

## Some Guardian Angels Have Missing Parts

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# Some Guardian Angels Have Missing Parts

by [hufflepirate](#)

## Summary

Bucky Barnes has been tailing the Avengers ever since Steve got dragged back in to help them instead of continuing his search for Bucky. That makes him the first on the scene when the Avengers are hit by a spell that leaves them deaged into 6-year-olds. He knows how to finish the fight and rescue them, but gaining their trust, looking after them, and getting them back to their old selves isn't so easy. Luckily, he has watched Steve long enough to know he can trust Sam Wilson, and that just might be enough to get them by...

# Contingency Plan

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bucky Barnes knew he was probably the last person in the world who should be taking care of children, but that didn't stop him from running toward Steve the moment he realized what that flash of light had done. Some kind of magic was at play here, which would have been difficult to believe if he hadn't been watching his best friend fight alongside a Norse god for the last few months. But just because he could accept the evidence in front of his eyes - a flash of light that, once it had dimmed, left behind 6 suddenly very small Avengers - didn't mean he had a contingency plan for it.

Technically, his contingency plan for this was the same as his contingency plan for everything, which was "jump in if I have to to protect Steve," but it seemed like a desperately inadequate plan now that he was actually putting it into action.

He'd kept carefully away from Steve when his old friend was searching for him, but once Steve had been pulled away, dragged back into the Avengers to save the world, Bucky had stopped avoiding his friend and started shadowing him. He'd been careful not to let anyone see him, and to leave only casualties that looked like they'd been Black Widow's kills when he had to do something to protect Steve's back. Mostly, he'd just watched, hidden in the shadows to keep Steve safe even though he wasn't ready to go back to him.

As he threw a knife into the sorcerer's chest to keep the man from casting any more spells on the now-vulnerable Avengers, he couldn't help thinking that this was pretty far from what he'd thought his contingency plan would look like when he finally used it.

Half of the sorcerer's companions vanished the moment they realized their leader was dead, pressing buttons at their wrists that teleported them away, but the other half hesitantly continued to move toward the Avengers. Bucky got there first, concerned to find that the Avengers, all of whom looked about six, weren't trying to fight back. The Steve he knew would fight back no matter *what* size his body was, as long as he thought it was the right thing to do. If he wasn't fighting, if *none* of them were fighting, it meant they didn't understand the situation yet. They weren't just small. They were small, and confused, and they might be *actual children*.

He wanted to curse, but didn't. He needed the breath to take out the last few minions surrounding the Avengers. It wasn't difficult, but he needed to do it quickly, because he didn't like Steve being vulnerable in the middle of the street. He needed to start dealing with the Avengers themselves as soon as possible.

Four men went down in just over a minute, and the others cut their losses and ran.

Bucky found himself alone with a crowd of 6-year-olds staring up at him.

Abruptly, the adrenaline from the fight drained out of him, leaving him feeling hollow and useless. He'd spent a lot of time feeling hollow and useless since he'd left HYDRA to become a person instead of a weapon. It was harder than it sounded. But he couldn't afford to think like that right now, because the kids didn't need a weapon. They needed a *person*. He needed to push through the empty feeling and be a person for them.

He took a deep breath and looked them over, trying to get his bearings and determine how much trouble they were actually in. The children's clothes hadn't shrunk with them, which was probably going to be a problem, but most of them had managed to adjust on their own, some more effectively than others.

Natalia didn't seem bothered by the fact that she'd had to abandon the one-piece suit that no longer fit her. She'd apparently also decided that grown-up Natalia's too-big underwear wasn't working for her in her new body, either, because she wasn't wearing it. She stood behind the others, completely naked, in what looked like a trained defensive stance, and there was a hardness in her eyes that suggested she had no intention of standing down. He wondered, briefly, how young she'd been when they'd started her training, because her SHIELD file hadn't listed much of her KGB history.

He would have to deal with the fact that she was standing in the middle of New York completely naked. He would also have to deal with the fact that she looked ready to run, and that he suspected she was behind the other kids so that he would go after them first if he turned out to be another enemy. But she wasn't his only worry, and if she hadn't run already, she would probably stay until she had a specific reason not to.

It would help that she was considerably less frightened of him than Bruce was. Bruce was trembling and wouldn't meet Bucky's eyes, but he at least kept himself covered, holding tightly to pants much too large for him and trying to keep them up around his chest. He was definitely human at the moment, which was better than the alternative, but he looked on edge, and they couldn't afford for him to stay that way for long if the Hulk was in there, too. Bucky hoped that after whatever had happened, the Hulk was gone. He didn't know how he would deal with a miniature Hulk.

Bruce was sitting beside an equally frightened-looking Clint, who was on his feet, but standing absolutely still - *too* still - with his head down and one arm wrapped behind his back. He kept his eyes firmly on the ground, not looking at Bucky either, but Bucky was sure that the boy knew he was being observed. It made the stillness a little bit worrying. But unlike Bruce, Clint hadn't been frozen like this from the start, so perhaps there was hope for the archer yet. Clint had abandoned his pants and stood there in just his shirt, which fell down to below his knees. It looked more like a dress than a shirt, particularly since it had no sleeves, but Bucky could leave the boy like that for now. Clint being clothed at all was a step up from Bruce and Natalia.

Tony, Steve, and Thor were dressed the same way, pantless and in shirts that half drowned them. Like Clint, Thor had no sleeves, though his armor was obviously heavy and might cause some problems. Tony had managed to roll the thin fabric of his undershirt up to free his hands, in spite of the length of his sleeves. Both would be mobile, if he could get them moving, though getting Tony away from the Iron Man armor, which had crashed when he

shrunk, but which he had apparently made it out of on his own, might be just as hard as convincing the other three not to be afraid of him. But he didn't seem afraid of Bucky, ignoring him to poke at the armor's innards, and that was workable. Or it could be.

Steve was less mobile, the stiff fabric and broad shoulders of his uniform puffing out around him and getting in his way. His sleeves dangled down from a point that didn't even look like the jacket's elbow, and the ends of them dragged on the ground, making him look like some kind of spider-legged monster as he spread his arms out to protect the others. He couldn't cover them, but he was trying anyway, and Bucky was struck with a wave of emotion he couldn't completely comprehend. He glanced away, aware that he was going to have to deal with whatever these feelings were, but not ready to do it yet.

Thor was also standing between Bucky and the others, clearly trying to protect them. His legs wobbled under the weight of his armor and of holding Mjolnir, which was half propped against his stomach because his arms couldn't quite keep it up on their own. The fact that he'd lifted it at all was impressive, and Bucky briefly regretted not having met the man before. It was perfectly clear that even this child Thor believed himself to be a warrior. Bucky suspected that Steve had already been forced to assert his considerable stubbornness in order to stand beside the larger boy instead of behind him.

He also knew Steve had succeeded, which meant that, as usual, Bucky needed Steve's leadership skills. His best friend's breathing wheezed a little, probably from the dust in the air, but the boy stood firm, eyes narrowed warily at him. Bucky wasn't fooled by the wheezing. Steve wasn't the weak link here. This was the real Steve. The original Steve. This was Steve the way he'd always been, and if Bucky could get Steve on his side, the other kids would follow. Both his swiss-cheese memory and the place Steve had already made for himself in the group told him that Steve could get the other kids to listen to him.

But knowing he needed Steve and knowing what to *say* to Steve were two different things. Bucky looked at the pint-sized blond boy again, trying to find the words that would convince Steve that he could trust him.

Tony Stark spoke instead, all heads turning toward him as he declared, "I like your hand."

Bucky had been standing here long enough for the boy's surprisingly piercing brown eyes to turn from the Iron Man suit to him. That meant he had been standing here for *too* long, and a brief, familiar wave of shame washed over him at the thought that he was failing at this. He didn't know what to say to Tony any more than he knew what to say to Steve, but he knew he had to say *something* if he was going to turn this around.

His arm was hidden when he kept his hand tucked in the pocket of his hoodie, but the kids had seen it when he was fighting, so there was no point in hiding it now. And Tony hadn't been afraid of Bucky's arm. He'd complimented him on it. After two panicked heartbeats, Bucky managed a "Thank you."

It was enough, apparently. The ice was broken, and Steve stepped forward, Thor mirroring him with a step labored enough to prove that the armor was definitely too heavy for him.

"Where are we?" Steve asked, voice steady enough that Bucky almost believed his bravado was genuine fearlessness. "And who are you?"

Bucky's mind raced. Neither question had an easy answer, and the words didn't seem to want to come to him.

Tony answered for him, rolling his eyes with an intensity that was impressive in a boy so young. "We're in New York City, dummy."

Steve frowned. "No, we're not."

"Are too!" Tony protested. "I know 'cause I *live* here."

Steve turned halfway around to face Tony while still keeping an eye on Bucky, "And I know we're *not* because I live in New York City, and this ain't it."

Steve had never jumped into an argument without a good reason - he had a hair trigger if he thought people were being hurt or insulted or disrespected, but he never fought without a *reason*. Bucky had no idea if the same was true of Stark, and he could hear Steve ramping up for a fight in case the bigger boy pushed him too hard. He had to cut that off at the pass.

"It uh-" he began. Bucky wasn't used to talking his way out of awkward situations. He hadn't had to do it for a long time. But they'd been standing here too long, even with most of the civilians in the area still cowering inside as if they weren't sure the mysterious sorcerers were gone, and if Steve got into a fight, they'd be here even longer. He cleared his throat to keep their attention and buy himself one more split second of time.

"He's right, Steve," he finally explained, "It *is* New York City. It's just not *our* New York City. This is - this is the future. It's 2014."

Bruce, Clint, and Tony all made surprised noises, and Thor spoke for the first time, asking "What is the meaning of that number?" but Bucky couldn't focus on any of them with Steve suddenly *glaring* at him so intensely that it felt like a punch to the gut.

"How do you know my name?" Steve asked, anger simmering in his voice, "And why are you *lying* to us?" Bucky's stomach flipped irrationally at the thought of Steve being angry with him. It hadn't happened often in their friendship, but it always made him feel this way, nauseous and unsettled until Steve came back around again. The memory didn't make him feel any less unsettled. The longer he'd shadowed Steve, the more he'd remembered, but it was still disorienting to find a new memory.

He found himself kneeling in front of the little boy before his brain could really catch up with his body. He needed to look him in the eye, so that Steve would know he meant what he was saying. But meeting Steve's eyes again, closer together than they'd been since the helicarrier was crashing around them, triggered a wave of half-broken memories so intense that he had to put his metal hand down to keep himself from toppling over, unbalanced by the sudden rushing in his ears that accompanied the memories.

He realized that at this distance, all six of the children had probably seen his momentary wobble, and a flash of fear ran through him. He had been weak. He wasn't supposed to be weak. It wasn't allowed. And he had been *seen*.

He flinched when Steve's hand suddenly moved toward him, and it was only when Steve pulled his hand back again that he realized it hadn't been an attack.

The boy's brow suddenly furrowed, "Are you ok, Mister?"

Something tight in Bucky's chest loosened again, just for a moment, and he found himself smiling weakly. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm ok. And... it's Bucky." He looked down, terrified that Steve wouldn't recognize him. He wasn't sure he could take it if Steve thought he was lying. Steve's faith in him had been the only thing he had to hold onto since before his reliable memories began. He'd never been a coward, but he wasn't brave enough to look Steve in the eye when he knew that faith might be gone.

"I- The future's been rough for me, Stevie," he admitted, knowing he had to say it. Steve - at any age - would want to know. He'd want to know what had happened to his best friend. "We got separated, and it didn't turn out so good for me." An understatement, but Bucky couldn't bring himself to be more specific. "But now you're here, so I'm ok."

Steve was suspiciously silent, and he stayed that way until Bucky's stomach was twisted up too tightly for him to stand it. "It's really me, Steve," he whispered, glancing back up into the little boy's blue eyes, "It really is."

"Ok," Steve said tentatively, as if he wanted to believe Bucky but wasn't sure he should, "Do you remember how we met?" Steve's voice was quiet when he spoke, but something in his eyes was soft now. Whether he believed Bucky or not, he wasn't angry anymore, and Bucky took a deep breath to steady himself. He didn't remember. But he could. He *had* to. Just like he'd had to remember Steve on the helicarrier. Steve had needed him to remember. He'd needed him to remember and to decide not to kill him. Now he needed him to remember so that Steve could remember him in return. And he *could* remember. He *could*. He'd been remembering more and more, now that he was out here on his own.

Bucky forced himself to look Steve in the eye, hoping the answers would be there. "We were young," he said quietly. It wasn't enough. It wasn't proof.

Steve nodded. "Five. An' I'm only six now. So I remember real good, and you can't just make something up and lie to me."

It came back in a flash, like a miracle, and Bucky's heart soared in his chest. "That kid you got in a fight with was seven!" he exclaimed. Details started filling themselves in, and he let them flow out of his mouth as they came back. "A second grader. And it was our first day of kindergarten, and you saw him picking on Colin O'Brien, and you told him to cut it out, even though they were *both* bigger than you."

Steve was grinning, now, a thousand-watt smile Bucky recognized even though he hadn't remembered it until now. "Yeah, but Colin was a lot smaller than that other kid."

Bucky's breath came easier, "Still a bonehead move, Rogers."

"I don't like bullies," Steve answered, casually.

"I know," Bucky answered, "And when you grow up, you even beat up a few yourself, instead of me havin' to do it."

Steve shoved him in the shoulder, and Bucky tensed, but didn't lash out, in spite of the part of him that wanted to. "Hey, I had 'im on the ropes without you."

Another flash of memory hit Bucky, the same words spoken in an alley in the 40s, and it was all too much. But he couldn't let Steve know it. He stood up abruptly, trying to keep his face calm. "'Course you did," he said, not quite meeting Steve's eye.

"Bucky-" Steve said, half protest and half admonishment, but whatever he wanted to say, he left it at that.

Bucky didn't know what to do with Steve's half-protest, so he focused on the other kids, visible now that he was on his feet again. Thor had lowered his hammer, though he still looked ready to leap between Bucky and the others, and however the other kids had explained years to him, he seemed not to be waiting for an answer to that question. Tony had come closer, probably to listen in, and Bucky managed to meet both Bruce and Clint's eyes for a moment before the boys looked away again.

Natalia had stepped closer, too, so that she stood beside Bruce and Clint, but he doubted she had understood any of what had been happening. If she was staying here, it was only because she didn't know what else to do, and part of him could sympathize.

"So, if you and the flag kid were in kindergarten together, we really *must* be in the future," Tony said. "How come you've got that cool hand and I've got this cool suit and nobody else has any cool future stuff?"

Bucky didn't have a ready answer for that question, but he suddenly felt like he had the tools to think of one, which was new. But answering Tony didn't depend on his unreliable, fragmented memory, which was a relief, and an answer came quickly enough. "Who says they don't? This is just the stuff you guys had with you when the grown-up versions of you got replaced by these versions of you."

"And where *are* the adult versions of us?" Thor asked. "Are they in Asgard?"

Bucky shook his head. "I don't know the answer to that. I just know we've got to get you guys out of the street and someplace safe. I don't know how you got here, or where they went, and I think we should probably try to find out."

Tony and Thor nodded in agreement, but Clint looked up, panicked, and blurted out, "Does that mean you're gonna send us back when you find the grown up ones of us?"

Bucky knew fear when he saw it, and he knew that the answer had to be, "No. Or - I don't know. Maybe. Right now, I don't care if you go back or not. I just care if you're safe."



Clint nodded, but he wasn't the only one who seemed relieved. Bruce took a deep, shuddering breath, and wiped his eyes like he might be crying.

Bucky had no idea what to do about the tears, but Thor clearly did, putting the hammer completely down for the first time since Bucky came over to the small group of Avengers, and making his way to Bruce's side. Thor's oversized armor was so long that it prevented him from sitting or kneeling, but it didn't keep him from wrapping his arms around Bruce.

"Do not worry, my friend - I am sure we will find our way home again."

Bruce shook his head no, but latched onto Thor's front anyway. "I just wanna be safe. And he said we'd be safe and I - I'm sorry."

Thor's small eyebrows drew together, "What are you sorry for?"

Bruce sniffled, "Crying."

"Do not be sorry. My mother says even great warriors cry sometimes," Thor answered, patting Bruce on the back.

Bruce gave him a watery smile in return, and Bucky relaxed, convinced the Asgardian had the situation in hand.

Bruce's too-large pants fell farther away from his body as he clung onto Thor's armor instead of holding them up, and Bucky realized that even if he was useless with crying, he could do something about the clothing situation.

He unzipped his hoodie, planning to wrap Bruce in it, but when he stepped forward to approach the boy, Natalia took a step back, looking nervous. Right. She didn't speak English, so none of the things that had started to get the boys on his side were helping him here. He sighed, calling out to her in Russian. All he could think to say was, "It's ok. I'm here to help."

Natalia relaxed at the sound of a familiar language, though it was such a slight shift in her muscles that clothes would probably have masked it, if she were wearing any. She asked him a series of suspicious questions, and as he answered them, he stayed aware of the rest of the Avengers. Steve watched him talk to Natalia, while Clint drifted closer to Thor and Bruce. Tony had gone back to poking at the Iron Man armor as soon as their adult selves were mentioned, but Bucky could tell he was observing the other kids, too.

Thor continued to comfort Bruce, but also listened in to Bucky's conversation with Natalia, nodding whenever he told the girl something he'd already said to the rest of them. Interesting. Bucky supposed he shouldn't be surprised that the boy spoke both English *and* Russian, but he didn't have time to think about it under Natalia's surprisingly effective questioning.

Ultimately, though, she didn't have a choice but to trust him, and they both knew it. He didn't like thinking about why she recognized so quickly that she was trapped or why she handled it

so well, but now there was a crowd forming, and he was just glad that the conversation was over with quickly.

Natalia was technically the first to agree to come with him, but when Steve agreed, too, the others fell in line. Bucky stripped off his hoodie, handing it to Bruce and letting Thor help the other boy into it. Natalia got his t-shirt. She swam in it, and for the first time, she stopped looking dangerous. Bucky decided it was a good sign, even if it was largely illusion. What had happened to him was bad enough, without adding other people's problems into the mix.

But now he was standing here in just his pants and an undershirt, and he didn't like the way his arm gleamed in the sunlight without a sleeve to cover it. He also didn't like the way the crowd around them was starting to grow, or the way they whispered among themselves.

"Come on, kids," he said, looking them over one more time, just to make sure he had them all, "Let's stash your grownup stuff in the park down the street, and we'll get out of here."

When he started walking, they followed, and when he told them to stay close as he glared and intimidated his way through the crowd, they did that too. He almost smiled at how completely his day had been turned around. If it weren't for the fact that he didn't know where he was going, it would have been funny. He'd started off his day following the Avengers so that he could make sure Steve was safe. Now, he was *leading* the Avengers so that he could make sure Steve was safe. And somehow, having met them just for a brief time and having barely spoken to most of them, he was leading the Avengers so that he could make sure *all* of them were safe.

## Chapter End Notes

Regarding time:

For Steve, it's 1924. He's come forward 90 years.

For Tony, it's 1976. He's come forward 38 years.

For Bruce, it's 1976. He's come forward 38 years.

For Clint, it's 1977. He's come forward 37 years.

For Natalia, it's 1991. She's come forward 23 years.

For Thor? Who even knows, man. Asgardians...

(I went with the birthdate for Tasha that we're given in Cap 2. I know some folks are hoping that's a false date for a false ID and she'd older, like in the comics, but I just went with what we've seen on screen.)

# Sanctuary

The Avengers' first real stop was just a hiding place, an abandoned warehouse Bucky knew they wouldn't be found in if they stayed there for a few hours. It wasn't ideal, and getting the kids there had been a difficult trek of a few miles, one that had left all of them exhausted. When they moved on tonight, he'd have to do something different, because none of them could take another walk like that.

The problems had started when Clint stepped on a piece of glass and tore the bottom of his foot open. Bucky hadn't noticed the injury until the boy had been walking on it for at least a block - probably longer - without saying anything, something that made Bucky nervous as he thought back on it. His stomach had plummeted when he saw the trail of small, bloody footprints behind them, and he'd set Clint up on his shoulders for the rest of the walk.

A few blocks later, Steve had stopped, abruptly, eyes widening as he felt the edges of an asthma attack encroaching. Bucky had stopped the rest of them and knelt in front of Steve to watch him breathe, laying his human hand on Steve's shoulder while he steadied Clint with the metal one. By the time the terror had faded from Steve's eyes, the threat of the attack fading with it, Bucky had realized he would have to carry Steve, too. He'd propped him up against his hip in spite of his friend's protestations that he was fine, and he'd been lucky that his metal arm couldn't tire.

The other boys had taken turns tucked against his other side as they grew tired, too, held up by his weaker arm for as long as he could hold on, or until another kid needed the help more. Everyone but Natalia eventually lagged behind the rest of them and needed to be picked up. His right arm had been nearly shaking with exertion by the end of the walk, and the kids weren't any less exhausted than he was.

Even Thor, the strongest of the boys, had eventually buckled under the weight of his armor. Bucky had been forced to put the other kids down and strip his undershirt off to give Thor something lighter to wear. It had meant revealing the heavy scarring on his shoulder, which Clint was fascinated with and kept running his fingers along from his seat on Bucky's shoulders, and then he'd still ended up carrying Thor for a few blocks when the boy needed the respite from walking.

But they had made it. They had made it, in spite of the blood dripping from Clint's foot and running down Bucky's chest, and Steve's wheezing in his ear. He wasn't comfortable with having both his arm and his scars out in the open air, even though the kids hadn't seemed disgusted or frightened, but he'd made it through that, too. As he looked the kids over again, sleeping in a pile on the floor because they'd been too tuckered out from the walk to cause him any trouble, he felt like he'd made it through something important.

But as good as that feeling was, he still wasn't sure he'd made the right choice in coming here.

When the boy asked why they didn't just go to his house, he'd told Tony that he couldn't take him home because his home had changed in the future. The truth was, he didn't *want* to take Tony home because he hadn't managed good enough recon on the tower to feel safe there himself. Bucky knew the grown-up Stark wanted the other Avengers to move into the tower with him, so that he could reach them more quickly. But they had resisted, and Steve hadn't moved in, and Bucky had let the place remain a mystery.

Stark Tower was difficult to watch. It had too much security, and too many cameras. Bucky had been afraid of getting caught, and he was afraid to go there now, because he didn't know it well, and he didn't know how it functioned on the inside. The place was too big for him to control, and if he couldn't control his surroundings, he couldn't be certain that Steve and the others would be safe. He couldn't afford to take the risk. Or perhaps he simply didn't want to. Being in control - of himself and everything around him - was too important.

Keeping *Steve* safe was too important.

That didn't mean they could stay here. Steve had offered up his sleeves to bandage Clint's foot once they got here, and once he was cutting sleeves, he'd ended up with plenty of bandage material. Tony had begged him to cut his sleeves off, too, and then he'd broken down and cut the sleeves off his hoodie, even though Bruce hadn't asked him to, so that the boy could move better. But Clint's wound would still need better attention than Bucky had been able to give it. The dirt in the warehouse wasn't much worse than some of the places he and Steve had played as kids, but it wasn't good for the boy's asthma, either, and once the sun went down, they would all quickly be cold.

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After a few hours of watching them sleep, he could think of only one place to go, one place that might be safe for them, but it meant going down to DC. So while they slept, he planned. He'd need to steal a car, and with the kids involved, he'd have to steal a big one. He'd need seven seat belts and the license plates off of a different car, if he wanted to guarantee there was no reason for a cop to stop them, and he'd need to make sure the car had all of its lights working properly. He'd also need to steal it without the kids in tow, and if he was going to steal a car, he'd better do it after dark.

Once the kids woke up, Tony started whining again, because he wanted to go home. Bucky understood, but held firm because he had an alternative, now, to Stark Tower. Thor found some empty bottles left here by previous squatters, and accidentally broke them. Bucky reminded himself that the plan would take them somewhere safer, and stayed calm.

When Steve started a game of tag with the others and almost gave himself another asthma attack, Bucky had to remind himself of the plan yet again, to keep control over his emotions. Natalia slipped and skinned her knee so that Bucky had to wrap Steve's other sleeve around it, and Clint pouted because he couldn't play with his foot sliced open. Thor tagged harder than he was supposed to, almost knocking Bruce over at least once. His plan wouldn't fix those things, but it was still good to have some idea of how he was going to survive this.

When they got hungry, he went down to the convenience store a few blocks away and spent almost every penny he had on a pile of hot dogs and a CUNY t-shirt, which was the cheapest one they had and put him on the right side of the no shirt, no shoes, no service rule. When he

got back, Tony complained that the hot dogs were gross, Thor complained that he was still hungry after eating his, and Natalia refused to eat hers since she didn't know what it was. It was quickly becoming apparent that even though he'd managed to get them here safely, which felt like a major victory, they were more than he could handle long-term. But Bucky Barnes did not give up easily - he didn't remember everything about his past, but he remembered that - and he didn't have to *do* this long-term, at least not if his plan went right.

In spite of it all, leaving the kids behind to go get the car was hard, because it seemed like he was going to be away from them for too long. The strangest part was that he was almost more worried about himself being away than about the children being alone. He wasn't sure why that was. He'd been on his own for months, and even worrying absently about Steve was a familiar feeling. This shouldn't be different already, not when he'd spent less than a day with the little Avengers.

He filed it away in the list of feelings he couldn't understand yet, alongside the way he'd felt about Clint's little fingers tracing the scars on his shoulder while he was carrying the boy, and the way he'd felt when Bruce had realized he wasn't mad at the kids for getting tired and had started hovering close to him, almost clinging to his leg while they both walked. The feelings he didn't understand about his interactions with Steve thus far could fill a book, and Natalia was almost as confusing. Sometimes he reminded himself that at least he hadn't shot her yet when she was this age, and he felt a little better, but it was small comfort at best to think that "I didn't shoot any of the children" was the best he could muster.

When he made it back to the warehouse an hour and a half later with an old grey Ford Expedition and two cans of extra gas siphoned from the original owner's neighbors' cars, it was a relief to see the children again, even though there was now a broken window at the front of the building and none of them would tell him who had broken it. He let it go, reassuring them that they were about to leave anyway, and pretended that Bruce and Clint hadn't both been shaking like leaves when he walked in.

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At the end of what had turned into a five hour drive when Steve got motion sickness and they had to stop for him to throw up on the side of the road, Bucky pulled up in front of Sam Wilson's house with a car full of sleeping Avengers. Standing in front of the door, he was suddenly aware that he had no idea what to say to the total stranger whose doorstep he was standing on at four in the morning.

The radio in the car had been speculating about where the Avengers were and what had happened to them. The spell that had hit them had apparently also shorted out all of the cameras in the vicinity, something he hadn't even thought about. The electronics in the news helicopters had gone haywire, too, and no one seemed to know anything. Someone had suggested that if it was Asgardian magic, and enough of it, it might have been too much for the technology to handle. But whatever was going on, people were panicking about the sudden absence of the Avengers. Maybe Sam Wilson was worried. Maybe this would be ok, because Sam Wilson had been worrying about them anyway. Maybe the other man would just appreciate knowing what had happened.

Bucky took a deep breath, steadying himself with the thought of the six little heads lolling against their seat belts in the car behind him, and pushed the button for the doorbell because they needed him to. He'd tried to kill Sam Wilson. But he'd also tried to kill Steve, and maybe the fact that he hadn't actually done it would be enough to earn him a conversation, to get Sam to realize the Avengers needed *him*, too.

Sam opened the door with his hands empty, dressed in a pair of plaid pajama bottoms and no shirt. He had no visible weapons, but the drawstring on his pajamas was tied tightly enough that Bucky thought he might be keeping a gun in the small of his back. He tried not to look too nervous, but as Sam stared at him, he could feel the nerves creeping onto his face.

"Bucky Barnes," Sam said after a moment, sounding surprisingly calm. "Didn't expect to find you here."

Bucky wasn't sure what to say to that. He shrugged. "Didn't really expect to *be* here."

Sam laughed, throwing his head back like he wasn't afraid of the Winter Soldier at all. Maybe he wasn't. Bucky felt suddenly very small and hollow in comparison. "Man, Steve's gonna kill me when he finds out you came here first. What are you doing here?"

Bucky bit his lip. "Hard to explain. Steve's in the car."

Sam's brow wrinkled, "What do you mean, Steve's in the car? No offense, Barnes, but there's no *way* he'd send you to the door without him."

Bucky shifted uneasily from foot to foot. "He didn't. He's asleep." He knew he should be explaining better, and for a moment he was angry with Sam for not being a child. At this point, he'd answered so many questions from the little ones that he didn't get nervous talking to them, and now here he was lost for words again.

The other man raised his eyebrow, "Now *that*, I'm gonna have to see. I spent months on the road with that guy and he never fell asleep in the car. He drove until lesser men would be asleep at the wheel and then he just kept going."

"It's hard to explain," Bucky said again, "And I didn't know where else to bring him."

Sam nodded, clapping him lightly on his human shoulder as he stepped past him toward the car. Bucky flinched, and Sam looked down sheepishly for a moment, "Sorry, man, I shouldn't have touched you. I'll ask next time."

Bucky knew he should tell Sam it was ok. He knew it should *be* ok. But the truth was that the whole idea that Sam would ask before he touched him, even to pat him on the shoulder, was exciting. He'd never heard of people doing that. But he wanted it. He hated the way he got nervous about other people. But he'd been asking the kids all day if it was ok to pick them up, in case they were afraid of his arm, and it had seemed to help them. He liked the idea of letting Sam do the same for him.

Sam walked to the car, Bucky trailing after him, but stopped short when he realized there was no one in the front passenger seat. "I thought you said Steve was with you?" he asked, turning

slowly toward Bucky. Sam was on edge, now, and Bucky couldn't help feeling sad about it. It made sense, if the man thought he'd been lying, but it still stung. Sam looked ready to fight, for the first time since he'd opened the door. Bucky put his hands up so the man could see that he still didn't have a weapon. He wouldn't have needed one, but it seemed like it might help.

"He's in the middle seat," he answered, "Between Clint and Bruce."

Sam's eyebrow shot even higher this time, but he turned back to the car, back muscles still visibly tense, and opened the door. After a moment, he turned back to look wordlessly at Bucky.

Bucky nodded. "Like I said. Hard to explain."

Sam rubbed the back of his neck as he looked into the vehicle. "Yeah, I'm starting to get that."

Bucky took another few steps, coming to stand beside Sam so that he could look at the kids again. "I didn't know where else to bring them," he said again, hoping it would be enough to explain why he was here.

Sam sighed. "I don't know either." He looked down at the kids for a few more seconds, then declared, "We'll take them inside. See if we can get them all to fit on the guest bed, and then that'll leave you the couch. I hope they're not early risers."

Bucky nodded. It was a relief to have someone else taking charge. It also made him feel inexplicably sad to have to share the children.

Bruce was the closest to their door, so at Bucky's nod, Sam reached to unbuckle his seatbelt. But then he rethought it, as Sam's hand got closer to the boy.

"Wait!" he said, reaching out to grab Sam's wrist and realizing a moment too late that he'd used his metal arm, and that he'd grabbed the other man harder than he'd meant to. Ashamed by the loss of control, he dropped the other man's wrist, probably too quickly.

"Bruce gets nervous," he explained, realizing that at the moment, he sounded nervous, too. It was more weakness he shouldn't show, though this time it was perhaps justified by the fact that he hadn't slept in almost 24 hours and he'd been looking after the six children since about 10:00 yesterday morning. "Clint does too. And Natalia. We should wake them up so that I can introduce you to them before we move anybody. The other three will be ok if they wake up and you're carrying them, but not those three."

Sam nodded. "Ok. Take the lead. You know them better than I do, now that they're like this."

Bucky nodded. Sam had met all of the Avengers. He and Stark been testing new wings almost every weekend since Steve had gotten called back to the East Coast, but he hadn't met these little versions of the Avengers. And Bucky had. It felt good to be the expert, even if it was a shallow half-day of expertise.

He knelt on the runner outside the SUV's door, so that he wouldn't loom over Bruce too badly. Sam's presence behind him made him feel a little nervous - he never liked having his back to people - but taking care of Bruce felt kind of ok. Kind of *good*. He nudged the boy's shoulder, gently. "Hey," he whispered, "We're here."

Bruce opened his eyes blearily, body tensing until he realized it was Bucky. The moment of relief flashing across the kid's face made Bucky feel something again. Something positive. Something not quite relief, but close. "It wasn't a dream, then."

Bucky shook his head. "Nope. You're still in the future. But we made it to - to my friend Sam's house." He shouldn't call Sam a friend yet. He wasn't a friend. But he couldn't tell Bruce that it was a stranger, either. The kids thought they were quiet when they whispered to each other, but he knew that if he and Steve hadn't been friends, the others would never have trusted him. He wasn't a stranger, because the kids from the past were all obviously tied together, and willing to accept that tie with each other, and because he was tied to Steve. He just had to hope he had enough currency with them that it would count that Sam was friends with him.

"Oh," Bruce said, glancing nervously at Sam, but not saying anything about him. "I'll get out."

"Ok," Bucky answered, "Why don't you wait here until I wake Clint up, and then both of you can go inside together?" He wasn't sure what made him think of that, other than that the kids had seemed more comfortable with each other, at first, than they had with him.

Sam nodded at him when he turned around to go to the other side of the car, and Bucky felt like it might have been the right thing to say.

Bruce walked into the house on his own, but Bucky carried Clint because of his foot injury, and he let Sam carry Steve so that they wouldn't have to wake him up. Steve had often slept poorly at this age, and if he was sleeping deeply, Bucky wasn't about to squander the moment. He also wasn't about to hand Clint to anyone else. Not with the anxiety in the boy's eyes at the appearance of a new person. It was strange to think that less than 24 hours ago, Steve had been his only worry, and now Steve was drooling on somebody else's shoulder while Bucky looked after someone else. But Steve wasn't awake to care, and something about Sam felt safe, in a way Bucky couldn't remember ever feeling before.

Back at the car, Natalia snapped awake immediately when he said her name, but took everything in stride when he told her, in quiet Russian, that they'd gotten where they were going. He told her he needed her to come inside with him, and then she could go back to sleep, and she nodded solemnly and agreed. Tony and Thor both slept like the dead, even with all the noise he made collapsing the middle seats to make room to get them out of the car, and they had to be carried into the house.

By the time they got back in, Clint and Bruce were asleep again, curled up beside Steve on top of what was, luckily, a fairly large guest bed. Natalia climbed up to join them, sitting up against the headboard and watching as Sam and Bucky put Tony and Thor down at the foot of the bed, below the other kids' feet.



"Go to sleep, Natalia," he told her gently, in Russian. "It's not really morning yet."

"Are we safe here?" she asked, a question Bucky still wasn't completely sure he could answer. He *felt* safe. And Steve trusted Sam. But he couldn't be certain. He could never be completely certain.

"I think so," he answered, "And I'll be right outside. I'm gonna sleep on the couch."

Natalia nodded, and laid down with her back pressed up against the headboard, her eyes still open. It was good enough. She'd been the last of the children to fall asleep in the car, and she would be the last one to fall asleep here, unless she fell asleep before they could get Clint's injury taken care of. He didn't really expect that to happen.

Turning to Sam, he felt his tongue wilt in his mouth. It was hard to assert himself with a man his own age, harder than it was with the children, but this was important. He took a deep breath and forced the words out. "We've gotta clean out Clint's foot. The bottle of water at the warehouse probably wasn't good enough. I don't know what might have been on that piece of glass. Don't even know where he stepped on it, because he didn't say 'til we'd been a few blocks."

Sam's brows furrowed, and for a moment, Bucky's stomach twisted. Then he cast a sad glance over the whole sleeping (and not sleeping) pile of Avengers, and Bucky realized that the furrow wasn't his fault. "They've had it rough, haven't they?" Sam asked, quiet.

Bucky nodded. "Some of 'em, yeah. I don't know what happened to them. I just know they look the way I feel, sometimes."

But he *really* couldn't talk about *feelings*, not when he couldn't identify half of his feelings to begin with. He knelt down to wake Clint up again, and tried not to think about it.

He also tried not to think about the way Clint clung to him when Sam followed them into the bathroom. And he tried not to think about the way the boy trembled when Sam reached for his foot to unwrap the wound, or the way he bit his lip to keep from making any noise as the wound was cleaned out - and properly cleaned out - for the first time all day, even while his hands tensed around Bucky's arm in pain.

It was a relief to carry Clint back in with the other Avengers and let him go back to sleep, and a bigger relief to hear Natalia whisper soft platitudes to the boy, telling him they were safe and she was glad his foot would heal now. Clint didn't understand a word of it, but Bucky wasn't sure it mattered.

When he and Sam closed the door on the Avengers, they were both silent for a moment, staring at each other. There was a lot to talk about, and Bucky knew it. He also knew he was exhausted, and not very good at talking, and that he didn't have answers to very many of the questions Sam was going to ask. He opened his mouth and closed it again, feeling the old, ringing emptiness come back.

"We'll just talk in the morning," Sam said. "Or... whenever. It's almost five now, but I'm gonna call in to work and tell 'em I need the day off for an emergency. I'll even play sick, if I

have to. So you just sleep however long you need to. The couch is yours as long as you want it, and then we'll figure out what to do about," he gestured toward the room, struggling for words, "*Them*."

Bucky nodded. He didn't have much else to say, until a random thought struck him. "I'm sorry I tore your wings off," he said.

Sam laughed. "'Course you are, now that you need me." The joke didn't have any venom in it. "Don't worry," the man continued, "I think since you got the Avengers here in one piece, I can probably trust you to sleep on my couch."

"Thank you," Bucky answered. It was *really* all he had left, now, exhaustion settling heavily around him now that the tension of worrying about the kids was gone and dampening whatever else there might have been to say.

The couch turned out to be softer than the homeless-shelter beds and hidden outdoor corners he usually slept in, but for once, he didn't mind the sensation. He was almost asleep before his head hit the armrest.

# Settling In

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bucky couldn't have slept for more than about 3 hours before he was woken up by the sound of shrill voices arguing in the kitchen. Sam was trying to break up the argument, but he couldn't hear it well enough to know who was fighting or what they were fighting *over*. He had a few guesses about who it *wasn't*, but he wouldn't know until he checked on them.

He sat up, and a blanket fell off his shoulders. Apparently, he'd slept through Sam draping it over him. He hadn't slept that hard in a very long time, unless you counted when he was actually frozen. But then, he hadn't had a day like yesterday in a long time, either. He turned sideways and put his feet on the floor, realizing as he did so that he should probably have taken his boots off last night, but hadn't.

Natalia was sitting in the chair next to him, watching him with her feet tucked underneath her body. "Доброе утро," she said, not cheerfully, but at least more contentedly than she'd said anything yesterday. She seemed to have adjusted to being here. At least, he hoped she had.

He returned her good morning, and as he stood up off of the couch, she clambered out of her chair. "Let's go see what the boys are fighting about," he said in Russian, offering her his right hand without really thinking about it. She took it, her little fingers wrapping around his as they walked down the hall and into the kitchen, and he felt a momentary wave of pride that she trusted him enough to do it.

Sam was at the stove cooking bacon, talking over his shoulder at Tony and Thor, who seemed to be fighting over a box of Pop Tarts. Steve was also trying to break up the argument, annoyance clear on his face as he stood in his chair with his hands on the other side of the table, leaning his whole body into the middle of the argument. He was telling Tony not to be so selfish and Thor not to be so greedy, but neither seemed to be listening. Steve's righteous indignation only worked when it worked, and right now, it didn't.

Clint was sitting quietly in the last of Sam's four chairs, eating a bowl of corn flakes, but he leapt up as soon as Bucky walked into the room, limping slightly as he joined Bruce next to the counter, where the boy was standing awkwardly off to the side. Sam turned at the sound of the chair legs scraping the floor in the boy's haste, but Bucky wasn't sure what to say to him.

Instead, he said, "It's ok, Clint, I don't need the chair. Why don't you sit down and finish your cereal?"

The boy limped tentatively back and sat down again, eyes on Bucky's face for the whole time he was moving. "Yes sir."

Bucky thought he might have handled that wrong. Something about it didn't feel good. "I mean," he said, backpedaling, "You were in the chair first..." Clint wouldn't look at him, and

he didn't know what else to say.

Sam cleared his throat. "I moved the car this morning," he said casually, drawing attention away from Clint, who looked even more nervous and had started blushing now that everyone was watching him. "I figured it wasn't yours, so I put it in the garage for now. The only one in the driveway's mine."

At the intimation that the car had been stolen, Steve turned his head to stare at Bucky, looking half betrayed. "It's a rental," Bucky said weakly. "I'll go turn it in later."

Sam gave him a look that made it perfectly clear that he knew it wasn't a rental, but instead of calling him on it, he just nodded. Bucky nodded back. Sam was Steve's friend, too. He understood that Bucky had to take care of Steve, and that he couldn't stand to disappoint him as he did it. Steve lost the betrayed look, though Bucky couldn't be sure the boy completely believed him, either.

"I would have gotten the folding chairs out of the garage, too," Sam commented, changing the subject again, "But I didn't think they'd *all* be up so early. Guess it's been a while since I was watching kids."

Bucky nodded, grateful for the subject change. "I'll go get the chairs," he said, letting go of Natalia's hand, "And then we'll see if we can fit everyone around the table."

Sam nodded back. "If we can't, there's a folding card table in there too, but I think it's buried a little farther back in the garage. Come to think of it, a couple of the chairs might be, too. I don't usually use more than two. But there *are* four of them, if you poke around for them."

When Bucky turned to leave, Natalia followed him even though he knew she didn't know where he was going. Maybe she wasn't so adjusted to Sam's place after all. He explained that they were going to get some more chairs so that everyone could sit down, and she told him she could help.

He wanted to ask if she trusted Sam, but he wasn't sure what he would say if the answer was no. Instead, he asked her if she'd eaten any breakfast. She said she'd been waiting for *him*, and he took it as confirmation enough that she wasn't ready to trust Sam. She hadn't eaten her hot dog last night, so he knew she must be hungry, but she hadn't complained about it, and she was waiting for him to eat instead of joining in the fight over the Pop Tarts. He'd have to keep a closer eye on her, now that Sam was here to pick up some of the slack with the boys, because that was worrying. If self-deprivation didn't bother her, he'd have to watch her like he did Steve, who always pushed too hard and put other people first.

In the garage, the first two chairs were leaning against the wall almost at the door, but the other two weren't much harder to find, not like he'd expected them to be. They were in the middle of the part of the garage Sam used for storage, but the area was organized neatly enough that it wasn't any real trouble. Bucky let Natalia 'find' them for him, since he'd told her she could help, then carried all four chairs back into the house, the little girl scurrying in front of him and looking happier than she had since he'd found the Avengers.

In the kitchen, a plate of bacon had quieted the argument, or at least transformed it. Tony, Thor, and Steve were duelling each other with bacon in their seats. The three crispiest pieces had all become swords, and the boys were laughing loudly enough that Bucky and Natalia had been able to hear them as soon as they walked back into the house. Clint and Bruce looked on, glancing nervously from the other boys to Sam and back, and Natalia looked up at Bucky pleadingly even though he could tell she wanted to jump straight in.

Sam was still at the stove, this time with pancakes cooking, and he flicked his head sideways at Bucky, telling him to do something about it. Bucky wasn't sure which thing he was supposed to be fixing. It felt wrong for the kids to be so scared of a little fun, but he suspected bacon fighting wasn't exactly *right*, either. Sam raised his eyebrows again, and Bucky made a decision.

Reaching for one of the slices of bacon, he joined in the fight, exclaiming, "Look out, Steve, I'm coming for you!"

"No, Bucky, get *Thor*!" Steve shouted back, meeting Bucky's bacon sword with his own and shoving him away. Bucky pretended to fall backward from the force of Steve's shove.

"Oof!" he grunted as his back hit the table, pretending Steve had knocked the breath out of him. If he was going to play along, he might as well really play along.

"THE SON OF ODIN FEARS NO GROWNUPS!" Thor howled, almost leaping on Bucky as he hit him across the arm with his bacon.

"Oh no, I'm hit!" Bucky groaned, grabbing at his arm where Thor had hit him.

"Don't worry, Bucky, I'll cover you!" Steve answered, standing up in his chair and brandishing his bacon at Thor.

"No fair teaming up!" Tony exclaimed, climbing out of his seat and leaping toward Steve, and the fight was suddenly mobile, the four of them chasing each other around the kitchen.

Clint retreated from his chair, taking his bowl with him and getting out of the way, but Natalia leapt into the fight, taking Bucky and Steve's side against Thor and Tony. Bucky wished he knew how to get the other two into the game. The boys' laughter had turned into full-fledged shrieks of joy, Natalia was grinning from ear to ear, and even Sam was laughing from his spot at the stove, but the other two were missing out on it.

Bucky let Tony force him backward, trying to get close enough to Sam to ask him - he wasn't sure what. He wanted to know if doing this was ok. He wanted to know how to get Clint and Bruce involved. He wanted to know if Sam was mad at them for the fact that the floor was quickly becoming littered with splinters of bacon. But before he could pick a question, Sam was calling to Bruce and Clint.

"Oh no! He's coming for the pancakes! Bruce, Clint, help me!"

Bucky grinned, playing along with a roar, "That's right! I'm going to eat them *all*!"

Tony gasped melodramatically, leaping forward to hit Bucky's sword with his own, "Not the *pancakes*! Come on, Thor, we have to stop them!"

Thor ran to join Tony, shouting, "No, *we're* going to eat them all!"

It was the straw that broke the camel's back. Sam handed spare plastic spatulas to Clint and Bruce, and the two most timid of the boys suddenly became fierce enough warriors to match Thor. Steve, Natalia, and Bucky went back to battling Tony and Thor, with Clint and Bruce hitting out indiscriminately at anyone who got too close to Sam.

Until all the pancakes were ready, the kitchen rang with childish squeals, bacon fell to pieces against Clint and Bruce's spatulas, and Bucky could sense their whole group relaxing, in spite of the high energy in the room. It was a completely different kind of relaxation than yesterday's exhausted collapse, and it made him feel good.

When the pancakes were done, Sam rallied his troops, calling for Bruce and Clint to make him a hole so that he could get to the table. They did, Bucky and the other kids falling back without any real fight, because they wanted the pancakes, too, and Bucky suddenly felt like maybe they could do this. Whatever *this* was.

The kitchen was a disaster, the kids were sticky, and Clint's bandages probably had bacon grease seeping into them. But the residual giggles around the table as they ate their pancakes made him smile for longer than he had in a long time. When Bruce dribbled a little bit of syrup on the table by accident and didn't panic over it, it felt like a victory, and when Natalia dug into her pancakes after only a moment of watching the others, it was a relief. Sam made more bacon once everyone was settled, and the second round of bacon actually managed to get eaten instead of scattered across the kitchen. That felt good too.

After breakfast, they sat the kids down in front of *The Muppets*, the only kids' movie Sam owned, and Sam went to the store to get some things he thought they needed, while Bucky cleaned up the kitchen.

Before long, Natalia had joined him, chattering at him in Russian because she didn't understand what was happening in the movie anyway. "Thor says you and Steve were friends when you were our age."

He nodded, looking up from the portion of the tabletop he was scrubbing clean of syrup, "We were, but it's hard for me to remember. It was a long time ago."

The little girl nodded sagely, "It was the longest time ago. And I'm from the shortest time ago. The others were trying to figure it out while you were at the store yesterday, but Thor doesn't understand years, and nobody else was answering his questions. He asked me, and that's how I know how long ago everybody is. I like it when he asks me things."

Bucky looked over at her again. "You like it when you know things, don't you?" he asked.

She thrust her chin into the air, proudly, "I *always* know things. I like it when I can *tell* people."

Bucky laughed, "Well, I'll have to ask you about things more often, then, won't I?"

Natalia nodded, "It's a good idea. At the facility, they ask me questions, because they know I always know things. I have to know *lots* of things for them, or I get in trouble, but I'm getting *really* good at knowing things. It's hard to know things about the people here because I don't understand them when they talk, but I can start knowing things about them, too."

Bucky had a thousand questions about the "facility," but he couldn't bring himself to ask them. Instead, he commented, "I'm sure you know *some* things about them already. I bet you've figured out that Steve's sick."

Natalia nodded again. "I *do* know that. He doesn't breathe so good. But he doesn't cough much. He just makes a noise. The noise is better now that we're here than it was before. I think it's better being here."

"I think it's better being here, too," Bucky agreed, "But you'll tell me if his breathing gets worse, won't you?"

Natalia nodded, "I'll tell you. Steve thinks if he's brave enough, no one will notice he's the littlest. But *I* know he's the littlest. So I'll take care of him. I know what it's like to be the littlest, 'cause *I'm* usually the littlest."

"Are you going to take care of the others, too?" he asked, thinking of the way she'd been with Clint last night.

"Yes," she answered decidedly, "Bruce and Clint get scared and they stop, but I get scared and I know how to not stop. And Thor needs me to answer his questions when the rest of them want to talk to each other instead. They do that sometimes, when his questions are silly. But I don't think they're silly. I think he's from far away, like me, and that's why he doesn't know things."

"And are you going to help Tony?" Bucky prompted.

"Maybe. Tony complains a lot. He's not as tough as me."

"No," Bucky agreed, "I guess he's not."

"Nobody's as tough as me," Natalia informed him earnestly, "That's how come you didn't have to carry me when we were walking to that place yesterday."

"*I'm* as tough as you," Bucky replied.

"I know," she answered. "That's how I know I can trust you. You used to be friends with Steve, but you're *actually* tough like me."

Bucky hoped he never had to explain to her just how alike they were. Instead, he joked, "And I speak Russian."

Natalia answered him seriously. "I didn't *trust* you because you speak *Russian*. Lots of kinds of people speak Russian. But that's ok, because *I* know you're *good*."

Bucky felt a prickling sensation starting in his eyes and nose and forced himself to focus on the last of the syrup on the table until he could get the feeling under control. "You're good too, Natalia. And you'll do a good job of helping me take care of the boys. I know it."

Natalia smiled. "I know it, too. I'm very good at doing what I'm supposed to."

For that, Bucky had no answer.

## Chapter End Notes

Gosh, thank you so much for all your nice comments so far! Usually, I try to answer everybody's comments individually, but this morning I woke up with 6 of them! I'm floored and humbled. Thank you to everyone who's been enjoying this so far, and I hope you continue to like it!

I know this chapter is a little short, but it and the next one were originally one chapter, and I decided it was too long together. The next chapter should be up shortly.

Oh! Also, Natalia's Russian, "Доброе утро" just means "Good morning," if you didn't get that from the context. Thanks to Fox+Scriber for correcting that for me.



# Settling Down

## Chapter Notes

Warning on this chapter for discussions of abuse.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By the time Sam returned, the kitchen was clean and the movie was over. Clint was the only one who remembered the Muppet Show, which he said had just started, and the other kids were asking him a thousand questions about it. Some of Steve's questions were really about television in general, which he found endlessly fascinating, and most of Thor's questions were about whether animals in this realm could talk or not. Clint had help with some of those answers, since Tony knew a lot about televisions (he'd taken one apart once, but he hadn't quite managed to get it put back together properly because he'd gotten distracted by the engine he was building now) and Bruce knew a lot about animals.

It was nice to see them getting along, and nicer still to see Clint and Bruce in the center of things, instead of on the edges. He thought it probably helped that he had gotten himself out of the way, sitting quietly on the couch behind them and leaving them to their conversation as he translated bits and pieces for Natalia.

Sam's arrival with a trunk stuffed full of things he'd bought for the kids broke them out of the quiet settledness they'd managed with the movie on. He'd brought back two pairs of jeans, three shirts, and a pair of pajamas for each kid, plus enough underwear and socks to equip a small army, and he'd stocked up on family-sized boxes of cheerios and dinosaur-shaped chicken nuggets. He'd also bought a huge bucket of legos, a hot wheels track and the cars to go with it, a pile of Disney movies, and six stuffed animals, all of them soft and squishy, with no two alike.

Bucky bit his lip as the kids tore into the bags, Tony taking the lead this time, but all of them shouting excitedly about all the new stuff and chattering about who was going to wear which t-shirt first. "I can't pay for this," he said softly, "I mean, I could, but I'd have to steal to do it, and I can't do that now. Not with Steve..."

"Is that what you've been doing all this time?" Sam interrupted, looking worried.

Bucky looked down at the ground, "I can't- I don't know how to do anything else. I asked about a job once, and they gave me a form to fill out and it asked all these questions, and I didn't have the answers. And drug dealers carry a lot of cash, and I can usually get it from them without a lot of people seeing. But I can't - Steve would never let me look after him like that. And I can't pay you if I can't steal, and I can't leave Steve-"

Sam raised his hand, but then stopped himself short of touching Bucky, "Is it ok if I put a hand on your shoulder? I want you to know I'm serious about what I'm about to say."

Bucky nodded, turning away from the kids to face Sam. The other man put a hand on his shoulder, and something about the contact was comforting. It made him feel grounded.

"These people are *my* friends, too," Sam said seriously, "And even if they weren't, it's not your fault that they need things. They're not your responsibility. Not like that. You don't have to steal for them, and you don't have to steal for *me*. They just need help, and that's *both* of our job now. You got them here, and you can protect them, if it comes to it. I have a place to keep them, and I can afford to buy them clothes. Don't worry about the money. I can take care of that, now."

"But you bought them toys," Bucky interjected. He knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't help himself. "You didn't have to do that. And I can't pay that back."

Something flashed through Sam's eyes too fast for Bucky to identify it. "I know," Sam answered, "But you didn't have to give them the clothes off your back, either. I know as well as you do that Natasha - or I guess 'Natalia,' at this age - didn't wear that t-shirt into a fight."

Bucky shook his head, glancing down, "Of course I had to. Bruce couldn't walk in his pants, and Natalia was running around naked-"

Sam leaned in a little bit, ducking down to force Bucky to meet his eyes. "But you *didn't*, Bucky," he said seriously, "You *didn't* have to. You *chose* to. You could have left them there. You could have let them get killed by the people they were fighting when they shrunk, because they told me about that fight before they got into the argument over the Pop Tarts. You didn't have to do that. But you did. And you *decided* to take care of them. Let me decide the same thing."

Sam laughed, breaking up the seriousness for a moment, "And let me decide that I want to make them *happy*, huh? You gave them a bacon war this morning, and I got behind on that everybody-having-fun count. Besides, I've been saving up for a motorcycle. I had a whole extra savings account set aside. The money was there, and I figured why not use it, while I was busting into the fund anyway."

It was a lot to take in. Too much. He couldn't process it. "You made the bacon," he finally said, knowing it was a weak protest, "That wasn't me."

Sam just laughed again, "I know. But you're still somehow the fun one." Then he squeezed Bucky's shoulder and waded in to break up the first hints of an argument over the stuffed animals.

The clothes went straight into the washing machine, and after a lunch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, they broke open the new toys. Tony started showing off right away, announcing that he was going to make the best lego helicopter ever. He made a good start, but when he noticed that Bruce's lego construction was just as complicated as his own, he grew abruptly silent. Bruce grinned like the cat who'd eaten the canary, spinning the wheels

on the car that had silenced the other boy, and when Tony challenged him to a lego duel, he accepted immediately.

They pulled apart what they'd already built, and Sam counted them down from ten, the other kids cheering them on as they started building. Both stayed silent, focusing intently on the tasks at hand in spite of the hooting and hollering. Both were fast, matching each other brick for brick, and both of them, now that they had the chance to show it, were clearly very smart.

By the time the laundry was finished, Bruce had beaten Tony twice, by two different sets of made-up rules, and the other kids had moved on to other things. Clint and Steve were propping the hot wheels track up with legos so that they could send the cars flying even higher into the air, Clint sitting on the floor to adjust the bottom of the track while Steve stood on the couch with the top. Thor had grown quickly bored with both games, and he and Natalia were tearing around the room with their stuffed animals instead, Thor's frog hopping frantically away from Natalia's bear while the children shouted at each other, pretending to be their animals.

Natalia had seemed most interested in the Hot Wheels, but then she'd picked the kid she could talk to over the game she liked best. Bucky wondered if he should start trying to teach her English. He still hadn't figured out how long he thought they would be like this. He hadn't even *really* figured out what 'like this' meant, but if it was going to be a while, it would be better for her to be able to communicate with *everyone*, not just him and Thor.

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Once the clothes were clean, Bucky announced that it was bath time, only to meet with resistance from the group. Sam stepped up to deal with it, but Bucky glared him down. Sam had bought the children everything he couldn't. He was going to do the hard work of looking after them, to make up for it. Steve teased Bucky about him needing a bath, too, but he realized he could use the joke as an in, and before long, Steve was on his way to being the first in the tub.

Steve's bath was a disaster, because Bucky was still his best friend, and Steve didn't think he'd been having enough fun today. He splashed Bucky enough times that Bucky felt like he'd taken his own shower, but he couldn't bring himself to mind. It was good to hear Steve laughing again, and taking care of Steve still felt like something he knew how to do, even when he didn't feel that way about any of the other kids.

When they came back out of the bathroom to where Sam was waiting with the other kids, Steve was clean and dry, wearing his new jeans and a blue t-shirt with a red-and-white train on the front. Bucky had damp patches all over, and his hair was dripping a little bit down his face. Sam started laughing the moment he caught sight of them. When Bucky glared at him, he just laughed harder, and the kids started giggling too.

"I got Bucky clean, too," Steve informed them proudly.

"Yeah, I can see that," Sam said, half wheezing because he still hadn't gotten control of his laughter.

"He was a *menace*," Bucky answered.

Steve grinned devilishly, "It was *fun*."

Much to Bucky's dismay, the 'fun' didn't stop with Steve.

Thor kept turning the faucets on and off, adding water to the tub every time his splashing lowered the level too far, and Bucky didn't really have the heart to stop him, not when playing with the faucets kept the boy still enough for Bucky to wash his hair. Thor got the floor even wetter than Steve had, and Bucky decided it was time to abandon his boots before he got any more water in them.

Tony seemed to take the puddles the other boys had left behind as a challenge, and if Steve had been a little devil, he had nothing on Tony. There was a glint in the boy's eye when he declared himself a hurricane that told Bucky he knew *exactly* what he was doing when he shoved the water around in a circle to build to the biggest splash. When Bucky finally broke down and abandoned his dripping t-shirt, the boy laughed like that was exactly what he'd wanted to happen, and when they walked out into the living room, Tony looking neat and dry and well-dressed while Bucky looked half-drowned in just his jeans, he looked proud of himself.

But then it was Bruce's turn, and everything suddenly changed. The boy looked like he was being marched to prison as they walked toward the bathroom, and nothing Bucky said seemed to make him feel any better about it. He washed in silence, answering Bucky's questions about his lego projects with single-word answers, and closing off like he hadn't since before breakfast. Bucky wondered if it was something about the bath itself, or if it was just that he didn't like being away from the other kids, but he didn't like thinking about it too hard.

When Bucky asked if he could help him wash his hair, Bruce nodded, but he still flinched away when Bucky touched his head. Bucky's stomach twisted. He knew, by now, that something had happened to Bruce and Clint, and that it hadn't been good. He knew it somewhere deep inside himself, the way he knew that what had happened to him hadn't been right, and the way he knew Natalia shouldn't be the way she was. But every time he had to actually think about it, he got all twisted up inside, and what he could ignore when Bruce wasn't talking, he couldn't ignore when the boy was flinching under his fingers.

He hated the fact that it was like this. He hated the fact that Bruce's curls took longer to get clean than the other boys' hair. He hated that Bruce squirmed the whole time like he hated it too. He hated thinking that maybe somebody had done this to him, already, and that he didn't know how to make it go away. He hated thinking that maybe there *was* no way to make it go away. And he hated that Bruce wouldn't talk to him, that he'd shut down instead.

Bucky let Bruce go with wet hair instead of trying to help him dry it, because he didn't want to push too hard. If Bucky was allowed to avoid Steve for all these months just because he didn't want to have to look in his best friend's eyes this way, Bruce deserved not to be pushed too hard.

Things only got worse with Clint. When he climbed into the tub, Bucky saw that the boy had scars across his back, and he felt suddenly like he'd been punched in the gut. There weren't many, but they were there, they were obvious, and facing them made him angry. He reached

out a hand, almost touching Clint's shoulder, then drew it back when the boy looked backward at him.

Bucky tried to tell himself that he'd known. He *had* known. He'd been thinking that something like this must have happened to Bruce, too, but he hadn't had marks to prove it. He just didn't know how to deal with *seeing* what he knew, not any more than he'd known how to deal with confirming what he'd already sensed. He'd felt vaguely sick when he'd had to half-look at what he knew, when Bruce flinched away from him or both boys hid themselves away in a corner, or he became aware that Natalia was hiding the fact that she wanted to do the same. But looking, *really* looking, did something else. He wanted to tear something apart. He wanted to tear *someone* apart.

But that someone wasn't Clint, and he knew he had to calm down. He clenched his right fist, feeling his fingers dig into his palm, and wished that clenching his metal fist had the same sensation to it, the same grounding feeling that he was real. He wanted to punch the tiles he was sitting on, but he didn't want to crack them.

"These are like yours," Clint asked tentatively, reaching over his own shoulder to trace the line of one of his scars until he couldn't reach it anymore, "Aren't they? They feel like yours."

Bucky nodded, trying to stay calm. They were and they weren't. It wasn't HYDRA's fault that he'd fallen off a train, except that he'd done it while fighting them. They hadn't given him his scars. Not the physical ones, not really. They'd removed the last vestiges of his arm, but they'd *needed* to, to give him a new one. The scars on his shoulder weren't intentional like the mental scars and the swiss-cheese memory were. They weren't intentional like Clint's scars were.

Clint smiled, looking relieved, and Bucky felt a moment of confusion weave through the anger he was still fighting to control. "I thought so," the boy said with a nod, "When I saw yours yesterday, I thought they were like mine. And they're ok, aren't they? I thought they were wrong, 'cause I thought I was supposed to get better - Barney *said* I would get better. But I didn't get better, and I got these instead, so I thought something was wrong with me. And I thought these were going to go away, and they didn't. But they're not *supposed* to go away, are they? Because you have them too."

"No," Bucky answered, fighting to keep the anger out of his voice, but sounding flat and tired, even to his own ears, without it, "They don't go away."

Clint's brow furrowed, "Do they make you sad?"

Bucky couldn't say that they made him angry. He remembered the last time someone had seen him angry. They had been terrified, and he couldn't scare the boy. So he nodded, instead, taking a deep breath and continuing to force the anger off his face.

"Why?" Clint asked, "Is it 'cause yours happened after your parents died, too?"

He shook his head, clenching his fist again where Clint couldn't see it. "No, Clint, it's not. It's because you only get them if somebody hurts you. And it makes me sad that somebody

would hurt you."

Clint looked away, "If I was good, I wouldn't get hurt so much."

Bucky wanted to reach out and grab the boy's chin, but he knew better, now, than to touch him without warning. He got up and moved, instead, sitting up on the other edge of the tub, in front of Clint, and forcing his jaw to unclench so that Clint wouldn't see that he was still angry. "No. If the people *around* you were good, you wouldn't get hurt."

"My foot got hurt," Clint said softly, still looking away, and when Bucky realized the boy blamed himself for that, he really *did* feel sad, somewhere inside the anger.

"Somebody bad left glass on the sidewalk," Bucky answered, "Just like somebody bad pushed me off a train. It's not your fault." He wasn't sure he'd ever told himself that before. That it wasn't his fault. It felt good.

The boy's head snapped up, "Somebody pushed you off a *train*?"

Steve had sparked that memory in Bucky months ago, now, and he'd gotten used to remembering it. He nodded, glad that the usual disorienting rush that came with new memories wasn't hitting him now. "Steve and I - we were older than he is now, but not as old as *I* am now, and we were fighting some bad people. One of them pushed me off the train, and Steve couldn't get there in time to save me. And then the bad guys found me, and they took me away, and then it was a long time before Steve could find me again and get me away from the bad people. But just because there are bad people around you doesn't mean you have to be bad."

That last part, he *had* told himself before. He'd told himself over and over that he didn't have to be the Winter Soldier anymore, that he could change, that just because he'd been bad didn't mean he had to stay that way, that just because he'd been reshaped into something didn't mean he had to stay that thing forever. But it had been hard to make himself believe it, even as he watched Steve tearing back and forth across the country to find him like his best friend didn't have a doubt in the world that Bucky could be fixed.

It was easier to believe that Clint could be good. Even if he hadn't known the boy grew up into a hero, it would have been easy to believe that Clint could be good. It was almost comforting that it was so easy.

"Are you gonna send me back to the bad people?" Clint asked, "The last time I ran away, they sent me back to the bad people. They said I had to stay with my foster parents, and then my foster parents pretended to be nice while the other people were there, and then they hit me when the other people were gone."

Bucky shook his head emphatically, "I'm not gonna send you anywhere." He didn't know that it was the truth. He *couldn't* know that it was the truth, because he and Sam had talked through everything they knew about this situation while the kids were playing, and they had determined that they didn't really know anything. They didn't know how to turn the kids back into grownups, and they didn't know if it would mean sending the kids back to their previous lives if they did. This could be time travel, or it could be regression, or it could be,

as Bucky had suggested in a moment of frustration, just some kind of ridiculous magic, and they didn't know what fixing any of those things would mean, or how to do it.

But he *did* know that he'd keep Clint *himself* before he sent the kid away to someone who might hurt him. Even living in a rotating series of streets and homeless shelters and stealing to pay for food, he'd keep Clint to get him away from people who might hurt him.

He wondered when he'd started feeling that way. And he wondered how many of them he'd end up keeping, if it came to it.

Bucky made Clint promise not to tell Steve any of the new details about his future. He didn't want Steve worrying about it, because there was nothing the boy could do now about his future, and because it had turned out ok. He didn't tell Clint that "It turned out ok" still felt like a lie. "Ok" was another scar, like Clint's, and "ok" wasn't actually ok at all.

After the boys, Natalia's bath time was a relief. She chattered happily at him, telling him everything she'd learned about Thor's home while they were playing in the living room, and describing everything Tony and Bruce had built with the legos. She washed behind her ears when he told her to, and she let him wash her hair without splashing him. She had scars, but she didn't talk about them, and she didn't flinch away from him like Bruce had. Natalia wasn't healthy, either - she'd only mentioned the facility once, and it was still enough for him to know that - but she had learned to hold herself together, somehow. Bucky wished he understood how it worked. She was so young, and so small, and even if her comfort with everything was a lie, he wished he knew how to match it.

He also wished he could change things for her so that he actually believed her comfort with this whole situation was real. She was as bad, in her own way, as Steve was. They were pint-sized and stuffed to the brim with bravado, and just because she could back it up like Steve couldn't didn't mean they weren't the same.

But he didn't know how to change that, either.

He just knew it was getting late, and he had to take his own shower quickly and get out to help Sam with dinner. Sam was lending him a clean pair of jeans and a t-shirt, and it would be ungrateful to leave him handling the kids alone for too long. He'd already had the mob for most of the afternoon. They'd have to figure out a quicker plan than six baths for tomorrow.

## Chapter End Notes

The stuff the kids ended up with and the stuff Sam actually bought for them are not the same. The train shirt was supposed to be Tony's, but Steve claimed it instead. (Bucky was... not totally happy about that, but he went with it because it made Steve happy.)

As far as the animals go:

The frog was for Bruce, but Thor claimed it.

The bear was for Steve, but Natalia claimed it.

The lion was for Thor, but Tony claimed it.

The dog was for Clint, but Steve claimed it.

The rabbit was for Natalia, but Bruce claimed it.

The tiger was for Tony (though Sam had been willing to admit that that was more for the sake of the Tony-the-Tiger joke than because he actually thought it might be Tony's favorite), but Clint claimed it.

Wow, that sounds like the end of a logic puzzle. But there you go. I worked it out, so...  
bonus behind-the-scenes info, I guess... \*eyeroll\*



# One Step Backward and Three Steps Front

## Chapter Notes

Warnings for discussions of child abuse. I'm pretty sure this is the last chapter that talks about it with any specificity, though.

At the end of the first day, Bucky felt like things were finally under control, like he and Sam could turn from damage control to actually figuring out how to solve their problems.

With the kids tucked into bed, pajamas on and teeth brushed with only a brief argument over who got to wear which pajamas, he and Sam sat down at the kitchen table and made a plan. It wasn't, admittedly, the most comprehensive of plans, but Sam knew someone he could ask for help, and they knew what to do with the stolen car and how to keep the kids safe until Sam's help could come.

They also knew that all of the kids were dealing with a lot - and that they were dealing with a lot more than having suddenly becoming children again. Bucky had seen enough in Bruce, Clint, and Natalia to know they'd had tough lives. Sam had seen even more, and he'd seen some things in Tony that Bucky had failed to recognize meant his rich-boy childhood hadn't been exactly ideal either. Steve's health was good, right now, but Bucky knew, even if Sam didn't seem to *really* understand when he told him, that it never stayed that way for long. Thor was on the wrong planet, and they didn't know how to contact Asgard, and even though Sam said his friend could help, that help was probably at least a few days away.

In spite of it all, he went to bed thinking everything was looking up.

When the sound of soft, frantic whispers woke him up at 2:00 in the morning, things didn't seem so bright. Suddenly, the whispers broke into a shout of "No! Stop!" Bucky was on his feet in an instant, leaping off the couch and racing toward the kids' room. Sam met him at the door, looking just as worried as Bucky felt about the terrified whispers still coming, unclearly, through the door.

When they pushed the door open, it almost hit Clint and Natalia. It looked like Clint had tackled the girl, but whatever he'd been trying to tell her, he became abruptly silent when the door opened. He looked up at them like he was terrified, and as he scrambled backward off of Natalia, he started hyperventilating.

The whispers had stopped, both from Clint and from where Tony and Thor stood at the side of the room, out of the way, both looking bleary-eyed like they'd hadn't fully woken up. In the silence, it became obvious that Bruce was crying, making soft, choked noises as he scrubbed frantically at a wet spot on the bed, hands full of toilet paper that Bucky could tell from here had started to shred itself to pieces. Steve was beside him, trying to help, but even

without the boy's obvious terror, the wet spot on Bruce's pajamas proved he'd been the one who wet the bed.

Bucky had no idea what to do.

Sam was already moving.

He walked into the room, perfectly calm in a way that Bucky knew he couldn't have managed, himself. His heart had been racing since he heard Clint's shout, but if Sam's had too, it didn't show in his face. "Hey, guys, it's alright. Calm down for a second, and we'll clean this up the *right* way, ok?"

Bruce let out a single loud sob before he muffled himself again, setting Natalia into motion, creeping slowly toward Bucky like she needed a place to hide. Steve wrapped an arm around the other boy's shoulder, glaring at Sam as if it were his fault Bruce was frightened. "He's really scared, Mr. Wilson," he said, "I *told* him it would be ok, but he said you were gonna hit him."

Sam stopped where he was at Steve's explanation, and knelt down in front of the boys, speaking softly even though he was still a few feet away. "Bruce, I *promise* I'm not going to hit you."

Bruce backed away, anyhow, shrinking into Steve's side.

"I wouldn't let him if he *tried*," Steve said definitively, wrapping his other arm protectively around Bruce, "I wouldn't let *anybody* hit you."

"Nor I!" Thor announced, "Though I do not think the Son of Wil would ever hit a child."

"I'd take apart the engine in his car to get back at him," Tony said with a yawn, "I know how, 'cause I'm building one. But it doesn't matter. 'Cause he's not gonna *hit* you. Can we go back to bed?"

Natalia grabbed Bucky's hand and pulled gently at it, and he bent down to sweep her up into his arms. He hadn't picked her up before, but he wanted to be able to talk to her while still keeping an eye on everyone else. She seemed ok with it, wrapping her arms around his neck before whispering anxiously in his ear, as if she didn't want anyone to know she was speaking even though she already knew no one else understood Russian. "Is he very angry?" she asked, "Are we going to be in trouble? Why are the boys talking back to him?"

Bucky's arms tightened around the girl almost in spite of himself, "No, Natalia," he answered quietly, "He's not angry. There's nothing to be angry about, because none of you did anything wrong. He's just trying to get Bruce to calm down."

"But it's weak to wet the bed," she whispered back, "And we're not supposed to be weak. I know that."

Sam was still talking to Bruce, half ignoring everyone else, "See, Bruce, nothing to worry about. You have friends to look out for you, and you know what? I'm your friend, too. So

you're gonna be ok. I'm gonna look out for you."

Bucky shook his head at Natalia. "No. That was the facility. This is here. You're here with me and Mr. Wilson now, and you don't have to worry about that anymore."

Bruce was still worried, but he poked his head up to look at Sam over Steve's arm as the man kept talking to him. "If you can just calm down, then we can find you some clean underpants, and we'll let everybody go to sleep in my room so that Bucky and I can clean up in here. Does that sound ok? Do you think you can calm down so we can do that?"

Natalia's face was screwed up in confusion, "But what about weak links? There can be no weak links."

Bucky had no answer for that. It hurt just to listen to it, said with perfect confidence in her small voice. He wished he had Sam's way with words. Bruce was nodding, now, tentatively, and he sniffled instead of crying.

"Is this another test?" Natalia asked him.

"What do you mean, 'another test'?" he asked, suddenly aware both that he had overestimated how thoroughly Natalia had adjusted to being here and that the Russian he'd learned as the Winter Soldier included no terms of affection or endearment, which he suddenly felt he needed to rectify.

"Isn't this a test?" Natalia asked, "To see how good I am at finding out what to do when nobody knows Russian?"

Sam hadn't stood back up, but he had scooted closer to Steve and Bruce, reaching out a hand and placing it gently on Bruce's shoulder even as the boy flinched, hard, into Steve's grip. "It's ok, Bruce, nobody's going to hurt you. Take deep breaths."

Bucky shifted his grip on Natalia, looking her straight in the eye. "No, little one. This isn't a test. We don't know how all of you got here, but for as long as you're here, there will be no more tests. All you have to do is be a child."

Natalia wrinkled her nose, "I don't know if I'm very good at being a child."

Bucky pressed his forehead gently against hers. "That's ok. Until yesterday, I didn't think I was very good at being a *person*. But you all helped me. Now we'll just all have to help each other."

Natalia nodded solemnly. "I can help Clint. He and Bruce got scared at the same time. They didn't want me to come find you, I could tell. But I thought not telling you would be worse."

Clint had moved even more gradually than Natalia had, and was pressed into the corner of the room, out of the way and still, clearly, afraid. Bruce's sniffles were quieting as he looked into Sam's face and decided to trust him. Clint's breath still came rapidly, though it didn't sound dangerously fast anymore.

Bucky felt bad that he'd forgotten the boy, attention caught up in Bruce and Sam and Natalia.

"It's ok, Natalia. I'll talk to Clint. I think Mr. Wilson is going to need your help when he sends everybody to his room to go back to sleep. Do you think you can carry your bear *and* Bruce's rabbit?"

Natalia looked at him like he'd grown a second head, and he realized he'd overdone it. "I can carry *all* the animals, if I want to," she informed him.

He blustered through it. "Of course. And I can carry Clint, if you'll let me put you back down. His foot's still hurt."

"Clint can walk," she answered, "We both can. His foot's much better. Just because it's not a test doesn't mean we *have* to be weak links."

Bucky bent down to put Natalia back on the ground, "No, I guess it doesn't. But it doesn't mean he can't ask for help, either." That was another thing he thought he should have told himself before. But he hadn't.

As Sam stood up again, Bruce calm enough for now, and started passing out pillows and stuffed animals for the trek down the hall, Bucky walked slowly into Clint's corner and knelt down in front of the boy.

"Hey, Clint" he asked, trying to keep his voice quiet enough that he wouldn't draw the other kids' attention the way Sam and Bruce had, "What's wrong?"

Clint shook his head, even though he was trembling, "It's nothing. I just got scared."

"Are you still scared? You can tell me the truth. I can keep a secret."

Clint nodded, but didn't say anything out loud.

"When - when they hurt you and you didn't get better," Bucky managed, hating the question even as he asked it, "When you got your scars - was that because you wet the bed?"

Clint shook his head again. "No," he answered, "That was because I broke one of the dishes. But sometimes I wet the bed, and then I always get in trouble, and usually they hit me, but it always gets better. And Bruce's dad, he hits him when he wets the bed, too, so even though Mr. Wilson says he won't, it's still scary."

Bucky nodded, "Well, I don't think Steve and Thor and Tony would let him hit you, either. And I know *I* wouldn't. And Natalia probably wouldn't, either. So I think you're pretty safe here."

"Did the bad people who had *you* hit you when you wet the bed?" Clint asked, an abrupt shift that Bucky wasn't really ready for. He was at least calmer, now. The reassurance that the things the others had told Bruce counted for him too seemed to have helped.

Bucky shook his head. "I don't think I did that, while they had me. But I was a lot bigger than you. And they hit me for other things, instead."

Clint nodded seriously, "Maybe you should tell Bruce about it. I don't think he has scars, like us, but I bet he would wanna know about how Sam's a good person and you know because you've been with the bad people, too."

Maybe he should. He just didn't know how to do it.

Bucky took over resettling most of the kids in Sam's room, while Sam got Bruce cleaned up. Then, they started stripping the dirty sheets off the bed, both of them looking like death warmed over now that they didn't have to keep a front up for the children.

Finally, Bucky couldn't take the silence anymore. "I hate it," he said, not sure he knew how to define 'it,' but sure to his core that he meant the statement anyway.

Sam nodded. "Me too. I just keep wishing I could have stopped it. But I wasn't even born when it was happening to half of them, so how could I ever have stopped it even if I'd known?"

"I was," Bucky answered faintly, feeling suddenly desperately sad.

"Bucky," Sam said seriously, motions stilling, "You were abused as much as them, when it was happening. It's not your fault."

"I still hate it."

"We'll do better," Sam said decidedly, "For however long we've got them, we'll do better. And we'll help them. We're not exactly clueless about what trauma's like. I've never specialized in counseling for children, but there are resources I can get, and I know people. Just because we've got to keep them hidden so the bad guys don't realize they're weak doesn't mean we have to lock them up without any help. We'll do what we can."

"I told Clint about my past," Bucky admitted, "Some of it, anyway. Just the bare minimum, and I told him not to tell Steve, but we were talking about scars, and I - I told him."

Sam started moving again, pulling the sheets off the bed more aggressively than strictly necessary. "I saw those," he commented, "When I was helping him with his pajamas. Made me want to punch something. Did the talking help?"

"He told me I should tell Bruce," Bucky said, stepping away from the freshly-stripped bed and letting Sam bundle the sheets up to take them to the laundry room. "He seemed to think it would help if Bruce knew I could tell you were good because the bad people used to have me, too."

Sam looked thoughtful, "It's not a bad idea. Like a group therapy session. I'll need to reread some of my old school stuff to make sure I'm not doing anything that might overtax them, but if we can get them to talk about it-"

"I don't want Steve to know," Bucky interrupted, stomach twisting, but this time with guilt. "He knows we get separated, and he knows things get rough for me. But I don't want him to

know he's going to watch me fighting for his enemies. I don't want him to know how much he loses me."

Sam looked at Bucky over his armful of sheets and then gestured toward the door with his head as he started toward the door. "You can't hide it from him forever, Bucky. At least this time, he'll know you come back to him in the end."

"Only because he needed me."

"Bucky," Sam said, exasperated, "He *always* needed you. But it's nice to see that you finally figured it out. Now he needs us both."

"He always needed you, too," Bucky reminded Sam, "Or always since he met you. I've watched him a lot since I got back. And he needed you."

Sam rolled his eyes, "Well, they *all* need us right now. And until F- my friend can get an Asgardian or a tech genius or *something* here, they're gonna keep needing us."

Bucky could agree with that. And once the laundry was running, agreeing with it seemed like all he really needed to say.

They checked on the kids together, but when Sam went to put clean sheets on the back bed, Bucky told him just to take the couch. Then he fell asleep on the floor outside Sam's room. It felt right to be where he could hear the kids' last little sleepy whispers as they drifted back to sleep in spite of all the excitement. It felt right to be where he knew he could hear them if someone started crying again.

He had a purpose, now, and it wasn't one a weapon could fulfill. That felt good too, when before it had just felt scary.

# Paranoid and Mushy

## Chapter Notes

This chapter's on the long side. FYI.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They were lucky that the next day was Saturday, because it meant Sam could take care of Bucky's stolen car and send a message to his friend while Bucky stayed at the house and watched the children. It was the second time he'd been left with them, and he was surprised how little it scared him now.

He was also surprised when the doorbell rang a mere 14 hours later, even though Sam had told him he wasn't sure how long the message would take to get to his friend, and that it might not work at all.

Both he *and* Sam's friend were surprised when they came face to face.

"I thought I killed you," Bucky said, the words slipping out before his brain could realize they were possibly the worst words he could have said. "I mean-" he backtracked "I'm glad I didn't kill you."

"Not for lack of trying," Nick Fury answered, before turning to Sam. "You didn't tell me the Winter Soldier was here."

"That's because he isn't," Sam answered calmly, "Nick Fury, meet Bucky Barnes. Barnes, Fury."

"I'm *sorry* that I tried to kill you," Bucky blurted, finally finding the words he really should have said.

As the man turned toward Bucky, he found himself wishing he could see Fury's eyes behind the sunglasses. The man was studying him, now, and Bucky felt his insides squirm a little as the man's calm stare stayed on him. His eyes were unreadable with the glasses, and the rest of his face was little help.

"We can talk about *that* later," Fury said after a moment, "Because I'm guessing that the assassin in the *Annie* t-shirt isn't the reason you called me here."

Bucky blushed. He had picked the t-shirt out of Sam's drawer this morning because even though he hadn't seen *Annie*, the musical at the community theater near where Sam's nieces lived, he vaguely remembered *Little Orphan Annie*, the comic strip in the newspapers and the serial on the radio. Sometimes he was better with details like that than he was with the facts of his own life, and even though Sam had been mildly embarrassed, saying something about

how good his sister was at dragging him into things when they'd lived close to each other, he'd let him wear it.

Bucky felt even worse about his shirt choice now that Fury was belittling it than he had this morning when Tony saw it and started singing some song about how no one cared about kids in orphanages. Sam had rerouted him into a song about the sun coming out, which had been better, but it had been a tough moment.

If this was another tough moment, Sam didn't show it. "No, it isn't the reason I asked you to come," he said casually, "But I think you're just going to have to come see the reason for yourself, because it's a little bit difficult to explain."

As Sam led Fury to the Avengers, Bucky trailed after them, not sure where his place was in all of this now that Fury was here. His emotions were desperately jumbled, and it made him feel afraid. Afraid, and a little angry. This was the man he'd killed. Or not killed. The man he'd blown up, if nothing else. It was one thing to come to Sam after he'd torn the man's wings off, because he'd at least been able to follow Sam some while he was guarding Steve. He'd known for sure that Steve trusted Sam, and he'd known Sam would protect the Avengers. He didn't know anything about Fury, really. He just knew he'd blown him up once, and that didn't make him feel confident about the guy.

He knew Fury didn't like him, which made him a threat, and he knew the man hadn't died in spite of his own best efforts, which made him dangerous. But part of him knew he shouldn't think that way when Fury was also the person Sam had called. It just didn't stop him from feeling suddenly and inexplicably angry, just for a moment, that of all the people on the planet, the one walking toward the kids - *his* kids, his mind supplied, even though they weren't - was Nick Fury.

At the kids' door, something in Bucky rebelled against the idea of giving Fury unfettered access to them. Whatever Sam said, Fury *seemed* dangerous. And if it was hypocritical for Bucky to judge him for it, that didn't stop him from doing it. As Sam opened the door, Bucky shoved his way between the other men and into the room, standing off to the side to give Fury a clear view through the door, but keeping an eye on him in case he tried to come in.

Fury didn't seem bothered by Bucky's sudden defensive measures, too focused on the shrunken Avengers to pay him much attention. He stared for a moment, then took his glasses off as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing, revealing one good eye and one blind, scarred one. "Damn," he said softly. Bucky suspected he was reining himself in to keep from waking the children, though he couldn't quite say why he thought so.

Steve twitched slightly in his sleep at the sound. The Avengers had been tucked into bed neatly, three of them with their heads on pillows at the head of the bed and three with their heads on pillows at the foot of the bed. Bruce, at the head of the bed on the side nearest the bathroom door, was the only one who had stayed still. Thor and Tony were both sprawled out on the opposite side, limbs reaching out to take up more space than was really theirs. Their feet tangled together, but their arms just seemed to have spread farther to make up for the way they ran into each other.



Steve and Natalia had adjusted around them and were curled up together in the center of the bed, away from the boys' wide-spread arms. They had Tony and Thor's side of the blanket bundled up over them, leaving the sprawlers uncovered. Clint had kept his blankets, but had drifted toward the middle, getting dangerously close to both Tony's arm space and Natalia's tightly-curved form.

Bucky stood watching them until he was certain that Nick Fury was really, truly leaving the doorway. He wondered if it was comforting for them to be so close to each other, or if they'd have felt better in their own separate beds. Sam didn't have separate beds to put them in, anyway, so he didn't suppose it mattered.

He stayed for a few moments longer than he needed to before stepping out into the hallway and closing the door quietly behind him.

He wasn't sure how to get Nick Fury to trust him, especially when he didn't trust Fury himself. He wasn't sure *exactly* how he'd gotten Sam to trust him, besides the fact that he'd had the Avengers, and they'd been vulnerable, and he'd helped them instead of killing them. Maybe that could be enough again.

He walked to the kitchen to find Fury sitting casually at the table with his glasses back on, chair tipped back on two legs and a gun beside him on the table. Bucky stopped short, hovering in the doorway. He'd had a gun and a couple of knives on him when he got here, but Sam had insisted that they go in the gun safe with the kids around. And he'd been right about it, but now Bucky felt naked, facing a man with a gun when he didn't have one.

He'd done that too often, at the HYDRA bases after missions, when they stripped everything from him again.

At the HYDRA bases, he'd have gone limp against it, waiting for them to hurt him, and waiting to take the pain. He'd have submitted in front of the threat and expended the fear in glaring at them and pretending he was already dead.

But he wasn't the Winter Soldier anymore. If Fury pointed the gun at him, he was going to take it from him. Even if he had to get shot doing it. And if Fury pointed the gun at the children, he was going to kill him, and he was going to get it right this time. The last part, he thought, was probably paranoid.

At the table, Sam rolled his eyes. "Let him have the gun, Buck, you *did* blow him up."

Even Steve's nickname for him didn't make him feel better. "My gun's in the *safe*," he said, hoping Sam would understand without him having to tell Fury he was afraid.

"And his will be too, if he stays here with the kids. For now, we've gotta make sure he wasn't followed." Sam was lying to him. Bucky felt something deflate inside him. Sam was trying to calm them both down, and it was probably fair for him to lie a little to do it. But it still hurt.

"He wasn't," Bucky protested, "He knows he wasn't."

"No," Fury answered, "I wasn't. But I'm not planning to shoot you, either, so get your ass in here and tell me what happened so we can stop listening to Wilson trying to be *tactful*."

Sam laughed, "Yeah, sure, make *me* the bad guy. Paranoid bastards."

Fury snorted, "'Paranoid bastard' kept me alive."

Sam rolled his eyes. "It kept the Avengers alive, too, when Bucky showed up," he said reasonably, "It's still not the time for it *now*."

Bucky stepped hesitantly forward into the kitchen. Maybe he *was* being paranoid. Maybe he *could* take a step back on that. "I want his gun off the table," he said, aware that it sounded like he was pouting.

"Tell you what," Sam said, "I'll take the gun, and if *either* of you goes for the other one, I'll shoot you both. Sound fair?"

Fury laughed without smiling, a harsh bark that surprised both Bucky and Sam. "Christ, Wilson, how old do you think we are? I'm putting the gun away. But don't think I won't still shoot you if you come at me, Barnes. I don't trust you yet."

Bucky felt a wave of relief as Fury tucked the gun back into the shoulder holster he had hidden under his layers of jackets and sweatshirts, all unzipped now that he was inside and safe. "I don't trust you, either," he told Fury. It felt good to say it. He sat down across the table from the man anyway, because Sam and the kids needed him to.

"Good," Sam said, "That's settled. And now if you're done, let's figure out what we're doing about getting the Avengers back to their usual size."

Once they got going, the strangest part of their planning session wasn't telling the story of how he'd found the Avengers. It wasn't picking apart everything they could even vaguely guess about the kids' condition. It wasn't even the way Fury talked about both Asgard and experimental science as if he were perfectly comfortable with things that didn't even sound real. It was that Fury kept calling him "Barnes" and he didn't know what to do with that.

The name brought up vague memories of being in the army, with occasional flashes of real, detailed memory that left him disoriented and asking the man to repeat himself. He was beginning to accept that this was just the way his life was - every new thing that was actually an old thing would disorient him for a moment, and he was going to have to deal with it.

It was still a relief, even though they didn't have everything settled yet, when Natalia padded softly into the kitchen. Fury grew abruptly silent, which Bucky thought might be from the shock of seeing one of the little Avengers actually in motion for the first time.

Natalia looked nervous about the stranger in the kitchen, but walked in anyway. She kept Bucky's body between her and Fury as she walked, and then stopped so close to Bucky's chair that he almost thought she was going to climb into his lap. "Steve is coughing," she said, eyes still fixed on Fury even though she was talking to Bucky. "Everybody else is sleeping through it, but you said to tell you if he got sicker."

She glanced at Bucky at the end, and he nodded to her. "Let me tell Sam and we'll go check on him, ok?"

Natalia nodded back, but before Bucky could talk to Sam, Fury interrupted. "I thought you said they were all healthy."

"You speak Russian," Bucky said, surprised.

Fury raised an eyebrow, the top of it showing over his glasses, "Of course I speak Russian, Barnes, I'm a veteran spy. And you *told* me all the kids were healthy."

"This *is* healthy for Steve," Bucky said, standing up, "Or did your files leave out the part when we were kids and he almost died a couple dozen times?"

Natalia reached her arms up, something she hadn't done before, but he picked her up like it was normal. It made a small, petty part of him feel better to know that she didn't trust Fury, but she *did* trust him.

"What's wrong with Steve?" Sam asked, getting to his feet as well.

"He's coughing," Bucky answered, "I'd better go see. It's probably the asthma." He should stop there, and he knew it, but Fury's presence drew out his more defensive side. "We're lucky he hasn't had trouble with his heart yet," he added, glaring at the man, "Or gotten dizzy from the anemia - and if he's got ulcers again, he hasn't said it. But if you wanna spend time worrying that I'm *lying* to you instead of worrying about the fact that the Avengers got shrunk, go right ahead. *I'm* gonna go check on my best friend. You guys can work out the rest."

Bucky had stopped overthinking his memories where Steve was concerned. Things came back to him in flashes, or they came back gradually, but he'd stopped worrying about them and started just letting them come. He hadn't realized he remembered so many of Steve's problems growing up until they came out of his mouth, but he knew he'd been monitoring the boy for them anyway. It felt good. It felt like he was in control of himself. It felt like he could be just as in control as Fury could.

Sam raised an eyebrow at his outburst, but then just nodded. "Ok," he said, sitting back down, "But you should probably let us check him over, too. Just to be safe."

Bucky nodded and turned around. As he walked away from the table, Natalia wrapping her arms around his neck to hold on against the sudden motion, he turned his back on Fury and he actually felt pretty good about it.

It helped that he knew Natalia was watching the stranger over his shoulder and would warn him if he were in danger.

When he opened the door to the room, Steve groaned quietly and put his arm over his eyes. He had crawled back up to his spot in the middle of the headboard, sandwiched between Bruce and Thor, and Bucky couldn't get to him. "Steve," he whispered, "Come out to the kitchen so we can check your breathing and make sure you're ok."

"I'm *fine*," Steve whispered, stubbornly.

"You're always 'fine.'" Bucky answered, "I still wanna listen for a bit."

Steve slid his arm down to glare at him, "It's the middle of the night," he whispered, "I'm supposed to be *asleep*."

"Yeah," Bucky said back, feeling strangely like this particular frustration was familiar, "But you're not, so why don't you just come to the kitchen so Mr. Wilson and I can listen to your breathing and you can meet his friend."

At that, Steve sat bolt upright, making himself cough drily. "Mr. Wilson's friend is here?" he asked, once he'd caught his breath again, "The one that's gonna help us be heroes again?" Even at a whisper, he sounded excited. Bucky forced himself not to smile. He'd just won the argument, but he needed to let Steve think he was coming around on his own.

Bucky nodded solemnly, face carefully neutral. "Will you please come with me?"

A grin broke suddenly across Steve's face, and he crawled forward to get out of his spot in the middle of the bed, coughing only once as he moved. "'Course. You gotta check my breathing."

Bucky rolled his eyes, but bent to put Natalia down as Steve clambered off the bed to stand beside them. Instead of letting go, the girl squeezed his neck tighter, "Wait!" she whispered, "I wanna stay with you."

"Why?" he whispered back. "Aren't you tired?"

"You don't know if you can trust him," she answered, "And I'm good at finding out about people."

What she meant was that *she* didn't know if she could trust Fury, and she wanted to find out. But one argument with a 6-year-old was enough for this time of night, and they were lucky the other kids hadn't already woken up.

"Ok," he agreed, reluctantly, "But once we're sure Steve's ok and he goes back to bed, you have to go, too."

She nodded, and the three of them left the room together, Bucky walking slowly to keep from taxing Steve as he tried to keep up. He wished he could carry Steve, too, but he knew his best friend would never let him. Not for as short a walk as the one to the kitchen, anyway.

When they got back to the kitchen, Sam lifted Steve up to sit on the countertop. He asked him to take a deep breath so that he could listen to his lungs, but Steve was focused on Nick Fury instead. "Hi!" he said, craning his neck to look over Sam's shoulder at the man, "I'm Steve Rogers. I'm little now, but don't worry - I'm gonna be a hero when I get big, just like Bucky. Mr. Wilson says you can help."

Fury stood up so that Steve could see him more easily, coming around the table and then leaning on the edge of it, facing Steve. "I'm Mr. Fury. And Mr. Wilson is right. I'm gonna

need my heroes back, and you're one of them."

Steve nodded, excitedly, "I know! They told me! But I bet I can be a hero *now* if you need me to. I'm tougher than I look." The last part was weakened by the fact that he started coughing again as soon as he'd finished saying it, harder than he'd coughed before. Bucky wondered if he'd been trying to muffle himself to keep the others from waking up, or if the coughing was actually worse now. Steve doubled over, Sam stepping closer to the counter to steady him and make sure he didn't fall off.

"I think we'd better take you to the doctor, Steve," Sam said, "Before that gets any worse."

Steve shook his head violently. When he'd caught his breath enough to speak, he rasped, "I'm fine. It's just a *little* cough. Tell 'im Bucky! Tell 'im I'm fine!"

Steve's blue eyes looked so desperately into his own that he almost agreed without thinking about it. But Sam was right, too. They had to be careful with Steve. "Give him a little bit," he said finally, "Maybe it'll get calm down. Shouldn't pull a doctor into this if we don't have to. But if it gets worse, we'll have to."

Sam nodded. "Ok. I'm gonna trust you on that, 'cause I know you're remembering more of the old days now. But if I think he *really* needs it, we're going whether either of you wants to or not."

Steve should probably have been mad at Sam, but instead he glared at Bucky. "Traitor. You'd've told the *teacher* I was fine, when you were still little." He coughed again, but it was briefer and weaker this time.

"Yeah," Bucky answered stubbornly, "And then we'd have gone home from school and I'd have told your Ma you'd been coughing all day."

"I was *always* coughing all day," Steve answered stubbornly, "It was *fine*."

"And I was always telling your Ma about it!" Bucky shot back, "You gotta let me look after you, Stevie. We won't call the doctor until we need to, but you gotta let me look after you."

The memories came back almost effortlessly, now, when they came around Steve. Maybe it was because his brain had more places to put them, more things to connect them to. Maybe it was just because it had gotten used to the way memories flooded back every time he talked to Steve about just about anything older than two days ago.

"Is he going to be alright?" Natalia asked, interrupting the argument.

Steve's brows wrinkled, "Is she - is she worried about me? 'Cause I'm ok. Tell her I'm ok, Bucky. Sometimes she talks to us even though we don't know how to talk Russian, and she sounds like she's trying to make us feel better or something, so I think she worries about us."

Bucky smiled in spite of himself at that, "He says he's alright, Natalia. But we have to watch him anyway, because he's tough like us, and sometimes he doesn't ask for help even when he needs it."

Natalia nodded, but then corrected, "He's tough like *Clint*. But that's ok, 'cause I look after Clint, too."

Fury had been watching the back and forth from a short distance, leaning against the table, but he chimed in at that, in Russian that clearly startled Natalia. "So, you're tough, Steve's tough, and Clint's tough - is everybody else tough, too?"

Natalia froze in Bucky's arms for just a second, then turned a surprisingly fierce glare on Fury. "We're *all* tough, but I'm *toughest*, and I won't let you hurt them. So you're not gonna find *out* how tough they are."

Bucky's eyebrows shot up at that. He didn't know when Natalia had bonded so strongly with the other kids - or even *how*, given the language barrier, but she had. If she'd thought Tony was whiny two days ago and Bruce was a weak link last night, she wasn't telling Fury about it. He actually felt kind of proud of her, or at least, he thought it was pride. It wasn't easy committing to a group of people you didn't really know, and if this particular group seemed to pull it out of people in spite of themselves, that still didn't make it easy.

Nick laughed, genuinely this time, with his head thrown back in abandon. Natalia kept glaring at him. Sam turned around in surprise, looking vaguely incredulous.

"What happened?" Steve asked, in a loud whisper, "What did she say?"

Nick answered, still chuckling, "I asked if you were tough, and she told me I wasn't gonna find out, 'cause she wouldn't let me hurt you."

Bucky glared at the man, "She *said* she wouldn't let him hurt *any* of you."

Steve nodded, "'Course not. She's a hero too. You told us that. We all are. And anyway, I bet she could do it. Thor says she says she's been training to be a warrior, just like him, only she's already knocked a grownup down once."

So that was it. Bucky had seen Thor translating for Natalia sometimes, and he'd done it himself sometimes, but apparently it had been happening more than he'd realized. That was good. He was proud of the kids for that, too.

"I *know* you're all heroes," Nick answered, "That's why I want you all back to fighting size again. The world is going to need you."

"You're perfect the way you are," Bucky blurted, defensively. He didn't know where that had come from, or what he meant by it. It sounded cheesy and sentimental and he didn't know why he'd said it. "You don't have to be a hero."

Sam rolled his eyes, "He means you don't have to be *big* to be a hero, Steve. You already are."

"I mean what I *said*," Bucky answered. He didn't. Or he might not. He wasn't sure what he meant. But somehow, whatever he meant, it wasn't what he'd said, and it wasn't what Sam

had said, either. "The kids are fine," he said again, "They're *fine*. We're getting the grownups back because we like them, too, but the kids are *fine*."

Steve almost pulled himself off the counter, reaching to grab Bucky's shoulder comfortingly even though his friend was slightly too far away for him to reach. Sam caught him before he tipped over. "It's ok, Buck, I *wanna* be a hero. I wanna be *big*, like my dad. Like *you*."

A new flood of memories engulfed him, and he'd been thinking a few minutes ago that it didn't hurt so much when memories came back, but all of a sudden, it did. Something about the set of Steve's chin, the gleam in his eyes, his dad's name on his lips, and there were entire years coming back to Bucky. They came back with a rushing sound in his ears and flashes, flashes, flashes across his mind's eye, so strong he couldn't see the kitchen anymore and the only thing keeping him upright was the part of his brain that knew he couldn't drop Natalia.

Steve hadn't grown up to be big. Bucky had known that. He'd remembered. But he hadn't remembered like this. He hadn't remembered the details.

Steve had been too small to join the army, and he'd known it, and he'd decided to ignore it. He'd started exercising the day Hitler invaded Poland, trying to get stronger, bigger, so he could do something about it. He'd half killed himself working out, pushing his body past what it could do. There had been asthma attacks and injuries and he'd pulled or strained nearly every muscle in his body and for a while they'd been afraid he'd given himself a hernia.

He'd argued with his Ma over it, and he'd argued with Bucky, too, and it had felt like a miracle when they'd convinced him, when it was 1940 and he wasn't any bigger or stronger or tougher but they could tell him that Churchill guy in England was going to fix it all, that he should stop pushing himself like that. It had felt like a miracle that the third time he'd almost lost his job as a delivery boy for the grocer's had been enough to get him to stop working himself past the point where he started to break.

But, of course, the war hadn't stopped, and - Steve's face when they'd heard about Pearl Harbor. How could he ever have forgotten that face? The pain, the anger, the sorrow... He'd sworn never to forget it. And he'd forgotten it anyway. They'd taken it away from him, that look. The one that had terrified him because his idiot of a best friend heard that their country had been bombed and he was mad at himself for not having been there, because he was *supposed* to be stopping things like that, supposed to be fighting for the good guys, supposed to be *doing* something about all that danger and all that evil out there.

He remembered thinking it was good that Sarah Rogers was six months gone when her son started it all up again, this time without the workouts he knew wouldn't do any good. He remembered walking to the recruitment station with Steve on December 8th, 1941, and listening to Steve trying to convince the man who gave him his first 4F that it couldn't be right, that he could *do* this.

He remembered Steve arguing, and then begging, and then pleading, remembered him almost crying as he grabbed the man's arm and told him he couldn't stay here while his best friend was going to war, crying like he never cried, because of course, of *course* the other recruiter had told Bucky yes while Steve's was telling him no. He remembered the complaints that

Steve was holding up the line, the recruiter's platitudes that Steve threw back in the man's face and, in the end, Steve screaming as he was dragged bodily from the building about the fact that he could *do* this, he *could*, and why wouldn't anyone *listen*?

Steve had gotten better at handling rejection. Bucky knew it and remembered it, and he didn't know if the dull, empty feeling in his chest was new or old, because his own early days in the army were gone, still, with a vague sense of blood and violence about them that matched the rest of his life and no details to speak of, but Steve had tried to enlist again every time Bucky had come home, and Bucky remembered it, now. He'd tried and failed, and Bucky had been glad, of *course* he'd been glad, but he'd hated himself for it, because Steve had hated him for it, or maybe, if he was lucky, just hated it and left Bucky out of the equation.

And then they'd taken Steve anyway, and they'd made him something else, something *his* Steve, little Steve, sitting-on-the-countertop Steve was never going to be, and he'd been so proud and so angry and so betrayed, betrayed by a world he thought he understood and a weakness he'd thought he could count on, and couldn't. It had been the first time his world really shifted under him, and he remembered that, too, remembered Steve looking down at him the first time he'd ever been big, remembered the drugs in his system making everything swirl and blur, remembered seeing Steve's face on two different bodies at once, big and little, memory and fact, and remembered the emotions he'd felt, too many to count, too many to suss out, too many to understand even when he'd understood feelings.

Then the memory flashes were gone. His legs were shaking underneath him, but that was ok. Sam was helping him into a kitchen chair. Natalia was murmuring at him in Russian, something vaguely soothing-sounding that his brain was too wrapped up in itself to identify. He took a deep breath to steady himself.

Steve hopped down off the counter, rolling a weak ankle briefly on the landing and straightening up like it was nothing, and it probably wasn't. It probably wasn't, because Steve never thought anything was anything until it almost killed him, and sometimes not even then. He'd known it since the moment he saw Steve again on the bridge, but he hadn't known it with so much of him at once, and now a wave of terror broke over him, not because Steve always risked too much, but because he hadn't *known* it well enough.

"Hey, Buck, are you ok? Did I say something wrong? What's going on?" Steve was at his elbow now, little face screwed up with worry, and Bucky reached out an arm - his human one, thank goodness - and pulled the boy into an awkward sideways hug, the other arm still wrapped around Natalia where she sat on his lap.

Steve grunted, "Don't be *mushy* Bucky, I didn't *mean* it."

Bucky wasn't sure what Steve hadn't meant. He wasn't sure *Steve* knew what he 'didn't mean.' He buried his face in the top of Steve's head, and Steve wriggled his arms out from where Bucky had crushed them, and wrapped them around Bucky's chest instead, like he knew Bucky needed the hug, even if it was mushy.

"Is he safe with the kids?" Fury asked, quietly, on the other side of the room. Bucky heard him, but couldn't quite bring himself to care.



Natalia stood up in Bucky's lap and hugged him, too, like she knew he needed it even if she didn't know what was wrong. She wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head on top of his, and he raised his metal arm to keep it around her back.

"Yeah," Sam answered, "He is. I was worried, when he showed up with them, 'cause he didn't look like the kind of guy who should be taking care of children. But I looked him in the eye and I could tell he wasn't just giving them up, so I let him stay. And I was gonna kick him out in the morning once he realized they were safe with me, but I didn't, because it turned out they were safe with him, too. In spite of everything. He's really *not* the Winter Soldier anymore. And when he zones out like that, he's getting memories back, and he comes out of it more Bucky than he was before. So they're alright. Just leave 'em alone for a minute. He gets disoriented, and that - I haven't seen him like that yet. It must have been a big one. But he's safe with the kids."

"Buck, what's wrong?" Steve whispered quietly.

In his other ear, Natalia was alternately telling him off for scaring her and telling him it was going to be ok because he was tough like her. He let himself tune her out, though he felt a little bit bad about it.

"Nothing's wrong, Steve," he said, but it came out hoarse, because there was a lump in his throat. "Nothing's wrong at all. I was just remembering. I was remembering too much at once."

"'Cause I said I wanted to be like you?" the boy asked, quietly and solemnly.

Bucky raised his head up and moved his arm, letting Steve out of the hug and gently touching his chin instead, "Don't be like me, Steve. Never be like me. Just be like you. It was always about you. 'Cause you always decided the right thing, even when I didn't know it. Even when I was sure you hadn't."

At some point in his life, he'd decided it was ok that Steve was big, that he was Captain America, and he remembered that too. He remembered following him. He'd remembered following him back on the bridge. He'd remembered following him every time he shadowed after the Avengers. He *knew* it had been the right thing, and he even knew it from memories that were new, memories he'd made since HYDRA, memories he didn't have to wait to reappear.

But he'd been so wrong. And he'd been so right. And Steve had no business being Captain America, but he had no business being anybody else, either.

"I was always best when I was following *you*," he finished, eyes still locked on Steve's.

"Bucky," the boy answered, sounding vaguely appalled, "That was *mushy*."

Natalia hit him lightly on the crown of the head, "Are you *listening*, Mr. Bucky? I told you to snap *out* of it!"

Bucky snorted with laughter at both of them. "Sorry, Natalia," he said, turning to the irate Russian standing on his thigh, "I was listening. I'm ok now. Tough like you, remember?"

"Of *course* I remember," she said haughtily, "I just *told* you that."

"Are you done being mushy?" Steve asked.

"Yeah," Bucky said, ruffling Steve's hair like he hadn't let himself do since the Avengers shrunk. Steve squawked, offended. And he *shouldn't* ruffle his best friend's hair. Not when they were supposed to be the same age and part of Steve's brain thought they still were, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

Sam cleared his throat, stepping away from Fury and into the center of the floor to take charge, as usual. "Ok," he said firmly, "Whatever that was, Bucky, you're clearly not in a good place to talk about making plans. But Steve's coughing seems to be getting better instead of worse, and Natalia should be in bed. Why don't I get you a blanket, and you can sleep on the floor in the kids' room like you did last night, while Fury and I work out the details? You can keep an ear on Steve's breathing, and it'll leave Fury the couch, if he's staying."

Steve looked surprised, "You slept on our floor last night?"

Bucky didn't meet his friend's eyes, not sure what Steve was thinking about that. "Nah. Slept on the floor outside. Wanted to be sure you were all ok on the other side of the door."

Steve put a hand on his shoulder. "Mushy," he declared, but this time, he didn't say it like it was a bad thing.

Maybe Bucky *was* mushy. Maybe he'd *always* been mushy, and it had just taken this long for anybody to notice.

As he left the kitchen with the kids, it was almost a relief to just trust Sam and let things happen. He'd tried so hard to protect Steve all those years ago, and what had it ever gotten him anyway? Maybe he'd better leave it to Sam and Fury and hope for the best.

He made himself a blanket nest on the floor from what was left in Sam's linen cabinet, and when Steve and Natalia curled up into it with him instead of going back to the bed, he let them, rolling over to put his metal arm underneath himself so that the kids had softer body parts to use for pillows.

## Chapter End Notes

I've read some pretty compelling meta about Bucky's serial number meaning he was drafted instead of enlisting, but I've also read some pretty compelling meta that says he can't be a sergeant at the beginning of CA:tFA if he hasn't already been in combat, and that's what I went with.



# Aftermath - An Interlude

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

At 3:30 in the morning, Clint drifted too far into Tony's space and got thumped roundly in the head for it when Tony rolled over. It turned into a silent scuffle that woke Thor and Bruce up, and ended when Bucky whispered at them to cut it out from across the room.

Clint, mad at Tony and with a bruise developing on his forehead, crawled into the blanket pile on the floor instead of going back to bed. Steve was tucked against Bucky's chest, his head under his friend's chin, and Natalia was wound around both of them, using Bucky's stomach for a pillow. Clint tucked himself behind her, resting his head on Bucky's thigh. Bucky reached out to ruffle the boy's hair and tried not to feel awkward about it.

Once Thor realized that sleeping in the pile on the floor was an option, he joined them too, snuggling up against Bucky's back because there was room there, and when Bruce came out of the bathroom - he'd gone, just in case, and Bucky was proud of him for it - Thor waved him over and he joined them, too. Tony sprawled out in the center of the bed like the whole thing was his, which it sort of was, now.

At 5:30, Sam put his head into the room to check on them, and Tony was wound up in the pile, too, plastered against Steve and Natalia in spite of his usual insistence on being independent. Sam smiled fondly at them and then quietly closed the door.

At 6:30, Natalia woke up at the center of the pile, moved too quickly, and woke everyone up. It was about the time they'd all been waking up anyway, so the heap sprang immediately into motion, whipping Bucky along in a sea of childish energy he didn't really share first thing in the morning.

Nick Fury was gone. Sam said he'd left as soon as their plans were made, because they thought it was best for everyone but Sam to come and go under the cover of darkness. There was a list of people who would be coming in over the next few days to try to figure out what had happened to the Avengers, and they would all be coming in overnight, too, for the sake of secrecy.

Sam was expecting the first of their friends to show up tonight, which was good, because while he could skip church to stay with Bucky and the kids today, he'd have to go to work on Monday. He'd used all his vacation chasing Bucky around the country with Steve. Bucky felt bad about that, and worse when Steve overheard. They tried to explain to Steve, without telling him too much, why he'd had to search for Bucky for so long and why Bucky hadn't wanted him to find him, but it was hard.

Ultimately, he decided just to tell Steve the truth. "I was with some bad people for a long time, and they made me do bad things. I guess I was just afraid that you wouldn't like me anymore if you really saw me like that."

Steve clambered into Bucky's lap to hug him, nuzzling his face into Bucky's shoulder. "Don't be silly, Bucky. You're my best friend. I'll always like you."

And then he was out of Bucky's lap again and moving into the jumble around the toaster where the other kids were fighting over the Poptarts as they came out. Bucky was left wondering how he could ever have thought Steve would give up on him. But then, for all that Steve hated being 'mushy' at this age, he was a lot more open than he'd been as a grownup. Or, at least, a lot more open than he'd been as Captain America. It was easier to believe that Steve wouldn't give up on him than it was to believe that the *Captain* wouldn't, and he wondered when he'd started to get the two confused.

## Chapter End Notes

Yeah... this is really short. But I didn't want to add it to the already-too-long previous chapter, and it doesn't really need to be in the next chapter. So... an interlude...

## Two Disruptive Arrivals

Bucky could tell that Sam was making the most of his time with the kids on Sunday, taking them all outside to run barefoot in the grass of his backyard with a football he'd gotten out of his garage and letting them shriek and tumble around and tackle each other. He carried Steve on his shoulders to prevent him from exerting himself into an asthma attack, but told the Steve it was so that he'd be tall enough to throw the ball to Clint even though the other boy was up on Bucky's shoulders with his foot still injured.

It was the first day they never sat the kids in front of a movie, and Sam didn't watch them play so much as he dove into the chaos and played with them. They built a tower with every single lego piece they had, tapping everybody's problem-solving skills to find places for them all. They held a full-on circus, with Clint as the ringmaster and Thor as a stuffed-animal tamer and Natalia turning a cartwheel on the back of the couch like it was a high wire. He let Tony and Bruce disassemble the toaster, and wasn't angry when they had slightly more trouble than they'd anticipated in putting it back together again.

But if either of them had thought their jam-packed day would make it any easier when Sam left for work on Monday, they were wrong.

The kids and Bucky woke up on Monday morning to find Pepper Potts sitting calmly at the kitchen table in one of her usual well-tailored business suits, drinking coffee and chatting with Sam. In addition to her own suitcase, she'd brought their adult things with her, the ones they'd hidden in the park (minus Mjolnir, which would remain hidden in the bushes until Thor could come back for it himself), plus a small suitcase with an extra set of clothes for everyone once they were resized again. The kids dug into the pile of stuff excitedly, trying to figure out what their grownup selves were like, now that they weren't on the run from a band of sorcerers.

Pepper introduced herself, apparently unbothered by the fact that they were ignoring her, "Hi guys. My name is Miss Potts, and I work with Tony at Stark Industries."

Tony abandoned his armor, which he'd started trying to drag out of the pile even though it was too heavy for him to lift, spinning around and fixing Pepper with a suspicious glare. "What do you *do* at Stark Industries?"

"Well," she said patiently, "I used to be an accountant, and then I was a personal assistant-"

"No!" Tony shouted, running forward all of a sudden and hitting her hard in the knee with his fist before she could tell the part of the story where he gave her the company and she became the CEO.

Sam rushed forward, pulling Tony away from Pepper by his wrists. "Tony, don't hit Miss Potts."

"Tony?" Pepper sounded worried, but Tony wasn't listening. He started screaming, without words this time, hands balling into fists in Sam's grip as he stamped his foot and screamed

like he was trying to drown her out.

"Tony!" Sam said, shaking Tony's wrists gently to get his attention, "*Tony!* Tell me what's wrong."

The other kids had frozen at Tony's first shout, dropping what they'd been doing to watch. Bruce was already tucking himself into a corner to get out of the way, and Bucky could tell from the way their eyes darted periodically sideways that even though Natalia and Clint hadn't moved, they were thinking about coming to hide behind him. Steve and Thor just stared.

"Make her go away!" Tony shouted, stomping his foot again, "I don't want her here! He wasn't supposed to send her! Make her go *away!*"

"Tony, Miss Potts is your friend. She's here to help." Sam's voice was calm, calmer than Bucky could have managed. He was glad Sam was handling this. He had no idea what to do with screaming.

"Nooooo!" Tony screamed again, dragging it out into a shriek, "No, she's a secretary, and Dad sent her, and he was supposed to *come*, and he was supposed to send *Mama*, but he sent a secretary *again*." He stamped his foot again, like he wanted to be lashing out but couldn't with Sam's hands still locked around his wrists.

There it was. Bucky knew there had been something going on with Tony. Sam had told him so, and Sam was a good judge of such things. But hearing Tony actually say it out loud was something else.

"Oh, Tony," Pepper said quietly and sadly.

Sam took a deep breath, forcing his face to stay steady. "Tony, I'm so sorry. I'm *so* sorry. Your father is dead. He didn't come to take care of you because he *died*. I thought you knew that."

Tony's eyes widened, "No, but- he's not *supposed* to die."

"Tony, it was a long time ago, now. I know you don't want to hear that, but you came pretty far into the future, and part of that is that some people aren't here anymore," Sam said gently.

"But he's *always* supposed to be around," Tony answered, the edges of tears audible in his voice even as it grew quieter. "He's *Howard Stark*. He's supposed to be able to do *anything*." Tony wasn't fighting Sam's grip on his wrists anymore. He wasn't angry. He was sad.

"Nobody can be around forever, Tony," Sam said, letting go of the boy's wrists and moving his hands to Tony's shoulders, "I'm sure he would have tried to be here if he could. I'm sure he would have come if he knew you needed him."

"No," Tony said, almost whispering now, "He wouldn't have. He would have been too busy. I thought - Bucky said home was different now, but I thought Dad was just *busy*, and I didn't have a nanny anymore and that's why we didn't go there."

"Tony, I *promise* we would have taken you home if we could have. We would never have kept you from your family if we could have taken you to them."

Tony burst into tears with a wail, and Sam pulled him into a hug. The boy flung his arms around Sam in return and buried his face in his chest, crying like he wasn't going to stop.

"It's ok, Tony, I've got you," Sam said softly, rocking back and forth just a little. "I've got you."

Tony sobbed into Sam's chest, and Bucky felt suddenly like he shouldn't be watching. He should let Sam handle this. He should take care of the rest of the kids. He should distract them, to get Tony some privacy to cry in.

"Hey," he said, turning toward the rest of the kids. "Why don't you guys show Miss Potts the lego tower we made yesterday? I bet she'd be really impressed."

Steve had been looking increasingly uncomfortable, and he leapt into action right away. "Yeah," he said, springing forward to grab Pepper's hand and drag her out of the chair, "Come see, Miss Potts, it's cool!" He had to stop just as she was making it to her feet, coughing so hard that Pepper reached her other hand down automatically, grabbing his shoulder gently to steady him and not letting go until he started pulling her toward the living room again.

They showed her their lego tower and then, because Bucky wasn't sure if Sam had gotten Tony calmed down yet, he told them to show her their hot wheels and introduce her to their stuffed animals.

She even had the good grace to pretend to be excited about it all. Bucky hadn't been sure what to make of her from a distance, and he hadn't been any more sure when he saw her in the kitchen, but this made him feel a little bit better. She was going along with him on this one, and that felt pretty good.

The kids were talking Pepper through their movie collection - most of which they either hadn't seen yet, or hadn't seen yet as a group - when Sam came back in, carrying Tony propped up against his left hip. "Hey guys, we're gonna need to go ahead and eat breakfast, ok? You can talk to Miss Potts later. But I need to go to work, and Tony's gonna come with me, so if you guys want to eat with us, it's gonna have to be now."

Everybody scrambled back into the kitchen, Tony crowing proudly about how he was gonna go to work with Sam and he was gonna fix the broken coffee pot in the lounge and help Sam help people. He was smiling like he was happy, but his eyes were still red, and his face was puffy. If the other kids were jealous of him for getting to go with Sam, they didn't show it.

Steve told Tony he thought it was great he was going to work with Mr. Wilson and he couldn't wait to hear about it when Tony got home. If Tony realized it was a lie, or at least a partial truth, he accepted it for the encouragement it was supposed to be, and everyone else pretended Tony *wasn't* Steve's least favorite person in the house to talk to.

At breakfast, Pepper and Sam worked out how he was going to explain Tony to his coworkers - an old army buddy's kid that he'd been babysitting for a couple of days - and then the woman listened intently to a half dozen stories about Thor's mother like learning about Frigga



was the most important thing in the world, purely because Thor was telling her about her.

But in spite of it all, Bucky wasn't sure he liked or trusted Pepper yet, and he wasn't sure he wanted to be left alone with just her and the children all day. He spent the first part of breakfast strategizing what he would do if he had to protect the kids from her, and the rest of it feeling guilty for being so paranoid.

After breakfast, Pepper confessed that she'd come straight from work without stopping to change or shower, and suggested that they watch a movie while she cleaned up. It was almost a relief to have her out of the room for a little while as he adjusted to the idea of her being here, and he felt guilty about that, too.

When she came back out of the bathroom halfway through *Monster's Inc* (which Sam had suggested before he left after nobody laughed at his 'take an obscure relative to work day' joke) she was barefoot, and somehow that made him feel better. She was wearing what was clearly a very expensive pair of dark jeans under a plain, light blue button-down shirt that only looked casual because she'd rolled its sleeves up, but her feet were bare, and somehow, that helped. She wasn't so intimidating that way, but as soon as he thought it, he wondered why he'd been intimidated by her to begin with. He knew she was a friend. But he'd also been watching her from a distance, every once in a while when she was near Steve, and he supposed just knowing she was a friend now wasn't enough to get past the way he'd seen her assert her will on the universe and force other people to fall into place.

Pepper sat down on the couch to watch the rest of the movie with the kids and when Thor immediately wanted to climb into her lap, she let him, adjusting her arms around him a little awkwardly. Bucky hadn't realized how much the Asgardian missed his mother, and if he was taking to Pepper as an alternative, that was probably the best they could do for him. Pepper seemed to be embracing the whole thing, moment of awkwardness or not.

That made her seem less intimidating, too. They were in this together.

By the time Sam got home from work and they started the evening dinner-baths-bedtime routine, Bucky had warmed up to Pepper completely. So had the children, and even Tony came around when she pulled a stack of picture books out of her suitcase after their baths (which they took in pairs, now, but which still took up a lot of the evening) to read them a bedtime story. He said he never got those, and Bucky suddenly felt guilty that they hadn't been reading bedtime stories all along.

She'd also made lunch - with *vegetables*, which she'd made them all eat - and helped him diffuse an argument over whose turn it was to send a car down the hot wheels ramp by drawing up a more-complicated-than-necessary chart. She'd enlisted their help with the chart to give them something else to do for a while, and it had actually worked surprisingly well.

Thor was not interested in charts, but Bruce and Natalia seemed to like the structure - and Clint and Steve seemed to like the opportunity to make the structure themselves.

But he was sure he could have managed both of those moments without her. Cooking wasn't a skill that had returned to him, though he suspected that he must have had it at some point, since he hadn't starved to death before HYDRA. Even so, he could have made them more pb&js, and there were instructions on the sides of nearly everything Sam had bought to be 'kid-friendly.' He could have diffused the argument himself, too, and possibly faster.

But the *stories* made him glad she'd come.

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Jane Foster's arrival was much different - louder and more chaotic - and it woke everyone up at 2 in the morning instead of keeping until breakfast. Bucky had taken the kids' floor again, leaving the couch for Pepper to sleep on, and when the noise started, he woke up to find the kids shifting and sitting up where he'd made them all sleep in the bed this time.

The commotion continued as Jane, Darcy, and Selvig tried to work out how to get their RV into the back yard, out of sight from the street. Pepper's car was hidden in the VA parking garage, but since there was so little room left in Sam's house that they'd have had to bring sleeping bags anyway, the scientists had decided to bring their own lodging with them and sleep in the RV.

It took twenty minutes for Bucky to decide they might as well go meet the new arrivals, because the kids weren't even *trying* to fall back asleep.

Like Pepper, Jane didn't tell the kids she was Thor's girlfriend. Instead, she told them she and Dr. Selvig were astrophysicists, and Tony and Bruce immediately attached themselves to her, asking her a thousand questions about space. Thor seemed patently uninterested in the subject, fascinated instead by the RV. He and Clint asked Dr. Selvig a thousand questions about the RV, what was in it, how fast could it go, and whether it was hard to drive. Darcy had her own little following, introducing herself to Natalia in her two-college-semester Russian and immediately catching the little girl's interest and a thousand questions from Steve about how she'd learned Russian and if he could learn, too.

Bucky looked apologetically at Sam as the kitchen filled with noise. Sam rolled his eyes affectionately, making his way over to talk to him.

"Sorry," Bucky said, "All the noise woke them up and I couldn't get them to sleep, so I thought maybe if they got all the excitement out of their system, it would be better."

Sam laughed, "It's fine. Actually, it might be better to be able to cut them off when they get to be too much. Looks like our new friends are handling them pretty well, though."

It was mostly true. Selvig seemed to be enjoying himself, and if he could tell Darcy was about to send Steve running because she'd cooed over him one too many times, that wasn't a major failure. Steve would probably even forgive her for it, if she could keep the comments about how cute the Avengers all were at bay for a while.

Jane wasn't so excited, though Bucky wasn't sure if the kids could tell or not. She kept looking over the other boys' heads at Thor, but held up well under the stream of excited questions even though he could tell it hurt a little bit to have her favorite Avenger - *her* Avenger - ignoring her. Pepper didn't look much better as she watched Tony chatter excitedly at Jane without any trouble, like his usual outgoing self, after he'd blown up at her so badly when she got here. Pepper held her chin up as she leaned against the counter, waiting for the chaos to die down, but he could see the strain in her eyes even if she didn't show it in her posture.

In the end, it took a shrill whistle from Sam to quiet the room, and promises from all three newcomers that they would be there in the morning to get the kids to go back to bed. It also took both Sam and Bucky tucking them in to get them to promise to stay there.

The adults (with the exception of Darcy, who "needed her beauty sleep" but "trusted her peeps to figure it out") pulled an all-nighter. They had two plans running at once, one scientific and one magical, but in spite of the presence of two astrophysicists at Sam's kitchen table, their team here was on the magic end. The science plan was entirely in Maria Hill's capable hands, up in New York, because if they were going to pursue a scientific solution, they needed more than astrophysicists. They needed biologists and doctors and maybe even a geneticist. They needed to cover all their bases and more, to keep the Avengers safe.

Hill was looking for those people - she'd told them on the phone that she'd found a potential biochemist, named Hank Pym, who she was trying to feel out without giving him too much information, and Pepper said she was also researching a Dr. McTaggart who might be able to help.

The rest of them were here to bring Asgard in on the situation.

Contacting the other world was hard, especially with Thor too little to help, and it was going to require a lot of work. Bucky understood that much, even with the scientific jargon flying over his head. Pepper seemed to be able to follow it all, or at least most of it, asking questions about the equipment they needed and assuring them that she could get everything they didn't already have, and she could get it here in the next 24 hours.

Sam seemed to be muddling along ok with the science, though not as well as Pepper, but Bucky was completely lost.

What he knew was that Jane and Erik had to set up a lot of equipment in the back yard, and they were still waiting on *something* from Nick Fury. Nobody knew where he was getting the - whatever it was - but they trusted him to do it.

It sounded like all Bucky really needed to do was keep the kids inside the house and out from under foot. He was pretty sure he could do that, though keeping Tony away from the scientists and their equipment was going to be difficult. Bruce, he trusted to behave himself, even if he drifted occasionally too close to the science, but Tony might even get in the way on purpose.

But the others weren't actually telling him what to do. Sam hadn't told him what to do, either - he'd just been there with suggestions every time Bucky felt lost. (Pepper had told him what to do, but it hadn't taken him long to realize both that Pepper was like that with everyone, and that she was trying to rein herself in.)

It felt weirder now, though, and not just because he wasn't getting orders. He was being involved in parts of the planning process that he wasn't needed for. He was being asked for his opinion in the few moments in the conversation when the kids came up like they cared about more than just the facts. It was odd, but a good odd.

He was sure that he must have worked with a group before. He had to have, right? He remembered fighting alongside Steve and knowing they had a plan, but he couldn't remember the planning itself. Maybe it was just because he hadn't had a night like this since before HYDRA. Or maybe it wasn't. The memories hadn't actually returned, and until they did, he wouldn't know what about this was different from before.

When the sun started coming up, Sam reminded them that the kids would be up not long after it, and that he'd have to leave for work after breakfast, since their plan wouldn't be going into action today. Bucky told him not to worry about it, because he'd take care of the kids while Pepper was tracking down the last of the equipment they needed and the scientists started setting up what they could. When everybody nodded in agreement, he felt more confident than he had in a long time.

# Marking Time

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bucky's confidence didn't last long.

Pepper's presence yesterday had required some adjustments, but it hadn't changed *everything*. Having the other three here changed everything.

Pepper was kind, and she'd jumped into taking care of the kids without any hesitation, but she didn't love children the way Darcy did, and she didn't make Bucky feel like she was trying to take them from him. He hadn't felt like he was alone with the kids when Pepper was around, but he hadn't felt *surrounded* like this, either. The longer Tuesday stretched on, the crazier it got, and Bucky started to feel like he was being shoved out of the way. Tony and Bruce were constantly making their way outside, Bruce shedding a surprising number of insecurities once he and Tony had a collective goal and he could be certain that Tony would stick with him.

But that didn't mean anybody needed Bucky to stop them. If Tony and Bruce weren't outside, Darcy was sneaking in to play with everyone, and when they *were* outside, it turned out that Erik was perfectly comfortable working with a kid sitting up on his shoulders, which for most of the day was Tony. As he worked, he told them stories about when Dr. Foster was their age and came into the lab he'd shared with her dad. Jane tried to distract everyone else in the vicinity by explaining exactly what she was doing as she did it.

What Bucky overheard of it, as he ducked in and out to make sure he knew where all the kids were, actually made a lot of sense. When he said as much to Darcy, she laughed and told him it was probably because Jane had gotten used to explaining everything to *her* when she wasn't actually a scientist.

It felt a little better to know Darcy wasn't an expert like the other two, but it also made him feel even more unnecessary. Bucky loved the kids, more than he'd thought he was capable of loving with all of his broken parts. But Darcy loved kids in general, and she'd babysat through her teens and worked at a daycare before she took the internship with Jane. She was probably a better choice for babysitter than he was.

He wasn't a scientist, and he wasn't a real babysitter, but he also wasn't Pepper Potts. He couldn't get high-powered scientific equipment delivered to them in the middle of the night by a cheerful round-faced man who only griped a little bit on the phone as he told them he'd packed the car already. (Happy hadn't even griped much about the fact that he was going to have to drive all this way only to turn straight around and drive back before the absence of Pepper's bodyguard outside her building tipped people off to the fact that she wasn't there.) He couldn't organize a rotating schedule of meals and showers to make the one kitchen and two bathrooms work for 12 people, and he *definitely* couldn't do it in a way that actually kept everyone but Darcy supplied with hot water.

Equally impressive was the way Pepper had learned to handle the fact that Thor yo-yoed back to her every time he was between games or movies with the other kids. He'd informed her very solemnly after the first breakfast she'd organized that he thought she must be a great CEO. He'd told her Clint said a CEO was like the queen of a company, and he could tell she was a great queen, like his mother. She'd taken the compliment seriously, and she'd been trying to encourage him ever since.

Bucky wasn't sure he knew how to do that, either. Steve had stuck by him, because Steve Rogers never abandoned a friend, but Bucky wasn't sure he was any better at talking to his old friend now than he'd been before. Natalia had stuck by him too, in spite of the fact that Darcy's Russian was mostly passable, but he wasn't sure why, and he didn't think he was any better at talking to her than he'd been before, either. He'd gotten better since he got here, but he wasn't any better today than he'd been yesterday, and their new friends clearly spoke better than he did.

In his more pessimistic moments, he thought Natalia might only be sticking by him because Darcy was new and Natalia had never liked new people. In his *most* pessimistic moments, he thought Steve was only sticking by him because the boy's health got worse every day.

Steve's coughing had started up weakly on Saturday night, and had been slowly and steadily worsening since then, though they'd escaped a full-scale asthma attack by keeping him inside, away from as many allergens as possible. He'd gotten dizzy Sunday night, in a moment when he'd been breathing fine, and they'd been giving him vitamins and feeding him extra red meat ever since to keep his iron up, assuming it was the anemia back again. Yesterday, he'd had a persistent stomachache, but until he started throwing up, Bucky was going to hope it was from the sudden diet change instead of an ulcer reappearing.

The best thing about having so many people around, all of a sudden, was having more eyes on Steve when the coughing spells and dizziness hit. But when Steve needed help most, it drew a crowd, usually Pepper and sometimes one of the other three from outside, and then somebody else was there taking care of him, too, sometimes better than Bucky could.

He got through the day because he knew he couldn't leave while Sam was at work, even feeling like an extra wheel. The evening was better, when Jane, Erik, and Darcy begged out after dinner and retreated to their RV in the yard. Being in charge of bath time and bedtime made things feel almost back to normal, and he wondered what was wrong with him that four days at Sam's house had turned this into "normal."

But it was something to hold onto, and it was enough to help him keep it together.

If he'd expected anyone to help, it wouldn't have been Tony, but when he crawled into his blanket nest on the floor after talking through plans for the morning with Sam and Pepper, the boy climbed out of bed and came over to talk to him.

Tony plopped down on the floor next to him, and when Bucky raised an eyebrow, he shrugged. "I thought maybe you were lonely," the boy whispered, "'Cause sometimes you get lonely when you're the only one around, and sometimes you get lonely when you're *used* to being the only one and there start to be other people."

"You're pretty smart," Bucky answered, not sure what else to say.

"I know. I'm a genius," Tony answered decidedly.

Bucky didn't laugh, but part of him wanted to. "Did you stay awake to tell me that, genius?"

Tony glared at him, "I stayed awake 'cause I *wanted* to."

Bucky wanted the boy to go to bed, but a battle of wills wasn't going to get him there. He'd learned that well enough with Steve growing up, and it hadn't taken long to figure out that Tony was just like Steve that way.

The other option was to talk about the feelings Tony had come over to talk about, and if it wasn't Bucky's favorite option, he could at least handle it better now than he would have five days ago, before they'd gotten here.

"Have you been lonely all this time, Tony?" he asked.

The boy shrugged. "I was excited at first, 'cause I never had a brother or a sister or anything, but then I was lonely 'cause Clint got hurt and Natalia didn't speak English and Steve got sick and you and Mr. Wilson wanted to take care of them instead of me. But you guys don't leave, like my dad, so I decided it was silly being lonely."

Bucky didn't say that the thought of leaving had occurred to him this afternoon. Instead, he reached out to ruffle the boy's hair. "Oh." He needed more words, but he didn't have them. It wasn't like with Steve, where new memories showed up to tell him what to talk about. But then, a moment later, he realized what Tony had actually said. "So, did it work when you decided being lonely was silly?"

Tony wrinkled his nose. "Nah. But I think I'm getting used to sharing. An' anyway Dr. Selvig likes *me* best. But I think Dr. Foster likes Bruce better."

"I think Miss Potts likes you best, too," Bucky answered, "Because she knows grownup you."

"No," Tony said, as confident as ever, "She likes Thor best. And you like Steve and Natalia best, but Clint almost best, too. And Darcy likes everybody but I think she likes Clint best 'cause when his foot hurts he's the only one who lets her carry him around. But Mr. Wilson doesn't have a favorite. That's why he's the best. But it's ok, I like you too, even though you're not as cool as Mr. Wilson."

Bucky forced himself to smile, "Yeah, well, I'm not sure anybody's as cool as Mr. Wilson. But you don't have to pretend. I know I'm not as cool as everybody else."

Tony fixed him with a withering stare, visible even in the moonlight, "Don't be silly, Bucky. Of course you're cool. You're our guardian angel, and not everybody has one of those. We decided that ages ago. Even though you only have one arm, you're still our guardian angel."

Bucky didn't know what to say to that. He didn't even know how to *process* that. It made him feel good, but in a mixed-up way he wasn't ready for that made him feel a little bit like he was also sad. There was a pressure behind his eyes and nose that usually went with sadness,

even though he wasn't crying. "Well-" he said after a moment, "Then I guess you'd better listen when your guardian angel tells you to go to bed. It's late."

Tony stared at him for a moment, and Bucky wondered if he was going to have to pick the boy up and carry him back to bed, and if he could do so without Tony raising a fuss to wake the other kids up. "I get why you and Steve are friends," Tony whispered after a moment, "You're both dorks. But I *am* kind of tired."

Bucky was relieved when the boy got up to go back to the bed. But then Tony turned around with one more whisper, "Don't be lonely, Mr. Bucky. Everybody else is cool, but you helped us first. We won't forget."

"Shh," Bucky answered, "You'll wake Steve up. You know he's a light sleeper."

"S'ok, Buck," Steve whispered softly from the bed, "You've always been my guardian angel. Ever since that second grader on the first day of school."

As he climbed back into bed, Tony shoved Steve, who had traded places with Natalia in the bed since his coughing started again in earnest, so that he could get up if he needed to. "You weren't supposed to hear that, Rogers," he whispered.

Bucky didn't have to tell them to be quiet, because Natalia threw her pillow at them before the words were all the way out of Tony's mouth. "Хватит разговаривать, давайте спать," she grumbled.

Bucky chuckled, and she sat up to glare at him before laying back down, head curling onto the edge of Bruce's pillow because she trusted him not to move in his sleep.

Maybe, Bucky thought, he could survive tomorrow, even if the phone call came with the last information they needed from Fury by the time the new machinery was in place, and even if the plan went as well as it possibly could and the Avengers went back to their old selves.

Or maybe they'd forget him as soon as they were themselves again, and he'd better hold on to this moment while it lasted.

He wasn't sure anymore. When he was the Winter Soldier, everything had been permanent, but that wasn't the way life worked anymore. It was better this way, because while everything had been permanent, it had also been permanently *bad*, but it was also scarier living life not knowing when things would change on him.

But then, if he was a guardian angel, maybe that was part of his job. Dealing with the scary stuff so his charges didn't have to. It was just easier when the scary things were enemy sorcerers and men with guns.

Either way, he slept easier than he'd expected to.



Хватит разговаривать, давайте спать - Stop talking and go to sleep.

(Russian from the lovely Taelle, who volunteered her help to replace my previous messy, google-translated Russian.)

# Return of the Avengers

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Fury's phone call came in around midnight with the last of the information they needed. The last of the equipment arrived from New York at 1:00 in the morning, and by the time the kids got up at 6:00, Jane and Erik had been working on their modifications to it for almost an hour. Sam stayed home, because it was the day they were going to contact Asgard, and maybe the day they were going to get the kids back to normal.

It felt like the end, and Bucky's emotions were jumbled up about it. It was good that they were doing this. It was what they were *supposed* to do. They were supposed to put the Avengers back like they were before, because the Avengers were supposed to save the world. He just didn't know where that left *him*. He couldn't go back to hiding in the shadows if he was here when Steve grew up again, and he couldn't go back to hiding at *all* if Steve remembered what had happened in this almost-a-week when he'd been small again.

But once they were big, they wouldn't need a guardian angel, and he wasn't sure he knew what to do instead. After HYDRA, he'd been trying to figure out how to operate autonomously, at first, how to find money and food and a place to sleep without handlers and orders, and he'd been trying to stay away from Steve before the man got hurt. Then he'd been trailing along behind Steve to protect him, and that had been the plan. And now that plan had run its course and he didn't know what he had left.

Natalia climbed into his lap at breakfast and pretended it was because Darcy and Pepper were already sitting at the table and there weren't enough chairs for them all. But Natalia was sensitive to other people's emotions, and he didn't really figure out the kids were feeling as tense as he was until Clint held his hand for the 30-second walk into the living room after breakfast was over.

He looked back to see that Bruce was hovering next to Sam, even closer than usual, as the man cleaned up from breakfast. He suddenly wondered if he should stop assuming that the reason Steve had been sticking so close to him all morning was that he still didn't feel well. And certainly, with new scientific equipment sitting outside, the only explanation he could think of for why Tony would be in the living room with the other kids was that he was nervous about today, too.

Everyone but Thor seemed to have lost interest in the toys scattered across the floor, standing around for a moment and looking at each other as if they were at a loss for what to do with themselves. When he suggested a movie, they accepted it, and seemed relieved to have something to do, but they wouldn't let him start it until Sam and Bruce were there, too. Then, when they finally *did* start, they abandoned their usual spots on the floor to pile onto the couch with Bucky and Sam.

They got tangled up with each other as they jockeyed for position on the couch, so much that Bucky couldn't be sure which kid had elbowed him in the gut in the scuffle, though he wasn't

sure it mattered, because he'd forgive any of them for it. Once they were settled, it was cozy, if a little overly warm. He had Steve on his left side, squashed between the couch arm and his side, Natalia in his lap so that he could translate the movie in her ear, and Clint plastered against his other side, but he also had Tony's foot on his knee, the boy's leg flung over Clint's lap to reach him. Bruce was in Sam's lap, but when Bucky reached his arm across the back of the couch, the boy leaned his head into it for a moment before pulling back away. He couldn't help but be reminded of the way Bruce always flinched away from him when he tried to wash his hair, and the brief almost-a-head-butt seemed like a gift.

By the end of *Robin Hood*, everyone seemed to be feeling a little better, and when Darcy came to tell them everything was ready to make contact with Asgard, the rest of them let Thor's excitement pull them off the couch behind him.

"I'm going to talk to Mother!" he shouted excitedly, "And Father, and Loki!" When the others weren't moving fast enough, he ran back toward them, pulling Bucky forward by the hem of his t-shirt. "You *must* meet Father, Bucky, for he is a great warrior like you, and Mother must meet Miss Potts and my brother Loki must meet *everyone*, for surely he would like to be friends with all of you, like I am!"

Sam laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Slow down, Thor-" Bucky remembered the others talking about what they knew of the state of things in Asgard, and he knew Thor's mother and brother were dead. But Sam didn't say it, and Bucky hoped they wouldn't have to. Instead, he said, "I don't think Dr. Foster knows how to get in communication with *everyone* in Asgard. We might only be able to speak to one person."

"That is alright! I will tell them to tell Odin where I am, and then surely Father will send Heimdall to retrieve me and I can bring you with me!"

"Thor," Sam said gently, "We can't go to Asgard with you. Not unless it's the only way to get you guys back to grown-ups again."

Thor stopped, turning around to fix Sam with a very serious stare. "Then you will come when we are grown-ups! I am the Prince of Asgard, and I will find a place for you all to stay."

"We'll talk about it when you get big again," Bucky said.

Thor seemed ok with that, or maybe he was just too excited to keep arguing about it once they got outside.

Outside, they clustered around what looked like a computer monitor, with all kinds of unfamiliar machines attached to it. Thor leaned forward, almost pressing his nose against the screen. "Is that where Asgard will be?" he asked.

Jane pulled him backward gently. "If this goes right, yes. We're still not *sure* it's going to work, but it should - we hope it will, anyway."

Erik stepped forward, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder, "And if it doesn't, we'll keep trying. Don't worry, Thor. We'll get it."

"Are we ready?" Darcy asked, standing by the laptop they had hooked into the contraption. The kids scrambled around, trying to see, while the grownups stood behind them and tried to keep them from pushing each other down as they all tried to get into a good position. Steve was pouting on Bucky's shoulders, where he'd told him he had to stay while they were outside, to keep the grass from making his breathing worse, but the rest were a mass of knees and elbows in front of the screen until Erik bent down to let Tony climb onto his shoulders and Darcy switched places with Jane and picked Clint up into a piggy-back hold. Thor stood squarely in front of the screen, and with two fewer bodies in the way, Natalia and Bruce could stand on either side of him without trouble.

With everyone arranged, Jane pushed a button on the laptop, and the screen flickered to life. For a few moments, it flashed from a blank screen to golden light and back again. The gold flashes started to come more often the longer they stood there watching, and when they resolved themselves into something that looked like an ornate ceiling, Thor hopped up and down, clapping his hands once in excitement.

"That is the ceiling at home!" he told them. "They have done it!"

"Hello?" Sam called tentatively into the screen, "Is anyone there?"

"The camera and microphone are over here," Jane said, "Let me just - Hello? Can you hear me?"

The image on the screen started moving, turning to reveal a woman's face, upside down. "Who seeks to speak with me through my blade?"

"Lady Sif!" Jane answered, "This is Jane Foster. We need your help."

Thor gasped, moving forward again to press his nose to the screen as Sif smiled. "Sif! Sif is my friend! Look, she's big!"

"Dr. Foster?" the Asgardian answered, unable to hear Thor. The view on the screen swung wildly again, eventually righting itself so that they could see the warrior properly. "Ah, yes, *it is* you! It is strange to see another's face reflected in my sword as mine should be. Though, if you wished to speak to me, I am certain it would have been easier to ask Thor to send a message to Heimdall."

"That's the problem, Sif. Thor's-"

Sif frowned, "He is not angry with me for failing to visit him when I was last on Midgard, is he? He should remember the trouble we had with Lorelai, and he should know that I had no choice but to return her to Asgard immediately-"

"That's not it, either-" Jane answered, but Thor had figured out that Sif could only hear him if he stood where Jane was standing, and he shoved his way between her and the computer before he could say anything else.

"Sif! You have become a warrior!" he exclaimed happily, "They did not tell me that in the future, you are a warrior like we planned!"

"Thor?" she asked, her face getting larger on the screen as she leaned into the sword, probably to see Thor better.

"And now I know you have met Dr. Foster before!" the boy continued, still clearly excited. "The future is strange, indeed! What other warriors of Midgard have you met? Have you met my friend Bucky? His arm is strong like the Destroyer! Have you met Natalia? She is only small right now, as I am, but they say she will grow up into a warrior like you..."

"Thor, how long have you been this way?" Sif asked, "We did not know that you were not yourself."

Thor's brow wrinkled, "Today is my 6th day on Midgard, but I did not know it was Midgard until Dr. Foster told me, because everyone else has been calling it 'Earth.'"

"And how did you come to be small?" Sif prompted.

Thor shrugged.

"That's what we need help with, obviously," Jane cut in, leaning over Thor's head so that Sif could see her better in the camera. "We don't know what happened - well, we *do* know what happened, but we don't know *how*. They were fighting some kind of sorcerer, possibly Asgardian, but possibly not. We didn't get a name. They got hit with a flash of light and now they're all children."

Sif raised an eyebrow. "They?"

"My friends are small, too!" Thor told her, "There are six of us, and they say that when we grow up, we are called the Avengers and we fight for Midgard. I do not know why I do not fight for Asgard, but there are valiant warriors here, and I think maybe that is why I stay."

Pepper walked calmly around the outside of their little group, joining Jane behind the computer and letting Thor know she was there with a hand on his shoulder. "Hello - I'm Pepper Potts and I work with the Avengers." she asked, "Dr. Foster and Dr. Selvig say they've figured out how to stabilize the bridge to get you here. Can you send us a doctor, or a healer, or a sorcerer, or anyone else who might be able to help? We can give you the details when you're here to see them in person."

Sif nodded, "Of course! Odin has not spoken much of Thor since he left Asgard again, but I am sure he will not mind if I borrow his palace healers for a few hours. And I know that Heimdall will help. I wonder that he has not helped already!"

Pepper nodded crisply, "And can you give us an estimate on how long that will take to organize? We'll need to coordinate it with our end, and you won't be able to call us and tell us you're coming with this system, so unless you have a way to reach us from your end, this may be our only conversation."

Sif thought for a moment, "Send word to me this way again if the sky does not show you the signs that I am coming within the next three hours. The healers may take some time to

collect what they will need to bring with them, if we are to heal these Avengers on Midgard, but it will not take long to meet with Heimdall."

And then Sif's face was swinging out of frame as she slung the sword over her back, and Jane was shutting down the connection.

The sky started to darken two and a half hours later, a little earlier than Sif had estimated, and it was immediately obvious, even through the living room windows, where the Avengers had been half-heartedly assembling and disassembling artistic-looking lego shapes since lunch. They weren't building any one thing or another, just putting the pieces together and taking them back apart, and when the weather darkened the room, half of them stopped entirely, hands stalling.

At the first clap of thunder, they all rushed to the windows to look out, but Thor was the only one who looked excited.

As they walked outside again, Clint asked softly if this meant they were going to have to go home. Bucky had no answer. He picked Clint up in one arm, and Natalia in the other when she indicated that she wanted up. Then he let Steve, stern-faced and silent, climb onto his shoulders.

As the scientists bustled around, preparing to anchor their end of the bridge, they actually needed the kids completely out of the way for the first time since they'd gotten here, but the energy of the hustle and bustle seemed to perk only Tony and Bruce up, leaving the three children draped around Bucky almost despondent and no trouble for the scientists.

"I know why I don't wanna go back," Clint said to Steve after they'd been watching for a few minutes, "but why don't you want to?"

Steve frowned, "I wanna see my Ma again, but... Bucky says me and him get separated. I don't want me and him to get separated. I want my Ma to come forward and be *here* so that we can all stay *together*."

Clint nodded seriously. Bucky didn't have a free hand to comfort Steve with, so he laid his cheek on the boy's thigh for a second. "It's alright, Steve. We found each other again. And we *will* find each other again. I'm not only here 'cause you're little."

In some ways, he *was* only here because Steve was little, but that didn't mean he was going to stay that way. It was time to be here, to engage with the world again, and to do it for real.

It was terrifying, but not as terrifying as the thought of losing Steve again, and after so many of his memories had come back while they were together.

The healers arrived to find five morose faces and an overexcited prince, who had nearly attacked Sif in his excitement to look at her armor and weapons and introduce her to everyone and ask her all about the fights she'd been in.

But they also knew exactly what to do.

The lead healer took one close look at Tony (who was a good combination of healthy, calm, and somewhat less likely than the others to freak out about being poked at by a stranger) and declared that she knew exactly what this spell was and how to reverse it.

"I have never seen this used as an attack before," she said, "Because it is a fairly simple spell, and easily undone. But then, I suppose if one is attacking Midgard, nothing of magic is easily undone. I have usually seen this as a prank, of one magical child against another. Loki did it to Thor once, when they were boys, because he wanted to be the elder brother. But I have also rarely seen it take so *much* time from a person, and I have not often seen a patient left this way so long. We will have to be careful with them. The magic itself is not difficult, but the memories of those years returning - that may not be so easy."

Bucky felt a chill run down his spine. He knew the way that felt. "Change them back one at a time," he said decidedly, "I can help them through it. I'll - I'll have to, won't I? Because I'm the only one who knows what that's like."

The healer wrinkled her forehead, stepping closer to him. "What do you mean by that, young man?"

He looked down at the ground. It felt strange to be called "young man." He didn't remember the last time someone had called him that.

"I was - wiped. They called it wiping. They took my memories, but before that, they gave me something to make me stronger, and it means that now the memories are coming back, but I can't control when. It's - difficult sometimes."

The healer put a hand gently under his chin, forcing it up and looking into his eyes. He wanted to flinch away, but with Steve on his shoulders and a kid in each arm, he couldn't jerk away from her without destabilizing them. "Hmm," she said as she stared into his eyes, even as they darted around her face because he didn't want to look her in the eye in return.

She stepped away, and he felt relieved. "Yes. You will be able to help the children. I can see your scars there, and I can see that you know the pain of what is coming for the children - and perhaps more, for there are other scars, too - but I cannot fix you. It is a rare thing that I cannot heal, and you, I think, are a rare thing."

Sam cleared his throat. "He's already *been* healing. He can keep doing it. And we can help him along, when we know how. We've been doing that, too. Supporting him. Or trying to, at least. He'll be alright. And the kids will, too. We'll help them learn to cope, and we'll help them learn to move on. It'll be messy, maybe, because we're only human, but we can do it. *They* can do it."

Bucky raised his chin up, hoping Sam was right. He'd been thinking of the children's progress more than his own, but maybe he'd healed, too. The more he thought about it, the more he felt like he had. It was a good feeling. He seized the moment while it was here, before he started feeling bad about himself again. "Bring them back one at a time," he said again, "So that I can help them through it."

The healer nodded. "Yes. We can do that. Who's first?"

Bucky didn't have an answer for that, but he knew he and Sam needed to make the decision, not the healer who didn't know the kids. He turned to Sam, "What do you think?"

But then Steve answered instead, poking Bucky in the forehead. "Me. I'll go first. I can be brave, and you said that when I'm big, I don't get sick as much, so then you won't have to worry about me while you're changing the others back. And if you'll *really* still be here when I'm big, even though we got separated, I know I'll be ok."

"Are you sure?" Sam asked, looking Steve in the eye.

"Yes," Steve answered, "I'm sure. Do it."

Clint reached up to grab Steve's forearm. "Good luck, Steve. I hope you get to see your Ma again."

Steve grabbed Clint's arm back, "I don't think so. It didn't sound like she was gonna send us anywhere. It sounded like we were gonna stay here, but just get big. But maybe I'll get to remember her when my memories come back."

He didn't say anything about his Ma being dead, but Bucky could tell from his voice that he'd worked it out. Steve had come forward 90 years, and even if his mother had died of old age instead of TB, she'd have done it a long time ago. Bucky hated the rush of a year or two coming back at once. He didn't know what he'd do with 90 years pouring through his head at once.

Maybe they would get lucky, and the time in the ice wouldn't hurt when Steve remembered it. Bucky's time in cryo was a blank, but a safe one, and until he'd learned to find stable memories from before, that safe blankness had been all he had to hold onto. He hadn't thought of it for a good long while, now, and he thought that was probably better. It was more like being alive, like being his own person, when he could let go of the frozen nothing moments. But maybe, *maybe* being frozen would help Steve. Because the alternative would be that it made things worse, and it wasn't an alternative he'd wish on *anyone*, much less Steve.

Steve couldn't change back in his child's clothes, so he took them off and they wrapped him in Sam's largest blanket, which would cover him even at full size. Bucky put Clint and Natalia down, leaving them with Sam, because Steve needed him. It made him sad to do it, even though he knew that was silly.

Steve reached out from the bundle of blankets, grabbing for Bucky's hand, and Bucky took it, sitting down to look Steve in the eye. "You ready to do this, Stevie?"

Steve nodded, eyes wide and chin set.

Bucky looked up at the healer, tossing his hair out of his face. "He's ready," he told her.

She nodded, and the magic started, a blue light glowing around her hands and then around Steve.



Steve clenched his jaw, squeezing Bucky's hand hard, and Bucky could tell it hurt. But he could also tell it was working. Steve's hands were already growing, albeit slowly. Steve had always been small, but as 6-year-old Steve turned into 7-year-old Steve turned into 8-year-old Steve, Bucky could tell the difference. Steve was maybe 11 when he squeezed his eyes shut against the pain, and Bucky felt a pang of sadness run through his chest at the thought that his best friend was hurting.

A breath later, Steve whimpered, and a memory flickered through Bucky's mind that he hadn't had before, with a flash of pain on his own end of things. Steve was 14, and the first time he'd been 14, he'd nearly died of rheumatic fever. This time, his body wasn't dying, but it *was* getting hot to the touch for just long enough to scare him. Bucky willed him to be ok, just like last time, and even though he knew Steve would live, this time, he felt relieved when the heat faded away again as suddenly as it had come.

The whimpers stopped, but then the growth stopped, too, and Bucky knew Steve was 17, and growing less and less as the other boys started hitting second growth spurts when Steve had never really had a first one.

The next major moment Bucky could see from the outside was Steve's mother's death. Steve's face grew grey and sad underneath the tightly-shut eyes, and when the name "Ma" made its way out of Steve's lips, tense and pained, Bucky felt a flash of memory running through him again.

He squeezed his eyes shut for half a second against the momentary pain, reaching his hand out to grip Steve's shoulder through it and gasping out the words he heard in his head. "I'm with you 'til the end of the line, pal." Oh. *Oh*. He hadn't remembered that before. It had been familiar on the helicarrier, just a little, just enough, and he'd heard it in his ears like he was saying it himself, but he hadn't known when it was. Everything made more sense, now. He'd remembered Steve's face on the helicarrier when his old friend told him he'd be with him 'til the end of the line, but he hadn't remembered the rest of him, and it was because the rest of him had been *this*, had been small, had been *Steve*.

Bucky opened his eyes again just in time to see Steve's snap open, too, his face twisting itself into the exact expression Bucky had remembered two days ago. Pearl Harbor. And then it slid into a vague desperation that he knew Steve had held onto for all of '42 and part of '43, and that was just as hard to watch now as it had been then.

If the pain and the rushing noise of memory hurt Steve now, he wasn't letting it show. His blue eyes were distant, like he wasn't behind them, and his jaw was set, more stubborn than strong, but his fingers, wrapped around Bucky's, still felt like Steve was behind them, and they didn't squeeze as tightly as they had before.

"What is-" the healer asked, half a second before Steve's sudden screams drowned out the rest of her question.

Steve was growing again, and fast, *so* fast. Bucky's heart started racing - this wasn't right. Something about this wasn't right. He pulled Steve into his arms, careful to keep the blanket over his best friend even as Steve's body seemed to explode outward. Steve's arms, swelling with new muscles, shoved him away.

"No! Don't! I can do this!"

And then it stopped, and it had only been perhaps two seconds, with the healer struggling to get Steve through it, but Bucky felt like it had been an eternity.

The war flashed by in just under a minute, three gasped names making their way out of Steve's throat, Bucky's name soft the first time and loud the second, and Peggy's name desperate as Steve started shivering in Bucky's arms, eyes flickering closed again. And then the shivers stopped, and they were all just - waiting.

"I do not understand," the healer said, hands and magic steady even as spoke, "I can feel that the temporal displacement is still there, but it is like pulling him through nothing to get him out of it, like nothing was *in* that time for him."

"He was frozen," Bucky answered softly, smoothing Steve's hair across his forehead. "Frozen leaves an emptiness like that. But it's ok. It doesn't hurt me to remember the emptiness, and his face doesn't have pain in it, either."

When Steve got to the end of his time in the ice, he gasped, eyes opening again. He seemed more present this time, but he still didn't react to Bucky like he could see him.

He hadn't been out of the ice for long, and after what felt like only a moment of empty-eyed staring, sadness written across his face like Bucky doubted it had been at the time, Steve was sitting up and shaking his head to clear it.

Bucky let go of his friend, but Steve was still leaning against him, where Bucky had pulled him when he started growing into the Super Soldier he was now.

Bucky felt his insides twisting in fear, until he almost couldn't breathe. What was Steve thinking? Was he angry with Bucky for running? Disappointed? Sad? Bucky had done his best these last few days to be the best he could be, had taxed the limits of his own humanity, had made himself be more than he'd been before, but he still wasn't sure it was enough. He wasn't sure it could *ever* be enough.

But then Steve *laughed*, flinging his head back to rest on Bucky's shoulder as he adjusted the blanket over himself. "Dammit, Bucky, if I'd known the way to get you back to the world was to lose a fight, I could have done that a long time ago."

Bucky found himself laughing in relief. His heart swelled with *something*, and because it was a good something, he didn't make himself identify it. "And here was me thinking I'd told you not to do anything stupid while I was gone," Bucky answered, surprising himself with the joke even as the memory of Steve losing a fight in an alleyway made it back to him, with the rest of that last day in New York. It was just memory, not new memory, just something he remembered. That made the good feeling even stronger. "If you'd lost a fight on purpose, I'd have let you go down," he said, knowing it was a lie, but saying it to finish the joke.

"No," Steve answered cheekily, "You wouldn't have. But I never thought of it 'cause you *did* take all the stupid with you *after* all, if you thought you had to stay away."

Bucky couldn't look Steve in the eye, though not looking didn't sting when he felt this good underneath it. "Thought you'd change your mind about forgiving me if you had to look at me all the time. Hear about the stuff I've done."

Steve reached back and ruffled Bucky's hair, "Told you. Took all the stupid with you."

"Hey!" Bucky protested, swatting Steve's hand away. He should be angry that he was being called stupid. He wasn't. He still felt good.

Steve laughed again, sitting up away from Bucky and scrambling to his feet with the blanket still wrapped around him. "You did it to me!"

Bucky spluttered, "You were six!" Steve helped him up, holding the blanket shut around his waist with his other hand. It felt good to rely on Steve, even for the split second before his feet were underneath him again, and to look him in the eye knowing who he was.

"I guess I'm gonna have to stay now, aren't I?" he asked Steve.

Steve grinned at him, "Yeah, I think so. And after this past week, I won't be the only one to stop you if you try to run off again. I feel pretty confident about that."

Sam stepped forward to clap Steve on the shoulder, "You know, man, I was kind of hoping you'd all forget this week when we got you back - but I guess I'm not that lucky, am I?"

Steve wrapped his free hand affectionately around Sam's upper arm. "Sam, if you thought *before* that we were gonna let you stay here instead of moving to New York and becoming an Avenger, you'd probably better stop thinking it."

Then the kids - and now there were only five of them, and Bucky felt like he was counting wrong even with Steve in front of his face - were surrounding Steve, asking a thousand questions about did it hurt and was it scary and did it feel like going back home, or just like remembering?

Pepper tried to cut the kids off and give Steve time to get dressed, but he waved her off, keeping both hands on the blanket as he knelt down to eye level with the kids and answered their questions. He told them that it hurt, but that he knew they were strong enough to handle it, and that it was scary because he didn't know what was going to come next, but that it was ok, because heroes learned how to deal with surprises, and they were all heroes.

He told them it felt somewhere in between actually going back and just remembering. He told them the growing hurt, but the mental pain was sharp and brief as soon as you were adjusted to the rush of memory. He told them that there were moments of joy that would also be sharp and brief, but that memory, underneath it, would tell them it had all taken longer. He told them that if there were dark days, they would pass quickly, and if there were good days, they would pass quickly too, but then he told them that the good days outnumbered that bad, in the end, because they were Avengers, and they were living a good life, right here, and right now. He told them he was sure they could handle anything their memories threw at them, because they'd already done it before, and that they should hold on to whatever they could to remind themselves that they were already survivors.

It was an inspiring speech, and Bucky and Sam both watched fondly as he made it. Bucky was thinking of the war, of the echoes of other speeches ringing in his head and the way Steve had always been ready to inspire. He wondered when Steve had done this lately, and how often, because Sam looked like it was familiar, too.

When Steve stood up again to go get his clothes and free the blanket up for the next Avenger, Sam patted him on the back, "Man, this time I *know* you didn't write that down ahead of time. You are gonna have to teach me how to do that, because if I could talk like *that* instead of snarky one-liners and stuff I've said so much in therapy I've got it memorized-

Steve snorted, "Shut up, Sam."

Sam laughed, genuinely, "Hey, man, I'm serious. Give me the tools and I'll find a way to use 'em. It's good to have you back."

Steve grinned at that, but then he was gone, back into the house, and Bucky realized he still had to deal with getting the other five kids through the process. Even just watching Steve go through it had been oddly exhausting, making him feel drained.

Thor tugged at his sleeve. "The Lady Sif says I should go next, for she desires to speak to the grown-up me about things in Asgard of late, rather than telling me stories of a past I am about to remember."

Where Steve had taken about 10 minutes to grow back into himself, Thor took more than half an hour. The healer said she could pull Thor along faster than she could Steve, because he was Asgardian and she didn't worry that the spell would go wrong if she pushed for speed, but Asgardians aged slowly, and Thor had been alive for a very long time.

Bucky held one of Thor's hands, and Sif held the other, because she had been part of more of his life than anyone else. Steve had told them there were times, during somewhat less emotional periods in his life, when he could half-see them through the memories in his head, and Sif wanted to be there for Thor.

The Asgardian grunted against the pain, but he didn't cry out, like Steve had. Not until the very end, when he rocketed upward into Sif's arms and stuttered out, "M-Mother - Mother *and* Loki-

"I know," Sif answered, "But you saved all of the nine realms in losing them. Frigga would make that sacrifice again, if she were alive to do it. And she would be proud of you. You *and* Jane."

"Jane!" Thor exclaimed. He let Sif and Bucky help him up, careful not to displace the blanket that had been transferred over to him from Steve, and then he abandoned them both, half-running to meet the scientist. He leaned forward, kissing her, and then, when they pulled apart, said, "I'm sorry I was cold to you when you arrived. I was not such a good judge of character when I was a child. I do not think I was a good judge of *anything* when I was a child."

Sif laughed, "You were a good judge of fighting prowess and when to listen to *me*."

Thor laughed, too. "And I would like to think I have always been a good judge of friends. Let us bring back the rest, so that you can meet them at their strongest."

The other kids looked nervous, but Natalia stepped up, turning to Bucky and announcing, "I'm next, because I'm tough like you. And I think then I'll remember how to speak English, and I can help the others."

Natalia was the youngest by quite a bit, and she was back to herself in just under four minutes. 6-year-old Natalia had gotten her blanket and then insisted on climbing into Bucky's lap, which meant that was where she was when the transformation finished, sitting in his lap, wrapped in a blanket. She'd bitten her lip and kept silent through the change, but once it was over, she smiled wickedly and poked him in the nose.

"See," she said in Russian, "Tough like you." Then she switched back into English, "And Steve's right. We are *definitely* keeping you."

Bucky had no idea what to say to that. "Ok," he managed after a moment.

Behind him, Steve, Sam, and Pepper all laughed. "I don't know what you guys have been talking about all week," Steve said, "But if you already know the right answer for when Tasha uses that tone of voice, we can probably make you an Avenger *right now*."

Natalia grinned like there was something she wasn't saying as she got up off his lap, blanket still trailing on the ground considerably more than it had when Steve and Thor used it. "Wait for the others, Rogers. We need a consensus. And if we don't have it, *then* we can go off my tone of voice."

Clint was next, because Natalia - he knew she should be Natasha, now, but she'd said he could keep using the name he knew for her - said he should be. She said she could support him through it, but still accepted Bucky's help as the three of them settled down in the grass.

Clint's transformation took 6 minutes. Bucky and Natalia each wrapped an arm around his back, and he leaned into their arms, alternately whimpering and gasping until he came to again. Then he was silent for a moment, and Bucky started to worry that something had gone wrong.

But then he looked up at the others and said, "Jeez, you'd think none of you had seen *magic* before, standing around staring like that. Somebody help me up."

Natalia helped him to his feet, and he leaned affectionately into her shoulder for a moment before going inside, not saying another word.

Tony was next, because after Steve's burst of super-soldier serum, no one was sure what the Hulk was going to do when Bruce changed. Tony transformed between Bucky and Pepper, holding tightly to their hands, and even though his transformation was only another 6 minutes, it felt like it had been a lot longer than Clint's, because he was loud. The noise broke out of his mouth in a jumble, happy and then sad and then angry, laughter and tears and shouting.

The other kids' wounds had, when necessary, appeared and then vanished again almost immediately, healing so fast, with the speed they were being pulled through time, that they were almost scars before they were wounds. Tony's chest was different. He'd had all the shrapnel removed after the incident with the Mandarin, and it didn't come back - but the wounds around the shrapnel did, and then a hole opened in his chest, and it stayed open. The healer's brows furrowed, but Pepper told her it was ok. When the blood vessels around it grew inflamed, Pepper knew what that was, too. "Palladium poisoning," she noted, "without the palladium. He'll be alright." There was still a hole in his chest. Bucky wondered, absently, if Tony might understand what it was like to have a metal arm, an arm that was both his and not-his, even better now that he was about to be an adult.

And then they were coming out the other side. The inflammation faded, then the shrapnel wounds started healing up and all that was wrong was the hole in his chest. Pepper carefully pressed an arc reactor into the space, scarred over now, just as Tony was coming back to himself.

Tony stared at Pepper like she was a miracle. Then, like Thor, he apologized to his girlfriend for how he'd treated her when he was six, but this apology was long and he dragged it out until the rest of them could hardly stand to listen. But she told him she didn't blame him for not knowing her when he didn't know her, and she said she believed him when he told her he would never, ever hit her again, and it was enough.

Once he was dressed, he was the man Bucky remembered tailing, all jokes and propositions and trying to convince everyone to move into Stark Tower as their home base. "Come on, guys, we'll pack up the legos out of the living room, it'll be great. Sam can have a floor. Extra big kitchen, table for 8, eggs flown in fresh every morning, and this time we'll all get our own beds and our own bathrooms-"

It was good, in a way. The jokes kept them from feeling too nervous about Bruce's transformation, even as Steve went inside to get his shield, just in case, and Tony called his armor and pretended it was because he missed Jarvis.

It didn't go as badly as they'd feared it might. Bruce's transformation was much like the others, until suddenly, it wasn't. The Hulk burst out of him, its huge green hand dwarfing Bucky's metal one but not quite crushing it. But then the healer made a soft, surprised sound, and he started to shrink back to Bruce again, before Bucky had to worry about whether he should pull his hand away and run or not. He hadn't sat down, staying in a crouch that would let him move fast if he had to, but he was glad not to have to. He was glad to be able to support Bruce. The Hulk came and went in what were almost flashes, until his final transformation back into their mild-mannered scientist.

And then it was over. Bruce went inside and got dressed, the healers packed their things and returned to Asgard with Sif, and then it was just *them*, all adults, standing around in a circle. The Avengers were back.

This is where I pulled in a little comic stuff. In the comics, Sif's sword could cut open gateways to other places, which is why Jane's machinery can tap into the sword and use it to send their message. Fury was getting information about Sif and her sword from Coulson and his team, but the Avengers and the people close to them still aren't supposed to know Phil's alive, so that's why it had to come through Fury instead of the Agents of SHIELD team showing up at Sam's. As fun as that would have been, Sam doesn't have room for a plane in his backyard, and I didn't want to write that particular reunion scene... :P

Edit: ratcreature pointed out that I hadn't addressed Tony and the whole arc reactor thing. I have now done so. Thanks again, ratcreature!

# Epilogue - The Howling Angel

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Eventually, with not enough to say to each other - or maybe *too much* to say to get it out - they decided to go out for dinner, jumping on Tony's suggestion that they go for Chinese. They ended up renting out a side room at a buffet near Sam's house, shoving all the tables together until they made one big table that could accommodate all twelve of them.

Tony made some comment about the fact that he'd probably have to order a custom table to get one this big for the dining room at the Tower, and then somehow, they were planning the move. Tony had set aside six floors for the Avengers when he started rebuilding the tower, but he said he could make it eight, or even nine, without much trouble, because after all, it was *his* building.

Bucky knew he was included in that number. He knew he was included in this group. But he still wasn't sure what that was supposed to look like, or what it was supposed to be. He knew he liked the idea of it, but he didn't know how to imagine it.

Not until they started talking about code names for him and Sam.

"Sam's easy," Natalia commented, "We'll call him Falcon, after the suit. Animal names are cool, and Tony's named after a suit already, too. But Bucky needs something new. No more Winter Soldier. The Winter Soldier was always a ghost, and he's solid now."

Solid. Bucky sort of liked that. He *did* feel solid, more than he had in years. "Maybe something to do with the arm, still," he suggested, "I've been informed that it's my most terrifying feature. The New York drug dealers are already afraid of it."

Steve looked over at him, "Buck, you didn't have to-"

Bucky glared at him, "I did. But now that's over, so stop giving me those sad-puppy-dog eyes over it, or I'm not moving into the Tower."

"Oh, you're *definitely* moving into the Tower," Tony answered, "I've already decided to evict our down-stairs neighbors from their offices and put them in the empty ones closer to ground level."

Clint was the one who found the answer, "We'll name him based on that thing Tony said last night. We'll call him the Guardian Angel."

Bucky snorted, "I am *nothing* like an angel."

Tony was running with it, though, and Bucky couldn't stop it, "No, it works with the hair, even if you weren't supposed to have heard that comment."

"You know," Sam suggested, "An Avenging Angel is a thing, too, and he *will* be an Avenger."



"Angel of Death," Natalia suggested, and something about her voice made the words sound fonder than they should.

Steve threw in, "Angel of Vengeance, if we're gonna go after HYDRA again..."

"Shadow Angel?" Bruce asked.

Bucky kept shaking his head. "No one in their right mind is going to believe *I* could be an angel. Call Sam an angel, he's got wings! I don't even have all my own limbs."

"Some guardian angels have missing parts," Natalia answered definitively, "It's the only way to get by in this world."

"I was just *Bucky* with the Howling Commandos," he grumbled.

Steve stood up in front of his seat. "That's it! The Howling Angel, back from the war to fight HYDRA on the home front!"

Bucky had to admit that he didn't hate that last suggestion, but he didn't have to admit it to everyone else. "Yeah, but then I'd have to *howl*. Name like that, and people would expect it."

"I'll make you a howling halo," Tony answered glibly, "I like it."

Natalia's face slid into a grin, "He likes it too, he's just not saying it."

Steve laughed, "He *definitely* likes it. I know you too well, Buck. That excuse was *weak*."

Bucky smiled tentatively. "Fine. I hate it less than the other suggestions."

"The Howling Angel and the Falcon," Sam said, testing out both names at once, "I think it works."

"I'll write a press release in the morning," Tony said.

"You will do no such thing," Pepper answered, "But *I'll* write a press release once they've actually decided they're ready to join the rest of you in the field."

"Yeah, Tony," Sam said, "No press conferences until you've finished my wings."

Tony snorted, "And no chocolate chip cookie until I've finished my sandwich - I'm not sure I *want* you two to be Avengers if you're gonna treat us like kids..."

"No Howling Angel without Sam's wings, either," Bucky interrupted, "Seems like *one* of us should have wings before we announce it all. And anyway, I don't want a big debut. It'll wreck my MO. I was always a sniper. Secretive. Hidden."

"We'll announce it the next time *I* need backup," Clint suggested, "It'll be good to have somebody else on this team handling long-range weapons. Keep me from having to watch everybody's back all the time."

And that was that. It was planned. It was over.

When they moved the next day, packing up the scientific equipment, the legos, and all of Sam's major belongings, the media had made it to town, drawn by the rumors that the Avengers had been there eating Chinese food, and there were a thousand questions being asked on TV and the radio that the Avengers had decided not to answer.

But when they made it to the Tower and started moving in, Bucky felt like he was coming home. The Tower had been terrifying, unknowable, and full of surveillance cameras the last time he was in New York. Now it was six floors of people he liked, and expanding to eight as their 'neighbors' moved offices. The doors to the stairwells were propped wide open so that they could shout up and down at each other, and the arguments over who got which movies from the kids' collection were familiar and comfortable, for all that they were all adults now.

The Howling Angel was out of the shadows, and as Sam came to join him on Tony's couch, grumbling about the fact that *technically*, all the movies were *his*, he thought he just might be able to stay that way.

## Chapter End Notes

I uploaded this from the wrong draft the first time, but I like this ending better, so I changed it out. So... whoops!

But anyway, thank you guys for sticking this out to the end, and I hope you enjoyed it! It was a lot of fun to write. ^ \_ ^

And thanks again to everyone who has left comments and said nice things. I'm just still all blushy-pleased about it and it means a lot to me, even though I'm not replying to them all on this one. I wish you all health and happiness!

Additional note, Oct 2015: In honor of hitting 1000 kudos (what?!?) I've written a one-shot set a little bit after this. You can read it here: <http://archiveofourown.org/works/4989550>. Or just click the next bit in the collection because I just realized it's in a collection. Whoops. But I already typed that out, so... you also have the link. Best wishes!

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