
by galwednesday, silentwalrus, skellerbvvt

Summary

Captain America wakes up from the ice in 2013. The Winter Soldier wakes up in 2009, or rather defects from HYDRA, for a value of defect that’s closer to decimate. He ends up working for SHIELD. In April 2014, he’s assigned to Captain America’s mission as a sniper.

Steve’s just trying to get some kind of life together. Bucky is too, or at least he was until tall, blond and Captain shows up and starts just - being there, all the time. It’s terrible. It’s the worst. He has to do something about it.

Notes

in this universe, there would be only one set of pronouns. However, it’s imaginary and also I’m writing this story in English. As such, all characters retain the pronouns they have in canon since I hate fucking with pronouns. If this is an issue for you for whatever reason, feel free to backbutton now.

- chad

Worldbuilding note: this is not “traditional” A/B/O, insofar as that exists; we’re using
“alpha” (A) and “omega” (O) essentially be they’re convenient existing fanfic gender markers outside of “man/woman”. In this universe there are no betas, heats or self-lubricating anuses. If you like group social structures and sniffy whiffy, you’re in the right place. For further information please contact Management.

Management: Chad built this beautiful trampoline of a world, and Skellerbvvvt and Galwednesday ran in and jumped all over it like a pair of drunken chimpanzees. IT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT THEM.

See the end of the work for more notes
“…in times of war there are recorded cases of individuals already in established pods recreating that experience with their regiment and fellow soldiers [39], reporting a distinct preference for the As they have served with, and perhaps bonded with, during times of extreme crisis. Separation from these “stress-linked” pods, even into the arms of their home pods, has been connected to higher incidences of depression, anxiety, and poor reintegration to society.

...however, the same behaviors [50] that best served these stress-linked pods in time of war have proven maladaptive in civilian life [51]. In order to best help these regiments adjust to post-war society Dr. Marvin Howell [52] first suggested what is now known as Post Traumatic Stress Gender Therapy [43] but was popularly termed "Clownfish Syndrome" [44]. In this therapy, Howell encouraged to adoption of a group-wide O's designation to calm nerves [53] and provided faster civilian integration[54] Diaries and letters from the period mockingly pointed to PTSGT as "Foxhole Itch" when it was first recorded in subjects switching sexes on an involuntary, or rather situationally coercive basis, to reduce stress. It is from this involuntary switching wherein Howell first conceived his theory [55].”

- Societal Implications of "Clownfish Syndrome": The Discovery of Post Traumatic Stress Gender Therapy by Helen Pultz

When Steve woke up in what he now knows was a SHIELD facility, he smelled the industrial strength soap of a hospital, heard the creak and grumble of a city at work, and figured Peggy would be in shortly to yell at him. But it didn’t smell like London smelled - hell, it didn’t even smell right for a hospital - and he half frowned at the sound of a baseball game rolling in over the crackle of what had to be a pretty old radio, with that kind of undertone.

And then the nurse walked in, and Steve thought: oh, this is a HYDRA trap.

At the time, it was the only explanation he could think of. It made more sense than somehow getting rescued out of the clear cold ocean by anyone else. Maybe the cabin of the plane had secretly been some sort of high tech submarine again. HYDRA liked those.

The baseball game was at least somebody trying. They could’ve only had one recording on file that just so happened to be one Steve knew. Would’ve made more sense to play music then some old baseball game, but Steve’d never pinned HYDRA as being all that bright. Stubborn? Sure. Really good at building weapons factories all over Europe? Absolutely. But they sent in an English speaking nurse with her hair down like they’d never seen a living human being in their lives and expected Steve to just bite the hook like the dumbest fish in the tank. Her make-up was too powdered, her lipstick was wrong, her hair was down, she must have found that tie in the costume department, and… well, either she’d had half a coathanger stuffed down her shirt or something had really gone off in the brassiere department.

She smelled pretty damn wrong, too, without the natural sweat scent that even clean clothes and skin carried, so Steve had been leaning towards robot. HYDRA would probably have robots. Their troops were already as close to robots as HYDRA could manage, and how in Hell they kept getting actual people to put on those helmets and blinders, Steve had no idea.

So, of course, he’d figured it for enemy capture, took off at a run, and smacked straight into a whole goddamn universe of wrong. The pavement somehow felt too spongy under his feet and the smells snapped at him like dog teeth and then he hit Times Square and looked up at all the
flashing colors and huge billboards of dames with their hair down and stood there struck dumb in
the middle of the seizing fit of motion and noise and lights because the alternative was to curl up in
a ball and ask all his senses to please stop working for a minute please.

It was sort of funny to him, later, how he’d listened to the cars roll up behind him and let all the
agents in their dark uniforms cautiously sidle in to surround him while he looked up and around at
the brightly colored signs, and all the while the clearest thought in his head had been if that’s an
ad then I don’t know who got hired as the art director, because they could’ve pulled that from any
blue comic and called it a day. What a hack.

And then it turned out, from the paper file they gave him, that if he’d woken up about five years
earlier, then he wouldn’t have been too far off about the HYDRA thing.

“In 2009 a HYDRA asset went… rogue,” says the very nice O they have minding him. Steve
wishes he could remember her name; it seems too late to ask now. Her job title was something to
do with HR. Human Resources. He supposes he qualifies as both. She’s dressed top to bottom in
simple, professional navy, with her hair in a bun and stud earrings shaped like little flowers. He
wonders if they gave her the outfit straight out of the dry-clean bag before he came in. Sure smells
like it. She’d poured him coffee. It hadn’t tasted right, but he’d sipped it since it was the polite
thing to do.

“It turns out our organization, and other organizations like it, as well as the governments of every
major world power, had been secretly infiltrated by HYDRA. Uncovering this fact caused a great
deal of shock and confusion,” she says, every word measured. She’s got a good voice, a nice
switchboard voice that glides you right into the call without a hitch. “SHIELD, assisted by the
former HYDRA asset, cleared the agency of moles and participated in the exposure and
elimination of HYDRA from the United States government and affiliated world intelligence
agencies. We’re still working to rebuild trust, internally and externally, and there were those
within our organization who are still very suspicious of unknown agents. It was felt that your
exposure to SHIELD should be limited until you were thoroughly vetted. In your case, excess
suspicion proved to be just as harmful as undue caution, to the agency’s regret.”

Steve realizes this is an apology. A political apology, no less. He doesn’t know why she’s talking
to him like he’s a pissed-off Senator, but he recognizes the phrasing. “I thought if anyone found
me, it would be the Army,” he says, not quite a question.

“SHIELD has always taken a special interest in you, Captain Rogers. Recovering the Valkyrie,”
which is a nice way, Steve thinks, to say recovering your corpse, “was the first SHIELD mission,
in a sense, spearheaded by Howard Stark himself. Director Carter authorized the use of every
resource at SHIELD’s disposal. We regret deeply that it took us this long to find you.” She puts
her hand over Steve’s, and given how sad she smells for a moment before she gets control of
herself it’s not just a diplomatic maneuver.

Steve stares at the thick binder in front of him, just… pages of faces and details. They’d left him in
the meeting room with the binder for a while before sending in the nice lady. His eyes keep
blurring over the words and catching on the pictures. The last time he’d had this much trouble
reading, he’d been near delirious from a high fever. “Peggy started SHIELD?”

“She found the SSR to be… constraining. Starting fresh gave her more control. There’s an early
history of the agency in Appendix C.”

Steve’s attention sharpens at the idea of HYDRA inside Peggy’s agency, something she built from
the ground up with her own two hands. She must have been furious when it all came out. “When
did HYDRA get inside?”
“Even now, it’s difficult to know. HYDRA was playing a very long game, and some of their agents have only been uncovered posthumously. We do know their influence extends back decades. HYDRA wormed its way inside, bided its time, and then…” She gestures to the binder. The section after the tab marked HYDRA Exposed is nearly an inch thick.

“A lot of damage from one defected asset,” Steve says, because he’d flipped through that first.

The O gives him a weak smile and sips her coffee. “He was, shall we say, motivated. It was an intense news cycle. I made - DVDs,” she says, her voice rising just slightly at the end.

“Great,” Steve says, looking at the round silver discs she gestures at and deciding not to ask what they’re for.

The rest of the meeting is occupied with a current events rundown that in Steve’s personal opinion makes about as much sense as trying to teach him calculus in Swahili. Names sleet past him, places, people, and the O shows him maps and photographs on smooth white paper. He doesn’t know why they told him it was a meeting, he thinks vaguely, when it’s clearly just another session. Session with the doctors, session with the Human Resources. Okay, switch.

He can’t shake the feeling that they think his lack of knowledge is a kind of unfortunate symptom of being frozen for seventy years - which, he thinks, suppressing a hysterical noise, it definitely is - but everyone he meets seems to act like if only they dump enough information on him it’ll be like he was from here all along.

They’re trying to be helpful. He can smell it. And who knows, maybe they’re right. Maybe if they give him enough facts and faces and figures his memory will finally get fed up and purge the first twenty-eight years of his life to make room for this new stuff, and then it really will be nothing more than a blip, an unfortunate accident, seventy years of temporal dislocation no more significant than missing a step going down the stairs.

“How are you adjusting?” the nice O asks, at the end.

He gives her a USO smile and the answer that made the last three doctors he talked to look the least concerned. “I’m just glad to be keeping busy.”

She nods and smiles back, her posture relaxing. Steve wonders what she’ll write in his file after she leaves. Rogers adjusting well. Probably won’t crash through any more walls. Definitely not HYDRA. Guess we can keep him around.

“How are you adjusting” comes up even more often now that he’s in a new century than it did when he was in a new body, and he can only say he’s keeping busy for so long without actually finding things to keep him busy, so Steve goes looking for ways to show he’s diving in. Whatever the lifestyle version is of chasing a murderer through the streets barefoot. SHIELD isn’t giving him much to work off of, just a lot of paper files about how the war ended and a room full of books about every war that followed it. He figures out how the credit card they gave him works just fine and there’s a diner near HQ that serves unlimited coffee refills for a dollar and seventy five cents, which isn’t so bad if you just pretend numbers aren’t real and lie to yourself about it.

The best thing about the diner is the corkboard by the door with flyers and posters on it. SHIELD is briefing him on history, but they don’t think to tell him about the free classical concerts in the park on Thursdays, or the hourly rate of modern dogwalkers, or which public gardens are leasing vegetable plots for the summer. He finds a pamphlet listing all the classes he could take down at the community center: CPR, Adult Ballroom Level 2, Intro to Carpentry, Intermediate Yoga. So he figures: well. Peggy was always after him about not calling himself a meatball. Might as well learn a thing or two in the information age.
One of the Center’s classes is for Intermediate Cooking. The description mentions “learning new dishes to surprise and delight your pod,” so Steve figures he won’t be the only one there without podmates present. Cooking is a good skill, a useful skill, and something he hasn’t gotten a chance to practice much lately. His mother taught him all the family recipes, but well-stocked kitchens were thin on the ground in occupied Europe, and now that Steve lives in SHIELD housing he hasn’t had a kitchen to mess around in. The supermarkets Steve has seen these days are intimidating enough that Steve’s been glad he mostly eats in diners or the SHIELD mess, but he has to learn what the Hell kohlrabi is sometime, and at least in a class there will be someone there getting paid to answer his dumb questions.

Steve might know all the family recipes, but the family recipes are mainly roast beef sandwiches, nine ways to make colcannon and twelve ways to make a loaf of bread last until next payday. It’d be nice to expand his repertoire a little.

It turns out he’s not wrong, mostly. Everyone there shows up sans podmates and, by at least one interpretation of age, they’re his peers. Maybe a touch younger, really, given that it’s a flock of empty nesters and folks who also probably found out about the class while drinking endless refills of coffee for a dollar and seventy five cents. He lingers on the threshold and thinks about leaving.

The class is being held in a nice little community center nestled in-between two larger buildings, with a playground out back layered with wood chips. The place probably needs more funding, but they painted it a cheerful sage green with some nice wood trim, and there are carrots and climbing peas growing in the beds by the sidewalk. The air inside smells like crackers and floor wax and kids, a combination that means peacetime right down to his hindbrain and made his shoulders relax as soon as he stepped inside. He’d been feeling pretty good about actually having something to say to people when they asked him the next morning if he’d done anything fun that weekend, until he’d followed the cooking smells and realized how unnervingly well his chronological age matched the demographics of the room.

Steve could probably leave. Pretend he was looking for another room. But… he came all the way here. And he’s hungry.

And it’s too late, now, because one of them has spotted him and is advancing on his position, clipboard in hand.

“You here for Expanding Your Menu?” the youngest person in the room asks, giving him a jaunty smile. She’s wearing an apron that says KISS THE COOK and has thick-lensed glasses dangling from a string around her neck. Steve panic smiles back.

"Er, yes," he says. "But I may have misread the listing?"

"Not at all, dear," a nearby O says firmly. There’s a cane tucked over their chair, but somehow the O’s got him by the elbow before he can do more than blink. "There’s no age requirement, it’s just us old farts are the only ones who bother with proper cooking these days. I’m Shara, that’s Mabel, and that lump over there is Josef."

"Nice to meet you." Steve follows the tug on his elbow as Shara pulls him over to their table like a fisherman reeling in the line. "I'm Steve."

It’s all over for him after that. Shara announces they’re making lasagna, and suddenly Steve’s in an apron printed with ducklings, standing in front of a cutting board, sauce pot, and baking pan. Josef rolls an onion at him across the table. The rest of the evening is a blur of getting gently directed by the person teaching the class, then mercilessly bossed around by Shara and guarding his pile of shredded cheese from Josef, who keeps pinching bits of mozzarella every time Steve’s back is turned.
Steve being Captain America has only come up once, in relation to one of Mabel's grandkids. "She works as a firefighter," Mabel says, grating cheese into a bowl as far away from Josef as she can get. "The other A in her pod is a preschool teacher, which is perfect for him, you know how it is, they like to keep busy. Like you, dear. How much garlic goes into the red sauce?"

So it’s not - bad. Not bad at all, really, which lasts right up until he removes his lasagna in the oven and, in the moment of truth, sees that what he’s made looks worse than the frozen and reheated pasta bakes SHIELD mess serves at three in the morning. Maybe it was the oven temperature? Steve’s old Brooklyn apartment had a gas oven a quarter of the size of the electric ones they have in the community center kitchen, and he’d had trouble lighting it more often than not. The oven here lulled him into a false sense of security with its bold digital readout of the supposed temperature, so he hadn’t opened the door to check while it was baking. Rookie mistake.

“Well, let’s see it,” Mabel says, so Steve shows her his pan. The edges are the kind of charred his mother would have diplomatically called “well browned.”


“Yeah.” Steve pokes the middle tentatively. The cheese there hasn’t melted for some reason and sticks unpleasantly to his finger.

“You can’t bring that home to your Os,” Shara says.

Steve almost says I can bring it back to the mess, the As will eat anything, then remembers rationing isn’t a thing anymore, and the newly-transitioned As at SHIELD have better ways to meet their higher caloric requirements than resorting to Steve’s experimental lasagna. “I don’t have any Os,” he says instead, before all three of them give him an evaluating look and he realizes he’s made a Tactical Error.

“I have this niece,” Mabel says, before Shara elbows her out of the way.

“Look, busy man like you, you’re looking for a group that’s already settled, right?” Shara nudges his side with a wink. “My grandson, he’s got a real good pod together, four Os, one of them goes A sometimes but it’s not really for her, they have the two cutest toddlers you’ve ever seen--”

“Leave the poor man alone,” Josef says. “Look at his lasagna, he’s having a bad enough evening.”

Steve thinks of his barracks room at Shield, his spartan single bed with its plain white cotton sheets, nothing softer than flannel shirts in his dresser drawers. “I don’t think I’m in a position to commit to anything right now.”

“Well, you’d know best,” Mabel says, openly dubious. “But if you ever do want to settle down, here’s my advice. Get yourself a nice place and fix it up right. Nothing’s more attractive than an A with real estate. You ever read Pride and Prejudice?”

“Yes,” Steve says.

“So you know that Elizabeth didn’t fall in love with Darcy, she fell in love with his house. Be like Darcy, honey.”

Steve’s taken worse advice.

-o-
Steve goes apartment hunting. Natasha suggests using an agency, and Steve decides it’s the way to go after looking at a couple listings and realizing he has no idea what half the terms mean. He picks a realtor team whose website has a slideshow of cozy, intimate interiors; a checkered tablecloth over a maple kitchen table, a living room pillow pit filled with flamboyantly luxurious purple cushions, a window box with neatly-staked cherry tomatoes. He pushes down his nerves and makes an appointment. As strange as it feels to go looking for a place to live on his own, he knows Mabel is right - if he doesn’t take action, he’ll keep staying in SHIELD housing because it’s easy and familiar, the way almost nothing is now, but that’s no place for a pod. He’ll never have anyone else in his life if he doesn’t make room for them.

The realtor team smells like baking cookies and has matching hairstyles, tiny intricate braids looping in circles and gathered in a fancy knot at the crown of their heads. At first they show Steve single structures, which all have beautiful gardens and less ceiling than skylight, but Steve, for better or worse, grew up in tenement holes and can’t seem to sleep without the sound of at least five other families bedding down in the levels around him.

“How long does the rest of your pod have on deployment?” Alex asks politely. “We offer short-term subletting services, if you’re looking for roommates to fill the space before your podmates return home.”

Steve isn’t sure exactly what his face and scent do in response to that, but Amanda winces and Alex gasps a little. Most of the time he has better control of himself, but touring all these homes, seeing so many wide open spaces drenched in sunlight, has stirred up the memories of all his idle planning during the war, when he’d spend night watches thinking about how to get his unit settled in once they were finally home. Falsworth and Dernier might have elected to go back to their home countries, but he’d thought he would at least get Jones and Morita and Dugan. He’d already had it mapped out in his head. It’s like having a broken bone heal without being set straight, to be standing in this beautiful room without them and imagining how it could have been.

“I’m not currently part of a pod,” he says as calmly as he can manage, because it’s not the realtors’ fault he’s stranded in the wrong century.

“Oh,” Alex says, wrong-footed. “I’m sorry, we...”

Amanda’s eyes widen. “Oh,” she says, then, “Oh goodness,” and then, “Captain Rogers,” she hisses, while elbowing Alex.

“Oh,” Alex says, getting it, and from there on it’s - well, really it’s almost worse. But they’re trying. It’s not their fault Steve’s sour on things. He doesn’t know how to deflect their relentless implications of a pod and children on the horizon, at least not without sounding rude. He finally manages to string together something about how he’s focusing on his career just this moment and that he’s really only looking for a single occupancy place right now, please.

Alex and Amanda frown at each other. “Might be difficult to find one outside of a dorm reef,” Amanda says doubtfully. “There might be a few structures where they have a room to rent, maybe?”

“It can be a larger place,” Steve says, giving up. “I’d just really rather prefer to be in a reef, if that’s alright.”

“Of course,” Alex says, rubbing reassuringly at Steve’s shoulder. “We never would have shown you those single structures if we’d known. Of course you need a reef. There’s that nice busy one in Sunnyside, plenty of kids, half the bathrooms just got redone. Why don’t we go take a look?”

The third apartment they show him is part of a six-story collective, with a communal garden in the
central courtyard and a bedroom with only one skylight in the ceiling. It’s tucked away, or at least as much as any building can be. Plenty of huge leafy trees block the view of his apartment from the sidewalk, but they’re far enough away that folks won’t be using them to jump straight in through his window.

The kitchen balcony opens onto the central garden, the plants well-established and spilling down from high archways above as well as twining up trellises from below. When Steve looks down he sees a couple of picnic tables and a sizable vegetable patch, currently occupied by three adults in sun hats and a gaggle of younger kids. Two of them are moving together in a sideways crab walk to ferry a watering can across the yard. There’s a nice playground here, too, centering on a ropes course webbed halfway up the building with canvas platforms every four feet or so, and some kind of spongy bottom layer thing in bright swirls and colors underneath it. He sees a little poof of dark hair in a mess of at least four or five pigtails, cuddled up on one of the higher platforms and working out some kind of imagination game with two dolls, and another little one frantically swinging back and forth and yelling just loud enough for Steve to hear it.

Steve takes it.

It takes about five minutes to pack up the SHIELD barracks room he’s been living in since he woke up. A few weeks after they met, Natasha dragged him on a tour of some place downtown called Brookfield, which turned out to be a warren of shops under the financial district where absolutely nothing was cheaper than five years’ rent on Steve’s tenement back home. He’d gone along, dazed and unresisting - “This is how I learned to understand modern America,” she had told him, so blandly he’d had no idea whether she was joking or not - so he does have some personal belongings, mostly because Natasha hadn’t let him leave until he’d spent a hundred dollars. He’d finally escaped with a new comb, a fancy coffee, and a pair of fuzzy pink slippers that had been just expensive enough to push him over the dollar limit. Everything fits into the canvas tote bag he’d gotten free from the slipper store, which was called Plush and sold nothing that wasn’t pastel, scented, aggressively fluffy or all three.

Right before he leaves for his new apartment, he pulls his trunk out from under the narrow barrack bed. It had belonged to his grandmother once. It was nothing special, just luggage sturdy enough for his Ma to take on the boat when she came to America. Steve had left it with the neighbors when he enlisted, and it had probably sat in someone’s attic until their grandkids found it and donated it to the Smithsonian. Everything that Steve has recovered from his old life lives there, where Steve doesn’t have to see it, but he can know that it’s safely nearby. He hoists the trunk onto one shoulder, swings the tote bag over the other, and walks to his new place.

Unpacking only takes longer than five minutes because there are so many options for where to put things away. Steve’s new bedroom has two closets. One of them is full of deep shelves, and it takes him an embarrassingly long time to realize the whole closet is just for linens. He lays his grandmother’s quilt on the top shelf and then kind of stops, just looking at the rest of the empty space.

He could buy a bed. The room has a bed pit built right into the floor, a shallow depression about ten feet in diameter, big enough for a whole pod to share. He’s a grown man with a bigger bank account than he knows what to do with, and the textiles available these days are amazing. There’s nothing stopping him from buying a dozen silk cushions and sleeping on them every night.

He imagines it, the bed pit full of layered mattresses and firm pillows in soft blues and greens, then pictures how much empty space that would leave around him. Better not to go overboard. He doesn’t need anything fancy just for himself, and he shouldn’t invest in good linens anyway until he’s sorted out his… personal problem.

He thinks back guiltily to how many times he had to go to SHIELD general services and tell them
he needed another mattress because he’d torn his apart in his sleep again. It’s not nightmares - Tod, who manned the request desk, had looked so worried and upset the first time Steve had shown up that he’d had been forced to explain it was just kneading.

“It’s the serum,” he’d said, red faced, after the third not-so-subtle hint Tod made about setting up an appointment with SHIELD therapy. “When I, uh. In my sleep. When I knead things. I tend to… grip too hard.”

And then Tod had looked blank and concerned, and it turned out Tod’s been O his whole life and his whole pod is O and his father only went A for the month or so it took to make Tod and Tod’s twin brother, so Steve had to fumble through an explanation of Sometimes Alphas Get Urges. “It’s a… reflex… thing,” he’d managed. “With our hands. And the - scent. You know - stress balls?”

“Do you need stress balls?” Tod had said anxiously. His hand had hovered over a requisition form, poised to spring.

“Yes,” Steve had said, giving up. Tod, at least, had looked pleased he’d stumbled across something he could do, and Steve had left him to it.

Three boxes of stress balls - some sand-filled, some foam, some made from malleable putty - had shown up on his desk the following day, which was very kind of Tod even though Steve has a devil of a time trying to hide the carnage every time he accidentally pops one. He’s got sand in every crevice of his desk from the last casualty and a graveyard of busted shells hiding in the bottom drawer. When he’d searched on the internet for something that could maybe make him quit the reflex kneading - popping the stress balls is one thing, but crushing everything he absentmindedly squeezes is just not a way to live - it told him he had stress problems and should probably go O.

Some more disgruntled digging turned up a couple of alpha message boards that told him to try textured gloves. He went and got some from an A specialty store down in - well, what used to be the Bowery, before the el got taken down. It’s still called the Bowery, according to the map on his phone, but it didn’t feel anything like it, with its broad open streets and lack of trains rattling overhead.

The A shop was a pleasant surprise, at least. The Smitten Mitten sign had been burned wood in neat script, clearly a skilled freehand, which was repeated large across the back wall. The gal behind the counter was taller than Steve and about as broad and gave him a friendly wave when he entered. It smelled like cedar and good woodsmoke, and Steve spotted a couple candles burning at strategic points around the shop; they had deep earthy scents, just sharp enough to override any alpha scent that might otherwise end up taking over the whole room.

There was a lot of stuff, all crammed into a shop that wasn’t that large: they had exercise gear and boxing tape and a whole aisle of stress balls and squeezers in various soothing shades of brown and green. Steve contemplated one shaped like a pumpkin - it was pleasingly round and solid and had different texture patches all over for extra stimulation, according to the tag - but he couldn’t very well take it to work and it wouldn’t solve his daily problem. He set it back on the shelf regretfully and moved on, looking for something that wouldn’t clash so obviously with his uniform. All he needed was for a news camera to catch him in the Captain America outfit and neon zebra-striped gloves in the aftermath of a mission.

He got two pairs of gloves, one leather and one a stretchy kind of canvas, both lightweight and breathable and textured on the inside. They’re straightforward black, utilitarian, and they feel a lot better than the SHIELD-issued ones he got when they were first dumping clothes and cards and paperwork and equipment on him. These don’t feel like they’ll make his palms puddle with sweat
and the wrist closures are mindful of where his glands extend down. They’re wider and more sensitive now than before he had the serum, like his big dumb body wants to spread his scent around everywhere he goes. It led to a lot of embarrassing accidental markings on the USO tour before he’d learned to keep his hands to himself.

The gloves are a good investment. They fit well, nobody at SHIELD gives them a second glance, and while he occasionally looks pretty stupid with his hands just kneading at empty air, they do stop him from grabbing whatever’s closest when he’s not paying attention. And the nubbly texture on the inside feels nice.

He’s not about to wear gloves at home, though, let alone in his sleep, which means his mattress problem is still… a problem.

He could get a hammock, maybe. Would a hammock be better or worse than a mat on the floor? Part of him likes the idea of being Up High, but the pad on the floor seems a little more “oh, maybe his bed hasn’t arrived yet” and the hammock would look more like a specific alternative lifestyle choice. Not that people don’t sleep in hammocks; he’d have slept in plenty of hammocks if he’d joined the Navy instead of the Army. Probably. Presumably they still have hammocks in the Navy.

He stands there staring at the ceiling, looking for load-bearing beams where he could attach anchor points, half thinking about what someone would think if they saw him, only all that gets stopped short with: well, who’s going to see his bedroom.

“You can’t think like that,” he says, because his Ma still occasionally grabs his brain from beyond the grave. More often these days, too. Especially on days like today, when he’s just moved the trunk full of everything that still smells a little like his Ma’s perfume.

If he shreds mattresses, he might shred hammocks, too, and getting dumped on his ass at 0400 sounds even less fun than waking up in a pile of foam confetti. He should go with a mat. If someone comes in and sees the mat he can aw-shucks about… breaking the bed? With his. Hands. Not normal bed breaking activities.

He could burn the entire place down and start a new life somewhere else. Grow a beard. There are no pictures of him with a beard, mostly because he’s never grown one. He could get fifteen dogs and live in a yurt, and make yogurt. Yurt yogurt. Yo-yurt.

Should he get a dog?

He travels too much for a dog.

His brain whites out for a second thinking of the loud clatter of nails on the wooden floors throughout the apartment. He could get a high-energy breed and then duck out of SHIELD for his lunch break with the excuse of “oh, I have to walk the dog” instead of eating in the mess hall and watching everyone pretend not to watch him. And then he could just. Run for awhile. Run in the morning, a nice long run at lunch, and a more leisurely run at night, and he’d have a dog by his side, so all the other dogs he passed by would stop turning their big sad eyes at him like he was responsible for - well, whatever dogs had to be sad about. The absence of bacon in the park.

He can’t get a dog.

The empty bed pit is so wide. He has to put something in it, if only to bring it down to a normal human scale. Also, if he lives here, Natasha is going to show up at some point, and her probable reaction to finding Steve sleeping on a bare floor would be a mandatory shopping trip with a price tag he doesn’t dare to estimate.
The bedroom is big enough that the idea of sleeping in all that exposed air makes him nervous. Steve checks, and sure enough there’s a hook centered in the ceiling above the bed pit, ready for a canopy or set of drapes. There had been some drapes at the alpha store, but they’d all been outdoor mosquito netting, meant for letting air and starlight through. Steve wants something to soften the light coming in through the bedroom window. Open, airy rooms are in vogue these days, but Steve still remembers the tenements he grew up on, where you were lucky if your apartment had a window at all. He’s gotten used to smaller, dimmer spaces, places where he can put his back to a wall.

He’s a grown man. He can buy bed drapes and cushions and, and, and a full set of linens if he wants to.

The thought still sends a little thrill through him. He and Ma used to play games when he was little, saying, when I grow up, I’ll have… and then spinning some fantastic tale about chocolate palaces and castles strung wall to wall with velvet. It had made Steve giggle then, to hear his Ma saying when I grow up, the two of them building an impossible future out of nothing.

Well, he’s grown up now. He heads to a nice linens shop he’s passed on his way to the park before, where he sometimes lingered by the windows to admire a length of amber wool or pale mint satin. The shop is big enough that he can duck into the back aisles and browse undisturbed, his hands knotted behind his back so he doesn’t give in to the urge to touch anything.

There’s a whole display of bed drapes in one corner by the window. The drapes are fanned out over the glass, showing how much light diffuses through the fabric, and Steve is immediately drawn to a rich emerald velvet, the highlights glowing almost gold in the sunlight. The price, as expected, is absurd. Right next to them are some nice cotton drapes in navy blue that seem - practical. Sturdy. Easy to care for, easy to repair; a nice appropriate working set. Nothing self-indulgent about them.

There’s a book of swatches so customers can touch samples of the fabric. Steve picks it up, flips through. The emerald velvet is plush and soft beneath his fingertips, even through the gloves. He catches himself rubbing his hand on it more thoroughly, unconsciously trying to leave a mark, and hastily puts the book down.

His Ma would have bought the emerald velvet. That’s enough to push him over the edge. He hands over his credit card with only a slight wince, and walks more quickly on his way back, like the neatly wrapped bundle in his shopping bag is a glowing radioactive beacon of selfishness. He knows it’s not actually written on his forehead that he’s buying them just for himself, but he feels like everyone can tell anyway.

It takes a while to get them hung properly, half because he’s never had to set up his own canopy before and half because he keeps getting distracted by the slide of the velvet between his bare palms, the weight of it a guilty little thrill, heavy and cool and abundant. When he’s finally done, the curtains fall in a tall cone from the ceiling hook.

He stops a moment, and then pulls out the small notepad he’d purchased so he could at least nod, smile and write something down when people helpfully told him about yet another thing he’d missed. He flips to a new page. His ma’s face has gone fuzzy-edged with memory a little, like she’s soft lit on a movie screen. But it still feels nice to draw her and it feels nice to rip the little page out of the notebook and tape it to the wall by the bed pit, where the sun has bleached around squares where paintings should go.

He fusses with the arrangement of the bed for a while, letting his hands linger, stroking his palm over the hemmed edges. It’s his now, after all. There’s no reason he can’t do it. When he crawls inside, the light is soft and gentle, like an early misty morning in a meadow in the spring.
When I grow up, he thinks, letting his eyes shut, the light coming through his eyelids filtered to the deepest forest green, I’ll have a big bed with velvet drapes, and a pod to share it with me.

He falls asleep right then and there and that’s the rest of his Sunday gone, and then it’s back to SHIELD on Monday, so it’s a few days before he has to figure out what to do with the interior of the bed nook proper. After some consideration, he goes to an outdoor supply store and buys some camping mats. They’re plenty soft, only an inch and a half thick, and won’t give him enough grip for his hands to start playing demolition zone in his sleep. Waterproof too, which would be handy if his apartment ever sprung a leak. And scent-resistant to help avoid attracting bears, according to the label. He would like to think that he’ll never need to test his home’s ability to ward off bears, but life with SHIELD has taught him not to take anything for granted.

He lines the bed pit with the mats, covers it all in a cotton sheet, and rolls over them experimentally. The arrangement won’t win any design awards, but it works.

The nook is still far too big for one, but he can’t figure out how to fix that and stop his hands from grabbing at stuff overnight. He half thinks of bookshelves arranged in a protective ring around the bed pit and then it would be less like a sleeping nook and more like a reading nook (in which he happens to sleep).

But people keep giving him books about Captain America. And he doesn’t know where to put them, or what to do with them, but it seems wasteful to just throw them away, and he can’t bear to give someone a book about himself. So now he has five books with his face on the jacket, and his eyes staring out from the spine like he’s disappointed in the font of the title. Which, to be fair, he has been. One of the SHIELD people on his reintegration team took him to the Guggenheim and gave him a summary of fine art since the 1940s, and Steve had nodded attentively and tried not to let his eyes glaze over. He doesn’t give a damn about Andy Warhol, but he does have a thirty-minute rant on typefaces all ready to go if anyone ever asks.

Not that anyone has; everyone seems to have forgotten that the art Steve did was advertisements and signage and the occasional blue picture (the Smithsonian hasn’t found out about those, apparently, and Steve isn’t going to be the one to tell them). The Hourglass Man: A Captain America Story kept calling him a painter, and he’d said out loud: “Where does this guy get off” and then realized he was a) not talking to anyone and b) if he had been, he was reading a book with his own face on the cover.

So now he doesn’t read them, and he’s shamefully tucked them in between all the other books SHIELD gave him during his briefing sessions, but he keeps meeting his own eyes at the worst times. He moved all the books out of his bedroom and into the living room just to reduce how often he wandered out of his bathroom brushing his teeth and saw himself staring judgmentally at his own underwear.

The living room presents its own challenges. It’s a nice big space, designed for the whole pod to come together after dinner and… well. Not listen to a radio program, not these days, but that’s what Steve had always pictured. The real estate website slideshows had mostly shown living rooms centered around a big TV, and Steve doesn’t have one of those. But he could get a couch. People have couches. If someone ever comes over he’d need somewhere for them to sit.

There’s a pillow pit in the living room, too, right below the skylight, but Steve hasn’t bought any pillows for it yet, so it’s just a big dent in the floor. He fell in once when he’d just moved in and hadn’t memorized the layout yet. He’d concealed his still-healing sprained wrist from Natasha the next day, too embarrassed to admit how he’d hurt it. If he got a couch, he could put it in front of the floor dent, so next time he’ll trip over the couch first instead of face-planting into the floor. Strategy.
So he goes out and gets a couch. There’s a nice furniture store a few blocks away, *Armoire Amore*. The website said it was pod-owned, with sustainably-sourced wood (which had Steve wondering if there was a tree shortage, and that was a whole evening gone) carved by hand and most of the textiles stitched together onsite (Custom order welcome, lead-time 6+ weeks). When Steve goes up to the counter to pay, the cashier looks around, obviously searching for Steve’s wayward podmates, and then asks if he’ll need any help moving it. Steve stares at the cashier. The cashier stares at him.

“I can, uh.” Steve gestures at the plush, neutral looking couch, with deep seats and matching throw pillows, which he’d just carried up to the front counter without even thinking about it. “I mean, I think I’ve got it.”

And he lifts it over his head and carries it out of the store without any trouble, although he feels sort of self-conscious when people on the sidewalk stop to stare. But he gets it upstairs, and then he has a couch. And glasses he could put water in. And if someone came to visit he could offer them a place to sit, facing a blank wall, and a glass of tap water.

“Welcome home,” Steve says, and tucks his hands into his pockets.

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In the meantime, work rolls on. They let Steve take the active duty agent qualification tests after he’s been awake for three months, and he breaks a few records (and part of the obstacle course, which he apologizes for) on his way to an easy certification. The doctors sign off on his physical fitness and, with only a little more hesitation, his mental fitness. The words “meaningful work” and “stabilizing influence” and “continuing social integration” get thrown around a lot.

“Normally we’d bench someone with your level of trauma history for at least six months,” his most plain-spoken doctor tells him, “but in your case, fighting with a team is probably better for you than sitting at home.” The *because you don’t have anyone at home* is pretty strongly implied. Steve can’t much argue. He’d met most of his friends while actively being punched in the face. The same doctor also tells him bluntly to lose a couple inches below the belt buckle, but Steve refuses as politely as possible. “Plenty of agents are O,” the doctor says. “Hell, most of them are. It’s not going to impede your performance any.”

“I know,” Steve says. “I’m alright as I am, thanks.”

“It’s my professional medical opinion that switching over would do you a lot of good,” she presses.

“If things get bad,” Steve says, more to get her to drop it than anything, “I’ll try it.”

She doesn’t believe him, but she nods like she’s willing to pretend she does, so that’s all right. It gets him a little bakelite badge that’s apparently an identification card, magic door key and computer activation doohickey all in one, which he dutifully clips to his new uniform. The badge has his photograph on it - he hadn’t even known they’d taken the photograph because there hadn’t been any click or flash or anything, just a cheery assistant saying “All done!” so in the picture his mouth is a little open and he looks moderately concussed - and *Agent Steven Rogers* printed under it.

Then Natasha introduces him to Melinda May and Maria Hill, and between the three of them the real training starts. He learns how to pilot helicopters, how to learn the mission-essential basics of a new language in seventy-two hours, which types of scentblock last the whole mission and which ones let him release shock scent if he needs to, which parts of a computer to pry out and take with
him back to the analysts and which to smash. After two more months of that, they start letting him do missions.

Steve can’t really call it monotonous, because half the time it’s, well, combat, but things do get into a kind of groove. Natasha gets sent on all the ops he does - she’s his minder, Steve knows, but she’s so good at her job that he can’t even be resentful about it. May, who heads up Alpha STRIKE, is an excellent captain and Hill is the kind of commander Steve wanted to have ten of back in the war.

It’s not the same as working with the Commandos. The Commandos had been on their own so often, on long missions in between debriefs, that falling into a pod was more or less inevitable. Steve’s SHIELD coworkers are coworkers. Nice coworkers, coworkers who are good at their jobs, coworkers he comes to trust with his life, but at the end of every mission they disperse and head back home. Still, fighting with a familiar team fulfills something necessary, eases an ache he hadn’t realized was building with every day he spent flipping through binders in his empty SHIELD office.

He gets used to working with Alpha STRIKE, operating a joint command with May. He comes to think of them as his; they’re the only all-A team and they’re the ones he gets sent out with most often. Steve gets the feeling they’re all like him, too - wouldn’t switch unless they really had to. It makes them a little insular, sure, and Steve gets it - he always feels a little too big when surrounded by Os, so it makes sense that O agents wouldn’t be dying to tack onto an A group like that. (Natasha doesn’t count. Steve occasionally suspects Natasha is some kind of faerie being who’s decided to holiday in the human realm for a lark.)

And they have specialists within A-STRIKE, which means there’s not much personnel shuffling, if any, which is why it’s such a shock to walk into the briefing room and see a stranger sitting in the back row.

“This is your sniper,” Hill says in her blunt way. “Call sign Winter Soldier. He’s joining you and Widow; she’ll be his spotter if necessary. Alpha STRIKE will meet you in the hangar.”

Steve looks at Natasha, who meets his eyes and nods, so Steve keeps his opinions about last minute roster shuffles to himself. It’s necessary, anyway. Barton is a good operative, and sometimes there are missions where they need to apprehend someone smart enough to use bullet-neutralizing technology or magic who has nonetheless failed to guard against arrows shot with unerring accuracy, but he has a terrible habit of breaking more than one major bone at a time. Barton’s clearly not available right now, so someone had to be brought in to pick up the slack.

May nods at their new addition and he nods back. Steve eyes the guy. He’s kitted up even in the briefing room, in full armor and a mask that covers the entire lower half of his face down to the collarbones. For a second Steve thinks he’s wearing an A-glove, but only the one, for some reason - and then realizes it’s not a shiny silver fabric but a shiny silver metal hand. Nobody else seems to think this is worth staring at, so Steve doesn’t either. Maybe it’s some kind of armor.

Apart from the hand, he’s the first person Steve’s seen this century that has an outfit that’s - well, utilitarian to the point of monkhood, sure, but it makes sense. It’s made of the same dark, tough material as the rest of his gear, and there’s a set of matching goggles around his neck. The only discrepancy is the long brown hair hanging in his face. Steve can only hope he ties it up somehow for actual combat.

Steve tries not to think about pre-roll messages listing the benefits of victory curls. People always want to point out all the little differences between when he was born and now, but they mostly talk about political milestones and technology upgrades and the world-changing events that made the history books. Steve knows those things are important, but walking out on the street for the
first time and seeing the lack of hats and hair hanging loose everywhere was - well, it’d been a bit like the first time they’d shuttled him over to Europe and he’d stood in a field without a building in sight and thought: God, this could use some concrete.

The Soldier doesn’t return Steve’s scrutiny. He glanced at Steve and Natasha when they came into the room, but he’s just staring at the table now like it’s telling him a story. Steve can just about tell that his eyes are blue.

May nodded at him, though, which is as good as a standing ovation from anyone else. Steve could do with a sniper, from a tactical standpoint. He and Nat are good in a brawl in… two different ways, sure, but if you have Nat shooting someone from across the hall then something’s gone very wrong, and putting Steve in long range is like driving a tank to a fight and then leaving it in the parking lot. If May passes this Soldier guy then Steve isn’t going to turn down the opportunity. He just sort of wishes he’d gotten the chance to get a firm handshake and a clean read on the guy.

In any case, callsign Winter Soldier doesn’t have any questions, which is new. Steve doesn’t think he’s gotten through so much as a “I’d like to buy a coffee” without three questions and an apology from anybody. A pregnant lady had tried to give up her subway seat for him and Steve’s head had filled up with static like bad radio. He’d tried to make a joke of it, saying “I’m not actually 95” with a smile, but then she had started apologizing and he’d had to flee the subway three stops early.

So that briefing ends in a hurry. Steve falls into step with Natasha, heading down the hallway in the general direction of the armory. “Worked with this guy before?” he murmurs as they pass a gaggle of junior agents, one of whom actually swivels around and walks backwards to watch Steve until he turns the corner.

“A few times.”

“Any good?”

“The best. Shot me through the stomach once,” Natasha says neutrally. “From eight hundred yards away. Right through me and into the engineer I was escorting.”

Steve almost stops, but this is Natasha. He knows about her history with the Red Room. More importantly, he knows how it ended, and exactly how thoroughly and literally she had cut those ties. “Is that going to be a problem?”

“Hazards of the job,” Natasha shrugs. “I was a hostile to him at the time. I would have done the same.”

“How likely is he to be a liability?”

Natasha gives a little hah under her breath. “To us, not at all,” she says. “He’s a professional. The best, if we’re being objective.”

“And if we’re being honest?” Steve asks, and Natasha always has some kind of smile when Steve asks her honest opinion. Which, maybe she’s glad someone wants to know, or maybe she just thinks somebody asking her to be honest is funny.

“Rogers, if you didn’t want to be the King of the Misfit Toys, you probably should have had a selection criteria for the Howlies.”

“They were the best,” Steve says, trying not to do the thing with his jaw the tabloids keep catching snapshots of and putting on the front page, but he has a feeling he’s doing it anyways.
Natasha shrugs and bumps her shoulder into his. “There you go, Cap. So's the Soldier.”

Steve google “Misfit Toys” and finds some sort of terrifying Christmas special he sits through, because Natasha never hands him the name of something and tells him to watch it, she just hints at what she means and it’s up to Steve to figure it out. Granted, if she is handing Steve the story of Rudolph as her honest answer, she’s not as subtle as people always make her out to be.

One hour before go time, Soldier’s in the hangar as promised, trooping into the quinjet behind STRIKE. He sits apart from them, but everybody treats that as normal, even the couple of younger agents who glance over at him in what they probably think are discreet ways. May doesn’t say anything, so neither does Steve, and as the jet takes off the two of them get everybody started on final mission prep and equipment rundown.

They all slather up in a final layer of scent blocker, Millegan passing out the gel and Sanchez digging out the aerosolized stuff for their gear. Steve sprays himself down, inside and out of his combat suit, and sprays the straps of the shield, too, where despite the heavy-duty A combat gloves the sweat of his hands leaks through. He sees Soldier in the corner of the cabin doing a final pass over his weapons. He’s not doing any scent blocking, and ordinarily, Steve would’ve gone over there and gotten on his case about it, only he hasn’t smelled a thing on Soldier besides plastic and leather and guns. He’s clearly got his scent lockdown handled.

Natasha did say he was the best. It’s nice to work with a professional.

Not that Alpha STRIKE isn’t, but they’re… well, Steve’s not sure it’s fair to call them rowdy, given they’re probably acting quite normally for a pack of well-fed alphas seeing relatively infrequent combat. They’re disciplined enough in the field, but on base they throw their weight around, shoving each other in the halls and laughing when the interns wince. The majority of Steve’s experience is still with underfed, overmarched infantry and the Commandos, who had gone from being underfed, overmarched infantry and the Commandos, who had gone from being underfed, overmarched infantry to very nearly adequately supplied spec ops. Alpha STRIKE may be spec ops, but they don’t live in a warzone. Steve’s found it makes for a difference in attitude.

In comparison, the Soldier is downright familiar. He has all-custom gear that he checks over quietly, moving through everything with the mechanical efficiency of someone who knows how to do it in a hurry. Steve watches for a second too long and he looks up, tracks Steve, and goes back to his preparation. Steve gets the impression that this is sort of like whatever Natasha does when she’s playing Model Agent for the rest of SHIELD. At a spitball guess, Steve’d say the Winter Soldier is only going through his checks so Steve doesn’t come up and talk to him. If he’d shoved Soldier out of the airplane fifteen minutes ago, he probably would have rolled into a tuck and come up in a firing crouch.

Which was a lot to get out of a man looking at his guns, but the 21st century has left Steve looking at lots of things while going I wonder if that’s normal now and checking the reactions of everyone else just to be sure they also all saw the giant moving ad for shampoo up in the middle of the daylit street where God and children could see it. He’s gotten pretty sure of his calls by now.

They deploy with no problems. The mission is more of a stalk to start with, just getting to grips with the terrain, so Steve sends them all out in teams, with the exception of Soldier. He was about to put him with Natasha, figuring that’s what Hill meant about her being his spotter, but Natasha had just said “We’ll split up and cover B and D quadrants,” Steve hadn’t seen reason to veto. Natasha knows what she’s doing and she seems to know which way Soldier will jump, and
frankly of the whole group they’re the only two Steve would consider sending out alone.

So they move out, and things are quiet, just as they should be. It’s day four in the field when Soldier does his in-person check-in, resupplying at the quinjet and reporting his all-clear to May and Steve. He’s been quiet up to that point, which is a change. The Howlies had been called that for a reason, and everybody on STRIKE tends to at least buddy up. Even Natasha doesn’t go out of her way to do solo ops. But Soldier went four days without checking in on the radio, not even click-checks, let alone the worried mother-cat caterwauling Monty used to do every time they made him take the high ground.

At check-in Soldier lays out his collected intel in a quiet, even voice, talking about hostile numbers and sentry patterns and occasionally raising a hand to tuck a loose strand of hair behind his ear. It turns out he does tie his hair back on missions, but it’s a tight low tail that makes the rest of it strain and frizz. Stray loops poke out everywhere. They’re out in the field and it’s not like Steve is passing judgment, but he can’t help the way his palms itch.

Soldier has to have podmates, right? Natasha said he was the best, and there’s no way someone becomes the best without people around them noticing and wanting to take them home. That’s what Steve likes about SHIELD, the way everyone respects competency. If there was ever a group of people who would cheerfully scoop up someone like the Soldier based on his marksmanship and deadly grace without worrying about the frizz of his hair or the way he sidles around the edges of things and doesn’t look up when he talks, it would be people at SHIELD. If Winter Soldier is the best sniper they have, he must have a pod of people who noticed and decided to treat him right. Right? Right. Somebody’ll braid his hair once they get back.

Steve isn’t the type to speculate publicly on people’s designations, but he’s pretty sure Soldier is O. His uniform buckles right up to his neck, and he only puts his gloves on once they’ve hopped out of the jet and headed off into the forest. He also hasn’t kneaded at anything, and he steps back and away from loud noise, head up and locating the sound instead of heading in chest first. It’s not like Steve’s an expert on body language or anything, it’s just that Peggy would flip herself back and forth like a coin depending on the situation, and while she was always Peggy - bold as brass and the sharpest tool in just about anyone’s shed - there were differences all the same. And Soldier sure acts more like the alley-cat wary Peggy over the big as Heaven and all its Holy Angels Peg.

Then again, if Soldier is O, his hair and clothes are even stranger. Absolutely nothing about the Soldier’s uniform looks comfortable, and all the Os Steve had known growing up wouldn’t have been caught dead outside without well-kempt hair after the age of fourteen or so.

But this is a military operation, so it’s not like hair care is top of anyone’s mind. Steve’s fingers keep twitching towards the plastic utility comb in his pocket, but he knows better than to offer. Maybe Soldier has a podmate who does his hair, and he just leaves their handiwork in place when he’s in the field, no matter how untidy it gets over time.

And then it’s a moot point. As Soldier walks ahead of him off the quinjet, the wind changes, and Steve catches a whiff of scent coming his way. It’s very faint, enveloped strongly in a scent blocker Steve recognizes as very heavy duty, and at first he stops, because the Soldier smells - sick. The kind of sick where Steve can’t even tell his designation over the muddle of bad sweat and confused hormones. Steve used to smell that kind of sick.

Steve eyes Soldier warily. He’s moving okay, and there’s no hint of fever in the scent, so whatever it is, it’s probably a personal problem that won’t affect the mission. He must be wearing a bucket’s worth of scentblock anyway, and Steve can only pick up his scent because of the serum senses. It might even be on purpose: the tricks he’s seen Natasha pull with her smell make him boggle, and who’s to say the sick-scent doesn’t come out of a bottle too, just another layer of mask. If the enemy smells that they definitely won’t be thinking it’s from a sniper hidden in the
Another day, though, and the scentblock erodes enough that the next time Soldier reports Steve can pretty reliably say the guy’s not an alpha.

He’s not surprised. Big as Soldier is, scouts were all O in the war, and for a sniper it’s the obvious choice. Most of the agents that do deep cover missions are O, for the same reason most STRIKE agents are A. The senses and look and not scenting everything you touch are much more useful in certain situations than others, even if there is a tradeoff in stamina and strength; if you have to hide, you want to be omega, though for more intensive missions agents sometimes do both.

That’s another thing that’s changed. It takes a whole month to transition fully, to the point where no trace of the previous designation shows up in bloodwork. Steve’s seen Natasha do it in six days. It’s not a fun six days, and she was swigging supplements and injecting herself with some kind of SHIELD cocktail every twelve hours, but by the end of day five she smelled alpha even to Steve and by day six her neck glands were gone like they’d never been there. A dye job, a wardrobe change, and she was a completely different person, ready to come before the mark in a new disguise. The first time it’d happened Steve had sort of half-believed she’d been hiding a twin.

It’s an incredible trick to have up your sleeve if no one thinks it’s possible, and plenty of people don’t - hell, plenty of people never transition at all. As far as Steve knows the majority only do it once or twice, for preference or pregnancy. Back in New York, or, well, back in his New York, no one ever really talked about it directly. You just knew that some people were more comfortable in one kind of body over the other.

Steve knows most folks prefer O just because they don’t like the aggression. He can’t blame them. He’s been A his whole life and even he had a Hell of a time controlling it after the serum. Transition’s pretty hard on the body, too, so with his constitution before the serum he hadn’t tried it. Hadn’t felt the need to, either. He didn’t figure the drive to step up and protect people would go away with switching, so might as well keep what extra muscle mass he could.

And then there had been a war on. And now he’s a comic book character, so it seems like there’d be a lot of news articles if he went changing anything. He’d had a complete stranger ask if he preferred boxers or briefs, and when he’d fallen into the door of a bookshop as politely as he’d known how to, he saw an entire case of his face glaring off at the YA section, behind the title “It’s A-OK to be A”. They’d have to print a whole new line of books if he switched now.

It took Steve two weeks to transition, when the doctors were running tests immediately after the serum and wanted to measure both his new bodies, but that had been a natural switch with no chemical quickening or inducement. Being O had been eye-opening, even for just that short while: it was amazing how much of what he’d thought of as personality was controlled by brain chemicals and hormone slurry. He’d been shocked by the pangs of loneliness and amazed at the fresh nuances of scent and new skin sensitivity. He hadn’t gotten any of the intense feelings of relaxation people talked about, but that was probably because he’d been in a military bunker with medical staff prodding him at every waking moment.

They tested everything, too. The doctors proclaimed that his womb and ovaries seemed one hundred percent functional and then wondered aloud if the serum could be passed down genetically. Steve had slapped at somebody’s hand over that, automatically getting riled on the behalf of the O in question, which happened to be him, sure, but there was no sense being fresh about it. Then he immediately went back to A and stayed there, because with a super serum and his luck he’d been liable to get pregnant if he so much as looked at a johnson wrong, and newly healthy or not, children had not been in the game plan.
Maybe he’ll switch over again, one day. It had annoyed him and Peg both that everyone just
assumed she’d be the one to go omega at the end of the war, just because she already did it often
enough for her spy work; Peg had always liked being A more and didn’t seem to have any
problems channeling the aggression. She’d told Steve once that being omega felt a little to her like
being drugged, in a way: not her senses dulled, but her self, whatever was in her that made her
strive to take the next step, conquer the next challenge.

Steve understood. It’s not that he thinks omegas don’t have that, or that Peg did, it’s just that they
both knew what they needed to be and omega wasn’t it.

Still isn’t, so far.

The op goes well, or as well as any combat situation can. They track the terrorist convoy across
nineteen miles of mountain terrain, picking them off as they go - Steve would’ve gone for one
clean ambush, but they need intel and so they bring the terrorists to Natasha one by one. If it was a
simple kill-off Natasha probably would’ve been sent in with a minor support team, but as it is they
need all of STRIKE to ferry the prisoners back to the jet and stop the other terrorists from
spooking.

They do end it with an ambush, boxed in enough that Soldier comes in close and helps with the
melee. He’s fast, so fast that Steve’s brain never flags him as a friendly who needs the shield
shoved in front of him to deflect a fatal stab or bullet. They take no casualties, which is standard,
but Steve doesn’t have to full body tackle anyone, which isn’t. Nothing even explodes, which sort
of feels anticlimactic, but that’s probably lingering overexposure to Dernier talking.

The worst injuries are a couple of cuts and abrasions and some semi-serious bruising on May’s
side. She huffs about it and takes care of it herself, and Steve thinks, not for the first time, that they
should get a dedicated medic on the team. But if they had a medic on the team, Steve would be
obliged to make the team listen to the medic’s professional advice, and STRIKE is composed of
people who have all, at one point or another, broken a somewhat important bone and decided: this
probably will heal on its own. Which was true in Steve’s case and shouldn’t count against him no
matter what Hill wrote in her report.

The rest of the team settles into post-op joshing around, which Steve can’t quite get the rhythm of
and Natasha never joins. Usually Natasha opens a book and Steve pretends to do paperwork
while he rewinds the mission from top to bottom in his head, looking for anything important.
HYDRA had a habit of just… leaving maps around. It could happen again.

And he’s drifting thinking about mud, and the slivers of info Natasha pressed out of the enemy,
and in the beats between thoughts he catches an off scent. He looks at where it's coming from, and
it's the Soldier, and Steve's dumb tactical brains goes: hey, that guy’s got a dislocated shoulder,
you could hit him there. His actual brain takes another beat to catch up.

“Damn,” he says under his breath, and goes over to help. “Here, let’s get that sorted,” he says,
crouching down and starting in on the catches on Soldier’s uniform.

Soldier’s sick-scent is that much stronger up close, now boosted by sweat and, yes, that’s some
pain he’s feeling there, under all the other mess. Steve automatically starts radiating more calm,
or as much as he can when his own body is still coming off the fight. Hopefully it’ll smell like team,
at least. “I’ll pop it back in for you. You done this before?”

Soldier, who, Steve notices, has stopped moving and is staring at him like he’s grown another
head, nods after a second. Steve pauses and waits for the I’m fine that usually precedes any kind
of fussing. Peggy would let him nag after her a bit, but he always thought that was more about
letting him feel useful than needing it herself.
“Good,” Steve says when he isn’t shoved away. “Good,” he repeats after a moment and goes back to working the body armor off. He feels around the joint to check if anything feels off, and right. Medic. They should get a medic. Steve keeps taking First Responder classes because it’s something to do on the weekends, but most of those don’t deal with So You Like Getting Shot At, Huh?


Soldier, after another second of staring, braces himself, putting his hand on Steve’s bicep one finger at a time before pressing his full palm in. “One, two,” Steve says, and shoves. “Three,” he finishes, and Soldier bends forward slightly into the pain but otherwise doesn’t even make a sound.

Steve can’t see his face from this angle. He rubs Soldier’s back for a bit, not letting go; even if he’s new he’s still part of Steve’s team on this op, and Steve learned the hard way to take care of his team. It makes sense that the guy isn’t comfortable with them yet.

Steve just has to do better. He keeps trying to start up banter, but it never seems to land right with the team as a whole. Natasha gets it, but that’s her job. Natasha can get anything. Aliens could land and Natasha would be giving them culturally-appropriate compliments about their tentacled grandkids after a couple of minutes.

Steve looks up and finds her already watching them, no kind of look on her face. “Widow, do we have any ice packs?”

They do. Natasha provides one, approaching with something almost like caution, and Steve helps Soldier strap it on. Soldier’s back to giving him strange looks. He’ll look at him for half a beat, then down and away, then back again, only now it’s sidelong and Steve is close enough to see the angle of his eyelashes change every time his focus shifts.

“Something on my face?” Steve finally says. Soldier shakes his head immediately and looks away again. Maybe he’s just looking at the dumb fresco Steve gets on his face when he takes off the helmet after getting a faceful of dust or mud or soot. It’s pretty funny. He’s laughed at himself in the mirror a couple times and can’t blame Soldier for having a look.

He finishes fixing the last strap. “Too tight?”

Soldier flexes his hand and shakes his head. He’s looking at his knees now, but Steve can tell when someone is watching him out of the corner of their eyes. “What’s your name?” Steve asks.

That startles Soldier back into looking full-on. “Bucky,” he says after a moment, then looks away quick again. Down at his knees. At the wall of the quinjet.

“Bucky,” Steve repeats. It’s a little odd, like if Steve introduced himself as Stevie or something. It must be the familiar version of - well, Steve actually can’t imagine what Bucky must be short for, other than Buckminster or God forbid Buchenwald, but parents have named their children crueler things. Maybe ‘Bucky’ is the best case scenario here. Maybe there’s a fun story involved, and Steve will get to hear it. Be on the inside of somebody’s joke.

Either way, if that’s how he wants to be called then Bucky it is. “I’m Steve,” Steve says. “Good work you did out there, not that you need me telling you.”

Bucky swallows and nods, not looking up. Maybe Bucky is some kind of… fan? That happens to people. As kids they read his comic book and saw his face staring down at them with that thing
his jaw does, and now they can’t talk to him in real life. Steve’s gotten that from more than a few agents, some of them pretty senior. If that’s the case Bucky is being professional about it, and Steve figures the only way out here is through.

Bucky swallows again. Looks at his shoulder and tries to shrug the body armor back on. The sick-pain smell isn’t going away, but it’s not getting worse or stronger, even in the recirculated air of the jet. No one else is saying anything, and Natasha would speak up if there were a problem, probably. Maybe. May would. May had taken fifteen seconds to tell a nationally venerated war hero that his hand-to-hand defense was a joke. She would take someone off mission if she thought they had - the flu? Was the flu one of the ones still around? Steve had checked a while back but had gotten sidetracked by how *polio* was now something that only showed up in history books. And mumps! Nobody got the mumps anymore. He’d gone to work churning over how neat that was, then got there and realized nobody in the building would think anything of it, so he’d just thought about it to himself.

He hesitates a few more seconds, then pats Bucky on his good shoulder again and stands to go back to his seat. He checks again as he sits down. Bucky is sitting with his fingers curled over the icepack, staring at the quinjet wall.

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They get back. They sit down and lay out the details while they’re fresh. Natasha knows the details of the infiltration, May covers the command view, and Steve only really needs to chime in when the question “so why did you hide in a cave?” gets raised. His team doesn’t ask him questions once he’s pointed them in a direction, so if he says it’s time to make camp behind a waterfall, they make camp behind a waterfall. It’s only in the post-action briefing that someone asks how he knew a cave would be behind the waterfall.

“Erosion patterns,” Bucky says quietly, because he’d been the one to spot it. And the conversation moves on and away. All of them are still covered in dirt, May has bruised ribs, Bucky’s holding his shoulder tight and stiff against his body, and Steve’s coming down off the mission in a sort of - well, he doesn’t want to navel gaze about it, but he could use something to do, and the debriefs always feel a bit too long for Steve. He used to come back from a mission and tell things to Peggy, she’d sort out what was relevant, they’d take 24 hours to rest up and report anything critical and then they’d be on to the next thing. Having everyone in the room for an hours-long discussion seems - wasteful.

But they log it, Hill turns them loose, and Steve heads straight for the locker room showers because the 21st century has more hot water than it knows what to do with. And about 500 different kinds of soap, which is enough to have a man walk into a drug store, turn around and walk right out again.

He’d eventually bought the soap that came from the corner store where he goes to restock his milk, which happens a lot, because every time he remembers nothing is rationed anymore he drinks the rest of his gallon. The corner store has three kinds of soap, none of them anything like what he’d grown up with, so he bought the one labelled Spring Fresh and hoped for the best. It’s better than what he had before, anyway. SHIELD provides body soap which smells a lot like chemicals trying very hard not to smell like anything and Steve keeps accidentally finding undercover SHIELD agents because of it. There’s a team of agents embedded in his reef that are clearly there to watch over him, and every time they pass each other in the mailroom Steve has to pretend he thinks they’re dentists. It’s a little embarrassing, but going along with it saves him from having to have a conversation about it, and he’s pretty sure only an enhanced nose would pick up the SHIELD soap signature, so it’s not a security risk to just let it lie.

He gets to the locker rooms, strips down to his underclothes, and only realizes after he’s holding
his grimy uniform in his hands that he doesn’t have a towel. He’d taken his towel home to wash in
the sink, because the industrial laundry soap SHIELD uses is another thing that Steve would
rather smell less of. It smells how waiting room paintings look. Trying so hard to be nothing it
ends up making him mad. Or that font everything is in these days. It has bad kerning between the
r’s and Steve notices it everytime he picks up a newspaper. If he sees one more ad using Helvetica
he’ll - write a strongly worded letter. To someone. Maybe to the editorial section of the New York
Times, with the stipulation that they can only print it if they don’t use Imperial for it. Each line can
be a different font and show the art directors that there’s more than one typeface in the world.

He stands in front of his locker in sodden exhaustion for longer than maybe the Greatest Tactical
Mind of a generation should. He could… redress? He stares at his muddy armor and drops his
hand from where it’s still reaching for the hook his towel was supposed to be on. He rests his head
against the door of the locker and wishes everything still smelled mostly like boiling water and
cow bones.

He has a small, private pity party about it before he notices there’s someone hovering at his
periphery. Steve doesn’t look up, at first, because if he snaps to attention then that’ll spook them
and he’ll be there almost in his all-together with a startled -

It’s the Soldier. Bucky. Steve turns once his nose catches up with him. He looks a little less
hulking without his gear, slighter, in just tac pants and a long-sleeved undershirt. He’s still got his
gloves on, boots too, but the armor and mask and all visible weapons are gone. He’s got an ice
pack on, maybe the same one even though it’s got to have melted by now, making him look a little
like he’s got a little bag of potatoes riding on his shoulder. Shouldn’t he have gone to get that
immobilized? Steve wouldn’t, but it seemed like something somebody more attached to their
shoulders would do.

He’s very pretty, under the mask. Or, with the mask off he’s pretty. Or, regardless of mask his
face is… Steve’s brain chews on that for a second and then sort of presents the fact back to him
like he figured something out instead of just noticing it. Bucky is pretty.

Bucky looks uncomfortable for a second, not quite looking at Steve, but not not looking at him
either. Once he sees he’s got Steve’s attention he jerks his chin and heads down the row of
lockers. Steve drops his uniform and follows, curious, and Bucky leads him to an alcove in the
wall behind a plastic curtain, stacked with folded towels and little soap bars and even individually
packaged toothbrushes. They’re a step up from the antibacterial soap and industrial shampoo in
the shower dispensers.

“Oh. Wow. Thank you,” Steve says. There are even slippers, although they’re thin rubbery-
looking ones, also packaged up in plastic. Steve’s toes curl against the cold ceramic tile, a reflex
reaction like how his stomach grumbles every time he tries to watch one of those cooking shows
people kept saying will relax him. “I never knew this was back here. Everyone just looked like
they brought towels.”

Bucky nods jerkily, then stands there hesitating like he has something to say but doesn’t know
how to start.

“How’s the arm?” Steve asks. Probably asking to check it over again would be going a little too
far. Bucky's only been on Steve’s team for this one mission. Should Steve tell him to go to the
medic? Steve would feel better if he could handle the joint for himself and see if the swelling has
gone down, but now that they’re on base it’s not really Steve’s job, however much his instincts
insist that ignoring a teammate smelling like pain means he’s shirking his duties.

Bucky gives him another one of those startled rabbit looks, and Steve wonders wildly if pointing
out arms is in bad taste now. But then Bucky shows him the arm, flexing it back and forth. He
keeps looking so shocked every time Steve says something that Steve’s starting to wonder if he’s got some kind of strange old-timey accent that he’s not noticing and everyone else so far has been too polite to react to. In the old radio programs they gave him a newscaster accent, and that’s what his USO vocal coach had always… should he go to a vocal coach? Should he record himself? He could listen to the voicemail he set up on the phone that he only uses to text. Steve opens his mouth to try and make another joke about it, maybe start a sentence with “in my day” to get it out there, but Bucky clears his throat, nods, and hurries away.

It’s the start of… something. If Steve was worried he’d somehow offended Bucky, then either he was reading the signals wrong or Bucky has a funny way of showing offense. Or maybe he figured Steve was in sore need of a tour that nobody had given him, in preference of: “This is a cell phone it is short for cellular phone it is also called a mobile phone --” before listing off the thousand and one things phones did now instead of calling people.

The day after Bucky shows Steve the shower nook, he appears just out of sight again while Steve is frowning at the paperwork they keep giving him. He’d broken one computer his first week, but that was only because he was used to his typewriter jamming on the L key and he forgot and hit the key so hard he cracked the laptop’s motherboard. So now they give him paper files to go with the goddamn fountain pen and inbox and outbox on his desk.

Steve wonders if he can just… steal a computer, maybe. They look small, he could probably manage it. If he slaps one of the Captain America shield stickers they sell in packs of twelve onto it, nobody would dare take it back. During his first week Steve had accidentally sat in someone else’s chair, and once it smelled like him nobody else would go near it, like his mark was as good as a threat.

Steve looks up from where the pen has bled a historically accurate splotch on the paper and thinks about how it’s someone’s job to type this up again and finds Bucky not-exactly hovering. Steve wonders if Bucky has that Natasha knack of knowing exactly where and how to stand to make it look like you hadn’t been sneaking up on someone. Steve stares at him. Bucky stares at the wall right back.

“Hi,” Steve says, because that’s usually. Good. It’s a good word.

Bucky clears his throat and does the head nod again before turning and walking away twice as slowly as he normally walks. Steve puts his pen away and follows him in silence until Bucky stops down some hallway. Steve vaguely thinks this is a very strange way to lure someone into a fatal ambush until he reads the sign on the wall and sees that this is where the requisitionable weapons are.

“Oh,” Steve says. “Thanks.” He’s always just taken what was given to him, since back in the day Howard had always been cooking up some new design he wanted to put in Steve’s hands. Or whenever he was drawing from the general supply, it had been “Well, these are the guns we have, Cap. Godspeed and good luck. Maybe focus on punching the Nazis to death.”

So Bucky’s showing him where the requisitionable weapons are. Steve looks up to say thank you better, maybe offer to go a few rounds at the shooting range if maybe this was somebody’s idea of needling over the whole “throws a brightly colored disc at people” schtick (which is a working schtick). But the fella’s gone up in smoke again.

So now Steve knows where towels and guns are, which is good. He’s not sure why he knows it, but it’s still good. Maybe Bucky is trying to say thanks for Steve’s help with his shoulder, but he didn’t need to thank Steve for helping out a teammate in the first place, and if he did, the towels would have covered it. Still, Steve’s not going to complain about seeing Bucky again. He’d never seen him around base before their first meeting at all; maybe Bucky had been on a long away
mission, and now he’s back. Steve likes the idea of running into Bucky more often. There’s something restful about his presence.

The day after that, Bucky waylays Steve after his morning workout - which he does in the SHIELD gyms because he might as well, he gets up at 0400 anyway to drive over the bridge and through the tunnel to beat the traffic. The SHIELD base is in Jersey, which Steve understands, intellectually, is a necessity of space and resource allocation, but also, Jersey. The FBI gets to have a building in Manhattan. (Peggy can’t possibly have insisted on Jersey.)

That’s where it is today, though, so Steve trundles out every morning, showing up before the night guard shift leaves. Steve’s alone in the gym this early; he stuck around once to see when people came in, and Maria Hill was the first at 0530 and even she only came in to use the showers. She exercises outside. Maybe Steve should do that too.

But it seems Steve’s not the only one who gets here this early, because Bucky’s right outside the gym when Steve comes out, sweaty and probably with his hair looking like an electrified dandelion. “Hey,” Steve says, then, “Hi,” like some kind of dodo. Ten out of ten, Rogers. He thinks about maybe asking Bucky about his commute, maybe making a joke about Jersey - wait, is Bucky from Jersey?

Bucky mercifully dispels these blasphemous thoughts by giving an abortive little wave. Then he looks at the floor and walks away extra slow again.

This time their journey takes them to the admin floor, where Bucky draws back the leaves of a giant potted plant near the break room and shows Steve a bunch of white plastic pods, which, it turns out, is what coffee comes in. Then Bucky has to show Steve how to make the coffee.

“It’s called a keurig,” he mumbles, pressing buttons on the sleek little machine and slotting one of the rounded off-white mugs under the little nozzle. “You put it in. And. It makes coffee.”

“Thanks,” Steve says over the gurgling of the machine, trying not to sound too bewildered.

“This is the good kind,” Bucky says to the sink. “It gets used up fast so. I hid it.”

“...In the plant?” Steve says.


“Oh.”

“I water it now.”

“Oh. That’s good.” They just sort of stand there. The smell of the coffee slowly suffuses the space, layering in over the faintest chemical whiff of heavy scentblock. Bucky doesn’t smell sick like this; with a fresh application, he barely smells of anything, for all Steve keeps catching himself leaning in.

“You - like coffee?” Steve tries.

Bucky looks spooked. “What?”

Maybe that’s a highly offensive personal question now. They have coffee everywhere, though. Steve passes countless coffee shops on the way in. Unless Bucky is somehow a tea guy? That seems like one of those debates the Internet keeps having, like whether Chicago style pizza is pizza or a cobbler, and whether putting fruit on stuff is a sign of the end times. Is coffee a sign of
the end times? Steve backpedals furiously. “I mean, I do. Like it. Coffee. You don’t have to.”

“I haven’t tried it,” Bucky says, hunching on himself, looking between the plant and Steve like they’re going to gang up on him for some breakroom fisticuffs.

“Oh,” Steve says. It’s really hard to get a read on Bucky with how little he smells. “I - sorry. You said this was the good kind, and I…”

“All the agents fight over it,” Bucky says, looking increasingly hunted. He’s glancing now at the door, and the plant, and, worryingly, the window. “They say. Who took the last one. Why are we always out of single origin Malaysian.”

“Oh,” Steve says again, now also looking at the plant, and Bucky, and the door and, more worryingly, the window.

“It’s. Medium roast.” Bucky says, both of them now staring at the window.

“That’s good,” Steve says, not because he gives a damn or knows what that means, just in the hopes of making Bucky less nervous. They can’t both go out the window, but he doesn’t want Bucky to be the one to dive out of it and maybe cut himself with glass, so he thinks about moving to give Bucky a clean shot towards the door. But when he moves toward the plant Bucky’s shoulders go up, so he stops. Bucky looks at Steve’s left ear, fast, and back down.

Steve suddenly from the clear blue nothing wishes the serum didn’t make piercings close up. He used to wear earrings, just the one pair - Grandma Shannon’s silver-plated studs for Sunday mass - but he’d always thought when he was older he’d have more, maybe. Maybe if his ears had something in them Bucky would look longer. They make real wild earrings these days. He saw someone on the street with a whole hedgehog’s worth of piercings in their ear, and one of them had been a snake curled up along the shell and Steve had wanted to touch the small fangs. Instead he’d looked too long and then almost walked into someone, apologized, saw it was just a traffic light pole, and then put his head down and walked home faster.

Bucky is now looking at the coffee machine. As they watch, the… keurig… gives one final splutter and horks the last of the coffee into the cup. Steve looks down at it, then picks it up and offers it to Bucky.

Bucky stares at it like it’s a candy bar covered in spiders, then about-faces and walks smartly out of the break room.

Steve looks down at his outstretched hand. He’s seen a lot of mugs about coffee that have gotten downright rude. They’re a little funny, sure, but walking into a storefront where fifteen inanimate objects yell at you about what level of caffeinated they need to be before you can talk is sort of imposing. He’d just wanted a nice kettle. Something that whistled when it was done, so he could put it on the stove and then it’d whistle and he’d remember the hot water was ready and stop having to go, heat the water, forget about it, come back, heat the water, forget about it -

Anyways. This mug doesn’t have any rude sayings on it, so it must have been Steve.

Once again he’s left feeling like he accidentally insulted someone’s mother, and once again Bucky acts like he forgot all about it by next morning. Steve’s honestly at a loss. A lot of people have started just giving him things now that he lives in his reef, but that’s more a rotating cast of neighbors showing up with their kids to hand over banana bread and make what they probably think are subtle inquiries as to the status of his pod. This… isn’t really like that.

Bucky starts falling into step with him sometimes while he walks through the halls, and at first
Steve thinks he’s just headed to the same destination until Bucky starts saying “Camera,” under his breath every so often. Steve nods after he spots the cameras, all of them carefully hidden in the seams of walls or disguised in the molding, and after he nods Bucky always turns and walks away. Steve plays at not noticing one of them until Bucky actually stops in the middle of the hallway and stands rigidly directly underneath the camera, staring at Steve’s kneecaps until Steve acknowledges it. Steve feels kind of bad about that, after. He’s not trying to tease Bucky, he’s just trying to understand.

Even after Steve can point out every camera in the SHIELD complex, Bucky still shows up at unpredictable intervals. Once he makes glancing eye contact and taps his own cheek; Steve heads to the nearest bathroom and sees there's a streak of dried shaving cream on his cheekbone. Someone leaves a single, perfect acorn in Steve's tray in the mailroom. Steve brings it to his nose and catches a whiff of heavy-duty scent block.

After a couple weeks, Bucky gets more direct. Steve comes out of a training session with the SHIELD As where they’d done a lot of endurance work and finds Bucky lurking beside the vending machines outside the locker room. Bucky looks both ways down the hall, a quick back and forth glance, then hits the closest machine with his hand. A packet of what looks like nuts falls out of its wire grip thing and drops into the release tray. Bucky fishes it out, tucks it into Steve’s pocket and disappears through the nearest door, which Steve is pretty sure just leads to a janitor’s closet.

Steve stares after him for a good two minutes, then realizes if Bucky comes out and sees Steve still standing there watching the door it’s gonna be pretty embarrassing for them both, so he beats it out of there and goes to do some actual work.

He eats the nuts. It would be rude not to, surely.

So far nobody’s really noticed that Bucky’s been doing these little things for him, or if they have, they haven’t mentioned it. Come to think of it, Bucky tends to approach only when nobody else is around, which, well, the guy seems shy enough already, what with his scentblock on all the time, so it’s not shocking he wouldn’t want an audience for his social interactions. Steve hasn’t mentioned it to anyone either, because it sounds silly even in his own head. Winter Soldier given you any acorns lately? Say, me too! Any chance you could tell me what that means?

So it stays a mystery.

He keeps getting these little visits. He’s cleaning his gear in the locker room with Natasha when he accidentally snaps one of the straps of his sidearm holster. “Damn,” he says under his breath. It seems like every other week he accidentally busts a seam or pops a button or crushes a doorknob. He’s starting to think he’s never going to be over it, not even if he goes O, because it’s a serum problem and has more to do with Steve getting startled than any aggression issue. It’s not like he was mad at the holster, for heaven’s sake. He was just sitting here thinking about how that wall in front of him really needs regrouting, and how he should probably know how to regrout a wall. Has the future figured out how to avoid grouting bathrooms yet? The future has solved problems Steve’s never even heard of, but he still has to get on his knees and scrub out his shower.

Natasha, who minder or not seems like the only restful person in the world sometimes, what with how she can just sit next to him and do her own work and not want any talking, snickers. “Do you know if there’s a way to requisition permanent gear?” Steve asks her, holding up his busted holster. “Not just for use per mission. Should I just buy my own, do you think?”

Natasha looks like she’s about to answer, only Bucky suddenly materializes on the other end of the locker row. He’s holding something, and as he comes closer, Steve realizes it’s his own
holster: Steve has the standard issue SHIELD one but Bucky’s is custom, with a knife sheath on the outside and a fourth adjustable strap.

“Here,” he says, and gives it to Steve.

“Thanks!” Steve says, as open and friendly as he can, but Bucky is already retreating. Is there such a thing as guerrilla peace-fare? Steve’s heard about random acts of kindness, but this feels less like buying the next person in line’s groceries for them, and more like someone keeps jumping out of the woods to fix some small snag in his life. Tactical acts of kindness? Steve rubs the strap of Bucky’s holster, staring into the depths of the locker room like the chipped ceramic tile might impart some sort of deep mosaic secret to him.

He buckles the new holster on and gets the rest of his gear in place before he clocks the fact that Natasha is openly staring at him like he is the sole successful result of a secret government program who fought against a massive world power until it didn’t feel like getting up again, got frozen, and now was staring at bathroom tile like it was the top of his list of concerns. And then he clocks that it looks very much like Natasha does not know Bucky has been quietly ambushing Steve with helpful tips, so it probably just seems like maybe Steve had somehow summoned a holster, since, judging by Natasha’s expression, Bucky does not just go around distributing gear like the Tactical Magic Wish Fairy every time anyone pops a strap.

“Um,” Steve says in response to that, because he’s the Greatest Strategic Mind of a generation according to far too many plaques and carved stone edifices. Steve wonders what generation he is in now, technically. Do you stick with where you’re born, or your current age group? If they ever unthaw anyone else he’ll ask them what they think. Natasha likes pointing out the plaques, especially if they have bird poop on them, so she’s no help.

Now she keeps looking back and forth between Steve and the new holster with something like alarm in her face. “Steve,” she says carefully, “have you had contact with the Soldier outside of missions?”

“Not really?” he says, because they’ve only passed each other in the halls, and that’s not worth mentioning, despite how long he’s spent analyzing each encounter after it happens. If Steve has spent more than one boring mission briefing trying to guess at how long it’s been since Bucky combed his hair and whether or not he did it himself or went to his podmates for it, that’s Steve’s business, and absolutely not the kind of intel he wants to hand to Natasha.

“Not really,” Natasha repeats.

“I’ve just run into him in the breakroom, that sort of thing. He doesn’t like coffee.”

“He doesn’t like coffee. He told you that he doesn’t like coffee?”

“Well, no. He just didn’t have any.” Steve shrugs, a little helplessly. “I offered him some but he just walked away.”

Natasha relaxes slightly. She drops the interrogation, but Steve sees her eyeing his new holster while they finish suiting up.

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Bucky is dealing with an ongoing situation.

It is an extremely difficult situation. It appears to be originating from the body. It isn’t exactly pain. It isn’t exactly pleasure. It mostly seems to be a big hot ball in his stomach that has a direct radio line to his brain.
He hasn’t had this much trouble since he was detoxing off the HYDRA drug regimen. All the books say going O is the first step to recovering from trauma, and he did, and it helped - it helped a lot, and he hasn’t had much in the way of transition shock. He was glad to be rid of the high-pitched hypervigilance that kept him wandering the halls of his own head and snarling at everyone from the mailroom intern to Fury himself. He did feel slower, and… softer, but it’s - nice. Like he took his head and threw it in with some laundry and now it’s fresh out of the dryer and all warm and a little staticy.

The extra scent sensitivity took some getting used to, but his nose was sensitive enough even before that and by now it’s just something he deals with sometimes. It’s been five years since he got out and four since he went O and the worst he’s had is the scent headaches, which are normal and happen to other people. He didn’t get anything else. His diet certainly changed, but he doesn’t think the books were talking about transitioning from nutrient slurry to people food, and he got on cycle suppressants immediately so menstruation was never a problem, and all the other little things must have been minor enough that he didn’t notice, if they even cropped up at all. The books said he might be more cuddly and he has not wanted anyone to touch him. The books said he might want to exercise less and feel more sociable and he still takes gym time in the middle of the night and runs early enough that he doesn’t have to see even the track diehards led by Maria Hill.

Only - the effects must have been delayed, because now it feels like his whole body is bubbling with the need to - to - to do something with Captain Rogers. It’s not the first time he’s looked at something and felt like six traffic lights just all turned different colors in his brain, but usually that has something to do with some old HYDRA thing, or some old Before thing and this...doesn’t really have that same kind of metal-tongued smell to it. With Rogers, he just - he has - he just has so much skin, and, and, teeth, and, there are hands, and he has eyes, and there’s a fucking cowlick.
How. How can he go out in public with the cowlick. How has nobody flattened it down yet. Bucky watched it drying into place once when Captain Rogers had come out of the showers, a rebel lock of hair arching up like one of those curly dog tails, and had to lock his hands in place for dear life behind his back to avoid touching it. How does no one else try to touch it. The Widow touches Captain Rogers sometimes, but she doesn’t touch the cowlick. May doesn’t even look at the cowlick. How does no one touch the cowlick? How is there not a line of people who wait their turn to all fix the cowlick. Bucky wakes up from half a daydream sometimes and he’s reaching out toward a nice cloud of nothing and his fingers are whatever the stomach feels when presented with The Garlic Potatoes. The cowlick is what really gets Bucky’s goat if he’s going with how folks on first floor talk. The people on first floor talk to the most outside people, so they seem like they’re probably the closest to… how people are.

He doesn’t know if this is how other people are about Captain Rogers. Many, many bits of Bucky’s body are saying that they better not be but also how. How can they not. Captain Rogers call me Steve has a very deep voice and very short hair and - shoulders. Lots of shoulders. He may be more shoulders than he is anything else except for voice, probably. Maybe he keeps his extra voice in his shoulders. He smells like good sweat. He smells like a safehouse where no one can find you. He smells like someone you need in a crisis, which is pretty good considering Bucky usually feels like a crisis even on his best days.

Captain Rogers just came right up to him on the quinjet and set his shoulder and smelled so - so -

The first time Bucky got hurt on a SHIELD mission all the other agents had smelled scared, a harsh fight-or-flight response that stank up the quinjet all the way back to base. May was the only one who didn’t smell like she was trying to climb out her own ears but she only glanced him over and said, in a suggesting voice, that Medical could help him out. Not that Bucky had gone to Medical - he doesn’t even go to that floor if he can help it - but Captain Rogers saw Bucky’s
shoulder and came over and his scent went rich and gentle like - like - chocolate pudding. A whole vat of chocolate pudding. Bucky has not previously had very strong thoughts about chocolate pudding but now he knows he wants to drown in it.

Captain Rogers isn’t scared of him. Captain Rogers is quiet when he talks and his voice is soft like a buffing cloth, something that smooths and soothes. When Bucky talks, he listens. He found the cameras. He ate the peanuts. His arms look extremely biteable. He has a cowlick.

Bucky doesn’t know what to do.

In absence of actionable options in an unsustainable position the thing to do is retreat, so Bucky lurks heavily in Location Redacted. Location Redacted is just the forgotten bathroom in the SHIELD industrial basement, but calling it that makes him feel better about part time living in a bathroom (and part time living...outside) and also it was the first thing that popped into his head when Widow asked him where he was staying and he panicked. It’s ideal because it’s near the waste incinerator rooms, which smell bad enough to cover any trail Bucky might leave, and up in the corner it has a two by one foot sliding window with a steel grille over it. That means he can burn things in the sink and have the smoke come out safely, which means he doesn’t feel bad about what he did to the bathroom smoke detector.

He doesn’t usually burn things, but sometimes shredding is not enough.

He’s not alone in here. He has six paper shredders and one printer, rescued from untenable circumstances in the SHIELD offices. The printer used to belong to Agent Hoffmeyer at home only Agent Hoffmeyer was mean to his dog and now his dog lives with a nice pod two counties over and his printer lives with Bucky.

He likes to think they have a good life down here. He read all their manuals from cover to cover and he keeps them well supplied with electricity and purpose. And they help him right back. They are an excellent support team. The books said he’d pod bond faster as an O and he has not bonded with any SHIELD agents, but he feels - good. Printing things out and then giving them to the shredders. Therapy is talking about things out loud so they can’t chase you around your head anymore, but he figures seeing all those thoughts in black and white and then in shreds might be even better.

He has the shredders and the printer. They pin secrets down and then eat them. And when the shredding isn’t enough, Bucky has the bathroom sink, a window for adequate ventilation and his lighter.

He prints out another copy of the Winter Soldier file and feeds it page by page into his shredders. They whirr happily as they munch it down. A glimpse of Barnes, James Buchanan goes past, visible for a moment before it’s eaten forever by Shredder Five (HR, copy room).

He’d chosen Bucky out of his available options because it sounded - nice. Calm. Like a person who knows what calm is. He goes to counter places that take your name with your order and call it back just to hear it said out loud sometimes, to remind him. He must’ve been O, before he got drafted, with a nice name like Bucky. He must have had plenty of friends. He would have known what to do with all of this, once upon a time, before Nazis gave him brain damage.

Now he has six shredders and a copy of Cosmopolitan. The Cosmopolitan was in the recycling bin before Bucky rescued it and took it to Location Redacted. The cover is a daring bubblegum pink and has the headline A FOR ATTRACTION - make yourself irresistible! above an A-looking guy pushing his lips out at the viewer. He looks very comfortable and happy in his big sweater. It is, Bucky decides, an aspirational image.
The primary reason Bucky took this Cosmo, however, is that one of the smaller headlines, right next to the guy’s hip, says, TINGLY FEELINGS? HOT AND BOTHERED? Five Non-Scary Steps To Securing Your Crush!

That seems very promising. Hot, bothersome tinglings are the primary symptoms of Bucky’s recent affliction. This is the best lead he’s gotten so far, so he settles in and turns to the appropriate page.

The five non-scary steps appear to begin with a pleasingly periwinkle flow chart. All of the boxes are labeled and have very clear arrows. There’s even a number system for points. Bucky dutifully produces a pencil to tally with and reads on.

So you guys are thinking, okay, we’ve got a good thing going, but it’s time to invite that special someone in on our fun. Take this quiz together to find out who’s who and get started on your plan to snag your perfect A!

Bucky looks around. His shredders are all there and accounted for. Should he read aloud to them? They don’t have ears or any other audio pickup (Bucky checked very thoroughly for that). Maybe he’ll just feed them the quiz when he’s done.

He moves to the first question.

Your pod just moved to a new reef, and you’ve been invited to a neighborhood party! When you get there, do you:

A) Go around and start introducing yourself
B) Link arms with a podmate and read the room
C) Go straight to the food table and set up the super delish dish you brought for everybody
D) Start organizing a game of tag

Bucky stares at the quiz for long minutes, stuck on the very first sentence. He doesn’t have a pod, he doesn’t have a neighborhood, and he’s never been invited to a party, unless sneaking into the breakroom to eat the leftover cake after someone has a birthday counts. Cautiously, he circles D. Sometimes people run away from him and he catches them. That’s almost like tag.

Two of your podmates are having a big fight! Once the screaming starts, do you:

A) Remind them both to keep it down, the neighbors are listening
B) Step in between them and work a solution they can both be happy with
C) Take the rest of the pod out for ice-cream while those two work out their issues
D) Join in on the yelling and back up whoever you think is right

Bucky winces. Yelling is not good. Even before he’d gone O and gotten a boost to his hearing, he’d had sensitive ears. He can tune out the discomfort if it’s a mission requirement, but he carries earplugs with him on base. Angry yelling is even worse. He has no idea how people can stand to have yelling fights in the first place. Nothing bad has happened to him anytime he’s smelled someone at SHIELD angry, but his body feels hard-wired to pay attention to danger scents and the only way he reacts to anger is by going on red alert. It’s even worse now that he’s O, because instead of the teetering pre-fight feeling his whole body just wants to fit itself into a shoebox instead.
The idea of standing in between two people having a screaming fight makes him want to crawl out a window. He circles C.

The rest of the quiz is just more of the same. Bucky struggles through as best he can, and where he can’t he gives up and guesses at random.

Results:

The DIPLOMAT

The ADVENTURER

The PEACEKEEPER

The DEN MOTHER

The WILD CHILD

If Bucky tallies up his points, he gets WILD CHILD. Bucky does not feel like a WILD CHILD. Neither does he feel diplomatic, adventurous, peacekeeping or motherlike. He mostly feels like it’s a miracle he gets his boots on the correct feet every morning.

He pages further into the magazine. The five steps to securing a crush appear to be taking the quiz with your pod, defining which role everyone fulfills, and then sending the ADVENTURER and DIPLOMAT out to make an overture while the DEN MOTHER and PEACEKEEPER prepare a welcoming environment for the A. The WILD CHILD is advised to meet the A in the later stages of courting and to “test out the A’s gardening skills.” That piece of advice is followed by a winking smiley face.

Bucky is very good at cyphers. He carefully picks the magazine binding apart until the pages are loose, then locates every article with a winking smiley face. The mirrored wall above the sink is an excellent surface for intelligence analysis; tape adheres very well to the glass, and obstructing his view of himself lowers the rate of tension headaches he experiences. He tapes the magazine pages into logical clusters and begins to flag relevant articles with color-coded tabs. The pattern they make is unclear, but that’s to be expected. This is an ongoing situation, with many unknown data points. He will continue to make contact with Captain Rogers until the intelligence gaps are filled, and Bucky understands the chocolate pudding thoughts and the cowlick and the liquid knee feeling that results from Captain Rogers smiling in his near vicinity. And then he’ll know what to do about them.

In the meantime, he needs more intel. He glances at the clock: 0317. Captain Rogers will arrive on base within the hour. That leaves him plenty of time to raid the paper recycling bin for more magazines. He equips himself with a SHIELD base-appropriate number of weapons and slithers into an air vent.

-o-

Most of Steve’s time is spent training, because the consequence of having a bunch of As around is that they need to be occupied or they’ll start having dominance scuffles in the mess over who gets the last slice of cherry rhubarb. Steve participates in all of the terrain exercises and leads a lot of the forest ones, what with his experience traipsing through the Reich-infested European countryside and not dying. There’s a lot of combat training, which he appreciates, and weapons certifications and refreshers, which are interesting, and of course conditioning, which is just gym time but with former drill sergeants making you max out muscles you didn’t even know you had.
Then there’s O week, where every month active duty alpha agents have to practice combat against all the active duty omega agents with their scent block off. The exercise is open to non-combat staff, too, and doubles as a self-defense training course. Natasha leads this one. All the active duty Os on base take the weekend to do a deep cleanse of all their scent block and come in, as Dernier used to say, au naturale, and then they all take the morning to gear up and do their workouts in the big main gym. Now it’s afternoon and Steve can see the incoming As blink hard as they step into the wall of natural scent in here.

He and May are leading the alpha contingent. STRIKE is trained enough that they don’t automatically balk when an O comes at them with anything more vicious than a cutting look, but the reason they don’t balk is that they get these training sessions on the regular. Scent goes straight to instinct and it’s a Hell of a thing to override unless you’ve got the way of it banged into you over and over again. It can be as little a flinch as a half second of hesitation, but for agents like Natasha and Peggy a half second is all they need.

Around half the O agents are what Natasha calls frequent flyers, switching over regularly enough that they spend every other month on the other side of the fence, so to speak, but for the ones who don’t switch it’s practice too. An alpha coming at you swinging has your instincts saying play dead and show your throat, which is equally unhelpful. The As don’t have to do a deep scrub - alpha scent is more pungent and As sweat more, so all Steve and STRIKE had to do was not put on any scentblock or deodorant that morning. The As go first, anyway.

Steve’s been doing these trainings for a while, and by now there’s a formula. They start with warmups; Natasha and May both pick a form to train and proceed to use Steve as a practice dummy. Natasha demonstrates where to hit for a gaggle of junior agents, and has more senior ones practice their holds on Steve so she can correct their technique. It’s a good warmup for the next part, which is where the scent-scrubbing comes in.

Steve occasionally feels a little guilty about this part. It feels like flexing a muscle that needs the stretch, going right into the core of the alpha feeling and revving it as hard as he can, maxing out his scent. At the same time it’s - not his favorite thing, to see agents around him falter slightly or twitch, everybody turning to him with eyes wide and nostrils flaring, even when they know it’s on its way. But his alpha scent is so much stronger than even the next smelliest A that training with it will give the agents an advantage in combat with regular As, and everyone agrees they’re lucky to have him for that alone. It was at least half the reason all the HYDRA goons had worn masks in battle after the first few times they all stumbled over each other when Steve was upwind.

They’d used it as a battering ram in the war, when they knew it’d come down to open combat: Steve would scrub as best he could in the nearest well or pond or river if he still had any scentblock left on him, but half the time it wouldn’t matter because the watery stuff they’d been issued didn’t last long and Steve tended to burn it off in combat besides. Peg liked to induce it - her trick was to pick a fight, or near enough that their instincts couldn’t tell the difference: she’d shove Steve’s chest, snarl in his face until he was snarling back, until the stink of them rose up like steam. She didn’t just use it for combat, either - one time she dragged Steve through HQ, riled him up, brought him into a cell where they were keeping a captured HYDRA grunt and made Steve stand behind the prisoner while Peg asked very calm and civil and polite questions. The guy’s knees were knocking five minutes in.

It was primitive, and more than a little brutal, but Steve can’t deny Peggy got results. And when it comes to training, it’s what works.

This isn’t quite like that. For the SHIELD exercise, the real goal for junior O agents isn’t even to disarm him, it’s just to get within touching distance and land any kind of hit. A slap on the chest counts. For civilians, Steve thinks, the goal would probably be just to stand their ground when he...
advanced on them. More senior agents have to try and get the baton out of his hand, and for a few people like Natasha and May it’s an actual fight - though for these kinds of group trainings they use it more as a demo than a real spar.

He used to do this sort of thing with the Howlies, though nowhere near as official. With them being all-A it was only a few degrees more serious than a dominance tussle, but sometimes Peg would bring him a couple of O agents when they were in camp and yell things like show a little spine, you bloody pansies! and encourage them to dogpile him.

The Howlies would often come up against highly trained operatives who’d sneer at the shield like it was all pomp and circumstance until it beamed them right in the noggin. Peggy used to hit a fella with anything in reach, push her hair out of her face and sigh, looking at the bent poker or smashed lamp or broken jar of preserves: well, needs must. She tried to pass it along to everyone she trained, seeing as it was highly effective, but not everybody had the knack.

Everybody would cluster close around a mess table or campfire afterwards, reassuring themselves and Steve that it had all been practice, with no real aggression behind it. That part, Steve had liked; wrapping his arms around the same agents who’d tried to drown him in a mud puddle a few hours before, everyone companionably snuggled up. The twitchy energy that usually made him pace around camp for an hour or two before he could sleep would be drained from the fight and the satisfaction of having everyone held safe and close.

Steve wonders briefly why Bucky isn’t participating - even Lillian from Accounting is here, padded gear and all - because he’s not away on a mission: Steve saw him this morning. Then again, if Bucky’s smell is off enough that even Steve barely identified him as O, it’s probably not suitable for this kind of exercise.

Then May claps her hands to start. Natasha charges at Steve, smacks a numbing kick to the inside of his forearm, and they’re off. Everybody’s run starts with Steve, and then after they give it a go they line up in front of one of the other four alphas who have the next strongest scent. After Steve, going at Rodriguez or Baker or May feels entirely feasible.

Steve’s rank by the end of the session, dripping sweat and stinking. It’s not aggressive anymore: he can’t keep that up outside of combat anyway, not when his whole body knows it’s just a play fight. Now he just smells like himself, which is - well, it’s safe to say nobody leaves the room to get away from him anymore.

Everyone’s more or less adjusted by now, at least, so no one starts drifting in too close. The Howlies used to do that, for all they’d been As down to the bone of them. The younger GIs in camp would trail after him sometimes, not even knowing what they were doing. It was strange as Hell for Steve at first, because before the serum people sometimes crossed the street to avoid him, no matter how rude it was, and now it’s - this. He gets it, though. Sometimes when folks got tired and your scentblock was wearing off they’d get at you, like they were moths and you were the best sweater in the whole closet.

But if people can get used to him at his ripest, they can get used to anything. Everyone’s sniffing more than normal, sure, and Steve feels sort of helplessly like that bakery on 5th he used to linger outside of without really meaning to. Smells are free, right? He’s just not quite sure what to do with the fact that there are a couple of people looking at him the way he looks at a good old fashioned sticky roll.

“We should call it,” Steve says, pushing his sweaty hair from his forehead. Natasha nods, working a knot out of her neck with her free hand. All the other agents are doing stretches or gulping water, grouped over by the wall fountains. Steve could keep going but he knows nobody else could, not in any good way, even if they wanted to.
They’re just wrapping up when Bucky comes skidding in.

Steve has his back to the door but notices at the same time as the rest of them, because that faint sickly scent he caught in the quinjet is now a full-on avalanche. It spreads like wildfire in the sudden influx of air from the open doors, blowing through the fug of the gym. Bucky’s scrubbed off his scent block like the other agents, and when Steve turns around he sees he’s in training gear too. There’s a hectic kind of flush at the tops of his cheeks.

Very, very distantly, it occurs to Steve that he is staring. Bucky looks like Steve’s a fire alarm beeping a low battery at two in the morning. He looks like a fountaining fire hydrant on a bakingly hot day. Bucky smells like something has gone wrong and it is specifically Steve’s job to help fix it. He has no God damn clue why it’s translating so hard or to which instincts, but by God, it is happening.

“Soldier,” May greets cordially and not at all like she has swallowed any part of her tongue. Which is the sign of a true leader, Steve figures. He couldn’t have done that right now, his hands itching and whatever need he normally has to touch Bucky’s head revving up full gear. Behind May half of STRIKE is throwing panicked looks at each other. “We’re just finishing up. Do you need a partner?”

Bucky’s eyes dart around, from May’s professional acceptance to all the other As trying to hide behind each other. Bucky swallows. Steve sympathy swallows because if he were anyone else, he thinks, the urge to tuck Bucky up next to a fireplace with a nice book and something chipper on the radio would be overwhelming, and as it is -

“Me,” Steve offers, stepping up, then, to sound a little less like a grunting Neanderthal, adds, “I can spar. It’ll have to be one on one, though. Everybody else is, uh. Probably. Done. For the day.”

Bucky’s gaze zeroes in on Steve. He nods like he’s hypnotized. The entire room billows with relief. “Alright, dismissed,” Natasha says, exchanging a speaking glance with May, and there’s an immediate stampede for the showers. That’s good. Bucky doesn’t like an audience, that’s - good.

But now it’s Bucky staring at Steve and Steve staring at Bucky, and Steve stares hard and thinks colleague. Comrade in arms. Co-worker and doesn’t think anything involving blankets. He really wants to think about blankets. And how Bucky should probably be wrapped in at least eight of them. This is why the training is good and helpful, so you don’t go swinging at the enemy, then ditch out on the follow through and end up making hot chocolate. A war founded on marshmallows is a sinking kingdom, is probably how at least one parable goes. Steve tucks his lips over his teeth and pointedly takes a few deep breaths through his mouth because he has to acclimate and not think about. Blankets.

May steps to the side, her gaze neutral, clearly taking up the role of spotter, and that breaks the spell. Steve’s glad; Bucky seems less uneasy around May than most of the other agents, and it’s not like Bucky needs a chaperone, but it feels better to have someone there anyway. More professional. Less like the kind of sparring an A and O might do for fun, and Steve buries that thought as soon as it pops up. He’s not the kind of asshole who gets those wires crossed. He is a professional who is going to spar with a coworker. A nice coworker even, who showed him where towels and coffee are, and oh this wasn’t a helpful line of thought because now he can’t stop thinking about how he really should try and repay Bucky. Provide something.

He can provide being professional.

And that’s not going to happen while they’re still staring and scenting each other down and not even circling. With what feels like a historic amount of will, Steve breaks the staring contest and
steps into one of the big taped-off squares doing duty as sparring rings.

Bucky follows him, and now they’re a yard apart. Up close his scent is nearly overpowering. Steve doesn’t flinch. He used to smell sick too. It’s - a lot, though, pumping out more than is normal, Steve is pretty sure, but once again Bucky’s moving fine and breathing fine and Steve’s not about to bring up somebody’s personal problems when they can’t help it. The guy already wears scentblock off missions. Steve carefully doesn’t think about any of his Ma’s home remedies.

Somehow, possibly through divine intervention, they more or less simultaneously realize they should probably get going. They tap gloves. May claps her hands to start the fight, and Steve shouldn’t have worried too much about being professional because Bucky comes at him like an avalanche with the intent of at least one (1) broken bone. There’s no hesitation whatsoever. He’s telegraphing a little, but Steve figures that the guy with the metal arm asked to tussle with coworkers telegraphs out of basic human politeness and also from someone putting the fear of God into him via HR.

Steve catches Bucky’s fist and does the tried and true Peggy move of letting someone’s force carry them right into a wall. There’s no wall on option, though, just the mats, and Bucky straightens easily. They feint at each other for a second. Southpaw, right hook, jabbing and dancing away and then Bucky gets a glint to him that has nothing to do with how much metal is involved and probably a lot to do with the fact that Steve might be the only person on base who could take Bucky’s fist to the jaw without needing an ambulance. Steve gets a glint right back. Fighting with Natasha is productive and all, but sort of the way playing chess against a computer is: you aren’t gonna beat it, but gosh it’s informative to try.

Bucky is different. He goes at Steve again, faster this time, and Steve doesn’t know how well May is tracking them but for all he was sweating before, that was marathon sweat from just doing something over and over and over. This is a sprint. This is lungs pumping and heart picking up and the desperate race to a finish line that your body wants to smash through.

It feels so Goddamn good to just let loose. When Steve speeds up, Bucky matches it. It’s clear he’s learned more from the Natasha school of flip kicks and less from the Peggy school of hit them until they stop moving, but that’s not bad. Steve’s style of fighting, Natasha says, has all the grace of construction equipment but makes up for it by having the same kind of force - and Bucky can take it: Steve lands a hit and Bucky just rolls with it and moves in with the next strike. Steve bares his teeth and Bucky bares his back.

And Bucky’s fast, very fast, but Steve’s fast too. He finally gets Bucky pinned to the mat by using both hands to immobilize Bucky’s left arm and trapping Bucky’s legs in the vice grip of his thighs. He might be smiling at little. His muscles feel sore. They hurt. And he shouldn’t miss the pain of overexertion, but here he is, breathing down at the first thing that’s woken his body up that didn’t involve the miserable marathon of punching at an endless stream of aliens or running himself sick lapping Central Park.

And Bucky’s right beneath him, skin hot and scent rising. This close Steve can smell the last traces of scentblock mixed with that scouring antibacterial hand soap dispensed in all the SHIELD bathrooms, wafting from behind Bucky’s ears. His hair is damper than just sweat. Had he been late because he’d been scrubbing scentblock off in a bathroom sink? Bucky is sort of half smiling back up at him, some of the sick-scent burned off a little, replaced by the smell of true effort, both their bodies revved up more than SHIELD’s training equipment could ever induce.

Bucky rears up and flips him and it’s on again. Fighting Bucky is like trying to catch a greased wildcat in the bath, but Steve’s no slacker in the buttered feline department. Steve stays with him, closing every time Bucky tries to dart around, matching him strike for strike. Bucky’s hair isn’t even pulled back this time and so it whips around wildly, flicking against Steve’s skin, and it
doesn’t mean anything but Steve can’t help but run hotter each time.

And Bucky’s scent starts changing. It’s more than the fresh sweat of new exertion, although there’s plenty of that, which is actually flattering given how effortlessly Bucky seems to be slipping out of his holds. But the gratingly bitter smell of a body at war with itself is tapering off. There’s a thick, brassy note of challenge to Bucky’s scent now, and it's been so long since Steve had an opponent who was physically excited to fight him that he starts grinning like a dope when Bucky charges him again.

They go at each other with renewed vigor. Steve feels electrified, turned up, like riding one of the Coney Island coasters times a hundred. Bucky is relentless and Steve’s awake. He wants to live in this feeling, in the bright flashing thing between them. It’s like a dance. Bucky pins him. Steve flips them, their legs tangling together as they both fight for leverage, and then Bucky’s smell slides to hungry so fast that Steve freezes in place.

Bucky seizes the advantage immediately, rolling Steve onto his back with his metal arm across Steve’s throat. His moves are still flawlessly executed, but his eyes are wide and his cheeks are blotched with red. The panting breaths that seemed like a normal part of sparring a moment ago are registering very differently now, and Steve is about to embarrass himself in front of the best operative he’s met in the future and, oh God, Melinda May, who’s still watching from the sidelines, her face utterly unreadable.

"Good - good tactic," Steve manages. Maybe if he doesn't move, or breathe, ever again, his body will stop reacting to the apparently extremely interested O who's on top of him and he won't wind up pressing a hard-on into Bucky's ass. Maybe his dick will decide to fall off, suddenly, for no reason. That would be - great. "Good distraction. Very - Yes."

“What?” Bucky breathes, staring down at him with pupils the size of nickels. He’s less pinning now and more sort of - draping himself, on Steve’s - on his everything, and Steve already wants to shrivel up dick-first and this is not helping.


Bucky gives him a bewildered look. His nostrils flare as he draws in a deep breath, but that must just give him a big whiff of Steve, because his eyes go glassy right before he faceplants in the crook of Steve’s shoulder. Steve’s whole body jerks convulsively as Bucky’s mouth mashes right into his neck.

“Okay! Training exercise over,” May says, clapping her hands sharply.

The noise is loud enough that Bucky levitates and Steve flinches, jerking again when Bucky lands on him with all four hands and knees. Steve doesn’t think he’s ever heard May use that tone before, and he’d probably be concerned if all of his concern wasn’t currently concentrated in about five square inches between his legs.

Bucky hasn’t either, clearly, because his head whips around, and then he looks down, and then he gives Steve, May and his own sweat-soaked front an almost comically spooked look. Steve finds himself reaching out, his fingers brushing Bucky’s loose hair on their way to his cheek, but before he makes skin contact Bucky rears up off of him with huge eyes and practically teleports out of the ring.

Steve sits up on his elbows, dizzy as he’s ever been outside an actual concussion, just in time to watch Bucky disappear through the gym doors.

“I, uh.” Steve looks at May helplessly. “Was that - did I - “
May has her entire lower face cupped in the palm of her hand, like whatever it was Steve and Bucky were doing is something she needs physical support to withstand. Steve gets up, body still leaning in towards the lingering scent. Is Bucky okay? Did Steve scare him? Should they train more so this doesn’t happen again? Should they have a chaperone? Will Bucky’s… pod... be upset? About it?

“That was… unideal,” May finally settles on, and it rushes over Steve like a planeful of cold water, or, well, wow. That was dramatic, Rogers. It was fine. He’s fine. They hadn’t done anything… well maybe it was a little untoward, but that was the point of these things. It had never bothered Steve before, but maybe it was the combination of being thrown around a little and O that got him. Peggy used to -

It doesn’t matter what Peggy used to, because Bucky just ran off. Steve clears his throat. “Should I - do something? Is there a form or um. Do we need to practice… more?”

May gives him an extremely unimpressed look, which softens slightly as he stares back at her, wholly at a loss. “I’ll… talk to him,” she says, and looks him over. “Hit the showers for the upper level gyms and cool off, alright?”

Steve nods. Cooling down, yeah, that’s the smart thing. Then he hesitates, puffing up a little. “He’s not in trouble, right?”

May shakes her head, now looking more resigned than anything. “No trouble. Just want to see what page he’s on.”

Steve nods and feels the back of his neck go warm for no particular reason that he could explain. Cooling off. Right. He goes.

-o-

Bucky hides in the showers, his panting hidden by the sound of water. Putting water on the face is supposed to simulate the Diving Response, which slows the heart and calms the nerves. He pushes his face more into the spray, but his nerves remain severely uncalmed. His brain feels like a beehive that’s been punted down the stairs. He feels too hot. He feels like the water coming down on him should be steaming. He can smell himself, even in the shower, the way his body is just - gushing. It doesn’t smell like it used to. He doesn’t smell like he did three hours before. What is going on.

When he was A he hadn’t smelled right either, but that was probably because of all the drugs, and under that he knew he’d smelled - scary. It was done on purpose. Sometimes the handlers would have all the scentblock scrubbed off him, inject something that made his skin feel like it was trying to melt off and send him out that way. People scattered like gnats when he got sent out like that. Sometimes it made hostiles freeze like mice in front of him, when it didn’t make them drop their weapons and run, if they didn’t have enough of the right kind of training.

The training they did just now. Steve doesn’t - he didn’t - even the shock scent rolling off him somehow smelled good, though that’d all but disappeared by the time Bucky had run in, so late. Maybe it’s because his own shock scent was just as bad, when he was A. Maybe it’s because Captain Rogers smells good all the time.

Bucky doesn’t smell good all the time. He doesn’t smell good ever. He can’t make shock scent anymore but at least that was natural. He knows he doesn’t smell right, hasn’t since he detoxed, but he got used to the metallic scent of himself, a cross between thin bile and a wet tin can in a thunderstorm.
This is - this isn’t - it’s not anything like that. He doesn’t know what this is. He’s read his own manual (and shredded it) and the SHIELD manual plenty of times, and this isn’t covered. Is there another manual? Is there a normal person manual he should look for. All the magazines act like they are people manuals, but if they are, they’re written in a language Bucky doesn’t quite speak, and they need more appendices. Maybe a glossary. He needs a glossary right now. He needs a name for the way he’s reacting to having rolled around on the gym mats with Captain Rogers call me Steve.

He's fought a lot of people, but this was the first time he'd sparred with someone who had been… having... fun. Yes, Bucky decides, dizzily reviewing exhibits A through C: Steve's unhesitating willingness to grapple with him, Steve's puppy-wagging-its-tail body language in between holds, Steve grinning like a madman while Bucky tried to pull his head off with his knees. Steve had been having fun.

Bucky had been having fun too, until his body decided to ramp up to Mach 7 and cartwheel off the rails without even consulting him. In retrospect he'd probably lost control of himself when he overhead an agent say, “Captain Rogers? He’s doing O week training in the third floor gym,” and next thing he knew he was tossing the locker room for practice gear, soap still foaming behind his ears. And then they got in the ring, and all the instincts that tell him how to take down his opponent kept getting overridden by the parts of him shrieking LICK HIM LICK HIM BITE HIM ON THE FACE.

He’d kept himself under control, until they had been rolling on the mat and something in him went haywire and suddenly his body was doing… whatever the hell it’s doing now. He doesn’t smell like himself. It’s like passing a reflective surface and seeing someone else’s face.

He gulps more water from the shower spray, pressing his hot face to the cool tiles. He needs to figure out what to do. The ongoing Steve Rogers situation has escalated and Bucky’s body now feels like a tuning fork smacked against a piano. All week he’s been fighting off thoughts like what if you broke into his locker and stole all his deodorant, and he’s been trying very hard not to obey what feels like a rabid chimpanzee mashing buttons in his brain, because all its great ideas contradict the rules on Acceptable Workplace Behavior that SHIELD HR spent a few weeks explaining to him once he’d started going on missions. There had been PowerPoint presentations. Bucky really doesn't want to have to repeat the PowerPoint presentations.

And - beyond that, he doesn’t want Steve to start looking at him like the other agents do when they think he can’t see them. Steve talks to him like he’s a person, and not like he’s one wicker handle short of a basket case. That’s valuable enough to let him resist the urge to steal Steve’s socks while he’s still wearing them, despite how much the rabid chimpanzee wants to bring everything that smells like Steve back to his nest and roll around in it.

His good intentions are derailed briefly by thoughts of Steve himself showing up in his nest and rolling around in it. Of Bucky rolling on top of him, of - of rubbing his whole face against Steve’s face and pressing his thumb into the divot of Steve’s elbow. Bucky thinks about all the overhearing he does, all the conversations full of eyebrows and euphemisms because nobody has the decency to say a thing straight out for any potential listeners that might be lurking nearby, just trying to Get It. He thinks of the simple pleasure of having Steve’s skin against his tongue.

Everyone speaks around the details and Bucky’s not sure how or who or what to ask but he knows he wants Steve. He wants Steve the way he once saw a video online of a puppy climb into its own food bowl while eating and then fall asleep in it. He wants Steve like he wants to reach into make-up tutorial videos and touch all the brushes. He wants Steve to do a make-up tutorial, to soak up Steve’s smell that's so much like his voice, all deep and low and good while he talks about nice things like how matte is obviously superior when doing cut creases, but mostly Steve
should just have the brushes and use them to gently trace over Bucky’s cheekbones and forehead and -

HR would probably have a lot to say about these thoughts.

But thinking is allowed. He can just - think about it. Thinking is harmless. He’ll be a good normal person to Steve and inside his head he can think thoughts that will never ever come out. So far, he’s been doing a good job converting the thoughts to actions that are helpful instead of creepy. When he thought about breaking into the SHIELD surveillance center so he could see where Steve was all the time, he showed Steve where all the cameras are instead. When he thought about stealing Steve’s clothes while Steve was in the shower, he helped Steve find the good towels. Whatever his terrible lizard brain tells him to do, he’ll do the opposite, and then everything will be okay.

And if not, he’ll make it okay. This isn’t the first time the body has done something new and appalling and mystifying. This time, he has mission assists. The shredders and printer are still in his nest. He has more magazines to review. He’s almost out of color-coded tabs but he knows where Sheryll in Admin hides the extra office supplies.

It's his body and he may not be able to control it but he can try to understand, and no matter what, he makes the choices about what to do with it. He’s not sure what it is he wants to do, exactly, but - he has a lot of thoughts, and thinking is good. Thinking is harmless. Here in the privacy of the shower, with endless warm water surrounding him, he can rest his forehead on the wall and think as many chocolate pudding thoughts as he wants. Thinking is his again.
Huge thanks to Quietnight and AggressiveWhenStartled for invaluable beta work and to the many discord cheerleaders for yelling about blankets with us!

Wondering what to do this weekend? Tired of sitting at home and arguing over Netflix? Time to treat your pod to a night on the town! No matter how diverse your group is, we’ve got hot new openings and cool tried-and-true favorites for your pod to refresh, regroup and get out of the same old rut.

Athletic pods will find High Flying times at the grand opening of Trellis, which features a vertical ropes course fully integrated into their 4-story nature garden (don’t miss the animal-themed water fountains!). Laid-back podmates can snuggle on the elevated platforms and watch hourly light shows, while active explorers will be enthralled and enticed by the challenging climbs. Like your feet on the ground? An interactive sculpture garden offers hours of quiet contemplation for more down-to-earth members. Check out their themed nights for special deals and unique experiences:

Lovers In The Leaves (21+)

Pillow Fight Championship (first Monday every month)

ASMR Open Mic Night (Moderated)

A Race To The Top (A’s get in Free!)

Trivia Gardens (Pick Your Level)

For a tender low-and-slow night, check out the reopening of The Burrows, where cozy lovepods can wander along reinvented speakeasy tunnels and enjoy quiet entertainment, some of the best wine and cheese in the city, or just some time away from home. Explore the subterranean moss and mushroom gardens (don’t miss the glow-in-the-dark fungi room!) or settle in for the evening in an intimate pillow-lined cave. Looking for a more active night? Put on your best pajama sets and get ready to soft shoe the blues away on The Burrows’ cavernous dance floor!

Even more active: every fourth Thursday from May 1st - September 30th, pods can sign up for a network-wide game of Hide-and-Seek! Participants wear pod-coordinated glow-in-the-dark bracelets, sneak along glowing hallways, and hide in every sheltered nook the caverns have to offer. Special prizes are awarded to the first pod who gathers its members, and another for the pod member who can evade capture the longest...

- Time Out New York, July

Melinda finds the Winter Soldier in the least popular locker room the next day, the one that has the mysterious mold smell that no amount of antiseptic has been able to clear. He’s standing by the back sink and grimly slathering heavy-duty scentblock gel over his neck out of the largest container she’s ever seen with the single minded focus of a toddler trying to eat That One Noodle,
showing no signs that he cares if it gets into his hair or on his clothes.

Melinda’s never had children and doesn’t exactly want any, but she supposes that running STRIKE teams for nearly a decade has given her more parenting experience than most of the people who actually pop out the babies. She also currently has twenty-three cousins between the ages of thirteen and twenty, so she's more familiar than she'd like with the hormone explosion that accompanies someone's first transition, and yesterday Soldier had definitely smelled like someone catapulted face-first into puberty.

Melinda has no idea how that happened, given that Soldier is pretty thoroughly an adult, but it definitely did happen, and Melinda has A Duty. She wouldn’t call Soldier harmless, per se, but he’s not a mindless killing machine either, and she knows he gets - confused, sometimes. The guy’s been hard done by. If Melinda can help, she’s going to.

She’s waded neck deep into political plots and war zones. She’s not about to run from an uncomfortable conversation. Granted, she’d probably feel slightly more at home if the Soldier were holding a gun, or maybe if they were running through a burning building. And normally she’d leave this kind of interpersonal counseling to HR, but Soldier associates HR with being in trouble for eating everything in the break room refrigerator regardless of whose name was on the tupperware label, and HR associates Soldier with authorizing extra psychiatric counseling hours for everyone involved in his initial onboarding process.

She briefly imagines saying, "So Your Body is Changing," to the Winter Soldier, and fires her imagination immediately.

If Soldier and Rogers are sweet on each other, that’s their business, and Melinda’s business is to make sure this doesn’t end in tears. Or shooting. Or mandatory personnel counseling. Nobody wants more mandatory personnel counseling.

“Soldier,” Melinda says, stopping a few feet away.

He gives her a wet-cat look in greeting but does stop trying to drown himself in scentblock.

“About yesterday,” Melinda says, which makes Soldier twitch impressively and slap the lid of the container shut.

“What,” he says, looking like he expects her to send him away on a ten-month mission to Antarctica.

Melinda decides small words are in order. “Nothing bad happened,” she says. “I just want to check in with you. Things are probably… new…”

Soldier’s spooked horse look intensifies. May takes a hard conversational left. “So,” she tries instead. “You and Captain Rogers. Do you… spar... often?”

Soldier looks at her, then at the scentblock bucket, then at his hand, covered in gel. “I,” he says, struggling, then makes a couple of small, abortive hand movements that indicate he’s got no clue what’s going on but he knows for damn sure there’s a lot of it.

“Okay,” Melinda says, deciding that whatever Soldier and Rogers are doing together and how often and in what configurations isn’t information she actually needs to know, not unless she gets a complaint from whichever unwary Agent manages to walk in on their… private gym time.

“That’s fine. Have you talked about being safe?”

Soldier’s forehead wrinkles, and Melinda can hear him mentally rifling through mission briefings and weapons check protocols. She backtracks.
“It’s important to avail yourself of the resources at your disposal.” The chance that Soldier will go to SHIELD’s comprehensive health clinic is a negative integer. “There’s lots of information on the state health website,” she decides on. “The important thing is to be safe about - things.”

Then again, this is Captain America they’re talking about here and he probably couldn’t get a STD if he tried.

He can probably get Soldier pregnant, though. Melinda pauses as a fresh new landscape of horror opens up before her. She takes a deep breath. "If you're planning to menstruate - "

"NO." The Soldier is suddenly perched on the edge of the bank of lockers, a foot above Melinda’s head.

She adjusts the level of her stare. “It’s a perfectly normal bodily function. Many people find the experience fulfilling.” Not Melinda. She’d spent exactly one cycle with a heating pad clamped to her abdomen while chugging ginger tea by the gallon before vowing never to do it again, but one of her podmates swore it helped him feel closer to nature. Different strokes. Melinda wasn’t going to be the one responsible for depriving the Soldier of the chance to get in touch with his inner moon goddess or whatever the fuck the red death was supposed to do when it wasn’t making you pray for an alien attack to take your mind off of the cramps.

“I am not. Planning that,” Soldier says, strangled. “No. None of that. None.”

“Alright,” Melinda says. “Then you don’t have to worry about pregnancy. Do you know how to apply a condom?”

Soldier does not give a clear, immediate yes, which means whatever he knows is not adequate. Melinda holds in a sigh. “Wait here,” she says. “We're going to go over some examples.”

She keeps a couple of condoms and some dental dams in her wallet out of habit, and they don’t need to be unexpired if all they’re going to be used for is the world’s worst sex ed lesson. Melinda hunts around for a small, comforting space to make the experience easier on both of them, but the only thing available is the bathroom mop closet.

These aren’t exactly ideal circumstances. Watching the Winter Soldier sit on an upturned bucket and shamefacedly apply a condom to a Swiffer handle isn’t the most surreal fifteen minutes of Melinda’s life, but it does make the top ten. He looks like he wants to crawl under a couch and die there, and if not for the grace of Lysol Extra-Strength Stay-All-Day ScentFree he’d probably smell like it too.

Melinda is not unsympathetic. "This is my cell number," she says, and recites it. "If you have questions about anything we've discussed, you're going to call me. If Captain Rogers does anything that makes you feel uncomfortable or unsafe, you're going to call me. What are you going to do if you're uncomfortable or have questions?"

"Call you," Soldier mumbles.

"Right answer."

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Natasha sits down across from Steve when he’s eating lunch at his desk the next day, and she looks him in the eye and actually sighs. “It’s like this, Rogers,” she says. “The Winter Soldier is an operative of a caliber that very few systems have the capacity to control. We are not one of those systems. He’s here because he wants to be. After he single-handedly demolished twenty-two HYDRA cells - and I do mean single-handedly - he came in with one of our STRIKE teams. He
stayed put for a week, answered some questions - perfectly willing to talk, provided we knew what to ask him - and then decided he wanted some peanut butter. We still don’t know how he got out.”

Steve blinks at her, his forkful of rigatoni halfway to his face. He had been thinking about Bucky, but much more in the context of what can I get him as an apology gift than - his tactical record? Granted, it’s a nice tactical record, one that makes a fella sit up and pay attention like watching Peggy getting lip and returning it back with a sock across the jaw, but he tries not to dwell on those particular thoughts in the middle of the SHIELD cafeteria. “What?”

“He’s enhanced, like you are,” Natasha rolls on, like Steve knows what she’s talking about. And, well, he’d wrestled Bucky out there in the ring, so he’d known he’d been facing off against something special, but he’d figured it was like with Natasha: she doesn’t seem to have any serum or anything but she sure does trounce him on the mats on the regular. And Bucky has his armored metal hand.

“Add that to his level of expertise, and it’s almost impossible to keep him contained. But he came back, eating the peanut butter,” Natasha continues. “Just walked right back to his cell. After that Fury started putting him on missions because hey, we might as well -”

“His cell?” Steve interrupts.

Natasha looks at him oddly. “He’s ex-HYDRA, Rogers. STRIKE brought him back in five-point restraints and put him in maximum security.”

“He was HYDRA?”

“Not voluntarily,” Natasha admits. “He was a POW. Worst case of brainwashing I’ve ever seen. Did nobody brief you on this stuff?”

Steve makes a strangled sort of hedging noise because he figures the normal on-boarding training got a little lost in the whole: this is an Uber and you can take it to the airport. They showed him how to do an expense report right after, sure, but with a lot of this is what an app is buddy. And absolutely none of that is relevant to the fact that Bucky was apparently - POW. Christ. No wonder the poor guy had smelled sick. Steve had seen more than a few folks rescued from camps, in the war, and the only cure for it, apparently, was a close-knit pod. And sometimes they had them back home and sometimes they’d made them in the camp, and sometimes they had the hollow-eyed expression of someone cut loose and pushed out to sea.

Also enhanced sure explains a lot. You think somebody would have brought that up the way they brought up, “Oh my grandpa fought in WWII, did you know him?” Maybe a “Hey there’s another guy like you in existence now! You aren’t a weird case study! Can we have more of your blood anyways? Please? I’m working on my dissertation, see, and-”

“Long story short,” Natasha says, “he wasn’t culpable. HYDRA had him for a long time. Somehow, he broke his conditioning for long enough to start fighting back. We still don’t know what happened at the beginning there.”

“Why not?”

“He was very - ” Natasha pauses. “Efficient. We didn’t realize someone had gone rogue, at first. People just started turning up dead. It took us six mysterious corpses to start digging deeper and find that they all had the same connections.”

“Nazi connections,” Steve says, just checking in with reality.
“Yes. And then he just kept going. By the time our intelligence analysts figured out what was going on, he’d taken out most of the Eastern European branches and had made a solid dent in the North American ones.”

The penny drops with the force of a meteorite. “He was the defected asset. The one who took out most of Hydra.”

“That’s him.”

“And SHIELD arrested him?”

Natasha grimaces, or as much as she ever does. “SHIELD had no idea what the hell was going on, whether this was an internal schism between warring factions - HYDRA had plenty of those - or a mercenary contract dispute, or what. By the time we figured out Soldier was a POW he’d already wandered off to raid the commissary pantry. We caught up fast after that. Seriously, nobody told you this?”

“No,” Steve says numbly. “I had no idea. His name wasn’t in the reports.”

“Soldier’s work isn’t all that flashy, and we’ve worked to keep it that way, as much as that’s still possible at this point,” she says. “He’s the most famous assassin in history whose name is still top secret. He was a ghost story before he broke with HYDRA, and afterwards he wasn’t going around signing autographs. We’ve done what we can to keep him under wraps, but taking out HYDRA made waves. The journalists haven’t gotten ahold of him, but every first-rate intelligence agency knows who he is, enough that they know they don’t want to mess with him. Some of them have made job offers. So far, he’s stuck with SHIELD. We’d like to keep it that way.”

Steve sits back, his rigatoni forgotten, trying to process. Brainwashing. Jesus. It sounds so damn silly, but the look on Natasha’s face is lethally serious. “But he’s alright now,” Steve says, half a question.

Natasha shrugs. “As alright as any of us, I suppose. He keeps to himself.”

“But he has a pod?” Steve says, carefully; he isn’t sure what she wants her to say. For her to shrug again, or say of course he does, haven’t you met Terry and Isabel yet, they work in administration. On the one hand, if Bucky doesn’t have a pod, Steve can stop worrying that they’ll take one look at him and tell Bucky to pick literally anyone else. On the other, if Bucky doesn’t have a pod, then Bucky doesn’t have a pod. Steve thinks of Bucky’s frizzy ponytail, imagines Bucky doing it up himself in front of a bathroom mirror, and feels his fingers clench inside his gloves.

Natasha sighs again, this one short and sharp and fairly self-directed. “Nobody knows anything about him, Rogers. Precious few of us even got to read his file, before every copy started disappearing and any attempt to make a new one ran into ‘technical difficulties’.” She makes deeply sarcastic bunny fingers with both hands. “He’s made it pretty clear he’s here on his terms and his alone.”

“He follows orders,” Steve says.

“More or less. You’ve seen it. You give him an objective and a mission brief and he goes and gets it done. But don’t expect him to act like an agent. On his third mission, he went dark for 78 hours, just vanished without a word to anyone else on the op. Apparently he’d overheard one of the targets they were surveilling mention a facility where they were running experiments on people. He went AWOL, turned the facility into a crater, and showed up at the extraction site with five rescued prisoners in tow.”
“And that’s a bad thing?”

Natasha gave him a look. “Is it a bad thing when an operative is unpredictable and uncommunicative? You tell me, Mr. Tactics. I’m not saying his motivations are bad, just - be careful. I don’t know how he’s going to respond to… this, and neither do you, and neither does he, probably.”

“I appreciate your concern,” Steve says, and he actually means it. Natasha does her best to keep him from being dumber than he can help, and he’s learned not to dismiss her advice. “But this is something for Bucky and me to work out.”

Natasha stares at him. “Who the hell is Bucky?”

-o-

Steve looks it up. Secretary of State shot execution style in Mclean home, says the first headline, and that’s just the start. He hasn’t been keeping up with current politics so much as trying to stay afloat in a sea of information that started with “and here’s what happened in the past seventy years starting the day you corked it”, but it’s not like this stuff is hard to find. There are a lot of these headlines. Name after name comes up - politician, politician, lawyer, real estate mogul, politician - all of them executed, shot or throat slit, usually in their own homes. The later kills apparently had flashdrives and papers and photographs stacked up next to them, like the killer had started to realize there would be a massive investigation into motive and was politely trying to spare everyone the effort. The killer, Bucky, who systematically made his way through an entire fascist paramilitary organization, one by one, alone.

The nice HR lady had said SHIELD had been infected with HYDRA. That an asset had rooted them out. He hadn’t expected… this.

From a civil perspective, Steve can see how it’s - not the best, to bypass trial and due process and presenting evidence in court. From a military perspective, Bucky had no choice. When you’re alone, up against overwhelming odds and probably actively hunted by your former captors, you can’t afford to take it to a judge. Especially when the judge might be on the take, too.

As for a personal perspective, well. Call him old fashioned, but Steve can’t quite find it in him to feel broken up over Nazis dying. As far as he’s concerned, he owes Bucky a muffin and a drink. Several drinks.

He’d given Steve an acorn. Maybe he’d want something like that. A… neat… rock? Or - he’d given Steve an acorn and a package of nuts. Steve could buy him… more nuts. The nice kind in the crinkly bags with ribbon, maybe. He’d walked past a display of Macadamia Nut Flavored Cashews last week, but for whatever reason the concept of a nut he’d never eaten being flavored like an entirely different nut he’d never seen before had thrown him for a solid loop and he’d ended up walking right back out of the little gift bodega.

And now he’s back to daydreaming about giving Bucky gifts, only instead of just looking for an apology gift for being inappropriate during their wrestling match, he’s thinking about how to say I really admire the way you rooted out a paramilitary Nazi organization from Peggy’s agency - and by the way, just curious, do you have a pod - with a fruit basket and a blanket. It would have to be a damn big basket. He’s heard of the language of flowers but there’s probably no language of fruit, and in any case it’d be one hell of a time trying to find a flower that symbolizes “paramilitary” or, for that matter, “Nazi”.

And he should forget about the blanket entirely. That’s probably premature. And Natasha would definitely raise her eyebrows at him if she knew his response to her warning was to daydream
about wrapping Bucky up in a fourteen-layer confection of fleece and flannel.

He gets why Natasha is concerned. He’s met a few people like her, he thinks - there usually were a couple in every tenement building. His mother was one. Her pod hadn’t been big to begin with and then there was the Great War, which killed Auntie Siobhan and Uncle Ian outright and gave his father fourteen months with Steve before the mustard gas finally got him. She hadn’t taken in anyone after, just didn’t put up a fuss when Grandma Shannon - who wasn’t really Steve’s grandma, or rather, she was, just by way of neighbor and not blood - started coming over daily.

But every kid in their building got free check-ups, and sometimes free medicine, and his mother’s eye was on everyone’s health, looking all around. Sometimes when people don’t have a pod they make the whole world their pod instead, like they’re responsible for every kid with a skinned knee who’s not already being patched up by someone else. There’s no such thing as fending for yourself in a reef. Steve had grown up knowing that if he saw trouble brewing, it was his business as much as anyone’s, and he’d never been shy about wading in. No such thing as a load too heavy, just a matter of finding enough shoulder to put under and help lift, Steve’s Ma used to say, usually followed by a talk about the importance of unions for work reef protection and health.

That’s what Natasha’s doing. She’s talking like that about Bucky because she doesn’t know him, and she can’t predict what he might do. Steve can’t blame her. Natasha, of all people, would make it her job to be on the lookout for infiltrators, operatives who slide in through deception and take advantage of people’s trust. She’s guarding his weak spots for him. It makes him feel like thanking her, but she probably wouldn’t like that. Maybe he’ll bring her some of the next batch of banana bread the neighbors leave on his doorstep. Natasha either doesn’t get enough baked goods in her day to day, or she secretly owns a bakery and this isn’t even her day job, she just comes in for fun. It’s impossible to tell with Natasha.

It hits him all over again that nobody’s bringing Bucky banana bread, nobody’s guarding his weak spots, because Bucky doesn’t have a pod. He’d singlehandedly executed one of the most successful counter-terrorism ops in modern history and he’s walking around with a tragedy of a ponytail because there’s no one to fix it. It takes physical effort for Steve to not get up from his chair and pace mindlessly around base looking for him. Usually Steve has better control than this. He’d managed not to offer to fix Bucky’s hair on missions, or to invite him over for dinner during one of Bucky’s drive-by acts of kindness, because he’d known that even if Bucky might be receptive it wasn’t Steve’s place to make the first move. But now -

Natasha seems to think Steve could be in some kind of danger if he gets too close, but Steve can’t imagine Bucky attacking him. Bucky can’t even look at him straight and he runs away whenever Steve tries to make conversation. He can imagine coming on too strong and scaring Bucky off, but so far Bucky has sought him out every time, and apparently he doesn’t do that with anyone else at SHIELD.

If the Winter Soldier is a ghost, he’s one in a bedsheets with the eyes cut out, holding a pillowcase and asking for candy.

Or offering it, rather.

It occurs to Steve that what Bucky has been doing can, broadly, be considered courting behavior.

That’s. A thought.

Steve pauses as the universe quietly rearranges itself. Normally that kind of invitation is offered by the whole pod, but based on what Natasha told him, he doesn’t think Bucky even has a pod. And if Bucky doesn’t have a pod -
They’re all on scent block on missions, and at work nobody would deliberately put out an invite anyway. But Bucky has given Steve food. If he hasn’t got anyone else, it’s not like they could all come around and give a proper invitation - hell, Bucky might not even know how.

But he’s been doing everything he can, to show Steve he’s invited.

Steve goes out and buys four kinds of peanut butter candy. His taste buds are as enhanced as the rest of his senses, and with Bucky’s O nose he’s probably even more sensitive, so Steve goes for the packages without any words he doesn’t recognize in the ingredients list.

The whole time his eyes are reading and his legs are walking but significant parts of his brain seem to have decided to exist in a parallel dimension. The dimension is called What If Bucky Came To Visit And Left Never. Steve is getting treated to an infinitely-scrolling highlight reel of Bucky in his kitchen eating pudding at three in the morning, Bucky in his bed pit taking an afternoon nap, Bucky racing him up the reef’s climbing wall to see who can reach the roof first, Bucky wearing Steve’s sweaters until they smell so much like both of them it’s impossible to tell who they belonged to in the first place. He probably shouldn’t be having these thoughts in a grocery store, but it is entirely out of his hands at this point. It’d be one thing if these were ideas for courting, but apparently his brain has just decided to skip that step and go straight to the reward instead.

There hadn’t been any courting with Peggy, not really, unless you count the two of them going after the HYDRA agents who killed Erskine and comparing notes afterwards. They’d kind of just... happened to each other. Or rather Peggy had happened to him. She’d kept on looking at him, even before the serum procedure, and smelling the way Steve imagines a tiger smells right before it turns an antelope into several dozen pounds of steak. Steve had quite frankly been ready to pour the metaphorical barbeque sauce all over himself and absolutely would have if only he’d known how, so it’s lucky for everyone it had gone from looks straight to necking. And then the other stuff.

There hadn’t really been gifts, though, or at least not proper ones, because Steve suspects extracted intel and looted weapons don’t appear as suggested courting gifts in any etiquette guide. Peggy had given him a good knife, though, and Steve’d gotten Stark to make the tiniest radio he could and given it to her. Those were the kind of presents people gave, on the front. Like a promise: I’ll get you soft things later, but here’s something to help you live through now.

That’s not the happiest thought to be having in the candy aisle of a grocery store. He looks down at his basket full of candies and tries to refocus. The candy all looks good: soft yellow and brown and white packaging, with pink and blue and sage green lettering. Manufactured, though. Somebody else made and wrapped and packaged this candy. The longer Steve looks at it the more it seems a little… impersonal.

Steve turns to consider the baking aisle.

When he finally exits the store it’s with both arms loaded down with bags. When he gets home, he goes straight to his recipe card box. He’d had a very polite fight with the Smithsonian over whether the assorted journals, sketchbooks, and possessions of his they had curated belonged to him or the museum, and once he’d established that he was walking out of there with his belongings whether they liked it or not and they were welcome to call the cops on him if they felt like that was the best course of action, he was able to gather up everything he wanted in relative peace.

One of his best finds had been Grandma Shannon’s recipe cards, carefully preserved so they were yellowed and fragile, but still legible to anyone who knew how to read her narrow script. He’d made a couple of re-creations where something hadn’t quite been preserved as well, or where he’d
needed to rewrite around a sauce stain. He could have bought the Steve Rogers Cookbook out in the Smithsonian gift shop with all the same recipes on glossy pages and unasked for commentary by some of the world’s “top” chefs, but if Steve wanted to be told he was boiling potatoes wrong he’d go to class and not have this Thomas Keller fella yelling at him in his own kitchen about it.

Though he had gotten emails from most of the chefs who’d commented on his Ma’s recipes, inviting him to one kitchen or another with his pod. Seeing as he’d been short on that second one, it had seemed like a bit of a nightmare scenario, sitting and diving into the large pod-sharing portions by himself. It would all doubtlessly have been televised, too. Steve hasn’t done many televised appearances since he flunked out of the SHIELD press training by answering too many questions honestly, so he’s avoided the whole talk show circuit, not to mention the dating reality shows Natasha likes to make him watch and quiz him on the next day. Steve hopes Bucky hasn’t been watching those shows. He’s not sure how his dating style would stack up against The Bachelors.

Most of the courting etiquette Steve had learned growing up was big on carefully introducing potential partners to family members. Making Grandma Shannon’s scones, thinking of how his Ma had taught him to fold the dough delicately, Steven, we’re not making rock cakes, is as close as Steve can get to introducing them to Bucky, even if he’s the only one who’ll see the connection. It still counts. He’ll know.

While the scones are in the oven, Steve thinks about presentation. It’s not wartime anymore; a hastily wrapped handkerchief isn’t going to cut it. His stationary drawer is woefully empty, though: who would he write to? Most communication is electronic these days, but you can’t wrap a gift in an email, and Steve knows good packaging is just as important as always, given how many patterned boxes and colorful papers high-end stores wrap purchases in. When he bought his embarrassingly expensive pink slippers, the guy at the counter had nestled each slipper into a bed of rose-scented tissue paper inside the tote bag they came with. Steve still has those sheets in his desk, but rose would clash with the scones and peanut butter candy.

He takes the scones out of the oven and goes right back out again. There’s a scent shop every few blocks or so, with stationary sets and trinkets and things to make your home smell nice; the shop doors are always propped open to advertise their theme to passers-by. Steve ducks past a couple shops wafting floral and citrus smells without going in. When they buried his Ma, everyone in the reef turned up with flowers, like she and Steve weren’t just a pod of two after all. It’s a bittersweet memory, and smelling flowers in the wild generally reminds him of bouquets of carnations and clover and sweet william all bundled up in some paper and spilling out of the funeral home, which leaves him feeling slow and quiet on the best of days and isn’t at all what he wants to bring into his wooing overtures. The spice-wafting shops down the street don’t give him anything to get mopey about, and after some exploratory sniffing he heads into one with a stylized clove and cinnamon stick printed on the glass window.

Everything’s carefully sealed and compartmentalized so as not to overwhelm the space, but a rich aroma of spice permeates the store anyway. And it smells real, without the sneeze-inducing powdery itch of manufactured perfumes, and comforting, like somebody is going to come around the corner and hand him a cookie and some warm milk. The cashiers at the counter both have teddy-bear printed face masks, the papery disposable ones shopkeepers wear these days, and they both give Steve a wave; through the open back door he can see a couple more employees on the rear patio, sorting scent packets in the open air.

Steve waves back and turns towards the wall of little pull-out shelves. Acorns. Bucky had given him an acorn. If Steve doesn’t find the right scent here he’s going to one of the earthy ones with plant smells. After serious deliberation he selects a pack of sheets in a warm beige color that smells of cedar, not so dark brown that it won’t hold black ink but not so light that it can’t take white
He buys the set of papers, then realizes all he has to write with are the plastic SHIELD ballpoint pens that find their way into his pockets and accumulate on his dresser. At an art store four blocks over he finds some decent pencils and inks and a few markers. He gets slightly distracted in the pen aisle - he thinks *Okay Rogers, only three, that's the budget* and then remembers as far as his bank account is concerned *budget* is a made-up word. He wanted to make a courting gift with his own two hands, and he did, but scones are a pretty prosaic gift, no more out of the ordinary than the brownies his neighbors come by with when they make an extra pan. When it comes to making something Bucky might look at and feel *special*, Steve could… he could...

From there he maybe loses his mind a little. Shopping is entirely different when he’s buying things for someone else. He knows what he needs to get by, and it feels wasteful to go above and beyond that. The moment he thinks about what *Bucky* needs, any natural frugality gets swamped by a wave of avarice that even Natasha would be impressed by. He wants to give Bucky every good thing he can lay hands on, and the twenty-first century seems only too happy to provide.

He manages to get a grip on himself at some point between the pencil racks and the checkout line. If he comes on too strong, he might spook Bucky, and in this kind of situation especially quality matters more than quantity. Dumping the store’s entire inventory of ribbons over Bucky’s head isn’t the same as giving him a thoughtful, well-chosen gift, something that shows Steve has been paying attention. You can’t buy a love story, Steve always figured. You have to make it with your own hands.

Steve keeps the markers and a spool of bronze ribbon in the basket, though, and he pays without looking at the total. When he gets home he sits down at his kitchen table and sets up a workspace for himself for the first time since 1944.

He draws Bucky sitting on a bag of flour, holding a scone, and the cartoon comes out sweet enough that he adds a flower tucked behind Cartoon Bucky’s ear. Beneath it he writes, carefully, *Thank you for joining me for the training exercise yesterday. I hope my response wasn’t unwelcome, and I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable.* He chews on the plastic cap of his marker and tries to find the middle ground between *if you don’t want to see me again I’ll move to Florida* and *please let me braid your hair*.

Maybe he should just say that part. He’ll give the gift and if Bucky seems… receptive… Steve can see if he’s interested in spending some time together. If Bucky just wants to be friends then he’ll just have a nice card and Steve’s overtures can be forgotten and lost to the mists of time.

They’d both been having fun, Steve thinks, for most of it. Right up until May had pulled them both by the nose back into the real world. Maybe they could… wrestle again. Sometime. Should he say that? Very Mae West. *Why don’t you come up sometime and see me…* only, even apart from the courting, he sort of wants to wrestle for the sake of having somebody he won’t hurt on accident. Maybe Bucky wants that too. He edged around like Steve did sometimes, like he was going to knock something expensive over if he didn’t keep a close watch over his elbows.

After some thought he also copies out the scone ingredients list below, because in his reading about vaccines he came across a lot of people talking about rising allergy rates and he *really* doesn’t want to give Bucky something that might make his throat accidentally close up and send him to the hospital. That’s not the kind of memorable he’s going for.

It looks kind of strange with just the ingredients, so he copies out the recipe next to it, and at that point it looks like a recipe card, so he adds a border and a few matching flowers at the bottom to pull it all together. Then he forces himself to put the pen down before he ends up making some vast baroque composition of swirls and curlicues and goes to package everything up. It does make
it look sort of like the recipes on the back of ingredient boxes. He thinks about hanging a brand name above the picture of Bucky sitting on the flour bag, like he used to do for ads when they were still in the sketching phase. The copy guys used to get a laugh out of them. *Flour De Lis* maybe, or um… *While Away The Flours*.

He wraps the scones in wax paper, then remembers more elaborate paper folds he saw in the scent shop and tries to twist the loose ends together like petals. They get soft and mushy after his third attempt, and he unwraps the paper and starts over with a fresh sheet. It takes half the roll before he gets the shape *just right*, and it probably would have been faster to look up a tutorial than trying to recreate it from memory, but the end result has a softness to it that Steve likes. He loops a strand of ribbon below the flower and ties it tight, running the loose ends over his thumbnail until they curl.

Then all that’s left is the approach. Steve spends what’s probably a humiliating amount of time pacing his apartment and repeating fragments of sentences to nobody at all, complete with occasional pantomime. Eventually he gets sick of the false confidence in his own voice - he keeps slipping into radio announcer register without meaning to, like he’s going to invite Bucky to buy war bonds at the end of his pitch - and makes himself stop rehearsing. He’s done all the preparation he can.

No battle plan survives contact with the enemy. He’ll just have to say it straight out and go from there. If Bucky wants something more, then, well, Steve’s always been good at improvised tactics. If he doesn’t, then this will at least be repayment for all the gifts.

Actually *finding* Bucky turns out to be a much more difficult task than he expects, given how easily Bucky finds *him*. Steve wanders around SHIELD for nearly an hour joggling the paper bag from hand to hand to avoid it getting any creases from his grip. Then, after being reduced to poking his head into the break rooms, he’s struck with inspiration and goes and loiters in the courtyard lunch garden off the cafeteria until Bucky materializes by the nasturtiums. Apparently all Steve has to do is stand still for Bucky to introduce his own presence.

Alright. Moment of truth, Rogers. Steve marches over, sticks out the paper bag, takes a deep breath and blurts, “Would you like to go on a picnic with me?”

Bucky’s eyes go wide in slow motion. “A picnic?”

“Yes,” Steve says, heartened by the lack of Bucky immediately laughing in his face. “There’s a park, just north of the city - it’s got nice day trails. There’s a waterfall, apparently. They say the wildflowers are really something.” Wrap it up, Rogers, get to the point. “We could go this Saturday. If you’re not. Occupied.”

Bucky is looking at him like Steve just asked if he wants to be loaded into a trebuchet and fired over the Hudson. He looks at the paper bag in Steve’s hand, then back to Steve’s face like they’re two entirely separate enemies coming in to flank him. He doesn’t reach to take it, and Steve can’t just fold the bag into one of Bucky’s pockets like Bucky had with the peanuts. Steve locks his knees and waits him out.

“A picnic,” Bucky says tentatively, after another three endless seconds.

“Yeah.” Steve says, heartened by the lack of Bucky immediately laughing in his face. “There’s a park, just north of the city - it’s got nice day trails. There’s a waterfall, apparently. They say the wildflowers are really something.” Wrap it up, Rogers, get to the point. “We could go this Saturday. If you’re not. Occupied.”

They stand there for twenty more seconds of silence. Steve counts them.

“Yyy...es,” Bucky finally says, sounding only a little bit like he’s terrified of the sounds coming
out of his mouth. “Yes. Um. I would like the picnic. A picnic. At the park.”

“Great!” Steve says, trying not to steam relief. “Great. Good. Where should I pick you up?”

Bucky once again looks panicked before blurting out, “Bus stop.”

“Bus stop?”

“Near here. Other end of the parking lot.”

That makes sense. Steve’s heard agents talking about the more senior operatives having decoy apartments for their own protection. Bucky probably can’t go giving out his address to just anybody. “Okay,” Steve says. “Then I’ll. Do that. I’ll pick you up. How’s nine? In the morning, I mean. Not at night. That would be. Silly.”

“Silly,” Bucky agrees.

“Haha,” Steve says, actually saying the word “haha” instead of laughing, and immediately wants to punch himself in the face. Then he realizes he’s still holding the bag out at arm’s length. “This! This is for you.”

Bucky takes the bag very gingerly, like it might contain a kitten or an armed bomb. Steve’s mouth opens again and “This is a date” slips out before he realizes that sounds more like a unilateral declaration than an invitation. “I mean. That I’m asking you on one. If you want. Not just an… unrelated picnic. So you know.”

Bucky stares at him in silence for so long that Steve takes a step backwards. “If you don’t want,” Steve starts, and then Bucky makes a sharp clawing gesture with the hand that’s not holding the bag. “Yes,” Bucky says. “Want. That. Do that. We will go on. A picnic.” He tucks the bag against his chest; Steve helplessly thinks of the way Bucky had sort of patted the leaves of the plant where he hid the Good Coffee.

Then Bucky turns and speedwalks jerkily away. But he takes the bag with him when he goes, cradled carefully in his arms until he vanishes around a corner.

Steve nods to himself. “Right. Good,” he says to the courtyard at large.

A bird chirps in a very yeah, you tell ’em, pal way. Steve realizes all that he did just now happened at… his job. The place where he works. He should probably… do some of that.

Dawning awareness of the world reminds him of the security cameras overlooking the courtyard, and he quickly turns and walks purposefully into the building, hoping the angle hides his ridiculous grin.

-o-

Steve wants to take him to the park on a picnic.

Steve wants to take him. To the park. On a picnic.

Steve wants to take him to the park on a picnic and Bucky doesn’t know why the words keep bouncing back and forth through his head like a trampoline full of lemmings. Steve wants to take him to the park. On a picnic. On a date.

Bucky feels like he got put inside god’s cocktail shaker and now he’s making a martini. Last week he saw Steve’s bellybutton in the locker room and he’s been having dreams about it. The dreams
involving putting his tongue in places he hadn’t previously imagined were lickable. And now
Steve’s asked him on a DATE.

The thought feels like a massive mylar balloon, shiny and squeaky and bobbing up somewhere
high under his ribs. Normally he’d be suspicious of anything he wanted this much, but Steve had
asked him. It can’t be wrong if it was Steve’s idea first. Steve doesn’t seem like a person with a
crazed chimpanzee living inside his head.

Bucky’s chimpanzee, however, feels a little like it’s discovered methamphetamines. He feels like
he needs to try and activate the Diving Response again. Does he need a face mask. The magazines
always talk about face masks. From context, he’s pretty sure they’re not the same kind of face
mask he wears on missions. There’s no hydrating aloe vera in his mission face mask. Sometimes
there’s sweat, but that’s kind of the opposite of hydrating.

He looks down at his hands, which are holding the brown paper bag, then looks around and
books it back to Location Redacted. Only once he’s safely ensconced in his shredded paper nest
does he examine the bag again. He hefts it, then gives it a gentle rattle, then loses all patience and
shakily pulls it open.

Inside is a piece of paper, a waxed package with the paper ends twisted into a flower shape and a
ribbon tied underneath, and a plastic bag full of crinkling, rustling shapes.

He extracts the waxed package. He touches one of the wax flower petals and it bows under his
thumb. The wax paper part isn’t the present, he doesn’t think, but he very much likes that part, his
wild chimpanzee brain throwing up images of that look Steve gets when he’s focused on
something. And maybe it was easy. Maybe Steve makes wax paper flowers all the time. Maybe
half of SHIELD has Steve-made wax paper flowers, but he likes the idea of Steve frowning and
twisting the corners up so Bucky could have a paper flower.

But he also wants what is inside the paper. But he doesn’t want to ruin the paper. And he doesn’t
want to have to retwist the paper in case it goes all wrinkled in his hands.

He carefully cuts off the flower part and keeps the bottom pinched together until he can wrap it in
a paper clip. He looks around his bathroom and then puts the paper flower on top of the printer,
for now.

Once he unties the ribbon and pulls apart the rest of the paper he takes a cautious sniff, then puts
his face close and inhales. Cedar and vanilla waft from inside, earthy and edible, and through it all
the Steve-smell that’s felt like reveille in his nostrils these past three weeks. It feels like bits of his
brain are flashing on and off like marquee lights.

Bucky opens the inner packaging, imagining that he can feel the scent transfer to his fingertips. It’s
full of chunky triangles. Scones. A scone in hand is worth two in the bush, no wait that’s not the…
feed two birds with one scone? The source of the vanilla. And on top of it is a piece of paper. A
card. It’s the source of the cedar-scent and the Steve.

Bucky opens the card.
It’s a picture, in pencil and ink. It’s him. Bucky. It can’t be anyone else. Nobody else has tac gear pants with straps in that exact configuration, and Steve - it must have been Steve - drew them perfectly. It’s him, sitting down, smiling, and - there’s a flower behind his ear. Like the wax flower on the printer. He’s eating a scone. He looks as calm and relaxed and happy as the people on the magazine covers, only nine million times better, because Steve drew him like that. Steve thinks about him smiling.

Bucky is in serious danger of trying to put the card in his mouth. If he eats it maybe he’ll become that Bucky. If he eats it then nobody else can have it. They are going to go to a park. For a picnic.

Ingredients

• All-Purpose Flour  • Salt  • Baking Powder  • Sugar
• Egg  • Milk  • Vanilla Extract
• Unsalted Butter  • Confectioners Sugar
Maybe Steve will take a loose flower and he’ll brush Bucky’s hair back and -

Beneath the picture is a list of words: a recipe. It’s written out in letters so neat and fancy they look almost printed. Bucky brings the card close and sniffs it. Over the ink and paper and cedar and vanilla it’s all one big dose of Steve. The mental image of Steve holding a pencil and folding the paper and kneading the dough with his meat shovel hands is only making everything worse.

Bucky crams a scone into his mouth. Then he coughs it back onto his palm, takes a tiny bite, intending to savor it slowly, but then the flavor hits and he shoves it all in again. He chokes it down whole like a python, closing his eyes as flavor happens to him in high definition. The taste is so rich. It’s so buttery. He shovels another one into his mouth before the first one’s halfway down his gullet. The other scones don’t stand a chance.

After the carnage is over and there’s nothing left but a couple of crumbs too small to lick out of the crevices, Bucky uses both hands to carefully smooth out the paper, pressing out the wrinkles. It still smells like vanilla. Bucky can look at it and know that it came wrapped around food that Steve gave him. That Steve made for him.

And there’s still things in the plastic bag. Bucky looks inside. It’s filled with peanut butter candies. Peanut butter and ginger taffy. Peanut butter and chocolate chews. Peanut butter buckeye balls. Peanut butter brittle. Bucky stares at all four packages, then thwaps them against his face like he can press them through directly, no mouth required, if only he tries hard enough. The bags are cool and crinkly against his hot skin. He’s going to melt the candy. The candy is going to melt him.

Bucky clutches the bags to his chest and rolls in his crinkling bed of paper, eyes squeezed shut. His insides feel like they’ve been replaced with hot butter. He must be doing something right. Steve wouldn’t give him these things if he wasn’t doing it right. It’s the chocolate pudding thoughts all over again, but this time it’s not just him curled up alone thinking about Steve reading aloud from the SHIELD personnel manual while Bucky falls asleep on top of his used towels, it’s Steve giving him candy and asking him out on a date. Surely this means he’s having the thoughts too. Maybe chocolate pudding thoughts are contagious.

He’s gonna go on a date.

He’s got to prepare.

Bucky pulls himself together. He has important work to do.

The first step of mission prep is physical assessment. Is his body capable of carrying out the necessary actions of whatever a date might entail. He turns to his stack of fresh Cosmopolitans. These haven’t been dissected for the decryption wall yet, but he’s done a pass through their tables of contents to familiarize himself with the gist of each. He identifies the one with the HOW TO PREP YOUR BOD article, extracts it and settles in to take notes. After a moment he props up the card Steve gave him nearby, so he can glance at that Bucky. That happy Bucky sitting on a bag of flour and not panicking at all.

SMOOTH OR FUZZY? Whether you’re a sleek shaver or a cuddly bundle o’ fuzz, we’ve got the tips to help you style it all just the way you want - whether to encourage healthy growth or take it all away.

Bucky tugs out the neck of his tactical turtleneck and looks down at his torso. Patchwork tufts of hair are spread over his chest and stutter their way down to his crotch. He doesn’t look sleek. He doesn’t look like a cuddly bundle o’ fuzz, either. He looks like someone with poor aim went at his body hair with a weed whacker and the surviving patches were so demoralized they just gave up
as a result.

He doesn’t have time to encourage healthy growth, so sleek it’s gonna have to be. He gets seven words into the article on waxing, nearly throws the article at the wall in preemptive self-defense, and decides to shave instead. Shaving is good. Shaving is normal. If he dealt with HYDRA techs shaving his jaw and neck for the mask, he can deal with shaving his...everything else. He adds razors and shaving cream to his necessary supplies list.

Next is gear. Teen Vogue says “low-key layers” and “cute accessories” are the key to a “perfect first date outfit”. It also shows several examples, all of which look like they were designed by narcotized chameleons. They’re all so bright. So bright and obvious, like the pop star in one of the photo spreads who wore a peacock tail onstage, bright and iridescent and telling the whole world what they wanted. He doesn’t want Steve to think he’s, he’s some kind of hussy or something. But it’s not that he doesn’t want Steve to - to - do whatever it is people do. With him. To him. Maybe he can be just a little bit of a hussy?

Accessories. Accessories are key.

He ends up in a store he ducked into purely because it’s bigger than a lot of the others and thus less likely to get him crowded or jostled. How did he forget how challenging it is to shop? Strangers come up to you, and they say do you want this one or this one or this one, and you have to answer and it’s not okay to kill them. Bucky checks around for any advancing salespeople and hurries for the far, far back of the store.

He has a mission, he reminds himself firmly. He needs clothes. Correct ones. Date ones. He will be inviting and approachable. That’s a phrase that comes up in the pink magazines a lot, inviting and approachable, usually followed by a list of product recommendations that are supposed to be the equivalent of putting down a welcome mat. Inviting and approachable are not words he has ever previously considered as personally applicable properties, but he wants to try. He will find date clothes that are soft. They will be. Touchable. He can do it.

He skulks into the Intimates section and picks up a soft brown sweater that’s almost the color of the cedar paper Steve gave him, and then lingers in the linens before sternly telling himself it’s insane and far too early and he wouldn’t know how to housemake properly anyway. That leads to him having a crisis about how he doesn’t know what he’s doing and hiding in the bathroom for twenty minutes, taking deep breaths of the cinnamon sugar air freshener and flushing the toilet every time someone walks by.

He’s fine. He can do this. Stick to the plan.

So then he’s in the jewelry section, having another kind of crisis. Bracelets make him edgy and his ears aren’t pierced. Necklaces are for people without neck glands and by the look of it they only sell lanyards for alphas to keep their keys on here anyway. Rings, just no.

He has hair, though. A lot of hair. On his head, that is. It also definitely does not qualify for cuddly bundle status, even if all it ever seems to do is fuzz.

The hair accessory section is nearly as big as the linens. There are cloth headbands with embroideries and bows and ruffles and even glitter, though at least those are on the high shelves away from children. He cringes away from the brighter stuff and scuttles to the reassuringly plain end of the aisle, where there are occasional ruffles but no neon or, God forbid, sequins.

It’s still terra incognita as far as he’s concerned. He’s not very good with his hair. Every time he tries to comb it, it quadruples in volume and launches a ferocious counterattack. There are confused, sharp-edged memories of getting smacked a lot, of getting disciplined by handlers and
nuns and a couple of priests saying threatening things about self-abasement, and some days it’s just not worth the energy to try and do more than stand under the shower spray and halfheartedly shake out the twigs or broken glass or mulch.

None of them are here anymore, though. Nobody can tell him not to touch his hair now. And if he wants to make good hair feelings happen with Steve, he’s got to make his hair look inviting and approachable. Steve should feel invited. Steve should feel it’s safe to approach. Steve should put a flower behind his ear.

Feeling brave, Bucky marches to the slightly less spartan section of the hair aisle.

There’s more technology here: things that straighten and curl and crimp and blow. Bucky essays a closer look, but all of it seems to be a couple dozen steps above his current user level. The curling wands and hair irons say terrifying things like *Heats up to 350 degrees!* Bucky backs away from that whole section. He can already hide up to three knives in his hair after he tries to brush it, he doesn’t need *more* curl or volume, and while a flat iron might help with that, he’s not putting something hot enough to make toast half an inch away from his face.

Finally he gets to simple grooming tools. They have all kinds of hairbrushes here, from cheap utilitarian solos to full sets made out of fancy enameled hardwoods with security tags clipped to the packaging. Looking at those makes him think *dowry set* without quite knowing what that means, but the thought makes him tuck his hands behind his back so he won’t be tempted to touch. At the same time, he knows there are even fancier sets than what you can get in department stores. One of his magazines had a cover spread of an O showing off waist-length curls, the ivory comb in her hand barely teasing at the tips of her hair with tines so delicate just looking at the picture made him shiver with incoherent longing. He’d flip to that page now and again, when his hands itched and he was curled up in his nest. To use a comb like that, on hair that long, you’d have to brush your hair out *every day*, probably for *hours*.

As it is, he can’t even bring himself to touch the ebony set with inlaid enamel. The mahogany set’s price tag has fewer digits. He gingerly picks up the display model wide-toothed comb and tests the tines against his thumb. They’re sturdy, but with a little bit of give, enough that they won’t snap during their first melee with Bucky’s tangles.

He can’t bring himself to pick up the whole set, but one comb - he can get one comb. His fingers are good enough to keep his hair mostly contained, but they can never get out the knots, and there’s nothing *inviting and approachable* about barely-contained snarls.

He’s been keeping his hair tied up with plain black hair ties that come in packs of twenty at every drug store. The department store has a few of those, but also packs with whole rainbows of colors, everything from soft pastels to bold jewel tones. There are headbands. There are scrunchies. There are clips and decorative combs and strings of beads and just as he’s about to get overwhelmed and about-face, he sees the hairpins with glittery stars on them. They come in sets of twelve. One of the sets has pins with stars in red, white and blue.

He snatches the comb and the pins, feeling like he’s robbing a church, and goes for exfil before his nerve fails him. When the cashier sees his purchases she says “Oooo, good luck!” and winks at him. He blushes appallingly and practically runs out of the store.

He hustles back to Location Redacted and spends an appropriate amount of time shredding. He reviews his purchases. Comb. Pins. Sweater. It occurs to him that he has not acquired pants. It is too late for pants. He will wear his tactical ones. They will have to do. They are going to a park. It’s possible he will need to be active at the park.

He also did not get a shaving razor. He looks down the front of his shirt again. He doesn’t want to
go back to a store, and - there probably won’t be a lot of situations where he will take off his
clothes. At the park. That seems like a long-term engagement kind of mission preparedness. This
is a picnic. This is a first date. That’s more like scouting. He doesn’t need to worry about shaving
for scouting. He is properly equipped with his sweater and the hairclips he will eventually be able
to look at directly, if he continues practicing.

Next. He consults his growing stack of magazines again. He has the right gear - more or less - but
he still needs a mission plan, one with defined objectives. Right now he just has a collection of
bodily urges, half of which are physically impossible. He needs to translate them into tactics.
Effective ones.

The magazine articles are much less forthcoming about how to progress from fun, low-key layers
to touching all of Steve’s skin with all of his skin. Flirty hair clips are a start. Somewhere in
between flirty hair clips and marriage is a stage where Bucky gets to gnaw on Steve’s shoulders
and suck on the backs of his knees. Or - something.

Bucky goes to the office of an agent who’s on an overseas mission and opens a browser window.
Searching “how to court” gets him a lot of porn that he avoids clicking on and a few written
guides with confusing euphemisms that probably, somehow, correspond to sex acts. A lot of them
are written in a fun, ribbing tone, like the writer and the reader are in on a great joke together. If
you’re more used to hoeing the melons than harvesting zucchini, it can be intimidating to take a
trip to the other side of the garden. But don’t worry: these simple tips will let you take your the
stud for the ride of a lifetime!

Bucky reads the tips. They are not simple. He reads them again, then searches melon hoeing and
clicks on the first result.

The article doesn’t clarify things much. Bucky learns that melons need plenty of water and direct
sunlight. He washes regularly, but he’s not sure if direct sunlight means directly on him or directly
on his… melon. He doesn’t mind the idea of basking on the roof for an hour or so, but risking
sunburn in his general melon area is extremely contraindicated.

The paragraph on repelling slugs makes him curl up under the desk. He spends a few minutes
persuading himself that if he had slugs anywhere on him, he’d know. Eventually he crawls back
up into the chair and advances to the next page of the article.

The second page shows a picture of a garden, with cantaloupes growing in neat rows of dirt.
Bucky glares at them with furious betrayal and shuts down the computer.

Cosmo it is.

This is the most stressful mission prep he’s ever had to do and it’s not even for an op with any
targets in it. He thinks. He hopes. That’s not what dates are for. Steve wouldn’t ask him on a date
if they have to go kill somebody. They already do that at work. Steve asked him on a date because
- because he wants to give Bucky scones, and, and peanut butter candy, and drawings of Bucky
with a flower and nice hair and another scone.

He gets lost for a while thinking about the scones and how they tasted and how Steve made them
(he made them! For Bucky!) and how it made Bucky want to be a scone, which turns into fuzzy,
confused thoughts about Steve maybe kneading him and buttering him and covering him in
vanilla. Maybe there would be jam, and Bucky might get jam in his hair, and then Steve would
have to help him get it out, and -

Cosmo probably doesn’t have any articles than can help with this. The authors talked about melon
licking and melon balling and melon rolling, which he is starting to suspect is indicative of some
kind of fetish on their part. He’s not sure it’s going to be of any help at all.
And - maybe Steve knows. It’s bad manners to show up unprepared, but Steve doesn’t seem like the type of person to get angry if Bucky reports failure to secure complete intel, especially if Bucky explains the melon problem. He’s a good captain. And - maybe Bucky doesn’t have to report any failure, just - mention melons, maybe, and float some leading questions. Bucky isn’t nearly as good at passive interrogation as, say, the Black Widow, but he doesn’t have to be, for this.

And it’s not an interrogation. It’s a date.

He’s successfully completed missions on far less intel than this. And his objective is certain. He’s sure he wants it, whatever it is. He wants Steve’s squash blossom to enter his love bonnet. He wants his special cantaloupe eaten. He wants Steve’s zucchini friend in his garden, and sex talk might not be his strong suit but he knows what he’s asking for. More or less. He thinks. And what he doesn’t know, he can find out. Dating is a joint op; he and Steve can pool their intel.

-o-

The day before the picnic, Steve stands in front of his closet for far longer than the five hangers of clothing inside deserve. Steve does not have much in the way of civilian wear. He definitely doesn’t have anything suitable for courting. Times have changed, he knows, but he’s not wearing his red, white, and blue Captain America costume to meet an unattached O, partly because the papers would have a field day, and partly because the mere thought makes him feel the phantom pinch of his mother’s finger and thumb on his ear. He wants to be respectful. In his day, respectful had included not making a primary-colored spectacle of himself, and he doesn’t care what Natasha says about the 1960s and Steve’s “hidebound prismatic inhibitions”, he's not doing it now.

One must wear some color on a date. Steve can’t show up in professional navy, or clean and simple black kevlar. Everything else Steve owns is either plain white t-shirts, plain black sweatpants or trousers, or SHIELD uniforms. The sweatpants are soft enough, but he can’t wear sweatpants on a date, and nothing else is good to touch. The idea of Bucky cuddled up close in his arms has taken on the urgency of a mission objective, and that objective is incompatible with his current gear.

He’s going to have to go shopping.

Natasha’s exposure therapy has done some good here, in that at least he knows where to go. There’s a warren of stores near Atlantic-Barclays that have everything from shoes to swanky suits, and not at tourist prices either. (Steve’s starting to be able to tell the difference, mainly by the degree of faint he feels on looking at them.) Shopping is already difficult, because now to do it properly he has to not only redirect from automatically going to the petite section, but also try to decipher incomprehensible future sizing, and half the time he ends up too exasperated to bother. And everything is very… well, it’s very…. O.

It’s not that Steve is averse to cute, he’s not a whatsitcalled, a Goth or a Frank or whatever it is, but he just feels he’s not the kind of person who wears a pastel yellow fleece with a ducky pattern on the inner lining. The ducky pattern seems to be extremely popular. It’s on half the things he sees in damn near every store. The things that don’t have duckies have pompoms.

He found a sweatshirt once in his size and it was soft and comfortable and a nice staid blue, only he ended up having to snip the big fluffy pompoms off the string ends, feeling vaguely guilty as he did so but unable to stand them bouncing around in his field of vision anymore. He saved the pompoms, though. Maybe he can start giving them to the neighbor’s three year olds who keep solemnly gifting Steve their tiny plastic dinosaurs every time one of their parents swings by to push yet another tin of banana bread into his arms.
There also seems to be a current trend of putting animal ears on everything. Steve can’t really gripe about it. He *does* find it charming, and in his ma’s day it was fringe, and in Steve’s it was… well, it was mostly rationing, come to think of it, but he’s sure if not for that it would’ve been something. They’d put nice floral print on flour bags so folks would have something cute that they could turn into curtains or braid into rugs, and he likes the idea of flowers. Flowers are free, out in the world. Floral prints and red-tinted lipstick, until the war came and the cosmetics roared in all Victory Red, shouting confidence like a battle cry.

The sixties, though, good grief. It’s not that Steve’s averse to a little color, but all those *patterns.* And the sequins. He’s not even going to think about tie-dye. People dress pretty normal now, at least, even in New York. He’s seen plenty of eye-popping outfits out on the street but for the most part everybody seems to stick to neutrals or pastels.

Which is to say nothing about the hair. He flashes back to his first glimpse of the 21st century, him running face-first into Time Square and all the abundant curls rolling across billboards. He’s seen more loose hair since waking up then maybe in the whole rest of his life before. Nobody had filled him in on this particular gap, but he’d done his own research, and along with the color *explosion* of the 60’s, there’d been… a lot of Hair. A musical about it even. And so now everyone has curls swinging loose, or one of those complicated braided hairstyles that seem to be the more sophisticated fashion.

Steve brushes his own hair back, feeling how short it is. It’s always been practical, and he never minded or even stood out much before - when you got drafted or joined the military you got your hair cut short, and nearly everyone who wasn’t sick or older or pregnant joined up. But now, with everyone else wearing their hair all down and long and… shiny, he feels kind of like he’s rolling around in sackcloth and ashes.

On the other hand, that contrary bit of him that says things like *lying on your enlistment form doesn’t really count if you’re doing it for a good reason* notes that short hair is by no means monkhood and doesn’t “significantly reduce pod intimacy” at all, no matter what the quack doctors writing disapproving articles about foxhole itch had said. Peg used to rub the short fuzz at the nape of Steve’s neck all the time and Steve’s still not sure who got the most enjoyment out of that one. Sometimes on the street he’ll look around and realize he’s got the shortest hair out of anybody in sight, but he still goes to the barber every four weeks, and nobody’s tried to tell him he shouldn’t, not even his most outspoken SHIELD doc. Besides, it’s practical for combat.

But it does mean he can’t style his hair like he’s seen other people do before going on a pod date, usually in loose curls that look a little disheveled, like an invitation for someone to reach in and dishevel them more. About all he can do for his hair is put gel in it, and he hates having gel in his hair, he’s never figured out the trick of blending it in so he doesn’t wind up half porcupine and half straw bale. His presentation is going to have to rest on his clothes.

Courting attire was simpler when people mostly had one or two formal sets of clothes, but there’s so much *variety* in textiles now that expectations have gotten a lot more varied. There’s everything from mini-skirt sundresses to velvet shawls, and Steve doesn’t even have a church suit anymore. Looking at the outfits on mannequins just confuses him more. Is the mannequin wearing leggings, a halter top, and a cashmere cardigan getting ready for a date, a quiet evening at home, or a job interview? Steve has no idea. And the *colors.* How is he supposed to know how to interpret the colors?

At SHIELD he sees a lot of greys and blues and browns, with the occasional lavender or burgundy if people are feeling frisky. Even then that’s mostly the admin personnel, because the agents tend to just wear their uniforms.

Steve’s only ever seen Bucky in tac gear. Will he - what’s *Bucky* going to show up in?
Steve’s mind provides him a crystal-clear mental image of Bucky in the voluminous peach sweater Steve saw in a window display two days ago, complete with the mannequin’s velvet leggings and fuzzy socks. He actually swivels from side to side with his hands held out like the thought is a boiling kettle and he doesn’t know where to put it. He feels like he maybe needs to tell a priest. That’s - it’s - a lot. Bucky in fuzzy socks is. It’s very. Yes.

Focus, Rogers.

So he needs an outfit for the date. He can make food for the picnic, and he has a couch, if Bucky likes the date. If he wants to Come Up For A Drink. Maybe after the next date. Or the one after that. Steve’s not sure when that’s supposed to happen but he at least has a couch and…

No bed.

No pillows.

Steve’s brain goes to static and he thinks of Bucky showing up to Steve’s apartment and looking at all the plain walls and the bare floors and leaving or looking at Steve like the realtors had. Steve can’t just walk him straight to the emerald curtains and smile, he has to - he has to show he can make a comfortable home. An inviting space. Peggy used to do that with just a nice piece of cloth to go over the window and a soft peacoat, but Steve has an entire apartment and one pillow. Bucky would think he was some sort of… sort of… fiend who wanted to have sex on a hard floor or...or that he was into carpet burn. Except he doesn’t even have a carpet -

Thankfully, the same wildfire that grabbed his brain in the stationary store takes the wheel and he puts his head down and figures this is a problem he can fix.

For the picnic part of it, he finds a blanket in an inviting but not overly forward shade of blue, light and delicate. Something more playful than professional, and he’d stared at the plaid blue with the red stripe while he’d gripped onto this blanket and had one of those moments where he tried very hard not to think about what Bucky might look like in red. He tried hard enough that his brain looped around the side and tricked him by first remembering Peggy’s red dress and then upercutting with the idea of Bucky in the same dress while his defences were down. He had to stage a tactical retreat immediately and it was only luck that the blue blanket was already in his hands, because clearly he can’t be trusted to wander loose in the linens aisles like an adult human being.

He goes looking for clothes next. He’s seen plenty of people in tight, bright things nowadays, with daring patterns and prints and some even with glitter, but he knows himself and something beige is probably the most he can do. People wear their loungewear outside now, too, like there might be some kind of nap emergency and they need to be prepared. It doesn’t feel… right. During the war, you tried to be as polished and put-together as possible when you were outside your own home, doing the best you could with what you had, even if that meant drawing seam lines on your bare legs because you couldn’t get stockings for love or money. Wearing your soft things worn thin from washing meant you were home and you could put all that aside and relax. Even Peggy, who’d made an art out of weaponizing poise, had gone limp and quiet sometimes when it was just her and Steve cuddled up together in whatever bed they could find, lipstick off and hair down, all armor put aside. It’s an obsolete distinction now, but it’s one Steve can’t shake, and every time he enters a clothing boutique full of yoga pants and sequined tops he only lasts a few minutes before curling back and ending up on the pavement.

He doubles back to the store where he’d purchased the camping mat. It has plenty of clothes, mostly for going camping or hiking, but they come in soft, sturdy fabrics. He rubs his fingers along the hem of a sage-green flannel and swallows. It’s ivory and green. Those are… colors.
And it’ll be warm, and it feels like it’s already been through the wash a few times. And he has khakis. Those are a color. Tan is a color. He would know. He used to be a colors professional.

The camping store also has durable pillows that don’t have smiley cat faces on them, but are soft enough and smell like cedar and moss. The display above the biggest sizes, 3-5 square feet, shows tents lined with pillows against the backdrop of a beach sunset. They’re washable, which is. Which is good. If the pillow pit gets used the way Steve thinks it should be.

He buys them along with the flannel, feeling vaguely like the smiling cashier can tell exactly what was scrolling through his head as he was browsing, and hurries home, the huge canvas sack they’d given him to carry the pillows thrown over one shoulder like he’s Linens Santa Claus. He’s got a lot more prep work to do.

He dumps some of the pillows into the living room pillow pit, enough to convert it from “inexplicable hole in the floor” into “good place to lie down in a sunbeam.” The rest he stacks in his linens closet. If all goes well, maybe - but he’s getting ahead of himself. He goes to bed on his camping mats and tries not to think about how different it would be to curl up on pillows with Bucky there, Bucky warm and cozy in thick flannel pajamas and smiling at him with his eyes half-closed and -

Steve wakes up from a dream with a lot of embarrassingly realistic details about Bucky’s ponytail and realizes he’s drooled all over one of the camping mats. He ignores the fact that it’s still dark outside and goes to take a cold shower without looking at the clock. He knows he’s not getting any more sleep.

Setting up his kitchen prep station helps him calm down somewhat. The food, at least, he can handle. Early on his Ma had cheerily informed him that “Well, Steven, if you can’t get them with how you look you can certainly get them with how you cook,” and proceeded to teach him the entirety of Grandma Shannon’s recipe catalogue. They hadn’t always had the ingredients, but whenever there was a little extra money she would try and put it towards what was necessary for the fancier stuff, the desserts with vaguely French words in the title. “If me and Uncle Ian managed to catch your father you’ll do just fine,” she told him, and since then he’s had all those community classes with Mabel and Shara and Josef, learning how to baste and broil and marinade. Last week he even sautéed a beet.

Now’s not the time to try anything risky, though. He goes for what he knows best, baking soda bread and slicing tomatoes and onions and layering mustard, putting together roast beef sandwiches. He makes an apple tart with honey whipped cream and brews lemon tea, chilling it in the icebox before pouring a thermos full. He packs tangerines and napkins and forks and spoons, and manages to fit it all into an admittedly large knapsack, also courtesy of the camping store. He goes out on the balcony to check the sky, then remembers he doesn’t need to do that and pokes at his little phone until it shows him the forecast. It’s a whole week of tiny sun pictures.

Steve looks at his umbrella hanging up by the door, then back at the tiny sun pictures. He packs the umbrella.

When he steps out of his apartment, he finds a tin of gingersnaps on the ground with a cheery little crayon note on top from the pod in 2B, complete with a construction paper drawing that’s either him or a red white and blue starfish fighting various blobs which… might? Be robins? Or maybe aliens? He’s 50/50 on songbirds versus intergalactic threat. He holds the tin for a second and opens the bright and cheery lid, finding lopsided gingerbread monster men, all messy with icing and clumps of sprinkles. Steve tucks those in the backpack with the rest of the food and figures if conversation gets slow he can take them out and have at least part of a story.
When he pulls into the SHIELD parking lot, Steve is twenty minutes early as a result of getting up at three in the morning to bake the bread, assemble the food, and panic, and he means to just idle in the back lot until an actual sane time to pull up front. But as he rounds the corner he sees Bucky’s already there, standing practically at parade rest on the sidewalk next to the bus shelter, so Steve might as well drive over.

Steve could swear Bucky’s face momentarily does something indescribable upon seeing the Harley, but maybe he’s imagining things. Should he have not used the Harley? Is that inappropriate? He doesn’t have a car but he could have checked one out from his reef’s communal garage. He’s only ever driven an Army jeep, but civilian driving is probably easier anyway, what with the lack of sniper fire.

Either way it’s too late now, because here he is in front of Bucky and Bucky is most definitely not in tac gear. Steve loses valuable seconds to the sweater alone, because it’s the same brown as Bucky’s hair and looks very soft and the knit is so plush and the turtleneck so high that it nearly touches his ears. He’s even brushed his hair. It does, admittedly, now look a little like he stuck his fingers in a light socket for a few minutes, but it’s extremely fluffy. Between the hair and the sweater Bucky looks like a particularly well-appointed sheep and Steve wants to knead at something so badly he sort of maybe revs the engine a little by mistake.

Bucky waves, or at least his metal hand moves around a little jerkily at chest height before he yanks it back to his side. “Hi,” Steve says.

“Hi,” Bucky echoes, and there they are, staring at one another, stupidly on time. Whatever the opposite of fashionably late is. Embarrassingly early, that’s it.

“You uh. Ready to go?”

Bucky nods. He scrapes his teeth over his lip and glances at Steve, at the Harley, at the road and then at the ground. Whatever he finds there must not help him much because then he’s back to looking at the Harley. “You can just get… on,” Steve says. The Harley was definitely a mistake. “And. Hold on. To me.”

Bucky looks at the seat available behind Steve with wide eyes. Steve’s halfway to opening his mouth on an offer to go get them literally any other kind of transport - a car, a hang glider, a wheelbarrow to push Bucky in - when Bucky melts back into his bones a little and slings a leg over. He grabs on, gingerly at first, like he thinks he might pinch Steve or something, and then harder, and then Steve’s got a limpet on his back. It feels kind of like Bucky’s trying to become his second pair of pants. And shirt. And - belt. He hears the engine complain before he realizes he’s clutching again, and - he’s not wearing gloves. He forgot his gloves this morning. That’s… just… swell.

The ride up is - well, it certainly feels like it goes by quickly, and thank God for serum-enhanced recall and looking up the route beforehand because Steve nearly misses the exit as it is. The park is upstate but only just, a big one outside Westchester, and Steve pulls into the parking lot with what feels like radioactive awareness of Bucky pressed up behind him, like if he closed his eyes and turned he’d see Bucky glowing through his eyelids. Bucky’s left hand is a cooler spot of pressure on his chest, high enough for propriety but still on him. Everywhere else is warm, and strong, and Steve didn’t know you could turn the feeling of hot chocolate into an immersive experience, but he figures he’s getting the surround sound version of a cookie dunked in warm milk.

It feels nice.
When they get there Bucky doesn’t quite seem to want to get off, and now that the wind’s not in Steve’s face he can smell the slightly chemical tinge of heavy scentblock that he’s come to think of as Bucky’s scent. Only that’s not quite it anymore, not after he smelled those ten seconds of Bucky in the gym. Steve finds himself trying to take a deeper sniff as discreetly as possible as he parks, sits up, and puts down the kickstand. They sit there for a minute. A couple of joggers thump past. Some birds land on a tree next to them and Bucky is still a long line of heat along Steve’s spine and Steve half thinks about curling his hands back under Bucky’s thighs and just… piggybacking him the rest of the day. The would be. Fine.

“Should we go?” Steve finally says, which makes Bucky’s hands spring off his chest. The weight of his body disappears from the bike a second after. That’s not - what Steve wanted, but - well, it was, wasn’t it? He did bring them here to the park and it wasn’t to sit on his bike. So it’s good. They’re gonna go to the park. And picnic.

Steve takes the food knapsack out of the saddlebags as Bucky sniffs the air and does a 360 turn of the parking lot. The air is cool and crisp and smells of wet earth, the sunny morning drying the remains of last night’s rain. Steve shoulders the knapsack, Bucky finishes sniffing and they set off down the trail.

It’s a pleasant little path, bordered on one side by a wide, shallow creek. Steve wracks his brains for something to talk about. Bucky just walks quietly next to him, the mulch barely scuffling under his boots. Maybe he doesn’t want to talk? But he keeps sneaking glances at Steve like always. They’re on a date. They’re here to get to know each other. They should. Talk.

“So… how’s… work?” Steve says.

“Classified,” Bucky says, after a beat and a hard swallow.

“Oh,” Steve says. He should’ve thought of that. He doesn’t know where to pick up from there. Most of his social interactions have been about learning something, buying something, or being trapped in an elevator with someone trying too hard to treat him like a normal person and coming out on the other side; one of the admins had been so determined not to be over-formal that he’d accidentally invited Steve to his wedding, two minutes after they’d met in the mess hall line. He could ask what Bucky was planning to do with his weekend? Did - movies? Did people still movie? God, he should have taken them to a movie. Then you could talk about… the movie.

“Not - not to you,” Bucky says hurriedly, like he’s worried he offended Steve. “Just. Um. Insecure channels.” Bucky waves vaguely at the trees and the creek and the fat round birds in the trees who have it easy. As far as Steve knows they just scream at 0500 and then end up nesting with someone. Steve could scream outside Bucky’s window at 0500. Steve could… well, he can’t make a nest because he has an apartment and it’s unnested, but the part where he wakes up with the dawn and makes noise, he could probably manage.

“Right, no, I get it,” Steve says. He doesn’t see cameras, but he wouldn’t put it past their employers, given the number of times Bucky had glared at his knees in the locker rooms and even in front of the showers. “Mine… me… too.”

They walk further along the path. The silence isn’t uncomfortable, exactly. Hell, it’s probably safer, except then it feels too much like a mission, with Bucky eyeing the trees and Steve’s mind evaluating their cover instead of focusing on pitching woo. And he wants to pitch woo. If woo were just a, a shield or rock or other suitably heavy thing he could throw he’d probably be fine. Do they have classes? He should’ve checked if they have classes on 21st century dating.

The silence has gone on too long. He casts around for a suitable topic, or, failing that, a puddle to
drown himself in. “I - went to a coffee shop the other day,” he says, and immediately upgrades himself from drowning to immolation. He should have come with cue cards. Why didn’t he make cue cards? Why didn’t SHIELD just give him cue cards for everything?

“Did they have coffee?” Bucky says after a beat, like Steve isn’t talking like someone in a Learn To Speak French class.

“They did! They had coffee.” Someone stop him. Anyone stop him. Maybe there’ll be a surprise attack and he and Bucky could stop it and then talk about. That. “At the shop.”

There’s a pause where Steve stares desperately at a duck. The duck does not save him. “You like coffee,” Bucky says, glaring furiously at a tree.


Bucky nods. Steve nods too, like a puppet. He tries to think of something else to say but all that’s playing in his head is a loud refrain of Jesus Christ pull yourself together Rogers. They walk some more. Why’d he choose a park? Why of all the places on earth did he go with a park? Maybe grass saps his powers. Erskine never said as much, but it’s as solid a theory as anything. Most of his fights had been in snow, or barren concrete buildings, or in super secret HYDRA submarines. Maybe grass is his kryptonite. He would really like to be able to blame this all on grass.

But Bucky likes plants. He watered the plants. Should Steve… talk about the plants? They are right here. He doesn’t know what any of them are, but they are absolutely here, being plants.

The two of them come to a fork in the path. There’s a sign. They read the sign. It tells them which way to go to the running paths and the scenic overlook. The scenic overlook is probably the more romantic option, but going for a run sounds like the better option. Running has health benefits. Steve could… show Bucky he’s concerned about… health.

“That’s. A nice tree,” Bucky says pointing to one near the sign. Not the one he’d been glaring at, which, Steve guesses, is not a nice tree.

“Yes. Wow. It is,” Steve says, looking at it. What does Bucky like about it? The bark? The moss? Does he like moss? Steve saw little decorative moss balls in pretty jars at the scent shop. Would Bucky like a moss ball? Should he buy Bucky a moss ball? Four moss balls? How many moss balls are you supposed to keep at once? He knows with cats having two is sometimes better than one so they can play. That could also be true of, uh. Moss. It is the future. What makes a good tree? Should they climb it?

Bucky stares at the top of the tree and Steve sees a nice knothole where a person could crawl inside and hide forever, if a person were six inches tall. A squirrel scuttles up the tree and darts into it, and Steve’s never been jealous of a squirrel per se but apparently the latency is there.

“I wonder,” Bucky starts, which is nice of him. Kind of him to try and keep throwing out conversational ropes when it’s clear he’d have better luck with the closest decaying log. “I wonder. How many trees there are,” he finishes.

There’s a pause. “You mean - in the world?” Steve asks, desperate to understand.

“I. Maybe?” Bucky says, a little wild around the eyes.

“I guess - millions,” Steve says, uncertain. “Probably more than that. I mean, there’s seven billion people, or so they tell me. There’s gotta be more trees than people.”

“Do you think. Any of these trees are older than you,” Bucky asks.
“Uh. Maybe,” Steve says, thrown off. “I don’t. Recognize them?”

“Oh.” Bucky starts walking again, in the direction of the scenic overlook. They stop there to stare some more. It’s probably scenic. Steve can’t really tell; he’s too busy trying to figure out if Bucky is having a good time without looking directly at him for longer than half a second.

Steve’s stomach growls.

“Food,” Bucky ventures.

“Yes!” Steve remembers the existence of the knapsack and yanks it up. “Food!”

“We should. Eat it.”

“Great idea,” Steve says. Bucky is a genius. “Let’s find a nice place to sit down. Like grass. Unless you don’t want to sit on grass.”

“I like grass,” Bucky says.

“Me too,” Steve says. “I mean, I brought a blanket. For sitting on. So we wouldn’t be sitting on grass, exactly. Just, uh. On top of it.”

Bucky nods seriously, very kindly refraining from looking at Steve like he’s a tongue-tied numbskull who can’t go on a picnic without having a meltdown about the seating arrangements.

They find a suitable patch of grass under a tree with sunshine dappling the ground through the leaves. Steve carefully spreads out the blanket, and Bucky kneels down and rubs the fabric between his fingers while Steve unpacks the food. When Bucky brings a fold of the blanket up to stroke against his cheek Steve’s resulting surge of triumph carries him through unpacking the basket with a minimum of awkward babble. Steve didn’t do anything fancy with the presentation, but the sandwiches are still wrapped up tight and the tart shell hasn’t cracked, so if nothing else he can go home tonight and tell himself the date didn’t go that badly. Things could have been worse. He could have opened the backpack and found he’d accidentally made sandwich-tea soup in there.

When it’s all laid out Bucky surveys the food with the careful deliberation of a general surveying his troops and picks up a sandwich. Steve tries not to look like he’s staring with a clipboard ready to take marks. Bucky bites in, chews, makes a small noise and then crams half the sandwich into his mouth. Steve exhales.

“You like roast beef?” Steve asks, like a complete moron who can’t see Bucky’s mouth is full.

Bucky looks up at him, down at the sandwich, back up at him and then forcefully swallows down his mouthful. “I like - food,” he says, only a little muffled.

“Me too,” Steve says. “I’ve - started cooking recently, there’s a… class. It's been good. I've made - some friends.” Three counts as some. Two is a couple, and three is more than two, so. Steve imagines a hard-nosed pod matron standing behind Bucky’s shoulder, marking off Healthy Social Network on a checklist. There’s nobody who can vet him for Bucky except himself. It’s a terrifying responsibility, but Steve is determined to get it right. "And I've been practicing cooking at home. The neighbors seemed to like the roast beef okay.”

Bucky stares at Steve, then down at the half sandwich he’s clutching close to his chest, forehead creased like he’s doing an extremely complicated math problem. "I had a sandwich like this before. In a cafe."
"Oh?"

"This is better."

"Oh," Steve repeats, and tries not to puff up too ridiculously.

Bucky eats a second sandwich, four tangerines and half of the tart, which is only a sandwich less than what Steve eats. Steve tries to eat his own food like a human being and not hover over Bucky and only offer him utensils and napkins a normal amount. When Steve sees him eyeing the empty tart foil with open greed, though, he can’t help but nudge it over, and after another of his patent startled rabbit looks Bucky has no compunctions about snatching it up and licking off the remains of the honey whipped cream. Looks like Steve followed the recipe right.

Once that’s gone, though, Bucky puts the foil down with a vaguely embarrassed look and just sits there with his hands kind of forcibly on his knees, doing the thing where he stares at Steve out of the corner of his eye again. Steve racks his brains for something to say that isn’t some inane comment about the food. He needs to say something, because Bucky is a rapidly expanding little cloud of anxiety that Steve can smell even through the scentblock. Or maybe it’s himself he’s smelling.

The tin. Of course. Thank you, 2B and your constantly multiplying number of toddlers. His reef likes him; that’s important intel for Bucky to know, too. He’s got a community. He communes. Steve fumbles the cookie tin out and thumps it down, the card still taped to the top. “They leave food outside my door,” he blurts.

Bucky twitches slightly and looks at the tin like it might contain volatile rat poison. It occurs to Steve he hasn’t specified who. “The reef, I mean. I. I woke up and I had this.”

Bucky blinks and carefully takes the card off the top of the tin. “Most days people leave something,” Steve says lamely. “The reef has a lot of kids. And. I’m big, so. When I help out in the garden they like to… climb on me.”

Bucky darts a look at Steve, then at Steve’s shoulders, then Steve’s hands, and then his gaze retreats back to the construction paper drawing again in a hurry. He sets it down carefully. He opens his mouth, then shuts it again, then makes the field hand signal that can mean all clear or targets neutralized but also gets used a lot to mean good job. Then he puts his hand down and sits on it.

It occurs to Steve, with the subtlety of a falling piano, that Bucky might be having the same conversational difficulties he is. Maybe even more so. The fella doesn’t talk much, Steve knows that. Bucky’d made good conversation on their walk over here but now they don’t even have any fresh scenery to comment on. And Steve gets the feeling if he asks any questions Bucky will just go all spooked again and look for the nearest metaphorical escape hatch. Steve doesn’t want that. He wants Bucky to stay.

“We can save these for… later.”

Bucky rubs the construction paper between his fingers and looks at Steve, at the field, at the ground again. “You made good scones,” he mumbles.

Steve tries not to puff up again, but it’s tricky, because Bucky is petting at the tin like how Steve wants to pet at him.

“Could do with a nap,” Steve offers, hesitantly propping himself back on his elbows. He’s not sure it’ll help wind Bucky down but it’s worth a try. And if they’re both ostensibly asleep, nobody
has to talk or fail to talk or otherwise sit here avoiding each others’ eyes like two nuns spotting
each other in the same lingerie store. “Weather’s nice. We can - digest a little."

Bucky stares at him, then folds down to the blanket without using his arms like a quinjet seat
reclining. He looks stiff enough to pick up and use as a lever. Steve stacks his hands together
under his head and turns his head away a little, so that Bucky’s out of sight, in case being watched
is what’s making him nervous. It really is a nice spot for a nap. Steve doesn’t think he’d be able to
sleep for a million dollars and a lifetime’s supply of Hershey’s, but he can damn well fake it. His
belly’s full and he’s warm: that’s about all he needs these days to get some shuteye. The breeze is
soft and refreshing, and it’s carrying his scent to Bucky behind him, which is good the same way
Steve facing away is good. He concentrates on feeling calm and comfortable so his scent will give
the same all-clear signal as his body language.

There’s the faintest of sounds as Bucky inches closer across the blanket. Around fifteen minutes
later it happens again. Steve has to hold in a secret smile, relief coursing through him. Not such a
disaster after all, maybe.

When Steve comes up out of the doze some time later the sun has moved, dappling the meadow in
shadows. Bucky is pressed tight to his side, passed out. He appears to be eating Steve’s shirt in his
sleep.

The spreading wet spot might have been what woke Steve, a cool damp patch over his ribs. Steve
raises his head slightly to get a look. Bucky is curled up tight, elbows and knees cinched in close
to his body, metal hand also firmly wound in Steve’s shirt.

If he felt comfortable enough to fall asleep that’s a good sign. Steve watches for a minute, biting
his lip, then dares to ghost a hand over the curve of Bucky’s shoulder.

Bucky’s eyes flicker open. He tries to raise his head, shirt still between his teeth, and then his eyes
widen and his scent spikes and he lets go in a hurry.

It makes Steve’s hand land heavy on the back of Bucky’ neck, but thankfully he catches himself at
the last minute before he can give a reflexive squeeze. It’s already enough, anyway, for Bucky to
freeze, looking like he got caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Hey, it’s alright,” Steve says mindlessly. “That was a good nap, wasn’t it?”

Bucky doesn’t move, one shoulder still hunched, but now he’s also staring at Steve’s mouth like
gold is gonna come out of there. Peg used to look kind of like that, sometimes, only she was a lot
more carnivorous about it.

This… might be the same, maybe. He knows what to do when someone’s eyes keep drifting back
to his mouth more than he knows what to do about small talk. Steve takes a chance and leans in.

Bucky does not kiss like he knows what he’s doing. The sound he makes, however, says if Steve
tries to pull back he’ll get knifed. Bucky scrabbles at Steve’s shirt and gets a couple of tight
handfuls, which he uses to haul himself further up Steve’s chest. Steve puts his hands on Bucky’s
hips and gets another fantastic noise. It’s a little like their sparring session again only with - mouth,
so much mouth, so much better.

They pull back when it’s separate or run out of air. Bucky’s panting already, his whole face
tomato red and his eyes feverish. Steve wants to pin him down and suck on his neck, or be
pinned, he doesn’t care. He had a plan for what to do after the picnic, he knows he had a plan, but
his brain has ruthlessly jettisoned every thought that doesn’t relate to Bucky’s mouth and what to
do about it.
Fortunately, some things are instinctual. Bucky is sort of pushing uncertainly at Steve’s shoulder, his grip almost what it would be to flip him into a chokehold, so Steve gets an arm around and very gently tries a little tussle.

Bucky twists like a mongoose, slams Steve into the ground in a perfect armbar, then makes a little wheezy noise and runs away.

Steve rolls off his face, shakes the grass out of his hair, and feels his face split into a huge grin. He abandons the picnic and blanket without a second thought and throws himself into the chase.

But Bucky hasn’t gone far, skidding to a stop on the other side of a big tree. He’s still poised to run, though, weight evenly balanced, two huge trees on either side giving him cover. Steve circles him carefully, not getting any closer, until they’re almost face-to-face minus the narrow sapling between them.

“Good?” Bucky says, his eyes huge. “This is good?”

“Hell yeah,” Steve breathes, and lunges at him around the tree. He gets a glimpse of a big, half-disbelieving smile before Bucky whirls and darts off.

It’s the best run of Steve’s life. He can hear Bucky just ahead, zipping through the bushes like a gazelle. Steve doesn’t have to hold back or worry about overtaking him and Bucky doesn’t seem to be holding back either, only nominally using the trails, dodging through the flowering woods like he’s known them his whole life. He bounces up between two trees like a pinball and uses the height and momentum to launch himself over the gully of a creek, which makes Steve laugh out loud in admiration and follow him. At one point they crash into a clearing where a threesome has very obviously just finished their own chase, but Steve only has time to yell “Sorry!” before they’re off again.

And then it’s like Bucky vanishes into thin air. Steve skids to a stop, spraying dirt. He spins in place, looking up at the trees; he switches from panting to sucking air through his nose to scent.

Bucky erupts out of the bushes, catches Steve around the back of the neck with one arm and swings like he expects Steve to catch him, which - well, of course he does. Steve barely staggers as Bucky lands in his arms, curled up and still holding onto Steve’s head.

“Is this like tag?” Bucky whispers, an inch from Steve’s face.

“Kinda,” Steve admits, also whispering, although a little hoarser.

“If you catch me am I it? And I chase you?”

“If you want to,” Steve says, mouth a little dryer than before. Bucky chasing him - now there’s a thought he’s going to be having for a while.

Bucky is visibly considering it. “I like this,” he decides. “What happens if you catch me?”

Steve swallows. “We kiss some more?”

“Okay,” Bucky says, and then does a twisting thing with his knees that flips Steve halfway across the clearing. By the time Steve rolls to his feet Bucky’s gone, a roughly Bucky-shaped hole in the underbrush showing which way he ran.

Steve pelts after him. They must cross half the park, zigzagging through the woods; they zip past what’s probably the scenic overlook and startle a flock of geese into desperate honking flight. Grass lashes Steve’s legs and petals spiral down from the flowering trees, whipped up by their
passing. Steve feels like he’s sprinting through a Monet painting, all colors and greenery and light.

He catches Bucky at the river. It’s a wide, slow-moving thing, coiling from side to side, and Bucky decides to jump one of the loops. Steve’s catching up to Bucky on the right, and when Bucky slows for the jump Steve can’t help it, he sees his chance and his dumb tactical brain sends him right for the intercept, like he’s a labrador and Bucky’s a thrown frisbee.

It knocks them clear off the bank, Bucky in his arms, and Steve only has time to turn them midair so it’s him that hits the water back-first.

They submerge with a resounding splash. Steve’s arms loosen on Bucky automatically, but then he reorients himself and grabs tighter again, finding the surface and kicking up. Bucky does too, stroking down with his hands, so Steve lets him go and the two of them bob up one after another.

When Steve surfaces Bucky’s already laughing, incredulous and a little spluttery from the water. The apology Steve meant to make evaporates on his lips, because Bucky is laughing. Pond smelling, but breaking through that and the scent block is something small and fresh and clean. Steve nearly catches a floating leaf in his open mouth before he remembers to shut it. Bucky’s hair is spread out over the water like a velvet lilypad and his nose is wrinkled up from his little snorting giggles and it’s the best thing Steve’s ever seen in his life.

Bucky looks at him, wet hair gleaming in the sunlight, then gets a determined look and swims over with a couple of broad strokes. He grabs onto Steve, wrapping his arms over Steve’s shoulders and his legs around Steve’s waist. “You caught me,” he says.

“I did,” Steve says stupidly.

Bucky levels another meaningful look at Steve’s mouth. Steve starts to lean in just as the current, which had been gently drifting them down the river, whomps them into a boulder.

They dip briefly back underwater as some technical confusion takes over in regards to things like limbs and directions and what is rock and what is in fact body, and which bit belongs to who at what time. Some of Steve’s common sense wakes up and says maybe further face contact should wait until they aren’t literally dripping river water. “Let’s get out first?” Steve offers, and Bucky nods, now looking much less charmed about their surprise aquatic circumstances.

Bucky climbs onto Steve’s back again as he finds his footing and walks them out of the river, dismounting with reluctance once Steve gets into a particularly tricky patch of mud halfway up the bank. Steve would’ve been perfectly happy to carry Bucky all the way back through the woods, along the highway and right up to his bedroom, but it’s true that their clothes are extremely wet and clinging unpleasantly, which doesn’t make for ideal close personal time.

Then something wriggles in his calf area. Steve yelps and does what can best be described as a high kick, which ejects a small frog out of his pants leg and launches it into the air. Bucky jumps up and catches it in a flash, then lands and looks down at it in his cupped hands. He blinks at it, then proffers it to Steve like he might want it back or something.

It’s Steve’s turn to bust up laughing. Bucky half-smiles at him tentatively, then lurches forwards and makes a little oop noise when the frog takes its cue to leap for freedom. This time it slips through Bucky’s fingers, landing back in the water with a plop. Steve laughs harder, and Bucky’s wide-eyed surprise creases back into that lopsided half-disbelieving grin. Steve never wants to see another facial expression again. He’s knocked them in the river and thoroughly consummated his embarrassment and Bucky is still here, still looking at Steve like he’s the last pair of clean socks in the barracks.
Bucky wipes his hands ineffectually at his pants and then pushes his wet hair out of his face, still looking at Steve, and something about the sunlight and the smile lines and the romantic squelching of mud makes Steve realize that they’re knee deep in a river in public and at some point someone will feel compelled to yell at them over it, which might make Bucky’s smile go away. Steve nods to the shore and Bucky is still smiling as they dredge themselves out of the pond.

But they’re both still soaked, and the spring air is getting less refreshingly cool and more uncomfortably chilly by the minute.

Steve gathers himself to take the plunge. “Do you want to come back to my place?” he offers. “I’ve got a dryer. You can… warm up.”

Bucky looks like if Steve hadn’t offered he would’ve followed him home and broken in anyway. “Yes,” he says fervently.

“Okay,” Steve says, relieved despite pretty much knowing Bucky’s a sure thing. “Okay. Let’s go.”

Bucky sidles in close, Steve puts his arm around him, and they head off back the picnic site, squelching as they walk. When they arrive at the picnic blanket they look at each other, and Steve makes a gesture that Bucky seems to understand means let’s try and get as much water off as we can before we reapply ourselves to the dry picnic blanket.

Both of them look around, Bucky sort of absently squeezing water out of his hair, and Steve’s fingers twitch somewhat desperately toward him and Bucky catches Steve looking and freezes, and then Steve freezes and they both stand in front of the blanket before Steve gestures at Bucky’s clothes.

After a second Bucky nods, and Steve helps Bucky take off his jacket and holds it, dripping, while Bucky struggles out of his turtleneck. The fabric is high quality; when Steve half-turns back to ask if it maybe shouldn’t be wrung he catches a glimpse of bare midriff and about-faces right back again, squeezing at the jacket hard enough to make water squirt between his fingers.

Bucky seems completely unselfconscious, however, stripping off the turtleneck and wringing some water out, stepping back from the droplets and incidentally back into Steve’s field of vision. And it’s not that Steve’s looking, it’s just he sees a metallic glint and catches sight of Bucky’s left hand. Not just his hand: the metal goes all the way up to his shoulder and the seam where it meets flesh is one big tangle of scarring. Some of the scars reach as far as the neck glands at the base of his throat.

That doesn’t look like it was attached… medically. It kind of looks clawed at, actually. The big fluttery hot feeling in Steve’s stomach curdles somewhat. Natasha’s talk of Bucky being a POW rings in his head. HYDRA POW. They did human experimentation, Steve remembers. He wants to think that’s a wonderful new prosthetic arm provided for Bucky by good future doctors, but his gut is telling him it’s not.

And either way it’s not Steve’s business. He realizes he’s ogling Bucky’s naked back and turns hastily back to the jacket. It’s not polite to speculate on how or why people look like they do, especially if it’s some kind of injury. Steve wants to make it his business, but unless and until Bucky wants that too his eyes better stay front and center.

But then Bucky doesn’t put his turtleneck back on. Steve is trapped on the hot asphalt of his own brain because it’s not sneaking a look if you’re just… grabbing it and shoving it into your pocket. That’s gone from from sneaking a look, to stealing a look, to maybe heisting the whole damn bank. Of looks. Bucky’s looks. Not even specifically the arm, but the whole rest of Bucky, who
might be cold, and who Steve can’t give his coat to in a sweeping romantic gesture because he
does not have one and if he did it’d be wet. His instincts try to tell him to bodily lay himself on top
of Bucky as a solution and he’s only vaguely aware of why that’s not the best idea.

He’s half looking around for a pile of dry leaves to roll Bucky into when he remembers the
existence of the picnic blanket. He quickly drops the cookie tin and scattered picnic debris into the
knapsack and shakes out the blanket, brushing off leaves and scratchy bark while Bucky looks on.
It’s tempting to bundle them both up in it and retreat into the safe huddle of a nap, but Bucky is
standing out in the open with no protection from the wind or the eyes of strangers.

Steve carefully wraps Bucky in the picnic blanket, respectfully keeping his eyes somewhere over
Bucky’s shoulder and making sure he’s all covered. His hair is all wet and tangled and laid out
across his collarbones but Steve can’t think about that. He takes off his own undershirt and gives it
a perfunctory squeeze - Bucky makes a nearly subaural choking sound, but when Steve checks on
him he looks okay - and throws his flannel back on without bothering to button it. Bucky looks
pretty happy to stay as a blanket cocoon, so Steve picks up Bucky’s wet jacket, shaking it out
again to get the last drops. Something shiny falls out of the pocket.

Steve bends to pick it up. It’s a sparkly hairpin, the kind Steve sees on the street these days on Os
dressed in colors and patterns that have Steve averting his gaze automatically. He can’t not see this
one, though. It’s shaped like a star, and the little crystals on it are red, white and blue.

Steve’s plan is to tuck it back in the pocket and pretend nothing happened, but then Bucky turns
and sees Steve holding it. He freezes, looking at Steve with wide eyes.

It’s like a moment in a movie. It’s automatic. Steve reaches over and carefully slides the pin into
Bucky’ wet hair.

They stare at each other. The pin catches the light and sparkles. Birds are singing somewhere.
Bucky’s hand starts to go for his hair and Steve’s mouth starts stumbling toward an apology when
Bucky lunges forward and tries to eat Steve’s face again.

Steve, staggering backwards, can’t help but smile into it. This is so much better than he imagined.
Bucky keeps pressing in, going breathless with kissing, and then pulling back to pant for air and
look at Steve with giant disbelieving eyes. He looks like Steve’s a mile-long buffet table and he
keeps on changing his mind on where to start, but by god he is gonna put his mouth on there
anyway.

Somehow, eventually, they get back on the bike. Only the thought that they can do this only more
and better if only they get inside prevents Steve from rolling them into some bushes and staying
there until moonrise. When they mount up he’s torn between driving fast to get Bucky warm
quicker and driving slow so the wind won’t chill Bucky too much, and he ends up splitting the
difference and running a couple of red lights, stopping at others to rub Bucky’s thighs for a little
warmth. Bucky doesn’t seem to mind. He’s clamped onto Steve like a wet limpet, hands fisted in
Steve’s shirt underneath the jacket that Steve had, daringly, zipped over them both at the first red
light. The further they ride the lower Bucky’s hands slip until they’re clasped over Steve’s
stomach, and it’s like Steve can feel his higher brain functions boil off in real time.

When they finally pull into the open garage under Steve’s reef they’re probably about thirty
seconds away from violating a lot of indecent exposure laws. When Steve unzips his jacket and
turns around Bucky looks desperately frazzled, his drying hair gone every which way and his
cheeks still bright with color. Steve can’t help but duck in for another kiss.

Bucky doesn’t let him go, practically climbing him, which, hey, it’s not like Steve minds carrying
him up to the apartment. It’s faster this way. Efficient. Steve whacks mindlessly at the elevator call
button as Bucky sucks determinedly under Steve’s ear, making what feels like lit napalm slide down the back of his spine.

“Oh!”

Steve turns jerkily and sees Helena, the pod matron of 3A, standing at the end of the hallway, both hands over her mouth under eyes wide with surprise. Bucky doesn’t look up. Steve is pretty sure that he spotted her and ran a threat assessment that came up negative before Steve noticed she was there.

“Hi, Helena,” Steve says weakly, wondering if public indecency is going to be a bolded and underlined agenda item at the next reef community meeting.

“Ooo, don’t let me interrupt!” Helena says, wiggling her fingers in a wave but making no move whatsoever to leave the hallway. “Good to see you bringing friends over!”

Bucky also shows no indication of abandoning his pursuit of a higher goal. “Yes,” Steve manages, no idea what word is coming out of his mouth. The elevator dings and he takes the out, lurching in and staring at the back wall so he won’t have to make eye contact with anyone who reminds him strongly of Grandma Shannon while Bucky nibbles at where Steve’s scent glands would be if he were O. The skin shouldn’t be any more sensitive there than anywhere else, but Steve can’t help but think that Bucky is doing to Steve what feels good to him, and that cascade of thoughts is threatening to make his brain dribble out his ears. He’s got pretty good physical recall. He could lay Bucky out anywhere and show Bucky he’s been paying attention. Same as with the cameras.

Some of Steve’s higher functions start to come back as he scrabbles one-handed at getting the key into his front door. He doesn’t have anything, no special towels or good scents or, god, linens, his bed is nothing but camping mats and cotton sheets right now, he hasn’t even unpacked the pillows yet. But under the wet pond smell Bucky’s scent is blooming with arousal, and the way he’s hanging on for dear life makes Steve think maybe he won’t mind if the bed is a little bare at the moment.

They need to wash up first anyway. “Bath?” Steve manages into Bucky’s mouth, and Bucky breaks away just enough to nod fervently. Steve staggers them in the direction of the bathroom while Bucky scrubs his face feverishly against Steve’s neck like the Krauts are coming over the next hill and he’s on a time limit. It takes some maneuvering, but he gets Bucky propped up on the edge of the tub while he’s kneeling on the bathmat, so he can turn on the faucet without actually letting go of Bucky. Bucky definitely does not want to be put down. His ankles are locked behind Steve’s back and his metal hand is clutching Steve’s shirt so tightly the fabric is in danger of tearing. Steve thinks about Bucky literally ripping off his clothes and maybe whimper, a little, before getting his mind back on track. Bath. They’re taking a bath.

Doing things one-handed isn’t hard - Steve’s been more or less ambidextrous since he got the serum - but doing things one-handed while Bucky is hanging off his neck and absently grinding against his abs is extremely difficult. Steve manages by distracting himself with the sound of the pipes, the temperature of the water against his hand, the sound of whispers outside the front door -

Wait. He turns the water down until the whispers are intelligible.

“- kind of hair did they have?”

“Long, I told you it’s long -”

“I know it’s long I’m asking what kind -”
“I don’t know, I saw them for barely five seconds. Okay, we have shampoo, conditioner, soap -”
“- hair mask, two bath bombs, some lavender foam stuff. It’ll have to do. Where’s Lacy with that detangler?”

“Here!” There’s some light thumping, as of someone hurrying down the stairs. “I found this bath pouf too -”

“- perfect. Stick it in. Okay. Now get out of here, we can’t come to the door with the whole damn lot of us -”

“Aw!”

“- come on, shoo.”

There’s a very quiet stampede of retreating footsteps, followed by a knock at the front door.

Steve looks at the bath, which is still filling, then at Bucky, or at least as much as he can when Bucky is determinedly trying to increase the square footage of skin contact to 100 percent. But his neighbors are knocking at his door. And what the hell is a bath *bomb*?

It’s highly unlikely that this is offensive action, but he doesn’t think he can just leave it be. And now Bucky has perked up too, sniffing deeply at the air. He’s still not letting go of Steve, so Steve leaves the tub filling and picks him up again, almost smacking his back on the doorframe when Bucky chooses that moment to stick his metal hand under the back of Steve’s damp shirt. Steve somehow gets them to the front door without serious casualties, thinks for a second about making himself presentable, decides that’s a lost cause, and opens the door.

It’s Helena again. She’s got a smile going from ear to ear and she’s holding a giant wicker basket full of… stuff. Steve manages to identify a puffy bath sponge shaped like a pineapple before the basket is thrust towards him.

“Here!” Helena chirps. Steve fumbles for the basket with his free hand. Bucky’s looking at it with interest, nostrils flaring, so Steve passes it to him, which also earns him a minute without Bucky’s hands wandering to new territory that Steve is deeply interested in helping him map out as soon as his elderly neighbor isn’t standing on his doorstep.

“I just realized we never gave you your welcome basket when you moved in,” Helena continues, lying so blatantly and cheerfully that Steve can only stare back at her in mute bewilderment. They’d given him a basket with lemongrass mint shampoo and a spicy herb soap that was still sitting in the back of Steve’s bathroom closet. It was nice stuff, and he’d put it away with the vague thought that he should save it for guests, then forgotten all about it when thirty minutes later he’d been called on his SHIELD phone and Hill told him to get his ass to Jersey, they were wheels up in an hour.

“So here you go!” This new basket is three times larger and contains a *lot* more purple packaging. “So sorry for the oversight, hope you enjoy, I’ll get out of your pockets now. Have fun,” she coos, and Steve is very glad he can’t see how red his own face is.

“Thank you,” he manages before Bucky casually kicks the door shut, his face buried in the gift basket.

“That was, um, Helena,” Steve says, trying to ignore the faint giggle he hears through the doors and the distant sound of high fives. The biggest bottle in the basket is dramatically violet and says *LOVE POTION Sparkling Bubble Bath* across the front in flowery script. It’s a really big bottle.
"My neighbor. You know how, uh. You know how neighbors are." Shut it, Rogers, he probably gets five of these baskets a day.

Bucky resurfaces from the product cornucopia, looks at Steve, hangs the basket on his arm and then crowds in again with a look of laser-guided determination. Steve tries to remember what the hell they’re doing in the hallway while Bucky’s gnawing interestingly on his shirt collar. “Bath?" Steve suggests weakly, and Bucky responds by trying to get his leg up over Steve’s hip again.

Steve obligingly picks him up and takes them back to the bathroom, pushing the door shut with one foot. Bucky drops the basket on the floor when it starts to impede his ability to rub his face all over Steve’s chest. Steve’s never been on a horse, and has only debatably seen one, but the only thing he can think of with Bucky’s thighs holding on as tightly as they are is riding. “Hang on,” Steve says, and extricates himself for long enough to strip his clothes off.

When he surfaces from the depths of his still-wet shirt he sees Bucky’s staring at his chest with naked greed, his mouth open a little. Steve feels his blush start to gallop southward. Bucky looks like he’s really wishing for some whipped cream and chocolate syrup and maybe a spoon, and after a second his mouth snaps shut and he starts to frantically wrestle his own clothes off.

Despite the fact that Bucky is taking his clothes off for the express purpose of being naked with Steve, it still doesn’t feel right for Steve to just stare at him while he struggles with what looks like a complicated calf holster. Bath. Steve has to get the bath ready so Bucky can be clean and comfortable. He has the supplies to do that now, do it properly.

Steve stares fixedly at the basket assortment before his brain sputters to life and remembers it knows how to read. He starts extracting everything with the word *bath* in the label and is almost done lining it up on the tub’s sideboard when a very naked Bucky very gently tackles him from behind and scrubs his face vigorously against the short hair on the back of Steve’s neck, right at the hairline.

Steve braces with both arms against the tub and just kneels there panting for way too long. The tub is right there in front of them. They could improve the situation considerably just by moving a foot or so forward. Bucky does not want to stop chewing on Steve’s shoulders, but Erskine didn’t give Steve the superserum for nothing and somehow he gets them both in the bathtub. “Just a second, sweetness, just give me one second,” Steve says, and Bucky detaches just enough to let Steve fumble a cachet of *LOVE SUGAR* into the bath diffuser.

The tub is pod-sized, big enough for Steve to stretch out in full, and Steve settles them next to the taps, figuring it’s best to have them in arm’s reach if they get - distracted. He probably should have sniff-tested the bath stuff before dumping it in, but it’s too late now and stuff labeled “LOVE” and “SENSUAL” and “INTIMATE” typically doesn’t smell that strong anyway, so as not to overwhelm the scent of the intimacy itself. It’s probably fine. Steve hopes Bucky likes it, or that it at least doesn’t clash with their scents.

By the smell of it, though, Bucky’s only been using the SHIELD stuff himself. Between the river water and all their groping Bucky’s scenthblock is halfway gone, and now with the hot water rising - along with the delicate spice of what must be *LOVE SUGAR* - he’s starting to smell like he did in the gym, bright and sweet and inviting. He looks happy, too: when he pulls back to look at Steve his cheeks are pink and his mouth is in an open little half-disbelieving smile.

Steve can’t help but run his hands down Bucky’s sides. He’s got plenty of muscle and more than a few scars, and Steve’s gonna be careful around that pileup of scars at the join of his shoulder. He could probably use a few more meals, too: there’s none of the padding on his hips and waist that tends to show up when you go O, but maybe Bucky’s enhancements burn up fat the same way Steve’s do. Bucky’s big, tall with wonderful thick thighs, but his chest and shoulders are narrower.
than Steve’s, his wrists and calves more delicate. He sits back with his feet on either side of
Steve’s lap, Steve’s hands landing on the slight dip of his waist, just below the water.

Bucky puts his own hands on Steve, first his chest, then his shoulders, hesitant and almost patting
at first and then progressing towards what can only be called groping. His touch varies between
pressing at Steve’s muscles and trailing softer over places where the skin is close to bone, until he
sets his thumb lightly to the divot of Steve’s collarbone with the sort of look you couldn’t give
another person in public without causing some problems.

“Do you need… um. Do you have - hair?” Steve gestures to the cacophony of products around
them, and Bucky’s eyes flash back up Steve’s forehead. He reaches up and slowly drags his
fingers through Steve’s bangs. Steve figures he’s fine looking like a fluffy duckling if it keeps
making Bucky grip onto him like this.

Bucky’s other hand comes up, both of them drifting down Steve’s temples to the sides of his face.
Bucky touches Steve’s nose, then his cheeks, then grabs Steve’s hands and just - he just mashes
them straight to his own face, just like that, scrubbing his jaw back and forth right over Steve’s
scent glands. Steve thinks he might be having an out-of-body experience. And then Bucky tosses
his head back and bares his neck and drags Steve’s palms right over his throat, his eyes slitting and
his thighs flexing as he shoves himself deeper into Steve’s lap, his mouth opening, his scent
blooming with hunger. Steve is not gonna survive this. Steve is more than fine letting Bucky do
whatever he wants, but he figures he should help a little and shifts around, presses his nose to the
sweet give under Bucky’s jaw. Bucky lets out a soft little noise that Steve wants to eat. Steve’s
hand washes up Bucky’s chest, touching for the sake of touching; he focuses on the heartbeat
under his palm and the scent of the damp air enfolding them, drawing on all his senses to lock the
memory of this in his head forever.

They… probably shouldn’t have sex in the tub. It’s watery, and… soapy, and also they didn’t take
a shower before they hopped in so whatever river grit clung to them through the drive home is
now also in this water along with the copious quantities of LOVE POTION and herbal soap. And
they haven’t exactly been cleaning themselves either. Everything should be good and warm and
smooth for Bucky, and no part of this experience should cause orifices to interact with grit.

Steve, with biblical effort, pulls himself together and gently draws Bucky away from his ear.
“How about I wash your hair?”

Bucky looks at him like Steve just asked how he feels about making it be Christmas every day
forever. He grabs the nearest bottle of product - the LOVE POTION - and thrusts it out at Steve.

“Let’s - how about we start with this,” Steve says, taking the bottle and replacing it with the
shampoo. It’s probably the same thing but minus some of the edible glitter, but it’s also probably a
lot better than Steve’s simple Spring Fresh shampoo. He pops the cap and pours some into his
palm. It’s a little strong on the chocolate and raspberry notes for anything Steve would normally
use himself, but the idea of Bucky smelling like a bakery has undeniable appeal.

He rubs his hands together to distribute the shampoo and reaches out slowly, careful to keep his
hands in Bucky’s view. A lot of people react strongly to having their hair touched. If this is too
much too soon, there’s plenty of room in the tub for Bucky to move back without feeling trapped.

Bucky tilts his chin up as soon as Steve’s hands settle on his scalp. Steve’s breath catches but he
keeps moving, gently stroking both palms over Bucky’s hair from his forehead to the back of his
skull.

Bucky shivers. Steve works the shampoo in further, trying not to tug or press too hard; his hands
are very big and Bucky’s skull is very important. He gets a little bolder as Bucky’s shoulders
continue to slope down and tries massaging with his fingertips as the shampoo becomes a lather.

Bucky’s eyelids flutter. Steve feels like each of his organs is turning a warm, happy little somersault. He keeps his hands moving slowly, spreading his fingers and finger-combing down to coax some of the bigger tangles into separating. It will take a proper brushing to get all the knots out, but the shampoo is slippery enough that Steve gets most of Bucky’s hair hanging down straight after a few minutes of patient attention.

It’s very long all straightened out, a shining dark curtain past Bucky’s neck. Steve has to swallow a few times before he has the voice to say, “All done.”

Bucky opens his eyes and blinks at Steve a few times. His right hand comes up to touch his own hair. He looks around the tub for a second, and Steve doesn’t realize he’s looking for the shampoo bottle until Bucky has already swiped a hand through the foam on his head and used the other to scoop up some bathwater. He applies both to Steve’s scalp with a determined expression, copying the movement of Steve’s hands with exacting precision.

Steve smiles helplessly up at him, enjoying Bucky’s methodic attentions before groping around and getting his hands on the shampoo bottle again. “Here,” Steve says, briefly extracting Bucky’s metal hand so he can cup it with his own and pour shampoo over both their palms.

Bucky looks down at the iridescent puddle in his hands and then deposits it on top of Steve’s head, firmly massaging the product in. He’s maybe pulling a little, but that isn’t anyone’s business but theirs, and he’s not being half as rough as Peggy used to be on purpose. Bucky scrubs behind Steve’s ears and works the shampoo up to a stiff lather even though Steve doesn’t have enough hair to do anything fun with. Maybe if Bucky wants to stay around for a few more dates Steve can twirl his hair up into a shampoo crown like he used to draw for soaps ads. Bucky might let Steve make something funny on top of his head, catch sight of his reflection and laugh, his entire face crinkling up in joy. Steve’s chest tightens up with a funny little good kind of ache.

Bucky keeps going once the shampoo’s all worked in, just dragging his fingers through suds and hair and cupping his hand around the back of Steve’s head. He brings up water with his other hand to rinse Steve clean, a little clumsy but good enough for government work. The same process repeats with the bar of sugary soap, and there’s a great couple of minutes where it keeps slipping out of their hands and Steve gets to hear Bucky’s rusty giggling. At one point the bar of soap just floats amongst the bubbles and Bucky tucks his face to Steve’s shoulder and huffs while Steve tries to fish it out. They finally manage to lather up the pineapple-shaped sponge, and the look of reverent concentration on Bucky’s face as he uses it to soap up Steve’s chest and shoulders is something Steve wants to bottle up and keep.

Washing each other smooths away some of the frantic urgency. Their bodies seem to understand that neither of them is going anywhere, and that means they can take their time, do the thing properly. Steve detaches the faucet head and rinses them down as the tub drains, Bucky happily tipping his head under the warm spray. They’re both still pretty liberally covered in glitter, but it’s the subtle small-speck kind that just makes both of them look shimmery under the light.

They calm down further as they dry off. Steve working the towel gently over Bucky’s hair, then more firmly over his shoulders and sides, drying him head to toe. Steve’s towels aren’t the plushest but they’re all extremely big, because on Steve the normal sized ones like they have at SHIELD end up looking like hand towels. He’s about to usher Bucky towards the bed pit where he can at least get under the blankets when he remembers the sorry state of his bed and freezes. Bucky notices the towel rubbing has stopped and reattaches himself to start licking under Steve’s ear, which doesn’t help Steve concentrate.

“Just a minute, Bucky - can you - ah - hang a minute more for me?” Steve tosses the damp towel
into the bathroom, covers Bucky with a dry one and takes off while he’s distracted. Bucky’s naked and he’s got wet hair and the bed pit has insufficient blankets. Steve skids to the linen closet, frantically calculating ambient air temperature and how much Bucky’s core temperature will drop from having wet hair. Bucky could get cold, this is a disaster.

When he spins around, a dozen pillows crammed into his arms, Bucky is right behind him, staring at Steve with parted lips.

“Uh,” Steve says intelligently. “Do you - did you want to - “ Steve hoists the pillows higher and makes tentative motions towards the bed pit. Some Os prefer to assemble the bedding themselves, even if they’re not making a permanent nest.

Bucky takes the pillows, glances at Steve’s sad little stack of camping mats in the bed pit, and dumps every pillow in at once, letting them drop into a disorderly heap. “Done,” Bucky says, back to staring at Steve like he’s an open-backed ice truck on a ninety degree day.


Bucky is more interested in rubbing his face all over Steve’s bare shoulders than lying down in the pillows, but Steve gets him settled under three of his softest blankets and then pulls away quickly with two more. He dashes to the laundry machine and pops the blankets into the dryer. Five minutes on high and they’ll be nicely toasty, perfect for warming up the bed.

Approximately three seconds after Steve starts the machine running, Bucky, now sans towel, climbs up his back. “Grrgh,” Steve says, very reasonably.

Bucky uses all four limbs to clamp himself to Steve’s torso. He grabs Steve by the hair and uses his grip to make Steve look directly into his eyes. Steve’s whole scalp tingles. “Steve.”

“Yes?”

“I want you. To lick my melon.”

“Yes.” Bucky jumps down, takes hold of Steve’s wrist and jams Steve’s hand between his legs, where he’s soft and slick and oh, jesus, he’s wet. “My melon. I want. You should lick it.”

Steve swallows. “Sounds like a great idea.”

However. He wouldn’t mind a little clarification. If Bucky says melon and means elbows, this could get awkward really quickly.

“Yes.” Bucky jumps down, takes hold of Steve’s wrist and jams Steve’s hand between his legs, where he’s soft and slick and oh, jesus, he’s wet. “My melon. I want. You should lick it.”

Steve swallows. “Sounds like a great idea.”

Bucky looks at him narrowly, as if to make sure he’s gotten the message. Steve carefully moves
his hand just a bit, to show willing, and he watches Bucky’s eyes actually cross a little. Then Bucky grabs his forearm with both hands and grinds down and it’s Steve’s turn to have his eyes cross. The glands on his wrist and hand are right there, right against Bucky, and he’s got nowhere near the sensitivity of neck glands but there’s still some and anyway the idea of it, the image, Bucky wanting his scent all over, even there, that’s a hammer blow to the skull all by itself. If anyone… got there they’d smell Steve and know that Steve… and Steve is going to be able to smell himself and -

Steve’s battle plan, inasmuch as he had one, had been to give Bucky a nice rubdown, wash his hair, comb it out, take him to the bed and knead the knotted muscles of his back until his shoulders weren’t hunched up around his ears anymore. But it’s not like he’s complaining, he thinks dazedly, with Bucky towing him by the wrist back to the nest. If Bucky wants an orgasm to take the edge off then Steve can definitely provide. This, he figures, he can do well enough without worrying he’s coming off as some kinda outdated schmuck.

Bucky kicks a pillow aside, hops into the pit and drags Steve down with him. They land with a soft oof, and Steve tries to push up a little so he isn’t completely crushing Bucky, only Bucky doesn’t seem to support this agenda. He uses his legs to cinch Steve to him, grabs Steve’s head with both hands and plonks Steve’s face right against his bare neck. Steve tries to suppress the weird gargle of arousal that wants to come out and only partially succeeds.

Bucky seems determined to hack all Steve’s careful deliberations away with an axe. Steve gets swept up in it fast, nosing behind Bucky’s ears, under his jaw, reveling in the growing scent of him. The skin of his neck is so soft and his scent is so strong that Steve can’t help the embarrassing noise that comes out, a stupid little grunt of want. Bucky just tilts his head back further, squirming, his breathing fast and starting to shade into whines, and Steve can’t help but open his mouth and give a gentle bite right below his glands.

Bucky’s response feels a lot like a chokehold, only the noise he makes says if Steve lets up he’s gonna get stabbed. Steve runs his hands over Bucky’s sides, slow, feeling the ridges and dips of scars and knotted muscle. He hesitates a little, letting up the bite to kiss more at Bucky’s neck, still petting; it’s not that Bucky isn’t wonderful in all ways and it’s not his fault his skin is dry but Steve wants to help, to whatever degree Bucky will let him, with combing his hair and rubbing in moisturizer for Bucky’s calluses or even scar cream, maybe, if Bucky wants, if his shoulder bothers him. Steve gets caught up in that too, planning - he hadn’t been so ahead of himself as to buy… anything, which is a downside now considering Bucky’s here and would probably be receptive to some cold cream or coconut oil if only Steve had some.

He gets a flash of wishing for Peggy, just for a second. If she were here she could help kiss on Bucky and maybe keep him occupied with that while Steve works the knots out of Bucky’s shoulders. Or Bucky could sit in her lap while Steve kisses him and strokes his hair. Peggy probably would have pinned Bucky down the first time they met, turned to Steve and said: “We’re having company for dinner,” and it would have been neat. Tidy. The two of them and that pod she put together after Steve.

Well, he can’t do much about that, but he can do plenty about making sure Bucky has no complaints. And when they’re done he can… he could maybe… braid Bucky’s hair a little. In the morning. If Bucky wants. Maybe Bucky has more hair clips.

The thought has Steve nosing more at Bucky’s temples, running his fingers through Bucky’s damp hair, or as much as he can when Bucky’s on his back all snug in the pillows. Bucky turns his face into it, pressing his open mouth to Steve’s cheek, his neck, but after a few more minutes he starts pushing at Steve’s shoulders again, this time in a distinctly southerly direction.

Steve goes, but Bucky’d have to make a much stronger case than that to get him to rush any.
Bucky’s stomach is ridged with muscle and striped with scars, fuzzy in places and bare in others. Steve kisses the plane of Bucky’s sternum, reverent, and starts kissing down his belly until the hard ridge of his abs becomes the soft strip of skin below his bellybutton, between his hips, where the sparse hair starts to grow thicker. Steve rubs his face there, breathing deep, lipping at the skin. Bucky’s legs are trembling. He doesn’t seem to have a problem with the pace of things anymore. Steve kisses up one side of his belly and down the other, and then, daring, tries a very gentle scrape of teeth right below his navel.

Bucky makes an extremely positive noise, a slow ripple of muscle traveling up his whole body. Peggy had liked it a little bit rougher, and it looks like Bucky does too. This time Steve deliberately scrapes the beginnings of his stubble against the softest patch of Bucky’s skin, making his knees jerk up against Steve’s sides and his fingers dig into Steve’s shoulders. Steve wants to lay his cheek on Bucky’s hip and just smile there for a couple minutes, hugging his legs and maybe kneading his hips a little, but he also wants Bucky to make that noise again and anyway he got directed down here for a reason.

The reason, Steve sees, is that Bucky is beyond ready. He must have been O for years, given how he’s dripping wet but with his cock slower to rise, still on its way even with his hips rolling. Steve gets Bucky’s calves over his shoulders and gently spreads his thighs wider. Bucky smells so damn good, a lush, heady scent that has Steve thinking of rainforests and dark velvet. This, finally - he loves this, probably even more these days, because Steve can’t say the wrong thing or discover there’s a completely new way the twenty-first centuriers do it. His own cock is a pleasant ache somewhere off in the distance, something for later, an engine keeping warm. He runs his hands over Bucky’s thighs, kneading at the cords of muscle as he kisses more on Bucky’s stomach.

It’s been a while since he’s done this but he’d done it often enough with Peg and the other half of the time he’d been sucking her cock and, well, the principle of it is more or less the same.

Steve kisses him open-mouthed. Bucky makes a noise like a kicked puppy and tries to curl up around Steve’s head. Steve pulls back, alarmed. “You okay?”

“No! I don’t know! Don’t stop!”

Well, that’s a direct order. Steve gets back to it. Bucky makes a boiling teapot noise and tries to put his head in a leglock. Steve can’t help the smile even if it puts his grin right where Bucky probably doesn’t want to feel any teeth, and anyway a second later both of Bucky’s hands grab tight onto his hair and it reminds him what he’s down here for, exactly.

Steve kisses him again, right at the base of his cock where it’s sensitive, and Bucky might not be all the way hard yet but his hips jerk so sharply he pushes up off the bed. He’s holding onto Steve’s hair for dear life, his stuttering noises completely unmuffled somewhere up above. He can’t seem to decide how to put his legs, or maybe he isn’t paying attention to that, because Steve gets a knee to the back of the head every so often and his shoulders are gonna be black and blue.

It suddenly occurs to Steve that there’s a chance that Bucky’s never done this before. He’s definitely very - responsive. Sensitive. It’s definitely - possible, Steve thinks muzzily, still mostly focused on kissing around the base of Bucky’s cock. If Bucky had no pod, and before that was POW -

Steve thinks back to the first time Peggy put her mouth on him and lets up a little, pulling back to breathe out gently where his mouth had been. Bucky twists frantically against the pillows, grabbing at one that was supposedly dog-proof. Steve hears the tell-tale pop of stitches giving way.

“Hey, um,” Steve says, keeping close and rubbing his hand along the inside of Bucky’s thigh,
where he feels the muscle jump and shudder. “You uh. You can say when something feels good, or. Or not good.” Which is a far cry from the way Peggy had made him feel all meltingly soft, telling him how to sound and move and breathe. But Bucky whines all breathless and drags Steve back down with the kind of urgency that says he’s run out of words a while ago. It’s a pretty clear message. He already knows Bucky’s not much of a talker. Steve opens his mouth again and sucks a little, distantly registering a sensation that says he might’ve just lost a clump of hair or two, and then puts his tongue to work.

Bucky goes extremely squeaky after that. He shoves up with his hips and down with his hands and thighs and so Steve complies and goes deeper, fitting his tongue in, using hard strokes, up and down, side to side. Steve pays attention to his cock too, sucking him down, sticking his tongue out so Bucky’ll feel it on his labia at the same time. Bucky is sobbing for breath above him and Steve hardly even notices how every couple of seconds he’s getting kicked in the ribs.

He doesn’t care. He rubs his hands up Bucky’s stomach, over his hips, first for the simple joy of feeling it, and then to press into the muscle going soft under Steve’s hands. There’s something breathtaking there, in feeling something relax for the first time. He’s been on the receiving end himself, when he walked out of Howard’s machine breathing easy for the first time he could remember, but having it under his hands, his palms, his fingertips as Bucky loses all his coiled tension and drips into a puddle makes him feel ten feet tall. Steve doesn’t care much about the terminology of anything, so long as he can feel this useful.

Bucky’s breath shudders out of him and Steve keeps his tongue gentle, doesn’t get fingers involved for all Bucky’s body is soft and open under his mouth. He remembers how his own body had felt like something electrified and if this is - if this is unfamiliar territory for Bucky, Steve’s not going to throw him into the deep end for the sake of completeness. No reason to rush. Besides, Bucky’s all vowels right now, so Steve figures he’s doing alright. He grinds down hard against the bed, hauling Bucky’s hips higher, and as it pushes them further along the pit Steve feels a pillow under his knee, then between his legs. It takes some wriggling to get it where he wants it, distracted as he is, but then damn it feels good, a yielding pressure just right to move against while he keeps at Bucky with his mouth. His own slick is probably getting everywhere but that’s a problem for Future Steve and his washing machine. Bucky’s hips aren’t touching the bed at all anymore, straining upwards, close now, and Steve tries to take his weight on his palms, shifting his grip so Bucky can get a break.

At some point Bucky’s hands leave his hair, and when Steve hears the pop of more threads going he glances up - as much as he can from his angle - and sees that Bucky from the waist up is now a pillow with a pair of arms clenched around it. His metal fingers have already made four parallel rips in the outer fabric, bits of the frayed inner lining showing through, and when Steve zones back in again it’s to a soft little foof sound followed by a gentle rain of - feathers?

Bucky’s accidentally ravaged a pillow. It’s sort of romantic, like meeting your sweethearts at Rockefeller Center, and Steve smiles into Bucky’s thigh as the feather flutter down. He blows a stray bit of fluff from Bucky’s stomach and Bucky, somewhere beyond laughter, pulls Steve back to him, hips driving up again.

This time Bucky rides his mouth outright, driven now, more sure of how to move. Steve moves with him, matching the forcefulness in the roll of Bucky’s hips, ramping up faster this time. Steve sucks hard, then harder, and then Bucky makes a punched out noise and curls up around Steve, legs tight and body hovering up off the pillows. There we go. Steve, wet all down his chin, doesn’t know if he should stop or gentle him through it, but Bucky’s hands stay in his hair and so he keeps his mouth where it is until Bucky lets go and flops down, dropping into the pillows and breathing hard, his scent spilling outwards like hot molasses.
Steve turns and kisses blindly down Bucky’s thigh. Bucky fumbles a hand over and cups Steve’s jaw, fingers trembling, then even that slides down to the bed, all of him untangled and loose.

Steve rests his cheek on Bucky’s hip and lays a protective hand over his belly, closing his eyes. His own hips are still moving idly but even that feels peaceful, hazy, all of him basking in the lush floaty scent of Bucky so relaxed and sated and easy in his arms.

It’s some time before Steve raises his head. Bucky appears to have achieved oneness with the universe, or at the very least oneness with Steve’s bed. He’s puddled out amid the pillows with a dreamlike expression on his face. Everything about him is relaxed, open, stomach soft and one arm splayed out against the pillows, feathers caught in the plates. A delicate precipitation of fluff continues to drift over them. Steve is more than fine going for a weekly pillow run to replace everything if this is the kind of look it gets out of Bucky.

“Good?” Steve asks, rising up on one elbow and wiping his mouth.

“Mmm,” Bucky says. His legs have fallen open on either side of Steve’s shoulders and his flesh hand is petting vaguely at Steve’s arm.

He’s still moving his hips up, though, just a little, like he’s chasing the feeling. “Again?” Steve says, not going in right away; Bucky might just be settling down.

The question seems to make it through whatever cotton candy realm Bucky’s departed to, however. He picks his head up a little, looking down at Steve with big eyes. “Again?”

“If you want,” Steve says, rubbing his hand over Bucky’s stomach. A stray feather drifts off his hip and lands to the side. "If you feel done, then we're done.” He bends down to lick at a shiny spot on Bucky's hip and the big muscles in Bucky's thigh jump under his other hand.

"Not done,” Bucky says, a little strangled, and Steve grins before getting back to it.

- o -

Bucky has to resist the urge to pinch himself a couple times to make sure the things that are happening are Happening. From the picnic to the river to this. Things had started out so hard, but Steve didn’t care that Bucky spent the whole time fighting through the feeling of his tongue being a dead thing in his mouth. He’d taken Bucky home anyway. Bucky had panicked and run but that turned out to be the right thing to do and it had become wonderful so fast his head is still spinning.

And then Steve put his mouth - his mouth - right between Bucky’s legs. He did things with his tongue. Things like that can’t possibly be legal. Do other people do this? Have other people been doing this the whole time? That seems unrealistic. Nobody would ever leave the bed pit ever again.

Wanting to lick Steve’s bellybutton now seems extremely tame in comparison. Steve had licked Bucky’s bellybutton. He’d rubbed his whole face right there and the tingling scrape of his stubble had made Bucky feel like a plucked harp, every part of him vibrating in tune. And then the licking. Have they been having parallel licking thoughts this whole time. Would Steve be interested in Bucky trying out some licking on him.

Steve smells like he’d let Bucky get away with murder. After making him shake apart four times Steve had crawled back up and put his arm around him, and then carefully drew Bucky’s leg over his hip, and then hooked his own through, and then their bare stomachs were touching, pressed together front to front. They fit together so easily. At some point they’d sunk through the upper pillow layer and some of the lighter ones have risen to lay on top of Steve’s hip and Bucky’s calf,
creating a warm little space within the slightly bigger warm space, loose feathers filling in the gaps between pillows. Steve is fast asleep, his mouth half open, his arms tucked around Bucky in a way that presses his wrist glands against his skin.

Bucky doesn’t have a single knife on him and he couldn’t give a damn if he tried. He can feel his body move with Steve’s breathing. He’s seen videos of otters floating while holding hands and now the otter is him and the water is Steve and the other otter is also Steve and everything is warm. Muscles he didn't know he had have been liquified. Maybe that will be a problem, eventually, but right now he doesn't want to move ever again. He wants to stay nestled up against Steve in the dark pillow nest hidden by soft curtains. He will learn how to subsist on air moisture like a mushroom if it means getting to stay here in this warm green-gold gloom.

Steve snuffles and kneads a little at Bucky’s leg in his sleep. His smell has filled the whole bed pit, big and satisfied and warm like a huge fluffy tiger curling around them both. Bucky smells like him now too. He hitches his thigh higher over Steve’s hip, pushing his leg more under Steve’s hand.

He’s still tingling between the legs. Steve had ground his hips against the bed until he peaked, too, face buried between Bucky’s thighs, and the only thing that could have made it better is if Bucky had put his own mouth on Steve too. If licking is allowed Bucky is going lick to the best of his ability. He wants to make Steve shake and give up blurry, half-swallowed noises too.

Later. Steve is asleep now. Bucky should sleep too. He thought he’d found optimum sleep conditions when he’d attained four anti-exposure blankets and a suitable volume of shredded secrets for his nest, but he was wrong. This is optimum. Bucky suspects if he brings Steve back to Location Redacted it will become optimum too.

He will have to test this theory. He doesn’t have any pillows or soft curtains that look like green sunlight, but that’s okay. Bucky doesn’t remember being in a pod, but he thinks that this is how they’re supposed to work: everyone in a pod brings different things to share. Sometimes you need warm soft pillows and sometimes you need shredders. Maybe Steve has some secrets he needs eaten. Bucky can help with that.

But not now. The bed pit is for touching and sleeping and this big nebulous feeling that makes Bucky want to tell Steve things. He thinks he would let Steve read his file, if he asked. He thinks he’d let Steve do a lot of things. He wants to tell Steve things nobody knows, show him vantage points and blind spots and secret passageways. He wants to know every single thing about Steve, even the things Steve doesn’t know yet, and tuck them all away into his chest one at a time.

Maybe tomorrow he’ll start by learning how to make Steve squeak and kick.

Bucky smiles to himself, wiggles forward until his nose is resting against Steve's shoulder, and closes his eyes.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

AVON Romance NEW RELEASES

Wooed by a Werepod, by Judith, Daveed, and Ian Darling

Max was just trying to finish his ecology fieldwork so he could graduate with honors; he was thrilled when the feisty A he'd been pining after for three years was assigned as his fieldwork partner! He wasn't prepared to be surrounded by glowing eyes on the night of the full moon...

Janelle, losing interest in academia with her degree nearly complete, was hoping to reconnect with the discipline she loved during her fieldwork study. It didn’t hurt that her fieldwork partner was easy on the nose! But when she stumbles upon a hidden society of werewolves, she’ll have to make a tougher choice: between the discovery of a lifetime...or her heart.

Raphael, Angelique, and Marta were just trying to survive the loss of their pack lands to coastal erosion. Will they find salvation in a pair of unlikely academics...or will their burgeoning passion tear the pack apart?

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TV Tropes: Nick, Nora, and Nelson

The trope of the traditional detective trio has its own trappings and costumes within each iteration, but the roles each member tends to boil down thusly: The Gumshoe, The Socialite and the Listener. While the Gumshoe is actively working to solve the mystery, gather clues, or otherwise has a crime solving background, the Socialite (who needn't be an actual socialite) arranges for people to be in the same room for the Gumshoe and the Listener, or otherwise charms and distracts suspects. The Listener, or the Watson, is primarily part of the story to be a sounding board for his two cohorts, or otherwise narrate the story. Occasionally the Listener will note a key piece of evidence, but without the information of the Socialite and the Gumshoe, will not solve the mystery.

---“The Complex Art of Murder: from Sam Spade to Miss Marple and everywhere in between”, Annie Leeds and Neil Gupta

It’s the classic trio: the Nora is fabulously rich, the Nick is careless and charming, and the level-headed Nelson keeps them alive and somewhat functioning. Variations on crime-solving trios have abounded since Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Holmes, Watson, and Lestrade, but the Nick, Nora, and Nelson triad popularized by Dashiell Hammett was the first to marry all three elements into one pod, bringing domestic life and detection work into the same sphere. After the box office success of The Thin Man film adaptation, pod mysteries enjoyed a vogue in American cinema only somewhat dampened by the Hays Code, which limited expression of private domestic lives (notably, in later installments of the Thin Man series, Nick, Nora, and Nelson were all shown with conservative up-dos or close-cropped hair at all times, as opposed to the previous relaxed, loose hair styles later banned under the Hays Code).
Steve wakes up slow and drifting, like his brain got put in a boat and sent off to sea and there’s nothing any of him needs to do about it. He’s warm. His hands are wrapped around something nice to touch. He’s had a heightened awareness of his body plenty when he’s throwing all 200-odd pounds of himself into a fight, but not so often when everything’s loose and easy and he feels like all his bones are where they’re supposed to be.

He blinks his eyes open, half expecting to see a shower of feathers from where he’d ripped open the nest of pillows in his sleep. But all the debris from last night has already settled to the bottom of the pit, save for the feathers in Bucky’s hair. The rest of the pillows are whole and hearty and Steve can only glance at them in jumps and starts, because there’s Bucky, and he’s probably not actually glowing but it’s hard for Steve to be objective about it. His scent has spread everywhere overnight, trapped by the curtains.

It’s morning enough for light to filter through and meld the bed pit and its inhabitants into one cedar-rich mossy green blur. Bucky’s curled up tight against Steve, head pillowed on Steve’s shoulder and hair gone feral. He’s got a leg firmly around Steve’s hips and and seems pretty territorial about it; when Steve gets an elbow under himself to look down and see if their feet are under a blanket, Bucky rolls onto him further instead of letting himself slip away to the side. And Steve’s hands, instead of digging in and tearing apart any of the bedding, have curled around Bucky instead. Bucky’s tunelessly humming along to Steve kneading at his shoulder and hip, heavy and loose across Steve’s body and some of the fluffier pillows.

Steve presses a little more firmly, relishing the opportunity to knead on purpose, and Bucky doesn’t budge, stone cold out on Steve’s chest. Steve looks around like maybe a priest walked in while he wasn’t looking and then sniffs at Bucky’s hair. It smells like LOVE POTION, organic glitter and Steve’s bed. Steve tries to have a reasonable amount of emotions about it.

Bucky stretches against Steve, rubbing his whole body against whatever is available and Steve’s hand somehow finds its way into Bucky hair for an illicit scritch. Bucky yawns against Steve’s chest. Steve’s other hand can’t seem to let go of kneading at Bucky’s hip, and Bucky relaxes and goes even heavier under the slow rolls of pressure. It’s so good Steve feels almost guilty about it. He can maybe turn it into a more purposeful massage, at least, instead of whatever lizard brain this feels good, touch more instinct is rising to the surface.

Bucky looks up at him, blinking through tangles. Steve smiles. Bucky smiles back and then it’s just the both of them. Smiling. Steve feels like he should say something. Probably. Probably any words. Any second now one of them will stop smiling and say something.

“Good morning,” Steve says at the same time Bucky says, “You’re awake.” They both freeze waiting for the other to finish. Bucky ducks his head down again, then seems to decide it’s a winning strategy and flops fully on top of Steve.

“I like. Your bed.” Bucky says, ear to Steve’s chest, rising and falling as Steve breathes. Steve carefully threads his fingers through the towering catastrophe of Bucky’s bedhead. Bucky hums and it vibrates through Steve.

“Do you want to keep sleeping?” Steve asks. Bucky hums again; Steve feels well awake, his body knowing this is the usual time to go for a run, but Bucky is pretty lax on top of him.

Bucky picks his head up again and blinks some more at Steve. He’s got a pillow crease running down the side of his jaw. As Steve watches he cracks a massive leonine yawn, his molars showing and his nose scrunching up adorably. Steve’s free hand starts kneading at Bucky’s hips again.
Bucky looks Steve over blearily, mushes his face to Steve’s chest and then rolls back into the pillow pit, curling around one of the biggest, squishiest pillows. “You c’n g’tup.”

“I can stay here,” Steve offers. He’s not going to fall asleep again, but he can definitely lie here and produce body heat to the best of his ability.

Bucky wiggles around and encases himself more thoroughly in pillows. After a second he extends a hand and pats Steve’s hip. “S’okay,” he says dreamily, leaving his hand there. After a second his metal hand turns up and burrows in under Steve’s other hip.

Steve carefully raises himself on one elbow; Bucky already looks halfway back asleep, becomingly covered in Steve’s pillows and easily the nicest place for Steve to rest his eyes for a bit. His hands stay stuck on Steve’s hips, too, which is even nicer.

So, of course, like any nice thing, Steve feels the inane urge to ration it. If he tidies up a bit he can look again, and then make Bucky breakfast and watch him eat it.

It’s only practical. It’s extremely tempting to lie in bed holding Bucky until the end of forever, but eventually Bucky’s going to wake up, and Steve didn’t have time to get anything ready last night. When he’d thought, in vague and wistful terms, about a morning after with Bucky, it had included Steve making sourdough pancakes with batter he’d competently prepared the evening before and left in the fridge to rise. It’s too late for that now, but maybe if he has buttermilk he can modify the recipe.

Steve winces as he remembers sending them both careening into the river yesterday. It had worked out, but it means Bucky doesn’t have any clean clothes, unless his clothes have dried out well enough overnight to be passable. Or unless he’d be willing to borrow Steve’s clothes, which is such a viscerally satisfying thought that Steve knows it can’t possibly be appropriate. If Steve had been thinking, he could have stayed up to wash and dry them so they’d be ready in the morning, but his goals had been aimed in a very different direction than getting Bucky dressed. Maybe one of them had the presence of mind to at least hang Bucky’s pants up?

A lot of patient nudging eventually dislodges Bucky’s vice grip on his hips. He makes a few noises like a cat being evicted from a sunbeam, but eventually Steve gets him settled a little further to the side, curled against the pillow Steve had been lying on. The way Bucky immediately smashes his nose into the pillow and inhales threatens to derail Steve’s focus, but he scrapes together his resolve and pulls back the bed pit curtains far enough to peek out and evaluate the state of his apartment.

Their clothes are all over the place in a kind of sartorial blast radius. He can see at least three towels strewn around the room and someone’s underpants are on his kitchen chair. Had Bucky even been wearing underpants? That feels like important information to know. Are they good? Are they soft? Does Bucky put them on in the morning and admire himself in the mirror? Was Steve supposed to note them as especially sexy underpants? One time Steve had worn white underpants with a bright blue star pattern to feel especially daring and Peggy hadn’t let him take them off until they were nearly ruined. And seeing as there was a war on he’d had to wear them on unrelated missions after that, too, which had been… an experience.

Steve feels he can’t be too hard on himself for not having noticed Bucky’s underpants, though, given that yesterday he’d have been hard pressed to point out which way was up.

Bucky might want to look around, though, after breakfast, and Steve suddenly realizes he hasn’t dusted the ceiling fan since he moved in. He crawls out and walks as quietly as he can to the cleaning cupboard to at least make the place presentable for a wooing.
The problem is that he doesn’t have that many things to make a mess with, but that doesn’t shut up the insistent need to put out the nice dishes, plate the fancy cookies, and have everything in the house so clean it glows with it. Lack of fancy cookies and nice dishes does not dispel the urge. Maybe he can - make quiche? No, he’ll wake Bucky up. Cooking isn’t a quiet activity.

Instead he dusts everything he can reach without scraping a chair around and then stares around like nice dishes holding an elaborate breakfast will materialize somewhere in the apartment if he looks at enough bare surfaces. Once Bucky’s awake he can at least make pancakes. Does Bucky like pancakes? Are peanut butter pancakes a thing? Would those be too dense? Should he make coffee? He can make coffee.

He gets the coffeemaker running. He looks balefully at the dust on the ceiling fan. He putters around loading Bucky’s clothes into the washer and discovers quite a few knives tucked into pockets and sewn into hidden loops, which he carefully dries with a cloth and lays out on a towel on the kitchen counter. They’re nice knives. If they’d been ambushed in the park Bucky could have probably handled it on his own.

Steve looks at the clock on the stove. It’s been eleven minutes.

This is about when he’d usually go for a run, but right now walking away from the bed pit feels like pulling on the end of a tethered bungee cord, and he knows if he leaves the apartment he’d snap back to his doorstep before he went three blocks. From the doorway of the bedroom he can hear, if he really concentrates, the soft whistling of Bucky’s breathing. He stands there for longer than he should just letting his own shoulders rise and fall in the same rhythm.

The coffeemaker beeps at him and he lunges across the kitchen to shut it off before it can beep a second time. He skids on a damp patch on the tile where his pants had sat overnight, but catches himself on the counter fast enough to roll into a silent tumble instead of just falling on his ass with a thump. It’s not his most dignified moment, but he didn’t wake Bucky, and now he knows he needs to mop and dry his floors. Valuable intel.

A glint of light catches his eye. He has to crawl halfway under the kitchen table to get at it, but when he does - it’s Bucky’s pin. The sparkly red white and blue one that’d fallen out of his jacket. It must have been dislodged at some point and thrown over here.

Steve drags his thumb over the star and leans against the kitchen table. Bucky’s never worn anything in his hair before, other than plain black ties to put his hair up for missions. He hadn’t even worn this to their date - he’d had it tucked in his pocket. One plus one equals Bucky bought this pin for their date and then hadn’t worn it, had either never put it in or had taken it out again before Steve showed up.

And that’s… sweet. That Bucky had maybe worried about his presentation as much as Steve had, when he’d been standing in the blanket aisle and fretting that royal blue was too outré. They could pass for young sweethearts at a squint from a distance, as long as nobody checked Steve’s driver’s license and saw his birthdate. It’s been a long time since Steve’s felt young.

Steve dries the hairpin off with the edge of his shirt, smiling, and sets it on the counter right next to the row of knives. Maybe it should look incongruous, but it doesn’t. These are Bucky’s things, and they all fit him just right. Steve can imagine Bucky coming out and making his knives disappear into his clothes and then, if Steve is very, very lucky, maybe he’ll bend his head down and let Steve put the pin back in his hair like he’d done the day before.

And then Steve remembers everything that came after that and realizes Bucky’s going to have an awful case of bedhead, and he’s going to smell like the bath and everything they did in the bed pit, and Bucky is going to think Steve is an absolute heel if Steve doesn’t take just as much time to put
his hair back in order as he spent mussing it up last night. You don’t take nice people out for a
night on the town without cleaning them up after. Steve hasn’t been on many dates, and Peggy
had always given him precise instructions on how to get her hair the way it was supposed to be,
which depending on the mission sometimes meant messing it up even \textit{more}, but he knows that
much from basic etiquette. If you make a mess, you clean it up. He thinks of the way Bucky had
pressed his head back against the pillows as he came apart under Steve’s hands, loops of hair
catching and sliding while his open mouth made electrifying little noises, and his hands itch to do
\textit{something} to the point where he just kneads at the table until it makes an alarming squeaking
noise.

Steve bites his lip. Then he goes to the cabinet shelf in the living room that has the framed pictures
of Ma and his father and Grandma Shannon and Peg and all the Howlies on it. He crouches down
to get at the lowest shelf and takes out the wooden box holding his ma’s hairbrushes.

It’s a set of six, all done in carved ivory and stained walnut. Wide tooth, fine tooth, boar bristle,
wooden bristle, round brush and narrow-handled comb. Family heirlooms, like the linens now
stacked in Steve’s closet, protected in a hope chest when Ma had emigrated. They hadn’t been
able to afford a practice set for Steve and he certainly wasn’t about to bring in these, so he’d used
the school’s chipped loaner set for grooming class and shared with eight other kids. They’d taken
turns on the ratty-haired practice dummy and giggled to each other, haphazardly following the
diagrams in the same beaten-up copy of \textit{Introduction to Hygiene & the Healthful Arts of
Grooming}.

Steve had never gotten very good at it. Ma had tried to teach him some more than the bare-bones
public school basics, but she never had much time and at home they had nothing and no one to
practice on. Peggy had been some help, but practicality had her doing most of the work and giving
him a kiss on the cheek afterward. In the future they have hair care classes and instructional public
 television shows and whole video tutorial series online, which Steve had watched a fair number
of, glazing over, before he snapped out of it and realized what he was doing. Coincidentally, that
was the day he learned how to erase his browser history.

So he’s better off than he was before, in that he’s now got a photographic memory and several
hours’ worth of YouTube tutorials stored in it. His practical skills are probably still in the toilet. He
keeps his own hair short and businesslike with regular visits to the homey barbershop operating a
few blocks north, where he sheepishly enjoys the hot towel the barber puts on his face once every
four weeks and the efficient head massage that comes with the territory. So he hasn’t invested
much in hair upkeep and that means \textit{these are the only damn brushes in his house} besides the
deeply utilitarian comb living in Steve’s bathroom cabinet.

On the one hand, this is his mother’s dowry set. He doesn’t want to scare Bucky away by moving
too fast or seeming too eager. Or… potentially damaging the brushes like the preservationists at
the Smithsonian had been making dire predictions about as they handed him a 4-inch booklet
about how to take care of things he’d seen less than a year ago. If he had to call up the chief
conservator and confess that he’d snapped one of the handles, she’d either burst into tears or put a
hit out on him. It’s probably best to leave them in the box.

On the other hand, he really, really wants Bucky to stay. And since he hadn’t thought to prepare,
he doesn’t have anything else.

The brushes look smaller than he remembers. He drags a finger along the tongs and they plunk
back how he remembers, but the ivory is yellowing, and the walnut hasn’t been polished in years.
Held under glass instead of what they were meant for. Steve hasn’t been taking care of them. He
hadn’t thought of them in so long, not since he’d extracted them from the Smithsonian. It had been
easier to leave them in the chest, where he wouldn’t have to see them looking impossibly older
than he remembered, incontrovertible evidence of how much he’d missed.

And Bucky deserves better than faded polish and bittersweet remembrances. He deserves his own set. Something they can make new memories with.

Steve closes the box and sets it back in the cabinet. He pokes his head back into the bedroom and looks into the bedpit. Bucky has become an impenetrable ball of blankets in the time it took Steve to tidy up the apartment. Apparently Bucky gets cold, because he’d found those blankets under all the pillows and burritoed himself with fervor. They rustle a little as what might be Bucky’s arm rises up to rub what is possibly Bucky’s face.

“I don’t know what your plans are for the day,” Steve says, quiet just in case Bucky’s still sleeping, “but if you don’t have to leave right away, you’re welcome to stay longer.”

The rustling stops. “What if I leave never,” say the blankets.

Steve brightens up. “Let me make you breakfast.”

“Wait.” A head slowly rises from the blanket depths, like the world’s hairiest whale breaching. “Zucchini.”

Steve tries to remember what he has in his fridge. There’s no zucchini, but he has some leftover radishes from his share of the reef’s vegetable plot crop, and half a head of green cabbage, he could make a hash fry, that might be filling -

Bucky’s metal hand snakes out from the blanket ball and points unerringly at Steve’s fly. “I didn’t get to see your zucchini.”

“Ah,” Steve says, slotting zucchini right next to melon into his newly-expanded genital euphemism thesaurus. “Did you - want to?”

“Zucchini,” Bucky insists, trying to fight his way out of the blankets. He gets one foot free before his exfil strategy devolves into angry wiggling.

It’s too cute. Steve wants to pick him up, blankets and all, and knead him like a cushion. “How about coffee first?”

The blanket ball deflates. “Okay.”

“We will,” Steve says, trying for reassuring. “We will do - zucchini things, if you want to. But um. How about on a full stomach?”

The blankets consider this, then start rolling around in deburritofication. Steve ducks his head on a smile and heads to the kitchen. He takes the carafe of coffee off the warming stand, pours two cups, and gets to setting up the breakfast hash fry up. A good amount of fresh eggs whipped up with a touch of cream, salt and pepper can’t hurt, and plenty of butter in the skillet takes care of the protein. He fills a second pan with a pile of chopped-up homefries he figures he can get some peppers and onions into and starts emptying his vegetable drawer to see what else he has. He eats enough breakfast for four by himself. Given how quickly they’d demolished yesterday’s picnic, Bucky is capable of similar feats, and Steve isn’t about to send him away still hungry.

Bucky, accompanied by a small armament of blankets, shows up when the hash is nearly done and settles onto Steve’s one kitchen stool. His hair didn’t get to dry all the way before they’d… made a night of it, and now it’s, well, it’s not kind to call something attached to somebody a rat’s nest, but it is certainly leaning more toward postmodernism in its interpretation.
Bucky wraps one hand around Steve’s Other Mug and Steve feels hopelessly warm at Bucky just flopped there, his face creased and blankets drawn around him like an entourage. He’s entirely comfortable in Steve’s space and not trying to freshen up or anything. He’s just warm and looking into his mug and smelling all soft and unworried.

“Eggs?” Steve says, trying to put that whole big warm feeling into something he can act on.

Bucky blinks and looks at the bowl. “Powdered?”

“No, just um. Regular eggs,” Steve says, pointing to where the shells were in his little “For Compost” bin. “I took the shells off.”

Bucky stares at the bowl, and Steve wonders if he’d prefer powdered eggs. SHIELD serves eggs in the cafeteria sometimes, but they come out in a huge steam tray looking more like the brains of some deep ocean creature than actual food. Steve still eats them, but the same way he eats his least favorite flavor of MREs when it’s that or pulling up weeds to chew.

“If you keep them moving in the pan. The curd stays smaller,” Bucky says slowly, like it’s something he forgot about and found in his pocket just now.

Steve nods. “Low heat, right?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, thoughtful. He squints around the table, locates the sugar bowl shaped like a pineapple Steve’s upstairs neighbors had pressed on him as a housewarming gift, and starts spooning sugar into his coffee. Then he stops mid-transfer and blinks at his hands like he’s just realized he’s defusing C4 instead of preparing a drink. Steve watches him peer suspiciously at his right hand, then at his left, and then slowly resume the sugar ferrying operation. When he’s added half the sugarbowl he stirs, sniffs and takes a very cautious sip.

His eyebrows go up. He takes a much bigger sip. His coffee’s got to be more like syrup at this point, which means Steve needs to learn how to make whatever the hell a caramel macchiato is. He also needs to mind the pan on the stove, because those potatoes won’t fry themselves and if he burns the first breakfast he cooks for Bucky, Shara and Mabel and Josef will know and join together with the entire population of his reef to put some kind of curse on him.

Steve keeps cooking, Bucky watching him, still blinking sleepily and stirring his coffee from time to time; when Steve puts a plate of eggs and steaming hash down Bucky pokes at it a moment, leans in close for a vigorous sniff, and then eats in huge, starving mouthfuls. Steve brings the pans from the stove to the counter so he can refill Bucky’s plate before he’s finished chewing the last bite. Bucky keeps the stool and Steve leans on the counter’s edge, holding his plate up by his chest.

It’s a while before they both finish eating. Steve’s topped up both their mugs twice and Bucky’s sitting with his head resting on his elbow, plate empty, sucking idly on his fork. Steve can’t help but notice Bucky’s hair is starting to look a lot like the massive sprawl of wisteria that’s perched across four trellises in the reef courtyard garden, only less purple and not nearly so full of bees. The flower pin is still sitting at the end of the line of Bucky’s knives on the counter. Steve is trying not to look at it.

He won’t bring up the pin, that’s for Bucky to offer or not as he pleases, but a simple combing is just good manners. He doesn’t have the supplies to do it properly, but not offering - that might be worse. He’d had a really, really nice time yesterday. Last night. This morning. He wants to do it again. Bucky shouldn’t leave here thinking Steve isn’t serious, or that it wasn’t good enough for a repeat.
The worst that can happen is Bucky will say no, and delaying isn’t going to make him any more likely to say yes. Steve takes a deep breath. “Would you like me to do your hair?”

-o-

Bucky has been having a good morning. People say that from time to time in the mess hall, an overlapping soundtrack of “- was your morning? Did you have a - ” “good, Pat made waffles for breakfast - ” “ - a good weekend, we went down to the coast and - ” “ - great time with the pod, we’re going again next - ” all blended together into genial background noise like birds waking up and yelling at the sun. Bucky has never known how to fit into the chain those paper puppet sentences make, but now he knows he is having a very good morning.

Steve has made him breakfast and the coffee his hands knew how to calibrate tastes almost as good as it smells and Steve is not wearing many clothes. Bucky tries to slow down to enjoy the food Steve made (Steve made it for him) but the warm potatoes and fluffy eggs he’s shoveling into his mouth are so good and Steve is smiling and smelling better by the moment. Bucky has a mid-bite fever dream of sucking on Steve’s fingers and eating this sprawling plate of food that keeps refilling itself, but his mouth is not that big and he might bite Steve harder than he wants to if he’s trying to chew at the same time. The blankets he’s wearing smell just right and Steve’s kitchen is full of sunlight filtered through green leaves. He doesn’t even need to pick his knives up off the counter; it’s enough to see them there, clean and sharp and ready for him where he’d see them as soon as he got up. Steve understands that having a good morning requires food and a warm mug to hold and knowing where your knives are.

He finally slows down just to find Steve looking at him all warm and soft. His cowlick is out in full force and it brought reinforcements. There’s an overlooked bit of feather stuck to the side of his neck. The light is at his back so he’s all gold around the edges like the sun itself wants to show him off for Bucky.

And then he asks to do Bucky’s hair.

Bucky’s never had anyone offer to do his hair. Not that he knows of. But the magazines had plenty to say about grooming on “the morning after.” What, precisely, came before the morning after had always been obscured by garden metaphors, but the various braids, twists, curls, up-dos, casual waves, and other hair options had been examined with merciless clarity, often with pictures and product recommendations in the margins.

It all seemed complicated and technical and in any case secondary to the business with the melons, but - Bucky very much wants it. He wants Steve’s giant hands to run through his hair like they had in the bath, smoothing and stroking until the inside and outside of Bucky’s head are both calm and well-ordered.

But. The magazines were very clear. Grooming is for the after, and Bucky’s not done with the garden tending yet. He wants to do this properly.

Steve is starting to look nervous. Bucky has been staring for too long. “Zucchini,” he says, sitting up as tall as he can and dropping his fork to the table. Steve stands up as tall as Bucky, looking at him across the demolished breakfast platters. Bucky’s ready to drop everything else in favor of touching all of the happy, content smell radiating off Steve. He wants to make more of it. He wants Steve to be so content that he melts into the bed pillows and both of them can just stay there forever.

Bucky thinks pointing might help. He points. Steve looks down, then nods and brushes the crumbs off his hands. He picks up their plates and takes them to the sink to rinse. Bucky slips off the stool and starts shedding layers of blankets until he just has one draped over his shoulders like
a cape. Steve glances over at him, goes pink around the ears, and looks quickly back at the plate he’s scrubbing. Bucky wouldn’t mind watching Steve wash dishes, but he wants to rub his unshaved chin over Steve’s stomach more. He circles the counter and Steve shuts the water off, watching Bucky approach.

Kissing worked last time, so Bucky steps forward and only hesitates a second before leaning in against the long line of Steve’s warm front. Bucky has an ever-expanding itemized spreadsheet of Very Good Things about Steve, but the fact that whenever he presses close Steve’s arms automatically go around him and pull him in like maybe they can mush together like water droplets on a windscreen is underlined and in bold. Steve turns until he’s leaning against the sink, dragging his hands down Bucky’s sides, and Bucky smashes his whole face into Steve’s neck.

“You wanna go back to the -” Steve’s right hand briefly leaves Bucky’s hip to gesture somewhere before coming back and kneading at the tight muscles around his lower back. Bucky hums and presses his tongue where Steve smells very good and Steve melts a little, his - everything - pressing more heavily against Bucky as he gives up his weight to Bucky’s hold. Bucky knows that means something good even if the exact details are murky, but he’s his own person and can innovate and experiment and Steve will make the good noises.

Steve hefts Bucky up by his thighs and Bucky kicks reflexively. It sounds like that does something unfortunate to Steve’s under-sink cabinet, but Steve doesn’t even glance down so it must not be important. Bucky wraps his legs around Steve’s hips and Steve kisses his collarbones, all pink faced and warm smelling and soft skinned and walking along like Bucky is an easy thing to carry. An easy weight. Bucky smiles without really thinking about it and Steve smiles back, walking them back to the pillow pit.

Bucky half expects to be dropped but Steve wades in instead, falling to his knees and laying Bucky out on the blankets like a fancy coat. Bucky surges back up and tumbles them over in a way that’s - probably more judo throw than love tackle, but it’s fine so long as he doesn’t actually choke Steve out.

Steve smiles up at him from where Bucky has him pinned, then holds up his hands and drops them back against the pillows. “Your turn.”

Bucky nods and assesses the terrain. Steve flat on his back, Bucky’s legs wrapped around him. Good. Ideal. But Bucky is naked and Steve isn’t. Bucky frowns and tries to edge Steve’s pants down with his knees, then his thighs, then growls and gets on all fours and wiggles them off with his hands.

Steve, now significantly pinker and even more significantly all naked, is breathing even harder than Bucky, despite not actively participating in the victory Bucky just achieved over his pants. Bucky had seen him naked in the bath yesterday, but he’d been distracted from doing a full evaluation by his body’s urgent insistence that he climb onto Steve and stay there until something fused. That urge is still there, but now it’s background noise instead of a full brass band playing directly into his ears. Now he can take his time.

Bucky looks at all of the Steve that’s lying there and feels like a shook-up snowglobe. He can put his hands anywhere. Whatever the touching equivalent of eating so fast you get sick is, Bucky wants to do that.

When in doubt, start from the top. He carefully reaches up and rubs Steve’s head, going in with his metal hand first so he doesn’t overload too fast. Steve’s cowlick curls up toward the ceiling and Steve’s eyes half-close as Bucky tries to smooth it down. “Short,” Bucky says.

“Yeah,” Steve says. Bucky strokes down the fine hairs along the curve of Steve’s neck and Steve
shivers slightly, just enough so Bucky’s fingers pick it up. His metal hand is sensitive to movement. He can unlock a safe by feel and pick up the vibrations of footsteps two rooms over and know when Steve Rogers likes being touched.

“You ever have short hair?” Steve says, sounding distinctly more blurry.

“Probably,” Bucky says, unconcerned. He traces his fingers back up for another round. Steve’s scent is expanding to fill the curtained space and Bucky wants to drink the air down like soup.

“Probably?”

“I have brain damage,” Bucky says. Steve blinks up at him, his cowlick finally tamed, but with the rest of his hair all sticking up. Bucky thinks of the Before And After pictures in Cosmo, and puffs up at having helped create an After photo. It takes him a second to retrieve the thread of what they were talking about. “I don’t remember things sometimes.”

“Oh,” Steve says, but doesn’t tense up or pull away, which Bucky likes.

“I was in the Army. So. Probably short.”

“That makes sense,” Steve says.

Bucky drags his hand against the grain of Steve’s hair and Steve’s eyes droop closed again. Bucky feels his heart do something fluttery and light and he presses a kiss down against Steve’s cheekbone, his jaw, his lips. Steve hums and arches up a little, which is like riding - something. Something big. Bucky has probably ridden something, even if he can’t remember what it was.

“Do you like it short?” Bucky asks, and then because he can he presses his cheek to the side of Steve’s head, and feels the hairs brush against this cheek and then his neck, tickling over the glands.

“S’good,” Steve murmurs, and his fingers are curled in all soft and calm above his head and Bucky likes looking at them like that. He puts his thumbs at the divot of each wrist and Steve lets out a soft sigh and Bucky wants to somehow grab Steve and shove all of him inside and keep him there. This Steve. This soft and quiet and happy Steve that doesn’t exist at SHIELD except sometimes. When Bucky tucked snacks in his pocket. The thought makes him nestle down close over Steve again, resting his chin in the perfect space between Steve’s shoulder and neck.

“Short’s not bad,” Steve murmurs in his ear. “Long is great too.” He rubs his cheek against Bucky’s, nuzzling against the hair falling over Bucky’s shoulder. Bucky thinks of the way the curtains trap scent and rakes his hair down over his face until it enfolds both of them in a tiny dim pocket. He means to wait and see if that works to create a good Steve smell bubble, but Steve’s eyes get wide and dark and his mouth opens and Bucky’s kissing him before he can think to do anything else, like Steve’s parted lips are a mission-critical intel gap and Bucky has the answer.

His hair curtain has broken apart into tangled clumps by the time he comes up for air. Bucky tables that experiment for a time when he can stand to look at Steve without touching him, which is possible the same way an inversion of the Earth’s magnetic poles is possible. Theoretically it could happen, but it’s hard to conceptualize.

Bucky puts his hand in Steve’s, pinning it, and puts his mouth on Steve’s wrist. Steve gasps and then grunts like he’s been punched when Bucky sucks. He worries at it and Steve starts making the big, deep pleasure-smells he made last night. Bucky looks at the rest of Steve’s hand because it’s big, and it’s there, and he knows the strength of that hand but right now the fingers are relaxed and twitching. Bucky kisses Steve’s big bony knuckles and Steve’s other hand lifts up to hover
above Bucky’s shoulder.

“You kinda seem like you wanna run the show,” Steve says, sounding out of breath. His hand runs through the air above Bucky’s shoulder and Bucky arches up until Steve is petting a large warm line along his side. Bucky leans agreeably into the contact, but doesn’t let himself get distracted from investigating Steve’s neck. There’s a lot of Steve and Bucky has wanted to touch this entire landscape for a long time now.

Steve makes a very nice sound. Bucky can work with feedback. If he does something that makes a nice sound, then he should do it again. Soft kiss to the bottom of Steve’s jaw and Steve makes a good noise. Repeat and he does it again. Bite at at the strong tendon along his neck and the noise sort of rolls in gravel for a second and comes back up.

Bucky leans back to evaluate his work. Steve’s skin has shiny patches of spit and red marks and his eyes are very sleepy and dark and he smiles when Bucky looks at him, one hand still pinned down into the pillows because Bucky just likes it there. Steve does a lot of things and Bucky wants him to not have to do anything. He should get to be warm and happy and relaxed like Bucky felt last night and - yes. All of it and more.

Steve is still running his free hand down Bucky’s back, like maybe Bucky is as soft as Cosmo was telling him to be and Steve just wants to keep touching. It makes Bucky want to do things for Steve even more. He doesn’t have a clear mission plan, but the best operatives are willing to improvise based off available intel.

And Available Intel is breathing like he wants to be heard and smells as enticing as the toasty butter pastries Bucky sometimes turns around on the sidewalk to track down and purchase from someone with an interesting haircut who will put anything he wants in a crinkly bag and hand it to him so long as Bucky swipes the card SHIELD gave him. Something Bucky can eat in three bites and think about for four weeks. Except here he hopes the experience won’t end with him throwing up on anything Steve owns.

Bucky slides down, which drags an interesting stuttering breath out of Steve, and examines the situation. The situation is big and pink and, yes, does somewhat resemble a zucchini. When Bucky was A his never looked like this, but that’s not surprising given he hadn’t exactly been in any pillow pits or fraternizing with any Steves. For a moment Bucky considers finding a condom - May had been very, very clear about condoms - but those were for pregnancy risk and that sort of thing is pretty thoroughly out of the question here.

He can’t do precisely what Steve did to him last night, but, Bucky decides, the principle is sound. Licking. And mouth. Lots of mouth. He doesn’t know quite where to start, but he has the firm sense that he should mind his teeth and not pinch anything and maybe nuzzle it a bit first. Steve’d gone in slow and soft, all lips at the beginning, so Bucky will too and Steve will make Good Noises.

Bucky bends down and gives it a try. Steve’s legs jump like a slapped horse. Steve had also hugged Bucky’s legs, and moved his tongue around, and breathed on him all warm and slow. Bucky tries all those things too. Steve says “ohgod,” in a very small voice. This seems promising. Bucky opens his mouth wider.

The next twenty minutes are extremely educational. Bucky wants an entire filing cabinet just for Steve’s noises. He’s not loud at all but it’s like he’s talking with his whole body and he’s saying a lot. Bucky might’ve worried about flying blind, but it feels like last night turned down the volume on every grating or distracting thing in the world and in any case it’s like Steve’s body is laying a roadmap all by itself. Steve makes the softest questioning noise and Bucky follows it until it turns over and becomes a better one.
Steve had not used any teeth and so Bucky keeps his away, but Steve had used a lot of gentle tongue and lips and when Bucky follows that track Steve kicks a leg into the pillows and keeps his arms up where Bucky put them and says “You can…”

Bucky lifts up entirely. The blush that had started on Steve’s ears has reached his sternum and shows no sign of stopping. Bucky’s mouth is too full of saliva again. Maybe this was what the internet meant by watering daily.

He braces himself up on his hands. Steve looks down his whole front in one quick sweep and then at the curtains and back at him and his hands are still where Bucky put them and Bucky has to surge up and press a kiss to Steve’s wrist like he’s got magnets in his mouth and Steve’s the one with the metal arm.

“If you want you can…” Steve huffs and turns his face into his own bicep. Now Bucky has to put his lips to the warm color of Steve’s cheek. “Just um. If you want to suck a little more it’s less… it won’t be too much for me.”

Steve’s hips twitch a little and Bucky moves back down to put his hands on Steve’s thighs. “If you want to,” Steve repeats, sounding like finding words is now as hard for him as it usually is for Bucky.

“I want,” Bucky tells him seriously. Steve shouldn’t doubt that at all. Bucky wants Steve’s quiet gravel noises and his big warm smells and the sweat gathering at his hairline behind his ear. Bucky wants Steve to know he wants these things, and so he sets about proving it, coming back to Steve with a firmer mouth and his metal thumb braced against the curve of Steve's hipbone.

He lets back up when Steve starts to sound like he’s scaling Mount Everest freehand, growling in his chest and gripping handfuls of pillow and sheet and bed pit. Steve whines but also looks a little relieved to be able to catch his breath for a second. Bucky wipes his mouth and glances down at himself quickly. His own stomach feels all hot and molten like it had last night and he is also, he notices, making a mess. Steve’s hips have started to move again, though, so Bucky hurriedly shoves his hair out of his face and ducks back down, taking Steve back in his mouth.

“Bucky,” Steve says this time, not like he wants Bucky to pay attention but just like it’s the only word he has right now. “Bucky. Jesus. Oh, lord.”

Bucky sucks harder. Steve makes a noise like a hamster going down a water slide. Bucky stifles a giggle and, emboldened, carefully snakes his skin hand down between his stomach and the bed and tentatively presses between his own legs. Oh, yes. Good idea. He shuts his eyes and tries to copy Steve more, with his hands and his smell and his mouth, hugging Steve’s leg with his metal arm and pushing up on himself with his other hand and vaguely wishing he’d tied his hair back because this is just inefficient.

Maybe Steve can hold it back for him. “Bucky,” Steve manages again, like he heard Bucky’s thoughts, like he wants the same thing, “Bucky, please,” so Bucky reaches up and gropes around until he finds Steve’s elbow. “What do you,” Steve starts, confused and breathless, but then he gets the point when Bucky drags his arm down and slaps a hank of hair in his palm. Steve makes a brand new noise and gathers Bucky’s hair up in his fingers with massive delicacy, like the hair might bruise if he squeezes too hard. All the loops of hair that were catching on Bucky’s chin are swept away. Bucky hums his appreciation and Steve makes a brand new smell.

“Can I kiss you?” Steve gasps, sounding like he’s dangling by one hand over a cliff. Bucky kind of wants to push him off it but also Steve sounds so yearning, like he’d do anything for it, so Bucky pulls off again and swipes at his mouth and shuffles himself up.
Steve meets him with his whole body, his back arching up and his spare arm going around Bucky’s waist, his other arm still cradling Bucky’s hair in a loose clump at the back of his head. Bucky had intended to go back to the gardening after a few seconds but he gets distracted, Steve’s mouth moving so - so good on his, and Steve’s hands, and Bucky ends up plastered against Steve’s side with his leg slung over Steve’s stomach and his hips moving. One of Steve’s hands slides down Bucky’s back, then his ass, helping him grind, then Steve half-rolls them and Bucky’s straddled across him and suddenly they’re pressed *right against each other*. Steve’s hips keep moving and so do Bucky’s and Steve’s rubbing up right between his legs and Bucky’s brain feels like it’s being pushed through a noodle maker. He’s dissolving from the sternum down like a sandcastle in high tide. The vegetable patch is no longer a monoculture. Being this close feels *so good*.

Steve makes a noise like it hurts and his whole body goes tight as garrote wire. Bucky’s rhythm stutters and he stops, muzzy and confused, only then Steve shudders out a breath and reanimates. His hand goes down between them and between Bucky’s legs and, oh, just like last night, like when Bucky had guided his hand there and pressed where he knew it felt good to press. Now Steve’s hand is moving a lot more, and Bucky has better leverage, so he plants both hands on Steve’s shoulders and shoves himself down on Steve’s hand until the hot buttered feeling leaps and fireworks through his whole body.

They collapse on each other, gasping. Steve pants like one of the especially fluffy dogs Bucky sees sometimes on Dog Days Fridays and Bucky has the same urge to stuff his face into Steve’s fur except Steve doesn’t have any. Which could be solved by rolling Steve into a sufficiently fuzzy blanket, except that Bucky wants to connect with Steve like a battery and blankets would only get in the way. Steve’s body isn’t soft but *Steve* is soft right now, fluff or no fluff, and Bucky can’t stuff his face into that softness but he can breathe it in. Steve is flushed and sweat-soaked and Bucky’d be more or less fine if this turns out to be what Heaven is. The two of them floating in this moment.

He feels warm to his core, his belly tightened up to his spine and alive with energy. Steve is still panting, fingers digging into the pillows, and Bucky licks his lips wanting more of it. Wanting him to stay there panting and helpless for as long as Bucky can keep him there. All loose-limbed and easy. Bucky pushes up so their faces are aligned and Steve blinks up at him, then smiles and reaches out to take Bucky’s chin in his hand.

Steve rubs his thumb along Bucky’s jawline and just stares. Well, no. *Looks* might be a better term, because he’s not sizing Bucky up like a threat, but he seems to want to look at Bucky more than he wants to look at anything else, so that’s where his eyes are staying. Bucky looks back at him and thinks, if all of them were gone tomorrow, this would still have happened. If he never saw Steve again, he would still keep this. Steve’s imprint on his life. Bucky arches down on impulse and presses his forehead to Steve’s and Steve rumbles up into it.

They both hover in silence for awhile, Bucky relaxing down into Steve’s body and Steve cupping his hand along Bucky’s ribs and stroking downward.

“*Good?*” Bucky asks, lips pressed sideways against Steve’s chest, because post-op intel can be the most important of all. He doesn’t bother to open his eyes.

“*Good.*” Steve said, stroking the back of Bucky’s head. Bucky feels like he could probably sleep another four hours - the novelty of that hasn’t worn off either - but they are extremely sticky. Maybe they can have a bath.

How many baths are acceptable within 24 hours? Bucky hopes it’s at least 7. He wouldn’t mind switching aimlessly between soaking in warm water and drying off in the pillows with Steve licking at him or him licking at Steve or the both of them belly up in a sunbeam in a defensible
position. He has muscles unknotting that he didn’t know he had.

Maybe Bucky can crawl into Steve’s lap in the bath and put his chin on Steve’s shoulder and nap that way. Maybe Steve will wash his hair again and even comb it after. The day before yesterday those things seemed about as likely as Director Fury opening the annual SHIELD staff meeting by doing the can-can, but now all things seem possible. Steve could carry him to the bath, maybe.

Steve seems very awake. Having one’s zucchini tended seems to be quite the energizer. Bucky is just a dead weight manifest destinying the entire landscape of Steve’s chest, but Steve’s hand is already working away at Bucky’s scalp, like he can’t wait to get a jump on hair care now that zucchini business is concluded. His nails burrow down into the itchy roots of Bucky’s hair and Bucky’s body unravels like a ball of yarn thrown off a cliff.

Steve’s smell gets real smug, and Bucky’s fine with that. He feels smug too. They can be smug and snug here together until Monday slams its fist against the door. It’ll have to damn near knock it down to drag Bucky out of this vast simmering eggnog feeling.

Steve sits up after a bit, but since he uses the angle to put his other hand in Bucky’s hair too Bucky doesn’t feel the need to do anything about it. Eventually he rolls over - rolls might be too strong a verb for what’s essentially a prolonged directional loll - and Steve starts massaging his temples. Bucky wants to buy real estate here.

Steve’s fingers move along his hairline and then start fussing at the surface tangles, all meat-pawed gentle, the little tug-tug-tugs giving Bucky a good idea of how much new surface area his hair has acquired in the past twenty-four hours. O’s in magazines always have hair like a waterfall and Bucky has stared at himself in the mirror and thought: oil spill, seagulls beware.

“Would you like me to do your hair now?”

Bucky opens his eyes. Steve’s face is right above him and he looks like if he had something in his hands he’d be fumbling it, but since he doesn’t all he has to fumble with is his face. “I don’t have anything, nice, but. I’d like to. If you want.”

Steve has many nice things. But maybe he wants others. Bucky thinks of the ivory comb he’d seen in the Cosmopolitan centerfold and his neck goes hot.

“Yes,” he says, because whatever Steve’s got, he wants it. “Yes please.”

Unlike in the commercials, however, Steve’s fingers get stuck in the first thicket of tangles and he carefully pulls his hand out. Steve looks down at him. Bucky looks back up. It’s a suboptimal moment, but Bucky still feels sufficiently liquid about the whole thing and Steve seems to be in the valley of chocolate pudding with him, tracing his thumb along Bucky’s hairline.

“Do you, uh... usually do anything with it?” he asks.

Bucky shrugs, trying not to dislodge Steve’s hand. He drags a steel comb through every couple of days, but since that tends to make it retaliate with merciless poof he hasn’t made it a habit. Steve nods like he understands. Maybe Steve has the right idea with keeping his hair short. Except that
gives his cowlicks free reign, completely unacceptable. Bucky is ambushed by an image of Steve with heaps of hair piling up around his knees. There’s a children’s story like that, and Bucky doesn’t remember how it goes but that’s okay, that means he can end it how he wants it to end, with him and Steve together. Just the two of them snug in a tower somewhere with yards of hair spilling over the floor in braids they give each other. Bucky curls his hands into his chest and Steve smiles warm all over.

Steve’s hands are big and careful and very slow. He just pets over the surface of Bucky’s hair for a while, like Bucky’s head is a small animal that he’s trying to get to fall asleep. Bucky’s not sure he’s wrong. His eyelids close of their own accord, and he only realizes Steve’s hands are supporting most of the weight of his head when Steve rolls his head a little to get at his temples. His neck muscles are napping on the job. He could use them if he had to, but Steve’s hand is still very big and very warm. When he tries to lift his head Steve smooths along his hairline again and Bucky’s muscles clock out for the day and set an out of office message for the foreseeable future.

“Here, let me -” Steve mutters and then Bucky is flopped back into the pillows and Steve is shoving things around before the two of them are snuggled neatly into a corner, with Bucky tucked up along Steve’s front, head on Steve’s stomach. It makes a friendly gurgle at him and it is not a good tactical position for Steve to get at all of his hair, but Steve starts finger picking at the tangles from the front and back, and most of Bucky’s body decides here is a good place to fossilize.

Left without recourse, Bucky dozes for a bit. Steve hums to himself, gently moving Bucky’s head around, and then rubbing along the long over-tired muscles of Bucky’s neck.

“Maybe if we put some of the bath stuff in it, it might loosen up,” Steve says. Bucky snorts from a quarter awake to at least half. A solid half awake, and a solid half too happy to be lounging on Steve like he’s a beach chair to do anything but hum in agreement.

“I don’t have any detangler,” Steve says, like it’s something he has to apologize for. “But the leave-in conditioner should work.”

Bucky butts his forehead into Steve’s chest. Steve correctly interprets this as agreement and gets to work. His fingers are pulling more firmly now, tugging at the knots after spreading conditioner over them, but he keeps one hand tight in the hair above the knot so nothing pulls on Bucky’s scalp. Bucky feels the ripples of movement distantly, like he’s a seismograph picking up Steve’s earthquake but staying balanced himself, no need to move.

It’s new. He doesn’t have to check the windows or the doors or secure the perimeter. Normally he’s very good at staying awake but he doesn’t want to stay awake. This is as warm and safe as he can ever remember feeling and he’s slept so much already but he wants more, he’s greedy for it, he wants to store up the quiet of Steve’s home in his bones. And he can. Steve wants this. Bucky can smell it. When the first thread of dreaming starts, Bucky chases it.

-o-

They drift, the two of them, Steve’s hands moving soft and slow over Bucky’s hair even after the tangles are out. After a while Steve can’t kid himself that he’s not done and sheepishly gets up to puts some music on, at the setting just above silent. One of his pat phrases for the press is that he likes that you can buy any kind of music you like and then it’s there for you whenever you want it. Folks are out there hunting down vinyl because it sounds “warmer” and that’s alright too, but Steve likes keeping every song he’s ever heard into a little white rectangle he can fit in his pocket.
After 20-something years of listening to whatever was on offer, Steve has fallen arms outstretched into a world filled with music.

Bucky’s cuddled up with a few of the pillows and blinks, clearly half asleep, when Steve settles back in. He keeps one eye open and squishes a pillow corner over the other.

“People keep recommending me stuff,” Steve says, quietly. Like they’re in a fort and actually hiding from the world. Bucky rolls over and replaces his pillows with Steve. His left hand is just as warm as his right, the whole bed pit heated up from how long they’ve been lying there. “Usually with caveats. Like ‘oh you have to watch this, but not after season 9.’”

Bucky puts his hand flat on Steve’s stomach. “Anything good?”

Steve frowns and thinks about it. He’s mostly been watching movies like he’s a oil miner dowsing for references. He stares up at the ceiling and then says, “I don’t know. I usually say it was great, because if it’s the one thing they want me to watch then they must love it.”

Bucky just hums without commentary and Steve’s stomach goes soft right under Bucky hand and he can’t resist a kiss to the top of Bucky’s head. Bucky presses up against him in a long, warm line and noses Steve’s jaw.

“You have anything?” Steve asks, because usually someone would chime in about something by now.

Bucky kicks idly against Steve’s calf. “Have you tried those peanut m&m’s?”

Steve wraps his leg under Bucky’s. “Yeah?”

Bucky draws his fingers along Steve’s arm, following a vein. “They’re better than the original. More textures. You have crispy, and then chocolate, and if you let it all melt you have a peanut. Normal m&m’s melt and you have nothing to bite on.”

“Like one bite trail mix.”

“Efficient,” Bucky agrees. “In suboptimal conditions, the best thing to steal from a vending machine. Unless jerky is present.”

He looks up at Steve, and his lips turn up. So Steve’s lips turn up. Then it’s just the two of them, in a pillow pit on a lazy Saturday morning, smiling.

Steve gathers himself together from the puddle of feelings he’s flowed into and makes his proposition. “Would you…. I mean… is there anywhere you have to be this weekend?”

Bucky, still looking up at him, shakes his head. Steve bites his lip. “I could - I have to run a couple errands,” he says. “But if you’d like to stay, I could go, and come back, and we could um. Spend some more time together.”

Bucky’s nodding before Steve even finishes the sentence. Steve gets caught up smiling at him like a dope, then realizes if he wants to come back to Bucky in his apartment, he has to actually leave first. Supplies. He needs supplies, so he can do Bucky’s hair properly.

“I could - braid your hair, before I go? Just to start,” he adds hastily, lest Bucky think all Steve wants to do is a utilitarian tie-back, like Steve doesn’t know how to do proper hairdressing or doesn’t think Bucky’s worth the effort. “So it doesn’t get in your face.”

Bucky’s already sitting up. He drapes his arms over his knees and gives Steve his back, all his hair
in easy reach. Steve sinks his fingers in with a guilty thrill—Bucky has *so much hair*, and it’s not like Steve would care for him any less if he had a buzz cut, but the soft weight of it in his hands is breathtaking—and wrangles it into the best braid he can without doing a full conditioning and brush-out.

“Okay,” Steve says softly, tying the braid off with a hair tie Bucky miraculously produced from nowhere just when Steve was reaching the end. “That should hold for a while.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” Steve echoes, and chases himself out of the pillow pit before he kisses the back of Bucky’s neck and starts something he doesn’t have time to finish before the shops close. “I’ll be right back.”

-o-

Bucky stays curled up in the pillows after the door closes behind Steve. After a while his bladder’s signals get more insistent, and he crawls begrudgingly out of the bed pit.

When he’s done he stands in the bathroom and looks at the products lined up at the side of the tub. Then he looks at the clock. He feels his own hair, running a hand over the braid. It’s lumpy from knots and a little greasy now from all the conditioner Steve used. Steve had mentioned detangler like that would be better. Bucky could get detangler, and then maybe Steve would comb his hair out again the next time it gets messy.

Maybe he can get something for Steve too. Something nice. Steve’s home is full of nice things like pillows that smell like trees and warm laundry, but none of them are things Bucky’s given him, except for the acorn he spotted on the end of the bookcase. It sparked something hot and soft in Bucky’s chest to see it there. He wants more of that feeling. And Steve should have as many nice things as Bucky can find.

-o-

Manuela is elbow deep in the demonstration sink when the giant butch alpha comes in, a whole cloud of drama blowing in with him. It’s not totally weird— they’re a super fancy place so their client base is less giggling teens and more Russian tourists in furs and tracksuits buying each other gold-plated combs and $3,146 moisturizer. They do, however, get the occasional lost soul reeking of sex, amazement and nerves.

This one looks to be an especially intense case. Talli offers him the complementary glass of rosé and he takes it like she could be putting a dead rat in his hand and he wouldn’t notice. “What are you looking for today?” Talli asks, and he just looks around the store wild-eyed, doing a double take at the grooming workshop Jordan is running in the back.

Manuela has been running this shop since before she was old enough to vote. She knows the look of a career alpha suddenly faced with a dire courtship emergency. It’s the only thing worse than a career alpha who’s finally gone O and suddenly found themselves with an urgent need to no longer live like a rabid gorilla.

“I think I can take this one,” she says to Talli, coming up and wiping her hands on her apron. The A is wearing *no* deodorant and she can practically smell what his O ate for breakfast this morning. At least he smells happy. It’s a concussed kind of happy, but happy nonetheless.

“Let me guess,” Manuela says. “It’s getting serious and you don’t know what to get that’ll convey just the right amount of ‘stick around, I’ll show you my velvet underwear’?”
The guy was already pretty pink in the face but that makes him go full tomato. “I just - I don’t have any brushes,” he says. From this close she can see his pupils are the size of quarters. “Or - anything. I was in the Army,” he finishes lamely.

“Don’t worry,” Manuela says. “You’re not the first. What kind of hair does your partner have?”

The A glazes over. Manuela sighs, but internally, because if she plays this right the commission will send her to Barbados. “Long? Short? Curly?”

“Long,” the guy says. “Um. There’s kind of a wave in it?

“Do you know if the texture is coarse or fine?”

If he blushes any harder he’s gonna pop a blood vessel. “It uh. It didn’t. It didn’t feel coarse?”

“Let’s go take a look at some of our options.”

All in all he’s not a bad A to work with. He’s got a pretty good head for details and listens to her suggestions carefully, staring in a mildly stunned way at the options all in velvet boxes. Also he doesn’t seem to notice nothing has a price tag near it, and he doesn’t ask. She gets a read on him by sneaking in a number for the round comb and he just nods slowly and asks what it’s for.

“Now this is a boar bristle brush, it’s good for most hair types, and you said it was…” Manuela isn’t going to use the F-word about a poor O she’s never met, but the A had made wild, sheepish hand gestures around his head and she knows what that means. “A bit - uncontrolled? Carefree?”

He nods and she hands him the brush. A nice smooth oak without too much fuss, given the client, with a nice grip along the handle. “Now this is a vented paddle brush with a mix of boar and nylon which is perfect for thicker hair. You can use a blow dryer with it for more elaborate styles, which my colleague Jordan would be happy to demonstrate for you.”

The A just nods agreeably and adds both the brush and the blow dryer to the basket. He leans more towards the traditional and classic looks; Manuela walks him through the aisle, each piece coming in its own box, until she gets to the end and gestures to the portfolio case. “Now, do you wish to display these somewhere, or would you like to have them in a travel ready bag?”

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He takes a nice mahogany display case. Manuela discreetly signals for Talli to sweep in and take the basket when it looks too full, and it gets tucked behind the counter as the A gets bolder, picking up items on his own and looking around at the shop. "Is this paint?" he asks, picking up a package of small silver tubes arrayed in a spiral around a few soft brushes.

"It's a body painting kit," Manuela says. "It's pretty popular. All of the paint is both edible and skin-safe."

The A freezes like she's pulled a gun on him. "Oh. Oh. I didn't - realize - that was -"

There goes all the budding confidence. He takes a deep breath and puts the package gingerly back on the counter, then spins around and points in a random direction. "Are those scarves? Those look nice. I'm going to, to, look at the nice scarves. Over there."

They’re hair wraps, but Manuela has to admit the A is very endearing, in a way that has a few other shoppers watching and leaning into each other with a sort of wobbly-kneed deer fondness. Three Russians in the corner smile indulgently at him and stroke each other’s fur wraps.

The A, oblivious, finally makes it to checkout and takes Manuela’s card and doesn’t even really look at the receipt, just smiles in a vaguely anxious way and gathers up his bags in his giant arms.
He carefully navigates around the decorative cases like a barge trying to pass through Venice before loping out of the store. For a second Manuela thinks he’s wearing roller skates, then realizes the guy just actually runs that fast.

“So did he just leave someone in bed to come here, or…” Talli says quietly, watching the small dust cloud that was all that remained of the A.

“Did he just clear the road in under a minute?” Manuela says back.

Talli squints. “He’s in a rush to get back, at least.”

“Hah,” Manuela says, her attention already swaying back to the Russians, freshly dosed with mooning alpha scent and now crowded around the body paint display. “Wonder who the lucky beau is.”

Thirty minutes later an O comes stumbling in, wearing weird pants, an inside out turtleneck and a braid that looks like at some point today he had to fight off a hawk. He also looks wild-eyed around the store like he needs to take all of it home right now, though his gaze is less boxer puppy and more barracuda on speed. Manuela wonders if she can just summon desperate customers now, or maybe someone sprayed something alluring and appetizing around the doorframe. She’d always thought a good store advertised itself, but it wouldn’t the first time a certain pheromone had drawn in extra business.

This new customer zeroes in on Manuela. He stalks over. He smells very, very much like he got fucked within an inch of his life recently, and it’s all wrapped up in that thick cosseting smell of a lovestruck alpha doing their damnedest to make the motion stick.

And she’s smelled that particular stink recently. There really is no accounting for taste, she supposes. At least their crazy eyes seem remarkably similar. He’d probably followed his A’s scent straight back here, which wouldn’t be the first time she’d ended up assisting both halves of a courtship. It’s convenient that way.

“Welcome to Lavish,” Manuela says, resigned to smelling this for the rest of the day or at least until Talli does another peppermint oil demo. “Let me guess: you’ve got a special someone you want to stick around?”

“I need him,” the O says, very intently, “to touch my hair all the time.”

Well, that’s refreshingly direct. “Right this way,” Manuela says.

“And my skin,” the guy insists, trailing after her. “All of my skin.”

“You’ve come to the right place,” Manuela tells him, even though it doesn’t matter what she sells this guy, given how willing his A was to let Manuela upsell him on every possible comb, lotion, and detangling serum that might persuade an O to stick around. It’s a little sweet, in a high school pod drama kind of way. If she had a bookstore section she’d hand him a few coming of age stories to help sort himself out.

But she’s a professional. She takes pride in her work. She steers the O towards products that the A managed to miss and picks out complimentary scents, so their collective grooming cabinet will have everything they could possibly need in a harmonious array of textures and scent profiles. It’s easier now that she’s got the O in front of her and isn’t working from the A’s stuttering recollections. The O is a lot more focused and a lot less inhibited, which Manuela appreciates. It’s easy to work with a goal-oriented client.

“This will make your hair smooth and shiny, and then your A will want to touch it,” she tells him.
He nods and sweeps the entire hair care product line into his basket. Manuela steers him towards products more for daily use than a special occasion, holding up each item and telling him clearly and directly what they’re for and where he can find the directions. He listens like there’ll be a test later and quickly repeats every instruction back, which is impressive. She’s had new hires she’s had to coach more than that. If he didn’t look like he wanted to simultaneously punch out everyone in the room and hide in the scarf rack she might hire him.

“Do you have a daily skincare routine?” she asks. He slowly shakes his head. She thinks about offering face mapping, but given the way he’s carefully moved around her so she can’t even brush his shoulder, she’s guessing this is a spit and hope arrangement on her part.

“This will make your skin soft, and then your A will want to touch it.” For the face, a jelly cleanser, a witch hazel toner, and a gel moisturizer with aloe because she doesn’t know much about him, but she’s confident his skin is as stressed as the rest of him is. For the body, a shea butter body mask, exfoliating scrub, and sponge shaped like a jelly bean all go into the basket. Talli takes the basket to the counter and replaces it with the fresh one with minimal growling. Manuela gets his top-to-toe regimen all sorted out and mapped on the Skin Wellness Guide she put together for pods buying all at once and needing help sorting who owned what. It looks a little lonely with only one person’s boxes filled in, but there are enough products there to overflow into the neighboring boxes anyway, so he’ll at least have a whole pod’s worth of supplies.

“I also want. To touch him,” the O says when he’s recovered from Talli. Manuela suspects the A in question would be happy to be touched however this O wants to try, but far be it for her to stop someone on a roll. She adds a whole range of massage oils in understated woody bergamot scents that won’t overpower anything and should match well with the A’s base scent, which is still hanging around the store like someone detonated a pheromone bomb. Talli has the peppermint oil demo set up with a studied Professional face on, just waiting for the O to remove his ground zero self from the premises.

The O is going cross-eyed looking at the massage oil, so Manuela guides him towards a starter kit and finds a silk body wrap that should fit the A’s unreasonably massive shoulders. The O looks at her like she just carried his puppy out of a burning building. After a second of deliberation, she also tosses in the body painting kit the A had nearly swallowed his tongue over before. It might give him a heart attack when his O pulls it out, but at least he’ll die happy.

“Final word of advice,” she says while she’s ringing him up. Forget Barbados, this commission will be enough to send her to Mars. “There’s no point in playing hard to get. If you want someone, be upfront about it. Make your intentions clear. If you’re as honest with them as you were with me you’ll be fine.”

The O nods very seriously. “I should harvest the zucchini.”

Manuela pauses, remembers the A glowing with dumbfounded joy every time he thought of his O, and says, “Yeah, that should do it.”

-o-

Bucky, having acquired his necessary supplies - his many, many, very, very necessary supplies - considers taking them back to Location Redacted. That lasts about four seconds. He did not get these for himself. He got them to share with Steve. Location Redacted has neither bathtub nor Steve. At this moment in time these are both highly undesirable qualities.

Bucky makes his way back to Steve’s reef. He’s sure Steve won’t mind if he lets himself back in. He hadn’t smelled for one second like he’d minded anything Bucky did for all of yesterday and this morning and he’d asked Bucky if he could stay longer. Steve had smelled… good, as Bucky
had moved around in his space. He had made Bucky some food. SHIELD had also made food when they’d wanted him to stay. Steve’s food is better and if Bucky can figure out the bath part, maybe Steve will make him lunch and they could go to a park and just start the entire day over again from the picnic lunch and then wrestle and then Bucky will smell good and can slope lotion all over to make himself softer and Steve might make more noises Bucky wants to claw his fingers into and eat.

He’s walking up to the building by the time he realizes he doesn’t have any keys or access cards or passcodes to Steve’s reef. He knows he could get in anyway if he really has to, but he doesn’t want to be rude. The main door is unlocked, though, so he just walks in with his bags of things. A pod is watching their kids play on the soft playground in the courtyard and they look up at him, sniff and then wave.

Bucky looks behind him and then back at them. They keep waving. Bucky waggles his elbow back at them and quickly retreats to the stairwell. When he peeks around the corner they’re all leaning in together, whispering and giggling.

They all look a little more excited than the usual greeting of a reef acquaintance warrants, but the only standout smell is curiosity. They’re all sitting around on folding chairs with drinks. There’s a baby carrier made to look like a green bean in the middle and one of them occasionally pokes it with their foot to keep it rocking. On the playground a toddler is industriously bopping their sibling with a stuffed frog. The sibling is peaceably being bopped and chewing on a squishy-looking ring. Bucky’s jaw clenches with a want to chew on something.

He’s never gone into a residential reef through the front door. For a long time even after he went O people would look down and hurry their kids along if he happened to pass by on the street. Bucky wants to get into Steve’s apartment and close the whole world out with the green curtains but he also wants to - stay. For a second. Steve’s neighbors seem very friendly. Some of them had been very helpful last night.

That brings him back to his op. He looks down at the bags in his hands and then takes the stairs.

Steve’s not back when Bucky gets there. That suits Bucky fine. He’s surprised a lot of people over the course of his life with widely varied results - although screaming had been a pretty constant theme - but this time it’s going to be really good.

Steve’s bathtub is one of the biggest Bucky’s seen, barring the one in that General’s mansion that he had to burn down, but he doesn’t like to think about that. He doesn’t have time to think about it, anyway, not when he has two dozen packages lined up in front of him on the bathroom floor and very serious decisions to make about all of them. The bathtub has a couple of built-in oil diffusers, and an attachment on the spout so if you add bubble liquid it’ll make it foam right from the tap, and there are some candle nooks inset into the tiled wall but those don’t have any candles in them. Bucky should have bought candles. Maybe Steve doesn’t like them? Bucky will ask.

In the meantime, he has to decide between Tuscan Lavender, Honey Almond, Lemon Verbena and Basil Bliss. There are also bath salts and bath oils and bath butter, as though he’d meant to make some kind of bath cake. Maybe he’s not supposed to decide on just one? Maybe these are all just ingredients. Maybe cake is exactly what’s supposed to happen. Bucky hunts around for some kind of manual, but the packages just say things like Add to bath for an experience of unparalleled sensual pleasure and Transport yourself to a decadent realm of pure relaxation by applying to skin and For external use only, which just tells him that if it does make a cake, he shouldn’t eat it.

He’ll try it all a little at a time, just to make sure. He tips a teaspoon of the Tuscan Lavender salts into the bottom of the tub and starts the spout running. The steam rising off the water is pleasantly floral, but not overpowering. Emboldened, he adds a capful of the Lemon Verbena oil to one of
the diffusers.

By the time the enormous tub is half full, Bucky has added some of everything and the whole room is fogged up, water misting on the tiles and blanking out the mirror. It smells - good? It smells good.

He hopes Steve likes it.

-o-

The first thing Steve notices when he gets back is that his whole corridor smells a lot like one of the stores he just visited, if someone had gone through and methodically pushed everything off the shelves. It’s not by any means a bad smell, it’s just complicated and - strong. When he opens his door, the scent goes from strong to scouring, to the point where he staggers back and nearly drops a bag on his foot.

He’d wound up going to the linens store and then a food market on his way back from the body shop, vague but urgent thoughts of even softer blankets and some kind of casserole for dinner driving him onwards, with the end result that the shopping bags he’s carrying weigh more than he does. Steve sets everything down and puts away the cold groceries in the icebox before going to investigate. There’s a gentle splashing coming from the bathroom, so he’s already got a decent picture of what’s going on before he ducks through the half-open door.

Bucky is sitting in the middle of the tub like a pearl in an oyster or - probably more accurately - like a lobster in a soup pot. He’s shiny and pink and looks delicious, but Steve is pretty sure he’s accidentally boiled his sinuses into a coma. The bathroom windows are already open, at least, letting in the sunshine and also blessed air circulation. Bucky is sitting directly under them, which explains why he hasn’t passed out from scent stress yet.

Bucky turns in the tub, spots him and lights up. “Steve,” he says, somehow making it sound like a hug wrapping around Steve’s neck.

“Hi,” Steve says, stepping further into the bathroom but leaving the door open.

“I went to the store too,” Bucky says. “We have more bath things now.”

“That’s great,” Steve says weakly. “You like this smell?” If Bucky does, that’s - fine. Steve’s a supersoldier. His sinuses aren’t actually melting, no matter what his nerve endings are telling him, and if they are, they’ll grow back. Probably. Bucky looks hopeful and a little bit anxious and Steve would staple his own nose shut before doing anything that might make Bucky think he doesn’t appreciate this gesture.

Bucky looks around and gives a sniff. “I don’t know which one this is,” he admits. He points to a row of bottles and jars on the tub ledge that had not been there when Steve left. “I added them one at a time, but.” He waves his hand, encompassing the massive conglomerate scent cloud smothering the bathroom.

“Did you add them… all?” Steve asks, already smelling the answer.

“The store person said they go together,” Bucky says.

That’s probably true. Even now, the smell isn’t bad, exactly; nothing’s clashing or grating. It’s just that what Steve suspects is supposed to be a gentle hint of frolicking through a sweet spring meadow is instead the sensory equivalent of having his eyes ground into an herb garden while someone pours steaming lemon honey up his nose.
It’s a lot more flowery than the shock scent Steve is used to facing across a battlefield, but the same training applies. He draws steady, even breaths until his body has processed the first assault to the system, then focuses on his other senses to ground himself. The air feels warm and humid on his skin. The adjustable overhead light is casting soft yellow reflections across ripples of bathwater. There’s a glistening oily sheen over the water and over Bucky’s skin. Bucky’s head is resting against the lip of the bathtub, his neck loose. Steve gets distracted from his operational evaluation by the sleepy way Bucky’s eyelids are drooping. It’s the furthest thing imaginable from Bucky’s combat focus, and he finds himself relaxing into the nasal napalm feeling faster than he would’ve thought possible.

He kneels down next to the tub and crosses his arms along the lip. “Want to give me a second try with your hair?”

Bucky nudges a cheerfully wrapped bar of something with his toe. Steve picks it up - the bar has a cute little drawing of a bear undoing a knot and Steve smiles at it before reading the instructions. *UnBEARable knots have met their match with Behold-Free-Locks Massage Bar! Never greasy, deeply hydrating, Behold-Free-Locks Massage Bar is Always Just Right.*

Bucky’s hair smells clean, but now it looks like a loosed fishing net just tangled up in itself. Steve gets the bar warmed up in his palm and has a determined vision of Bucky going into work with a smooth, neat braid. Nothing flashy, Steve could wait to braid things in it like ribbons, and flowers, and some of those shiny nets they had nowadays, and - anyway, that could all wait until they had been on a few more dates. But he wants everyone to know Bucky is being Taken Care Of. That he has people who care about him, or at least one person caring a whole lot. Bucky deserves no less.

Steve’s hands knead at Bucky’s scalp and after some steady work with the conditioner and the detangler bar, Bucky’s hair finally falls into a dark, shining curtain. Steve keeps kneading, finger combing and rinsing it out with handfuls of hot water.

Bucky points at a different bottle with his foot and Steve picks it up. This one is some type of… skin conditioner? Well, if there’s conditioner for the hair, there might as well be some for the rest of the body. Steve rolls his sleeves up past his elbows and gently scoots Bucky along the bottom of the tub until Bucky rolls forward, bracing his elbows on his folded knees. His head droops down and the silver scars of his back and shoulder stretch out long, fingertips of both arms drifting in the water. Steve draws his wet hair forward and kisses the back of his neck, because it’s there and Bucky is letting it be vulnerable.

“You could get in,” Bucky mumbles. “I could. Do your hair?”

“It’s my turn,” Steve responds, dragging his thumbs along the loosening muscles of Bucky’s shoulders. Bucky had his turn to play with Steve in the morning, and Steve had never finished his turn with Bucky’s hair. He’d had to retreat and resupply. Now that he’s got products on hand and has fully adjusted to the full frontal scent assault, there’s no reason he can’t take his time. Bucky turns sideways and slowly collapses over the lip of the tub, his head sinking down to rest against Steve’s stomach, until his knuckles are brushing along the bathmat. Steve smooths the body conditioner down his back and then keeps working it in, since he can’t reach anything else without jostling Bucky.

“You,” Bucky says, wrapping his arms around Steve’s hips.

“Do we need to rinse this off?” Steve looks at the bottle, but then Bucky is wrapping his arms around Steve’s neck and his hair is wet and silky looking and Steve’s eyes keep swinging to the water pooling in the hollow of his collarbone instead of focusing on the label.
“I want you to do my hair,” Bucky says. “I have a plan.”

Steve looks at Bucky all pinked up from the hot water, skin shining and warm as Steve strokes down his sides, and feels his ears go hot. “What kind of plan?”

“A written one,” Bucky says, unplugging the tub with his foot. Steve oomphs him up with a slosh of water and he doesn’t know why he bothered staying dressed because Bucky just wraps him up in the rest of his limbs, latching on like a friendly octopus. Steve keeps stroking down his back, because it feels good and because he’s seen Bucky hold himself up in a tree by thigh strength alone, so Steve’s lifting capacity is clearly irrelevant.

“I have a paper,” Bucky says, unsticking one arm to point at the bathroom counter, where Steve can see a pamphlet next to several more bottles and jars. “From a professional.”

“Let’s take a look.” Steve gets Bucky dried off first, setting him on the counter in a nest of towels and grabbing a fresh washcloth to carefully get all the water out from the grooves in Bucky’s metal hand. Bucky takes it with good grace, letting Steve dry the crooks of his elbows and behind his ears and the crease of his stomach, and when Steve finally steps back Bucky picks up the pamphlet.

It unfolds into quite a large sheet of durable cardstock with a lot of labeled circles and squares and arrows on it. Someone’s marked it up further with purple marker, circling things and adding little notes. At the top it says *Hair, Skin & Self: Holistic Wellness Guide* in a nice font with little hedonistic serif flourishes. It looks like a battle plan.

“We can do this,” Steve says reading it over and looking at the product lists. Some of them he recognizes from his own shopping binge, and the rest are lined up by the tub. He fetches the strawberry-colored bags from Lavish that he’d left piled up by the door and unpacks them, Bucky biting the inside of his cheek in concentration as he nudges all the products into neat little groups. The storage nooks built into the bathtub wall are finally full.

Steve picks each one up to read the description and locate it on the wellness chart. Then he gets out the new brush set and places it down next to the platoon of supplies. They both stare at the platoon of supplies. The wellness chart says which products to use where, but it doesn’t say anything about how to start.

“Videos!” Steve blurts, and Bucky startles and then echoes, “Videos.”

“There’re a lot of videos about how to do things on the Internet. Like how to braid hair and, um. Do skin things?” Steve feels his face going warm and Bucky looks flushed and Steve realizes he’s asking his beau if he wants to watch some… some racy videos with him.

Bucky’s hair is dripping a little onto the floor. Now that the bathtub has drained and Steve’s not getting socked in the face by every smell under the sun, Bucky mostly smells like he rolled himself through a bakery and then down a weedy hillside. Steve could probably fall on him and they could make a wonderful, terrible case of bedhead again. But then people will think *Steve* thinks Bucky isn’t worth the time to treat respectfully and that’s unacceptable.

“Videos.” Bucky repeats, watching Steve closely and sounding not at all averse to the idea. “You have videos?”

“Yes,” Steve says, impressively steady, and goes and looks for his phone. He finds yesterday’s mud-stiff pants instead, and then fishes out his phone out and stares at it. There’s a dried leaf still stuck to the screen.
“Can phones get wet?”

Bucky makes a noise from the bathroom which Steve interprets as *oh boy they sure can’t*. “Did... your phone.”

Steve returns to the bathroom, holding out the phone like the rectangle of shame it’s become. Bucky looks it over and shakes his head. “Do you have a phone?” Steve asks sheepishly.

Bucky shakes his head again. “Security reasons,” he says.

“Oops,” Steve says, inadequately.

“Do we need videos,” Bucky says, watching Steve’s face again.

“Well,” Steve says. “I haven’t used a lot of these products before.” Damn near none of them. “I don’t want to mess this up.”

“You won’t,” Bucky says, confidence absolute. He nudges Steve’s knee with his foot, then seems to decide it’s not enough and hooks an ankle around Steve’s calf. “You won’t mess this up.”

And, well, there’s no way to argue with that kind of trust; all he can do is try to live up to it. Steve reads the backs of the bottles carefully and assembles an order of operations. He pours out a thick, lavender-tinted ribbon of leave-in detangler and starts working it into Bucky’s wet hair from behind while Bucky leans over the sink. The conditioning mousse comes out of the can with a quiet hiss and leaves a marshmallowy pile of foam in his palm. By the time he’s worked it through Bucky’s hair from crown to tip, every strand of hair is smoothed straight and covered with a faint rainbow sheen. Steve tries to keep his eyes on his work, but he keeps catching deeply distracting glances of Bucky’s reflection in the mirror. Bucky’s cheeks are flushed and his breathing is slow and deep. The glitter left in the bathtub from their first body wash soak has migrated all over his skin and hair, catching the light whenever he leans into the press of Steve’s fingers.

Once all his hair is soft and biddable, Steve starts braiding, wrapping from Bucky’s left temple down to behind his right ear and gathering in new strands as he goes. It’s nothing fancy, which is good, because he barely gets the end tied off before Bucky pounces on him, bearing him down onto the bathmat and biting gently at his jaw.

“You like it?” Steve asks, a little breathless. It’s hard to string words together with Bucky smiling down at him, Steve’s braid coiling around the side of his neck.

“Yes. It doesn’t pull. Good job.” Bucky nibbles at him again. Steve tilts his chin up, thoughts pinballing between how the bathroom floor isn’t the most comfortable place to start something and how far away the bedroom suddenly seems, when Bucky’s stomach gives a demanding gurgle.

“Lunch?” Steve suggests.

Bucky looks at Steve’s exposed throat consideringly, but he nods and sits back. “Lunch.”

They eat again. They nap. Steve wakes up every so often, but each time the sound of Bucky’s faint rabbity snores sink him back down again. Somewhere after sunset Bucky wakes up, crawls onto Steve and makes several very persuasive arguments with his mouth, inviting Steve to counterdebate with *his* mouth. This time Bucky ends up on top, braced on his forearms and curling over Steve’s head. It’s the best weekend Steve’s had since the opening night of Wizard of Oz.

And when Steve next wakes, really wakes, it’s 0400, on a Monday, when he has to go to work.
Bucky’s awake this time too. Steve feels him rustle, roll over and rub his nose in a pillow, his leg nudged up against Steve’s. It’s only been - really, less than thirty-six hours - but Steve can already tell that Bucky’s woke up fifteen minutes or so ago and has just been idly watching time scroll by.

“Would you like a ride to work?” Steve whispers. “If you want. If you come in today.” Presumably Bucky is on the same non-emergency schedule, but who knows. Maybe Bucky’s on leave.

Bucky yawns spectacularly. “Ya-huh,” comes out of there as he nestsles deeper into the pillows.

“Okay.” Steve smooches Bucky’s shoulder before eeling out of the bed pit to go start breakfast. At some point Bucky slithers out of the pit, shuffles over and attaches himself to Steve’s back. He keeps his chin on Steve’s shoulder and his arms around Steve’s waist and shuffles along whenever Steve moves, and Steve thinks, well, the fritatta needs to cool, and they’ve several times already washed each other, so what’s one more before they go.

They shower again after. Bucky doesn’t seem to have any inclination to stop using Steve as a mobile gantry, so it’s probably okay for Steve to enjoy it. Bucky also animates enough to use some of the bath gel he acquired yesterday, and then he works it through Steve’s hair, his blunt fingers skritching carefully over Steve’s scalp, and it’s definitely okay to enjoy that.

When they get out Bucky raises his arms for Steve to wrap a towel around him, which makes Steve’s chest feel big and broad and full of very important things. While Steve dries him down Bucky looks owlishly around the bathroom, and while most of the things they bought are still in their packaging, the comb they used isn’t. Bucky picks it up and hands it to Steve.

The braid Steve manages this time is a slight improvement on his previous work, mostly because Bucky’s hair is wet and sleek with conditioner. Bucky gnaws sleepily on the neckline of his shirt throughout but abandons it once the smell of coffee starts to reach the bathroom.

Steve packs his serum-necessitated snack bars for the day while Bucky pours coffee with the care of a neurosurgeon, methodically tipping seventeen spoonfuls of sugar into the mug and stirring without ever letting the spoon clink against the sides. Bucky’s back in the clothes he wore for their date, which at this point Steve has laundered twice; it’s probably silly to think Bucky looks even better each time. But he does. Steve should trust his senses. They’re full of superserum, they must be accurate.

When the lunchbag is packed and Bucky’s coffee is drunk, Steve runs out of reasons to stall. “Ready to go?” Steve says, and Bucky says “Yes,” and then looks at him and says “Wait,” and dashes off.

He comes back with the comb Steve used on him. He leads Steve to the kitchen sink, wets it and stands on his toes to run it through Steve’s hair. “Cowlick,” he explains, Steve bowing his head obediently.

“Thank you,” Steve says, touched.

“You’re welcome,” Bucky says, looking up at him. Then he goes pink around the edges, lurches forward an inch and kisses Steve on the chin. Steve dissolves like Jello in a frying pan, which makes it even easier for Bucky to immediately bury his face in Steve’s collar.

They head out. It occurs to Steve, as they pass a couple of his neighbors in the hall, that the two of them are currently the scent equivalent of a matching tea set. Steve’s nose went dead to the particulars of smell many hours ago, but even he can tell that the washing up they’ve done hasn’t
been enough to get rid of the soaked-in bath scent. He doesn’t know how to feel about it. On the one hand, they don’t smell like they’ve spent all weekend rolling in bed with each other. On the other hand, they don’t smell like they’ve been rolling in bed with each other.

Possessiveness and politeness have a small, petty war in his head as they mount the bike and Bucky once again molds himself to Steve’s back. He’s thrilled Bucky stayed the whole weekend and is even letting Steve drive him to work, and that should be enough.

They definitely smell like they took the same bath. The wind takes off some of the scent’s sharpness, but by the time Steve parks they still definitely smell like - cooperative bathers. Shower sharers. Buddies of the bath.

When they get off the bike Bucky hooks his hand in the back of Steve’s shirt and ambles after him through the lot. Steve tries not to expand four sizes and lift off the ground.

Bucky is still yawning as Steve swipes his badge and gets beeped in. Bucky doesn’t take out a badge, but the agents in the garage security booth don’t say anything, just stare at them wide-eyed and return Steve’s nod with weak little waves.

“I usually go to the gym, so.” Steve points towards the locker room like Bucky doesn’t know where they are or what the gym is. “Do you… also…?”

Bucky yawns again, but he’s nodding even before his mouth closes and he waves Steve into the locker room ahead of him. Steve gets changed into the SHIELD sweats and t-shirt he keeps in his locker for days when he’s not punching aliens or shaking hands with senators. By the time he’s done, Bucky has reappeared in the door of the locker room wearing his standard SHIELD uniform with about half the weapons missing, which Steve assumes is his version of casual office wear.

The gym is empty. Bucky looks around while Steve flicks the lights on, gives a slow, spine-popping stretch and starts climbing up the agility course. Steve knows there’s a ledge up there, up at the very top; it looks like Bucky knows it too, because he heads right for it. He peers briefly over the edge, seems satisfied Steve is still over by the weight machines, and curls up and goes to sleep.

Steve’s glad Bucky’s decided to stay close. It feels like he’s got a kind of weekend hangover, half of his mind still dozing in the pillow pit, his body puzzled that Bucky’s not within reach. Steve keeps glancing up to check that Bucky’s still there in between reps.

Trainees start to filter into the gym around 0700. They’ve mostly gotten over staring at Steve by now, and Steve’s learned not to try running laps if he doesn’t want to accidentally suck the whole lot of them into trailing after him like winded ducklings, so they’re used to sharing the space. Their faces squinch up when they catch a noseful of Steve’s… weekend scent, but they’re polite enough not to say anything about it, although a couple of them wheel around and head right back into the hallway. The rest of them exchange nods with Steve and go to their regular machines. The gym has constantly circulating air and top-of-the-line filters, so it’s almost as good as being outside.

Steve tunes out the familiar soundtrack of clinking weights and focuses on not accidentally wrenching apart the rowing machine, until a sudden hush makes him look up. Bucky’s in the process of climbing down from the ledge he’d been napping on.

Bucky looks more awake now, a sharpness returning to his face and a wariness to his stance. Steve hadn’t realized how different Bucky looked until it came back. He goes right to Steve, and he comes very close, definitely within hugging distance, but he doesn’t plaster himself to Steve’s front like he’s been doing for the past two days and Steve suddenly hates every other person in
this room.

It immediately shows in his smell. He doesn’t mean to swell up like a water balloon connected to a firehose, but it’s not really something he can help. The trainees closest to him blanch and find interesting patterns in the floor tiles to stare at.

At least Bucky seems completely unaffected. He doesn’t press up against Steve’s side (because they’re at work and Bucky is a professional and Steve needs to get himself under control before they have to run a full scent decon on the gym three days ahead of schedule), but he gives Steve a curious sideways look before turning so they’re a little more back-to-back.

Normally Steve would shower after a workout, but he hasn’t really worked up a sweat and he’s loathe to do anything that would make him smell less like Bucky. Hopefully this is just more of his weekend hangover and his instincts will settle down over time. If they don’t he’ll have to send himself to HR for a stern lecture on personal boundaries in the workplace, which would be mortifying for everyone involved.

For now he ushers Bucky to the cafeteria on the grounds that it’s one of the largest rooms in the building, and full of food besides. Bucky might want a snack. The few people they pass in the hallways duck through the nearest open door to avoid them. Steve isn’t sure if that’s due to the bath scent or whatever kicked-porcupine pheromones he’s giving off, but it’s embarrassing enough that he’s mostly calmed down by the time they get to the cafeteria. Bucky slips off to hover near a table at the very back of the room while Steve loads up two trays.

Bucky eats fast and without speaking, his eyes roving around the rest of the room in a clearly practiced search pattern, but he hooks his ankle around Steve’s under the table. Steve has an unfortunately clear view of the door, so he gets to see the procession of double-takes as people walk into the cafeteria and immediately play Good Gods, What Is That Smell? Their corner of the room is left entirely empty, even as the morning breakfast rush starts.

Agent May is the first to get within ten feet of them. She walks in the door without pausing, locates Steve and Bucky, and approaches in a direct, confident line. Her eyes start to water once she’s halfway there, but her steps don’t waver.

“Agent Rogers,” she acknowledges. “Soldier.”

“Good morning,” Steve says, with a bit of an edge. Bucky hasn’t seemed to notice the way people are scattering out of their path. Maybe that’s how people normally react to him. The only time Steve’s seen him interact with groups of personnel outside of missions is the training session in the gym, where most of the room had emptied as soon as he stepped inside. The thought ramps up his protectiveness a bit higher, and he lays a hand over Bucky’s forearm without quite meaning to do it. He doesn’t like how the trainees are all staring at Bucky.

May ignores his posturing. “I have an assignment for you,” she says, directly to Bucky. “The roof garden on Concourse B has been flagging recently. It’s long overdue for a weeding, and many of the plants need to have their watering schedules adjusted. Are you available to evaluate it this morning?”

Bucky looks surprised, then suspicious, then, in the face of May’s clear sincerity, he settles on warily pleased. Steve’s hackles drop accordingly. He’s really, really glad Natasha isn’t in the cafeteria to see this.

May leads them out of the cafeteria and towards the east stairwell. The hallways are suspiciously empty. Steve wonders if someone sent a memo and, if so, what it said, then decides he’s better off not knowing.
The fresh air on the roof is a relief. Steve’s nose has mostly shut down by this point, but the feeling of an incipient migraine eases off the longer he and Bucky spend in the open air, a steady breeze wafting away the lingering perfumes. Bucky crouches on the broad stones that make up the rock garden walking path and gently manipulates the leaves of individual succulents, checking for signs of rot or withering. Steve looks around until he spots the discreet maintenance shed and goes to hunt down a watering can.

There’s a creak of the rooftop door. Steve looks around. A junior agent is climbing out onto the rooftop, marching stiffly over to Steve and coming to a vibrating parade rest a few feet away.

“Agent Rogers,” the junior agent croaks. Steve recognizes him as one of May’s trainees. He takes a deep breath, then edges forward to stand directly downwind of Steve.

Steve crosses his arms, not sure if he’s annoyed or amused. “Roscoe, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Training going well?”

“I hope so, sir.”

“Working on scent hardening this week?”

Roscoe’s eyes and nose slowly turn red as his sinuses overload. “Yes, sir.”

Steve nods. “Carry on.”

They spend the whole day on the roof. It’s the best day Steve can ever remember having at SHIELD, even with the steady trickle of trainees May sends after them. Being used as a blunt nasal instrument for training purposes is a fair exchange for getting to see Bucky up to his wrists in potting soil, late afternoon sunlight gilding his left arm, everything about him steady and calm as he works his way through the garden.

-o-

So they start - dating. That’s what it’s called now. When Steve was growing up there hadn’t been an overly long span of time between courting and signing pod papers, but apparently now dating can go on for years. Steve does some furtive googling, after asking if Bucky wants to do something next weekend and Bucky saying yes even before his sentence was finished.

That weekend they go to Coney Island, where Bucky wins four stuffed bears, two dolphins and a turtle at the sharpshooter game. He also carefully considers the rides and then shakes his head at Steve, who ends up pretty happy about that given some residual queasiness of his teenaged years has made an unexpected resurgence. They go to the aquarium instead, where Bucky holds Steve’s hand and Steve doesn’t even try to pay attention to whatever’s floating in the nearest tank in favor of the play of blue-green aquatic lights over Bucky’s hair. They drive back that night on Steve’s bike with all seven stuffed animals tied to the back, and then Steve has a bed pit with seven stuffed companions, all of which smell like Bucky seriously enjoying himself by the time they stumble into work Monday morning.

Things carry on more or less in the same vein. The week after that they go to dinner Tuesday night, and then Wednesday night, and then again on Monday night because Steve has to go escort some diplomat from Thursday to Sunday. When buying groceries Steve has to outright stop in the bread aisle as it occurs to him that he could pick something up for Bucky. He could bring Bucky a packed lunch. He could bring Bucky one of these ciabatta rolls, fresh baked here today.
And *everything* reminds him of Bucky. Steve sees a cute picture of an otter on a t-shirt and thinks of the aquarium date and thinks of Bucky, and otters, and how they are like otters whacking open the clam of courtship on the rock of their emotions, and inside is affection and intimacy and also, realistically, probably slime. But it’ll be the slime of love.

He researches otters, just to be sure they aren’t secretly a kitten-eating sadist species like dolphins or something, and he gets endless pictures of two sea otters holding hands and bouncing around in the surf. He wants to send it to Bucky, but he can’t. So he sits down a doodles a picture - one otter with cowlicks, the other otter with a cute braid and the two of them cresting over a wave and holding hands. It’s too much. Is it too much? It’s probably too much. He still puts it in a lunch bag with the fresh jar of honey someone had been selling and Bucky seems to expect a doodle with any brown paper bag Steve gives him, so - maybe not too much. Steve doesn’t know where the doodles go, but he likes to think they’re tucked away somewhere nice. Bucky’s favorite book, maybe.

And Bucky’s still giving him little gifts too, because it’s either that or Steve is now haunted by extremely helpful fairies. He opens his SHIELD locker and finds all his gear freshly cleaned and polished, the leather conditioned and the snapped shoelace on his gym sneaker replaced. His Colt sidearm is always freshly scrubbed and his backup boot knife gets upgraded to something a lot sleeker and sharper. A pouch on his utility belt is always full of shelf-stable snacks in the non-sawdust flavors.

And it seems to be going well for Bucky. He looks at Steve a lot more now, as opposed to Steve’s shoulder or elbow or shoes or any point several feet above or to the side of Steve’s head. His voice is still quiet but he talks more easily, explaining the shape difference between throwing and stabbing knives and how to use both to best advantage. They spend a lot of time in the SHIELD gyms and gun ranges, where other people tend to leave them alone even though Steve’s instincts have calmed down enough that he’s not billowing scent like a KEEP OUT sign on a kid’s tree fort whenever someone looks at Bucky. They even chase each other around the obstacle course gym without risking a repeat of their first spar or date forest run. It’s a lot easier to keep things strictly professional when Steve knows Bucky’s gonna meet him at the bus stop and they’ll go do a lot more interesting body things at home.

Bucky’s always teaching himself new things, too, which makes Steve feel a lot less of an idiot in just day-to-day life. It’s like they’re a team, investigating things together. They see a billboard advertising for a show, or a shaving cream, or that just has six penguins and the word EQUINOX and Bucky will look at Steve, Steve will shrug and they’ll figure it out. Someone asks Steve if he has a 401K, and it’s a Roth and Steve later looks at Bucky and asks “Do you have a retirement plan?”

Bucky sucks his teeth for a second, getting the last of the peanut brittle out, and stares at the ceiling. “Do gold bars count?”

“Boy, they sure used to. The neighbors used to hide nickels in their furniture legs.”

Bucky nods like this is a sensible course of action, but they start up a 10-part video course about retirement plans anyways, narrated by a unenthused voice quietly asking questions in spinning font about when they plan to retire, and their financial goals, before falling asleep around part 4: Stocks, Bonds and Futures.

Steve watches Bucky sit in the corner of the large conference room during the new Updated Civilian Care and Deescalating Procedures seminars and drink the cups of tea Steve brings him, and once, gloriously, try not to fall asleep in a sunbeam. As the meeting drones on the sunbeam creeps across the room, until Bucky’s legs, then chest, then his whole corner is directly in it. Steve watches Bucky’s eyes start drifting closed every minute or so while desperately regretting his
watches Bucky’s eyes start drifting closed every minute or so while desperately regretting his choice of seat, i.e. not directly under Bucky. He wonders if anyone would notice if he just scooted six inches to the right and gently tucked Bucky’s head to his shoulder. He needs a suitable nap surface. Would Bucky like a nap date? Steve will ask. He’s been amassing pillows. Or they could go to one of those nooks that seem to be everywhere now. Steve heard a couple of agents raving about a new one that had opened in SoHo, where there are apparently snack caches hidden all over the place in the geode cave-themed walls.

People also seem to be pretty approving of their relationship. Maria Hill stops Steve outside the cafeteria one afternoon. “I don’t know what you did, Rogers, but keep doing it,” she says.

“What?”

“Soldier’s attended four out of five safety briefings in the past two weeks. Keep it up.”

Hill’s not the only one. The second Steve walks in the door of the community center, Mabel, Josef, and Shara’s heads whip around as one. Mabel lets out an "OOOOOooooooooh" noise like a seventy-eight year old foghorn. Steve, recognizing escape is impossible, flushes hot as they totter towards him in a slow-motion stampede.

"Good for you," Shara says, poking him in the chest. "Good. For. You. Who's the lucky O?"

"His name is Bucky," Steve mumbles.

Mabel makes the foghorn noise again. Steve eyes the door longingly, but Josef has cannily positioned his walker to cut off Steve's retreat. “When are you bringing him by?” Shara demands.

“Our schedules can be kind of unpredictable,” Steve hedges, not wanting to commit Bucky to anything without asking.

“Dance Night is next Thursday,” Shara says sweetly. “That should be plenty of time to plan ahead.”

“Ooooooooooo," Mabel says, this time in tandem with Josef.

“I’ll see if he’s available,” Steve mumbles, and thankfully their wool carding instructor walks in then and Steve can flee to the relative safety of putting together his own station.

Josef and Mabel and Shara do spend the entire session making extremely unsubtle comments about how they don’t meet enough new people and it’s only right for friends to introduce each other, but it’s well-meant and eventually gets subsumed by the usual chatter. Something’s gone really wrong if Josef doesn’t talk about his latest weekly murder; they all watch a lot of the same programs on the television, most of which are apparently murder mysteries.

Steve likes that the detective novel hasn’t died out. Gotten a little more graphic, sure, but you have a big, gruff A hunting down criminals and protecting his reef and Steve has a guilty fondness for that type of story, where the bad guys are clearly identifiable and all get caught by the end. In one of them they keep calling the big gruff A captain and Steve’s about 30% sure the fella is based on him. It gives him a weird vertigo like how sometimes he draws the ceiling too tall in his drawings, but the cabinets too low because sometimes he’s a man staring over his own shoulder about perspectives and heights.

His community learning group also talks about their “Stories” but Steve doesn’t know where to begin with those: people brushing other people’s hair, and it turns out they’re an evil twin. Other folks hiding their scent on people and everyone snarling about pack. Engrossing, sure, and maybe Steve fell down a small well watching The Reef Unbroken for a few days. A week. No more than a month, because he had to watch the Russ vs Russel plot get resolved and Vern deserves better,
but they also hadn’t told Jen that they were back from their sabbatical and-

Anyway. He wasn’t gonna get a television even if the folks kept talking about all the stories, because a lot of times they’re playing on the gym screens anyway. But then Natasha upped the latest shopping trip minimum to two fucking thousand fucking dollars, pardon his French, and then Steve made the mistake of imagining himself and Bucky like one of those movie ads, tangled up together on the couch, surrounded by snacks, watching the teevee in open-mouthed delight. Then he’d have two arms free for Bucky, instead of one for Bucky and one for holding his phone up above them so they can watch cake decorating videos.

So he buys a television. Bucky comes too. When they go to their Friday dinner - rapidly becoming a weekly routine - Steve asks if he knows anything about televisions. Bucky frowns and says “Some?” which is more than Steve does, which is none.

“Would you like to come buy one with me tomorrow?” Steve says. “I have to spend - two thousand dollars this weekend.” He hopes he manages to subdue a sufficient amount of his cringe. “So I thought. A color television. Maybe we could - watch a movie. When you come over.”

Bucky sponges sauce off Steve’s plate with his pork bun, eyebrows pulled together in thought. He’s sitting across from Steve, which only happens when they can’t get a booth where they can sit next to each other. Steve’s rapidly learned that means the second they sit down Bucky hooks his ankles around Steve’s and keeps them there, like an anchor in double knotted tac boots. “You have to spend two thousand dollars?”

Steve nods morosely. “Natasha makes me show her the receipts.”

“Widow,” Bucky confirms. Steve nods. “She makes you buy things?”

“Yeah. She’s helping,” Steve says, lest Bucky think Natasha’s bullying him into draining his accounts or something. “It makes me try new things. And get used to inflation. And since I arrived without a lot of... stuff.” Steve tries to lighten it up. “Didn’t exactly get a chance to pack a suitcase when the conductor said, next stop, two thousand and thirteen.”

Bucky doesn’t laugh but he doesn’t look at Steve like he’s the saddest puppy at the pound either. He’s nodding, still looking thoughtful. “The strategy works?”

“I guess so,” Steve says. “It certainly gets me to try things I never would’ve on my own.”

“I don’t have much stuff either,” Bucky says matter of factly. “I also didn’t get to pack.”

Right. Steve’s still not sure if Bucky’s time as a HYDRA prisoner is something he’s meant to ask about, since Bucky seems to reference it sparingly but also straightforwardly enough. Steve wouldn’t know how to bring it up, either. Not in a way that he’s sure won’t do more harm than good. Hey, pal, I’ve busted up a few of the squids’ torture labs, so you probably can’t shock me too bad... no. He figures he’ll just wait for Bucky to talk about it himself, if he ever feels like it, and in the meantime just seem as open and ready to listen as he can.

Bucky doesn’t elaborate, and then their servers come by with another cart of buns, so the discussion gets tabled until they’re back in Steve’s apartment. Steve went back and bought cushions for the living room pillow pit two days after their first date, the same sturdy kind that fill his bedroom pit, except these ones are in shades of buttercup and acorn squash and smell like dried lemon peel. He’s hoping that after a few more successful dates they’ll smell like dried lemon peel and Bucky.

“We should get a whole movie theater,” Bucky says, after they’ve done a little gentle tussling that
turned into snuggling after Bucky got him in a headlock and then flopped on top of him. He's looking around and staring at the big blank wall opposite the kitchen. “With the speakers that go all around.”

“How many speakers do you need for that?”

Bucky scans around without shirking his job as duvet before testing the waters with, “Eight? I think eight speakers?”

“Four there and four there?”

“Four there. Two there. Two there.”

Steve nods, envisioning the configuration as Bucky points. “We can do that.”

That night Bucky actually goes home instead of sleeping over, but he shows up again the next morning with what looks like a tool bag. Steve goes to make breakfast as Bucky pulls out a measuring tape and starts tapping along the walls with his listening face on.

Steve makes tartines and trusts in the process. After several minutes, Bucky says, “I found a stud.”

“Okay,” Steve says, putting the tartines and juice on the new floral breakfast tray and bringing it all to the edge of the pillow pit. Sometimes Bucky looks at chairs like they’re an obstacle course he needs to overcome, but he’s always happy to eat in the pillow pit. Steve is too, as he recently discovered his vacuum cleaner has a nozzle attachment perfect for getting into seams and digging out crumbs.

Bucky, eyes narrowed in concentration, marks what must be the stud’s location with a pencil, then measures across to the next stud. He stands back, frowns at his two marks for a solid minute, and eventually nods. Steve sits down at the edge of the pillow pit to watch him, chin propped on his fist. Bucky’s hair is still up in the way Steve did for him yesterday, swept up off his neck after their mutual agreement to try whatever a messy bun is. Whatever they’ve achieved might not fully qualify for bunhood but it is absolutely messy.

“You have to hang from the studs.” Bucky says, which shows he’s been paying attention to the shows where a reef goes pod by pod to make sure their living spaces are what they want and need, while Steve had just watched the noise and color wash over Bucky’s face and smiled whenever Bucky made a thoughtful noise. “So it stays stable.”

“What about the wall,” Steve asks, gesturing at the blank canvas of it. “Is it a good color for the TV wall?”

Bucky steps back and looks at it, then glances back and sees Steve is in the pillow pit. He promptly sets down his pencil and tape measure, wriggles out of his turtleneck and flops back into the pillows. Then he tugs Steve in and starts to shove things around until they’re cuddled up staring at the long expanse of wall.

“A dark wall,” Bucky says, thoughtful. “Like a theater.”

“Black?”

“Navy,” Bucky says, tapping at Steve’s chest. “Like your uniform.”

Steve wants to go out and collect every navy paint swatch in the world just to see Bucky pick one. To sit and paint the whole wall right then so anyone can walk in and see someone lives here with Steve. That it’s not just the off-the-rack pod apartment he moved into.
“Eggshell… finish?” Bucky says, like he’s trying to speak to a teenage pod about their favorite band and he’s trying to remember their name. Steve nods slowly, eggs are good, he likes eggs, and then they sit and nod at each other.

“There’s a store,” Bucky says. “A paint store. For houses and things. It’s open today. We can go.” Then he looks at the tray of tartines and visibly switches priorities. “After breakfast.”

“Should we get the television first?” Steve says, nudging the tray closer. “So we can pick a paint shade that’ll complement it. Dunno how many colors televisions come in, but I bet we can find any paint to match.”

“Yes. Smart,” Bucky says, then fits a solid two-thirds of a tartine into his mouth.

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Steve, for lack of knowing where the best shops for televisions are, takes them to the Brookfield Place shops again. It’s a nice place to look around, at least, light and airy even technically below ground, and maybe Bucky will see something he likes.

They stop by the entrance to the electronics store and survey the territory. “Here we go,” Steve says.

“Two thousand dollars,” Bucky says. He doesn’t say it the way Steve does or Natasha does; Natasha says it like it’s real numbers and Steve says it like it’s really big real numbers. Bucky almost says it like it’s all one foreign word he carefully memorized.

“It can be more,” Steve says.

“But it can’t be less.”

“No.”

“Got it.”

They set out.

Bucky sticks close at first, his hands in his pockets, but then they pass through a section titled VINTAGE and find dozens of pastel colored toaster ovens and radios and stand mixers. There are microwaves and laptops and a dozen other things Steve can’t readily name, but everything looks very cheerful. Rounded edges and the hefty tanklike construction that Steve figures you could throw at a rabid animal and pick it up and still use it for breakfast the next morning.

They wander through the appliances holding up friendly moose spatulas and hand carved wooden ladles. Steve pauses at two mugs with little empty spaces in the handle to put spoons, and a wide little slot to put… marshmallows? Cookies? They match, and by the time he’s convinced himself to pick them up Bucky’s stopped at a sleek fern-colored radio and is investigating the dials. It’s a familiar make, something that wouldn’t have been out of place in a more well to do home in Steve’s neck of the woods, and Bucky’s fingers turn about looking for a radio station. Steve hasn’t seen Bucky listening to music on his own devices. No phone, no earphones, no boombox or, uh… going to discos, or whatever the right term is for going out to see a band. He taps his foot sometimes to songs Steve plays, though.

Bucky pets the radio and looks off into the middle distance. Steve taps the radio and Bucky looks at his hand. “Think this would be nice too? For uh… the kitchen?”
Bucky traces the speakers and then nods without saying anything, so Steve adds that to the mugs up front. Bucky settles in alongside him in a warm line and they stand in the middle of the shop sort of half hugging, while the shopkeepers smile at them from under ducked heads and all of them try to look busy without offering to help too often.

Bucky spots the televisions first, and promptly crouches down and proceeds to read the specs on each model with a determined frown, like he’s going to have to eel up a tree and make a shot on one of them and he needs to know everything about all of them just to start. There’s only five options, and a helpful little sign saying what stores in the area have different models and the offer to call any of them, and who to call to move and install it. Bucky digs around behind the displays and comes up with a fistful of manuals, which he promptly takes over to a quiet corner to read. Steve figures he’s got this under control and goes up front to buy the radio and the cookie-slot mug and everything else that’s wound up in their shopping basket. In the check-out line on impulse he adds a mini electric frother that’s shaped like a squid and looks like it’ll make really smooth hot chocolate.

It’s hot enough still that he’s mostly making Bucky iced tea and milkshakes, but it pays to lay in supplies for every season. He thinks Bucky will still be around when the weather turns. Bucky’s favorite brown sweater has been sitting, neatly folded, on Steve’s dresser for a week now, and Steve’s been tip-toeing around it like it’s a sleeping cat that will stay put as long as he doesn’t disturb it.

Steve stacks his wrapped parcels near the door to pick up later, checks the place where Bucky was reading and finds it empty, then sniffs deep and finds him in the aisle with a lot of the more rounded screens, where the interactive displays are. He touches one of the screens, and Steve watches digital fish swim over to the “ripples” caused by his finger. Bucky touches it again and the fish swim to the other corner of the screen.

“You can feed them,” he tells Steve, not looking away from the fish. “And they’ll make bubbles. Try it.”

Steve tries it. Fat golden fish wiggle determinedly over to the sparkles left by his finger. Bucky’s almost smiling, taking his flesh hand out of his pocket again to drag an arc of sparkles over the screen.

“That’s my favorite screensaver,” someone says confidingly, and Steve turns to find a short O in a shop t-shirt at his elbow. “You can change the color of the fish and decorate their aquarium. It’s super cool. Great for kids, too. You tried the garden one?”

They touch the corner of the screen and the aquarium dissolves into a moss garden. This one has brightly colored frogs. Steve watches Bucky’s eyes go big as one of the frogs hops onto a moss patch.

“How much is this one?” Steve asks the shop assistant.

They end up getting the television, a speaker set, and a soft-light lamp with leaves patterned on the shade along with all the impulse buys Steve had squirreled up front in the meantime. They take it back to Steve’s place on the subway, managing the awkward size of the package between the two of them and not bonking anyone in the head. Bucky is the one who sets it up; he reads the instructions very carefully and then just goes for it, moving like he’s been putting up televisions his whole life, so Steve hovers for only a moment before going to make them lunch.

They only turn on the television for a minute, just to check that it works, but somehow the second show in the lineup is *The Reef Unbroken* and Steve says “Oh, the folks at the center love this one,” and they sit down to watch.
They get sucked in like goldfish in a toilet bowl. “I can’t believe they didn’t tell Vern,” Bucky says, shoving another handful of kettle corn in his mouth.

“I can’t believe Vern didn’t tell Jane,” Steve says, rummaging in the bowl. Bucky steadies it for him with his knee. At some point it’d gotten dark outside. Steve looks around to check the time, then remembers he doesn’t own a wall clock.

He looks back at the screen, where the end credits montage has faded into the selection menu. “It says this… season… has one more episode,” he says. “But it’s getting pretty late.”

Bucky looks up at him, cheeks full of kettle corn. Then he looks back at the screen.

“You’re right,” Steve says. “It’s just one more. We can’t go to bed on a cliffhanger.” Bucky’s already reaching for the remote.

Bucky stays the night. It’s only polite, for Steve to offer and make sure Bucky doesn’t have to trudge home in the dark alone. Most of Bucky’s skin care seems to be at Steve’s place anyways, so then every morning he gets to do Bucky’s hair and Bucky dutifully pats a seeming army of products on his face. And then he stays the next night, because they eat breakfast and then they go and find a nice carved wood wall clock for Steve’s apartment and then of course they need to get lunch and nap and then find dinner. And watch the next season. And undo Bucky’s hair and do the night treatments for everything, Bucky tries a clay mask. Bucky makes Steve try a clay mask. It’s nice.

They do more than watch TV. Steve, working off the intel that the picnic was a success, suggests sculpture parks and botanical gardens and the Flower Walk that opens on the Highline. Bucky never says no. Most of the time he doesn’t wait for Steve to finish the words “Would you want to - ” before he asserts that yes, he would. He very much wants to. He seems perfectly happy to bump shoulders and hook elbows with Steve as they wander down moss pathways and examine art and flowers and plants, and Steve is probably getting disproportionate satisfaction out of buying snacks from street vendors and corner cafés and passing them to Bucky.

Bucky eats everything Steve hands him except for the coconut-pickle relish cup, which he hands back after a lot of dubious sniffing and one tiny test bite, and half the funnel cake with burnt sugar dipping sauce, which he likes so much he insists on sharing with Steve. It makes Steve's teeth ache, but the powdered sugar halo it leaves around Bucky's mouth more than makes up for it.

And Bucky seems very happy in bed, enthusiastic and very appreciative, but it occurs to Steve that he’s never really outright asked Bucky what he likes.

He should. Talking about it is important. But he also doesn’t want to throw a boulder in the easy ebb and flow of each other’s company. He has to approach with caution, with uh… delicacy, with -

Natasha is across the table from him, smiling, chin in hand.

“I bought a color television,” Steve half-shouts in self-defense.

Bucky sometimes joins him for lunch, and sometimes gets absorbed into the SHIELD facility with no clue where he’s gone. Which is…fine. It doesn’t leave Steve as slightly panicked as when Peggy sunk into the dirt of Europe and turned up two weeks later with a bruise on her jaw and six folders of intel. Neither of them appreciate Steve fruitlessly hovering at them until the exact moment they want him to, so he tries to keep it to himself.

Natasha keeps tucking a smile into her cheek in a clear and obvious interrogation tactic to make
Steve talk more, but he has tapioca pudding and he can just as soon eat that and let Natasha stare at him. Her hair looks nice today, which either means she spent time with one of her pods, or she just wanted people to think she did.

“You look nice,” Steve tries, after he finishes his tapioca and Natasha hasn’t relented.

Natasha does a long, slow blink and keeps staring at him, gently tapping her foot against Steve’s shin.

“You know I can just leave,” Steve says. “You doing this at the gym has a much worse return rate.”

“Your braids are getting better,” she says. “You can practice your French Braid on me if you want. Or a fishtail, but maybe you’re saving that for the six month anniversary.”

Steve pokes at his empty tapioca cup. “Is this going to be a shovel talk?”

“Do you need a shovel talk?”

“I’d feel better if someone gave me a shovel talk.” Steve frowns. “Bucky deserves a shovel talk or two on his behalf.” Steve had been meaning to give himself a shovel talk in the power vacuum. He’s been told he does a good disappointed face.

Natasha raises both her eyebrows, and Steve vaguely notes she must have filled them in more today so he’ll notice. Steve and Bucky have watched makeup tutorials. They know about… pomade. They’d stared at each other’s eyebrows and decided they were probably fine.

“I’m just happy for you,” she finally says, and kicks his shin. “You smell obnoxiously cheerful so I’m not sure we can go out in the field for awhile, so if you want to hurry up and move in together so we’re not benched, I wouldn’t mind.”

Steve grips his tray and Natasha tilts her head. “You’ve asked him?”

“No,” Steve says carefully, because screaming something inside your head very loudly wasn’t asking. Or sort of… sneakily making your house their house. He doesn’t know the correct time window for it. It can’t be that much longer, right? Another few weeks, or maybe a month or… “It seemed too soon. Is it too soon?”

“A year or two is usually standard,” Natasha says, and Steve stares at her because they could be dead in a year. A year? Anything could happen in a year. The sun could implode and the stars turn into radioactive space slime. It’s not as far-fetched as he wishes it were. His life already contains a lot more radioactive space slime than he’d really been prepared for.

“A year,” he repeats.

Natasha shrugs. “If you want to move faster, you can. Just talk to him. Make sure you’re on the same page.”

“Communication is important,” Steve says automatically, because that’s what Josef and Mabel always say when they’re dissecting each new development on The Reef Unbroken and cataloging everything the characters are doing wrong.

“There you go,” she says, and kicks his other shin in an approving way. He’ll have symmetrical bruises for the next ten minutes or so. “Talk it over.”

Talk it over. Steve thinks about that for the rest of the day, to the point where May nearly elbows
him in the head during their sparring session when he doesn’t duck fast enough. He can do that. He can talk it over with Bucky. He isn’t sure exactly what they should talk over, but maybe there’s a list?

Steve searches “moving in with a new pod” on his replacement phone. There are lists. There are a lot of lists. He reads through the first twenty results and makes a compendium of the most common talking points. Up at the top with “group finances” and “managing in-laws” is “intimacy and romance.” Finances are easy; SHIELD pays him a lot more than he spends, and with Steve’s back pay account, he has enough to support an entire pod for a generation. Neither of them have any in-laws to manage; Steve’s original podmates are all long dead, and when he asked Bucky if he had any family, Bucky just shook his head and went around with rounded shoulders and muted scent for an hour.

Steve felt bad about asking that, after. He should have known better. Bucky’s never even mentioned any relatives, let alone smelled of them. Bucky didn’t seem upset with him, but Steve made strawberry-lemon popsicles and roasted peanut apology chicken anyway, and felt disproportionately relieved when Bucky did his usual climb-Steve-like-a-cat-tree after dinner.

Intimacy and romance. Bucky has seemed pretty happy with what they’ve been doing, but. Talking it out. The lists are right; if there’s something they need to correct or expand on, better to find out now.

Steve broaches the topic after their next date. They spend the morning in a park in the city, skirting the edges of crowded fountains and stopping at every snack stall that makes Bucky’s nostrils flare. Steve waits until they’re back in his apartment, pours them each a glass of iced tea, and sits down at the kitchen table with his heart hammering like he’s going into a firefight.

Bucky, responding, straightens up and looks around, then at Steve, like there’s a fire alarm going off that only he can hear, and Steve tries to rein himself in. “It’s alright,” he says, soothing Captain voice coming out more or less on automatic. Luckily, these days it has the side effect of soothing him too. “We’re fine. I just - wanted to check in.”

Bucky’s settling down again, looking at Steve curiously.


Bucky blinks at him. He says, tentatively, “Good?”

“Good! Me too, that’s what I think. Things are good. But if you can think of anything you want to change, or - something that would make things better for you, that would also. Be good.”

“Good,” Bucky says, looking a little lost.

“I’ve been doing some research,” Steve says, and Bucky brightens visibly. “I found some lists. Of things we should talk about, to make sure everyone’s happy. So. If there’s anything else you wanna try. We can always try it. And talk about anything.”

Bucky gives Steve the politely inquisitive look that means he has no earthly clue what he’s talking around and is hoping someone will say something that makes sense soon.

Steve’s not sure how crude he’s capable of being, but he should probably quit with the pussyfooting. He takes a breath of Bucky’s steadying scent, back to being all relaxed and sated from the pineapple pork they ate in the park earlier. “In bed,” Steve says. “What do you like?”

“All of it,” Bucky says promptly.
Steve pauses. “All?”

“All of what we’ve done.”


Bucky’s eyebrows knit slightly. “What else is there.”

Steve kind of stares at him for a bit while all the relevant information rapidly rearranges itself in his brain. He’d - thought, sure, that Bucky maybe wasn’t the most - experienced, but it’s a slightly different thing to have it explicitly confirmed. It’s not that Steve is averse to explaining, it’s just - well, where does he start? And - what if there are whole new types of sex now? Steve wasn’t exactly an expert before, and he certainly can’t be one now.

What else is there. His lists suddenly don’t feel comprehensive enough.

“Let’s find out,” Steve says.

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Two hours later, they rendezvous at the kitchen table. Steve has several library books. Bucky has a small stack of magazines and what looks like clippings.

“They’re not the best intel,” Bucky warns. “Confusing language. Insufficient detail. And I haven’t broken the code yet. But they have pictures.”

“Right,” Steve says, for lack of better answer. “Should we swap?”

Steve had mostly checked out books like *Your First Time!* and *1001 Games in the Bed Pit* and *Health & Recreation (Fifth Edition)*. Bucky opens *Your First Time!* and starts reading, directly from the beginning, like Steve’s gotten him a textbook and told him there’ll be an exam later.

Well. No harm being thorough. Steve pulls the magazines towards himself and flips the first one open.

It’s very informative. He sees what Bucky means about the unreliable intel; there are acronyms that Bucky has annotated in the margins and some that are circled with ??? above them, and some of the trend reviews read more like product placements than objective journalism, but there’s still enough actual information that by the time Steve turns the last page he’s got a whole new bubblegum pink mental filing cabinet full of skin care routines and wardrobe suggestions. He’s been able to match up some of the outfits he’s seen around the reef to the magazine’s spreads on *business casual* or *dressed-down chic* or *formal loungewear*. There are *lots* of hairstyles in here, with step by step instructions and pictures of techniques. It’s not as visually instructive as video, but the detailed breakdowns of different products and brushes and methods is very informative.

After a while Steve gets up and makes mint lemonade. Bucky accepts his glass still reading, but after a few minutes he drains the glass and looks up with a dazed expression.

“There are *toys,*” he says, in vaguely shellshocked tones. “I didn’t know there was *equipment.*”

Steve thinks of the sapphire satin ribbon Peggy had miraculously procured on the Western front and used to tie delicate bows around his wrists when they had the rare free evening together, then blushes so hard his eyes water a little. "It's - optional," he manages. "But it, uh. It can be fun.”

Bucky makes an interested noise, but doesn’t look up, so Steve has time to hide behind a magazine while he waits for his blood to redistribute. By the time he puts the magazine down,
Bucky has started to write notes on the back of Steve’s library receipt. Steve gets one of his blank sketchbooks down from the bookcase - he’d made the mistake of doodling on a mission briefing in front of Natasha once, and as soon as the mission was over she’d dragged him to an art store and given him a $500 spending minimum - and hands it to Bucky.

“For notes,” he says.

Bucky accepts it with a nod and immediately fills the first page with bullet points. Steve goes back to his stack of magazines. By the time Bucky leaves for the evening, Steve is already brainstorming ways to continue their research, hopefully with some hands-on experimentation. He kisses Bucky goodbye at the door, then goes straight to his computer.

Bucky has clearly taken to the bed pit explorations initiative and the idea of equipment in particular, so that’s where Steve starts. When he imagines trying to walk into a physical store and talk to another human being about sex toys, however, he experiences an immediate and overwhelming MISSION ABORT. This, he decides, is exactly what the internet was invented for.

A few basic searches present him with a bewildering variety of options and brands. There are a lot of vibrating toys that come in cute, bee-themed packaging, with attractive honeycomb-print stationary in discreet shades of marigold. Steve pages through the results and tries to figure out what the hell Bucky would like. Should he buy one of the Busy Bee bumbles that comes with a packet of bee-friendly wildflower seeds you can scatter in your garden? Does he want to back the Humble Indie Bumble Bundle on Kickstarter and get a variety of boutique toys as his pledge reward? Would Bucky appreciate a Bumble of the Month Club membership, or would that be too presumptuous?

Steve notices a few product descriptions touting high scores from independent evaluators. Blushing but determined, he pulls up the Consumer Reports website and finds their bumble rankings. Two manufacturers, the Bees Knees and Bee-Twixt the Sheets, both get very high quality assurance ratings, and after twenty minutes of flipping back and forth between their product specs (one of them offers ten hours of battery life, which, wouldn’t there be… chafing? None of the reviews mentioned chafing, it’s probably fine) he gives up and orders a range of basic bumblers from both.

The packages arrive in very normal-looking boxes, though when he opens one the inside is - well, it’s adorable, but he really hopes the smiling bee face on the golden packaging isn’t actually on the bumble itself. He’s not sure he could in good conscience give Bucky something to use amongst his melony bits if it’s sporting a pair of eyes.

Bucky, Steve’s learned over the past several weeks, has an almost supernatural sense of when something new has entered Steve’s apartment, from mail and packages to a leaf that floated in through the open balcony doors that one time. It feels less typical O territoriality and more a feature of Bucky’s professional skillset. He pops up behind Steve approximately twenty seconds after Steve opens the first package of bumblers, sniffing suspiciously, and, well, it’s not like Steve bought these to hide in a cupboard for special occasions.

“What is that,” Bucky says, poking at one of the bumbler’s cardboard antenna, and Steve bites the bullet and holds the thing up.

“It’s for - us,” he says. “To try. If we want. Uh, equipment.”

Bucky carefully looks everything over, then picks up a long, sleek, rubbery thing with *The Stinger* stamped across its base. It’s a nice cursive script and the color is an alluring tangerine. It, thankfully, has absolutely no eyes on it. “It goes,” Bucky says, brows scrunching together, “inside?”

“Buzz,” Bucky repeats, sounding not quite doubtful but more open to the potential to be persuaded.

“They have really good reviews,” Steve says. “Some of them are more rumbly, others are more… pulsating. Since we didn’t know what you liked I just…” He gestures at them all.

Bucky picks up the packaging and reads it over, including the fine print. “Pollination,” he says, just the tiniest crease between his brows.

“We don’t have to try it,” Steve says. “I just thought it might be. Fun.”

“We’ll have fun,” Bucky says decisively, picking up The Stinger - and the Honey, the Bumble Buzzin’ and the Stripey Surprise - and heads for the bed pit.

Twenty minutes later the two of them fall back, panting, the sheets below them soaked with sweat. Bucky reaches out a trembling hand and turns off the Surprise. There’s another one quietly bumbling under a pillow somewhere but Steve can’t be bothered to find it. Maybe it won’t have 10 hours of battery life.

“That,” Steve manages, gulping for breath.

“Uh huh.”

“That was. Wow.”

“Uh huh.”

Bucky crawls out of the bed pit while Steve’s still trying to remember how his legs work, and Steve is briefly worried that the experience had been too overwhelming or upsetting somehow. Sure everything smells correct and good, but communication is important. He half flails up, but the pillows suck him back in, subtly rumbling as Steve pats around for the Bumble Buzzin’, which had been wide and slightly rounded in his palm. It made Bucky slam one hand hard against Steve’s shoulder, and use his other leg to hold Steve in place. Mostly right now that means the thing keeps sneaking deeper into the pit.

Bucky rolls back inside a minute later, the sketchbook Steve gave him in one hand and an assortment of pens in his mouth like a bunch of jolly pastel cigarettes. The sketchbook has acquired color-coded tabs that say things like “TOUCHING” and “MOUTH THINGS”. Steve perks up a little, especially as Bucky blunt forces his way into tucking himself under Steve’s arm and shoving them both up to a half sitting position.

“It’s better to record observations as soon as possible,” Bucky explains around the pens, taking one out, flipping to a blank section and writing “BUMBLES” across the tab. Steve’s scientifically perfected heart probably can’t skip a beat, but it gets heavy and full in his chest as Bucky uses Steve’s arm as a book rest. “Your input matters,” Bucky adds, delicately spitting the rest of the pens into his lap and looking up at Steve. “Did you… like… one?”

Steve is stupid and flushed and presses his nose to Bucky’s temple. “I like you.”

Bucky frowns even as he goes pink - pinker- and tucks the pen behind his ear, diving into the pit and unerringly fishing the Bumble out of the pillows. “I like this one,” he says, like he’s trying to demonstrate for Steve how to give an after-action report. The pinkness is intensifying. Steve kisses his ear, then more of his ear, then his temple again. “Do you also,” Bucky perseveres, his voice...
now gratifyingly breathless, “um. Do you also like - it?”

“I think,” Steve says, now fully drunk on the space just behind Bucky’s ear, the crook of his neck and shoulder, “we should try it again.”

They do. Two hours later, they fill out three whole pages of the notebook. Then they make a review account on the bumble website. They very conscientiously click five stars.

-o-

That gets them on trying other bed things. It takes a while for them to get to the makeup brushes, since they get distracted running through the various bumber settings and rating the results on a scale of mauve to fire truck, but they get there eventually. Bucky consults his Wellness Guide and finds that the short fat dense brushes go with the Avocado Butter Buffing Cream and the long delicate poufy brushes go with the Matte Perfecting Powder. Technically the brushes can be used for other substances, it says, but it’s best to match the consistency of the substituted cream or powder. The brush kit has a flat brush for masks and a smaller soft-as-air brush for under the eyes.

Bucky pushes the kit over to Steve. They’re back in Steve’s bed pit, the remains of breakfast frittata on plates left soaking in the sink, and they don’t have anything planned for the day. The kit has fourteen brushes. Bucky has a whole page of his notebook ready to record observations.

Steve picks up one of the short dense ones and pulls his thumb through the plush bristles like he’s evaluating a tool. Testing the flat edge of a blade. Testing the strength of a punching bag with a pulled blow. Bucky swallows and feels his fingers itch, ghostly whispers of imagined sensation winding up his knuckles as Steve evaluates the brushes, picking up each one, dragging them along his own neck. Steve wouldn’t try anything on Bucky without first testing it on himself. Bucky’s stomach goes warm and liquid and he tilts his head up, baring his neck, wanting to feel it all on his skin. Wanting Steve to steady Bucky’s head with one of his big, warm hands and trace an invisible make-up tutorial along Bucky’s face.

Steve looks back up at Bucky with a sort of focus that has his body tightening down and opening up all at once. Steve smiles. “They feel like high quality.”

Bucky shrugs, trying to convey with his face and body and smell that they’ll have to test it and see. Practical trials yield the most valuable research. Steve grins and sets one of the thickest brushes against Bucky’s jaw, dragging the plush fibers up to his ear. Bucky’s eyes close without him thinking about it and Steve draws a line down his neck and along his collar bone, pressing down and then lightening up along the end in a flick. His skin wakes up as the brush moves, soft enough that it’s like Steve is breathing over him. Not an itchy or scratchy bristle among them.

Steve follows the line with his dry thumb and Bucky leans into it until his face is nestled into Steve’s palm. Bucky presses a kiss to Steve’s wrist and the entire bed pit smells like contentment. It’s a hot chocolate kind of smell, like this whole apartment is a warm cup of cocoa fluffed with whipped cream that he can curl around to warm his bones. Bucky doesn’t like the cold. He’d never fully realized there was a place away from it.

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Steve picks up another brush to try on his own face. Bucky lifts up to bonk his lips against Steve’s cheekbone, nothing so coordinated as a kiss. Steve realigns them, shifting Bucky into the crook of one elbow so he has the other hand free for the brushes and access to Bucky’s face and arms and neck, and Bucky thinks about being a mural. He’d be up for being a mural. There seem to be no obvious downsides. He’s professionally good at lying still. Maybe he can put that skill towards having all of Steve’s focus while they work their way through every kind of brush stroke in the world.
“I could find you something softer,” Steve says, his fingers curled in and supporting Bucky’s head. Bucky thinks of cocoa and being drunk down to nothing and filling up Steve's stomach all hot and fortifying.

Steve smiles and Bucky smiles back up at him. Steve drifts his lips against Bucky’s again, and Bucky’s spine stretches out and curls over the long, fat pillows he’s nestled into, his body all sweet and liquid.

Steve smoothes the brush down Bucky’s throat. Bucky swallows and Steve keeps tracing around. Filling him in and giving him depth. Bucky has watched Steve when it’s the two of them each working in their sketchbooks, Bucky making lists while Steve turns blobs into desks, or coworkers, or Bucky’s foot. Everytime Bucky walks into Steve’s apartment his shoulders unclench from his ears and he feels… quiet. And he goes back to Location Redacted and cuddles into his nest holding onto that feeling until the next time he finds Steve, and then they smile at each other until Steve says *hey, would you want to* and Bucky does, he *does* want to, every part of him chanting *yes yes yes.*

Steve leans down and presses smiling lips to the goosebumps marching up Bucky’s arm. Bucky’s hand lifts up on its own to pet his head, then pinches a tuft of Steve’s hair and whisks it back and forth across the top of his ear like a tiny lopsided brush, tickling him just to see how big he can make that smile go. Steve *laughs* and shoves his head into Bucky’s stomach and Bucky has to curl up around him until they’re tussling back and forth and kicking pillows out of the pit. Bucky gets Steve pinned and snatches the brush out of his hand triumphantly, planting himself right on Steve’s hips, using his spoils to trace the thin veins on the underside of Steve’s wrist.

“It’s my turn still,” Steve grumbles, but not very loud.

Bucky squints down at him from his position of moral superiority and tactical leverage. “I don’t get to do your hair. That’s a whole turn *every day.*” He runs the brush up Steve’s forearm and circles the crook of his elbow, by way of punctuation.

“But then you go to work with it and that makes me…” Steve swallows, looking like he also thinks it seems silly to have an argument about who gets to make who happy. Bucky wants to make Steve happy *all the time* and maybe Steve is on the reverse side of the same page.

So Bucky makes a considering noise, like they do on the soap operas, and shades in Steve’s collarbones. “You orgasm *one* time,” Bucky points out, because this is deeply unfair and he needs to find a way around it. “You get *multiple* times with me.”

Steve turns a very interesting red color. “That’s. I mean. I’m not counting.”

“I am,” Bucky reassures him. “Don’t worry. We can fix it. Even if it takes a long time. Persistence is the key to victory.”

Steve, now extremely pink more or less everywhere but the elbows, blurts out, “Do you want to come to a dance night with me?” in about half a breath.

Bucky slows down with the brush, which may not be the main source of Steve’s breathless pinkness, but probably isn’t helping.

“My community center has a dance night,” Steve soldiers on. “And they, um. Since we’re. They’re real interested in meeting you.”

Bucky falls back into the pillows to think about it, stretching his legs over Steve’s middle to keep him there. Steve’s gone to the community center multiple times since they started going on dates,
for weekly cooking classes and a birthday party and a community garden harvest. He hasn’t invited Bucky before. Cosmo had plenty of articles titled *WHY HAVEN’T I BEEN INVITED TO MEET THE POD YET?* And *THE TRI-POD METHOD: THREE STEPS TO A STAND OUT FIRST IMPRESSION*, but since Bucky’s still unclear as to what kind of timeline to apply to their relationship he hasn’t found it necessary to study those sections yet.

Steve’s friends. “Like a pod?”

“I mean they… it’s, um. They don’t live here, or anything. But they want to meet you.”

“You like them.”

“Yeah, I do.” Steve’s hand find its way to Bucky’s ankle. Bucky absently stretches into the massage.

“Cosmo has a lot of advice for safe and fun first pod dates.” Bucky starts to get up to get his notebook. Steve sits up and smoothes a hand over Bucky’s hip, pinning him in place without any force at all.

“Is dancing on there?”

“Dancing is a fun and energetic group activity the fosters closeness and encourages teamwork,” Bucky says, omitting the part where the magazine had surrounded these points with a bright pink bubble captioned RAD, because he doesn’t know how to interject that.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Steve starts, because Bucky hasn’t actually said yes yet, and Steve always notices things like that. Steve likes holding open exit doors for Bucky for things. Bucky never takes them. He still likes seeing them there.

“Yes. Community dance night. That is an acceptable turn.” Bucky opens his hand and lets Steve pick up the brush.

-o-

Bucky shows up to dance night in the brown turtleneck he’d worn for their first date, his hair strictly combed out. Steve obeys the implicit invite and starts braiding, the two of them standing under the wisteria trellis over the community center’s side door. Steve can hear music already playing inside, a warm steady tune that feels familiar even though he doesn’t know it. Someone must have chased Mabel away from the music player; whenever it’s her turn to pick the cooking playlist, she defaults to music that’s just a wall of sound to smack your face into, ostensibly for fun, that the activity coordinator grudgingly plays at the lowest possible speaker volume. A month ago Mabel had demonstrated head banging for Steve and nearly cracked her cervical spine.

They pause just inside the doorway so Bucky can breathe in and get used to the new scents. His eyes only dart around to each exit once, so he must not be too stressed out, but his grip on Steve’s arm tightens for a few seconds.

“Good?”

Bucky nods. “Mabel, Shara and Josef,” he says. “Engineer, painter, park ranger. Fourteen grandchildren.” He puts his hand in his pocket and withdraws a bag of caramels, the individually paper wrapped ones sold in fancy stores. “Emergency backup.”

“They’re gonna love you,” Steve says.

Steve’s not just guessing. He’s gotten a preview of how pod matrons react to Bucky every time
his neighbors run into them in the hallways, and barely-suppressed glee seems to be the dominant response. Nikolas from 1B had even patted Bucky’s cheek the other day after Bucky helped him dig holes for autumn bulbs. Bucky had held still for it with the same look of intent concentration he wears as they walk into the main hall.

The walls and ceiling are festooned with crepe streamers, the recycled newsprint kind with headlines and the occasional comic strip pressed into the creases. All the lamps are low and warm, closer to candlelight than the clean white they use for cooking class, and Steve has a moment of disorienting deja vu. Even the accents are right. Only the smells of wax and cheap gin and unlaunched sweat are missing.

Bucky takes the lead smoothly when Steve falters, steering them towards the table where Mabel has loaded her plate to capacity with apple bacon fritters. She turns, sees them, squeaks in delight and immediately seizes Josef, who grabs Shara. All three of them descend like a plague of locusts, Mabel even forgetting her plate on the buffet table. Steve’s shoulders square up automatically.

“Steven,” Mabel says. She looks them both over head to toe, incandescent with vengeful delight. Steve swears her eyes immediately lock onto the still-healing hickey barely hidden under his shirt collar.

“Hi. Uh. This is Bucky,” Steve says, willing to accept total exsanguination if it means it’ll stop his blush from its imperialist aspirations. He’s positive his smell is ramping up to do something fantastically embarrassing. “Buck, these are my friends.”

“Oooohhhhhhhhhhhh,” Mabel, Shara and Josef say in unison, all of them grinning like pumpkins.

“You dance, son?” Mabel says as Shara expertly flanks Steve, takes his elbow and starts towing the group towards the refreshment table.

“Not lately,” Bucky says, which is a good sign considering he sometimes makes Steve tell his juice order to the O’s who run the corner cafe even though by this point all of them consider him a preferred customer.

“Me neither,” Josef says jokingly, wiggling his walker. “Don’t worry. They play all sorts of songs. We’ll pick it up no problem.”

“Why don’t you open up the floor?” Mabel twinkles at Steve and Bucky, because she is an instigator and a provocateur.

“If you won’t, I will,” Shara says, drawing an honest peacock feather fan out of their pocket and flicking it open like a paladin unsheathing a holy sword.

Bucky immediately lampreys himself to Steve’s arm, so Steve sidles them out onto the floor. They go largely unnoticed in Shara’s wake - some lucky gent in a velvet smoking jacket is about to undergo a lot of excitement across the room - and after a quick glance around to make sure he’s doing it right Steve puts one arm around Bucky’s waist and offers Bucky his other hand.

Bucky takes it, brow wrinkled like he’s trying to solve an arithmetic problem or remember if Steve left the stove on. They shuffle back and forth; Steve resolutely ignores the blush creeping up the back of his neck and wishes he didn’t have such an acute sense of when people are watching him. Bucky doesn’t even seem to notice, just frowns at their feet and then at the grip of their hands and then back at their feet again. He doesn’t smell displeased, though, and when Steve experimentally
loosens his grip Bucky tightens it, so it’s probably not because Steve has sweaty-feeling gloves or can’t follow the beat.

The music speeds up, trumpet and drums joining in, and it’s becoming less of a waltz and more of what Steve used to hear in wartime dancehalls. Steve’s just trying not to step on anyone’s feet when Bucky says “Oh,” under his breath, then “I know this,” and suddenly Steve’s flying.

For a second he thinks Bucky threw him, and - he did, only in a very different way than in the gym, because suddenly Bucky’s there catching him by the hips and he’s somehow on the ground again, stumbling, though not for long. Bucky’s grip is just as unforgiving as when he spars, only he’s using it to turn Steve, spin him, haul him under one arm and over the other, and this is - dancing? Steve would watch dancing sometimes and it looked fun but this is an extreme sport. Bucky whips him out and reels him back in again, slinging him around like he weighs nothing, like he’s in his old body again, and Steve shoots past a momentary blur that might be Mabel’s face gone obscene with wondrous glee. Steve would maybe try and say something only Bucky’s face is right there as he brings them close and spins them and he looks very - bright. His whole face is sharp with concentration but it’s the kind - like when Steve draws, Steve thinks. When he’s drawing something beautiful.

And since Bucky stopped wearing scentblock after the first time he rolled around in a bath with Steve, Steve can smell him, his mood expanding, glowing up the room. It’s delight tinged with wonder, airy and heady, and people are laughing around them, clapping along to the beat. Steve feels tipsy just breathing it in. He’s six-and-a-half feet of cartwheeling beefsteak as Bucky throws him into spins and he just tries not to break anything when he lands, but second by second that’s changing. Steve’s reflexes and Bucky’s control are doing most of the work for him, and it’s getting his blood up, not knowing what the next step will be, thrilling, even as he gets the hang of some of the repeating bits and starts to be able to anticipate some of Bucky’s moves. He doesn’t have to dance, he just has to follow, and Bucky is nothing if not explicit about what he wants. It’s nothing like combat but he’s lighting up anyway, the leather of his gloves squeaking in Bucky’s grip, their shoes smacking down onto the floor at the same time as Bucky motions for him to jump a split second before they do it and they come down together, perfectly in time. Bucky’s cheeks are red and his hair is coming out of Steve’s admittedly dissolute braid and he looks like he’s having the time of his life.

The song ends with a last jaunty chord. The room bursts into arthritic but extremely loud applause. Steve and Bucky look at each other, panting, Steve torn between trying to get more air through his mouth but wanting to use his nose to scent more, breathe Bucky’s happiness in deeper.


“Yeah,” Steve agrees. He’s tingling all over. No wonder everybody kept on setting up makeshift dancehalls in the war, even if it was just a couple of boards on the ground and everybody taking turns around one A stomping along to her harmonica. Why hadn’t he ever tried? The Howlies had gone out looking for music whenever they were in a city and sometimes Steve tagged along, but he’d only ever watched or helped clap or stomp, encouraging from the edges. He hadn’t known the moves, hadn’t learned them when everyone else had and it wouldn’t have done, for Captain America to go falling on his face on a simple dancefloor. That must have been it. He hadn’t known, not until Bucky showed him.

“Again?” Bucky offers, and the whole room goes up with cries of “Again!” and “Put the next one on, the Chattanooga Choo Choo!” and Steve remembers the existence of other people. Mabel and Shara and Josef are standing at the edge of the dance floor beaming at him, Josef thumping his fist
on his walker as he joins the calls for more.

“Encore!” Shara yells, and Bucky turns and winks.

“After this one, you can cut in,” he says, and Shara does a hip shimmy of victory.

Bucky’s version of the Chattanooga Choo Choo is more mentally and physically taxing than most of Steve’s SHIELD training exercises. Steve loves it, but he’s not sorry to pause for a cup of lemonade once it’s done. Josef introduces Bucky to the wonders of buffet-style eating while Shara drags Steve into a four-person cluster on the dance floor that starts out as a swing quartet and ends with Steve taking turns tossing his partners into the air, once they figure out he can lift two people at a time, one on each hand. It’s not that different from giving the toddlers in his reef airplane rides.

When Steve eventually returns Shara to their army of waiting suitors Bucky and Josef and Mabel have taken over a table. Judging by the carnage Josef has fed Bucky every snack in the room. Mabel has taken the tiny screwdrivers out of her purse and now she and Bucky are bent over Bucky’s arm, heads close together. “I have shredders,” Bucky is saying. “One of them started making a noise. Last week. A noise it didn’t make before, I mean. I checked the parts that open but I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“Might need to look at the motor,” Mabel says. “Bring it to the center, I’ve got a full workbench there. Steve’ll show you where to go.”

“She fixed my pinky,” Bucky says when he spots Steve, holding up his metal hand and flexing it. “See. No squeak.”

“Screws just needed a little tightening,” Mabel says. “And you can give it a nice oil soak when you get home.”

Steve had kind of liked the little squeak Bucky’s pinkie finger made. Just barely audible, like Bucky was hiding a small mouse in his hand somewhere, a nice Beatrix Potter-type mouse with a housecoat and a jaunty hat. But Bucky is smiling as he flexes his fingers, so Steve is reflexively happy, and generally if something’s squeaky that means it’s not well kept or starting to break down, and for Bucky Steve wants the opposite of that. It’s good to see Mabel and Bucky going through a diagnostic together, Bucky relaxed and content while Mabel peers at his pinkie through a thick lens that makes her eyeball look the size of a tangerine.

They stay late into the night, or at least as late as it gets for septuagenarians like them, which is still late enough that the snack they get on the walk home is from a vending machine because all the kiosks are closed.

“That was fun,” Bucky pronounces like he’s a judge passing down a sentence, but he’s still bright cheeked and smelling like a whole garden of happiness.

“We can ask the organizers to do dance nights more often,” Steve offers, and Bucky hooks his elbow in Steve’s and plants a fast, happy smooch on his mouth. It’s a quick kiss, warm and unthinking, the kind of thing you give to someone you’re comfortable with. Someone you know so well that kissing is just another thing you do. Someone you love without even thinking about it.

Steve takes it as a yes.

-o-

Bucky is having the time of his life.
He is discovering whole new emotions. He is dating. He is learning every day. He learns if he sets his whole body against Steve’s body, Steve will put his arms around him and squeeze and settle himself cheek to cheek until Bucky feels like doing more or letting go (Steve never lets go first, unless it’s to do more). He learns if he lays down in Steve’s bed pit and stretches his arms up and points his toes, Steve will look kind of concussed and then put his big hand right below Bucky’s collarbones and stroke all the way down, over his chest and stomach and hips and back up again. He learns that with some fumbling and positional experimentation he and Steve can lick each other at the same time, which makes him feel like he should’ve run into the street shouting Eureka! after that one.

And he likes talking to Steve. Lots of things that are complicated and confusing become less so after talking about them with Steve. Steve asks smart questions and he’s always willing to try things. Listening to Steve talk about adverts and memorable typefaces and mood-affecting colors is like taking a warm bath inside his head, only with associated pictures. He thinks Steve should maybe make some ads again, in the future. If he feels like switching the spec ops career to part time. It would be nice, Bucky thinks, to walk down the street and see an ad Steve made, telling people about a colorful new design of shoe or electric scooter or camping tent. It would be nice to see the world inside Steve’s apartment overflowing into the streets, spilling warmth and color like a sunrise.

And then he hears word of a HYDRA cell, active just over the border in Canada.

In some ways SHIELD is very inefficient. When something is “outside their jurisdiction” they have to wait and talk to politicians and ask for permission and negotiate border crossings. But Bucky has seen borders shift and merge and collapse in on each other like matchsticks, here today and gone tomorrow, and they’re not important anyway, not when it comes to something like this. HYDRA must be stopped. They hurt people. They make people into things.

And SHIELD thought it could use HYDRA, once upon a time. They might think so again. It was on Bucky to stop it last time, once he could.

It’s been a while since his last HYDRA raid. A while since his last SHIELD combat op, too. He’s mostly been sent out on short courier missions these past couple of months - passing papers for Fury, who is the only one who ever assigns him missions at all. He doesn’t have anything coming up and he won’t be missed, if he slips away for a while.

Steve will miss him.

Steve makes him want to say secrets. He makes Bucky want to tell him everything, anything, from the butterfly that briefly landed on his shoulder yesterday to the things that surface in the dark of his head, things he saw and felt and did that show up in his nightmares. Steve doesn’t pry, doesn’t ask questions Bucky has no answer to, like what happened to your family or where did you go to school or how did you lose your arm. If Bucky says I have to go away for a few days, he won’t demand an explanation.

Bucky… wants to give him one. Steve is a good person. A good captain. But. This is Bucky’s job. He has to fix what he helped break. He can tell Steve about it after.

He has to tell Steve he’s leaving, though.

How does he tell Steve he’s leaving.

He’s coming back. Obviously he’s coming back. But he can’t say when. It’s not that Steve isn’t trustworthy, it’s just you don’t break opsec unless you really, really have to, and right now Bucky doesn’t really have to. And Steve runs missions too. He’ll understand.
Bucky shuttles around Location Redacted for much too long, trying to think of how to talk to Steve. It’s stupid. It’s silly. He should just say it. Steve, I have an op. I’m gonna be gone. For some days. And nights. Easy. Why does his throat feel full of congealed oatmeal.

He’s gotten too used to doing everything with Steve. This will be good for him. For them. A little bit of space and time apart, to remind himself that he can do things alone. He’s spent years alone. It’s not good to lapse in training. It doesn’t do to let skillsets rust.

He lifts the floor tiles that cover his main weapons compartment and starts packing a bag with firearms.

-o-

Steve comes home to find Bucky already there, processing what looks like an assembly line of guns. He’s sitting on the floor with a rifle taken apart in front of him, cleaning it bit by bit; in a line next to it are three pistols, eight knives and a few other assorted things that look like explosives and rope. His mask is right by his hip.

There’s a big container of scentblock, too. That, somehow, jars a lot more than the rest of it. Bucky hasn’t bothered with any in - months. It’s been months.

“Hey,” Steve says, and Bucky silently puts down the pieces of handgun he’s polishing and scuttles under Steve’s arm.

“Hey,” Steve says again, looping him in. Bucky settles into what Steve’s come to understand is his favorite standing up position: chin on Steve’s shoulder, front pressed along Steve’s side, where he can see behind Steve or tuck his face behind Steve’s ear just by turning his head. His metal arm loops around Steve’s stomach, just below his ribs.

“Got an op?” Steve says.

“Yeah.”

“Gone long?”

“Dunno.”

“Need help?”

Bucky’s quiet for a while. Steve eyes the guns. There’s a lot of them. Bucky’s a sniper and a scout; usually for anything this involved, it’s a job for Steve and May and Alpha STRIKE. But he hasn’t heard of anything coming down the pike.

“Not... this time,” Bucky finally says, and Steve doesn’t like how he braces himself a little. He thinks about asking how extracurricular this particular mission is. He thinks about Peggy standing firm in a tent with all her Agent Carter drawn up high on her shoulders like a knight’s cloak. He thinks, mostly, about the brisk cafeteria debrief Natasha gave him about Bucky. What he did while Steve was cold in the ocean.

Bucky didn’t have to gear up in Steve’s apartment. None of the equipment he’s checking is Steve’s, or anything Steve’s seen before. He took it from his own place and brought it here, where Steve would see it, where he’d be bound to ask about it. But he’s not asking for Steve to come with him. He’s just giving Steve as much information as he can, and asking Steve to trust him to know what he’s doing.

It’s hard, knowing Bucky will be going into danger without him, maybe without a team behind
him at all. But folks are always saying a good pod is based on trust, and Steve’s no quitter.


-o-

Steve promised Estefania down the hall that he’d help her tear down the old wallpaper in her kids’ room and help move furniture and paint, so that’s his Saturday, and Sunday morning he takes advantage of the lack of bedpit lazing to strip the covers off every pillow and run three sets of laundry. He cleans the rest of the apartment before lunch, then goes out to help in the reef garden.

The garden seems more crowded with volunteers than a regular Sunday, and disproportionately tilted towards supervising pod matrons who keep handing him a new task as soon as he’s finished the last. They have him move patio furniture and the grills around, then powerwash the grill pit, then haul bags of soil and fertilizer outside the communal gardening shed so he can patch a leak in the roof before putting everything back where it was. The wheelbarrow that’s usually beside the shed is conspicuously absent.

What should have been a week-long project for a team of three is done by dusk. He’s invited to four separate dinners and he doesn’t know if it’s because people can already smell that Bucky is gone, or if they’re just trying to be nice, but he knows he wouldn’t be good company right now. His phone keeps ending up in his hand without him thinking about it.

“We used to call that a phone yawn,” says Beatrice, when she catches him staring at it. “When you take it out and don’t do anything with it.”

Steve keeps meaning to text Bucky, but Bucky still doesn’t have a phone. And he’s off doing something important and secretive and Steve is… not fine with it, but he understands. Natasha and Bucky both have skill sets that sometimes need him and sometimes really don’t. No one person is suited to every kind of work that needs doing. That’s the whole point of pods in the first place.

Beatrice pushes herself up from the newly repositioned patio chair and pats his arm. “We’ll find you more to do, dear. An idle mind makes mischief.”

True to her word, a steady stream of neighbors drop by in the following week to borrow his reach for putting up high shelves, or his carrying capacity for re-arranging furniture, or just to shove him into a room full of preschoolers so they can scale him like a human climbing wall. It helps, he thinks. He installs new insulation for the reef and attends briefings at SHIELD and doesn’t try to bully the Op administrators into telling him where Bucky’s gone, which he suspects Beatrice would classify as mischief.

It gets better after a few days. Steve stops expecting to spot Bucky in the hallways of HQ or walk through his front door and hear him splashing in the tub. He used to wait for Peggy like this, when he was stuck doing paperwork while she and Dernier got to do something fun like blow up a bridge, and after the first sleepless night he finds that rhythm again, the patience of a long march. He stops looking at his phone.

The couch still seems cold without Bucky there. Steve pulls a blanket out of where it’s wedged between the cushions and tugs it up high around his ears like it’s a turtleneck, tucking his chin so he can catch the scent of mingled SteveandBucky without outright stuffing his face into it. He can't help missing Bucky, but he doesn't have to be melodramatic about it. If they both keep on working for SHIELD, they'll be on separate missions sometimes. Now is as good a time as any to practice getting used to it.

The blanket gets him thinking, though. He leaves the cooking show he’s been half-heartedly
watching - there are more episodes of The Reef Unbroken in his queue, but it doesn’t seem right to watch them without Bucky - and goes to his linen closet. His family quilt is still folded neatly where he unpacked it, untouched, on a shelf apart from all the work-a-day blankets he and Bucky have been enthusiastically making a mess of and washing and folding and making a mess of all over again.

When he picks it up, the quilt is light in his hands, the batting worn thin from hard use. Steve runs his thumb over a yellow paisley patch he had watched his mother sew on, during one of the innumerable days of his childhood when he was feverish enough for his Ma to stay home with him during the day. It was from one of Uncle Ian’s shirts, from Ma’s basket of fabrics; in there were Grandma Shannon’s scarves, Auntie Siobhan’s dresses, his father’s shirts. She’d let him pick the fabric scrap and shown him how to lay the stitches. He’d known it would be his job to keep the quilt in good repair, someday. His job to add to it.

Steve realizes he’s been standing in the closet doorway for too long. He coughs to clear the thickness from his throat and picks up the mending kit the linens shop had thrown in free when he’d bought a quarter of their stock of blankets. It has a nice supply of embroidery floss in bold, bright colors, silky shining lines of goldenrod and cranberry and cobalt.

In his memory, the quilt is as big as a circus tent. He used to sit with the quilt over his head so he could look at the light filtering through all the different colored patches, a stained glass window that was soft to the touch. Now it barely stretches the length of the couch. It’s big enough to cover him and Bucky, though, and that’s as big as it needs to be. For now. Steve tries not to daydream about some future time when he might have a pod big enough to warrant adding new squares. It will come in time, or it won’t, and he has a different task in mind for right now.

The names embroidered on the quilt border unspool in his memory as he runs his fingers over the stitches. Steve Rogers. Sarah Rogers. Joseph Rogers. Shannon Donaghue. Anna Delaney. Ian Delaney. Siobhan Lee. His mother and father, their podmates, their parents, their parents’ podmates, and on and on, Steve’s family even if he’d never known most of them, even if they’d never known him. Their names are on his family quilt, and that makes them his to remember.

He’s barely touched the quilt since retrieving it from the Smithsonian. It still has the same names that have been there since before Steve enlisted, and that means it’s out of date. Putting Bucky’s name down without asking would be presumptuous, but there are other names Steve has a responsibility to add, other podmates he wants to make sure are remembered. It’s time he stopped neglecting that responsibility. His ma had taught him, on scrap cloth and dish towels, and she had let him trace his own name in the way she stitched it, all crisp and neat. The way she told it, she had asked for the quilt right after feeding him for the first time. Exhausted to the bone but wanting the big blanket heaped over her and to stitch him into their pod before she fell asleep like there was some magic in it. His eyes are wet, but clear enough that he can thread a needle. Steve choses a deep forest green, finds an unmarked stretch of cream fabric that will provide a good backdrop to the rich colors of the embroidery thread, and gets to work.

He doesn’t use green for Peggy. She belongs in red.

-o-

Natasha calls him two days later. “We need you,” is all she says, but Steve is already moving from the first word, from the tone of voice alone.

“What?”

“SHIELD HQ.”
It’s three in the morning and Steve cuts across the city no problem, the streets empty save for delivery trucks and the occasional car. He jumps the security gate, flashing his shield up, and he has a tail, but they can take care of it later. He goes straight to the briefing room, not bothering to hit the locker room first; if it’s a live situation he’ll be suiting up on the jet.

But Natasha’s not there, and neither is anyone else. The lights are on but the room’s empty, screens powered down; Steve goes back out to the corridor just as Natasha sticks her head out of a smaller conference room down the hall.

“Steve,” she says, and he hustles over. Hill is in there, surrounded by her pack of assistants, most of them rattling away at laptops and whispering urgently to each other. Steve stops short at the doorway: the whole room stinks of anxiety worse than an air raid shelter.

“Steve,” Natasha repeats before he can get a deeper sniff. “We need your help. Soldier came back injured and now we don’t know where he is.”

Steve forgets about trying to get a read of the room. “Injured?”

“He went on another one of his unsanctioned solo trips. Kellie -” Natasha gestures at a short agent in a junior tech uniform who looks like she has some regrets about her career choices - “saw him come in through the loading bay at 0245 and that’s the last we had eyes on him. None of the cameras or sensors are picking anything up.”

“He was limping,” Kellie puts in, looking scared but determined to say it. “And he was pressing onto himself, like, here, and his jacket was all ripped up, and I saw part of maybe a bandage under there but it was white and red and he really, really smelled like blood.”

“The loading bay?” Steve repeats.

Kellie nods.

“Show me.”

Kellie takes them down, hurrying down the hall but smelling determined now that the situation is being addressed. Steve focuses on that, on how Bucky was moving under his own power, on how he has to stay calm because if he doesn’t his own scent will blow through this base like napalm and Bucky won’t be able to get the help he needs as fast as he needs it.

They exit the stairwell on a ground floor level. Kellie leads them through swinging doors into a loading bay, empty except for parked humvees.

“He went through there,” Kellie says, pointing at a door blocked from the security cameras by a gear cabinet. “I looked inside, but he was gone.”

“Thank you,” Steve says quietly. He can smell blood, even if the bay floor is too dark for him to see it. “I’ll take it from here.”

Kellie gives him an uneasy look, but when Natasha just rests a hand lightly on Steve’s arm for a second before drawing away, she follows without complaint. Steve waits until the door closes behind them, then shuts his eyes and inhales.

Steve didn’t have much luck tracking Bucky through SHIELD before, but that was before he spent weeks marinating in Bucky’s scent. And now Bucky is bleeding. He opens the door and walks through it with his eyes still closed, following the thread of blood and pain.

Steve’s nose leads him to the basement, then the sub-basement, then further past several
maintenance access doors. The corridors wind in towards the center of the building, the HVAC ducts getting larger as they get closer to the central furnace. His footsteps are almost drowned out by the pervasive humming of generators a level below.

He loses the scent at a four-way hallway junction. It’s too close to the garbage rooms and incinerator in the basement, the marshy smell of food that’s most of the way to compost and the burnt paper crispness of files fed to the furnace drowning everything else out. He circles the floor anyway, slowly, looking for a clue.

On his second lap he finds a spot of blood, dried, right under a dark gap in the fluorescent overhead lights. The spot is in front of an unmarked door, although small drilled holes in the wall next to it show where a sign used to be.

Steve slowly pushes open the door. There’s a faint scrape marring the paint on either side of the door at about the right height for a clothesline wire boobytrap, but there’s nothing there now, and no other traps he can spot. His first breath tells him he’s in the right place. The whole room is permeated with Bucky’s sick-smell, the watery, acidic thing he’d smelled like when they’d first met, and over that, in a cloying splash, the stink of blood.

It’s a bathroom. Or at least, it used to be a bathroom. There are stalls along one wall and sinks along the other. Bucky has built a nest in the ten or so square feet in between. Steve can see more than one of the thermal blankets from SHIELD’s emergency kits wadded up around a massive heap of shredded paper in the middle of the floor, and behind that is a row of - shredders? Are those paper shredders?

“Buck?” Steve calls out, well aware that sneaking up on operatives who’re hurting or unconscious is a great way to collect concussions. There’s a moment of silence, then a brief rustling.

He takes that as invitation enough to step inside. The paper scraps shift, the dark outline of Bucky’s uniform becoming visible under a few inches of black-and-white camouflage. He’s curled up on his side, arm over his ribs, breathing shallowly. His eyes are gleaming slits.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Steve says softly. He crouches in front of the paper mound, the bathroom tile cold under his knee. “Are you hurt bad?”

Bucky shakes his head, but it doesn’t look very emphatic.

“Are you still bleeding?”

Bucky looks down, then moves his shoulders slightly in a shrug.

“Will you let me see?”

There’s a rustle, and then light: Bucky takes his hand out of the inside of his jacket, a blue chemstick glowing in his palm.

Steve moves the paper aside and looks. It’s - not that bad. Bucky patched himself up pretty well: the bandage on his shoulder is lumpy but clean, no blood showing through. He left the lacerations in his thigh and hip unbandaged, just stapled them both and poured the liquid stitches glue-stuff over top. But it’s all clean and holding.

Steve ghosts a hand over his hip. “You stitched yourself up, huh?” Bucky nods. “Did you take any painkiller?” Another nod. “Let’s get you to Medical.”

Bucky’s metal hand is suddenly gripping hard on Steve’s wrist. He doesn’t say anything but he smells like no, emphatic enough that Steve resists the urge to scoot back.
"Or not," Steve amends, and the grip on his wrist relaxes.

Okay. Field medicine rules it is. “Can you show me what you took?”

Bucky’s slow to release Steve’s wrist, but then he reaches carefully into the depths of the nest and extracts a plastic first aid box. Steve opens it for him; it’s entirely full of those modern orange pill bottles. Bucky touches a finger to one, two, three bottles - painkiller, antibiotics, another substance Steve memorizes but doesn’t recognize.

“Got stabbed?” Steve guesses.

Bucky nods and touches his shoulder. “Fence,” he says croakily, pointing at his hip.

“Barbed wire?”

Bucky nods. Steve looks back at the little first aid box. “Do you think you’ll need anything else?”

Bucky shakes his head. Steve looks him over again, lingering on the bandages. He’s got a mini pharmacy on hand, and if he’s anything like Steve his infection risk is minimal, but Steve guesses his throat is dry and hurting, and the only water source in here is the sinks. The hard tile under the nest is leeching heat. Steve’s seen worse sickrooms - Hell, he’s been in worse sickrooms, when half the tenement had diphtheria and they’d been quarantined together on one floor to make the nursing easier - but Bucky doesn’t have to settle for not bad, not when Steve has something better to offer. “Will you come ho - to my place?”

Bucky blinks up at him, then slowly raises one arm, reaching for Steve’s neck. Steve takes the hint and scoops him up carefully, an arm at his back and under his knees. He hooks the first aid box with a pinkie through the handle, in case Bucky needs more later.

Then Bucky makes a hand sign, wait, and Steve stops. Bucky gestures to be brought back to the corner under the window, so Steve crouches down again, ready to pick up whatever Bucky wants to take along.

The wall itself is covered in articles, Steve realizes, clippings and pages from magazines taped up in clusters and rows. It’s hard to see in the dim light, but he catches the Cosmopolitan logo and several others: magazines for grooming and relationships and style. Like the ones he’d brought when they were doing bumbler research. The articles get neater as they progress along the wall and acquire notes along the margins, but none of them have the colored tabs Bucky uses in his notebooks now, and Steve thinks these are older. Bucky doesn’t look at them now, focused instead on a clear patch of wall below them.

Bucky lifts up a tile in the wall and carefully extracts something brown. It’s his card, Steve realizes, as a hint of cedar wafts up. The card he drew for Bucky before their date. Bucky handles it like it’s a badly injured butterfly and tucks it into the front pocket of his vest.

Steve reflexively squeezes Bucky to his chest, remembering at the last moment to moderate his grip and not aggravate any injuries just because he couldn’t keep ahold of the emotions flapping like landed fish in his chest. “Ready to go?” he asks instead, slowly rising.

Bucky bites his lip and signs wait again. It’s hard to just stand there with Bucky smelling like injury and pain, but he’s not in immediate danger and Steve already feels better now that he’s holding him and sharing body heat and breathing in the scent of him. Steve doesn’t smell any fresh blood or infection. He hopes Bucky heals as fast as he does.

It takes Bucky a while to put the words together, but eventually he says, “Will you come back for
them?"

Steve glances around. “Come back for...”

Bucky points. Steve looks over at the row of paper shredders. “Yeah,” he says. If Bucky wants six paper shredders Steve will bring them. “I’ll come back and get them.”

“And the printer.”


Bucky seems pacified by this. He lays his head on Steve’s shoulder again and lets out a small sigh, resting the hand holding the chemlight on his stomach.

It’s not the worst place for a nest, Steve thinks mindlessly as he eases the door open with his back. The vague smell of garbage and disinfectant conceals his scent, and the heat from the incinerator keeps the space reasonably warm. He focuses on the upsides so he won’t have to think about Bucky coming back here alone and hurting, like he must have done god knows how many times before; Bucky had patched himself up too well for this to be anything but routine to him. Steve can’t think about that. He’s here now, and Bucky’s letting him help, and Steve will move Bucky to somewhere that’s safe and warm without the garbage smell and the drain in the middle of the floor, somewhere Steve can make him soup and help him change his bandages and wrap him in the softest blankets the 21st century has to offer.

Halfway out of the building Steve changes course and veers for the motor pool, because Bucky is injured and Steve’s only vehicle is a motorcycle. Steve walks straight past the guard booth and hones in on the nearest car that looks like it will give the least bumpy ride. He fails to remember he has to check out a set of keys, but Bucky pats his arm to get his attention and then points at the driver’s seat. Steve sets him down in it, and Bucky proceeds to open up a panel beneath the steering wheel and do a couple things with different colored wires. He also pulls out a square of plastic that he crushes in his metal fist and sprinkles on the asphalt outside the car door. “Tracker,” he says raspily.

Steve doesn’t bother mentioning that his address is on file with SHIELD, and if it wasn’t he’s pretty sure they’d know anyway, what with how many “secret” agents they have hanging around his reef like worried nannies. If it makes Bucky feel safer to ride in a car without a tracker, that’s what they’ll do. Steve can buy SHIELD a replacement later.

They drive home without incident, Bucky curled up on the back seat, Steve checking in the rear mirror every three seconds and blowing protective scent practically out his ears. They don’t run into any neighbors when Steve carries Buck up through the reef; he vaguely registers that right about now is when the earliest risers are out jogging and everyone else is still asleep. Bucky rouses enough at the door to open it himself while Steve is debating just kicking it in so he wouldn’t have to put Bucky down.

At least Steve’s bed is prepared this time. He carefully lays Bucky on the new flannel sheets, drawing the canopy down until it’s a warm dark cave with just one slice of light coming through the gap where Steve’s leaning over him. Bucky settles in, not moving all that much but small muscles relaxing around his eyes.

Steve leans in and kisses his forehead, using the opportunity to check for any fever. Bucky’s skin is slightly cool but not clammy, and definitely no temperature. “Snack?” Steve says, pulling the blankets higher and tucking them in.

Bucky nods, looking surprised by the offer but not enough to question or turn down providence.
Steve heads for the kitchen, where peanut and peanut butter products have colonized fully two thirds of his pantry. Bucky needs something easy to eat, preferably in conveniently bite-sized pieces, and luckily for him that’s what the future seems to be all about. Steve gathers up a bag of peanut butter bites, a package of peanut butter cookies, some peanut butter popcorn and peanut brittle. From the icebox he takes a bottle of something that promises to taste just like a fresh milkshake (Peanut Butter Blast! flavor) and some lemon tea.

Upon consideration, Steve also grabs a jar of Extra Chunky and a spoon.

Bucky’s eyes are closed when Steve pulls back the curtain, but he rouses enough to reach for the bottled milkshake when Steve crawls in beside him. He sips sideways as Steve snuggles up against his side, careful not to jostle him, and when Bucky’s eyelids start to droop barely half a minute later Steve makes sure it doesn’t spill.

Bucky naps with the milkshake bottle held against his chest, and when he blinks awake sometime in the late morning he looks blearily around the bed pit before visibly honing in on the pile of snacks. Steve, who had been lying motionless next to him while trying to pump out nothing but safety smells, immediately ferries them over. The fact that Bucky has an appetite is great news.

“How’re you feeling?” Steve asks softly.

Bucky glances down and prods testingly at his thigh. “Whoa, careful,” Steve says, catching his hand. The painkillers must still be going strong. “Gentle. Just because it doesn’t hurt bad doesn’t mean it’s not damaged.”

He sounds exactly like every nurse who’s ever had to deal with his outpatient procedures in SHIELD medical, but it does the trick. Bucky gives his own leg an apologetic pat.

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“I missed you too.”

“I miss you when I’m asleep,” Bucky continues, frowning. “Sometimes you die.”

The painkillers must be going really strong. “I’m right here, buddy.”

Bucky looks at him another moment and then pats Steve’s cheek, putting his whole hand flat along Steve’s head. Steve catches and holds it, turning to kiss Bucky’s wrist. Bucky paws at the snacks for a moment. Steve opens the peanut butter cookies for him and instead of reaching out, Bucky just opens his mouth, flopped out in a boneless sprawl, except for where he’s still trying to hold his hand up to touch Steve’s face.

Steve feeds him a cookie, because he’s not a monster, but he makes Bucky sit up first against the pillows so he won’t have survived the mission just to choke on crumbs. Bucky slumps resentfully against Steve at first but gets motivated pretty quick by the food, reaching for the hazelnut clusters on his own.

He should probably have some fruit. It takes a while, but Steve manages to persuade Bucky to detach from him long enough for him to go cut up some apples and mango and carrot chunks. That’ll keep Buck from getting scurvy, at least. They’ll need to find a nurse at some point. Steve’s pretty sure Mabel mentioned a niece working in a trauma unit. Maybe she can be persuaded to do a house call, if Steve can properly convey the offer of ‘Captain America will owe you one hell of a favor’ without coming across as presumptive or crass. Bucky’s stable, but a trained medic’s take is worth its weight in gold.

The phone rings. Steve sweeps his head around like a startled meerkat for a full three rings before
he remembers phones exist, remembers he has a phone, and remembers where he put it. He picks up: it’s Natasha.

“Steve,” Natasha says very carefully. “Where is the Winter Soldier?”

“Uh,” Steve says, belatedly realizing he’d walked out of HQ and essentially stolen a SHIELD vehicle without so much as leaving a note. “My couch?”

There’s a pause as Natasha takes this in. “And what is he doing there?”

Steve leans over to get a look into the living room pillow pit, where the muffled chewing noises brook no interruption. “Eating peanut butter?”


“Yes?”

“That’s all? He’s... fine? Not - erratic?”

“He’s not using a spoon,” Steve notes. “But I don’t know that I’d call that erratic. Inefficient, maybe.”

Bucky shoots him a half-guilty look from where he’s chin deep in the Extra Chunky. “We’re alright, Nat,” Steve says. “He’s healing up. I’ll call you tomorrow if we need anything.”

There’s a brief silence. “You’ll call me tomorrow either way.”

“I’ll call you,” Steve agrees, and hangs up when the line clicks. Natasha could probably help with the medic question, but he doesn’t want to raise that until Bucky’s a little more coherent. The important thing for early healing is to keep him hydrated and fueled up. With that in mind, Steve heads to the pantry.

“Hey,” Steve says, handing Bucky a jar. “I think you’d like this.”

Bucky looks down at the label, focusing with difficulty. “Nutella,” he reads aloud.

“It’s a chocolate hazelnut spread. It’s good on toast, or inside crepes. Natasha likes it with ice-cream. I’ll... get you another jar,” Steve says, because by the time he’s finished his first three sentences Bucky has scooped out half the jar and eaten it straight off his metal fingers. By the look of it, it tastes like religion.

-o-

The next day, SHIELD watches Captain America pull up in the Honda Accord he took out of the motor pool yesterday, go inside, and then proceed to carry out a total of six paper shredders of various sizes and one desktop printer. Then he starts to systematically remove the plants from the building. A few people think, tentatively, about asking him why, but he smells exactly the same as he does going into a firefight, all calm purpose and iron-hard determination, and nobody can quite work up the resolve to slow him down. He gets an unofficial honor guard instead, as people line the halls to watch what he’s doing. One of the junior agents even holds the door for him when he carries the big potted tree from the breakroom out and settles it into the backseat. He leaves without incident.

There’s a mirroring honor guard when he gets back to the reef, only this one is made up of beaming matrons sending their teenagers to hold doors for Steve and filling the air with the rich pumpkiny scent of approval and satisfaction. Steve catches more than one whisper of he’s moving
Bucky looks like he might try to get up from the couch when Steve comes in with the first plant, but Steve persuades him to stay curled up under his mound of blankets and just point at where to put everything Steve carries in. The paper shredders wind up in a loose circle in the living room, with most of the plants in between them in spots that get the correct amount of sunlight. Steve sets the printer onto the table by the couch and gives it a friendly little pat.

“Welcome home,” Steve says, feeling a little silly but not nearly enough to outweigh the startled pleasure on Bucky’s face when he overhears. He ducks his head and starts tidying up, shifting things around so the printer and shredders look integrated into his home decor, or as integrated as possible when he’d started out with no home decor to speak of. They can re-decorate later. Maybe buy curtains together. Steve’s imagination ambushes him with a vision of Bucky running the booklet of curtain fabric samples over his cheek and he has to go and check on Bucky before he gets any more ideas. Bucky’s injured and here Steve is thinking about velvet.

“Does everything look okay?” Steve asks, sitting down on the arm of the couch and not saying anything about future decor conferencing.

Bucky looks around, nods, then points at the third paper tray on the printer. Steve opens it and finds instruction manuals inside for the shredders and the printer, one for each model. When he tries to hand them to Bucky, Bucky pushes them gently into Steve’s chest.

“For me? Thank you,” Steve says. Bucky gives him an expectant look, so he sets the stack of manuals on the arm of the couch, settles in next to Bucky, and starts reading. Bucky leans into his side and starts in on his third jar of nutella.

“What’s that?”

Steve looks around, at Bucky first because it’s the first thing he’s said in a little while and he’s sounding more awake now. He’s looking at the edge of the bedpit: Steve’s sewing is still out, the quilt folded up next to his basket of needles and thread.

“Oh. It’s - my family quilt. Did you,” Bucky says, his eyes so soft Steve can’t even look at him, except that looking away is completely impossible, so he’s just going to have to put up with his insides wavering like a mirage. “My family quilt.”

“Steve Rogers,” Bucky reads, his eyes so soft Steve can’t even look at him, except that looking away is completely impossible, so he’s just going to have to put up with his insides wavering like a mirage. “My family quilt.”

“My Ma.”

“Your family quilt.” Bucky runs his thumb over the brick red Steve and smiles.

“I added some names while you were away.” Steve flips the quilt open further, spreading it over both their laps. The new lines of embroidery are bright and vivid compared to the comfortably faded names laid down by others. “My old unit, from before. And Peggy. We never filed the pod paperwork, what with the war, but.” Steve has to stop and wait for his throat to unstick itself.

Bucky tilts his head sideways like an inquisitive pigeon to look at the new names, a line forming between his eyebrows as he reads. “Gabe Jones.”
“That’s right,” Steve says. “He was a Private. Hell of a linguist. Taught us all to cuss in a dozen languages, real cosmopolitan like.”

“Timothy Dugan.”

“God, he hated being called Timothy. Monty did it just to annoy him. Everyone called him--”

“Dum Dum,” Bucky finishes with him. His forehead crease is deeper. “His hat. He had a hat.”

Steve stares at him. “You… read up on us?” he asks weakly, even as he knows, impossibly, that’s not it. Bucky didn’t say it the way history people say it, the way people say things they’ve read about or watched in a film. Bucky said it like he was excavating a memory.

“Read about you,” Bucky says distantly. “There were. Memos. Not about them.”

“You knew Dum Dum,” Steve says quietly. Bucky, brow still furrowed, gives a slow nod. He doesn’t seem to have noticed Steve’s confusion.


Steve doesn’t let any of the questions trying to climb up his throat escape. That’s not how this works. When Bucky wants him to know something, he tells him. He doesn’t understand how any of this is possible, but as this new knowledge sloshes around in his head other flakes of insight float to the surface like panned gold. Bucky’s family being gone. Bucky knowing all the dances Steve grew up with. The way both of them move through the world like the terrain is brand new and it’s taking all their concentration to chart a safe course. He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t ask any questions, but he can’t help the way his heart rate doubles as he starts to draw conclusions.

Bucky looks at him in a way that Steve doesn’t quite know how to read, then seems to come to some kind of decision. He looks around, rifles through the snack pile, and hands Steve a packet of peanut crunch balls and a bottle of milkshake.

Steve takes them with the solemnity they were given. Then Bucky pops open a plate on the inside of his metal bicep, sticks his hand in there and fishes out - a USB drive. He leans over to the printer, plugs the USB into the side and pokes a couple of buttons. The printer beeps. After several seconds of whirring, pages start to slide out.

When Bucky returns the USB to the compartment inside his arm, Steve sees it also contains the sparkly pin he put in his hair on their first date. Helpless affection rises up in him like a flood tide of molasses. There’s nothing for it but to lean in and kiss the top of Bucky’s head again. Bucky turns and butts his forehead into Steve’s jaw, friendly like, and Steve buries his nose in Bucky’s hair.

The printer gives a final whirr and spits out the last page. Bucky carefully neatens the edges of the stack and then pushes it towards Steve.

The first page has a US Army header, one Steve’s eyes skip right over, only to jerk back up as he realizes exactly how familiar that particular format is. Everything he’s seen from the Army in cross-departmental briefing packets nowadays looks different, but Steve’s own enlistment papers and mission orders had looked something like this.

James Buchanan Barnes, DOB 3/10/1917, it says, right at the top. Steve stares at it for a few long seconds.
“This is your file,” Steve says, and Bucky nods. “Okay. Okay.”

Steve reads it. Name, date of birth, next of kin, home address - his heart does a funny little jump when he recognizes the street address, close to Steve’s old tenement but a few rungs up the income ladder - he takes it all in. There’s a headshot of a handsome young soldier on the second page, not quite smiling at the camera, head tilted back. It takes Steve a long moment to identify the soldier as Bucky. The image is grainy and over-exposed from repeated photocopying, but that’s not why; the confident jut of Bucky’s jaw, the impossibly young face, are what throw him off.

Steve startles a little when Bucky taps his arm and nudges the milkshake on the table. He swallows hard and takes a drink. What he just read is starting to sink in.

“You were in the war,” Steve says. “You… the 107th. Oh, Christ.” He puts his hand over his mouth, setting the milkshake down. “Peg and I raided a prison camp. That’s… most of the soldiers we recovered were from the 107th. They’d been used for - experiments.”

Bucky nods. He doesn’t look upset, just - focused. He reaches over, picks up the top page of the file, puts it in Steve’s hand and then gently guides it over to the shredder.

Steve watches the page steadily get crunched down. There’s a plastic window on the front of the container, and he can see the shredded pieces of the page tumble down to mix with other ribbons of paper. Bucky’s nest in the basement bathroom had been full of them, drifts of crinkly paper strands like snow.

Steve reads the rest of the file in silence. Occasionally Bucky gives a loud slurp of milkshake, which oddly enough helps a lot. Bucky’s right here next to Steve, for all that horrible things happened to him, and he smells like peanut butter and clean bandages and contentment. His bare foot is tucked under Steve’s calf. And judging by the calm, patient way he occasionally moves Steve to shred the pages, he’s processing through this stuff all right.

At the end of the file, the Army headers give way to plain text and the writing style goes from Bureaucratic, Military to something a lot more disjointed. It takes Steve half a page to realize he’s reading a mission report Bucky wrote. Not one he ever turned in, judging by the lack of annotations or signatures, just a personal record. There’s a stack as thick as his thumb of missions Bucky executed and dutifully recorded. The last file in the stack has a mission plan and preliminary intel, but no final report. Steve checks the date - Bucky wrote it two weeks ago.

“I got them,” Bucky says, surfacing from the last dregs of the milkshake and seeing what Steve’s looking at. “There was an active cell. Stockpiling rifles. Explosives.” He frowns. “There were more personal than expected. Personal. Personnel.”

“You think they might have been warned you were coming?”

Bucky shakes his head. “Solo op. No leaks.”

And that’s - not a surprise, exactly. None of his self-made mission files made reference to op support beyond scavenged intel, comments overheard or pulled out of unrelated SHIELD briefings that Bucky quietly assembled into actionable intelligence. And then he went right out and acted on it, with extreme prejudice.

The thought shouldn’t make Steve want to squeeze him like a favorite pillow, but there it is nonetheless.

That’s not the only feeling, though. “Hey,” Steve says. “Next time you get wind of a HYDRA cell. Tell me about it so I can help. May and Natasha and the others - I bet they’d help too.”

“But you don’t have backup. And you get hurt.”

Bucky looks down at himself, frowning. “Not usually.”

“What about just me,” Steve says. “Next time you hear about an op that needs to stay quiet - I can sneak too. No politics. Just me.”

Bucky looks at him, still woozy but visibly concentrating. “You want to?”

“I really want to,” Steve says fervently. “I’m not as stealthy as you, but I can guard a perimeter with the best of them. Or if you need something punched, I’m your guy.”

“Okay.”

“Okay,” Steve says, relieved. Okay. He’d really like to bring the full force of May and Natasha and Alpha STRIKE on any nascent HYDRA heads that are apparently still emerging, but he also sees Bucky’s point about needing to move fast, give no warning. They can figure it out.

“I punched through a tank,” Bucky informs Steve. “Like a tin can. Chunk.” He makes the sound effect with his hands and his face, gesturing and blowing his cheeks up. Then he looks around at the wrapper remains of the devastated snack population. “I’m hungry.”

“Let me make you some lunch,” Steve says, automatic.

He goes to the kitchen, feeling slightly unreal as he tries to decide what to make. Soup, probably. A second later he realizes Bucky’s following him, or at least trying, so Steve scoops up the blanket sandwich with Bucky filling and sets him up at the table where he can see the kitchen and Steve can make sure he doesn’t fall down and hit his anything on anything.

It’d take too long to make anything but tomato cream, so Steve gets out a can of tomato puree and starts chopping garlic. He heats up the pan - might as well make cheese sandwiches to dip - and thinks. It’s - well, it’s not like this changes anything. Bucky’s still Bucky. Still the person he’s been this whole time.

“Steve,” Bucky says. Steve turns. Bucky’s holding up the can opener Steve used on the tomatoes, the one shaped like a smiling lobster. “Steve. Steve. It’s me.” Bucky pinches his metal hand together like a crab claw and clacks it at Steve, then cackles quietly to himself and puddles further on the table.

Steve can’t help but smile back at him, stirring the soup. “Well, I think you’ve really come out of your shell,” he says.

Bucky, after several beats of staring, slowly cracks a grin and then starts giggleing. He puts his forehead down on the table and rolls it from side to side. “I will make you soup next time you get hurt,” he promises, words only a little distorted by how his face is mushed to the table. “And also stop you getting hurt. I’m dangerous. All day long.”

“I appreciate that,” Steve says. Whoever Bucky is - whenever he was born, whatever he’s been through - he’s still the same person. Steve can ask him questions and talk through it all later, when Bucky isn’t so clearly still doing mental loopity loops on the morphine rollercoaster and he’s been properly fed.
Steve sets a mug of soup and a triangle of sandwich in front of Bucky, pulling up a chair beside him just in case he starts listing to the side again. “Here you go, buddy. Ham and cheese and goat cheese tomato.”

Bucky straightens slightly to investigate the mug. “I’m dangerous all day,” he repeats, sniffing at it.

“You sure are,” Steve says, tucking the blankets closer around him. “But we don’t need to be dangerous right now. We’re at home.”

Bucky briefly abandons the mug to look wonderingly at his metal arm, now quilted over. “Dangerous… but soft.”

“That’s exactly right.” Steve nudges the sandwich closer. “Give this a try.”

Bucky, with the exaggerated care of a drunk Marine handling live ordinance, returns his attention to the food and dips the corner of sandwich in the soup. He takes a bite. Then he picks up the mug of soup and chugs it like hot chocolate.

“Don’t choke,” Steve says, by now if not at peace with then at least used to Bucky’s Hoover-vac eating strategies. “There’s plenty more if you want it.”

Bucky finishes glugging the soup, sets the mug down and looks at Steve very seriously. “You’re my favorite,” he tells Steve, only slightly undermined by his tomato soup mustache. “My favorite person ever.”

“You’re real swell too, Buck,” Steve says, taking a napkin to wipe at Bucky’s face and sounding only a little thick in the throat. “Real swell. My best guy.”

Bucky pushes into the face wiping and then further, sticking his head under Steve’s chin. “Mine too,” he says. “I like your house. And your voice. And hair. And soup. And the quilt.”

Steve takes a deep breath. “I’d like to put your name on too. If you like. If you want.”

Bucky perks up bodily against him. “In green?”

“Yeah,” Steve says, relief and joy frothing up together like champagne foam. “Yeah, any color you like.”

“I like green,” Bucky says, and they sit together and hug and feel things like a couple of turnips floating together in a broth of emotions. The entire reef is probably stewed to the gills in various lovesick nasal arias by now.

After a minute Bucky shifts. “Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“I want to eat it but I know I can’t eat it.” His eyes are laser focused on the quilt

Bucky sounds pretty upset by this. “Here,” Steve says, fishing out one of the remaining peanut butter balls. “You can eat this instead.”

Bucky munches it right out of Steve’s hand, once again slumping prodigiously against Steve’s chest. He heaves in a breath and sighs, a long steady exhale like he’s breathing out a plume of held smoke. “I want to stay here forever.”
“I want you to stay too,” Steve says. He’d stay exactly here with Bucky for days and days and damn the consequences, but reality, he knows, has no patience for romance and its preferred schedule. Also, Natasha is probably going to kick his door down at some point in the next eight hours.

“We… should probably get you some professional medical attention,” Steve says, remembering Bucky’s first reaction. “And SHIELD made this really amazing dissolving suture glue for me that I think you should try.”

Bucky grumbles under his breath, but after some shifting to put his ear against Steve’s heart he quiets down. Finally, he says, “Then we come back?”

“Yeah. We come back.”

EPILOGUE

Clint gets 90% of the way through his mandatory medical leave before he makes a break for it, which is nearly a personal best. He doesn’t plan to sneak out while the rest of his pod is at the park, it’s just that his leg barely aches at all, and the sun is shining, and he hasn’t been able to shoot anything but rubber bands in weeks, and before he really makes a decision about it he’s already on his feet and pulling stretchy pants over his cast.

Bobbi and Laura conspired with the kids to hide his crutches every time he took a nap, but he’s not Hawkeye for nothing, he can spot a secret at a hundred yards, and also Lila is six years old and pretty bad at hiding things. He fishes one crutch out of the bathtub and finds the other shoved under his own mattress and boom, he’s mobile. Hawkeye out.

Well, to the bus stop. Then, half an hour later because the bus is running on a Sunday schedule and there were delays up the line, Hawkeye out.

He hops down the steps at the SHIELD HQ stop and spends a few seconds beaming at the compound before swinging expertly towards the guard gate.

“ID?”

Clint reaches confidently into the right pocket of his jacket, and then into the left pocket, and then, with declining confidence, his pants’ pockets, his waistband, and his socks. He finds an arrowhead, one of the kids’ bus passes, and a dollar thirty-five in assorted loose change, but not his SHIELD ID.

“I’m Hawkeye,” he tries.

The gate guard, Sheila, remains blandly unimpressed. “If you don’t have an ID, you’ll need a guest pass or an escort.”

Clint scratches his nose. “Can I use your phone?”

“You don’t have a phone?”

“No, I do, but I ran out of battery playing Angry Birds at the bus stop.”

“Sunday schedule today,” Sheila says, showing a trace of sympathy for the first time.
Clint senses a valuable line of inquiry and spends a good five minutes exchanging complaints about public transit with Sheila. By the time they’ve compared average commute times and worst What’s That Smell stories, he’s able to parlay Sheila’s newfound goodwill into an invitation to use the guard gate phone.

He tries Natasha’s line, but isn’t surprised when she doesn’t pick up. Hill doesn’t work Sundays unless it’s a genuine, world-ending emergency. May picks up on the second ring.

“Hi May, so uh, I wanted to come back from medical leave early and uh, finish some paperwork, keep an eye on things, you know, this is, um. This is Clint, by the way.”

“Yes. I know. Laura rang and said you were AWOL. We offered to come pick you up,” May says, in tones that indicate she knows that Laura making him navigate the Sunday bus schedule is karmic punishment for sneaking out without telling anyone, “but she said it was no trouble.”

“Right. No trouble. The thing is, I left in a bit of a rush, so uh… I remembered my bow,” Clint says, because clearly that’s the most important readiness factor, “but I, um, left my ID in my other jacket.” Or Cooper used it it to jimmy open the snack food cabinet again and they’ll find it underneath the fridge in a few weeks. Basically the same thing.

May sighs. “Put Robertson on the phone.”

Clint hands the phone to Sheila. She and May proceed to have an involved discussion in which Sheila says little but definitely laughs a lot. At the end of it she grins, hangs up and waves Clint through into the parking garage. “Don’t forget your pass next time!”

Clint salutes, hobbling past gratefully, only to turn the corner and stop when he’s met with a sight that’s strange even by SHIELD standards.

Captain America is by the elevators. Next to him is the Winter Soldier. It’s definitely the Winter Soldier, because even in a shape-swallowing grey fleece and sweatpants with hems piled up around his fuzzy pink slippers there’s no mistaking the hair or the metal hand. The hand is currently holding a thermos.

“You have a smoothie,” Clint hears the Winter Soldier say, to Captain America.

“I do,” Captain America says. He is also holding a thermos. His other arm is pretty occupied with the Winter Soldier’s elbow, because, as Clint notes with his hawklike observation skills, the Winter Soldier is listing slightly to one side.

“I also have a smoothie,” the Winter Soldier says.

“You do,” Captain America agrees, adjusting his grip as he tries to move the party to the elevator.

“It’s got mango.”

“It does. You like mango?”

The Winter Soldier’s brow wrinkles with this deeply philosophical question. After serious thought he ponderously brings his flesh hand up and pats the top of his thermos. “Good smoothie,” he says very solemnly.

Clint could’ve sworn he didn’t take any of his heavy painkillers this morning, but it looks like the Winter Soldier definitely did. The last time Clint saw that kind of behavior was Natasha stroking her oxygen tank in the ICU unit of Medical and telling it what a good job it was doing.
More pressingly, there is only one elevator. It requires a security card to operate, like the one Captain America is currently swiping and the one Clint does not have. Clint makes an executive decision and hobbles faster.

“Oh, hey,” Captain America says when Clint catches the door, his eyebrows going up at Clint but his scent staying fully preoccupied with the Winter Soldier. “Are you going up or down?”

“Oh. Up,” Clint says. The Winter Soldier gives him a bleary look from Captain America’s shoulder, the way Lucky sometimes looks at a toy the baby has chucked at him while he’s lying under the coffee table. “You guys… working today?”

“Not exactly,” Captain America says. The Winter Soldier aggressively ignores him in favor of trying to climb up Captain America’s side.

Clint watches Captain America select the floor for Medical while boosting the Winter Soldier up into a piggyback hold. “You… is he… okay?”

“Yeah, he’s fine,” Captain America says. “Just on a lot of painkillers.”

The Winter Soldier, having finally succeeded in lampreying himself to Captain America’s back, sighs gustily in satisfaction and settles in. Then, as the elevator numbers tick higher, Clint swears he hears a snicker.

"Steve."

"Yeah, champ?” Captain America says.

"I'm a Buckpack."

"You sure are."

The elevator dings and Captain America carries the Winter Soldier out. Clint stands there staring, trying to decide if it’s more likely that he really just saw that or that there’s some kind of hallucinogenic gas loose in the compound, for so long the elevator doors roll closed while he’s still gawping. They’re opening again on another floor before Clint realizes he never pushed a button.

Natasha is waiting for him in the hallway. She looks him over, eyes lingering on his left elbow, which has started to twinge from the strain of crutching long distances. “Barton.”

“What happened,” Clint demands.

“What do you mean?” she says, very clearly fucking with him on purpose, but he’s too agitated not to play along.

“The Winter Soldier! And Captain America! They smelled like each other. They smelled all moony lovey dovey!” he says, gesturing wildly, which makes him drop a crutch and almost fall over. Natasha watches him try to hook the fallen crutch with his foot for a few seconds before picking it up and jamming it back under his armpit. “What the fuck happened, was there a chemical attack?”

“Well, Barton, if you want to stay up to date on office gossip in the future, you know what to do.”

“Come back from medical leave sooner?”

Natasha makes a bzzzzt sound and pokes him hard on the nose. “Try again.”
“Not… jump off buildings without an exit plan?”

“Better.” She takes her foot out of the elevator door, and Clint crutches forward before the doors close on him off again.

“They smelled happy,” Clint says, because that’s the weirdest part of the whole damn thing.

“I think they are,” Natasha says, sounding proud and fond and just a little bit creeped out. “Now come see what else you missed out on.”

Clint follows her hopefully, expecting something equally momentous and possibly even fun, but she tricks him by taking a left into what he thought was a breakroom but is just a small conference room. Full of paperwork. Stacks of it. And at the head of the table, Angelie and Omar and Charlie from Admin.

“Oh no,” Clint says.

“Oh yes,” Angelie says, as Natasha lives up to her traitor reputation and shuts the door behind him. “We’re going to have a nice, relaxing chat about improperly filed and insufficiently filled out after action reports.”

Clint swivels to give Natasha a last-ditch begging stare. She smiles and signs exit plan at him through the door window, then wiggles her fingers and toddles off to do something actually fun like stalk Captain America and hoover up all his cloying happy but not actually unpleasant scents of blissful domesticity.

“So,” Angelia says. “Forty-seven reports. And delinquent benefits paperwork. This doesn’t have to be hard, Agent Barton.”

“No,” Clint says weakly, resigning himself to his fate. At least visibly. He fully intends to make a break for it the second one of them opens the door for tea or coffee or extra ballpoints or something.

Omar, though, has a gleam in his eye. Slowly, once he sees Clint is watching, he brings an object up and sets it on the table with a delicate click.

Clint stares at it like a hypnotized mouse.

“The trainees are running evasion exercises in Block D today,” Omar says conversationally. “And I just happen to have this semi-automatic 46-dart capacity pump action Nerf gun. The technical name, I believe, is ‘The Annihilator’.”

“Let’s make a deal,” Charlie says, putting their hands on the table like a mob negotiator. “Every finished report is another ten Nerf darts in the clip.”

“Fill out the bennies, you get the gun,” Angelie says.

“Make a break for it,” Omar says, because he used to work in Interrogation, “and the gun goes to Agent Romanova.”

Angelie checks her watch. “The trainees will be starting in twelve minutes,” she says. “The exercises run until two. The faster you finish…”

Clint looks at the clock on the wall, then at the stacks of paperwork, then at the gun. Indoor evasion exercises are the best time to teach baby agents the true meaning of covert warfare, not to mention have the most fun possible crawling through gaps and air vents cackling with the heady
power of Nerf.

He makes the decision and holds out his hand. “Give me a pen.”

Chapter End Notes

a huge round of applause to galwednesday, who did all the cool coding stuff to make the intro to ch 3 look like a TV Tropes page!

and to the commenter who last night was like, "you know, i think it would actually be 10000% ok if the story ended here, at the end of ch 2, it's a good ending": HAPPY HALLOWEEN

End Notes

This work is open to related transformative works of all kinds - if you feel moved to make podfic, art, fic, or any other work inspired by this story, please feel free!! (And if you're worried about somebody else podficking it - do it anyway! TWO CAKES. As we say here in the clownfish sandbox, THE MORE THE MERRIER!)

Works inspired by this one: The Turtleneck by The_She_Devil, Location REDACTED by quietnight

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!