The Simple Life

by howler32557038

Summary

"The simple life."

"You'll get there one day."

"I don't know. Family, stability...The guy who wanted all that went in the ice seventy-five years ago. I think someone else came out."

Bucky wants to be part of Steve's life. He wants to be an Avenger. He wants to be a good partner. Unfortunately, sometimes that means not telling Steve everything.
Based on an "anonymous" Tumblr prompt. All my love to the anon who gave me this story to care for.

Beta-read by mollynoble and howelleheir.
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“Steve, these aren’t barracks.” Bucky keeps his voice low, like he’s suspicious they might have entered the wrong quarters by mistake. “This is a goddamn penthouse.”

“Well, better get used to it,” Steve laughs. “Got a washer and dryer and everything. Color television, too,” he adds, looking back over his shoulder at Bucky with laughter in his eyes.

Still, Bucky isn’t altogether convinced they’re in the right place, but after watching Steve drop his wallet and keys in the bowl by the door and seeing the old shield propped up nearby, he finally sets down his bag just inside the foyer. There’s no need to unpack it right now. It contains a change of clothes, a toothbrush, and a few important papers. He doesn’t take more than a few steps away from it just yet.

The kitchen is just around the corner to the left of the door, with a narrow island running down the middle, and a counter with tall bar stools on the far side. Every surface is empty and starkly clean. Doesn’t look like Steve uses it much, but he knows exactly where he’s stowed the coffee. With a few automatic movements and less than a minute, the twelve-cup pot is filling. Bucky walks a few paces closer to the spacious living room, glancing past the kitchen and down the hallway. There’s a bathroom on the right, a wide set of doors on the left — probably a linen closet — and a closed door just past that. At the end of the hall, the door to Steve’s bedroom is standing open. What Bucky can see of it looks the same as the rest of the apartment: eerily clean, undorned and utilitarian, lit only by the blue evening beyond the blinds.

“You know, if this is…” Steve begins, then trails off, thinking better of whatever he was going to say. He puts the container of coffee back in the cabinet, and tries again. “Tony said you can have your own quarters, if you want them. They’d be smaller than this, but you’d have more privacy.”

“You guys don’t have to put me up here,” Bucky insists. “I could find my own place.”
“This is all bought and paid for, Buck,” Steve replies gently. “I’ve got more room in here than I can use. Had this place all to myself for a couple years, and...well. Can’t say I’ve done much with it.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Be nice to have some company.” He waits for a few seconds, either searching for words or anticipating further argument from Bucky. But Bucky sets a hand down on the back of one of the bar stools, as if merely touching the furniture could show Steve that he’s willing to make himself at home. Steve seems to understand the gesture, however vague. “There’s an extra room, actually, so you can—” Steve decides mid-sentence to demonstrate rather than describe, and hurries around the kitchen island, motioning for Bucky to follow him down the hall. He opens the door to reveal a small guest bedroom.

The rest of Steve’s quarters were practically sterile — this room is warm. Welcoming. Steve’s put some thought into it. It still reflects Steve’s stoic sense for decor — the mattress sports the same patternless sheet-set that Bucky had just seen on the corner of Steve’s own bed, but there’s also an old quilt folded neatly by the footboard. There are plain, dark curtains hanging over the blinds. A little rug on the wooden floor. A piece of Steve’s art hangs on the wall above the desk — watercolor, grey, brown and blue, kids playing in a Brooklyn street with only a single car, leaping over white and gold streaked puddles that have caught the sunshine spilling over the uneven tops of the brownstones. Bucky recognizes the rails of the old fire escape in the foreground, in sharp, detailed focus against the playful cityscape beyond.

“Still haven’t finished cleaning out the desk and the bookshelf,” Steve explains hurriedly, as if to downplay the hours of work he must have already put into this. “Used to have an office in here, but now I’ve got one upstairs in Ops, and, well, you know. If I’ve got paperwork, I just do it at the kitchen table, so…” he trails off, eyes flickering over to watch Bucky’s expression, trying to gauge his opinion. “Well. All yours, if you want it.”

“It’s gorgeous,” Bucky replies, surprise still evident in his voice.

“You don’t have to use it, you know.”

“Steve, it’s perfect, really, I mean it—”

“Well, I just meant that—”

“I could use the company, too, unless you think I should—”

“No, no, Buck—” Steve’s ragged, frustrated laugh brings a halt to the conversation as he squeezes his eyes shut, trying desperately to phrase a complicated request. “I just wanted to say that...my bedroom’s right down the hall.”

Bucky turns to stare at Steve, the bedroom beyond the doorway all but forgotten. “You want to — you wanna share a room?”

“Well, you don’t…” Steve replies quietly, a blush spreading slowly across his cheeks. “When you’re ready. You know you’re welcome. Anytime. I hope you know that.”

“Yes,” Bucky says, voice barely more than a whisper. “If you’re...I would like that. I’d love that.”

Steve is briefly lost for words, but the smile that slips onto his face is more telling than anything words could express. He reaches across the width of the open doorway to lay a hand on Bucky’s shoulder. For the first time in months, he doesn’t feel the need to pull it away and break the contact, no matter how many seconds slip by before he can speak again. “Okay.”
“Do you still want—” Bucky swallows nervously, eyes searching back through the bedroom, like he’s trying to see if the right words are lying on the floor somewhere. Steve thinks he can see the knot in his throat. “Are we sleeping together?”

“Only if you want to.”

“Do you want to?”

“Bucky, if—”

“Yes or no?”

“Of course I do.”

“So do I.”

“Bucky...if you just want to take some time to yourself for now — get settled in — I don’t want you to feel like we have to rush back into this.”

“I don’t want to wait anymore. I — Sorry. Steve, thank you. For what you did in here. It’s nice. But if you’re alright with it...you know, let’s just call this what it is. Pick up where we left off.”

Steve is paralyzed for a moment, every mental and physical resource he possesses focused on processing this recurring fantasy into present reality. Finally, he blinks the last cloudy disbelief out of his eyes and his face splits into a grin. His hand drops from Bucky’s shoulder down to the small of his back, where it rests just as naturally as ever. “Well. I’m sure we can come up with something else to do with this room.”

“Tonight?” Bucky asks, voice lower and more hesitant than before, but with a shining, hopeful note.

“Let’s wait to decide until after dinner,” Steve suggests, fingers sliding back up Bucky’s side to squeeze his shoulder again, only to feel it go a little rigid.

Bucky’s teeth worry at the inside of his cheek. “You don’t...it’s not a good time?”

Steve thinks he understands what Bucky has decided not to say — You don’t think I’m ready yet. He slides his hand up further to the back of Bucky’s neck and pulls him close, chest to chest, leaning on the doormframe, and bends down to lay his chin on Bucky’s shoulder. “It’s your call, Buck. But listen — I got all the stuff to make lasagna and—”

Bucky sighs, realizing where Steve’s going with this, and his sigh builds to a laughs that seems to release all the tension form his muscles. He retaliates with a weak, playful punch, right in the ribs.

“Bought enough food to put us both in coma,” Steve continues, laughing along with Bucky. “I’m just saying, let’s see how you’re doing once you got five pounds of Italian food in you.”

Bucky leans forward to rest on Steve’s shoulder just as Steve is resting on his, rubbing his flesh hand up and down the length of Steve’s spine. “I want to make the lasagna. I remember how.”

Of all the little miracles that have occurred in the course of their brief conversation, that’s the request that strikes a chord in Steve’s heart, that drives it all home.

This is the culmination of infinite singular events that had brought them both from 1944 to the hallway of this apartment, against every impossibility. This is what he’d prayed for at the end of every long night spent pouring over the Kiev files one more time, just to read Bucky’s name. Just to
see his face. He wanted Bucky to remember him, to want to be close to him. To be safe. To feel safe. For everything to come easily, for his mind to have time to rest, to recover good memories — schoolyard games, Brooklyn rooftops on Independence Day, that snowy night in a London pub, his mother’s recipes. “God, Bucky — I—”

“I love you,” Bucky nods resolutely, tipping his head up to rub their cheeks together.

In the kitchen, the coffee maker is beeping, and there’s an oven that needs to preheat, and an old cast iron skillet to brown the sausage. There’s unplayed music on the antique record player, and all over the apartment, there are lights just waiting to be turned on. Steve had never had a reason to make the place feel anything but temporary. Now, Bucky’s here to share it all with again, to make hours into memories, songs into dances, and empty rooms into a home.

“I feel like...I don’t know,” Bucky mumbles against his shoulder. “Like everything’s gonna go better for us, this time.”

“Well, look at it this way,” Steve grins, standing up straight and giving Bucky’s arm a hard pat as they both head for the kitchen. “Sure as hell can’t go any worse.”

Bucky thinks the lasagna tastes off, somehow. Not bad, but not quite like his ma made it, either. Steve, on the other hand, raves about it until Bucky can no longer get a word in edgewise. Bucky finishes a third of the pan on his own, but Steve eats most of the remainder, complimenting every layer, and tells Bucky he has to force himself to quit eating before he hurts himself.

Afterwards, they sit at the kitchen table, making quiet conversation as they finish their drinks. They talk about nothing in particular — Steve’s teammates, his life at the Facility, the little life Bucky had made for himself in Europe, old memories, lost friends, the war. Talking about the war devolves quickly into reminiscing about the times the Commandos had almost caught them in the act. Nice to be able to laugh about it now — at the time, it had been scary as hell.

Ten minutes of that kind of talk, and Steve’s face feels hot and Bucky’s cheeks are flushed. Steve excuses himself for a moment to get another beer for them to split, but all he really wants to do is stick his head in the freezer for a minute or two. He’s pleasantly surprised to find a slice of cheesecake behind the beers — a gift from Pepper. She always told him that baking saved her money on therapy. He plates it, grabs one fork from the drawer, and brings it out to the table.

The moment he sits back down, he can feel an electric anticipation gathering between them, and although they don’t talk about their after-dinner plans just yet, something about Bucky’s eyes tells Steve that the goal hasn’t changed. This feels like a date — a date that’s going really, really well.

The atmosphere is warm and charged as they sit beside each other at the table, passing the fork back and forth until the cheesecake is gone. This is perfect. This is heaven.

Steve isn’t sure which of them moves first. Bucky shifts forward in his seat. Steve drops the fork on the empty plate and lays his hand on top of Bucky’s. Their eyes meet. Bucky’s head tilts a little, sweet, inviting, and Steve leans forward.

And then their press together, as easy and natural as breathing, and they draw each other in slowly and carefully, tasting like sweet cream and soda pop, heartbeats loud, feeling like twenty-somethings in the park after an evening stroll. Steve is amazed that after all they’ve been through together, they still have something they can share, something untouched, unblemished, that still feels this new and innocent. He supposes that’s just how love is — no matter how many times you test it, it remains
Steve lets Bucky set the pace. He doesn’t want to go too fast — he still has no idea what might spook him, what level of contact Bucky can handle, what he’ll need to work up to, what he’s comfortable doing and what he’s comfortable having done to him.

But once the bedroom door is shut and all the lights are out besides the warm, dim bedside lamp, Bucky seems to pick up right where they left off in ‘45. The rich, creamy light on Steve’s dark, solid sheets makes the room feel small and intimate, like they’re back in that little tent in Switzerland with their bedrolls stacked together, trying to ease each other to sleep.

Bucky takes a seat on the edge of the bed and sheds his jacket and the long-sleeved shirt underneath. Steve’s lovesick eyes tell him he’s made of solid gold. Bucky’s also bigger than he used to be — stronger and healthier than he’d been during the war — and Steve will no longer have to worry about hurting him, because Bucky can hold his own. Bucky’d probably had the same thought about him back in ‘43. Now, they’re perfectly matched.

Steve pulls off his own shirt and drops it on the floor. He can clean up in the morning. Right now, neatness is his last priority, because Bucky leans back on the heels of his hands and tips his chin up invitingly, signalling that Steve should come closer.

Steve plants a knee on the bed between Bucky’s legs and a hand on his bare shoulder, pushing him back onto the cool blankets, and Bucky grips Steve’s thigh between his almost reassuringly, telling him, I’m alright. Keep going.

He presses one more hard kiss to Bucky’s lips before moving on, nuzzling gently along that stubbled jawline, detouring momentarily to worry the soft shell of Bucky’s ear between his teeth, and finally dipping down to swipe the flat of his tongue over the pulsepoint on his throat. Bucky’s soft, needy sigh becomes a low moan that Steve feels vibrate under his mouth. He brings his thigh forward to close the distance between them, quad pressing firmly at the apex of Bucky’s legs, and he can feel how hot Bucky’s running even through two layers of denim.

Bucky reaches out and takes hold of Steve’s belt-loops, pulling him in insistently, and then pops open the button and lowers his fly, knuckles brushing lightly over Steve’s cock. A shiver of arousal skitters through Steve’s body and he gasps against the red bruise he’s sucked into Bucky’s shoulder, because even that careless little touch feels like a hot brand right in the pit of his stomach and fresh waves of blood fill him up and make him throb and ache and...

God, he needs this.

And then Bucky shoves him away, forcing him to stand, drags his jeans down over his thighs and yanks his boxers down just low enough to free his flushed, swollen cock. Steve groans deep in his chest as the cool air and Bucky’s warm exhale hit him in quick succession.

This is. Steve’s head spins. Amazing. Unbelievable. This is so good. Physically, the sensations are amazing, but his heart is soaring right alongside his body, because this is Bucky. Hell, this moment shouldn’t even be possible, and yet here they both are. The man he thought he’d lost is right here. Bucky who went off to war, who he had found against all odds, Bucky who fell into that ravine and survived everything that Hydra put him through and walked away and disappeared and took back his selfhood and then came home. He would have been perfectly content to lie down beside him, clothed from head to toe, and do nothing more than kiss him and hold him close until they’d both drifted off. He would have been content to do that for every night for the rest of his life, if that’s all Bucky had wanted. But instead, Bucky is giving him this, and more importantly, Bucky is taking this for himself. They’re sharing this. Both giving, both taking.
Bucky is the one driving this forward, and Steve trusts him to know what he wants, to go at his own pace, to slow down if he needs to. Slow just doesn’t seem to be what Bucky is interested in right now.

Steve steadies his breathing and reaches down to push his fingers through Bucky’s hair. He tightens his grip involuntarily when a warm, flesh palm cups his balls and presses them upward. Bucky groans when his hair is pulled, wrapping the other hand — smooth, unyielding vibranium — around the base of Steve’s cock.

The metal is cool and powerful and so, so foreign on Steve’s overheated, sensitive skin — it’s a completely new sensation, and Steve can’t get enough of it. He wants so badly to thrust forward into Bucky’s fist, but he flushes down to his chest at the thought because, damn it, if Bucky knew how much Steve loves the feeling of the Weapon gripping him...well, Steve doesn’t guess he’s ever hear the end of it.

Oh, hell, forget it. Because when Bucky presses his lips to the head of Steve’s cock, sucks it into his mouth, drags his tongue over a vein and hollows out his cheeks and swallows, once Steve feels that softness and heat on him again he doesn’t know why he’d ever want anything else.

To his credit, Steve lasts a staggering five minutes before he has to hold his breath and give Bucky a desperate tap on the shoulder. The look in Bucky’s eyes mirrors Steve’s own disappointment at the interruption. God knows, he doesn’t want him to stop, but Steve has other plans. This shouldn’t be how it ends, or really even how the night starts. He wants to be closer. He wants Bucky to feel what he’s feeling, wants them moving together. Bucky’s heavy lashes and bright cheeks and sharp, ragged breaths are enough indication that Steve isn’t the only one wanting a little more.

Steve takes care of his own clothes first, shucking his shoes, socks, jeans, and boxers in a hurry and tossing them in the general direction of his discarded shirt. Bucky’s jeans and briefs come next, and by that time, Steve’s so focused on the sight of his gorgeous guy that he’s not sure where the hell he throws those.

Steve realizes with a stuttered apology that he’s been living the single-and-overworked life for so long that he doesn’t even have a bottle of lube in his bedroom. He wishes he’d have thought to pick one up at the drugstore, but Bucky’s request had come so suddenly that he hadn’t even thought about it. After a few seconds of panic and a smiling roll of Bucky’s eyes, he jogs off to his bathroom to dig a jar of Vaseline out of his medicine cabinet, and boy, is he ever glad that it’s not empty.

When he returns to the bedroom, Bucky is stretched out on his belly across the covers, one arm dangling languidly off the edge of the bed, so clearly waiting for Steve to come back and work him open that Steve lets a low hum of arousal slip from his throat. He pops the jar open and settles between Bucky’s open legs.

As much as he wants to hurry, Steve is intensely aware that the responsibility of setting the pace now falls to him, and this is not something he can allow himself to rush. He starts out slow, setting the Vaseline aside and rubbing his palms from the small of Bucky’s back over the dimples above his hipbones and down to the swell of his ass until Bucky’s just purring for him with every stroke. Finally, he takes hold of Bucky’s full cheeks and parts them, rubbing firm fingers everywhere he can reach, digging his thumbs in right where glute meets thigh, kneading the muscles and feeling the perfect roundness under his hands until Bucky’s soft, contented sighs become desperate, throaty pleas.

Steve coats his middle finger and then rubs the pad of it in slow, lazy circles over the velvet ring of muscle, until Bucky finally relaxes enough to let him slide in. Bucky’s groan starts out quiet and focused, but quickly builds to a wrecked, wild crescendo as Steve presses in deep. By the time Steve has him worked open enough to accommodate a second and third finger, he’s pushing back into
them, fucking himself on Steve’s hand, and Steve knows he’s miles beyond ready now. He’s halfway to begging. And thank God, because he’s too hard to wait another minute.

When Steve pulls his fingers free, Bucky rolls onto his side and draws his knee up to his chest, pulling one of Steve’s feather pillows down to cradle his head so that he can watch him. Steve gathers up most of the remaining Vaseline in his palm and slowly, feeling Bucky’s eyes on him, he strokes himself from tip to root, careful not to push himself too far. Bucky hugs his knee closer and wets his lips, pupils wide and dark and breaths measured. Steve twists his wrist right as he ends his stroke, just because he’s not above putting on a show when Bucky’s staring him down like that, and when he finally leans forward and presses against him, Bucky smiles and settles down on the pillow, whispering softly, hazily, “I missed you. I love you.”

Steve lets his head drop to rest against Bucky’s shoulder and plants a kiss on his arm. “Love you, Buck.”

And Bucky repeats it again and again as Steve pushes into him, chants it like a mantra as Steve sinks in inch by inch until they’re both breathless and sweating and Steve is so deep inside him that they can feel each other’s pounding heartbeats.

Steve starts out nice and easy — fucks into him with slow, measured rolls of his hips as they both fall silent, each intent on listening to the other breathe, wordlessly focused on nothing except the feeling of being joined together. And as fervently as Steve’s aching cock is telling him to thrust in hard and fast, he can’t seem to tear his gaze away from Bucky’s profile as it is right then — framed by the Weapon and his pillow, dark waves of hair spread out like a halo, eyes shut and lips parted to drag in deep lungfuls of the sex-tinged air, with breaths occasionally interrupted by a low, sighing utterance of Steve’s name.

“Baby,” he begs. “Baby, please. Please, Stevie, more, more—”

“I’ve gotcha, Buck. I’ve got you,” Steve promises, leaning back onto his heels and taking Bucky’s knee in his own firm grip for purchase. And from the moment Steve sets that quick, powerful rhythm, they’re both gone. Bucky calls Steve’s name again and again and Steve answers with his body, driving in harder and rougher than he ever would have dared had it not been for the way it’s making Bucky toss his head back and practically sob with pleasure.

Bucky reaches up and lays a hand on Steve’s chest, not asking him to slow down, not pleading for more — just to touch him and feel the way his heart is clamoring beneath his skin. Steve lays his own hand over Bucky’s in response, and that closeness, that intimate, simple connection is what ultimately carries them both over the edge of the precipice.

Steve feels Bucky’s orgasm building first, unstoppable and earth-shattering. He feels the way Bucky’s fingers dig into his chest and the fluttering contractions rippling inside him, pushing back against his cock, squeezing him powerfully at the base, and Steve’s own climax hits him with unbelievable speed and intensity as he buries himself completely in Bucky’s feverish heat. Bucky’s orgasm takes longer to crest but, God almighty, it lasts and lasts until Steve can hardly believe that Bucky hasn’t lost consciousness, rolling in like a tide and crashing through his body like wave after wave onto soft sand, ebbing in slow motion and leaving him clean and bare, washing everything away.

“Steve,” Bucky sighs, the name hitching on tears that he can’t seem to stop from dripping onto the pillow. “Oh, my God.”

Steve laughs weakly. “Oh, sweetheart,” he smiles, collapsing onto the bed beside him. He wraps him in his arms and pulls him flush to his chest, settling his forehead into the crook of Bucky’s neck.
“You’re all I need, Buck. You’re... *this — this* is all I need.” He holds him tighter, and Bucky presses back against him.

“I never thought — I didn’t think I’d ever have this again. After so long — I…”

“I’m right here, Buck,” Steve swears, pouring his whole heart into every word and knowing that Bucky can hear it. “I’m not going anywhere. And neither are you.”
September

It’s not quite 0600 yet, and Steve is still asleep. Bucky slips out of bed to use the bathroom, but he
doesn’t go back to bed. Careful not to make too much noise, he takes a pencil out of the cup on the
phone-table, then goes to their refrigerator where their calendar hangs to make a very light X on
today’s date - September 4th. It’s already a bad day.

“Would you like me to add an engagement to your personal calendar, Bucky?”

Friday’s voice startles him so badly that he breaks the pencil lead against the slick page. He turns to
glow at the air in the center of the room, as if that’s where Friday is floating. “Shh,” he hisses, not
sure that the robot will understand.

“Would you like me to contact someone in the medical wing?” she asks, now imitating a human
whisper.

“No,” Bucky replies to the empty room. “Just stop spying on me in the bathroom.”

“It’s my job to keep an eye on everybody, Bucky.”

“I don’t appreciate being watched.” Bucky wishes he knew how to turn her off, but finding out if
that’s possible will have to wait. He heads back to the bathroom and locks himself inside, hoping
Steve won’t wake up once the shower starts running. Steve’s in the habit of sleeping in on Sunday
mornings. Usually, nothing except the smell of breakfast will get him up before nine. Bucky shucks
his sweatpants and A-shirt and turns on the water, then plugs the sink and throws his underwear in,
letting a stream of cold water run over them. A nervous sigh shudders through his chest.

More blood.

He thinks he can remember a time during his captivity when this was a common occurrence, but he’s
almost certain it had never happened before the war, and he had no recollection of it happening
during his final years as Hydra’s Asset. But a few months after he had escaped, it started again, all on
its own. He didn’t know what caused it. Probably some kind of food allergy, who knows? Maybe it
was something Hydra did to him. He had certainly tried every dietary solution he could think of.
He’d cut out milk, then nuts, then acidic foods, carbohydrates (that had been a struggle), meat, he’d
tried eating less fiber, more fiber. Nothing seemed to work. About once a month, it would happen
again. That, and back pain. Not bad, but it was enough to wear him out, when it went on for three
days. Sometimes more.

The thought keeps crossing his mind that Hydra might have tried to give him some sort of sex
change, that maybe they managed to do something that made it possible for him to...menstruate? He
can’t think of another explanation for regular monthly bleeding, and it seems eerily similar to what
he’d heard his sisters complaining about when he was young. With all the other bullshit Hydra had
tried on him (once they figured out how hard he was to kill) he wouldn’t be surprised, but he’s got
no way of knowing without consulting a doctor.

And a doctor wouldn’t know without looking. Bucky knows very well that there’s nothing exterior
to suggest he’s been physically altered, so they’d probably have to put him in stirrups. The thought
makes him feel cold and nauseous. He won’t go to see a doctor. No way in hell.

Which means that Steve cannot find out that he’s bleeding. Telling him would mean that Steve
would all but force him to get it checked out. Bucky understands that it’s just because Steve cares,
but he might not understand how much the idea scares him right now. Bucky wants to give himself a little more time to adjust. Maybe, if the bleeding keeps up, he’ll work up the gumption to handle it.

And how would he even tell Steve, anyway? There’s no good way to tell his best guy that he thinks he’s having cycles. Just thinking those ridiculous words makes Bucky flush red. He scrubs his underwear harder with the knuckles of his prosthetic hand and leaves them to soak, disgusted by the sight of them.

The back pain is worse than usual today, even if the bleeding isn’t as heavy as it was last month. His usual lukewarm shower just doesn’t cut it, so he spends thirty minutes stranding under a stream of scalding hot water before he gives up. He’ll just have to deal with it.

Luckily, most of the blood in his underwear washes out, so he can throw them into the hamper without worrying about Steve finding them and asking questions. Moving as quickly and quietly as he can, he takes clean clothes from their shared dresser and tiptoes back to the bathroom to shove some toilet paper in his briefs. He’ll just have to hope that the bleeding doesn’t get heavier.

Steve manages to drag himself out of bed and into the hallway in the time it takes Bucky to put on fresh clothes and tidy up their bathroom. When Bucky opens the door and finds him leaning sleepily in the hallway, probably waiting in line for the toilet, he’s suddenly unsure of whether he’s left any evidence where Steve might find it, and when Steve smiles blearily at him, Bucky wonders if he can tell that he’s hiding something. He schools his expression, letting Steve past him.

Steve, always the gentleman, doesn’t bother to shut the door. Bucky tries to convince himself that he loves absolutely everything about Steve. That there’s not a thing in the world he’d like to change. But Steve has this bizarre habit of always wanting to carry on a conversation while he’s peeing. Or while Bucky’s peeing. And Bucky wishes that this only happened when they were at their own apartment, but Steve will do it just as readily in a public restroom. He’ll strike up conversations at crowded urinals, when he can get away with it.

“I’m flying out for an assignment in Taboga at six,” Steve yawns. “Briefing starts at four, but I’m all yours until then.”

Bucky sighs. If he engages Steve now, it’ll just make him think that Bucky doesn’t mind talking over the sound of piss hitting the toilet bowl. Which he does. Except now, he’s curious. “Where’s Taboga? Gonna be dangerous?”

“Nah, not really,” Steve shrugs, flushing the toilet and shuffling over to the sink to wash his hands. Bucky fidgets with his metal thumb, hoping that he didn’t leave any bloodstains on the ceramic. “Little island off the coast of Panama. Looks really beautiful, actually.”

“And you’re not taking me? I could’ve had a vacation,” Bucky smirks. “Who’s your team?”

“Oh, Wanda, Sam, Clint. It looks like those arms dealers Tony’s been tracking are doing their manufacturing and shipping from a port there, off the grid.”

“So why isn’t Tony going?” Bucky asks, letting Steve past him into the hallway so he can make his usual beeline for the coffee maker, relieved that Steve finished in the bathroom without finding anything suspicious. “Sounds like it would be his collar.”

“Ah, he’s got some kind of gala to attend for the Foundation,” Steve comments, tossing some beans in the grinder, then yelling over it as it runs. “Told him I’d handle it. Want me to make breakfast?”

Bucky waits for the grinder to power down to answer and settles on one of the stools at the kitchen
island. “Fuck yes, I do.”

“Oatmeal, again?” Steve asks flatly. Admittedly, Bucky is a creature of habit.

But today, he’s also ravenous. And craving sweets more than he’s craving bland. “No, something we can make a lot of.”

“We make a lot of everything,” Steve reminds him, perusing the inside of their well-stocked refrigerator. “Bacon? Eggs? Sausage? What do we want, buddy?”

Bucky stretches and folds his arms on the counter, resting his head in the crook of his elbow and wishing he had the gall to crawl back into bed and ask Steve to just bring his breakfast there. “No...something bread-y. Pancakes or waffles or French toast.”

“Crêpes?” Steve tempts. Steve thinks he can make excellent crêpes, but Bucky doesn’t have the heart to tell him that he always ends up making greasy, thin pancakes.

“Not...today,” he deflects. “I’m really hungry. Pancakes sound better,” he smiles. “Make, like, forty of them.”

“Oh, I’ll make forty pancakes,” Steve promises, taking out the eggs and a half-gallon of buttermilk. “I don’t know what you’re going to eat, but I’ll make forty fuckin’ pancakes, pal.”

They never do end up sitting down to their breakfast. They cover the counter with dishes of butter and syrup, fruit and whip cream, peanut butter and chocolate sauce, and eat their pancakes one or two at a time, fresh off the griddle, until all of Steve’s batter is gone. The remaining fruit doesn’t go to waste, either. Steve leans on the island, leisurely cleaning up the last of the banana slices and strawberry halves, passing the bowls to Bucky to be washed as he finishes. Bucky glances at the little switch over the sink and laughs, wondering if Steve has ever used a garbage disposal.

Once they’ve tidied up the kitchen, they settle in on the couch. Bucky excuses himself twice because he’s bled through the toilet paper, but Steve doesn’t take much notice of his absence. He’s too busy shouting at the Mets and cussing at C-SPAN on the commercial breaks, thank goodness.

After an hour of that, Steve is itching to find an outlet for his frustration, so they head downstairs to gym. The punching bags are occupied, but the basketball court is empty. Neither of them like watching it much on television, but they can certainly entertain themselves in a one-on-one game.

Bucky has to call for three time-outs so that he can jog off to the restroom - and not because he’s bleeding. The bleeding slowed down (which can only be good - usually it goes on for two days, at least). Now he’s vomiting.

And that worries him. He’s not injured and he hasn’t caught a stomach flu since his first internment with Hydra and Zola’s earliest experiments. This has never happened in conjunction with the bleeding before, though, so it must be a coincidence. If it’s not a coincidence, then whatever is wrong with him is getting worse, and he needs to go to medical. And he’s not going to do that now, anyway. Not when Steve only has a few hours left to relax before he ships out on another assignment.

So he doesn’t mention the vomiting. He just laughs and tells Steve he drank a little too much coffee, while trying to convince himself it was the buttermilk. Steve doesn’t exactly seem sold on his lie, but
he doesn’t question him, either. Bucky’s sure it’s just a matter of time.

Thirty minutes after Steve boards the quinjet, the apartment starts to feel too empty and the rest of the tower seems too crowded. Bucky doesn’t know what to do with himself. There’s a communal lounge with a kitchen, but Rhodes is using the couch and has paperwork spread out all over the coffee table. Bucky doesn’t want to disturb him and, moreover, he’s firmly convinced that Rhodes still doesn’t trust him and probably never will. Each new room he visits, there’s someone else there. Someone he’d rather not intrude upon. He’s about to resign himself to a few days of reading Steve’s boring history books, shut in the apartment, when he comes to a small gym at the end of a hall. It’s not nearly as nice or well-equipped as the main gym he’d visited with Steve that morning, but it is empty.

He turns on the fan in the corner, then stakes out a treadmill with a good view of the television and the better part of the breeze. The pace he sets is slow, even by non-enhanced standards - he’s not here to push himself, just to pass the time and make sure that he’s not wound up too tight later, so that he can sleep tonight.

He doesn’t sleep well when Steve is gone. The apartment is still new and unfamiliar - he’s afraid to touch the furniture, unsure of what is Steve’s space and what is his or if it’s all theirs or all Steve’s, terrified that he’ll break something or leave a mess somewhere or eat something he shouldn’t. Maybe he’s just not at home yet in the Facility, or maybe he just doesn’t trust himself to be on his own yet. He knows that’s stupid - he was on his own for two years in Europe and he did alright, but there were certainly bad days and nights that were even worse. But back in Bucharest, there wasn’t talking AI around to comment on his bad days and report them to God knows who. He’s not naive enough to think that the team doesn’t still keep a wary eye on him. He doesn’t blame them.

The backpain makes a reappearance after about forty-five minutes of jogging, even though he hasn’t started to bleed again. Which is abnormal, even it’s not intolerable. The constant movement actually seems to be easing the ache. He promises himself that if he’s still in pain tomorrow, he’ll go to the medical center whether he wants to or not. And if it’s better, then he won’t go. Somehow, gambling with the idea instead of pressuring himself makes it all a little more bearable to think about.

So, no blood, no pain, no doctors. There. That gives him a little bit of hope. And if the bleeding comes back next month, he’ll deal with that then, and not a moment before. Maybe he’ll even work up the courage to tell Steve what’s going on. Some advice and support couldn’t hurt.

Once he’s set those terms for himself, Bucky compartmentalizes the whole thing. He packs it all away and closes the box. Instead of the lingering dull ache in his lower back, he wills his body to focus on the repetition of putting one foot in front of the other on the treadmill, and lets his mind focus on the television screen.

And it turns out to be a pretty effective distraction. He’s not sure exactly how he’s managed to spend this long as a free man without having discovered the Food Network. It is fantastic. He catches the tail-end of a cooking competition, which is exciting, but the food doesn’t look all that great - he’s sure it’s meant to be innovative and interesting, but it’s mostly just bizarre - cooking with a blowtorch looks like a good time, but he imagines the food would come out tasting like butane. And who the fuck wants to eat something that’s been foamed, whatever that means? All the portions are measly, anyway.

Once that’s over with, they move on to classic, relaxed cooking shows - ladies who look like his ma and his sisters, who talk you through what they’re making one step at a time, who taste every ingredient before it goes in. No flamethrowers or shrimp-flavored foam. Someone makes a really gorgeous rhubarb pie. Then another lady makes pork meatballs. Stuffed artichokes. Beer-battered
onions. Gnocchi that look so good he’d eat them off a dirty floor if they fell. A plate of nachos meant
for a party of twenty that Bucky’s damn sure he and Steve could clean up all on their own.

After two hours of that, Bucky’s inhibitions about using the kitchen in Steve’s (their?) apartment
when Steve isn’t home are fast-fading, overpowered by a sudden temptation to go cook something
ridiculous. Not nachos - too many steps. But that lady was definitely on the right track. And certainly
not whatever this new lady is making in her slow-cooker. He doesn’t want to wait all night to have
dinner. Maybe something that he can make in one pot. He’d already done all those damn breakfast
dishes since Steve had cooked for them.

Something spicy sounds nice, for a change. It’s been four years since he left Hydra, but he’s only just
beginning to enjoy flavors beyond bland or sweet. Salty would be good, too. He knows they have
ground turkey - Steve likes to stuff peppers with it. And Steve had offered him sausage this morning.
Maybe he could use that. Steve won’t mind. The meats probably need to be used before Steve will
be back, anyway, and if Bucky can manage to make a big enough batch of something that will keep
for a few days, Steve might really enjoy having a home-cooked meal ready the moment he’s off the
jet, even if it is just left-overs.

“Chili.”

The idea strikes him with such awesome force that he unthinkingly says it out loud. Chili would be
perfect.

“So turn off the fan.”

Bucky’s heart jumps into his throat when he hears the unexpected voice in answer. Suddenly, he’s
acutely suspicious that he’s not supposed to be using this gym. He flinches and turns to look over his
shoulder as the door shuts behind the unidentified speaker. And, shit. It’s not just some new recruit or
staff-member: it’s Tony Stark. Given their torrid history, Bucky has done his best to stay out of
Tony’s way since moving into the compound. He feels himself pale with embarrassment and an
underlying sick feeling as his skittish brain calls up images of Howard - showing off his flying car at
the expo, then laughing with the Commandos, and then half-conscious, bleeding from both nostrils,
asphyxiating, slumped against his car on a gravel road. It happens every time he sees Tony.

“I’m - I’m sorry,” he says, trying and failing to paste on a sheepish smile. “Is this...I mean, it’s all
your - but….can I be here?”

But Stark only gives his question a dismissive scoff as he briefly stretches one quad and then the
other, then climbs onto an elliptical on the other side of the room. “You can be anywhere you want,
Barnes, as long as you’re not, like, waiting for me in my shower tomorrow morning. That’s a hard
Anyway, I’m guessing we’re here for similar reasons. I am...hiding from everybody.”

“I really don’t mind clearing out, if you’d rather be alone,” Bucky insists.

Stark jabs at the control panel on the elliptical, setting it for one of those structured exercise programs
that Bucky’s never bothered with. “No, no, really--,” he smiles disarmingly. “One person who also
doesn’t want to make small talk, I can handle. Big groups of people, though...not so much. Not
today,” he sighs, starting off at a slow pace on the elliptical. Like Bucky, he seems to be using it as
more of a distraction that a workout.

Bucky gives him a rueful half-smile, hoping it looks understanding. “Is that why you didn’t end up
going to your gala thing?”
Stark draws in a deep breath and holds it while he formulates a response, then lets all of the air rush out as he speaks. “No. Ha. But, um, you’re not going to like the truth.” He bows his head, laughing disparagingly at himself. “It why I said I had a Foundation gala and asked Cap to take that assignment for me. So. Yeah. Lied to Cap. Not like he hasn’t lied to me, but...well. I lied to him. And yeah, I absolutely know that I should be out there with them right now. If I worked a desk job and called in for some bullshit like this and got caught, I’d be out on my ass. And I’m going to be real sorry if something happens - to any of them. It’s just, you know, sometimes I can’t - it’s like I can’t manage to, to do much but just try to...

“Get by?” Bucky finishes quietly.

Tony rolls his eyes thankfully. “Yeah, you get it. Cap - I don’t know if he’d get it. Sometimes I think he’s incapable of feelings outside of righteous anger and compassion for his fellow man.”

“He would get it,” Bucky promises, knowing that it probably won’t help to hear. It sure wouldn’t help if someone said it to him.

“Okay,” says Tony, his tone indicating that he’d really love a change of subject. “I shared. Your turn, Robo-Hobo. ‘Chilly’ what? What’s ‘chilly’? My guess is, outdated and painfully ironic trigger-word.”

A laugh breaks through Bucky’s lingering shell of discomfort. “No. I just decided to make chili when I get back upstairs tonight.”

“Oh,” Stark grins, intrigued. He gestures fleeting toward the television screen. “So, what, Rachel Rae is you new therapist? I like it. I heard she’s good. Just trying to keep yourself busy while Cap’s out of town?”

Bucky laughs. “I’m just hungry. But I guess the apartment feels a little empty without him, too,” he admits.

Stark ponders this for a moment, wiping his forehead on the sleeve of his shirt. “You know what might also help with that?”

Bucky glances over at him, brow knitted questioningly.

“Company,” is Stark’s innocent suggestion.

Bucky lets out a staggered, uncomfortable chuckle. “I thought you hated me.”

“I like chili more than I hate anyone, Barnes.”

“Really,” Bucky smirks.

“Not that hipster vegan bullshit, is it?”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Meatless?”

“Oh, fuck, no.”

“You like wet burritos?” Stark asks, cocking an eyebrow.

Bucky wrinkles his nose. “Now, if that a pick-up line--”
“Oh, no, no, no. No strings attached. I only want you for your chili,” Stark assures him, managing to look totally serious when he says it. Bucky doesn’t really know how to respond without saying something totally inappropriate and he’s not sure what might offend Stark and what might amuse him. The silence between them gets thick and awkward before Stark finally adds, “But look, just saying....it’s a really big wet burrito. Nine, ten inches.”

Bucky snorts. “You know, I can’t say no to that.”
Hey guys! A dear friend and fellow author, like, just GAVE me a computer. Outta nowhere. So go read everything directorshellhead has ever written, bask in her incredible storytelling, and leave her a ton of kudos and comments, because this update is brought to you by her generosity.

“I mean, let’s just call it what it is, Buck, you want to have a family dinner for the Avengers.”

“It sounds stupid when you put it like that.”

“No - no, no, no. I do not think it’s stupid. It’s just...it’s so cute, Bucky. It’s just not your usual style. But I think it’s awesome, actually. I mean, I’m excited. I think we should do it tonight.”

“No, no--”

“I’m serious!”

“I’m not ready yet.”

“Aw, I thought you said you felt like you were up to it.”

“I am up to it, I just don’t have a plan! And they’re not even all here. And I gotta come up with a menu and go to the grocery store.”

“Ha! A menu? Are you going to make them a seven course meal, or something?”

“No, but I should at least try to coordinate with Tony, see what he wants to fix.”

That draws a mockingly exasperated groan out of Steve. “Tony, Tony, Tony. Your new best friend. Look, I love Tony, but I need one Stark-free zone in my life, and I’d like it to be my bedroom.”

It’s almost 0600, and Steve’s alarm is about to go off. He realizes this with two minutes to spare, and reaches over to the nightstand to turn it off, since he’s already wide awake. They’d turned in early the night before. Steve had come home late in the afternoon from a quick relief and evac op in Canada, helping to move families out of the path of a wildfire. Wanda, Vision, and Rhodes had stayed behind to finish the job, and they hadn’t hesitated to let him know that they didn’t need him there. It hadn’t been the most taxing mission he’d ever undertaken - not by a long shot - but the extra sleep was still a welcome blessing.

He woke up feeling great - totally refreshed, and Bucky was right there beside him, nestled into his shoulder. They had started leaving their balcony door open at night in lieu of the air conditioning, because both of them liked the fresh air and preferred to sleep in a cool room, with a breeze when they could get it. The autumn night air made their skin chilly and damp, just right for lying close together and enjoying each other’s bodies like the cool side of a feather pillow.

Steve’s not due anywhere until 0900. He could still get a run in if they...well, hadn’t he gotten enough exercise on that op? Maybe he could skip the run altogether. That wouldn’t be such a bad
“Then why’d *that* happen as soon as I brought him up?” Bucky smirks.

*What? Brought who up? Wait, Tony. What were they talking about? Not wanting Tony in his bedroom? And why did what happen?*

Oh.

Steve scoffs defensively, pulling their quilt up over the sheet he’d slept under, but even the heavy quilt tents. “Sorry,” he says, wincing with embarrassment. “Forgot what we were talking about.”

“Get a little bit sidetracked?” Bucky chuckles, pinching Steve’s side between two metal fingers. Steve doesn’t have time to come up with a witty reply. Bucky bumps his forehead against his jaw to get his attention. “Want a blowjob?”

Steve can’t help but laugh. At first, Bucky had been a little quiet after he and Steve had moved back in with his team, but after two months of settling in, he’s becoming increasingly blunt about two things: hunger and sex. No witty reply needed, and there’s *certainly* no need for the usual, *Oh, you don’t have to do that for me!* song and dance. Steve just grins sleepily and nods.

Bucky moves, slow and lazy, to press in closer to Steve’s side, letting Steve feel the warmth of his own erection against his hip. He cranes his neck forward to bring his mouth to Steve’s earlobe, and Steve’s body vibrates with a pleasant shiver as Bucky worries it between his lips then draws it in to nip at it, letting his stubble scratch lightly against Steve’s neck.

“I’ve got a question,” he whispers warmly.

Steve turns to stare him down, bumping their noses together. “What?”

Bucky smirks, but underneath it he seems a little nervous. “Which hand do you like better?”

Steve decides immediately that playing dumb will be more fun, and asks, “What? In general? Or--”

“Oh your dick, dumbass.”

“Oh,” Steve replies, as if this is a shocking revelation. “Hm. Whichever one’s touching me, I guess.”

“It’s a serious question.”

And in spite of himself, Steve pauses to actually give it some serious thought. “I’m going to say…” he makes a face and whines indecisively. “You know what? Metal,” he proclaims unabashedly. “Let’s go with metal. I’m feeling crazy today.”

Bucky shakes his head like he’s ashamed of Steve, but his metal hand slides up the length of Steve’s thigh and he brushes his cool thumb over the soft, sensitive juncture between Steve’s leg and pubic bone, indicating that he doesn’t mind Steve’s answer one bit. “You’re an old kink, Cap. Who’d have guessed.”

“Mm,” Steve hums as Bucky grips his adductor roughly. “Don’t you go telling everybody - woah,” he giggles nervously as Bucky’s mechanical fingers move inward to cup his balls. “Hey, Buck, how about we use the soft one for those, though?”

“I thought you trusted me,” Bucky cuts in with mock offense, and the servomotors in his fingers hum as he tightens his fist threateningly, making Steve’s thighs snap defensively shut. “Scared I’m going
to break your eggs, huh?” he taunts.

“No, but stop--”

“Huh, you big chicken?”

And Steve can’t help but snort at Bucky’s God-awful name-calling. Bless his heart, the guy tries. Still, he’s starting to feel a little impatient, so he pushes meaningfully on the top of Bucky’s head. “Hey, if you’re going to suck me off, Buck, would you hurry up and do it? I either need sex or breakfast,” he gripes.

Bucky laughs at him, but thankfully shows him some mercy, too. He finally gives up on using the Weapon to antagonize Steve and grabs the quilt and the sheet and sends them both billowing to the floor at the foot of the bed, leaving Steve naked and exposed. If his aggressive handling had made Steve nervous, it certainly hadn’t caused his erection to flag in the slightest. If anything, his cock looks more flushed and heavy than ever in response to it. Steve wonders silently if he’s just learned something about himself, and plans to ask Bucky to help him test his theory one of these days.

Bucky goes straight to the end of the bed, apparently planning to kiss his way up rather than down today. He starts with Steve’s ankles, lifting them to his mouth one at a time and brushing his stubble-roughened cheeks up along Steve’s sculpted calves. His tongue tickles against the inside of Steve’s knees, making him gasp as he fights the urge to jerk away. Steve bares his teeth in a smiling wince, savoring the teasing kisses. With his flesh hand, Bucky pins Steve to the mattress by one prominent, muscled hip, while his metal hand clamps around Steve’s hard, aching cock. He settles over him, trapping Steve’s legs under his weight and teasing him with frustratingly gentle strokes of the cool, ribbed metal.

Once Steve is completely hard in his hand, Bucky angles his cock toward his parted lips, letting him feel the warm, humid caress of his exhales in relief to the chill of his fingers. “God--Buck,” Steve groans with a dazed, lop-sided smile.

And Bucky must be tired of teasing him now, because he sinks his mouth down onto Steve without any further pleasantries, still gripping the base in his prosthetic hand, tightening his hold as he laves his tongue over the head in long, unyielding strokes. And Steve is so thankful for the cool firmness of that grip, because he’s nearly certain that without it, he might have just blown his top at the first contraction of Bucky’s throat around him and boy, would that have been embarrassing.

“Fuck,” Steve breathes, throwing one arm over his eyes so he can lose himself in the pure physical sensations of having Bucky’s mouth on him. “Fuck, sugar, that’s...oh, that’s so good.”

Most days, Steve’s not much of a hair-puller, but with the way Bucky is manhandling him this morning, he can hardly help himself and he figures that it’s only fair, anyway, since Bucky got rough first. He twines his fingers into those sweat-dampened brown waves and lets his guy feel just how much he’s appreciating the attention. And Bucky doesn’t seem to disagree with him one bit, either - his moan reverberates around Steve’s throbbing cock, which only makes Steve pull harder, and soon their mutual lust becomes an echo chamber. Wordlessly, they both agree to give up any pretense of calm and trade their usual fare of sweet, patient love-making out for unselfconscious, needy sex, and neither of them back down or seem to regret it.

Bucky’s flesh hand soon relinquishes its bruising hold on Steve’s thigh and he cants his hips up, giving himself room to reach down beneath himself and pump his own cock, keeping his strokes in time with the relentless, rhythmic squeezes of the Weapon on Steve.

Knowing that Bucky is working himself over like that, feeling the quick, desperate motions of his
hand and the way the tip of his overheated cock keeps brushing against his leg and the slick warmth of precum painting his skin - it’s enough to drive Steve over the edge so forcefully that his vision reduces to darkness and phantom bursts of color. His orgasm knocks the wind out of him, making him double over and lifting his shoulders up of the bed as his trembling fingers pull mercilessly at Bucky’s hair and the heels of his hands force Bucky’s head lower still, driving his cock deeper into the heat of his mouth. Steve feels a raw growl claw its way out of his chest, and he’s vaguely aware that this is starting to sound more like a drag-out brawl than sleepy, early morning sex, but he’s suddenly miles beyond caring when Bucky’s body tenses and shudders against him.

Bucky hollows out his cheeks around Steve, sucking painfully hard as his face twists with ecstasy of his own, drawing Steve in as deep as he can as he rides out their climaxes. Between watching Bucky fall apart and feeling spurts of semen streaking his legs in one hot pulse after another, Steve’s orgasm just keeps coming until every limb and every muscle is shaking with the strain of it.

Steve isn’t sure how long he lays there, boneless, dragging air into his dry mouth and floating weightlessly on his post-orgasmic buzz. He loses track of time. Space, too, for that matter. He thinks he must have reached nirvana.

“Holy shit,” Bucky rasps, still panting.

Steve finally begins to come down from his high and opens his eyes to see Bucky seated on the edge of the bed, realizing dazedly that he’d been too out of it to even notice him move away.

“Oh,” Bucky groans, sweeping back his bangs with the Weapon, because it’s cleaner than the other hand. “I think I threw my back out.”

“Think I had an aneurism,” Steve counters hoarsely.

Bucky leans down beside him to kiss him, long and slow and deep, and his wet lips feel like a cool drink of water against Steve’s parched tongue. Steve doesn’t want it to end, but eventually Bucky grips his jaw with the Weapon and pulls away, leaving a final, parting kiss on Steve’s chin before plucking a few tissues from the nightstand and cleaning them both up.

“So, what are you making me for breakfast, Cap?” he asks, tossing the tissues haphazardly into the wastebasket and scooping a pair of jeans up off the floor where he’d left them last night.

Steve stretches hard, groaning happily as his spine cracks. “Thought you just had it.”

Bucky huffs with laughter as he pulls his pants on. “Don’t be stingy with me, you dizzy old queer.”

Steve rolls reluctantly out of bed to rummage through his dresser for fresh clothes. “Well, don’t be so demanding. Fuckin’ rough trade.”

“Bacon,” Bucky suggest, ignoring the insult as he yanks his shirt over his head, also the same that he’d worn yesterday.

“Did you pick some up?”

“Got a five pound box at the butcher shop yesterday.”

“Five pounds? I don’t even want to know what you paid for that, Bucky.”

“It’s cheaper when you buy it in bulk!”

“Yeah, if we don’t end up throwing half of it out.”
“We have _never_ thrown out bacon--”

“I’m just saying, Bucky, five pounds is a lot of--”

“I ate a pound of it on my own already.”

Steve shakes his head, laughing. “Golly, Buck, it’s like I’m feeding a whole _baseball team_. You’re eating us out of house and home.”

“Steve, you probably make enough dough these days to actually feed a baseball team, so I don’t want to hear it.” Bucky calls back toward the bedroom as he shuts the bathroom door. Then, through it, “Especially not after I blew you!”

“Oh yeah. Guess I do,” Steve chuckles privately, allowing himself a pleased grin.

Sometimes, he wishes his younger self could see how things are now. His life has certainly seen some trials and tribulations, but he couldn’t be happier with the way it’s all turned out. It feels like only ten years ago that he was shivering in a freezing kitchen, adding water to that week’s soup pot. Financial stability was nothing but a pipe-dream, and waking up next to Bucky like _this_ was sheer impossibility.

*And just look at us now,* he thinks as he hurries to the kitchen to to put the coffee pot on. *Our own place together...and a five pound box of bacon,* he smirks. *Who’d have thought.*

Today is the 18th of October, which means that whatever Hydra had done to him, whatever body modification or half-realized sex-change they had inflicted on him, it should have made him bleed again this month, if it was going to. Bucky has given it two weeks since the day it should have happened and hasn’t seen a drop of blood this month, so he still hasn’t sought medical attention. He’s beginning to think that he ought to have gotten help anyway. Now, the only thing making him wait longer to seek help is the fear of already having waited too long.

Maybe this isn’t even the same problem. Maybe something _new_ is wrong with him, and the bleeding amounted to nothing. He knows that he and Steve received vastly different variations of the serum and that it’s entirely possible that his didn’t bolster his immune system the way Steve’s had, but he’s never seen Steve catch a stomach flu. Even in a non-enhanced person, he’s never seen a stomach flu drag on this long.

Bucky locks the bathroom door behind him, turns on the vent and the shower, and spends the next fifteen minutes with his forehead against the cool ceramic of a toilet seat, desperately wishing that he’d gone to medical two months ago or mentioned the bleeding to someone back in Wakanda, because now he’s almost certain that something is _very_ wrong, and he can’t seek help now without spilling a year’s worth of secrets he’s kept about his health.

What would that do to Steve’s sense of trust in him? All the progress they’ve made, all of the work Bucky has put into earning back Steve’s faith in his honesty and his ability to care for himself - what would happen to that? And he’s been training with the team for two months, preparing to join them on assignments. He doesn’t want that delayed any longer. As fun as it’s been learning to cook and getting his driver’s license and reading all the new books from the last seventy years, that’s not the kind of life he wants for himself and it’s not the kind he deserves.

What’s more, if he tells the medical staff at the facility about the bleeding, he can only assume they’ll ask about his sex-life. Which will mean _telling_ them. The rest of the Avengers are still under the
impression that he and Steve are merely sharing a living room and kitchen to save space, while utilizing their separate bedrooms. He has no desire to out Steve to his team, and he’s sure that’s not what Steve wants, either.

Once the room steadies and he can stand up, he gets into the shower just long enough to get his hair wet and rinse out his mouth. He’s had it running for fifteen minutes, he might as well at least make it look like he used it. He steps out, brushes his teeth, and on a panicked whim, hoping to keep Steve from realizing that he’s been sick several times a day for the last week, he shaves, too. Not with the electric razor and a guard, but with Steve’s straight-razor. He does it so quickly that he doesn’t have time to stop and regret it, although once he’s done and looks into the mirror, he wishes he’d just calmed down not made such a drastic, ill-advised change. He cringes when he sees himself - somehow, he manages to look old and puffy and childish all at the same time. If Steve didn’t have a good excuse to not want to be seen in public with him before (and given Bucky’s history, he did), this ought to do it. He redresses and leaves the bathroom without checking his reflection again. Better to just ignore it, at this point.

In the kitchen, Steve has already poured them two cups of coffee and stirred sugar into Bucky’s. He doesn’t look up immediately, but as he’s passing the cup over, he finally notices that the stubble is gone. His initial reaction is to reach out and touch Bucky’s face.

“Oh, wow,” he says lightly. “Smooth. You want me to cut your hair later today?”

Bucky shrugs. “If you think it’d look better, sure.”

And Steve doesn’t bring it up again. Bucky hopes that Steve’s silence isn’t because he’s suspicious or angry, but prepares himself for questions, anyway.

There’s already a pan full of bacon on the stove, with eggs nestled in right beside it. Bucky figures that this is the sort of breakfast that Steve likes to have toast with, so he takes out the butter and a knife and plate. If he’s not listening for it, the toast popping up will startle the hell out him. He knows it’s a silly precaution to feel the need to take, but it’s all in the interest of not letting Steve see even the subtlest signs that he’s anything less than sane.

They sit down to breakfast and, thankfully, don’t talk much. The bacon is perfect - Steve has a way with it, but Bucky has to hold his breath to swallow the eggs. The coffee’s not much better - suddenly too sweet and too bitter. Bucky smiles broadly every time he catches Steve staring at him, telling himself that Steve’s just getting used to the change in his appearance, and Steve smiles back. By the time they’re finished eating, Bucky is tapping his heel against the floor and taking shallow breaths just to keep the food down.

“I’ll just be downstairs, if you need me. I’ll leave my phone turned on,” Steve promises, taking his dishes to the sink. “Debriefing on that wildfire situation, then Tony and I have to talk about the budget for next year.”

“Sounds fun,” Bucky laughs, trying not to let it sound stiff.

“He complains about it, but I think he loves talking finances - not as much as Pepper, but enough to bore the hell out of me.”

Steve heads out after that. Bucky knows that this means that he should do the dishes, but he hasn’t even managed to stand up yet. His plate and coffee cup are still in front of him. The dregs of his coffee and cold scraps of egg yolk stare back at him dolefully. If he keeps sitting there, he has to keep smelling them, and if moves, he’ll be sick. Undoubtedly, this means that instead of worrying about the dishes, he should probably head to medical now.
Finally, the nausea reaches a point of urgency that forces him away from the table and back into the bathroom. He’s pretty sure he loses all of his breakfast. All the while, he tells himself that as soon as he can stop vomiting, he’ll go straight to the medical floor. He’ll get help. He’ll tell them as much as he has to. It doesn’t matter. He’ll tell Steve everything too, and if Steve is unhappy with him or disgusted, he’ll deal with that.

And yet, despite all of those promises, he ends up washing his face, scraping the breakfast dishes into the trash, leaving them in the sink, and crawling back into bed.

He tells himself that he’ll try again tomorrow.
“You know,” the disembodied voice interrupts with that uncannily human lilt, “I daresay I could help you with that, Bucky.”

It’s November 11th. Steve had left the facility at 0400 sharp on a quinjet bound for Latvia. He and Bucky had said their farewells and good lucks the night before, so Steve had let him sleep that morning as he made his departure. Which Bucky had done. Until well after noon.

When he finally sits up, he has no more than a ten second window before a spell of dizziness puts him right back on the bed, flat on his back, and once he’s prone, he drops off like he’s been drugged. At this point, he’s not so sure that he hasn’t been drugged. They really ought to be celebrating Veteran’s Day together - God knows, they’d been invited to enough parties and parades and memorial services to keep them busy from sunup to sundown. Steve had, that is.

Instead, Steve is out of the country on assignment and Bucky’s in bed, feeling like he just polished off a fifth.

And the more he thinks about it, the more unfair he feels that it is that he should have to feel this sick without actually having enjoyed a fifth of whiskey.

Once he realizes that whatever is wrong with him has developed into something truly debilitating, he resigns himself to taking action. Only now, he doesn’t even feel like he could make it down to medical. In a panic, he grabs his cellphone, which he only ever uses to message or call Steve, off the nightstand, and pulls up the Google search box. He types in stomach pain bleeding nausea dizziness, holds his breath, and waits for the results.

He ends up on WebMD.com, which Friday apparently has a problem with.

“No, thank you,” Bucky says aloud to the empty room. “Pretty sure I can figure it out on my own.”

“WebMD.com is not a reliable source for diagnostic information, Bucky--”

“I’ll go to medical, alright?” he promises the AI. “I’ll go. I just want an idea of what it could be.”

“Given your physiology and the modifications which--”

“How do I turn you off?” Bucky snaps.

“Sorry, Bucky, I won’t interrupt again,” she replies.

He tries to remind himself that she’s just a program, but he still feels downright low for being so rude to her. She may be a robot, but she seems so real - and really, she’d only been trying to look after him. And robot or not, she’s still a lady. He turns his focus to answering the questions.

For: Me

Gender: Male

Age:

Bucky sighs. If he enters his actual age, he’s sure to come up with a dozen strange diagnoses which simply amount to old and dying. He selects 25-34 from the dropdown menu, and hopes that it won’t skew the results too badly.
The screen pulls up an impression of a human body - pale, featureless, and sculpted. It’s much easier to pretend all of this is happening to that guy, rather than to him. He selects the abdomen first, zooms in, and specifies *entire abdomen*. A list of symptoms appears, and he begins checking items off the list. He almost feels a bit better, just from finally admitting in some capacity what he’s been experiencing. That certainly doesn’t detract from the humiliation he feels, but this is still easier than telling all of this to some girl in a labcoat downstairs. He selects everything that applies, even when it seems redundant.

*Bloating or fullness*

*Change in bowel habits*

*Frequent urge to have bowel movements*

*Distended stomach*

*Nausea or vomiting*

When he presses his thumb to those words, a warning appears on the screen, telling him that if he’s been experiencing this symptom for a prolonged period of time, he should seek emergency medical attention immediately. Subconsciously, he averts his eyes from the phone-screen as he hurries to close it. A secondary menu appears.

*Nausea or vomiting brought on…*

And here he taps:

*Or worse after meals*

*Or worse early morning*

*Or made worse by eating certain foods*

He’s allowed to move on after that, and adds:

*Pressure or fullness*

*Stomach cramps*

*Upset stomach*

Once he’s exhausted that list of symptoms, he moves onto the figure’s head.

*Dizziness brought on or made worse by sitting up, standing*

He glances at the door as he returns to the full body of the figure, feeling self-conscious. Finally, he tells himself that he’s being ridiculous, that he’s an adult, and that he should just *deal* with this. He selects *Buttocks*, even though that doesn’t seem to quite cover his problem. Fortunately, it pulls up the applicable symptoms.

*Bleeding*

*Blood in toilet*

*Blood on toilet tissue*
It doesn’t ask about the frequency of the problem, so he convinces himself that it must not be too important.

Irritable Bowel Syndrome is the top result. Middle ear infection is second. A quick internet search for IBS reveals that it not only fits the majority of his symptoms, but also that the dizziness could be due in part to dehydration. It’s very manageable, as long as you watch your diet. It’s also very common.

And suddenly, he wishes he’d done this sooner. The sigh of relief he breathes lets some of the tension bleed out of his shoulders. Maybe he can handle this.

Once he feels well enough, he drags himself out of bed and into the kitchen. He drinks a glass of water. He drinks one of Steve’s stupid sports drinks. And then another glass of water. He has to hurry to the bathroom twice to urinate in the course of three drinks, but afterwards, he feels... better.

He feels a lot better.

He takes one of Steve’s vitamins and gives it an hour. Cleans up the second bedroom. Organizes his books, files away his papers, makes the bed, sipping on a second bottle of the sports drink all the while. By the time he finishes, he feels well enough to eat. He makes a bowl of oatmeal - something he knows his stomach can tolerate. Adds slices of apple and peach, both of which he loves. He takes a shower. Combs his hair, brushes his teeth, puts on fresh clothes.

And once he’s done all of that, he realizes that he’s got a little smile on his face that had crept up on him while he wasn’t paying attention. This is the best he’s felt...when he really thinks about it, this is the best he’s felt since before he shipped out for England. And all he’d done was...

God, all he’d done was take care of himself. He had paid attention to how he felt, and he’d fixed it. All of this worry, and this is all it was. He’s a little ashamed of how stupid he’s been, but more than that, he’s glad to finally have reached the understanding that his health is in his own hands. He can do better. He will do better. He’s going to take good care of himself. He’s going to be a better partner to Steve, give as much as he gets. And pretty soon, he’ll tell him he wants to start shadowing on team ops. Maybe he’ll tell Tony. There’s so much he could contribute, and it gives him something to look forward to. A reason to keep getting better.

He reads a book until evening - one he’d been meaning to start for a while - and then goes back to his phone (clears the search history) and types out a text message to Steve.

Be safe

Steve gets back to him in less than thirty seconds.

Just investigating...facility we’re headed to is abandoned. Still on the jet anyway. Don’t worry. :)

Bucky smiles. Be safe anyway. There could be rats. They bite

And Steve seems happy to play along. What are latvian rats particularly vicious?

Bucky snorts. Yes. He answers. Terrors of prehistoric world.

Jeez I’ll be careful then. Happy V day! Love you

Love you too, Bucky replies, suddenly feeling giddy, and then takes a deep breath and adds an exclamation point. He sends the message before he can tell himself how stupid he sounds.

He puts his hair up in a low bun - a fashion trend he’s been seeing everywhere, but one that he’s
avoided, apart from when he spars - and finds that when his hair is clean and brushed, it really makes him seem presentable. He takes Steve’s bike into the nearest city and finds a nice grocery store that’s still open, even though it’s getting late, where he replenishes Steve’s stock of drinks and buys extras for himself, as well as fruits and vegetables with tolerably mild flavors and a few other staples he enjoys, referring to a list on his phone that explains what someone with IBS ought to avoid - greasy foods, sugary foods, milk, grains, alcohol, chocolate, caffeinated beverages. He has to laugh at himself in the middle of the aisle.

No wonder he’d felt so terrible. Chinese take-out, Tony’s burritos, pancakes or French toast in the mornings, Italian food with four different cheeses in abundance, bread, beer, candy bars, coffee - that sums up his entire diet. Steve’s metabolism mandates that he eat whatever has the highest caloric density, and a lot of it, at that. Of course Bucky had felt like hell.

He fills his basket with whatever the internet recommends: blackberries, figs, bananas, almonds, sunflower seeds; and things he’d never eaten in his life, like chia seeds and flax seeds, edamame, quinoa (although he has no idea how to prepare most of it). Olives come highly recommended, and remembers loving them as a kid, so he finds a big jar of the kalamata variety. He buys his own vitamins, too. And as much as he wants to shut his eyes and cover his ears over the total, he looks the cashier in the eye, smiles, and says, “Thank you, have a great day.”

The cashier replies, “You, too. And thank you for your service.”

Bucky stares at her for a long, tense moment, confused. Hadn’t...she been the one providing the service here?

And then the answer hits him like a brick in the head. His publicized trial. His arm, which he’d left exposed. The date. “Holy cow,” is his wildly inappropriate response. That, and an aching knot in his throat, which he ignores in the nick of time and manages to collect himself. “I--I mean, thank you. Thanks for--for saying that.”

The old lady laughs at his shock, and he has the presence of mind to leave it at that, take his bags, and let the next shopper have their turn.

On his way back through the parking lot to Steve’s bike, Steve finally returns his text.

*How are you, Buck?*

Bucky’s mismatched thumbs admittedly aren’t up to the task of telling Steve via text message everything he’s accomplished today, or everything that’s happened. Maybe he’ll tell him when he comes home. For now, a short, simple answer will do.

He types *F*.

Autocomplete suggests his usual response of *Fine*.

*Fantastic*, he types.

Natasha brings the quinjet down on the flattest area she can find in the hills, which puts them, unfortunately, about a quarter-mile from the bunker’s coordinates. As Steve fastens his shield to his back and steps off the jet, he quickly decides that this isn’t the worst news - actually, the countryside in Tiraine is breathtaking and idyllic. He wishes he had the time to sit down and sketch it out - or better yet, to paint it. Hardly seems like the kind of place one would find an old Hydra facility tucked away, but if Steve’s learned anything, he’s learned that Hydra is unpredictable.
Still, the situation, his assignment here, makes for an almost eerie discord with the picturesque setting. Their jet is nestled right in the middle of a patch of wildflowers, and the path leading up to the abandoned bunker is speckled with the bright, hardy late-bloomers - blue stars of Alpine gentium, golden Jerusalem artichoke, and lavender tufts of orpine and Chinese astilbe. Steve could remember, clear as day, sketching each one during the war, when their missions would take them out into the foothills of the Alps. When they’d get back to base, Peggy would go through his sketchbook and label them for him.

“Why am I here?” Natasha laments to no one in particular, stomping off the jet with a duffel-bag full of equipment slung haphazardly over her shoulder. “Steve, I don’t like investigations. What am I supposed to fight out here, my own histamines?”

“Oh, come on, Romanoff,” Steve teases. “It’s gorgeous.”

Sam follows close behind, taking a quick scan of the area through his goggles, just to make sure they’re alone. “Yeah, says the guy who’s not allergic to anything,” he argues, already rubbing his nose with the sleeve of his uniform.

“You know, when I was a kid--”

Natasha barks out a harsh laugh. “Oh, God. I love it when he starts a story like that.”

Sam adds a wheeze to his voice. “I tell you, when I was a young man, we didn’t have none of them histamines, hadn’t been invented yet!”

Natasha joins in. “And no shoes, neither. And what’s more, we respected our elders.”

“I - I was just going to say that I was allergic to almost everything.” Steve finishes weakly, striding on ahead of his teammates. “It’s - that wasn’t...even a story. Nat.”

“Aw, Romanoff, look what you did. Hurt old Cap’s feelings.”

“You’re older than I am, Sam.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Look, if you don’t count the time that I was in the ice, then I’m technically--stop shaking your head, Sam--technically, I’m only--”

“Uh huh.”

The bunker had only been brought to the Avengers’ attention when Friday had pinged a coded location on an old document - one of millions that had been dumped onto the internet after the Insight debacle. Over the first few years, they had made it their priority to neutralize the bases that were still active. Now, they had moved on to the abandoned locations, where their involvement didn’t generally go beyond taking photographs, cataloging weapons and equipment, and seizing files and anything left behind in storage. If the structure of the base was still solid, Stark Industries would be on hand to expropriate it. Tony and Pepper would usually have the building fixed up and repurposed for some humanitarian cause within a few months.

Most of the time, the Avengers would send agents out on behalf of the senior members. Tony had been surprised when Steve had asked to take this one rather than handing it off to a less specialized team, especially on a holiday, until he’d looked through Friday’s decryption.
The base had been used as a lab and research facility in the late 1960s. One of Zola’s. The documents that had revealed the facilities location were in reference to the acquisition and transport of a single, enhanced test subject, along with several 100L tanks of liquid nitrogen. They both knew what that meant, and Tony had understood Steve’s need to keep this situation in sensitive hands.

Steve had investigated similar locations in the past - they rarely retained much evidence of Bucky’s presence or the experiments conducted there, but it was important to him to see them. To be there. To smell the decay and listen to the ghosts, put his own footprints in the dust, curse the men that had sat in the broken chairs and stood over the empty tables, and to spit on every threshold.

The team steps inside the dim bunker and lays down their equipment by the door. It’s been totally gutted - nothing left but an empty, damp concrete box. But in one corner, the floor opens up to a descending stairwell. That’s probably where they’ll find anything worth collecting, if they find anything at all.

“I’m seeing three sublevels,” Sam informs them. “Let’s take a look and get the hell out of here. This looks like some shit off Ghost Adventures and I’m not really in the mood to see Steve get himself possessed.”

“Bro, I think something touched me just now, for real,” Steve imitates, trying to lighten the gloomy atmosphere. It gets a laugh out of Nat and Sam, but he doesn’t like the hollow echo that follows. He heads straight for stairs while Natasha begins the task of photographing the facility. Sam follows at his heels. They both know that Steve won’t need any back up. There’s no threat here. Steve knows very well that Sam had read the files thoroughly. He doesn’t want him to be alone.

The first sub-level contains nothing but a single row of filing cabinets, an overturned office chair upholstered in cracked, rotting leather, and a desk. Beyond that corner, there’s nothing - just a smattering of debris on the floor. The cabinet drawers are locked, but Steve grips the handles and jers, making quick work of them, then leafs delicately through the papers inside. The files are Hydra’s. He and Sam pull them and stack them in the middle of the floor. Nat will be along shortly to photograph them, and then they’ll box them up and haul them to the jet when they’re ready to leave. Steve searches every drawer of the desks, but finds nothing but a few dried-up pens. There’s a heavy, expensive one in the middle drawer, embossed with Hydra’s crest. He doesn’t touch it.

The next floor is similarly bare. Along the back wall, two stacks of cardboard filing boxes, each three high, sagging with water damage and deterioration. Steve tears the lid off one and tosses it away. 8mm film reels. All six boxes. His face suddenly feels hot and his throat feels tight, and he knows it’s not the moldy air. They open every box and drag them to the center of the room.

The basement level houses the lab. Steve knows this, because Sam hurries to get back to the stairs before him and goes down first - his scanner must have picked up the shapes of some equipment - and the look he gives Steve from the darkness at the base of the stairwell is one of worry and warning. Sam finds the lights before Steve can get down the steps - the lever snaps to and throws a few sparks and the bulbs hanging from the ceiling fixtures crackle and flash, illuminating the old lab like a lightning strike, but then the light steadies. The bulbs hum like mosquitos.

Steve takes it all in.

Empty containers of liquid nitrogen surround the old cryostasis chamber. It’s not like the ones they had found in Siberia - this one is more compact and lays oblong on the floor, like a coffin. Probably meant for transport or short-term storage.

There’s an exam chair, like one Steve would expect to find in a dentist’s office, although this one is outfitted with footrests and a dozen locking steel bands - Steve’s eyes stall on two in particular,
which would fasten around the forehead and the neck.

Monitoring equipment has been shoved against the far wall, where decades of dust has collected on the dials and switches.

In the center of the floor, there’s a metal table. Two bare trays flank it, a pair of antiquated surgical lamps loom over it, and there is a grate in the floor beneath it. In the recessed edges of the grate, the concrete is stained dark brown.

Steve dampens his emotions and does his best to distance himself. He takes a few steps into the room. His enhanced senses can still discern the faintest scent of old blood wafting from the floor drain. Zola probably had a lot of test subjects in this lab. It may have been used as a medical facility for wounded Hydra operatives. He circles around the small operating suite and sees the leather straps hanging limply from the edges of the surgical table. He sees that the pair which would have once secured a left arm have been snapped.

He leaves. He climbs back up the stairs until he’s at the bottom landing just below the first sub-level, and he sits down. Takes out his phone. He thinks about calling him, but quickly talks himself out of it. This isn’t the time. He doesn’t trust his voice, anyway.

So he types something out - something that won’t give away the horror twisting in his gut, but will give him what he needs. His fingers are still fumbling at the screen when Natasha’s voice rings out above him.

“How are you, Buck?”

One o’clock. Steve sits in the empty conference room, jet-lagged and tense, tapping his foot against the carpeted floor - toe to heel, toe to heel. He knows Tony will be late. Steve had texted him early that morning from somewhere over the Atlantic, while he was still en route on the quinjet from Latvia.

Can we meet a little later? Need to talk.

Yeah, no problem, Cap. Should I be worried? Not in trouble, am I?

No, but it is important. It’s about Bucky.

Please tell me I don’t need to start rounding up lawyers.

No lawyers. 1pm ok? 3rd floor cr? One o’clock had given him time to sit down with Bucky for a few hours. Ask his questions. Listen. Learn just how much Bucky had been keeping from him. Realize that Bucky shouldn’t have had to tell him, because if he had been paying attention, he would have noticed. Realize that Bucky shouldn’t have had to live in fear of him finding out, because maybe if Steve would open up a little more to Bucky, Bucky would do the same. At half past noon, he pulls Bucky close. He holds on until he has to leave to meet with Tony.
Tony always says sure thing, and yet, he’s always late. Knowing doesn’t help, though. It doesn’t make the ten minutes between one o’clock and Tony’s eventual arrival any shorter. Steve feels his shoulders rise when the door finally opens and his fingers clench around the file folders he’s laid out on the table in front of him.

Tony enters without any sort of apology for his tardiness - ten minutes isn’t too bad, considering his track record, but he does hurry to the table and put his phone away, letting Steve know that he’s ready to listen. He sits down in the chair directly beside Steve even though there are twelve others available. If it’s about Bucky, Tony must know that it’s personal. He’s approaching him as a friend, and Steve silently thanks him.

“Okay, what’s the latest on my favorite Robo Hobo?”

If that comment is supposed to be disarming, it’s a miserable failure. Steve smiles in spite of himself, but shakes his head, too. This is going to be a long and difficult talk.

He takes a deep, preparatory breath, but it doesn’t yield any explanation. Just a long sigh. “Couple of things,” he begins softly. “You...I don’t really know where to start. This is probably going to be the...well, the strangest conversation we’ve ever had.”

“Stranger than the time Thor got you trashed and we talked about how you couldn’t believe how taboo cocaine was these days?”

Steve laughs in earnest this time, but finds that Tony’s interruption has given him just enough time to lose his nerve again.

“Is he alright?” Tony asks, voice and expression suddenly sober.

“He...” Steve trials off. No, he tells himself. Keep talking and get it over with. The sooner the better. “Let me just start at the beginning - Buck and I...” Steve doesn’t know why he feels like he should be whispering; every conference room in the New Avengers Facility is remarkably sound-proofed. “We’re partners. Since the war.” He lowers his eyes and makes himself clarify the statement. He’s not ashamed of this - just unused to saying it out loud. “I mean to say that...he’s my lover.”

Tony doesn’t bat an eye. “Well, you’ve been bunking together since the team got back together. Should I be surprised? Don’t tell me I’m supposed to be surprised. What, did you think I’d assume the close proximity was just for emotional support? Brotherly love? Tax benefits?”

“I wasn’t sure that you knew--”

“Everyone knows.”

“How?”

“Because I know, and I gossip. Also, we’ve been orchestrating those little noshing meet-ups every time you’re out of town, and he sort-of-kind-of told me.”

Steve can’t really be upset about that - he’d told Sam, after all. He’s just shocked that Tony, of all people, is who Bucky chose to tell.

“Cut to the chase, Captain. What can I do?”

Steve swallows hard. He doesn’t see why this should be so difficult - the team deals with utterly
unbelievable and impossible things every week - this isn’t an alien invasion or physics turning on its head. This is just...too personal. He slides the file folders toward Tony, hoping that Tony won’t notice that his sweating palms have left the top page a little damp. “That assignment. In Latvia - the old Hydra base in Tiraine....Natasha and I recovered these files from Zola’s laboratory.”

“And...didn’t mention them in the report you sent over last night?”

“I...we needed time. I wanted to call Dr. Banner and Dr. Cho before I handed them off. And I needed to speak to Bucky before I did anything.”

Tony doesn’t wait for any more preface - just flips the first folder open and takes a look. These are copies - the original was written in German. Handwritten notes in Russian fill the margins. “You want me to have Friday translate?”

“She already went over them with Banner and sent them off to Cho, it’s easier if I just tell you.”

“You know, I’m not surprised when you hide something from me, and I’m a little hurt that Banner would hide something from me - but Friday - that stings.”

“Sorry, boss,” her voice chimes from the walls.

“It’s one of Zola’s old projects. A breeding program,” Steve forces out.

“Sounds like typical Zola, from what I’ve heard,” Tony nods, flipping through the pages, presumably understanding at least a little of the German. “For the serum? Let me guess - he wanted an army of little snowflakes to go with his Winter Soldier, or something? Oh my God, did Barnes knock some lady up while he was with Hydra and now he owes child support?” he snorts, laughing at his own joke, until he turns another page.

This one is a full-page photograph - grainy, high contrast, gruesome. Bucky, splayed out on a table, abdomen split open, straps on every limb, eyes not quite shut, like he’s not fully sedated. The next pages are similarly gory: closeups of the surgery; sickening images of internal organs, either freshly removed or ready to implant; Bucky in high stirrups, face twisted with pain, as if the photographer had snapped the shot mid-scream. Zola himself is standing between Bucky’s spread knees. Then, a closer shot of Zola’s work - Bucky, spread open with a speculum, Zola’s gloved hand pulling at torn flesh, delicately holding a scalpel in the other, ready to cut along a messy dashed line of surgical marker. This one is so horrifying that Tony leans back in his chair, hand over his mouth like he wants to vomit. He takes a few steadying breaths through his nose as Steve watches him, then turns the page. Zola and another doctor, wearing nice, clean suits, shaking hands. Almost more terrifying than the rest of the photographs.

“They were trying...they wanted to use him. To carry it,” Tony confirms quietly.

Steve nods. He can’t unclench his jaw, even though he’s looked at these images before, dozens of times. With Cho via satellite, with Banner, with Natasha when they found them at the abandoned lab in Tiraine (and God, his heart shrinks in his chest all over again, thinking about the initial shock of seeing them, the horror and then the rage, and the sadness, the panic, disgust, numbness). “They had used him...before. To create enhanced children. But they couldn’t get the serum they used on him to work on a woman. Their female test subjects all died - massive internal hemorrhaging. One did finally survive, but that was twenty-five years later. So every time, they ended up with a diluted version of the serum. The idea, here....was to use him as the...the carrier. Enhance another male subject, if they could - create children with an undiluted version of their serum. Train them from birth.”
“I...well, shit.” Tony heaves a sigh. “I have to ask...has he seen these yet?”

Steve bites the tip of his tongue. “No. He asked to, but...I’m - I’m not ready, yet. I just needed some time to process, so I can focus on helping him deal with it.”

Tony nods slowly, understandingly.

“There’s more.”

Something about the way Steve says that makes Stark close the file and give him his full attention.

“He had been bleeding. He didn’t tell me about it. Banner says he’s not sure yet what made it start again - why his hormone levels shifted. He’s going to do some labs, try to pin it down. But Bucky didn’t tell anyone. Didn’t tell me. He bled six months in a row, like clockwork. Says he thought it was just...something that was wrong with him. Old internal injury, IBS or something he heard about online - I don’t know. We...”

And suddenly, Steve realizes what he’s saying, and who he’s saying it to, and he’s just too ashamed to go on. This isn’t the sort of conversation he’d ever wanted to have with Stark. With anyone, for that matter.

But Tony’s smart. He can already see where this is headed. “Menstrual cycles,” Tony says plainly, almost affectedly plain, as if the part of him that’s pure scientist is struggling not to sound impressed. “And you said...you said he bled six months in a row? He’s--” Tony chuckles humorlessly. “He’s not bleeding anymore, is he?” he asks, like he already knows exactly where this is headed.

Steve immediately goes on the defensive. “Tony, I didn’t know - neither of us knew this was a possibility.”

Tony’s eyes soften apologetically.

“He - he didn’t remember. All the procedures. He still doesn’t have it all back. He lost a lot because of the memory erasure, and that is healing with time but...some things were too traumatic. It’s like...he’s not letting himself remember.”

“Can’t blame him,” Tony replies firmly, tipping his head toward the file folders that he’s shut and pushed a few feet away.

“Says it’s been happening less the last few months. And this month, not at all. He’s been sleeping a lot, and he gets these dizzy spells, he’s put on weight. I didn’t say anything about it, though. I thought, if he needed my help, he’d tell me. I...I told him about the files that we found, and that was when he finally told me about the bleeding, the abdominal pain, the nausea. Helen will be back from Seoul at the end of the month. I want her to look him over.” Steve pauses long enough to replay the whole conversation in his head, re-examining everything he’s just related to Tony. “I sound like an idiot, don’t I?”

“For wanting Cho to take a look at him? No. For - and just correct me if I’m wrong, here - for thinking that you might have gotten your boyfriend pregnant?” Tony holds for tension, and then concludes, “Given the evidence, no. Not at all.”

Steve feels his jaw drop a few centimeters. It’s rare for Tony to pass on the chance to confirm that Steve is overreacting.

“There are doctors and surgeons studying this very subject as we speak, Steve. Trying to take bottom surgery for transgender women a step further, give them the opportunity to carry their own biological
children, or researching just to be the first to call ‘Eureka.’ Consider how far ahead of the game Hydra has been for the last _eighty years_. You know what kind of weapons they were building during the war. Arnim Zola? Total douche canoe. Also, _infuriatingly_ brilliant. That algorithm that almost put a bullet in my skull a few years back? Yeah, wish I’d _written_ it. Not because I want to kill twenty million people, but just to have written an algorithm that _good_. Bruce is the best scientist I know; he tried to study the serum that created you and ended up with the Hulk. But Zola does the same thing, with fewer resources - in a factory basement, according to my dad - and doesn’t even _finish_ the job, and Barnes survives a fall off a moving train into a ravine. That is not luck, Rogers, that’s good science. Oh, and Zola - _also_, a vegetarian and one of those creepy, small men who likes to call themselves ‘chivalrous.’ Zola _hated_ experimenting on women. He was kind of famous for it. So no, you don’t sound like an idiot. Not only do I feel that using an enhanced male American soldier as an unwilling breeding mare is perfectly in keeping with that man’s philosophy, I’m also pretty sure that if there’s one person who could do it, it’d be him. I think that smiley handshake picture kind of confirms my suspicions, don’t you? Granted, for it to happen by accident, it’d take quite a few tries and an impressive sperm count, but I daresay you might have checked both of those boxes, Captain.”

Steve doesn’t respond. For once, he listens intently to Tony and then takes time to absorb everything. It makes sense. It scares the hell out of him, but Tony’s right.

“You said you guys talked. How’s he feeling, given this new information?” Tony presses, cutting right into the heart of the issue.

Steve lets a breath out that’s been aching in his lungs. “He’s...shaken up. I think he felt bad for not telling me that he’d been sick. I also think I might have ruined one of the first really _good_ days he’s had in months. Mostly, though...shocked. I mean, obviously, we don’t know anything for certain yet. Banner said a test,” and Steve purposefully omits the descriptive word, “wouldn’t do us any good. Something about his, uh, HGC levels—”

“HCG,” Tony corrects. “And yeah, his biological sex, the serum, both would elevate it too much for there to be any kind of baseline. Cho’s the best option - I wouldn’t trust any other doctor to give you guys accurate results the first time, and you deserve that peace of mind. I’ll see if I can’t expedite her trip, okay?”

“Okay,” Steve says faintly. He means to leave it at that, shake Tony’s hand, thank him, and leave. But Tony doesn’t let him off that easy.

“Let’s say - hypothetically - Cho discovers that it’s viable and Barnes’ life isn’t in danger,” he postulates. “What do you think you guys will want to do?”

“That’s up to him, not me,” Steve replies too quickly, realizing immediately how empty his voice sounds.

“Steve,” Tony says earnestly, leaning forward across the short space of table between them. “You’re going to go back upstairs in a second and you’re going to be there for him, because he needs it. But right now, stop making the rest of us look bad and _be selfish for once_. Tell me what’s going on in that wingéd head.”

“I want...I want Bucky to be happy.”

“You want to be happy, too.”

“If he’s alright, then I—”

“You want a kid, Steve.”
“This is not my choice, Tony--”

“Oh, come on,” Stark cuts him off, locking his gaze on Steve, unblinking. “Circumstances aside, this is a dream come true for you, Rogers. You have been on my ass about knocking Pepper up since the second you found out we were bumping uglies because you’ve hit the biological storm of your mid-thirties and you are lonely enough to settle for bouncing someone else’s brat on your knee and, frankly, it shows.” He laughs like he’s had an epiphany. “This is everything you thought you had to give up, isn’t it? This is the stability and the family thing we talked about. Your white picket fence, your American dream, your simple life. This is your homecoming,” he smiles, as if this revelation was the key he’d always lacked to have Steve all figured out. “The end of the war.”

Steve rests his elbow on the table and presses his thumb and forefinger hard against his eyes. It’s useless at this point, though. Tony won’t have missed the way he keeps swallowing, the flush on his face, the tightness of his lips. He holds it all back until his temples throb, but he still gets the sense that if he moves his hand and uncovers his face, he’ll lose that last thread of control. Eventually, it’s been too long and he can’t justify sitting in unbreathing silence anymore. One sob shudders from his chest, and it hurts like being strangled. He wipes at his eyes over and over and over, until his palms are soaked with the tears his eyes are relentlessly producing. Tony does him a favor, and doesn’t comment - just reaches out and gives his shoulder a quick squeeze.

“Alright,” Steve agrees, voice thick. “Let’s say that he’s pregnant. And it’s safe. Viable. You’re saying I should tell him...that I want it? That I don’t want him to terminate it. Because, no, Tony, I wouldn’t want him to terminate it. That would be really hard for me.”

Tony leans back in his chair, watching Steve and considering him carefully. He answers the question with what Steve can only assume is the kind of honesty only a friend would give. “No. I think you’re right, Steve. I think it would be a huge mistake to tell him any of this. I think you need to tell him that it’s his choice, and you want him to be happy. But...I think you needed to get the truth off your chest, too. And look - whatever he wants to do, whatever you guys need, I’ll cover it. Argue and I’ll start telling everyone you’re hooked on nose-candy again,” he smiles.

“I’m going to go check in on him,” Steve sighs weakly, standing and wiping his face off on his shirt-sleeve. “Thank you, Tony.”

Tony shakes his hand firmly, a rare, genuine smile reaching his eyes before he turns somber again. “Anytime, Cap.”
December: Part 1

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Descriptions of various medical procedures, including use of a speculum and transrectal ultrasound. Not sure if that would be disturbing to anyone here, but it plays a large part in...well, figuring out if Bucky's pregnant.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The file weighs heavily in Steve’s hands as he hurries to his quarters. His palm leaves sweat on the door handle as he blinks away the memory of the photographs inside the folder - some part of him is afraid to go inside and find Bucky just like that. Open, bleeding, dehumanized, drugged, altered, restrained. He knows that won’t be the person who’s waiting for him - and yet it is. The Bucky he loves is the same one in the photographs. He may remember those surgeries and procedures as well as Steve remembers leading his first field operation. Between Bucky himself and the images, there’s no room for denial - his face, even twisted with agony, is still his face. Clinical photographs of body parts are still signed with his scars and birthmarks. However unbearably bitter it is, it’s true.

Steve wouldn’t so much as think of showing these files to Bucky if he felt he had any other choice, but Natasha’s translation of them - and the photographs themselves, for that matter - leave him none. Bucky will have to get medical help, which he'll inevitably decline, and it will be Steve’s job to convince him that he needs it. That he’s safe and that he’s in kind, competent hands and among friends, and that they need to know precisely what damage Zola did to his internal organs, so that they can deal with it. Together.

He opens the door and walks inside.

“Hey!” Bucky calls out before Steve can gather the constitution to speak. Bucky turns around with a big smile on his face, looking happy and well-rested and totally at ease. He’s hard at work over the kitchen counter, apparently determined to show off some new recipe he’s discovered. He lays down his knife the moment he sees Steve. Steve knows what his face must look like. He knows Bucky can already see how much he’s going to regret ruining this moment. He hasn’t even taken the time to change out of his uniform.

Bucky takes a step closer, prepared for the worst. “Everyone alright?”

Steve takes a breath, struggling to find his voice. “Yeah. Yeah, no one’s hurt, Buck.” He swallows. “It’s about the AVOTS Procedures.”

The look of horror Steve had expected to see in Bucky’s eyes doesn’t come. His brow furrows. He’s just waiting for an explanation.

“It was...you--they experimented on you--”

Bucky forces out a soft, apprehensive laugh. “What, you think I don’t know that?”

“This was different. Zola, and a man named Dr. Juris Strazds, Latvia, 1971.”

Bucky’s eyes flicker questioningly toward the file folder in Steve’s trembling hand. “Let me see.”
Steve’s fingers twitch against the gritty paper as he clutches it tighter. “I can’t. I just--I don’t think you should see this yet. I think we should talk first.”

“Let me see it.”

“After we talk.”

Bucky holds his ground for a few more seconds, before finally relenting. He turns off the burners, sets their dinner aside, and wipes his flesh and blood hand off on a dishtowel, which he then tosses onto the counter as a show of reluctant surrender. “Fine. Then let’s talk.”

Tony hadn’t been able to bring Helen Cho back to the States any faster, but he had accommodated the transport of half of her equipment - anything she could possibly need, she had it, as well as her own spacious suite on the medical floor, outfitted for research and diagnostics and close to the facility’s OR, should the necessity arise. Tony had even hatched a brilliant plan during the last week in November and had the lab’s white walls painted over with a rich, dark blue - intentionally uncharacteristic of a medical facility. As per Tony’s own request, Steve hadn’t told Bucky about the pains Tony was taking to make it all a little easier, but he’d thanked him a hundred times in private. Tony always waved him away and insisted that laboratory outfitting and aesthetics wasn’t exactly drudgery to him.

Bucky had answered all of Bruce’s questions and given every vial of blood requested of him throughout the month without much complaint, but Steve knew it was a strain - an intrusion on the bodily autonomy he had so recently reclaimed. Maybe he wouldn’t complain outright, but he certainly smiled a little less. His newfound interest in cooking was all but gone. They hadn’t had sex since the day Steve returned from Latvia. Every few nights, Bucky would stay up, pouring over medical journals and Hydra’s files on him, and Steve would go to bed on his own. Bucky would always promise - just one more minute, and he’d be there. The next morning, Steve would usually find him asleep in his own room or on the sofa. After nearly three weeks, it was becoming unbearable. Steve didn’t try to discuss the situation with him - Bucky had asked that all conversations on the topic be postponed until Dr. Cho had made her assessment.

But Steve’s not stupid and he’s not blind, either. He’s watched Bucky for the past few weeks. He’s finally become as aware as he should have been in the first place. He knows that when Bucky spends an extra fifteen minutes in the bathroom, it’s because he’s sick. He counts the hours of sleep stolen by trauma and anxiety (when Bucky paces his room until the sun is up) and by anger and worry (when he reads and rereads Hydra’s old files on him). If Steve had just had his eyes open before, had cared to see the that something was wrong, rather than hiding behind his rose-tinted lenses, maybe this wouldn’t have been such a mess. He had been stupid and blind.

Steve’s mind is trapped in a loop of those thoughts - everything he could have done better - as he leans against the exam table in Cho’s newly constructed office. Bucky is seated at the end of the padded table, where Bruce is talking Cho through his findings so far, getting her up to speed on the situation. Bucky seems attentive, if not entirely emotionally present. Steve doesn’t bother listening just yet - he’s heard Bruce go over it a dozen times already. We think he is. We don’t know how. May not be safe. May not be viable. Exploratory surgery would be dangerous. Doesn’t make any sense.

For how oddly Banner’s own condition has presented, he seems unreasonably astounded by Bucky’s - perhaps because Bruce’s condition had been the result of a freak accident, while Bucky’s demanded a why. And even after going over Zola and Strazds’ files a hundred times to determine the why, Bruce still seemed rigid. Maybe there was still some part of him that wanted to believe that doctors, deep down, followed his creed of Do No Harm. Steve knew it wasn’t true, and Bucky not
only knew it, he was living it constantly.

“Helen, is there anything else I can do for you? If not, I’ll let you get to it.” Bruce says with a little more volume and a deep sigh, alerting Steve to the end of their long conversation.

“No, I think I’ve got my bearings. I’ll call you if I have any questions,” Cho says with a surprisingly confident smile. “Thanks again,” she calls out, as Banner shuts the door behind him. As she turns toward them, hands clasped together, Bucky sits up a little straighter, and Steve steps up to stand beside him at the end of the exam table, both silently asking her, Now what?

Cho’s poised expression dissolves into a wry grimace. “Oh, my goodness. He was kind of stressing me out,” she divulges.

Steve freezes, surprised, but Bucky lets out a breath he’d been holding and forces a small smile. “Yeah,” he admits softly.

“Like, you work with enhanced people and you are the Hulk,” she whispers, although her tone is casual and familiar now. “And this has your panties in a bunch, Banner?” And now Steve laughs right along with Bucky and Cho, his shoulders relaxing minutely. “No offense to Dr. Banner, of course,” she adds hastily. “He’s one of the greatest scientists of our time, but he’s a researcher. He’s a little excitable when it comes to new findings, I guess. I think it detracts from his bedside manner.”

She takes a seat on her stool and swivels it back and forth, like she’s testing it out. “So, Bucky...how do you feel?”

Bucky’s eyebrows rise, nearly betraying surprise, and he glances over to Steve, as if Steve might know the answer. “Fine.”

“I’m a very good doctor, but even I can’t glean much from fine,” Cho presses.

Bucky takes one more look at Steve, like he’s still expecting advice, but Steve listens just as expectantly as Cho. “Sick to my stomach. A lot. Almost every day, actually.” That seems to open some kind of floodgate. Bucky doesn’t look at Steve again, or at Cho. He keeps his eyes down, as if his attention is turned inward, so he can take a good look at himself. “I’m tired. It’s been really hard to get up in the morning. Tough to fall asleep, too, because I’m sore. Been having really vivid dreams. And then I’ve just been...anxious, I guess.”

Steve doesn’t go so far as reaching out and touching Bucky like he wants to, because Bucky might interpret that as pity - something Steve senses he hates. He leans over a few inches and bumps their shoulders together instead. “I mean,” Bucky continues, scoffing. “Comparatively, I’m alright. Things have definitely been worse.”

Cho nods. “I imagine so. Still, you guys have had a rough month, I’ll bet.”

Bucky blinks slowly as he contemplates that, then nods.

“You were bleeding,” Steve repeats emphatically. Bucky keeps his body from shrinking away from Steve’s eyes, but his expression testifies to his sudden need to do just that.

“It was--” Bucky tries, stammering.

But Steve cuts him off. “I don’t care where the blood’s coming from,” he says with an incredulous laugh, devoid of any humor. “Bucky, you and I are partners,” he continues, voice hard as nails, even in his own ears. “We trust each other. We don’t keep things from each other, even when they’re
embarrassing or scary. Because--” Steve struggles to choose a reason. “Because we’re adults. Because we love each other. Intimately. And intimacy does not stop at sex - it’s everything. Anything else you want to tell me?” he says, throwing his hands up.

Bucky doesn’t raise his eyes from the floor, and he doesn’t answer either.

“How there anything else?” Steve asks again, gentler.

“What do you want to know?” Bucky sighs defeatedly, like a man who has broken down under hours of interrogation.

Steve is frustrated to find that he doesn’t have a straight answer for that. “I just…I don’t want you to keep secrets from me. I don’t want you to think you need to keep secrets. If something hurts, I want you to…complain,” he says, surprised by the tender way he feels himself smile. “God, Buck, I knew this was never going to be a walk in the park. I know we never really....” he looks down, a wistful exhale creeping past his smile. “We never really made it all official, because we didn’t have the option, so we didn’t say all that for richer or poorer, sickness and health stuff. But that’s the way it is. That’s the way it’s always been. Bucky, sharing a bad day with you...I want that more than a good day alone. If you didn’t know that, then I just don’t say it enough. I’ll say it every day if I have to. I love you. Unconditionally. There are going to be problems, and maybe our problems are going to be bigger than most people’s, but we’ve got a better chance of tackling them together than we do alone.”

Bucky watches him for a long time, taking in his words, processing and absorbing them. When he finally starts speaking again, Steve can tell that he’s blown a hole in Bucky’s defense. He’s candid and unguarded. “I just wanted to move on. I didn’t want to think about all that bullshit. When I was living on my own, that was all I did. I thought, now, maybe I could...I wanted to make a life that didn’t involve Hydra. Where I didn’t even have to think about them. And that was...stupid. That’s...that’s not how you fix something. I know that. I just got exhausted.”

“Is that why you didn’t tell me about the bleeding? Because you knew it had something to do with them? With their experiments?”

Bucky shrugs like his shoulders are almost too heavy to lift. “I don’t know. I wasn’t sure what had caused it. For a while, I figured it was them - some kind of sex change, or something. Who knows? Zola was...he was a talented scientist, sure. But he was a pervert, and he had funding,” he scoffs. “So I spent a lot of time trying to talk myself out of that idea. Probably just because I didn’t like that idea. Tried to diagnose myself using some website I found and had myself convinced it was IBS or something...” he says, ducking his head with embarrassment. “I didn’t remember the surgeries. I still don’t. But the AVOTS Procedures...that’s something I...I know what it means. I don’t know why I know what it means, but I remember recovering after the surgeries. I think I remember the first time I bled, too. I think it happened...on and off. For a long time. Then, the past few months, it was pretty consistent. And then it just stopped, so I figured it had just gotten better on its own.” He pauses. “But then I just started to feel...worse, after a while. Sick to my stomach. Usually if I laid down for too long. And sore all over, like after a fight.”

Steve tries to keep his expression steady and neutral, but he knows that Bucky will see his frown, however minute. He leans forward in his seat, setting aside the files which he was still clutching. He has to swallow before he can find his voice. “Buck,” he says, low and nervous despite his best efforts. A thought had occurred to him - a near impossibility, but one that absolutely had to be addressed, even if it was unlikely. Unless he’s misunderstood the timeline here, Bucky stopped bleeding and started getting sick just a few weeks after they’d started having sex again. “When did it stop?”
Bucky draws a breath to answer, and then the same frightening coincidence dawns on him. The breath catches in his throat and he frowns with realization, thinking harder.

Steve’s eyes flicker back over to the file. “When did it stop?”

“How about you, Steve?”

Steve looks up from the speckled floor tiles, caught off guard. “I’m sorry?”

Cho inclines her head and restates her question. “How are you feeling?”

Steve takes a hard look at Bucky as he tries to give a single name to the dozens of emotions coiling in his chest. “I’m...really eager for some answers.”

Bucky gives a single nod of agreement.

Cho slaps her hand lightly against Strazds’ file on her desk. “Me too. You know, Strazds was a real nutcase,” she says, her tone harsher than her playful choice of words would imply. She stands and takes a penlight from her breast pocket. “So, how do you feel about a full physical? Can you handle that today or do you need some time?”

Bucky looks a little surprised to have even been asked. “I was...it was kind of what I expected.”

“So...yes or no?” she asks softly, waiting for clearer consent. She and Steve had already discussed that this was of the utmost importance to them both.

“Yeah.”

Cho tips her head in Steve’s direction. “You want me to kick Rogers out?”

Bucky looks to Steve again, hoping that Steve will answer for him, but Steve returns his stare expectantly.

Cho offers again, as if she’s hoping to defuse the situation. “If you want me to give him the boot, I will. I think I can take him.”

“Is it alright if he stays?”

“He’s your boyfriend, you tell him what to do,” Cho laughs.

Bucky and Steve end up with matching blushes - Cho may not realize it, but she’s the first person to say that to them. They lock eyes again, but this time, it’s with shared embarrassment, mixed up with tenderness and a strange sense of pride.

“Yeah, he can stay,” Bucky decides. “As long as he stays out of your hair.”

And the timeline fits.

Steve reminds himself that there’s no reason for either of them to jump to conclusions over the coincidence. It’s a one-in-a-million chance. He shouldn’t assume the worst. A voice he ignores corrects him: he shouldn’t get his hopes up.
“Bucky,” Steve begins, feeling the fragility of his own voice. He knows he should be putting on a brave face, but it’s just not coming to him at the moment. He resigns himself to taking his own advice and letting all the difficulties be laid bare between them. He’s shocked by how painful it actually is, in practice, but at least now he knows what he’s asking of Bucky. “There’s only one reason they’d have done a procedure like this.”

Bucky’s silence is confirmation enough. His eyes harden and his mouth forms a grim line. Steve gets the sense that Bucky already knows what Steve plans to ask, and has already begun to brace himself.

When Cho had said she wanted to do a full physical, she really meant it. She takes every reading and measurement under the sun. She’s already studied the mechanics of his prosthetic on paper, but she examines even that. She tests his eyesight, checks for scoliosis, and even measures his lung capacity. Steve begins to suspect that maybe she was just a little excited to see how a super soldier compared to her other patients. With the completion of each successive test, she looks increasingly impressed.

“Well,” she finally shouts, standing at the other end off the room with a very small piece of paper, containing even smaller letters, which Bucky had just read without any trouble. In fact, even Steve would have had to guess at a few of them. “You’re really cool,” she says emphatically.

“Scientifically speaking, I mean. Not quite as cool as Thor, but really close.”

Bucky’s easy reply comes as a pleasant surprise to Steve. “That’s saying something. Thanks.” She’s done a great job of making friends with him - Steve’s got to give her that. Even he’s feeling more relaxed. Usually a scientist of any kind making a study of Bucky put Steve on edge, but Cho was the first who didn’t seem to have a single ulterior motive.

“If you’re still feeling alright, I’d like to see what’s going on with your reproductive system,” Cho says, entering her newest data into her Starkpad and taking one last admiring glance at it all. Bucky has already started shrugging off his coat and jacket and passing them to Steve, but Cho checks with him again, just in case he’s changed his mind. “Steve or no Steve?”

“Steve,” Bucky answers.

“He does make a handsome coat rack,” Cho agrees, and then hangs her lab coat on his free arm.

Steve thinks for a moment that she’s just being playful and funny to detract from the clinical atmosphere, but then he realizes that she’s doing a lot more than that. She’s making sure that Bucky doesn’t have to look at anyone in a bleak white coat looming over him. It makes an immediate difference, even to Steve, seeing her in her red blouse and emerald cardigan. It’s a small change, but just knowing that she’s looking forward to Christmas, seeing that the cardigan must be a favorite of hers because it’s wearing thin in the shoulders and has a few little snags, it humanizes her. Puts her on their level. It’s an informed and sensitive change that shows that she’s put a lot of thought into making this whole debacle a little more tolerable for Bucky. Steve gladly holds it for her.

“Just your shirt off, for now,” she instructs. “Your estrogen was a little high and your prolactin was through the roof, so I’m going to do a quick breast exam - I know, it sounds weird when we say ‘breast exam’ to a man, but they’re important. Lie back for me and put your right arm under your head,” she continues. As Bucky lies down on the exam table positions himself, she strikes up an easy conversation, holding his attention as her hands make quick work of the exam. “I’m not particularly worried that you have cancer, but your hormone levels are probably doing a number on every part of your body. Have your armpits been hurting?”

“A little.”
“Kind of feels like you bench pressed a little too much?”

“Exactly like that.”

“Wait, what exactly is too much for you to bench press?” she laughs. “Like, two-thousand pounds?”

“Twelve hundred makes me sore the next day.”

“Switch arms for me. And - what? I was joking - one thousand two hundred pounds? Bull.”

“What?”

“You can’t bench over a thousand pounds.”

“Steve can do a thousand, and I’ve got a cybernetic prosthesis that’s grafted to my skeleton,” Bucky reasons.

“Well, if you keep lifting based on the capabilities of your left arm, you’re going to end up with tendonitis in that right elbow. Bet you anything. I did a hundred and eighty once at the gym,” she says, cocking an eyebrow. She’s taking a little more time on the left side, carefully differentiating between undamaged flesh and scar tissue, feeling out the parameters of the arm’s attachments under his skin. “Well, I did one rep,” she clarifies. “If it counts as a full rep. My spotter had to save my life. I stick to bodyweight exercises now.”

Bucky smiles and exhales a small laugh, but Steve can see that, just below the surface, he’s starting to get nervous. The fingers of his flesh hand twitch, the nail of his forefinger digging into the pad of his thumb, and his eyes shift restlessly across the ceiling, looking for something to focus on. Luckily, Cho has been fast and thorough. She pats his shoulder to let him know that she’s finished.

“You’re pretty swollen. Not that I’m telling you anything you didn’t already know,” she remarks sympathetically. “And there’s not a lot you can do about it, unless you want to try my personal method.”

“Yeah?” Bucky prompts, sitting up.

“It’s not very professional,” she admits. “I just sort of...hug a bag of frozen peas to my boobs.”

That earns a more genuine laugh from Bucky, but Steve barely hears a word she’s saying. The combination of their month-long dry spell, colder weather, and often separate sleeping arrangements hasn’t given Steve many opportunities to see Bucky undressed. Cho was certainly correct - his chest is swollen. His hips seem wider, too. Steve knows that Bucky hasn’t been out shopping for new clothes since the last time he had forced him to do so, and he recognizes the jeans Bucky is wearing. After all, he’d worn them almost every day. Where the waistband used to ride loose and low, it now pinches at his sides and looks almost uncomfortably tight just underneath his abdomen. The buttonhole is stretched and curled outward. He’s still muscular - he doesn’t seem to have lost any strength or definition, but Steve can certainly tell that he’s grown. He can’t tear his eyes away from the low swell of Bucky’s belly as he tries to separate all the emotions it evokes - horror, panic, giddiness, love, and blinding realization. He no longer feels on edge waiting for Cho’s final assessment - there’s confirmation enough right in front of him.

“Did they ever...did it work?” Steve swallows but finds his mouth dry as he attempts to force out the word that’s been hovering over their conversation since Steve came home. “Have you been pregnant?”
Bucky had fully anticipated the question, and his response is sharp and immediate, although his eyes become apologetic the moment he’s bitten out the words. “I don’t know.” He takes a shallow breath. “I’m sorry. I don’t remember.”

“I thought--” Steve begins, choosing his words delicately. “I thought you didn’t have much missing time left.”

“There are still... years are missing, Steve. I remember the kill-missions and the ops I worked on. They kept me lucid for those. Pumped me full of stimulants so I wouldn’t need to sleep. But when they would... when they used me in the labs,” he stutters, losing his thought. He shakes his head to clear it, gaze roaming blindly over the room like he’s trying to avert his eyes from some terrifying hallucination. “God damn it. Fuck. I mean, I might as well have been in cryo for all I remember of that shit. They kept me sedated most of the time. I don’t know. Maybe I just can’t remember it because I don’t want to remember it. I don’t know,” he repeats.

“It’s alright,” Steve soothes him. “It’s alright, Buck. We’ll get it all figured out.”

Chapter End Notes

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And one more thank you to Dee, because, guys, seriously, I might have abandoned half of my WIPs if it wasn’t for her love and encouragement. Go check out her illustrations for Project Vesna!
December: Part 2

The physical changes are all shockingly apparent. And he’s had *morning sickness*. Over and over again, Steve tells himself that it’s high time he started acknowledging what is obviously a reality, and yet he just can’t. It’s too impossible. Too strange. All he can do now is wait for Dr. Cho to actually say the words, and hope that brings it all home to him,

“I hate to push any more of this on you today, but I should really do a thorough pelvic exam as soon as possible,” says Cho with honest sympathy coloring her voice. “Are you still feeling alright?”

Steve knows that Bucky had been expecting this. In spite of whatever he’d done to mentally prepare himself for the inevitability of an invasive exam, Steve sees him pale a little, despite the careful ease with which he replies, “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Cho nods and gives him a smile that’s almost congratulatory. He can certainly relate - as worried as he is, he’s still immensely proud of Bucky’s resilience and willingness to cooperate with so many weeks of intrusive, albeit necessary, investigation. She reaches into a drawer and thumbs through a stack of neatly folded cotton exam gowns, and then turns back to Bucky and Steve with a mortified blush. “I swear, I did *not* order these. This is all Tony. Please don’t laugh at me.”

Steve tips his head curiously and Bucky stills awkwardly, jeans halfway down his thighs.

Cho clears her throat, clearly holding back a chuckle. “Which Avenger would you like?” she manages around her encroaching grin.

“He bought Avengers-themed hospital gowns,” Steve sighs.

“Whatever’s on top,” Bucky smiles, handing Steve his pants. It seems that whatever Cho herself hadn’t considered, Tony had. Steve is touched that they’ve gone to such great lengths to make this even a little less terrifying.

“Hawkeye it is,” Cho grins, passing it over to him.

Bucky dons it, shaking his head at the loud print. Steve can’t help but notice that it’s a little more masculine and modest in its design than most, with a tunic closure rather than the typical ties in back. Once he has it on, he also removes his briefs and hands them to Steve. He sets all of Bucky’s clothes aside on an empty counter and drapes Cho’s coat over her office chair, looking for something to do with himself. As much as he wants to be present and supportive, he’s never exactly sat in on someone else’s physical. If what he’s now convinced of really is true, he supposes this won’t be the last time, either.

Cho heads over to the other side of the room and sits down in an exam chair. She crosses her legs daintily as if she’s posing for a photograph and gives them both a wry smile. “Okay, I’m going to be honest with you - you’re going to hate every single minute of this exam. I know, because I get one every year. There’s nothing recommendable about them,” she sighs. Steve is almost certain that Dr. Cho is making a conscious decision to sit in the exam chair *first*, before Bucky has to come anywhere near it. Steve and Tony had both seen old footage from Hydra’s files, some recovered from the Vault back in DC, and even more once they cleared out the base in Siberia, which showed Hydra’s methods of memory erasure. Steve guesses that Stark had made the connection when he’d outfitted the lab and exam room and had made sure Cho understood that Bucky might find particular pieces of equipment more reminiscent of past horrors than others.
“Who else knows about this?” Bucky asks flatly, fidgeting absently with his mechanical fingers, bending them back and forth like he’s hoping for his knuckles to crack. Steve has noticed it becoming a fairly frequent nervous habit, lately.

“Natasha was the one who found them, and Sam was with us,” Steve begins to explain, but hesitates when he sees even that much much Bucky’s jaw tighten. But he’s not going to lie or omit the truth, and he’s still convinced that seeking out qualified, trusted help was the right decision. “And I contacted Bruce on the flight back. Bruce said it was a beyond his expertise, so he contacted a mutual friend—”

Bucky takes a sharp breath in through his nose and lets it out slowly, and his eyes look hot with frustration. He has to know that Steve was only doing what he thought was best. Steve can understand his anger - if he were in Bucky’s place, he doesn’t doubt that he’d be a furious wreck - but he knows that underneath it, Bucky is still listening. All things considered, Bucky is handling himself pretty well. Steve pauses, allowing Bucky a few seconds to process, letting the wave of venom pass.

“Dr. Helen Cho, from U-GIN Research Facility in Seoul. She’s a geneticist, but she started out in reproductive endocrinology. She’s worked with the team before. She and Bruce have looked over the files and they’re going to do everything they can to help us out.” Steve tells himself a third time that the whole truth is always best. “And I’d like to bring the files to Tony. I think we need his resources.”

Bucky has stopped fidgeting now. His utter stillness reminds Steve of what a man looks like who knows his foot’s on a landmine.

“I want to see the files.”

“I don’t think…” Steve stammers, strengthening his own resolve. “I think you should give it a day. Don’t try to deal with all of this at once, Bucky. Please.”

“Steve, I can’t spend the rest of the day wondering what the fuck is wrong with me. I don’t want to guess anymore about what they did. I want to read the files.”

“Bucky, I said let’s give it a day.”

The silence between them becomes instantly charged, and Steve resigns himself to facing Bucky’s hurt - he doesn’t have the option of letting any amount of Bucky’s anger deter him from seeking out the necessary expertise from his team, especially since this is a matter of Bucky’s health, which he could never be swayed to take lightly or neglect. Bucky hauls himself up from the sofa and goes back to the kitchen without a word, looking over the meal he was hoping they would share. He doesn’t seem to know what to do with any of it now. His body language and empty expression tell Steve that he’s more than just lost - he’s dissociated. That usually only happens after a bad nightmare these days, so Steve’s not too surprised that it’s happening now. He follows him to the kitchen and lays a gentle hand on his shoulder, hoping he can fish him back out of the murky water, wishing with all his heart that they were back in their little kitchen in Brooklyn, with their peeling wallpaper and ice-cold floor, and day-old soup on the burner and nothing in the icebox. He wishes that their struggles could have stayed that simple.

Steve stays right next to Bucky, directly in his line of sight as the chair rises, tips backward, and the
seat retracts from underneath him. Bucky seems present, though - he keeps his eyes on Steve as the chair moves, and Steve says, “So why didn’t you ask for the Captain America gown?” to drown out the whirring motor.

Bucky smiles, trying for his usual cheeky grin but falling short. “I’ll wear it next time. Promise.”

They keep up a steady stream of small talk as Cho makes quick work of an external exam. “How you feeling?” Steve asks when he runs out of other things to say. He realizes that it’s been too long since he asked. He lays a hand on one of the soft straps holding Bucky’s thighs apart, like it’s a wound he wishes he could soothe.

“I’m alright,” Bucky assures him, and Steve can tell that he means it. “Really glad you stayed.”

Cho cuts in softly to add, “If you do need a break, though, just let me know. You’re my only patient.”

“I will, thanks.”

“Were you sick again this morning?” says Steve, drawing Bucky’s eyes back to him.

“Yeah,” he admits with a shrug. “It passed pretty quickly though. It’s been getting better...especially now that I’m not treating myself for something I don’t have,” he adds.

“This might still turn out to be something gastrointestinal,” Cho provides. “They could have damaged any number of things with those procedures. I’m sure the extra organs are putting lots of pressure in places they shouldn’t,” she muses, vitriol creeping into her tone when she mentions Zola and Strazd’s work. “But none of this should really be a problem - if they managed to damage half your intestinal tract, I’ve got equipment with me to make new intestines for you. I have the neatest toys,” she grins proudly. Steve can’t fault her for beaming about her innovations - she’s on the verge of revolutionizing medicine in a truly monumental way. He’s just also a little perplexed by how delighted a scientist can sound when discussing intestines.

Bucky doesn’t seem to mind watching her or engaging with her, so Steve takes a step back to watch her work, hoping it doesn’t make Bucky uncomfortable. She doesn’t currently seem to be doing much that’s outside the bounds of a normal physical, though.

“Can I ask some questions? About the AVOTS procedures?” Steve says, addressing them both. “Would I be distracting you?”

“No, no,” Cho assures him. “Both of you - any questions you have. I’ll do my best to answer them.”

“I’m still not sure I understand what it is,” says Steve. “I mean, I know what they wanted to do, but I’m at a loss after that.”

“Same here,” Bucky replies bitterly, as if to imply, and it’s my goddamn body.

“Well,” Cho sighs, sitting up straight and rolling her chair over to another workstation to gather a few instruments. “I think I understand the jist of it and I’d be happy to give you my take on it, but I’m going to do an internal exam--are you still alright? Think we can get that done today?” she pauses to ask.

Bucky tips his head up from the reclined chair. “I’m already fastened into the stirrups over here, so I’d say let’s just get it all done in one go.”

Steve chuckles and returns to his side, replacing his hand on Bucky’s thigh with a comforting pat.
“Okay - want me to explain any of the equipment or talk you through the procedure? Or do you want to just get it all over with?” she smiles, rolling back over with a laden tray.

“Oh, get it over with,” Bucky concurs emphatically, purposefully looking away from the tray of supplies.

“You got it,” she nods, lubricating her gloved hand. It’s Steve, not Bucky, who swallows audibly with discomfort. “As I was saying, since I’m going to do an internal exam anyway, I can actually talk you through all the modifications they made and show you,” she says excitedly, gesturing to a currently blank monitor above the exam chair. “Any objection to seeing your own insides on the big screen?”

“And you thought I’d hate every minute of this,” Bucky replies. Steve snorts, taking his comment for sarcasm, but Bucky corrects him. “I’m serious! I knew there were tiny cameras and things that could go inside your stomach now, but I’ve never actually seen one. I really do think it’s cool,” he says with what Steve suspects is a threatening pout.

“No, I agree,” Steve laughs disarmingly. Bucky had been fascinated with science and technology since they were both kids. It was good to know that his interest hadn’t been dampened, even after so many of those innovations and advancements had been brutally used to modify and control him over the decades.

Cho winces apologetically. “Well, we’re not going in with one of the cool scopes today. Once I figure out where everything is, we’ll do an ultrasound and see if you actually are pregnant—” and Steve actually flinches “—and if you’re not, then we’ll do what’s called a hysteroscopy, but we’ll wait a few days so you can have a break. And I’ll put you on some good drugs before we do that procedure,” she smiles temptingly. “Okay, cold and pressure,” Cho warns him, laying her right hand on his inner thigh as a cursory touch. “And bear down just a little - very nice, thank you.”

Steve briefly debates the making some perfunctory joke about lots of practice to keep the mood light and relaxed, but thankfully Cho speaks before he can phrase the jibe for polite company.

“So, apparently Strazds and Zola thought they were being very clever with their little play on words…” she begins. “They define AVOTS as anaplastic vaginal-ovarian transrectal semination in the text - now what that means is…”

She becomes momentarily distracted by the digital exam as she rotates her finger, and Steve sees surprise bloom on her face, despite the fact that she obviously knew what she was searching for. “Wow. Bucky, it feels like there’s almost no scar tissue around this. If it makes you feel any better, this seems to have healed seamlessly.

“Anyway - when we say something is anaplastic we don’t just mean something surgically altered, we’re specifically talking about something surgically created. Something that wasn’t there before that is added or attached. So, it’s a surgically created female reproductive system.

“Transrectal just means inside the rectum, of course, referring to the fact that they created a protective sphincter on the anterior wall of your rectum. It feels like it’s a little inset...now, they would have done that to avoid infection from fecal matter. Actually, that would be a huge risk in a non-enhanced person,” she muses, using her free hand to palpate his abdomen, “but they already knew you could fight off infections really easily.

“And semination... well, that means that the end goal of the procedure was for you to carry children. Bear down for me one more time. Great, thank you.” She withdraws her finger and changes her gloves, then begins lubricating what Steve guesses is some kind of speculum. He doesn’t think it’s
the same kind a gynecologist would use. “Turns out, Avots is also a Latvian surname that translates to spring or source or fountain. Real clever,” she remarks flatly.

“So it worked, obviously…” Bucky sighs, staring up at the ceiling. “I mean, I guess I was having menstrual cycles, which means I had eggs and they were doing…” he considers the correct terms, but doesn’t seem to find them, “whatever stuff eggs are supposed to do,” he finishes lamely. “So, why did I stop bleeding for such a long time? And how come I started again?”

“Good question,” Cho nods. “And one that I just figured out this morning while I was reviewing your files.” She pauses to hold the speculum up briefly so he can see it. “Okay, you’re going to feel cold again and a lot more pressure than last time. Just keep bearing down, take steady, deep breaths. Here we go.”

Bucky breathes exactly as Cho had instructed and endures what Steve can only imagine is a painful invasion without so much as an errant blink. Steve, on the other hand, has to look away entirely and think about something less horrifying to him. A gunshot wound, for instance.

“You know, I actually spent the whole month wondering about that,” she explains, pressing the instrument in until its base is flush against him. Steve risks one sidelong glance at what she’s doing and then decides that he won’t look again. “Keep taking those deep breaths and tell me if I’m going too fast - you’re going to feel a big stretch while I open this up. It’s going to spread out laterally, so there’s going to be pressure on the sides and burning on the top and bottom. Steve’s right here if you need him. But the bleeding - yeah, that was a mystery to me, too. Of course, I was approaching it like an endocrinologist and geneticist. Turns out, I was just making things way too complicated. I should have been looking at it like a general practitioner. It was just your body fat percentage.”

Steve is curious to hear the rest of Cho’s explanation, but he’s only half listening. Bucky’s brow is just starting to furrow with pain and Steve can see a sheen of cool sweat forming on his cheeks and neck. Steve instinctively reaches out and grips Bucky’s hand (because what else can do?) and he half-expects Bucky to wave him away dismissively. Instead, he squeezes back, tight as a vise, and Steve knows he must be hurting. Cho take notice, too, and slows down. “Hang on a little longer for me, we’re halfway there. You’re doing great. So, when you were being forced to work for Hydra, you weren’t fed very well and you were very physically active. Your bodyfat was probably around four to eight percent most of the time. Way too low for menstruation to occur. When you got settled in here and stopped carrying out missions--”

“--And started eating with Steve,” Bucky rasps, forcing a smile, but not loosening his hold on Steve’s hand one bit.

Cho laughs. “Yeah, that probably helped, too. Now, your body fat is a little higher, so you were able to menstruate again. I can’t believe I overlooked something that simple for an entire month. And...more pressure...pressure, pressure - and...we...are...done. That burning sensation will settle down in a few seconds. Just stay still and relaxed. We’re not going to do anything else painful today, I promise.”

Steve lays his unoccupied hand on Bucky’s rigid shoulder, reminding him to let the tension out. “We won’t say a word if you need to cuss like a sailor, Buck,” Steve reminds him gently. “Hell, I’d be in tears,” he offers with a weak chuckle, wishing he could think of something more comforting to say.

Cho presses the foot-pedal, raising the exam chair a little higher to have him at eye level, and swings a bright light around so she has a clear view.

Steve smiles faintly as he feels Bucky’s shoulder slacken under his hand - either the pain is passing, or Bucky is acclimating to it. Bucky’s grip on Steve’s fingers relaxes, too, as Steve flicks a few stray
strands of hair off of Bucky’s damp forehead. “Turns out you were right all along, Bucky. It was the Italian food.”

Bucky still has the energy to scoff. His eyes smile, even though he remains tight-lipped over his clenched teeth.

“If it makes you feel any better, we can have whatever you want for dinner tonight,” Steve consoles him.

“Four aspirin and and shot of bourbon sounds pretty good,” he answers, finally releasing a long-held and ragged breath.

“Alright,” Cho says slowly. “Everything looks fine so far.” She wheels over a small stand with a box on top - Steve identifies it as some kind of microscope. She pushes away the exam light and brings the lens closer to the apex of Bucky’s thighs. After a few seconds of adjusting the focus, a clear image appears on the monitor beside the exam table. “There you go. Your own insides. Are they everything you hoped they’d be?” she quips, looking through the eyepieces and toggling the magnification.

Bucky glances over, still interested, but now exhausted. “Wow. Weird.”

Cho sniggers. “What’s weird about it?”

“It’s just not...what I expected all of that to look like,” Bucky admits disappointedly. “It’s really plain.”

Bucky’s genuine dissatisfaction makes Steve laugh straight from his belly. “What were you expecting? A nicer lobby?”

“Where’s my prostate?” Bucky inquires squinting at the screen.

Cho snorts. “Right at the top of the screen, and you can’t see it because it’s not enlarged. Because you don’t have cancer,” she explains.

Bucky seems to accept that answer. Steve watched the magnification increase on the monitor until he can see miniscule webs of blood vessels, which he assumes Cho is interested in because Zola or Strazds might have damaged them. When he looks back down to see how Bucky’s doing, he finds Bucky’s eyes already on him, with an expression that denotes that he has something to say. Steve inclines his head curiously. “You okay?”

“I’m just saying, Steve…” he answers very softly in a futile attempt at discretion. “She found that in about ten seconds--”

“I’m going to leave,” Steve threatens, holding back a grin in favor of mock offense.

“It just seems like it shouldn’t be so hard to find if--”

“You oughta ashamed of yourself.”

Whatever reply Bucky could have been devising is cut off as Cho tilts the chair back a few degrees further, giving her a better view of the anterior wall. Steve gives Bucky one last disapproving shake of his head and then turns his attention back to the monitor, but he couldn’t say what he’s looking at. For all he could differentiate, it could be the inside of someone’s cheek.

“See how there are no white areas and it’s all pretty smooth?” Cho asks helpfully. “That’s what we
want. It means that even if Zola and Strazds were disgusting, evil psychopaths, they weren’t butchers. I mean, I’m way better, but for an early attempt at microsurgery, it’s practically flawless. Your own ability to heal certainly plays a major role, of course.”

“But I’m guessing that that’s not supposed to be there?” Steve guesses, nodding toward a darker, inset area.

“Nope. That’s the reason why we’re here. It’s almost like they were trying to mimic cloacal malformations…” Cho muses to herself. “The things you can accomplish if you don’t care about the safety or health of your patient,” she deadpans, leaning back to look at the screen. Steve catches the hint of a scowl on her face, but the moment she turns back toward them, her expression is bright again. She rolls the microscope away and the monitor is suddenly filled with blurry blues and whites - the lab, but out of focus, Steve realizes.

“Alright!” she exclaims, like she’s trying to revitalize her own good mood. “Everything actually looks much better than I was prepared for. Let’s get you the hell out of this chair,” she says apologetically. Immediately, she begins to loosen the screws of the speculum. She withdraws it very carefully and gently, then lowers the chair and gives Bucky a handful of tissues to clean away the lubrication.

“One more test and we’re done,” she announces, tossing her gloves in the trash and returning the chair to an upright position as the seat slides back out. Bucky looks momentarily crestfallen before Cho continues, “I don’t know about you, but I’m pretty anxious to see if you’re actually pregnant or not.”

At that, Bucky swallows visibly. Steve can suddenly hear his own pulse in his ears. They exchange nervous glances before Steve finds his voice to ask, “You up for one more?”

“I’d like to know what’s wrong with me, so yes,” he replies. Dr. Cho releases the Velcro straps that had held Bucky’s ankles and thighs apart so that his feet could rest easily in the stirrups. He straightens his legs immediately, stretching them out and rotating his ankles.

Steve can only imagine how stiff and sore he must be. He offers both his hands to help him up, then puts a protective arm around him and draws him close, rubbing a little warmth into his back. “Love you,” he says, voice quiet and low as he leans in toward Bucky’s ear.

Bucky gives him a conciliatory half-smile. “You, too.”

Near the exam table where they’d started out, Dr. Cho enters more information into her Starkpad, then leans over to access a cabinet below her workstation. She takes out a pillow and lays it on the exam table. “This one’s going to be a little invasive, too, but the worst part is already out of the way. Just lie down on your back for me and I’ll get set up.”

“What are you going to do?” Steve asks, giving Bucky a hand up onto the table and supporting him as he lies back. Bucky, for once, doesn’t decline the assistance.

“I want to get a better look at his uterus and ovaries. See how they’re positioned, if they’re healthy, if he has any cysts that could be causing some of that abdominal pain. The best way to do that is a transvaginal–” she pales, then pinches the bridge of her nose and flushes bright red. “Oh my God, Bucky, I’m so sorry. I got caught up with the uterus and ovaries and misspoke. Trans rectal ultrasound. Excuse me.”

Bucky shakes his head dismissively. “Well, I apparently got one of both, so I can’t blame you.”
She wheels a cart with a small control panel and monitor up to the end of the table. On one side, there’s a wand which Steve guesses is a transducer, over which she fits a sheath of protective plastic. Cho raises the stirrups at the end of the bed.

Bucky shifts toward the table’s edge with an exhausted sigh and lays his heels in the high stirrups. Dr. Cho stops what she had been doing as soon as he’s positioned himself correctly to get him a blanket. It comes all the way up to his shoulders and down over his feet, and as Steve helps him pull it up, he doesn’t miss that it’s also incredibly soft. *Thanks, Tony,* he thinks for what seems like the hundredth time that day.

To Steve’s dismay, Cho keeps the screen turned away from them as she folds the blanket back to Bucky’s knees and slowly introduces the lubricated wand. “Hate to say it again,” she smiles, “but this is going to be chilly, and I need you to bear down a little. Good job. Told you this wasn’t going to be as awful.”

Steve almost asks why she hasn’t turned the monitor toward them yet, but the answer dawns on him just as he’s taking a breath to speak. Bucky might not be pregnant after all. He may be pregnant. Even more frightening to Steve, he might have been pregnant. The more he considers all the possibilities, the better he understands Dr. Cho’s decision to make her assessment first, then give them the news however she sees fit. She keeps her face infuriatingly even as she guides the wand from side to side, tipping her head to watch the screen. Steve completely forgets to keep his conversation with Bucky going to give him some kind of distraction and anchor him in the present. It would be unnecessary, though - Bucky would just ignore it. His attention is every bit as consumed, picking apart every minute movement of Cho’s eyes. Steve finds Bucky’s hand and grasps it, although this time it’s as much for his own peace of mind as Bucky’s.


Steve flinches and Bucky grips his hand tighter.

She glances up from the monitor, embarrassed. “Sorry, I didn’t realize it had gotten so quiet,” she chuckles. “Your ovaries look really healthy. It just surprised me. Both of them look totally normal. They’re a little further back than a woman’s would be, but that’s not a big deal. Gives me a great image, in fact. Also, no extrauterine or ectopic pregnancy, so we can strike that off the list. One less thing to worry about, right?”

“Do you actually think I might be pregnant?” Bucky asks skeptically. Steve wants to kiss him for having the guts to blurt it out when he’d spent the entire exam too nervous to ask point-blank.

“Well, I’ve got a great picture of your uterus, so let’s just find out instead of guessing,” she suggests. “Have you two talked about all your options, in either case?”

“As far as we knew what our options were,” Steve provides. “If he’s not pregnant and none of this is going to hurt him, we don’t want it surgically removed. If it is hurting him or likely to, take it all out. Get him back to normal.” Steve hesitates and clears his throat, feeling that it’s not his place to state the rest. He wants to give Bucky one last chance to make his own decision.

“If I am...and it’s viable...I want to keep it.”

And Steve feels electricity in his chest - Bucky had never said it quite like that.

“It would be high risk,” Cho reminds him. Steve notices with a sense of anticipation strong enough to knock the wind out of him that she’s stopped moving the wand. She’s focussing on something that she doesn’t want to lose. His heart is thumping faster than it has since he was ninety pounds and
feverish. “Even considering that you seem to have a fully functional, healthy reproductive system, there are a lot of variables that modern medicine has never dealt with in play, here. Are you sure you would want to go through with it?”

Bucky appears to weigh his reply before he speaks. “If there’s a even a chance of...of having a healthy kid. Any chance at all. Then...I want to take the chance. I’m sure.”

Cho studies the monitor for a few more seconds, expression still betraying agonizingly little. When she turns it toward them at last, Steve’s heart sinks to the pit of his stomach.

The screen contains absolutely nothing discernible to him. Just gray static and vague, fluctuating shapes. There’s nothing there.

He forces himself to accept what should have been obvious to him all along. This wasn’t possible. Really, this was the best possible outcome, wasn’t it? Cho was right - it would be high risk. And Bucky didn’t need any more pain in his life. He needed time to heal, time to relearn himself and rebuild himself. This was what he should have been hoping for all along.

He accepts it all in a matter of seconds, and tells himself that the sense of emptiness will pass soon.

In the kitchen of their apartment, Bucky finally breaks down. He doesn’t cry, but he does collapse into Steve’s arms and give up the argument. Steve holds him until the time comes to meet Tony, and he’s forced to loosen his embrace.

He pulls Bucky’s head down and kisses his forehead reverently. “We can do this, Buck. Hell, we can do anything,” he grins, patting Bucky’s cheek.

Bucky doesn’t have it in him to smile, but he nods sincerely. “I know.”

“I’ve got to go. I’ll be back as soon as I can. Shouldn’t be more than an hour.”

“I’ll finish making lunch,” Bucky offers, voice crackling tiredly.

“Okay,” Steve agrees, thinking it might be better if Bucky stayed busy with something for now. “Would it be okay if Bruce stopped by? Just to talk to you?”

“Sure.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Oh, Buck,” Steve sighs, gripping his shoulder. “No. I’m sorry. I should have gotten in contact with you first. I just thought....You’d been so happy, sweetheart. I didn’t want that to end. I still hope it doesn’t.”

“I’ll be alright.”

“I know you you’ll be alright,” Steve replies. “But I want you to be fantastic,” he smiles.

“Go,” says Bucky, pushing him away gently. “You’re going to be late.”

Steve doesn’t know what else to say, so he picks up the file, skin crawling where the paper touches his fingers, and leaves.
He makes it halfway to the elevator before he has to stop, feeling too drained to take another step. He stops thinking and forces his legs to keep carrying him forward, and tells himself that the sense of emptiness will pass soon.

Cho angles the transducer downward a little and points to the screen. “I know this is, um, a little hard to interpret because the wand is in such close proximity to--to your uterus,” she says with a tremor in her voice. Steve can see that the hand she’s gesturing with is shaking a little. “I’m going to guess...about fifteen weeks,” she says, an exhale of pure amazement escaping with the words.

Steve doesn’t quite process them.

“It looks much larger on the monitor but, it’s just over four inches long. Good lung development for this stage - see this little flutter? That’s practice for breathing,” she grins.

And Steve keeps standing there like a wooden post.

Bucky catches up first. “Oh, my God. Steve.”

And at the sound of his voice, a little patch of gray static suddenly moves, uncurling, stretching out, turning, until Steve’s overheated brain can finally retrieve the words for the shapes he’s seeing - head, torso, arms, legs, moving, breathing.

Dr. Cho places her free hand over her mouth in awe. “Say something else, Bucky. This is about when its hearing should have developed enough to recognize your voice.

Hearing. Recognizing.

Whether he’s too astounded to think of something more creative, or if he says precisely what he means to, exactly what he should say, Steve is too dazed to decide. Bucky’s jaw works silently for a few seconds before he pours his whole heart into the words, “Hi, there.”

When the image on the screen shifts again, responding, Steve thinks he feels his heart jump right out of his chest.

Maybe, in a way, it does. Maybe it has somewhere else to be.

He still hasn’t managed to say a word.

The best Bucky can do is repeat, “Hi.” The second time he says it, wide-eyed and looking more alive than he’s looked since before the war, his face splits into a smile that Steve has never seen before. “Fifteen weeks?” he says to the monitor.

“Yeah,” Cho replies like she hardly believes it herself. “About the size of an apple. Do you...do you want me to print these out for you?”

Steve neither replies nor hears Bucky’s reply. For a moment, he feels feverish, and then his ears ring, and then, though he’s not sure when it starts or how to possibly make it stop, he cries.

He’s never cried quite like this. It’s painless. Happy. And he can’t seem to stop anyway, so he allows Cho to get him a chair and a box of tissues, and he lets it happen.

Ten minutes later, when Steve eventually regains some composure, Bucky is redressed and seated beside him, metal hand running soothingly up and down his spine. “You alright?” Bucky asks.
Steve pulls him close with no plans of letting go. “Yeah. Thank you,” Steve assures him around a stuffy nose, sniffing and scrubbing at his eyes with a wet tissue, knowing what he must look like - red in the face, bloodshot eyes, grinning like a moron. “I’m fantastic!”

Bucky laughs, patting Steve’s back comfortingly. “Me, too.”
January

The remainder of December had been occupied with all the obligatory conversations and a dozen more exams. Bucky and Dr. Cho kept one another updated. Dr. Cho shared all her research and findings with Dr. Banner. Steve had several long meetings with Tony regarding living arrangements at the Facility, security, and (to Steve’s surprise and delight) other, extraneous topics, as well. Despite the fact that their professional relationship was long-since repaired, their friendship had never quite returned to normal after they’d come to blows in Siberia. Now, they were making progress. They still had their disagreements in the field, but those were swiftly becoming what they’d once been - inconsequential.

The first of December still feels very recent to Bucky. He remembers every moment of Cho’s exams in vivid detail, every expression that crossed Steve’s face, and every word Cho had said to them, although it’s now been just a day shy of a month. It felt like his life had started over.

He hadn’t wasted any time that night pouring over Hydra’s old files on him. He hadn’t paced or sat in silence, anxiety churning in the pit of his chest. Then again, he hadn’t slept, either - he’d been exhausted, but closing his eyes was out of the question. But he had reclaimed his side of Steve’s bed. They didn’t make love, but they held each other as close as they could and planted kisses over shoulders and cheeks and hair. They had talked until eight the next morning. They had discussed the future solely in hypothetical terms. That night, despite all the evidence to the contrary, none of it had seemed real yet.

Three nights later, Bucky had woken Steve with a sudden shout around in the dark hours of the morning. Steve had groped for his shield, but Bucky called him back immediately and made him press his hands just above his left hipbone. It took fifteen tense minutes, but Steve was finally rewarded with the same unbelievable movements that had woken Bucky up. After that, all their cautious ifs became anxious, exhilarated whens.

It’s now seven o’clock in the morning on New Year’s Eve, and Bucky wakes up alone. Steve lets him sleep in most mornings, since he spends so much time tossing and turning at night. Once he’s rubbed the sleep from his eyes, there’s only one thought on his mind - one he’s been avoiding for almost a month. By his own request, only Dr. Cho, Dr. Banner, and Tony know about his predicament. Natasha and Sam had simply been assured by Steve that the exam had gone well and that Bucky would be fine. They hadn’t inquired further. But he and Steve are planning to stay at the Facility, to live there after the.

After it’s over. And his current strategy of layering thermal, t-shirt, jacket, and sweater is not only becoming intolerably hot and constrictive - it’s also hiding less every day. Steve’s teammates - their friends - will inevitably notice the weight gain soon, if they haven’t already. They’ll have to tell them. Bucky feels woefully unprepared for the task.

He stretches out over the full width of the mattress, twisting the ache out of his pelvis and back, gasping when the sharpness of what Cho assures him is “normal” round ligament pain blossoms in his sides, and looks down at himself.

His shirt is bunched around his ribcage and his briefs are riding low under the swell of his belly. He stares for a few minutes until his eyes accept the fact that this is no longer passable as the result of inactivity and too much food. This is unmistakably something which does not belong on his body. And yet, there it is. He stares at his own stomach until he almost feels like it’s staring back at him, then lets out a strange, panicked laugh, alone in the dark bedroom. He can hardly believe he’s awake - that this is reality. It’s so surreal that it borders on terrifying. With a sudden sense of lightness
spreading through his chest, he hauls himself out of bed and hurries to the bathroom, letting himself in without so much as knocking just as Steve is adjusting the shower taps.

Even as he stands there, half asleep and completely naked, one foot in the shower and one foot on the tile, Steve looks nothing but delighted to see Bucky. His eyes brighten instantly as he leans over precariously to plant a kiss on his cheek. “Hey, Sergeant,” he grins, knocking their foreheads together lightly.

“Morning,” Bucky replies, knowing that he sounds entirely too wakeful. “We gotta talk.”

Steve blanches a little, his grin turning sheepish. “Am I in trouble?”

Bucky snorts. “No…” he sighs, trying to choose his words from the overwhelming wave of them that threaten to spill out in his next breath. “I just need some advice. Maybe some help, too.”

Steve’s smile melts into a sympathetic frown. He keeps his eyes on Bucky, letting him know he still has his full attention as he bends down to adjust the water’s temperature, warming it up. “Want in?”

Yes, you do, his back informs him. He nods and - quickly, before he can think better of it - strips off the clothes he’d slept in. The way Steve looks at him barely changes, but Bucky notices that his gaze jumps to his belly for a moment and that he fights off what might be a smile, or maybe a grimace.

“Yes, I know,” he groans dejectedly, before Steve can change the subject.

“What?” Steve asks innocently. Bucky permits him to hang on to his arm as he draws him in, even though his feet and legs work just like they always have. The warm water instantly begins to relieve the tension between his shoulder blades, and Steve’s hands head for the small of his back like guided missile, where he immediately begins unravelling a month’s worth of knots.

“I got fat,” Bucky laughs, tipping his head back to let the water beat through his hair. He’s fully aware that he’s commandeered Steve’s shower, but as the heat makes his skin break out in goosebumps and the water washes the sleep from his eyes and the steam clears his head, he’s finding it increasingly difficult to care. Steve doesn’t say a word about it, though - just drives his thumbs into the muscles that run parallel to Bucky’s spine, forcing them to relax.

“And you better get a lot fatter,” Steve laughs. “Is that a little vanity I hear, Buck?”

“Oh, I’d love to see your face if you put on a few,” Bucky challenges.

“Big difference between getting fat and getting pregnant,” Steve reminds him.

“Yeah, you’re right. If this was just a gut, I wouldn’t need to start saving for its college fund.”

Steve’s hands slide up Bucky back and he goes to work on his neck and shoulders. Bucky hangs his head, thankful for every ounce of serum in Steve’s blood that has made his fingers so powerful.

“What did you want to talk about?” Steve asks softly.

“The team,” Bucky replies meaningfully.

Steve seems to have been mulling the same ideas over already. “Yeah, it’s about time we told them.”

“What are we going to tell them?”

Bucky senses Steve’s shrug just behind him. “The truth. I guess that’s all we can do, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Bucky scoffs. “But how much of it?”
“No more than you’re comfortable with,” Steve amends firmly. “How much are you willing to let them know?”

“None of it,” he says, only a little sarcastic, reaching for the soap to lather his hair as he speaks. “But we have to tell them that I’m pregnant,” he adds, consciously focusing on saying the word evenly, without letting it stick in his throat. “And they’re going to ask how. I mean, they’ll guess that Hydra was involved, whether we say so or not, so we might as well tell them that, too.”

“I think you’re forgetting the most important half of how,” Steve prompts.

Bucky eyes are closed, but he rolls them anyway. “Oh. You?”

“No, us,” Steve corrects him. “No one’s going to think twice about it, Bucky. I mean, the pregnancy, yes. I think most of them already know, anyway.”

“How?”

“Well, you told Tony, didn’t you?” Steve scoffs. “You might as well have hung a sign on everyone’s door, Buck.”

Figures. “Well, we’ll have them all together tonight,” he sighs. “Nothing like food and booze to make sure of that. You think it’ll ruin the party?”

Steve drags his fingers through Bucky’s hair, rinsing the soap out. “Not if they’re already drunk when we tell them.”

Bucky turns to face Steve and switches spots with him, finally letting Steve have some time under the shower head. “Good plan. Be an even better plan if I could be drunk, too, but that’s not happening.”

“I do have...one request...” Steve proposes, his speech staggered as he scrubs at his hair, water splashing into his mouth. “I’d like to talk to Sam first...if you feel up to it.”

“Sure,” Bucky concedes, absently dragging the nails of his right hand up and down Steve’s back. “He’s got about twenty weeks of making fun of me to look forward to. What’s a few more hours in the grand scheme of things,” he deadpans.

Steve rubs the last of the soap out of his eyes, laughing. “He’ll be nice, Bucky. He really does like you.”

“He’s gonna razz the shit out of me and you know it,” Bucky counters, turning Steve to face him. Steve opens his eyes, and suddenly, they’re really looking at each other. It takes the words right out of their mouths and drowns out the static of falling water. Bucky can’t quite recall what they were talking about.

He thinks about how long he and Steve were forced apart, how long they endured living in a world where their partner, their other half, was lost. Suddenly, he’s ashamed of himself for wasting a moment of their new life together pushing Steve away and hiding from him. He thinks back to the first long years with Hydra, when the memory of Steve still stung like a fresh cut and bit at his heels no matter how many times they wiped him, and all the things he’d promised God he’d give, what he would have done for just one more hour with him.

And yet, even after years of healing and progress, his mouth is still at a disconnect with his mind, and he can’t find a way to say all of that. He takes a breath, hoping the words will come to him, but he
feels like a machine trying to compose a symphony and nothing seems right. The emotions still feel like a breach of protocol and he gets the sensation that the gears and wires that compose his left arm are spreading out, filling and replacing the rest of him, and even the places of his body that are made of warm flesh only offer the warmth of a just-fired gun.

“Can I kiss you?” Steve asks, and Bucky’s not sure whether he knows and forgives him, or if he loves him and doesn’t care. Either way, Bucky thanks him by kissing him first.

Steve’s initial plan is to take Sam out to lunch. They used to go out for burgers or pizza at least once a week, but since Bucky has been living at the Facility, he’s seen less of Sam than he’d like. Unfortunately, it’s New Year’s Eve, and most places are either closed or packed, and Bucky wants to get the conversation over with as soon as possible. He and Steve decide the best course of action is to invite Sam to their apartment for breakfast. He’s currently bunking at the Facility with them, so all Steve has to do is go collect him while Bucky attempts to make a quiche. As far as missions go, it’s an easy one.

When Sam doesn’t answer his door, Steve’s only a little surprised. Sam is usually up by eight thirty - in fact, he’s usually been in the gym for an hour already. But it’s a holiday, so Steve doesn’t think twice about Sam sleeping in today. He sends him a text, which also goes unanswered, but he can hear movement just beyond the door and Sam has never minded in the past when Steve has barged in. So that’s what Steve does.

“Sam!” he calls out, knocking on the wall before trespassing any further. The living area is empty, but only for a moment. Steve hears footsteps behind him that sound strangely soft for Sam’s weight, and when he turns toward the bedroom, he finds himself standing about ten feet away from Sharon Carter, who is wearing Sam’s Washington Nationals jersey and, quite possibly, nothing else.

They stare at each other for a little too long, both of their mouths open and both searching for the appropriate greeting. Sharon recovers first.

“Sam is in the shower,” she informs him with a stiff grin, and backs into the bedroom she’d just left, taking very small, careful steps in the short jersey, and shuts the door.

Steve doesn’t really think about anything for the next minute. He just stands in the foyer with his hands in his pockets, listening to the white noise buzzing in his ears, wondering what shade of mortified his face is.

Sharon returns before Sam makes an appearance, this time wearing a pair of sweatpants. She takes a seat at the small breakfast counter to his right, settling in like the stool is covered in thumb tacks.

“No big deal,” Sharon assures him. “You’re not upset, are you?” she asks, her tone almost challenging.

“No!” Steve shakes his head and raises his hands disarmingly. “Oh, wow. No. Very happy for you guys. But I had no idea. Which, if I had, I wouldn’t have just - well, no. This is great! This is great,” he finishes lamely, making some unidentifiable gesture toward the empty room at large. “So how long have you guys been…doing what you do? Whatever you’re doing. I mean, not that it’s any of my business, but-—”
“Um,” Sharon begins, tilting her head thoughtfully. “Well, we were talking about fifth gen fighter jets last night, and then we played a few rounds of foosball, and then…” She smiles wryly and imitates Steve’s room-encompassing hand-wave.

“Oh, wow, alright,” Steve says, forcing a laugh and trying to sound interested but not too interested and happy but not too happy. “Yeah, foosball,” he smiles woodenly, wishing he could figure out how to get his mouth off autopilot. He listens helplessly as his own sighing laughter pitters out, like air from a balloon. “Classic.”

He’s never felt so close to hoping for something nearby to explode.

Nothing explodes, but Sharon does burst into genuine laughter after a long moment of silence. “Oh my God,” she sighs. “I always thought she was exaggerating about you. Nope.”

“Who? Sorry?”

“Aunt Peggy,” she chuckles, brows knitted sympathetically. “She always said you were...a little awkward around women.”

Steve shrugs, still blushing, feeling around in his pockets for a response. “Well, I’m gay, so that’s probably why.” But, goddamnit, not that one.

“Oh?” Sharon intones politely and nods, taking in the new information which she had neither asked for nor needed. “Nice,” she comments. “That’s good.”

Sam emerges from the bathroom just in time to prevent Steve from leaving the apartment, packing the essentials, and fleeing the country. Thankfully, he’s dressed. “Steve!” he shouts from the other end of the hallway. “You need me?”

“No. Yes,” Steve replies. “Well, I was just going to ask if you wanted to have breakfast, but you’re busy. I can come back later.” He suddenly feels Sharon’s eyes on him and wonders how much deeper he can dig his own grave. “Not like a breakfast date, just breakfast,” he adds for her benefit.

Sam looks perplexed, but Sharon replies on his behalf. “No, I have to go anyway. I didn’t even bring a toothbrush with me,” she reasons, hurrying back to the bedroom to gather the rest of her clothes.

“You sure?” Sam asks, stepping into the hallway to catch her before she can bolt.

“Are we going to do this again?” Sam asks softly. Steve silently envies how easy he makes flirting seem.

“Well, I’m going to have to bring you your shirt back soon, so definitely,” Sharon answers, and Steve can hear the smile in her voice.

“Oh, I’m going to need that back tonight.”

“That’s feasible.” Steve stares straight ahead in the interest of being polite, but he can’t help but notice the quiet pop of a kiss which concludes their conversation.

Sharon passes Steve on her way out the door, practically beaming, and pats him on the shoulder. “Really sorry,” Steve winces.

Sharon laughs again and calls out, “Happy New Year’s, Steve,” and then shuts the door behind her.
Sam and Steve occupy the foyer in silence for a few long seconds, one apologetic, the other still confused.

Sam looks longingly toward the door, then sighs meaningfully, “She is really good at foosball.”

Steve clears his throat, finally smiling and finding the grace to have a laugh at his own expense. “You want some quiche?”

Forty-five minutes later, Sam sits back, sinking into the couch, his orange juice and the last few bites of his slice of quiche apparently forgotten.

“This is what those files we found in Latvia were all about,” he states carefully.

Bucky nods. “I didn’t remember what they’d done to me. Steve and I...we just kind of picked up where we left off. And then,” he leaves the rest implied, not caring to restate what he and Steve had already painstakingly explained.

“And you’re…” Sam says, pointing to Bucky. “You’re not going to die? You’re safe?”

“I’m fine.”

“And the, um, the kid, the baby is…?”

“Also totally healthy, as far as Dr. Cho can tell,” Steve provides.

“And this is what you guys want?” he adds, looking from Steve to Bucky, gauging both of them. “You’re okay with this?”

Bucky laughs wearily. “We’re surprised. But when we found out it was viable, we decided to let it...run its course.”

Steve nods in agreement. “We’re kind of taking it a day at a time right now.”

Sam collects himself as quickly as he can. “Hey. I think that’s how it goes for just about everybody. I’m happy if you guys are happy. It’s a lot to take in, but as far as that goes...I’ve got no room to complain.” He takes a breath, looking to Steve. “You quitting the team?”

“No,” Bucky answers immediately.

Steve raises his hand, silencing him. “Now wait, we haven’t even talked about that yet. You might need help—”

“He’s not quitting. He’d be miserable,” Bucky maintains.

“I may cut back on my involvement,” Steve insists.

Sam lets out a long, breath, cheeks puffing out like the news has winded him. “So. When is this thing happening?”

Steve smiles entirely by accident. “Due May 25th.”

Again, Sam’s eyes dance from Steve to Bucky and back to Steve, although this time, they’re narrow and suspicious. “And...this isn’t some kind of prank? You guys aren’t just pulling my leg right now?”
Bucky can think of no better way to prove their honesty, and unzips his jacket and lifts up his shirt. Steve’s jaw drops at his sudden openness, and so does Sam’s. Bucky only feels a strange sense of relief and pride to have overcome something he’s been terrified of for a month. It takes Sam a while to find his voice again. “Alright. I believe you. I don’t care how much quiche you eat, it won’t do that to you. So you’re, like...what? Twenty weeks? Out of forty?”

Steve takes a steadying breath. “Almost twenty weeks. Halfway there.”

Sam frowns deeply, squinting as a thought strikes him. “So, how is it going to...How do you....Where...”

Bucky drags a hand through his hair and looks up at Steve, hoping his eyes convey, I told you they’d ask that. Steve chews his lip.

Sam backpedals as fast as he can, standing as if he wants to make an announcement. “You know what? Forget I asked that. That is nobody’s business but your own. I’ll just say ‘Good Luck’ and leave it at that,” he says, stepping around the coffee table and extending his hand toward Bucky. “If you guys are happy, I’m happy,” he grins sincerely, shaking his hand. “Alright, Dad,” he concedes, approaching the arm of the couch where Steve is leaning. He shakes Steve’s hand for only a moment before pulling him into a strong hug. “Congratulations.”

Bucky feels like a bolt of lightning has struck a foot away. And poor Steve looks as if he’s the one it hit. Bucky glances sidelong at him, wondering if he can get up fast enough to catch him if he faints.

Sam scoffs. “What? Had that not occurred to you? The ‘dad’ part?”

Steve scratches his head with both hands, yanking at his own hair a little, a dazed and dreamy smirk spreading across his face. “Not really...hadn’t hit me yet.”

“Well, I’d get used to it,” Sam warns him. “It’s about to be your name. Twenty four hours a day. Seven days a week. That’s who you’re going to be to Sammy.”

“Oh, Sammy, huh?” Steve chuckles. “You had that picked out for a while?”

“Gender neutral,” Sam points out.

“We’ll...uh, put it on the list,” Bucky promises.

Tony Stark never does anything by halves - especially not parties.

Especially not New Year’s parties. Steve just wishes he could force himself to settle down and enjoy this one.

After giving Sam the news that morning, Steve had made his intentions to inform the team known to Tony. Tony had indicated that he approved of the idea and couldn’t deny that it was about time, but also expressed a great deal of amusement that Steve was coming to him looking for advice on making public announcements.

So far, Steve has passed most of the night wandering from one polite conversation to another, nursing a single beer until it had warmed to roughly the same temperature as his palm. For a while, he had watched Bucky and Natasha play a vicious game of pool, and when Bucky had found a seat on one of the couches, he had occupied himself by running back and forth from the couch to the table of snacks and hors d’oeuvres. Thor had joined them for a painfully long conversation about the
inconvenient traditions of mortal feasts - specifically, the small plates and tiny bites of food, while enjoying his own share off the serving platter in his lap. Steve has to admit - Thor not only has a point, but also a pretty good solution.

Now, it’s well after midnight and most of the Facility’s staff have turned in for the night. Luckily, the majority of the team tends to keep later hours and they’ve all stuck around. Tony, Banner, Rhodey, Vision, and Wanda are still present, although Banner seems to be dozing off. Helen Cho has been drinking with Thor, and Steve guesses that she’s going to need a little help getting back to her quarters before the night is over - every few minutes, her unabashedly loud laughter cuts over the drone of conversation. Barton has that patent trouble-making smirk plastered on his face, and he keeps goading people out onto the balcony with him - mostly Dr. Banner or Nat or Maria. When they come back, the whole room smells strongly of marijuana for a few minutes, and Steve takes deep breaths and hopes for a contact buzz to calm his nerves. Sam and Sharon have once again commandeered the foosball table in the corner. Steve can’t bear to watch them play. He knows what foosball’s about, now.

Around two in the morning, Tony sends someone out for enough (very cheap, very greasy) Chinese food to feed a village, which he spreads out on the conference table, effectively gathering the team together. Thor roars his approval when it arrives.

“Hey. Hey, Avengers. Everybody. I need to talk to you.” Tony blows a noisemaker to get everyone’s attention. Steve can see that he’s a little unsteady on his feet, but he certainly doesn’t expect that his social skills are so compromised that he would-- “Silence, children. I bought the booze, I get to do a speech. You drank, you listen. Announcement time.”

He wouldn’t.

“So, first of all, happy fucking New Year’s. Hopefully, you know, it’s a good one. No alien invasions, no Avenger-on-Avenger hate crimes, all that good stuff--”

“No more of your goddamn robot overlords,” Rhodes adds, pointing his chopsticks in accusation.

“Nope. No more of those.” A tense silence follows as Tony contemplates something. “Actually, this time, I’m thinking about sentient nanotechnology that I can inject directly into everybody’s bloodstreams.”

There’s a chorus of groans and heckling. “Fucking fascist!” Clint shouts.

“Come on, what could go wrong?”

“A great deal,” Vision provides, apparently not detecting Tony’s sarcasm. At least, Steve is praying that it’s only sarcasm.

“Fuck you, Jarvis, I’m an innovative risk-taker,” Tony states blandly. “Anyway, I would like to do one of those boring bullshit toast things that no one likes...because a giant ‘congratulations’ is in order.”

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, he would. Steve glances sidelong at Bucky, who shifts uncomfortably in his seat. He looks across the table to find Sam’s eyes locked on him, with an expression that clearly imparts, Oh my God.

“So, a little backstory on the congratulations,” he says with a flourishing gesture in Bucky’s direction. “This is Sergeant James Barnes - I realize he doesn’t speak, so it’s okay if you don’t know him yet or hadn’t noticed him. He’s got an awesome new arm, as you can see. His old one may or
may not have been destroyed in a kind of on-purpose sort of accident involving me and my unresolved issues which, I sincerely apologize for that, by the way,” he says directly to Bucky, grimacing with remorse. “Please, enjoy the combo lo mein as mea culpa. So, without going into detail, Hydra did some very weird stuff to him back in the sixties - nothing as cool as what Wanda got, but hey, we can’t all have superpowers. Okay, so,” and here, he raises his carton of fried rice up like a champagne flute, “toast number one is to Bucky and Cap, who are very gay for each other. Steven, James, we are all very gay for you guys.”

Steve’s ears are ringing from embarrassment and Bucky looks like he’s actively trying to dissociate to save himself any further humiliation, but the enthusiastic response of their teammates reaches them nonetheless. A few of them clap and Wanda gives a shout of, “Aw, yay!” Clint and Sharon whistle while Natasha sits slack-jawed and grinning at Steve, obviously impressed that he’d successfully hidden anything from her. Once Banner explains to Thor that Tony’s rambling string of innuendo had implied that Steve and Bucky are lovers, he stands and claps them both on the shoulders. “This is a wise union,” he proclaims. “If you ruled a realm of your own as King and Consort, none would dare assail your might.”

“Thank you,” Steve replies, hoping that’s the correct response.

Maria, a little drunk and very, very high, raises her beer aloft. “Fuck, I’m so glad I’m not the only lesbian anymore.”

“Forget it, I’m just glad I’m not the only lesbian anymore.”

“Toast number two--shush, goddamnit,” Tony continues. “Toast number two is also to Cap and Bucky, because due to some Zola-inspired Hydra fuckery and organ decellularization and some kind of super cool pituitary implant and generally unethical human experiments but who am I to talk...they are gonna have a baby.”

The drunkest ones clap simply because Tony has reached the end of his sentence. Those who are still moderately sober try to work out just how drunk Tony is. Helen Cho, who is on her sixth martini, actually gasps with surprise and grabs Thor’s arm to steady herself. Steve doesn’t quite know what to think about that.

“And before you guys start arguing about grade-school science bullshit and basic human anatomy, allow me to point out Actual Demigod and his physically impossible hammer, Teenage Sith Lord, Radioactive Anger Troll, Flesh-Jarvis, and myself - a man whose liver functions on strength of will alone. Like, I’m just saying. We have accepted stranger truths than pregnant men around here. In fact, I consider it far more noteworthy that two centenarians have successfully procreated. Congratulations on your happy little accident, guys. May he or she be blessed with Bucky’s hair and Cap’s appendages.”

The team seems to hesitate momentarily, but eventually they all follow Tony’s cue to clap. Sam, Bruce, and Cho smile broadly. Steve, at a loss for any other option, briefly raises his own warm beer in thanks. Bucky leans toward him before the applause die down to whisper, “You had the chance to take his head off. And you didn’t.”

“Will you ever forgive me?” Steve mutters around a tight grin.

“Hell no, I won’t.”
February: Part 1

Steve isn’t sure where he is or how he got there. Actually, he doesn’t know much of anything. Just that his body is a patchwork mass of aches and pains, and that there’s a light shining directly into his eyes, and that he wants the light off.

He thinks the words, What happened to me? but all that comes out of his mouth is a weak, rasping, “Unh.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet,” answers a voice that’s almost as grating as the light.

Steve finally forces his eyes open, the brightness making his ears ring sharply. His mouth is insufferably dry while the rest of his body is overheated and drenched in sweat. The pain radiating from his side, the absence of his suit, the low arch of the matte grey ceiling above him, and the roughness of the sheet beneath him reveal that he’s back on the quinjet and injured. Beyond that, it’s all guesswork.

Stark leans over him, still wearing the entirety of his suit, although the faceplate is raised. He swings the light down a few feet to get a better look at what feels suspiciously like an exit wound.

“Hi, there,” Stark greets him distractedly, tilting his head and squinting as he studies the damage.

Steve may be a little confused at the moment, but he knows damn well that Tony is no doctor. He can breathe alright - for now, at least - and he doesn’t feel like he’s lost too much blood, but he resigns himself to death anyway.

“Remember what happened?” Tony asks, putting his suit in sentry mode and stepping out of it.

Immediately, he sanitizes his hands and dons a pair of nitrile gloves.

“Not even sure where I’m at,” Steve manages.

“We are parked...uh, let me think. Just outside of Sakchi village,” Tony explains as he begins to sterilize Steve’s injuries. Steve feels a particularly sharp burn in three places and guesses that he’s either been shot or stabbed multiple times. When he doesn’t reply or show any sign of recognition, Tony continues, “Jamshedpur. Jharkhand. India. Human traffickers. Trafficking some of their humans to affiliates of Hydra for probably super-unethical research purposes. Nurse Friday, I need full diagnostics on Captain Rogers, please.”

“Vasant Darzi,” Steve says automatically, before he even remembers why the name is important. A grid of fine, bluish lines illuminates his chest, abdomen, and groin as Friday makes her assessments. Her three dimensional map of his injuries hovers above him, indicating location, depth, and any suspected internal damage.

“Captain Rogers has been shot,” Friday announces, sounding incredibly surprised, as far as disembodied computer voices go.

“Thank you,” Tony enunciates crisply.

Friday evidently recognizes and processes his sarcastic tone. “You did say full diagnostics, boss,” she reminds him a little sheepishly.

“Okay, fair point. But now is quiet time, so shush. I’m trying to concentrate on not killing my buddy. Just show me the readout and I’ll take it from here. Steve - tell me you remember more than just his

"Yeah, already on it," Tony assures her as he begins to prepare the IV. "Um, probably need some painkillers, too. Suggestions?"

"Midazolam hydrochloride and morphine sulfate."

"Okay, sorry I was mean to you, Friday," Tony smiles apologetically as he inserts the needle into Steve’s arm and hangs the bags.

"Followed him through Sakchi Market…” Steve mumbles. “He was...he was with a girl. Thought he was going to...kidnap. Kidnap her. Led me and Nat back to their storage unit. Nat canvassed the building, I followed Darzi. When she found...when Nat found the other prisoners, I tried to arrest Darzi. Got in between him...and the lady. Lady shot me. Twice? And Darzi got me once, I think.”

"Uh, yeah, lady was actually Mrs. Darzi. Turns out, she’s been funding the whole operation since day one. She knew we were coming. We got tricked, Cap," Tony sighs. “But, on the bright side, I got you out safely and Rhodey, Nat, and Clint cleaned house. The Darzis are in custody and we’re going to move their prisoners to Apex hospital for treatment. Also, four, not two."

"What?"

"She shot you four times."

"Why?" Steve wheezes, confused.

"I - don’t fucking know? Because she is a mean person and that was how many bullets she had?"

"How long…?" Steve tries to ask. Wow. Midazolam works pretty quickly.

"About an hour," Tony shrugs, hands working feverishly over Steve’s injuries. “They’re on their way back to the jet, and then we’re headed home. Apex doesn’t know how to deal with super soldiers and I don’t know how to deal with abdominal trauma, so the faster we get back to New York, the better.”

"Sounds like...team did a good job,” Steve smiles. His voice is starting to sound like a weak radio broadcast, and he thinks he can feel the quinjet rocking - swinging through the air like a pendulum.

"They usually do,” Tony agrees. “Except when they take off alone in pursuit of a dangerous target rather than exercising one minutia of caution and get themselves hurt which, by the way, that’s you. I’m talking about you right now.”

"Whoa,” Steve suddenly sighs.


“No, no, no,” Steve slurs, now unsure if he’s awake or asleep. “Just thinking...I’m gonna be a dad pretty soon. You believe that? Me.”

“So you continually remind us all.”

Steve knows Tony is laughing at him, but the way he smiles is genuine and unguarded. Steve doesn’t know what that means, but that’s fine, because he feels great.
And then, for the next few hours, he doesn’t feel anything at all.

“Oh, come on. You know you want to,” Helen grins impishly, sliding the ultrasound wand a little further down and left, craning her neck to look at the screen, which is currently turned away from Bucky.

“Steve and I decided not to,” Bucky huffs, smiling ruefully. “Our moms didn’t know, so we don’t want to know.”

“You really don’t want to know,” Helen repeats skeptically. “You’re just going to...what, figure a name out after it’s born?”

“Yeah,” Bucky insists. “That’s how it’s done.”

“Fine,” Cho concedes, shifting the wand through the gel again. “I won’t bug you about it any more. And I’ll make sure to print you some pictures that are...non-descript,” she promises.

Bucky swallows nervously. “Still...looks alright? Healthy?”

Helen nods emphatically, capturing a few images. “Great, actually. Nicely proportioned, lots of movement, ideal size. Exactly where we ought to be. Three more weeks and you’ll be in your third trimester,” she announces, saving a few more images in celebration.

“That’s so weird,” Bucky yawns. “That I’m so far along. Since I’ve only known for two months. Officially known, anyway.”

“This has felt like it’s gone by quickly. You feeling prepared? I know you and I spend a lot of time talking about prenatal care and your health, but that’s really not the scariest part, is it?” she smiles understandingly.

“Oh.” Bucky shifts uncomfortably on the exam table, eyes dancing over his stomach. “I’m still processing the other part.”

“As in, the part where you’re a dad, with a kid, who is your responsibility forever?” Cho smirks. Bucky feels himself go pale and they both hear his pulse speed up, thanks to the ultrasound wand. “Yeah, that’s the scary part. Have you been getting enough sleep?” she asks as she captures her last images and begins helping him clean up the gel. She’s probably only changing the subject for his benefit. “You look a little run down.”

“No,” he admits frankly. “Not since the sixth, anyway.”

“That’s eight days ago,” Cho winces. “You really need to be getting lots of rest. Is that the day Steve left? You can get dressed, by the way - I’m not going to check your cervix until next week.”

Bucky reaches for his phone even before he fixes his clothes. Still nothing from Steve. Radio silence from the rest of the team in India, as well. It’s not uncommon for Steve to get caught up in his work, but Bucky had figured that a quick Valentine’s Day message wasn’t too much to expect.

Helen is quick to pick up on his disappointment. “Uh-oh. Where’s he at?”

“Busting up a human trafficking ring in India.”

She clicks her tongue sympathetically. “Missing Valentine’s Day,” she says, heaving a sigh. “We’ll
give him one more month of Avenging and then I’ll tell him you need him at home. I’ll say you can’t lift more than a pound or...bathe without supervision, or something.”

“He wants to be here,” Bucky shrugs, finally smoothing out his clothes and putting his hat back on. “I’m the one that doesn’t want him to quit. I just don’t always like it,” he admits.

“I guess I know how you feel. Thor’s back in Asgard. Well, also, he doesn’t even know that I like him because I haven’t actually told him yet,” she adds, clearing her throat. “That’s not the same, I know. Want to have dinner with me anyway? I’ll make peach cobbler. You make everything else.”

Bucky laughs, stalling at the door to the lab. “Is that fair?”

“You’re a good cook, and you want free cobbler. Plus, if we don’t do something together, we’ll both spend Valentine’s Day eating discount candy and reading Nora Roberts books.”

“Those books are for broads,” Bucky smirks. “You should try J.D. Robb. See you tonight.”

“I’ll bring the pictures!”

Bucky doesn’t quite know what to make of his mood at the moment. He’s sick with worry, waiting to hear from Steve or anyone on the op, for that matter. He’s exhausted from yet another night tossing and turning in a half-empty bed. He’s fucking dying to get something on his stomach and like hell he’s waiting until dinner. He’s breathless over the thought of seeing the new ultrasound images.

And on top of all of that, he’s jittery. There’s a deep, unshakable restlessness in his legs, and the ellipticals and treadmills in the gym aren’t doing much to lessen it lately. He feels like an animal on display at a zoo - he’d been content to not work for his meals for a little while, but it wasn’t his nature. There were times when he missed hunting, when that deeply-ingrained instinct snapped at his heels and he itched like an addict for an adrenaline rush.

In spite of that nagging restlessness, he takes one look at the stairs that lead back up to the living quarters and slaps the elevator button with a resigned huff.

The little jolt of gravity as the elevator begins to rise doesn’t bother him so much, but someone else seems to feel it, too. And they don’t like it one bit, judging by the twinging pains low in his chest. He can now identify the source of the discomfort as two very small feet, bracing against his lungs. The poor kid really hates sudden movements.

Bucky jabs gently at the top of his belly, hoping that this minor upset won’t result in an hour of agonizing rib-kicks, like last time. “Hey. Stop it,” he says aloud.

An impressive kick to the left rib is all the answer he gets, followed by a third that feels like it catches an organ. He bounces on his toes, trying to calm the tempest with a steady, soothing movement.

“You’re so bad,” he laughs, rubbing his metal hand up and down his side - sometimes, the gentle vibrations of the mechanical joints are all it takes to subdue a kicking-and-punching fit.

But not this time. The baby stretches out again, feeling much bigger than Dr. Cho had indicated, with their head against his bladder and their heels practically pedaling against his stomach. The burn of acid splashing into his throat comes instantaneously.

He gives his belly a sharp thump with his knuckles. “I said stop it, asshole.”
“Listen, he called his baby an asshole!”

“Sam. Oh my God.”

Bucky looks up to find that the elevator doors have opened out onto the main medical floor, where Sam and Sharon are waiting for a ride. He’s sure he ought to be embarrassed about getting caught chatting with his own belly, but he has neither the time nor energy today. Sam’s right arm is in a bulky, temporary cast and he’s looking woozy, swaying from side to side as Sharon nudges him onto the elevator.

“Aw, what’d you do to your girlfriend?” Bucky asks sympathetically.

Sam’s brow knits with concern as he turns to study Sharon. “What? You okay, baby?”

“He’s talking about your hand, Sam,” Sharon says slowly and clearly.

“Oh, it’s good. It’s good.”


“Must be good stuff,” Bucky laughs.

“Hey, listen. Listen, man. Listen. I took down a neo-Nazi terror cell. Alright? I did that. They were trying to buy eleven assault rifles—”

“Eleven thousand, Sam.”

“Oh my God! Yeah, they were trying to buy twelve hundred guns. How many guns they got now?” he asks, cocking an eyebrow at Sharon. The expression seems to actually disrupt his balance.

Sharon and Bucky wait patiently for him to finish his thought. Finally, Bucky asks, “How many?”

“None,” Sam enunciates. “Because you can’t bring a gun with you when you go to jail.”

The elevator doors open right on cue as if to give his punchline a full stop, and Sam floats out while Sharon follows close behind, trying to wrangle him. “Someone managed to shoot out his flight pack during the bust and he took a dive. He’s lucky he only broke his arm. He shouldn’t even be walking, but he threatened to puke if we tried to put him back in the wheelchair.”

“Hey, listen, I don’t do so great with pain-meds.”

“Want to have lunch with me after I put him to bed?”

Bucky has to hold his breath to keep himself from interrupting as soon as Sharon says lunch. “Definitely.”

Bucky heads directly back to Steve’s quarters while Sharon gets Sam settled and throws together a few deli sandwiches. He’s too hungry to cook something hot. He constructs three before Sharon gets there, so he’s able to shove a full plate of food into her hands the moment she walks through the door. Now that he sees the sandwich next to her, he realizes he might have made it a little big, but Sharon doesn’t seem to mind.

“It’s so beautiful,” she sighs. “Are there pickles?”
“Jar’s on the table.”

“Lend me a hair-tie. I’m not going to try to eat this neatly.”

Bucky really enjoys Sharon’s company. He’s come to realize over the last month that, next to Steve, she’s his favorite person at the Facility to spend time with. Tony and Sam have become great friends to him, but Tony can be exhausting and Sam was an incurable introvert - sometimes even Steve has trouble pulling him out of his routine. Everyday is run, breakfast, errands, lunch, work, dinner, read, sleep, and repeat, and Sam always seems a little hesitant to deviate from his schedule. Sharon, on the other hand, makes no pretenses. She’s relaxed and content to share a comfortable silence, and she doesn’t seem to think, like Sam does, that passing a few hours doing nothing will ruin her week. That, and she eats a two pound sandwich like there’s prize money riding on it. Neither of them talk until their plates are empty.

“So,” she sighs happily, picking at the last crumbs of her potato chips, “Are you freaking out?”

“About the baby?”

“Yeah. The prospect of parenthood is fucking terrifying to me.”

“I guess. I don’t know. It’s happening, so I’ve had to get used to the idea. I’m probably not someone who should be allowed to raise a kid, but I’ll have Steve’s help. I think it’ll be a lot easier for me than it is for a lot of people.”

“Why?”

“Most people don’t have all of this.” His eyes travel around the room, indicating the luxury and comfort of the Facility. “My ma had me when she was sixteen,” Bucky shrugs. “In Shelbyville, Indiana. Just her and my father, twenty miles from a hospital with no car,” he chuckles. “Then all my sisters came along, and we moved up to New York, and then my dad was killed, so she was on her own in Brooklyn with four kids and not much money. I think I’ve got it easier than that.”

“Shit,” Sharon laughs with realization. “Guess that’s one way to look at it.”

Bucky means to continue their conversation, but something catches his ear first. A plane overhead, drawing closer fast. Soon, Sharon can hear it, too. A few more seconds, and it’s close enough that they can identify the engine noise; the quinjet’s back.

And Steve still hasn’t contacted him.

Something isn’t right.

Sharon must feel the tense shift in the air even before Bucky rises, because she’s up and out the door right along with him. “What?” she asks, keeping pace with him as he jogs down the hallway.

“He always calls first,” Bucky explains hastily. He doesn’t even glance at the elevator - it’ll be too slow. Whatever exhaustion had been dragging at him earlier is long-forgotten. He takes the stairs three at a time up to the landing pad, Sharon sprinting to keep up, and bursts through the exit onto the rooftop just as the quinjet’s gangway opens.

A long space of seconds pitters by, drenched in a ringing silence as a cold rain drips listlessly onto the landing pad. Bucky watches the jet, swallowing dryly and trying to get his breath back.

Only Tony leaves the jet. His expression as he steps out into the February rain is foreign to Bucky - unreadable. He approaches them wordlessly, one hand fidgeting in his pocket.
Sharon seems to understand before he does. She takes an unsteady step backward as Tony stops a few feet away from Bucky, her skipping litanies of “Oh my God, no, no,” loud in his ear but distant in meaning.

Tony sighs wearily. “Barnes.”

“What the fuck’s going on?”

Tony’s voice is as flat and empty as a desert and rough like sand. “Do you want to see him?”

“What happened?”

“Can you give us a minute?” Tony asks Sharon.

“Yes,” comes the soft reply.

Bucky doesn’t feel himself walking, but he knows that Tony’s hand is on his shoulder and they’re getting closer to the ramp. They’re walking up the ramp. They’re inside the jet. It’s dark. The low hum of the engine drowns out the rain outside and his own uneven breaths, creating it’s own relative peace in the air. The cockpit is empty.

“Where is he?” Bucky’s voice echoes in the hollowness of the quinjet.

“Med-bay.”

What little light had been spilling from the cockpit’s controls and the wall panels dampens and dims as Bucky’s eyes drift aimlessly, looking for something, anything out of place. Something that doesn’t make sense, that shouldn’t be there. Something that will tell his brain that this can’t be real, that he’s dreaming and he can wake up now; but there’s nothing. The floor beneath him is solid. The smell of the wet tarmac outside is unmistakable. His clothes are the same ones he’d put on that morning.

“Want me to come back with you?”

“No.”

Bucky moves forward once again, detached from his legs, the open foyer of the med-bay looming before him, faster and faster. He must be stumbling toward it.

There’s a sheet on the table to his right. The surgical light droops over it, extinguished. The sheet covers the shape of a body, but the face is hidden. Bucky recognizes it anyway. He understands.

He draws back the edge of the white cloth.

It’s Steve.

There’s still a little color in his cheeks. It must not have happened too long ago. Bucky collapses back onto the padded ledge seat behind him. He looks everywhere but back to the table.

“I’m sorry, Barnes.”

Bucky has no answer for that. Words are lost. He hears rushing wind and feels the tingle of numbness creeping through him, metal hand forming a fist as he stands and turns back toward the main cabin.

The gun Tony aims at him comes as no surprise. In fact, it’s a strange relief. He would have killed him. He still wants to kill him. He doesn’t know what else to do.
But the rising gangway behind Tony, the thinning sliver of light from the tarmac, the med-bay door closing in his face, the strange smile twisting Tony’s lips into an unrecognizable expression - that’s not right. None of this is right.

Behind him, from the rear of the jet, boots suddenly beat against the steel floor. He turns, back hitting the locked med-bay door. Six men emerge from the cargo hold. Heavy tac-gear. AK-74s. The quinjet lurches as the repulsor engines fire. They’re in the air.

Bucky’s vision whites out. He had felt so safe for so long - the moment he stopped looking over his shoulder, everything went to hell. This is too much, too fast. He can’t process what’s happening. Tony isn’t Tony. Steve is dead. His back is against a magnetically sealed door and there are six guns in his face. The quinjet is flying him to some unknown location. Sharon will be rounding up a team to pursue.

He’s not sure he cares what’s happening. Steve is gone.

But the moment he thinks of Steve being gone, he remembers why that’s so goddamn unfair. He thinks of the son or daughter Steve won’t meet. He’s got cargo to protect, and it’s more important than any biological weapon he’s smuggled or any ambassador he’s kidnapped or intel he’s stolen. He would have guarded any of those things with his life.

It’s different now. He’s guarding something that is his. Something that connects him to Steve, that will grow into a person he’ll love and teach, a person that might even love him back. No one’s forcing him to fight. It’s his choice. Most importantly, he doesn’t have to answer to anyone. There are no rules of engagement.

He cares about this moment more than he’s ever cared about anything in his life. He’ll be all right. He’ll make it out of this. There is no alternative.

Why do they want him? If they wanted him dead, they would have done it already. But if they want him alive, why not take Steve alive, too?

No, Steve wasn’t meant to die - someone had tried to put him back together. There’s still an IV bag hanging above his body and the smell of iodine is thick in the air. Bloody bullets rattle in a metal pan beside the operating table. He must have given them no choice but to use lethal force.

They’re coming for him now either because his pregnancy makes him vulnerable or because he’s pregnant. He’ll have to hope for the second option, because it means that they have orders to exhaust all other options before shooting him, and he doesn’t plan on giving them the time. But every movement will have to be perfect, and he’s out of practice.

No badges, no ID or insignia on the operatives. Tac-gear is mismatched. They’re not police or military, and judging by their bad formation, they’re not a team. Just mercs. Bucky can worry about his immortal soul later. He’ll have to kill all six. He has a pocket knife - not meant for a fight, but long and sharp enough to pierce skin and do damage.

The floor shudders beneath him as the quinjet banks hard and fires at something. Sharon must have gotten someone in the air to chase them down. Barring a miracle, that doesn’t help him much.

He numbers the gunmen.

One - moving in close on his nine. Weighs about 230. Hands and eyeline both steady, good footing. Competent.

Two - rifle too high. 180 pounds. Weight in front leg. If he fires, the recoil will knock him off
balance. One to two second window.

Three - broad and heavy, positioned too close to Two to be behind him. Looks about like One otherwise, but if he fires four inches to his right, he’ll catch Two’s elbow.

Four - standing under a glass light panel.

Five - thin and long-limbed, nervous. Drenched in sharp-smelling sweat. Muzzle trembling, drawing little circles in the air. Finger tight on the trigger. Five will kill him if he moves, and he can’t anticipate where he’ll fire.

Six - about like One. Well-trained, strong. Hopefully predictable. No, wait - different gun. Tranq gun. That’s why Six is on his far right - so he can’t block the tranq with his metal arm. He’ll have to take that hit when it comes, and hope he can fight past the drug.

One, Five, and Six will fire - Six first, then One, then Five. But that doesn’t matter; failure, he reminds himself, is impossible. His execution will be flawless.

“Les mains en l’air!” French mercenaries. Hydra had a wealth of them at their disposal.

The dance starts off slow. He raises his hands in surrender and looks at floor, letting his eyes show only panic and hopelessness. “Don’t shoot.” He adds a soft “Please,” for effect.

All he needs is a single moment of distraction, and he can think of only one word that might break their focus. He’ll have to gamble on it, no matter how sick it makes him to say it. He lets three seconds pass. Pricks up his ears, even though he’s heard nothing. Looks up sharply, letting his jaw slacken and his eyes bloom wide with shock. “Steve?”

Their fear of Captain America does the trick.

Three and four turn toward the table. Five turns and takes the aim of his rifle along with him.

One calls his bluff. Shouts for the tranquilizer.

Six is ready on the trigger and the dart catches Bucky in the meat of his right thigh.

He ducks low, draws back for a strike at One. One’s body tenses, ready to fire, but Bucky doesn’t follow through with the punch - he fits the palm of the Weapon over One’s muzzle break instead. The shot jars his shoulder joint, but the explosive kick-back knocks One off balance and compromises his grip on the rifle.

Bucky grabs One by throat and pulls him close into a headlock, getting his own back against the wall. Five spins back around in a panic and shoots twice - hits the floor and then hits One in the chest. Bucky uses the time to take out the pocket knife and open it.

One tries to break the headlock, and he does it right. He brings one hand over his head, hoping to jam his thumb into Bucky’s eye, but it leaves his armpit exposed, where the tac-gear has no coverage. Bucky stabs and twists. One loses the fight for his rifle.

Bucky guides its aim high - shoots out the glass lighting panel. The med-bay goes dark. Quick neck-snap: One is out.

He lowers the rifle thirty degrees--

-- no he’ll duck when the glass comes down compensate--
-- fifty degrees and shoots. The distinctive crack and splatter of bullet-meeting-face: Four is out.

One’s limp body falls to the floor, and in the darkness and commotion, Bucky lets himself fall with it. Three hasn’t fired - he can’t be sure he won’t hit Two now that visibility is bad, but Two has the open shot at the space where Bucky had been standing and takes it. There’s the stumble.

Bucky takes advantage of Two’s poor footing and, from the ground, sweeps his legs out from under him. Two falls forward hard. The elbow of the Weapon descends onto his cervical vertebrae: Two is out.

He rolls toward the back of the cabin, tearing the tranq out of his leg on the way as Three sprays the floor around him with bullets. He grabs the gun as he passes but Three hangs on. Flat on his back on the ground, all Bucky can do is hold on to the muzzle and keep it just to the left of his head as the rounds deafen him. The angle is good, though. Three stays standing through the first two kicks driving up into his groin, but the third cracks his cup and he crumples, gagging.

Five and Six are advancing quickly. No time to finish Three off, but Bucky takes his gun as he stands.

A wild shot from Five skims his right bicep with a stinging burst of heat, but his eyes have adjusted now - one rattle of Three’s AK-74 and the bulletproof vest gives way: Five is out.

Three’s magazine is empty. Bucky ducks left and Six’s next shot misses. Six is right beside Steve’s body on the operating table. And the big surgical lamp on the swinging arm.

Bucky gets desperate and throws the spent rifle like an ax. It hits the lamp, the lamp swings wide and shatters its bulbs on Six’s chin, giving Bucky just enough time to move forward.

He kicks the tranq gun out of the op’s hands, but Six collects himself fast. Bucky takes two good punches to the face and catches a third with the Weapon that would have connected with his gut. Six’s knee comes up fast, but Bucky manages to sidestep it.

Six ends up with one foot on the ground and no chance of keeping his balance. Bucky tears the riot helmet off his head, gets him by the hair, and smashes his bared-teeth down onto the metal corner of the operating table. He keeps going until the sound of the impact is soft and wet: Six is out.

The first minute dip in his adrenaline gives the tranquilizer all the foothold it needs. It washes over him in seconds: a ringing in his ears; then a swarm of black spots in his periphery, pitch against the dark backdrop of the med-bay; a ticklish weakening in every joint. He has to get to the cockpit. He has to kill Tony or the man who looks like him. He has to get control of the jet and land it.

He stumbles forward, biting his tongue to keep himself conscious.

find a way to override the door no there’s no time going to lose--

Pry it open

weapon’s fingers latch onto a ridge on smoothslick metal

pulls and pulls begs it to open for him

Metal gives way before the magnetic seal fails, dents, creaks please please open

“Mettez-vous par terre.”
Bucky struggles to parse the words. *Ground. Get on the ground.*

Three.

He feels the warm muzzle of a just-fired rifle against the small of his back. The shot would sever his spinal cord. Kill the baby. So Bucky does something he’s never done before, despite every opportunity.

“Please,” he slurs, desperately trying to articulate. “Don’t shoot. Don’t hurt me, please. *Ne me faites...pas de mal. S’il vous plaît. Ne tirez pas. Ne tirez pas.*”

“*Tais-toi!*”

He sinks to the ground. The jet shudders violently and banks hard. Bucky can hear the blast of its guns on the wings, feels it rattling the door against his spread fingers. One moment of too much turbulence and Three’s hand could slip, whether he cooperates or not. His stomach lurches as the quinjet dives.

“*Merde!*”

Bucky hears the gunshot, but doesn’t feel it. Must be the drugs. He can’t believe it. He can’t believe it. He let them kill him. He got *both* of them killed.
February: Part 2

The dull *thud* of a body that’s not his own clears his head a little. A moment later, there’s a strangled, agonized groan behind him. Ragged breathing.

Even in broken cries and choked breaths, he knows Steve’s voice.

He finally dares to move again and turns around. Steve drops the rifle and collapses to his knees, then onto his side. The top of his uniform is gone, exposing his iodine-smeared abdomen and four bullet holes, just beginning to bleed again. One is partially stitched shut.

“Steve!” Bucky shouts. It’s hard to breath. His head is pounding. His eyes feel hot. He’s crying. He crawls toward him. “Stevie, fuck, Steve,” he gasps, getting a hand under Steve’s head and cradling it.

Steve doesn’t respond right away. Bucky thinks he’s lost consciousness, but then he groans again and pitches forward, vomiting. He looks like he’s gone from *dead to dying*. Blood runs in thick rivulets from the bullet holes with each convulsion as Steve tries to stem the flow with his shaking hands. Bucky scrambles to gather up the sheet that had covered Steve’s body and presses it to his stomach.

“Steve - here - keep pressure on it--”

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” Steve rasps. “What’s--”

“Need your override code for the door.”

“Your birthday - fuck - be careful. Eight digits.”

Bucky drags himself up. Leaving Steve right now feels like tearing off his other arm, but he has to get them down.

“Get my shield. Probably overhead storage, cargo.”

Bucky stumbles back to the cargo hold and gropes for the handle above him. The shield isn’t hard to find, but he takes a hard fall in the cramped, dim hold when his foot catches against something soft. Tony.

Head wound. Bridge of his nose busted open. But he’s alive.

Perfect. That means that - if he can get his legs to cooperate - Bucky doesn’t need to think twice about killing the pilot.

Shield in one hand and a Glock off One’s holster in the other, he goes back to the door to the main cabin. 03101916.

The warped door groans open and Bucky keeps to one side of it. The pilot can’t leave the cockpit, but he must hear the door. He fires back toward the med-bay. One bullet passes through the gap and three more ricochet off the foyer, but then he has to pull up sharply, giving Bucky an opening. He takes a deep breath, pushing past the drugs and forcing the fog out of his brain, and throws the shield.

It hits the back of the pilot’s head. His head hits the controls. He slumps to side.
Bucky supports himself against the wall for a moment, numb and hazy. It’s over. He did it. He’s alive. Steve’s alive.

Low in his belly, a tiny body makes a sluggish turn.

They’re all alive.

He clings to the wall, weaving his way up toward the cockpit, and steps over the pilot’s unconscious body. The photostatic veil sags around the man’s eye-socket, its damaged matrix shimmering in crooked white grid-lines.

Bucky steadies the craft as a second quinjet sweeps around in a wide arc, waiting to see if the ceasefire means that the controls have changed hands. There’s some kind of drive wired into the main computer, which he disconnects. Instantly, Friday’s voice bursts from the speakers through a lagging garble of digital white noise. He’s never been happier to hear her.

“Hailing Agent Carter in quinjet Dagger!”

Sharon’s face appears a moment later, superimposed over the windshield glass. “Bucky! Jesus! What’s your status?”

“Pilot was wearing a veil. Steve’s critical, needs medevac,” he says, fighting to speak clearly enough that Sharon will understand him. Sharon doesn’t say anything about Steve just yet, but she clasps her hand to her mouth. Bucky thinks her eyes tear up. “Four GSW, abdomen. Stark’s got BFT to the head, non-responsive. Six dead French mercenaries, pilot’s non-responsive—”

“Vision’s boarding you right now. Stay with me, Barnes. What about you?”

“Fine,” he pants, hardly comprehending it himself. “Got hit with a tranq but I got it out. Superficial GSW - just a graze on my arm.” In the med-bay, he can hear Vision already setting to work on getting Steve and Tony somewhere stable.

“I’ll have a surgical team standing by at the Facility for Steve. Cho’s listening in, she’s got a team waiting on you and the kid.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m heading straight for Sakchi to find the rest of the team. Vision’s coming with me once he gets you home. Please, please take care, Bucky.”

“You, too,” he sighs, as the transmission ends.

Vision approaches without a word and leans over the console, programming a course into the nav-computer to take them back to the Facility at top speed. His face takes on an odd spark of something very human when he turns from the controls to appraise Bucky.

“You don’t look well,” he says, verging on sympathetic. “You’ve been drugged.”

“I’m shaking it.”

Vision’s eyes flicker down to the swell of his stomach, the sensors around his pupils dilating almost naturally as they scan. He lays both hands on Bucky’s abdomen, touching lightly at a few points. Bucky not only tolerates the unorthodox diagnostics - he’s grateful for them. Still, he holds his breath, waiting for Vision to speak.
“The fetus is in a slight state of distress, but recovering quickly. It is unharmed.” The android’s mouth forms a gentle smile as he removes his hands only to extend them, palms up, to help Bucky stand. “You may tend to Captain Rogers. I will man the helm.”

Bucky nods unsteadily. “Thanks, pal.”

“You’re quite welcome, Sergeant.”

The indescribable shock of seeing Steve alive and standing must have given Bucky a second wave of adrenaline. His pounding heart is burning through the drugs faster than they can drag him down, now. He feels a little steadier on his feet as he makes his way back to the med-bay - although that could have something to do with the quinjet’s steadier course.

Back on the operating table where Vision had laid him, Steve is calling out deliriously for Bucky. Despite all that had just happened, Bucky feels a sad twinge of nostalgia when he hears Steve’s voice; suddenly, he can practically smell the musty, peeling wallpaper in their apartment under the Manhattan Bridge, and feel the dry autumn breeze drifting in as Steve’s brain had cooked with scarlet fever.

He sits down beside him and takes over pressing the coarse sheet to the bullet holes. His right hand finds Steve’s fingers, sticky with clotting blood and cold, and clasps them tightly. “Hey, hey,” he whispers soothingly. “Hush. I’m right here.”

“What’s happening?”

“Someone hijacked the jet. Just hang on tight for me. We’re gonna get you home.”

Steve wrests his hand out of his grip only to reach out to him, groping clumsily for the swell of his stomach. “Buck?”

“Right here, Steve.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. We’re both okay. You saved us back there.”

“You still think I’m Captain America?” he mumbles.

Bucky has to laugh at that. “Oh, yeah. You’re still my Cap.”

Vision pushes the jet’s repulsor engines to their limit to get them back to the facility in only minutes. He gives Wanda and Banner a concise briefing on the situation, then flies off like Superman, leaving them to handle the six bodies and the unconscious pilot.

A team of medical personnel boards the jet as soon as the gangway is down, pushing a gurney in with them. Bucky meets them in the main cabin, cradling Steve’s body to his chest, and plants a hard kiss on his forehead before they rush him away.

“No way. No!” shouts a voice out on the tarmac. Helen. She runs a wheelchair up the ramp, looking furious and a little terrified. “Tell me you didn’t just pick Steve up?” she demands, wide-eyed as she shoves the wheelchair toward him and pulls him down into it by his prosthetic arm. A second gurney
pushes past them to get to Stark in the med-bay, Wanda following close behind it. Bruce brings up the rear of the team and heads for the cockpit to deal with the pilot.

“Oh my God,” Wanda gasps, no doubt getting a look at the carnage. Helen hurries over to see what has her so startled, and immediately puts a hand over her mouth and nose and stumbles away from the door.

“Was this you?” Helen asks stiffly.

Fuck it. If the Avengers want to give him hell for killing the ops, they can all go to hell. “Yeah.”

“Nice work. Don’t do it again,” says Helen, still covering her nose against the stench of standing pools of blood as she pulls the wheelchair to the side so the medevac team can get Stark out.

Wanda emerges from the med-bay holding his pocket knife gingerly between her thumb and forefinger. “Is this yours?”

“He can get it later,” Cho cuts in. “I’ve got to get him to the lab so we can—”

Their conversation is brought to a sudden halt by a ringing gunshot. Helen curses shrilly and ducks down to cover Bucky. In the cockpit, the pilot is sitting up, Glock still aimed at Banner.

Bucky thinks for a moment that he’ll never be able to forgive himself for this. He had known the pilot was armed. He knew, and he didn’t disarm him. And now Bruce is tottering backward, hunched over. A red stain spreads across the back of his grey button-down. The pilot shoots again, blowing Bruce’s body back against the wall.

Wanda moves fast, but rather than rushing toward the fray, she grabs Bucky and Cho and drags them toward the back of the cabin.

“No--fuck, help him--!”

“Shut up!”

A roar like Bucky’s never heard in his life shakes the frame of the quinjet. He turns back toward the cockpit and Banner is gone; the Hulk - the fucking Hulk! - has the pilot, now unmasked, pinned high against the steel wall under one gigantic palm. The pilot whimpers piteously as the Hulk leans in close, baring his teeth with a deep, angry rumble and staring him down with murder in his eyes.

“Banner - no - don’t!” the pilot wheezes.

“I think they know each other,” Cho whispers.

“Holy shit,” Bucky says, unable to contain his awe. “I’ve only ever seen him do that on the television.”

“Be quiet,” Wanda deadpans softly through clenched teeth.

The Hulk growls again and gives the pilot a hard shake, causing the gun to slip from the man’s trembling fingers and clatter to the floor. A gigantic heel descends immediately upon it, rubbing the Glock into pieces like a cigarette butt. He turns his massive head back toward Bucky and the others, with something in his eyes that’s a little more Bruce, then grunts and gives a jerky nod toward the gangway.

Wanda gives him a thumbs up, which he seems to comprehend, then leads Bucky and Cho past
Bruce and down the ramp, keeping herself protectively positioned between the two parties all the while.

“I’m going to stay with Bruce and make sure he does not kill the pilot,” she sighs, waving them on toward the Facility. “I would like to interrogate him myself, anyway. Take care, Barnes.”

“Let me know when you figure out what the hell’s going on,” Bucky calls back to her as Cho wheels him away. Not another second passes before his own interrogation is underway.

“Is that a bullet wound on your arm?”

“Yeah. Graze.”

“No other injuries?”

“That I know of.”

“Back pain?”

“No.”

“Abdominal cramps?”

“No.”

“Discharge?”

“No?”

“Bleeding?”

“Well, my arm.”

“Light-headed? Short of breath?”

“Getting a little dizzy,” Bucky replies shortly.

“Really? Or are you just trying to be cute?”

“No, not really. Well, yes. A little. But it’s probably the drugs. They’re wearing off, though.”

“Ugh,” Helen huffs. “Playing obstetrician to an enhanced assassin. Makes me wish I’d stuck with the dental hygiene program. So. They hit you with a tranquilizer...what, fifteen minutes ago? And it’s almost completely worn off?”

“Yeah.”

“Hm,” she hums, pulling him into the elevator. “Sounds like they came here specifically for you. They had to know that you’re enhanced - probably used one hell of a tranq.”

“Worked better than most of them do.”

“And your metabolism is even higher than usual, right now. That’s a big problem, Sarge,” she laughs humorlessly, hurrying them toward her lab. “You know that C-section we’ve been planning on?”

“Well. Yes.”
“That might not work so well.”

Bucky is in no state to respond to that news or even comprehend it - especially not as Cho pushes him through the doors to her lab where two strangers are waiting to assist her.

Valentine’s Day hasn’t exactly been spectacular: the gut-wrenching horror of thinking Steve had been killed and the earth-shattering sight of it; fighting his way off a hijacked quinjet through six mercs with 74s; and although nothing can dampen the joy of knowing that Steve is alive, Steve is still in critical condition. Medical exams from strangers is just the fucking icing.

But the two younger men don’t look so threatening once he works up the nerve to look at them. Actually, they seem worried.

“Cap’s going to pull through, Stark’s okay, and Barnes’s just got nicked. We’re just going to do a thorough exam to make sure the baby’s all good,” Cho explains. Her enlisted helpers let out a sigh of relief.

One of them steps forward to give him a hand up to the exam table. “You okay?” the guy asks.

Bucky finds that the unassuming, gentle question was exactly what he needed to hear. There are no Hydra technicians or researchers in this lab. He’s back among good people. “Kinda shook up,” he admits.

“I’m - I know this is not the time to tell you,” the man stammers, “but I’ve got a this really cool Howling Commandos comic book and it would be so cool if you’d sign it sometime.”

“Brandon, do not,” the other guy laughs, helping Bucky lay back and taking a pair of scissors to his shirt.

“No--” Bucky says too quickly, then feels himself smile a little. “No one’s ever asked me to sign anything for them.”

“When are you due?” the one with the scissors asks.

“May 25th.”

“Mine’s supposed to be here on the 28th. Gonna be my third little girl,” he beams.

“Wow,” Bucky winces as the nervous one - Brandon - sterilizes the wound on his bicep. “You’re hardly showing.”

The guys get a kick out of that, but Helen practically laughs herself to tears.

He feels safe here. Sharon and Vision will bring the team home from India safely. Wanda and Bruce will find out what the pilot knows. Cho and the guys will make sure that his kid’s okay. Tony will come around soon. Between the medical staff and the serum, Steve will be fine. Beneath the understandable stress and fear and discomfort, Bucky still feels secure. Things are better than ever even if it’s not easy, and he’s finally beginning to see that he doesn’t have to do any of it alone. He’s going to be alright. Everyone is going to be alright.

Twenty hours pass quickly and quietly.

Cho doesn’t go as far as demanding bedrest, but she does request that Bucky stay off his feet for a
few days. That’s not so hard - he sits with Steve in recovery, then sits with him in the room they move him to.

Steve regains consciousness just four hours after the laparotomy, and Bucky is right beside him to say hello. Through a swollen, dry mouth and a haze of drugs, he only manages to speak a few words.

“You hurt?” he rasps.

Bucky smiles. “Nope.”

“We win?”

“Looks like it.”

“So hungry.”

Bucky laughs sympathetically. “Get some more rest, Steve.”

“I’m awake,” Steve assures him, and falls asleep for another fifteen hours.

Tony has suffered only a badly broken nose and a minor concussion, and although Bucky is sure that the prescription must have been rest, Tony does no such thing. He joins Banner and Maximoff the moment he’s conscious.

Six hours after the incident, poor Sam wakes up and rushes down to the medical floor.

“Why the fuck didn’t anybody wake me up?” he demands.

“What were you going to do?” Bucky snorts. “You got a gimp arm,” he points out, tugging his sleeve down over the stitches in his right bicep.

“I wish they had just amputated it. I would have asked for something like what you’ve got. But mine would have a rocket launcher. And free wi-fi.”

Sam sits with him for the rest of the day.

Bucky wakes up in the recliner by Steve’s hospital bed around hour nineteen, back and sides aching. Inside him, the baby seems to be kicking their legs over and over, like they’re trying to get the leverage to turn some other way, but can’t quite swing it. He puts up with it for a few minutes, hoping the kid will either wear out or get comfortable. Finally, it stops for a few minutes, and he almost goes back to sleep. The baby waits until he’s dozed off, then starts again.

“Fucking quit.”

Those are the first words Steve hears and understands. It takes him a while to open his eyes and take stock of his surroundings, but when he does get a look at his predicament, it’s not too far from what he’d expected. Hospital room at the Facility. Couple monitors, IV drips in the crook of his elbow and the back of his hand. The lights are out, but there’s creamy sunlight streaming through the gaps in the blackout curtains.

Bucky is tossing in the recliner a few feet away, with a baseball cap over his eyes and a cotton blanket wadded up under his head. He shifts onto his other side, but it doesn’t seem to help. He makes a sound that reminds Steve of a hiccup, then huffs, “Goddamnit.”
“That baby’s going to come out cussing like a dock-worker, Buck,” Steve laughs.

Bucky’s on his feet in an instant. He plants himself on the edge of the bed, being careful not to jostle Steve which, at his current size, looks a little tricky. He must have gained ten pounds just since Steve left.

Steve finds that he doesn’t feel too bad, all things considered, and grabs Bucky by the jacket collar to pull him down for a kiss. He can’t help himself.

“Is my breath horrible?” he grins, still holding on.

“Sort of,” Bucky cringes.

Steve yanks him close and kisses him again, just to be an ass. “So was I dreaming earlier, or did I mention something about me saving you?”

“You did save me. I’d have a bullet in my brain if it wasn’t for you.”

“Oh, thank God,” he chuckles. “Because I was pretty fuckin’ useless on that mission, otherwise. What happened back there, anyway? You said we were hijacked—”

His thought is interrupted by a sudden, high-pitched snore. He knows who it is even before Bucky raises the bed up so he can see.

Sam is slouched on the other chair, legs stretched out in front of him, chin drooping down to his chest. “What happened to him?” Steve laughs.

Bucky seems to consider telling Steve the real story, but Sam hears Steve’s voice and sits bolt upright. “Aw, he just jerked off too much. He’s fine.”

“You’re going to have to clean up that language before Sammy gets here,” Sam scolds them, coming forward and reaching out his good hand to clasp Steve’s. “Nice to see you back, Cap. You scared us again.”

“I’ll be more careful.”

“No, you won’t.”

Within the hour, the little hospital room is crowded with doctors who are interested in Steve’s vitals and teammates who are very interested in his vitals. Tony announces his own entrance with a dramatic sigh and the most sheepishly apologetic expression a man of his considerable ego can manage.

“Hi, honey,” he greets them. “We’re all home. Carter and Vis just got back with the rest of our team. Turns out we weren’t the only ones who ran into trouble. Banner and Wanda just got done tickling info out of Darzi and I just got off the horn with Romanoff, so I think we know what happened.”

“They tortured someone?” Bucky asks incredulously.

“Sweet Geneva, no. And if that’s what ‘tickling’ means to you, I’m suing for full custody,” Stark answers, sitting down at the foot of the bed. He pauses to catch his breath - Steve is only a little distracted by how ridiculous Tony’s usual fast-talking sounds through a stuffy, broken nose.

Tony throws a wary glance toward the two remaining doctors reviewing Steve’s charts and catches their eyes, then motions them subtly out of the room. Once the door is shut behind them, he explains. “Want me to start at the beginning? Or go backwards? It’s confusing and convoluted either way.”

“I’m allowed to hear this, right?” Sam cuts in.

“Are you an Avenger?”

“Just checking. You want me to kick Barnes out?”

“No, he’s an Avenger. It’s his job to make more Avengers, because when I do it you guys tell me I’m a mad scientist with a God-complex.”

“This was Hydra, wasn’t it?” Bucky guesses.

“What gave it away?”

“Seems like they went to a lot of trouble to get to me.”

“Well,” Tony mumbles, clearing his throat. “They didn’t have to try as hard as they should have.”

He sighs, scratching his nails across his jaw, looking desperately in need of a cup of coffee. “Banner made a little communications faux pas. Try not to be pissed at him. He’s doing enough of that for all of us. Remember that trip you took to Latvia?”

Steve nods. That’s not an op he’ll forget anytime soon.

“Banner was back in India that week, working with an old colleague. ‘Pretesh Patel.’ Excellent scientist, according to Banner - who was supposed to be helping him develop the tetrodotoxin-B formula into something useful. Like an Epipen for Hulk-attacks. That was Darzi, by the way. Bright young student of one Dr. List, turned operative once we arrested his boss. He was mostly concerned with stealing Banner’s TDB formula, but his superiors knew he still had ties to the Avengers. They correctly assumed that Barnes had stuck around with you,” he says, nodding toward Steve. “Darzi bugged the whole lab on him.”

“And then I called him,” Steve provides. “But I only told him that I’d found the files on the AVOTS project. Why’d they come after Bucky?”

“Because Banner got in contact with Cho and speculated. Not just about the files…about you and Barnes. He wasn’t gossiping or anything. That’s more my style. He was just losing his scientific shit over the fact that, if Hydra had accomplished what Zola and Strazds laid out in the files and,” Tony looks skyward, feigning prudishness, “the right kind of hanky-panky were to happen, Barnes could actually reproduce. So, there’s Banner’s fuck-up. Onto mine. The tips from Sakchi that I brought us out there on? Fake. Totally fake. They...uh, they read me right. Soon as I heard human-trafficking ring, I saw a chance for some good press. Didn’t ask as many questions as I should have. The victims we left the rest of the team to deal with were operatives. All armed. They got Rhodes and Barton and Romanoff pinned down at the warehouse and let Darzi follow us right back to the quinjet which, of course, has that handy emergency autopilot. Took him straight back to our Facility. He took a couple mercs with him back to the bird with him, they knocked me out, he used my unconscious face to program his veil, and then he hit you with the TDB he’d stolen from Banner. Dead Steve Rogers was a pretty surefire way to get Barnes onto the jet alone and throw him off his game. There's a silver-lining, though: tetrodotoxin-B slows Steve's pulse down and kept the bleeding to a minimum. He would've bled out before we got home if Darzi hadn't dosed him.”

“He planned all that pretty carefully,” Bucky speculates. “And I’ll bet he was in contact with a base
before he landed. Probably as soon as he had the Facility’s coordinates.”

“Yeah, I was...pondering that,” Tony huffs. “So, people within Hydra know exactly where their favorite defected assassin is bunking. And they know that he’s now become a supersoldier BOGO. Do you guys have any ideas? Because my idea is just find them first and throw them in a very dark, very deep hole.”

“I like that idea,” Sam concurs.

“Agreed,” says Steve. “See what Wanda can get out of Darzi - any locations he knows, we’ve got to hit them in quick succession. A coordinated strike will keep the bases from tipping each other off so they can’t disappear on us.”

“Absolutely,” Tony nods emphatically. “Any other instructions before I give you the boot?”

“What?” Steve feels himself pale.

“You’re on medical leave. Surprise.” Tony laughs humorlessly. “What’d you expect, Rogers? You’re a colander. I’ll call you when I need some linguini drained, but until then, you are off duty.”

“I’ll be fine in a couple of days. I’ve got to do this, Tony. I can’t just sit back and--”

“Well, you can’t exactly sit up, either. In a couple of days, when you’re ‘fine,’ medical leave ends and paternity leave starts. Barnes, back me up, here.”

Steve watches Bucky carefully, trying to determine what he wants, but Bucky’s a closed vault, arms crossed, eyes betraying very little. “It’s up to him.”


“Someone should be here with him, Steve. I think you should stay.”

“Believe me, I’d rather be here, but if Hydra is--”

Tony gets hard look in his eyes that silences Steve even before he speaks. “The answer’s ‘no,’ Cap. You may be the general manager, but on paper, this is my team and I get the final say on who’s on duty and who takes paid leave. You want to be a dad? Good. Do that. Trust me to lead this team. Trust the team to have your back and stop micromanaging. I might do things differently than you would, but I have done this without you before and I can do it again if it means you never miss a piano recital or a baseball game, and I will do it permanently if it means a kid grows up with two parents and not just - two famous dead people.”

Sam looks at the floor, eyebrows raised, like he’s silently acknowledging that Tony has scored a winning point. Steve thinks he hears Bucky exhale, tight and unsteady, before he finally musters the strength to meet Tony’s eyes. Steve watches something pass silently between them - gratitude and understanding and a jarring moment when devastating loss and agonizing guilt collide in midair. Bucky lowers his head, apparently conceding on Steve’s behalf. “He’s right, Steve.”

It’s three against one, now, and Steve feels like it might even be four-oh. There isn’t much for him to say, except, “Okay.”

“Hello?” Cho’s voice, along with a simultaneous knock at the door, shatters the thin-blown glass tension in the room. “Can I interrupt? Sounds intense in here.”

“No, no,” Tony smiles, waving her in. “Just our weekly passionate foursome. You just missed the
explosive climax but you’re welcome to partake of the loving afterglow.”

“Oh, super,” she smiles, letting herself in. “Bucky, I know you were a little distracted, so I just held onto these until you and Steve could get a look at them together.”

She offers up a manilla folder, passing it over Steve’s lap to Bucky. Steve thinks he knows what’s inside, and the spark of excitement in Bucky’s eyes is all the confirmation he needs. Bucky almost opens them, but his fingers stutter on the edge of the folder. He gives a soft, almost giddy laugh, and hands it to Steve instead and scoots closer to look over his shoulder. Steve doesn’t have the slightest problem with that. Stress, injuries, and contention forgotten, he practically snatches thick packet away, grinning like it’s midnight on Christmas Eve, and throws it open.

Bucky’s quiet, “Oh my God,” is drowned out by Steve’s elated gasp of, “Holy shit!”

That’s his kid. That’s his kid! Part of him wants to stare at each image forever, but his hands move on their own, paging through them too fast, devouring every detail. Hands, legs, curled spine, arched back, bent knees, tiny shoulders, round head - nose! A perfect little profile, and leaping out from the static-filled image, the unmistakable valley and peak of a nose. And an unbelievable picture - two curled fists, drawn up to rest upon cheeks which somehow seem round even on the two-dimensional, colorless print. Judging by how abrupt and sharp his own sudden joyful laughter sounds, Steve realizes he must have been holding his breath.

“Wow,” Bucky says simply.

“Really starting to look like a person,” Cho grins.

“Look at that big old head,” Sam chuckles. “That’s gonna hurt.”

“Shut up,” Bucky laughs, passing him one of the prints.

Tony slips one out of Steve’s fingers, apparently having decided that Steve has stared at it slack-jawed long enough. “Look at that. Two arms,” he announces triumphantly. “He really takes after his old man, Cap.”

Tony’s self-indulgent giggle at his own joke hangs awkwardly in the air of the suddenly silent room. Finally, he glances at Cho, who seems to be tightening her lips against either mirth or a stream of expletives, and then takes in the surprise on every other face in the room. “Oh, shit. Can you people not read an ultrasound image? Had you guys not seen that?”

Bucky looks at Steve, shocked and unblinking, and Steve looks at Bucky, mouth agape as a positively euphoric smile that he can’t manage to suppress blooms on his cheeks. “I told you!”
March: Part 1

Nothing is guaranteed to wake Steve up so instantaneously as the word, “Trashcan.”

He rolls to the side of the bed and gropes for it, but they haven’t needed it in a while. It’s not in its usual place. By the way Bucky sounded, he has about one second to find it. He gets his hand on the rim and drags it over, but not in time to pass it to him. Bucky flings himself heavily into his lap to lean over the side of the bed and get close to the bin. Thankfully, he makes it.

Unfortunately, Steve is now trapped underneath him. He doesn’t mind. Not really. He lays back onto the cool pillows, savoring the last moments of resting his eyes and ignoring the light of the rising sun, rubbing soothing fingers over the small of Bucky’s back until he can stop vomiting.

Five minutes later, the last shivering convulsions have passed, and Bucky is dead weight, slumped across Steve’s belly. He pats him comfortably. “Better?”

“I guess.”

Steve will have to take his word for it, because he shows no sign of moving, even when Steve’s cell buzzes on the bedside table. He has to stretch to reach it, since Bucky doesn’t seem to want to let him up. Tony’s face, flashing a peace sign, fills the screen, only to be replaced by Tony’s face a year older, a smudge of dirt on his cheek, face illuminated by the interior screens on his suit. He must be mid-flight.

“Come on, Cap, why you still in bed? It’s one o’clock in Lithuania.”

“No, I was up,” Steve replies roughly, just as Bucky groans back tensing up again under Steve’s free hand and face disappearing back into the wastebasket.

“Oh, wow, that’s a noise. I can smell tequila and stomach lining. Must be a flashback to ‘05. I’m gonna put you on mute. This suit’s a bad place for a sympathy vomit.”

“I’m good, I’m done,” Bucky rasps.

“What’d you find?”

“Oh, you’re going to be so proud of us. Two brand new Hydra bases found and cleaned out, and we haven’t even taken a lunch break yet.”

“Where are you?”

“Headed into Šilutė. Rhodey just called with a good lead from his base. Mine was a hit, too. They had a very expensive lab all set up to receive Barnes once Darzi delivered on his end of the deal. We’ve uploaded all of their research into our databases - Cho’s going to love it - it’s all of Zola and Strazds’ lab results from after they’d finished the AVOTS modifications. Couple more film reels, too.”

“What’s Rhodes got?”

“Well, I’d hate to speak too soon, but it looks like he might have dug up old Juris himself.”

Bucky sits up, moves to the foot of the bed and turns to listen. Steve can’t interpret the look in his eyes.
“Strazds is alive?” Steve asks softly.

Tony rolls his eyes. “Don’t act so surprised. He’s only ninety-two. Doesn’t look like he’s in on the fun, though - Rhodey says it looks like Hydra’s been trying to contact him - no word on whether or not they succeeded, yet. So. Prenatal hangover aside, how is he?”

Steve swallows a thousand more questions - they can wait until Tony is back, so he lets them all go with a sigh. “Hes, uh…” he glances over at Bucky, whose face softens the moment Steve smiles at him. “Getting big. Week twenty-nine.”

“Like, just big or like Kim K. big?”

“Call me when you find out more,” Steve chuckles.

“Oh, man, he’s a whale, isn’t he? Oh, hey, and tell him--”

Steve flips him the bird and hangs up on him. “Tony says happy birthday. Speaking of which, what do you want to do? We’ve at least got to do something fun, since you won’t let anyone buy you any presents.” Bucky’s already out of bed, changing the trashcan liner, and getting dressed. He’s turned away, so Steve can’t see his face. The possibility that Strazds could be alive might have really bothered him.

But Bucky’s voice is strangely light when he finally speaks and his sigh indicates that his silence was only thoughtful - not at all the storm Steve had half-expected. “What’s the weather supposed to be like today?”

“Fifty-seven degrees and sunny!” Friday announces happily, almost like she’d been waiting for a chance to join the conversation. “Happy one hundredth birthday, Bucky!”


“What were you thinking?”

“Want to go for a run? Outside, since it’s warm? I figure I better enjoy it while I can.”

Steve grins. He’s enjoyed his time with Bucky, but being off-duty has been a little tough on him, especially following his stint of bedrest. “Sure. Breakfast before or after?”


Not things he likes to be able to do on a morning run.

Keeping pace with Bucky is the polite thing to do, right? Or can Bucky sense that Steve’s getting bored? Is he just making this awkward for both of them? When they’ve gone running together in the past, even just two months ago, Bucky had been as fast as ever. Hell, on a good day, Steve couldn’t even catch him - he could beat him at a sprint, sure, but Bucky could almost always win over a distance, and golly, that used to bother Steve. Now he kind of misses the competition.

Steve’s let himself get distracted again. He realizes that he’s lost sight of Bucky after rounding the corner of the Facility’s main hangar, so he slows down to let him catch up. They’re practically power
walking, for God’s sake.

He hadn’t been kidding Tony - Bucky’s gotten big. He’d hit some kind of growth spurt two weeks back, and it didn’t show any sign of slowing down. At the beginning of February, he had put on a bit of weight through his face and limbs, but that’s gone, now. His belly, on the other hand, has become an unmistakable, perfectly round bump. Every single staffer at the Facility knows about his pregnancy now (and are under a gag-order from Stark, who had made it very clear that a press leak would not be tolerated) and Steve doesn’t even have gossip to blame, since Bucky is visibly pregnant now, from all angles and distances.

And...he’s alone again, isn’t he? Steve stops and strolls back toward the bench where Bucky has flung himself, metal hand rubbing the small of his back as his flesh fingers dig at the juncture of his pectoral and the prosthesis.

Steve sits down next to him, smiling sympathetically, thinking, Poor guy. He can’t imagine walking in that state, much less running. “You about ready for breakfast?”

“Steve,” Bucky huffs, cringing with disgust. “I gotta do something about this.”

“About what?” Steve feels his heart speed up for the first time that morning. It sounds like something’s wrong.

“I think--”

Oh, God. Please don’t be in labor. Please don’t be in labor.

“I need--” Bucky sighs, cringing with either pain or disgust, apparently unable to continue.


Bucky sits up a little straighter and gives Steve a withering look.

Oh.

Steve suppresses his laugh, but can’t keep from smiling. “Well, at least now I know what to get you for your birthday.”

“You better get me something besides that for my birthday. I’m a hundred. I deserve better. And don’t get me anything, anyway. I just want dinner and a backrub, and I’m good.”

“Man, I don’t even know where to get a brassiere.”

Bucky stands up and starts back toward the main building. “Don’t even say that word.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Steve snorts, chasing after him. “It’s just a bra! For your breasts!”

“I have shot you before, Rogers - don’t fucking test me.”

Cho, as usual, has thought of precisely everything.

On his way back inside, Bucky sends her a hurried text which reads, Think I need bra Help? to which she replies, Come to lab! What she has waiting for him doesn’t look much like any brassiere that Bucky’s ever seen - just a stretchy, shapeless half-shirt, but it certainly does the trick.
“Bet that’s a weight off your chest!” she giggles. Even Steve rolls his eyes. “How’s your birthday going? This is triple digits, right?”

“Good so far, and yeah,” Bucky smiles, putting his t-shirt back on and struggling to make it cover the bottom of his belly. “I don’t feel a day over fifty-nine.”

“No drinking,” she orders teasingly. “Which reminds me, we’ve got to set up a meeting to figure out what to do about delivery. I think I mentioned a few weeks ago that I doubt a C-section will be a viable option, but then we all got so busy, I didn’t end up following up with you.”

Steve sits up a little straighter, suddenly rapt. Bucky realizes at that very moment that he’d forgotten to tell Steve anything about Cho’s concern - this is the first he’s heard about it. Bucky tries to convince himself that he’s not in trouble and that there’s no need to be sweating bullets. “I - Sorry, Steve. We talked about it the day the jet got hijacked, and I forgot to--”

“No, no,” Steve stops him distractedly. “It’s fine, I just - what are we going to do if a C-section isn’t possible? And why can’t he have one? I thought you said that was the only safe option.”

“Bucky,” Helen smiles ruefully. “I know it’s your birthday, but how would you feel about getting our meeting out of the way now?”

Steve sighs ruefully. “Sorry, Buck. I don’t mean to--”

“It’s only eight,” he laughs. “I wasn’t planning to start in on the blow and tequila until after noon. It’s not classy.”

That seems to put Steve at ease. Honestly, Bucky is just as concerned and curious as Steve is, and he’s been that way for a month. He just doesn’t possess Steve’s incredible, unattainable ability to just deal with things. Helen takes out her Starkpad and calls up a folder of charts and dense graphs, then projects them onto Friday’s holographic display matrix. “So...I felt like an idiot when I realized this. We would have been in a lot of trouble, actually, if you hadn’t gotten hit with that tranquilizer on the quinjet. These charts - you can just ignore them, they’re more of a visual aid for me - show everything I know about your metabolism. And the metabolism of fetuses and newborns. And just about every conceivable projection of how the serum could affect a fetus’ metabolic rate. Now, an epidural was unfortunately never going to be an option; the connections for the arm’s sensors and the surgical reinforcements to your spine where it was broken when you fell, particularly around your L3 and L4 - they leave me almost no epidural space to get a catheter placed. So, I would have needed to use a different form of anesthesia.”

“I thought you had something that might put him out,” Steve interjects.

“I had something that would have put him out before he was pregnant,” Cho corrects him. “His metabolism is much higher, now. The tranquilizers they shot him with on the quinjet? Those were about as powerful as what I’d formulated. Obviously, I’m pretty glad we didn’t open him up after anesthetizing him on something he could walk-off. And upping the dose any more would pose a huge risk to the baby.”

“So,” Steve says slowly. Bucky finds a little comfort in knowing that Steve hasn’t necessarily absorbed all of the technical jargon, either. “So, you’re saying that, at this point, it’s not possible to put him under for surgery. Even if there was a complication and it became necessary.”

“If it did come to that,” Bucky interjects. “I mean, if the baby was in distress, I’ve undergone dozens surgeries with only light anesthesia. We know I won’t go into shock.”
“Yeah,” Steve snaps. “We’ve seen the photographs. We can do better than that, Bucky.”

“I’m working on something to put you under safely,” Helen promises. “It’s my top priority. Believe me.” She turns back toward Steve. “But, if a complication arose today and I had to perform an emergency C-section, you would feel it. It would be up to you whether I dosed you enough to kill the pain or if we just did our best with local anesthetics, but I want to be absolutely clear that I don’t know how the amount of opioids it would take would affect the baby. It would have to be up to you.”

“Don’t do anything that would put the baby at risk. No question.”

Steve sits back heavily in his chair, brow creased with worry and frustration as he fidgets, running his finger nervously over his lips. “As far as delivery goes - complications aside - what are our other options? And please don’t say what I think you’re going to say.”

Helen runs a hand through her dark hair, tugging at her temples to ward off a headache. Bucky almost feels bad for allowing Steve to continue interrogating her like this, but he supposes that Steve has a right to ask, and he’s confident that Helen can handle it.

“Well. I guess this is that conversation we’ve all been dreading,” she laughs, then picks up her Starkpad again, presumably to call up another visual aid that Bucky can only hope isn’t some kind of diagram, only to have it buzz in her hands. “It’s Stark - sorry. One second.”

She answers the call, and Tony’s voice crackles through the speakers. He sounds exhausted. “Hiya, Doc. You in your office?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Good. Me and Rhodey found another cache of goodies - we’re back on the jet, now. Friday’s scanning in thirteen more film reels from the AVOTS projects and I think you’re going to want to take a look. Like, ASAP. Looks like these might have been pulled from that base in Siberia.”

“Why?” Helen asks, rolling her chair over to her desk and turning toward her computer. “What’s on them?”

“Oh, hi, Cap and Barnes. Yeah. Just about to call you guys. Uh, found some very enlightening home movies.” He clears his throat uncomfortably, and Bucky senses that Tony would rather he wasn’t listening in. “Might be a good idea to let Cho screen them first. Just to make sure they’re relevant.”

“Will do,” Helen answers, seeming to understand what he means by that, and they end the call.

Bucky worries the inside of his cheek between his canines for a moment, wondering whether or not he should even ask, and then decides that he needs answers more than he needs a peaceful morning. Helen and Steve are silent, as if they’re both waiting on him to speak. Finally, he addresses Steve. “He said he found thirteen more reels.” Bucky watches Steve’s eyes drop to the floor, and knows he’s hit an exposed nerve. “There are others? Film reels, from the AVOTS project?”

A beat, then Steve decides to respond. “We recovered them in Tīraine. They were--”

“Of what? The surgeries?”

“You didn’t tell him?” Helen says incredulously.

“There wasn’t a good time to--”
“I don’t give a fuck whether it’s a good time, you should have at least told me about them.”

“Bucky, it won’t do you any good to watch--”

“Yes, it will. This is my body and I want to know what they--”

“He has every right to see them, Steve--”

“Dr. Cho, I appreciate your concern, but that’s not your decision--”

“No, you’re right, it’s his!”

“Bucky, listen to me, I could not watch this footage. You shouldn’t put yourself under that kind of stress right now--”

“You think I can’t handle stress? You think I won’t be able to watch?” Bucky laughs bitingly. “I already survived it. I live with it. I waited seventy years for the right to know what the hell they’d done to me--”

“Seeing this won’t change anything, Buck--”

“I don’t care. No one gets to tell me what I’m allowed to know about myself.” Bucky catches himself raising his voice. He forces his tense muscles to relax, makes himself breathe, and does his best to sound calm. “Not even you,” he adds. “It’s not up to Helen, or Tony, or Bruce, or you, or anyone else what I get to remember. Anything you’ve got on the AVOTS project, I want access to it.”

Steve doesn’t reply. Bucky knows he was only trying to keep him safe. Bucky knows that he’s done the same shit - hidden things from Steve, thinking he was keeping them both safe. But when Steve had told him that partnerships didn’t work that way, that they didn’t keep secrets from each other, he’d listened. Steve needed to understand that the rule went both ways.

Cho’s resigned sigh breaks the tense quiet. “You two, get that worked out. It looks like we need to postpone our discussion of delivery, anyway. But the good news is, this new intel might give us some answers.”

“Now, or later?” Steve concedes, not looking up from the floor.

“Now,” Bucky answers. “Please.”

“I can pull it up on the TV screen,” Steve says tightly, opening the door to his quarters. “Tony has digital copies stored.” Moments after the words have left his mouth, he wishes he’d taken a breath before speaking - taken the edge out of his voice. He’s not angry at Bucky. He wasn’t angry at Cho, either. He’s angry at Hydra. At some old man, living comfortably somewhere in his old age, probably not thinking about the damage he’s caused. Maybe even enjoying a sense of accomplishment, thinking about what a genius and an innovator he is. “Can I at least get you to eat something first?”

“Yeah, I’m starving,” Bucky says quietly. Steve makes straight for the kitchen, but Bucky’s fingers catch his shirt sleeve before he can get too far. “Hey.”

He finds Bucky’s arms open and waiting for him - not demanding. Just an offer. Steve lets it all go and snaps like a magnet into the embrace.
“Sorry I was a shithead,” Bucky mumbles against his shoulder.

“I think I was a bigger shithead,” Steve admits.

They let themselves stay like that for a while, taking a few deep breaths together until all the anger has seeped out into the air and floated away.

“Love you, Buck.”

“Kinda want fish.”

“For breakfast?”

“Guess so. Do we have some?”

“Yeah, it’s Friday.”

“Love you, too, Steve.”

Being romantically involved is absolutely surreal, Steve decides. One minute, they’re both seething, and the next they’re stretched out on opposite ends of the sofa, legs entangled on the center cushion, working their way through a pig pot of macaroni, a colander full of steamed spinach, and a dozen pan-fried haddock filets. Bucky cusses up a storm when he tastes the food, which Steve knows to mean that he likes it. If Steve’s honest with himself, he’d have to agree that he fixes the best fried haddock he’s ever tasted - Sarah Rogers had really known her way around a Lenten meal.

“But I seem different?” Bucky asks, seemingly out of the blue. He’s gone back to the kitchen to slice another lemon, and Steve can see that the question is weighing heavily on him: he’s staring down at the cutting board, knife held loosely in his right hand as the fingers of his prosthesis continue to steady the remainder of the lemon with robotic diligence. He clears his throat, probably getting anxious as Steve lets the silence linger on while he tries to work out what he’s supposed to say to that. “I mean...have I changed? Since - I don’t know. Sometimes I don’t feel like I’m the same person I was--” He seems to give up on the thought, until he manages to force out, “I guess I just feel like Bucky is someone that you knew. I get scared sometimes that I’m just...wearing him. I don’t know.”

“Wearing him?” Steve repeats, sitting up. “What do you mean?”

Bucky brings the lemons back to their nest of cushions on the sofa and tosses half the slices onto Steve’s plate. “It’s hard to explain,” he groans. “I see these old photographs and you tell me about shit that happened back when we were kids. I can remember some of the stuff I liked, the people we knew. But they’re just lists of things and names. If you asked me to tell you about myself, I wouldn’t know what to say.” He pauses for a while to finish off his spinach.

Steve smiles accidentally - it’s an unavoidable consequence of looking at Bucky, these days. “Well, for one thing, you hated spinach.”

“Well, young people don’t have a taste for it,” Bucky laughs. “I’m an old man, now. Gotta like spinach and Brussels sprouts and hard candies - oh, shit - Steve, put your foot right here!” He grabs Steve’s bare foot - apparently not wanting to make him put down his plate and sit up - and places it low on his side, tucking it under his shirt to feel a particularly savage barrage of kicks.

“He must not like spinach yet.”
“Fuck, he likes everything. It’s the pop. Really gets him going.”

“Are you sure you can even have Coke?”

“I can have a fucking glass of Coke.”

“Are you sure?”

“*Normal* people can have a glass of Coke when they’re pregnant! I could probably drink two fucking liters and not hurt him. Lay off.”

“Oh, man. We’ve really got to--” Steve stops himself just in time. “Nevermind.”

“Were you gonna say we’ve got to clean up our language?”

“No!”

“Yeah, you were. I’m telling Tony.”

“What the fuck were you saying? We were having a serious conversation.”

“I was just…” He huffs, getting frustrated. Honestly, Steve doesn’t know how he’s thinking at all, considering that the baby’s still pedaling like he’s second place in the Tour de France. “After I got drafted, everything just went to hell. Army told me to act like a sergeant, so that’s what I had to do. Hydra told me to be no one and follow orders, so that’s what I did. Now…” he leaves the sentence unfinished, but Steve can see a thousand more words fluttering around, just behind his drifting eyes.

“And now you’re wondering if you’re Bucky, or if you’ve just made yourself into who you think I want you to be.”

Bucky grimaces at that even as he sighs concedingly, like it’s the last true thing he’d wanted to hear. “Once you’ve been a blank slate for someone, it’s hard to know if you’re ever going to be anything else, ever again. Maybe you don’t get to take back the stuff you got rid of. You’ve just got to keep being what someone else decides to make you. And even if they make you into something *good*, it’s still not you.”

“What do you think I made you?”

Bucky leans back against the arm of the couch, releasing a breath so slowly that it becomes a hiss. “I don’t know. I used to feel like a dog you brought in off the street. Like I needed to be domesticated.”

“What brought this on?”

“Probably just stressing about *this* whole thing,” Bucky shrugs, tapping his stomach. “I think a lot of stupid things while he’s keeping me up all night.”

“You think…you can’t raise a kid right if you don’t know who you are? That you won’t have it together?”

“Not exactly.”

And then it dawns on Steve. “So, you’re worried that you’re going to lose what little you’ve got. That you’re going to have to put everything aside all over again and just be a parent. And not you.”

“I guess so. Is that selfish?”
“I don’t think so. And if it is, that’s alright. You’re allowed to be selfish. You’ve always been sort of,” he pauses, takes a breath, hums, “malleable. No, that’s the wrong word. A chameleon. You could fit in anywhere, make friends with anybody. I was so jealous of that. I always stuck out like a sore thumb.”

Bucky smiles. “You still do.”

“Golly,” Steve chuckles. “But you sure did love to dance. I hated it, because I couldn’t do it, but now I miss watching you. Every Friday night, there was always a party going on somewhere and you’d always heard about it from a friend of a friend and managed to invite yourself. And me. It was all I’d hear about the minute you were off work. And you’d dance with everybody. Anybody. Guys, dames, little old ladies. I liked music alright, but I just liked to relax and listen to it. But for you - it was like you’d done a bump,” he scoffs. “You couldn’t hear a song without snapping your fingers.”

Bucky thinks for a moment, then tries out the motion with his left hand, but only manages a dull, percussive clang. “What else?”

Steve takes Bucky’s plate as he passes it over, still a third full. He hasn’t been able to eat very much at once this week - Cho says it’s because the baby’s crowding his stomach, shoving it up toward his lungs. Still, it’s not like Steve minds finishing off his macaroni. “You made gorgeous pottery.”

Bucky sputters. “Pottery.”

Steve’s jaw drops. “You don’t remember that? Buck, you went to art school and studied it!”

“I don’t know jack-shit about pottery,” Bucky insists.

“I bet you’d remember the second we put you back at the wheel. You could use your fake arm to pull hot pieces out of the kiln. It’d be perfect.”

“What if I liked it? We have a bunch of decorative pots stacking up and nothing to do with them.”

“You used to sell them.”

“And now I’ve been Interpol’s Most Wanted. That’d be worse than Martha Stewart’s new cooking show.”

“You love that show.”

“I guess I just don’t recognize myself lately,” Bucky continues. “Couple years ago, I was a ghost. I didn’t even know my own name. If I was conscious at all, it was because someone had to be killed, and it wasn’t my job to care if I came out of it alive or not. Now, I’m supposed to know who I am and protect this thing we made, and on top of it I’ve got to take care of myself. I am different. - You know I talk to him? The baby, I mean. Like, every time I’m alone. Sometimes even when I’m not,” he scoffs. “And I worry all the time—”

“Oh, that’s not new.”

“And I get so goddamn weepy. Jesus, I didn’t even want to tell you about it.”

Steve pushes himself up and leans forward to put a hand on Bucky’s ankle. “You’ve been depressed?”

“No, I just cry! I cry when I’m pissed off, I cry when I’m happy - fuck, sometimes I cry because I can’t find a comfortable way to sleep at night. Stupid stuff like that. Friday tried to help me shop for
cribs on the internet the other day and I had to quit, I was bawling so hard. That ain’t me, pal.”

Steve can’t contain a knowing chuckle. “That’s hormones, Bucky. That’s all that is.”

“Hormones can get fucked,” he declares, then adds, “No, wait. They’d probably like it.”

Steve grins. “See, that’s you. You have changed. You’ve changed a lot. You grew up, you went through some terrible, unimaginable things. But you’re still a fucking jerk. And a worrier. You always have been a big mother hen. And you’re funny as hell. You make fun of me when I deserve it, you come to bat for me when I need you, and you don’t take shit from anybody. You’re still Bucky Barnes. Believe me.”

“Even without the pottery.”

“Aw.” Steve dismisses him with a wave. “You were always bitching about how you should have studied architecture, anyway.”

Their laughter carries them happily through the next few moments, but as it dwindles, Steve is suddenly painfully aware of why they came back to their quarters in the first place. The flat television mounted on the wall to his left edges intrusively into his periphery, bringing with it a cold snap back to the matter at hand. He knows Bucky will say something soon. Lunch is over. They’ve stalled long enough with idle conversation. The only way to make it easier is to say something first. “You still want to see this footage?”

“Yeah, of course I do.”

“Alright,” Steve relents, feeling sick nonetheless. “Let me put the food away and I’ll pull up the files.”

“Don’t put the food up,” Bucky requests, with a little more urgency than is really necessary. “I’ll just have to get it all back out in twenty minutes.”

Steve has seen part - as much as he could force himself to watch - of the reels he’s about to open, and he can’t fathom how anyone, especially Bucky himself, could watch something so gruesome and still think about food. But like hell he’s going to tell him no. “Friday, pull up the files from Tiraine. November 2016.”

“Those files are restricted.”

“0310-17.”

“Thanks, Captain.”

“Steve, you’ve got to come up with better passwords. Anyone could figure that out.”

“Oh, my passwords are fine.”

“I’m forced to agree with Bucky on that one, Captain. Nine files found. Which shall I play?”

Steve’s voice sounds hollow in his ears. “Sort by date created and play all.”

“On your Starkpad?”

“On-screen!” Bucky calls out suddenly, with a hint of a smile.

“Aye, Captain!”
“Friday, that was Bucky.”

“Bucky made a Star Trek reference, to which I responded.”

“That’s the one with the Millennium Falcon?” Steve asks quietly.

“No,” Bucky replies.

“Oh, when did you even--”

“I had nothing to do in Bucharest,” he snorts, but Steve can already hear the mirth seeping out of his voice like air from a tire, leaving his tone strange and empty as an uneasiness settles over the room.

The television flickers on, but the image is only a wall of black, pierced occasionally by skittering grey static like insects darting across the screen - a façade cast over what he knows will soon be revealed as the lab in Tiraine, 1970.

Steve doesn’t think he can watch it again. Especially not now, with Bucky like he is. He feels his heart knocking against his ribs like it wants out and his stomach churning with the horrific certainty of what’s on the film. Instead, he keeps his eyes fixed on Bucky’s face, ready to stop the playback if he sees the cloudiness of dissociation or the razor-cut stillness of panic in his eyes. For the moment, Bucky’s expression remains steady and calm. He watches.
Zola’s voice - high, reedy, forever short of breath and wheezing in those last two years of his flesh-and-blood life - mutters through the white noise as the screen remains dark.

--Funkioniert es jetzt? Nein, Moment mal - ich sehe das Problem--

Strazds cuts in from somewhere off-camera. Ja, Doctor Zola, die Objectivkappe ist noch--

--Ich Schussel--

--Ist das nah genug an den Tisch?

--Ja, ja, Zola replies lightly. Steve can hear that pursed-lip, viscid smile when he speaks. He must be pleased with himself. Ich denke schon.

The soft scrape of the lens cap rotating muffles their conversation for a moment, and finally, the bleak lab emerges like a stark, haunting moon seeping out from behind Earth’s shadow, all yellowed-whites and dark greys washed pale by the grainy Super 8 lens.

Bucky pushes himself up to sit facing the television screen and Steve takes the opportunity to move closer to him. He drapes his arm over Bucky’s shoulders, hoping that Bucky doesn’t mind it - and sure enough, Bucky leans over just a little to rest his weight against Steve’s side.

Zola moves out of the way of the camera, exposing the surgical table and, standing beside it, the empty shell of Bucky. He sways unsteadily, eyes drooping, hair lank and wet, still much shorter than when Steve had first seen him in D.C., but longer and messier than when he’d lost him in ‘45, naked except for the strips of medical tape which secure the IV tubes to his arms and the telemetry pads to his chest.

--Guten Morgen, Soldat.

Bucky mumbles something, which Steve guesses to be, Where is this?


--Ich werde dir gehorchen.

--Gut gemacht. Zola smiles, looking just past the camera as if searching for Strazds’ approval.

“Would you like an on-screen translation?” Friday asks quietly.

“Please,” Steve replies. Bucky probably doesn’t need it, and Steve understands German well enough, but Swiss and Latvian accents make it harder. The text appears instantly below the image.

ZOLA: Sit on the edge of table, please.

STRAZDS: He’s American? How many languages does he know?

ZOLA: I taught him six, but--

STRAZDS: How did you manage that?

ZOLA: Give him a handler who speaks only the language you want him to know. His food and
water must depend on him asking so that the handler can understand. Everything he needs or wants must depend on him speaking correctly, and he learns quite fast.

STRAZDS: Amazing. It's the same way a child learns.

ZOLA: We encourage him to learn a bit faster than that, but yes. Zola moves to the other side of the table as he speaks and gathers Bucky’s hair into a surgical cap. Steve has to close his eyes briefly. Even considering how vacant Bucky’s expression is, the terror and resignation that washes over him as the cap goes on remains painfully evident.

“Are you still alright?” he whispers.

Bucky looks over at him, concentration broken, but seeming otherwise undisturbed. “Yeah. I’m fine. I watched a lot of footage just after I left D.C. - I raided bases on my own for a while before I left the country. Took whatever intel I could. The first ones were hard to watch, but it’s not so bad, now. They must have just pulled me out of stasis, here. No body hair. And I look like I’ve got a sunburn. It’s from the lamps they used to warm me up.”

“I don’t know how this doesn’t bother you.”

“Because it already happened and I’m still here,” Bucky shrugs. “And now I already know what they did to me. Not much suspense,” he adds wryly, then gives Steve a smile. “And there’s a happy ending.”

The sit in silence for the next half hour, watching as Zola and Strazds draw a map on Bucky’s body to guide their scalpels, explaining the planned modifications as they go. It’s nothing that Cho hasn’t already shown them, though, and Bucky eventually begins skipping over portions of the reels, stopping only when Zola or Strazds turns toward the camera to give another breakdown of the procedure. Bucky listens attentively, mostly unfazed, even (just as he said he would) filling up another plate of food after a while.

But soon, the cutting starts and the surgery begins in earnest. Despite the mask over his face delivering isoflurane and nitrous oxide and the drip in his right arm, there’s more screaming than Steve can bear. He manages to sit through less than a minute of it as they open up Bucky’s abdomen before he kisses his own, solid, whole Bucky on the cheek and whispers, “I don’t think I can. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright.”

He leaves to clean up the kitchen and collect himself, feeling low as hell for not staying beside Bucky and being there for him.

Bucky scans through over twenty hours of footage in just two. When he turns off the television, he feels lighter, somehow. He’s seen it. Now he knows. Another blank space of memory has been filled, and he can dispose of his fearful imaginings of what might have happened. Seeing himself tortured, dissected, modified, humiliated - it was unquestionably horrific. Sickening. But he had learned very quickly after leaving Hydra’s service that uncertainty would always, always be worse.

Poor Steve has spent the past hour and a half trying to work off a nervous rage, and when Bucky finally finishes reviewing the footage, he rises from the couch to find that Steve has scrubbed and tidied every surface of his quarters and has even finished clearing out the office space that once served as Bucky’s bedroom. Bucky finds him in there, sitting cross-legged on the carpet, with an
open legal pad in front of him, tapping a pencil in the margin of his floor-plan sketch. Bucky turns on the lights takes a seat next to him to look over his shoulder.

“Where are we going to put toys and shit?” Bucky smiles, looking the sketch over.

“Box. We can slide it under the crib.”

“What about books?”

Steve traces his finger along three walls of the room. “I’ll put up shelves at the top of the wall.”

“Damn it. We’ve got so much stuff to do. We’ve got to get on it soon. I haven’t actually bought anything yet.”

“Me neither,” Steve admits with a sigh.

“Makes it seem too real.”

“Yeah.”

“Fuck,” Bucky groans, because he can feel that awful, unstoppable weepiness coming on like a freight train again. He doesn’t even feel like crying, but his tear-ducts have their own agenda. He puts his head in his hands, yanking at his hair. “God, I hope we’re not lousy parents.”

Steve gives a shaky, humorless laugh. “At least you had your little sisters. You and Beck practically raised the younger ones while your Ma was working.” He leans back on his hands, looking toward the ceiling as if he’s confessing right up to God Himself. “You know, the only time I’ve even held a baby was for photographs? And the USO even asked me to stop. ‘Cause they all cried. Man, I had a nightmare last night that I was back on tour and somebody in a crowd handed their kid to me for a photo, and then they just disappeared. And I was stuck there, holding this tiny person that I didn’t know how to take care of. And then everybody left...no more cameras, nobody in sight, and it was just me and this little baby I didn’t know, and it didn’t know me, and I didn’t even know--” his breath hitches on the next word as he scrubs a hand through his hair.

Bucky stares, mouth open and eyes like dinner plates, utterly terrified. Steve is crying.

“I didn’t even know the right way to hold it. Or what to feed it or how to give it a bath or what to do if it got sick - and I just felt completely lost and fucking scared that I was going to do something wrong and hurt it, or lose it, or...God. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have brought this up.”

Bucky reaches out and rubs his flesh hand over Steve’s spine, hoping it’s soothing. “You’re going to be great,” he assures him. “You’re going to be a good father.”

“I wanted this so bad,” Steve sighs. “I’ve wanted a family and kids of my own for my whole life, and now here we are and it’s finally happening and - God, this is just like me, isn’t it?” he laughs, wiping his eyes. “I finally get something I’ve spent my whole life chasing...and then I don’t know what to do with it!”

Bucky laughs, squeezing his shoulder. “Yeah. But you always get it figured out.”

In the warm, sweet silence that follows, Bucky’s cellphone rings.

Projekta: Ziemasvilki
Minutes later, they’re back in Cho’s lab. The computer monitor displays only the first frame of the reel she’s just watched, which is nothing but that unadorned text against a white background. Between those words and the cold, forced composure of Helen’s features, understanding echoes through Bucky’s brain like a whipping thunderclap before she even speaks.

“You should sit down.”

Steve sits, and pulls Bucky down into the chair beside him.

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky mumbles. “He got it to work.”

Cho’s composure cracks and she shuts her eyes just as Steve’s body goes rigid beside him, leaning forward as if his back is bowing under the weight of questions. “What?” he demands. “What does that mean?”

Bucky sinks into the chair, head buzzing so loudly with some unnameable emotion that he can only let Cho explain, saying nothing. He hardly listens, though, because he doesn’t need to. Part of him already remembers. The memories have no details - only flashes that he feels more than sees: a bare, locked room underground, with a treasured bed and blankets and even a pillow; a stained hospital gown with fraying ties to worry between his fingers; bare feet pacing a frozen concrete floor, sweating, struggling to breathe instead of scream as a new kind of pain overwhelmed him like a stranger breaking down his door, too afraid of what help meant to call for it; and profound sense of sorrow, of longing, of saying goodbye.

“Strazds finished the AVOTs procedures on his own after Zola’s death,” says Cho. Bucky thinks her voice sounds like it’s coming over a shaky radio channel. “They fertilized the eggs in vitro and implanted them, creating sets of twins when they could. He gave birth to two sets, and another two children besides that. They kept him out of commission almost constantly for just over five years. The children were born partially enhanced, to varying degrees. Hydra had plans to raise them within the organization and condition them from birth.”

“Children,” Steve says emptily, as if he’s been struck. “And...it worked? He gave birth and--” Steve sounds as if he might not go on. Finally, he forces out the burning question. “And then what happened - to them?”

Cho shakes her head. She doesn’t know.

“Hydra used them,” Bucky confirms. “They tried to finish the enhancements, but it didn’t work. They’re dead.”

Steve and Cho both stare, horrified, but Bucky doesn’t know what more there is to say. Certainly, nothing comforting.

He raises his head to give Steve a meaningful glance. “Zemo.”

Steve’s eyes drift back toward the screen behind Cho, and Bucky sees them stop over the singular word, Ziemasvilkis. “Hydra used you to create the Wolfpack.”

“Zemo,” Helen repeats. “The one who tried to frame you for that bombing?”

“Yeah. They were too violent, so Karpov had them put in stasis. Zemo knew where they were being
kept,” Bucky explains. “We thought he was going to release them - try to control them, but he was just using them to draw out Tony and Steve. By the time we got there, he’d shot them.”

Steve puts his head in his hands. Bucky can’t look at him, or at Cho. Suddenly, he feels like he’s breathing water instead of air. “Two sets of twins? And two more? They - there were only five.”

Helen nods, jaw tight with painful sympathy. “There was one who was born almost completely non-enhanced.”

“Did they say what…” Bucky can’t finish. He already knows, anyway.

“I doubt Hydra would have…” And Cho can’t finish either. Let it live, Bucky completes the statement silently. “I’m so sorry. I thought about,” Cho struggles, “about not telling you today. Waiting. But I thought you’d rather know as soon as I did.”

“Thanks,” Bucky manages to say. “Thank you for telling me.”

Steve lays on the wide couch, Bucky’s back tucked against his chest. They stay there for hours. The sun sinks lower outside, but neither of them rise to turn on the lights. Steve feels like they’re both sleeping off a bad beating.

He slides his hand under Bucky’s shirt, searching for that still-elusive presence beneath his skin, until Bucky takes him by the wrist and guides him to the right spot. A few minutes later, Steve catches a little flutter - just one short, staccato movement, but it’s enough. It breathes a little life back into him, and he presses into it, just to...he’s not sure why. Maybe just to make the only kind of connection he can, right now. To let his son know that he’s right here beside him. That he’s waiting on him. The movement comes again, followed by a few seconds of stillness, only to jump against his palm a third time.

“What is that? Braxton Hicks?” he asks, cupping the bottom of Bucky’s belly where the spasms seem to be centered.

Bucky puts his hand tenderly over Steve’s. “It’s just hiccups.”

“You don’t have--” Steve begins, but then his jaw goes slack with a shocked smile. “He’s got the hiccups?” Laughter bubbles up from his chest and he squeezes Bucky closer. “That’s incredible!”

“What’s so great about hiccups?” Bucky laughs.

“People get hiccups!” Steve exclaims, not caring how ridiculous the statement is. “People! There’s a person in there! And he’s got the hiccups!”

Before Steve can humiliate himself any further, there’s a pounding at the door, followed by a voice.

“FBI! Open up!”

Steve throws Bucky a panicked, confused glance, but Bucky rolls his eyes tiredly, chuckling. “Open it. It’s Sharon.”

He throws the door open. It’s not just Sharon - it’s Sam and Natasha, too. And all of them are holding pizza boxes. “Oh, it’s just the CIA,” he smiles.

Sam strides in, obviously in high spirits. “Me and the girls just got back from Florida and we’re ready
for the afterparty. Let’s go.”

“Sam just collared the rest of his white nationalist terror cell,” Sharon explains.

“Oh, you guys helped a little bit,” Sam jokes. “And you make it sound like I was running it or something. Anyway, that seems like a pretty good reason for a party, right? You guys feel like having a party to celebrate me finishing this op?”

Natasha hurries in with an arm full of two-liter bottles and a big white box and puts it all down on the kitchen island. Sharon hands her stack of pizza boxes off to Bucky, sending a text with her free hand. “I’m inviting Maria and Dr. Cho,” she informs him. “Cool?”

Bucky throws his hands up, laughing. “It’s Sam’s party, ask him.”

“Those cunts!” Natasha shouts, standing at the counter with the white box open in front of her. “Look! Look at this shit! Oh my God, those cunts!”

Sam leans over the counter to get a look as Steve hurries over. Natasha is, of course, staring down at a giant cake. At first glance, it’s perfectly gorgeous, but upon closer inspection, the words, rendered skillfully in buttercream, read, HAPPY BIRTHDAY, BUDDY!

“Oh, no!” Steve claps his hands, doubling over. “Oh, that’s great,” he wheezes. “He’s going to love that.”

But Sam’s already off his barstool and rummaging through Steve’s kitchen drawers. He returns promptly with a spoon. “Not if he doesn’t see it,” he says, straight-faced as he scrapes off the portion of icing containing the two D’s, which he eats. With the end of the spoon, he draws a CK into what’s left of the white frosting. “Look at that. He won’t even know.”

Bucky makes his way over to them, slowly but surely, and gets a look at the cake and it’s little imperfection. Steve can hardly appreciate the look on Bucky’s face - he’s still in stitches over the mistake and Sam’s hasty cleanup job. “What’d you guys have them write? ‘Busty’?” he snorts.

“Oh,” Natasha groans. “A moment of silence for that missed opportunity.”

And just when Steve thinks that the day has delivered every surprise imaginable, it throws him another curveball as Bucky announces, “Hey, my kid has the hiccups - you guys want to feel it?”

For a moment, no one can quite believe that Bucky would invite them to do something like that. Casual touching with anyone but Steve hadn’t really been something Bucky did. No one’s more shocked than Steve himself.

“Yes,” Sam says emphatically, breaking the stunned silence as he extends an open palm. Bucky places both of Sam’s hands where he can feel the little spasms, and Sam waits, looking almost skeptical until his face actually lights up with excitement. “No way. No way! It’s seriously hiccups! That’s insane. ” He doesn’t show much sign of moving away to let anyone else have a turn, either. When it happens again, he stares wide-eyed at Sharon. “He’s got the hiccups, Sharon! I didn’t even know this happened!”

“News to me, too,” she chuckles, shaking her head.

“Come here. You have to feel this.”

“Pass. I watched Alien when I was way too young.”
“Sharon, I want one.”

“A baby?”

“Yeah,” Sam says, as if it’s obvious. “Please? I want one so bad now. Let’s get one.”

“Sure.”

Sam looks like he’s not quite sure what to say to that. “Are you - really?”

“Yeah,” Sharon shrugs. “If Cho can use her cradle thing to recreate what Hydra did to Bucky on you, then be my guest, baby.”

Poor Sam’s face falls, but he laughs it off. “Don’t do me like that, Sharon.”

“You’re welcome to practice on ours,” Bucky offers. “Me and Steve were raised Catholic. We’ve got to have godparents, right?” he asks, looking to Steve for approval, who collects himself just in time to nod happily.

“Sam? Sharon? Is that okay with you two?” Steve already knows they’re going to say yes, though. Sharon seems pleased as can be, but Sam looks like he’s going to go through the roof.

“I mean, I’ll do it, but, uh…” He turns toward Steve, cocking his head to the side, straightening his jacket and running a hand over his hair, preening and scowling. “But...you don't ask with respect. You don't offer friendship. You don't even think to call me Godfather. Instead, you come into my house on the day my daughter is to be married, and you ask me to do murder. For money.”

Steve can tell by the way everyone else is laughing that Sam must be doing a pretty good impression of someone, but the reference is unfortunately lost on him. “I’m...” he chuckles lamely. “I’m going to guess that’s from The Godfather?” They all laugh harder. “Or... The Sopranos? Guys, lay off, I’ve been busy.”

“Is this a birthday party?” Cho calls out from the doorway.

“Where are the dancers?” Maria demands, pushing in behind her.

“No,” Sam declares adamantly. “This is a mandatory viewing of The Godfather. The Epic. The seven-hour cut. With cake and pizza.”

“Was that you doing the Corleone?” Maria scoffs. “That was good.”

“I know it was good. I worked very hard on that.”

“Helen, come feel this,” Bucky interrupts. “He’s hiccuping.”

Friday, who doesn’t seem to like feeling left out of anything, asks in her best Italian accent, “You, uh, you want me to cue up the movie, boss?”

“The seven-hour cut,” Sam emphasizes.

Bucky wakes up to the sound of vomiting. Boy, does he feel bad for whoever’s under the weather, but that doesn’t stop him from feeling awfully pleased that it’s not him for once.

Even considering how rough the majority of the day had been, it had ended in one of the best
birthdays parties of his life. The pizza was great, the cake was amazing, and the company was even better. Nothing had been planned - everything was spontaneous and wild, in ways he’d have thought would make him nervous. Instead, he’d found himself swept up and thrown right back to those Friday nights that Steve had told him about yesterday. At first, everyone had been a little hesitant to drink around him, since he couldn’t have a beer with them, but he’d eventually reminded them that he and Steve weren’t really missing out on anything, since neither of them could get drunk, anyway. Things had really got to hopping after that, and as everyone else had loosened up, so had he. With Natasha’s bartending expertise, it hadn’t taken long at all for the night to dissolve into lewd dancing and cutthroat card games. And he and Steve had danced. Together. And even though Steve didn’t know many steps and Bucky couldn’t remember even half of what he’d once known (and had another big handicap besides) it was wonderful. For his hundredth birthday, he got to be twenty all over again. He couldn’t ask for much more than that.

It’s pretty bright outside and Steve’s side of the bed is empty, and no wonder: it’s noon. Which is fine, really. He hadn’t gone to bed until five.

The living room is crowded when he wanders in. Natasha is bagging up trash while Steve and Sam shift all the furniture back to where it should be, including the couch, where Sharon is still trying to sleep with an afghan over her eyes. Hill is draped over the armchair. Which means that’s Helen in the bathroom, tossing her cookies. The coffee is still brewing, and it must be the first pot, because everyone but Steve looks like hell.

“Happy birthday,” Maria calls weakly. “We trashed your place.”

“I had a great time,” Bucky assures her. “Sorry I overslept - I would have helped with the clean-up.”

“I was the first one up, and that was only twenty minutes ago. You did pretty good,” Steve chuckles. “You beat Sharon,” he adds loudly, receiving only a piteous groan from beneath the afghan in response.

“I’m going to see if Dr. Cho needs anything.”

“Well, she was looking for her shirt,” Steve suggests.

“I got it,” Sharon whines, sticking out only her hand, clutching the rumpled garment, from her blanket nest.

Steve takes it from her and tosses it to Bucky with a bemused sigh. “How’d you get that?”

“Poker,” Sharon mumbles.

“Maybe Buck and I shouldn’t have turned in early. Sound like we missed the real fun.”

“Oh,” Sam laughs. “That is an understatement.”

As if to prove Sam’s point, Natasha follows Bucky down the hall to the bathroom where Cho is still in the throes of her hangover and passes him four twenty dollar bills. “Please get your armchair steam-cleaned,” she whispers cryptically.

“What - why?”

“Not telling.”

“Tell me.”
Natasha peeks over her shoulder to make sure they haven’t been followed, then mouths, “Everyone else fell asleep, so.”

She presses the money into his hand, like that’s all the explanation he needs, but he keeps a hold of her wrist, cocking an eyebrow, more intrigued than ever.

“No judging,” she requests, relenting. “But Hill fingered me.”

“Whoa!”

“Shh!”

“Holy shit!”

“Shut up, I don’t want Steve to know!” she hisses. “He’ll be mad!”

“He will not. I gave him head in that chair.”

“It’s his chair!”

“Was it at least good?” Bucky whispers.

Natasha makes her best O-face and signs, Excellent.

“Well, good on you,” he commends her, giving the cash back. “Keep that. Makes the place seem more lived in.” And just so Natasha can’t keep arguing with him about it, he knocks on the bathroom door and calls out, “Dr. Cho? It’s Bucky. We found your shirt. Can I come in?”

A soft, hoarse, “Yeah,” followed by, “but I threw up.”

Bucky smiles to himself. “I know, it’s okay.”

Helen is sitting in front of the toilet with her shoes next to her on the floor, holding her hair back as she rushes to flush the toilet and wipe off the edges of her mouth. Bucky throws her blouse over his shoulder and gets her a glass of water.

“I am so sorry,” she laments. “I thought I could still drink like I was in college. I was very wrong.”

Bucky laughs out loud, passing her the cup so she can rinse out her mouth. “God, don’t be sorry. It was the best birthday party I’ve ever had. You’re a great singer.”

“I sang?”

She says that like Bucky would imagine anyone else saying, I killed someone? “Yeah, you taught us about K-pop. It was amazing - I’d never done karaoke before. I love it.”

“Oh my goodness,” she mutters as she hauls herself up off the bathroom floor mortified.

“You’ve - uh, you’ve got a…” Bucky, not knowing what else to do, pulls the two fivers out of the band of her bra and offers them to her.

“Oh my goodness,” she says again, though now she sounds a little more pained. “I’ve never done anything this unprofessional in my adult life,” she assures him, struggling back into her shirt. “How can you even take me seriously as a medical professional? I can’t even handle my Kahlúa.”

“Actually, that’s part of why this was so great,” Bucky admits. “Look, I’ve dealt with a lot of doctors
since ‘44 - and researchers, and scientists, and quacks. None of them have ever gotten sauced and done karaoke at my birthday party,” he laughs. “What I mean is - it’s good to have a friend for a change. And you’re the smartest doctor I ever met, so don’t sell yourself short.”

“Yeah, right,” she says, rolling her eyes. “Really smart. Just can’t seem to find a way to anesthetize you.”

“It’ll be alright--”

“Look, I don’t mean to scare you,” she frets, “but I have been working every single day to try to find a way to put you out safely. The only thing that makes me feel any better is that Banner, who is the single greatest chemist ever, can’t figure out how to do it either. But that doesn’t change the fact that your two best bets for safe delivery are A) a C-section, which is surgery, or B) surgery, and then I put you back together with the right equipment in the Cradle. And you have spent enough time being tortured by bioengineers.”

“Can’t it just come out the way it went in?” Bucky finally dares to ask.

“I mean, yes?” Helen says uncertainly. “You’ve delivered naturally before. I watched the process on one of those reels Tony sent from Lithuania. But that would be incredibly painful--”

“More or less painful that being conscious during a surgery? Is the risk of infection high or something?”

“Not anymore than it would be in a normal birth. But don’t you think it’s...well, I figured you wouldn’t want to...”

At first, Bucky’s not sure what she’s implying, but when he catches up, he can’t help but laugh. “You think I’m going to be - what, grossed out or embarrassed? Look, honestly, the thought of you making me a new hole with that Cradle thing bothers me a lot more. If assholes scared me more than vaginas do, I doubt I’d have spent this long letting Cap pound me.”

“If it’s what you would rather do, then I’ll make sure that it’s facilitated, but any number of situations could arise in which we’d need to anesthetize you for an emergency--” Suddenly, she claps her hand over her mouth and snorts. “I’m so sorry. I can’t believe you just said that.”

“Let’s get out of this bathroom before I throw up. Want coffee? I’ll get you some while you wash up.”

“Yes.”

“Cream? Sugar?”

“Stir in four ibuprofen. I’ll make myself a new liver.”
Steve tries to walk down the long hallway toward the Facility’s main conference room, but his efforts to remain collected only survive half the journey. He ends up taking the last few meters at a jog, ignoring the nervous stares from passing base personnel, who are probably wondering why Captain America is running, and if it means that they should also be running in the same direction.

One minute ago, at precisely 0800, Vision had contacted him via cellphone. The fact that he’d used a cellphone rather than tapping into Friday’s comm system (with which he was intimately familiar) was strange enough. After confirming that Bucky was still asleep, specifically asking if Bucky might follow him, he had instructed Steve to meet him immediately. Worst of all, there had been an almost imperceptible note of urgency in Vision’s voice, which Steve had never heard.

The rest of the team is on their way back from an intensive operation up in Nunavut, dismantling the main base of the Hydra faction Darzi had once served. He hasn’t heard from them since last night. Vision had been with them, and now Vision’s back, but there’s been no word on the quinjet landing. Steve hasn’t spoken to Tony since they took off from Hall Beach last night. Everything seems to point to bad news.

Steve rounds the corner to the main conference room’s wing, and he’s suddenly sure that it’s bad news. He comes to an unsteady halt right in front of Nick Fury, who’s standing just outside the double doors.


“Nothing, I hope,” Fury responds, then turns away, pointing back toward Steve. “Hey. Is he supposed to be here?”

Supposed to be here? What? Steve can hardly choose between panic and confusion anymore.

Sam leans out from behind the wall of the inset foyer, just as someone else steps out of it and stares him down. “Yeah, I think he’s good,” says Sam. “Vision just called him. It’s Barnes we’re watching out for.”

And that doesn’t sit well with Steve at all. He doesn’t know what Fury’s presence has to do with Bucky, or why everyone’s being so secretive, but he’s damn sure that if they’ve got a problem with Bucky, they’re going to have to go through a vibranium shield if they want so much as to speak to him. “What’s this about?” he demands.

“Barnes is still in your quarters?” Fury asks, ignoring him.

“He’s thirty-six weeks pregnant, he’s not going anywhere,” Steve assures them, just in case - God forbid - they have it in their heads that they’re going to arrest him. “Why the hell are you here?”

Fury looks taken aback by Steve’s tone. He cocks his head. “What’s the matter? You never seen this many black men all in one place, Rogers?”

Sam steps forward, laughing despite the fact that he seems to feel a little sorry for Steve. “Nothing’s wrong, Steve--”

“Who’s this?” Steve asks, nodding toward the third man, still not convinced.

“I’m Brandon!” the young man replies, sounding almost apologetic. “I work in - uh, I work in...
medical. I mean, I used to work in an ER, but Uncle Nick - Colonel Fury, he recommended me for - I work here now. I met Sergeant Barnes when he - I-I was helping out in Dr. Cho’s lab.”

“This is my cousin’s kid - my godson,” Fury explains more concisely. “Wilson told me you popped the question, so I thought I’d give him some advice. Brandon, what the fuck’s the matter with you? Why’s that stutter back?”

“I’m just nervous.”

“Because of him?” Fury chuckles, jabbing his thumb toward Steve. “I should’ve never bought you those goddamn comic books,” he sighs, then leans over to address Steve in a mock whisper. “Brandon’s a... big fan of the Howling Commandos,” he explains with a saccharine smile.

“What’s going on?” Steve pleads. “Why did Vision just call me?”

“How the fuck should I know?” Fury shrugs forcefully. “He’s in there - go ask him.”

Steve has every intention of doing just that. He shoulders past the three of them and yanks the door open. Just behind him, Brandon whispers, “Wow, he’s intense.”

The conference table has been shoved against the wall. Someone has moved sectionals from one of the lounges in. A lot of them.

And that’s not even the strange part. Cho is here. Pepper is here. She’s got a clipboard in her hand and she’s chewing on a pen. Thor is arranging the heavier sectionals. With T’Challa. Vision is in the air hanging some kind of banner along the back wall. Holding the other end of it is a young kid, who seems to be...hanging on to the wall. Steve can’t really decide what to say. Or rather, what to say first.

Before he can decide, Pepper notices him, and she doesn’t seem too happy about it. Her high heels clip across the floor at an alarming speed as she waves her arms like she’s trying to block his view. “Oh, no, no, no, no. Hi, hello, why are you here? Oh my God.”

“What the hell is--”

“Who told you?”

“Fury just told me--”

“Fury? Fury seriously told you--”

“Just to come--”

“Did he tell Bucky, too? I’m going to be livid--”

“Vision called me and--”

“You’re kidding.”

“Just tell me what’s--”

“Vision? He called--? Vision, come down here, right now. Why did you--”

“What is going on?”

“Oh, this was supposed to be a surprise.”
“Ah, Captain. I apologize if I woke you. Does Sergeant Barnes have any particularly strong dietary preferences?”

“What does that mean?” Steve practically shouts. His voice sounds shrill in his own ears.

“Mr. Stark instructed me to find out if--”

“Tony told you to call Steve up here and ruin--? That ass!”

“Hey, hey, hey! There he is!” someone shouts from the doorway, wheezing with laughter as someone else lets out a piercing scream, and then Thor’s roaring his own wordless greeting and lumbering across the room to pick up the newcomers and give them a spin. Must be Dr. Selvig from the astrophysics lab and his assistant. Their excited shouts intermingle with Vision and Pepper’s rapid bickering, and Steve suddenly wishes he had a gun to fire into the air.

Fury steps in and takes a deep breath, presumably preparing to quiet everyone down, but someone else beats him to it.

“Everyone. Shut the fuck up.” T’Challa makes his request calmly and without raising his voice much, but it works. Fury seems a little shocked. In the sudden calm, T’Challa addresses Steve amiably. “It’s a baby shower. Do not tell Barnes.”

Steve makes eye contact with everyone else in the room, one at a time, making sure they all know he’s annoyed. “Anyone of you assholes could have said that.”

Pepper clears her throat. “We were having a miscommunication.”

Steve sighs, raising his arm tiredly to indicate the subject of his second most pressing question. “Why - why is that child stuck to the wall?” he asks flatly.

The kid cranes his neck to look back over his shoulder at Steve, and somehow manages to wave.

“Oh, hi! I’m Peter. We met.”

Steve stares at him.

“I’m the - I do the - from Queens.”

“Oh, man!” Steve smiles with realization. “Nice to see you again.”

“Yeah, yeah, same!”

“Sergeant Barnes’ dietary preferences, Captain?”

Steve sighs heavily. Scratching the stubble on his jaw. It’s Sunday morning. He’d been trying to sleep in. He hasn’t shaved yet. He hasn’t even had coffee. All because Vision couldn’t ask him a simple question over the phone. “He’ll eat just about anything,” he sighs, and then looks around. All these people. And considering how much seating and tablespace they’re arranging, along with the fact that the majority of the team hasn’t even arrived yet, more are coming. The banner that Vision and Peter had been hanging reads, CONGRATULATIONS.

“Guys,” he chuckles weakly, rubbing his eyes. “This is amazing.”

Steve finds himself tasked with keeping Bucky occupied until they’ve finished setting up the conference room and given everyone time to arrive. At least some of that time will be consumed by a
visit from T’Challa, who refuses to wait any longer to say hello and, as he puts it, “see my baby.” He waits for Steve to give him the inevitable, offended stare, before he adds, “The arm.”

“Mr. Stark explained the physical modifications which made the pregnancy possible,” he says as they make their way back down the hallway toward the elevators. “He also told me that one of the men who did this to him was still alive and free. That must be difficult - knowing this.”

“Well,” Steve replies thoughtfully. “It’s complicated. Bucky got a little help from Sharon and Natasha and tracked down his last known address. Doesn’t look like he’s there anymore, but maybe that’s just as well. He’s in his nineties. Hasn’t been involved in anything illegal or even morally questionable for almost thirty years, but whether he had a change of heart or just retired, we don’t know.”

“You and I had many interesting conversations on the matter of revenge,” T’Challa smiles. “Still, I cannot say what I would do, were I in Barnes’ position. I think it will be a difficult choice, whether or not to pursue this man, Strazds. But he will have to decide.”

“We’re putting all that on hold until after the baby’s born.”

“And you are already quite sure about the name?” T’Challa chuckles.

“What? No, not at all. We haven’t decided on anything.”

“Wilson said that he would be named Samuel.”

“That - jeez. Sam won’t let that go. I don’t want to hurt his feelings, but it would be so confusing for my best friend and my son to have the same name,” he gripes as they board the elevator. “So, what brings you to the States? Don’t tell me you came all this way for a baby shower, your Highness.”

T’Challa groans, rubbing his neck. “Oh, please, no formal titles. I am trying to pretend I am taking a vacation.”


“Alright, I admit, I have some business with Stark. I am going to offer him some Wakandan technology.”

“You’re kidding me!”

“Not at all. I’m going to show him how to manufacture vibranium weaves.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Yes, that could mean a new suit for you, I suppose.”

“What are you asking for it?”

“A fair price, I think. Repulsor technology.”

“Is that all? I’ll bet you could get more out of Tony for that weave.”

“No, no - I’m happy to keep my price low. After all, I am only going to give him the method for creating vibranium textiles. He will have to buy the means. And I happen to dominate that particular market,” he smiles.

“Oh, Tony’ll bite in a heartbeat. Pitch to him, though - Pepper will be a tougher nut to crack.”
“Noted,” T’Challa nods as they make their way through the deserted lounge toward the team quarters. “I’ll wait out here while you fetch Barnes. I do not want to intrude on your personal quarters.”

“Normally,” says Steve, “I’d tell you to come on in and have a cup of coffee. But it’s a mess right now - we’re rearranging everything, trying to get ready, and honestly, I don’t know if Bucky’ll be decent. Pants have been...hard to find.”

“Please, take your time,” he laughs. “I will wait.”

Bucky must already be awake - there’s a pot of tea on the counter and a few dishes in the sink, and Steve can hear some noise coming from down the hallway. Voices, in fact. That makes Steve a little anxious. No one had mentioned coming by. The rest of the team hadn’t even landed yet.

Suddenly, a resounding crack shakes the walls, followed by the sound of crumbling drywall. Steve’s shield, thankfully, is resting against the wall beside the door. It’s on his arm in an instant and he barrels down the hallway, fear and adrenaline driving him forward, every muscle tight and ready to make a kill if he has to.

He almost passes the baby’s room, he’s moving so quickly. Drywall dust billows out of the doorway as he shoulders it open and bursts in, expecting to see the unthinkable.

Bucky’s metal fist rips free of the wall, flinging debris everywhere, which Steve blocks with his shield. He’s laughing. Someone else is laughing, too, except...Bucky’s the only one in the room. The first coherent thought Steve manages is one of overwhelming frustration. He’s getting a little sick of not knowing what the hell’s going on today.

“Bucky!” he shouts.

Bucky spins around, startled, and stares guiltily at him as the dust settles. He’s got his hair tucked up into a baseball cap and a bandanna tied over his nose and mouth - meaning he’d been planning to put his fist through the wall. In the corner, a relatively safe distance from the blast zone, he’s got a thermos of tea, and family sized bag of chips, two empty candy bar wrappers, and a stack of sandwiches.

Steve coughs, waving his shield to clear the air, then wonders what he’s supposed to say to this. It doesn’t take him long to recognize the second voice. He’d know that stupid giggle anywhere. And there’s Bucky’s phone on the floor, and just as he’d suspected, there’s Tony Stark’s face on the screen, clapping like a delighted kid.

“I thought...you were going to be gone for a while,” Bucky says, as if that somehow explains the arm-sized hole in the wall.

“Doing a little remodeling?” Steve grimaces.

“Tony...uh, Tony said it was okay.”

“Yeah, I don’t doubt it. Give me the phone. No, don’t bend over to get it - I’ll get it. Just sit down. Not on the floor. God almighty, Hydra had the right idea, giving you a handler,” he mumbles, scooping up the phone. “Hello, Stark,” Steve says sharply, whisking the phone out of the room and dropping his voice to a whisper. “Dare I ask?”

“Yeah, well, first of all, Barnes called me, so I’m feeling like your steely righteous anger is a little,
uh, misdirected. He just wanted to know if maybe we could put an interior door between your bedroom and the nursery. And I did not tell him to punch through that wall.”

“You just...told him that it was okay to knock out the wall. And where the support beams were. And then probably just offhandedly mentioned that a vibranium arm would probably do the trick.”

“...Yes. Actually, have you been listening in this whole time? Because - not to change the subject from my personal culpability here - that was, like, eerily accurate.”

“Bucky - stop punching that fucking wall, or so help me - Living room, now. Sit down. Stop breathing that dust!”

“I am trying,” Tony whispers, “to keep him busy, okay? Look, it was supposed to be a surprise, but-
”

“But you’re throwing him a baby shower. I know.”

“Do you have me wiretapped? Is my microwave bugged? What is this? Oh, goddamn it, I bet Vision asked you instead of Friday! That naive bastard--”

“Tony, look, I am genuinely touched that you’re throwing him a baby shower. And it is so sweet that you’re trying to keep him busy so you can surprise him. But he is thirty-six and a half weeks pregnant and he can’t be punching through reinforced walls.”

“Okay. I mean, observable facts say otherwise, but--”

“He's - he’s still demolishing the fuckin’ - I gotta go.”

“See you in an hour, tell Barnes to have fun getting sealed in bubble wrap.”

Steve hangs up and stomps back over to the nursery. He lets Bucky tear a few more slabs of drywall free before clearing his throat meaningfully. “Three words, Buck: respiratory distress syndrome.”

“I’m not breathing the dust in, stupid.”

“But you had an asthma attack?”

“Nope,” Bucky shouts, kicking at the remainder of the wall near the floor. “Been waterboarded a lot, though.”

“Alright, stop it. I’ll let you get away with the punching, but if you kick that goddamn wall one more time, I’ll fucking waterboard you.”

“Fine! You finish it. Asshole,” Bucky grumbles, tossing a chunk of their apartment at Steve’s feet, pulling down the bandanna, and shuffling off to the corner to get a sandwich.
“What are those?”

“BLTs. With avocado and about a cup of mayonnaise,” Bucky replies tauntingly, not bothering to offer him one.

“Ugh, Bucky, there’s a piece of the wall on that--” Steve warns him, and Bucky pulls it away from his mouth to look just long enough for Steve to snatch it and steal a bite. Bucky doesn’t hesitate for a second before hitting him, and even if he’s not treating this like true combat, he’s not exactly pulling his punches, either. Steve does his best to guard, but between triumphant laughter, trying to eat Bucky’s sandwich, and keeping those fists from connecting with his face, he has to resort to letting himself be driven back down the hallway.

“You have - ow - three more over there - ouch! Come on, man, you’re big enough - fuck, ow!”

“Spit it out!”

“I can’t, I already swallowed! Ah! Shit, Buck--”

“Did you seriously just make a fat joke?”

“Ah! Whoa, whoa, not below the belt you, you crazy - argh, God, why would you just punch me in the dick--”

Bucky plucks the remainder of the sandwich from his limp fingers as Steve struggles to breathe, rather than vomit.

“Is everything alright?”

T’Challa is standing in the doorway to Steve’s quarters, looking sincerely worried, like he’s wondering if Bucky might be having some kind of violent relapse. Steve can practically feel surprise and embarrassment radiating from Bucky when he sees him. Well, serves him right.

“He’s trying to kill me,” Steve huffs. “I think you should arrest him.”

“You knew he was here and you didn’t say anything?” Bucky hisses quietly. “Steve, I’m a mess, I should have changed clothes.”

“He and Tony were remodeling the apartment.”

“I’m glad to hear that you and Stark have reconciled,” T’Challa laughs, stepping inside to have a look around. Steve immediately starts collecting up the laundry on the couch, which he hadn’t finished folding the night before.

“Sorry about the mess,” Steve blushes. The one time that royalty visits, and his boxers are all over the sofa.

But T’Challa doesn’t seem to notice. He hardly glances toward the untidy living room and goes right to Bucky to shake his hand and clap him on the shoulder.

“Well, this is mortifying,” Bucky sighs, smiling anyway. “I haven’t really seen anyone who hasn’t been around for this whole mess,” he says, glancing down at his belly. “I feel like a whale all of a sudden. It’s really good to see you, though. How are things in Wakanda?”

T’Challa shakes his head, still staring at Bucky’s figure. “Not nearly as interesting as things have been here, I imagine. I apologize, Barnes, I don’t mean to be rude - from a medical standpoint, this is
“Absolutely fascinating. How do you feel?”

“Miserable,” Bucky admits. “But I’m healthy.”

“And how do you feel otherwise?”

“Great, thanks to you.”

“And your arm?”

“Perfect. It’s so much lighter than the old one. I hardly feel any impacts, anymore.”

“And what did Steve mean - remodeling?”

“He’s knocking out a wall,” Steve interrupts. “Because he’s an idiot.”

“I’m trying to put an interior door between our bedroom and the nursery. Steve’s losing his mind because he thinks I shouldn’t be allowed to do anything physical.”

“Well, exercise is necessary for a healthy pregnancy,” T’Challa smiles dismissively, finding his own way down the hall to the baby’s room. “Oh, my,” he sighs, seeing the empty nursery. “You are not quite ready for a baby, are you?”

“Not exactly,” says Steve.

“May I help?”

Steve looks around, flustered. “Oh, gosh, you don’t have to do that. We’ll get it taken care of. We’re both on leave, so we’ve got nothing but time, and you’re on vacation—”

“I would really appreciate if you would let me punch that wall,” T’Challa suggests softly, grinning.

“That’s - I mean, it’s reinforced. Am I going to be in trouble with your guards if I send you back with a broken hand?”

“I’m not going to break my hand,” he assures them, lining up a strike and connecting with immaculate form. The wall crumbles under the heel of his hand, and he looks immensely pleased. “This is exactly what I needed,” he decides. “Let me kick it. Are you removing this part, too?”

“Yeah!”

“May I have one of your sandwiches?”

“Sure, but they’re a little dusty.”

“I don’t care.”

It only takes them a few more minutes to have the wall opened up, and T’Challa is excited to see it through. He insists that Friday put in an order to a hardware store for express delivery of the necessary materials. By four o’clock, when Stark calls to let Steve know the quinjet is ten minutes out, they’re all desperately in need of a shower, but they’re also finished.

“I didn’t think I would have so much fun, keeping you occupied, Barnes,” T’Challa says, testing the door to make sure the hinges don’t creak. “But you should get cleaned up, now. Level five conference room. Be ready in thirty minutes.”
Steve has to hold his breath to keep from giggling. Poor Bucky looks nervous as hell.

“Are you having me extradited again?”

“Ask Captain Rogers. He knows. Beat it out of him!” T’Challa instructs, grinning ruthlessly as he shows himself out.
“This isn’t fucking cute, Steve. What is this? Someone’s going to jump out try to scare me and I’m going to accidentally kill them. Then I’m going to kill you on purpose.”

Steve’s not listening. In fact, Steve’s fucking giggling, which only makes Bucky more sure that this is going to be some horrible prank. He pushes him off the elevator, driving him forward unrelentingly. Bucky’s not the least bit comforted by Steve’s constant litany of grinning assurances - *It’s a surprise! It's not scary! You’ll like it! Stop being paranoid! -* and Bucky would really prefer if Steve would just accept that he doesn’t appreciate spontaneity anymore. Steve says he used to love it. Well, goddamn it, now he hates it. It’s not complicated.

Steve shoves him through a set of double doors, into the big conference room that Tony said no one ever used. Well, it looks like it’s being used now. It’s packed. With people he knows. He didn’t even realize he knew this many people. And they’re all smiling. And staring. Bucky’s not sure what to do with this.

“Oh,” he says softly, with a smile of his own sneaking up on him. “What the hell?”

“Surprise!” Tony shouts. “Damn, no, we just agreed not to do that. Sorry, I messed up.”

“What is this?” Bucky wheezes.

“A baby shower.”

“Is this why you told me I should put a new door in Steve’s quarters?”

“Yes. But to be fair, it was a really good idea, logistically--”

“You planned this?”

“Ah - Pepper’s the doer here. I just picked up a few folks on the way back from Canada and and, of course, you know, facilitated the whole affair--”

Bucky didn’t think there was a thing in the world that would shut Tony Stark up, but being hugged seems to do the trick. And however weird it is for Tony, Bucky’s just as shocked with himself. He hasn’t hugged anyone apart from Steve in decades.

But who cares? He felt like doing it, he did it. It’s happening. Stark can deal with it. It takes a few seconds, but Tony eventually joins in on the embrace and gives him a solid pat on the back.

“You know, I’ve been bankrolling the Avengers for years,” Stark says quietly. “And this is, like, the first hug I’ve ever gotten and it’s good. I’m digging this.” Suddenly, he raises his voice so everyone can hear. “Okay, that’s enough, we’re squishing your little snowflake. Cool - everybody party it up. But keep it wholesome, there are minors present. If you want booze or hard drugs, I’ll be running the cash bar and pharmacy out of the bathroom down the hall, so hit me up.”

Steve doesn’t let Tony off the hook, though. He taps Bucky on the shoulder like he’s cutting in on a dance, and Tony has to endure a second hug. This time, Bucky gets to enjoy his expression from over Steve’s shoulder, which hovers somewhere between tearfully happy and viscerally irritated.

“And,” Tony finally says. “That’s about all the healing and reconciliation I can take for one day. Okay, Cap, stand down.”
Steve lets him go, but keeps a hand on his shoulder. “Look, Tony - Bucky and I couldn’t have done this without you. This means a lot to us. More than I can tell you.”

“Oh, gosh, stop it. I’m not even doing this for you guys,” Tony snorts. “Just nursing my own raging guilt complex and trying to get some use out of this goddamn conference room that we only use once a year…”

Pepper strolls over, positively simpering. “Which...is why you called me in the middle of the night six weeks ago--”

“She’s a compulsive liar.”

“And told me how well you and Bucky were getting along.”

“It’s been a problem since she was a child, actually, but therapy had no effect--”

“And said how much you missed Captain Rogers, when he wasn’t around--”

“If we ignore her, she’ll eventually stop.”

“And told me that you just couldn’t stop thinking about how none of you had immediate family to share important moments with--”

“She craves attention. She can’t help but create these elaborate fantasies.”

“So, wouldn’t it be great to have a baby shower and get everyone together?” Pepper says emphatically. “Just so, and I quote, ‘just so they know everybody’s got their backs’?”

“I admit to having said that, however, it was far less sentimental and not nearly as impishly smug as Ms. Potts’ reenactment.”

It takes Bucky hours to weave his way through the conference room.

Helen makes sure she gets to him before anyone else can and, despite her petite frame and his broad one, she throws a protective arm around his shoulders and gives him a tight squeeze. “If this gets too intense, just find a couch and pretend to faint. I’ll make everyone give you some space.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

“Also I asked Tony to order twigim and gukhwappang from that place I brought you take-out from last week.”

Bucky feels himself light up. “Really?”

“Well, yeah , you said you never wanted to eat anything else for your entire life. You weren’t just trying to impress me by liking Korean junk food, right?”

“It’s deep-fried everything and fluffy waffle cakes - who wouldn't like that?”.

“Want me to grab you a…?”

Helen trails off with a faraway, glassy look in her eyes and Bucky turns, already knowing who he’s going to see. And sure enough, there’s Thor making his way out of the bathroom, apparently finding the crowded hall a little too warm for his tastes and removing the cloak he’d had wrapped over his
broad shoulders, revealing *those arms*. Bucky’s used to being the biggest guy in the room, along with Steve, but Thor dwarfs them both. And he’s rugged and golden, and his muscles are *incredible*, and he has a great smile and he doesn’t hesitate to use it, and come to think of it, he’s stronger than Bucky and Steve put together. And *royalty*, too.

“You see what I’m talking about?” Helen whispers.

“He’s alright,” Bucky says, not looking away just yet. A moment later, a palm passes in front of his face, startling him. Oh. Steve. How long has Steve been standing beside him? Probably too long.

“Well,” Steve chuckles. “Caught you with your hand in the cookie jar, didn’t I?”

Helen slaps Steve’s arm lightly. “Oh, give him a break. *Look* at the guy.”

“Not my type.”

“Okay,” Helen grants him. “So there’s not *one* person besides Bucky you’ve got eyes for? Nobody?”

Steve tries to make it look like he’s giving it some thought, but they both catch the nervous way his eyes flicker over to a couch on the other side of the room, where T’Challa is sitting with one leg crossed over the other, looking immaculately modelesque and regal.

“Steven,” Bucky hisses as Steve tries to step away to hide a blush. Bucky snags him by the shirt and pulls him back over. “What were you guys up to while I was in stasis back in Wakanda, huh?”

“Oh look, there’s Laura!” he says suddenly, turning toward the main doors. A lady that Bucky’s never met has just slipped in with a baby in her arms. Bucky’s pretty sure Steve’s just trying to steer the conversation away from T’Challa.

“Who’s—” he starts to ask, but a burst of joyous laughter catches his attention before Steve can answer as Thor strides over to the woman making her way inside. He pulls Tony along with him.

“Here we are, Stark. Here’s the wet-nurse!” he grins, taking the baby and holding it aloft, as if he means to present it to the whole room.

Steve books it over there fast, muttering, “Oh gosh, oh no.”

“He’s a good size, isn’t he?” Thor notes, hefting the infant experimentally. “As he should be - his fathers are strong. Of course, I don’t doubt that my blessing had something to do with it.”

Tony looks like Christmas has come early.

“Ooh, Thor, no—” Steve stammers.

“Steven! Here is your son!”

Oh, this is a mess. Bucky presses his way through the crowd to join Steve, and Clint slips in behind the woman, leading a few other kids behind him. Bucky puts two and two together, but Thor, evidently, does not.

“That’s...uh, mine, buddy,” Clint corrects him.

“Yours?” Thor repeats softly. “Did...Captain Rogers owe you a debt? Whatever it is, I’ll settle it.”

“That’s my eight-month-old daughter,” says the woman, just as Bucky joins Steve beside Thor.
Thor hands the little girl back uncomfortably, giving her blonde head an apologetic stroke, then takes a long look at Bucky. He clears his throat and turns to Tony. “You said this was a celebration for Steve and Barnes’ new baby.”

“He’s...not born yet,” Bucky supplies.

“Will he be here soon?” Thor asks, disappointment evident on his face.

Steve nods as he greets Laura with a one-armed embrace. “In about a month.”

Thor smiles knowingly. “And we celebrate all month.”

“No, no,” Tony interjects. “This is...it’s just our backwards, mortal, Midgardian way of doing shit, alright? Forget it.”

“Well!” Thor blusters, now apparently eager to move on. “I do remember Barton’s beautiful wife, of course. But you must understand that time passes very differently in Asgard and,” he clears his throat, “it has - of course, it has been thousands, hundreds of thousands of your mortal years since I’ve seen all of you, and I’ve been quite busy. I’m glad I was able to make an appearance at your gathering,” he muses. “In fact, I traveled here directly from Ljosalfgard on Alfheim - nothing too dire, of course - merely a trade dispute between the Spice Elves and the mermaids. We all know how the mermaids feel about trading vessels passing through their waters. Always demanding gifts from the surface….Barnes, you look well.”

And then, as if Bucky must be waiting on him to get around to it, he steps forward and takes the swell of his belly in both hands and studiously touches every inch of it. Steve looks as surprised as Bucky feels, which is only compounded by the fact that another woman - this one younger, wearing glasses - rushes over and claps her hands like she’s trying to break up a fight.

“Oh, okay, wow, nope,” she says sweetly. “Thor, we ask before we touch people. Especially the pregnant people. Especially if the pregnant people already maybe don’t like touching. We talked about this that one time at Target, remember that? That lady didn’t like that and neither does Bucky. I’m so sorry,” she mouths, looking nervously between Bucky and Steve. “I’m, like, his caretaker, but he just gets excited and, you know, whoops! There he goes, being a weirdo again.”

None of this breaks Thor’s intense focus on Bucky’s belly - he stops in his own good time, at which point he nods his approval to all parties. “He’s very big, and his heart beats fiercely. He will have the wisdom and strength of Captain Rogers and Barnes’ compassion and sharp wit!”

“Thor? That’s very sweet, but Mr. Bucky can read his own horoscope, now let’s go get you more snacks and let him enjoy the party.”

“How do you know all of that?” Bucky laughs softly, a little taken by Thor’s sincerity.

“I watch over things that grow,” Thor smiles honestly. “The storms I bring to other realms water the crops in the spring, and help to bring forth all the new life begotten during the harvest-months. In many realms, there are great festivals in my honor, thanking me for a fertile year. Your union and all the fruit it may bear has my blessing,” he promises, taking Bucky and Steve by the shoulders and squeezing a little hard, even for Steve’s tastes.

“Thanks a lot,” Bucky nods, wondering if that’s sufficient or if he should bow, or something. He’s not sure he could, right now, anyway.

“Hello! My God, here I’ve been listening to all the gossip down in my laboratory, and I still hardly believed it, but you’re really big, aren’t you?”
“Fuck. Crap,” says the young lady with the glasses. “I’m so sorry. I’ve been trying to teach them social skills, but I’m completely under-qualified.”

And suddenly there’s someone else manhandling Bucky, turning him every which way to get a better look at him. At least this one’s gentler - just a wide-eyed old man who seems genuinely fascinated by Bucky’s state. He’d like to think that after so many years, he’s become a fairly good judge of character - especially when it comes to doctors and scientists - and there’s not a hint of bad intention in the way the old man touches him. He’s only excited to see something he’s never seen before, so Bucky waves dismissively at the young woman to let her know it’s alright.

“Ah. Dr. Erik Selvig,” he says, extending his hand abruptly. “And who are you?”

“James Barnes, but Bucky to just about everybody.” He accepts the man’s jittery handshake warmly. “Du er den berømte astrofysiker fra Norge, ikke sant?”

“Oi da!” Selvig laughs, eyes lighting up. “Ja, det er jeg,” he replies happily, gripping Bucky’s hand a little more firmly. “Very nice to make your acquaintance. Now - they are quite sure this isn’t a tumor, I suppose?”

Bucky snorts, turning back to the young woman. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Darcy!” she gasps, putting out her hand haltingly, as if she’s worried he might have run out of handshakes. “I work downstairs with Dr. Selvig. But not like - I’m not an actual physicist. I just sort of, you know, toss out ideas, think outside the box. Kind of a big picture sort of person.”

Selvig gasps. “Oh, Darcy! This is the one we saw on the television, isn’t it?”

“Nope,” Darcy grins stiffly.

“Yes, it is, he was on, ah, CNN, or maybe MSNBC, having it out with that other man in Washington! I remember that - they played that all the time after that building in Berlin exploded. Very exciting!”

Steve and Bucky exchange a painfully awkward glance before Bucky says, “Yeah, that was me alright.”

“Oh, ha- hat!” Selvig chuckles teasingly, giving Bucky’s arm a comforting slap. “You almost got him, didn’t you? Maybe next time!”

“Yeah, maybe,” Bucky sighs, waving goodbye as Darcy leads both Selvig and Thor away toward the food, throwing the same mortified, overzealous grin over her shoulder at them as she hurries away.

“Gentlemen,” Clint says, standing up straight, authoritative, and, if Bucky’s reading him right, smug as hell. “Thought you could use a quick PSA. This,” he huffs, indicating his children with a wide sweep of his hand, “is why condoms are so very, very important. Cooper, Lyla - you guys remember Steve?”

“Hi, Steve!”

“Hi.”

“Gosh,” Steve laughs. “You two got tall. Cooper, your dad told me you won a medal at your last gymnastics meet.”
“Yeah, I did uneven bars. I got a 9.1.”

“Must have been a great routine. Lyla, you still playing soccer?”

“No,” the girl giggles, looking up at her father like she’s keeping a secret.

Clint raises an eyebrow. “Tell him what you’re doing.”

“We’re fixing dad’s old Pontiac so it can be a drag racer.”

“And who going to race it?” Steve asks, glancing skeptically at Clint.

“Me,” she laughs, as if it’s obvious. Bucky hopes one of the modifications is a stack of books for the seat and tin can tied to her shoe, so she can reach the pedals.

“Guys, this is Steve’s boyfriend, Bucky.”

The kids manage two shy hello’s, and Bucky feels awful for them. It’s got to be uncomfortable, having your old man introduce you to some pregnant guy with a metal arm and trying to act like nothing’s off - especially considering that he’s probably killed more men than they’ve caught Pokemon.

Steve takes it upon himself to break the silence before it becomes too unbearable. “Jeez, is that Nathaniel?”

“Who, this giant?” Clint grunts, scooping him up. “How old are you, buddy?”

“Three,” the boy replies, looking to Laura for confirmation.

“You’re going to be four really soon,” she informs him. “And the fussy, smelly one up here is Natalie. Natasha was over the moon.”

“Number four, huh?” Steve says, throwing Bucky a smile, all dreamy eyes and a hint of terror, caught somewhere between, I can’t wait until we have that many and, God, what if we fuck up that bad?

“Well, you know how Clint is.” Laura gets a look on her face that Bucky could swear he saw on guys who’d made it off of Omaha Beach. “Never misses.”

If Steve were any happier, he’d split his face in two from smiling. As it is, he wishes he could go around the room and kiss every cheek in it. He’s never felt so thankful to know such fine people, and not only are all of those fine people crammed into the same room - for the first time since the debacle over the Sokovia Accords, no less - but Bucky is acclimating to the situation spectacularly. There’s a dream come true.

Bucky’s never even met some of them. Some are regulars at the Facility, of course - Tony, Nat, Bruce, Cho, Sam, Sharon, Clint, Thor, Maria, Vision, and Wanda. Some aren’t around much, but Bucky’s at least acquainted with them. He’d met Scott Lang in Leipzig. Pepper stopped in from time to time, but she had a company to run, and Rhodes was around occasionally, when the Air Force didn’t demand his full attention, but he liked to keep to himself. He hasn’t seen T’Challa since they’d left Wakanda. Parker, Tony’s newest recruit, had also been in Leipzig, although the meeting hadn’t exactly been cordial. And then there’s Brandon, from medical, who must have come with Cho. The rest are new faces: Laura and the kids had been a pleasant surprise; Scott’s brought his own daughter
along; Steve’s *dreading* the prospect of Fury striking up a conversation; and Darcy and Selvig had been their own interesting brand of encounter.

Busy schedules and long distances have made it difficult to keep in contact with many of them, much less gather them all together. Honestly, Steve can’t even begin to imagine how far in advance Tony and Pepper must have been planning this to have rounded everyone up so neatly. Steve’s at least mentioned them, though, so all Bucky has to do is put faces to Steve’s stories. For every new hand Bucky shakes, he rattles off some anecdote Steve has shared about them, telling them how glad he is to finally meet them in person. Steve can feel himself swelling with pride each time - they all seem just a little taken with Bucky, and nothing in the whole world could make him prouder.

And through it all, even with that unbelievable baby-bump and a million other things on his mind, Bucky’s just as cool as a goddamn cucumber. He’s found his rhythm again - those social graces that had made him so popular back in Brooklyn before the war - and he’s all cheeky grins and smooth talk and easy jokes. For God’s sake, he just about charms the socks off of *Nick Fury*. Steve feels like Bucky’s finally taken back something he’s been struggling for years to find; some inner peace that had been evading him, that had once made him feel so at home in a crowd. For the first time since ‘43, Bucky’s looking for the next smiling face instead of looking over his shoulder, meeting their eyes instead of fixing his gaze submissively on the floor, and trusting everyone and letting himself relax instead of counting the exits. Steve doesn’t do much of the talking, after a while - just watches Bucky remembering how to enjoy the company of friends, feeling inexplicably awed at every unguarded laugh and casual touch. Confidence looks good on Bucky. Better than it had even in Steve’s fondest memories.

Once they’ve made their rounds and said hello to everyone, Bucky finds the nearest couch, makes a bee-line for it, then collapses like a house of cards in a breeze. He looks like he’s just run a marathon.

“Had enough?” Steve suggests fretfully. “Need to bug out for a while?”

Bucky looks at him like he’s lost his mind. “No! No, I’m having a great time. My feet and my back aren’t, though,” he sighs sadly. Steve knows how much he must miss his former physicality - he can only imagine how much he’d hate to feel clumsy or tired or sore again. “You want to do something really nice for me?”

And Steve has heard that pleading tone frequently enough in the past few weeks. He knows precisely what it means. “I’ll go grab us some food.”

“You’re a hell of a guy, Steve.”

Steve makes half a dozen trips back to the buffet table over the next half hour. He and Bucky put a visible dent in it on their own, not even considering the extensive damage Thor has done to it. Thankfully, Tony’s always likes to play it safe with the catering. Eventually, a small crowd forms around Bucky and a few of the sectionals get shoved together in a messy circle. Friends settle down together and the low hum of mingling crescendos to the noisy buzz of a good party. Even Lang joins up after a little while, forsaking his spot against the wall where he’d been hanging back as his daughter pulls him toward the action. Scott looks a little hesitant to intrude - he probably still feels like the new guy on the team. Steve makes a point to wave him over.

“Hey, guys,” says Lang, sounding more nervous than usual, and it doesn’t take Steve long to understand why.

“Can I ask you questions?” the little girl grins eagerly, wedging herself in right next to Bucky.
“No, honey, we should probably leave Bucky alone,” Scott chuckles weakly.

But Steve’s pretty sure Bucky can handle whatever she can dish out. He scoots over to make room and pats the couch beside him. “It’s fine, man. Come on, sit down.”

“Nothing weird, please,” Scott warns his daughter, sitting down like the cushion might be covered in needles.

“So, this is the legendary Cassie, huh?”

“In the flesh,” Scott admits. “We were hanging out when Stark called and he told me to bring her along, and she was so excited, I just couldn’t tell her no, and Stark said there’d be a few other kids her for her to play with, but look, she’s a big fan of Bucky’s and she just doesn’t understand that—”

“How many people have you killed?”

Scott reaches over to swat his daughter on the knee. “That some questions are super uncool.”

“But I’ve killed some really bad people, too, so I guess there’s a silver lining.”

“I saw videos of you on YouTube from when you were the Winter Soldier. You blew up a car in Washington, DC.”

“Is there just footage of everything now?” Bucky laughs.

“Yeah, because of cellphones. When you were the Winter Soldier, did you get to pick out your own clothes?”

Bucky thinks for a moment, trying to remember, then breaks down laughing again. Steve can see why Scott might have been nervous - this kid’s not one for small talk. “No, I didn’t get to pick out much of anything. I would have picked something cooler.”

“Did you get to pick out your own guns?”

“Yeah, I got to pick those out.”

“What’s your favorite gun?”

“Barrett M82s are good, but if I ever get back on combat missions, I’m going to make Steve buy me an M249 Paratrooper.”

“Hey, I used to have one of those!” Natasha shouts from the couch across from them.

“I’m sorry!” Bucky calls back to her.

“Too bad someone lost it!”

“I’m so sorry.”

“That was a $12,000 gun, Barnes. God, I’d almost forgiven you, and now the pain is back.”

“Twelve thousand,” Steve coughs. “I’ll get you a $30 used Glock, if you’re lucky.”

“How’d your arm fall off?”
“Cassandra Lang, what the hell?” Scott hisses, swatting her again.

Bucky looks happy to answer at first, but then turns back to Steve, perplexed. “You know, I’m actually not sure. Fell of a train as it was passing over a ravine. Could have hit the side of the train, could have hit rocks on the way down, might have tried to break my fall with it when I hit the ground. First thing I remember is waking up in the snow with it barely hanging on.”

“Barely hanging on?” she repeats hungrily.

“Yep. Couldn’t move it, and there was a big piece of bone sticking out of my jacket sleeve.”

“Ugh!” she giggles.

Bucky must notice how much the gory details delight her, so he doesn’t hold out. “Bled a lot while I was laying there and it froze into the snow. Then some Russian guys came and dragged me off - yanked me out of the ditch by my jacket collar and half of my arm just stayed stuck right where it was. Just sort of popped off.”

Cassie’s smile broadens, but Steve sets his plate aside with an unsteady sigh.

“Can you take it off?”

“Not without Stark’s help,” Bucky replies cheekily, loudly enough that Tony overhears.

“Don’t start none, won’t be none, Barnes.”

Cassie wiggles her fingers, indicating that Bucky should lean in closer, then whispers something in his ear so quietly that not even Steve’s enhanced hearing can catch the words. He watches Bucky’s expression for any clues, but Bucky’s got a solid poker-face.

“Not much choice,” Bucky finally nods, to Cassie’s horror and fascination. “Gross, huh?”

“Neat!”

“Oh, dear God, I don’t even want to know,” Scott laments. “Come on, let’s go get you some food, Stinkerbell. Give Bucky a break and let Steve eat. You’re gonna make everyone puke.”

“If I come and visit again will you help me get really good at paintball?”

“You bet,” Bucky promises as Scott leads his new best friend away.

“Alright,” says Fury, stepping forward. “Open your damn presents, kids. I’ve got shit to do.”

An hour later, Bucky and Steve are sitting in a sea of wrapping paper, speechless, faces aching from smiling. Beside them, gifts are packed neatly back into boxes to be brought back to their quarters. As far as Bucky can tell, they have all they need to care for a baby and then some. A baby-monitor with a live-feed from Natasha. A pair of hand-made carrier slings from Banner. Cho gives them a box full of every first aid supply they could possibly need.

Thor brings them a little cradle, ornately carved, which had once belonged to him, meaning it’s thousands of years old. T’Challa and Tony get into something of a cold war: they’ve both had onesies custom-made to resemble their respective suits. Both are patently ridiculous - though not nearly as ridiculous as two of the wealthiest men in the world bickering over which of them has designed better, cuter baby-clothes.
Sam and Sharon provide a stroller and car-seat. Pepper gives both Steve and Barnes a kiss on the cheek, and lets them know to call her when they’re ready to set up the nursery and Tony will have a crib, rocking chair, dresser, and changing table brought up, and furthermore informs them that, after a lot of debate, she’d had it all painted blue and white rather than red and gold.

Scott lets Cassie give Bucky their gift - all the books and stuffed animals she’s outgrown. She’s gone through and labelled the toys with the names she’d given them. Darcy and Selvig have assembled a beautiful mobile to hang over the crib. Peter gives them his home-made business card and tells them to shoot him an email as soon as they want pictures.

Rhodes gives them a stack of clothes, all from the U.S. Army and Air Force, and all absolutely precious, which bear phrases such as “Army Baby,” “Infantry,” “New Recruit,” “My Uncle is in the Air Force,” (Bucky wants to cry when he sees that one), “Don’t Confuse Your Rank With My Authority!” and Bucky’s personal favorite, a silhouette of an assault rifle with the text, “Proof That My Daddy Doesn’t Shoot Blanks.”

Clint and Laura give them a huge box full of stuff that Laura assures them they actually need: a nursing pillow, a silicone changing pad, outlet covers, a sturdy baby-gate, an electric pump, freezer storage bags for milk, scratch mittens and, best of all, a little drive filled with what their own “instructional videos” - how to change a diaper, how to cure tummy-ache and snotty noses, how to get a baby to sleep, latch, stop crying, how to handle car rides and doctor visits and baths. On top of it all, Laura gives Bucky her personal cell number, and tells him to call her with any questions. Then, Clint gets that little smirk, and brings his daughter over. She’s been fussing and crying for the past few minutes, which he’s apparently quite used to. He’s been continuing his conversation with Steve, bouncing Natalie offhandedly. Without any warning, he hands her off to Bucky.

“There you go, guys. She’s been pissed off all day. See what you can do. Free crash course.”

Bucky laughs and passes her right over to Steve, watching panic wash his face white. “Here, Steve. You’re the one who says he’s so bad at holding babies.”

“That’s a bad idea.”

“You need to get used to it!”

“So do you!”

“I had a bunch of little sisters, I know how to hold a baby. Take her.”

“She’s going to cry!”

“She’s already crying, you can’t make it worse.”

Clint and Laura are positively red in the face from laughing at Steve which, admittedly, pleases Bucky a little.

Finally, Steve takes her very carefully into his arms. Clint steps in to help him position her on his shoulder. “Look, man, babies are like wild animals. She can sense your fear. If you relax, she’s gonna relax.”

Bucky has to admit, with a little instruction from Clint, Steve does everything right. Natalie doesn’t seem to care, though. She goes right on crying. Bucky takes a turn, tries everything he remembers helping Rebecca and Louise when the colic kept them awake, but she doesn’t slow down. Laura even puts a hand to her forehead, just to make sure she’s not running a fever. She and Clint agree that it’s probably just the noisy room upsetting her.
Fury, with a deep sigh, steps away from his conversation with T’Challa and Tony and pushes Clint aside, then scoops the little girl off Bucky’s shoulder with no explanation.

“See, this is what I hate about being the best,” he says, speaking directly to Natalie in a slow and measured voice, opening the side of his coat and covering her with it, holding her close and bouncing her. “It means you’ve got to do every goddamn thing yourself. Sometimes, you just need a nice little place of your own, where you can get your head back on straight, not deal with anybody else’s bullshit, right?” Bucky looks on in awe as Clint and Laura’s jaws drop. It’s actually working. “That’s right. You were just sick of looking at all these people, weren’t you? That’s okay, baby girl, that’s okay, parties aren’t everybody’s thing,” he soothes softly. “But you’ve gotta shut the fuck up and deal with it, because it’s not doing you a damn bit of good and you’re giving me a headache. There you go. Quit that crying shit, I don’t want to hear it.”

Dead silence. He passes her back to Clint, dozing contentedly. “Well,” he says decisively. “Now that I’ve shown you people how it’s done, I’m afraid I’ve got somewhere to be. Barnes, Captain,” he nods, passing Bucky a sealed envelope. “Congratulations on your little accident. I’ll keep an ear to the ground for you two. There will be a few people who’ll be really excited to hear about that kid of yours, but I suppose we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

He shakes their hands and leaves, not stopping to talk with anyone else on his way out. The party’s winding down anyway. Bucky thanks everyone again for the gifts and excuses himself, hurrying off toward the restrooms. Once he’s inside, he leans against the door, filling his lungs with the cool air and taking in the relative silence, feeling his guts twist with a strange, cold sense of anticipation.

He steps over to the sink and opens the envelope. One slip of paper and two photographs fall out onto the ceramic counter. A picture of the front of a home, and a picture of the back. The half-sheet of paper reads:

*Avenida Juan Ramírez de Velasco 619, La Rioja, Argentina*

*-- Your call.*

He knows exactly what this is.

He rereads the address, spends a few seconds studying each of the photographs, then folds it all up and puts it in his back pocket, knowing he’ll have to dispose of it later, or Steve’s bound to find it and ask questions he’s not ready to answer. He is going to tell Steve - just not yet. Not until he figures out what he wants to do. It’ll be at least six months before he’s ready to move on the intel, anyway, and he’ll need every minute of it to make his decision.

He hears Steve’s voice outside the door, talking to someone else, and turns on the tap. Steve knocks a moment later, then glances around the door. When he sees that Bucky’s just washing up, he lets himself in.

“You still feeling alright? You look a little tense,” Steve informs him, worry weighing on his brow.

Bucky gives him a perfectly honest smile, and a perfectly honest answer to match. “I’m just excited.”

“So, I guess you’re not going to tell me what Fury gave you?” Steve smirks.

“I will. Just need some time to think.”
Steve sighs, but he doesn’t argue - just tugs him over by the sleeve and kisses him, communicating what can’t be put into words though one brief embrace. *I love you. I trust you. You can trust me. I’ve got your back. I know you’ve got mine.*

“Let’s get back out there,” Steve suggests, and Bucky can feel the shape of his grin where their cheeks are pressed together. “Before they start thinking we’re up to something.”
May: Part 1

Chapter Summary

Warning: We get a little more detail about Bucky's earlier pregnancies in this chapter, and there's some discussion of Bucky's horror at having each of them taken away immediately after birth, along with some generally dark themes pertaining to his memories of Hydra.

On Monday morning, Bucky spends a few minutes standing alone in the kitchen, staring at the calendar.

May, already.

The sun’s just coming up. Their quarters and the grounds around the Facility always look strange and beautiful when the colors of early morning strike the wide, open windows, but today, he’s taking in the fruits of Sunday night’s labors. He and Steve had come back from their unexpected baby shower, arms laden with gifts to be utilized, and now the whole apartment feels particularly new to him.

Every open outlet is covered. Sharp coffee-table corners are sheathed in soft, rounded rubber. Their furniture has been rearranged, pushed back against the walls to open up space on the carpet to crawl and play, and to give them better visibility of the room from the kitchen island. There are still dozens of boxes in the living room to unpack, and the nursery will have to remain empty until they’ve painted it. Steve wants to put up those shelves along the top of the wall, anyway.

They could easily have it all finished today, but Bucky doesn’t feel like they should rush through the process. He wants to take his time, enjoy it all, to savor every moment of silence and waiting, while looking forward to sleeplessness and noise and fulfillment.

He takes his coffee over to the messy couch and, with no real goal in mind, begins to sort through the boxes and separate the items out into neat piles - clothes, toiletries, medicine, toys, books - whispering to the empty room all the while.

“Man, they fixed you up pretty good, kiddo,” he sighs happily, thumbing through one of Cassie Lang’s old board books, imagining how it’s going to feel to read it aloud to his own sleepy child. “Couple of years ago, if you’d have tried telling me about any of this, I’d never have believed it. We’ve got really good friends, you know that? I guess Stark can be irritating, but he always means well. And he’s smart - you could learn things from him that me and Steve could never teach you.”

He stops suddenly, thinking about what he’s said, then adds quietly, “Steve’s your dad. Maybe I’ll get used to calling him that later, once you’re here. But you know, it’s still too fucking weird - and I promise I’ll clean up the way I talk. I’m trying to do better, but I picked up some bad habits in the Army. I’ll watch it.”

The baby makes a languid turn inside him, no doubt trying to get comfortable as the walls seem to close in around him a little more every day. Bucky gives his belly a gentle tap, right where a pair of feet should be, just to say good morning, and gets a harsh kick in reply. Poor kid can hardly stretch his legs out anymore. He must be cramped as hell in there.
“Anyway, listen. Your dad is going to love you. And Tony’s going to love you. I love you. Sam and Sharon are probably going to love you so much they’ll try to steal you. Man, and are you ever going to like them. Sam can be a jerk sometimes - likes to tease people, but he’s not really mean. He knows how to fix people when they get hurt and how to make them feel better if they’re down. And he knows all about stuff that you’ll like - baseball, and dinosaurs, and movies and books - and he tells amazing stories in all these funny voices. Maybe one of these days he’ll convince Sharon to let him be a dad, too, and then you’ll have someone your own age to play with. Who knows?

“She’s his girl. She can tell you anything you want to know about anybody - history, politics, gossip, you name it. Plus, she bakes every time she gets pissed off about work, so she’s always got cookies and cake, and I’ll bet she’d be happy to share with you. She says she’s never even held a baby if she could help it, but she’s going to make an exception for you, pal. Give her a little while to get used to you. Just go easy on her at first and she’ll warm up to you in no time.”

He rambles on, making his way to the next box. This one’s all the stuff they’d hauled out of the nursery - the book and papers from their spare room, which had once been Steve’s old office. Bucky falls silent as soon as he opens it - the file folder on the AVOTS project stares back at him from the top of the pile, weathered, forever bearing the gritty, withering dust from Arnim Zola’s desk and cabinet. Bucky hasn’t touched them in months. He doesn’t like the way they make his hands feel, the pervasive sense of filth and the clinging smell of mold and antiseptic, along with the lingering ghost of some cologne or aftershave Zola had worn, which had hung heavy in the air of a thousand bad dreams.

It makes him afraid in a way the footage never did. Reaching for that folder always sends a current of eerie discomfort through his fingertips, like when he’d drummed up the nerve as a young child to caress the body of a dead bird, just to feel the softness of its feathers, and he had imagined the terror of discovering that it was alive but mad with pain, pictured it suddenly beating its crooked wings, smothering him and scratching at his face.

He takes a deep breath, then grabs it out of the box with his flesh and blood hand, not holding it gently or hesitantly, but gripping it with firm, resolute fingers.

It belongs to him, now. He owns it. It’s nothing but the dark and stormy night at the beginning of a story, and it’s a story that he knows will end happily. And maybe the hero hasn’t made his grand entrance just yet, but he’s on his way.

Then, fear all but forgotten, he opens the file folder and pages through it. He looks at every photograph as the musty scent of rotting paper mingles in the air with that faint sweetness he’d caught earlier, brain suddenly firing every synapse, desperate to place it even though he’s not sure he wants to remember.

Something that had always clung to Zola.

Faint. Saccharine. It might have even been pleasant, like candy or - cake - but there was something about the memory of the smell that was off. Chemical. Poisonous.

Sweet. Heavy. Thick. Almost like ice cream.

And cold. Cold. It’s liquid nitrogen.

And suddenly, the smell is almost perfectly real. It’s him. Not Zola. That little whisper of sterile vanilla - that was his skin, his hair, from the moment they brought him out of the stasis chamber until the moment the door sealed shut and the gas hissed in all over again.
Finally, finally, the last piece of the puzzle falls into place.

He remembers Strazds’ face and Zola’s - not as they had looked in the photographs, but exactly as they had been in 1970, hovering over his body, saying words he couldn’t understand, sweat dripping from their noses and clotting blood marbling their white gloves. He remembers a room full of men cheering and clasping hands the day their machines discovered a brand new heartbeat inside him.

He remembers thinking, At least I don’t have to go back to into that box. At least the years won’t slip away again.

Then, I was wrong. I don’t want to live. Like this. If I can’t have a mission, put me back to sleep.

They had kept him out of stasis for nine months. They had been forced to let his programming break down. Eventually, pieces of Bucky Barnes had slipped back in, tried to tear apart everything he’d let himself become, and then he had even missed the electricity. At the end, they had cut him open. Took a piece out of him he didn’t know he needed.

And then they started over.

After a while, he came to understand that the final cut was always on the horizon, only a few months away - that no matter what he did, they’d always be back to claim their piece of him. They were sowing him like a field and ripping their harvest out of his body, and he’d never see it again.

So, the next time that foreign pain started rolling through his abdomen, he decided not to let them take this one away. In a locked room with a bed and a pale blue blanket and stone walls painted sickly yellow, deep inside the compound in Siberia, he had told himself that he could finally meet one of them. He could finally hold one of them. Tell them that there was someone in the world who cared for them. All he had to do was stay silent.

There’s a guard just outside the door. I can’t let him hear. He’ll bring Zola.

And they hadn’t heard. He had nearly been finished by the time the guard happened to peer in through the slot in the door. Zola hadn’t been there that night. Only Strazds. By the time the doctor had arrived, he was on his knees at the foot of the bed, with a cold concrete floor beneath him and metal bed-frame clutched in both hands, head swimming and body on fire. There had been blood on the floor, on his thighs, on the bottoms of his bare feet.

Strazds and one of the guards had helped him stand, put him on his hands and knees on the edge of the bed, and a few minutes later, it had been over. Strazds had taken the baby away. Another doctor had cuffed him to the bed, sewn him up, given him water. In the morning, Zola was back, which should have meant punishment, but Strazds had convinced him that the guard simply hadn’t answered when Bucky had called out for help. That this wasn’t his fault. That it was Hydra’s callousness and neglect, and not their Asset’s disobedience, which had jeopardized their bottom line.

Even now, knowing that Strazds’ small kindness had only been kindness when juxtaposed against Zola’s mawkish obsession with perfecting Hydra’s Asset and Lukin’s irascible cruelty, Bucky still wonders why Strazds had lied for him.

He closes the file and sets it aside, having now faced it in its entirety and finding himself still composed, still sane. He takes one more book out of the box, but the baby must finally get his legs untangled, because he gives him a hell of a kick. And he doesn’t stop there - just keeps on pedaling like he’s on a little bicycle. Bucky leans back to rest against the side of the couch, trying to stretch himself out so that his ribs and lungs are out of the onslaught’s reach. Must be the coffee.
His eyes drift back over to the AVOTS files as he waits for his son to wear himself out, and this time, he finds himself smiling, then grinning, then laughing. “Goddamnit,” he groans. “You’re worth every bit of it. All that shit they did, all the kicking and the wiggling you’re doing, you’re worth it, kid. Fuck - a name,” he whispers. “You can’t just be kid. Why can’t you just tell me what your name is, huh?”

The baby turns, then pushes against him, pressing an elbow outward until the outline of it shows through Bucky’s shirt.

He looks down, sees the book beneath his outstretched foot.

One of Steve’s stupid coffee table books. Some kind of guide to all the US presidents. Probably a gift from someone who hadn’t known Steve very well. The cover contains all forty-five, displaying their names on little banners beneath their portraits. He shifts his foot out of the way to glance at them, because no matter how many times he’s seen that stupid image of all those old men lined up, it’s only natural that his own name - James Buchanan - never fails to catch his eye.

He’d somehow managed to forget since high school that Grant had become President only eight years after Buchanan’s term. Between them sit Andrew Johnson (who, if he remembers correctly, had been one of the most universally despised Presidents ever elected) and, of course, Abraham Lincoln.

Oh, no.

It’s the worst idea he’s ever had.

It’s the stupidest shit he’s ever heard of in his life. He’s not even right in between Buchanan and Grant, but then again, no one would ever name their kid after Andrew Johnson, would they? It’s a real groaner of a joke, and he should probably just have a laugh over it and move on.

Instead, he allows himself to say it - just once, and only in his head, and decides he absolutely hates it, only to feel it growing on him instantly. And he’s not getting kicked anymore. Does that mean the kid likes it? Is he just using the coincidence of the barrage of kicks ending as an excuse to entertain this horrible idea? Yeah, he probably is.

He leaves his coffee behind and practically runs down the hall toward their bedroom where Steve is still dozing, shouldering the door open and startling him awake. Steve opens his eyes, takes in Bucky’s pained grimace, and instantly reaches for his phone.

“Jesus, Buck - do I need to call Cho? You okay?” he slurs, one eye still partially closed.

“You’re going to hate it.”

“Hate what? What am I hating?”

“Lincoln.”

“What - what is that? Is that a movie?” Steve mumbles, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“No - it’s...shut. Shit, Steve, it’s a name.”

Steve sits there for what feels to Bucky like several long minutes, just staring at the wall, slowly processing Bucky’s revelation. At first, he seems completely passive to the idea, and then he frowns, then visibly winces, then smiles, shakes his head, and goes back to rubbing his tired eyes. “Bucky, no.”
“Steve, I think I like it.”

“Fuck!” Steve huffs abruptly, throwing his hands in the air and letting them fall limply back onto his knees. “Fuck. I do too.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Tony’s going to have a field day. We’re going to hear it from the whole team over this shit.”

“Just give me a yes or no before I get any more attached.”

“Are we talking Lincoln Samuel? Because that’s the only way it’s going to fly with Sam, and you know it.”

“Fuck,” Bucky cringes, chuckling in spite of his horror. “I like that a lot.”

“Yeah,” Steve groans, throwing himself back down onto the mattress and covering his eyes with one hand, mortified. “Yeah. That’s it. We’re naming him Lincoln.”

“I’m sorry I said anything,” Bucky laughs, laying down next to him.

“I’m sorry you said anything,” Steve replies. “But it’s too late to fix it now. That’s his name. It’s an awful name, and everybody’s going to make fun of him, and us, and he’s going to hate it and he’ll probably resent us for the rest of his life.”

“So, you’re saying it’s perfect.”

“Fuckin’ perfect,” Steve answers weakly.

Friday, May 19th.

Bucky has crossed into the long-awaited realm of any day now. And Steve has chewed his nails down to the quick. He can’t find anything else to do, though. Everything that can be prepared has been completed and triple-checked and second-guessed: Lincoln’s room is painted a soft, goldenrod yellow; his clothes are neatly folded and stored in the drawers of his dresser; the box of toys beneath his crib is packed full and perfectly organized; the freezer is even half-full of pre-made meals, just in case they find themselves too tired or busy to cook during those first few weeks, while the other half is filling slowly with dated storage bags full of milk. Laura had walked Bucky through the basics of pumping, storing, and reheating breast milk, but so far he refused to talk to Steve about it or to pump anywhere but in their bathroom with the door locked, no matter how many times Steve assures him that he is fully aware of breastfeeding as a concept and what it entails.

There’s a far more embarrassing conversation looming on the horizon, anyway. Bucky had suggested that they tell a few of the others about their choice of name before Lincoln is born, and they decide that the best way to have that conversation is over really good food, so they pull out all the stops.

They slide open the balcony doors in the living room, letting in the still-cool summer air, and Bucky grills burgers for Tony and Sharon, Italian sausages for Sam, chicken kabobs for Cho, and portobellos for Banner, and Steve invites them to their quarters. He tells them as they sit down to eat that he and Bucky just wanted to thank the five of them for all that they’d done. They wait until everyone’s been fed and buttered up a little to give them the news. Steve has now been sitting in a silent room for twenty long seconds. If not for the birds singing outside, he’d wonder if he’d gone
deaf.

Sam is the first to speak. “Lincoln what?”

“Lincoln Abraham,” Bucky bites back at him, then chuckles as a momentary expression of horror seizes Sam’s face.

Steve reaches out and grips Sam’s wrist from across the table, trying to shake him out of his fugue state. “Lincoln Samuel.”

“Alright, then.”

“I...do not know what to say about that decision,” Sharon sighs haltingly, as if she’s struggling to choose each word over a far more offensive synonym.

“Aw,” Steve giggles. “Sharon, you don’t like it?”

“Can’t say I do.”

“Alright, what would you name him?” Sam asks, and Steve wants to warn Sharon that Sam’s just itching to razz her - he can see that glint in his eye.

“I don’t know--”

“What names do you like?”

“Uh...Liam,” she proposes, throwing her hands up.

“Oh, wow. Wow,” is Sam’s answer.


And by this point, Sam is just about howling with laughter.

“God, anything that doesn’t make the baby sound like he’s got a beard and a stovetop hat!” she pleads.

Sam pulls her over to him and kisses the top of her head. “Baby, no. Stop. You’re too white, I can’t take it.”

Sharon flushes red. “You always say that, and I’m--”

“Well, stop being so white!”

“Those weren’t white names, they were just--”

“Let’s just name him Mayonnaise. Or Pumpkin. Let’s go full-white.”

“It’s old-fashioned, but I’ll warm up to it,” Cho interjects.

“It’s either Celtic or Roman origin…” Bruce mumbles thoughtfully, looking over his phone screen. “It means, like...a settlement by a pool or...lakeside colony or something.”

“I love it.”

And the room falls silent once again. All eyes lock on Tony, waiting for the other shoe to drop. There has to be a punchline on the way.
“But?” Steve finally prompts.

Tony shrugs, perplexed. “But, nothing. I just like it. I like the name. Would you rather I hated it? Are you actually that petty, Rogers?”

“We just…” Bucky smiles, then clears his throat. “We kind of expected you to be more of a dick about it. You know, just make fun of Steve a little, like you usually do.”

“I was gonna,” Tony assures him, “And then I thought, you know what? That’s a pretty cool name. I see what you did with it, too - right in between Buchanan and Grant, throwing a little shade to Johnson, it’s good. It’s a great name.”

Steve feels his shoulders finally beginning to relax and a smile growing on his lips. Maybe Tony’s really grown up, after all. “Seriously?”

Tony leans back in his chair and crosses his legs, mouth curling wickedly, and Steve knows he’s put his fucking foot right in it. “No, Steve, it is awful. It is sickening, and by modern standards, it’s child abuse. I’m actually short of breath and nauseous - I am fighting back real vomit even as we speak - from the acute second-hand embarrassment I feel for you. Lincoln. Captain America and James Buchanan are having a baby, and they’re going to name him Lincoln? And I’m not supposed to make fun of you? No, no, my friend, I think not. You want to be a giant dork, you suffer the consequences. Barnes - Bucky, help me out here, we can’t let him do this to our son.”

“It was my idea.”

Tony heaves a deep sigh, then drums his fingers on the table. “Alright, it’s kind of growing on me.”

Steve groans. “Tony, God - you’re just being facetious—”

“Nuh-uh. I just needed a little time to acclimate to it. Now I like it.”

“Well, I’m glad we have your blessing,” Steve simpers.

“But I swear to God, if the next one’s Washington, I’ll sue for custody.”

“Next one,” Bucky mumbles, scowling. “Ha. Fuck you.”

“Steve.”

That’s Bucky. I should probably wake up.

“Steve.”

Man, I haven’t gotten much sleep lately. I’m really tired.

“Steve? You awake?”

No. I am not.

Steve pries his eyes open. “Yeah,” he replies gruffly, then sits up like busted spring, suddenly alert. “Yeah! You okay? You need Cho?”

Bucky huffs with frustration, shrugging. “I don’t know. He’s not moving much. And he’s kind of low.”
Steve sighs, shaking off the sleepiness clinging to his eyes. “You just jittery?”

“I don’t know.” Bucky re-emphasizes. “I’m so fucking restless. I mean - I’m tired, but my legs are driving me crazy. Feels like I need to move them and stretch them every few seconds or I’ll just...explode, or something.”

“Well,” Steve yawns, looking over at his clock. “It’s only eleven. That’s not all that late. Come on, let’s take a walk.”

They only get dressed enough to be decent - sweatpants and wrinkled t-shirts and tennis shoes - although both of their cell phones are fully charged and in their pockets, just in case of emergency. Sharon and Sam are in the lounge, snuggled sweetly together on the couch, watching what Steve thinks must be Godzilla on the huge screen on the wall. Sam sits up straight the moment he sees them, with an eager grin on his face. “Uh oh. Are we clear for take-off?”

“Boy, I wish,” Bucky groans. “Back hurts, legs hurt, sides hurt, feet hurt. Cho says she’s giving me another day or so and then she’s going to induce me.”

“About time,” Sharon laughs, and Steve finds himself nodding his agreement. “You’re like, forty weeks, right?”

“Plus a few days,” Steve smiles wryly.

Bucky fidgets, running nervous fingers through his hair. “He just doesn’t want to budge. I don’t think I’ve got the right parts to make it happen on its own. It would have happened already if it was going to.”

Sam narrows his eyes thoughtfully. “No, I’ve got a good feeling about today. You’ve got a look about you. He’s ready. You’re going to have a Memorial Day baby,” he insists. “This child is determined to be the most patriotic thing ever.”

Sharon smacks his arm lazily. “Sam, you don’t know shit about babies. Stop it.”

“Look at him! I’m just saying, stick a damn fork in him, because he is done.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not happening. Wish it was, but it’s not.”

“Fifty dollars.”

“You’re on,” Bucky laughs, shaking on it.

Steve wanders off toward the kitchen as Bucky continues to bicker with Sam, still trying to wake himself up, and rummages through the communal refrigerator until he finds the water pitcher. He takes out two glasses, then calls over his shoulder, “Buck, you want ice?”

He knows it came out as a sleepy mumble, but before he can repeat himself, Bucky jogs over, cocking his head.

“Ice?”

“Oh. No thanks.”

Steve hands him the water. Bucky drinks half, then sips at the remainder, looking pensive. Steve drinks his. It wakes him up a little. He goes back to the fridge to get another.

“Steve?”
“Yeah.”

“Have you got your wallet?”

“What? Yeah.”

Bucky holds out his hand. Steve tosses it over without thinking, then watches Bucky take out a few bills. Steve stares with only half-hearted curiosity. He doesn’t mind Bucky taking a little cash, of course. They don’t really separate their money anymore, but as for why he needs it now, in the middle of the night, Steve couldn’t say, even though his mouth suddenly feels very dry and his head very, very light.

“Sam!” says Bucky. “Sam, come here.”

Sam hurries over, with Sharon on his heels, both looking a little worried. Bucky folds up the bills and puts them in Sam’s hand. Only when Sam’s jaw drops with excitement and disbelief does Steve begin to connect Points A and B.

“Spoke too soon,” Bucky sighs heavily, taking out his cellphone and dialing slowly, deliberately. “Man, all I did was walk too fast.”

Steve has to lean against the counter for support, or he might melt into a puddle on the linoleum.

“Helen? You asleep?”

He’s calling Helen. This is real. He’s calling Helen. I’m going to be a dad. And a moment later, Steve numbly thinks, Shit, I wanted to call Helen. But in a split-second, he’s right back to his frantic mantra of, I’m going to be a dad. I’m going to be a dad.

“Oh, yeah, I’m pretty sure.”

Dear God.

“No, not long.”

I’m not ready. What if I pass out? I’m really going to pass out.

“Yeah, we can meet you in the lab. No rush.”

No, rush. Absolutely rush, Dr. Cho. This is an emergency.

“Thanks - see you in ten.”

Steve still hasn’t managed to speak by the time Bucky ends the call. Shouldn’t he say something? He’s not even certain that he’s breathing. Is he breathing? Nope, not in a while. He should probably see to that.

He takes an audible, deliberate breath, in and out, but it doesn’t do him much good. He imagines that he must look like a glassy-eyed fish laying on the beach at low tide.

Sharon grabs him by the shoulder, making him look at her, and gives him a hard, sobering shake. “Steve? You good? Because you look like you might be freaking out.”

“Yeah!” Steve says loudly, but he can’t think of anything else to add, so in the silence that follows, he forces himself to laugh. “I’m fine, I’m great. And - wait, don’t worry about me. Worry about Bucky. He’s having the baby.”
“Don’t worry about me either,” Bucky scoffs. “I feel pretty good.”

Steve scratches his head with both hands like he can shake the anxiety out of his hair. “Then - I just don’t get why - why did you call Cho if - how do you even know you’re in labor? This could be anything. This could be nothing.”

“Well, I’m having a contraction and I’m bleeding, so it’s something .”

“Bleeding? How much are you bleeding?” Steve demands, a little too forcefully.

“Not that much,” Bucky says quietly, flushing red with embarrassment. “It’s just - there’s a spot on my pants. And it’s mostly clear, anyway.”

Sam’s eyebrows shoot up. “Oh, hang on, so your water broke?”

“I don’t think so. There’d be more, wouldn’t there?”

“Aw,” Sam groans, sounding almost disappointed as he leans over to check out the spot of pinkish fluid staining Bucky’s sweats. “You’re just leaking,” he laughs, rifling through the kitchen drawers until he finds a large dishtowel. “Here, man, sit on that. Actually, I guess it could be your water going. Sometimes it comes all at once and sometimes just a little bit at a time. Depends on how big the tear in your amniotic sac is, plus how effaced your cervix is.” He makes sure he says every anatomical term loud and clear, all while making pointed eye-contact with Sharon. “But what do I know about babies, right?”

“Oh, I stand corrected,” she admits, equal parts grudging and loving.

“I’ve got four big sisters. Even the gay one’s got two kids. And I’ve been there for every single baby. And a set of twins. I bet I could deliver this baby right here if I had to.”

“No more betting,” Bucky begs. “Steve’ll kill me.” He bangs his fist against the table and Steve flinches, startled. “Wow. Goddamnit. This is definitely not the Braxton Hicks bullshit. This is moving my insides around.”

“Steve, come here, I’m going to show you something very important,” Sam says, beckoning him with a snap. He drifts over and tries to pay attention as Sam stands behind Bucky and puts a hand on his shoulder. “Hey, no homo, man, but I’m going to rub your back. Trust me, I’m so good at this.”

Steve watches the way Sam grips Bucky’s hips and presses in toward his spine, then drives his thumbs into the indentations of his pelvis, just below the small of his back. Bucky wilts forward onto the counter like Sam has hit his off-switch, then utters a soft, relieved, “Oh my God.” Sam balls one hand into a fist, places his knuckles where his thumb had been, and twists, throwing all his weight into it.
Sam watches Steve, making sure that he’s taking note. “Now, does that help or does that help?”

“Please, don’t stop.”

“You want Steve to do it?”

“No, don’t stop.”

“Okay, I’m not going to stop,” Sam smiles - managing to only look a little smug - and turns his gaze back toward Steve. “I’m good to do this part, Steve. I was on pressure-point duty for about six hours straight for my sister a few months ago.”

And Steve knows the look Sam’s giving him - he has an almost instinctive ability to assess and analyze panic and anxiety, no doubt learned over years of doing triage in the middle of firefights in Afghanistan followed by his equally demanding work at the VA. Sam must not like what he sees, either, because it takes him all of a few seconds to decide that Steve’s mental faculties are compromised and that, for the time being, he needs to take point. “You guys got a baby bag packed?” he asks calmly.

“Uh, yeah,” Steve sighs, trying to remember where he put it. “Um, it’s on the dining room table back in my--”

“Okay, you go get that,” he instructs. “Take your time. Do an idiot check on your quarters and the baby’s room, make sure you didn’t forget anything you want to take to the lab with you. Grab a couple blankets out of Sammy’s crib, so he’s used to them when he starts sleeping there, get a stuffed animal for him to have waiting on him, couple of outfits, hats, mittens so he doesn’t scratch his face up or anything. Just take your time and go slow. Call anybody you want to call. Everything’s fine.”

Steve feels himself nodding as he backs away, partially because Sam is nodding and partially because Sam nearly has him convinced. “Yeah, everything’s fine,” he repeats, then turns to head back to his quarters. “Everything’s fine,” he says, louder than before, and this time, he starts to believe it.

“You just meet us in Cho’s lab, buddy. Me and Sharon have got him. Go get yourself together.”

“Yeah, I’ll get myself together,” Steve tells himself. Everything is fine.
Bucky loves Steve with all of his heart, but the discomfort of that first contraction had only been intensified by Steve’s nervous hovering. Thank God for Sam Wilson. And thank God for Sam Wilson’s hands.

Sam takes a deep breath behind him, like he’s trying to remind him to do the same. “Okay. Now we can just chill out for a minute. When this one’s over, we’ll walk you to the labs and get you situated.”

“If I wasn’t so attached to my job,” Sharon giggles, “I might be more open to the idea of having your kids, Sam. You know what you’re doing.”

“This is actually the only part I know how to do,” Sam whispers secretively. “I’ve never actually seen a baby come out. It’s a beautiful thing and a miracle and all that, but I still don’t want to see any of my sisters’ business.”

“But you’ve already seen Sharon’s business,” Bucky mumbles around another low groan.

“What is wrong with you?” Sam chuckles. “You sound like that mouth-breather kid from Hey, Arnold. I know you’re not sick, Barnes.”

“I haven’t been able to breathe through my nose for a month. It’s fucking awful. And my head’s throbbing. But everything I’ve read says it’s normal.”

“And...just like that, my baby-fever is cured,” Sharon announces. “Quick, Bucky, you want one of my Diet Mountain Dews while Steve’s gone? The caffeine might help your head.” She pulls one out of the fridge and slides it across the counter.

“Oh, that sounds fantastic, thank you,” he huffs, opening it, taking a drink, and then immediately pressing the cold can to his damp forehead. “Everybody tells you about the pain, and nobody bothers to mention that shit that’s just fucking miserable.”

Eventually, the painful cramp passes, leaving Bucky with an absolutely bizarre sense of discomfort. He can really feel the baby - not just his movements, but exactly where he is and details of his size and shape that he’s never noticed before. He’d gotten so used to carrying him right at his center of gravity that he’d barely felt his presence at all, aside from those kicking-punching-rolling fits Lincoln occasionally threw. He’d become as unobtrusive as a pair of well-worn shoes on his feet. Now, he can feel the weight of Lincoln’s head suddenly pressing lower, throwing off his balance, and he’s becoming so acutely aware of the insistent pressure that he’s afraid to move too quickly or shut his legs too tightly.

Very carefully, he stands up, steadying himself on the counter as he feels Lincoln’s little body tilting head-first toward his spine. It’s nauseating. He knows the expression on his face must be hilarious, if it’s as shocked and confused and awed as he imagines it is, but Sam only seems concerned.

“Think you can walk? And don’t be afraid to say no.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah. I’ve got it,” he replies quickly, stretching his back out. “It doesn’t hurt. I just feel funny.”

“Funny ha-ha or funny like what the hell is wrong with me, I need a doctor?”

“Funny, like, there’s a little person inside me and if I’m not careful I’m going to drop him.”
“Oh,” Sam laughs. “They do not come out that easily. Believe me.”

Down the hallway, the elevator chimes. Thinking it might be Cho, Bucky throws back the rest of Sharon’s pop and tosses the can deftly into the trash.

“Oh, boy. Are we too late?” Tony calls out, rounding the corner with a wheelchair. “Oh my God, Banner, we’re too late, he had already had it.”

Banner, white with panic, skids around the corner after him, then relaxes, rolling his eyes forcefully.

“Goddamnit, Barnes,” Tony gasps. “Is that one of my handmade 850 gram Egyptian Cotton hand-towels you’re bleeding on? I’m fucking with you. Whole five-pack was a dollar - bleed away. Hop in, I’ll drive.”

“Bucky doesn’t want to deal with your immaturity right now, Tony. And I never want to deal with it. Just give us all a break, for one night,” Banner begs.

“I’d really rather walk,” Bucky laughs. “If I stop moving around, my back starts hurting. Let me lean on it, though, will you?”

Tony shrugs and settles down into the wheelchair himself, letting Bucky take the handles, and he and Bucky lead the way to the elevators.

“Tony, I swear to God,” Banner mutters under his breath, eyeing his friend hard as he slouches comfortably in the seat, not bothering to pull his own weight. “You’re such a wreck.”

“So, were guys up?” asks Bucky. “You got up here pretty fast.”

“Oh yeah, we were elbow deep in some baller physics in my playroom.”

“Really, we were just fooling around with Vision,” Banner corrects him.

“Working on something big?”

“No,” Banner admits. “Just trying to figure out how my mass manages to increase as the Hulk by studying Vision’s density shifting capabilities.”

“Do you know why you turn green?” asks Sam.

Banner throws his hands up. “Believe me, if I knew why that happened, I’d try to fix it.”

“No,” Sam says slowly and firmly. “No. Flesh-toned Hulk makes me feel deeply uncomfortable.”

Sharon nods, but the faraway look in her eyes and the tightness of her lips indicates that the image is still haunting her.

“Okay, but now we’ve got bigger, rounder problems,” Tony says thoughtfully. “Look, Bruce, for the sake of Bucky’s privacy, I try not to pry too much into the anatomical specifics of man-birth, but...you do know how to get his baby out, right? Please tell me you have a plan that doesn’t involve a scissor jack and crowbar, because that’s the only plan I’ve formulated so far.”

“Yeah, anatomically speaking, natural birth is going to be the best option. Lower risk of shock, less traumatic, since we couldn’t fully sedate him for surgery, and shorter recovery time.”

“And - correct me if I’m wrong, Barnes - but you and Cho did not do any kind of surgery to fabricate a new...escape route?”
“I’ve already got all of this going on,” Bucky sighs, gesturing vaguely toward his chest. “I really didn’t feel like redoing the downstairs to match. I’m too vain. I couldn’t take it.”

“Oh,” Tony nods, finally understanding, once Bucky put it in terms of ego. “So, you’re just going to try to fit this eight pound sofa out through the back door, huh?”

“That’s the plan,” says Bucky, wheeling Tony off the elevator and out into the medical wing. “And stop talking about me like a house that’s getting renovated. I made a person, give me some credit, here.”

“No, listen, Tony, this is completely doable,” Banner explains. “I mean, the earliest stages are going to be living hell while his cervix turns around and effaces. I imagine that will be the hard part. After that, aside from the fact that will have to be really mindful of tears, things should progress in relatively the same way as they would in a female.”

“Wait - turns around?” Sharon repeats flatly, clearly unimpressed with Dr. Banner’s idea of what constitutes “completely doable.”

“Well, his is normally inset, which means that when it’s not effaced, it’s almost inside-out, so that there’s a smaller possibility for fecal matter to contaminate his reproductive organs.”

“Oh, cool, gross,” Tony interjects quietly.

Banner continues, oblivious to the discomfort of everyone around him, using his hands as he speaks to represent various organs and processes. “So, when the baby descends, it’s going to push this anterior wall downward - which Zola actually made from skin grafts from the inside of your cheek, Bucky, not sure if I told you that, but I thought it was really cool - anyway, it’ll push that membrane downward, effectively blocking access to his rectum and causing his cervix to essentially flip right-side-out. Like a sock.”

Bucky swallows audibly amid a chorus of reactions. Sharon squeezes her eyes shut and whines with disgust, Sam utters a soft, sincere, “Hell, no,” and Tony actually covers his ears.

“No, no, no. Absolutely not. Why did I ask? Why do I always ask?”

“Hey, I delivered a lot of babies while I was hiding out in India. Don’t let anybody tell you it’s all beautiful. There’s always screaming, there’s always death-threats, there’s always blood and amniotic fluid and poop and every other kind of mess the human body can manufacture. But, you know, if that stuff was better advertised, no one would want to do it and the human race would die out.”

“Gonna be a very long night,” Sam predicts. He jogs forward to hold the doors to Cho’s lab open so that Bucky can roll Tony in.

Cho meets their arrival with a withering smile and heavy, tired eyes, sitting on the edge of her own exam table. Clearly, she’s about as impressed with Tony’s choice of seat as Bruce had been. Bucky has to work hard to keep himself from having a laugh over her outfit - her tennis shoes and tangled bun aren’t her usual style, but they don’t catch his eye; it’s the lab coat. For once, she’s actually wearing one, and to be honest, it’s not doing much to hide her pajamas.

She throws a cotton blanket over her exam table, trying to suppress a yawn. “Is Steve on his way?”

“Yeah, he’s just getting my bag,” he replies, trying to mimic whatever magic Sam had worked on his back. He can feel another cramp winding up already.

“And are...all of you staying for this exam, or does someone want a job?”
Sharon is the first to put her hand in the air. “Me. I want a job. I don’t want to see anything. What do you need?”

“Starbucks?” she suggests pleadingly. “Is there a 24-hour location around here?”

“About fifty minutes down the highway,” Sam answers.

“There is zero point in having a quinjet if we never use it to make fast food faster,” Tony tells them earnestly, hauling himself out of the wheelchair and fishing for his wallet. “Take the Dagger, the bike is in it. Sharon, are you catering this party?”

“Why, need me to make a few more stops?”

Bruce, who is washing his hands and throwing on a spare lab coat, can’t help but to snort and shake his head. “Are you seriously going to make her stop for tacos, too?”

“No,” Tony scoffs, exaggerating even his usual level of petulance, then pulls Sharon, Bucky, and Sam into a close huddle. “I think all the Shake Shacks are closed. Everyone good with Burger King?”


“Sam, I’ve got something for you, too. Go keep Steve distracted for just a little bit longer, will you? Wait, Bucky - did you still want a little bit of time to get situated before he gets here?”

And Bucky knows precisely what she’s talking about, unfortunately. She’d suggested an enema before labor picked up in their last meeting a few days ago, and he wasn’t about to say no to anything she and Banner thought would make the whole affair safer or more comfortable, but he’d begged her not to tell Steve. Shaving was also a necessity that would have to be addressed, just in case - God forbid - they found themselves with no choice but to do a C-section. At this point, he’s fiercely protective of whatever’s left of his dignity, so he’d hoped to take care of all the embarrassing stuff without Steve’s knowledge. “Definitely.”

“I’ll try, but if he looks like he’s going to punch me, I’m not about to get in his way,” Sam warns them.

“Tony? You want to help?”

“No, but I will.”

“You’d get to wear one of your suits.”

“Fuck yeah, I want to help. Need the heavy equipment moved to L&D?”

“If it’s not to much to ask of the Iron Man,” she smiles.

“On it.”

L&D, as Tony likes to call it, is just the other half of the lab he’d built for Cho - the lab itself was windowless and full of equipment, but a door beside her desk opened onto a slightly smaller room with a bed and a private bathroom, where the lights were a little more adjustable, and a window looked out over the empty part of the Facility grounds. The cart with the ultrasound array on it is small enough for Bruce to move on his own, so he loads it up with various other supplies and wheels it into the other room. “Come on!” he grins, motioning to Cho and Bucky. “Let’s get started!”
“What’s got you so excited?” Bucky asks nervously, smiling in spite of himself, because he’s rarely seen Bruce look so happy.

“Oh, man, it’s been years since I got to deliver a baby. Babies are amazing,” he sighs, with such innocent wonder that Bucky can’t help but catch a little of his enthusiasm. He suddenly doesn’t feel even half as anxious about all the mortifying details. “I’m just - I’m really glad you asked me to assist with this whole thing,” he explains haltingly. “You know, I can’t have one of my own, and people aren’t exactly lining up to let me hold theirs so, you know. This is kind of a...rare treat, I guess.”

Bucky blames the ache in his throat on hormones. “You can borrow Lincoln anytime, Dr. Banner,” he promises, glancing at Cho, so that she knows she’s included. “Thanks for...well, everything, guys. It’s nice to not feel...I don’t know. You’re good people.”

Cho runs a hand over his back as she walks him in behind Bruce. “Don’t get all sentimental on me now, Barnes,” she laughs.

Steve can’t shake the irrational fear that he’s taken too long tidying up their quarters and rechecking the nursery and Bucky’s bag. He looks at his cell phone one last time, still worried that he somehow managed to miss a frantic call from Bucky or Bruce or Cho, even as he hurries toward the lab, Sam jogging along behind him.

Sharon exits the lab before Steve can enter, and they very nearly collide. “Sorry!” Steve gasps, pulse racing.

“He okay?” Steve pants, putting his hands on his hips so he doesn’t end up wringing them like an old housewife.

“He’s good,” she nods. “Just puking. Cho says that’s just his body’s way of making room.”

“Hey, they need me in there?” Sam asks. Steve thinks he sounds more than a little hopeful.

“They’ve got it, Godfather,” Sharon assures him, planting her hands on Sam’s chest in a gesture that could either be meant to calm him down or keep him the hell out of the lab. “Come on, I got us burgers. Let’s let Steve and Bucky have a couple of minutes without us breathing down their necks, buddy.”

“Text me,” Sam instructs. “Remember that trick I showed you. And don’t call me if the baby’s like, coming out, but get a hold of me right after that. I want pictures of my little man while he’s fresh, got it?” he grins, as Sharon pushes him away.

“Got it,” Steve laughs, breathless and giddy.

Cho shouts for him to come in on the first knock. She gives him an expressive sigh as he looks around the room, searching for Bucky. Beside him, the bathroom door opens, and he steps out, face ashen and eyes bloodshot and teary.

Bucky tries for a smile, but all he manages is a rough groan of, “Oh, man--” before he turns on his heel and rushes back to the bathroom, barely getting the door shut behind him. Steve returns Cho’s sigh. Never in all his life did he think he’d become so used to the sound of another person vomiting.

“That’s very normal,” Bruce says unsteadily, leaning against the edge of the bed, arms crossed
tightly over his chest. If being on a quinjet with him is anything to judge by, Bruce has a weak stomach.

Steve decides to take his chances with his own stomach: he waits for a lull in Bucky’s nausea (for Bruce’s sake) and then slips into the bathroom. Bucky doesn’t acknowledge him - he remains on his knees, hovering over the toilet, body wracked with chills and dry heaves.

Thanks to Sam, Steve has come well-prepared. He gathers up Bucky’s hair, lifting it off his neck, and ties it back with an elastic from his wrist.

“Thanks,” he rasps, throat raw, sniffing piteously as he unrolls a fistful of toilet paper to clean up his tear-streaked face.

Steve takes his plastic cup from the floor beside the toilet and refills it with cool water from the faucet, then settles down right beside him with his back against the door and his feet propped against the sink cabinet. Part of him still can’t believe he hasn’t woken up from this glorious, wonderful nightmare yet, while another part of him can’t help but think that this isn’t really so unfamiliar to either of them. “Do you remember Harper Perry?”

Bucky chokes on a sip of the water, laughing, then grins back at Steve, squinting with disbelief. “Do you remember Harper Perry? Because that’s what would surprise me.”

“Didn’t we just sort of...run into him on the beach?”

“We’d never seen him before in our lives,” Bucky reminisces. “Just some rich student, and it was his birthday, so he was out on the boardwalk telling people to follow him back to his old man’s house for the party. He kept telling us we looked like a pair of girly faggots.”

Steve breaks down laughing at Bucky’s attempt at the posh accent. “Wasn’t that why he invited us?”

“No, Steve, that’s why he invited you. He got you so sauced you couldn’t tell your ass from a hole in the ground. Spent my whole night keeping him off of you.”

“Yeah, you’re a real knight in shining armor, pal.”

“ Practically had to drag you home,” Bucky continues, every word slurred with mirth. “Eight o’clock in the morning, and you were weaving down the street, stopping at every garbage can to puke, the whole way back.

“Oh, how many times am I gonna have to apologize for that? I am sorry!”

“Hey, you’re the one who brought it up.”

“Yeah, well, look who’s blowing chunks now,” Steve chuckles, taking Bucky by the arm and helping him off the cold floor tiles. “Finally representing the right team, I see,” he notes, smoothing out the hem of Bucky’s Captain America-themed hospital gown.

Bucky brushes his thumb over one of the little shield emblems on his sleeve. “Uh huh, I figured whatever I wore would end up ruined, so - fuck, ow,” he groans, leaning heavily on Steve and using his metal fingers to put pressure on his back.

“Well, that’s what you get,” Steve smiles, cradling him gently.

“What time is it?”
Steve glances down at his phone - Sam has sent him a text that reads, *Tell him he’s doing a good job!!!* “Eighteen after midnight,” he answers. “You’re doing great.”

Bucky pushes past him, apparently desperate for some fresh air, and heads straight for the bed, where Bruce is still seated. Wordlessly, he snatches the pillow from the headboard, leans over the mattress to rest his weight on his elbows, and buries his face in it.

“Eighteen?” Cho confirms. Steve nods, and she jots the time down on her Starkpad. “That’s his third,” she informs him quietly, cocking an eyebrow and giving him a thumbs up. “This is going fast.”

“Is that bad?”

At least, that’s what Steve *thinks* Bucky just asked - it’s hard to tell with the pillow muffling his voice.

“Higher chances that you’ll tear,” Bruce explains. “Lower chances of fetal distress, unless we see the baby’s heart rate start to slow down - then we know it’s going too fast. Most people will tell you that faster’s better, though.” Banner stands and, foregoing Sam’s method, he simply traces his thumbs from the dimples of Bucky’s hip-bones down to the two junctures where femur and pelvis meet, then presses his fingers into the muscle tissue. “Better?”

“Yes,” Bucky answers, but Steve doesn’t like how strained his voice still sounds. Of course he’d known that there would be pain - he supposes that watching someone you love hurting isn’t something expectation can make any easier. He leans down over the opposite side of the bed and lays his hand on Bucky’s hair, stroking carefully, hoping he’s not intruding.

“We should get him on a CTG,” Cho frets.

“Oh! I programmed Friday! She’ll put it on the screen for us, and Bucky won’t have to drag any wires or tubes around with him,” he says, fishing two square pads out of the pocket of his lab coat. “Tony and I have been working on these little bastards for two months - they’re my pride and joy. They can do everything a traditional intrauterine pressure catheter would - well, at least they did in every test I ran so far. I guess we’ll see how they do in the field. Honestly, I’m pretty confident that the tech will work fine - it’s the adhesive I’m not sure about. Soon as this contraction is over, Bucky, I’m just going to stick these to your belly so that we know what’s going on in there, okay?”

“Yeah,” Bucky sighs heavily, sitting up. Apparently, the pain let up while they were talking. Steve’s a little impressed with how quickly Bucky brushes it off.

Cho jogs over to the corner and rolls a big, inflatable ball over to the side of the bed, then takes a seat on it, bouncing experimentally. Meanwhile, Bucky turns and settles carefully on the edge of the bed, opening his hospital gown so that Bruce can affix the monitoring pads. Steve can only watch anxiously over Bucky’s shoulder, but he hopes his presence is at least comforting, rather than nerve-wracking. It may very well be nerve-wracking.

“Friday,” Bruce calls out, like he’s shouting for someone in the other room. “You read me?”

“Loud and clear!” she answers as the screen on the wall lights up, showing rows of readouts, all developing in real time. “Baseline fetal heart rate is at 123 beats per minute, baseline uterine pressure is about 33 mmHg. I’ll have the MVU calculated in nine minutes and twenty-five seconds.”

“That’s a lot of pressure,” Banner mumbles thoughtfully adjusting the placement of one of the pads, like he thinks the reading might be off. “Man, I don’t have time to re-calibrate these things.”
“Well, it makes sense,” Cho laughs. “Maybe super soldiers just have a higher resting tone. And even if you calibrated it to read the baseline high, it won’t affect the difference between resting tone and peak contraction, which is all we really need to know. And we’ve got a great read on the baby’s heart rate. Those are amazing.”

“Thank you,” Bruce replies, looking pleasantly surprised by the praise. Steve feels for him - it’s probably rare that anyone pays a compliment to his skills as a medical doctor. He imagines Bruce feels about like he’d felt himself, when Bucky had flipped through his newest sketchbook and fawned over his art.

“Bucky! How are you?” Friday asks brightly.

“Not too bad,” he answers, and Steve watches him have a little laugh at himself for talking back to the AI, then hears him swallow nervously, glancing down at his open gown. “Can you see me?”

“Oh, I’ve seen everyone naked. No big deal,” she assures him. “If it makes you feel any better, I’m not wearing much, either.”

“Friday, did Tony fiddle with your humor?” Bruce chuckles.

“Just a bit,” she says coyly. “And just within the parameters of this lab. He thought it would contribute to a more relaxing experience.”

“Is it okay if I check your cervix on the next one?” asks Bruce. “No speculums or anything - just a digital exam.”

“If you promise not to Hulk out on me,” Bucky shrugs, closing his gown. Steve knows he’s probably not too bothered by stuff like that anymore - especially given their current situation - but he places a steadying hand on Bucky’s back all the same.

“If the contractions get intense, you can try sitting on the ball,” Bruce suggests. “I hear those help a lot with early labor pains.”

“I think Helen claimed it already,” Steve snorts.

Cho gives him an impish grin, and bounces a little higher, giggling. “No, I love this thing. I roll it up to my desk while I’m working sometimes.”

“Also, we can clear out for a while,” Bruce suggests. “If the contractions get intense, you can try sitting on the ball,” Bruce suggests. “I hear those help a lot with early labor pains.”

“I think Helen claimed it already,” Steve snorts.

Cho gives him an impish grin, and bounces a little higher, giggling. “No, I love this thing. I roll it up to my desk while I’m working sometimes.”

“Also, we can clear out for a while,” Bruce suggests. “You know, if you want some time to yourself. I’m not a big fan of mad scientists, either.”

Bucky leans back against Steve, as if he’s been knocked over by the laugh that escapes him. “No worries. You two are about as far from Hydra as it gets.”

“I know jokes now!” Friday discovers.

“You got that right,” Steve smiles in reply to Bucky’s assessment.

“Did you hear about the sheepdog who was also a statistician? He brought all the sheep in, and then he said to the shepherd, ‘Here are your forty sheep!’ And the shepherd said, ‘I only had thirty-six when you left!’ And the dog said, ‘Yes, but I rounded them up!’”

“Hm,” says Cho. Everyone seems to agree.

“Sorry, let me try again. Maybe that one was too long? Oh! Why do mathematicians like to hang out
in the woods?"

Everyone waits patiently for the punchline, until Bucky finally provides the prompt she’s looking for. “Why?”

“They like all the natural logs!”
In spite of both his compromising position and a great deal more pain than he’d expected, Bucky’s mind is wandering back to last November. He’d rather not consider the depth of the correlation (or maybe it’s causation) between reminiscing on his first conversations with Banner over the AVOTs procedures and the present fact that two of Banner’s fingers are buried inside him up to the knuckles. He can’t help but remember how difficult that first conversation had been - there were words he couldn’t even bear to say, just a few months ago. Not just the mortifying anatomical terms, but more important words, too: pain; hurt; help; scared; angry, disgusted. He had told Bruce all he could recall in their first talk, before Cho had arrived, but he might as well have been giving a field report. What occurs to him now is that, at the time, he had told himself he was better. Normal. Back to his old self. He was sure that he had finally put himself back together.

Maybe Tony hadn’t been too far from the truth with his stupid house metaphor, after all. A house - for all the good things it can do - sure as hell can’t build itself. It could keep a family safe, but that family might have to patch the roof every now and then. Maybe he’d done all he could to become whole again - maybe he had just needed to let everyone else finish the job.

He knows he couldn’t have done this back in November - he can’t imagine having tolerated an invasive exam, especially with three people crowded around him. Either he’s finally managed to let go of some of the trauma he’d been living with, or labor is really just painful enough to overshadow all lesser sources of distress.

He’s starting to lean heavily toward the latter.

“Current intrauterine pressure is approximately 75 mmHg, 1 in 10, 42 MVU. Fetal heart rate is approximately 140 beats per minute, showing normal acceleration.”

“Looking good so far,” Cho remarks, watching the graph drift by on the screen.

Bucky studies it, curled on his side on the bed as Banner tries to get a fix on his cervix. He’s not thrilled about how long it’s taking, but Steve’s sitting right beside him with a hand in his hair, so the situation is nothing he can’t tolerate. “What’s all that mean?” he asks.

“Acceleration is when the baby’s heart rate speeds up during a contraction, and it’s exactly what we want to see,” Cho answers, pointing out the little peaks in one of the graphs. “And the increase in intrauterine pressure, along with the frequency of your contractions, basically gives us a way to measure the intensity of your labor in MVUs. We get that number by taking your intrauterine pressure at the peak of a contraction - 75 - minus the resting tone of your uterus, which is 33, and
then adding together however many of those occur within a ten minute span. You only had one contraction, so...42 MVU.”

Fortunately, Banner seems to understand that Bucky is more interested in what the assessment means in reality than how it’s measured. “You’ll have to be over 200 MVU for the labor to progress,” he explains, withdrawing his fingers and removing his glove. “And I can feel that anterior wall pushing outward, but your cervix hasn’t turned around yet. So,” he chuckles. “You better buckle up, because this is going to get a lot more painful before it’s over, buddy.”

“Right now, your labor is about as painful as the cramps girls get during their period,” Cho smiles, putting it in truly humiliating terms. “And that’s if their periods are normal. Some get it worse.”

“Oh my God,” Bucky laments, putting his face in his hands. “Oh my God. I used to make fun of Rebecca everytime she got her cycle. Fuck! I told her to stop whining. I’m such an awful jerk. Jeez, I hate myself.”

Cho looks heavenward, as if an angel has descended from the clouds to grant her most long-held desire. “I’ve been waiting my whole life to hear a man get it.”

“Oh, man,” Bruce snorts. “This is a monumental moment for women everywhere.”

“I have have no sympathy for you,” Helen crows. Bucky doesn’t argue. Poor Rebecca. He deserves every bit of this.

“So, next time you see someone being a sexist asshole?” Cho giggles.

“I will deck him,” Bucky promises. “And then I’ll get him pregnant.”

Steve had envisioned the delivery of his son a thousand different ways, but in no iteration of plausible outcomes was arm-wrestling involved.

It’s nearly four in the morning, and they’ve just about got a party going on out in the main part of Cho’s lab. He and Bucky had spent an hour walking the compound, trying to increase the strength and frequency of his contractions, taking every set of stairs they passed, and they’ve picked up a following. Clint had been out on a balcony with Wanda, and Steve had no trouble smelling what they’d been smoking. Apparently, he was staying at the Facility by choice while Laura and the kids spent Memorial Day weekend with her parents. Thor had been downstairs, chatting and drinking with Selvig. Both wind up following them back to the lab and joining up with Sam, Sharon, and Tony. Bucky disappears back into the L&D room with Banner for a few minutes to see how much progress he’s made, but re-emerges looking impatient and irritated.

“I don’t know what the hell’s wrong with me,” he had lamented. “I’ve probably walked ten miles. What am I supposed to do, wrestle a fucking bear?”

And that’s when Steve, at a loss for any other kind of help to offer, had pulled a chair up to the sturdiest table in the room and offered his arm in challenge. Bets had been placed in seconds, and Tony hadn’t hesitated to organize a pool.

So far, Steve’s won three and Bucky’s won three. Steve’s not holding back, either, reaffirming his surety that his strength and Bucky’s are, in fact, evenly matched. Thor rolls a chair of his own up to the table after the sixth round and puts out his hand, raising an eyebrow. “Any takers?” he smiles.
Cho takes off her lab-coat, tosses it on the floor, and sits down to whoops and whistles. Thor lets her struggle to make his arm budge for almost a minute. “That’s quite good, actually,” he remarks, sounding perfectly relaxed as Cho resorts to using both hands and most of her body-weight, growling viciously as she tries to pull his arm down. “Very strong, as far as mortals go,” he chuckles, and then, without straining at all, he pulls her close and stuns the room into silence by planting a kiss on her lips. Cho’s arms go limp with surprise, and Thor pins her hand gently against the table. “You see? I had to resort to cheating to win.”

Cho touches her lips, face blank with disbelief. Steve knows he should close his mouth and quit grinning - and he sees that Bucky’s not doing much better as they glance at each other, just to confirm that what they’re seeing is real.

“I did you...mean that? Or was that a joke?” Cho stutters quietly.

“You guys--” Bucky whispers.

Steve puts a hand on his shoulder. “Bucky, shush.”

“You are a beautiful and admirable woman,” Thor proclaims. “I thought you might slap me, but if you’re not so inclined, I would be happy to take you to visit Asgard...sometime soon,” he smiles genuinely, suddenly sounding a little nervous and unsure. “Would that be...?”

“Hey, uh, Helen--”

Steve gives Bucky’s arm a little slap.

“I’d really like that,” she says, and Steve gets a little thrill from how breathless her voice is. Helen deserves to get everything she wants, and boy, had she ever wanted Thor.

“I’m sitting in a fuckin’ puddle over here, everybody,” Bucky announces loudly.

Steve very nearly faints. He really should have been paying attention.

“Oh!” Helen gasps. “Bucky. Sorry. Thor, I’ve got to--his water broke and...after this though, we should talk.”

“We’ll talk,” Thor grins. “Go, tend to him. I’ll be here.”

“Oh - oh, my God, okay,” she stammers.

Steve can’t worry about Thor and Cho right now, though. He and Sam each take one of Bucky’s hands to help him up, but Bucky doubles back over the moment he stands. “Oh, goddamnit,” he hisses. “That’s a good one.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Banner says excitedly. “Come on, Bucky, let’s get you settled in. Welcome to the home-stretch.”

Steve feels his knees weaken underneath him as he tries to support a little of Bucky’s weight. Luckily, Sam’s there to pick up his slack. “Deep breaths, man. Just breathe.”

“I am breathing,” Bucky replies shortly.

“I know you are, I’m talking to your man.”

Steve nods shakily, but he’s so happy and terrified that all he can really hear is blood pounding in his ears.
“You need to sit on the ball, sweetheart?” Even wearing that pained frown, Bucky still manages to razz him.

Steve is embarrassed by the sound of his own laughter - high-pitched and frantic - but beside himself with joy nonetheless. “Yeah, I might.”

“Get me out of these things,” Bucky gasps as soon as the door shuts behind them.

“The pants?” Steve asks, just to be sure. He’d hate to assume and be wrong

“Yeah, the fucking pants - get this waistband off of me. Now.”

And Steve tries his best not to look hurt, but the fact is, Bucky’s never snapped at him quite like that. He helps him shuck the sweats and Bucky continues to lean on him, but he certainly doesn’t offer an apology.

The moment Steve has him free of the pants and his sandals, Bucky reaches for the wall, puts his forehead against it, and that’s where he stays. Steve, luckily, knows exactly how to help. He’s there in an instant, doing precisely what Sam had shown him. The results are not exactly what he’d been hoping for.

“Don’t,” Bucky whispers. Steve lightens the pressure and tries just running his hands over the length of Bucky’s spine. “Steve, don’t touch me.”

And finally, Steve takes the hint, as well as a full step backward. Never mind how Bucky’s talked to him before, he’s never heard Bucky be that sharp with anyone, ever.

“Oh, boy - that looks like it’s topping out at 87,” Cho remarks, watching the CTG.

“That is a zinger,” Bruce agrees. “FHR’s up to 155, too. They’re both feeling that one.”

“Is he going to be okay?” Steve asks quietly. He knows Bruce and Helen would have taken action if this wasn’t normal, but he needs to hear them say it, anyway.

Bruce smiles sympathetically. “He’s definitely having a baby.”

“And…” Helen winces, watching the line on the graph waver, then spike. “There’s 90 torr.”

“What does that mean?” Steve pleads.

“It means his uterus is contracting so hard that it’s exerting almost two pounds of pressure per square inch,” says Bruce, then grabs a towel tosses it to the floor, right between Bucky’s feet. “Can you talk?” he asks softly, coming closer, but not touching him.

“What,” Bucky replies, barely getting the word out.

“Is this a really sharp pain, right around your perineum?”

And Bucky nods with intense surety.

“I don’t think your water’s quite done breaking because your cervix still hasn’t turned around, and it can’t all get out - which is making this one really painful. Can you just squat down and push a little bit? I think it’ll pop right into place.”

“No,” Bucky mumbles, practically incoherent. “Feels like I’ll--”
“What?” Bruce laughs humorlessly. “You’re worried you’ll have a bowel movement or something? Is that what you’re afraid of? That’s good, that’s how pushing is supposed to feel - for everyone. No one’s going to bat an eye,” he explains firmly, brooking no argument. “Lose the fragile masculinity attitude or we are going to be here all day. Now turn around, lean on the wall, and do what I told you,” he barks.

Steve’s jaw drops at the harshness of Bruce’s command, but he collects himself enough to come forward and take one of Bucky’s hands as he slides down the wall. Even in his current state, Bucky must know better than to annoy Bruce Banner, because he follows the instruction without further complaint.

“Keep going,” Bruce insists, when Bucky backs off from the push. “Come on!” He raises his voice a few decibels. “Like you mean it. Don’t waste my time.”

Steve thinks Bucky bears down out of sheer anger, but it works. He lets out a choked gasp that makes Steve’s stomach turn - because he knows the kind of pain that makes that sound. That’s the noise a man makes when he’s been stabbed. Finally, his water breaks in earnest, soaking the towel underneath him with fluid, pink with fresh blood at first and almost viscous, which then turns perfectly clear as the flow tapers off. It takes all three of them to help him up, but he’s positively humming with relief now, and his disdain for being touched has thankfully passed. He practically lets Steve carry him over to the bed.

“Sorry,” he breathes, eyes watering and face flushed and beaded with sweat.

Bruce gives him a tap on the knee as puts a glove on, and Steve helps him draw his leg up.

“Don’t apologize!” Bruce laughs, looking pleased as he locates Bucky’s cervix. “Your water broke, and your cervix finally turned around, and you’re about four centimeters dilated. That’s perfect. You did great. Sorry I yelled at you, but I was hoping we could get that step over with and make those contractions a little more manageable for you.”

“No, I think I needed someone to yell at me,” Bucky laughs weakly. He presses his hands to the bottom of his stomach, looking equal parts shocked and exhilarated. “Whoa - he moved down a little.”

Bruce feels for himself with his free hand. “Boy, did he ever.”

“You want to walk around a little more?” Steve asks, then looks to Helen and Bruce. “Or - is it okay if he just rests for now?”

Helen nods. Steve notices that she’s already got the towel and the floor around it cleaned up. “Oh, I think he earned a rest,” she smiles.

The next contraction isn’t nearly as bad, but Bucky’s a little surprised to feel it winding up only eight minutes after that God-awful one ended. Helen and Bruce watch the CTG throughout it, and they’re apparently so reassured by its normalcy that they decide to give themselves a break, and to give him a little while alone with Steve.

Before they go, Bruce puts out a bowl of icewater and a washcloth beside the bed, which Steve applies to Bucky’s forehead (and it feels so incredible he could cry), while Cho douses another towel in warm water, leaving Steve with instructions to press it directly against Bucky’s perineum, so that the skin will stretch easily once the second stage of labor starts. She also gives him gloves and
mineral oil, so he can stretch him out with his fingers, and Bruce makes a point to say no less than three times, “There is no such thing as too much mineral oil.” They assure them that they’ll be right outside the door in the main lab, and that Friday will inform of them if anything out of the ordinary shows up on the monitor, and that the best thing to do now is for everyone to relax while they can. Friday dims the lights without even being prompted.

Bucky supposes that the whole conversation should have embarrassed the hell out of him, but once that ice-cold cloth hits his forehead, he’s too drowsy to care. The bed is big enough that he can stretch out on his side, hugging a pillow to his chest. Steve throws a cotton blanket over his feet and calves. “Is that too hot?” Steve asks softly, pressing the warm cloth against him.

“No,” he says, drifting hazily. “Actually, it feels so good that I don’t even care about making you do it,” he laughs. “Sorry you have to put up with all this gross stuff.”

“Oh, Bucky,” Steve sighs, and Bucky can hear him rolling his eyes. “Shut up.”

“Don’t tell me to shut up,” he smiles.

“No, you shut the hell up. This is the best day of my whole life, so don’t call any of it gross.”

“It’s a little gross, just admit it.”

“No, it’s incredible. It’s fantastic. Bruce and Helen seem really happy with how you’re doing, and - God, and look at that! Bucky, look!”

Bucky pries his eyes open to find Steve pointing at the screen. The line labelled UC - uterine contractions, he supposes - is hovering right around 30 mmHg. Above it, another line labelled FHR is meandering over the graph’s minute units, dancing right around 135. FHR must stand for fetal heart rate.

“I don’t mean to sound like a sap, or anything,” Steve chuckled, and the quality of his voice contradicts his words entirely. His throat sounds like it must be tight - one sentimental remark right now, and Bucky’s pretty sure he could have Steve bawling if he wanted to. “But just look at that! He gets excited when you have a contraction, he calms down when they’re over. I mean - he’s right here! He’s this tiny little person, and he’s ours, and,” Steve suddenly cuts himself off with a laugh, “And it’s his birthday. God,” he groans, rubbing his eyes. “I can’t believe we’re having a Memorial Day baby. That’s fucking hilarious.”

“We’re having a May 29th baby,” Bucky reminds him. “His birthday won’t fall on Memorial Day again until he’s six.”

Bucky hadn’t expected that to be what did it, but there Steve goes, grinning and crying. Bucky giggles sleepily, reaching out to pat the hand that’s resting on his hip. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Aw, nothing,” Steve huffs, still smiling like an idiot. “It’s just crazy to think about. One of these days, you know - we’re gonna have a six year old.”

“Fuck.” Bucky presses the cold rag a little tighter to his forehead. “That is weird.”

An hour slips quietly by as he lays on the bed, and their conversation dwindles into a silence that seems almost reverent in the solemnity of the dim room. Bucky can hear birds beginning to chatter outside the window, and even though sunrise is still another hour away, the stars have disappeared and the black sky is beginning to radiate a deep and luminescent blue. In the space of that hour, a
dozen contractions roll through him, as Steve works him open with his fingers, slowly and steadily. Every time the pain comes, gripping him like the hand of God, he shuts his eyes and accepts it. And every time, Lincoln’s head comes down just a little more, and that’s the happiest feeling he could ever hope for.

But his relative comfort doesn’t last too long; at the end of the hour, his nose is stuffy again, and his head is pounding, and his chest and armpits are aching worse than they’ve ever ached.

Eventually, he has to abandon his pride. “You bring that pump?”

“Yeah, it’s in your bag.”

Bucky doesn’t mention the fact that he’s been too shy to share this particular necessity with Steve - Steve is almost certainly aware that Bucky’s been avoiding him every time he’s pumped, anyway - but Steve has the good grace to say nothing of it either. Without any further prompting, he rises, retrieves it, and sets up like he’s done it a hundred times already. *He must have read the instructions,* Bucky thinks with a smile, pushing himself up. He can’t even find the will to worry about Steve’s opinion on him or his swollen chest - not until he can breathe through his nose again, anyway.

“Here,” Steve whispers absently, and opens his gown for him. “One or both?”

“Both.”

The relief is worth every bit of the embarrassment. And Steve doesn’t say another word about it - just holds one side on for him, so that Bucky can keep the cold rag pressed over his eyes. With his other hand, he kneads Bucky’s shoulders and neck with every bit of strength he’s got, and pretty soon, Bucky finds that he can breathe again.

He doesn’t get the opportunity to lie back down before the next contraction twists inside of him. He bows his head, tries to breathe through it like all the others, but his slow, even breaths turn to ragged panting, and then a long, low groan than he can’t suppress. This one hurts, but the pain isn’t as sharp as it had been. This one is different - oddly transcendent, deep, and physically powerful. Almost terrifying, except that something deep inside his muscle memory tells him that it’s exactly what he should be feeling.

Steve lets him ride out the first thirty seconds on his own as he cleans the pump and leaves it to dry on the counter, but he hurries back before it’s over and takes Bucky’s hands in his. Bucky lets himself be pulled up and then guided back down onto the ball Cho loves so much, and he suddenly understands why - it’s a thousand times better than the mattress, which only had so much give, and he can rock back and forth, letting it roll underneath him, and lean his head on Steve’s belly, with two warm hands on his tense shoulders, his own hands clinging onto the hem of Steve’s t-shirt.

They pass the next ten minutes there, just like that. Ten more minutes bring three contractions instead of two, and so do the ten after that. Outside, the sky is getting brighter, shining like shattered rosey glass through the trees surrounding the compound. A pain hits him suddenly, before he gets his breath, and this one is hard, but he counts sixty seconds, and it’s over. It wasn’t so bad. Another one starts, just as intense, and he makes it through again. He feels like he’s barely recovered when the third contraction starts. He counts to sixty again, but this time his voice starts to break when he groans, and he says Steve’s name over and over again like a mantra or a cry for help or a love letter - he can’t quite decide. The fourth in that ten minute stretch is too much - hurts everywhere, not just in his back and his belly, but right into the tips of his fingers - and suddenly he can rock or groan or breathe anymore. He starts to feel like he’s swimming out in the ocean, with nothing but water beneath him, nothing but water on every side, and he’s lost the rhythm of the waves. The swells wash over him relentlessly, and he can’t get his head above water before the next crashes down.
“Steve, God, Steve--”

“I’ve got you, Buck. You’re gonna be okay.”

He loses words after that, and buries his face in Steve’s shirt, repeating something through his clenched teeth that even he can hardly understand. “I can’t--I can’t--I--”

“Yeah, you can,” Steve promises, gathering him to his chest, soothing him with a soft, easy back-and-forth motion - side-to-side, front-to-back, moving him like a pendulum to count the seconds, so that time doesn’t stand still. “You’re doing it, Buck. You’re already doing it, sweetheart.”

“Fuck,” Bucky shudders, gasping for air, then slurs, “Over.”

“Okay, I’m going to move you over to the bed--”

“Don’t go--”

“Just for a second - just gonna grab Bruce so he can see where you’re at, okay?”

“Okay.”

If Steve had the time, he’s sure he’d feel a little moved by the fact that no one has left. In fact, there have been a few joiners to the group waiting out in the main lab. Wanda must have eventually followed Clint in, and Nat has brought coffee. Thor, Clint, Tony, Sam, and Sharon have dragged in office chairs from other rooms. Banner’s already on his feet when Steve comes out to get him, but Cho has one of the blankets out of the cabinet and a paper-cased pillow, and she’s curled up on the exam table, napping. Sam’s doing the same over in the exam chair.

“How’s he doing?” Tony asks, quiet and sincere for once.

Steve thinks about how to answer that - really, he and Bucky are the happiest they’ve ever been, but he’s sure that Bucky’s not thrilled to be having contractions. “He’s in a lot of pain, but he’s in high spirits,” he laughs, wiping a little sweat off his own forehead.

“How are you doing?” Natasha smiles. “Looks like you’re staying uncharacteristically calm.”

“Yeah,” Steve nods, feeling rather proud of himself. “I’m good.”

“Oh, I wish you’d seen him earlier,” says Sharon. “Sam and I almost got him a paper bag to breathe into.”

“Holler if you need a Xanax,” Nat calls out as Steve follows Bruce back through the door. He throws her a reproachful glance over his shoulder. “I’m kidding.”

“Current intrauterine pressure is approximately 23 mmHg, 4 in 10, 219 MVU. FHR 139 beats per minute, still showing normal acceleration.”

Bucky barely seems to notice Bruce’s quick exam - Steve’s not actually certain that he doesn’t sleep through it. He’s curled on his side on the bed, passive and exhausted, but Bruce doesn’t seem to find anything wrong with him.

“That last one he had was pretty bad,” Steve informs him.
Bruce looks back toward the screen on the wall. “I’d call it pretty good,” he shrugs. “His cervix has ripened perfectly - which basically just means that it got soft. Feels like he’s about seven or eight centimeters right now, so contractions are going to get a little more frequent and intense, and then he should start getting the urge to push - and I know it’s not what you see in the movies, but once he starts pushing, that stage is generally a lot less painful than transitional labor...Hey, Bucky, you should be coming up on another one - is it okay if I keep my fingers right by your cervix?”

Bucky nods against the pillow.

“Where’s the pain hitting you the worst, when you get a contraction?”

Bucky finally stirs and pushes himself up on his elbow. “Hips,” he says, touching the front of his pelvis, sliding his hand all the done to the top of his thigh.

“Turn over for me and try laying on your back - now, actually laboring like this is really uncomfortable and slow, but let’s just put your pelvis in a new position for a minute or two and get your legs stretched out.”

Bucky turns himself over while Bruce is speaking, and Steve can tell by his expression that the pain is already ramping back up.

“Shift this way a little bit so that your bottom’s right at the edge of the bed, and then just let your knees fall to the side. Actually - would it bother you if someone else came in?”

Steve isn’t sure he likes that Bruce would even suggest that. He steps forward before Bucky can answer. “I can go get Helen - what do you need?”

“Well, the problem with me or Helen is that he could kick either one of us across the room.”

“I don’t care,” Bucky replies shortly. “Jesus, I’m done caring. Everybody out there’s got an asshole.”

“Uh...oh! Thor. Steve, go see if Thor minds helping out.”

Steve has to fight against every territorial instinct to do it, but he jogs to the door and sticks his head out. Thor doesn’t look very busy - in fact, he has Tony’s Starkpad, and it looks like he’s playing a game. “Thor - do you - would you mind helping out for a minute?” Steve tries to think of something else to say to explain his request, but he’s not even sure what Banner wants. Thankfully, Thor doesn’t seem to need any further explanation. He hurries right to the door.

“I’d be delighted.”

“He’s not exactly dressed,” Steve warns quietly.

Thor just laughs. “You mortals are so frightened by your bodies. I’ve seen more birth than Banner will see in his entire lifetime - women, men, livestock. In Asgard, when a baby is born, the whole family attends,” he chuckles, shutting the door behind him and stepping up to the bedside. “The only part of this birth that is strange to me is that you gave the baby his gifts a month in advance. And no one is drunk.” Steve bites his tongue as Thor plucks the cloth from the bowl of ice water, rings it out, and lays it on Bucky’s forehead. He could have done that. “Barnes? Are you well?”

“No,” Bucky answers, clutching the rag to his head with both hands, apparently thrilled to have it back. Steve wishes he would have just asked for it.

“Steve, Thor, could you guys grab his legs and let him put his feet against you?”
They each do as instructed, and Banner has them lean their weight against Bucky’s bent legs. By the
time Banner has them where he wants them, though, Bucky’s eyes are tightly shut and his jaw is
clenched. An agonized cry seeps through his teeth around each shuddering breath.

Steve isn’t really sure what this is supposed to have accomplished. “I don’t think we’re helping.”

“You are,” Bucky assures him sharply, pushing back against Steve’s chest. Thor rocks his upper
body slowly, leaning in to deepen the stretch on Bucky’s hip. Steve grudgingly follows suit, but
soon, Bucky gets his breathing back under control. Instead of frantic gasps, he goes back to that
deep, humming moan, and his jaw relaxes.

“Wow,” Bruce smiles. “Bucky, nice job. Just keep on making that noise with those nice, slow
exhales. That’s perfect. I mean, I can actually feel you moving him down.”

The contraction ends, and Thor sets down Bucky’s foot for a moment to yank all the pillows off the
top of the bed. He gives Bucky his hand to pull himself up and slides them under his back, so that he
has something propping him up.

Bruce goes back to work with the warm cloth and the mineral oil - Steve almost laughs when he
notices that he’s settled down on the birthing ball. “You just let me know if you want me to stop,” he
instructs quietly. “You still felt a little tight and I don’t like giving stitches.”

“Not bothering me.”

“Just focus on relaxing your whole pelvic floor - picture your pelvis getting a little bit more open
every time you exhale. And if you start feeling like you need to push, you do it, but I want you to
keep breathing exactly the same way. No holding your breath.”

Two minutes later, the next one starts, and Bucky takes up that low, droning hum again, pushing his
heel hard against Steve’s chest. Four more pass in exactly the same manner, and Steve has to admit,
Bruce’s meditative approach seems to have done the trick. Bucky’s breathing stays even and calm.
He opens his eyes every now and then to watch Bruce or the growing light from the window behind
him, but the tension is gone from his face. Another begins, and Steve actually sees his abdomen tense
involuntarily as the contraction seizes him, but Bucky’s reaction doesn’t change.

“Friday, what’s his IUP right now?” Bruce asks softly.

“92,” she answers, intuitively matching her volume to his. “266 MVU.”

Bruce glances up at Steve, a lopsided smile quirking his lips. “That’s the biggest one he’s had. This
is a really intense transition, and he’s just gliding right through it.”

“Well, he is a great warrior,” Thor remarks, as if that’s the obvious rationale. “Pain is of no
consequence to him when there’s a task at hand.”

“Steve - go wash your hands.”

Something about the urgency in Bruce’s voice makes Steve certain that he doesn’t want to question
the order. He sets Bucky’s foot down on the edge of the bed, then rushes to the sink and back. The
contraction isn’t over yet when he returns, and Bucky puts his foot right back against Steve’s chest
insistently. Bruce moves out of the way, but keeps the warm cloth against Bucky’s perineum.

“Okay, I just want you to feel this--” Bruce explain, guiding Steve’s fingers in and up. “Press toward
that front wall. Feel something kind of hard?”
“No - I don’t think so.”

“No - Bucky bear down just a little bit.”

Bucky braces himself a little high on his elbows, and does it.

“Wait, now I do. And what is that? Oh, my God. Is - is that?” The realization strikes Steve unexpectedly, and he laughs out loud. Tears form in his eyes and splatter down onto Bucky leg before he can even blink, too heavy and fast-forming to even catch on his cheeks.

Bruce laughs right along with him. “That’s the top of his head,” he confirms, like he’s telling Steve he’s won a million dollars. “Don’t press too hard, but if you move your fingers back and forth a little bit, you can kind of mess up his hair.”

Steve puts his face in his hand to try to stem his tears, but it’s useless, and - and who cares, anyway? He’s touching the top of his son’s head, for the first time in either of their lives. That tiny bit of wet downy hair and soft scalp and hard bone is so incredibly real - and it belongs to his little boy. He feels entirely justified in letting himself laugh and sob to his heart’s content.

“Nice surprise?” Banner chuckles, sounding a bit surprised himself. Steve has never been one to cry in front of his teammates.

Blindly, he reaches up to grip Bucky’s knee. Sam would probably tell him just the right thing to say right now - he should probably tell Bucky what a good job he’s doing, or how proud and happy he is. “This is really happening!” is the best he can manage.
Memorial Day

Steve might have stayed right where he was, smiling and sniffing like a dame at the train station and not moving out of the way for God or anybody, until Lincoln eventually plopped right into his waiting hands. However, a quick rap at the door as it opens interrupts his trance, and Helen hurries in, still struggling to get her hair back into its bun.

“Oh, you guys, I’m so sorry. Bruce, why the heck didn’t you wake me up?”

“Because I am an expert on natural childbirth and you’re an excellent surgeon,” he says simply. “And if we end up needing a surgeon, I’d prefer to have the only one who knows this case well-rested.”

“Helen - Dr. Cho! Come here, you’ve got to - oh - uh, Bucky, is it alright if Helen feels this?”

“Steve,” Bucky exhales, getting a few deep breaths as the contraction finally ends. “I think she’s been inside me more times that you have.”

Helen has herself a little giggle over that. “Yeah, Steve, move over. I’m his boyfriend now.”

“Whoa, now, I’m not afraid to fight you, doctor,” Steve smirks.

“What hell’s the temperature in here?” Bucky asks, cutting them off with a huff of frustration and collapsing back against the pillows.

Friday is right there with an answer. “72 degrees Fahrenheit.”

“Is anyone else dying? Oh, give me a break - I’m having a hot-flash.”

Cho snaps on a glove to humor Steve’s request and searches absently for Bucky’s cervix as she speaks. Steve can’t keep an anticipatory grin off his face - she probably thinks he’s just getting close to fully dilated and, boy, does she have another thing coming. “Bucky, you just get yourself comfortable. We’ll put on coats if we have to -- Oh my God!” she cries, jaw dropping as she looks up at Steve, then turns to Bucky, and then back to Steve. “It’s Lincoln!” She stands up and hugs Steve, then reaches down to give Bucky a high five, oblivious to her bloody glove. Steve’s too excited to say anything. “Oh my God, Bucky - you’re so close. I’m so proud of you. Friday, kick on the AC. Thor, get him some water - Thor! Why are you here?”

“I am…” Thor shrugs as he heads to the sink to fill a cup, looking around like the answer should be apparent. “A fertility god. Where else should I be?”

For a few wonderful minutes, everything seems to be getting easier, and Bucky thinks he might be through the worst of it. After seventy years of bad luck, he really ought to know better than to let himself entertain such an stupid thought.

Friday gets the air conditioning blasting, and the vent is right over the bed, which Bucky could only describe as a miracle. He has a brief respite from the labor pains and he’s able to sit up, which brings down the swelling in his sinuses just enough that he can get one glorious breath through his nose. It’s not much, but he’ll sure as hell take it. And the absence of a contraction brings absolute euphoria, too, making his whole body tingle with a flood of endorphins. Thor brings him a cup of cool water, which he enjoys like a man who’s been forty days and forty nights in the desert.
For a moment, Bucky is certain that he can do this. Banner said that once transitional labor was over, labor would get easier, which means that it’s all downhill from here. He’s ready to get this over with, hold his son, and then go the hell to sleep, and that happy ending is finally in sight. And good riddance: he has earned it.

“Bucky, you want a new gown?” Bruce asks. “That one looks drenched.”

“Oh, man. Yeah,” Bucky sighs happily, giddy at the thought of dry clothes.

Bruce shakes the creases out of a fresh smock (Iron Man), after pulling out one covered in little smiling Hulks and returning it promptly to the bottom of the drawer.

Bruce is untying the back closures of his current, sweat-soaked gown when Bucky whites out.

Something is wrong.

He crumples from his sitting position until he’s slouched on his side, supported only by the strength of his prosthetic arm. He doesn’t think he cries out - he’s not even sure that he could make a sound if he tried - but he can’t be sure with the way his ears are ringing.

His back feels like it’s broken.

Steve rushes over, saying...something. His voice sounds like an echo with no point of origin, while his own voice is razor sharp in his ears, chanting, “Oh, God, God, God, oh God, oh God—”

His brain reaches frantically for other memories, trying to place a level of pain to compare this to, but it’s worse than falling off a mountain, worse than a bone saw, worse than electroconvulsive therapy, worse that any beating he’s ever endured or bullet he’s taken or dug back out. This is like a kick to the groin and a punch to the kidneys and two broken femurs all at once.

He’s going to die, isn’t he?

Steve holds onto his right hand - luckily, the demi-god takes the left. He would have crushed every one of Steve’s fingers if he’d squeezed that hard with his prosthetic. Between them, Bruce is hovering, checking between his legs for blood or fluid, feeling his abdomen, shining a light in his eyes, looking back at the monitor, talking, asking questions. Bucky tries to focus on what he’s saying.

“Bucky, it’s alright—”

fuck you, it's not

“Can you tell me what’s hurting? Can you talk to me?”

No I can’t I can’t I’m dying and it’s everywhere

Bruce makes a more thorough examination of his abdomen, then gets a glove on in record time.

“Lean him back a little so I can see what’s going on.”

Just as Bruce works his fingers in to feel the baby’s position, it gets worse. Somehow, it actually gets worse. Bucky can’t even scream or curse or beg so that Bruce knows it’s worse - the wind has been knocked out of him. All that’s coming out is a high-pitched whine.

“Hold on for me - shallow breaths - you can do this--”

“Banner - you’re hurting him, back off!”
“I’m not hurting him, he was hurting all on his own.”

“Banner, I said back the fuck off!”

Even through the ringing in his ears, Bucky hears Bruce hiss at Steve, suddenly furious, “You really want to make me mad right now? I know what the fuck I’m doing, and I can do it green if I have to, Rogers - Oh! Bucky, turn around, hands and knees!”

not likely pal

“Help him turn over.”

Bucky’s not sure how they get him onto his hands and knees, but by some divine intervention, he gets there before he dies. He knows the pain is easing up now, but it was so bad that he still can’t shake it. Every limb is trembling. He mouth fills with watery saliva as a wave of nausea rolls over him, and every bit of his energy and strength is devoted to keeping himself supported and partially upright.

“Round out your back - just relax your abdomen and let the baby hang, okay? Keep breathing, Bucky. Come on - quick, shallow breaths. It’s gonna pass, I promise.”

And it does pass. Feels likes it takes a few days, but it does eventually become bearable again. “What the fuck,” he pants raggedly. “What - the fuck - happened.”

Bruce - that smug fucking know-it-all - actually has the audacity to laugh. “Oh, that’s what we call ‘back labor,’ my friend. That was Lincoln trying to slide down a little bit, and jamming his big old head right into your sacrum and coccyx. And we’re going to keep you tipped forward or on your side from now on, so he doesn’t do that to you again.”

Fuck. The little prick’s not even born yet, and he’s already in trouble. “I’m going to ground this stupid kid as soon as he’s old enough to know what grounding is,” he groans. “That’s the most pain I’ve ever been in. Ever. Fuck.”

“Sorry, Bruce,” he overhears Steve sighing sheepishly, and just over his shoulder, he catches him pulling Banner into a one-armed hug.

“Oh,” Banner groans teasingly, giving Steve an audible thump on the back. “No problem - you’re not my first helicopter dad.”

“Buck - you better now?” Steve asks him, going back to that nervous habit he’s developed over the last few hours of rubbing his hands over his hips. Bucky manages not to shout at him or kick him, but only narrowly.

“Not really,” he answers, watching a bead of sweat drip from his nose onto the white sheet beneath him. He can feel every stray strand of wet hair clinging to his forehead, the scratchiness of the remaining tied closure at the nape of his neck - even the air around him has become irritating.

“What can I do?”

“Learn to pull out.”

Bucky doesn’t get the opportunity to laugh at his own joke, though - the pain climbs again, with a sharper and more insistent build than he’s felt yet, transcending mere muscular pain and sinking right into his bones. Thankfully, the stabbing, snapped-spine agony isn’t nearly as intense this time around, but the bodily memory of it has left him feeling drained and weak.
The tension in his low-belly and sides winds tighter, once again surpassing the threshold of what he thinks he can endure. He can’t even bring himself to care that his position on the bed is probably giving the whole room a less than spectacular view, or that the damp Captain America gown is hanging immodestly off his shoulders, completely open in the back.

Steve tries to do him a favor and save him a little dignity by draping a blanket over his hips. Bucky doesn’t have the wherewithal to tell him with words to get that goddamn thing off him, so he just reaches back and throws it off. Steve tries to rub his back again.

“*No.*”

He hears himself say it, and somewhere, in whatever part of his mind is still functioning, he’s shocked by how low and dark and full of warning his own voice has become. Steve must hear it too, because he takes his hands off like Bucky’s skin was a hot stove, and he steps back. Honestly, Bucky couldn’t be happier.

Some animal instinct deep inside him wants desperately to be alone right now. Not just alone in this room, but *utterly* alone, tucked away in some tiny nook where it’s dark and silent and cool, with only the wind creeping through. He realizes that he’s making that noise again - that purring drone of a cry - which seems to be the only way his body knows to keep him breathing around the pain.

“Is he alright?”

“Yeah, he’s alright, he’s doing exactly what he’s supposed to do.”

“He won’t even let me--”

“Of course he won’t. He wants some space, so we’re going to give him some space.”

“What should I--”

“You wait. There’s a lot of waiting,” he hears Bruce laugh.

Just when Bucky has resigned himself to living with that indescribable anguish forever, drifting in an ocean of it like a mote of dust in space, his body relaxes. He can see again. He becomes aware of sensations other than pain. He stares down at his hands, white-knuckled on the right, and whirring frantically on the left, both gripping the edge of the mattress. He’s still alive. He can even move.

So he crawls forward to the side of the bed and, keeping his hands on the mattress to steady himself, he stands up.

Steve is around the foot of the bed and at his side in an instant. “Whoa, Bucky, let me--”

“I’m okay, I’m okay,” he promises, leaning forward to stretch out his cramped calves and practically singing with joy to have a break from the worst of the pain. “Just need water.”

Thor already has the cup refilled. He drinks it as slowly as he can.

“What else?” Steve asks.

“Walk,” he says, feeling like it’s a last request.

Steve lends him an arm, and they make their way slowly across the room to the window. The sun is brighter than the last time he’d glanced out - must be eight or nine o’clock by now. Behind him, the bed’s motor hums as Cho and Bruce raise it to accommodate a sitting position, and then drop the
footboard down so that it creates a shelf for his feet.

“Let’s get you back over there, Buck - next one’s probably on its way.”

“What color you think his hair’s gonna be?” Bucky smiles, hoping that Steve knows it’s his way of apologizing for all the times he’s snapped at him.

Steve laughs. “You know, I had this weird dream that you had him, and he had red hair. And I went and found Natasha and started a fight with her, because I thought that meant it was hers. It was bizarre.”

Bucky laughs right along with him. “I had a dream that I went into labor and instead of having a baby, I had a fucking fish.”

“A what?”

“A fish! It was terrifying, God - woke up crying.”

“What, because you didn’t want a fish for a kid?” Steve snorts.

“No, no - we couldn’t find a bowl or water to put him in. I thought he was going to die. It was horrible.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Steve sighs. “That is pretty scary.”

Steve has to resist the urge to sweep Bucky up into his arms and carry him back to the safety of the bed. Bucky’s not moving too fast - in fact, Steve finds himself a little amused by how drastically his gait has changed in the last few hours. He was getting around pretty normally just before his water broke, but now he looks like he’s just jumped off the horse he’s been riding all day.

“You look like John Wayne,” he grins.

“Wish you looked like Joan Crawford,” Bucky fires back, making it to side of the bed. Right at the end of his sentence, with no warning or explanation, he drops down into a low squat. Damn it, Steve thinks. I knew he wasn’t going to make it. Should have carried him. Bucky seems to have his balance, so Steve does what he knows he’s supposed to, and backs the hell off.

Wrong again. Bucky reaches out, groping for Steve’s hand, so he takes a knee beside him and Bucky pulls him in close.

“Oh, fuck - Steve, fuck - I’m pushing.”

“Are you supposed to be?” Steve asks in a panic, looking to Cho and Banner for help.

“Yeah!” Banner confirms, getting his bearing quickly and squatting down right behind him. He tips his head and leans over to make sure he’s not bleeding. “Not too hard, though, if you can help it. No rush. As long as Lincoln’s heart rate looks good, I want to take this part slow. You want me to warm that cloth back up?”

Bucky can’t talk, but he nods.

Steve studies his face intently. He no longer looks like he’s in pain, even though his eyes are shut and his face is flushed and dripping with sweat. He looks like he’s doing something physically difficult, but not agonizing - lifting a heavy weight. Finishing a long race. Pinning down a sparring
partner. He’s calm and focused and - and he’s smiling.

Steve leans forward to kiss Bucky’s curled fist - never mind that it’s the metal one. On his right side, Helen brings Bruce the warm rag and drapes the cold one over the back of Bucky’s neck. “Thank you,” Bucky says softly, but clearly.

“This is great,” says Helen. “I always thought I’d make a really good nurse. I love research and development, but I don’t get to take care of people as much as I thought I would.”

Steve finally laughs with disbelief. “What’s that grin about, huh?” he asks, brushing a few damp strands off Bucky’s forehead. “You just happy?”

Bucky’s smile widens a little, but he keeps groaning low in his throat, and nods instead.

And suddenly, as if Bucky’s trance is contagious, Steve feels himself enveloped in the deepest, happiest calm he’s ever known. Whatever has come over Bucky seems to have spread over the entire room: Thor is leaning happily beside the window, bathed in golden light, lips curling with a mixture of nostalgia and admiration; Bruce has settled down on the floor with his legs crossed, one hand underneath Bucky, pressing the warm towel against him, the other braced against the dip of his spine, giving him a point of counter-pressure; Helen is seated on the edge of the bed, where she can occasionally replace the cold rag and keep one eye on the monitor. After all this anticipation and impatience and stress, the wait is finally over. And right here, at the end, time seems to have stopped just to give everyone a moment to remember as having been entirely perfect amid all the chaos.

No one even seems to notice when the contraction ends, until Bucky stands up again. “Floor’s kind of hard,” he mumbles, then drags himself onto the bed.

“I raised the headboard up if you want to turn around and hang onto it,” Bruce suggests, “but you do whatever feels right.”

Bucky crawls right to that position, draping the front of his body over the pillows and the headboard, supporting himself on his knees, which he keeps wideset. “Yeah,” he says with relaxed certainty. “I like this.”

“You want me up there with you or down here?” asks Steve.

Bucky takes his face out of the cool pillow long enough to reply, “You should catch him.”

“No, I’m sure Bruce should--”

Bruce gives an exaggerated shrug. “Why should I do it? He’s not my baby. You made him; you catch him.”

Steve swallows down a sudden resurgence of that all-too-familiar panic. “Oh. Oh. Oh, right, yeah, okay. How - what do I do?”

Bruce gives him a very serious stare as he helps Bucky finally change into the dry Iron Man gown. “Don’t drop him, don’t throw him, don’t try to walk off with him before the cord’s cut, don’t offer him drugs or alcohol. And even if you do drop him, he’s just going to hit the mattress, so no big deal.”

Steve laughs, trying to let out the anxiety with every exhale. “I’m not going to drop him,” he says, more to himself than Banner.

“Hey, they’re very slippery when they come out - it does happen.”
“See if anyone else wants to be here when he’s born - I think it’s going to be too late in a minute.”

Steve actually looks at everyone else in the room before he looks at Bucky. That had to be someone else, just saying something stupid. That was just someone who sounded like Bucky. Bucky wouldn’t have suggested that.

“Steve?”

That is Bucky. What’s wrong with him? Is he running a fever? Is he delirious?

“I mean, unless you’re not comfortable with it,” Bucky adds. “But at least ask Sam - I know this would freak Sharon out, but Sam might want to be here.”

Steve’s feet walk off before his head has time to believe what he’s just heard. Has Bucky lost his mind? He sticks his head out into the main lab long before he knows what the hell he’s supposed to say. He’s never seen seven people sit up so straight all at once. Wait - seven?

“Rhodey?” Steve blurts out.

“Where else would I be, man?”

Tony throws his hands in the air. “Fuck Rhodey! Where’s our baby?”

“Not here yet, but--” Steve clears his throat shyly, mouth dry and clumsy. “I mean - if anyone wants to come in and, you know - be there when it happens - Bucky says you’re welcome to--well, be there.”

Tony’s out of his seat like a runner at the gunshot. Clint follows a moment later, grabbing a bag as he rises. Sam takes a deep breath, and joins them.

Tony doesn’t surprise him - even if Tony hadn’t been so deeply involved in the whole process from the very beginning, facilitating Bucky’s care at every turn, he’d still never miss an opportunity have a front row seat to the action, no matter the situation. Clint is probably just coming along because he’s tired of sitting. After all, aside from the fact that Bucky isn’t female, he’s not going to see anything new in there - not after Laura’s four homebirths. Sam is the real surprise.

“Thought you didn’t want to see this part,” Steve smiles, patting him on the shoulder. He wants him to know that there’s no expectation, here - that Sam doesn’t have to feel like he’s no longer a perfect godparent if he chooses not to come along. “You said you didn’t even want to be there for this stuff when you were helping your sisters out.”

“No, I think that’s why I’m good with this,” Sam says, sounding mostly sure of his decision. “Seeing Bucky naked isn’t nearly as weird as seeing one of my sisters naked,” he chuckles. “If Bucky’s good, I’m good - are you good?”

“Hell yeah, I’m good,” Steve answers, face splitting into a grin as Sam throws an arm around him and plants a teasing, congratulatory kiss on his cheek. “I’m gonna be a dad,” he exclaims, voice shrill with unbridled excitement.

“Ooh, do not hug me back - you’re pitted out, man.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.”
Bucky has made it through another long minute of pushing by the time Steve returns with the others - thankfully, it’s winding down when the door finally opens again, so he’s able to lift his head to see Stark saunter in and immediately raises one triumphant fist aloft.

“My dream has come true,” Tony announces. “Captain America’s firstborn will officially open his eyes for the first time to see his beaming progenitor rocking an Iron Man dress. I win.”

Clint hangs back, digging through his bag, and pulls out a camera, holding it up so Bucky can see it. “Hey, man - no pressure, but if you want some photos for your scrapbook, I won’t use the flash and it’s analog. No digital copies floating around anywhere to get into the wrong hands. I’m pretty good at not getting anything too graphic, unless you don’t care about graphic.”

“I…” Bucky stops momentarily to think, then reminds himself how badly he’ll wish he had photos later on, if he doesn’t suck it up and say yes. “I would really appreciate that.” He glances briefly over Clint’s shoulder, as Steve finally makes his way back in, then does a double-take. “Sam? You have a change of heart?”

“Come on, Barnes,” Sam smiles, stepping right up to the bed and squeezing Bucky’s shoulders. “This is my godson, man. I’m not about to miss this.”

Bucky tries to thank Sam by clasping his hand, but he finds himself gripping it a little too hard, then bows his head with a gasp. Suddenly, it’s like there’s no one in the room, and he’s pushing and humming again, oblivious to everyone who must be watching.

Cho’s voice is the only one that filters in through the haziness, her words cutting right through the blood rushing in his ears and the steadily rising thrum of his pulse. “Bruce, I’m going to go grab the scale and the bassinet - he’s getting really close.”

And oh, Bucky knows Banner wants him to go slow, to not rush, but he pushes just a little harder when he hears that. He’s probably hurting Sam’s hand, isn’t he? He can’t think about that right now. Hopefully, Sam will forgive him.

“Don’t hold your breath, man. Keep moving him down,” Sam says softly, squeezing back. “Everybody’s right here. We’ve got you.”

Tony has replaced the bowl of ice water and wet down the cloth again, and he’s claimed the spot behind the headboard of the bed, right at eye level with Bucky. He folds up the rag and slides it quickly under Bucky’s forehead, where he’s resting it against the mattress. It feels amazing.

Thor is still by the window, watching the whole scene, and it makes Bucky feel safer somehow - having him there like a sentry, guarding the room from the rest of the world.

Sam holds on tight to his hand, pulling back against him like an anchor, bracing his knees down into the bed.

Clint has taken a seat on the birthing ball, getting a few test shots of the floor as he adjust for the room’s natural light.

Just behind him, on the lower half of the bed, he can feel Steve’s weight on his right and Banner’s on his left. Banner works in more of the mineral oil while he still can. Steve lays a warm hand on the back of his thigh, so tender and hopeful and sweet that Bucky can practically feel love passing between them from mere skin contact.
“You want Friday to play the National Anthem when he comes out?” Tony asks softly. “Just moan incoherently if you want her to.”

Even while he’s pushing, Bucky still finds the strength to smile and shake his head no. There’s laughter all around him.

This is exactly how it’s supposed to be.

Steve watches Bucky’s body relax and slump back over against the headboard. That was three - three long, slow, hard pushes, but he knows there won’t be too many more. He stays right beside him, completely transfixed, knowing that it won’t be long before Bucky bears down and just like that, they’ll have a son.

There’s four. Bucky loses his composure a little this time, back arching, beating his fist once against the mattress with frustration, but he regains control. He measures his breaths once again. Slow and steady. He gets about forty seconds to rest.

He seems ready when the fifth contraction hits him - he bears down a little harder than before, vocalizing louder, arms and legs shaking, sinking the weight of his body down onto his heels. This one ends with a choked, shuddering cry of pain.

The sixth push goes about the same way, but this time, there’s a second rush of fluid, marbled with blood. Banner doesn’t even blink, even though it splashes over his wrist, and glances over at Steve. “Don’t worry - little bit of blood’s normal. He’s not tearing.”

The seventh time he pushes, he draws one leg up, putting his foot underneath him and effectively shifting the angle of his pelvis. “Good - great job,” Banner declares. “That’s perfect.” And it must be, because something happens - Bucky exhales sharply, panting hard and nearly sobbing, and the metal guard rail on the side of the bed creaks in his mechanical hand’s grip. Another rush of clear fluid, almost like his water has broken all over again. Banner does a quick internal exam, then smiles. “Baby’s just turning, Bucky. I’m touching his head right now - he’s almost here. You’re almost done.”

After a thirty-second respite, another contraction builds, but Bucky never really bears down - just pants hard and fast, pushing his forehead down onto the cool rag. When it’s over, he asks for water, and Tony’s right there with it. “It’s okay, man,” Steve overhears Sam’s soft assurance. “Just rest for a minute. You’ll get back in the game.” Moments later, Cho wheels in a cart with additional monitoring equipment and a lamp, which hangs over a bassinet lined with a soft pad. She brings over a folded, terrycloth blanket, and sets it down between Bruce and Steve.

Sam’s encouragement and that little bit of water seem to give Bucky an edge he’d desperately needed - he lets go of Sam’s hand, gripping the back of the bed instead, pulling against it until it starts to groan with the strain. “It’s okay, it’s okay,” Tony whispers to him. “Listen, Barnes, you break the fucking bed if you need to. Steve’s right back there waiting on him.” The ninth contraction lasts well over a minute. When it ends, there’s more blood on Bruce’s glove than Steve wishes there was, but Bruce still doesn’t seem concerned - he cleans it away with the towel, checks for tears, and finds none. He makes a last pass with the oil. “Almost out,” he says. Bucky rests for fifteen seconds.

The moment Bucky starts pushing, just a few seconds after the tenth contraction begins, Steve catches a little glimpse of the rest of his life - about a half square inch of the top of Lincoln’s head.
He has to put his hand over his mouth to keep from shouting for joy. Beside him, he thinks he can hear the shutter of Clint’s camera click and whir, probably capturing whatever expression had come over him, and he glances up self-consciously, suddenly very aware that his eyes are tearing up. Clint’s eyes may be hidden behind the viewfinder, but Steve can still see the breadth of his grin as he snaps a second photo.

Eleven, and there’s just a little more of his son. Bucky stays remarkably calm until the twelfth round, when he throws his head back, reaching out again for Sam’s hands. “Go slow, go slow,” Banner tells him. “If you feel it starting to burn like that, just slow down.” He pats Bucky’s thigh, drawing his attention downward. “Next time you push, lean over and put your hand right down here, okay? You’re gonna be able to feel his head - he’s got so much hair.”

Bucky bears down for the thirteenth time, hand between his thighs, but breaks his rhythm to shout, “Oh! Oh my God!” as his fingers find the crown of his son’s head. He crumples forward, laughing breathlessly until the contraction peaks and his laughter becomes a low keen. He adjusts his footing, falls silent, lays his head down into the cold rag and then, with one long exhale, he pushes Lincoln’s head free. Steve can only see the back of it, but it’s enough to make him feel like his heart’s going to burst from loving too much. He puts out his hand and very, very gently, brushes his thumb over the shell of an ear.

“There - he’s--”

“I know, I know!”

Sam actually jumps up and down. “Yes! Oh my God, yes!” And then leans over to get a look at his godson’s head. “Oh - whoa, uh-uh. No thank you,” he decides, then says apologetically to Bucky, “I’m sorry, Barnes, but when I look, it’s like I can feel it. You’re doing good, though.”

Fourteen. Bucky screams and shouts in earnest this time, pushing only in short, staccato bursts whenever he can. One very small, wrinkled shoulder pops free.

Steve’s not quite ready. Surely, this will take one more push - but gravity seems to take over just when no one is expecting it. He doesn’t have time to prepare himself in the slightest. Even with his enhanced reflexes, he barely has time to put out his hands and--

And that’s it. That’s it.

There he is.

One wet, limp, shockingly heavy little body, hanging for the longest second of Steve’s whole life, belly down in the palm of his left hand in a room rendered perfectly silent with elated disbelief. He lifts the body up, cradling a still-soft skull in his cupped fingers, shifting his grip to pull it into his lap and turn it over.

And there’s Lincoln. Not a static-filled image on the screen of a monitor; not a ghostly, strange movement a brief glimpse of a pressing palm or kicking foot just beneath Bucky’s skin; or a fleeting moment of contact, knowing that holding him would still be hours and hours away.

There’s his face. There are his curled hands and his tiny feet, tucked against the roundness of his
belly. He’s fat and his skin is purple and pale white and he’s covered in blood and afterbirth and Steve can’t imagine thinking that any of it is anything but beautiful and heavenly and utterly perfect.

Banner leaves him in Steve’s lap while he scrubs him with the soft blanket. Tony and Sam each take one of Bucky’s arms and help him turn around and sit down on his knees. Steve hasn’t even managed to look up at him yet.

Banner turns Lincoln over in Steve’s lap, rubbing him vigorously with the blanket.

Two weak coughs, and then an angry chirp, and then Lincoln really lets them have it. He’s the only one in the room crying harder than Steve, now.

“You’re here!” Steve tells him. “Oh my God,” he says, voice breaking under the strain real, bone-deep, happy weeping. “You’re really here.”

He holds him to his chest as Bruce helps Bucky pull down the smock, and even though he doesn’t want to let him go yet, Bucky is reaching out with a look of disbelief and need and longing in his eyes that Steve doesn’t even have words for. He lays him down right against Bucky’s chest, and if seeing Lincoln and hearing him scream like hell was something, it’s nothing special compared to seeing Lincoln and Bucky together, and hearing Lincoln’s wails dwindle into calm, contented cries.

“Steve,” Bucky says, voice hoarse and softened by shock. “He’s really ours, huh?” he laughs. Supported by the lingering swell of Bucky’s belly - which, Steve realizes with an odd sort of heartbreak, will soon be gone - Lincoln begins to stretch his legs and wave his arms, fingers clutching at the air until Bucky understands what he wants, and gives him both of his thumbs to cling to. Lincoln acts like he understands - like he knows exactly who is holding him. Bruce reaches over to suction out Lincoln’s airways and the blood drains momentarily from Bucky’s face. “Wait, not yet--” he pleads. He must think Banner’s going to take him.

Banner looks briefly stricken when he realizes why Bucky is so afraid. “Oh, no, no, no. You hold him as long as you want.”

Bucky draws Lincoln a little closer, gladly accepting the blanket that Cho puts over him and tucking it carefully around the baby. It’s the one Steve had brought from his crib. “Look at you,” Bucky whispers, almost too quietly for Steve to overhear. Lincoln squirms and coos when he hears that familiar voice, padding his feet just like he always had when Bucky had talked to him before he was born. Steve watches as Bucky melts - he falls for Lincoln so hard that Steve can practically feel how his head must be spinning. “You wouldn’t believe how long I’ve been waiting for you.”

Either everyone starts talking at once, or else they’ve been talking all this time and Steve had been too absorbed to hear any of it. Bruce and Cho are both chattering at each other at a breakneck pace, punctuating every near-sentence with practically nonsensical exclamations of joy.

“I can’t believe how well that went!”

“Look at the size--”

“I know, he’s so big--”

“Still didn’t tear. I can’t believe it.”

“Look at his BP and heart rate.”

“I know, it was perfect the whole--”
“No, Bucky’s!”

“Oh, wow, that’s good.”

“Oh boy, look at that! He pinked up so fast!”

“Great lungs.”

Just behind Bucky, Sam and Tony have suddenly forgotten years worth of contention and pulled one another into a half-embrace, grinning and slapping each other like their team has just won the World Series. Thor’s enormous hands descend on Steve’s shoulders a moment later, giving him a bracing shake. “You have a fine son, Captain.”

“He’s bigger than I thought he was going to be,” Steve stammers, hazy with awe as he watches Lincoln learning how to move, now that he can stretch out and explore - now that there’s a whole world around him to touch and feel and hear and smell, all for the first time.

“Little smaller than he felt,” Bucky sighs, but he’s still grinning with wonder as he tests Lincoln’s grip on his thumbs, letting his hands be pushed and pulled as Lincoln discovers his own strength.

Steve settles down right beside Bucky and Lincoln for the next hour, doing nothing but smiling and watching the two of them. The last few contractions as Bucky delivers the afterbirth are intensely painful, but Bucky hardly seems to care. Steve puts his arm around him, letting him lean into him, humming drowsily. Helen eventually borrows Lincoln for a moment and places him in the bassinet to see his weight, and a moment later, Friday replaces the CTG readouts on the screen with a simple message:

Lincoln Samuel Barnes-Rogers
Born May 29th, 2017 at 9:57AM
8 pounds 4 ounces, 20.25 inches

Eventually, everyone who had kept them company removes themselves to the main lab, to give Steve and Bucky a while alone with their son, but they make Steve promise to call them in to get a look at him as soon as they’re ready for company.

Lincoln’s hair - which had at first looked almost black - dries and fades to a beautiful chestnut brown. He latches on his own, and once he’s eating, Steve sees the first hints of personality shining through - not just how he looks, but who he is: he way he buries his face against Bucky’s skin, snuffling and sighing when he’s happy; the way he kicks his legs and knits his brow with frustration if Bucky has to shift and jostle him; the way he’ll grasp whatever he can, whether it’s Bucky’s hair or Steve’s fingers, but prefers Bucky’s thumbs above anything else, especially the prosthetic. He likes the vibranium and the soft whir of the joints. Steve slips his hand under the blanket and lays it on Lincoln’s back, just to feel it move with his quick little breaths, and he must be very curious to find out who’s touching him. His brow furrows for a moment as he struggles, but soon he manages to crack one eye open and peek over at Steve. Steve thinks he looks hilariously skeptical.

“Hi, Lincoln,” Steve laughs, brushing his fingers over the boy’s cheek. He repeats the motions a few times, until his eyelid begins to droop sleepily. “He looks happy, doesn’t he?”
“I think he knows we’re going to spoil him rotten.”

“How about you?” Steve asks, finally tearing his eyes away from his son long enough to get a look at Bucky. His hair is a mess and his eyes are a little puffy and dark with exhaustion, but Steve doesn’t think he’s ever seemed this happy or handsome. “How do you feel?”

Bucky’s gaze wanders up to the screen on the wall. “A little over eight pounds lighter,” he chuckles, then reaches up to hook his arm around Steve, pulling him close and pressing their foreheads together. “I’m fantastic.”

“Yeah,” Steve laughs, thinking back to a text message he’d gotten from Bucky almost seven months ago, on Veterans Day, which had said the very same thing. Steve had read it while sitting on the dusty concrete steps of a bunker in Latvia where, in a way, Lincoln’s story had begun. At the time, it had broken his heart to read it, knowing that he was going to return home and ruin whatever sense of peace Bucky had finally found by dragging Hydra and Zola’s presence back into their lives. Sitting on those steps, with those files weighing heavily in his hands, he’d never have guessed that that they would eventually lead him here. He never had responded to Bucky’s message that day. Well. Better late than never. “Me, too.”
June 5th, 2017.

It’s nearly 0800 on the first Monday of the month - which means that Tony and a few other senior members of the team should be making their way to the conference room downstairs, preparing to mull over all the less exciting aspects of managing a team of enhanced vigilantes. At any given time, there are dozens of lawsuits being filed against them, which will have to be forwarded to Pepper’s team of lawyers. There are usually hundreds of requests for aid to be reviewed, and - sometimes the only entertaining part of the meetings - applications to considered. Those written applications for admission into the team’s ranks have yet to yield a single serious contender but they have, on occasion, put a person of interest on the team’s radar early. Generally, if you were someone the Avengers wanted or needed, they would come to you - not the other way around. Steve used to hate the meetings like he’s always hated dealing with bureaucracy and red tape. Now, after having been on leave since the middle of February - his longest sabbatical ever, in fact - he’s looking forward to being back at the table across from Stark.

He has to check the date twice, just to be sure - days and nights have blurred together lately into one long week of sleeping in one hour shifts, eating whatever was easy and quick, cleaning constantly and still falling behind, and basking in the most transcendent happiness he’s ever known. He’s exhausted, he needs a shower (maybe even two showers), he needs to do his laundry, and he needs to eat a solid meal that includes at least one fresh vegetable.

His life is perfect.

He’s probably seen hundreds of parents running errands with their babies in carriers and slings, hurrying through crowded streets in Manhattan, plucking heavy items off of high shelves in supermarkets, cramming themselves and their infants onto the train. Steve is too nervous to bring his coffee with him. He’s worried he’ll accidentally let the hot liquid drip onto Lincoln’s little head, which could then potentially seep through his thickly crocheted hat. He knows the slings that Banner had bought them were intended to free up his hands, but he’s just not ready for that yet. He doesn’t trust them, so he keeps one hand under Lincoln’s bottom to support him and the other on his head, just in case he bumps into something.

So far, Lincoln hasn’t even stirred since he got him into the sling. Steve thinks this going splendidly for his first outing - even though he’s not technically leaving the facility. And Bucky is going to be so happy to have a shower. He stays quiet until they board the elevator, but as soon as the car moves, Steve feels his legs curl up against his belly and his breathing quicken against his chest, and looks down to find Lincoln’s eyes open as wide as he can get them with curiosity and a hint of terror. Man, are those ever a pair of baby blues.

“You like the elevator?” Steve chuckles, bouncing him.

Lincoln answers with an unhappy grunt, followed by a long, expressive whine.

“Oh. You hate the elevator.”

They come to a stop before reaching Steve’s floor, and Lincoln gasps and pants noisily as the car slows, burying his face in Steve’s shirt and clutching clumsily at his buttons.
“Hang in there, baby, we’re almost there,” Steve promises as the doors open.

“He still hates the elevator?” Sam laughs, stepping in.

“How’d you guess?” Steve snorts. “This is the first time I’ve ever taken him on it.”

“Godfathers know these things,” he answers cryptically, then offers a finger up for Lincoln to grip. “Look at you!” he grins. “Oh, you’re so strong. You wanna go to a boring-ass meeting with me and ditch your dad, buddy? Huh? You wanna hang out with Uncle Sam instead?”

“We’re actually on our way to the meeting.”

“What? Steve, you’re on leave, man. Take your leave. Like, just one time, take leave when you get it.”

“I’ve been on leave for three and half months - I can go to one meeting. And I’ve got a few things to run past Tony, anyway.”

“You could have just told me and I’d have run them past him.”

“Sam, I’m bored and I miss everybody.”

“Alright,” Sam nods. “That’s a better excuse.”

Come to think of it, Steve really should have known better than to bring Lincoln. It takes them a while to get started with any actual business. The first twenty-five minutes are spent passing the baby around the room - Lincoln is a real sport about it, too. He smiles at Clint and plays with Thor and Natasha’s hair and Wanda’s earrings, and he spends a few minutes fixing Vision with that wide-eyed stare he gets when something is really interesting. Rhodey is the only one who doesn’t ask to hold him, but Tony kind of forces the issue, and after a few yawns and a little babbling, Lincoln seems to win over another devoted fan. In fact, he only decides to cry when Tony grudgingly starts the meeting and Bruce tries to hand him back to Steve. Steve swallows his jealousy and suggests that Bruce should just hang onto him for the time being. And even if it’s still hard at this stage to spend a few minutes without Lincoln in his arms, the elation in Banner’s eyes makes it so worth it. Steve learns quite a bit from watching Bruce keep him calm and quiet, anyway.

Luckily, it’s a light agenda. Only three lawsuits, and they’re all manageable - just a few old claims of property damage which Stark could repair with pocket change. They rarely get serious requests for aid that can’t be forwarded to an appropriate department of government, since most situations that legitimately require their attention are cataclysmic emergencies which no one could have foreseen, although today brings a few pleas for help with disaster relief, which they immediately delegate. And as always, there are the the “applications.” Most have already been screened and replied to in letters full of Thank you’s and Unfortunately ’s. Tony does take a few minutes to show them a really fantastic juggler who thought they might have a place for him. The only other submission arrives in a box with no postage, meaning it had been dropped off in-person. Steve is horrified that they’d even consider opening it at first, but Vision assures them that it’s safe.

It contains not just a letter, but an essay, along with several years worth of newspaper clippings raving about Spider-man’s accomplishments. Peter has even included a slew of negative articles from times he’d made very bad calls, and attached a short description of how he resolved the resulting situation and what he learned. Most of them agree that it’s positively adorable. Steve thinks it shows real initiative. Tony says he’s going to make the whole team start doing a yearly report of their own.
It’s Steve who eventually calls for a vote. He and Tony argue for a few minutes and it feels just like the old days, before Steve finally puts his foot down and demands they vote today.

Rhodes and Banner end up being the only two against letting the kid join - they want to wait until he’s a little older. Tony switches his vote with a sigh. “Thought: if he’s not fighting crime with us, he’s just going to keep doing it on his own, with no one to call if he gets in too deep. We’ll try to keep him off the big stuff and keep his travel to a minimum. God knows, he can stay busy enough if he never leaves New York. Let’s not think of this as bringing him on as our back-up. Let’s back him up.”

Bruce switches his vote. Rhodes follows with a deep sigh and says, “He just talks so much.”

“One more item,” Steve smiles, as soon as they’ve made the necessary meeting notes.

“Lincoln is too young, Rogers. I’m not fighting you on this one. He can’t even hold his head up.”

“He could fight,” Thor chuckles. “Banner, put him on the table.”

“Why?” Steve asks, voice cracking.

Rhodes groans. “Thor, we’re trying to finish the meeting--”

Thor lays his hammer down on the table and suddenly everyone is interested.

“Don’t you hammer my godson,” Sam warns.

Banner finally relents and lays him down on his back. Lincoln looks around the room, fascinated with the lights on the ceiling and the smiling faces around him. Thor moves Mjolnir a little closer, until Lincoln can get his searching fingers around the leather strap. Everyone laughs and coos, but Steve holds his breath. And sure enough, with one insistent little tug on the handle, the hammer moves.

The only person in the room who hasn’t fallen deathly silent is Thor, who gives a triumphant bellow and claps. “It must still feel quite light to him!”

“How come Cap’s little nugget gets to be worthy and Cap’s not?” Tony demands.

“All infants can lift Mjolnir. They have done nothing wrong yet,” Thor chuckles. “And they are too young to be asked to earn what they’re given.”

“Well. I’ll be damned,” Steve sighs happily, watching Lincoln fidget with the handle. He really wishes Bucky could get a load of this.

“Steve? One more item? This is fun and all, but I have a Congressional committee to shout at about clean energy in three hours and I don’t have my note-cards memorized.”

“Oh!” Steve gasps, fishing around in his jacket for the manilla envelop he has stashed there. He drops it on the table with what he imagines is a proud smirk. “New application for a contractor.”

After a long pause and a moment of staring down the envelop on the table, Tony very simple says, “No.” Steve isn’t sure whether it’s a no of disbelief, or if that’s his final decision.

“You didn’t even open it.”

“Is that from Barnes?”
“You bet it is. I told him I’d deliver it for him,” Steve smiles.

Tony heaves a dramatic sigh and slumps back into his chair, swiveling it as he struggles to form his argument. “Have you guys actually put any thought into this? Look, I was pretty clear about my opinion on both of you working high-risk missions, now.”

Their eyes lock eyes briefly - Tony’s brow knitting as he subtly entreats, telling Steve that he knows it’s not up to him, but he doesn’t like it, as Steve gives an almost imperceptible nod of acknowledgement. He remembers the conversation. He knows that Tony’s only concern is not seeing one more kid grow up without parents, walking in their long shadows which have no origin. He understands that. It’s been on his mind, too.

“We’ve been talking about it,” Steve finally nods. “And we decided it’s worth the risk. If one of us goes down, it’ll be because we’re trying to give him a better world to grow up in.”

Steve knows he’s walking a thin line, but he’s still a little surprised with how quickly Stark’s tone hardens. The others don’t comment or intervene - they know better than to try to mediate when Tony and Steve clash. “Kids do not need heroes for parents,” he bites out. “Kids need parents. Buy him some goddamn action figures and then stick around. Stay home and play with his Transformers with him. If you want him to have a hero, then I suggest you consider checking your pride at the nursery door and letting him have heroes that are not you. Buy him some Lego Batman shit or some Doc McStuffins DVDs. You’re a father, Steve. His father. Let that be enough. Tell Barnes to let that be enough.”

Steve sits for a moment and thinks about that. He’s learned over the course of several years that he can almost always follow a thread of Tony’s anger and find himself tugging on a knot of Tony’s guilt. This is about what happened in India - that hijacking that Tony couldn’t stop, which nearly cost Steve’s own life as well as Bucky’s and Lincoln’s. This is because Tony already knows that he can’t keep them safe in the field, and if he loses one or both of them, he’s going to carry it for the rest of his life. And maybe this goes back even further than the hijacking. Maybe this is about the Accords and Siberia, too.

“We’re not just talking about Bucky anymore, are we?” Steve guesses, voice flat. “You think I should quit the team?” he asks a moment later, just to hear Tony say it.

“I think you should run the team, Steve. I think you should be the heart and goddamn soul of this team, because Fury’s pushing seventy and he’s worn out. But I think you ought to take a leaf out of Nick’s playbook: stay out of combat. At least until your kid is old enough to understand why his dad can’t keep his skin out of the game.”

Steve almost admits to himself that it’s good advice. Tony’s argument may be sheerly based in emotion, but he knows where he’s coming from. “Can we compromise?”

“Something tells me that’s the only way I’m going to make my next meeting, so yeah. Let’s compromise.”

“I don’t want to quit the team, and I don’t want to quit field duty.”

“Terrible compromise.”

“Just - listen. Strategically - as far as balancing the team’s strengths is concerned, Bucky and I will be interchangeable once he’s trained on our protocols. He wants to do this, Tony. He needs something to do, and he’s got a skill set we could use. If we bring him on and train him, I can take time off to be with Lincoln. When I’m gone, he can be with him. And the Avengers don’t have to lose their
supersoldier. So - there’s my compromise. If you can bring him on, once he’s mission-ready, I’ll reduce my involvement by half. Fair?”

“Pretty sure that’s nepotism.”

Sam clears his throat, looking around the room. “Uh, not to butt in, but he’s kicked just about every ass in this room. I don’t think we’re in any position to question his skill level. And if you guys are still honestly worried he’s going to go psycho and murder everybody...he’s been hanging with us for more than a year now, and no incidents. And you’ve got to admit, he seems way less crazy.” Sam swallows suddenly and meets Steve’s eyes. “No offense. He was a little weird, at first.”

“I like him,” Clint says simply. “I could use some help, anyway. I can’t do every long range job.”

“I admire him greatly,” Thor adds. “Stark - allow him to join.”

Natasha smiles sweetly at Steve. “I’m good, but he brings his own guns. And he does not touch mine. Ever again. And I get to use his guns if I want to.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m good, too” Rhodey sighs, seeming a little hesitant - but a yes is a yes, and Steve will take it. “Besides, it’s going to be really nice to have somebody on this team that remembers that I’m a Colonel and addresses me accordingly,” he enunciates, staring Tony down.

“I’m not calling you Colonel,” Tony mumbles. “Weirdly kinky.”

“And if we’re trusting me,” chuckles Banner, “I think we’ve got to trust him. So far, I’ve had way more destructive accidents.”

Wanda nods. “But he will be the new junior member. I move up,” she smiles. “Which will mean a bigger room, I think.”

“Okay, cool. Literally none of you have addressed my main concern,” Tony sighs snippily. “Which is not all the Hydra on his background check, nor - dare I mention - the conflict of interest at play between our team leader and our potential rookie member. It’s the fact that he’s got a newborn.”

Clint groans dismissively. “I got tons of kids. You know what you’re doing, Tony? You’re romanticizing the idea of having kids. You’ve gotta get away from them, sometimes. Look, let him work some missions with us, or else his entire existence is gonna consist of Dora and Diego and - and slowly losing his fucking mind because he’s got a VeggieTales song stuck in his head. Come on, why do you think I’m at this stupid meeting?”

Clint’s easy quipping garners the usual chuckles from the team, but the sound of laughter fizzles uncomfortably under the unsteady rhythm of Tony’s fingers drumming against the table as he deliberates.

“I could just call for a vote,” Steve suggests lightly, knowing that he’s toeing the boundaries of Tony’s patience. “But I’d hate to embarrass you like that, boss.”

“Don’t fucking boss me, Rogers.” Tony snorts. “You will not exploit my fetishes like that.”

“In all seriousness - Tony,” he says softly. “He doesn’t want to do this without your blessing. He wants to help.”

“Maybe,” Rhodes interjects - and Steve can hardly believe that Rhodes is the one to back him up here, but if anyone’s endorsement is going to tip the scales, it’ll be his. “Maybe, Barnes feels like he messed up. You know what I mean, Tony? Maybe he didn’t understand at the time what kind of
damage he was doing - what he was contributing to - but now that he *does* understand, it’s really important to him to make amends. And, you know. I’m just saying. Sounds a little familiar.”

Tony’s fingers strike the table five more times, harder than before, and with grudging finality. He takes a breath in through his nose, tight-lipped, and stares Steve down, grim and sincere. “I’ll make you a deal, Rogers,” he says brazenly, eyes flickering over to Sam’s shoulder, where Lincoln is now resting.

Steve smiles back, doing his best to spare Tony the smirk of triumph which threatens to accompany his response. “Name your terms. Boss.”

Bucky had expected two hours of privacy and calm to come as a huge relief. And it does, at first. He indulges himself with one of the longest, hottest showers of his life before switching the water over to an ice-cold, beating stream, letting it hammer against his tired eyelids until the week’s worth of fatigue finally begins to wash away. He shaves and brushes his teeth, trying to decide between making a real breakfast or resigning himself back to bed for another two hours of uninterrupted sleep. However, the moment he steps out of the bathroom into the deserted hallway, he finds he feels too awful to do anything at all.

How can he *possibly* feel awful? All things considered, his life is practically perfect. It’s unquestionably better than it’s ever been: he’s a free man, with all the agency he could ask for; he’s got shelter, plenty of food, and a bed; and he has friends now, more than he would have thought he’d ever have again, and - unbelievably - his own little family. He really shouldn’t be feeling so down that he can’t bring himself to eat even though he’s hungry or sleep despite how tired he is.

But Steve isn’t here right now. And neither is Lincoln. He knows they’re not far away. They’re three floors away, in fact. That’s not that far.

That’s *so* far. His little boy is three floors away, after spending nearly forty-three weeks either safe inside of him or right at arm’s length, and Bucky is *really* alone, for the first time in all those long months.

He likes being alone, doesn’t he?

Isn’t that all he used to wish for, every morning as he beat a path through Brooklyn’s teeming streets on the way to the docks? In the crowded barracks and trenches of Italy? In the damp corner of a hundred concrete cells, where he had never been without the weight of a handler’s eyes bearing down on him through a camera? Hadn’t it been like a thorn in his side for months that he couldn’t seem to find one little nook of the sprawling facility without an Avenger or staff member occupying it?

None of this seems to make him feel any better in the moment, though, because now, Steve’s not around to whistle and hum tunelessly, or ask him question after idle question about his needs and wants and his wellbeing - he’s really managed to get himself spoiled, he realizes. The baby monitors broadcast an empty, silent nursery. The lights are all still off, and the pale daylight flooding in through every window only seems to highlight the stillness of each room.

Finally, he forces himself to move. To clean up, to work mindlessly and think of nothing at all. He tells Friday to play music - he doesn’t even care *what* music, as long as it fills the apartment with something besides the lonely quiet.

Cleaning turns out to be a mistake, too. Without the little messes of laundry and dishes, the rooms
only seem more barren.

Even as his throat aches and his face flushes hot and tears gather swiftly in his eyes, he’s struck with the revelation that this bitter sadness is probably more chemical than circumstantial, so he tries not to judge himself too harshly for allowing himself to sink down onto the couch, slump over, and cry. Soon, soft weeping builds to wracking sobs as he slouches in on himself, back bowing around the unfamiliar absence of his son.

“Dr. Cho is on her way to visit you, Bucky,” Friday warns softly, lowering the volume on the upbeat music she had selected. “Shall I tell her you’re asleep?”

The tears seem to stop on their own out of sheer embarrassment as Bucky hurries to the kitchen to dry his face off with a paper towel. “No - no. I’m okay.”

He meets her at the door just as she arrives, fairly confident that any evidence of his brief breakdown can be passed off as fatigue. But then there’s the sad smile on her face, and the suitcase she’s towing behind her, and her free arm extended to embrace him - and that’s all it takes. There he goes again, crying like a baby as he pulls her into a tight hug. He feels like a fucking idiot. He’d forgotten she was leaving today.

“Oh!” she sighs, half-teary herself, and laughing anyway - not that he can blame her for laughing at him. “Oh, Bucky. It’s going to be okay,” she promises him, patting his back soothingly. “You want me to come in for a minute?”

He tries to say yes, but a shuddering gasp is all he can intone, so he just nods against her shoulder, although it still takes him a little while to pry himself away from her.

She walks him over to the couch, then hurries around the room, turning on the lights until the apartment is bright and cheery. “Wow - the place is so clean! God, I don’t know how you’re doing it. Are you here all alone? Where are Steve and Lincoln?”

“He took him to the meeting to see everybody,” Bucky replies pitifully.

“Oh,” she nods understandingly, flopping down next to him. “I bet you feel like you just sent your little boy off to college, huh?”

“Kind of. Yeah.”

“Well, I guess it’s good that you’re seeing how both of you do - being apart for a few hours at a time. I gave you a month in my report, but - listen - I wanted to give you a little longer. We can still change it if you feel like you need longer.”

“No, I think I should - I should get out of the facility at some point,” he says. “Or I’ll never do it.”

"Well," Helen sighs, "I guess I can only commend your tenacity. It's up to you to decide when you're ready to jump back on the horse--"

"Not sure I'm ready to jump on any horses just yet," Bucky jokes, finally getting his wayward emotions back under control as he mops at his wet face with the shoulder of his t-shirt.

Helen snorts, but her eyes stay fixed on the wall in front of them, wandering over the dark television screen. Bucky can already see exactly what's on her mind even before she speaks which, luckily, gives him a moment to prepare himself to give her an unwavering response.

"You're going after Strazds, aren't you? Once you've got the means."
"Of course I am."

Helen laughs once, and Bucky thinks that it's a sound too callous and mean for someone who has always seemed so kind, and then she shakes her head. "You don't have to convince me of anything, Bucky. I know what you're capable of, and I know what Strazds deserves. Listen, I wish Zola was still alive so you could kick his ass, too. I figured you'd want to go find him. To be honest, if you hadn't decided to pursue him, I might have done it myself. I'm no super soldier, but I'm pretty sure I could take down a ninety year old if I really put my mind to it."

"I just want information. I'm not going to kill him."

That's not the whole truth, though, is it? Bucky doesn't like the idea of killing. He never wants to do it again, and in a perfect world, he never would. But Juris Strazds? That was a man who had worked with Zola, who had befriended him, assisted him, and devoted himself to studying his work, learning from him. That's a man who signed his own death warrant a long time ago. He was certainly dangerous enough to warrant assassination by merit of his knowledge alone. The things Strazds knows, in the wrong hands, could be infinitely dangerous, and Strazds had already proven that his own hands could do considerable damage without much help from Zola or anyone else.

The right thing to do - and Bucky knows this, but tries not to think about it - would be to ask for help from the others. Perhaps even recuse himself from the situation entirely. Strazds would be brought in mostly unharmed, and the appropriate authorities would deal with him as they saw fit.

But there is no government agency or intelligence group that Bucky would trust to deal with a man like Strazds, who had spent so long with Hydra, working directly with one of their most prized weapons. Strazds would have connections throughout the organization, and there were very few systems whose staffs weren't seeded with Hydra spies and sympathizers. Strazds would find more friends than fair prosecutors anywhere he was sent. Bucky knows that he doesn't want to see that happen, but he's also not sure what he will want, in that moment when he's face to face with Strazds again for the first time in nearly fifty years.

He's going to find Strazds on his own for precisely this reason. He can't drag Steve into this without giving up what he feels is his right and his alone - to choose how his captor should be punished. And he hasn't decided what to do with him yet. He may not even know until he looks him in the eye. He'll come prepared to bring him in and surrender him to the team's best judgment, but in his heart, he's also preparing himself - already forgiving himself - for killing his tormentor. He has paid dearly for that right. If he wants to collect what he's owed, he's not going to let anything or anyone - even Steve - stand between him and the closure he has earned.

"You're not sure about that, are you? About not killing him."

Helen Cho's intuition is nothing to shake a stick at, apparently.

"If you knew what you wanted to do, you'd have told Steve already. You know he'd support you if you wanted to turn him in, and you know he'd help you if you wanted Strazds dead. But you haven't made up your mind yet, have you?"

"Steve would kill him in a heartbeat," Bucky sighs. "I doubt I could stop him, if he so much as laid eyes on him. His knuckles go white if I even mention the footage or the files. Whatever happens to Strazds when I find him - I want it to be my call."

"And how exactly do you plan to find him?"

"Fury gave me his address," he smiles wryly. "At the party."
"Oh. Go figure. Typical Nick Fury baby shower gift: the home addresses of your enemies." Cho takes a deep breath, fidgeting with the handle of her suitcase. "You said you wanted information from him. What are you hoping to find out?" she asks, but her voice drops low just as she finishes the question. Her jaw clenches momentarily as she realizes she already knows the answer. "You want to know what happened to the missing one. The second little girl."

"She's the only one left."

"If she's still alive."

Bucky looks up sharply, stung by the prospect, but lowers his gaze to the floor again, knowing that Helen is absolutely right.

"You know there's a chance that they killed her. If you didn't see her again and she was never trained with the others, then she may have been born without your enhancements. They might have considered her a failed test subject."

Bucky worries the inside of his cheek between his canines, trying to reconcile with that possibility. He can't do it, though. It's not possible, and if it is, he's not ready to face it. "I don't think so. Even if she was born non-enhanced, Hydra wouldn't throw away the opportunity to raise an operative within their own ranks - condition her from birth. She would still be valuable to them."

“So...you think she might be working for them.”

And he almost wishes that he could bring himself to believe she had died. Bucky is silent, though how long he remains that way, he couldn't say. "I hope not."

"If you find out that she's still out there, and she's not on our side...that she's working for them - what are you going to do?"

"I don't know that, either." Bucky can only tell himself that, if that's the case, then he'll deal with her - with whoever she's become - the same way he'll deal with Strazds. He'll find her. He'll confront her, talk to her if he can, and then he'll make a decision. It's a bridge that can't be crossed yet - thank God.

Helen clears her throat. "This wouldn't have anything to do with why you were so upset, would it? You looked like you'd already been having a rough morning when I got here. I know all those water works weren't just for little old me. Or were you really just missing Lincoln that bad?"

"It was mostly just Lincoln," Bucky admits. "Strazds was the last thing on my mind, actually. I just - it's stupid. I've got more friends now than I've had in my whole life. Not just classmates and neighbors, like I had back before the war. Real friends. People I trust. I've got Steve. I've got a beautiful, perfect little boy. I don't know. Maybe it's just the hormones. One second, I felt alright, and then I just got so...lonely. Heavy. I missed my mom. I missed my sister. God, I'd give anything for them to be able to meet Lincoln," he whispers shakily, fighting to keep his voice from breaking again. "Lonely doesn't even cut it. I'm depressed."

"Your hormones are going to take a while to balance out again, Bucky. As your endocrinologist, my current prognosis is that you're in for a hell of a ride for the next few weeks. Bleeding, weight loss, weight gain, depression, euphoria, unbridled rage - I wish I could stay a little bit longer, but--"

“No,” says Bucky. “God, no. I'll miss you like crazy and you better stay in touch, but you've got your own research and your lab and your staff's probably up Shit Creek without you,” he sighs. “You did so much for me. Thank you so much.”
“Aw,” she giggles. “Tony paid me well. So. Thanks for getting pregnant. Give me a call when you’re up for round two—”

“No.”

“You might—”

“God, no. He can play with Clint’s kids. No siblings. I’m done.”

Helen collapses back into the couch cushions, laughing. “Okay, then. And don’t let Steve talk you into any more, either. And don’t let him give you that bullshit about how much happier Lincoln will be if he has a brother or sister to play with. I’m an only child and I never had to share anything. It was great.”

“I’m sure gonna miss you,” Bucky says, shaking his head. “But you seem happy to be heading home.”

“Well. I’m not going home just yet. I think I’ve earned a vacation, haven’t I?” she winks. “A few nights in Asgard might do me good.”

“You and Thor are...working out, I guess?”

“Oh, we’re working out. At least, I’m getting a workout. It’s not...you know. It’s not a romantic thing. Just good, old-fashioned sex. With the Norse god of thunder.”

“That why it’s been storming every night?” Bucky smiles flatly. The lightning has been keeping Lincoln up.

“I - do you think that's...possible?”

“Well, he’s the Norse god of thunder, Helen.”

“And...I rode him so hard the weather changed?” she grins, wide-eyed. “Talk about a confidence boost.”

Bucky is up off the couch on pure instinct before Steve’s fingers can even reach the door handle. He forgets all about his company in favor of lifting Lincoln out of the sling on Steve’s chest. He doesn’t even let poor Steve into the apartment.

“Hi, handsome,” he breathes, feeling the painful knot between his ribs uncoil and relax. “Boy, did I ever miss you - you know that? God, I’ll bet you’re starved.”

“Hi, Buck,” says Steve. He’s probably feeling a little overlooked, but Bucky can’t bring himself to care in the slightest. The only thing he cares about is settling down in the armchair and getting his sleepy little boy cradled right up against him. “And congratulations.”

“On what?” Bucky replies absently.

“You’re an Avenger. Officially,” Steve smiles, not seeming entirely happy about it, but beaming with pride all the same.

Bucky’s sudden jolt upright wakes Lincoln, who pries his eyes open to peer up at him with a gaze that’s almost questioning and a frown of annoyance. “You’re fucking kidding me. They said yes?”

“But they want us both to give it a few more months. We’ll only be called in for missions if it’s all hands on deck and after that we’ll alternate, so someone’s always here with Lincoln. If we need
something to do before then, I’ll work in tactical and Stark wants your help in R&D.”

Six months. Tactical. R&D. Sure, whatever. “Do I get a suit?”

“We can’t have two Iron Mans.”

“No, like—”

“We can’t have two Captain Americas, either, Bucky.”

“What am I supposed to wear, jeans and t-shirt?” Bucky gripes.

“Well, you’re not going into combat without protective gear—”

“So what am I going to be?” he demands, bouncing Lincoln as he begins to fuss. “Captain Tac-gear? Mouth-guard Man?”

“We’ll figure something out,” Steve snorts.

Helen shrugs. “I kind of liked Mouth-guard Man.”

“So...when I’m on an op and you’re here with Lincoln—”

“Hell, no.”

“Please.”

Steve gives his shield, which is at home right by the door, as usual, a pained and possessive glance. “I...will think about it.”

“He loves you a lot,” Helen says sympathetically. “But not that much.”

“Welcome to the team, Buck,” Steve smiles, and Bucky smiles back.

“Get back to me about that shield, buddy.”

"Oh, crap," Steve groans suddenly, hand flying to his forehead, where it fumbles to rub out a sudden rush of tension. "Uh, Tony bought Lincoln an Iron Man onesie. He wants him to wear it when we get pictures done."

Bucky stares at Steve to keep his eyes from rolling. Lincoln kicks his legs and coos excitedly, and even though Bucky knows it has to be coincidental, he can’t help but think, You little traitor. "Why?"

"I..." Steve sighs, then chuckles tiredly. "I had to compromise."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long gap in updates! The play I did wrapped up today and I was so desperate to sit down and write that I skipped the cast party! Knocked out a new chapter, too! Thanks for hanging in there, everyone! Also, sorry, because I didn't even pretend to proofread this.
When the infamously jaded Clint Barton tells Steve and Bucky that they’ve had it as easy at getting with Lincoln, they don’t question his authority on the subject. They also decide that they don’t want to know what difficult is. Clint offers to tell them a few horror stories sometime. He claims to be saving the really gnarly ones for the inevitable point at which either Steve or Bucky experiences a lapse of reason and begins to flirt with the notion of adding a second baby to their family. Bucky promises Clint that, while he can’t speak for Steve, that particular temptation won’t be a problem for him.

Day to sleepless, bleary-eyed day, it hasn’t seemed all that easy.

In hindsight, though, it could have been worse. June slips away in a hazy whirlwind, and when July comes, the paper calendar on the refrigerator remains a month behind. Neither of them know the date most mornings, and sometimes they’re a little unsure of the day of the week. Actually, there are times when Bucky counts himself lucky to know whether the sun is rising or setting.

For over a month, their lives no longer run on clocks and calendars: when Lincoln is awake, they’re awake with him - feeding, changing, soothing, rocking, humming, singing, laying on a blanket in the center of the living room floor, stretched out on their bellies alongside him as he struggles to lift his head when he hears their voices; and when he’s asleep, they’re cleaning, cooking and eating if they can, showering if they have the extra time. Sleep comes somewhere in between all of that.

Steve had been stir-crazy by the end of Bucky’s pregnancy - now he doesn’t want his leave to end. Secretly, he’d rather that Lincoln never got a day older, either. He spends every moment with his son wishing that he could stop time, and yet every day brings new surprises and discoveries, new pieces of Lincoln’s personality to marvel at, and more awe and wonder as that ghostly ultrasound image transforms into a living, breathing, thinking person right before his eyes.

They’re unforgivably greedy over him during that first month. Sam and Sharon have access, of course, and Bruce sees to all his first medical assessments, but other than with those elite few, Steve and Bucky don’t feel like sharing a single second of Lincoln’s time. They suffer only one major excursion, but afterward they agree that it’s completely worth it: Parker must have taken three hundred pictures of the three of them, and Steve prints almost all of them. He frames the best - of course, Tony gets a very nice, framed picture for his desk, of Lincoln with that goofy little grin, decked out in his puffy little Iron Man suit - and the rest are painstakingly placed into a scrapbook. Steve particularly treasures a set of four images - Peter’s rapid-fire photography had preserved in stop-motion the glorious moment when all the excitement had finally gotten the best of Lincoln, and he had spit-up all over that precious red and gold onesie. Steve barely keeps himself from having those framed, as well, and giving Stark the complete set.

Then around the beginning of July, something really wonderful happens: Lincoln discovers that night is for sleeping, and daytime is for everything else. Incrementally, Bucky goes from feeding him every two hours, day or night, to feeding him twice at night, to one short feeding around three, and then, suddenly, Lincoln decides that he can sleep for nine glorious hours without waking up his parents. In the process, they move him from the cradle beside their bed into his crib.

His internal clock is precise and consistent: between 0555 and 0605 every day, they doze and listen to him stirring on the monitor, but it only ever last for a few minutes. Once he’s awake, he’s starving. And screaming. Steve dubs him the most reliable alarm clock he’s ever owned.

On the morning of Sunday the 30th, Bucky wakes Steve just before the huffing and squirming is
bound to start on the screen of the monitor on their nightstand. He rolls into Steve’s arms, burying his face in his bare chest as he stretches.

“Could have slept three more minutes,” Steve slurs, weaving his fingers into Bucky’s hair.

“I’m hungry,” Bucky mumbles against Steve’s skin. “But also fat.”

Steve chuckles softly - it’s more of a sleepy exhale, but he’s still too tired to manage an actual smile to go along with it. “You were a little chunky right after he was born, but you burned through most of it nursing...too fat for pancakes?”

“I guess I’m not that fat,” Bucky agrees, and Steve can feel his grin forming against him. “If you’re making pancakes and bacon, you know.”

“Who said bacon?”

“Thought you said something about bacon.”

“Did I.”

“And eggs.”

“Must have been talking my sleep. Hey - come here. Before he starts crying.”

Steve feels a little giddy as Bucky shifts up onto the pillows beside him. He knows he’s kissed Bucky since Lincoln was born. He must have. But as far as he can recall, they’ve been quick and neat little courtesies - more habitual than anything. He makes sure to make this one count. Leans into it, takes it slow and easy, but insistent. Lays a hand between Bucky’s shoulder blades to draw him in closer until Bucky gives in and reciprocates the depth of the kiss, metal fingers humming as they stroke a pleasant chill into Steve’s side.

“Oh my God,” Steve gasps, breaking away suddenly. “He’s sleeping through the night now. Are you still sore?”

“Of course I’m not sore. It’s been a month, Steve.”

“We should have sex!” Steve whispers, knowing he sounds a little too desperate and delighted by the thought.

“You should buy condoms!” Bucky answers, mocking Steve's grin.

“I’ll buy condoms today.”

“Seriously?” Bucky laughs flatly.

“You bet your ass, I will.”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing,” Bucky sighs, pushing himself up reluctantly and finding his discarded t-shirt. “Go make breakfast. I’m gonna try to get him up and dressed before he starts hollering.”

“He’s not a morning person. He can’t help it.”

“Takes after me,” Bucky yawns, hurrying to the bathroom as quietly as he can. Once Lincoln hears that he’s up and not in the nursery, he’ll be inconsolable for at least fifteen minutes. Steve never thought he’d have to strategize with Bucky about how to make less noise while peeing, and
yet...here they are.

As Bucky goes through all the morning paces with their son, Steve utilizes his newest talent: brewing coffee while still technically asleep. The old coffee maker lives on top of the refrigerator now - press pots are quieter, and he can brew half-caf for Bucky and add cocaine and tequila to his own - should he ever have the need - without poisoning his partner or his kid. He moves on autopilot for a while, with only one eye peeking open against the kitchen light, shaking off the prickling, sandy feeling on his eyelids that he had almost managed to forget after the serum had worked its initial magic. Not even the best formula of the serum stands up to parenting a newborn, apparently. How non-enhanced individuals survive it, he can’t imagine.

By the time Bucky wanders into the living room with Lincoln still yawning and stretching on the pillow of his shoulder, the kettle of water is close to whistling and Steve, now closer to full consciousness, is already mixing up the pancake batter. His wrist moves the whisk absently through the bowl, not meaning to watch, unable to look away, as Bucky settles down on the sofa, leaning against the cushioned arm, crossing his legs in front of him, and laying Lincoln in the cradle of his lap to free up his hands.

Usually, he feeds him in the nursery with the door barely ajar, requesting - not demanding - to be alone. And Steve doesn’t really mind. At least, he can understand why he’s private about it. Of all the emotional and physical changes pregnancy had caused, Bucky only really despises his swollen chest. If he goes a few hours without feeding Lincoln, clothes don’t do much to hide what can only be classified as breasts, and boy, does Bucky hate that word. His only consolation is the hope that, as with each of his past pregnancies, they’ll go back to normal once he’s no longer nursing.

But today promises to be blisteringly hot, and the nursery is uncomfortably warm and humid for anyone who hasn’t just spent ten months in a near-hundred degree environment, like Lincoln has. So today, Steve is allowed to be in the room with them. To bask in a sense of grace he doesn’t have a name for. He watches without curiosity, driven only by the pleas of his future self, who promises to treasure the memory, as Bucky catches the hem of his shirt between his teeth to hold it up, pausing momentarily to pull back his hair.

Lincoln watches him even more intently than Steve does, with eyes like saucers and his tongue darting in and out between his curled brushstroke lips. Bucky laughs at him. “Yeah?” he grins, voice muffled by the fabric of his shirt, as if Lincoln has told him aloud that he’s hungry. He pulls him up to lay across his abdomen. Instantly, Lincoln’s hands grasp for his chest, holding on like he’s a favorite toy, and he latches all on his own. With Bucky lying back like that, it’s up to Lincoln to maneuver his own head, but with that cushioning support beneath his chin, he manages to do it. Ever since Buck started using the temptation of food to get him to pick his head up and crawl, he’s gained strength and dexterity at an alarming rate.

Steve can feel himself smiling dreamily. He doesn’t bother to hide it.

“Stevie, water.”

Shit, Bucky doesn’t have anything to drink, does he? Steve remembers how Cho had emphasized the need to stay hydrated while breastfeeding. He should have thought of that. He reaches up toward the cabinet for a glass.

“Steve - the teapot.”

Oh, that is whistling. Clumsily, he aborts his search for the cup and whips around to turn off the burner. The kettle, of course, keeps shrieking until he snatches it off the stove. Every now and then, and only in the face of embarrassment, he experiences this bizarre phenomenon that causes his
subconscious image of himself to revert back to that ninety-eight pound young man, with weak, shaking fingers and two left feet. He’s experiencing it intensely, at the moment.

Lincoln is nearly finished with his own breakfast by the time Steve has the first batch of pancakes off the griddle. Bucky’s flow is always faster in the mornings, which has never seemed to bother Lincoln too much, and sleeping through the night only makes him more ravenous when morning finally comes. On top of that, he’s a lot bigger than he was two months ago. Unfortunately, the fact that he wakes up hungry also means that he can be a real asshole to Bucky, because when he’s hungry, he’s rough.

To say that Bucky had been surprised by how painful nursing turned out to be would be an understatement. In fact, his surprise is threefold: he hadn’t been aware that it was painful at all; he was shocked to discover that it was painful enough to hurt him; and he’s frankly astonished that he’s never seen a woman so much as flinch while nursing. Christ – there had been nights in those first few weeks where he’d practically dissociated from the sheer magnitude and relentlessness of the discomfort. Laura had been prepared for his frantic phone call, though, and had almost smugly confirmed that, yes, occasional (or constant) agony while nursing was totally normal. “Just give your nipples a few weeks,” she had advised bluntly. “They’ll toughen up.”

Lincoln is beginning to look a little less drowsy, Bucky thinks, studying him tenderly. Lincoln’s eyes are always open and bright now, taking in his surroundings with such concentration and curiosity that Bucky can almost feel him learning. Lincoln studies him right back, staring up into his eyes. The way he looks at the world is lovely, but the way Lincoln looks at him and at Steve – that’s different. Not awestruck or filled with wonder - just contemplative and easy. Safe. Familiar. It reminds Bucky that they belong to him. He’s theirs, and they’re his.

He pulls away on his own, cooing and snuffling in what sounds to Bucky almost like a triumphant laugh. Bucky snorts, giving him a hard pat on the backside. “Yeah, that’s right, buddy. No more,” he shrugs. “You cleaned house. I got nothin’ left.”

That earns him a grin and a hilarious, throaty laugh. And when Bucky laughs back at him, Lincoln laughs harder. They’re like their own little echo chamber. “Gross,” Bucky whispers, wiping drool off his son’s chin with the hem of his shirt as they smile at each other. “You’re a mess. Spit on me again, see what happens.”

He keeps Lincoln (and a rag - he’s learned his lesson) on his shoulder while he eats his own breakfast. Steve doesn’t disappoint with pancakes, either – they’re full of banana and peanut butter to make them more filling, so they don’t have to waste their time cooking and eating forty apiece, and - true to his word - he makes bacon and sausage. And slices up a melon. Bucky is always shocked by what Steve can accomplish in such a short space of time, even while very nearly sleepwalking.

They eat quickly, now in the habit of avoiding small talk in the mornings, and they’re just starting to clear away the dishes when an urgent rap at the door halts their efforts. They share a brief, questioning glance before Steve jogs over to answer it. Bucky’s hackles are up immediately: the rest of the team should be on duty. Granted, he’s become more social over the course of the past year, and given how much parenthood has served to isolate him, he’d normally love some company, but that frantic knock gives him a bad feeling.

When the door opens, he and Steve are equally surprised to see Pepper Potts standing in the entryway, hardly her usual dapper and pantsuit-ed self. She’s dressed down, with a big bag over her shoulder. And she doesn’t bother with the niceties, either.

“Hi,” is all they get, and a hurried smile, and then she stretches her arms out toward Lincoln. “Okay,
I’ve got him - you guys go.”

“Go where?” Bucky demands, but Steve’s hand is already on his shield, eyes wide and intent on Pepper, brow furrowed.

“Did Tony not - has he not--? Crap,” she huffs, pulling out her phone then gesturing broadly toward their television screen with it, like the image is a physical object that can be thrown. Seconds later, Tony’s face appears there, illuminated by the interior lights of his suit.

“Hello, Virginia. No time for booty calls - taking heavy fire.”

“I thought you were calling--”

“I got a little bit busy!”

“--Steve and James.”

“What part of--”

The television speakers buzz as an explosion causes the image of Stark’s face to judder.

“--heavy fire did you not understand?”

“They think I’m stealing their baby,” she says entreatingly.

“Cap, Barnes - Pepper is stealing your baby. You guys are the closest to me - I’ll upload my coordinates to the Dagger. Help, please, thank you, bye.”

And with that, the screen cuts out to static, and they’re back on active duty. For as much as he hates to leave Lincoln and as worried as he is about Stark, Bucky feels a twinge of excitement deep inside his chest. He has needed some excitement.

“I yelled at some trainees on my way up,” says Pepper, speaking rapidly. “Jet should be prepped for combat - Tony says everything you’ll need will be on it. Be safe, please.”

Bucky has to bite the inside of his cheek as he passes Lincoln into her open arms. “You do know how to take care of a baby, right?” he can’t help but ask.

Pepper glances back over her shoulder at the now blank television screen where Stark’s face had been only a moment ago, then allows herself a very unladylike snort as she looks Bucky dead in the eye. “Are you kidding me?”

“Do you know how to--”

“Yes, I do know how to fly the fucking jet, Steve.”

“Well, Tony put in new navigational softwa--”

“Oh, would you look at that? We’re flying.”

“Did you get the coordinates for--”

“We’re going to set her down in twenty-nine minutes at 45.303, -81.625. Flowerpot Island. Stark says the facility they dug up is about a half-mile west of the landing site.”
“Sounds...like you’ve got this,” Steve admits, hurrying back to the jet’s main cabin and opening up his locker and - oh boy, he might do an end-zone dance, if he’s not careful. There’s his suit. He’s Captain America again. Finally. And thank God, because Steve Rogers had really needed a break. He practically tears off his clothes, he’s so eager to get into that beautiful, blue thing. He can’t even complain about being back in a jockstrap, even if it is July.

“Wish Tony’d put in a rear-view mirror,” Bucky sighs as the jet’s altitude climbs steeply. Steve is forced to linger in nothing but his jock and cup, steadying himself against the wall as the Dagger makes its sharp bank, picking up speed.

Moments later, they’re on a straight course northwest, and Bucky can leave the controls. Steve finally yanks his suit on, almost wishing Bucky’s eyes were still on him, even though he knows they’ve got more pressing matters to think about right now. Bucky seems more concerned with the lockers and the gear inside them.

“What’s this?” he hums softly, pulling a neatly folded bodysuit out of Steve’s locker - such a dark grey that it seems to be pulling light right out of the air.

“Stealth suit for night ops,” Steve explains, taking it by the collar and shaking it out.

“Can I have it?”

“No, Bucky. You can’t just steal my suits,” Steve laughs teasingly. “You’ve got a locker right there. Tony put so much gear in here for you.”

“Stop being such an only child and share your stuff, Rogers,” Bucky grins, yanking it back out of his hands.

“It won’t fit over your stupid arm, asshole.”

“Can I rip the sleeve off?”

“Absolutely not.”

“I’m gonna.”

“Well, you can try, but it’s reinforced carbon-f--Fuck you! Oh my God!”

“There, no more sleeve.”

“You stupid prick! I can’t believe you just tore the sleeve off my fuckin’ suit!” Steve whines, chuckling anyway.

“My suit now.”

“God, I should have known you were going to do that. You used to spit in my beers so you could steal them, too.”

“Worked, didn’t it? There, now you got a spare sleeve,” Bucky grins, tossing him the torn cloth as they both pick through the weapons locker. Steve is almost certain that Bucky cataloged all of his favorite guns and knives and was making a point to reach for them just before he did.

“I’m--” Steve cuts his threat short, realizing he has no real recourse here. “I'm gonna tell Lincoln.”

Bucky’s hand stills on his holster and his face pales, suddenly expressionless, then swallows, jaw working nervously all the while. “You think he’s doing alright?”
Steve, only seconds after witnessing the consuming heaviness of worry descend on Bucky, experiences it firsthand. “We should call.”

“It’s only been ten minutes since we left the apartment.”

“Yeah,” Steve sighs in resignation, then swallows tightly.

“Let’s call.”

Stark isn’t hard to find. Bucky makes a steep descent, bringing the Dagger as close to the epicenter of the flashbulb explosions and the narrow columns of dark smoke as the forest canopy will allow. Steve straps on his helmet and opens up the back of the jet. He takes them down to a reckless 250 feet, gives Steve the greenlight to make the jump, and then pulls up so hard on the yoke that his head presses back into the seat with the sheer force of the ascent. The beach is the only place clear enough to set it down, and even that’s tricky. He’ll have to take the bike from the beach to Steve’s position.

Hoping his coordination hasn’t suffered during his long leave of absence from combat, Bucky activates his comm while picking a path through the thick forest at a solid 40mph, knees and calves brushing the dirt on each tight turn.

“Get him?” he shouts over the roar of the bike’s engine.

“Not - yet,” Steve answers brokenly, each pause punctuated by the impact of his shield against metal. “Looks like someone got a hold of Stark’s Iron Legion tech - gave it more guns - got seventeen engaging--”

“Oh my way.”

“No - head for the bunker - see if you can find Sam and Rhodes - and keep the bike running, might need it for medevac--”

“You got it.”

Luckily, the bunker’s not hard to find. It’s halfway between the landing site and Steve’s position. All that shows above ground is a concrete structure overgrown with brush, but there’s a wide hole blown in the side of it that’s gushing acrid smoke. Bucky leaves the bike a safe distance from the action and sprints toward the demolished entrance, but skids to a halt when he hears an enraged shout off to his left that can only be Sam. He passes two downed ILs on his way toward the commotion, and finds Sam still engaged with three others, fighting them hand-to-hand with a knife. If they’re anything like Stark’s models, then bullets won’t do much good. It takes precision to disable them - he’ll have to get under their plating and go for sensors, power sources, and servos.

Sam’s been knocked on his back and lost his grip on the knife, but he lands a powerful kick right at the robot’s center of gravity, sending it into the air. It fires its repulsors to steady itself, and Bucky takes advantage of the brief mid-air stall to grab it by the ankle and bring it down hard on the one that’s advancing on Sam’s six, demolishing both with the force of the impact. Sam rolls to his feet without a moment’s hesitation and hits the remaining one with a running tackle, jamming his knife into the unprotected wiring at the juncture of its neck and shoulder, twisting the blade until a spray of sparks forces him to recoil with his arm flung over his eyes. The IL’s fists clench spasmodically, but it doesn’t get back up.

Sam rounds on Bucky with his weapon half-raised, barely able to tell friend from foe through his adrenaline high, then takes a stumbling step backward when Bucky puts his hands up in surrender.
“Fuck,” Sam shouts, sounding mad as hell but grinning all the same. “Where the hell’d you come from?”

“Stark called for backup.”

“Got desperate enough to call mama, huh?”

“Fuck you, Wilson,” Bucky mumbles, jogging after him back toward the bunker. “Where’s the Colonel?”

“In here - Tony had him working on disabling the other units before they could boot up and try to kill us. How’s Sammy?”

“Misses you. Can’t wait for you to come back and do the airplane trick so he can throw up in your mouth again.”

“Asshole. I’ll cover the west wall - see if your dumb arm can rip off that door on the north side.”

Bucky picks up speed and beats Sam to the bunker, finds the door, and, hoping it’s only a single layer of steel, stiffens his fingers until the plates lock and drives through the metal in a single thrust. It gives with a shrill creak as the steel stretches and then rips under the force of the punch, and it turns out that the structure’s so old and weak that when Bucky tears his arm out of the fissure, the whole damn door comes with it, frame and all.

“Wilson!” he calls, flinging the ruined steel door at an IL as it rounds the corner. “You take this door! Stay out of that smoke!”

“Fuck you! I got it!”

“I can hold my breath for three minutes, you can’t,” he argues, baiting Sam by holding out a spare SMG and affixing a 40mm grenade launcher to its underbarrel.

“Whatsoever,” Sam concedes, heading for the entrance and taking the offering. “Smug motherfucker.” Bucky just catches his sensual whisper of “Ooh, damn, baby,” directed at the gun.

The inside of the bunker is expansive - a wide, bare room, hallways at either end that each terminate in stairs leading down to the lower levels. “Ground floor’s clear.”

“North stairwell’s blocked,” Sam shouts back. “What’s the south look like--”

Bucky answers the question with a concussive blast from his M203 that sends the first three IL knockoffs to claw their way up into the hall careening back into the dark stairwell. One makes it out, gets a shot off from the repulsor in its palm. Bucky makes a quick pivot as the heat from the beam ghosts past his face and then ducks low to avoid the second, then returns fire blindly. The ILs don’t take much damage even at close range, but they stall long enough that Bucky can shoulder his way into the narrow passage and get his arms around the one that’s still standing and throw them both down the steps, knocking all the advancing ILs off balance.

Once he gets his back against the wall, disabling the attackers is just a matter of quick, precise knife work. Luckily, their hand-to-hand capabilities are clumsy and slow and their visual sensors aren’t as good as Stark’s models. One hits him with a weak backhand, scratching his cheek, but it follows up by driving its elbow into his chest, which is so fucking sore. He sees nothing but red. His metal arm traps the offending IL in a tight headlock and he wedges the bare fingers of his right hand under its jaw. It’s a satisfying method of decapitation. Kind of like popping a champagne cork.
“Barnes? You alive?”

Bucky realizes he must have left his comm link open. The silence following the fight sounds like it made Sam nervous. “Yeah, no thanks to you.”

“Fuck you, I’m busy,” he shouts, and he must be - Bucky can hardly hear him over gunfire and the scream of wind. “Got a couple airborne - think they’re heading for the-”

Unfortunately, Bucky has to stop listening. Something’s coming down the hallway fast, and it’s definitely made of metal. He reloads the grenade launcher and ducks down into the shadows just beside the stairs, keeping still in hopes that its motion sensors won’t see him immediately and that these bootlegged units don’t detect heat.

It rounds the corner a second later, repulsors glowing, and Bucky’s finger jumps dangerously against the trigger. He holds his fire on nothing but instinct, and thankfully, it doesn’t shoot him. It yells at him.

“Go, go! Clear the building!”

Well, at least he managed to locate Colonel Rhodes without killing him. Rhodes doesn’t wait around for him - once he hits the stairs, the repulsors on his calves flare and he takes off for the bunker’s exit. If the Colonel’s retreating, Bucky’s not going to hang out long enough to find out why, so he follows him at a dead sprint. He’s not quite clear of the bunker when it blows, so he throws himself on the ground, covers his head, and hopes for the best.

When the debris settles and Bucky opens his eyes, Colonel Rhodes is hovering over him, arms spread wide to shield him from the hail of concrete and earth. “Sorry about that,” Rhodes pants, raising the faceplate on his suit. “My comm system took a hit. Didn’t know you were in there. There were twenty-five more of those units in the basement ready to boot up.”

“So who booted them up in the first place?”

“Tony was working on that - traced the signal to somewhere in South America, didn’t get any further than that before we realized someone was already bringing them online to kill us. Where's he at?”

Bucky reopens his channel. “Steve, you got Stark?”

Steve actually sounds a little winded when he answers. Maybe he's gotten a little out of shape during his leave. God knows, they've both been eating like shit. “Yeah, but he’s out cold. I'm taking him to the jet. Looks like they ganged up on him in the air and brought him down pretty hard. Vitals are good for now.”

“Knocked out but not dead,” Bucky informs Rhodes tightly.

Rhodes heaves a sigh. “Dumbass.”

“They got the Dagger in the air!” Sam's voice crackles suddenly through his earpiece. ”Barnes, I could really use some War Machine up here now.”

_Oh, fuck that. “Sam, repeat?”_

“They’re stealing our jet. Help.”

Great. He was hoping he'd misheard.
“Steve, stay with Stark - me and Colonel Rhodes will get the jet.”

“Copy that - be careful.”

Bucky shuts off his comm and shoulders his rifle, swallowing a twinge of embarrassment. “You mind carrying me?”

Without nearly enough warning, Rhodes hooks his arms under Bucky’s and takes off like a shot. His flight-suit is a lot faster than Sam’s wings and Bucky wasn’t exactly prepared to be terrified.

“I hate carrying people,” the Colonel grumbles, voice distorted by the suit.

“Sorry!” Bucky hadn’t meant to scream.

They reach the jet in seconds. Sam’s in the air with it, trying to slow them down without disabling their ride home, but he can’t do much with them shooting at him except bait, evade, and repeat.

“Roof?” Rhodey shouts.

“Roof.”

“Just hope they don’t barrel-roll.”

Rhodes makes a pass over the Dagger and lets him down on the hull, which Bucky immediately decides is way too smooth. And fuck, they’re flying erratically. He doesn’t see any better solution than to make his way to the tail of the jet, try to reach the seam of the cargo door, and then force it open.

Wouldn’t have been a problem for him two years ago. He would have done it without thinking. Now, he can feel a knot forming in his stomach as he makes his way down the curve of the hull. There’s miles of choppy ocean water on his left, jagged rocks on his right, five hundred feet of air in between him and either landing, a fierce wind all around that would like nothing more than to drag him off of his precarious foothold, and Lincoln waiting for him back at the Facility, probably already missing him. He can’t afford to be reckless anymore.

Unfortunately, his situation calls for a certain degree of recklessness.

He crouches low, shifting his weight swiftly as the jet bucks underneath him, and clambers back toward the aft end of the Dagger, leaning backward into the cutting wind. When he reaches the tail, he drops down flat on his belly and lets himself slide toward the ledge, making a conscious effort to breathe steadily as he relinquishes his mechanical hand’s grip on the edge to reach for the lip of the cargo door. The speed and height combined make him feel like he might pass out if he doesn’t keep reminding himself to exhale.

The jet goes nose up. The engines scream on either side of him as they instantly accelerate.

They know he's back here. They're trying to shake him.

And with one sharp twist to the side, they do it. For a second that seems much, much longer, Bucky’s in the air and has no contact with the jet. Somewhere inside him, a breaker switch seems to flip. His brains resets. Everything is simple again.

Complete the mission. Win or die.

As natural as breathing.
His fear evaporates, leaving him with nothing but the dry, desolate heat of rage.

The fingers of his prosthetic slam into the edge of the jet's tail, piercing deep into the empennage plating, and his right hand slides along the tilted underside of the craft until he feels the airtight seam of the cargo door. If his fingernails tear away from their nail-beds as he pries it open, he doesn't feel it. He makes a one inch gap and, using his bare hand as a wedge to keep it open, he frees his prosthetic from the fin and plunges it into the cargo hold, breaking through the seal. The hydraulics put up a good fight, but once he's got a two-foot opening, he swings his legs up, braces his boots against the edge, and forces the ramp downward in a single, unrelenting press.

The jet banks hard, but he's got a good foothold now. As it rights itself, two IL units rush the cargo door to defend their stolen prize. Bucky grabs the ledge above him and kicks the first unit back, swinging himself into the hold just as the other charges the repulsor in its palm to fire. He grabs it by the throat and flings it out of the narrow opening, so the blast comes too late and hits only empty air.

The unit guarding the cockpit advances with a little more caution than the other two had, closing on him and aiming pulse after pulse at Bucky's head, rapid-fire, forcing him to duck and sidestep and block with his left arm as the craft heaves upward again, twists, then dives into free fall.

His assailant's aim suffers in the sudden weightlessness of the descent. A blast hits the ceiling over Bucky's head, splitting a pipe open that sprays a plume of scalding coolant into the cargo hold, but it gives him a moment of cover. He uses the forward tilt of the jet to carry him down hard onto the attacking unit, grips it by the flexible juncture of torso and legs, then rends it in half.

The last unit remaining - the one wreaking havoc at the navigational controls - doesn't bother to defend itself as he tears it from its seat, throws it to the cockpit floor, and brings his heel down on its head to demolish its sensor array. Even before it stops thrashing, Bucky takes back the yolk and eases the jet out of its vertical dive. He had very nearly regained control too late - the fuselage sends up twin waves as it skims across the shallows.

He makes a brief ascent. Banks against the wind to decelerate. Touches down in the sand and scrub, just out of reach of the surf. Once the sound of his own heartbeat stops filling his head, he hears Sam laughing and whooping over the comm. It takes Bucky a moment to remember how to speak - he still hasn't managed to shake himself free of that strange, adrenaline-dampened state. "Got it."

Rhodes and Sam land on the beach a few seconds later, and Steve emerges from the treeline carrying Tony over his shoulder, suit and all.

Together, Sam and Steve extricate him from the suit, and Sam takes over from there, rechecking his vitals and making sure his pupils still dilate, while Bucky immediately sets to work on a temporary repair for the leaking coolant line.

"Nice job, Buck." Steve slaps him on the shoulder. Bucky feels himself stiffen at the unexpected contact, but he nods. Acknowledges him.

"You okay? Jesus, Bucky, your hand--"

"Not broken," Bucky reports, and keeps working.

He can feel Steve’s eyes on him, but he doesn’t know why. He doesn’t think he’s done anything wrong. If Steve has something to say, he’ll say it.

"Did...the jet take any other damage?"

"No." The coolant leak is repaired as well as it can be. He moves on to checking the two IL units for
signs of life. Finding none, he locks them in a cargo storage container. He can feel Steve’s eyes on him again.

“Me and Rhodey are going to make another pass through the forest, see if any of those Iron Legion units are still out there. I’ll grab the bike.”

Bucky nods again. He doesn’t know why Steve is reporting to him. Part of him understands why, but there’s a buzz in his head that’s keeping him from hearing the explanation. His eyes flicker up toward Steve’s face. There’s a bleeding laceration on the bridge of his nose. Not too deep.

“I’ll take a look at your hand when I get back, alright?”

"Was Bucky...did he seem alright?" Steve finally asks. He's been trying for a few agonizing minutes to phrase what should have been a simple question.

Rhodey shrugs as much as his bulky suit will allow, still focusing on getting his damaged sensors to scan the forest for running units. "Didn't talk to him much. I mean, he did just hijack that jet midair from the outside. He's tough - wouldn't be surprised if he could whoop your ass on a good day."

"He has," Steve laughs weakly. "Couple times."

"Nice to be fighting with him instead of against him. What'd you think was wrong with him?"

"Just seemed quiet."

Rhodey shakes his head. "One of these days, you're gonna figure out what the letters in PTSD stand for."

"He’s dealing with a lot more than PTSD."

"You really want my advice?" Rhodey smiles gently. “Because I’ve got some.”

"Yeah. Of course."

“Tony has PTSD. Flashbacks, night-terrors, dissociation, depersonalization. He struggles bad sometimes. But you know what he doesn’t do anymore?"

“Sell weapons to terror cells?” Rhodey doesn’t look amused, so Steve bites his tongue.

“Drink. He decided to sober up a few months ago, and he’s sticking with it. He does stupid shit when he hits the bottle. Shit he regrets. He’s still an alcoholic, but now he’s a recovering alcoholic. Now, I know that’s not going to fix everything that’s wrong with him, but when he’s struggling I don’t stop trusting him not to drink. At least...I don’t let him see that I don’t trust him, you know? If he thinks I’ll always see him as an addict, hell, why not just be an addict?” Rhodey’s voice softens - a rare occurrence, at least in Steve’s experience. “Don’t punish Barnes for feeling like he needs to use again - just help him get to a place where he doesn’t need to use.”

“You think the conditioning Hydra put him through is an addiction? That any of that felt good? He doesn’t want to go back to that.”

“I don’t know. Life’s a lot simpler when you don’t have to think about anything. When you can just...you know. Follow orders. I miss it, sometimes.”

Steve allows himself a small smile, full of guilt. “I don’t.”
Rhodey scoffs. “I know you don’t. But I don’t think giving Barnes a gun is all that different from giving Tony a Scotch.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“Or you could just listen to him, Steve. Maybe without treating him like he’s a danger to himself,” Rhodey chuckles, almost like he’s trying to take some of the heaviness out of his words.

Steve still flinches. “Have I done that?”

“I don’t know. But that’s what I was doing to Tony. All I’m saying is...don’t carry him just because he trips. But if he needs somewhere to lean, make sure you’re there.”

Rhodey decides to make one last sweep of the bunker before heading back to the jet, so Steve takes the bike back to the beach without him. He finds Bucky wading through the shallows, dragging a disabled unit back to a heap of them he’s made in the sand to load up on the jet before they depart. The less of this tech they leave lying around, the better. Bucky dumps the lifeless unit on the pile just as Steve pulls up, but still doesn't look at him.

Even from a few yards away, Steve can see that familiar emptiness in his eyes. He hasn't seen it in a long time, and he had hoped he'd never see it again.

He wants to believe that Bucky has beaten all that conditioning. He needs to be able to trust him - not just at home, but in the field - and this has been their first real test of how he'll hold up on a mission since they'd fought together in Siberia. Then, there hadn't been time to care about the condition of Bucky's mind; his life and his freedom had taken precedent. Now, Steve wants to know that he's not just responding to old protocols triggered by violence. Bucky has to be in control, in every situation.

But he knows Rhodes is right. If Bucky is going to be trustworthy, then he’s got to trust himself, and he can’t do that if Steve doesn’t trust him first.

Finally, Bucky looks up. Turns that deadened gaze on him.

The second he meets Steve's eyes, his rifle is drawn and aimed.

Steve feels the world come apart underneath him. Like he’s hit the bottom in a falling-dream. The bolt clicks and the end of the barrel flashes.

Just behind his left ear, he hears the muted impact of the bullet meeting metal, followed by a the low blast of a repulsor cannon. Once he catches sight of the IL unit in his periphery, he pivots and brings his forearm down across its chest, crushing it into the sand and pinning it under his knee.

The shock and shame catch up with him instantly. He knows he should do something to permanently disable the unit, but he just sits there, some confused sense of remorse driving him to apologize before doing anything else.

Fortunately, Bucky speaks before Steve can decide what to do. "Wait, wait - don't disable it," he says softly, then passes Steve a 9mm. "Think we can track it back to whoever's operating these things?"

Steve reaches into his belt for a tracker. “Maybe.” He affixes it just beneath the plating of the unit's torso, somewhere he hopes whoever receives it won't look immediately. Its AV sensors are dead,
even though it’s targeting and propulsion systems seem functional. "If it's only interested in fighting, we'll take it down."

"Alright, move away on three - one, two--"

They release the unit and spring backward. It rights itself instantly and pummels them with a vicious barrage from its repulsor cannons, which hit only Steve's shield and Bucky's arm, and they fire back with a rain of bullets from the two Glocks. It continues the assault for only a few minutes before it decides they're not worth risking the remainder its functionality and flight capabilities, and takes off over the water. If it's built like one of Starks, it'll be able to muster enough power from its solar array to make it back to whoever might want it salvaged.

"It's a long shot," Bucky remarks, catching his breath and shaking a little sand out his arm's plating.

"Worth a try."

Bucky only stares expectantly at him. He must have seen Steve struggling for words a moment ago. Hell, he probably already knows why he's spooked. Steve feels low, especially considering that the fugue-state that had aroused his suspicions now seems to have passed.

"Sorry," Bucky says, seeming to force the word out. His voice sounds tired. "I was out of it back there."

"But you're okay now?" Steve asks carefully, laying a hand on his shoulder. "You had a look on you face like...I don't know. Like back in Washington."

“And Berlin,” Bucky adds, voice rough with exhaustion. The accusation seems to sting him as much as Steve was afraid it would, but he bows his head thoughtfully, eyes studying the dry grass sprouting from the sand at his feet, yet seeming to look inward instead. "The Winter Soldier’s who I am, Steve. We're not separate people. It's a part of me. It always will be."

Steve's jaw tightens. He doesn't want to ask, but he'd be remiss if he didn't. "You've been out of this kind of combat for a long time. If you're still acting on those protocols...I just have to know that we’re doing the right thing, Bucky. I need to know that you can handle being on combat missions."

Bucky doesn't flinch when Steve puts that all-important question to him. His eyes remain just as hard as they had been, but his gaze is sure and steady, unblinking. "I have to rely on programming when I'm in over my head. I just need some time to acclimate, but I'll learn to handle it. I’ve spent a year walking, and now I think I can run.” He smiles. “I was a little out of practice on hijacking quinjets.”

“I can deal with working with the Winter Soldier, as long as I take Bucky Barnes home with me afterward,” says Steve. “As long as the Winter Soldier’s willing to be an Avenger.”

“I don't take orders from Hydra anymore,” Bucky promises, taking back his Glock and releasing the magazine into his own open palm. "I take orders from you." He smiles, and Steve knows it's all for his sake. "Cap."

And Steve can't help but laugh at that. Finally, Bucky's forced smile spreads into a genuine one.

“There’s no part of me that would ever hurt you, Steve. Whoever I am, I love you.”

Steve’s shoulders sag with tired laughter. “You know, that’s not a bad pickup line,” he remarks, gripping Bucky’s shoulder. On an impulse, he pulls him into a tight hug. He feels solid in his arms. Not at all fragile. "Come on. Let's get Tony home."
"Fuck Tony," Bucky grunts, shouldering two of the units to haul them back onto the jet. He sounds like himself again. Steve follows suit. "Let's get me home."

"Too much action for you, old man?" Steve chuckles, then realizes that Bucky probably has a far more pressing problem than fatigue. "Buck, am I gonna have to wash breast-milk out of my suit?"

"No," Bucky replies, almost managing to sound innocent. "Might have to wash some out of my suit, though."

"You fucking jerk," he sighs, with all the bemused surprise of an I'll be damned. "Come on, let's hurry up with these. I wanna get back in there before Stark wakes up. We’ve gotta take pictures of ourselves kissing him."

“So we can - what? Why would you do that?”

“We do it every time he gets knocked out.”

“That’s stupid.”

He’s probably right. “Yeah, well,” Steve shrugs. “It’s a tradition.”

Sam pilots the jet on the way back home, since he’s the least roughed up from the fight. Their flight from the Facility at Lake Alice to Flowerpot Island had taken thirty minutes in a working quinjet, but it’ll take an hour to get back unless they want to risk overheating after that coolant blowout. Rhodey settles down in the cockpit next to Sam and starts to doze after only a few minutes in the air. Stark is still out cold; Sam’s visual evaluation and Friday’s scans had agreed on two badly bruised ribs, a concussion, and a fractured zygomatic arch, but he’s shaken off worse. Steve assures Bucky that he’ll be good as new in a week, and back in action long before then.

Now that the immediate danger has passed, Bucky remembers what Rhodes had told him - Stark had managed to partially trace the signal to its origin, somewhere in South America. It’s a large continent, but it will put him closer to La Rioja than he’d be otherwise. He’ll have to make sure he’s on the investigation team when they follow up on these Iron Legion knockoffs, and he’ll have to make sure that Steve stays at home. He’ll find a way to break away from the team, find Strazds, and.

He doesn’t know what he’ll do after that.

He’ll bring a loaded gun and a pair of mag-cuffs, and see which he uses.

He doesn’t want to kill. Not even Strazds. Never again.

He thinks of Strazds. Of the way his face had looked. He’d always looked up at Strazds from a table. His features and voice were always warped by the drugs. He imagines seeing him again. Now.

Memories of pain skitter through him. The bone-deep ache. The cold. The sensation of falling when he’d watched a scalpel burrow in.

It’ll be the gun.

“Steve?”

Steve’s already compiling their report, but he stops what he’s doing. Gives Bucky his full attention. Bucky turns his eyes pleadingly to one of the alcoved seats in the cargo hold behind Tony’s
unconscious body, further from the cockpit, and Steve seems to understand. He rises and leads the way, then sits down and waits.

The laceration on the bridge of Steve’s nose looks awful. A bruise has formed on his cheek just beside it, and his face seems swollen. Bucky grabs Neosporin and Steristrips and a package of gauze on his way over. The expression on Steve’s face makes it clear that he doesn’t mind being pulled away from his report for this - he looks grateful, almost moved by the gesture. Bucky wonders who had the privilege of patching Steve up on all the missions before this. He wishes he could have been the one to do it.

“I need your help.” Bucky keeps his voice low. He doesn’t want the rest of the team involved. Coming to Steve is hard enough, for the moment.

“With Strazds,” Steve supplies quietly. He doesn’t flinch - doesn’t even blink - when Bucky cleans out the gash on his face with alcohol, so he probably sees how surprised Bucky is to know Steve’s already a step ahead.

Bucky swallows hard, momentarily turning all his concentration to cleaning the cut. His right hand is clumsy - bruised and sore, from when he’d used it to jam the cargo door - so he has to force his metal fingers to undertake the gentle task of wiping away the dried blood. “How’d you know?”

“Rhodey said the signal was coming from somewhere in the Chaco Province. That’s only about four hundred miles from La Rioja.”

Bucky’s hands stall as he’s unwrapping one of the Steristrips. He places it at the deepest part of Steve’s cut, not quite as gently as he’d meant to, although Steve still doesn’t show any signs of discomfort. “You saw the note. From Fury.” Even as he says it, he decides there’s no way Steve could have seen it. He’d put in his pocket in the bathroom and burnt it as soon as they were back in their apartment. He supposes Fury might have told him, but Fury doesn’t seem like the type to spill a secret he’d promised to keep. Not even to Steve.

“Oh,” Steve huffs. “So that’s what he gave you. Had a feeling you guys were hiding something from me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Steve says. Still, Bucky thinks he sounds a little reluctant.

“How’d you know, then?”

“I wanted to find him, too. I’ve hunted down more than one retired fascist, Bucky. Argentina’s not exactly the last place I’d look.”

“Smartass,” Bucky smiles, placing the second Steristrip neatly. He thinks Steve’s face looks better already.

“If you’ll let me,” Steve adds cautiously, “I want to come with you. We can keep it strictly off the record. As an Avenger, you’re obligated to bring him in. He’d get due process. But...I assume you want to keep your options open.”

“I want you to come with me. That’s what I was going to ask.”

“I know what he did to you,” Steve whispers, leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees and rubbing his hands thoughtfully. “I know this is personal. If you want faster closure than extradition and a trial, I’ve got no problem looking the other way. Or pulling the trigger.”
“No.” And just like that, Bucky has made his choice. Once he faced it down with Steve, it seemed easier. “I want you there to make sure I don’t kill him. I want him to stand trial.”

“He’s old. He might die before he ever sees the inside of a courtroom.”

“But he’ll have to see me. He’ll be expecting me to kill him. I want him to see that I don’t have to. That I’m...I’m not what they made me. Not anymore. I want him to see that after everything Zola did, after everything he did, I got better.”

Steve doesn’t reply to that. Not out loud, anyway. He looks at Bucky, seeming to take him in, to study him. He smiles. Bucky’s not entirely surprised when he closes the small distance between them and kisses him. The kiss is insistent, but not forceful or hard. It’s bracing. Affirming.

They part softly, and Bucky lays his forehead against Steve’s, uttering a barely audible, “Thank you.”

“Excuse me. Uh, guys?”

As happy and irritated as they both are to hear it, Tony’s voice doesn’t exactly come as a surprise to Steve and Bucky.

“Oh, no, don’t stop, I don’t mind. I just want more morphine for my face. Feel free to have sex on my unconscious body after you knock me back out.”

Steve snorts, rising to check the IV in Stark’s arm. “You’ve had enough morphine, Tony. You’ll be okay.”

“What’s the damage? Am I deformed? Should I start learning all the songs from Phantom of the Opera?”


“Everybody make it out?”

“Barely a scratch,” Bucky informs him.

“Seriously, I don’t care if you guys keep kissing,” Tony mumbles. “Kind of always suspected I might be pansexual or something. I’ll just watch and see if I like it.”

Tony finishes the sentence with a soft snore.

“You know, Pepper was right,” Steve sighs. “He is kind of like a baby.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Well, he is.”

“No, I mean don’t even mention babies. I’ll leak. We’re not gonna get home for another half hour and these nursing pads are shot.”

Steve throws his head back and laughs, eyes crinkling sweetly with the force of his smile. “What have our lives become?”

Bucky slumps back into the seat behind him, shoulders sagging, but he smiles back. “Complicated.”

“You got that right.”
Just before they land back at the Facility, Rhodey and Steve agree that a debriefing can wait until Tony has had a day to recover. He’ll be the best set of eyes to look over the recovered Iron Legion bootlegs, and Vision will be the best person to track them, and he’s still tied up at Ground Zero in Sokovia. (He’s building a school with Wanda, just the two of them; she’s tackling the heavy-lifting while he acts as surveyor and engineer. Steve is pretty sure it’s a date.)

Thankfully, that gives Steve and Bucky some time to rest before they go after Strazds. Although, Bucky doesn’t seem all that concerned with resting as jogs out of the hangar, Steve close at his heels, back toward his quarters and their son. Steve knows they’ve only been gone for four hours, but the distance has somehow multiplied the time, and the danger of the mission had raised it to the tenth power. He keeps up with Bucky’s eager pace. He wants to see him, too.

They reach their floor after an infuriating elevator ride - Bucky paces in the small space like a caged animal until the chime sounds. He only slows down when he gets his fingers wrapped around the handle to their apartment door. He turns it gently, just in case Lincoln is asleep.

Only Pepper is asleep.

Banner and Lincoln, on the other hand, are stretched out on their bellies atop a blanket in the living room floor, each tugging at the end of a teething ring while yelling wordlessly at each other. Bruce looks up, falls awkwardly silent, and lets Lincoln win this round. He stands up, rubbing his hands together in embarrassment. “He, uh, he cried right after you guys left, so Pepper called me. My conference was wrapping up, so I headed straight over. She was doing great, though,” he adds hastily. “Everybody okay?”

“Tony took a hit, but it’ll heal. Fractured cheekbone. Thank you guys so much for watching him,” Steve sighs, relieved to see Lincoln, even if he hadn’t been particularly afraid for his safety.

“Fuck,” Bucky whispers, stopping on his hurried march toward his baby. He glances desperately toward Steve. “I’ve got to get out of this suit. I can’t nurse in this thing.” He takes a step toward the bathroom to go take it off, but Lincoln has already seen him. One second, he’s laughing and playing with Banner and gurgling triumphantly over having won his game of tug-of-war, and the next, he’s contorting his little face into the most pitiful expression of grief and betrayal that Steve’s ever seen and crying like he’s at a goddamn funeral. Bucky doubles back momentarily on pure instinct at the sound of Lincoln’s wails, but forces his feet to carry him the other direction, because the sooner he gets out of the suit, the sooner he can nurse, and that’ll make him and Lincoln a lot happier. Pepper, meanwhile, sits bolt upright on the couch: hearing a crying baby seems to have terrified her out of her deep sleep. She looks like she might cry herself from sheer happiness when she sees that Steve and Bucky are home.

Steve sweeps his screaming, red-faced son off the floor and pulls him close to his chest, mindful of the buckles and rough textures of his own uniform, rubbing his hand up and down the length of Lincoln’s spine in a vain effort to temporarily console him. “Hi, baby boy. I know, we were gone for a long time. You’re not used to that, huh? Neither are we.”

Bruce gives Steve a gentle pat on the shoulder as Pepper gathers up her bag and her shoes. “We’re gonna head out so you guys can get some rest.”

Steve glances at the clock on the wall. “Jeez, it’s not even one. I could go to bed right now,” he laughs.
“You guys will find a balance,” Bruce assures him, ushering Pepper out. “Call me soon - we’ve got to schedule a checkup for him.”

Steve feels his heart flutter anxiously. “Is he okay? Did he seem sick?”

“No! He’s fine,” Banner huffs. “But I was fighting him pretty hard for that teething ring.”

Steve kind of zones out once he hears that Lincoln’s not sick. He gives Banner a distracted nod, then turns his attention back to his baby. He barely hears the door shut when they leave. In the absence of Banner and Pepper’s chatter, Lincoln’s screams only seem to get louder. “Hey, hey,” Steve hushes him, lifting him up so they can see each other’s faces. “Papa’s gonna be right back. You’re okay, baby. I’ve got you. Dad’s got you,” he promises, grinning and hoping his show of happiness is contagious.

It is not. Lincoln, sucking relentless on his own fingers like he does when he’s hungry, decides to go totally limp on him and lets his head collapse forward, smacking it right into Steve’s chin. He goes right on hollering. “Okay,” Steve says flatly, struggling to maneuver Lincoln, who is now intent on making himself dead weight, back onto his shoulder. “I get it. You don’t want me ‘cause I don’t make the food. I’m useless. I know,” he grumbles idly, bouncing him a little, and finally, Banner’s words catch up with him.

Keeping his eyes on Lincoln, feeling something in between apprehensive, suspicious, and hopeful, Steve kneels down and picks a toy up off the blanket - a set of big, plastic keys that Lincoln always seems to have clutched in his hand. He lets them dangle by their ring on the index finger of his free hand. Lincoln wants them back as soon as he notices them - reaches, grabs, and pulls. Not too hard - just letting Dad know that those are his, and he had better hand them over. Steve doesn’t let his finger or the keys budge.

Lincoln’s first ploy is to cry a little harder. Steve shakes the keys enticingly, but he doesn’t give them up. Once he’s sure his first plan has failed, Lincoln seems to strategize. His cries quiet down as he focuses, thinks of how to solve this problem, and then he tries to lift the keys up and off of Steve’s straightened finger. Steve laughs and shakes his head, curling his finger around the ring before Lincoln can get it away from him. “Ooh. Nice try.”

Lincoln’s face is flushed with frustration now. He’s still crying those crocodile tears and fussing noisily, but he’s going to get those goddamned keys one way or another. He leans over in Steve’s arm, pushing his knees against him, grips one of the keys, and pulls. Steve doesn’t pull back, he just keeps them in place and lets Lincoln try to move them. Lincoln lets out an angry chirp and tugs hard, and the plastic ring snaps at its seam. Steve’s eyes widen.

He slips the keyring into his pocket, much to his son’s dismay, but appeases him by returning the teething ring he’d been playing with earlier. Lincoln puts it in his mouth, calm for the moment. Steve holds him a little tighter, trying not to think of what this could mean - of all the trouble it’s bound to cause his family down the road. “You’re gonna be a handful, baby,” he groans.

“Did they leave?” Bucky calls from behind the closed bathroom door.

“Yeah.”

“Oh, thank God.” Bucky shuffles out of the bathroom, looking sore and exhausted, wearing nothing but his briefs and one of Lincoln’s soft towels, which he’s clutching to his chest, presumably to mop up a particularly heavy flow of milk. “I’ve got to bring a pump with me next time I go somewhere. This is a fucking mess. Here, pass him over.”
Bucky sits down in the corner of the couch with his legs crossed and his arms out, and Steve feels the tension evaporate from the air the moment he puts Lincoln back in his waiting hands. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen him latch so fast. You’d think they starved him for days, but Steve knows that missing his Papa is more to blame than hunger.

Bucky lets out a ragged breath as his milk lets down, cradling Lincoln in his prosthetic arm and still clutching the towel to his chest with his right.

Steve decides it’ll be worth it to risk embarrassing Bucky, and retrieves their manual pump from the dish drainer. Bucky waves it away instantly. “I can’t do it with one hand.”

“Is it too weird if I do it?” Steve grimaces, taking a step back to give him some space, just in case he’s crossed some unspoken line. He hasn’t helped him pump since he was in labor, but that was a special circumstance. “I’ll do it with my eyes shut if you want, but we’re running low in the freezer and it seems stupid to waste it.”

Tapping his fingers anxiously against Lincoln’s bottom, Bucky clears his throat, then groans in resignation, dropping the towel into his lap and sitting up a little straighter. Steve kneels down beside him, recognizing the precariousness of his situation and hoping that keeping this interaction all business will ease Bucky’s discomfort rather than worsen it. For all he’s tried, he hasn’t yet managed to convince Bucky that he knows about this part, that it’s not shocking or strange or disgusting or uncomfortable to him, and he wants to be there to help in whatever way Bucky might need him.

He sits down on the worn arm of the sofa and fits the pump over Bucky’s nipple without a word, keeping his face free of anything but concentration and care, and cradles the bottom of his breast, stroking his thumb firmly over Bucky’s sore side.

“You’re gonna need to--”

“Five or six fast pumps to make your milk let down, then depress the plunger for a few seconds, release, repeat. Then long and slow. Just let me know if I’m hitting the plunger too hard.”

Bucky actually laughs. “I know you haven’t had practice with this.”

“I read every single book and watched every video on YouTube that had anything to with breastfeeding,” Steve snorts, blushing when he admits it. “I sound like a creep, don’t I? I was just so scared that - you know, given our unique situation - that breastfeeding would be hard. And we knew they didn’t make a formula that would be able to keep up with his metabolism, so once we had decided that this was our best option, I got worried about...well, everything. I mean, I came early, then I wouldn’t latch and mom couldn’t get my weight up, and then I caught thrush, and there’s just so much that can make this difficult, so I just thought--”

Bucky reaches out and lays a tender hand on Steve’s cheek, effectively silencing him. Steve swallows the rest of his rambling excuses, and turns his attention back to the pump. The bottle is a quarter full already. No wonder Bucky was so anxious to get back.

Bucky moves his hand to keep the pump in place and scoots toward the middle of the sofa. “Come here.”

Steve’s attempt to keep things clinical fails spectacularly as his carefully composed face breaks into a smile. He slides his leg in behind Bucky and settles down against the arm of the couch, letting Bucky and Lincoln lean back into the cradle of his lap. It gives him a better angle to operate the pump, but it also feels better. Absolutely, completely right. Bucky relaxes, too, allowing his head to fall back onto Steve’s shoulder, trusting him, letting him into a private piece of life in a way that Steve never
thought he would.

Suddenly, a giggle shakes Bucky’s shoulders.

“What?”


“The...president? Or D.C.?”

“You mentioned Washington earlier - when they sent me out to track you down,” Bucky explains. Steve fails to see what’s suddenly become so funny about all of that. “I was so sure I knew you, but...mostly, I was just...look, don’t take this the wrong way, but I remember being just so fucking angry that I couldn’t beat you in a fight. That hadn’t happened to me before. I didn’t want to kill you, but, man, I wanted to kick your ass.”

“I’m flattered,” Steve scoffs.

“I was just thinking. I wish I could just go back in time and show myself where we were going to end up.”

Steve finally sees the humor, and has to control his laughter to avoid jostling Lincoln and losing the seal on the pump. “Yeah, that would have been pretty confusing. But consider this: what would we have thought of this when we were teenagers?”

“I wouldn’t believe it was you. You’re way too big.”

“Really?” Steve gripes. “Me getting into shape? That would be weirder to you than the giant metal arm or the baby?”

“That outfit you’re wearing would have raised some questions, too.”

“Want me to get another container? This one’s full.”

“Nah, he’s done on this side, he might be able to finish that side off, too.”

“Man, he can really put away, can’t he?”

“Well, he’s your kid.”

“He’s our kid. Want me to make a couple of burgers?”

“Yes, I do.”

Steve knows he’s already got a couple pattied out in the fridge, and they’ll cook fast. He can spare a few more minutes on the couch, at least until Lincoln is done eating and Bucky is ready to get up. He reaches down and touches the pocket of his uniform, where he had stashed Lincoln’s broken toy. He decides to let that conversation wait, too. For now, he wants to focus on savoring what he knows will one day seem like a brief stretch of heaven, these fleeting few months while his son is still an infant, while Bucky will let himself be held and cared for. He has a life to return to after every mission, win or lose. It does seem complicated sometimes, but at the end of each long and trying day, Steve can fit everything he needs right into the circle of his arms. It all comes back to this.
“A fucking copycat.” Tony’s voice is flat. Unimpressed. Bucky thinks he even sounds just a little disappointed. Tony might hate trouble, but Iron Man tends to prefer a worthier adversary.

It’s only been two days since they limped back to the Facility from the debacle on Flowerpot Island, and - just as Steve had predicted - Tony is ready to pursue his target the moment he’s awake. Once Wanda had returned from Sokovia, she had volunteered herself and Sam to supervise the cleanup back at the destroyed bunker, while Vision, Rhodes, Steve, and Bucky accompanied Tony to canvas the Chaco Province. They didn’t have to search blindly for long - they got a ping from Steve’s tracker after only a few hours and converged on an old furniture outlet on the edge of the city.

Their culprit is a tourist who had visited Sokovia several months after the Incident. He had picked up a non-functional Iron Legion Unit, dismantled and studied it, become embroiled in conspiracy theories about Ultron, found a few other death-robot enthusiasts, and made a run at manufacturing his own. It’s a fairly standard cleanup, as far as Avengers missions go. They had also been planning to steal a bunch of fragments of the Campo de Cielo meteorites and drop them on major cities from space, presumably in a low-budget attempt to pay homage to Ultron’s meteor obsession. Bucky doubts that they could have gotten that far, in any case.

“We didn’t copy Ultron!” the man - Jared Forche - argues emphatically. The have him flat on his face on the warehouse floor, alongside his staff, or...congregation, or whatever he wants to call it. “He chose us to continue what he started. He’s still out there on the web. He’s coming back.”

“Well, not in one of these Roombas,” Stark informs him. Vision is making a huge pile of them along the back wall of the warehouse. One EM blast and they were all useless. “Gosh, what is it with this dry-spell, guys? We haven’t had a good evil mastermind in months. We come all the way to Argentina, and what do we fucking get? Jared. God, even your name is boring. Couldn’t even come up with a sweet codename? Did you give up when you checked IMDB and found out Meteor Man was copyrighted?”

“When Ultron gets out of the net,” Jared says, attempting a threatening snarl and sounding more like a small dog, barking incessantly, “He’s going to kill you first, Stark. He’s a God! You won’t be able to run.”

“You heard it here, everyone. I am the man who created God. I get to pick where we eat forever.”

“You heard it here, everyone. I am the man who created God. I get to pick where we eat forever.”

“He’ll know what we did for him. He’ll know we were faithful.” Jared mumbles furiously, squirming on the ground like he’s somehow going to bust out of the magcuffs. Bucky’s pretty tired of hearing him talk, and tired in general, so he kills two birds with one stone and sits down on him.

“This is what happens when people spend too much time on Reddit,” Rhodey hums as he finishes cleaning out their servers. Bucky imagines those will be a lot of fun to review.

“He’ll break us out of any jail you can put us in,” Forche goes on wheezing. At least the other losers are exercising their right to remain silent.

“Jail, right,” Bucky scoffs quietly, mostly to himself. “We’re gonna put you someplace with better shrinks, buddy.”

Rhodes flips up his visor. “Alright. I’m done. Barnes, Steve, if you guys want to load these folks onto the jet and get them into containment, Vision and I can worry about the IL units. Tony, let’s do
one more scan of the building. I wanna make sure they’re not hiding any more stockpiles of scrap metal. Or meteorites.”

“God, I love it when you boss me around,” Tony remarks offhandedly.

Bucky has to bite his tongue to keep himself from smiling - he knows that feeling. Although, he’s sure Tony doesn’t mean it the way he would in regards to Steve. Or maybe he does? Bucky decides that conversation can wait for their next lunch together. He stands up, letting Forche get a full breath, then taps his shoulder. “Come on, pal. Let’s go.”

Forche makes it a few steps, but then stumbles. His baggy cargo shorts leave a swollen ankle revealed. He must have turned it in the fight. “Here,” he sighs, hooking his arm under Forche’s elbow, careful not to put pressure on his cuffed wrists. He slows down and lets him lean on him as they walk. “We’ll take a look at that once we get you on the jet.”

“Sure, you will.” Forche throws him a pitiful glance, full of spite and fear. “I know who you fucking are.”

“Oh, great.”

“Nice to know the Avengers finally sank low enough to work with Hydra.”

Bucky sighs.

“Oh, and I know all about Hydra, too - I know they’re still running everything.”

“Can’t you just be quiet?”

“No. And if Hydra’s thinking about recruiting me, the answer is no to that, too.”

Steve is leading another group toward the jet, and they converge with Bucky and his charge on the way out of the warehouse.

“Got yourself a talker, Buck?”

“Oh, yeah.”

They secure Forche and his staff of seven in the jet’s two containment cells, and at Bucky’s request, Steve takes a quick look at Forche’s injured ankle, confirms that it’s not broken, and then wraps and ices it. Bucky’s just a little offended when he doesn’t give Steve any shit.

Steve had promised to take care of their excuses for slipping away from the rest of the team, although he hadn’t told Bucky what he had planned. If they’re going to make their escape before takeoff, though, Steve will have to do something soon.

In the interim, Bucky’s got problems of his own. He’s carved out a little space for himself in the medbay, behind the singular privacy curtain, where he can pump, and he absolutely hates doing it here - despite the fact that he knows they can’t see him, he still feels too close to the team, too nervous and exposed - but the jet’s bathroom is utilitarian and too small. No elbow room. At least from the medbay he can listen in on Steve’s conversation with Tony, since he’ll have to corroborate whatever excuse Steve thinks up.

Out in the cabin, Tony is uploading the contents of the servers and forwarding it all back to HQ. “Man, people will make a religion out of anything these days - we got robots for the Ultronistas, weed for the Rastafarians…butter and romance novels for the Amish--”
“Ultronistas,” Steve repeats, nodding his approval. “I like it. Hey, are you going to need me and Buck again before the debriefing, or is this one open and shut?”


“No.” Bucky can just overhear Steve’s soft, embarrassed laughter. He’s a good liar.

“Asado,” Tony states with utter surety. “Meat should have been my first guess. Yeah, I doubt we’re going to run into any problems with these evil masterminds on the way home...tell you what, since there were so few of these guys, we’re not going to need the Dagger. We’ll take the Trident home and you two hang onto it so you don’t have to fly commercial.”

“You don’t have to--”

“Come on, it’ll be romantic. The two of you, stealing my jet, flying off into the sunset together. Just like old times.”

“Okay, I’m sold.”

“And if I don’t see you tomorrow - happy birthday, buddy. You don’t look a day over eighty.”

Bucky finds himself smiling when he hears how firmly they hug one another. He’s glad he didn’t manage to ruin their friendship.

Steve, with all the innocent disrespect for boundaries of an overgrown dog, sticks his head through the privacy curtain. Bucky mouths an affronted What the fuck and hunches over to hide his bared chest and the pump.

“We’re clear for that date, Buck,” he announces a little too loudly. Maybe he’s not that great of a liar.

“I heard,” Bucky replies through clenched teeth.

“Want me to put that in the fridge for you?”

“That cooler’s for blood.”

“I’ll ask Tony if it’s okay to--”

“Do not.”

An hour later, the low hum of the Trident’s engine is fading into the distance, and Steve and Bucky find themselves alone on the Dagger, without the need for cheerful pretenses or false motives. Steve moves quickly through the cabin and the cockpit, readying the jet for takeoff, changing into a set of nondescript civvies, trading his shield for a concealed gun and taser and a pair of handcuffs. He hears an unfamiliar voice in the cockpit and tenses, tucking the gun deeper into his pocket, but he’s greeted only with Natasha’s face on the communication screen, bouncing Lincoln in her lap. Her right cheek and bottom lip are swollen and bruised, and Steve can see gauze in her mouth when she smiles.


“The dentist,” she laments, struggling comically for every muffled word. “I had an impacted wisdom tooth. Otherwise, I’d be helping you guys out with Strazds.”

“No,” she scowls. “Not after you guys snuck around behind my back and made a baby. I tried to find Steve a girlfriend for, like, a year before I found out he was gay.”

Steve blushes hotly; he’s not entirely sure anyone’s ever come right out and called him that. Although, he supposes she’s perfectly correct.

On the monitor, Lincoln leans forward in Natasha’s lap to touch her phone screen, recognizing his parents’ faces there. The tension in Bucky’s face evaporates into a gentle, delighted grin, as he reaches out toward the image of his son’s searching fingers.

“Hi, baby,” he laughs. “Hi...you miss me? Are you being good?”

Lincoln babbles frustratedly back at him, apparently finding this whole experience to be confusing.

“Yeah? You mad at me for leaving? I’ll be back soon.” Lincoln’s protests get a little louder and angrier when Natasha refuses to let him confiscate her phone. “Stop that. Don’t you be an asshole to Nat,” he scolds. “Has he got enough milk left in the fridge? There’s more in the freezer if you need it.”

“Yeah, we’re good. He eats like a damn horse, though. You guys won’t sue me if he explodes, right?”

Lincoln smacks the screen harder, fussing at them as soon as he’s sure they’re no longer speaking to him. His gaze has drifted away from Bucky and now his attention is bent on Steve. Steve briefly forgets just how serious the mission he’s undertaken with Bucky is, and reaches up toward the camera like Bucky had, wishing right down into his bones that he could stretch out his arms and grab his little boy right off the screen, feel the weight of him in the crook of his elbow, against his shoulder, where he’s grown so used to carrying him. It’s been almost fifteen hours since they left the Facility. “Oh, baby, I know. I know. Me and Papa are coming right back. We love you so much.”

Lincoln falls silent, listening intently to the sound of Steve’s voice, eyes wide and filled with wonder. He gives them a little half-smile, eyes just beginning to droop with sleepiness, and coos and hums like he must understand.

“That’s right, baby boy,” Steve chuckles, letting his voice get a little softer and lower with each word as Lincoln's frowning frustration melts into a hazy, tired grin. “We love you. You be good.”

Nat nods, relieved and impressed by Steve's quick handiwork. “I'm going to hang up while he's still high on endorphins. You two, stay safe.”

“We will,” Bucky promises.

The screen disappears, and Steve wishes that he could somehow transport himself back home.

“Man,” Bucky sighs, his expression caught between an admiring smile and a jealous scowl. “Teach me that trick. He never calms down like that for me.”

“Well,” Steve says, aiming for a humble tone even while feeling a smug smirk form on his face. “You know, I talked to him every night before you had him. I'd just lay beside you and tell him about my day, about you, about how much we love him. I think he could hear me.” Bucky reaches out and takes Steve by the arm, pulling him a step closer so he can catch him in a half-embrace and squeeze his shoulder hard. Steve thinks even Bucky's prosthetic feels warm, when he touches him.
Bucky frowns, mouth agape, and pushes Steve away. “He loves my voice. I got a nice voice.”

“All you ever did was yell at him.”

“Bullshit.”

“You called him a fucking cunt that one time. Remember? ‘Cause he kicked you and made you pee your pants.”

“Nope, don’t remember that.”

“You gonna ride that excuse forever?”

“Yeah, I am.”

They arm themselves with only a light supply of weapons and gear before setting off on the bike together. However the situation with Strazds plays out, they agree that it has to be kept low profile, so they leave the Dagger on the roof the old furniture outlet. Bucky drives - he has the route committed to memory even from their unplanned starting point - and Steve grips his waist loosely as the highways fly past beneath them. Bucky likes the security of feeling him there, at his back, watching the road behind them.

The rest of the team had taken off around 0500 hours, and Bucky and Steve had left an hour later. They spend the first two hours in silence, aside from a few short words shouted over the roar of wind, travelling with the rising sun at their backs and savoring the gentle coolness of Argentina’s mild winter season.

The drive will take almost nine hours. Bucky had expected to spend every second of it thinking about Strazds, preparing himself for the reality of staring at a face he hasn’t seen since the darkest years of his life, but he finds that he’s done all the thinking he cares to do on that eventuality. No amount of imagined outcomes or posited scenarios will matter by the end of the day. He’ll have some kind of closure, whatever happens.

He thinks about Lincoln instead. He even indulges his anxiety a little and lets himself worry and fret all he wants, because it distracts him from Strazds - and Lincoln matters more than Strazds. Infinitely more.

They’re going to have to start making hard choices soon - there won’t always be other Avengers around to watch him. A situation is bound to arise that calls for all available hands, leaving the Facility unguarded and Lincoln without a caregiver. In all likelihood, Bucky will have to remain behind if that happens, and let Steve go do his job. The team had functioned just fine before he joined, and it would again, and he’s their greenest member. And the best qualified to care for his son. And if he had to, he could defend the Facility. If he couldn’t, he knows how to get out fast.

There are bigger problems. Lincoln will need an education. He’ll need friends. He’ll need to leave the Facility’s grounds. And until he’s older, he’ll have to do that with Bucky and Steve. That presents three major obstacles.

First, there’s the easiest problem to face: if Bucky and Steve left the house with their son, even with the cover-story of adoption, their relationship would instantly become a public matter. He knows things have changed since he was younger. He’s seen men kiss in public, like it was the most natural thing in the world. He’s seen them with their own kids, pushing them in swings, taking pictures in
the park, picking them up from school. It’s becoming normal. It still scares him. And considering that Steve is something of a national symbol and he’s considered an international threat, it’ll be all over the news for months.

Beyond that, the challenges become more complicated.

Bucky didn’t get out much even before his pregnancy had become obvious; Stark’s team had worked for months to clear his name in every country where he was wanted, and after dozens of court dates and hundreds of depositions and countless hours that Bucky had spent unfolding Hydra’s intelligence and tactics to nameless officials, they had succeeded. Stark and T’Challa’s testimony’s, along with Zola and Karpov’s meticulous records and Zemo’s detailed confession had played no small part in that. But despite Stark and Pepper’s best efforts, it had been a media circus. Public opinion on him would always be divided. In the eyes of about forty-nine percent of American adults, he should be in a maximum-security ward, getting the psychiatric care he needed. Twenty percent thought that some kind of house arrest would be sufficient. About twelve percent were still clamoring on social media for the death penalty. The rest were far more likely to be indifferent than supportive. People barely trusted him to stand in line at a Starbucks. They’d never let him get away with walking down the street with his son. People would question whether or not Lincoln was safe with him. There would be outrage. They’d want his son taken away.

And then there are the people who’d want to take him.

Hydra. AIM. The American government - both CPS and the CIA.

It might even get out that Lincoln is theirs. Biologically. The medical community would want - demand - an explanation. Bruce and Cho could easily provide them with one, and it might even lead to good things.

Maybe more queers could have kids of their own, one of these days, he reasons.

But Bucky doesn’t want to be studied like that. Not in a lab, not in a hospital or university. He doesn’t even want them to look at photographs of his body or his name on a piece of paper. He feels sick just thinking about it.

And then there’s the next logical conclusion: those same people would want Lincoln because he’s enhanced.

He and Steve aren’t talking about that yet. Steve must have noticed. Lincoln is one month and six days old and breezing past the three month milestones and reaching for even later ones. He eats four times what other babies need. His vision is perfect. He’s showing preferences for colors that he shouldn’t even be able to differentiate between. He can roll from his back to his belly (clumsily) and hold his head up, even if it’s just for a short time. He solves problems. His grip is frighteningly strong. A few nights ago, when Bucky had read to him out of one of Clint’s old boardbooks, Lincoln had taken the corner out of his mouth long enough to try to turn a page when Bucky had taken too long to continue.

To turn a page. The implications of that singular action are exponentially incredible. That means he had been observing and learning from Bucky’s example. That means his motor skills have developed far beyond expectations for his age. That means he had understood that whatever his Papa was saying was coming from the book, and in order to hear more, the page had to be turned, and he could just about do it all on his own.

The rational part of Bucky’s mind is terrified. The irrational part - Lincoln’s father - is proud, and awed, and over the fucking moon with sheer adoration. He hopes that one can somehow temper the
other into sanity.

The bike runs on solar power and a well-camouflaged repulsor engine. They won't need to stop for gas, but eventually Steve starts feeling a little stiff, which must mean that Bucky’s downright uncomfortable. The next time he sees a way station, he taps Bucky’s side, signaling him to pull over.

The rest stop isn't much to look at - a single gas pump out front, bathrooms with concrete floors and dripping faucets, and a stand with curled, sun-faded maps. Steve could stand to eat, but he's not sure he trusts the lone vending machine or it's handprint-covered glass. At least they seem to be alone. He follows Bucky into the bathroom without a word, just in case they aren't.

“Fuck.”

Bucky's faint whisper from inside the stall forces a quiet exhalation of laughter from Steve as he flushes the urinal. "You still bleeding?"

“No, I fuckin’ forgot--”

Steve doesn't wait for him to finish. He passes two dry nursing pads over the top of the stall, feeling pleased with himself.

“Thank you,” Bucky responds flatly.

“Should we start looking for someplace to have lunch? We're coming up on a few big cities in about an hour, if you're hungry.”

Bucky gives him a weird look as he passes him on the way to the sink. “You always stop for lunch in the middle of a mission?”

“If I'm not on a tight schedule, yeah, I like to eat,” Steve huffs. “Not really a standard assignment, anyway.”

“Yeah, we better do something for your birthday, since I'm keeping you away from your friends,” Bucky decides, splashing cold water on his face to wash away the dust from the road. “As long as we can find a place without cameras.”

Steve follows Bucky's clipping pace back to the bike, reaching out to catch him by the arm and slow him down before he can climb back on. “Just so we're clear, this has been a fucking great birthday so far.”

Bucky scoffs. “Shut the fuck up--”

“It has.”

“You'd say that if you'd broken your goddamn leg, Steve.”

“We closed the case on Tony's stolen tech, we stopped a terrorist group before they were able to hurt anyone, nobody took a hit in the fight, and now I'm riding bitch through Argentina with you.” Steve has to stop to laugh. “Come on, man, look at it out here,” he urges, making an expansive gesture out toward the countryside.

Steve takes a moment of his own to take it all in, hoping Bucky will follow his example. It's just past 0800 and the sun is pouring liquid gold, with the freshness and brilliance it only ever seems to have at this time of morning. The trees are thick just a few meters from the dusty roadside, vibrantly green
even in these so-called winter months. Miles and miles eastward, back toward Charata, a wall of heavy storm clouds are giving them a lazy chase, but that same far-off, streaked grey morphs seamlessly into the bold, unblemished blue that vaults over the place where they're standing together just off the highway.

“Yeah,” Bucky finally replies, his voice almost too soft to hear over the gusting wind and rattling trees. “This is good.” He pauses, still considering the landscape. “You ever thought about getting married?”

The question is so casual, so artless and easy that Steve almost doesn't process the weight of it. When the words finally untangle themselves in his brain, he finds no ready reply but to stare at Bucky in disbelief. The necessity of an answer strikes him like a hammer on a nail. “Of course I have.”

“Not just - I mean...to me.”

“Who else would I marry?”

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have - I didn’t mean to spring that on you. I was just thinking about Lincoln, and about how he’s going to go to school, and how we’re going to--”

Steve drops to one knee on nothing but impulse. He has no plan. He doesn’t know what he’s going to say. He doesn’t even have a ring. Luckily, the simple act of kneeling is enough to stun Bucky into awed silence, so Steve has a moment to think.

He reaches nervously into the pocket of his jacket, hoping to find the right words buried somewhere in there, and comes back with the best possible solution: the plastic keyring their son had broken. It’s not exactly a wedding band, but in a funny, beautiful way, it’s a far more binding symbol of their commitment to one another.

“I’ll...do this right once we get back home.”

“Stop - Steve, dont--”

“Is that a no?”

Bucky’s face cracks into a smile. “No, I wanted to--”

“Well, too bad, I beat you to it,” Steve grins teasingly. “I want to know the answer before I do this in front of the entire team, Buck. I’m not about to embarrass myself. Do you want the broken set of teether keys or not?” he laughs.

Bucky snatches them decisively, clasping Steve’s hand and pulling him to his feet as he takes them. “Can’t say no to a guy on his birthday.”

“Don’t be a prick,” Steve scolds with the straightest face he can muster. “That’s a four dollar teething ring.”

“You’re gonna spoil me.”

“All your friends’ll be so jealous.”

“I know--”

Steve cuts his reply short with a kiss. “Let’s go get this bastard,” he says softly. “Still got seven hours to drive.”
“Yeah,” Bucky sighs, slipping the broken toy into his own pocket. Even at the mention of Strazds, the smile never leaves his lips. “And then we can go home.”

At 1500 hours, they pull the bike into a narrow alley beside a deserted bodega and complete the last few minutes of their journey on foot. The streets are nearly empty, but Steve keeps his sunglasses and hat on and his head low, just in case one of the local shops has CCTV. Bucky lowers his cap, but seems to be aware of any security, judging by the subtle way he turns his head every now and then, like he’s watching something on the street. Steve guesses he’s angling his face away from a camera he’s clocked, and follows suit.

It really doesn’t matter if they’re seen, now that both of their names have been cleared - not unless Bucky ends up beating their target to death. Steve sets his jaw, reminded by a sudden wave of rage swelling relentlessly in his chest that he’s probably a bigger threat to Strazds than Bucky is. His hatred for Strazds is fresher. It’s still raw. He’s starting to wonder if Bucky was right to trust him not to do something rash. Maybe he shouldn’t have come.

Bucky slows down in front of a collection of run-down, Mission-style apartments. There are four whose doors face Avenida Juan Ramírez de Velasco, but no house numbers anywhere that Steve can see. The two on either end don’t look inhabited - there are no blinds or curtains on the windows, and the rooms inside look dark and empty and dust-filled. One of the middle two has a garden out front, and there’s a young woman pulling weeds by her porch. The other is plain and unadorned, with heavy blinds and a faded sign in the corner of the window that reads NO PASAR. The latter looks as promising as Steve could ever hope to find.

But the woman complicates things. This seems like a fairly quiet street, and her neighbor - unsurprisingly, if Steve’s suspicions are correct - doesn’t look like someone who gets many visitors. The back of the building is another row of apartments, so they can’t go in that way, and she’ll see if they force their way in through the front door. She’s bent over, trimming the edging of her walk, and Steve can see the outline of a phone in her back pocket, so she could call the police quickly if she decided to.

He falls in step with Bucky and speaks low, struggling to keep his voice even and calm. “What do you want to do?”

Bucky glances at him briefly, his eyes indicating that he’s perfectly serious. “Knock on the door.”

Steve has no choice but to follow as Bucky approaches the apartment, walking easily and confidently.

“He’s looking for a friend,” he instructs quietly. Steve does as he’s told.

Bucky knocks. The woman in the garden looks up briefly, but then goes back to work on the weeds before she could possibly get a good look at either of them. There’s no answer at the door.

Bucky knocks again, a little louder this time, and slips his prosthetic hand into the pocket of his jacket, in case the neighbor looks up again. They hear some movement behind the door, but there’s no answer. The gaps in the blinds remain dark.

Three more knocks, just a little louder this time. Steve knows it will be the last time Bucky tries. After this, it’ll get suspicious. They’ll have to come back later, when they can break in without so many witnesses. Steve hears slow footsteps behind the door and his breath catches in his throat.

The wrinkled face of an old woman peers through the sliver of open doorway. She keeps the
deadbolt locked.

“¿Quién eres tú?”

“Hola, perdónanos. Estamos--”

“Sal de aquí.”

“Lo siento--”

Bucky had managed a shockingly innocent and pleasant tone, but it hardly mattered. The conversation comes to an end in only seconds, and the woman slams the door again. A few more deadbolts slam into their locks on the other side, and she mutters something indiscernible over the shrill sound of a barking dog.

“Think Strazds is in there?” Bucky murmurs.

Luckily, Steve had gotten a look inside the house from his vantage point to Bucky’s right. “Not likely. Hoarder, lots of debris on the floor, smelled like cigarettes and mold. Guy his age wouldn’t last a week in there.”

“¿Puedo ayudarlo?”

Steve and Bucky turn at the same time, having no other option, and acknowledge the woman standing at the low hedge on the other side of the low mud-brick wall which separates the two properties. She doesn’t look concerned to see them there - her hands are on a plastic bucket full of the tops of deheaded white tulips and nowhere near her phone or her scissors, so she must not see them as a threat.

“Quizás. Estamos buscando el número 619.”

“Eso es todo,” she replies trustingly, pointing to her own door.

“¿Habla usted Inglés?”

“Ah...no,” Bucky laughs easily, looking a little rueful. His right hand fishes in his pocket, and he pulls out a weathered black and white photo of Strazds. He’s much younger than he’d been in the videos Steve had seen. He’s not sure when Bucky got it. “Is this guy one of your neighbors, by any chance?”

She takes the photo carefully, her polite smile falling into a slack expression of surprise. “How...do you know Juris?”

Bucky’s face breaks into a convincing grin. “He and my dad were lab partners back in Rīga. He - my dad, he died back in ‘07, left a bunch of boxes in a storage locker with this guys name on ‘em. I thought, maybe--”
But the woman has raised her eyes from the photograph. The way she’s looking at them now - Steve can’t decide her intent, but he knows their cover is blown. It’s enough to wipe the smile off Bucky’s face pretty fast, too.

“I know who you two are.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve sees a muscle in Bucky’s jaw tense, then relax. He’s silent for a moment, and then gives her a curt nod, conceding her suspicions. Her next question doesn’t come as much of a surprise.

“Are you here to kill him?”

Steve turns to Bucky for an answer - he’s not quite certain whether to lie or not. He’s not sure Bucky will have to lie, one way or the other. Everything, from this moment on, has to be Bucky’s decision. His steady gaze remains fixed on the woman, unblinking.

“No. I’m not.”

She turns her narrow glance on Steve this time. “Arrest him?”

Bucky takes his hands out of his pockets to show that he’s not holding a weapon. Her eyes lock briefly on his prosthetic, but she doesn’t lose her composure. He takes a few steps toward her. Cautious. Slow. “I just want to talk with him.”

She stands her ground for a few more immeasurably long seconds, then sets down her bucket and her shears, and heads for the porch. She stops with her thumb tensed against the button on the screen-door’s handle, ready to open it. “Come on.”

The apartment Bucky enters is dilapidated, but every inch of it is immaculately tidy. Sparsely furnished, clean, with no visible luxuries beyond an old radio, nothing bright or aesthetic but the Virgin Mary in her alcove and the candle burning at her feet. Silent as an empty church. The faint smell of the candle doesn’t do much to drive away the stench of age and sickness. There are electric light fixtures on the ceiling of every room, but none are turned on; instead, all the blinds and curtains are open, although the sunlight coming through the dust-mottled panes casts only a weak light on the white walls.

He’s finally here. He had expected to feel something. Rage. Terror. Anticipation, apprehension, triumph, some kind of sadistic gratification, anything, but he doesn’t. He’s as empty as the rooms he walks through.

The woman steps into a narrow hallway and stops at the open door on her right. She raps her knuckles hard against the frame. “Are you up?” she calls out.

“Yes.”

Bucky feels something then. He can’t name it, but it settles low in the pit of his chest and tangles itself like a broken spring. The answering voice is faint and weak. It belongs to an old, dying man. It doesn’t sound like Strazds - not at all like the voice he’d heard on the tapes. Something about that makes him angry. The irrational part of his mind had hoped that somehow, he’d find Strazds unchanged. Somehow, it should be the same voice that had planned the demolition and reconstruction of his body. The same face that had looked down at him from above a dozen tables, a formless silhouette, eclipsing the glare of surgical lamps. He had known it would be different, but the gap between knowing and accepting seems wider by the second. He had wanted to find Juris Strazds in his fifties, wheedling pitifully for his life, still wearing his lab coat. That’s the Strazds he could
have killed.
He feels cheated.
The woman steps forward into the room, signalling for them to stay back. Bucky waits, feeling Steve’s tense presence just behind him, eager to follow.

“What’s the matter?”
“It’s...it’s James Barnes.”

“On the news? What did you hear?”
“No - he’s here to see you.”
A long silence follows, and then Bucky hears Strazds release a rattling, wavering sigh, like the old man might be weeping. He can’t put words to the way it sounds. “Please...let him in.”

“May I stay?”

“No, no. Please, let me talk to him alone. Please--”

“Let me--”

“What’s left for him to kill? Please, I must talk to him. Please.”

Another long silence, punctuated by the woman’s short, steadying breaths as she makes her decision. “Alright. I’ll wait.”
She leaves the room, and without looking at Bucky or Steve, with no word or gesture, steps aside. Bucky’s mind is blank as he enters the bedroom, nothing but white noise and static grey.
Strazds is thin. Withered. He’s sitting up in his bed, dressed in warm flannel nightclothes and supported by pillows. He doesn’t look like he leaves the bed often. He doesn’t look capable of it. His face is still recognizable as the face of Juris Strazds, although the expression on it as he stares at Bucky is one Bucky has never seen before.

“Tas esi tu,” Strazds whispers, the words seeming to force their way out of his weak lungs. Bucky has learned enough Latvian from listening to Strazds to understand the simple utterance of, It’s you. Strazds takes a moment to collect himself, then sits up a little straighter and folds his hands in his lap, meeting Bucky’s eyes. “What do you want to know?”
Bucky can’t quite decide. Too much. Nothing at all. Finally, he finds a few words. “Hydra’s been looking for you.”

“You haven’t come to collect me, I hope?”
“I don’t work for them.”
Strazds nods, and seems to smile just behind a pained grimace. “I know. You’re free, now.”

“You were waiting for me.”

“Yes.”

“You wanted me to find you.”
“Yes. I did. I was only afraid that Hydra would find me first.” Strazds’ voice sinks to a low murmur, presumably so his caregiver won’t overhear. “You deserved to kill Zola, if you had wanted. I’m sure you did. You deserve to kill each and every one of us. I can give you nothing but myself. I’m sorry.”

Bucky has prepared for every outcome, but not this. Not surrender. Not regret. Somewhere deep inside that tangle of hatred in his chest, he wants to accept Strazds’ offer. “I don’t kill anymore. Not unless I have to.”

Strazds smiles in earnest this time. “I suppose you really have beaten us all, then. Although, if you wish to make an exception for me, I think God will understand.”

There’s a wooden chair near the bed. Bucky looks back toward the door, and for the first time in the course of the conversation, he remembers that Steve is still with him. Steve had remained in the doorway rather than following him in. That was probably best. Bucky pulls the chair closer to the bed, and sits down. He thinks Strazds will tell him anything he wants to know, but he doesn’t really know what he wants anymore.

“Why did you work with them?”

Strazds answers with all the bluntness of a man who’s dying anyway. “For the money. And the raw materials - I mean you. They approached me in 1967. I had already conceptualized the AVOTS procedure, but no one would fund it, and there was no one to test it on. They offered me both.”

“Did they tell you about me? Did you know what they’d already done?”

“Not before accepting their offer. Everything was in Zola’s records. I did not like it. I knew from the moment I read your history that I was doing something terribly wrong. I had made a mistake. But once I had been given that information, I could not leave. I understood that what I was doing was not forgivable, but I did not want to die. I did not want Hydra as my enemy, so I ignored my conscience, and I worked with Zola willingly. I strove to impress him. I valued my own life more than yours.”

“You kept working after Zola died.”

“Yes. Vasily Karpov wanted the project completed.”

“You left after that. What changed?”

Strazds bows his head. “The children. I knew I could not help you without risking my life, but I did not like seeing the children treated as they were. Tested. Trained. That, I knew I could not live with.” He pauses, catching his breath. “What happened to them?”

“Hydra used them. They were a kill squad. When they were old enough, they tested a prototype of a new serum on them, and their enhancements allowed them to survive the process, but it made them too violent. Hydra couldn’t control them. They’re all dead.”

Strazds’ back bows under the weight of that news, and he lays his head in his hands. After a few racking exhales, he puts his hands back in his lap. He doesn’t seem to know how to go on, but now Bucky’s mind has cleared enough to ask what he wants to know.

“There were six,” he states simply. Strazds will understand the unspoken question.

The answering voice is softer, gentler. “And now there is only one.”

The words explode in Bucky’s ear like a lightning clap. “The - the non-enhanced one - they must have - they wouldn’t have let it live.”
Strazds raises a trembling hand to silence him, shaking his head impatiently, eyes shut like he’s trying to call back a memory. “I’ll tell you what happened.”

Bucky takes a deep breath, then waits.

“Just before Zola died, he was often bedridden. He came very rarely to the laboratory. Already, you had delivered two sets of twins, and the project was becoming worth the money they had spent. I told them your body would not withstand another set within so short a period of time, and I convinced them to only fertilize a single egg. We discovered that it would be female, and we discussed terminating it at that time. Karpov decided she would be useful as a spy, so the pregnancy was not terminated. Zola was sick, and Karpov was still struggling to keep his faction obedient, so none of them watched me very closely. The staff at the lab reported only to Karpov, though - not to me - so I did not step out of line. Since the procedure had proven successful twice already, I did not monitor you so closely the third time. You were given a room with a bed.

“I should have kept a closer watch on the lab. I was aware that the guards were not feeding you as much as I had ordered. I think, several times, you were defiant, and they may have beat you. The baby came early, before we could induce labor. You were alone in your room, and did not call for help.”

“I remember. I - I wanted to hold one of them.”

Strazds lifts his eyes to study him, and Bucky sees equal parts of pity and respect there. “I had always wondered why you did not tell them,” he remarks quietly, then continues. “The baby came, but it was premature and sick. Could not breathe well. I stayed with her for three days, and she began to improve. When Zola came to ask about her progress, I lied to him. I said that her lack of oxygen had caused irreparable brain damage. He told me I was to dispose of her, and he left again. I took her with me, and cared for her.”

“That facility was only accessible by helicopter. You couldn’t have gotten her out.”

“I sedated her and put her inside my bag. She slept until we reached the hotel I stayed at. Her lungs were still not good, and I did not expect her to survive. If she woke and cried, I was afraid we would both be killed. I have never done anything more frightening,” Strazds laughs dryly. “I kept her with me for several years in secret after Zola died, but I felt safer when only Karpov was looking over my shoulder. We used several more fathers to inseminate you - all pre-selected by Zola - and since Zola was no longer alive to issue a new directive, Karpov had no present need of me. He said he would need my services in the future, but I did not wait for him to call upon me again. I took the girl and went to Syria. When Syria became too dangerous, we went to Turkey. When Turkey became too dangerous, we came here.”

Bucky turns back toward the door, knowing the woman is still somewhere in the house. “She’s--?”

“Yes. That is your daughter. Before I raised her, I cared only for myself. I was cruel. Cowardly. I am sorry for all the suffering I caused you, but I am not sorry to have her.”

Bucky has given up on emotion for the present. He understands what Strazds is saying, but for now, thinking about it is too much.

“She’s enhanced. Just as you are,” Strazds adds. “But if Zola had known that, he would have kept her. She is remarkably intelligent. Eight languages. A doctorate in education. She has no interest in utilizing her physical strength, though,” he adds with a smile. “She moves my furniture when she helps me clean. And now that I am old, she sometimes carries me to her car.”
“Does she know…” Bucky searches for the right words. “Does she know how she was born?”

But Strazds is nodding even before Bucky has finished fumbling over what he wants to say. “She knows everything. There is nothing I have not told her. And there is nothing I will not tell you. If there is anything you want to know about the procedures - any information I can offer on Hydra, I will tell you—” He inhales to continue, but a coughing fit stops him. Mindlessly, Bucky hands him the cup of water from the nightstand. When he can speak again, Strazds laughs, and Bucky can hear the fatigue and sadness in his voice. “For six years, I tortured you. For forty-seven years, I waited for you to come and kill me. And now you give me water when I cough.”

“I’m not forgiving you,” Bucky informs him plainly. “That’s not what I came here to do. I just wanted to know what happened. That’s all.”

“I don’t want you to forgive me,” Strazds promises, then squeezes his eyes shut, weak fists grasping at the quilt that covers his legs. “But for the sake of my soul...I want justice done for you.”

*I’m alright, now,* Bucky thinks, wondering if he should even allow Strazds the privilege of letting him hear it said aloud.

“I wanted...” Strazds’ body crumples again, and he shakes his head over and over, wheezing between each several words and yet never stopping to rest. “I wanted my work to do good. I wanted to be successful, to help people. I thought I would cure infertility, I thought I would help children born with malformations, heal women who were sickened by radiation…” He trails off again, tired, and too weak to form another word until he takes another drink of water. “If my daughter - your daughter - is all the good I have ever done, I hope she is enough. I think she is enough.”

Bucky couldn’t say what possesses him to do it, but he reaches into his jacket. Strazds watches him, and sighs with something like relief. It occurs to Bucky that in that moment, Strazds is expecting him to pull out a gun. Not a photograph. He holds up the picture of Lincoln and watches Strazds stare at it until understanding dawns on the old man.

“There,” he says plainly. “Best thing that ever happened to me. He’s five weeks old. I can’t forgive you. Not yet. I’m not ready, and I don’t know if I ever will be. But this is how I got my justice, Strazds. I got better. All the enhancements - I use those to help people now. What you did to me? I started a family. Doesn’t excuse what you did, or what Hydra did, or what I did, but begging for forgiveness and looking for revenge, none of that’s gonna fix anything. All I can do is keep getting better and trying to do some good. Just like you. So I don’t need to kill you to make things right,” he states, finally feeling sure of himself. “They’re already right.”

Strazds is still studying the photograph when Bucky falls silent. His face looks almost twisted with pain, and one of his hands has moved to his chest, like he’s trying to coax his heart on for a few more minutes. Finally, he nods, and Bucky can almost feel a mutual sense of closure and finality settling over the quiet room. “He looks...so very happy.”

“His name is Lincoln.”

Strazds’ mouth falls open, as if he’s been given a priceless gift. He swallows, still unwilling to take his eyes from the picture, even as Bucky hides it away in his pocket again. “Her name is Ruth.”
August: Part 2

August 29th - Lake Alice, NY

Lincoln screeches with excitement when the jet touches down in the hanger, floating elegantly to the ground. The lights and noise are enough to delight him, although Bucky’s own elation is all for the people inside. T’Challa is in New York purchasing property and Shuri had begged him to detour to Stark’s labs (Bucky assumes she wants to ridicule them). They haven’t met his son yet, and he hasn’t seen T’Challa in months and Shuri in over a year. He and Steve had jumped at the opportunity to be their welcoming party.

“You better behave,” Bucky warns quietly.

“It'll be fine,” Steve laughs. “He's in a great mood. Slept all night.”

“Talkin’ to you,” Bucky smiles. “Try not to get too glassy-eyed when you see him.”

“What - glassy-eyed?”

“I know you can't help hitting on him, baby, just be less obvious, you're an embarrassment.”

“I'm charming.”

“You winked at him last time he was here. Nobody winks unironically. Not for the last thirty years…”

The jet's ramp starts to open, and they both shut their mouths and stand up a little straighter, expecting T’Challa to make his usual regal entrance, flanked by his entourage. But he's nowhere in sight. Instead, Shuri comes weaving comically down the gangway at a run, shouting, “Yes! Finally!”

Bucky's missed her like hell, but he can hardly believe that she's this happy to see him. And of course, she not. She jogs up to him with her arms outstretched expectantly.

“Holy shit!” she coos. “Look at this little white baby! Come here, my sweet girl!”

And without any further warning, she plucks Lincoln right off Bucky's shoulder and takes him.

“He's - a boy--” Bucky interrupts.

Clearly, she's no longer listening. “No, no, that's okay -- Hi! Hello, baby! Oh my goodness, look at how fat you are, you look so ridiculous.”

T’Challa and Nakia deboard without much ceremony, and T’Challa’s expression is both apologetic and a little exhausted. “Shuri, I think you are making the Sergeant anxious.”

“He doesn’t mind if I play with her, do you?” Shuri smiles wheedlingly. “T’Challa, feel her soft
white-baby hair,” she suggests, ruffling the top of Lincoln’s head with her fingers. T’Challa, unsurprisingly, does not accept the offer. Shuri gets a better grip on Lincoln and hurries back toward the ramp before anyone can apprehend her. “I’m going to let her press buttons on the jet.”

“Is alright if my sister borrows your son?” T’Challa asks softly, embarrassment and exasperation creeping into his normally even tone.

“I trust her not to let him fly it too far,” Bucky laughs, bowing alongside Steve. T’Challa grips both of them by the shoulder and pulls them back up, then embraces each of them in turn. “Congratulations on your family. You should be very proud.”

“We are,” Bucky assures him, then turns to greet Nakia, only to find that she’s answered a call on her bracelet and is wandering away.

“No - that is not what I asked you to do. I told you to get them the check and - no, they don’t get to delegate the funds, we’ve already specified that the money must go directly to legal representation for the children - one moment,” she huffs, turning back to them. “I’m sorry - it’s the Foundation, I don’t mean to be rude.”

“God, it’s like if Tony and Pepper had their shit together,” Bucky mumbles under his breath.

Steve cocks an eyebrow in agreement.

T’Challa smiles understandingly toward Nakia, but sighs when he turns his attention back to Bucky and Steve. “She is all work and no play,” he explains. “But that will give the three of us an opportunity to catch up. Shuri!” he calls out. A moment later, she pokes her head around the cargo bay opening. “Where is their baby?”

“In the cockpit.”

“Bring him back to Bucky.”

“He’s wearing a safety belt, he won’t fall out,” she grumbls, as if that was everyone’s concern, and returns a few seconds later with Lincoln. The moment she steps onto the ramp with him, Lincoln realizes he’s being forcibly removed from his new jet, goes limp in her arms and starts throwing what Bucky can already tell is going to be a real good fit. “I know, little baby, you would have been a great pilot,” she croons sadly, patting him as the tears start in earnest. “T’Challa, look at what you’ve done. Shame on you, brother.”

La Rioja - July 4th

Bucky doesn’t have to ask Steve to drive on the journey back to Charata. They leave the small apartment together, letting the silence between them deepen as they make their way slowly down the darkening streets of La Rioja, back to the bodega where they’d parked. The ride back to the jet will be another nine hours, and the wind will drown out any words they could possibly exchange, and that will give Bucky time to think. He’ll need every moment of it. He mounts the motorcycle behind Steve and wraps his arms around him, laying his head down on the broadest part of Steve’s back, surrounded by the smell of his brown leather jacket and dirty hair. In the dusky alley, he settles into the closeness, the safety, the quiet...it feels like a dose of morphine washing over the ache of bullet wounds.

Steve only speaks to him once before firing up the bike. He lays both his hands over Bucky’s, which
are clasped at his waist, and squeezes them bracingly. Bucky can hear the rawness of emotion in his voice. “Have I ever told you,” he begins, then pauses, swallowing hard, “how lucky I am to know you?” Bucky tightens his embrace in answer. “I have so much respect for - I couldn’t have--” Steve trails off, shaking his head and leaning back into Bucky’s chest. “I’m just...in awe, Bucky. I love you.”

“Love you, too,” Bucky replies, planting a kiss between Steve’s shoulder blades. “Let’s go home.”

August 29th - Lake Alice, NY

Lincoln calms down eventually, but Steve and Bucky soon decide that he’s had enough excitement for one day, and leave T’Challa and Shuri to their business with Tony and Bruce in the lab.

The world has been blessedly quiet today - none of the team has been called out to put out any fires, and the Facility is full of people.

The labs are teeming with Stark’s staffers as he, Nakia, and Shuri negotiate the trade of various pieces of her tech for properties he owns in Manhattan.

Vision is in the communal kitchen, baking pie after tasteless, inedible pie, insisting that - statistically - he’s sure to produce an acceptable one very soon.

Sam has command of the common room, giving what Steve likes to think of as his weekly film lectures. That’s a nice way of describing the process of Sam discovering a teammate hasn’t seen one of his favorite films, gathering everyone together, putting the movie on, and then frequently pausing it to deliver behind-the-scenes facts that absolutely no one had requested.

Clint is home with his family. Thor has returned to his own people. Hill and Natasha, both sporting unkempt hair and messy clothes, have spread hundreds of papers out on the conference table, and even with Maria’s help, Natasha doesn’t seem to be holding up well as she tries to sort out her back-taxes. Sharon is filling out case reports at the coffee table, except for when Sam shouts for her to look at the paused screen and appreciate a shot of Dr. Strangelove. Wanda is in the corner of the far side of the room, trying to sneak a piece of unspeakably bitter rhubarb pie into a wastebasket where Vision won’t find it. And their greenest member, Parker, has stretched himself out on the floor by the window largest window, with a Starkpadd, notebook, highlighter, and a copy of The Metamorphosis, where he has promptly fallen into a deep, restful sleep. The only words in his notebook are Daddy issues (scratched out), and SISTER issues (with a very large question mark).

Steve is carrying Lincoln, who needs to be bounced for a little while after yet another traumatic elevator ride, leaving Bucky free to say hello to everyone before they go back to their quarters to start their own dinner. Steve watches as Bucky grins and intentionally knocks a few documents off Natasha’s table and gets a vicious kick in the ankle for it. Vision talks him into trying a bite of a visually stunning pie, and Bucky is polite enough to fight the good fight and swallow it, but then jots down a better recipe on a piece of receipt paper and leaves it on the counter. He stands behind the couch for a while, watching a few minutes of the movie and rubbing Sam’s shoulders with what looks like brutal force - which Steve knows Sam absolutely loves.

Bucky’s really won them all over. More importantly, they’ve won him over. He trusts them. They trust him. When Lincoln had come into the picture, he and Bucky hadn’t been alone. His son was just another welcome addition to their ever-growing family.
Although, right now, he’s ready to be alone with Bucky and Lincoln again. Lincoln looks a little exhausted, too. Steve heads for their quarters, and Bucky follows a moment later, apologizing to Sam and promising him a Kubrik marathon some other time.

“Cook something fast,” Bucky orders sharply, grimacing as Steve hands him his hungry, fussing son. “Actually, just grab me something to drink. Anything. That pecan pie tasted like rancid cod liver oil.”

“Yeah, I could smell that,” Steve winces, pouring Bucky a glass of iced tea and sliding it across the counter.

Bucky has settled down on one of the barstools and tucked Lincoln under the hem of his shirt to nurse. Steve does his best not to stare or seem surprised - Bucky has slowly been letting his guard down about nursing for the last few weeks, but he’s never just rolled up to the kitchen counter, lifted up his shirt without reaching for the blanket, and gone about his business without the usual contrition. Steve takes a pot of beef stew out of the fridge, sets it on the stove to reheat, and checks dinner off his to-do list, then rounds the counter almost cautiously to sit down next to Bucky and Lincoln. Neither of them seem to mind.

“I can’t stop thinking about him starting school,” Bucky sighs, patting Lincoln’s bottom automatically as he speaks, the rhythmic motion seeming to calm him as much as it keeps his son happy. “I don’t know what we’re gonna do.”

“We could always homeschool him,” Steve insists for the hundredth time. “There’s more PhDs in this building than we could get an elementary school, anyway,” he laughs, reaching out to work Lincoln’s rumbled socks back onto his feet. “And stop worrying about that. We’ve got a few years, Buck, we’ll figure it out.”

“He’s gonna be a fuckin’ handful, Steve,” Bucky remarks, watching Lincoln’s face pensively.

“Yeah, he is,” he scoffs, cringing a little at the severity of their mutual understatement. Now’s as good a time as any. “You know...I could be wrong, but...does he seem a little - you know - strong for his age?”

“And sharp,” Bucky agrees. “I thought it was just me being too sweet on him,” he chuckles. “But he’s definitely a little super soldier.”

“Born enhanced,” Steve muses quietly, reaching out to cradle Lincoln’s head in his palm, while he still can. “He’s gonna tear this apartment up in a year or two, isn’t he?”

“Once he starts walking,” Bucky frowns, as if he’s imagining something horrifying. “Yeah. That’s gonna be tough.”

“We’ve got to figure out contraception in the meantime,” Steve realizes, answering the sudden rush of panic in his chest.

Bucky laughs. “Yeah, you destroy condoms.”

“I mean,” Steve grins. “I can offer a real simple solution until we come up with something more permanent. I can’t get pregnant.”

Bucky seems to consider Steve’s proposal, but then stares down at Lincoln, distracted. “There are a lot of variables. My body fat is down again, so I’m not bleeding anymore. I can hardly keep weight on as long as I’m nursing. You could get a vasectomy, but that wouldn’t last - you heal too fast.”

“There’s always Dr. Cho,” Steve forces himself to suggest, heart aching in spite of his head telling
him that it’s the right thing to say. “She could fix everything, Buck. Get you back to normal.” He makes himself add a smile, hoping that Bucky can’t tell that it’s just an afterthought.

But Bucky makes up his mind without ever glancing at Steve. “Let’s...just see what happens. I mean, we’ll use condoms, we’ll be as careful as we can. But beyond that, I mean - with regards to sex - let’s just do what makes us happy. You know I ain’t picky,” he says with a sweet little smirk. It breaks under a sudden moment of sadness. “And, you know, Lincoln’s life isn’t going to be easy. He’s going to be different from everybody else his age. He’s going to struggle, and we’re not going to be able to solve every problem that comes along. Might be better if he didn’t have to go it alone.” He worries the inside of his cheek, bouncing Lincoln like he’s trying to comfort him before all the inevitable troubles come. “We won’t try for more, but if more come along, we can handle it. We know what we’re doing now.”

A weight lifts off of Steve’s heart. He hopes he doesn’t let all that relief and happiness show on his face, because he doesn’t want to think that Bucky is just saying this - making this choice - for his sake. He must let it all show, though, because Bucky laughs at him, then repeats, this time with resolution, “Let’s see what happens.”

“You know it’s okay to change your mind,” Steve says sincerely. “Anytime. I don’t want you to feel like you’ve got to do this to keep me happy, Bucky, because I’m happy. I don’t need anything but what I’ve got right here. But having more kids - it’s your body. It’s your decision.”

“It’s yours, too.” Bucky frees up one of his hands to pull Steve close and plant a kiss on his cheek.

“Oh, okay,” he nods. “Then we’ll see what happens.”

Contented silence settles over them for a while, but soon Bucky moves on to more pressing issues. Steve watches him pull out his phone and check it nervously, then set it down on the counter, where he can keep an eye on it. He lays a gentle hand on Bucky’s knee, watching the dark screen with him. “You heard from her?” he asks softly.

“Not since yesterday.”

“How’s she holding up?”

“Not too good.”

Steve hesitates, unsure whether or not he should let the conversation end there. He decides his question warrants the risk of causing Bucky a little pain.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“How are you?”

Bucky looks him in the eye. “I don’t know.”

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**La Rioja - July 4th**

*With no parting word to Strazds, Bucky finally rises from the chair and leaves the room. Steve is waiting for him with an open, extended hand. Bucky takes it, grips it hard, then lets go, and leans his*
weight against the wall next to Steve. Steve watches him, not knowing what to anticipate, until Bucky finally shuts his eyes, lets his head fall back against the wall, and releases a ragged sigh of deep exhaustion.

“Are you alright?”

Ruth’s voice washes over both of them from the end of the hall, nothing but a gentle whisper. The edge of suspicion is gone, now that Bucky has proven true to his word and left Strazds unharmed.

Steve feels the silence stretching out and Ruth’s worry growing as she approaches, and almost answers on Bucky’s behalf, but Bucky takes a breath, stands up, and looks at her. “I should be asking you that.”

“I’m glad you came,” she smiles. “I’ve waited my whole life to meet you.”


Ruth makes the first steps down the hallway toward Bucky, but it’s Bucky that closes the final yard of distance between them and pulls her into his arms. Steve feels Bucky’s sobs right in the pit of his own chest. They’re powerful, wracking, uncontrollable. Even when Ruth cries, she doesn’t stop smiling.

This is what Bucky had wanted. This had kept him silent through hours of labor in a cold, concrete room. This is what Hydra had taken away from him, after he had been so close to finally attaining it.

Steve isn’t sure if Ruth knows what Bucky had done all those years ago, just for the chance to hold her - just once, only briefly, before the inevitable parting - but either instinct or some deep, genetic memory of their long, painful months together seems to guide her head to rest on his shoulder. Bucky’s hand moves to support it, to cradle it, like when he holds Lincoln there. Ruth seems content to stay where she is until Bucky can find the strength to part with her of his own free will. Steve thinks she understands.

Steve doesn’t look away - even though the sight of Bucky holding onto Ruth for all he’s worth and Ruth offering up nothing but love to him seems almost blindingly bright, like sunshine on broken glass.

When Bucky finally lets her go, she keeps her hands on his shoulders. “I watched the news everyday,” she laughs sweetly. “I was so happy when your name was cleared. I - can’t imagine what--”

“It doesn’t matter,” Bucky insists. “It’s over, now.”

August 30th - Lake Alice, NY

The sun is coming up, changing the light in the room. Bucky knows that Lincoln will be awake soon. He should get up and start his day. Steve is probably already awake in the bed beside him, but something tells Bucky that he’s just giving him the space and time he needs - that Steve already knows why he’s sitting on the edge of the bed at 0530 with his phone beside him and his head in his hands.

Steve gives him a few more minutes of struggling on his own, but finally sits up and lays a hand on
Bucky’s back. “You hear from her?”

Bucky can only nod. For a moment, he can’t find any words at all. There aren’t words for something like this - not in any language he knows. He can’t place what he’s feeling, can’t put a name to it. Maybe that’s normal. Eventually, he decides that all he can do is tell Steve the facts and trust him to understand. “Yeah. He passed last night. Pneumonia.” He reaches down and touches his phone, like some modicum of comfort might find its way through the little machine and reach his daughter, five thousand five hundred miles away. “She’s tied up right now, taking care of everything...she said she’d call me later. When she’s ready. I told her I’d be here.”

“You make sure you’re there for her,” Steve agrees, moving to the edge of the bed so he can put an arm around Bucky’s shoulders, bracing him. “I’m here for you.”

“I thought I’d be happy when he died,” Bucky sighs, searching for emotion in his own voice. “But he took care of her. She loved him. He...he gave her what I couldn’t give her, but I still haven’t forgiven him. Maybe that’s not right, but I can’t do it. Steve. But I’m glad he was there for her. I’m glad they had each other. And maybe that’s not right either.”

Through the open nursery door, Bucky can here Lincoln starting to stir. Steve gives him one more tight squeeze, then pushes himself out of bed. “I got him.”

“Thanks.”

Bucky allows himself a few more long minutes on the edge of the bed, feeling the morning light surrounding him like a warm flood. Eventually, he finds the strength to stand up, and that seems to shake a the last bit of clinging darkness out of the room. He walks through the apartment, turning on every light he passes, and starts a pot of coffee. He goes through the motions like every other morning, until the normalcy and easiness of the routine becomes its own kind of comfort.

He can hear Steve in the nursery, talking to Lincoln as he gets him changed and dressed, and he can hear Lincoln babbling and laughing. The smell of coffee is starting to fill the room. There’s food for breakfast in the refrigerator. Lincoln will be hungry. There are messes to clean. Later in the day, there’s work to be done in R&D with Tony and a postnatal appointment to keep with Bruce. At some point, Ruth will call, and wherever he is, whatever he’s doing, he’ll give her as much of his time and love as she needs, and Steve will be there to handle the rest.

He starts small, knowing all the bigger problems will wait. He starts breakfast. He picks up Lincoln’s toys from the rug and puts them away. He cleans the laundry off the couch, somehow finding the strength - today of all days - to box up a few of the onesies that Lincoln has already outgrown. He sets them with a disorganized pile in the living room corner - the boxes from the study that had needed a new home when the study became the nursery. Steve’s sketchbooks and unfinished paperwork. Belongings they don’t have room for anymore.

He takes a newer box out of the pile, deciding that today is as good a day as any to find a permanent home for all the photographs Clint had taken for them the day Lincoln was born. In the meantime, grinning helplessly, he puts the shoebox full of too-small baby clothes with Steve’s old coffee table book of presidents, where he’d reluctantly discovered his son’s name a few months ago.

Underneath the book, right where he’d left it, is the file folder that Steve had brought home from Tiraine. He opens it. He looks through the files and the gruesome pictures, unafraid. There’s nothing inside that file that he hasn’t faced down and made peace with.

With the box of Clint’s photos in one hand and the AVOTs file in the other, he heads back to the kitchen counter. He opens the box, thumbs through the pictures, looks at the smile on his face as he’d
held Lincoln for the first time. He feels the same smile form again.

With an indescribable sense of lightness in his chest - *freedom* - and no second thoughts, he tips the AVOTs files out of their folder and into the trash.

Photograph by photograph, he fills it back up.
Hi, guys! I put my Spotify playlist in order today, and I thought it might be fun to share with you guys.

Three songs that Spotify doesn't have are missing from it, but I'll include the YouTube links below.

Here's the Spotify link! Unfortunately, Spotify didn't have a couple of the songs that I listened to a lot to set the tone for certain scenes and themes, so I included YouTube links for those in the Track List instead. Apologies if they're not available in your country!

THE SIMPLE LIFE - Spotify Playlist

THE SIMPLE LIFE - YouTube Playlist

And here's a complete tracklist:

1. Chapter 1 (Moving in together): Lover, You Should've Come Over - Jeff Buckley
2. Chapter 1 (Meanwhile, in the bedroom...): American Money - BORNS
3. Chapter 2 (Bucky tries to settle in at the Facility): Dearly Departed - Shakey Graves and Esme Patterson
4. Chapter 3 (Morning at the apartment): Fire and the Flood - Vance Joy
5. Chapter 4 (Bucky attempts to take his healthcare into his own hands): I Wanna Get Better - Bleachers
6. Chapter 4 (Steve finds the AVOTs files in Tiraine): Arsonist's Lullabye - Hozier
7. Chapters 5 and 6 (Bucky and Steve work it all out): Resolution - Matt Corby
8. Chapter 7 (Telling the team): Only Son - Shakey Graves
9. Chapter 7 (New Years): THISKIDSNOTALRIGHT - AWOLNATION
10. Chapter 8 (Valentine's Day): Afraid of Everyone - The National
11. Chapter 8 (Shootout on the Quinjet): No Church in the Wild - Jay-Z and Kanye West
12. Chapter 9 (Steve wakes up): Hard Wired - Shakey Graves
13. Chapter 10 (Catching up on the couch): I Will Wait (Mumford & Sons)
14. Chapter 11 (“People get hiccups!”, Bucky's birthday): Welcome to Your Life - Grouplove
15. Chapters 12 and 13 (Babayshower): On Top of the World - Imagine Dragons
16. Chapter 14 (Getting the apartment ready): Home - Phillip Phillips
17. Chapter 14 (Remembering the day Ruth was born): In the Woods Somewhere - Hozier
18. Chapter 15 (Waiting for Lincoln): Dig Down - Muse
19. Chapter 16 (Still waiting for Lincoln): There Will Be Time - Baaba Maal, Mumford & Sons
20. Chapter 17 (Meeting Lincoln): Slow and Steady - Of Monsters and Men
22. Chapter 19 (Back in the field): Cat People - David Bowie
23. Chapter 20 (Remembering to trust each other): Gone, Gone, Gone - Phillip Phillips
24. Chapter 21 (Driving through to La Rioja): Who Did That To You - John Legend
25. Chapter 21 (Talking to Strazds): Babel - Mumford & Sons
26. Chapter 22 ("Let's see what happens."): Roll the Bones - Shakey Graves
27. Chapter 22 (Making a new photo album): Past Lives - Borns

Guys, I can't thank you enough for reading this story and for letting me write it. Love you guys!

Works inspired by this one:

Your white picket fence, your American dream by cobaltmoony

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!