project REBIRTH, who had made this entire miracle possible to begin with, would agree with them – or at least that they wouldn’t regret wasting their resources on him. It would be nice to know, after all of this time and the countless sacrifices it felt like he and Bucky had made through the years, that he might finally measure up to being enough in the eyes of the people who’d put their lives’ work into creating a super soldier in the first place.

Steve was drawn back to the present as a metal hand sneaked its way into the back pocket of his jeans. He glanced over in surprise, shrugging minutely when Bucky raised his eyebrows in an unspoken question. Buck tilted his head a fraction of an inch to the right, so that it was gesturing back towards the building, and Steve gave him a quick, tight nod, clearing up their plans. They hardly needed words to discuss what had happened, or for Steve to voice his thoughts out loud; God knew they’d been talking about it enough over the past few weeks.

“Okay, that was creepy,” Tony muttered as they both turned to him, although his smile undermined his words. He cleared his throat after a beat of silence, finally opening the car door. “Do you guys want a ride back into the city? We’re getting late enough in the day that we’ll be pushing rush hour, but this bad boy handles well enough that I can probably beat it. You’ll need to find a way to get from Manhattan out to your neck of the woods, but…”

“No,” Steve cut him off with a smile of his own. “Thanks, Tony, but we’ve got a couple of things we need to wrap up here, first.”

Stark nudged his sunglasses low on the bridge of his nose, staring over them and eyeing Steve shrewdly “You guys aren’t changing your mind now, are you? Because I’m going to end up looking like a major asshole if I’m the only one quitting the band.”

“You wouldn’t be: technically Thor left first,” Bucky responded smartly, “and I’m pretty sure Bruce isn’t planning on leaving the lab –”

“No, we’re going, we really are,” Steve cut in. “Like I said, I’ve just got a bit of unfinished business. We won’t be longer than an hour, I swear, but there’s no point in you waiting around for us.”

“Besides,” Bucky drawled, “there’s no damned legroom in the backseat of your car and our bikes are still in the garage, anyway.”

“Alright, your loss.” Tony responded flippantly, lifting his foot into the car but pausing to study Steve again. “You alright?” He finally asked, sounding so sincere that it made Steve’s guts turn. He must look like a fucking wreck, if Tony Stark was able to see through his issues.

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“Yeah,” Steve said immediately, allowing his right arm to wrap around Bucky’s shoulders and taking a deep breath. “Yeah – I will be;” he looked down at Bucky, returning his soft, encouraging smile before adding, “We’re finally going home.”

“Alright, then,” Tony agreed, giving them both a nod. “You crazy kids be safe, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do – and I’ll be in touch about the synthskin, Bucky Bear. We should have it ready to go before your first week of classes.” With a final wave he closed the door and peeled out of the driveway, kicking up dust as he made his way onto the access road that led back to the freeway.

Steve and Bucky stood watching Stark go until the car had disappeared from view – without
meaning to, Steve found his eyes wandering over to the set of recruits again.

“C’mon,” Bucky murmured after a while, pulling Steve closer to him and steering them both back towards the building, “let’s go say our goodbyes and get this wrapped up, he wasn’t kidding about getting stuck in the afternoon rush.”

Steve followed Bucky’s lead easily, doing his best to ignore the nerves that were slowly continuing to grow inside of him. He knew that Bucky was right, and that he’d feel much better once he’d finished what they were waiting for and headed home, but it didn’t make the process any easier. Neither Bucky nor Steve bothered letting go of the other as they marched back past the labs and offices on the main floor of the facility; it wasn’t as if the relationship between the two was a secret anymore, and Steve was thankful for the support as they made their way up to the main Avengers training levels.

As they approached the primary combat area there were only two people waiting in the hallway: Natasha was facing away from them, decked out in her usual jumpsuit with her red curls hanging loose, and leaned in close to Yelena as they conversed quietly in Russian. Belova’s outfit was basically the same – there had been a few modifications made to her suit, but nothing permanent yet as she was still a probationary member, although Steve seriously doubted that would be the case for long. As expected, it had taken no time at all for her to prove herself a worthy training partner – she’d given both Bucky and Steve all that they wanted, but also began helping Wanda better understand her own powers as they both came out of their shell. She was the one who saw Steve and Bucky approaching first, raising her eyebrows slightly and causing Natasha to turn around and give them both the same skeptical look.

“The 14:00 training session is for active Avengers only, you two,” Natasha said with a smirk. “Don’t tell me you’re already having second thoughts about this retirement business.”

“Stevie’s got some unfinished business,” Bucky responded with a cheeky smile, pushing Steve gently towards the locker room door and shoving his hands in his pockets as he came to a stop next to the Widows. “Then I swear I’ll have him out of your hair.”

Steve gave them all a sarcastically fake laugh but made his way into the locker room anyway, letting the door swing shut behind him and drown out the quiet Russian that had started back up between the three of them. Thankfully, the locker room was unoccupied except for the one person he had been looking for; he swallowed thickly before clearing his throat.

Sam was in the middle of fastening the straps to his wing pack when Steve walked into the room, and didn’t bother hiding the look of surprise on his face as he looked him over. “I thought you guys were heading out… if this is about the new place that offer to help moving was a once-in-a-lifetime deal,” he said teasingly.

“It’s not about that,” Steve responded with a short chuckle. “Actually, Tony already had movers haul all of our shit over, anyway. It’s just a matter of unpacking, now.”

Sam watched him for a long moment, his hands still frozen on the clips of his pack, before giving a low whistle. “Oh no; don’t tell me Captain America is already ending his retirement. It’s been like – 30 minutes, dude.”

“What?” Steve asked innocently as he made his way to the locker that the shield was still stored in. “Would it change your mind about sticking around full-time? Was that what Nat used to convince you, the promise that you wouldn’t have to deal with me anymore?”

Sam rolled his eyes as he finished with his straps and looked up at Steve in earnest. “I didn’t need
any convincing after Sokovia, you know that. Losing Riley meant I lost my reason to fight, back in the
day – I’ve finally got a team I wanna throw down with again, and a new group of friends to work
with. That’s reason enough to stick around.” He gave Steve a smirk as he pulled his gloves and
goggles out of the overhead compartment of his locker, fiddling with them for a moment before
continuing. “And I wouldn’t have a problem working with you again, Cap – but I don’t like the idea
of facing Bucky’s wrath if I encourage you backing out on him this late in the game.”

“There’s only one person who Buck would be pissed with if I changed my mind now,” Steve
corrected him with a shy smile, “but that’s not the reason I’m here at all. I wanna go with him, I do –
I just needed to get some stuff off my chest, first.”

Sam nodded silently and crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back against the frame of his locker
and waiting for Steve to proceed. Steve didn’t think he would ever get over the ease with which
Sam could encourage others to start talking, even when they didn’t exactly want to. He looked
down into the remnants of his locker, buying himself time; both he and Bucky had taken a suit and
tac gear back with them after their last visit to the facility, so that they could have some on hand in
the event that a situation ever arose where they had to come in for assistance on short notice, but
there were still plenty of spares left behind. Steve had to wonder if the team would throw it all into
storage once they were done – the idea of the Shield simply getting locked away in a crate left a bad
taste in his mouth.

“We’ve been talking about it a lot, y’know…” Steve finally said with a sigh, running his fingers
lightly around the edge of the shield, remembering the first time he’d seen it on Stark’s workbench in
London an entire lifetime ago. “My hang-ups about getting out, the things that were holding me
back. I honestly do wanna try the civilian thing, to give Buck the kind of time and attention he
deserves, but I guess I’ve got a lot of guilt about stepping away from the job. Especially considering
it’s the only reason I’m around right now, to begin with.”

“Bucky’s starting reading for his psych class, hasn’t he?” Sam asked with an amused smile.

Steve couldn’t stop the laugh that escaped him, rubbing his forehead as he did. “God fuckin’ help us
all… yeah, he has. But – he’s made some good points.”

Sam nodded and waited with patient eyes. Steve chewed his lip for a moment, before turning
completely away from the locker and continuing. “The thing is, The Avengers – hell, the world –
they’re better with Captain America fighting for them. It’s not just my title, he’s become a mantle; a
symbol of his own.”

“But you deserve a chance to be Steve Rogers for a change,” Sam said shrewdly, after a long beat of
silence.

Steve shook his head, swallowing heavily and forcing a smile back onto his face. “Did you give
Buck that line? Cuz he’s used it on me about a dozen times in the past week.”

“You know what they say about great minds.” Sam responded coyly.

Steve knew he was right, knew that they were both right, and steeled himself for the next bit.
“Anyway – I get it, and I want a chance to figure out who he is too, for me and for Bucky. But… I
also don’t want to abandon the title, y’know?” He reached behind him and lifted the shield
reverently out of the locker, holding it in position for a moment before moving towards Sam and
clearing his throat again. “It’s meant so much to so many people for so long, it doesn’t seem right to
just put it away in storage. Best case scenario would be to find someone who stands for the same
principles as I do – who can represent the uniform and his country, but who also knows himself well
enough to not lose it to the burden of carrying the shield.”
The smile on Sam’s face had slipped away as Steve had said his piece, so that he was left staring blankly across the locker room while Steve stood awkwardly in front of him. “And I thought – well, we thought, really, and I hoped – that, uh; you’d be the man for the job.”

Sam stared at him for a long moment, while the only sound in the room was the quiet hum of the lights above them. Finally, after studying Steve’s face for way longer than he was actually comfortable with being watched, Sam laughed shortly. “Alright, where’s the camera?”

“What?” Steve asked in genuine confusion, actually looking around the room for bugs.

Sam snorted at him. “This is one last goodbye prank for you and Barnes and Stark, ha ha let’s see the look on Falcon’s face when we spring this shit on him, it’ll be a YouTube smash.”

Steve blinked down at him, surprised that Sam would think he’d joke about such a thing. “I’m serious, Sam. I know it’s a lot to ask; it’s probably more than is fair to ask of you, so if you don’t wanna take it I won’t hold it against you at all, but… it would mean a lot to me, to know the shield is in good hands and not just lying around gathering dust here in storage or in a coat closet in Brooklyn.”

Sam pushed himself off of his locker, licking his lips as he stared down at the shield that was still hanging loosely on Steve’s arm. “For real? You… you want me to be Captain America?”

“I can’t think of anyone who’d be better for the job,” Steve responded sincerely, holding the shield out for him to take. There was a long, pregnant pause, where they both stood looking down at the shield between them, before Sam finally sighed and reached across the space, taking the weight from Steve’s hands.

It was amazing, how much lighter Steve felt standing there and watching as Sam turned the shield over in his grip. He was so overwhelmed that Sam had actually agreed that it took him a few minutes of silence to realize that he was still standing there, frozen and staring down at the shield with suspiciously shining eyes.

“You alright?” Steve asked hesitantly, feeling completely out of his depth.

“Yes,” Sam finally responded after a couple of seconds of silence, his eyes still glassy and locked on the shield in his hand. Finally, with a deep breath, he looked up at Steve again, his lips quirking into a crooked smile. “Trying to figure out who would be freaking out more right now, my Dad or Riley…”

“Either way, I know they’d both agree that I couldn’t’ve found a better guy for the job,” Steve answered quietly, surprised to find his own throat closing up a bit.

Instead of responding Sam launched himself forward, closing the few inches left between them and wrapping his arms around Steve in a tight hug, shield and all. Steve returned it immediately, squeezing his shoulders lightly and smiling all the while.

“But I’m keeping the wings,” Sam added thickly a few moments later, stepping back from the hug with his usual smile in place.

Steve scoffed lightly, taking a step back himself. “You sure as hell had better; I don’t know how else you thought you’d stand a chance filling my shoes…”

He’d fully expected a smart comment in return, but instead Sam simply laughed and changed his grip on the shield, pulling it properly onto his forearm. “Here,” Steve said, moving back across the room and grabbing one of his gauntlets out of the overhead cubby. “Tony designed the recall sensors so
that they were detachable, you can put them in your gloves for now; I’m sure someone in R and D can throw a set together for you in the next couple of days.” Steve tossed the gauntlet across the room to Sam, waiting awkwardly as he pulled the sensors out and clipped them to his gloves as instructed.

“And Sam?” Steve added once he’d finished. “Take care of her. If you guys get in too deep and wind up calling us in, I’m gonna need that back.”

Sam laughed outright at that, shaking his head at Steve. “Man, screw you – ask Stark to build you a new one, you can’t call take-backs on somethin’ like this.”

Steve couldn’t help his grin at that, shaking his head as he made his way for the door. “Good luck, Sam; you’ll do great.”

“Same to you, Steve,” Sam responded sincerely. “And call me if you need anything, alright? I gave Bucky some names for contacts at the VA in Brooklyn, but if they don’t work out…”

“You’ll be the first person I call,” Steve promised. He tried not to feel offended by the look of obvious surprise on Sam’s face. “I just… I need a little time with just the two of us, to get my head straight, but then — then we’re gonna look into the counseling thing. I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“That’s awesome,” Sam beamed. “Take care, I mean it,” he added shortly, before nodding towards the exit door to the locker room as a brief alarm buzzed overhead. “That’s my cue, but I’ll talk to you soon, yeah?”

“For sure,” Steve agreed, smiling as he watched Sam turn and jog out the door, shield in hand.

Steve made sure to keep his smile plastered on his face until he’d made it out the main door back into the hall; thankfully the hallway outside was empty, and he let his shoulders slump forward as he exhaled heavily, still surprised by how relieved he felt after the conversation with Sam. The guilt over leaving wasn’t resolved entirely, and he was still all kinds of anxious over what he’d end up doing with himself, but knowing that the shield and the title were in such good hands was an enormous weight off of his shoulders. Steve hadn’t even realized how catastrophic it would have been had Sam refused him.

Across the hallway, Bucky leaned against a guardrail, looking through the window into the training room below. Steve could tell that Bucky was pretending not to notice him, and giving Steve the moment of privacy that he so badly needed after talking to Sam – he continued to be amazed regularly by how well Bucky could read him, how he always seemed to know exactly what Steve needed from him. It really shouldn’t have come as a surprise, given the fact that it had been that way since he’d first gotten lucky enough to meet the new kid in the neighborhood during the summer of ’30, but Steve didn’t think there would ever come a day when he wasn’t thankful for it. With a deep breath, he finally made his way down the hallway, sidling up next to Bucky so that their shoulders rested against one another as he looked down to where the team was assembling below.

Rhodey was already waiting on the main training floor, decked out in his full War Machine armor, while Vision hovered off of the ground slightly to his right. Wanda descended in a fog of red smoke from the ladies’ locker room, met by brief flash of silver before Pietro came to a stop next to her, bouncing on the balls of his feet as he waited impatiently for orders. The Widows had already moved into the room, and stood on a platform above the group, calling out a set of instructions that the glass of the windows was thick enough to keep listening ears in the hallway from overhearing, even those with enhanced senses.

“All set?” Bucky asked casually after a few seconds, leaning slightly into Steve’s touch.
“Mmhmm,” Steve agreed quietly, although he made no move to go anywhere. “He ended up saying yes. After assuming that I was trying to prank him.”

Bucky chuckled quietly. “I told you he would. Say yes, anyway.” Below them, Sam made his way onto the training floor, decked out completely in his wings and drones and goggles, with the shield gripped proudly on his right forearm. Steve wasn’t at all surprised when Bucky’s left arm shifted, so that his hand was resting gently on the small of Steve’s back. “You doin’ okay?” He murmured quietly.

Steve cleared his throat, watching the group below for a few moments before nodding decisively. “Yeah,” he finally said. “Yeah, I am. Or – I will be. I’m still feeling a little goofy, but this is helping.”

“Hmm,” Bucky hummed, his thumb stroking along Steve’s spine with just enough pressure that he could feel the metal plates shifting as they moved. “I was gonna suggest this as soon as we got home, but if the locker room is free now I betcha I could think of somethin’ to keep you occupied for a few hours…”

Steve snorted and turned towards Bucky with a smirk, but before he could say anything in response there was a thump of a pair of boots behind them. Clint crouched where he’d landed, glaring at Bucky with a sour look on his face. “You knew I was up there, Barnes… not cool.”

Bucky threw his head back and laughed unabashedly for a moment before grinning wolfishly at Clint. “I wouldn’t be much of an assassin if I couldn’t see your dumbass hiding in the rafters, Barton – quit eavesdropping and get to work, that’s what you get for being nosey.”

Clint grumbled something unintelligible as he made his way through the doors next to them and joined the Widows on the platform overlooking the training floor.

Steve and Bucky watched for a few more minutes, still casually leaning against each other as the group in the training room started to match up against each other and spar, before Bucky finally checked his watch and cleared his throat. “Probably would be a good idea to point it South pretty soon here, if we want to beat the worst of rush hour and get home at a decent time.”

Steve felt a swell of affection hearing Bucky say the word home, knowing what it meant to the both of them to finally be heading to a permanent, safe space in Brooklyn. He didn’t bother holding back his dopey smile as he finally responded, “Yeah, alright,” taking one last look at the training room below before turning away completely. Predictably, Bucky’s arm was wrapped around the small of his back immediately, leading them both towards the entrance to the parking garage where their Harleys were waiting.

“We picked up a chuck roast the other night at the market, right?” Bucky asked absently as they made their way through the doors of the parking garage underneath the main level of the facility.

Steve hummed an affirmative response, knowing full-well that Bucky remembered their shopping trip from the weekend prior. He leaned deeper into his touch all the same: he was fully aware of what Buck was up to – trying to take Steve’s mind off of his mixed emotions during the hardest part of leaving – and wordlessly tried to show his gratitude for the thoughtfulness.

Bucky looked down at his watch again as they approached the Harleys. “We should get in plenty early enough to put a pot roast on, then – I’m feelin’ that recipe that Ma used to make for special Sunday dinners; I’m pretty sure it’s in that book Becca’s granddaughter gave us for Christmas.”

“Yeah, it is,” Steve finally agreed, unable to help smiling as he squeezed Bucky tighter against him.
“That sounds great, Buck.”

Bucky nodded proudly, giving Steve a squeeze back before breaking away as they made it to where their bikes had been parked. He mounted his Harley immediately; powering it up before Steve had even stepped up to his, then flashed a cheeky grin over his shoulder. “Oh, and Stevie?” He added innocently, “last one home has kitchen detail.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth Bucky was peeling out of his parking spot and hauling ass out of the garage. Steve stayed rooted in place, huffing a short, surprised laugh, before jumping on his bike and powering it up as well. He waited until he was out the door and onto the main driveway to open the throttle up completely, but in no time Steve was flying down the access road, intent on catching up with Bucky and enjoying the ride back into the city. He was so focused on the brunette form in front of him, on how crazy he was for the jerk, and how lucky they both were to be getting a shot at making a real life together now, that Steve didn’t even think to look back as the Avengers facility faded away into the distance.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted to include the first week after the battle of Sokovia, but it wasn't fitting the tone of the rest of the chapter so I had to cut it... I'll probably post it one day as part of the outtakes I've got planned, though, in case ya'll are interested in reading pages of unapologetic super soldier cuddling.

Alright folks - all that's left now is the epilogue, which I'm guessing should be done in the next couple of days. As always, thanks so much to those of you who have left comments and kudos, and who've stayed along for the entire ride (and special thanks to bibiliojess for putting up with all of my late-night ramblings and complaints); this story never could have happened without your support ♥
Bucky rolled up the sleeves of his Henley and readjusted his backpack on his shoulder as he picked up the pace of his walk up Flatbush Avenue. He wasn’t running so late that he needed to actually run just yet, thank God – given how busy the sidewalks were and the amount of attention he was already drawing to himself running seemed overkill, but he’d promised Steve that he would meet him at 15:30 near the Navy Yard and it was already 15:38; Bucky didn’t want to keep him waiting much longer, especially not on a day like this. If anything, he’d been hoping to arrive to their planned meeting place early, in the event that Steve didn’t show, but his last class of the day had run late, and then his train had been delayed, and the next thing Bucky knew he was walking from Barclays Center against foot traffic in the afternoon rush. He would have been glad for the Autumn sun, if he hadn’t dressed for how chilly the morning had been – now he was afraid he was just going to be stuck sweaty and uncomfortable and pressed for time by the time they did meet up, which would hardly help with making the appointment easier.

He pushed the thought of his mind, shaking his head briefly as he waited for the crosswalk to change and trying to focus again on simply enjoying the afternoon and getting to Steve in as pleasant of a mood as possible; God knew Steve was going to be twitchy enough for the both of them.

Bucky had a split-second of panic when he noticed a group of teenagers approaching him and staring openly at his left forearm: the absolute last thing he needed at the moment was for the holographic sleeve that Tony had built him to start malfunctioning now. Before he could check it in paranoia, though, he noticed that their faces were appreciative, rather than the pitying grimace or surprised shock of recognition that the prosthetic usually got. He gave a short, awkward nod when one of them huffed out, “Nice ink,” as they passed, biting his lip to avoid laughing when the rest of the group started giving the kid shit once they thought they were out of earshot.

Even after a couple of weeks, and merciless ribbing from Stark about them, Bucky was still getting used to the ‘tattoos’ on the hologram – but he stood by the fact that the gears and cogs both fit his personality and served as a subtle reminder of what was underneath as well, so they were staying until he either had to lose them for a job or came up with something better to take their place. The
fact that they helped make him considerably less recognizable was an added bonus, as was the fact that Steve apparently had a thing for tattoos, which had ended up taking both of them by surprise.

Once the park they had agreed on meeting in was finally within eyesight Bucky pulled the hair tie from the nape of his neck, letting his hair fall loose from the low ponytail he’d been wearing it in and shaking the bump out as well as he could with his right hand. Although the cloaking device did an incredible job of making the left look like it was still made of flesh and masked the sounds of the plates recalibrating when needed, Tony hadn’t quite figured out a way yet to make it so that his hair didn’t get stuck in the joints of the fingers – but it was easy enough to work around. He was actually starting to enjoy the longer hair, even if it meant that he had to pull it out of his face to take notes or go running; and he’d only been half-joking when he’d shut up Pietro’s teasing about it by pointing out how much Steve liked having something to hold onto during particular bedroom activities.

Bucky paused for a moment on the sidewalk, looking around the park before grinning when he saw a familiar form slouched on a bench on the opposite side of the lawn. He approached slowly, trying to get a read on Steve’s mood before he actually engaged him. From a distance it almost looked like he was trying to be incognito – he was wearing the ridiculous flat-brimmed baseball cap that Sam had gotten him as a housewarming present, pulled low on his head so that it shielded most of his face and made the huge dark sunglasses that he wore seem especially overkill, and his shoulders were rounded in the same way that he subconsciously posed every time he tried to make himself seem smaller (a trick that worked surprisingly well, Bucky thought, given how enormous the punk was).

The beard helped to disguise him too, of course. Steve had decided to forego shaving after Sokovia for the same reasons that Bucky hadn’t bothered getting a haircut – it helped them stay under the radar of the paparazzi (although keeping away from Manhattan made a world of difference on that front), but it was also a nice change from years of Army regulations that forbade them from both. Sam liked to joke that they were both turning into Brooklyn hipsters; Bucky didn’t necessarily agree, just like he didn’t expect that the looks would stick forever, but somehow they had made all of the other changes that they were making with their lives seem a little bit easier.

(Bucky would be lying if he said that he wouldn’t mind if the beard stuck, though – even after the novelty had worn off it looked damned good on Stevie, and given how quickly his own skin healed from minor injuries beardburn was never, ever gonna be a problem, regardless of how much Barton liked to joke about it).

As Bucky got closer, he realized that Steve wasn’t hunched to make himself smaller: it was because he had an open sketchbook in his lap, and was focused enough on his drawing that he wasn’t noticing Bucky’s approach. He couldn’t help but smile at that – since Sokovia, Steve had finally gotten back into sketching on the regular, a fact that Bucky couldn’t help being pleased about.

Under any other circumstances, Bucky probably would have marched up and teased him about trying to hide-out in broad daylight… but the more he looked the more that he wasn’t sure that Steve was consciously hiding, and these definitely weren’t normal circumstances, even for them.

Things were still far from perfect: they both still woke one another up with nightmares at least a couple of times a week, and since moving in June they’d spent seven nights on the couch cushions in the living room when nothing else would help lull them to sleep. That didn’t mean that they weren’t figuring things out, though: they still ran together on most mornings and sparred at Goldie’s most evenings, while the Widows made a habit of dropping by the Tower every Saturday that they weren’t on a mission, giving them a chance at even more intense training. They spent every Tuesday afternoon volunteering at children’s hospitals around the city, caught a movie together every Friday and had even started going swing dancing on Saturday evenings (Steve had put up a hell of a stink when Bucky had first brought it up, but was finally beginning to get the hang of it).
But while Bucky’s classes were off to a great start, there were still mornings when he felt rotten for going to them – mornings when he had the feeling that Steve wasn’t likely to leave the house until Bucky returned home, and would instead spend the day either wallowing in bed or torturing himself by obsessively following whichever mission the Avengers were on. Getting him enrolled in a couple of art classes had helped, but Bucky would still feel infinitely better once they’d found a more permanent goal for Steve to pursue. But then… that had been the whole point of talking him into the afternoon’s appointment in the first place.

With that thought Bucky pushed the rest of his worries out of his mind, approaching Steve’s bench with a lazy smile and a heavier step, so that there was no chance Steve would miss his approach and end up startling. “Hey gorgeous,” he drawled once he was a couple of paces away, a thrill of excitement sparking in his belly when he noticed Steve’s immediate grin. “This spot taken?”

Steve schooled his features before glancing up as Bucky came to a stop in front of the bench, nudging his ridiculous sunglasses down and looking coyly over the dark lenses. “Ah yeah, sorry - I’m actually saving it for when my fella gets here, he’s just runnin’ a little late.”

Bucky clicked his tongue as he let his backpack slide off of his shoulder, shaking his head and biting down a smile as he dropped onto the seat anyway. “Y’know, any schmuck who would keep a doll like you waiting can’t be worth your time, sweetheart. You should forget the bum and let me treat you right.”

“I dunno,” Steve responded, the apples of his cheeks pinking up beautifully as Bucky really laid the charm on, ridiculous though it was. “He’s pretty swell; it’s gonna take a hell of a lot to convince me that there’s anyone better around.”

Bucky laughed at that, unable to hold the act up any longer, and leaned in for a chaste but lingering kiss. He could feel Steve smiling against his lips, in no hurry to pull away either, and Bucky couldn’t hold back his sigh of contentment. For all of the shit that they’d been through, this – being able to sit out in the sun and flirt like idiots and kiss on Steve whenever and wherever he wanted – this damn near made it all worth it.

“Sorry,” Bucky murmured with a soft smile as they finally parted and sat back against the bench, “class didn’t get out on time, then the R was running stupid late and I didn’t have cell service underground, so I ended up just huffing it from Barclays...”

“It’s fine,” Steve interrupted softly, and Bucky couldn’t help the smug satisfaction he got out of seeing his dopy smile stick around as he licked his bottom lip. “I ended up getting here early anyway – was able to finish a couple of still lifes for Friday, actually.”

He held his sketchbook out for Bucky to see the ridiculously gorgeous depiction of the overflowing trash can that sat on the corner of the lot. Bucky couldn’t help chuckling as he shook his head in wonder, “Only you could make a literal pile of junk look like high art,” he mused, feeling absurdly proud.

“Clearly you weren’t paying attention when we visited MoMa last weekend,” Steve deadpanned, closing the pad and putting it away as Bucky continued laughing.

“How was the rest of your day?” Bucky asked after a moment, flinging his arm over the back of the bench and sighing contentedly when Steve leaned against him.

“It was alright,” Steve responded vaguely, in a tone that made it pretty clear that it wasn’t – Bucky bit his lip, willing to bet that he’d been holed up in the house until he’d left for the park an hour earlier. “How were classes?”
Under any other circumstances Bucky might have called Steve out for the deflection, but given how glad he was that they were actually here and how nervous he could tell Steve already was feeling he let it slide, and instead launched into an admittedly over-embellished recount of his day. He sincerely doubted that Steve actually gave a shit about the calculus behind rotational kinematics that they’d covered in his physics lecture or the principles of classical conditioning that they’d discussed in psychology, but he seemed content enough with listening to Bucky ramble on about them, and Buck was all-too-happy to provide the distraction.

He was halfway through explaining Pavlov’s experiment with dogs when the timer on Bucky’s phone went off, startling both of them into tense silence. As he swiped it off, Bucky noticed that Steve had gone ramrod straight, suddenly staring ahead at the building across the street. “That’s our ten minute warning,” he pointed out gently, before adding, “It’d probably be a good idea to get in there and get the paperwork done, so we can start on time…”

He rolled to his feet easily, but Steve remained seated, looking frankly terrified. Bucky sighed, kneeling slightly in front of him and resting his palms on Steve’s jean-clad knees. “Hey doll,” he murmured, smiling when Steve looked down at him, “I promise it won’t be so bad. And if he’s terrible, Sam’s list had five more names on it,” Steve’s posture was relaxing a bit with his words, at least, but he still made no move to get off the bench. “And if they all suck, we’ll go find someone better on our own,” Bucky added brightly, standing again and offering his hand for Steve to grab. “But we’ll never know if we don’t go in and give it a shot, right?”

Thankfully the challenge seemed to get through to Steve – after a deep breath he set his jaw and nodded, wiping his palms on his jeans and looking up at Bucky with the same fierce determination that Buck had fell in love with in the thirties. It was a testament to how nervous Steve was feeling when he actually took the proffered hand without comment, then didn’t let go of it even as they walked across the street.

Bucky gave his fingers a gentle squeeze as they paused outside the main door to the VA building, then followed closely behind after Steve let go of his hand and passed through the threshold, propping the door open behind him for Bucky to pass through. They checked in with their IDs at the main desk in the lobby, and Bucky could have kissed the secretary who didn’t so much as blink at either of their names. She approved their visit with nothing but courtesy and professionalism, before pointing out the direction of the elevators and telling them that the office they were looking for was on the third floor.

Steve led the way again, marching down the hallway as if they were going to battle. The second that the elevator door was closed behind them he grabbed Bucky’s hand again, staring at the panel of the elevator as they moved towards their destination and not letting go until they were at the sign-in desk for the appropriate office.

“Uh… we’re Steven Rogers and James Barnes,” he told the desk clerk in a low voice, shifting his weight on the balls of his feet as Bucky waited a step behind him. “We’ve got an appointment at four thirty with Doctor Novak?”

The guy confirmed their appointment and handed Steve a packet of papers, indicating that Bucky’s records had all transferred without problem from DC but that the psychiatrist would like to have Steve’s paperwork on file before the appointment started. Steve took the clipboard without question, making his way to the corner of the thankfully-empty waiting room and dropping into one of the leather seats. Bucky took the seat to his left, pressing their knees together gently and glancing around the waiting room, constantly reminding himself that they were making the right choice while simultaneously pushing down his own nerves over the entire situation, knowing that he needed to be as strong as possible to support Steve.
Things were probably never gonna be perfect; Bucky knew that as well as he knew that they still had a hell of a lot of work ahead of them. But then, it wasn’t as if either of them really knew what easy living was actually like.

After a few minutes of listening to Steve’s pen filling out the forms with considerably more force than sounded necessary, Bucky surreptitiously put his right hand down on his thigh, squeezing gently to get his attention. There was a short delay, but the tiny, shy, appreciative smile that he got for it before Steve went back to the forms told Bucky all he needed to know: they’d figure it out eventually.

Somehow, against all the fuckin’ odds, they always did.

Chapter End Notes

GUYS. I CAN’T BELIEVE WE’VE ACTUALLY MADE IT. Seriously, this was my first foray into writing for the Stucky fandom, and the first chaptered story that I’ve taken on in over ten years – I never, ever, ever would have thought that it would wind up being this long, or that I would have gotten even a fraction of the response that I have to it. So again; thank you to each and every one of you who took the time to read this monster, and especially to those of you who have left kudos and comments along the way – I can’t even begin to tell you how much I’ve appreciated the feedback, and I doubt I ever would have finished without your continued enthusiasm and support.

Someday I hope to add some cut-scenes to this ‘verse, covering things that I’d planned out for the actual plot that never made it in as well as some updates to what happens to our heroes as the years go on; it’s probably going to be quite a while before I can get to them, but feel free to either follow me here or you can hit me up on tumblr, where I spend most of my time yelling about these two anyway.

End Notes

Chinese translation available

Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!